

Buddhism and Ancient Chinese States

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I. Introduction

This is a study of the inscriptions on various types of Buddhist images and stelae made by the common people during the Northern dynasties and the Sui and Tang dynasties from the fourth to the ninth century. These inscriptions demonstrate that many common people dedicated their merits of making Buddhist images to emperors, ministers and the state apart from their present parents and parents of past seven generations. The ordinary people's consciousness about emperors and states was very high and they paid their debt of gratitude to the emperors and state by dedicating the merits of making Buddhist images. Hou Xudong 侯旭東 thinks that this is a recognition of the state, the Northern Wei, by the common people. Satō Chisui 佐藤智水 thinks that it is the emperor worship amongst the common people as instructed by their society's monastic teachers. But he is still not sure about the reasons why the Buddhist monks and nuns also had the mentality of emperor worship. In this paper, I argue that it was the Buddhist way to pay their debt of gratitude to the Chinese emperors for their protection of Buddhism because Buddhism had faced many challenges and criticisms from Chinese people and even persecutions since the time of its introduction to China in the Han dynasty.

II. Reasons for the Dedication of Merits to Emperors

The practice of dedication of merits to one's parents, both living and dead, diseased relatives, and all sentient beings is very common in India when Buddhists, both lay and monastic, made Buddha images, stupa, or any Buddhist objects of worship. The Indian tradition of making such dedication in the inscriptions is well demonstrated by Gregory Schopen's studies.¹⁾ The dedication of merit to parents and diseased parents is called filial piety in the Chinese tradition because both the living and diseased parents are included in the Chinese filial practice. Such practice was very common as indicated by the inscriptions on the Buddhist images and stelae found from the Northern dynasties to the Tang dynasty.

A special feature in such dedication of merits in the inscriptions made during the fifth and sixth centuries is the dedication of merits to emperors and states. Hou Xudong's study of the inscriptions on various types of Buddhist images and stelae made in the Northern dynasties demonstrates that many common people dedicated their merits of making Buddhist images to emperors and sometimes even to ministers apart from their present parents and parents of past seven generations.²⁾ This is interesting because while the eminent learned Buddhist monks fought for the independence or semi-independence of Buddhism in China, the ordinary Chinese Buddhists totally and willingly submitted themselves to the emperors as reflected in these inscriptions.

Hou Xudong has collected 1,607 inscriptions on Buddhist images and stelae made during the fifth and sixth centuries in the Northern dynasties and there are 472 of them which mention emperors.³⁾ Hou has divided these inscriptions into the

1) Schopen 1984, 110-26.

2) Hou 2003, 10-41. There are many inscriptions on Buddhist images and stelae during the fifth and sixth centuries that mention only the present parents and parents of the past without mentioning emperors. See Hou (2018).

3) Hou 2003, 14.

following three groups. The first group is the inscriptions which clearly mention that the donors made the Buddhist images and stelae in the name of the emperors and dedicated their merits to the emperors in the first place and then made dedication to others like parents and sentient beings as well. This group clearly demonstrates that the donors directly expressed their gratitude to emperors. The second group is the inscriptions which mention that the donors made those Buddhist images not in the name of the emperors but in the name of their parents mostly and dedicated their merits to the emperors, which are always mentioned in the first place and others such as parents and sentient beings are mentioned thereafter. This is the most common type of inscriptions that mention emperors in their dedication of merits. The third group is the inscriptions without mentioning any name for whom the donors commissioned it, but the donors dedicated their merits to emperors first and this dedication was followed by the dedication to others, who were in most cases their parents, relatives, and sentient beings.

According to Hou Xudong's analysis, Buddhist images particularly made in the name of the emperors are very common amongst the donors of the officials, Buddhist clergies and organized groups such as Devotional Society (Yiyi 邑義) and Dharma Society (Fayi 法義).⁴⁾ This may be interpreted that the positions they held and futures of officials were very much dependent on the emperor so they sincerely wished that the emperor could have a long life. The Buddhist clergies on the other hand also depended on the support of the emperors because they faced huge challenge and criticisms from Confucian scholars and other Chinese that they violated the Chinese morality of filial piety. As these organized societies were usually led by one or several Buddhist clergies as teachers to guide the members in their Buddhist practice, they were quite conscious of the emperors. Thus, Hou comes to the conclusion that this is the common people's recognition of the emperor and state as the emperor had a strong and wide influence in the Northern dynasties and it served as a foundation for imperial rule.⁵⁾

Satō Chisui thinks that the appearance of emperors in the inscriptions of the

4) Hou 2003, 16.

5) Hou 2003, 32.

Northern Wei reflects the worship of the emperors amongst common people.⁶⁾ As Satō points out that these inscriptions on the Buddhist images were made under the instruction or guidance of the Buddhist clergies who served as the heads or teachers of these Buddhist societies.⁷⁾ They organized the members of the Buddhist societies to perform many different activities such as attending lectures on Buddhist teachings and observing Buddhist eight precepts apart from making Buddhist images. As Satō has noticed, the worship of emperors is very high amongst three groups of people: first the officials and princes, second the monastics, and third the Buddhist societies. These three groups are the same as Hou's observation of the recognition of states amongst people. It is easy to understand why the offices and princes worshiped or paid their respect to the emperor as their very careers depended on the emperor. However, it is strange and contrary to the normal understanding that the Buddhist monastics also worshiped the emperor. Even Satō also wonders why, but he has not provided any good answer. Satō just explains that the dedications to emperors in the inscriptions made by the members of the Buddhist societies may have been instructed and guided by their monastic teachers.

Ishimatsu Hinako's 石松日奈子 observation is more reasonable and she says that many Buddhist monastics experienced the terrible tragedy of Emperor Tai Wudi's persecution and some even lost their lives so they were afraid that such tragedy might happen again.⁸⁾ Buddhists realized that Buddhism could not continue and prosper without the support of emperors. As a result, Buddhism and the imperial state were united together into one single body and it stimulated the Buddhist images to be made by those in the imperial capital Pingcheng as well as by the ordinary people in villages in the Northern Wei.⁹⁾ This is reflected in the

6) Satō 1995, 89. For the original Japanese version, see Satō (1977).

7) Satō 1995, 92.

8) Ishimatsu (2012) is Shinohara Norio's 篠原典生 Chinese translation of the original Japanese version, Ishimatsu (2005). According to the "Biography of Xuangao" (玄高傳) in Huijiao's *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks), fascicle 11, two Buddhist eminent monks Xuangao and Hui-chong 慧崇 died at Emperor Taiwu's persecution of Buddhism.

9) Buddhists started to make huge Buddha images in memory of the five emperors of Northern

dedication of merits in the inscriptions of Buddhist images made by the ordinary people. However, the situation is more complex; although Taiwu's persecution may be considered as the direct cause, there are also other causes which I will discuss in this article.

I argue that the inclusion of the emperors and the states in the dedication of merits in the inscriptions most probably was a Buddhist strategy in order to repay the compassion or debt of the emperors for their support, protection, and promotion of Buddhism. This is particularly true with regard to the dedications of merits made by the Buddhist clergies as they were more aware the challenging situation Buddhism faced. Even the ordinary people and Buddhist societies, who made their dedications to the emperors, may have also been instructed or guided by their monk teachers as Satō says. I have the following two reasons to support my arguments.

First, Buddhism faced many challenges and criticisms since its introduction to China in the Han dynasty because the Buddhist way of life is primarily different from the Chinese way of life which has been basically shaped and guided by Confucian teachings that played a dominant role both in Chinese politics and Chinese people's lives.¹⁰⁾ Confucian teachings emphasized the family life and social participation and contribution of the individuals to society with the aim of building first a happy family and then a harmonious society and world. On the other hand, Buddhism focused on liberation from suffering by practicing morality and concentration with an aim of achieving *nirvāṇa*. Thus, the fourth century great Buddhist master Daoan said, "As we are not relying on the ruler of a state, religious activities are difficult to establish."¹¹⁾ In other words, Buddhism

Wei in Yun'gang led by the Buddhist leader Tanyao. There are many studies about Tanyao's five caves and the relationship of the five huge Buddha images with the five diseased Northern Wei emperors. For the most recent studies, see Wei (2020, 32-38); Sofukawa (2008, 1-155).

10) Many studies have been published regarding to the Chinese criticism of Buddhism. For instance, see Zurher (2007; original 1959); Wright (1951); Guang (2010); Huang (2017); Gu (2012). Of these Huang's article has been translated into English by Jan Vrhovski as *The Debate and Confluence between Confucianism and Buddhism in East Asia* (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2020).

11) Tsukamoto (1979, 689).

should rely on the emperor in order to flourish in China as the emperor in China was the supreme head and all people in his kingdom were his subjects. The two persecutions of Buddhism in the Northern dynasties, first by Emperor Taiwu (r. 424–451) of Northern Wei around 446 and second by Emperor Wudi (r. 561–578) of Northern Zhou around 574, are good examples and the memories of such catastrophic events must be deep in the memories of the Buddhist monks and nuns.¹²⁾

Second, the idea of the beginning of the Final Dharma in the three periods of Buddhist teachings (first is the True Dharma [正法], second is the Semblance Dharma [像法], and third is the Final Dharma [末法]) was widely spread towards the end of in Northern and Southern dynasties and continued to the Sui and Tang dynasties.¹³⁾ Most of the Chinese and Japanese Buddhist scholars usually attribute the immediate causes for this thought to the two persecutions of Buddhism mentioned above together with the social upheaval, political turmoil and frequent wars fought between the states in the North although the idea of the end of Buddhist teaching is found in Indian Buddhist scriptures as scholars like Jan Nattier have demonstrated in their studies. We find evidence that indeed the idea of the end of Final Dharma must be widely spread after the persecution of Buddhism by Emperor Taiwu of Northern Wei as demonstrated by the inscription found in Yun'gang and Ruicheng, both are in Shanxi province. First, a Buddhist society consisted of forty-four woman members with four monk teachers made donations for making ninety-five Buddhist images at Yun'gang cave, and eleven in Pingcheng (today: Datong) in 483. At the beginning of the inscription, it is said that “as we are born at the time of the Final Dharma because we had not accumulated enough good karma, so we lead a senseless and muddle-headed life without self-

12) For the anti-Buddhist discussion in the Northern and Southern dynasties, please see Kenneth Ch'en (1952, 166-92; 1954, 261-73). For emperor Taiwu Di's persecution, see Liu Shufen (2002).

13) According to Jan Nattier (1991, 102), the idea of xiangfa 象法 (a period of the Semblance Dharma) and moshi 末世 (a period of the latter age) were first introduced in China by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 (fl. 265-313 CE) in his translations. Yin Guangming 殷光明 (1988) argues that 434 is the year that the end of the Final Dharma started and this idea was most probably told by Dharmakṣema in Northern Liang (北凉). Also see Liu (2018).

awareness.”¹⁴⁾ Another evidence is that a Buddhist society of forty members in Ruicheng 芮城 (southern Shanxi province) made donations for making a god with four faces in 538. They said, “We Buddhists of forty members were born in the Saha world in the time of the Final Dharma and could not be born in the other shore due to the lack of good karma and causes.”¹⁵⁾

These ideas of the Final Dharma led to many different phenomena appearing within the Buddhist circle in China towards the end of the sixth to the beginning of the seventh century and have a huge impact on Chinese Buddhism. The Chinese Buddhists, particularly some eminent Buddhist monks, worried much about the end of the Buddhist teaching so they responded to it in different ways.

Sanjie jiao 三階教, Three Stages School or Three Level Movement, appeared as a direct response to this thought.¹⁶⁾ The founder Xinxing 信行 (540–594) clearly thought that the beginning of the end of Buddhist teaching had already started in his time and during this period of time the place was impure and people were only those had wrong views and practiced Buddhism wrongly. Hence, he called people to believe in all kinds of dharmas and respect all kinds of people, which was called the universal practice 普行.

The second direct response to such thought is the carving of Buddhist scriptures on stones in order to preserve the words of the Buddha in cases of calamity and persecution. One of the earliest stone carving of Buddhist scriptures was done by Tang Yong 唐邕 (d. 581) who carved four Buddhist texts during 568–572.¹⁷⁾ The Inscription says, “(Books written on) fine silk easily get damaged, (books written on) bamboo slip are not for ever, Buddhist and Daoist books are difficult to get,

14) 自惟往因不積，生在末代，甘寢昏境，靡由自覺。 Cited from Mizuno and Nagahiro (1955, Appendix 3).

15) *He yi sishi ren zaoliang ji* 合邑四人造像記 (I. 1, 96b3-6): 佛弟子合邑卅人等，生閻浮，運遭末劫，自飛高因妙業，无以同生彼岸。

16) See Hubbard (2001). There is also a Japanese research published nearly a hundred years ago. See Yabuki (1927). More recently, there is a Chinese study of the Three stages School, such as Zhang (2013).

17) See Lü (1999, 19-20). Tang Yong 唐邕 (d. 581) was a very influential and capable officer who served the Northern Wei (386-533) and the Northern Qi (550-577). His biography is found in the *Beishi* 北史 (History of Northern dynasties), fasc. 55 (Biographies, fasc. 43) and *Beiqi shu* 北齊書 (History of Northern Qi), fasc. 40 (Biographies, fasc. 32).

(books written on) mulberry bark are also easily destroyed.”¹⁸⁾ So he managed and supervised the carving of Buddhist texts on stone including the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (維摩詰經) and the *Śrīmālādevī Siṃhanāda Sūtra* (勝鬘經). The main interlocutors in these two texts are two lay Buddhists and so it reflects that Tang Yong must have considered himself a lay Buddhist. The largest work is the stone carving of Buddhist scriptures at Yunju monastery in Fangshan that was started by the monk named Jingwan 靜琬 in 628 in order to preserve Buddhist scriptures as he thought that it was the time of the Final Dharma.¹⁹⁾ Jingwan expressed his idea in many of the inscriptions that his carving the stone Buddhist texts is for the preservation of it so that it can be used to make copies when Buddhist texts are completely lost on earth.²⁰⁾

Recently, scholars also think that Pure Land Buddhism in China was also a response to the idea of the beginning of the Final Dharma. Chen Chien-huang 陳劍鐔, for instance, discusses Daochuo’s 道綽 (562–645) idea of the Final Dharma and his promotion of Pure Land Buddhism.²¹⁾ Chen thinks that Daochuo used the idea of the Final Dharma to establish Pure Land Buddhism as an independent school and also its particular direction of practice.

According to the *Weishu* (History of Wei), Tanyao 曇曜, the chief Buddhist clergies in Northern Wei suggested to the emperor Wencheng that five caves should be constructed to the west of the capital with one colossal Buddha statue in each of the caves in 452 and the emperor agreed.²²⁾ Five colossal Buddha statues were built to physically resemble five emperors of Northern Wei. When it was finished, it was seen to have black pebbles on both the face and soles of the feet, which mysteriously resembled the moles on Emperor Wencheng’s body.²³⁾

18) 以為縑緗有壞, 簡策非久, 金牒難求, 皮紙易滅, 於是發七處之印, 開七寶之函, 訪蓮華之書, 命銀鈎之迹, 一音所說, 盡勒名山.

19) See BTJZ and ZFTWSZ (1987), vol. 1.

20) Lü 1999, 20-21: 此堂內唯有石涅槃經一部, 更無餘物. 本為未來懸遠無佛法時, 留為□[經]本, 開生□[慧]目, 靜琬□頭, 願□□[盡未]來.

21) Chen 2008.

22) Tsukamoto 2007, 130. This work is Lin Baoyao’s 林寶堯 Chinese translation.

23) Yi 2018, 53.

Scholars are of the opinion that the construction of Yun'gang caves were also reflected the idea of the Final Dharma.

III. Dedication of Merits to Emperors Made by the Three Groups

Under such a circumstance, it is easy for us to understand why the ordinary Chinese Buddhists, particularly the Buddhist monks and nuns, dedicated their merits of making Buddhist images and stelae to the emperors and states as they were powerless to do anything else. They thus had nothing to do but direct their wishes to the supreme heads for the protection of Buddhism. I will cite examples in the following three groups to demonstrate their dedication of merits to the emperors.

1. Buddhist Societies' Dedication of Merits to the Emperors

First, Buddhist societies played an important role in making Buddhist images and they were mostly guided by Buddhist monks and nuns who served either as heads of the societies themselves or as teachers. So these monks and nuns directly involved in the process of making Buddhist images including the writing of the dedications of merits. The first example is from Yun'gang Caves as mentioned above that a Buddhist society consisted of fifty-four woman members with four monk teachers, namely Daoyu 道育, Puming 普明, Tanxiu 曇秀 and Fazong 法宗 who made donations for making ninety-five Buddhist images at Yun'gang in 483. These people were fully aware that it was due to Emperor Xiaowen 孝文 (r. 471–499) and the Grand Empress Dowager that Buddhism could revive. So they first dedicated their merits of making Buddhist images to emperor.

Thirtieth of August, the seventh year of Taihe (483), fifty-four women members of a Buddhist society: as we are born at the time of the Final Dharma because we have

not accumulated enough good karma, so we lead a senseless and muddle-headed life without self-awareness. Now since we still have some good karma so we have encountered the Divine Emperor who has made the Buddhist teachings prevail under heaven and Buddhism flourishes (on earth). His compassion spreads to the ten directions and his blessings extends to everywhere so that the dark night changes (to the light of day) and (we) wake up from a long sleep.

We disciples are enriched by the Buddhist teaching and our faith has risen. We wish to respectfully repay the immense blessings but could not do so. Thus, we urge each other to bring about good fortune for the state by making ninety-five Buddhist images at the cave temple.

With these merits, we wish that the Emperor, the Grand Empress Dowager (太皇太后) and the Sons of Emperor, their virtue uniting Heaven and Earth, their power greater than the Cakravartin, their inscrutable spiritual powers extending to the four heavens, the state's fortune flourishing, (neighboring) nations from the ten directions submit themselves (to the emperor), promoting Buddhism for a hundred million years.

太和七年, 歲在癸亥, 八月卅日, 邑義信士女等五十四人, 自惟往因不積, 生在末代, 甘寢昏境, 靡由自覺. 微善所鍾, 遭值聖主, 道教天下, 紹隆三寶. 慈被十方, 澤流無外, 乃使晝夜改昏, 久寢斯悟. 弟子等得蒙法潤, 信心開敷, 意欲仰酬洪澤, 莫能從遂. 是以共相勸合, 為國興福, 敬造石廟形象九十五區及諸菩薩. 願以此福, 上為 皇帝陛下太皇太后皇子, 德合乾坤, 威逾轉輪, 神被四天, 國祚永康, 十方歸伏, 光揚三寶, 億劫不隳.²⁴⁾

In this passage, the Grand Empress Dowager (太皇太后) clearly refers to Madame Feng 馮太后 (441–490), the grandmother of Emperor Xiaowen, who in fact held the real power. According to Tsukamoto Zenzyū 塚本善隆, both the grandmother and the emperor were quite supportive of Buddhism so the donors expressed their gratitude to them for their protection and support of Buddhism.²⁵⁾

This is a typical dedication of merits to the emperors and state as it happened after the Emperor Taiwu's persecution of Buddhism and during the revival of

24) Cited from Mizuno and Nagahiro (1955, 3-4).

25) Tsukamoto 1957. Cited from "Tanyao and His Time," translated into English by Glen E. Sergeant, *Monumenta Serica* 16, 363-96.

Buddhism under the auspicious Emperor Xiaowen. From the dedication, we can feel that these donors sincerely expressed their gratitude to the emperor for his promotion of Buddhism.

The second example is the monks in Zhuiyuan 追遠寺 monastery together with a lay Buddhist Gong Sunxiao 公孫小 from Yinchuan 穎川 who made images of a thousand Buddhas in the names of emperor, and his family in 483.

In the seventh year of Dadai Taihe (483) era, the monks in Zhuiyuan monastery together with Gongsun Xiao from Yinchuan exhort monks and lay people to make images of a thousand Buddhas in the names of his majesty the Emperor, the Grand Empress Dowager and the Prince and wish to dedicate the merits for the bless and prosperous of the imperial family for ten thousand years and for saving all sentient beings.

大代太和七年(483)歲次癸亥, 合追遠寺眾僧, 穎川公孫小, 勸所道俗, 為皇帝陛下, 太皇太后, 皇太子敬造千佛, 願緣此慶福鐘, 皇家神隆萬代, 普濟眾生。²⁶⁾

This bronze Buddhist image was also made in the same year 483, and the dedication also mentions the Grand Empress Dowager apart from the Emperor and Prince.

The third example is the Buddhist society in Ruicheng (Shanxi Province) consisted of forty members who donated and made a god of four faces in 538 with the guidance of three Buddhist monks as their teachers Faxian 邑師法仙, Sengqian 門師僧欽 and Jing (missing) 門師靜口。

In the fourth year of Datong (538) of the Great Wei, the twelfth month, Buddhists of forty society members were born in the Saha world in the time of the Final Dharma could not be born in the other shore due to the lack of good karma and wonderful causes. Thus we persuaded one after another charged with emotion and made donations to make a god with four faces in the name of the Emperor, the lord

26) Jin 1994, 446-47.

of the state and dedicate the merits to (the emperor) and teachers, parents, relatives born in the past seven generations, all members of the society, in all our lives and generations, could meet a Buddha and listen to the Dharma; attend the first assembly if Maitreya is born.

大魏大統四年(538), 歲在戊午, 十二月丙戌朔辛亥日, 佛弟子合邑卅人等, 生闍浮, 運遭末劫, 自飛高因妙業, 無以同生彼岸, 遂尔謫相率化, 頃竭己資, 仰為皇帝國主, 建崇四面天宮石像一區, 逮及師僧父母, 七世所生, 因緣眷屬, 香火呂義, 生生世世, 值佛聞法, 彌勒現世, 願登先首, 邊地眾生, 普同正覺, 咸登正果.²⁷⁾

Further, a hundred people made Buddha images in 536, the Northern Wei and their dedication of merits is as follows:

First, we dedicated the merits to the emperor, the monk teachers, parents, all sentient beings in the Dharma realm. May they all obtain happiness and meet in the first assembly of Maitreya.

上為皇帝陛下師僧父母法界眾生, 見存得福, 彌勒初會, 願使先首.²⁸⁾

All the above examples clearly demonstrate that guided by their society teachers, the Buddhist monks, they dedicated their merits of making Buddhist images to the emperor and the state for their protection and promotion of Buddhism.

2. Monastics' Dedication of Merits to the Emperors

The second group is the monastics who made Buddhist images and dedicated their merits to the emperors. The Buddhist monk named Sengan 僧安 made an image of Śākyamuni and dedicated the merits to the emperor and parents of past seven generations together with his fellow Buddhist monk.

27) *He yi sishi ren zaixiang ji* (I. 1, 96b1-13).

28) Hou 2018, 204.

On the twelfth day of the eleventh month of the eighth year of Taihe (484), Bhikṣu Sengan made an image of Śākyamuni. May first, the parents of past seven generations, the emperor, classmate Chen (missing a character) seng, realize the patient acceptance based on cognizance of non-arising (Skt. anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti), and attain the tenth stage (of Bodhisattva bhūmi)...

太和歲次甲子十一月十二日，比丘僧安，造釋迦文佛像一區。上為七世父母，皇帝陛下，陳□僧同學，願宿乾鎧，悟無生忍，位登什地。前上□□，一切塵生，普同□□，所願從心，故記之。²⁹⁾

A Buddhist nun named Fadu 法度 made an image of Śākyamuni for veneration in 498 and dedicated the merits to the emperor, all sentient beings, monk teachers and parents for a happy life.

On the eighteenth day of twelfth month of the twenty-second year of Taihe (498), Bhikṣuni Fadu from Miaoyin monastery made an image of Śākyamuni for veneration. With the merits, may the emperor progress constantly so that Buddhism flourishes, sentient beings practice patience for ten lives in order to seek for bodhi, monks teachers and parents are at ease...

太和廿二年十二月十八日妙音寺比丘尼法度，敬造釋迦靈像供養。緣此功德，當願皇□日新，三寶方盛。含生之類，□修十生忍，志求菩提。師僧父母，逍遙自在。□□滅□，佛道在世間，得道見出家，梵侍流布，大乘天廣，濟物悟天。³⁰⁾

A Buddhist monk named Faxing 法興 made an image of Maitreya in Luoyang in 511 and dedicated the merits to the emperor who is mentioned twice in a short inscription.

On the first day of ninth month of the fourth year of Yongping (511), Bhikṣu Faxing made an image of Maitreya. First, may the imperial family, monk teachers, parents, sentient beings, all together meet at Maitreya's three assemblies under the Dragon

29) Jin 1994, 447-48.

30) Jin 1994, 456.

flower tree by their little good karma. Again, may the good fortune of the Emperor last for ever, the glory of Buddhism extend and the wheel of the Dharma sing forever, birth parents be born in a divined place...

永平四年(511)歲次□卯九月一日甲午朔,比丘法興,敬造彌勒像一區,上爲皇家,師僧父母有識含生,普乘微善,龍華三會,俱□齊上.又願,皇祚永隆,三寶暈延,法輪長唱,所生父母,託生紫府,蓮昇免率,面奉蘇氏,足□虛空,悟發大解,所願如是.³¹⁾

This inscription clearly demonstrates that Buddhist clergies were more aware of the importance of imperial support and protection for Buddhism.

An unknown Buddhist monk named Daoen 道恩 made an image of Avalokiteśvara in Eastern Wei in 542 and dedicated the merits to the emperor.

On the eighth day of fourth month of the fourth year of Xinghe, Bhikṣu Daoen made an image of Avalokiteśvara. May first the Lord of the state and lay supporters, then parents of past seven generations and present parents, sentient beings at the borderland all become Buddhas.

興和四年四月八日,比丘道恩造觀音像一區.上爲國王檀主,復爲七世父母,所生父母,邊地眾生,一時成佛.³²⁾

Another unknown Buddhist monk named Sengyue 僧悅 together with other Buddhist monks made a stone stela of Buddhist images in Western Wei in 547 and dedicated the merits first to the emperor.

On the first day of ninth month of thirteenth year of Datong, (Sengyue) made a jade Buddhist image (stela). May the emperor have a prosperous and good fortune for the state, parents of the past seven generations and the present parents to attain enlightenment, and all sentient beings to have the same good fortune.

大統十三年九月一日造玉像一區,上願皇帝陛下,永隆國祚,七世父母,所生父母,同登正覺,

31) He 2010, 114.

32) Jin 1994, 490.

因緣眾生，鹹同斯福。比丘日口比丘安僧…。化主比丘道辯，像主僧悅。³³⁾

The above five examples demonstrate quite clearly that Buddhist clergies were very conscious about relationship between the emperors and Buddhism so they sincerely wished that the emperors could support Buddhist activities and protect Buddhism.

3. Official's Dedication of Merits to the Emperors

The officials are the third group which expressed their gratitude to the emperors in their dedication of merits when they donated for the making of Buddhist images. The first example is Bao Zuan 鮑纂, whose father was also an official. Here, he made donations to make a Buddhist image for his father in 442. The dedication says,

On behalf of my father, the former Xingxing county magistrate, and my deceased mother Wang, I make this stone Buddhist image and a copy of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, wishing Your Majesty the Emperor permanent happiness, my father a long life, my father and mother presence before Maitreya in future, all the relatives the remaining blessings, future generations as well.

為父前邢邢令，亡母王造茲石浮圖，大涅槃經一部。願皇帝陛下享祚無窮，父身延年益壽，父母將來生彌勒前。合門眷屬，普蒙十一餘福，子子孫孫鹹受福慶。

The second example is Cao Wangxi 曹望愷 who made donations to make a stone image of Maitreya in 525. Cao Wangxi who was a Xiangwei 襄威 general served as the Boren 柏仁 county magistrate when he commissioned this the image.³⁴⁾

33) Jin 1994, 497.

34) The ancient Boren county is in modern Longyao County 隆堯縣, Hebei province 河北省. “襄威將軍柏仁令齊州魏郡魏縣曹望愷.”

May the state, oneself, and relatives end the causes of suffering, always meet the Buddha, the diseased of the past seven generations be born in a blessed place, all relatives bathed in Buddhist teaching, etc.

仰為家國已身眷屬，永斷苦因，常與佛會，七世先亡，神升淨境，親表內外，齊沐法澤，一切等類，共沾惠液。³⁵⁾

According to Li Xiaomin's 李曉敏 studies of the inscriptions on the Buddhist images and stelae made during the Sui and Tang dynasties, just as Hou Xudong's observation shows, the donors of officials and monastics mostly dedicated their merits first to the emperors and the state; the ordinary people and women paid more attention to their families and dedicated their merits to their close relatives such as parents and other members of their families, particularly the diseased members of their families. On the other hand, organized societies such as the Devotional Society and the Dharma Society paid more attention to the emperors and dedicated their merits first to those emperors, then to sentient beings and families. The donors of family groups with members of several generations also paid more attention first to the emperors and then their families while the individual donors mostly gave priority to their families first and then sentient beings and the emperors.³⁶⁾

While most inscriptions mention emperors in general without reference to a particular emperor, but some refer to Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690–705) and Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756).³⁷⁾ For instance, in 694, a lay Buddhist named Da Xijing 達奚靜 at Longmen commissioned a Buddhist image and dedicated the merits to:

the Saintly and Divine August Emperor of the Golden Wheel, the Peerless (Yuegu Jinlun Shengshen Huangdi) above, sentient beings in the dharma realm below, and the six close relatives (of father, mother, older brothers, younger brothers, wife, and

35) Jin 1994, 476.

36) Li 2018, 123.

37) Li 2018, 111-12.

children), all be benefitted by these merits.³⁸⁾

上為越古金輪聖神皇帝, 下為法界眾生, 內外六親, 共同斯福。³⁹⁾

Here, the title “Yuegu Jinlun Shengshen Huangdi” 越古金輪聖神皇帝 clearly refers to Wu Zetian as she gave herself this title in 694 as recorded in the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (Old History of Tang).⁴⁰⁾ This reflects the influence amongst the ordinary people she had as she supported Buddhism.

The second popular emperor mentioned by name in the inscriptions of the donors is Emperor Xuanzong, who was in power for over 45 years and supported particularly Tantrayana Buddhism. We find the titles such as “Tianbao Shengwen Huangdi” 天寶聖文皇帝造 and “Kaiyuan Shenwu Shengwen Huangdi” 開元神武聖文皇帝 particularly refer to Xuanzong as “Tianbao” and “Kaiyuan” are names of eras during Xuanzong’s reign.⁴¹⁾

IV. Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion, we may come to the conclusion that the dedication of merits to the emperors and states, as shown in the inscriptions on the Buddhist images made by both Buddhist societies led by monastic teachers and the monastics themselves, may not be emperor worship, but an expression of gratitude to and repayment of the debts for the emperor’s protection and promotion of Buddhism. The direct causes may be the two persecutions of Buddhism, particularly Emperor Taiwu’s persecution of Buddhism which was more severe, but the social upheaval, political turmoil and frequent wars in the North should also be taken into consideration. Another important cause is the

38) Cited from Li (2018, 118).

39) Lu Zengxiang. 陸增祥. *Baqiongshi jinshi buzheng* 八瓊室金石補正. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, Juan 32, 211.

40) *The Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, Vol. 1, (Zhonhua Shuju, 1975), 123.

41) Cited from Li (2018, 120).

idea of the Final Dharma which played an important role as reflected in many inscriptions on Buddhist images made during this time.

Evidences from the inscriptions on Buddhist images and stelae also demonstrate clearly that the practice of repaying the debts of emperors for their protection and promotion of Buddhism amongst the ordinary Buddhists started very early, roughly three hundred years before the translation of the *Dacheng bensheng xindi guan jing* 大乘本生心地觀經 (Mahāyāna Sūtra on the Concentration of Mind Ground) in 790 which formerly endorsed such a practice. It became very popular in the Northern Wei and the Sui and Tang dynasties. This demonstrates that the social consciousness was ready in China to include the repayment of the ruler or emperor in the four kinds of compassion. It is also noteworthy that the ordinary Buddhists always mentioned the emperors in the first places in the dedication of merit, which is different from the list in the *Dacheng bensheng xindi guan jing* that parents are mentioned in the first place. In other words, in contrast with the learned eminent monks, in the minds of the ordinary Buddhists, the emperors were more important than their parents and thus it deserves the first place of honor and respect.

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Buddhism and Ancient Chinese States

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This is a study of the inscriptions on various types of Buddhist images and stelae made by the common people during the Northern dynasties and Sui and Tang dynasties from the fourth to the ninth century. These inscriptions demonstrate that many common people dedicated their merits of making Buddhist images to emperors, ministers and the state apart from their present parents and parents of past seven generations. Hou Xudong thinks that this is a recognition of the state, the Northern Wei, by the common people. Satō Chisui thinks that it is the emperor worship amongst the common people as instructed by their society's monastic teachers. But he is still not sure about the reasons why the Buddhist monks and nuns also had the mentality of emperor worship. Ishimatsu Hinako thinks that it is due to Emperor Taiwu's persecution of Buddhism; Chinese Buddhists were afraid that such tragedy might happen again so that their faith in Buddhism became stronger and they wished that the emperor could protect Buddhism. I argue that it was the Buddhist way to pay their debt of gratitude to the Chinese emperors for their protection of Buddhism because Buddhism had faced many challenges and criticisms from Chinese people since its introduction to China in the Han dynasty and it even underwent severe persecutions. Emperor Tai Wudi of the Northern Wei, for instance, persecuted Buddhism so the monastics had a vivid

memory of such events.

Key Words: emperor, Buddhist images, dedication of merits, common people