

Female Buddhists at Longmen Grottoes*

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Abstract: By examining 601 dedicatory inscriptions and their associated projects at Longmen Grottoes that were solely sponsored by women, this study investigates the demographics and religious aspirations of these female Buddhists. It addresses three central questions: 1) Who were these women, in terms of their religious and social identities? 2) What motivated them to make these Buddhist projects and engage in relevant practices? 3) What social and religious goals did they seek to achieve through their engagement with Buddhism? To answer these questions, the study adopts a twofold approach: first, I offer an examination of the demographic distribution in order to present a comprehensive picture of women's participation in Buddhist projects at Longmen; second, I closely analyze a collection of exemplary inscriptions that reflect specific religious aspirations upheld by women and that demonstrate their role in promoting Buddhist teachings locally. In sum, I argue that through these projects, women found new avenues to articulate their identities and assert their religious agency.

Keywords: Longmen Grottoes, dedicatory inscriptions, Buddhist images, female donor, devotional practice, identity, religious agency

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Introduction

What insights can we gain into the lives of female Buddhists in medieval China from the material evidence they left behind—which documents their religious practices and social networks—given that literary sources do not provide sufficient evidence? Scholars of Chinese Buddhist art and epigraphy, such as Amy McNair¹ and Liu Shufen,² have laid a solid foundation for examining the roles of medieval female donors in the dissemination of Buddhism through their involvement in image-making (*zaoxiang* 造像) activities at sites in the capital, such as the Longmen Grottoes 龍門石窟, or in rural communities across North China. Building on previous studies, this paper advances the discussion by exploring how women from a broader social landscape engaged in Buddhist devotional practices, revealing how their religious aspirations and social identities were expressed through the images and dedicatory inscriptions they sponsored at the Longmen Grottoes between the sixth and eighth centuries.³

As a significant Buddhist site located close to the ancient capital of Luoyang, Longmen houses 2,345 numbered grottoes and approximately 2,840 inscriptions commissioned by donors from the Northern Dynasties to the Song Dynasty (approx. fifth–twelfth centuries) (Fig. 1).⁴ Within this vast collection, the number of proj-

¹ McNair, *Donors of Longmen*. For her major discussions on female donors at Longmen, refer to chapter 3, (51–75), chapter 6 (111–22), and chapter 7 (123–42).

² Liu, ‘Wu zhi liu shiji Huabei xiangcun de Fojiao xinyang’, 522–27.

³ The earliest inscription indicating female donors at Longmen is No. 1840, dated to 495, while the latest one is No. 2549, dated to 754. I will introduce the numbering system in later notes.

⁴ Dates confirmed in the inscriptions range from 494 to 1117. See Liu and Li, *Longmen shiku beike tiji huilu*, 9–11.

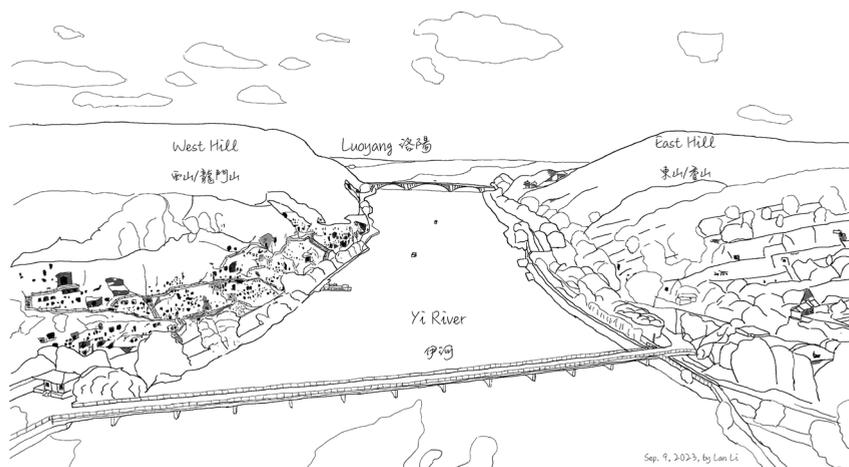


FIG. 1 Grottoes distributed on the cliffs at Longmen, drawn by the author.

ects exclusively sponsored by women can be identified. By carefully examining the names, titles, and contextual information preserved in the inscriptions, I have identified 601 projects that were either solely sponsored by female donors or explicitly highlighted women as the principal practitioners. These materials provide invaluable access to the firsthand Buddhist experiences of these women, allowing us to discern the distinctive features of their practices in comparison with those of men, families, and other collectives, while also recognizing shared patterns across these groups.

This study employs three guiding questions to categorize the data collected from Longmen, aiming to reconstruct a ‘big picture’ of female Buddhists from the Northern Dynasties to the mid-Tang period and to recover their voices embedded in epigraphic sources that reveal their social identities and religious aspirations. These questions are: How can we define these women through the identities they asserted in the inscriptions? What motivated their sponsorship of Buddhist projects and participation in associated practices? And what kinds of religious goals and social practices did they pursue through their engagement with Buddhism?

This study combines both quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate female donors at Longmen. By systematically categorizing all dedicatory inscriptions according to key factors related to

gender representation and individual intentions, it offers a general understanding of the Buddhist practices undertaken by female practitioners in medieval China.

Primary Sources

All transcripts of Longmen inscriptions cited in this study derive from two sources: my own investigations in the caves at Longmen and my reading of rubbings collected by the Longmen Grottoes Research Academy (LGRA), which remain partly unpublished. I undertook this research while working as an archaeologist in the LGRA between the years 2010 and 2018. In addition, I consulted the numbering system and transcripts compiled by Li Yukun and Liu Jinglong in *Longmen shiku beike tiji huilu* 龍門石窟碑刻題記彙錄 [Collection of the Inscriptions and Colophons at Longmen Grottoes].⁵ In terms of my methods, my transcripts were initially based on materials recorded directly at the site and from the LGRA rubbing collection; following this, I then used Li and Liu's edition to supplement inscriptions inaccessible through fieldwork or the LGRA rubbing collection, such as those damaged by erosion or located at high elevations.

Methodology

I have examined all of the names of the Longmen donors in order to identify words, characters, and semantic units that clearly indicate gender. From the Northern Dynasties (386–581) to the Tang (618–907), the titles of monastic donors explicitly declare their gender. Most frequently, female monastics used the titles *bhikṣuṇī* (Ch. *biqiuni* 比丘尼) to refer to themselves. Some nuns used an abbreviated title such as *ni* 尼 or the *ni* of a particular monastery. Other,

⁵ See Liu and Li, *Longmen shiku beike tiji huilu*. This volume also published selected rubbings from the LGRA collection though in relatively low quality.

less commonly used terms like śramaṇa (*shamen* 沙門) or *upādhyāya* (*hesbang* 和上), which on most occasions refer to monks, were also used for senior nuns.⁶

For laywomen, the easiest way to identify their gender is through their family titles. For example, describing an individual as ‘the mother/wife/daughter of someone’ (*moumou zhi mu/qi/nü* 某某之母/妻/女) reveals their gender. Likewise, recognizing female donors through their Buddhist titles is also an effective method, especially for ‘women of pure faith’ (*qingxin nü* 清信女). In addition, some characters were extensively employed by women to name themselves, such as *niang* 娘 (and 孃), *po* 婆, or *fei* 妃. Among these, the character *niang* 娘 was used predominantly for women during the Tang dynasty.

Building on my quantitative categorization of female donors, I subsequently carried out qualitative analyses through case studies that highlight both shared and distinctive Buddhist ideas and practices undertaken by women. I will discuss both types of results below, with sustained focus on qualitative analysis.

Quantitative Analysis: Female Donors at Longmen

Among the 601 inscriptions commissioned by women, 101 were dedicated by nuns, 131 inscriptions were associated with donors identified through family connections, and 362 projects were sponsored by laywomen who did not indicate family or institutional affiliations. Notably, only a small proportion of female donors made reference to their family affiliations by citing the names or official titles of their male householders, while the majority chose to assert their independent identities in Buddhist dedicatory practices, rather than subsuming themselves under male family members. The reasons underlying this phenomenon are worth further study.

To analyze the data chronologically, the Northern Dynasties show

⁶ Seen in the cases of Nun Zhiyun 智運 (Inscription no. 620) and Lingjue 靈覺 (Inscription no. 1336).

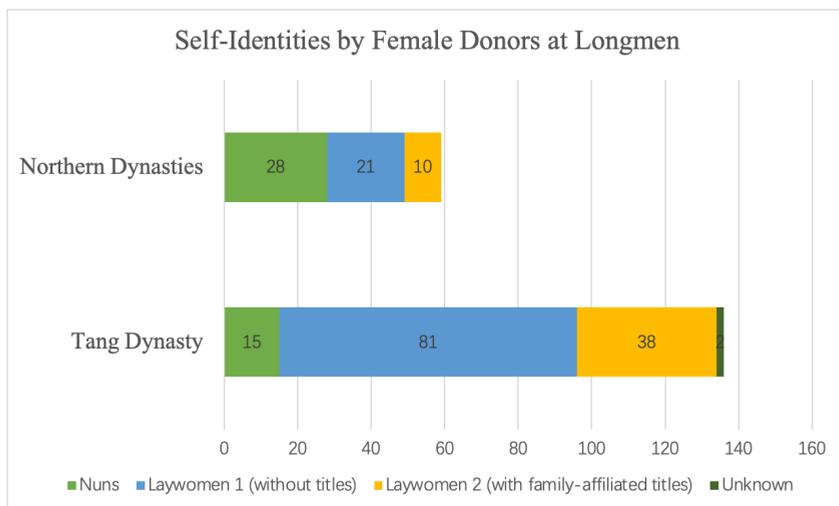


CHART 1 Self-Identities of Female Donors at Longmen.

that among 59 dated inscriptions, 28 were created by nuns, 10 by women who indicated family information, and 21 by women who provided no titles, making up 36 percent of all female projects during this period. In the Tang dynasty, out of 136 dated inscriptions by female donors (excluding two uncertain examples), 15 were dedicated by nuns, 38 reflected affiliations with male family members, and 81 cases, approximately 60 percent, were attributed to laywomen who recorded themselves solely by name, without reference to family background or social status (see Chart 1).

Two notable tendencies can be observed in female-sponsored projects at Longmen from the Northern Dynasties to the Tang: First is the growing participation of laywomen in commissioning Buddhist projects; and second is the rising number of women without titles, who either chose not to disclose their social affiliations or came from families of comparatively lower standings. Projects sponsored by untitled women are generally small in size (often less than one meter in each dimension)⁷ and exhibit relatively simple

⁷ Only two projects sponsored by female donors are large-sized caves that

artistic standards.⁸

Earlier scholarship has provided clues about the financial conditions of women at Longmen during the Northern dynasties, suggesting that those who claimed family affiliation would rely on family funds to sponsor their Buddhist projects, while only those with independent financial sources (such as Dang Faduan 覺法端, a Palace Director) were able to fund projects on their own.⁹ My analysis of broader data further enriched this perception and demonstrates its continuity into the Tang period. When a woman sponsored a project under her family's name, it is reasonable to infer that her family provided the necessary funds. By contrast, if she sought to create images independently, questions arise as to whether her family or male householders would still support her financially. As a result, most projects attributed solely to women appear smaller in scale and are accompanied by fewer inscriptions, potentially due to limited financial backing from collective family groups.

exceed 300 cm (Cave 543 and Cave 1955), while a number of medium-sized caves range from 100 to 300 cm. Most projects solely patronized by female donors are under the size of 100 cm.

⁸ There is no fixed standard for categorizing the caves and niches based on their sizes at Longmen. *Longmen shiku zonglu* 龍門石窟總錄 [The General Records of Longmen Grottoes] uses 30 cm as the threshold for numbering caves or niches, but these criteria are poorly defined. Li Chongfeng's chronological study on the large caves at Longmen in the Tang instead defines 3 meters or more as the criterion to define the large-sized ones but leaves medium and small categories unspecified. In my dissertation, I proposed adopting 1 m as the basic measure for categorization. See Li, 'Stone Inscriptions', 16–17.

⁹ McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 53–56. For example, the laywomen Chen Yun, the wife of a military official Li Changshou, stated in her dedicatory inscription (No. 1712), 'Thus I have parted with the family wealth to have made one Śākyamuni image shrine' (割捨家財, 造釋迦像一堪...), which indicated the project under her name was funded by the entire family.

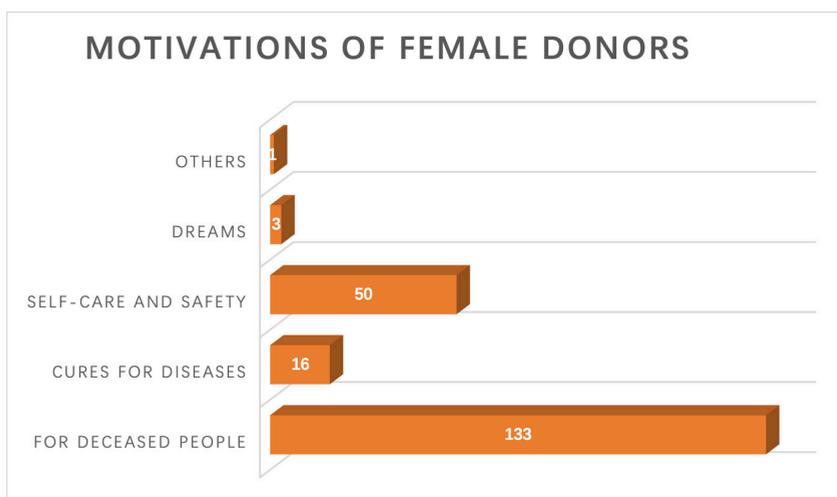


CHART 2 Motivations of Female Donors at Longmen.

Qualitative Analysis: Remembrance, Hardship, and Religious Aspiration

Inscriptions by women are typically short and concise, most comprising no more than 50 characters, with a few extending to between 50 and 100 characters. In some cases, they include nothing more than the donor's name, just two or three characters, engraved beside the images, while others add the word 'made' (*zao* 造) to denote the sponsorship. Despite their brevity, these inscriptions convey valuable insights into the varied motivations and personal trajectories that inspired women to donate images to Buddhist sites, standing as direct messages preserved for audiences across time.

On surveying the epigraphical material, it is apparent that the motivations of female donors are primarily focused on gaining benefits for themselves and/or their families. I have identified five types of motivations (see Chart 2) and merged them into three categories for further discussion. The largest number of projects, totalling 133 image niches or caves, were dedicated to deceased family members such as parents, spouses, or children. The second most common motivation expressed wishes for the safety and well-being of the family or care for family members, including the female donors themselves,

accounting for 50 projects. Additionally, there are 16 inscriptions in which women expressed their desire to receive cures for diseases. Examples are provided below.

1. For the Deceased

The inscription of Lady Lu 盧氏 (No. 0775, Cave 560, 677),¹⁰ wife of the Administrator of Su Prefecture, Cui Yuanjiu 崔元久 (d.u.), states that she donated this image niche in remembrance of her late mother, with the wish to repay her protection and guidance during childhood. She said:

(I) encountered misfortune in my early years and lost my father a long time ago. Owing to my loving mother's protection and education, I was able to grow up and establish myself (in the world). 夙遭不造, 早喪所天, 慈母保育, 得至成立.

This inscription shows that the donor had wished to care for her mother but was unable to due to her mother's unexpected death. She later laments that she was not able to fulfil her 'crow's intention' (Ch. *wuzhi* 烏志), by which she means her emulation of the filial care that a crow shows when it feeds its parents. Overwhelmed by grief, she commissioned a niche on the cliff at Longmen to express her longing and commemorate her mother's love. Such projects were common among donors who created images in memory of their deceased parents.

Meanwhile, the commissioning of images for the benefit of one's family is also seen in the dedications of Buddhist nuns. A nun named En'en 恩恩 created a complex of images dedicated to her late parents (Inscription no. 2743, Cave 1931-W1), including two main figures seated on lotus pedestals, dressed in ornate clothing and jewels, with

¹⁰ I adopt the numbering systems of inscriptions and caves compiled by the earlier scholars at LGRA, including Liu Jinglong, Li Yukun and Yang Chaojie and indicate them in the brackets when introducing the inscriptions, except for entries requiring specific explanations. See Liu and Li, *Longmen shiku beike tiji huilu*, 11; Liu and Yang, *Longmen shiku zonglu*.

seven small Buddha images carved above them (Fig. 2). Her project includes three sub-projects:

This is an image of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva made by the Nun En'en for the death anniversary of her late mother, completed on the twentieth day of the seventh month. 造地藏菩薩一軀，尼恩恩為亡妣忌，七月廿日成。

This is an image of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva made by the Nun En'en for the death anniversary of her late father, completed on the seventh day of the (...) month. 造地藏菩薩一軀，比丘尼恩恩為亡考忌日，□月七日造成。

These are seven images of the Karmic Path (*yedao* 業道)¹¹ made by the Nun En'en for her parents of seven generations and the previously deceased, completed on the fourteenth day of the seventh month of the third year of Shenlong reign period (August 15, 707). 敬造業道像七軀，比丘尼恩恩為七世父母、先亡，神龍三年七月十四日造成。

As a Buddhist nun, En'en also memorialized her karmic parents in previous lives, for whom she cultivated merit through offerings to prominent Buddhist figures and prevalent practices, some of which are not even clearly articulated in the Buddhist canon.¹² Notably, she

¹¹ According to the themes described by En'en in her inscription, the seven images of The Karmic Path should refer to the seven Buddhas engraved above the two sitting Kṣitigarbha images in her niche. A similar theme was observed in another sculpture made in 742, collected by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in which the donor juxtaposed these *yedao* images alongside the two bodhisattvas of Mañjuśrī (*Wenshu* 文殊) and Samantabhadra (*Puxian* 普賢), rather than Kṣitigarbha. See <https://collections.lacma.org/node/186936>, accessed on September 6, 2025.

¹² Such as the *yedao* images. My transcript of the number of the karmic path images/*yedao* differs from Liu and Li's, who recorded it as one (一). Based on close examination of the carving details and associated images onsite, and by referencing comparable examples in other museums, I interpret the number as seven (七) and the *yedao* images as representing a group of seven seated Buddha images. See Liu and Li, *Longmen shiku beike tiji huilu*, 606.



FIG. 2 Buddhist Images made by En'en in Cave 1931-W1, photography by Jiao Jianhui 焦建輝.

completed this on the day before the Ghost Festival, the fourteenth day of the seventh month. Similar to the case of En'en, many projects under this category were dedicated to the universal beneficiaries described as 'the previously deceased' (*xianwang* 先亡) or, simply, 'the deceased' (*wangzhe* 亡者).¹³

2. For Safety, Self-care, and Healing

Among the 50 projects dedicated to safety and care, female donors often expressed their concerns for their families and themselves. For instance, the Yuzhang Princess (豫章公主, d.u.) stated that she made the images 'for her own safety' (己身平安) (Inscription no. 0149). Similarly, many inscriptions reveal a universal wish for the 'safety of the entire family, including adults and children' (合家大小平安) through the creation of Buddha images. Lady Wang 王婆, for example, made an image of Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin 觀音) on the facade of Cave 557 (Inscription no. 0748) to ensure a safe journey for her son, Song Xuanqing 宋玄慶, who would be travelling to the east in 676.

Furthermore, the act of making Buddhist images to pray for a safe pregnancy was exclusively carried out by female donors. In 678, Lady Fan 范, the wife of Liu Baozui 劉寶最, reverently made an image of the Medicine Buddha for her pregnancy (*renshen* 妊身) and also for

¹³ For the definition of 'parents of seven generations', it is unclear whether it refers to the biological parents traced back to seven generations of the donor or if it signifies a karmic relationship with one's parents from the most recent seven rebirths. Zongmi 宗密 (780–841), in his work *Foshuo yulanpenjing shu* 佛說盂蘭盆經疏 [Commentary on the *Ullambana Sūtra*], T no. 1792, 39: 510c05–12, suggests that the parents of seven generations are distinct from one's biological parents, and should be differentiated from the concept of 'ancestors of previous generation' (上代祖宗). He further explains that although the parents of seven generations may appear distant in the present life, they are instrumental in giving birth to an individual, enabling them to cultivate the path to awakening. Consequently, it is recommended to offer tribute to the parents of seven generations during the Ghost Festival, specifically on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, along with one's birth parents.

the well-being of respected masters and parents, hoping to avoid suffering (為師僧父母敬造, 免離苦難, Inscription no. 1791, Cave 1394).

An inscription found in Cave 597 (Inscription no. 0899, 715) reveals the reciprocal nature of Buddhist practice: Lady Du Shisiniang 杜十四娘 mentioned her ‘recovery from an illness’ (身患得差) and the donation of an Avalokiteśvara image, wishing for the safety of her entire family. It is likely that Lady Du had made a vow to create an image during her illness, and upon her recovery, she fulfilled her vow. This connection between image-making and praying for the cure of diseases is evident.

3. For Protective Powers: Dreams, Spirits and Others

Some projects were intended for special or mysterious purposes, such as fulfilling dreams or expelling malevolent spirits. These cases were rare and exclusively sponsored by female donors at Longmen, making them of significant interest for further investigation. For example, Sheli 舍利, the daughter of Chang Wencai 常文才 (No. 0395, Cave 353), created a niche for Amitābha Buddha and two bodhisattvas in order ‘to appease the restless spirits at home’ (為家內鬼神不安), evidently relying on the protective efficacies of the Buddha.

Lady Liu 劉氏, who identified herself as a woman of pure faith, stated that her purpose for excavating a niche and making images on the cliff at Longmen was to pacify the fear that she experienced in her dreams. In her inscription (Inscription no. 0997, Cave 669-Niche 151), she said:

The woman of pure faith and a disciple of the Buddha, Liu, had a sudden dream of ascending the mountain and climbing a cliff at the eastern bank of [Yi] Que Valley.¹⁴ In the dream, she felt terrified,

¹⁴ The Longmen Valley was alternatively called Yique 伊闕, reflecting its distinctive topology, where the West Hill 西山 and East Hill 東山 on opposite banks of the Yi River form a natural gateway. One of the earliest records of the name of Yique is found in the chapter ‘Yi shui’ 伊水 [Yi River] in *Shuijing zhu* 水經注, vol. 15, 361.

and she then made a vow to donate a thousand buddhas to awaken her thoughts and bring a pleasant mind. (Afterward) she made (a thousand buddhas) in accordance with the dream, however, she was afraid those tiny thousand images might be worn away over time. So, she returned to make an Amitābha image to satisfy the vow in the dream. As the scripture says: the Buddha's body becomes many bodies, and the many bodies become one [Buddha] body.¹⁵ By means of this supernormal power (of the Buddha), may all sentient beings acquire wisdom and achieve the right awakening together. On the first day of the tenth month of the first year of the Yonghui reign period of the Great Tang (October 10th, 650). 清信士女佛弟子劉, 夜忽夢於關峽水東升山履壁, 夢中惶懼, 願造千佛悟便思惟, 心開情悅. 如夢即作, 恐千像微小, 久久磨滅, 迴造阿彌陀像一區, 以遂夢中之願. 經言: 佛一身為多, 多身為一. 特斯神力, 一切含靈, 同發菩提,

¹⁵ The concept of 'the multiple bodies of the Buddha' appears in many Buddhist scriptures circulating during this period, including the *Da zhuangyan jing lun* 大莊嚴經論 [Skt. Sūtrālamkāra-śāstra], translated by Kumārajīva (*T* no. 201, 4: 335c1), the *Dafangguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經 [Buddhāvataṃśaka-sūtra] translated by Buddhahadra (*T* no. 278, 9: 552a12–13), and later by Śikṣānanda (*T* no. 279, 10: 78b29), as well as in the *Sifen lü* 四分律 [Dharmaguptaka-vinaya], translated by Buddhayaśas and Zhu Fonian 竺佛念 (*T* no. 1428, 22: 949c23–950a1). I have translated the relevant passage from the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* describing the miraculous manifestation of the Buddha: 'On the eleventh day, the Buddha showed his miraculous powers to the assembly. He transformed his body into many bodies and many bodies into one body. He appeared near and far, passed through mountains and walls without obstruction, flew in the air like a bird, appeared and disappeared on the ground like water waves, walked on water like walking on land, and his body was like a flame of smoke. He touched the sun and moon with his hand and went to the Brahma heaven. At that time, all the people saw the Buddha's transformation and were very happy. Their minds never again gave rise to difficulties.' (於第十一日, 世尊於大眾中現神足變化, 一身為多身, 多身為一身. 於近現處, 若遠不見處; 若近山障石壁, 身過無闕; 遊行空中, 如鳥飛翔; 出沒於地, 猶若水波; 履水而行, 如地遊步; 身出烟焰, 猶若大火; 手捫摸日月, 身至梵天. 時諸大眾見世尊如是變化, 皆大歡喜得未曾有, 厭離心生.)

俱登正覺. 大唐永徽元年十月一日.

Lady Liu dreamed that she had suddenly ascended a steep cliff of the East Mountain, and, feeling fearful, had made a vow to donate images of a thousand buddhas. Later, she fulfilled her vow as stated in the dream and made the images at Longmen. After completing this project, she became concerned that the weather would easily erode these tiny images engraved on the surface and thereby render them indistinct. Therefore, she returned to Longmen and sponsored a niche for an Amitābha image in order to ‘satisfy the vow in the dream’ (以遂夢中之願). She also explained that the reason for choosing the theme of a thousand Buddhas was that the Buddhist canon says the Buddha possesses multiple bodies and that these bodies all become one. We can perhaps interpret this as her wish to attain the ultimate awakening with all beings by relying on the divine power of the Buddha.

It is clear from the inscriptions that Lady Liu sponsored two image niches: one for an Amitābha image and another dedicated to a thousand Buddha images. However, the physical evidence at the site only reveals a portion of her projects: that of Amitābha Buddha and his attendants. Moreover, despite dreaming of climbing the cliff on the eastern bank of the Yi River, Lady Liu engraved her project and inscriptions in a cave on the opposite side, the West Hill at Longmen. The cave that houses her niche is Cave 669, located in the middle of West Hill at Longmen and right on the western bank of the Yi River.¹⁶ The image niche of Lady Liu is a relatively large project in a prominent location, measuring 162 cm in height, 146 cm in width, and 26 cm in depth, allowing the images to directly face the Yi River and East Hill (Fig. 3).¹⁷ In this way, the creation of Buddhist images in response to a dream can be seen as the fulfillment of vows, seeking the extraordinary power of the Buddha to dispel the fear the donor

¹⁶ The Longmen valley consists of the West Hill and East Hill, and the Yi River goes through these two hills. Most caves are distributed on West Hill, ranging from Cave 1 to 2045. Cave 669 can be seen in the middle of West Hill.

¹⁷ See Liu and Yang, *Longmen shiku zonglu*, vol. 4, 76–117.

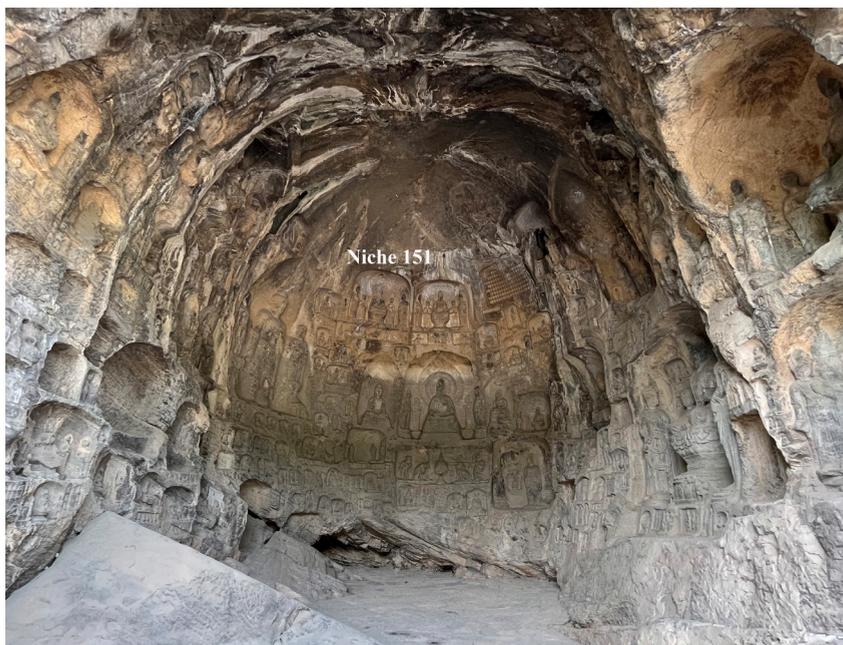


FIG. 3 Location of Lady Liu's project (Niche 151) in Cave 669, photograph by the author.

experienced and ensure it would not recur, neither in a dream nor reality.¹⁸ While Lady Liu's ultimate goal is to attain awakening, her fundamental motivation seems to be driven by the desire to overcome the fear brought about by her dream.

Similar to the example of Lady Liu in Cave 669, Miaoguang 妙光, a devout woman whose 'body had contracted a disease' (身得惡), 'dreamt of making five Buddhist statues' (夢見造像五身). Upon waking up, she was motivated by what she saw in her dream and completed the project, seemingly with the hope of curing her illness (Inscription no. 0153). Presently, the five Buddhist images she created still stand on the southern wall of Cave 159.

¹⁸ Company, *The Chinese Dreamscape*, 5–6.

Voices: Women Who Took the Lead

Apart from three personal aspirations among female donors at Longmen, I want to highlight cases in which women not only served as primary sponsors but also took on leadership roles in commissioning Buddhist images and caves at Longmen, whether through family-funded or court-sponsored initiatives, a role typically undertaken by men. For example, Inscription no. 2753 in Cave 1955 (Ji'nan Cave 極南洞) speaks of a large project under the direction of Lady Liu 劉氏 (ca. 624–707), the mother of Yao Chong 姚崇 (650–721), and recounts the story that led to its creation:¹⁹

During the Longshuo reign period (661–664)... the Yao family resided in a villa south of the Yi Que. The lady, at that time, entered the city of Luoyang and passed through this place...[she made] an initial vow for the safe growth of her sons and daughters, wishing that they all attain official ranks. Thereupon, she would reverently make a [cave] on this very cliff. 龍朔年中.....居於伊闕南之別業也。夫人時入洛城，路由此地.....子孫□□始願男女長大，皆於班秩。即於此壁敬造一.....

More than forty years had passed when, sometime between the first and second months of the first year of the Shenlong reign period (January 30–March 705),²⁰ Cave 1955 was finally completed, fulfilling Lady Liu's aspirations for her children's success in remarkable ways. Following a long list of her children's distinguished titles,²¹ the inscription goes on to identify all of the

¹⁹ For Inscription no. 2753, I examined both the inscription and its rubbing while referring to the latest transcription done by Yao and Yang, 'Jingnandong xinkao', 75–77.

²⁰ Yao and Yang, 'Jingnandong xinkao', 80.

²¹ For example, by the time this project completed, her eldest son, Yao Chong, received titles as the Supreme Pillar of State 上柱國 and Marquis of Liang District 梁縣侯, while holding the positions of Minister of Two State Affairs Ministries 二尚書 and the Chancellery and Secretariat in the Third Rank 鸞臺鳳閣三

participants in this endeavour while also recording their wishes for this family project:

In hope of the power of prayer, we shall together be bathed in the glory and celebration. Now, let us take out our earnings and salaries... May our sons and grandsons constantly enjoy peace and happiness... (We) long for the day when our descendants of future generations will climb to this [place]... the later generations ascend this secluded pavilion... 禱力同沐榮慶, 今各抽貲俸.....子子孫孫常保安樂.....冀後代子孫, 他年眷屬登此.....之後裔登此幽閣.....

Upon Lady Liu's request, all her descendants joined together and commissioned this elaborate family-funded cave (Fig. 4). This project not only represents a collective endeavour that reflects the family's prestigious status and their wishes to ensure the prosperity of future generations through the merits it has garnered, but also serves as a testament to Lady Liu's accomplishments as an extraordinary wife and mother in her long yet challenging life, which further elevated her social standing as a leader within the family.²²

Another example is Cave 1917, an independent cave that required substantial labour and expense. Its inscription (Inscription no. 2730) discloses that it was commissioned in honour of the late Lord Lu

品. One of her daughters, Shiniang 十娘, married Chen Zhengguan (d.u.), who held positions such as the Grand Master of the Palace 中大夫 or Grand Master of Palace Leisure 中散大夫. Moreover, in the first year of the Chang'an reign period (701), Lady Liu herself was conferred with the noble title of Lady of the Pengcheng Commandery 彭城郡夫人 in accordance with her son's official titles. See Yao and Yang's transcript. *Ibid.*, 77.

²² I also refer to the description of Lady Liu found in the stele attributed to her late husband, Yao Yi 姚懿 (591–663), 'Xizhou dudu Youzhou dudu libu shangshu shi wenxian Yao fujun beiming' 嵩州都督贈幽州都督吏部尚書謚文獻姚府君碑銘 (Stele Inscription for Gentleman Yao, Commander-in-Chief of Xi Prefecture, Bestowed Commander-in-Chief of You Prefecture, and Minister of the Ministry of Personnel, posthumously titled Xian), to reconstruct the life trajectory of Lady Liu, see *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文, 328/3326–3327.

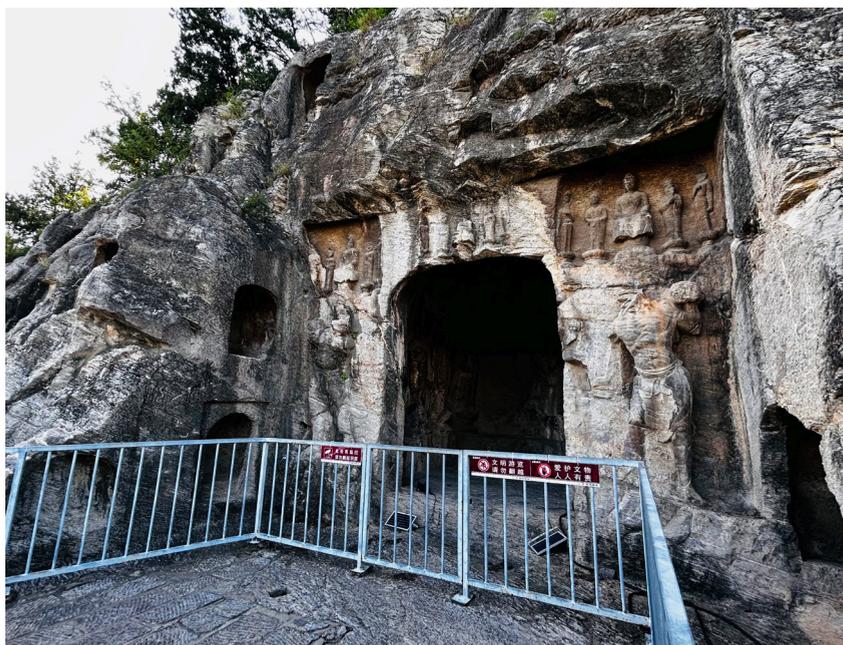


FIG. 4 Cave 1955 (Jinan Cave 極南洞), photograph by the author.

by his elder daughter,²³ who was married to an official.²⁴ Lady Lu claimed that she undertook this project because she ‘integrated the principles of rites into her nature and practiced filial piety in accordance with her mind’ (禮則成性, 孝行因心). Thus, her motivation was driven by two fundamental duties as a daughter: adherence to ritual propriety and the performance of filial piety. To repay ‘the debt

²³ The full title of Lord Lu was ‘the late Grand Master for Closing Court (5b in Tang), who worked as Revenue Manager of the Zi Prefecture’ (大唐故朝散大夫梓州司戶盧公). According to the epitaph of his son-in-law, Li Jingyou 李景由 (664–717), the full name of Lord Lu was Lu Xu 盧詡 (d.u.). See Henansheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Yanshi Xingyuan tangmu*, 274–78.

²⁴ Her husband was Li Jingyou, who held the position of the Administrator of Levied Service Section (rank 7a or lower) in the Superior Prefecture of Commander-in-chief of the Great Yi Commandery 益州大郡督府士曹參軍事 at the time when this project was completed.

of kindness' (欲報之德), she 'gazed over the eastern river and longed for his spirit, reminisced on the southern terrace and wept with blood' (望東水而馳魂, 想南陔而泣血) while searching for a 'place of merit' (傍求福地).²⁵ Eventually, she selected an ideal location at the West Hill, where she 'donated gold and fine jade and gave up pearls and emeralds' (施以金瓊, 捨其珠翠) to carve a cave at Longmen, inside which she placed a set of stone images.

The inscription engraved by Lord Lu's daughter offers a representative case, resembling the structures and genres of projects led by men or male householders on behalf of their families or communities, with a rhetoric that closely mirrors those contemporary writing styles of dedicatory inscriptions and epitaphs.²⁶ Like sons who patronized projects for their parents, Lord Lu's daughter presented herself as a filial child, thereby underscoring the legitimacy of a daughter leading a family project at this level. As a married elder daughter, she was entrusted with the responsibility of conducting a commemorative Buddhist project for her late father.

Examples involving Buddhist nuns further demonstrate that women possessed the agency to take on leading roles in significant Buddhist projects. A parallel can be drawn between these laywomen and a nun named Zhiyun 智運 (?–ca. 675), who acted as the leading sponsor of Cave 543 (Cave of Ten Thousand Buddhas 萬佛洞). In the inscription engraved on the ceiling (Inscription no. 620), she stated:

For the Heavenly Emperor, Heavenly Empress, Crown Prince, and all princes, I reverently made a niche of fifteen thousand Buddha images. 沙門智運奉為天皇、天后、太子、諸王敬造一萬五千尊像一龕。

²⁵ In *Longmen shiku beike tiji huilu*, this phrase was transcribed as 聖東水而馳魂, but based on my reading of the rubbing, I identified the character 聖 as 望. See Liu and Li, *Longmen shiku beike tiji huilu*, 602.

²⁶ For example, Inscription no. 1112 sponsored by Wei Liqi 韋利器 and his brothers for their late mother in Cave 670, or Inscription no. 0077 of the collective project by residences of the Sishun ward 思順坊 in Cave 159.

As a Chan master (*chanshi* 禪師) serving in the palace, Zhiyun cultivated merit on behalf of the imperial family.²⁷ While most vows at Longmen recorded in female donors' inscriptions reflect motivations of personal benefit for themselves and their families, examples outlined above stand in contrast to showing women taking central roles in collective projects.

Whether Zhiyun commissioned a cave for the imperial family or Lady Lu and Lord Lu's daughter oversaw family projects, such examples show that female donors at Longmen, like their male counterparts, could take on the primary responsibility of constructing a Buddhist project on behalf of the entire family and court, thereby positioning themselves as leading figures, a role otherwise closed to them outside the Buddhist context. Within this context, women could assert their agency by choosing to participate in practices according to their own will rather than conforming to social norms and traditional values expected in domestic and quotidian life, thus enabling a meaningful shift in gender paradigms in medieval China.

²⁷ Zhiyun is the principal donor of Cave 543, the large project dedicated to Emperor Gaozong and Empress Wu Zetian in 681, together with Director Yao Shenbiao 姚神表, who is probably a female palace official. See McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 132–39. Also, we can know more about Zhiyun's life from the inscription (no. 1650) of her disciple, nun Huideng 惠燈 (650–731), who was buried in a cave at Longmen. Huideng's inscription notes that, 'at the tender age of just over ten, she served as an attendant to Auxiliary Chan Master Nun Zhiyun in the palace, along with her sister Hui' (年甫十餘, 與妹惠□□事內供奉禪師尼智暉). This account suggests that Zhiyun held the title of Chan Master and served within the imperial court, a privilege rarely conferred upon nuns in comparison to their male counterparts. According to Huideng's life story, Zhiyun passed away sometime between 666 and 675; however, the inscription in Cave 543 includes a precise date of completion in 681. Therefore, it is possible that Zhiyun passed away before the full completion of her project.

Conclusion

In summary, both the quantitative data I have shown above and the qualitative analysis of exemplary inscriptions that I have offered, reveal that the female donors at Longmen came from diverse backgrounds, ranging from the imperial household and office-holding families to Buddhist nuns and ordinary women. Many of these women chose to identify themselves by name alone, rather than through their roles within the patriarchal family system. Most of the female-funded projects were small to medium in size, and their inscriptions were generally short and concise. At the same time, female donors, especially laywomen, did not limit their sponsorship to conventional purposes, such as commissioning projects to honour deceased family members in ways comparable to their male counterparts. Instead, they showed particular gender-based preferences for certain practices. They more frequently emphasized self-care and initiating projects driven by specific bodily concerns, such as seeking cures for illnesses or ensuring safe childbirth.²⁸ What stands out most are projects invoking supernatural protection for unusual requests—beyond the common wishes for family safety or an ideal rebirth in a Pure Land—such as appeasing restless spirits or fulfilling dream-induced vows. These appear exclusively in projects sponsored by female donors at Longmen, reflecting a distinctive motivation through which women expressed their dedication to Buddhism.

Furthermore, women's active participation and leadership in image-making projects demonstrate that they had access equal to that of men in these devotional spaces and artistic mediums, where they explored new ways to articulate independent identities, elevate social standing, and assert religious agency. Such roles would have received little acknowledgment within the dominant gender norms

²⁸ Among the 452 projects I've identified that were exclusively sponsored by men at Longmen, fewer than ten examples clearly state their primary motivations as the self-care and healing. This small amount needs further investigation, but it already shows the limited proportion of this category of motivation among male donors at Longmen. See Li, 'Stone Inscriptions', 358.

in medieval China, shaped by Confucian ideologies that reinforced patriarchal authority and patrilocal family structures. The images and inscriptions at Longmen, therefore, highlight the significant role and lasting influence that female Buddhists played in the dissemination and development of Buddhism in medieval China.

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Abbreviations

T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. See Secondary Sources, Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.

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