

No Salvation in Buddhism

If, as I have argued above, Empress Dowager Ling had all the same resources in play as Emperor Wu Zhao of the Tang did; if, that is, she had a bodhisattva emperor ruling over a Buddhist populace after having taken control of the court and its ritual and staffed the court with women, why did it not work as well for her as it did for her Tang successor? Why was she not able to rule unchallenged? Why has she been forgotten while Emperor Wu Zhao has been celebrated?

The simplest answer to these questions is that Empress Dowager Ling was a weak ruler. Although I believe that she provided a model for direct rule by Buddhist women that was later fulfilled by Emperor Wu Zhao at the end of the seventh century, she did not herself enjoy the support that the latter ruler did. Empress Dowager Ling took power at a deeply divisive point in Northern Wei history when internecine war and political rebellion were brewing on all sides. When Erzhu Rong drowned the empress dowager in the river in Luoyang, and when his army murdered her courtiers and destroyed her city, he did so in large part owing to the culmination of many years of resentment by the military men of the impoverished northern garrisons against their rulers who had moved south and abandoned them economically and culturally. His murder of the empress dowager was therefore not a personally motivated assassination, though he is said to have taken particular glee in destroying her hallmark projects and violently purging the court of any of her supporters.

I believe that this simple answer of long-brewing political instability is the correct answer as to why the empress dowager was not more successful; however, this is not the entirety of the answer provided in the *Book of the Wei*. As we have seen in that text, Erzhu Rong is remembered as having invaded the capital

on the pretext of avenging the empress dowager's murder of her son and placing her granddaughter on the throne. Because I have argued that the placement of the granddaughter on the throne was a political act legitimized through Buddhist notions of kingship known throughout the Northern Wei, in this chapter I further argue that the empress dowager's murder and subsequent legacy were innately and inextricably tied to her own practice of Buddhism in her time. That Erzhu Rong and his armies—many of whom, like the Gao Clan of Gao Huan were public patrons of Buddhism—did not hesitate to murder the empress dowager and destroy the Buddhist city she had created speaks to the fact that, for them, Luoyang was no Pure Land and the emperor was no bodhisattva.

To explore the reasons why the empress dowager's assassination included a total destruction of the Buddhist landscape of the capital that she had helped create, we must examine how her Buddhism was viewed by those who sought to challenge her power. Buddhism was incredibly popular across all sectors of the society of the northern dynasties, but not everybody practiced Buddhism in the same way. Until now, we have examined the type of Buddhism used by the court in the legitimation of the court's own power. This type of Buddhism was heavily regulated by individuals who held court-monastic appointments, just as it was ideologically formed around the idea of the Northern Wei emperor as the buddha. We have seen how the empress dowager continued this type of Buddhist practice in her reign; however, what we have not yet seen is how she also aligned herself with Buddhist elements in her population that were seen as unstable, indulgent, and heterodox by her own advisors. As a woman born without a recorded name in the far reaches of the empire, Empress Dowager Ling came to the central court in Luoyang with her own practice of Buddhism. As I will explore here, her Buddhism was closely aligned with the common Buddhism of her polity and her home territory, and it was a Buddhism that made her courtiers uncomfortable. I argue that the empress dowager's reign was emblematic of a Buddhism that the court found difficult to control, just as it found her difficult to control. In the end, I show that even though her murder was the result of long-bubbling tensions in the empire, her legacy, as told in the Ru histories compiled under the direction of her immediate successors, suggests that they did not approve of her Buddhism and saw it as partial justification for her overthrow.

A TRADITION UNDER SUSPICION

Although they used Buddhism to express their vision of kingship, the rulers of the Northern Wei court, as well as their political advisors, viewed the Buddhist tradition with deep suspicion and ambivalence. This is true even though many of these advisors were themselves Buddhist patrons. To understand why this was the case, we move beyond Luoyang and its urban Buddhism full to the brim with opulent

temples and donative sites and out to the countryside where we see a different type of Buddhist movement frequently arising throughout the Northern Wei: Buddhist rebellion. The Northern Wei saw, from its beginning to its end, continual and violent political uprisings articulated along ethnic and cultural lines. What is less known is that such ethnically aligned, anticourt factions were often aligned with Buddhist ideology and infrastructure. For example, Liu Shu-fen has explored the ethnic boundaries that backed the Buddhist-supported Gaiwu Rebellion of 445, when Buddhist monasteries were accused of being storehouses for weapons to be used in the fight against government forces. In her work on the rebellion, Liu begins by making the connection between the Lushui branch of the Xiongnu peoples, their competition with the Northern Wei, and their Buddhist faith. The Lushui branch of the Xiongnu ruled over the Northern Liang, which the Northern Wei conquered in the year 439. The Lushui were fervent Buddhists as well as political opponents and, while in power, had sponsored large-scale translation projects, which included the support of two of China's most eminent translators of early Buddhist texts: Kumārajīva and Dharmakṣema. When the Northern Wei fought to take the Northern Liang, Buddhist monks took up arms against the Taghbach in solidarity with the Lushui.¹ Liu Shu-fen argues that although the Taghbach took the Northern Liang in 439, the Lushui continued to hold power over many parts of the country, particularly the trade routes leading from central to western China, and that because of this they were able to quickly take Chang'an during the Gaiwu Rebellion, apparently storing arms in monasteries along the way. It was the discovery of these stockpiles of weapons that is said to have spurred a widespread suppression of Buddhism under the early Northern Wei leader, Emperor Taiwu. The Gaiwu Rebellion first erupted in Xingcheng and spread widely across the old Northern Liang territory and even beyond. It was a serious threat to the Northern Wei, who vigorously suppressed it.

The Gaiwu Rebellion was not the only such Buddhist-supported rebellion during the Northern Wei. No less than ten antigovernmental rebellions arose in the Northern Wei, many of which utilized Buddhist ideas in the articulation of their aims.² Such rebellions were typically millenarian in orientation and depicted the overthrow of the government as a way of bringing about a new and Buddhist world order backed by a saintlike figure. Buddhism was popular among northern groups living in an increasingly Sinicizing cultural milieu because the tradition was understood by non-Han peoples as precisely "foreign" and therefore theirs. They celebrated northern, non-Han Buddhist teachers like the miracle-working, eminent monk Fotucheng (232–348) as their leaders and they joined the Buddhist community in great numbers at that time, seeing the tradition as simultaneously religiously powerful and as something that belonged to them as northerners.³ David Ownby has traced a useful history of millenarian rebellions in China from the Eastern Han period through to the

creation of Buddhist texts and messianic figures, such as the Bodhisattva Prince Moonlight (Yueguang Tongzi), who appeared throughout the entire Six Dynasties period.⁴ He argues that although millenarian rebellion in China was not new with Buddhism, Buddhism brought a new and powerful medium of expression for it, particularly in the northern dynasties.⁵ Furthermore, and from a sociological angle, these rebellions often erupted among the commoners, suggesting that the common form of Buddhism was different than that of the educated elite, particularly in the Northern Wei.

Such rebellions continued to gain intensity throughout the latter half of the Northern Wei with four Buddhist-inflected millenarian rebellions happening between the years of 509 and 515 and with all of them being led by Buddhist monks.⁶ Finally, in the year 515—the very year of the death of Xuanwu and the rise of the empress dowager—the largest and most violent of these rebellions occurred against the court and it took more than two years to fully quash. This rebellion, the so-called “Mahāyāna Rebellion” is discussed in the *Book of the Wei*, which tells us that the rebellion was led by a monk named Faqing who was also called “Mahāyāna.” Faqing, along with his assistant, Li Guipo, who also held the titles the bodhisattva of the ten bhūmis (Skt. *daśabhūmibodhisattva*, Ch. *shizhu pusa*), the prince who pacifies Han (*ding Han wang*), and the director of the army for combating māra (*pingmo jushi*), led a rebellion in which members of their army were awarded the first stage of *bhūmi* upon murdering an enemy and were thus given the title *ekabhūmibodhisattva* or the “bodhisattva of the first *bhūmi*” (*yizhu pusa*).⁷ Their apparent goal was to bring about a messianic Buddhist revolution and overthrow the Northern Wei. It took the government three months and an army of one hundred thousand to quell the rebels,⁸ only to have them resurface briefly in 517.

Although the Mahāyāna Rebellion was quashed in the year 517, the region where it had taken place retained both a connection to Buddhism and to the challenge of imperial power. The rebellion took place in modern-day Hebei province, in the region of Jizhou. At the final collapse of the Northern Wei, the general and then kingmaker Gao Huan moved the capital away from Luoyang and established the Eastern Wei dynasty with its capital at Yecheng. Yecheng is also in Hebei province, in a region to the south of Jizhou. After his death, his son took the throne as Northern Qi Emperor Wenxuan and also ruled in Yecheng. During this Eastern Wei and Northern Qi transition an additional and fantastic set of imperial Buddhist caves was carved, this time just outside the capital of Yecheng. These caves are collectively called the “Mountain of Echoing Halls” (Xiangtang shan). The north cave of the site has long been considered to be Gao Huan’s own mausoleum. The Jizhou and Yecheng regions of Hebei therefore retained their connection to Buddhism as well as their status as alternate regions for the exercise of political power throughout the empress dowager’s

reign, and they emerged as the center of power of the Northern Qi court and its own Buddhism.

GOVERNMENTAL SUPPRESSION

The previously discussed Gaiwu Rebellion happened under the rule of early Northern Wei Emperor Taiwu, who was Emperor Wencheng's grandfather, and during a time in which the Northern Wei was aggressively expanding its territory while ruling from Pingcheng. From the perspective of Taiwu's court, which sought control of the Northern Liang territories where the Gaiwu Rebellion had been raised, the recognition that enemy arms had been stored in monasteries during the rebellion was cause for the violent suppression of Buddhists and their institutions. This court-backed suppression included the sacking of monasteries and the forced laicization of monks. Such tactics were encouraged by Taiwu's adviser, Cui Hao (381–450),⁹ who was a supporter of the Daoist tradition of the Celestial Masters under the leadership of Kou Qianzhi (365–448),¹⁰ who successfully engaged Emperor Taiwu in supporting his tradition over and above Buddhism. Taiwu's sponsorship of the Celestial Masters sect, which was then under the leadership of Kou Qianzhi, is detailed in the Daoism section of the "Annals on Buddhism and Daoism" in the *Book of the Wei*. In the text, Wei Shou tells us that Kou was given the title of Celestial Master via a revelation from a high-ranking Daoist god, the Supreme Lord Lao (Taishang Laojun), and that, furthermore, in a second revelation, Kou was given new registers for himself and his disciples. In his recent overview of the Celestial Masters tradition in this period, Terry Klee-man notes that the registers were for the purpose of supporting Emperor Taiwu's Daoist-styled reign—that of the Perfected Lord of Great Peace (*taiping zhenjun*, 440–51).¹¹ While in his position as religious adviser, Kou is said to have used Daoist arts to advise the emperor on military matters, and he attempted to invest the emperor himself with magical powers through the creation of various elixirs of immortality.¹² Notably, although he patronized Daoism and violently suppressed Buddhism, Emperor Taiwu was also interested in harnessing the magical powers of the Buddhist tradition: He was the ruler who had tried to steal the Northern Liang's infamous monastic thaumaturge, the magic-wielding Dharmakṣema, who was then murdered by the Northern Liang leader.

What the "Treatise on Buddhism and Daoism" does not tell us, however, is that other than the emperor's own fascination with the arts of immortality, he also likely chose to patronize Kou and his Celestial Masters tradition because that tradition then represented a form of religious orthodoxy at a time when religious cults of many forms were mushrooming across the empire and creating violent rebellions. The Celestial Masters, under Kou's leadership, represented a tradition charged with the task of "purifying and reforming the Taoist Religion."¹³ In particular, these Celestial Masters advocated an innovative and hybridized form of

the religion that included the use of Buddhist morality as a means to combat the heterodox practices of other communities that were deemed licentious by society's elite. They also used Confucian ritual and etiquette to restrain the actions of those groups by creating a law code not unlike Buddhist monastic law.¹⁴ Thus, as a way of aligning with a religious orthodoxy and establishing a powerful government, Emperor Taiwu elevated Celestial Masters Daoism to the level of state religion and used it to challenge other nonorthodox religions, including Buddhism.

Following on the heels of this violent suppression of Buddhists and their institutions, the reign of Wencheng, Taiwu's grandson as well as his successor, saw the official installation of Buddhism as the state religion, a political gesture that we can understand as a move toward solidarity that brought the tradition of Buddhism to the heart of the court and sought to ease bubbling tensions across the empire. As we saw in chapter 3, Wencheng created Tanyao as the "superintendent of the śramaṇas," thus establishing an innovative religio-political bureaucracy that continued to develop throughout the Northern Wei in which the *weinas* served as court-monastic go-betweens who kept tabs on monastic activities. This religio-political bureaucracy that Wencheng created worked to police the spread of Buddhists and their activities from the inside. We see the perceived necessity of such insider policing in a memorial made to the court of Empress Dowager Wenming and Emperor Xiaowen by one of their courtiers, Lu Yuan (fl. fifth century) when the court was still located in the northern capital of Pingcheng.¹⁵ Against the backdrop of Buddhist unrest across the empire, and on the heels of the Gaiwu Rebellion, Lu Yuan links popular Buddhism in the countryside to the revolt of the Yellow Turbans (*huangjin*) during the Han—a massive peasant rebellion that sought to overturn the ruling house and establish a new religio-political order. Famously, this rebellion contributed to the eventual fall of the Han empire.¹⁶ In part, Lu Yuan's memorial reads:

Your slave has also heard, what is generally known, that among the common people in the eastern regions since many years there is a virtual competition in establishing vegetarian societies [*zhaihui*]. [Their leaders] falsely claim to be nobles to agitate and delude [their followers]. Obviously, they use their position among the populace to arouse feelings against the ruling dynasty. Their ambitions are boundless and beyond compare. In my ignorant view it would be appropriate to punish them as soon as possible to stop these activities and to execute their leaders. Otherwise, I fear, they may become a disaster such as the Yellow Turbans and the Red Eyebrows. If we tolerate the small seedlings and do not cut them as soon as they appear or chop them with an axe when they have grown up, we may face a mass of criminals.¹⁷

Although this memorial was presented slightly after the death of Wencheng, it describes a rise in Buddhist activity during his time that continued to vex the court. Starting with Wencheng, the central court attempted to control the tradition by co-option instead of by suppression. As we have already seen, Wencheng

initiated the early strata of monumental buddha/ruler images at Yungang. This building project was furthered under the regencies of Empress Dowager Wenming, who may also have had her regency government depicted in those grottos in the paired images of Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna from the *Lotus Sūtra*. Through their unprecedented patronage, the rulers merged themselves with the buddhas, engaging in a tactic that allowed them authority over the religion. Emperor Wencheng was even able to secure the reverence and obedience of the monastic community, ensuring that they bow to him.¹⁸ Similarly, in carrying on Wencheng's tradition of patronage, in 477 then-ten-year-old Emperor Xiaowen commissioned the building of the Repaying Virtue Monastery (Baode si). This commissioning was for the purpose of repaying the "support" of his regent, Empress Dowager Wenming. Built just outside the northern capital of Pingcheng, the Repaying Virtue Monastery was built over the top of the site of the imperial hawkery and therefore also brought an end to the popular but "un-Buddhist" practice of hawking by the imperial elite. As a result, all the birds of prey within the area were released. This story is recorded in Empress Dowager Wenming's biography in the *Book of the Wei*, where it says:

In the first year of the Chengming Era [477], the empress dowager was respectfully called Great and August Empress Dowager [*taihuang taihou*] and again heard court and presided over government. By nature, the empress dowager was wise and cunning. When she came to the palace, she had but crude knowledge of letters and numbers and yet she ascended to the most venerable of ranks, scrutinizing and settling all the myriad affairs.

Gaozu therefore made an edict, saying: "Because I was the only one, I inherited this illustrious lineage as a child [and so] relied on [her] compassion and understanding to pacify the four seas. Desiring the virtue of recompense and in accord with complete enlightenment,¹⁹ all of the birds of prey and other injurious sorts of animals should be released to the mountains and forests, and we should use this spot to start building a numinous pagoda for the empress dowager." Thereupon, the class of hawkers was ceased, and the area was used the area for the Buddhist Monastery of Repaying Virtue.²⁰

In this story from the *Book of the Wei* we see Empress Dowager Wenming's leadership style through the child emperors that she controlled. When the edict was issued, it was in the name of Emperor Xiaowen, then ten years old, in the first year of his reign, and under the influence of the empress dowager. As such, this was truly the story of Empress Dowager Wencheng using Emperor Xiaowen as a legitimate and public mechanism for employing her own policies: his edict served her reign. As a means of legitimating her second and contested regency, the empress dowager built a Buddhist monastery over the imperial hawkery, thus championing Buddhism over the traditional hunting of both the Han and the Taghbach.²¹ In turn, she established herself as a Buddhist leader who controlled the court/monastic bureaucracy and caused it to work in her favor. We see this

strategy at many points in her rule, including in the following edict from Xiaowen's accession in 471, in which the two rulers are depicted as the "father and mother of the people." The edict reads thus:

In order to raise and establish felicitous merit, people in- and outside [of the saṃgha] have stūpas and temples made and erected which, however high and wide, conspicuous and spacious, share the one aim to illuminate and exalt the Supreme Doctrine. Ignorant knaves, however, each trying to outstrip the other and competing over poverty and wealth, spend their entire property and holdings to make sure [their] edifices maintain [a certain] height and width, indeed they would go so far as to kill to reach their goal. If only they were capable of sincere intent, even piling up some clay and heaping up some sand their measure of merit would be incorruptible. They want to establish the [kind of] factor that causes merit, unaware of the retribution [that comes of] harming life. We, father and mother for Our people, make it Our duty to cherish and nurture them. From now on, [such building projects] shall all and one be stopped.²²

The above edict characterizes the ambivalent relationship that the Northern Wei had with Buddhism under the reigns of Wencheng, Wenming, Xianwen, and Xiaowen: On the one hand, the government consistently supported their own Buddhist building projects; on the other hand, they forbade the building projects of nonelite Buddhist patrons under the guise of protecting the populace from both financial bankruptcy and moral corruption. We should interpret this ambivalent approach of patronizing and policing as a continuation of the state suppression of Buddhism by Taiwu, though by different means. Under all these leaders, including Xuanwu, a long series of edicts was issued by the court. In some cases, these edicts gave support to the monastic community by allowing them forms of funding, including slaves and land, as well as access to social and political prestige. In many other cases, the edicts worked to delimit the unrestrained spread of Buddhism among the nonmonastic elite by forcing the weina to inspect the caliber of monastics and enforce limits on their numbers. Such restrictions on the building of monasteries and the staffing of them with court-allocated numbers of monastic residents speaks to the real-life situation of the Northern Wei court in its agricultural policy. Having established an equal-field system that included the allocation of agricultural land to largely Han populations in the central plains, the court also established a system of taxation that necessitated an active agricultural tax base to support the empire.²³

In sum, throughout the fifth and early sixth centuries, the government of the Northern Wei was heavily invested in both supporting and regulating the monastic community as a means of controlling the spread of Buddhism in the realm. They did so to curtail rebellion and delimit the social power of the religion, which continued to spread rapidly across all regions of the empire. In creating their imperial form of Buddhism, they sought to manage the religion of the empire by defining

its terms of practice, placing it under their purview, and forming it into a system that ultimately supported governmental stability.

THE BUDDHISM OF THE EMPRESS DOWAGER

Empress Dowager Ling was a different sort of ruler than those who came before her. Her patronage of Buddhist building projects far exceeded that of her imperial predecessors, perhaps surpassing the sum of four million medieval cash coins.²⁴ She spent extravagantly on Buddhist building projects, just as she was known to have audience with a diversity of patrons to Buddhist projects and members of the monastic order alike. She was also steeped in Buddhism from birth. With her parents being notable Buddhist patrons in the region of her birth and her aunt and personal benefactor being the court's most celebrated Buddhist nun, the empress dowager came to court deeply familiar with the practice of Buddhism and she continued that practice with one significant difference: wealth. As an independently ruling regent of a powerful empire located in the economically powerful heartlands of the central plains, the empress dowager enjoyed tremendous financial advantage, and she used that advantage to spend lavishly on Buddhist structures. In this section of the chapter, we begin by surveying the empress dowager's massive expenditures on Buddhist building projects before moving on to interrogate the precise type of Buddhism the empress dowager seems to have practiced in her time. Was her Buddhism more closely aligned with the court and its careful policing? Or was it more closely aligned with her populace in the carnivalesque Buddhism of the capital?

The empress dowager had a penchant for building tall things: Her pagoda at the Eternal Peace Monastery was the tallest building in the known world; her grotto at Longmen was the tallest and highest on the cliff face of all the Northern Wei grottos.²⁵ But these were not her only projects. Although the Eternal Peace Monastery was situated outside the palace gates, its sister complex, the Jade Radiance Nunnery, was the only Buddhist building constructed within the palace walls. Its construction was commissioned by Emperor Xuanwu. The *Record* locates the Jade Radiance just north of the palace, between the northwest corner of the palace, the palatial gardens to the east, and a fortress built in the northwest corner of the city wall.²⁶ This proximity between court and nunnery was owing to the fact that the nunnery was home to the most elite women of the realm who still enjoyed close ties to the court and may have needed the court's protection. Of the nunnery's inhabitants, Yang says:

Imperial consorts from the "Pepper Chamber" studied the path there, as did the ladies of the court who dwelled there together with them. Likewise, there were maidens of reputable clans whose disposition was to cherish this place of practice and so they shaved their heads, bade farewell to their families and came with proper

deportment to this nunnery. Rejecting their rare and beautiful ornaments and wearing the clothes for cultivating the path, they surrendered their hearts to the eight truths²⁷ and entrusted themselves to the one²⁸ vehicle.²⁹

Not only was the empress dowager connected to the Jade Radiance through the women of her court, but she was also a patron of it: She personally funded the construction of the nunnery's majestic pagoda,³⁰ which was similar to the famed golden pagoda at the Eternal Peace Monastery. A brief description of the pagoda and the nunnery is found in the *Record*:

There was a five-story pagoda that rose fifty *zhang* from the ground. Its "immortal's palm"³¹ crested into the sky and its bells were hung on the clouds. The brilliance of its workmanship matched with the beauty of the Eternal Peace Monastery. Of the lecture halls and the nun's quarters, there was over five hundred rooms. Elegantly scattered, they were all connected, as their doors and windows shared a passage on which there were rare trees and fragrant grasses that could not be expressed in words.³²

Furthermore, beyond the court's own Jade Radiance Nunnery and Eternal Peace Monastery, the *Record* tells us that the empress dowager built yet another pagoda in a monastery to the south of the city, the Bright View Monastery (Jingming si), which, like the Jade Radiance, had also been established by Emperor Xuanwu. Regarding this project, the *Record* says that the pagoda was seven stories and that the ornamentation and gold work were equal to that of the nine-story pagoda at the Eternal Peace.³³ It seems also that the empress dowager's populace understood her penchant for pagoda building: For example, we have seen how her supporter and brother-in-law, Yuan Yue, commissioned two pagoda building projects in her honor. One of his projects was to rebuild a pagoda built by his father, Emperor Xiaowen, in which he dedicated the merit to the "Two Sages" of Empress Dowager Ling and the child Emperor Xiaoming. The other of his projects—building a pagoda at the site of the numinous platform—was also an act of imperial mimicry of the empress dowager and in support of her.

We must linger a little longer on the story of the numinous platform. I believe that this was a special place for the empress dowager and it may also be the place where her body was interred. The numinous platform was located just outside the south edge of the city walls of the capital proper and slightly to the east of the city's central avenue, and there the empress dowager engaged in a cooperative building project with her younger sister, the Mistress of Pingyi (Pingyi jun, d. 557), in commemoration of their deceased father, Hu Guozhen. The two sisters each built a separate complex, each with its own five-story pagoda. The *Record* tells us that the site was collectively referred to as the Monastery of the Two Women (Shuangnü si) by the people of the time on account of its patronage by the two sisters.³⁴ Yang's *Record* also tells us that this monastery was the only

one given a dedicated eunuch attendant who would organize the donations and supplies offered for the great feasts in the liturgical calendar. The eunuch and the supplies came from the empress dowager, who personally sent them for the care of the monks who dwelled in and maintained what was effectively her own patrilineal clan's family shrine.

As stated in the *Record*, the Monastery of the Two Women was built at the location of the numinous platform, which, as we discussed, was the imperial observatory of the Eastern Han court. This location for the selection of her father's mortuary temple aligns with what we already know about the empress dowager's pattern of patronage from Longmen. As we have seen, the empress dowager was the patron of the Huoshao grotto that features rare images of the Han dynasty gods, the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East. Whereas Amy McNair has argued that the grotto was built for the veneration of the empress dowager's deceased mother, I argue that it was built for Sengzhi, the aunt/nun. Regardless of whether it was built for mother or aunt, it is a Buddhist grotto for the commemoration of the deceased members of the empress dowager's family and it features Han dynastic imagery that serves as a display of the family's own known status as belonging to the Han ethnicity. Unlike the Huoshao grotto, which we do not know much about, it appears that the Monastery of the Two Sisters was commonly associated with the then-classical Eastern Han numinous platform, and we are certain that it played a role as a family shrine built for the empress dowager's father. But could this in fact be none other than the Monastery of the Two Lings, where she herself was buried? Although archeological excavation has largely located and confirmed the existence of the Northern Wei Buddhist structures built at the numinous platform and described in the *Record*,³⁵ the Monastery of the Two Lings—which is not in the *Record* as such—has not been found. If we recall from chapter 2, the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* states that the empress dowager was brought to the bridge over the river that led into Luoyang and then drowned there. Furthermore, her own biography in the *Book of the Wei* states that her body and that of the emperor were brought to the Monastery of the Two Lings by her sister, Mistress of Pingyi, and interred there. The Mistress of Pingyi was the copatron of the Monastery of the Two Women, which is, in fact, located just on the bank of the river where the empress dowager would have been drowned. It makes sense to think that the sister brought the corpses to her own, personally funded monastery that already served as a family shrine. In fact, where else could she have brought them, since we have no other record of her patronizing or commissioning other Buddhist structures? Furthermore, it could be the case that the name Monastery of the Two Lings is a contraction of a compounded name for the complex, a name that includes the “two sisters” and the “numinous platform,” such that the Monastery of the Two Sisters at the Numinous Platform would have been abbreviated as the “Monastery of the Two Lings.” As an abbreviation, however, the “two Lings” could also refer to either the empress dowager and the

emperor or the empress dowager and her father. Given that archeological surveys of Northern Wei Luoyang have provided no evidence of the existence of a separate Monastery of the Two Lings and that Yang does not describe it in his record, it perhaps stands to reason that the Monastery of the Two Women became known as the Monastery of the Two Lings in the times after the death of the empress dowager, when the associations between the complex and the numinous platform as well as the empress dowager herself became more apparent.

The *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* catalogs and eulogizes the most splendid Buddhist architecture of the Northern Wei capital, and the presence of the empress dowager is woven through almost every story. Either directly connected to her or her policies or indirectly connected to her through her own eunuchs and courtiers, the resplendent monasteries of Luoyang were built and rebuilt with her oversight, her permission, and, often, her money. Her patterns of donation and patronage accord with her participation in Buddhist life in her city: Inviting nuns to lecture her at court, convening large-scale Buddhist feasts at court, and, along with her courtiers and eunuchs, personally funding carnivalesque and spectacular monasteries and nunneries, the empress dowager provided the pulse of her very Buddhist city. Sima Guang expresses a similar sentiment in his *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, saying:

The empress dowager loved the buddha. Her court erected monasteries without end. She commanded all the prefectures to each build a five-story pagoda. So that the resources of the common people did not run low, the lords, aristocracy, eunuchs, and imperial guards were to each build a monastery in Luoyang that was both tall and beautiful. The empress dowager established numerous vegetarian assemblies, provided the monastics resources for tens of thousands of plans, granted rewards everywhere and without limit. There was not an expense that she did not pay and still she did not give as much as the common people.³⁶

Here, the *Comprehensive Mirror* tells us that although the empress dowager spent untold riches in support of the Buddhist tradition, her populace spent more. In such a way do we see her own alignment with the Buddhist followers in her city. As a political figure, she spent like them and established herself as the single largest donor and patron.

Not only did the empress dowager build pagodas but she was also sympathetic to Buddhist causes in general. Two notable examples of her sympathy toward Buddhist causes can be found in the *Book of the Wei*. In the first instance, during her reign, a child was born in the countryside and was propped up as the aforementioned messianic Prince Moonlight to inspire political rebellion. Even though this child was a direct threat to the sovereignty of the ruler, the empress dowager did not give him the death penalty, and instead argued that the boy was a victim of those around him and did not identify himself as Prince Moonlight even if others did.³⁷ Similarly, the *Book of the Wei* records that the empress dowager personally

patronized a magic-wielding Buddhist monk who claimed that he could heal the sick.³⁸ She did so contrary to the wishes of her courtiers and in a movement away from the Northern Wei court's practice of controlling and policing such magic makers before they had the opportunity to sow discord among the populace.

The *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* retains a telling anecdote that expresses the delicate situation that the empress dowager found herself in with respect to the Buddhism of her court and the Buddhism of her polity, and that also shows whose side she may have been on.³⁹ The anecdote relates that one of her own minor courtiers spoke harshly against Buddhism, arguing that a teaching that causes one to stop having children constitutes the worst sort of crime against filiality and is nothing other than a "teaching of ghosts" (*guijiao*). This criticism of Buddhism is said to have been reported to the empress dowager by one of her monastic superintendents, who argued that this labeling of Buddhism as a "teaching of ghosts" constituted a slander of Śākyamuni Buddha. As a result, the empress dowager then questioned her courtier on his meaning. In response, the courtier artfully explained how he had not meant any slander. He argued that since "heaven is called spirit, earth is called gods, and humans are called ghosts," and that since Śākyamuni Buddha went out into the world of humans, he is therefore called a ghost. He also cites the classical Confucian text, the *Book of Ritual*, to argue that in the case of the ancient sacrifices to heaven, the ritual was organized such that "on the bright side, there is ritual and music; on the dark side there is ghosts and spirits."⁴⁰ He then uses this logic to explain that Śākyamuni's teaching is "dark" because it is directed to humans, who are ghosts, in contrast to the Confucian worship of heaven and the ancestors, which is "bright," but that the two traditions are two sides of a complementarity. At the end of the debate, the empress dowager fined her own courtier one *liang* of gold, thereby siding with her monastic superintendent in his opinion that this was slander. This story highlights the religious tensions in the empress dowager's court while also showing that she was the arbiter of religious truth in her time. Notably, the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* goes on to say that even though the empress dowager thought that her own courtier's words were fair, she could not disagree with her monastic superintendent. I read this interpretation of the events through the optic of a later Confucian discourse that wants to side with the Confucians at court during this time of turmoil, even if the empress dowager herself was more aligned with Buddhism—a tradition that she spared no expense in espousing as her own.

What kind of Buddhism was the empress dowager aligned with? Why did she build so many pagodas in her glimmering capital and why did she entertain questionable Buddhist elements in her populace? I want to argue that the answer to these questions is more historically murky than is the easy answer of political expediency. Although we have certainly seen how the empress dowager benefitted politically from her association with Buddhist monastics, texts, and ideas, I also think we should consider how the empress dowager saw herself in relation to the

Buddhist tradition. In other words, did she practice Buddhism herself? And, if so, what variety of Buddhism was it?

The empress dowager had a unique relationship with the Buddhism of the people in her polity because her own Buddhism was much like the Buddhism of her people—perhaps she was just like them. Perhaps the empress dowager herself had a religious practice that carried the flavor of the localized forms of Buddhist practice seen throughout the empire that were so often at odds with the Buddhism of the court. Brought to the central court in Luoyang from a region near the edge of the empire that was associated with the Lushui Xiongnu-led Gaiwu Rebellion, the empress dowager hailed from a family of known Buddhist patrons from the local gentry. She is said to have been the favorite of her aunt, the famous nun Sengzhi, who had her appointed to court on account of her precociousness. Once at court, she was quickly promoted to high-ranking concubinage by Emperor Xuanwu, who was himself known to have a great interest in Buddhist texts and ideas. Perhaps he was interested in her because she came to Luoyang deeply familiar with the Buddhist practice of her region, just as his own private Buddhist teacher, the aunt-nun Sengzhi, had been. If the empress dowager did indeed faithfully practice a form of Buddhism brought to the court and capital by families like hers who hailed from the western, Buddhist, and conceivably Xiongnu regions of the old Han territories, it might also stand to reason that the empress dowager was herself faithful to the religion. Her expenditures on Buddhist building projects may have seemed to her an imperial investment in the economy of merit exchange that she participated in, just as did countless thousands of others around the empire and in her capital city. If we accept the idea that the empress dowager practiced her faith in public and did so by behaving much like the people in her capital who funded Buddhist spaces, persons, art, and architecture, then we can see the empress dowager less as a politically expedient usurper who carelessly supported unstable Buddhist elements that challenged the court and more as a Buddhist ruler of a Buddhist population that practiced her tradition in a similar fashion to that of the people from her city and polity. Adding this consideration of the empress dowager's personal faith to our understanding of why she was such a prolific Buddhist patron helps us to make sense of the historical situation, for it is the case that Buddhism—as a political force—was not powerful enough to save her from the economically driven, militarized collapse of her dynasty.

BUDDHISM AGAINST BUDDHISM

Buddhist rebellions that constantly erupted in the Northern Wei—and that perhaps resonated with the empress dowager's own Buddhism—were similar in political orientation to the imperial Buddhism of the Northern Wei court. Both forms of Buddhist practice and ideology held the millenarian belief in the imminent descent of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, a mainstream idea in the Buddhism of the

period that provided the rationale for both the legitimation of imperial authority as well as the challenge to that very authority.⁴¹ Similarly, in the previous chapter of this book we have seen how Maitreya worship was behind imperial support for the Northern Wei emperors Xuanwu and Xiaoming. As I argued in the previous chapter, such an ideology also explained why the empress dowager placed her granddaughter on the throne. Yet, just as many political groups experimented with millenarian monarchy, some members of the imperial court who worked in the service of this type of Buddhist practice did not always agree with it. Scared of the power of Buddhist belief to create challenges to their own power, the Buddhists of the court spoke against the Buddhism of the people. As we will see here, the empress dowager's own courtiers openly criticized her for patronizing a form of Buddhism that made them nervous.

To understand why they were so nervous, we should start by acknowledging just how fast Buddhism was growing in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. According to Tang Yongtong, before the move of the capital to Luoyang, there were approximately one hundred monasteries in the old capital of Pingcheng, which housed some two thousand monastic residents. There were also 6,476 monasteries in the lands under control of the Northern Wei, which housed some 77,258 monastic residents. However, by the reign of the empress dowager, these already substantial numbers had swelled to such a degree that Luoyang itself had 1,376 monasteries, with the empire in general housing approximately thirty thousand monasteries. Altogether, there were more than two million members of the monastic community accounted for.⁴² The *Book of the Wei* provides corroborating evidence for the popularity of extra-imperial Buddhist building projects in Luoyang in the form of a lengthy memorial presented to Empress Dowager Ling by Yuan Cheng,⁴³ a powerful member of the Taghbach royal elite who accompanied the move of the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang. He made his memorial to her soon before his death in the year 519. Instead of celebrating the lavish wealth and prosperity of Buddhist spaces in the capital, Yuan Cheng presented an alternate description of the Buddhist situation in the city, characterizing it as corrupt, defiled, and potentially dangerous. In part, his memorial criticizes the unrestrained building projects of the commoners, characterizing them as an inappropriate way of practicing their religion.⁴⁴

Delicate and subtle are the marks of learning: someone of shallow discernment will not recognize them; spacious and still is the gate to [Buddhist] mysteries: how could a few short sentences ever get to the bottom of them? Nonetheless, a pure life away from the dust [of the ordinary world], that is what the adepts of the Way make their priority; the causes for [the accumulation of] merit being as obscure as they are profound, they ought not to set store by a retirement in the midst of splendour. If they are capable of sincere belief, even children piling up sand can surpass [the merit gained by building] a ritual space; even the frugal spread of [the Buddha's patron] Chuntuo is worth presenting [to the Buddha attaining nirvāṇa]

between the twin [*śāla*] trees. Why should we allow their depredations, with which they finance the construction of [Buddhist as well as Taoist] temples? Such [behaviour] may be a case of “many people trusting to luck,” but it does not serve the well-being of the State.⁴⁵

Perhaps because Empress Dowager Ling was deeply involved in the Buddhist tradition, the logic of Cheng’s argument is entirely Buddhist: If enlightenment is profound and obscure, how can it be quantified financially through merit donation? To make his case, Prince Cheng relies on Buddhist precedent and cites the story of King Aśoka’s past-life childhood gift of piled sand to Śākyamuni Buddha. Cheng argues that if Aśoka was able to reap the great karmic reward of rebirth as a king from this humble gift of dirt, then it makes no sense that the monks of his day expect large donations of wealth from the struggling populace in order to facilitate the merit exchange. Similarly, Cheng argues that if Cunda (Ch. Chuntuo), the devotee who provided Śākyamuni Buddha with his last meal that ultimately killed him, still reaped karmic reward, then how could it be that the populace needed to bankrupt themselves and bring instability to the empire in order to gain their share of Buddhist “luck”?

After making his Buddhist arguments, Cheng’s memorial states that the monks of his time had become wealthy landowners because the populace wanted their share of Buddhist “luck” and that such a situation was spelling disaster for the empire. He continues:

And yet Saṃgha temples of today are everywhere. Whether they stand packed one next to the other in the city centre, or whether linked in rows they spill over into butchers’ stalls and wineshops, or again whether three or five young monks join together to form a temple of their own, the chanting of hymns and the cries of the butchers resound in chorus up the eaves; [Buddha] statues and *stūpas* stand wreathed around by the rank smell of meat, spirituality is drowned amid lustful craving, genuine and bogus live jumbled together and come and go in perfect riot. But by long usage none of the authorities finds fault with this, and they don’t bother that the Saṃgha Bureau acts contrary to the Ordinance. Is it not a scandal, though, how true practice [of the Buddhist precepts] is being polluted, how observant monks are being defiled, how [fragrant] orchid and [noisome] reeds are put in the same vessel?⁴⁶

The picture painted here is of a Luoyang so full of monasteries and *stūpas*—funded by the populace and not the government—that the line of demarcation between sacred and profane could no longer be drawn. Prince Cheng describes Buddhist monks inheriting the karmic gift from the populace as “the dregs of Buddhism, the ‘rats under the altar’ at the heart of the Doctrine, whom their own internal precepts do not condone and who—by our royal canons—we ought to expel” and who “encroach on the small people and rob them, occupying [their] fields and homes on a large scale.”⁴⁷

Prince Cheng's memorial went on to implore the empress dowager to enforce more vigorously the court's already established laws for governing the building of new monasteries and the ordination of new monastic candidates, he argued that the Buddhism of their time was not like it was in the time of her predecessors. Buddhism, Prince Cheng argued, flourished far more during the empress dowager's reign than it did in Xiaowen's time, just as it was far more corrupt than it was in Xuanwu's. Prince Cheng argued that the monastic members of Empress Dowager Ling's polity required the heavy hand of government lest they rise to rebellion like they did before under the monk Faxiu.⁴⁸ Such government intervention, Prince Cheng insisted, should have included the destruction of illegal monasteries and images, the forced resettlement of monasteries to the countryside, and the forced amalgamation of small monasteries into larger ones of at least fifty monastic members.⁴⁹ In his memorial, Prince Cheng argued that such policies would work to reestablish order in Luoyang and set right what he saw as a deplorable reality on the streets of the city: the ownership of land and buildings by the monastic community and the attendant intermixing of sacred and profane such that buddha images were cloaked in the stench of the meat market and the common people were the victims of greedy and corrupt Buddhist monks.

Although Prince Cheng's memorial is said to have been approved by the empress dowager's court, Wei Shou states that it did no good because it was not enforced. Nearing the end of his record of the Buddhist tradition in his "Treatise on Buddhism and Daoism" in the *Book of the Wei*, Wei Shou states that wealthy courtiers were increasingly turning their homes into Buddhist monasteries and temples in the latter stages of the dynasty with no intervention by the government, one consequence of which was that wealthy individuals were being ordained as monks in order to avoid conscription to the army. Although Wei Shou states in his text that Empress Dowager Ling issued a number of commands aimed at controlling the spread of Buddhism among her polity and the prevalence of false, tax-evading monks,⁵⁰ he also laments that the empress dowager did not enforce her commands. Immediately following his record of the empress dowager's commands in his text, Wei Shou states that "At the time, the laws and prohibitions were lax and loose and it proved impossible to rectify and adjust them."⁵¹ For Wei Shou, this was, at least "for men of judgement, reason indeed to sigh in desperation."⁵²

As further recorded by Wei Shou, the empress dowager was warned about the possibility of a Buddhist rebellion by her own courtiers. Reiterating the above-stated warning of the potential dangers of Buddhism and its practitioners, which likened them to the infamous revolt of the Yellow Turbans, Yuan Yi directly compares Empress Dowager Ling to the Han ruler who is blamed for the Yellow Turban uprising. This story is found in Yuan Yi's own biography in the *Book of the Wei*, which states that:

There was a śramaṇa named Huilian who spoke spells over people's drinking water and was able to cure their illness. Of the sick who went to him, there were a thousand

a day. The empress dowager commanded that he be given clothing and food and because the power of his service was particularly favorable, he was sent to the south side of the west of the city to administer the healing of the commoners.

[Yuan] Yi brought a memorial of admonition: The ministers hear that the law is submerged [by] bewildering schemes that ritual has been cut off [by] licentious taboos. In all cases, therefore the ruler [must] remain orthodox and dispel heterodoxy! In ancient times at the end of the Han, there was one called Zhang Jue [d. 184] who used such arts to bewilder his contemporaries. In considering these actions against those of today, they are no different. On account [of them] [Zhang] was able to deceive and seduce the people and bring about the disasters of the Yellow Turbans wherein all the world was mud and ashes⁵³ for a period of ten years on account of following [Zhang] Jue. In the past and as in now, evil needs to be walled up so that it cannot ascend to the bright hall, squander the five benefits and bring a death sentence to the young.”⁵⁴

In his memorial presented in response to the empress dowager's patronage of a magic-making Buddhist monk, Yuan Yi links the empress dowager directly to the emperor who ruled the Eastern Han at the time of the Yellow Turban revolt: that emperor is the only other emperor in all of Chinese history to also have the posthumous name of “Ling”—that is, Han Emperor Ling (r. 168–89), who also ruled from Luoyang.⁵⁵ Yuan Yi compares the empress dowager to Han Emperor Ling by suggesting that her sympathy for a particular magic-wielding monk would lead to the downfall of her kingdom in the same way as did the Han Emperor's sympathy for Zhang Jue, the leader of the Yellow Turbans.⁵⁶

Wei Shou's desperate sighs over the state of Buddhism in the late Northern Wei that he says are shared with other “men of judgement” or, in other words, Ru scholars in the service of the court, center on the Zhengguan reign of Emperor Xiaoming, the son of the empress dowager behind whom she was ruling. The five years of this reign coincide with the aforementioned coup d'état, when Yuan Cha was regent behind the emperor and Empress Dowager Ling was removed from power. After 525, the empress dowager reestablished her regency but the empire continued its decline into chaos and disorder until the eventual murder of Emperor Xiaoming in 528 and the supposedly retaliatory murder of the empress dowager a few months later. This period of murderous dynastic transition was a symptom of a larger disease: the collapse of the dynasty's northern garrisons, many of which were economically, culturally, and politically impoverished because the court had moved the capital to Luoyang, which saw the relocation of their soldiers to the interior.⁵⁷ This, in turn, was disastrous for the stability of the empire, whose rulers had decided to exhaust their resources on building a new capital while impoverishing their own military. As such, internecine war brought to the gates of an unfortified Luoyang in the year 528 induced the final collapse of the empire in the year 534. According to Wei Shou, this time of increasing violence saw commoners taking refuge in Buddhist monasteries instead of heading to the front lines to fight

for the empire. Implicitly, the empress dowager is behind this critique because the collapse of the dynastic house is laid at her feet and because, as we saw above, she is criticized in the *Book of the Wei* for failing to enact limits on how many Buddhist monasteries could be built and on how many persons were permitted to populate them as monks and nuns.

Wei Shou depicts the empress dowager as a person who helped to destroy the purity of the Buddhist faith by encouraging masses of unfaithful and illegitimate monastics to fill the monasteries and taint the reputation of the buddha. This interpretation of the empress dowager's support of Buddhism during her reign is telling regarding Wei Shou's own predicament with respect to Buddhism. Although it has been argued that Wei Shou was himself a Buddhist because his childhood name was "Buddha Helper" (*fozhu*),⁵⁸ he was also a literatus and a courtier. If he ascribed to the Buddhist faith at all,⁵⁹ the version of Buddhism he paid homage to was likely not of the same variety that the empress dowager encouraged, which was a Buddhism of the masses that left policymakers afraid of its power and critical of what they saw as its failings and indulgences. Wei Shou's insider critique of the empress dowager's Buddhism was also influenced by the role that he played at the court of the Northern Qi, whose rulers were also notable patrons of Buddhist art and institution. Therefore, in crafting his political critique of the empress dowager, Wei Shou needed to be careful not to criticize Buddhism, per se. He needed only to criticize the empress dowager and her support of a Buddhist tradition that he characterized as prone to violence and uprising and one that defiled the buddhas and their teachings through its connection to urban life, rebellion, and avoidance of conscription to the army. This criticism comes not only from the writings of Wei Shou but through his record of memorials brought to her in which she is directly compared to Han Emperor Ling and in which the Buddhism she patronized is compared to the revolt of the Yellow Turbans.

These Buddhism-contra-Buddhism arguments that we see in the *Book of the Wei* are important because they have longevity across the medieval world and point to a larger tension that develops between what we might call Ru Buddhism—or the Buddhism of the literate elite—and the Buddhism of lay followers. Later historiographical texts of the Ru tradition under different dynasties largely reiterate the words of the *Book of the Wei* in their descriptions of Buddhism in Luoyang in the sixth century before its collapse. For example, the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government* contains an abbreviated but still lengthy version of Prince Cheng's memorial to the empress dowager where he argues that she has let Buddhism become totally defiled by refusing to police the Buddhist community and enforce the boundaries between what he considered to be sacred and profane.⁶⁰

Such a critique of the empress dowager was not only adopted by Sima Guang in his *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, but also by later Buddhist historiographers as well. For example, in the Tang era compilation, *The Expanded Collection for the Proclamation and Clarification of Buddhism* (Guang hongming

ji), the eminent monk Daoxuan (596–667) records both the story of the empress dowager's funding of the Eternal Peace Monastery and the memorial against her support of such funding quoted in the above selection from the *Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*, which is derived from the *Book of the Wei*. Notably, Daoxuan does not challenge the characterization of the Buddhist monks of the empress dowager's time as "the Dregs of the Śākya Clan." Instead, he provides additional commentary on why they were known as such. Citing the memorial of Yuan Yi, Daoxuan reiterates that these "dregs of the Śākya Clan and altar rats of the gate of the teaching did not abide by their own internal laws and considered it appropriate to discard imperial rules."⁶¹ He further explains that when the Northern Wei fell into terminal violence that, "those courtiers who had died further cast their families into the monastery."⁶² Daoxuan's account of the state of Buddhism in the late Northern Wei is clearly based on Wei Shou's analysis from the *Book of the Wei*. What we see, then, is that Wei Shou's criticisms of the empress dowager and her practice of Buddhism were known among elite Buddhist monastics in the Tang. This represents both a marked and a rapid shift within the development of elite forms of Buddhist monasticism in China that saw the incorporation of a Ru worldview into the leadership of the Buddhist monastic community.

Furthermore, in another Tang era historiographical account of the tradition of Buddhism, the *North Mountain Record* (Beishan lü), the elite monk Shenqing (d. 820) describes the Buddhism of the empress dowager at length. Arguing that the destruction of her Eternal Peace Monastery and pagoda by Erzhu Rong was deserved because its benefactor stood as an affront against heaven and empire as a female ruler, he explains that:

Northern Wei Empress Dowager Ling commissioned a stūpa for which she exhausted the resources of millions on millions. Its peak towered like a mountain, appearing to create and transform. People truly cherished it; Heaven, it seems, rejected it. Therefore, the court underwent catastrophe.

With smoke and scarlet flames on all nine stories, steam and ash enveloped it completely. Was this not a metaphor for how [she] had gone against the will of Heaven? The masters said, "Now, in order to be virtuous, things must accord with their limits. To forget one's limits is evil. Acting on behalf of virtue is the criterion for permanence; acting on behalf of evil is the criterion for loss." Madame Hu is evil! This is therefore a transgression of harmony. How can it be that the banality of gods and ghosts has surpassed the power of men?⁶³

In his *Record*, Shenqing tells us that the empress dowager transgressed the natural order of things and, as such, that her pagoda burned to the ground as a result of heaven's retribution and divine reordering. The text continues by explaining what the precise transgressions of the empress dowager were. Shenqing criticizes the empress dowager's extravagances by relating the story of the two Zhang brothers of the later Zhao (319–50), who each erected a fantastic pagoda. Instead

of being praised, their pagodas earned the scorn of the aforementioned great northern patriarch, Fotucheng, whom Shenqing records admonished the brothers as follows:

Buddhist works abide in clear purity and are without desire; compassion and pity should be taken as their core. Almsgivers expound and uphold this great law. [By contrast,] greedy misers never stop. They will hunt without limit and accumulate things without end. In fair measure, they receive punishment in this world. How can they have the hope of meritorious retribution?⁶⁴

Implicit in Shenqing's use of Fotucheng's remembered chastisement of the Zhang brothers who built resplendent stūpas while transgressing basic Buddhist teachings on desirelessness and renunciation is a critique of the empress dowager who had done the same. The empress dowager's huge expenditure of resources on the building of the Eternal Peace Monastery was, according to Shenqing, a crime against both heaven and buddha. This sentiment furthermore agrees with a discussion of the monastery in the *Book of the Zhou* (Zhou shu), which records that:

At the time when Empress Dowager Ling held court, she reduced the salaries of her court servants by ten percent and built the Eternal Peace Monastery and commanded outstanding ceremony for it.⁶⁵

Further in his treatment of the empress dowager and her transgressions, Shenqing relays a gendered criticism of the empress dowager's rule and of the reasons heaven felt it necessary to intervene. Referencing the passage on hens from the *Book of Documents* cited in chapter 1, Shenqing argues that the empress dowager's position as a female ruler was a transgression against heaven and that it therefore deserved the retribution it received. In providing more context for heaven's righteous action in destroying the empress dowager's Eternal Peace Monastery, Shenqing explains that:

Therefore, when considering those who are good, we must use the good to arrive at the good and we cannot use the not-good to arrive at the good. The *Book of Documents* says: "Hens are not for the dawn. In the case of a dawn hen, this is nothing other than the dissolution of the family." How reckless that Empress Hu has subverted the Yuan family!⁶⁶

What we see in these examples of Tang era Buddhist historiographical writing is that elite Buddhist authors from the Tang were thinking about their tradition through the *Book of the Wei*. However, even though he was writing about Empress Dowager Ling, Shenqing, at least, was not necessarily thinking about the Northern Wei when he crafted his criticism. What is more likely is that he was thinking about his own society in the Tang. The Tang empire, of course, saw the rise of the one and only woman to directly rule China under the title

of emperor, or *di*. That woman, Wu Zetian, or Emperor Wu Zhao, has been discussed many times in this book because it is a well-established fact that she, too, legitimated her reign through the use of both Buddhist and Han-dynastic symbols of monarchy. One of her most famous projects was the construction of her own majestic complex of buildings in Luoyang that contained the towering bright hall (*mingtang*). A structure of this same name was an important part of the state ritual palladium in the Han empire; therefore, Emperor Wu Zhao's construction of it placed her at the center of traditional Han notions of monarchy as it was the architectural center of her religio-political landscape. However, much of the symbolism employed on the decoration of the bright hall was Buddhist in nature; the structure was therefore also deeply interwoven into her own project of state Buddhism.⁶⁷ Like Empress Dowager Ling, Emperor Wu Zhao is blamed for bankrupting her populace to fund such a large-scale and expensive project.⁶⁸ Even more like Empress Dowager Ling, Emperor Wu Zhao's state palladium with the bright hall was ill-fated: First destroyed by wind, it was rebuilt only to be destroyed by fire, all within a span of five years.⁶⁹ As such, we might be best served by reading Shenqing's detailed and gendered criticism of the empress dowager's pagoda at the Eternal Peace Monastery as a critique of Emperor Wu Zhao. The descriptions of the fires that struck the hearts of their imperial and Buddhist building projects became, in the Tang, a sort of Buddhist trope by which to criticize the rule of a female regent.

Both Empress Dowager Ling and Emperor Wu Zhao participated in modalities of statecraft that we can call Confucian; however, they did so as Buddhists. For Empress Dowager Ling, it is clear that although she was said to be of Han ethnicity and although she advocated the usage Confucian virtues of filial piety that were symbolically rooted in the Han empire, she was not a Ru scholar. For our purposes, we can think about her practice of both Buddhism and Confucianism distinctly not from the perspective of the elite male class of authors and text masters known as the Ru. Although she worked with Ru scholars at court, she was not one of them; her cultural location as both peripheral and female prevented her from being so. In this chapter, I hope to have shown that her Buddhism was also not the same Buddhism as patronized by the Ru. Even though she participated in a world and court structured along Confucian lines, her practice of Buddhism allowed her to push those lines and even transgress them. She was aided in this task by the public cultural lives of Serbi women in Luoyang whose own gender performance included taking on tasks normally demarcated as male in Confucian culture. This distinctly non-Ru, non-Han, and Buddho-Confucian world that the empress dowager was located in is not something discussed by Ru scholars and is therefore not seen in either Confucian or Buddhist historiographical writings throughout the medieval period. I do not believe that this kind of writing about the empress dowager's cultural world and practice of Buddhism was intentionally done; rather, I think that her world was a world that the Ru scholars of her

time and later simply did not participate in, and it was one that they struggled to adequately write about.

THE NAME THAT CAPTURED A REIGN

The ambiguity that surrounds the empress dowager and her cultural practice that is seen in the above discussion of her Buddhism is emblemized by her name “ling.” *Ling* is a tricky word to translate into English. Graphically, the character 靈 is composed of a shaman (巫), three mouths (口), and rain (雨). We might therefore interpret the basic meaning of the word as “shaman praying for rain.” Metaphorically, however, the word is interpreted to signify the supernormal efficacy of particular individuals, forces, and objects in the material world that inspire impact and effect from the spiritual world. In English translation, *ling* is often rendered as “numinous”; however, its usage in medieval Literary Chinese is more expansive, and it can refer to ghosts or spirits or to the magical or spiritual properties associated with material things or natural elements. When applied to a person, the word might be understood as describing a supernormal or an extraordinary element in their personality. Here, we will attempt to understand the word *ling* in the context of sixth-century Luoyang, and we will do so in order to understand more about how the empress dowager was remembered by those who knew her.⁷⁰

In Buddhist usage during the times in which she lived, the word *ling* would have signified a desirable spiritual association or benevolent supernormal efficacy. For example, the *Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang* notes the existence of the Numinous Response Monastery (Lingying si) and the Numinous Awakening Monastery (Lingjue si). In a more straightforward connection to imperial life, the aforementioned stele from the year 499 on the Radiant Blessings Monastery that refers to Empress Dowager Wenming and Emperor Xiaowen as the “Two Sages” also states that the “numinous monastery” was built for the veneration of the emperor.⁷¹ Read as such, then, the *ling* in the empress dowager’s posthumous name strongly associates her with the Buddhist religion practiced in Luoyang and it retains a positive connotation of divine inspiration and efficacy.

Despite the positive Buddhist associations of the word *ling* in the empress dowager’s time, another interpretation of the name also exists. This interpretation is negative in tone and linked with the Confucian history of imperial naming. As mentioned above, the only other regent in Chinese history to hold the posthumous name of “Ling” is the aforementioned Han Emperor Ling. Like the empress dowager, the Han emperor also saw the destruction and collapse of his empire. In both cases, the rulers are said to have shown problematic favoritism and to have ignored unstable elements in their polities.⁷² They were also both criticized by their courtiers for their excessive expenditures that were said to bankrupt the populace.⁷³ For the Han emperor, this was particularly disastrous because he ruled over the peasant uprising of the Yellow Turbans that was partly responsible for the

fall of the Han, which is often remembered as China's greatest empire. Unlike in the case of the Northern Wei empress dowager, in the case of the Han emperor, historical sources give us clear guidance for how to interpret his posthumous name. His biography in the *Book of the Later Han* directly says that he was under the influence of dishonorable court servants and therefore ignored his duties in favor of wine, women, and merriment.⁷⁴ For this reason, the biography tells us, "did Han Emperor Ling become *ling*."⁷⁵ Although there are no other regents who share the posthumous name "Ling," there is one official from the Northern Wei who was posthumously called "Ling." In this case, the name is articulated in the exact same way as the idea of "becoming Ling" as expressed in the biography of Han Emperor Ling above.⁷⁶ This official, Gao You (d. 499), has a biography in the *Book of the Wei*,⁷⁷ which clearly states what *ling* means and why the official was called by this name. Although Gao You had been an effective policymaker early on in his career, he came under the influence of Liu Chang (436–97), the ninth son of Emperor Wen (r. 424–53) of the Liu Song, whom Northern Wei Emperor Xiaowen had granted the title of "King of Song" (*songwang*) after the collapse of the Liu Song. Liu Chang bestowed riches and concubines on Gao You, which evidently swayed the latter from his duties. Upon Liu Chang's death, Gao You was promoted to the office of director of the imperial clan (*zongzheng*); however, in this position he ignored the commands of the central court. He was then dismissed from his post, exiled for three years, and demoted to his original rank. At his death in 499, Emperor Xiaowen made an edict according to which, "Not taking orders from one's superiors is called '*ling*,' he shall posthumously be called 'Ling.'"⁷⁸ In such a case, then, *ling* can designate a person who is unrestrained by established hierarchy and therefore insubordinate. Given the otherworldly associations of the term, such insubordination could be understood as having being coerced by unknown—even supernatural—causes.

As we have seen, the empress dowager's courtiers disagreed with her unrestrained support for popular Buddhism and unfavorably compared her to Han Emperor Ling, who was besieged by the uprising of the Yellow Turbans. At the same time, the name "Ling" seemed to be one that the empress dowager endorsed through her patronage of the Monastery of the Two Women at the site of the Numinous Platform. As a Buddhist name, "Ling" would have carried a beneficent valency. To further investigate how such an ambivalent name was heard and received in the empress dowager's time, it is useful to think about who it was precisely that gave the name to her. The empress dowager's biography states that her name was given under the reign of the last of the puppet emperors of the Northern Wei, Emperor Xiaowu. Xiaowu's own biography in the *Book of the Wei* states that he granted her the posthumous name and that he also saw that her remains were buried after almost four years in an undisclosed location said to be the Monastery of the Two Lings.⁷⁹ As we will see, Emperor Xiaowu inherited a mixed dynastic legacy that befits the granting of the ambiguous name of "Ling" on the Empress Dowager.

A puppet emperor and the last of the dynasty, Emperor Xiaowu was a legitimate Taghbach heir. Otherwise known as Yuan Xiu (510–35), he was a grandson of Emperor Xiaowen and the nephew of Emperor Xuanwu. He was born in the same year as Emperor Xiaoming, the empress dowager's son and coruler. Emperor Xiaowu is even less well loved than the empress dowager in the *Book of the Wei*, so much so that he is consistently referred to by the pejorative expression, “the Emperor Who Fleed” (*chudi*). The use of this pejorative is owing to the fact that although Xiaowu was originally propped up by Gao Huan and had married one of Gao Huan's daughters, he eventually broke free from Gao Huan and fled the capital to attempt to establish the Western Wei. Even though he broke free from Gao Huan, however, he was murdered by his collaborators in the process. Gao Huan, as we have seen, went on to establish the Eastern Wei and his son was the first emperor of the Northern Qi, under whose auspices the *Book of the Wei* was written. Xiaowu's biography in the *Book of the Wei* tells of a man who loved war, murdered any other claimants to the Northern Wei throne, and was disloyal to his supporter, Gao Huan. Gao Huan, of course, was the winner to emerge from the collapse of the Northern Wei, and the *Book of the Wei* narrates the fall of the empire from the perspective of the winners who established the Northern Qi—namely, his family. This is why Emperor Xiaowu is referred to as “the Emperor Who Fleed.”

Before he fled, the emperor reigned with the backing of Gao Huan. His accession came on the heels of a bloody five-year internecine war, which saw Luoyang invaded by a collective force that included the Erzhu clan and the Gao clan, the empress dowager murdered by Erzhu Rong, the subsequent establishment of two successive puppet emperors supported by the Erzhu faction, the ultimate murder of Erzhu Rong by Emperor Xiaozhuang, the rise of the Gao Clan, and Gao Huan's support for Emperor Xiaowu's accession. As such, by the time of Xiaowu, although the empress dowager had been the enemy of the Erzhus, the Erzhus were now the enemy of the Gaos. Did it stand to reason, therefore, that the enemy of the enemy was the friend? In Xiaowu's accession edict, we see both explicit and implicit support for the empress dowager in the context of the slaughter of the Taghbach line by the Erzhu faction. Xiaowu's accession edict begins with a summary of the decline of the ruling house, saying:

Prosperity and decline have been passed down; the rise and the fall are mutually constitutive. The dark sky hides nothing and the clever numen [*ling*] is unable to command. The line of the great Wei has dried up. Virtue has trickled away from the world and the nine garments [of rulership] are bound up in prison, putting aside the light of the three luminaries [of the sun, moon, and stars]. Moreover, Heaven's calamities have befallen and set in motion much hardship. Ritual and music have collapsed and decrees and regulations have fallen by the wayside. The illustrious Zhou ancestors have been cut off [from us] because of armed bandits; the venerable imperial shrine has become thick straw. The barbarians of the Jie seized the

opportunity and were reckless in their dark tyranny, killing the sovereign and harming the princes and gutting the territory inside the seas. Competing with [each other] in their intentions to bite and swallow, the heart of their intoxication and gluttony cannot be understood. There has never been anything like this ever [recorded] in scripts and writings!⁸⁰

From these opening words of his accession edict, it is evident that Emperor Xiaowu and Gao Huan behind him positioned themselves at what they hoped would be a turning point in Northern Wei history. The edict argues that there had never been recorded such a violent pillage as that of the “dark tyranny” of the barbarians of Jie. The barbarians of Jie are here a reference to the Erzhu. The Jie are one of the non-Han groups commonly included in the so-called “Five Barbarian” groups in Han Chinese writings, and the Erzhu arguably hail from their ethnicity or past political alliances, or both.⁸¹ In the beginning of his edict, therefore, we see Emperor Xiaowu’s attempt to both blame the Erzhu for the destruction of the Northern Wei line and position himself as a legitimate, Yuan-family heir capable of renewing it. Most notably, in this depiction of the state of the rule of the empire we see multiple references to the empress dowager. The opening sentence of the edict reads: “The dark sky hides nothing and the clever numen [*ling*] is unable to command.” The use of the word *numen* in this sentence implies a reference to the empress dowager, who was herself given the name “Ling” by this same government. Similarly, the edict laments the loss of rule in terms of the loss of Han-dynastic modalities of imperial legitimation. Given that the empress dowager was the only Northern Wei ruler of Han descent, and given that she emphasized this descent by including Han era gods and structures in the commemoration of her own deceased family members at both the Huoshao grotto and the Monastery of the Two Women at the Numinous Platform, we can read the edict as a statement that the rule of the empress dowager had been cut off by the rebellion of the Erzhu, who had pillaged the empire and harmed the people with an intensity never before seen. Furthermore, the usage of “dark sky” above might also refer to the Erzhu, with the explanation being that the Erzhu can no longer hide and that their crimes are now brought under scrutiny and have been avenged. In this way, then, the reference to the empress dowager is again positive. As a ruler of spiritual efficacy associated with Han dynastic modalities of rule and reign located specifically at the numinous platform, she was seen in a sympathetic light by those who gave her the name, even if this sympathy was simply because of their shared enemies, and even if those who gave her the name also had a hand in her death.

The empress dowager and her posthumous name both stand out in history for their rarity. If we contrast Empress Dowager Ling’s posthumous name with that of the other infamous ruling woman from the Northern Wei, Empress Dowager Wenming, the strangeness of Empress Dowager Ling’s name becomes even more clear. Empress Dowager Wenming’s posthumous name means “Civilized and

Illuminated” and it matches that of her partner, Emperor Wencheng, “Civilized and Accomplished.” Although she was a powerful empress dowager, Wenming enacted her regency government as normally conceived of in an imperial system of patriarchal descent—indirectly and in a manner that was dependent on the regent. Her posthumous name therefore suggests her partnership with Emperor Wencheng and her generally positive posthumous reputation, even though she was a woman who effectively seized power by forcing the emperor into retirement. What is strikingly different between the two women is how they vested their power: Wenming remained behind the scenes and her posthumous name suggests a maintenance in the gendered order of rulership; Ling, on the other hand, ruled directly and her posthumous name is not connected to that of any male rulers. This lack of a male reference in her posthumous name makes her name even more meaningful because it indicates her independent rule.

In sum, the empress dowager’s posthumous name, “Ling,” is a remarkably apt summation of her reign. As a unique name not connected to names of men in the imperial line, it signals her difference as an independent female ruler. As a religious name denoting supernormal efficacy that was both associated with Han court’s imperial legitimation and popular in the Buddhist worlds of Luoyang, “Ling” was a name invoked by the empress dowager herself, in her lifetime. Yet, as a double entendre, “Ling” also resonated with her courtier’s fears that she had been dangerously subverted by Buddhist forces that they deemed unstable to the empire in a manner similar to the Yellow Turbans of the Han dynasty. Her name therefore also links her forever to the Han emperor whose name and whose numinous platform in Luoyang she shared. The divergent meanings invoked by the name “Ling” also help us to appreciate the very character of Northern Wei Luoyang under the rule of the empress dowager: diverse, energetic, unstable, and creative, the city that knew the empress dowager as their cakravartin was one of deep ambiguity and precarity but also one of excitement and, possibly, supernormal efficacy.

DESTRUCTION/REINVENTION

Thinking through the Northern Wei court’s various political spectacles in the latter half of the dynasty, Scott Pearce invokes Clifford Geertz’s theory of the theater state in order to make sense of some of the chaos and power plays that are attested to in historical sources documenting Luoyang politics. What I find particularly useful in this framing is Pearce’s insightful characterization of the fall of the empire under the empress dowager. Using the metaphor of theater, Pearce argues that the political spectacle so carefully orchestrated and leveraged by the empress dowager in her city failed to capture the sympathies of the armed men who came to her city gates and “who care[d] neither for the spectacle nor the principles of its organization.”⁸² Nonetheless, although she failed to convince the armed men from

the northern garrisons of her particular form of Buddhist kingship enacted in the public eye, her theater is one that we need to pay attention to because it was precisely this theater that Emperor Wu Zhao was more successful at in the implementation of her own accession and reign. With her active patronage of Buddhism as a crucial component of her political theater, Empress Dowager Ling showed herself both pious and generous and placed herself at the center of her vibrant Buddhist capital in order to gain the support of its people—an important undertaking for a female ruler. Such political theater, however, was a choice, and the choice did not always play out in her favor. By aligning herself with popular Buddhism, she alienated some of her own courtiers who, according to Wei Shou at least, wished that she would have enacted more stringent policing of the tradition to ensure control over Buddhists, and they came to compare her with the infamous Han emperor whose name she shares. Her courtiers were wrong in their estimation: it was not Buddhists who would overthrow the court. Instead, a collection of disenfranchised, largely non-Han groups from the impoverished northern garrisons murdered the empress dowager, proving that neither her bejeweled Buddhist capital nor her role as ritualist and dramaturge could outlast economic collapse.

The prophecy of the future birth of Maitreya says that he will arrive on this earth to usher in a time of great peace and prosperity. The late Northern Wei capital knew a handful of potential Maitreya rulers, and the rapid and dramatic construction of the jeweled capital city that they oversaw must have felt like the dawning of a new age. The new age never materialized: The city was burned, the Buddhist structures were destroyed, the court and its ruler were murdered, and the population was dispersed. The dream of a new buddha age proved fleeting and the world was shown to be impermanent, just as Buddhist teaching says that it is. Luoyang's history of rise and decline are an apt metaphor for the Buddhist idea of creation, which sees our world and all beings in it subject to death and rebirth because of the causal powers of ignorance, delusion, and greed. The city's cycles of destruction and rebuilding have long been decadent and illustrious and then dark and violent. With the story of the empress dowager that I have told throughout this book, we see the Northern Wei cycle completed in a mere forty years in which the city was built, prospered, destroyed, and abandoned. The empress dowager's attempt to establish herself and her granddaughter as Buddhist monarchs that might withstand the pending collapse of the dynastic line was unsuccessful and Luoyang fell, once again, to the destruction that it had seen with other dynastic fates, particularly with the fall of the Eastern Han. Like Empress Dowager Ling, Han Emperor Ling is considered the last independent ruler of his dynasty. For both rulers centered in Luoyang with its central avenue and numinous platform, their deaths brought about the final collapses of their weakened dynasties and thus threw Luoyang into decline.

In a Buddhist sense, the decline of Luoyang brought about by the deaths of the two rulers named "Ling" paved the way for the city's rebirth. After the fall of

the Eastern Han, Luoyang rose again in the Northern Wei when Empress Dowager Ling built her majestic Eternal Peace Monastery. And it rose again in the Tang when Wu Zhao built her bright hall and ruled her own dynasty with the gendered male title of di, or emperor. In this story, Buddhism has not provided salvation—nor was it meant to—but it has provided opportunity. With each rebuilding of the city, Buddhist structures, institutions, and ideas were rearticulated and revived. The opportunities that a Buddhist Luoyang in all its various cultural sources and tensions created were many, and they affected people's lives in myriad ways. With this book, my interest has been to draw out for analysis the affect that this tremendous city and all its cultural practices and opportunities had on the lives of elite, Buddhist women in the early medieval period, particularly during the sixth century. These opportunities were manifold: As administrators, nuns, politicians, regents, rulers, and maybe even monarchs, Buddhist women were at the core of Northern Wei Luoyang. The story of these new opportunities for women witnessed in the Northern Wei chronicles the radical reinvention of tradition in the sixth century just as it indexes the main social currents that allowed for such reinvention.