# Three Women's Voices

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**Abstract:** Although women's voices are rarely recorded in historical writing in early medieval China, the prominence of many Buddhist women among the patrons of fifth- and sixth-century monuments provides a glimpse into their social and religious lives, and the dedication inscriptions on such monuments often speak from their first-person perspectives. In the three inscriptions selected here, female patrons speak to their relationships to their families and communities, and the role of Buddhist practice in those relationships.

**Keywords:** patronage, monuments, memory, voice

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## Introduction

Buddhist votive figures and monuments (including stelae, cliff-face carvings, and cave temples) of the fifth and sixth centuries in China typically carry inscriptions recording the names of the donors, the circumstances and date of the monument's dedication, and some representation as to the donors' intentions in making the gift. The dedications left by women donors, despite their sometimes formulaic nature, provide a uniquely direct record of women's participation in their social and religious communities. Unlike the scattered and occasional accounts of women's lives found in historical writing, these inscriptions record specific, public actions taken by female Buddhist devotees.

Many such inscriptions are entirely conventional, sometimes recording no more than a name and a date. More usually, there is a common sequence of core elements: on a given date, a named patron commissioned this image for the benefit of another named person, with the intention of fulfilling the following several hopes or prayers. Some longer inscriptions also begin with an apologia for image-making which may reveal some of the specific religious concerns and affiliations of the patron or their community. This makes them a rich resource for considering a range of questions in the history of both social life and religious belief.[1]

The actual composer of a dedication is usually not recorded, and some were likely composed by monastic advisors or assistants, especially where they use abstruse language or touch on complex points of Buddhist doctrine.[2] But the question of authorship is separate

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[1] For a number of large-scale studies of donor inscriptions, each with its own focus and concerns, see, *inter alia*, Hou, *Wu, liu shiji*; Kuramoto, *Hokuchō*; Sato, 'Hokuchō'. Further studies of donors and patronage include Hao, *Zhonggu shiqi sheyi yanjiu*; Liu, 'Art, Ritual, and Society'; McNair, *Donors of Longmen*; Ning and Hao, 'Beichao'; Wong, *Chinese Steles*.

[2] A useful analogy for this situation may be found in the Dunhuang documents, a body of texts found in the early twentieth century walled up in the famous 'library cave' at Dunhuang. Although the vast majority of these texts are of later Tang date, they can provide useful comparative examples for earlier

from the question of voice. By claiming the role of patron in these inscriptions, on monuments which were often installed in public places, the donors also claimed the voice in which the inscriptions described what they had done. Though the voices of women are scarce in the historical record from early medieval China, they can be heard in the dedications left by the patrons of Buddhist monuments. The following three inscriptions provide examples, in three cases of increasing complexity, dating to the middle years of the sixth century.[3]

## Wang Nüren: A Daughter Speaks for Her Parents

Wang Nüren's 王女仁 simple and straightforward inscription is found on the reverse of a seated Buddha figure (Fig. 1), probably intended to represent Śākyamuni (based on the inscription).[4] It was found in one of the caches of buried sculptures unearthed in 1953 at the Xiude Temple 修德寺 site in Quyang 曲陽, Hebei.[5] Like many of the

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donor practices. As Stephen F. Teiser points out ('Terms of Friendship', 155ff), the female donors who signed the bylaws for a donor association in the year 959 appear to have been mostly illiterate and signed the document with marks made up of circles and crosses, suggesting that the document was drafted by someone else; but in doing so, they claimed their affiliation with the association every bit as actively as if they had been able to write it themselves.

[3] These translations have benefited from the generous suggestions of several anonymous reviewers, for which I offer my thanks.

[4] This Buddha is seated in *bhadrāsana* (Ch. *yizuo* 倚坐), with pendent legs, which is unusual among images of this time and place; in the sixth century this pose is most commonly associated with images of Maitreya, though other examples representing Śākyamuni are known to exist (Shenzhen Museum and Beijing Palace Museum, *Yushi Fanxiang*, 6). Since this inscription identifies the images made by Wang's parents as Śākyamuni and Avalokiteśvara, the former is the more likely identification. There is no evidence to suggest what happened to the second image, which may have survived but so far remains unidentified.

[5] This transcription is based on a rubbing of the original. The image and its inscription are published in Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 130–31, and in Shenzhen

**FIG. 1** Wang Nüren's image. After Li and Tian, *Dingzhou*, 130.

Quyang figures, it is broken; the Buddha's head and the upper part of the leaf-shaped aureole are missing. Although Wang's inscription is clearly dated to 543, the style of the figure, with its formal drapery folds and flaring hems, places it in the first two decades of the sixth century.[6] The discrepancy is accounted for by the inscription itself.

> In the first year of the Wuding era, on the eighth day of the ninth lunar month,[7] I, the pure and faithful daughter [*upāsikā*] Wang Nüren, resolved to make this inscription. In the first year of the Zhengguang era,[8] while my parents still lived, they sponsored two sculptures of Śākyamuni and Avalokiteśvara, hoping that the state may always flourish, that the Three Treasures may long endure, that among my brothers and sisters, the deceased should attain nirvāṇa, and the living be blessed with happiness; that our family members should thrive, and our kinsmen gain release;[9] that all living beings should universally realize their virtuous vows, and at once achieve Buddhahood.
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> 武定元年九月八日，清信女王女仁興心造記．父母生存之日正光元年中, 造像兩區釋迦、觀音, 為國祚永康, 三寶長延, 兄弟姊妹, 亡者歸真, 現存得福, 親羅蒙潤, 眷屬得濟. 一切含生, 普得善願, 一時成佛.

This inscription is unusual because it was not added to the sculpture by the original donors, but by their daughter, posthumously

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Museum and Beijing Palace Museum, *Yushi Fanxiang*, 6. The image itself is in the collection of the Palace Museum in Beijing.

[6] It may be compared, for example, to the standing figures on the side walls of the Binyang Central Cave 賓陽中洞 at Longmen, which was completed around 523. See Longmen Conservation Office and Peking University Department of Archaeology, *Longmen Shiku*, pl. 17, 19, and the discussion of the dating of the cave, 265–66.

[7] 543, during the Eastern Wei dynasty (534–550).

[8] 520, during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–535).

[9] *ji* 濟, meaning 'to cross over [to the other shore]'—a metaphor for enlightenment.

and some twenty-three years after their donation. She offers no explanation for the long gap between donation and inscription. It is possible that Wang Nüren made the inscription in fulfillment of her parents' intentions. Images made to satisfy vows left unfulfilled on someone's death are not unknown,[10] but inscriptions added to existing monuments decades after the fact, and acknowledging the gap, are vanishingly rare; this is the only one of which I am aware. Wang Nüren's clear statement of her own intentions ('I resolved to make this inscription') suggests it is just as likely that she herself perceived her parents' donated images as incomplete without a record of what they did. Rather than dedicate an image for their benefit after their death, as was common among the Quyang donors, she worked to complete the images they had sponsored. It reminds us of how many women patrons were acting from filial loyalty toward their own parents, even where that role is traditionally ascribed to sons.

## Lei Mingxiang: A Mother Speaks to Her Position at the Centre of Her Family

Lei Mingxiang's 雷明香 stele (Fig. 2) is from Yaoxian 耀縣 in Shaanxi and is in the collection of the Yaowangshan Museum 藥王山博物館.[11] She dedicated it to the memory of her deceased husband Tongti Qianchi 同蹄乾熾, along with a group of her relatives including her daughters and sons-in-law. Although at heart it is as straightforward

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[10] For example, the palace official Cheng Siyun 承祀允 dedicated a sculpture in 506 on behalf of his friend Dang Faduan 黨法端, who had planned to sponsor an image but died before she was able to do so. See Liu, *Guyang*, appendix, 56, inscription number 1855.

[11] Her stele and its inscription are published in at least two places: in Yen, *Beichao Fojiao shike tapian baipin*, 224–45, and Shaanxi and Yaowangshan, *Shike zongji*, vol. 3, 115–35. The present transcription is based on personal examination of a rubbing of the stele in the Fu Ssu-nien Library at the Academia Sinica in Taipei in March 2025, and of the stele itself at Yaowangshan in July 2025, with reference to the two published versions, which are not significantly different.

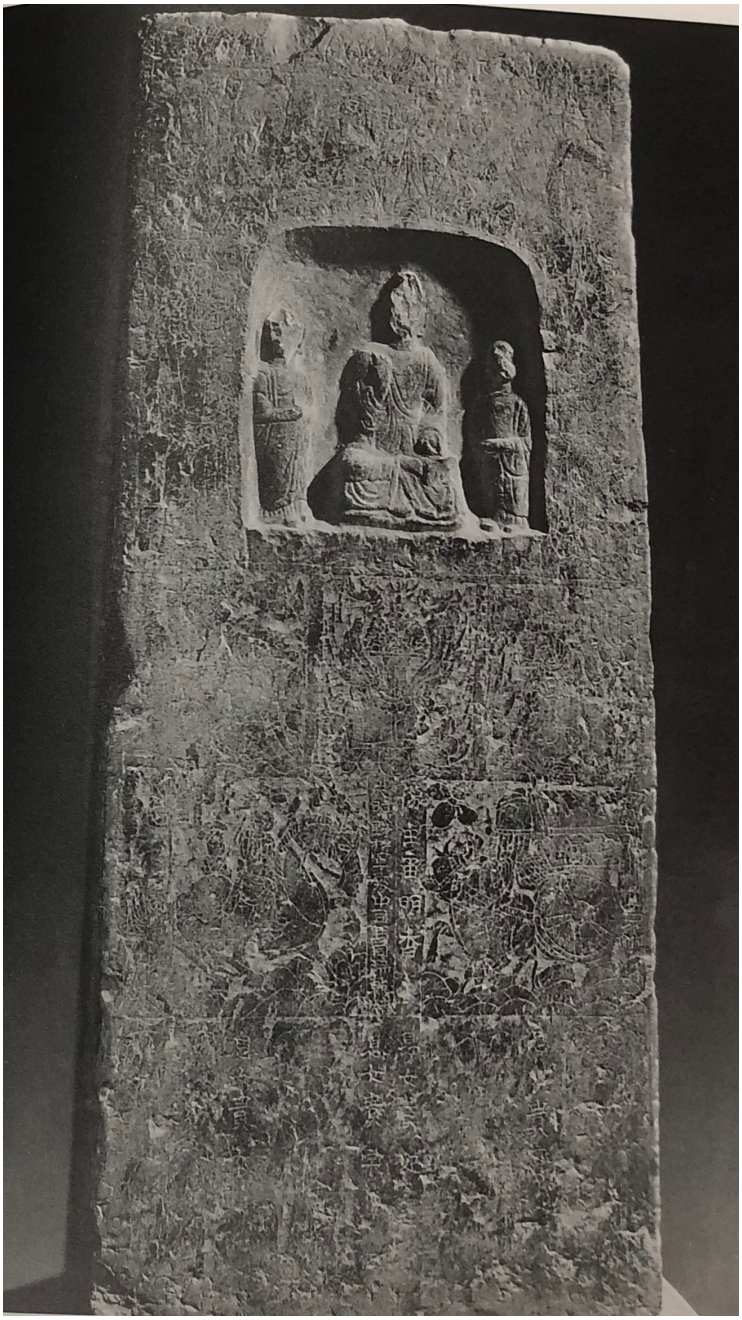

FIG. 2 Lei Mingxiang's stele. After Shaanxi and Yaowangshan, *Shike zongji*, vol. 3, 120.

as Wang Nüren's dedication, naming the donor, beneficiary, intentions, and date, it begins with a kind of introduction which constitutes an apologia for Buddhist image-making. This introduction speaks to the value of creating representations of the Buddha even though images, like all physical objects, are fundamentally impermanent, and representations can be imperfect. Introductions like this are common in longer dedications during the sixth century. They frequently emphasize the value of Buddhist images in preserving the memory and knowledge of the Buddha, perhaps reflecting millennial anxieties about the end of the dharma (*mofa* 末法).[12] In doing so, such introductions often use elevated language and Buddhist technical terms to a degree that mirrors the sūtras and commentaries of the time, by contrast to sometimes simpler language that recounts the donor's actions and intentions.

The effect, in this case, is of a change of voice in mid-inscription: a dedication that begins with a brief set of flowery parallel phrases, sounding like the work of a Buddhist scholar, then shifts to more ordinary language describing the actions of a Buddhist lay believer. Although there is no reason to suppose the inscription as a whole was not written by a single author, the contrast provides an opportunity to consider who may have been the actual composer of an inscription like this one, and what exactly the donor's role was in shaping its voice. Like most donor inscriptions, this one contains no clues to indicate who composed or drafted it.[13] Was Lei Mingxiang herself

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[12] The 'decline of the dharma' is the term for a historical era in which knowledge of the Three Treasures (Buddha, dharma, saṅgha) would be lost to the world. At various times in the history of Buddhism, it has been thought to be imminent, prompting various efforts to preserve Buddhist texts and images against loss. For more on this doctrine, see Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time*, especially 90–118, and Hubbard, *Absolute Delusion*, 55–75.

[13] The vast majority of donor inscriptions of the sixth century omit this information, which suggests that it was not of primary interest to most people at the time. One exception is the so-called 'Shiping Gong' inscription in the Guyang Cave at Longmen, commissioned by a monk called Huicheng in memory of his deceased father (see Liu, *Guyang*, appendix, 55, inscription 1842). It concludes

literate enough to compose this, alone or in consultation with a monastic advisor? Did someone compose it for her? And if the latter, what was her role in approving it? How much of the text is borrowed from similar, conventional models,[14] and how much represents original composition? Whatever the answer, the visual composition of the stele (about which more below) and its use of kinship terms show that Lei is indisputably the chief patron of the monument, making it clear that the inscription speaks with her voice.

The translation here omits the lists of donor names to save space, but they may be read in both published versions of the stele.

> Now, the sublime origin is empty and silent; the marvellous course is ordered and subtle. In response to difficulties and in search of awakening, [we] therefore... cast gold and carve wood to represent the true likeness [of the Buddha]. Today I, the Buddhist disciple Lei Mingxiang, aware that the present world is impermanent, sacrificed the treasures of my household and reverently made a stone image for my late husband Tongti Qianchi. May my deceased husband be reborn in the West, in the land of Amitāyus;[15] may the multitude of evils be swept away, and may the myriad blessings gather around him. Furthermore, of the members of my family great and small, may the old enjoy continued good health, and the young, long life

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with the line 'Completed on the fourteenth day of the ninth month of the twenty-second year of the Taihe reign [498]. Copied by Zhu Yizhang, text by Meng Da' (太和 [廿] 二年九月十四日訖. 朱義章書, 孟達文). The Shiping Gong inscription is a rare example of carving in relief characters (陽文), and its calligraphic style is exceptionally fine, which may explain this unusual attention to the author of the text and its calligrapher.

[14] No such model texts for donor inscriptions survive from the sixth century, but the discovery among the Dunhuang documents of later models for other ritual texts, dating mostly to the ninth and tenth centuries, reminds us that such tools could possibly have been available centuries earlier. See Teiser, 'Terms of Friendship', for a discussion of some examples.

[15] Wuliang shou fo 無量壽佛, the Buddha of Infinite Longevity, an alternate form of Amitābha (Wuliang guang fo 無量光佛), the Buddha of Infinite Light.

to come. May the family uphold its customary morality, education, and propriety, frequently nourishing itself with the savour of the dharma, and always keeping company with goodness. With this bit of merit [earned by the donation], I pray that the Emperor's rule continue auspicious without end; may [the benefit] extend down to my monastic teachers and parents in seven previous incarnations,[16] the family I am bound to by karma,[17] and the living beings of the dharma-realm, that they may together enjoy this blessing, and as one achieve true enlightenment. Sixth year of the Tianhe era of the Great Zhou,[18] fifteenth day of the seventh month.

夫沖元虛寂, 妙趣理幽, 應難尋悟. 遂□□□鑄金
鏤木以表真容. 毋今佛弟子雷明香, 知世非常世,
減割家珍, 為亡夫同蹄乾熾敬造石像一區. 願亡
夫託生西方無量壽國, 眾惡崩消, 万善慶集. 復願
家內大小, 老者延康, 少者益算. 門風、庠序、禮義備
足, 常飡法味, 恒与善俱. 蒙此微因, 願　皇帝延祚
無窮. 下及七世師僧父母, 因緣眷屬, 法界眾生, 咸
同斯福, 等成正覺.　　大周天和六年七月十五

We have already observed the change of tone between the poetic introductory phrases of this inscription and the concrete description of Lei Mingxiang's donation and intent. The latter is further divided into two parts, the first of which describes the immediate reason for

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[16] This is an example of the difficulty caused by the strongly conventional nature of many donor inscriptions. The term 七世 can equally mean 'seven previous incarnations' and 'seven generations,' and is usually used without qualification, which suggests that the meaning was sufficiently clear to contemporary readers that it did not need explanation. Here, the inclusion of teachers (who are not literal ancestors) suggests that it means seven incarnations, rather than seven generations of Lei Mingxiang's direct ancestors. For more on this question in a slightly later period, see Lan, 'Female Buddhists', 62, n. 13.

[17] This suggests not only Lei Mingxiang's actual kinfolk, but those with whom she shares karmic ties from previous incarnations.

[18] 571. 'Great Zhou' refers to the Northern Zhou dynasty (557–581).


FIG. 3 Donor portraits of Lei Mingxiang and her husband. Drawing by the author.

her donation, while the second expresses more generalized wishes. Lei sponsored this stele for the benefit of her deceased husband, Tongti Qianchi. She offers good wishes for his rebirth in the Western Pure Land of Amitāyus, then expresses hopes that similar blessings should extend to the members of her family, many of whom appear on the stele as fellow patrons. We may think of this as the core reason for the stele's creation. After this, however, the final section contains generalized good wishes for universal blessings. Wishes of this kind, common in sixth-century donor inscriptions, are always strictly hierarchical. Blessings are first sought for the dynasty itself, the emperor, and possibly his court, then for the donor's own benefactors in seven previous incarnations, then for present family, and finally for all sentient beings. The effect is to call down blessings for others in descending order of rank but in increasingly expansive scope, from the lonely occupant of the imperial throne to all beings on the wheel of rebirth. Lei Mingxiang's inscription is typical in including these prayers, and we may think of the last section as a series of conventional expressions, while her main motivation was clearly to benefit her deceased husband.

Lei Mingxiang and her husband are represented as donor figures on the front and centre of the monument (Fig. 3), he as a mounted man with several attendants, and she in a modestly enclosed oxcart,

her face seen peeking out of the window.[19] That the deceased beneficiary is included among the donors, a common practice, reminds us that the point of donor portraits was to represent all those involved in the act of making merit—here, by offering reverence to the Buddha. Of course, representation can be aspirational, and while Tongti Qianchi may well have been a devout Buddhist in life, he might just as easily have been an indifferent man memorialized by a devout wife. Either way, the placement of the figures suggests Lei Mingxiang is the driving force behind this monument.

The figures representing Lei and Tongti are arranged symmetrically, in keeping with the dominant symmetry of such monuments, facing each other toward the centre. But Lei Mingxiang appears on the Buddha's left hand, Tongti Qianchi on his right. This reverses the usual arrangement. As a general rule men appear on the left and women on the right (*nanzuo nüyou* 男左女右), in keeping with the greater prestige of the left as a position over the right.[20] Lei Mingxiang is in the prestige position here, over her deceased husband, as the principal donor. All the other donors are identified (using kinship terms) by their relationship to her and not to her husband: for example, Tongti Qianchi's father is identified with a term meaning 'father-in-law' (*zhong* 姾). She also places her daughters on the front face of the stele and relegates their husbands to a position on the back. As the patron, she clearly had the ability to dictate the spatial hierarchy of the monument itself as well as voice her intentions in the inscription, even where those contradicted usual practice. Some monuments of this period give the impression that they might have been made first and purchased or inscribed later,[21] but this one seems

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[19] Yen, *Beichao Fojiao shike tapian baipin*, 224.

[20] The idea seems to be related to associations of the left side with masculine yang and the right side with feminine yin, such that even the court official of the Left was also always superior to the same-titled official of the Right. See Wong, 'Ethnicity', 96, for a fuller discussion.

[21] This possibility suggests itself whenever details of the inscription do not match details of the sculpture. For example, Wang Nüren's inscription names its subject as Śākyamuni even though its iconography is more commonly associated

to be entirely bespoke, reflecting Lei Mingxiang's voice in both text and image.

## Yang Yingxiang: A Group of Women Donors Tell the Story of Their Project and the Intervention of the County Magistrate

Yang Yingxiang's 楊暎香 inscription comes from a stele originally located on the grounds of the Chongqing Temple 崇慶寺 at Xinxiang 新鄉 in Henan.[22] This location was historically known as Jiexiu 介休 County. The inscription is known from surviving rubbings, but the present location of the stele, if it survives, is unknown. It recounts a curious story including multiple acts of Buddhist collective patronage by a group of mostly women over a period of eight years, from about 562 through the completion of the stele in 570. Two women, Yang Yingxiang and Ren Mainü 任買女, founded a Buddhist charitable society and successfully organized a small-scale commission, producing a copy of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The first half of the inscription seems to speak from their perspective and thereby with their voice, even given the unusually erudite introductory apologia.

What is striking is the change of voice about halfway through, at a point in the narrative of patronage where the group's more ambi-

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with Maitreya (see n. 4 above), a situation which could arise if her parents had purchased a preexisting figure and decided it would represent Śākyamuni, rather than commissioning a sculpture *de novo*. Similarly, at times the number and distribution of donor portraits does not agree with the names inscribed on a monument, as for example on the Zhai Xingzu 翟興祖 stele of 523 in the collection of the Yanshi Museum, which has over one hundred donor figures, nine of which are not provided with names. See Li, 'Bei Wei'. At least one known inscription explicitly describes patrons purchasing a figure from a workshop and having their names added to it after it arrived: see Liu, 'Art, Ritual', 31.

[22] Yen, *Beichao Fojiao shike tapian baipin*, 242–45. The present transcription is based on personal examination of a set of rubbings of three sides of the stele in the Fu Ssu-nien Library at the Academia Sinica in Taipei in March 2025, with reference to Yen's published transcription. The original stele can no longer be identified.

tious second project, to sponsor a stone monument, is taken over by one Magistrate Yang 縣令楊君,[23] possibly a relative of Yang Yingxiang. It is difficult to tell what exactly happened here. Perhaps the women whose project it was originally were running out of funds, and Mr. Yang, a locally prominent man, stepped in to help complete it; but he might just as well have co-opted a project that was already well underway in order to attach himself to the religious merit (and perhaps the social prominence) it was to generate. In either case, the voice of the inscription shifts radically from an account of the project itself to an encomium describing Mr. Yang's many apparent virtues. Given the modesty with which the original women describe themselves, it is a startling change of tone, and hints at some of the possible complications and limitations of women's agency as Buddhist patrons.

The original stele was quite eroded by the time the rubbings were taken, and so some characters are no longer readable; in addition, the surviving rubbings represent only three sides of what was originally a four-sided stele, so the record of the monument as a whole is incomplete. None of the rubbings reproduce any Buddhist images, although the inscription claims that the stele had four image-niches, which might have been on any or all of its four faces; it is likely that the rubbings were taken only from the inscribed portions of the monument.[24] The original might have looked something like Lei Mingxiang's stele, or perhaps like the Nie 聶 family stele of 543 in the Shanghai Museum, which has image-niches on all four faces and extensive inscriptions below them (Fig. 4).

The translation here preserves the dedication and its attached odes, but omits the lists of donor names in order to save space; they may be read in the source publication. In total, the surviving inscriptions name 66 donors, of whom 30 are clearly women, 21 are clearly men, 2 have names which are ambiguous as to gender, and 13 have

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[23] Later in the inscription his personal name is given as Yang Jingxin 楊景信.

[24] This is another difficulty of studying Buddhist monuments from rubbings when the original sculpture does not survive: rubbings taken by collectors who were mainly interested in the calligraphic quality of the inscription may omit portions of a monument that are decorated with pictorial images.

FIG. 4 Nie family stele, Eastern Wei, dated 543. Collection of the Shanghai Museum. Photograph by the author.

names which are ambiguous because of missing characters.[25] Because donors' names are clustered by gender (1 line of male donors, a second line of female donors), it seems likely that of the 13 partly-legible names, 7 were female and 3 were male, for a total of 37 women and 24 men. 3 of the eroded names remain genuinely unclear. The inscription names a group of 80 donors, so we may expect that some names were on the fourth side of the stele, though the totals named in the main inscription of such a stele often do not agree perfectly with the lists of donors' names.[26] There are about 20 surnames represented among the donors' names, including 7 donors surnamed Yang 楊 and 6 surnamed Ren 任, who were possibly relatives of the 2 leaders of the group;[27] official titles, where they appear, tend to be local to Jiexiu County and its environs. Several lacunae in the eroded inscription are indicated by [...] in the translation.

> Now, the thread of principle is sublime and quiet; it is not heard by the undiscerning and vulgar.[28] The true and the provisional are [...] dependent; how could they be distinguished by the six [sensory]

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[25] Chinese personal names are not always strongly gendered, but in the sixth century, women's names often included characters with a female element, such as *nü* 女, *ji* 姬, *fei* 妃; female donors' names are also sometimes given gendered titles like *qingxin nü* 清信女, 'the pure and faithful daughter', equivalent to Sanskrit *upāsika*; male names are often identifiable because they have official titles or gendered Buddhist titles like *qingxin shi* 清信士 (Skt. *upāsaka*), while both male and female donors may be distinguished by gendered kinship terms like 'son' or 'grandson' (*xi* 息, *sun* 孫). As a result, many names like those found here can in fact be identified as male or female names with some confidence.

[26] This is true of the Zhai Xingzu stele, mentioned in n. 21 above, which is quite well preserved and documented. The main inscription describes it as the project of a Buddhist society of 30 members, a number which does not agree with the 92 names of individual donors that appear on the stele. See Li, 'Bei Wei'.

[27] One other surname appears in significant numbers: Shangguan 上官, with nine members, probably also related to one another.

[28] Literally, 'the deaf and vulgar'. However, literal deafness is not what is implied here.

consciousnesses? There is no-one who does not [...] chase after the fire wheel, blown and shifting like smoke on the wind: after an inch of shadow on a sundial in [this] Sahā world, we wander the road for endless kalpas.[29] Ever since the miraculous light [...] dream,[30] which converted sentient beings, the teachings of the sūtras and the images of the departed[31] all offer refuge in praising and reciting. Hearing a bit of truth, one enters into the place of enlightenment; receiving the Five Precepts [for laypeople], one ascends to the other shore.

We, the pure and faithful believers[32] Yang Yingxiang, Ren Mainü, and others, [formed] a lay society of eighty members.[33] Although

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[29] *Suopo* 娑婆 here is a transliteration of the Sanskrit sahā, meaning the human world. This phrase contrasts the fleeting nature of a single human incarnation with the eons of time that beings undergo rebirth after rebirth in the cycle of saṃsāra. The metaphor of a long road used here may also allude to the bodhisattva path, which takes many incarnations to complete.

[30] Possibly a reference to the legendary dream of the Han emperor Ming, who saw a 'golden man, tall and broad, with a light coming from his head' and sent emissaries to India to inquire about it. They are said to have brought back the first Buddhist scholars and texts to found the White Horse Temple in Luoyang, traditionally the first Buddhist temple in China. See *Hou Han shu* 88.2922.

[31] *Yixiang* 遺像, 'portraits of the deceased', alluding to any image of a Buddha, whose nirvāṇa meant his departure from the world, but perhaps specifically to legendary images like the King Udayana image, which was said to have been taken from life. The *Zeng yi Ahan jing*, *T* no. 125, 2: 28.706a, reports that King Udayana of Kaushambi in Vatsa ordered the first Buddha image to be carved from life, out of sandalwood, and King Prasenajit of Śrāvastī in Kōsala responded by commissioning a second image in gold. See also Hamada, 'Chūgoku'; Carter, 'The Mystery'.

[32] The term used here is *qingxin shinü* 清信士女, which could be translated as '*upāsaka*s and *upāsika*s', and refers to all the members of the society, male and female.

[33] See notes above about the makeup of this society. Such lay societies were organized for the purposes of collective Buddhist merit-making, and engaged in all sorts of charity and support of monastic communities, as well as the production of Buddhist images and texts, and the sponsorship of rituals and teaching.

> we have not changed our clothing or appearance [to take monastic vows], yet we have greatly internalized the precepts and virtues [of Buddhism].[34] Having recognized that form is not a fixed substance, we understood that it is the convergence of myriad conditions. [...] fire is not [...], thus the four minutest forms are all distinct.[35] [Apparent distinctions like those of] the livers of Yan and the galls of Yue are insufficient as a metaphor [to distinguish among them].[36] We looked

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Lists of bylaws from such societies, found among the Dunhuang documents, show that in later periods at least, they also sometimes functioned as mutual aid societies for members in need. See Lin, 'Art, Ritual', 34–38; Wong, *Chinese Steles*, 15; McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, chapter 3; Gernet, *Buddhism*, 261–62; for the bylaws see Teiser, 'Terms of Friendship'. For further studies of lay societies see also Hao, *Zhonggu*; Ning and Hao, 'Beichao'; Meng, *Dunhuang*.

[34] This sentence, along with another at the end of this section, is part of a quotation from the Southern Dynasties writer Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513), from his essay titled *Nei dian xu* 内典序 [Preface to the Inner Canon]. He writes: 'Thus the pure and faithful male and female believers cultivate their fate over many eons, so that although they do not change their clothing or appearance [to take monastic vows], yet they greatly internalize the precepts and virtues [of Buddhism]. They look toward Vaisali and gather the reins, face toward Persia and turn their carriages, and drive onward into the sublime realms of the four meditation [heavens]' (至夫清信士女植緣曠劫, 雖復容服未改而戒德內弘. 瞻毘耶而聳轡, 望波斯而迴軫, 駕四禪之眇眇. My translation). Shen's essay is now collected in *Guang hong ming ji*, *T* no. 2103, 52:19.231c25–27. However, *Guang hong ming ji* was compiled around 664, a full century after this inscription's date, so it cannot be the source for this quotation or the others noted below (n. 36, 45). This raises interesting questions about the circulation of Shen's Buddhist writings in the sixth century, but these questions are beyond the scope of the current paper; at the very least, it seems obvious that the composer of this inscription had access to Shen's collected works, since at least three of them are quoted.

[35] *Si wei* 四微, the four minutest forms perceptible to the four senses of sight, smell, taste, and touch.

[36] This is part of a second quotation from Shen Yue 沈約, who wrote: 'Now form is not a fixed substance; it is [merely] the convergence of myriad conditions. The four minutest forms differ, as wind and fire are distinct. If we observe and

toward Vaiśālī[37] and gathered the reins, faced toward Pārasī[38] and turned our carriages.[39]

So we parted with extraneous things, and reverently made one copy of the *Nirvāna Sūtra*. With our hearts set on providing what is lacking,[40] we began in the Heqing era of the Great [Qi dynasty],[41] carefully copying [the sūtra] and decorating it. Then in the eighth month of autumn of the fifth year of the Tiantong era, an *yichou* year,[42] we had

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separate them, they are not the same; [Apparent distinctions like those of] the livers of Yan and the galls of Yue are insufficient as a metaphor [to distinguish between them]' (夫形非定質, 眾緣所聚. 四微不同, 風火亦異. 析而離之, 本非一物, 燕肝楚膽未足為譬. My translation). Shen's essay, titled 'She shen yuan shu' 捨身願疏 [On a Vow of Self-Sacrifice], is now collected in *Guang hong ming ji*, *T* no. 2103, 52:28.323b14–323c25. In this case, Shen is referencing a line in the Zhuangzi: 'Looking at [things] from the point of view of their differences, [we distinguish] liver and gall, Chu and Yue; but looking at [things] from the point of view of their similarities, [we recognize that] the ten thousand things are all one...' (自其異者視之, 肝膽楚越也; 自其同者視之, 萬物皆一也. My translation). *Zhuangzi* 5.83. The point being made in the *Zhuangzi* is that a wise man recognizes that the differences he perceives in the phenomenal world are illusory, and that the true nature of the universe is unity—a Daoist concept which is a good fit for Buddhist notions of the impermanence of the phenomenal world and the unity of truth.

37 Location in modern Bihar, India, where Śākyamuni Buddha preached his last sermon.

38 I.e., Persia.

39 See n. 34: this is more of the same quotation from Shen Yue.

40 'What is lacking' here is probably knowledge of the *Lotus Sūtra*; writings that justify the sponsorship of text-copying tend to emphasize that the purpose of doing so is to allow texts and thus knowledge to spread. For instance, one sutra praises those who 'may be able to write them [in this case, the Buddha-name sūtras] out so that they may be explained to others'. *Guoqu zhuangyanjie qian Fo ming jing* 過去莊嚴劫千佛名經, *T* no. 446a, 14: 365a–b. See also Soper, *Literary Evidence*, 202.

41 562–565, under the Northern Qi dynasty (550–577).

42 569, Northern Qi.

four niches [on a stele] carved according to the vow we took to make an image. We determined the name of the stele, chose the stone, and hired the artisan. The project was not yet complete, when we encountered the county magistrate,[43] Mr. Yang.

[He] was awake to singular clarity, and excelled at enlightening others. Mr Yang's style-name was Jingxin, and he was a man of Hongnong Prefecture.[44] From the time that he joined [us], he let his wisdom flow to [...]. He spread harmony among the people below; he proclaimed the beneficence of the emperor above.[45] He could ladle up the water of desire and it would turn clear; he could handle filthy riches and turn them pure. Having overcome [...] the disturbances of the day, his great sighs filled the night. As for his laments at coming [to the project] late, the matter does not bear discussing. Thereupon [we] once more gathered [...] what we could spare, setting our minds [...] on the dharma.

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[43] Among the names of the members of the society, he is identified as the magistrate of Jiexiu 介休 county, which was a historical name for modern Xinxiang in Henan, where the stele was located.

[44] Jiexiu county was indeed a part of Hongnong prefecture, but this is probably intended to point out that Mr. Yang was a member of the prominent Yang clan of Hongnong (弘農楊氏), which produced a number of prime ministers and imperial consorts during the Han and Jin dynasties. According to the imperial history of Sui, the founder of that dynasty, Yang Jian, was also a member of this lineage (see *Sui shu* 1.1); however, in 570, Yang Jian was still a general in the service of the Northern Zhou. Thus, our Mr Yang was here claiming a noble but not yet an imperial lineage.

[45] This phrase, 'He spread harmony among the people below; he proclaimed the beneficence of the emperor above' (下被民和, 上宣聖澤, my translation) is a quotation from yet another essay by Shen Yue, titled 'Nanqi Puye Wang Huan Zhiyuan si sha xia shiji' 南齊僕射王奐枳園寺剎下石記 [Stone Inscription at the Pagoda of the Zhiyuan Temple given by Wang Huan, Vice-Director of the Secretariat of the Southern Qi]. In this case what is being quoted is not Shen's Buddhist commentary, but language praising another donor from another donor inscription which Shen apparently composed. *Guang hong ming ji*, *T* no. 2103, 52:16.211a–b.

Then, a high and capacious place was selected [to install the stele], a kind of location like the Jetavana Grove.[46] At its back [to its north] is the Shouling [Mountains], and in front [to its south] it is surrounded by the Yellow Marsh. To the east rises the Phoenix Terrace, and to the west, the forbidden enclosure.[47] Now the work is complete from beginning to end, it is truly thanks to his encouragement and support. Its august beauty comes from heaven; its form is not the product of human artifice. We have carved the good news, that it might be passed on without decaying. [48]

The odes are:

The torch of the dharma shines brightly, and wisdom illuminates Jambudvīpa.[49] Purity sustains samādhi, competing to shed [...]. Leather and paper must decay, bones and sinews are [...] scattered. It is said that even the kalpas must end, and even divine garments do not endure. The first ode.

The four serpents spit poison; the two rats gnaw at the vine.[50]

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[46] The location of one of the earliest Buddhist monasteries in India, where the Buddha Śākyamuni was said to have given many of his early sermons.

[47] *Yong jin* 永禁, meaning 'forbidden territory'; what kind of place this was is unclear. Taken as a whole, this is likely a flowery description of the geographical location of Xinxiang County, which sits between a mountain ridge to the north and the Yellow River to the south.

[48] This is a common claim in Buddhist dedications of the time and place. Despite the core Buddhist insight that the physical world is fundamentally impermanent, the idea that stone's durability was proof against the losses of time and decay (and the end of the dharma) seems to have had a persistent appeal.

[49] The realm of human existence.

[50] This refers to a parable warning about the distractions of desire. In it a man, fleeing two elephants who represent life and death, climbs down a vine (the stem of life) into a well, which represents impermanence. Within the well are two rats, representing the sun and moon, who gnaw away at the vine; around him are four venomous snakes, representing the physical elements (earth, air, fire, water); below him are three dragons, representing greed, anger, and stupidity, breathing fire up at him. The man is in despair as the elephants draw near the well, when a bee flies overhead and drops some honey, representing the five desires, into his

Reflecting on [the above] words about the sea of suffering, in which we are submerged at this instant [of our present incarnation], we respectfully rely on the assistance [derived from accumulated] merit; the donation [...]. Our society [of laypeople] are like [the wise layman] Vimalakīrti; our intentions are equal to [those of the Bodhisattva] Mañjuśrī. The second ode.

Sculpting the stele with the [likeness of the] sage, and carving the miraculous True Visage,[51] we have represented exactly what is to come, and completed [...] what is past. Yang[52] governs this society, and both monks and lay believers [...] respect. [Our society's] benevolence outshines the spring sun, with virtue as flourishing as the winter pine. The third ode.

On the fourteenth day, a *guihai* day, of the eleventh month, in which the first day was a *gengxu* day, in the first year of the Wuping era, a *gengyin* year, of the Great Qi Dynasty.[53]

夫理貫沖寂, 非聾俗所聞. 真假□資, 詎是六識所辯.
莫不□火輪騖, 風燗飄遷. 娑婆寸陰之晷, 徘徊永劫之路.
自神光□夢, 化洽群生, 經教遺象, 咸歸讚誦.
聞片義而涉道場. 受五戒而昇彼岸.
清信士女楊暎香任買女等邑義八十人, 雖容服未改, 而戒德內弘.

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mouth, whereupon he forgets all his danger. *Piyu jing*, *T* no. 0217, 4:1.801b–c.

[51] *Zhenrong* 真容, 'true visage', a term which appears in many Buddhist dedications, emphasizes the accuracy of the representation of the Buddha, ideally through some connection to an authoritative source such as a portrait thought to be taken from life, like the King Udayana image (see n. 31 above), or the 'shadow image' in the cave at Nagarahāra (see Wang, 'The Shadow Image'). For an in-depth discussion of the concept of *zhen* 真, 'truth', in this context, see Choi, 'Quest', 29–60.

[52] Because of a missing character, this might equally refer to Yang Yingxiang (who could be called 'née Yang' 楊氏) or to Magistrate Yang (楊君).

[53] 570. The inclusion of the sexagenary terms (*ganzhi* 干支, 'stems and branches') was important for determining auspicious dates, which were relevant to the dedication of Buddhist images as for many other aspects of premodern Chinese life. For more on the relevance of specific dates to Buddhist dedications, see Magnin, 'Pratique religieuse', 138–41.

既悟形非定質, 且覺眾緣所聚. □火不□, 四微乃異.
燕肝越膽, 未足為喻. 想毗耶而聳轡, 望波斯而迴軫.
並割捨肌膚之外, 敬造涅槃經一部.
覆匱之心, 起於大□河清之祀, 繕寫裝飾.
至天統五年歲在己丑秋八月, 剋就發願製像四龕.
因碑建號, 採石求匠. 事未有成, 遇縣令楊君.
□悟獨曉, 善於開導. 君字景信, 弘農人也. 爰自蒞止, 流惠為□.
下被民和, 上宣聖澤. 挹貪水而逾清, 處脂膏而轉潔.
既泯□晝擾, 大息夜囂. 來晚之詠, 事不容口.
又復納□之餘, 垂心□法. 遂擇一顯敞之地, 擬類祇園之所.
卻背獸嶺, 前帶黃津. 東據鳳臺, 西居永禁.
今經始畢功, 實蒙勸獎. 尊麗自天, 形非人造. 刊勒徽音. 載傳不朽.
其詞曰:
法炬開朗. 惠照閻浮. 淨持三昧. 競捨□□. 皮紙應化. 骨筋□流. 劫云將盡. 天衣未仆. 其一.
四蛇吐毒. 二鼠侵株. 眷言苦海. 沈溺須臾. 敬憑介福. 撤施□廬. 邑同詰士. 義等文殊. 其二.
雕碑刊聖. 刻妙真容. 當來即是. 過去成□. 楊□宰邑. 道俗□恭. 恩超春日. 德茂寒松. 其三.
大齊武平元年歲在庚寅十一月庚戌朔十四日癸亥

This inscription reads very much like a pastiche in which two voices are interwoven: the plainer, simpler voice in which the women of the society describe themselves and their first acts of patronage, and the more flowery, literary, and ultimately laudatory voice that introduces the inscription and describes Mr. Yang and his intervention. It is tempting to ascribe authorship of that voice to Mr. Yang himself, which would make it not just laudatory but self-congratulatory; but in fairness to him, the truth is likely impossible to know. At the same time, it is clear that there *was* an intervention, which, even if it rescued the project, also redirected it to some degree.

Thus this case reminds us of how Buddhist women and their patronage activities were deeply embedded in, and constrained by, their communities and their kinship networks, even as the opportunity to engage in Buddhist patronage on their own terms also provided women with a forum for public action that might not otherwise have been available to them. Much of this is also true of Buddhist men of

the same period, of course, and it is possible that the most significant lesson we can draw from an examination of these materials is that sixth-century women Buddhists were ordinary Buddhists—that they participated fully and publicly in the religious practices of their communities, as members and even as leaders. At a time when other public roles (like official positions) were closed to them, women's public participation in the practice of Buddhism deserves our attention.

## In Conclusion: The Problem of Voice

One of the choices the translator has to make in rendering donor inscriptions into English has to do with grammatical voice. Classical Chinese does not have grammatical voice; that is, it lacks grammatical forms indicating the first person, second person, and third person. Grammatical subjects are often simply omitted or elided, and, in many contexts, propriety demands that one should speak of oneself using kinship or rank terms that, when rendered into English, fall naturally into the third person ('your servant will do as you ask') rather than using first-person pronouns ('I will do as you ask'). It is therefore the case that many inscriptions can be translated with equal justice in the third or the first person. I have chosen the first person, on the grounds that the choice to attach one's name, one's identity, and sometimes one's likeness to a monument erected in a public place implies that first-person perspective.[54] Such a perspective is rarely preserved for any historical person in early medieval China, and thus it deserves the emphasis that the first-person voice provides; still more in the case of women, whose stories are regularly overlooked by historical documents of all kinds, and whose names are omitted from their own family genealogies.[55] The women we have met here—Wang Nüren, Lei Mingxiang and her daughters, Yang Yingxiang and Ren Mainü and their collaborators—have left a record of their voices which we can hear if we are willing to read them in those terms.

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[54] For a further discussion see Lingley, 'Lady Yuchi', 7.

[55] Ibid., 1.

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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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