

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. Hence, learning more about these headstone inscriptions can add to our general knowledge about the history and culture of the regions where the steles are located. 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.

The preservation of these headstone inscription is done by a Chinese method of using special paper and ink to rub on the inscription plate. 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, where EFEO has made about 20,980 rubbings. Currently, the Hán-Nôm Institute has in its possession about 50,000 rubbings of which nearly 30,000 were executed by the Hán-Nôm Institute itself. Some of these inscriptional rubbings are from regions beyond the Red Delta region and reached as far as Hue. Due to wars and upheavals of the second half of the 20th century that have destroyed many Vietnamese historical records including temples in which these stele inscriptions are located, the founding of these rubbings are of significance to the effort of cultural and historical restoration when the original steles are no longer in existence. Since the discovery of these rubbings that are deemed to be of high cultural and historical value, a campaign to continue making the rubbings from the headstone inscriptions has begun since 1991 and is ongoing to regions beyond the Red Delta region and Hue.

In 2002, the Hán-Nôm Institute along with the EFEO and L'École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) [Applied School of Higher Learning] have begun the process of printing out volumes of copies of these rubbings. This is done by using special photography to reproduce a copy of the rubbing. Currently, 10,000 inscriptions have been printed into ten book volumes, each volume containing about 1,000 inscriptions. The currently printed 10,000 inscriptions are from 5,053 steles because one stele may have many inscriptional plates (front, back, sides). EFEO, EPHE and the Hán-Nôm Institute plan to print out the remaining 40,000 inscriptions in time. These volumes are titled, "Corpus of Ancient Vietnamese Inscriptions." The first volume was printed in 2005 guided by the editorial board of Trịnh Khắc Mạnh, Nguyễn Văn Nguyên and Philippe Papin.

The next task after publishing copies of the rubbings is translating the inscriptions. Because the general information about the inscription such as title of inscription and name of temple and the information about the time and date of the day of rubbing and the entry number of

the rubbing are in Chinese, that first general information must be translated for indexing. Once the inventory of inscriptions are done and recorded in an excel database, then the task of translating the content can begin. In addition to translating the inscription, researchers would also like to know whether or not the original inscriptions on steles in temples are still extant. This task requires a team of field workers to locate the temple steles and report their conditions of existence, ruin or damage. If the steles and temples still exist, then the field workers can collect more data about the temple to add to the existing database. Two projects are thus being conducted simultaneously: one of field surveying and the other of translating and indexing.

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. Vietnam ECAI is divided into two subgroups with two different functions: one in charge of surveying where the stele inscriptions are for GPS coordination input and finding contact information of the temples; the second is in charge of translating the inscriptions and related information into Vietnamese for inventory and content analysis. The ECAI translation team is comprised of second level students in a Chinese Buddhist Literature class at the Vietnam Buddhist University. There were originally 50 students and now 20 students who are currently engaged in translating and inputting the inscriptions information into notebooks and an Excel database.

Once the initial inventory of the inscriptions are done, one can then use the database to sort out how many steles and inscriptions are in each temple. The reason is that the rubbing was not done in any systematic way so that rubbing entry #1, #2, and #3 at Nguyệt Quang Temple were done in sequential order and at a similar time, but rubbing entry #1150 at Nguyệt Quang Temple was done at a later time. The publication of the inscriptions, however, are done in rubbing entry order. Once one knows how many steles and inscriptions are in each temple, one can then sort out the inscriptions by order of time. The contents of the inscriptions can then be analyzed to give one a better sense of the history of the temple and possibly more about the people who frequented the temple. The final step is to check if the temple still exists to update the database with more current information about the temple and its possibly newer steles or not yet rubbed stele inscriptions. This database of stele inscription information and GPS mapping can then be shared online and scholars all over the world can add their knowledge to this ongoing project of cultural and historical preservation and investigation.

In sum, the research process involves four steps:

- Step 1. Doing an inventory of the inscriptions to find out how many stele inscriptions are in each temple
- Step 2. Sorting by time the order of inscriptions to get a timeline of each temple
- Step 3. Translating the content of the steles to get the detailed history of the temple (and probably of the village given that 50% of the inscriptions are about the donors or villagers and that three-fifth of the inscriptions are from the 17th and 18th centuries)
- Step 4. Field surveying to see if the temple and steles still exist to update the database information

The ECAI translating team at the Vietnam Buddhist University is currently engaged in translating the first five volumes of the Corpus of Ancient Vietnamese Inscriptions. It has done the first phase of inventory over three thousands inscriptions and has entered into Excel two

thousands. The remaining one thousand inscriptions have been entered into a notebook awaiting input into Excel. The remaining nearly two thousand steles have yet to be indexed, not to mention the other forty thousand inscriptions yet to be printed for translation, and all of the inscriptions still need content translation to be complete. Hence, the work for the Vietnam ECAI group is a great and long-term enterprise.

Report on the ongoing inventory work (Step 1):

Nguyệt Quang Temple has 4 inscriptions (1,2,3, 1150); Hồng Ân has 11 (4-14); Linh Am Temple has 13 (15-22, 4106-4107); Tiên Linh Temple has 8 (29, 1401-1403, 1414-1415); Bửu Temple has 3 (24, 1404-1405); Phúc Châu Temple has 20 (58-60, 77-91, 115-116); Ngọc Sơn has 2 (61-62); Tịnh Lâu has 3 (64, 107-108); Chúc Thánh has 3 (112-114); Hòa Mã has 20 (122-141); Từ Ân has 8 (142-149); Trường Khánh has 3 (150-152); Hàm Long has 7 (156-160, 162-163); Liên Phái has 30 (202-226, 247-250, 255-256); Trần Bắc has 14 (233-246); Linh Sơn has 3 (267-269); Hồng Phúc (Hòa Trại) has 57 (272-276, 287-295, 309-316, 320-344, 347, 349); Linh An has 1 (284); Đông Môn has 3 (317-319); Một Cột has 3 (345-346, 348); Kim An has 10 (366-376); Càn An has 15 (414-429); Chiêu Thiên has 9 (431-439); Vi Văn has 9 (440-449); Sùng Phúc has 12 (465-477); Tam Huyền has 3 (478-480); Long Quang has 42 (496-537); Quang Phúc has 10 (546-553, 753-754); Hoàng An has 9 (159-600); Hoàng Ân has 14 (601-614); Nhật Chiêu has 18 (615-632); Phúc Khánh has 14 (633-646); Thiên has 15 (647-661); Hưng Khánh has 13 (677-689); Bộ Đê has 9 (690-698); Kim Liên has 13 (794-806); Hiền Ứng has 5 (807-811); Phổ Quang has 16 (887-901, 939); Khánh Diên has 9 (892-897, 904, 911, 918); Phước Khuê has 6 (898-903); Đại Phúc has 2 (934-935); Trùng Quang has 2 (936-937); Phúc Khánh has 16 (954-969); Quang Lục has 2 (1004-1005); Thanh Xuân has 3 (1008, 1013, 1014); Linh Sơn has 5 (1015-1019); Thiên Định has 13 (1027-1039); Thiên Trúc has 2 (1061-1062); Hoàng Thôn has 12 (1159-1170); Linh Sơn (tỉnh Hà Thành) has 2 (1223-1224); Long Đầu has 7 (1225-1231); Thiên Phước has 8 (1248-1251, 1232-1233, 1240-1241); Bối Am has 4 (1235-1238); Vĩnh Phúc has 9 (1284-1287, 1290, 1259-1260, 1263-1264); Nhật Tân has 2 (1272, 1283); Phật Linh has 3 (1273, 1299, 1230); Pháp Vũ has 2 (1288-1289); La Văn has 7 (1384-1390); Sùng Khánh has 5 (1391-1395); Hàm Sơn has 5 (1396-1400); Đông Lao has 2 (1419, 1451); Hoa Phát has 1 (1557); Quỳnh Lâm has 23 (1565-1584, 1606-1609); Linh Ứng has 13 (1592-1604); Tường Quang has 22 (1679-1640); Đại An has 2 (1636-1637); Đại Bi has 4 (1649-1652); Thần Trung has 22 (1671-1678, 1700-1713); Đông Quật has 2 (1679-1680); Đông Triền Giáp has 3 (1681-1683); Diễm Xá has 8 (1684-1689, 1692-1693); Phước Lâm has 2 (1696-1697); Quán Sóc has 5 (1762-1766); Đại Khánh has 1 (1800); Cảm Ân has 3 (1902, 1903, 1918); Long Hồ has 2 (1904-1904), Linh Sơn has 1 (1914); Phúc Hạ has 1 (1917); Nhạc Lâm has 3 (1959-1960, 1963); Quảng Nghiêm has 5 (1964, 1966-1967, 1969-1970, 1975-1976); Pháp Quang has 4 (1994-1997).

We do not know to which temples the following inscriptions belonged and will have to wait after the actual field survey to add in such information: 494, 586, 664, 669, 699, 700, 703, 713, 718, 722, 724, 725, 746-751, 762-766, 768-773, 782-785, 843-844, 847-849, 863-880, 919-921, 924-925, 945-948, 950-953, 982, 996-998, 1007, 1042-1044, 1046, 1059, 1060, 1072-1076, 1078, 1089, 1090, 1119-1125, 1130-1138, 1142, 1146, 1149, 1174-1182, 1169, 1201-1204, 1212-1215, 1217-1218, 1256, 1261-1262, 1402, 1416-1418, 1420, 1421, 1471-1488, 1495-1540, 1587-1591, 1611-1612, 1621-1624, 1655-1661, 1664-1670, 1690-1691, 1695, 1771-1773, 1788-1798, 1801-1806, 1809-1810, 1812-1829, 1832-1854, 1869-1888, 1998.

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