A Study of Yinshafo Ceremonies in Dunhuang in the Ninth and Tenth Centuries

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Many Dunhuang documents produced in the ninth and tenth centuries referred to religious observances, including a Buddhist ceremony called yinshafo in which a seal engraved with the image of a Buddhist deity or stūpa was put on the sand and prayers were counted on Buddhist rosaries. This ceremony has been studied extensively as an important event in Dunhuang Buddhism. These previous studies have mainly focused on the connection of the ceremony with the Lantern Festival, a Buddhist ritual held in the first lunar month; however, it is also worth examining the relationships with other Buddhist rituals held in Dunhuang in that period, such as the Buddha's Birthday Festival.

Another point that cannot be overlooked in relation to the yinshafo ceremony is an association called the she. It was one of the key players in organizing the ceremony. This type of association was unique in that it was based on the religious bond of Buddhism, unlike other contemporary organizations which were based on a shared territorial bond formed from the worship of local deities. She, associations of commoners, built close relationships with religious groups of monks through working together to organize religious ceremonies.

One of the main purposes of yinshafo ceremonies was to pray for people’s lives. The prayers ranged from communal to private, such as universal peace, a huge harvest, recovery from illness, protection from misfortunes, and happiness in the next world. These diverse prayers clearly show some aspects of Dunhuang Buddhism at that time. From this perspective, the present article examines the social aspects of Dunhuang Buddhism and its relationships with other local worship and belief, which so far have not been fully studied in either China or Japan, to reveal the realities of yinshafo ceremonies and analyze their features.

In the mid-Tang period, she associations supported fasting ceremonies and were involved in the festival to celebrate Buddha’s Birthday on the eighth day of the second month of the Indian calendar as well as other folk rituals. These facts are examined in this article to analyze the acceptance of Buddhism among the people and the ceremonies and social aspects of Dunhuang Buddhism, which have not been fully studied until now.

Key words: Dunhuang Buddhism, yinshafo ceremony, New Year events, performing arts, ancestor worship ceremony