

Luoyang Reborn

In the year 515, Empress Dowager Ling commissioned the construction of the tallest building that anybody in the then known world had ever seen. The building was a Buddhist stūpa, otherwise known as a pagoda, and it stood in the center of her capital city, Luoyang. Positioned in front of the palace on the west side of the central avenue, the stūpa was the showcase structure within the palace's own religio-political complex, the Eternal Peace Monastery (Yongning si). Nine stories tall and covered with rich decoration, the stūpa soared high into the sky like a glimmering jewel. Completed in the year 519, this veritable wonder of the world stood for less than a decade. It was destroyed by fire after the empress dowager's murder in 528, when Luoyang was sacked.

The empress dowager's Luoyang must have seemed modern and extravagant to everyone who visited the city; however, in the year 494, when the Northern Wei moved its capital there, Luoyang was in ruins. Having served as the capital city for a number of prior empires—most notably that of the Eastern Han (23–220)—the city of Luoyang was synonymous with imperial rule in early and medieval China. Its very name still evokes ancient capitals and their cycles of rise and decline. For those people in Northern Wei era Luoyang who saw the capital rebuilt, the feeling they had must have been one of tremendous energy and excitement. In the year 515, when the empress dowager began her regency, the city had been resurrected with an imposing palatial complex, with Buddhist monasteries and nunneries of all varieties, and with the late Emperor Xuanwu interred in a luxurious tomb at the imperial burial site north of the city. The neighborhoods and markets of the city were flourishing, and construction at the Buddhist cave site at Longmen had begun. By the year 519, the empress dowager's signature

stūpa at the Eternal Peace Monastery was completed, as were many other majestic Buddhist complexes. Construction at Longmen had continued, with cavernous and highly decorated grottos being added month after month. Luoyang was reborn in majestic splendor.

Luoyang was built on the north bank of the Luo River, a tributary of the Yellow River, along a north-south axis and inside an enclosing wall. The palace was at the north end of the city, and its main entrance faced the central avenue, which bisected the city's markets and living quarters. During the Eastern Han, important structures of imperial legitimation were built just outside the city's southern gate, near the river. Two of these structures are important to our story of the formation of rule by Buddhist women in the medieval period: The imperial observatory or the numinous platform (*lingtai*) and the bright hall (*mingtang*). The Eastern Han court entombed their royals at a site east of the city called Mount Mang. The Northern Wei capital at Luoyang maintained much of this structure, burying their imperial dead at Mount Mang, constructing their palace at the northern end of the enclosed city, and building up the site of the Eastern Han numinous platform at the south of the city. Even in their prior northern capital of Pingcheng (modern-day Datong), they utilized the Han court's imperial structures and built a bright hall for the purpose of their own rituals of political legitimation.¹

As akin to each other as Han and Northern Wei Luoyang were in their bones, two important differences between them remained in their connective tissue. The first of these differences concerned Buddhism. Buddhist persons, ideas, and texts started to arrive in the central plains of China along the Yellow River basin sometime during the Eastern Han period; however, their presence was limited and the Han court never exclusively patronized the Buddhist religion. By the time of the founding of the Northern Wei, Buddhist persons and things of all types had spread rapidly throughout both the northern reaches of the old Han territories and the central plains. Unlike its Han predecessor, then, Northern Wei era Luoyang was a Buddhist city. And, like Buddhism itself, it was also multiethnic. Ruled over by the Taghbach imperial clan and replete with the presence of other Inner Asian traders, translators, and royals, Northern Wei era Luoyang looked, smelled, and tasted differently than Han era Luoyang did. Small glimpses of this can be found in the archeological record, where some statues of men have beards and boots that identify them as peoples from the Inner Asian steppe and where some tombs have identifiably Zoroastrian funerary beds.² But even in this Northern Wei multi-ethnic capital, we can discern connection to the Han dynasty. The Han rulers had annexed the so-called "western regions" (*xiyu*), which were accessed from the central plains through the Hexi corridor and included large segments of Inner Asia that we today commonly call the Chinese province of Xinjiang. The Han rulers and politicians were thereby early facilitators of a long process of cultural exchange and confrontation along the

Silk Roads, and their Luoyang was also markedly diverse in terms of its population. By the time of the Northern Wei, trade routes between the central plains and the western regions were well traveled and increasing numbers of peoples of different origin lived in the big cities along them, including Luoyang at the eastern edge of the network.

The empress dowager was born in Anding, a prefecture that would have been at the western edge of the territory occupied by the Han empire prior to its annexation of the western regions. This region, just at the entrance to the Hexi corridor through modern-day Gansu province and along the ancient Silk Roads that connected the Han empire with its Western Protectorate, served as a conduit between the major centers of the Sinitic, Iranian, and Indic worlds. It was a region of the medieval world characterized by ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity and hybridity. It was also characterized by Buddhism. Situated geographically between the two most famous centers for Buddhist textual translation that produced the scriptures most germane to the practice of Buddhism across East Asia—Guzang (modern-day Wuwei), where the translator Dharmakṣema (Ch. Tan Wuchen; 385–433) worked, and Chang'an, where Kumārajīva worked (Ch. Jiumoluoshi 334–413)—the region from which the empress dowager and her family hailed would have been a place where Buddhist objects, people, and texts commonly circulated. During the first three decades of the fifth century, this region also saw the creation of early Buddhist grottos that would come to be so important to the Northern Wei's own projects of Buddhist grotto building: Both Tianti shan and Maiji shan, with their colossal Buddhas, are near the well-traversed routes that lead to major centers and cities in the region. Furthermore, if one continues the journey from Chang'an, through the empress dowager's ancestral home, to Guzang, and then beyond, one would eventually encounter Dunhuang, the great monastic city on the Silk Road that Dharmakṣema came from, and much further, the kingdom of Kucha, where Kumārajīva was famously imprisoned and translated Buddhist scripture.

In a sense, then, the empress dowager's own arrival in the capital reflects much of the cultural and demographic change that all the old Han territories were experiencing in the reformation of empire during the medieval period: Just as she came to Luoyang as a Buddhist woman from a culturally hybrid region at the periphery of the old Han empire, so too did the cultural networks that she was embedded in. Having been born in the latter half of the fifth century, just on the coattails of famous Buddhist translation projects and building projects that were formative for the development of East Asian forms of Buddhism throughout the medieval period, she arrived in the central plains as part of a Buddhist vanguard from the regions of the empire where Buddhism was flourishing most impressively. The story of her move to the central plains and her rise in power therefore tracks the movement of both Buddhist ideas and multicultural life to a major center of power: Luoyang. Although the empress dowager likely



MAP 1. Places and territories discussed that were under Northern Wei jurisdiction in the sixth century and that are important to the peoples and events discussed in this study.

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came directly to Luoyang from her family's region in Gansu, her benefactor at court—her aunt, the Buddhist nun Sengzhi—took a much longer route. With the Northern Wei's political takeover of the empress dowager's ancestral lands in the mid-fifth century, the nun Sengzhi went first to their northern capital of Pingcheng—a trip of almost two thousand kilometers. Hence, when we think about the arrival of the Northern Wei court in Luoyang in the year 494, we need to think not only of those who ruled it but of the collection of people that they ruled over, the people who moved with them and who brought their families and their religions with them to the central plains.

In this chapter we journey to the rebuilt and resplendent capital city, Luoyang. Our aim on this journey is to explore the urban life and culture of the city that both sustained and created the empress dowager and that she, in turn, sustained and created. In doing this, we consider the intersecting vectors of ethnicity, religion, and gender that converged in the capital. We concentrate on these three cultural vectors in order to introduce important characteristics of the world that the empress dowager lived in and therefore to understand this

story of the rise of Buddhist women in public and political positions in early medieval China.

LIFE IN THE GLIMMERING CITY

Luoyang served as the Northern Wei capital for a mere forty years, and only in its full splendor for approximately fifteen of those. It was regarded as a wonder of the world in its time, and then it was destroyed. Fortunately for us, one man journeyed back to the ruined capital some twenty years after its demise and wrote a retrospective of the broken city that had been so famed for its Buddhist opulence. This man was named Yang Xuanzhi (fl. fifth century) and his text is called the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* (Luoyang qielan ji). Yang had worked directly for the empress dowager during the final era of her reign.³ After her death and the turbulent ultimate demise of the Northern Wei, Yang relocated to the new center of power, a city called Yecheng, and there he served the Eastern Wei (534–50), which is known to have been the successor of the Northern Wei. Yang states in his *Record* that he was sent back from Yecheng to Luoyang in order to write the official memoir of the old capital's most resplendent Buddhist structures after their sacking and demise.⁴ His text is less journalistic than it is commemorative; seeking to recall the splendor of Luoyang's Buddhism after its ruin, Yang returned to the destroyed city in the year 547. His record provides the most detailed description of the empress dowager's stūpa at the Eternal Peace Monastery that we have.⁵ It is the first building that Yang features in his *Record* and he states that it was built by the imperial decree of Empress Dowager Ling and contained more than one thousand rooms for monks. Various records attest to the structure rising ninety *zhang* in to the sky. This would be approximately 248 meters, or the height of more than two American football fields.⁶ The whole structure was embellished with fineries the likes of which dazzled the semimythical founder of Chan Buddhism, Bodhidharma (fl. 6th c.), who had seen the entire Buddhist world in his lifetime and considered the monastery to be without comparison.⁷ Regarding the workmanship and finery of the stūpa, Yang writes:

Within the precincts [of the monastery] was a nine-story pagoda built with a wooden frame. Rising nine hundred feet above the ground, it formed the base for a mast that rose another hundred feet. Together they soared one thousand feet above the ground. You could see it even at a distance of a hundred *li* from the capital. In the course of excavating for the construction of the monastery, thirty golden statues were found deep underground. The empress dowager regarded them as proof of the sincerity of her faith. As a result, she spent all the more lavishly on its construction.

On the top of the mast was a golden vase inlaid with precious stones, with a capacity of twenty-five piculs. Underneath the jeweled vase were thirty tiers of golden plates. In addition, chains linked the mast with each of the four corners

of the pagoda. Golden bells, each about the size of a one-picul jar, were also suspended from the link works.

There were nine roofs, one for each story, with golden bells suspended from the corner of each one, totaling one hundred twenty in all. The pagoda had four sides, each having three doors and six windows, all painted in vermilion lacquer. Each door had five rows of gold studs. Altogether there were 5,400 studs on twenty-four panels of twelve double doors. In addition, the doors were adorned with gold ring knockers. The construction embodied the best masonry and carpentry and its design reached the limit of ingenuity. Its excellence as Buddhist architecture was almost unimaginable. Its carved pillars and gold doorknockers fascinated the eye. When the bells chimed in harmony deep in a windy night, they could be heard over ten *li* away.⁸

According to the archaeological record of the Eternal Peace Monastery, the complex was located a mere five hundred meters from the south gate of the palace, and the two buildings were the tallest structures in Luoyang.⁹ Furthermore, Yang's *Record* states that certain rooms in the monastery were used to house both political prisoners and buddha images given to the Northern Wei court from foreign countries.¹⁰ Although all that remains of the complex is the base of its gigantic and resplendent pagoda, which was said to be the tallest building in the known world,¹¹ excavations of the site have revealed several statuary and ornamental fragments that suggest the opulence of the décor and, perhaps, something about the Buddhists of Luoyang themselves. For example, we can determine that many of the excavated statuary heads are not those of buddhas or Buddhist figures, since they bear the hairstyles and caps of the social elite of the time and show ethnic variation.¹²

The empress dowager's Luoyang was a wonder. Not only did her own project at the Eternal Peace Monastery captivate all those who saw it up close and from afar but the entire city was filled with lesser, though still glimmering, structures. Of the rise of Buddhist infrastructure in Luoyang by the late Northern Wei, Yang boasts:

During the Yongjia (307–313) period of the Jin dynasty, there were only forty-two Buddhist temples [in Luoyang], but when the imperial Wei received the plan to develop the residences of the Song-Luo area (i.e., by moving the capital there) sincere belief overflowed and multiplied and dharma teachings recovered and prospered. Lords, marquis, and nobles cast off their elephants and horses (as donations) just as though they were taking off their shoes. Commoners and influential families gave up their wealth and treasures as if they were just old relics. As such, the brightness accelerated, combing rows of precious pagodas side-by-side, competing to write their brilliance across the skies and vying to imitate the shadows of mountains. Golden shrines and the numinous (*ling*) platform were as high and wide as the Apang [Palaces of the Qin Dynasty (221–207 BCE)].¹³

Not only was the empress dowager's capital visually stunning; it was also lively. Yang's *Record* describes the activities that took place in these Buddhist buildings

that competed with mountains, and his description is positively carnivalesque. For example, in his description of the imperially funded Nunnery of the Joyous View (Jingle si), Yang records that the nuns in residence enjoyed a splendid life as urban socialites, hosting a variety of entertainment opportunities for the people of the city. The Nunnery of the Joyous View faced directly toward the Eternal Peace Monastery, and I suspect that its name, “Joyous View,” recalls its vista. The nunnery is described as a place of leisure with lush, shady gardens where the people came to enjoy a good show. The description of the shows at the nunnery reads:

At the time of the “great fast” [six monthly fasts, *posadha*],¹⁴ there was constant music performed by female entertainers: the sounds of their songs coiled around the beams of the roof and the sleeves of the dancers swirled around with the melodies from the instruments, bringing wondrous enchantment.

As this was a nunnery, men were not able to enter. Those who were allowed to look considered it to be like arriving in paradise. After the death of Prince Wenxian, temple restrictions were more lenient and the commoners went in and out without obstruction. Thereupon, [Yuan] Yue, prince of Runan, who was the brother of Wenxian, renovated the nunnery and summoned all manner of musical performers to display their talents inside the nunnery.

Strange birds and rare beasts danced in the courtyards and flew into the sky, creating an illusion the likes of which nobody had ever seen. Bizarre and heterodox arts were all arrayed: “skinning the donkey,” “pulling out of the well,” and planting a date seed that would instantly bear fruit that everybody could eat.¹⁵ The ladies and gentlemen who saw the performances were utterly bewildered.¹⁶

The Nunnery of the Joyous View was established by a prince of the imperial house named Yuan Yi (487–520). Yuan Yi was the lover of the empress dowager after the death of Emperor Xuanwu, who was his half-brother, and he therefore came from the highest strata of the imperial elite. That he was both the lover of the empress dowager and the chief patron of the nunnery should assure us that the empress dowager knew of and sanctioned the jubilant atmosphere contained within. The story of this nunnery becomes even more fascinating after Yuan Yi’s death in 520. On his death, his full brother, Yuan Yue (494–533)—whom we will meet again—is said to have changed the rules of the nunnery so that both men and women could enter its gates and behold the magical spectacle within. As he is written about in the official dynastic history of the Northern Wei, Yue stands out as a transgressive character. His official biography describes him as “queer by nature,” while it also records that he undertook heterodox religious practices and engaged in homosexual relationships.¹⁷ Such an explicit chronicle of homosexual activities among the ruling elite is extraordinarily rare in the writings of the Ru and stands out dramatically as a marker of difference in the biography of Yue. That Yue was the patron of the Nunnery of the Joyous View and that his sex life was presumably known in his own lifetime suggests that Luoyang Buddhism was not the Buddhism of texts, doctrine, meditation, and the monastic elite. Luoyang Buddhism

was widely diverse and the *Record* narrates all kinds of persons and activities that enjoyed Luoyang's cultural life from inside Buddhist spaces.

In a similar explanation of the types of social activities that the nuns of Luoyang enjoyed, when discussing a eunuch-funded nunnery in the heart of the city that was constructed for high-ranking women of the court, the *Record* states that the nunnery was home to one statue of a buddha as well as two statues of bodhisattvas that were taken on procession on the seventh day of the fourth month of the year. This procession was matched in fanfare by another procession undertaken by the private temple of another of the empress dowager's courtiers. That procession is also described in carnivalesque terms: It was a party with all manner of enjoyments. The description runs:

On the fourth day of the fourth month,¹⁸ this statue was always taken out and pulled by *bi-xie* and lions in front and with sword swallows, fire spitters, and galloping horses at the sides, and with unordinary things like flag-staff climbers and rope walkers. With such strange tricks and bizarre clothing in the capital city, they were unmatched in the capital. Wherever the statue stopped, spectators would encircle it like a wall. Carrying each other and jumping about, it often happened that people died.¹⁹

Although the commissioning of glamorous and resplendent Buddhist pleasure gardens and leisure spaces in Luoyang was a project of the wealthy, the *Record* details how these spaces functioned to cut across class and social barriers. The public of Luoyang enjoyed themselves in Buddhist monasteries that were open to them and that offered them entertainment, spectacle, celebration, and magic.

Beyond temples and their activities, one act of Buddhist patronage that the public of the city broadly engaged in was the commissioning of Buddhist statuary. Although the cost for the creation of buddha images in the Northern Wei era was exorbitant, it was still a widely popular practice that transcended class barriers. Amy McNair has conjecturally calculated the cost of creating a niche with an image and estimates that the cost of a niche of 3.1 square meters would be approximately equal to half the year's wage of a government official.²⁰ Thus, the Buddhist grottos in Longmen and other similar sites across the empire should only have been accessible to wealthy donors, but that was not the case. As we will explore in chapter 4, epigraphical sources contain the patronage records of collective village societies that pooled their wealth in order to build Buddhist statuary and images. Furthermore, the epigraphical record also bears witness to lone donors of lesser means who used their limited resources to build statuary. Such donors were sometimes found among the common people of pious faith. One example of such an inscription is the Zhai Man stele analyzed and translated by Dorothy Wong.²¹ As to the great expense of the stele, the donor, Zhai Man, says that not only that he bankrupted his family to build a statue of the future buddha, Maitreya, but also that he had to forsake his own wife.²²

Amy McNair understands this donor's claim to have bankrupted his family as a rhetorical device that exaggerated his piety in order to ensure that his investment in spiritual life would be returned at a high rate. McNair argues that donors participated in a religious economy of the "Karmic Gift" whereby,²³ on commissioning the image of a buddha, an intangible karmic exchange was made between the support of the image from the donors and the support of the buddha to the donors.²⁴ This "Karmic Gift" would therefore be a financial transaction that individuals and groups undertook in order to create positive karmic fruits for themselves, their kin, and their empire. They evidently made this financial exchange in huge numbers, as the economy of merit exchange took place in the early medieval period on a large scale.

MEDIEVAL MULTICULTURALISM

Unlike the Han empire, the Northern Wei was not ruled by Han peoples who thought of the central plains as their ancestral homeland. The rulers of the Northern Wei court traced their native lands to regions of the modern Chinese provinces of Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang. These two areas are very different: the central plains are flat and arid; the northern regions of Heilongjiang are lushly forested with low mountains. Fed by the Yellow River, the central plains have long been settled owing to attractiveness of the land's rich soil; meeting eventually with the Mongolian grasslands, Inner Mongolia and its eastern neighbor of Heilongjiang, on the other hand, are regions of the world where horse breeding and seasonal migration have provided the means of food and mobility. As previously discussed, the peoples who settled on the central plains are known through the ethnonym of "Han," whereas the peoples who founded the Northern Wei are known through the reconstructed ethnonym of "Taghbach." The Taghbach are believed to be a subgroup of the larger Inner Asian *Serbi (Ch. Xianbei) ethnogroup.²⁵ These rulers from Inner Asia spoke a language related to modern Mongolian,²⁶ but during the latter half of the dynasty they also began speaking the language of the Han peoples from the central plains at court and, in 494, took the Han-styled name of "Yuan" as their own, making it the name of the ruling clan of the Northern Wei. Therefore, when I discuss members of the imperial clan who died prior to 494, I use the ethnonym "Taghbach" in my analysis; however, for members of the imperial clan who died after 494, I use their adopted name "Yuan."

The Northern Wei was a northern empire of the Southern and Northern Dynasties period (Nanbeichao) (420–589), a time of political and social division that is bookended by the fall of the Han in 220 and reunification by the Sui dynasts in 581 (–618). The Northern Wei was arguably the most successful of the northern polities during this time, which is demonstrated by the fact that they expanded their southern border south of the Yellow River and established their capital in Luoyang. In general, the Southern and Northern Dynasties period was characterized

by dramatic transitions brought about through dual migrations. Areas south of the Yangzi River were settled by southward-moving migrants from the old Han empire in response to increased conquest of prior Han territories by Inner Asian populations.²⁷ The Northern Wei is considered a “conquest dynasty” of this sort in the writings of the Ru scholars because it was a collective of Inner Asian peoples ruled over by the Taghbach who moved their southern border far into the territories of the old Han dynasty and thereby spread their cultural, military, and political traditions across the central plains. Jennifer Holmgren argues that the Northern Wei’s identification as a “conquest dynasty” has affected its status as a legitimate topic of historical inquiry in modern scholarship.²⁸ In other words, until recently, there has not been adequate scholarly interest in the study of the Northern Wei state or its court in any language because of the enduring legacy of cultural chauvinism and ethnocentrism in political and literary texts written by the Ru scholars, which have long dominated the study of Chinese history. Despite the comparative lack of secondary scholarship on the Northern Wei, Scott Pearce argues compellingly for a recognition of the empire’s importance for the later development of Chinese and East Asian history by characterizing the empire as a formative example of the type of governments created by various Inner Asian populations, which would continue to overtake large swaths of the Chinese heartland for the remainder of the first two millennia.²⁹

In the context of the Southern and Northern Dynasties, and as written about by the Ru, Han peoples were considered those who traced their received history through a lineage of imperial dynasties by using a compendium of texts composed in their own language. The northern dynasties were ruled over by cultural Others to the Han peoples—that is, ethnically different persons who did not compose texts in their original languages and who had largely been nomadic, horse-breeding groups unified along linguistic and familial lines. During the Han era, these groups were judged to be “primitive” and hence inferior to Han peoples owing to their lack of proximity to the imperial center.³⁰ In this study, the English rendering *non-Han* is used to refer to these groups, which, in Ru texts before the Tang are referred to by more generic terms such as *hu* (mounted nomads) or *fan* (foreigner).³¹ In using the term *non-Han*, I again follow Abramson who argues that the term adequately expresses the outsider identity of these peoples without being burdened by the clear pejorative meanings of indigenous terms in Literary Chinese, even though those pejorative meanings were certainly in use at the time in question. Therefore, the present study employs Abramson’s terms *Han* and *non-Han* to refer to the ethnic Self in historiographical and political writings of the Ru scholars and the peoples that were considered ethnic Others in these same writings. I use these terms with the caveat that they are imperfect but important. Although we know that people and families had a variety of mixed family lineages, and although we know that lineage falsification was common, we also know

that these ideas of cultural insiders and cultural outsiders are a formative feature of historiography from the period, and they are important for understanding the cultural practices and attitudes evoked throughout this study.

The term *non-Han* therefore encompasses many different ethnic and cultural groups that Han peoples came in contact with and wrote about. For our purposes here, we will focus on the Taghbach. The histories and social customs of the Serbi people, from whom the Taghbach are believed to have been descended, are found in the annals of Chinese historiography that describe Han interactions with non-Han peoples. An example of such annotation is retained in the *Later History of the Han* (Hou Han shu), which tells us that the Serbi took their name from a mountain of the same name,³² that they had large wedding ceremonies wherein they cut their hair for the one and only time in their lives,³³ and that the animals they hunted provided luxurious and warm pelts that they used for fine jackets.³⁴ A longer narrative of the foundation of the Taghbach is chronicled in a genealogy from the “Prefatory Annals” (Xuji) of the dynastic history of the Northern Wei, the *Book of the Wei*, which, though written in the Literary Chinese of the Ru scholars, is said to have been derived from Taghbach oral history.³⁵ This genealogy says that the ethnic birthplace of the Taghbach is found in modern-day Heilongjiang province in a mountainous area home to the Gaxian Cave (Gaxian dong). As Charles Holcombe notes, however, there is an inherent problem in locating the birthplace of a nomadic group. He argues that what does appear to be plausible is that by the 440s, Northern Wei Emperor Taiwu (r. 424–52) “came to believe this cave contained his family’s old ancestral temple.”³⁶ Emperor Taiwu therefore sent his court secretary, Li Chang (fl. fifth century), on a mission to examine the site. After arriving there, Li Chang decided that this cave was the home of the original Serbi clan. He therefore undertook rituals for the ancestors within the cave, and in 443 he carved an inscription in 201 Chinese characters that is still in situ today.³⁷ A recent archeological survey of the site records the existence of ritual structures inside the cave and therefore supports the idea that rituals were undertaken there at some early date, though we have no way of knowing if such rituals predate Emperor Taiwu’s official acknowledgment of the cave as the ancestral temple of his clan.³⁸ The cave is still an active location for ritual today, and visitors come to circumambulate the central ritual platform while making offerings to ancient Taghbach ancestors.³⁹

Returning to the Taghbach lineage preserved in the “Prefatory Annals” of the *Book of the Wei*, we read that simultaneous to the Eastern Han era the Taghbach were under the direction of the sixth of their clan patriarchs, Taghbach Tuiyin, and had begun a southern migration, settling by a large marsh in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, where they are said to have stayed for seven generations.⁴⁰ After this, the record relates, the group was divided into eight subgroups,⁴¹ some coming under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Han court and some

establishing independent lineages.⁴² Subsequently, according to the record, the remaining Taghbach subgroup succeeded in consolidating its rule and rising up as an independent political entity to eventually establish the Northern Wei in the year 386. The name of this empire hearkens back to a prior northern polity, the Kingdom of Wei (220–66), which also had its capital in Luoyang.⁴³ Although the history of the Taghbach is seamlessly articulated in these “Prefatory Annals,” we must treat the text with skepticism given its anachronistic date, the fact that it is retained in the Literary Chinese of the Ru scholars (and not the Taghbach language), and also because it fits into the particular genre of dynastic history.⁴⁴

First establishing a new sort of empire beyond the northern periphery of the old Han territories, the Taghbach leaders of the Northern Wei eventually made their way south to the northern reaches of the old Han territories and founded their capital city at Pingcheng. They also relocated much of their newly conquered subjects into cities. One estimate suggests that no less than fifty-eight thousand lone persons as well as one hundred thousand households were relocated to Pingcheng before the year 494.⁴⁵ This relocation of subjects went hand-in-hand with the Northern Wei dynasts’ other grand project of population settlement, which they undertook in the 480s and largely in the newly conquered territories along the Yellow River plain: the establishment of an equal-field system that would see regulated amounts of agricultural land allotted, for the most part, to Han populations.⁴⁶ This system remained relatively unchanged throughout the Tang empire and was later used in Japan.⁴⁷ In sum, the story of the building of the Northern Wei empire is a story of the resettlement of large amounts of northern peoples into newly built cities in the north alongside the later redistribution of newly conquered agricultural lands to Han people in the Yellow River plains. Notably, this policy of land allocation included the distribution of land to women as well as to men.⁴⁸ It did not, however, include populations of largely non-Han peoples from the northern garrisons, and Scott Pearce argues that this failure to incorporate the northern garrisons into the economic life of the dynasty after its move to Luoyang is what would bring about the court’s own downfall. In 528, militarized groups from these northern garrisons would arrive at Luoyang, sack the city, murder the empress dowager and the emperor, and bring about the fall of the Northern Wei.⁴⁹

Although the Taghbach leaders that would become the dynasts of the Northern Wei ruled their polity as the heads of the military known in their own language as **khagan* (*khan* in later Mongolian usage), during the Northern Wei era they adopted the Sinitic tradition’s title of “emperor.” Under such Han-styled leadership, they came south to the Yellow River plains and rebuilt their capital in Luoyang with an emperor ruling from the capital instead of on the frontlines of the military as a *khagan* would. The move to Luoyang was symbolic but also strategic: Luoyang had long been a stronghold of Han infrastructure, statecraft, and

economy.⁵⁰ Resettling the capital in Luoyang corresponded with a different kind of project developing among the ruling elite: the radical effort to remake the court from an Inner Asian polity into a type of government that more closely resembled that of the Han empire. This effort at remaking the government, its policies, and its administration reached its high point under the reign of Emperor Xiaowen, whose project of cultural and political reinvention, based on the original Chinese term *hanhua*, is often referred to as “Sinification.” Xiaowen’s Sinification program reached its apex in the 490s and included the adoption of a bureaucratic system modeled after the Han court, the use of the Literary Chinese for court documents, the conversion of non-Han names at court to Han ones,⁵¹ and the employment of both Han dress and Han individuals at court.⁵²

If we consider Han peoples as the ethnic Self in the writings of the Ru in Literary Chinese and the Taghbach as an example of the ethnic Other in those same writings, we see that the term *Sinification* exposes what Northern Wei historiographers sought to express about the Taghbach. Not arguing for the cultural parity of their non-Han traditions with those of the Han, they instead created a narrative that the Taghbach were holders of the very same heritage. We see this effort at cultural—perhaps, even, ethnic—invention in the opening words of the previously discussed “Prefatory Annals” from the *Book of the Wei*, which are said to chronicle the Taghbach’s indigenous, oral history. The text begins as follows:⁵³

In ancient times, the Yellow Emperor⁵⁴ had twenty-five sons; those who stayed with him became the descendants of Han culture, those who went outside were scattered in the wilderness. Changyi⁵⁵ had a few sons and he conferred the northern lands on them. Within this land there was the great Mountain of the Serbi and from this they took their name. After this, for generations, they became the lords and elders who ruled over the far north, spreading out over the vast wilds while following the movements of their cattle. They used archery for hunting and their customs were pure and uncomplicated. They were accustomed to simplicity and ease and, as such, they had not developed writing. For records, they carved notches into wood and that was all, and for worldly matters both near and far, these were conferred and transferred between men. These resemble the records and registries of the court historians.⁵⁶

This opening to the “Prefatory Annals” of the *Book of the Wei* does more than introduce the nomadic origins of the Taghbach; it also situates them within the larger framework of Chinese historiography by positing that the Taghbach people are descendants of the Yellow Emperor and that they kept records, albeit simple ones, just like their brethren in the Han regions of the empire. Tian Yuqing has analyzed the creation of this narrative as it is retained in the *Book of the Wei*. In his analysis, the received text is the culmination of an ongoing process of historiography from the time of the founding emperor of the Northern Wei, Taghbach



FIGURE 2. Burial figurine of Taghbach horseman from the Northern Wei. Piece is now held at the Musée Cernuschi in Paris, France.



FIGURE 3. Emperor Xiaowen and his procession. Originally carved in the Central Guyang Grotto in Longmen. Circa 522. Now held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Gui (r. 386–409), in the late fourth century, through to Wei Shou's compilation in the sixth century, which relied, in part, on Taghbach oral history though it placed that history in the service of constructing a national history.⁵⁷ Such a national history, written by elite scholars in a genre of literature strongly associated with Han culture and politics, took on the flavor of a Han history, including the narrative of the development of civilization and writing. In sum, Tian argues that the *Book of the Wei's* version of Taghbach historiography should not be considered false; rather, he suggests that it is an outcome of the process of reinvention that the Taghbach leaders themselves embarked on during the making of the Northern Wei empire.⁵⁸ Similarly, it is also the case that the genealogy of the ancestors of the Taghbach house that is delineated in the *Book of the Wei* is matched one-for-one with the genealogy of the Han emperors.⁵⁹

Emperor Xiaowen was the emperor who oversaw the move of the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang in 494, and the story of his relations with his first-born son reveals that the Taghbach adoption of Han cultural norms during their migration south was not without contention. Crown Prince Yuan Xun (483–97) was born in the northern capital of Pingcheng and migrated to the southern capital of Luoyang with his father, Emperor Xiaowen, and the entire court.

Unfortunately for the father/emperor, the son/prince was not fond of Luoyang. The latter's biography in the *Book of the Wei* describes how he repeatedly tried to sneak away from Luoyang to return north but also how his father and his father's advisors prevented him from doing so. In one attempt at escape, he murdered his own advisor who wanted to stop him from fleeing. The biography also tells us that the crown prince was not interested in study (presumably in texts of the Han literary tradition) and that he chafed against the expected comportment and dress of the Han-styled official that he was supposed to be. Ultimately, the crown prince was stripped of his titles and then poisoned to death by his father's own officials at the age of fourteen. He was buried like a commoner somewhere to the south of the city.⁶⁰

FOUNDATIONS OF BUDDHIST KINGSHIP

Beyond the Northern Wei court's official policy of Sinification, the rulers of the court in the latter half of the dynastic line also participated in cultural politics through their patronage of Buddhism. On his accession in 452, the mid-Northern Wei ruler, Emperor Wencheng (r. 452–65), is said to have proclaimed Buddhism as the state religion. The *Book of the Wei* tells us that he decreed the following:

He who deems life and death equal sighs in admiration at [the Buddha's] penetrating insight, and he who observes the [deep] sense of his writings values his subtle understanding. [Buddhism] supports the regulations and prohibitions of kingly government, it augments the good-naturedness of the benevolent and the wise; it repels and rejects all evil, and opens one's eyes to true enlightenment. Therefore since previous dynasties none has but honoured and revered it, and likewise for our ruling house it has always been a matter of veneration.⁶¹

This formal declaration of the empire's support for the tradition of Buddhism illustrates how the ruling elite sought to use religion in their governance and in the legitimation of their own power. They did not, however, always or solely use Buddhism to do this. Emperor Wencheng's grandfather and predecessor, Emperor Taiwu (r. 424–52) violently suppressed Buddhists and their institutions, instead establishing Celestial Masters Daoism as his state religion.⁶² Taiwu supported the use of Daoism for statecraft because it offered a radically new invention of tradition that allowed him to place himself at the center.⁶³ The emperor's wager was, however, unsuccessful; with Buddhism fast becoming the religion of his empire, the dynasty needed to pivot toward the adoption of this tradition in order to survive.

Wencheng's establishment of Buddhism as a state religion coincided with his imperial support for the commencement of the building of the early stratum of the Buddhist grottos at Yungang, just outside the then-Northern Wei capital of



FIGURE 4. A partial overview of the Northern Wei cliffside at Yungang showing its colossal buddha rulers. These caves are all circa 450s. Photo is author's own.

Pingcheng. Although there is debate over the precise date of the initial building of the grottos, most scholars agree on their intention. The original five grottos at Yungang were made to represent the four founding rulers of the dynasty, as well as the then-current ruler, Wencheng.⁶⁴ The original strata of grottos at Yungang were commissioned by Emperor Wencheng in consultation with the highest-ranking Buddhist monk of the empire, a man known as Tanyao (fl. 450).⁶⁵ The construction of Northern Wei emperors as forms and faces of monumental Buddha images at Yungang was a genre of imperial Buddhist practice that continued to develop throughout the dynasty. When the court moved the capital to Luoyang, they soon also funded the construction of the Buddhist grottos at Longmen.

It is arguably the case that women who held political profiles during the Northern Wei era also sought to produce images of themselves as buddhas in the monumental grottos at Yungang and Longmen. This tradition appears to have begun with a powerful empress dowager who ruled earlier than did Empress Dowager Ling. As empress to Wencheng, the woman who came to be called Empress Dowager (*huanghou*) Wenming (442–90) was regent for two emperors—the father, Emperor Xianwen (r. 465–71), and the son who ruled after him, Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–99).⁶⁶ According to the histories of this period in the *Book of the Wei*, this empress dowager had a hand in putting to death Xianwen's birth mother, taking power as regent herself afterward. When Xianwen came of age, an intense power struggle ensued, one that saw Xianwen becoming the earliest recorded “retired emperor” in the year 471 and at the young age of seventeen. Xianwen was

then murdered five years later, but by that time his eldest son, the nine-year-old Emperor Xiaowen, had already been installed on the throne for the five years following his father's early retirement. His regent was Empress Dowager Wenming who was his grandfather's empress but who was not his own grandmother. By the standards of the Northern Wei court, Emperor Xiaowen ruled for a long time, until his death in 499. Famously, he only ruled independently after the Empress Dowager Wenming's death in 490. She had ruled prior to that.

The regencies of both Empress Dowager Wenming and Empress Dowager Ling coincide with a rise in popularity of the dual image of the buddhas Śākyamuni (Ch. Shijiamouni) and Prabhūtaratna (Ch. Duobao), who are seated together in a stūpa, or reliquary, an image that references a story from the *Lotus Sūtra*, where the two buddhas meet together in a jeweled stūpa despite the Buddhological maxim that there can only be one buddha in the world at a time. Scholars refer to this image as it appears on donative inscriptions as the Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna (Ch. Shijia-duobao) image. In his summary of the appearance of Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna images in medieval times, Hou Xudong has demonstrated that the earliest images date to the 470s, that they increase dramatically in the 480s, and that they then begin to decline thereafter.⁶⁷ Significantly, such images disappear almost entirely in the 530s and beyond. The period between the 480s and the 530s, we recall, is the precise period of the reigns of Empress Dowagers Wenming and Ling.

Eugene Wang argues that we can link the early rise in Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna images to the reign of Empress Dowager Wenming. Focusing on the Yungang grottos during the empress dowager's regency, Wang argues that after the initial building of the first five imperial shrines—the so-called Tanyao grottos that gave form to the buddha/ruler identification—the latter stage of building at Yungang included the construction of twinned grottos. Wang believes that these twinned grottos with their buddha images can plausibly be linked to the famous *Lotus Sūtra* scene of the meeting of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna.⁶⁸ He reports that of the chapels that were constructed during Empress Dowager Wenming's coreign with Emperor Xiaowen, eight of the thirteen feature twin niches with twinned buddha images. Wang argues that this twin buddha motif was specifically undertaken to give expression to the dual reign of Empress Dowager Wenming and the then-child Emperor Xiaowen. Having overseen the building of these grottos herself, Wang argues, Empress Dowager Wenming would have wanted her own regency immortalized in the faces of the buddhas at Yungang alongside those of her independent, male predecessors.⁶⁹

In part, Wang's argument relies on evidence from Tang era sources that are more solid than what evidence we have from the Northern Wei era. Before Wu Zetian established her own direct rule as Emperor Wu Zhao, she was empress to Emperor Gaozong (r. 649–83) and is known to have exercised political influence in that role.⁷⁰ So influential was she that she and Gaozong were known as the "Two Sages." Wang believes that the "Two Sages" rule of then Empress Wu with

Emperor Gaozong is linked to a rise in images of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna at Dunhuang that were commissioned during their reign.⁷¹ Based on this, Wang claims that the Northern Wei twinned grottos at Yungang might also suggest a connection between the two rulers of Empress Dowager Wenming and Emperor Xiaowen that was articulated through the bodies of the buddhas in the same way as the original five grottos at the site were connected with other Northern Wei rulers. In sum, Wang argues that just as independent, male Northern Wei rulers were immortalized in the faces and bodies of buddhas at Yungang, so too was the regency rule of Empress Dowager Wenming. This time, however, the expression of this leadership took the form of the twinned buddha image from the *Lotus Sūtra*. Wang therefore suggests that the “Two Sages” rule of Empress Wu and Emperor Gaozong was rooted in the Northern Wei.

Wang’s argument is strengthened through a deeper investigation into Northern Wei materials. Specifically, we have epigraphic evidence that both Empress Dowager Wenming’s rule with Emperor Xiaowen and Empress Dowager Ling’s rule with Emperor Xiaoming were referred to as the “Two Sages” during the times they lived in. As for Empress Dowager Wenming, we can consider a stele inscription that commemorates the building of the Radiant Blessings Monastery (Huifu si). The inscription is dated to 488 and dedicates the building of two, three-storied stūpas at the site to the “Two Sages” of Empress Dowager Wenming and Emperor Xiaowen.⁷² Second, and for Empress Dowager Ling, we have an inscription for the renovation of an old stūpa commissioned by Yuan Yue, the prince of the Northern Wei court who was a half-brother to Emperor Xuanwu and who became patron of the Nunnery of the Joyous View after the death of his full brother, Yuan Yi, who was himself the lover of the empress dowager. The inscription is dated to 524 and dedicates the renovation of the stūpa to the “Two Sages” of Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Xiaoming, wishing that their reign last for ten thousand years and be unobstructed. In a Longmen grotto of a similar period, the Huangfu Gong grotto commissioned by the uncle of the empress dowager, we find a portrait of the empress dowager. Here she is presented in a royal procession that includes Emperor Xiaoming, who walks behind her. The portrait of these “Two Sages,” as Yuan Yue calls them, is carved directly underneath a large-scale Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna image.

As such, what we potentially see in the regency governments of Northern Wei women is the expression of their rule through a similar metaphor of the buddha as ruler that we see for the reigns of male emperors of the dynastic line that are depicted in the imperial grottos at Yungang and Longmen. From this, we also understand that this early connection between the women who ruled, the “Two Sages,” and the Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna image constituted an interpretive framework for legitimizing regency rule in the medieval period that lasted into the reign of Emperor Wu Zhao, the only woman who would rule an empire in Chinese imperial history with the title of “emperor.”



FIGURE 5. The Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna image in the Huangfu Gong Grotto at Longmen. Circa 527. Photo © Li Lan.



FIGURE 6. Detail of the Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna image. © Andrew MacIver.

BUDDHISM AS A TAGHBACH TRADITION

Although the ruling elite of the Northern Wei court adopted Buddhist forms of statecraft alongside procedures of state inherited from the Han empire, they also retained a connection to their own ancestral past. Sources are sparse for the study of Taghbach lineage, but one story from the “Prefatory Annals” of the *Book of the Wei*’s record of Taghbach historiography is particularly illuminating

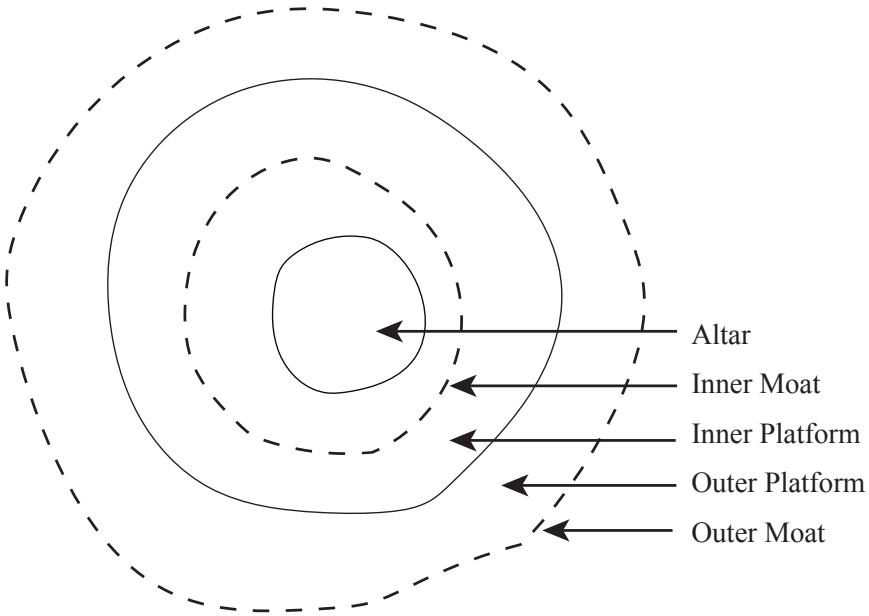


FIGURE 7. Diagram of a ritual altar used for imperial sacrifices by the Northern Wei court in Datong. © Andrew MacIver.

here—the story of two of the Taghbach’s ancestors, Taghbach Jiefen (d.u.) and Taghbach Liwei (trad. r. 220–77).⁷³ According to the chronicle, Taghbach Jiefen was the fourteenth and last in the line of ancient founders from when the Taghbach tribe was united, and Taghbach Liwei was the pivot that took Taghbach accounts of the past from their mythological origins to more historical ones, when he founded the one Taghbach subgroup that eventually established the Northern Wei. In the preface to the *Book of the Wei*, the date of his accession was 220 and it is marked as the “first year” of Taghbach history in the sense that all subsequent rulers are dated chronologically forward from him.⁷⁴ It is no coincidence that this date also corresponds with the fall of the Han dynasty; illustrating how much of early Taghbach history was written through the historiography of the Han tradition, the choice of the year 220 as the start of Taghbach history is likely more ideological than chronological.

The story begins with Jiefen, who was leading his people south and found himself and his people dwelling in the ancestral lands of a different Inner Asian ethnogroup, the Xiongnu. The story goes:

Emperor Shengwu had led several tens of thousands of horse riders out into the mountains and marshes and suddenly saw a bannered carriage coming on its own accord down from the heavens. He immediately went to it and saw a beautiful woman to whom he offered his support and protection and who accepted it. The emperor



FIGURE 8. Google Earth satellite image of the remains of the ritual altar. © Andrew MacIver.

thought this was strange and so he asked her about it. She responded: “I am a celestial woman and it is our fate that we shall be a pair.” And they subsequently went to the bedchamber together. At dawn, she further requested: “Come back to this same spot at this same time next year.” And with those words she departed, disappearing like wind and rain. When the time came, the emperor went back to that same place and he saw her again. The celestial woman brought forth a son and gave it to the emperor, saying: “This is your son. Raise him well and care for him. The descendants will all undertake to become kings and emperors of this world.” On finishing these words, she left. The son became the original ancestor⁷⁵ and therefore the people of the time made a proverb, saying: “Emperor Jiefen has no wife or in-laws; Emperor Liwei has no maternal uncle or in-laws.”⁷⁶

This story of the birth of the Taghbach’s original ancestor serves to characterize the Taghbach line as divinely begotten. The strange parenthood of Liwei illustrates his celestial matronage while underscoring the idea that the Taghbach are destined to be kings of the world and to claim their sovereignty, or perhaps to reclaim it after having lost it to their Han cousins.

Establishing a celestial lineage with a central ruler accords with what else we know about the actions of the Taghbach rulers of the Northern Wei: Not only did the rulers enact the suburban sacrifices rooted in Han imperial ritual, in which the Taghbach line was authorized by the five agents’ (*wuxing*) calculation that the

Taghbach leaders were ruling first under the power of earth and then under the power of water; the ruler also undertook a number of unique rituals including sacrifices for mountains and rivers in every place he journeyed to.⁷⁷ These additional rituals are rooted in Taghbach indigenous statecraft according to which the leader was considered a divine agent between this world and the next. As we saw in the above story of Jiefen and his celestial woman from the Taghbach genealogy in the *Book of the Wei*, Taghbach practices of statecraft were heavily invested in supramundane notions of sanctification. Ishimatsu Hinako characterizes the Taghbach as having practiced a form of “great hero veneration” that was complemented by the worship of various natural forces.⁷⁸ This great hero veneration arose not only from the divine origins of the ruling family but also because the Taghbach themselves had a ritual system where the leader of the tribe, and often his female companion, played the highest roles as religious officiants alongside a female priestess or shamaness-type figure.⁷⁹ These rituals proved the ruler to be in control of both this-worldly and otherworldly affairs by showing him to be a leader from both realms, and they thus accord with what we already know about Liwei from the *Book of the Wei*: He hails from celestial stock, having a Taghbach father but a divine mother.

To understand why Wencheng pivoted Taghbach notions of monarchy toward the adoption of state Buddhism, we need to appreciate just how fast the tradition of Buddhism was spreading among all sectors of society in the mid-Northern Wei period when Wencheng ruled. One way of examining this growth is to look at the record of donor inscriptions on Buddhist statuary. Hou Xudong has surveyed these kinds of inscriptions and he has observed a stunning growth of the tradition across many levels of society.⁸⁰ For example, for the sixty years between 400 and 459 Hou catalogues seventeen such inscriptions (or 0.28 per year), only two of which came from the ruling class and the rest of which came from commoners. None of them were dedicated by monastics. After this period, a rapid development in images and dedicatory inscriptions are seen. In the years 460 to 469, which coincide with Wencheng's death, the end of his rule, and the initial development of Yungang, ten such additional inscriptions are seen (or, one per year). This time, six come from commoners, two from the ruling class, one from monastics, and one of uncertain attribution. However, throughout the next sixty years, until the death of the empress dowager, Hou counts 497 such inscriptions (or 8.3 per year), with 299 from commoners, fifty-eight from the ruling class, seventy-five from monastics, and the others with mixed dedications from a variety of social classes. Based on these numbers, the practice of commissioning Buddhist art etched in stone increased by approximately 3,000 percent in the latter half of the Northern Wei. This trend continued through the Northern Qi (550–77 CE), but not as exponentially as within the period of the Northern Wei itself.

A survey of inscriptional materials of this sort only gives us one set of data by which to see the growth of the Buddhist tradition in the fifth century. Alongside

Hou's work, Wang Yongping uses textual sources to trace a similar history of the development of Buddhism during the Northern Wei era, though concentrating on the Buddhism of the imperial family.⁸¹ In Wang's review of the historical documents, imperial patronage of Buddhist temples and monastics strongly increased under the reign of Emperor Xiaowen in the years immediately preceding and succeeding the move to Luoyang, a fact that Yong links to Empress Dowager Wenming's faith in the tradition and the political power that she held during his reign.⁸² This increase in imperial patronage continued to develop through the regency of Empress Dowager Ling, reaching its high point with her own personally commissioned Buddhist building projects. In sum, primary source materials of different types from the time period in question reveal that both rulers and commoners were heavily engaged in the patronage of their new religion and that there was therefore a significant advantage to the ruler in depicting his or her own rule and reign in the imagery of Buddhism.

In his study of Emperor Wencheng, Scott Pearce argues that the mid-Northern Wei emperor's decree in support of Buddhism constitutes a "re-casting of Northern Wei as a Buddhist state, which reached its point of highest development decades later in Luoyang."⁸³ To interpret this move toward Buddhism undertaken by Wencheng, Pearce goes on to argue for the necessary polyvocality of the imagery of the Northern Wei ruler at the time of cultural reinvention in which he ruled. This polyvocality included both Buddhist and Taghbach idioms of rule and expressions of cultural prestige in order to appeal to the ruler's diverse polity. Extending this argument, we can ask what better method would there have been for the Taghbach in the fifth and sixth centuries to reenvision their indigenous traditions of rule by hero than by identifying the ruler with the buddha? As would have been known to audiences across the Southern and Northern Dynasties at the time, Śākyamuni Buddha was himself a prince with a divine heritage. Śākyamuni's father, King Śuddhodana, was a tribal ruler of the Śākya people in Kapilavastu. When this buddha, who was named Siddhartha, was born under miraculous circumstances, the king sought out the advice of a sage. That sage, Asita, made a prophecy that the child would become either an enlightened religious man—a buddha—or a universal monarch otherwise known as a "wheel-turning king" (Skt. *cakravartin*; Ch. *zhuanlun wang*), a term that will be discussed in detail below. Despite strident efforts by King Śuddhodana to have his son become the latter of the two options, Siddhartha went on to become a buddha; and yet, the mythology of his kingship never left his side and, to this day, buddhas are depicted with the marks of kingship. Textual and art historical evidence show that this story was known to audiences in the Northern Wei period.⁸⁴

Can we imagine a circumstance whereby the Taghbach rulers of the Northern Wei court, who were eager to establish a strong ruling house, used a new and popular cultural idiom of statecraft—Buddhism and the buddha—to give expression to their own indigenous ideas of rule by divine hero? In order to



FIGURE 9. The seer Asita making a prophecy over the baby Śākyamuni Buddha. Detail from Yungang Cave 6. Photo © Yi Lidu.

employ a form of Buddhist statecraft in their governance, the Northern Wei emperors directly depicted themselves as buddhas in their monumental, imperially funded grotto sites.⁸⁵ One of the most important texts of Buddhist statecraft utilized across the entirety of East Asia is a text variously referred to in English as the *Sūtra for Humane Kings* (*Renwang jing*).⁸⁶ Charles Orzech argues that the first iteration of this text in East Asia was not itself a translation from any Indic or Central Asian language but was in fact written with the patronage of the Northern Wei court during the reign of Emperor Wencheng, when the grottos at Yungang were being carved. Whatever the origins of the text, its emergence in the mid-Northern Wei era must be understood in the context of the Northern Wei rulers' adoption of a polyvocal imagery of rulership that included not only the Taghbach-styled ruler and the Han-styled ruler but also the cakravartin. One of the central doctrinal claims that the *Sūtra for Humane Kings* makes is that the king in this material world is none other than the buddha in the transcendent world. In Orzech's interpretation, both the king and the buddha occupy the same continuum, with the king known as the cakravartin or wheel-turning king, who has the same merit but lesser insight than the buddha.⁸⁷ Although the mythology of the cakravartin came to East Asia from South Asia, it predates the life of the historical buddha, and is well-known in Indic sources from a variety of traditions; Orzech argues that the *Sūtra for Humane*

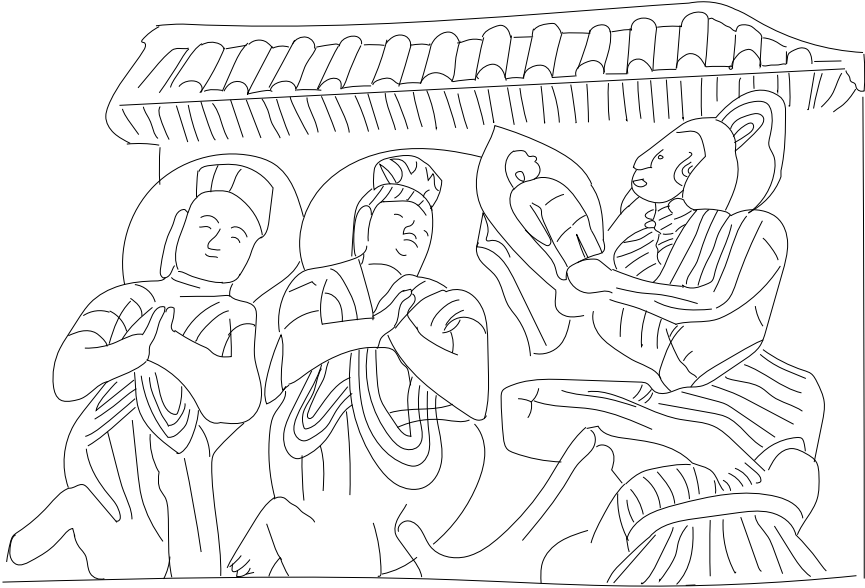


FIGURE 10. Detail of Asita making a prophecy. © Andrew MacIver.

Kings, as it is known in Literary Chinese, is a text that purposely integrates Buddhist ideals of monarchy with those of the traditional ruling elite in China as modeled after the Han empire.⁸⁸

I agree with Orzech's interpretation of the text; however, I want to suggest that the notions of kingship invoked by it also find deep resonance with the Taghbach tradition of "great hero veneration" that saw the leader of the group conceived of as a semidivine agent and leader of the military. This person, likely known in the Serbi language as khagan, also came to be identified with the figure of the buddha. One place to look for proof of this is philology. In his explanation of the Japanese pronunciation of *hotoke* for the character 仏 (*butsu*), which means "buddha," linguist Marc Miyake conjectures that this pronunciation is a cognate with the Korean word for buddha, *puchhō* (부처), both stemming from a conjectural archaic Korean compound **put-ka-i*, in which **put* is a phonetic rendering of *buddha* and **ka-i* a word for ruler.⁸⁹ This term, Miyake conjectures, is ultimately analogous to the Old Turkic and written Mongolic word for "buddha," *burqan*. *Burqan*, in this instance, would literally mean "buddha khan," reflecting a shared understanding of the core defining features of the buddha legend across North Asia in the early medieval period. As such, we can say that the notion of the emergence of Buddhist forms of statecraft in East Asia has many sources and is not simply a response to Han imperial forms of statecraft. In the Northern Wei era,

Buddhism allowed for the rearticulation of the khagan as buddha, a move that also corresponded to the adoption of Buddhist notions of monarchy in developing modalities of Sinitic statecraft in the period.

WOMEN OF THE EMPIRE

There are few sources by which to embark on a general study of the lives and freedoms of Northern Wei women; however, what there is, is intriguing. One source—the “Biographies of Exemplary Women” (*Lienü zhuan*) from the *Book of the Wei*—offers a depiction of Northern Wei women engaging in public life that is striking because it is a depiction rarely seen in medieval historiography. It is also a depiction that counters what such texts say about the way in which gender performativity is proscribed for the ethnic Self in said texts. In her survey of these biographies, Lee Jen-der argues that Northern Wei women were active and autonomous public persons and that they were in control of their own finances. In support of her argument, Lee cites the example of a certain Ms. Feng whom, alongside many other Northern Wei women who were famed for their learning and who contributed greatly to the economies of their families or both, officials would seek out for her learned political advice.⁹⁰ Lee also cites the fact that Empress Dowager Ling practiced archery, though much to the objection of one of her Han courtiers, Cui Guang (451–523), who lectured her on the proper etiquette for a woman.⁹¹ Cui Guang was also one of the courtiers who tried to prevent Yuan Xun, son of Emperor Xiaowen, from fleeing back to the Northern Wei’s prior northern capital of Pingcheng; he was also implicated in the ultimate poisoning of that fourteen-year-old prince who refused to accept life and courtly custom in Luoyang. In the case of the empress dowager, Cui Guang rebuked her for her archery, saying:

Confucius said: “[for the] gentleman, ambition belongs to the path [*dao*], reliance belongs to virtue [*de*], dependence belongs to compassion, and leisure belongs to the arts.”⁹² As for the arts, these are: ritual, music, writing, mathematics, shooting, and ruling. To clarify, the first four of these activities can be cultivated by both women and men. But as for shooting and ruling, these are matters only for men, not to be attained by women.⁹³

Empress Dowager Ling did not heed the advice of Cui Guang. The independence that she displayed throughout her life may have been owing to the fact that even though she was said to be of Han descent, she was born into the culturally hybrid context of the northwest border regions at the gateway to the Hexi corridor. Such a cultural background may have allowed her to fulfill different types of gender roles than those advocated by Han scholars like Cui Guang—may have allowed her to shoot, as it were. Archeological evidence suggests that Serbi women could shoot: A recently unearthed Serbi tomb from Mongolia has revealed the skeletons of two women whose skeletal remains show repetitive stress injuries related to

archery and spinal trauma associated with extensive horse-back riding, a fact that has led bioarcheologist Christine Lee to argue for the existence of gender equality in Serbi society.⁹⁴

These shreds of evidence concerning the gender roles of women in Serbi culture resonate with what is said about the Serbi in the *Later History of the Han*. In the same section that describes the origins of the ethnonym “Taghbach,” the text also records that it was the mothers of the Taghbach who held the lineage together. The text states that a man must follow his wife into her family after marriage and stay there for one or two years before the couple can strike out on their own.⁹⁵ It also states that although the Serbi people may kill their fathers and elder brothers if they are angered, they will never harm their mothers because the mother is the lineage holder.⁹⁶ Ishimatsu Hinako locates this practice of matrilineality within the context of a form of “sacred mother worship” wherein the earliest form of Taghbach religious belief seems to have been the veneration of women as mothers and matriarchs.⁹⁷ Ishimatsu’s thesis regarding “sacred mother worship” is a gendered companion to her other thesis of “great hero veneration” in Taghbach society. The sources for both are intertwined in the Taghbach’s own chronicle of their lineage according to which the Taghbach Serbi tribe that became the rulers of the Northern Wei traced their descent back to a human father, Jiefen, and a divine mother who granted him a child—an heir—before retreating to the heavens.

Ishimatsu’s thesis on “sacred mother worship” finds possible support in the recorded existence of shamanesses (*nüwu*) among the Taghbach. According to the *Book of the Wei*, these shamanesses played important roles in early Northern Wei rituals of imperial legitimation and sanctification, which were an admixture of Taghbach and Han ritual procedures involving the shamaness as well as the emperor, his empress, and his female consorts.⁹⁸ For example, the *Book of the Wei*’s “Annals on Ritual” (Lizhi) detail the roles that shamanesses played in the state rituals of Emperor Daowu, the founding emperor of the Northern Wei. One such excerpt records a complex ritual said to be undertaken in the year 405. The record of the ritual describes the construction of the sacrificial altar, the placement of the emperor, the empress, and their courtiers, as well as the types of sacrificial animals to be offered to heaven. As to the role of the shamaness, it says:

The shamaness held the drum and stood in front, to the east of the stage, west-facing. Seven persons of ten from the clan of the emperor were selected to hold the wine at the south of the shaman, west-facing and north of the emperor. The shamaness ascended the platform and shook the drum. The emperor paid his obeisance and the empress paid obeisance with bowed head. The hundred ministers from the interior and the exterior all paid obeisance. The ritual was finished, and again they paid obeisance. When the obeisance was over, the animals were then slaughtered. The seven persons holding the wine came from the west and sprinkled the wine on the pillars of the spirit of heaven, again paid obeisance, all seven of them doing the same. The rite finished, they returned.⁹⁹ After this, there was one sacrifice a year.¹⁰⁰

This ritual is noteworthy for our study because it appears to be something like a Taghbach reinterpretation of the Han suburban sacrifice with the addition of a shamaness, or at least it was written to look that way in the *Book of the Wei*. In the accounts of imperial rituals in the *Book of the Wei* that took place after Emperor Xiaowen's implementation of his Sinification policies and his move of the court and capital to Luoyang, this role of the shamaness disappears. Although this disappearance of the shamaness from imperial ritual may suggest that the women of the clan disappeared from ritual prominence as the dynasty increasingly adopted strategies of statecraft rooted in the Han dynasty, I will argue below that the roles of women in public life were rearticulated through the merging of Taghbach, Han, and Buddhist cultural forms in the latter half of the dynasty.

The idea that Serbi women may have expressed their female gender in ways that included public performance and martial ability finds support in literature from the Han tradition beyond the *Book of the Wei*. Two tantalizing literary snippets suggest that Taghbach women may have enjoyed greater freedom of movement and personal choice than did their Han counterparts. The most enticing of these snippets comes from the observations of the southern-born Yan Zhitui (531–91), who had immigrated to the great northern city of Yecheng, the capital of the Northern Qi, and was struck by what he saw northern women doing. He attributes the behaviors of the women of Yecheng to their Taghbach origins and compares them to the women of his own cultural milieu, proclaiming:

The customs of Ye are, however, quite different: they let the wife take charge of the family. The womenfolk are involved in disputes and lawsuits; they pay visits and receive guests; their carriages crowd the streets, and official quarters swarm with their silk dresses. They seek office for their sons or make pleas to authority on behalf of their husbands. This, I am afraid, is the legacy of Heng and Dai.¹⁰¹

Thus, according to Yan Zhitui, a member of the Ru class who wrote these observations in a record to be handed down to his family, the freedoms and powers of Taghbach women—those who enjoyed the legacy of Heng and Dai—seemed opposed to those of the women in his own cultural milieu. Yan appears surprised by the public social lives of women in the cultural context of the northern dynasties and he attributes their social freedom to the non-Han origins of the Taghbach rulers of the Northern Wei.

Yan's observations find further support from an unusual bit of information recorded in the *Book of the Southern Qi* (Nan Qi shu), which claims that Empress Dowager Wenming went out in her carriage with her court ladies and that they drove the carriage themselves without being concealed by heavy draperies, which is also a habit that Empress Dowager Ling is said to have engaged in. Most remarkably, however, in the case of Empress Dowager Wenming, the *Book of the Southern Qi* tells us that "When the Empress Dowager went out, she was accompanied by women wearing armor and riding horses to the left and right of her carriage."¹⁰²

Although the histories of the southern dynasties cannot be taken as entirely accurate accounts of the people and cultures who lived in the polities at their northern borders, they offer striking observations from an outsider perspective and should be consulted in conjunction with other source materials wherever possible.¹⁰³ In our case, if it is in fact true that Empress Dowager Wenming had female bodyguards or cavalrywomen, then this would be a remarkable example of the autonomy of Northern Wei women in premodern times that perhaps accords with the aforementioned archeological evidence of the two women from the graveyard site in Mongolia who could evidently ride and shoot. Similarly, a further story from the *Book of the Wei* chronicles how a woman whose name is uncertain but who was empress to early Northern Wei leader, Taghbach Yiyi (fl. third century.), commanded the military in her time and was therefore considered the leader of the Taghbach alliance in the early fourth century. According to the text, such female leadership saw the Taghbach alliance being pejoratively described as a “woman’s country.”¹⁰⁴ As enticing as these accounts are, they need to be approached with caution, for though it may be true that some women did fight alongside men in the army, the army remained a male domain. Nonetheless, the inclusion of these stories in the *Book of the Wei* and the *Book of the Southern Qi* speaks to the fact that from very early times, Han culture believed Taghbach culture to have held different opinions regarding the social lives of women than it itself did.

One important criticism of the thesis that Taghbach women enjoyed public, political, and military power comes from the fact that during the mid-Northern Wei period the ruling elite are known to have enacted a policy of forcing the mother of an heir apparent to commit suicide. Expressed by the adage, “If the Son is Noble, the Mother Dies” (*zigui musi*),¹⁰⁵ the practice dictated that if any woman, regardless of rank, mothered an heir apparent, then the woman herself was forced to take her own life. This action was undertaken so that the natal family of the mother would have no way of interfering with the workings of the court after the birth of the designated heir and so that the mother would not be able to present challengers to the realm by mothering another child. The ideology behind this practice recalls the myth of the Taghbach ancestors Jiefen and Liwei discussed above. Not only was Jiefen an illustrious military leader who was chosen because of his ability to lead his people on their campaign to political dominance, his son, Liwei, was birthed without a mother.

The work of Cheng Ya-ju helps us to understand this practice of imperial matricide. Having surveyed the biographies of empresses in the dynasty, Cheng shows that they enjoyed abundant social power but also that their social power was not derived through their court status as “empress” (*hou*) in the same way as it was within Han-styled court structures. Instead, Cheng argues, access to political power for women in the Taghbach leadership depended on their maternal relationships to elite men, whether or not the women in question actually held the title of empress at court.¹⁰⁶ To express this situation of matrilineal power, Cheng argues

that the early Taghbach court did not use the term *empress* in the same way as did the Han court and that a woman could be an empress but have no social power if she did not have a maternal relationship with an elite male member of the court. According to the inverse, then, the attempt to limit a woman's access to political power was also to limit her ability to be a mother. Only in this way does the policy enshrined in the maxim, "If the Son is Noble, the Mother Dies," make sense. Notably, access to this sort of maternally derived political influence for women of the court was available in roles outside that of blood mother. Regarding this matter, Scott Pearce points to the rare existence of the role of "Dowager Protectress" (*baotaihou*), an anomalous Northern Wei title that was held by the wet nurse and future dowager empress to Northern Wei Emperor Taiwu (r. 423–453), Madam Dou and, successively, by wet nurse and future dowager empress to Northern Wei Emperor Wencheng, Madam Chang.¹⁰⁷ In his study, Pearce argues that the basic human relationship between nursemaid and nursling facilitated these women's rise to power within the context of the increasing centralization of the Taghbach governmental system.¹⁰⁸ This argument dovetails with Cheng's argument that Han-styled modes of courtly title and power diminish the power of maternal kin connections at court, and that this diminishing of kinship ties conflicted with the Taghbach preference for maternal relationships—though not necessarily blood relationships—in the delineation and definition of which women could hold power.

To bring this all back to the empress dowager, she was a rare sort of woman in her court. As a northern woman, she shot arrows and participated in public life. As a woman of Han descent who, as we will see, connected herself with procedures of rule derived from the Han empire, she held the title of "empress." She also held the title of empress dowager (*huang taihou*), which identified her as regent in the type of politics styled after Han statecraft that were adopted by the Northern Wei court in the late fifth century. Furthermore, owing to her own termination of the practice of imperial matricide cited above, she was also the one and only woman to have a maternal and blood connection to the emperor for whom she was dowager while also holding the title of "empress." Her power at court was therefore doubly entrenched. She hailed from a culturally hybrid region of the empire, and the cultures that she was born into allowed for two different modalities of the articulation of female power at court. She herself tapped into a third modality: Buddhism.

A BUDDHIST MONARCH?

According to Sinitic notions of leadership, which, in the early medieval period were modeled on the Han empire, the empress dowager was regent to the monarch and not a monarch herself. However, we need not assume that notions of monarchy from the Han empire should define whom we do and do not call a monarch during the Northern Wei era. If we look at the empress dowager's actions while she was ruling, it becomes clear that she was interested in enacting a different

type of monarchy—namely, that of the Buddhist monarch, the cakravartin or “wheel-turning king.” In his foundational study of the early association between Buddhist images and imperial metaphors in the Chinese realm, Erik Zürcher argues that from approximately the fourth century onward, Buddhist ideas, symbols, and imagery infiltrated Han notions of dynastic and imperial legitimation.¹⁰⁹ He argues that dynastic legitimation during the early medieval period depended on a number of Buddhist elements, the most important of which was the merging of the notion of the emperor with that of the Buddhist monarch, or cakravartin—the archetype of which was King Aśoka (r. 288–32 BCE), the great imperial patron of Buddhism in early India’s Mauryan empire (322–185 BCE). According to hagiographical legends of Aśoka, the king is said to have converted to Buddhism and repented of his violent past and political consolidation through military conquest. His conversion went along with his unwavering support of the Buddhist tradition,¹¹⁰ which was shown through his fabled dispersal of the relics of Śākyamuni Buddha’s body in eighty-four thousand stūpas across the known world in his time. The Aśoka legend was well known in China, attested in both the north and the south, and in art and in text, by the fifth century.¹¹¹ Recognizing the importance of the Aśokan archetype to the legitimation of the emperor in early medieval China, Zürcher identifies two cases in which the identification between the emperor and the Mauryan king were made complete: Emperor Wu (r. 502–49) of the Liang 梁 (502–56) and Emperor Wen 文 (r. 581–604) of the Sui.¹¹² Although Zürcher does not mention it, Emperor Wu Zhao later did the very same thing by identifying herself as a cakravartin and undertaking a campaign for the distribution of relics across her realm.¹¹³

Studies of cakravartin kingship in the sixth century in East Asia have focused on Emperor Wu of the Liang who in fact ruled at the same time as Empress Dowager Ling, but in a southern polity. Referred to as the “Aśoka of China,”¹¹⁴ Emperor Wu is said to have convened “universal vegetarian assemblies” (*zhaihui*) of monastics who came together to chant texts in support of the empire.¹¹⁵ Such assemblies were grand feasts open to the public, attended by foreign emissaries, and they included acts of extreme donation by the emperor himself who also gave sermons.¹¹⁶ Presenting himself as a practicing Buddhist, Emperor Wu also twice undertook his own public bodhisattva ordination in which his identity as emperor was merged with that of the bodhisattva. The *Book of the Wei* records that this southern emperor was therefore known as “the bodhisattva emperor” (*huangdi pusa*).¹¹⁷ Emperor Wu is famous for his interest in relics. Said to have unearthed an old relic trove from one of King Aśoka’s own stūpas that was located in the Liang territory, he then reinterred the relics in stūpas across his empire in an act of imperial mimesis.¹¹⁸ Emperor Wu enjoyed close and official ties with a monastery in his capital, the Brilliant Abode Monastery (Guangzhai si), which he donated his own residence in order to establish and in which he also deposited relics.¹¹⁹ Those particular relics were themselves later disinterred and distributed by Emperor Wu Zhao in her own cakravartin campaign.¹²⁰

In his recent overview of the empires from the Southern and Northern Dynasties period that took the southern capital, Jiankang, as their capital, Andrew Chittick connects Emperor Wu of the Liang's adoption of Aśoka's form of cakravartin rulership to the Jiankang region's links with South and Southeast Asia. Focusing on a different route for the transmission of Buddhism into China than that of the northern dynasties' polities, Chittick shows how the Buddhist kingdom of Sri Lanka played a pronounced role in the transmission of Buddhism through the South China Sea and into Jiankang, where it was diffused across the southern dynasties.¹²¹ Tracing a compelling history of the arrival of Buddhist monks, images, and texts in the Jiankang region throughout the fourth century via this southern, maritime route, Chittick shows how Buddhism became the dominant modality of dynastic legitimation and imperial ritual by the fifth century. He therefore provides a formative backstory to Emperor Wu's Buddhist practice. This backstory is interwoven at many places with references to Aśoka. As a ruler present in texts about him that were translated in the southern courts, as a predecessor with physical ties to the southern regions through the presence of his stūpas, and as a model Buddhist king or *dharmaraja* whose influence was seen and felt via physical objects that made their way through Southeast Asia and to Jiankang, Aśoka had a story that formed the backdrop for Emperor Wu's imperial Buddhism. This backdrop manifested itself not only in the Liang emperor's public Buddhism but also in a general interest in Aśokan objects in the region. As Chittick has shown, Jiankang historiography was reimagined in court-sponsored Buddhist writing to include the presence of Aśoka's personally commissioned stūpas in their region and at the sites of the capital cities of the southern kingdoms of antiquity.¹²² Similarly, Chittick argues that the story of Aśoka influenced the architecture of the Jiankang region and shows evidence for the construction of Aśokan-style pillars being built there.

The north also knew of Aśoka. In her recent study of the Buddhist grottos at Yungang, Joy Lidu Yi points out that depictions of Aśoka flourished at the site in its second stage of development between the 490s and the 520s. Notably, Yi points to the rare depiction of Aśoka in these scenes: At Yungang, he is depicted in his past life, as a child offering a gift of dirt to the buddha. Yi argues that this depiction is derived not from the texts brought to and translated in the southern courts of the Jiankang region but from a text called the *Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish* (*Xianyu jing*), which is said to have been translated by a Northern Wei monk in the mid-fifth century.¹²³ The circumstances involved in the creation of the *Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish* are complicated, but it is clear that the work is connected to a monk named Tanxue (fl. 450), who is said to have been active during the Northern Wei era. According to the catalog of Sengyou (445–518), the medieval bibliographer of Buddhist texts, Tanxue and his companions journeyed to the western regions and ultimately to the Buddhist kingdom of Khotan, where they heard the sūtra before journeying back to Turfan (then named Gaochang) and writing it down from their collective memory.¹²⁴ The sūtra is a long compilation of many stories,

and it displays influences from both Sinitic and Inner Asian Buddhism; it lacks, however, a Sanskrit version. Despite the text's uncertain origin, it was popular during the Northern Wei era, as we will see in chapter 4. Further from the Northern Wei, the Aśokan story is also attested to in the "Annals on Buddhism and Daoism" in the *Book of the Wei*, where Wei Shou records that Aśoka had supernormal powers and, with the aid of the gods, built his eighty-four thousand reliquaries across the known world, including three in Northern Wei territory with one in Luoyang.¹²⁵ Finally, according to the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, the well-known retrospective on the Buddhist landscape of Luoyang after its demise, Empress Dowager Ling dispatched two monastic ambassadors to the western regions. These monks were named Songyun and Huisheng and they are said to have visited several Aśokan stūpas during their journey, most notably one built at the site of one of Śākyamuni Buddha's miraculous act of bodily sacrifice whereby he cut off his skin to be used as paper and broke off his bone to be used as a pen.¹²⁶

The last chapter of the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* contains a long account of the empress dowager's dispatch of Songyun and Huisheng to the western regions in 518, which was roughly around the same period during which the Eternal Peace Monastery was being finished. That record narrates how the empress dowager and Xiaoming were internationally promoted as great Buddhist regents in distant Buddhistic lands. At the end of their journey, Huisheng and Songyun reached Udyāna (Ch. Wuchang) in the Swat valley, where they stayed for two years under the patronage of the king while also journeying through Gandhāra (Ch. Qiantuoluo), visiting all the famous spots in the region where Śākyamuni Buddha is, according to myth, said to have visited and to have left relics during his past lives. The record of their travels contains several noteworthy stories that help us to think about the empress dowager as a cakravartin. Perhaps the most intriguing of these stories is that of the meeting of the two monks with the king of Udyāna. Regarding the king's actions at this meeting, we are told the following: "Hearing that the Empress Dowager upheld the buddha's law, he straightaway faced east, joined his hands together, and paid ritual obeisance from far off."¹²⁷ Furthermore, after asking many questions about the Northern Wei, the king is reported to have declared, "If it is like you say, it is none other than a buddha land. I desire to be reborn there."¹²⁸ After visiting the king, the two monks eventually journeyed to the famous, semimythical Queli stūpa. Rising four hundred Chinese feet above the ground and with an additional iron post of eighty-eight feet rising out of its peak, the stūpa was said to have been spontaneously self-created in a series of miraculous events. According to legend, the stūpa was prophesied by Śākyamuni Buddha himself, who said that it would be built by the Kushan king, Kaṇṣka I (r. 127–44). The record tells us that when they arrived at the stūpa, Huisheng and Songyun still bore one of the hundred-foot silk banners that the empress dowager had given them with the command that they disseminate the banners across kingdoms throughout their travels. They hung the last of the empress dowager's silk

banners at the top of the stūpa and they also donated their own personal slaves to act as indentured temple servants.¹²⁹

Even though the *Record* tells the tale of their encountering relics on the journey, it does not state that the two monks returned to Luoyang with any verifiable ones; however, one might wonder if the search for relics was their original intention, given the close proximity in time of the completion of the Eternal Peace Monastery with its soaring pagoda, which was so well suited for the storing of relics for a cakravartin ruler. Whatever the intention behind the journey of the two monks, it appears to be the case that in the north—just as in the south—the ideal of the cakravartin ruler was well known by the fifth century and enacted in state ritual by the sixth century. In a 2017 study of the empress dowager's Buddhist identity, Zhou Yin enumerates how the empress dowager enacted the role of the cakravartin, perhaps modeling it after Aśoka. Zhou argues that the empress dowager constructed her pagoda at the Eternal Peace Monastery as the central masterpiece of her prefectural pagoda building project, whereby she ordered the building of five-story pagodas in every prefecture throughout the realm in an imitation of Aśoka's eighty-four thousand relic stūpas. At the same time, Zhou brings to a light a record from the *Book of the Wei* that describes how the empress dowager also commissioned "vegetarian assemblies" of monks who gathered to receive alms from her and to chant scriptures on feast days in the Buddhist calendar, presumably for the purpose of state protection. Finally, Zhou reveals how the empress dowager continued on with traditions of vegetarianism from earlier emperors and explores how her support for vegetarianism fit within her own practice of the "ten good paths" (*shi shandao*) from the *Huayan Sūtra* (Ch. *Da fang guang fo huayan jing*; Skt. *Buddhāvataṃsaka-mahāvaipulya-sūtra*). According to Zhou's research, the empress dowager invited monks to her court to lecture on the *Huayan Sūtra* and therefore reinforce her own connection with the bodhisattva ideal that is advocated within it.¹³⁰ As regards her use of sūtras for the support of her cakravartin identity, we will later see how the empress dowager patronized the translation of canonical texts that feature elite women as Buddhist teachers. We can, however, mention one here: The *Sūtra of the Woman*, "Silver Countenance" (*Yinsenü jing*). In that sūtra, Silver Countenance (i.e., a past-life incarnation of Śākyamuni Buddha) offers her breasts to feed a starving new mother in order to prevent the mother from eating her newborn child. After completing her act of bodily sacrifice, Silver Countenance's body is miraculously restored and then further transformed into a male body. At this point, she (now he) lies down for a rest only to be discovered by envoys from another kingdom and made into their lawful Buddhist king, or cakravartin.

As a cakravartin ruler—a type of Buddhist monarch akin to the great Buddhist patron Aśoka—Empress Dowager Ling was the most public and most prolific of Buddhist patrons in her time. According to Amy McNair in her study of the patronage of sixth-century Buddhists at the imperial Buddhist grotto site of

Longmen just to the south of the capital, Empress Dowager Ling was responsible for the patronage of the highest and largest of the Northern Wei grottos at the site—the Huoshao grotto.¹³¹ Moreover, away from Longmen and in the city proper, the empress dowager is also said to have personally funded monasteries big and small. Her most famous project, and the one for which she is most commonly cited in historical, biographical, and political texts, was the rebuilding of the Eternal Peace Monastery. Built after a structure of the same name from the dynasty's former capital, the empress dowager's Eternal Peace Monastery was the symbolic apex of her Buddhist patronage, as well as the physical center of her Buddhist metropolis, and it conveyed that important status with stunning architecture, massive size, opulent decoration, and the empire's only nine-story pagoda. This pagoda was so famous that it was taken as the model for both the pagoda at the August Dragon Monastery (Kr. Hwangnyong-sa; Ch. Huanglong si) in Silla (trad. 57 BCE–935 CE) on the Korean peninsula and the Japanese pagoda on the site of Kudara Ōdera (Great Paekche Monastery), which was built during the Asuka era of Japan's Yamato period (538–710).¹³² After its completion on the main avenue in front of the palace, the empress dowager engaged in a public display of her political power and religious patronage by climbing the pagoda alongside the child emperor Xiaoming. The two of them are said to have been the only persons allowed to climb to the top of the pagoda because the structure was so high that the vantage point gained from the top gave one a glimpse inside the palace walls.¹³³ According to the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, the empress dowager funded many other projects within the urban landscape of the capital, and a number of them were for her family. For her aunt, the nun who brought her to court and who was from the Hu Clan, she personally funded the building of the Nunnery of the Superintendent of the Nuns (Hutong si). This nunnery was finely crafted and beautifully resourced and it housed the most studious nuns in the capital.¹³⁴ Similarly, the empress dowager and her sister commissioned the building of a monastic complex at the site of the prior Han court's numinous platform. This complex was a mortuary complex for their deceased father and it included two majestic stūpas. The empress dowager herself provided the funds for all the monastics in residence.¹³⁵ As we have seen, the empress dowager's patronage extended beyond Luoyang. Both the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* and the 13th century Buddhist historiographical collection, the *Complete Chronicle of the Buddha and the Patriarchs* (Fozu tongji), record her patronage of Buddhist missions to the western regions.¹³⁶

The year 519 was a pivotal and fascinating year in the reigns of both Empress Dowager Ling in the north and Emperor Wu of the Liang in the south. Suggestive of a competition in the building of Buddhist infrastructure and typologies of rule between the two cakravartin rulers, 519 was the year of the completion of the Eternal Peace Monastery in Luoyang with its nine-story pagoda and it was also the year in which Liang Emperor Wu started construction on his central monastic complex, which also housed a nine-story pagoda.¹³⁷ Furthermore, 519 was the year

of the Liang emperor's public taking of bodhisattva ordination, just as it was the year in which the empress dowager's court saw the translation of the *Sūtra of the Woman*, "*Silver Countenance*." There may also have been some textual disagreement between north and south: Although the Liang emperor merged his identity with that of a bodhisattva in a way that resonates with the ideology of the *Sūtra for Humane Kings*, he is also recorded to have rejected the use of that text in his vast vegetarian assemblies. According to Andreas Janousch, Emperor Wu's objection to the text was doctrinal in nature; however, given the apparent competition in Buddhist political legitimation between north and south, it might also be the case that the southern emperor refused to use the northern text. His refusal of the text in such court-backed monastic assemblies is striking: Used in the successor state to the Liang, the Chen (557–89), the text was also utilized in court rituals from a variety of later courts across East Asia as part of their large-scale Buddhist rites of repentance and state protection.¹³⁸

If we look outside the Chinese mainland and to the Korean peninsula, we see that many of the strategies undertaken by Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Wu of the Liang were also adopted by rulers in Silla as a part of their imperial Buddhism. Richard McBride has argued that much of the ideology and infrastructure of Silla's state Buddhism, including King Chinhŭng's (r. 540–76) establishment of large-scale, monastic, ritual feasts for the chanting of the *Sūtra on Humane Kings*, were based on those of the Northern Wei courts. As McBride argues, the establishment of these rituals finds historical context within the Northern Wei court's program of identifying their rulers as buddhas, both in text and in monumental art, and it came about at a time when the leaders of Silla were interested in establishing diplomatic relationships with polities on the mainland. As a nod to the cakravartin identity of the ruler of Silla, McBride notes that it was in 535 when construction began on the Promoting the Wheel of the Dharma Monastery (Hŭngnyun sa). The wheel metaphor here links up with the mythology of the cakravartin ruler. Similarly, McBride argues that "Chinhŭng embraced the imagery of the cakravartin (Kr. *chöllun wang*) and constructed the state palladium August Dragon Monastery to combine Sinitic and Indian modes of legitimation."¹³⁹

SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE RISE OF THE EMPRESS DOWAGER

In the thirteen years of her reign, Empress Dowager Ling managed to construct a Buddhist Luoyang with herself as leader even though she was under house arrest for almost five of those years as a result of a coup d'état against her. Having been appointed to court at the recommendation of the highest-ranked Buddhist nun in the empire, she worked to build Buddhism into her city just as she presented herself as a Buddhist monarch. She supported monks and nuns, built majestic temples and soaring rock-cut grottos, and sponsored the activities of Buddhist translators

from Inner Asia at her own Eternal Peace Monastery in the heart of the city. Her reign marks a watershed moment in the patronage of Buddhist building projects by elite women, and it had a pronounced and direct effect on the Buddhist polities that would arise across East Asia throughout the rest of the medieval period. As a leader of a multiethnic state during the time of intense cultural, religious, and political reinvention that we associate with the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the empress dowager was able to do all the things she did by connecting to social currents that would help promote a woman to a position of leadership within an urban milieu. These currents included Buddhism, its integration into both Taghbach and Han notions of imperial legitimation, and the changing roles of women in society that came about during this period of intense social change, all of which were indebted to the public status of Taghbach women, the rise of Buddhist monasticism for women, and the establishment of political roles for women both rooted in and inspired by the administration of the then-classical Han dynasty.

The empress dowager was born far from the capital and to a family of the local gentry. She has no recorded name and no recorded date of birth. She rose to become one of the most powerful politicians of her age and died having seen the completion of the tallest and most wondrous building the world had ever seen to that point. She did so by ruling directly and by controlling the court's finances. She funneled money into her projects and supported the Buddhist building projects of others. She was a Buddhist patron and a Buddhist donor. She was a Buddhist monarch who attempted to establish herself as a cakravartin in Luoyang just as did her southern contemporary, Emperor Wu of the Liang.

How did she do all of this? And why? And what did the people who knew her think about all that she had accomplished? To begin to answer those questions we must turn to the next chapter—her biography.