Public Lecture

Rags to Riches: Preaching to the Poor in Ancient Japan

Bryan D. Lowe
(Assistant Professor, Department of Religion, Princeton University)

December 20, 2022, 6:15–7:45 pm

Universität Hamburg, Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1, Ostflügel (East Wing), Room ESA-O 221

Standard accounts claim that Buddhism in the eighth and ninth centuries was limited to courtly and aristocratic circles, only becoming popular in later times. But recent archaeological evidence shows that Buddhism had spread to villages across the archipelago by the start of the ninth century. Preachers often traveled between provincial villages, performing sermons and rituals for local communities. My paper focuses on sermon materials that address poverty. Preachers at once blamed the poor as karmically responsible for their poverty while also advocating for accessible practices that erased class distinctions. I will combine this textual evidence in the form of sermon notes with excavated potsherds and wooden slips that suggest poor people may have found these teachings attractive. Using these sources, I will argue that Buddhism was “popularized” centuries earlier than our standard narratives would suggest, crossing geographic boundaries and social classes.

Bryan D. Lowe is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Religion at Princeton University. He specializes in Buddhism in ancient Japan (seventh through ninth centuries) and has broader research interests in ritual, manuscript studies, historiography, canons, and the religion of non-elites. Lowe’s first book, Ritualized Writing: Buddhist Practice and Scriptural Cultures in Ancient Japan, received the John Whitney Hall Book Prize from the Association of Asian Studies.