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**WOMEN IN THE HISTORY OF CHINESE BUDDHISM**

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### Abstract

An important feature of Buddhist culture in China is a tradition of fully dedicated bhikkhun nuns, which began here in the IV century. The female monastic community was created in the era of six dynasties, when the country was invaded by the barbarians, and several states existed in China. During the reign of the Tang dynasty, Buddhist culture gained immense popularity among women; as a result, both noble court ladies (princesses and concubines) and ordinary women began to take monastic vows. At the same time, the nuns did not completely reject secular life. In the second half of the VII century, a woman came to power in China. It was Empress Wu Tse-t'ien, who provided broad support to the Buddhist Church. Wu Tse-t'ien used Buddhist ideas to legitimize her power. Another famous female ruler in Chinese history was the Empress Cixi, who considered herself a zealous Buddhist and supported Buddhism. The twentieth century witnessed various upheavals in the development of Chinese Buddhism. The Cultural Revolution led to a significant decline in the number of Buddhist nuns, many of whom were persecuted or forced to leave the monasteries. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the female sangha in China began to recover. Despite all the problems of the female monastic community, it was possible to restore female monasteries, restore monastic foundations and Buddhist education.

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*Keywords:* Buddhism, China, Chinese Buddhism, woman, female monasticism



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## **1. Introduction**

The relevance of this study is due to the trends in the development of modern civilization, changes in the nature of gender relations, transformation of the previous paradigm of socio-cultural space distribution between men and women, changes in the social, political, cultural and economic status of women. Today, many thinkers and public figures note that the degree of women's rights and freedoms, the possibility of their self-realization are an important criterion for the civilization of any society. As Nehru points out, “the attitude towards women is the litmus test of any civilized society. The better the attitude towards a woman, the higher the level of development of a society” (as cited in Gopal, 1975, p. 36). As you know, religion has traditionally exerted a significant influence on the position of women in society, which has established its values and norms of behavior in society. All this actualizes the study of the role of women in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The problem of the role of women in Buddhist culture, especially in Chinese Buddhism, has not been studied in comparison with the role of women in Islam and Christianity, which is due to the fact that the Buddhist doctrine provides less opportunities for feminist criticism ...

Among the studies devoted to the role of women in Buddhism, one can name the works by Gross (1993) “Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism”, Paul (1979) “Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition”, Shaw (1994) “Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism”, who view Buddhist culture and philosophy in terms of the feminist doctrine.

As for the studies devoted to the role of women in the history of Chinese Buddhism, a limited number of works deal with this issue; many of them are of a journalistic nature. There are few foreign works that examine the Buddhist monastic tradition in China and the role of women in the history of Chinese Buddhism (De Vido, 2010, 2015; Georgieva, 2000; Lee, 1994; Levering, 1982; Schuster, 1985; Tsai, 1981).

Among the works of Russian authors, the works by Vasiliev (2001), Gorbunova (1998, 2008), Mylnikova (2014), Chebunin (2009), and Yangutov (1998) deal with this issue.

## **3. Research Questions**

This paper examines the role of women in the history of Chinese Buddhism. The authors try to answer the question about the role of women in the history of the Chinese tradition of Mahayana Buddhism.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of women in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

## 5. Research Methods

The theoretical and methodological basis of this study is a system of well-known general scientific approaches and methods, including the specific historical approach, the systems analysis, the methods of synthesis and analysis.

## 6. Findings

An important feature of Buddhist culture in China is a tradition of fully dedicated bhikkhun nuns, which has existed since the IV century, while in many other regions of Asia this tradition was suppressed.

The female monastic community was created in the era of six dynasties (220–589), when the country was invaded by barbarians, and several states existed in China. It was during this troubled period (Georgieva, 2000), notable Chinese women founded a female monastic community in China. Among them was the daughter of Princess Ching-chien, who founded the Bamboo Forest Monastery. In 357, in Luoyang, four women headed by Ching-chien took full monastic vows of bhikkhuni. As a result, the Chinese Buddhist monastic community was fully structurally formed. By the early VI century, the female sangha (monastic community) had become a significant social and cultural force, as evidenced by the famous Biography of Bhikkhuni by Pao Chang, which includes the lives of 65 of China's most authoritative nuns of that period (Goonatilake, 2007).

In the era of six dynasties, many noble women and even queens, fleeing military operations and palace intrigues, were forced to seek refuge in convents. For example, the mother of Emperor Wendi (541–604), the founder of the Sui dynasty, who united the country, hid from enemies in one of the female Buddhist monasteries, where she raised her famous son (Lepekhova, 2012) ... In the Buddhist environment, Emperor Wendi tried to patronize Buddhism: he canceled the anti-Buddhist law of the Northern Zhou, which prohibited this religion, and built new Buddhist temples and monasteries. Under Wendi, Buddhist sutras and commentaries were translated into Chinese (Markhanova, 2014).

During the reign of the Tang dynasty, Buddhist culture reached its peak and gained immense popularity among women; both noble court ladies (princesses and concubines) and ordinary women began to take monastic vows. At the same time, the nuns did not completely reject secular activities, often visited the imperial palaces, houses of the Chinese nobility, salons that united famous writers. The nuns took an active part in the socio-political life of the country and even participated in hostilities (Selezneva, 2007). In the Tang period, noble lay women who were engaged in charity donated a huge amount of land and other gifts to Buddhist monasteries; some emperors even tried to stop the redistribution of land property in favor of monasteries (Lepekhova, 2012).

In the second half of the VII century, the Tang Dynasty's reign was briefly interrupted. This event was associated with the transfer of power to Empress Wu Tse-t'ien (624–705), who proclaimed a new Zhou dynasty. Wu Tse-t'ien is also known for her broad support for the Buddhist Church. Despite the disputes about the degree of influence of Buddhist ideology on the empress' politics, it cannot be denied that she used Buddhist ideas to legitimize her power. Her desire to rely on Buddhism was reflected in the motto "Given from above", under which her reign began.

One of the reasons why Wu Tse-t'ien began to patronize Buddhism was the fact that she had lived in the Buddhist monastery of Ganye. It could not but affect her policy. She relied on the support of numerous Buddhist and Taoist monasteries. In addition, Buddhist ideology positively influenced the active foreign policy and China's expansion to the West. It facilitated the easier accession of the Central Asian states to China (Bokschanin, 2010).

Before Wu Tse-t'ien came to power, she had managed to gain support of the Buddhist elite. When she faced a powerful Confucian opposition that traditionally supported the Tang dynasty, she gained support from the largest and richest Buddhist monasteries, which formed the basis of the new government (Liu, 2010).

The accession of a woman to the Chinese throne could not but cause protests from the local elites, since according to the laws and Confucian norms, the woman could not rule the country. Therefore, Wu Tse-t'ien was in dire need of an authoritative religious and ideological substantiation of his power. Naturally, the empress turned to Buddhism, which, unlike Confucianism, was more inclined towards women. Buddhists found a substantiation of her claim to the throne in the Big Cloud Sutra, which was brought from India and translated into Chinese. In one of the chapters of this sacred text, it is said that Buddha made a prediction that, due to the merits received from listening to the Buddha's teachings, she would incarnate as a universal ruler and patron of Buddhist teachings (chakravartin). This text was in line with Wu Tse-t'ien's aspirations to give legitimacy to her power. Therefore, she ordered the "Big Cloud Sutra" to be distributed throughout China (Yangutov, 1998).

To raise the authority of the empress among the population, she was declared the earthly incarnation of the Buddha Maitreya, who, according to Buddhists, is a new Messiah and successor of Buddha Shakyamuni. At the same time, the empress declared her court ladies to be reincarnations of bodhisattvas (Mahayana saints). To give weight to the cult of the Maitreya Buddha, Wu Tse-t'ien began to build a huge statue of Maitreya Buddha in the Longmen cave temple complex (Paludan, 1998). This giant statue has survived and been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

At the end of the Tang dynasty, under Emperor Wu Tse-t'ien, Buddhism was under serious pressure exerted to weaken the influence of the Buddhist Church, which increased under Empress Wu Tse-t'ien. In addition, the imperial authorities sought to sequester female monasteries' land and wealth.

During the reign of the Song dynasty, Buddhism continued to be in decline. Despite the fact that the Sung dynasty was quite tolerant of the Buddhist religion, it is difficult to mark this period as favorable for Buddhism, since China often experienced various kinds of upheavals. It is known that during the Song period, some nuns were respected by the imperial court. For example, Huyao Jitoo notes that two nuns "from the domain of Ye-lo-he wanted to attend the highest ceremony. [They] were given purple vestments and their request was satisfied" (Bashikov, 1974, p. 25).

During the Ming era, the first emperor of the Ming dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang tightened the process of issuing monastic certificates. For women who wanted to become nuns, the age limit was increased. As a result, a woman could become a nun only after reaching the age of 40, which led to a noticeable decline in the number of female nuns. However, another Ming emperor Ying Tsung decided to eliminate these restrictions and contributed to the emergence of new Buddhist monasteries. This contributed to the significant growth of the female monastic community (Bokshchanin, 1977).

The Manchu Qing dynasty, as well as the Mongol Yuan dynasty, provided patronage to Buddhism. Thus, the Dowager Great Empress of Qing China, Qi Xi (Cixi), like Wu Zetian, considered herself a zealous Buddhist. Interestingly, the confidants called her "Venerable Buddha". Qi Xi compared herself to the goddess of mercy Guanyin. However, her earthly life was far from lofty Buddhist ideals. The last and most important event in her life was a meeting in September 1908 with the XIII Dalai Lama, the spiritual and political leader of Tibet, who decided to visit Beijing. After meeting with the earthly incarnation of Buddha Tsy Xi, the Dalai Lama was declared the highest spiritual person of all Buddhists in the world and increased subsidies to the state treasury in favor of the Buddhist church (Sidikhmenov, 1985).

The twentieth century witnessed various upheavals in the history of Chinese Buddhism. According to some data, by the middle of the 20th century there were about 225 thousand nuns in China (Vastutin, 2006). However, new political processes and the "cultural revolution" decreased the number of Buddhist nuns, many of whom were repressed or forced to leave the monasteries. In addition, the level of monastic discipline has dropped. Due to a significant decrease in the number of male and female monasteries, monks and nuns were forced to live together, which violated the monastic rules (Gorbunova, 2008). Since the "Cultural Revolution" of 1966 until the early 1980s, there was no official three-stage ceremony for the entry into the female sangha in mainland China. This initiation ceremony was carried out in secret. However, the life of the female Buddhist monastic community, despite repression and persecution, continued, and the tradition of fully ordained monasticism was not interrupted. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, the female sangha in China began to gradually recover. Despite all the problems of the female monastic community, it became possible to restore female monasteries, restore monastic foundations and Buddhist education.

## 7. Conclusion

Thus, women have played a rather important, although not primary role in the history of Chinese Buddhism. An important feature of Buddhist culture in China is a tradition of fully dedicated bhikkhun nuns, which has existed since the IV century. The twentieth century witnessed various upheavals in the history of Chinese Buddhism. However, despite the difficulties, the female Buddhist monastic community in China has survived.

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