

# **Kingship and Religion: the contributions of 'Emperor Bodhisattva' Xiao Yan promoting the Sinicization of Buddhism during the reign of the Liang Dynasty**

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**ABSTRACT.** *For 500 years after Buddhism was introduced in China, it was mostly spread among the aristocracy rather than the common folk and did not have any standard or systematic religious commandments and activities. During his reign, Xiao Yan, Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, promoted the Sinicization of Buddhism and established it as the national religion. He was the emperor with the closest relationship with Buddhism and played a critical role in its Sinicization. His contributions included promoting the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism; perfecting the Buddhist commandments; clarifying the vegetarian system; establishing large-scale dharma assemblies; and building a system of religious activities.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Xiao Yan, Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, Buddhism, Integration, Localization*

## **1. Introduction**

Buddhism originated in ancient India and was introduced to China in 2 B.C. before being officially recognized and worshiped in 67 A.D. [1]. For a long time after Buddhism was introduced into China, however, it was only regarded as a kind of immortal Taoism that was popular in society. It did not spread throughout upper society until the Northern and Southern Dynasties, when a large number of aristocratic bureaucrats and literati began to study and advocate Buddhism and some emperors shifted their focus from traditional Chinese Confucianism and Taoism to Buddhism.

The most representative example is Xiao Yan, Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty (464–549), who is known as the 'Emperor Bodhisattva' in Chinese history. Emperor Wu was a legendary figure, and as the founding monarch, he led troops for many years and made many outstanding achievements. In addition to his political and military talents, he was a scholar of calligraphy, music, art, and literature and

was proficient in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. As he said in his poems, he studied Confucian classics and believed in Confucianism in his youth, then began to study Taoist classics and absorbed Taoist thoughts when he was middle-aged before learning the Buddhist classics in his old age.

In 504 A.D., Emperor Wu issued an imperial edict, solemnly proclaiming that he would no longer believe in Taoism and would convert to Buddhism [2]. Later, he personally led more than 20,000 monks to Chongyun Palace to copy the Buddhist scriptures and show his determination. Fifteen years later, after being initiated into monkhood by a bodhisattva, he became a disciple of the Buddha and was therefore known as the 'Emperor Bodhisattva'. He also called on the royal family, his wives and children, officials at all levels, and even ordinary people to be initiated into Monkhood or Nunhood, and around 48,000 people from all walks of life responded to the emperor's appeal.

After being initiated into Monkhood or Nunhood, a person must follow the relevant rules. Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty was strict with himself and only ate one meal a day of just beans, did not drink alcohol or listen to music, and preferred cloth gowns and straw shoes to luxury clothes. Wearing a hat for three years and using a quilt for two years, he lived up to his reputation as an ascetic monk. After the age of 50, he refused to have sex and required the maids in the imperial palace to purify their hearts, control their desires, and not wear nice clothes. In a way, Emperor Wu regarded Buddhism as the national religion, and he pushed Buddhism to unprecedented heights across China [3].

## **2. Methodology**

Secondary data is used for this paper as it can be relatively easy obtained. For this paper, secondary data has been collected from previous studies and research about 'Emperor Bodhisattva' and 'the Liang Danysty'.

## **3. Results and discussion**

### ***3.1 Promoting the integration of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism to lay a foundation for the sinicisation of Buddhism***

Buddhism developed rapidly during the Southern and Northern Dynasties of China, resulting in political and economic issues between the feudal country and Buddhism and between secular landlords and upper level of Buddhism. There was also serious conflict between the traditional Confucian culture and Buddhist culture and between Taoism and Buddhism. To expand the influence of Buddhism and make it conducive to his rule, Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty proposed the theory of the 'same origin of the three religions'. This not only helped improve Buddhism's status, but also facilitated the integration of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

Emperor Wu believed that all three religions taught people to focus on the good and that there was no difference between Confucius, Lao Zi, and Shakyamuni. He argued that people choose to believe in different religions because of their different natures, and that each person has his or her own unique consciousness, therefore, different people might understand the three religions in different ways and the differences between the three religions should not be emphasised. Emperor Wu integrated Confucian and Taoist ideas into Buddhism, and under his influence, Buddhism absorbed the Confucian ideas relating to human nature and filial piety. Confucian classics and stories were also often cited to refute anti-Buddhist remarks. The absorption of the Taoist idea that 'doing good deeds can prolong life' led to the Buddhist belief that doing good can increase life expectancy, while doing evil can reduce life expectancy.

The viewpoint of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty was directly related to his life experiences and religious beliefs. As he was devoted to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism at various points in his life, his beliefs reflected a combination of all three. More importantly, to govern the country and consolidate its politics, he strongly advocated the integration of the three religions. Influenced by such thoughts, he introduced various policies and measures to promote Buddhism's absorption of Confucian and Taoist ideas. This laid the foundation for the localisation of Buddhism and profoundly impacted the development of Chinese Buddhism.

### ***3.2 Perfecting the Buddhist commandments and clarifying the vegetarian System***

Chinese Buddhism's comprehensive vegetarian system was vigorously promoted by Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty. Although there is no Buddhist code that bans alcohol and meat, there is a saying in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* that "all kinds of meat are forbidden and those who eat meat commit a crime" and the *Lankavatara Sutra* also mentions that "the Bodhisattva is merciful and cannot bear to eat the flesh of all beings". These are not commandments, however [4].

Prior to Emperor Wu, many people advocated vegetarian food for monks and nuns, but it failed to become a trend in the Buddhist world and there was no consensus in society. Emperor Wu systematically demonstrated the necessity, possibility, authority, and sacredness of being vegetarian for monks and nuns and used political methods to promote the vegetarian system nationwide. Due to his unremitting efforts, the ban on alcohol and meat and the comprehensive vegetarian system became established characteristics of Chinese Buddhism.

Tang stated that most of Emperor Wu's opinions on being vegetarian can be found in the latter's article, *On Giving up Alcohol and Meat* [3]. This article demonstrates the importance, necessity, and sacredness of the prohibition of alcohol and meat from three perspectives. First, he believed that the prohibition of meat was consistent with not only Buddhist beliefs but also the inherent Chinese cultural traditions. In ancient China, vegetarianism was a ritual performed by families during funerals to show respect and reflection of the dead. Besides, Confucius always advocated that people should be content in poverty and devoted to all things spiritual

rather than pursue material enjoyment. Therefore, vegetarianism also conforms to the spirit of Confucianism. Similarly, in Taoism, the cultivation of some spells must be based on vegetarianism.

Emperor Wu demonstrated that the prohibition of alcohol and meat conformed to both Buddhist teachings and Chinese religious ideological and cultural traditions. He announced that if monks and nuns refused to give up meat and alcohol, he would punish them accordingly using his political power. Moreover, he set an example by vowing to the monks and nuns before the Buddha that he would also suffer hellish pain if he could not give up meat and alcohol and abandon lust. In this way, giving up meat and alcohol was enforced by Emperor Wu's political power and the idea of receiving bad karma if you did not comply.

Second, Emperor Wu's article aimed to eliminate the contradictory claims in different Buddhist texts regarding the need to ban meat. As there is no explicit prohibition of eating meat in the Buddhist commandments, and such records can only be found in the Mahayana Buddhist text *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, many monks and nuns objected to the idea. Therefore, Emperor Wu held a dharma assembly with many eminent monks to fundamentally prove that alcohol and meat must be banned.

Third, changes in the lifestyle of Chinese monks and nuns made it possible to ban alcohol and meat. In India, monks and nuns are predominantly beggars and eat whatever they are given, therefore, they do not specifically exclude meat. Monks and nuns in China possess their own money, however, and many are capable of buying food freely. This gives them the opportunity to exclude alcohol and meat from their diets.

### ***3.3 Establishing large-scale dharma assemblies and improving religious activities***

Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty initiated Kumbh Mela, where alms are given to monks and laymen; the Shui-Lu rites; and the Obon Festival, all of which became the most important religious activities for Chinese Buddhism. 'Wu Zhe' are Chinese characters meaning no coverage and refer to treating people equally, whether they are noble or lowly, monks or laymen, wise or foolish, good or evil. Kumbh Mela is an assembly that distributes wealth and preaches the Buddhist doctrine. According to the *Book of Liang Dynasty*, in 529 A.D., Emperor Wu went to Tongtai Temple as a Buddhist monk for the second time and set up four Kumbh Mela, which was the origin of Kumbh Mela for Chinese Buddhism. Indeed, there were as many as 18 Kumbh Mela recorded during Emperor Wu's reign [3].

As the largest Buddhist event at the time, the Shui-Lu rites were also initiated by Emperor Wu. According to historical records, he was inspired by a monk in a dream to found the Shui-Lu rites to deliver all living creatures from torment and release souls from purgatory [1]. Since then, through full development as an esoteric religion in the Tang Dynasty and maturity in the Song, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, the Shui-Lu rites continue to be passed down and are still gaining momentum.

The Obon Society is also known as the Obon Festival. 'Obon' is a transliteration

in Sanskrit meaning 'to save the people from suffering'. The Obon Festival in China was also initiated by Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty in 538 A.D. in Tongtai Temple [1]. Its theme is in line with the Chinese Confucian tradition of valued filial piety, and its activities can be roughly divided into two stages. Before the Song Dynasty, the festival was mainly carried out in Buddhist temples to offer a sacramental feast for the Buddha and provide Buddhist monks with meals. After the Song Dynasty, the festival was held mainly by folk, and its theme was offering sacrifices to ancestors and releasing souls from purgatory. Held on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month, the Obon Festival is known as the Zhongyuan Festival in secular society and is referred to as the Ghost Festival among the common folk.

After Emperor Wu converted to Buddhism, he held several large-scale dharma assemblies where Buddhist disciples could exchange and discuss ideas. Amnesties were often implemented during these assemblies to show the Emperor's compassion. He interpreted the scriptures to the monks and nuns personally at these events, which generally involved more than 10,000 people. For example, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> lunar month in 533 A.D., he explained one topic to more than 300,000 people from all walks of life for seven days, and the splendour of the occasion surpassed anything heretofore seen [5].

#### ***3.4 Making Buddhist music and collecting, translating, and annotating Buddhist scriptures***

As an important tool and beneficial method for the promotion of Buddhism, Buddhist music was introduced into China. To meet the country's own communication needs, an important change occurred in the area under the control of the Chinese regime: Buddhist music gradually absorbed and integrated local traditional music for innovation. Such a transformation in the form and style of Buddhist music began in the Han Dynasty, deepened during the Wei and Jin Dynasties and the Southern Dynasty, and carried on throughout the Six Dynasties, laying the foundation for the styles of Chinese Buddhist music found during the Sui and Tang Dynasties and later generations.

According to legend, the earliest Buddhist music was produced by Cao Zhi in the Three Kingdoms. By the time of the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties, and with the prosperity of Buddhism, Buddhist music had developed. With a strong passion for music and great proficiency in rhythm, Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty devoted himself to the development of Buddhist music. He not only reorganised the original Buddhist music, he also created some of his own. Moreover, by introducing Buddhist music to the court, he strengthened its orthodox status and greatly consolidated the legitimacy of Buddhism in national politics. The Buddhist music created by Emperor Wu was fully localised. As music with the regional and cultural characteristics of the Southern Dynasty, it can be regarded as the origin of Chinese Buddhist music localisation.

Another contribution made by Emperor Wu to the localisation of Buddhist music was the basic paradigm for the music used in later Buddhist rituals. Indeed, the

large-scale dharma assemblies that he organised involved the monks' chanting and the performance of Buddhist songs, and these assemblies became grand Buddhist events with singing, music, and detailed rituals. In addition, he pioneered a new form of Buddhist songs sung by children on Kumbh Mela. According to the historical records, these songs involved an instrumental accompaniment and some performance elements [6].

The performances by children were both religious and interesting and not only expanded the participation of the dharma assemblies, but also injected considerable vitality into the solemn and boring ceremonies. The songs greatly enriched the content and form of dharma music and provided a great opportunity and reference model for the enrichment and spread of Buddhist music.

During the early days of the communication of Buddhism, the translation of Buddhist classics was very important as the lack of good Chinese translations meant many Buddhist classics failed to spread and develop. Emperor Wu recognised the importance of these translations and paid foreign monks to translate the classics. He also participated in the translation of the Buddhist scriptures himself, which highlighted his enthusiasm for the project. He asked each temple to copy and collect the translated scriptures and thanks to his efforts, Chinese temples gradually formed a relatively complete Buddhist book collection. This laid a solid foundation for the development of the grand collection of Chinese Buddhist scriptures in later generations.

The translation of a large number of Buddhist classics is of great significance to the localisation of Buddhism and the formation of denominations. During the reign of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, China communicated frequently with South Asian countries, and as there were often tributary activities between China and South Asian countries, Buddhism was introduced into Japan and Korea.

### ***3.5 Constructing Buddhist temples, establishing Buddhist Sangha and monk administrators, and promoting the integration of Buddhism and kingship***

The reign of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty lasted 48 years, and during that time, he not only makes great efforts to rectify the Buddhist Sangha and standardised the Buddhist monk system, but also built massive temples and Buddha statues. According to the *Veritable Records of Jiankang* and the *Records of Liangjing Temple*, many Buddhist temples, such as Changgan Temple, Fawang Temple, Yongjian Temple, Foku Temple, and Yongxiu Temple were successively built during the Liang Dynasty [3].

Tongtai Temple, the so-called 'royal temple', was the most representative temple among the temples built by Emperor Wu, and he went there as a Buddhist monk four times in 527 A.D., 529 A.D., 546 A.D., and 547 A.D. Each time he took off his royal robe, put on his monk robe, refrained from eating meat and having sex, and kept the carriage and utensils he used as simple as possible. He stayed at Tongtai Temple for at least four days and at most 37 days each time [1]. Moreover, he explained Buddhist scriptures to the disciples and organised religious activities on a

large scale. According to the historical records, the second and third time he went there to serve as a monk, it was the ministers who collected money to redeem him from the temple.

Thanks to Emperor Wu's efforts, everyone recited Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist temples were built everywhere. The wealth of the country was used to develop the cause of Buddhism and Emperor Wu continued providing unlimited funds for the temples. He was always ready to do charity for Buddhist temples and generously donated money and objects worth more than ten million yuan. He became greatly concerned about the small number of temples that depended on tourists for their livelihoods, and in addition to calling on people to give alms, he ordered famous scribes to write inscriptions on the temples' plaques to attract tourists. Although these actions significantly facilitated the development of Buddhism in China, they weakened the country's financial resources. Some bureaucrats even used them as an opportunity to defraud the Chinese people.

Emperor Wu united and gathered a group of Buddhist monks to study the Buddhist scriptures, refute social doubts about Buddhism, participate in political life, formulate various Buddhist policies, and carry out various Buddhist causes. In addition, he created the 'system of royal monks', which provided religious services to the royal family [7]. As the 'employer' of these monks, the emperor paid them, treated them well, and provided them with various daily necessities. To strengthen the management of the Buddhist temples and monks, Emperor Wu also appointed monk administrators. These so-called 'administrators of monks' were officials appointed by the state to manage all kinds of Buddhist affairs and first appeared in the Jin Dynasty.

#### 4. Conclusion

Under the leadership of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, Buddhism prevailed throughout Southern China and achieved unprecedented prosperity. According to the *Continuation of The Biographies of Eminent Monks*, written by Daoxuan during the Tang Dynasty, 48,000 people became monks due to the influence of Emperor Wu [8]. Based on the *History of the Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties*, Wang Zhongluo, a famous Chinese historian, conducted detailed research into the number of monks, nuns, and Buddhist temples in China during the Wei, Jin, Northern, and Southern Dynasties. This information is presented in Table 1 and highlights the prosperity of Buddhism during the Liang Dynasty[1].

Table 1 shows that the number of monks and nuns peaked during the Liang Dynasty at 82,700. The second highest amount was 36,000 during the Song Dynasty, which was still only 44% of that during the Liang Dynasty. There were nearly 3,000 temples during the Liang Dynasty, almost 700 of which were located in Jiankang, the capital of the Liang Dynasty. The Qi Dynasty had the second highest with 2,015 temples, which was 71% of those found during the Liang Dynasty.

Table 1. The popularity of Buddhism in different dynasties

Dynasty	Buddhist temples nationwide	Buddhist temples in the capital	Buddhist monks and nuns	People translating Buddhist scriptures	Translated Buddhist scriptures
Western Jin	Missing data	180	3,700	13	73
Easter Jin	1,768	Missing data	24,000	27	263
Song	1,913	Missing data	36,000	23	210
Qi	2,015	Missing data	32,500	16	72
Liang	2,846	700	82,700	42	238
Chen	1,232	300	32,000	3	11

Furthermore, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, although there were wars of different scales between South China and North China, the profound and extensive cultural exchanges between the two regions never stopped. With their prosperous culture, the Southern Dynasties were more developed than the Northern Dynasties, which meant the Northern Dynasties were learning from and imitating the Southern Dynasties in terms of culture. Therefore, Buddhism became popular in North China due to the frequent exchanges between the north and the south.

According to the historical records, the 15 emperors of the Northern and Western Wei Dynasties all advocated for the Buddhist doctrine and vigorously promoted the translation of scriptures, the construction of temples, and the carving of statues. At that time, Luoyang was filled with as many as 3,000 monks from the western regions, and the majority of the literati advocated for the Buddhist doctrine as well. Also, during the middle and late period of the Northern Dynasties, 17 empresses left the palace to serve as nuns [9].

It is clear that after being localised by Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, Buddhism adapted to the Chinese culture and evolved from Indian Buddhism to Chinese Buddhism. Emperor Wu also became a key figure who played an indispensable role in the Sinicization of Buddhism.

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