

Brought to Court by a Nun

Until now we have been introduced to Empress Dowager Ling largely through the *Book of the Wei*. Starting with this chapter, we will begin the process of learning about her and her life through sources not created or compiled by those who benefitted from her murder. A good starting place for that process is Longmen, the imperially funded Buddhist grotto site south of the Northern Wei capital, Luoyang. Understanding the artistic program of the various caves and grottos at Longmen is difficult. The thousands of caves, grottos, and shrines show a dizzying variety of size, imagery, and motif, as well as a diversity of donors and their intentions. Arguing contrary to the work of art historians of Indian Buddhist art who have shown that some images and some inscriptions in similar Buddhist devotional sites in India were not meant to be seen by human eyes, Amy McNair believes that the images in the Longmen caves were meant to be seen. Showing that the devotional object of a shrine often sits in the shrine's very center, for example, and that shrine imagery employed at Longmen is stereotypical and therefore easily read by public audiences, McNair explores the precise visual mechanisms that made the pictorial and spatial programs at Longmen easily legible to visitors.¹ The sum effect of these caves and grottos at Longmen on the visitors who saw them must have been awe-inspiring. Offering the largest and most profuse collection of images that sixth-century people living in the central plains of China would have seen in their lives, the site was famed and acclaimed. People from all walks of life spent lavishly to have their wishes inscribed on the cliffside next to beautifully carved buddha and donor images, all of which could be viewed by the public.

As we have seen, and as we will discuss later in this chapter, it is conjectured that the empress dowager funded her own grotto at Longmen, the so-called



FIGURE 11. Depiction of the carving of the women's imperial procession in the Huangfu Gong Grotto at Longmen. The procession is placed directly under the Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna representation of the past buddha. Circa 527. © Li Lan.

Huoshao grotto. As the largest and highest of all Northern Wei grottos, it was definitely meant to be seen. At this juncture, however, it is instructive to refer to a different, monumentally sized grotto: the aforementioned Huangfu Gong grotto built by the uncle of the empress dowager in 527. The grotto contains a unique image of what has been identified as a royal procession that includes both Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Xiaoming.² Preceded by three Buddhist nuns, two of whom are undertaking ritual worship of the buddha and one of whom is standing very close to her, the empress dowager is followed by the ladies of her entourage and then a second entourage led by the-then seventeen-year-old emperor. Built in the year before her death and that of Xiaoming, this portrait would have been known to and, assumedly, approved by the empress dowager herself. The image is one of corulership. With the two rulers united in their Buddhist worship and led by a procession of imperial nuns, there is no hint of the type of political infighting that implicated the empress dowager in the death of Emperor Xiaoming shortly after this image was made. Of course, this image is also political. The year 527 was a

difficult one for the empress dowager and her supporters; having reasserted power after the coup d'état of 520–25, the years from 525 until her death were fraught with internal tension, political murder, and the realignment and reassertion of political power. It was a time when she is said to have been swayed by corrupt officials whom she favored.

For our purposes in this chapter, what is immediately interesting in this depiction of an imperial procession is the existence of Buddhist nuns as well as the apparent closeness that they are shown to have had with the empress dowager. As chronicled in her biography, the empress dowager gained appointment to court owing to the recommendation of her aunt, the eminent nun Sengzhi. Although a seemingly minor detail in the biography of the empress dowager, the power of the aunt-nun is critically important for our study of the empress dowager because it forces us to confront scholarly and traditional understandings of what Buddhist monastic women in East Asia were doing with their faith in the earliest times for which we have records attesting to their existence. In the case of the aunt, her appointment of her niece to court irrefutably chronicles how one of East Asia's earliest recorded Buddhist nuns enjoyed audience with the emperor and how she used that audience to promote members of her natal family to powerful positions at court. Precisely how the aunt came to court and exactly why she had the power and ability to support her niece's position are the subject of this chapter, because an exploration of both topics will help us to locate the empress dowager in her social and historical context. In so doing, we get a glimpse into the gendered nature of courtly life in the times of the empress dowager; this will enable us to engage the thesis that Buddhism offered women access to elite social networks to which they otherwise had no access.

In exposing the nature and power of these social networks and the individual opportunities within them, the present chapter places the aunt-nun Sengzhi in the service of a larger story of the creation of a radically new social category within early medieval society: elite monastic women. This social category arose between the third and fifth centuries of the common era but has had an incredible influence on the lives of women across East Asia until the present day. Although the Buddhist tradition is no longer the sole domain of monastic women in East Asia—Daoist women, too, have long had the opportunity to live in religious communities—between the third and fifth centuries the Buddhist tradition did provide forms of shelter, support, and community for women that were unique. In this way, Buddhist monasticism constituted an innovative social avenue for women in China that provided the space necessary to reconfigure female identities and the power to be trusted to do so. In this chapter, I explore what such opportunities looked like and what women did with them at the Northern Wei court in Luoyang, a place where female members of the Buddhist monastic community created state-funded and all-female networks of support from which they enacted new forms of virtue creation in society

as chaste women a step removed from the sexual politics of the patriarchal family unit. The rise of unmarried, often autonomous, women acting in positions of social prestige and influence across the breadth of early medieval China is a fascinating and complex social history that remains largely unexplored. In this chapter, I aim to explore a piece of that history through a focus on the eminent nun, Sengzhi, and I will do so with the aim of describing the social platform by which her niece, Empress Dowager Ling, was able to rise, govern, and further support female politicians in her own court.

SITUATING SENGZHI

To begin a study of how Buddhist monasticism affected women's lives in early medieval China, we should begin with the work of Gregory Schopen, who is the world's foremost living authority on Buddhist monasticism in India. As Schopen has noted with respect to Indian Buddhism, prior to the establishment of the Buddhist community of nuns,³ there were no "natural" or "cultural" all-women social spaces in India outside the realm of prostitution. Provocatively, Schopen notes a few of the ways in which the community of Buddhist nuns and the community of prostitutes seem to have mimicked each other in urban settings.⁴ For Schopen, then, the establishment of monastic orders for women in India was more than a simple admission of individual women into monastic life. Ordination as ranking members of the Buddhist monastic organization represented a marked social change in the historical lives of women. Despite the famous hesitation of Śākyamuni Buddha on the question of female ordination,⁵ the fact that women were ordained in the early Buddhist monastic community was a watershed moment for women's history, allowing women the opportunity and support to live their lives a step removed from the patriarchal family unit. This is true of India, and it also true of China.

Giving women the opportunity to depart from the traditional family structure and take up lives as unmarried, independent members of the Buddhist community, a woman's decision to identify as a Buddhist nun was a radical undertaking that necessitated a redefinition of gendered notions of work and virtue that were unavailable to women in pre-Buddhist modalities of culture and gender performance. In reference to notions of gendered work and value creation written about in the literature of the Chinese tradition, Robin Wang argues that in imperial China a woman's *dao*, or path, was to follow her male kin; by supporting their male kin's flourishing, she argues, a woman had a means of creating virtue, or *de*, for themselves. "Chinese women's social roles as daughter, wife, and mother," Wang states, "are the embodiment of their *dao*."⁶ This means that, for a woman, *de*, or virtue, is only created in relation to a male *dao*. In her argument, Wang offers a sympathetic interpretation of a Chinese heuristic known as the "three followings" (*sancong*), which, in its origin, was a descriptive model for mourning rites first

recommended in the Confucian Classic from times prior to the Han dynasty, the *Book of Etiquette and Ceremony* (Yili). The text here recommends that, in terms of funerary rites, “Women have the rule of the three followings and do not have a unique path. Therefore, a young woman should follow her father; if she is married then she should follow her husband; if her husband has died, she should follow her son.”⁷ Although this maxim is intended to establish mourning and funerary rites that indicate within which family lineage a woman should be buried and who should mourn her, the idea of “following” has been extended to suggest that a woman’s life is defined by her role as daughter, wife, and mother. It was through these roles, Wang argues, that a woman was able to create virtue for herself and garner public standing.

The canons of early and early medieval Chinese literature archive the biographies of many such eminent women, women noted for their strength and foresight in family matters. For example, the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* contains the biography of the mother of Mencius (Meng mu, 372–289 BCE), who is arguably the most famous mother in the history of China. As an example of her fame in Confucian cultures across East Asia, she is featured on a board game for women that is housed in the Korean National Museum and that is thought to have been created by Queen Inhyeon (1667–1710) of the Joseon dynastic house (1392–1897). In playing the game, a female player ascends through various levels of virtue in a snakes-and-ladders-style format in order to attain the status of eminent women of old. Featured prominently among these women is the mother of Mencius.⁸ As her own biography tells us, the mother of Mencius was widowed and yet raised her son to be one of history’s most celebrated philosophers. Having chosen a suitable location for their lodging in which her son could appreciate both ritual and learning, having slashed her own weaving in order to impress on him the importance of making progress in his own studies, and having educated him in the matters of proper relations with his wife and in-laws, she has been known throughout East Asian history as a model mother. She is famous for having raised a peerless son without the need for a male partner; however, her biography in the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* also includes a number of instructions for women and their partners that she relays to her famous son so that he can relate to and respect his new wife. She tells her son:

The rites for a wife require that she purify the five grains, strain the wine, care for her father-in-law and mother-in-law, and sew clothing, and that is all. Thus, she takes care of the inner quarters but has no ambitions beyond that sphere. The *Book of Changes* says, “She prepares the food within but pursues nothing beyond that.” The *Odes* says, “She has no transgressions and no authority to decide,/ Wine and food are her only concerns,” to explain how a woman does not usurp authority but practices the Way of the Three Obediences. Therefore, according to the rites, when she is young she obeys her parents, when she marries she obeys her husband, and when her husband dies she obeys her son.⁹

These notions of the gendered nature of work and personal freedom that the mother of Mencius here explicates in no way amount to a universal deprecation of women, though they do work to heavily invest women in the family unit. Arguing for the importance of women within the patriarchal family order, Mark Edward Lewis reminds us of the sixth-century family manual, the *Family Instructions of the Yan Clan* (Yanshi jiaxun), where the aforementioned Yan Zhitui argues that, "In forbidding the violence of children, the injunctions of a teacher or a friend are not as good as the commands of a nurse or a maid. In stopping the quarrels of ordinary people, the teachings of Yao and Shun are not as good as the instructions of a widowed [mother] or wife."¹⁰ As Yan makes clear in his manual, women should be entrusted with power and authority in the domestic sphere. As mothers, women earned rites of mourning from their sons, a public act of filial closeness between mother and son that was popularized at the highest levels of society from approximately the second through the fifth centuries.¹¹ The women whose biographies are included for veneration in the *Biographies of Exemplary Women* are all filial women; as mothers, wives, and daughters, they find their *de* through supporting the thriving of their male kin. Even in the "Depraved and Favored" chapter of this text, all the women biographized are women connected with men.¹²

Despite such female modeling in the classical canons of Chinese literature, Lisa Raphals has argued against any notions of the timeless oppression of women in China by showing that women have long been influential within Chinese political and literary worlds.¹³ There are countless stories of eminent and socially prestigious Chinese women throughout all the eras of Chinese history. Crucially, however, until the arrival of Buddhism in China, the ideal woman of the Han literary, philosophical, and historiographical traditions created social virtue and wielded social influence through her location as a holder of family identity: wife, mother, daughter. To explain this gendered dynamic of filial location, Ko, Haboush, and Piggott argue that although women of differing age and class (and, I would add, ethnicity) related to gendered ideas about the home and the family in different ways, nonetheless such an importance on gender roles within the family unit constituted a Confucian discourse that ran through East Asian history, which defined women as the "Other" of manhood.¹⁴

Indeed, a single, never-married woman living from her own means is one we rarely encounter in the many stories of virtuous women that have come down to us from our earliest sources on women's lives in the Chinese literary tradition. The mother of Mencius is an eminent example of the type of virtuous life that an honorable widow might lead, but hers was also a life unavailable to most women in imperial times for whom marriage helped to create financial security. This tying of a woman's virtue to their fulfilment of gendered family roles is not only true of the tradition we commonly term "Confucianism" in modern, English-language studies. Although women have long had space to act in roles of religious leadership within Daoist communities, the early Daoist tradition does not have a lineage

of unmarried women who draw virtue from outside the family structure. The early tradition's women are wives and mothers.¹⁵ For example, although the second-century Celestial Masters community certainly made space for Daoist priestesses in their liturgies and treated them as the equals of their male members, they were women partnered with men.¹⁶ Relatedly, although Robert Campany has pointed out that women have reached high levels of prestige and attainment within the lineage of Daoist transcendents,¹⁷ it is also the case that the women we have stories of are wives who often trump their husband's abilities,¹⁸ revealing thereby an unusual display of high-level attainment because, normatively, women do not surpass men in such matters.

One example of an eminent and unmarried woman in the pre-Buddhist literary tradition is Ge Hong's (283–343) "Hairy Woman" (*maonü*), who is memorialized in the text of Ge that carries his own sobriquet, the *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (*Baopuzi*). The Hairy Woman wanders the mountains in a half-human, half-animal state, a sign of the type of religious transformation that Ge advocates.¹⁹ In the same text, Ge offers other sorts of commentary on female religious activity for nonimmortal women, and disapproves of women being in Buddhist spaces. The earliest reference I have seen within the Chinese literary tradition to groups of women associated with Buddhist temples is found in Ge's text, where he offers testimony on what he feels are changing gender dynamics in his time. He laments that:

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

Some lodge at others' houses for the night. Some return under the cover of darkness. They entertain and amuse themselves at Buddhist temples and observe men fishing and hunting. They climb heights and enjoy themselves on riverbanks. They leave their districts for parties and funerals. When riding in carriages, they open the curtains and circle about all over town. Cups and goblets are filled and poured, and strings and songs come forth while they are on the road. They think that such conduct is lofty, and so gradually what is wrong becomes customary, and the opportunity [for illicit relationships] arises. There is nothing which they are unwilling to do. This is the cause of lasciviousness in our time.²⁰

With regard to Ge's opinions on the bad behavior of the women of his time, what has yet to be commented on is the brief but important connection that Ge makes between Buddhism and women's behavior. Although it is well known that men often enjoyed parties and picnics in Buddhist monasteries and temples,²¹ Ge's

description of women doing the same is our earliest record of such events. In his voice we hear anxiety about women abandoning domestic life and household crafts to engage in modes of leisure that place them in the public eye. Notably, Buddhist temples provided a social space in which women could behave in much the same way as men, and this did not sit well with Ge.

Ge Hong belonged to a markedly different society from that of, for example, the Hu clan of Anding whence our empress dowager hailed. Living in the southern regions of the old Han empire near to the Yangze River, the perceived type of gender expression and transgression that he wrote about is drawn from the long-standing ideas about the connection of women to family and home that we have discussed. Although we do not have a similar literary record from the peoples at the northern reaches of the Han empire or from the northern dynasties, we might assume, based on our previous discussion of Taghbach notions of gender, that women in Inner Asian cultural traditions had a different relationship with Buddhism than women of the southern regions did. Such an assumption finds little in the way of contemporaneous documentation; however, Diego Loukota has recently translated a number of documents from the ancient Silk Road city of Niya, which sat on the southern rim of the Tarim Basin, that do suggest that Buddhist women were public actors in society and that they were ordained as nuns earlier than women of the southern courts and cultural areas were.²² In his documents, which date to the third century, Loukota has uncovered proof of women not only holding the title of “nun” but also of these nuns owning and selling slaves as well as acting as witnesses in legal cases. This extraordinary find does suggest that women in the Buddhist centers of the northwest regions of the Han empire and beyond may have carried the title of “nun” significantly earlier than southern women did and that they engaged in public life. The documents that Loukota has translated, however, are preserved in Gāndhārī and they speak for a quite different historical situation than that of our Northern Wei women. For Empress Dowager Ling and her aunt, the nun Sengzhi, it appears that they were Han Chinese women living in a multiethnic and multicultural milieu at the gate of the Hexi corridor to the western regions. Hence, their stories display both a marked ability to engage in social and political life alongside their own engagement with Han cultural, religious, and political traditions.

The most well-known text of the Chinese literary tradition that discusses early nuns and their works in the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, the *Lives of the Nuns* (T. no. 2063: Bīqiuni zhuan), includes some discussion of early Buddhist nuns from Inner Asia who made their way into the reaches of the Han territory and it perhaps captures the predicament of our Northern Wei women and their hybrid cultural lives. The *Lives of the Nuns* is a biographical collection of the earliest monastic Buddhist women known to the Chinese Buddhist tradition and it is attributed to a monk called Shi Baochang (trad. d. 518) who was active in the sixth century, but in the southern dynasty of the Liang. Scholars have objected to this

attribution, arguing that the text was likely composed during the Tang.²³ Whatever the date of the text, Brett Hinsch argues that the collection is less aimed at documenting an accurate historical chronicle about early Buddhist women and their lives than it is meant as an ideological text of Chinese Buddhism that works to “construct new female identities specifically designed to resolve conflicts between Buddhism and Confucian family values.”²⁴ Hinsch further contends that these stories do not so much provide biographies of early nuns as they provide evidence of the negotiation between Confucian and Buddhist notions of gendered virtue creation that become important in the medieval period and that is often expressed as the confrontation between filial piety and renunciation.²⁵ Hinsch argues that the author of the *Lives of the Nuns* took the aforementioned *Biographies of Eminent Women* as a template for his text and “manipulated his stories of exemplary women within a traditional genre to construct Buddhist female ideals appropriate to Chinese culture,”²⁶ thereby positioning the nuns as Confucian exemplars who, when the occasion to become Buddhists arose, brought their Confucianism to their practice of Buddhism and vice versa.

Furthermore, in the *Lives of the Nuns*, these Confucian family values were also thought to have been important in the lives of non-Han women, such as in this famous biography of a fourth-century Sogdian nun, An Lingshou. It says:

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

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

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

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

Lingshou said, “I am setting myself to cultivate the Way exactly because I want to free all living beings from suffering. How much more, then, do I want to free my two parents?”²⁷

This brief story illustrates the conflict between Buddhist and what we might call Confucian perspectives on the social and religious roles of women. However, since this story is placed in the service of biographizing a non-Han woman whose father served a dynastic house of peoples from the Jie ethnic group (one such group from the so-called “five barbarians,” or what are called *wuhu* in Han writings), we can read the story of An Lingshou through the additional lens of the development of particularly Han Chinese cultural forms of Buddhism at a time when the non-Han peoples of the north were physically and culturally moving farther south. Sengzhi is also part of this story, which will be further discussed below.

Although the aforementioned sources from Niya suggest that Buddhist nuns may have been present in the northern border areas of the Han empire as early as the third century, the Chinese literary tradition recognizes that the commencement of the full lineage of nuns took place only in the fifth century and only after the Liu-Song (420–79) court in the south had supported the Buddhist monastic community in its struggle to introduce canonical ordination for Buddhist women in China. From the point of view of Buddhist law, the legal ordination of a nun requires both a full set of monastic laws to be ordained under and a quorum of already-ordained women to be present at the ordination. Such standards were hard to come by in early medieval times, when there were no legally ordained nuns present, perhaps particularly so in the south, and when monastic law codes, or *vinayas*, were still being translated into the Chinese language.²⁸ As such, ordinations for nuns were performed without full legal authorization until the year 433, when, with the support of the Liu-Song court, the first legal ordination was undertaken with a group of Sinhalese nuns.²⁹ The other significant factor that supported this first legal ordination of Buddhist nuns was the arrival of the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* and its translation into Chinese by the monk Guṇavarman (Qiunabamo, 367–431). The story of Guṇavarman's role in advocating for and facilitating the ordination of women in the Liu-Song dynasty is told in the account of his life in the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (Gaoseng zhuan).³⁰ Since the time of this first ordination of Chinese women into the Dharmaguptaka lineage, countless women have taken up the opportunity to live as legally ordained, Buddhist nuns in this tradition. In today's world, it is the Dharmaguptaka lineage of nuns that has been transmitted continuously without fracture, despite the unbroken transmission of other traditions for monks.³¹

What is true of monastic women, north and south, is that a woman's status as a Buddhist nun placed her outside of her natal family or her husband's family, which allowed her to work and create virtue in a space that was different from the family unit. This did not mean that a woman severed herself from her family completely. We have seen how Sengzhi promoted her own niece, the empress dowager, to court. What it did mean, however, is that she was able to identify herself outside the family unit and was removed from the sexual and reproductive politics of marriage and motherhood. Such an opportunity for social value creation through chastity and all-female community seems to have been particularly attractive to widows, since they, too, were divorced from the family unit owing to the deaths of their husbands and they therefore experienced estrangement within the patrilocal family. Such a precarious position as widowhood—that of involuntarily being removed from the social prestige of the family unit—was creatively leveraged by becoming a Buddhist nun.³² Similarly, throughout the biographies contained in the *Lives of the Nuns*, we see a number of women using entrance to the Buddhist community as an alternate and sometimes complementary path to social virtue than what was offered by dominant and gendered familial structures

in pre-Buddhist China. For example, the text contains stories relating Buddhist monasticism for women to themes of rape resistance with the threat of death,³³ marriage resistance by almost fasting to death,³⁴ and using entrance to the community of nuns as a cause for divorce and a means to escape a bad husband.³⁵

A woman's involvement in Buddhist monasticism accords with what Lo Yuet Keung argues is a shift toward sexual abstinence for women in medieval China, a shift that saw a redefinition of female virtue from the ideal of sexual procreation to the ideal of pure chastity.³⁶ An illustrative example of Lo's argument is seen in the following story of a nameless Buddhist nun from the *Records of the Hidden and Visible Realms* (You ming lu), an early collection of "tales of the strange" (*zhiguai*) literature authored by Liu Yiqing (403–44). As the story goes, the Jin dynasty general Huan Wen (312–73)³⁷ was considering raising a rebellion against the emperor and usurping the throne, at least until a Buddhist nun came around to teach him the folly of his ways. As the story puts it:

Huan Wen harbored the mind of a usurper. At that time, a Buddhist nun came from afar. It was in the summer, during the fifth month [of the year]. The nun was bathing in another room. Wen spied on her stealthily and saw the naked nun cut her belly with a knife and take out her five internal organs (the viscera) first, and next she severed her two legs, head, and hands as well. After a long while she finished bathing. Wen asked her, "Previously I saw you. How could you mutilate yourself like that?" The nun replied, "When you become the Son of Heaven, you should also be like that." Wen felt disconsolate.³⁸

Although the idea of women acting as ad hoc political advisors to powerful men is not a new idea in the history of Chinese writing on women,³⁹ what is new in this story is the way in which the message is delivered. The medium of delivery is further clarified in another version of this same tale from a similar and perhaps contemporaneous text, the *Sequel to in Search of the Spirits* (Soushen houji).⁴⁰ This second text tells us that the nun in question took Wen as a benefactor and that he was so appreciative of her learning and talents that he allowed her to lodge within the inner gates of his home.⁴¹ Despite Wen's respect for the woman, he was also curious about what she did in the shower. This curiosity turned him into a voyeur instead of a benevolent benefactor. His peeping at the nun—a reference to his sexual curiosity, which was akin to his questionable political ambition—is turned on its head when the nameless nun in question dismembers her own body, showing it to be both grotesque and impermanent. By mutilating her body in an act of self-sacrifice symbolizing the self-sacrifice of an emperor, the nun shames Wen and puts an end to both his sexual curiosity and his political machinations. Her actions are strongly reminiscent of the type of bodily mutilation and dismemberment explored by Liz Wilson in her pioneering work on disfigurement and disgust within early Indian Buddhist hagiographies and the depiction of her actions is perhaps modeled after the story of the nun Subhā, who, according to

the foundational Indian text, the *Songs of the Sisters* (*Therīgāthā*), is said to have plucked out her eyes to prevent the sexual advances of a pursuing man.⁴²

The nameless nun described in the story of the usurper Huan Wen draws on an entirely different repertoire of eminence in order to gain prominence in society than did the women whose lives are recorded in the *Biographies of Eminent Women*. Through the grotesque dismantling of her physical form, she displays her independence and self-reliance, her ability to choose when and how she lives, her advanced learning shown through magical arts, and her inversion of normative sexuality. In Lo's words, she manifests the idea of pure chastity over the ideal of sexual procreation. This shift to pure chastity represents a new way of being a woman that we see arising in various historical sources from early medieval China. It is this new type of womanhood that supported Sengzhi's rise and power at court.

WHO WAS SENGZHI?

We know of Sengzhi only through her entombed biography, which is the earliest dated biography that we have for a Buddhist nun for all of East Asia.⁴³ Sengzhi died in the year 516 and the biography is also dated to that year. Although the *Lives of the Nuns* collects the stories of nuns who are said to have lived before Sengzhi, that text is not dated and it is likely from the Tang era. We have also seen, above, how that text describes the behavior of Buddhist nuns in a way that encodes female virtues associated with the Confucian tradition. Sengzhi's biography is different. Not only is it our earliest, dated biography; it was also written in the year of her death and presumably by people who knew her, who witnessed her work at court, and who may even have attended the funeral described in the text. The biography thus offers critically different data than does the *Lives of the Nuns*. The data offered includes a chronicle of her life working for the imperial family and rare terminology attesting to the practice of Buddhism in her time, as well as to her own practice of that religion. It tells us which ranks she held at court and where she lived as a nun. And yet the biography is no simple eye witness. As we saw in the introduction to this study, commemorative biographical accounts of a person's life etched into stone and entombed with them in their death are a common genre of elite writing in the medieval period that, by the time of the Northern Wei, had become stylized and fixed in form.⁴⁴ They are a genre of literature strongly associated with elite male authorship and they do not offer the deceased's version of their own life. Nonetheless, as discussed in the introduction to the present book, they are incredibly rare sources regarding the lives of women in history that offer data nowhere else available in the Chinese Literary tradition. In the case of Sengzhi, her biography offers the earliest such data available for a Buddhist nun in East Asia.

In wanting to bring these critically understudied entombed biographies of elite women from the Northern Wei era to my study of the rise of political and Buddhist women in the medieval period, I have adopted a tripartite method for

critically reading them. First, I do not read these texts as unproblematic historical fact; while offering data that is important and unique, I endeavor to place these texts in their historical context by reading them with and against other sources of information, such as dynastic histories, Buddhist texts, and art historical remains. Second, even though I handle these sources with critical awareness of their limitations, I insist that the information they provide is substantially different from the information about the lives of women offered in other source materials and that we have no compelling reason to be suspicious about the sort of information revealed by names, ranks, and dates in the biographies since, in all the cases studied here, they were written by contemporaries of the deceased. Third, given the rise in popularity of Buddhism in the early medieval period, I am particularly attentive to the ways in which Buddhist ideas and institutions shape what constitutes the type of virtue, rank, and prestige that is an integral aspect of the composition of these entombed biographies and I argue throughout that since Buddhism was a tradition generally open to women in the medieval period, it actually facilitated the mechanisms by which women could be praised for their individual merit outside the patrilineal family.

The epigraphical record of the Northern Wei has thus far yielded four different entombed biographies for Buddhist nuns, including that of Sengzhi.⁴⁵ All four of these were commissioned by the Northern Wei court during the regency of Empress Dowager Ling and are from tombs at the imperial burial cluster at Mount Mang. These biographies are incredibly rare, early sources and we will survey all of them in this chapter. The information offered documents how monastic women in this period began to fill the types of political roles that normally earned one their own entombed biography and elite-level mortuary rites—these roles were normally held by men.⁴⁶

In the case of Sengzhi, she is remembered and praised in her entombed biography for holding positions in both civil and religious administrations. Like her niece the empress dowager, Sengzhi was a woman from the non-Han regions of the northern boundaries of the old Han empire. Her social location within the hybrid culture at the gateway to the western regions may have given her access to social freedoms not offered to the women in the heartlands of the Han. Drawing social prestige and influence from her status as a nun, as well as her position as advisor to the emperor, Sengzhi's entombed biography details her life in both domains. In so doing, her entombed biography is a rare source that contradicts what we know about the lives of early Buddhist nuns in China from the aforementioned *Lives of the Nuns*. Specifically, if the purpose of the *Lives of the Nuns* is to show that Buddhist practice was an avenue for women to enact Confucian notions of virtuous gender roles, then it is no surprise that political nuns like Sengzhi are not included in that collection. The exclusion of nuns with political portfolios from the collection is not only a historical inaccuracy, it is also an irony because it was only with the support of the Liu-Song court that women in East Asia achieved

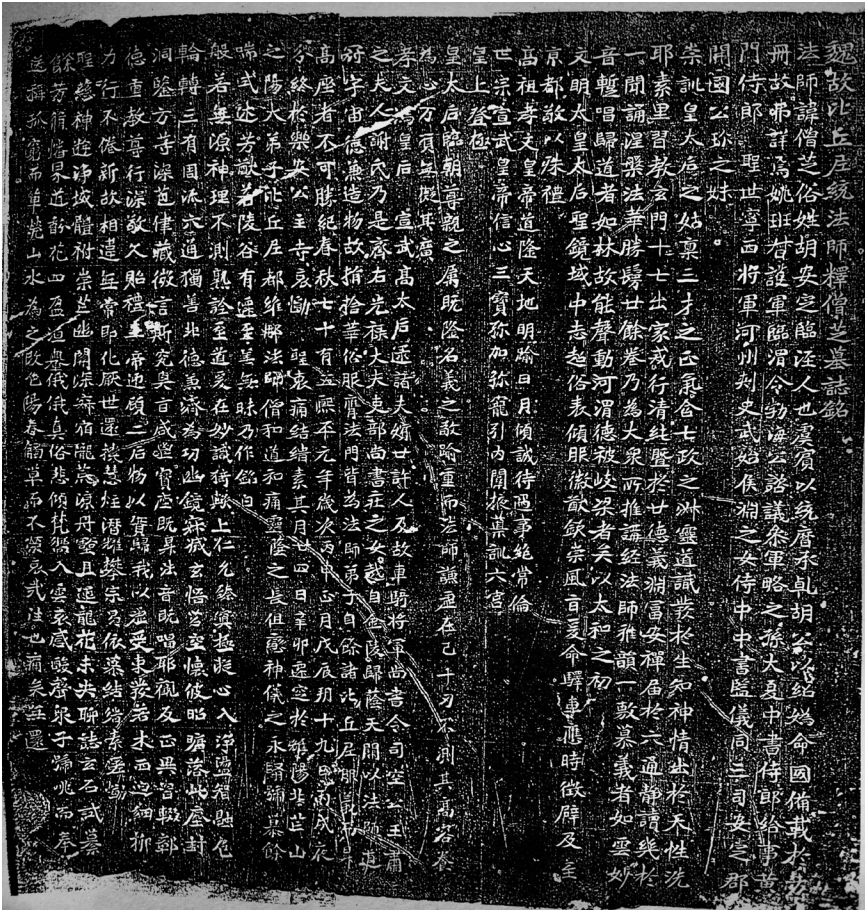


FIGURE 12. Photo of rubbing of the entombed biography of the nun Shi Sengzhi. Circa 516. Photo reproduced from Zhao and Zhao, *Heluo Muke Shiling*, 20.

canonical ordination as legally recognized Buddhist nuns. The earliest biographies of Buddhist nuns collected in the *Lives of the Nuns* are of women who practiced Buddhism during the Jin dynasty, the southern dynasty prior to the Liu-Song. Although many of the biographies of the women of the Jin cannot avoid a discussion of those women's relations with the court, the collection minimizes such political connections as a means of extolling the women for their extrawordly religious commitments. For example, the *Lives of the Nuns* contains the biography of the nun Huixu (431–99),⁴⁷ who was frequently asked to visit the Jin palace and for whom a royal monastic lodging was built nearby. Although Huixu was connected to and may have been dependent on the court, her biography in the *Lives of*

the Nuns stresses how she sought to avoid any courtly entanglements or positions. According to the text, she staged a hunger strike in order to enforce her rejection of the court and its politics, and the text claims that the court went into decline as a result of her withdrawal. Although, by the seventh century, we have examples of Buddhist monastic women creating and working within practice communities outside the capital city and the court that ruled it—the most preeminent of these being the medieval community of nuns at Baoshan studied by Wendi Adamek⁴⁸—in the Northern Wei we have no such evidence at all. Instead, what we have is plenty of evidence that early nuns of the fifth and sixth centuries worked in tandem with the court and populated both the court and the nunnery.

Sengzhi's story preserved in her entombed biography is therefore of critical importance. As the earliest dated biography of a Buddhist nun in East Asia that we currently have, it provides a markedly different chronicle from what we are accustomed to seeing in the *Lives of the Nuns*, and it therefore challenges past scholarship, which has strongly relied on that text. For example, we see the effect of the source on the area of study in the work of Chikusa Masaaki, one of the few scholars to have studied the lives of the Buddhist women of the Jin dynasty like Huixu. Chikusa details the relationships between courtly life and religious life in these early biographies, but characterizes the women's joint religious/political undertakings as a "corruption" of the Buddhist faith.⁴⁹ In the story of Sengzhi, her joint religious and political undertakings were in no way considered a corruption of her faith by her contemporaries, patrons, and benefactors. On the contrary, her ability to hold rank in both religious and political domains was seen as a sign of her strength and eminence.

AN EMINENT BUDDHIST AT COURT

Sengzhi's entombed biography describes both her personal virtue as well as her accomplished practice of Buddhism. It says the following:⁵⁰

The aunt of the empress dowager who venerated the teachings,⁵¹ [Sengzhi] was endowed with the true vitality of the three capabilities⁵² and embraced the refined energy of the seven governances.⁵³ Her knowledge of the Way grew forth from innate knowledge and her spiritual demeanor came forth from her heaven-sent nature. Clean of all falsity and pure on the inside, she studied and taught the arcane gate. She left home at seventeen and her practice of the precepts was clear and pure. When she reached the age of twenty, her moral virtue was rich and profound. By abiding in concentration, she had arrived at the six supernormal powers⁵⁴ and so could serenely recite many [sūtras] after hearing them one time. She chanted more than twenty scrolls of sūtras, including the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*,⁵⁵ the *Lotus Sūtra*,⁵⁶ the *Śrīmālā Sūtra*,⁵⁷ and thus, the great assembly recommended that she lecture on the sūtras. With a single exposition in the Dharma-master's elegant prosody, those who admired her righteousness [amassed] like clouds; with a fleeting chant in her

marvelous voice, those who took refuge in the Way were [thick] like a forest. Thus, she could shake the Yellow and the Wei Rivers with her voice, and reach both the Qi and the Liang Mountains with her virtue.

The account of Sengzhi's Buddhism above is rare among the entombed biographies of other monastic women of the Northern Wei because it indicates that her virtue was associated with her Buddhist practice more so than with her elite status. Of the four entombed biographies of nuns from the Northern Wei imperial burial site of Mount Mang that are currently available for study, two are for women who share monastic names beginning with the word *compassion* (*ci*), Ciyi and Ciqing. Their shared religious name is perhaps because they were sister nuns at the imperially funded Jade Radiance Nunnery. We have met Ciyi before: otherwise known as Empress Gao, she was the empress to Xuanwu who attempted to murder Empress Dowager Ling; however, the latter pushed her to the nunnery and eventually had her murdered there. This story is recounted in Empress Gao's official biography in the *Book of the Wei* and it implicates the empress dowager in her murder.⁵⁸ As for Ciqing, and according to her entombed biography, her entrance into monasticism happened while at court. According to the text, she was the wife of a leader of a rebellion that was quashed by the Northern Wei.⁵⁹ As a result, she was brought into the female ranks of the court as a slave, yet she quickly ascended to the high position of royal governess. In this role she cared for the young emperors of the dynasty, notably Emperor Xiaoming who considered her like a mother and ordered her state funeral after weeping at her bedside. Her ascent from court slave to imperial mother was made possible through her renunciation. Allowing her to reconfigure her public virtue from "rebel wife" to "chaste matron," her association with the Buddhist monastic institution was a pivotal and strategic turn that placed her in a position removed from the sexual politics of court life and her rebel in-laws. For both Ciqing and Ciyi, then, their entrance into monastic life was necessitated by their location at court: Ciyi was forced into the nunnery by Empress Dowager Ling, while Ciqing appears to have chosen monastic life as a means of renouncing her rebel family and converting her public virtue to that of pure chastity. The final entombed biography that we have is for a princess of the imperial clan, who is identified as a "nun" (Skt. *bhikṣuṇī* ; Ch. *biqiuni*) but not in the way we might expect. Instead, her title contains a unique appellation—*biqiu "yuan" ni*. We should understand that this title means "Nun of the Yuan family," with "Yuan" being the name of the royal family. However, that the Yuan family name is inserted into the monastic title of *biqiuni* in a way that obfuscates the underlying Sanskrit title of *bhikṣuṇī* suggests that those who gave her the title did not actually understand what it meant.⁶⁰ Such confusions might further suggest that the princess was not a normal sort of Buddhist nun at all, and indeed, her biography does not mention that she ever "left home" or practiced the Buddhist precepts. On the contrary, as a princess, she was made to marry twice for reasons of family alliance despite her desire to live a

contemplative life. Reading her entombed biography reveals that her life as a “nun” seems to have been a self-styled one embarked on after the death of her second husband. In this role, she lived at home serving her family with great care while also studying Buddhist texts. She died in old age on her way to a hermitage. In the case of this princess, her title matches her actions: self-styled renunciation without the authority of a monastic community to which a nun would normally belong.

Unlike those of the three other elite Buddhist nuns from Empress Dowager Ling’s court, Sengzhi’s title on her entombed biography—dharma master (*fashi*)—bears witness to the fact that she was a higher-status Buddhist than they were. While in modern usage the epithet “dharma master” is common in Buddhist monastic communities, it was rare in the context of the Northern Wei. In her study of the rock-cut grottos at Yungang, Joy Lidu Yi argues that dharma masters were important community leaders and preachers of the dharma within the Yungang grottos and that their dharma lectures were attended by members of the Buddhist laity who also undertook rituals, such as offerings and circumambulation.⁶¹ Yi also argues that the content of these dharma masters’ lectures were linked to scenes from Buddhist scriptures that were carved into the grotto wall. As such, dharma masters were entrusted with the power to both officiate at rituals and interpret Buddhist teachings for large audiences. As far as I am aware, Sengzhi’s biography is the earliest example we have of a woman having had the title of “dharma master” in all of East Asia, a title that was also rare in her time. I know of no other earlier women who held the title, though, as we will see below, two of her own disciples did hold the title after her.

Her status as a dharma master unites her with one other eminent Buddhist at the Northern Wei court: the Northern Wei Dharma Master named Sengling, the Great Superintendent of the Śramaṇas Who Clarifies Profundities (*Da Wei gu zhaoxuan shamen datong Sengling fashi*). According to his entombed biography, also from Mount Mang, Sengling died in the year 535 at the age of eighty-one. His biography tells of his own Buddhist practice and reveals that, upon ordination, he “deposited his heart in the clan of *Shi*,”⁶² *Shi* being the first character of the transliterated name of Śākyamuni Buddha in Chinese (Shijiamouni). This is noteworthy because it suggests that ordination for elite Buddhists in the period included taking the name of the buddha as their new family name. Sengzhi also bears the family name of *Shi* as a monastic name. This may be evidence of her own canonical ordination. Similarly, her biography specifically says that she “left home” and that her practice of the precepts was “clear and pure”—important markers of Buddhist monastic affiliation that are not mentioned in the other entombed biographies of Mount Mang. Although there are scattered records of Buddhist nuns in epigraphical sources from many geographical areas throughout the latter half of the Northern Wei, there is no record of any sort of formal ordination for them. As such, we have no idea what affiliation these nuns belonged to and if they would have been

legally recognized nuns from the perspective of *vinaya*, or Buddhist monastic law. In fact, in the case of Ciqing and Ciyi, there is no reason to think that they were legally ordained at all, or even that they were committed practitioners of Buddhism. Their status as nuns seems to be derived from the fact that they lived in the Jade Radiance Nunnery because of the loss of their male kin. For the princess nun from the Yuan family, her status as a nun appears to be self-professed, just as her title *biquyuanni* displays a fundamental misunderstanding of the Sanskrit word for “nun” and hence brings into question whether or not she was legally ordained. Sengzhi is different: her monastic name, her status as an eminent Buddhist, and the monastic position she held, all suggest that she was unlike her peers at the Northern Wei court and may have been legally ordained.

I believe that Sengzhi was ordained as a legally recognized nun in the *Dharmaguptaka* lineage being popularized at the southern courts during her life. As we have seen, it was the court of the Liu-Song that finally established legal, canonical ordination for women. The same court also sponsored the translation activities of the monk Guṇabhadra (Qiunabatu; 394–468) who translated the above-mentioned *Śrīmālā Sūtra*, which Sengzhi is said to have been fond of preaching. Sengzhi’s entombed biography includes the earliest epigraphical attestation to the text that we have for all of East Asia. Bearing in mind that the text was translated in the Liu-Song and known in the Buddhist worlds approximately ten years prior to Sengzhi’s recorded date of renunciation and that the Liu-Song, also, seems to have been the only court in all of East Asia then sponsoring canonical ordination for Buddhist women, it might be possible to place Sengzhi and her ordination in the Liu-Song.⁶³ If this is true, it would suggest that her ordination was lawful according to canonical Buddhist law and that she held a status among Northern Wei society that demarcated her as a virtuoso practitioner of the Buddhist faith worthy of the titles she held.⁶⁴

NUNS’ WORK, WOMEN’S WORK

Outside of her status as a dharma master, Sengzhi also held a second important title that identified her as a court servant who helped to administer the Buddhist faith in the empire, perhaps mostly in the capital city. She was the Northern Wei superintendent of the nuns (*biquini tong*). Like her status as a dharma master, her status as “superintendent of the nuns” aligns with similar Northern Wei naming practices for monastic men, though Sengzhi is evidently the first woman to hold the title of “superintendent.” Tsukamoto Zenryū’s foundational work on Northern Wei monastic superintendents is still relevant here. In his study of the revival of Buddhism under its severe suppression by Northern Wei Emperor Taiwu, Tsukamoto sees the establishment of monastic superintendents as a part of the empire’s need to police the growth of Buddhism from within the court itself. Such superintendents,

then, were used by the court to disseminate and enforce the court's restrictive policies to monastic communities across the empire. Richard McBride has shown how this system of imperial monastic superintendents was also employed in the Korean kingdom of Silla, based on Northern Wei precedents.⁶⁵ Sengzhi's role as the "superintendent of the nuns" was a court-appointed role that identified her as the senior administrative monastic woman of the empire.

Although her entombed biography does not say when and why she received the title of superintendent of the nuns, it might make sense that this title indicates the original role that she was called to serve by Empress Dowager Wenming. Famously, the Northern Wei court under the reign of Emperor Wencheng established political oversight over the affairs of the Buddhist monastic community. Wencheng formalized the roles of the court-appointed overseers of monastic communities across the empire that were called superintendents and who were tasked with both propagating and policing the monastic community on behalf of the laws, decrees, and policies of the court. The appointment of such superintendents reflects both the anxieties and the hopes of the court: Hoping to capitalize on the social power of Buddhism in legitimating its rule and holding on to its power, the court was also deeply anxious about harnessing and growing a Buddhist tradition that it could control. The job of the superintendent was therefore not an easy one. Throughout the latter half of the dynasty, various Northern Wei leaders supported the spread and building of Buddhist ritual, devotional, and monastic structures, just as they enforced limits on the building of such structures among the populace. The superintendents supported the court in transmitting and enforcing these restrictions. Shi Sengzhi was such a superintendent, and she is the only female member of the monastic community that I am aware of as having held any titles during the rules of Wencheng and Wenming and, hence, during the founding eras of such positions at the court.

The first Buddhist superintendent in East Asian Buddhist history was engaged by the court of the Northern Wei. He was a monk named Faguo (fl. fifth century) and he is famous for having directed the Buddhist community to bow to the emperor by arguing that the Northern Wei emperor was a living buddha.⁶⁶ Faguo served the court of Emperor Wencheng's grandfather, Emperor Mingyuan (r. 409–23), who attempted to bestow the imperial title of "duke" on Faguo because of the monk's helpful service to the empire. Faguo declined but did accept the position of "religious superintendent" (*daoren tong*) and publicly declared Emperor Mingyuan to be the tathāgata, a buddha.⁶⁷ Faguo was not the only monk to enjoy such a title. During the reign of Emperor Wencheng, the monk Tanyao was given the newly constructed title of the "superintendent of the *śramaṇas*" (*shamen tong*)⁶⁸ and is himself said to have been the force behind the initial strata of building at Yungang, effectively giving form to the buddha-ruler identification made by his predecessor, Faguo. The *Book of the Wei* records that at some point in the mid-460s:

Tanyao stated to the emperor that west of the capital city, at the Wuzhou fortress, [one could] chisel out stone walls in the rock and open up five rock chambers and in every one of them, by carving [the rock] away, erect a statue of the Buddha. [In the event], the largest [statue] was seventy feet high, smaller ones sixty feet, and once they had been as exquisitely and monumentally adorned, they were the wonder of the world.⁶⁹

The establishment of such court-monastic appointments under the Northern Wei speaks to the desire that both institutions had to establish a mutually beneficial relationship that would support the stability of the court and the patronage of the Buddhist community.⁷⁰ As an integral part of this relationship, Wencheng resurrected the monastic “superintendent” role that his grandfather, Emperor Mingyuan, had granted to the monk, Faguo, with Wencheng himself granting the title to Tanyao after the suppression of Buddhism undertaken by his immediate predecessor, Emperor Taiwu. Although the story of Tanyao is very well known, and although both of the stories of Tanyao and Faguo are recounted in the “Annals on Buddhism and Daoism,” what is much less known is that Sengzhi also served in this role.

Sengzhi’s position at court may also have been made possible by Emperor Wencheng’s reorganization of the women’s inner court. According to the *Book of the Wei*, prior to Wencheng’s reign, ranks for women at the Northern Wei court were increased in both number and diversity. The text tells us that in the early stages of the Taghbach dynasty, the rulers used their own processes to bring women to court and title them and that, as a result, the ranks of women in the inner court swelled to the extent that the court was “saturated” in women.⁷¹ It makes sense to think that, in an era as turbulent as the Northern Wei dynasty, when emperors, generals, dukes, and other men of the court often lived much shorter lives than their womenfolk, and also when the emperor himself had an inner chamber populated by large numbers of women placed there for political reasons, women were actually a more common feature of court life than were men. Their numbers were certainly greater. The early rulers of the Northern Wei kept a “mobile court,” as they were constantly moving back and forth between the capital and the frontier, going where military matters required them to be.⁷² This befitted their role as khagans and leaders of the military. As such, they left their empresses and concubines at home in the court of the capital, where the women were amassed together in the inner chambers. The *Book of the Wei* suggests that the inner chambers were poorly organized prior to the reign of Emperor Wencheng and that he oversaw the standardization of ranks for women, both employing the classical Han-dynastic canons of ritual in order to do so and aligning his newly established female ranks with those of the men in his court.⁷³ Regarding this, the *Book of the Wei* tells us:

Gaozong changed the order of the inner chambers: The ladies of clear etiquette of the left and right were established relative to the minster of war, the three ladies



FIGURE 13. Burial figure of a female official from the Northern Wei court. Circa early sixth century. Excavated from Mount Mang. Piece now held in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Canada.

relative to the three dukes, the three concubines relative to the three ministers, the six concubines relative to the six ministers, the mother of the realm relative to the ordinary grand master, and the palace women relative to the gentleman of the Yuan family. After arranging the women's posts, [Gaozong] employed the classics for internal issues: the inner officer was established relative to the director and servant of the secretariat; the three common bureaus of the acting officer, the great overseer, and the women's attendant were relative to the second rank; the overseer, the women's secretary, the talented women, the women's historian, the female sages, the scribes, the scribal ladies, and the lesser female scribes of the five bureaus were established relative to the third rank; the central lady of talent, the provisioner, the ladies of talent, the respectable palace envoys were established as relative to the fourth rank; and the spring clothier, the female libationer, the banqueteuse, the restaurateuse, the menial service and the female slaves were established relative to the fifth rank.⁷⁴

Although we cannot know to what extent such ranks were fully implemented, they were modeled after the ranks of male courtiers. These ranks were also known outside the Northern Wei, in the writings produced by other early medieval courts. The dynastic history of the Liu-Song, the *Book of the Song* (*Song shu*), describes the complex court ranks for women of the Northern Wei in its delineation of court ranks for women from the Han through the Liu-Song.⁷⁵ Critical for our understanding of Sengzhi is the fact that these court ranks for women were purposefully aligned with the ranks of the regular male bureaucracy of the court. This might be why we see Sengzhi brought to court by the very people that promoted, protected, and listened to Tanyao: Sengzhi was Tanyao's counterpart in a reorganization and realignment of ranks for women undertaken by the same court that brought her there.

Sengzhi was appointed to court during this time of the reinvention of roles for women courtiers, but she was appointed directly by Empress Dowager Wenming in 477. Empress Dowager Wenming was regent for two emperors: the father and the son, Emperors Xianwen and Xiaowen. When Xianwen died, he left behind no shortage of children from the many consorts of the court. One of those children, the then-nine-year-old child Emperor Xiaowen, who was installed on the throne in early childhood and whose regent, again, was Empress Dowager Wenming, had already been on the throne for five years by the time of his retired father's death. In 477, then, having finally rid herself of the father, the empress dowager was in full control of the son. Together, they ushered in a new era that would last beyond the death of the empress dowager in 490 until the death of the emperor in 499. To support this stability and cement her control over the nine-year-old child emperor, his siblings, and the many women now amassed at the inner court, Empress Dowager Wenming may have needed help in the form of a governess. It is possible that she found that help in Sengzhi.

Shayne Clarke has shown that although Buddhist nuns in India did indeed care for their own children in the nunnery, the caring for another's child—a child of the laity—was prohibited by monastic law.⁷⁶ Such law appears to have not been followed (or perhaps even known) in early medieval China, where we have evidence of nuns as caregivers of the royal elite. Most notably, and later than the Northern Wei, is the story of a divine Buddhist nun (*shenni*), who raised Emperor Wen (r. 581–604) of the Sui.⁷⁷ According to the story, the divine nun had requested that she be able to care for the young emperor because she recognized his outstanding caliber and did not consider him fit for secular life. Her actions were so noteworthy that they were taken as cause for the erection of relic stūpas across the realm in an act that Chen Jinhua associates with the rule of the Indian Buddhist King, Aśoka.⁷⁸ In the case of the Northern Wei, we have direct proof that such a situation existed in the case of the nun Ciqing, whose story we read above. According to Ciqing's entombed biography from Mount Mang, after being taken as a rebel slave and then rehabilitating her identity through becoming a Buddhist nun, Ciqing was given the task of caring for the imperial young during their childhood. The biography records that on her death bed, Emperor Xiaoming himself—then fourteen

years old and only four years away from his own murder—came personally to her bedside, wept, and declared that she had been with him since the day of his birth, guiding and protecting him.⁷⁹ Here we should remember that Xiaoming was taken away from both his mother, Empress Gao, and his stepmother, Empress Dowager Ling, as a means to safeguard his life and ensure dynastic succession through the patriline. Evidently, it was a nun that was tasked with the incredibly important job of keeping the young emperor alive. The biography further relates that Xiaoming posthumously granted Ciqing the title of “superintendent of the nuns,” the exact title that Sengzhi held in her life, though she herself had already passed away. Even though she was granted the title of “superintendent” only after her death, Ciqing held the aforementioned title of “lady of clear etiquette” when she was still alive. We cannot be certain as to what the duties of the “lady of clear etiquette” were, but we do know that this title was among the highest of court ranks for women, second only to that of the empress.⁸⁰ In the story of Ciqing, then, we have direct and contemporaneous evidence for the existence of nuns as royal caregivers bearing the title of “superintendent of the nuns.” It makes sense to consider Sengzhi’s own appointment in that light, and we have corroborating evidence for such a consideration in her entombed biography. In the account of her death, the entombed biography tells us that Sengzhi died at the Nunnery of the Le’an Princess (*Le’an gongzhu si*). The Le’an Princess was an orphaned daughter of Emperor Xianwen and the sibling of the child emperor, Xiaowen. If Sengzhi was playing the role of imperial caregiver, the Le’an Princess would likely have been placed under her care as a child. Perhaps, then, in her old age, the care that Sengzhi may have placed on the princess was reciprocated: Sengzhi lived her last days in the princess’s nunnery after having been her contemporary and her caregiver for almost forty years.

As chaste matrons a step removed from the politics of sexual procreation, Buddhist nuns would have been useful in medieval courts as caregivers of young emperors and administrators of the female ranks of the inner chambers. We see many aspects of this caregiving role in Sengzhi’s entombed biography. From her primary relationship with Emperor Xiaowen, to her position as overseer of the inner chambers of the court, her role as superintendent of the nuns saw her caring for a number of people who were not in fact nuns, and she fulfilled this role from the time of Empress Dowager Wenming until the time of Empress Dowager Ling, whom she herself brought to court owing to her influence over Emperor Xuanwu. As to the roles Sengzhi played at court, her entombed biography goes on to relate that:⁸¹

Empress Dowager Wenming was in the imperial city⁸² determined to transcend worldly custom. Greatly admiring [Sengzhi’s] mastery and venerating her manner and intent, she consequently commanded the postal carriage to immediately and officially summon Sengzhi. When [Sengzhi] arrived at the capital, she was venerated with extraordinary protocols.

Gaozu, Emperor Xiaowen, whose path brought abundance to heaven and earth, and whose brilliance exceeded the sun and the moon, poured all of his sincerity

into his receptions [with Sengzhi] [such that] the matter transcended the ordinary principle of human relationships.

Shizong, Emperor Xuanwu entrusted his heart to the three treasures, bestowed more and more favors on her, and led her into the women's quarters to instruct the six palaces.⁸³

Sengzhi enjoyed a long tenure at court. According to the biography, she was appointed in 477 while dying in 516 after thirty-nine years of service. She served the two empress dowagers who bookended her career as well as the emperors they ruled behind: Xiaowen and Xiaoming. She also served at the court during the reign of Emperor Xuanwu, who was the son of Xiaowen and the father of Xiaoming. Sengzhi's long court service would also have seen the move of the capital from Datong to Luoyang, the decision to employ a majority of Han Chinese bureaucrats at court and officially adopt their language as the language of the court, the building of the Buddhist grottos at Yungang and Longmen, and the rise of an extremely powerful and influential Buddhist monastic community that served the court she was such an integral part of.

Sengzhi's titles and dates show us that the proliferation of female court ranks supported by various Northern Wei courts extended also to the administration of the Buddhist monastic organization. Interested in having bureaucratic control over the institution of Buddhism, Northern Wei leaders installed a monastic bureaucracy that worked to implement the court's policies in the wider monastic community. They were also engaged in the proliferation of ranks for women, possibly because of the relatively high social position that Taghbach and Serbi women reputedly held. In building their Buddhist empire, the Northern Wei leaders included female monastic courtiers within its structure to act as organizers of the inner court and caretakers of the royal children. A woman like Sengzhi was a good fit. Said to be from a literate Han family at the gateway to the Hexi corridor and possibly in possession of a more verifiable ordination status and an elite practice of Buddhism than other women of her time and place, Sengzhi became a fixture at court and the favorite religious teacher of Emperor Xuanwu, whose personal audience she enjoyed. Within the confluence of religion, politics, and gender that the Northern Wei court is known for, Sengzhi saw herself installed as the first ever superintendent of the nuns, serving and influencing an incredibly powerful northern court for most of her life. These facts have received little scholarly attention to date.⁸⁴

NETWORKS OF WOMEN

Unlike that of her male counterparts, Sengzhi's work as superintendent of the nuns may not have been enacted in the public eye. We have no records of her involvement in public statecraft that can compare with Faguo's declaration of the Northern Wei emperor as the Buddha nor with Tanyao's involvement in giving form to this buddha/ruler identification by having it carved into the cliffside at Yungang.

What we do know is that Sengzhi was active at court and as an administrator of the inner court, presiding over the affairs of the women of the inner court and caring for their children. We know this because Emperor Xuanwu appointed her to be in charge of the inner chambers of the court, regulating and supervising the deposed and widowed women who found themselves under her guidance as new members of her Buddhist monastic community. Her entombed biography further tells us something about what this work looked like. It continues as follows:⁸⁵

Empress Feng of Xiaowen and Empress Gao of Xuanwu⁸⁶ and more than twenty wives and concubines—even Madam Xie, the wife of the former General of the Carriages and Horses and the Minister of Works, Wang Su⁸⁷ who was herself the daughter of the Great minister of the Glowing Blessing of the Office of Fasting of the Right and the Secretariat of the History Section, [Xie] Zhuang [d.u.] who came from Jinling,⁸⁸ sought refuge in the seclusion of the imperial palace.⁸⁹ Considering the way of the dharma master to crown the universe, and her virtue to be commensurate with the creation of things, [the women] therefore cast aside their extravagant customs, clothed their bosoms in the gate of the teaching, and all became disciples of the dharma master. From all of these nuns so cloaked in their integrity, those who rose up in rank and those who took the high seat were too many to record.

The above story of the court women who became Sengzhi's disciples reveals the gendered nature of her work as the superintendent of the nuns at the Northern Wei court in Luoyang: She served the court by providing its women with refuge after the deaths or estrangement of their imperial husbands. For example, as to the three women identified by name as her disciples, Empresses Feng and Gao were the two most eminent in the nunnery, both widowed, and Madam Xie was a southerner who had traveled on her own to the Northern Wei capital in Luoyang in order to publicly shame her own husband who had abandoned her for both a position at the Northern Wei court and a princess from the imperial house.⁹⁰ Widowhood and abandonment for women of the court were dangerous matters: More than losing their spouses, they also lost their own social standing. In a patriarchal and patrilocal setting, a woman's own social standing relied on that of their husband. A loss of husband was therefore tantamount to a loss of one's own privilege, livelihood, and, in cases like that of Empress Gao, even life. What Sengzhi offered to the widowed and deposed women of the court was Buddhism. By taking these women of the court on as members of the monastic community, Sengzhi shepherded them through the pitfalls of widowhood, offering them invaluable social and institutional support in their most vulnerable state by bringing them under her care, often housing them at the Jade Radiance Nunnery, which the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* notes was specifically for the use of court ladies-turned-nuns.⁹¹ In providing the women of the court with an alternate means to create social prestige than the court itself was able to do—a means that was necessarily a step removed from family life—Sengzhi enabled the women of the

court to construct a new virtue of pure chastity, even leading them in worship and devotion through her status as a “dharma master.” This virtue allowed them to negotiate the social conundrum of being a woman without a man in a society that, historically, has not made similar space for such women. As a poignant depiction of the value of Sengzhi’s work, Empress Dowager Wenming—the very woman who appointed Sengzhi at court—is said to have attempted suicide by throwing herself on the funeral pyre used to burn her deceased husband’s possessions and was pulled off by her female courtiers.^{92,93} She appointed Sengzhi to court twelve years after this apparent attempted suicide, when she had become the *de facto* monarch of the dynasty. Her appointment of Sengzhi helped to guarantee that the very same female courtiers that pulled her off of the fire would not meet the fire themselves—metaphorically or otherwise.

We must not deny the gendered nature of Sengzhi’s work, and we also cannot underestimate its value. Her work saw the creation of long-lasting institutional ties between the court and the nunnery. These ties become increasingly entrenched and important throughout the medieval period, particularly during the Tang era. Sengzhi’s contributions to the development of Buddhism in East Asia have gone unrecognized in studies of both Chinese Buddhism and the history of the Chinese court; however, they did not go unrecognized in her time. In recognition of her almost forty years of dedicated service to the women of the court, she was honored at her death with an elaborate state funeral, which was well attended by the women of the court who mourned her vigorously. One of the standard features of an entombed biography is a discussion of the funeral and mourning rites established for the deceased, and in the case of Sengzhi the text extols her deep connection to the imperial house by starting with the personal mourning of Emperor Xiaoming. The biography tells us:⁹⁴

The emperor was overcome with grief and the clergy and the laity were bound together in mourning. Then, on the twenty-fourth day of the month, a *xinmao* day [March 12, 516 CE], they buried her north of Luoyang on the south slope of Mount Mang. Her great disciples, the *Bhikṣuṇīs*, Metropolitan *Weinas*,⁹⁵ and Dharma Masters, Senghe and Daohe, mourning the long-dimming of [her] numinous shadow and yearning for the eternal cover of [her] divine authority, wailed [for her] until they lost their voices, and ceremonially spoke about [her] fragrant merit.

Sengzhi’s burial is recorded as having been a well-attended, elite event that included the personal mourning of Emperor Xiaoming and the attendance of the female monastic community. Noteworthy is the fact that two other eminent nuns, Senghe and Daohe, attended the funeral and appear to have led the mourning. We know nothing else about these women other than this brief mention in Sengzhi’s entombed biography, but we can understand from their titles that they were eminent Buddhist nuns in the service of the empire who were Sengzhi’s subordinates. The two women both hold the title of metropolitan *weina* (*duweina*).⁹⁶ *Weina* is

a monastic title often translated as “comptroller.” Those who held the title were in charge of a number of monastic affairs—from the daily running of the nunnery or monastery to the implementation of the court’s directives meant for the monastic community. We can find descriptions of the duties of the *weina* in many places across the “Annals on Buddhism and Daoism.” The picture of the *weina* that appears is one of a court-enforced, often-but-not-always-monastic individual working within a network of regulatory officials. In the “Annals on Buddhism and Daoism,” we see that the Northern Wei court used *weinas* to transmit their edicts to the monastic community. For example, the *weinas* were in charge of making sure that the court’s restrictions on the numbers of monastics to be ordained in every region were adhered to and that, similarly, the restraints on the building of new monasteries were as well.⁹⁷ Furthermore, the text records that *weinas* were also in charge of certifying and handing out monastic travel permits.⁹⁸ The job of the *weina* was thus an important administrative position in the Northern Wei that facilitated the court’s official oversight over the monastic body. Senghe and Daohe’s title was not simply *weina*. Instead, they are listed as the “metropolitan *weina*,” which I take to mean the head monastic organizers of an urban center, though it is possible that this title was simply an honorific signifying the head *weina* of a particular community.

What we therefore have in this record of Sengzhi’s funeral is the attendance of her immediate subordinates. Sengzhi was the superintendent of the nuns and her disciples Senghe and Daohe were in her employ as administrators of the state/monastic complex. It is no surprise, then, that they attended her funeral and led the mourning. There are many other mentions of female *weinas* listed as patrons in the records of donor inscriptions from the time period; however, this record of Sengzhi’s funeral is the only source I know of in which we see the female metropolitan *weina* at work, venerating their superior and leading the mourning at her funeral. The image of two metropolitan *weina* nuns working alongside their superintendent is strongly reminiscent of the donor image of the empress dowager’s procession from the Huangfu Gong grotto wherein there is a depiction of two nuns completing a ritual and a third nun standing closer to the empress dowager. Gu Yanfang suggests that the third nun could actually be the aunt of the empress dowager⁹⁹—Sengzhi—however, she would have passed away approximately ten years prior to the building of the grotto. The image might suggest that the empress dowager had appointed a new superintendent to take her place, though we have no other evidence of that. In any case, the image of a nun close to the empress dowager and two other nuns completing ritual is strongly reminiscent of the scene at Sengzhi’s funeral recounted in her entombed biography. The mortuary veneration of Sengzhi by her disciples is beautifully captured in the final words of her eulogy:¹⁰⁰

[In order to] cultivate and disseminate her Way in the world.
The fragrance of flowers fills all four directions,

and the nirvana carriage¹⁰¹ is high and lofty.
 Both monastic and lay are overcome with melancholy:
 Brahma-sounds enter the clouds,
 As do mournful and sour dirges.
 Her disciples weep and wail as they take part in the procession,
 calling themselves poor orphans and lonely rejects.

Here we see Sengzhi memorialized and remembered by the very women of the Northern Wei court who staffed the newly-created court ranks for women surveyed above and who, at various times in their lives, relied on the Buddhist monastic community to help them negotiate between and retire from those ranks. When we consider the almost forty years that Sengzhi spent in the service of the Northern Wei court, we must highlight the fact that she was appointed to her position by an empress dowager and later died in her position under the patronage of a different empress dowager, one who supported her state funeral and the writing of the very words from which we know anything about her life. It was powerful women who bookended Sengzhi's career, one who likely brought her in as a caregiver of the inner chambers and another, her own niece, whom she brought in, likely because of her close relationship with the emperor. The fact of Sengzhi's intertwined court, monastic, and filial responsibilities nuances, complexifies, and problematizes what we know about how women in patriarchal court and family systems created opportunities for themselves and for others. In the Northern Wei, as in many other times and places, women of the court were often famous for their infighting. Sharing the same physical space and competing for the same males to rely on and link their lives and careers to, court women have long been guilty of perpetuating the very same systems of oppression of which they were victims in order to gain a higher standing within those very systems. One need only think of the infighting between Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Xuanwu's empress from the Gao Clan. At the death of Xuanwu, both women attempted to have the other assassinated, and Empress Dowager Ling succeeded. That success, however, came at an unlikely juncture: Empress Gao was murdered while in the imperial nunnery, a fact that suggests that the empress dowager still feared the power that her competitor held, even from the nunnery. Sengzhi's story provides us with a different portrait of the women of the court. With her, we see all-female networks functioning to increase the social opportunities afforded to women of the court and doing so through refuge in the institution of the Buddhist monastery. That Empress Gao attended Sengzhi's funeral and then was murdered by the empress dowager shortly afterward suggests that Sengzhi's safeguarding of the nuns in her care may have diminished after her death.

As representatives of a newly emerging means of creating social virtue for women in the early medieval period, celibate Buddhist women like Sengzhi were able to facilitate the lives and careers of women of the court without becoming

embroiled in the sexual politics of the court. This ability was owing to the fact that women like Sengzhi and her contemporaries manifested the virtue of pure chastity, which set them one step apart from the traditional family system that saw a woman's public social power largely authorized by her connection to male members of her family. For a woman like Sengzhi, her social power was validated through her identity as an eminent and learned woman of pure virtue: she was chaste; she had no children; she did not depend on the career of her husband; and she was new to the elite political worlds of early medieval China. From this new social role, Sengzhi was able to work for most of her life at the Northern Wei court. As a woman of new virtue, Sengzhi was an ideal candidate for facilitating the lives of women who were, by the nature of the patriarchal court and family, necessarily situated in deep conflict with and pitted against each other with their lives depending on their own success with the men of the court.

WORK, PAYMENT, AND THE MATRILINE

Sengzhi was at the vanguard of new forms of womanhood that were on the rise in society during her lifetime. Her work is a historical testimony to changing notions of gender and family in the early medieval period and to the tenacity by which women worked to bring them about. Her work was also not unpaid. Just as she was the benefactor of the empress dowager in her childhood, so too was the empress dowager Sengzhi's benefactor in the latter's advanced age. Having used her influence to bring the empress dowager to court, Empress Dowager Ling used her power to publicly repay Sengzhi. The *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* provides a description of the Nunnery of the Superintendent of the Nuns that the empress dowager had built for Sengzhi. It says:

Nunnery of the Superintendent of the Hu Clan: Under the direction of her aunt, the empress dowager had it established. [Her aunt] had entered the Way and become a nun and she dwelled in the nunnery, which was a bit further than one *li* south of the Eternal Peace Monastery. [It had] a jeweled pagoda of five stories which was crowned in gold surrounded by cavernous rooms whose doors all faced it and opened onto it. With vermillion beams and unadorned walls, it was extremely beautiful. [In] this nunnery were all the nuns who were famed for their virtue within the imperial capital and who excelled at enlightened teaching and whose work was discussion and argumentation. [These nuns] often went to the palace to lecture the empress dowager on the dharma. The expense for caring for these monastics and their disciples was beyond compare.¹⁰²

From this description we see that Sengzhi presided over a community of elite and learned nuns that were regularly granted entrance into the palace in order to teach and that this community was funded by the empress dowager, even though its expenses were "beyond compare." As we will see in subsequent chapters, the

empress dowager was the most prolific patron of Buddhist building projects in Luoyang and her frequent commissioning of large Buddhist structures such as the Eternal Peace Monastery was a result of her desire to show to the populace and to the court that she controlled the imperial purse. Amy McNair argues that one of the ways that she did this is through the commissioning of the Huoshao grotto at Longmen, which, she further argues, was commissioned in 517 as a mortuary grotto for the empress dowager's deceased mother who passed away in 502.¹⁰³ In full agreement with McNair's careful argument for how this grotto may have been sponsored by the empress dowager, I suggest that perhaps it was not built as a mortuary grotto for her mother. Perhaps it was built as a mortuary grotto for her aunt, Sengzhi, just as it contains a scene strikingly reminiscent of that described in the record of Sengzhi's funeral.

As McNair describes, the Huoshao grotto was likely a private grotto for the empress dowager on which work was started in or around 517.¹⁰⁴ It also appears to have been a mortuary grotto or a commemorative grotto for the dead because its dramatic façade contains a non-Buddhist image of the Han-dynasty mortuary deities—namely, the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East. With these images in mind, McNair argues that the grotto must have been meant for a person of Han descent such as someone from the empress dowager's family. The empress dowager's mother is certainly a viable candidate for dedicatee because the empress dowager did bestow many posthumous honors on her in the years after she took power. Sengzhi, however, might be a more viable candidate. Having been the empress dowager's patron and having had that patronage publicly reciprocated in a resplendent nunnery dedicated to her, the empress dowager publicly celebrated her closeness with her aunt in her capital city. Unlike her mother, who died in 502, Sengzhi died in 516, thus making the temporal connection more immediate. Furthermore, it might make sense that the Huoshao grotto was established to represent her father's line, that of the Hu clan, and not her mother's line, that of the Huangfu clan. As McNair has shown, a later inscription in the grotto does connect the grotto to the empress dowager; however, that connection is made through the Hu line and not the Huangfu line. Finally, in simple terms of religious affiliation, would it not make sense for the largest of the Northern Wei grottos at the Buddhist site of Longmen to be dedicated to the most famous Buddhist woman of the time, one who had died a few months before and who had shepherded the empress dowager to her high political office?

I believe that the Huoshao grotto was built for Sengzhi after her death, but even if it was built for the empress dowager's mother, one thing we can take from its very existence is the striking observation that with this grotto we see how communities of women began to make their presence known by having carvings in stone dedicated to their memory. They did this in a Buddhist medium. Using the example of a different Northern Wei shrine at Longmen, Kate Lingley argues that it is with such acts of Buddhist donorship that we can begin to see and thus make



FIGURE 14. Detail of the façade of the Huoshao grotto at Longmen showing the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East to the upper left and right of the cave entrance. Circa 517. Photo © Li Lan.

matrilineal relations, and that we have no other sources by which to reconstruct such connections because women's names are often not recorded in other modes of writing from the medieval period.¹⁰⁵ This is true of both Sengzhi and Empress Dowager Ling. Both women began their lives as “nameless” daughters from the Hu clan of Anding, and yet both women ended their lives with important imperial titles made possible by both women's connections to Buddhist monasticism. Furthermore, both women's titles are carved in stone because of their high status, even if we will never know their birth names. In sum, the study of the Buddhist profile of the nun Sengzhi is much more than what it seems. By utilizing Buddhist sources in order to provide additional support for the study of women's history, this chapter has chronicled how the rise of the aunt, who earned her fame through the Buddhist notion of pure chastity, fostered the accession of the niece, who used her power to repay her aunt and thereby document, in stone, the all-female relationships of the Hu clan of Anding. These relationships were female, Buddhist, and imperial, and they form the context of the rise of Empress Dowager Ling.