

The GIS Database of the Headstone Inscriptions of Temple Steles in Vietnam

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One of the many cultural and historical vestiges of Vietnam Buddhism is the temple steles in Vietnam. These temple steles are basically headstones with inscriptions that are records of the history of the temple (e.g., when and why it was built, restored, renovated, and renamed), the biographies of its abbots and patriarchs, and its Buddhist lineage. For Vietnamese Buddhism, it is of great importance to understand the past through these relics in order to develop the direction for the future. In addition to being of significance to Vietnamese Buddhist history and culture, the inscriptions sometimes are about the donors of the temples which then give us a glimpse into the lives of the people at the time. For examples, what social class are the donors, what buddhas do they worship, what kind of donations do they give, and to which affiliations they belong. These headstone inscriptions thus give us some ideas about the social, economic and political climate of the time.

Given that Buddhism plays an integral part in nation building of Vietnam, researching and understanding more about these headstone inscriptions will be beneficial not only to Buddhists but all Vietnamese. Moreover, because these inscriptions are in Chinese and Nôm, translating these steles into Vietnamese will benefit the majority of the Vietnamese people who cannot read Chinese nor Nôm. This preservation work was first executed by the L'École Française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) [French School of Far-East Studies] in the early 1900s in the Red Delta region.

The group in charge of these two major tasks is the Vietnam ECAI group. The Electronic Cultural Atlas Initiative or ECAI is a project on world culture in the digital age with the aim of building a dynamic online atlas that connects the world. This Vietnam group has been organized and guided by Professor Lê Mạnh Thát, Vice President of the Vietnam Buddhist University, and consulted by Dr. Lewis Lancaster, professor at University of California, Berkeley to make an inventory on these inscriptions and to later translate their contents.