

Buddhism and Taoism in the Tang Dynasty of Ancient China: From Gender Perspective

Jiayin Li^{1,a,*}

¹*Department of Social and Legal Sciences, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, Madrid, Spain*

a. jy_li.cn@hotmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Gender studies has become a popular field in sociological research. With the deepening of research, women's empowerment is still a considerable challenge facing various industries. As a prosperous dynasty in ancient Chinese history, the Tang Dynasty, because of its inclusive social environment, women had more independent rights compared with other dynasties. This study uses the method of textual research to analyze the historical materials and archaeological evidence of the Tang Dynasty. It was found that women in the Tang Dynasty expected to participate in social affairs, and religious beliefs, especially Buddhism and Taoism, played a role in promoting participation in social affairs. In addition, it is also found that Taoism has made outstanding contributions to the gender equality of women in the Tang Dynasty.

Keywords: Buddhism and Taoism, gender, social participation, equality

1. Introduction

Early literature has shown that religious women tend to experience more discrimination due to prejudice against women [1]. There is a significant negative correlation between women's education and some ethnic religions [2]. Not only that, but religious customs also cause harm to women's physiology to a large extent and even violate women's human rights [3]. Although we strongly call for gender equality in contemporary times, discrimination caused by gender is common, and women are sometimes still in a subordinate position [4]. Women's promotion channels are often more complex than men's under the same conditions, and even gender has become a stumbling block preventing women from obtaining senior positions [5]. Women's equality today is still worrying, not to mention the oppression women suffered during the feudal dynasty.

Regarding the relative progress of the sex mentioned in the previous paragraph, it is necessary to understand the situation of women in other dynasties of ancient China. In this case, it is more about the place of women in a patriarchal society and homeland, where female dominance ceases to exist, and the initial equality of the sexes gradually shifts towards male subordination. This gender-induced difference in status is rooted in the dominant ideology of traditional culture [6]. The conventional Confucian thought of loyalty, filial piety, and strict class division greatly impacted society through the political system [7]. After Confucianism established itself as mainstream thought, successive Confucian thinkers dismissed the status of women along with other interpretations of morality and society. For example, Confucianism has "three cardinal principles

and five constant principles,” “three obedience and four virtues,” and even “a woman who has no talent is a virtue,” which has become the dominant theory lacking autonomy and ideological control [8]. To explain these theories more specifically [9], the “three rules” refer to the ethical logic between parents and children, monarch and ministers, and husband and wife, and the “five rules” are the five social norms one must obey. The three obedience refer to obedience to the father when he is single, adherence to the husband when he is married, and obedience to the son when the husband dies. The Four Virtues refer to the moral qualities of women, social speech, manners, and the manual skills required of women (such as sewing, embroidery, and knitting). It is not difficult to see that the status of women is extremely low, even inferior to others, and the principle is to demand unquestioning obedience [9], which is a distorted ethical principle. The excellence of female morality is reflected in the lack of social skills, which is the suppression of female talent, courage, and wisdom [10]. This vision goes against the modern society that promotes female education and tries to provide more education to women [11].

Compared with other dynasties in ancient China, the equality of women in the Tang Dynasty (AD 618-907) has been dramatically improved. But it is worth noting that this rise in quality also occurs within the framework of a patriarchal society, so it can be said that this “rise” is only relative. Therefore, this study attempts to understand the social equality of women in the Tang Dynasty from religious levels, especially from Buddhism and Taoism. It should be noted that the equality of women is only discussed here in the context of the gender binary.

2. Literature Review and Research Theory

2.1. Buddhism and Taoism in Tang Dynasty

The Tang dynasty was a period of rapid development of Buddhism in China [12], and across the belief system, Taoism had the largest following and influence, so the Tang dynasty rulers not only lent attention to the management of these two religions by Buddhism, also effectively regulates the practice of religious beliefs [13]. Even In the Daming Palace, the imperial palace of the Tang Dynasty, many Taoist and Buddhist temples were built for royal use.

Buddhism originated in ancient India around the sixth century BC, whose founder was Siddhārtha Gautama. The fundamental purpose of Buddhism is to get rid of “samsara,” obtain the absolute truth, understand the nature of things, get rid of suffering, and bring liberation (Nirvana) [14]. Taoism originated in ancient China in the second century AD, and it is generally believed that Lao Tzu provided the fundamental ideas of Taoism. At the same time, Daolin Zhang was the actual founder of Taoism. The fundamental goal of Taoism is to cultivate the “Tao,” which guides believers to “cultivate the body and cultivate one’s character,” seek to be one with the Tao, and be in harmony with nature and society [15].

The Tang dynasty was the heyday of Buddhism [16]. The development of Buddhism caused the rulers to regulate and restrict it [17]. In a unified, centralized state, Buddhist affairs are tied to the government [18]. The Buddhist solid culture thus engulfed the entire Tang Dynasty, a typical manifestation of the social and cultural mindset at that time. At the same time, the secularization of Buddhism also significantly impacted the festival customs of the Tang Dynasty [19]. The reason why women convert to Buddhism should be analyzed from the teaching of Buddhism, “Regardless of the distinction between high and low, all living beings are equal and become a Buddha.” This teaching draws deeply into the spiritual foundation of women’s demand for equality. This analysis was confirmed by other scholars [20], who also mentioned that, in addition to practicing women, the subjects of female Buddhist beliefs in the Tang dynasty also included royal women, noble women, and ordinary women. In other words, the women of the royal family and nobles believe in

Buddhism, which undoubtedly leads to a trend of belief. Buddhist ideas provided a rich social life for Tang Dynasty women and spiritual nourishment for women's liberation [20].

Like Buddhism, Taoism reached its height during the Tang dynasty [21]. However, Taoism seems much more active than Buddhism in addressing the inevitable issues of life and death [22]. Like many Tang emperors who sought immortality, Taoism was also inextricably linked to the royal family [23]. Even the reverence of Taoism in the Tang dynasty established its status as a state religion, a historical fact recognized by Taoist academic circles [24].

2.2. Gender Theory Model

Many research questions about women in ancient China are usually expressed using the term "female status," but the concept of female status itself has been questioned [25]. Because the concept is still measured against patriarchy, gender equality / inequality should be used [26]. In order not to blur this concept, this article will use the idea of gender equality/inequality for description.

The gender and social interaction model was used in this research [27]. This model assumes relative equality of ability across the binary gender, which can vary widely due to social background, situational context, individual choice, and other factors. This model has three elements: the perceiver, the target individual, and the background situation. In this study, the perceiver was marked as a woman who believed in Buddhism and Taoism during the Tang Dynasty, and the target individual was observed as participate in social life. Notably, the model allows for the interchangeability of these two roles, setting the context as social interactions in the Tang Dynasty, with particular attention to messages related to gender equality.

Religion is essential for women to participate in social affairs [28], and women may also take greater responsibility in religious affairs [29]. The first research question based on this model is whether the perceiver has expectations about the behavior of the target individual? The second research question is, did Buddhism and Taoism in the Tang Dynasty contribute to this expectation?

3. Methodology

This study used the historical research method. Studying history from the perspective of gender is a new perspective for constructing a comprehensive examination of history and construction [30]. By examining gender history in a specific period from a new perspective, the course further extends the horizon of historical research. Under the guidance of this research method, it is necessary to select valuable texts and evidence. Famous books describing the history of the Tang Dynasty were used for research: the Old Tang Book and the New Tang Book [31] [32]. Since Taiping Guangji recorded a large amount of information about religion in ancient China [33], especially about women religious believers, it was also used for research. In addition, this study incorporates archaeological evidence [34], including the unearthed epitaph texts of Tang Dynasty women containing descriptions of their lives. The focus is verifying their rights to participate in social affairs and gender equality through their religious beliefs.

4. Results

4.1. Faith Ratio of Women

There are different descriptions in ancient books and archaeological evidence. The study found that among the records about the beliefs of royal women, there are only accurate records about princesses. According to the author's statistics, there were 220 canonized princesses in the Tang dynasty [31, 32], and the belief number of Buddhist and Taoist princesses was equal, with 19 each.

Reflecting the same level of importance believed in Buddhism and Taoism in the Tang Dynasty. From the archaeological evidence, of which 198 involve women and Buddhist beliefs, and only 33 epitaphs involving Taoism and women. This is consistent with the findings of some authors [35, 36].

4.2. Female's Social Participation and Gender Equality

4.2.1. Buddhist Perspective

Followers of Taoism differ slightly from Buddhists in that they also have other social and family responsibilities due to differences in religious teachings. The dominance of Buddhism in the Tang dynasty gave royal women the same rights as men to spiritual liberation, emotional experience, and participation in religious society. One of the Buddhist women worth mentioning is Wu Zetian, who caused a sensation in politics. She was the only female emperor in China's ancient history. Her family nurtured the Wu's Buddhist beliefs. Her mother was a member of the old royal family and was a religiously educated monk in her early years [37]. Contrary to the precedent set by successive Tang emperors, in 691, Wu Zetian made Buddhism the state religion and gave it essential status [38]. Not only that, but he patronized Buddhist monks, such as the famous Xuanzang (600-664). The famous Tang Dynasty imperial temple Famen Temple and Luoyang Longmen Grottoes were built under Wu's auspices and cost great expense [39] [40]. Among them, the Famen Temple is a national AAAAA-level scenic spot, and the Luoyang Grottoes is a world heritage site, demonstrating Wu's dedication and enthusiasm for Buddhist beliefs at that time. Also, it provided opportunities and places for female believers who had difficulties. To perform social roles to express their values. Thus, gaining a new identity from religious activities.

4.2.2. Taoist Perspective

Taoism embodies gender equality more clearly. Women and men had the same opportunities to practice their faith, followed the exact requirements and procedures, and had the same system of examinations. Many women entered Taoism, leading to the establishment of many female Taoist temples. According to the official statistics of the Tang Dynasty, from AD 713 to AD 741, 550 of the 1,678 Taoist temples in the country were female Taoist temples, accounting for the formation of female Taoist temples about 32.78% [41]. Jia studied 53 Taoist practitioners, and the study results showed that about 25% (n=13) were working as Taoist teachers and performing their duties well [42]. Fourteen Taoist women (26%) reached the two highest levels of the Taoist system, understood as high clergy. This suggests that these senior women clergy had a relatively high religious education and knowledge level. The Tian Yuansu experience is an example of women serving as Taoist preachers. Tian Yuansu is the daughter of the famous Taoist Tian Guidao, who practiced Taoism with her father (The Zhengyi sect of Taoism does not restrict the marriage of practitioners). According to Tian's epitaph, she was named the foremost Taoist of the Tang dynasty in AD 814.

In this way, Buddhism and Taoism, provided spiritual support and other survival opportunities for the women of the Tang dynasty. Through their beliefs, they could selectively assume family responsibilities and, at the same time, embark on another path. Fight for your place in a patriarchal society. Therefore, it can be said that religious belief also became one of the ways women enhanced their equality in the Tang dynasty. In this belief, the gender binary itself was blurred, giving women the opportunity to achieve parity with men.

5. Conclusion

This research responds to the research question of whether the perceiver has expectations for the behavior of the target individual. That is to say, women have expectations for participation in social activities, and the Buddhist and Taoist beliefs in the Tang Dynasty promoted this expectation. In addition, it is also found that Taoist female practitioners have a certain degree of gender equality when they realize their careers and career development.

Despite the continued evolution and development of Confucian gender equality themes, such inequality and even oppression of women existed very clearly in ancient China, except for a few dynasties [43]. This dominant idea led to the fate of women imprisoned in the family and was often accompanied by the destruction of their lives by feudal ideology. For example, when a woman's husband dies, the woman may be forced to sacrifice her life for the honor of the family to gain family approval and demonstrate what is known as "chastity." Fortunately, in ancient China, not everyone agreed with this idea. From the perspective of the Tang dynasty, it is not denied that Confucianism was dominant. Still, it must be admitted that it was influenced by other religions, such as Taoism and Buddhism [44]. Since it was the most prosperous period in ancient history, the Tang Dynasty had a clear position and was inclusive of multiple ideologies. The extensive connections with the surrounding countries and regions have formed an excellent cultural combination, and the convergence of various ideas in the ideological field has relaxed the Tang Dynasty's social status more in terms of ideology and culture [45]. Tang dynasty women were encouraged by society and, in addition to traditional family matters, could participate in various organizations. Although the number is less than that of men, women, from emperors to officials to practitioners, can play different societal roles and succeed in various fields [43].

References

- [1] McFarland, S. G. (1989). *Religious orientations and the targets of discrimination*. *Journal for the scientific study of religion*, 324-336.
- [2] Norton, S. W., & Tomal, A. (2009). *Religion and female educational attainment*. *Journal of Money, Credit and Banking*, 41(5), 961-986.
- [3] Platt, J. A. (2001). *Female circumcision: Religious practice v. human rights violation*. *Rutgers JL & Religion*, 3, 227.
- [4] Khetjoi, S. (2020). *Buddhism: The Religion For The Equality of Gender*. *Journal of International Buddhist Studies*, 11(1).
- [5] Segovia-Pérez, M., Figueroa-Domecq, C., Fuentes-Moraleda, L., & Muñoz-Mazón, A. (2019). *Incorporating a gender approach in the hospitality industry: Female executives' perceptions*. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 76, 184-193.
- [6] Li, J. A. (2013). *Gender differences and role positioning in Confucianism*. *Yunnan Social Sciences*, (1), 61-65.
- [7] Zhu, R. Y. (1987). *The structure and characteristics of Chinese traditional political culture*. *Political Science Research*, (6), 43-48.
- [8] Ma, W. (2012). *A brief analysis of the changes in women's social status in ancient China*. *Journal of Lanzhou Institute of Education*, 28(4), 23-24.
- [9] Yang, W. Z. (2001). *On the ethical connotation and historical limitations of "Three Obediences and Four Virtues"*. *Chinese Culture*, 2.
- [10] Liu, L. J. (2009). *Research on "A woman without talent is virtue"*. *Women's Studies*, (5), 55-60.
- [11] Figueroa-Domecq, C., Kimbu, A., de Jong, A., & Williams, A. M. (2022). *Sustainability through the tourism entrepreneurship journey: A gender perspective*. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 30(7), 1562-1585.
- [12] Jiang, W. (2016). *History of Chinese Buddhism*. BEIJING BOOK CO. INC.
- [13] Zhou, Q. (2005). *The management of religious affairs in the Tang Dynasty and its modern enlightenment*. *Chinese Religion*, (3), 54-55.
- [14] Yao, W. Q. (2006). *Introduction to Buddhism: History and Doctrine*. China Renmin University Press, Beijing.
- [15] Administración Estatal de Asuntos Religiosos. (2013). *The history of Taoism in China and its main sects*. http://www.gov.cn/test/2005-06/23/content_8822.htm
- [16] Zhu, Z. H. (1994). *A brief discussion of Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty*. *Issues in History Teaching*, 5.

- [17] Guo, P. (1980). *Sui and Tang Buddhism*, Qilu Publishing House: Jinan.
- [18] Ming, J. (2003). Discussion on the Buddhist system of saving monks in the Tang Dynasty. *Buddhist Studies*, 179-192.
- [19] Ji, X. L. (2013). *Ji Xianlin talks about Buddhism*, Wuhan Publishing House.
- [20] Wu, M. X. (2002). Looking at the Buddhist beliefs and characteristics of women in the Tang Dynasty from Tang epitaphs. *Buddhist Studies*, 256-267.
- [21] Wang, Y. P. (2002). On the development scale of Taoism in the Tang Dynasty. *Journal of Capital Normal University: Social Sciences Edition*, (6), 5-10.
- [22] Sun, C. W. (2019). *Taoism and Tang Dynasty Literature (Essence)--Collected Works of Sun Changwu (Vol. 11)*. BEIJING BOOK CO. INC.
- [23] Lei, W. (2001). Taoism and national etiquette in the Tang Dynasty—centered on Gaozong's Zen activities. *Chinese Literature and History*, (4), 62-79.
- [24] Zhang, Z. H. (1996). Analysis of the scale of Taoism in the Tang Dynasty. *Chinese Culture Forum*, (2), 104-108.
- [25] Song, J., & Zhang, X. Q. (2019). Women's status: concepts, measurements and theories - observations in the whole field and the family field. *Women's Studies Series*, (4), 107.
- [26] Mason, K. O. (1986, March). The status of women: Conceptual and methodological issues in demographic studies. In *Sociological forum* (Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 284-300). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- [27] Deaux, K., & Major, B. (1987). Putting gender into context: An interactive model of gender-related behavior. *Psychological review*, 94(3), 369.
- [28] Schober, J. (1995). The Theravāda Buddhist Engagement with Modernity in Southeast Asia: Whither the Social Paradigm of the Galactic Polity? *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 26(2), 307-325.
- [29] Kim, J. (2012). Unheard Voices: Women's Roles in Medieval Buddhist Artistic Production and Religious Practices in South Asia. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 80(1), 200-232.
- [30] Du, F. Q. (2003). The gender dimension and perspective of historical research - also discussing the relationship between women's history, gender history and economic-social history. *Journal of Shanxi Normal University: Social Science Edition*, 30(4), 111-118.
- [31] Liu, Y. (1975). *Old Tang Book*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [32] Ouyang, X. (1975). *New Book of Tang Dynasty*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [33] Li, F. (1961). *Taiping Guangji*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [34] Zhou, S. L. (2001). *Sequel to a compilation of epitaphs from the Tang Dynasty*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House.
- [35] Wu, M. X. (2002). Looking at the Buddhist beliefs and characteristics of women in the Tang Dynasty from Tang epitaphs. *Buddhist Studies*, 256-267.
- [36] Zhao, J. N., & Jiao, J. (2006). Looking at the Taoist beliefs of women in the Tang Dynasty from the epitaphs. *Collection*, (0).
- [37] Chen, Y. K. (1977). *Wu Zhao and Buddhism*. *Modern Buddhist Academic Series* (6) - Anthology of Chinese Buddhist History (2) - Sui, Tang and Five Dynasties, 131-147.
- [38] Karetzky, P. E. (2002). Wu Zetian and Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty. *Tang Studies*, 2002(20-21), 113-150.
- [39] Li, F. L. (2011). On Wu Zetian and Famen Temple. *Research on Qianling Culture*, 106-114.
- [40] Wen, Y. C. (1989). On Wu Zetian and Longmen Grottoes. *Dunhuang Academic Journal*, (1), 119-127.
- [41] Li, L. F. (1992). *Tang Liu Dian*, Volume 4, 124. Zhonghua Book Company: Beijing.
- [42] Jia, J. H. (2021). The religious experience of female Taoist priests in the Tang Dynasty. *Humanities Forum*, 36(02), 257-275.
- [43] Cui, H. D. (2020). The Three Evolutions of Ancient Confucian Views on Women. *Contemporary Confucianism* (01), 89-101.
- [44] Liu, Z. X. (2018). Research on the status of women in the Tang Dynasty. *Journal of Kaifeng Institute of Education* (01), 49-50.
- [45] Han, L. R. (2015). The inspiration of the open style of women's clothing in the Tang Dynasty to modern clothing design. *Journal of Packaging* (02), 69-73.