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Thus we have heard: imperial Buddhist prefaces and ideology in Tang China

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Citation

Bai, Y. (2026, April 9). *Thus we have heard: imperial Buddhist prefaces and ideology in Tang China*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4301016>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Thus We Have Heard

Imperial Buddhist Prefaces and Ideology in Tang China

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van

de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Leiden,

op gezag van rector magnificus prof.dr. S. de Rijcke,

volgens besluit van het college voor promoties

te verdedigen op donderdag 9 april 2026

klokke 16:00 uur

door

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Abstract

This dissertation provides a systematic examination of imperial Buddhist prefaces—texts written by emperors to accompany Buddhist canonical works—and their ideological significance during the Tang dynasty. Although these texts are numerous, they have been largely overlooked in previous research. Thirteen such prefaces were produced during the Tang, in stark contrast to the limited number of similar texts produced in the Confucian and Daoist traditions, despite these traditions being central to Tang ideology. Furthermore, nine of the thirteen texts were produced during the early Tang period (618–713). It is this that motivates my investigation into these early Tang prefaces.

This study provides an annotated translation of these texts and uses a combination of textual and historical analysis to examine their nature, development, objectives, and implications. The findings reveal that these prefaces were utilised to define the Buddhist tradition and its relationship with the state, a relationship that had become firmly embedded in state ideology by the sixth century. Monarchs, officials, and monastics strategically shaped these texts to negotiate power, establish authority, and resolve doctrinal and political tensions. As the first systematic study of these texts, this dissertation highlights the integral role of imperial Buddhist prefaces in understanding the relationship between the state and the Buddhist tradition, as well as in the formation and reinforcement of Tang ideology. It invites scholars to reconsider the role of the Buddhist institution in early Tang ideology, viewing it not as an anomaly but as a fundamental strand.

Acknowledgements

Throughout my academic journey, Dr. Wang Xiang, my mentor during my undergraduate studies, sparked my interest in Buddhism. In Heidelberg, Prof. Michael Radich, my MA supervisor, helped me develop my research approach through our fortnightly meetings. Dr. Chen Ruixuan introduced me to this PhD opportunity. During my doctoral studies, Prof. Jonathan Silk and Dr. Antonello Palumbo provided invaluable guidance. Their academic insights and intellectual rigour profoundly shaped my development as a scholar. Dr. Rafal Felbur was always willing to help whenever I encountered difficulties in my research. Even when I decided to switch to this new project four years ago, Prof. Silk, Dr. Palumbo, and Dr. Felbur gave me their full support, for which I am truly thankful.

This research was made possible by the European Research Council through the “Open Philology” project (2018–2023). My colleagues at Leiden—Meng Xiaoqiang, Dr. Jiang Yixiu, Dr. Chris Handy, Dr. Greg Forgues, Dr. Li Channa, Dr. Péter-Dániel Szántó, Suzuki Nobuyuki, Zheng Kexin, and Laura Berdikhojayeveva—offered companionship and assistance. I thank the staff at the Leiden Institute for Area Studies for their prompt help with all administrative matters. During my time at Yale, Dr. Eric Greene, Prof. Valerie Hansen, Dr. Zhang Zekun, and friends enriched my experience both intellectually and socially, and I am very grateful. My thanks also go to Prof. Ochiai Toshinori and Dr. Zhang Meiqiao for facilitating my access to some Japanese Buddhist manuscripts.

I am fortunate to have dear friends who accompanied me along the way: Merijn ter Haar, Iris Chan, Prof. Barend ter Haar, Dr. Hu Xuejiao, Dr. Hua Tingting, Shao Yijia, Howard Mu, Lin Xueni, Dr. Dong Yiming, Li Chang, Yu Jiahui, Cai Xinyuan, Huang Xuan, Xie Tingting, Liu Yuxin, Nemo Cai, Dai Jiahang, Hou Xiangning, Jay Liu, Wu Shidi, Zhang Pengyu, and Sun Xiangjun. Special thanks go to Howard for reading my dissertation draft and providing useful feedback. I would also like to thank Wang Jinyu, Li Ling, and Jin Yunhao for welcoming me with open arms in Kunming, where I completed the final phase of my dissertation.

My deepest gratitude goes to Shine Aung, who supported me through the most challenging years of my PhD. He understands me in ways that I do not even fully understand myself, and he has always been there for me when I needed him most.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my grandparents and parents. My grandparents, who are now only a memory, gave me a happy, carefree childhood among animals and fields in the countryside. My parents have supported and encouraged me unconditionally with their unspoken love. They made me, and made me strong.

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