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To cite this article: Xiaolu Wang (2023) Rethinking the history of Buddhism through female Buddhist heritage investigation, Cogent Arts & Humanities, 10:1, 2198328, DOI: [10.1080/23311983.2023.2198328](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2198328)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2023.2198328>



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Published online: 09 Apr 2023.



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Received: 12 July 2022  
Accepted: 29 March 2023

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## CULTURAL HERITAGE | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Rethinking the history of Buddhism through female Buddhist heritage investigation

Xiaolu Wang<sup>1\*</sup>

**Abstract:** As the merits of Buddhism in history gave rise to architectural constructions, the preserved historical heritage opens a window to a better understanding of the past. However, most of these cultural-historical treatises have been read and narrated only from a paternal perspective. Even though there is an increased awareness of female Buddhism, a number of Buddhist constructions built under female patronage have yet to receive full recognition. Based on a field survey conducted by the author, this paper examines three representative female Buddhist architectural relics in China: the Yungang Grottoes, the Great Vairocana (or the Lu-she-na Buddha) of the Longmen Grottoes, and the Tiantai'an Nunnery, in order to understand the diversity of Buddhist practise and discuss the role of women in early Chinese Buddhism. Through case studies and comparative analysis, this paper presents Buddhist practise based on female engagement, social context, and female traditions in China. The author argues for a re-evaluation of the history of Buddhist architecture and for it to be placed into a broader framework that takes into account female Buddhist communities and their contribution to the history of architecture.

**Subjects:** Architecture; History of Art & Design; Religion; Cultural Studies

**Keywords:** Buddhist architecture; female Buddhism; historical heritage; monastery; nunnery



Xiaolu Wang

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xiaolu Wang is currently a PhD candidate at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, co-supervised by Dr Xiang Ren and Dr Jan Woudstra. She is a member of the East West Studies in Architecture and Landscape Research Unit and Space, Cultures and Politics Research Group. Her research aims to contextualize and interpret the historic Buddhist architecture of Foguang Monastery from a landscape and architectural perspective. This research is also concerned with understanding cultural interaction, religious feminism, pilgrimage networks, religious landscapes, and Buddhist rituals. Before coming to the UK, Xiaolu Wang was a lecturer at Jinan University in China and a visiting researcher at Waseda University in Japan.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This article aims not only to interpret pre-modern Chinese Buddhist architecture, female Buddhism, religious politics, and art history but also to enrich the knowledge of early religious architecture and contribute to the historical development of Buddhist history in Asia. In addition, this research hopes to provide inspirational information for Buddhist women's community worldwide, feminist researchers, designers of religious spaces, religious artists, or anyone interested in women's history.

## 1. Introduction

It is generally believed that Buddhism arrived in mainland China after 126 BC, due mainly to international diplomacy and spread further by the travels of missionaries such as Zhang Qian (138 BC-126 BC) from the capital Chang'an to the western regions (Liu, 2010; S. Zhang, 2004). The first group of monks probably came to China from India via Pakistan and Afghanistan around the 1st century (Liang, 1961). The Han dynasty thus witnessed the first phase of Buddhism expansion, in particular the way in which this foreign religion was introduced from India to China. After its arrival via the Silk Road, Buddhism experienced a long and slow process of development in China (Tang, 1987, p. 48). It is generally accepted that Buddhism went through four phases: preparation (65-317AD), domestication (317-589AD), independent growth (589-900AD), and appropriation (900-1900AD) (Wright, 1959). The three case studies used in this paper are from different periods in the flourishing development of Buddhism. The second construction phase of Yungang Grottoes, manipulated by the Empress Dowager Feng, dates from a time when Buddhism was beginning to grow, namely between 453 and 495 AD of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The Great Vairocana (or Lushena Buddha) in the Longmen Grottoes, which were under the patronage of Empress Wu Zetian, was built during the heyday of Buddhism (672-675 AD in the Tang Dynasty). Tiantai An (or Tiantai Nunnery), one of the few ancient monasteries in China, was built during the later Tang Dynasty (around 907 AD). This paper's argument is structured around three selected cases and narrated using photography and mapping methods.

Buddhist merit to some extent boosted the Buddhist architectural construction, and the surviving historical heritage has opened a window to a better understanding of the history and cultural significance of women. Fortunately, some representative Buddhist relics from the growth and flourishing periods in China have been well preserved. Some representative examples are as follows: the rock-cut architecture, such as the Yungang Grottoes, the Longmen Grottoes, and the Dunhuang Caves, the ancient wooden architecture of the Tang Dynasty, such as the oldest surviving building of the Nanchan Monastery, the oldest above-ground palace building of the Foguang Monastery from 857 AD, and the Tiantai'an Nunnery made during the Late Tang Dynasty and described in greater detail later in this paper.

The author agrees with the view that Buddhist philosophy put greater value on the role of men, resulting in women being afforded little freedom being treated as dependents and given lower duties (Paudel & Dong, 2017). Historically, Chinese Buddhism was no exception to this. In feudal patriarchal societies, although Buddhism provided only a limited space for women to challenge gender inequality, it did, however, offer them an opportunity where they could represent and free themselves from the feudal hierarchy. Buddhist monumental relics, such as rock caves or some surviving architecture located in China provide solid evidence that trace the history of feminism within Buddhism.

The reasons for women choosing Buddhism in China were complicated. Through an investigation into the epitaphs of women living during the Tang dynasty, it has been concluded that apart from seeking purely doctrinal creed, other specific factors also caused the spread of Buddhism among women, for instance parental influence in Buddhists' families (Jiao, 2000). Moreover, the hardships commonly faced by women, such as being widowed or divorced, being orphaned would induce them to seek spiritual redemption and psychological healing through the practice of meditation (Jiao, 2000).

This paper examines the three representative architectural relics with the aim of revealing the impact of Buddhist nuns' communities on Buddhist architectural development and discuss religious feminism and Buddhist history. To better understand the history of female Buddhist architecture in China, this article highlights how female Buddhists created a unique style of architecture by modifying existing monuments to suit their social status and needs. The author argues that women Buddhists played an important role in the evolution and development of Buddhism, revealing them to be an indispensable part of Chinese and world history.

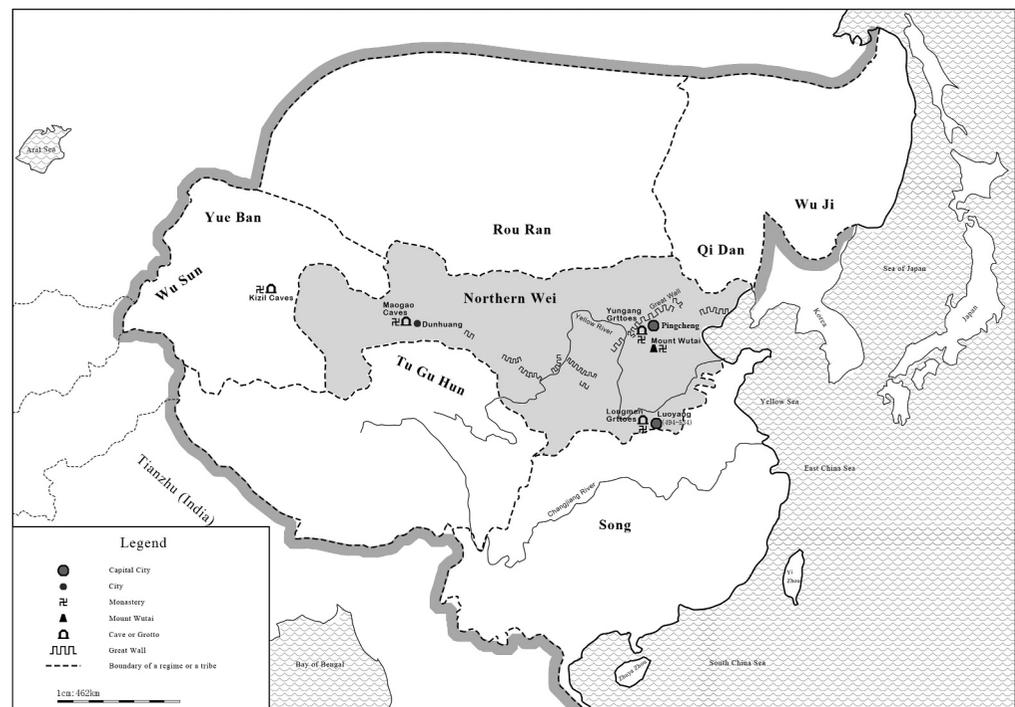
## 2. Empress Dowager Feng with Yungang Grottoes

Since patrons could achieve merits through supporting monumental construction, Buddhist adherents contributed to numerous representative Buddhist architectural projects in their communities, particularly throughout the first construction boom period during Northern Wei Dynasty. The Yellow Turban Rebellion broke out nationally in 184 AD, eventually destroying the Eastern Han regime (Z. Wang, 2004). Thereafter, China was divided for more than 400 years, apart from the brief unification of the Western Jin Dynasty (266–316 AD). Not until 589 AD when Emperor Wen of Sui reunited the north and south did this long-standing state of separatism end.

Although the protracted conflicts had adverse effects upon the whole of society, for example, large numbers of civilians suffered severe hardships, urban decline, and market stagnation, the spread of Buddhism was unexpectedly not affected by the political chaos. The first Buddhist commandments were created initially in the CaoWei regime (220–265AD); Buddhism even spread to the south of China, such as Dong Wu kingdom (229–280AD) wherein Buddhist monasteries were gradually erected; the translation of scriptures became crucial and favoured events that had occurred during the Jin Dynasty (266–420AD) due to the large increase in Buddhist (C. Huang, 2013). Many eminent monks emerged and contributed significantly towards the successful promotion and continuation of Buddhism in China, such as Fotudeng, Dao’an, Huiyuan, and Kumārajīva (Han,1979).

Later during the Southern and the Northern dynasties (420–589AD), Buddhism began to flourish in China. Tiantai Buddhism, initially created by the Chinese monk Zhiyi’ in the Southern Chen dynasty (557–589AD), is known as “the earliest attempt at a thoroughgoing Sinitic reworking of the Indian Buddhist tradition” (Ziporyn, 2016). In the Northern dynasties (439–581AD) (including Northern Wei regime, Northern Qi regime, and Northern Zhou regime), Buddhism also received widespread praise, especially during the period when Tuoba of Xianbei’s nomadic clan unified northern China and built the Northern Wei kingdom (386–534AD) (Ziporyn, 2016, pix). According to dialectics by Fa Lin, in 386, the Northern Wei regime first built Pingcheng (current Datong) as their capital city under their Xianbei Emperor Daowu (Figure 1). In 477AD of the Northern Wei, the number of Buddhists numbered no more than 77,000, but after 60 years it had risen dramatically

**Figure 1. Northern Wei regime during the Song and Wei dynasties of China (447 AD), redrawn by the author from the historical atlas of China by Tan (1996).**



to around 2,000,000 (the total population of the northern China was about 30 million during the same period) (Z. Wang, 2004).

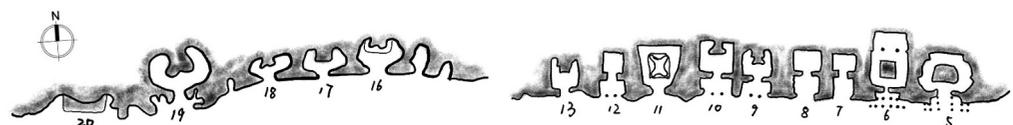
Empress Dowager Feng (441–490 AD) played an indelible role in spreading Buddhism and developing religious architecture during her 15-year reign from 465 to 480 AD, the development of Yungang Grottos being the clearest demonstration of this. The construction history of the Yungang Grottoes is generally divided into three phases: The first period (460 – 470AD) saw the construction of caves 16–20 (also known as the Five Caves of Tanyao); the second period (470 – 494AD) culminated in double caves 7 and 8, as well as cave 9, double cave 10, caves 11–13, double caves 1 and 2; and the third period (494 – 524AD) when the western caves and some repair work to caves of the first and second phases were completed (W. Huang, 2017). The third-phase caves, excavated after the death of Empress Dowager Feng, are very small and inferior in terms of spatial design, Buddhist art and building techniques compared to the previous excavations carried out during the first two periods, so are not discussed in this article. The impressive changes in Buddhist practice from the first to the second phase reflect how Empress Dowager Feng gradually advanced the reformation of the Buddhist rock architecture in the fifth century.

Although the Empress Dowager Feng did not witness the construction of the Five Caves of Tanyao, she did, however, learn how patriarchal authority was able to strengthen its power through religious symbolism. In 465 AD, the sudden death of Emperor Wencheng left the 24-year-old Empress Feng widowed with an 11-year-old adopted son born to the imperial concubine Li. At this time, the First Period Caves were in the fifth year of their construction awaiting completion, when the royal family of Northern Wei wanted to make the capital Datong a Buddhist centre. Attending to state affairs behind a curtain whilst continuing the Yungang Caves project were Empress Dowager Feng's in stopgap strategy to ensure a stable society under the rule of a female emperor. Although she was probably not involved in the planning of the Yungang Grottoes during Emperor Wencheng reign, she guaranteed the successful completion of the Five Caves of Tanyao.

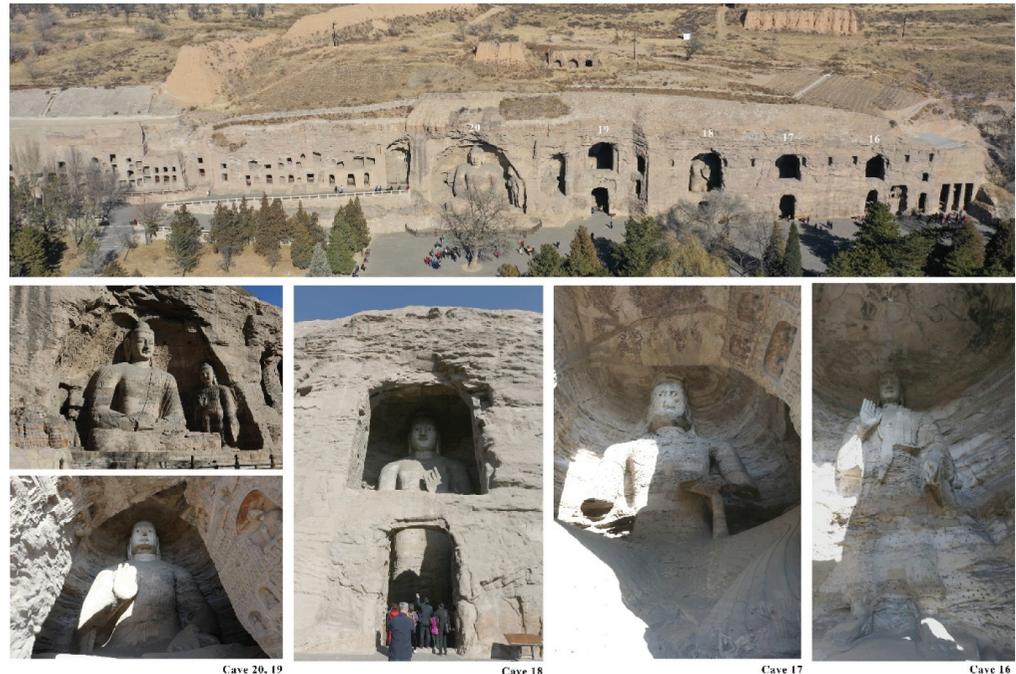
Beyond their religious symbolism, the five-giant statues are regarded as depicting the five deceased emperors of the Northern Wei Dynasty. The five caves are aligned from west to east and represent the emperors Daowu, Mingyuan, Taiwu, Prince Jingmu, and Wencheng, each built in the following historical order: 20, 17, 19, 18, and finally 16 (Wei, 2020) (Figures 2-3). This type of architectural statement is understandable for monumental cases in which religion was used to maintain social stability and is not uncommon throughout history. At this point, the Empress would be keen to ensure that peace be maintained within the traditionally patriarchal order of the Northern Wei Dynasty.

Political symbolism, however, should be based on religious cosmology. In Buddhism, the five cosmic Buddhas represent different sanctities with different names and orientations (Williams et al., 2012), which were adopted to define the holiness of the Yungang caves. Therefore, the creation of the Five Caves of Tanyao probably also embodies the theory of the Five Cosmic Buddhas. Although Empress Dowager Feng was the centre of power in the Northern Wei Dynasty, even actively helping in the completion of the first phase of the Yungang Grottoes, it does not appear that she interfered directly with the Buddhist practices representing patriarchal society. The five caves are huge, and the details contained within the carvings are intricate; however, there are no traces of Empress Dowager Feng.

**Figure 2.** Left – the first phase caves floor plan and right – the second phase caves floor plan, drawn by the author.



**Figure 3. Five Tanyao Caves (460-465AD) of Yungang Grottoes, author's picture, taken in 2020.**

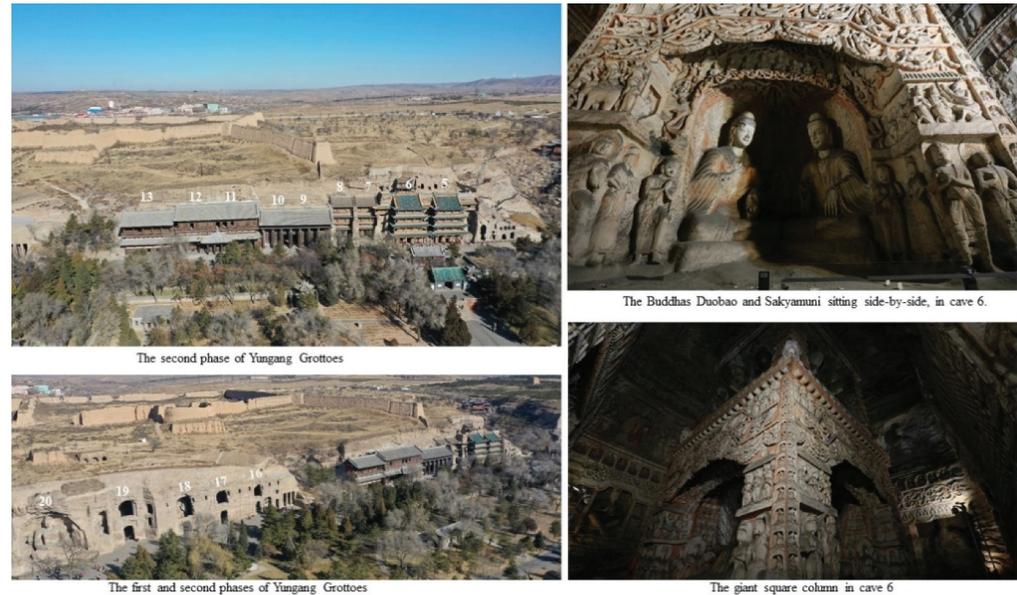


During the second phase of the Yungang Grottoes, however, she began to exert her influence on Buddhist practice to better serve a female-led imperial empire. Accordingly, she dominated the second phase of the Yungang Grottoes project when the first phase of the Five Tanyao Caves were finished (Xia, 1994). In comparison, the main statue in the Tanyao Five caves occupies most of the area in each cave, and in the outer wall of each cave, two openings were excavated from the bottom and from the top. With the collapse of the outer wall in cave 20, the Buddha statue was fully exposed. The five huge statues, respectively, symbolise the five early Northern Wei Dynasty emperors (Li, 2020, p. 65). Architecturally, the cave plan in each was designed in the shape of a horseshoe chamber, which housed a huge statue, with a short and straight ritual passage.

However, the space design approach of the Yungang caves, which had been built during a subsequent phase under the empress Dowager Feng's guidance, became more sophisticated and diverse in sculpture art and engraving theme. The inner space, compared with the caves constructed during the first phase, was divided more meticulously because it was dug deeper and had become divided into two chambers, a lobby and a back room, which increased the size of the worship passage and the amount of time that devotees could remain inside. The giant square column, added as a new architectural component, such as can be seen in cave 6, stands in the centre of the cave making the "circumambulation" more convenient and fluid. The carving themes in each cave also became more diverse with greater engraving details (Figures 2-4).

Moreover, the Empress Dowager Feng made subtle interventions in Buddhist practice to represent herself. The double caves, which consist of two distinct areas connected by an antechamber, as seen in the second phase (such as caves 7 and 8, caves 9 and 10, and caves 5 and 6), represent a breakthrough in the ancient cave-building pattern seen in the first phase. Meanwhile, the various legends depicting Buddhist deities carved into the walls challenge the traditionally male orientated theocratic images. For example, the Buddhas Duobao and Sakyamuni seated side by side (Figure 4) are believed to be avatars of Empress Dowager Feng and her foster son (Emperor Xiaowen) (W. Lin, 2012). Thus, the evolution of the Yungang Grottoes from the first to the second phase embodies the awakening of Empress Dowager Feng's feminine consciousness, and through Buddhist architectural practice she was able to convey her religio-political power. It is also conceivable that this expression provided a strong reference for later queens to use religious architecture to articulate themselves.

**Figure 4. Illustrating the second phase of Yungang Grottoes, author's picture, taken in 2020.**



### 3. Empress Wu Zetian with Longmen Grottoes

Many Tang emperors (618–907 AD) were Buddhists or nominally supportive of Buddhism, although it suffered a period of anti-Buddhist persecution between 841 and 846 AD. The Sui and Tang Dynasty was the heyday of Buddhism development in medieval China. Accordingly, 52 caves of Dunhuang Grottoes were excavated during the Tang dynasty (Hu & Mei, 1997)<sup>1</sup>, which involved creating 56 frescoes of Mañjuśrī Jingtu Bian (Buswell & Lopez, 2013, p. 390)<sup>2</sup>. Two extensive excavations taking place over 140 years also took place in the Longmen Grottoes during the Northern Wei and Tang dynasty. In the Longmen Grottoes, there are more than 2,100 extant remains of the ancient cave niches and 100,000 Buddha statues depicting the Lu-she-na Buddha (or Great Vairocana Buddha), which is 17.14 meters in height (Figure 5) (Gong, 2002); 60 percent of the excavation projects were completed during the Tang period, compared with 30 percent from the Northern Wei (Li, 2020). 271 monasteries were constructed during the Sui dynasty and the number of monastic sites' reached 3985 (excluding private temples) at the end of Sui China (581-618AD). 3901 monasteries were originally built during the Tang period (618-907AD), especially by

**Figure 5. Lu-she-na Buddha of Longmen Grottoes built in 675AD, Luoyang, China, author's picture, taken in 2020.**



the emperors Taizong, Xuanzong, and Zhaozong (G. Zhang, 1997). The implementation of the construction law—Yingshanling 营缮令 ensured huge Buddhist construction investment during the Sui and Tang constructions. This provided a highly efficiently project management criterion encompassing strict regulations governing building projects and uniform construction standards in timber structures during the medieval period (Fu, 2012, pp. 18–25). Therefore, if project funds were sufficient, this advanced system made constructing a large number of buildings possible.

Empress Wu Zetian, as a Tang dynasty Buddhist, inevitably affected the Buddhist practice. Her reign (650–704 AD) is held to be the most glorious developmental period of the Longmen Grottoes, as two-thirds of the statues were engraved in this period (Gao, 2006). Meanwhile, Wu Zetian is believed to be promoting the popularity of the cult of Maitreya (Gao, 2006). In Buddhist philosophy, Maitreya Bodhisattva is regarded as the future age of the Buddha. From the fourth century onwards, the cult of Maitreya spread from India along the Silk Road to mainland China (Wong, 2001). The Maitreya Bodhisattva is believed to live in “Tushita Heaven” where he practises virtues and preaches to devas (heavenly beings) while awaiting his rebirth on Earth (Wong, 2001). Wu Zetian is considered to be the one who decisively pushed the popularity of the Buddhist Maitreya, but towards the end of her political career, faith in Maitreya declined, and the project of the three Buddha statues were not completed in Longmen Grottoes (Gao, 2006).

It is generally believed that in order to strengthen her political leadership role as a woman, she supported the creation of Lu-she-na Buddha to convince her subjects that she was the incarnation of Lu-she-na Buddha on earth (Gong, 2002, pp. 291–298). She adopted the same previously used approach of expressing an emperor’s connection to the Buddha through tangible statues and rock architecture in her new faith and political intention with the Lu-she-na Buddha.

The shape of the Lu-she-na niche is unique, resembling a massive opened-up painting carved in stone. Technically speaking, the space of Lu-she-na may not be defined as a cave, but rather a niche, because instead of digging statues into a cave like the Yungang Grottoes, it has no interior, all the statues carved into the rock are directly visible to pilgrims. At 33.50 meters wide from north to south and 27.30 meters deep from east to west, it contains the central Lu-she-na Buddha, two disciples, two bodhisattvas, two deities, two Hercules, and two patrons (N. Zhang, 1999). Initially over the statue of the Lu-she-na Buddha, there was a wooden canopy of which currently only a few holes remain, which formally held the wooded pillars supporting the roof (Figure 5).

The strategy of using Buddhism to manifest political ambition was also employed by Empress Wu Zetian. However, the monumental spatial design in the Lu-she-na niche is more obvious and more visible compared to the Buddhist architectural practices seen in the Yungang Grottoes. The form of the Lu-she-na niche might have been inspired by the first phase of the Yungang Grottoes, featuring the five Buddha statues symbolising the five emperors of the Northern Wei, but on a more massive scale. However, the more feminine features and art applied in the Lu-she-na statue is distinct from the more masculine representation seen in the Yungang Grottoes Buddhas. Furthermore, the second phase of the space in Yungang Grottoes is indirect to access because of its exterior wall entrance lobby. These monastic design makes Buddha statues hidden in the extended interior surrounded by abundant sculptural content and decorative detail. In contrast, the Lu-she-na Buddha is fully exposed and is located on the highest platform as part of the Fengxian Monastery complex. The Fengxian Monastery used to be at the foot of the mountain until being flooded by the Yi River (Gong, 2002, p. 288). The format of a monastery consisting of a cave and a temple points to ritual events being shifted from the cave space to the temple (Figure 6).

It can be seen that, Empress Wu Zetian’s representation in Buddhist practice is reflected more boldly compared with Empress Dowager Feng. This not only influenced medieval period Buddhist art to reflect more on women’s insights but would also encourage more laywomen devotees to engage in and rethink their social and religious positions in a feudal patriarchal society. The memorial niche of Lanfeng Shan in Anyang of Henan, for instance, created in honor of the nuns

**Figure 6. Lu-she-na Buddha, located in the west of Yi River, Yungang Grottoes, Luoyang, China, author's picture, taken in 2020.**



who dedicated their lives to Buddhist practice, modified the landscape at Lanfeng Shan and created a unique bricolage based on various pre-established iconographic, literary, and funerary traditions (Adamek, 2009). The creation of this female Buddhist community separate from men suggests that laywomen also had the opportunity to engage in Buddhist practice. Individual performance as a Buddhist nun, therefore, entitles the same practice as male devotees. Physical Buddhist practice could be used as a political tool to help enforce ruling ideologies, such as how the Lu-she-na niche was used by Empress Wu Zetian, which can also gain merits such as the niche in Lanfeng Shan. Either top-down intervention or bottom-up involvement culminated in the architectural expression of an ancient civilisation that remains to the present day.

#### **4. Plebeian bhikkhuni in Tiantai'an**

If the aforementioned caves reflect the interaction of high-ranking women with Buddhist practice, the Tiantai'an nunnery, built after the late Tang dynasty and possessing one of the oldest wooden Buddha structures in China, embodies the most common female Buddhist in China's hierarchical society.

In Pali, Bhikkhuni in Theravada Buddhism translates as nun, female fully ordained Buddhists. Accordingly, Jing Jian the first bhikkhuni (an ordained female monastic) in China built the first female Buddhist community and monastery in Luoyang city of the Northern Wei dynasty fourth century (C. Zhang, 2006; Yan, 2005).

With Buddhism popularity in the Middle Ages, 5358 monasteries of high rank and built on accordance to strict building regulations called Si (in Chinese 寺) were directly monopolised and financially supported by the ruling family (G. Zhang, 1997). Smaller scale and remote Buddhist sites called Lan Ruo were used by the rural population for pilgrimage, but these kinds of monasteries were deemed illegal and so eradicated by the authorities during the early period (G. Zhang, 1997). The term "An" (in Chinese 庵) initially referred to a round and small thatched hut in prehistoric China (C. Zhang, 2006; Yan, 2005). When Buddhism's popularity grew in China, the site of female Buddhists (nunneries) was likely adopted from the word "An" which formally referred to a prehistoric small round thatched hut (C. Zhang, 2006; Yan, 2005).

It is difficult to distinguish nunneries from monastic monasteries by the name of the temples alone because, both monks and nuns were allowed to practice in a monastery during the tenth century Tibet (G. Zhang, 1997). There is also no clear record of how Buddhist communities were classified and historically when women began to establish female Buddhist communities.

Little is known about when exactly the "An" became an exclusive title for female Buddhist sites due to a lack of historical records, though, it is generally believed that there were two operating modes of monasteries in ancient China, those run by patrons (in Chinese 檀越施营) and those run by Buddhists themselves (in Chinese 释门自营) (G. Zhang, 1997). As a result of this lack of historical information, it is difficult to say whether and how the two types of monasteries differed in their construction, and even

what was the initial motivation for the construction of the Tiantai'an. Located in a rural hamlet Wangqu village, Ping Shun county Shanxi Province, the Tiantai'an erected on a four-meter-high platform is one of China's most precious architectural and Buddhist heritage sites (Figure 7). The courtyard covers an area of approximately 450 square meters (Li, 2018). Its initial construction date is highly controversial due to a lack of historical data with some academics insisting that it is a surviving relic dating back to the Tang Dynasty. Through comparing the timber structure framework typology, dimensions and the sophisticated interlocking joints with other Tang relics, in particular the Nanchan and Foguang monastery, some scholars strongly suggest that it is a relic of the late Tang Dynasty (C. Wang, 1993), Tsinghua University Architectural Design and Research Institute et.al, 2011, p. 8). However, some building elements, such as the interlocking roof and the painted art on wood, are not regarded as characteristic of the architectural typology of the Tang Dynasty (Xu, 1989), but rather that of the architectural style of the Jin Dynasty. Irrespective of whether the exact initial building time was during the medieval period or later, interpretation based on the perspectives of Buddhist nuns was neglected, although many female adherents and female providers undoubtedly played a vital function in developing Buddhist's holy sites.

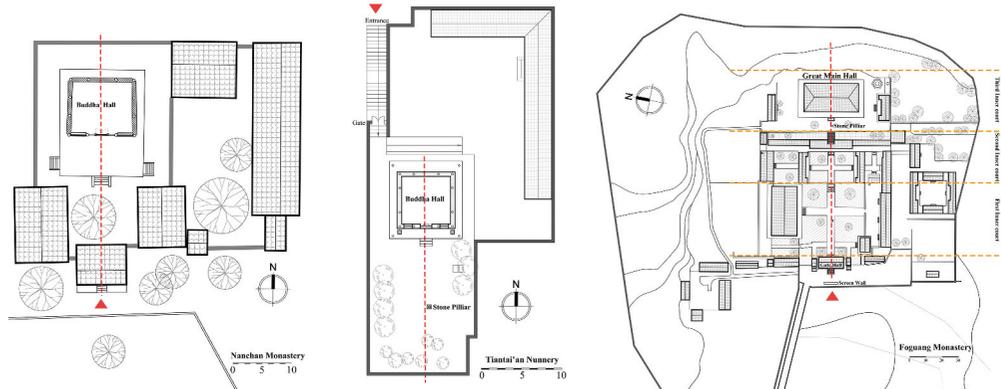
It is without a doubt that in traditional Chinese courtyards, the main entrance was at the outset of the main ceremonial route and used to be placed on the layout's central axis. The courtyard's entrance runs through a continuous outer wall, transitioning from a public to a space designated for a particular purpose. It connecting the passageway also helps the ceremonial ritual transition from the beginning gate passing by inner courts, then up into the final main hall. This traditional layout tradition is typical of all Buddhist sites. At Foguang Monastery, for instance, the ceremonial route begins from the screen wall, processes through the inner courts on an east-west axis, and ascends 34 brick stairs (17.66 meters high) finally reaching the higher platform of the Great Main Hall. Moreover, Nanchan Monastery as the oldest surviving Tang architecture in the country has a similar building volume and architectural rank as the Tiantai'an nunnery. Although Nanchan Monastery's main entrance lies opposite the Buddha-Hall, it also has another ancillary court on the east of the hall, which serves as the current entry point for visitors. The original religious route connecting the entrance and the main Buddha hall is still clearly visible (Figure 8 -left and right)

However, as a purely female medieval-period Buddhist site, the Tiantai'an nunnery breaks the layout tradition (Figure 8 -middle). Its entrance is placed on the back wall of the Buddha Hall rather than at the front and furthermore and does not follow the central south-north axis symmetrical framing layout. The four-meter-high multilateral square base lifts up the Buddha hall. A retaining stonewall encircles this raised foundation. In this monastic design, there is no traditional procession entry to the south edge of the Buddha Hall terrace. In addition, according to the two only investigative reports on the preservation and restoration of Tiantai'an heritage relics<sup>3</sup>, neither made mention of any past maintenance work ever being carried out on the high platform or the retaining stonewall. Therefore, it

**Figure 7. Aerial view of Tiantai'an in Wang Qu Village, author's picture, taken in 2020.**



**Figure 8. The courtyards of Nanchan Monastery (left), Tiantai'an Nunnery (middle), and Foguang Monastery (right), drawn by the author in 2020.**



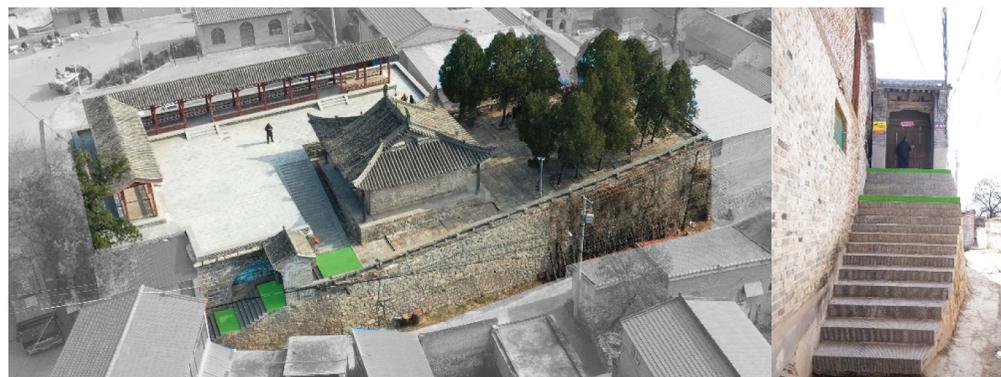
is likely that the current entry is in keeping with its initial location. An entrance set behind the main hall is unconventional in Chinese monastic sites, possibly due to the influence of the patriarchal feudal society. Although women were considered of lower status in Buddhism, there is no Buddhist creed that makes a distinction between women and men in the construction of architectural monuments.

Furthermore, it is rare to find such a case choosing an uncommon approach to create the ritual passage to reach the Buddha. Buddha hall is placed on a three-meter-high terrace, while the entrance preceding the Buddha was set at the rear. As a result of recent maintenance work, the original staircase has been covered with modern slates but has most likely retained its original condition. As the difference in height between the lower level and the Buddha Terrace is only 3 metres (Figure 9), the use of three resting landings to connect the two levels is not necessary for normal users. Therefore, this unusual form of staircase was probably adapted to the particular needs of the population, especially women in ancient China, who had to bind their feet, making them inconvenient to move.

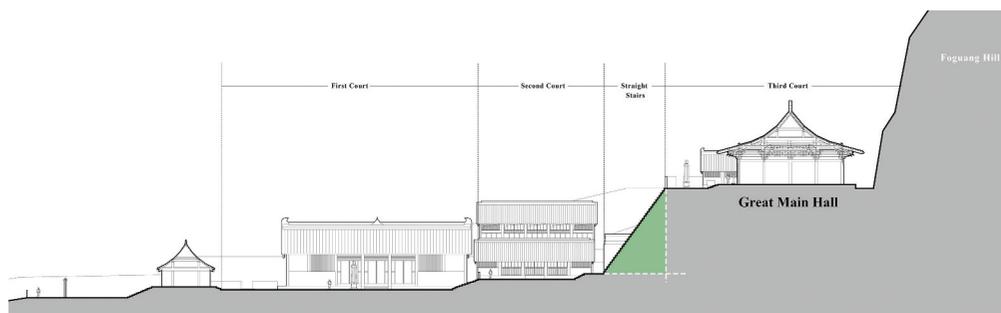
Conversely, in Foguang monastery, the steep stairs that front the Great Main Hall have 34 brick steps (17.66 meters high) without any landings (Figure 10). Thereby, Tiantai'an's unusual design is most likely due to concerns about women with bound feet. This Chinese custom was not uncommon before the seventeenth century and is also another piece of tangible evidence that the purely female Buddhist site adapted its suitable space to cater to female characteristics and against patriarchal religious standards, especially in top-down construction.

Since the restoration of the Buddha hall of Tiantai'an, the four wooden pillars under each corner of the eaves were newly fitted to support the heavy roof, the four pillars did not exist in the original plan (Figure 11). Compared with the Buddha hall in Nanchan Monastery, both

**Figure 9. Three landings in procession staircase of Buddha Hall in Tiantai'an, author's picture, taken in 2020.**

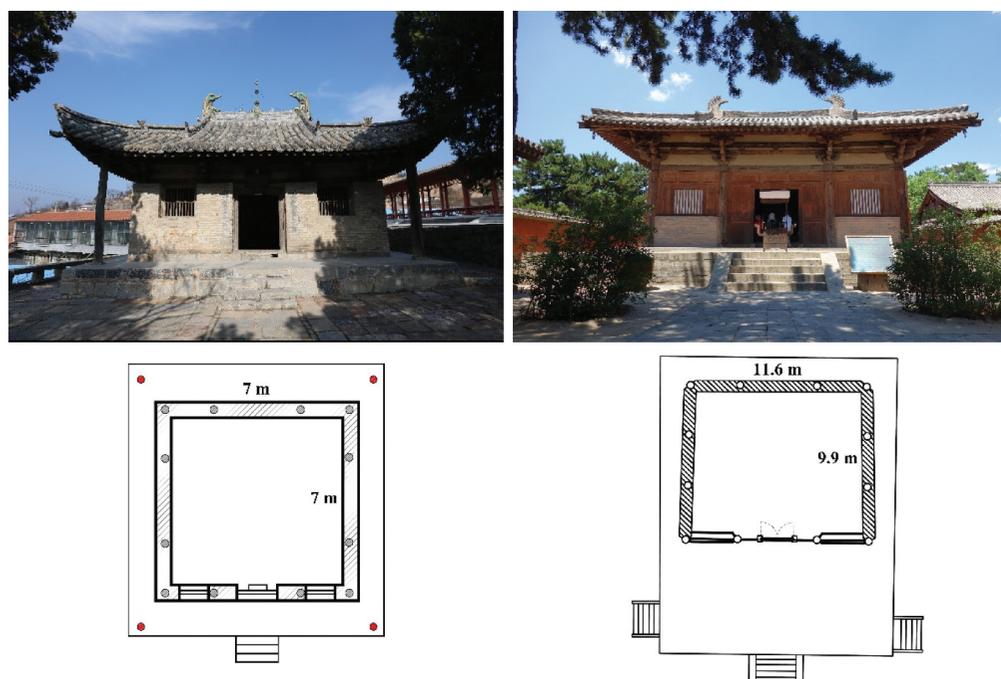


**Figure 10. Straight stairs up to the Great Main hall of Foguang Monastery, drawn by the author.**



have 12 columns supporting a sophisticated grid roof, whilst the distance between two columns of Tiantai'a, is smaller. The former plane is a rectangle, while the latter is almost a square. The curved roof in Tiantai'an, which was common in ancient wooden buildings in southern China, was used in the north. This unusual roof not only enhances the diversity of the curved aesthetics of architecture in northern China but also represents the distinctive feature of Tiantai Temple as a women's monastery. Since Buddhism became popular among women, they were able to challenge conservative views, for example, propose non-marriage, and they could even accept cremation after death rather than be given a proper burial. These dramatic changes in female Buddhists were substantial and challenged the patriarchal authority and Chinese society's then feudal system. Thereby, it is not difficult to understand the reason gender difference was manifested in Buddhist heritage. This group challenged patriarchal society and the traditional Buddhist teachings of abstaining from marriage and having children, and choosing cremation after death. Among these women, the Buddhist empresses, as the highest representatives of equality and freedom, provided the greatest inspiration. The erection of Buddhist monuments expressed the embodiment of the female inner world; however, these were not faithfully recorded in historical texts, and not even recognised as a necessary architectural typology by modern society.

**Figure 11. Buddha Hall of Tiantai'an with floor plan (left), Buddha Hall of Nanchan Monastery with floor plan (right), drawn by the author, taken in 2020.**



## 5. Conclusions

The three case studies of Yungang Grottoes, Longmen Grottoes, and Tiantai'an all show women's interaction with Buddhism from the ruling class to laywomen. The ideas and donations made by female devotees also visibly influenced the architecture history visibly. These historical heritage sites reference the living environment for women in Buddhist communities. By comparing and analysing the three preserved architectural relics, the rock-cut architecture in Yungang Grottoes, Longmen Grottoes, and even Longmen Grottoes and other numerous small grottoes are considered as significant evidence for researchers to narrate art, Buddhism, and history in China. Women are always involved in the construction work at these sacred shrines, and should not be ignored by researchers. Meanwhile, Tiantai'an, as a female Buddhist monastery, has obvious features of social context that had previously been ignored. However, the main focus of this paper is not only on gender equality in Buddhist practice in the history of China but also on the proper awareness of the study of Buddhist architectural history and even Asian history that includes women's involvement and contribution. Human history is filled with contradiction and complexity from a multi-dimensional scope. It is impossible to reveal the story and interpretation of Buddhist architectural history only by looking at case studies from a period of patriarchal domination. The female Buddhist community is consistent with Buddhist history, and this engagement created a diversity of architectural history. Fully understanding cultural heritage is the first step towards the sustainable innovation of traditional human heritage.

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### Disclosure statement

This research was supported by the University of Sheffield Institutional Open Access Fund.

### Citation information

Cite this article as: Rethinking the history of Buddhism through female Buddhist heritage investigation, Xiaolu Wang, *Cogent Arts & Humanities* (2023), 10: 2198328.

### Notes

1. Seven caves began to engrave in the Early Tang (618–705 AD) and were completed until the mid-Tang and the Late Tang (848–907 AD), before dynasties' unfinished caves, such as No. 392, No. 397, No. 206, No. 401, and No. 431 also were completed during the Tang period (Hu and Fu 1997, pp. 63–66).
2. Jingtū Bian 净土变: 'the counterparts of what transformation tableaux of the pure land' or 'transformation paintings', through drawing diagrams and dramatic visual aids for disseminating pure land ideas. (Buswell and Donald 2013, p390)
3. In 1989, Built a new fence stone wall railings and a new door by Pingshun County Cultural Relics Museum, Shanxi Province, published in Changzhi Yearbook, p618.  
In 2018, Protection and Repair Project of Tiantai'an, Project Managers - Li W. D. & Shuai Y. C., Cultural Relics Tourism Development Center of Pingshun County, Shanxi Province, published in China Ancient Construction Industry Yearbook, pp. 270–274.

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