

# Introduction

This book is about a woman who ruled an empire in medieval China, a woman who did so independently, as a man would do. Her capital city, Luoyang, was said to have shone brightly throughout the sky on account of the gold-topped Buddhist temples and monasteries that stood on every corner. Life in her city was teeming with Buddhist persons, ideas, objects, and architecture, all of which the female monarch utilized in the legitimation of her rule while she also connected herself and her reign to pre-Buddhist sites and symbols of political importance from the then-classical Han empire (206 BCE–220 CE), which had also had Luoyang as its capital. As the most prominent patron of Buddhist building projects in her time, she commissioned the construction of a massive, opulent, religio-political complex in her capital, which subsequently (and famously) burned to the ground. The burning was reported to have been a karmically appropriate response to the indulgent expenditures of a female ruler. She also commissioned the building of a massive rock-cut grotto at the Buddhist site of Longmen just to the south of Luoyang, and her own likeness can still be found at the site, forever etched in stone. Buddhist donative inscriptions from the period refer to her rule—as regent to the emperor even though she ruled directly—as that of the “Two Sages” (*ersheng*). This book chronicles the life, reign, and death of the earliest known woman to rule an empire in East Asia as a Buddhist monarch.

But this book is not about who you think it might be about. It is not about the most famous woman in Chinese history, Wu Zetian (624–705), who was the only woman to rule with the male title of “emperor” (*di*). Although Wu Zetian was known as one of the “Two Sages” in a paradigm of corulership, although she made Luoyang her capital city while legitimating her reign through both

Buddhist and Han dynastic ideas, texts, and objects, although she built a majestic religio-political complex in Luoyang that was destroyed by fire, and although she was a major patron of the Buddhist grottos at Longmen, where her visage is arguably still seen, this book is not about her.

This book is about a woman whose name is probably unknown to most readers: Northern Wei (386–534) Empress Dowager Ling (d. 528). I argue that the Northern Wei empress dowager served as a hitherto unrecognized predecessor to Wu Zetian/Emperor Wu Zhao. This is an argument largely based in Buddhist sources from the period, which I bring together, analyze, interpret, and translate in order to explore the precise social and historical circumstances that contributed to the accession of this largely unknown woman in the year 515 of the Common Era.

### A NAMELESS GIRL

On an unknown date in an unrecorded year sometime in the mid to late 400s, a girl was born in northwestern China to a family of the local gentry. At her birth, the sky was awash in a glimmering crimson glow. Thinking this odd, her father consulted a diviner who made a prophecy for the otherwise unremembered child born far away from the imperial center. Reading the sky's majestic hue as an omen of the girl's great virtue, the diviner declared, "She will become the mother of heaven and earth and will give birth to the lord of heaven and earth."<sup>1</sup> The prophecy proved true on both counts: The child would go on to enter the inner court of the capital, become the favored concubine of the emperor, and provide him with a male heir. After her son's birth, part of her prophecy was fulfilled. The other part she made happen all on her own. As regent to her son, she ruled in her own name and did not relinquish power to him when he came of age. Although we know very little about her birth as a girl from the local gentry, we know much about her death as an empress dowager. In 528, Northern Wei Empress Dowager Ling (regency: 515–20; 525–28) is recorded as having been drowned in the river by invading forces in the capital city of Luoyang, but not before attempting to retire from political life by shaving her head and becoming a Buddhist nun.

How Empress Dowager Ling came to the central court in Luoyang is almost as curious a story as her birth: On the advice of a Buddhist nun, she was appointed to court by Emperor Xuanwu (r. 499–515).<sup>2</sup> The recommending nun was the empress dowager's aunt, a reputed teacher of the Buddhist law known to history by her monastic name, Shi Sengzhi (d. 516). The aunt-nun's name and story are preserved in her biography, which was etched on stone and placed in her tomb.<sup>3</sup> Sengzhi was the private Buddhist teacher of Emperor Xuanwu. More than simply lecturing him on the Buddhist law at court, the aunt used her influence in elite circles to promote her niece's appointment. This appointment

raised the profile of their patrilineal clan, the Hu Clan from Anding, which saw their patriarch, Hu Guozhen (438–518), awarded with a position at the central court in Luoyang.<sup>4</sup> As for Hu Guozhen's daughter and benefactor, Empress Dowager Ling, her own trajectory at court is remarkable: Having given birth to the only living direct male heir to the throne, who would himself go on to become Emperor Xiaoming (r. 515–28),<sup>5</sup> the empress dowager ruled as regent after the death of Emperor Xuanwu. Her ascension was not without difficulties. Records indicate that she outlived an assassination attempt from Emperor Xuanwu's official empress, Empress Gao (d. 518).<sup>6</sup> Those same records tell us that Empress Gao did not escape her own assassination at the hands of Empress Dowager Ling, the latter of whom paved her own way to regency by eliminating her competition.<sup>7</sup>

Normative modalities of regency rule appear not to have been what Empress Dowager Ling had in mind when she found herself at the helm of the empire. Hailing from comparatively humble roots but managing to ascend to the highest possible of female ranks, the empress dowager wanted more: direct rule. The dynastic annals of Chinese history tell of a woman who held court in her own name, used the royal “we” (*zhen*), issued her own edicts, enacted the ancient calendrical rites demarcated for the emperor, placed honors on her patrilineal family, survived a coup d'état in order to resume her regency, and finally murdered her own son in order to retain power. Even more incredible, the empress dowager is said to have placed a female child on the throne after that son's murder. This infant was her own granddaughter, the daughter of the murdered son, and though she was not the only person in Chinese history to have had the honor of being called China's sole female emperor—that honor belongs to Wu Zetian as Emperor Wu Zhao—she was, indeed, China's other forgotten female monarch.<sup>8</sup> Placed on the throne by her grandmother, Empress Dowager Ling, the baby held her status for merely a few days before being displaced by a male heir. Her fate, as well as her name, is unrecorded by history.

Empress Dowager Ling is often characterized as the last independent ruler of the Northern Wei because the empire had suffered irreparable internal division with its move of the capital to Luoyang in 494, and it fell to internecine war during her rule. After the murder of the empress dowager in 528, her murderers set up a puppet emperor and the subsequent remainder of the dynasty was beset by a series of other short-lived puppet emperors installed by competing factions until its final collapse. During the reign of the last of these emperors, the empress dowager was given her posthumous name, “Ling,” which is conventionally translated into English as “numinous” and which, in medieval usage, well expresses the historical ambiguity that surrounded this controversial female politician. Although she was granted a posthumous name, she was not given an imperial burial. Not entombed in the cluster of Northern Wei imperial tombs at Luoyang's Mount Mang,<sup>9</sup> the

empress dowager's body, as well as the precise circumstances of her death, is—just like her granddaughter's—unrecorded by history.

#### ARGUMENTS FOR A NEW RECORD

Although the empress dowager's birth name and body have been lost to history, it is my goal in this book to excavate the details of her life insofar as is historically possible. I do so because the many underutilized sources that document her life tell a story that has not yet been adequately told: This is the story of the emergence of public and political roles for women brought about through the arrival of Buddhism to East Asia, the advent of multiethnic states and multicultural cities, and the reinvention of cultural and political traditions that came about as a result.

In chapter 1, "Luoyang Reborn," I begin my deep dive into the historical and social context of the empress dowager by providing an overview of Northern Wei society as it was settled in its final capital city of Luoyang, situated in the central plains of the lower reaches of the Yellow River valley. By providing an overview of Northern Wei history as it relates to the founding of that polity's southern capital and the cultural practices found there, I engage, in some depth, the question of the type of world that the empress dowager was living in and helped to create during her brief but important reign. Northern Wei Luoyang in the sixth century was a dynamic urban center; that very dynamism, however, likely contributed to its downfall. In describing the changing nature of ethnic relations, religious affiliation, and gender norms in this city and at this precise juncture in time, I seek to locate the empress dowager within the historical setting of her precarious but exciting capital.

In chapter 2, "A Woman of Power, Remembered Poorly," I offer a full translation and study of the standard biography of the empress dowager as it is retained in the *Book of the Wei* (Wei shu), which is the official history of the Northern Wei compiled by a scholar named Wei Shou (506–72) approximately twenty-five years after the death of the empress dowager. Before providing the reader with an annotated translation of this work, I discuss the political biases in the text that make it an unreliable witness to the life of the empress dowager and I argue that the genre of dynastic history is not well suited for documenting the lives of women. Following the translation, I provide an overview of the formative tropes that inadequately characterize the empress dowager and that have emerged from her biography, and I argue that such tropes have facilitated the general historical silencing of the empress dowager and her story.

In chapter 3, "Brought to Court by a Nun," I begin the first of three chapters that offer a critical interpretation of the life and reign of the empress dowager and that are informed by her Buddhist practice. Chapter 3 focuses on the very woman who brought the empress dowager to court in the first place: the Buddhist nun Sengzhi, the empress dowager's aunt. In positioning the empress dowager's own

role at court within the history of the rise of Buddhist monasticism for women in East Asia, I reveal in this chapter how the empress dowager benefitted from the Buddhist monastic institution in order to achieve her highest status as the last independent ruler of the Northern Wei. Through a study of the entombed biography (*muzhiming*) of the aunt-nun, I investigate the ways in which Buddhist monasticism created opportunities for women in the Northern Wei's court/monastic structure. I argue that women of the Northern Wei court utilized the new social role of the elite Buddhist woman in order to position themselves as eminent persons in high society, thereby enabling themselves to mobilize their relationship with the Buddhist monastic institution as a means to support their own political careers. Finally, I set this argument in the context of the general, cultural openness to women holding public positions across various sectors of society within the social organization of the people who ruled the Northern Wei.

Chapter 4, "A Girl on the Throne," contains the most challenging of all the arguments that I put forth in this book, which is that perhaps the empress dowager knew just what she was doing when she attempted to place her granddaughter on the throne. In the *Book of the Wei* and its derivative texts, the fact that the empress dowager placed a girl on the throne is entirely glossed over, possibly being seen as an example of the general recklessness with which she is said to have ruled. Using Buddhist sources, I argue that this was not the case. I believe that the empress dowager's placement of her granddaughter on the throne was backed by the intriguing possibility that by the early sixth century Buddhist texts had provided textual precedence for rule by women, and that this fact dovetailed with a widespread change in both notions of imperial legitimation and gender dynamics in the period, a change rooted in the rise of multiethnic states like that of the Northern Wei. By surveying Buddhist textual material translated under the auspices of the empress dowager's court, by using entombed biographies and donative epigraphy from the late Northern Wei, and by connecting to comparable Buddhist forms of imperial legitimation flourishing in neighboring polities, I probe the ways in which Buddhist women participated in the Northern Wei court as high-level politicians. I furthermore expose how the empress dowager actively created and supported roles for women in her court—maybe even the role of emperor.

In chapter 5, "No Salvation in Buddhism," I engage the question of the empress dowager's death and legacy. The biography of the empress dowager states that she attempted to evade her own death by becoming a Buddhist nun, as did many women of her time who faced perilous situations like widowhood or loss of title. Her ploy did not work. Despite having the shaved head of a nun, she was murdered by enemy forces invading the capital. Thousands of her courtiers were also murdered, and the nuns of the inner imperium were reportedly raped in their nunnery. In this last chapter, I consider the fact that although the empress dowager came to court and rose in power there—in part through her affiliation with Buddhists, their texts, ideas, and institutions—Buddhism failed to prevent her

final downfall. Furthermore, I raise the possibility that in the hands of those who controlled the Northern Wei after her death and informed the composition of the *Book of the Wei*, the type of Buddhism that she ascribed to was one of the sources of her demise. In positioning her as a ruler whose Buddhism diverged from that of her courtiers, I also explore the divergent meanings of her posthumous name, “Ling” among both Confucian and Buddhist audiences and I show how the name functioned simultaneously as a political critique and a form of religious identity. Finally, I argue that the space between these meanings was the space she occupied as a deeply controversial figure in her time.

In the “Conclusion” I consider the question of how the empress dowager’s legacy affected the lives of women who came after her. Working from the premise that Buddhism was patronized as a secondary arm of government during the Northern Wei and beyond, I expose how elite women in medieval times were uniquely situated to play central roles in the development, expansion, and policing of state-sponsored Buddhism through to the Tang empire (618–907). In sum, I argue that Empress Dowager Ling provides our earliest known case study of the formation of a type of courtly Buddhism that came to characterize Buddhism as such across much of East Asia: A Buddhism that looked to the buddhas and bodhisattvas as religio-political figureheads, but used court and bureaucratic structures rooted in the administration of Han dynastic forms—structures that, within the multiethnic context of the northern dynasties, had often fallen under the auspices of political women. The gendered angle, I suggest, is what made the Northern Wei unique—that is, it is this angle that ultimately set Northern Wei Buddhism apart from the Buddhism of other medieval polities. Such a Buddhism—female, political, and northern—was similarly seen under the reign of the female Emperor Wu Zhao. I argue that Northern Wei Empress Dowager Ling was a model for the Emperor Wu.

#### THE MAKING AND THE BREAKING OF HISTORICAL SILENCE

Empress Dowager Ling is little known outside medieval historiographical sources. To my knowledge, there is not one dedicated, book-length study of her in any modern language.<sup>10</sup> This lack of interest in her life and reign is frustrating. A medieval woman who transgressed the boundaries of culture, station, and gender, who built majestic Buddhist structures including the tallest building in the known world, and who ruled a major urban center in the medieval period—her story should be much better known. What accounts for this silence? And how do we break it?

Influential source materials that document the life of Empress Dowager Ling belong to a genre of historiographical texts authored by a social stratum of elite, literate men who wrote in a literary form of the Chinese language that I refer to as Literary Chinese.<sup>11</sup> These men, who are called the *Ru*, wrote political and governmental histories throughout China’s imperial era, and their histories have shaped

a narrative of the dynasties that is concerned with documenting continuity over time. This narrative is androcentric and ethnocentric. Throughout the imperial era, rulers, their advisors, and their courtiers were mainly men. There are very few counterexamples—perhaps just enough to prove the rule. It is the stories of these men and their counterparts that are central in the standard dynastic histories written by the Ru. Women do appear in these political histories, but usually only in the context of biographies of women partnered with powerful men or biographies of women noted for heroic acts of virtue. In addition to this sort of androcentrism, we witness a certain misogyny in the official accounts: When women were depicted as having taken power, they were written about poorly in the dynastic histories, a fact we will explore throughout this study. The Ru scholars belonged to a cultural tradition that is referred to in this study as the tradition of the Han, an ethnogroup that has been the majority population in the central plains of China since antiquity. Following Marc Abramson, who explains that although the term *Han* was not the most commonly used term in the medieval period to express the ethnic Self borne witness to in Literary Chinese writings, it is nonetheless an effective English translation for a variety of other words that express a similar idea,<sup>12</sup> this study uses the term Han to refer to peoples in the medieval period who identified themselves as the primary cultural and ethnic holders of a tradition that was: (1) defined on the basis of historical links to the Han empire; (2) conceived of through classical literature that became authoritative during the Han; (3) located geographically in administrative place names derived from the Han state. The Ru are very much in this tradition. Their texts encode an ethnocentric bias that favors polities ruled over by Han peoples and that considers only those polities to be legitimate dynasties in the unfolding of the Chinese imperial tradition.

Not only was Empress Dowager Ling a woman; she also ruled a dynasty that was famously non-Han, even though she herself was said to be Han. As I will show in the subsequent chapters of this book, the Northern Wei was founded by people who were ethnically different from—“Other” than—those represented by the traditions of the Han and the Ru, a group whose ethnonym has been reconstructed from historical sources as “Taghbach” (Ch. Tuoba) and who trace their origins to what is modern-day Inner Mongolia. Not only did the Taghbach have a different understanding of political order and dynastic succession than did the Han; they also knew different definitions of gender and its performance. By the time of the Northern Wei, the Taghbach were also Buddhist. Arguing that Taghbach cultural traditions helped to facilitate the rise of Buddhist and female politicians at court, I will discuss the Taghbach at length and critically analyze the role that they played in the redefinition of kingship during the medieval period. For now, what needs to be considered is that the empress dowager is doubly disadvantaged in terms of the historical records compiled and written by the Ru: A female ruler of an illegitimate empire, her story has been ignored. Moreover, the empress dowager’s story has been ignored because it has become troped. Important sources documenting the

life and rule of the Empress Dowager were written by those who benefitted directly from her death. As we will see, the stories of her life that these people compiled serve to characterize her as an incapable ruler and a licentious woman. These same sources also suggest that she murdered her own son, the emperor. Such tropes align with similar descriptions of powerful women in the official histories of the Ru scholars and they have allowed for the minimizing of women's work across the *longue durée* of imperial history.

To reinterpret the historical record, we can return to these same historiographical sources and read them deeply, looking for new ways in and equipped with different questions to ask. In this study, much of the equipment and the questions that I bring to the sources that document the life of the empress dowager are derived from the tradition of Buddhism. As a historian of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, it is clear to me that Buddhist studies has much to offer to the project of women's history because Buddhism was very popular among women in medieval times and because women themselves both created and are documented in many of the source materials that we might call "Buddhist sources." In the case of Empress Dowager Ling, Buddhist sources of all types—texts, epigraphs, architecture, art, and material culture—provide clues to a different history than that offered in the Ru accounts. All those sources will be used in this study to sketch a new and more historically meaningful portrait of the empress dowager. In creating that portrait, this book aims to bring to the surface the history of how Buddhist women came to rule diverse polities in East Asia during the medieval period. I also seek to make a methodological intervention into my discipline of Buddhist studies with the story that I tell in these pages. Reading Buddhist sources in their full context of patronage and audience and with attention to gender and ethnic difference, I show the potential that Buddhist sources hold for offering new forms of historical information. I also suggest a method of historical scholarship that I refer to as Buddhist feminist historiography, which prioritizes historically contextualized Buddhist sources as a means for asking critical questions about women's lives in history.

One other type of source that is often used in this study is a genre of texts known as entombed biographies (*muzhiming*). These are mortuary biographies that contain verses of praise for the dead, and which are inscribed on stone slabs that are located either inside the tomb with the body or outside the tomb near the tomb entrance or doorway. They are a literary genre of the Ru tradition and are bound by specific genre conventions, as well as being subject to the ethnocentric and androcentric biases of other Ru texts.<sup>13</sup> They are also a genre of writing that seeks not only to commemorate the dead but to rank them according to family prestige and individual attainment.<sup>14</sup> In general, historical information that details individual rank and attainment is not information that we have for women in the historical record; however, in the early medieval period, such emerging entombed biographies do document the lives of cultural outsiders to the Ru tradition, both



women and ethnic Others. Even though the data that comes from these texts is itself influenced by tropes and genre conventions, this is data that we simply do not have in any other form and it is therefore invaluable for our study, which seeks to ask new questions about women's lives in the medieval period. By critically utilizing these biographies alongside other source materials, we will meet many women of the empress dowager's time who also took up new social roles in society that helped to bring Buddhist women into the mainstream of medieval Chinese political life. With their bodies interned at the cluster of Northern Wei imperial tombs north of Luoyang and their names and biographies etched in stone within, we will meet Buddhist nuns, Buddhist administrators, female bureaucrats of the Northern Wei court, and high-ranking women of the inner chambers who all had some affiliation with Buddhism. We will even meet women who were buried alone in the sixth century without reference to their male kin.<sup>15</sup> Taken together, these women's lives document a tremendous change in how women lived their traditions in the context of urban, Buddhist, and multicultural life in Luoyang, and they track a course toward the accession of the only woman to ever rule China with the male title of "emperor," Wu Zetian or Emperor Wu Zhao. Finally, because this genre of literature seeks to appraise and rank, and because Buddhist affiliation in the medieval period provided a mechanism to adjudicate women and their work, these biographies contain information on the social standing and gender performance of Buddhist women from the medieval period who were deeply engaged in the reinvention of tradition in their time.<sup>16</sup>

Historical studies often highlight "great men of history," a tendency both motivated and described by the nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle's dictum that "The history of the world is but the biography of great men."<sup>17</sup> In turn, studies in women's history have sometimes looked like companion texts, showing that women, too, were great and that women, too, shaped history. Empress Dowager Ling certainly was great. Her work had a long-lasting impact on the development of Buddhism and Buddhist ideas of monarchy in East Asia. I do not, however, write this book as a "great women of history" project. Instead, with this study, I embed the empress dowager deeply within her society to show the complex networks of persons, ideas, and institutions that enabled her to do the work that she did. In so doing, I embrace texts that are on the periphery of normative political history. Sources like Buddhist texts, Buddhist donor inscriptions, entombed biographies, and Buddhist images and statuary allow me to bring to life a political history that, until now, has not been told. To put this differently, the use of sources peripheral to imperial power allows me to tell a story that, until now, has only been told from the center of imperial power itself. In so doing, I join other feminist scholars of history in their insistence that feminist history must not affirm patriarchal modes of power and the dissemination of said power but that it must seek to overturn such ways of thinking about the past and thereby radically envision the social structures of the world in which we live.<sup>18</sup>

In the case of Empress Dowager Ling, her physical move from the periphery to the center—from being born without a recorded name at the far edge of an empire to dying as the leader of the court in the capital city—presents an opportune case study in feminist history. As I will show, if we adopt the historical method of reading from the center of power, we see the empress dowager described as licentious, indulgent, and dangerous. If, however, we read from sources that are peripheral to normative historiography, we see her as acutely involved in multifarious ways across networks of social forces that worked to shift that very center of power and thereby make it possible for a woman like Emperor Wu Zhao of the Tang to fully take control of it 150 years later. By adopting the methodology of Buddhist feminist historiography, which highlights social embeddedness and reads from both the center and the periphery of power and history, I tell a bigger story than that of just two women. The story I tell is one of shifting notions of what it meant to be a woman and what it meant to be a ruler in a time of the rapid reinvention of tradition, and I aim to show that this shift—brought about in no small part from the spread of Buddhism in the period—saw the emergence of profoundly new and arguably revolutionary social roles for women, roles that put them at the center of public life.