

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 worshippers 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 (220BCE – 221CE) 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 劉向 (79-8BCE) compilation of *Biographies of Women* (*Lienü zhuan* 列女傳) narrated female exemplars who defined the Confucian ideals of femininity.² Ban Zhao's 班超 (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 statecraft, 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 reliefs. They served didactic purposes for the education of women, particularly women of the upper class or court women.³ 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 顧愷之 (c. 344 – 406).⁴ 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.⁵

In what ways then did Buddhism offer changes for women in China? What did it mean to be a Buddhist woman?⁶ In general Buddhism advocated asceticism and the denial of sexuality for both men and women. The religion regarded the celibate state-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.⁷ 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.⁸ Since Mahāyāna Buddhism advocated that every being could become a Buddha, then the female body became an impediment to achieving enlightenment.⁹ In her discussion of the portrayal of women in several early Mahāyāna texts that were influential in China, such as the *Vimalakīrti*, *Lotus*, and *Sūrangama sūtras*, 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.¹⁰ In the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra*, for example, the goddess exchanged her female body with Śāriputra, the

monk antagonist, in order to demonstrate that things male and female were both illusions and that reality was nothing but emptiness.¹¹ 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, Śāriputra 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.¹²

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."¹³ 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 Mahāprajāpatī, 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 vigorous 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 Baochang's 寶唱 *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 (*Biographies of Nuns*) recorded the lives of some sixty exemplary nuns from the fourth through the sixth centuries.¹⁴ 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 *Biqiuni zhuan* 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.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ Donors' inscriptions and biographical sources confirm that many aristocratic or gentry women joined the nunnery only after they have become widowed. The convents 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 statuses as benefactresses of the religion.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ With another concept, *parinama* 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."¹⁹

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 Baochang's *Biographies of Nuns* and other sources. For example, Empress He 何 of Eastern Jin (317–420) founded the Yong'an Nunnery 永安寺 in Jiankang in 354. Empress Chu 褚, also of Eastern Jin, built the Yanxing Nunnery 延興寺 for some favored nuns and the Qingyuan Monastery 青園寺, both at Jiankang. Empress Yuan 元 of the Liu Song dynasty (420–479) invited the Kashmiri monk Dharmamitra to the palace to perform Buddhist rituals for the imperial family.²⁰ The patronage of nuns by empresses (and by imperial concubines, princesses, and other noble women) no doubt accounted for the flourishing of the community of nuns in Jiankang recorded in Baochang'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."²¹ 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 馮氏, r. 442–490) and Empress Dowager Ling 靈太后 (Lady Hu 胡氏, 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 Xianwen 獻文帝 (r. 466–471). Later Xianwen 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 雲岡, 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 宿白 suggested

that the twin cave-chapels of nos. 7&8, 9&10, 5&6, 1&2, as well as nos. 11 – 13, and no. 3 were all dated to this period, the second period in Su's sequence.²⁸ Among these, the paired cave-chapels of 7&8, 9&10, and 5&6 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 donor 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). Su 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."²⁹

Therefore among the three defining cultural traditions of the Northern Wei – Buddhism, sinicization, and the tribal organization of its aristocracy – Empress Dowager Wenming was a key figure in the first two aspects.³⁰ 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 Gansu, Lady Hu was consort to Emperor Xuanwu 宣武 (r. 500 – 515), son of Emperor Xiaowen. When Xuanwu came to the throne, his mother (Empress Wenzhao 文昭, née Gao 高) either committed suicide or was murdered in 497.³¹ 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 manoeuvre 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 Tuoba 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.³² 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 Xuanwu. 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 unsusceptible 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 528, when the rebel general Erzhu Rong 爾朱榮 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 楊銜之 *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (*A Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang*) gave extensive accounts of Empress Dowager Ling's Buddhist patronage activities.³³ The most spectacular monument the empress dowager built, in 516, was the Yongning Monastery 永寧寺, the first entry in Yang's book. In its precinct was the nine-storied pagoda which rose to some 400 feet high. When the foundations for the pagoda was 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. Surmounting 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."³⁴ 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.³⁵

The Buddha Hall of the monastery was modeled after a ceremonial hall of the palace. In it were 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.³⁶ Yang's description of the elaborateness of the monastery's construction went on at great length. All the *sūtras* 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).³⁷ She also founded two temples, the Qin Taishangjun Monastery 秦太上君寺 in remembrance of her mother and one of the two Qin Taishanggong Monasteries 秦太上公寺 for her father (the second Qin Taishanggong Monastery was built by an imperial aunt, probably her sister).³⁸

The Northern Wei court's support of Buddhism was not exclusive to Empress Dowager Ling. Emperors Wencheng, Xiaowen, Xuanwu, and Empress Dowager Wenming all supported Buddhism enthusiastically. Nevertheless, the material wealth allocated to support Buddhism and its institutions during Ling's regency 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 Erzhu Rong's coup, the Heyin massacre, and the burning of the pagoda in 534. Under the entry of Zhaoyi Convent 昭儀尼寺, 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."³⁹ 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, Bodhiruci (act. c. 508–535) presided over the translation projects, with several hundred monks assisting him.⁴⁰ 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 Yogacāra Buddhism through the translation work of Bodhiruci and others. The growth of Buddhism during this period was essential to the independent developments of many schools of Chinese Buddhism, such as Dilun 地論, Jingtū 淨土, Tiantai 天臺, Huayan 華嚴, Faxiang 法相, and Chan 禪 that flourished later.⁴¹

Like Empress Dowager Wenming 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 賓陽洞 at 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 鞏縣 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 陳明達 surmised that digging at Gongxian began around 517, the second year when Lady Hu assumed regency as empress dowager.⁴² Caves 1 and 2 were probably built for Xuanwu and Lady Hu; Cave 1 was finished around 523 while Cave 2 was unfinished.⁴³ 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

dedicated two temples for her parents. Like Empress Dowager Wenming, her access to power challenged the traditional role assigned to imperial women. However, her failure as a political leader and ill-fated fortune made her patronage of Buddhism receive all the more harsher criticisms from traditional Chinese historians.

The representation of royal donors at Gongxian was preceded by the well-known ones at the Binyang Cave at Longmen, but in this case the empress portrayed had a very different role from the two empresses discussed above, Emperor Xuanwu dedicated the Binyang Central Cave, dating between 500 and 523, for his deceased parents: Emperor Xiaowen and Empress Wenzhao. The two panels portraying the royal donors and their attendants thus represent Xiaowen and Wenzhao, the former is now at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the latter at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas (Fig. 2). The empress is shown as a stately figure in the center, wearing an elaborate crown. Another aristocratic woman and a group of

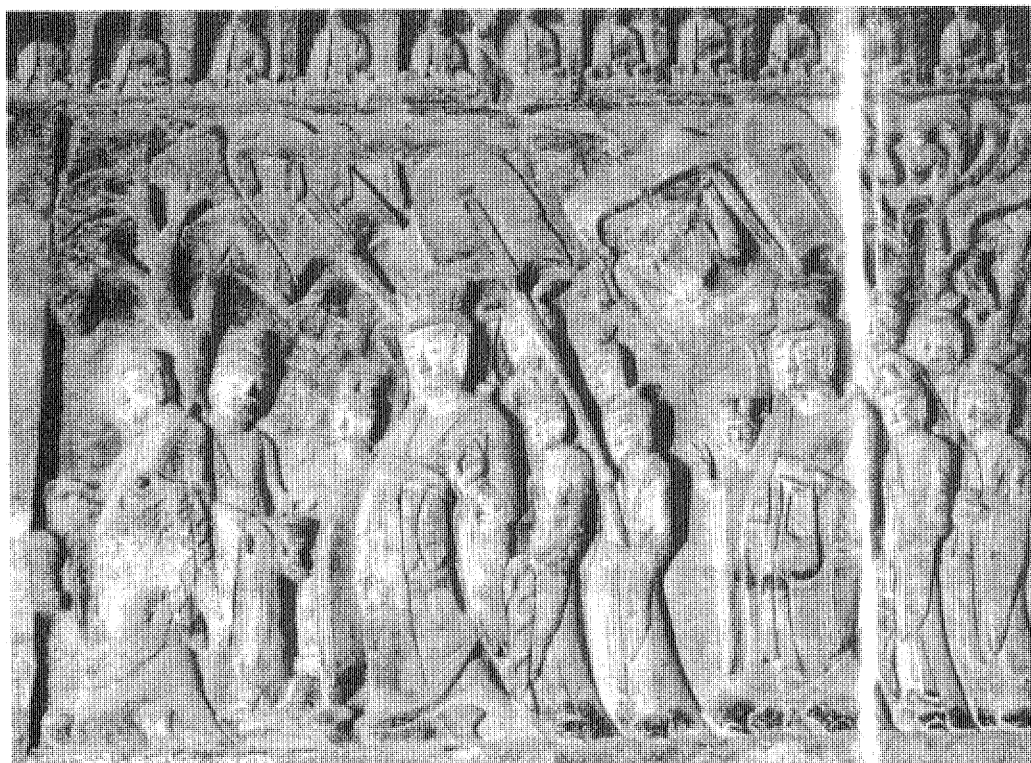


Fig. 1 The Empress as donor (Lady Hu) and attendants, c. 517 - 23

Northern Wei Dynasty (386 - 534)

Gongxian Cave 1

Stone

From Henan Research Institute of Cultural Relics, *Zhongguo shiku: Gongxian shiku*, Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1987, pl. 3 (detail)

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.⁴⁴ 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. 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 Baochang's *Biqiuni 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 古陽洞 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 尉遲, wife of Prince of Changle 長樂王, Qiumu Lingliang 丘穆陵亮 (a close aid of Emperor Xiaowen), dedicated a Maitreya image for her deceased son (Fig. 3).⁴⁵

Several images were associated with Lady Gao 高氏, mother of Prince of Beihai 北海王, Yuan Xiang 元詳 (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.⁴⁶ 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 Fasheng 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.⁴⁷ 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 侯氏, grandmother of Prince of Guangchuan 廣川王 dedicated a Maitreya image for her deceased husband, Helan Han 賀蘭汗 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 Śākyamuni

Fig. 3 Maitreya Bodhisattva dedicated by Lady Yüci, dated 495, Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534)
Guyang Cave, Longmen
Limestone
From Longmen Institute of Conservation of Cultural Relics & Department of Archaeology, Beijing University, *Zhongguo shiku: Longmen shiku*, Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1991, vol. 1, pl. 156

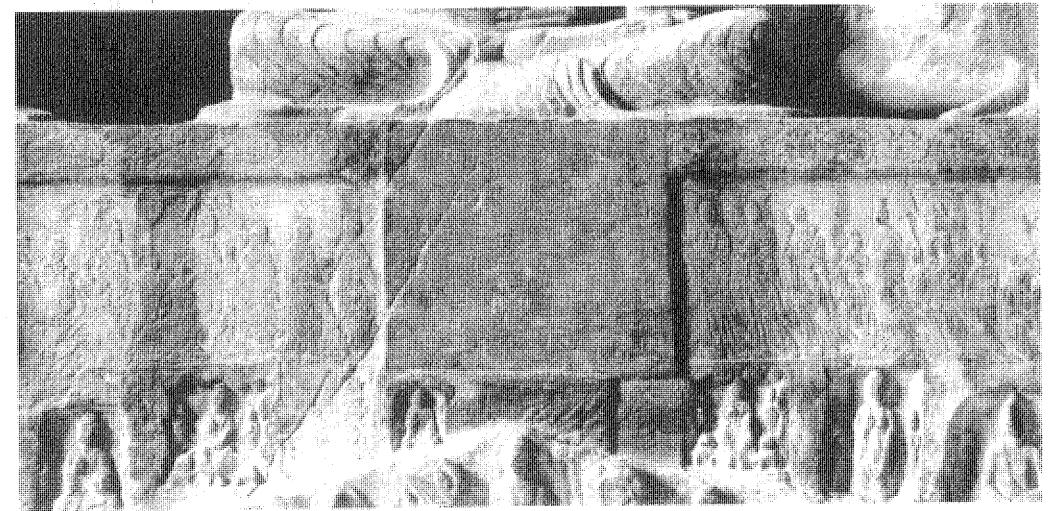


Fig. 4 Śākyamuni Buddha dedicated by Monk Fasheng for Emperor Xiaowen Prince Beihai and his mother, dated 503; inscription and engraved images of donors below Buddha image
Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534) Guyang Cave, Longmen
From *Longmen shiku*, vol. 1, pl. 141

images for Lady Hou and the prince.⁴⁸

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 *hu* 胡 costume. In Binglingsi 炳靈寺 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 stubbles.⁴⁹

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 *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.

Fig. 5 Bronze image of Śākyamuni and Prabhutaratna, dated 489, male and female donors in *hu* costume on pedestal
Northern Wei Dynasty (386 – 534)
Gilt bronze
H. 2.5 cm
Nezu Art Museum, Tokyo
From Tokyo National Museum, *Kondō butsu*. Tokyo: Tokyo National Museum, 1987. Col. 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.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



Fig. 6

Rubbing of stone pedestal, dated 525,
showing male (2nd panel) and female
donors (3rd panel)

Northern Wei Dynasty (386 – 534)

Pedestal in University of Pennsylvania
Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology
From *Zhongguo meishu quanji: shike
xianhua* volume, Shanghai: Shanghai
renmin meishu, 1988, pl. 3.

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 Gongxian also belonged to this tradition.

Group patronage

Women, from different strata of the 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.⁵¹

At Yungang towards the end of the fifth century group donations made by

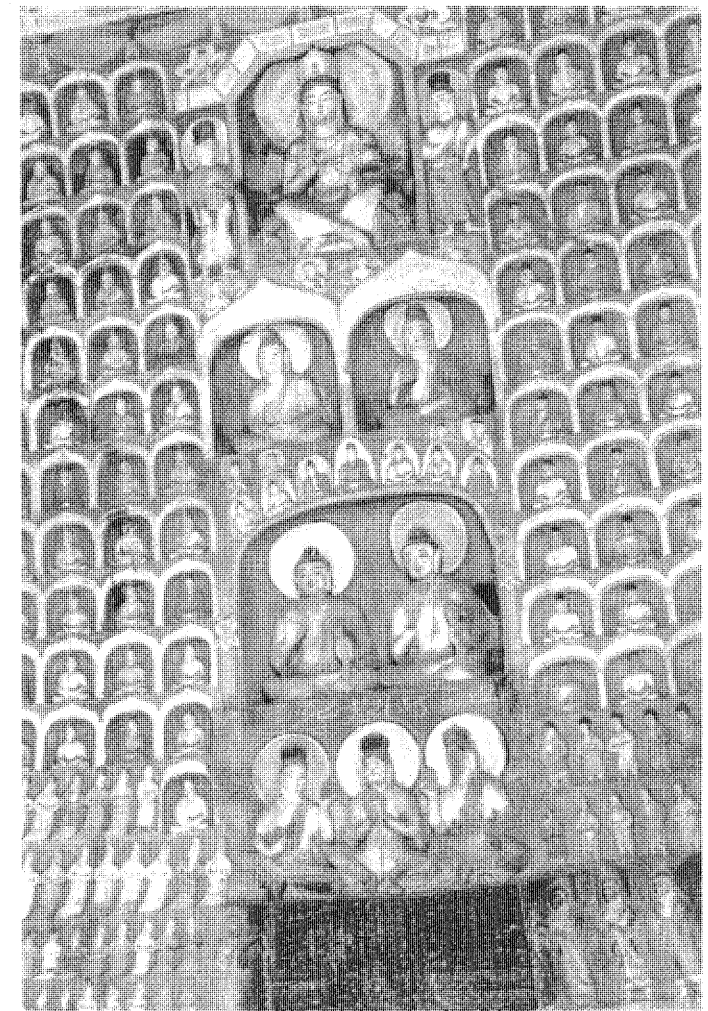


Fig. 7 Panel of 95 Buddha and
bodhisattva images dedicated by 54
members of a devotional society,
dated 483

Northern Wei Dynasty (386 – 534)

Yungang Cave 11

Sandstone

From Yungang Institute of
Conservation of Cultural Relics,
Zhongguo shiku: Yungang shiku,
Beijing: Wenwu Press, vol. 2,
pl. 90(detail)

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.⁵² 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 *yiyi* 邑義 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.⁵³ Such organizations consisted of two tier of leadership: chiefs and administrative staff from lay members of the group; and spiritual leaders and administrators in charge of religious affairs (*weina* 維那, or *karmadana* 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.

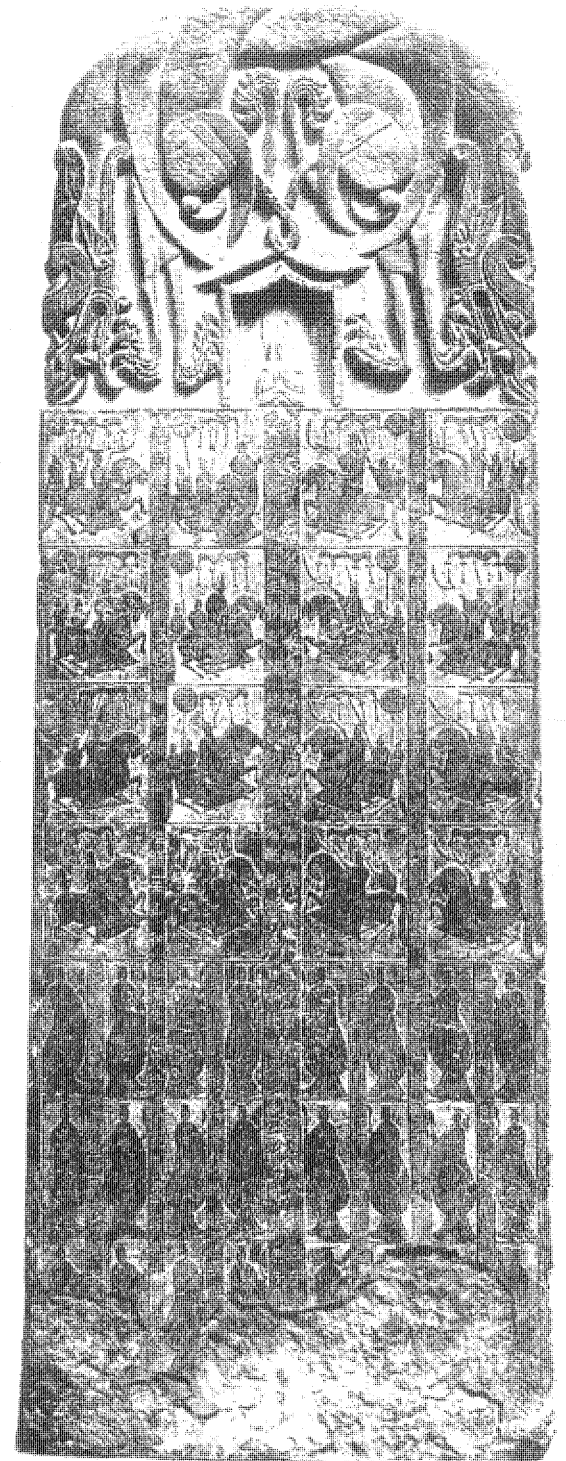


Fig. 8 Buddhist stele dedicated by a devotional society, dated 529, reverse showing male donor images
Northern Wei Dynasty (386 - 534)
From Henan
Limestone
H. 183 cm
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
From Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Sculpture*,
London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1925, pl. 111

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.⁵⁴

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.⁵⁵ 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 the public. But

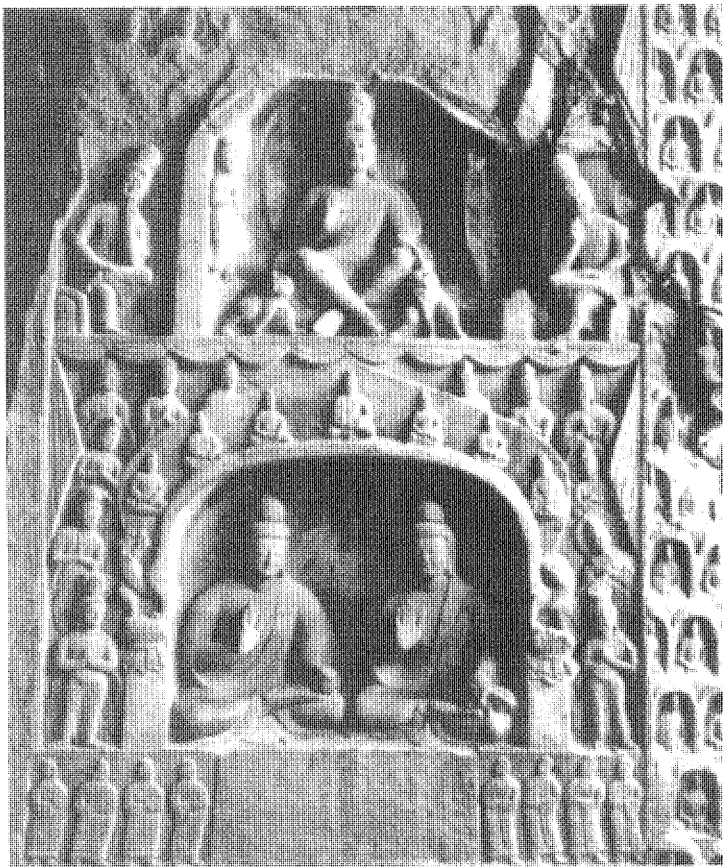


Fig. 9 Images of Maitreya, Śākyamuni and Prabhutaratna dedicated by Nun Huiding and seven other nuns, dated 489

Yungang Cave 17
Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534)
From Henan
Sandstone

From Shanxi Provincial Committee of Cultural Relics & Yungang Institute of Conservation of Cultural Relics, eds., *Yungang shiku*, Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1977, pl. 81

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, Śākyamuni and Prabhutaratna (Fig. 9). The images are arranged in two tiers: Maitreya in a niche above, and Śākyamuni 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 Amitābha shrine dated to 593 (Fig. 10).⁵⁶ A complex altarpiece consisting of the Amitābha Buddha on a double lotus throne, flanked by two bodhisattvas, two disciples, and two pratekabuddhas (?). 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 downcast, 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 names of Li 李, Zhao 趙, and Feng 馮, 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



Fig. 10 Altarpiece with
Amitābha and attendants,
dedicated by eight mothers
(née Li, Zhao and Feng)
of the Fan clan, dated 593
Sui Dynasty (589 – 618)
Gilt bronze
H. 76.5 cm
Museum of Fine Arts,
Boston; Fitz, 47. 1407 –
1412
From *Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston, Selected
Masterpieces of Asian Art*,
Boston: Museum of Fine
Arts, 1992, pl. 121

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 societies 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 negotiated 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 武則天 (r. 692 – 705) of the Tang dynasty to declare herself the first female ruler in China, employing Buddhist ideology to buttress her claim to legitimacy.⁵⁷ 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 undesirable influence of palace women at court, philosophers like Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179? – 104? 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 Joe Cutter 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*

- Woman in Early China* (Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, 1971); Lisa Raphals, *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (Albany, N. Y.: State Univ. of New York Press, 1998).
- 2 As. R. J. Cutter and W. 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." (*Empress and Consorts*, p. 41)
 - 3 Arthur Waley, *Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting* (London: Ernest Benn, Ltd., 1923), 62-3; O'Hara, *The Position of Woman in Early China*, p. 9; Wu Hung, *The Wu Liang Shrine: The Ideology of Early Chinese Pictorial Art* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1989), 168; 252-53.
 - 4 Illustrating the text of the same title written by Zhang Hua 張暉 (232-300), the extant scroll at the British Museum is thought to be a Tang (618-907) copy of Gu's painting; see Arthur Waley, *Introduction to the Study of Chinese Painting*, pp. 50-59.
 - 5 The screen is now in the Shanxi Provincial Museum, Taiyuan.
 - 6 For a discussion of Chinese women in religious traditions other than Buddhism, see Daniel L. Overmyer, "Women in Chinese Religions; Submission: Struggle, Transcendence," in K. Shinohara and G. Schopen eds., *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religion in Honour of Prof. Jan Yün-hua* (Oakville, New York & London: Mosaic Press, 1991), pp. 91-119.
 - 7 Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), "Introduction," pp. 9-28.
 - 8 Since women's pregnancy and childbirths were associated with miseries and pains, discarding the state of being female was a means to alleviate women's sufferings. In the *Sukhāvativyūha*, one of the forty-eight vows Dharmakara-Amitābha Buddha in a previous life-made was to promise women who were born in his paradise would be transformed into men; see Luis Gómez, trans. *The Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 1996), p. 170; Kajiyama, "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, Lisa Raphals 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, admittedly also (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.
 - 10 Nancy Schuster, "Striking a Balance: Women and Images of Women in Early Chinese Buddhism," in Y. Y. Haddad & E. B. Findly, eds., *Women, Religion, and Social Change* (Albany, N. Y.: State Univ. of New York Press, 1985), 87-112; see also Schuster's "Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some

- Mahāratnakūṭasūtras*," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4. 1 (1981): 24-69. Other discussions of the portrayal of women in Buddhist literature include: I. B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1930); Diana Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*; and Yuichi Kajiyama, "Women in Buddhism," *Eastern Buddhism* 15. 2 (1982): 53-70.
- 11 Burton Watson, trans. *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1997), ch. 7, "Regarding Living Things," pp. 83-92.
 - 12 Leon Hurvitz, trans. *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 200-201.
 - 13 Nancy Schuster, "Striking a Balance: Women and Images of Women in Early Chinese Buddhism," p. 89.
 - 14 T 2063; translated into English by Katherine Ann Ts'ai, *Lives of the Nuns* (Honolulu, Univ. of Hawai'i Press, 1994); see also Nancy Schuster, "Striking a Balance," pp. 93-103.
 - 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 sons rather than on daughters, especially the eldest son or the only son. Declaring obeisance to the Buddha and the *sangha* also meant defection from the state; these fundamental conflicts with Chinese social values have aroused clerical debates and tension in Buddhism's interactions with Chinese society.
 - 16 Katherine A. Ts'ai, *Lives of the Nuns*, P. 7.
 - 17 Janice D. Willis, "Nuns and Benefactresses: The Role of Women in the Development of Buddhism," in Haddad & Findly, eds., *Women, Religion, and Social Change*, pp. 59-85.
 - 18 Romila Thapar, "Patronage and Community," in Barbara Stoler Miller, ed., *The Powers of Art: Patronage in Indian Culture* (Delhi, Oxford & New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), 19-34; see also "Introduction," by B. S. Miller, in the same volume, pp. 1-18.
 - 19 "Nuns and Benefactresses," p. 77.
 - 20 *Biqiuni zhuan*, pp. 935, 936; *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (*Biography of Eminent Monks*), Huijiao 慧皎 (497-554) comp., T. 2059, vol. 50, p. 343; Nancy Schuster, "Striking a Balance: Women and Images of Women in Early Chinese Buddhism," pp. 92-93.
 - 21 Note Zürcher's use of the word "dangerous," *The Buddhist Conquest of China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), vol. 1, p. 110.
 - 22 Jennifer Holmgren, "The Harem in Northern Wei Politics - 398 - 498 A. D.," in *Marriage, Kinship and Power in Northern China* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Variorum, 1995), ch. 4, pp. 71-96. Rpt. from *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 26 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983).
 - 23 *Ibid.*, pp. 84-96. Empress Dowager Wenming's biography is in Wei Shou 魏收 comp., *Wei shu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju ed., 1974), *juan* 13, pp. 328-331; a translation of this biography is in Archibald Wenley, "The Grand Empress Dowager Wên Ming and the Northern Wei Necropolis at Fang Shan," *Freer Gallery of Art Occasional Papers* 1. 1 (1947). See also Jennifer Holmgren, "Women and Political Power in the Traditional To-pa Elite: A Preliminary Study of the Biographies of Empresses in the *Wei-shu*," *Monumenta Serica* 35 (1981-83): 33-74.

- 24 The Feng clan's claim to Chinese ancestry may be problematic; some sources regarded the Feng clan as "barbarized Chinese," or "sinicized, politically influential, non-chinese families." See Jennifer Holmgren, "Social Mobility in the Northern Dynasties: A Case Study of the Feng of Northern Yen," *Monumenta Serica* 35(1981-83): 19-32.
- 25 For discussions of the Xianbei and Northern Wei see Ma Changshou 馬長壽, *Wuhuan yu Xianbei* 烏桓與鮮卑 (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1962); Lu Yaodong 遼耀東, *Cong Pingcheng dao Luoyang* 從平城到洛陽 (Taipei: Luanjing, 1979); and Le Kang, "An Empire for a City: Cultural Reforms of the Hsiao-wen Emperor (A. D. 471-499)," Ph. D. dissertation (Yale University, 1983).
- 26 Studies of Yungang include Mizuno Seiichi 水野清一 and Nagahiro Toshio 長廣敏雄 *Ūnko sekkutsu* 雲岡石窟 (Kyoto: Kyoto daigaku jimbun kagaku kenkyūsho, 1951-56), 16 vols; *Zhongguo shiku: Yungang shiku* 中國石窟·雲岡石窟 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1991), 2 vols.
- 27 Her brother, Feng Xi 馮熙, was also known for his lavish patronage of Buddhism, from building temples and pagodas to making images and copying *sūtras*. The biography of Feng Xi (*Wei shu*, *juan* 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 tripitaka (some of the *sūtras* he commissioned have been found at Dunhuang). When criticized for costing too many lives in building pagodas in mountainous and remote areas, Feng replied that in later times people would only see the built monuments and not know that men and oxen were killed; see Jao Tsung-饒宗頤, "Fong Hi, des Wei du Nord, et les manuscrits bouddhiques, trouvés à Touen-houang," *Contributions aux études sur Touen-houang*, 1979 (the article is also published in Chinese, in *Xuantang jilin shilin* 選堂集林·史林, vol. 1, Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1982); Su Bai, "Pingcheng shili de jixu he 'Yungang moshi' de xingcheng yu fazhan 平城實力的集聚和'雲岡模式'的形成與發展" in *Zhongguo shiku: Yungang shiku*, vol. 1, pp. 187-88.
- 28 The five large cave chapels with colossal Buddhas, nos. 19-20, belong to the first period (c. 450-470), while caves nos. 15, 16 as well as a number of smaller caves, some attached to earlier, larger cave-chapels, fall into the third period, from around 490s (around the time when Xiaowen moved the capital to Luoyang) onward; see Su Bai, *Zhongguo shikushi yanjiu* 中國石窟寺研究 (Beijing: Wenwu Press, 1996), 89-113; Su's discussion of the Yungang cave-temples is also in *Zhongguo shiku: Yungang shiku*, pp. 17-97.
- 29 Mizuno & Nagahiro *Unkō sekkutsu*, 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 Stele Tradition in China," Ph. D. dissertation (Harvard University, 1995), pp. 294-303.
- 30 Wong, "The Buddhist Stele Tradition," pp. 273-316; see also nt. 25.
- 31 Wenming's niece was also murdered in 499 as a result of a power struggle between the Feng clan and the imperial Tuoba line; see Jennifer Holmgren, "Social Mobility in the Northern Dynasties: A Case Study of the Feng of Northern Yen," *Monumenta Serica* 35(1981-83), p. 30.
- 32 An in-depth study of Emperor Dowager Ling and the historians' treatment of her is in Jennifer Holmgren, "Empress Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei and the T'o-pa Sinicization Question," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 18(1978): 123-170; Holmgren's article also consists of an

- annotated translation of the official biography of the empress dowager in *Wei shu*, *juan* 13, pp. 337-340.
- 33 T 2092; translated into English by W. J. F. Jenner, *Memories of Loyang: Yang Hsüan-chih and the Lost Capital (495-534)* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1981), and by Wang Yi-t'ung, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984). Jenner also discussed Northern Wei history and Luoyang as a capital in *Memories of Loyang* (pt. 1; chs. 1-6).
- 34 Jenner, *Memories of Loyang*, p. 148.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 151.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 37 Jingming Monastery was founded by Emperor Xuanwu during the Jingming reign (500-03); *ibid.*, p. 207.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 185-88, 210-12.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 169.
- 40 Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667), comp. *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (*Further Biographies of Eminent Monks*), T. 2060, vol. 50, *juan* 1, p. 428.
- 41 Studies of Northern Wei Buddhism include Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Han Wei liang jin Nanbeichao fojiaoshi* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史. 2 vols. 1st ed. 1938. (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1983); and Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆, *Shina bukkyōshi kenkyū: Hoku-Gi hen* 支那佛教史研究·北魏篇 (Tokyo: Kobundo shobo, 1942); Kenneth K. S. Ch'en. *Buddhism in China*. (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964).
- 42 "Gongxian shikushi de diaozuo niandai ji tedian 鞏縣石窟的雕鑿年代及特點," in Henan sheng wenwu yanjiu suo 河南省文物研究所, ed. *Zhongguo shiku: Gongxian shikushi* 中國石窟·鞏縣石窟 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1989), pp. 191-99.
- 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 Xiaoming's reign, the emperor had his grand-mother's tomb moved to a more appropriate site and Empress Dowager Ling took part in the pomp and ceremony of the occasion; Jennifer Holmgren, "Empress Dowager Ling of the Northern Wei," p. 133. Empress Wenzhao's biography is in *Weishu*, *juan* 13, pp. 335-336.
- 45 Tsukamoto Zenryū, *Shina bukkyōshi kenkyū: Hoku-Gi hen*, pp. 430-33.
- 46 *Zhongguo shiku: Longmen shiku* 中國石窟·龍門石窟 vol. 1 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1991), pl. 155.
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp. 433-40.
- 48 *Ibid.*, pp. 440-45.
- 49 *Zhongguo shiku: Binglingsi shiku* 中國石窟·炳靈寺石窟 (Beijing: Wenwu, 1989), pl. 36.
- 50 For example, the Wei Wenlang 魏文朗 Stele, a Buddha-Daoist stele dated to 424, portrays the chief donor, Wei, and his wife prominently at the bottom of the stele, along with members of the extended family; see Zhang Yan 張硯, "Chūgoku Senseishō Yōken no hilin 中國陝西省耀縣的碑林," trans. Wang Jianxin 王建新, pt. 1, *Bukkyō geijutsu* 佛教藝術 205 (1992): 77-89; Wong, "The Beginnings of the Buddhist Stele Tradition," pp. 12-58.
- 51 See Ning Qiang's discussion in this volume.

- 52 Jacques Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, trans. Franciscus Verellen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1995), 259-77; Yamazaki Hiroshi 山崎宏, *Shina chūsei bukkōnotenkai* 支那中世仏教の展開 (Tokyo: Shimizu shoten, 1942), 765-831; see also Wong's discussion of the Buddhist adaptation of the Chinese *she* 社 and *yi* 邑 religious organizations as well as the tablet, "The Beginning of the Buddhist Stele Tradition in China," pp. 157-271, 294-99.
- 53 Wong "The Buddhist Stele Tradition," see nt. 52.
- 54 See Ma Changshou, *Beiming suojian Qian Qin zhi Sui chu de Guangzhong buzū* 碑銘所見前秦至隋初的關中部族 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1985).
- 55 Jenner, *Memories of Loyang*, pp. 166-67.
- 56 John E. Lodge, "The Buddha of Measureless Light and the Land of Bliss," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 24(1926): 2-10; Kojiro Tomita, "The Chinese Bronze Buddhist Group of A. D. 593 and Its Original Arrangement," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 43(1945): 14-19.
- 57 Yang Len-sheng suggested that the high position of women in northern China (during the Northern and Southern Dynasties) may have helped to inspire Empress Wu to declare herself emperor, "Female Rulers in China," *Excursions in Sinology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), p. 61. For study of Empress Wu see Antonino Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century* (Naples: Istituto Univ. Orientale, 1976).

南北朝時期之婦女資助佛教造像(摘要)

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這篇文章審視佛教傳入中國後在宗教及社會上所導致的若干改變，集中討論女性以俗世信徒或出家人的身份在贊助佛教藝術中所扮演的角色。這些變化發生於佛教傳遍全中國的南北朝時期。當時佛教成為一種融合分裂國家的文化社會力量。在佛教所帶來的種種改變中包括女性社會生活的開展。

中國在漢代將儒家思想視為正統。以強調倫理來成就社會安定的儒家思想，制定了一套角色嚴明的社會結構，其中婦女多局限在家庭範圍之內。她們所接受的教養使她們對父母敬重，對丈夫忠貞，對兒子關愛。只有在生下兒子成為母親後，女人才擁有權威和力量。婦女所受的是家事訓練，對公共及政府事務則不容參與。在宮廷中，婦女只能出入於內宮，不得涉足於處理國家大事的外殿。詮釋陰陽思想的漢代哲學家也將女性的陰柔視為次於男性的陽剛，因此將女人貶為次於男人的性別。劉向(前79-8年)所纂《列女傳》敘述貞節列女事迹，為儒家理想女性特質作出定義。雖然書中不乏具有睿智才干的婦女，她們多在家庭範圍內活動來展示她們的婦德。

究竟佛教為中國婦女提供了什麼改變？作為佛教婦女信徒的意義又是什麼呢？佛教婦女出家修行的制度在中國開始於公元四世紀，其在宗教與社會層面上為中國婦女所開拓的新的途徑包括在宗教層面上，婦女可藉由出家修行從事思想或心靈上的追求；在社會層面上，尼寺成為無家可歸或逃避婚姻的婦女的避難所。比丘尼及婦女信徒積極參與佛教事業的經營，出資贊助造像、興建寺廟、傳抄佛經等。由於佛教造像中“捨”與“追福”的觀念與儒家為父母祖先盡孝道的思想吻合，相關的資助活動在中國很快被接受并廣泛流傳。中國婦女對佛教的資助參與容許她們一方面完善婦女的社會角色，另一方面又可超越社會角色的限制。尤其對皇室婦女而言，參與佛教事業的經營有助於實現她們的政治企圖。為探討佛教為婦女提供的各種機會及婦女如何透過資助佛教事業來提升她們的社會地位，我將以供養人像、銘文、比丘尼傳記、歷史及其他文獻材料為基礎，將女性供養人分為兩大類型：比丘尼及俗世婦女信徒。對於後者，我又進一步將之區分為后妃、貴族婦女、士紳婦女及平民婦女。

1. 后妃

北魏(386-534年)期間,至少有兩位慷慨贊助佛教藝術的著名后妃,即文明馮太后以及靈太后胡氏。拓跋氏所建立的北魏政權設定一系列措施以防範后妃干政。比如皇太子的生母被迫自殺,以防止日後母以子貴而取得政權;得以升格為皇妃的宮女多半沒有子嗣;她們經常來自被征服的外族,因此不會對皇室形成威懾等等。然而,這些措施無法防範皇太后通過所收養的皇孫左右政權,文明馮太后便是通過皇孫孝文皇帝干預國事。由於她是漢族血統,文明馮太后積極促使孝文皇帝推行漢化政策,亦大力支持雲岡石窟寺的開鑿。她對於佛教的贊助鞏固了她在皇室中及政治上的權威地位。佛教也是在她在位期間成為北魏國教。靈太后胡氏亦積極扶助佛教,并以資助著名的洛陽永寧寺及其九層佛塔知名。可能由於其在宗教活動中具有的權力,傳統史書多將北魏的衰亡歸罪於她的奢華揮霍。與之相比,文昭皇后則在賓陽中洞被塑造為傳統式的皇后和母親。這一洞窟是宣武帝為紀念其父孝文帝和其母文昭皇后而建的,通過這一工程體現了他作為孝子和佛教皇室贊助者的雙重身份。

2. 貴族婦女

龍門石窟寺中有許多年代約在公元490至520年間由北魏貴族婦女贊助的造像。這些造像多半沒有女性供養人的形象,僅以銘文記載造像緣由及供養人身份。不同於男性貴族為北魏朝廷及皇帝發願贊助的愛國造像,女性供養人贊助的造像多半題獻給其死去的丈夫或兒子。這樣的發願造像與其性別角色相符。

3. 士紳婦女

早期金銅佛上的施主形象常著胡裝,男子著褲,女子著高冠長袍。由於漢化的結果,供養人像在公元六世紀前已著漢服。男性與女性供養人像有時伴以馬匹與牛車,以表明其士紳地位。此類供養贊助行為中,婦女多半具有與男性同等的地位。

4. 集體供養

以義邑方式而成的集體供養首先出現於北方;雲岡石窟寺內有許多此類範例。義邑中的供養人為平民百姓,他們以集體的方式贊助建造平民個人無法負擔的大型造像。在這類造像上的供養人像通常以性別分開排列,僧尼有時與俗世信徒混合。義邑多半由地方社區成員組成,地方寺廟的住持僧侶擔任領袖。此類義邑組織使平民婦女有參與公共事務的機會。然而,所有義邑職務均由男性信徒擔任。如僧尼參加此類組織的話,領導權則由僧人擔負。供養銘文顯示有些比丘尼在出家之前曾有俗世家庭生活。她們為死去的父母、丈夫、或兒子造像。在南方,比丘尼傳指出有些比丘尼乃是當時的思想領袖,她們的布法講道吸引大批聽眾。然而文獻對這些比丘尼的生活則少有記載。

漢唐之間的宗教藝術與考古

巫 鴻 主編



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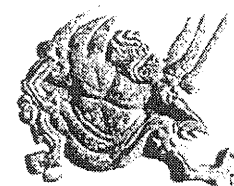
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