

POLITICS, PHILOSOPHY, AND PATRIARCHY IN THE REIGN OF EMPRESS WU

Analysis of Tang Dynasty Religious and Gender Imagery in Elite-Sponsored Buddhist Caves at

Mogao Grottoes, China

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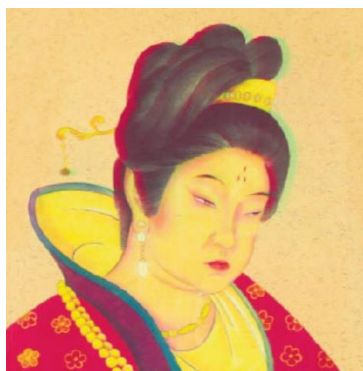
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(Woo 2008)

Abstract

The topic of how women in societies with patriarchal ideologies and systems can break through the social hierarchy to establish power and influence, and what role religion plays in these types of political issues has been relevant for millennia and is still relevant today. In China and much of ancient East Asia, traditional structures of belief and power tended to be patriarchal, which made it difficult for female leaders to rise to positions of authority. Despite this social system, some women in imperial Chinese history rose above the system to become authority figures. One of these women was Empress Wu Zetian (624-705) of the Tang dynasty, who rose to power to become the sole emperor of China in 690 CE. This thesis examines iconography in Mogao Caves 96 and 321 in Dunhuang, Gansu, two caves constructed by the elite Yin family of Dunhuang under Empress Wu's reign. Using iconographic and archaeological methods, I analyze the murals and statues within the two Yin family caves to understand how Empress Wu and powerful families of this period leveraged popular Buddhist stories and imagery to assert and legitimize authority. These two caves both featured imagery of several Buddhist teachings supporting female authority, suggesting that Buddhist concepts and infrastructure, as well as the ambitions of elite families, was utilized to demonstrate and cultivate political authority throughout her empire.

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Chinese Dynasties

Dynasty

Reign

Shang	ca. 1600-1027 BCE
Zhou	1027-256 BCE
Western Zhou	1027-771 BCE
Eastern Zhou	771-256 BCE
Spring and Autumn Period	722-481 BCE
Warring States Period (not a dynasty)	481-221 BCE
Qin	221-206 BCE
Western (former) Han	206 BCE-8 CE
Xin	8-23 CE
Eastern (later) Han	23-220 CE
Three Kingdoms Period (Wei, Su, Wu)	220-280 CE
Western Jin	265-317 CE
Northern and Southern Dynasties	317-589 CE
Sui	589-618 CE
Tang	618-907 CE
Song	960-1279 CE
Northern Song	960-1126 CE
Southern Song	1126-1279 CE
Yuan	1279-1368 CE

(Moise 2013; Lewis and Brook 2009)

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

1.1 Power Structures in Medieval China

The intersection between religion and politics continues to exert influence on modern societies, but the power dynamics underlying these forces are deeply rooted in the past. For example, China is considered a patriarchal society today, a social structure that is commonly attributed to, and considered to be justified by, Confucianism due to its hierarchical ideology (Jaschock and Miers 1994). While religious themes play an important role in the assertion of political power in many societies, this dynamic is particularly complex and important in the case of female leaders, who face immense challenges especially in societies whose politics favor men (Eagly and Carli 2012). Medieval Chinese Empress Wu Zetian, who rose to power in the late seventh century, managed to assert political authority in a complex social and religious landscape, even in remote areas far from the imperial capital of Chang'an along the ancient Silk Road. How did this female leader, navigating a male-dominated social hierarchy, establish and maintain power – and what role did religion play in this project? What lessons can be learned from Wu's reign for the modern era? Although Empress Wu lived over one thousand years ago, studying her and the political and power structures that she navigated during her lifetime, is valuable today because her life can provide a better understanding of how women navigated patriarchal power structures, the interaction between religion and politics, and how modern societies continue to be impacted by powerful women like her.

1.1.1 Introduction to the Tang Dynasty

The Tang Dynasty, which reigned from 618 to 907 CE, is considered the Golden Age of Chinese art and culture due to its advanced government and economy and the artistic revolution that resulted from the empire's success. This nickname was granted to the Tang dynasty because it produced what people living in China later on consider to have been the finest poets, painters, and musicians of all time (Benn 2002). Tang citizens had the ability to pursue these creative ventures because the early Tang emperors increased the size and trade prowess of the dynasty by conquering other parts of China, many of which had prolific Silk Road trade. This also promoted peace throughout the empire (Callick 2016).

To ensure order throughout their large empire, the Early Tang government established a bureaucratic system that ensured its economic and cultural prosperity. This prosperity peaked in the eighth century, but it soon fell due to the An Lushan rebellion, which caused the dynasty to become a shadow of its former self (Lewis and Brook 2009). Even before the ruling family was removed, writers such as Li Bai and Du Fu, who were still living under the late Tang Dynasty, became nostalgic about the prosperity experienced during earlier parts of the dynasty (Bender 2019).

1.1.2 Tang Dynasty Government Structure

While the poetry written during the Tang Dynasty is the main reason that it earned the title of the Golden Age of China, the imperial court structure designed by the Tang emperors was another accomplishment vital to the dynasty's success (Lewis and Brook 2009). One governmental

achievement made by the imperial Chinese court in the Tang Dynasty was the creation of the Tang Code, or tang liu dian, which outlined a series of laws which allowed the central government to maintain an effective administrative system throughout the fragmented empire by separating and clarifying administrative and penal codes (N. P. Ho 2019). This code was not a new idea, as laws had been written down and bureaucratic systems had been codified in previous dynasties, but the Tang Code was unique because it was the most comprehensive written law code and it perfected many ideas of the past. This code included laws about family and marriage, the duties of the imperial guard, theft, assaults and killings, land rights, and the administration of justice (Benn 2002). The Tang Code was impactful in Chinese history because it not only allowed the government to maintain order around the empire during the Tang Dynasty, but many parts of the code were still in place until the imperial dynastic system ended in the early twentieth century (MacCormack and Wang 1983).

The Tang Code also outlined how communities far from Chang'An, which had largely been relatively autonomous previously due to the size of the empire and the inefficiencies of communication networks, would be governed under the same imperial rule as the rest of the country. The Tang Code also maintained social stability throughout the country and its trade networks by relieving social tension and conflicts (L. Wang 2005). The massive task of managing this large geographical area had to be carried out by many people with many different specialties, which the Tang Code covered by discussing the structure of the government in detail. In short, the imperial court was headed by the emperor, who held the highest executive, judicial, and legislative authority. The next highest positions in the court were the Three Preceptors and Three Dukes, who served as personal advisors to the emperor. From there, the court was broken up into several courts and departments, which were then further divided into ministries, such as

the Court of Imperial Regalia, the Department of State Affairs and the Ministry of Justice (Johnson 1997). In order to fulfill the needs of all of the central government departments, approximately 11,312 positions needed to be filled by the most qualified citizens from around the country, which they hired through a complex, standardized bureaucrat recruitment system often referred to as the Chinese imperial examination system (N. P. Ho 2019).

1.1.3 Civil Service Examinations

The imperial examination system was thought up by the government in the previous dynasty: the Sui Dynasty, and then written down in the Tang Dynasty. It was intended to do away with the outdated hereditary system of bureaucracy by recruiting the best minds from around China as officials to help run the empire. The civil service examinations were forward-thinking compared to the way that the imperial government had been structured previously, but it was still only open to men which may have limited its ability to find gifted bureaucrats (R. Wang 2012). It also demonstrates how the patriarchal ideologies of the time were often reflected in political systems.

The imperial examination system was made up of two groups: civil service officials and military officials, each of which had their own examination. The Civil Service exam, also known as jinshi or keju, was administered to prospective civil service officers to ensure that imperial government officials would be virtuous and meritorious Confucianists. The government chose the best candidates by administering tests which focused on literary writings discussing current issues and Confucian principles. This exam was opened to the public in the Sui dynasty to avoid elite families recommending their kin for official positions and to allow anyone that was worthy to work for the government. The rulers of the Tang Dynasty then adopted and perfected the examination system, making it much more widespread (R. Wang 2012). In fact, Empress Wu

was a fierce proponent of the Civil Service Exams before she became the emperor because she needed to find aristocrats that would support her to ensure that she could ascend and maintain the throne (Dien 2003).

Many of the bureaucrats chosen by the imperial government were assigned to communities far away from Chang'An in order to ensure that the imperial court maintained ultimate control over these communities. This system ultimately maintained or even expanded the authority of old elite families, as many elite families learned how to take advantage of the imperial examination system by training their kin on exam-taking. As a result, much of the imperial government was still made up of leading families, despite the original purpose of the exams (Lewis and Brook 2009). The implementation of the imperial examination system did cause some change within the governmental structure, though. According to several genealogies from the Dunhuang Library Cave, the imperial examination system was successful in that it recruited new people into the government, which is demonstrated by the increase in the number of "Great Clans" from three to nine in Dunhuang during the Tang Dynasty. Because of these examinations, the dividing line between classes blurred when this newly arisen class of scholar officials emerged (Hao 2020).

1.1.4 Summary of Power Structures in Medieval China

Tang Dynasty China was one of the most powerful empires in the medieval world due in part to the carefully organized hierarchy within the government, which ensured that communities thousands of miles away from the emperor's capital city would remain under the emperor's authority. This structure led to economic prosperity and safety in the empire, which allowed the citizens to focus on intellectual and creative matters far more than they could in previous

dynasties. The governmental model that the leaders of the Tang Dynasties perfected was so successful that civil service examinations and many other parts of the Tang Code were used until the last Chinese dynasty abolished it in the early 1900's, and several other East Asian countries adopted similar legislative models (L. Wang 2005). When the civil service examinations were put into place, political power was shifted based on the values that the emperor saw fit. However, elite families from around the empire often came back into power by taking advantage of the structure of the civil service examinations, and the authority structure of Imperial China left few opportunities for female advancement into positions of power.

1.2 The Silk Road and Buddhism

The Silk Road was one of the most extensive trade networks in history, and its expansion during the Tang Dynasty introduced new social, religious, and cultural influences into the social structure of China. The "Silk Road" was not just one route between two countries like Rome and China, but rather a network of trade routes, and silk was only one of the numerous goods traded along these routes, which is why it is sometimes known as the "Silk Routes" (S. Whitfield 2007). People traveling and trading on what we now call the Silk Routes traveled over land and through oceans connecting most of the Old World. Few, if any individuals ever made the long and dangerous transcontinental journey as a single trip because silk and other high-value goods were transported in contiguous stages, each part of more or less distinct economic systems and under the control of various political rulers and systems (Foltz 2010). The Silk Road traded in Eastern Asia, Southern Asia, Europe, and as far as Africa between the first century B.C.E. and the thirteenth century C.E. (S. Whitfield 2015). Other products traded along the Silk Road included

spices, pottery, paper, pearls, bronze, iron, and many other prized, regional items from the different parts of the world along the routes (Su-il 2017).



Figure 1. 1: Popular “Silk Road” land and sea routes during the Tang Dynasty (eighth century) (Maunu 2013)

Along with the trade of valuable physical goods, people traveling along the Silk Road also carried cultural values and religions with them, which they disseminated throughout the communities that they visited. People of many different occupations traveled along the Silk Road including merchants, monks and nuns, government officials and royals, and soldiers who often traveled in caravans with people (S. Whitfield 2015). As Roderick Whitfield states in his book, *Cave Temples of Mogao: Art and History on the Silk Road*, material goods were not the only commodity to travel along the Silk Routes: ideas, artistic styles, and religious beliefs were also exchanged among civilizations (R. Whitfield et al. 2000).

Some religions, such as Christianity, were spread mainly through the missionaries who preached their beliefs to the people they encountered on their travels. Other religions such as Islam and Judaism did not actively proselytize, but their beliefs spread through a phenomenon

called conversion by voluntary association. This occurred because adopting the dominant religious practices could also help with trade and/or cultural success (Foltz 2010); (Liu 2010). Many other religions spread due to contact between Silk Road travelers, some of which have since evolved or largely died out. Others adopted features of other religions that they encountered. Religions likely spread in this way because religion could encourage the trade of certain items and trade resulted in the spread of religions. For example, the expansion of Buddhism brought an increased demand for silk because it was used in Buddhist ceremonies. The increased demand in turn stimulated the long-distance trading activity that had facilitated the spread of Buddhism in the first place (Foltz 2010).

Buddhism owes its widespread popularity largely to Silk Road exchange. While it is unknown precisely when Buddhism arrived in China, it is likely that Silk Road trade is largely responsible for Buddhism's expansion from India east (Liu 2010). It is most widely accepted that the central Chinese government became aware of this foreign religion during the early Han Dynasty, but there are accounts that describe Buddhist communities existing in parts of China in the first century C.E., and it is plausible that some form of Buddhism already began to enter China during the first century BC (Heirman and Bumbacher 2007). From there, Buddhism spread throughout East Asia over hundreds of years due to monks traveling and preaching along the Silk Road, government patronage of the religion, and several other factors. This led to Buddhism becoming the state-sponsored religion during the Sui Dynasty, acquiring enough power for Empress Wu to be able to refer to Buddhist beliefs to support female rulership in a patriarchal society (Karetzky 2002).

1.3 Religious Authority and Patriarchy in Tang-period China

Religion was relevant to all parts of life in China during the Tang Dynasty and the popular religions during the time were cited in many contexts from the home to government policies because they outlined the “right” way to live. There were three main religions that were popular throughout China during the Tang dynasty: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

Confucianism is the oldest popular philosophical system in China, and it guided many of the imperial court’s decisions during the Tang dynasty. Confucianism is still important to Chinese people today. Daoism is also a native Chinese religion that was centuries old by the Tang Dynasty and was deeply embedded into Chinese society during the Tang dynasty. The third religion that was popular in Tang dynasty China was Buddhism, which was brought to China from India several centuries before the Tang dynasty and had increased in popularity to become widespread throughout the Tang dynasty. All of these religions impacted Tang Chinese politics and domestic life and contributed to harsh social conditions for women.

Even though the Tang Dynasty was a golden age of art, literature, and culture in China, women in the empire had defined roles in the household and society. These roles often restricted and oppressed women. It is clear that women were not viewed to be as precious as men throughout much of Chinese history due in part to the principles of filial piety and the five relationships. Filial piety is a Confucian virtue that states that people must be benevolent and love everyone, which starts with one's parents (Moore 1978). These virtues were further expanded on to create a hierarchy of roles among people, as well as the practice of the firstborn son taking care of his parents in old age and the daughters joining their husbands’ families.

1.3.1 Confucianism Overview

Confucianism is China's oldest and most revered philosophy. It has been the dominant state ideology since the Han dynasty, and as a result, it has shaped political institutions and become intertwined with Chinese culture that it is woven into the social fabric of China. Confucius was a philosopher who lived during the Warring States Period between 551 and 479 BCE. He taught many disciples while he was alive who carried on and spread his teachings after his death (Goldin 2015). Confucianism's main ideal is called *ru*, which is what an exemplary person aspires to be. *Ru* is not a simple idea though, and students of Confucianism are still unable to agree upon a single definition of the word. However, many believe that Confucius' followers have four convictions which represent *ru*: humans are capable of developing morally; in order to morally develop, one should reflect on their own behavior and attempt to improve their flaws; if one is able to develop in this way, they will contribute to developing in the world; and there have been people who were able to perfect themselves in this way, and their society was a harmonious one (Goldin 2015).

To summarize these four convictions, Confucianists' ultimate goal is to create a harmonious society in which everyone practices proper social behavior because Confucius believed that the ultimate society would consist of morally developed people (Livia Kohn 2005). He believed that one had to be self-motivated to become virtuous because inner virtue was the only way to success and harmony, and therefore external means such as laws and punishments only accomplish external submission. He also taught that people first needed to love and respect their family, which will lead to an inner feeling of duty, and this will lead to a love of mankind (Wilhelm 2005). This was narrowed down into the five constant relationships which were vital to this harmony. These five relationships are between: ruler and subject, father and son, husband

and wife, older and younger brothers, and friends (He 2015). In each of these relationships, there is a senior and a junior, and both people in the relationship have obligations to each other (Livia Kohn 2005). Confucius believed that defining and establishing roles within relationships were necessary to sustaining a functional society, and it likely became popular in China because it helped create order throughout society.

In addition, Confucius emphasized the importance of family. This conviction was revealed through the practice of continuation of the family name through male descendant, which was a change from China's previous matriarchal society, as well as filial piety and ancestor worship. He also attributed certain traits to the sexes relating to the Daoist belief of *Yin and Yang*, and he wrote about women as if they were their idealized roles such as wife and mother, rather than as people. All of these practices justified the oppression of women because they maintained that men and women were inherently different and allowed the creation of sexist expectations of social roles due to those differences (Rosenlee 2006).

1.3.2 How Confucianism Contributed to Patriarchy and Power Structures in Medieval China

Confucianism is often blamed for the treatment of Chinese women throughout history, but after considering Confucianism's core values of duty and respect, it becomes more difficult to claim that Confucianism is the only force that created the social structure of China. Although some common practices in the Tang Dynasty and beyond, such as foot-binding, demonstrated the unequal balance of power and status, the question of whether Confucianism was responsible for this oppression remains, since there is a clear disparity between the moral teachings of Confucius and the treatment of women. Because of this disparity, as well as the long history of China's cultural interactions with Confucianism and the changes in the status of women in China

throughout time, it is impossible to say what the true root cause of the patriarchal ideology embedded within Chinese society (Rosenlee 2006).

One value that is clear in Confucianism is that men and women are different and therefore their relationships, such as husband/wife, father/mother, and son/daughter are unequal (Rosenlee 2006). Some interpret this value as inherently prejudiced because the genders have different responsibilities and spheres of influence, such as women being homemakers, but this idea alone does not necessarily mean that women must be treated as lesser than men (De Bary 1996). Confucianism also instituted unequal gender norms which emphasized male honor and female chastity (Hinsch 2013). It is also possible that certain patriarchal practices were put into place because Confucianism's family values stated that families should have a son to carry on the family name, which led to practices such as the sale of adopted sons and eventually the widespread patriarchy (Jaschock and Miers 1994). On the other hand, although there is a hierarchy of respect in Confucianist philosophy, Confucianism also has a principle of mutuality and reciprocity among all people (De Bary 1996). Confucianism is not likely solely responsible for the unequal treatment that Chinese women have experienced throughout history, but it is important to analyze the cultural, political, and social factors contributing to the oppression of women rather than claiming that one man's philosophy is the root cause for all of the injustices faced by women in China throughout history.

Modern critics of Chinese patriarchy, such as Mao Zedong, have claimed that Confucianism is the sole source of China's patriarchy. This sentiment began gaining traction in the early twentieth century when the Chinese Republic was forming. During this time, anti-Confucian sentiment ran rampant because Confucianism was a symbol of Old China and reformers wanted their country to be more westernized (Bary et al. 1998). These Chinese blamed

Confucianism for the oppression faced by women, and they began looking for a new value system. Since then, the idea that Confucianism is the reason for the suffering of Chinese women and is anti-feminist has been spread around the world, and it is still a common conception held by Westerners (Rosenlee 2006).

Throughout Chinese history, the Confucian hierarchy may have caused certain trends that damaged the lives of many Chinese women. For example, many dynasties of emperors had a harem of concubines who were expected to only be with one emperor and then become a nun after his death (Woo 2008). Another trend was foot-binding, which became popular with elites for its perceived beauty during the Tang Dynasty, but soon became widespread and lasted until the early twentieth century. While foot-binding was considered a manifestation of sacrifice and self-discipline and functioned as a way to limit women's ability to move and perform laborious tasks, it began as high fashion among noble women and was not required of all women at the time (De Bary 1996). Also, many regulations were designed to prevent women from ascending to political positions, and women in all classes were presented with challenges in their daily life due to their sex (Rosenlee 2006). On top of these, women are less well represented in Chinese art and literature, which is even evident at the Mogao Grottoes where women are not as clearly depicted in the caves or manuscripts from the Library Cave. These disparities may have occurred because men created social norms to keep themselves in power, or these trends may have arisen out of males' fear of powerful women that would change the expectations of society. Because of all these factors and more, it is clear that the origins of China's patriarchal system are complex. The origin of China's patriarchy is hotly debated, but some scholars believe that ancient Chinese religions and philosophies played a role in legitimating the subordinate role of women in society at this time (Hinsch 2013).

1.3.3 Daoism Overview

Daoism is another religion that originated in China that is still popular today. Daoism was created in the third century CE by a thinker named Laozi. Daoism emphasizes mental serenity through different types of meditation and stresses the Dao or spontaneous, organic order and essence of nature (Eskildsen 2015). This organic order is made up of cycles and dichotomies such as life and death, light and dark, and yin and yang. None of these ideas are evil, but rather contribute to the balance of the world, as they are interdependent and move together. While it is a religion, it also prescribes healthy ways of living called qigong, which encourages certain diets, breathing exercises, slow movements, and sexual practices (Livia Kohn 2005). Because Daoism is about balance and order, and because meditation is so important to Daoists, Daoist practices were easily integrated with other religious practices. As a result of their similarities and ease of integration, Daoism and Buddhism have commonly been practiced together since Buddhism became popular in China around the sixth century (Eskildsen 2015). Daoism is a flexible and adaptable religion that encourages certain types of choices that can fit into many worldviews, including Buddhism and Confucianism, which is likely the reason it has survived for over a millennium.

1.3.4 How Daoism Contributed to Patriarchy and Power Structures in Medieval China

Unlike Confucianism, Daoism is rarely believed to have contributed to China's patriarchal ideals and is even praised for improving women's status at times. The dichotomy of yin and yang actually advocates for gender equality because it views males, the yang, and females, the yin, as

different but complementary forces, as they are both necessary for sustaining life (Y.-T. Lee, Yang, and Wang 2009). Unlike Confucianism, Daoism emphasizes a much more passive approach to life that does not put as much importance on yielding to others in relationships. In fact, the Daodejing, which is the central Daoist text, discusses the importance of the feminine aspect of nature and even worships the divine feminine (Miller 2017). The Daodejing even considers the Dao itself to be a feminine concept, as it is the force of creation and is the mother of all beings. This aspect of Daoism created a proto-feminist ideal in its followers (Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn 2005). While the principles of Daoism appear feminist in nature, since it is easy to combine with other religions and has existed alongside confucianism since its inception, it seems as though Daoism has not been impactful enough to overcome the sexist ideologies within China.

1.3.5 Buddhism Overview

Although Buddhism has evolved since its inception, its original goals of peace and enlightenment have remained for the 2,600 years that it has been around. Buddhism was developed in the fifth century BCE by Siddhartha Gautama, who, according to legend, was a wealthy man in India who saw human suffering in his late twenties and then renounced his wealthy lifestyle to seek enlightenment. He went on a long journey and studied under many teachers, but none of them knew the path that he was seeking, so he realized his own beliefs to become a Buddha, or Enlightened One, and began teaching others (Harvey 2012). These teachings consist of the Four Noble Truths: the noble truth of suffering, the arising of suffering, the ceasing of suffering, and the approach to the ceasing of suffering (Dhammanada 2002). The path to the cessation of suffering, which is what Buddhists are expected to follow, is known as

the Eight-factored Path. Buddhism's ultimate goal is called to help people realize Dharma, or the Buddhist path of practice, and develop a calmer and more compassionate personality and release their earthly attachments to achieve Nirvana, or enlightenment (Harvey 2012).

Since the time of Gautama's death, Buddhism has evolved and new schools of thought have been formed. Mahayana Buddhism is one expansion of traditional Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism, which composed new scriptures and practices expanding on the teachings of the Buddha and focused more on holy beings, formed during the first century BCE and began spreading farther around Asia and is the main school of thought in China. Mahayana Buddhism has several schools underneath it such as Zen (or Chan) Buddhism, which teach followers rituals, meditation, and repetitions of sacred words called mantras (Walser 2018). Many other Buddhist schools and practices have been and are still being formed around the world, but its purpose of releasing earthly attachments and forming compassionate practices to release oneself of suffering is still at the core of all Buddhist sects, and Buddhism is still gaining followers around the world for that reason (Harvey 2012).

1.3.6 How Buddhism Contributed to Patriarchy and Power Structures in Medieval China

Whether Buddhism contributed to patriarchal norms among its followers in Tang Dynasty China is unclear. When Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama, both men and women were allowed to practice and teach Buddhism, and an order of nuns was created by Gautama himself. The ability of women to become religious scholars is a luxury that is not shared by all religions, which would make it seem as though women are valued equally in Buddhism. However, in practice, nuns have far more rules than monks and nuns are expected to treat monks as their superiors (Sharma 1994). Also, Gautama had a deep mistrust of women because he felt that men

and women inherently had different psychologies, and therefore women never truly enjoyed a status that was equal to men (Chen 2016). On top of these disparities, there was a large amount of Buddhist imagery that depicted women from the early days of Buddhism, although these were largely abandoned until Empress Wu brought them back into the spotlight through her propaganda. All of these differences reveal that the nature of women in countries that practice Buddhism is largely defined by the culture of that area (Faure 2003).

Buddhism is compatible with many other religions and philosophies because there are only a few doctrines that practitioners are expected to follow and other rites such as ancestor worship are tolerated. Buddhism likely became so popular around Asia because it was so easy to integrate into the daily life of many Asian societies (Zürcher and Silk 2013). Since it was so easy to follow, people around China began practicing Buddhism within the home. This was the woman's primary sphere of influence, so women were largely credited with the religion's expansion. While Buddhism spread, nunneries became popular and influential and recruited elite women to serve (Faure 2003). Women experienced large amounts of leisure time, which allowed them to create art and poetry and travel more than ever before (Xiangli Fan, Wang, and Xiao 2021). While Buddhism was tolerant of women, the genders are inherently treated unequally under Buddhist doctrine, and the religion likely contributed to certain patriarchal practices of the time, such as foot-binding.

1.3.7 Summary of Religious Authority and Patriarchy in Tang-period China

Even though the Tang Dynasty was arguably one of the best times for women in Chinese history, deeply sexist practices were still carried out throughout that time and Chinese religions and philosophies may have partially caused this. Because Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism

have been linked throughout Chinese history, some philosophies are more responsible for China's patriarchal social structure than others. While people around the world still consider Confucianism to be the main reason that Chinese patriarchy arose due to its hierarchical nature, Buddhism also contributed to the unequal treatment of men and women.

1.4 Empress Wu Zetian



Figure 1. 2: A drawing of Empress Wu (Guisso 1978)

1.4.1 Early Life and Rise to Power

Empress Wu's early life was somewhat unusual for a girl of her status, but her youth was influential on the rest of her life, as many of the lessons from her youth were valuable to her reign. Empress Wu was born Wu Zetian in the imperial capital Chang'an in 624 CE to a mother

who belonged to a royal family and a father who rose through the ranks in his young life to become a trusted minister of the Tang emperor. These family ties allowed Wu Zetian, who later became known as Wu Zhao, to become educated and accomplished in activities such as horseback riding (Woo 2008). Some of the activities that Wu Zetian enjoyed during her childhood were traditionally considered boy activities. When combined with her predilection to dress in boy's clothing, Wu Zetian was likely known as somewhat of a tomboy, which may have been an indication of her future ventures (Dien 2003). According to historical accounts, Wu Zhao's family practiced Buddhism throughout her childhood, which would have created the foundation for Empress Wu's extensive use of Buddhism in politics (Woo 2008).

Wu Zetian's ascent to the throne began early in her life, but it took many years and many emperors before she would officially become the emperor. Wu Zetian's fate began to change when she became an imperial concubine, which was the beginning of her journey to becoming the empress. Because Wu Zetian was from a noble family, she was well known in Chang'an and was considered a beauty. When Wu Zetian was thirteen, the current Emperor, Taizong, heard about her beauty and personal accomplishments, and invited her to become one of his concubines. Wu Zetian accepted his offer and quickly became well-liked by the emperor and was given a high rank among the concubines (Woo 2008). At some point during Empress Wu's concubinage, Emperor Taizong's son and Crown Prince fell in love with Wu Zetian, but this love was forbidden because Wu Zetian was already committed to Taizong. When Emperor Taizong died, Crown Prince Gaozong ascended the throne to become Emperor Gaozong (Dien 2003). Then, Wu Zetian became a Buddhist nun, which most concubines did when their emperor died because they were expected to be committed to only one man. However, this would not last the rest of her life as was expected of her. Empress Wu likely studied Buddhism during her time in

the nunnery and she may have learned about female authority in Buddhism, which could have given her ideas on ways that she could leverage this religion to create political opportunities (Huang 2021).

Empress Wu experienced several setbacks on her road to emperor, but these did not keep her from gaining the favor of Emperor Gaozong and ultimately ascending the throne. Emperor Gaozong married another woman for several years while Wu Zetian was in the nunnery. Then, Empress Wu was welcomed back into the palace because of Gaozong's love for her and began vying for the already occupied title of empress (Woo 2008). She soon gained this title when she married Emperor Gaozong in 656 after having two of the emperor's highest concubines killed. This was one of the first times that Empress Wu showed how willing she was to do whatever it took to gain power, even if it took punishing anyone that opposed her and elevating her supporters. She is still known for this ruthlessness today (Dien 2003).

Empress Wu established political authority through expert navigation of the imperial government. She rose through the ranks of the imperial concubine system, and took advantage of the court's weak spots to rise to power to get closer to the throne. In 660, Emperor Gaozong was incapacitated due to an illness, and Empress Wu took on many of his administrative responsibilities, even though women were forbidden from interfering with, or concerning themselves with politics (Woo 2008). After establishing that she had an immense amount of skill in ruling, Empress Wu was allowed to participate in an ancient sacred ritual that no woman had ever participated in. This ritual allowed her to be recognized as Emperor Gaozong's equal, which was an important step on her road to becoming the sole ruler because she was placed in a higher position than any other woman before her. It is reported that even after Gaozong recovered, Empress Wu sat by his side and conducted the government (Dien 2003). Gaozong then fell ill

again, which meant that it was time to worry about his successor. He named his and Wu Zetian's eldest son, Li Hong, the new Crown Prince, but Li Hong passed away before he could become emperor. There were rumors that Empress Wu killed Li Hong because he was disobedient, but he had been struggling with tuberculosis for many months, so it is likely that he died of his illness in 656. After Li Hong died, Emperor Gaozong's son, Li Xian 1 became the crown prince in 681. Li Xian1 was soon deposed and exiled because he had ordered someone to be killed, though. Empress Wu's younger son, Li Xian 3 then became the Crown Prince, and Li Xian 1 committed suicide while in exile. Then, Emperor Gaozong passed away in 683 (Woo 2008).

Empress Wu's rise to power continued for many years, but she persevered through the deaths of sons and the opposition of the court. During this time, she intelligently led her people and promoted her supporters while brutally punishing her opponents at times. After the emperor's death, Empress Wu's son Li Xian3 was made emperor and renamed Zhongzong. Some historians in the imperial court felt that it was suspicious that two of Empress Wu's sons were dethroned but it is unlikely that foul play was involved. Once Zhongzhong was crowned, his wife gained the title of Empress, but Wu Zetian remained Empress Dowager and Zhongzong allowed her to keep control of his administrative duties, despite her constant opposition and requests to step down. While Wu Zetian was Empress Dowager, she was not only criticized for taking over her sons' duties as a woman, but she also had anyone who opposed her authority executed or exiled. Empress Dowager Wu used her power by instilling some new policies during this time, including making the civil service examinations more popular in order to find common people for her court that would support her (Woo 2008).

1.4.2 The Sole Ruler of China

Empress Wu used knowledge of Chinese traditions and Buddhist beliefs to find ways to legitimize her sole authority, rather than merely performing administrative tasks while her sons and husband were named emperor. Empress Wu's next step on the path to becoming the sole ruler of China was being crowned the first female sovereign in Chinese history in 688. Legend says that a stone was found in the Luo River that foretold of a Sage Mother who would rule mankind and bring prosperity (Woo 2008). Empress Wu used this spiritual opportunity to bolster her position even further. In order to elevate her position, she held an elaborate ritual ceremony at a holy river, which culminated in Empress Wu gaining the title of Holy Mother Heavenly Empress (Woo 2008). Around this time, Empress Wu also created a new character for her given name, *Zhao* (曌), which consisted of the characters for sun and moon on top and the character for the sky on the bottom to mean "all encompassing and everlasting brilliance" (Dien 2003).

While Empress Wu was quickly gaining power and receiving honors that no woman had ever received before, she still had to work hard to reach her ultimate goal. After Empress Wu gained the title of Holy Mother Heavenly Empress, she was looking for a way to convince her subjects that she should be the sovereign ruler of China, which she found in Buddhism. She had believed in Buddhism her whole life and knew that there were Buddhist sutras that could support her in her decision to be sovereign. Her trusted spiritual advisors wrote a memorial about the Great Cloud Sutra that stated that Empress Wu was the reincarnation of the Maitreya Buddha and that the Buddha had predicted that she would be sent down to rule China (Woo 2008). The Empress knew that this would help her gain supporters, as several previous emperors had claimed that they were reincarnations of Buddhist deities to legitimize their rule. She then had

many copies dispersed throughout the country to convince others to follow her (Zürcher and Silk 2013).

Empress Wu clearly understood the value of citing religion as a tool for legitimizing female authority, as she called upon Buddhism many times to support her rule. After Empress Wu's memorial about the Great Cloud Sutra became widely read, people from around the country began petitioning for Wu Zetian to become the sovereign. In 690 she accepted the people's petitions by changing the emperor's status to successor and instating herself as emperor. This began the new, but short lived, Zhou Dynasty (Woo 2008). While she was emperor, Wu Zetian sponsored several temples in Chang'an and ordered the construction of a Great Cloud Monastery in every prefecture (Dien 2003). During this time, Buddhism became even more popular around China than it already was and it replaced Daoism as the most popular religion due in large part to the Empress' patronage of the religion.

Empress Wu went on to rule in her own name for the next fifteen years, and, while she continued to call upon religion to ensure that her authority remained, the deeply embedded Chinese patriarchy also remained, and Empress Wu was criticized by the elites throughout her rule. Throughout most of her reign, Empress Wu was seen as indulgent by the court and was often criticized because of this perception. She never faltered, though, and maintained that she had the authority to act as male emperors would. In 699, the 75-year-old empress began developing health problems and her palace began devolving into more of a house of merriment, which gave her critics even more opportunities to question her competency. Some of Empress Wu's critics began asking her to abdicate the throne, but she was not ready to give up the throne, so she continued to rule in the same way that she had been (Dien 2003). Finally, her son Zhongzong, took charge of the imperial government in February of 705. The Empress did not

formally abdicate the throne until December of 705, though. Soon after, she passed away at age 81 (Woo 2008).

1.4.3 Summary of Empress Wu

While it is clear that Empress Wu used strategy and ruthlessness to navigate the hierarchy of the Tang period to facilitate her rise to power, the long-term viability of her rule was dependent on legitimizing her authority with elite families, who because of structures like the civil service exams, were key to the power structure of ancient China. It is well known that Empress Wu relied on people from around the country to support her since so many people within the imperial court criticized her. While we know that Empress Wu disseminated Buddhist sutras to gain supporters, it is unclear what many of these supporters did to bolster Empress Wu's status. While there are several large construction projects that were used to support Empress Wu that still stand today, thousands of people were needed to help Empress Wu break through her gender expectations, and these types of projects alone were likely not enough to convince the imperial court to allow her to ascend the throne. Also, it is largely unknown what Empress Wu's supporters, especially elite families outside of Chang'an, would have gained by building structures showcasing their belief that her rule was legitimate. This thesis analyzes two such construction projects that supported the Empress' reign and discusses the effects that they likely would have had on Empress Wu and on the people who built them.

1.5 Dunhuang and the Mogao Grottoes

One of the necessary challenges of Empress Wu's reign was to establish authority in the important areas of Silk Road trade, where Buddhist influence was particularly significant. Dunhuang was one of the first communities to adopt Buddhism when it expanded from India, as it was on the Silk Road where Buddhist monks often traveled. In the mid-fourth century AD, a monk who was in Dunhuang translating Buddhist teachings, or sutras, into Chinese, stumbled upon Mogao Mount and decided to dig a shrine. From there, a rich tradition of cave temple construction at that site emerged, and it came to be known as the Mogao Grottoes (Fan 2010). Throughout its thousand-year history of construction, many of the people who sponsored construction of new caves at Mogao were members of local elite families. These families generally sponsored caves to appease the Buddha and gain good Dharma, as well as to showcase their wealth and improve their position within the community. The Yin family was one of these elite clans that lived in Dunhuang for most of its history and sponsored many caves (Ning 2004). They sponsored Caves 96 and 321 during Empress Wu's ascent to the throne and they intentionally placed imagery that conveyed their belief in female Buddhas in their caves to express their support of the female emperor. The two caves sponsored by the Yin and other families provide an opportunity to explore the role of Buddhist imagery and gender power dynamics between Wu and elite families on the Silk Road margins of the Tang empire.

1.5.1 The Town of Dunhuang

Dunhuang, a popular stop for Silk Road travelers trading in China, was one community that adopted Buddhist traditions which are still studied today. Dunhuang is an oasis town on the

outskirts of the Gobi Desert in the western Chinese region of Gansu on the Hexi corridor.

Dunhuang was one of the main stops for travelers on the Silk Road because it was on the western edge of the Chinese empire leading to the imperial capital of Chang'an, which was located approximately 1,000 miles away. Dunhuang was also a place that supported travelers while they prepared for or finished their journey through the Gobi Desert. This interaction between east and west resulted in Dunhuang growing and becoming a hub of commerce and a microcosm of the many ideas being proliferated along the Silk Road. Because of the cultural and intellectual growth that resulted from the interaction of many different peoples traveling on the Silk Road, as well as political and social chaos in the Hexi corridor at the time, Buddhism spread and developed in Dunhuang (Rong and Galambos 2013). During this period, a rich tradition of Buddhist art was established, which, combined with the interaction of cultures in the area, has revealed invaluable information about the Silk Road and Buddhism in China.

1.5.2 The Mogao Grottoes

The Mogao Grottoes site has a long, rich history that can help us understand the culture and Buddhist traditions in Dunhuang for over 1,000 years. The Mogao Grottoes is a series of 735 caves carved into a cliffside on the outskirts of Dunhuang. 492 of these caves contain a unique Buddhist temple that was carved out of the cliff, plastered, and then intricately painted with various styles of Buddhist imagery. There are also several caves that were used as living and religious quarters for monks (Ning 2004). The earliest cave was dug out in AD 366 when a monk that was in Dunhuang translating Buddhist teachings, or sutras, into Chinese, came upon Mount Mingsha and decided to dig a shrine because he saw a golden light that contained a thousand buddhas (Rong and Galambos 2013). From there, a rich tradition of cave temple construction at

that site emerged and endured until the 14th century. The caves at this site reflect one thousand years of well-preserved Buddhist imagery and legend, and is a nearly untouched view of early Buddhist belief in western China (see Figures 1.3 and 1.4).



Figure 1. 3: Image of the cliffside that contains the Mogao Grottoes (“China Principles” 2019)

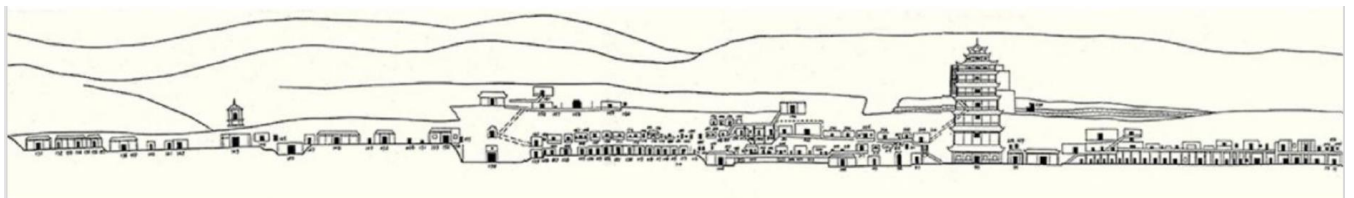


Figure 1. 4: Diagram of the numbered caves of Mogao Grottoes (Agnew, Reed, and Ball 2016)

1.5.3 Art and Architecture of the Mogao Grottoes

Since the construction of the Mogao Grottoes spanned over several dynasties, the artwork and architecture changed a great deal from the fourth to the fourteenth century. All the cave shrines were first dug out of the sandstone cliff face, which left a rough indent. Then, clay stucco was applied to the walls and ceiling to create a flat surface that they would paint elaborate murals on. The cave shrines also contain sculptures. These were made by first creating an armature out of bound straw, and then applying and sculpting the same stucco to it (S. Whitfield 2015). The caves all contain a sculpture of a Buddha in the center, and walls and ceilings painted with elaborate murals. Aside from these features, though, the caves at Mogao Grottoes have few other commonalities.

The first caves that were constructed at Mogao Grottoes were built during the Northern Dynasties period in the mid-fourth century CE, and while they were noticeably less complex than later caves, they created some artistic and architectural traditions that spanned through many other periods. An example of this type of architectural tradition is the three architectural forms: Central Stupa Caves, Assembly Caves, and Seven Buddha or Parinirvana Caves. The main difference between Northern Dynasty caves and the later cave periods is that caves that were built during the time of the Northern Dynasties had less elaborate decoration than caves from later periods (see Figure 1.5) (Fan 2010).



Figure 1. 5: Cave 254 from the Northern Wei Dynasty (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)

The art of the Mogao Grottoes went through an artistic transformation during the Sui and Tang dynasties which later dynasties attempted to replicate. While Sui and Tang artists continued creating caves with similar architectural styles and layouts to some Northern Dynasty caves, they diversified cave architecture, painted images and sculptures, and wall paintings, including more secular images and more diverse religious images (R. Whitfield et al. 2000). One example of a unique cave type created during the Sui and Tang Dynasty were colossal Buddha caves, which were much more impressive and livelier in scope and art style than previous periods (see Figures 1.11, 2.3, 2.4). Overall, the artwork in Sui and Tang Dynasty caves were far more advanced artistically and diverse religiously than the artwork from the Northern Dynasties. Furthermore, the Sui and Tang Dynasty caves are considered to be the pinnacle of art and architecture at the Mogao Grottoes (see Figures 1.6-1.11) (Fan 2010).



Figure 1. 6: Cave 420 from the Sui Dynasty (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by "Digital Dunhuang" 2020, published under fair use)



Figure 1. 7: Cave 303 from the Sui Dynasty (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by "Digital Dunhuang" 2020, published under fair use)



Figure 1. 8: Cave 322 from the Early Tang Dynasty (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)

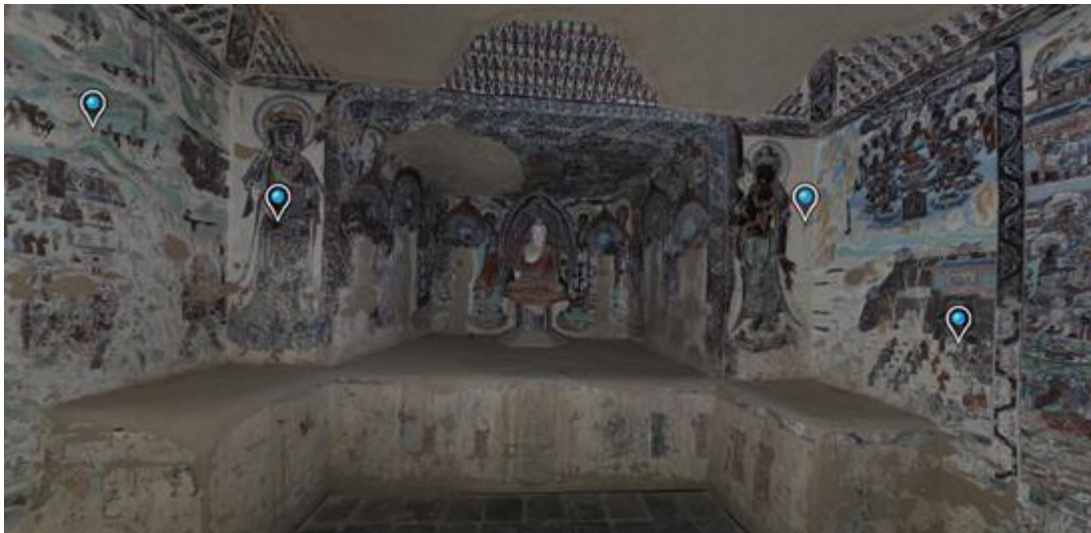


Figure 1. 9: Cave 217 from the Tang Dynasty (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)



Figure 1. 10: Cave 057 from the Tang Dynasty (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)

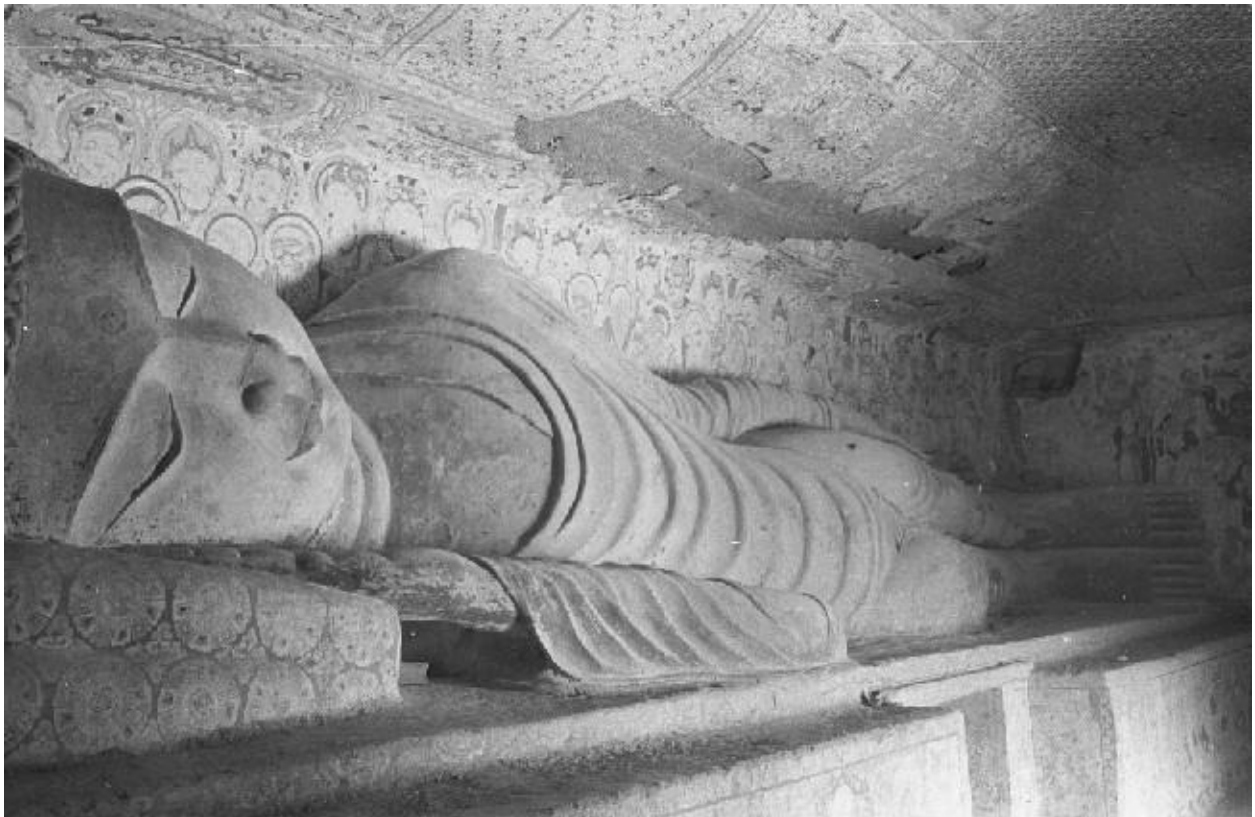


Figure 1. 11: Cave 158 from the Tang Dynasty (“Parinirvana, Mogao Cave 158 (MCD-4)” 2021)

The final period in which new caves were constructed at the Mogao Grottoes attempted to build upon traditions of earlier periods but were considered artistically lacking compared to the Tang Dynasty, which led to the end of Mogao's construction. The final artistic period showcased at the Mogao Grottoes was from the Five Dynasties period (see Figure 1.12), the Song Dynasty (see Figure 1.13), the Western Xia Dynasty (see Figure 1.14), and the Yuan Dynasty (see Figure 1.15). These are placed in the same category because the caves built during this period carried on the theme and the style of the Tang tradition, but lacked the Tang spirit (Fan 2010). The architecture, paintings, and sculpture were all similar to the artwork created in the Tang Dynasty, but with few new stories and ideas being portrayed. Unfortunately, many of the sculptures from this time period are severely damaged, but the images that they portrayed and the donors' intentions have been interpreted (Fan 2010). Because the donors and artists from these dynasties were not as inspired as Sui and Tang artists, construction of new caves ultimately ceased during the Yuan Dynasty (Agnew, Reed, and Ball 2016). Once no new caves were being built, Dunhuang was gradually forgotten and was turned into farming and herding land because the Silk Road largely ceased operation. Dunhuang did not experience a revival until the 18th century during the Qing Dynasty, when people began traveling to Dunhuang largely due to an attraction to the Mogao Grottoes (Fan 2010). These caves provide a dataset of architectural forms and images which are invaluable resources for understanding power structures, gender roles, political disputes, economic conditions, and what everyday life was like in a Silk Road destination for one thousand years.



Figure 1. 12: Cave 61 from the Five Dynasties Period (“Mogao Cave 61 (Five Dynasties 907-960AD)” 2014)

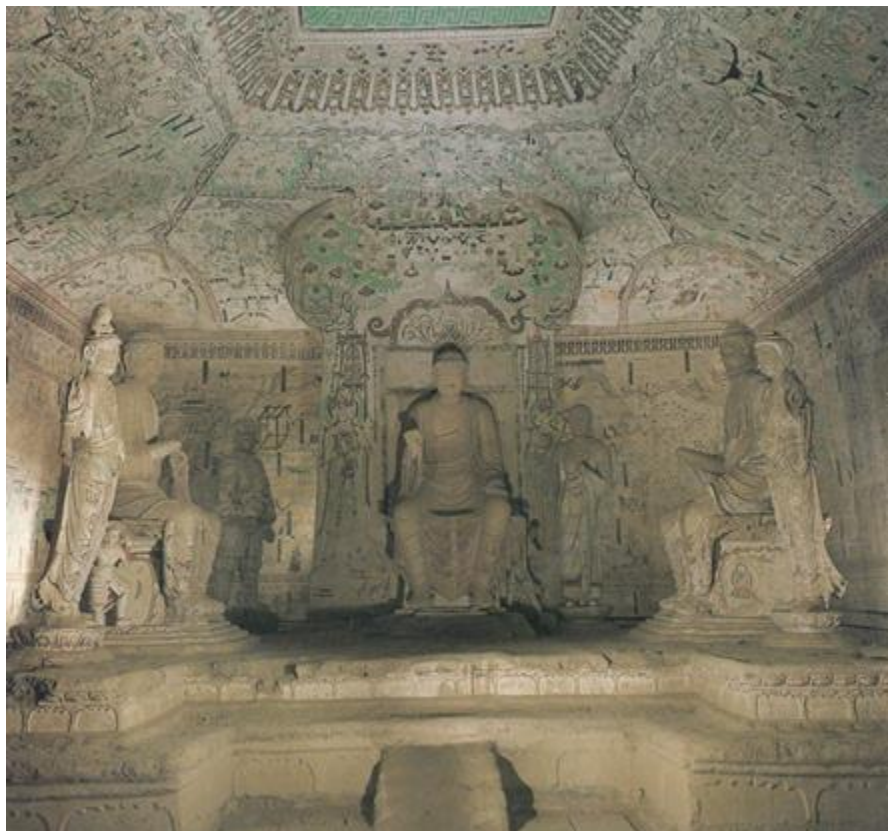


Figure 1. 13: Cave 55 from the Song Dynasty (“Mogao Cave 55 (Northern Song 960-1127 AD)” 2014)



Figure 1. 14: Cave 249 from the Western Wei Dynasty (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by "Digital Dunhuang" 2020, published under fair use)



Figure 1. 15: Cave 465 from the Yuan Dynasty ("Mogao Cave 465 (Yuan 1271-1368AD)" 2014)

The Mogao Grottoes contain a diverse array of cave types and artworks. These artworks not only offer an understanding of the religious values of elite families, but also give a glimpse into the daily life of the locals and travelers that came through Dunhuang for over one thousand years. Because of the artwork's honest interpretation of the values and lives of the sponsors, the cave temples of Mogao provide the perfect dataset to understand elite families' interactions with gender and Buddhism along the Silk Road.

1.5.4 Mogao Cave Sponsorship

Cave sponsorship at the Mogao Grottoes and other similar cave temple sites was not just a declaration of the sponsors' commitment to Buddhist practice or a way to gain positive dharma, but was also a show of political and economic power for elite Dunhuang families. During the millennium of cave construction at the Mogao Grottoes, Buddhists believed that there were several ways to acquire merit in the eyes of the Buddha to achieve nirvana, which not only included cave temple construction, but also translating and copying sutras, manufacturing ritual paraphernalia, and donating materials to support monks (P.P. Ho 2004).

The process of cave sponsorship in Dunhuang says a lot about the intentions of the people who built them. When sponsoring a cave, either one or more elite families hired several craftsmen to make the family's visual ideas a reality. The sponsors would usually be made up of laypeople, which were regular Buddhist practitioners, as well as monks and nuns who had left their families to live a Buddhist lifestyle, but they supported their families in their cave sponsorship when the elite clans decided to build a cave. Then, after the original sponsors passed away, the upkeep and renovation of the caves would be passed on to later generations of the same family, which is why they were generally known as family caves. Within these families,

there were often female sponsors painted on the walls and inscriptions discussing who they were, which indicates that females could be involved in cave sponsorship. There is a clear divide between sexes, though as in many of the caves, women were all depicted with the other women but separate from the men. Also, literary histories of the people that built caves at Mogao give the name of the person considered to be the primary sponsor of the cave, which seems to always be male (Ning 2004).

When planning out the caves, the sponsors would specifically choose different stories, figures, and types and positions of the main Buddha statue and the murals that they created according to teachings that they felt were important. For example, the Li family sponsored Mogao Cave 148, which contains an enormous statue of the Buddha in nirvana to ensure the family's survival in uncertain times and convey a religious theme that they felt was important (S. Lee 2010).

Construction of these caves not only showed travelers and members of the community who visited the cave the stories that the Li family felt was most important, but it also showcases their wealth because of the size and craftsmanship of the images within the cave. Several elite families from Dunhuang engaged in these types of sponsorship projects, and as a reflection of the competition for power and wealth within their community, they continually built larger and more ornate caves to showcase their prominence to Silk Road travelers and other local families in hopes that they would help them improve their status (Ning 2004). While it is true that on the surface, sponsors of caves did so to improve their religious status, this type of patronage was also meant to assert the family's prominence in the present and ensure its continued influence in the future (S. S. Lee 2010).

1.5.5 The Library Cave

Along with one thousand years of Buddhist iconography and architecture, the Mogao Grottoes contribute to the understanding of the area because of another unique feature: the Library Cave. Mogao Cave 17, also known as the Library Cave, is a small, sealed cave connected to Cave 16. This cave was rediscovered by a local Daoist priest named Abbott Wang in 1900, but many give credit to a Hungarian scholar and explorer named Aurel Stein who came to Dunhuang in 1907 and began studying the artifacts inside. When it was rediscovered, the Library cave contained more than fifty thousand historical and religious objects from several dynasties, languages, and countries, including sutras, paintings, and manuscripts from Dunhuang and beyond (see Figure 1.16) (Rong and Galambos 2013). According to the International Dunhuang Project, the collection from the Library Cave includes items of enormous international cultural significance such as the Diamond Sutra (see Figure 1.17), the Sogdian Ancient Letters, and the Old Tibetan Annals. Much of this collection was taken from China by Aurel Stein and other Europeans for their personal collections or museums in their country in the early 20th century. Many of the documents are now being tracked down, catalogued, and digitized, but most of the documents were taken out of their archaeological context, which has left them difficult to study. Nevertheless, the Library Cave is often considered the most valuable part of the Mogao Grottoes and has contributed to the Mogao Grottoes' status as a World Heritage Site (S. Whitfield 1907).



Figure 1. 16: “Aurel Stein’s 1907 view of Mogao Cave 16, with a portion of the manuscripts from Cave 17” (S. Whitfield 1907)



Figure 1. 17: “The Diamond Sutra (a sacred Mahayana Buddhist text), which dates from 868 and is the world’s oldest dated complete printed book.” (S. Whitfield 2002)

1.5.6 Summary of Dunhuang and the Mogao Grottoes

The Mogao Grottoes is an important site for learning about Buddhist history, as well as the history and culture in Dunhuang and along the Silk Road. Firstly, the caves at Mogao showcase Buddhist art and religion, which can be studied to understand Buddhist history. Also, although the art at the Mogao Grottoes is religious in nature, it also reveals what local life, history, and culture were like for over one thousand years (Fan 2010). The Library Cave and the artwork at the Mogao Grottoes World Heritage Site can be analyzed to assess power relationships between sexes and the role of Buddhism in society.

1.6 Chapter 1 Conclusion

The Tang Dynasty was a time of peace and prosperity for China due to the early Tang emperors who expanded the empire to unify several different dynasties and encompass more Silk Road trade routes. These emperors also encoded a series of laws which outlined the structure and operation of the government, including how to recruit the best bureaucrats to help run the empire. Wu Zetian was born during this prosperous time, and due to the combination of timing, religious authority, and perseverance, she was able to rise and become the only female emperor in her own name. She was influenced by the newly popularized religion, Buddhism, throughout her lifetime, and when she wanted to become the sole emperor, she cited Buddhist teachings to convince her highly patriarchal, Confucian society that she was worthy of becoming the emperor even though she was a female. One resource that Empress Wu relied on was elite families around the country, who used their resources and influence to help legitimize her authority to their communities. In some instances, these elite families built Buddhist monuments inspired by Empress Wu's teachings to clearly support her authority. The relationship that these families had

with Empress Wu, and how both parties were impacted by the construction of such monuments remains unanswered, though.

Even though Dunhuang was a several days journey away from Chang'An during the Tang, the Mogao Grottoes and Dunhuang can provide insights on the topics of women in patriarchal power structures and the role of religion in politics, as well as the effect that Empress Wu had on her empire because elite families living in Dunhuang participated in the imperial government and created monuments to reflect their power and religious struggles. The local elite Yin family was one such family, which sponsored Mogao caves 96 and 321 during Empress Wu's rise to power to appease the Buddha to gain good dharma, as well as to showcase their wealth and virtue in order to gain their community's, as well as Empress Wu's political and financial support. The artwork in these caves provide a dataset to explore the use of Buddhism in Empress Wu's reign and the relationship between religion, gender, and authority.

Chapter 2: Methods and Results

2.1 Theory and Methods

During the Tang Dynasty, elite families were vital to the power structure of the imperial government due to the way that they took advantage of the civil service examinations. These families were Empress Wu's key to cementing her authority as a female, and she used Buddhist sutras to convince these families to support her. Many of these elite families then used a variety of methods to convey their support for her to the imperial court, including sponsoring Buddhist projects that contained images of the Empress. While it is clear that elite families that sponsored these types of Buddhist projects intended to improve Empress Wu's status, it is not yet known how Buddhist construction projects actually impacted Empress Wu and female authority Tang China, or how they impacted the elite families that built them.

I examined the images within Cave 96 and 321 at the Mogao Grottoes using critical theory and iconography theory to understand how the family that constructed these two caves showcased their support for Empress Wu. I chose these two caves because they were both constructed by a single elite family during the time that Empress Wu was rising to power. This historical context lends itself to a focused analysis of the caves to form an understanding of the purpose of their construction and the impact their construction had on the lives of that family and of Empress Wu. I examined Cave 96 by looking at current and historical pictures of the Great Buddha Statue and the external temple structure. I examined all four walls and the ceiling of Cave 321 by using Digital Dunhuang's interactive imagery of the caves. The following section explains how I attempted to combine iconography theory from Art History with relevant archaeological methods.

2.1.1 Theoretical Background

In my interpretation I apply critical art theory and iconography theory to discuss the implications of the Yin family's support on their own political power and Empress Wu's power to contribute to the understanding of religion and power dynamics in ancient China and in the modern world. Iconography theory is the main theory that I consider in my analysis. Iconography theory seeks to understand the meaning behind common religious symbols (Müller 2011). Critical art theory asserts that art is a representation and product of the people and time that created it (Preziosi 2009). These are both important to my analysis because in order to understand the context of the artwork within the caves, one must understand the cultural context of the time period that it was created in.

Iconography theory is an appropriate framework of interpretation for Caves 96 and 321 because Chinese Buddhism has a rigid and consistent iconographic tradition, and the lessons within Buddhist artwork become apparent if the viewer is knowledgeable about Buddhist iconography. For example, the position that a Buddha figure is in and the gesture that he is making can inform the viewer what type of Buddha it is and what type of prayer the Buddha can grant. Other aspects of Buddhist artwork are also important for understanding that artwork such as the clothes that the human figures are wearing, and the surroundings of the figure.

Using iconography to understand artwork is not all encompassing for this type of analysis, though. Iconography theory only considers the visual aspects of the artwork and ignores some important factors of analysis such as the materials made to use it, where the artwork is located geographically and in respect to other works of art, and who made it. These weaknesses are the reason that I consider other theoretical backgrounds in conjunction with iconography theory to conduct my full analysis of Mogao Caves 96 and 321.

Along with studying Buddhist iconography to understand the religious meaning of each panel within the Yin family caves, I also consider several other analytical lenses to form a well-rounded analysis of the artwork and its historical impact. For my analysis, I conduct an in-depth investigation of the historical and political context of the time period that the caves were constructed in. I also use an archaeological and critical art theory perspective which asserts that artwork is a product of the cultural context in which it is created. Finally, I investigate translations and reports of the literature from Empress Wu that inspired the construction of Caves 96 and 321, as well as some documents that discussed the social climate of Dunhuang, to understand the sponsors' inspiration and artistic goals. All of these frameworks combined create a balanced analysis of the implications of the construction of these two caves.

2.1.2 How the Analysis was Conducted

I conducted my analysis of the art within the caves through a common iconographic research strategy: a subjective sampling strategy, which is often used to understand the cultural context and stories behind religious artwork through the close examination of individual aspects of the art and the comparison of those aspects to other known artworks from similar areas and time periods (Müller 2011). This assessment was conducted in three steps. First, I examined each part of each panel and described the icons in a neutral way, trying to avoid attributing meaning to them too quickly. Then, I compared the icons that I described to previously researched icons. Finally, I analyzed the icons in light of all available sources, to attribute meaning to the analyzed visuals related to their original temporal and special context (Müller 2011).

In order to understand the intentions of the artists that built the caves and the families that sponsored them, I first examined each of the murals and statues in Caves 96 and 321

systematically to form an in-depth analysis. During this examination, I analyzed the panels at several scales, ranging from overall composition, including layout, color, geographic features, orientation, and spatial relationships, to individual features such as religious icons, symbols, and names. I first examined the images of each wall and the ceiling in their entirety to understand the composition as a whole. Then, I looked closely at each individual section of the panels, such as top, middle, and bottom to understand each component in isolation. Next, I individually examined each human character's characteristics such as their poses and clothes to understand each of their roles in the artwork and the sutra. Finally, I considered each panel within the context of the entirety of the cave to understand why it was placed where it is, how it is associated with the other icons and statues within the cave. I then considered how the artist used this imagery to convey their intended sutras. This methodology is important because Buddhist iconography places a large amount of meaning on clothing, poses, facial expressions, colors, directions, and individual components as well as larger contextual relationships within the artwork, and there are often messages within Buddhist artwork that are not often seen at first glance, but are important to the overall understanding of the artwork.

In order to assess the intentions of the Yin family and their relationship to Empress Wu and ideas of female authority, I qualitatively assessed imagery for evidence of a few different features. One feature that I considered was whether there is evidence of male affiliation, which is portrayed as Buddhas wearing male clothing and having male bodily features, or female affiliation, which consists of the Buddhas having feminine features or portrayals of the Maitreya Buddha, which are believed to be female in some Buddhist ideologies. I also considered symbols of authority, such as Buddha-kings known as cakravartins, as well as symbols of prosperity, such as images of treasures and happiness of the people. I also researched Buddhist temples and icons

sponsored directly by Empress Wu to understand the similarities and differences between the Yin family's proclamation of support and Empress Wu's proclamation of power. I found some consistent iconography within the caves, between the caves and Empress Wu's sutras, and between the caves and other artworks that Empress Wu sponsored. Although it is clear that much of the imagery in these two caves were intentionally designed to promote the empress, there was also imagery that was not relevant to Empress Wu's rise to power.

2.2 Results

Mogao Cave 96 is arguably the most well-known cave at the Mogao Grottoes, and possibly the rest of Dunhuang as well. Mogao Caves 96 and 321 were both built in the early Tang Dynasty during the time that Wu Zetian was rising to power, and both caves contain imagery that display the Yin family's promotion of Empress Wu's ability and religious right to rule China. When one goes inside the external structure of Cave 96, the first thing that that person sees is a pair of massive feet in front of them. Then, they must look straight up to see the face of the Great Buddha statue housed inside Cave 96, which is difficult to do as there is little space in front of the 116-foot statue. The sheer magnitude of the statue, as well as the consideration of the age and level of preservation in the cave stirs awe inside anyone who views cave 96. It becomes clear that whoever had the will and the resources to build such a monument wanted to make a statement for all to see. Cave 321 is far less immense and awe inspiring than 96, as it is similar to other caves in style and form, but it is equally as important to consider in the case study of Empress Wu's use of religion to rise to power. This section will discuss the iconography found in Mogao caves 96 and 321 that showcase the Yin family's support for Empress Wu.

2.2.1 Iconography that Supports Empress Wu

Several iconographic examples show the Yin family's affiliation with Empress Wu. Firstly, there is an artistic representation of Empress Wu's chosen name of Zhao (曷) on the south wall of Cave 321 (see Figure 2.1). Secondly, the exterior of Cave 96 is believed to be a Grand Cloud Temple, which is a style of temple architecture that Empress Wu sponsored hundreds of around the country (see Figure 2.2).



Figure 2. 1: Visual Symbol of Wu Zhao's chosen name and the treasures falling from the sky, detail from above the Buddha on the south wall of Cave 321 (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by "Digital Dunhuang" 2020, published under fair use)



Figure 2. 2: Exterior of Cave 96 (Grand Cloud Temple design) (“Mogao Cave 96 (Early Tang 618-705AD)” 2014)

Several images also show that the Yin family supported legitimization of female religious authority. Firstly, the Great Buddha in cave 96 has feminine features such as a pronounced bosom, a feminine face, and women’s clothing, which was unusual for Tang Dynasty caves as the Buddhas in most other Tang Dynasty caves had masculine features that were similar between caves from similar time periods (see Figures 2.3 and 2.4). Along with these Buddhas being feminine, Cave 96’s Great Buddha is the Buddha Maitreya, which is what Empress Wu was portrayed as in the Great Cloud Sutra, which she disseminated throughout China to convince her patrons of her political authority. Similarly, the Great Buddha and the Buddha on the South wall of Cave 321 are clothed in royal garments, whereas normal buddha statues were portrayed as monks (see Figures 2.2 and 2.5). Finally, a copy of the Great Cloud Sutra was found in the

Library Cave, proving that Empress Wu's propaganda reached Dunhuang and that the Yin Family likely saw it.



Figure 2. 3: Head of the Great Maitreya Buddha ("Mogao Cave 96 (Early Tang 618-705AD)" 2014)



Figure 2. 4: View of the Great Maitreya Buddha from the ground (“Mogao Cave 96 (Early Tang 618-705AD)” 2014)

Finally, two image examples show that the Yin family wanted to support political authority using religious imagery. Firstly, on the south wall of Cave 321, the Buddha is shown as a cakravartin, which is a legendary Buddha-king that Empress Wu associated herself with. Lastly, the south wall of cave 321 portrays an iteration of the Grand Cloud Sutra called the Treasury Rain Sutra, which shows images of jewelry, musical instruments, and flowers falling from the sky (See Figure 2.1) (Kim 2001). This sutra proclaims that treasure will rain from the

sky under the rule of the future Cakravartin, which is likely what the Yin family was hoping that Empress Wu would bring about during her reign.



Figure 2. 5: South wall of Mogao Cave 321 (Artwork in the public domain; Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)

Because Buddhism maintains such a strict iconographic tradition, the meaning of all of the images within Cave 96 and 321 were understood by the Buddhists who saw them. Therefore, the message of support for Empress Wu and female authority that the Yin family was intending to portray in these two caves would have been clear to Dunhuang community members and Buddhists traveling through Dunhuang, which would have impacted the community, the Yin family, and Empress Wu. This chapter discusses how the artwork can be used to understand the impacts that the artwork inside Caves 96 and 321 had on the people who saw them during the Tang Dynasty and how they contributed to female authority in medieval China.

2.3 Parts of the Caves that do not Explicitly Support Empress Wu

While there is imagery explicitly legitimizing Empress Wu in Caves 96 and 321, the caves were not entirely devoted to imagery about Empress Wu. For example, Cave 321 contains imagery that also reveals the sponsors' religious beliefs, such as their goals to reach the Pure Land. As for Cave 96, archaeologists can tell that there used to be other decorations within the cave that may have revealed different stories that the Yin family wished to convey, but the features of Cave 96 that are still standing are clear representations of the family's support for Empress Wu.

2.3.1 Historical Modifications that may Influence Analysis

There have been several changes to Cave 96 throughout history that could affect modern interpretation of cave symbolism. Firstly, the outside temple structure has been changed several times since Empress Wu's lifetime, at which time it was four stories tall. Since then, it was increased to nine stories after three separate renovations starting in the tenth century. Similarly, people have been upkeeping the cave for over one thousand years and have repainted the statue and changed other parts of the cave many times, so parts of the statue likely look somewhat different than they did in the seventh century. Also, a massive earthquake in the tenth century destroyed all of the murals and structures other than the Great Buddha statue, which means that there could have been more iconography that revealed the Yin family's feelings about Empress Wu within the cave when it was built ("Mogao Cave 96 (Early Tang 618-705AD)" 2014).

According to the imagery that we can see today, as well as recorded histories found in the Library Cave, it is still plain to see that the Yin family wanted everyone in their community to know that they were backing Empress Wu through their monumental art and architecture.

2.3.2 Other Imagery in Cave 321

Cave 321 has fared much better than Cave 96 since its construction, and since most of the imagery within the cave is still visible, an analysis of the parts of Cave 321 that do not explicitly support Empress Wu is possible. Cave 321 is a much more traditional Mogao Cave in that its architectural form is a traditional Chinese assembly structure, which contains a platform with several statues on it and murals covering the entirety of the walls and the ceiling. The western wall of Cave 321 contains a platformed niche that seven statues stand on which is typical of Tang Dynasty caves. The center statue is a buddha with a halo around his head. He is surrounded by two bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who stay on earth to help others reach Nirvana, on both sides, and one heavenly king on each side. Both sides also have *tianshou*, or heavenly animals on their own small platforms, which are motifs with the heads of tigers and the bodies of lions who guard the Buddha's law (Kim 2001). On the ceiling of the niche is a tree, which symbolizes the place that the Buddha Shakyamuni reached enlightenment, as well as several heavenly figures, including four flying apsaras, which are very common in Dunhuang art, and three other Buddhas floating around the statues' heads. There are also many paintings of patterned flowers and birds which show what Buddhist believe nirvana will look like ("Digital Dunhuang" 2020). The rest of the wall contains images of the Thousand Buddhas as a continuation of the ceiling, which was a common motif in Tang Dynasty caves that symbolized the presence of Buddha-nature throughout the universe. This thousand buddha motif extends around the cave and covers the entire ceiling (R. Whitfield et al. 2000). There is also a small part of the western wall that is too eroded to recognize (see Figure 2.6).



Figure 2. 6: Western wall and niche of Mogao Cave 321 (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)

The murals on the east wall of Cave 321, like the north and west walls, are not clearly meant to support Empress Wu, but they are still valuable to understanding the cultural and religious context of the cave. The east wall murals are symmetrical around the entryway, with a Buddha in the center sitting on a lotus, another common Buddhist motif meaning life and purity, as well as enlightenment, as well as two other buddhas on each side, all of which are surrounded by bodhisattvas (Wong 2018). The lower panel on the right side also contains a buddha with his two bodhisattvas, and the left side is composed of a deity called the Eleven-Faced Avalokitesvara, which is an image from a Buddhist sutra, flanked by two deities. This wall also depicts trees and flower patterns, which creates a continuity among the walls of the cave. Finally,

images of some of the donors of the cave adorn the north and east walls, which were from the Yin family, as well as several other prominent elite Dunhuang families, such as the Cao family, who sponsored several other Mogao caves throughout the centuries (see figure 2.7) (Wong 2018).



Figure 2. 7: Eastern wall of Mogao Cave 321 (Artwork in the public domain; Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)

The North wall contains a common religious theme from the Tang Dynasty, which provides more insight into the Yin family’s religious convictions and cultural context. The north wall is directly across from the wall that contains imagery that supports Empress Wu, portrays the Amitabha or Pure Land Sutra. This sutra was popular during the Tang Dynasty by members of the Pure Land school of Mahayana Buddhism. It described a paradise ruled by Buddhas and bodhisattvas that would help with the suffering of humanity (R. Whitfield et al. 2000). The doctrine of the Pure Land school describes the methods one should take in order to be reborn in the Land of Ultimate Bliss (Hua 2013). The mural is also symmetrical, with a central buddha

surrounded by bodhisattvas and other servants, and two other buddhas and their respective enclaves on either side. This whole mural is depicted as floating on clouds in the sky. There are temples, as well as beautiful trees, birds, and flowers all floating around the buddhas in the sky (“Digital Dunhuang” 2020). This mural is meant to represent the beauty and peace that one will achieve when reaching enlightenment. There are several other caves from the time period that contained murals depicting this Pure Land, such as Cave 220, which was also notably built during Empress Wu’s lifetime (see Figure 2.9). The depiction of this sutra within Cave 321 reveals that the Yin family believed that enlightened people would reach this wonderful, pure land, and that they wished to reach *Nirvana* and be welcomed into the Pure Land as well (see Figure 2.8).



Figure 2. 8: Northern wall of Mogao Cave 321 (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)



Figure 2. 9: Mural of Pure Land Sutra from Mogao Cave 220 (“Mogao Cave 220 (Early Tang 618-705AD)” 2014)

The entirety of Cave 321 is composed of murals and statues that are similar in color and theme, which shows that the artists carefully planned out what they wanted their cave to contain and considered what each motif meant to properly convey their intended message. Most of the imagery was commonly used in caves from the Tang Dynasty, but each image is unique in its meaning and relation to the other parts of the cave. Although only the south wall of cave 321 has imagery that clearly indicates that the Yin family wanted to show their support for Empress Wu, the rest of the cave is also full of meaning which is important to pay attention to in order to understand the goals of the donors when building Cave 321 (see Figure 2.10).

While the images on the northern, eastern, and southern walls, as well as the ceiling were not related to Empress Wu’s rise to power, they are still relevant to the case study of Empress Wu. Some of them, such as the sutra on the north wall (see Figure 2.8) and the thousand buddha motif (see Figure 2.19) on the cave ceiling, provide information about the common motifs and

stories that were being portrayed during the time period. They also reveal more information about the Yin family's hopes for the future, such as prosperity and wealth. The images of the donors on the eastern wall are also invaluable to understanding the history of Cave 321 because it provides information on who built the caves, as well as their positions in society and relations to other donors. While the southern wall of cave 321 is of most interest to this research because it is a direct artistic commentary about Empress Wu, the other parts of the cave are also necessary to understand.

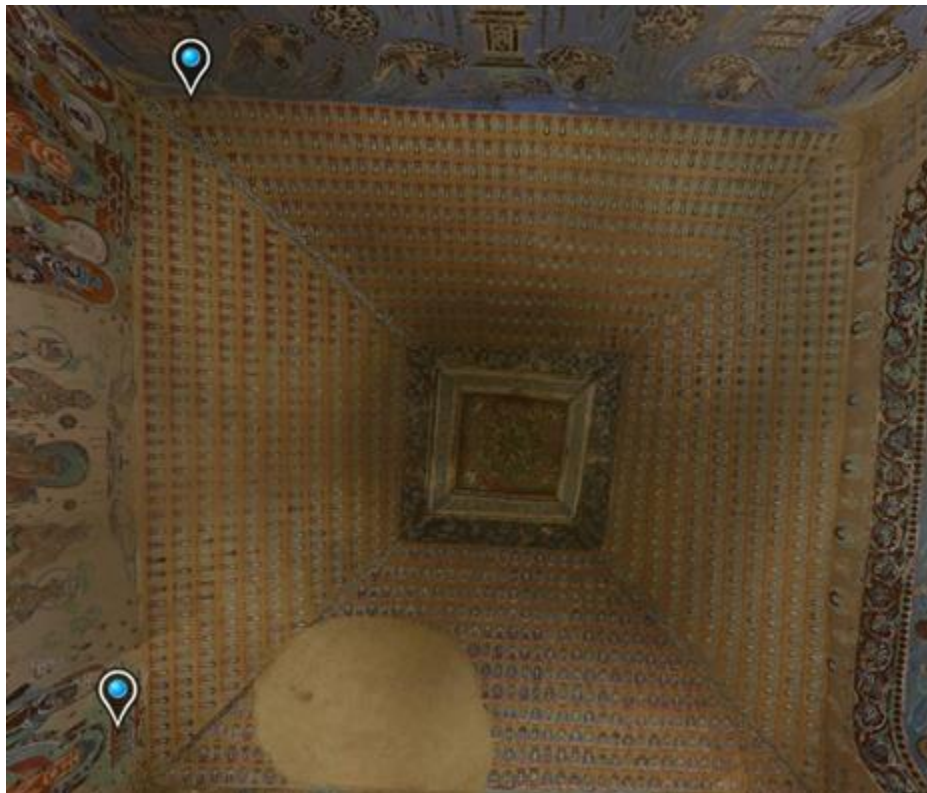


Figure 2. 10: Ceiling of Mogao Cave 321 (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by "Digital Dunhuang" 2020, published under fair use)

Chapter 3: Discussion and Conclusions

While many families and individuals contributed to the construction of different caves at Mogao throughout its millennium of additions, many of the people that sponsored new caves were members of local elite families. These families generally sponsored caves to appease the Buddha and gain good Dharma, as well as to showcase their wealth and improve their position within the community. The Yin family was one of these elite clans that lived in Dunhuang for much of its history and sponsored many caves.. My analysis of imagery in caves 96 and 321 suggest that Buddhist religious imagery and gender symbolism were strategically employed by the Yin, and perhaps other elite families, to legitimize the authority of the empress. These efforts may have helped the Yin family curry favor with the Empress and the imperial government in order to secure their political status. Studying these two caves reveals insights on the intersection between religion and politics in medieval China and showcases the Yin family's opinion on a controversial subject: women's role in this deeply patriarchal society.

3.1 How the Yin Family Caves Impacted Empress Wu

While the Yin family surely contributed to Empress Wu's success in her campaign to become sole ruler, it is unclear how much they affected the outcome. Given the Yin family's prominent role in the Dunhuang community and the use of imagery of Empress Wu in a Buddhist context, it is most probable that the Yin family constructing caves 96 and 321 would have helped convince a few of the caves' main audience members, Dunhuang community members and travelers, that Empress Wu's rule was supported by religious doctrine. Dunhuang was already a highly religious community, especially in regards to Buddhism, so it is likely that people that were

viewing the finished caves already had made up their minds about Empress Wu's rule. Also, since Empress Wu had already disseminated her Great Cloud Sutra as widely as possible around the country, most elites in Dunhuang had likely already read the Great Cloud Sutra and expressed their thoughts about her rule to the imperial court to argue for or against her ruling in her own name. Although Empress Wu was crowned before these caves could be completed, Empress Wu could use all of the support that she could get during her ascent to the throne and she likely appreciated the effort put into the construction of these caves. On the other hand, though, if these two caves were never built, Empress Wu would have likely still been emperor since she had the support of so many others around the country.

The Yin family sponsorship and iconographic approaches to legitimize Wu's rule are emblematic of larger processes at play across China. Along with the fact that one family would not make or break the Empress' ability to ascend the throne, the Yin family was not the only family to sponsor a cave at Mogao that supported Empress Wu's rule. During the time that Wu Zetian was campaigning to become sole ruler, she sponsored hundreds of temples, including the Grand Cloud Temple that adorns the exterior of Cave 96 (see Figure 2.2), an enormous statue of her was carved at the Longmen caves near Dunhuang (see Figure 3.2), and Mogao Cave 323 was also built around the same time that the Yin family built their caves (see Figure 3.1), which implies that the Yin family was not very unique in showing their support for the Empress through the creation of Buddhist art in her image, but that these types of projects were necessary to the Empress' success (R. Whitfield et al. 2000).



Figure 3. 1: Niche of Cave 323, built in the Early Tang Dynasty (Artwork in the public domain: Photograph by “Digital Dunhuang” 2020, published under fair use)



Figure 3. 2: Statue of Empress Wu at Longmen Grottoes (McNair 1994)

3.2 How the Yin Family Caves Impacted the Yin Family

The construction of the Yin Family caves might have helped the family gain Empress Wu's favor, and helped the Yin family reach their personal political goals. The Mogao grottoes was a meeting place for locals and travelers during holidays such as the Buddha's birthday and the New Year, and it was also a place of reception for important domestic and international visitors. Thus, elite families that built caves could be confident that the religious and political ideas that they depicted within their caves would be seen by many people ranging from peasants to kings. Clearly, these caves were an outlet for the expression of the patron family's political and religious beliefs, but they also had political implications for the family in relation to the imperial government (Ning 2004).

Dunhuang has a long history of strife with their neighboring communities, which often affected their local politics and was sometimes depicted with religious stories in cave images. Because relations between newly-incorporated Dunhuang, imperial China, and the surrounding kingdoms were often tense, the Yin family used their artistic platform to show their affiliation with the imperial government and retain Empress Wu's trust, as well as sending the message to others who saw the cave that the female emperor was their ruler (Ning 2004). They likely also realized that the clan structure around the country was changing due to the imperial examination system, and they wanted to take advantage of the social mobility that the exams and Empress Wu provided to increase their political power. If the Yin family received similar promotions to other elite families in Gansu, they could have received power within the imperial military, as administrators within the economically and politically important outpost of Dunhuang or Gansu, or possibly even in higher positions in Chang'an.

3.3 Contemporary Considerations

Even though the events discussed in this thesis occurred over one thousand years ago, Empress Wu is still a useful case study for understanding several modern-day phenomena in China and around the world. The questions of how women in patriarchal societies break through the social hierarchy to establish power and influence, and what role religion plays in politics and gender roles are still relevant in many societies today. Empress Wu navigated patriarchal structures by embracing Buddhism and molding its stories to support her personal advancement as a female and contrast existing philosophical traditions. In the wake of her rise to power, elite families used iconography and religious structures to try and legitimize her authority even though she was a woman, and establish affiliation and favor with her to improve their own social status.

The case study of Empress Wu is indicative of a larger pattern that has been playing out in societies around the world for millennia. Power struggles and inequality inevitably happen in many social hierarchies, big or small. While there are many examples of social hierarchies, females have been considered the inferior sex in many cultures throughout history until the modern day. Empress Wu is one female who expertly navigated the existing political landscape of her time to rise above rigid gender roles to gain more power than any Chinese woman before her or since. She took advantage of the opportunities provided by changing religious and social infrastructure to show her empire her power and ensure that people would support her. While the world is very different now than it was during the Tang Dynasty, similar strategies to the ones that Empress Wu and the Yin family adopted have been used many times and can still be imitated in many situations today.

There is still structural inequity regarding gender and sex in China and around the world, but women are navigating those structures to make their voices heard. Politically, China is

considered to be in the middle of the global ranking for women in the government, at 87th out of 195 countries. The highest governmental office in China, known as the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP, has seven seats, none of which are female. From there, the ratios of female to male in government offices increases as rank decreases, but the lowest governmental office in China, the National People's Congress, is merely 25% female, which is still incredibly low considering that women comprise of 50% of the population ("Women in Government | US-China Institute" 2021). This is a clear improvement from Empress Wu's time, and it only improved because strong women understood their social structures well enough to convince enough people in their highly patriarchal society to support them in their ascent to power. Clearly, there is much work to be done to ensure that women have an equal voice in the government, but Chinese women and women around the world can look to role models such as Empress Wu to figure out effective strategies for getting their voices heard. While Empress Wu and her relationship with the Yin family is a very specific case study, many of the systems in use during Empress Wu's ascension to the throne are indicative of larger structures that are constant throughout time and place, and therefore people who learn about her political strategies can often adapt them to their own situations.

3.4 Limitations of this Study

Throughout this thesis, I encountered a few challenges in my research. Firstly, although there are three-dimensional interactive images of Cave 321 online, and there is a large amount of information on Cave 96, I did not have the opportunity during my research to visit the Mogao Grottoes and examine my caves of interest in person, and only a small portion of the caves have had high quality photographs taken of them. I believe that this study would have been improved

if I had physically visited the site. Secondly, the Library Cave has an enormous number of documents and while there are several organizations working on digitizing the documents found in the Library Cave, resources from the cave were dispersed around the world in the early 1900s and many are lost or have not been digitized yet. The challenge that I had with this issue was that I did not have access to primary sources, such as Empress Wu's commentary on the Grand Cloud Sutra and genealogies that may have mentioned what happened to the Yin family, which would have been invaluable to this thesis. Finally, I only researched two caves from one family which built their caves to serve one emperor, and therefore I do not know how generalizable my results are to other time periods, families, and emperors. In future studies similar to mine, researchers should visit their site during their research and ensure that they can gain access to the primary sources that they need in order to write the most effective study possible,

I think that there are several ways that this study could be expanded on as well. Firstly, there are several elite families that have been studied in depth in the past, such as the Zhai and Cai families of Dunhuang, but the Yin family has not been researched as much and I think that finding out more about the Yin family would be beneficial to the overall understanding of the Tang Dynasty and Dunhuang (Ning 2004). Secondly, a comparison of these two caves to the other caves built during Empress Wu's time, as well as the greater Tang Dynasty would shed light on how different the feminine imagery within these two caves are, and would improve understanding of how religious imagery was used in politics in the Tang Dynasty. Finally, I would be interested in seeing a study that compares these two caves to other religious places around China that were commissioned by Empress Wu to support her reign, as well as other places similar to the Yin family caves that were inspired by Empress Wu, but where the family made their own decision to support her like the Yin family because it would expand our

understanding of how much individuals impacted Empress Wu's rise to the throne and how much was facilitated by Empress Wu herself. These are just a few ideas of ways that the topics that I touched on in this thesis could be further studied, but the Mogao Grottoes and Dunhuang still have many secrets that it has yet to reveal.

3.5 Conclusion

Empress Wu has been viewed as a tyrant throughout history because she took advantage of every possible opportunity to gain power despite the patriarchal society that she lived in and the many obstacles in her way. She used a religious platform that was already popular in her time to prove to her citizens that women could have authority without changing their religious beliefs. She realized that she could offer power to others if they helped bolster her political power as well. The Yin family of Dunhuang understood this tradeoff and in order to improve their political power within the imperial capital, they built two Buddhist cave temples at the Mogao Grottoes that contained imagery of the Empress in the form of the Maitreya Buddha, as well as artistic representations of Buddhist sutras that Empress Wu disseminated among her followers to demonstrate that her authority was supported by popular religion. Embracing Buddhism, with its different concepts of female authority, helped to circumvent some of the patriarchal limitations of Confucian society. The Yin family built these caves because they wanted to demonstrate their support for the empress and the imperial government to people living and traveling through their community, to boost their good dharma, and to gain Empress Wu's favor to bolster their personal political statuses. An improved understanding of the interplay between authority, gender, and religion in Tang China can help us understand the barriers and choices made by women in highly patriarchal societies.

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