

## A Girl on the Throne

The *Book of the Wei*'s narrative of the empress dowager placing her granddaughter on the throne offers no plausible explanation as to why she may have done it. As we saw in chapter 2, the biography of the empress dowager tells us that she and her advisor, a man who was reputed to be her lover, had undertaken the plot as an act of political expediency that would assist the empress dowager in extending her regency. However, as we also saw in chapter 2, the *Book of the Wei* and the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* record that placing a girl on the throne was not at all politically expedient: Erzhu Rong is remembered to have used the act as a pretext for his invasion of Luoyang and his ultimate murder of the empress dowager and her court. Moreover, if placing a girl on the throne was simply an act of succession supported by her advisors because of the lack of more suitable heirs, how is that those in the empress dowager's circle so quickly found another male heir from the royal clan to take the throne when their original plan had failed? The accession and inauguration of a new emperor is perhaps the most scrutinized of political acts. It is doubtful that the empress dowager and her courtiers took such a cavalier attitude toward this important event in their rule that they propped up any child that was close to them regardless of past precedent and regardless of the child's gender. Why, then, did they do it?

In this chapter, I reconsider the story of the granddaughter-as-emperor and I do so in order to bring both non-Han and Buddhist notions of gender, its construction, and its performance into our historical understanding of the granddaughter on the throne. By using donative epigraphy evidencing the life of female administrators in the empire, the entombed biographies of elite women who worked at the Northern Wei court in the service of the empress dowager, Buddhist sūtras

that were either translated or popularized with the patronage of the Northern Wei court during its latter stages, as well as an analysis of key Buddhist ideas of monarchy that were quickly becoming popular in the medieval period, this chapter will argue that the imperial Buddhism of the Northern Wei court in Luoyang was staffed by women at many levels, that the Buddhist organization provided an avenue for women to enact such powerful political roles, and that Buddhist sūtras, as well as popular Buddhist imagery in the period, may have provided a doctrinal basis and historical model for elite Buddhist womanhood in the service of the court, maybe even of the emperor. Furthermore, this analysis of the lives of women at court derived from Buddhist sources will also be shown to have a deep and complementary resonance with a type of gender performance that may have been known to the Taghbach people who ruled the Northern Wei and who, I will argue, knew the social category of “honorary men.” Finally, and most provocatively, this chapter will explore the idea that when the empress dowager placed a girl on the throne, she did so herself as a Buddhist regent familiar with the idea that Buddhist notions of rule might support the notion of female rulership in her realm.

It is impossible to go back in time and ask the empress dowager why she saw fit to place her granddaughter on the throne; however, in this chapter I provide carefully researched and historically responsible conjectural answers that make more sense than does a Confucian perspective gleaned from dynastic histories written by Ru scholars working in the service of the court but with little access to women’s spaces within it. The answer suggested here is multivalent: Peeling back the many layers of gender, its performance, and its interpretation that surround the story of the nameless granddaughter on the throne in a multiethnic, Buddhist Luoyang, I argue that the placement of a girl on the throne may not have been as reckless as it seems and that, in fact, it makes sense in a variety of ways that a Ru scholar like Wei Shou may have been either unfamiliar with or unwilling to write about.

#### WOMEN AS ORGANIZERS

We begin this chapter by returning to the person of the *weina*, whom we first were introduced to in the story of Sengzhi’s funeral in the previous chapter. The inscriptional record attests to the existence of *weina* working in Buddhist communities across the empire during the Northern Wei. Women serving as *weina* are commonly attested in such materials. For example, we can cite a donor epigraph from the reign of the empress dowager that records several women acting as *weina* in the commissioning of twenty-four buddha images. The inscription comes not from Luoyang, but from further afield at the previously discussed Yellow Cliff site in Shandong province, and it bears witness to the religious lives of women as enacted in a Buddhist community in the sixth century. Shandong had a variety of political fates during the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, with different polities ruling the peninsula. By the Luoyang period of Northern Wei rule,

the peninsula and its surrounding areas were under Northern Wei jurisdiction; research on the Yellow Cliff site shows that the individual donors had strong connections to the central court in Luoyang, just as the artwork at the site is similar in style to the Northern Wei art at Longmen.<sup>1</sup> Luoyang Buddhism was both a model and an impetus for projects at the Shandong site, even though it was more than five hundred kilometers from the capital. For our purposes, the inscription that we will consider from the Yellow Cliff reads:

On the twenty-ninth day of the seventh month of the fourth year of the Zhengguan era (August 25, 523), a dharma collective of brothers and sisters reverently commissioned a stone grotto with twenty-four figures. Everyone who undertook the completion of this [has made a] record of their names enumerated here.

Shi Fushou and Xinqu.

The weina presider, Liu Ainü; the weina presider Mu [missing character] ji; Jia [missing character]; Liu Faxiang; Wang Baoji; Liu A'Xiang; Liu A'Si; Liu Shengyu; Hu A'zi; Wang Lijiang; [missing] ting Fuji; Jia A'Fei; Liu Taoji; Wang Zu; Sun Jingzi; Zhao Feijiang; Zhang Shengjie; Zhang Hanren; [missing] Jiangnü; [missing] Guzi; Xu Qingnü; the weina presider, Zhang Niunü; the weina presider Huting Moxiang; Bai Qijiang; Shi Taonü, Zhao Yijiang; Zhang Daonü.<sup>2</sup>

This inscription describes the building of a niche undertaken by a group of mainly women working together with two monks, Shi Fushou and (Shi) Xinqu. It is difficult to say with absolute certainty which genders the donors belong to: The majority of the personal names listed are either common names for women in the time period (as in the name *a* 阿) or feature semantic elements that identify them as women, such as *nü* (女), or girl, or words like *ji* (姬), *fei* (妃), *jiang* (姜), which all refer to the titles of concubines or courtesans, or finally the name *xiang* (香), or “fragrant.” I have never encountered an example of a man taking on such names in other inscriptions.

This rock-cut inscription shows that women and men collaborated on projects, that women had adequate financial autonomy to be able to take the lead in expensive projects of this type, and that there seems to have been no restriction against women acting as weina within a group of women presided over by male members of the monastic community. Even more noteworthy in this inscription is the fact that unlike the metropolitan weina that we met in the record of Sengzhi's funeral, here there is no indication that the weina belonged to the monastic order. This observation on their nonmonastic status accords with Kate Lingley's work on Eastern Wei inscriptions at the Gaomiao cave temple in Shanxi where we also see community organizers in donative inscriptions holding the title of weina but not holding monastic titles.<sup>3</sup> In sum, from such inscriptions we see that women in the Northern Wei were able to organize among themselves, spend money by themselves, and have their ability to do these things carved in stone for posterity.

To further our analysis of how women were involved in public Buddhist donorship and administration during the Northern Wei we can look to another donative inscription from the Yellow Cliff site that also features nonmonastic women in the role of weina. Notably, the site contains a donative inscription for an image of Maitreya commissioned by a religious society that was composed of thirty-five members and that existed for the benefit of the emperor and the imperial clan.<sup>4</sup> It says:

In the second year of the Xiaochang reign in the ninth month which had its new moon on a *dingyou* day and on the eighth day, a *jiachen* day [September 29, 526], a dharma collective for the emperor and imperial clan [composed of] thirty-five people commissioned the building of one image of Maitreya. Universally, [this is] on behalf of all sentient beings in the dharma realm, the three existences, and [those from the] four benevolences who wish to meet Maitreya.

Metropolitan weina and monk Jingzhi, metropolitan weina Yang Luzi, metropolitan weina Jia Daoshun, metropolitan weina Zhao Funian, the monk Daoyun, the monk Hong [missing], Feng Daoxiang, Deng Gongbo, Zhang Huiyin, Zhang Huangsi, Zhang Shesheng, Ma Sengzhi, Huang Wailong, Liu Huan, Liu Shinu, Chen Yide, Wang Nansheng.

Weina Liu Amunü, weina Zhao Shengjiang, Cui Lingzi, Yu Xiaoji, Bai Sheji, Zhao Anji, Xue Nansheng, Zhang Jinzi, Wang Sisheng, Zhang Nüzhu, Liu Zhai, Liu [missing], Guo Nan, Ximen Qingjiang, Zhao Yingnan, Jia'E, Zhang Waizi, Yuan Sanying, Zhang Shengjiang, Wang Fuji, Zhao Gounan, Zhao Shengzi, Liu Mingsheng, Zhao Taonü, Zhao Zuxi.

In the list of names on the inscription, the members are grouped together by gender, with males listed before females. Similarly, within each gender grouping, the names of the weina are listed at the top of each gendered group so that the inscription follows in this manner: male weina; male members of the dharma collective; female weina; female members of the dharma collective. As to the male grouping, there are four metropolitan weina, one of whom appears to be a Buddhist monk. Following this are the names of two monks and eleven men. After the men are listed, the inscription lists the women, beginning with the weina, of whom there are two, neither of whom appear to be nuns. There are no nuns listed on this inscription, but there are the names of twenty-one women.

These inscriptions and hundreds more like them were produced by locally organized religious collectives during the medieval period. Such collectives—called, as in the case of the above-mentioned examples, a *fayi* or otherwise an *yiyi*—became an important part of religious and social organization in the north of China beginning around the fifth century. Such collectives often came together to support the building of statuary or to undertake social service work, such as the building of bridges.<sup>5</sup> Notably, these dharma collectives include the participation of women in many roles and they reflect the ambitious support for Buddhism across the medieval empires from both women and men who went along with expansive building projects in Buddhist art and infrastructure.<sup>6</sup> In Hou Xudong's magisterial

treatment of the development of widespread belief in Buddhism among grassroots groups in the medieval period, he uses inscriptional material to argue that village-based practices of Buddhism were deeply connected with new religious ideas revealed through miraculous stories by charismatic teachers. Hou argues that a local and dynamic context was responsible for the spread of Buddhism in early medieval China to a much larger extent than was the politicized Buddhism of the court and the elite.<sup>7</sup> In short, Hou argues for a “bottom-up” interpretation that sees the spread of Buddhism flourishing at the local level first, and then creating a mimetic movement at the level of statecraft and the court.

Thus, the establishment of Buddhist communities on top of preexisting social organizations throughout the heartland of traditional Han China signifies two important changes: (1) the large-scale patronage of Buddhism on top of pre-Buddhist modalities of social and religious organization; (2) the participation of women in these communities at a variety of levels.<sup>8</sup> In the most recent study of such societies, Hao Chunwen describes the development of such women’s groups from the Northern dynasties through to the Song dynasty and provides detailed and fascinating data on the types of roles that women held within them. However, Hao cautions that such inscriptions cannot tell us much about women’s freedoms with respect to their social status because all the women in question were elite women in their local contexts.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, what we can see is that such village devotional groups were instrumental to the spread of Buddhism in early medieval East Asia and that women were important and agentive actors in these associations. In short, Buddhism in the sixth century was—to no small extent—female.

One striking aspect of donor inscriptions from this period are the semantic meanings of the names themselves. Here, I will focus on trying to make sense of gendered names. In the inscription above, we see female donors whose names translate into English as something like “Male Birth” (Nansheng 男生), “Man” (Nan 男), “Welcoming Man[hood]” (Yingnan 迎男), and “Evoking Male[ness]” (Gounan 勾男). These names are similar to those listed on another inscription for the commissioning of an image of Śākyamuni Buddha in 504 CE by the eminent Gao clan of Dangmo,<sup>10</sup> which lists two women whose names evoke manhood or male birth.<sup>11</sup> The donor inscription lists the first of them as “A Servant of the Buddha called Xing Nansheng who is the wife of Gao Mai, a Gentlemen of Pure Faith” wherein the characters for her name “Nansheng” mean “male birth,” like in the name above. Moreover, “Male Birth” is the wife of a “gentleman of pure faith,” a term common in inscriptions that signified a person’s status as a lay Buddhist.<sup>12</sup> The second of these names is similar: “A Servant of the Buddha called Ni Dainan who is the wife of Gao Xiang, a Gentlemen of Pure Faith,” wherein the characters for her personal name Dainan (殆男) translate to something like “Almost a Man.”

All the names of these women are puzzling; however, there are a few points of clarification that may help us make sense of them. The first and foremost point is that the names certainly have semantic intent, which we saw above in how the

names of women often feature words identifying them as women. In the case of men, the names are also semantically meaningful. For example, the above inscription lists men named “Community Born” (Shesheng 社生), “Difficult Birth” (Nansheng 難生), “Suitably Virtuous” (Yide 宜德), “Foreign Dragon” (Wailong 外龍), and “Financial Benefit” (Huiyin 惠銀). A straightforward survey of such names suggests that they have semantic meaning and are unlike the types of phonetic transcriptions of Taghbach names seen on inscriptions like Emperor Wencheng’s “Stele of the Southern Progress.”<sup>13</sup> These names are not typical Han Chinese names; rather, the names speak to the nan-Han identities of their namesakes.<sup>14</sup> This is also true of the women’s names that evoke maleness or manhood. Although it is possible to interpret names such as “Man” and “Evoking a Man” through the lens of Confucian discourse and therefore see them as indicative of wishes for husbands and male children, I believe that they are to be understood differently. In what follows, I argue that these rare names for women that evoke or suggest maleness or male birth on Northern Wei inscriptions are better understood within the notions of gender and its performance that were known to the Taghbach, which were defined positionally within the family unit and may have allowed women to act as men in certain situations.

#### WOMEN AS COURTIERERS

The epigraphical record so far contains the entombed biographies of two women who held the title of “woman secretary” (*nü shangshu*) at the court of the Northern Wei. Although the authoritative *Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* states that the establishment of the woman secretary came about in the Tang dynasty,<sup>15</sup> we have already seen in the previous chapter’s discussion of expanded court ranks for women under Emperor Wencheng that the Northern Wei included the woman secretary at the rank of third grade. As for the position itself, the *Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China* tells us that the secretary was the highest administrative position in the court during the time period in question, being in charge of all six of the major bureaus of administrative procedure, and that the person who held the role was required to take examinations in order to show their literacy and ability. The woman secretary was even in charge of arranging the emperor’s own meetings with the women of his inner court as well as keeping those women properly administered.<sup>16</sup> This description accords with the description of the two women secretaries from the Northern Wei that we know of, particularly in that we know that the women’s court was also divided into six bureaus like that of the male court. Both Northern Wei women secretaries for whom we have entombed biographies have honorary names that evoke social maleness. Their names are “Samgha Man” (Sengnan 僧男; Samgha is the term for the Buddhist monastic community) and “Welcoming Man[hood]” (Yingnan). In the case of “Samgha man” we do not know her birth name and she is consistently referred to only as “Man” in her

entombed biography. “Welcoming Man[hood]’s” birth name was said to have been “Girl” (Nülang 女郎), but she was given the name “Welcoming Man[hood]” as an honorific perhaps befitting her role as woman secretary.

In the case of our two women secretaries from the empress dowager’s court who both have honorary names that evoke their proximity to maleness and the male gender, we can narrow the hypothesis of social maleness for women within forms of gender organization known to the Taghbach even further: I postulate that in certain cases women who had no fathers became the social men in their families. To elaborate on this argument, I begin by offering a full translation of the entombed biography of “Samgha Man.” It reads:

The woman secretary<sup>17</sup> was from the Wang clan and her honorary name was “Samgha Man.” She was from Yanyang in Anding. She was the grandchild of Governor Gong from Anding and the child of Governor Na from Shangluo. The earth blossoms [in the regions of the] Jing River and Long Mountain<sup>18</sup> and [those who oversee it] are led by illustrious descendants of noble clans. On account of his bravado and machismo, “Man’s” father broke the law, led his cavalymen into criminality, and was therefore punished. All alone, “Man,” along with her mother, was left helpless and endured suffering and by herself she entered the palace. At that time, she was six years old.<sup>19</sup> Because her intelligence and talents were splendid and bright, she was selected to fill [the role of] student. With a wise nature and an agile perception, she daily chanted one thousand words. She listened to the explanation of ancient texts with comprehension, fully grasping the meaning after only hearing them one time. She was promoted through the palace administration, ascending to [the rank] of woman secretary of the third grade. Able to record and explain the female court, she brought about an established order and was able to assume a manly [*qian*] heart. Because she disseminated brilliance by employing the scarlet pipes,<sup>20</sup> she was conferred the second grade. Heaven did not repay her goodness, wiping out this fine sage at the age of sixty-eight. She reached her end in the Jinyong palace of the great Wei.<sup>21</sup> Upon taking into account that “Man” had already been presented with the second [grade] and that she continued [as a] virtuous elder [to be] hardworking, she was again promoted and conferred [the rank] of first grade. She was bestowed with a casket of the type used by the imperial family<sup>22</sup> as well as a sleeping carriage.<sup>23</sup> The expenses for her funeral were all gathered together from collective donations and she was interred at long last at the north of Peace Tumulus. Through a compromise of abundance and frugality and in complete accord with ritual protocols, [we] carve this stone and engrave her name [so as to be] handed down to future descendants! On the twentieth *yimao* day in the ninth month, under the *xingqi* asterism,<sup>24</sup> in the second year of the Zhengguang reign of the great Wei (November 5, 521).

If we compare the details of Samgha Man’s entombed biography to those in the entombed biography of Welcoming Man[hood], significant similarities emerge.<sup>25</sup> In both cases, the girls had absent fathers. In the case of Samgha Man, her father was a criminal who was put to death for his crimes. In the case of Welcoming Man[hood], her father appears to have lost his life in the service of his prefecture.



After his death, mother and child joined the menial service of the palace because life was too difficult for them in the countryside to remain there independently. Like *Samgha Man*, *Welcoming Man*[hood] was noted as a youth for her intelligence and was chosen as a palace student at the age of eleven. When she was fifteen, she was brought into imperial service at the level of woman secretary, where she was responsible for ordering the inner chambers. Both women died while staying at the palace in Jinyong, just north of Luoyang, which had been a substitute palace throughout the dynasty and which had housed out of favor royals in the early medieval period in general. Their presence at that palace may have occurred owing to the coup d'état during which they both died, though there is nothing to suggest that their deaths were brought about by state violence. For *Welcoming Man*[hood], the entombed biography tells us that she became ill and died, though the precise date of her death was not remembered. She was buried in Luoyang with much mourning from the women of the court. Her death contrasts with *Samgha Man*'s in certain ways because we have been told that *Samgha Man*'s funeral was incredibly expensive and that she was posthumously rewarded the rank of first grade. *Samgha Man*'s entombed biography also does not provide a cause of death, ambiguously saying that "Heaven did not repay her goodness" and she was "wiped out at the age of sixty-eight." The record therefore might suggest malicious intent behind her death, but it is impossible to say one way or another. Unlike *Welcoming Man*[hood], *Samgha Man* was promoted to the rank of first grade after her death, and the reasons for this are also left ambiguous.

For both women, we have a situation wherein two young girls without fathers and without any known brothers took on political roles at court that had long been the prerogative of males. It was the Northern Wei's alignment of male and female courtly titles that allowed them the opportunity to do so. Their appointments therefore coincided with that of *Sengzhi*: *Sengzhi* was brought to the palace in 477 and was already an eminent nun; *Welcoming Man*[hood] was given the title of Woman Secretary in 480, and *Samgha Man* was brought to court in 459 as a six-year-old child and would have therefore reached maturity and appointment in the same general timeframe as the other two women. As a group, these three women were all unmarried, autonomous, and gender-ambiguous women in professional positions. *Sengzhi*'s gender identity was simultaneously female and ambiguous: As a nun, we have seen how she was desexualized through the virtue of pure chastity and therefore entrusted to work closely with the emperor, never fearing that she would bear his children. As women secretaries, both *Samgha Man* and *Welcoming Man*[hood] were clearly women, though they held positions in the women's area of the court that were aligned with the positions that men held in the outer court, and they were known by honorific names, suggesting their proximity to the male gender. They also, like *Sengzhi*, were given positions that placed them in direct proximity to the emperor, perhaps a role allowed by their gender ambiguity. Unlike *Sengzhi*, whose gender ambiguity was made possible through her status



as an eminent nun, the gender ambiguity displayed by both Samgha Man and Welcoming Man[hood] was linked to their social existence as women without men who served the court in a traditionally male role.

#### WOMEN AS MEN

Beyond the shared nature of their work and their male-sounding names, a striking similarity exists between Samgha Man and Welcoming Man[hood]: They were both women neither of whom had fathers nor brothers. Their lives and their work therefore find resonance with the life of the most famous Taghbach woman of the Northern Wei who is believed to have ever lived: Hua Mulan. Mulan is fabled to have been a Northern Wei woman who dressed as a man in order to join the military in lieu of her incapacitated father. The story about her therefore assumes that she had no brothers to take on this work for her. The extant text of her story that we can read today dates to the Song dynasty, although the earliest version of the story is said to have been compiled in the sixth century from Northern Wei precedents, likely in the Serbi language.<sup>26</sup> In his excellent study of the Mulan story, Chen Sanping argues that although when read in Chinese the name "Mulan" is an obviously feminine name calling to mind a fragrant flower,<sup>27</sup> its meaning in the Taghbach language is entirely different and also masculine: "Unicorn."<sup>28</sup> Altaic peoples, including the Serbi, are well known for their worship of animals from the Cervidae family, such as deer and elk; Chen argues that the Taghbach's own particular obsession with the unicorn falls within this Altaic Cervid worship.<sup>29</sup> As such, the name "Mulan" would suggest masculinity and martial prowess. Just like the names and family situations of Samgha Man and Welcoming Man[hood], Mulan acted as a male in society, taking on traditionally male work and being given a masculine name.

The precise biographical similarities between Mulan and our two other women who served the Northern Wei court under masculine names leads us to a fascinating historical question: Did the Taghbach organize their understanding of gender differently from how we in the modern West do and differently from how the Han populations in their polity did as well? In other words, did they know a form of gender that was tied less to physical sex than to social and family location? And if so, does this also account for the names of women on Northern Wei inscriptions that evoke proximity to maleness?

If the Taghbach had such a practice in their cultural repertoire, we do not need to assume that it was unique to them. Within the context of early medieval China, other ethnic and cultural groups from the Inner Asian Steppe did not have forms of written language, and we therefore have few sources by which to understand their gender regimes. In the case of the Taghbach, however, they adopted Literary Chinese as a written language during the Northern Wei dynasty and employed Ru scholars at court who wrote dynastic histories and entombed biographies.

The common people, too, used this language to compose donor inscriptions on Buddhist art. In sum, we know more about the Taghbach from this early period than we know about other contemporaneous steppe peoples. That we see noteworthy forms of gender expression in the sources that the Taghbach left behind during the Northern Wei does not mean that such gender expression was practiced only by them, but it does mean that we only know about it through them. In an effort to explain what I see in the sources regarding gender performance in the period, I adopt the concept of social or honorary maleness to categorize women who, in their lack of male kin, behave as men in society and take on male names and male work.

Social or honorary maleness is a typified form of gender expression practiced in diverse cultures around the world. In their 2015 study of global preference for male children, Christophe Z. Guilmoto and James Tovey point to the ongoing practice of traditions of social maleness in the world today, arguing that:

Sex permutations are a possibility in some regions, with biological daughters treated socially as boys in response to the lack of a son. Traces of this practice can be found in the temporary pre-puberty transformation of the gender of *bacha posh* (girls “dressed as boys”) in Afghanistan and in the permanent conversion of “sworn virgins” (*virgjinesha*, *burrnesha*, or *zavetovana devojka*) into men in Montenegro, Albania, and Kosovo.<sup>30</sup>

This is not to suggest that Taghbach culture shares any form of continuity with the cultures of Afghanistan or Albania, or that those cultures share any continuity with each other, but it is to suggest that gender can operate in nonbinary modalities for divergent social reasons and in different cultural contexts. This, I believe, was true of the Taghbach. Whether it is derived from their specific cultural repertoire or shared among other steppe peoples is a question I cannot yet answer; however, I am inclined to accept the latter explanation, given the fact that Samgha Man herself, like the empress dowager, hailed from Anding in modern-day Gansu, which was an area of the world more commonly associated with the Xiongnu.

My hypothesis that Taghbach notions of social gender were positional within the family and not permanently tied to biological sex requires a wide survey through diverse materials because we do not have texts written in the indigenous Taghbach language that might describe gender on its own terms, independent from how Ru scholars understood gender to operate in Taghbach society. We therefore begin in a very different place: modern and contemporary ethnography and anthropology. In her study of the anthropological character of the shaman, Silvia Tomášková reviews early twentieth-century scholarship on the shamans of North Asia. She concludes that gender was a fluid category for shamans in the indigenous cultures of the area, and argues that it was only early anthropologists who began to fix the shamanic form onto the male body, thus obfuscating the ways in which gender had operated in the past. Although she acknowledges that prehistoric notions of

gender are largely obscured in modernity, she challenges us to “attempt to ‘image the unimaginable’ rather than only mirror the most recent arrangements and ‘see only that which we deem comprehensible.’”<sup>31</sup> Inspired by her study, we can revisit the gendered norms of Taghbach society not with the question of how they were different from those of the Confucians who wrote about them in the Chinese language but with the question of how they were articulated within their own indigenous ways of knowing. To further this line of inquiry, Joel Bourland uses Queer Theory to approach the topic of gender fluidity among the Chukchi people of Siberia whose shamans of both sexes are known to have changed their social gender and undertaken homosexual marriages.<sup>32</sup> Bourland argues that such creative uses of gender “see through arbitrary paths” and emerge as “creative ‘play’” within a given cultural context.<sup>33</sup> It is precisely this sort of gender flexibility that I see in the medieval sources on the Taghbach, wherein a woman can be a social man with a male name doing men’s work but also still be a woman and mother children.

In a recent ethnographic study of the Evenki people, a hunter-gatherer ethnogroup from Siberia, Tatiana Safanova and István Sántha have recorded the cultural establishment of “tomboys,” whom they refer to in Russian as *patsanka*. From the perspective of contemporary public policy in the People’s Republic of China, the Evenki are considered one of the country’s official ethnic minority groups and are also considered to be the long-distance cultural or blood descendants of the Taghbach, or both.<sup>34</sup> Based on Safanova and Sántha’s research in the Baikal region of Siberia, which is approximately one thousand kilometers west of the Gaxian Cave and contains early Serbi tombs even though the region is more commonly associated with the Xiongnu,<sup>35</sup> they describe the life of one such woman they have named “Nadia.” According to Safanova and Sántha, Nadia embraces the Evenki tradition of *manakan*, or “personal freedom.” Employed as a park ranger on horseback, she is extolled in her culture for her general independence. Her independence, however, genders her male and allows her to participate in traditionally male-demarcated rituals of the Evenki people and to live her life in men’s spaces even though she has mothered a child. The ethnographers argue that it is her status as an unmarried woman that facilitates her ability to transgress binary gender lines in both formal and informal ways. This further allows the authors to argue that binary gender among the Evenki is related to the act of marriage more so than it is to biological sex, because it is within the boundaries of marriage that the division of family labor takes on a binary mode with attendant, gender-specific specialization.<sup>36</sup> Finally, Safanova and Sántha argue that Nadia’s identity within her culture is not bound to a specific gender “role” but is, rather, defined through her own autonomy.<sup>37</sup> As an unmarried woman by choice, she need not conform to the binary gender of male and female and is therefore a biological woman but is known in her community by her male nickname “Volodia,”<sup>38</sup> spends her leisure hours among men, and is also allowed to share their ritual space. It is also interesting to note that Nadia/Volodia’s role within their culture is also not bound to their

identity as an Evenki person, for both the male and female names that they take are Slavic in origin. This dynamic of cultural fluidity might further remind us of the Taghbach rulers and their Sinicized name, Yuan.

Although Nadia/Volodia was by no means a Northern Wei person, their cultural location within Tungusic hunter-gatherer society once again calls to mind the famous story of Mulan. Hua Mulan is similar to Nadia/Volodia in that she is said to have embraced her own autonomy as an unmarried woman with an incapacitated father and a masculine name while being proficient at horseback riding and granted access to social spaces normally demarcated as male. The Disney versions of the Mulan story known in the West today construct her narrative through the Confucian optic of filial duty within the patriarchal family system and they therefore stress the gender transgression of being a woman in a man's job. This version of the story is sourced in texts written in Literary Chinese that long post-date the Northern Wei. In such stories, the Confucian framing makes Mulan's gender transgression both shocking and meaningful and it finds context in the Han literary tradition with the emergence of Chinese tales of heroic filiality wherein we see women taking on men's filial obligations in situations where they lack male kin. Keith Knapp has pointed out how, for daughters in the medieval period, heroic acts of filiality that even included suicide became the mechanism by which women were able to fulfill the male role of filial duty and thereby be considered exemplary, and he refers to a subset of these filial daughters who take on the male role of seeking revenge for crimes against their family as "surrogate sons" who remain women but who act as men would do for a short time and take personal vengeance or lead troops in retaliatory battle.<sup>39</sup> Scholars of early medieval Chinese history have pointed out many places in the texts of the Han tradition wherein women have taken on violent roles in order to avenge wrongs committed against their family members.<sup>40</sup> Such an extreme act of filial piety as abandoning one's typified gender performance and putting oneself in physical danger is seen by the biographical tradition as favorable. In these stories, the gender transgression is clear: The women are exemplary because they have done something normally unthinkable for a woman to do and all for the cause of maintaining their family honor. These stories from the Han tradition date back as early as the Eastern Han and they provide the interpretive context by which the Mulan story has long been read within the Chinese literary tradition.

There is a different interpretation of the Mulan story that we should consider. I believe that if Mulan was in fact a Northern Wei woman, she would not have had to hide her gender, nor would her actions have been seen by her contemporaries as transgressive as much as they were heroic. Within Taghbach articulations of gender, Mulan may have been seen as particularly brave for living up to the difficult family situation that would lead a woman to act as a man in place of her deceased male relatives; that she did so while securing a successful military defeat would have stressed her bravery. We know of many cases in the annals of Taghbach

history where women fought in the military as women, and although they did not wear “men’s clothes,” they did wear military clothing. I would assume that, just as in the *Mulan* story, they would put on their regular clothing after returning from battle. In a horse-riding, hunter-gatherer society such as the Taghbach, women likely did wear clothing that to Han culture seemed masculine. They likely wore pants.<sup>41</sup> What I am suggesting, here, is that participation in the military would not have been what made the *Mulan* story remarkable in Taghbach cultural norms, for women did participate in the military. That *Mulan* did so as a surrogate for her father and with great success is what makes the story remarkable. As an honorary man, she lived up to tremendous life challenges, and she succeeded. This is precisely the case of our two women secretaries who were named *Samgha Man* and *Welcoming Man*[hood]. In their entombed biographies, they are extolled for their work, work that was normally thought of as exclusive to men. Importantly, their stories are different from those of the surrogate sons of the Han tradition; not women seeking vengeance through violent or militaristic means, these honorary men have a wider repertoire of cultural practice available to them on account of the deaths of their male kin. Again, it is also likely true that such cultural practices were shared across steppe peoples and can still be seen in the world today. In the early medieval period, we can really only see it through the example of the Taghbach and the Northern Wei.

Although it might seem extraordinary, it might be true that the Taghbach identified certain categories of biological women as social men. If they did, this would offer a new interpretation of the *Mulan* story while also shedding light on gender-ambiguous naming practices and the establishment of court positions for women who held such names. Furthermore, such an understanding of Taghbach forms of gender expression allow us to understand the story of *Mulan*, if she ever existed, in ways that are potentially more resonant with how she knew herself. Finally, there is one more daughter whose story makes sense within the context of the possibility of honorary men in Taghbach culture: The granddaughter of Empress Dowager Ling. Fatherless, brotherless, and of mixed Han and Taghbach descent, the granddaughter was placed on the throne in lieu of a male heir. Read alongside the stories of *Samgha Man*, *Welcoming Man*[hood], and possibly, also, *Mulan*, the granddaughter’s story begins to make more sense.

This potential context of honorary men within forms of gender organization known to the Taghbach that may have seen women known and acting as men in the situation of absent fathers and brothers and doing so at the court of Empress Dowager Ling is augmented by the Taghbach’s own experimentation with monarchy. Until the time of Emperor Xiaowen—the emperor who moved the court to Luoyang in 494—the monarchs had all been leaders of the military. Following Taghbach notions of the monarch as *khagan*, military leadership was integral to the political legitimacy of the leader. However, from Xuanwu forward—or, in other words, throughout the Luoyang period—the association of the monarch with

military leadership was displaced in favor of a more Sinitic model of the emperor being at an arm's reach from the military. This meant, practically speaking, that the emperors in the Luoyang period were ruling from the capital and not from the frontlines. As Anne Broadbridge has argued in her study of the roles of women in the later Mongol empire, with the military led by the khan himself, women supported the empire by building, maintaining, and servicing the nomadic camps while also engaging in trade and diplomatic relations.<sup>42</sup> A similar situation is seen in the Northern Wei: as khagans, the Northern Wei rulers led the military and therefore ruled far away from the capital, leaving women in the capital to support the empire in other ways. However, as the Northern Wei rulers in the Luoyang era were no longer khagans by definition and practice, power became concentrated in the court of the capital, which was a space that was arguably much more female in population and where women were accustomed to holding powerful roles. In sum, the reinvention of monarchy in the Luoyang period brought the monarch back home to the women's arena where women, in the absence of men, had become accustomed to living as men. Maybe they were even thought of as fit to serve as the leaders of men.

#### WOMEN AS BUDDHAS

Before embarking on the ultimate question of the granddaughter on the throne, we must first consider another vector of gender expression active at the Northern Wei court: Buddhist canonical depictions of elite women and their bodies alongside the frequent depictions of elite Buddhist womanhood within the context of statecraft. As we have seen, Sengzhi was credited with chanting the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* while in the service of the Northern Wei court. The *Śrīmālā Sūtra* was first translated during the Liu-Song dynasty some ten years before Sengzhi was potentially ordained there; as we saw, Sengzhi's entombed biography includes the earliest epigraphical attestation to the text yet found. The narrative of the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* describes the actions of Queen Śrīmālā, who is said to have been the queen of Ayodhya, in India, as well as the daughter of the buddha's great benefactor, King Prasenajit. In the sūtra, Queen Śrīmālā teaches profound lessons on emptiness, forms, perception, and the path of Buddhist practice that align with the framework of other "Lion's Roar" sūtras.<sup>43</sup> Her teachings inspire both women and men of the court to convert to Buddhism. The rarity of the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* comes not from the teaching but from the teacher. Preached by a woman whose command of the Buddhist teachings is equal in quality to that of a buddha's own teaching, the sūtra begs the question of the spiritual readiness of women according to Buddhist texts.

Buddhist canonical depictions of a woman's spiritual potential constituted an important and unstable question within the development of East Asian forms of Buddhism because many texts conflict with each other regarding the eschatological vision for the female body contained in Buddhist teaching.<sup>44</sup> The spiritual

potential of women is thought to be denied in what is East Asia's most popular Buddhist text that Sengzhi also preached at the Northern Wei court—the *Lotus Sūtra*. Famously, the *Lotus Sūtra* contains the story of the daughter of the dragon king, who, when faced with male, monastic disbelief over her spiritual development, changes her body in to that of a male one and then goes on to complete all of the actions of attaining buddhahood.<sup>45</sup> Her act of sexual transformation or “turning away from the female form” (*zhuannü*) has been the subject of much theological and scholarly discussion because the story is ambiguous concerning the question of whether she changes her body because she must do so on the path to buddhahood or whether she does so as a sign of her buddhahood already attained.<sup>46</sup> On this topic, the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* is not particularly helpful; although *Śrīmālā* constantly preaches the universality of the true body of a buddha, she also states that “independence” is a condition of one's ability to achieve it.<sup>47</sup> Such a condition might seem opaque, and yet it appears again in a popular medieval text on the topic of sexual transformation, the *Sūtra on Turning Away from the Female Form* (*Zhuan nüshen jing*),<sup>48</sup> wherein a woman's lack of independence or inability to be self-sovereign (*bude zizai*) is cited as the precise reason why a woman must leave behind her female body if she would like to attain the highest levels of spiritual achievement.<sup>49</sup>

Buddhist textual discourse on the female body and its readiness for buddhahood was known at Empress Dowager Ling's court, and not just from the famous *Lotus* and *Śrīmālā Sūtras*. In general, the Northern Wei is not known for its patronage of Buddhist textual translation in the ways in which the Northern Liang and the southern courts were; however, Emperor Xuanwu and Empress Dowager Ling were both patrons of Buddhist texts and their translation. When we survey the textual materials that are recorded to have been translated by monastic translators supported by Xuanwu and Ling, a curious observation arises: Three of the texts are explicitly about women's bodies and their potential for Buddhahood, and they all feature settings attached to courtly life. These three texts were translated by the Northern Wei's best-known translators, all of whom worked for the Northern Wei court in Luoyang. First, the *Sūtra of the Woman*, “*Silver Countenance*” is recorded as having been translated by Buddhaśanta (Ch. Fotuoshanduo; fl. fifth century) who is said to have been placed in the palace in Luoyang in 508 CE to translate Buddhist texts with his colleague, Bodhiruci (Ch. Putiliuzhi; d. 527), who was himself later ordered to continue his translation activities at the imperially funded Eternal Peace Monastery after its completion.<sup>50</sup> One of the texts that Bodhiruci may conceivably have translated while working for the Northern Wei is the *Sūtra on the Prophecy of Kṣemavati* (*Chamopodi shouji jing*). Bodhiruci did not live to see the destruction of the capital and the Eternal Peace Monastery; however, his colleague Buddhaśanta is said to have gone from Luoyang's White Horse Temple (*Baima si*)<sup>51</sup> to the Eastern Wei capital of Yecheng where he continued to translate texts.<sup>52</sup> Finally, a third translator, Gautama Prajñārucci (Ch. Qutan Boreliuzhi; ca. sixth century), came to the Northern



Wei in 516. At some point before the fall of the sacking of Luoyang he translated the *Sūtra of Vimalī* (Dewugounü jing). After Luoyang's fall, he also relocated to Yecheng, where he and Buddhaśanta worked together.<sup>53</sup> Buddhaśanta's *Sūtra of the Woman*, "Silver Countenance", Bodhiruci's *Sūtra on the Prophecy of Kṣemavati*, and Gautama Prajñāruci's *Sūtra of Vimalī* all deal with the question of the readiness of women for buddhahood and they all include episodes of female-to-male sexual transformation along the path to attaining it.

The *Sūtra of the Woman*, "Silver Countenance" is a past-life story of Śākyamuni Buddha from when he was a woman. As the story goes, he-then-she was out begging for alms and stopped by a house where a new mother was starving to the point that she was about to eat her newborn baby. Faced with this horrific scene, Silver Countenance then asks for a knife from the woman and proceeds to cut off her own breasts to feed to the starving new mother.<sup>54</sup> Her breasts are subsequently and magically restored after she swears to the villagers that there was no vexation in her heart when she offered them in the first place. Indra then appears disguised as an old brahmin to ask her the same question. She declares that she will take on a male body if it is true that she harbored no vexation in her heart when she sliced off her breasts. She then takes on a male body. After all this, she-turned-he takes a rest under a tree where they are discovered by envoys from another kingdom and made their king. Ultimately, after a series of births and deaths, Silver Countenance is born as Maṇava, who sacrifices his body to a hungry tigress in a well-known story of Śākyamuni Buddha's past lives.

The *Sūtra of Vimalī* tells the story of its namesake, Vimalī, who is the daughter of King Prasenajit, who is also the father of Queen Śrīmālā. In the sūtra, Vimalī goes out for a walk and her parents insist that she be accompanied by five hundred brahmins to protect her from wayward Buddhist teachers. As she is walking, she comes across just such a group of Buddhists, declares her adherence to and understanding of the buddha's teaching, and then engages a series of the buddha's major disciples in doctrinal conversation. The back-and-forth between them all eventually lands on the question of why and how Vimalī can be so learned in Buddhist teaching while also retaining a female body. In order to prove to the disciples that physical sex is not a barrier to Buddhist practice, she spontaneously changes her sex into that of a man and the earth quakes in six different ways like it does at the birth of a buddha. All the brahmins in her entourage convert to Buddhism as does King Prasenajit himself. King Prasenajit is said to have been the ruler of the kingdom of Kosala, a kingdom in the Gangetic plain in the north of the Indian subcontinent that existed from the seventh century to the fifth century before the Common Era. The kingdom of Kosala was integral for the development of early Buddhism in India because King Prasenajit sponsored the construction of foundational Buddhist monasteries.<sup>55</sup>

Neither the *Sūtra of Vimalī* nor the *Sūtra of the Woman*, "Silver Countenance" were new translations under the Northern Wei: Both are recorded as having been

previously translated during the Western Jin dynasty although the *Sūtra of the Woman*, “*Silver Countenance*” bore the earlier title of the *Sūtra of the Transformations of the Three Prior Ages* (Qianshi sanzhuān jīng) and the *Sūtra of Vimalī* was known by its earlier name, the *Sūtra of the Girl Vimaladattā* (Ligou shīnū jīng). In both cases, the translations have few notable differences between them, and yet it is important to note that the texts share strong resonances with many other texts from the early medieval courts that discuss the female body and its possibility for buddhahood in remarkably similar ways.<sup>56</sup> These texts were all translated between the third and seventh centuries. Together they typify the form of elite Buddhist womanhood enacted by Sengzhi and many others at the Northern Wei court—a sort of Buddhist womanhood inflected by gender ambiguity, proximity to manhood, and elite status.

We see this type of womanhood on display in Saṃgha Man’s entombed biography. Although she is not explicitly identified as a Buddhist or a nun, her very name evokes the Buddhist monastic institution. Moreover, the description of her character employs stereotypically Buddhist language like “wise nature” (*huixing*) and “agile awareness” (*minwu*), which are qualities commonly associated with buddhahood or with the development of Buddhist ideals of good character. Moreover, as we have already seen, the ability to chant texts is a Buddhist skill par excellence and, just like in Sengzhi’s entombed biography where she is said to have chanted many sūtras after only hearing them one time, so too is Saṃgha Man remembered as having chanted so many words and studied the texts so diligently that she could clearly retain them after only hearing them once. In a manner that is even more similar to Sengzhi, Saṃgha Man is responsible for organizing and regulating the ranks of women filling the inner court and doing so with a “manly” heart, which is another character trait that we might associate with Buddhist practices of monasticism for women as well as with their attendant gender ambiguity.

The Northern Wei translators not only replicated and amplified such teachings on elite Buddhist womanhood already known in early medieval China; they also acted as innovators in textual translation. For example, as we have seen, Bodhiruci translated the *Sūtra on the Prophecy of Kṣemavati* for the first time during the Northern Wei. Centering on the question of the readiness of women and their bodies for buddhahood, the *Sūtra on the Prophecy of Kṣemavati* features similar conversations on the relationship of physical sex to spiritual progress as they relate to the female protagonist Kṣemavati, who is the wife of another famous Indian Buddhist king, Bimbisāra.<sup>57</sup> According to the text, the buddha and his retinue arrive at Bimbisāra’s palace to beg for food and are instead greeted by his wife, Kṣemavati, who is covered in shining jewels from head to toe. The buddha asks Kṣemavati about her jewels and she responds to him by saying that like a tree that has had good seeds planted, she too, in prior lifetimes, had planted the seeds of the teaching so that she could now be enjoyed in a beautiful form.

Following this argument, she then goes on to acknowledge the necessity of sexual transformation on the path to buddhahood. She says, in verse:

In deeds of my body, speech, mind,  
 I have cultivated the practice of all kinds of goodness,  
 Vowing to achieve great bodhi,  
 I have sought out the buddha's wisdom and cultivation of merit.  
 I will abandon my female form  
 And attain the superb male body.  
 Having attained the male body,  
 The next step is to attain the buddha body.  
 Having attained superb bodhi,  
 I will turn the unsurpassed wheel of the teaching,  
 I will bind up the prison of life and death,  
 And extinguish and liberate all living creatures.<sup>58</sup>

This text reinforces the idea that imperial and elite women were featured in Buddhist textual materials known to the Northern Wei court and that they were seen as eminent teachers on bodies and buddhahood. They were also queens and princess who advocated for the act of female-to-male sexual transformation along the path to buddhahood.

So far as I have seen, the earliest mentions of the ideal of female-to-male transformation as a religious practice surface in the context of early medieval Chinese Buddhism, particularly in the northern dynasties. For example, Chikusa Masaaki argues that the textual desire to achieve a man's body manifested socially in Buddhist women committing acts of deadly self-immolation more often than their male counterparts in the early medieval period.<sup>59</sup> In the case of the Northern Wei, Amy McNair has summarized sixth-century donative inscriptions by women from Longmen in which the donors lament their female forms and transfer the merit generated from their donation to others like them who are bound by the "three followings"<sup>60</sup>—women. Similarly, Chen Ruifeng has recently uncovered the colophon on a collection of copied Buddhist texts from Dunhuang that contains the wishes of the donor, a Buddhist nun named Jianhui. In this colophon, Jianhui expresses her desire to be reborn as a man. Although Jianhui's colophon is dated to 536, and although this date falls under the Western Wei's control of Dunhuang, it stands to reason that Jianhui was a nun there prior to the demise of the Northern Wei some two years before when the Northern Wei controlled Dunhuang. Jianhui commissioned the writing of seven different sūtras, with two copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and states (in Chen's translation): "By the little merit, [I aspire] to become male after leaving this female body, and for the multitudinous beings in the realm of reality to become buddhas at the same time."<sup>61</sup>

In his work, Chen Ruifeng asks the question of whether Buddhists in the early medieval period understood the meaning of the texts they patronized. He does this

by probing the possible connection between the personal colophons that feature on sponsored manuscript copies of texts from Dunhuang and the actual content of the texts themselves. Chen's conclusion is that, in general, there is a strong concordance between the religious aspirations of a text's patron and the contents and teachings contained in the texts themselves.<sup>62</sup> This might seem like a natural conclusion; however, the textual situation in medieval China is complicated by questions of translation, literacy, and market saturation that make Chen's study both important and helpful. In our case, what his study suggests is that elite women of the court in Northern Wei Luoyang lived in a Buddhist milieu in which they were familiar with the ideal of female-to-male sexual transformation particularly linked to elite women of the court who were the princesses and queens of Buddhist antiquity. Again, whether such a history is true or not misses the point. The teachings on female bodies seen in the texts of Northern Wei Buddhism supported the rise of the Buddhist ideal of female-to-male sexual transformation among elite women and went alongside new practices of self-immolation, lamenting the female body, and vowing to become men.

By the late Northern Wei, Buddhism was a religion that was flourishing in every village, town, and city. At all levels of society, from the court in the capital to the villages and towns in the countryside, Buddhism had become established as the religion of men and women, north and south. In the case of the Northern Wei, by the time of Empress Dowager Ling, art historical, textual, and material sources tell us that people understood many aspects of their new religion, including the contents of Buddhist texts, the structure of the monastic organization, and the methods of devotion that would come to affect the Buddhist practice of East Asia much more broadly. One of the things that they likely understood—because they would have had multiple layers of exposure to the concept—is that Buddhist texts of their period featured women as high-level teachers who were often princesses and queens. These female protagonists frequently took on male bodies or advocated doing so as a sign of their spiritual readiness. At the level of elite Buddhist womanhood, the women in these sūtras provided a canonical basis for the type of womanhood that Buddhist women at court then modeled. Women like Sengzhi, Samgha Man, and the many *weina* we have met through this study exemplify the close connection between political and public women, Buddhist teaching, and gender ambiguity that we see in Buddhist texts commonly known from this period.

The gender ambiguity present in elite forms of Buddhist womanhood during the Northern Wei does not adequately explain why the empress dowager placed her granddaughter on the throne; if these women saw themselves as close to manhood as a condition of buddhahood, how does this explain placing a girl in a typically male role? The answer lies in a different but related Buddhist devotional figure, the bodhisattva. Buddhas are not the only objects worthy of reverence in the Buddhist tradition. The buddhas to be, or beings on the path to buddhahood

otherwise known as bodhisattvas, were widely popular as devotional figures in early medieval China and many sūtras translated in the period were specifically linked to the worship and popularization of them and their cults. According to influential Buddhist texts of the period, buddhas must be in male bodies. However, this is not the case for bodhisattvas. Bodhisattvas can and do appear in female bodies, and they do in the sūtra material cited above. For our purposes, we need to ask an important question: If women of the court and the administration of Buddhism modeled themselves after high-level Buddhist queens in sūtra literature who enjoyed a certain bodily and gender ambiguity that comes from Buddhist doctrine but who also resonated with the gender ambiguity of both monasticism and honorary maleness seen in the sixth century, is it possible that women as emperors could have modeled themselves after bodhisattvas, who do indeed appear in female bodies within canonical Buddhist scripture?

### *Maitreya in Stone*

The future buddha, Maitreya, is arguably the most popular bodhisattva of the sixth century. Images of Maitreya across the period are commonly linked to a schema of the buddhas of the three ages wherein Maitreya is depicted as the next buddha to come. This interpretation of the buddhas of the three ages is seen in Northern Wei grottos, such as the Huangfu Grotto at Longmen,<sup>63</sup> which was commissioned by the uncle of the empress dowager, as well as the Binyang Grotto, which Amy McNair argues was commissioned by Emperor Xuanwu himself.<sup>64</sup> In both grottos, Maitreya is the buddha of the future; Śākyamuni is seen as the buddha of the present; and Prabhūtaratna is the buddha of the past (depicted in his Śākyamuni-Prabhūtaratna image discussed in chapter 1). A beautifully clear articulation of this formula is found on an early Northern Wei stele from the Buddhist cliff and cave site of Maiji shan, also in Gansu province. In this instance, even though Maitreya is the buddha of the future, he is the central image on the stele. Maitreya's central position on this rare and early stele from Maiji shan suggests his centrality as a devotional figure of significant importance in the sixth century.<sup>65</sup> At Dunhuang, the monastic city along the Silk Roads famed for its Buddhist grottos that contain art and texts, the few Northern Wei grottos that were built there feature Maitreya as an image of devotion: both of the major devotional grottos at Dunhuang that date to the late Northern Wei (numbers 257 and 254) prominently feature Maitreya.<sup>66</sup>

Such images that center Maitreya inaugurate a particular understanding of political leadership that had wide resonance across East Asia in medieval times: A Buddhist interpretation of political legitimation in which the leader was connected with one figure in particular—the bodhisattva and future buddha, Maitreya. According to Buddhist cosmology, Maitreya's appearance in the world will usher in a new era of peace and prosperity that will bring an end to the dark ages we are currently living under. This message found wide appeal across East





FIGURE 15. Rubbing of #10 image stele from cave 133 at Maiji shan grottoes in Gansu, China. Steles shows the three buddha paradigm, with Maitreya at center. Circa mid-sixth century. Stele in situ. Rubbing is from the author's collection.

Asia and the type of millenarian political orientation that it invoked continued to develop throughout the medieval period. April Hughes has conclusively demonstrated how, beginning with Northern Wei rebellions against the court, Maitreya-based millenarianism became an integral component of the reigns and rules of Emperor Wen of the Sui and Emperor Wu Zhao herself.<sup>67</sup> Richard McBride has also shown how such Maitreya-based political ideology was replicated on the Korean peninsula where Kungye (d. 918), the founder of what is known as the Later Koguryŏ period (901–18), declared that he, too, was none other than Maitreya reborn.<sup>68</sup> McBride links Kungye's use of Maitreya ideology to the reign of Emperor Wu Zhao, arguing that he modeled himself, in part, on her. Such Maitreya-based imagining of the ruler is not unique to East Asia: The ancient Silk Road Buddhist kingdom of Khotan also saw many of their semimythical, ancient kings identified with the bodhisattva and future buddha Maitreya.<sup>69</sup>

Within the context of the Northern Wei, we see the bodhisattva Maitreya identified with the emperor as early as the 490s, just after the move of the capital city to Luoyang. Chapter 1 of this study offered a brief overview of Emperor Wencheng's program of imperial Buddhism in Pingcheng and argued that the buddha was identified with the Northern Wei ruler during that time. This identification of the ruler with the buddha took on two visible manifestations: (1) the building of the imperial grottos at Yungang where the buddha/ruler identification was given monumental form; (2) the appearance of the previously discussed *Sūtra for Humane Kings*, a text that argues the ruler is the manifestation of the buddha in this world. In the Luoyang era, this matching of the buddhas with the rulers continued on with one notable difference—a new generation of princes and emperors. Amy McNair argues that within Longmen's Guyang grotto, a cluster of seven shrines was originally constructed to represent the six past rulers of the dynasty as well as the current ruler, Xiaowen. She further argues that these seven buddha rulers were represented in a Central Asian style of monastic dress, which would mark them as prior, foreign, and consistent in style with the depiction of the buddha rulers at Yungang. However, McNair also points to an eighth shrine within the grotto, which was completed at a slightly later date and in which, she argues, the buddha image is represented in a Han style of monastic dress. McNair argues that this image was made to represent the heir apparent, Emperor Xuanwu, in the guise of a Han-styled future buddha, Maitreya. This is an argument that she can connect with external evidence: In 492, McNair tells us, “a Maitreya image was made for the ‘Temple of the Seven Wei Emperors’ in Dingxian, Hebei province, therefore adding an eighth emperor to the temple, which was imaged as the future buddha, Maitreya.”<sup>70</sup> McNair suggests that the move to a Han style in the depiction of Emperor Xuanwu as Maitreya is linked to its later date when the Northern Wei had formally adopted policies of Sinification. More specifically, the move from depicting the ruler as a foreign king represented in a buddha of the past to a Han-styled emperor in a buddha of the future also marks the change in the form of



leadership undertaken in the Luoyang period. As discussed previously, Emperor Xuanwu was the emperor who reinvented Northern Wei forms of monarchy by breaking away from Taghbach understandings of the leader as khagan; acting as the pivot to a more Sinitic notion of monarchy, Xuanwu abandoned the notion of the monarch as khagan and head of the military and embraced the notion of the emperor as head of state in the capital city.

But if we look at the images in Buddhist sites that were not commissioned to inaugurate Xuanwu's reign, we see that the image of Maitreya as emperor is not specifically and only connected to Xuanwu, but also—and often—to his son, Emperor Xiaoming. A poignant example of this is found in the region of the world from which the empress dowager hailed. At a lesser-known Buddhist grotto site in the empress dowager's region of Gansu—the aforementioned Monastery of the Hollow Rock at Chicken Head Mountain that the empress dowager visited when Emperor Xiaoming was a young child—the regional inspector (*cishi*) of the area, a Taghbach courtier named Xi Kangsheng (467–521), commissioned the building of a grotto with the seven past buddhas as well as a cross-legged Maitreya representing the buddha of the future.<sup>71</sup> The site was built in the year 510—the year of the birth of Emperor Xiaoming. I do not think it is a coincidence that the grotto with its image of Maitreya and the seven past buddha-emperors was commissioned by the regional inspector of the empress dowager's ancestral land in the very year in which the empress dowager birthed the only heir apparent. I believe that, just like his father, Xiaoming was emblemized as the future buddha Maitreya. His father was born in 489 but only named heir apparent in 493, the precise year in which Amy McNair argues that the Guyang grotto was planned and the year after the Temple of the Seven Wei Emperors added its own Maitreya figure. That a similar image of Maitreya with the seven past emperors was built in the empress dowager's homeland and by the court-appointed regional inspector suggests that the motif of the seven past rulers, plus the heir apparent as the future buddha, came to be a more generalized way to express, in Buddhist terms, the commemoration of the birth or appointment of an heir apparent. It was also a way to celebrate that new ruler's reign and legitimate that new ruler's power. Furthermore, for Xiaoming, we see how his reign continued to be connected to the bodhisattva Maitreya at the Yellow Cliff site in Shandong. Above, we surveyed a donor inscription of a dharma collective of thirty-five people who commissioned the building of an image of Maitreya and said of themselves that they were supporters of Emperor Xiaoming. They commissioned this image in the year 526—just after the empress dowager had resumed her regency after the coup d'état and when the question of whether or not Emperor Xiaoming was old enough to be ruling directly was presenting ever-increasing challenges.

A deeper study of the caves that Xi Kangsheng commissioned in the year of Emperor Xiaoming's birth once again finds connection with the work of contemporary scholar April Hughes. Working on the rise of millenarian Buddhist religion

at the various courts of medieval China, Hughes has shown that a Buddhist text that appears to have been written in China with no Indic analog and that positions the bodhisattva Maitreya in a millenarian and salvific role was integral to the identification of Emperor Wu Zhao as a birth of Maitreya in a female form.<sup>72</sup> The text that Hughes has studied in-depth is known as the *Sūtra Expounded for the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra on Attesting Illumination* (Puxian pusa shuo zhengming jing). The origins of this text are unknown; however, historian of Chinese art Patricia Karetzky argues that the text provided the narrative behind the visual program at Hollow Rock Monastery at Chicken Head Mountain that was commissioned by Xi Kangsheng. In a short article thoroughly illustrated with rare and high-quality photographs of the inside of the cave, Karetzky interprets the perplexing visual program as a direct rendering of a particular scene from the sūtra that includes seven buddha images with attendant bodhisattvas, the independent image of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra on his elephant mount, the presence of asuras, and two independent images of the bodhisattva Maitreya. Karetzky argues that such a unique collection of Buddhist deities can only express a particular narrative within the *Sūtra Expounded for the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra on Attesting Illumination* wherein Samantabhadra seeks an efficacious method for combatting the decline of the buddha's law in the world, recommends worshipping the seven buddhas of the past, and beseeches Maitreya to speak on the topic of the coming of the next buddha himself. At Samantabhadra's urging, Maitreya tells of a future in which the world is burned to the ground by an asura who is holding seven suns, and that only after this destruction will he himself finally descend. As such, the presence of this visual program at the caves commissioned in the year of the birth of Emperor Xiaoming and in the ancestral land of his mother, Empress Dowager Ling, suggests very strongly that Maitreya-based millenarianism was alive and well at the court of the Northern Wei and that Emperor Xiaoming, like his father, was seen as a millenarian ruler connected to the bodhisattva Maitreya.

### *Maitreya in Prophecy*

Although Maitreya is typically cast in a male figure, East Asian traditions of lore and worship that center on the figure of Maitreya are not always and exclusively tied to maleness. Studying a Buddhist text that is listed in numerous medieval catalogs as the *Sūtra on Maitreya Taking a Female Form* (Mile wei nüshen jing)—even though that text can no longer be found in the modern Buddhist canon—Tang Jia has located the text in other medieval compendia and has shown how, in this story, Maitreya takes a female body on his own path toward buddhahood. Tang locates this story within a Mahāyānic trope of advanced female bodhisattvas that features in many texts in early medieval China, which advocate for the buddhahood of women. Tang also connects this form of Maitreya to the popular worship of Maitreya by women in the early medieval period.<sup>73</sup> Within this cluster of texts that come to associate Maitreya with women, Tang cites the *Sūtra of the Rain of Jewels*

(Baoyun jing) that was presented to Emperor Wu Zhao and that she used as part of her campaign to have herself identified as the rebirth of Maitreya in a female form.

In her quest to be interpreted as the reincarnation of Maitreya in her time and therefore a cakravartin ruler of her empire, Emperor Wu Zhao and her supporters found support in a Buddhist text called the *Great Cloud Sūtra* (Dayun jing).<sup>74</sup> In the *Great Cloud Sūtra*, the buddha praises the wisdom and understanding of a heavenly woman named Pure Radiance (Jingguang) who has appeared in his assembly and engaged him in a conversation about the appearance of past kings and rulers in the world, of which he was once one. The buddha praises her by saying:

Heavenly woman! At that time there was a queen, and you are none other than her. From a different buddha, you once suddenly heard the *Nirvana Sūtra* and from that karmic cause have now attained this heavenly body which is suitable for leaving our world. [When you] again hear the deep teaching, you will cast off this heavenly form and take on a female body and will be the king of a country and attain one quarter of the realm of the cakravartin. Attaining great autonomy, receiving and upholding the five precepts, and serving as *upāsikā*, you will teach and convert all those who belong to the cities and villages and settlements, men and women great and small. Receiving and upholding the five precepts, defending the true dharma, bending and destroying the external ways of all of the heterodox dissenters, at that time you will be a true bodhisattva and will manifest in a female body for the sake of converting sentient beings.<sup>75</sup>

Emperor Wu Zhao's court writers composed a commentary on this Buddhist text that claimed she was the rebirth of the bodhisattva in question, none other than Maitreya.<sup>76</sup> As a bodhisattva ruler in a female form, Wu Zhao brought the prophecy of the *Great Cloud Sūtra* to life and she did so by positioning herself as Maitreya. But was she the first to do so?

Sources for the study of both Buddhist manuscripts and women's lives are comparatively much less available and much less studied for the Northern dynasties than they are for the Tang. Unlike in the case of Emperor Wu Zhao, we have no manuscript fragments that show us directly how the *Great Cloud Sūtra* may have been understood by Northern Wei courtiers or by Empress Dowager Ling. What we do have, however, are two textual colophons from Dunhuang attesting to the fact that the text was known by at least one member of the imperial house that worked for the empress dowager's court. For a study of these colophons, we return to the work of Chen Ruifeng, particularly to his survey of the various colophons for textual copying that were commissioned by Yuan Rong (d. 545). A fourth-generation grandson of the Northern Wei emperor Mingyuan (r. 409–23), Yuan Rong was sent by the central court to serve as the regional inspector of Guazhou in 525 and he served in that role until his death in 542. Guazhou prefecture included Dunhuang, and Rong Xinjiang has commented on Yuan Rong's influence in the

region, particularly showing how Yuan Rong consolidated power among the elite and patronized the copying of Buddhist texts and the construction of a large Buddhist grotto, Mogao grotto number 285.<sup>77</sup> In a style reminiscent of the empress dowager's Huoshao grotto, Mogao grotto 285 also combines Han-Chinese deities with Buddhist motifs. Yuan Rong was both a political and a religious force in the Dunhuang area, which, given its peripheral location, spared him much of the violent disaster that befell the central court in Luoyang between 528 and 534. In short, he lived while others died. While he lived, he regularly commissioned the copying of sūtras. In the colophons to his copies, we find mention of the *Great Cloud Sūtra*.

Although Yuan Rong lived far from Luoyang, we see his support for the Northern Wei emperor and the crumbling imperial line manifesting in increasingly urgent ways throughout the colophons to sūtra copies that he commissioned at Dunhuang. Unlike many other Taghbach courtiers, Yuan Rong continued to hold his title after the death of the empress dowager and was even granted a new title which he used on his colophons. That title, Prince of Dongyang (*dongyang wang*), was granted to him by Emperor Xiaozhuang, who was the first emperor propped up by the Erzhu faction and who eventually murdered Erzhu Rong in his attempt to assert his own power.<sup>78</sup> Yuan Rong commissioned copies of the *Sūtra for Humane Kings* in both the years 530 and 531. In 530, when Yuan Rong twice commissioned the text, the ruling regent was Emperor Xiaozhuang. After Xiaozhuang's murder of Erzhu Rong, the latter's clansmen murdered Xiaozhuang in retaliation and briefly propped up a new emperor, Yuan Ye (r. 530–31). During Yuan Ye's very short reign, Yuan Rong again commissioned the copying of the *Sūtra for Humane Kings*. The aspirations that he declares on this colophon are that his family all be safe and awakened and that they all be returned to the capital city, which was also near the site of the Heyin massacre that saw the deaths of many members of their clan who had served at the court of the empress dowager.<sup>79</sup> Finally, in 532, Yuan Rong again commissioned the further copying of Buddhist texts, which included the *Sūtra for Humane Kings* and several other items. This time, however, the puppet in question was Emperor Jiemin. Jiemin attempted to assert his own power away from the Erzhus to reestablish the legitimate imperial line; however, he was murdered when Gao Huan rose to prop up his own emperor. In the colophon dated to the reign of Jiemin, Yuan Rong states that he had sent his son to the capital to renew the family's imperial commitments. He also expresses his personal happiness that the "Son of Heaven has been restored" because, as he states, "since heaven and earth have been abnormally barren, the royal way has been obstructed."<sup>80</sup> In this colophon dedicated to the restoration of the Taghbach imperial line, Yuan Rong states that he commissioned the sūtra copies so that the Northern Wei's current "era be endless" and so that the "lineage of the emperor not be broken off."<sup>81</sup>

Yuan Rong's dated colophons display how a member of the Taghbach imperial family used Buddhist textual copying to support the reigns of three Taghbach puppet emperors and, by extension, to support his own authority as a member of

the imperial family. For the most part, Yuan Rong frequently commissioned a text that contains the most forceful argument that we have for the identification of the ruler with the buddha, the *Sūtra for Humane Kings*. And yet, after his commissioning of texts in support of the renewal of the Taghbach line under Emperor Jiemin, he commissioned a different corpus of sūtras, many of which were popular in his time. Among those texts, one stands out for its rare, early epigraphical attestation: the *Great Cloud Sūtra*.<sup>82</sup> Similarly, in another of his colophons from 533, the *Great Cloud Sūtra* is again listed as one of the texts that he had commissioned.<sup>83</sup> In keeping with Yuan Rong's pattern of patronage, this group of texts was commissioned during the reign of the last of the Northern Wei's emperors, Emperor Xiaowu, who had been propped up by Gao Huan but who had also attempted to break free of his power, an act that led to the final demise of the Northern Wei.

Until now, historical records of the existence the *Great Cloud Sūtra* have strongly been linked to the Tang because of Emperor Wu Zhao's claim that she was the fulfillment of the text's prophecy of a female ruler as the Bodhisattva Maitreya. With Yuan Rong's colophons, however, we can place the sūtra within the textual and social context of other popular Buddhist sūtras in the sixth century. Chen Ruifeng has carefully analyzed all those sūtras in his study; in brief, they contain many of the sūtras we have already discussed in this study such as the *Lotus* and the *Nirvana* but also other texts that were popular in the Northern Wei such as the *Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish* and the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra* (Weimojie suoshuo jing). What this suggests is that Yuan Rong knew about the *Great Cloud Sūtra* and thought it appropriate to have copied it on two separate occasions, along with other well-known texts from his era and that were circulating in his milieu. With Yuan Rong, then, we can place the *Great Cloud Sūtra* in the striking context of a Northern Wei courtier and member of the Taghbach royal house who worked for the empress dowager and then commissioned the copying of Buddhist sūtras for four out of the five emperors that came in the six years between her death and the end of the dynasty.

Is the fact that the *Great Cloud Sūtra* was known by at least one of the empress dowager's courtiers and commissioned alongside other popular texts of the age enough to link it to the empress dowager herself? Specifically, can we postulate that the empress dowager may have known about the text and that it informed her own Buddhist practice? Michael Radich has shown that the two different Chinese versions of the text of the *Great Cloud Sūtra* that we have today are both strongly linked to the translator Dharmakṣema, with one of them most certainly being his own translation and the other bearing a striking resemblance to that one in terminology and phrasing.<sup>84</sup> Dharmakṣema was active in the mid-fifth century when the great translation bureau at Guzang was under the jurisdiction and sponsorship of the Northern Liang. The empress dowager was born in the late fifth century between Chang'an and Guzang. As we have already seen, both her matrilineal and patrilineal family were local gentry and known Buddhist patrons. Her aunt, the

nun Sengzhi, was so esteemed for her Buddhist practice that she was called to work at the Northern Wei court. What we can say, then, is that the empress dowager's family were known supporters of the Buddhist tradition from Gansu who lived at the gate of the Hexi corridor and would have been immersed in the Buddhist texts, ideas, persons, and objects being transmitted through their region from Guzang. Dharmakṣema was a famous monk in his time, widely known across the north. So renowned was he that Emperor Taiwu attempted to steal him from the Northern Liang ruler, Juqu Mengxun (r. 401–433), who then killed the monk instead of handing him over to the enemy.<sup>85</sup> We therefore have every reason to think that the texts he translated circulated widely through the northern dynasties where they became known by the Northern Wei's regional inspector and likely also by the empress dowager's famous family of eminent Buddhists and Buddhist patrons.

#### THE NAMELESS GRANDDAUGHTER AS MONARCH

Let us return once again to the rare names for women from this time period, names that evoke social maleness. Particularly, the names from the Gao clan in Dangmo present unique opportunities for historical interpretation. To remind us, the names of the two women in question can be translated into English as “Male Birth” and “Almost a Man.” Both women are identified in the inscription as wives of men from the Gao family who hold the title “Gentlemen of Pure Faith.” This title identifies the women's husbands as lay Buddhist practitioners, and I believe that the names of their wives identify them in the same way; in the case of the Gao family inscription, these names for women that evoke social maleness seem to be dharma names. As dharma names, they suggest Buddhist affiliation and knowledge of Buddhist teachings in ways that resonate with the dharma names of members of the monastic community also seen in the period.<sup>86</sup> They also resonate with the names of the two women secretaries who were given their names as honorifics. In the case of the women secretaries, though there is some connection to Buddhism in their stories, what is more striking is their status as “honorary men” in their families. What we have, then, are two groups of two different kinds of women sharing similar names. In the case of the women of the Gao clan, I find it unlikely that they were considered honorary men because their husbands were eminent men in their society, and because it would be too suspicious a coincidence that they would both hold such names related to family circumstances prior to marrying into the Gao family, unless they were sisters. Yet, in the case of the women secretaries, I think it likely that their names evoke honorary male status, given their family situations, their gender ambiguity, and their work at court. In the case of the Gao women, the honorary nature of these dharma names identifies them with popular currents of Buddhist thought in their day; whereas, for the women secretaries, their honorary names evoke a different type of gender expression linked to diverse forms of gender organization known to the Taghbach in the sixth century.

These divergent ways of understanding the names of women in the late Northern Wei, when women served at court and Buddhism was the religion of the land, are not at odds with each other. Rather, both forms of naming belong to the cultural matrix of the Northern Wei, wherein the intersection of Taghbach or Inner Asian ways of knowing, Han Chinese ways of governing, and Buddhist ways of worshipping supported women's lives in entirely new ways. As we saw in the previous chapter, women leveraged their belonging in the Buddhist monastic institution to create safety, space, and opportunity. So, too, did they with other forms of Buddhist identity and practice. As donors, as weina, as women secretaries, as empresses and empress dowagers, and perhaps even as the emperor, Buddhist-affiliated women in the late Northern Wei enjoyed both social fluidity and social protection through Buddhist ideas and institutions. In the dynamic context of hybrid Buddhist/Taghbach/Han forms of faith, gender expression, and work, women in the sixth century created opportunities out of intersection.

Returning to the central problem of the unnamed granddaughter on the throne, we can ask a final question: Did this dynamic cultural context of women in Buddhist texts, Buddhist deities as monarchs, Taghbach honorary men, and the reinvention of the Taghbach leader from khagan to emperor result in a baby girl becoming the Northern Wei monarch for a few days? Although the Han-styled emperor is male, and although Buddhist women of the Han-styled court in Luoyang adopted a form of gender ambiguity linked to both monasticism and honorary maleness that was modeled on canonical Buddhist literature known to them, it is also true that the granddaughter in question could arguably have been seen as an honorary male in Taghbach culture at a time when Buddhist texts also supported the idea that Maitreya could be reborn in a female body and when, simultaneously, Maitreya was linked to the identity of the heir apparent as well as to the emperor who was her deceased father. Unlike in the Tang where we have historical sources documenting how Emperor Wu Zhao capitalized on this context of the gendered reinvention of the monarch through Buddhism, we do not have similar sources for the Northern Wei. What we can say, simply, is that all the same pieces that allowed Emperor Wu Zhao to identify herself as a female monarch—including the *Great Cloud Sūtra*—were also in play at the time Empress Dowager Ling placed her granddaughter on the throne. Additionally, during the Northern Wei, women known as honorary men already worked for the court in the capital of Luoyang. I believe that we should consider the nameless granddaughter as a similar sort of honorary man, one who fulfilled a prophecy of a Buddhist monarch in a female body just as she took on her father's identity as the Bodhisattva Maitreya in an act of honorary maleness.