Women as Buddhist Art Patrons During the Northern and Southern Dynasties

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This paper examines some aspects of religious and social changes brought about by the introduction of Buddhism to China, namely, the new roles that women assume as patrons of Buddhism and Buddhist art, in the capacity either as lay worshipers or as nuns. These changes occurred during the Northern and Southern Dynasties when Buddhism spread through the entire country. The religion became a cultural, social force that unified a divided country, and among the changes Buddhism brought about were the avenues opened up for women in their religious and social lives.

In Han (220 BCE – 221 CE) China, Confucianism was adopted as the official ideology. Emphasizing stability achieved through regulated human relationships and moral obligations, Confucianism prescribed a rigid social structure with clearly defined roles. Women were largely confined to the domain of the family. They were brought up to show deference to aged parents, fidelity to husbands, and devotion to sons. Women exercised authority and power only when they assumed the role of mothers and had produced sons. Trained in the domestic arts, women were also discouraged from public and government affairs. At court women were confined to the inner courts, as opposed to the outer courts where affairs of the state were conducted. Han philosophers who interpreted yin-yang 陰陽 thought also attributed femininity (yin) as inferior to masculinity (yang), thus relegating women to a position inferior to men.1 Liu Xiang’s 離 Xiàng’s (79-8 BCE) compilation of Biographies of Women (Lienü zhuan 列女傳) narrated female exemplars who defined the Confucian ideals of femininity.2 Ban Zhao’s 卢 zhào’s (c. 49 – c. 120 CE) Precepts for Women (Nü jie 女戒) offered prescriptions for the way a woman ought to comport herself, emphasizing her
proper behavior in relation to her husband and her role in the family. Many stories and precepts were about women giving wise counsel to educate and admonish their sons and husbands, or even ministers and rulers. Although women were praised as being virtuous for their sagacity, intellect, and stacteraf, it was within the inner courts or the inner domain of the family that women functioned as active agents and exercised their virtues.

These two works by Liu Xiang and Ban Zhao had far-reaching consequences in establishing normative standards for women behavior not only in their time, but in later times as well. Illustrations of the texts became subjects for ornamental screens, wall murals, and tomb relief. They served didactic purposes for the education of women, particularly women of the upper class or court women. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, paragons of womanly virtues continued to be an important theme in pictorial arts in aristocratic circles. An important example is the famous Admonition of the Instructress handscroll, attributed to Gu Kaizhi (344 – 406). Another example is the lacquer-painted wooden screen portraying scenes of the paragons of filial piety and female virtues well-known since Han times. Dating to 484, the painting was recovered from the Tomb of Sima Jinlong 司馬金龍, an official who served the Northern Wei (386 – 534) court in Datong 大同, Shanxi.7

In what ways then did Buddhism offer changes for women in China? What did it mean to be a Buddhist woman? In general, Buddhism advocated asceticism and the denial of sexuality for both men and women. The religion regarded the celibate state as transcendence of sexuality as the higher spiritual state. Higher spiritual being such as bodhisattvas were androgynous and above gender. However, within the historical context in which Buddhism developed the religion also shared Hindu views about the pollution of the female body and female sexuality. For example, a woman's body was perceived as incapable of achieving enlightenment. A woman has first to be reborn as a man before further spiritual progress. Since Mahāyāna Buddhism advocated that every being could become a Buddha, then the female body became an impediment to achieving enlightenment. In her discussion of the portrayal of women in several early Mahāyāna texts that were influential in China, such as the Vimalakīrti, Lotus, and Sūtra of the Buddha, Nancy Schuster noted that, in relation to women, these sūtras focused on whether women could become a Buddha or not. A device to resolve this dilemma was the performance of changing sex, thereby enabling the female practitioner to transcend her physical limitations. In the Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sūtra, for example, the goddes exchanged her female body with Śūraṇa, the

monk antagonist, in order to demonstrate that things male and female were both illusions and that reality was nothing but emptiness. In the Lotus sūtra, the eight-year old dragon girl was said to have the ability to understand the Buddha's teachings best. When called upon to demonstrate her abilities, Śūraṇa challenged that she would never attain enlightenment because of her sex. The dragon girl then offered to the Buddha the jewel she carried on her head, a sign of her femininity. This gesture signaled that she was ready to undergo any transformation, including that of changing her gender, in order to achieve the goal of enlightenment. And indeed, in an instant the dragon girl transformed herself into a man in front of an assembled multitude.

Nancy Schuster concluded that the women portrayed in these Mahāyāna texts, like the goddess or the dragon girl, were largely positive images: "They are ideal images, sometimes even mythic figures-supremely wise and witty teachers of the Buddhist Dharma, miracle-workers, precociously clever little girls, queens and princesses and magical goddesses who are all devotees of the Buddha." They were intelligent and eloquent, often engaging in subtle and challenging debates of the doctrine with the Buddha's most esteemed disciples. The fact remained, however, that these images of women in Buddhism were literary imaginations rather than real historic personalities.

The order of convents for nuns was established in India during the Buddha's lifetime and, according to tradition, the first Buddhist nun was Mahāprajñāpati, the Buddha's aunt. In China the order of nuns was established in the fourth century. Since then Buddhist convents have provided religious as well as social options for Chinese women. Convents were places for women to pursue intellectual and spiritual goals. Women who joined the order learned Buddhist teachings and followed rigorous precepts, from dietary restrictions to meditation and other ritual practices. In relation to their male counterparts, however, the Assembly of Nuns was subordinate to the Assembly of Monks. Monk Biagong's Biography of Nuns (Biographies of Nuns) recorded the lives of some sixty exemplary nuns from the fourth through the sixth centuries. Most of them coming from the Jiankang 建康 (present-day Nanjing) area, these women were educated and many became known female teachers of Buddhism of their times. Some commanded followers and were quite influential at the courts of the Southern Dynasties, receiving generous support from empresses and other noble women. The Biography of Nuns is rather exceptional in that we do not read more similar accounts from the contemporary north or from later times. The relative
freedom and high status of these Buddhist nuns of the Southern Dynasties should be regarded as an anomalous phenomenon rather than the norm.

Given the Confucian emphasis on the family, monasticism was one of the greatest challenges to the established Chinese social order. Leaving the family to join a monastery or a convent meant not fulfilling one’s duties towards the parents and the continuation of the family line. For Chinese women whose whole life centered around the family it must have been a hard decision to cut oneself off from family networks. Ideally one joined the convent because of religious aspirations. But in a time of social upheaval such as the Northern and Southern Dynasties, “the convent also provided a refuge from such vicissitudes of life as unwelcome marriage, flight from war, homelessness, lack of protection, or frustrated intellectual ambitions.”

Donors’ inscriptions and biographical sources confirm that many aristocratic or gentry women joined the nunnery only after they have become widowed. The conventions in China thus provided both religious opportunities and social alternatives for women outside the family.

Buddhism also accepted women as supporters of the religion. Both laywomen and nuns could participate in patronage activities. Buddhist literature portrayed aristocratic women, women of both high and low status as benefactresses of the religion. Patronage activities ranged from making donations for images, temple-building, copying of sūtras, to the funding of special ceremonies. Economically Buddhist institutions relied on the support of lay donors for their survival. In return the patrons accrued merit through the act of making charitable donations. This reciprocal relationship of material giving in exchange for spiritual rewards corresponded to the Buddhist notion of dāna (giving), one of the most important precepts in Mahāyāna Buddhism. As the Mahāyāna appealed to a much wider popular base than the Hinayāna, the notion of dāna developed as a way to involve the lay populace. With another concept, pratītyā or "transference of merit," a devotee could designate the merit gained to relatives and others. This rationale proved to be extremely successful in China, for donors could dedicate images for their parents and ancestors, thus fulfilling the Confucian duty of filial piety. Patronage activities for Chinese women enabled them to take two paths: 1) to fulfill and reinforce their normative roles in the society, and 2) to transcend those assigned roles in order to negotiate for their own status and realize their ambitions, especially in the cases of imperial women. Furthermore, if Buddhist women were significantly absent as doctrinal specialists, builders or sculptors, it was in their role as supporters and benefactresses that they made the most contributions. Janice D. Willis concluded from her study of Buddhist women as nuns and benefactresses in India that in this domain women were “independent and active in the world,” and were “capable of affecting and, in some cases, even of shaping, the development of the Buddhist tradition.”

This paper argues that Chinese Buddhist women also made significant contributions in their newfound roles as supporters of Buddhist art, and that an investigation of their activities will lead to a greater recognition of the active roles they played in shaping the Buddhist tradition. I rely on a variety of sources to investigate their activities: images of donors, inscriptions, archaeological evidence, biographies as well as historical and other textual materials. I classify women donors into two large groups: lay worshipers and nuns. For lay worshipers I further divide them into the categories of empresses, aristocratic women, women of gentry status, and women of common background.

The availability of sources and the nature of these materials also shape the scope and depth of the present investigation. In general the representation of donors on Chinese Buddhist artworks began in the fourth century: First found on stone or bronze sculptures, they appeared in cave-chapels since the fifth century. They were of both gender, nomadic and Chinese, lay as well as monastic. The expansion in patronage, especially from the latter half of the fifth century onward, occasioned the adoption of Buddhism as a state religion and the rapid spread of the religion to all levels of the society. The formation of devotional societies also gave rise to group patronage, with participation from both lay and monastic members. Fifth-century donor images in the north were mostly shown in nomadic costume. By the sixth-century, however, donor images in both north and south were shown in Chinese dress—an outcome of the sinicization of nomadic peoples (see discussion below). Donor images and the accompanying inscriptions give pertinent information about the patrons' social, ethnic, and religious background, the types of roles they assumed, and the intent of the donation. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the public display of donors’ identity informs us what the donors wanted to announce to the world. Biographies of individuals and historical sources permit more in-depth examinations of individuals' actions and their motivations. Such sources, however, are available only for the study of imperial women and some prominent figures, the majority of donors from the lower social strata remain obscure owing to the dearth of records narrating their life and religious experiences. The present study, given the constraints of
available sources, is thus a preliminary survey of the topic.

Empresses

The tradition of princely figures and wealthy queens supporting Buddhism was a well established one in India, both in literature and in historical contexts. In China, Buddhism also received royal patronage early on. Several empresses of the southern courts had been important benefactresses of Buddhism, as we know from Baoshang’s Biographies of Nuns and other sources. For example, Empress He 何 of Eastern Jin (317–420) founded the Yóng’àn 余安寺 in Jiankang in 354. Empress Chú 初, also of Eastern Jin, built the Yánzǐng 燕郢寺 for some favored nuns and the Yíngyuán 亨園寺, both at Jiankang. Empress Yuan 元 of the Liu Song dynasty (420–479) invited the Kashmiri monk Dharmānītra to the palace to perform Buddhist rituals for the imperial family. The patronage of nuns by empresses (and by imperial consorts, princesses, and other noble women) no doubt accounted for the flourishing of the community of nuns in Jiankang recorded in Baoshang’s work. In fact, commenting on the intricate relationship between court politics and Buddhism at Jiankang, Eric Zürcher remarked that “The important role of nuns must be noted; the imperial patronage of nuns around the middle of the fourth century formed the beginning of their influence upon the court and the government, an influence which around the beginning of the fifth century had assumed dangerous proportions.” These empresses’ participation and their relatives’ activities helped consolidate the position of Buddhism at the imperial court in the south.

In the north, several empresses likewise played instrumental roles in the development of Buddhism. Two empresses from the Northern Wei dynasty were particularly notable: Empress Dowager Wenming 文明太后 (Lady Feng 萬氏, r. 442–490) and Empress Dowager Ling 靈太后 (Lady Hu 萬氏, d. 528). The latter was represented in imagery, but we know of both empresses’ patronage activities through historical sources and archaeological evidence.

The Northern Wei was founded by a nomadic tribe called the Tuoba 拓跋. Its aristocracy maintained a tribal organization, transferring leadership to the strongest male member of the group. In the fifth century the Tuoba Wei adopted the Chinese system of imperial succession, along with the institution of empress, empress-dowager, and regency governments. However, uncomfortable with women assuming positions of authority, the Wei at the same time instituted measures to prevent the empress and the natural mother of the emperor-designate from gaining excessive power. In 409, the court issued a decree stipulating that the natural mother of the heir-apparent had to commit suicide, in order that she would not gain too much power through her son. Women who were appointed consorts to emperors often did not bear sons. They also came from groups conquered by the Tuoba Wei; lacking powerful relatives and other networks at court, they would not pose threats to the ruling house.22

However, these measures did not prevent an empress dowager from gaining power through her foster grandson, which was the case for Empress Dowager Wenming, who ruled through Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (r. 471–499).23 Lady Feng was of supposedly Chinese descent and came from the conquered state of Northern Yan 北燕.24 She was recruited to the imperial harem as a slave concubine and later appointed consort to Emperor Wencheng 文成帝 (r. 452–465). When Wencheng proclaimed his infant son, Tuoba Hong 拓跋弘, heir-apparent at the age of two, the young son’s mother was forced to commit suicide. Lady Feng then assumed the role of foster-mother to the infant heir, who became Emperor Xiaowen 孝文帝 (r. 466–471). Later Xiaowen produced a son and the son’s mother passed away. The infant, Tuoba Hong, was then assigned to the care of Lady Feng, now foster-grandmother. At the age of five, Tuoba Hong ascended to the throne as Emperor Xiaowen, with his foster-grandmother now assuming the roles of empress dowager as well as regent. Because of the emperor’s young age and her influence in the harem, Empress Dowager Wenming was able to control the emperor and thus gained access to the outer courts. She actively participated in government affairs, and appointed her relatives to key positions. Because of her Chinese descent, she was instrumental in influencing Emperor Xiaowen to adopt a series of cultural reforms transforming the Tuoba tribal customs to Sinicized ones.25

After the Buddhist persecution of 446, Emperor Wencheng reinstated the status of Buddhism and funded the excavation of the grand cave-chapels with colossal Buddhas, Caves 16–20, at Yungang 楼閣, near the capital at Datong 大同.26 A devout Buddhist herself, Empress Dowager Wenming continued to support the Yungang project.27 New inscriptional evidence indicates that the number of cave-chapels excavated during the era when Empress Dowager Wenming was in power, from the time Xiaowen ascended to the throne in 471 to her death in 490, was far greater than previously thought. The Chinese scholar Su Bai 苏白 suggested
that the twin cave-chapels of nos. 788, 9810, 586, 1&2, as well as nos. 11-13, and no. 3 were all dated to this period, the second period in Su’s sequence.26 Among these, the paired cave-chapels of 788, 9810, and 586 are well-known as imperial chapels. Their interior wall surfaces are all covered with relief carvings arranged in panels of niches, but none of them portray any donors. Since these three pairs of cave-chapels were all imperially sponsored, Empress Dowager Wenming could be seen as a driving force behind the building projects. In Caves 11 and 13, the latest of the group, we begin to find many donar images shown beneath niches and images, some accompanied with inscriptions. The representation of large numbers of donors at Yungang signaled a significant change in patronage. Many were ordinary lay worshipers, or monks and nuns (see discussion below). So suggested that many small images were dedicated by aristocrats or even commoners to please the empress dowager, for inscriptions mentioned that the images were made in honor of the emperor and the empress dowager, and were very patriotic in tone. For example, at Yungang Cave 11, fifty-four members of a devotional society dedicated a panel of ninety-five images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the year 483 (see Fig. 7), the year when Emperor Xiaowen made a visit to Yungang. The last sentence of the inscription recorded that the dedication was “to bring good fortune to the country... and wishing by this means that the virtue of the Emperor [Xiaowen], the Empress Dowager[Wenming] and the Prince shall be identical with heaven and earth.”

Therefore among the three defining cultural traditions of the Northern Wei – Buddhism, saination, and the tribal organization of its aristocracy – Empress Dowager Wenming was a key figure in the first two aspects.27 She accessed power through her roles as regent to and foster-grandmother of the infant ruler, bypassing the institutional measures that were meant to curb a woman from gaining political influence. An ambitious, capable woman, Wenming transgressed the boundaries of assigned gender roles and was able to negotiate for her own status. She wielded enormous power and in turn implemented cultural policies of her own design. Her Chinese background ultimately led Emperor Xiaowen to institute sweeping sinicizing reforms. (Because of her sinicizing influence, traditional Chinese historians have been much kinder to her in evaluating her legacy.) In her role as a royal patron of Buddhism she affirmed her regal authority. It was also during her reign that Buddhism became a state institution.

Empress Dowager Ling (Lady Hu) was another lavish benefactress of Buddhism.

Her periods of influence occurred at a time when the Northern Wei, with its second capital at Luoyang, was most prosperous and yet most turbulent. Born of a Chinese clan in Ganlu, Lady Hu was consort to Emperor Xiaowu 宣武(r. 500 – 515), son of Emperor Xiaowen. When Xiaowu came to the throne, his mother (Empress Wenzhao 文昭, nee Gao 高) either committed suicide or was murdered in 497.28 However, when Lady Hu produced an heir, she managed not only to keep her own life but also to rule as regent of her son, Emperor Xiaoming 孝明帝 (r. 516 – 528), from 515 – 520 and again from 525 – 528. Lady Hu’s maneuver to escape the decree for biological mothers of heir-apparents to commit suicide indicated that some of the institutions of early Northern Wei were already disintegrating. As the first Chinese, male or female, to gain complete control of the Tuobo Wei administration system and the last independent ruler of the Wei empire, she was a remarkable figure and a formidable political force in the early decades of the sixth century.29 Like her predecessor, Empress Dowager Wenming, or perhaps even more so, Empress Dowager Ling was a central figure in court politics, from making policies to appointing officials. When she came to power, the empire was at its most prosperous, reaping the fruits from reforms of the earlier reigns of Xiaowen and Xiaowu. Unfortunately, towards the end of her regency, economic, social problems and cultural conflicts of the empire came to a head in form of peasant uprisings and rebellions of the Northern Garrison soldiers. Nor was she insusceptible to the ills of court intrigues, influences of relatives and eunuchs, and poor judgment in appointing officials. Her career ended horrifically in the Heyin 河陰 massacre of 526, when the rebel general Erzhu Rong 軒朱荣 and his troops marched into Luoyang and slaughtered thousands of people. Ling and her protégé, another infant hastily put on the throne, and many others at court were thrown into the Yellow River and drowned.

In addition to her official biography in Wei shu, Yang Xuanzhi’s 楊衒之 Luyang qidian 郭朝俊記 (A Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang) gave extensive accounts of Empress Dowager Ling’s Buddhist patronage activities.30 The most spectacular monument the empress dowager built, in 516, was the Yungang Monastery 永寧寺, the first entry in Yang’s book. In its precinct was the nine-storyed pagoda which rose to some 400 feet high. When the foundations for the pagoda were being dug, the discovery of some thirty gold statues led the empress dowager to view this as a sign of her sincere faith. Accordingly the building of the pagoda was excessively extravagant. Surrounding the central pole of the pagoda was
a golden vase. Beneath the vase were eleven golden dishes for collecting the dew, which were hung all around with golden bells. More golden bells were hung on the four iron chains that held the pole to the corners of the pagoda, and on the corners of each storey as well. The windows and doors of the pagoda were lacquered and furnished with gold ornaments. Yang remarked: "It was a triumph of building, a masterpiece of construction, and one could not conceivably describe the excellence of the sacred objects within it." He further wrote:

When the decoration of the pagoda had been finished Emperor Ming-ti and the Empress Dowager climbed it together. They gazed down at the palace as if into the palms of their hands, and the whole of the capital seemed no bigger than a courtyard. As it overlooked the palace climbing it was forbidden. The Buddha Hall of the monastery was modeled after a ceremonial hall of the palace. In it was a golden statue of 18 foot high, ten gold statues of life size, three statues studded with pearls, five statues wove from gold thread, and two jade statues. Yang’s description of the elaborateness of the monastery's construction went on at great length. All the stūpas and pictures that foreign countries had presented were also stored in this monastery.

In addition to the Yongning Monastery, the empress dowager also built a seven-storied pagoda for the Jingming Monastery 景明寺 during the Zhengguang 正光 reign (520–25). She also founded two temples, the Qin Taishangjun Monastery 秦太上君守 in remembrance of her mother and one of the two Qin Taishanggong Monasteries 秦太上公守 for her father (the second Qin Taishanggong Monastery was built by an imperial aunt, probably her sister).

The Northern Wei court’s support of Buddhism was not exclusive to Empress Dowager Ling. Emperors Wencheng, Xiaowen, Xuanwu, and Empress Dowager Wenning all supported Buddhism enthusiastically. Nevertheless, the material wealth allocated to support Buddhism and its institutions during Ling’s reign was seen as especially extravagant. While recounting first-hand experiences of the splendor of Luoyang during its heyday, the Confucian historian Yang Xuanzhi did not hide his inferences that the extravagance lavished on Buddhist institutions was one cause for the empire’s demise. For example, the second half of the entry on the Yongning Monastery narrated the turmoil of the last years of Northern Wei, including Erhu Hong’s coup, the Heyin massacre, and the burning of the pagoda in 534. Under the entry of Zhaoji Convent 昭儀寺, which was founded by eunuchs, Yang remarked that "when the Empress Dowager was in power the eunuchs were very much in her favor and their households grew extremely wealthy." Attributing the collapse of the dynasty to extravagances, in this case on Buddhism, and the detrimental influences of women and eunuchs in power followed a long tradition of historical writing in China. The author’s unsympathetic attitude towards Buddhism was hardly disguised.

In all fairness, the Yongning Monastery was the de facto official headquarters of the Buddhist church, an institution that served to protect the state. Previously located in the imperial palace, the court-sponsored bureau for translating Buddhist texts was transferred to the Yongning Monastery once it was completed. The Indian monk, Bodhidruci (act. c. 508–535) presided over the translation projects, with several hundred monks assisting him. The court’s patronage of Buddhism led to a flowering of Chinese Buddhism at Luoyang in the early sixth century, especially in the introduction of Yogâcāra Buddhism through the translation work of Bodhidruci and others. The growth of Buddhism during this period was essential to the independent developments of many schools of Chinese Buddhism, such as Dîhaj 地輪, Jingjì 净土, Tiantai 天台, Huayan 华严, Faxiang 法相, and Chan 禅 that flourished later.

Like Empress Dowager Wenning and other Northern Wei rulers, Lady Hu’s patronage of Buddhism was also associated with cave-temple projects. Her husband, Emperor Xuanwu, commissioned the Binyang Caves 宾陽洞 for Longmen for his parents (see below). Two of the three Binyang cave-chapels were never completed, partly because of the intensive labor it required to excavate the hard limestone at the Longmen site. At about the same time, large cave-chapels began to be excavated at the Gongxian 肝縣 site to the east of Luoyang. The suitability of the Gongxian site for imperial cave-chapels might have contributed to the abandonment of the Binyang project. The Chinese scholar Chen Mingda 陳廾達 surmised that diggings at Gongxian began around 517, the second year when Lady Hu assumed regency as empress dowager. Caves 1 and 2 were probably built for Xuanwu and Lady Hu; Cave 1 was finished around 523 while Cave 2 was unfinished. Caves 3 and 4 were built for Emperor Xiaoming and his consort and were finished in or about 528. Thus four of the five cave-temples at the Gongxian site were dated to the period when the empress dowager was in power. The depiction of two groups of royal donors flanking the entrance on the south wall of Cave 1 probably portrayed the empress dowager and Xuanwu, her deceased husband, each with their entourage and attendants (Fig. 1).

In her role as a royal patron of Buddhism, Empress Dowager Ling sponsored the Yongning Monastery, which served as the foremost Buddhist center of the capital, and the Gongxian imperial cave-chapels. To fulfill her role as a daughter, she
female attendants surround her. This relief panel juxtaposes the one showing the emperor and his entourage. Xuanwu’s meritorious act therefore fulfilled his role as a royal patron at one level, and as a filial son at another. Empress Wenzhao, recipient of her son’s merit, assumed the traditional role as a mother, and as a parent. This public display of religious and filial piety, however, also hid a darker side of Northern Wei politics. Wenzhao, the natural mother of Xuanwu, either committed suicide or was murdered in 497 by the empress née Feng in the power struggle between the Feng and Kao clans for dominance over the Northern Wei harem. Wenzhao was initially buried outside the imperial tombs and later Xuanwu had her tomb enlarged.14 Xuanwu’s dedication of the Binyang caves was thus a way to rectify his mother’s status as well as to pacify her spirits.

Fig. 1 The Empress as donor (Lady He) and attendants, c. 517-23
Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534)
Gongxian Cave 1
Stone
From Hanan Research Institute of Cultural Relics, Zhiyuan relics: Gongxian relics, Beijing: Wenzhao Press, 1987, pl. 3 (detail)

Fig. 2 The Empress (Wenzhao) as donor with attendants, c. 505-23
Northern Wei Dynasty (386-534)
Binyang Cave, Longmen
Limestone with traces of color
H. 193 cm, W. 276.8 cm
Photograph courtesy of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri (Purchase: Nelson Trust)
Aristocratic Women

Aristocratic women also played a significant role in the support of Buddhism, although we know much less about their personal lives. From Baocang’s Siqian zhuan, we know that imperial concubines, princesses and other noble women in the south had presented gifts or land to convents and monasteries. During the last two decades of the fifth century, when group patronage began at the Yungang site, some of the donors might have been noble women. At the Kuyang Cave 529 at Longmen, dated between the 490s and 520s, a significant number of women from the Northern Wei imperial house dedicated images. For example, in 495, Lady Yuchi 姚姬, wife of Prince of Changle 楚榮王, Qiuma Lingqiang 丘穆陵亮 (a close aid of Emperor Xiaowen), dedicated a Maitreya image for her deceased son (Fig. 3). 4k

Several images were associated with Lady Gao 高氏, mother of Prince of Beihai 北海王, Yuan Xiang 元祥 (a younger brother of Xiaowen). The prince joined Emperor Xiaowen on the southern expedition in 494, and Lady Gao commissioned an image at Longmen to pray for the son’s safety on the eve of the prince’s departure. In 498 Yuan Xiang dedicated a Maitreya image in gratitude of the fact that both mother and son were safe. 4l A row of donor images, in flat relief and divided into two sides, was portrayed beneath the image. Led by monks and nuns, the male and female groups of royal donors proceed towards the center, with attendants holding canopies behind them. In 503, Monk Fusheng 法生 dedicated an image for Emperor Xiaowen, Prince of Beihai, and Lady Gao (Fig. 4). The royal donors were depicted considerably larger than those in the previous example, and were executed in the graceful and rhythmic linear style associated with Longmen and the indigenous Chinese art tradition. Yet another image, an undated Maitreya image, was dedicated by Lady Gao for her deceased grandson. 4m These images and inscriptions suggest that Lady Gao was not only an important Buddhist donor, but that she also held a position of prestige and power within the imperial household.

Another imperial woman, Lady Hou 候氏, grandmother of Prince of Guangchuan 廣川王, dedicated a Maitreya image for her deceased husband, Helan Han 贺蘭汗 in 502; the husband died in 480, followed by the son’s death in 495. In 503, Lady Hou dedicated another Maitreya image, praying for protection in raising the grandson by herself. In addition, several noblemen donated Sakyamuni
images for Lady Hou and the prince.\textsuperscript{44}

Lady Yuchi, Lady Gao, and Lady Hou were some of the more prominent female figures in the Northern Wei imperial household. They commissioned Buddhist images for husbands, sons, and grandsons, many of whom were warriors, for their safety or for the well-being of their spirits if deceased. Many male members of the Northern Wei aristocracy dedicated images at the Guyang Cave as well, but for overtly patriotic reasons, for the state and the emperor. In patronage activities, these aristocratic women thus affirmed their gender roles as mothers and wives. As a state religion Buddhism served its role as the protector of the state and its elitist rulers.

Women of Gentry Background

Next I want to look at women from the gentry background as donors, both nomadic and Chinese. Some of the earliest representations of donors were found in Buddhist cave-temples or on bronze and stone images. In the fifth century, donor images found in the north demonstrated ethnic identities through dress, either in Chinese dress or in the nomadic \textit{hu} costume. In Binglingsi 释靈寺 Cave 169, which bears an inscription dating to 420, a mural on the north wall depicts a Buddha triad and a group of donors to its left. The prominent figure in this group is a woman in larger scale and in Chinese dress. She is accompanied by a lady companion, an attendant and a monk, shown with stubble.\textsuperscript{45}

Examples of donors shown in nomadic dress include a gilt bronze representing two seated Buddhas, dated by inscription to 489(Fig. 5). On the pedestal are engraved images of two donors, one male and one female. The man wears a tunic and trousers and the woman a long dress and a tall headdress. Each of them holds a stalk of lotus flower in their hands as offerings. Presumably they represent a couple, a husband and a wife.

By the sixth century, because of sinification reforms decreed by Xiaowen, one of which was to change the \textit{hu} costume to Chinese dress, most donors were shown in Chinese style robes (see Fig. 4). The male and female donors were sometimes accompanied by a horse and an oxcart respectively to indicate their gentry status. One of the most beautiful examples is found on a four-sided pedestal originally supporting a statue(Fig. 6). Dated to 525, the front of the pedestal shows a pair of lions flanking the earth goddess who supports a censer as an offering to the Buddha.

\textbf{Fig. 5} Bronze image of Śākyamuni and Padmapani, dated 489, male and female donors in \textit{hu} costume on pedestal. Northern Wei Dynasty (386 – 534) Gift house no. 2. 5 cm Nezu Art Museum, Tokyo From Tokyo National Museum, Kodai Ima, Tokyo Tokyo National Museum, 1987. Cat. pl. 14

An inscription is on the back. On the two sides are representations of the main patrons—a couple. The horse and the oxcart indicate the gentry status of the donors. Each donor holds a censer as an offering, and each is accompanied by a group of attendants.

In family or clan-based donations, the couple as head of a family or a clan were prominently represented; many examples can be found on Buddhist and Daoist steles.\textsuperscript{50} The portrayal of a family or clan with extended family members presided over by the chief and his wife is an ideal image of a prosperous family or clan—the fundamental unit of social organization in China. As spouses of chiefs and mothers of
offsprings, the gentry women were afforded appropriate rank symbols and are shown as equal partners of their spouses in public, patronage activities, although there was no indication as to whether in actual life they shared equal rights to properties and privileges.

By the sixth century, representations of the stately, elegant processions of donors, along with members of extended families as well as attendants, were abundant. Sometimes the processions are preceded by monks or nuns; many examples can be found at Longmen (see Fig. 4). Dressed in Chinese costume, they were rendered in fluent, graceful lines. The grand processions of emperors and empresses,

as heads of the state, at Longmen and Gengxian also belonged to this tradition.

Group patronage

Women, from different strata of society, also participated in group patronage activities. Early forms of group patronage were primarily family or clan-based, with women participating according to their positions within those social units, as wives, daughters or kinswomen. At Dunhuang early on there were expressions of group patronage. Caves 268 and 285 are among the early examples where donors of mixed ethnic groups were represented side by side.

At Yonggang towards the end of the fifth century group donations made by
nomadic patrons were particularly prominent. Like those at Dunhuang, donors were represented beneath the images they dedicated. They were also separated according to gender, and were sometimes led by monks and nuns (see Figs. 7, 9). In contrast to the grandiose schemes of imperial cave-chapels with colossal images, the icons commissioned by multiple donors tended to be mid or small sized. The donors could be aristocrats or perhaps even commoners. By combining their resources groups of patrons were able to commission images which otherwise they would not have been able to afford individually.

Buddhist devotees also formed devotional societies and made donations as a group. Group patronage and joint monastic and lay donations were new developments that occurred as a result of the Northern Wei’s establishment of the Buddhist church as a state institution with a bureaucratic structure to administer all the Buddhist temples in the empire. Monastic officials were appointed to oversee religious affairs. Devotional societies were formed among members of local communities, relying on the clergy of local temples as their spiritual leaders. Such devotional societies also enabled women of common background to participate in public, religious activities as much as their male counterparts.

In a panel from Yungang Cave 11, fifty-four members of a yiji 巴義 devotional society dedicated a total of 95 Buddha and Bodhisattva images in 483 (Fig. 7). The fifty-four donors are shown in the bottom rows of the panel. The five monastic members are shown larger in scale. On two sides are the lay donors: eighteen male donors on the right side and all the thirty-six female donors are on the left side. The active participation of a large number of nomadic women is noteworthy. As mentioned earlier, the images were dedicated to Emperor Xiaowen and Empress Dowager Wenming.

By the sixth century, most devotional societies in the north chose to commemorate their patronage activities on steles. Such organizations consisted of two tiers of leadership: chiefs and administrative staff from lay members of the group, and spiritual leaders and administrators in charge of religious affairs (weina 騎那, or karmanado in Sanskrit) coming from monastic members. These office-holders, lay and monastic, were all men. As a result some steles showed donor images that were predominantly masculine (Fig. 8). The Buddhist devotional societies in the sixth century primarily drew members from local communities, which sometimes consisted of several major clans. The organization then resembled that of clan-based groups. Wives of chief donors, who were also heads of clans, were prominently represented.
Records of these devotional societies also give information on other aspects of social organization such as marriage patterns, including intermarriage among different ethnic groups. The example from Dunhuang Cave 268 suggests that women from both Chinese and another ethnic group were married into a Chinese family. In locales in Shaanxi, interracial marriages were quite frequent.24

In the case of nuns participating in these groups, since all offices were held by monks, they were precluded from any leadership position. Donor inscriptions and biographies recorded that some nuns joined the convent after having had a secular family life or were not entirely severed from secular life. Upper class women or imperial concubines joined the nunnery after they had become widowed. The Yaoguang Convent in Northern Wei Luoyang, for example, was well-known as a nunnery patronized by imperial women.25 They dedicated images for their deceased parents, husbands, or sons. In the south, biographies of nuns suggested that in fifth- and sixth-century Nanjing there were nuns who were intellectual figures of the day, and who commanded large audiences when they preached in public. But overall the dearth of materials does not allow us to have greater insights into the lives of these religious women.

Last I want to look at isolated examples of images dedicated exclusively by women. On the exterior of Cave 17 at Yungang, an inscription dated to 489 records that Nun Huiding 惠定 and several other nuns together commissioned the images of Maitreya, Samyakamuni and Prabхutaratna(Fig. 9). The images are arranged in two tiers: Maitreya in a niche above, and Sakyamuni and Prabhutaratna in another niche beneath. The eight nuns are shown below the lower niche. Despite the fact that nuns were subordinate to monks and were barred from holding offices in religious organizations, this record shows that donative projects provided nuns (and women) the opportunities to take initiatives and to participate in fulfilling religious activities.

Another well-known example of women as Buddhist patrons is the exquisite Amittabha shrine dated to 593(Fig. 10). A complex altarpiece consisting of the Amitabha Buddha on a double lotus throne, flanked by two bodhisattvas, two disciples, and two prateekabuddhas (?) . Above the main icon is a beautiful double-tree canopy. On the lower tier of the altar are a censer in the center, flanked by a pair of lions and two lokapalas. The Buddha and his attendants, their eyes downward, are rendered in the gently swaying elongated style characteristic of Sui sculptures, imparting the figures with a sweet, ethereal quality. Arguably one of the finest works of sixth-century Buddhist sculpture, the inscription records that the altarpiece was dedicated by eight "mothers" for the Sui emperor, Wendi 文帝 (r. 581 – 604). The quality and workmanship of the sculpture also suggest that the women came from upper class background. Bearing maiden nuns of Li 李, Zhao 赵, and Feng 凤, these women were married into the Fan clan and all bore sons. Within the traditional Chinese social scheme, a woman assumed the position of authority after she had produced a son(s). These eight mothers coming together for a joint charitable act signified a sense of solidarity among the women married into the same clan. The charitable act affirmed as well as transcended the donors’ social roles as mothers, for they were able to act independently outside of the family domain.

Conclusion

This brief survey of women as Buddhist patrons in the fifth and sixth centuries suggests that Buddhism enabled women to assert themselves in the public domain to a
much greater extent than in previous times through the participation of religious activities. From empresses to aristocratic women, women of gentry background, and commoners, women from all levels of society were able to participate in patronage activities. Many continued to fulfill their traditional roles as mothers and wives, with their concerns focused on the family. In religious organizations, from monastic institutions to devotional societies, offices and leading roles were still held by men. However, a small number of women were able to transcend these restrictions and negotiate for their own statuses, especially in the case of the two Northern Wei empresses. Lady Feng was an exceptional woman and an influential force in shaping cultural policies of her era. Lady Hu also lavished patronage on Buddhism, but her career was marred by court intrigues and ill fortune. The precedents of these two powerful empresses as royal patrons of Buddhism paved way for Empress Wu of the Tang dynasty (r. 692–705) to declare herself the first female ruler in China, employing Buddhist ideology to buttress her claim to legitimacy.1 Some women who joined the convent no doubt also found self-fulfillment through the pursuit of spiritual and intellectual activities. In isolated examples, we see Buddhist women bonding together to partake of independent patronage activities. By the seventh and eighth centuries, all-female devotional societies emerged. For the first time these organizations allowed women to articulate their interests exclusively from their own perspective. They also enabled women to form a social bond and a support network. In late imperial China, such women-only groups often became the only alternative for women to leave the family in a society that became increasingly restrictive for women. Today, some all-female religious and social organizations still survive in Taiwan and other parts of Southeast Asia, although they face an uncertain future in face of modernization and the different social options now available for women.

1 Early expressions of the notion of yin-yang duality (sun/moon, man/woman, etc.) did not distinguish the two aspects as superior or inferior in relation to each other, but rather as complementary. In attempts to use cosmological theories to interpret current and past events such as the undeniable influence of palace women at court, philosophers like Dong Zhongshu (179 BCE - 1047 BCE) and Liu Xiang made interpretations that things feminine were inferior to things masculine and that the yang no longer needed to be balanced by yin, see Robert Cole Gitter and William Gordon Crowell, *Empress and Consorts* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999), 27–31. Other discussions of women in early China include: Albert R. O’Hara, *The Position of*

2. As R. J. Catter and M. G. Crowell wrote, the writing of the Biographies was "a part of Liu's efforts to address what he saw as the deleterious influence of palace women. Throughout his official career, Liu struggled against the undue influence at court of palace women and affinal families." (Express and Converse, p. 41)


4. Illustrating the text of the same title written by Zhang Xia's 張夏 (232–300), the essay scroll at the British Museum is thought to be a Tang (618–907) copy of Gu's painting; see Arthur Wesley, Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting, pp. 50–59.

5. The script is now in the Shansi Provincial Museum, Taiyuan.


8. Since women's pregnancy and childbirth were associated with miracles and power, discarding the state of being female was a means to alleviate women's sufferings. In the Sutramahayukha, one of the forty-eight Dharma-amaitha Buddhiss in a previous life made vows to promise women who were born in his paradise would be transformed into men; see Luis Gomez, trans., The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai‘i Press, 1996), p. 170; Kajiya, "Women in Buddhism," pp. 48–49.

9. In the Confucian context, with "sagehood" being the ultimate goal of moral cultivation, there was also the question of whether women could become a sage or not. In examining this issue, Lise Raphael concluded that there were two possible readings: "On one reading, Confucian gender metaphysics may be ultimately more benign than its Western counterparts, even if it reserves androgynous sagehood for men. In the other, successive waves of Confucian ideologies—Han Confucian and Song and Ming-Qing neo-Confucian—overwhelmed an earlier, admitted but less male-dominated tradition in which wisdom and the capacity for moral judgment were relatively ungendered and in which sage women functioned as fully realized persons and were recognized as such." Sharing the Light, p. 262.


15. One can also argue that leaving the family to join the monastic order was equally, if not more, difficult for men, since the burden of continuing the family line fell largely on some rather than on daughters, especially the eldest son or the only son. Declining obedience to the Buddha and the script is also meant to redirect the state of two fundamental conflicts with Buddhist social values, especially around clerical debates and tension in Buddhism’s interactions with Chinese society.


27 Her brother, Feng Xi 鳳熙, was also known for his lavish patronage of Buddhism, from building temples and pagodas to making images and copying sutras. The biography of Feng Xi (Wei shi, 魏史, 83, pp. 1818–1820) recorded that Feng had built a total of seventy-two Buddhist monasteries and pagodas all over the provinces, and commissioned copies of sixteen tripitikas (some of the sutras he commissioned have been found at Dunhuang). When criticized for spending too many lives in building pagodas in mountainous and remote areas, Feng replied that in later times people would only see the built monastries and not know that men and women were killed to save the text collection. “Feng Xi, des Wei du Nord, et les monastères bouddhiques,” *Annales de l’Université de Turin* (1979); and *Contributions an études sur la Turc-Hamang* (1979). (The article is also published in Chinese, in *Xiaoduan jiao shilin* 小端集林·史林, vol. 1, Beijing: Zhongsha shuju, 1982).

28 Four large cave chapels with colossal Buddha, nos. 19–20, belong to the first period (c. 405–470), while caves nos. 15, 16 as well as a number of smaller caves, some attached to earlier, large cave-chapels, fall into the third period, from around 490s (around the time when Xiaowen moved the capital to Luoyang) onward; see Su Bai, *Zhangye shike zuanti* 中原石刻足記 (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1996), 89–113; Su’s discussion of the Yangqin cave-temples is also in *Zhangye shike* 中原石刻, pp. 17–97.

29 Minwu & Nagahiro *Daijō seitoku* 大乗事蹟, plates vol. 8, 29–31; text vol. 8/9, 114–5; the inscription also recorded the earliest existence of Buddhist devotional societies in China, see this author’s “The Beginnings of the Buddhist Secte Tradition in China,” *Ph. D. dissertation (Harvard University, 1995)*, pp. 294–303.


31 Wenzeng’s name was also recorded in 499 as a result of a power struggle between the Feng clan and the imperial Tusha line; see Jennifer Holmgren, “Social Mobility in the Northern Dynasties: A Case Study of the Feng of Northern Yan,” *Monumenta Serica* 35(1981–83): p. 30.


36 Ibid., p. 149.

37 Jingting Monastery was founded by Empress Xiaowu during the Jingting reign (500–501); ibid., p. 207.

38 Ibid., pp. 185–88, 210–12.

39 Ibid., p. 169.


43 Chen conjectured that Cave 2 was left unfinished because Lady Hu lost her power after 520 (before assuming her second period of regency in 525); ibid., p. 198.

44 During Emperor Xiaojing’s reign, the emperor had his grand-re turned’s tomb moved to a more appropriate site and Empress Dowager Ling took part in the procession and ceremony of the occasion; Jennifer Holmgren, “Empress Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei,” p. 133. Empress Wendi’s biography is in *Wei shi* juan 13, pp. 325–336.


49 *Zhangye shike* Congqin shihui 中原石刻·桑乾石刻 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1989), p. 36.

50 For example, the Wei Weiwdang Chao Liang, a Buddhist-Daoist sect dated to 424, portrays the chief host, Wei, and his wife prominently at the bottom of the steles, along with members of the extended family; see Zhang Yao Zhang, “Chongqi Sengzaozao Taiwan xia hui jie de qi” 陳書, *Zhongguo wenwu yanjiu* 中國文物研究 (1997), 39; “Chongqi Sengzaozao Taiwan xia hui jie de qi,” *Zhongguo wenwu yanjiu* 中國文物研究 (2002), 105 (2001), 77–88; and the *Beginning of the Buddhist Secte Tradition,* pp. 12–58.

51 See Ng Qing’s discussion in this volume.
南北朝時期之婦女資助佛教造像（摘要）

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這篇文章探討佛教造像在南北朝時期的社會性、宗教性和政治性多面向的影響。它探討了這個時期婦女如何透過資助佛教造像來影響社會、政治和宗教的關係。文章指出，這個時期的婦女在佛教造像中的角色非常複雜，不只限於在家中的角色，還包括在公共領域的參與。文章也探討了婦女如何透過佛教造像來影響社會的分化和再分化，以及佛教造像如何影響婦女的地位和角色。

婦女在佛教造像中的角色

在南北朝時期，婦女在佛教造像中的角色非常複雜。婦女不僅是佛教造像的資助者，也是佛教造像的參與者。婦女透過資助佛教造像來影響社會、政治和宗教的關係。婦女在佛教造像中的角色非常複雜，不只限於在家中的角色，還包括在公共領域的參與。婦女透過佛教造像來影響社會的分化和再分化，以及佛教造像如何影響婦女的地位和角色。
1. 后妃
北朝（386–534 年）期间，至少有两位慷慨赞助佛教艺术的著名后妃，即文明冯太后及孝文冯氏。冯氏所建立的北魏政权设立一系列措施以保护后妃的尊严。比如皇后子的生母会受到尊敬，以防止日后母以子贵而取得政权；得以升格为皇后的宫女多不以子嗣，她们常被来自被征服的外族，因此不会对后宫形成威胁等等。然而，这些措施无法防止冯太后通过所收养的皇孙左右政柄，文明冯太后便通过皇孙孝文皇帝干预国事。如是当时是汉族血统，文明冯太后积极促使其孝文皇帝推行汉化政策，亦大力支持其同是石窟寺的御制。她对于佛教的赞助显其在宫廷中及政治上的崇威地位。佛教也是在她为位期间成为北魏国教。皇太后冯氏亦积极赞助佛教，并以资助著名的洛阳永宁寺及其九层佛塔知名。可能由于其活动在宗教活动中具有的权威，影响史书多将北魏佛教衰亡归咎于她的赞助权益。与之相比，文明冯后则在宫中所建被认定为佛教的皇后的宫，称为冯后。这一洞窟是宣武帝为纪念其孝文帝及其母文昭皇后而建的，通过这一工程显其为孝文帝佛教皇室赞助者的双重身份。

2. 女性僧女
龙门石窟寺中有许多的佛教雕像，这些雕像多为女性供养人的形象，但以铭文记载雕像缘由及供奉人的身份。不同于男性壮丽为北魏朝廷及皇帝所赐赞助的雕像，女性供养人的雕像多半是献给其死后的丈夫或儿子。这些雕像具有女性角色的关联。

3. 士绅僧女
早期金铜像上的维新形象常著胡服，男子著裤，女子著高领长袖。由于汉化的结果，供金像在公元六世纪前已有汉服。男性与女性供金像常有著以马鞍与牛车，以表明其士绅地位。此款供金像赞助行为中，妇女多半具有与男性同等的地位。

4. 集体供金
以义西方式而成的集体供金首先出现于北方；龙门石窟寺有相当多此类供金。义西中的供金人多为平民百姓，他们以集体的方式赞助建造平民僧人无法负担的大型雕像。在这些雕像中的供金人通常以性别分界，僧尼有别，僧尼有别以供金圣僧圣女。此款供金组织使平民僧女有参与公共事业的机会。然而，所有义西僧尼均是由男性信徒赞助。如僧尼参加此款组织的活动，领导权则由男信人转移，供金文显示有些比丘尼在出家之前曾有世俗家庭生活环境。她们为死去的父母、丈夫或儿子造像。在南方，比丘尼常指出有些比丘尼是孩童时的徒弟，她们的名法清晰吸引大批僧众。然而文献对这些比丘尼的生活则少有记载。
漢唐之間的宗教藝術與考古
BETWEEN HAN AND TANG:
RELIGIOUS ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN A TRANSFORMATIVE PERIOD

Edited by
Wu Hung

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