

EMPRESSES, *BHIKṢUṆĪS*, AND WOMEN OF PURE FAITH

EMPRESSES, *BHIKṢUṆĪS*, AND WOMEN OF PURE FAITH:
BUDDHISM AND THE POLITICS OF PATRONAGE IN THE NORTHERN WEI

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a study of the contributions that women made to the early development of Chinese Buddhism during the Northern Wei Dynasty 北魏 (386–534 CE). Working with the premise that Buddhism was patronized as a necessary, secondary arm of government during the Northern Wei, the argument put forth in this dissertation is that women were uniquely situated to play central roles in the development, expansion, and policing of this particular form of state-sponsored Buddhism due to their already high status as a religious elite in Northern Wei society. Furthermore, in acting as representatives and arbiters of this state-sponsored Buddhism, women of the Northern Wei not only significantly contributed to the spread of Buddhism throughout East Asia, but also, in so doing, they themselves gained increased social mobility and enhanced social status through their affiliation with the new, foreign, and wildly popular Buddhist tradition. Throughout the dissertation, stories of empresses, concubines, female bureaucrats, lay devotees, and female members of the Buddhist monastic institution will be studied in order to show the unique connections between women and the Buddhist tradition under the Northern Wei and also to reveal the diversity of roles that they played in the administration of a court-sponsored, imperial Buddhist tradition. In bringing these stories to light, this dissertation will utilize biographical material from the dynastic history of the Northern Wei as well as from a number of previously unstudied epigraphs. Additionally, other forms of inscriptional, religious, and secular materials will be widely consulted in this exploration of the lives of Buddhist women at a time when Buddhism was becoming a state religion in a powerful and ambitious dynasty – the Northern Wei.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a study of the contributions that women made to the early development of Chinese Buddhism during the Northern Wei dynasty 北魏 (386–534 CE). Working with the premise that Buddhism was patronized as a secondary arm of government during the Northern Wei, I argue that women were uniquely situated to play central roles in the development, expansion, and policing of this particular form of state-sponsored Buddhism, and that in so doing they gained increased social mobility and enhanced social status while significantly contributing to the spread of Buddhism throughout East Asia. As such, this study is largely an examination of the art-historical, epigraphical, and textual remains that tell the story of the roles that political Buddhist women played at the Northern Wei court and in support of the dynasty's larger projects of building an imperial Buddhism. This story, a meta-story created by the interweaving of the narratives of individual women and men along with stories about the rise of the non-Chinese empire of the Northern Wei, is largely an attempt to uncover and put forth for examination a chronicle of the formation of a type of courtly Buddhism that came to characterize Buddhism in East Asia; a Buddhism that looks to the Buddha as religio-political figurehead, but which uses classical, Han-Chinese court and bureaucratic structures in its administration, structures that are often under the auspices of political women. In order to begin an exploration of these structures and the individual players within them, I would like to open with a single story of one woman who lived this courtly Buddhism throughout her life, as her story offers context to many of the themes that will be discussed throughout this dissertation.

Lady Feng, as she is commonly called, or Empress Dowager Feng, Feng Taihou 馮太后 (442–490 CE),¹ was one of the Northern Wei's most successful politicians with respect to both her ambitious rise to power and to the efficiency with which she undertook many of her aims for the empire. According to her biography in the *History of the North* (*Beishi* 北史), Empress Dowager Feng ruled behind her own husband, Emperor Wencheng, or Wenchengdi 文成帝 (r. 452–465) while he was still alive and then behind his child, Emperor Xianwen, or Xianwendi 獻文帝 (r. 466–471), staging a coup and then putting that child's own mother to death in order to do so. She then poisoned that child emperor once he grew to manhood and became a challenge to her, only to raise that child emperor's son, Xiaowendi 孝文帝 (r. 471–499 CE), whom she herself established as a child emperor and ruled behind as Empress Dowager, having also murdered that child's mother. In total, Empress Dowager Feng ruled the Northern Wei for most of her life, doing so behind three of the most influential of the Northern Wei emperors. She held court in her own name, made important political and military decisions, pushed the Northern Wei court towards the adoption of traditional Han Chinese modes of dress and leadership,² and brought the empire to the heights of its power, being the only northern

¹ Empress Dowager Feng's posthumous name is Wencheng Wenming Huanghou 文成文明皇后, or the "The August Empress Wencheng who is Cultured and Enlightened."

² The increasing use of Han Chinese elements over the course of the rule of the Northern Wei has often been termed as a process of "sinification" based on the Chinese term, *hanhua* 漢化. For a thorough study of the policies of the Northern Wei that have been considered "*hanhua*" see: Sun 2005. Though the term is accurate in the sense that Northern Wei and other groups certainly took on Chinese innovations in their own courts, it does suggest a sort of passive absorption of dominant Han culture by a minority group,

dynasty to establish its capital south of the Luo River, in Luoyang 洛陽.

Furthermore, Empress Dowager Feng did all of this as a Buddhist. She demonstrated her public patronage of Buddhism by overseeing much of the building of the imperial shrines at the Buddhist cave site of Yungang 雲崗, a site that will be discussed in detail below but which, in brief, enshrines five buddhas which represent the four past rulers of the Northern Wei as well as the then current ruler.³ Eugene Wang argues that the Empress Dowager's own genius can still be seen at the site in one unique pictorial program known as the "two Buddha" motif, which he believes represents both the Empress Dowager and the child Emperor Xiaowen envisioned as the two buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna in the famous *Lotus Sūtra* scene of their meeting in a jeweled stupa.⁴ Evidently, then, not only did Empress Dowager Feng consider herself the rightful ruler of the Northern Wei, she also considered herself akin to a Buddha. Moreover, the numbers of Buddhist temples, monasteries, and monastic residents increased dramatically under her reign⁵ and she and her female kinsmen were famous at court for their study of Buddhist sūtras. As we will see below, her biography reads as a

and I would rather suggest that the Northern Wei took on bits of Han culture, as they sought necessary, as a self-conscious political choice.

³ The five early cave shrines, built around 460 CE, are the so-called Tanyao 曇耀 group, as they were designed by the monk Tanyao (f.c. 450 CE) who was in charge of the administration of the monastic community in the mid-fourth century. For a review of scholarship on the buddha-ruler identification with the Northern Wei rulers, see: Tseng 2013, 53. However, for a foundational work on the topic see: Soper 1966.

⁴ Wang 2009, 7.

⁵ For a breakdown of the numbers of monasteries that were built throughout her rule and also for a list of the edicts made in support of Buddhism, see figures four and seven of this dissertation.

tribute to her Buddhist affiliation – characterizing her as a sort of renunciant ruler, doing away with the extravagances of the imperial household while building Buddhist temples and statuary.⁶

This story of Empress Dowager Feng clearly exemplifies the sort of undeniable relationship between political women and Buddhism that I wish to reveal, analyze, and explain throughout the pages of this study. As a northern woman participating in the court of a non-Han ethnic group, she maneuvered her way to the highest position in the government of the Northern Wei by recourse to three main currents of power: 1) the Buddhist institution; 2) the non-Chinese court in which she participated, and; 3) Han Chinese culture which she worked to integrate into both her court and the Northern Wei's patronage of Buddhism. It is my contention that her story is unique to her situation of being a woman in the court of the Northern Wei at a time when the Northern Wei had taken control over large portions of the Chinese empire and at a time, also, when Buddhism was gaining wide popularity. Thus, in order to understand her life and her rule, and by extension to know about this court Buddhism that featured female politicians, we need first to understand more about the Northern Wei.

The Whats and Whys of the Northern Wei

The Northern Wei dynasty was a successful tribal confederation ruled over by the Tuoba 拓拔, or Tabgach, people in the north of China that enjoyed social, political, religious, and military advances during a time of momentous transition in China that

⁶ For a full translation of another of her biographies, preserved in the *Book of the Wei* or *Weishu* 魏書, see chapter three of this dissertation.

historians refer to as the Six Dynasties, or liuchao 六朝 (220–589 CE).⁷ Specifically, the Northern Wei is considered the most powerful northern dynasty of a temporal subset of the Six Dynasties, the Southern and Northern Dynasties, or Nanbeichao 南北朝 (420–589 CE).⁸ This rather confusing classification of dates comes from the fact that China, for the entire 469 years of the Six Dynasties, was not a unified entity. Bookended by the fall of the powerful Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) and re-unification under the short-lived but successful Sui 隋 dynasty (581–618 CE), the Six Dynasties was a time of both division and reconfiguration in China; due to national disunity, clear dividing lines emerged between the north and the south, with both regions housing powerful and distinct ruling houses. In a recent overview of this period, Mark Edward Lewis argues that the most dramatic transition that China underwent throughout this period was the change in geography that came about due to a lack of a centralized government and new patterns of migration. Specifically, he points to the settlement of the areas south of the Yangze River by Han migrants as a major feature of the time and makes clear the fact that they settled there due to increased conquest of the northern parts of traditional China

⁷ The name “Six Dynasties” refers to the six dynasties during this time of division that made their capital in the south, in Nanjing 南京, due to increased pressure by non-Han groups in the north of China, such as our Tuoba, sending Han Chinese migrants southward.

⁸ As the Northern Wei is a northern dynasty it does not accord well with the paradigms contained in our understanding of either the Six Dynasties or the Southern and Northern Dynasties, as both of these are dated by using events in the politics of the south. Hence, though the Northern Wei is not one of the “Six Dynasties” it is also begun significantly before the official start date of the Southern and Northern dynasties set with the fall of the powerful, and southern, Jin Dynasty 晉朝 (265–420 CE).

by groups such as the Tuoba.⁹ As such, the long span of time that was the Six Dynasties is characterized by a general lack of sustained political unity throughout the Chinese realm resulting in civil war and successive regime changes until reunification under the Sui and the subsequent unity and prosperity of the Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907 CE). Both the Six Dynasties and the Southern and Northern Dynasties were therefore times of violence and rebellion wherein various political powers were competing for control of China's traditional territory and its resources, and the people that they ruled over were gravitating away from the centrality of a unified governmental system and taking refuge in new forms of social organization such as powerful family lineages.¹⁰

Although this period of time was violent, politically disparate, and without the products of a centralized government and literati culture such as the institutes of higher learning and philosophy that we associate with the Han, it was nonetheless one of the most exciting and innovative time periods in the history of China.¹¹ For both north and south, this period of division was a time of tremendous creativity, ingenuity, and development: great strides were made in political and technological advancements between competing groups,¹² China itself became increasingly globalized as people

⁹ Lewis 2009, 1.

¹⁰ For a sustained and enlightened discussion of the new social spaces that arose as a result of the fall of the Han dynasty, see chapter four of Lewis, 2009.

¹¹ Al Dien explains that although the Six Dynasties are often compared with the European Dark Ages, for it was a time of violence, struggle, and political unity, this comparison is not quite apt because of the negative connotations of the European middle ages. Rather, he argues, though the Six Dynasties is characterized by strife, rebellion, and violence, it is also one of China's most dynamic time periods wherein great innovations were made in religion, technology, warfare, domestic life, and agriculture (2007, 1).

¹² For an example of the military innovations introduced in this time period, see: Dien 1986.

began looking beyond their borders for support and innovation, and non-Chinese groups took control of large portions of traditional Chinese territory. Again, according to Lewis, the large-scale presence of non-Chinese peoples in traditional Chinese cultural areas during the Six Dynasties, “made possible a broader, more encompassing world”¹³ than what was known in prior ages, and that by the Tang approximately 1.7 million foreigners had become Tang subjects. Lewis thus argues that, “These Japanese, Koreans, Sogdians, and others played crucial roles in government, receiving the highest military and civilian posts.”¹⁴ The internationalization of China at this time is well seen in the subject of this study – the Northern Wei – for it was the first non-Chinese court to take a traditionally southern capital in Luoyang.

Along with this increased exposure to foreign peoples and toleration of new ideas, innovative schools of religion and philosophy sprung up out of the decay that was the great philosophical schools of the Han. Buddhism became an established and institutionalized religion in China during the Southern and Northern Dynasties with a significant monastic presence, imperially funded translation efforts, monasteries, temples, and a large congregation. This spurred China’s indigenous tradition of Daoism to also develop in similar ways. Specific to the study at hand, and to be discussed in much more detail, the tradition of Buddhism underwent a complete metamorphosis during the Six Dynasties – changing from an undeniably foreign tradition to one that was distinctly

¹³ Lewis 2009, 150.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Chinese. Indeed, this creation of a “Chinese Buddhism,”¹⁵ aided as it was by increased trade and travel to Central Asia and India, is a hallmark of the Six Dynasties in that it reveals just to what extent people were looking away from the centrality of the Han Chinese tradition of religion and learning and toward new technologies, ways of social organization, and ideas. In part due to its non-Chinese origins and thus proximity to foreign technologies, languages, and practices, Buddhism spread unrestrained throughout all of China during the Six Dynasties, and incorporated South, Central, and East Asian elements into a uniquely Chinese form of Buddhism, one that would come to dominate the entire religious marketplace of all of East Asia.

Despite the wide prosperity of Buddhism both north and south, the major defining feature of the Six Dynasties was the clear division between north and south, with southern dynasties being ruled by Han Chinese and northern dynasties being ruled by non-Han groups. Unlike the southern dynasties ruled by Han people who were able to

¹⁵ It is difficult to say what “Chinese Buddhism” is, for, as with any religion, there are multiple forms of belief and practice at play in what we label as a singular entity. However, as a few defining principles, it is clear that Buddhism in China is a religion of cosmic exchange that aids its believers in providing a better afterlife for their parents and ancestors, and which combines Indian notions of karma and the exchange of merit with the Chinese belief in providing care for one’s dead kin in the netherworld. Chinese Buddhism is largely a tradition of providing aid in the afterlife through the petition of a select number of Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas as well as Śākyamuni himself and the future Buddha, Maitreya. This is not to say that Chinese Buddhists were not interested in Buddhist philosophy, as indeed the great translation projects of early medieval China and the prominent schools resulting from those translations suggest otherwise; however, there is a popular notion throughout all of East Asia that Buddhism is a religion to die with, and I do believe that this notion is unique to the East Asian tradition which, of course, finds its roots in China. Furthermore, in keeping with the Northern Wei, it is evident that Buddhism was a devotional tradition of karmic exchange and was not engaged in discussions of Buddhist philosophy.

trace their history through an illustrious line of Chinese dynasts by using a compendium of texts composed in the Chinese language, the northern dynasties were ruled by non-Chinese tribal groups, collectively known as “barbarians” or *hu* 胡 by the Han, who did not compose texts in their indigenous languages. These “barbarians” were largely nomadic, horse-breeding tribal groups unified along linguistic and familial lines, some of them speaking languages related to modern Turkish. According to Nicola Di Cosmo, during the Han, these groups were judged to be “primitive” and hence inferior to Han peoples due to their lack of proximity to the imperial center.¹⁶ According to the *Book of the Wei* (*Weishu* 魏書¹⁷), composed in the Northern Qi 北齊 (550–577 CE) by a historian trained in the Northern Wei named Wei Shou 魏收 (506–572 CE), these northern people were pastoral and primitive in that they did not participate in the creation of an elite city culture, preferring instead a nomadic lifestyle as herders.¹⁸ Yet they were not disorganized. These groups, among them the Xianbei 鮮卑 (of which the Tuoba are a subgroup), Murong 慕容, and Xiongnu 匈奴, organized themselves in tribal affiliations, making alliances with each other when necessary for peace, development, and the ascension to power.¹⁹

¹⁶ Di Cosmo 2009, 202.

¹⁷ For references from the *Book of the Wei*, I have used the Zhonghua Shuju edition: Wei 2009. All translations are my own and the Chinese text is available in appendix one.

¹⁸ Wei 2009, 1

¹⁹ In contemporary times and in English, the scholar whose work has shed the most light on China’s early northern nomadic groups is certainly Nicola di Cosmo. Particularly, his 2002 book, *Ancient China and Its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Powers in East Asian History*, provides a detailed description of where these groups came from and the relations they had with each other and with the Han Chinese through the Eastern Han, the fall of the Han, and the Six Dynasties. Beyond Di Cosmo’s work, a few classic studies

The histories and social customs of these northern peoples have long been observed and recorded by Han Chinese scholars and writers. For example, in the section of the *Latter History of the Han* (*Hou Hanshu* 後漢書), called the “Biographies of the Wuhuan and the Xianbei”²⁰ it states that:

With regard to the Xianbei, they were also a branch of the eastern barbarian tribes.²¹ They administered the region of Mt. Xianbei, and hence they were named after this region. It is said that their language, learning, and customs were the very same as the Wuhuan.²² The only time they cut their hair²³ was prior to their wedding ceremony, which was held during the spring at a great assembly in Raoleshui where they drank and feasted together, and then afterwards the marriage would take place. Further, their birds and animals are different from those in China: they have wild horses, grazing sheep, and horned cattle, whose horns they use to pull things and hence they are customarily called “the horned pullers.” Also they have sables, *na* 獬,²⁴ and *hun* 羆²⁵ whose pelt is soft and smooth and thus used to make the finest fur cloaks in all the world.²⁶

have been undertaken by Peter Boodberg and published in the 1930s in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1936, 1938, and 1939).

²⁰ *Wuhuan Xianbei Liezhuan* 烏桓鮮卑列傳; this fascinating section on the barbarians of the eastern tribes deals with the Wuhuan and the Xianbei as similar groups that come together to create later Xianbei history.

²¹ According to the *Latter History of the Han*, they share this affiliation with the Xiongnu and with the Wuhuan, with whom the texts says they have much in common.

²² The Wuhuan tribe is discussed prior to this section and it is stated that they have no written language and are nomadic herders. It is also stated that they have a marriage custom that involves the man cutting off his hair.

²³ According to eminent scholar of the Six Dynasties, Wang Zhongluo, the Xianbei were considered to be the Wuhuan who cut their hair (2008, 476).

²⁴ As for what this mysterious animal truly is, the Han Dictionary, the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字, says that it was a beast with no legs and it cites the *Hanlü* 漢律 in saying that whoever can hunt it can earn much reward. According to the “Notices on Rare Animals” (*Yiwu zhi* 異物志) from the Book of the Tang (*Tangshu* 唐書), it appears that this animal originally came from Korea, but is associated with the western regions of China and is fox-like in figure, black in colour, and missing its two front legs.

²⁵ Again according to the *Shuowen Jiezi*, this animal appears to be some kind of rodent whose pelt is used to make fur cloaks.

²⁶ Li and Fan 1965, 2985; translation is my own. For the Chinese text, see appendix two.

Despite their evident differences from the Han Chinese who had long been settled in cities by the Six Dynasties, one of the greatest projects of these northern groups was their move toward a more “Chinese” or Han society. This was undertaken in order to become more like their counterparts in the south who were descendants of the great Han civilization, so as to compete with them in power and control of the land. Aware of their southern stigmatization as “barbarians,” Northern Wei rulers embarked on ambitious projects of sinification to more closely align themselves with the dominant Han Chinese in the south, eventually gaining literacy in the Chinese language and taking Chinese family names.²⁷ This move toward sinification coincided with the Northern Wei’s gradual move away from a nomadic, herding lifestyle and to a more urban one. The Northern Wei rulers eventually adopted Chinese rules of imperial succession as well as the Chinese penal code, and to support their new-found state structure they relocated tens of thousands of villagers to the cities and established an equal-field system, essentially settling the nomadic peoples of the north in to an agrarian lifestyle serviced and ruled by a Han-style government.²⁸ The southern dynasties, too, were marked by this project of sinification, but it was largely undertaken by Han officials looking to amalgamate the tribal peoples living in the extreme south of the country. As such, Han Chinese civilization grew to have unparalleled influence across the landscape of what we now

²⁷ In an unprecedented move toward sinification, the Northern Wei rulers took the Chinese surname *Yuan* 元 in 496 CE and simultaneously forbade the use of their own language, which was of Turkish origin. A list of all the Chinese surnames taken by the Tuoba peoples is available in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009, 113).

²⁸ Wang 2008, 487. Also, Sun provides a useful chart of the numbers of Han Chinese bureaucrats employed at the Northern Wei court under different emperors (2005, 51–52).

consider to be modern China, uniting diverse peoples under a sino-centric form of government and language. Thus, although the Southern and Northern Dynasties were a time of division, the effect that they had on the later unity of the country is undeniable. By spreading Han Chinese culture and language to new and foreign empires, and by developing Han Chinese political and religious systems far and wide, the Southern and Northern Dynasties set the stage for later cultural and economic coherence and success in the Tang and beyond.

Beyond the Northern Wei: The Wider Context for this Dissertation

The Northern Wei had a pronounced effect on both the development of later China and on China's neighbours. As the largest and most powerful northern dynasty, the Northern Wei's adoption of Chinese names, language, and court would ensure that the north of China would forever be integrated into Chinese culture in a way that it never was before. Further, the power and prestige of Northern Wei leaders guaranteed that they would not disappear from the face of Chinese politics after the collapse of the dynasty. For example, during the Tang, Empress Wu, or Zetian Huanghou 則天皇后 (625–705 CE)²⁹ had strong connections with the Northern Wei. The Empress was of direct Northern Wei descent: her ancestors in her father's line held official positions in both the courts of the Northern Wei and the Northern Qi, generally held to be the successor dynasty of the Northern Wei. Her great, great, great-grandfather was a certain Wu Keyi

²⁹ Empress Wu's full posthumous title is: Zetian Shunsheng Huang Hou 則天順聖皇后, or the August Empress Zetian who Follows the Sages.

武克己³⁰ who was a high-ranking official under the Northern Wei and she herself posthumously bestowed the title of the Duke of Lu 魯國公 on him. His son, Wu Juchang 武居常³¹ was a general under the Northern Qi, and Empress Wu bestowed the rank of Tai Wei 太尉, or Great Officer on him. Furthermore, beyond China's geographical boundaries, the Northern Wei also had an impact on the larger East Asian cultural sphere, including Silla, Korea (57 BCE–935 CE) as well as Yamato (250–587 CE) and Nara (710–794 CE), Japan. According to Herman Ooms, the early courts of Japan were well aware of the power and prestige of the Northern Wei in that the dynasty held a certain fascination for them: they adopted the Northern Wei's legal codes, Yamato archaeological sites contain Northern Wei mirrors, and a number of important names and phrases were adopted from the Northern Wei into Japanese parlance. For example, he argues that the Yamato pronunciation for Pingcheng 平城 – the first capital of the Northern Wei – was in fact Heijō (Nara).³² As for the Korean Kingdom of Silla, Northern Wei motifs show up in the ornamentation of Silla objects,³³ and moreover, unique glasswork bowls developed in the early Northern Wei capital of Pingcheng, modern-day Datong 大同, have been found in Silla tombs,³⁴ while a wooden pagoda at the Hwangnyong Monastery 皇龍寺 was likely modeled after a similar, and very famous

³⁰ The precise dates for Wu Keyi are unknown though he must have thrived in the mid-sixth century. Empress Wu bestowed this posthumous honor on him in 684 CE.

³¹ Like Wu Keyi, we do not know the precise dates of Wu Juchang, though he thrived in the Northern Qi. He was also given this posthumous honour by Empress Wu in 684 CE.

³² Ooms 2008, 164.

³³ Carriere 2006, 178.

³⁴ Soyoung and Patry Leidy 2013, 123.

one, in Northern Wei Luoyang.³⁵ Thus, although the topic of the precise depth and breadth of political influence of the Northern Wei on both China and the larger East Asian cultural sphere is not as of yet well studied, it is safe to say that the Northern Wei was considered a powerful Chinese dynasty by later China as well as by Korea and Japan, and they thus looked to the dynasty for support in establishing their own Chinese-style empires, as the Northern Wei had doubtless been successful in doing as such. Finally, one telling bit of information on just how powerful and widespread the Northern Wei truly was, is the simple fact that the Uyghur equivalent underlying the word “Tuoba,” as in the name of the rulers of the Northern Wei, was used in Uyghur-language sources to refer to China in general centuries after the demise of the dynasty itself.³⁶ And further in this vein, the Byzantine historian Theophylact Simocatta (*f.c.* 630 CE) records in his *Historiae* that what is now recognized to be China was then called *Taugust* as was the capital city and the ruling class – a name that certainly means Tuoba.³⁷

Specific to the topic of this dissertation, the precise alignment between women, politics, and Buddhism that we see in the Northern Wei also has deep and specific resonances with similar connections seen in Tang-dynasty China. Although lesser known than her Tang Dynasty counterpart, Empress Wu, Empress Dowager Feng may well have

³⁵ Carriere 2006, 94.

³⁶ In Uyghur sources, the name for China is *Tawɣač* (variants *tawqač*, *tabɣač*), which is taken from the word “tuoba,” which in Middle Chinese was presumably pronounced *t'ak-pat- and was a rendering of the native ethnonym of the Northern Wei dynasty (Von Gabain 1950, 181). The earliest Uyghur document where this appellation is found is the Tonyukuk inscription, dated to 716—725 (Geng 2010, 206).

³⁷ Boodberg 1936, 223.

been the template that Empress Wu modeled herself after.³⁸ A few hundred years after Empress Dowager Feng, in 690 of the Common Era, Empress Wu became the first and only woman to govern China in her own name, and she did so as a Buddhist – a politically savvy and seemingly power-hungry Buddhist. First holding a position as concubine to Emperor Taizong, or Tang Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626–649 CE), she then, after his death, married his son and successor, Emperor Gaozong, or Tang Gaozong 唐高宗 (r. 649–683 CE) and is said to have had much power over him. Upon his death, Empress Wu decided not to pursue another position as concubine or wife to an emperor and instead usurped the Tang, renaming it the Zhou 周 (690–705 CE) and ruling in her own name for fifteen years. In so doing, she renewed official court patronage of Buddhism, and her rule saw the re-envisioning of Empress Dowager Feng’s “Two-Sages” motif in paintings at Dunhuang.³⁹ Her support of the Buddhist tradition was mutually beneficial; she built Buddhist temples and statuary, and the Buddhist community, whom she sponsored, authored an apocryphal text naming her as a *cakravartin*, or a divine Buddhist ruler, despite the fact that a woman can be neither a ruler in the Chinese sense nor a *cakravartin* in the Indian sense. To further her identification as a *cakravartin*, Empress Wu initiated a

³⁸ Major studies of Empress Wu include: Guisso 1978, Forte 1988, Chen 1994, Chen 2002b, and Twitchett 2003. Most of these studies have been based on the biographies of Empress Wu available in the *New Book of the Tang* (*xintangshu* 新唐書) as well as later secondary sources that tend to put the Empress in a negative – as a seductress and a usurper. Recently, Jowen Tung has given a different treatment to the figure of Empress Wu through an attempt to extricate her story from the largely patriarchal annals of Chinese history (2000, 57).

³⁹ Wang 2005, 141.

large-scale religio-political cult of the veneration of relics across her realm⁴⁰ in much the same fashion as did the famous Indian *cakravartin*, King Aśoka (r. 270–232 BCE) and her predecessor, Emperor Wen of the Sui, or Suiwendi 隨文帝 (r. 581–604 CE). In so doing, she consolidated her power over the realm through encouraging participation in Buddhist worship among the populace, a worship that was directed at her as the figurehead, both politically and religiously. Furthermore, she was the foremost patron of the Buddhist caves at the Northern Wei's second cave site of Longmen, commissioning so many caves that her reign is known to have ushered in a mature Tang style of building at that site. Beginning her building projects at Longmen in 662 of the common era, she eventually succeeded in building the largest grotto at the site, the Fengxian Temple 奉先寺, with its soaring image of the Buddha Vairocana.⁴¹ Empress Wu is thus remembered throughout the annals of Chinese history for her rare position as the only female ruler of China, a role that is forever paired with stories of her being both a ruthless politician and a promiscuous woman who brought her lovers to the imperial bed, yet also for her simultaneous Buddhist piety, a piety that smacks of her religio-political machinations. And it must be remembered that she, like Empress Dowager Feng before her, was a woman of northern descent.

The seeming rarity of the reigns of both Empress Dowager Feng and Empress Wu, rare not only because the Chinese court system leaves no space for female leadership but also because Buddhism is not thought to be a religion particularly accepting of

⁴⁰ For more on this, see: Chen 2002.

⁴¹ For more on this, see: McNair 1994, 68 ff.

women's bodies,⁴² is made somewhat less rare when we look across the ocean to China's neighbours. Indeed, between the reigns of these two Chinese empresses, both the Korean Kingdom of Silla and Japan's Yamato Dynasty witnessed their first ever female rulers, female rulers who were Buddhist: both Japan's Empress Suiko (r. 592–628 CE) and Korea's Queen Seondeok (r. 632–647 CE) became the first in successive lines of female rulers, and both of them worked diligently to support Buddhism in their realms. Empress Suiko was known to lecture on Buddhist texts and she legally recognized Buddhism as an official religion in Yamato⁴³ whereas Queen Seondeok commissioned the building of the previously mentioned nine-story wooden pagoda at Hwangnyong Monastery. Herman Ooms discusses this rare collection of East Asian female rulers in the seventh century, but he does not take into account their shared Buddhist patronage.⁴⁴

Taken together, these four women, and those few who came after them in both Silla and Yamato/Nara during the 5—8th centuries, represent a particular moment in history – a moment in which women seem to have had success as political leaders in the early developments of their empires, empires all noted for their Buddhist patronage. This is particularly interesting given that prior to the lives of these women, the Chinese imperial tradition has consistently venerated the “Son of Heaven” (*tianzi* 天子) as the leader of the realm, never the daughter. Thus, in being foundational rulers in their

⁴² The problem of a female form has been long documented both in Buddhist texts and in secondary studies of said texts. In brief, it is stated that the female body cannot take on the state of Buddhahood without first taking on a male form. This topic will be addressed in chapter three.

⁴³ For more on Suiko's Buddhism and her connections with the mainland, see: Piggott 1997, 95 – 97.

⁴⁴ Ooms 2008, 13.

empires – Empress Dowager Feng at the helm of a powerful new dynasty from the north of China, Empress Wu in charge of a newly unified China, and Empress Suiko and Queen Seondeok working to establish a complex Chinese-style court in their lands – these female leaders simultaneously facilitated the rise of a traditional-Chinese court system, including legal and penal codes, imperial rituals, and the adoption of the classical Chinese language and its associated names and ranks, yet they did so as nominally Buddhist women. Looked at somewhat differently, it can be said that all of their realms – Northern Wei and Tang China, Yamato/Nara Japan, and Silla, Korea – adopted a sort of Buddhist/courtly hybrid tradition used in state building and state leadership; an imperial Buddhism noted for its strong patronage of the Buddha as a religio-political figurehead, but which also used traditionally Chinese modes and strategies of rule, the Chinese calendar, and the Chinese language. This form of Buddhism-at-court seems to have been a conflux of ideas and practices in which women were able to climb to high positions in society as politicians.

As evidenced by Empresses Feng, Wu, and Suiko, and Queen Seondeok, women fared well within this nexus of courtly Buddhist rule; the question, however, is why? Why did Buddhist women succeed politically in the 5–8th centuries, at a time when all of East Asia was adopting traditional Chinese forms of statecraft alongside Buddhism? A possible answer, I believe, lies in a study of the precise alignment between political women and Buddhism in the Northern Wei, as the dynasty not only reveals the earliest manifestation of this phenomenon, but also because the history is particularly well documented in the art-historical, epigraphical, and textual record. As such, in order to

advance an understanding to the question of why, precisely, early medieval courtly Buddhism was a favourable environment for female politicians, this dissertation will offer a detailed analysis of the Buddhist tradition from the perspective of the women of the Northern Wei court. This analysis will include an examination of the particular nature of Northern Wei society, a non-Chinese dynasty in its roots that was working vigorously on becoming more Chinese, an investigation into the nature, popularity and bureaucracy of Buddhism under the Northern Wei court, an inquiry into the status of women in the political bureaucracy of the Northern Wei as well as in larger society, research into a few contemporaneous and popular Buddhist texts of the time that may shed light on the question of female leadership, and finally a survey of the roles that political women played within the newly-developing Buddhist monastic community of the day.

Sources for the Study of the Northern Wei

This dissertation will further proceed to tell the story of the connection between political women in the Northern Wei by focusing largely on the inscriptional record of the dynasty. As for inscriptional sources, two types of inscriptions will feature significantly in this study: the first are Buddhist votive inscriptions, many of which are from the Northern Wei Buddhist cave site of Longmen; the second are tomb inscriptions of Northern Wei nuns and elite Buddhist women, many from the imperial burial site of Mt. Mang, or Mang Shan 邙山.⁴⁵ Working from a set of approximately 100 Northern

⁴⁵ The Northern Wei created both the Buddhist cave sites of Longmen and Yungang, yet unlike Longmen, Yungang is rather void of written inscriptions, though the images represented tell the story of Empress Dowager Feng and will be dealt with in this dissertation.

Wei inscriptions,⁴⁶ I will show that the most immediately striking feature of the inscriptional record of the Northern Wei is that in the rise of this new medium, women are represented equally to men in their social and religious functions: donating images, acting as image presiders, making imperial edicts, serving as leaders of village religious societies, acting as go-betweens from the court to the larger community, coming together in gendered groups to donate images, educating the royal family as Buddhists, and acting as politicians at court.⁴⁷ The inscriptional record of the Northern Wei is highly informative – it provides a picture of the Northern Wei in which Buddhism is flourishing among many segments of the population, among both men and women, and in forms varying from the most elite possible to the most common, and hence any study of Buddhism in the Northern Wei that does not consult the inscriptional record is an incomplete one.

Beyond the inscriptional record itself, the larger art-historical record that these inscriptions accompany is rich for the Northern Wei and will be consulted at length

⁴⁶ The major collections of inscriptions that I am using throughout this dissertation include: Zhao 1992, Yan 1966, Luo 2004, Zhao 2006, and Beijing Tushuguan (1989-1998). Many of these inscriptions have been made available to me in digital format through a database held at the Centre for the Study of Chinese Characters at East China Normal University in Shanghai.

⁴⁷ The one drawback to the inscriptional record is that it is very difficult to say that it speaks for anything beyond elite society – society with enough money to make inscriptions. This is certainly the case for tomb inscriptions that, without exception, are all created by the royal family. Yet some of the smaller images at various Buddhist cave sites may perhaps contend this ideal, showing that large groups of presumably peasants gathered together to donate a small image. Often these groups had women as their leaders and in many cases they were created after imperial building had been completed. This speaks to the popular nature of donor images, and throughout this dissertation, wherever possible, I will attempt to include an examination of the social worlds of the donors into my discussion of the material at hand.

during this dissertation. Possibly the greatest and most enduring project of the Northern Wei is the dynasty's own imperially sponsored Buddhist caves and grotto temples. The earliest of the sites is the cave complex at Yungang, just outside of the first Northern Wei capital of modern-day Datong. With its massive buddhas and hundreds of smaller grottoes, the complex still remains today as some of the most expressive, impressive, and informative sources of information that we have on pre-Tang Buddhism in China and houses no less than 51,000 pieces of Buddhist statuary.⁴⁸ Following Yungang, the rulers and monastic community, working in tandem, built a similar and even larger cave site just outside the dynasty's latter capital of Luoyang. This site, Longmen, houses 2,345 grottos with 3,000 donor inscriptions and more than 100,000 Buddha images, the largest of which soars to 17 meters in height.⁴⁹ Although sharing certain similarities, the Longmen site is distinctive because of its inscriptions; whereas Yungang was built before the Northern Wei adopted the Chinese language at court and is therefore void of inscriptional material, Longmen was built after the adoption of Chinese and houses more than 3000 inscriptions. Outside of the sites of Yungang and Longmen, a further cave site at the margins of Northern Wei territory, in Gansu 甘肅 province, called Maijishan 麥積山, will also be consulted. Overall, these sites provide both an image of how the empire wanted its buddhas constructed, through their obvious, majestic, and gigantic scope, but also of how Buddhism was generally practiced by common people, through the smaller

⁴⁸ McNair 2007, 1.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

devotional grottos and the attending inscriptions that record the faith and donations made by women, slaves, families, and military generals, among others.

Beyond inscriptional and art-historical sources, I will also consult a selection of textual sources produced either in the Northern Wei or shortly after in order to provide a wider historical understanding of the conflux of political women, Buddhism, and empire in the Northern Wei than the inscriptions themselves are able to do. The most important of these texts is undoubtedly the *Book of the Wei*. Unlike some dynastic histories, the lapse of time between the close of the dynasty and the composition of the history is not great, and therefore the text can be considered somewhat accurate, barring authorial bias and imperial editing.⁵⁰ The *Book of the Wei* reads best as a celebration of a dynasty, using particular care to present the rulers of the Northern Wei as kind to religion, specifically Buddhism. This is interesting because although the Northern Wei did support Buddhism it also persecuted it as well, a topic to be discussed below. Nonetheless, throughout this dissertation I will consistently look to the *Book of the Wei* for historical guidance, but also for a frame through which to read the Northern Wei's support of Buddhism. I will take a critical approach to the text; challenging the presentation of Buddhism under the Northern Wei as represented in the text while asking the important question of why, in fact, the rulers took such pains to present themselves as a "Buddhist" dynasty and why women were so integral to this presentation. The final section of the *Book of the Wei*, the "Pronouncements Buddhism and Daoism" (*Shilaozhi* 釋老志) – a unique treatise on the

⁵⁰ On the historicity of the *Book of the Wei*, see: Ware 1932.

court's relationship with religion – will be consulted at length.⁵¹ Other than the *Book of the Wei*, the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, or *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記⁵² provides fascinating detail on the role of monasteries and nunneries in and around Northern Wei Luoyang, and will be consulted extensively. Finally, in attempting to understand something about how the people of the Northern Wei understood the role of women in Buddhism, a few Northern Wei translations of Buddhist sūtras will be translated and offered for analysis, notably the *Sūtra of Vimalī*,⁵³ the *Sūtra of the Woman*, “*Silver*”,⁵⁴ and the *Sūtra on Transforming the Female Form*.⁵⁵ These texts provide a unique and so-far unstudied depiction of the role of women in early Chinese Buddhism.

Chapter Summary

Chapter one is a discussion of the social and political situation of Buddhism in the Northern Wei wherein I will argue that the Northern Wei adopted Buddhism as its state religion due to political necessity. In so doing, I will discuss the popularity of Buddhism among the population of the north and will situate the support of Buddhism as a political

⁵¹ The section of the *Book of the Wei* entitled the *Essay on Buddhism and Daoism* has been sufficiently translated by Leon Hurvitz, including the careful annotations of Tsukamoto Zenryū (1956). Thus when citing from the *Essay on Buddhism and Daoism*, I am citing Hurvitz's text and using his translation.

⁵² The *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* has been translated by Wang Yitong (1984) and is throughout the dissertation as such. It was also recently translated into French by Jean Marie Lourme (2014) with more substantial notation than has previously been given, and which will also be cited on occasion.

⁵³ *Dewugounüjing* 得無垢女經, T338. Translations offered in this dissertation are my own, and the Chinese text is available in appendix three.

⁵⁴ *Yinsenüjing* 銀色女經, T179. Translations offered in this dissertation are my own, and the Chinese text is available in appendix three.

⁵⁵ T564. *Zhuannüshenjing* 轉女身經, T564. Translations offered in this dissertation are my own, and the Chinese text is available in appendix three.

choice made by the rulers of the Northern Wei that allowed them to create and maintain political control over a large and diverse empire. By analyzing pre-Buddhist Tuoba religious beliefs and pre-Northern Wei Tuoba political structures through sections of the *Book of the Wei*, and by showing how the Tuoba aligned these same structures with Han-Chinese ones, I will show that Buddhism was the metaphor of choice by which the Tuoba expressed their religio-political mandate, and that they enforced their rule by building buddhas all over their realm. This religio-political scheme saw that the populace would simultaneously respect these buddhas as manifestations of their new religion while being awed by their size and majesty – a clear nod to the political power of their rulers.

Chapter two is a discussion of the precise structure of the highest echelons of the Northern Wei court and will focus on a discussion of the roles that women played within that court. As part of this exploration of the women of the court, I will provide a survey of the status of women in the Tuoba society of the Northern Wei as the status of women in northern society allowed them to take on roles that they would not otherwise have had in the traditional sinicized court structure. Ultimately, I will suggest that as members of the political elite, women of the Northern Wei formed also a sort of religious elite that saw them as the court's caretakers of the Buddhist tradition. In proof of this thesis, I will detail the actions of a number of court women as seen in inscriptional material and in the biographies contained in the *Book of the Wei*.

In chapter three I seek to move away from the generalized information offered in chapters one and two in order to embark on a discussion of just who was ruling the imperial Buddhism of the Northern Wei. Working from the biographies of empresses and

emperors in the *Book of the Wei*, I will show that it was largely Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu who were behind the majority of the decrees aimed at the support and regulation of the imperial Buddhism of the Northern Wei. As part of this study, I will suggest that the popular depiction of women in contemporary translations of Buddhist texts – a number of which were undertaken under the auspices of the Northern Wei – not only lent itself to the presence of female politicians but also was closely aligned with the relatively high status that Tuoba women already enjoyed. Moreover, I will explore the idea that the establishment of female politicians in the Northern Wei was in part due to both Buddhist notions of sacred rule and Buddhist notions of buddhahood, both of which seem to have been open to women during the early medieval period.

Chapter four highlights the multifaceted roles of Buddhist representatives of the Northern Wei court and revolves around a peculiar subset of elite women at court – *bhikṣuṇīs*⁵⁶ – or ordained female members of the Buddhist monastic community. In order to study the lives of these women, I will offer a translation and study of the four extant mortuary inscriptions that the inscriptional record retains, and I will contrast the representation of their lives as seen in their tomb inscriptions with those of the two Buddhist men at the Northern Wei court that I have found. Specifically, I will discuss how the establishment of the Buddhist community of nuns became fully incorporated into the life of the Northern Wei court and how this situation allowed women to hold a dual

⁵⁶ In this thesis I use the term *bhikṣuṇī* to refer to women whom my sources refer to in a transliterated form of the Sanskrit, as *bīqiuni* 比丘尼. My usage is not to suggest that these women held full ordination, as this is an issue that my sources do not speak to, but rather to suggest that the people of medieval China felt the term meaningful and so it is retained here.

court-Buddhist identity that saw them benefit from an intentionally-created, permeable boundary between court and monastery.

Chapter five examines the members of the court who were involved with the administration of the imperial Buddhism of the Northern Wei and who worked closely with the populace under the auspices of the dynasty. I will focus on a number of individuals at court – both men and women – who retained a connection to the Buddhist tradition, and I will ultimately argue that the women of the court had a closer relationship to Buddhism than did the men. This relationship was a beneficial one for women as it provided them with a new definition of virtue – being unmarried women in the service of the court and its religious needs. In arguing for this new definition of virtue, I will align my discussion of the dual court-Buddhist identities of early medieval women with new depictions of women's roles and family life revealed in Buddhist texts of the period.

The Scholarly Context

Although there is currently no monograph-length study of Buddhist women's activities in the Northern Wei in any language that I know of, there are a number of other studies that will aid me in the completion of this work. Notably both Pang Shiyong and Wendi Adamek have begun the work of scouring inscriptions for women's involvement in the Buddhist tradition during the Tang dynasty. Pang Shiyong has made the argument that inscriptions show women to be positioned as both eminent Buddhists and virtuous Confucians,⁵⁷ an argument that I will show is perhaps rooted in the Northern Wei. Wendi Adamek has embarked on a study of a number of Tang inscriptions of the *bhikṣuṇīs* at

⁵⁷ Pang 2010, 77.

Mt. Bao 寶山 and has put forth the argument that groupings of female-sponsored inscriptions do account for a certain amount of female agency during Tang Buddhism.⁵⁸ As I will show in my dissertation, female Buddhists of the Northern Wei certainly wielded their own agency, using the Buddhist tradition for social advancement and prestige in order to benefit themselves, their families, and the state. Other than Pang and Adamek, the work of Yao Ping is of immediate interest to this dissertation for she works on representations of women in early medieval Chinese epitaphs.⁵⁹ Although there are many studies of women's lives in the Tang based on epigraphical literature,⁶⁰ there has not yet been any sustained study of women's lives in the Northern Wei that is based on inscriptions: however, Amy McNair's many publications on the social worlds evident in the donor inscriptions at Longmen certainly inform much of my work as she has done a wonderful job in bringing the voices of women to light through her careful study of their donor inscriptions.⁶¹ Finally, the work of Dorothy Wong has done much to situate the study of Chinese inscriptions and steles with respect to their ethical and social uses and so her work has also been consulted at length in the preparation of this dissertation.⁶²

As for other relevant English-language studies of Buddhism and women, Bret Hinsch, Alan Cole, and Chen Jinhua have all discussed the representation of Buddhist women vis-à-vis Confucian filial piety, but their studies do not take up the inscriptional

⁵⁸ Adamek 2009, 5.

⁵⁹ Yao 2008, 2010, 2011.

⁶⁰ Wan 2002; Wu 2002; Su 2003; Yan 2003.

⁶¹ McNair 1994, 2000, 2006-7, 2007.

⁶² Wong 2000, 2001, 2004, 2010.

record in a serious way or are concentrated in later time periods.⁶³ At present, studies on women's religious practices in early China are disproportionately concentrated on the Han Dynasty and the Tang Dynasty, as these unified eras yield the richest and most accessible source materials, and these studies are often focused on the lives of Daoist women as well as the connections between Buddhism and Daoism.⁶⁴ The historical work that I would like to do, then, is to fill in the narrative of the development of female religiosity, female public activism, and female public intellectualism between the Han and the Tang, with particular respect to the close alignment between Buddhism and courtly life seen in the lives of Buddhist women in the Northern Wei. This study has been partially undertaken by Chikusa Masaaki in his work on the early communities of *bhikṣuṇīs*.⁶⁵ Very few studies of women's lives are focused solely on this period, with notable exceptions being Catherine Tsai's translation and examination of *The Lives of the Nuns*, a collection of biographies of early Chinese Buddhist nuns from the 4th to 6th centuries of the Common Era which will be discussed in this dissertation.⁶⁶ Tsai's study of this text focuses on religious beliefs and the ideology of female renunciation, but does not venture into the political. In a similar way, Suzanne Cahill's work on early Chinese understandings of divine women, though fascinating, does not entertain the political.⁶⁷

⁶³ Hinsch 2002; Chen 2002a.

⁶⁴ Yao 2010, 2011; Ko, Kim, and Piggott 2003; Cahill 2003; Despeux 2003; Chiu-Duke 1995.

⁶⁵ Chikusa 2002.

⁶⁶ For Tsai's work see her published translation (1994) although her dissertation from the University of Michigan on the same topic sometimes contains more thorough analysis of the material (1972).

⁶⁷ Cahill 1993 & 2003.

Conversely, studies of the early Tang dynasty, particularly those centered on the figure of Empress Wu, although excellent, tend to focus on the political to the expense of not fully dealing with the religious.⁶⁸ My dissertation will deal with the political and religious as joint institutions in a shared history of female religiosity and public life during a time period that is largely unstudied. This work will also be of interest to those working on the fundamental question of Japan's earliest leadership. Early imperial Japanese women, of which there are many eminent examples, have long been known to patronize Buddhism at court while enacting traditional Chinese forms of court politics, and the connection between them and their Chinese counterparts is not fully understood.⁶⁹ From the later time periods of Chinese history, specifically the Late Imperial Period, there are a number of excellent studies of women's lives and religious choices, and although these studies do not bear direct relation to the dissertation they are nonetheless formative works on the topic of gender in Chinese society. For representative studies, see the works of Dorothy Ko, Francesca Bray, and Susan Mann.⁷⁰

Interest in Northern Wei Chinese Buddhist culture seems to have peaked in the 1930s with the work of Peter Boodberg and James Ware.⁷¹ Since then, a number of fascinating articles have been written by Chen Jinhua, Andrew Eisenberg, Jennifer Holmgren, Alex Soper, Katherine Tsiang, and most recently, dissertations by Chin-yin Tseng and Yi Lidu, on either the Northern Wei specifically or Buddhism in the Six

⁶⁸ Forte 1976 & 1988; Guisso 1978; Lewis 2006 & 2009.

⁶⁹ Piggott 1997.

⁷⁰ Ko 1994; Bray 1997; Mann 1997.

⁷¹ Boodberg 1936, 1938, 1939; Ware 1933.

Dynasties more generally.⁷² Additional secondary scholarship on the Northern Wei has been undertaken by Japanese scholars, the foundation of which is likely Tsukamoto Zenryū's classic work on Chinese Buddhism in the Northern Wei.⁷³ There has been a recent wave of interest in the study of Chinese inscriptions, particularly tomb inscriptions, of both the Northern Wei and later periods. Eminent studies include Kubozoe Yoshifumi's work on epigraphs as well as Muroyama Rumiko's work on tomb inscriptions from Luoyang.⁷⁴ A further important contribution to the study of Buddhist art historical remains in the Northern Wei is Ishimatsu Hinako's *Buddhist Images in the Northern Wei Period*,⁷⁵ which has been so well received that it has been translated into Chinese.⁷⁶ Furthermore, a collection of scholars undertook a research project from 2006–2009 to collect previously unrecorded inscriptions from the Northern and Southern Dynasties, under the supervision of Sagawa Eiji.⁷⁷ Moving on from inscriptions, Chikusa Masaaki's work on early Buddhist organizations is an important contribution to our understanding of the various social worlds in which Buddhists participated in China's medieval period.⁷⁸ Further, Matsuura Norihiro has a brief but thorough study of the tomb inscriptions of Tang nuns that is helpful to my understanding of the Northern Wei

⁷² Chen 2004; Eisenberg 1991; Holmgren 1978, 1981-3a, 1981-1983b, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1989, 1993; Soper 1966; Tsiang 2002; Tseng 2013; Yi 2010 .

⁷³ Tsukamoto 1942. A history of scholarship has developed out of this landmark work of Tsukamoto's which has included reviews of his scholarship by a number of scholars as well as the identification of numerous omissions and errors in his original manuscript. Tsukamoto himself details this in the preface to his 1974 publication (2–3).

⁷⁴ Kubozoe 2011; Muroyama 2010.

⁷⁵ Ishimatsu 2005.

⁷⁶ Ishimatsu 2007.

⁷⁷ Sagawa 2012.

⁷⁸ Chikusa 1982.

material.⁷⁹ Finally, Mizuno Seiichi and Nagahiro Toshio contributed an early and extensive study of the Buddhist caves of the Northern Wei by indexing those at Yungang.⁸⁰

By far, the most work done on Northern Wei history, society, and inscriptional remains has been done by Chinese scholars, and their works are often carefully researched historical pieces that attempt to shed light on the practices of the Northern Wei system of governance. Major studies of the Northern Wei that include sections on the contributions of women include, Tian Yuqing's *Exploration of Toba History, Revised Edition*,⁸¹ Wang Zhangluo's *History of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties*, and two works by scholar of Northern Wei society, Li Ping, *The Era of Pingcheng in the Northern Wei* and *The Spring and Autumn of the Northern Wei*.⁸² The major work on inscriptions from the time period is Zhao Chao's *Thorough Explanation of Ancient Tomb Inscriptions*⁸³ though there are other important collections.⁸⁴ As for studies of the inscriptional remains of the Northern Wei, Mao Yuanming's *Thorough Explanation of Stele Literature*⁸⁵ provides a theoretical and historical framework by which to understand the Northern Wei's unprecedented drive to create large-scale Buddhist art and inscriptions.

⁷⁹ Matsuura 2007.

⁸⁰ Mizuno and Nagahiro 1956.

⁸¹ Tian 2011.

⁸² Li 2010 & 2011.

⁸³ Zhao 2003.

⁸⁴ Beijing tushuguan 1989; Lin 1977; Xin 2004; Zhao 2006.

⁸⁵ Mao 2009.

As for studies specifically related to Buddhism in the Northern Wei, Tang Yongtong's voluminous *History of Buddhism in the Han, Wei, Two Jins, and Northern and Southern Dynasties*⁸⁶ is the standard history of the time period and includes a lengthy discussion of women's contributions to the development of Buddhism in the Northern Wei. In a more specific way, both Hao Chunwen and Hou Xudong are working on the social life of Buddhist practice, and their work informs much of my analysis in this dissertation.⁸⁷ In Taiwan, a number of scholars at Academia Sinica are working on related topics; both Lee Jen-der's "Life of Women in the Six Dynasties"⁸⁸ and Lin Xin-yi's *From Dirty to Pure: The Concept of Decline of the Dharma and Women in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*⁸⁹ are unique contributions to our understanding of women's religious lives in early medieval China. Furthermore, the outstanding work of Academia Sinica's Liu Shu-fen has contributed a great deal to our understanding of Buddhism in the time period in question, particularly as related to the complex nature of Northern Wei tribal society and the support of Buddhism among various groups therein.⁹⁰

As is thus evident, there are a number of excellent studies that will support the progress of this dissertation and support many of the arguments that I will make in the course of it, and to these scholars I am deeply indebted. The aforementioned scholars are

⁸⁶ Tang 2006.

⁸⁷ Hou 1998; Hao 1998, 2006, 2010.

⁸⁸ Lee 1993.

⁸⁹ Lin 2010.

⁹⁰ Among Liu Shu-fen's highlights is *Zhongguo de fojiao yu shehui* 中古的佛教与社会 [*Medieval Chinese Buddhism and Society*] (2008) and "Ethnicity and the Suppression of Buddhism in Fifth-Century North China: The Background and Significance of the Gaiwu Rebellion" (2002).

working on inscriptions, histories of the northern dynasties, women and social status, women and religion, religion and social status, and religion and ethnicity, yet no single study has brought all these aspects together into a sustained examination of the inscriptional remains that tells the story of Buddhist women in the Northern Wei – this is precisely what my dissertation will do. I believe that my work will provide an essential piece to the puzzle that is the early development of Chinese Buddhism by helping to explain the close alliance between Buddhism, the court, and women. Furthermore, I desire to help bring the inscriptional record further into the mainstream of Buddhist Studies scholarship for I believe that the information it offers is both invaluable and unavailable in other source materials.

It is my hope that this dissertation will be of importance not only to those working on Buddhism and women or Buddhism in the northern dynasties but also to those working on Buddhist social history in general and in later periods. I firmly believe that the social systems established under the Northern Wei had important ramifications on both those of the Tang and of the larger East Asian cultural sphere, especially with respect to the role of women in both political and religious organizations. As this case has not yet clearly been made, I hope to show that the early Tang embraced the connection between Buddhism and women in politics and that this forever changed the face of both Chinese political structures and Buddhism. In the process, women themselves enjoyed a higher status in public society than they had previously known, by relying on both court and religious structures. In telling this story I hope to make it clear that this is not a story

of women, but that it is a story of Buddhism; that the contributions of women do not constitute women's history but form a significant part of Buddhist history itself.

CHAPTER ONE. Tuobas, Mandarins, and Buddhas: Imperial Buddhism in the Northern Wei

When Gaozong⁹¹⁹² ascended the throne, he handed down a decree, which said:

Now those who are emperors and kings must humbly revere the illustrious spirits and make manifest the way of humanity. Those who were able to bestow compassion on the people and rescue the beings, be it even in antiquity, there is yet record of their great deeds. Therefore the *Spring and Autumn annals* approves the worship of the gods, and the Sacrificial Codes record those who achieved great exploits. How much the more is this true of Śākya Tathāgata, whose merits save the Grand Chilocosm and whose compassion flows out to the grimy regions! Those who inquire into life and death as equal admire his supreme vision; those who look at writings and doctrines honor his wondrous clarity. He supports the prohibitions and regulations of kingly government, and enriches the good nature of humanity and wisdom. He drives away the many evils and sets forth right perception. Therefore since former ages none has failed to do him honor. Even in our realm has he been ever revered and served.⁹³

– Tuoba Wei Emperor Wencheng, proclaimed on his ascension to the throne in 452 CE.

The above passage from the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” in the *Book of the Wei* marks Emperor Wencheng’s decision to reinstate Buddhism as the state religion of the Northern Wei, a decision that accompanied the dynasty to the end of its rule in 534 CE. Signalling a change in his predecessor’s official patronage of the Daoist tradition,⁹⁴ this decree aligns itself with the politics of the mid-fifth century Northern Wei

⁹¹ Gaozong is the temple name of Emperor Wencheng who officially brought the Northern Wei to its patronage of Buddhism upon his ascension to leadership in 452 CE.

⁹² From here forward all romanization systems have silently been amended to pinyin.

⁹³ Hurvitz 1956, 69–70.

⁹⁴ Although early on in the Northern Wei, Emperor Daowu 道武帝 (r. 386–409 CE) was also a supporter of Buddhism, Wencheng’s direct predecessor, Emperor Taiwu 太武帝 (r. 424–452 CE) both elevated Daoism and persecuted Buddhism. This will be discussed in more detail below.

when the dynasty was spreading its territory to new regions, taking on increasingly Han-Chinese elements in their rule, and facing a Buddhist tradition that was widely popular among its subjects. This chapter serves to provide an overview to this fascinating period in Northern Wei politics by offering a more thorough introduction to who the Tuoba were and how they envisioned the Buddhist tradition to be a part of their rule. I will suggest that the Tuoba saw Buddhism as a natural partner in their campaign to empire as it aligned well with their own indigenous religious and political practices of seeing their leaders as religio-political figures. Furthermore, I will show that the Tuoba use of Buddhism by the state, most notably through the building of the majestic cave and temple complexes of Yungang and Longmen, to create a pictorial program of rule that combined both Buddhist and Tuoba elements and which, at the same time, incorporated Han Chinese innovations; hence, bringing together diverse facets of their dynasty. Finally, I will argue that the members of the Tuoba court did this because it was good politics to do so – that Buddhism, for them, was a means to negotiate a sacred identity for the ruling house but also to negotiate power among the diverse peoples that they ruled over. In sum, I will argue that the Tuoba used Buddhism to unite their empire under a more universal religio-political system than they had previously developed, and that this was an important factor in bringing the diverse members of their population under their control.

Thus, although this dissertation is ultimately about the connection between political women and Buddhist patronage, it is obviously the case that the women to be discussed were northern women living in a Tuoba society, and hence the history of their patronage of the Buddhist tradition cannot be well understood without a wider

understanding of the role that Buddhism, in general, played among the Tuoba Northern Wei. It is my contention throughout this dissertation that the connection between imperial women, Buddhism, and political power is not simply due to any one of these three forces, but is the result of a particular connection between the Tuoba/Han Chinese religio-political structure, the rise of their largely Buddhist empire, and the social situation of women under the Tuoba Wei. As such, this chapter serves to introduce the Tuoba's imperial Buddhism so as to later place the connection of women and Buddhism within it.

More About the Tuoba

Specific to the study at hand, the Northern Wei was established prior to the official start date of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, set with the fall of the Jin 晉 dynasty (265–420 CE), and was the most successful of the northern dynasties in terms of the length and scope of its rule as well as its impact on the later development of Chinese history. The Northern Wei was a tribal confederation founded and ruled by the Tuoba people, who were a subgroup of the larger Xianbei peoples who seem to have come from the regions of Mongolia and spoke an Altaic language related to modern Turkish.⁹⁵ Although they kept no written records in their own language, their presence begins to be recorded in Han dynasty records as relations between the Han and their northern border areas were of great concern to the Han rulers.⁹⁶ These same records also mention a

⁹⁵ Much debate has occurred over precisely what language the Xianbei Tuoba spoke, with the likely result that it was an Altaic tongue. For a good review of this debate, see: Tseng 2013, 11-12.

⁹⁶ Di Cosmo 2009, 201.

number of other nomadic groups, in particular the Xiongnu and Murong⁹⁷ people who were in fact incorporated into the ruling elite of the Tuoba class, often through the practice of taking the women of these tribes as princesses.⁹⁸

The Tuoba originated in what is modern China's Heilongjiang 黑龍江 province and traces of their civilization can still be found in a place called Gaxiandong 嘎仙洞, or the Gaxian Cave, which is just across the border from Heilongjiang into modern-day Inner Mongolia.⁹⁹ The Gaxian Cave is said to be the original birthplace of the Tuoba's first ancestor, Tuoba Mao 拓拔毛, who was the first in a lineage of fourteen such ancestors for whom we have little or no information outside of rare mentions in the dynastic histories. By the Eastern Han 東漢 dynasty (25–220 CE), the Tuoba were under the direction of the sixth of these patriarchs, a Tuoba Tuiyin 拓拔推寅, and they began a southern migration, settling by a large marsh in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, where

⁹⁷ The process of identifying the cultural origins of these nomadic groups is difficult, though the Murong are also thought to be of the Xianbei group who settled in a slightly different region and made their state of the Northern Yan 北燕 (409–430 CE). The Xiongnu, however, who are a constant presence in Tuoba records of the Northern Wei, appear to be culturally distinct though geographically close in origin. Scholars are now working on identifying the differences between these groups but much work remains to be done. For more information, see the work of Sophia-Karin Psarass (1994, 2003, 2004) in the bibliography. Through linguistic analysis, however, the Xiongnu have been identified as being related to the Huns (Gao 2012/13).

⁹⁸ Holmgren 1981–1983a, 62. This practice was not only undertaken by the ruling Tuoba but also by other powerful clans. For example, the Gao 高 clan, who were contenders to the Tuobas in the latter half of the dynasty, took a Rouran princess to be the wife of the daughter of the powerful Gao Huan 高歡 (496–547 CE), a Northern Wei general who eventually went on to establish the Eastern Wei. The tomb of that princess has been located and excavated and has been recently studied by Bonnie Cheng (2007).

⁹⁹ Wang 2008, 475.

they stayed for seven generations.¹⁰⁰ Despite this relative peace and stability, life started to get complicated for the Tuoba; their tribe saw division into eight subgroups,¹⁰¹ some joining the Eastern Han and some building their own lineages. Yet the Tuoba were resistant to defeat. Throughout a series of inter-tribal assemblies, tribal affiliations, and conflicts between warring tribes, the remaining Tuoba subgroup succeeded in calling a great inter-tribal assembly in 386 CE where they consolidated their rule and established the Northern Wei, a dynasty whose name harkens back to a prior northern dynasty, the Kingdom of Wei 魏國 (220–280 CE) which had its capital in Luoyang.¹⁰²

The Northern Wei is often referred to as the “Tuoba Wei” though this is not entirely accurate because the dynasty began as an inter-tribal alliance in which the Tuoba acted as leaders but used older Xiongnu policies of governmental organization.¹⁰³ Moreover, after much fighting with the Murong, the Tuoba eventually took the Murong’s territory, assimilating Murongs in their wake and appointing Murong princesses at court.¹⁰⁴ Their policies also involved the mass migration and settlement of all the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ This origin story for the Tuoba has considerable and undeniable overlap with the origin story of the Khitan who also originated from mountains and who saw their tribe divide into eight subgroups (Twitchett and Franke 1994, 52). Work has not yet been done on the important role that the Northern Wei played for later conquest dynasties in China, but I see it is fundamental.

¹⁰² Wang 2008, 477.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 476.

¹⁰⁴ Holmgren argues that in the early Northern Wei, all of the court ladies and empresses came from recently conquered non-Chinese states, some taken in at elite levels for political negotiation and some taken as slaves to work in the palace. She also argues that often these captive concubines made good candidates for empress as they had no other powerful relatives in the court who would be able to cause division or interfere with court politics (1983a, 77–78). However, Empress Dowager Feng was such a woman, a Murong assimilated Han Chinese from the state of the Northern Yan, and, as we will see, she

northern pastoral peoples under their rule as the Tuoba continued with the formation of their empire. Throughout all their expansion in the north, in 398 CE the Tuoba founded their capital in the northern city of Pingcheng, and they stayed in Pingcheng until 494 CE, when they moved to Luoyang.

In order to support their urbanization plans, the Tuoba leaders relocated huge amounts of their newly conquered subjects into cities, a plan that assisted in their administration of the empire. The scale of the Northern Wei's relocation programs was gigantic. According to Chin-yin Tseng, who has combed the *Book of the Wei* for precise amounts of relocated families, no less than 58,000 lone individuals as well as 100,000 households were relocated to Pingcheng in the early half of the dynasty.¹⁰⁵ This relocation of subjects went along with the Northern Wei's other grand project of population settlement: the establishment of an equal-field system across the empire that would see regulated amounts of agricultural land allotted to various peoples of differing tribal nations and sizes of family units.¹⁰⁶ This system remained relatively unchanged throughout the Tang¹⁰⁷ and was used in Japan.¹⁰⁸ In sum, the story of the Northern Wei is not simply the story of the rise of a new dynastic family or lineage in China, but it is truly

managed to climb to the highest levels of power and cause a number of divisions through her own initiative.

¹⁰⁵ Tseng 2013, 37–38.

¹⁰⁶ For a thorough study of how this system worked, including extensive annotation to relevant passages from the *Book of the Wei*, see the work of Lin (1989) in the bibliography.

¹⁰⁷ For a study of this equal-field system and its impact on later China, see: Xiong 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Wang 2008, 501.

a story of the domestication of great amounts of China's northern peoples into both newly built cities and newly allocated land holdings.

The first words of the *Book of the Wei* speak to the pastoral roots of these northern peoples, particularly of the Tuoba, with both pride and nostalgia, stating:

In ancient times, the Yellow Emperor¹⁰⁹ had 25 sons; those who stayed with him became the descendants of Han culture, those who went outside were scattered in the wilderness. Changyi 昌意¹¹⁰ had a few sons and he conferred the northern lands on them. Within this land there was the great Mountain of the Xianbei and from this they took their name. After this, for generations, they became the lords and elders who ruled over the lands north of Youdu 幽都,¹¹¹ spreading out over the vast fields while following the movements of their cattle. They used archery for hunting and their customs were pure and uncomplicated. They were accustomed to simplicity and ease and as such they had not developed writing. For records, they carved notches into wood and that was all, and for worldly matters both near and far, these were conferred and transferred between men. These resemble the records and registries of the court historians.¹¹²

This opening to the preface of the *Book of the Wei*¹¹³ does more than introduce the nomadic origins of the northern peoples of China, it also serves to situate them within the larger framework of traditional Chinese history by positing that the northern peoples are descendants of the Yellow Emperor and that they kept records, albeit simple ones, just

¹⁰⁹ The Yellow Emperor is one of the early, mythical rulers of China who is supposed to have aided the development of agriculture in China as well as made great strides toward the development of Chinese court structures and language.

¹¹⁰ Changyi is supposedly the youngest son of the Yellow Emperor.

¹¹¹ Youdu is the name of a place in Heilongjiang that is close to the Gaxian Cave.

¹¹² Wei 2009, 1; translation is my own.

¹¹³ Holmgren has also analyzed this passage of the *Book of the Wei* from the perspective of the historical movement of the Xianbei group (1982a, 51). My translation differs only slightly from Holmgren's. What I find revealing in this section is that the very first sentence of the *Book of the Wei* links the Xianbei with two political ideals that were very important in the Northern Wei: 1) longstanding sovereignty in the north; and 2) lineage with Chinese culture by identifying themselves with the Yellow Emperor.

like their more cultivated brothers in traditional Han regions in the south of the empire. As Peter Boodberg has shown, this narrative serves to create a genealogy of the Tuoba house that is matched with the genealogy of Han-Chinese emperors,¹¹⁴ and this is important for the single greatest undertaking that the Northern Wei managed was the conversion of their northern “barbarian” empire into one that more closely resembled that of their Han brethren. This ambitious program of sinification undertaken by the Northern Wei included the adoption of a Chinese-style bureaucratic system at court with Chinese rules of succession, the use of the Chinese language at court, the conversion of non-Chinese names at court to Chinese ones with the Tuoba themselves taking the Chinese name Yuan,¹¹⁵ and the adoption of both Chinese dress and Chinese individuals themselves at court – with many of these policies being undertaken by Emperor Xiaowen in the 490s who was controlled largely by Empress Dowager Feng who was herself of northern assimilated Han Chinese stock of the Murong Northern Yan 北燕 (409–430 CE). The numbers of Han Chinese bureaucrats employed at the Northern Wei court reached its high point under the administration of Emperor Xiaowen and Empress Dowager Feng, reaching 68.9% of total employees.¹¹⁶ And of these two, the most grandiose of their sinification plans was the move of their capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang in 494 CE. This move was undertaken so that the Tuoba, for the first time in history, would be able to establish themselves south of the Yellow River, hence being the

¹¹⁴ Boodberg 1936, 179.

¹¹⁵ A complete listing of these names changes is available in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009, 113).

¹¹⁶ Sun 2005, 52.

first northerners to hold power in a traditional stronghold of Han civilization, as Luoyang had been the capital for important Han Chinese dynasties of old.¹¹⁷

Despite the fact, however, that the Tuoba succeeded in uniting a confederation of northern peoples under a Chinese court that patronized Buddhism as a state religion, they were not able to hold on to their ambitious power for long; their power crumbled after their move to Luoyang, just after the Tuoba had reached the heights of their power. At the time of its decline, the court was under the power of Empress Dowager Hu, or Hu Taihou (胡太后 d. 528 CE)¹¹⁸ who played a significant role in the fall of the dynasty by allowing non-loyal subjects into her court,¹¹⁹ such as the Xiongnu general Erzhu Rong 爾朱榮 (493–530 CE) who staged a major rebellion. She also contributed to the dynasty's instability by murdering Emperor Xiaoming 孝明帝 (r. 516–528 CE) when he came of age so that she could continue to rule behind a puppet emperor whom she then established. When Erzhu Rong gained control of the court in 528 CE, he drowned both Empress Dowager Hu and the young emperor in a river.¹²⁰ However, Erzhu Rong was then outmanoeuvred by Gao Huan 高歡 (497–547 CE), a member of the elite Gao family who had serious reservations about how “Chinese” the dynasty was becoming.

¹¹⁷ Wang 2008, 506. The move to Luoyang was also undertaken for important economic reasons, putting the capital closer to longstanding economic centers in the heartland of China (Sun: 2005, 47ff).

¹¹⁸ Empress Dowager Hu is commonly known by her official name, Ling Taihou 靈太后; however, in this dissertation I will refer to her by her family name so as to be consistent with references to Empress Dowager Feng.

¹¹⁹ For a study of the complex racial and ethnic tensions in the elite class of the Northern Wei, see: Holmgren 1993.

¹²⁰ For more on the empress dowager, see chapter three. Her biography is translated in: Holmgren 1978, 160–170.

Gao Huan took power, dividing the dynasty into the Eastern Wei 東魏 (534–550 CE) and Western Wei 西魏 (535–556 CE), of which he ruled the Eastern, and then eventually established the Northern Qi as the true successor dynasty of the Northern Wei.¹²¹ Evidently, then, the fall of the Northern Wei and the subsequent divide of the elite families who worked at its court, succeeded in tumbling the north and once again sending it into a succession of geographically disparate regions until the unification of the Sui in 581 CE. Although there was not quite 50 years between the fall of the Northern Wei and the reunification of the Sui, this time period saw four northern dynasties take power in different regions, many of them similar in style to the Northern Wei itself: the Eastern Wei, the Northern Qi, the Western Wei, and the Northern Zhou 北周 (557–581 CE).¹²²

Tuoba Leadership and Dynastic Legitimation

Tuoba society and statecraft differed from traditional Han-style society and statecraft in a number of important ways; however, the sources documenting the unique facets of Tuoba society are few given that the Tuoba did not produce written documents prior to their adoption of the Chinese language in the late fifth century. Similarly, the

¹²¹ For a study on the rise of the Gao family, see: Holmgren 1982b.

¹²² Scholarship on this period centers around two major topics: 1) military strategy throughout this divide; and 2) ethnic tensions between elite members of the Northern Wei that became exacerbated throughout time and eventually led to the downfall of the dynasty. For a sample of the former, look to the work of Wallacker (1969, 1971a, 1971b) in the bibliography. For a sample of the latter, Albert Dien's "The Bestowal of Surnames Under the Western Wei – Northern Zhou" (1977) is an indicative study. In brief, rebellions among the Northern Wei elite led to the collapse of the dynasty with the Western Wei-Northern Zhou representing one continuing faction and the Eastern Wei-Northern Qi representing the other faction. The Northern Qi is thought to be the true successor of the Tuoba Northern Wei and indeed continued on with the production of Buddhist images and caves and took the northern city of Ye 鄴 as its capital.

inscriptional record of the Northern Wei, though rich, is skewed to the latter half of the dynasty after the Tuoba began using the written medium of the Chinese script. Among available sources written in Chinese, the *Book of the Wei* is the most helpful for understanding Northern Wei society and the special character of Northern Wei politics and social organization. And one story from the text is particularly illuminating on this topic. It is the story of two of the Tuoba's ancestors, Tuoba Jiefen 拓跋珪 (d.u.) and Tuoba Liwei 拓跋力微 (174 – 277 CE);¹²³ Tuoba Jiefen being the 14th and thus last in the line of ancient founders from when the Tuoba tribe was united, and Tuoba Liwei being the pivot that takes Tuoba historiography from its remote origins to more present ones as he was the leader of the one (out of eight) of the original Tuoba subgroups that eventually founded the Northern Wei. In the preface of the *Book of the Wei* his birth signals the “first year” of Tuoba history and all subsequent rulers are dated from him.¹²⁴

The story begins with Tuoba Jiefen, also known as Emperor Shengwu (Shengwu Huangdi 聖武皇帝), who was leading his people south and found himself and his people

¹²³ Boodberg has shown this chronology to be more mythological than it is historical by exposing how it has been created to match the chronology of Chinese emperors with Tuoba Liwei being the 82nd emperor after the legendary Emperor Shun 舜 (1936, 179).

¹²⁴ In the lineage of Tuoba leaders provided in the preface to the *Book of the Wei*, the 14 ancestors of the Tuoba are listed with names and titles but no dates. When the list arrives at Tuoba Jiefen we are offered the story about the Celestial Woman and then, without any explanation, the text begins a dating system at Tuoba Liwei and dates him as the “first year” or *yuannian* 元年. Subsequent leaders are then dated with subsequent years so that the next leader is dated at “year 29.” This invention of history is a salient feature of the *Book of the Wei* in that the text represents the Northern Wei as the fruition of a turning point in history, which includes a turn toward religion, particularly Buddhism.

dwelling in lands then ruled by the Xiongnu, who were fierce competitors. The story goes:

Emperor Shengwu had lead several tens of thousands of horse riders out into the mountains and marshes and suddenly saw a bannered carriage coming on its own accord down from the heavens. He immediately went to it and saw a beautiful woman to whom he offered his support and protection and who accepted it. The Emperor thought this was strange and so he asked her about it. She responded: “I am a Celestial Woman and it is our fate that we shall be a pair.” And they subsequently went to the bedchamber together. At dawn she further requested: “Come back to this same spot at this same time next year.” And with those words she departed; disappearing like wind and rain. When the time came, the Emperor went back to that same place and he saw her again. The Celestial Woman brought forth a son and gave it to the Emperor, saying: “This is your son. Raise him well and care for him. The descendants will all undertake to become kings and emperors of this world.” On finishing these words, she left. The son became the original ancestor¹²⁵ and therefore the people of the time made a proverb, saying: “Emperor Jiefen doesn’t have a wife or in-laws; Emperor Liwei doesn’t have a maternal uncle or in-laws.”¹²⁶

This simple story tells us much about Tuoba society, and about their competitors, the Xiongnu. The mention of the Xiongnu early on in the story is indicative of the fact that the Tuoba had long been at odds with the Xiongnu, and in the Northern Wei they saw them as their competitors for control of the north. *The Book of the Wei* traces the lineage of the Tuoba from the far north of Heilongjiang to the grasslands of Inner Mongolia and finally to being an imperial power in Pingcheng. Throughout this lineage of people and geography, one consistent theme is the Tuoba’s competition with the Xiongnu, who were also ardent supporters of Buddhism and rulers of another powerful, and powerfully

¹²⁵ Although he is actually the 15th ancestor, his story signals a pivot in Tuoba history placing him as the first ancestor and he is literally called *shizu* 始祖, or the first ancestor.

¹²⁶ Wei 2009, 2; translation is my own.

Buddhist, northern dynasty, the Northern Liang, which was finally taken by the Tuoba in 439 CE.¹²⁷ Yet even though the Northern Wei Tuoba defeated the Northern Liang Xiongnu, their problems were far from over, for, as Liu Shu-fen points out, a branch of the Xiongnu was partially responsible for rebellions against the Tuoba.¹²⁸

However, even though the Tuoba defeated the Xiongnu during the successful growth of the Northern Wei, their dynasty was not without its own, internal struggles. Particularly, as Andrew Eisenberg has shown, once coming to power in the form of the Northern Wei, the Tuoba found themselves experiencing a serious crisis of leadership due to their own style of dynastic succession. Prior to and at the beginning of the Northern Wei, the Tuoba practiced a form of imperial succession that saw rule passed from older to younger siblings within a generation before being passed on to one of the children of those siblings.¹²⁹ This situation was extremely dangerous for dynastic succession as it allowed all number of agnate groups of uncles and cousins to attempt to attain leadership of the Tuoba and the people the Tuoba themselves ruled over. Political assassinations were commonly carried out on the brothers of the rulers as well as on their families and supporters. When the Tuoba successfully conquered large parts of China, they did not have a system of succession that would support the existence of a strong, centralized ruler and ruling house – something they needed in order to guarantee the continued success of

¹²⁷ For studies of the interactions between the Northern Wei and the Northern Liang, particularly with regard to Buddhist ideals and patronage, see: Soper 1958; Wang 2008, 475.

¹²⁸ Liu 2002; for further discussion, see below.

¹²⁹ For an overview of the rules of and changes to Tuoba rules of succession, see: Eisenberg 1991.

their rule and their outward expansion. However, as Eisenberg has further shown, in order to combat this situation and create a more stable ruling house, the early Northern Wei leaders set about changing their form of succession to a Han-Chinese one – direct primogenitic succession wherein rule went from the ruler to his eldest son. The first emperor to accomplish this was Emperor Wencheng. He successfully passed leadership to his eldest son, who quickly abdicated for his eldest son,¹³⁰ only a four-year old child at that time – a decision that speaks to the need to establish direct rule. This direct primogenitic rule continued unchanged until the end of the dynasty.

The urgency to establish a strong ruler and ruling family using Chinese rules of succession accords with what else we know about the Tuoba's rule – that they were eager to elevate their own Tuoba emperor to a status equal to that of the Chinese Emperor, or Son of Heaven. In Chinese thought, the Son of Heaven is the one individual in the universe who is eligible to have audience with the celestial powers that be, and hence is also the emperor as he is able to know what heaven wants and thus to hold the Mandate of Heaven.¹³¹ In establishing their ruler as the Son of Heaven, the Tuoba employed

¹³⁰ Emperor Wencheng was 12 years old when he took rule over the Northern Wei and was placed on the throne after the political assassinations of his father's brothers, one of which did manage to rule for a few brief months in 452. On his death, leadership passed to his son, Xianwendi. Xianwendi, however, as a tribute to what turbulent times these were, ruled only for 5 years, abdicating in teenage-hood so that his eldest son, who was then four years old, would be able to take the throne with no challengers, as his father would still long be alive to support his son's rule. This abdication, or political retirement, Eisenberg argues, was done in order to ensure direct succession, and it is unique in history for it marks the first time that an emperor] took the honorific title of Taishang Huangdi 太上皇帝 while still living, as it was until then an honorific for the deceased.

¹³¹ In traditional Chinese thought, the emperor is said to hold the Mandate of Heaven in that he and he alone can communicate with heaven, know the will of Heaven, and enact this will among his populace. Further, throughout Chinese history, the ability to

geomancers at court to calculate under what phase of the five phases of the Mandate, or *wuxing* 五行, they were in fact ruling under. This was important, for establishing such a rule was tantamount to declaring that they were now the true holders of the Mandate of Heaven and the rightful rulers of China. And although the answer to this very pressing question of what phase they were under was the subject of great debate, it was eventually agreed upon that the dynasty ruled by the power of water.¹³² As such, the various emperors of the Northern Wei, empowered by their status as a legitimate Han-Chinese style dynasty, undertook Han-Chinese style court rituals throughout their reigns. Like the Chinese emperor, the Northern Wei emperor made the traditional suburban sacrifices in the north and the south of the capital in accord with the seasons.¹³³

Yet, more than just undertaking the suburban sacrifices, the Northern Wei emperor also undertook a number of unique rituals including ritual sacrifices for mountains and rivers in every place to which he journeyed.¹³⁴ These additional rituals hearken back to the Tuoba's pre-Han Chinese lifestyle when their leader was considered a divine agent between this world and the next. As we saw in the above story of Tuoba Jiefen and his celestial woman from the Tuoba genealogy in the *Book of the Wei*, the Tuoba were no strangers to mixing religion and politics. Japanese scholar of Northern

overthrow an emperor has been seen as a sign that he had in fact lost the Mandate of Heaven and thus become weakened and vulnerable to defeat. For a study of how this Mandate has worked with respect to rebellion and revolution from antiquity through the republican period, see: Perry 2002.

¹³² Chen 2010, 67ff.

¹³³ Ibid, 108. In this article, Chen Shuguo provides a lengthy and detailed explanation of the rituals that the Northern Wei undertook and shows that they both took Han rituals seriously while bringing their own innovation to the ritual schedule.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Wei society, Ishimastu Hinako, characterizes the Tuoba as having practiced a form of “great hero veneration” prior to their adoption of Han-style leadership, one that was complemented by the worship of various natural forces.¹³⁵ This great-hero veneration came not only from the divine origins of the ruling family but also because the Tuoba themselves had a ritual system wherein the leader of the tribe, and often his female companion, played the highest roles as religious officiates alongside a female priestess or shamaness-type figure.¹³⁶ These rituals proved the ruler to be in control of both secular and religious affairs by showing him to be a leader from both worlds, and thus accord with what we already know about Emperor Liwei from the *Book of the Wei* – that he hails from celestial stock, having a Tuoba father but a divine mother.

When the Tuoba came to power in the form of the Northern Wei, they adopted Chinese state rituals and worked to equate their head of state with the Son of Heaven; however, this was not a simple process of sinification or of the natural influence of Chinese culture on the Tuoba. Rather, this was a calculated move on the part of the Tuoba that allowed them to combine their own ideas of religious rule with that of the Han Chinese Son of Heaven so as to maintain a dual Han-Tuoba identity. This identity was further enforced by the use of court ritual – both in a Han and a Tuoba style – by the emperor and his court. The Tuoba/Han dual identity and dual court structure was important for the Tuoba ruling class because it aided in their ability to establish a strong, stable, and sanctified ruling family against their own ancient tradition of dynastic

¹³⁵ Ishimatsu 2007, 13.

¹³⁶ Tseng 2013, 23.

succession, which proved to be dangerous and out-dated by the time of the Northern Wei. Finally, their ambitious adoption of Han-style ritual and their pursuit of Han-style dynastic legitimation was a successful means of reshaping their own, tribal-based system of rule into one that was able to hold power over much larger regions than just the north, and this was a key factor in both their conquering of the northern Murong and much of the traditional area of the southern courts.

Adding Buddhism to the Mix

Although the Tuoba ruling house had succeeded in establishing a dynasty, a court, and a stable form of dynastic succession, and though they were able to legitimize this court through the pairing of their own Tuoba-identified leader with the Han-Chinese Son of Heaven, their rule was not entirely stable. They struggled to establish a strong ruling house that could rule over the diverse empire that they had created. And so, to add strength to their rule in the mid-fifth century, this identification of ruler with divinity took on an even more complex dimension: Buddhism. Buddhism became the vehicle by which the Tuoba expressed their belief in a divine ruler, and uniformly in Northern Wei art, the Buddha, or various buddhas, are identified with Northern Wei rulers. This added layer of imperial lore – the stories and iconography of Buddhism – helped the Tuoba to create a complex, hybrid identity necessary to bolstering the strength of their rule in a time period when Buddhism was fast becoming a presence in both the northern and southern courts.

Scholars agree that the five central buddhas at Yungang were made on behalf of the four founding rulers of the dynasty as well as the then current ruler, Emperor

Wencheng.¹³⁷ In agreement with this Buddha-ruler identification, the *Book of the Wei* records that, of the site, “The authorities concerned [were] to have five standing images of Śākyamuni cast in the ‘grand temple of the five-storeyed [pagoda]’ on behalf of the five emperors from Taizu on; each to be sixteen feet high, with a total use of 25,000 *jin* of copper.”¹³⁸ Moreover, as to the eight central buddhas at Longmen, Amy McNair argues that the religio-political iconographic program at Longmen is even more developed than at Yungang for she argues that Longmen’s buddhas depict the then six past rulers of the dynasty, the current ruler Xiaowendi, and the heir apparent, depicted as the future Buddha, Maitreya.¹³⁹ Further to this buddha-ruler identification, Yungang is also home to a unique development in Buddhist cave building, the building of twin caves with twinned buddhas, and these twinned buddhas are said to represent Empress Dowager Feng and her co-reign behind the child emperor, Xiaowendi – an image that resurfaced under the rule of Empress Wu in pictorial representations at Dunhuang.¹⁴⁰

McNair argues that the Northern Wei ruler is identified with the Buddha, or Tathāgata, but she stops short of explaining why this is the case. Indeed, why did the Northern Wei rulers envision themselves as buddhas, and why did the people support this? What, about Buddhism, made it easy for them to substitute their Han-court identified “great hero veneration” with the veneration of rulers-turned-buddhas? One

¹³⁷ For a review of scholarship, see: Tseng 2013, 53. For a foundational work on the topic see: Soper 1966.

¹³⁸ Tseng 2013, 53

¹³⁹ McNair 2007, 17. This is a speculative argument without agreement in the field.

¹⁴⁰ Wang 2005, 141.

simple explanation is that the Buddha himself is a prince.¹⁴¹ All those familiar with the story of the Buddha's life and the foundations of Buddhism know that the Buddha's father, King Śuddhodana, was a tribal ruler of the Śākya people in Kapilavastu. When his son, Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, was born, he was far from a normal child and this caused his father to seek out the advice of a sage. That sage, Asita, made a prophecy that the child would become either an enlightened religious man, a buddha, or a *cakravartin*, a wheel-turning king and universal monarch. Despite strident efforts by King Śuddhodana to have his son become the latter of the two options, Siddhartha went on to become a buddha; yet, the mythology of his kingship never leaves his side and to this day buddhas are depicted with the marks of kingship.

By the time of the Northern Wei, textual evidence identifying buddhas with royalty was already well attested. Likely the earliest telling of this story to make its way to China is found in the *Āgamas*. All of the *Āgama* material known in China had been translated into Chinese by the time of the Northern Wei.¹⁴² Also, the famous Indian poem of the life of the Buddha, depicting popular scenes of the Buddha's birth and royal upbringing, the *Buddhacarita*, had been translated into Chinese by the end of the fourth

¹⁴¹ For a classic study of the princely status of the Buddha, see: Tambiah 1976.

¹⁴² The *Longer Āgama-sūtra* (T1–25: Skt. *Dīrghāgama*; Ch. *Zhang A'han jing* 長阿含經) was translated in 412–13 by Buddhayaśas 佛陀耶舍 and Zhu Fonian 竺佛念. The *Middle Length Āgama-sūtra* (T26–94: Skt. *Madhyamāgama*; Ch. *Zhong A'han jing* 中阿含經) was translated in 397–98 by Gautama Saṃghadeva 瞿曇僧伽提婆. The *Āgama of Combined Discourses* (T99–124: Skt. *Samyuktāgama-sūtra*; Ch. *Za A'han jing* 雜阿含經) was translated in the fifth century by Guṇabhadra 求那跋陀. Finally, the *Incremental Āgama* (T125 增一阿含經 148: Skt. *Ekōttarāgama-sūtra*; Ch. *Zengyi A'han jing* 增一阿含經) was also translated by Gautama Saṃghadeva in 397.

century. This translation is attributed to the well-known, magic-wielding translator at the court of the Northern Liang, Dharmakṣema, or Tan Wuchen 曇無讖 (385–433 CE) though there is cause to doubt this attribution.¹⁴³ In a similar vein, another Indian life of the Buddha, the *Lalitavistara* was translated into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa, or Zhu Fahu 竺法護 (d. 316). And finally, the popular *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* also contains this story of the life of the Buddha and the translation is also attributed to Northern Liang monk, Dharmakṣema. Thus, as these well-known texts treat the story of the Buddha in detail and, as such, certain story elements from the Buddha's life were widely known prior to the Northern Wei. Furthermore, I believe that this royal depiction of buddhas was not lost on the Tuoba, nor was the story of Śākyamuni's royal birth and tribal ancestry; perhaps they saw themselves in the stories of the Buddha and in his father's position as tribal ruler, and if so, perhaps they saw it fitting to make Buddhism into their religio-political creed.

However, more than simply reading stories about the Buddha's birth, people in Six Dynasties China had become accustomed to seeing Buddha images depicted as kings. In the early years of Buddhism's introduction to China, the tradition was called the “teaching of/by images” or *xiangjiao* 像教 for it seems that Buddhism was beloved in China for its imagery of buddhas but also of South and Central Asian imperial courts and

¹⁴³ This attribution to Dharmakṣema only appears in later catalogues beginning with the *Gu jin yijing tuji* 古今譯經圖記 [An Illustrated Record of Translated Scriptures Past and Present] (T. 2151) which was composed by Jing Mai 靖邁 (d.u.) in 665 CE. In earlier catalogues the translation is attributed to Bao Yun 寶雲 (d. 449) who also spent a portion of his life translating at the court of the Northern Liang.

regalia.¹⁴⁴ In one of the earlier caves at the earliest of the Northern Wei cave sites at Yungang,¹⁴⁵ one can find a depiction of Asita making his prophecy over the young Siddhartha Gautama (fig. 1) who would live to choose the religious life over the courtly one. Furthermore, within those very caves one can see buddhas and other figures such as wealthy donors and laymen such as Vimalakīrti with resplendent regalia, like robes, crowns, and parasols, in poses of luxury and elegance. We can find further corroborating evidence for this at Maijishan. Although this site was on the fringes of the Northern Wei territory, a few Northern Wei works remain there intact. One such eminent example of Northern Wei art showing the Buddha as ruler is a stunning stele with two indicative depictions of the Buddha/monarch identification: the central image on the stele is Maitreya Bodhisattva wearing a crown and with elaborate flowing robes (fig. 2), and a small carving on the top right depicts the Indian King, Aśoka,¹⁴⁶ known as a *cakravartin* for his promotion of Buddhism, who is depicted as a past life incarnation of Aśoka and is a child, giving a gift of dirt to the Buddha (fig. 3).¹⁴⁷ Scholars of Buddhism have long pointed out this connection between Buddhism and imperialism as seen in Buddhist art

¹⁴⁴ In *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*, John Kieschnick provides a thorough overview of this indigenous Chinese term, “the teaching of/by images” and argues that though the use of Buddhist icons did not become common until into the first century of the common era, that by the time the tradition reached China, it was well endowed with a vibrant cult of icons brought in by Indian and Central Asian emissaries. Furthermore, he argues that these icons played a major role in the reshaping of material culture in every Buddhist country to which they spread (2003, 52–53).

¹⁴⁵ Cave 6, built after 470 CE.

¹⁴⁶ For a study and translation of the story of Aśoka, or *Aśokavādana*, see: Strong 1983.

¹⁴⁷ Because Aśoka is said to have been born after the Buddha’s *parinirvana*, the two of them never actually met. However, in his past life, Aśoka gave a gift of dirt to the Buddha and the Buddha is then said to have made a prophecy that the boy would be reborn as a *cakravartin* (Strong 1983, 198–204).

and text,¹⁴⁸ and I believe that at the time of the Northern Wei, people imagined buddhas as rulers, a popular imagination enforced by images, and that there was no better expression of divine rule for the Tuoba than Buddhism.

Figure 1. Cave 6 at Yungang Grottoes. The scene shows Asita making a prophecy over the baby buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. Photograph is author's own.



Figure 2. A rubbing of a Northern Wei Stele from Maijishan, showing an image of Maitreya. Cave 133. Image 10. Rubbing from author's collection.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Much excellent work has been done on the topic of the connection between buddhas and kingship and Buddhism and imperialism. For example, see Charles Orzech's *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture for Humane Kings in the Study of Buddhism* (2008) where he discusses one of the most influential Buddhist sūtras in all of East Asia, the *Renwangjing* 仁王經, and for a perspective on Japanese Buddhism see Michael Como's *Shōtoku: Ethnicity, Ritual, and Violence in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition* (2008). More specific to this study, Antonino Forte's work on the reign of Empress Wu argues that the Empress did indeed establish herself as a *cakravartin*, one whose prophecy was delivered in a Buddhist text of her own fabrication (Forte 1976, 1988).

¹⁴⁹ There is also a photo of the original stele on ArtSTOR that can be accessed under the search criteria: Gansu sheng (China); Mai-chi-shan; Cave 133; #10 stone tablet. The inscription has been cut off here, but it is not contemporaneous with the image.



Figure 3. Northern Wei stele from Maijishan, showing Aśoka as a child presenting a gift of dirt to the Buddha. Cave 133. Image 10. Rubbing from author's collection.



The question of Buddhism's early association in Chinese culture with imperial images and metaphors has been well studied, and one of the most cogent explanations for this phenomenon is found in the work of Erik Zürcher. Zürcher argues that from

approximately the fourth century forward, Buddhist ideas, symbols, and imagery infiltrated Han-Chinese notions of dynastic legitimation.¹⁵⁰ Specifically, he argues that during the medieval period, dynastic legitimacy depended on a number of Buddhist elements, the most important of which was the idea of the emperor being seen as a *cakravartin*, akin to King Aśoka. He further identifies two cases in which this identification was made complete, Emperor Wu of the Liang (Liangwudi 梁武帝; r. 502–549) and Emperor Wen of the Sui, while further noting that Emperor Wen distributed relics around China in the same way that Aśoka had done in India.¹⁵¹ And though Zürcher does not mention it, Empress Wu did the very same thing – identifying herself as a *cakravartin* and undertaking a campaign for the distribution of relics across her realm.

Zürcher’s argument is clearly articulated and based on observable, historical fact; however, I would like to add one element to his argument: not all Buddhist leaders envisioned their rule in quite the same way. Indeed, when we consider the Tuoba, and their unique position of being minority rulers over a powerful dynasty struggling with its own succession, then we can appreciate some of the unique facets of the Tuoba’s form of imperial Buddhism – specifically, the very medium of rocks and cliff faces which the Tuoba used to give face to their Buddhism at both Yungang and Longmen. This unique medium, I believe, is reminiscent of the Tuoba’s own sense of identity and genealogy. As we previously heard in the first of the stories of the Tuoba lineage, the Xianbei people are associated with mountains, taking their name from their ancestral home near the Great

¹⁵⁰ Zürcher 1980, 406.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Xianbei Mountain. And it seems that this story is not just a distant bit of historical detail chronicled in *Book of the Wei*, but rather, it was a fact of Tuoba life that was important to the Tuoba during the Northern Wei. During the reign of Emperor Wencheng's father, Emperor Taiwu 太武帝 (424–452 CE), rumour had it that this very same ancestral cave, the Gaxian Cave, had been found in the northern reaches of the territory. As a result, Emperor Taiwu sent his court secretary, Li Chang 李敞 (*f.c.* fifth century), on a mission to examine the supposed ancestral cave. Upon arrival, Li Chang decided that this cave was in fact the home of the original Xianbei clan. He therefore undertook rituals for the ancestors within the cave and in 443 carved an inscription in 201 characters in the cave that can still be seen today.¹⁵²¹⁵³ The carving of this cave inscription was undertaken a mere 20 years before the carving of Yungang, and I believe that both carvings were done in the same spirit – that is, an attempt to re-create a lineage of the Northern Wei that would see the dynasty stabilize its rules of succession around a distinctly Tuoba family of religious rulers. Furthermore, the *Book of the Wei* tells us that the worship of Tuoba ancestors had long been associated with caves. It records that, “When the Wei first dwelled in Youdu, they chiselled stone to make temples for ancestral worship northwest of the land of Wuluohou.”¹⁵⁴ This account appears to be verified by recent excavations of

¹⁵² This story is recounted in two places in the *Book of the Wei*. First, it is told in some detail, including the measurements of the Gaxian Cave, in the section of the *Book of the Wei* entitled “Biographies of the Wuluohou” *wuluhouzhuan* 烏洛候傳 (Wei 2009, 2224). It is also mentioned again in the “Monograph on Ritual” (Wei 2009, 2738).

¹⁵³ Katherine Tsiang has worked on the changing notions of ritual and divinity during the Northern Wei periods, specifically dividing the Pingcheng period from the Luoyang period (2002).

¹⁵⁴ Translation from: McNair 2007, 184 note 71. Original source is: Wei 2009, 2738.

the Gaxian cave that have revealed ritual structures.¹⁵⁵ Hence, the medium of rocks and caves for the building of buddhas had strong resonances with the Tuoba and was likely purposefully done to cement the idea of religious rule, a Tuoba-Buddhist religious rule, over the subjects of the dynasty.

The Tuoba use of Buddhism provided legitimacy to their reign in two important ways: 1) Buddhist iconography allowed them to reinvent their own idea of religious political rulers linked to caves; and 2) the use of Buddhism in dynastic legitimation was also becoming an important aspect of Han Chinese dynastic legitimation, in which the Tuoba were then interested. Thus, Buddhism, as a sort of “floating signifier” without strong historical, social, and legal ties to either the Tuoba or the Han at the time of the Northern Wei, became a flexible iconography for the Tuoba to manipulate throughout their rule. And manipulate it they did. Other than the bold and unorthodox building of their own Tuoba emperors in the faces and bodies of buddhas, the Tuoba also controlled whether these buddhas would be depicted in a Central-Asian style or a Han-Chinese style; whereas at Yungang the central buddha cluster is all dressed in central Asian clothes,¹⁵⁶ at Longmen the central buddhas who represent the past rulers and the current ruler are still depicted in a Central Asian style, but the heir apparent features a Han-Chinese style dress.¹⁵⁷ The explanation for this being that as the non-Chinese rulers of the Northern Wei became gradually more “Chinese,” so, too, did their buddhas.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Liu and Ni 2014, 57-58.

¹⁵⁶ Tseng 2013, 42, after: Su 1986, 435–66.

¹⁵⁷ McNair 2007, 8 & 14 ff.

¹⁵⁸ McNair argues that the continued usage of the Central Asian style in the first five buddhas at Longmen is to match the old tradition of Central Asian dress at Yungang in

However, more than querying the Tuoba's shift to a Chinese motif, I would like to examine why they also retained a Central Asian one in the depiction of their past buddha-rulers. I believe it to be the case that in their move toward sinification the Tuoba believed Buddhism to be distinctly *not* Chinese. They understood the tradition to be a "foreign" and northern one that they themselves were uniquely situated to establish in China due to their own foreign and northern identity. They showed this by increasingly incorporating Sinitic elements into a Buddhist iconography that they controlled. On this topic, the "Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism" opens with these lines:

Great men once arose and shepherded the people. But everything anterior to the tying of the knots is unmentioned in literary records. Therefore there is no way of knowing about it. From Fu Xi and Xuanyuan down through the Three Dynasties, the preternatural words and mystical scriptures were accumulated in the writings of the diagrams and apocrypha. The art of setting an example to the ages and of guiding the people was handed down in the traces of the *feng* and *tian*. Qin, reckless in its wrongdoing, reduced them to ashes. Han picked up the surviving texts and piled them once again like hills and mountains. Sima Qian's classification of their contents in terms of differences and similarities contains the principles of six schools, viz., 'yin-yang' dualism, Confucianism, the school of Mo Di, Nominalism, Legalism and Taoism. Liu Xin published the Seven Epitomes and Ban Gu composed his Treatise on Arts and Letters, but the doctrines of the Śākya clan had never yet been recorded.¹⁵⁹

After this introduction that links the Northern Wei with Buddhist teaching, Wei Shou, the author of the *Book of the Wei*, continues to delineate a history of Buddhism in China that relies entirely on traditionally northern ethnic groups, northern locales, and famous northerners, ending with the passage of Buddhism to the Northern Wei and an

the five central Buddhas, whereas images created after 489, at Yungang, could have a Chinese style, and so too could they at Longmen (2007, 17).

¹⁵⁹ Hurvitz 1956, 25.

enumeration of all that Northern Wei rulers did to promote Buddhism across the lands that they ruled. Wei Shou also states that before the Wei had established their rule, the common people were completely cut off from high culture, living peasant lives in the countryside, and thus had no access to Buddhism,¹⁶⁰ suggesting that the common people should be glad that the government had brought them such a grandiose tradition. In this history of Buddhism, Wei Shou tells of the first contact that China had with Buddhism in the Han, proceeds to give the story of Śākyamuni, and then continues on with a lengthy discussion of the foreign words associated with Buddhism; he gives Chinese glosses to words such as *nirvana*, *śramaṇa*, and *bhikṣuṇī*, explains the nature of the Buddhist monastic community, and gives a brief outline of basic Buddhist teachings. He also goes into a brief history of the various edicts in support of Buddhism that the Northern Wei issued during its rule. His goal in writing such a text is very clearly one of recording the facts of Buddhism for all posterity, so that all future people may learn from reading the history of the Northern Wei. The sentiment in the text is simply that the Northern Wei government knew much about Buddhism and took every opportunity to support its growth not only among the population of the dynasty itself, but also for posterity.

The message in the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” is quite clear – that Buddhism is a tradition of the north and that the Northern Wei is not only a Buddhist court but one that serves to facilitate the spread of Buddhism among its subjects. Hence, although Zürcher’s previously-discussed analysis of the use of Buddhism for dynastic legitimation remains true in a general sense for the case of the Northern Wei, I would like

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 50.

to add to it by further considering the related vector of non-Chinese dynasties and their political use of Buddhism vis-à-vis sinification. I believe that the adoption of Buddhism by the Northern Wei not only played an important role in dynastic legitimation in general, as Buddhism's imperial uses were increasingly well-known by the fourth century, but more specifically that the dynasty's patronage of the tradition constituted a form of cultural capital that, for the first time in their history, put the north on par with their southern counterparts. Specifically, I believe that Buddhism was of importance to the Northern Wei because it was a tradition that, as northerners with Central Asian roots, the Tuoba saw themselves in possession of and as part of their identity in their move toward adopting a Han-style court. Further, in using Buddhism to stress their own identity over and above the Chinese systems that they were adopting, it is also the case that the Tuoba used Buddhism as a justification to change official Chinese court rituals. The *Book of the Wei* records that the Northern Wei refused the traditional sacrifice of animals at court due to their intense compassion for the suffering of all beings, a compassion linked to their showing themselves to be outwardly and forcibly Buddhist – more so, even, than their Chinese counterparts. Thus, I believe that for the Tuoba, Buddhism was something that they “owned” – that was their cultural capital – and further something which allowed them to create a hybrid, Tuoba and Han ethnic identity, which showed their “sinification” to be more than just a blind following of all things considered to be “Han.”

In sum, the Tuoba used Buddhism to represent their rule because Buddhism provided an iconography of divine rule that had strong resonances with both Chinese court rituals identifying the ruler as the Son of Heaven and with Tuoba beliefs in a heroic,

divine leader associated with caves. Thus, in finding a face for divine rule in Buddhism, the Tuoba rulers of the Northern Wei were able to fulfill two goals: 1) uniting their own populace under a vision of divine rule and a new form of succession that saw the creation of a sanctified ruling family of direct primogenitic succession, and 2) both reaching out to and placing themselves well within the realm of Han-style bureaucracy by showing that this new, divine, ruling family was capable of holding the Mandate of Heaven along with its Buddhist affiliations, as the courts of the south were then doing.

The Adoption of Buddhism as a Social Imperative in the North

And yet, this masterful, hybrid Tuoba-Buddha scheme which united the mythology of the Tuoba with that of the Buddha seems not to have been the brainchild of the Tuoba leaders, but instead of the Buddhist community, with whom they had a synergetic relationship under Emperor Wencheng and his predecessors. According to Tsukamoto Zenryū, it was a certain *bhikṣu* called Faguo 法果 (*f.c.* fifth century) who first identified the Northern Wei emperors as living Buddhas by way of making a directive to the Buddhist community that they should bow to the emperor as the emperor was a living buddha.¹⁶¹ Early on in the dynasty, Emperor Mingyuan 明元帝 (r. 409–423 CE) attempted to bestow the imperial title of “duke” onto Faguo due to this monk’s service to the empire. The monk declined but did accept the position of “Religious Superintendent” (*daorentong* 道人統) and did publicly declare Emperor Mingyuan to be the Tathāgata, or Buddha.¹⁶² Faguo was not the only monk to enjoy such a title. During the time of

¹⁶¹ 1957, 371.

¹⁶² Hurvitz 1956, 53.

Emperor Wencheng and his public support of Buddhism, Tanyao was given the newly constructed title of the “Superintendent of the Śramaṇas” (*shamentong* 沙門統) and is himself said to be behind the initial strata of building at Yungang – thus giving form to the Buddha-ruler identification made by his predecessor, Faguo.¹⁶³ The *Book of the Wei* records that at some point in the mid-460s:

Tanyao humbly begged the emperor to dig out the mountain wall of Wuzhou Pass, west of the Capital, open up five caves, and carve [a Buddha image in each of them], the tallest to be seventy feet high, the next tallest sixty feet high, with carvings and decorations superb, a crowning glory to the world.¹⁶⁴

The question, then, is why would Tanyao institute such a project through the leaders of the Northern Wei? What could he, personally, or the Buddhist institution, generally, gain in allying himself with the Tuoba so forcefully? And what, indeed, did the Tuoba gain by agreeing to fund such a project?

The Tuoba did not immediately choose Buddhism as their religion of choice when establishing the Northern Wei – this choice did not come into firm effect until the ascension of Emperor Wencheng in 452 – instead, the early emperors of the dynasty wavered between sponsoring both Buddhism and Daoism,¹⁶⁵ with Wencheng’s

¹⁶³ The precise dating of the first strata of building at Yungang is hotly contested but is generally agreed to be between the early to mid-460s. Caswell argues that the bulk of the early building happened between 461–467 CE (1988, 20) whereas Mair puts it slightly later between 465–467 CE (1992, 349) with the difference being that Emperor Wencheng died in 465 and so Mair’s later date would place the building of the caves squarely in the dual reign of Emperor Xianwen and Empress Dowager Feng.

¹⁶⁴ Caswell 1988, 13.

¹⁶⁵ Emperor Mingyuan first promoted the monk Faguo to be the superintendent of monks under the Northern Wei government, and Faguo himself first identified the Northern Wei ruler with the Buddha and required that monks bow to the Buddha. However, the

immediate predecessor, Emperor Taiwu aggressively promulgating Daoism and persecuting Buddhism. This Northern Wei sponsorship of Daoism, under the supervision of the Daoist exegete Kou Qianzhi 寇謙之 (365–448 CE),¹⁶⁶ was undertaken by Emperor Taiwu and is well recorded in the Daoism section of the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” in the *Book of the Wei*. In that text, Wei Shou tells us that Kou was given the title of “Celestial Master” by none other than the highest of Daoist gods, the Most Supreme Venerable Lord (Taishang Laojun 太上老君), and subsequently gained a high position at the Northern Wei court. While in this position, he used Daoist arts to advise the emperor on military matters and also attempted to invest the emperor himself with magical powers through the creation of various elixirs of immortality.¹⁶⁷ What the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” does not tell us, however, is that other than the Emperor’s own fascination with the arts of immortality, he also likely chose to patronize Kou Qianzhi and his Celestial Master tradition because that tradition then represented a form of religious orthodoxy at a time when religious cults of many forms were blossoming all over the realm.¹⁶⁸ According to Richard Mather, the Celestial

Buddhist tradition suffered a severe persecution under Emperor Taiwu, only to be reinstated with aplomb by Wencheng.

¹⁶⁶ The Northern Wei also famously patronized the then fledgling tradition of Daoism during this time of the persecution of Buddhism. Specifically, the Daoist exegete Kou Qianzhi had the ear of Emperor Taiwu. Kou was a Daoist reformer, looking to renovate the rituals and legal codes of Celestial Masters Daoism, and created a *New Code* 新科 for how Daoists should behave. He had plans to make Daoism the religion of the Northern Wei, but even he relented under the fierce suppression of Buddhism that Emperor Taiwu undertook (Mather 2002).

¹⁶⁷ Ware 1933b, 237 ff.

¹⁶⁸ For an informed discussion of the role that the Celestial Masters played in combating the spread of religious cults considered heterodox by the state, see: Lai 1998.

Masters, under Kou's leadership, were a tradition charged with the task of "purifying and reforming the Taoist Religion."¹⁶⁹ In particular these Celestial Masters advocated a new, hybrid form of "Neo-Daoism" that included the use of Buddhist morality as a means to combat the Daoist sexual practices of other communities that were deemed licentious by the elite in society. They also used Confucian ritual and etiquette as a means to restrain the actions of said groups by creating a law code not unlike the Buddhist *vinaya*.¹⁷⁰ Thus, as a way of aligning with a religious orthodoxy and establishing a powerful government, Emperor Taiwu elevated Celestial Master Daoism to the level of state religion and used it to challenge other non-orthodox religions – popular Buddhism included. As a part of this rejection of heterodoxy, during the reign of Taiwu and at the behest of Kou and his most powerful supporter, Cui Hao 崔浩 (381–450 CE), the Northern Wei undertook a vigorous suppression of Buddhism that included the sacking of monasteries and the forced laicization of monks.¹⁷¹ This suppression came on the heels of the supposedly Buddhist-supported, Gaiwu 蓋吳 Rebellion of 445 wherein enemy weapons were said to have been found hidden away in Buddhist monasteries.¹⁷² Hence, for a *bhikṣu* like Tanyao, the chance to have the Buddhist institution married to the Tuoba ruling house through the unity of buddha-Tuoba imagery was a beneficial one. Certainly, official patronage of the Buddhist tradition by the Tuoba court equated with wide acceptance and protection of the

¹⁶⁹ Mather 2002, 110.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 111.

¹⁷¹ For more on this, see: Liu 2002; Ware 1933.

¹⁷² The mid-fifth century suppression of Buddhism that Liu discusses was undertaken because weapons were allegedly found hidden in a Buddhist monastery near Chang'an 長安 while the Northern Wei were fighting the Gaiwu Rebellion (Liu 1995, 16).

Buddhist institution, and indeed, as Caswell has shown, after the completion of the initial imperially sponsored strata at Yungang, the later stages were funded by private donors who were members of the Buddhist institution.¹⁷³

And yet the benefit of such a relationship was not only to the Buddhist community. For the Tuoba, the sponsorship of Buddhism was a political necessity in the social fabric of the north during the Six Dynasties, providing them strategic means of ruling over large sums of people that the Daoist tradition did not.¹⁷⁴ This was important for the tradition of Buddhism was spreading fast and wide across the landscape of northern China during the Northern Wei. The inscriptional record is an ideal witness to the popularity of Buddhism among northern society as it records the creation of thousands of stelae across the countryside of north China during the medieval period.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, the quantity of image stelae erected in the north far outnumbers the quantity of those erected in the south,¹⁷⁶ which is telling of how popular this new medium was in the north. In order to account for the popularity of stele inscriptions in the north, art historian Dorothy Wong argues that the policies of the Northern Wei, towards Buddhism, worked to integrate Buddhism more fully into Chinese culture than it had previously been, and that this involved the conversion of a non-Buddhist medium – the stone stele –

¹⁷³ Caswell 1988, 29–40.

¹⁷⁴ In his 1957 article, “The Śramana Superintendent T’an Yao and his Time” Tsukamoto Zenryū discusses the wide popularity of Buddhism across all levels of society by the mid-Northern Wei and the related fact that Buddhism made a fast and successful comeback after its severe repression under Emperor Taiwu.

¹⁷⁵ Liu 1995, 24.

¹⁷⁶ Mao 2009, 113.

to a Buddhist one.¹⁷⁷ In a topic that will be discussed in detail in chapter five, she links the development with these stelae to a rise in village-based devotional societies in the Northern Wei whose members erected stelae¹⁷⁸ as did the emperor and the elite.

The north created so many Buddhist stelae in fact that the northern dynasties are known to be the genesis of stela culture in China, and those of the Northern Wei are taken as archetypical by scholars in the field.¹⁷⁹ The art contained in these cave sites, burial clusters, and rural stelae is some of the finest of medieval China and of East Asian Buddhism writ large, yet this art and its attendant inscriptions record more than the creation and development of an East Asian Buddhist art, they also record the complex inter-workings of at least three different levels of society which were all interested in patronizing the caves: the imperial elite, the religious elite, and the common lay devotees. As a testament to the northern patronage of and affiliation with Buddhism, the donor inscriptions that go alongside many of the images at Longmen tell the stories of various stakeholders, their interest in the caves, and their claims of ownership to religious, political, and artistic ideals thus represented. For example, an inscription made by a monk on behalf of his deceased parents:

On the [?] day of the fifth month of the third year of the Jingming era (between June 21 and July 19, 502 CE)¹⁸⁰ the monk Huigan has reverently commissioned this singular image of Maitreya on behalf of his deceased parents. He wishes that the country has good fortune and is forever prosperous, that the three jewels be increasingly manifest and be spread throughout this age by teachers and the saṃgha, and that his parents and all relatives will forever be saved from the three evil destinies due to the

¹⁷⁷ Wong 2004, 44.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Mao 2009, 113.

¹⁸⁰ The Jingming era is from 500–503 CE.

growth and accumulation of their karma. He makes this wish, also, for every living being in the triple world.¹⁸¹

A further example of the variety of people engaging in Buddhist practice through the commission of images, this next example of a donor inscription is one made by a Regional Inspector on behalf of his military generals. It says:

On the seventeenth day of the tenth month of a *xinmao* year, the fourth year of the Yongping era (November 21, 2011)¹⁸² of the Great Wei, the Regional Inspector (*cishi* 刺史) Wan Furong, commissioned the building of one image of Śākyamuni with respect to maintaining and regulating all the military matters of Liangzhou and for seeking out captured military generals. His utmost prayer is that the emperor and the country be safe and that there be a respite from warfare. He wishes intensely that all brothers, mothers, children, and all others be in peace and contentment and that they revere and take refuge in the Three Jewels that will prosper forever, that the country's blessing are extensive, that the five grains will be abundant, and that the populace will be joyous. This extends to all living beings – may every person receive these blessings.¹⁸³

And finally, the following inscription records the wishes for the emperor made by a village collective. It says:

On the second day after the new moon, on a *guiwei* day in the fourth month of the fourth year of the Jingming era of the Great Wei (May 12, 503), Gao Fude, from the village of [missing], Fei district, Fanyang commandery, Youzhou, along with the image presider and *weina* 维那,¹⁸⁴

¹⁸¹ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 3.132.

¹⁸² The Yongping era is from 508–512 CE.

¹⁸³ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 3.143; translation is my own.

¹⁸⁴ The title *weina* was a Buddhist term from the time period which labeled an individual as one who was in charge of a number of different administrative positions within a monastic community. These individuals will be discussed further on in this chapter and again in chapter four; however, in brief, in the Northern Wei *weinas* were both men and women and they worked closely between the court and the monastic community as enforcers of the court's policies regarding monasticism. A quite confusing title, the origins of the term *weina* are unknown, as it does not seem to make a lot of sense in either Chinese or Sanskrit. In his *Managing Monks: Administrators and Administrative Roles in Indian Buddhist Monasticism*, Jonathan Silk (2008) provides a discussion of the range of possibilities of the meanings of this title and concludes with uncertainty. In the

Liu Xiong, and three hundred others, have commissioned an image to be built on behalf of the emperor.¹⁸⁵

These three examples show a certain confluence of many levels of society around the patronage and financial support of Buddhism, wherein lay devotees, *samgha* members, and imperial officials all make public appeals to the tradition. The first case is predictable – a member of the monastic community commissioning an image on behalf of his family. The second case is less predictable, a military general building an image to bring an end to violence and warfare. And the third case is unique to the time period at hand as it shows members of a lay religious society coming together to build an image, presumably all of whom put forward whatever money they could spare to create the image.¹⁸⁶ Although a widely popular practice that transcended class barriers, the cost for the creation of Buddha images in the Northern Wei was exorbitant. In her *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture*, Amy McNair calculates the actual cost of creating a niche with an image. She says that the cost of a grotto of 3.1 square meters would be approximately equal to half the year's wage of a government official.¹⁸⁷ Thus the grottos in Yungang and Longmen should only have

Northern Wei, however, although Buddhists and rulers likely did not understand the linguistic origins of the word, it is clear that this position was powerful as the *weina* of Luoyang was the administrator of state Buddhism and very close with the emperor.

¹⁸⁵ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 3.062; translation is my own.

¹⁸⁶ The topic of these lay religious societies will be dealt with extensively in chapter 5. By way of a cursory introduction to them, Liu Shu-fen characterizes them as charitable organizations administered at the village level. These societies did more than fund Buddhist building projects; they also undertook social work projects such as the building of bridges. Liu Shu-fen records a votive inscription from one of these village societies that records over 1000 names (1995, 27).

¹⁸⁷ McNair 2007, 59.

been accessible to the wealthy donors or to those who had organized a collective in order to make such expenditure, and yet we have examples of lone donors. These lone donors were sometimes even common people of pious faith who surely would have had to save money over years in order to make such an image. One example of such an inscription, commissioned by a lone man who, as a rhetorical device to show his piety, claims to financially devastate his family in order to commission an image, and whose name translates to something like “the uncultured nomad” reads as such:

The disciple of the Buddha, Zhai Man, on behalf of his deceased parents, has commissioned one image of Maitreya though he has fallen on hardships. He wishes that all deceased persons will gain rebirth in a heaven or be endowed with birth in the Western regions¹⁸⁸ where they can behold buddhas everywhere and at that time provide offerings to the three jewels. This was recorded on a stele in the Wanshou Monastery, on the 13th day of the 4th month of the 3rd year of the Shengui Era (May 15, 520).¹⁸⁹ He now builds this in order to commence the creation of merit for all of those who see its fruition; so that all of them will know the happiness and bliss of the heavenly hall, but not know the bitterness and pain of the hells. Furthermore, on behalf of the various members of his own family, he vows to give rise to a flood of prayers. He has completely exhausted his family’s treasures and thus severed himself from and harmed his wife and children in order to build this one image of Maitreya so that they may all receive the benefit. He wishes to serve his brothers and his children in the family so that all of them may dissipate the clouds of evil and gather together the 10,000 kinds of goodness and blessing and that each of them may have longevity that is equal to that of Pengzu.¹⁹⁰ In serving those who study and question, may they have intelligence, clarity, and strength and for those officials of the soil and various other ministers, may they reach

¹⁸⁸ Rebirth in the “western regions” is a popular desire in Northern Wei inscriptions and surely refers to rebirth in the Western Pureland, Sukhāvatī, though this is strange because the Buddha of the Pureland, Amitābha, is not mentioned in my inscriptions.

¹⁸⁹ The Shengui Era is from 518–520 CE.

¹⁹⁰ A mythological figure from the *Biography of Divine Immortals* who is said to have lived for over 700 years. Source: CJKVE- Dictionary.

the Three Offices¹⁹¹ and may the passage of time not diminish them. He undertakes to wish that all insects [broken text] of varieties, that each and all of them have this merit. His father, Zhai Qiaosheng, his son Man Gou, his son Yao Man, his son Mao Man, his grandchild, Yuan Bin, and his grandchild, Zhong Bin.¹⁹²

Taking a pragmatic approach to the question of donorship and the patronage of Buddhist art in the Northern Wei, I believe that people spent large amounts of money on the public support of Buddhism in part because it was an act of imperial mimesis – a copying of the actions of the emperor and the royal elite that simultaneously declared them as people of good Buddhist faith and reliable supporters of the empire. In the mid-fifth century, Emperor Wencheng gave the imperial decree that: “We now command the various provinces, prefectures, and sub-prefectures, wherever multitudes dwell, to permit the building of one reliquary in each place and to tolerate the expense, setting no limit.”¹⁹³ This decree coincided with the emperor commencing building of the Yungang caves.¹⁹⁴ Thus, for the individual who could afford it, sponsoring a cave *alongside* the emperor’s own personally sponsored caves and projects at either Yungang or Longmen was both good religion and good politics. Furthermore, since the emperor was in fact making decrees in support of Buddhist building, it can be argued that people built Buddhist statuary and stupas in their local regions in order to show themselves as good

¹⁹¹ The Three Offices, in the Northern Wei, were the three main divisions of the imperial bureaucracy all under the leadership of the *Shangshu* 尚書, or the official court secretary. Achieving a position in the Three Offices is thus the highest rank for a court officer.

¹⁹² Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 4.080. This stele is shown in: Wong, 2004, fig. 6.5.

¹⁹³ Hurvitz 1956, 70.

¹⁹⁴ This decree was likely made in support of Buddhism after the government’s severe oppression of the tradition during the Gaiwu Rebellion (Soper 1966, 241).

subjects of the empire, an empire that desired to see itself on par with Han civilization, and which proclaimed itself as distinctly northern and fervently Buddhist.

The precise reasons behind northern China's strenuous support of Buddhism between the fourth and sixth centuries are complex and multifaceted, but one aspect of this phenomenon may simply be the fact that people were interested in the religious assistance that Buddhism promised to them and provide for them and their family members. In a Buddhist economy that Amy McNair refers to as the "Karmic Gift,"¹⁹⁵ when commissioning a buddha image an intangible exchange is made between the building of said buddha and the aid of that buddha in achieving a positive fruition of one's karma;¹⁹⁶ meaning that devotees, through patronizing the building of Buddhist caves, stupas, and monasteries, were literally buying themselves and their kin a better rebirth. And they were doing so in huge numbers – much more so than the imperial decree to have one stupa in every place where people were dwelling. Although the great majority of inscriptions mention the empire in the sense that the emperor and empress are listed as beneficiaries of the donor's wishes, this mention seems to be a stock phrase, included as it is in many inscriptions, and the earnestness of the donor's faith can often be seen further down in the inscription. As a standard form, votive inscriptions of this type usually begin with the date followed by the name(s) of the donor(s), they go on to say

¹⁹⁵ McNair 2007, 31ff.

¹⁹⁶ The notions of karma, rebirth, and karmic exchange was one of the features of Buddhism that was the most popular in the medieval period as it allowed for Buddhist believers to still express their filial piety towards their deceased parents by giving them a method of helping them to achieve a better rebirth after their death. For comprehensive studies of this particular issue by two leading scholars in the field, see: Bokenkamp 1999; Teiser 1988.

what they are wishing for, such as a better rebirth, and they usually end by listing the beneficiaries of these wishes, which are first said to be the emperor but then actually declared to be the person's parents, teachers, or family.¹⁹⁷ Thus, I contend that when analyzing the inscriptional record of the Northern Wei, the image that arises is one of a society deeply amorous of Buddhism, or particularly of the karmic exchange of merit that Buddhism offered, and one in which both rulers and subjects partook of the merit exchange, perhaps in a copy of each other's actions.

Beyond the inscriptional record, there are a variety of other sources and stories that reveal just how popular Buddhism was in the north of China during the Six Dynasties. Liu Shu-fen argues that Buddhism was popular in the north because it was seen as “foreign” and non-Han, perhaps northern, and she cites the miracle-working eminent monk Fotucheng 佛圖澄 (232–348 CE) as evidence for her argument. According to Liu, the non-Han peoples of the north identified with Fotucheng as a powerful, non-Han religious man and they joined the Buddhist community in great numbers at that time, seeing the tradition as simultaneously religiously powerful and as something that belonged to them as northerners.¹⁹⁸ Fotucheng was not the only miracle worker in northern China, however, as the *Book of the Wei* records many miracles of a Buddhist nature, miracles completed by other northern peoples.¹⁹⁹ From miracle stories reporting

¹⁹⁷ For more on the form of inscriptions see: Liu 1995, 20.

¹⁹⁸ Liu 1995, 6.

¹⁹⁹ The existence of the the collection of stimulus-response stories in the Northern Wei is itself further proof of the dynasty's efforts toward sinification wherein they collected these miracle tales in much the same way as had been done by the Han before them. Hence, their writing of these tales was one more method by which the Tuoba increasingly

that Northern Wei Emperor Xiaoming had a vision of a golden man like that of the famous vision of Emperor Wu of the Han 漢武帝 (r.141–87 BCE),²⁰⁰ to stories of glowing relics,²⁰¹ stupas that are miraculously saved from fire,²⁰² divine revenge on persecutors of Buddhism,²⁰³ monks who burn their bodies but are left with tongues still intact due to their merit accrued from chanting sūtras,²⁰⁴ and Buddhist statues trembling in fear and sweating about calamities in the realm,²⁰⁵ the Northern Wei is full of miraculous events that increase the dynasty's connection to Buddhism. One of the more entertaining of these stories from the Northern Wei follows:

The monk Huishi listened to Kumārajīva's newly translated sūtras and followed the master to Chang'an in order to study the classical texts. He came across a broken beggar who trapped the monk and tried to kill him. The beggar hit Huishi's body with a plain blade and yet his body was uninjured. The broken beggar became enraged and grabbed hold of a jeweled sword and struck him again, and still no damage was done, ultimately scaring the criminal so that he departed. After this, Emperor Shizong paid excessive attention to Hui's study of contemplation, which he undertook for more than 50 years. Huishi never lay down and was constantly roaming in the dirt and the mud though his feet never became dirty and hence he was called the "white-footed master." When he finally came to his end, his corpse remained intact for more than 10 days with a

participated the production of Han-style knowledge while simultaneously showing their empire to be a divinely ordained one – one in which miracles flourished.

²⁰⁰ The following miracle tales are all from the *Book of the Wei*, but are collected in a text called, *An Expanded and Complete Collection of Stimulus and Response Throughout History* [增修歷史感應統計 *Zengxiu lishiganying tongji*], distributed for free from Honghua publishers on behalf of the Jiangsu Provincial Buddhist Association. Han Wudi's story, called "In Search of Buddhist Scriptures" is at 2.120.

²⁰¹ Ibid. "Relics," 2.121.

²⁰² Ibid. "Strange and Numinous Stupa," 2.119.

²⁰³ One story, in particular, is directed at revenge against Cui Hao, Kou's partner in his Daoist theocracy and eventual suppression of Buddhism after the Gaiwu rebellion. Ibid. "Cui Hao," 2.106.

²⁰⁴ Ibid "Zhi Kao," 2.123.

²⁰⁵ Ibid "The Sweating Image," 2.119.

healthy colour. After 10 years his grave was moved to the southern suburbs and as they opened his coffin his body was still dignified, without being bent or broken. As for those who came to see him off, there were more than 6000 people in attendance and every single one of them was deeply moved. This biography is eminently sufficient to be a eulogy of his divine traces.²⁰⁶

Miracle tales of this sort testify to the popularity of Buddhism among many levels of northern society, just as do the previously cited donor inscriptions on Buddhist statuary. Thus, the Northern Wei's patronage of Buddhism – a very aggressive patronage as seen in the building plans of Yungang and Longmen – was a move toward solidarity with their populace, something that the patronage of Daoism likely would not have provided them with after Kou Qianzhi's death and the decline in the popularity of Daoism in the north. The inscriptional record of the Northern Wei does contain a few examples of Daoist stelae and statuary, but to date they have often been found in restricted geographical locales in Shaanxi 陕西 and from the later stages of the dynasty, a fact that likely speaks to the popularity of Daoism in the south of China, after the Northern Wei had moved its court to Luoyang. Furthermore, in general, Daoist stele of the Northern Wei are relatively rare artefacts among the thousands of Buddhist ones that are very prominent in the art historical record.²⁰⁷ Hence, Buddhism was likely the most popular religion among the majority of the subjects of the Northern Wei, and thus the court's decision to patronize the religion should be seen in that light.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. "Hui Shi," 2.122-123.

²⁰⁷ For some of the work done on Daoist steles of the Northern Wei, see: Abe 1996; Little et al 2000, 163ff. Gil Raz is currently undertaking further work on Daoist steles of the Northern Dynasties and has kindly provided advice for my reading of a number of the steles themselves.

The Adoption of Buddhism as a Defensive Strategy in the Northern Wei

This intense interest in Buddhism by many sectors of northern society contributed to unrestrained and unprecedented growth of the tradition during the Northern Wei. According to Tang Yongtong, before the Northern Wei had moved to Luoyang, there were approximately 100 monasteries in the old capital of Pingcheng housing more than 2000 monastics and there were 6476 in the lands ruled by the dynasty, housing some 77,258 monastic residents. However, by the end of the dynasty these already substantial numbers had grown incredibly, so that Luoyang itself had 1376 monasteries, the realm housed approximately 30,000 monasteries, and altogether there were more than 2 million members of the monastic community.²⁰⁸ Although originally supported by the government of the Northern Wei, this extremely fast building of monasteries, temples, and buddha images that was undertaken by the populace of the Northern Wei eventually caused trouble for the rulers of the dynasty as the populace was increasingly organizing itself along class and ethnic lines in support of their patronage of Buddhism. The government feared this unrestrained building and the political challenge that these organized and powerful Buddhist groups could, and did, wield. This fear is well documented in the *Book of the Wei*. The following excerpt from the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” well describes just how many monasteries and Buddha-images were being built by the populace in their quest for a karmic reward:

But the monasteries of today, there is no place that does not have them! Either side by side they fill the interior of the walled cities, or one upon the other they overflow into the butcheries and wineries. At times three or five young monks together make one monastery. Brahman chants and the

²⁰⁸ Tang 2006, 451.

sounds of slaughter, each next door to the other, mingle their echoes. Statues and reliquaries are wrapped in the stench of rotting meat, the spiritual is submerged in lust. Truth and falsehood have confounded their places, the comings and goings are tangled and mixed. The lower officials acquiesce and not one says nay, the hierarchs stand face to face with the regulations but ask no questions. When mud stains true practice, when grime soils refined monks, when fragrance and stench share the same vessel, is it not indeed excessive?²⁰⁹

The picture painted here is of a Luoyang so full of monasteries and stupas – funded by the populace, not the government – that the line of demarcation between sacred and profane could no longer be drawn. These vexations over the mixing of sacred and profane can be understood when considering that the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” is part of the official *Book of the Wei* and hence a product of Northern Qi literatus Wei Shou who was educated in the Northern Wei. His depiction of the state of Buddhism in Luoyang is in fact a description of Buddhism in the hands of the common people, wrestled away from the careful machinations of the government and the creation of their grandiose and elegant monasteries and grottos. The Northern Wei government feared this popular, unrestrained, and disorderly practice of Buddhism and they sought to restrict it. Throughout the dynasty a succession of decrees was issued with the aim to restricting Buddhist building by the populace while simultaneously supporting the Buddhist building undertaken by the government itself. According to the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism,” it was decreed that within the city limits there should only be the imperial Eternal Peace Monastery (Yongning si 永寧寺) and one nunnery. Furthermore, when it came to the building of new privately funded monasteries,

²⁰⁹ Hurvitz 1956, 94-95.

it was to be that a monastery needed to have at least fifty monks in residence, and if a monastery was caught with less than fifty monks then the patron of the monastery would be punished and the monks sent to distant regions.²¹⁰

This attempt by the government to restrict popular building projects and lay funding of Buddhist images and temples was done, according to the *Book of the Wei*, with the wellbeing of both the common people and the state of Buddhism in mind. In order to justify their restriction of popular support to the Buddhist community, the government argued that the wide proliferation of Buddhist building projects had created a situation in which “the laity have been dazzled by the prospects of vain renown, the clergy have coveted lavish enrichment, and, although there was a clear prohibition, yet did they arbitrarily and unlawfully build;”²¹¹ meaning that the cost of the karmic gift had simultaneously devastated the populace while causing Buddhist monks to tend toward decadence. The text also states that due to popular support of Buddhism, these locally funded monasteries were found not only to contain liquors and wines from wealthy donors, but also to contain “clandestine rooms in which with the daughters of noble families they had practiced debauchery.”²¹² Ultimately, the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” takes a negative stance towards the unrestricted funding of Buddhist monasteries and images by the populace, arguing that the populace were becoming irresponsible and lax toward their this-worldly duties because they were

²¹⁰ Ibid, 85.

²¹¹ Hurvitz 1956, 93.

²¹² Ibid, 65. This depiction of the licentiousness of Buddhist monks finds resonance with a number of other texts of a slightly early period that are discussed in: Seiwert 2003, 103ff.

relying on the doctrine of the karmic to care for them. Further damningly, the text also argues that the populace was in fact violating the rules of Buddhism through their business and building practices. The text says:

Men in both the interior and outlying areas are raising up meritorious works and erecting reliquaries and temples. High and wide, extensive and imposing, they are also adequate to propagating and exalting the Ultimate Doctrine. And yet the ignorant outdo one another, and the poor and rich vie with one another. They exhaust their property, striving only for magnificence, but they harm and kill insects and other life-containing beings. If one has a pure and pious mind, even though engaged in heaping earth and gathering sand, one's accumulated merited shall not perish. But they wish to create a cause for building merit while not yet knowing the effect of harming life. We are the Father and Mother of the People; lovingkindness and nurture, these are Our concern. From this time forward We forbid all such actions.²¹³

The ambivalent relationship that the Northern Wei had with Buddhism is thus poignantly depicted; on the one hand the government supporting their own Buddhist building projects, and on the other hand forbidding and slandering the building projects of others, particularly of the commoners, and doing so by arguing that it is for their own karmic good as well as for the good of Buddhism. In such a way, the Northern Wei rulers considered themselves the rulers of Buddhism – it was their job to support and control the tradition and their job to shape it in their image, and to that extent the Emperors of the Northern Wei arranged monastic support to aid them in their rule over the *saṃgha*. Other than the previously discussed Faguo and Tanyao, by the second half of the dynasty a system of government-regulated monastic leadership had been established, wherein the court relied on *weinas* to work between the emperor and the Buddhist *saṃgha*, policing

²¹³ Ibid, 77; translation from Hurvitz.

the *saṃgha* from the inside on behalf of imperial decree. For example, the municipal *weina* of Luoyang was in charge of administering civil law within the *saṃgha* as it was situated within the precinct of Luoyang city and hence he worked closely with the court that was centered in Luoyang.²¹⁴ According to the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism,” if a monk or nun did not know the monastic rules, the *vinaya*, then he or she need be disciplined by the *weina*, the Elders, and the Residents in Chief. These persons were also responsible for registering monks within their monasteries, as the Northern Wei severely curtailed the wanderings of monks by restricting them to their home monasteries. The Northern Wei also restricted the personal possessions of monks, the practice of monks lending money on interest, and the allotted mourning times of monks for their deceased family members.²¹⁵²¹⁶ The *weina* were also responsible for inspecting the grain held in trust by monasteries on behalf of the populace, lest it be squandered or misused by the monks.²¹⁷ Finally, on behalf of imperial decree, the *weina* were to supervise the ordination of monks in order to ensure that the appropriate number of capable people were chosen for ordination in each province and that none of them were

²¹⁴ Unfortunately, I have not found tomb epigraphs for any of these municipal *weina* from the Northern Wei and this suggests to me that although the *weina* were political figures, they were not proper politicians of the royal family who would normally receive a tomb and epigraph.

²¹⁵ Hurvitz 1956, 85-86.

²¹⁶ The image of Buddhist monks that appears through a study of the Northern Wei’s legal code is one very much in line with that of the work of Gregory Schopen, who has shown – among other things – that monks and nuns in India had their own wealth (2004 1ff), kept slaves (2004, 193ff), and lent money on interest (2004, 45ff). For more on this, see the entire manuscripts of Schopen 2004 and 2014.

²¹⁷ Hurvitz 1956, 87-88.

slaves, as the decree was made that slaves could no longer turn to the religious life as a means of escaping their enslavement.²¹⁸

Yet despite this careful policing, no less than ten rebellions²¹⁹ arose in the Northern Wei, at least four being of clear Buddhist affiliation.²²⁰ The details of two of those, the Gaiwu Rebellion and the supposed Mahāyāna Rebellion, are recounted in the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism.” According to James Ware’s reading of the *Book of the Wei*, the Mahāyāna Rebellion was led by a monk called Faqing 法慶 who was also called “Mahāyāna.” Faqing, along with his assistant, Li Guipo 李歸伯 who was also styled as the Bodhisattva of the Ten Bhūmis (Daśabhūmibodhisattva, shizhupusa 十住菩薩), the Prince Who Pacifies Han (Dinghanwang 定漢王), and the Director of the Army for Combating Māra (Pingmojungsi 平魔軍司) lead a rebellion in which members of their army were awarded the first stage of *bhūmi* upon murdering an enemy and thus were given the title “ekabhūmibodhisattva” or the “Bodhisattva of the first *Bhūmi*” (Yizhupusa 一住菩薩).²²¹ Their apparent goal was to bring about a messianic Buddhist revolution and overthrow the Northern Wei and it took the court three months and an army of 100,000 to quell them.²²² Of course this description of the Mahāyāna Rebellion

²¹⁸ Ibid, 90.

²¹⁹ Liu 1995, 15.

²²⁰ Seiwert 2003, 108-9.

²²¹ I owe all these insights from the *Book of the Wei* to James Ware who has dug through the book for references. For more information see: Ware, 1933a, 172 (note 3). Tsukamoto discusses this rebellion in much more detail (1942, 269–290) in his section on these Buddhist rebellions in the Northern Wei (241–291); as does: Seiwert 2003, 111-114.

²²² Seiwert 2003, 112.

comes from the *Book of the Wei*, a work produced by Northern Qi literatus, Wei Shou, and so the depiction of them is likely skewed to exaggerate their wrongdoings as a polemic on the unrestrained growth of the Buddhist tradition.

This type of millenarian rebellion was not uncommon in early medieval China. In trying to situate such movements within the context of Chinese society and not within Buddhism specifically, David Ownby has traced a useful history of millenarian rebellions from the Yellow Turbans (184 CE) near the fall of the Han dynasty to the creation of Buddhist texts and messianic figures such as the bodhisattva Prince Moonlight (Yueguang Tongzi 月光童子)²²³ throughout the entire Six Dynasties. Hubert Seiwert has worked to understand these rebellions sociologically, and has positioned their rise solidly in the common class of peasants, suggesting that the common form of Buddhism was different than that of the educated elite, particularly in the Northern Wei. In support of this, he cites a memorial that was presented to Emperor Xiaowen by a certain Lu Yuan 盧淵. The contents of that memorial read:

Your slave has also heard, what is generally known, that among the common people in the eastern regions since many years there is a virtual competition in establishing vegetarian societies (*zhaihui* 齋會). [Their leaders] falsely claim to be nobles to agitate and delude [their followers]. Obviously, they use their position among the populace to arouse feelings against the ruling dynasty. Their ambitions are boundless and beyond compare. In my ignorant view it would be appropriate to punish them as soon as possible to stop these activities and to execute their leaders. Otherwise, I fear, they may become a disaster such as the Yellow Turbans and the Red Eyebrows. If we tolerate the small seedlings and do not cut

²²³ For a thorough study of this character and his role in Buddhist messianism in early medieval China, see: Zürcher 1982.

them as soon as they appear or chop them with an axe when they have grown up, we may face a mass of criminals.²²⁴

However, likely the most cogent and historically relevant argument for why these rebellions arose and succeeded in such large numbers is found in the work of Liu Shu-fen. Lest we think of these rebellions simply in terms of a class struggle, Liu Shu-fen calls our attention to the important role that ethnicity and ethnic relations played in the creation of such rebellions, particularly under the Northern Wei.²²⁵ Liu begins by making the connection between the Lushui 廬水胡 branch of the Xiongnu peoples, their competition with the Northern Wei, and their fervent Buddhist faith. The Lushui branch of the Xiongnu ruled over the Northern Liang, which the Northern Wei conquered in 439 CE. They were fervent Buddhists as well as political opponents and had sponsored large-scale translation projects including the support of two of China's most eminent translators of Buddhist texts, Kumārajīva (334–413 CE) and Dharmakṣema. When the Northern Wei fought to take the Northern Liang, Buddhist monks took up arms against the Tuoba in solidarity with the Lushui²²⁶ and Dharmakṣema himself was a casualty of this Buddhist politicking – he was invited to the Northern Wei court in 432 but the then Lushui ruler, Juqu Mengxun 沮渠蒙遜 (368–433 CE) was unwilling to part with him, and so killed him instead.²²⁷ Liu Shu-fen argues that although the Tuoba took the Northern Liang in

²²⁴ Wei 2009, 1048. I owe the translation to: Seiwert 2003, 109.

²²⁵ Liu 2007.

²²⁶ Ibid, 3

²²⁷ Further details about Dharmakṣema in the *Book of the Wei* state that the reason that the Northern Wei wanted Dharmakṣema is that the monk was known to have mastered secret sexual techniques that the then Tuoba ruler, Tuoba Tao, also wanted to learn.

439 CE, the Lushui continued to hold power over many parts of the country, particularly the trade routes leading from central to western China, and that because of this they were able quickly to take Chang'an 長安 during the Gaiwu rebellion, apparently storing arms in monasteries along the way.

I have attempted to show here that northern China between the third and sixth centuries was a collection of non-Han tribal groups sharing a fervent belief in the foreign religion of Buddhism, a belief that not uncommonly showed itself in the form of popular rebellions, and that as such the Northern Wei necessarily supported Buddhism as a political imperative during their ascension to power. In doing so, I have argued that both the Buddhism of the court and the Buddhism of the people influenced each other to create a situation wherein the empire could not afford to be seen as not supporting Buddhism and wherein the common people showed their allegiance to the empire through their continued practice of a court-sanctioned Buddhism.²²⁸ Yet, this patronage of Buddhism

According to this source, Dharmakṣema perfected these techniques with the women of the Northern Liang court. For more information on this, see: Chen 2004, 228.

²²⁸ The question remains of what this common form of Northern Wei Buddhism looked like. It is my contention that for the average person during the Northern Wei, Buddhism was primarily a devotional religion that assured one a better rebirth through proper acts of religious devotion in this life. In the votive inscriptions that I have collected, by far the most popular buddhas depicted are Śākyamuni (Shijiamouni 釋迦牟尼) and Maitreya (Mile 彌勒), with Guanyin (觀音), (Prabhūtaratna 多寶), and Amitāyus (Wuliangshou 無量壽) coming in as distant seconds. Furthermore, in their requests toward these buddhas, there is seldom talk of enlightenment or nirvana. Instead, what is requested is a positive rebirth for one's family. Predictably, temple inscriptions show a far more thorough understanding of Buddhist teaching, one replete with images of the Pureland and discussions of Buddhist teachings of emptiness and desire. Assuming that the average person might be able to hear a dharma teacher teach these things that were written on temples, I would argue that regular citizens of the Northern Wei knew more about Buddhism than their votive inscriptions suggest. However, a study of the votive

by the court in fact put the Northern Wei rulers in the precarious position of both supporting Buddhism among the populace and policing it when they felt that it was getting too powerful, especially among tribal groups such as the Lushui. Thus the Northern Wei was caught in a dangerous game of both supporting and repressing the Buddhist tradition – a game fuelled by their desire to not only unite, but to rule over, a country composed of diverse tribal peoples whom they were trying to sinify and bring under their control. In so doing they positioned themselves as Buddhist leaders, *cakravartins* in fact, seeking to control their population as insiders to the Buddhist faith, but also policing the faith when they felt threatened by the faithful.

Conclusion

The picture of Buddhism in the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” is a chaotic one; commoners spending their savings on inscriptions and building projects while uniting around monasteries in social and religious communities that the empire found increasingly difficult to police. Yet the ruler of the empire desired to police this Buddhist fervor as it well knew that religious alliances were also cemented in social and ethnic divides and that a religion left unchecked may have the ability to stir rebellion, as it certainly did. Thus the rulers of the dynasty undertook to play the dangerous game of both supporting and restricting Buddhism – a game that caused them to sponsor the building of large-scale Buddhist art and statuary, while simultaneously requiring them to keep close control of the very monks they sponsored. The court and the members of the

inscriptions reveals that their primary motive for their support of Buddhism was salvation for their family and associates.

literati who supported them engineered a court-sanctioned form of Buddhism in which they were the supreme patrons of the religion and also its moral beacons – they alone had the right to decide what Buddhism should be, not only because they were the rulers of the country, but because they were Buddhism's most visible patrons and wealthiest donors.

Furthermore, the Tuoba's adoption of Buddhism at court facilitated the universalization of the Tuoba's own indigenous belief in a religio-political leader through their building of Buddhist statuary that was symbolic of their own rule. This imagery, though rooted in Tuoba ideals of rule, gained wide popularity throughout the empire. Hence, I believe that the Northern Wei's turn toward the patronage of Buddhism in the 450s was a strategic move aimed at uniting the diverse ethnic groups of northern China under the rule of the dynasty through universal patronage of the Buddha as divine figurehead. This was an opportunity that patronage of the Daoist tradition would not provide them as Daoism did not enjoy the same popularity in the north of China as Buddhism did, particularly among the Northern Wei's competitors, the Xiongnu.

Finally, in adding one more layer of understanding to the complicated situation of Buddhism in the Northern Wei, it is also the case that the rulers of the dynasty used Buddhism to help sanctify and stabilize the ruling house, which was necessary due to the precarious situation of Tuoba dynastic succession and also for the legitimacy of the Tuoba's rule over China. Through building their own likenesses in the forms of massive buddhas at Yungang and Longmen, and through further manipulating the iconography of these sites to show increasing sinic and less Central Asian motifs throughout time, including the use of the Chinese language, the designers of the Northern Wei's imperial

Buddhism brought together the three most important sociological components of the dynasty: 1) the Northern Wei's identification of Buddhism as a northern religion over which they had ownership; 2) the Northern Wei's increasing need to show themselves open to Han-Chinese innovation as they took over traditionally Han lands; and 3) the ability to retain a distinct Tuoba identity by relying on Tuoba ideals of religio-political rulers associated with caves.

Figure 4. Timeline of relevant events in the history of the Northern Wei.²²⁹

Year	Ruler	Event	Importance
r. 386 – 409	Daowudi	Founding of the Northern Wei	
396 – 398		Appointment of first Chief of the Monks to the monk Faguo.	Faguo also declared Emperor Daowu to be the Thatāgata, or buddha.
r. 409 – 423	Mingyuandi		
411		Kou Qianzhi made the Celestial Master	According to the "Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism" Kou Qianzhi was given the title of Celestial Master by the Daoist god Taishang Laojun, thus establishing his power before arriving at the Northern Wei court.
r. 424 – 452	Taiwudi		The "Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism" states that he was an avid practitioner of Daoism and funded projects aimed at the creation of various medical elixirs. However, the text records that the emperor lost interest as none of the elixirs was successful at bringing about immortality.
425 – 451		Daocracy of Kou Qianzhi	According to the "Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism" Kou Qianzhi came to the court to present his book, the <i>New Code</i> and was given a high position by the emperor who then erected a Celestial Master's quarter in the capital, invited Kou's disciples and took charge of their expenses.
434		Finding of Gaxian Cave	On imperial command, Li Chang makes an inscription in 201 characters naming this to be the birthplace of the Xianbei people.
439		Northern Wei take the Northern Liang capital of Guzang	After much struggle, the Xianbei Tuoba finally takes the territory of the Xiongnu.

²²⁹ A much expanded timeline for important events in the Northern Wei exists as an appendix at the end of Tsukamoto 1974, numbered pages 15—47.

		姑臧, effectively ending the Northern Liang.	
445		Gaiwu Rebellion	Supported by the Lushui branch of the Xiongnu, displaced after the fall of Guzang.
446		Suppression of Buddhism	Including the execution and forced laicization on monks.
448		Kou Qianzhi dies at the Northern Wei court	Is declared an immortal due to the miraculous, post-mortem expanding and shrinking of his corpse.
r. 452	Nan'anwang 南安王		Only remaining brother of Taiwudi; quickly executed so that Taiwudi's son, Emperor Wencheng, could take power.
r. 452 – 465	Wenchengdi		On his ascension to the throne in 452, quickly declares the dynasty's support for Buddhism. Took Empress Dowager Feng as his wife, who had been raised at court by her aunt after being taken as a slave after the fall of her family to the Northern Wei.
c. 460		Beginning of building at Yungang	Early strata of the 5 buddha-ruler caves designed by Tanyao, the first Comptroller of the Monks.
r. 466 – 471	Xianwendi	Empress Dowager Feng Begins her Regency as Empress Dowager behind the child emperor.	Was a child emperor who abdicated at the age of 17 for his son; Empress Dowager Feng ruled behind him but then murdered him when he was 21 over a dispute about her lover.
r. 471 – 499	Xiaowendi	Empress Dowager Feng Continues her Regency behind the child emperor.	Xianwendi abdicated for his son, Xiaowendi, but continued to hold significant power as a "retired emperor." Problems arise between Xiaowen and Empress Dowager Feng.
476		Empress Dowager Feng murders Xianwendi.	Having eliminated her political rival, she then ruled over the court and the emperor with complete power.

490		Death of Empress Dowager Feng	She is buried at her pre-selected tomb site at Fang Shan just outside Luoyang. Her mausoleum houses 2 tombs: one for her and one for Xianwendi, but he never returned to be buried there and so his tomb mound remains empty.
490s		Various edicts in support of sinification: Chinese language, names, and dress taken on at court.	The number of Han-Chinese bureaucrats working at the court reaches its peak at 68.9%
490s		Initial building of the caves at Longmen	Undertaken by the monk, Huicheng, to celebrate the move of the court to Luoyang.
494		Move of the capital to Luoyang	Relocating 10s of thousands of people so that the Northern Wei could make their capital in the heartland of China.
r. 499 – 515	Xuanwudi 宣武帝		Said to be a diligent Buddhist who gave lectures on Buddhist doctrine. Took Empress Dowager Hu for his concubine.
		Edicts limiting the building of temples being built as well as the numbers of monastics in residence.	These edicts continue for the rest of the dynasty and show the fear that the Northern Wei felt at the unrestrained spread of Buddhism.
515		Mahāyāna Rebellion	The largest of the Buddhist-lead millenarian rebellions to rise against the Northern Wei. Required an army of 100,000 to defeat it.
r. 516 – 528	Xiaomingdi	Empress Dowager Hu begins her regency	Was a child emperor who was ruled behind by his mother, Empress Dowager Hu, who later poisoned him when he attempted to rid her of the power that she held.
518		Sends two lesser-known monks to India	Mimics actions of the Northern Liang and their support of Kumārajīva as well as the Jin and their support of Faxian 法顯 (337–442 CE).

516 – 517		Empress Dowager Hu and Emperor Xiaoming ascended the newly built Eternal Peace Monastery.	Emperor Xiaoming was a child at the time, 6-7 years old.
520s		Rise in power of Erzhu Rong	A general of Xiongnu ancestry, Erzhu Rong challenged the power of Empress Dowager Hu/Xiaoming and lead forces against them, leading to the collapse of the dynasty.
r. 528	Youzhu 幼主		The child that Empress Dowager Hu attempted to place on the throne, both where drowned in a river by the General Erzhu Rong shortly after.
r. 528 – 530	Xiaozhuangdi 孝莊帝		The emperor who was placed on the throne by Erzhu Rong.
r. 528 – 534	Many rulers		The dynasty falls under the short-lived reigns of many emperors supported by warring factions, leading to the demise of the dynasty.

CHAPTER TWO. A Buddhist Gynaecium: Opportunities for Women in a Hybrid Tuoba-Han-Buddhist Court Structure

On the *jiwei* day of the eleventh month of the second year of the Reign of Bright Tranquility²³⁰ (November 30, 517CE) of Emperor Suzong²³¹, a representative of Bing prefecture was sent to the region of Qi because a person named Han Cengzhen had a daughter, Ling Ji,²³² who had been born out of the right flank of her mother's body.²³³ Empress Dowager Ling then commanded that the daughter be admitted into the women's chambers of the court.²³⁴

– From the chapter on “Numinous Omens” in the *Book of the Wei*

In the previous chapter, I argued that the Northern Wei held a deeply ambivalent relationship with the tradition of Buddhism – both supporting it in order to gain a grasp over the people of its empire and suppressing it when they felt that its popularity was a danger, and I situated this Northern Wei Buddhism within the rise of the non-Han court of the Northern Wei. In order to understand better just how the tradition of Buddhism was made to fit into the court structures and into the lives of individuals at court, this chapter offers a thorough examination of the unique structure of the Northern Wei court with special attention to the place of women within that court. Beginning with a generalized survey of the epigraphical record, in this chapter I will show precisely what kinds of people were working at court and in what capacity. I will argue that it was in fact women of court rank who were often associated with the Buddhist tradition as it was seen at

²³⁰ The Xiping 熙平 Reign lasted from 516–518.

²³¹ Suzong 肅宗 is the temple name of Yuan Xu 元詡 or Emperor Xiaoming 孝明帝, who ruled from 510–528 CE.

²³² The personal name of this child, Ling Ji 令姬, literally means “commanded to be a concubine.”

²³³ This is clearly a play on the story of the birth of the Buddha who was born from the right flank or armpit of his mother's body.

²³⁴ Wei 2009, 2915.

court. In so doing, I further seek to show that elite women not only patronized Buddhism in the Northern Wei because it was good politics, which it was, but that women were uniquely situated to form a religious elite that was well suited to the administration and public support of the Buddhist tradition. This chapter will thus serve as a formative introduction to the proceeding chapters which will analyze, in detail, three overlapping sectors of these Buddhist women of rank: empress dowagers, ordained members of the female saṃgha, or *bhikṣuṇīs*, and women of rank in the administration of Buddhism under the Northern Wei.

Known to us in Death: Epigraphs of Court Men and Court Women from the Northern Wei

There are many ways to approach an analysis of what the court of the Northern Wei actually looked like, and much of this work has already been done by Jennifer Holmgren in a series of articles on the ethnic make-up of the court, gender at court, and the fall of the court itself.²³⁵ Her work is informed by careful readings of dynastic histories in tandem with close attention to historical detail, and is thus highly informative. However, in what follows, I seek to provide a different sort of analysis based not on dynastic histories, but on the epigraphical record. There are as many problems with the epigraphical record as there are strengths: 1) the Northern Wei only adopted the Chinese language in the 494 CE and hence the early half of the dynasty is not documented in inscriptional data; 2) due to archaeological limitations, the collection of epigraphs is nowhere close to being fully representative of the entire scope of those commissioned and

²³⁵ Holmgren 1978, 1981-83a, 1981-83b, 1982a, 1982b, 1983a, 1983b, 1989, and 1993.

created in the Northern Wei; and 3) the current state of scholarship on epigraphs means that they are collected in a number of different volumes, some more comprehensive than others, which are released as new finds come to light and as such there is not a full analysis of these materials anywhere available.²³⁶ And yet the strengths of the epigraphical record are many: 1) epigraphs provide a picture of what was happening on the ground²³⁷ in the religious, cultural, and political arena of the time in which they were created; 2) surveying epigraphs allows for an understanding of individual people and their works more so than other materials;²³⁸ and 3) particularly for the Northern Wei, the epigraphical record is quite rich but has largely been ignored in favour of studies of the even richer record of donor inscriptions. Thus, in undertaking such a survey of epigraphical materials, I am aware of both the benefits and limitations of the study and will not attempt the unwieldy task of compiling a fully comprehensive survey. Rather, considering it a valuable undertaking, I will here provide a survey of the epigraphical materials collected in the most comprehensive of the available catalogues, *A Guide to*

²³⁶ Work is being done by numerous individuals and organizations to attempt a synthesis of available materials. The Center for the Study of Chinese Characters at East China Normal University is working on a comprehensive digital database and Japanese scholar Sagawa Eiji is working at on-the-ground surveys of disparate remains held in various museums in the Chinese mainland.

²³⁷ The most authoritative argument for the use of inscriptions in the study of Buddhism has been made by Gregory Schopen in his groundbreaking 1991 article in *History of Religions*, entitled “Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism.” Moreover, Schopen’s works has repeatedly and consistently demonstrated the importance of inscriptions for the study of the history of Buddhism.

²³⁸ One of the limitations of the epigraphical record is that it tends to only be able to speak for those individuals wealthy enough to have commissioned their own tombs and epigraphs. However, since this study is a study of the imperial Buddhism of the Northern Wei court, then this is not such a limitation as the record speaks for exactly the individuals that I am studying.

Tomb Inscriptions from the Han, Wei, and Northern and Southern Dynasties compiled by Zhao Chao in 1992.

A Guide to Tomb Inscriptions from the Han, Wei, and Northern and Southern Dynasties preserves 294 epigraphs from the Northern Wei of which 67 belong to women and will be the topic of the discussion below. The remaining 227 belong to men who held court titles such as lord (*jun* 君), general (*jun* 軍), regional inspector (*cishi* 刺史), or ruler (*wang* 王).²³⁹ More often than not, these inscriptions are for political leaders in small, regional locales throughout the countryside; however, some of them are indeed from the imperial court in Luoyang. In the Northern Wei, the granting of court titles was a means of integrating diverse peoples from disparate areas into the political program of the court after they had been brought under the control of the rulers, and hence we commonly see very long and very complex titles in epigraphs. Holmgren argues that during the Northern Wei this obsession with court titles and related affiliation with families that held court titles was so intense that it led to the falsification of family genealogies, and she cites the Feng clan of Empress Dowager Feng as a prime example of an elite family who fabricated an illustrious Han-Chinese lineage though they were indeed of Murong

²³⁹ This term, *wang*, can mean a variety of things from ruler to emperor. In the Northern Wei, however, this was used to refer to rulers of outlying states, an observation that Hucker agrees with (1985, 562). It is very odd, indeed, to see the term *jun*, or lord, applied to a woman, and I have not seen this anywhere outside of these early sixth century Northern Wei sources. It is possible that either I am reading the epigraphs incorrectly or that the author of the epigraph used uncommon or mistaken syntax in the construction of these titles, but from what I can see, the identification of these *juns* as women is straight-forward and unmistakable.

descent.²⁴⁰ To illustrate just how grandiose these titles were and how important they were to an individual's standing in society, I have included this translation of the most complex title that I have yet to come across:

The Wei Chariot and Horse General Commissioned with Extraordinary Powers, Commander in Chief of all of the Construction in the three Prefectures South of the Fen River²⁴¹ and all military matters in the western townships, Regional Inspector of all Military Matters, Commander in Chief with Special Warrant over all Military Matters, and also the Court Secretary and Prime Minister of the Left Offices from the district of Pingyang, who Supports the Great Activities of the Northwest Passage, the Dynasty-founding Lord Yuan Gong.²⁴²

Yuan Gong, or Northern Wei Emperor Jiemin 節閔帝 (r. 531–532 CE), ruled for a brief time near the end of the dynasty after Erzhu Rong had been killed; however, he was subsequently imprisoned by Gao Huan and eventually murdered. Nonetheless, his title provides insight into just how complex and important court titles were at the court of the Northern Wei. Of course this is an extraordinary title as it belongs to an emperor and for most men in the epigraphical record, their titles are not as impressive, but they nonetheless show concern for rank and title and for piling honours upon honours.

The standard form of these epigraphs from the Northern Wei usually provides the lineage of the man's family, a nod to his official wives and courtesans, and a brief

²⁴⁰ Holmgren 1981-1983b. In personal communication, Jessey Choo has advised that these fabricated lineages are very easy to find from the time period and most readily seen in the lineage sections of a person's epitaph wherein there are clear gaps of jumps in the attempt to create an illustrious family lineage that served to link various peoples with Han ethnicity.

²⁴¹ The Fen 汾 River is in Shanxi 山西 province.

²⁴² 魏故使持節假車騎將軍都督晉建南汾三州諸軍事鎮西將軍晉州刺史大都督節度諸軍事兼尚書左仆射西北道大行台平陽縣開國子元恭君; Zhao 1992, 297; translation is my own.

synopsis of his life and works, and then a final eulogy, which praises his skills and abilities. In her work on Han Dynasty stele inscriptions, Patricia Ebrey has summarized these early inscriptions similarly with the distinct difference that, in the Han she argues, women were not mentioned on the tombs of their husbands and the eulogy at the end is missing.²⁴³ Other than that, the form has remained largely similar over the centuries. Further, in her work on Song Dynasty 宋 (960–1279 CE) inscriptions, Valerie Hansen has shown that a number of different peoples were responsible for the making of the inscription, including the author, the calligrapher, and the financier(s).²⁴⁴ In the Northern Wei, in some cases the author of the inscription is listed and is usually a literati member of the deceased's family, and in some cases the author was the official court historian.

Different from Ebrey's Han epigraphs, not only is it the case in the Northern Wei that women are often mentioned on the epigraphs of their husbands, but it is also common to find separate tombs and epigraphs for the wives and concubines of high-ranking, wealthy men and their families. And, similarly, for a wife, her title can also be very lengthy and complex; however, it generally details the ranks of her male kin and not her own ranks. The longest title that I have come across for a woman is as follows:

Song Lingfei, the Commandery Mistress of Spreading Equanimity who is the Wife of the Forthright Gentleman and Eldest Son of the Dynasty-founding Marquis from the County of Xihua, who was the Attendant-in-Ordinary and General of the Military Campaigns that spread East, The Grand Master of the Golden Seal and Purple Ribbon, and who was himself the fourth son of the Dynasty-founding Duke of the Fengyi Commandery

²⁴³ Ebrey 1989, 333.

²⁴⁴ Hansen 1987, 18.

who was also the Cavalier Attendant and a Palace Mentor who kept the records of the Court Secretary.²⁴⁵

Song Lingfei certainly has an impressive title which includes a nominal rank for herself as “Commandery Mistress” as well as a number of titles granted to her male kin, and she also must have been a person of some wealth to have had an epigraph in her name alone, instead of being attached to her husband’s as was often the practice. Her situation is not unique: of the 67 epigraphs for women, 20 of them are principal wives, or *furen* 夫人, 10 are regular wives, or *qi* 妻, and 11 are consorts, or *fei* 妃.²⁴⁶ All of these women have very similar situations – their families were wealthy and eminent enough to have provided them with their own tombs and epigraphs; however, they remain in death known to us largely through the actions and ranks of their husbands, and their tomb biographies generally record their filial attitude toward the family and their unwavering service as wife and mother.

However, unique to the Northern Wei²⁴⁷ are a number of other inscriptions that list women with titles independent from their male kin, and in most cases these seem to

²⁴⁵ 騎侍中太傅錄尚書事馮翊郡開國公第四子 散常侍征東將軍金紫光祿大夫西華縣開國侯長孫士亮 妻 廣平郡君宋（靈妃）氏墓志; Zhao 1992, 301; translation is my own.

²⁴⁶ For an enumeration of court ranks and wifely ranks for women in the Northern Wei, see below.

²⁴⁷ The epigraphical record of the Northern Wei contains the earliest epigraphs of Buddhist nuns that I have yet to come across in any primary or secondary materials, and they are completely unstudied. Furthermore, though the development of a woman’s bureaucracy at court is normally associated with Empress Wu of the Tang, it was in fact established under the Northern Wei, a fact that once again has received no scholarly attention and will be addressed further in this chapter. With respect to the Tang, the tomb of Empress Wu’s high-ranking female official, Shangguan Wan’er 上官婉兒 (f.c. 8th CE), was excavated in 2013. It is considered a major find in the study of eminent women

be unmarried women of political or monastic affiliation – sometimes of both. Of the 67 inscriptions for women recorded in *A Guide to Tomb Inscriptions from the Han, Wei, and Northern and Southern Dynasties*, two are listed as *bhikṣuṇīs*, two are listed as Women’s Secretariats (*nü shangshu* 女尚書), two are listed as Lords (*jun* 君), two are listed as Palace Women (*mingfu* 命婦), two are listed as Officers of the Inner Imperium (*huangneisi* 皇內司), two are listed as Directors (*taijian* 太監), one is listed as Matronly Mentor (*fumu* 傅母), one is listed as Director of the Matronly Mentors (*fumutaijian* 傅母太監), and one is listed as a Lady of Clear Etiquette (*zhaoyi* 昭儀).²⁴⁸ The most immediately striking feature in all of these inscriptions is that most of the women are unmarried and all of them gained prominence at court in their own name. Although many of them clearly come from high-status backgrounds – one of our *bhikṣuṇīs* is a princess from the Tuoba lineage²⁴⁹ – their epigraphs speak of their own merits as politicians and not of the merits of their male kin. Hence, it is the rare case that all of these single women were given the opportunity to rise politically and socially in their own names, and, as I will show throughout this dissertation, they were sheltered by both the court and the Buddhist *saṃgha* in order to do so.

in China but the contents of that inscription have yet to be released. However, comparable and earlier mortuary inscriptions have long been available for female politicians of the Northern Wei. A similar case study will be included in chapter five.²⁴⁸ This court title is somewhat difficult to understand but it signifies a woman of the highest rank at court outside of the empress. This will be discussed in much further detail in chapter five.

²⁴⁹ This is the woman whose dharma name is Zhishou 智首 and who carries the label *biqiuyuanni* 比丘元尼 or *bhikṣuṇī* of the Tuoba Yuan family. I have translated her biography and presented it in chapter four below.

Now, if these titles for women are not fascinating enough, a survey of the epigraphical record provides a further detail: all of these women died while serving in the court of Empress Dowager Hu. Indeed, outside of the Empress Dowager's reign behind the child emperor Xiaoming, we do not see any other epigraphs of this type. Furthermore, other collections of epigraphs besides the one surveyed here hold similar details. For example, there are two additional epigraphs of *bhikṣuṇīs* from the Northern Wei, both under the court of Empress Dowager Hu, and their stories will be dealt with in detail in chapter four. Thus, a survey of epigraphical data reveals a rather strange collection of women with unique court titles all serving in the court of one of the dynasty's most controversial rulers, Empress Dowager Hu. Portrayed by later historians as lax in the administration of her court and leading the dynasty to its eventual downfall, Empress Dowager Hu reigned over some of the most turbulent times in the dynasty, eventually murdering Emperor Xiaoming and then herself being murdered by the general Erzhu Rong. Thus we may expect to see a number of deaths and a number of tombs during her violent reign, but what is surprising are that *all* of the women of court rank came from her reign, suggesting that she furnished her court with a substantial bureaucracy of women. Furthermore, all of these tombs come from the vicinity of Mt. Mang, an important burial site for imperial families from the Han through the Northern Dynasties. Perhaps the most famous tomb that Mt. Mang houses is that of Northern Wei Emperor Xuanwu who ruled the dynasty after its move to Luoyang, was an avid Buddhist, and who took Empress Dowager Hu as his concubine, who also seems to have been a Buddhist.²⁵⁰ She then

²⁵⁰ The biography of Empress Dowager Hu will be discussed in chapter three.

mothered his child, Emperor Xiaoming, whom she ruled behind²⁵¹ and ultimately murdered when he became a threat to her. Thus, when we approach these tombs at Mt. Mang we have a unique window into the life of the court of the Northern Wei between 510 and 530 of the Common Era. The majority of our imperial tombs come from this locale as do the tombs of the women who acted as politicians at the Northern Wei court.

In order to understand how these court ranks and the female bureaucracy of Empress Dowager Hu came about, the *Book of the Wei* provides a partial answer in the introduction to its section on the biographies of empresses. In this section, the text tells us that not only did the number of women at court swell in abundance during the Northern Wei due to the imperial practice of emperors' taking on large numbers of concubines to cement inter-tribal relations, but that for the first time in Chinese history these courtesans, empresses, empress dowagers, and princesses enjoyed a women's bureaucracy that was aligned completely with the bureaucracy of court men. Not surprisingly, this alignment of male and female ranks was established under the reign of Empress Dowager Feng, through her husband Emperor Wencheng; however, the inscriptional record does not speak well for the early time of the court of Empress Dowager Feng, and so we cannot know if she truly implemented this system or not. The introduction to the biographies of Northern Wei Empresses in the *Book of the Wei* details this bureaucracy as such:

²⁵¹ As will be discussed in the next chapter, Empress Dowager Hu was a forceful politician. After birthing the heir apparent she petitioned the emperor to overturn a Northern Wei tradition of imperial matricide – then doing the very thing that the Northern Wei feared that women rulers would do, ruling the dynasty in her own name and eventually murdering the emperor. Unlike Empress Dowager Feng, however, Empress Dowager Hu's ambition may have clouded her political judgment as many of her choices lead to the downfall of the dynasty.

The Han dynasty accorded with the regulations of the Qin dynasty and called the grandmother of the emperor the *Taihuangtaihou* 太皇太后 and the mother of the emperor the *Huangtaihou* and the consort of the emperor the *Huanghou* 皇后, and called all the other women the *furen* 夫人 no matter how many there were. This was unlike the *furen* in the *Book of Etiquette*, for which there were concubines, mothers and several levels of imperial wives.²⁵² The Wei and the Jin mutually accorded with this, but at the time there was much turbulence and so for these prior histories we have words and nothing else.

Now, as for the similar practices of the prior Kings of the Wei, although they started with Shenyuan²⁵³ and ended with Zhao Cheng,²⁵⁴ the world at this time venerated things of a frugal nature and so the limits of consorts, ladies, concubines, and empresses, were greatly decreased and they were given only secondary levels of admiration. Therefore, the eight emperors, Zhang, Ping, Si, Zhao, Jing, Hui, Yang, and Lie,²⁵⁵ did not listen to their courtesans and consorts.

Emperor Taizu gravitated away from these practices and venerated his female descendants and gave posthumous titles to the empresses of all these eight past emperors, and within the palace he started to promote many of the ladies-in-waiting to the designation of *furen*. Their numbers were limitless and they were all given a rank. Shizong contributed slightly to this organization and added the Zhaoyi of the Left and Right to be the

²⁵² As to the ranks of imperial women and wives, the *Book of Etiquette* says: “After the era of the ancient princes, there were established the six offices, the three *furen*, the nine concubines, the twenty-seven hereditary concubines, and the eighty-one imperial wives 古者天子後立六宮、三夫人、九嬪、二十七世婦、八十一御妻” (Chapter on marriage rituals *hunyi* 昏義, section 8).

²⁵³ Shenyuan, or *Beiwei shenyuan huanghou* 北魏神元皇后 (d. 248) was the wife of Tuoba Liwei, who was the son of Tuoba Jiefen and the Celestial Woman who began the Tuoba tribe that founded the Northern Wei.

²⁵⁴ Zhao Cheng, or *Zhaochenghuanghou Murongshi* 昭成皇后慕容氏 (d. 360) was the wife of Tuoba Shenyijian 拓跋什翼犍 (318–376) who was the one of the early leaders of the Tuoba tribes, before the foundation of the Northern Wei.

²⁵⁵ In order, these emperors were Tuoba Xilu 拓跋悉鹿 (r. 277–286), Tuoba Chuo 拓跋綽 (r. 286–293), Tuoba Fu 拓跋弗 (r. 293–294), Tuoba Luguan 拓跋祿官 (r. 294–307), Tuoba Yilu 拓跋猗盧 (r. 295–316), Tuoba Heru 拓跋賀犍 (r. 321–325), Tuoba Hena 拓跋紇那 (r. 325–329 and 335–337), and Tuoba Yihuai 拓跋翳槐 (r. 329–335 and 337–338).

heads of the *furen*. He also established the “Pepper Chamber,”²⁵⁶ and several other categories of this type, and finally the whole court was completely saturated [with women]. One story from the Wei is that a woman who was about to become the empress had to first cast a golden man by hand; if she succeeded, this was taken as an auspicious omen, but if she failed then she was not allowed to become empress.

After Shizong, Gaozong was deeply enraptured by the abundant kindness of his wet nurse and held her virtue in the absolute highest esteem. Although it was in disagreement with the classical rituals, he looked over these matters with tremendous understanding and compassion, and he²⁵⁷ further regulated the levels of the inner chambers²⁵⁸: the *Zhaoyi* of the Left and Right were established as equal to the Great Inspectors of the Armies, the Three *Furen* were established as equal to the Three Offices, the Three Concubines were established as equal to the Three Ministers, the Six Concubines were established as equal to the Six Ministers, the Mother of the Realm was established as equal to the Grand Master, and the Female Guards were established as equal to the Scholars.

Furthermore, as for those women in the employ of the court, he relied on classical norms to arrange the inner court, so that the Inner Officer was established as equal to the Secretary in terms of powers and abilities. As for those appointments established at the second grade, there were the three palaces of the Acting Officer, the Great Overseer, and the Women’s Attendant. As for those of the third grade, there were the five palaces of the Overseer, the Women’s Secretary, the Talented Women, the Women’s Historian, the Female Sages, and those women literate in history, literate in general, and of lesser literacy. Of those in the fourth grade, were the capable women of for use inside the court, the women in charge of the offerings, the women born to court servants, capable people, and those respectful of the court and its servants. Of the fifth grade, were the women in charge of clothing, alcohol, feasts, food, and those who were servants, and slaves.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁶ According to Hucker, the “Pepper Chamber” (椒房 *jiaofang*) is an indirect reference to the wife of the emperor, one of which, as legend goes, was delighted by pepper-wood paneling in her bed chamber (1985, 141).

²⁵⁷ It is likely no coincidence that Gaozong was the husband of Empress Dowager Feng.

²⁵⁸ It should be noted that Gaozong made the levels of the women’s bureaucracy to match the levels of the men’s bureaucracy.

²⁵⁹ Wei 2009, 321-322.

This introduction to the biographies of empresses from the *Book of the Wei* is remarkable for it shows, indisputably, that women's ranks were created commensurate with men's ranks during the Northern Wei and that their bureaucracy directly accorded with that of the men's bureaucracy. It also shows that the women of the palace were literate to a high degree and that they managed their own affairs without relying on the traditional court bureaucracy to do it for them. Furthermore, in a dynasty that was often ruled over by Empress Dowagers, this bureaucratic structure also reveals the degrees of power and prestige that court women could reach as assistants to the empress.

In an era as turbulent as the Northern Wei, when emperors, generals, dukes, and other men of the court often lived much shorter lives than their women folk, and also when the Emperor himself had an inner chamber populated by large numbers of women placed there for political reasons, it makes sense to think that women were actually a more common feature of court life than were men. Certainly their numbers were much greater. As Chin-Yin Tseng has shown, the early emperors of the Northern Wei kept a "mobile court" as they were constantly back and forth between the capital and the frontier, going where military matters necessitated,²⁶⁰ and as such, they left their empress and concubines at home in the court, where we might conjecture that they administered the central business of the court itself. Thus it seems a natural occurrence that the large numbers of women at court would organize themselves in an independent, bureaucratic system, as seen in the alignment of men's and women's court ranks in the *Book of the*

²⁶⁰ Tseng 2013, 29ff.

Wei, but it is not until the rule of Empress Dowager Hu that we actually see this system come to fruition.

Buddhism and the Representation of Court Women

Dorothy Wong, an art historian working on the Six Dynasties, has shown conclusively that women were among the most active of Buddhist art patrons in the Southern and Northern Dynasties.²⁶¹ She argues that prior to the adoption of Buddhism in China, women were excluded from public forms of religiosity due to social and gender restrictions largely assumed to belong to the Confucian tradition; however, she also argues that once included in the process of public religiosity through the Buddhist institution, that women were extremely active in the building and dedicating of statuary. This is a fact that can be seen all over the inscriptional record wherein women of the north during the Southern and Northern Dynasties donated statuary just as frequently as men as a way to both make religious merit and express their connection to the tradition of Buddhism. Wong enumerates how women of all levels of society – empresses, court women, and commoners – all participated in the building of statuary in ways determined by their financial means, either as lone donors of objects of various sizes or as groups of women or women and men coming together to collaborate on one project. One of the earliest and most notable examples of women and men coming together in a group comes from Yungang cave number 11. This dedication of an image was funded by a group of 54 people in 483 CE, including 18 men and 36 women, and the depiction of their donors’

²⁶¹ Wong 2000.

images clearly shows female forms. Dorothy Wong argues that it is the earliest example of an inscription by a Buddhist devotional society (*yiyi* 義邑) that we have on record.²⁶²

Figure 5. Image of the Donor Inscription in Yungang Cave #11 which depicts both female and male donors.²⁶³



Northern Wei inscriptions are often held up as examples of female patronage as women from all levels of society – empresses, court women, and commoners – were actively involved in the donation of statuary. However, one aspect of the inscriptional record of the Northern Wei that has not received significant attention is the presence of statuary donated by courtesans. An analysis of Northern Wei materials clearly shows a common association between the ideal of a court woman and patronage of Buddhism, and

²⁶² Wong 2004, 52. More will be said on such devotional societies in chapter five.

²⁶³ There are not very good photos of this inscription available in publication. What this image shows is the inscription itself in the bottom with three bodhisattvas at top (Guanyin 觀世音, Mahāsthāma-prāpta 大勢至, and Mañjuśrī 文殊師利), and donor images to the right and left, with the right being female donors in dresses and the left being male donors in boots (Mizuno and Nagahiro 1989, 2.89).

in many cases actual courtesans have donated statuary. Thus, in order to facilitate a further discussion of the lives of court women and their involvement with the Buddhist tradition, what follows is a brief analysis of inscriptional materials that suggest the linkage of Buddhism with life as a woman at court, or perhaps just with elite women more generally speaking.

It is difficult to understand a great many of the names and ranks of these court women who are recorded in the inscriptions of the Northern Wei, and the difficulty comes because women's names are: 1) often listed in reference to their husbands, and 2) often a combination of a family name from the northern tribal people which is transcribed into Chinese and then abbreviated to the first character, with a dual-character first name wherein the second character shows either a possible rank or, perhaps, just a popular first name for women, and 3) the titles sometimes add the appendage of a Buddhist rank. For example, in one relatively famous inscription made by the Gao family,²⁶⁴ the names of all the men of the Gao family are easy to identify, with the Gao family name and a personal name of one or two characters, but the women are listed with such confusing names as “The Wife of Gao Zong, Zhao Tongji²⁶⁵” wherein the characters for Tongji 同姬, literally mean “equal to a concubine” or perhaps “associate concubine,” or names such as “The Wife of Gaofu, Kong Yunü, who is a servant of the Buddha²⁶⁶” wherein her personal name translates literally as the “plumed daughter.” In both of these cases, and in the

²⁶⁴ See below for a full translation.

²⁶⁵ Gao[?]zongqi zhaotongji 高[?]宗妻趙同姬

²⁶⁶ Gaofuqi kongyunü chifo 高扶妻孔羽女侍佛

majority of women's names from the inscriptional record, the appendage of a marker of female status, in this case either "concubine" or "daughter," makes it difficult to identify whether these are mere personal names or if they signify some sort of status. I am personally inclined to the former explanation. Further, the Gao family inscription records two names whose translations sound very Buddhist. The first is, "The Wife of Gao Mai, a Gentlemen of Pure Faith, who is a servant of the Buddha and called Xing Nansheng"²⁶⁷ wherein the characters for her name "Nansheng" 男生 mean something like of "male birth," signifying the Buddhist trope that women need to be reborn as men in order to be born a buddha.²⁶⁸ Moreover, she is the wife of a "Gentleman of Pure Faith," a term common in inscriptions and signifying a person's status as a lay Buddhist, an *upāsaka*. The second of these names is similar: "The Wife of Gao Xiang, a Gentlemen of Pure Faith, who is a servant of the Buddha and called Ni Dainan"²⁶⁹ where the characters for her personal name Dainan 殆男 translate to something like "almost a man."

In order to show the diversity of names in the Gao family inscription and to reveal the differences between men's and women's names and titles that we see in Northern Wei inscriptions in general, a tentative translation is offered below. It should be mentioned that the inscription is effaced in some places and thus that a number of characters are

²⁶⁷ Qingxinshi gaomaiqi xingnansheng chifo 清信士高買妻邢男生侍佛

²⁶⁸ For specific studies on the topic of female to male sex change in Buddhist texts, see: Schuster 1981; Paul 1981; Kajiyama 1982; Wilson 1996; Nishiguchi 1998; Sunim 1999; Ohnuma 2001; Peach 2002; Katsuura 1986, 2003; Collett 2006; Ueki 2013.

²⁶⁹ Qingxinshi gaojun qi nidainan chifo 清信士高詳妻倪殆男侍佛

missing and indicated with a [?]; however, since it is largely a list of names it can be reconstructed quite easily. It reads as follows:

In the first year of the *Zhengshi* era of the Kingdom of the Great Wei, in a great year that was a *jiashen* year, in the third month, a *wujia* month, on a new moon on the ninth day (April 9, 504 CE), the *weina* Gao Luo Zhou, along with seventy other people from the village of Dangmo in the province Zhuo,²⁷⁰ have constructed one stone image of Śākyamuni on behalf of the emperor and all those under him. Therefore, this is a record of [those who contributed to] the establishment of that stone:

The wife of Gao(?), Wang Axiang; the extended family of Gao Long; the extended family of Gao Shi; Gao Yin; Gao [?]da; Gao Tingxing; Gao Daoyuan; Gao Anshi; Gao [?][?]; Gao Si[?]; [?][?][?]; Gao Dayu; Gao Junsheng; Gao Yongren; Gao [?]; Gao Wen; Gao Shibao; Gao Zeng Gong; Gao Shuangbao; Gao Zhiming; Gao [?]luo; Gao Huiwu; Gao [?][?]; Gao Dai'an; Gao Shunan; Gao Qiren; Gao Taibao; Gao An[?]; Gao Yan; Gao Baorong; Gao Taixin; Gao Bocheng; Gao Jie[?]; Gao Guoxing; Gao Ming; [?][?]; Gao [?]zi; Gao Fusun; Gao Keyang; Gao Cike; Gao Baiju; Gao [?]ju; Gao Kun; Gao Anju; Gao Keren; Gao Zhengnu; Gao Tian; Gao Xun; Gao [?]; Gao Kang; Gao Baocheng; Gao Siren; Gao Yuanming; Gao Renju; Gao Ling[?]; Gao Duren; Gao Baozhou; Gao Zengshou; Gao Qingzhou; Gao Longju; Gao Faxing; Gao Siji; the ancestor Gao Nansheng and his wife Zhao Wen; the wife of Gao Rong, Wang A'[?]; Gao Ting[?]; Gao Bei[?] who is a servant of the Buddha; the presider of the stone image, the wife of Gao Wen, Shi [?] and her five children, Mai Lai, Mai De, [missing text] who along with their extended family are servants of the Buddha; the wife of Gao Chongren, Wang Niangjie and her children, Fu Yi, Sheng Ke, Sheng Jing, Bing Jing, and her elder and younger brothers, her father, and her extended family who are servants of the Buddha; the women of pure faith, Zhang Mensheng and Yu Niang, their elder sister Pang A'yue, and the four people of their extended family who are servants of the Buddha; Gao Xianglu; Gao Jingshen; the wife of Gao Fu, Kong Yunü, who is a servant of the Buddha; Gao A'[?]; Gao [?]; Gao Yi; Gao Yansheng, who is a servant of the Buddha; [?][?] and others, who are servants of the Buddha; the extended family of Gao Ciwen; the wife of Gao Rong, Wang A'[?]; the wife of Gao [?]zong, Zhao Tongji; the wife of Gao Gainu, [?]; the wife of Gao Yin, Shen Xiangzhu, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of Gao Yu, [?] Luo, who is a servant of the Buddha; Gao [?][?]; the wife of Gao [?] Wang A'[?], who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of Gao [?], Su Bailuo, who is a servant of the Buddha;

²⁷⁰ This is present-day Zhuoxian 涿县 in Hebei 河北 province.

the wife of Gao Shi, a good friend of the Buddha, Qiu [?], a servant of the [broken text]; the wife of Gao Tian, Cui Si, in the 11th month, a *bingwu* month (November 23, 504 – December 21, 504); the wife of the Gentleman of Pure Faith Gao Xiang, Ni Dainan, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of the Gentleman of Pure Faith Gao Fugai, [?] Rongzhi, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of the Gentleman of Pure Faith Gao [?], Yuan Qishi, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of the Gentleman of Pure Faith Gao Mai, Xing Nansheng, who is a servant of the Buddha; the *weina* Gao Long [?] and his neighbours, Gao Ju; Gao Shi; Gaozi.²⁷¹

These names of the extended members of the Gao family tell us a number of important things and leave us confused about others. First, as to the confusion, there seems to be little discernible order in the listing of names, other than that men seem to be listed before women, and that people who hold titles such as “image presider” and “servant of the Buddha” are peppered throughout the text, and with additional donors listed in the eleventh month when the stele was originally dedicated in the third month. However, despite these confusions, one simple thing that we can be more certain about is that Buddhist affiliation is more common in a woman’s title than it is in a man’s.²⁷² Although I do not think that any of the women in this inscription were courtesans to the imperial family, I do believe that their names and their statuses display two simultaneous modalities of virtue that were popularly ascribed to women in the time period; first, the connection of a woman with a position of court rank by naming her something like “just like a courtesan,” and second, the connection of a woman with Buddhism by either

²⁷¹ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 3. 076. A digital image of the front side of the stele is available from Academia Sinica at: <http://catalog.digitalarchives.tw/item/00/1b/fe/6f.html>

²⁷² Dorothy Wong has indicated to me that it may be possible that the women of the family are Buddhist whereas the men are not – a situation that may parallel inscriptions at Nāgārjunaconda wherein women are Buddhist but men are Brahmins, presumably pointing to the possibilities Buddhism might offer women in a patriarchal society.

naming her something like “almost a man” or by commonly ascribing Buddhist labels such as “woman of pure faith” or “servant of the Buddha” to her. Thus, at least the Gaos were interested in representing their womenfolk as being representatives of both Buddhism and elite status. Furthermore, the Gao was no ordinary family. Characterized by Hou Xudong as one of the “great families” of the time, the Gao were certainly the leaders of Dangmo and their name was the clan name that dominated the town itself.²⁷³ Hence the inscription that remains of their family provides a unique opportunity to appreciate precisely how an elite family of the time would have presented themselves – as Buddhist, with female members of the clan taking charge of Buddhist affiliation more so than male members, and with those same female family members having names that either linked them with the ideal of concubinage or labeled them as concubines and courtesans to the Gao family of Dangmo.

Apart from the confusions and intrigues of the Gao family inscription, there are also instances in the inscriptional record where we see a far more clear confluence of elite names for women with attached Buddhist titles. For example, an interesting case is a donor inscription made by a person called Yang A’zhen 楊阿真,²⁷⁴ who, along with a group of eleven other donors commissioned an image. Arguably the majority, if not all of the donors in the inscription, are women of the same family, including nieces and three women whose names suggest the coupling of elite status with Buddhism: “Zhao Baoji of Pure Faith,” wherein her name literally means “nourishing concubine;” “Guo Shiji of

²⁷³ Hou 2010, 30.

²⁷⁴ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 5.155; for a full translation see appendix one.

Pure Faith,” wherein her name literally means “stone concubine;” and “Zhao A’fei of Pure Faith,” wherein her name literally means “courtesan whose name is A.”^{275 276}

Nonetheless, despite the uncertainty of the names shown in family inscriptions, there are also completely unambiguous examples of courtesans donating statuary. For example, in one donor inscription from Longmen the donor is listed without a complete family name, but as, “the grandmother of the King of Guangchuan and a great imperial Courtesan Hou”²⁷⁷ who dedicates an image of Maitreya. The inscription reads as follows:

On the seventh day of the tenth month of the fourth year of the Jingming era (November 11, 503 CE), the great courtesan Hou, and grandmother of the King of Guangchuan, herself relying on the fact that the dharma has gotten farther away throughout the progress of numerous kalpas, has charged a path to meet with the teaching of images and has herself rebelled against the accomplished scholars. Even though she was entwined with the purple radiance²⁷⁸, she was soon reduced to a mere wafer, and she had to raise her orphaned grandson from infancy in order to continue their border kingdom. With a heart cold and shallow, she [missing character] returned to true quiescence. Now she is building one statue of Maitreya, and her wish is that this insignificant cause will help benefit her spirit and consciousness, so that her manifest body will remain forever strong, that she become clearly enlightened and achieve awakening, that in distance places she is able to purify these broad worlds of the unenlightened and their ignorant activities, and that this be extended to future generations, and that the empty teaching be marvellous and inconceivable. She also wishes that her grandson live for many years, that his spiritual intentions are quickly achieved, that his descendants increase and multiple, that their blessings radiate throughout the 10,000 worlds, that those of imperial rank are forever resplendent, and that they spread and disseminate the

²⁷⁵ The character A 阿 is a common middle name for women of the period.

²⁷⁶ Qingxin Zhaobao Ji 清信趙保姬, Qingxin Guoshi Ji 清信郭石姬, Qingxin Zhao’a Fei 清信趙阿妃.

²⁷⁷ 廣川王祖母大妃侯, for a full translation of the inscription see the appendix. Amy McNair has identified her as the widow of Tabgatch Helüehen (d. 480). McNair 2006-7, 202.

²⁷⁸ This is a reference to her marrying into the royal family.

marvellous dharma so that even the base, the foolish, and the unenlightened, give rise to *bodhi*.²⁷⁹

This woman, a courtesan to a king on the border regions of the Northern Wei, dedicated a personal shrine to the longevity of the imperial family – her family – while also presenting herself in the most austere of Buddhist terms, desperately working toward her enlightenment despite the struggles of living the life of a courtesan in this secular world. This is a theme we will see repeatedly in chapter four in our discussion of *bhikṣuṇīs*, but for now suffice it to say that as a courtesan to the royal family it was important for her to express her religious identity in Buddhist terms. And she is not alone in this. As we will see, many others like her, powerful women of the court, expressed their religious identity through the idiom of Buddhism, wherein Buddhist ideals are often used to support the health, longevity, and success of the rulers of the empire.

Finally, these religious needs, as well as the identification of elite women with religion, do not end with Buddhism. Elite women also patronized the building of Daoist sculpture. One particularly famous example of this is a Daoist stele now held in the National Museum of Chinese History in Beijing that features an inscription to both a deified Laozi and the Jade Emperor and was made by a woman of the court who held a title we commonly associate with Daoist women who act as libationers, a *nüguan* 女官. This inscription has been studied by Stephen Little and he translates the left side of the stele as: “On the twenty-fifth day of the eleventh month of the first year of the Longxu Reign [527], the female officer [*nüguan*] Wang A’shan commissioned two sculptures.

²⁷⁹ The Chinese text is available in the appendix. This inscription is also translated by Amy McNair with minor differences. See: McNair 2006-7, 202.

May my mother and son long have virtuous households.” The donors are listed on the back side as, “The Taoist female officer Wang A’shan [who] rides in a cart”; “The niece Feng Wufang [who] rides on a horse]; and “The Son Feng Faxing [who] rides on a horse.”²⁸⁰ Thus, as we can see, elite women held an association with religion that was not only Buddhist, but was associated more with the patronage of those around them. In this case, the stele is not dated with the regular Northern Wei dates, but with a reign name used specifically by the court of a Northern Wei military general who rebelled against the court in 527 and wished to re-establish his family’s former dynasty, the Southern Qi *nanqi* 南齊 (479–502 CE). Thus it is fascinating that in such a short period of time – one year – the people of this rebellion managed to build their own statuary, Daoist statuary funded by women, at a time when the Northern Wei fervently patronised Buddhism.²⁸¹

On the Status of Women in Northern Society

Dorothy Wong explains the connection between women and the patronage of Buddhist art by arguing that Buddhism provided women with a means to enact public religiosity through the commissioning of images and stele – an opportunity that the indigenous religious traditions of China did not afford them²⁸² – and that they thus took

²⁸⁰ Little 2000, 177.

²⁸¹ A similar observation can be made for the Buddhio-Daoist, Northern Wei, Yao Boduo 姚伯多 stele studied by Stephen Bokenkamp. Although that stele lists the brothers of the Yao clan as the primary donors, the only people on the stele listed as “of Pure Faith” are the women of the family. For more on the Yao Boduo stele, see: Bokenkamp 1996.

²⁸² This topic will be discussed further below, but what Wong is here referencing is the gender ideal in indigenous Chinese religions that a woman is a private person of the house and that a man is a public person in society, and hence, until the arrival of Buddhism in China, women had little to no opportunity for public worship or any type of public religiosity.

advantage of this opportunity in large numbers; however I want to add another layer of explanation to this fascinating rise of female donorship in the Southern and Northern dynasties. Particularly for the Northern Wei, whence the majority of our inscriptions come, I believe that female donorship and participation in public religion was fuelled in part by the fact that women of the Northern Wei enjoyed a particular social status that supported their participation in such activities. I believe that the rise of female-donated statuary and imagery that we see in the Northern dynasties is not simply due to the fact that Buddhism allowed them such an opportunity, but also because women of the North were uniquely situated to engage in such activities through their social status and social roles within Tuoba society, a topic that will here be discussed.

The unique social status of women is seen in the fact that a number of women acted as powerful, independent politicians of the Northern Wei; a fact that is surprising because we are accustomed to hearing quite the opposite about the lives of women in China's medieval period – that women were generally oppressed by the rules, mores, and social structures of a society and a court that is often termed “Confucian.”²⁸³ Certainly there are many examples of social regulations from the annals of Chinese history that support this idea, many of which are based on the philosophical concept of *yin* and *yang*, wherein women are seen as *yin* and hence physically weak, culturally passive, and

²⁸³ A precise definition of Confucianism is difficult to pinpoint, especially during an age of division such as the Southern and Northern dynasties. With that said, the word is used in this dissertation to refer to a tradition of prescriptive social norms linked to both court society and larger society. Furthermore, these prescriptions are rooted in the Chinese literary tradition and supported by the writings of individuals who see themselves as contributing to the commentarial tradition of which Confucius was an advocate.

vulnerable to penetration, both sexual and otherwise, and men are seen as *yang* and thus the opposite. The earliest and most famous regulations for women to have come out of China are those indicated in Ban Zhao's 班昭 (45–116 CE) *Rules for Women*, or *Nüjie* 女誡, in which our eminently well-educated and well-bred author employs the concept of the complementarity of *yin* and *yang* to make her case. She states:

Yin and Yang are different in nature;
Men and women are different in behavior;
Yang is powerful [“virtuous”] because he is hard [“firm”]:
Yin is functional because she is soft;
Men are worthy because they are strong;
Women are beautiful because they are weak.²⁸⁴

And she further gives these maxims a more pragmatic interpretation:

Women have four behavioural patterns:
First, in (“wifely”) virtue or power; second in speech;
Third, in appearance; fourth, in achievement;
It is said that woman’s virtue is in never being exceptional in intelligence;
Woman’s speech should never be clever or eloquent;
Woman’s appearance should never be [noticeably] beautiful in face and form;
Woman’s achievement is in never being more capable than men.

Moreover, these pronouncements on the role of women in society did not disappear with Ban Zhao; a few hundred years later, the writings of another famous southern exegete, Ge Hong 葛洪 (283–343 CE), display additional vexations over, and recommendations about, the freedoms and social roles of the women of his time. Ge Hong was abundantly concerned about his female contemporaries; he believed them all to be trifling fools, excelling only at gossip and leisure. As such, he suggested that none

²⁸⁴ This translation and the following one are from: Paul 1980, 212.

whatsoever should be allowed to have political opinions or dealings and, in fact, they should be segregated from men at all times for they simply served to distract men from the higher obligations of study and governance.²⁸⁵ He says:

The common women of our times have stopped working at sericulture, have abandoned their work at making cap strings [worn on ceremonial robes], and have discontinued [weaving from] hemp. Rather, they go out to dance in the cities; they abandon their cooking and like to mingle with others. They pay visits on each other and go to see relatives. They grasp their torches under the stars (i.e., late at night) and continue to roam about. They take many servants with them, [thus appearing conspicuous]. The glamour [of their equipages] fills the roads. [They are accompanied by] maidservants and menservants, guards, and soldiers, in a mass as at a market-place. On the road they laugh and joke – a deplorable situation!

Some lodge at others' houses for the night. Some return under the cover of darkness. They entertain and amuse themselves at Buddhist temples and observe men fishing and hunting. They climb heights and enjoy themselves on riverbanks. They leave their districts for parties and funerals. When riding in carriages, they open the curtains and circle about all over town. Cups and goblets are filled and poured, and strings and songs come forth while they are on the road. They think that such conduct is lofty, and so gradually what is wrong becomes customary, and the opportunity [for illicit relationships] arises. There is nothing which they are unwilling to do. This is the cause of lavisciousness in our time.²⁸⁶

Similar pronouncements on the roles and status of women have been echoed throughout the ages, such that women have been encouraged to be “inner persons” or *nei* 內 and men have long been considered “outer” persons or *wai* 外, which essentially

²⁸⁵ Although Ge Hong's opinions on the women of his time sound unimaginably misogynistic, it must be said that throughout his writings Ge Hong is critical of almost every school of thought at his time and is further disproving of the social practices of the majority of his contemporaries. As a sort of puritanical and paranoid disenfranchised descendent of the old Han literati, Ge Hong is brilliant but biased, and his thoughts on women are likely a diatribe against the ‘fallen’ state of society post Han and not an accurate depiction of the society of his time. Thus, Ge Hong is likely not a fully trustworthy witness to the status and influence of women in the early south.

²⁸⁶ Ge 1978, 143, translation by Sailey; Li 1993, 50.

meant that women were to stay at home and care for domestic issues whereas men were to be the ones that ventured out into public life, holding positions and earning salaries. This has gone along with the related ideal of the “three followings” (*sancong* 三從) that sees women “follow” the three paths of their fathers, husbands, and sons in all public dealings.²⁸⁷ This, of course, also meant that the ruler of the country must be male and that the vast bureaucracy of those working under him in the service of the country should be male as well. Although these concepts are most clearly stated in the early writings of Ban Zhao, scholar of women in Chinese history, Patricia Ebrey, has shown that these maxims existed for well over 1000 years, affecting the architecture of Song dynasty homes.²⁸⁸

Yet despite the breadth and longevity of these social restrictions on the lives of both men and women, it seems that the women of the Northern Wei simply did not care

²⁸⁷ Much work has been done on the restrictions to women’s lives reputed to have arisen from the Confucian tradition. In brief, two particular maxims from that tradition have had a profound impact on the lives of Chinese women, the earliest being the so-called “three followings” or *sancong* 三從 first recommended in the “Section on Funerary Rites” in the *Book of Etiquette and Ceremony* (*Yili* 儀禮) which says that in regard to a woman “Women have the rule of the three followings and do not have a unique path. Therefore a young woman should follow her father; if she is married then she should follow her husband; if her husband has died, she should follow her son. 婦人有三從之義無專用之道。故未嫁從父，既嫁從夫，夫死從子。” Although this maxim is intended to establish mourning and funerary rites, indicating to what family lineage a woman should mourn, the ideal is related to a social environment wherein women were known as ‘inner people’ and physically dwelt in the inner courts of a Chinese house. Men, then, were ‘outer people’ who took care of the affairs outside the house, thus acting in government and the larger society. Furthermore, this is undoubtedly also related to the recommendations that Ban Zhao makes in her *Rules for Women* – recommendations that suggest a women’s virtue be established through pliancy and softness toward her male kin.

²⁸⁸ Ebrey 1993, 21ff.

about them at all for, as we have just seen, they enjoyed court ranks in the service of the empire that were matched with those of their male kin. When reading through the biographies of Northern Wei women, it is evident that women acted of their own accord. They did not hesitate to make political decisions on their own, act decisively in matters of their family, or rule the country when given the opportunity. Moreover, they seem to have been respected by the wider society for living their lives as such; they garnered support at court and held positions of high importance in the Buddhist monastic community. Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu, as well as many other women of the court, are all eminent examples of just this type of woman.

In order to understand how this situation of powerful female politicians and female leaders came about so early in medieval China, it is necessary first to survey the status of women in the Northern Wei, for I believe that the freedom of movement that these women enjoyed was in part due to their status as northern women. Furthermore, the only other woman in Chinese history to achieve, and in fact exceed, the heights of power reached by Empress Dowager Feng was Empress Wu of the Tang, and it must be remembered that she too was of northern lineage. There are very few references to the lives of northern women in the annals of the classical Chinese tradition, outside of brief references to women from the northern tribes who married in to the royal family, but two tantalizing snippets of information from early Chinese texts do indeed suggest that women in the north of China may have enjoyed greater freedom of movement and personal choice than did the women of the south, while also holding posts in society that gave them a higher social status. One of the most enticing of these snippets comes from

the observations of the southern émigré, Yan Zhitui 顏之推 (531–591 CE) who had relocated to the great northern city of Ye 鄴 and was quite struck by what he saw northern women doing, assuming, then, that southern women did not undertake such dealings. He had this to say:

East of the Yangzi women had very little social intercourse. Even families related by marriage might for ten years or so have no connection except for expressions of intimacy and goodwill through an exchange of messengers and presents. But in the city of Ye it was the custom for women to handle all family business, to demand justice, to straighten out legal disputes, to make calls and curry favor with the powerful. They filled the streets with their carriages, occupied the government offices with their fancy dresses, begged official posts for their sons, and made complaints about injustice done to their husbands. Were these customs handed down from the Tuoba Wei dynasty?²⁸⁹

Thus, according to Yan Zhitui, who was a Confucian-leaning literatus with quite developed opinions about the state of society at his time, the freedoms and powers of northern women were in stark contrast to those of women in the south, who seem to have had considerably less dealings with public society. It is difficult to tell how exactly Yan felt about this situation, but it is clear that he is quite surprised by it and that he attributed it to the non-Chinese origins of the Tuoba rulers of the Northern Wei. Further in this vein, the *Book of the Southern Qi* (Nanqi Shu 南齊書) reports that the Empress of the Northern Wei was accompanied by female bodyguards when leaving the palace.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁹ Originally from Yan Zhitui's *Family Instructions of Master Yan*, or *Yanshi Jiaxun* 顏氏家訓, I owe this translation Teng Ssu-Yü who has translated the text in full (Yen 1968, 18-19). Both Mark Edward Lewis (2009, 92) and Lee Jen-der (1993, 49) have also cited this excerpt.

²⁹⁰ Dien 2002, 25.

Although information about the lives of northern women in the southern literary tradition is tenuous at best, thankfully we have a wealth of information from the northern tradition that also attests to the relatively high status of women in northern society. The biographies contained in the *Book of the Wei* offer a depiction of northern women having unapologetic involvement with court and public life, much akin to the observations made by Yan Zhitui. Lee Jen-der has done the work of digging through these biographies for information about the lives and activities of northern women and has discovered that northern women were largely in control of their own lives and finances and that they were often quite politically active. From the biographies, Lee cites the example of a certain Ms. Feng whom officials would seek for her learned political advice²⁹¹ and Lee also cites the fact that Empress Dowager Lin practiced archery despite objections from Confucian aristocrat Cui Guang 崔光,²⁹² and that other Northern Wei women contributed greatly to the economies of their families.²⁹³ Furthermore, from the many biographies of exemplary women and empresses preserved in the *Book of the Wei*, we know that Northern Wei women were deeply and readily involved in the public face of the Wei court, acting as moral exemplars, political advisors, and the educators of emperors. Finally, the Chinese literary tradition holds that the popular female character, Hua Mulan 花木蘭 was herself a Northern Wei women – one who dressed as a man in order to join the army and uphold her family's honour – and though the text of her story that we can

²⁹¹ Lee 1993 53; citing: Wei 2009, 1978.

²⁹² Ibid, 53-4; citing: Wei 2009, 1492.

²⁹³ Ibid, 55.

read today dates to the Song, the earliest text of the story, which is no longer extant, is said to have been compiled in the sixth century from Northern Wei precedents.²⁹⁴

Depictions of Northern Women in Inscriptional Materials

Other than these enticing fragments of information on the lives of northern women in the writings of the literati of the south and the biographies of women contained in the *Book of the Wei*, we can go one step further and corroborate the theory that women had a relatively high social status in the northern dynasties with evidence from Northern Wei inscriptions. Personally, the most striking research observation I have made in surveying inscriptions is the very simple fact that women are represented just as commonly as men in inscriptions, and as such inscriptions are the only source of knowledge to come out of medieval China that can in any way speak for the reality of women's lives, though they too are constrained by various social norms. The inscriptional remains documenting women's activity in the social life of the Northern Wei are largely religious in nature, but from these religious documents we can easily see that women moved freely in many levels of society, not just the elite level, enjoying a level of public prestige that their southern counterparts may not have had, and in some cases actively objecting to the classical roles that women should fulfill in Confucianism. For example, one inscription of a certain nun, Cixiang Huizheng 慈香慧政, dated 520 CE, says:

On the 20th day of the third month of the fourth year of the Shengui era of the great Wei (April 23, 520 CE), the nun Cixiang Huizheng governed over the building of a cave, whose record states: As for the falling into enlightenment and spreading of emptiness, it is shapeless and truly

²⁹⁴ For more on the character of Mulan and her Northern Wei roots, see: Tseng 2013, 105 ff.

abstruse, yet the traces it leaves should be followed; upheld and venerated as a constant model. Are they not the expressions of this beautiful and profound teaching? For this reason, the undertaking of yearning and thirsting to cross the stream of dharma, is responded to by the building of images whose subtle merit is both in this form and in the remote distance. Having been born and being dependent on this troublesome body, I vow to surpass these boundaries without hindrances and to attain the highest embrace of passion and will thus benefit all beings in the dharma realm. I confer these blessings [missing text] so that this stone becomes a pure image whose virtue lasts for 80,000 years, and extends even to the thrice-followers, so that they dare to share in this very same benevolence.²⁹⁵

On an ideological level, and with respect to the social and religious position of women in early medieval China, this inscription reveals two very important aspects of a particular woman's belief in the tradition of Buddhism: 1) that she publicly laments the problems of her "troublesome body," meaning her life as a woman, and 2) on a more universalized level she then extends her wishes and her karmic blessings to all women, or "thrice followers" so that they may be able to find religious transformation, in this case Buddhist liberation, or crossing the stream of dharma. What is also interesting is that she connects her vow to the building of Buddhist images so that all beings, particularly women, may see the image and be blessed by the buddha's teaching. Amy McNair has calculated the cost of building this grotto and estimates that at 3.1 square meters, it would have "cost about half the annual salary of a government official."²⁹⁶ This is a significant amount of money – especially for an ordained woman, somebody who we might think would not normally have access to such amounts of money. The religious implications of her vow will be discussed below, but for now the message is clear that this is a lone

²⁹⁵ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 4.078; this is also translated and studied by Amy McNair (2007, 57-59).

²⁹⁶ McNair: 2007, 59.

female donor using her own money to dedicate images to other women. We can also find many inscriptions attesting to women's real-life abilities and freedoms, ones that suggest a rather high social status. For example, the following characteristic inscription from Longmen records the religious actions of a lone female lay donor:

On the seventh day of the tenth month of the fourth year of the Yongping era (November 12, 511 CE), the nun Daozeng from the Immortal Peace Monastery has planned the commission of one image of Maitreya so that birth after birth and life after life she will see the Buddha and inquire after the Dharma. Zhou A'zu, a Woman of Pure Faith, vows to watch over this mystery in this manifest world so that all living beings, equally and altogether, can make this vow.²⁹⁷

Similar to the above inscription and dedication by Cixiang Huizheng, this inscription further makes clear that women had enough disposable income to commission statues independently from their male kin and that women of differing levels of society met and organized themselves in ways that made sense to them, in this case in the service of the Buddhist teaching. This inscription describes the relationship between a member of the ordained Buddhist community, a *bhikṣuṇī*, and a Buddhist lay disciple, also known as a woman of pure faith. Evidently the *bhikṣuṇī* was the religious authority behind the commission of the image of the future Buddha, Maitreya, whereas the woman of pure faith was likely the money behind the project – vowing to take care of the image in this world so that all others may have the chance to see it and therefore turn their hearts toward Buddhism.²⁹⁸ This inscription records a financial and religious transaction

²⁹⁷ Beijing tushuguan 1989–1998, 3.139.

²⁹⁸ It is also likely that the woman funding the project had intentions other than religious merit. For her to be able to personally fund a sizeable image at an imperial site such as Longmen suggests a relatively high social and economic status, and I suppose that this

between two women – a monastic and a lay devotee who was likely wealthy enough to fund her own unique image – but many others describe larger interactions between village societies and clergy and/or court officials, also between men and women. For example, the following Northern Wei votive inscription shows a female village collective working in tandem with a military general:

In the first year of the Jianyi Era,²⁹⁹ in the seventh month of the year, which was a *wushen* month, on the 14th day of the month, which was a *jisi* day and also a new moon (August 14, 528 CE), the *dānapati*,³⁰⁰ The military General Who Opposes Licentiousness and is the Commander of Horses and Households, Chang Shenqing, along with a village collective of wives and women, of more than 1010 persons, constructed one jade figure measuring two *chi* in height. At its highest, this image is for the sake of the Emperor and those below him; at its middle, it is on behalf of our deceased parents; at its lower end, it is further on behalf of wives, children, and those to whom we are close; and lastly it is on behalf of all the beings in the world. This is offered to the *bhikṣu* Sengxian, offered so that the brilliant radiance of opening up the Buddha be always abundant, offered so that the village collective that built the image may always see it and thus constantly create merit, offered so that our contemporaries will always [text unreadable], offered for our contemporary Sun Changhe and also for our contemporary Pei Yingzhen, and finally for the spirit of those who handle the affairs of kingly laws.³⁰¹

The topic of these village collectives will be further taken up in chapter five, yet it is important, here, to understand that women of the Northern Wei, united in the service of the Buddhist tradition, both had the means and the social ability to gather in gendered groups to dedicate statuary. Moreover, this inscription shows that these women's groups

would not have been lost on the visitors to Longmen who could see her inscription and know both her Buddhist faith and financial affluence.

²⁹⁹ The Jianyi Reign 健儀 was a brief reign-period at a turbulent time nearing the end of the dynasty lasting for only part of 528 CE.

³⁰⁰ The Chinese here, *tanyue* 檀越, is a transliteration of the Sanskrit term, *dānapati*, which means “almsgiver.”

³⁰¹ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 3.121.

had enough power to secure wealthy donors, in this case a military general. The picture that one gains from reading this inscription is of a small village in which the women gathered together to undertake a project that would benefit themselves, their families, and their neighbours – the building of a buddha image so that not only would all people be able to see the image and thus benefit from exposure to the Buddha’s teaching, but also so that the whole village may benefit from the accrued karmic merit that creating such an image would provide. And they did this by uniting several levels of society, namely themselves, the monastic community as presiders through the *bhikṣu* Sengxian, and the wealthy elite through the donor who was a military commander. Hence it is obvious that these northern women did not stay in the house, as one may assume of Chinese women in the early medieval period, but that they were active in the public and social lives of the community, and were so in the service of Buddhism.

One other inscription demonstrating the ability of women to fund and control their own projects is the previously discussed inscription for the Gao family dated 504 CE. This inscription begins by stating that the provincial *weina*, a Buddhist monastic and administrative title, along with 70 members of the Gao clan, “on behalf of the emperor and all under him, have built a stone statue of Śākyamuni.”³⁰² The inscription then goes on to list all those members of the Gao clan who supported the project, but what is fascinating is that in listing the names, the male members of the clan have no particular Buddhist titles of affiliation whereas almost all of the women do, and in fact it is a

³⁰² Beijing tushuguan 1989, 3.076; see earlier in this chapter for a full translation and appendix one for the full text of the Chinese.

woman, the wife of a certain Gao Wen 高文, who is listed as the presider of the image and it is with her name that the family is listed as in service to the Buddha. Thus, this inscription suggests that women enjoyed a relatively high social status in the Northern Wei, one that allowed them to act in public, save and spend their own money, and commission religious statuary on behalf of their family. In fact, a general survey of the inscriptional record suggests that there was really no difference between men and women in the practice of Buddhism throughout the empire: both women and men dedicated images, both acted as image presiders, both acted as the leaders of village communities, and both acted as members of the Buddhist community, as *weinas*, dharma teachers, and monastics. Furthermore, the most notable thing about the inscriptional record, in terms of research into the history of women, is simply that women seem to be represented in equal numbers to men and doing similar activities – no other genre of texts from medieval China represents the actions of women so readily and abundantly.

Women of the Northern Wei: A Sino-Tuoba Negotiation

The inscriptional record, along with the fact that women held rank at the Northern Wei court, are enough to suggest that women enjoyed a relatively high status in northern society, but the truth is not that simple, as northern women also struggled against unfair practices. In chapter one, I introduced the story of Tuoba Jiefen and the Celestial Woman who came from the heavens to grant him a son in order to discuss the long-standing association in Tuoba society between religion and politics. I again return to that story, but this time for a different reason: to highlight the situation of Tuoba women. The

otherworldly origin of the Celestial Woman is indicative of both the Tuoba's complicated situation of cementing their rule among and above competing northern tribes, and of the power that women held in Tuoba society. We know for certain that the earliest of the Tuoba princesses were members of the Murong, Xiongnu, and even northern-assimilated Han Chinese groups,³⁰³ and that they represented a sort of cultural contract between the Tuoba and these groups that they dominated. Thus, a woman came to court as a princess or empress, not only with her own political agenda, but also with the expectations of her family behind her and endowed with the potential problems that her family could make for the Tuoba themselves. In the case of Tuoba Jiefen, however, he was able to escape the entrapments of his wife and her family while still engendering a son. This is, of course, because his wife came from the heavens and returned back to them, effectively removing herself from any positions of power and without providing him with any power-hungry in-laws, which was a situation to be feared in Tuoba society. As a case in point, with respect to Tuoba Jiefen's Celestial Woman, the story in the *Book of the Wei* records that, "the people of the time made a proverb, saying: 'Emperor Jiefen doesn't have a wife or in-laws; Emperor Liwei doesn't have a maternal uncle or in-laws.'"³⁰⁴ This meant, of course, that neither of them had to face the challenges of retaining either an empress or an empress dowager who would be able to usurp their power by exercising her own.

This rather inventive take on the role of women in Tuoba society, vis-à-vis the story of the Celestial Woman, has a darker side: the Northern Wei is known to have

³⁰³ Holmgren 1981-1983b, 62.

³⁰⁴ Wei 2009, 2; translation is my own.

practiced a form of matricide referred to as, “If the Son is Noble, the Mother Dies.”³⁰⁵

This meant that if a princess or concubine became the mother of a son who became emperor then she herself was forced to commit suicide. This precautionary action was undertaken in order for the mother in question to not be able to sway her son toward her political leanings if he happened to become a child emperor and she an empress dowager,³⁰⁶ so that her natal family would have no way to interfere in the workings of the court, and finally in order to prevent the mother from presenting challengers to the realm by mothering another child.³⁰⁷ Unlike traditional Chinese rules of succession, wherein leadership is passed directly from emperor to eldest son of the empress, the Tuoba originally took the emperor from a wider field of candidates, choosing the most capable son of those fathered by the emperor, regardless of age or the rank of the mother, hence competition between mothers and their families was fierce and a situation most undesirable in the higher echelons of Tuoba power. Furthermore, this also meant that in traditional laws of Tuoba succession, there could be no possibility of creating an empress dowager, because a mother would have been killed if her child took the throne, and also because a child emperor would never have been chosen as the candidate most capable of

³⁰⁵ My translation of the term “子貴母死,” as the practice is commonly known in primary and secondary literature. The origins of this practice are hotly contested, but I agree with Scott Pearce and Tian Yuqing who argue that the practice is not necessarily a long-standing Tuoba practice, but instead one instituted by Emperor Daowu with respect to his situation of declaring an heir, and that later Tuoba rulers use this practice to legitimate their own rules for a variety of different reasons. For more on this, see: Pearce 2009, 290 and Tian 2011, 1-49. For an overview of the differing opinions on the origins of this practice among the Tuoba, see: Golavachev (2002) and the response to Golavachev by Pearce (2003), both published in *Early Medieval China*.

³⁰⁶ Holmgren 1981-1983b, 60.

³⁰⁷ For a detailed account of this practice see: Tian 2011, 1-49.

rule. Hence the story of the Celestial Woman paired with the “If the Son is Noble, the Mother Dies” maxim shows that although women held a relatively high status in Tuoba society, there was still great ambiguity as to the roles and powers of elite women. Indeed, as both an elite woman and her agnates could potentially cause trouble for the stability of the court, the Celestial Woman in no uncertain way represents the ideal woman – she provides a ruler and disappears, leaving no trace of herself or her family behind.

Despite the fact that Empress Wu of the Tang and Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu of the Northern Wei enjoyed unprecedented political power, scholar of the Northern Wei, Jennifer Holmgren argues that, “Women in T'o-pa society were merely passive instruments in cementing temporary politico-military alliances with outside groups”³⁰⁸ because, as she rightly points out, the early Tuoba empresses were all of non-Tuoba stock as they were foreigners used as payment for creating the political alliances that facilitated the Tuoba rise to power. She also correctly points out that the Tuoba system of appointing emperors was not – as the Chinese one – based on direct filial succession but rather on a system of fraternal succession which saw the most talented descendent take precedence over the direct and first-born one. This system effectively diminished the importance of a having a strong empress, for that empress would never have the opportunity to become an empress dowager – ruling behind her child emperor – because that child would be overlooked in succession in favour of a more competent leader. Holmgren further argues that in the year 409 CE, when the Tuoba began their move toward the adoption of Chinese rules of imperial succession, that women were finally

³⁰⁸ Holmgren 1981–1983b, 63.

able to take on roles such as empress and empress dowager, and hence only then did they and their families hold real political power.³⁰⁹ This she argues is the reason behind the Tuoba adoption of the “If the son is noble, the mother dies” policy discussed before; once they became important as the mothers of emperors, women became deeply problematic for the Northern Wei rulers because of the political machinations they and their families could make at court.

Neither Holmgren nor the Tuoba were wrong; Tuoba women were restricted from enacting power under Tuoba rules of succession, but when they were given the opportunity to enact political power they did so without hesitation. One only need reference the biography of Empress Dowager Feng in the next chapter to see how she both filled the court with her personal favourites and assassinated her political rivals. Indeed, the Tuoba need fear her and her reign. Thus, it must be said that although the practice of imperial matricide was a clear sign of the unfair treatment of women, it also suggested that women were a force to be feared, at least politically. When given the opportunity to rule, due to changes in laws of succession, women of the Northern Wei were ready and able to fill positions of high rank; they were educated, calculating, and wielded the sort of social prestige necessary to secure positions of power by inspiring confidence in various arms of the government. This fact, I believe, speaks to a relatively high status of women in northern society. Although it took Chinese rules of succession to provide women with a solid means of advancing politically, it also took the peculiar gender organization of northern society to have created women capable of taking over.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 62.

Thus the hold on power that northern women enjoyed can be seen as a Chinese-Tuoba partnership,³¹⁰ and, as we will see, these political women both continued on with the Northern Wei's support of Buddhism and made affiliation with the Buddhist tradition an important aspect of their reigns.

Northern Women as a Religious Elite

Though I have just positioned the unique status of women in the Northern Wei court within the matrix of a Tuoba-Han hybrid system of rules and social norms, I want to further complicate the roles that women played at the court by further investigating the larger context of Tuoba society. If the donor inscriptions have not already made it clear, women of the Northern Wei often used their power to support the growth and prosperity of the Buddhist tradition. Further, as also seen in the inscriptions, the association between elite women and religion is quite commonly seen in their names and titles and the fact that they are donating religious imagery. In understanding why this is the case, the argument can be made that their deep involvement with the Buddhist tradition was due to the fact that it was good politics and they were politicians; however, I do not believe that this argument quite encapsulates the entirety of the particular social and historical circumstances that both lead to these women acting as rulers of a powerful dynasty and being fervent patronesses of Buddhism. In order to help explain how this state of affairs could have developed, I would like to again look to the unique social structure of the Tuoba – particularly to the religious life of the group.

³¹⁰ This is an insight which Holmgren, in another article, largely agrees with (1983a, 84).

To begin, yet another fascinating snippet of information from the *Book of the Wei* is instructive for our understanding of how Tuoba religious structure affected the association of women with Buddhism. Deep in section four of the chapter entitled “Monograph on Ritual” (*Lizhi* 禮志), there is a detailed description of the types of chariots that were used by the ruling elite, including emperors and empresses, and of the types of activities they performed in such chariots. Out of all the chariots demarcated for exclusive use by female members of court, such as mothers of emperors, empresses, empress dowagers, and sometimes princesses, they are all, without exception, used for the women to journey to the ancestral temples in the outskirts of the city to perform rites. Their chariots are different from the chariots reserved for the emperor, whose chariots were used for ritual field ploughing during minor festivals and for more leisurely activities such as hunting and making rounds. For example, one of the chariots for use by female members of the court is described as such:

The Elephant Carriage: It is adorned on left and right with phoenixes, white horses, and transcendents preparing to take off in flight, and it is pulled by two elephants. With wings of grass and streamers like the tail of a bird, and dragon banners, flags, and standards, the adornment was just like that of the Men’s Elephant Carriage. It was used for the mother of the emperor, the empress dowager, and the empress to journey to the suburbs in order to perform their rites at the ancestral temples.³¹¹

In contrast, the emperor’s carriages are described as something like this:

The Touring and Observing Carriage: With two sets of stairs, the ornamentation is similar to the other carriages. It is pulled by 15 horses, all of which are white with scarlet manes. The Son of Heaven uses this cart to methodically drive his horses around while delivering good blessings, making his rounds, and attending lesser rituals.³¹²

³¹¹ Wei 2009, 2812.

³¹² Ibid.

Without exception, all of the chariots for women are described as being for the use of attending to the ancestral shrines in the outskirts, suggesting that imperial women were responsible for taking care of the imperial ancestors – being responsible for the religious concerns of the royal family. By contrast, the emperor used his carriages for official business, making his rounds and attending to agricultural rituals such as field ploughing. Thus it may be that although the emperor was going out of the palace to enact rituals for the populace – court rituals – it was the empresses, and other court women, who were charged with the important task of overseeing their family’s own religious needs. Moreover, although the women of the family were in no way officiating rites assigned to the Son of Heaven, they were in fact doing equally public things – journeying to far off places in the outskirts in their glorious chariots so as to enact imperial religion in the view of the common people.

A further bit of information on the cultural status of northern women comes from a section of the *History of the Latter Han* that deals with the traditions and customs of China’s northwestern tribal groups. In the section devoted to the Xianbei people, the text records that it was the mothers of the tribes, and not brothers and fathers, who held the lineage together and that a man must follow his new wife into her family for one or two years before striking out on their own.³¹³ Therefore, the text states that when doing battle with the northern tribes, “If you are angry, then kill the fathers and brothers, but never harm the mothers. Because the mother is the lineage holder, the fathers and brothers will

³¹³ This is recorded in the chapter entitled “Traditions of the Xianbei and Wuhuan” in the *Hou Hanshu* (Li and Fan 1965, 2978).

have no choice but to retaliate.”³¹⁴ This means, of course, that women were the most eminent people in society and that if you killed one in battle you could be sure of swift and intense retaliation. In order to explain this, Ishimatsu characterizes Tuoba society as engaging in a sort of “sacred mother worship” wherein the earliest form of Tuoba religious belief seems to have been the veneration of women as mothers and matriarchs.³¹⁵ Although it is difficult to say exactly what Ishimatsu means by this “sacred mother worship,” as the explanation is not well developed, the idea likely relates to what we know of the Tuoba’s own delineation of their lineage wherein the Tuoba Xianbei tribe that became the Wei court traced their lineage back to a human father, Tuoba Jiefen, and a divine mother who grants him a child, a descendent, and then leaves back to the heavens. Yet likely more compelling, this “sacred mother worship” is an attempt to explain the presence of female shamans (*nüwu* 女巫) in Northern Wei materials. There are eleven references to female shamans in the *Book of the Wei*. These women play important roles in Northern Wei imperial rituals, which themselves involved a unique admixture of Tuoba and Chinese regulations that curiously included the involvement of the empress and consorts as well as a female shaman.³¹⁶ The “Monograph on Ritual” details the role of female shamans in the state rituals of Emperor Daowu, the first emperor of the Northern Wei. One such excerpt reads:

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ For more on this, see: Ishimatsu 2007, 14.

³¹⁶ For more on this, see Kang 1995, 167-169, also cited in Tseng 2013, 24. Kang refers to these rituals as being those of the “north Asia steppe system” and points out that they are discussed on page 2736 of the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009).

In the summer of the second year of the Tianci reign,³¹⁷ in the fourth month (June 15–July 12, 405 CE), he undertook the complex sacrifices to heaven in the western suburb, and for this there was one square altar with seven wooden layers on top. In the east there were two steps and nothing else. Along the walls there were four doors, each door was a different colour in accord with its direction. The sacrificial animals that were used were one of each of a white calf, a yellow foal, and a white sheep. On the day of the rites, the emperor came in his imperial carriage with a hundred officials and his National Guard as well as great men from various regions that all followed him to the suburb. The emperor went in the green door and proceeded from the south to the west. The officials of the inner court all assembled at the north of the emperor and the officials of the outer court all waited outside of the green door. The empress lead the officials of the six offices in through the black door and they then all lined up inside the green door to the north side, with all of them facing west. Then it was commanded to raise up the sacrificial animals from the stockpile of sacrifices and to line them up in front of the altar. The female shaman³¹⁸ held the drum on the steps leading to the throne, facing west. Then the seventh son from the 10 clans of the emperor held the alcohol and was to the southwest of the shaman. The female shaman ascended the altar and beat the drum. The emperor prayed a solemn prayer, and the hundred officials all exhausted themselves in prayer. When the rite was finished, again they prayed. When the prayer was finished, the animals were slaughtered. Then the seventh man, who was holding the alcohol and facing west, took the alcohol and sprinkled it on the presiding heavenly deity, and then they prayed again. They did this seven times. The ritual was then complete and they left.³¹⁹

This ritual is unique because in its first recorded enactment in the Northern Wei, as recorded in the *Book of the Wei*, the Chinese suburban ritual is supplemented with the Tuoba admixture of both a female shaman and a prominent role for the empress. In later ritual accounts in the *Book of the Wei*, as the dynasty becomes more “Chinese,” this role of the female shaman disappears. Hence it is clear that this is an example of the Tuoba’s own views on the ritual importance of women in religious affairs. Furthermore, since we

³¹⁷ The Tianci 天賜 reign runs from 404–409 CE.

³¹⁸ Here the text specifically says that these shamans are female.

³¹⁹ Wei 2009, 2736; translation is my own. See appendix three for Chinese text.

know that female shamans were important to ritual, since we have a clear-cut example from the *Book of the Wei* of women taking charge of religious affairs for the most elite family in society, the royal family, and since we know that the court shamans were female, does it make sense to think that women of all levels of society were doing the same thing? Could it be the case that northern women were responsible for their families' religious needs, even outside of the practice of Buddhism? As part of the Northern Wei's sinification policies, the empire not only patronized Buddhism, but also set itself to practicing traditionally Chinese forms of worship – ancestor worship and the imperial worship of heaven. In so doing, it may be that the Tuoba, relying on indigenous models of social organization from their pre-Chinese influenced nomadic origins, believed it natural that women took charge of religious matters, and only after adopting Chinese-style religious rituals did eminent men such as the emperor necessarily take part as well. This might indeed make sense if we further consider the little we know about Tuoba women: 1) that the most illustrious Tuoba female ancestor, the Celestial Woman, in fact came from the heavens to give Tuoba Jiefen a child; 2) that according to the *Later History of the Han*, the Tuoba themselves practiced a sort of matriarchy wherein women were the holders of the ancestral lineages; 3) that Northern Wei women were made to undertake a mysterious ritual whose origins we know nothing about: if they were chosen for empress they were required to cast a figurine of a golden man by hand and in front of the court as a sign of divine favour,³²⁰ and if they failed at this task they were not allowed

³²⁰ This story is told in the biography of Empress Dowager Hu, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

to ascend to the position of empress; and 4) that Northern Wei women retained an important role in state rituals both alongside the emperor, as seen in the suburban sacrifice, and independent from the emperor, as seen in the description of their chariots. These four stories about northern women, or more specifically, women of the Xianbei Tuoba court, create an image of women in society that is well imbued with religious significance, and I think it is not a stretch to assume that within Tuoba social organization women may have been the individuals responsible for religious rites and religious propagation.

If this is the case, and I think it might be, then when the Tuoba set themselves to patronizing Buddhism, it would have made sense that women were responsible for administering Buddhism to the populace as they already held the role of religious practitioners in their society and they had cemented the social avenues necessary for the transmission of religious ideals and rituals. Hence, it may further be the case that when the Tuoba overlaid their religious practices with Chinese ones – including both court rituals and Buddhism – that it was a natural fit for them to rely on the workings of women to help establish the new tradition, which as we have seen, was an important political move for the Tuoba in their ascent to power. Furthermore, this role of women fits with what we know about the religious practice of women within the Northern Wei court itself. According to eminent historian of early Chinese Buddhism, Tong Yangtong, during the Northern Wei “The flourishing of Buddhism that was at the gates of the women’s quarters of the palace was due to the force of the Feng family of Yan.”³²¹ This

³²¹ Tang 2006, 445.

family is of course the family of Empress Dowager Feng, from which many of the women became nuns at the imperially-sponsored Jade Sparkle Nunnery, or *Yaoguangsi* 瑤光寺. Moreover, at this nunnery, the women were known for being fantastic teachers of the dharma and elucidated on a precise understanding of the rules and tenets of Buddhism.³²²

Thus, in returning to the basic aim of this thesis – an exploration of the various social and religious factors that united elite women of the north with Buddhism in the early medieval period – I would like to put forward the argument that the apparent connection between political women and Buddhism runs deeper than these women's decisions as politicians, and it is found in the precise social location of women in the Northern Wei at a time when the north was moving toward urbanization, sinification, and Buddhism, while maintaining a relatively high status of women. As the north adopted Chinese rules of succession, northern women found themselves in positions of immense power and used their relatively high social standing to both cement their power in society and promote a new social movement that helped them to expand their social power across new sectors of society: Buddhism. In so doing, they relied on a traditional mode of Tuoba social organization that saw women forming a stratum of society that was well associated with religious belief and practice, and hence felt natural to them. Thus, in terms of a social understanding of the rise of Buddhism among elite women of the Northern Wei, it must be said that this fascinating phenomenon is both due to Chinese and Tuoba forces propelling women to the heights of the court, and also to northern forms of gender

³²² Ibid.

organization that saw women as respected clan matriarchs that were in charge of such auspicious rituals as the casting figures of golden men by hand, golden men who we could only too easily associate with the figure of a Buddha, though the archaeological record provides no way to verify this.³²³ Hence, in sum, my argument is that when the Tuoba adopted both Buddhism and Chinese court and state rituals, that the role that women played as a religious elite in Tuoba society positioned them to be matrons of the Northern Wei's court Buddhism.

Conclusion

In chapter one I argued that the Northern Wei's patronage of Buddhism was an important component of their consolidation of power in the north – bringing together diverse tribal groups under the unity of a shared religion – and of its move toward sinification – allowing the northern 'barbarians' to compete with Han Chinese for cultural superiority through art, building, and language. I sought to show that the patronage of Buddhism by the royal elite was not only a religious choice, but also rather a political imperative spurred by the mass popularity of Buddhism across all levels of society. Through reference to the numbers of Buddhist building projects underway in the Northern Wei and citation of the various efforts made by the government to control them, I attempted to show that the Northern Wei had a deeply ambivalent relationship with the

³²³ The suggestion that this golden man that women casted at court may be identified with a Buddha is tenuous at best, but comes from the observation that the records of this procedure use the term *xiang* 像 to explain what sort of figure this is and further that *xiang* is also used on votive inscriptions as a counter for Buddha images. The word simply means "Image" but has strong associations with Buddhism in early medieval China as Buddhism was then often known as the Teaching of Images, or *xiangjiao*, as recorded in the *Book of the Wei*.

Buddhist tradition – both supporting it and controlling it, in some cases even suppressing it. As a corollary to this, I offered a depiction of Northern Wei society wherein Buddhism was flourishing unrestrained across a society of northerners who saw the tradition simultaneously as “theirs” and as something that gave them access to higher levels of literate and artistic culture, akin to that of the Han Chinese in the south. This process of sinification that the north underwent, coexisting as it did with their adoption of Buddhism, also saw the north move toward urbanization and the adoption of a Chinese imperial and legal system, one that was thoroughly entangled with the rising Buddhist tradition. I ended the chapter by suggesting that women were often responsible for administering this court-centered form of Buddhism throughout the dynasty.

In chapter two, then, I attempted to show that imperial women were well-suited to the task of administering imperial Buddhism, and in support of this I spent much time discussing the relatively high social status of northern women across all levels of society. I believe that the social status of northern women accounts for what comes out of the historical record as their overwhelming and uncharacteristic public support of the tradition.³²⁴ Furthermore, I revealed the powers that women of the Northern Wei held at

³²⁴ In comparison with other avenues of public life in early medieval China, women are significantly better represented in the public face of Buddhism. This is not to say that women were the only ones responsible for the tradition of Buddhism during the Northern Wei, for of course we have eminent monks and male dharma teachers in the historical record as well, but only that women are represented just as commonly as men in the inscriptional record, and much more commonly than in any other types of historical sources documenting medieval public life. I argue that Buddhism was the one vector of public life in early medieval China, especially in the north, where women were unquestionably allowed to take up powerful public positions of great responsibility, and I seek to ask the questions of why this was the case and why they wanted this.

court and I argued that these women, notably Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu, were among the dynasty's strongest rulers, and certainly its most ardent supporters of Buddhism. In attempting to explain the connection between these powerful women and support of the Buddhist tradition, I put forth the idea that these women were well suited to the support of Buddhism in that Tuoba society was long accustomed to seeing women in roles of religious leadership. Ultimately, I suggested that imperial women of the Northern Wei formed a sort of religious elite, one that relied on long-standing Tuoba beliefs about the roles and powers of women, and one that looked to Buddhism for its official patronage.

Going forward, then, the remainder of this dissertation will be dedicated to detailed studies of three subsets of women that lived with and participated in this Tuoba-Court Buddhism throughout their lives: Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu, *bhikṣuṇīs*, and female politicians at court with noted Buddhist affiliation. In studying the lives of these women, particular attention will be paid to the question of precisely what Buddhist affiliation offered to their lives as well as to how these particular women used Buddhism-at-court to accomplish the things that they were interested in. As for our two Empress dowagers who will be the topic of chapter three, their biographies and the policies that they undertook during their reigns show that they retained an undeniable connection with the tradition of Buddhism, one that supported their rule just as they supported its spread. Chapter four will discuss the lives of *bhikṣuṇīs* at the Northern Wei court and ask just how the process of “leaving home” enabled their involvement with courtly life. And finally, the last chapter, chapter five, will deal with what, to me, is the most interesting

segment of the Buddhist women of the Northern Wei – those who worked in the administration of imperial Buddhism in the court and in the greater social milieu.

CHAPTER THREE. Building an Imperial Buddhism with Women at the Helm: Empress Dowager Feng and Empress Dowager Hu

Men in both the interior and outlying areas are raising up meritorious works and erecting reliquaries and temples. High and wide, extensive and imposing, they are also adequate to propagating and exalting the Ultimate Doctrine. And yet the ignorant outdo one another, and the poor and rich vie with one another. They exhaust their property, striving only for magnificence, but they harm and kill insects and other life-containing beings. If one has a pure and pious mind, even though engaged in heaping earth and gathering sand, one's accumulated merit shall not perish. But they wish to create a cause for gaining merit while not yet knowing the effect of harming life. We are the Father and Mother of the People; lovingkindness and nurture, these are Our concern. From this time forward We forbid all such actions.³²⁵

– Edict issued in 472 CE when Emperor Xiaowen was five years old and Empress Dowager Feng ruled the Northern Wei

To further a discussion of the women who worked within this Tuoba, Han, Buddhist matrix of ideas and customs and of the specific actions that they undertook therein, this chapter is an exploration of the lives and works of the two most powerful women of the realm: Empress Dowager Feng and Empress Dowager Hu. Beginning with a translation of the biography of Empress Dowager Feng, I will show precisely what policies the Empress Dowager promoted in her expansion of Buddhism, and I will also examine the possibility that the use of Buddhism helped her to enforce her rule. Moving forward, I will discuss the life and works of Empress Dowager Hu, who ruled at a very different time in the dynasty's relationship with Buddhism than did Empress Dowager Feng, I also will focus on the political uses to which she put Buddhist tradition. Finally, raising the question of whether or not there is an further connection between Buddhist

³²⁵ Hurvitz 1956, 77.

teachings and ruling women in the medieval period, I will discuss some popular sūtra material of the time and argue that Buddhist ideals of buddhahood for women allowed women an identification with idioms of rule that they did not enjoy in the classical Chinese tradition.

Classical Notions of Chinese Rule: The Son of Heaven

As discussed in chapter two, the ruler of China has consistently been venerated as the Son of Heaven, a clearly gendered label that has never included women either in how the term has been understood historically in China or how it has been translated in English. Yet throughout the annals of Chinese history this ideal has never prevented women from seeking – and sometimes achieving – ultimate political power.³²⁶ However, with the exception of Empress Wu and, as we will see, perhaps Empress Dowager Hu, this political power has always been negotiated from behind powerful men, through women's roles as Empress Dowagers and wives or courtesans of emperors. This is because, as Keith McMahon has pointed out, the Chinese tradition has long held the premise, first formulated in the *Shangshu* 尚書, that “Hens should not announce the dawn,”³²⁷ and hence that women should not rule. Although there have been many counter-examples to this maxim throughout the annals of Chinese history, McMahon has further shown that the women who have been able to rule in the various Chinese dynasties have not been remembered fondly by later historians. Relegated to the status of

³²⁶ The work of Keith McMahon deals with the topic of female rulers in detail, using a chronological organization to reveal the individual lives and works of female rulers throughout the annals of Chinese history (2013a, 2013b).

³²⁷ McMahon: 2013a, 186.

meddlers and usurpers, female rulers have been subject to judgement by dynastic historians who have held the assumption that, “Women taking part in government is the root of chaos”³²⁸ because, “If no distinction is made between male and female, it will be a case of two masters. If there are two masters, then all is lost.”³²⁹ As such, the stories of women rulers told in dynastic histories have often been carefully constructed to portray them as incapable, power-hungry, and licentious in their sexual behaviour. As McMahon clearly states, in the opinion of Chinese historians, “If women ruled, they were considered meddlers in politics. They were a sign of weakness and decline. Heaven abhorred them because rule by women was unnatural.”³³⁰

Yet, as we have already seen in chapter two, the women’s bureaucracy of the inner court of the Northern Wei was a complex and stratified environment that did succeed in creating female rulers. The Northern Wei is unique because it produced two female rulers who ruled largely unchallenged for a significant part of the whole of the dynasty, and these rulers supported a women’s bureaucracy with court positions for women equal to those of men. We do not know if women’s salaries in these positions were equal to those of their male counterparts, but what we do know is that at least some women had their own disposable income in the Northern Wei, we know this from the donor inscriptions discussed in chapter two and more which will be discussed in chapter five. As we will see in this chapter, our two female rulers of the Northern Wei were

³²⁸ Ibid, citing the *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, or *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (Chen 1982, 2.8).

³²⁹ Ibid, citing the *Annotated Hanfeizi*, or *Hanfeizi yizhu* 韓非子譯注 (Zhang 2007, 15).

³³⁰ Ibid.

remembered by history very differently, at least in the *Book of the Wei*: Empress Dowager Feng as a successful and humble politician with a few lapses in judgement that seem to be forgiven by our biographer, Wei Shou; Empress Dowager Hu as a licentious and incapable usurper who brought about the end of the dynasty.³³¹

Thus, as Jennifer Jay cautions us to remember, although these women did indeed rule, their rule, as well as the rules of all women across the East Asian cultural sphere in China, Korea, and Japan from the 5th to 8th centuries, in no way constituted a sort of matriarchy; women ruled, but they did so over a Chinese court system that was inherently patriarchal.³³² Their ability to rule in no way changed the filial structure of the court or larger society – a structure that saw them rule behind or through their male kin because men in the Chinese tradition have always remained the lineage holders. Indeed, as we have seen, women were to “follow” men in regard to where they dwelled and how they lived, and whose tombs they were to venerate and be buried in. This situation remained the same for powerful women throughout history. Though, as we will see, Empress Dowager Feng did her best to change this practice and to this day remains buried alone.

³³¹ Of course, as Wilkinson cautions us to remember, the entire point of the writing of a dynastic history was to, “set the framework for right thinking of the past” through the example of legitimate dynasties (2013, 622). Empress Dowager Hu, as she was a contender to the Gao family (more on this below) who themselves went on to rule the Northern Qi who commissioned the *Book of the Wei* and saw themselves as the legitimate heirs to the *Wei*, certainly did not want to hold up the model of Empress Hu for emulation; hence the biography likely purposely exaggerates her misdeeds. For more on the Wei Shou’s writing of Empress Hu’s biography from the perspective of the Northern Qi, see: Holmgren 1978.

³³² For more on this see: Jay 1996, 221. In this article Jay discusses the situation of female leaders in medieval China, Tibet, Japan, and Korea in order to argue that there was no such thing as a “matriarchy” in these places though it is the case that women sometimes ruled.

However, one small caveat remains, as we have just seen in chapter two, the *Later History of the Han* tells us that when battling with the Xianbei, “If you are angry, then kill the fathers and brothers, but never harm the mothers. Because the mother is the lineage holder, the fathers and brothers will have no choice but to retaliate.”³³³ Thus, for the early Xianbei it does seem that women held a different societal role than did their Chinese kin, though not one that would suggest a matriarchy. Tuoba women, although enjoying a relatively high social status, were certainly never political leaders of the Tuoba tribe. Only when Chinese rules of succession were adopted in 409 CE did Tuoba women gain the ability to act as ruling Empress Dowagers. What is interesting, however, is that although women gained this ability in 409 CE it was not until the reign of Emperor Gaozong some fifty years later that an Empress was actually appointed within the standard three-year rule, if at all. This is because, as Holmgren notes, the Tuoba were afraid of the power of the inner court and attempted to prevent the rise of empresses and empress dowagers.³³⁴ Gaozong, however, adhering to the dynasty’s sinification plans, both took an empress three years after his ascension and managed to pass on succession to his direct, eldest son.³³⁵ That empress, ironically, proved that the Tuoba’s fear of the rise of women were not unfounded for, she was, of course, Empress Dowager Feng.

The Biography of Empress Dowager Feng

The most powerful and well-known woman of the Tuoba Northern Wei was undoubtedly Empress Dowager Feng, who ruled the dynasty at an exciting and

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Holmgren 1983b, 76.

³³⁵ Ibid, 77.

transitional period in its history, when it was rapidly expanding its territory, ambitiously patronizing the tradition of Buddhism, and aggressively pushing forwards its self-conscious program of sinification. Empress Dowager Feng is a rarity in the biographies of powerful women because she did not mother any children, yet managed to rule as regent throughout the reigns of two child emperors. She did this through recourse to the custom of “if the son is noble, the mother dies,” putting the two birth mothers of her child emperors to death. Empress Dowager Hu herself later had this custom overturned so that she could rule behind her birth son.³³⁶ Empress Dowager Feng’s power grew throughout the reign of the first of these child emperors so that by the time the second was given leadership, she was in charge of the court. She managed to gain such power over the court that she filled it with agnate members of the Feng family,³³⁷ and such power over Emperor Xiaowen that he only appointed his own empress after her death.³³⁸ While in power she proved herself a capable politician. She worked diligently to push the dynasty toward sinification, possibly because she was of the northern-assimilated Han Chinese-identified stock of the Northern Yan. Though it could be argued that sinification was her foremost project, her support of the Buddhist tradition did not lag behind. Particularly, she promoted the building of Buddhist monasteries and the Buddhist caves at Yungang.

I here offer a complete translation of her official biography from the *Book of the Wei* for this important biography is available nowhere else in English translation.³³⁹

³³⁶ For more on this custom, see chapter two, note 302.

³³⁷ Ibid, 90.

³³⁸ Ibid, 89.

³³⁹ The section on biographies of empresses in the *Book of the Wei* comes directly after the section on emperors, thus occupying a quite important position, though it must be said

The Civilized and Enlightened Empress Dowager Feng of Emperor Wencheng³⁴⁰ was from the city of Xindu in Changle.³⁴¹ Her father's name was Lang and he had served both the regions of Qin and Yong³⁴² as the official historian and the Duke of the Commandery of the Western Cities. Her mother was from the Wang clan and was from Lelang.³⁴³ The Empress was born in Chang'an and at the time of her birth there was an unusual supernatural glow. Her father, Lang, was put to death for having presided over some affairs, and then the Empress entered the palace because Shizu's³⁴⁴ *Zhaoyi* of the Left³⁴⁵ was her aunt and took over the role of the Empress's mother, raising and educating her.

When the Empress was fourteen, Emperor Gaozong³⁴⁶ was installed and selected the Empress to be a Noble Woman³⁴⁷ and after that he established her as the Empress. When Gaozong died, so the story goes, the country was in great mourning and three days after his passing, all of the emperor's clothing, utensils, and belongings were burned³⁴⁸ and all of the hundreds

that the biographies of empresses are not nearly as lengthy as the biographies of emperors. Her biography runs from pages 328 to 331.

³⁴⁰ The full name of Empress Dowager Feng is Wencheng Wenming Huanghou Fengshi 文成文明皇后馮氏.

³⁴¹ This is in the modern day prefecture of Ji 冀 in the province of Hebei 河北.

³⁴² Both the regions of Qin (秦州 Qinzhou) and Yong (雍州 Yongzhou) are two administrative regions of the Northern Wei, with Qinzhou being modern day Tianshui 天水 in Gansu and the administrative region of Northern Wei Yongzhou being located in Chang'an in Shanxi 山西 province though as one of the classical Nine Regions, this region often shifted during the dynasties.

³⁴³ Lelang was a region in the extreme northeast of China that was eventually annexed by Kugoryo, Korea, in the fourth century.

³⁴⁴ Shizu 世祖 is the temple name of Tuoba Tao 拓跋燾 or Emperor Taiwu 太武帝, who ruled from 423–452.

³⁴⁵ This rank, the previously mentioned *Zhaoyi*, was the highest rank a woman could have next to an empress, and there were two of them, the left and the right.

³⁴⁶ Gaozong 高宗 is the temple name of Tuoba Jun 拓跋濬, or Emperor Wencheng.

³⁴⁷ This rank, Noble Person or *Guiren* 貴人 was equivalent to a "lady" at court and was lower than the *Zhaoyi*.

³⁴⁸ There seems to be no other reference to specific examples of funerary fires in the *Book of the Wei*. However, one biography of a high-level advisor to the Northern Wei, Gao Yun 高允 (390–487 CE), may help us to establish whether or not this was a common practice. Gao Yun was advisor to many Northern Wei Emperors from Taiwu to Xiaowen, and having hailed from the Northern Yan, would have been familiar with Sinitic practices and hence was deeply involved in the Northern Wei's sinification program and bureaucratic procedures. Given his time at court, he would have attended Wencheng's

of his empresses, courtesans, and ladies of the court were marked with tears while they surrounded the fire. The Empress screamed out in sorrow and threw herself in the fire. She was rescued by the Left and the Right³⁴⁹ and only revived after a long time.

At this juncture in the biography it is worth stressing that Empress Dowager Feng came into the court at a low level under the care of her aunt as a result of her father's actions against the Northern Wei, and that from this low position she succeeded in becoming the wife of Emperor Wencheng (Gaozong), throwing herself on his funerary fire when he died. As we have seen, Emperor Wencheng was himself a transitional figure in the dynasty, as he was the first emperor to establish direct primogenital succession and reinstated Buddhism as the state religion after its suppression. Empress Dowager Feng was integral to both of these projects; protecting the Emperor's descendants and helping

funeral and witnessed Empress Dowager Feng's attempt at self-sacrifice. Related to this, his biography reports that: "Yun undertook the activities of regulating the collected ministers of Gaozong, and relied on the customs of old in so doing. The mourning rites of the women did not rely on ancient models and so Yuan remonstrated them, saying: "In the previous courts, there was often put forth the bright edict that it was prohibited for women to make any merriment. On the day of the funeral procession, songs and ballads, drums and dancing, sacrificial animals, and the burning of the tomb – all of these are proscribed and cut off; 允以高宗纂承平之業，而風俗仍舊，婚娶喪葬，不依古式，允乃諫曰：前朝之世，屢發明詔，禁諸婚娶不得作樂，及葬送之日歌謠、鼓舞、殺牲、燒葬，一切禁斷。” What we may assume then is that Yun took to regulating the mourning practices of imperial women as they were not in accord with those of prior Chinese dynasties and were perhaps customs of the northern steppe peoples, though the *Book of the Wei* says nothing more about this. Moreover, Kurgan tumuli as far east as modern-day Mongolia have been excavated and show the existence of fire pits inside of the tomb. Although there is evidence of Zoroastrian fire altars in the tombs of Sogdians in China from a similar time period (Lerner 2005), as far as currently reported, there seems to be no evidence of fire in Xianbei tombs.

³⁴⁹ I am assuming that these were the *Zhaoyi* of the Left and Right.

them to attain power – only to then rule behind them – and also taking great lengths to support the growth of Buddhism across the empire.

The biography continues:

When Xianzu³⁵⁰ was installed as emperor, Empress Dowager Feng became his Empress Dowager. The Senior Minister Yi Hun³⁵¹ mounted a rebellion and at that time Xianzu was only 12 and was kept hidden away. Thus Empress Dowager Feng secretly managed the government's strategy, executing Hun, and thereafter she took over the court and presided over the government. At the time when Gaozu³⁵² was born, the Empress Dowager personally took charge of his rearing and thus she returned command to the Emperor and no longer presided over the affairs of the court. But Empress Dowager Feng's actions at this time were improper; she favoured and was in love with Li Yi.³⁵³ Xianzu thereupon executed Li Yi. The Empress Dowager did not agree with this. Xianzu was then murdered, and at the time people said that it was the Empress Dowager who did it.

And it is with these last sentences that we meet with Empress Dowager Feng's indiscretion – she was in love with Li Yi. Further, in revenge for his death, she murdered Emperor Xianwen, who by that time had abdicated for his child, Emperor Xiaowen, whom Empress Dowager Feng ruled behind for the rest of her life. This incident seems to be treated by Wei Shou as a forgivable indiscretion for nothing else is said about it,

³⁵⁰ Xianzu 顯祖 is the temple name of Tuoba Hong 拓跋弘 or Emperor Xianwen, who ruled from 465–471 CE.

³⁵¹ Neither the *Book of the Wei* nor the *History of the North* retain a biography of Yi Hun 乙渾, but the later collection, *A Comprehensive Mirror of Aid in Governance* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑) records the story of Yi Hun's attempt to gain power in two places, scroll 130 (Sima 1957, 4073) and scroll 131 (Ibid., 4104).

³⁵² Being the first Tuoba to take the family name of Yuan 元 during the move toward sinification, Gaozu 高祖 is the temple name of Yuan Hong 元宏 or Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝, who ruled from 471–499 CE.

³⁵³ Li Yi 李弈 does not have a biography in the *Book of the Wei* and not much else is known about him.

perhaps due to the fact that Wei Shou did not want to shame the Feng clan who were powerful throughout the entirety of the Northern Wei. The biography continues:

In the first year of the Chengming Era³⁵⁴ (476 CE), the Empress Dowager was again elevated to the position of taking over the court and presiding over the government. The nature of the Empress Dowager was both wise and cunning and when she entered the palace of the concubines her learning was coarse but she consulted the books. Ultimately, she ascended to her venerable rank, scrutinizing and settling all of the myriad affairs.

Gaozu therefore made an edict, saying: “In my youth, I inherited this majestic succession with nothing at all at my disposal. I looked up to and relied on the kindness and understanding [of the Empress Dowager] in order to tie up the area of the four seas in tranquility. I desire to repay her virtue, and as proof of her complete enlightenment,³⁵⁵ all of the birds of prey and other injurious sorts of animals should be released to the mountains and forests, and we should use this spot to start building a numinous pagoda for the Empress Dowager.” Thereupon, they ceased with the officers and the teachers of hawks and used the area for the Buddhist Monastery of Repaying Virtue.³⁵⁶

This section of the biography makes clear two more important points: 1) that Emperor Xiaowen is remembered to have officially deferred to Empress Dowager Feng as she was the one who brought tranquility to the four seas; and 2) in order to venerate her wise council, Emperor Xiaowen made an edict full of Buddhist resonance – the release of captured birds of prey to the mountains³⁵⁷ and the building of a pagoda.

³⁵⁴ This reign, the *Chengming* 承明, was a brief reign in 476 CE.

³⁵⁵ The term used here, *zhengjue* 正覺, is the term used in Chinese translations of Buddhist texts to represent the highest attainment of Buddhist awakening. Furthermore, the edict to release all birds of prey to a natural space with a pagoda is a clear reference to the Empress Dowager’s Buddhist leanings.

³⁵⁶ *Baode fosi* 報德佛寺.

³⁵⁷ In her study of the importance of releasing-life societies in the Ming 明 (1368–1644 CE), Joanna Smith provides an overview of the practice in Chinese history, linking the earliest reference of the practice to the fifth-century *Brahma’s Net Sūtra* (*Fanwangjing* 梵網經) and then further linking the concept with Emperor Wu of the Liang’s 梁武帝

The Empress Dowager and Gaozu went for a tour of the area of Mt. Fang from where they could look over the rivers and villages. She thereupon made a notice about her death, telling their vassals that: “Shun was buried among the lush paulownia trees and his two courtesans did not follow him. Why must we have distant ancestral shrines in the mountain tombs and consider this to be noble? For myself, after 100 years my spirit will still be at peace right here.” Gaozu thereupon instructed the ministers to build the tomb of longevity³⁵⁸ on Mt. Fang and also to establish the Forever Steadfast³⁵⁹ Hermitage there, to be used as the ancestral shrine after his death. They started to build it on the fifth year of the reign of Great Peace³⁶⁰ (481) and it was finished eight years later and they then carved and erected an engraved stone stele eulogizing the virtues of the Empress Dowager. For the fortune of Gaozu’s life to come, the Empress Dowager commissioned the *Songs of Powerful Protection*³⁶¹ in more than 300 stanzas, and the *August Admonitions*³⁶² in 18 chapters. Although these texts were numerous, they no longer remain today.

The Empress Dowager erected the Shrine of the King Who Spreads Civilization³⁶³ in Chang’an and also erected the Pagoda of Contemplation and Repose³⁶⁴ in Longcheng³⁶⁵ and in both of them she erected engraved stelae. The Empress Dowager also ordered that, internally, those sons of the five members of the ancestral shine,³⁶⁶ and externally, the six

(502–549 CE) offering of noodles instead of meat to his parents. She then traces a long trajectory of the practice through to the Ming (1999, 51–52). However, our example here in the Northern Wei would be the earliest historical example of an emperor releasing life, and would place it as contemporaneous with the *Brahma’s Net Sūtra*, though that text is itself hard to date given its status as an apocrypha.

³⁵⁸ *Shouling* 壽陵 is a poetic but typical reference to a tomb.

³⁵⁹ *Yonggu* 永固 is the name of both the hermitage and the tomb itself. Today, only the tomb remains.

³⁶⁰ This reign, the *Taihe* 太和, was a long and prosperous reign from 477–499 which saw the move of the Northern Wei capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang.

³⁶¹ *Quanjiege* 勸戒歌.

³⁶² *Huanggao* 皇詔.

³⁶³ *Wenxuanwang Miao* 文宣王廟.

³⁶⁴ *Siyan futu* 思燕佛圖.

³⁶⁵ *Longcheng* 龍城 was the name for a Xiongnu city in Mongolia also called E’erhun 鄂爾渾.

³⁶⁶ These five people would have been Daowudi, Mingyuandi, Taiwudi, Wenchengdi, and Xianwendi.

generations' relatives who grieve and mourn,³⁶⁷ would all receive tax exemptions.

In the above section, Empress Dowager Feng objects to having the royal tombs of Northern Wei rulers located in far-off locales and insists on creating a mausoleum at Mt. Fang, which is in the proximity of modern-day Datong. According to Victor Mair, the early emperors of the Northern Wei were buried at the Jinling 金陵 mausoleum far to the north in the indigenous lands of the Xianbei, close to modern-day Hohhot and which “significantly lay *outside* of the Great Wall.”³⁶⁸ Thus, in line with the Empress Dowager's sinification plans, she moved the imperial burial site close to the center of power, Datong, and built a mausoleum complex for herself and Emperor Xiaoming. Although badly damaged, the two burial mounds still stand on Mt. Fang (see Fig. 5) and are reminiscent of the later and much more extravagant mausoleum at Qiangling 乾陵 which enshrines the joint tomb of Empress Wu and Gaozong and is just outside of modern day Xi'an, or the Tang capital of Chang'an.

Although the tomb was created for him, Emperor Xiaoming was never interred in his pre-selected burial place on Mt. Fang. To this day his mausoleum remains empty. After moving the capital to Luoyang, Emperor Xiaoming never returned to his burial site in the area of the old capital where Empress Dowager Feng has been laid to rest. Jennifer Holmgren characterizes Xiaowen's move to Luoyang and the death of Empress Dowager Feng as a turning point in his personality, allowing him finally to rule as emperor.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁷ These should be the six generations of ancestors of the Empress Dowager.

³⁶⁸ Mair 1992, 348.

³⁶⁹ Holmgren 1983a, 92.

Furthermore, the Empress Dowager's refusal to be buried in the traditional burial place of the Tuoba is also a rejection of traditional Chinese notions of the "three followings" which, as an advocate of sinification she certainly knew about. By creating her own tomb apart from that of her husband, she accomplished a unique feat – the creation of an independent tomb for a woman. This is certainly a notable feature of her policies, and not even something that Empress Wu was able to do. After the discussion of her tomb, the biography then goes on to describe the empress's character:

By nature, the Empress Dowager was simple and frugal; she did not indulge in flowery ornamentation and she herself wore only simple, plain silks. When it came to food presented by the cooks, in these cases she made the regulation that plates could only be of one foot in size and she directed that the preparation of food with a luxurious flavour be lessened, and therefore it was reduced by 80 percent. One time when the Empress Dowager became ill, she went to a small hermitage and was served with only *lǚ*.³⁷⁰ At dusk the cook brought her this porridge and she found a small lizard inside but she lifted it out with her spoon. Gaozu went to her side to aid her. He was enraged and wanted to penalize the servant. Empress Dowager Feng just smiled and calmed him.

Since the Empress Dowager personally held court and dictated the government, Gaozu, who was weak by nature, held her in great esteem and deferred to her, not desiring to join in on the governmental decisions. All matters, whether big or small, he assigned to the Empress Dowager. The Empress Dowager was extremely intelligent and strategic, and also suspicious and heartless, and thus was able to manage major affairs such as bestowing life and death sentences. She was able to decide on these matters impartially, all without consulting Gaozu. In such a way, her authority was commensurate with her merits and she terrified both the inner and outer circles. Moreover, she personally cultivated Qi Daode, Wang Yu, Zhang You, Fu Chengzu and others from their humble status as eunuchs, installing them as dukes and royals within one year.

³⁷⁰ *Lǚ* 藟 or *lǚru* 藟茹 is a medicinal herb related to the chrysanthemum family.

Again we see that Emperor Xiaoming officially deferred to her on all political matters because she was not only wise and cunning, but also frugal and disciplined. I read this emphasis on her frugal nature and her journeying to a hermitage in illness as a possible comment on her Buddhist faith.³⁷¹

Wang Rui³⁷² frequented her bedroom and for many years acted as her most trusted advisor and was bestowed with gifts of money and cloth to the sum of 1,000,000,000,000,000. He was also awarded a gold book and an iron token with the edict that he not be put to death. As for Li Chong,³⁷³ although he was capable to accomplish his duties, he had also seen the behind-the-curtains affection of the Empress Dowager and Wang Rui, and so for this reason she secretly increased his gifts and awards, the number of which cannot be calculated. By nature, the Empress was commanding and intelligent, and although she briefly engaged in this affection, she also did not continue on with it.

In the above we see that although she was known for frugality and restraint, she also lavished gifts and favours on her male lovers. Unfortunately for her regular staff, although she cared for them, this care was of a different calibre, for:

³⁷¹ Although the available tomb inscriptions of *bhikṣuṇīs* will discuss in the next chapter all make a point of the frugality of the women in question, this may not be simply a Buddhist trope. Taking again the biography of the mother of Mencius, her frugal nature was a defining feature of her personality and was a sign of her virtue. In contrast, Empress Dowager Hu, as we will see, is not said to be frugal and is, of course, not well depicted. What I think we see in the biographies of Buddhist women at the time, including this of Empress Dowager Feng, is the conflation of the ideal of frugality for women (over and against the fineries and indulgences of court life) united with the ideal of Buddhist renunciation, and I think we can see this in the mention that these women journeyed to simple hermitages at times in their lives, thus choosing to use their independence from “three followings” to escape courtly life and indulgence.

³⁷² The story of Wang Rui 王叡 and his family’s rise to prominence at court due to his closeness with the Empress Dowager is recounted in his official biography in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009, 1988-1990).

³⁷³ Li Chong’s official biography in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009, 1179–1186) is a lengthy recounting of his roles at court and those of his family members, particularly under the patronage of the Empress, but it does not mention the story of Empress Dowager Feng and Wang Rui, though Wang Rui’s biography mentions Li Chong.

If her attendants made even a small mistake she would beat and whip them at most more than 100 times, at least several 10s of times; however, by nature she did not harbour resentment and so she would inquire if the servant's behaviour still resembled its earlier self, and if it had changed she would add to their wealth and nobility. For this reason, people cherished her and desired her advantage, and until their deaths they never thought of withdrawing from her service.

The Empress Dowager and Gaozu were delighted by the Pool of the Numinous Spring³⁷⁴ and they entertained the ministers of all the border territories there, including all the leaders and chieftains, each one of them being invited to come for entertainment. Gaozu bestowed all the chieftains and the many ministers with wishes of longevity and the Empress Dowager delighted in singing for them all, and the Emperor would join in on the singing as well. As part of this they would command each of the ministers to speak their notices, and altogether there would then be 90 persons participating in the singing.

On the issue of the etiquette of these foreign tribes, the Empress Dowager looked toward Yuan Pi,³⁷⁵ You Minggen,³⁷⁶ and others and she bestowed on them gold banners, chariots, and horses. She always praised the beauty of Rui³⁷⁷ and others, and she always drew the support of Pi and others to join her. She presented herself as selfless. However, if anybody made a mistake, she would be scared of people's talking, and if she had even the slightest suspicion about it she would see to the execution of the people in question.

The above statements speak to both the complexities of the Northern Wei's multi-ethnic, clan-based rule, and the talent that the Empress had in regulating inter-clan troubles while

³⁷⁴ During the Northern Wei both the Pool and the Palace of the Numinous Spring were built on Mt. Fang, where the tomb of Empress Dowager Feng is today.

³⁷⁵ I cannot verify who this is. The name of the second son of Emperor Taizongming and the brother of Emperor Taiwu was Tuoba Pi, which would have become Yuan Pi with the name changes, but that he is said to have died in 444 and thus would not have been one of Empress Dowager Feng's associates.

³⁷⁶ You Minggen was a Murong and an eminent official at court with strong family ties to the Northern Yan state that lasted from 409–430CE, after which it was taken by the Northern Wei. His biography in the *Book of the Wei* runs from pages 1213 to 1215 (Wei 2009).

³⁷⁷ Likely this is her aforementioned lover, Wang Rui.

keeping the leadership of the dynasty under her strict control. Following this section, the biography moves on to details about her death:

When the Empress Dowager passed away, Gaozu had no idea what to do with his life and so he followed the direction of Li Xin³⁷⁸ and Li Hui³⁷⁹ who were jealous and hateful and completely exterminated more than 10 families, in total killing more than 100 people. These leaders were extremely coercive and reckless and all under heaven resented them.

In the 14th year of the reign of Great Peace (490 CE) Empress Dowager Feng died in the Hall of Great Peace³⁸⁰ and at this time she was 49 years old. On that day, all the male pheasants were gathered together in the Hall of Great Splendour.³⁸¹ Gaozu did not take any drink for five days as he was destroyed by his longing and was undertaking rituals. Her posthumous name was pronounced as the Great and August Empress Dowager of Civilization and Understanding³⁸² and her tomb was placed at the Forever Steadfast Tomb.³⁸³ On that day, Gaozu returned to and made his preparations in the Hall of the Mirror of Mystery³⁸⁴ and made an edict, saying:

“If I follow the frugality that the venerable one indicated, then I cannot express the intensity of my suffering, yet if I venerate and cherish the appropriate rituals, relying on austerity and frugality, then I am respectful of the virtue of her teachings. I will abide by and yield to her thinking and her nature, but will double the emotions that I feel in her passing.

³⁷⁸ As for Li Xin 李訢, his family had distant Murong descent and he had served the Northern Wei court since the time of Taiwu. His biography states that he was fond of Emperor Xianwen, whom Empress Dowager Feng apparently murdered, and it also records tensions between him and Empress Dowager Feng, with the latter lowering his rank after the death of Emperor Xianwen. His biography runs from page 1039-1043 in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009).

³⁷⁹ Li Hui's biography records tensions between the Li family and Empress Dowager Feng, stating clearly that he was the enemy of the Empress, and runs from pages 1824 to 1826 in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009).

³⁸⁰ *Taihe dian* 太和殿.

³⁸¹ *Taihua dian* 太華殿.

³⁸² *Wenming Taihuang Taihou* 文明太皇太后.

³⁸³ *Yongguling* 永固陵 is the name of the Empresses Dowager's tomb on Mt. Fang.

³⁸⁴ *Jianxuan dian* 鑑玄殿.

“In accord with the regulations for mountain tombs, she made these stipulations: the measurement on the inside should be one *zhang*³⁸⁵ and according to regulations the inside should be a covered pit; however, the heart of this dutiful son does not receive complete consolation from this, and so the chamber shall be two *zhang* and the mound itself should not exceed 30 paces. Now, in order for all the 10,000 beings in this world to see and pay their respects to the mountain tomb, it should be sixty paces in width. Violating and going against the Empress Dowager’s noble indications is for the purpose of bringing an end to my suffering. As for the size of the concealed chamber, the inner and outer coffins should be concise and solid and should not be furnished with brilliant utensils. White screens, un-patterned cushions, and earthenware objects, all of these are further not allowed. This is all in accord with her prior indications and aligns with her plans and commands and will be respected as the last vestiges of her affairs.

“Moreover, having both followed her commands and having departed from them, I have neither been able to completely adhere to them nor have I fully dealt with this strange situation. As for the management of the wooden palace,³⁸⁶ inside the Temple of Mysteries³⁸⁷, sagacity and numinosity should be relied on, and this should be singularly elevated and adhered to, so that we can admire her clear and humble virtue. Anything beyond these matters should not be followed in undertaking to bring closure to the emotions of pain and longing.

“This proclamation should be expressed both near and far and should be made known to the groups of officials, at best so that they will understand her humility and the goodness of her teachings, at worst so that they are informed of the error of departing from her commands.”

The above edict by Emperor Xiaowen is fascinating for it shows that, due to her frugality, the Empress departed from the traditionally lavish burials set out in the Chinese classics, and that this was such a contentious issue that Xiaowen himself considered going against her wishes in his implementation of her wishes. Ultimately, he agreed to follow her designs, but also deemed it necessary to issue an edict stipulating why he did

³⁸⁵ One *zhang* 丈 is approximately 3 meters.

³⁸⁶ Likely a reference to her inner coffin.

³⁸⁷ Another name for the tomb.

so. His actions possibly speak to a sentiment at the Northern Wei court that Buddhist sensibilities were more important than standard rituals, a trope that we see in the decree to forbid the sacrifice of animals in state ritual. Akin to Chinese state rituals, early Tuoba rites of worship were on a massive scale and involved the sacrifice of large numbers of many types of animals. And yet, in a move away from Chinese traditional rituals and toward Buddhism, in 472 CE the then child Emperor Xiaowen, under the control of the Empress Dowager, made an edict saying: “the command to be administered is that within the suburban altars, worship of heaven, worship in the ancestral temples, and worship of the god of the soil must not use sacrificial animals.”³⁸⁸ This command was made because of the emperor’s apparent compassion for the plight of animals, numbered to be 75,500 for one ritual alone, and his desire to create a more humane placation of the gods, one that smacks of Buddhism.³⁸⁹

The description of her funeral continues:

At that point, those in attendance began to cry but Emperor Xiaowen brought an end to this type of mourning and the ministers close to him followed him in doing so. The three offices³⁹⁰ and the lesser foreign ministers were all able to abate this mourning, overcoming it and bringing an end to it. Those of the seventh grade³⁹¹ and under brought an end to it and wiped it away, all moving on to happiness. Having established these funerary rites in the Hall of Great Peace, the dukes, eminent officials, and all under them began to have understanding for these affairs. Gaozu was

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ The three offices refer to the three of the administrative divisions of the Chinese court responsible for the smooth running of the imperial grounds, food, etc. The leaders of these Three Offices held the highest positions at court.

³⁹¹ The various grades of the Northern Wei government are detailed in the “Notices on Ritual” chapter of the *Book of the Wei*.

weakened and emaciated as he had been abstaining from meat and alcohol and he didn't go into the royal rooms for three years.³⁹²

In the times immediately following her death, Gaozu was filial to the Empress Dowager, and thereupon undertook the building of his own longevity palace³⁹³ one *li*³⁹⁴ to the northeast of Forever Steadfast Tomb from where it was his purpose to look over and observe the tomb. Eventually, he migrated to Luoyang, and thereupon he himself was actually buried on the west bank of the Chan River³⁹⁵ in a place of mountains and gardens. Still today his empty palace exists on Mt. Fang and it is called the "Temple of 10,000 years."³⁹⁶

As the biography makes clear in many places, Empress Dowager Feng reached the highest levels of political power, holding court on her own and ruling as regent and as Empress Dowager behind two child emperors. This unique situation happened because Empress Dowager Feng murdered the first of these child emperors once he had come of age and took power from her, and she simultaneously personally cared for that emperor's eldest child, putting the child's own mother to death by use of the "If the son is noble, the mother dies" policy,³⁹⁷ so that he was reared to be dependent on her and completely deferred to her on all political matters while being a child emperor and further when he became regent himself. During her reign, the Northern Wei court adopted the Chinese

³⁹² The three-years mourning is a common pattern of Chinese mourning handed down from Confucian times and was technically only 25-months, hence extending into but not completing the third year. For a discussion of the significance of this three-year period of abstention and various opinions on it, see: Waley 1939, 126ff.

³⁹³ This means that he built his own tomb just beside the Empress Dowager's, and it still stands there today.

³⁹⁴ A *li* is a Chinese unit of measure, approximately 1/5 or 1/3 of a mile.

³⁹⁵ The Chan River 瀍河 is a small tributary of the Luo River 洛河; Luoyang is situated just north of the Luo River.

³⁹⁶ See: Fig. 1. The photo shows the two tombs side by side, but evidently the one of Xiaowendi is empty.

³⁹⁷ This will be discussed in much greater detail below.

language, Chinese dress, and employed Han Chinese staff at court while expanding their geographical territory to its heights, including rebuilding the capital in a stronghold of Han culture, Luoyang, just after her death. She reigned over the court by herself, took lovers, bribed members of the court, and handpicked other members of the court that would be loyal to her for promotion. She was politically aggressive, masterminding the deaths of a child emperor and the mothers of two others so that she would be able to stay in power for as long as possible, and she did this while making a show of her filiality – throwing herself on her husband’s funerary fire.

Figure 6. Remains of the tombs of Empress Dowager Feng (background) and Emperor Xiaowen (foreground). Photo is author’s own.



The Buddhism of Empress Dowager Feng

Despite the political machinations described in her biography, the Empress is also described in what is Buddhist language; from her being depicted as “fully enlightened” to the edicts of releasing life and pagoda building, the Empress is immortalized in her biography as retaining a connection to Buddhist ideals and practices. Furthermore, the

table below (Figure 7) shows the edicts in both support of and control of the Buddhist institution that were issued by the government of Empress Dowager Feng. From them one can clearly see that the Empress Dowager both restricted and promoted the advance of Buddhist buildings and centers of worship by positioning herself and the child Emperor Xiaowen as the “father and mother of the people.” Accordingly, the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism,” states that Empress Dowager Feng’s reign saw such a Buddhist building frenzy that between 454 and 476 CE the building of monasteries had reached such an extent that within the capital there were about 100 monasteries with 2000 monastic residents, and within the empire there were 6,478 monasteries and 77,258 monastics.³⁹⁸

As to her personal patronage of the Buddhist institution, we know that the reign of Empress Dowager Feng saw the initial and continued building of Yungang. Though first suggested by the Chief of the Śramaṇas, Tanyao, the initial building of the site was first undertaken either under the direction of Wencheng just before his death or by his immediate successor, Xuanwu – in either case the Empress Dowager would have been politically active at the time. Eugene Wang argues that after the initial building of the first five imperial shrines, the later stage of building at Yungang includes further development – the construction of twin caves. He claims that of the chapels that were constructed during the Empress’s reign behind Emperor Xiaowen, eight out of 13 of them feature twin niches with buddha images, a stylistic feature that he associates with the

³⁹⁸ For a breakdown of the edicts in support of Buddhism that were issued during the Northern Wei, see the table below.

reign of the Twin Sages, Empress Dowager Feng and Emperor Xiaowen. According to Wang, this image is linked to the *Lotus Sūtra*’s depiction of the two buddhas side-by-side³⁹⁹ wherein Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna meet in a jeweled stupa.⁴⁰⁰ Furthermore, this twin-buddha plan resurfaces at both Longmen and Dunhuang in the Tang, perhaps under the auspices of Empress Wu. At Longmen, the image of the twin Sages/Buddhas/rulers is found in a set of twin caves now referred to as the “Paired Grottoes.” Although the question of the sponsorship of these caves is still debated, Amy McNair argues that they were sponsored by Li Xian, Prince of Zhou,⁴⁰¹ on behalf of his parents, Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu, and hence that they represent the Buddhist iconography of the three ages and are thus not connected to the rule by the Twin Sages. However, Wang suggests that the motif of twin-Buddhas and Twin Sages indeed received a revival in the paintings at Dunhuang during the reign of Empress Wu. He states that:

As Empress Wu Zetian forcefully put herself on the political map, her contemporaries began to refer to the imperial rule as that of the Twin Sages, echoing the identical setup of Empress Dowager Feng and Emperor Xiaowen in the Northern Wei. It is by no means coincidence that images of twin Buddhas were comparatively rare at Dunhuang until the final decades of the seventh century, when they suddenly became popular.⁴⁰²

We will return to this topic of the connection between buddhahood and female leadership below. For now, however, it is worth noting that Empress Dowager Feng’s Buddhist identity – seen in her biography and envisioned in the two-Buddha paradigm – was not forgotten in later Chinese history, for Empress Wu may have identified herself in

³⁹⁹ Watson 1993, 170 ff.

⁴⁰⁰ Wang 2005, 6–10.

⁴⁰¹ McNair 2007, 126.

⁴⁰² Wang 2005, 141.

the same way. Yet, the impact of Empress Dowager Feng lived on in other ways as well – through the policies and edicts that she put forth in support of the tradition of Buddhism when she was ruling the Northern Wei. Those policies, as well as all other policies and edicts issued in the Northern Wei, are enumerated in the table below.

Figure 7. Edicts and actions in public support of Buddhism issued by the Northern Wei, as taken from the “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism.”

Issuer	Year	Edict or directive	Empress Dowager
Emperor Daowu	389–409	During battle Emperor Daowu forbade his soldiers to pillage Buddhist monasteries.	
Emperor Daowu	398	Edict requiring that within the capital all the officers should erect shrines and dwellings for Buddhist <i>bhikṣus</i> .	
Emperor Mingyuan	409–423	The emperor constructed stūpas and images and directed <i>śramaṇas</i> to teach people.	
Emperor Taiwu	424–451	The emperor studied <i>śāstras</i> with eminent <i>bhikṣus</i> and venerated the <i>bhikṣu</i> Huishi after his display of miracles.	
Emperor Taiwu	428–431	The emperor attempted to have the translator and ritualist Dharmakṣema delivered from the Northern Liang to his court. Eventually the Northern Liang fell to Northern Wei forces and the emperor took all of their Buddhist images and regalia, but Dharmakṣema had been killed.	Empress Dowager Du 明元密皇后杜氏, appointed the Empress Dowager of Taiwu, who was 15 when he ascended the throne.
Emperor Taiwu	Post 445	Edict issued forbidding private residents to keep <i>śramaṇas</i> in their households and instead forcing them to send said <i>śramaṇas</i> to the court. Failure to adhere to this edict was punishable by death.	As Taiwu aged and came into his own power he turned from Buddhism to follow the Daoist teachings of Kou Qianzhi and eventually persecuted Buddhism after the Gaiwu Rebellion.
Emperor Wencheng	452	Issued a lengthy edict reinstating Buddhism as the court religion following its severe persecution under Emperor Taiwu.	In 455, he promoted Empress Dowager Feng to a courtesan and in 456 he made her his Empress.

Emperor Wencheng	460?	Agreed to two requests from Tanyao: 1) all households with extra grain become " <i>saṃgha</i> households" which must give the grain to the monastery to be held in trust in case of famine, 2) all official slaves and criminals be given to the monastery as corvée labour.	Empress Dowager Feng was then Empress.
Emperor Wencheng	461–467?	Order to build images of the last five emperors, cast in metal in the likeness of Śākyamuni, all of this done with the aid of the monk Tanyao who was appointed the Chief of the <i>Śramaṇas</i> .	Empress Dowager Feng was then Empress.
Emperor Xianwen	465	Names his first reign <i>Tianan</i> 天安 after the name of the home monastery of a supernatural monk who had visited the court a few years previous.	Empress Dowager Feng was regent as Empress Dowager; Emperor Xianwen was eleven years old at the time.
Emperor Xianwen	465	Finished work on the first strata of Yungang, the imperially sponsored five caves representing the 5 past Northern Wei Emperors as Buddhas that were overseen by the monk Tanyao.	This work began under Emperor Wencheng and Empress Dowager Feng in the early 460s.
Emperor Xianwen	465–471	Throughout his short reign there were intensive building projects undertaken, including the then biggest stūpa and Buddha image and many monasteries all over the country.	Empress Dowager Feng held power while Xianwen ruled. Although she handed power to him when he turned thirteen, he soon abdicated for his four year-old-son, whom Empress Dowager Feng personally raised and ruled behind.
Emperor Xiaowen	472	Edict stating that monks must reside in monasteries and if they are roaming in order to convert people then they must have a letter from their <i>weina</i> .	Empress Dowager Feng; Emperor Xiaowen was five years old at the time.

Emperor Xiaowen	472	Edict stating that the common people are not... to bankrupt themselves for the cause of gaining merit through the building of images, stupas, monasteries, etc.	Empress Dowager Feng; Emperor Xiaowen was five years old at the time.
Emperor Xiaowen	472	Edict stating that a Buddha image that had miraculously changed colour should be paraded around the land so that court and commoners alike may have a chance to see it.	Empress Dowager Feng; Emperor Xiaowen was five years old at the time.
Emperor Xiaowen	474	Edict forbidding birds of prey to be kept and used for hunting. This was done because his then abdicated father, Xianwendi, was moved to grief by the sight of hunting falcons.	Empress Dowager Feng; Emperor Xiaowen was seven years old at the time.
Emperor Xiaowen	476	Gave a sermon and personally conducted the hair-cutting ceremony to ordain new monastics. This was done at the first of the two Eternal Peace Temples, which was originally built under Xianwendi in Datong but rebuilt by Empress Dowager Hu in Luoyang. During this same month the emperor also fasted, pardoned criminals, and commanded that a large-scale assembly of <i>bhikṣus</i> be convened at the Eternal Peace Monastery for the purpose of discussing the nature of the Buddha.	Empress Dowager Feng; Emperor Xiaowen was nine years old at the time.
Emperor Xianwen and Emperor Xiaowen	454–476	The building of monasteries had reached such an extent that within the capital there were about 100 monasteries with 2000 monastics, and within the empire there were 6478 monasteries and 77258 monastics.	Given such in the <i>Book of the Wei</i> , this odd delineation of time covers from the birth of Xianwendi until the time when Xiaowendi was emerging in public as a nine-year-old supporter of Buddhism; hence this covers the time of Empress Dowager Feng's two reigns.

Emperor Xiaowen	486	Edict forbidding false renunciants to escape paying taxes and requiring that all monastics be registered to a monastery and also authorizing the <i>weinas</i> to defrock monastics of poor conduct.	Empress Dowager Feng still ruling the court. She dies in 490 and Xiaowen moves the capital to Luoyang in 494 CE.
Emperor Xiaowen	492	Edict restricting the number of ordinands to: 100 for large provinces, fifty for middle-size provinces, and twenty for small provinces.	Empress Dowager Feng now passed away.
Emperor Xiaowen	493	Edict saying that there should be a code for the monastery with forty-seven sections.	Same as above.
Emperor Xiaowen	495	He visited the White Horse Temple in Luoyang to study with a monk there, and when the emperor died the monk was in the greatest grief.	Same as above.
Emperor Xiaowen	500–503	Commissioned two caves to be built in honour of him and his wife, Empress Wenchao 文昭.	Same as above.
Emperor Xuanwu	508	Edict saying that for crimes of murder, a monk would be dealt with by the civil court, but for all other matters their crimes could be dealt with by the <i>weina</i> .	No empress dowager, but Empress Dowager Hu was his courtesan.
Emperor Xuanwu	509	A decree was issued in favour of a report that recommended that monastics who do not know the <i>vinaya</i> shall be returned to lay life, that monks' possessions must be limited to that allowed by the <i>vinaya</i> , that they may not lend out money with interest, that mourning rites for renunciants be limited to three days or seven days depending on one's proximity to one's parents, that renunciants without a monastery should be defrocked, that one can only build a monastery if there are fifty or more monastics in need of it, that the laity are not allowed to follow	Same as above.

		the <i>vinaya</i> , and that foreign monastics be permitted to stay only if they know the <i>vinaya</i> and conduct themselves well.	
Emperor Xuanwu	506–510	Various attempts to limit the building of monasteries to the Eternal Peace Monastery within the city walls and one nunnery just outside the city walls. These attempts clearly failed as <i>Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang</i> records many monasteries both inside and outside the city walls.	Same as above.
Emperor Xuanwu	511	Power taken from the <i>weinas</i> given to the provincial governors to control the <i>saṃgha</i> 's grain because of reports that monasteries were lending on interest and because the institution had become a burden to the people.	Same as above.
Emperor Xuanwu	483–515	Gave annual lectures on Buddhist doctrine to an assembly of eminent monks. During his reign the number of monks and nuns in the country had increased to 13,727.	Same as above.
Empress Dowager Hu (issued in her own name)	517	Made a number of edicts requiring that the monastic candidates be first sent to the capital for choosing by the Head <i>weina</i> , or <i>Tongweina</i> 統維那; large provinces should send 300 candidates, medium ones should send 200 and small ones should send 100. If suitable candidates are not found by the <i>weina</i> then the provinces will not have their allowed quotas of 100, fifty, and twenty respectively. She also decreed that slaves could no longer be ordained, that members of the imperial family could no	Empress Dowager Hu; Emperor Xiaoming was then regent, but was seven years old at the time.

		longer request that slaves be ordained, or that rogue monastics could not ordain slaves of their own volition (punishable by banishment), that the children of slaves that are raised in the monastery could no longer be ordained, and that private ordinations would result in banishments or servitude for all parties involved.	
Emperor Xiaoming	516–517	Rebuilt the imperial monastery, the Eternal Peace Monastery, in Luoyang and ascended its stupa with Empress Dowager Hu when it was completed.	Empress Dowager Hu; Emperor Xiaoming was six or seven years old at the time.
Emperor Xiaoming	518	Imperial order was given to send two <i>bhikṣus</i> to the western countries to retrieve sūtras and vinayas. They returned in 522 with many sūtras and <i>śāstras</i> .	Empress Dowager Hu; Emperor Xiaowen was eight years old at the time.
Emperor Xiaoming	519	Decree once again trying to delimit the building of monasteries, making it so that current monasteries of less than fifty residents be amalgamated into larger ones and also the building of new monasteries first be proposed in writing to the court for approval.	Empress Dowager Hu; Emperor Xiaoming was nine years old at the time.

The Biography of Empress Dowager Hu

Although the time of Empress Dowager Feng was one of rigorous building projects in support of the Buddhist tradition, her reign contributed to a situation in which Buddhism was flourishing across the dynasty's territory on such a large scale that the subsequent rulers of the dynasty felt an increased need to police it. During this latter time, another important Empress Dowager and patroness of Buddhism, Empress Dowager Hu, ruled the Northern Wei after it had been resettled in Luoyang, and one can see many of her directives for the regulation of Buddhism in the above table.⁴⁰³ As we will see below, like Empress Dowager Feng before her, Empress Dowager Hu ruled the dynasty in her own name, took lovers, murdered her kin, and was an avid Buddhist; however, unlike Empress Dowager Feng, she referred to herself with the royal "we," issued her own edicts, attempted to place a female child on the throne, and contributed to the collapse of the Northern Wei. As such, her biography does not read in such glowing terms as Feng's – instead she is depicted as morally corrupt and somewhat incapable. Jennifer Holmgren has translated this important biography from the *Book of the Wei* and the discussion below relies on her translation.

Though the biography is generally unflattering, it does begin by telling us that when Empress Dowager Hu was born there was a strange light in the sky, just as in the case of Empress Dowager Feng. Her father inquired about this omen and was told that, "This virtuous girl represents the greatest nobility; she will be the mother of Heaven and

⁴⁰³ Empress Dowager Hu's full name is The Numinous Empress of Emperor Xuanwu, or *Xuanwuling Huanghou* 宣武靈皇后.

Earth and will give birth to the Lord of Heaven and Earth,” and upon hearing these words her aunt became a nun.⁴⁰⁴ As she grew, her miraculous nature caught the eye of the emperor and she was made a courtesan to Emperor Xuanwu, eventually bearing his child. According to her biography in the *Book of the Wei*,⁴⁰⁵ she spoke against the previously discussed “If the Son is Noble, the Mother Dies” policy and was spared death upon the ascension of her son to the throne, being given an imperial title instead. As a result, she was able to live alongside, and rule behind, her son, Emperor Xiaoming. In this position she ruled in her own name, even personally undertaking the Southern Sacrifices in 515 CE against the will of her advisors.⁴⁰⁶ And further in this vein, when her son the Emperor came of age and posed a challenge to her, she is said to have had a hand in his death.

While in power behind her son she ruled absolutely. The biography says:

When Suzong 肅宗 (Emperor Xiaoming) came to the throne, he honoured the Empress as Huang Taifei 皇太妃. Later he made her Huang Taihou 皇太后. She held court and administered the affairs of the state but was still called “Your highness” and issued “instructions.” Later these instructions were termed “edicts” and the officials in memorials referred to her as “Your Majesty” while she referred to herself as “We.”⁴⁰⁷

After she was implicated in the death of her own son, Emperor Xiaoming, she attempted to place a girl child on the throne, but seems to have changed her mind on this plan and subsequently changed the heir apparent to a three-year old boy child after only a

⁴⁰⁴ Wei 2009, 337.

⁴⁰⁵ All of the following biographical details on the life of Empress Dowager Hu are taken from her biography in the *Book of the Wei*. (Wei 2009, 337–340).

⁴⁰⁶ Holmgren 1978, 162.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid.

few days.⁴⁰⁸ This child, Emperor Youzhu, was eventually imprisoned by Erzhu Rong and then drowned in a river alongside the Empress Dowager in 528 CE. Because of clashes between elite families of differing ethnicities near the end of the dynasty⁴⁰⁹ – many of whom, like Erzhu Rong, held eminent positions – her court weakened and began to crumble, thus providing an opportunity for Erzhu Rong himself to stage a coup against the ruling house, resulting in him executing both Empress Dowager Hu and the child she had placed in the throne after Emperor Xiaoming. The Northern Wei collapsed shortly after this, in 534 CE, and the remainder of the dynasty was ruled over by a number of short-lived emperors, supported by either the Erzhu clan or the Gao clan,⁴¹⁰ all of whom were evidently poisoned.

Because of her position as leader over a court that was in serious decline, Empress Dowager Hu's biography reads as a story of her fall from grace, detailing her auspicious origins and initial success as an Empress Dowager and eventually falling into a long account of her murder of her own son, her turbulent affairs with court officials, and her inevitable conquest by Erzhu Rong. Unlike Feng's, Hu's biography does not contain the mournful words of the emperor, and no edicts are made upon her death nor are there any indications made for public mourning. On the contrary, according to Holmgren's translations, the Empress Dowager was "licentious and unrestrained and the Empire hated her."⁴¹¹ Holmgren, who has worked extensively on the latter half of the Northern Wei,

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid, 168.

⁴¹⁰ For an important study of the political might of the Gao clan at the close of the Northern Wei, see: Holmgren 1982b.

⁴¹¹ Holmgren 1978, 165.

argues that this characterization of the Empress Dowager may be in part due to the fact that Wei Shou was caught in a balancing act when writing Empress Dowager Hu's biography in the *Book of the Wei* – on the one hand, pandering to the enemies of the Hu clan, the Gao clan, for whom he was employed under the Northern Qi and who had long attempted to overthrow the Empress Dowager, and on the other hand, not wishing to bring shame on the entire Hu clan, some of who still worked for the government in high positions.⁴¹² This social pressure may not have been the same for Wei Shou when he was writing the biography of Empress Dowager Feng, as the Feng clan was certainly powerful throughout the Northern Wei but was not as directly involved in the fall of the dynasty as were the Gaos and Empress Dowager Hu.⁴¹³

The Buddhism of Empress Dowager Hu

Despite Empress Dowager Hu's divisive character and rule, her biography is full of a number of fascinating Buddhist referents, including the fact that a number of the women in her retinue became *bhikṣuṇīs*. The biographies of these women will form the next chapter. For example, though the Empress Dowager is remembered as the ruler that brought the dynasty to its ruin, her biography still states in no uncertain terms that:

The Empress had a nature that was both intelligent and enlightened. She had so many skills and talents that her aunt straightaway became a *bhikṣuṇī*, and, together with the Empress during her youth, they depended on and trusted in the maxims that they obtained from the great truths of the Buddhist sūtras.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹² Holmgren 1978, 125.

⁴¹³ Again we can look to Holmgren for guidance as she has undertaken an in-depth study of the character, history, and importance of the Feng clan: Holmgren 1981-1983a.

⁴¹⁴ Wei 2009, 338; translation is my own.

Speaking further to this personal identification of the Empress Dowager and Buddhism, the final section of her biography in fact suggests that the Empress Dowager may have herself taken up monastic life during the siege by Erzhu Rong. The passage in questions is somewhat contested, but it says:

In the first year of the Wutai 武泰 era (528 CE), Erzhu Rong commanded his army to cross the river⁴¹⁵ and the Empress Dowager then commanded that all the women of the six offices of Emperor Suzong enter the way. She too cut off her own hair.⁴¹⁶

Holmgren translates “enter the way” (入道) as “enter Daoist institutions;”⁴¹⁷ however, her translation is incorrect and relies entirely on the use of the character *dao* 道 to indicate “Daoist.” Although the word is certainly associated with Daoist philosophy, it is here used in its sense of “way or path” and signifies entrance into Buddhist monastic life by clearly referencing the shaving of heads, which has never been a Daoist practice. Furthermore, I have personally come across no accounts of imperially-sponsored Daoist nunneries in Northern Wei Luoyang, and so this sentence must mean that the Empress Dowager commanded all of the women of the palace to enter the Buddhist monastic institution, which, as we will see in the next chapter, had very close connections with the court of the Northern Wei, particularly under Empress Dowager Hu. Perhaps also the Empress Dowager’s cutting of her own hair and taking up of monastic orders was an attempt to temporarily “de-politicize” herself in order to spare her life, for, as we will also see in the next chapter, the Buddhist monastic institution of the Northern Wei facilitated

⁴¹⁵ The Yellow River, thus reaching Luoyang.

⁴¹⁶ Wei 2009, 340; translation is my own.

⁴¹⁷ Holmgren 1978, 169.

the political lives of many elite women in the dynasty – often sheltering them from political intrigues at court. Finally, to further connect the Empress Dowager to Buddhist affiliation, just one sentence further down from her shaving her own head, we are informed that after she and the emperor were drowned in the river by Erzhu Rong, her sister “gathered her remains and buried them in the Buddhist Monastery of Reduplicated Numen (*shuangling fosi* 雙靈佛寺),” which the biography explicitly identifies as a Buddhist monastery.

Empress Dowager Hu also embarked on her own project of Buddhist building, one that would unite the new capital, Buddhism, and the ruling class of the Northern Wei. Her project was the previously mentioned Eternal Peace Monastery. As to the stunning character of this monastery, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* states that,

Bodhidharma claimed at that time to be one hundred fifty years old. But during his extensive travels, which had taken him to every corner of many countries, nowhere in the sullied world had he seen a monastery as elegant and beautiful as this one. Not even in a Buddha’s realm of ultimate things was there anything like this.⁴¹⁸

Evidently, after uttering these words, Bodhidharma, later identified with the semi-mythical fifth/sixth-century founder of Chan Buddhism, then paid homage to the monastery for several days. When this jewel of a monastery was finished, standing out amongst the 1000 other Buddhist buildings in Luoyang, the then Emperor Xiaoming and Empress Dowager Hu ascended the tower of the monastery together – an amazing display of imperial power and religious authority.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁸ Wang 1984, 20-21.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 20.

According to Wei Shou, the author of the *Book of the Wei*, the support for this temple came from the child Emperor Xiaowen, behind whom Empress Dowager Hu ruled. The “Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism” states that the rulers were apparently inspired by the edict of their long-past predecessor, Emperor Daowu, who decreed that:

Since the rise of the Law of Buddha it is now a long time. Its saving and beneficent powers mysteriously reach to life and death. Its divine traces and the models it has bequeathed can indeed be trusted. We hereby command the officials to build and adorn images and repair the official residences in the Capital and see to it that the believers have places to stay.⁴²⁰

This decree was taken seriously, for the building of temples, monasteries, and nunneries was comprehensive across the country, particularly in Luoyang, where, as *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* records, by the end of the Northern Wei the larger metropolitan area housed more than 1000 temples.⁴²¹ *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* also records that as soon as he arrived in the new capital, Emperor Xianwen built his own monastery, temple to the South of his Majesty, or *Nanwang si* 王南寺⁴²², where ministers greeted him at the gates, and where he went to discuss matters of Buddhist doctrine with the monks.⁴²³

⁴²⁰ Hurvitz 1956, 52.

⁴²¹ Wang 1984, 7.

⁴²² The obvious imperial title should not be ignored. Having just moved his country from the north to the south on a wildly ambitious program of sinification aimed at taking control of the traditionally-Han, southern regions, Emperor Xianwen named this temple after himself.

⁴²³ Wang 1984, 10.

This building frenzy would reach across Luoyang, filling the city with a Buddhist buzz best described by the author of *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, Yang Xuanzhi 楊衒之 (f.c. fifth century). Of Luoyang, he quite proudly states:

During the Yong-jia (307–313 CE)⁴²⁴ period of the Jin dynasty, there were only forty-two Buddhist temples [in Luo-yang], but later when our imperial Wei accepted the heavenly mandate and chose the [same] Song-Luo area as the site of our national capital, there was an increase in the number of Buddhist converts and those who lectured on the Dharma. Princes, Dukes, and ranking officials donated such valuable things as elephants and horses, as generously as if they were slipping shoes from off their feet. The people and wealthy families parted with their treasures as easily as with forgotten rubbish. As a result, Buddhist temples were built side by side, and stūpas rose up in row after row. People competed among themselves in making or copying the Buddha's portraits. Golden stūpas matched the imperial observatory in height, and Buddhist lecture halls were as magnificent as the [ostentatiously wasteful] A-pang [Palaces of the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE)]. Indeed, [Buddhist activity was so intense] that it was not merely a matter of clothing wooden [figures] in silk or painting earthen [idols] in rich colors.⁴²⁵

Yang's words might seem somewhat opaque, but he is describing a type of Buddhism different from the more mundane practice of the worship of wooden and clay images of the Buddha, which archaeological remains suggest may have been a common practice;⁴²⁶ instead he is describing a Buddhism full to the brim with luxury, beauty, and financial support from the court and wealthy members of the imperial elite. The picture of this sort of courtly or elite Buddhism reported in Luoyang is even more undeniable when one considers the layout of that city with respect to imperial and Buddhist structures. The

⁴²⁴ In all places in this dissertation, BC/AD has been changed to BCE/CE.

⁴²⁵ Wang 1984, 5-6.

⁴²⁶ Recently a pit full of thousands of small Buddhist statues was excavated just outside the old Northern Qi capital of Ye. For more information, see the online English version of the archeological report: <http://www.kaogu.cn/en/detail.asp?ProductID=3455>

Record of the Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang proceeds to describe central Luoyang, the suburbs of north, east, south, and west, as well as the outlying areas – all in comparably glowing terms – to the effect that the work reads as a celebration of the opulence of a Buddhism well sanctified by the state.

Thus, though the Eternal Peace Monastery is specifically labelled as a Buddhist building – a *si* 寺 – it does not take much to see the clear political role that it played in the social environment of Northern Wei Luoyang. According to the archaeological record of the Eternal Peace Monastery, the complex was located a mere 500m from the south gate of the palace, and the two buildings were the tallest in Luoyang.⁴²⁷ And according to *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, certain rooms in the monastery were used to house Buddha images given to the Northern Wei from foreign countries.⁴²⁸ Although all that remains of the complex is the base of its gigantic and resplendent stupa, which was the biggest in China at the time and measured 300 Chinese feet in height with seven levels,⁴²⁹ excavations of the site have revealed a number of statuary and ornamental fragments that suggest the opulence of the décor and, perhaps, something about the donors themselves. For example, of the statuary heads that have been excavated, it is evident that many of them are not those of buddhas or Buddhist figures as they bear the hairstyles and caps of the social elite of the time period.⁴³⁰ Also, uniquely, one of the heads is of a non-Chinese person with reddish skin, blue eyes, and abundant facial hair –

⁴²⁷ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 1996, 6.

⁴²⁸ Wang 1984, 17.

⁴²⁹ Tang 2006, 441. This pagoda is discussed by Nancy Steinhardt who says that it has nine levels (2014, 199-202).

⁴³⁰ Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo 1996, 57ff.

perhaps recording the countenance of the Tuoba.⁴³¹ This situation is also observed in fragments of feet and bodies that we have from the temple which clearly show a cross-section of the social life of Luoyang at the time and do not simply match with Buddhist figures. It is evident that the Eternal Peace Monastery played an important role in the dynasty – as the emperor and empress dowager’s own monastery it was splendidly adorned and within sight of the palace. It was an example of the combined political and social power of the ruling house and the Buddhist establishment.

It is thus no surprise that the Eternal Peace Monastery is the first to be described in Yang’s *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*. Several pages of the text are devoted to the structure and opulence of the monastery as well as to the political intrigues that attended it in the last years of the dynasty. Throughout the text, Yang seems to be acting as a government worker, describing a well-organized, extravagant, and peaceful Buddhist community flourishing under the support of the Northern Wei government despite the precarious situation of Luoyang at the end of the dynasty. And this makes sense, because we know that Yang was a member of Empress Dowager Hu’s court. He held the title of *fengchaoqing* 奉朝請 during the Yong’an 永安 era (528–529 CE) near the end of the dynasty. This title was of the seventh degree and the fourth class, and according to Jean-Marie Lourme it was commonly given to high-level, literati families.⁴³² Thus it is clear that in the turbulent times at the end of the dynasty, Yang’s family

⁴³¹ Although hair and eye colour are difficult to determine, in the image of Tuoba donors in Cave #11 that was offered in the previous chapter (Figure 5), the male donors to the right of the inscription are clearly depicted with large beards.

⁴³² Yang 2015 (Introduction by: Lourme, ix).

supported the government, and thus he himself lived to serve under the successor dynasty, the Eastern Wei who made their capital in Ye. The Eastern Wei was interested in establishing itself as the true heir of the Northern Wei and eventually gave way to the Northern Qi. In 547 CE, Yang was sent from the Eastern Wei capital of Ye back to Luoyang to write the official account of Luoyang's monasteries.⁴³³ Thus, the text is less journalistic than it is commemorative. The text seeks to recall the splendour of the Northern Wei after its ruin, from the vantage point of its successor, the Eastern Wei, and for Yang this meant returning to Luoyang and recounting the carefully planned and lavishly embellished monasteries that were officially allowed to flourish under the reign of Empress Dowager Hu, whom he served under, and whose vision of a state-sponsored imperial Buddhism he seems to have supported.

Finally, Empress Dowager Hu's reign saw the Northern Wei's most rigorous period of textual translation. Though the Northern Wei is not known for its translation activities when compared to the major translation centers of Nanjing 南京, Northern Liang Guzang, or Chang'an there were in fact a number of texts translated under the auspices of Empress Dowager Hu by the Northern Wei's most eminent translators: Bodhiruci, Ratnamata, Buddhaśānta, and Gautamaprajñāruci.⁴³⁴ Her court also sponsored two lesser-known Buddhist emissaries, Songyun 宋雲 and Huisheng 惠生 (*f.c.* early

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Bodhiruci, or Putiliuzhi 菩提流支 arrived in Luoyang in 507 and then worked in Ye from 534–537; Ratnamata, or Lenamoti 勒那摩提 arrived in Luoyang in 508; Buddhaśānta, or Fotuoshanduo 佛馱扇多 worked in Luoyang and Ye from 525–539; Gautama-prajñāruci, or Jutan Boreliuzhi 瞿曇般若流, came to Luoyang in 516 CE and then also went to Ye.

sixth-century) who were sent out to the western regions in the winter of 518 CE in order to bring back Buddhist scriptures. The *Record of Buddhist Temples in Luoyang* records this journey in some detail. Of course, this type of activity is reminiscent of the Northern Liang's sponsoring of the translation projects of Kumārajīva, and the Jin's commission of the famous traveling monk Faxian 法顯 (337–442 CE) to journey to India to fetch scriptures. The elite of the Northern Wei were aware of both Kumārajīva and Faxian because details of their stories are recorded in the *Book of the Wei*. Thus it is likely that the Northern Wei rulers – particular Empress Dowager Hu – believed that part of being a powerful empire meant undertaking the quest for and translation of Buddhist texts.

Buddhist Rule a Useful Paradigm for Female Rulers?

The imperial patronage of Buddhism by the court of the Northern Wei – whether the rulers were male or female – was certainly an important and strategic political manoeuvre; however, it is also worth considering whether or not Buddhism as a religious teaching had any inherent connection to ideas of divine leadership for women, as we know that the Chinese tradition itself did not. Through our brief survey of the life and works of Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu above it is clear that both women patronized Buddhism as a state religion, and this is also true of other women in positions of leadership that we see forming a unique cluster in East Asia from the fifth to eighth centuries: Empress Wu of later China, Empress Suiko of Japan, and Queen Seondeok of Korea. So the question remains of why. Why did these female leaders look to Buddhism to give face to their courts and their own rules? Is it simply because during these turbulent times Buddhism itself offered a progressive, integrative, and populist paradigm

through which to rule? Or can it be that Buddhism retained a special connection to female leadership? By using the context of early medieval China and the lives of Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu as well as Empress Wu of the Tang/Zhou, in the remainder of this chapter I will put forth that possibility – that just as Buddhism served a role in uniting the empire under a Sino-Tuoba rule, so too did it play a role in the rise of female leaders of that empire, a role that went along with their relatively high status in northern society.⁴³⁵

As discussed in chapter one, the idealized Buddhist ruler is the *cakravartin*, or wheel-turner, who like King Aśoka, supports and spreads Buddhism while ruling a large and powerful kingdom. The ideology of the *cakravartin* is tied in with that of the Buddha who himself was of a ruling class in society and was prophesied to be either a great ruler or a great religious teacher. We have many examples of rulers from Chinese history who positioned themselves as *cakravartins*; yet, of note to this chapter is the surprising fact Empress Wu of the Tang/Zhou positioned herself as just such a ruler. In so doing, she commissioned a particularly spurious piece of writing, a commentary on the *Great*

⁴³⁵ This possibility is also raised by Joan Piggott in her discussion of Queen Suiko where she argues that the Buddhist ideal of the enlightened ruler, or *cakravartin*, was one open to women and thus aided in Suiko's validation of her rule (1997, 95-96). Though Piggott's argument is very brief, she links Queen Suiko with Buddhist texts of the time period that support the ideal of buddhahood and rule by women and thus makes a similar, though abbreviated, argument to the one I will make in the following pages. In a similar vein, and also related to Japan, Michael Como has explored the connections between female immortals of a Chinese style and Chinese notions of rule transplanted into the islands of Japan, though he does not discuss the Northern Wei case specifically (2009, 55–83).

Cloud Sūtra (*Dayunjing* 大雲經),⁴³⁶ which positioned her as a fulfillment of a Buddhist prophecy of divine leadership by a woman, which she then used to justify her usurpation of the Tang and her rule over her own dynasty, the Zhou.⁴³⁷ Furthermore, in shaping her identity as a *cakravartin*, she also embarked on a nation-uniting scheme of the veneration of relics across the land in the same way that her Indian predecessor, Aśoka, had done.⁴³⁸ The most curious aspect of Empress Wu's rule, however, is that she did this all in spite of the fact that the *Lotus Sūtra* explicitly says that she could not. The *Lotus Sūtra* tells the story of the Dragon King's daughter who is on the verge of buddhahood despite being female, non-human, and a child. During the story, the Dragon King's daughter is told that because she is a woman:

First, she cannot become a Brahma heavenly king. Second, she cannot become the king Shakra. Third, she cannot become a devil king. Fourth,

⁴³⁶ Antonino Forte's study of the sūtra and its commentary remains the authoritative study of Empress Wu's use of Buddhist literary precedents in her establishing herself as a *cakravartin* and as the future Buddha, Maitreya (1976, 125ff).

⁴³⁷ According to Denis Twitchett, Empress Wu had a whole team of political authors working under her, creating her political opus. These so-called "Scholars of the Northern Gate," or *Beimen xueshi* 北門學士, were recruited personally by Empress Wu because of their proven literary ability in working in various other parts of the government, but they were not an institutionalized sector within the court, rather they were brought in by the Empress for specific literary support (2003, 45). They are said to have produced more than 1000 scrolls of text as well as being responsible for the wording of Imperial edicts (46). Yet the lives of these Scholars of the Northern Gate were not very secure and by the time Empress Wu ascended the throne in her own name in 690 she had personally seen to the death of all but one of them, who had been killed by other means (53). The longest enduring of the texts composed by Empress Wu through her Scholars of the Northern Gate is the *Rules for Ministers*, or *Chen Gui* 臣規, which replaced the *Laozi* 老子 on imperial examinations and is generally considered a part of a larger genre of texts detailing the proper actions and etiquette of court officials (57).

⁴³⁸ Chen 2002, particularly 56ff.

she cannot become a wheel-turning sage king. Fifth, she cannot become a Buddha.⁴³⁹

Despite this pronouncement against the ability of women to become *cakravartins* in what is arguably the most influential of all Buddhist texts in East Asia, and further despite the fact the Chinese tradition clearly maintains that “hens should not announce the dawn,” and hence women shall not rule, Empress Wu in fact did both. Yet, as radical and innovative as she was, Empress Wu relied on an easily discernible historical trajectory in positioning herself as a female Buddhist ruler – namely our two Empress Dowagers of the Northern Wei. And as we saw in the introduction, Empress Wu herself exaggerated her northern pedigree by providing posthumous titles to her ancestors that had served under the Northern Wei. Furthermore, like Empress Dowager Feng before her, she maintained traditional Chinese rituals and court procedures while identifying as Buddhist.⁴⁴⁰ Seeking to rule over a Chinese dynasty and pay proper attention to Chinese court proceeding and bureaucracy, Empress Wu undertook the complete Feng and Shan rituals in order to sacralise her realm and establish her and her husband as sanctified leaders. She also seems to have been behind continued use of the two-Buddha motif, which may have suggested her rule behind her husband as a rule of Twin Sages just like Empress Dowager Feng may have done before her.⁴⁴¹ Moreover, this time like Empress Dowager Hu, she issued edicts in her own name, filled the court ranks with female

⁴³⁹ Watson 1993, 187.

⁴⁴⁰ According to Chen Jo-shui, Empress Wu enacted traditional Han rituals for the empress, reconfiguring them to stress the power of empress as reigning matriarch (Chen 1994, 79).

⁴⁴¹ Wang 2005, 141.

politicians,⁴⁴² including her own female Prime Minister,⁴⁴³ and was known to have been uncompromising in her role as a female Buddhist leader.⁴⁴⁴

How did these women – particularly Empress Wu – succeed in identifying themselves so completely with notions of Buddhist leadership despite the fact that the *Lotus Sūtra* says they cannot? And why did they do it? What sort of textual precedent is there outside of the *Lotus Sūtra* that may allow us to understand this apparent widespread connection between Buddhist rule and women that we see in the early medieval period? Working toward a tentative answer, there are in fact many early medieval Buddhist texts regarding the status of women in Buddhism that appear to have been widely circulating in pre-Tang times. And these texts both agree and disagree with the *Lotus* depending on how they are read – consistently arguing that women are capable of buddhahood but as a final act of renunciation must choose miraculously to take on a male body, a story that accords with the *Lotus* in which the Dragon King’s daughter goes on to do just that. Two notable examples of texts containing this story are the *Sūtra of the Woman*, “*Silver*”⁴⁴⁵

⁴⁴² For a detailed description of her female bureaucracy, see: Chen 1994, 81 ff.

⁴⁴³ See chapter two, note 247.

⁴⁴⁴ For a study of Empress Wu’s Buddhist rule, see: Forte 1976, Ch. 3; for a discussion of Empress Wu’s campaign for the veneration of Buddhist relics, see: Chen 2007.

⁴⁴⁵ T179 (Ch. *Yinsenüjing* 銀色女經; Skt. *Rūpāvatyāvadāna*). Reiko Ohnuma has done considerable work on the story of Rūpāvatī, a female past-life incarnation of the Buddha who gives her own flesh to feed a starving new mother who is about to eat her own child, and then changes her body in to a male one as an act of truth witnessing to her offering. Ohnuma’s work stresses the perfection of giving through the gift of the body, and focuses on a certain reversal of gender ideals that she argues follows from the Buddha taking on female characteristics while still a bodhisattva (2001). The first translation of this text was done in the Western Jin by Faju 法炬 T178 *The Sūtra of the Transformations of the Three Prior Ages* (*Qianshisanzhuanjing* 前世三轉經).

and the *Sūtra of the Woman Vimalī*.⁴⁴⁶ Both of these texts were originally translated in the Western Jin and then again in the Northern Wei under the court of Empress Dowager Hu: the former by Buddhaśānta who came to Northern Wei Luoyang in 511 CE and the latter by Gautama Prajñāruci who came to Northern Wei Luoyang in 516 CE. Both of these texts deal specifically with the question of buddhahood for women, and the former ties buddhahood with both women and leadership. Thus in order to discuss texts of this type and their importance, what follows is a summary of that sūtra with excerpted sections from my translation, the whole of which is available in the appendix.

The *Sūtra of the Woman*, “Silver” begins with the Buddha telling the story of a woman whose name was “Silver” and who was out begging for alms. She came across a house where a terrible scene was unfolding: a new mother was alone in the house and was starving to the extent that she was on the verge of eating her newborn child. The woman Silver is moved to act out of compassion and the following happens:

The Woman, “Silver” said, “Sister, wait! I will go out to the families and bring something for you to eat!” The other woman replied, “Sister, right now I desire to destroy the two sides of his body! I even desire to tear apart his back! My heart is at war and I am not at peace! I am facing eclipse from all sides! If you go out to the families I will certainly die very soon.” At the time the Woman, “Silver” had this thought: “If I take the child and leave, the woman will surely die, but if I don’t go out then this woman will surely eat her child. What sort of expedient means would be able to save both of these lives?”

⁴⁴⁶ There are two extant Chinese translations of this text, evidently based on a lost Sanskrit original, the *Vimaladattāparipṛcchā*. The first is T338, the *Ligoushinüjing* 離垢施女經 translated by Dharmārakṣa, and the second is T339, the *Dewugounüjing* 得無垢女經 translated by Gautama Prajñāruci, who came to Northern Wei Luoyang in 516CE. I have translated selections from that text and made them available in the appendices.

Then she said, “Sister, do you have a sharp knife in this house? I have need of it.” She replied saying, “yes.” She then gave he knife to Silver. The Silver then grasped the knife and cut off her two breasts and gave them to her and made her eat them. She said, “Eat my breasts and then you, Sister, will be free from the bitterness of this thirst and hunger.” The woman ate them and the Silver asked her, “Sister, are you full or not?” The woman answered that she was full. The Woman, “Silver” then said, “Sister, you should know that this was the flesh of my body and it must be replenished, and so now I must also go out to the houses of the families in order to obtain something to eat.”⁴⁴⁷

Then, after this selfless act of charity, villagers question the Woman, “Silver” as to whether or not she is remorseful at having cut off her breasts. She then makes an act of truth, swearing that if she is truly not remorseful then may her breasts be returned to her. They are then magically restored. After this, our protagonist is visited by Indra who also does not believe that she could have committed such an act without pain, vexation, remorse, or ego, so he disguises himself as a Brahmin and goes to question her. She then makes another act of truth swearing that if she truly had no vexation in her heart then she would take on the form of a man, which she immediately does.

Yet the story does not stop there. In her male form, she takes rest under a tree only to be found by envoys of the king who are searching for a successor to the king who will be able to rule in accord with the *dharma*. They choose her/him as successor and the Woman, “Silver” goes on to become the Silver King and makes all under her swear that they will become right in the *dharma* if she becomes king. They all swear to it and she/he rules over a Buddhist kingdom until death. Upon death she/he is then born into another

⁴⁴⁷ T179: 0450b03–0450b15. For full text of the sūtra and the Chinese, see the appendix.

body, whose flesh they also sacrifice, this time to birds.⁴⁴⁸ Finally, that person then chooses the womb of a Brahmin to be reborn in and is born as Māṇava who sacrifices his body to the hungry tigress in a well-known story of the Buddha's past lives. And, naturally, following this story, the Buddha makes the following declaration to the assembly of monks:

“*Bhikṣus*, I am concerned that you all have given rise to doubt in your hearts. You must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don't think otherwise! Why is this? You should all know, I was at that time the “Woman, ‘Silver’” and I cut off my two breasts so that that child could be saved! Who was that strange woman “Silver” who during the time of the Lotus Flower King cut off her two breasts? In present times, that person is none other than me! *Bhikṣus*, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don't think otherwise! Why is this? You should all know, that I was the Woman, “Silver” in the imperial city called Lotus Flower. *Bhikṣus*, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don't make excess perceptions! Why is this? You should all know, I was at that time called the “Woman, “Silver”” and I cast off my two breasts so that that child could be saved!”⁴⁴⁹

The Buddha of course goes on to say that he was not only the Woman, “Silver” but that he was naturally the next two incarnations and that through these activities he perfected the act of charity or *dāna*.

Although there are many texts which reveal the connection between women and buddhahood that were circulating in pre-Tang China, I have chosen to offer these excerpts from the *Sūtra of the Woman, “Silver”* because the text clearly shows an early

⁴⁴⁸ The sacrifice of the physical body out of one's intense compassion for the plight of others is a common trope in Buddhist literature. Reiko Ohnuma has done extensive research on the topic in general (2007) and further with specific reference to the above *sūtra* (2001). Also, James Benn has worked on the topic of the gift of the body in Chinese sources (2007, particularly 93-94).

⁴⁴⁹ T179: 0451c20–0451c25

association between women-buddhahood-leadership that seems to have been known in pre-Tang times. The association being, of course, that the Buddha was a woman in his past life who went on to be the ruler of a Buddhist kingdom after changing her sex to that of a man's. In popular notions of Buddhist rule in the early medieval period, the Buddha and his mythology were taken as a new paradigm for rule and we see this most forcibly enunciated in the Buddha-ruler identification at both Longmen and Yungang. This Buddha-ruler identification is then reinforced by our *Sūtra of the Woman*, "*Silver*", which establishes our protagonist as a sex-changing Buddhist king, perhaps suggesting that a Buddhist woman may be able to become a Buddha and a ruler herself, as long as she commits to changing her gender at some point along the path. And furthermore, since it may be possible that Empress Feng utilized the Twin Sages or Twin Buddha motif to give face to her reign, it could be that she, too, considered the Buddhist ruler paradigm one that was open to women.

The question of whether or not a woman can become a Buddhist king, or even a *cakravartin* like Empress Wu depends entirely on whether or not one believes that a woman can become a buddha, and a survey of the record of translations of Buddhist texts from the early medieval period suggests that this issue was not only a murky one for faithful Buddhists and studious exegetes alike, but one which was widely questioned. Indeed, in the translation records of pre-Tang China, there are no less than 20 sūtras that contain stories of sex-changing women, some of these being multiple translations of a

base text by a series of eminent translators.⁴⁵⁰ We can find witness to the circulation of these texts in the *Sūtra of the Buddha's Names*,⁴⁵¹ a pre-Tang apocryphon that provides a fascinating list of the names of sūtras and the names of buddhas that were known within the pre-Tang, Chinese Buddhist worldview. A number of these texts feature female protagonists who take on a male form before becoming a buddha. In one place the text even offers the name of the “Buddha Who Transforms her Female Form (*zhuannüfo* 轉女佛)” for veneration. Although the *Sūtra of the Buddha's Names* has been shown to be a pre-Tang apocryphon, it was in wide circulation in both China and Japan from the 6th to 11th centuries. Kuo Li-ying has shown that the text was used in Buddhist rites of repentance and confession, or *zhai* 齋, whereby the recitation of the names of the buddhas listed in the text was a popular means for the making of merit by members of all four of the assemblies of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen.⁴⁵² Moreover, as Robert Buswell has shown through his study of the exegetical work of the compiler of the second Korean Buddhist Canon, Sugi 守其 (*f.c.* Goryeo 高麗 period, 918-1392 CE), the *Sūtra of the Buddha's Names* was extremely popular among the Buddhist congregation of his time

⁴⁵⁰ For a full citation, see the bibliography. By Taishō number, these texts are: T152, T178 T179, T224, T262, T334, T335, T336, T338, T339, T374, T402, T425, T480, T557, T562, T563, T564, T565, T566, T598, T625, and T638.

⁴⁵¹ T441, or 佛名經 *Foming jing*. This text has no translator attributed to it and is listed as apocryphal in the *Zhenyuan Revised List of Canonical Buddhist Texts* (*Zhenyuan xingding shijiao mulu* 貞元新定釋教目錄; T 2157, compiled by Yuanzhao 圓照 (*floruit circa* 778) in the year 800 CE. Furthermore, T441 is similar in name to T440, the *Sūtra of the Buddha's Names as Spoken by the Buddha* (*Foshuo fomingjing* 佛說佛名經) but it is much longer than that text – a massive 30 scrolls to the other's 12. For a chart that compares these two versions of the text, see: Kuo 1995, 249, note 67.

⁴⁵² Kuo 1995, 231-234.

because of its role in such ceremonies. In fact it was so popular that Sugi, despite his misgivings, included it in his canon although he knew it was an apocryphon. He did this simply because to do otherwise would have offended the people of his time.⁴⁵³ Thus it can be accepted that texts featuring female protagonists, as well as the Buddha Who Transformed her Female Form, must have been known to some extent in early medieval times as they are cited in the sūtra by name. Specific to the Northern Wei, there are actually two texts of the *Sūtra of the Buddha's Names* in existence, consecutively numbered in the modern Taishō edition of the canon as T440 and T441. We know that the previously discussed T441 is an apocryphon; however T440 is attributed to Bodhiruci, one of the Northern Wei translators under the court of Empress Dowager Hu. One of the main differences between the texts is that T441 is much longer and lists the names of sūtras for veneration whereas T440 does not. Yet both texts make mention of a Buddha known as “Transforming the Female” (*zhuanniüfo* 轉女佛) and a Bodhisattva known as “Transforming the Female Root” (*zhuannügen pusa* 轉女根菩薩). Hence it would certainly be the case that Empress Dowager Hu and the Buddhist women of her court knew about the idea of buddhahood for women that involved them changing their sex. Relatedly, Chikusa Masaaki argues that in the early medieval period, the desire to achieve a man's body was what caused Buddhist women to self immolate more often than their male counterparts.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ Buswell 2004, 150.

⁴⁵⁴ Chikusa, 19.

All of the sūtras on the topic of buddhahood for women agree that the path to buddhahood includes the final renunciation of the female body and the conversion to a male one, yet they disagree as to when, why, and how exactly a woman is to do this. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Dragon King's Daughter takes on a male form immediately prior to conversion to buddhahood, whereas in the *Sūtra of the Woman*, "Silver", she takes on a male form and then is promoted to the status of Buddhist King. Confusion on the issue even led to the creation of Chinese pastiche on the topic, the *Sūtra on Transforming the Female Form*, which provides a definitive justification of the practice.⁴⁵⁵ In that text, the woman in question takes on a male form only after questioning the Buddha extensively as to why she must do so and her final undertaking of the act is a supernatural event that causes several other women to join the *saṃgha*. Finally, in order to query further how widely known the idea of sex-changing buddhahood for women was in the early medieval period, we can look back again to the works of Empress Wu. As mentioned, Empress Wu was behind the writing of a commentary to the *Great Cloud Sūtra* and, as it turns out, the *Great Cloud Sūtra* is not that unlike our *Sūtra of the Woman*, "Silver" and was known to the Tang court as early as the 629 CE – some 60 years before Empress Wu's

⁴⁵⁵ The *Sūtra on the Transforming the Female Form* (T564. *Zhuanniushenjing* 轉女身經) is attributed to Dharmamitra (Tanmomiduo 曇摩密多 356–442 CE): however, the text appears to be a pastiche and I have analyzed its components in my forthcoming article, "Interpreting the Buddhist Practice of Female to Male Sex Change in Early Medieval China: On the *Sūtra on Transforming the Female Form*." This text includes a unique list of the ten reasons why a woman should take on a male form, and I have included that excerpt in appendix three. In Japanese studies, this text is often confused with that of another name the *Sūtra on Transforming the Female and Becoming a Buddha* (*zhuanniuchengfojing* 轉女成佛身經) a confusion that Nishiguchi Junko has discussed in her work on the latter, apocryphal text and its popularity in medieval Japan.

usurpation.⁴⁵⁶ That text contains a prophecy regarding a number of rulers; however, the most important for our sake is the prophecy regarding the queen, about whom there is the following conversation:

“The queen in her sovereignty will destroy and subdue the perverse visions Later she will reach the end of her life and then she will change this female body. For the cause of the beings she will show the great Supernatural Penetrations and desiring to venerate the Buddha of Infinite Life, she will be reborn in that world.” “Bhagavat, will this queen in future obtain the *anuttara-samyak-sambodhi* or not?” “Good son, this queen in a future generation when incalculable *kalpas* have passed will be able to be a Buddha and will be called Tathāgatha Jingbao Sengzhang.”⁴⁵⁷

In his study of Empress Wu and the textual precedents that helped secure her rule, Antonino Forte goes to great lengths to show that this text – a text which repeats the exact same themes as our *Sūtra of the Woman*, “*Silver*” – was in circulation prior to the rule of Empress Wu and only under Empress Wu was a commentary to the text created which identified her as this prophesied queen and as the future Buddha, Maitreya. This commentary was then presented to the throne of Empress Wu in 690 CE with the further edict to distribute the text throughout the empire and to build a Great Cloud Temple in every prefecture.⁴⁵⁸ Hence, unlike what later histories of the Tang would have us believe – that Empress Wu was a manipulative female who actually authored the text of the *Great Cloud Sūtra*⁴⁵⁹ – what is actually true is that she and her court worked on

⁴⁵⁶ Forte 1976, 39.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁵⁹ Forte also goes through these classical Confucian arguments as to the nature of the *Great Cloud Sūtra* which see the text itself as apocryphal, but he shows that the text was translated likely by Dharmakṣema a few hundred years earlier than it appeared in the court of Empress Wu. Hence, although Empress Wu certainly utilized this Buddhist trope of Buddhahood and leadership for women, she did not invent it (3-54).

capitalizing on a theme that was already known in early medieval society: the possibility of buddhahood and leadership for women. This theme is seen also in our *Sūtra of the Woman*, “*Silver*”, a text retranslated under the auspices of Empress Dowager Hu in the Northern Wei. As such, it may well be that in creating her rule, Empress Wu took yet another play from our Northern Wei empress dowagers – one that united her rule with Buddhist textual precedents.

The point that needs to be made here is not that Buddhism offered an unquestioned, authoritative paradigm of religious rule that included women, but that it certainly offered some ambiguity on the issue – an ambiguity clearly not available in Chinese notions of the Son of Heaven. Furthermore, this ambiguity was indeed capitalized on by Empress Wu in her positioning of herself as a future Buddha and thus rightful ruler of China, and perhaps also suggested by Empress Dowager Hu in her promotion of the re-translation of the *Sūtra of the Woman*, “*Silver*” and Empress Dowager Feng in her two-Buddha, Twin Sages motif at Yungang. Although the suggestion that in early medieval China Buddhist paradigms of leadership included women remains just that – a suggestion – what we do know is that powerful women across East Asia in the 5th–8th centuries promoted Buddhism as they promoted themselves as rulers. Further, I do believe that this early medieval association between women and buddhahood and buddhahood and leadership is one aspect of the story of early medieval female rulers that has not been given any scholarly attention to the present date.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the two most important and powerful women of the Northern Wei through their biographies in the *Book of the Wei* and in so doing, have suggested that they were the two rulers of the dynasty that most aggressively pursued the creation and policing of a sort of imperial Buddhism throughout the dynasty that saw them as the supreme patrons of the tradition. This identification was enforced most visibly among the populace in Empress Dowager Feng's two-Buddha paradigm at Yungang and in Empress Dowager Hu's ascension of the Eternal Peace Monastery upon its completion. Although the patronage of Buddhism was an important undertaking for all leaders of the Northern Wei – male or female – I further suggested that an additional vector of the court Buddhism of these two women be considered: the fact that there may be an innate connection between Buddhist teachings and female rulers in the early medieval period. In an era when political leaders began to be associated with buddhas, and women also began to be identified as buddhas, it might make sense to consider the idea that political women aligned themselves with Buddhism because it was a tradition that allowed them this very opportunity whereas the traditional Chinese court system did not. It may be that the understanding of buddhahood for women that had become popular by the Northern Wei in fact prefigures the connection that Empress Wu saw between her rule and the Buddhist tradition – a tradition which accepted her support of an apocryphal commentary that positioned her as a *cakravartin*. Certainly, Empress Dowagers Hu and Feng did not go as far as Empress Wu in utilizing Buddhist doctrine to support their rule; however, I do believe that this connection between female rulers and Buddhism that we

see across all of East Asia between the 5th-8th centuries owes much to the Buddhist usages of our Northern Wei Empress Dowagers. In ruling their realms in their own names, actively patronizing and regulating the tradition of Buddhism, Empress Dowager Feng possibly identifying herself with a Buddha, and Empress Dowager Hu supporting the translation of texts linking buddhahood with both women and leadership, these women ensured that the tradition of Buddhism had a stable home in the hands of female politicians. This potentially impacted the choices of the much better known Empress Wu. At the very least, we can safely say that the idea of buddhahood for women was well known prior to the Tang, thanks in part to the iconographic Twin Sages program of Empress Dowager Feng and the textual translations of Empress Dowager Hu, and that Empress Wu's self-positioning as a buddha-ruler, or a *cakravartin*, is thus not without a historical context.

In the next chapter, then, I will continue this line of inquiry into the specific and distinctive ways in which the Buddhist tradition found itself in conversation with women of high social standing by examining a rising subset of society in the early medieval period, the Buddhist community of ordained women, or *bhikṣuṇīs*. By reading through the few extant tomb inscriptions of Northern Wei *bhikṣuṇīs* that we have – the earliest inscriptions for Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs* that we have to date – I will argue that the Buddhist institution offered women a new form of social organization that brought stability and safety to their lives.

CHAPTER FOUR. The Three Followings and the Three Jewels: Imperial *Bhikṣuṇīs*

The agent of metal⁴⁶⁰ does not endure; water will overcome it and thrive alone.

– The beginning phrase of the eulogy on Yuan Chuntuo's 元純陀 (474–529 CE) epitaph; referencing her life of constant negotiation living between her royal family and her religious devotion.⁴⁶¹

In the preceding chapter, I argued that the most powerful women of the Northern Wei – Empress Dowager Feng and Empress Dowager Hu – were ardent supporters of the Buddhist tradition, and that they were so not only because it was good politics to be so, but also because the notion of the *cakravartin* may have been a paradigm that supported leadership by women more so than Chinese notions of divine rule and the Son of Heaven. In this chapter, then, I seek to further this discussion of the specific ways in which the rise of Buddhism at the Northern Wei court, and the participation of women at that court, impacted each other in order to create a unique and long-lasting relationship between women and the tradition of Buddhism. By discussing the lives of four individual *bhikṣuṇīs* who had relations with the court and whose tomb inscriptions have all been found at the Mt. Mang cluster of imperial mausoleums, I will explore the connections that these four women had with the Buddhist institution and with the court of the Northern

⁴⁶⁰ This poetic beginning to Chuntuo's epitaph roots her own life of constant negotiation and willingness to be pliant to changes within the very creation of the universe and development of Chinese civilization. In traditional Chinese thought, the five elements that create the world (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) are in constant metamorphosis wherein one element gives way to the next and in this paradigm water continually overcomes metal just as softness overcomes strength. This opening characterizes the life of Chuntuo as she became entirely virtuous and powerful through having given in to the desires and commands of others. The sentence also sets up the further depiction of Chinese civilization that is here characterized as having developed in the same way.

⁴⁶¹ Zhao 1992, 261. For a full translation of this epitaph, see appendix one; for a discussion of Yuan Chuntuo, see below.

Wei. I will reveal the precise ways in which their choice to follow the Three Jewels of the Buddhist tradition was intimately connected to their status as women in a society characterized by the Three Followings. As affiliates of a northern court where women held high roles that were often connected to those of their male kin, participation in the Buddhist tradition allowed them to carve out a unique social space that gave them increased independence and social security.

The primary text material that I will use in my investigation of the lives of the women in question comes from extant tomb inscriptions, the earliest that we have on record for any Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs*. As these inscriptions are all from Mt. Mang, they provide invaluable information on what the participation of Buddhist women looked like in the latter stages of the Northern Wei court. Although the inscriptions are largely formulaic (they include a formal lineage through the patriline, a biographical section, a description of funerary rites, and a verse eulogy at the end),⁴⁶² Shiyang Pang argues in her work on Tang *bhikṣuṇīs* that inscriptions provide information on the lives of women that is nowhere else available in the Chinese literary tradition. She explains:

Since tomb inscription at root was a manifestation of Confucianism's impulse to appraise and rank, tomb inscriptions of Buddhist female renunciants contain valuable information about the historical confrontation and reconciliation of these two teachings... and hence that "...tomb inscriptions are helpful for their potential to provide diverse types of information about the lives of female renunciants, even as they attempt also to synthesize that information."⁴⁶³

⁴⁶² Pang 2010, 79.

⁴⁶³ Ibid, 78.

As she further makes clear, this information is often related to the dual, simultaneous roles that women played as both Buddhist renunciants and virtuous members of families of rank. In the case of our Northern Wei inscriptions from Mt. Mang, the situation is slightly different, showing that these women moved between at least three sectors of society – family, *saṃgha*, and court – and that they did so in order to negotiate social prestige, mobility, and security.

On the Physical Proximity between the Court and the Women's *Samgha*

Before turning to the individual lives of the our Northern Wei *bhikṣuṇīs*, it is helpful to consider the physical relationship that the nunneries of Luoyang shared with the imperial centre, as recorded in *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*. In the preface of that text, Yang Xuanzhi states that he cannot hope to describe all of Luoyang's monasteries and Buddhist temples in his book, as there are simply too many, but that he will choose only the largest of them to describe in his record.⁴⁶⁴ Of the ones he chooses to describe from the city centre, five of them are monasteries and four of them are nunneries; however, of the five monasteries included, one is Empress Dowager Hu's Eternal Peace Monastery, which does not seem to have been a simple monastery. As we have seen, the Eternal Peace Monastery seems to have been used for imperial purposes as it housed political prisoners as well as gifts from foreign rulers, and according to the biography of Empress Dowager Hu, it housed *bhikṣuṇīs* as well as *bhikṣus*.⁴⁶⁵ Thus, Yang's enumeration of the imposing monasteries and nunneries in the center of Luoyang

⁴⁶⁴ Wang 1984, 7.

⁴⁶⁵ According to the biography, the Eternal Peace Monastery housed several tens of thousands of *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* (Wei 2009, 338).

includes equal numbers of both types of structures and suggests that both *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* played important roles in the Buddhist landscape of the city.

With respect to the nunneries in the center of the city, Yang states that the largest was the Jade Sparkle Nunnery, which was located north of the palace on Imperial Drive and specifically demarcated as the sanctuary for female members of the royal elite who had decided to join the Buddhist monastic community. It was the only Buddhist building situated north of the palace, and was tucked between the northwest corner of the palace and a fortress built in the northwest corner of the city wall.⁴⁶⁶ Evidently gigantic, the nunnery housed more than 500 cells for *bhikṣuṇīs*. Furthermore, the author makes it clear that the statuary and ornamentation of the nunnery was so fine that it matched the positively breathtaking Eternal Peace Monastery in its beauty.⁴⁶⁷ To the south of the palace on Imperial Drive, directly facing the Eternal Peace Monastery, was the equally resplendent Nunnery of the Happy View, or *Jingle Si* 景樂寺, which Yang tells us was a popular social space for the people of Luoyang to enjoy various entertainments.⁴⁶⁸ Next, the Nunnery of the *Zhaoyis*, or *Zhaoyi Si* 昭儀寺 was located even further to the south of Imperial Drive and was financed by eunuchs made rich by Empress Dowager Hu. It is impossible to say whether or not this temple was only for the retired *Zhaoyis* of the court – the *Zhaoyi* being the highest position a woman could reach outside of Empress⁴⁶⁹ – but

⁴⁶⁶ For a reconstructed map of central Luoyang in the Northern Wei, see: Lourme 2014, LII-LIII.

⁴⁶⁷ Wang 1984, 51–52.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid, 52.

⁴⁶⁹ In this dissertation, we have encountered the *Zhaoyi*, or Lady of Clear Etiquette in many places: in the discussion of those women of the court buried at Mt. Mang, in the

at the very least the imperial connections are maintained in its name. According to *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, the Nunnery of the *Zhaoyi* housed a tree, which bled profusely when chopped down by an imperial order that was aimed at preventing the populace from being bewitched and swindled by the tree,⁴⁷⁰ and perhaps by the *bhikṣuṇīs* as well. Finally, even further south along the imperial axis was the Nunnery of the Administrator of the Hu Clan, or *Hutongsi* 胡統寺, built by the aunt of the Empress Dowager Hu who lived there as a *bhikṣuṇī*.⁴⁷¹

As further evidence of the proximity of these nunneries to the imperial center, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* is again useful. The text is divided into five sections: the center of the city and the suburbs of north, east, south, and west. In the chapter on the inner city, nunneries are discussed as commonly as monasteries, and the author goes through great pains to point out that they were resplendent places with a grandeur that matched Empress Dowager Hu's brainchild, the central Eternal Peace Monastery.⁴⁷² However, in the sections of the text that deal with the suburbs of Luoyang, only four nunneries are mentioned: three clustered quite close to each other east of the

section of the *Book of the Wei* that discussed the court ranks for women under the Northern Wei, and in the biography of Empress Dowager Feng.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid, 55.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid, 56.

⁴⁷² As previously discussed, the Eternal Peace Monastery was the most resplendent monastery in the realm and was a focus of the political life of the empire as it housed political prisoners as well as gifts from foreign governments, and it is also said to have housed both *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs*. It was the project of Empress Dowager Hu, who ascended the monastery upon its completion. The *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* provides a long account of the political intrigues of the complex as well as a description of its grandeur. For this account, see: Ibid, 15ff.

city center and one lone one to the south, but none to the north or west.⁴⁷³ All of these nunneries, like most of the monasteries as well, were established with imperial money, being funded by princes and eunuchs. Unlike monasteries, however, nunneries seem to be clustered around the city center, with the majority being very close to the palace, whereas monasteries seem to be quite spread out throughout the suburbs.⁴⁷⁴ What this tells us, perhaps, is that unlike *bhikṣus*, *bhikṣuṇīs*⁴⁷⁵ were more often located in the city and within close proximity to the court than were their male counterparts, which agrees with Schopen's similar findings that early nunneries in India were located in urban settings, unlike monasteries, which could certainly be found in the suburbs and beyond.⁴⁷⁶

Permeable Boundaries and Social Mobility

To begin this examination of the lives of imperial *bhikṣuṇīs* at the Northern Wei court, it is necessary to begin with a discussion of the main opportunity for social advancement that the practice of Buddhism brought to the lives of Chinese women, the Buddhist monastic institution, or *saṃgha*. The introduction of the *saṃgha* to early

⁴⁷³ East of Luoyang city center, we have: the Nunnery of Clear Manifestations (Mingxuansi 明懸尼寺; Ibid, 66); the Nunnery of the Prosperous Wei (Weichangsi 魏昌尼寺; 77); and the Flourishing Prospect Nunnery (Jingxingsi 景興尼寺; 77). On the south of the city, we have the Perfect Enlightenment Nunnery (Zhengjuesi 正覺尼寺; 139).

⁴⁷⁴ For more on the urban location of nunneries in Indian Buddhism, see: Schopen: 2008, 229-256.

⁴⁷⁵ Although I am discussing *bhikṣuṇīs*, the text uses the abbreviation “ni” 尼 instead of the full Chinese word “biqiuni” 比丘尼. It has been suggested to me that Yang may have been referencing women with a different ordination status than *bhikṣuṇī*, by calling them “ni,” but I maintain that this is simply an abbreviation and does not suggest any knowledge of precise ordination levels.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, 245.

medieval China was a radical undertaking in that it necessitated a certain redefinition of gendered notions of work and virtue that were unavailable to women in pre-Buddhist China. Specifically, as Schopen has noted with respect to Indian Buddhism, prior to the establishment of the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs*, there were no “natural” or “cultural” all-women social spaces in India outside of the realm of prostitution and interestingly Schopen notes a few of the ways in which the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs* and the urban community of prostitutes seems to have mimicked each other.⁴⁷⁷ In China, the establishment of such a cultural all-woman space – the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* – had profound ramifications on notions of family and gender roles that we see changing quite drastically around the fourth century; giving women the opportunity to depart from the traditional family structure and take up lives as single, independent members of the Buddhist community without mothering children or protecting their virtue through gaining standing as eminent wives, a topic we will discuss in detail below. Though this change in no way meant that a woman severed herself from her family,⁴⁷⁸ it accords with what Lo Yuet Keung argues is a shift toward sexual abstinence for women in medieval China, a shift that saw a certain redefinition of female virtue from the idea of sexual procreation to the ideal of pure chastity.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁷ Schopen 2008, 20.

⁴⁷⁸ For a fascinating study of the dual virtues of *bhikṣuṇīs vis-à-vis* their representation as Buddhist renunciates belonging to a Confucian family system, see the work Pang Shiyin and her study of biographical tomb inscriptions of Tang *bhikṣuṇīs* (2010, 77–96). Similarly, also see: Yao 2008, 2010, 2011.

⁴⁷⁹ Lo 2010, 22–56.

Throughout the biographies contained in the Chinese biographical compilation, *The Lives of the Bhikṣuṇīs*, we see women using entrance to the Buddhist community as an alternate and sometimes complementary path to social virtue than what was offered by the traditional patriarchal family structure. For example, the text contains stories relating Buddhist identification with themes of rape resistance with the threat of death,⁴⁸⁰ marriage resistance by fasting almost to death,⁴⁸¹ and using entrance to the community of *bhikṣuṇīs* as a cause for divorce and means to escape a bad husband.⁴⁸² Although the text contains many stories of this type, I will cite just one example here, the biography of the fourth-century *bhikṣuṇī*, An Lingshou 安令首:

When she was young, Lingshou was intelligent and fond of study. Her speech was clear and beautiful; her nature modest and unassuming. Taking no pleasure in worldly affairs, she was at ease in secluded quiet. She delighted in the Buddhist teachings and did not wish for her parents to arrange her betrothal.

Her father said, “You ought to marry. How can you be so unfilial?”

Lingshou said, “My mind is concentrated on the work of religion, and my thought dwells exclusively on spiritual matters. Neither blame nor praise moves me; purity and uprightness are sufficient in themselves. Why must I submit thrice [to father, husband, and son], before I am considered a woman of propriety?”

⁴⁸⁰ Tsai 1994, 21. This is biography of Zhixian 智賢 (300–370 CE) who was stabbed more than 20 times for successfully resisting rape by the Prefect Du Ba 杜霸, of whom nothing else is known.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid, 27. This is the biography of Sengji 僧基 (330–397 CE) who did not take food or drink once she had been betrothed, but relented once her family allowed her to become a *bhikṣuṇī*.

⁴⁸² Ibid, 23. This is the biography of Miaoxiang 妙相 (4th CE) who divorced her husband by joining the community of *bhikṣuṇīs* because he did not undertake proper funerary rites after the death of his parents.

Her father said: “You only want to benefit one person – yourself. How can you help your father and your mother at the same time?”

Lingshou said, “I am setting myself to cultivate the Way exactly because I want to free all living beings from suffering. How much more, then, do I want to free my two parents?”⁴⁸³

This brief story well illustrates the conflict between Buddhist and Chinese perspectives on the social and religious roles of women, part of a more generalized conflict between Buddhism and Chinese thought situated in medieval Chinese society at a time when Buddhism was becoming an increasingly influential presence in the social fabric of China. Prior to the establishment of the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs* in the fifth century⁴⁸⁴, the religions of China provided little space for women to thrive outside of the family system, a situation linked to the tradition of Chinese thought which largely defines a woman’s virtue in relation to her family status, as an “inner person” in idealized constructions of social organization. This is not to say that women were not able to reach high levels of learning and social prestige in the pre-Buddhist religions of China, only that they did so as wives, mothers, and filial daughters. The example of the mother of Mencius is one such woman who has long been remembered in Chinese thought as the pre-eminent, ideal woman.⁴⁸⁵ She is intelligent, capable, strong-willed, and independent,

⁴⁸³ Tsai 1994, 20. For a brief but informative study of the use of filial piety to justify one’s practice of Buddhism, as seen in the early medieval period, see Arthur Wright’s translation of this same biography (1952).

⁴⁸⁴ The establishment of authentic *bhikṣuṇī* ordinations in China was not straightforward and required many attempts to ensure the validity of the ordaining body. For a history of this see, Heirman 2001, particular 275-276.

⁴⁸⁵ The biography of the Mother of Mencius is contained in the *Biographies of Eminent Women*, or *Lienüzhuan* 列女傳, and as the story goes, this amazing woman was the poorest of widows yet raised Mencius to be one of nation’s most celebrated philosophers. The mother of Mencius has popped up repeatedly in a number of handbooks for women

but her life is also defined by her role as a widow and as the mother of Mencius.

Furthermore, although in what we call “Daoism,” women have long had space to act in roles of religious leadership, the early tradition does not have a lineage of lone, female renunciates.⁴⁸⁶ Similarly, although the second-century Celestial Masters, or *tianshidao* 天師道, community certainly used Daoist priestesses in their liturgy and treated them as equal to and matched with their male members, they were married women or women partnered with men.⁴⁸⁷ Thus, although I in no way argue that Buddhism provided women with the sole means of participating in the religious life of early medieval China, as that

throughout Chinese history where she is consistently depicted as a model woman and mother. Most recently, I came across a board game for women in the Korean National Museum that is thought to have been created by Queen Inhyeon (1667–1710 CE) of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1897 CE). The game teaches morality by allowing women to work their way through the board, like snakes and ladders, and transform their status from that of a “wicked woman” to a “virtuous woman” and the Mother of Mencius is high on the way to supreme virtue. Recently, Beverly Foulks McGuire has discussed the prevalence of games of this type in East Asia (2014). The games that she discusses are not related specifically to women as some of them take the becoming of a Buddha or the gaining of official titles as their goal.

⁴⁸⁶ Although Robert Campany has pointed out that women can reach high levels of attainment in the tradition of Daoist transcedents, it is also the case that the women we have stories of are often wives who trump their husband’s abilities (Campany 2009, 197–198). As such, we do not have proof of a tradition of single Daoist female renunciants at the time of the entrance of Buddhism to China, and the rise of later lineages is undoubtedly indebted to the establishment of the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs* and the new opportunities that it furnished women with. Furthermore, the earliest sets of indigenous Chinese biographies that we have, the *Biographies of Lofty Gentlemen* (高士傳 *Gaoshizhuan*) and the *Biographies of Divine Transcedents* (神仙傳 *Shenxianzhuan*) list the biographies of men almost exclusively, with the former listing no biographies of women at all and the latter listing a very small minority, though it is notable that this text includes any at all.

⁴⁸⁷ For more on the roles of women in the Celestial Masters, see: Despeux and Kohn, 10–13.

would be proven wrong through a long history of Chinese women,⁴⁸⁸ I wish to argue that Buddhism brought a *new* means for participating in religion. This new means – renunciation⁴⁸⁹ – allowed them an identity that remained in relation with the patriarchal family system of China, yet was also one step removed from it.

This situation is somewhat more complex in the court of the Northern Wei because the court fostered an all-female social environment that saw women enjoying a higher degree of social freedom and mobility than we are accustomed to seeing in broad studies of women and gender in China. And yet these powerful women readily identified themselves with the Buddhist *saṃgha*. As we have seen, the nunneries of Luoyang were intimately connected with the court and with the women of it, through their names, benefactors, residents, and locations; however, what we need to ask is why. Why were women of the court, women who already held a high degree of social power, interested in advancing a parallel social institution similar to what they already knew at court? The answer, surprisingly, seems to lie with their married lives and the misadventures and insecurities that being a wife or a consort to the emperor or his retinue often engendered. As we will see below, although women of the court enjoyed prestige and power, this was always dependent on their relationship to their male kin for empresses and consorts were left abandoned and deposed after the death of their male partners. However, on the

⁴⁸⁸ Robin Wang has published a lengthy study on the histories of these various women (2003).

⁴⁸⁹ There are eminent women in Daoist traditions prior to the Tang when Daoist renunciation for women became common place; however, they are married women. For example, the woman/deity responsible for the Shangqing 上清 revelations, Wei Huacun 魏華存 (252–334 CE), was a wife and mother (Despeux and Kohn 2003, 17).

establishment of the imperially-sponsored Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs*,⁴⁹⁰ these women were able to find a refuge or a safety net in a community that divorced them from their married lives, even just temporarily in some cases. This refuge allowed them both the means to exist financially through the considerable assets of the community, and socially, by protecting their virtue by continuing to act as eminent female politicians in the service of the state, or the state's religion. The relationship between the women of the Northern Wei court and the Buddhist nunnery was as complex as the women's individual lives, and so it is to those lives we now turn.

Widowed and Deposed Women at the Imperially-Sponsored Jade Sparkle Nunnery

It has been pointed out that during the Tang Dynasty, women of the court who were widowed often joined up with the Buddhist, or by that time also the Daoist, nunnery.⁴⁹¹ This decision was likely practical for a number of reasons – after the deaths of their imperial husbands or the men to whom they were consorts, women were unable to return to their natal families and hence took up positions of relative safety and cultural prestige inside the nunnery. Although this situation is best understood in the court of

⁴⁹⁰ Likely the earliest court to have official ties with Buddhist nuns was the Jin (265–420 CE) (Chikusa 2002, ??)

⁴⁹¹ It is my contention that the rise of Buddhism precipitated the rise of institutional Daoism throughout the early medieval period so that by the Tang it is not uncommon to hear of ordained Daoist monastics. The works of the Northern Wei Daoist thinker and reformer, Kou Qianzhi, provide proof of this trend toward a sort of Buddhist-influenced rise of institutionalized Daoism. On this topic, Livia Kohn argues that although Daoism borrowed Buddhist forms of monasticism, this was not a straight copy and that Daoist monasticism still retains uniquely Chinese and Daoist elements, possibly related to the Celestial Masters. In my opinion, the Celestial Masters themselves may also have been looking toward Buddhist elements, though this is much less clearly seen than in later developments in Daoist monasticism. For more on this, see: Kohn 2003, 43 ff.

Empress Wu, as she was such a dynamic figure and her rule so well studied, the situation is very similar in the Northern Wei. In fact, the Northern Wei may be our earliest and best-documented example of such a situation. As we have seen, in the Northern Wei, Emperor Wencheng established the women's bureaucracy as a means of organizing the large numbers of women at the court, and it seems that in some cases, these women became *bhikṣuṇīs* at decisive junctures in their lives, often after being widowed. For a historical example of such a case, I offer below a translation of the biography of a certain *bhikṣuṇī* whose dharma name was Ciyi 慈義, and who was a widow of the court. The biography is from her tomb inscription:

The tomb memorial from the Northern Wei monastery of Jade Sparkle for the nun Ciyi whose name was Ying, and whose family name was Gao, and who was from Bohai. She was the daughter of the elder brother of the August Empress Zhaoming.⁴⁹² She was appointed as a lady of the court in the 4th year of the Jingming reign (504 CE) and in the 5th year of the Zhengshi reign (509 CE) she was elevated to the position of empress.⁴⁹³ When the emperor died, she expressed her aspiration to traverse the gate, leave behind the secular world, and became a *bhikṣuṇī*.

On the 24th day of the ninth month of the first year of the Divine Tortoise reign (November 12, 518 CE) she died in the monastery. On the 15th day of the 10th month (December 3, 518 CE) her funeral procession went to Mt. Mang⁴⁹⁴ with over 100 disciples of the King of the Dharma. The far off sun shone its light all over and little sprouts grew on the grave mounds. This venerable epitaph was carved into stone so that her intention may never be forgotten.

⁴⁹² This empress was a concubine to Emperor Xiaowen and was posthumously given the title empress.

⁴⁹³ Gao Ying therefore became the Empress of Emperor Xuanwu. As empress, her full name was Xuanwu Huangtaihou Gaoshi 宣武皇太后高氏, or the Xuanwu's August Empress from the Gao family (d. 518 CE).

⁴⁹⁴ Though the text here is unclear, the epitaph is from the mausoleum at Mt. Mang.

Her epitaph says: The three emptinesses⁴⁹⁵ are obscure and profound; the path of the four fruits⁴⁹⁶ is long and continuous. Those who can attain the gate are few: only those who are clever and worthy and who harmonize and unite themselves with this highest good are alone liberated from their conditions. They leave behind this defiled world, are liberated from fetters, and their actions follow the path of the Western contemplation.⁴⁹⁷ As a result of the exhaustive cultivation of merit that she has constantly embraced for many years, how can it not be that that during this long life calamities have been destroyed and that she has ascended to heaven?

The assembled followers cry out their longing and tears and snot tumble down. As they are grievous and absorbed in their laments, they beat and pull at themselves. The elder inscribed this for the people of the world so that they will forever be in accord with the mysterious source, through the model that is inscribed here on this rock, and by the virtuous path that is here transmitted.⁴⁹⁸

This epitaph thus tells us a number of important things: 1) that Empress Gao (Ciyi)⁴⁹⁹ was of low birth, coming to the court under the care of her aunt, but that she managed to reach the highest possible position of empress; 2) that upon the death of her husband she became a *bhikṣuṇī* at the imperially-sponsored Jade Sparkle Nunnery; 3) before the death of her husband, her biography makes no association between her life and Buddhism – she is not characterized as having any special Buddhist affiliation or innate

⁴⁹⁵ These are the three levels of the understanding of emptiness. As described in the *Vajrasamādhi Sūtra* these are the emptiness of marks, emptiness of emptiness, and emptiness of that which is empty. This could also be the emptiness of self, emptiness of dharmas, emptiness of emptiness.

⁴⁹⁶ This denotes the four phases toward arhatship: stream enterer, once returner, nonreturner, arhat.

⁴⁹⁷ I cannot quite make sense of this turn of phrase, but I assume it to be related to rebirth in the Western Pureland, as knowledge of this Pureland is commonly seen in contemporaneous inscriptions.

⁴⁹⁸ Zhao 1992, 102. The entire inscription, along with the Chinese text, is available in appendix one.

⁴⁹⁹ In all other cases, I have referred to monastics by their dharma names throughout. However, because Ciyi was an empress, I have opted to use her title.

learning as some of our other cases below display. It is thus evident that for Empress Gao, the move from an eminent position at court to an eminent position at the nunnery was a lateral move that saw her retain her status without being at the mercy of the court.

Fortunately for us, since Empress Gao was an empress, she has a biography in the *Book of the Wei*, and that biography provides much more information as to why she entered the nunnery without any prior Buddhist affiliation. And we should not be surprised to learn that the person behind Empress Gao's lateral move into the nunnery was none other than Empress Dowager Hu. Empress Gao's biography tells us quite directly that although Empress Gao had birthed both a son and a daughter – a prince and a princess – and although she was a venerated figure at court, that:

As soon as Suzong was established [as emperor], she was given the respectful title of Retired Empress (*huangtaihou* 皇太后) and was directed to become a *bhikṣuṇī* and dwell in the Jade Sparkle nunnery. There were no celebrations and she did not enter the court.⁵⁰⁰

This drastic banishment from court to nunnery is of course because Suzong is none other than Emperor Xiaoming, the son of Empress Dowager Hu, whom she birthed by the husband of Empress Gao, Emperor Xuanwu, as she was his consort, and whom she then ruled behind. The biography then goes on to make clear that Empress Dowager Hu took Empress Gao's daughter in charge and that three years later, in the first year of the reign of the Divine Tortoise (518 CE), Empress Dowager Hu was personally responsible for the murder of Empress Gao, an act that “all under heaven” condemned. Although as

⁵⁰⁰ Wei 2009, 336; translation is my own. Original text reads: 及肅宗即位, 上尊號曰皇太后. 尋為尼, 居瑤光寺, 非大節慶, 不入宮中.

we have earlier noted, the *Book of the Wei* purposely paints Empress Dowager Hu as corrupt, and now murderous, it is certainly the case – without embellishment – that any empress who birthed a successor to the throne immediately found herself in a precarious position. In the case of Empress Gao, this position was temporarily rectified through entrance to the nunnery, but it seems that even the Jade Sparkle could not save her from the dangers of the court of the Northern Wei.

Empress Gao is not alone in this situation. The *Book of the Wei* tells of a number of other women who became *bhikṣuṇīs* under similar circumstances relating to widowhood or to misadventures with their husbands. The most sensational of these stories is preserved in back-to-back biographies of empresses from the *Book of the Wei*, empresses of the Feng family of Empress Dowager Feng. These two empresses were sisters and nieces to Empress Dowager Feng and they were also empresses to the second of the child emperors whom Empress Dowager Feng ruled behind, Emperor Xiaowen, or Gaozong. As the biographies go, Emperor Xiaowen was very fond of the first of these sisters, a certain Feng Run 馮潤 (d. 499), who also came to be known as Empress You of Xiaowen (Xiaowen You Huanghou 孝文幽皇后). However, although Emperor Xiaowen favoured her, and although she did eventually become his empress, her path to ascension was not easily wrought. Before Emperor Xiaowen could marry her, her biography says that she became sick and was taken away from her family by Empress Dowager Feng and was made a *bhikṣuṇī*. Assuming, then, that she was both lost to her illness and to the nunnery, Emperor Xiaowen then married her sister, a certain Feng Qing 馮清 (d.u.), or the Empress Fei of Xiaowen (Xiaowen Fei Huanghou 孝文廢皇后) whom we know

much less about. What we do know is that while married to the second of the sisters, Emperor Xiaowen still harboured intense desire for the first, so much so that after the death of Empress Dowager Feng, Emperor Xiaowen went and retrieved the first sister from the nunnery and appointed her as his *Zhaoyi*, second only in importance to the Empress, her sister. As one might imagine, this created all sorts of problems for Emperor Xiaowen and his first wife, and he eventually resolved these problems by simultaneously promoting Feng Run from *Zhaoyi* to empress and deposing Feng Qing and making her become a *bhikṣuṇī* in the same nunnery as Empress Gao, the imperially sponsored Jade Sparkle nunnery.⁵⁰¹ Unfortunately this was not a good decision for Emperor Xiaowen, as Feng Run was not a faithful empress and her relations with other men were known at court, so well-known that Emperor Xiaowen distanced himself from her completely but forced her to commit suicide on his death so that they could be buried together in order to preserve the Feng family name. She did not agree to this suicide and was murdered.

Thus, as the tomb inscription and biography of Empress Gao, as well as the lives of the Feng sisters, well illustrates, the entrance to the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs* was undertaken at times as a sort of security or protection for elite women in precarious positions, whether they wanted to be there or not. The most obvious of these positions is widowhood, a situation wherein a woman essentially loses her family belonging and is able to create a new one through enrollment in the monastic community. This crossing from the imperial institution to the monastic one – in all cases a nunnery funded by the

⁵⁰¹ Both of these stories are preserved in the two sister's biographies in the section on empresses in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009, 332–335). They are also available in translation in: Holmgren 1979, 316–322.

government, the Jade Sparkle nunnery – allowed a woman to maintain her virtue in society by ensuring that she did not remarry or mother any children that were not of her original husband and it also safeguarded her status by allowing her a lateral move to an eminent position in the nunnery, one that saw her eventually buried with honours on her death. Finally, the entrance to the community of *bhikṣuṇīs* also ensured her a more solid means of belonging, perhaps a more peaceful one even, than the court itself could offer. This is well illustrated by the tumultuous lives of the Feng sisters who were both made to become *bhikṣuṇīs* because of political pressures and whose positions at court were in no way guaranteed or peaceful. In such a way, the nunnery thus acted as a refuge for these court women, and the permeable boundaries between the Northern Wei court and the Jade Sparkle nunnery well attest to this.

Renunciation as Political Move: The Case of Ciqing

Having just told the stories of three women who were sent to the nunnery by powerful Empress Dowagers – sent there due to their situation as the wives and/or lovers of emperors – I would now like to use a different tomb inscription to tell a different type of story, that of a woman who seemingly self-elected to become a *bhikṣuṇī* but did so with an entirely political motivation. The following is the story of Wang Zhong'er 王鍾兒 (dharma name, Ciqing 慈慶), a woman whose husband's clan staged a rebellion against the rulers of Yuzhou 豫州⁵⁰² and who was, therefore, taken from her husband and placed in the court. Her unfavourable position at court, however, turned out to work in

⁵⁰² Yuzhou is the old name of Jiuzhou 九州. During the early life of Ciqing, Yuzhou was not under the control of the Northern Wei. The Northern Wei took Yuzhou in 500 CE.

her favour as she became both a *Zhaoyi* and a *bhikṣuṇī*, a move that was seen as a signal of her renunciation of her husband's family and of her prior rebellious identification through her clan. This strategy proved very well undertaken for Ciqing as she lived to be 86 years old, to serve under three different emperors, and to become an eminent personality at court despite her questionable origins. Upon her death, the then emperor, Emperor Xiaoming, came to her bedside, wept, and took charge of her funerary rites. Her lengthy inscription was authored by the court secretary, and here I offer only excerpts:⁵⁰³

This is the tomb epitaph of the Wei Superintendent of *bhikṣuṇīs*⁵⁰⁴ known as Ciqing. As to her secular family, her family name was Wang and her given name was Zhong'er. She was from the suburbs of Taiyuan and was the daughter of the Governor of Dangqu, Wang Qianxiang. Her inborn vitality was auspicious and true, she was endowed with a spirit that was both calm and fierce, her inherent nature was a dwelling place for unadulterated virtue, and her determination and consciousness were both liberal and far-reaching.

As such, the calibre of her intelligence was such that when she was just an infant she had already become flexible and compliant to all rules and exceeded, therein, to become completely virtuous. At the age of 24 she was therefore sent as a bride to Yang Xingzong, the *zhubao*⁵⁰⁵ of Yuzhou,⁵⁰⁶ Governor of Nandun from Hengnong.⁵⁰⁷ They harmonized their dissimilar foreign customs and observing the rules of etiquette she

⁵⁰³ Zhao 1992, 261. The entire inscription, along with the Chinese text, is available in appendix one.

⁵⁰⁴ All of the other women in this chapter are identified as “*bhikṣuṇī*” in their titles, except for Ciqing who is only listed as a “*ni*.” Though it is possible that reflects a different status than that of *bhikṣuṇī*, I believe it to be an abbreviation and so have rendered my translation as “*bhikṣuṇī*.” If further research proves that the Northern Wei knew of differing ordination ranks or codes then I will revisit this choice.

⁵⁰⁵ 主簿: An official court title from the Han through the Sui whose responsibilities are not well defined.

⁵⁰⁶ During the Northern Wei, Yuzhou 豫州 was located in what is now Xinyang 信陽 City, Henan 河南 Province.

⁵⁰⁷ Hengnong 恒農 is located in modern-day Henan province.

became a wife. In the matters of women's work she was already brilliant and in the rites of wifely standards she was uniquely clever.

Then the Clan Patriarch Tanzhi⁵⁰⁸ went out to invade Zhangshe,⁵⁰⁹ and took with him his family and retainers. When they reached Yuzhou he served as the Garrison Commander of Xuanhu⁵¹⁰ and the people of Runan⁵¹¹ always thought him rare. He then seized the city and raised rebellion. In order to respond to this external attack, an imperial army was sent to suppress it. Ciqing was plundered and placed in the Menial Service but was eventually made the *Zhaoyi*⁵¹² of the Hulu clan to the Emperor Jingmu, or Gongzong.

This first section of Ciqing's tomb biography provides the background for how to understand her life: despite her relatively peripheral origins and early involvement with counter-imperial forces, she succeeded in becoming an eminent person at court. Her life in the service of the Northern Wei sees her go from the menial service to the office of the *Zhaoyi* and she apparently made this happen through both her good nature and her affiliation with Buddhism. The next section of her biography explains as much:

⁵⁰⁸ No further information is available on Yang Tanzhi. In dynastic histories, Tanzhi is a popular name of the time period yet there is no mention of a Yang Tanzhi. However, the "Buddhist Studies Authority Database Project (佛學規範資料庫) identifies Yang Tanzhi, but seems to use this very inscription as the source text.

⁵⁰⁹ Zhangshe 長社 is in modern-day Xuchang 許昌, Henan province and is quite close to Yuzhou.

⁵¹⁰ The administrative center of Yuzhou is called Xuanhu, normally spelled, 悬瓠. However, our inscription spells the name of the city 玄瓠, which I take to mean the same.

⁵¹¹ Runan 汝南, which is still the name for a prefecture in Henan.

⁵¹² From this we should understand that the clan of Ciqing's husband defended the city walls of Yuzhou from a rebellion by the peoples of Runan, and it seems that the men may have died, but not the women. As a result, Ciqing – as she was of high rank – was taken at a high rank at the court, the rank of *Zhaoyi*.

In person she was nurturing and merciful and she was considered to be of the same birth as Empress Wenzhao.⁵¹³ During the Taihe period⁵¹⁴ she resolutely sought to leave home and though she continued to dwell in the imperial household, she took the pure conduct of a *bhikṣuṇī*.⁵¹⁵ In that situation she assisted with both high and low, and grasped a pure mind that was completely consistent from beginning to end. From this came her patience and vigour.⁵¹⁶ She esteemed and valued the dharma current and with humane feeling and harmony she showed reverential virtue. When she undertook the rank of the Cap of the Women's Chambers,⁵¹⁷ she served and protected the former emperor during the time of his youth and she guarded the sage's body [i.e. the emperor] during the days of his lengthening years. Although she grew weary from this labour, she never had a neglectful heart, and although her strength wavered in old age, she never dared to depart from these activities. Verily, this was a direct path that she relied on and a connection to compassion and sincerity.

The picture painted in this section is of a hardworking and virtuous woman who claims for herself an eminent position through a sort of self-cleansing by working diligently at court and in the service of the religion. It is interesting to note, here, that though “she took the pure conduct of a *bhikṣuṇī*,” her epitaph really says nothing of her Buddhist actions or affiliation – instead she lives at court and serves the emperor and the

⁵¹³ Empress Wenzhao 文昭皇后 (469–497 CE) was the wife of Emperor Xianwen, the emperor responsible for drastic policies of sinification such as moving the capital to Luoyang and whom Empress Dowager Feng ruled behind as regent. She only became his wife after the death of Empress Dowager Feng. Hence her participation at court would have overlapped for a number of years with that of Ciqing.

⁵¹⁴ The Taihe 太和 period runs from 477–500 CE and was under the rule of Emperor Xiaowen.

⁵¹⁵ Here is the only mention in the text to her rank as a *bhikṣuṇī* and it is quite unclear whether or not she took the tonsure in any official capacity. What is clear, however, is that although she took up the actions of a Buddhist renunciants, she remained living at the court and maintained her status as a *Zhaoyi*.

⁵¹⁶ Both patience, or *renru* 忍辱, and vigor, or *jingjin* 精進, are two of the Six Perfections or *pāramitās*.

⁵¹⁷ It is unclear what exactly this rank is but it seems to be a position of administrative power in the inner quarters of the court, perhaps akin to a *Zhaoyi*.

inner chambers. So why is her Buddhist affiliation important? We find the answer in the part of her epitaph, which offers her eulogy:

As to the way of her nature, although she was pure and tranquil, and of a pure and calm vitality, still she was not able to escape being mixed up in spurious pathways. Yet she was able to regulate both religious and secular and therein her pure intellect was able to shine forth. Indeed, she was a glowing model of purity, like clouds departing from mountain peaks or the moon descending on a pond.

She suffered family tragedy but did not dare to become worldly-wise. She trusted in destiny and was at peace with her times. At first she had gone astray and lacked opportunities. A solitary shadow, she roamed about easily. Exhausting herself in the evening and struggling at twilight, she devoted herself to the four stages of *dhyāna*⁵¹⁸ and she sought out and was faithful to the six perfections. This brought her mind to direct illumination. In practicing this with earnestness, she was able to create a hole through which she could glimpse non-thinking⁵¹⁹ and the mystery that shines forth without words.

Though quite poetic, the eulogy makes clear that though she was of a good nature, she had been involved with the politics of her family at a young age. Further, she was able to distance herself from these family matters through recourse to the Buddhist monastic community that provided her with a virtuous life path outside that of “following” family. This was obviously a good strategy for her as, on her death on June 17, 524 CE the emperor himself, who has come to her bedside to put in order her medicine, decreed:

“Throughout her life, this *bhikṣuṇī* has served five courts and venerated three emperors. Her glorious name has grown old and her dharma gate has aged. We have been together from the day of incipience in the Eastern floriate realm, from the beginning of Our birth. Every day, with

⁵¹⁸ These are the four stages of concentration that allow one to progress from the realm of desire to the realm of form.

⁵¹⁹ Literally non-thinking, or *feixiang* 非想 this term refers to the state of being beyond thinking and non-thinking, and is akin to Buddhist contemplation.

compassionate commands, she served and protected me. Yesterday in the late afternoon she suddenly met with her death and departed and now We are personally suffering with pain in Our bosom. It is fitting that We supply the burial requisites, completely according to a separate decree. Wang Shao, the Senior Supervising Secretary, will personally supervise the funerary rites, and there will be 1500 kinds of gifts given. Furthermore, We posthumously confer on her the rank of Superintendent of the *Bhikṣuṇīs*, On the eighteenth day, she was entombed on Mt. Mang to the north of Luoyang.”

It is hard to imagine a more eminent death than one that involves the emperor's own grieving, especially for a woman who was not of his family or a lover; however Ciqing managed just that. Although there are many noteworthy pieces of information offered in Ciqing's tomb inscription, the role that Buddhism played in the creation of her imperial identity is among the most interesting. Wang arrived to court in a precarious position – having been the wife of a leader who staged a rebellion against the court. Yet, as the inscription says, the court did not keep her as a slave but rather gave her a high rank, that of *Zhaoyi*, while supporting her monastic life and giving her the title of “Superintendent of the *Bhikṣuṇīs*.” Her biography tells us that although she had chosen the religious life, she remained living at court and took care of the emperors. Her inscription further tells us directly that this path of court/religious practice allowed her a break from her family – a family of rebels – a break that was undoubtedly necessary for the establishment of her proper moral standing at court. Of this break with her family, the inscription tells us that although it was difficult and although at first Ciqing did not agree with it, she had faith and was at peace. This peace characterizes her epitaph and provides the backdrop for understanding why the emperor was so grieved at the loss of her life.

Therefore, in negotiating a court-*saṃgha* identity that saw her maintain eminence in both institutions while also being cherished by the emperor himself, Wang also accomplished something that few people did during the Northern Wei – longevity. Living to the age of eighty-six years and serving three emperors, Ciqing enjoyed a long and prosperous life as a single woman of high virtue who was employed in both the service of the empire and the empire's religion. As an employee of the court, she was a *Zhaoyi* who acted as the “Cap of the Courtesans,” a position which suggests that she was in charge of the matters of the inner court. As a *bhikṣuṇī*, the inscription does not tell us much other than that she was posthumously given the rank of the “Superintendent of *Bhikṣuṇīs*.” And yet what the inscription also tells us about her Buddhist affiliation – through its omission of such information – is that she seems to have not undertaken the activities we might usually associate with life as a Buddhist renunciant: there are no mentions of Buddhist leanings in the description of her early life, she does not seem to teach dharma or chant texts, and she only retires to the nunnery to die. Indeed, the picture painted in her tomb inscription is one of a tireless servant to the realm, leaving behind her family through official recourse to the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs* in order to show her allegiance to the realm and not to her own clan, and thus safeguard her political standing. In sum, the biography in her tomb inscription tells the story of a woman who moved through two prestigious institutions – the court and the *saṃgha* – and who did so to such effect that she went from a traitor to the court to one of its most cherished members and lived that way to the rare age of eighty-six.

Buddhist Faith and Court Service

Although I have just argued that Ciqing used her identification as a *bhikṣuṇī* to safeguard her political situation, through distancing her from her family of rebels and thus showing her allegiance to the court and advancing her long and prosperous life at court, I now want to introduce the story of a woman who seems to have quite the opposite trajectory. Unlike Ciqing's Buddhist faith, which reads as an important political undertaking that allowed her to remain at court, the following is the story of a woman whose Buddhist devotion seems to be the reason why she was placed at court in the first place. As we will see in the following inscription, our *bhikṣuṇī* in question "leaves home" at an early age, seemingly of her own volition. Her biography reports that as a *bhikṣuṇī* she was a famed teacher of the dharma, so famous that she was personally brought to the court by Empress Dowager Feng, and spent the remainder of her life in the service of it. As her inscription states, she served three emperors and two Empress Dowagers, namely Emperors Wencheng, Xiaowen, and Xuanwu as well as Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu. She reached the end of her life during the reign of Empress Dowager Hu, who was her niece. Furthermore, we know from her title, "Superintendent of the *bhikṣuṇīs*, the Dharma Master, Shi Sengzhi"⁵²⁰ that she held rank both at the court and in the *saṃgha*. As for her religious associations, she is labeled a "Dharma Master" so was clearly venerated for her learning of the dharma and she also appears to take the family name *Shi* 釋, the first character of the name of Śākyamuni when rendered in Chinese. This is the

⁵²⁰ *Biqiunitong fashi shisengzhi* 比丘尼統法師釋僧芝

only occurrence I have seen in Northern Wei materials of such a situation and may suggest a full *vinaya* ordination for Sengzhi, though her inscription says nothing of this and like the other epitaphs here discussed – with the exception of Ciqing – she is labeled as *bhikṣuṇī*. Her title, “Superintendent of the *Bhikṣuṇīs*” matches what we already know about the administration of imperial Buddhism in the Northern Wei through our early “Superintendent of the Śramaṇas,” Tanyao, and his predecessor, the “Religious Superintendent,” Faguo. Other than Ciqing who is given the title posthumously, this inscription is the only one I have yet found wherein a woman holds such an eminent administrative role, and hence it is extremely valuable. Unlike Tanyao and Faguo about whom we know much from the *Book of the Wei*, the same text is silent on the figure of Sengzhi and thus her rather lengthy inscription⁵²¹ appears to be our only source of information:

The Dharma Master was called Zhi and her secular family name was Hu. She was from Linjing in Anding.⁵²² In the times when Yu Bin⁵²³ undertook to govern and inherit rule, the Duke of Hu was bequeathed Gui as a state.⁵²⁴ This is completely recorded in the upright records of old, but they

⁵²¹ Again, I have here excerpted important sections of her inscription, but the full text along with the Chinese is available in appendix one.

⁵²² Anding is a commandery of in Gansu province and the ancestral home of the Anding Hu Clan.

⁵²³ Yu Bin 虞賓, or Danzhu 丹朱, is the supposed son of the legendary emperor Yao 堯 (c. 23rd BCE). As legend has it, Yao passed his throne to Emperor Shun 舜 and not to Danzhu because the latter was incompetent.

⁵²⁴ According to 36th scroll of the *Annals of the Historian*, or the *Shiji* 史記, in the Section on the Chen family, the Duke of Hu was a descendent of Shun’s through the daughter of Emperor Yao who was Shun’s concubine and who was from Gui 媯 and took the family name of Gui. When Yao died, the lands were then distributed to his sons, with the Duke of Hu being given the ancestral land of his mother.

have not been scrutinized.⁵²⁵ She is a descendent of Yao Ban, who was the chief the Capital Guardsman of the City and Director of sending out decrees and who was the Duke of Bohai and a Military Consultant. She is the daughter of the Observer of Martial Uprisings, the Regional Inspector of Hezhou, the sagely Military General Yuan who settled the four corners of the world, who was a palace attendant and Director of the Chancellery in Daxia.⁵²⁶ She is the younger sister of the Dynasty Founding Duke Zhen of the Commandery of Anding, whose prestige was equal to the Three Offices, who was also the Secretariat Supervisor and a Palace Attendant. She was the aunt of the Empress Dowager who enjoyed her counsel.⁵²⁷

Her biography thus begins with a lengthy enumeration of her pedigree. This is important for two reasons: 1) although, as we will soon see, she left home at an early age, her family background is important for her status, and; 2) she is from the Hu Clan from Anding, who were themselves peripheral but ambitious people who often appear in the stories of the *Book of the Wei*. Empress Dowager Hu was herself from this clan. After this introduction to Sengzhi's lineage, we get to hear more of her own character:

Endowed with a rectified qi of the three generative forces,⁵²⁸ and embracing the clear numen of the seven governances,⁵²⁹ with a way and a

⁵²⁵ As we saw in chapter one, the Tuoba ruling house went to great lengths to create an eminent genealogy for itself, even matching its lineage one-for-one with that of the Han Chinese. Here, with the Hu clan, we see a similar process whereby the Hu are asserting ownership over territories of China proper. The Hu name itself is problematic as many non-Chinese tribes took this name in their move towards a Sinitic identity and because “Hu” simply means “barbarian.” For our case, here, we are dealing with the Hu Clan from Anding, a commandery in Gansu, who became increasingly powerful throughout the Northern Wei although their pre-origins are somewhat obscure. For an overview of the importance and reliability of this lineage in the tomb inscription, see: Wang 2008, 89.

⁵²⁶ Daxia is the name of a Xiongnu Kingdom during the Sixteen Kingdoms.

⁵²⁷ This is a reference to Empress Dowager Hu. In the Empresses biography it does indeed mention an aunt who had become a *bhikṣuṇī*.

⁵²⁸ According to the *Book of Changes*, the three generative forces (*sancai* 三才) are: heaven, earth, and man.

⁵²⁹ It is unclear what exactly the “Seven Governances” or *qizheng* 七政 refers to, but the *Shangshu* 尚書 identifies it with astral constellations, whereas the *Shangshudazhuan* 尚書大傳 and the *Shiji* 史記 identifies it as heaven, earth, humankind, and the four seasons.

cognizance that gave rise to knowledge, with a spirit and disposition that emerged from the nature of heaven, she cleansed all impurity from her pure nature and studied the teaching of the mysterious gate. She left home at seventeen and her practice of the precepts was clear and pure. When she reached the age of twenty her virtue and her principles were both deep and broad. Through concentrating on dhyāna she attained the six supernormal powers⁵³⁰ and she serenely read until in one hearing she could recite the *Niepan*, the *Fahua*, and the *Shengman* in more than twenty scrolls. As such, she encouraged the entire assembly to recite sūtras. The dharma masters refinements and elegance were universally displayed, so that those who admired her righteousness were like clouds. Her marvellous voice was like a fleeting song and as such those who returned to the path were like a forest.⁵³¹ Because her voice was able to shake the Wei River, her virtue reached all those in both the Qi and the Liang mountains.⁵³²

Because of all of these abilities, Sengzhi was called to the court by Empress Dowager Feng and given a high position – that of “Superintendent of the *Bhikṣuṇīs*.” Yet the inscription further tells us that in this position she took care of the emperor and the empress as well as the inner chamber of the court and it is unclear if she lived in the nunnery or at court. Furthermore, on her death, all the women of the court gathered at her funeral to mourn her passing. These women included retired Empress Feng Qing whose story we heard about above as well as Ciyi, or Empress Gao. A large portion of her tomb inscription is dedicated to her eulogy, which reads as a testament to her Buddhist faith:

Her *prajñā*⁵³³ was without a source and the character of her spirit had no measure, and she profoundly explained the ultimate path. From whence did this miraculous knowledge arise? Her supreme humanity is absolutely complete and attains the very limits. Through mental absorption and

⁵³⁰ This is a Buddhist term and is usually listed as: unimpeded bodily action, the power of divine vision, the power of divine hearing, the power of awareness of the minds of others, the power of the knowledge of previous lifetimes, and the power of the extinction of contamination. (DDB)

⁵³¹ Both “like clouds” and “like a forest” are poetic ways of saying that there were many of them.

⁵³² These are two mountains in modern-day Shaanxi province.

⁵³³ A Sanskrit term meaning wisdom.

entering purity, she has cleansed her wisdom and melted her form. She turns the wheel in the triple world⁵³⁴ flowing completely through the six destinies.⁵³⁵ Her own goodness she did not consider virtue, but instead she worked on behalf of all existence. Her subtle mirror has passed away⁵³⁶ and this mysterious awakening accords with emptiness. She yearned for that other light and has dropped away from this realm of dust. She had penetrating insight into the *vaipulya*⁵³⁷ and her knowledge of the *vinaya*⁵³⁸ was deep and rich. The minutest word she studied carefully, and in the profoundest meanings she was quite at ease. As for the jeweled seat, she immediately ascended it; as for the sound of dharma, she could immediately sing it. As such, heterodox views could be converted to orthodoxy, erroneous doctrines brought to an end, virtues esteemed and teachings venerated, practices profound and respect long lasting. She served three emperors and welcomed and cared for two empresses. As for beings she truly prized them; yet, as for the self, she considered it empty.

Though the eulogy further continues on in this way, the final portion of her epigraph describes a unique funerary scene:

The smell of the flowers fills the four directions, the Nirvana Carriage⁵³⁹ is high and lofty – these are true customs of compassionate inclination.

⁵³⁴ This is a Buddhist reference to the realms of desire, form, and formlessness.

⁵³⁵ The Six Destinies are the subdivisions of the three realms stated above in which a person can be born in to depending on their karma, and they are: the realm of the gods, the realm of the titans, the realm of humans, the realm of animals, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the hells.

⁵³⁶ Ie, the enlightened mind.

⁵³⁷ The *vaipulya* literature refers to all the collected sūtras and other texts of the Mahāyāna.

⁵³⁸ *Vinaya* refers to the legal texts of the tradition; the rules of behavior for clergy and laity.

⁵³⁹ This translation is conjectural and based on both context and contemporaneous usage. The characters themselves *huanyu* 洹輿 make little sense together except when we consider that 洹 is perhaps an abbreviation for *nihuan* 泥洹, an early transliteration of the Sanskrit “nirvana.” If we can accept that this might be the case, then we can find further support for the translation of “Nirvana Carriage” in the *Book of the Southern Qi*, or *nanqishu* 南齊書, which in the biography of Liu Biao 劉彪 (d. u.) tells of a *nihuan* 泥洹輿 (our *yu* 輿 and this *yu* 輿 are variants), which was used in funerary practice to transport one to their tomb. Furthermore, the *Biographies of the Tripiṭaka Masters from the Great Ci'en Monastery in the Great Tang* (*datong daci'en si sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳: T50n2053) tells of a similar funerary carriage, also a *nihuan*.

Sanskrit echoes enter the clouds with pitiful emotion and bitter sound. The congregation of disciples wails aloud in a respectful send off, saying that they are orphans, desperate in their singular abandonment. The mountains and the water carry out their change in colour; the sun of the spring beats down on the grasses and yet they do not flourish. Is this not sorrow that advances? Pain indeed is without respite.

The funeral scene that is indicated in this inscription is a rarity; the use of such Buddhist elements as a “Nirvana Carriage” and Sanskrit chants is not one that I have seen in other inscriptions and is thus fitting for a woman whose inscription takes pains to connect her with Buddhist teachings. The image offered in this tomb inscription is one of an extremely pious and learned woman who self elected for the renunciant life at the age of seventeen and whose talent in chanting scripture is only matched by the profound depths of her awakening.⁵⁴⁰ As a political entity she was in charge of the administration of the inner court, presumably of the Buddhist leanings of the women at that court. At her death, the most famous of these court women, as well as two female *weinas*, attended her funeral while weeping madly. And yet, although her inscription reads as a testament to her pure faith, we must also remember that she is from the Hu family of Empress Dowager Hu, a family from the outskirts of the empire looking to increase their power. This is made clear in the opening sentences of the epigraph wherein the attempt is made

Finally, though less closely related, the Tang dynasty, *A Record of Personal Memos on Textual Explanation of the Marvelous Scripture* (*Miaojing wenju sizhi ji* 妙經文句私志: X596) refers to a similar Nirvana Carriage as a *niepanche* 涅槃車.

⁵⁴⁰ It is fascinating to note that although the text characterizes her as enlightened it nowhere mentions that she attained *nirvāṇa*. Instead the text suggests – in a much more Daoist way – that her spirit roams freely through cinnabar valleys in what is perhaps a Pureland. In Northern Wei inscriptions there is, in fact, very little mention or understanding of the notion of *nirvāṇa*, yet mention of the Pureland is quite common. This is true of both mortuary and votive inscriptions of the time period.

to recognize the power, prestige and history of the Hu clan from Anding, whose most famous member was certainly Empress Dowager Hu.

Furthermore, when we consider the make-up of Empress Dowager Hu's court and particularly of her inner chamber, an interesting continuity arises: Both Sengzhi and Ciqing lived and worked in this court from the time of Empress Dowager Feng to the time of Empress Dowager Hu, perhaps being two of the longest-serving Northern Wei court officials ever recorded. They died four years apart, having spent their lives in the service of the court. Empress Feng personally appointed Sengzhi, whereas Ciqing was placed as a *Zhaoyi* in the service of Emperor Wencheng's father, during the period when Wencheng was ruling, but did not become a *bhikṣuṇī* until the Taihe reign when Empress Dowager Feng was ruling behind Emperor Xiaowen. Thus we have a situation in which we know, for sure, that our two Empress Dowagers worked to create an elite stratum of court women of Buddhist affiliation. Empress Dowager Feng herself established the *bhikṣuṇīs* Sengzhi and Ciqing and it was under Empress Dowager Hu that both of them were awarded spectacular state funerals at the site of the imperial mausoleum at Mt. Mang. Furthermore, as we have seen in other stories, Empress Dowager Feng sent Empress Feng Run to the nunnery, thus setting in play the intrigues between her, her sister, the nunnery, and Emperor Xiaowen, and Empress Dowager Hu sent the women of her court to the nunnery when Erzhu Rong attacked Luoyang and then herself proceeded to shave her head and enter the nunnery. Hence the connection between elite women and Buddhism that we see in the Northern Wei was not casually undertaken – it was quite otherwise. Our Empress Dowagers backed the creation of a set of elite Buddhist women

who moved back and forth between court and *saṃgha*, and they did so because the close alignment between these two institutions not only was good for the politics of the Northern Wei but added a second layer of social prestige and social security to the women of the court – the Buddhist community of renunciant women. This was important, for although Northern Wei women held high positions in Northern Wei society and politics, they did not form a matriarchy – they were subject to the workings of their male kin, fathers, husbands, and sons, and thus their positions were far from secure.

To highlight both the status and the restrictions of our court women, the inscriptional record contains the epigraph of one other Northern Wei *bhikṣuṇī* whose dharma name was Zhishou 智首 and who was of a very high status – Yuan Chuntuo, a princess of the Tuoba house – but who was twice married and was thus only able to renounce late in life, despite her initial religious inclinations.⁵⁴¹ She was the granddaughter of Emperor Jingmu (Jingmu Huangdi 景穆皇帝: 428–451 CE) who himself was never actually the ruler of the Northern Wei but was posthumously given the title by his powerful son, Emperor Wencheng. Like Sengzhi above, she was a fervent Buddhist, but unlike Sengzhi she was unable to renounce and was made to remarry after the death of her first husband. Although the biography does not say so explicitly, it may be that her political situation as a Tuoba princess made marriage for political alliance a necessity, particularly when one considers that she married into the Mu 穆 clan, who had

⁵⁴¹ Many thanks to Lee Jen-der for sharing with me her forthcoming manuscript, “Women, Families and Gendered Society” which will be published in the *Cambridge History of China, Vol. II. The Six Dynasties*. Her article contains a summary of the life of Yuan Chuntuo as well as analysis of the social worlds in which she lived.

long been in allegiance with the Tuoba. Her biography is quite lengthy and need not be quoted in full here,⁵⁴² but it begins thus:

The Lady's name was Chuntuo, and her dharma name was Zhishou. She was the granddaughter of the Jingmu Emperor Gongzang⁵⁴³ and she was the fifth daughter of Prince Kang of Rencheng.⁵⁴⁴

With coiled roots like jade peaks, a select character like a jasper forest, a fine appearance like a budding flower, and a breezy spirit like a pliant mulberry, she was discreet and sharp witted even in her infant years. In gentleness and grace, she passed through her childhood days. Prince Rencheng was partial to her and his affection was very deep. He saw that she was different from the rest of the girls. She was long in his embrace and never left his lap. However, when she had just turned seven years old, the Prince died and was mourned. Due to her divine emotion and filial nature, having not yet studied it [filiality] at all, still she knew how to do it. She cried tears of blood and feasted on melancholy, without quitting both day and all night.⁵⁴⁵

When she reached a marriageable age⁵⁴⁶ it was requested that she be married to the Mu Clan and thus she strenuously undertook women's work and was endowed with all manner of womanly virtue. However this excellent person (her husband) soon passed away and feeling then as only half a person she spoke of her inclination to regretfully sever the three followings⁵⁴⁷ and she went to undertake religious libations, mindfully doling out the ginger water and singing the *Song of the Yellow Stork*.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴² The full text of the translation, as well as the Chinese, is available in appendix one.

⁵⁴³ Emperor Jingmu, or Tuoba Huang 拓跋晃, was the eldest son of Emperor Taiwu but was never himself an emperor, being given this title posthumously by Emperor Wencheng who was his son. He is also known by his temple name Gongzong 恭宗 and had previously been known as Prince Jingmu 景穆太子.

⁵⁴⁴ Prince Kang of Rencheng (Rencheng Kangwang 任城康王: 447–481 CE), or Tuoba Yun 拓跋雲, was also the son of Emperor Jingmu and hence the brother of Emperor Wencheng.

⁵⁴⁵ According to Lee Jen-der this is a typical Confucian expression used to depict children mourning the deaths of their parents (forthcoming).

⁵⁴⁶ Literally the age in which she would wear a hairpin (*ji* 笄), about age 15.

⁵⁴⁷ Meaning, literally, that she did not want to remarry and hence “follow” another man.

⁵⁴⁸ According to the *Biographies of Eminent Women* (*Lienüzhuan* 列女傳), which was composed in the Han dynasty by Liu Xiang 劉向 (77 BCE – 6 CE), a young widow from Lu 魯, Tao Ying 陶嬰, composed the *Song of the Yellow Stork* (*Huanghu zhige* 黃鵠之

Her eldest brother, The Grand Mentor and Prince for the Propagation of Culture,⁵⁴⁹ opposed her faithful decisions and feelings and he resolutely did not authorize her actions.

Thus we know from this section of her epitaph that she was something of a child prodigy held dear by her father and who knew the proper filial rituals to perform at the death of her father though she was just a child and had never studied them. However, after the death of her father, she was married to the Mu clan only to be widowed shortly thereafter. As a widow, she desired to “sever the three followings” by not marrying again and instead taking up the religious life; however her brother objected. Then, as the biography tells us, she was met by Duke Wending of the Xing Clan who respected her path and brought her to court as his wife. Of their relationship, the text says:

Duke Wending considering her of lofty family and eminent virtue and that her talents were equal to those of ministers and generals, brought her into the service of the civilized imperium where she fit in just like a fish in water. In this eminent cap handed down from antiquity, her merits accrued to the present time. And with grace, she accordingly made a match and came to be the wife of the lord, and together they were happy like the *qin* and the *se* (lute and zither), living in harmony like the flute and the *xun*. She never spoke of her personal dwelling, but instead was like a guest in her respectfulness. She honoured her mother-in-law with complete courtesy and was triumphant in not neglecting even one person. She dwelt with her husband’s sister in nothing but delight and was able to retain harmony among all the ranks.

歌) during the Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu* 春秋 770–476 BCE) Period in order to lament her situation of being both orphaned and widowed young and did so in order to express her intention to remain celibate and alone. Hence we see here very clearly the association between traditional notions of widowhood and chastity being conflated with new notions of Buddhist renunciation for women.

⁵⁴⁹ Again, Lee Jen-der has identified her brother as Yuan Cheng 元澄 (467 – 519 CE) who was the Grand Tutor of the court (forthcoming).

The text then further tells us that she remained in this position for much of her life, doing menial work like sweeping and washing and also taking charge of the rearing of the Duke's child from a past mother.⁵⁵⁰ She was successful in such a matronly role, never complaining and working through what is described as an exhausting domestic life. However, when the Duke himself passed away, Zhishou made a bold proclamation on her life wherein she laments having been remarried. After this, her inscription tells us, she took up religious devotion wholeheartedly, eventually gaining permission from the ruler to leave her husband's house and move to the house of her son-in-law:

When the General of the Chariots and Horses bade farewell to the world, she attentively accomplished her wifely virtues: at night she did not weep and carry on; in the morning, she did ritual lamentations with great compassion. Thereupon, she lamented: "I have endured suffering my whole life, and once again I must distance myself from bitterness and difficulty. Previously, I was ashamed of having yielded to another's grasp, and now I am embarrassed of my unshackled heart."⁵⁵¹ I have lost virtue in serving people as there is no joy in another's house. Happiness will be born out of sorrow just as results come forth from causes."

Then having discarded the self and her worldly anxieties, she entrusted her person to the dharma gate, discarded and put aside desire and excess, abided in leisure and righteous waters, exhaustively investigated the scriptural canon, completely penetrated the rules of discipline, treasured

⁵⁵⁰ Although the idea that a woman may be both a *bhikṣuṇī* and a mother seems somewhat counter-intuitive from the modern perspective, it was nonetheless a popular trope in tomb inscriptions of *bhikṣuṇīs* from the Tang dynasty and seems to be indicative of changing notions of women's virtue that had come to include the passing of Buddhist teachings from mother to children, and quite often, the idea of safe-guarding a woman's widowhood through recourse to a celibate community. For an in-depth study of these Buddhist mothers in Tang dynasty inscriptions, see: Yao 2008. Shayne Clarke has also worked extensively on Buddhist monastics and their family ties, see 2008 for a discussion of monastic motherhood and 2014 for a full length study of monastics and the family.

⁵⁵¹ Here she is lamenting a dual struggle, the first being her remarriage after intending to remain celibate and widowed after the death of her first husband, and the second being the shame that she feels at her connection to and sense of loss at the death of her second husband whom she originally did not want to marry.

the six perfections,⁵⁵² and considered great wealth to be completely useless. When she had attained the karmic retribution of the 10 benevolent practices⁵⁵³ she quickly attained extinction under the shade of twin trees.⁵⁵⁴

Soon after fulfilling her long-cherished goal of full-time religious devotion, Zhishou passed away on November 29, 529 CE and was buried at Mt. Mang. In her death, she managed to accomplish what she could not in her life – the renunciation of married life and the severing of the three followings – for she specifically told her son-in-law that she wished not to be buried beside her husband, but instead alone, hence departing from the ritual maxims laid out in the rule of the three followings. The text states:

When she was nearing the end, she awoke to reality, divided her brilliance, and let go of her supports. She commanded that she be buried separately from her husband's site and thus she accorded with the mind of one practicing the path. Her son and daughter followed these stipulations and dared not disobey her indications.

Thus, although both Zhishou and Sengzhi had similar life paths that brought them to both Buddhism and to the service of the court, they had different results: Sengzhi was from a family hungry for power and brought to a powerful position at court because of her Buddhist devotion; Zhishou was from the royal Tuoba family but was blocked from full-time religious service by the necessity of political marriage to the Mu Clan, long-

⁵⁵² The Six Perfections are also known as the Six Pāramitās and are the Buddhist virtues of charity, morality, forbearance, effort, meditation, and wisdom. When entering the Buddhist path one seeks to perfect these virtues on their way to enlightenment or buddhahood.

⁵⁵³ Similarly, the Ten Benevolent Practices of refraining from killing, stealing, adultery, lying, speaking harshly, speaking divisively, speaking idly, greed, anger, and false views characterize the path of Buddhist progress toward awakening.

⁵⁵⁴ This is reminiscent of Śākyamuni Buddha who entered Parinirvāṇa under twin trees.

time associates of the Tuoba. What these two stories suggest, then, is that a woman under the Northern Wei court – though able to work between the court and the *saṃgha* – was not able to have complete control over her life. Though the dual institutions of court and *saṃgha* offered safety and security to the women of the court, alliance with both of these institutions was always affected by the political life of court and greater society, despite the sincerity of one's religious inclinations.

Between Court and *Samgha*: Making an Imperial *Bhikṣuṇī*

The above biographies represent such a diversity of goals, motivations, and personal considerations in the lives of these *bhikṣuṇīs*, that taken together they beg the question of what, if anything at all, unites these women as members of a monastic community. A partial answer to this question can be found in their deaths. As *bhikṣuṇīs* with strong familial and/or administrative ties to the court, these women were all buried at Mt. Mang, just outside of Luoyang. Mt. Mang houses the tombs of the royal families of many dynasties, but notably from the Northern Wei, and is hence an invaluable cache of information on the life and social fabric of the court at the end of the dynasty. The fact that these women were all buried there suggests that they were identified as members of the royal family and/or court first and foremost, and that their affiliation with the community of ordained monastics was a secondary status.⁵⁵⁵ Furthermore, their death also facilitates the way in which we can know about them from our present perspective.

⁵⁵⁵ Indeed, we have no way, at present, of knowing whether or not any of these women undertook *vinaya* ordination. We know from the *Biqiunizhuan* that the southern tradition had undertaken *vinaya* ordination for women by this time, but we have no information on the northern tradition, and certainly the biographies of our four women do not mention any such affiliation.

As members of the royal elite, these *bhikṣuṇīs* were buried with imperial honours, including lengthy tomb epitaphs, and it is only through the existence of this kind of monument that we can today find the traces of their fascinating lives. And the traces do tell us that the lives of many of our women intersected either at court or at the court-sponsored Jade Sparkle Nunnery. As we have seen, other than Zhishou, our *bhikṣuṇīs* worked in the court of Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu and were in contact with each other. Hence these women moved in and through a select but easily identifiable social stratum that we can begin to reconstruct through their stories.

This social stratum was defined and constructed by both the Buddhist institution and the court, but in a variety of different ways. Taking two of the most disparate of these biographies, those of Ciqing and Zhishou, the questions we must ask about them take an almost entirely opposite path: for Ciqing we can question her Buddhist faith in the sense that her move toward Buddhist renunciation seems entirely politically motivated, for it was as a strategy to distance herself from her family of rebels after having herself been taken by the court during their rebellion; whereas for Zhishou we can question not the veracity of her faith but that of her married life as she had sought not to remarry but was forced to due to her political life as a Tuoba princess. Hence political might and political alliance were important factors in the lives of our women and shaped not only their relationship with the Buddhist community but also with the empire. Further, when adding in the stories of Empress Gao and Sengzhi we are faced with even more permutations of

this power play between court and *saṃgha*⁵⁵⁶ in the lives of these eminent *bhikṣuṇīs*.

Empress Gao was forced into the nunnery through the political might of Empress Dowager Hu, who considered Empress Gao a political threat as she had mothered a son to Emperor Xuanwu, whose wife she was, and thus was a possible contender in the power play that followed the death of Xuanwu. Sengzhi, however, was called to the court by Empress Dowager Feng at an early time in the Empress's power, when she herself was busy crafting both a state-sponsored Buddhism and a powerful women's bureaucracy that saw her as the figurehead of both – as a female ruler in the guise of Buddha.

The point that needs to be made here is that these women, though moving in the same social stratum, did so very differently, and yet did so all for the same reason: as women of the court and/or the royal family their lives were shaped by their specific relationships with their royal families, particularly with their male kin. Although we know that in the Northern Wei women did enjoy a considerable amount of social freedom, we also know that this was not absolute as women never ruled except behind men and, as we have seen, there is no shortage of political intrigue and sabotage in the stories of how the women of the Northern Wei court positioned themselves with regard to their men. As the mothers, mothers-in-law, caregivers, wives, courtesans, and lovers of emperors, the power of our women was carefully maneuvered through a relative position that prevented them from independence by making them dependent on the emperor or

⁵⁵⁶ I am here using the word “*saṃgha*” to refer to the Buddhist community of renunciants that was known in the time of the Northern Wei. Whether or not the members of this community were properly ordained and thus formed a *saṃgha* in the Indian sense of the word is impossible to prove with the available sources. Yet I choose to use the word as that is how it was known to the people of the time.

their political husbands. And unfortunately for our women of the Northern Wei, imperial men tended not to live very long lives and their deaths sent their female relatives into a struggle for power and position. Yet, the women of the Northern Wei found a new way out of this predicament – establish an elite female renunciants community as an alternate, prestigious, all-female social institution that would run parallel to the court. Although the women in the biographies above all show very different lives and very different motivations for becoming *bhikṣuṇīs*, what is clear is that they all used a joint court-monastic identity to enjoy long and prosperous lives in the service of the court and the royal family, a situation not available to many others. In fact, the life options represented in the lives of these women show considerable freedom of movement, a freedom that allowed them to negotiate their lives and identity between two tremendously powerful social institutions, the court and the monastery, and that this ability was both unique to the Northern Wei and a defining characteristic of their identities as *bhikṣuṇīs*.

Bhikṣus at Court?

The rise of the monastic organization in China, contributing as it did to a powerful all-women social structure, had a profound effect on the lives of Chinese women: it provided them options specific to their gendered roles in medieval Chinese society and hence offered them increased social mobility and social security. Yet, men, too, were involved in court Buddhism. As we have seen in this dissertation, the monks Faguo and Tanyao played the important role of the dynasty's early monastic administrators who worked between court and *saṃgha*, and as we will see in the next chapter, there are many other *weina* of both the male and female sex. In looking for further records of these

monastic-court administrative men, our test case of inscriptions – the imperial mausoleum at Mt. Mang – contains two biographical tomb inscriptions for men that have clearly identifiable Buddhist affiliation. Both of these men, however, are not recognized as *bhikṣus*; instead they share the title of the “*Śramaṇa* of the Office for the Clarification of Buddhist Profundities.” But their titles do not end there; for one, his complete title is the “The Wei *Śramaṇa* of the Office for the Clarification of Buddhist Profundities who is the Dharma Teacher and the *Weina*, Huimeng,”⁵⁵⁷ and for the other he is called, “The Grand Superintendent *Śramaṇa* of the Office for the Clarification of Buddhist Profundities who is the Dharma Teacher Sengling.”⁵⁵⁸ Therefore, just as women’s court titles show a fascinating admixture of Buddhist bureaucratic power and courtly political power, so too do men’s. One difference, however, is that although women with such titles seem to be in charge of both other women at court as well the imperial family, the two men listed with such titles held positions wherein they were responsible for supervising both male and female monastics.⁵⁵⁹ Unfortunately one of the tomb inscriptions for these

⁵⁵⁷ *Weigu zhaoxuan shamen douweina fashi hui meng* 魏故昭玄沙門都維那法師惠猛: Zhao, 507.

⁵⁵⁸ *Weigu zhaoxuan shamen datong sengling fashi* 魏故昭玄沙門大統僧令法師: Zhao, 311.

⁵⁵⁹ *Zhaoxuan Shamen* 昭玄沙門; the term 昭玄 remains somewhat unclear, however it is a type of Buddhist administrative rank created in the Northern Wei and the persons who held it were responsible for policing both male and female monastics (Xing 3835). According to Hucker, this person was responsible for Buddhist education throughout the empire (1985, 117). The title is connected with its own office, the *Zhaoxuan si* 昭玄寺, which, according to Charles Muller, is cited in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* to refer to the office in charge of the *bhikṣuṇīs* quarters. Yet, a search through reference materials and the Taishō turns up no other reference to this being an office in charge of *bhikṣuṇīs* other than Soothill (303), who Muller relies on for his dictionary. Although there seems to be no further evidence for labelling this office as one in charge of *bhikṣuṇīs*, this may

court *śramaṇas* is badly corrupted and exists only in fragments, but the other one tells a great story:⁵⁶⁰

The tomb epitaph of the Grand Superintendent *Śramaṇa* of the Office for the Clarification of Buddhist Profundities who is the Dharma Teacher, Sengling. He was tied to the Du family and was from the capital. When he was a child he was already skilled, and was determined to go after pure emptiness. And then, while still just a boy, he was liberated from secular life and returned to the Way. He studied and straightaway became widely knowledgeable and his goodness was likewise universal. As he dispersed the contents of his book satchel and wet his quill, he was at ease and was completely self-so. He was like one who fords streams and hunts after a flock so abundant that it was equal to the sum of the Huang and the Han. He debated the treatises of the ominous and the arcane and even set in order the most indiscernible. With excellence, he took up the three levels of emptiness and left no traces, he completely penetrated the nine classics,⁵⁶¹ and dwelling in his remote room he therefore cried out like a bird on a distant bank.

Gaozu⁵⁶² graced his hermitage, determined that his writings were both great and full, that they were of the Śākya clan, and that they comment on the meaning of the wheel of the dharma. Thereupon, he heeded to the customs of the Emperor and desired to give rise – both in sleep and in waking – to a happy life like a river reed at rest. He took up his staff and began to roam. Arriving at this point was like shaking off dust and in this fashion he attempted to dry up the cavern and exhaust the depths of the

make sense as we will see later on the alignment of women's courtly ranks with men's under the northern Wei created the offices of the *Zhaoyi* 昭儀 for women. There are also a number of other ranks for women that refer to them as “昭,” such as *Zhaoxun* 昭訓, *Zhaohua* 昭華, and *Zhaorong* 昭容. Schopen argues that the tendency toward “anxious” monastic men and their supervision of *bhikṣuṇīs* certainly does exist in Indian materials, that this worry shows not the status of *bhikṣuṇīs* as an oppressed minority, but rather reveals the fact that *bhikṣuṇīs* were seen as clear competitors with the *bhikṣus* who sought to ‘control’ them as a means of protecting their own status. I tend to agree with him. For more, see Schopen on “The Suppression of *Bhikṣuṇīs* and the Ritual Murder of their Special Dead in Two Buddhist Monastic Codes”: 2004, 329ff.

⁵⁶⁰ Again, I here offer only excerpts. The full text as well as the Chinese is available in appendix one.

⁵⁶¹ A set of texts for which the content is unknown, but which is mentioned by Ge Hong in the *Baopuzi*.

⁵⁶² Emperor Xiaowen.

teachings. In so doing, he knelt on his knees, sighed in joy, paced back and forth, and put aside his weariness.

Unlike those of our *bhikṣuṇīs*, this excerpt from Sengling’s tomb inscription offers little information about his family other than to say that he is originally from the Du Clan. Instead, the focus is on the *śramaṇa*’s innate understanding of complex teachings, his intensive study, and his grasp of profound religious tenets. Because of this, he is directed by Emperor Wencheng to enter the religious life full time and to roam. He does so, but then the inscription further tells us that he was:

...made the highly venerated presider of the Dwelling in Leisure Monastery.⁵⁶³ He drank water from the spring and sheltered himself in the trees. He whistled longingly into the hazy mists and through mountains and valleys. He achieved the full embrace of his heart.

And then it says that:

...although he was an example of one who has left behind the defiled world and was above the fetters that entrap one in this life, still he was requested and beseeched to become the Rector of the *Śramaṇas*.⁵⁶⁴ He frequently made pleas to withdraw from this post, but he reached his end without seeing them authorized. Since he did not obtain permission he still undertook his rituals and went on to cooperate with respect of the law.

The remainder of the inscription details the *śramaṇa*’s wish to leave behind his administrative position so as to concentrate on his religious practice, but it also makes the point that he never achieved permission to do so and eventually succumbed to his fate.

The eulogy section expresses this issue quite poetically:

With his heroic virtue having been born from the heavens, his aim was to find ease in the lofty heavens, and like an orphan, he plucked out all the dust from his appearance and by himself grasped “the middle of a ring.” His way was one of cooperation with all things and his actions were at all

⁵⁶³ *Juxian Si* 居閑寺.

⁵⁶⁴ *Shamen douweina* 沙門都維那

times harmonious so that he praised the 100 generations and made the 1000 burdens float in the breeze. His way was one of finding peace in the black robes of the court: his voice soared above the scarlet gates of the palace, he was seen doubling his veneration for the emperor, and his letters were repeatedly sent off. His elegant treatises moved the heavens and his pure speech shook the moon, and although people were always coming to him, his voice never wavered.

This tomb inscription, although telling the story of a religious adept in the service of the empire, is markedly different from those of our *bhikṣuṇīs*: it says nothing of Sengling's secular family except that he was "tied to the Du family." As such, the inscription purposely removes standard family information such as fathers, grandfathers, and further ancestors. In a similar vein, the inscription offers absolutely no discussion of the personal life of this *śramaṇa*, seeking instead to position him as a lone ascetic. And herein lies the major difference between his inscription and those of our *bhikṣuṇīs* – that in being participants in medieval Chinese society, both the identities of Buddhist men and Buddhist women were shaped by their gendered roles in that society. For women, this meant that a Buddhist identity continued to include a family identity which was associated with the three followings of daughter, wife, and mother; however, for a man, his Buddhist identity could also be united with pre-existing Chinese religious tropes open only to men – in this case, the ideal of hermetic life in which it was acceptable to shun social obligation and court responsibility.

In so far as identifying this hermetic ideal in the life of our *śramaṇa*, his inscription, as pointed out above, cites both references to the *Zhuangzi* and to a set of nine classics mentioned by Ge Hong, both of which place him in the Daoist literary tradition more than the Buddhist one. Moreover, his epitaph describes his religious

transformation as a sort of merging with the Dao that melts time away and allows his spirit to soar even though his body remained in the service of the court. Although he spent much of his life as a servant of the court, the inscription tells us that he continually objected to this role but that his petitions never met with imperial favour. This rejection of courtly airs, service, and rituals is a standard trope in the Chinese eremitic tradition, and not one that we see in the lives of our *bhikṣuṇīs*. As Robert Campany has shown, this sort of “freedom from social constraint” was an important component of a Chinese Transcendant’s “cultural repertoire,”⁵⁶⁵ and as the presider of the Dwelling in Leisure Monastery, Sengling fulfills these predictable behavioural patterns of Chinese transcendents – he wanders through mountains and valleys, whistling, and enjoying a life of leisure in the comfort of the Way. Furthermore, the inscription makes no mention of any particularly “Buddhist” sounding activities. Other than the Emperor’s own declaration that his writings were in line with Buddhist teaching, and of course the emperor piling official Buddhist titles on him, we see nothing of Buddhism: there is no Buddhist language describing his enlightenment, no mention of his ability to chant *sūtras*, no discussion of his making of merit or donation of images, and no hint at the Pureland.

Thus Sengling’s inscription is unlike those of our *bhikṣuṇīs*. The question, then, is why. Why does our *śramaṇa* have such a different religious identity than do our *bhikṣuṇīs*? The answer is, simply, that this ideal hermetic life was never one open to women in the early history of Chinese religions and by the time of the Northern Wei it was just beginning to develop through the establishment of the Buddhist community of

⁵⁶⁵ Campany 2009, 55 ff.

ordained women so that by the Tang there are indeed independent lineages of *bhikṣuṇīs* who practice a renunciatory lifestyle similar to that of their male counterparts.⁵⁶⁶ As previously discussed, prior to the establishment of the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs*, the religions of China provided little space for women to thrive outside of the family system, a situation linked to the tradition of Chinese thought which largely defines a woman's virtue in relation to her family status, as an "inner person" in idealized constructions of social organization. Thus, although the establishment of the Buddhist community of ordained women in China impacted the lives of our *bhikṣuṇīs* in important ways, these ways were, by and large, still constructed through gendered lines for, as we have seen, a woman often used entrance to a Buddhist nunnery not only to safeguard her social status in the event of losing it through losing her male kin, but also provided her with an alternate path to virtue by way of distancing herself from the intrigues of both sexual and filial ties.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the lives of the female members of the religious elite who served the Northern Wei court and whose tombs are preserved at the imperial burial site of Mt. Mang. In so doing, I have tried to complicate the notion of what it meant to be a *bhikṣuṇī* and to show that the role of *bhikṣuṇī* brought many opportunities to the lives of women, not simply an identification as a person of Buddhist faith. As

⁵⁶⁶ In her work on the Bao Shan 寶山 site of niches donated by Tang dynasty *bhikṣuṇīs*, Wendi Adamek has pointed out that although these women do show a fair amount of their own agency in the creation of the niches, their lives and their stories continue to be intimately connected with their family associations (2009).

bhikṣuṇīs, women had the opportunity to safeguard their livelihood and their status in society on the event of losing their social status through the political mishaps or the deaths of the men to whom they were related. In short, what I have argued is that women were interested in pursuing membership in the *saṃgha* because it offered a measure of stability that they could personally control in their lives that were otherwise measured by court intrigues, murders, and political rebellions. As such, they used the nunnery to shelter them in widowhood and in political siege, and they also used their power to send fellow female members of the court to the nunnery in order to rid themselves of political rivals. I then contrasted the lives of these *bhikṣuṇīs* with the biography of a contemporaneous *śramaṇa* of the court because the contrast provides an instructive case study of the different possibilities for religious life that was possible at a time when gendered notions of work, piety, and virtue were both changing and yet still important. Although the sources are too limited to be conclusive, what is clear from the inscription of our *śramaṇa* is that he has the option – at least ideologically – to have his religious identity defined through rejection of family and court honours, whereas this seems not to have been an option for our *bhikṣuṇīs*, or at least not one that they were interested in.

In the next and final chapter, then, I will continue to explore the unique and gendered contributions that the establishment of Buddhism as an imperial religion under the Northern Wei offered to women. Moving beyond the elite strata of empresses and imperial *bhikṣuṇīs* that we have until now been focused on, this next chapter will attempt to analyze – in so far as it is possible – the lives of women who helped to administer and promote the religion of Buddhism widely across the empire. By examining donor

inscriptions, the biographies of lesser court members, and stories of eminent *bhikṣuṇīs* in the wider society, I will show that Buddhism included women in both the economy of merit exchange that the religion undertakes as well as in the ranks of its most eminent representatives, and that women seem to have enjoyed this opportunity as they took it up in large numbers. Finally, I will argue that this participation of women at many levels in Buddhist society further contributed to the ability of women to lead public lives in the service of the non-Chinese court of the Tuoba Northern Wei.

CHAPTER FIVE. Administering Imperial Buddhism in the Northern Wei: Women in the Service of Society, State, *Samgha*

Furthermore the body of a woman is that which is used by others and cannot achieve self-sovereignty, and also that which grasps on to and makes many things – pounding herbs, milling rice, sometimes frying and sometimes grinding big and small beans and barley, pulling wool for weaving and spinning piles of it – as such all these many sorts of suffering are established without limit, and therefore a woman should respond to the sufferings of this body.

- Ascribed to the Buddha, on why a woman should change her sex and become a man.⁵⁶⁷

Having now studied a number of factors that lead to the close alignment of the female members of the court of the Northern Wei with the Buddhist community, this final chapter seeks to contextualize this alignment within the wider political and social worlds of the dynasty. In so doing, I will show that the support of the Buddhist tradition undertaken by the Northern Wei court brought about a situation wherein women, as political actors, *bhikṣuṇīs*, donors, and objects of reverence, were seen to be undertaking all manner of Buddhist activities throughout the empire. Through revealing, exploring, and analyzing the activities of these women, I will argue for what is in fact an observable historical reality – that the introduction and domestication of Buddhism to China was not only accomplished through ideas, but through the establishment of public institutions and related social processes, and that these involved the direct participation of women. These institutions and processes included the monastic organization and its relationship with imperial Buddhism, the establishment of an economy of merit exchange, and the recognition of individual persons as fields of merit.

⁵⁶⁷ See appendix three for the Chinese text and a longer selection of the sūtra offered for translation.

Finally, to provide a conclusion to this exploration of the new social and political lives that women enjoyed in the service of court Buddhism, I will argue that their roles as powerful, public, religious persons went along with a discernible re-thinking of traditional gender organization in the social worlds of early medieval China. This reorganization saw Buddhist women increasingly taking on public roles in both courtly and common society, often leaving behind their roles as “inner people” in the family unit in order to do so. Furthermore, I will argue that this opportunity to take up public works was not only an opportunity that was unavailable to them in the religions and related social organizations of pre-Buddhist China, but also that was presented to have been encouraged by the Buddha himself in the pastiche text, the *Sūtra on Transforming the Female Form* (*Zhuannüshenjing* 轉女身經).⁵⁶⁸

Much of this final chapter will be devoted to an analysis of the inscriptional record, as Buddhist inscriptions from the Northern Dynasties are the only source of information to come out of medieval China where women are represented in numbers and in positions equal to their male counterparts, doing all the things that men do in the service of Buddhism.⁵⁶⁹ Constituting a rare cache of information on the lives of medieval women, the inscriptional record reveals that women were active in the realm of public religiosity in the Northern Wei, and that they undertook a vast array of activities across that polity. In utilizing this record, I have until now focused on the lives of elite persons at the court of the Northern Wei as tomb inscriptions only record this high stratum of

⁵⁶⁸ See note 455 in the previous chapter.

⁵⁶⁹ For an engaging description of the problems associated with finding women’s voices in the textual record of China, with particular respect to Buddhist texts, see: Lo, 318-319.

society. In this chapter, I will attempt to show that the inscriptional record can speak to some extent for non-elite sectors of the populace and in so doing reveals a similar involvement of women in the service of Buddhism. As we will see below, we have donor inscriptions from village societies (*yiyi* 邑義 or *fayi* 法義) working in tandem with members of the *saṃgha*, inscriptions for lower-level bureaucrats and members of government such as generals and lesser lords donating images, and inscriptions from single donors working with *saṃgha* members.⁵⁷⁰ In presenting these materials for study, I seek only to establish that in all forms of inscriptions – from the imperial donors of Longmen building majestic buddhas to a village society of 50 people coming together to create a more modest image – women were active in every type of project and in every role, an opportunity granted them by the fact that the Buddhist tradition includes women in roles of religious leadership and monasticism and, as we will see, supported their roles as leaders of religious communities and active fields of merit.

Contrasting Portraits: From Ban Zhao to the Streets of Luoyang

Before embarking on a broad study of the roles of Buddhist women in the Northern Wei as seen in inscriptions and the social worlds represented therein, I would like to begin by offering two very disparate images of women preserved in the textual

⁵⁷⁰ Amy McNair (2007, 59) has calculated the cost of building a grotto and estimates that the cost of 3.1 square meter grotto, the one dedicated by the *bhikṣuṇī* Cixiang Huizheng, would have cost about half the annual salary of a government official. This is a not insignificant amount of money and in some cases we do indeed have lone donors who must have been of means. In some cases, however we have records of many donors coming together to build much more modest statuary or niches, hence suggesting that individually, they were not persons of great means or financial standing.

records of China, one much later than the other. The first is that of Ban Zhao. As discussed in chapter two of this dissertation, the Han Dynasty female scholar, Ban Zhao – one of the most famous women to have come out of the annals of Chinese history – proscribed women to a life of domestic affairs. Recommending that women remain the passive agents to their male counterparts, her works have long endured as a particularly clear, cogent, and eloquent description of gender organization as it has been classically idealized in Chinese society from the Han forward, and which has seen women defined as “inner” people or *nei* and men as “outer,” or *wai*. Furthermore, as scholars have shown, this bifurcation continued for almost 2000 years – into the late imperial period – where it continued to affect the architecture of homes, wedding practices, and the ways in which women were able to contribute to the economy and to domestic life.⁵⁷¹ In general, this inner/outer form of social organization has been taken to be linked to ideas of *yin* and *yang* wherein women are seen as *yin* and therefore passive, hidden, and creative; translated to family life as mothers who are the keepers of the family’s internal affairs. And we find further proof that this gender ideal was further put into social practice through the writings of Ge Hong and Yan Zhitui who – as also discussed in chapter two – show both lament and surprise at the fact that women of their time were increasingly taking on social roles, particularly northern women.

Although Ban Zhao’s delineation of the roles of women by no means meant that women lead lives of quiet subjugation – her own life, along with the lives of many others

⁵⁷¹ For representative studies of women’s lives in the inner chambers in the Late Imperial period, see: Ebrey, 1993; Ko, 1994; Mann, 1997.

would suggest otherwise – but only that for these early women, their stories, lives, and triumphs were always discussed in relation to their families. As eminent daughters, wives, and mothers, women could reach high levels of prestige in Chinese records, but it was seldom that they led lives independent from their male kin. In her introduction to *Images of Women in Chinese Thought and Culture: Writings from the Pre-Qin Through the Song Dynasty*, Robin Wang provides a thoughtful overview on the identities and virtues of women throughout Chinese history and ultimately argues that, “Chinese women’s social roles as daughter, wife, and mother are the embodiment of their *dao*,”⁵⁷² and hence her volume presents a number of instructive stories which show how acting as eminent female family members has provided Chinese women with fame and virtue throughout much of Chinese history.

Despite the longevity of the thought of Ban Zhao and others after her, the account of the lives of *bhikṣuṇīs* in *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* offers a completely different depiction of women, largely Buddhist women belonging to a northern dynasty though living in a stronghold of Han culture, Luoyang, not far from Ban Zhao’s own home province of modern-day Shandong 山東. The portrait of *bhikṣuṇīs* offered in *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* is one of a group of unmarried women enjoying public lives at the centre of the social life of the community, and doing so with imperial funding. *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* tells us, for example, that the *bhikṣuṇīs* of the imperially-funded Nunnery of the Happy View were having a very good time during the high-point of the Northern Wei, for their nunnery

⁵⁷² 2003, xii.

hosted a variety of entertainment opportunities for the men and women of the city. The Nunnery of the Happy View is described as being a place of leisure with lush, shady gardens where the populace – both men and women – came to enjoy a good show. The description of the nunnery in the text is as fascinating as it is detailed:

At the time of the “great fast” (six monthly fasts, *posadha*),⁵⁷³ music performed by women artists was often provided: the sound of singing enveloped the beams, while dancers’ sleeves slowly whirled in enchanting harmony with the reverberating notes of stringed and pipe instruments. It was rhythmical and breathtaking.

As this was a nunnery, no male visitors were [ordinarily] admitted, but those who were permitted to come in for a look considered themselves as having paid a visit to paradise. After the death of Prince Wenxian, restrictions on visitors were less strict, so that people had no trouble in visiting the nunnery.

Later, [Yuan] Yue, Prince of Ru-nan had it repaired. Yuan Yue was the brother of Prince Wenxian.

[Yuan] Yue summoned a number of musicians to demonstrate their skills inside the nunnery. Strange birds and outlandish animals danced in the courtyards and flew into the sky, and changed into bewildering shapes. They presented a show never seen before in the world. Unusual games and spectacular skills were all performed here. Some magicians would dismember an ass and throw the cut-up parts into a well, only to have the mutilated animal quickly regenerate its maimed parts. Other would plant date trees and melon seeds that would in no time bear edible fruits. Women and men who watched the performance were dumbfounded.⁵⁷⁴

In a similar explanation of the types of social activities that the *bhikṣuṇīs* of Luoyang enjoyed, when discussing another nunnery, the eunuch-funded Nunnery of the *Zhaoyis*, the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* records that the nunnery was home to one statue of a Buddha and two statues of bodhisattvas that were taken on

⁵⁷³ During a *poṣadha* feast, lay people take vows and the *Prātimokṣa-sūtra* is recited.

⁵⁷⁴ Wang 1984, 51-52.

procession on the seventh day of the fourth month of the year, a procession that was matched in fanfare with another procession undertaken by a private temple of one of the city's gentlemen, Liu Teng 劉騰 (d. 523 CE). That procession is described in carnivalesque⁵⁷⁵ terms; a party with all manner of enjoyments. The description runs:

As a rule, this statue would be carried out [of the temple] and put on parade on the fourth day of the fourth month,⁵⁷⁶ behind such [man-made] animals such as *bi-xie* and lions. [Variety shows would be held, featuring] sword-eaters, fire-spitters, galloping horses, flagstaff climbers, and rope-walkers—all being [demonstrations] of unusual skills. Their spectacular techniques and bizarre costumes were unmatched in the capital. Wherever the statue stopped, spectators would encircle it like a wall. Stumbling and trampling on each other, people in the crowd often suffered casualties.⁵⁷⁷

Yet the *bhikṣuṇīs* of Luoyang were not only known for their parties, they were also very studious, and those of the Nunnery of the Administrator of the Hu Clan were said to be the most learned teachers of Buddhism and the most skilful preachers of the dharma, and as such they often gave dharma talks to the Empress Dowager.⁵⁷⁸ Further in this vein, the *bhikṣuṇīs* at the official imperial nunnery, the Jade Sparkle Nunnery, were described as such:

Imperial consorts, as well as ladies of the harem, studied Buddhism here. Women of nobility interested in Buddhist studies also shaved their head and bade farewell to their parents, to come to lodge at this nunnery. Putting aside their precious and beautiful ornaments, they dressed instead in Buddhist robes and devoted themselves to the Eight Correct Ways, and adhered to the one Buddha-vehicle.⁵⁷⁹

⁵⁷⁵ A new dissertation has recently been prepared on the scale and nature of these processions in Northern Wei Luoyang and the impact they had on the creation of a larger East Asian Buddhism, see: Wong 2012.

⁵⁷⁶ In preparatory celebrations for the Buddha's birthday.

⁵⁷⁷ Wang 1984, 46.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid, 56.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid, 49.

Yet all was not well for these imperial women. Despite their devotion and their propensity for studying Buddhist doctrine and obtaining Buddhist texts, these women were also the targets of political machinations as they were the wives, mothers, and daughters of emperors. During a sacking of the city by the Xiongnu general Erzhu Zhao 爾朱兆 (d. 533 CE), the women of the nunnery were raped by his invading army.

According to our author, this event became the source of a popular joke in Luoyang at the time, which went: “Hurry up, you males of Luoyang! Plait your hair in the barbarian fashion, so the nuns of the Yaoguang Nunnery will take you as their husbands.”⁵⁸⁰ This crude joke likely points to the idea that the *bhikṣuṇīs* of Jade Sparkle Nunnery were not only sexually unavailable due to their monastic status, but also because they were the finest women of the empire and as such were regularly unavailable to a common soldier.

Beyond the social lives and activities of the monastics of Luoyang, although *bhikṣus* seem also to have been involved in the social fabric of the city and in teaching the dharma in much the same way as the *bhikṣuṇīs* were, they are also differentiated by one factor: meditation. In no place in the *Record* does it say that *bhikṣuṇīs* ever engaged in meditation, but it does describe one monastery, the Scenic Forest Monastery (*Jinglin si* 景林寺), which despite being in the noisy streets of Luoyang was a place where,

the monks sat erect, observing ascetic rituals. Feeding on the wind, they were absorbed in Buddhist teachings. Sitting cross-legged, they counted the breaths they took, in order to calm their minds and bodies for meditation.⁵⁸¹

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ Ibid, 59.

Thus, although both nunneries and monasteries were known as pleasure gardens where monastics studied texts and lay people went for leisure and entertainment, enjoying a fervent, carnivalesque atmosphere,⁵⁸² only a monastery is described as a place of quiet where *bhikṣus* engaged in meditation.⁵⁸³ This might account for the fact that in no place in the inscriptional record of the dynasty have I found a *bhikṣuṇī* referred to as a meditation master (*chanshi* 禪師), although this term is used in inscriptions for Buddhist men of the time.⁵⁸⁴

I offer this depiction of the *bhikṣuṇīs* of Luoyang as an instructive contrast to the prescriptions for women recommended by Ban Zhao, as far from Ban Zhao's advice, these women took on public lives in the capital city of the realm. At least according to Yang's recollection, the *bhikṣuṇīs* of Luoyang constituted a central aspect of the social life of the city – a social life punctuated by Buddhist celebration and enjoyed within the gardens and venues of Buddhist institutions. They did so as their lives were informed by two social currents that were unknown to Ban Zhao when she was writing her proscriptions: 1) the fact that, as discussed in chapter two and recorded by Yan Zhitui, women in northern society commonly ventured out into public life on their own, doing

⁵⁸² Mark Edward Lewis deals quite thoroughly with Buddhist temples as social spaces in the Northern Wei capital of Luoyang and says that the temples built in Luoyang were both a focus of piety for lay followers and a sign of the elite status of Buddhism, and that people of all walks of life enjoyed their gorgeous garden scenery. See: Lewis, 103ff.

⁵⁸³ One other such monastery is mentioned by Yang, the so-called Meditation Forest Monastery (*chanlin si* 禪林寺) in the Eastern Suburbs (75).

⁵⁸⁴ As for the Tang dynasty, Wendi Adamek has found the term *chanshi* used in the titles of *bhikṣunis* in her work on the niches of Bao Shan (2009, 12), but this is something I have not observed in Northern Wei inscriptions of any sort.

their own business and filling the streets with their carriages, and; 2) the existence of the Buddhist monastic institution which physically created space for women in the running of the religion by allowing them their own places and means of worship. These dual forces of northern social norms and the strong presence of Buddhism within both the imperial elite and in the populace worked to create a different picture of women's lives in the Northern Wei than what we are accustomed to envisioning when reading works such as Ban Zhao's. The remainder of this chapter will be spent in exploring what precisely these northern, Buddhist women did in the service of the state's imperial religion.

Women in the Administration of Imperial Buddhism

To begin this discussion of the administrative roles that women played in the service of the imperial Buddhism of the Northern Wei court and society, it is instructive to start with the figure of the *Zhaoyi*. As we saw in chapter two in our discussion of court ranks for women in the Northern Wei, the *Zhaoyi* was the highest position for a woman at court next to the empress. In this dissertation, we have already met a number of women who had a shared *Zhaoyi*-Buddhist biography; in fact every *Zhaoyi* that I have come across in the record of the dynasty is identified as Buddhist. In the previous chapter, we examined the life of Ciqing, the *bhikṣuṇī* whose marital family had staged a rebellion against the court and who was taken into the court at the level of the menial service, but eventually became a *Zhaoyi* – her Buddhist practice being an important factor in this transition. Other than her, we also saw in the story of the two Feng sisters in relations with Emperor Xiaowen that the first of them, after returning to court from the Jade Sparkle Nunnery, was made a *Zhaoyi* at the court. Finally, we saw in the descriptions of

the Buddhist temples of Luoyang that the city included a Nunnery for the *Zhaoyis*, which was funded by eunuchs and evidently populated by retired or deposed *Zhaoyis*. There are no counter examples in the record to this association of *Zhaoyis* and Buddhism, and therefore the assumption can be made that the association was a common and important one that saw women taking on an elite role in the service of the state's expansion and representation of Buddhism.

This association between women of elite status and Buddhism that we have seen with the aforementioned images of *bhikṣuṇīs* offered in *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries of Luoyang* as well as in the *Zhaoyi* of the court can be further verified by examination of the inscriptional record. By and large the inscriptional record agrees with that of the textual record in *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries* – that Buddhist women of the Northern Wei were active in the social life of the Buddhist tradition as administrators and representatives. When looking for women's voices and stories in tomb inscriptions such as the ones we have already seen, one problematic situation is that women of the Northern Wei, and of medieval China in general, are usually listed on their own tombstones with deference to the names of their husbands so that they are the wives of so-and-so, and not independent people in their own right. This is true of almost every biographical tomb inscription for women in the record, including those of empresses, with two notable exceptions: female members of the Buddhist monastic community, or *bhikṣuṇīs*, and women who held a particularly high administrative title at the Northern

Wei court, the Women's Secretary.⁵⁸⁵ The similarities between these two types of women are striking, and include the facts that they are generally unmarried and thus listed with their own titles, that they are politically and socially powerful, and that they are held up as paragons of learning and religious virtues. Although we do not know much about these Women's Secretaries, we do have tomb inscriptions for two of them, and so to further our discussion of the various roles that women played in the administration of imperial Buddhism, I begin with one:

The Women's Secretariat from the Wang Clan whose name was Sengnan was from Yanyang in Anding County. She was the descendent of the Governor Gong of Anding and the child⁵⁸⁶ of Governor Na of Shangluo. From this land where the Hua River passes through the hills, she had been expected to carry on as an outstanding heiress. But "Man's" father, due to his heroic spirit, became bound up in legalities, and handed over his horse and invited punishment on account of his crimes. Then only, "Man," given by her mother who was to deal with the bitter effects by herself, entered the palace all alone.

By the time she became six years old, she was intelligent, beautiful, and distinctive, and therefore was fully satisfied with her study of the bamboo

⁵⁸⁵ Although Hucker notes that the invention of the Women's Secretary (*niishangshu* 女尚書) came about in the Tang and refers to one of the six matrons of the court (1985, 357), it is clear from the *Book of the Wei* that this position was a Northern Wei initiative that came about through the alignment of the men's bureaucracy with the women's one. As discussed in chapter two, the alignment of men's and women's ranks puts this Women's Secretary in the third grade, yet in the inscription below, the woman in question was promoted to the second rank and then posthumously to the first. As for the position itself, the Secretary was the highest of administrative positions in the Chinese court in our period, was required to take exams showing his literacy, and was in charge of all the major six bureaus of administrative procedure. The description in the following tomb inscription suggests that this also was the case for the Women's Secretary as she is also described as learned and in charge of the inner court.

⁵⁸⁶ Interestingly, she is listed as both a *xun* 孫 and a *zi* 子, not as a *nü* 女, which would mark her explicitly as a daughter. As such, she is a "child," not a "daughter" and this term is usually reserved for male children.

slips. She had a capable nature and was clever and awakened.⁵⁸⁷ Every day she chanted 1000 characters,⁵⁸⁸ listened to and embraced the teachings and the commentaries. As soon as she heard them she grasped their meaning. In the palace she was therefore promoted and became the Women's Secretary, who ordered and arranged the three classes of people. She was able to keep track of and educate all of the courtesans and ladies and push them towards order and succeeded in encouraging their imperial hearts. She used her red writing brush to spread this brilliance and therefore was awarded the second grade.

But heaven did not repay her goodness, and her exhaustion increased and though she was excellent and intelligent, and at the age of 68 she reached her end in the golden walls of the palace of the Great Wei. At her highest, she undertook a man's fate and served two empresses,⁵⁸⁹ and she cherished people of virtue and restraint and was posthumously honoured with a rank of the first grade and was awarded ceremonial instruments in the Eastern Garden [text corrupted]. All the fees for the funeral and the gifts were taken in charge by the Duke and she was buried on the north slope of Ningling. During the decay of her abundant bonds all ritual norms were followed.

Therefore, we have chiselled into stone and engraved this notice as a message for all posterity to come, so that they may all come to know it. The was recorded on the 20th day, an *yimao* day, in the ninth month, under the *xingqi*⁵⁹⁰, in the second year of the Zhengguang Reign of the Great Wei (November 5, 521 CE).⁵⁹¹

Although the Buddhist referents in this inscription may not be immediately clear, there are in fact many. First of all, her inscription is peppered with Buddhist language: in the description of her virtues, she is said to be “awakened;” she is an expert at chanting texts, a Buddhist skill par excellence; and her death is described as the “decay of her

⁵⁸⁷ Although the word “awakened” is in reference to her study of the classics, the character *wu* 悟 has a clear resonance with Buddhist teaching as it is the most common translation for Buddhist awakening.

⁵⁸⁸ Again, this is a Buddhist referent for Buddhists were noted for their ability to chant large amounts of text.

⁵⁸⁹ I am reading 後 as 后. These empresses should be Empress Dowagers Feng and Hu.

⁵⁹⁰ One of the stars in the constellation of the ox.

⁵⁹¹ Zhao 1992, 124.

abundant bonds,” which echoes the Buddhist teaching that manifest life is a net of entrapments and snares that prevents one from becoming enlightened and must therefore be obliterated. However, none of these Buddhist referents is near so telling as her personal name, Sengnan 僧男, which literally means “monastic man.”⁵⁹² Oddly enough, throughout the inscription, her biographer simply refers to her with her personal name, *Nan* or “man,” hence purposely eschewing her gender. Similar to hers, the inscriptional record also retains another tomb inscription of a woman with the same status as Women’s Secretary and her name translates to “welcoming man[hood],” or *Yingnan* 迎男.⁵⁹³ This women’s inscription represents her in much the same way as the one translated above, as a born women acting in a male capacity at court with Buddhist connections and high status. It is far too much of a coincidence that the only two women we have in the inscriptional record who held the position of Women’s Secretary both had personal names suggesting their proximity to manhood, and so we must consider the fact that Buddhist affiliation was a prominent factor in the lives of these political women for as we have seen Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching dictates the necessity of transforming the female body to a male one.

⁵⁹² Though it is quite possible that her rather strange name, Sengnan, is a transliteration of what may have been a non-Chinese personal name, this does not account for the fact that such names show clear semantic meanings. In this particular case, the woman in question has a connection to Buddhism – as shown in her name – yet in many other cases the semantic meaning identifies the people of the northern inscriptions with clearly gendered attributes and courtly or religious virtues, as we saw in chapter two.

⁵⁹³ Ibid, 123.

Beyond these elite female *Zhaoyis* and Women’s Secretaries, the options for Buddhist women in the service of the court did not end with the elite. When we look at the record of votive inscriptions of the dynasty we see many women acting as *weina*. Unlike the posthumous title of “Superintendent of the *Bhikṣuṇīs*” given to Ciqing above, and which seems to have been the most eminent title the court could offer a monastic as the same position was earlier held by Tanyao, the position of *weina* was a vital and functional administrative position in the dynasty. According to Jonathan Silk, although the term *weina* is something of a mystery, it is likely aligned with the Sanskrit *karmadāna*, and the roles and responsibilities of that position were quite well articulated in sixth- and seventh-century Chinese texts.⁵⁹⁴ In his attempt to understand these *weina*, Silk shows how they were involved in the intricate day-to-day running of the monastery, including locking the gates at night and keeping time. He also shows evidence that the appointment of a *weina* was to come from the monastic community and not from the laity.⁵⁹⁵ However, Silk does not take into account Northern Wei precedents in his discussion of *weina* and it seems that for the Northern Wei the *weina* had enhanced duties as important court-monastery go-betweens. If we refer back to the table of edicts in chapter three (Figure 7), we see that the Northern Wei court used *weinas* to enforce their edicts and to police the *saṃgha*. For example, the *weina* were in charge of making sure that the court’s restrictions on the numbers of monastics were adhered to and that,

⁵⁹⁴ Silk 2008, 127 ff. In her review of Silk, Petra Kieffer-Pulz has also commented on the meaning of the word *karmadāna*, and though she understands it differently, she still relates it to the task of administering the monastery (2010, 80).

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid, 131.

similarly, so were the restraints on the building of new monasteries. The *weina* were also in charge of providing a *saṃgha*-based justice system that administered punishments for monastics for all crimes less than murder.⁵⁹⁶ The job of the *weina* was thus a very important administrative position in the Northern Wei as the eligible individual needed to be trusted by the court and the *saṃgha*, and we have many women playing this role on behalf of communities of *bhikṣuṇīs* and female devotees. In fact the existence of female *weina* is quite commonly attested across the inscriptional record of the Northern Wei. For example, in the following inscription we have three women listed as *weina*:

On the 29th day of the seventh month of the fourth year of the Zhengguan era (August 25, 532 CE), this group of brothers and sisters in the truth of the teaching reverently created a stone niche with 24 images. All of those for whom there is attainment are here listed in successive order: Shi Fushou and those united in the discipline; the *weina* presider, Liu Ainü; the *weina* presider Mu [missing character] ji; Jia [missing character]; Liu Faxiang; Wang Baoji; Liu A'Xiang; Liu A'Si; Liu Shengyu; Hu A'zi; Wang Lijiang; [missing] ting Fuji; Jia A'Fei; Liu Taoji; Wang Zu; Sun Jingzi; Zhao Feijiang; Zhang Shengjie; Zhang Hanren; [missing] Jiangnü; [missing] Guzi; Xu Qingnü; the *weina* presider, Zhang Niunü; the *weina* presider Huting Moxiang; Bai Qijiang; the Zhao Yijiang; Zhang Daonü; Gao Fuxiang; reverently build this one image of Śākyamuni, and with reverent hearts make this offering.⁵⁹⁷

This inscription describes the building of a niche undertaken by what seems to be a group of women and men and perhaps a single male as the primary donor, the first listed who has the dharma-family name *Shi*, which signifies his connection to Buddhism as this is a partial name of the Buddha in Chinese. Although it is difficult to say with absolute certainty which genders the donors belong to, the majority of the personal names

⁵⁹⁶ CITATION

⁵⁹⁷ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 4.147.

listed are either common names for women in the time period (as in the name *a* 阿) or feature semantic elements that identify them as women, such as *nü* 女, or girl, or words like *ji* 姬, *fei* 妃, *jiang* 姜, which all refer to court concubines or courtesans, or finally the name *xiang* 香 “fragrant.” It is highly unlikely that a man would take on such a name, and I have never encountered such a situation in other inscriptions. What this tells us is that women and men collaborated together on projects, but that since it is a largely all-woman group, it seems the case that women had their own *weinas* who were in charge of overseeing a faith community of this sort, one that does not mention having any ordained members.

The question of just what sort of grouping of individuals this inscription represents is further engaging as it was the work of a small-scale religious collective. Liu Shu-fen has worked extensively on such collectives and explains that these groupings, either like ours above called a *fayi* 法義, or otherwise called a *yiyi* 義邑, became an important part of religious and social organization in the north of China beginning around the fifth century.⁵⁹⁸ She argues that these collectives often came together to support the building of statuary and also to do social service work such as the building of bridges. Further, Liu points out that a notable feature of these collectives is the presence of women; she has found two other inscriptions that list only women as the members of the collective.⁵⁹⁹ Dorothy Wong argues that these societies were a direct result of the ambitious support of Buddhism in the countryside by the Northern Wei, a support that

⁵⁹⁸ For a thorough overview of these type of religious societies, see: Hao, 2006.

⁵⁹⁹ Liu; 1995, 17 ff.

went alongside the expansive building programs undertaken both by the court and larger society.⁶⁰⁰ Whalen Lai agrees with this and claims that state support of these localized monasteries contributed to their abundant wealth and popularity across the wider landscape of the empire⁶⁰¹ and which necessitated a separate, monastic bureaucracy.⁶⁰² Thus, the establishment of Buddhist communities on top of already existing social organizations represents two important things: 1) the large scale patronage of Buddhism over and above indigenous Chinese religions or ideologies, and 2) the participation of women in these communities. As the Buddhist institution includes a female *saṃgha* in its mandate, it further allowed women to take up positions as *weina* who did important work connecting village-level religious practice to court-level religious practice. Such a position was not available to them in pre-Buddhist society and in traditional forms of Chinese gender organization that saw women fulfilling their religious roles or “dao” as inner people connected with the home.

Other than *weina*, we have many examples of *bhikṣuṇīs* working directly with these village societies. The following, though slightly later than the Northern Wei – from the successor Northern Qi – makes for an indicative case study:

On a *xinji* day twenty-five days after the new moon, in the eighth month, of the first year, a *gengchen* year, of the [missing] Qianming era (September 7, 560 CE), the *bhikṣuṇī* Huicheng and the *bhikṣuṇī* Jing You [missing], engaged the leader of the village, [missing] Meijiang, to work together to establish this magnificent activity of reverently building one image of Maitreya. Primarily this is for the realm of the Emperor, and all the ministers, lords, and guards that are under him, and it is for all the teachers and parents, and also includes all who have been born. We wish

⁶⁰⁰ 2004, 43 ff.

⁶⁰¹ 1987, 12.

⁶⁰² Ibid, 13.

that this causes them to transform themselves like a flash of lightning and to pierce into their darkness so that they manifest [missing] an understanding of the three levels of emptiness so that all in the experiential realm can together understand correct awakening. The presider of the village collective, the *bhikṣuṇī* [missing] Jiu; the presider of the village collective, the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengyan; the presider of the white robed great image; Zhang Gou and his brothers; the village society of Fan Xing [missing]; the presider Song Fuxiang. Furthermore, the image [presider] Xu Mingbian, the image presider Xu Liuzhou, the image presider Bi Changshou.⁶⁰³

Although somewhat fragmentary, the above inscription provides a clear example of a number of social layers working together in both the service of Buddhism and the service of the empire in order to construct an image of Maitreya, and doing so with both male and female members. The leader of the village community has a female name, and the members of the community of Buddhist monastics that she is working with are all female, clearly identified as *bhikṣuṇīs*, and most of the people listed as donors of the community are female as well, with the presider of the community itself being listed as a *bhikṣuṇī*. Thus, this inscription, and many more like it, make it clear that these village communities worked alongside members of the *saṃgha* for their projects, the *saṃgha* members in question likely acting as individuals of religious repute and hence seen as necessary for the proper sanctification of the image,⁶⁰⁴ and also because, perhaps, *saṃgha* members are political entities working between court and larger society.

⁶⁰³ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 7.100.

⁶⁰⁴ In her study of Nirvana images, Sonya Lee argues that the cooperation between monastic and clergy members with members of lay society and lay devotional organizations represents an impetus by the former to make the teachings of Buddhism more palatable to the latter through the medium of popular devotional art (2010, 9-10).

Other than acting as *weinas*, members of village collectives, and *saṃgha* members who participate in the dedication of images, the inscriptional record also tells us that women often acted as the presiders of images or as religious people of prestige that worked alongside regular devotees in their creation of images and inscriptions. The clearest example of this trend is an inscription that was previously discussed in chapter two, but which is worth citing again. The text of that inscription goes:

On the seventh day of the tenth month of the fourth year of the Yongping era (November 12, 511 CE), the *bhikṣuṇī* Daozeng from the Immortal Peace Monastery has planned the commission of one image of Maitreya so that birth after birth and life after life she will see the Buddha and inquire after the Dharma. Zhou A'zu, a Woman of Pure Faith, vows to watch over this mystery in this manifest world so that all living beings, equally and altogether, can make this vow.⁶⁰⁵

This inscription clearly shows two women working together to create and dedicate an image – one women a lay devotee otherwise called a woman of pure faith and the other a *bhikṣuṇī*. The inscription bears witness to the method of having religious leadership present in the dedication of a layperson's image, whether a *bhikṣuṇī* or *weina*. Although it is tempting to read these inscriptions along gendered lines wherein women such as Daozeng and Zhou A'zu work together to donate images, a larger study of the inscriptional record proves this supposition wrong as we have numerous examples of men and women, both monastic and lay, working together in building images.⁶⁰⁶ One last

⁶⁰⁵ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 3.139.

⁶⁰⁶ Though it is the case that many inscriptions show the participation of women and men equally, some do show a tendency to only women. Furthermore, as Hao Chunwen has clearly shown, from the period starting just after the Northern Wei until the Song, there were a number of women-only groups at Dunhuang that worked together to dedicate images. He makes the case that women of relatively high status worked together to commission images and those who were able to “leave home” took up the status of

inscription that I will offer below shows this tendency quite clearly. The section is an excerpt of a longer inscription and is only a partial list of the names of donors that is situated on the back side of the stele in question, and shows donors of both genders and with all manner of titles. Specifically, this stele unites *bhikṣuṇīs* with members of government and other officials, and it thus provides a more thorough look at the social worlds that were united in the service of constructing Buddhist images and niches than the ones previously studied. It clearly reveals the fact that women were very active in this undertaking. More precisely, it demonstrates that eminent Buddhist women were united with government officials in the building of Buddhist images, a situation that certainly provided them access to the political life of the area. The rather lengthy inscription reads as such:

The teacher of the village collective, Wen Falüe; the presider from Guangfu monastery; the elder, *bhikṣuṇī* Huizang; the elder, *bhikṣuṇī* Sengjin; the *bhikṣuṇī* Huijiang; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengzan; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengjing; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengsheng; the *bhikṣuṇī* Senghao.

The village presider of the Yewang District and secretary of books, Ji Xian [missing]; the member of the village society and officer of the lord of Henei; the member of the village society and warrior of Taiyuan, [missing] Lian; the general of Ningshuo who is the presider of the flowers on the right side of the bodhisattva's brilliant light, Ma Zhou; the member of the village society who presides over the unveiling of the flowers on the left side of the bodhisattva's brilliant light, Wei Ye; the servant who presides over the verification and regulation of the height and form as well as who presides over the closing of the Buddha's brilliant light, Liang Yong; the head of the village and the prior secretary of books of the lord of Henei, Wang Weng; the village leader and instructor in Luoyang who took in charge the canopy, Seng Jian; the general of Xiangwei who presided over

bhikṣuṇī whereas those who were not able to "leave home" participated with the community as lay devotees. He classifies this participation of women as having no special effect on the growth of Buddhism, other than a gender balancing that saw women participate in similar ways to their male counterparts. See Hao 2006.

the inspection of the south side of the stele, Cao Si; the member of the village society who presided over the flowers to the right side of the bodhisattva.

The presider of the south side of the image, Song Xianbo, who was the former commander of the Labour Section and the West-Side Military Commander.

The *bhikṣuṇī* Sengyao; the *bhikṣuṇī*, Senghui; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengxiang; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengyuan; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sanguang; the Woman of Pure Faith, Jia Tongji; the *bhikṣuṇī* A'Sheng Luofei; the presider of opening up the Buddha's brilliant light, [missing] Si Feiren [missing].

The general of Dangkou who inspects the west side and also presides over the flowers on the right of the bodhisattva, Si Zu; the member of the village collective who presides over the great fast, Hu Xiaojia; the general of Ningyuan and the lord of Zhangnei who inspects the fast and presides over the altar, Meng Can; the member of the village society [missing] who is the instructor of Yewang, the honourable Zhang Yingzu; the lord of Henei who presides over the halo, is the bookkeeper, who distributes libations and serves all matters, Song Xian; the village member who faces the white [missing] and serves all things, Cao Xin; the villager from the state [missing] who keeps the records of all matters, Le Rong.

The *duweina* who is the great general of Fubo and defends the city, Sima Chengluo, recorded the words.⁶⁰⁷

This donor inscription is compelling not only because it tells us who, precisely, was involved in the building of such an image, but it also tells us what pieces of the image they were responsible for. The top stratum of names on the stele is that of our *bhikṣuṇīs*, which is divided in two sections on either side of the names and title of Song Xianbo. Listed beneath the names of the *bhikṣuṇīs* are those donors of eminent ranks who had been in charge of certain statuary elements such as ornamentation or else responsible for ritual feasts corresponding with the dedication of the image. Underneath this strata,

⁶⁰⁷ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 7.017.

and not translated above,⁶⁰⁸ are the names of more generalized donors who do not seem to have been in charge of any particular object or function. Thus this list of donors clearly shows that Buddhist women participated with local government officials in their support of Buddhism, and, furthermore, it seems that these government officials provided the money behind the project as the inscription clearly itemizes exactly what pieces of the stele and the images for which many of the officials were responsible for funding. It perhaps seems a simple point to make that women were active in the dedication of Buddhist stele in the Northern Wei, but the point is not entirely that simple. The important point put forward here is that the Buddhist institution and devotional structure provided room for women to play pivotal roles in the public face of the religion, and it is to an explanation of this situation that we now turn.

Economies of Merit and Women as Fields of Merit

Upon consideration of the donor inscriptions above, the question remains of why indeed court officials and government workers considered it important to spend their money on Buddhist statuary. And why did they do so in cooperation with female members of the monastic community? Amy McNair argues in *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* that the creation of Buddhist images in medieval China was an important social act more than it was a simple act of religious devotion. Building on the knowledge that the images of the buddhas are also depictions of Northern Wei emperors, McNair discusses how the earliest

⁶⁰⁸ The list is partial because the bottom section of the stele, which lists village contributors of a lower stratum in society, is largely broken and badly effaced. An attempt to reconstruct that section is included in the appendix but not included here.

strata of Longmen – the Northern Wei caves – provided a setting for what she calls the “karmic gift of sculpture.”⁶⁰⁹ This gift, she argues, is exemplified in the images donated by Emperor Xuanwu to his deceased parents and the merit that he accrued and passed to them in so doing. McNair thus positions the popularity of offering such a karmic gift to one’s parents as a Buddhist interpretation of the tradition of filial piety that had long been immensely popular among all walks of Chinese society. In short, the dedication of Buddhist art to one’s parents saw a transfer of merit to them that accompanied them in the afterlife and was hence a filial act. This explanation of karmic exchange, she argues, provides the motivation behind why lay members of the populace sacrificed large amounts of money in the creation of said images and niches.⁶¹⁰ Further, alongside this spending of money in this life to help your parents in the next, McNair argues that though niches and images did indeed cost a lot of money, the cost was also an important part of a “rhetoric of expenditure” that functioned to promote the donors’ public religiosity, intensify the earnestness of their donation, and increase the amount of the merit transfer. Furthermore, although she does show that the expense of building a niche was far outside of the capabilities of a farmer or other such rural person in medieval China,⁶¹¹ she demonstrates that people came together in groups to help finance these projects.⁶¹² This group cooperation allowed otherwise powerless members of society to participate in the economy of merit exchange and hence ensure that they were filial sons and daughters. I

⁶⁰⁹ For more on this see, McNair 2007, chapter 2.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid, 51 ff.

⁶¹¹ As discussed in chapter one, McNair estimates the cost of a 3.1 square metre niche to be approximately half the annual wage of a government official.

⁶¹² Ibid, 52.

agree with McNair in all places; however, I would add the related vector of imperial power into the equation. It is evident that in making karmic gifts, members of the populace were not only offering filial piety to their parents, but they were also participating in an imperial form of the Buddhist religion – they were able to simultaneously show their deference to the imperial family by consistently making them the first of the recipients of their karmic gift, while at the same time transferring merit to their own families. In so doing, it was not the sincerity of their karmic offering to the empire that mattered, but rather that they were seen to be expressing public support of the empire through the process of building and dedicating Buddhist statuary.

To ground this discussion of the economy of merit exchange within the context of individual members of the Buddhist community, it is necessary to point out that the rise of Buddhist building projects brought about an economics of exchange wherein members of the *saṃgha*, as well as other Buddhist officials, were necessary players in such a re-envisioned act of filial piety. Further, by involving the *saṃgha* in the act of building and merit exchange, such a religious economy was one that was necessarily open to women as the Buddhist monastic community guarantees space for the participation of women through the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha*. The very fact that women can and do hold positions of leadership in the Buddhist *saṃgha* – both now and throughout history – facilitated the rise of women in public society in early medieval times by providing them with a role in this religious economy of merit exchange. Furthermore, in the sources to be examined below, female monastics were seen by society as virtuous “fields of merit,” which were thus entirely appropriate to be included in the donation of images – perhaps not more so

than their male counterparts but certainly on par with them.⁶¹³ Women's roles as "fields of merit" makes sense in the context of the Northern Wei where, as we have seen, women had long been integrated into Tuoba religious rituals through their roles as shamanesses and more generally through the various religious roles that women played in the dynasty that were discussed in chapter two. In what follows, then, I will use a variety of donor inscriptions as well as stories of Buddhist women from the Northern Wei to discuss the roles that women played as active "fields of merit" in the donation process.

To begin, the following is a simple example of a *bhikṣuṇī* working in tandem with her brother in order to erect an image:

The *bhikṣuṇī* Faguang, on behalf of her brother Liu Taofu who is traveling in the north, wishes that he be returned safely and thus constructs one image of Guanyin. Furthermore, on behalf of her deceased parents, she builds one image of Śākyamuni. She wishes to see that all her relations and all beings in the world all are filled with this merit. This was dedicated on the 2nd year of the Putai Era (532 CE).⁶¹⁴

This inscription is important because it shows not only that one *bhikṣuṇī* had the money and means to donate statuary, but also that she had such means likely because of her disciples, in this case the *bhikṣuṇī*'s brother. This is simple observation on the devotional practice of Buddhism, but one that represents a marked shift in the roles that women played in the service of religion in China. In this particular case, it is noteworthy

⁶¹³ In a similar vein, Monica Falk has published a book-length study on Buddhist nuns as fields of merit within the social and gender construction of contemporary Thailand and devotes chapter six to a discussion of how differing notions of gender create differing merit fields (2008).

⁶¹⁴ Although not the topic of this dissertation, for a fascinating study of the popular buddhas and popular forms of worship in the six dynasties, see Hou Xudong's dissertation, *Wu liu shiji beifangmin fojiao xinyang* 五六世纪北方民佛教信仰 [Buddhist Faith of Northern People in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries] (1998).

that the *bhikṣuṇī* was the beneficiary of a male family member, though during the Northern Wei this situation is not uncommon and perhaps speaks to the social and religious roles that women held in the culture of the time.⁶¹⁵ As women moved toward the tradition of organized, institutional Buddhism, we see more and more examples in the textual record of individual women who were venerated by the wider society for their religious attainments and leadership within the Buddhist community – a public community in which they existed as unmarried, lone females of prestige. Furthermore, using Tang dynasty inscriptions from Bao Shan, Wendi Adamek argues that the economy of merit exchange which allowed *bhikṣuṇīs* to utilize their own resources in the building of statuary is related to a certain rise in female agency in the religious life of early medieval China through the existence of a collective group consciousness that supported the lives and actions of these women.⁶¹⁶ I would argue the same thing as Adamek, but rather push the date a few hundred years earlier, to the high point of the Northern Wei.

For example, the following inscription – and many others like it – makes it clear that *bhikṣuṇīs* were objects of lay devotion as unmarried,⁶¹⁷ public women. Although we do not know if the donor and the *bhikṣuṇī* were related by blood, what we do know is that the public veneration of the *bhikṣuṇī* as a female member of the monastic community

⁶¹⁵ It is also possible that the *bhikṣuṇī* and the disciple in this inscription are members of the same family, perhaps even mother and son. However, in the absence of the *bhikṣuṇī*'s personal name and any biographical information, this cannot be proven. Yet it is not uncommon for entire communities, related by blood and marriage, to donate imagery along with monastics with whom they could well be related.

⁶¹⁶ 2009, 5.

⁶¹⁷ I make the assumption that these women are unmarried based on the fact that all the *bhikṣuṇīs* in early medieval China for whom we have biographical information are unmarried, many of them widowed. Thus I assume this to be a common trait.

represents a marked change in the religious culture of early medieval China wherein women are given the option of identifying as independent persons outside of their traditional patrilineal associations. The inscription reads:

On the fifteenth day of the fifth month of the second year of the Xiaochang Era (June 10, 526 CE), the man of pure faith Yu Hui, on behalf of the deceased *bhikṣuṇī* Faming who had embraced all types of consciousness, reverently builds one image of Guanyin and wish to ascend this [missing] and to forever meet with the distinguishing of suffering.⁶¹⁸

This inscription thus provides witness to the fact that this *bhikṣuṇī* was considered an object of veneration during the time period as it clearly shows that an individual disciple built an image for her in order to provide a posthumous memorial. This is further interesting because it suggests that although the *bhikṣuṇī* had left behind her family system and perhaps did not have children to take care of her posthumous rites, an individual disciple did it for her, possibly thinking this an act of filial piety for a woman who may not have had husband or children. Furthermore, this inscription and others like it find resonance with the fact that *bhikṣuṇīs* – like their male counterparts – were considered capable of miracles due to their high level of Buddhist practice and hence attracted large numbers of followers. One simple story from the *Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism* in the *Book of the Wei* well illustrates this:

In the ninth year (485 CE) the officials memorialized that the *bhikṣuṇī* Huixiang of Shanggu Jun had died under a pine tree on the northern mountain, and that her corpse had not decomposed for three years now; that the men and women who had come to see it numbered in the hundred and thousands. People at that time all marvelled at it.⁶¹⁹

⁶¹⁸ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 5.025.

⁶¹⁹ Hurvitz 1956, 79.

What this story shows is that a Buddhist woman became an object of devotion in the early medieval period – individuals capable of transferring merit and enacting miracles. Furthermore, they became objects of devotion as unmarried women – women who would not have normally garnered devotion in the pre-Buddhist religions and social organization of China wherein a woman was largely identified through her male kin.

Yet although these women were venerated for religious roles that saw them depart from the traditional family system, they then supplemented the monastic family with the natal one. One of the most interesting aspects of note in a survey of the inscriptional record of the early medieval period is that Buddhist monastics, both male and female, organized themselves in families with shared dharma names as early as the Northern Wei. Many inscriptions show a tendency toward both monks and nuns with shared dharma names working together on Buddhist building projects. We have already seen this tendency in the above donor inscription of Song Xianbo wherein all but two of the *bhikṣuṇīs* mentioned take the family name of Seng 僧, literally meaning “the *saṃgha*.” Throughout inscriptions “Seng” is a popular dharma name for monastics, as are *hui* 惠, *fa* 法, and *dao* 道, a trend seen in later materials as well. Two brief examples of inscriptions featuring multiple *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* illustrate this well. The first reads:

On the 25th day of the fourth month of the second year, a *jichou* year, of the Yongping era (May 29, 509 CE), the *bhikṣuṇīs* Fawen, Falong and others, having awoken to this transient world have profoundly given rise to this sincere vow to cut themselves off from and exhaust their personal wealth and have each, on behalf of their own selves, reverently commissioned the building of one image of Maitreya. They wish that they are able to surpass all manifested forms and be completely drenched in the dharma rain, and that for those who worship, they all reach the

unsurpassable happiness of three assemblies of the Dragon-Flower.⁶²⁰ And they wish that this continues to flow to all sentient beings so that they can share in this same prosperity.⁶²¹

In the above example, we have two *bhikṣuṇīs* with the same dharma name working together to achieve liberation and doing so by spending their personal wealth on the building of an image of Maitreya. Hence this resembles what we know of donations from village societies – that multiple persons of the same family unit came together to commission statuary when the cost exceeded what they alone could afford. And not only did women undertake to arrange themselves in dharma families, men too seem to have done the same. The following inscription illustrates just this situation as it is an image donated by members of the Fan family in collaboration with a number of *bhikṣus* from the “Dao” and “Hui” family names:⁶²²

Dated the *bingyin* day three days after the new moon, which was a *jiazi* day, in the fourth month of the second year, a *renzi* year, of the Putai Era of the Great Wei (May 22, 532 CE). Because Lord Zhao of Pingli prefecture in Dingzhou had conferred the southern strip onto Fan Guoren, the latter reverently commissioned the building of one image of Maitreya. Foremost this is for the emperor and those under him. Then it is for the lords, leaders, and elders of the region, the seven generations of parents. Finally it is for the all extended family members and good friends with knowledge and comprehension, so that they can all have this prosperity and blessing. The *bhikṣu* Daoqian; the *bhikṣu* Daoyong; the *bhikṣu* Huiyun; the *bhikṣu* Daochou; the *bhikṣu* Huizhi Fada; the deceased Fan Xiang; the deceased Fan Pidu; the deceased Fan Lang; the deceased Fan

⁶²⁰ These assemblies are those who will be in the presence of Maitreya when he becomes a Buddha and sits under the Dragon-flower tree.

⁶²¹ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 3.125.

⁶²² There are numerous cases of persons from the same family name dedicating Buddhist statuary alongside members of the monastic community in early medieval China, but scholar of kinship Hou Xudong, uses one particular example, that of the Chen 陳 clan, to point out that these family names were often geographically oriented so that one entire village may hold the same family name, with women taking that name as they marry in from the outside (2010, 31).

Chong; the deceased Fan Boyi; the deceased Fan Shirong; the deceased Fan Shuqi; the deceased Fan Wenqing; the deceased Fan Yang; the deceased Fan Gao; the image presider, Fan Guoren; Fan Zhu; Fan Tou; Fan Baonu; Fan Huaishi; Fan Niao; Fan Fahe; Fan Shixian; Fan Hui'an; the deceased Liu Wangren; Fan Sengguang; Fan Wenying; Fan Daoheng; Fan Liuwang; Fan Gaishi; the deceased Wang Yu [missing text].⁶²³

More than in just these above-cited inscriptions, the taking on of the same dharma name by members of the monastic community is in fact a common feature of inscriptions from the time period, and suggests perhaps that both *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* organized themselves in collective units with shared family names marking them as such, that they undertook projects such as the building of images within these groups, and that they also participated in groups with other families and collectives. This type of donation thus represents the rise of a new social unit in China, the dharma family, in which an individual has the freedom to turn away from the traditional family unit and to a new social unit that acted as a family in larger society, the *saṃgha*. Holmes Welch has worked on the naming of *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* and has shown that in the case of two-character dharma names such as the ones shown above, the first character referred to the generation to which the *bhikṣu* or *bhikṣuṇī* belonged and that this character was taken from a composition of the “ancestral master” and was literally called his “traditional lineage” or *zongpai* 宗派.⁶²⁴ Welch compares these names to those held by lay members of many clans. I would agree that the construction of a shared identity, through naming, was likely an important component of social cohesion between members of the *saṃgha*, uniting

⁶²³ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 5.160.

⁶²⁴ For a thorough discussion of the precise ways in which these names are chosen, Welch’s study of succession provides detailed information and also sheds light on the organization of the “monastic family” unit.

them, as it did, in clan or family lineages. Furthermore, in a culture such as medieval China wherein family names and lineages were important as they constituted the proper modes of filial worship and care for the ancestors, and I would contend that this worked the same in the Buddhist *saṃgha*. By organizing themselves in “dharma families,” not blood families, the members of the Buddhist *saṃgha* created an alternate family that cared for them both while living and in death.

Buddhist Perspectives on Women, Family, and Renunciation

Much recent work on Buddhism and the family has stressed the fact that members of the ordained community of Buddhists often kept strong ties with their natal families, hence throwing into question the ideal of Buddhist renunciation.⁶²⁵ This is a point well taken since the action of renunciation is rendered literally in Chinese as “leaving home” (*chujia* 出家), yet the actual action does not seem to signify that drastic of an undertaking. I agree with this supposition, for even the most cursory survey of the inscriptional record of early medieval China shows a number of inscriptions dedicated by *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* to the wellbeing of their parents and siblings – transferring merit to them in this life and the next. However, though it is clear that renunciation in China has never meant the complete abandonment of one’s natal family, I believe that it is equally clear that as both a social ideal and an institutional structure, Buddhist renunciation brought great changes to the lives of individual woman and to social concepts of gender

⁶²⁵ For a book-length study of just this very situation in Indian Buddhism, as seen largely through *vinaya* literature and inscriptions, see: Clarke, 2014. For a particular study of medieval China, see: Chen, 2002.

more widely construed. In the materials that I have been working with, renunciation for women has never seen them taking up roles as wandering mendicants with no family connections. What it has meant, however, is that they have had an alternate social path to that of the natal family system. Furthermore, this alternate path provided them the opportunity to hold eminent positions in society while being unmarried or widowed. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the entrance of Buddhism to China coincided with the rise of a tradition of marriage resistance for women starting in around the third century and which is well recorded in the collection of biographies of early Chinese *bhikṣuṇīs*, the *Lives of the Bhikṣuṇīs*. We can easily link the occurrence of marriage resistance with the introduction of Buddhism to China as the women in the text were of Buddhist affiliation and also because pre-Buddhist Chinese religions had no such space for women, though perhaps they had such a space for men; we saw this very situation in the tomb inscription of the court *śramaṇa*, Sengling.

As discussed, prior to the entrance of Buddhism to China, the religions of China offered very little social space for a woman to exist as an eminent religious personality outside of her role within the family unit: the women cited in Ge Hong's *Biographies of Divine Immortals* are all married women, female practitioners of the Celestial Masters were paired with male members, and the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* features the biographies of exemplary mothers, wives, empresses, and palace women. In fact, as far as I have seen, the only unmarried woman of divine identification in the pre-Buddhist Chinese literary tradition is Ge Hong's Hairy Woman (*maonü* 毛女), who is mentioned in the *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* and who wanders the mountains in a half-human,

half-animal state – a sign of the type of religious transformation that Ge advocates.⁶²⁶

Again, this is not to say that a woman could not achieve great heights of learning, power, and prestige from within the traditional gender organization of pre-Buddhist China, but that they did so as daughters, wives, and mothers.

However, though we may be surprised to hear it, it turns out that the Buddha himself had quite a lot to say on this topic – at least the Buddha that we hear speaking through the translations and indigenous texts of early medieval China. As discussed in the chapter three, the Chinese Buddhist textual records of early medieval China contain mention of no less than twenty sūtras on the topic of enlightenment for women, sūtras opening up a path for women that includes their taking on of a male body prior to taking on the body of a Buddha. At least one of these sūtras, the *Sūtra of Transforming the Female Form*,⁶²⁷ is a pastiche text which sews together a number of other texts into one grand narrative. This is an important identification as Lori Meeks has shown that a text with the same name was taken as an authentic Mahāyāna text in Japan and was given by the thirteenth-century priest Sōji to the nuns at Japan's Hōkeji temple with a personally inscribed message exhorting them to leave behind the karmic burdens of the female

⁶²⁶ Ware 1981, 194 (Translating Ge's *Baopuzi*). Campany also discusses Ge Hong's Hairy Woman and shows that there are at least two biographies of her in early materials – one suggesting that she became a transcendent and one suggesting that she did not (2002, 23, note 15). Despite the version, however, this is the one clear example from the indigenous Chinese textual tradition of a woman who achieves a high level of religious transformation completely independent of any male kin.

⁶²⁷ This text appears to be a pastiche with a unique and specific argument for why a woman must change her sex, which may be an apocryphal expansion authored by Dharmamitra. For more on this, and for a diagram of the various other texts that inform and give shape to our text see: Balkwill, forthcoming.

body.⁶²⁸ Bernard Faure has stated that our text was probably the most influential text of its kind in Japan and was read at the funerals of women and that the text's name was used in the vows of elite women.⁶²⁹ The text itself is a pastiche of a number of different texts in translation with a ten-point enumeration as to why a woman must change her sex. However, at the culmination of this argument there is a unique section that does not accord with any of the other texts that this text draws from and thus appears to be a unique apocryphal expansion. In that section, the Buddha provides additional explanation as to why a woman need change her sex. The answer is surprising:

Furthermore, the female body resembles that of a maidservant and cannot obtain self-sovereignty for she is constantly troubled by sons, daughters, clothing, food and drink, and other necessities related to family matters. They must remove dung and defilement, nasal discharges, saliva and other impure things. A female will go through nine months of pregnancy, during which she will suffer numerous pains. When she gives birth to a child, she suffers great pains to the brink of death. For this reason, a woman should give rise to the thought of abhorring and getting rid of her female body.

Furthermore, as for a woman who is born inside the imperial palace, she is also the possession of another person's. Throughout her life she is like a maidservant who must serve and follow a great family, also like a disciple who must venerate and serve his master. She is beaten by different kinds of swords and staves, rocks and tiles, and is defiled by every evil word. These kind of sufferings deprive her of self-sovereignty. This is why a woman must give rise to the thought of abhorring and getting rid of her female body.

Furthermore, this female body is constantly being tethered and restricted, like a snake or a rat that is in a deep hole, from which they cannot come out at their will. Furthermore, the legal system for women does not allow a woman to have her own freedom: she must constantly be at the side of someone else, receiving food and drink, clothing, perfumes, and all types of adornment, as well as elephant and horse carts. This is why she must give rise to the thought of abhorring and getting rid of her female body.

⁶²⁸ Meeks 2010, 258.

⁶²⁹ Faure 2003, 101.

Furthermore, this body of a woman is that which is used by others, and cannot achieve self-sovereignty, as her labours are many – pounding herbs, milling rice, sometimes frying and sometimes grinding big and small beans and barley, pulling wool for weaving and spinning piles of it – these many types of suffering are innumerable. For this reason, a woman must take her own body as a burden.⁶³⁰

This line of argumentation is then contrasted, by the Buddha, in the following section of his speech where he advises women to practice Buddhism, join the *saṃgha*, and thus leave behind the restrictions of the family lives that keep them so tied to their bodies.⁶³¹ Artfully articulated, the Buddha thus delivers a lengthy description of the fact that women, at least women of early medieval China, are not sovereigns of their own bodies – they are used and abused by others, made to fret madly over the affairs of the household, and dressed up with luxurious adornments. By contrast, he says, Buddhism offers them a way out of this predicament: listen to the Buddha, become a *bhikṣuṇī* and cast away worldly problems and desires, become a sovereign of one's fate, and then become a man who and cultivate the Buddhist path without the fetters of a woman.⁶³² This final step will allow one access to buddhahood. Thus, it seems that the Buddha, in his defense of the doctrine of sex-change, has also become an advocate for women's rights, offering women a somewhat bizarre escape from the bonds that are specific to living life in a woman's body in a society characterized by traditional notions of gender roles.

⁶³⁰ T564: p919b04-b18. For a full text of the 10-point explanation as to why a woman must change her form, see the appendix number three.

⁶³¹ T564: p919b19-b20.

⁶³² T564: p919b21-b22.

It seems that the women of early medieval China largely heeded the Buddha's call as the pages of both the *Lives of the Bhikṣuṇīs* as well as the tomb inscriptions of women of Buddhist affiliation that we have thus far studied all reveal a similar sentiment – that entrance to the Buddhist *saṃgha* was not only something that allowed them safety from unstable family situations, but also something that let them be entirely independent from the family unit. In this new role, they did such things as taking up roles in the *saṃgha* and working alongside villagers and members of government in order to donate images, and doing so in newly-created communities of dharma families though perhaps still in tandem with their natal families. The path that Buddhism offered women of early medieval China represented a marked shift in the normative way that women had traditionally created virtue and prestige in traditional Chinese society. Far from the biographies of women in the *Biographies of Eminent Women* wherein women were upheld as virtuous either by being proficient and learned mothers and daughters, or by suffering stoically through widowhood or similar situations – Mencius' mother doing both – Buddhist women engendered prestige through their works within the Buddhist community, a community that allowed them departure from the social norms encoded in the traditional family unit and further included them in the economy of merit exchange. Thus, more than any Buddhist teaching or doctrine, it was the establishment of Buddhism as an institutional religion in China that affected women's lives by providing them alternate social avenues for prestige and leadership.

In a similar vein, using the *Sūtra on the Young Woman, Yuye* (*Yuyenü Jing* 玉耶女經 T142), Yuet Keung Lo also argues that Buddhist ideas and practices affected the

popular conception of women's virtues in a Confucian society in surprising, neglected, and counter-intuitive ways. Specifically, in the case of his text he argues that Buddhist notions of filial piety interjected themselves into Chinese ones in order to create a proper ritual etiquette, or *li* 禮, for women – one that marked them as filial daughters. In his discussion he reveals how, in his text, the Buddha advises the haughty young woman, Yuye, to follow the precepts of Buddhism in order to overcome the ten problems of the woman's body. These problems, similar to the ones stated above in the Buddha's explanation of why a woman should become a man, relate to the fact that a woman cannot do what she wishes because she is burdened by child and husband. After lecturing her on these problems, the Buddha tells Yuye about the seven kinds of women in the world – ranging from those who act as mothers to those who act as murderers⁶³³ – and ultimately she decides to take on the role of a maid. The Buddha then advises her that good maids are filial and obedient, and thus virtuous. Thus the Buddha himself becomes a champion of filial piety for women in this text, and Lo shows how this idea thereafter gained tremendous popularity in China.

Although discussing a completely reverse trajectory to my own – the creation of filial daughters in Buddhism – Lo's method is not different from my own in that he considers the ways in which Buddhist ideals and practices affected changing ideals of gender in the early medieval period. The early medieval period was a time of deep social change in China across many levels of society. The lack of a centralized government, increased foreign presence, near constant warfare, and the rise of organized religion are

⁶³³ Lo 2005, 344.

the hallmarks of the time period, and thus it should not be surprising that gender organization also underwent revision. What is surprising, however, is just to what extent Buddhism affected this change, either by offering women a filial morality of their own, as evidenced in Lo's work, or by offering them an extra-family situation through membership in the *saṃgha*, as evidenced in my own. What my analysis thus shares with Lo's is that the question of women's roles in the early medieval period was one that caused vexation to teachers and religious exegetes alike who, it seems, often looked to Buddhist teachings to shed light on the issue. Unfortunately and yet predictably, the Buddha is not quite consistent on all these matters; either advising women to join the *saṃgha*, change their sex, and take hold of their religious attainment, or advising them to stay in the family and cultivate the virtues of filial piety, the Buddha's ambivalent advice is likely due to his audience of early medieval China and the translator/authors of the texts at hand who were writing with a specific audience and doctrine in mind.⁶³⁴

One other point that my research shares with Lo's is the simple observation that Buddhist women and men in Chinese history are often noted for their affiliation with Confucian morality. In the case of the women whose inscriptions I have here discussed – most of them unmarried *bhikṣuṇīs* with social prominence – their virtue seems to come from the fact that the community of Buddhists protected it. By positioning these women away from the family unit, the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs* also took a woman out

⁶³⁴ Lo argues that one version of the text, an anonymous one, shows considerable variation which is attributed to authorial intervention in attempt to make the Indian base story more relevant to Chinese society (2005, 328). This, I believe, is the same situation as in the *Sūtra on Transforming the Female Form*.

of the web of sexual politics that often defined her virtue. For example, by providing a living space for widows, the Buddhist community assured, at least ideologically, that these women stayed chaste, and by taking in young women who refused marriage the effect was similar. Thus women such as these ones were removed from sexual/family politics and free to embark on public lives in the service of the Buddhist community, perhaps even seen as gender androgynous through idealistically leaving behind sexual ties, as in the case of our Women's Secretary discussed earlier. Lo even points out that one such early fourth-century *bhikṣuṇī*, Zhu Daorong 竺道容 earned the title of sage or *shengren* 聖人,⁶³⁵ a title normally reserved for men of high learning and capability. Of course, in discovering the voices of these little-known women from early medieval Chinese history, Lo's work ultimately argues, through reference to the *Sūtra on the Young Woman, Yuye*, that Buddhist teachings on women brought the lives of women into the realm of Confucian ideology by providing them with a method ensuring a virtuous status as a daughter-in-law. However, the resonance with my work is clear – Buddhist teachings and practices served to unite women with Confucian ideals by providing them with a prominent path in society, either one that kept them in the family by being wives and mothers or one that took them out of the family unit by allowing them to be politically and socially active *bhikṣuṇīs*, *Zhaoyis*, and Women's Secretaries.

In the cases of all of the women that I have discussed in this dissertation, the trend toward women leading lives of Confucian-styled virtue through their adherence to the

⁶³⁵ Ibid, 330.

Buddhist community has been a dominant theme. From the high-level workings of Empresses Dowagers Feng and Hu, to the lives of Confucian-Buddhist negotiation seen in the tomb inscriptions of our elite nuns, to the numerous names of more anonymous women seen on donor inscriptions and who acted as *weinas*, donors, and objects of veneration, the idea that Buddhism brought women more in line with the public workings of the court and empire has been the thread that has woven all these women together. Thus, in offering a conclusion to this discussion of changing gender roles and attendant changing ideals of women's virtue, I want to make the argument that the introduction of Buddhism to China had two fundamental and related forms of impact on the lives of women: 1) by opening up the possibility for living religious lives as "renunciants" in the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs*, the tradition of Buddhism safeguarded a woman's virtue as it safeguarded her chastity, and 2) that this opportunity to leave the traditional family system while maintaining one's virtue allowed women to leave behind traditional gender roles and move out to public society, gaining prominence in roles traditionally ascribed to men – as bureaucrats, administrators, and public social actors. In the final analysis, it is not that Buddhism gave women the opportunity to do more or different things than their male counterparts – indeed no textual record would support such an interpretation – only that it gave them the opportunity to do more or less the same things that men did in public society, and that this opportunity led to a fundamental change in the lives of early medieval women.

Conclusion

In order to conclude this study of the various social worlds that women were engaged in, in the service of Buddhism under the Northern Wei, it is helpful to revisit the story Empress Dowager Feng. The actions of the Empress Dowager provide a prime example of just what women of power did in the Northern Wei to support the rise of institutionalized Buddhism and why they were uniquely fit to do it. Empress Dowager Feng managed to rule the dynasty through three male rulers: her husband, his son, and his son's son. As a woman protected by the court, Empress Dowager Feng lived a much longer life than did her male counterparts, and she used the longevity of her reign to do a number of things, including: 1) supporting the close alignment of the court with the Buddhist *saṃgha* thereby creating an imperial form of the religion, and 2) supporting the rise to power of female members of her court by creating a women's bureaucracy and appointing Buddhist women in its ranks, as it must be remembered that she herself appointed the only two Women's Secretaries that I have found notice of in the dynasty and which were likely the first women in Chinese history to hold such a title. Thus she used her power at court, likely derived from the fact that she was a northern woman of high status, to support the rise of social positions for women in the service of Buddhism – a situation beneficial both to the women of the court and to the Buddhist *saṃgha*.

Empress Dowager Feng was not alone in her actions. A few hundred years later, Empress Wu did the same thing. Using her power at court, perhaps derived from her status as a northern woman, to refuse to step down after the death of her husband, she usurped the Tang, established the Zhou, and filled the court ranks with women who often

patronized the *saṃgha* or, by that time also, the Daoist nunnery. The rise of both the popular practice of Buddhism and the official Buddhist *saṃgha* created a situation wherein women of all walks of life participated in imperial Buddhism, taking up public roles in the service of the tradition. This new form of gender organization saw women, which itself had been laid over traditional Confucian networks of ancestral temples as witnessed by the creation of dharma societies or *yi yi*. Using the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs* as well as their identification in powerful lay societies, Buddhist women of the Northern Wei did something entirely unexpected – they acted as we imagine typical court literati might. Under the auspices of the Buddhist organization, women were given the opportunity to take up public roles in the service of the empire and the social life of the dynasty, an opportunity not afforded them in the delineation of women's roles afforded by Ban Zhao and much of the rest of the classical Chinese tradition. By leaving behind children and husbands and taking on their own names, even sometimes taking personal names suggesting their proximity to manhood, Buddhist women of the time appealed to a new – and Buddhist – understanding of gender that allowed them increased social movement. The establishment of the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs*, imperially-funded as it was in the Northern Wei as a secondary arm of government, offered women a secondary institution for their social organization outside of the family unit. As witnessed in the pages of this dissertation, they accessed this in order to add to their social prestige, escape difficult marital situations, and amass disciples of their own who cared for their economic needs, allowing them even the funds to build images in their own names.

In sum, this study of the actions of Empress Dowager Feng as well as of the other women presented in this chapter has worked to clarify one central point that this dissertation has put forward, that Buddhism provided women with the social space necessary to become “Confucians.” Or, more precisely, the establishment of the Buddhist *saṃgha* provided women with the social support necessary for them to take on roles usually associated with Confucian men in the service of the court and elite society; Buddhism allowed them to leave behind family life and their roles as “inner” people and take on roles as unmarried politicians in the public or “outer” world. As such, just as the Chinese Empire became increasingly more Buddhist, so too did it see the participation of women in the public life of the religion as donors, teachers, socialites, and eminent persons worthy of veneration. Furthermore, this story is rather counter-intuitive, for what we know of both Confucianism and Buddhism suggests that neither institution was entirely comfortable with the involvement of women. Certainly, Confucian court titles and public roles have all been gendered as male and the Buddha himself is famously said to have been against the establishment of the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha*, allowing it only with the caveat that women take on additional rules that function to make their status lower than that of *bhikṣus*.⁶³⁶ And yet, when the two traditions combined at the unique point in history that was the Northern Wei, they worked to create a surprising hybrid tradition in which women fared quite well.

Yet this is not to say that the introduction of Buddhism to China erased all gender divisions or created a society in which men and women were always given equal

⁶³⁶ For an overview of these rules, see: Husken 2010, 133-139.

treatment, or in which all Buddhist women abandoned the family unit.⁶³⁷ History would not support such an interpretation. For example, to this day, Buddhism women of many walks of life are still fighting for ordination rights,⁶³⁸ and Chinese women in the Late Imperial period saw a re-interpretation of Confucian gender roles that saw them binding their feet as a fashion trend suggesting elite status and womanly virtue.⁶³⁹ However, for the lives of the women in this study, Buddhist women of the Northern Wei – a small subset of society indeed – the story is truly one of increased opportunities for women, but opportunities linked specifically to the social, political, and economic situation of the Northern Wei. Thus, in the conclusion to this dissertation that is now to follow, I will work to re-contextualize all that has been offered for discussion in the pages of this study back in to the precise circumstances of the Northern Wei.

⁶³⁷ Although I am arguing that the Buddhist institution provided women of the Northern Wei court, and larger Northern Wei society, with a means to leave behind traditional family roles, I do not mean to suggest either that every Buddhist women did this, or that Buddhism, in any way, was seen to be against the family unity. The inscriptional record suggests otherwise as it retains a great number of family-based inscriptions – inscriptions that show husbands and wives dedicating images together and, as we have already seen, listing women and men with Buddhist titles as one would list members of the family, suggesting that women with Buddhist affiliation still dedicated images alongside their natal family. What I wish to suggest in this chapter is simply that the establishment of the Buddhist community of *bhikṣuṇīs* in China, provided Chinese women with more options than they previously had, and that some women used these options to help negotiate social prestige and political power. Other women, it seems, took up Buddhist patronage through the family, acting as co-donors with their husbands and lay members of the *saṃgha*, or, in the terms of our inscriptions, “women of pure faith.”

⁶³⁸ Although the question of women’s ordination status in the various schools and sects of the Buddhist tradition – both historically located and in the present day – has garnered much secondary literature, the most recent set of studies on the issue is Thea Mohr and Jampa Tsedroen’s *Dignity and Discipline* (2010).

⁶³⁹ Dorothy Ko has worked extensively on the issue of bound feet, fashion, and virtue in the Late Imperial, and has published a manuscript devoted to the topic: Ko 2005.

CONCLUSION. Current Research Methodologies and Future Research Trajectories: From the Northern Wei to the East Asian Cultural Sphere

The pages of this dissertation have been filled with stories featuring a collection of different personalities all linked together thematically and historically, and which all contribute to the telling of one meta-story – the story of women’s patronage of and relationship with the Buddhist tradition during the Northern Wei. As such, the topics that have been discussed have varied quite widely as I have attempted to make my telling of this story as complicated as it was during the time in which it unfolded. Thus, throughout the pages of this dissertation we have met empresses and concubines, Buddhist *bhikṣuṇīs* and *bhikṣus*, advanced Buddhist practitioners who take on male bodies, and women and men of pure faith. We have also read about individuals who show such differing social circumstances as young princesses, elderly widows, and common women and men who donated statuary in groups. My goal in presenting such data was to take a relatively simple and observable historical event – the patronage of Buddhism by women in China’s early medieval period – and make it as complex as possible in order to appreciate all possible sources of information and avenues of thought that such an event did indeed engender and include. However, despite the purposefully exploratory and intentionally meandering nature of this study, it is likely now necessary to bring the actors and the stories back into their specific historical context, the Northern Wei, in order to show just what a unique time period that dynasty was and why it provides such fruitful avenues of study. Thus, by way of a conclusion, what follows is not so much a summary of the dissertation as it is a simplification – a brief survey of the important historical moments

and intersections that made such a study possible, and from which I hang all the stories that have been offered in the previous pages.

Bringing it back to the Northern Wei: Women as a Religious Elite Revisited

In chapter two of this dissertation, I presented many forms of information that suggested that women held a relatively high status in northern society, especially in the court of the Northern Wei. I ended by arguing that in the Northern Wei women were seen as a sort of religious elite. As proof of this, I cited a passage from the *Book of the Wei* which records that court women journeyed through the countryside in fantastic chariots in order to undertake religious rituals among the populace and I also showed proof that women of the Northern Wei were involved in rituals of the state, as shamanesses and ritualists. Now, having presented more information on the roles that women played as religious actors in public society in the Northern Wei, the argument needs revisiting.

The Northern Wei was a non-Chinese dynasty that underwent a large-scale, imperially administered project of sinification that saw them adopt a Chinese-style court, while also taking on Buddhism as the state religion. Furthermore, the Northern Wei undertook its support of sinification and Buddhist expansion through its own cultural idiom – a tribal society with a relatively high status of women, a status that changed the nature of the Chinese court by giving women rank and position equal to that of their male counterparts. Thus, although I cannot argue that the rise of women taking on public roles in support of Buddhism was in any way only seen in the Northern Wei, I would like to restate the case that this dissertation has been about the unique social worlds of the Northern Wei – about how women engaged with and participated in these worlds, using

both the court and the Buddhist *samgha* to garner safety, position, and prestige in public society, while enacting political and social roles usually associated with men of the court.

The tradition of Buddhism was gaining popularity among the populace in north and south China by the time of the Northern Wei, but it perhaps impacted northern political structures to a greater degree than southern ones because of the tribal character of the northern dynasties. As we have seen, the Tuoba of the Northern Wei were only one group of the tribal peoples the Xianbei, and they were in intense competition with other tribal groups, often taking the women of other tribes as princesses in order to create inter-tribal relations and political alliances. Furthermore, with the collapse of centralized power at the end of the Han, these tribal groups were fighting for land and ultimate control of the north, and for the Northern Wei, their biggest adversaries were the Xiongnu who ruled over the neighbouring state of the Northern Liang. The Northern Liang was perhaps even more active in their patronage of Buddhism than was the Northern Wei, bringing eminent Central Asian translators to court. The Northern Wei eventually defeated the Northern Liang, taking their capital, Guzang, in 439 CE. However, this did not put an end to the fighting between the Tuoba and the Northern Liang Xiongnu, as they later rose up in rebellion – a rebellion aided and assisted by Buddhist monasteries and monks – the Gaiwu rebellion of 445. Moreover, numerous sources record that this was not the end of the Buddhist troubles for the Northern Wei as many Buddhist-organized rebellions rose up from among the populace, organized around tribal lines. The most notable of these was the so-called Mahayana rebellion discussed in chapter one. Thus for the Northern Wei, the support of Buddhism was a political necessity due to the popularity of the

tradition among the north and the tribal nature of that society. The Buddhism of the Northern Wei was not an accident – it was a political decision.

During this time of division, the northern dynasties took on Chinese-style courts, and the Northern Wei adopted the Chinese language, changing the name of the Tuoba family to a Chinese one. Yet this project of sinification was not entirely “Chinese” in the sense that the Buddha, and not a Chinese deity, remained the religious figurehead of the state for most of the empire. The Buddhism that the Tuoba knew and practiced at that time was largely foreign to the Chinese, but not to the Tuoba, due to the north’s proximity to Central Asia. Thus, as we have already seen, when the Northern Wei patronized Buddhism it did so as a tradition that belonged to them, not to the south of China. The opening paragraph of the *Pronouncements on Buddhism and Daoism* in the *Book of the Wei* makes this quite clear, stating that although Chinese records have already noted the rise of the great sages, “the doctrines of the Śākya clan had never yet been recorded.”⁶⁴⁰ As such, the author of the *Book of the Wei*, Wei Shou, who was trained in the Northern Wei, set out to do exactly that: to tell a story of the rise of Buddhism among the increasingly sinified society of the north that is punctuated with the works of Northern Wei rulers. This record details how the court of the Northern Wei established and expanded a northern-flavoured, sinified form of Buddhism – a Buddhism of the court – which was an odd situation given that the Tuoba were neither Chinese nor Buddhist at the start of the dynasty.⁶⁴¹ Yet this odd situation did not seem to bother them as they

⁶⁴⁰ Hurvitz 1956, 25.

⁶⁴¹ As previously discussed, the Northern Wei, early in its reign briefly but famously patronized Daoism as a state religion and did so under the guidance of the Daoist thinker

pushed their court Buddhism far and wide, branding it as “Northern Wei” to such an extent that Northern Wei buddhas are easily recognizable in the art historical record.

The related vector to discuss here is, again, the status of women. As all sources of information attest, women fared well within the society of the Northern Wei. Their relatively high status saw them take up eminent positions at court, as individuals with control over their own bureaucratic structure. It also saw them ruling over the dynasty for a not-insignificant period of time. Between the two reigns of Empress Dowager Feng and the one reign of Empress Dowager Hu, it is clear that women held political power and used that power to push the dynasty toward the programs of establishing a Sino-Buddhist empire. Furthermore, the vast numbers of court women other than these empresses – many of them taken on to cement tribal alliances with the Tuoba – were also interested in supporting the rise of the Buddhist *saṃgha*; however, as we saw in the tomb inscriptions presented in chapter four, their support of the *saṃgha* was often more political than devotional or religious. The *saṃgha* provided a safety net for large numbers of court women – giving them a place of honour and prestige to reside in after the deaths of their imperial husbands, who often lived very short lives. Further, as we also saw, the *saṃgha* may have given women the opportunity to act as high-level politicians as, unencumbered by family, entrance to the *saṃgha* gave women the opportunity to work as public servants. This situation was backed by teachings contained in popular Buddhist texts, texts which were translated during the early medieval period, wherein the Buddha taught

Kou Qianzhi, who was interested in re-structuring the Daoist tradition and wrote a *New Code* of revised Daoist practices.

that the change of a woman's physical sex was a necessity, but that women could achieve high status as leaders of religious communities, high enough, even, to be seen as powerful political entities. It is thus my contention that the women of the court patronized Buddhism not only for the support of the *samgha* but also because Buddhist teachings presented women in powerful public positions. Finally, as there were great numbers of women at court, their patronage affected the rise of the tradition in no small way as they built nunneries, studied texts, taught, arranged social events, and in the case of Empress Dowager Hu, sent emissaries to the west to retrieve Buddhist scriptures.

Within this nexus of study – the lives of women along with the rise of political and religious organization in the Tuoba Northern Wei – one other aspect need be considered: the urbanization projects of the Tuoba. One would not normally associate urbanization directly with the rise of institutions for women, yet that is exactly what happened in the Northern Wei. The dynasty undertook major projects of relocation, settling tens of thousands of people in their capitals of Pingcheng and Luoyang.⁶⁴² Within both of these projects, the imperial city was built to include Buddhism, and the greatest witness we have of this still remains, the imperially funded cave sites of Yungang and Longmen. The record of the building projects and urban planning of the second Northern Wei capital, Luoyang, contained in the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries of Luoyang* along with a few interesting notes in the *Book of the Wei* reveal to us quite clearly that the empire considered Buddhist building an integral part of the construction of a capital, with emperor Xuanwu cooperating with the *samgha* to build the central grottos at Longmen in

⁶⁴² For a chart of some of the numbers of these relocation projects, see: Tseng 2013, 38.

copy of those at Yungang, and Empress Dowager Hu ascending the religio-political complex, the Eternal Peace Monastery upon its completion in the new capital of Luoyang. The *Record of Buddhist Monasteries of Luoyang* also tells us that the building of socio-political spaces for women viz-a-viz the community of *bhikṣuṇīs* was an important undertaking of the court, seeing both women and eunuchs who were made rich by the women of the court build numerous majestic nunneries within the closest possible proximity to the court itself, one even tucked in at the north side between the back of the palace and the city wall. Thus, it is the case that this rare support of the Northern Wei, a court that was full of powerful women and ambitious in both its support of Buddhism and a sinification, resulted in the actual building of all-women spaces into the urban architecture of the new capitals.

This form of urban planning that guaranteed public spaces for women was further complemented by a tandem development of the Northern Wei – the rise of stele culture. Attempting to be more Chinese than the Chinese themselves, the court and citizens of the dynasty literally wrote the Chinese language everywhere: in caves, on images, and on steles. They did this to such an extent that in the study of stele culture in China, the Northern Wei is not only credited with the popular rise of this particular medium of cultural and religious expression, but they are credited with their own style.⁶⁴³ Furthermore, the Northern Wei only adopted Chinese in the latter half of their dynasty and so all the thousands of inscriptions that we have from that time period can be attributed to the last 100 years or so of the dynasty – an amazing feat. One aspect of this

⁶⁴³ Mao 2009, 112.

rise of stele culture is that the construction of a Buddhist stele or an image with an inscription usually involved a number of levels of society all working together: the donors, the artisans, members of the Buddhist community, and the recipient of the merit, usually deceased. As such, the creation of a stele necessarily involved the participation of women as women acted in positions of high religious attainment. As members of the *samgha*, women were famous for teaching the dharma, making miracles, and supporting the social life of Luoyang, and as such they were eminent people to be involved with the building of an image or the construction of a stele. This situation is obvious through even a cursory look at the inscriptional record wherein women are represented as participating as donors, the recipients of merit, and religious authorities. Finally, the widespread popularity of building steles and images, alongside the imperial push to do so, brought about the situation of women acting as public social agents in the creation and administration of such projects.

This brief summary of the arguments I have undertaken in this thesis was necessary to make my final assertion that the rise of women as a religious elite in the Northern Wei was the result of a complex variety of social, political, and religious factors unique to the predicament of the Northern Wei. As a non-Chinese tribal dynasty interested in ambitious, Chinese-style imperialism but needing to patronize Buddhism in order to rule the populace, quash rebellions, and make alliances, the Northern Wei is probably the best example that we have from pre-Tang China of a truly Sino-Buddhist state. Furthermore, the fact that women had a high status in tribal society is incredibly important as, in adopting a Chinese-style court, the Tuoba did something very un-Chinese

– give court women positions equal to men. This inevitably led to the court’s further support of the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha*, as the *saṃgha* offered these court women a certain form of social security. As such, *bhikṣuṇīs* and their living spaces were supported by the court and their numbers grew. These *bhikṣuṇīs* also engaged with public society in a number of ways that would not have been available to them in either pre-Buddhist Chinese religions or pre-Buddhist forms of the Chinese court, specifically in the donating of their own images and the acting as religious officiates in others and thus acting as necessary players in an economy of merit exchange. Thus, the Tuoba Northern Wei is a particular moment in history wherein a number of seemingly unrelated social vectors – northern tribal society, the Chinese court, the rise of Buddhism, and the building of new urban centers – came together to support the formation of a new religious elite for women, wherein they took on public lives as Buddhists, often themselves being members of the court.

Methodologies that Take Us Beyond the Northern Wei

In this dissertation, I have in part come to the same conclusion that Schopen has put forth in his study of Indic materials: that women were active in the practice of early Buddhism, and that their activity is well appreciated through the numbers of women who were involved in the commissioning and sponsoring of images. Schopen says that “donative inscriptions from a significant number of Buddhist sites show clearly that approximately the same numbers of nuns as monks, and sometimes more, acted as donors.”⁶⁴⁴ Furthermore, he uses this data to argue that *bhikṣuṇīs* were seen as fierce competitors with *bhikṣus* for the wealth of private patrons, as it seems that these *bhikṣuṇīs*

⁶⁴⁴ 2004, 329.

took on their own disciples, a situation that the *bhikṣus* tried to control through suppression of the *bhikṣuṇīs*.⁶⁴⁵ Although in the Northern Wei I have encountered no evidence of such a religious competition as Schopen has in his materials, the very fact that Buddhism provides a sanctioned religious and social space for women through the *bhikṣuṇī saṃgha* and through the inclusion of women in the economy of merit exchange remains the same.⁶⁴⁶ Indeed in many other places and times – most notably the reign of Empress Wu in China a few hundred years later – we see a similar situation wherein Buddhism became the religion of the state and women took on quite public roles in the religious life of the society. In fact, one could even argue that this situation is specific to Buddhism itself, though differently articulated due to time and place. As for Empress Wu who usurped the Tang to establish the Zhou, she appointed court women and patronized Buddhism while ordaining her daughters as Daoist clergy members. Furthermore, powerful female rulers in both Korea and Japan did the same – using their power to support the rise of Buddhism, and perhaps enjoying the support that Buddhism provided to their reigns as well. Thus, although the pages of this dissertation have been a specific study of the changing society of the Northern Wei, the phenomenon of women being involved with the Buddhist community is observable throughout the East Asian cultural sphere during the early medieval period, and even in Indian Buddhism.

Yet this cross-geographical and temporal observation begs the question of precisely how it should be studied. Though the Northern Wei was certainly a powerful

⁶⁴⁵ This is the central thesis of Schopen's article entitled, "The Suppression of Nuns and the Ritual Murder of their Special Dead" (2004, 329-359).

⁶⁴⁶ 2008, 229 ff.

dynasty and well-known in later China as well as in Korea and Japan, the idea that the Northern Wei provided a tangible model for later women and their patronage of Buddhism is likely both difficult to prove and an over-simplification of the facts at hand. With the possible exception of Empress Wu, who herself had family connections with the Northern Wei and who may have benefited from the Northern Wei precedent of establishing court ranks for women, the female rulers of Japan and Korea were themselves members of their own societies – societies though in relationship with the Chinese empire have maintained distinct differences from that empire. Thus, this dissertation has in no way meant to suggest that the Northern Wei was necessarily the sole model for female rulers and Buddhists in the early medieval sinic sphere of influence, but only that it is one piece of the puzzle that, as of now, has remained largely unstudied. The Northern Wei represents a certain, clearly-observable crystallization of a number of the factors that facilitated the rise of eminent female Buddhists: the purposeful creation of empire, the rise of Buddhism among the populace, a high status of women which may have seen women forming a religious elite, and the adoption of a Buddhist ritual organization of merit exchange that saw donors work with clergy – often female clergy – in order to tend to their ritual needs. Furthermore, the Northern Wei's importance in the East Asian cultural sphere may certainly have contributed to the connection between women-Buddhism-leadership that we see across East Asia from the 5th to 8th centuries, but it need not be considered the only contributing factor.

This is not to say that Korea and Japan cannot tell similar stories from their historical circumstances in the medieval periods, only that their stories should not take

the Northern Wei as a sole model but instead take this study as indicative of a methodology of study. Throughout the dissertation, my methodology has been one of situating a unique historical moment – the confluence of women, Buddhism, and political leadership – within as wide of a historical and social context as possible. This was done for two reasons: 1) to show that there is no one simple answer to the question of why powerful women patronized Buddhism; and 2) to suggest that whatever the answer is to the fascinating question of political women and Buddhist patronage, it need be carefully located in a precise time and space, in this case, the Tuoba Northern Wei dynasty that ruled much of China in the early medieval period but which has not yet received the scholarly attention that it is due. As such, I have positioned my study in a number of facets that are unique to the Northern Wei in their particulars but which can also be found across the East Asian cultural sphere – sinification, empire building, non-Han ethnicity, and the rise of organized religion – and I have tried to show that the Northern Wei provides a unique example of how these avenues came together to support the confluence of women, Buddhism, and politics, but that it is not the only example of just such a situation. Thus it is my hope that further studies of the medieval period in Korea and Japan may yield similar results – data that may tell the story of powerful women and Buddhism, but which will bring additional culturally and historically specific data to bear on the question itself, hence adding breadth to our understanding of how Buddhism and the rise of empire affected the lives of East Asian women in early medieval times.

APPENDIX ONE: Full Text of Inscriptions, Chinese and English

Chapter One

1. Title to the Record of the Construction of an Image by the *Bhikṣu* Huigan on the 23rd section of the Longmen Hill, from the 3rd Year of the Jingming Era (502 CE)⁶⁴⁷

On the [?] day of the fifth month of the third year of the Jingming era (between June 21 and July 19, 502 CE) the monk Huigan has reverently commissioned this singular image of Maitreya on behalf of his deceased parents. He wishes that the country has good fortune and is forever prosperous, that the three jewels be increasingly manifest and be spread throughout this age by teachers and the saṃgha, and that his parents and all relatives will forever be saved from the three evil destinies due to the growth and accumulation of their karma. He makes this wish, also, for all every living being in the triple world.

龍門山造像二十三段之比邱惠感題記 景明三年

景明三年五月□日。比丘惠感。爲亡父母敬造彌勒像一軀。願國祚永隆，三寶彌顯。□曠劫師僧，父母眷屬，與三途永乖，福鍾競集。三有群生，咸同此願。比丘法寧。爲亡父母敬造石像一軀。

2. Record of the Building of an Image by Wang Furong, in the 4th Year of the Yongping Era (511 CE)⁶⁴⁸

On the seventeenth day of the tenth month of a *xinmao* year, the fourth year of the Yongping era (November 21, 2011) of the Great Wei, the Regional Inspector Wan Furong, commissioned the building of one image of Śākyamuni with respect to maintaining and regulating all the military matters of Liangzhou and for seeking out captured military generals. His utmost prayer is that the emperor and the country be safe and that there be a respite from warfare. He wishes intensely that all brothers, mothers, children, and all others be in peace and contentment and that they revere and take refuge in the Three Jewels that will prosper forever, that the country's blessing are extensive, that the five grains will be abundant, and that the populace will be joyous. This extends to all living beings – may every person receive these blessings.

⁶⁴⁷ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 3.132; translation is my own.

⁶⁴⁸ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 3.143; translation is my own.

萬福榮造像記 永平四年

大魏永平四年，歲次辛卯，十月十有七日。持節督涼州諸軍事，討虜將軍、涼州刺史萬福榮。敬造牟尼像一區。上祝皇帝，國土康寧，兵戈休息。並願一切兄弟妻子眷屬安善。仰賴三寶永隆，國祚延長，五穀豐登，人民樂業。普及衆生，同享斯慶。大魏永平四年十月。

3. The *Yang* side of the Record of the Building of an Image by Gao Fude, in the 4th Year of the Jingming Era (503 CE), from a Niche in the Western City Gate of Zhuo District in Hebei Province⁶⁴⁹

On the second day after the new moon, on a Guiwei day in the fourth month of the fourth year of the Jingming era of the Great Wei (May 12, 503), Gao Fude, from the village of [?], Fei district, Fanyang commandery, Youzhou, along with the image presider and *weina*,⁶⁵⁰ Liu Xiong, and three hundred others, have commissioned an image to be built on behalf of the emperor. Gao Cai, Gao Qi, Gao Dou, Gao Woren, Gao Tanzhu, Gao Tiannian, Gao Shenlong, Gao Junsheng, Gao Bao, Gao Quan, Gao Fulian, Gao Daofeng, Gao Yansui, Gao Puci, Gao Shijian, Gao Sengde, Gao Shuangju, Gao Yan, Gao Luo, Gao Wen, Gao Yinye, Gao Shewo, Gao Dezu, Gao Chou, Gao Shenhu, Gao Linju, Gao Senggong, Gao Shenming, Gao Seng'ai, Gao Fuzhu, Gao A'ci, Gao Daochang, Gao Jiechou, Gao Tongli, Gao Fusun, Gao Ciwen, Gao Boduan, Gao Tong, Gao Shu, Gao Sengci, Gao Yongshou, Gao Baosun, Gao Chen, Gao Tianhu, Gao Yanxing, Shi Qiwan, Gao Maihu, Gao Wen, Gao Huilong, Gao Guiu'an, Gao Wengsheng, Gao Sengjing, Gao Baoqing, Gao Shenu, Gao Baorong, Gao Baoshan, Gao Yun, Gao Maju, Gao Lingyuan, Gao Baolin, Gao Jisheng, Gao Sengli, Gao Daoyuan, Gao Jizhou, Gao Youzhou, Gao Fu, Gao Dui, Gao Qiang, Gao Anshi, Gao □qing, Gao A'hei, Zhang Yuancheng, Gao Long, Dong Rong, Zhao Tongren, Gao Haizhou, Gao Mai, Gao Daorong, Gao Gongzu, □

⁶⁴⁹ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 3.062; translation is my own.

⁶⁵⁰ The title *weina* was a Buddhist term from the time period which labeled an individual as one who was in charge of a number of different administrative positions within a monastic community. These individuals will be discussed further on in this chapter and again in chapter four; however, in brief, in the Northern Wei *weinas* were both men and women and they worked closely between the court and the monastic community as enforcers of the court's policies regarding monasticism. A quite confusing title, the origins of the term *weina* are unknown as it does not seem to make a lot of sense in either Chinese or Sanskrit. In his *Managing Monks: Administrators and Administrative Roles in Indian Buddhist Monasticism*, Jonathan Silk (2008) provides a great discussion of the range of possibilities of the meanings of this title and concludes with uncertainty. In the Northern Wei, however, although Buddhists and rulers likely did not understand the linguistic origins of the word, it is clear that this position was one of great power in that the *weina* of Luoyang was the administrator of state Buddhism and very close with the emperor.

Fubao, Gao Zunian, Gao Bonu, Gao Luozhou, Gao Mainu, Cheng Aling, Gao Chounu, Gao Cibao, Gao Cigong, Gao Hu□, Gao Boqing, Gao Xingguang, Gao Mingda Gao Cinan, Gao Hengsheng, Gao Leng, Gao Podang, Gao Jinlong, Liu Ciwen, Liu Xiaobao, Gao Shu, Liu Baiju, Li Baokui, Li Ling, Gao Zhen, Gao Wannian, Gao Sishun, Liu Mangshi, Gao Boqi, Zhuo Dao'an, Liu Qingnu, Li Gan, Gao Jian, Gao A'yin, Gao Fei, Gao Fuzhou, Gao Wuhui, Liu Yongde, Gao Qingshi, Gao Huigui, Liu Heidui, Li Yong, Gao She'an, Gao Zongjing, Gao Fen, Gao Mianxing, Liu Sengda, Gao Baigai, Gao Faxian, Liu De, Fu Sheng, Li Wusheng, Liu Yuanshi, Gao Yu, Gao Men, Gao Dingzong, Liu Puwen, Wang Fajing, Wang Wulong, Gao Changsheng, Liu Longju, Li Hu, Gao Ling'An, Gao Min, Gao Fachong, Gao Qizhou, Liu Sengfu, Gao Hui, Gao Dulian, Gao Side, Wang Jin, Wang Fusheng, Li Yuanlong, Gao Zhouxing, Gao Shezuwu, Gao Maide, Gao Jinzhong, Gao Dinghe, Liu Yanjing, Gai Hainu.

高伏德等造像記陽 景明四年 河北涿縣西城門洞

大魏國景明四年太歲在癸未四月癸未朔二日。幽州范陽郡涿縣當陌村高伏德像主唯那劉雄合三百人爲皇帝陛下造石像一區記。高才、高啓、高都、高倭仁、高曇助、高天念、高神龍、高郡生、高保、高權、高伏連、高道豐、高煙歲、高普慈、高市鑒、高僧德、高雙居、高衍、高騾、高溫、高寅業、高舍我、高德祖、高醜、高神虎、高鄰居、高僧恭、高善明、高僧愛、高伏助、高阿次、高道暢、高解愁、高同利、高副孫、高次文、高伯端、高同、高樹、高僧次、高永受、高保孫、高琛、高天護、高延興、史寄王、高買虎、高文、高惠隆、高歸安、高甕生、高僧敬、高保慶、高社奴、高保榮、高保山、高暈、高馬俱、高靈援、高保林、高寄生、高僧利、高道原、高寄周、高幽州、高扶、高堆、高羌、高安世、高□慶、高阿黑、張願成、高龍、董容、趙同仁、高還周、高買、高道榮、高恭祖、□伏保、高祖念、高伯奴、高洛周、高買奴、程阿陵、高醜奴、高次保、高次恭、高胡□、高伯慶、高興光、高明達、高次難、高恒生、高楞、高叵當、高今龍、劉次文、劉小保、高舒、劉白駒、李百揆、李零、高珍、高万年、高思順、劉芒時、高伯奇、卓道安、劉清奴、李干、高寄安、高阿因、高非、高副周、高无諱、劉永得、高卿世、高惠規、劉黑堆、李永、高舍安、高宗敬、高糞、高勉興、劉僧達、高保蓋、高法顯、劉得、伏生、李午生、劉原始、高玉、高門、高定宗、劉普文、王法敬、王作龍、高長生、劉龍居、李虎、高零安、高愍、高法崇、高寄周、劉僧副、高惠、高犢憐、高思得、王矜、王伏生、李原隆、高周興、高舍族武、高買得、高今鍾、高定和、劉延敬、高還奴。

4. Record of the Building of an Image of Maitreya by Zhaiman, in the 3rd Year of the Shengui Era of the Northern Wei (520 CE)⁶⁵¹

⁶⁵¹ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 4.080; translation is my own.

The disciple of the Buddha, Zhai Man, on behalf of his deceased parents, has commissioned one image of Maitreya though he has fallen on hardships. He wishes that all deceased persons will gain rebirth in a heaven or be endowed with birth in the Western regions⁶⁵² where they can behold buddhas everywhere and at that time provide offerings to the three jewels. This was recorded on a stele in the Wanshou Monastery, on the 13th day of the 4th month of the 3rd year of the Shengui Era (May 15, 520).⁶⁵³ He now builds this in order to commence the creation of merit for all of those who see its fruition; so that all of them will know the happiness and bliss of the heavenly hall, but not know the bitterness and pain of the hells. Furthermore, on behalf of the various members of his own family, he vows to give rise to a flood of prayers. He has completely exhausted his family's treasures and thus severed himself from and harmed his wife and children in order to build this one image of Maitreya so that they may all receive the benefit. He wishes to serve his brothers and his children in the family so that all of them may dissipate the clouds of evil and gather together the 10,000 kinds of goodness and blessing and that each of them may have longevity that is equal to that of Pengzu.⁶⁵⁴ In serving those who study and question, may they have intelligence, clear, and strength and for those officials of the soil and various other ministers, may they reach the Three Offices⁶⁵⁵ and may the passage of time not diminish them. He undertakes to wish that all insects [broken text] of varieties, that each and all of them have this merit. His father, Zhai Qiaosheng, his child Man Gou, his child Yao Man, his child Mao Man, his grandchild, Yuan Bin, and his grandchild, Zhong Bin.

翟蠻造彌勒像 北魏 神龜三年

佛弟子翟蠻，爲亡父母洛難，敬造彌勒像一軀。願使亡者上生天上，託生西方。侍佛左右，供養三寶時。萬壽寺碑記，神龜三年四月十三日，夫興造福果者，悉知天堂之快樂，乃知地獄之酸楚。即自爲居家眷屬，誓發洪願，竭其家珍，分割妻子，以造彌勒像一軀。悉皆成就。願使弟子居家，衆惡雲消，萬善慶集。悉各□壽齊如彭祖。使學問者聰明精爽。土宦屬官者，爲致三司，歷世不絕。伏願虫□□□有□之類，咸同斯福。父翟橋生，息蠻苟，息要蠻，息毛蠻，孫子元賓，孫子仲賓。

⁶⁵² Rebirth in the “western regions” is a popular desire in Northern Wei inscriptions and surely refers to rebirth in the Western Pureland, Sukhavati, though this is strange because the Buddha of the Pureland, Amitabha, is not mentioned in my inscriptions.

⁶⁵³ The Shengui Era is from 518–520 CE.

⁶⁵⁴ A mythological figure from the *Biography of Divine Immortals* who is said to have lived for over 700 years. Source: CJKVE- Dictionary.

⁶⁵⁵ The Three Offices, in the Northern Wei, were the three main divisions of the imperial bureaucracy all under the leadership of the *Shangshu* 尚書, or the official court secretary. Achieving a position in the Three Offices is thus the highest rank for a court officer to take on.

Chapter Two

1. Record of the Building of an Image Stele by Gao Luozhou and Others, in the 1st Year of the Zhengshi Era (504 CE)⁶⁵⁶

In the first year of the *Zhengshi* era of the Kingdom of the Great Wei, in a great year that was a *jiashen* year, in the third month, a *wujia* month, on a new moon on the ninth day (April 9, 504CE), the *weina* Gao Luozhou, along with seventy other people from the village of Dangmo in the province Zhuo, have constructed one stone image of Śākyamuni on behalf of the emperor and all those under him. Therefore, this is a record of [those who contributed to] the establishment of that stone: the wife of Gao(?), Wang Axiang; the extended family of Gao Long; the extended family of Gao Shi; Gao Yin; Gao [?]_{da}; Gao Tingxing; Gao Daoyuan; Gao Anshi; Gao [?]_?; Gao Si_?; [?]_?[?]_?; Gao Dayu; Gao Junsheng; Gao Yongren; Gao [?]; Gao Wen; Gao Shibao; Gao Zenggong; Gao Shuangbao; Gao Zhiming; Gao [?]_{luo}; Gao Huiwu; Gao [?]_?; Gao Dai'an; Gao Shunan; Gao Qiren; Gao Taibao; Gao An_?; Gao Yan; Gao Baorong; Gao Taixin; Gao Bocheng; Gao Jie_?; Gao Guoxing; Gao Ming; [?]_?; Gao [?]_{zi}; Gao Fusun; Gao Keyang; Gao Cike; Gao Baiju; Gao [?]_{ju}; Gao Kun; Gao Anju; Gao Keren; Gao Zhengnu; Gao Tian; Gao Xun; Gao [?]; Gao Kang; Gao Baocheng; Gao Siren; Gao Yuanming; Gao Renju; Gao Ling_?; Gao Duren; Gao Baozhou; Gao Zengshou; Gao Qingzhou; Gao Longju; Gao Faxing; Gao Siji; the ancestor Gao Nansheng and his wife Zhao Wen; the wife of Gao Rong, Wang A'_?; Gao Ting_?; Gao Bei_? who is a servant of the Buddha; the presider of the stone image, the wife of Gao Wen, Shi [?] and her five children, Mai Lai, Mai De, [missing text] who along with their extended family are servants of the Buddha; the wife of Gao Chongren, Wang Niangjie and her children, Fu Yi, Sheng Ke, Sheng Jing, Bing Jing, and her elder and younger brothers, her father, and her extended family who are servants of the Buddha; the women of pure faith, Zhang Mensheng and Yu Niang, their elder sister Pang A'yue, and the four people of their extended family who are servants of the Buddha; Gao Xianglu; Gao Jingshen; the wife of Gao Fu, Kong Yunü, who is a servant of the Buddha; Gao A'_?; Gao [?]; Gao Yi; Gao Yansheng, who is a servant of the Buddha; [?]_? and others, who are servants of the Buddha; the extended family of Gao Ciwen; the wife of Gao Rong, Wang A'_?; the wife of Gao [?]_{zong}, Zhao Tongji; the wife of Gao Gainu, [?]; the wife of Gao Yin, Shen Xiangzhu, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of Gao Yu, [?] Luo, who is a servant of the Buddha; Gao [?]_?; the wife of Gao [?] Wang A'_?, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of Gao [?], Su Bailuo, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of Gao Shi, a good friend of the Buddha, Qiu [?], a servant of the [broken text]; the wife of Gao Tian, Cui Si, in the 11th month, a *bingwu* month (November 23, 504 – December 21, 504); the wife of the Gentleman of Pure Faith Gao Xiang, Ni Dainan, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of the Gentleman of Pure Faith Gao Fugai, [?] Rongzhi, who is a servant of the Buddha; the wife of the Gentleman of Pure Faith Gao [?], Yuan Qishi, who is a servant of the Buddha;

⁶⁵⁶ Beijing Tushuguan 1989–1998, 3.076; translation is my own.

the wife of the Gentleman of Pure Faith Gao Mai, Xing Nansheng, who is a servant of the Buddha; the *weina* Gao Long [?] and his neighbours, Gao Ju; Gao Shi; Gaozi.

高洛周十人等造象碑 正始元年

大魏國正始元年，太歲甲申三月戊申朔九日，涿縣當陌村維那高洛周七十人等，上為皇帝陛下造釋迦石像一軀。故臨石立記之。高竭妻王阿香，高龍眷屬，高市眷屬，高欣，高□達，高延興，高道原，高安世，高□□，高思□，□□□，高□□，高大榆，高郡生，高用仁，高□，高文，高式保，高僧恭，高雙保，高知明，高□洛，高惠午，高□□，高代安。高沐難，高氣仁，高太保，高安□，高演，高保榮，□太心，高伯成，高界□，高國興，高明。□□高□子，高副孫，高可陽，高次可，高白居，高□居，高昆，高安居，高可仁，高征奴，高天，高詢，高□，高康，高保成，高思仁，高迎明，高仁居，高領□，高社人。高保周，高僧受，高清周，高龍居，高法興，高思吉，高□向，高安欣。高祖明，高拔漢，高伏蓋，高文欣，高貴，高黑胎，高□。祖高難生，妻趙文。高融妻王阿□。高延□，高備□侍佛。石像主高文妻史□，五息買來買得椽□□□眷侍佛時。高允仁妻王念姐，息伏宜生客生景賓景和兄弟父眷屬侍佛。清信女張門勝玉念，姐龐阿月，四人眷屬侍佛。高香盧，高景慎。高扶妻孔羽女侍佛。高阿□，高□高益，高巖生侍佛。□□等侍佛。高次文眷屬高融妻王阿□，高□宗妻趙同姬，高蓋奴妻□。高欣妻審香珠侍佛。高羽妻□羅侍佛。高□□高□妻王阿□侍佛。高□妻蘇□白羅侍佛。高士佳佛妻仇□侍□□。十一月丙戌高天妻崔思。清信士高詳妻倪殆男侍佛。清信士高伏蓋妻□容之侍佛。清信士高□妻員契士侍佛。清信士高買妻邢男生侍佛。維那高龍□其鄰高具高市高□子。

2. Record of the Building of an Image by Yang A'zhen, in the 2nd Year of the Putai Era (532 CE)⁶⁵⁷

On the fifteenth day of the third month of the second year of the Putai Era (April 5, 532)⁶⁵⁸ Yang A'zhen of Pure Faith commissioned the building of one stone image on behalf of her parents and all living beings: the disciple of the Buddha Wang Tianjin gave offerings; the disciple of the Buddha Wang A'jie gave offerings; the disciple of the Buddha Wang Daohui gave offerings; the niece Shuanghu; the niece Bainü; the niece Heizong; the niece Baizong; Zhao Baoji of Pure Faith; Guo Shiji of Pure Faith; Zhao A'fei of Pure Faith; the niece Gui Li.

楊阿真造像記 普泰二年

⁶⁵⁷ Beijing Tushuguan 1989–1998, 5.155; translation is my own.

⁶⁵⁸ The Putai Era runs from 531–532 CE.

普泰二年三月十五日。清信楊阿真，仰爲世父母，一切衆生，造石像一軀。佛弟子王天進供養。佛弟子王阿緒供養。佛弟子王道暉供養。侄雙虎，侄白女，侄黑縱，侄白縱。清信趙保姬。清信郭石姬。清信趙阿妃。侄貴季。

3. Record of the Building of an Image by the Great Courtesan Hou, in the 4th Year of the Jingming Era (503 CE)⁶⁵⁹

On the seventh day of the tenth month of the fourth year of the Jingming era (November 11, 503 CE), the great courtesan Hou, and grandmother of the King of Guangchuan, herself relying on the fact that the dharma has gotten farther away throughout the progress of numerous kalpas, has charged a path to meet with the teaching of images and has herself rebelled against the accomplished scholars. Even though she was entwined with the purple radiance,⁶⁶⁰ she was soon reduced to a mere wafer, and she had to raise her orphaned grandson from infancy in order to continue their border kingdom. With a heart cold and shallow, she [missing character] returned to true quiescence. Now she is building one statue of Maitreya, and her wish is that this insignificant cause will help benefit her spirit and consciousness, so that her manifest body will remain forever strong, that she become clearly enlightened and achieve awakening, that in distance places she is able to purify this broad world of the unenlightened and their ignorant activities, and that this be extended to future generations, and that that the empty teaching be marvellous and inconceivable. She also wishes that her grandson live for many years, that his spiritual intentions are quickly achieved, that his descendants increase and multiple, that their blessings radiate throughout the 10,000 worlds, that those of imperial rank are forever resplendent, and that they spread and disseminate the marvellous dharma so that even the base, the foolish, and the unenlightened, give rise to *bodhi*.

侯太妃自造像記 景明四年 河南洛陽龍門石窟

景明四年十月七日，廣川王祖母太妃侯。自以流歷彌劫，於法喻遠。囑遇像教，身乖達士。雖奉聯紫暉，早傾半體。孤育幼孫，以紹蕃國。冰薄之心，唯歸真寂。今造彌勒像一區。願此微因，資潤/神識。現身永康，朗悟旨覺。遠除曠世無明惱業，又延未來空宗妙果。又願孫息延年，神志速就。胤嗣繁昌，慶光萬世。帝祚永隆，弘宣妙法。昏愚未悟，咸發菩提。

4. Record of the Building of an Image by Cixiang Huizheng, in the 3rd Year of the Shengui Era (520 CE)⁶⁶¹

⁶⁵⁹ Beijing Tushuguan 1989–1998, 3.066; translation is my own. This inscription is also translated by Amy McNair with minor differences. See: McNair 2006-7, 202.

⁶⁶⁰ This is a reference to her marrying into the royal family.

⁶⁶¹ Beijing Tushuguan 1989, 4.078; translation is my own. This is also translated and studied by Amy McNair (2007, 57-59).

On the 20th day of the third month of the fourth year of the Shengui era of the great Wei (April 23, 520 CE), the nun Cixang Huizheng governed over the building of a cave, whose record states: As for the falling into enlightenment and spreading of emptiness, it is shapeless and truly abstruse, yet the traces it leaves should be followed; upheld and venerated as a constant model. Are they not the expressions of this beautiful and profound teaching? For this reason, the undertaking of yearning and thirsting to cross the stream of dharma, is responded to by the building of images whose subtle merit is both in this form and in the remote distance. Having been born and being dependent on this troublesome body, I vow to surpass these boundaries without hindrances and to attain the highest embrace of passion and will thus benefit all beings in the dharma realm. I confer these blessings [missing text] so that this stone becomes a pure image whose virtue lasts for 80,000 years, and extends even to the thrice-followers, so that they dare to share in this very same benevolence.

慈香惠造像記(慈香慧政造像記) 神龜三年

大魏神龜三年三月廿□日，比丘尼慈香慧政造窟一區記之。夫靈覺弘虛，非體真邃。其迹道建崇，□表常範，无乃標美幽寂。是以仰渴法津，應像營微。福形且往，生託煩躬。願騰无礙之境，逮及□恩。含潤法界，□□銘澤。壘石成真，刊功八萬。延及三從，敢同斯福。

5. Record of the Building of an Image by the nun Daozeng from the Immortal Peace Monastery, in the 4th Year of the Yongping Era (511 CE)⁶⁶²

On the seventh day of the tenth month of the fourth year of the Yongping era (November 12, 511 CE), the nun Daozeng from the Immortal Peace Monastery has planned the commission of one image of Maitreya so that birth after birth and life after life she will see the Buddha and inquire after the Dharma. Zhou A'zu, a Woman of Pure Faith, vows to watch over this mystery in this manifest world so that all living beings, equally and altogether, can make this vow.

仙和寺尼道僧略造像記 永平四年

永平四年，十月七日。仙和寺尼道僧略。造彌勒像一區。生生世世，見佛/聞法。清信女周阿足，願現世安隱。一切衆生，並同斯願。

6. Record of the Building of an Image by Chang Shenqing and Others, in the 1st Year of the Jianyi Era (528 CE)⁶⁶³

⁶⁶² Beijing tushuguan 1989–1998; 3.139; translation is my own.

⁶⁶³ Beijing tushuguan 1989–1998; 3.121; translation is my own.

In the first year of the Jianyi Era, in the seventh month of the year, which was a *wushen* month, on the 14th day of the month, which was a *jisi* day and also a new moon (August 14, 528 CE), the *dānapati*, The military General Who Opposes Licentiousness and is the Commander of Horses and Households, Chang Shenqing, along with a village collective of wives and women, of more than 1010 persons, constructed one jade figure measuring two *chi* in height. At its highest, this image is for the sake of the Emperor and those below him; at its middle, it is on behalf of our deceased parents; at its lower end, it is further on behalf of wives, children, and those to whom we are close; and lastly it is on behalf of all the beings in the world. This is offered to the bhikṣu Sengxian, offered so that the brilliant radiance of opening up the Buddha be always abundant, offered so that the village collective that built the image may always see it and thus constantly create merit, offered so that our contemporaries will always [text unreadable], offered for our contemporary Sun Changhe and also for our contemporary Pei Yingzhen, and finally for the spirit of those who handle the affairs of kingly laws.

常申慶等造像記 建義元年

大魏之世建義元年歲次戊申七月丙辰朔十四日己巳。檀越主蕩逆將軍馬戶尉常申慶。共婦女邑子伍拾人等。造玉石像壹軀，高二尺伍。上爲皇帝陛下，中爲所亡父母，下爲妻子眷屬。復爲一切衆生。比丘僧法惠供養。開佛光明常侯祖供養。造像□人常見喜供養。所當人常僧敬供養。所當人孫萇浴供養。所當人常萇命供養。所當人裴英珍供養。徑管事王法神供養。

Chapter Four

1. Epitaph of the *bhikṣuṇī* of the Yuan family from the Great Awakening Nunnery⁶⁶⁴

Preface and tomb inscription of the *bhikṣuṇī* of the Yuan family⁶⁶⁵ from the Great Awakening Nunnery who was the successor Wife of the Great General of Chariots and Horses, Duke Wending from the Xing Clan.⁶⁶⁶

The Lady's name was Chuntuo, and her dharma name is Zhishou. She was the granddaughter of the Jingmu Emperor Gongzang⁶⁶⁷ and she was the fifth daughter of Prince Kang of Rencheng.⁶⁶⁸

With coiled roots like jade peaks, a select character like a jasper forest, a fine appearance like a budding flower, and a breezy spirit like a pliant mulberry, she was discreet and

⁶⁶⁴ Zhao 1992, 261.

⁶⁶⁵ In her official title she is called not a 比丘尼 *bhikṣuṇī*, the standard transliteration of *bhikṣuṇī*, but a very odd appellation, a 比丘元尼 *bīqiūyuānni*, which I take to mean “a *bhikṣuṇī* of the Yuan family,” Yuan being the family name that the Tuobas took for themselves. This is a rare title that I have not seen elsewhere and is strange not only because of the insertion of a semantically unrelated character right in the middle of a well-defined semantic unit – the Chinese transliteration for the Sanskrit *bhikṣuṇī* – but also because this character marks her as a monastic that very clearly retains a family name. Yet this appellation “*bīqiūyuānni*” does fit with a number of other titles from the Northern Wei that are also difficult to decipher. For example, as seen in chapter two, we have the titles *qingxin hunü jingongyang* 清信胡女進供養 and *qingxin humienü gongyang* 清信胡篋女供養 wherein family and personal names are placed in between the semantic elements of 清信 and 女, making possible such a translation as the Daughter of the Hu Family of Pure Faith who Puts Forth Offerings instead of the “Daughter of Pure Faith from the Hu Family who Puts Forth Offerings,” with this latter allocution being much more common in inscriptions with a woman being called a *qingxinnü/shi* 清信胡女/士 (“Girl/Man of Pure Faith) plus the addition of their family and personal names.

⁶⁶⁶ Lee Jen-der has identified this person as Xing Luan 邢巒 (464–514 CE), a Northern Wei literatus and military commander (forthcoming).

⁶⁶⁷ Emperor Jingmu (Jingmu Huangdi 景穆皇帝; 428–451 CE), or Tuoba Huang 拓跋晃, was the eldest son of Emperor Taiwu but was never himself an emperor, being given this title posthumously by Emperor Wencheng who was his son. He is also known by his temple name Gongzong 恭宗 and had been previously been known as Prince Jingmu 景穆太子.

⁶⁶⁸ Prince Kang of Rencheng (Rencheng Kangwang 任城康王: 447–481 CE), or Tuoba Yun 拓跋雲, was also the son of Emperor Jingmu and hence the brother of Emperor Wencheng.

sharp witted even in her infant years. In gentleness and grace, she passed through her childhood days. Prince Rencheng was partial to her and his affection was very deep. He saw that she was different from the rest of the girls. She was long in his embrace and never left his lap. However, when she had just turned seven years old, the Prince died and was mourned. Due to her divine emotion and filial nature, having not yet studied it [filiality] at all, still she knew how to do it. She cried tears of blood and feasted on melancholy, without quitting both day and all night.⁶⁶⁹

When she reached a marriageable age⁶⁷⁰ it was requested that she be married to the Mu Clan and thus she strenuously undertook women's work and was endowed with all manner of womanly virtue. However this excellent person (her husband) soon passed away and feeling then as only half a person she spoke of her inclination to regretfully sever the three followings⁶⁷¹ and she went to undertake religious libations, mindfully doling out the ginger water and singing the *Song of the Yellow Stork*.⁶⁷² Her eldest brother, The Grand Mentor and Prince for the Propagation of Culture,⁶⁷³ opposed her faithful decisions and feelings and he resolutely did not authorize her actions.

Duke Wending considering her of lofty family and eminent virtue and that her talents were equal to those of ministers and generals, brought her into the service of the civilized imperium where she fit in just like a fish in water. In this eminent cap handed down from antiquity, her merits accrued to the present time. And with grace, she accordingly made a match and came to be the wife of the lord, and together they were happy like the *qin* and the *se* (lute and zither), living in harmony like the flute and the *xun*. She never spoke of her personal dwelling, but instead was like a guest in her respectfulness. She honoured her mother-in-law with complete courtesy and was triumphant in not neglecting even one person. She dwelt with her husband's sister in nothing but delight and was able to retain harmony among all the ranks.

⁶⁶⁹ According to Lee Jen-der this is a typical Confucian expression used to depict children mourning the deaths of their parents (forthcoming).

⁶⁷⁰ Literally the age in which she would wear a hairpin, about fifteen.

⁶⁷¹ Meaning, literally, that she did not want to remarry and hence "follow" another man.

⁶⁷² According to the *Biographies of Eminent Women* (*Lienüzhuan* 列女傳), which was composed in the Han dynasty by Liu Xiang 劉向 (77 BCE – 6 CE), a young widow from Lu 魯, Tao Ying 陶嬰, composed the *Song of the Yellow Stork* (*Huanghu zhige* 黃鵠之歌) during the Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu* 春秋 770–476 BCE) Period in order to lament her situation of being both orphaned and widowed young and did so in order to express her intention to remain celibate and alone. Hence we see here very clearly the association between traditional notions of widowhood and chastity being conflated with new notions of Buddhist renunciation for women.

⁶⁷³ Again, Lee Jen-der has identified her brother as Yuan Cheng 元澄 (467 – 519 CE) who was the Grand Tutor of the court (forthcoming).

When the child⁶⁷⁴ would run away and escape his attendants, she would then laugh and swaddle him and with goodness and sagacity she would care for him and nourish him, and through these teachings of compassion she added to her great truth and profound humanity. When the child had grown and left the home, she herself took to studying so that they could be equal in their formation. Her speech was brief and poignant and she used it to command the child to grow eminent and to overcome enticements.

At the same time, her most basic feeling was toward her solitary enlightenment. In her brilliant intention, she was unsurpassed. The Odes and the Histories gave her correct ritual behaviour, and she was widely read in the Classics.

As to the ropes and beads that made her square cap, she braided and wove them; anything she took in hand she was able to do. Few in words and true in speech, like flawless white jade, she respectfully and faithfully assented. Her gold was not heavy and her robes were those of the general palace. She did not favour elegant or rare dress.⁶⁷⁵ She did menial service in the noble chambers and always made sure that the emperor had clean clothes. With this trustworthiness it was appropriate that she was the chief of the women in a short period of time. Her matronly rituals numbered in the thousands. Surely it's the case that by hearing her words one knew her actions, and that by observing her countenance one knew her emotions.

When the General of the Chariots and Horses bade farewell to the world, she attentively accomplished her wifely virtues: at night she did not weep and carry on; in the morning, she did ritual lamentations with great compassion. Thereupon, she lamented: "I have endured suffering my whole life, and once again I must distance myself from bitterness and difficulty. Previously, I was ashamed of having yielded to another's grasp, and now I am embarrassed of my unshackled heart."⁶⁷⁶ I have lost virtue in serving people as there is no joy in another's house. Happiness will be born out of sorrow just as results come forth from causes."

Then having discarded the self and her worldly anxieties, she entrusted her person to the dharma gate, discarded and put aside desire and excess, abided in leisure and righteous waters, exhaustively investigated the scriptural canon, completely penetrated the rules of

⁶⁷⁴ Lee Jen-der has established that this child was the child of the duke from his first marriage (forthcoming).

⁶⁷⁵ This is likely a description of the fact that she wanted to live as a renunciant though she was at court. We saw a similar trope in the biography of Empress Dowager Feng who worked to simplify court dress and ritual and also to minimize excess food and waste.

⁶⁷⁶ Here she is lamenting a dual struggle, the first being her remarriage after intending to remain celibate and widowed after the death of her first husband, and the second being the shame that she feels at her connection to and sense of loss at the death of her second husband to whom she originally did not want to marry.

discipline, treasured the six perfections,⁶⁷⁷ and considered great wealth to be completely useless. When she had attained the karmic retribution of the 10 benevolent practices⁶⁷⁸ she quickly attained extinction under the shade of twin trees.⁶⁷⁹

With the blessing of the Prince of the Xihe County of Wei,⁶⁸⁰ she departed from the Mu Clan and thus became a lady in the house of her son in law. She was an outstanding talent in the imperial household, and her fame and reputation were widely appreciated, and thus she was protected by all those near to the city. The imperial capital enjoyed her and was enriched by her.

Then once when the lady went out to some other place, she contracted a lingering illness that lasted for thirteen days, from the *jiyou* day (November 17, 529 CE) and thirteenth day in the 10th month of winter until the new moon on the *xinyou* day (November 29, 529 CE), when she died in a separate residence in Yingyang Prefecture. Her descendants cried out their longing. Both monastics and laity⁶⁸¹ undertook lamentations.

When she was nearing the end, she awoke to reality, divided her brilliance, and let go of her supports. She commanded that she be buried separately from her husband's site and thus she accorded with the mind of one practicing the path. Her son and daughter followed these stipulations and dared not disobey her indications. According to this, in the eleventh month, on the seventh day after the new moon, which was a *wuyin* day (December 16, 529 CE), on the *jiashen* day (December 22, 529 CE) at dawn, her tomb was selected 115 *li* to the northwest of Luoyang city on the southwest of Mt. Mang which has a different name: the lesser mountain, Ma'an. This gold and jade were then

⁶⁷⁷ The Six Perfections are also known as the Six Pāramitās and are the Buddhist virtues of charity, morality, forbearance, effort, meditation, and wisdom. When entering the Buddhist path one seeks to perfect these virtues on their way to enlightenment or buddhahood.

⁶⁷⁸ Similarly, the Ten Benevolent Practices of refraining from killing, stealing, adultery, lying, speaking harshly, speaking divisively, speaking idly, greed, anger, and false views characterize the path of Buddhist progress toward enlightenment.

⁶⁷⁹ This is of course reminiscent of Śākyamuni Buddha who entered Parinirvāṇa under twin trees.

⁶⁸⁰ The Xihe county of the Northern Wei was located in modern-day Shanxi 山西 province, close to the city of Lüliang 吕梁.

⁶⁸¹ The term used here (*zisu* 緇素) to express both members of the laity and members of the monastic institution is a commonly-used epithet describing the clothing that both sectors of society wore and thus could otherwise be rendered as the “black-clad” (monastics) and the “white-clad” (laity). However, for clarity, I have chosen to render it “monastic and lay.”

completely destroyed, burned entirely into ashes.⁶⁸² This was respectfully engraved in stone in this original hermitage where numerous plants and flowers are intertwined. Her memorial states:

The agent of metal⁶⁸³ does not endure; water will overcome it and thrive alone. Therein lays the fusion of our two forebears, the flying dragon and the soaring phoenix. Succeeding Wen there was Wu,⁶⁸⁴ who brought double sagacity, reduplicated splendour, courageous light, and the pursuit of virtue. From the fiefdoms of the Zhou to the luxury of the Han, cordiality gave rise to tenderness and compliance and to the ability to accord with true warmth and excellence, so that when walking along the wooden bridges of Qi⁶⁸⁵ there were the most noble grade of river fish, lotus flowers blooming on the small islets, the sun shining down on the wooden beams, grains, fungus, vines, and irrigation channels collecting all the orioles.

These words return us to the possession of ritual. Like chimes thundering forth their sound, they illuminate completely every fold in an axle. This understanding is like burying a sheep to sincerely unite the nine clans and calm and harmonize the different divisions of the house.⁶⁸⁶ Ages therefore have their ends, continually rising and falling. In

⁶⁸² I take this to be a reference to her body that would suggest that she was cremated in a Buddhist fashion in accord with her wishes to not be entombed with her husband.

⁶⁸³ This poetic beginning to Chuntuo's epitaph roots her own life of constant negotiation and willingness to be pliant to changes within the very creation of the universe and development of Chinese civilization. In traditional Chinese thought, the five elements that create the world (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) are in constant metamorphosis wherein one element gives way to the next and in this paradigm water continually overcomes metal just as softness overcomes strength. This opening characterizes the life of Chuntuo as she became entirely virtuous and powerful through having given in to the desires and commands of others. The sentence also sets up the further depiction of Chinese civilization which seems to be characterized as having developed in the same way.

⁶⁸⁴ King Wen 文周王 (1152–1056 BCE) and King Wu 武周王 (1046 – 1043 BCE) are the founding emperors of the Zhou dynasty 周 (1046 – 256 BCE), with Wu being the son of Wen.

⁶⁸⁵ Qi 齊 was a long-standing state under the Zhou in what is modern-day Shandong and lasted from approximately the beginning of the Zhou to the founding of the Qin 秦 dynasty in 221 BCE.

⁶⁸⁶ This is a reference to the story of Shu Ji 叔姬 from the *Biographies of Eminent Women*. According to the story, Shu Ji's husband was pushed out of Jin for his uprightness but was given a cooked sheep on departing. Shu Ji encouraged her husband to accept the sheep in order to keep the peace but to bury it instead of eating it, lest it be poisoned. For more on this see: Raphals 1998, 43.

past times the kingdom was small, but still today its name has not yet perished. If one is inclined to Heaven when they reach their very end, how can there not be suffering?

In departing from this increasingly defiled realm, and meeting this mysterious other place, the dark prisons are quiet beyond quiet while the path of heaven is vast beyond vast. Once we are born our lives become rushed, the days are short and the nights are long, but if we directly gravitate to the delicate willow and not turn away from the support of the mulberry,⁶⁸⁷ then although frost congeals on the green catalpa and the breezes bring sadness to the white poplar, if we rest in the fragrance of the lily fields, their luxurious aroma will never be severed.

This was erected in the second year of the Yongan Reign, the second of her *jiyou* years, in the eleventh on the *jiashen* day that was seven days after the new moon of the *wuyin* day.

魏故車騎大將軍平舒文定邢公繼夫人大覺寺比丘元尼墓誌銘并序

夫人諱純陀。法字智首。恭宗景穆皇帝之孫。任城康王之第五女也。蟠根玉岫，擢質瓊林，姿色端華，風神柔婉，岐嶷發自韶年。窈窕傳於朏日。康王偏加深愛。見異眾女。長居懷抱之中。不離股掌之上。始及七歲康王薨殂。天情孝性不習而知。泣血茹憂無捨晝夜。初笄之年言歸穆氏。懃事女功備宣婦德。良人既逝。半體云傾慨絕三從將循一醺思姜水之節起黃鵠之歌。兄太傅文宣王違義奪情確焉不許。文定公高門盛德，才兼將相，運屬文皇契同魚水。名冠遂古，勳烈當時。婉然作配來嬪君子。好如琴瑟。和若埴簞。不言容宿。自同賓敬。奉姑盡禮。剋匪懈於一人。處姒唯雍。能燮諧於眾列。子散騎常侍遜，爰以咳襁。聖善遽捐，恩鞠備加，慈訓兼厚，大義深仁。隆於已出故以教侔在織。言若斷機，用令此子成名剋構。兼機情獨悟。巧思絕倫。詩書禮辟，經目悉覽。紃紃組紃入手能工。稀言慎語，白珪無玷，敬信然諾，黃金非重巾帨公宮。不登袷異之服，箕帚貴室，必御浣濯之衣。信可以女宗一時。母儀千載。豈直聞言識行。觀色知情。及車騎謝世。思成夫德。夜不洵涕。朝哭銜悲。乃歎曰吾一生契闊。再離辛苦。既慚靡他之操。又愧不轉之心。爽德事人。不興他族。樂從苦生。果由因起。便捨身俗累。託體法門。棄置愛津。栖遲正水。博搜經藏。廣通戒律。珍寶六度。草芥千金。十善之報方臻。雙林之影遄滅。西河王魏慶。穆氏之出。即夫人外孫。宗室才英。聲芳藉甚。作守近畿。帝城蒙潤。夫人往彼。遘疾彌留。以冬十月己酉朔十三日辛酉。薨於熒陽郡解別館。子孫號慕。緇素興嗟。臨終醒寤。分明遺託。令別葬他所。以遂脩道之心。兒女式遵。不敢違旨。粵以十一月戊寅朔七日甲申。卜窆於洛陽城西北一十五里。芒山西南。別名馬鞍小山之朝陽。金玉一毀。灰塵行及。謹勒石於泉廬。庶芳菲之相襲。其辭曰。金

⁶⁸⁷ Just as the live of Chuntuo, the willow and the mulberry are characterized by pliancy, softness, and delicacy, so the author is suggesting that though life is busy, hard, and cold, we should remain soft and pliant for therein will we find repose.

行不競。水運唯昌。於鑠二祖。龍飛鳳翔。繼文下武。疊聖重光。英明踵德。周封漢蒼。篤生柔順。剋誕溫良。行齊槁木。貴等河魴。蓮開淥渚。日照層梁。谷草葛藟。灌集鸛黃。言歸備禮。環珮鏗鏘。明同折軸。智若埋羊。惇和九族。雍睦分房。時順有極。榮落無常。昔為國小。今稱未亡。傾天已及。如何弗傷。離茲塵境。適彼玄場。幽監寂寂。天道芒芒。生浮命促。晝短宵長。一歸細柳。不反扶桑。霜凝青檣。風悲白楊。蕙臥蘭畹。無絕芬芳。

2. Tomb Memorial for the Nun Ciyi (Gao Ying) from the Jade Sparkle Monastery in the Wei Dynasty Reign of the Divine Turtle, 1st Year, 10th month, 15th day (December 3, 518 CE).⁶⁸⁸

The tomb memorial from the Northern Wei monastery of Jade Sparkle for the nun Ciyi whose name was Ying, and whose family name was Gao, and who was from Bohai. She was the daughter of the elder brother of the August Empress Zhaoming.⁶⁸⁹ She was appointed as a lady of the court in the 4th year of the Jingming reign (504 CE) and in the 5th year of the Zhengshi reign (509 CE) she was elevated to the position of empress.⁶⁹⁰ When the emperor died, she expressed her aspiration to traverse the gate, leave behind the secular world, and became a *bhikṣuṇī*.

On the 24th day of the ninth month of the first year of the Divine Tortoise reign (November 12, 518 CE) she died in the monastery. On the 15th day of the 10th month (December 3, 518 CE) her funeral procession went to Mt. Mang⁶⁹¹ with over 100 disciples of the King of the Dharma. The far off sun shone its light all over and little sprouts grew on the grave mounds. This venerable epitaph was carved into stone so that her intention may never be forgotten.

Her epitaph says: The three emptinesses⁶⁹² are obscure and profound; the path of the four fruits⁶⁹³ is long and continuous. Those who can attain the gate are few: only those who are clever and worthy and who harmonize and unite themselves with this highest good

⁶⁸⁸ Zhao 1992, 102.

⁶⁸⁹ This empress was a concubine to Emperor Xiaowen and was posthumously given the title empress.

⁶⁹⁰ Gao Ying therefore became the Empress of Emperor Xuanwu. As empress, her full name was Xuanwu Huangtaihou Gaoshi 宣武皇太后高氏, or the Xuanwu's August Empress from the Gao family (d. 518 CE).

⁶⁹¹ Though the text here is unclear, the epitaph is from the mausoleum at Mt. Mang.

⁶⁹² These are the three levels of the understanding of emptiness. As described in the *Vajrasamadhi Sutra* these are the emptiness of marks, emptiness of emptiness, and emptiness of that which is empty. This could also be the emptiness of self, emptiness of dharmas, emptiness of emptiness.

⁶⁹³ This denotes the four phases toward arhatship: stream enterer, once returner, nonreturner, arhat.

are alone liberated from their conditions. They leave behind this defiled world, are liberated from fetters, and their actions follow the path of the Western contemplation.⁶⁹⁴ As a result of the exhaustive cultivation of merit that she has constantly embraced for many years, how can it not be that that during this long life calamities have been destroyed and that she has ascended to heaven?

The assembled followers cry out their longing and tears and snot tumble down. As they are grievous and absorbed in their laments, they beat and pull at themselves. The elder inscribed this for the people of the world so that they so that they will forever be in accord with the mysterious source, through the model that is inscribed here on this rock, and by the virtuous path that is here transmitted.⁶⁹⁵

魏瑤光寺尼慈義 (高英) 墓志銘 (神龜元年十月十五日)

魏瑤光寺尼慈義墓誌銘尼諱英，姓高氏，勃海條人也。文昭皇太后之兄女。世宗景明四年納為夫人。正始五年拜為皇后。帝崩，志願道門，出俗為尼。以神龜元年九月廿四日薨於寺。十月十五日遷葬於□山。弟子法王等一百人，痛容光之日遠，懼陵谷之有移，敬銘泉石，以誌不朽。其辭曰：三空杳眇，四果攸綿，得門其幾，惟哲惟賢。猗與上善，獨悟斯緣，出塵解累，業道西禪。方窮福養，永保遐年，如何弗壽，禍降上天。徒眾號慕，涕泗淪連，哀哀戚屬，載擗載援。長辭人世，永即幽泉，式銘茲石，芳猷有傳。

3. The tomb epitaph of the Northern Wei *bhikṣuṇī* Ciqing, whose personal name was Ciqing. Dated the seventh day of the fifth month of the fifth year of the Reign of Gleaming Orthodoxy (June 23, 524 CE).⁶⁹⁶

This is the tomb epitaph of the Wei Superintendent of *bhikṣuṇīs* known as Ciqing. As to her secular family, her family name was Wang and her given name was Zhong'er. She was from the suburbs of Taiyuan and was the daughter of the Governor of Dangqu, Wang Qianxiang. Her inborn vitality was auspicious and true, she was endowed with a spirit that was both calm and fierce, her inherent nature was a dwelling place for unadulterated virtue, and her determination and consciousness were both liberal and far-reaching.

As such, the calibre of her intelligence was such that when she was just an infant she had already become flexible and compliant to all rules and exceeded, therein, to become completely virtuous. At the age of 24 she was therefore sent as a bride to Yang

⁶⁹⁴ I cannot quite make sense of this turn of phrase, but I assume it to be related to rebirth in the Western Pureland, as knowledge of this Pureland is commonly seen in contemporaneous inscriptions.

⁶⁹⁵ Zhao 1992, 102.

⁶⁹⁶ Zhao 1992, 146.

Xingzong, the *zhubao*⁶⁹⁷ of Yuzhou,⁶⁹⁸ Governor of Nandun from Hengnong.⁶⁹⁹ They harmonized their dissimilar foreign customs and observing the rules of etiquette she became a wife. In the matters of women's work she was already brilliant and in the rites of wifely standards she was uniquely clever.

Then the Clan Patriarch Tanzhi⁷⁰⁰ went out to invade Zhangshe,⁷⁰¹ and took with him his family and retainers. When they reached Yuzhou he served as the Garrison Commander of Xuanhu⁷⁰² and the people of Runan⁷⁰³ always thought him rare. He then seized the city and raised rebellion. In order to respond to this external attack, an imperial army was sent to suppress it. Ciqing was plundered and placed in the Menial Service but was eventually made the *Zhaoyi*⁷⁰⁴ of the Hulu clan to the Emperor Jingmu, or Gongzong.

In person she was nurturing and merciful and she was considered to be of the same birth as Empress Wenzhao.⁷⁰⁵ During the Taihe period⁷⁰⁶ she resolutely sought to leave home and though she continued to dwell in the imperial household, she took the pure conduct

⁶⁹⁷ 主簿: An official court title from the Han through the Sui whose responsibilities are not well defined.

⁶⁹⁸ During the Northern Wei, Yuzhou 豫州 was located in what is now Xinyang 信陽 City, Henan 河南 Province.

⁶⁹⁹ Hengnong 恒農 is located in modern-day Henan province.

⁷⁰⁰ No further information is available on Yang Tanzhi. In dynastic histories, Tanzhi is a popular name of the time period yet there is no mention of a Yang Tanzhi. However, the “Buddhist Studies Authority Database Project (佛學規範資料庫)” identifies Yang Tanzhi, but seems to use this very inscription as the source text.

⁷⁰¹ Zhangshe 長社 is in modern-day Xuchang 許昌, Henan province and is quite close to Yuzhou.

⁷⁰² The administrative center of Yuzhou is called Xuanhu, normally spelled, 悬瓠. However, our inscription spells the name of the city as 玄瓠, which I take to mean the same.

⁷⁰³ Runan 汝南 and Runan is still the name for a prefecture in Henan.

⁷⁰⁴ From this we should understand that the clan of Ciqing's husband defended the city walls of Yuzhou from a rebellion by the peoples of Runan. As a result, it seems that the men may have died, but not the women. As a result, Ciqing – as she was of high rank – was taken at a high rank at the court, the rank of *Zhaoyi*.

⁷⁰⁵ Empress Wenzhao 文昭皇后 (469–497 CE) was the wife of Emperor Xianwen, the emperor responsible for drastic policies of sinification such as moving the capital to Luoyang and who Empress Dowager Feng ruled behind as regent. She only became his wife after the death of Empress Dowager Feng. Hence her participation at court would have overlapped for a number of years with that of Ciqing.

⁷⁰⁶ The Taihe 太和 period runs from 477–500 CE and was under the rule of Emperor Xiaowen.

of a *bhikṣuṇī*.⁷⁰⁷ In that situation she assisted with both high and low, and grasped a pure mind that was completely consistent from beginning to end. From this came her patience and vigour.⁷⁰⁸ She esteemed and valued the dharma current and with humane feeling and harmony she showed reverential virtue. When she undertook the rank of the Cap of the Women's Chambers,⁷⁰⁹ she served and protected the former emperor during the time of his youth and she guarded the sage's body [i.e. the emperor] during the days of his lengthening years. Although she grew weary from this labour, she never had a neglectful heart, and although her strength wavered in old age, she never dared to depart from these activities. Verily, this was a direct path that she relied and a connection to compassion and sincerity.

By the fifth year of the Zhengguan reign the *bhikṣuṇī* had experienced 86 springs and autumns, and on the third day of the fourth month (May 18, 508 CE) she suddenly met with illness and left from her dwelling to an outside monastery. In that same month on the 27th day (June 11, 508 CE) the emperor came to observe her. From dawn until dusk he personally and affectionately supervised her medication while her condition worsened. And as her remaining *qi* was on the point of exhaustion, she still praised his was of government with noble words.

In the fifth month, seven days after the *gengxu* day of the new moon (June 17, 524 CE), on the *bingchen* day (June 23, 524), her spirit was transferred to the Monastery of Clear Etiquette. The Emperor suffered the highest grief and, ultimately, with his hands drooping, decreed:

“Throughout her life, this *bhikṣuṇī* has served five courts and venerated three emperors. Her glorious name has grown old and her dharma gate has aged. We have been together from the day of incipience in the Eastern floriate realm, from the beginning of Our birth. Every day, with compassionate commands, she served and protected me. Yesterday in the late afternoon she suddenly met with her death and departed and now We are personally suffering with pain in Our bosom. It is fitting that We supply the burial requisites, completely according to a separate decree. Wang Shao, the Senior Supervising Secretary, will personally supervise the funerary rites, and there will be 1500 kinds of gifts given. Furthermore, We posthumously confer on her the rank of Superintendent of the *Bhikṣuṇīs*. On the eighteenth day, she was entombed on Mt. Mang to the north of Luoyang.”

⁷⁰⁷ Here is the only mention in the text to her rank as a *bhikṣuṇī* and it is quite unclear whether or not she took the tonsure in any official capacity. What is clear, however, is that although she took up the actions of a Buddhist renunciants, she remained living at the court and maintained her status as a *Zhaoyi*.

⁷⁰⁸ Both patience, or *renru* 忍辱, and vigor, or *jingjin* 精進, are two of the Six Perfections or *pāramitās*.

⁷⁰⁹ It is unclear what exactly this rank is but it seems to be a position of administrative power in the inner quarters of the court, perhaps akin to a *Zhaoyi*.

Thereupon he commanded the official historian to compose the inscription. The text reads:

As to the way of her nature, although she was pure and tranquil, and of a pure and calm vitality, still she was not able to escape being mixed up in spurious pathways. Yet she was able to regulate both religious and secular and therein her pure intellect was able to shine forth. Indeed, she was a glowing model of purity, like clouds departing from mountain peaks or the moon descending on a pond.

She suffered family tragedy but did not dare to become worldly-wise. She trusted in destiny and was at peace with her times. At first she had gone astray and lacked opportunities. A solitary shadow, she roamed about easily. Exhausting herself in the evening and struggling at twilight, she devoted herself to the four stages of *dhyāna*⁷¹⁰ and she sought out and was faithful to the six perfections. This brought her mind to direct illumination. In practicing this with earnestness, she was able to create a hole through which she could glimpse non-thinking⁷¹¹ and the mystery that shines forth without words.

Having been filled with her goodwill and tenderness, and having taken further and further refuge in her compassion, now we are empty and sorrowful and we cry out at the loss of this beam of light. Her followers call out for her to remain, but she has stopped in this valley for a short time, departing like a boat without a dwelling. Her life force has finished its peaceful revolutions and her and spirit has been worn down, just as dusk turns to night. Yet her kingfisher decorum⁷¹² abides and her carriage bells remain for a long time.⁷¹³

⁷¹⁰ These are the four stages of concentration that allow one to progress from the realm of desire to the realm of form.

⁷¹¹ Literally non-thinking, or *feixiang* 非想 this term refers to the state of being beyond thinking and non-thinking, and is akin to Buddhist contemplation.

⁷¹² This and the following clauses contain laborious literary allusions. The phrase *cuiyi* 翠儀 (kingfisher/ precious feather decorum) is likely a literary variation on the more common term *yuyi* 羽儀 (feather decorum), an allusion to a passage in the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經, *Jian* 漸, *shang jiu* 上九) that prescribes the usage of the feathers of descending auspicious geese as ritual ornaments. Metaphorically, *yuyi* 羽儀 can refer – among other things – to moral stature or prestige. For example, Tang essayist Han yu’s 韓愈 (768–824 CE) *Record of the Pavilion of the Joyous Swallows* (*Yanxiting ji* 燕喜亭記) says: “knowledge [is obtained] through seeking, humanity through abiding: I know that if these are missing, one’s moral prestige in the court of heaven will not advance far” (智以謀之, 仁以居之: 吾知其去是而羽儀於天朝也不遠矣).

⁷¹³ The *luan* 鸞 carriage bells are an aristocratic attribute. Furthermore, because the word is also homophonous with the melodious *luan* 鸞 mythical bird, the word itself took the

Her extinction from form returns us to an opportunity to quiet the mind and reach transformation. Sorrow binds the four assemblies.⁷¹⁴ The two palaces⁷¹⁵ are tied up in feelings of mourning like losing one's child; their sympathy becomes increasingly sincere and their honours and rituals become increasingly venerable.

The source of darkness has brought an end to the light. On the top of this hill abiding in the breeze, we shall begin to propagate her eminent teachings by writing them out on stone for others to see and pursue until the end.

Author: Li Ningmin, Secretariat Drafter who in Charge of Signs and Writings, Grand Master of Palace Leisure, and the General Who Goes out among the Foreign Tribes

魏故比丘尼慈慶(王鍾兒)墓志銘(正光五年五月七日)

魏故比丘尼統慈慶墓志銘尼俗姓王氏,字種兒,太原祁⁷¹⁶人,宕渠太守虔象之女也。稟淑真,資神休烈,理懷貞粹。志識寬遠。故溫敏之度發自韶華。而柔順之規邁于成德矣。年廿有四。適故豫州主簿行南頓太守恒農楊興宗。諧襟外族。執禮中饋。女功之事既緝。婦則之儀惟允。于時宗父坦之。出宰長社。率家從職。爰寓豫州。值玄瓠鎮將汝南人常珍奇。據城反叛。以應外寇。王師致討。掠沒奚官。遂為恭宗景穆皇帝昭儀斛律氏。躬所養恤。共文昭皇太后。有若同生。太和中固求出家。即居紫禁。尼之素行。爰協上下。秉是純心。彌貫終始。由是忍辱精進。德尚法流。仁和恭懿。行冠椒列。侍護先帝於弱立之辰。保衛聖躬於載誕之日。雖劬勞密勿。未嘗懈其心。力衰年暮。莫敢辭其事。寔亦直道之所依歸。慈誠之所感結也。正光五年。尼之春秋八十有六。四月三日。忽遭時疹。出居外寺。其月廿七日。車駕躬臨省視。自旦達暮。親監藥劑。逮于大漸。餘氣將絕。猶獻遺言。以贊政道。五月庚戌朔七日丙辰。遷神于昭儀寺。皇上傷悼。乃垂手詔曰。尼歷奉五朝。崇重三帝。英名耆老。法門宿齒。并復東華兆建之日。朕躬誕育之初。每被恩敕。委付侍守。昨以晡時。忽致殞逝。朕躬悲悼。用惕於懷。可給葬具。一依別敕。中給事中王紹。鑒督喪事。贈物一千五百段。又追贈比丘尼統。以十八日窆于洛陽北芒之山。乃命史臣作銘誌之。其詞曰。道性雖寂。淳氣未離。沖凝異揆。縑素同規。於昭淑敏。寔粹光儀。如雲出岫。若月臨池。契闊家艱。屯亶世故。信命安時。初睽末

metaphorical meaning 'respect, authority' from early on. As to this meaning, the *Shuowen Jiezi* sates that as for *luan* 鑾: "When lords ride their carriages, four horses are bridled [with] eight *luan* 鑾 bells; they resemble the sound of the *luan* 鸞 birds, whose harmony instills respect" (人君乘車,四馬鑣,八鑾鈴,象鸞鳥聲,和則敬也).

⁷¹⁴ In Buddhist terminology, the four assemblies are the groups of male and female clergy and laity.

⁷¹⁵ The "two palaces" refer to the emperor and the empress.

⁷¹⁶ I am reading this as 郊.

遇。孤影易影。窮昏難曙。投迹四禪。邀誠六渡。直心既亮。練行斯敦。洞窺非想。玄照無言。注荷眷渥。茲負隆恩。空嗟落晷。徒勛告存。停壑不久。徂舟無舍。氣阻安般。神疲旦夜。延佇翠儀。淹留鑾駕。滅彩還機。夷襟從化。悲纏四眾。悼結兩宮。哀數加厚。寔禮增崇。泉幽閼景。隴首淒風。揚名述始。勒石追終。

征虜將軍中散大夫領中書舍人常景文 李寧民書

4. The Tomb Epigraph of the Wei Superintendent of the *Bhikṣuṇīs*, the Dharma Master, Shi Sengzhi⁷¹⁷

The Dharma Master was called Zhi and her secular family name was Hu. She was from Linjing in Anding.⁷¹⁸ In the times when Yu Bin⁷¹⁹ undertook to govern and inherit rule, the Duke of Hu was bequeathed Gui as a state.⁷²⁰ This is completely recorded in the upright records of old, but they have not been scrutinized.⁷²¹ She is a descendent of Yao Ban, who was the chief the Capital Guardsman of the City and Director of sending out decrees and who was the Duke of Bohai and a Military Consultant. She is the daughter of the Observer of Martial Uprisings, the Regional Inspector of Hezhou, the sagely Military General Yuan who settled the four corners of the world, who was a palace attendant and Director of the Chancellery in Daxia.⁷²² She is the younger sister of the Dynasty Founding Duke Zhen of the Commandery of Anding, whose prestige was equal to the

⁷¹⁷ Zhao and Zhao 2006, 20.

⁷¹⁸ Anding is a commandery of in Gansu province and the ancestral home of the Anding Hu Clan.

⁷¹⁹ Yu Bin 虞賓, or Danzhu 丹朱, is the supposed son of the legendary emperor Yao 堯 (c. 23rd BCE). As legend has it, Yao passed his throne to Emperor Shun 舜 and not to Danzhu because the latter was incompetent.

⁷²⁰ According to 36th scroll of the *Annals of the Historian*, or the *Shiji* 史記, in the Section on the Chen family, the Duke of Hu was a descendent of Shun's through the daughter of Emperor Yao who was Shun's concubine and who was from Gui 媯 and took the family name of Gui. When Yao died, the lands were then distributed to his sons, with the Duke of Hu being given the ancestral land of his mother.

⁷²¹ As we saw in chapter one, the Tuoba ruling house went to great lengths to create an eminent genealogy for itself, even matching its lineage one-for-one with that of the Han Chinese. Here, with the Hu clan, we see a similar process whereby the Hu are asserting ownership over territories of China proper. The Hu name itself is problematic as many non-Chinese tribes took this name in their move towards a Sinitic identity and because "Hu" simply means "barbarian." For our case, here, we are dealing with the Hu Clan from Anding, a commandery in Gansu, who became increasingly powerful throughout the Northern Wei although their pre-origins are somewhat obscure. For an overview of the importance and reliability of this lineage in the tomb inscription, see: Wang 2008, 89.

⁷²² Daxia is the name of a Xiongnu Kingdom during the Sixteen Kingdoms.

Three Offices, who was also the Secretariat Supervisor and a Palace Attendant. She was the aunt of the Empress Dowager who enjoyed her counsel.⁷²³

Endowed with a rectified qi of the three generative forces,⁷²⁴ and embracing the clear numen of the seven governances,⁷²⁵ with a way and a cognizance that gave rise to knowledge, with a spirit and disposition that emerged from the nature of heaven, she cleansed all impurity from her pure nature and studied the teaching of the mysterious gate. She left home at seventeen and her practice of the precepts was clear and pure. When she reached the age of twenty her virtue and her principles were both deep and broad. Through concentrating on dhyāna she attained the six supernormal powers⁷²⁶ and she serenely read until in one hearing she could recite the *Niepan*, the *Fahua*, and the *Shengman* in more than twenty scrolls. As such, she encouraged the entire assembly to recite sūtras. The dharma masters refinements and elegance were universally displayed, so that those who admired her righteousness were like clouds. Her marvellous voice was like a fleeting song and as such those who returned to the path were like a forest.⁷²⁷ Because her voice was able to shake the Wei River, her virtue reached all those in both the Qi and the Liang mountains.⁷²⁸

Thus, in the beginning of the Taihe era (477-499), The Empress Dowager Wenming⁷²⁹ in the city of the Sagely Mirror, with the intention that those in the city might transcend their customs and superficialities, might be inclined to comply with her (Sengzhi's) strategies, and might esteem and respect her customs, then sent out the horse carts and carriages to at once seek her out and collect her. And when she arrived at the eastern capital, the Empress welcomed her with utmost respect.

⁷²³ This is a reference to Empress Dowager Hu. In the Empresses biography it does indeed mention an aunt who had become a *bhikṣuṇī*.

⁷²⁴ According to the *Book of Changes*, the three generative forces (*sancai* 三才) are: heaven, earth, and man.

⁷²⁵ It is unclear what exactly the “Seven Governances” or *qizheng* 七政 refers to, but the *Shangshu* 尚書 identifies it with astral constellations, whereas the *Shangshudazhuan* 尚書大傳 and the *Shiji* 史記 identifies it as heaven, earth, humankind, and the four seasons.

⁷²⁶ This is a Buddhist term and is usually listed as: unimpeded bodily action, the power of divine vision, the power of divine hearing, the power of awareness of the minds of others, the power of the knowledge of previous lifetimes, and the power of the extinction of contamination. (DDB)

⁷²⁷ Both “like clouds” and “like a forest” are poetic ways of saying that there were many of them.

⁷²⁸ These are two mountains in modern-day Shaanxi 陝西 province.

⁷²⁹ This is Empress Dowager Feng.

The way of Gaozu, Emperor Wencheng, upheld Heaven and earth, its brilliance surpassed the sun and the moon, and inclined to sincerity he waited to meet her – an affair quite beyond normal human relations.

Shizong, or Emperor Xuanwu, entrusted his heart to the Three Treasures,⁷³⁰ and he bestowed much on her and gave her much affection, pulling her out of the inner chamber and placing her under his wing so that she could lead the instruction of the Six Palaces.⁷³¹

At the time when the emperor has ascended the throne and the Empress Dowager held court,⁷³² the direct line of her descent had already been established and respect for her name was already profound, and yet as to the Dharma Master's modesty and self-containment, a thousand *ren*⁷³³ was not able to measure it, and as for her reverent and nurturing mind, not even 10,000 *kui* could approximate its width.⁷³⁴

Then the Retired Empress Feng of Emperor Xiaowen⁷³⁵ and Empress Gao (Ciyi) of Emperor Xuanwu⁷³⁶ gathered together all of the wives and the concubines so that there were more than 20 persons, including therefore Madam Xie wife of Wang Su who was the General of the Carriages and Horses, and the Minister of Works. There was even the daughter of The Secretariat of the History Section, Zhuang, who was also the Great minister of the Glowing Blessing of the Office of Fasting of the Right. All of them returned from Jinling⁷³⁷ to hide away in the Imperial Palace. They considered the way of the dharma master to be the crown of the universe her virtue to be also the creator of all things, and therefore they abandoned their flowery secular life and entrusted their minds to the dharma gate – all of them becoming disciples of the Dharma Master. Furthermore, of that group of *bhikṣuṇīs*, those who followed her example and went on to ascend the high seat are too many to record.

When she had reached 75 years during the first year of the Xiping era (516), which was a *bingjia* year, during the first month, on a *bingwu* day nineteen days after the new moon

⁷³⁰ The Three Jewels are the Buddha, the dharma, and the *saṃgha*.

⁷³¹ According to Hucker, the six palaces refer to the bedchambers of the King's principal wives. Hence, Sengzhi was put in charge of all the matters of the women's court.

⁷³² Following the chronological order laid out in the inscription, this Emperor and Empress Dowager would be Emperor Xiaoming and Empress Dowager Hu.

⁷³³ *Ren* 仞 is a unit of measure equal to about eight feet.

⁷³⁴ *Kui* 頃 is a unit of measure equal to 100 *mou* 畝, or 1.5 acres.

⁷³⁵ This is a reference to Feng Qing whose story we heard earlier on in this chapter.

⁷³⁶ This is a reference to Gao Ying, or Ciyi, whose story we also heard earlier on in this chapter.

⁷³⁷ Jingling 金陵 is another name for Jiankang 建康 in modern day Nanjing 南京, Jiangsu 江蘇 province.

that was a *wuchen* day (March 7, 516 CE) she came to the end of her life in the Nunnery of the Le'an Princess.⁷³⁸

This deeply moved the emperor's heart and the grief united both clergy and laity. On the 24th day, a *xinmao* day (March 12, 516 CE), they moved her to a tomb on the sunny side of the northern Mang mountain of Luoyang. Her great disciples, Senghe and Daohe, who were both *bhikṣuṇīs*, *weinas*, and Dharma Masters, whose suffering spirits were clouded with long-lasting dolour and whose loving spirits were eternally shaded, wailed to their last gasp, ceremonially recounting her sagely virtue. It was as if the very hills and valleys were shaken by her ultimate goodness that could not be concealed.

They wrote an epitaph, which states:

Her *prajñā*⁷³⁹ was without a source and the character of her spirit had no measure, and she profoundly explained the ultimate path. From whence did this miraculous knowledge arise? Her supreme humanity is absolutely complete and attains the very limits. Through mental absorption and entering purity, she has cleansed her wisdom and melted her form. She turns the wheel in the triple world⁷⁴⁰ flowing completely through the six destinies.⁷⁴¹ Her own goodness she did not consider virtue, but instead she worked on behalf of all existence. Her subtle mirror has passed away⁷⁴² and this mysterious awakening accords with emptiness. She yearned for that other light and has dropped away from this realm of dust. She had penetrating insight into the *vaipulya*⁷⁴³ and her knowledge of the *vinaya*⁷⁴⁴ was deep and rich. The minutest word she studied carefully, and in the profoundest meanings she was quite at ease. As for the jeweled seat, she immediately ascended it; as for the sound of dharma, she could immediately sing it. As such, heterodox views could be converted to orthodoxy, erroneous doctrines brought to an end, virtues esteemed and teachings venerated, practices profound and respect long lasting. She served three emperors and welcomed and cared for two empresses. As for beings she truly prized them; yet, as for the self, she considered it empty.

⁷³⁸ *Le'an Gongzhusi* 樂安公主寺; the Le'an Princess was a daughter of Emperor Xianwen.

⁷³⁹ A Sanskrit term meaning wisdom.

⁷⁴⁰ This is a Buddhist reference to the realms of desire, form, and formlessness.

⁷⁴¹ The Six Destinies are the subdivisions of the three realms stated above in which a person can be born into depending on their karma, and they are: the realm of the gods, the realm of the titans, the realm of humans, the realm of animals, the realm of hungry ghosts, and the hells.

⁷⁴² Meaning, here, the enlightened mind.

⁷⁴³ The *vaipulya* literature refers to all the collected sūtras and other texts of the Mahāyāna.

⁷⁴⁴ *Vinaya* refers to the legal texts of the tradition; the rules of behavior for clergy and laity.

The east gives rise to the *ruomu* tree,⁷⁴⁵ and the west compels the delicate willow, but the force of their actions is not exhausted and new things therefore arise which are different from each other. Impermanence achieves these transformations and the wearied world revolves through this mechanism. The candle of wisdom conceals its flame, but if you can grasp its teaching then what else is there to rely on? In our remembrance we are tied up between the sacred and profane and we cry and wail for her sageliness and compassion.

Her spirit roams in the pure city⁷⁴⁶ while her body is entombed on the lofty Mt. Mang; this abstruse access is profound and quiescent. Residing in these cool and uncultivated hills, she roams in a cinnabar ravine and through endless dragon flowers. We can rely on this record on this mysterious stone and use it in our longing for her remaining fragrance and in order to cultivate our casting off of the worldly path.

The smell of the flowers fills the four directions, the Nirvana Carriage⁷⁴⁷ is high and lofty – these are true customs of compassionate inclination. Sanskrit echoes enter the clouds with pitiful emotion and bitter sound. The congregation of disciples wails aloud in a respectful send off, saying that they are orphans, desperate in their singular abandonment. The mountains and the water carry out their change in colour; the sun of the spring beats down on the grasses and yet they do not flourish. Is this not sorrow that advances? Pain indeed is without respite.

魏故比丘尼統法師釋僧芝墓誌銘

法師諱芝俗姓胡安定臨經人也。虞賓以統曆承軋，胡公以紹嫡命國，備載於方冊故弗詳焉。姚班督護軍，臨渭令，勃海公諮議叅軍略之孫，大夏中書侍郎給事黃門

⁷⁴⁵ A mythical ancient tree.

⁷⁴⁶ This may be a reference to the Pureland, using *jingcheng* 淨城 instead of *jingtu* 淨土.

⁷⁴⁷ This translation is conjectural and based on both context and contemporaneous usage. The characters themselves *huanyu* 洹輦 make little sense together except when we consider that 洹 is perhaps an abbreviation for *nihuan* 泥洹, an early transliteration of the Sanskrit “nirvana.” If we can accept that this might be the case, then we can find further support for the translation of “Nirvana Carriage” in the *Book of the Southern Qi*, or *nanqishu* 南齊書, which in the biography of Liu Biao 劉彪(d. u.) tells of a *nihuan* 泥洹輦 (our *yu* 輦 and this *yu* 輿 are variants), which was used in funerary practice to transport one to their tomb. Furthermore, the *Biographies of the Tripitaka Masters from the Great Ci'en Monastery in the Great Tang* (*datong daci'en si sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳: T50n2053) tells of a similar funerary carriage, also a *nihuan*. Finally, though less closely related, the Tang dynasty, *A Record of Personal Memos on Textual Explanation of the Marvelous Scripture* (*Miaojing wenju sizhi ji* 妙經文句私志: X596) refers to a similar Nirvana Carriage as a *niepanche* 涅槃車.

侍郎，聖世寧四將軍，河州刺史，武始侯淵之女，侍中，中書監，儀同三司，安定郡開國公珣之妹，諒訓皇太后之姑。稟三才之正氣，含七政之淑靈，道識發於生知，神情出於天性，洗耶素里，習教玄門。十七出家戒行清純，暨於廿，德義淵富。安禪屆於六通，靜讀幾於一聞。誦《涅槃》《法華》《勝鬘》廿餘卷，乃為大眾所推誦經。法師雅韻一敷，慕義者如雲，妙音暫唱，歸道者如林。故能聲動河渭，德被岐梁者矣。以太和之初文明太皇太后聖鏡城中，志域超俗表，傾服徽猷，欽崇風旨，爰命驛車，應時徵辟，及至京都，敬以殊禮。高祖孝文皇帝道隆天地，明踰日月，傾誠待遇，事絕常倫。世宗宣武皇帝信心三寶，弥加弥寵，引內闡掖，導訓六官。皇上登極，皇太后臨朝，尊親屬既隆，名義之敬踰重，而法師謙虛在己，千仞不測其高，容養為心，萬頃無擬其廣。孝文馮皇后，宣武高太后逮諸夫嬪廿許人，及故車騎將軍尚書令司空公王肅之夫人謝氏，乃是齋右光祿大夫吏部尚書之女，越自金陵歸蔭天闕。以法師道冠宇宙，德兼造物，故捐（合）拾華俗，服胸法門，皆為法師弟子。自餘諸比丘尼服義而昇高座者不可勝紀。春秋七十有五，熙平元年歲次丙申正月戊辰朔十九日丙戌夜分，終於樂安公主寺。哀慟聖衷，痛結縑素，其月廿四日辛卯，遷窆於洛陽北芒山之陽。大弟子比丘尼都維那法師僧和，道和，痛靈蔭之長但，戀神儀之永翳，號慕餘喘，式述芳猷，若陵谷有遷至善無昧。乃作銘曰：般若無源，神理不測，熟詮至道，爰在妙識猗歟？上仁充臻寔極。凝心入淨；盪智融色，輪轉三有，周流六道。獨善非德，兼濟為功。幽鏡寂滅。玄悟若空。懷彼昭曠，落此塵封。洞鑒方等，深苞律藏。微言斯究，奧旨咸鬯，寶座既昇，法音既唱，耶觀反正，異旨輟鄣，德重教尊，行深敬久。貽禮三帝，迎頤二后。物以實歸，我以虛受。東發若木，西迫細柳。力行不倦，新故相違。無常即化，厭世還機。慧炷潛耀，攀宗曷依。慕結縑素，嗟慟聖慈。神遊淨域，體祔崇芒，幽關深寂，宿隴荒涼。丹壑且遊，龍花未央。聊誌玄石，試慕餘芳，修播界道。紛花四盈，洎輦俄俄，真俗悲傾。梵嚮入雲，哀感酸聲。眾子號咷而奉送，稱孤窮而單營。山水為之改色，陽春觸草而不榮。哀哉往也，痛矣無還。

5. The Grand Superintendent *Śramaṇa* of the Office for the Clarification of Buddhist Profundities who is the Dharma Teacher, Sengling.⁷⁴⁸

The tomb epitaph of the Grand Superintendent *Śramaṇa* of the Office for the Clarification of Buddhist Profundities⁷⁴⁹ who is the Dharma Teacher, Sengling. He was tied to the Du family and was from the capital. When he was a child he was already

⁷⁴⁸ Zhao 1992, 311.

⁷⁴⁹ *Zhaoxuan Shamen* 照玄沙門. The term 照玄 remains somewhat unclear. However, it is a type of Buddhist administrative rank created in the Northern Wei and according to Charles Muller, it is cited in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* to refer to the *bhikṣuṇīs* quarters. This may make sense as we will see later on the alignment of women's courtly ranks with men's under the northern Wei created the offices of the *Zhaoyi* 昭儀 for women.

skilled, and was determined to go after pure emptiness. And then, while still just a boy, he was liberated from secular life and returned to the Way. He studied and straightaway became widely knowledgeable and his goodness was likewise universal. As he dispersed the contents of his book satchel and wet his quill, he was at ease and was completely self-so. He was like one who fords streams and hunts after a flock so abundant that it was equal to the sum of the Huang and the Han. He debated the treatises of the ominous and the arcane and even set in order the most indiscernible. With excellence, he took up the three levels of emptiness and left no traces, he completely penetrated the nine classics,⁷⁵⁰ and dwelling in his remote room he therefore cried out like a bird on a distant bank.

Gaozu⁷⁵¹ graced his hermitage, determined that his writings were both great and full, that they were of the Śākya clan, and that they comment on the meaning of the wheel of the dharma. Thereupon, he heeded to the customs of the Emperor and desired to give rise – both in sleep and in waking – to a happy life like a river reed at rest. He took up his staff and began to roam. Arriving at this point was like shaking off dust and in this fashion he attempted to dry up the cavern and exhaust the depths of the teachings. In so doing, he knelt on his knees, sighed in joy, paced back and forth, and put aside his weariness.

In those times of both war and illumination, when rituals were meeting with extensive proliferation, the Dharma Master was made the highly venerated presider of the Dwelling in Leisure Monastery.⁷⁵² He drank water from the spring and sheltered himself in the trees. He whistled longingly into the hazy mists and through mountains and valleys. He achieved the full embrace of his heart.

This was truly the high path of his determination and he was not without complying with the will of his emotions. And although he was an example of one who has left behind the defiled world and was above the fetters that entrap one in this life, still he was requested and beseeched to become the Rector of the Śramaṇas.⁷⁵³ He frequently made pleas to withdraw from this post, but he reached his end without seeing them authorized. Since he did not obtain permission he still undertook his rituals and went on to cooperate with respect of the law.

In adorning the emperor he took up his writing brush and depended on it transmit and bring forth this summation: “I have remained in this position for a long time and through many courts, serving without even momentary obstruction. All the bitterness has returned me to virtue. Now since I have been promoted, I have resolutely begged to receive my withdrawal. I have been frequently vexed and anxious to the extreme, but for a long time have still remained correct and genuine. In so doing, I have concealed my suffering in the

⁷⁵⁰ A set of texts whose content seems obscure, but which is mentioned by Ge Hong in *Baopuzi*.

⁷⁵¹ Emperor Xiaowen.

⁷⁵² *Juxian Si* 居閑寺.

⁷⁵³ *Shamen douweina* 沙門都維那

wheel and have developed my will. I have held fast to simplicity and my duty has been true so that my shape and shadow remained in this difficulty while my heart and spirit has already moved on. Suddenly, I have met with a deep disease and so I will soon leave this world. I have lived to have 81 years, and now that I come near to my end, I have reached a peace that is like a returning.”

The Son of Heaven was overtaken with pain and ordered the Scribe Ren Yuanjing (*d.u.* mid fifth-century) to pay his respects to the monastery and proclaim his condolences.

On the 3rd day of the 2nd month (March 3, 534 CE), a *bingchen* day, he was buried on the *yang* side of Mt. Mang. His disciples Zhiwei, Daosun, Jueyi, with their faces increasingly anguished at the passing away of their elder, and fearing that they were contrary to the righteousness of their general, spoke of their constant longing.

Thereby, the epigraph says:

With his heroic virtue having been born from the heavens, his aim was to find ease in the lofty heavens, and like an orphan, he plucked out all the dust from his appearance and by himself grasped “the middle of a ring.” His way was one of cooperation with all things and his actions were at all times harmonious so that he praised the 100 generations and made the 1000 burdens float in the breeze. His way was one of finding peace in the black robes of the court: his voice soared above the scarlet gates of the palace, he was seen doubling his veneration for the emperor, and his letters were repeatedly sent off. His elegant treatises moved the heavens and his pure speech shook the moon, and although people were always coming to him, his voice never wavered.

The third day, a *bingchen* day, after the new moon of the second month, which was a *jiayin* day, in the third year, the second of his *jiayin* years, of the Yongxi Era of the Great Wei.

大魏故昭玄沙門大統令法師之墓志銘

魏故昭玄沙門大統僧令法師墓志銘法師緣姓杜，京兆人也。幼而惠，志尚清虛，爰在兒童，脫俗歸道。學既多聞，善亦兼濟，散帙濡翰，怡然自得。若其涉獵群品，富同河漢，討論微蹟，殆剖秋豪。良以三空靡遺，九典咸達，居室遐應，鳴皋自遠。高祖光宅土中，憲章大備，存也釋氏，注意法輪。由此聞風欽，想發於寤寐，嘉命蘋止，荷錫來遊。至若振塵，式乾洞窮幽旨。故以造膝嗟善，徘徊忘倦。武明之世，禮遇彌隆，乃以法師爲嵩高閑居寺主。飲泉庇樹，嘯想烟霞，一丘一壑，得之懷抱。實有高蹈之志，非無遂往之情。雖迹出塵中，而尚羈世綱，尋被徵爲沙門都維那。屢自陳遜，終不見許。既弗獲以禮，便同之畏法。莊帝聿興，仍轉爲統。自居斯任，彌歷數朝，事無暫壅，衆鹹歸德。今上龍飛，固乞收退，頻煩切至，久而方允。于是隱輪養志，保素任真，形影難留，心神已化。俄遭篤疾，

奄然辭世。行年八十有一。臨終自得，安然若歸。天子追悼，敕主書任元景詣寺宣慰。二月三日丙辰窆于芒山之陽。弟子智微道遜覺意等痛茲顏之長往，懼大義之將乖，興言永慕，乃作銘曰：天生英德，志逸旻穹，孤，拔塵表，獨得環中。道與物合，行共時融，百代飛譽，千載垂風。道逸緇庭，聲飛朱闕，見重高帝，尺書屢發。雅論移天，清談動月，其人雖往，斯音未歇。

大魏永熙三年歲次甲寅二月甲寅朔三日丙辰

Chapter Five

1. The tomb inscription of the Women's Secretary from the Wang Clan whose name was Sengnan, Dated the 20th day of the 9th month of the 2nd year of the Zhengguang Reign (November 5, 521 CE)⁷⁵⁴

The Women's Secretariat from the Wang Clan whose name was Sengnan was from Yanyang in Anding County. She was the descendent of the Governor Gong of Anding and the child⁷⁵⁵ of Governor Na of Shangluo. From this land where the Hua River passes through the hills, she had been expected to carry on as an outstanding heiress. But "Man's" father, due to his heroic spirit, became bound up in legalities, and handed over his horse and invited punishment on account of his crimes. Then only, "Man" given by her mother, who was to deal with the bitter effects by herself, entered the palace all alone.

By the time she became six years old, she was intelligent, beautiful, and distinctive, and therefore was fully satisfied with her study of the bamboo slips. She had a capable nature and was clever and awakened.⁷⁵⁶ Every day she chanted 1000 characters,⁷⁵⁷ listened to and embraced the teachings and the commentaries. As soon as she heard them she grasped their meaning. In the palace she was therefore promoted and became the Women's Secretariat, who ordered and arranged the three classes of people. She was able to keep track of and educate all of the courtesans and ladies and push them towards order and succeeded in encouraging their imperial hearts. She used her red writing brush to spread this brilliance and therefore was awarded the second grade.

⁷⁵⁴ Zhao 1992, 124.

⁷⁵⁵ Interestingly, she is listed as both a 孫 and a 子, not as a 女, which would mark her explicitly as a daughter. As such, she is a "child," not a "daughter" and this term is usually reserved for male children.

⁷⁵⁶ Although the word "awakening" is in reference to her study of the classics, the character 悟 has clear Buddhist referents as it is the most common translation for Buddhist awakening.

⁷⁵⁷ Again, this is a Buddhist referent as Buddhists were noted for their ability to chant large amounts of text.

But heaven did not repay her goodness, and her exhaustion increased and though she was excellent and intelligent, and at the age of 68 she reached her end in the golden walls of the palace of the Great Wei. At her highest, she undertook a man's fate and served two empresses,⁷⁵⁸ and she cherished people of virtue and restraint and was posthumously honoured with a rank of the first grade and was awarded ceremonial instruments in the Eastern Garden [text corrupted]. All the fees for the funeral and the gifts were taken in charge by the duke and she was buried on the north slope of Ningling. During the decay of her abundant bonds all ritual norms were followed.

Therefore, we have chiselled into stone and engraved this notice as a message for all posterity who comes, so that they may all come to know it. The was recorded on the 20th day, an *yimao* day, in the ninth month, under the *xingqi*,⁷⁵⁹ in the second year of the Zhengguang Reign of the Great Wei.

女尚書王氏諱僧男墓誌（正光二年九月廿日）

女尚書王氏諱僧男，安定煙陽人。安定太守觥之孫，上洛太守那之子。地華涇隴，望帶豪冑。男父以雄俠罔法，渡馬招辜，由斯尤戾。唯男與母，伶丁奈蓼，獨入宮焉。時年有六。聰令韶朗，故簡充學生。惠性敏悟，日誦千言，聽受訓詁，一聞持曉。官由行陟，超升女尚書，秩班品三。能記釋嬪嬙，接進有序，克當乾心。使彤管揚輝，故錫品二。天不報善，殲茲良哲，年六十八，終於大魏金墉宮。上以男歷奉二後，宿德者勲，又追贈品一，賜東園祕器及輜輶車。喪之資費，皆取公給，瘞於終寧陵之北阿。豐約折中，一從禮制。故鏤石刊號，詒之來昆云爾。惟大魏正光二年，歲厘星紀，月侶無射，廿日乙卯記。

2. Record of the Building of an Image on the Fifth Section of the Huangshi Cliff, with the title of the Brothers and Sisters in the Truth of the Teaching, made in the 4th Year of the Zhengguan Era of the Northern Wei (523 CE)⁷⁶⁰

On the 29th day of the seventh month of the fourth year of the Zhengguan era (August 25, 532 CE), this group of brothers and sisters in the truth of the teaching reverently created a stone niche with 24 images. All of those for whom there is attainment are here listed in successive order: Shi Fushou and those united in the discipline; the *weina* presider, Liu Ainü; the *weina* presider Mu [missing character] ji; Jia [missing character]; Liu Faxiang; Wang Baoji; Liu A'Xiang; Liu A'Si; Liu Shengyu; Hu A'zi; Wang Lijiang; [missing] ting Fuji; Jia A'Fei; Liu Taoji; Wang Zu; Sun Jingzi; Zhao Feijiang; Zhang Shengjie; Zhang Hanren; [missing] Jiangnü; [missing] Guzi; Xu Qingnü; the *weina* presider, Zhang Niunü; the *weina* presider Huting Moxiang; Bai Qijiang; the Zhao Yijiang; Zhang Daonü;

⁷⁵⁸ I am reading 後 as 后. These empresses should be Empress Feng as well as Empress... the wife of Emperor Xiaowen.

⁷⁵⁹ One of the stars in the constellation of the ox.

⁷⁶⁰ Beijing tushuguan: 4.147.

Gao Fuxiang; reverently build this one image of Śākyamuni, and with reverent hearts make this offering.⁷⁶¹

黃石崖造像五段之法義兄弟姊妹等題記 正光四年

大魏正光四年七月廿九日，法義兄弟姊妹等，敬造石窟像廿四軀。悉以成就，歷名提記。釋伏守同心鋤，維那主劉愛女，維那主沐姬，賈□，劉法香，王寶姬，劉阿香，劉阿思，劉勝玉，胡阿姿，王犁姜，延伏姬，賈阿妃，劉桃姬，王足，孫敬姿，趙妃姜，張勝界，張漢仁，□姜女，□骨子，徐清女，維那主張牛女，維那主呼延摩香，白齊姜，石桃女趙義姜，張道女，高伏香，敬造釋迦像一軀，敬心共養。

3. The Dedication of the Building of an Image by the *Bhikṣuṇī* Huicheng on the First Year of the Qianming Era (560 CE)⁷⁶²

On a *xinji* day twenty-five days after the new moon, in the eighth month, of the first year, a *gengchen* year, of the [missing] Qianming era (September 7, 560 CE), the *bhikṣuṇī* Huicheng and the *bhikṣuṇī* Jing You[missing], engaged the leader of the village, [missing] Meijiang, to work together to establish this magnificent activity of reverently building one image of Maitreya. Primarily this is for the realm of the Emperor, and all the ministers, lords, and guards that are under him, and it is for all the teachers and parents, and also includes all who have been born. We wish that this causes them to transform themselves like a flash of lightning and to pierce into their darkness so that they manifest [missing] an understanding of the three levels of emptiness so that all in the experiential realm can together understand correct awakening. The presider of the village collective, the *bhikṣuṇī* [missing] Jiu; the presider of the village collective, the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengyan; the presider of the white robed great image; Zhang Gou and his brothers; the village society of Fan Xing [missing]; the presider Song Fuxiang. Furthermore, the image [presider] Xu Mingbian, the image presider Xu Liuzhou, the image presider Bi Changshou.

尼慧承等造像記 乾明元年

□齊乾明元□歲在庚辰八月辛巳朔廿五日。比丘尼慧承，比丘尼靜遊□迎□義姜率□諸邑，同建洪業。敬造彌勒像一區。上爲皇帝陛下，群臣宰守，諸師父母，含生之類。願使電轉冥昏。三空現□，法界共脩，等□正覺。邑義主比丘尼□究，邑義主比丘尼僧炎，白衣大像主張苟生兄弟等，邑義樊興，□主宋伏香，□由，像□徐明弁，像主徐六周，像主苾蓀受。

⁷⁶¹ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 4.147.

⁷⁶² Ibid, 7.100.

4. A record of the Building of an Image by Song Xianbo, back side.⁷⁶³

The teacher of the village collective, Wen Falüe; the presider from Guangfu monastery; the elder, *bhikṣuṇī* Huizang; the elder, *bhikṣuṇī* Sengjin; the *bhikṣuṇī* Huijiang; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengzan; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengjing; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengsheng; the *bhikṣuṇī* Senghao.

The village presider of the Yewang District and secretary of books, Ji Xian[missing]; the member of the village society and officer of the lord of Henei; the member of the village society and warrior of Taiyuan, [missing] Lian; the general of Ningshuo who is the presider of the flowers on the right side of the bodhisattva's brilliant light, Ma Zhou; the member of the village society who presides over the unveiling of the flowers on the left side of the bodhisattva's brilliant light, Wei Ye; the servant who presides over the verification and regulation of the height and form as well as who presides over the closing of the Buddha's brilliant light, Liang Yong; the head of the village and the prior secretary of books of the lord of Henei, Wang Weng; the village leader and instructor in Luoyang who took in charge the canopy, Seng Jian; the general of Xiangwei who presided over the inspection of the south side of the stele, Cao Si; the member of the village society who presided over the flowers to the right side of the bodhisattva.

The presider of the south side of the image, Song Xianbo, who was the former commander of the Labour Section and the West-Side Military Commander.

The *bhikṣuṇī* Sengyao; the *bhikṣuṇī*, Senghui; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengxiang; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sengyuan; the *bhikṣuṇī* Sanguang; the Woman of Pure Faith, Jia Tongji; the *bhikṣuṇī* A'Sheng Luofei; the presider of opening up the Buddha's brilliant light, [missing] Si Feiren [missing].

The general of Dangkou who inspects the west side and also presides over the flowers on the right of the bodhisattva, Si Zu; the member of the village collective who presides over the great fast, Hu Xiaojia; the general of Ningyuan and the lord of Zhangnei who inspects the fast and presides over the altar, Meng Can; the member of the village society [missing] who is the instructor of Yewang, the honourable Zhang Yingzu; the lord of Henei who presides over the halo, is the bookkeeper, who distributes libations and serves all matters, Song Xian; the village member who faces the white [missing] and serves all things, Cao Xin; the villager from the state [missing] who keeps the records of all matters, Le Rong.

The *douweina* who is the great general of Fubo and defends the city, Sima Chengluo, who recorded the words.

Village [broken], villager [broken], villager [broken], villager [broken], villager Nan [broken], villager Nan [broken], villager Zong [broken], villager [broken] Yan, villager

⁷⁶³ Ibid, 7.017.

Wu Weimeng [broken], villager Meng Yanhong [broken], villager Zhao Junli [broken], villager [broken] the ancestor of all the northern fields, villager Feng Yiji, villager from the state of Liang, Qiao Gui [broken], villager who is the commander of Zhangnei, Ye [broken]chou, villager from Xiangling, Jia Biaoren, villager from the commandery of the He and Luo Rivers, who is the Minister of Joyous Activities and whose personal name is [missing] Hong[missing].

These words have all been recorded in writing. This was established on the eighth day of the fourth month, on the second *renjia* year, the third year of the Tianbao era of the Great Qi (June 16, 552 CE).

宋賢伯等造像記隱 天保三年

邑師文法略，廣福寺主僧寶，上坐比丘尼惠藏，上坐比丘尼僧津，比丘尼惠姜，比丘尼僧贊，比丘尼僧敬，比丘尼僧勝，比丘尼僧好。

邑主野王縣功曹吉賢□，邑子河內郡之官□，邑子太原賁□憐，寧朔將軍右蒨菩薩光明主馬周，邑子開左蒨菩薩光明主衛業，使持節高陽主關佛光明主梁永，邑先河內郡前功曹王甕，邑先旨授洛陽令蓋僧堅，襄威將軍南面都督石碑主曹思，邑子右蒨菩薩主王方俊。

南面像主前郡功曹西面都督宋顯伯。

比丘尼僧要，比丘尼僧暉，比丘尼僧相，比丘尼僧援，比丘尼薩光，清信士女賈同姬，比丘尼阿勝洛妃，開佛光明主□斯妃仁□。

盪寇將軍西面都督左蒨菩薩□思祖，邑子大齊主胡小買，寧遠將軍帳內都督齋場主孟璨，邑無旨授野王令張映族。河內郡光初主簿祭酒從事宋顯。邑先前白□從事曹忻，邑子州□代錄事樂榮。

都維那伏波大將軍防城司馬程洛文並書。

邑□ [BROKEN]，邑子□ [BROKEN]，邑子□ [BROKEN]，邑子□ [BROKEN]，邑子南 [BROKEN]，邑子男 [BROKEN]，邑子宗□ [BROKEN]，邑子嚴□ [BROKEN]，邑子武威孟□ [BROKEN]，邑子孟嚴洪 [BROKEN]，邑子趙郡李□ [BROKEN]，邑子北平田祖□ [BROKEN]，邑子馮翊吉□ [BROKEN]，邑子梁國喬貴□，邑子帳內都督也□醜，邑子襄陵賈標仁，邑子河陽鎮司馬樂勤字□恭□。

大齊元保三年歲次壬申四月八日建。

4. The Dedication of an Image by Faguang, on the Second Year of the Putai Era⁷⁶⁴

The *bhikṣuṇī* Faguang, on behalf of her disciple Liu Taofu who is traveling in the north, wishes that he be returned safely and thus constructs one image of Guanyin. Furthermore, on behalf of her deceased parents, she builds one image of Śākyamuni. She wishes to see that all her relations and all beings in the world all are filled with this merit. This was dedicated on the 2nd year of the Putai Era (532 CE).

法光造像記 普泰二年

比丘尼法光爲弟劉桃扶北征。願平安還，造□世音像一區。又爲亡父母，造釋迦像一區。願現在眷屬，一切衆生，共同斯福。普泰二年四月八日造訖。

5. The Dedication of an image by the Man of Pure Faith, Yu Hui, in the Second Year of the Xiaochang Era (526 CE)⁷⁶⁵

On the fifteenth day of the fifth month of the second year of the Xiaochang Era (June 10, 526 CE), the man of pure faith Yu Hui, on behalf of the deceased *bhikṣuṇī* Faming who had embraced all types of consciousness, reverently builds one image of Guanyin and wish to ascend this [missing] and to forever meet with the distinguishing of suffering.

欲會造像記 孝昌二年

孝昌二年五月十五日，清信欲會，爲亡女比丘尼法明，一切含識，敬造觀世音像一軀。願登此極，永與苦別。

6. The Dedication of an Image by the *Bhikṣuṇīs* Fawen and Falong and Others at the 98th Section of Longmen, Made in the Second Year of the Yongping Era (509 CE)⁷⁶⁶

On the 25th day of the fourth month of the second year, a *jichou* year, of the Yongping era (May 29, 509 CE), the *bhikṣuṇīs* Fawen, Falong and others, having awoken to this transient world have profoundly given rise to this sincere vow to cut themselves off from and exhaust their personal wealth and have each, on behalf of their own selves, reverently commissioned the building of one image of Maitreya. They wish that they are able to surpass all manifested forms and be completely drenched in the dharma rain, and that for those who worship, they all reach the unsurpassable happiness of three assemblies of the

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid, 5.161.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid, 5.025.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid, 3.125.

Dragon-Flower.⁷⁶⁷ And they wish that this continues to flow to all sentient beings so that they can share in this same prosperity.⁷⁶⁸

龍門山造像九十八段之尼法文法隆等題記 永平二年

永平二年歲次己丑四月廿五日。比丘尼法文、法隆等。覺非常世，深發誠願。割竭私財，各爲己身敬造彌□像一區。願使過現者，普沾法雨之潤。禮拜者，同無上之樂。龍華三唱，願在流□。一切衆生，普同斯福。

7. The Dedication of an Image by Fan Guoren in the Second Year of the Putai Era (532 CE)⁷⁶⁹

Dated the *bingyin* day three days after the new moon, which was a *jiazi* day, in the fourth month of the second year, a *renzi* year, of the Putai Era of the Great Wei (May 22, 532 CE). Because Lord Zhao of Pingli prefecture in Dingzhou had conferred the southern strip onto Fan Guoren, the latter reverently commissioned the building of one image of Maitreya. Foremost this is for the emperor and those under him. Then it is for the lords, leaders, and elders of the region, the seven generations of parents. Finally it is for the all extended family members and good friends with knowledge and comprehension, so that they can all have this prosperity and blessing. The *bhikṣu* Daoqian; the *bhikṣu* Dao Yong; the *bhikṣu* Huiyun; the *bhikṣu* Daochou; the *bhikṣu* Huizhi Fada; the deceased Fan Xiang; the deceased Fan Pidu; the deceased Fan Lang; the deceased Fan Chong; the deceased Fan Boyi; the deceased Fan Shirong; the deceased Fan Shuqi; the deceased Fan Wenqing; the deceased Fan Yang; the deceased Fan Gao; the image presider, Fan Guoren; Fan Zhu; Fan Tou; Fan Baonu; Fan Huaisi; Fan Niao; Fan Fahe; Fan Shixian; Fan Hui'an; the deceased Liu Wangren; Fan Sengguang; Fan Wenying; Fan Daoheng; Fan Liuwang; Fan Gaishi; the deceased Wang Yu [missing text].

範(范)國仁造像記 普泰二年

大魏普泰二年歲次壬子四月甲子朔三日丙寅。定州趙郡平力縣因封南皮范國仁。敬造彌勒尊像一軀。上爲皇帝陛下，州郡令長，七世父母。下及來生眷屬，善友知識，同斯福慶。比丘道遷。比丘道勇。比丘惠曇。比丘道籌。比丘惠直法達。命過范相。命過范辟毒。命過范朗。命過范忠。命過范伯夷。命過范世榮。命過范叔齊。命過范文愛。命過范陽。命過范高。像主范國仁。范助。范頭。范寶奴。范懷嗣。范鳥。范法和。范市顯。范惠安。命過劉王仁。范僧廣。范文英。范道恒。范六王。范蓋世。命過王玉□。

⁷⁶⁷ These assemblies are those who will be in the presence of Maitreya when he becomes a Buddha and sits under the Dragon-flower tree.

⁷⁶⁸ Beijing tushuguan 1989, 3.125.

⁷⁶⁹ Ibid, 5.160.

APPENDIX TWO: Full Text of excerpts from dynastic histories, Chinese and English

Introduction

1. From the *Latter History of the Han*, Section on the “Biographies of the Wuhuan and the Xianbei”⁷⁷⁰

With regard to the Xianbei, they were also a branch of the eastern barbarian tribes.⁷⁷¹ They administered the region of Mt. Xianbei, and hence they were named after this region. It is said that their language, learning, and customs were the very same as the Wuhuan.⁷⁷² The only time they cut their hair⁷⁷³ was prior to their wedding ceremony, which was held during the spring at a great assembly in Raoleshui where they drank and feasted together, and then afterwards the marriage would take place. Further, their birds and animals are different from those in China: they have wild horses, grazing sheep, and horned cattle, whose horns they use to pull things and hence they are customarily called “the horned pullers.” Also they have sables, *na*,⁷⁷⁴ and *hun*⁷⁷⁵ whose pelt is soft and smooth and thus used to make the finest fur cloaks in all the world.

後漢書《烏桓鮮卑列傳》

鮮卑者，亦東胡之支也，別依鮮卑山，故因號焉。其言語習俗與烏桓同。唯婚姻先髡頭，以季春月大會於饒樂水上，飲宴畢，然後配合。又禽蓋異於中國者，野馬、原羊、角端牛，以角為弓，俗謂之角端弓者。又有貂、獬、驪子，皮毛柔蠕，故天下以為名裘。

⁷⁷⁰ Li and Fan 1965, 2985; translation is my own.

⁷⁷¹ According to the *Latter History of the Han*, they share this affiliation with the Xiongnu and with a group called the Wuhuan 烏桓, who they have much in common with.

⁷⁷² The Wuhuan tribe is discussed prior to this section and it is stated that they have no written language and are nomadic herders. It is also stated that they have a marriage custom that involves the man cutting off his hair.

⁷⁷³ According to eminent scholar of the Six Dynasties, Wang Zhongluo, the Xianbei were considered to be the Wuhuan who cut their hair (2008, 476).

⁷⁷⁴ As for what this mysterious animal truly is, the Han Dictionary, the *Shuowen Jiezi* 說文解字, says that it was a beast with no legs and it cites the *Hanliu* 漢律 in saying that whoever can hunt it can earn much reward. According to the section on strange animals 《異物志》 from the Book of the Tang or *Tangshu* 唐書, it appears that this animal originally came from Korea, but is associated with the western regions of China and is fox-like in figure, black in colour, and missing its two front legs.

⁷⁷⁵ Again according to the *Shuowen Jiezi* this animal appears to be some kind of rodent who originates with the Dingling barbarians and whose pelt is used to make fur cloaks.

Chapter One

1. From the Preface to the *Book of the Wei*.⁷⁷⁶

In ancient times, the Yellow Emperor⁷⁷⁷ had 25 sons; those who stayed with him became the descendants of Han culture, those who went outside were scattered in the wilderness. Changyi 昌意⁷⁷⁸ had a few sons and he conferred the northern lands on them. Within this land there was the great Mountain of the Xianbei and from this they took their name. After this, for generations, they became the lords and elders who ruled over the lands north of Youdu 幽都,⁷⁷⁹ spreading out over the vast fields while following the movements of their cattle. They used archery for hunting and their customs were pure and uncomplicated. They were accustomed to simplicity and ease and as such they had not developed writing. For records, they carved notches into wood and that was all, and for worldly matters both near and far, these were conferred and transferred between men. These resemble the records and registries of the court historians.

魏書 《序》

昔黃帝有子二十五人，或內列諸華，或外分荒服，昌意少子，受封北土，國有大鮮卑山，因以為號。其後，世為君長，統幽都之北，廣漠之野，畜牧遷徙，射獵為業，淳樸為俗，簡易為化，不為文字，刻木紀契而已，世事遠近，人相傳授，如史官之紀錄焉。

2. From the Preface to the *Book of the Wei*⁷⁸⁰

Emperor Shengwu had lead several tens of thousands of horse riders out into the mountains and marshes and suddenly saw a bannered carriage coming on its own accord down from the heavens. He immediately went to it and saw a beautiful woman to whom he offered his support and protection and who accepted it. The Emperor thought this was strange and so he asked her about it. She responded: “I am a Celestial Woman and it is our fate that we shall be a pair.” And they subsequently went to the bedchamber together. At dawn she further requested: “Come back to this same spot at this time next year.” And with those words she departed; disappearing like wind and rain. When the time came, the Emperor went back to that same place and as a result he saw her again. The Celestial

⁷⁷⁶ Wei 2009, 1; translation is my own.

⁷⁷⁷ The Yellow Emperor is one of the early, mythical rulers of China who is supposed to have aided the development of agriculture in China as well as made great strides toward the development of Chinese court structures and language.

⁷⁷⁸ Changyi is supposedly the youngest son of the Yellow Emperor.

⁷⁷⁹ Youdu is the name of a place in Heilongjiang that is close to the Gaxian Cave.

⁷⁸⁰ Wei 2009, 2; translation is my own.

Woman brought forth a son and gave it to the Emperor, saying: “This is your son. Raise him well and care for him. The descendants will all undertake to become kings and emperors of this world.” On finishing these words, she left. The son became the original ancestor⁷⁸¹ and therefore the people of the time made a proverb, saying: “Emperor Jiefen doesn’t have a wife or in-laws; Emperor Liwei doesn’t have a maternal uncle or in-laws.”

魏書 《序》

聖武皇帝諱詰汾。獻帝命南移，山谷高深，九難八阻，於是欲止。有神獸，其形似馬，其聲類牛，先行導引，歷年乃出。始居匈奴之故地。其遷徙策略，多出宣、獻二帝，故人並號曰「推寅」，蓋俗云「鑽研」之義。初，聖武帝嘗率數萬騎田於山澤，歛見輜輶自天而下。既至，見美婦人，侍衛甚盛。帝異而問之，對曰：「我，天女也，受命相偶。」遂同寢宿。旦，請還，曰：「明年周時，復會此處。」言終而別，去如風雨。及期，帝至先所田處，果復相見。天女以所生男授帝曰：「此君之子也，善養視之。子孫相承，當世為帝王。」語訖而去。子即始祖也。故時人諺曰：「詰汾皇帝無婦家，力微皇帝無舅家。」

3. From the Biography of the monk Huishi, from *An Expanded and Complete Collection of Stimulus and Response Throughout History*.⁷⁸²

The monk Huishi listened to Kumārajīva’s newly translated sūtras and followed the master to Chang’an in order to study the classical texts. He came across a broken beggar who trapped the monk and tried kill him. The beggar hit Huishi’s body with a plain blade and yet his body was uninjured. The broken beggar became enraged and grabbed hold of a jeweled sword and struck him again, and still no damage was done, ultimately scaring the criminal so that he departed. After this, Emperor Shizong paid excessive attention to Hui’s study of contemplation, which he undertook for more than 50 years. Huishi never lay down and was constantly roaming in the dirt and the mud though his feet never became dirty and hence he was called the “white-footed master.” When he finally came to his end, his corpse remained intact for more than 10 days with a healthy colour. After 10 years his grave was moved to the southern suburbs and as they opened his coffin his body was still dignified, without being bent or broken. As for those who came to see him off, there were more than 6000 people in attendance and every single one of them was deeply moved. This biography is eminently sufficient to be a eulogy of his divine traces.

增修歷史感應統記 《惠始》

⁷⁸¹ Although he is actually the 15th ancestor, his story signals a pivot in Tuoba history placing him as the first ancestor and he is literally called *shizu* 始祖, or the first ancestor.

⁷⁸² *An Expanded and Complete Collection of Stimulus and Response Throughout History*. “Hui Shi,” 2. 122-123; translation is my own.

沙門惠始聞鳩摩羅什新出經。遂詣長安習經典。會赫連屈丐阬戮道俗。惠始身被白刃而體不傷屈丐大怒。以所持寶劍擊之。又不能害。乃懼而謝罪。後世祖甚重之。始習禪五十餘年未嘗寢臥。跣行泥塵。初不污足。色愈鮮白。世號之曰白腳師。終後。停屍十餘日容色如一。瘞後十年。改葬南郊。開殯儼。然初不傾壞。送者六千餘人。莫不感動。高充為傳。頌其德迹。

Chapter Two

1. Excerpt from the chapter on “Numinous Omens” in the Book of the Wei⁷⁸³

On the *jiwei* day of the eleventh month of the second year of the Reign of Bright Tranquility⁷⁸⁴ (November 30, 517CE) of Emperor Suzong⁷⁸⁵, a representative of Bing prefecture was sent to the region of Qi because a person named Han Cengzhen had a daughter, Ling Ji,⁷⁸⁶ who had been born out of the right flank of her mother’s body.⁷⁸⁷ Empress Dowager Ling then commanded that the daughter be admitted into the women’s chambers of the court.

肅宗熙平二年十一月己未，并州表送祁縣民韓僧真女令姬從母右肋而生。靈太后令付掖庭。

2. Introduction to the section on the biographies of Empresses from the *Book of the Wei*.⁷⁸⁸

The Han dynasty accorded with the regulations of the Qin dynasty and called the grandmother of the emperor the *Taihuangtaihou* 太皇太后 and the mother of the emperor the *Huangtaihou* and the consort of the emperor the *Huanghou* 皇后, and called all the other women the *furen* 夫人 no matter how many there were. This was unlike the *furen* in the *Book of Etiquette*, for which there were concubines, mothers and several levels of imperial wives.⁷⁸⁹ The Wei and the Jin mutually accorded with this, and at the time there was both ascension and recension [in the ranks]. The prior histories tell about this.

⁷⁸³ Wei 2009, 2915; translation is my own.

⁷⁸⁴ The Xiping 熙平 Reign lasted from 516–518.

⁷⁸⁵ Suzong 肅宗 is the temple name of Yuan Xu 元詡 or Emperor Xiaoming 孝明帝, who ruled from 510–528 CE.

⁷⁸⁶ The personal name of this child, Ling Ji 令姬, literally means “commanded to be a concubine.”

⁷⁸⁷ This is clearly a play on the story of the birth of the Buddha who was born from the right flank or armpit of his mother’s body.

⁷⁸⁸ Wei 2009, 321-322; translation is my own.

⁷⁸⁹ As to the ranks of imperial women and wives, the *Book of Etiquette* says: “After the era of the ancient princes, there were established the six offices, the three *furen*, the nine

Now, as for the similar practices of the prior Kings of the Wei, although they started with Shenyuan⁷⁹⁰ and ended with Zhao Cheng,⁷⁹¹ the world at this time venerated things of a frugal nature and so the limits of consorts, ladies, concubines, and empresses, were greatly decreased and they were given only secondary levels of admiration. Therefore, the eight emperors, Zhang, Ping, Si, Zhao, Jing, Hui, Yang, and Lie,⁷⁹² did not listen to their courtesans and consorts.

Emperor Taizu gravitated away from these practices and venerated his female descendants and gave posthumous titles to the empresses of all these eight past emperors, and within the palace he started to promote many of the ladies-in-waiting to the designation of *furen*. Their numbers were limitless and they were all given a rank. Shizong contributed slightly to this organization and added the Zhaoyi of the Left and Right to be the heads of the *furen*. He also established the “Pepper Chamber,”⁷⁹³ and several other categories of this type, and finally the whole court was completely saturated [with women]. One story from the Wei is that a woman who was about to become the empress had to first cast a golden man by hand; if she succeeded, this was taken as an auspicious omen, but if she failed then she was not allowed to become empress.

After Shizong, Gaozong was deeply enraptured by the abundant kindness of his wet nurse and held her virtue in the absolute highest esteem. Although it was in disagreement with the classical rituals, he looked over these matters with tremendous understanding and

concubines, the twenty-seven hereditary concubines, and the eighty-one imperial wives 古者天子後立六宮、三夫人、九嬪、二十七世婦、八十一御妻” (Chapter on marriage rituals *hunyi* 昏義, section 8).

⁷⁹⁰ Shenyuan, or *Beiwei shenyuan huanghou* 北魏神元皇后 (d. 248) was the wife of Tuoba Liwei, who was the son of Tuoba Jiefen and the Celestial Woman who began the Tuoba tribe that founded the Northern Wei.

⁷⁹¹ Zhao Cheng, or *Zhaochenghuanghou Murongshi* 昭成皇后慕容氏 (d. 360) was the wife of Tuoba Shenyijian 拓跋什翼犍 (318–376) who was the one of the early leaders of the Tuoba tribes, before the foundation of the Northern Wei.

⁷⁹² In order, these emperors were Tuoba Xilu 拓跋悉鹿 (r. 277–286), Tuoba Chuo 拓跋綽 (r. 286–293), Tuoba Fu 拓跋弗 (r. 293–294), Tuoba Luguan 拓跋祿官 (r. 294–307), Tuoba Yilu 拓跋猗盧 (r. 295–316), Tuoba Heru 拓跋賀犍 (r. 321–325), Tuoba Hena 拓跋紇那 (r. 325–329 and 335–337), and Tuoba Yihuai 拓跋翳槐 (r. 329–335 and 337–338).

⁷⁹³ According to Hucker, the “Pepper Chamber” 椒房 *jiaofang* is an indirect reference to the wife of the emperor, one of which, as legend goes, was delighted by pepper-wood paneling in her bed chamber (1985, 141).

compassion, and he⁷⁹⁴ further regulated the levels of the inner chambers⁷⁹⁵ as such: the *Zhaoyi* of the Left and Right were established as equal to the Great Inspectors of the Armies, the Three *Furen* were established as equal to the Three Offices, the Three Concubines were established as equal to the Three Ministers, the Six Concubines were established as equal to the Six Ministers, the Mother of the Realm was established as equal to the Grand Master, and the Female Guards were established as equal to the Scholars.

Furthermore, as for those women in the employ of the court, he relied on classical norms to arrange the inner court, so that the Inner Officer was established as equal to the Secretary in terms of powers and abilities. As for those appointments established at the second grade, there were the three palaces of the Acting Officer, the Great Overseer, and the Women's Attendant. As for those of the third grade, there were the five palaces of the Overseer, the Women's Secretary, the Talented Women, the Women's Historian, the Female Sages, and those women literate in history, literate in general, and of lesser literacy. Of those in the fourth grade, were the capability women of for use inside the court, the women in charge of the offerings, the women born to court servants, capable people, and those respectful of the court and its servants. Of the fifth grade, were the women in charge of clothing, alcohol, feasts, food, and those who were servants, and slaves.

漢因秦制，帝之祖母曰太皇太后，母曰皇太后，妃曰皇后，餘則多稱夫人，隨世增損，非如《周禮》有夫人、嬪婦、御妻之定數焉。魏晉相因，時有升降，前史言之具矣。

魏氏王業之兆雖始於神元，至於昭成之前，世崇儉質，妃嬪嬪御，率多闕焉，惟以次第為稱。而章、平、思、昭、穆、惠、煬、烈八帝，妃后無聞。太祖追尊祖妣，皆從帝諡謚為皇后，始立中宮，餘妾或稱夫人，多少無限，然皆有品次。世祖稍增左右昭儀及貴人、椒房、中式數等，後庭漸已多矣。又魏故事，將立皇后必令手鑄金人，以成者為吉，不成則不得立也。又世祖、高宗緣保母劬勞之恩，並極尊崇之義，雖事乖典禮，而觀過知仁。高祖改定內官，左右昭儀位視大司馬，三夫人視三公，三嬪視三卿，六嬪視六卿，世婦視中大夫，禦女視元士。後置女職，以典內事。內司視尚書令、僕。作司、大監、女侍中三官視二品。監，女尚書，美人，女史、女賢人、書史、書女、小書女五官，視三品。中才人、供人、中使女生、才人、恭使宮人視四品，春衣、女酒、女饗、女食、奚官女奴視五品。

3. Excerpts from the “Notices in Ritual” in the *Book of the Wei*⁷⁹⁶

⁷⁹⁴ It is likely no coincidence that Gaozong was the husband of Empress Dowager Feng.

⁷⁹⁵ It should be noted that Gaozong made the levels of the women's bureaucracy to match the levels of the men's bureaucracy.

⁷⁹⁶ Wei 2009, 2812; translation is my own.

The Elephant Carriage: It is adorned on left and right with phoenixes, white horses, and transcendents preparing to take off in flight, and it is pulled by two elephants. With wings of grass and streamers like the tail of a bird, and dragon banners, flags, and standards, the adornment was just like that of the Men's Elephant Carriage. It was used for the mother of the emperor, the empress dowager, and the empress to journey to the suburbs in order to perform their rites at the ancestral temples.

The Touring and Observing Carriage: With two sets of stairs, the ornamentation is similar to the other carriages. It is pulled by 15 horses, all of which are white with scarlet manes. The Son of Heaven uses this cart to methodically drive his horses around while delivering good blessings, making his rounds, and attending lesser rituals.

象輦：左右鳳凰，白馬，仙人前卻飛行，駕二象。羽葆旒蘇，龍旗旌旄麾，其飾與乾象同。太皇太后，皇太后助祭郊廟之副乘也。

遊觀輦：其飾亦如之。駕馬十五匹，皆白馬朱髦尾。天子法駕行幸、巡狩、小祀時，則乘之。

3. Excerpts from the “Notices in Ritual” in the *Book of the Wei*⁷⁹⁷

In the summer of the second year of the Tianci reign,⁷⁹⁸ in the fourth month (June–July 12, 405 CE), he undertook the complex sacrifices to heaven in the western suburb, and for this there was one square altar with seven wooden layers on top. In the east there were two steps and nothing else. Along the walls there were four doors, each door was a different colour in accord with its direction. The sacrificial animals that were used were one of each of a white calf, a yellow foal, and a white sheep. On the day of the rites, the emperor came in his imperial carriage with a hundred officials and his National Guard as well as great men from various regions that all followed him to the suburb. The emperor went in the green door and proceeded from the south to the west. The officials of the inner court all assembled at the north of the emperor and the officials of the outer court all waited outside of the green door. The empress lead the officials of the six offices in through the black door and they then all lined up inside the green door to the north side, with all of them facing west. Then it was commanded to raise up the sacrificial animals from the stockpile of sacrifices and to line them up in front of the altar. The female shaman⁷⁹⁹ held the drum on the steps leading to the throne, facing west. Then the seventh son from the 10 clans of the emperor held the alcohol and was to the southwest of the shaman. The female shaman ascended the altar and beat the drum. The emperor prayed a solemn prayer, and the hundred officials all exhausted themselves in prayer. When the

⁷⁹⁷ Wei 2009, 2736; translation is my own.

⁷⁹⁸ The Tianci 天賜 reign runs from 404–409 CE.

⁷⁹⁹ Here the text specifically says that these shamans are female.

rite was finished, again they prayed. When the prayer was finished, the animals were slaughtered. Then the seventh man who was holding the alcohol and facing west, took the alcohol and sprinkled it on the presiding heavenly deity, and then they prayed again. They did this seven times. The ritual was then complete and they left.

天賜二年夏四月，復祀天於西郊，為方壇一，置木主七於上。東為二陛，無等；週垣四門，門各依其方色為名。牲用白犢、黃駒、白羊各一。祭之日，帝御大駕，百官及賓國諸部大人畢從至郊所。帝立青門內近南壇西，內朝臣皆位於帝北，外朝臣及大人咸位於青門之外，後率六宮從黑門入，列於青門內近北，並西面。廩犧令掌牲，陳於壇前。女巫執鼓，立於陛之東，西面。選帝之十族子弟七人執酒，在巫南，西面北上。女巫升壇，搖鼓。帝拜，若肅拜，百官內外盡拜。祀訖，復拜。拜訖，乃殺牲。執酒七人西向，以酒灑天神主，復拜，如此者七。禮畢而返。自是之後，歲一祭。

Chapter Three

1. Biography of Empress Feng from the *Book of the Wei*⁸⁰⁰

The Civilized and Enlightened Empress Dowager Feng of Emperor Wencheng⁸⁰¹ was from the city of Xindu in Changle.⁸⁰² Her father's name was Lang and he had served both the regions of Qin and Yong⁸⁰³ as the official historian and the Duke of the Commandery of the Western Cities. Her mother was from the Wang clan and was from Lelang.⁸⁰⁴ The Empress was born in Chang'an and at the time of her birth there was an unusual supernatural glow. Her father, Lang, was put to death for having presided over some affairs, and then the Empress entered the palace because Shizu's⁸⁰⁵ Left-side *Zhaoyi*⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰⁰ Wei 2009, 328-331.

⁸⁰¹ The full name of Empress Dowager Feng is Wenmingcheng Wenming Huanghou Fengshi 文成文明皇后馮氏.

⁸⁰² This is in the modern day prefecture of Ji 冀 in the province of Hebei 河北.

⁸⁰³ Both the regions of Qin (秦州 Qinzhou) and Yong (雍州 Yongzhou) are two administrative regions of the Northern Wei, with Qinzhou being modern day Tianshui 天水 in Gansu 甘肅 and the administrative region of Northern Wei Yongzhou being located in Chang'an 長安 in Shanxi 山西 province, though as one of the classical Nine Regions, this region often shifted during the dynasties.

⁸⁰⁴ Lelang was a region in the extreme Northeast of China that was eventually annexed by Kuguryo, Korea, in the fourth century.

⁸⁰⁵ Shizu 世祖 is the temple name of Tuoba Tao 拓跋燾 or Emperor Taiwu 太武帝, who ruled from 423–452.

⁸⁰⁶ This rank, the previously mentioned *Zhaoyi*, was the highest rank a woman could have next to an empress, and there were two of them, the left and the right.

was her aunt and she took over the role of the Empress's mother, raising and educating her.

When the Empress was 14, Emperor Gaozong⁸⁰⁷ was installed and selected the Empress to be a Noble Woman⁸⁰⁸ and after that he established her as the Empress. When Gaozong died, so the story goes, the country was in great mourning and three days after his passing, all of the emperor's clothing, utensils, and belongings were burned⁸⁰⁹ and all of the hundreds of his empresses, courtesans, and ladies of the court were marked with tears while they surrounded the fire. The Empress screamed out in sorrow and threw herself in the fire. She was rescued by the Left and the Right⁸¹⁰ and only revived after a long time.

⁸⁰⁷ Gaozong 高宗 is the temple name of Tuoba Jun 拓跋濬, or Emperor Wencheng 文成帝, who ruled from 452–465.

⁸⁰⁸ This rank, Noble Person or *Guiren* 貴人 was equivalent to being a “lady” at court and was lower than the *Zhaoyi*.

⁸⁰⁹ There seems to be no other reference to specific examples of funerary fires in the *Book of the Wei*. However, one biography of a high-level advisor to the Northern Wei, Gao Yun 高允 (390–487 CE) may help us to establish whether or not this was a common practice. Gao Yun was advisor to many Northern Wei Emperors from Taiwu to Xiaowen, and having hailed from the Northern Yan, would have been familiar with Sinitic practices and hence was deeply involved in the Northern Wei's sinification program and bureaucratic procedures. Given his time at court, he would have attended Wencheng's funeral and witnessed Empress Dowager Feng's attempt at self-sacrifice. Related to this, his biography reports that: “Yun undertook the activities of regulating the collected ministers of Gaozong, and relied on the customs of old in so doing. The mourning rites of the women did not rely on ancient models and so Yuan remonstrated them, saying: “In the previous courts, there was often put forth the bright edict that it was prohibited for women to make any merriment. On the day of the funeral procession, songs and ballads, drums and dancing, sacrificial animals, and the burning of the tomb – all of these are proscribed and cut off; 允以高宗纂承平之業，而風俗仍舊，婚娶喪葬，不依古式，允乃諫曰：前朝之世，屢發明詔，禁諸婚娶不得作樂，及葬送之日歌謠、鼓舞、殺牲、燒葬，一切禁斷。” What we may assume then is that Yun took to regulating the mourning practices of imperial women as they were not in accord with those of prior Chinese dynasties and were perhaps customs of the northern steppe peoples, though the *Book of the Wei* says nothing more about this. Moreover, Kurgan tumuli as far east as modern-day Mongolia have been excavated and show the existence of fire pits inside of the tomb. Although there is evidence of Zoroastrian fire altars in the tombs of Sogdians in China from a similar time period (Lerner 2005), as far as currently reported, there seems to be no evidence of fire in Xianbei tombs.

⁸¹⁰ I am assuming that these were the *Zhaoyi* of the Left and Right.

When Xianzu⁸¹¹ was installed as emperor, Empress Dowager Feng became his Empress Dowager. The Senior Minister Yi Hun⁸¹² mounted a rebellion and at that time Xianzu was only 12 and was kept hidden away. Thus Empress Dowager Feng secretly managed the government's strategy, executing Hun, and thereafter she took over the court and presided over the government. At the time when Gaozu⁸¹³ was born, the Empress Dowager personally took charge of his rearing and thus she returned command to the Emperor and no longer presided over the affairs of the court. But Empress Dowager Feng's actions at this time were improper; she favoured and was in love with Li Yi.⁸¹⁴ Xianzu thereupon executed Li Yi. The Empress Dowager did not agree with this. Xianzu was then murdered, and at the time people said that it was the Empress Dowager who did it.

In the first year of the Chengming Era⁸¹⁵ (476), the Empress Dowager was again elevated to the position of taking over the court and presiding over the government. The nature of the Empress Dowager was both wise and cunning and when she entered the palace of the concubines her learning was coarse but she consulted the books. Ultimately, she ascended to her venerable rank, scrutinizing and settling all of the myriad affairs.

Gaozu therefore made an edict, saying: "In my youth, I inherited this majestic succession with nothing at all at my disposal. I looked up to and relied on the kindness and understanding [of the Empress Dowager] in order to tie up the area of the four seas in tranquility. I desire to repay her virtue, and as proof of her complete enlightenment,⁸¹⁶ all of the birds of prey and other injurious sorts of animals should be released to the mountains and forests, and we should use this spot to start building a numinous pagoda

⁸¹¹ Xianzu 顯祖 is the temple name of Tuoba Hong 拓跋弘 or Emperor Xianwen 顯文帝, who ruled from 465–471.

⁸¹² Neither the *Book of the Wei* nor the *History of the North* retain a biography of Yi Hun 乙渾, but the later collection, *A Comprehensive mirror of Aid in Governance* (*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑) records the story of Yi Hun's attempt to gain power in two places, scroll 130 (Sima 1957, 4073) and scroll 131 (Ibid, 4104).

⁸¹³ Being the first Tuoba to take the family name of Yuan 元 during the move toward sinification, Gaozu 高祖 is the temple name of Yuan Hong 元宏 or Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝, who ruled from 471–499.

⁸¹⁴ Li Yi 李弈 does not have a biography in the *Book of the Wei* and not much else is known about him.

⁸¹⁵ This reign, the *Chengming* 承明, was a brief reign in 476.

⁸¹⁶ The term used here, *zhengjue* 正覺, is the term used in Chinese translations of Buddhist texts to represent the highest attainment of Buddhist enlightenment. "Awakening" is a better translation than enlightenment. Furthermore, the edict to release all birds of prey to a natural space with a pagoda is a clear reference to the Empress Dowager's Buddhist leanings.

for the Empress Dowager.” Thereupon, they ceased with the officers and the teachers of hawks and used the area for the Monastery of Repaying Virtue.⁸¹⁷

The Empress Dowager and Gaozu went for a tour of the area of Mt. Fang from where they could look over the rivers and villages. She thereupon made a notice about her death, telling their vassals that: “Shun was buried among the lush paulownia trees and his two courtesans did not follow him. Why must we have distant ancestral shrines in the mountain tombs and consider this to be noble? For myself, after 100 years my spirit will still be at peace right here.” Gaozu thereupon instructed the ministers to build the tomb of longevity⁸¹⁸ on Mt. Fang and also to establish the Forever Steadfast⁸¹⁹ Hermitage there, to be used as the ancestral shrine after his death. They started to build it on the fifth year of the reign of Great Peace⁸²⁰ (481) and it was finished eight years later and they then carved and erected an engraved stone stele eulogizing the virtues of the Empress Dowager. For the fortune of Gaozu’s life to come, the Empress Dowager commissioned the *Songs of Powerful Protection*⁸²¹ in more than 300 stanzas, and the *August Admonitions*⁸²² in 18 chapters. Although these texts were numerous, they no longer remain today.

The Empress Dowager erected the Shrine of the King Who Spreads Civilization⁸²³ in Chang’an and also erected the Pagoda of Contemplation and Repose⁸²⁴ in Longcheng⁸²⁵ and in both of them she erected engraved stelae. The Empress Dowager also ordered that, internally, those sons of the five members of the ancestral shine,⁸²⁶ and externally, the six generations relatives who grieve and mourn,⁸²⁷ would all receive tax exemptions.

By nature, the Empress Dowager was simple and frugal, she did not indulge in flowery ornamentation and she herself wore only simple, plain silks. When it came to food presented by the cooks, in these cases she made the regulation that plates could only be of

⁸¹⁷ *Baode fosi* 報德佛寺.

⁸¹⁸ *Shouling* 壽陵 is a poetic but typical reference to a tomb.

⁸¹⁹ *Yonggu* 永固 is the name of both the hermitage and the tomb itself. Today, only the tomb remains.

⁸²⁰ This reign, the *Taihe* 太和, was a long and prosperous reign from 477–499 which saw the move of the Northern Wei capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang.

⁸²¹ *Quanjiege* 勸戒歌

⁸²² *Huanggao* 皇詔

⁸²³ *Wenxuanwang Miao* 文宣王廟

⁸²⁴ *Siyang futu* 思燕佛圖

⁸²⁵ *Longcheng* 龍城 was the name for a Xiongnu city in Mongolia also called E’erhun 鄂爾渾.

⁸²⁶ These five people would have been Daowudi, Mingyuandi, Taiwudi, Wenchengdi, and Xianwendi.

⁸²⁷ These should be the six generations of ancestors of the Empress Dowager.

one foot in size and she directed that the preparation of food with a luxurious flavour be lessened, and therefore it was reduced by 80 percent. One time when the Empress Dowager became ill, she went to a small hermitage and was served with only *lii*.⁸²⁸ At dusk the cook brought her this porridge and she found a small lizard inside but she lifted it out with her spoon. Gaozu went to her side to aid her. He was enraged and wanted to penalize the servant. Empress Dowager Feng just smiled and calmed him.

Since the Empress Dowager personally held court and dictated the government, Gaozu, who was weak by nature, held her in great esteem and deferred to her, not desiring to join in on the governmental decisions. All matters, whether big or small, he assigned to the Empress Dowager. The Empress Dowager was extremely intelligent and strategic, and also suspicious and heartless, and thus was able to manage major affairs such bestowing life and death sentences. She was able to decide on these matters impartially, all without consulting Gaozu. In such a way, her authority was commensurate with her merits and she terrified both the inner and outer circles. Moreover, she personally cultivated Qi Daode, Wang Yu, Zhang You, Fu Chengzu and others from their humble status as eunuchs, installing them as dukes and royals within one year.

Wang Rui⁸²⁹ frequented her bedroom and for many years acted as her most trusted advisor and was bestowed with gifts of money and cloth to the sum of 1,000,000,000,000,000. He was also awarded a gold book and an iron token with the edict that he not be put to death. As for Li Chong,⁸³⁰ although he was capable to accomplish his duties, he had also seen the behind-the-curtains affection of the Empress Dowager and Wang Rui, and so for this reason she secretly increased his gifts and awards, the number of which cannot be calculated. By nature, The Empress was commanding and intelligent, and although she briefly engaged in this affection, she also did not continue on with it.

If her attendants made even a small mistake she would beat and whip them at most more than 100 times, at least several 10s of times; however, by nature she did not harbour resentment and so she would inquire if the servant's behaviour still resembled its earlier self, and if it had changed she would add to their wealth and nobility. For this reason, people cherished her and desired her advantage, and until their deaths they never thought of withdrawing from her service.

⁸²⁸ *Lii* 藟 or *liiqie* 藟茹 is a medicinal herb related to the chrysanthemum family.

⁸²⁹ The story of Wang Rui 王叡 and his family's rise to prominence at court due to his closeness with the Empress Dowager is recounted in his official biography in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009, 1988-1990).

⁸³⁰ Li Chong's 李冲 official biography in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei 2009, 1179-1186) is a lengthy recounting of his roles at court and those of his family members, particularly under the patronage of the Empress, but it does not mention the story of Empress Dowager Feng and Wang Rui, though Wang Rui's biography mentions Li Chong.

The Empress Dowager and Gaozu were delighted by the Pool of the Numinous Spring⁸³¹ and they entertained the ministers of all the border territories there, including all the leaders and chieftains, each one of them being invited to come for entertainment. Gaozu bestowed all the chieftains and the many ministers with wishes of longevity and the Empress Dowager delighted in singing for them all, and the Emperor would join in on the singing as well. As part of this they would command each of the ministers to speak their notices, and all together there would then be 90 persons participating in the singing.

On the issue of the etiquette of these foreign tribes, the Empress Dowager looked toward Yuan Pi,⁸³² You Minggen,⁸³³ and others and she bestowed on them gold banners, chariots, and horses. She always praised the beauty of Rui⁸³⁴ and others, and she always drew the support of Pi and others to join her. She presented herself as selfless. However, if anybody made a mistake, she would be scared of people's talking, and if she had even the slightest suspicion about it she would see to the execution of the people in question.

When the Empress Dowager passed away, Gaozu had no idea what to do with his life and so he followed the direction of Li Xin⁸³⁵ and Li Hui⁸³⁶ who were jealous and hateful and completely exterminated more than 10 families, in total killing more than 100 people. These leaders were extremely coercive and reckless and all under heaven resented them.

In the 14th year of the reign of Great Peace (490 CE) Empress Dowager Feng died in the Hall of Great Peace⁸³⁷ and at this time she was 49 years old. On that day, all the male

⁸³¹ During the Northern Wei both the Pool and the Palace of the Numinous Spring were built on Mt. Fang, where the tomb of Empress Dowager Feng is today.

⁸³² I cannot verify who this is. The name of the second son of Emperor Taizongming and the brother of Emperor Taiwu was Tuoba Pi, which would have become Yuan Pi with the name changes, but he is said to have died in 444 and thus would not have been on of Empress Dowager Feng's associates.

⁸³³ You Minggen was a Murong and an eminent official at court with strong family ties to the Northern Yan state that lasted from 409–430CE, after which it was taken by the Northern Wei. His biography in the *Book of the Wei* runs from page 1213-1215.

⁸³⁴ Likely this is her aforementioned lover, Wang Rui.

⁸³⁵ As for Li Xin 李訢, his family had distant Murong descent and he had served the Northern Wei court since the time of Taiwu. His biography states that he was fond of Emperor Xianwen, who Empress Dowager Feng apparently murdered, and it also records tensions between he and Empress Dowager Feng, with the latter lowering his rank after the death of Emperor Xianwen. His biography runs from page 1039-1043.

⁸³⁶ Li Hui's biography records tensions between the Li family and Empress Dowager Feng, stating clearly that he was the enemy of the Empress, and runs from page 1824-1826.

⁸³⁷ *Taihe dian* 太和殿

pheasants were gathered together in the Hall of Great Splendour.⁸³⁸ Gaozu did not take any drink for five days as he was destroyed by his longing and was undertaking rituals. Her posthumous name was pronounced as the Great and August Empress Dowager of Civilization and Understanding⁸³⁹ and her tomb were placed at the Forever Steadfast Tomb.⁸⁴⁰ On that day, Gaozu returned to and made his preparations in the Hall of the Mirror of Mystery⁸⁴¹ and made an edict, saying:

“If I follow the frugality that the venerable one indicated, then I cannot express the intensity of my suffering, yet if I venerate and cherish the appropriate rituals, relying on austerity and frugality, then I am respectful of the virtue of her teachings. I will abide by and yield to her thinking and her nature, but will double the emotions that I feel in her passing.

“In accord with the regulations for mountain tombs, she made these stipulations: the measurement on the inside should be one *zhang*⁸⁴² and according to regulations the inside should be a covered pit; however, the heart of this dutiful son does not receive complete consolation from this, and so the chamber shall be two *zhang* and the mound itself should not exceed 30 paces. Now, in order for all the 10,000 beings in this world to see pay their respects to the mountain tomb, it should be sixty paces in width. Violating and going against the Empress Dowager’s noble indications is for the purpose of bringing an end to my suffering. As for the size of the concealed chamber, the inner and outer coffins should be concise and solid and should not be furnished with brilliant utensils. White screens, un-patterned cushions, and earthenware objects, all of these are further not allowed. This is all in accord with her prior indications and aligns with her plans and commands and will be respected as the last vestiges of her affairs.

“Moreover, having both followed her commands and having departed from them, I have neither been able to completely adhere to them nor have I fully dealt with this strange situation. As for the management of the wooden palace,⁸⁴³ inside the Temple of Mysteries⁸⁴⁴, sagacity and numinosity should be relied on, and this should be singularly elevated and adhered to, so that we can admire her clear and humble virtue. Anything beyond these matters should not be followed in undertaking to bring closure to the emotions of pain and longing.

⁸³⁸ *Taihua dian* 太華殿

⁸³⁹ *Wenming Taihuang Taihou* 文明太黃太后

⁸⁴⁰ *Yongguling* 永固陵 is the name of the Empresses Dowager’s tomb on Mt. Fang.

⁸⁴¹ *Jianxuan dian* 鑑玄殿

⁸⁴² One *zhang* 丈 is approximately 3 meters.

⁸⁴³ Likely a reference to her inner coffin.

⁸⁴⁴ Another name for the tomb.

“This proclamation should be expressed both near and far and should be made known to the groups of officials, at best so that they will understand her humility and the goodness of her teachings, at worst so that they are informed of the error of departing from her commands.”

At that point, those in attendance began to cry but Emperor Xiaowen brought an end to this type of mourning and the ministers close to him followed him in doing so. The three offices⁸⁴⁵ and the lesser foreign ministers were all able to abate this mourning, overcoming it and bringing an end to it. Those of the seventh grade⁸⁴⁶ and under brought an end to it and wiped it away, all moving on to happiness. Having established these funerary rites in the Hall of Great Peace, the dukes, eminent officials, and all under them began to have understanding for these affairs. Gaozu was weakened and emaciated as he had been abstaining from meat and alcohol and he didn't go into the royal rooms for three years.⁸⁴⁷

In the times immediately following her death, Gaozu was filial to the Empress Dowager, and thereupon undertook the building of his own longevity palace⁸⁴⁸ one *li*⁸⁴⁹ to the northeast of Forever Steadfast Tomb from where it was his purpose to look over and observe the tomb. Eventually, he migrated to Luoyang, and thereupon he himself was actually buried on the west bank of the Chan River⁸⁵⁰ in a place of mountains and gardens. Still today his empty palace exists on Mt. Fang and it is called the “Temple of 10,000 years.”⁸⁵¹

文成文明皇后馮氏，長樂信都人也。父朗，秦、雍二州刺史、西城郡公。母樂浪王氏。後生於長安，有神光之異。朗坐事誅，后遂入宮。世祖左昭儀，后之姑也，雅

⁸⁴⁵ The three offices refer to the three of the administrative divisions of the Chinese court responsible for the smooth running of the imperial grounds, food, etc. The leaders of these Three Offices held the highest positions at court.

⁸⁴⁶ The various grades of the Northern Wei government are detailed in the “Notices on Ritual” chapter of the *Book of the Wei*.

⁸⁴⁷ The three-years mourning is a common pattern of Chinese mourning handed down from Confucian times and was technically only 25-months, hence extending in to but not completing the third year. For a discussion of the significance of this three-year period of abstention and various opinions on it, see: Waley 1939, 126ff.

⁸⁴⁸ This means that he built his own tomb just beside the Empress Dowagers, and it still stands there today.

⁸⁴⁹ A *li* is a Chinese unit of measure, approximately 1/5 or 1/3 of a mile.

⁸⁵⁰ The Chan River 瀍河 is a small tributary of the Luo River 洛河; Luoyang is situated just north of the Luo River.

⁸⁵¹ See: Fig. 1. The photo shows the two tombs side by side, but evidently the one of Xiaowendi is empty.

有母德，撫養教訓。年十四，高宗踐極，以選為貴人，後立為皇后。高宗崩，故事：國有大喪，三日之後，御服器物一以燒焚，百官及中宮皆號泣而臨之。后悲叫自投火中，左右救之，良久乃蘇。

顯祖即位，尊為皇太后。丞相乙渾謀逆，顯祖年十二，居於諒暗，太后密定大策，誅渾，遂臨朝聽政。及高祖生，太后躬親撫養。是後罷令，不聽政事。太后行不正，內寵李弈。顯祖因事誅之，太后不得意。顯祖暴崩，時言太后為之也。

承明元年，尊曰太皇太后，復臨朝聽政。太后性聰達，自入宮掖，粗學書計。及登尊極，省決萬機。高祖詔曰："朕以虛寡，幼纂寶歷，仰恃慈明，緝寧四海。欲報之德，正覺是憑，諸鷙鳥傷生之類，宜放之山林。其以此地為太皇太后經始靈塔。"於是罷鷹師曹，以其地為報德佛寺。太后與高祖遊於方山，顧瞻川阜，有終焉之志。因謂群臣曰："舜葬蒼梧，二妃不從。豈必遠祔山陵，然後為貴哉！吾百年之後，神其安此。"高祖乃詔有司營建壽陵於方山，又起永固石室，將終為清廟焉。太和五年起作，八年而成，刊石立碑，頌太后功德。太后以高祖富於春秋，乃作《勸戒歌》三百余章，又作《皇誥》十八篇，文多不載。太后立文宣王廟於長安，又立思燕佛圖於龍城，皆刊石立碑。太后又制：內屬五廟之孫，外戚六親總麻，皆受復除。性儉素，不好華飾，躬御縵繒而已。宰人上膳，案裁徑尺，羞膳滋味減於故事十分之八。太后嘗以體不安，服菴藹子。宰人昏而進粥，有蠅在焉，后舉匕得之。高祖侍側，大怒，將加極罰。太后笑而釋之。

自太后臨朝專政，高祖雅性孝謹，不欲參決，事無巨細，一稟於太后。太后多智略，猜忍，能行大事，生殺賞罰，決之俄頃，多有不關高祖者。是以威福兼作，震動內外。故杞道德、王遇、張祐、苻承祖等拔自微闥，歲中而至王公；王睿出入臥內，數年便為宰輔，賞賚財帛以千萬億計，金書鐵券，許以不死之詔。李冲雖以器能受任，亦由見寵帷幄，密加錫賚，不可勝數。后性嚴明，假有寵待，亦無所縱。左右纖介之愆，動加捶楚，多至百餘，少亦數十。然性不宿憾，尋亦待之如初，或因此更加富貴。是以人人懷於利欲，至死而不思退。

太后曾與高祖幸靈泉池，燕羣臣及藩國使人、諸方渠帥，各令為其方舞。高祖帥羣臣上壽，太后忻然作歌，帝亦和歌。遂命群臣各言其志，於是和歌者九十人。太后外禮民望元丕、遊明根等，頒賜金帛輿馬。每至褒美睿等，皆引丕等參之，以示無私。又自以過失，懼人議己，小有疑忌，便見誅戮。迄后之崩，高祖不知所生。至如李訢、李惠之徒，猜嫌覆滅者十餘家，死者數百人，率多枉濫，天下冤之。

十四年，崩於太和殿，時年四十九。其日，有雄雉集於太華殿。高祖酌飲不入口五日，毀慕過禮。諡曰文明太皇太后，葬於永固陵。日中而反，虞於鑑玄殿。詔曰："尊旨從儉，不申罔極之痛；稱情允禮，仰損儉訓之德。進退思惟，倍用崩感。又

山陵之節，亦有成命：內則方丈，外裁掩坎；脫於孝子之心有所不盡者，室中可二丈，墳不得過三十餘步。今以山陵萬世所仰，復廣為六十步。辜負遺旨，益以痛絕。其幽房大小，棺槨質約，不設明器。至於素帳、縵茵、瓷瓦之物，亦皆不置。此則遵先志，從冊令，俱奉遺事。而有從有違，未達者或以致怪。梓宮之裏，玄堂之內，聖靈所憑，是以一一奉遵，仰昭儉德。其餘外事，有所不從，以盡痛慕之情。其宣示遠近，著告羣司，上明儉誨之善，下彰違命之失。"及卒哭，孝文服衰，近臣從服，三司已下外臣衰服者，變服就練，七品已下盡除即吉。設祔祭於太和殿，公卿已下始親公事。高祖毀瘠，絕酒肉，不內御者三年。

初，高祖孝於太后，乃於永固陵東北里餘，豫營壽宮，有終焉瞻望之志。及遷洛陽，乃自表瀍西以為山園之所，而方山虛宮至今猶存，號曰"萬年堂"雲。

2. Excerpt from the Biography of Empress Hu from the *Book of the Wei*.⁸⁵²

The Empress had a nature that was both intelligent and enlightened. She had so many skills and talents that her aunt straightaway became a nun, and, together with the Empress during her youth, they depended on and trusted in the maxims that they obtained from the great truths of the Buddhist sūtras.⁸⁵³

太后性聰悟，多才藝，姑既為尼，幼相依託，略德佛經大義。

3. Excerpt from the Biography of Empress Hu from the *Book of the Wei*.⁸⁵⁴

In the first year of the Wutai 武泰 era (528 CE), Erzhu Rong commanded his army to cross the river⁸⁵⁵ and the Empress Dowager then commanded that all the women of the six offices of Emperor Suzong enter the way. She too cut off her own hair.⁸⁵⁶

及武泰元年，尔朱荣称兵渡河，太后尽召肃宗六宫皆令入道，太后亦自落发。

⁸⁵² Wei 2009, 337; translation is my own.

⁸⁵³ Wei 2009, 338; translation is my own.

⁸⁵⁴ Wei 2009, 340; translation is my own.

⁸⁵⁵ The Yellow River, thus reaching Luoyang.

⁸⁵⁶ Wei 2009, 340; translation is my own.

APPENDIX THREE: Full Text of Sūtra Translations, Chinese and English

Chapter Three

1. *The Sūtra of the Woman, “Silver”*

As translated by the Indian Tripiṭaka master, Buddhaśānta in the Yuan Wei

[Full text of the sūtra]

Thus have I heard. At one time the Bhagavān was dwelling in Śrāvastī in the Jetavana Anāthapiṇḍada-ārāma with a great assembly of 1250 *bhikṣus*. At that time the World-Honoured One addressed the *bhikṣus*, saying: “*Bhikṣus*, there are sentient beings who are able to understand the karmic repayment of the merit of *dāna*. This is what I know about mealtimes: if before you eat and after you eat, if you don’t give *dāna*, then you will not be provided with food for yourself. At that time, the Buddha spoke a gāthā, saying:

If there are sentient beings,
Who resemble what the Buddha says,
They will diminish their hunger and give *dāna*,
And the result will be great karmic repayment.
If before you eat,
and if after you eat,
you don’t give *dāna*,
then you will not be supplied with food for yourself!

When the Buddha was finished speaking this gāthā he then addressed the *bhikṣus*, saying, “*Bhikṣus*, I have been coming and going for innumerable *kalpas* ago in the past. At one time there was a king of a city called Lotus Flower. In that city there was also a woman called “Silver.” She was beautiful and was endowed with marks of particular brilliance. She had attained the supreme bodily form of the highest wonder and therefore she had necessarily left home and had gone to dwell in different houses.⁸⁵⁷

She entered a dwelling and saw that within the family there was a new mother who had just given birth to a boy child who was also beautiful and whose form was particularly wondrous. However, just then, the woman was raising the child up in her hands and preparing to eat it. Then the Woman, “Silver” asked her about it, saying, “Sister, What are you doing?” The reply was, “I am extremely hungry and am without any vitality. I don’t know what I can eat and so I desire to eat the child!” Then the Woman, “Silver” addressed the other woman, saying, “Sister, stop! This is not okay! Sister, is there nothing else in this house for a person to eat?” The other woman replied, “Sister, for a long time

⁸⁵⁷ A reference to her life as a Buddhist mendicant.

now our stores have been exhausted and we are dirty and broke! And so there is nothing I can eat!”

The Woman, “Silver” said, “Sister, stop! Wait and I will go out to the families and bring something for you to eat!” The other woman replied, “Sister, right now I desire to destroy the two sides of his body! I even desire to tear apart his back! My heart is at war and I am not at peace! I am facing eclipse from all sides! If you go out to the families I will certainly die very soon.” At the time the Woman, “Silver” had this thought: “If I take the child and leave, the woman will surely die, but if I don’t go out then this woman will surely eat her child. What sort of expedient means would be able to save both of these lives?”

Then she said, “Sister, do you have a sharp knife in this house? I have need of it.” She replied saying, “yes.” She then gave he knife to Silver. The Silver then grasped the knife and cut off her two breasts and gave them to her and made her eat them. She said, “Eat my breasts and then you, Sister, will be free from the bitterness of this thirst and hunger.” The woman ate them and the Silver asked her, “Sister, are you full or not?” The woman answered that she was full. The Woman, “Silver” then said, “Sister, you should know that this was the flesh of my body and it must be replenished, and so now I must also go out to the houses of the families in order to obtain something to eat.”

And so, with her blood flowing all over her body out in to the dirt and the mud she went out toward the families. The many followers of Silver and her intimates saw her and they all asked her about it saying, “Who did this to you?” Silver answered, “I myself did this.” And so they all asked her, “Why did you do this?” She answered, “I have already given rise to a heart that does not abandon great compassion, and I did this in order to achieve *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*.” All of her intimates said to her, “Although you have practiced this *dāna*, if your heart is remorseful then this cannot be the perfection of giving! And when they had said this, some others asked, “When doing this act of injury and abandonment were you happy or not? Isn’t it that this bitterness has given rise to vexation?” At that time, the Woman, “Silver” made a vow, saying, “If it is the case that when I cut off my two breasts, I did not give rise to any vexation in my heart, nor if it is the case that my heart now is without any strange feelings, then I vow to have my two breasts returned to their original state!” And when she was finished making the vow, by means of the strength of her vow, her two breasts were returned to their original state.

At that time, all the *yakṣas* in the Lotus Flower city heard the vow of the Woman, “Silver” who had cut off her two breasts. Further, all of the gods of heaven and earth had also heard it and praised it. The praise of these celestials was heard coming out of the sky, and as such the praise was transmitted to and heard even in the Brahma Heaven. At that time Indra thought to himself, “This situation quite rare. This Woman, “Silver”, because of her sympathy for living beings, cut off her own two breasts. I should go to her and test her.” He then changed his form into that of a Brahmin and he held in his left hand a golden flask and a golden bowl and in his right hand he held a golden cane and then he

went out to the Lotus Flower City and eventually arrived at the hermitage in which the Woman, “Silver” was dwelling. He stood outside her door, begging something to eat.

At that time, the Woman, “Silver” heard the sound of somebody begging for food outside of her door and so she immediately went to fill his bowls with food. When she went out the door the Brahmin addressed her, saying, “Sister, I have stopped here but I do not need to eat.” The woman asked him why. The Brahmin said, “I am in Indra, and with respect to your actions I have given rise to a suspicious heart, and that is why I came. And so you must answer my questions.” The woman said, “Great Brahmin, just ask your question right now and I will certainly answer in due fashion as I must respect the commands of your Brahmin’s heart.”

At that time, the Brahmin questioned her, saying, “Sister, did you really cut off your two breasts and give them to somebody else, or not?” She answered, “I really did, Great Brahmin.” Then the Brahmin asked her, “Why did you do this?” The Woman, “Silver” said, “Because, with a heart full of great compassion I received *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*.” The Brahmin said, “This is a very difficult matter. And of this very difficult matter you say that it was for *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*. If you gave this act of *dāna* and there was any vexation at all in your heart, then this is not the perfection of giving. At the time of your giving were you happy or not? When you injured yourself, did the pain give rise to strange ideas or not?”

The Woman, “Silver” answered, “Kauśika,⁸⁵⁸ I will now establish this vow: In seeking out all the wisdom in my own heart, I have sought to triumph over all the hearts in this world. I have sought out to rescue the hearts of all living beings. In cutting off my two breasts I truly did not give rise to any remorse. If it was such that I did not have any remorse then let me now change my female form into a male form!” When the Woman, “Silver” finished her vow she straightaway turned herself into a man. When the others saw the woman turn herself into a man their hearts gave rise to joy and they danced endlessly. Then she went to a forest and slept under a tree.

At that time the Lotus Flower King suddenly passed away and that king had no son. Although the temperature was very hot, all of the great ministers went from tree to tree, from village to village, from city to city, and from capital to capital, in every place searching out a person that was fit for becoming King. All the great ministers said, “We are now asking about obtaining a king that would govern in accord with the *dharma*.”

At that time one of the great ministers needed a reprieve from the heat and so he entered the Lotus Pond and he then saw a person under a tree. That person’s form was exceptionally outstanding and bore a sufficient collection of marks. The person was sleeping and although that person remained that way for the whole day, the others did not

⁸⁵⁸ The name of Indra when he takes a human form. Also the family name of Indra.

depart from the tree's shadow. Then one of the great ministers snapped his fingers and commanded the person to wake up. That person immediately woke up.

They brought that person to the imperial abode and straightaway shaved his head and commanded that he undertake the clothing of the King and put on the jeweled crown, and they said to him: "You must now govern the affairs of the King." The other one immediately responded, "I am truly unable to preside over the affairs of the King." They responded by saying, "Now you must preside over the affairs of the King." And he again replied, "If I become the King and govern this country in accord with the dharma, then all of you people will have to fully adopt the path of the 10 wholesome acts.⁸⁵⁹ Only then will I become King."

All of the others responded right away, saying, "All of the ministers will accord with these actions and will straightaway embrace the 10 wholesome acts." And similarly they advised the common people on the path of the 10 wholesome acts and then the one governing the King's affairs was called the "Silver King." At that time the lifespan of all the people in the country was 70,000 *nayutas*.⁸⁶⁰ And the King governed the country for incalculable amounts of hundreds of incalculable amounts of thousands of years. And then he died. But as his death was approaching, he spoke a *gāthā*, saying:

All things are inconstant
and must reach their destruction.
All that has come together must be diffused
and all that lives must die.
In accord with the action of things,
if beings are good or are not good
all of them
will live a length of time that is concordant.

Then that King met the end of his life and was reborn again in the imperial City called Lotus Flower, taking his birth in the wife of an elder who, after eight or nine months gave birth to a boy who was upright in deportment and of a wondrous and particularly beautiful form. When that boy was eight years old, 500 other boys were out circumambulating the Hall of Learning where they had been previously studying their books. And at that time, the boy questioned the eldest of them, saying: "What are you all doing in here?" The eldest answered, "We are studying our books." And then the boy said, "What advantage is there to studying these books? Why must you all study these

⁸⁵⁹ According to the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, these acts are: 1) not killing; 2) not stealing; 3) not committing adultery; 4) not lying; 5) not speaking harshly; 6) not speaking divisively, not speaking idly, not being greedy, not being angry, and not having wrong views.

⁸⁶⁰ A vast and imprecise Indian number, meaning something like "billions," or perhaps "incalculable."

books? You should merely give rise to the mind of *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*.” The eldest said, “How can we give rise to *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*?” The boy said, “You must cultivate the six *pāramitās*.⁸⁶¹ What are these six? They are: the *pāramitā* of charity, the *pāramitā* of morality, the *pāramitā* of forbearance, the *pāramitā* of effort, the *pāramitā* of meditation, and the *pāramitā* of wisdom. At the time that I heard this I straightaway said that I would give rise to the mind of *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*.”

At that time, the boy commanded all the people to give rise to *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*. And then he thought to himself: “I desire to give *dāna* to the minute and the small. I will now go and undertake *dāna* on behalf of the two and four legged birds and wild animals.” When he finished thinking this, he then went the *śītavana* (the cemetery) and then he took a knife and stabbed his body until the blood was flowing out of all sides and he then smeared his body with oil and went to lie down in the forest. Then he sang to himself: “All of the two and four legged birds and wild animals will now come to eat me. I desire for them to come and eat my flesh.”

Then, when he abandoned his body he was immediately reborn in the imperial city called Lotus Flower, taking his birth in the wife of a Brahmin, and after ten months a boy was born boy who was upright in deportment and of whose beauty was beyond comparison. At the time when he had reached 21 years old his parents spoke to him, saying, “Māṇava, you should go and build a house.” Then the boy replied to his parents, saying, “For what reason should I build a house? My heart does not live in a house. My nature desires release and I shall enter the deep mountains.” His parents agreed that he could leave to dwell in the mountains and forests and so he immediately went to dwell in the mountains and forests.

At first there were two elder Brahmin *ṛṣis* in that forest and Māṇava went to these two elder Brahmin *ṛṣis* and questioned them, saying, “You Brahma *ṛṣis*, what are you doing dwelling in this forest?” The two *ṛṣis* replied, “Māṇava, we are seeking a more advantageous rebirth by dwelling in this forest and undertaking all manner of ascetic practices.” Then he replied to them, “I am presently also seeking to undertake ascetic practices for the cause of a more advantageous rebirth.” And then at that time Māṇava went to a place far in the forest where the earth was measured by its cliffs. At that time, because Māṇava had received the power of karmic merit from undertaking such benevolent practices he suddenly obtained a celestial eye and was able to see to places very far in the distance.

Then he saw, at a place in the near distance, a mother tigress. The tigress was concealing her pregnancy but was just about to give birth. When Māṇava saw her he thought to himself, “This tigress will give birth in a short time, but when she gives birth she will be starving to death and this extreme hunger will bring about grave suffering and she will eat

⁸⁶¹ Literally, “perfection.” The Six *Pāramitās*, are a list of virtues that must be perfected prior to enlightenment and which take many life times to perfect.

her children.” When he was finished thinking this he went to the two elder Brahmin *ṛṣis* and said, “Who is able to harm their body by giving it to that tigress?” They answered, “We are not able to undertake the *dāna* of self-harm.” And that was all they said. After seven days the tigress had given birth and was about to put all of her children in her mouth, but she was hesitating, putting them down and picking them up. When Māṇava saw this he went immediately to the two *ṛṣis* and said, “great *ṛṣis*, the tigress has given birth! If you still desire to have a more advantageous rebirth through undertaking ascetic practices, then this is the opportunity to arrange it by harming yourself for the sake of the tigress!”

At that time the two elder Brahmin *ṛṣis* went straight to the left side of the tigress and pondered, “Who is able to bear this type of ascetic practice and undertake this great *dāna*? Who is able to harm their body that they so cherish and give it to the hungry tigress?” When they had finished pondering as such, the tigress that had just given birth began to chase them, and those two *ṛṣis*, cherishing their bodies, flew off into the sky and Māṇava followed after them into the far distance, saying to these two Brahmin *ṛṣis*, “This is nothing other than the vow you have made!”

When he finished saying this, Māṇava himself made a vow, saying, “I will now cast off my body for the tigress to feast on! And I vow that I will now, in accord with causes and condition, surely achieve *anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi*!” When he finished saying this he went straightaway to the side of the tigress and grabbed a knife. He destroyed his body as an act of *dāna* for the hungry tigress.

“*Bhikṣus*, I am concerned that you all have given rise to doubt in your hearts. *Bhikṣus*, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don’t think otherwise! Why is this? You should all know, I was at that time the “Woman, “Silver”” and I cut off my two breasts so that the child could be saved! Who was that other woman “Silver” who during the time of the Lotus Flower King cut off her two breasts? In present times, that person is none other than me! *Bhikṣus*, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don’t think otherwise! Why is this? You should all know, that I was the Woman, “Silver” in the imperial city called Lotus Flower. *Bhikṣus*, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don’t make excess perceptions! Why is this? You should all know, I was at that time called the “Woman, “Silver”” and I cast off my two breasts so that the child could be saved!

Bhikṣus, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don’t think otherwise! Why is this? You should all know! Rāhula, who was this strange person who at that time was a boy? *Bhikṣus*, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don’t think otherwise! Why is this? You should all know that when that boy from the imperial city called Lotus Flower went to the *śītavana* to offer his body to all the birds, who was this strange boy? That was me!

All you *bhikṣus*, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don't make excess perceptions! Why is this? You should all know that at the time of the two Brahmin *ṛṣis*, who were these strange people? These, all you *bhikṣus*, are you! Who are these strange people? They are none other than you, all you *bhikṣus*! All you *bhikṣus*, you must not give rise to doubt and suspicion and don't make excess perceptions! Why is this? You should all know that at that time I was the Brahmin child, Māṇava.

All you *bhikṣus*, this is why I am now addressing you all: if all you *bhikṣus* understand the karmic repayment of the merit of *dāna*, then you will all accord with it by giving *dāna* at the beginning of your meal and at the end of your meal. Then you can eat! At the time that the Buddha spoke this all the *bhikṣus* were joyously happy.

銀色女經

元魏天竺三藏佛陀扇多譯

如是我聞。一時婆伽婆。住舍衛國祇陀樹林給孤獨園。與大比丘眾千二百五十人俱。爾時世尊告諸比丘言。諸比丘。若有眾生。能知布施所有功德及施果報。如我所知於食食時。若初食搏。若後食搏。若不捨施不應自食。爾時世尊而說偈言。

若有諸眾生	如佛之所說
減食分而施	成就大果報
或以初食搏	或以後食搏
若不用布施	則不應自食

爾時世尊說是偈已。告諸比丘言。諸比丘。乃往過去過無量劫。時有王都王號蓮華。彼城有女名曰銀色。端正殊妙容相具足。成就最上勝妙色身。彼銀色女有所須故。從自家出往至他舍。入他舍已。見彼家內新產婦女生一童子。端正殊妙身色成就。時產婦女以手擎子而欲食之。時銀色女即問之曰。妹何所作。彼即答言。我今甚飢無有氣力。不知何食故欲噉子。時銀色女即語之言。妹今且止。此事不可。妹此舍中豈更無食人所食者。即答言。姊我久積集慳貪垢惱。是故於今無物可食。銀色女言。妹今且止。待我向家與妹取食。彼復言。姊我今二脇皆欲破壞。背復欲裂。心戰不安。諸方皆闇。姊適出舍我命即斷。時銀色女作如是念。若將子去彼婦命終。若不將去必食此子。以何方便救此二命。即語之言。妹此室中有利刀不。我今須之。彼答言有。即便取刀授與銀色。銀色取刀自割二乳與彼令食。而語之言。食我此乳即令妹身離飢渴苦。彼取食已。復問之言。妹為飽不。彼答言飽。銀色女言。妹今當知。此子乃是我自身肉之所贖得。今且寄妹。我須向家取諸飲食。作是語已。流血遍身曳地而去。往至家中。銀色眷屬諸親見已。皆共問言。是誰所作。銀色答言。是我自作。彼復問言。何以故爾。銀色答言。我已起心不捨大悲。為求成就阿耨多羅三藐三菩提故。諸親皆言。雖行布施而心悔者。乃可是檀非波羅蜜。作是語已。復問之言。當割捨時為歡喜不。勿以苦痛至生悔惱。時銀色女即發誓

言。我割二乳不生悔心心無異想。以是誓願。令我二乳還復如本。作是誓已。即時二乳還復如本。

爾時蓮華城中諸夜叉等。發大聲言。銀色女今自捨二乳。爾時地天聞已復唱。虛空中天聞已傳唱。如是傳聲乃至梵天。時帝釋王作如是念。是事希有。此銀色女愍眾生故自捨二乳。我今當往至彼試之。作是念已。即自變身作婆羅門。於左手中執金澡罐及捉金鉢。於右手中捉一金杖。而便往詣蓮花王都。到已漸漸至銀色女所居舍宅。在門外立唱言乞食。時銀色女既聞門外乞食聲已。即便隨時以器盛食。出在門外。時婆羅門而語之言。妹今且停我不須食。女言何故。婆羅門言。我是帝釋。我於汝所甚生疑心。故來到此。如我所問必當答我。女語之言。大婆羅門。今者但問。隨意所問我當答之。必令稱汝婆羅門心。時婆羅門即問言。妹實割二乳施他以不。答言實爾。大婆羅門。婆羅門言。何以故爾。銀色女言。大悲之心為取阿耨多羅三藐三菩提故。婆羅門言。此事甚難。甚難事者。所謂阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。若布施已而生悔心彼乃是檀非波羅蜜。汝當施時歡喜以不。當割時苦生異念不。銀色即答言。憍尸迦。我今立誓。我以求於一切智心。為求一切世間勝心。求救一切眾生之心。割此二乳實不生悔。若不悔者。令我女身變成男子。時銀色女作是誓已。即成男子。彼見女身成男子已。心生歡喜踊躍無量。至於餘處樹下睡眠。

時蓮華王忽然崩亡。其王無子。時甚大熱。當於是時諸大臣等。從樹至樹從村至村。從城至城從都至都。處處永覓有相之人應為王者。諸臣皆言。我等今者云何而得如法治王。當爾之時。有一大臣。以熱困故入華池中。時彼大臣見樹下人。色貌殊勝具足眾相。睡臥不覺日雖移去。然其樹影不捨彼人。時彼大臣彈指令覺。彼既覺已。將至王舍即與剃髮。令被王服首著寶冠。而語之言。當治王事。彼即答言。我實不能治於王事。復語之言。今者必須治於王事。彼復答言。我若為王如法治國。汝等諸人。若當悉受十善業道。我則為王。彼皆答言。臣等順行。即時皆受十善業道。彼人如是十善業道勸眾生已。即治王事名銀色王。爾時國內諸人民等。壽命七萬那由他歲。彼王於是無量百歲無量千歲治王事已。爾乃命終。臨命終時作如是言。

一切皆無常	必有敗壞事
合會必有離	有命皆必死
隨所作事業	若善若不善
一切有生者	命皆不久住

彼王命終。還生彼處蓮華王都。於長者妻而便託生。可八九月便生童子。端正殊妙具足眾色。然彼童子過八歲後。五百童子而圍遶之將詣學堂。彼學堂處。先有五百童子學書。時彼童子問舊者言。汝等於此為何所作。舊者答言。我等學書。又言。學書得何義利。汝等何須學此書為。汝等但應發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心。舊童子言。發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心。為何所作。童子答言。必須修行六波羅蜜。何等為

六。所謂檀波羅蜜。尸波羅蜜。羼提波羅蜜。毘梨耶波羅蜜。禪波羅蜜。般若波羅蜜。彼既聞已即言。我發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心。

時彼童子既令諸人發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心已。作如是念。我今欲以微少物施。我今當為二足四足禽獸鹿等而行布施。作是念已。而便往至尸陀林中。即以利刀刺身出血塗身令遍。復以油塗臥彼林中。而自唱言。諸有近遠二足四足鹿等禽獸須食之者。願來至此食我身肉。

于時彼處飛鳥眾中有一鳥來。名曰有手。坐其額上挽其右眼。挽已還放。彼問鳥言。汝今何故挽我右眼而復放耶。彼鳥答言。我於人身餘分肉中。一切無有美於眼者。彼語鳥言。假使千遍挽我右眼而復放之。而我不生嫌恨之心。彼鳥於是噉其二眼。無量鳥眾集彼林中。彼鳥悉共食其肉盡。唯白骨在。

[彼捨身已。即復還生蓮華王都。託生彼處婆羅門婦。足滿十月生一童子。端正殊妙最上無比。身色具足年二十後。于時父母而語之言。摩那婆。當須造舍。時彼童子報父母言。為我造舍為有何義。我心今者不在於舍。惟願放我入於深山。父母即聽。彼出自舍往詣山林。既往到已見山林中。於前先有二婆羅門舊住仙人。在彼林中。時摩那婆。至婆羅門二仙人所。問婆羅門二仙人言。梵仙在此山林之中。為何所作。二仙報言。摩那婆。我等皆為利益眾生故在此林。行於苦行作種種事。彼復語言。我於今者。亦為利益一切眾生故。來至此欲作苦行。彼摩那婆即至餘處樹林之中。量地作屋。彼摩那婆以修善業福德力故。忽得天眼。即時遙見於其住處。相去不遠。有一母虎住在彼處。而彼母虎懷妊將產。時摩那婆見已念言。而此母虎將產不久。此虎產已或容餓死。或時飢餓極受困苦。或食自子。念已。即問彼婆羅門二仙人言。誰能割身與此虎者。彼即答言。我等不能自割身施。作是語已。復過七日母虎便產。虎既產已口銜諸子。復置於地而復還取。時摩那婆見是事已。即便往到二仙人所語言。大仙。母虎已產。若為利益諸眾生故行苦行者。今正是時。可割身肉與此母虎。時彼仙人二婆羅門。即便往至母虎左已。作是思惟。誰能忍受如是苦事而行大施。誰能自割所愛身肉與此餓虎。作是念已。彼產母虎即遠逐之。彼二仙人惜身命故飛空而去。時摩那婆即便遙語彼婆羅門二仙人言。此是汝等誓願事耶。作是語已。即發誓言。我今捨身以濟餓虎。願令我身以此因緣必得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。作是願已。於彼地處得一利刀。自壞其身以施餓虎。諸比丘。我愍汝等生於疑心。諸比丘。勿生異疑莫作餘觀。何以故。汝等當知。爾時於彼蓮華王都銀色女人割二乳者豈異人乎。今我身是。諸比丘。勿生異疑莫作餘觀。何以故。汝等當知。我是爾時蓮華王都銀色女也。諸比丘。勿生異疑莫作餘觀。何以故。汝等當知。我是爾時名銀色女。捨於二乳濟彼子者。諸比丘。勿生異疑莫作餘觀。何以故。汝等當知。羅睺羅者豈異人乎。即是爾時彼童子也。諸比丘。勿生異疑莫作異觀。何以故。汝等當知。爾時於彼蓮華王都尸陀林中。為諸鳥眾割捨身者。豈異人乎。我身是也。諸比丘。勿生異疑莫作餘觀。何以故。汝等當知。爾時二仙婆羅門

者。豈異人乎。即是汝等諸比丘也。諸比丘。勿生異疑莫作餘觀。何以故。汝等當知。我是爾時婆羅門子摩那婆也。

諸比丘。是故我今為比丘說。若諸比丘知施功德及施果報。應施初搏若施後搏如是而食。佛說此時彼諸比丘皆大歡喜。

Chapter Five

2. *The Sūtra of Transforming the Female Form*

As translated by Dharmamitra (356–442 CE)

[Selections from the Sūtra, p918c02-919b18]

At that time, the taintless girl addressed the Buddha, saying: “World-Honoured One! Now, in this assembly of all the *bhikṣus*, *bhikṣuṇīs*, *upāsakas*, and *upāsikās*, we listen with great anticipation: Why is it that in cultivating the benevolent practices, one must obtain the departure from the female form and hastily achieve a man’s form in order to give rise to the mind of supreme enlightenment? I only want, World-Honored One, that you now undertake to explain this!”

At that time, the World-Honored One, because he desired to increase the attainments of the four-fold assembly, spoke to the taintless girl, saying: “It is like this: as to the attainments of women, there is one reason for their them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by this one reason? What is meant is that it is a profound mind that seeks *bodhi*. Why is this so? If there are women who give rise to a mind of *bodhi*, then this is the mind of a greatly benevolent person, the mind of a great person, the mind of a great sage, the mind of person who is not inferior, the mind of a person who has forever left behind the inferiority of the two vehicles,⁸⁶² the mind that is able to destroy all the heterodox teachings and strange treatises, a mind that is the most triumphant one in the triple world, a mind that is able to set aside all confusion, that is not tied up in discriminations, and that practices purity and cleanliness. Supposing that all women give rise to the mind of *bodhi*, then, on the contrary, they cannot remain mixed up women whose minds are all bound up with afflictions. Therefore, in order not to be mixed up, they should forever leave their female form, obtain the achievement of a male form, and then all of their benevolent roots will certainly lead them to supreme enlightenment. This is called ‘one.’

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are two reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by two?

⁸⁶² This is a reference to the non-Mahāyāna paths of the śrāvakas and the pratyekabuddhas, which are seen as inferior to the Mahāyāna path of the bodhisattva.

What is meant is the abandoning of an arrogant mind: departure from deception, not making illusory perceptions, having all benevolent roots, departing widely from the female form and hastily achieving a male form. In all cases this will lead them to supreme *bodhi*. These are called ‘two.’

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are three reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by three? The first is bodily action that is pure and clean; grasping a body of the three categories of precepts.⁸⁶³ The second is to have a mouth whose actions are pure and clean; to depart from speaking the four fallacies. The third is to have thoughts whose actions are pure and clean; to depart from hatred, anger, false views, and foolishness. Undertaking the ten benevolent practices will allow one to give rise to good roots, to desire to leave behind their female form, hastily achieve a male one, and this will bring them to *bodhi*. These are called ‘three.’

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are four reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by four? The first is not being malicious. The second is not holding grudges. The third is not following afflictions. The fourth is residing in the power of patience. These are called ‘four.’

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are five reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by five? The first is to joyously seek out the benevolent law. The second is to doubly venerate the orthodox law. The third is to use the orthodox law to make oneself amused. The fourth is to respect those who teach the law as elders and teachers. The fifth is to likewise speak about cultivating one’s actions. Undertaking the ten benevolent practices will allow one to give rise to good roots, to desire to leave behind their female form, hastily achieve a male one, and this will bring them to *bodhi*. These are called ‘five.’

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are six reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by six? The first is to constantly remember the Buddha and to desire to achieve the body of a Buddha. The second is to constantly remember the dharma and to desire to turn the wheel of the dharma. The third is to constantly remember the *saṃgha* and to conceal and guard it. The fourth is to constantly remember the precepts and desire to fulfill all of the vows. The fifth is to constantly remember charity and to discard all things without having any vexation of taint. The sixth is to constantly remember the gods and desire to fulfill all the varieties of wisdom of the god among the gods⁸⁶⁴. These are called ‘six.’

⁸⁶³ These are precepts for ordained renunciants, for devout householders, and for ordinary laity.

⁸⁶⁴ Chin. 天中之天, Skt. *devātideva*, a Mahāyānic epithet of the Buddha.

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are seven reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by seven? The first is to grasp on to an indestructible faith in the Buddha. The second is to grasp on to an indestructible faith in the dharma. The third is to grasp on to an indestructible faith in the *saṃgha*. The fourth is to not have matters with other gods and to only venerate and uphold the Buddha. The fifth is to not accumulate things and be stingy, to follow the teachings and be able to do the practices. The sixth is to leave behind words which have no limits and to always be honest. The seventh is to be endowed with comportment. These are called ‘seven.’

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are eight reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by eight? The first is to not have a biased love for one’s own sons. The second is to not have a biased love for one’s own daughters. The third is to not have a biased love for one’s own husband. The fourth is not to singularly adore clothing and jewels. The fifth is to not desire or be attached to flowered cloth and to daubing oneself with scents. The sixth is not to consider beautiful foods as a reason to trap and kill living beings for food. The seventh is not to be stingy in donating things and to always recollect and give rise to joy and happiness. The eighth is that all actions be pure and clean and to constantly harbour shame. These are called “eight.”

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are nine reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by nine? What is meant is to subdue the nine vexing elements: hating that which the self loves, past, present, and future hatreds; loving that which the self hates, past, present, and future loves; and within the self, past, present, and future hates. These are called “nine.”

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are ten reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by ten? The first is to not be proud. The second is to get rid of pride. The third is to respect and venerate elders. The fourth is to say what is true and essential. The fifth is to be without hostility. The sixth is to not have vulgar speech. The seventh is to not have difficulty with the teachings. The eighth is not to be stingy. The ninth is not to be fierce. The tenth is not to be restless. These are called “ten.”

“Furthermore, as to the attainments of women, there are ten reasons for them to obtain departure from the female body and hastily achieve a male one. What is meant by ten? The first is to not be proud. The second is to get rid of pride. The third is to respect and venerate elders. The fourth is to say what is true and essential. The fifth is to be without hostility. The sixth is to not have vulgar speech. The seventh is to not have difficulty with the teachings. The eighth is not to be stingy. The ninth is not to be fierce. The tenth is not to be restless. These are called “ten.”

“Furthermore, benevolent woman, if there are women who are able to completely investigate their female body in order to transcend it, then they shall become sick of it, depart from their hearts, and hastily leave behind their female bodies and with great urgency achieve a male body. As for those women who have gone past their bodies, that is to say, they have gone past greed, hatred, delusion, and all the surplus vexations of the heart that are twice as much as in males, and this includes the 100 corpse worms inside the body that constantly cause suffering and are the causes and conditions for grief. It is thus the case that a woman’s vexations are partial and double and thus the response to them should be the benevolent and thoughtful observation that this body is an impure vessel that stinks as it advances with age, that certainly resembles a dried up well, an empty city, a destroyed village, and that it is difficult to be loving and happy about this and this is why we should respond to the body by becoming sick of it and leaving it.”

“Furthermore, the female body resembles that of a maidservant and cannot obtain self-sovereignty for she is constantly troubled by sons, daughters, clothing, food and drink, and other necessities related to family matters. They must remove dung and defilement, nasal discharges, saliva and other impure things. A female will go through nine months of pregnancy, during which she will suffer numerous pains. When she gives birth to a child, she suffers great pains to the brink of death. For this reason, a woman should give rise to the thought of abhorring and getting rid of her female body.

“Furthermore, as for a woman who is born inside the imperial palace, she is also the possession of another person’s. Throughout her life she is like a maidservant who must serve and follow a great family, also like a disciple who must venerate and serve his master. She is beaten by different kinds of swords and staves, rocks and tiles, and is defiled by every evil word. These kind of sufferings deprive her of self-sovereignty. This is why a woman must give rise to the thought of abhorring and getting rid of her female body.

“Furthermore, this female body is constantly being tethered and restricted, like a snake or a rat that is in a deep hole, from which they cannot come out at their will. Furthermore, the legal system for women does not allow a woman to have her own freedom: she must constantly be at the side of someone else, receiving food and drink, clothing, perfumes, and all types of adornment, as well as elephant and horse carts. This is why she must give rise to the thought of abhorring and getting rid of her female body.

“Furthermore, this body of a woman is that which is used by others, and cannot achieve self-sovereignty, as her labours are many – pounding herbs, milling rice, sometimes frying and sometimes grinding big and small beans and barley, pulling wool for weaving and spinning piles of it – these many types of suffering are innumerable. For this reason, a woman must take her own body as a burden.

爾時無垢光女白佛言：「世尊今此會中諸比丘、比丘尼、優婆塞、優婆夷願樂欲聞：

修何善行得離女身，速成男子，能發無上菩提之心？惟願世尊當為解說！」

爾時世尊欲利益成就四部眾故，告無垢光女言：若女人成就一法，得離女身，速成男子。

何謂為一？所謂深心求於菩提。所以者何？若有女人發菩提心，則是大善人心、大丈夫心、大仙人心、非下人心、永離二乘狹劣之心、能破外道異論之心、於三世中最是勝心、能除煩惱不雜結習清淨之心。若諸女人發菩提心，則更不雜女人諸結縛心。以不雜故，永離女身，得成男子，所有善根亦當迴向無上菩提，是名為一。

「復次，女人成就二法，能離女身，速成男子。何謂為二？所謂除其慢心；離於欺誑，不作幻惑。所有善根。遠離女身，速成男子，悉以迴向無上菩提，是名為二。

「復次，女人成就三法，能離女身，速成男子。何謂為三？一、身業清淨，持身三戒；二、口業清淨，離口四過；三、意業清淨，離於瞋恚、邪見、愚癡。以此十善所生善根，願離女身，速成男子，迴向菩提，是名為三。

「復次，女人成就四法，得離女身，速成男子。何謂為四？一、不恚害；二、不瞋恨；三、不隨煩惱；四、住忍辱力。是名為四。

「復次，女人成就五法，得離女身，速成男子。何謂為五？一、樂求善法；二、尊重正法；三、以正法而自娛樂；四、於說法者，敬如師長；五、如說修行。以此善根，願離女身，速成男子，迴向菩提，是名為五。

「復次，女人成就六法，得離女身，速成男子。何謂為六？一、常念佛，願成佛身；二、常念法，欲轉法輪；三、常念僧，欲覆護僧；四、常念戒，欲滿諸願；五、常念施，欲捨一切諸煩惱垢；六、常念天，欲滿天中之天一切種智。是名為六。

「復次，女人成就七法，得離女身，速成男子。何謂為七？一、於佛得不壞信；二、於法得不壞信；三、於僧得不壞信；四、不事餘天，惟奉敬佛；五、不積聚慳惜，隨言能行；六、出言無過，恒常質直；七、威儀具足。是名為七。

「復次，女人成就八法，得離女身，速成男子。何謂為八？一、不偏愛己男；二、不偏愛己女；三、不偏愛己夫；四、不專念衣服、瓔珞；五、不貪著華飾、塗香；六、不為美食因緣，猶如羅剎殺生食之；七、不吝所施之物，常追憶之而生歡喜；

八、所行清淨，常懷慚愧。是名為八。

「復次，女人成就九法，得離女身，速成男子。何謂為九？所謂息九惱法：憎我所愛，已憎、今憎、當憎；愛我所憎，已愛、今愛、當愛；於我，已憎、今憎、當憎。是名為九。

「復次，女人成就十法，得離女身，速成男子。何謂為十？一、不自大；二、除憍慢；三、敬尊長；四、所言必實；五、無嫌恨；六、不羸言；七、不難教；八、不貪惜；九、不暴惡；十、不調戲。是名為十。

「復次，善女！若有女人能如實觀女人身過者，生厭離心，速離女身，疾成男子。女人身過者，所謂欲、瞋、癡心并餘煩惱重於男子；又此身中有一百戶虫，恒為苦患、愁惱因緣。是故女人煩惱偏重，應當善思觀察：此身便為不淨之器，臭穢充滿，亦如枯井、空城、破村，難可愛樂，是故於身應生厭離。

又觀此身猶如婢使，不得自在，恒為男女、衣服、飲食、家業所須之所苦惱，必除糞穢、涕唾不淨；於九月中懷子在身，眾患非一，及其生時受大苦痛，命不自保，是故女人應生厭離女人之身。

又復女人雖生在王宮，必當屬他盡其形壽，猶如婢使隨逐大家，亦如弟子奉事於師，又為種種刀杖、瓦石、手拳打擲，惡言罵辱，如是等苦不得自在，是故女人應於此身生厭離心。又此女身常被繫閉，猶如蛇、鼠在深穴中不得妄出。又女人法制不由身，常於他邊稟受飲食、衣服、花香、種種瓔珞嚴身之具、象、馬、車乘，是故應當厭離女身。

又此女身為他所使，不得自在，執作甚多—搗藥、舂米，若炒、若磨大小豆麥，抽毳、紡疊—如是種種苦役無量，是故女人應患此身。

3. *The Sūtra of Vimalī*

As translated by Gautama-prajñāruci in the Yuan Wei

[Selections from the Sūtra]

Start at [0098b29]

Thereupon there was a great voice heard by all those Bodhisattvas, and they took it to be the dharma of the Tathāgata that he was undertaking to preach, and so altogether they hurried back to Śrāvastī.

At that time in Kośala, King Prasenajit had a daughter whose name was Vimalī⁸⁶⁵, and who had already become familiar the limitless numbers of Buddhas. She had already planted seeds of goodness for a long time, worshipped many Buddhas, comprehended the most profound *dharma*s, and had attained the 5 supernatural powers. With her celestial eye she could see those pure and clean people coming in the far distance, those Bodhisattvas who had heard that great voice, and she could hear everything that they were saying though they were very far off.

That girl's deportment, appearance, and beauty were such that few could match her and she was deeply happy and joyous. She was beautiful in form and sufficiently endowed. Her parents cherished her. All of the court women and all of the populace thought she was a complete pleasure to behold. She was 12 years old.

On the eighth day of the second month, on the day of the *Puśya* asterism⁸⁶⁶, she went out on a pleasure stroll, intending to seek out auspicious omens. Her parents immediately complied by sending 500 Brahmins to follow her. They were carrying thick buttermilk and flowers and grasses and they followed her when she went out, desiring to give these things to other Brahmins as a memorial. But then Vimalī saw all those Bodhisattvas who had heard the great voice and she straightaway commemorated them by saying: "I am now seeing the auspicious omens of these good people."

At that time, within the group of attendant Brahmins, there was an old and great Brahmin called Brahma who addressed Vimalī, saying these words: "Girl, now you should now that what I am seeing is not an auspicious omen. In front of you are merely those who resemble beggars and who make their rounds in the city. If you see people with these kinds of marks then they are not auspicious. For this reason, presenting them with things and memorializing them is neither auspicious nor proper."

And at that very moment Vimalī spoke a *gāthā* to the Brahmin called Brahma, saying:

My vision is exceptional and without obstruction
and I am able to avoid evil people.
This vision is due to the purity of the four noble truths,
and to my proper concentration and my faith in liberation.
Their two feet have tread upon a field of merit
and they were thus free to make a vow to take rebirth in a heaven.
In accord with the sweet dew of karmic retribution,
those freed ones can no longer do evil.
These premier individuals who hold firm to the rules
leave behind filth and are without evil thoughts.

⁸⁶⁵ Her Chinese name is transliterated as *Dewugou* 得無垢, which literally means the Attainment of Spotlessness.

⁸⁶⁶ This is the birthday of Śākyamuni Buddha.

They act in this world to cure sickness
and to heal and to rescue the numerous beings from their sufferings.
The Buddha is the supreme champion of this world,
the premier presider of the Law!
These are disciples of the Buddha
and are without even the minutest defilement or affliction!
These are all Mahābodhisattvas,
who have long ago departed from every kind of *dharmas*;
long ago departed from all evil *dharmas*.
They are constantly prudish and cautious and never lapse.
They are the utmost of the rule abiders in this world
and good people can see that they are triumphant.
All the defilements that we make are pardoned by providing offerings for them,
as they have obtained the wealth of the dharma.
They have sufficient marks of the triumphant ones:
good hearts and pure lands.
Brahmin, hold on to faith
And capture all the merit in this human birth.

At that time, the Brahmin called Brahma spoke a *gāthā* on behalf of Vimalī.

I will not follow the words of your silly heart,
and I must purify myself for a time after seeing these *bhikṣus*!
All of them displaying their robes and shaven heads!
You look for auspiciousness, but I don't see it here!
The venerable court will not be happy with you.
I can only but laugh,
and will not undertake the abstentions and the rules.
I vow to never look at these *bhikṣus*!
If I never again see these *bhikṣus* then I will be very happy!

At that time, Vimalī spoke a *gāthā* to the Brahmin called Brahma.

I am not on this very morning
able to rescue my father and my mother!
Without all relations, without wealth,
and further without adornments,
these are the people of virtue
who undertake to enter into the phenomenal world.
These people will be able to save me,
and what's more, they will be able to save my father and my mother!
Now on this very morning
I abandon my body and my fate!
With deep love and joy of the Buddhist dharma

I do not desire this-worldly enjoyments.
Furthermore, I take refuge on no other
in order to rescue the numerous beings!
It is only the community of Buddhist *bhikṣus*
and the three jewels that are able to rescue them!

At the time the Brahmin Brahma's Heaven addressed Vimala, saying: "You are really not okay! In your life you have never before seen the Buddha, never before heard the dharma, never before provided offerings for a monk! What is that you are seeing? How can you speak of faith in the Buddha?"

Vimala then made these words: "Seven days after I was born there was a Brahmin who cared for me in the Sandalwood Hall, on a bed of gold and jewels. 500 princes had come to see me and at that time I could see. At that time within this group of 500 princes there was one prince who had seen the Tathāgata and had all kinds of praise from him. He spoke of the virtues of the Buddha and praised the dharma and the *saṃgha*. At that time I heard all the 500 princes questioning him as such: "The Lord sees the Buddha coming, but what can he say about the Buddha's form? How can he say that he knows it?" At that time the prince, knowing the faith in my heart, and on behalf of the 500 princes, spoke a *gāthā* saying:

得無垢女經

元魏婆羅門瞿曇般若流支譯

爾時彼大聲聞彼諸菩薩，依如是法，如是行說，相與進向舍婆提城。
時憍薩羅，波斯匿王有女，名得無垢，已曾親近無量諸佛，久種善根，供養多佛，
解甚深法，得五神通—天眼遠見，清淨過人—彼諸菩薩彼大聲聞，在道語說皆悉遙
聞。

彼女端正姿媚少雙，甚可愛樂。妙色具足，父母意念，一切婬女、一切人民皆悉樂
見，年始十二。

二月八日，弗沙星日意樂出遊，以求吉相。父母即聽，從婆羅門有五百人。齎持蘇
酪、華草、符[土*瓦]相隨而出，為欲解奏彼婆羅門。見諸菩薩、大聲聞已，即住
念曰：「我今見此吉相好人。」

時彼侍從婆羅門中，有一長老大婆羅門，厥名梵天，謂得無垢，作如是言：「女今
當知，我此所見是不吉相。前有如是諸比丘住，可迴入城。見如是相，所作不吉。
以此因緣，或解或奏，不吉不成。」

即於爾時，得無垢女偈對梵天婆羅門曰：

「見此無障勝，	能却多人惡，
此見淨四諦，	正念信解脫。
二足上福田，	施彼願生天，
得甘露果報，	施者不得惡。
第一持戒人，	離濁無惡念，
行世間治病，	療救苦眾生。
佛世間最勝，	第一之法主，
此是彼佛子，	無有塵垢染。
此諸大菩薩，	遠離何等法，
惡法皆遠離，	常謹慎不越。
持戒世間最，	好人見者勝，
作塵許供養，	彼得如法財。
此滿足勝相，	此善心淨田，
婆羅門得信，	獲多福生人。」

爾時梵天婆羅門，為得無垢女，而說偈言：

「莫隨癡心言，	齋時觀比丘，
如著衣剃髮，	求吉不用見。
尊朝不喜汝，	我當必被笑，
不得持齋戒，	願勿觀比丘。
若不觀比丘，	則是大善哉。」

爾時得無垢女，為梵天婆羅門，而說偈言：

「非於今朝日，	能救我父母，
非諸親非財，	亦復非嚴飾。
此之功德人，	入於有為行，
此人能救我，	亦救我父母。
我於今朝日，	捨身復捨命，
甚愛樂佛法，	不欲世富樂。
更無異歸依，	能救護眾生，
唯有佛法僧，	三寶能救護。」

爾時梵天婆羅門，語得無垢女言：「汝大不是。汝於昔來，未曾見佛、未曾聞法、未供養僧。汝何處聞？云何信佛？」

得無垢女作如是言：「我生七日，時婆羅門，安置我身在栴檀殿金寶床上，五百天子，在於我上空中行過，我時得見。時彼五百諸天子中，有一天子，曾見如來，種種讚歎，說佛功德，讚歎法、僧。我時得聞五百天子，皆共問之，作如是言：『君

見佛來，佛狀云何？云何得知？』時彼天子，知我心信，為生五百天子信故，而說偈言：

Start: Line 0101a26.

At that time Vimalī questioned the Venerable Ānanda, saying: “Great and virtuous Ānanda! You are the foremost among the learned hearers of the Buddha’s great and virtuous speaking! Great and virtuous! Of what things did he speak, learned hearer? Did you understand the meaning contained in it? Did you understand it exhaustively? Supposing you understood the meaning contained in his words, but there is also meaning that is without words, that cannot be put into words and thus that cannot be perceived by the ears and also that cannot be seen. Supposing you understood the meaning exhaustively, naturally the World-Honoured One’s speech had a meaning that could be heard, but in no case was that a hearing of words and letters! In such a way this is not hearing! Great and Virtuous Ānanda! What have you to say, Learned Hearer?”

The Venerable Ānanda remained silent and did not answer.

At that time the Mañjuśrī the Prince questioned the Venerable Ānanda, saying: “Why is it that you remain in silence and do not answer that woman’s questions? The Venerable Ānanda said: “It is the nature of all words and letters that they are independent from their sounds. The woman asked me about words, therefore I cannot answer. The woman asked if having no mind and being apart from mind are the same thing, and this meaning is ultimately not of the learned people’s of the phenomenal world! What can I say? Benevolent one! I must ask the Tathāgata, the King of the Dharma.”

爾時得無垢女，問於尊者阿難陀言：「大德阿難陀！佛說大德於多聞中最为第一。大德！何物得言多聞？為有義知？為究竟知？若有義知，義無言語，不可言說，非耳識知，彼非可見。若究竟知，然世尊說當聽於義，莫聽文字，如是不聽。大德阿難！云何多聞？」

尊者阿難默然不答。

爾時文殊師利童子，問於尊者阿難陀言：「何故默然，不答女難？」尊者阿難陀言：「一切文字性離如響，女問我字，故我不答。女問平等無心離心，此義乃非學人境界，云何得說？仁者！當問如來法王。」

Start: Line 0103b12

When Vimalī had finished speaking, the World-Honoured One addressed her as such: “How great! How great! Vimalī! You are extremely great! From your goodness you have now asked the Tathāgata the meaning of thusness! You have heard the truth and you have pondered well over it! For you, I will now speak!”

Vimalī said: “How great, World-Honoured One! I vow to happiness and desire to listen!”

The Buddha then addressed her, saying: “Vimalī! All of the Bodhisattvas and Mahāsattvas! As to the perfection of the four teachings that demolish Māra, why are there four? The first is to provide offerings to others with a heart that is not envious. The second is to remove evil words from your tongue. The third is to always plant good roots for the people. The fourth is to never tire of cultivating compassion. Vimalī! All of the Bodhisattvas and Mahāsattvas! If you are able to perfect these four teachings, then you are able to demolish Māra.”

得無垢女如是說已，世尊即告得無垢言：「善哉，善哉！得無垢女！汝甚善哉。汝今善能問於如來如是之義，汝今諦聽，善思念之！我為汝說。」
得無垢言：「善哉，世尊！願樂欲聞。」

佛即告言：「得無垢女！諸菩薩摩訶薩，成就四法能壞魔王。何等為四？一者、供養他人不嫉妬。二者、捨離惡語。三者、常生多人善根。四者、無盡修慈。得無垢女！諸菩薩摩訶薩，若能成就如是四法，能壞魔王。」

Start: Line 0105c13

Vimala then venerated the Buddha, saying: “World-Honoured One! It is such that the Buddha gave such a teaching on the dharma gate on my behalf! Supposing I don’t have faith, I don’t receive these teachings, don’t cultivate them, don’t practice them, then this would be the destruction of all of the Buddhas and World-Honoured one’s who are now presiding over, now living their lives in, and now present in all of the 10 directions.”

Then Mahā-Maudgalyāyana addressed Vimalī saying: “This is exceedingly rare! Since what has been taught is a difficult practice even for a Bodhisattva to obtain, and that even the Bodhisattvas find this difficult to cultivate and undertake, then if a woman were able to do this it would be exceedingly rare indeed!”

Then Vimalī straightway made an oath, saying: “Mahā-Maudgalyāyana, I have not come to the world in order to correct the teaching of the Tathāgata or make the partialities known, and as such the World-Honoured One is without differentiation! This reality is not emptiness! I now command this trilochosm to quake in six different ways such that all living beings are full of fear! I now speak to you true words: If I am suitable to sufficiently undertake the cultivations just spoken by the Buddha, then let it rain flowers from the sky and let the sound of drums spontaneously come forth, and I will transform my female form in to a male form!”

爾時得無垢女白佛言：「世尊！如佛為我所說法門，若我不信、不取此法，不修、不行，是則破壞一切十方於今現在現命現住諸佛世尊。」

爾時尊者大目犍連，語得無垢作如是言：「汝甚希有！若如是說菩提難得，彼菩提行難得修行，女能修行甚為希有。」

得無垢女即發誓言：「大德目連！我未來世當成如來應正遍知，如今世尊等無有異。若實不虛，令此三千大千世界六種震動，無一眾生有怖畏者。我今實語，若我堪能如佛所說具足修行，今當雨華天諸妓樂自然出聲，我婦女身轉為丈夫。」

Start: Line 0106b02

Then the venerable Ānanda finished speaking and the Buddha addressed said to him: “Ānanda! Vimala is firmly in reality! She changed her female form in to a male form! Did you not see it?”

Ānanda answered: “I saw it, World-Honoured One.”

The Buddha said: “Ānanda! This Vimala Bodhisattva has been practicing the Bodhi practices for 80,000 *asaṃkhyā kalpas* and has sought out *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*.⁸⁶⁷ For 60,000 *asaṃkhyā kalpas*, the Buddhas undertake these practices of Bodhi; Prince Mañjuśrī was just then able to give rise to the mind of Bodhi. As such, Mañjuśrī is in the category of the 80,000 Bodhisattvas. If this is a Buddha world of the adornments of merit, then Vimala Bodhisattva is the foremost in this Buddha world of the adornments of merit.”

At that time Mahā-maudgalyāyana addressed Vimala Bodhisattva, saying: “Good man! If, with such humanity and for such a long time, you have undertaken these Bodhi practices and sought out *anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*, then why didn’t you transform your female form before?”

Vimala said: “Mahā-maudgalyāyana! Enlightenment to Bodhi is not in a female body and it is also not in a man’s body! Why is this? Bodhi is not born! It is not in the body, but in the mind!”

尊者阿難，如是說已。佛言：「阿難！此得無垢如實住持，轉女人身得成男子，汝為見不？」

阿難答言：「已見。世尊！」

佛言：「阿難！此得無垢菩薩，於八十千阿僧祇劫行菩提行，求阿耨多羅三藐三菩提，於六十千阿僧祇佛所行菩提行，文殊師利童子菩薩，爾乃於後發菩提心。如文殊師利等八十千菩薩，若佛世界功德莊嚴，如得無垢菩薩一佛世界功德莊嚴。」

⁸⁶⁷ Literally, “unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.” This is the highest form of Buddhist enlightenment and one that is reached by the Bodhisattvas.

爾時尊者大目犍連，語得無垢菩薩言：「善男子！若仁如是久遠已來行菩提行，求阿耨多羅三藐三菩提，如是女身何以不轉？」

得無垢言：「大德目連！菩提覺者非女人身、非男子身。何以故？菩提不生，非身心覺。」

Start: Line 0106c09

At that time, the Bodhisattva-mahāsattva Vimala, in front of the World-Honoured One, heard her prediction of future enlightenment, and rose up and danced with joy. She ascended in the sky to a height of 8 million palm trees, and remaining in the sky she cast off a tremendous light and this light shone done on every side of the 1000 Buddha world and on the head of the World-Honoured One there resided a precious flower 84,000 *yojanas* in height. Then in order to worship the Buddha, she descended like a flying bird, circumambulated him 1000 times, clasped her hands together, faced the Buddha and sat down to face him.

爾時得無垢菩薩摩訶薩，於世尊前，聞授記已，歡喜踊躍，上昇虛空高八十億多羅樹，住虛空中，放大光明，其光遍照千佛世界，世尊頂上八十四千由旬寶華中住，為供養佛，如鳥飛下，繞佛千匝，合掌向佛，於一面坐。

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