AOSIS

Application of E-textual research in Chinese Buddhist studies

CrossMark

Authors:
Liandong Wang¹
Min Jia¹

Affiliations:
¹Institute of Sinicization of Religion, School of Humanities and Foreign Languages, China Jiliang University, Hangzhou, China

Corresponding author:
Liandong Wang,
wangliandong@cjlu.edu.cn

This article attempts to introduce the emerging research method of E-textual research into the study of Chinese Buddhism. By outlining the origin and significance of E-textual research, it explores the potential of this endeavour. The application of E-textual research in the field of Buddhism is discussed to clarify its scope and operational procedures. The article also addresses the limitations of E-textual research, stemming from its inherent constraints and the impact of other emerging technologies. E-textual research is not merely a passing trend but offers further avenues for exploration, representing a novel approach for Buddhist studies to engage with new materials and questions in the digital age.

Contribution: This article introduces the emerging research method of E-textual research into the study of Chinese Buddhism, outlining its background, operational procedures, existing limitations and future prospects. E-textual research is presented as a new method for addressing new materials and questions in the digital age.

Keywords: E-textual research; Chinese Buddhism; databases; research methods; Buddhist literature.

Introduction

In recent years, research in the field of Buddhism has seen exponential growth. For instance, the number of publications on the theme of 'Buddhism' in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) has increased significantly: from 6800 articles in 1984–1994 to 17 200 in 1995–2005, 48 700 in 2006–2016 and 29 400 in 2017–2024. This encouraging trend is closely related to the mass digitisation of Buddhist texts over the past century.

Traditionally, Buddhist research relied on paper documents, which are vast in both variety and quantity. The Buddhist faith encompasses the 'Three Jewels' (Tri Ratna), namely the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Among these, the Dharma can be simply understood as Buddhist scriptures. According to the *Stele of the Sutra Repository at Huchou West Temple*, Chinese Buddhists have a saying, 'Creating a canon is making a Buddha', which means printing and preserving the Tripitaka is a path to enlightenment.

Chinese Buddhists have historically placed great importance on the Dharma Jewel, which has accelerated the translation and writing of various Buddhist scriptures. It is estimated that the total number of Chinese Buddhist scriptures is about 4.5 billion characters (Guangchang 2023:4). The *Complete Collection of Chinese Palm-leaf Manuscripts* contains more than 91 million characters (Guangchang 2023:47), among others. This does not include scriptures in Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchu, Xixia and other languages.

Traditional Buddhist studies utilise primary sources such as the successive editions of the Tripitaka, compilations of extra-canonical texts, local gazetteers and stone inscription monographs. Additionally, modern comprehensive research series are also employed, including the 'Series of Modern Buddhist Studies', 'Great Series of Modern Buddhist Studies', 'Series of Translations of Modern Buddhist Classics', 'New Series of World Buddhist Classics Translations', 'Dharma Treasury Collection' and various reference works. However, these are not only invaluable cultural heritage but also a heavy reading burden for Buddhist researchers.

Past scholars have emphasised the reflection on research methods based on paper scriptures. Notable works in this area include 'Eighteen Articles on Academic Research' (Qichao 2014), 'Methods of Buddhist Studies' (Cheng 1991), 'Researching Buddhism with Buddhism' (Yinshun

2011), 'Methodology of Buddhist Studies' (Rujun 2006) and the 'Methods of Buddhist Studies' edited by the Modern Buddhist Academic Series (ed. Mantao 1981). Scholars such as Ouyang Jingwu, Jiang Weiqiao, Hu Shi, Zhou Shujia, Tang Yongtong and Ren Jiyu also wrote extensively on Buddhist research methods. However, these works did not address the digitisation of texts and their research because of the technological limitations of their times.

Contemporary Buddhist scholars increasingly engage with electronic texts for research on canonical scriptures, biographies of the Buddha, the history of Buddhism and doctrinal studies. The fundamental difference between traditional and contemporary Buddhist research lies in the research objects. The research object determines the research method, and adapting research methods to the research objects can advance in-depth studies and yield new knowledge. For instance, research on the 'Chart of Becoming a Buddha' illustrates how new documents can generate new research domains (Liandong 2023:40–47). Although current attention in the field of Buddhist studies remains largely focussed on research objects, with limited exploration of new methods, some scholars have already recognised the significant impact of digital tools on Buddhist research (Bingenheimer 2021:3–30).

Given the insufficient application of E-textual research methods in the field of Chinese Buddhist research, this article attempts to introduce the emerging E-textual research method into Buddhist studies. This article will discuss four main aspects: (1) What is E-textual research and its emergence; (2) the application of E-textual research in the field of Buddhism; (3) challenges faced by E-textual research and (4) the future of E-textual research.

The origin and significance of E-textual research

A concise review of the academic history of E-textual research will be presented, followed by a systematic exploration of its application within the field of Buddhist studies. E-textual research, first proposed by Professor Huang Yinong in his book 'Two-headed Snake: The First Generation of Catholics in Late Ming and Early Qing', refers to the method of open or even large-scale use of the Internet and electronic databases for textual criticism. The book supplements and extends his 1994 article 'A Study of the Family and Life of Qu RuKui'. By then, computers, the Internet, data storage and optical character recognition (OCR) technology were becoming widespread; big data and cloud computing were emerging; data service companies such as ChaoXing and CNKI had been established and accumulated technology and data; and Google Scholar and Baidu Scholar were already online. Yinong (2006) declared in his book:

> With the flourishing publishing industry and modernized libraries, combined with the widespread use of the Internet and electronic databases, a new generation of historians often find themselves in an environment that their well-informed predecessors could only dream of. We have the opportunity to access materials that previous generations could not even envisage, filling many gaps in exploring historical details and quickly resolving previously doubts or contradictions through logical reasoning. Indeed, an era capable of nurturing an 'E-textual Research school' may already have arrived! (p. vii)

Professor Huang Yinong used the 'Union Catalog of Ming Authors and Subject Index Database' produced by the Taipei Center for Chinese Studies and, through 'E-textual research', collected materials not only from traditional academic secondary sources on the Qu family but also from primary documents and material evidence related to Qu RuKui's appearance, height, personality, family and social network. In addition, the application of E-textual research method even uncovered the chaotic relationship between the uncle and his sister-in-law, thus finding the true reason for Qu RuKui's elder brother's belief in Buddhism. These approaches show that 'E-textual research' often involves comprehensive and large-scale use of the Internet and electronic databases.

The emergence of the E-textual research method has provided new opportunities for the study of digitised Buddhist scriptures. Shanshan (2018:133–140) discovered the long-lost Chinese version of 'Tongxuan Ji' using the E-textual research method. Before this, only the Xixia version of 'Tongxuan Ji' unearthed from Heishuicheng had been known. Gao Shanshan found auction records of 'Tongxuan Ji', which led to the discovery of photos displayed on an auction website. By comparing these with the Xixia version, it was confirmed to be the Chinese version of 'Tongxuan Ji'. Meanwhile, Shuwei (2018) used the 'National Catalog of Cultural Relics' retrieval system to uncover a complete 'Tongxuan Ji' from the collection of cultural relics at Zhihua Temple in Beijing. From these cases, we can see how E-textual research provides new opportunities for the study of Buddhist scriptures today. These cases can be summarised in several aspects, though they are not limited to these points.

Firstly, compared to paper searches, E-textual research expands the breadth of searching Buddhist texts. E-textual research covers the entire network and databases accessible by search engines. Secondly, E-textual research enhances the depth of research. For example, using Harvard University's China Biographical Database (CBDB) to search for the poet-monk Qi Ji (Hu Desheng), one can visually see Qi Ji's entire social network, undoubtedly deepening the understanding of his relationships. Thirdly, E-textual research has also enhanced the speed of reference checking. Traditional textual research, which relies on manual transcription and visual inspection of limited materials, cannot ensure efficiency. For example, Mitsuyoshi (1989:222), in order to write the article 'Origins and Idealism', 'spent two summers exploring various documents and organised the necessary information from her notes for narration'. This indicates that the efficiency of traditional methods for locating literature is indeed very low.

Application of E-textual research in Buddhist studies

The mass digitisation of Buddhist texts presents an opportunity for E-textual research. In the mid-1980s, the

mainland version of the 'Chinese Buddhist Canon' began digitisation and achieved some results. In the early 1990s, Japan's Hanazono University International Zen Studies Institute produced the 'Electronic Dharma' CD-ROM, containing dozens of Zen studies documents; from 1993 to 2005, Korea's Haeinsa Temple undertook the digital full-text project of the 'Komazo'; from 1997 to 2007, Japan's SAT Taisho Tripitaka team digitised volumes 1–85 of the 'Taisho Tripitaka' texts, including annotations, and made them available online, and the 85–100 volume image sections and catalogue database were also planned. In 1998, the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA) was established at the Anhe Branch of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taipei, launching the electronic version of the 'Taisho Tripitaka' project. To this day, CBETA data continues to expand and update, freely available to the world. Additionally, Taiwan's 'Buddhist Normative Database' offers search items for time, names, places and scripture titles, providing an intuitive, systematic presentation of all information (Zhaocheng 2012). This can be further exemplified by citing additional resources, including the Korean Tripitaka Knowledge Database, the Chinese Temple and Ancestral Hall Statues Database, the Fo Guang Shan Electronic Tripitaka, the Xiangguang Nuns' Buddhist Academy Library and the NTU Digital Buddhist Library. These can all be seen as tools for E-textual research in Buddhist studies.

Based on the aforementioned historical developments, we have identified the following issues. On one hand, researchers can utilise database tools such as CBETA, FoDict, Buddhist Normative Databases, Duxiu and online big data, as well as second-hand book websites and auction company websites. Guided by well-defined research questions and precise keywords, they can efficiently locate the desired content. This approach breaks away from the traditional manual transcription and visual inspection methods, allowing scholars to bypass the stages of accumulating specialised knowledge and overcoming professional barriers. It enables them to directly search for evidence, saving significant time and effort while greatly enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of textual criticism. Additionally, it provides ordinary individuals with opportunities to participate in scholarly validation, thus expanding the academic boundaries of research (Junchuan 2023:1). On the other hand, comprehensive data collection, comparative analysis and refinement processes make it easier to find corroborative and multiple pieces of evidence, thus strengthening solitary pieces of evidence.

How can one use the E-textual research method for Buddhist studies? The first step is to select keywords. Keywords can include the dharma names of Buddhist figures, their preaching places, honorary titles, pen names and nicknames, among others. For example, Chao Kung (1879–1943) is the dharma name of a foreign monk in modern Shanghai. If we want to study this monk who is not recorded in the 'History of Religions in Shanghai', we should first search in databases such as Duxiu or CNKI. From the search results, we discover that this was a foreign monk with a notorious reputation. For example, the Duxiu Encyclopedia includes an entry on Ignaz Trebitsch-Lincoln (Trebitsch-Lincoln's name before ordination as Chao Kung). This entry even lists several cited references and additional links to substantiate its accuracy. The entry details his extraordinary life from birth to death. Trebitsch-Lincoln, a Hungarian adventurer and convicted fraudster of Jewish descent, lived a life marked by numerous roles: Protestant missionary, Anglican minister, British MP for Darlington, German right-wing politician and spy, Nazi collaborator and Chinese Buddhist abbot. Some scholars even believe he suffered from mental illness (Ning 2010:83–84). Even the editors of the *Haichao Yin* magazine were uncertain about the motives behind Chao Kung's ordination as a monk (Manzhi 1931:65–72). However, as rational researchers, we need to reconstruct Chao Kung's experiences using available materials to understand his motivations for becoming a monk. This is essential for accurately characterising Chao Kung and his activities after ordination.

The second step is to select databases and build a knowledge system about the research subject. Databases like CNKI and Duxiu can provide relevant research results but not primary sources. Given that Chao Kung was a public figure in the UK before and after becoming a monk, we chose to search for information on Chao Kung and Trebitsch-Lincoln in the British Newspaper Archive (BNA). Through the research database, our retrieved information is largely consistent with the entries and mutually corroborative. Distinctively, through our BNA search, we discovered as many as 286 newspaper reports on Chao Kung in 1926. According to these retrieved newspaper articles, his son, Young Lincoln, had drunkenly shot and killed a wealthy businessman the previous year. Upon learning this news while secluded in a Sri Lankan monastery, Chao Kung requested the British government to allow him to return home to see his son one last time. The British government ultimately granted him special permission to do so. During this period, the approximate route and timeline of Chao Kung's journey back to England to see his son attracted significant attention and coverage from the British media. However, Chao Kung's race across almost half the globe ultimately ended in vain. Thus, the numerous difficulties and inner turmoil he faced on his journey back to England also contributed to the general knowledge map we have constructed about Chao Kung.

The third step involves integrating traditional research methods to analyse materials and establish mutual corroboration of evidence. Traditional methods and knowledge, such as philology, textual criticism, phonology, exegesis, textual collation and authentication studies, can be interwoven with E-textual research. By comparing Chao Kung's various unfortunate life experiences with his own accounts of his motivations for ordination, we can analyse the changes in his state of mind before and after becoming a monk. He stated (Manzhi 1931):

I once served as a Christian pastor, but the more I studied Christianity, the less faith I had in it, and I eventually abandoned it. … I sought happiness through the pursuit of money and fame, but the more I tried, the more I felt it was impossible. My life was filled with unhappiness. I began to realize that life was truly a tragedy. Some may not agree with my words, but I truly felt this way, which is why I renounced the world and became a monk. (p. 65–72)

We find that Chao Kung's thoughts resonate with the core Buddhist teaching that life is full of suffering. Chao Kung's descriptions of his pre-ordination experiences can be corroborated by his early autobiography. These accounts also align with Juzan's (2000:455–466) recollections in the article 'The Foreign Monk Chao Kung'. In conclusion, in light of these mutually corroborative pieces of evidence, we might need to reconsider our characterisation of Chao Kung.

Challenges faced by E-textual research

Applying E-textual research to Buddhist studies is highly necessary, as it caters to the needs of Buddhist research in the digital age. However, as a new approach, it still faces various challenges and scepticism. If we acknowledge both the positive value of E-textual research in the field of Buddhism and the positive significance of these challenges or scepticism in promoting the self-improvement of this methodology, the first thing to address is: What are the challenges or scepticism that E-textual research faces? Broadly speaking, these challenges come from two main sources: the inherent limitations of E-textual research itself and the impact of other new technologies.

E-textual research still has many unresolved issues. Firstly, material limitation. Although the quantity of materials it can use is theoretically unlimited, it is practically constrained. Despite the vast volume of Buddhist materials, many resources remain undisclosed for various reasons. For instance, some documents are scattered among private collections, lost overseas or not accessible to the public in domestic libraries and museums. Besides, certain Buddhist texts, even after being digitised, have not been included in databases. An example in this case is the 'Taishō Tripiṭaka', whose 'Image Section' has not been included in the CBETA database despite its digitisation years ago. Additionally, various barriers are set within databases for different reasons, making the data unusable or unsearchable. For instance, many resources have been removed from commonly used search engines like Duxiu because of copyright issues; similarly, some second-hand book websites display and auction letters and manuscripts with watermarks obscuring the content. These situations are beyond the reach of E-textual research.

Secondly, the quality of materials in E-textual research varies greatly. Some documents are merely text entries without punctuation. Others suffer from errors or omissions during the digitisation process. Additionally, issues with the original texts can lead to data problems. For example, one of the primary texts relied upon by scholars, the 'Record of Yunshan Dharma Assemblies' included in the Japanese Manji Zokuzōkyō, was shockingly found to be a forgery (Huachuan 2014:1). Therefore, for users, these materials cannot serve as direct references and must be cross-checked with the original books.

Thirdly, E-textual research can give rise to certain research biases. Its convenience and speed may tempt researchers to focus excessively on compiling materials, thereby neglecting the in-depth study of classical texts. The discernment, analysis and synthesis derived from studying classical texts are crucial for advancing research and presenting new scholarly questions with deeper significance. The strength of E-textual research lies in the presentation of evidence. However, it falls short in distinguishing the authenticity of evidence and in the deep analysis of human nature, personality and character. Thus, when E-textual research is applied to literary studies, some scholars voice scepticism. This scepticism serves as a reminder to researchers that E-textual research is not omnipotent and should be used within reasonable limits. Combining E-textual research with traditional methods of study, analysis and refinement of classical texts can significantly advance research and highlight new academic issues.

Besides, E-textual research still faces other external challenges. Firstly, because of substantial initial investments in technology, funding and other resources, it is difficult for ordinary researchers to tailor E-textual research tools to their specific needs. Specifically, E-textual research heavily depends on storage, digitisation and network technologies. These technologies and resources require significant financial and human investment. Therefore, for an average researcher, developing a bespoke E-textual research tool is much more challenging than adapting to an existing one. Secondly, online resources vary in quality and authenticity. For instance, forged documents, letters and careless discussions by some social media outlets, if not carefully vetted, can hinder the accurate application of E-textual research. E-textual research should not merely be about compiling evidence. If the evidence is flawed, it ultimately leads to invalid research conclusions. Thirdly, the use of E-textual research raises some concerns regarding technological ethics. The rise of artificial intelligence technologies such as AI and ChatGPT also poses challenges to E-textual research. This could potentially lead to issues related to academic ethics. For instance, researchers can use the E-textual method to connect pieces of evidence and then leverage AI for further creation and modification. This raises the question: is the academic work being conducted by humans or machines? This represents an abuse of technology, as technology should not replace human thinking and thereby academic research, but rather serve it. Therefore, this is not merely a question of the authenticity of academic work, but of who is actually conducting the research, making it a matter of technological ethics.

The future of E-textual research

With the advancement of digitising Buddhist texts, the maturation of big data technologies and the continual improvement of search technologies, we believe that E-textual research holds a promising future. However, there are still several aspects that warrant further consideration.

Firstly, refinement of procedures. As a research methodology running through the process of Buddhist studies, the operational procedures of E-textual research should be continually refined and clarified. The steps of E-textual research proposed in the third part of this article are merely applications in the main phases of research. There are some minor research tasks, such as how to apply the E-textual research method in the refinement stage of research, that also require further consideration.

Secondly, continuous improvement of Buddhist canonical databases. In addition to what has been mentioned earlier, there are areas where improvement is still needed, such as the inclusion of image sections into databases. For instance, although modern Buddhist journals collected in the 'Integrated Literature of Buddhist Journals in the Republic of China' have been digitised, they have not been incorporated into databases. These Republican-era magazines, overlooked by databases, possess significant historical value for the study of modern Buddhism. For instance, the woodblocks at Gushan Yongquan Temple contain many unique Buddhist texts (Huachuan 2014:15–16); Suzhou Xiyuan Temple houses a large collection of ancient Buddhist scriptures and the Shanghai Library holds rare Buddhist documents. Taking Gushan as a case study, texts such as *Xu Huan Shan Lu* [续还山录], *Kaiyuan Yulu* [开元语录] and *Lingshi Yulu* [灵石语录] are available exclusively in Gushan editions. Furthermore, works including *Ba Shi Ba Fo Chan* [八十八佛忏], *Jingye Changke* [净业常课], *Xu Jingtu Sheng Wusheng Lun* [续净土生无生论], *Fayuan Wen Zhu* [发愿文注], *Jingtu Zhijue* [净土旨诀] and *Amituo Jing Luejie* [阿弥陀经略解] are of considerable significance because of their unique editions and textual historical value. Additionally, Gushan's historical patriarchal writings, such as *Gushan Shenyang Guoshi Xuanya Ji* [鼓山神晏国师玄要集], *Songxi Huayan Si Xuansi Chanshi Yulu* [松溪华严寺玄锡禅师语录], *Yashan Huigao Chanshi Yulu* [丫山晦杲禅师语录] and *Weijing Chanshi Yiyu* [惟静禅师遗语] are preserved as unique copies. This phenomenon is not restricted to Gushan and Xiyuan Temple. Based on my research experience, I have identified unique copies at the Tianyi Pavilion Library in Ningbo, the Zhejiang Provincial Library and the Sichuan Provincial Library. Moreover, numerous libraries outside China, such as the Cabinet Library in Japan, also possess extensive collections of valuable Chinese ancient texts. If these materials could be digitised and included in databases, these treasures of the Dharma, accumulated over centuries, would shine once more. Therefore, the application of E-textual research would lead to more fruitful outcomes in Buddhist studies.

Thirdly, platform integration. If research platforms, social media platforms, databases and self-media can be integrated without the need for switching between them, and this integration is achieved through E-textual research, studying Buddhism will become significantly more convenient. For instance, I once presented a paper titled 'Resistance under Buddhist Propaganda: The Publishing Industry of Buddhism in Hangzhou (1912–1948)' at the Third Lingyin Mountain Buddhist Culture Forum. While researching this article, I searched for books on Hangzhou Buddhism published between 1912 and 1948. I found a book published in 1939 titled *Record of the Establishment of Buddhism in Hangzhou* by Jianshan (1939:1) through a search in a bookseller's social media WeChat. This booklet introduces the dissemination of Japanese Buddhism in Hangzhou during Japan's occupation of the city. Previously, literature on Japan's use of religion for invasion consisted mainly of publicly issued newspapers; this book is a report, longer in length and used internally by Japanese Buddhists. The book explicitly states that the head of the Japanese military's secret service was well versed in Buddhism and established the Japanese-Chinese Buddhist Association as a wing of pacification work under the control of the secret service. This is direct evidence of the Japanese military's use of Buddhism for invasion. If platform integration is achieved, relevant research would advance more quickly.

Fourthly, the integration of technologies. In addition to the aforementioned technologies such as big data, storage, search and databases, integrating content from electronic documents about temples and monks' residences with geographic information system (GIS) would more intuitively display the activities of monks and the prosperity of regional Buddhism. Similarly, integrating blockchain into the Buddhist data system would create diverse data storage and distribution nodes, facilitating the digitisation and sharing of scattered Buddhist documents. Incorporating AI technology into the Buddhist data system could recreate the appearances of monks based on descriptions in some biographies.

Fifthly, the integration of functions. Currently, the mainstream database for E-textual research is CBETA, which is designed for scripture viewing. Therefore, many interdisciplinary functions of interest to researchers cannot be realised. For example, constructing interpersonal relationships through correspondence and poetry exchanges, or conducting quantitative analysis based on the number of temples and monks in a certain region. By applying E-textual research research methodology to conduct interdisciplinary research involving Buddhism, sociology, literature and geography, new issues and knowledge can emerge.

Sixthly, new ethical issues in academia. Some may question whether research derived from search tools constitutes genuine scholarship. In fact, E-textual research is merely a research tool. The critical tasks of filtering, analysing and synthesising information still require rational thought from researchers. Our ultimate research goal is the pursuit of truth, and E-textual research is just one of the many paths leading to that truth. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the professional competence of a Buddhist scholar in integrating Buddhist doctrines and history requires long-

term accumulation and persistent contemplation. This competence is not dependent on the proficiency and skill level in using databases.

Conclusion

As a research tool or method, E-textual research cannot be simply judged as good or bad. Shih (2003:363–390) believed that research is about providing examples for new insights, and the more examples there are, the more it exemplifies inductive reasoning. E-textual research can more efficiently break the limitations of time and space, uncovering more examples and evidence. The evidence uncovered can be digitised and incorporated into retrieval systems, including texts, photographs, inscriptions, paintings, calligraphy, maps, etc. Modern Buddhist literature databases are gradually integrating these contents. In a word, E-textual research is a method that has emerged to adapt to the vast amount of digitised Buddhist literature in contemporary times.

As a novel approach, E-textual research still requires refinement and offers ample room for broader discussion Researchers should be aware that E-textual research is neither omnipotent nor entirely intelligent. As previously noted, E-textual research faces significant challenges in tasks such as distinguishing genuine from fake materials, refining classical texts and analysing metaphysical issues. However, under current technological conditions, E-textual research cannot overcome these inherent limitations. Therefore, E-textual research should not and cannot replace human thought. However, under current technological conditions, E-textual research cannot overcome these inherent limitations. Therefore, it should not and cannot replace human thought. From our examination of the pros and cons of E-textual research, we are more convinced that E-textual research cannot abandon traditional research methods but should instead achieve a complementary relationship between traditional and modern methodologies. As Junchuan (2021:123), who has made substantial contributions to the application of E-textual research methods in recent years, stated, 'If a researcher with profound knowledge uses E-textual research tools, it truly adds wings to a tiger'.

E-textual research may bring about a paradigm shift in Buddhist studies. Historian Yinke (2001:266) once said, 'The scholarship of an era must have its new materials and new issues. Using these materials to explore problems is the new trend in the scholarship of that era'. E-textual research may indeed be a new method for acquiring new materials and addressing new issues in Buddhist studies in the digital age.

In conclusion, E-textual research offers significant potential for enhancing scholarly inquiry by leveraging digital technologies to access and analyse a broader range of data. It addresses the need for more efficient research methodologies in an era of abundant digital resources. However, it also faces substantial challenges, both inherent and external, which must be addressed to fully realise its benefits. By acknowledging its limitations and integrating it with traditional research methods, E-textual research can contribute to the field of Buddhist studies and beyond.

Finally, it is crucial to emphasise that literature forms the bedrock of scholarly research. Nonetheless, it must be recognised that researchers' perspectives and experiences differ when engaging with photographs as opposed to physical texts. Consequently, traditional printed documents, particularly those of historical significance, should not be disregarded. Furthermore, traditional texts remain indispensable in the study of newly discovered materials, as they continue to provide essential foundational support in research.

Acknowledgements

References

Bingenheimer, M., 2021, 'Digital tools for Buddhist studies', in C.D. Cantwell & K. Petersen (eds.), *digital humanities and research methods in religious studies*, pp. 3–30, De Gruyter, Berlin.

Cheng, L., 1991, *Methodology of Buddhist studies*, Jiangsu Guangling Ancient Books Publishing House, Nanjing.

Guangchang, F., 2023, *Introduction to Han Chinese Buddhist Philology*, Social Science Literature Publishing House, Beijing.

Huachuan, J., 2014, *The literature study on Gushan Cao Dong Sect in Ming and Qing Dynasties*, Social Sciences Literature Press, Beijing.

Jianshan, D., 1939, *Record of the establishment of Buddhism in Hangzhou*, Japan Association Publishing Department, Tokyo.

Junchuan, A., 2021, 'Discussing E-textual research', in A. Junchuan (ed.), *Reading and living*, pp. 120–123, Guangxi Normal University Press, Guilin.

Junchuan, A., 2023, *E-textual research stories: From the Qing Dynasty to the Republic of China*, China Bookstore, Beijing.

Juzan, S., 2000, 'The Foreign Monk Chao Kung', in *Complete works of Juzan*, pp. 455–466, Jiangsu Classics Publishing House, Nanjing.

Mitsuyoshi, S., 1989, 'Origins and idealism', in K. Kawada & H. Nakamra (eds.), *Huayan thought*, pp. 221–297, Far Press, Taipei.

Liandong, W., 2023, 'The text, notes and functional transformation of "Buddhahood Guidance": From games to teaching aids', *World Religious Studies* 45(6), 40–47. https://doi.org/10.3969/j.issn.1000-4289.2023.06.006

Mantao, Z. (ed.), 1981, *Methods of Buddhist studies,* Dasheng Culture Publishing House, Taipei.

Manzhi, S., 1931, 'Another foreigner becomes a monk in China', *Voice of the Sea Tide* 12(09), 65–72.

Ning, C., 2010, 'The secret life of Tribisky-Lincoln', *World Expo* 26(08), 83–84.

Qichao, L., 2014, *Eighteen essays on Buddhist studies,* The Commercial Press, Beijing.

Rujun, W., 2006, *Methodology of Buddhist studies*, Taiwan Student Bookstore, Taipei.

Shanshan, G., 2018, 'Several new discoveries regarding Huayan Fa Realm View Tongxuan Ji', *Journal of Sun Yat-sen University* 58(02), 133–140. https://doi.org/10.13471/j.cnki.jsysusse.2018.02.014.

Shih, H., 2003, 'Scholarly methods of the Qing Dynasty Scholars', in J. Xianlin (ed.), *Complete works of Hu Shih, vol. 1*, pp. 363–390, Anhui Education Press, Hefei.

Shuwei, G., 2018, 'Search again for Tongxuan Ji ①: Tracing ancient temples', in *The paper – Shanghai book review*, viewed 07 September 2018, from https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1610912610600508809.

Yinke, C., 2001, 'Chen Yuan Dunhuang Catastrophe record preface', in C. Yinke (ed.), *Jinming hall collected manuscripts, Volume II*, pp. 266–268, Sanlian Bookstore, Beijing.

Yinong, H., 2006, *Two-headed snake: The first generation of Catholics in Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasties*, Shanghai Classics Publishing House, Shanghai.

Yinshun, S., 2011, *Studying Buddhism through Buddhism*, Zhonghua Book Company, Beijing.

Zhaocheng, S., 2012, 'Exploration of electronicization of Buddhist scriptures: international trends and breakthroughs in China', viewed 29 February 2012, from https://fo.ifeng.com/special/qianlongdazhangjing/zhangjingyanjiu/detail_2012_02/29/12871878_0.shtml