Against Impermanence: Women, Ritual, and Materiality in Early Medieval China

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Abstract: The patrons of early medieval Chinese Buddhism commissioned thousands of votive images and monuments, many including inscriptions justifying their gift and even donor figures depicting them in the act of offering worship. Such monuments provide a lasting record of the lives of Buddhist believers, especially women, whose existence was overlooked by historical writing. Those produced in enduring materials like stone and bronze offer a kind of permanence that is echoed in the rhetoric of the donor inscriptions themselves, which justify the making of Buddhist images as a way to preserve knowledge of the Buddha and the Dharma. This contrasts with the ephemerality of both the ritual practices surrounding the dedication of such monuments and the lives of women in Chinese history.

Keywords: monuments, donors, impermanence

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The essays in this issue, like the conference which inspired them, ask us to consider the relationship between the practice of ritual, which is ephemeral, and its lasting material traces in the world, including both the paraphernalia used in ritual and the objects which result from it. We do so in the context of Buddhism, whose basic insights include the fundamental impermanence of all things material. Yet Buddhist believers in medieval China sponsored the production of Buddhist images in huge numbers, often in materials chosen for their durability, which included inscriptions that make it clear that the preservation of the image of the Buddha in the face of impermanence and decay was one of their goals. Rather than relinquishing their attachment to the material world, or to the memory of the dead, for whose benefit these images were often dedicated, the donors of such images actively resist the loss of the ephemeral and impermanent.

In doing so, they also provide a material record of the lives of individuals who were of no interest to official history. The medieval Chinese historical record is voluminous and richly detailed, but one of its greatest absences is the accounts of women, who appear only occasionally and usually as adjuncts to a male relative's story. Women's lives, in the context of medieval Chinese history, are as ephemeral as the performance of ritual in the context of medieval Buddhist practice. Yet the durable record of Buddhist images in stone and bronze, sponsored by patrons from various classes and walks of life, was explicitly intended to defy that ephemerality. The effect is that women patrons of Buddhist images in medieval China resisted their own impermanence, alongside that of the rituals they enacted.

The dedication inscriptions on Buddhist figures and monuments of the fifth and sixth centuries are often terse and conventional, including a date, a donor's name, and possibly the name of the person intended to benefit from the gift. Yet where they depart from convention, they sometimes capture details of belief and practice that can be illuminating. For example, consider a Guanyin figure dated 541 CE, found in the ruins of the Xiude Temple 修德寺 in Quyang, Hebei, and dedicated by a patron called Wu Yanying 吳延英 (Fig. 1):

> [On this day in the year 541], the pure and faithful daughter, the Buddhist disciple, Zhang Feng's mother, Wu Yanying, held a ritual

FIG. 1 Guanyin bodhisattva figure sponsored by Wu Yanying, Eastern Wei, 541. After Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 171.

for her deceased mother, her living father, her husband, and her sick son, and reverently made a white marble Guanyin statue. Now, after the work is complete, may her deceased mother ascend in purity, and transcend the Three Realms. May her living father's health continue, may her husband enjoy longevity, and may her son's sickness be cured. May all living things benefit from this advantage; may her living relatives enjoy remission of the twelve [links of dependent arising],[1] and may all [beings] together ascend to the greatest reward. 興和三年八月廿五日，清信女佛弟子張豐母，吳延英為亡母、現在父、

[1] This is slightly unclear but seems to be a reference to the *shi er yinyuan* 十二因緣, the twelve phases of conditioned existence that give rise to human suffering.

> 夫主、患子修禮, 敬造觀世音白玉石像一軀. 功成[之]後, 願令亡母清升, 超越三界. 現父康延, 夫主延壽, 子患得除. 蒼生沾益, 現眷蒙休等諸十二, 並及一切俱登果極.[2]

Wu Yanying's inscription records two acts of devotion: the creation of the modest white marble sculpture on which the inscription is found, and the sponsorship of a ritual of some kind. Both were evidently key to fulfilling the hopes Wu expresses here, but only one, the bodhisattva figure, can still be examined directly. Yet both are still of interest. The sweet-faced standing Guanyin with his draped scarves is in keeping with the themes of salvation that Wu's inscription evokes, since Guanyin was popularly revered as a universal saviour;[3] would the ritual have been equally consistent? Just what kind of ritual did Wu enact (or sponsor) on her family's behalf?

The problem with studying ritual in the past is similar to the problem of studying identity in the past, in that neither one is a thing which itself can be preserved through time. Identity is situational, socially constructed, relational: it is something that you do, rather than something that you have. In order to inquire into the history of identity, one has to identify the signs it leaves in the material record, rather than observing the thing itself. Similarly, ritual is by definition an activity, a thing that happens; as Catherine Bell observes, it is a 'category for human action',[4] whose study in the present day is fundamentally ethnographic. It can only be studied in the past indirectly, through religious texts and the historical record as well as through artifacts (some of which are also texts) which may have been used in ritual practice.

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[2] Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 171. Now in the collection of the Hebei Provincial Conservation Center 河北省文物保護中心.

[3] The chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* called the 'Guanyin pumen pin' 觀音普門品 [Universal Gateway of Guanyin] enumerates the many ways in which Guanyin is ready to help any believer who calls upon his name. The chapter began to circulate independently, as if it were a separate sūtra, not long after its translation into Chinese. See Yü, *Chinese Buddhism*, 82–85.

[4] Bell, *Ritual*, xi.

Of these, it is the artifacts of ritual which potentially provide the most tangible access to actual rituals as they were performed in early medieval China. There is no shortage of received texts on ritual, or of liturgies which were demonstrably used in medieval Buddhist practice, but anyone who has been involved in planning a religious ritual will recognize that the liturgy provides a structural framework for the ritual, which is then adapted in practice (and within limits) to the needs of the moment and the community.[5] The Buddhist canon is of course full of texts which refer to or outline ritual practices, but in some cases these are more prescriptive than descriptive.[6] A good number of liturgical prayers do survive from the later medieval period[7] to offer a perspective on how specific rituals might have been carried out.[8] Historical texts from the period occasionally mention or

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[5] My perspective on this question is undoubtedly shaped by having recently planned a double bar mitzvah for my twin sons in a liturgically conservative community where correct practice is a strong value. A broad range of questions not addressed by the liturgy needed to be resolved in order for this to take place, and as a result, a reading of the liturgy itself, which we followed quite faithfully, would nevertheless fail to provide an account that resembled the ritual as it actually occurred.

[6] As in, for example, the *Guan Wuliangshou Fo jing* 觀無量壽佛經, *T* no. 365, 12: 340b–346b, which prescribes a series of sixteen visualization meditations on the Pure Land of Amitayus, but which itself provides no insight into how early medieval practitioners performed them.

[7] I use 'medieval' here to cover the period from the fall of Han in 220 CE to the fall of Tang in 907 CE, encompassing the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties, the Sui, and the Tang. Some aspects of Buddhist practice, such as the development of lay Buddhist associations, are far better documented for the Tang than for the preceding period of division, not least because of the Dunhuang documents, which mostly date to the Tang and later. These can be extraordinarily useful and illuminating, but we should be cautious about the extent to which we project their insights backward on the pre-Tang period.

[8] I refer here to the broad category of *yuanwen* 願文, many of which survive among the Dunhuang documents (dated to the Tang and later), which includes both model texts which can be seen as prescriptive, and individual documents

describe rituals, but often rather incidentally, in contexts where an accurate and detailed record of the ritual practice was not a primary concern.[9] The artifacts used in or produced in a ritual context, by contrast, are the relics of an actual, specific ritual which was actually carried out at some date in the past. In this, their very materiality makes them a lasting trace of the ephemeral practices of Buddhist ritual.

For early medieval Chinese Buddhism, few if any examples of ritual paraphernalia (such as censers, vestments, altar furniture and so on) remain; most of the surviving artifacts with connections to ritual practice are Buddhist monuments large and small, including small-scale Buddhist figurines, freestanding stelae and figures, and cave temples. Thousands of such monuments survive which were produced in North China during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries CE, under the patronage of monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists, who gained religious merit thereby. Early medieval Buddhism offered the believer many opportunities for merit-making, which were available to anyone who could muster the resources or the skills. One sūtra text, translated into Chinese in the early fourth century, promises rebirth in the paradise of the Pure Land to:

> Any worthy man or woman there may be who hears the names of the world-honoured Buddhas of the three kalpas; who believes in them joyfully and reads and recites them without slander; who may be able to write them out so that they may be explained to others, or who may be able to paint or erect Buddha-images, or may be able to worship them with incense, flowers, and music. 若有善男子善女人,

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which seem to report (or may have been used in) the performance of a particular ritual. The latter may in fact qualify as artifacts of ritual in the sense that I am using the term here, but most are later than the inscriptions that are my focus. See, for example, Stevenson, 'The T'ien-t'ai Four Forms', Teiser, 'The Literary Style'; Wang, *Dunhuang*, Chen, 'Making'.

9 As in the descriptions of Buddhist street festivals in the *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記, written around 547. See for example Zhou, annot., *Luoyang*, 53, and Jenner, *Memories of Loyang*, 165.

聞是三世三劫諸佛世尊名號，歡喜信樂持諷讀誦而不誹謗；或能書寫為他人說, 或能畫作立佛形像, 或能供養香華伎樂.[10]

The ritual practices described here depended on having the resources to pay for images and offerings, or the literacy necessary to 'read and recite'; nevertheless, this is still a remarkably egalitarian statement. There is no notional restriction on who counts as a 'worthy man or woman' in this case, and this is what makes the study of Buddhist practice in this period so valuable for the social historian: unlike the official historical sources of the period, which took very little interest in the lives of ordinary people, the donors of Buddhist monuments came from nearly all walks of life. The elite and the humble, laymen, laywomen, monks, and nuns, who might otherwise have disappeared from history, have left their own memorials in the inscriptions on these monuments. Such texts form a rich epigraphic record that documents the ephemeral: the practices of medieval Buddhism, the rituals that surrounded the dedication of a Buddhist monument, and the lives of ordinary Buddhists themselves.[11]

The broadly patriarchal nature of premodern Chinese society, and the fact that the lives of men were the primary focus of historical writing, means that few things are more ephemeral in early medieval history than the lives of women. Chinese Buddhism is not an obvious place to look for female empowerment, given several persistent themes which disparage the potential of female practitioners: specifically, the uncleanliness of the female body, with its discharges of

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[10] *Guoqu zhuangyanjie qian Fo ming jing* 過去莊嚴劫千佛名經, *T* no. 446a, 14: 365a–b. For a slightly different English translation of this passage, see Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 202. Similar promises are found in the texts of other Buddha-name sūtras such as the *Foming jing* 佛名經 in its two recensions of 12 and 30 chapters (*T* no. 440, 14: 114a–184a and *T* no. 441, 14: 185a–311b). See also the *Zuo Fo xingxiang jing* 作佛形像經, *T* no. 0692, 16: 788a–c, or its English translation in Sharf, 'The Scripture on the Production of Buddha Images'.

[11] Several large-scale studies have made use of this body of material to fascinating effect: see Hou, *Wu, liu shiji*; Sato, 'Hokuchō'; Kuramoto, *Hokuchō*, among others.

blood, and the difficulty or impossibility of achieving enlightenment from a female incarnation. Yet among the patrons of Buddhist images in the early medieval period were many women, some of whom donated images in their own right, to their own benefit, with their own funds, and in service of their own hopes and prayers. Some led their communities in collective patronage, and others left inscriptions in their own voices. In fact, it seems that in many cases Buddhism provided opportunities for women's public participation in social life in early medieval China, which might otherwise have been more limited; and it is this which has enabled their stories to survive.

The enduring nature of the Buddhist images such donors produced is mostly a function of their material. Although the historical record informs us that early medieval Buddhist images were produced in a wide range of materials, such as wood, ivory, dry lacquer, clay, tapestry, embroidery, paper, and silk, the surviving body of material is predominantly made of stone[12] and bronze, and of these, stone images, being the most durable, are the most numerous. Stone of all kinds has a long history of association with ideas of durability and preservation in China, dating back to the pre-Buddhist period when (for example) Cai Yong 蔡邕 and other scholars of the second century commissioned a complete set of the Confucian classics to be carved into stone tablets, to protect them from future loss or corruption.[13] A similar anxiety sometimes drove the practice of engraving sūtra texts on stone to preserve them against destruction in the face of the decline of the dharma, most famously at the site of Fangshan in the suburbs of Beijing, where sūtra texts were inscribed on stone slabs and walled up in sealed chambers.[14]

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[12] Limestone, sandstone, and marble are the most common among surviving examples, but any stone might be used. The specific type of stone depended on what material was locally available and best suited to carving.

[13] The 'Xiping shi jing' 熹平石經 [Xiping Stone Classics], made between 175 and 183 and installed in the Eastern Han capital of Luoyang. See de Crespigny, *Fire Over Luoyang*, 382–85.

[14] See Tsiang, 'Monumentalization', especially 253–54, and more recent ongoing work by the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities project

Relatively few surviving Buddhist donor inscriptions in the early medieval period refer explicitly to the age of the decline of the dharma, but many allude to anxiety over the loss of true knowledge in the wake of the historical Buddha's nirvāṇa. The many Buddhas of the Mahayana cosmos, and especially the historical Buddha, Śākyamuni, were the objects of worship for ordinary practitioners, and Śākyamuni at least provided an example for the believer seeking ultimately to achieve release from the cycle of rebirth through Buddhahood. Yet nirvāṇa, in principle the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, implies the departure of the Buddha from the universe. Those left behind clearly lamented the loss that this represented. The opening section of a donor inscription on the base of a white marble statue from Hebei province, dated 560, and dedicated by a female patron named Jin Jiangwei 金將微 (Fig. 2), expresses this anxiety quite clearly:

> Now the true body [of the Buddha] has no form, and must be represented through images, for which reason King Udayana represented it in gold, and King Prasenajit carved it in sandalwood;[15] the stone images floating on the river are the [same] miraculous response in our own time.[16] The Buddhist disciple, the daughter Jin Jiangwei,

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on Buddhist Stone Sūtras. The 'decline of the dharma' (Ch. *mofa* 末法 or Jp. *mappō*) indicated a future age, which at various times was thought to be imminent, in which all knowledge of the Three Treasures (Buddha, dharma, saṇgha) would be lost to the world. For more on this doctrine, see Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time*, especially 90–118, and Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion*, 55–75.

[15] This is an inversion of the famous account from the *Zeng yi Ahan jing*, *T* no. 125, 2: 28.706a, in which King Udayana of Kaushambi in Vatsa commissions the first Buddha image to be carved from life, out of sandalwood, and King Prasenajit of Śrāvastī in Kōsala responds by commissioning a second image in gold. Udayana and Prasenajit were said to be contemporaries of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, in the later sixth or the fifth centuries BCE.

[16] This refers to a famous story of miraculous Buddhist images discovered floating on the surface of the Wusong river during the Xianhe reign of the Eastern Jin (326–335 CE), as recorded in the biography of Huida 慧達 in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, *T* no. 2059, 50: 13.409c. See also Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 9–10.

FIG. 2 Base of a Buddhist sculpture dedicated by Jin Jiangwei, Northern Qi, 560. After Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 363.

> knowing that wealth is as transitory as a flash of lightning, instantaneous and impossible to preserve, seeks instead benevolence and grace. Now [on this day in the year 560], I have reverently made a white marble image of Śākyamuni... 夫真身無狀, 假像以表形, 故優填寫金, 波斯刻檀; 石像浮江, 近代神感. 佛弟子女金將微, 知財電炎, 倏忽難留, 追慕恩德. 今以乾明元年歲次庚辰, 六月辛巳朔十五日乙未, 敬造釋迦等身白玉像一軀...[17]

The implication here is that Jin Jiangwei's image serves the same function as the more famous King Udayana and King Prasenajit images; that is, to preserve knowledge of the Buddha in the wake of his departure from the world. As a carving in stone, it may even have been thought better for this purpose than burnable sandalwood or

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[17] Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 363–64. Only the base of the sculpture survives and is in the collection of the Hebei Provincial Conservation Center 河北省文物保護中心.

meltable gold, though Jin herself does not make this claim in her inscription. To value stone for its material permanence on some level contradicts the basic Buddhist insight that the material world is fundamentally impermanent. But as the practice of inscribing texts on stone shows, the permanence of stone—or perhaps better, its durability—appears in fact to have offered a remedy for the problems of impermanence. For the nuns Fawen and Falong, who dedicated an image at the Longmen cave temple site in 509, the awareness of impermanence was part of their motivation for sponsoring their monument, which they offer as a lasting benefit for all living beings.

> [On this day in the year 509], the bhikṣuṇīs [nuns] Fawen and Falong, mindful of the impermanence of the present existence, conceived a deep and honest wish. We parted with our personal resources, each for her own benefit, to reverently make this image of Maitreya. May it cause all those who pass by and see it to be watered with the fruitfulness of the dharma-rain. May those who worship it share in all-surpassing joy. At the Three Sermons under the *nāgapuṣpa* tree, may we take our place in the stream. May all living beings in their turn enjoy this blessing.[18] 永平二年歲次己丑四月廿五日, 比丘尼法文法隆等, 覺非常世, 深發誠願, 割竭私財, 各為己身, 敬造彌勒像一軀. 願使過見者普沾法雨之潤, 禮拜者同無上之樂. 龍華三唱, 願在流次. 一切衆生, 普同斯福.[19]

Being 'mindful of the impermanence of the present existence', as their inscription says, they recognized that life is short, and were moved to sponsor an image while they still could; but in doing so,

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[18] The Three Sermons under the *nāgapuṣpa* tree describes the occasion in the far future when Maitreya Bodhisattva will achieve Buddhahood, which he has vowed to postpone until all living beings have achieved enlightenment. Thus, the nuns pray to be 'in the stream' of those who benefit from Maitreya's vow, i.e., among the ranks of enlightened beings. In more general terms, 'stream-enterers' are those who have taken the first steps on the path to sure enlightenment. For a slightly different translation of the inscription, see McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 170.

[19] Mizuno and Nagahiro, *Ryūmon*, 303, entry no. 606. Punctuation mine.

they left an image of Maitreya to future generations, in full awareness of the power of stone to last through the centuries, and with the explicit wish that the image should continue to testify to the truth of the Buddha-dharma, as in fact it does.

These themes of endurance and preservation resonate through the practice of image-making in early medieval China. Clearly, one of the goals that motivated the production of Buddhist images and monuments was to allow the preservation of something transient and easily lost in an impermanent world: the true face of the Buddha and the true knowledge of Buddhism. But in the course of sponsoring an image or a monument, the donors were also creating a permanent record of their own beliefs and practices, which were, in their way, just as impermanent. And inasmuch as most of the patrons who sponsored the production of Buddhist images were too ordinary to have been recorded in the official histories or other writings of their time, they were also creating an enduring record of their own lives.

Buddhist images and monuments were, of course, intimately connected with ritual practice. As the sūtra text quoted earlier makes clear, images of the Buddhas and the bodhisattvas served as the focus of large-scale devotional rituals and small-scale personal offerings of 'incense, flowers, and music'. At this point in the history of Chinese Buddhism it is hard to envision any temple, monastery, or shrine that was not organized around multiple images of the Buddha. A sixth-century account of Luoyang by the former Northern Wei official Yang Xuanzhi 楊衒之 (fl. 500–535) describes the main Buddha-hall of the Yongning Temple 永寧寺, founded in 516 through the sponsorship of the Empress Dowager Hu, as containing 'a gilded Buddha figure eighteen feet in height, ten gilded Buddha figures of medium size, three figures studded with pearls, five figures woven with gold thread, and two jade statues' (丈八金像一軀, 中長金像十軀, 繡珠像三軀, 金織成像五軀, 玉像二軀).[20] The same text describes offerings made to Buddha images, periodic vegetarian feasts held before them, and festivals in which images were brought out of the temples in procession, sometimes to be celebrated with music, acrobatic per-

[20] Zhou, annot., *Luoyang*, 20; Jenner, *Memories of Loyang*, 149.

formances, and other entertainments.

In addition to rituals in which an image of the Buddha served as the object of devotion, we know that there were rituals connected specifically with the dedication of a Buddhist image or monument.[21] The most famous of these is the 'eye-opening' (*kaiming* 開明 or *kai guangming* 開光明) ceremony, in which the eyes of the Buddha or bodhisattva figure were painted in or dotted to complete the image and awaken its spiritual potential. This is still a key practice in the dedication of new images in East Asian Buddhism and Chinese popular religion today, to the extent that even new dragon boats and lion-dance costumes may be 'awakened' in a similar way.[22] The significance of the ritual is such that after the dedication of the colossal Buddha of the Tōdai ji 東大寺 in Nara (Japan) in 752, the huge paintbrush used to dot in the eyes was preserved as a relic in the temple's collection, where it remains today.[23] Stone and bronze Buddhas from early medieval China have mostly lost the polychrome pigment that once adorned them, but we know they must have undergone similar consecration, not least because their lists of donors often name the sponsors of the ceremony.

The occasional appearance of acrobats and musicians among the figures on Buddhist monuments of the fifth and sixth centuries[24] suggests that the more pictorially complex stelae could be at once the relic of ritual practice and a representation of ritual celebration. Donor figures depicted on such monuments conventionally show the patrons of the image facing reverentially toward the Buddha, often with a flower or other offering in hand,[25] which must have

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[21] Many liturgical prayers (*yuanwen* 願文) related to these rituals survive among the Dunhuang documents, although most date to the Tang or later. Several hundred are collected in Huang and Wu, *Dunhuang*, for example pages 382 and 411 (for image consecration), 388 (for dedicating a cave temple), and 423 (for the eye-dotting ceremony).

[22] Reich, *Spirit Image*, esp. 307–10.

[23] Wang, 'Early Chinese Buddhist Sculptures', 14–15.

[24] For example, Metropolitan Museum 65.29.1 (dated 528 CE).

[25] For example, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco B6252+ (dated 549 CE).

been an echo of the reverence they offered at the time. Surely these gestures evoked familiar ritual practices for the viewers of the time. But it is usually unclear whether these representations depict actual rituals which really took place, or whether they are simply meant to identify the donors as the kind of people who take part in rituals.

This paper began by introducing a white marble Buddha dedicated in 541 by Wu Yanying, in which she states outright that she performed a ritual to benefit her family members. The explicit mention of ritual in her inscription is unusual, though not unique. A fragmentary bronze image in the collection of the Shanghai Museum, dated to 522, includes the phrase 'The Buddhist disciple Lu [name missing] offered a ritual for…' (佛弟盧口侍禮為…).[26] A stone stele in the Beilin Museum 碑林博物館 in Xi'an, undated but probably belonging to the first decade of the sixth century, reads: 'The pure believer Liu Baosheng and the pure believer Wang Meijiang reverently made a Maitreya image for their deceased daughter [Liu] Yingluo, and furthermore made an offering…' (清信士劉保生、清信士王媚姜, 為亡女英洛敬造彌勒像一區, 並有奉…).[27] These incomplete inscriptions also allude to rituals enacted by the donors of the images, and while the details of the rituals do not survive, there is a distinct sense in all three cases that the ritual and the donation are part of the same whole: that is, that both are aimed at the fulfillment of the donor's hopes. Wu Yanying's inscription expresses a variety of hopes: that her deceased mother should have a favourable rebirth or even escape rebirth entirely; that her living father should enjoy good health for years to come; that her husband should be blessed with longevity; and that her son recover from his illness. Any one of these hopes could be a typical single goal for an image donation, as commonly found in other inscriptions: Wu could also have added hopes for her own well-being, or that of the emperor and the state, while her extension of the blessing to 'all living beings' is also conventional. In any event, the inscription suggests that both the donation of the image and the unnamed ritual have the same overall constellation of goals.

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26 Matsubara, *Chūgoku bukkyō*, no. 187c.

27 Ibid., no. 128.

The dedications which allude to rituals performed do not generally describe the nature of the ritual. Yet a ritual, properly completed, results in a change in the state of things—a marriage enacted, a blessing conferred, a person transformed from child to adult—and the language of dedication inscriptions also frequently emphasizes the completion and describes the change. This seems particularly important where there is a significant gap of time between the vow to dedicate an image and the fulfillment of that vow. For example, a dedication for an image in the Guyang cave at Longmen records that the Northern Wei Lady Gao parted with her son, the Prince of Beihai, Yuan Xiang, on the riverbank at Longmen in 494, when the prince led his troops into battle in the south. At the time, they made a mutual vow that if mother and son could be safely reunited, they would sponsor a Maitreya image in thanks. The inscription is dated to 498, by which time Yuan Xiang had returned safely home, and it is attached to the Maitreya image which they commissioned in fulfillment of their vow, with the correct rituals: 'When the carving of the dharma-countenance was completed, we held a ceremonial vegetarian feast, having engraved the stone to express our hearts, and offered it in fulfillment of our previous intention' (法容刻就, 因即造齋, 鐫石表心, 奉申前志).[28]

The sense of the transformative importance of vow-fulfillment is pervasive, to the point that occasionally a dedication is made by a donor in posthumous fulfillment of someone's vow made during life, as one Di Longfu 邸龍副 did on behalf of his daughter Di Ajin 邸阿盡 after she made a vow during her final illness in the fourth month of the year 555. The inscription on the image he commissioned reads in part:

> As she was dying, she charged her parents and sisters to rely on the Three Treasures, and vowed to make a copy of the *Dīrghāgama sūtra* and a white marble Buddha figure. Her father, naturally, agreed to abide by her charge, and on the fifteenth day of the seventh month[29] of the same year, he commissioned a white marble 'pensive prince'

[28] Liu, *Longmen ershi pin*, n.p.

[29] The date of completion of this vow is not random: the fifteenth day of the

> under the *nāgapuṣpa* tree,[30] and a copy of the *Dīrghāgama sūtra*, both completed together. 鄰受終, 仗憑父母姉妹等投奔三寶, 願造長經一部、白玉像一軀. 父子天性依口稱許, 其年七月十五日造白玉龍樹思惟、長經一部, 並各造.[31]

Similarly, the donor Wang Nüren 王女仁 sponsored an inscription in 543, to be carved on one of the two Buddhist figures[32] her deceased parents had commissioned in 520, which apparently had gone uninscribed at the time they were made. Although Wang does not say so in as many words, the implication is that the figures were previously incomplete in some important way, and one wonders whether they had been not only uninscribed, but also unconsecrated. Many inscriptions emphasize this sense of ritual completion with some version of the phrase 'what we seek is as we have vowed' (所求如願)[33] or

seventh month is the hungry ghost festival, also called the Yulanpen 盂蘭盆 festival, when donations were made to provide for the well-being of deceased family members in the afterlife. Observance of this festival dates back at least to the fifth century. See Teiser, *Ghost Festival*, esp. 3–5.

[30] Although the term 龍樹 elsewhere may refer to Nāgārjuna, here it is a description of the sculpture Di Longfu commissioned (for a photograph, see Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 311). The figure, although fragmentary, clearly represents a seated bodhisattva of the *siwei* 思維 or 'pensive prince' type, always depicted under a tree, and understood to represent Maitreya in contemplation under the *nāgapuṣpa* tree 龍華樹. See Leidy, 'The Ssu-wei Figure', for an introduction to this type. It is a very common iconographic theme among the white marble statues of the Dingzhou region, and in the inscriptions on these figures, 龍華樹 is regularly abbreviated to either 龍華 or 龍樹. For examples of the latter abbreviation, all found on seated bodhisattva figures of the siwei type, see Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 285 (dedicated by Bhiksu Baofu 比丘寶副 in 552), 335 (dedicated by Wu Shaogui 吳紹貴 in 557), 350 (dedicated by Gao Gui'an 高貴安 and his wife in 558), and 352 (dedicated by Zhang Jixing 張寄興 in 558), among many others.

[31] Feng, *Quyang*, 179.

[32] A standing Buddha in late Northern Wei style from the Xiudesi hoard. Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 130–31.

[33] A standing Buddha from Quyang, dated 550, dedicated by a husband and

'our every vow follows our heart, and what we seek is as we intended' (願願從心, 所求如意),[34] some going further to conclude 'what we have vowed is thus [i.e. has come to pass], therefore we have made a record of it' (所願如是, 故記之耳).[35]

Other inscriptions also suggest that the dedication of a Buddhist image or monument, far from being a single act of merit-making, was part of a complex of rituals and donations, of which the image was simply the most permanent, lasting, and public element (especially given that many monuments were placed in public settings, in temple courtyards, or at cave temple sites, all of which might be visited and seen by others). Collective donations, by patrons who organized themselves into Buddhist charitable societies called *yiyi* 邑義 or *yishe* 邑社, most frequently describe multiple acts of sponsorship, but individual patrons also made multiple donations. Zhang Yuanfei 張元妃, the principal patron of the Shuiyu Si cave near Fengfeng in Hebei, made a memorial inscription for her husband after his death in 573, in which she records making for him 'a *renzhong* image, a copy of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and a stone chamber' (人中像一區, 法華經一部, 石堂一口).[36] The 'stone chamber' is the burial cave to which the inscription is attached, but the *renzhong* image (possibly a figure of the cosmic Vairocana) and the copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* are not traceable. Among the most extensive such accounts is that belonging to the Wu 吳 family of Qinyang 沁陽 county in Hebei, who sponsored a stone stele in 531, depicting the two Buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna, which is now in the collection of the Hebei Provincial Museum (Fig. 3).

> [On this day in the year 531], we reverently made one stone image of Prabhūtaratna, one wooden image of Śākyamuni, three white marble images of Prabhūtaratna, Maitreya, and other subjects, one gilded

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wife for the benefit of their deceased son. Li and Tian, *Quyang*, 256.

[34] A similar standing Buddha, also dedicated 550. Ibid., 257.

[35] A bronze Buddha in the Fujita collection, dated 518. Matsubara, *Chūgoku bukkyō*, no. 145.

[36] Lingley, 'The Multivalent Donor', 25. See this article for a complete study of the site and its inscriptions.

FIG. 3 Stele commissioned by the Wu family of Qinyang, Northern Wei, 531. After Li, *Zhongguo Bei Chao*, 310.

image of Guanyin, one sandalwood image of … and other subjects, two copies of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, two copies of the *Lotus Sūtra*, two copies of the … *Sūtra*, one copy of the *Karuna-pundarika-sūtra*, one copy of the *'Black Fish' Sūtra*, one copy of the *Golden Light Sūtra*, one copy of the *Diamond Sūtra*, one copy of the *Ten Stages* [*Dasabhumika*] *Sūtra*, one copy of the *Trapusa and Bhallika Sūtra*; one copy of the *Amitayus Sūtra*; one copy of the *Visualization Sūtra*; one copy of the 'Initial Teachings'; and one copy of the *'Abode of Compassion' Sūtra*.[37] 普泰元年歲次壬亥八月戊戌朔, 敬造多寶石

[37] A number of these sūtras (here with titles in quotation marks, like the

像一區, 釋迦木像一區, 白玉多寶彌勒雜事三區, 觀音金像一區, 旃檀□□三相雜事像一區, 涅槃經兩部, 法華經兩部, □起經兩部, 悲華經一部, 玄魚經一部, 金光明經一部, 金剛般若經一部, 十地經一部, 提謂經一部, 無量壽經一部, 觀經一部, 初教一部, 恩室經一部.[38]

The total count is seven sculptural images and sixteen sūtra texts sponsored by this mixed-gender group of patrons from the Wu family. Only the first, stone figure mentioned in this inscription is still identifiable, as it is the image on which the inscription was made. The donors who commissioned this inscription were so intent on their litany of donations that there is no description of their vows or their hopes for the project. The only other inscriptions on the piece are names of donors, inscribed next to each of the donor portraits. But importantly, there is no sense in inscriptions like these that the separate donations they record were intended for separate purposes—they all seem to belong to the same collection of hopes and prayers. It would be interesting to know whether the other images and/or the sūtra copies bore similarly comprehensive inscriptions, or whether the stone image was seen as particularly indexical. If all of these offerings were consecrated at the same moment, that must have been a spectacular ritual event; but as we see elsewhere, a monument may also record multiple donations at different times, as in the case of Yang Yingxiang 楊暎香 and Ren Mainü 任買女,[39] two women whose

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'Black Fish' Sūtra) are described with nonstandard names, and it will require further work to match them with their counterparts in the Buddhist canon, if they exist. Some are probably non-canonical, such as the *Trapusa and Bhallika Sūtra*, which was considered apocryphal from its earliest history, although it survives in several Dunhuang manuscripts. See Tavor, 'Correlative Cosmology', 434 for a brief discussion of the text's history, and Tokuno, 'Byways', for an in-depth study. Others might have been made obscure by the use of non-standard character forms (異體字), common in this period, or even simple transcription errors: although the last named text in this inscription clearly reads *En shi jing* 恩室經, this could be an error for *Wen shi jing* 溫室經, *T* no. 701.

38 Li, *Zhongguo Bei Chao*, 310–11.

39 Yen, ed., *Bei chao*, 242.

initial act of patronage, as the leaders of a mostly female Buddhist charitable society of eighty members, was to commission a copy of the *Lotus Sūtra*. This copy, made during the years 562–565, became a sort of gateway act of patronage, leading them subsequently to a more ambitious vow, in 569, to commission a four-sided stone stele, on which they recorded their story at its completion in 570.[40]

It is in the inscriptions belonging to collective donations by Buddhist charitable societies that we find the other direct evidence of ritual activities by patrons in connection with their gifts.[41] Such societies, especially those with many members, had an organizational structure including officers who had various responsibilities. The list of officers of the society, while far from standardized, usually included 'leader of the society' 邑主, 'society preceptor' 邑師 (usually a monk or nun), and 'karmadāna' 維那 (a monastic title usually meaning the second-in-command of a monastery, in charge of discipline and duties; but in a society of lay Buddhists this seems to mean someone responsible for handling funds). Less common titles are usually descriptive, such as 'recorder' 典錄, 'leader of conversion' 勸化主, probably a kind of recruiter of new donors, or 'rectifier of the society' 邑中正, a title borrowed from the ranks of government officials and possibly meaning a person in charge of ensuring orthodox practice. Ordinary members are often designated as 'members of the society' 邑子, 'elders of the society' 邑老, or 'mothers of the society' 邑母 (i.e. female members). Variations on these titles are extremely common, sometimes indicating rank by analogy with official administrative positions in the imperial government.

Beyond this, individual donors within the society could choose to sponsor a specific image among the many found on a visually complex monument, or a specific ritual activity connected with the dedication of that monument. It seems safe to assume that these roles involved an added contribution of funds. Many indicate specifically what was

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40 A full translation of their dedication, with analysis, is in a forthcoming article by this author.

41 For more information on such charitable societies, also called lay religious associations, see Hao, *Zhonggu*, and Meng, *Dunhuang*.

paid for, including 'donor of the main image' 大像主, 'donor of the bodhisattva' 菩薩主, 'donor of the niche' 龕主, and so on. Others clearly refer to roles in the dedication ritual: 'donor of the incense and candles' 香火主, 'donor of the incense and flowers' 香花主, 'sponsor of the vegetarian feast' 齋主, and 'sponsor of the eye-opening ceremony' 開光主/開光明主. Reading the litany of roles gives us a glimpse into the rituals that were performed to dedicate the image, just as reading the end credits of a film gives us a small sense of how the film was made, even as the work of the 'key grip' (head of camera equipment) and 'gaffer' (chief lighting technician) are not directly observable in the finished product, except perhaps by other specialists. In Buddhist images, if there are any such named roles, they will almost always include the sponsor of the vegetarian feast and the sponsor of the eye-opening ceremony, and this gives us a sense that these are the core rituals surrounding the dedication of a monument. The degree of variability in this list, on the other hand, indicates the adaptability of ritual practice to the interests, personnel, and resources of the patrons.

Because of this variability, it may be useful to look at an example of one such Buddhist charitable society to get a sense of the range of responsibilities in a single organization. The stele donated in 533 by a Buddhist charitable society of thirty-one members from Yaoxian in Shaanxi, led by female devotees Junmeng Wenji 儁蒙文姬 and Dang Ji'e 甞姬娥, had the following officers:

Karmadāna, [...] Balian
Speaker, Tongti Yun[...]
Leader, Junmeng Wenji
Bhiksus Guo Sengjing, Qiu Fengluo
Sramanera Fumeng Senggui
Leader, Dang Ji'e
Speaker, Tongti Dingjiang
Karmadāna, Tongti Miruo
Incense and candles, Wang Lanxiao
Recorder, Tongti Amei
Rectifier, Tongti Emei
Timekeeper, Fumeng Miaozhu
Timekeeper, Tongti Tianji
Rectifier, Zhu Adang
Recorder, Tongti Aling
Incense and candles, Tongti Mozhi[42]

[42] I have left 'the pure and faithful' 清信, which precedes each name, untranslated, to save space. Two unusual titles, *yiwei* 邑謂 and *tanguan* 彈官, represent officers whose specific function is unclear; I have rendered them as Speaker and

惟那清□□拔連
邑謂清信同蹄雲□
邑主清信儁蒙文姬
比丘僧郭僧景丘豐洛
沙彌夫蒙僧貴
邑主清信甞姬娥
邑謂清信同蹄定姜
維那清信同蹄彌弱

香火清信王蘭小
典錄清信同蹄阿美
邑正清信同蹄娥媚
彈官清信夫蒙妙朱
彈官清信同蹄天姬
邑正清信朱阿儻
典錄清信同蹄阿陵
香火清信同蹄磨帋[43]

There is much of interest in this monument and its inscriptions, not least because of the presence of the Qiang surnames[44] Tongti, Fumeng, and Junmeng. The region around Yaoxian is particularly known for producing both Buddhist and Daoist steles, and even some hybrid monuments.[45] Some of the more unusual titles here are probably ascribable to that mixed tradition, even though this particular monument is clearly Buddhist. There are a range of standard roles including the leaders and the karmadanas, but in addition there are officers whose roles are unclear but suggest the complexity of the group's ritual practice.

The membership of this group was mostly but not exclusively female. Although personal names in Chinese can be ambiguous as to gender, the presence of feminine characters like 姬, 姜, 娥, and 美, all visible here, can mark particular names as clearly female. The bhikṣus (monks) and śrāmaṇera (novice) are marked by their titles as male, and the names Miruo, Mozhi, and Balian are not obviously either male or female (in fact, all three have the feel of transliterated non-Chinese names, since they don't actually make semantic sense as Chinese names usually do—Mozhi, for instance, means 'grind paper'). All the others are clearly women. The members of the char-

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Timekeeper respectively. See Wong, 'Chinese Steles', 115. There were no 'special donors' who paid for specific images in this case.

43 Yen, ed., *Bei chao fojiao shike tapian bai pin*, no. 31, pages 79–80. The stele is in the collection of the Yaowangshan museum 藥王山博物館.

44 Wang, 'Southern Girls', 76.

45 Wong, 'Chinese Steles,' 105–20.

itable society, listed under the title 'member of the society' 邑子, are also mostly women. In all, I count thirty-two women, eight men, and eight names of unclear gender. Thus we have an organization convened for the purposes of collective merit-making and ritual practice, which is led by women even though it is not exclusively female. This example is far from unique,[46] and reminds us of how Buddhism provided a context in which early medieval women could be community leaders. Their dedication makes the public nature of their activity explicit: 'Therefore we sacrificed our family treasures, hired a famous [artisan][47]...and in an open place by the main road, reverently set up one stone image' (故減割家珍,聘名☐☐☐大路顯敞之處,敬造石像一區).[48]

It would be satisfying to the modern researcher if a study of Buddhist monuments could illustrate clearly and in detail how women in the early medieval period shaped ritual practice to respond to their interests and concerns. Our contemporary interest in female agency in a patriarchal society might lead us to look first for examples of resistance and subversion of social norms and practices. But these can be tricky to identify. As with so many historical questions, this is one in which our sources are interested in different questions than we are, and sometimes resist our inquiries. Occasionally we find the stories of Buddhist women only incidentally, in the cracks and lacunae of our source material. Such a situation calls for both creative thinking and empathy for both our subjects and our materials.

If there is a lesson to be learned about women from the examples explored in this paper, it may be that women Buddhists are mostly not atypical Buddhists in early medieval China. I have deliberately chosen monuments with female patrons as examples in this paper, but for the most part the points I have chosen them to illustrate

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[46] For more on women's lay associations, see Ning and Hao, 'Bei chao'; Hao, *Zhonggu*, 206–19; and Meng, *Dunhuang*, 284–303.

[47] An interpolation for the missing characters, by analogy with other, similar inscriptions in which donors boast of choosing the finest artisans to produce their monument.

[48] Yen, *Bei chao*, 80.

could be equally well illustrated with male patrons. The conclusion this suggests is that women enjoyed, or potentially enjoyed, a surprising degree of equality with men as far as their participation in Buddhist ritual was concerned. Far from subverting the practices which Buddhism prescribed for its devotees at the time, many Buddhist women entered fully into them alongside their male relatives and counterparts, with equal engagement and creativity. Where is the resistance and subversion we might expect of women exerting their agency in a patriarchal society?

Wendi Adamek's work on the nuns of Baoshan provides a useful analogy here, as it leads her to consider the agency of Buddhist women from another angle. Specifically, she asks whether challenge to authority is in fact the most significant form of subaltern agency, and suggests that for medieval Buddhist women, the source of agency might better be seen to lie in forms of community, including ties of kinship, the sisterhood of the saṇgha, and cooperation between nuns and lay women.[49] Though Adamek is working on Tang-period material, the patterns of women's patronage in the Northern Dynasties period seem to suggest something very similar. In her work on elite Northern Wei women who took vows as nuns, Stephanie Balkwill points out that sometimes Buddhism can be seen as providing a new means for women to enact existing social virtues, including chastity, cultivation, and self-sacrifice, rather than requiring them to renounce these and claim an entirely new set of ideals.[50] Given this, it is not surprising that Buddhist women found ways to embed their Buddhist beliefs and practice deeply into their social lives, and that they did so by claiming their right to the regular practices of the Buddhism of their times, rather than remaking them in some other image. In doing so, they have left us an engaging historical record.

The relationship between a ritual once performed and its material traces is analogous to that between women's lives once lived and the imperfect glimpses of them available to us today. Buddhist monuments, especially those carved in stone, make permanent that which

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49 Adamek, 'A Niche of their Own', 23–24.

50 Balkwill, 'When Renunciation', 227–28.

is ephemeral: religious belief and ritual practice, but also the lives of those whom official history ignores. In the face of the fundamental recognition that everything in the phenomenal world is impermanent, they were intended to preserve that which might otherwise be lost, and it is their materiality which makes this possible.

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