

A Brief Discussion on Women and Buddhist Education in the Northern Dynasties

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Abstract: The Northern Dynasties was an era marked by significant social turmoil in Chinese history, with frequent shifts in power and ongoing warfare. This instability fostered a sense of disillusionment with the present world and a desire for a blissful afterlife. Such conditions created an ideal environment for the spread of Buddhism. As a vulnerable group in society, women, on the one hand, endure oppression under the traditional cultural background; on the other hand, it is difficult for them to build their own careers like men, and they hope to achieve personal liberation in some ways in times of unrest. During this time, women had a significant relationship with Buddhist education. The extensive propagation of Buddhism in the Northern Dynasties offered women new educational opportunities, which deeply influenced their lifestyles, family roles, and level of social involvement. In addition, during the Northern Dynasties, Buddhist education also had a profound impact on society through the enlightenment of women.

Keywords: Women in the Northern Dynasties, Buddhist Education, Buddhism in the Northern Dynasties

1. Introduction

During the Northern Dynasties, the social context was marked by the establishment of a regime by the Xianbei people in the Central Plains, leading to significant ethnic integration and facilitating the formation and development of a multi-ethnic nation. This era also witnessed profound transformations in culture, with the introduction and flourishing of Buddhism playing a pivotal role in shaping the evolution of social culture. The rise of Buddhism during this period was largely due to the patronage of the rulers. For example, Emperor Wenxuan of the Northern Qi invited the eminent monk Fachang to deliver lectures on the "Nirvana Sutra" at the imperial court and honored him with the title of national teacher. Additionally, the establishment of the Zhaoxuan Temple, which was overseen by a Great Commissioner, ten supervisors, and three chief monks, was instituted to manage Buddhist affairs, with Fajiang appointed as the Great Commissioner[1]. As Buddhism gained increasing prominence in society, Gao Shengji, in his work "Buddhism and the Society of the Sixteen Kingdoms", discussed the growing number of Buddhist monks and nuns, the expansion of temple complexes, and the involvement of monks in political affairs. As the number of believers increased, the need to regulate the behavior of Buddhists became a pressing issue. It was in this context that Buddhist education began to emerge.

The field of Buddhist education has seen considerable research in the past. For example, Zhu Bingjie's study, "A Study of Buddhist Education for Scholar-Officials in the Southern Dynasties", delves into the intellectual content and practical approaches to Buddhist education within the scholar-official class during that time. Yu Jinfang's work, "The Main Educators of Common People in the Northern and Southern Dynasties: Buddhist Monks", examines how Buddhist monks filled the educational void for the lower classes during an era when formal education was scarce, thereby shaping the cultural literacy of ordinary people. Meanwhile, Luo Wen's research, "A Study of Buddhist Monk and Nun Education in the Wei-Jin and Northern and Southern Dynasties", explores the subjects, content, methods, and distinct characteristics of monastic education, highlighting its essential role in spreading Buddhist culture. Although these studies cover various social classes, they predominantly focus on the male perspective, often neglecting the role of women in Buddhist education. This oversight suggests a promising avenue for future research to explore the contributions and experiences of women within Buddhist education during these periods.

From the viewpoint of women during that period, while they were constrained by their gender and unable to access systematic education in the same way as men, a broader understanding of education encompasses all purposeful activities aimed at shaping others' knowledge, moral values, and fostering personal growth. Consequently, women of that time could still receive Buddhist education through various channels, such as society and family. This article examines three categories of women: royal women, aristocratic women, and commoner women. By analyzing their attitudes towards Buddhism and their records of Buddhist practices, we can better understand the nature of Buddhist education experienced by women across different social classes during the Northern Dynasties.

2. Different Classes of Women and Buddhist Education

2.1. Royal Women and Buddhist Education

Building upon the legacy of the Five Hu and Sixteen States period, the Northern Dynasties' rulers further propelled the promotion of Buddhism, evidenced through the construction of Buddhist statues, temples, and meditation halls, along with contributions to monastic life. The emperors' deep commitment to Buddhism significantly influenced their empresses and concubines, who followed in their footsteps, notably by choosing to become nuns. The "Book of Wei", "Book of Northern Qi", and "Book of Zhou" all include sections on "Empresses" that document instances where empresses and concubines "took Buddhist vows and entered the nunnery". Over time, from Emperor Xiaowen of Northern Wei to Emperor Xuan of Northern Zhou, there was a continuous trend of empresses and concubines taking Buddhist vows and becoming nuns, highlighting the widespread practice during this era. In terms of their conduct post-nunhood, while some under the Northern Wei and Northern Qi dynasties returned to the palace or remarried, during the Northern Zhou Dynasty, upon the emperor's demise, empresses and concubines chose to embrace monastic life fully, adopting religious names, residing in Buddhist temples, and being interred according to Buddhist rituals, indicating a gradual tightening of adherence to Buddhist precepts.

The considerable number of individuals in the imperial harem who adopted Buddhism warrants our attention, and the reasons behind this phenomenon are as follows.

Firstly, concerning their backgrounds, many empresses and concubines originated from families that held Buddhism in high esteem, where activities such as constructing Buddhist statues and founding monasteries for monks were commonplace. For instance, both the Empress Dowager and the Empress Consort exiled by Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty belonged to the Feng family. Their father, Feng Xi, personally funded the construction of a total of 72 Buddhist temples and monasteries across various prefectures and towns. According to the "Book of Wei", he "copied all 16 Buddhist scriptures, invited renowned and virtuous Buddhist monks, and diligently engaged in

daily discussions with them, all at considerable expense.[2]" The Buddhist influence on their family education also molded these women, enabling them to encounter and study Buddhism, thereby laying the groundwork for them to uphold Buddhist teachings. From this perspective, the decision of empresses and concubines to become nuns was spontaneous and influenced by Buddhist ideologies.

Additionally, during that period, the introduction of Buddhism to women was not primarily aimed at their liberation. Instead, it stemmed from the fact that both Buddhist philosophy and traditional Confucianism outlined ideals for female behavior, and the integration of these two systems allowed for a more effective education of women, guiding them to become individuals who aligned with societal expectations. The statement in "Collection of Buddhist Scriptures Out of the Three Pitakas", which asserts, "Women's hearts are weak and inclined to excess; Buddha, perceiving their delicacy, sets stricter rules for them to guard against such excess, hence the Buddhist rules for women are twice as many as those for men",[3] underscores the objective societal restrictions on women at that time. Consequently, from this viewpoint, the trend of women in the Northern Dynasties embracing the life of a nun can be seen as a consequence of the combined pressure from societal expectations of female chastity and Buddhist rules.

The decision of empresses and concubines in the Northern Dynasties to embrace the monastic life as nuns exerted a specific influence on society during that era. Historically, for instance, Confucianism has consistently highlighted the gender divide, and society has attached significant importance to women's virginity and chastity. According to "The Book of Rites", rituals serve to curb immoral behavior, delineate gender roles, prevent misunderstandings among individuals, and provide discipline for the populace. Hence, it is deemed inappropriate for men and women to interact without a matchmaker's mediation or exchange gifts, as this may obscure the gender boundary.[4] Out of the 348 precepts for nuns, approximately one-seventh, specifically 50 precepts, pertain to sexual misconduct and are considered grave offenses.[5] These stringent behavioral constraints are imposed upon women who take the vow of nunhood. By adopting the identity of a nun and adhering to these monastic precepts, empresses and concubines are able to adhere to the Confucian virtue of chastity, thereby rendering Buddhism as one of the tools for regulating women's behavior.

2.2. Aristocratic Women and Buddhist Education

During the Northern Dynasties, the elite families exhibited a profound aspiration and capability for political involvement. They shifted their focus from mere abstract discussions to extensive participation in tangible governmental affairs, showcasing remarkable military and political prowess that cemented their indispensable status within the political sphere. The Bohai elite families of the Northern Wei Dynasty not only influenced central decision-making and contributed to governance but also made significant achievements in local administration [6]. Given the objective of "enhancing family prestige", the education of women within these elite families, as integral members, garnered considerable attention.

In the realm of education, Buddhism was broadly embraced and studied during that era, largely due to the efforts of rulers in spreading its teachings and the cultural exchanges with other societies. The principles of the "Five Precepts and Ten Virtues", which embody ethical spirit and traditional moral codes, had a significant impact on the aristocratic women of the time. The epitaph of Yang Wu'chou, who died at the age of 21, highlights her virtues: "She possessed the four virtues and her wisdom reached the three illuminations. She understood the profound teachings of Prajna and adhered to the secret teachings of the Ban family [7]". Yang Wuchou hailed from the prestigious Yang family of Longxi, a prominent clan during the late Northern Wei dynasty, underscoring the crucial role of family education in the Buddhist upbringing of aristocratic women. Wang Zhong'er, from the Wang family of Taiyuan, became a nun and developed close ties with the Northern Wei royal family. She played a vital role in the upbringing of two generations of emperors. Her epitaph describes her as

follows: "The nun's pure conduct was harmonious with all, and she maintained this pure heart throughout her life. She practiced patience and diligence, her virtues aligned with the flow of the Dharma, and her benevolence, harmony, respect, and kindness were exemplary among the noble ladies. She cared for the young emperor in his early years and protected the holy person on the day of his birth. Despite the hardships and toil, she never wavered in her dedication. Even in her old age and declining strength, she did not dare to neglect her duties. This is truly where the upright path lies, and it is the result of her compassionate sincerity [8]". This epitaph exemplifies the significant embodiment of the good deeds of a nun from an aristocratic background.

For specific Buddhist practices, in addition to becoming nuns, aristocratic women also participated in various practices related to Buddhism that were intertwined with their secular lives, such as seeking blessings. The "Inscription on the Statue of Bhikkhuni Falian" notes: "Bhikkhuni Falian, out of gratitude for the blessings from her past lives and the favor of heaven, sincerely undertook this act. She commissioned a statue of Shakyamuni for her daughter, Lady Erzhan, who was married to Yexian Nanduo, wishing her good health, everlasting peace, a long life, and spiritual support in the afterlife [9]". This act highlights her desire for a safe and healthy childbirth for her daughter. Furthermore, many widowed women from the aristocracy also embraced Buddhist teachings. Buddhism advocates for the control of material desires and the cultivation of pure thoughts. Fu Hua, the mother of Zhao Yanshen, a prominent official of the Northern Qi dynasty, exemplified this by living a life characterized by "humility in high status, mindfulness of restraint in prosperity, wearing plain clothes, eating simple food, avoiding luxury items, and refraining from music [10]". She maintained this lifestyle for over sixty years as a widow, illustrating the impact of Buddhist practices on those who were not nuns.

Buddhism's growth during the Northern Dynasties brought several positive effects for aristocratic women. For one, the cultural appreciation for educated and talented women gave these women the chance to engage in extensive reading, expanding their knowledge and perspectives. In ancient times, women were frequently restricted to their homes and often struggled to find ways to deal with life's challenges, leading to significant distress. However, Buddhism, with its teachings and guidelines for practitioners, offered women a pathway to alleviate their internal struggles and attain spiritual freedom through religious practices.

2.3. Commoner Women and Buddhist Education

During the Northern Dynasties, it was common for monks to come from ordinary families, a trend that is well-documented in historical texts. The "Book of Wei" records: "In the first year of the Taihe era, during the eighth month, Emperor Gaozu held a grand ceremony at Yongning Temple, ordaining more than a hundred men and women from respectable families as monks and nuns. The Emperor personally shaved their heads, provided them with monk's robes, and instructed them to adhere to the monastic precepts, thereby seeking blessings for his ancestors [2]". This event highlights the active promotion of Buddhism by the ruling class and the widespread desire among the common people to embrace it. As a result, the number of nuns during this era saw a notable increase.

Women from different social classes were drawn to Buddhism for various reasons. Unlike the women from the higher classes discussed earlier, commoner women did not have the benefit of family education or the obligation to uphold family honor. Their decision to follow Buddhism was deeply connected to the significance of Buddhism's arrival and its impact on the common people.

One key reason was that Buddhism promoted the idea of equality among all living beings, offering a common foundation for the formation and sustenance of diverse communities [11]. The teachings of Buddhism assert that all beings, regardless of their social standing, are eligible to receive the Bodhisattva precepts and deserve compassion and care. The "Brahmajala Sutra" explicitly states: "The Buddha said: 'Disciples, when giving precepts to others, do not make distinctions between kings,

princes, ministers, officials, monks, nuns, laymen, laywomen, men or women of ill repute, the eighteen heavens, the six heavens of desire, those without roots, those with two roots, eunuchs, slaves, and all ghosts and spirits. All are permitted to receive the precepts [12]." Furthermore, during the Northern Dynasties, monks actively engaged in social responsibilities such as disaster relief, poverty alleviation, and providing medical care and medicine [13]. This active involvement made Buddhism particularly appealing to the common people, especially women who often found themselves in vulnerable positions. For ordinary individuals, and particularly for women who were frequently marginalized, a religion that did not discriminate based on gender held a significant and powerful attraction.

Secondly, from the standpoint of societal expectations for women during the Northern Dynasties, although the rulers were primarily non-Han ethnic groups, the process of sinicization within the ruling class led to a growing emphasis on the importance of female chastity. For example, the Northern Qi government actively encouraged widowhood by providing financial support to women who remained unmarried after their husbands' deaths. As noted: "Noble families upheld traditional virtues, and their exemplary conduct was widely praised. During the Taihe era of the Wei dynasty, the government established a nunnery in Yanzhou specifically for widows without children, encouraging them to become nuns and uphold their chastity through adherence to monastic precepts [14]". These policies not only provided widowed women with a space to practice Buddhism but also reinforced the moral expectation of "chastity" for women.

Lastly, another factor to consider is the government's preferential treatment of monks. During the Northern Dynasties, ordinary citizens faced an exceptionally heavy tax burden, leading to widespread hardship. In stark contrast, monks were exempt from these taxes. He Ziquan, in his article "Buddhist Monasteries in Medieval China", points out: "The sole reason for this is that monks and nuns enjoyed the privilege of being exempt from state labor and taxes. As a result, people sought refuge in monasteries as a means to escape the oppressive taxes and labor demands imposed by the state [15]". Consequently, many commoners, including women, opted to become monks or nuns to avoid the heavy taxes and grueling labor.

What effects did Buddhism have on commoner women who embraced the faith or became nuns? From the viewpoint of their daily lives, these women not only faced the constraints of traditional feudal society but also the significant risks associated with childbirth. The challenges of pregnancy, labor, and breastfeeding required immense effort and sacrifice. Given the limited medical knowledge of the time, it was natural for women to feel fear and anxiety about these life-changing events. This led to the emergence of a form of Buddhist belief focused on women's fertility. Certain scriptures suggested that reciting the names of Buddhist deities and chanting mantras during difficult childbirth could help avoid danger and ensure that the child would be protected by divine forces, leading to a healthy and long life [5]. In this way, Buddhism offered spiritual comfort to women and had a positive impact on reducing their mental stress. Additionally, Buddhism promotes the idea of equality for all beings. The "Zabaozang Jing" states: "All people in the world who wish to avoid suffering should diligently cultivate virtue. Why should one indulge in idleness and neglect [16]?" This teaching inspired women to engage in prayer and Buddhist practices, allowing them to accumulate virtue for a better future life. By showing concern for the common people in their everyday lives, Buddhism encouraged a more positive outlook on life, which had a beneficial effect in the context of that era.

3. Conclusion

The Northern Dynasties, a time of upheaval in Chinese history, were crucial in shaping the development of Chinese culture and thought. As a foreign religion, Buddhism underwent a prolonged period of interaction and integration with local traditions. It gradually adapted to the indigenous cultural practices, social values, and the psychological needs of the population. This adaptation was

evident in various aspects, ranging from the reinterpretation of its doctrines and the evolution of religious ceremonies to the design of monastery architecture and the creation of Buddhist statues. Through this process of localization, Buddhism was able to thrive and expand, drawing in a diverse and widespread following. Women, whether as nuns or lay adherents, played a vital role in the Buddhist community.

Buddhist education, by engaging in the study of its teachings and the practice of its principles, leads individuals to comprehend the true nature of the self and the world. It helps them transcend worries and suffering, and ultimately, it elevates their spiritual state to attain the ultimate state of goodness and wisdom. The characteristics of Buddhist education for women during the Northern Dynasties can be observed in the following ways:

The implementation of Buddhist education is closely related to the social class in which it is situated. The way women engaged with Buddhist education was closely tied to their social class. Aristocratic women typically encountered Buddhism through family-based education and had the means to delve deeply into its teachings. In contrast, women from the commoner class often turned to Buddhism as a form of religious comfort to cope with the difficulties of their daily lives.

The Buddhist education that women received during the Northern Dynasties was not at odds with their traditional family roles. The ideal image of a woman promoted by Buddhism during this era was shaped by the prevailing social expectations, which were influenced by the aristocracy's desire to uphold family honor and by the qualities and skills that society deemed appropriate for women. Consequently, the Buddhist education they received was designed to complement their roles within the family.

The Buddhist education for women across various social classes aligned with the Confucian ideals that governed women's conduct. As society increasingly emphasized the concept of female chastity, Buddhism, during its process of adapting to local culture, incorporated these values. This emphasis on chastity influenced the trend of widowed women in the Northern Dynasties choosing to become nuns.

During the Northern Dynasties, the Buddhist education system, which focused on women as its primary audience, had a profound effect on various groups. From the viewpoint of women, Buddhism provided a spiritual refuge and comfort during times of social upheaval. It gave women greater opportunities to gain knowledge and engage in religious practice, making it a crucial aspect of women's education in ancient China. From a broader social perspective, Buddhism emphasized the concept of charity and compassion. The six perfections of Mahayana Buddhism—generosity, morality, patience, meditation, diligence, and wisdom—prioritized generosity, highlighting the religion's compassionate ethos. This had a significant impact on guiding the actions of those who practiced Buddhism and fostered the growth of charitable activities, including the involvement of women. Ultimately, this contributed to greater social stability.

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