

From Scriptural to Familial: Textual Shifts of Zunsheng Dhāranī Tomb Pillars in Middle Period Northern Shanxi

WANG JINPING 王錦萍
National University of Singapore

Abstract: In Middle Period China, how did changes in inscriptional content and format affect people's perception of the imagined salvation powers of Zunsheng dhāranī pillars? While the existing scholarship focuses on Tang-dynasty pillars, which were commonly inscribed with a full set of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*, this article sheds light on Zunsheng tomb pillars in the post-Tang periods. It analyses how textual shift on the pillar surfaces indexed changing perception of the pillars' merit-making performance. Drawing on extant Zunsheng tomb pillars and published inscriptions from northern Shanxi and neighbouring communities, I argue that after the Tang, the scriptural texts that had been the essence of Zunsheng dhāranī pillars were displaced by familial texts on pillar surfaces, as local people inscribed increasingly lengthier familial records that extended from epitaphs of individuals up the conviction that the scriptural texts' material presence was necessary for the Zunsheng tomb pillars to contain efficacy. Instead, the imagined efficacy of a tomb pillar hinged on people's recognition of it as a Zunsheng pillar.

Keywords: *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*, tomb pillar, Middle Period China, Tang dynasty, Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan periods, genealogical writing, salvation powers

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.15239/hjbs.05.01.04>

Since its introduction into China in the late seventh century, the *Foding Zunsheng Tuoluoni Jing* 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經 (Skt. *Buddho-nīsavijayadhāraṇī Sūtra*; hereafter the *Zunsheng Dhāraṇī Sūtra*) became one of the most popular Buddhist sūtras for both the ruling elite and the masses in Middle Period China.¹ This sūtra mentions that merit can be gained for the deceased by making pillars bearing the Zunsheng dhāraṇī. From the Tang dynasty (618–907) onward, the custom arose of inscribing stone pillars with all or part of the *Zunsheng Dhāraṇī Sūtra* in either Chinese or Sanskrit. Zunsheng dhāraṇī pillars (*Zunsheng tuoluoni chuang* 尊勝陀羅尼幢, hereafter Zunsheng pillars) adorned various spaces including Buddhist monasteries and roadsides to generate merit for builders, patrons, and visitors. Over time, people also installed Zunsheng pillars near tombs or within ancestral graveyards as an act of Buddhist devotion for deceased ancestors.² Such Zunsheng pillars, often with inscribed epitaphs, were called tomb pillars (*fenchuang* 墳幢 or *muchuang* 墓幢), which also featured epitaphs in addition to the Zunsheng dhāraṇī text.

After the Tang, the practice of making Zunsheng tomb pillars continued to spread in Song (960–1279) China, affecting local funeral practices in both the south and the north.³ Although they gradually disappeared in the south after the Song dynasty, they remained popular throughout the north in the Liao-Jin-Yuan periods (907–1368).⁴ If we

¹ This scripture grew in fame and popularity in the mid-eighth century due to both its alleged power to assist the living and the dead and its ties to the growing cult of Mount Wutai. See Lin, ‘Tangdai Foding zunsheng tuoluoni’.

² For a comprehensive study on the Zunsheng pillars, see Liu, *Miezui yu duwang*.

³ Xia, ‘Foding zunsheng tuoluoni xinyang’.

⁴ *Yushi*, 129–40.

compare Tang-period Zunsheng tomb pillars with the counterparts in the Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan periods in the tenth to thirteenth centuries, we quickly recognize significant changes in their inscribed texts, not just in terms of their calligraphic quality but also in terms of their content. As such, documentary claims of Zunsheng tomb pillars shifted from privileging religious texts in the Tang to familial ones in the post-Tang eras. This article studies this textual shift and how it indexed changing perception of Zunsheng tomb pillars' merit-making performance.

The article focuses on Zunsheng tomb pillars from the northern Shanxi regions near Mount Wutai 五臺山. This geographical choice offers a rich body of Zunsheng pillar materials.⁵ The availability of sources is inseparable from the popularity of the belief in and practices of Zunsheng dhāraṇī and pillars in this area. As Mount Wutai had close ties to the popularity of the *Zunsheng Dhāraṇī Sūtra* in the Tang, making Zunsheng pillars thrived in neighbouring communities throughout the middle period.

This article asks two questions: (1) How did the Zunsheng tomb pillars evolve from the Tang to the Song, Liao, Jin, and Yuan periods in northern Shanxi? (2) How did changes in local people's epigraphic practices—especially the increasing interest in inscribing genealogical records on various stone media—affect the imagined mighty powers of Zunsheng tomb pillars, such as relieving the deceased from the hells and removing bad karma? These questions prompt us to consider to what extent the material presence of scriptural texts mattered for the Zunsheng tomb pillars to contain and perform the imagined powers.

Foregrounding the role of a Zunsheng tomb pillar as a text-bearing medium, this article operates outside of the dichotomous framework of 'religious function' and 'social function' of Buddhist objects. Instead, it discusses people's understanding and use of Zunsheng tomb pillars not just as Buddhist objects but also as stone media in diverse contexts. I argue that after the Tang, people increasingly exploited a tomb pillar's

⁵ According to Zhao Gaiping's survey, in today's Shanxi province there are thirty-two recorded and existing Zunsheng pillars from the Tang. Most of them come from several counties in southern Shanxi and areas near Mount Wutai in northern Shanxi. See Zhao, 'Tangdai foding zunsheng tuoluoni'.

nature as a medium to inscribe familial records that extended from epitaphs of individuals to genealogical records and charts of kinship groups. As the material presence of the scriptural texts took second place to that of familial texts, the perceptions of how Zunsheng tomb pillars were defined and how they contained efficacy also changed. What mattered was no longer following scriptural injunctions in the making of Zunsheng pillars but people's recognition of a stone medium as a Zunsheng pillar, which was believed to have inherent salvation powers.

Zunsheng Tomb Pillars in the Tang and Afterward

In *Yushi* 語石 [Words on Stones], a comprehensive study of stone carvings and engravings, the late Qing antiquarian Ye Changchi 葉昌熾 (1849–1917) made the following remark about the changes of Zunsheng pillars after the Tang:

Regarding the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*.....People in the Tang built pillars everywhere in the thirteen circuits. Before the reign of Tianbao [742–756], in their carvings, pillars featured a chessboard-like grid on their surface [the space of one grid was used to carve one character]. Their carving and calligraphy [of texts] were exquisite and precise. The sūtra, the preface, and the dhāranī were carved. Those [pillars] without a carving of the preface were less than three-tenths. And those carved with the dhāranī only were less than one-tenth. This trend continued until the end of the Tang. The pillars of the Five Dynasties and early Song, however, became increasingly profane. Very few were inscribed with the sūtra. Some had no sūtra at all but rather only one sentence, which comprised seven words starting from the phrase of the 'prayer'. The sentence reads like a Buddhist verse or ode. When it came to the Liao and Jin periods, less than one- or two-tenths of the Zunsheng pillars were carved with the sūtra. Some included an excerpt of the opening and concluding lines of the sūtra after the dhāranī, such as 'The Buddha told Indra that.....' or 'At the time the World-Honoured One gives predicts the achievement of awakening that.....' Most of such texts were less than one hundred

words. The calligraphy of sūtra copiers was also deteriorating. 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經.....以是唐時造幢遍於十三道.....天寶以前皆棋子方格, 雕寫精嚴, 兼刻經序咒, 不刻序者不過十之三, 單刻咒者不過十之一. 至唐末尚然. 五代宋初風氣日趨於陋, 刻經者已寥寥無幾. 或無經而有啟請七字為句, 如偈如頌. 馴至遼金, 刻經者遂十無一二. 或於咒之前後節書咒下經文首尾, 如佛告帝釋云云, 爾時世尊授菩提記云云. 約不及百字, 其經生書法, 亦每下愈況.⁶

Ye Changchi's observation, which was based on his extensive and in-depth text and field investigations, captures the textual transformation of the Zunsheng pillars from the Tang to the post-Tang eras: the diminution and eventual elimination of the sūtra texts.

In order to understand the diminishing role of scriptural texts, we must first understand what these sūtra texts were and how they played an important part in the making of Zunsheng pillars in the Tang. The full set of scriptural texts that were inscribed on many Tang Zunsheng pillars often include three parts. They were a Chinese translation of the sūtra (most commonly the version allegedly translated by Buddapālita [Fotuoboli 佛陀波利] in 683), a Chinese transcription of the Sanskrit dhāranī as part of the sūtra, and a preface that narrates the legend of the obscure Indian monk Buddapālita.

The emergence and circulation of the sūtra, the dhāranī, and the preface in Tang China has received extensive treatment from scholars. Research has suggested that the rising popularity of the Zunsheng texts was the result of two interconnected politico-religious agenda under the imperial patronage of Empress Wu 武則天 (r. 690–705): the promotion of the Mount Wutai cult and the justification of the empress as a female emperor ruling China.⁷ According to the preface, in 676 Buddapālita visited Mount Wutai hoping to encounter the manifestation of the principal Buddhist deity Mañjuśrī, who allegedly dwelled on the sacred mountain. There, he met a mysterious old man instructing him to return to India and bring a copy of the *Zunsheng*

⁶ *Yushi* 4. 133.

⁷ Chen, 'Śarīra and Scepter'; Barrett, 'Stūpa, Sūtra, and Sarīra'; Copp, *The Body Incantatory*, 158–70.

Dhāranī Sūtra to China, which was the condition for the Indian monk to see Mañjuśrī. Buddapālita faithfully obeyed and returned to the Tang capital Chang'an around 683 with a Sanskrit copy of the sūtra.

The spurious nature of the Buddapālita legend was already questioned by Buddhist scholars in the Tang and confirmed by modern scholarship. The sole purpose of the preface—the identity of whose author is unknown—seems to substantiate the Buddapālita legend by associating it with a range of historical sites and figures including Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (Empress Wu's husband), Indian and Chinese monks, as well as Buddhist monasteries in Chang'an and Luoyang.⁸ Validating the Buddapālita legend strengthened the cult of Mount Wutai, which in turn lent support to Empress Wu and her ideologues' propaganda to tout her family's divine origin by establishing its intrinsic ties to this sacred mountain.⁹ It also gave Empress Wu a great boost to claim both the centrality of her lands to Buddhist cosmology and her status as a Buddhist monarch.¹⁰ Given that the preface, the sūtra, and the dhāranī together served Empress Wu's politico-religious agenda, it is not surprising that people inscribed all the three on stones as the practice of erecting Zunsheng

⁸ In the preface, Emperor Gaozong commissioned another eminent Indian monk Divākara and a Chinese scholar Du Xingyi 杜行顛 to translate the Sanskrit copy of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*; Du was the author of one of the four Chinese translations of the sūtra. The preface also describes how Buddapālita later produced a new translation of the sūtra with the assistance a Chinese monk named Shunzhen who knew Sanskrit well and how two other Chinese monks heard about Buddapālita's story from Divākara and Shunzhen. Associating Buddapālita with authoritative political and religious figures at the time like Emperor Gaozong, Du Xingyi, and Divākara lent the legend authenticity. For the complete translation of the preface, see Copp, *The Body Incantatory*, 160–61.

⁹ Chen, 'Śarīra and Scepter', 103–11. Chen also points out the chronological tie between the preface and Empress Wu's rise into power: the last year mentioned in that preface is 689, exactly on the eve of Empress Wu's 'usurpation' in 690 (see page 111).

¹⁰ Copp, *The Body Incantatory*, 162.

pillars began to spread throughout Tang China in the eighth century.

In addition to political underpinnings, inscribing the entirety of the sūtra and the dhāraṇī was scripturally driven as well. The *Zunsheng Dhāraṇī Sūtra* includes a detailed scriptural narrative, which introduces the dhāraṇī, lays out each of its syllables, and elaborates on its powers.¹¹ The sūtra also highlights several ways of using the dhāraṇī: ‘if one can, one should write this dhāraṇī and place it on a tall banner (*chuang*) and place it on a high mountain, a tower, or within a stūpa’ 若能書寫此陀羅尼, 安高幢上, 或安高山或安樓上, 乃至安置窣堵波中. The sūtra emphasizes that by doing so, people gain great benefits even if they were just ‘to see this banner or come close to it, or were its shadow to fall upon them, or the wind to blow the dust from the dhāraṇī banner upon them’ 於幢等上或見或與相近, 其影映身; 或風吹陀羅尼上幢等上塵落在身上.¹² The scriptural narrative sheds light on the ‘thingness’ in the working of the dhāraṇī’s magic power; it should be written on or attached to a physical medium, be it a human-made cloth banner or a mountain. The thingness was accentuated so much so that its derivatives—shadow or dust—conveyed the same efficacy. The benefits resulting from the efficacy include being immune from the karmic retribution due to their sinful deeds, such as falling into the evil paths of hells.¹³ Because the Chinese word ‘*chuang*’ 幢 that is translated as ‘banner’ also means pillar, in Tang China the practice of inscribing the dhāraṇī on stone pillars became the most popular way of making use of it following the scriptural instruction.

Existing materials from northern Shanxi prove that the practice of inscribing the full set of scriptural texts on Zunsheng tomb pillars indeed continued in the late Tang. For instance, a Zunsheng pillar from Loufan 樓煩 county was produced in 850, bearing the title ‘Wei wangguo fumu jingzao *Foding zunsheng tuoluoni jing zhi chuang*’ 為

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of the scripture narrative in the *Zunsheng Dhāraṇī Sūtra*, see Copp, *The Body Incantatory*, 166–67.

¹² *Foding Zunsheng tuoluoni jing*, T no. 967, 19: 1.351b09.

¹³ For the complete translation of this passage on the dhāraṇī’s use and powers, see Copp, *The Body Incantatory*, 146.

亡過父母敬造佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經之幢 [Pillar of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* Made for (Our) Deceased Parents].¹⁴ The main body of the inscription starts with an epitaph for a former officer Liu Yuanzhen 劉元臻 and his wife, followed by the lengthy *Zunsheng* texts: the preface and the entire Buddapālita translation of the sūtra that contains the Chinese transcription of the Sanskrit dhāranī. According to the introduction to the pillar, the scriptural texts include sixty-four lines with each full line having sixty-nine words and in total around 4,416 words, ostensibly overwhelming the space of the pillar surface. The dominance of the scriptural texts on this pillar suggests a firm belief in the indispensable role of inscribing the full set of the *Zunsheng* texts for the deceased and the living to benefit from the mighty power of the *Zunsheng dhāranī*.

This belief in the ability of material presence of scriptural texts to generate salvation merits was reaffirmed with the continued epigraphic practice by the Lius' living descendants. In 876, their children and close relatives carved another Buddhist sūtra on the remaining space of the 850 pillar. This sūtra was the short Buddhist apocryphon entitled *Xuming jing* 續命經 [Scripture of Prolonging One's Life]. The text expresses an explicit message of salvation by three holy Buddhist deities: Amitābha Buddha 阿彌陀佛 and his two flanking-attendant of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva 觀世音菩薩 and Mahāsthāmaprāpta Bodhisattva 大勢至菩薩. As the scripture states, 'Those who could chant the names of this Buddha and the two bodhisattvas will be immune from the sufferings of life and death and will never fall into the hells' 能誦此一佛二菩薩者, 得離生死苦, 永不入地獄. The inscription of this apocryphon was followed by a list of patrons with the identity of 'Buddhist followers' (*Fo dizi* 佛弟子), including the Liu couple, their three sons, three daughters, three daughters-in-law, and a maternal nephew. These men and women were expected to be

¹⁴ The pillar is now preserved at the Bureau of Culture and Tourism of Loufan county, Shanxi province. For its brief introduction and the entire inscription, see 'Wei wangguo fumu jingzao *Foding zunsheng tuoluoni jing* zhi chuanyu Zhaoshi muzhi' 為亡過父母敬造佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經之幢與趙氏墓誌, Liang, eds., *Sanjin shike daquan: Taiyuan shi Loufan*, 6–9.

the receiving end of the great merits of chanting the scripture and inscribing its full text on the pillar.

During the process of making Zunsheng tomb pillars, specific roles were set up in charge of governing the material properties of the scriptural texts. Among those who were involved in making the Zunsheng pillar for the Lius, one man and one woman's roles stood out. The 850 inscription tells us that He Changyi 何長揖 was the sūtra-calligrapher (*shujing ren* 書經人) for the entirety of the Zunsheng texts. He was not a member of the Liu family but was likely hired by the Lius to take on the role of writing the manuscript of the scriptural texts for the carver (*juanren* 鐫人), Yin Guoqing 尹國清, to inscribe them on the stone pillar. In the Tang, sūtra-calligraphers were often devout Buddhists who were very familiar with the lengthy scriptural texts of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*. In addition to the sūtra-calligrapher, the 867 inscription specified one daughter-in-law née Yan 閻氏's distinctive identity as the 'sūtra-chanter' (*songjingren* 誦經人). This identity indicates that this woman was personally familiar with Buddhist scriptures, possibly including the two sūtras inscribed on the pillar. The positions of sūtra-calligrapher, sūtra-carvers, and sūtra-chanters indicated the centrality of the scriptural texts in the Tang-era practices of making Zunsheng tomb pillars. The Zunsheng texts had to be materialized on the pillar surfaces. These materializations were even embodied as makers and sponsors wrote, chanted, and listened. Direct engagement with scriptural texts was essential for the pillars to perform the mighty power of merit-making.

After the Tang, the diminution and eventual elimination of the sūtra texts was manifested in local practices of inscribing the Zunsheng texts in northern Shanxi and neighbouring communities. A close examination of the post-Tang steles reveals several meaningful nuances in this general trend. First, while local practitioners continued to value the tradition of carving 'sūtra' (*jing* 經) texts, their epigraphic practices demonstrated an important shift in the choice of scriptural content from the whole set of Zunsheng texts to the dhāranī alone. For instance, in the inscription of an 1139 Zunsheng tomb pillar from Datong 大同 county, the author described,

Ever since the Sui and Tang dynasties, filial sons and kind people regarded it [the Zunsheng dhāranī] [as] the place to cultivate merits for deceased relatives, inscribing the dhāranī on stones and requesting good calligraphers to write it. Its form embodies the six types of contact and looks like a pillar. Such a stone was thus named [as Zunsheng pillars] and installed near tombs. This practice has never changed.... Monk Zhixue, out of filial piety, produced this pillar and intended to inscribe the sūtra on it. He asked me to write an inscription to pass it on eternally. 自隋唐以來，孝子仁人類以此為過去眷屬植福之所，龔翠琰求墨妙，其形六觸，視之若幢然，乃以名之而揭諸墓口，至今莫之改也.....僧志學以孝口建立茲幢，且將刊經其上，而求予文以之傳無窮。¹⁵

In this case, Monk Zhixue installed the Zunsheng tomb pillar to bear the inscription of the ‘sūtra’ for his deceased father. Although the inscription claimed that the practice of installing Zunsheng sūtra pillars near tombs had not changed ever since the Tang dynasty, the ‘sūtra’ that was inscribed on the pillar was the Chinese transliteration of the Zunsheng dhāranī alone, excluding both the preface and the rest of sūtra narrative.

The textual format of the 1139 pillar appeared common in northern Shanxi and neighbouring communities, indicating the formation of a regional pattern in making the Zunsheng pillars. Several existing Zunsheng pillars from the Liao (907–1125) and Jin (1115–1234) dynasties in Yu county 蔚縣 of northern Hebei province have the same format that includes the following four parts:¹⁶

¹⁵ ‘Dong Renduan wei wangguo zhangnan Dong Yu jianli jingchuang wen’ 董仁端為亡過長男董裕建立經幢文 (1139), Liang, eds., *Sanjin shike daquan: Datong*, 8.

¹⁶ For a few examples, see ‘Weizhun jian foding zunsheng tuoluoni chuang’ 惟淮建佛頂尊勝陀羅尼幢 (1110), ‘Li Xing jian foding zunsheng tuoluoni chuang’ 李興建佛頂尊勝陀羅尼幢 (1157), ‘Li Xingyou jian foding zunsheng tuoluoni chuang’ 李興祐建佛頂尊勝陀羅尼幢 (1157), ‘Li Xingruan jian foding zunsheng tuoluoni chuang’ 李興潤建佛頂尊勝陀羅尼幢 (1157), Deng et al., eds., *Yuxian beiming jiluo*, 642–45; 650–61.

- 1) A pillar title— ‘Foding zunsheng tuoluoni chuang’ 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼幢 (Pillar of the Buddha Crown Zunsheng Dhāranī).
- 2) A short line introducing the Chinese translation of the sūtra— ‘Jibin shamen Fotuoboli fengzhao yi’ 闍寶沙門佛陀波利奉詔譯 (Jibin Monk Buddapālita Translated Obeying the Imperial Edict).
- 3) The text of the Zunsheng dhāranī in Sanskrit or Chinese transliteration, which was sometimes accompanied with visual symbols inscribed in circles.
- 4) A short inscription explaining who made the pillar for whom and for what reasons.

The four-part formulaic textual content of Zunsheng pillars illustrates the clear choice made by pillar sponsors and/or makers: leaving out the preface, skipping most of the sūtra narrative, and emphasizing the dhāranī.¹⁷ This choice, though not explicitly justified in the fourth part of explanatory inscription, conveyed some degree of changing local perceptions with respect to the spiritual powers deriving from the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*, especially in terms of what their priorities were.

The perceived power of the Zunsheng dhāranī itself rose to the forefront in the pillar making. For example, in 1157 Li Xing 李興 and his two paternal cousins—Li Xingyou 李興祐 and Li Xingrun 李興潤—from Lijiatuan village of Yu county installed three Zunsheng pillars on the same day for their deceased family members. The one sponsored by Li Xing, his wife, and his son explained how they came to understand the merit-making power of the dhāranī. Its inscription reads:

I, Li Xing, erected this dhamma pillar for my deceased father, uncle, and mother née Hao. I humbly heard that the divine spell of the Buddha Crown Zunsheng Dhāranī generates immeasurable merits.

¹⁷ Chen Xiaowei also summarized the four-part formulaic pattern of Zunsheng pillars from the Liao dynasty with a different focus. In his categories, Part 1 and 2 are combined into one, and Part 4 is divided into two: an explanatory inscription and a colophon of pillar sponsors. See Chen, ‘Miezui yu chaodu’.

Just by hearing it or seeing it, one will gain the karma causes to enter the sacred realm. By chanting it, one will achieve limitless awakening. The Dhāranī can save those who fall in the dark hells and benefit all sentient beings. When being touched by the dust from the dhāranī pillar, one will be exempted from the crime of treachery. When being fallen upon by the shadow of the dhāranī pillar, one will be immune from the disaster of falling into the three unhappy ways of hell-denizen, animal, and hungry ghost. 李興奉為亡父, 小叔, 母郝氏建立法幢。伏聞佛頂尊勝陀羅尼神咒功德不可測度。耳聞眼見皆獲入聖之因, 諷誦證無邊之果。能救幽冥, 益口含靈。塵霑口返逆之罪。影覆免三途地獄之殃。¹⁸

This explanatory inscription contains several important messages. The use of the term ‘divine spell’ (*shenzbou* 神咒) above all underscores the sole role of the dhāranī in generating merit-making and salvation powers for the deceased. Secondly, the inscription gives attention to the benefits the living could gain through personal and bodily engagements with the dhāranī. Such engagements could be direct contacts through hearing (ears), seeing (eyes), and chanting (mouth), or indirect impact by dust and shadow associated with a Zunsheng dhāranī pillar. This message basically aligned with the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*’s injunction to the working of the dhāranī’s mysterious power. The only newly added sensory impact was ‘hearing’, which suggested the importance of chanting the dhāranī. Comparing to the Tang practices of inscribing the whole sūtra text, people now could convey the same merit-making message by referencing the text with indicative languages like wind, dust, and shadow (this idea will be discussed in detail in the next section).

Third, members of the Lis were likely involved in both direct and indirect personal and bodily contacts with the Zunsheng dhāranī. According to the three pillars, several family members of the Lis were Buddhist clergy: Li Xing’s sister Nun Shanzheng 尼善政 (deceased), Li Xingyou and Li Xingrun’s sister Nun Miaoru 尼妙如, Li Xingyou’s

¹⁸ ‘Li Xing jian Foding zunsheng tuoluoni chuang’, Deng et al., eds., *Yuxian beiming jiluo*, 653.

two daughters and second son—Nun Shancai 尼善才, Nun Shanzhu 尼善住, and Monk Ximing 僧息名. Most of them were involved in installing the three Zunsheng pillars for their deceased parents and other family members. Like the sūtra-chanters and sūtra-calligraphers for the Tang Zunsheng pillars, these Buddhist monks and nuns possibly played the role of chanting Buddhist scriptural texts, especially the Zunsheng dhāraṇī, in daily life and during the ceremony of installing the three pillars near their deceased family members' tombs.

The above-discussed Liao-Jin tomb pillars demonstrate important features in the development of Zunsheng pillars after the Tang. Above all, the omission of the full or excerpt of the *Zunsheng Dhāraṇī Sūtra* became a common practice, with the emphasis shifting on the dhāraṇī text alone. The emergence of this feature was likely also the consequence of a simultaneous change in Zunsheng tomb pillars' inscriptions. Over time, the inscriptions became lengthier as they evolved into full biographical or genealogical records. Inscriptions about individuals and their kinship members, as we will see later, increasingly occupied more space of pillar surfaces than scriptural texts.

Meanwhile, the 1139 and 1157 tomb pillars also indicated a distinctive feature in pillar-making practices in areas that had been under Liao rule. That is, Buddhist monks and nuns collaborated with their secular family members to produce Zunsheng tomb pillars. Cleric members of a family likely played an instrumental role in choosing the format and content of the Zunsheng texts that were to be inscribed on the tomb pillars dedicated to the family's deceased members. To explore this distinctive type of epigraphic practices, the following section zooms in on a case study consisting of two Zunsheng tomb pillars installed by Buddhist nuns. It will show that the close monastery-family ties even affected the inscriptional form and content of Zunsheng pillars produced for monastic communities. In addition, the case study also sheds light on a new inclination in perceiving how the pillars performed the alleged magic power of merit-making and salvation without even inscribing the Zunsheng dhāraṇī.

A Case Study of Two Zunsheng Tomb Pillars Installed by Nuns

The abovementioned case study focuses on two Zunsheng tomb pillars: one installed in 1107 and the other in 1211, from the Miaoyin Buddhist Monastery 妙因寺 in Shuozhou 朔州 prefecture. The 1211 pillar, though damaged, is still extant, standing at the Chongfu Buddhist Monastery 崇福寺 in Shuozhou today (see Figure 1). Both pillars, over the course of a century, were installed by Buddhist nuns who represented not only the same monastery but also the same Ma 馬 family. The inscriptions of these two pillars illustrate two important directions in the development of Zunsheng tomb pillars in the Shuozhou region during the Liao-Jin periods. First, Zunsheng tomb pillars played an important part in strengthening a model of family-monastery ties, which were built and sustained through individual clergy who came from the same family and served in the same monastery. Second, scriptural texts became dispensable in defining Zunsheng tomb pillars, underlying a new local understanding of the workings of the Zunsheng dhāranī. The absence of the dhāranī text on the 1107 and 1211 pillars thus makes them a distinctive case for us to consider the underlying social perception of the merit-making performance of Zunsheng tomb pillars.

The first pillar was installed in 1107 by Nun Shenjing 審淨 and the other in 1211 by three nuns for their master, Nun Shanyuan 善圓.¹⁹ Both Shenjing and Shanyuan were descendants of Ma Yanwen 馬彥溫, who served as Governor of Shunyi Military Commandery 順義軍節度使—the highest ranking official in Shuozhou—during the reign of Liao Taizong (r. 926–946). Moreover, Shanyuan’s master, Nun Wuyou 悟幽, was also a disciple of Nun Shenjing. These three women had both religious and blood ties; they were all daughters of the Ma family. While Shenjing was likely a paternal aunt or grandaunt

¹⁹ ‘Daliao guo Shuozhou Miaoyin si jiang jing lü lun biqiuni Jing qianzang si tejian gongde chuang ji’ 大遼國朔州妙因寺講經律論比丘尼淨遷葬寺特建功德幢記, ‘Wei Dajinguo Shuozhou Miaoyinsi gu dasheng zuozhu Zunsheng tuoluoni chuangming bing xu’ 維大金國朔州妙因寺故大乘座主尊勝陀羅尼幢銘并序, Du, ed., *Sanjin shike daquan: Shuozhou shi Shuocheng*, 58, 114.



FIG.1 The 1211 Zunsheng tomb pillar, now at the Chongfu Buddhist Monastery, Shuozhou, Shanxi. Photo courtesy of Liu Wei, August 3, 2022.

of Wuyou, Wuyou was doubtless a paternal aunt of Shanyuan. The name of Wuyou appeared on both the 1107 and 1211 Zunsheng pillars; she was one of the Ma women, if not the only one, who inherited Shenjing's position during the Liao-Jin transition in the 1120s. Narrating stories of these women and their family across the Liao and Jin dynasties, the 1107 and 1211 Zunsheng pillars show how the Mas created the monastic-kinship ties in the Liao and how these ties continued into the late Jin.

The 1107 Zunsheng pillar documents the creation of a tradition cementing the Mas as a socio-political elite family in the Liao. They sent their daughters from every generation to the Miaoyin Monastery and made them the abbesses there. According to the 1107 pillar inscription, Ma Yanwen himself was a pious Buddhist. He built a Buddhist Hall and supported it with land, labourers, houses, shops, money, and other wealth. It was likely that the Buddhist building Ma Yanwen built was the Miaoyin Monastery and that the Mas owned the monastery as their property. When Ma Yanwen's son inherited his father's position as Governor of Shunyi Military Commandery, he also sent his two daughters to the monastery, and they later succeeded their aunts as abbesses. By the time of Nun Shenjing, women from the Ma family had continuously presided over the monastery for almost a hundred years. Not surprisingly, the Ma men's continued political success in the Liao court provided strong support for their women's dominant position in the monastery. Shenjing was the one in her generation who assumed the abbess's role, and both her grandfather and father were high-ranking officials.

In contrast, the 1211 Zunsheng pillar shows that the Ma family tradition of having their women control the Miaoyin Monastery continued in the following century even though the Ma men lost their political status after the imperial state changed from the Khitan-Liao to the Jurchen-Jin. This new political situation for the Ma men begs the question: What did it mean to them and to their daughters to carry on the family tradition? The 1211 Zunsheng pillar was excavated at a local village, Shuozhou, in 1993, along with a 1209 tomb epitaph for the same nun Shanyuan. The 1211 pillar inscription and the 1209 tomb epitaph share much in common,

while each contains some exclusive information. According to the 1209 epitaph, Shanyuan was the seventh-generation descendant of Ma Yanwen. Around 1131, at the age of six, Shanyuan entered the Miaoyin Monastery to become a disciple of Nun Wuyou, also a sister of Shanyuan's father.²⁰ At that early age, Shanyuan was clearly sent to the monastery by her family members. The 1211 pillar describes Shanyuan's grandfather and father as devoted Buddhist followers without mentioning any official careers, indicating that the Ma men had lost political power in the new Jurchen-Jin regime.

The continuity of their family-monastery ties could have been critical for the Mas to maintain social influence by virtue of women continuing to play important roles in the local community and among the Ma kinship group. Both the 1209 epitaph and the 1211 pillar inscription praise Shanyuan: 'Her eminent virtues widely touched on the Dharma's followers, while her plentiful grace showered members of her kinship group' 厚德普沾於法眾, 餘恩仍沐於族人. The family tradition of the Mas did not stop at Shanyuan. Among three disciples Shanyuan accepted, Nun Zhirong 志榮 was also Shanyuan's niece, who was obviously expected to carry on the family tradition after Shanyuan.

The persistent monastic-family ties between the Miaoyin Monastery and the Ma family were strengthened in the practice of installing Zunsheng tomb pillars, which involved both nuns from the Ma family and their secular kin. Shenjing erected the 1107 Zunsheng pillar to commemorate the reburial of her deceased master and other nuns. Yet given that Shenjing's deceased master was most likely her paternal aunt and some reburied nuns were her ancestors, this monastic event was, to a large extent, also a family event. By the same token, when Shanyuan's three disciples erected the 1211 pillar to commemorate their masters' merit, Nun Zhirong was also fulfilling her filial piety toward her paternal aunt. Moreover, before Shanyuan died, she summoned her nephew Ma Tianyou, asking him to help free her two maidservants after she died, as these women had served her

²⁰ 'Wei Dajinguo Shuozhou Miaoyinsi biqiuni dasheng zuozhu muzhi', Du et al., eds., *Sanjin shike daquan: Shuozhou shi Shuocheng*, 113.

well. This was an interesting arrangement. It could be interpreted in two very different ways. One possibility was that the Ma family still owned the whole monastery as its private property. Thus, any major monastic decisions had to be run through the Ma family members, especially its male leader. As another possibility, the nuns had full control of their monastic affairs, and Shanyuan asked her nephew's help simply because of their kinship relationship. The reality might lie somewhere in between the two scenarios. Nonetheless, what this arrangement meant was the constant overlapping between monastic and family affairs in daily life.

The case study of the 1107 and 1211 Zunsheng pillars thus demonstrates a distinctive pattern of strong monastery-family bonds tied together by women from an elite family and their continued practice of installing Zunsheng tomb pillars. These tomb pillars were for both deceased masters and senior female members of the Ma family. These women were generationally sent to the monastery to be Buddhist nuns and to serve as abbesses there. The succession of the monastic leadership was transmitted through dual ties: religious relations of master and disciple, and kinship relations between aunt and niece. For such a family and monastic tradition to work required the maintenance of a large kinship group as well as of political or economic clout, in addition to a strong family tradition of worshipping Buddhism. Political elite families in the Liao, like Ma Yanwen's family in Shuozhou, often enjoyed hereditary privileges, and they fit all these requirements.²¹ While transmitted historical records tell us much about these families' male members, especially their political careers, it is locally produced sources like the 1107 and 1211 pillars that allow us a glimpse into the life of female members

²¹ This Liao tradition might have origins in the Tang. For the close familial ties of Buddhist clergy in the Tang, see Chen, 'Nuns in Tang China'.

²² Scholars have long paid attention to the value of inscriptional sources for women's history in imperial China. Linda Cook Johnson has used inscriptional sources to demonstrate women's prominence in Buddhism in the Liao and Jin dynasties. But she mainly paid attention to women's active engagement with Buddhism as donors. See Johnson, *Women of the Conquest Dynasties*, 149–54.

of these elite families.²² Women like the Ma daughters played important roles in consolidating their natal families' ties to monastic institutions, and they even helped protect the families' status in local society at a time of political instability.

Interestingly, the 1107 and 1211 pillars did not even inscribe the dhāranī text let alone the rest of the sūtra content. They shed light on how the material form of the Zunsheng pillars mattered in enhancing their religious appeal. Ever since the emergence of Zunsheng pillars in the Tang dynasty, a key component in the making of a Zunsheng pillar was the carving of the Zunsheng dhāranī on the pillar. Indeed, most Zunsheng pillars that I have examined in the previous section bear the inscription of the Zunsheng dhāranī in Chinese or Sanskrit regardless of whether they inscribed the full or excerpts of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*. Without the inscription of the dhāranī, the 1107 and 1211 pillars were regarded as Zunsheng pillars on two grounds, one explicit and the other implicit.

Explicitly, the 1107 and 1211 inscriptions, both their titles and body texts, describe the two pillars as Zunsheng pillars, using the exact term '*Foding zunsheng tuoluoni chuang*' 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼幢. In addition, the two stones were carved into the shape of an eight-sided column, a typical form for sūtra pillars. In addition to a prismatic body, a typical sūtra pillar also includes a stone cover and a base (see Figure 2). Although the published rubbings of the 1107 and 1211 pillars do not show their covers and bases, their original material forms should have had both. The image of the existing 1211 pillar (see Figure 1) shows that it at least had a cover, which was lost over time. As the 1107 pillar inscription reports, '[Nun Shenjing] rebuilt a Zunsheng dhāranī pillar, which coiled down to the ground and towered upward to the sky overhead' 仍重建佛頂尊勝陀羅尼幢一座, 下蟠地面, 上聳天心. As seen in Figure 2, the stone base allows the pillar to stand firmly on the ground, while the cover creates the visual image of the pillar towering upward. The appellation of the 1107 pillar, combined with the standard material form, might have been considered by its installers as good enough for efficacy, hence the lower demand for the presence of scripture on the stone.

Implicitly, specific indicative languages used in the inscription subtly imbued the two pillars with scriptural references to the



FIG. 2 A newly discovered Jin-Dynasty Zunsheng tomb pillar, now at the Institute of Artifacts and Archaeology, Xinzhou, Shanxi. Photo courtesy of Guo Yingtang, September 26, 2021.

Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra. Most notably, immediately following the abovementioned description of Nun Shenjing rebuilding a Zunsheng dhāranī pillar, the 1107 pillar inscription continues that, ‘She expected that when wind blows the light dust and time moves the delicate shadow, in daytime or night, one will be infused [by the flying dust] or covered [by the shadow]’ 必欲風迎輕塵, 時移纖影, 或晝或夜, 一霑一覆. Educated readers who were familiar with the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* would quickly recognize the message conveyed by the literary images portrayed here: wind blowing dust, light moving shadow over time, and people nearby being infused by the dust and shadow.

These images were in tune with the scriptural description of the workings of a Zunsheng dhāranī pillar’s mysterious power through wind, dust, and shadow. On the one hand, the installers of the two pillars clearly believed in the Zunsheng pillar’s efficacy in salvation powers. Their steadfast belief was evidenced in a statement in the 1211 pillar inscription, which reported that Shanyuan’s disciples erected the Zunsheng pillar near their master’s graveyard to ‘benefit the deceased [Shanyuan] with merits and facilitate [her] to be reborn in the Buddha’s world’ 用福幽靈, 薦生佛境. On the other hand, seemingly derivative passages about wind, dust, and shadow were adopted over any actual lines from the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*. This contrast suggests that the installers conceived the presence of some non-scriptural elements sufficient to enact the pillars’ efficacy.

Given the absence of the dhāranī text on the two pillars, we might wonder how important its presence was to the working of generating great merits to benefit the dead and the living? Paul Copp argues that for the Zunsheng dhāranī to work its imagined potencies, it was critical to activate ‘infusing or anointing actions of bodily enchantment’ on a person, such as through the wind, dust, and shadow. The material presence of the dhāranī and its ancillary texts on the Zunsheng pillar was the key to allowing such bodily enchantment to happen.²³ Notably, the dhāranī pillars in Copp’s discussion are mostly the classical variety in the Tang: those inscribed with the full set of the sūtra, the preface, and the dhāranī. In this article, I am expanding

²³ Copp, *The Body Incantatory*, 170–72.

his vision by considering the post-Tang Zunsheng pillars without inscribing complete scriptural texts, especially those even without the dhāranī. The expressions of ‘being infused by dust’ (*chenzhan* 塵霑) and being ‘covered by shadow’ (*yingfu* 影覆) frequently appeared in many Liao-Jin inscriptions of Zunsheng tomb pillars that we have discussed in the previous section, but those tomb pillars all inscribed the Zunsheng dhāranī either in Chinese or Sanskrit.

Cases like the 1107 and 1211 pillars, which did not feature inscriptions of the Zunsheng dhāranī, however, reveal that even presence of the dhāranī text was no longer essential for the pillars to exercise their salvation powers. Rather, people believed in the two stone pillars’ sufficient efficacy as long as they conceived of them as Zunsheng pillars. In other words, it was not the magical words of the dhāranī text but other factors that substantiated the two pillars’ nature and imagined powers. These factors included the material form of the pillars, their explicit titles, and discursive but indicative words such as wind (*feng* 風), dust (*chen* 塵), shadow (*ying* 影), infusion (*zhan* 霑), and covering (*fu* 覆). The Zunsheng pillar nature was unquestionable for not just the pillar erectors and inscription writers but also the potential audience—nuns of the monastery, the Ma kinship members, and other local villagers. While both the explicit and implicit meanings of words might provide evidence for clergy erectors and educated lay readers, the material form of the two pillars was likely more critical than words for their illiterate village audience. Once being recognized as the Zunsheng tomb pillars, they were then believed to contain inherent spiritual powers deriving from the Zunsheng dhāranī.

In short, the 1107 and 1211 Zunsheng pillars attest to the emergence of new ways in which local communities in northern Shanxi conceived the material efficacy of a Zunsheng dhāranī pillar. Three different sets of things now conditioned the material efficacy: 1) the pillar-shaped stone standing on the ground; 2) inscribed words on the stone related to but not necessarily actual lines of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*; 3) wind and light in both imagination and daily life that work on the stone pillar to generate literary images or real-life effects of dust and shadow. In other words, Zunsheng pillars in the Liao-Jing periods were defined increasingly by material and visual forms of the pillar objects, as well as literary descriptions in the part of explanatory inscriptions.

The post-Tang changes in defining and conceiving the Zunsheng pillars urge us to interrogate the stone pillars as medium. Emphasizing the importance of seeing the Zunsheng dhāranī on pillars ‘as pieces of larger packages consisting in various registers—words both discursive and magical, images, and physical objects placed within specific surroundings’, Copp calls for attention to ‘the importance of original physical contexts to the spells and prose composed for individual pillars.’²⁴ I argue that as part of the ‘larger packages’, the materiality of pillars includes the medium nature of all text-bearing objects. For the 1107 and 1211 pillars, the physical objects and inscriptional prose were essential, though not in contextualizing the spell but in endowing the two pillars the Zunsheng-pillar nature without the blessing of the very spells’ material presence. To better understand this scriptural absence, we have to consider the emerging new texts that alternatively predominated the space of the pillar surface. In other words, what texts did the scriptural texts eventually yield the space to? What information did such texts convey and in what ways?

Zunsheng Tomb Pillars as Medium of Genealogical Writing

In the centuries after the Tang, the Zunsheng tomb pillars—as a popular stone medium in northern Shanxi society—began to feature new genres of texts, especially genealogical records. It was not new for Zunsheng tomb pillars to contain genealogical writing,²⁵ but it was novel for such writing to overtake the scriptural texts that had dominated pillar surfaces for centuries. Existing evidence reveals that Zunsheng tomb pillars erected across the Song-Liao borders

²⁴ Copp, *The Body Incantatory*, 171.

²⁵ The Zunsheng tomb pillars’ medium function for genealogical writing was possibly rooted in the tradition of the Buddhist funerary stele. As early as in the sixth century, Buddhist steles from Shanxi were inscribed with biographies of the deceased, as well as achievements of their ancestors in the format of funerary inscriptions. See Wong, *Chinese Steles*, 87–88; Hong, ‘Changing Roles of the Tomb Portrait’, 253.

bore lengthier inscriptions describing why and when the erector installed the pillar (often for his deceased parents and ancestors) and then listed names of the erector's family members.²⁶ In the Jin and Yuan periods that followed, Zunsheng tomb pillars began to include complete genealogical information of local lineages. Some pillars listed the names of local kinship groups that spanned five generations alone. Others included genealogical charts, which often assumed separate titles as 'Zongpai tuji' 宗派圖記 [A Record of the Chart of the Descent Group and Its Branches] or 'Zhongfang zongzu' 衆房宗族 [The Lineage and Its Multitudinous Branches].²⁷ Over time, such genealogical charts grew longer. Genealogical writing, including both biographical records and charts, thus emerged to reshape the functions of Zunsheng tomb pillars in the Jin-Yuan periods.

We might view this inscriptional shift in Zunsheng pillars as signalling the importance of genealogical information, completely surpassing that of scriptural information. However, such a vantage point overlooks a different but, perhaps, more generative question: How do we understand the linkage between the scriptural claim of the classical Zunsheng dhāranī pillars and the need for inscribing extensive genealogical information of tomb pillars in the Jin-Yuan periods?

Classical Zunsheng pillars from the Tang were expected to activate the potencies of the dhāranī spell to deliver the deceased out of the hell and bestow the living good fortunes. As such, names of the deceased and the living were inscribed too, but the need for displaying extensive genealogical information was low. The inscriptions of Jin-Yuan pillars, however, spoke to the need both to inscribe a broad range of genealogical information and to sustain such records through durable stone medium. In addition to eulogizing virtues and conduct of both deceased and living family members, genealogical information carved on Jin-Yuan Zunsheng pillars often included instruction to and/or

²⁶ For an example of a northern-Song Zunsheng pillar with these typical features, see 'Hongfusi jingchuang' 洪福寺經幢, Niu, *Dingxiang jinshi kao* 1.35b–36a.

²⁷ Wang, 'Clergy, Kinship, and Clout'; also Wang, *In the Wake of the Monks*, chap. 3.

arrangements for future generations to prosper their kinship lines. With genealogical writing taking up more space of pillar surfaces, the ways in which scriptures or scriptural-related texts were represented, as we have seen in the previous section, attested to nuanced changes in people's belief in how Zunsheng tomb pillars contained efficacy. This section explores how the Jin-Yuan tomb pillars from northern Shanxi presented scriptural information when the pillars served primarily as a medium of extensive genealogical records for kinship groups.

The trend of the Zunsheng tomb pillars featuring in overwhelming genealogical records needs to be understood within the strong demand for inscribing genealogical information on various stone media in north China in the Jin-Yuan periods. This epigraphic practice was contextualized within social, cultural, and political changes among the local elite. Such changes included the spreading ancestral worship from literati to non-literati families; the growing interest in identifying and organizing descent groups centring around ancestral tombs; and office-holding families using genealogical steles (*xianying bei* 先塋碑) to protect their hereditary political privilege under Mongol rule.²⁸ In this sociocultural environment, Zunsheng tomb pillars became a popular medium for genealogical writing among ordinary northern Chinese families in the Jin-Yuan periods. In northern Shanxi society, people's choice of Zunsheng pillars as a preferred medium for kinship records corresponded to two new trends in social practices at the time: carving genealogical records on stones and using religious monuments and institutions for kinship groups' own institutional growth.²⁹

Above all, we need to consider the social statuses and motivations of the people who sponsored Zunsheng tomb pillars from the Jin-Yuan periods. As scholarly works have demonstrated, people from different social strata tended to use different stone media in genealogical writing at the time. While official and scholarly families often turned to large stone steles to record their genealogies, families without official or literati statuses mostly employed Zunsheng pillars.³⁰ In addition, both

²⁸ Hong, 'Changing Roles of the Tomb Portrait'; Iiyama, 'Genealogical Steles in North China'; and *idem*, 'Steles and Status'.

²⁹ Wang, 'Clergy, Kinship, and Clout'.

steles and Zunsheng tomb pillars from northern Shanxi attested to the dual concerns of genealogical writing at the time: repaying one's debt to deceased parents as filial children and taking care of the family's current and future well-being.³¹ Between these two concerns, the latter took precedence over the ancestors' needs in the afterlife in pillar inscriptions.

Inscribing genealogical records was increasingly prioritized in the familial enterprise of installing tomb pillars in the Jin dynasty. Although many tomb pillars from northern Shanxi still had carved the Zunsheng dhāranī spell, their explanatory inscriptions completely focused on genealogical information, rarely narrating how the Zunsheng dhāranī worked its magic to benefit the deceased and the living, as we have commonly seen in Tang tomb pillars.³² Some commissioners described the act of inscribing the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* but without actually materializing it. For instance, in 1199, six sons of Yu Dehai 虞得海, a local gentleman of Shuozhou, installed an eight-sided tomb pillar for their recently deceased father. The inscription reads:

On the fifth day of the third month in the fourth year of Cheng'an era, Mr. Yu was buried in the village of Beishili of Fengyue Town in Mayi County. We specifically made this pillar inscription to indicate names of our ancestors so that members of the later generations know what words to be avoided as taboo. We sincerely copied and inscribed the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* to repay the limitless debts [to our ancestors]. 承安四年三月初五日, 葬於朔州馬邑縣豐樂鄉北石里, 特立確記, 標祖先諱, 庶後來使易迴避, 謹寫刊尊勝陀羅尼經, 用報罔

³⁰ Iiyama, 'Genealogical Steles in North China'; Wang, 'Clergy, Kinship, and Clout', 218–22.

³¹ Wang, *In the Wake of the Mongols*, chapter 3.

³² For examples, see several inscriptions of Jin-dynasty tomb pillars included in Niu, *Dingxiang jinshi kao*. These tomb pillars include 'Jin gu Qu gong muchuang ji' 金故麴公墓幢記 (1154), 43b–44b; 'Zhang Fu muchuang' 張福墓幢 (1187), 49b–50a; 'Gu Zhao gong zhi muchuang' 故趙公之墓幢 (1197), 53a–54a; 'Zhi shi xianying shichuang' 智氏先塋石幢 (1197), 55b–56b.

極之德.³³

Yet the content of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* is nowhere to be found in the entire pillar inscription.³⁴ The quoted passage indicates that Mr. Yu's sons did not install a separate pillar to specifically inscribe the sūtra. Similar to the 1107 and 1211 pillars discussed in the previous section, Yu's sons likely considered the literary invoking of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* sufficient to imbue the pillar with the imagined salvation powers. In this case, even the literary reference to the dhāranī's efficacy through wind, dust, and shadow was no longer needed.

With the minimum use of the pillar surface for inscriptions related to the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*, the majority of the 1203 pillar inscription was dedicated to biographical records of Yu Dehai, his two wives, their children and grandchildren. The pillar emphasized the two wives' contributions to the family, openly accrediting the Yu family's current prosperity and well-being to them. The two women were praised for their virtues of no jealousy of each other, filially serving their parents-in-law, and their shared devotion to Buddhist belief, including chanting sūtras themselves.³⁵ In addition, the inscription documents in detail the conduct of Yu Lu 虞祿, Yu Dehai's eldest son, who made

³³ 'Jinyi fuwei Yu gong chuang ji' 進義副尉虞公幢記, Zhou, ed., *Sanjin shike daquan: Shuozhou shi Pinglu*, 7.

³⁴ The currently published version of the pillar includes a brief introduction to the pillar by a modern editor, the entire inscription, and a relatively clear image of the eight-column rubbings. It is clear that the surface of the pillar was not inscribed with the *Zunsheng dhāranī* spell, let alone the entire sūtra. See 'Jinyi fuwei Yu gong chuang ji', Zhou, ed., *Sanjin shike daquan: Shuozhou shi Pinglu*, 7–8.

³⁵ For example, for the first wife née Jin 靳氏—she was unable to give birth to children and then arranged the marriage of née Ni with her husband, the inscription concludes, 'As to the kinship group, everyone in the senior and junior generations trust and love each other, leaving a reputation for the later descendants. If for a hundred and a thousand years, the ritual of sacrifices [to the ancestors of the Yus] continues, it is all the repercussion of née Jin' ('Jinyi fuwei Yu gong chuang

proper funeral arrangement for his father and allocated a specific land property to secure the expenditures needed for maintaining the family's graveyard and making sacrificial offerings for ancestors in the future. These details attest to the tomb pillar's focused attention to familial matters in this world, including its reputation, continuity, and prosperity

Some sponsors even deliberately saved pillar space for new carvings of genealogical records in the future. This practice was demonstrated by the inscription on the eighth column of the pillar dedicated to Yu Dehai. As the pillar inscription shows, the pillar was originally installed in 1199, on the same date when Yu Dehai was buried. At the time, the eighth column must have been left blank, because its inscription was carved four years later. After née Ni 倪氏, Yu Dehai's second wife, died in the fifth month of 1203, Yu Lu and his brothers, in the eighth month of the same year, inscribed the biography of their mother on the eighth column of the pillar they had installed for their father four years before. This fact tells us a great deal about how the Yu family planned for the pillar use when they commissioned it in 1199. Instead of inscribing the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* or at least the shorter dhāranī text on the eighth column—which would have fulfilled what they promised in the 1199 inscription, they reserved the space for a brief eulogizing biography of née Ni.

The tomb pillar dedicated to Yu Dehai represented a distinctive type of tomb pillar that appeared in northern Shanxi in the Jin-Yuan periods. They mentioned the Zunsheng dhāranī or sūtra in inscriptions, but they bore neither the sūtra text nor the appellation of 'Zunsheng dhāranī pillar'. In another example of a tomb pillar installed in Hengshan village of Dingxiang 定襄 county in 1300, the Zunsheng dhāranī was briefly mentioned within the narrative of explanatory inscription. The entire pillar inscription details the biography of Zhang Wenzhan 張文展 (the deceased) and his descendants, with a focus on Monk Miao 妙吉祥 (the installer and one of Zhang's five sons), as well as an extensive genealogical chart of the Zhang kinship group. The

ji', *ibid.*, 7: 至於親族, 上下孚休, 內外均愛, 垂裕後昆, 歷千百載, 奉祭祀蘋蘩之禮, 皆靳氏之餘波也。

tomb pillar was likely conceived as a Buddhist pillar on two grounds. Above all, the first column of this six-sided tomb pillar was carved an image of a bodhisattva, followed by the pillar title ‘Tomb Pillar of The Grand Old Man Leshan’ (*Leshan laoren muchuang* 樂善老人墓幢). Secondly, and also indirectly, the pillar inscription mentions that, ‘Mr. [Zhang]’s great-great-great-grandparents, great grandparents, and all ancestors of other branches complied with the Zunsheng dhāranī’ 公之五代祖及曾祖考妣兼房從向尊勝真言.³⁶ This brief note conveys the message that members of the entire Zhang kinship group were believers of the Zunsheng dhāranī. Some, such as Monk Miao, likely practiced chanting the dhāranī as well.

A pressing question emerges from examples like the tomb pillars of Yu Dehai and Zhang Wenzhan. Did their installers regard them as Zunsheng pillars and should we categorize them as Zunsheng pillars? As I argued in the previous section, for some Zunsheng tomb pillars without scriptural texts including the dhāranī itself, people continued to conceive them as Zunsheng pillars, which alone sustained people’s belief in the pillars’ efficacy. But at least the 1107 and 1201 pillars from the Miaoyin Monastery still bear the appellation of ‘Zunsheng dhāranī pillar’ without ambiguity. For the tomb pillars of Yu Dehai and Zhang Wenzhan, their titles put an emphasis on the people (the deceased and by large their families and lineages) instead of the Buddhist scripture to define the nature of the tomb pillars. We may never know whether the sons of Yu Dehai and Zhang Wenzhan considered their tomb pillars as Zunsheng pillars. But if they did, they surely continued to believe in the efficacy of the pillars in merit-making. For them, the efficacy would derive solely from the mentioning—instead of carving—of the Zunsheng scriptural texts in inscriptions, from the stones’ pillar-shaped form, and from the carving of a bodhisattva image. In other words, the material presence of Zunsheng dhāranī texts was figurative, not textual. But in their sponsors’ perception, that was sufficient for their tomb pillars to exercise imagined salvation powers to benefit both the deceased and the living of their kinship groups.

Conclusion

³⁶ Niu, *Dingxiang jinsbi kao* 3.4b.

Existing tomb pillars in northern Shanxi demonstrate a clear trajectory of Zunsheng tomb pillars' evolution from the Tang to the Song-Liao-Jin-Yuan periods. While the underlying religious message about a Zunsheng tomb pillar's mighty power in merit-making never changed, the perception of how the pillar worked the magic did. In the Tang, most tomb pillars bore the full set of scriptural texts including the preface, the sūtra, and the dhāranī. The post-Tang world witnessed the tendency to treat scriptural texts for pillar inscription: omitting the full or excerpted text of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* and the preface. While some tomb pillars continued to inscribe the Chinese or Sanskrit version of the Zunsheng dhāranī, others even left out the dhāranī text all together. This trend of epigraphic practice spoke to two intertwined socio-religious changes taking place quietly in northern Shanxi societies in the middle period after the fall of the Tang dynasty.

On the one hand, Zunsheng tomb pillars changed its primary focus from generating merits for the deceased and the living to bearing lengthy genealogical records. As a result, inscriptions with biographical and kinship information increasingly occupied more space of pillar surfaces than scriptural texts. From the Jin period onward, Zunsheng tomb pillars began to include extensive genealogical writing of local lineages, characterized by charts of male and female members of a local kinship group spanning several generations. Even many Zunsheng tomb pillars for Buddhist clergy began to include biographical and genealogical records of their lay family's members. In other words, the importance of Zunsheng pillars as a medium for kinship information increasingly surpassed that for scriptural information. The prevalent social practice concerning ancestral worship and kinship development interacted with people's epigraphic practice of shortening and eliminating scriptural texts, giving familial records the dominant space of pillar surfaces.

On the other hand, the changing epigraphic practice in northern Shanxi society from the Tang onward quietly altered the ways in which local people understood Zunsheng tomb pillars, especially the working of their efficacy. There seemed to emerge a new social perception about the importance of text and image in defining Zunsheng tomb pillars as

religious objects. Compared to the overwhelming role of the lengthy original scriptural texts on the Zunsheng pillars from the Tang, textual content increasingly shortened and even reduced from passages to indicative terms. Meanwhile, material forms—and sometimes visual forms too on pillars carved with Buddha or bodhisattva images—gradually overtook textual forms to indicate a stone pillar’s religious nature. The changes in textual content and form resulted to an implicit and likely unintended change in the religious assumption about the working of the Zunsheng tomb pillars. The material presence of the dhāranī text was no longer necessary in defining the physical object’s religious nature as Zunsheng pillars. The working of the Zunsheng dhāranī now also stopped relying on people’s diverse ways of direct or indirect bodily engagement with the dhāranī—as *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra* originally prescribes—but people’s conceptual recognition of doing so. By extension, the imagined efficacy of a tomb pillar now hinged on people’s recognition of it as a Zunsheng pillar.

Bibliography

Abbreviation

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. See Bibliography, Secondary Sources, Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.

Primary Sources

Foding Zunsheng Tuoluoni Jing 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經 [Skt. *Buddhosnīsavijayadhāranī Sūtra*]. 1 *juan*. Trans. Buddapālita (Fotuoboli 佛陀波利; active in 7th c.), between 349 and 352. *T* no. 967, vol. 10.

Yushi 語石 [Words on Stones]. 8 *juan*. By Ye Changchi 葉昌熾 (1849–1917). Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu yinshuguan 臺灣商務印書館, 1970.

Secondary Sources

- Barrett, T. H. 'Stūpa, Sūtra, and Sarīra in China, c. 656–706 CE'. *Buddhist Studies Review* 18.1 (2001): 1–64.
- Chen Xiaowei 陳曉偉. 'Miezui yu chaodu: Liao shiqi foding zunsheng tuoluoni jingchuang yu jinbei diqu de zaochuang' 滅罪與超度: 遼時期佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經幢與晉北地區的造幢 [Eliminating Sins and Releasing Souls from Hells: The Zunsheng Dhāraṇī Pillars in the Liao Dynasty and the Pillar-Making in the Northern Shanxi Region]. *Wutaishan yanjiu* 五台山研究 [Research on Mount Wutai] 1 (2009): 51–53.
- Chen, Jinhua. 'Śarīra and Scepter: Empress Wu's Political Use of Buddhist Relics'. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 25.1/2 (2002): 33–150.
- . 'Nuns in Tang China: Two Studies'. *Asia Major* 15.2 (2002): 51–85.
- Copp, Paul. *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Deng Qingping 鄧慶平 et al., eds. *Yuxian beiming jiluo* 蔚縣碑銘輯錄 [Compilation of Steles and Inscriptions from Yu County]. Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue chubanshe 廣西師範大學出版社, 2009.
- Du Qigui 杜啓貴, ed. *Sanjin shike daquan: Shuozhou shi Shuocheng qu juan (shang)* 三晉石刻大全: 朔州市朔城區卷 (上) [Complete Stone Inscriptions from Shanxi Province: Volume on Shuocheng District of Shuozhou City, Part One]. Taiyuan: Sanjin chubanshe 三晉出版社, 2017.
- Hong, Jeehee. 'Changing Roles of the Tomb Portrait: Burial Practices and Ancestral Worship of the Non-Literati Elite in North China (1000–1400)'. *Journal of Song-Yuan Studies* 44 (2014): 203–64.
- Iiyama, Tomoyasu. 'Genealogical Steles in North China during the Jin and Yuan Dynasties'. *International Journal of Asian Studies* 13.2 (2016): 151–96.
- . 'Steles and Status: Evidence for the Emergence of a New Elite in Yuan North China'. *Journal of Chinese History* 1 (2017): 3–26.
- Johnson, Linda Cooke. *Women of the Conquest Dynasties: Gender*

- and Identity in Liao and Jin China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011.
- Liang Binlong 梁斌龍 et al., eds. *Sanjin shike daquan: Datong shi Datong xian juan* 三晉石刻大全: 大同市大同縣卷 [Complete Stone Inscriptions from Shanxi Province: Volume on Datong County of Datong City]. Taiyuan: Sanjin chubanshe 三晉出版社, 2014.
- Liang Junjie 梁俊杰. *Sanjin shike daquan: Taiyuan shi Loufan xian juan* 三晉石刻大全: 太原市樓煩縣卷 [Complete Stone Inscriptions from Shanxi Province: Volume on Loufan County of Taiyuan City]. Taiyuan: Sanjin chubanshe 三晉出版社, 2016.
- Lin Yunrou 林韻柔. 'Tangdai Foding zunsheng tuoluoni jing de yichuan yu xinyang' 唐代佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經的譯傳與信仰 [Translation, Circulation, and Worship of the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*]. *Foguang Foxue xuebao* 佛光佛學學報 [Fo Guang Journal of Buddhist Studies] 3 (2008): 145–93.
- Liu Shufen 劉淑芬. *Miezui yu duwang: Foding zunsheng tuoluoni jingchuang zhi yanjiu* 滅罪與度亡: 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經幢之研究 [Eliminating Sins and Delivering the Deceased: Studies on the *Zunsheng Dhāranī Sūtra*]. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2008.
- Niu Chengxiu 牛誠修. *Dingxiang jinshi kao* 定襄金石考 [Textual Analysis of Metals and Stones from Dingxiang]. 4 juan. Unpublished manuscript of 1932 held in the Yale University Sterling Library, New Haven, CT, U.S.
- Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭, eds. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 [Buddhist Canon Compiled during the Taishō Era (1912–1926)]. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai 大正一切經刊行會, 1924–1932. Digitized in CBETA (v. 5.2) (<https://www.cbeta.org>) and SAT Daizōkyō Text Database (<http://21dzk.l.u-Tōkyō.ac.jp/SAT/satdb2015.php>).
- Wang, Jinping. 'Clergy, Kinship, and Clout in Yuan Dynasty Shanxi'. *International Journal of Asian Studies* 13.2 (2016): 197–228.
- . *In the Wake of the Mongols: The Making of a New Social Order in North China, 1200–1600*. Cambridge: Harvard Asian Center, 2018.

- Wong, Dorothy C. *Chinese Steles: Pre-Buddhist and Buddhist Use of a Symbolic Form*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004.
- Xia Guangxing 夏廣興. 'Foding zunsheng tuoluoni xinyang yu Songdai sangzang xisu' 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼信仰與宋代喪葬習俗 [The Worship of the Zunsheng Dhāranī and Funeral Customs in the Song Dynasty]. *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究 [Research on World Religions] 1 (2015): 59–65.
- Zhao Gaiping 趙改萍. 'Tangdai foding zunsheng tuoluoni jingchuang zai Shanxi de liubu' 唐代佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經幢在山西的流佈 [Circulation of the Zunsheng Dhāranī Pillars in Shanxi during the Tang Dynasty]. *Shanxi dang'an* 山西檔案 [Archives in Shanxi Province] 2 (2012): 41–46.
- Zhou Liang 周亮. *Sanjin shike daquan: Shuozhou shi Pinglu qu juan* 三晉石刻大全: 朔州市平魯區卷 [Complete Stone Inscriptions from Shanxi Province: Volume on Pinglu District of Shuozhou City]. Taiyuan: Sanjin chubanshe 三晉出版社, 2012.