

# Ideals of Buddhist Kingship

*A Comparative Analysis of  
Emperors Ashoka and Wen of Sui*

*Qin Zhi Lau '11  
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चक्रवर्तिन्

## Introduction

The ramifications of a religion's cultural transplantation are numerous - an introduced religion has the potential to unleash a host of transformative changes in its newly adopted culture. Such changes have been seen in the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity from the fourth century onwards as well as in the Islamization of Persia and Northern Africa post-eighth century CE.

Similarly, China underwent a significant cultural transformation after the conquest of Buddhism. Since its introduction to China in the latter years of the Han Dynasty, Buddhism has often been credited as a major driving force for Eastern culture, philosophy, fine arts, and many other aspects of society. It was during this period that the new religion began to gain a devoted following among the peoples of China, and by the beginning of the Sui Dynasty (隋朝) it had emerged as one of the primary religions of China.

While Buddhism's rapid spread has often been attributed to its ability to promise a war-weary populace happiness in a future life<sup>1</sup>, such a viewpoint is an overly simplistic analysis of the situation. While Buddhism was certainly popularized by the sheer number of peasants seeking a better afterlife, much of the credit for its dissemination goes to the emperors of the period who actively encouraged the spread of the new religion and made the religion a fundamental pillar of a constructed state identity. Like the propagation of Christianity by the late Roman and Byzantine emperors, Chinese imperial support was

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, Mark Edward. *China Between Empires: The Northern and Southern Dynasties*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) 184

crucial in ensuring that Buddhism was elevated from a minority faith of foreign traders to an institution enjoying widespread support.

That Buddhism's propagation in China was greatly assisted by imperial support came as no surprise to the religion's early missionaries. From its very founding, Buddhism had been closely linked to the royal and imperial authorities of the areas in which it spread. Upon their conversion, these rulers often incorporated tenets of Buddhism into their edicts and subsequent actions - a historical phenomenon most notably seen with the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (阿育王, variant 阿恕迦). Ashoka's personal dedication to Buddhism transformed him in history from simply a successful Indian conqueror to the archetype for right kingship in Buddhist literature.

After his death, tales and stories of Emperor Ashoka's putative deeds and feats abounded throughout Asia, eventually reaching China along with the vast corpus of the Buddhist canon. The ideal of Ashoka persisted in China in the form of several *sutras*<sup>2</sup>, influencing Chinese Buddhists' own conceptions of imperial authority as well as the duties associated with it. This gradual but perceptible shift culminated in the accession of a devout Buddhist, Yang Jian (楊堅), to the throne of a unified China in 581 CE as Emperor Wen of the Sui Dynasty (posthumously honored with the temple name of 隋文帝, hereafter referred to as Wendi).

Wendi was arguably the most committed of history's hundreds of Chinese emperors to Buddhism - not only did he adopt Buddhist tenets in his governance of the newly unified

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<sup>2</sup> Zurcher, E. *The Buddhist Conquest of China*. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 1959, 2007)  
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China, but also saw himself in the mold of Emperor Ashoka<sup>3</sup> and conducted his policies similarly. In this paper, I demonstrate how Wendi's sponsorship of Buddhism went far more than utilizing it as a propagandist institution of the state, and that the legacy of Ashoka figured greatly in his quest to become more than just another Chinese emperor, but rather, a genuine Buddhist *chakravartin* (轉輪聖王, literally, a "wheel-turning sage king") - a Buddhist sage-monarch.

## The Buddha and Ideals of a Chakravartin

*"Should he desire to become a king, then by his might and law he will lead all kings on earth."* - Royal astrologers' prediction of one of Siddhartha's destinies.<sup>4</sup>

The man who was to become the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was himself recorded in Buddhist Pali and Sanskrit works as an individual of aristocratic birth - in fact, the son of King Suddhodana of Kapilavastu<sup>5</sup>. A member of the Shakya clan, Siddhartha was said to be "from an unbroken *kshatriya* family... a family, rich, of great wealth, of

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, Arthur F. *The Sui Dynasty*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1978) 66

<sup>4</sup> Olson, Carl. *Original Buddhist Sources: A Reader*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005) 28

<sup>5</sup> Olson, Carl. 27

great possessions.”<sup>6</sup> As a kshatriya (刹帝利, a social classification for warriors and rulers<sup>7</sup>), it was expected that the young Buddha would inherit his father’s throne and bring glory to his clan - that was his dharma, or duty (according to a Vedic, pre-Buddhist definition of the term<sup>8</sup>).

However, tradition has it that the royal astrologers predicted that Siddhartha was destined for an illustrious career far greater than that of his father - that the prince would grow up and perhaps become “a lord, a universal king... as king of kings and lord of men,”<sup>9</sup> “as the light of the sun stands as the leader of all constellations.” If he chose the path of worldly power, then, he would attain the exalted position of a *chakravartin*.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise, the astrologers foretold, Siddhartha would renounce the worldly life and become the Buddha (佛陀, one who is awakened), a teacher of gods and humans alike.

Of course, Siddhartha took the latter path - as tradition tells it, he renounced his princely life and became a shramana, a renunciate of the world seeking liberation from the vicious cycle of birth and death. Yet the tale’s close juxtapositioning of these two ideals that the Buddha could become - one, the apex of worldly might and the other, of spiritual power - hinted at a greater role for the concept of the *chakravartin* in later developments of

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas, Edward J. *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*. (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc, 1949, 2000) 21

<sup>7</sup> Soothill, William E. *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1937, 1987) 250

<sup>8</sup> *Merriam-Webster Online*. <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dharma>> Accessed on December 10, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, Edward J. 21

<sup>10</sup> Olson, Carl. 28

Buddhism. Though early texts dismiss this concept as a mere temptation for the Buddha on his journey to enlightenment and elaborate no more on its significance, Buddhism's ever-present links to the monarchical systems in India eventually developed into a new doctrinal position for the chakravartin – as a righteous, Buddhist ruler who served as the worldly counterpart to the Buddha.

This ideal of the chakravartin was certainly greatly influenced by examples of kings who had converted to Buddhism in the Buddha's time. The Buddha's position as a kshatriya enabled him great access to the kings of the numerous Indian kingdoms, and their monetary and political support figured greatly in early Buddhist history. As Tambiah writes, "there is also no distinction made between... secular and sacred spheres [in Buddhism] as is commonly done in Western thought."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, a Buddhist ruler provides "conditions and the context for the survival of [the Buddhist] religion;" and in doing so sows "seeds of merit" which will help "fulfill his kingship."<sup>12</sup>

Examples from the Buddha's lifetime can be seen in the Jeta Grove: The Buddha's primary retreat during the rainy season, it was the result of a shared donation between Prince Jeta of Sravasti and a wealthy elder.<sup>13</sup> Another ruler, King Bimbisara of Magadha, was one of the Buddha's earliest royal converts and patrons<sup>14</sup> - he even went as far as to

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<sup>11</sup> Tambiah, S.J. *World Conqueror and World Renouncer*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 23

<sup>12</sup> Tambiah, S.J. 41

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, Edward J. 105

<sup>14</sup> Omvedt, Gail. *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. (New York: Sage Publications, 2003) 119

offer the Buddha rulership of his kingdom<sup>15</sup> (in essence, offering the Buddha another chance to embark upon that path of royal conquest which he had not earlier taken). His son and successor, Ajatasatru, was in later years both depicted as a devoted Buddhist and as a provider for the legacy of the Buddha who began the tradition of enshrining the Buddha's relics in stupas.

Another key component of righteous kingship developed in Buddhist thought was the prominence of royal engagement with society. As with earlier Indian notions of kingship, Buddhist thought held the ruler directly responsible for the well-being of the state and its people. With the rule of an unjust king, "oil, honey molasses and the like, as well as wild roots and fruits, lose their sweetness and flavor, and not these only but the whole realm becomes bad and flavorless."<sup>16</sup> It was not merely sufficient for a chakravartin to make material donations to the Buddhist sangha and temples - rather, he had to also embody "the same incomparable perfection" of the Buddha, albeit as an individual concerned with human affairs.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, tales of the Buddha intervening in secular, inter-state conflicts are common, with the Buddha having to council his Shakya clan and the Kosala kingdom from warring. According to tradition, the Shakyan people were moved to non-violence upon the arrival of the Buddha - "now that the Master has come, it is impossible for us to discharge a weapon

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas, Edward J. 69

<sup>16</sup> Sen, Benoychandra. *Studies in the Buddhist Jatakas: Tradition and Polity*. (Calcutta: Saraswat Press, 1974) 91

<sup>17</sup> Tambiah, S.J. 38

against the person of an enemy.”<sup>18</sup> Such events proved the Buddha’s political views epitomized pacifism above all, and focused on the role of reconciliation and harmony in foreign relations.

From these accounts in the liturgical narrative of the Buddha’s life and descriptions of kingship, we can draw three conclusions about early Buddhist conceptions of the ideal Buddhist ruler: Firstly, he would serve as the paramount lay supporter of the Buddha’s monastic community and teachings, either by monetary or material offerings (as seen in Prince Jeta’s example) or by personal devotion (King Bimbisara’s example). Secondly, he would have to work for the betterment of society and serve as an exemplar moral example for the people he led. Lastly, as a devout follower of the Buddha, such a ruler obviously had to adhere closely to the Buddha’s own pacifistic views.

While early Buddhist rulers like Bimbisara sought to put these religious principles into tangible political outcomes, the sheer number of kingdoms in India during the century following the Buddha’s life negated any large effects of these new policies. The adoption of regular standing armies and frequent occurrences of warfare and aggression<sup>19</sup> ensured that such idealist pacifist policies only remained just that - ideals. It was only under the establishment of a unified Indian state under the Mauryas that truly nonmilitant statecraft and the position of the chakravartin could become reality.

## **The First Chakravartin: Emperor Ashoka**

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<sup>18</sup> Sen, Benoychandra. 49

<sup>19</sup> Saha, B.P. And K.S. Behera. *Ancient History of India*. (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1988) 84

*“Amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history... the name of Ashoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star.”*

— H.G. Wells, *The Outline of History*<sup>20</sup>

From his very birth in 304 BCE, the man who would become Emperor Ashoka did not seem a likely candidate for becoming the archetypical Buddhist chakravartin. Born to Bindusara, a Vedic ruler of a dynasty that had acquired its power through armed rebellion against a Macedonian regime instituted by Alexander the Great<sup>21</sup>, the necessity of war and conquest was firmly engrained in his mindset. As a royal prince and viceroy, Ashoka had been sent to quell a rebellion in Taxila<sup>22</sup> and thus far showed no deviation from the Vedic *kshatriya* duties expected of him - to preserve and protect his father’s dynasty. When Ashoka succeeded his father as emperor of the Mauryan Dynasty in 273 BCE, there was no reason to expect that he would significantly alter the status quo of Indian kingship.

According to historical records, there was no single event that precipitated Ashoka’s conversion to Buddhism; Ahir cites the influence of his Buddhist queen Devi over a long period of time prior to the Kalinga War,<sup>23</sup> the scene of his conversion as depicted in popular culture and in religious texts. According to Ashoka’s Rock Edict XIII, “as many as one hundred thousands (sic) were killed there in action, and many times that number

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<sup>20</sup> Wells, H.G. *The Outline of History*. (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc, 1971) 339

<sup>21</sup> Smith, Vincent .A. *Early History of India*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924) 126

<sup>22</sup> Ahir, D.C. *Asoka the Great*. 17

<sup>23</sup> Ahir, D.C. 23.

perished.” Saddened at the sight of so numerous dead bodies, Ashoka proclaimed his “repentance” and how “extremely painful and deplorable” war was, and affirming that from then forward “conquest through Dharma is now considered to be the best conquest by the Beloved of the Gods.”<sup>24</sup> Though no explicit reference to the Buddha or his teachings is made in this particular edict, it serves as a clear endorsement of the Buddha’s pacifistic description of the proper king who “relies just on Dharma, honors Dharma, reveres Dharma... sets a Dharma watch and bar and ward for folk within his realm.”<sup>25</sup>

Having thoroughly renounced war and conquest, Ashoka sought to fulfill his duties as a king in accordance with Buddhist ideals. Like Ajatasatru before, Ashoka saw the erection of stupas for the preservation of the Buddha’s relics as an immensely important generator of merit. In the tale of the legendary religious narrative the *Sutra of King Ashoka* (阿育王經), Ashoka demolishes seven of eight stupas previously built by Ajatasatru in order to enshrine them in “eighty-four thousand precious cases... and gave them to the *yakshas* (nature spirits), ordering them to erect stupas at all places on earth.” Furthermore, the account tells that with such supernatural help King Ashoka was able to complete the stupendous task in a single day.<sup>26</sup> While the story has obviously been embellished for religious effect (but Ashoka did indeed enlarge and rededicate existing stupas)<sup>27</sup>, it was

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<sup>24</sup> Sircar, D. C. *Inscriptions of Asoka*. (Delhi: Government of India Publications Division, 1957) 52-54

<sup>25</sup> Tambiah, S.J. 40

<sup>26</sup> Li, Rongxi. Trans. *The Biographical Scripture of King Asoka*. (Berkeley: Numata Center, 1993) 18-20

<sup>27</sup> Kachroo, Vijay. *Ancient India*. (Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 2000) 237

this fantastical tale that most captivated the imagination of Wendi in China, as we shall see later.

To emphasize his role as a Buddhist ruler directly responsible for the welfare of his people, the rock edicts of Ashoka proclaim “everywhere in the dominions of [Ashoka], wherever there were no medicinal herbs beneficial to men and animals... they have been caused to be imported and planted... On the roads, wells have been caused to be dug and trees have been caused to be planted for the enjoyment of animals and men.”<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, “numerous watering sheds have been caused to be set up... I have done [these things] for the following purpose... that people might conform to such practices of Dharma.”<sup>29</sup> It is clear, then, that Ashoka sought to establish himself not merely as a provider of material pleasures for his people (declaring them to be “trifle” matters in that same edict), but rather as a moral center for the empire. His assertion that such public works projects were not for carnal enjoyment but rather aids in assisting his people to practice the Buddhist Dharma further underlined that point.

Finally, despite the seeming non-religiousness of his edicts (the term *dharma* also is used extensively in Jainism and the pre-Hindu Vedic religion), Ashoka proved to be an extremely devout Buddhist. Ashoka banned the popular Vedic practice of animal sacrifice and limited the number of animals slaughtered for royal consumption to three.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, he took an active role in the matters of the Buddhist *sangha*, writing to them in Rock Edict III that “it is known to you, Venerable Sirs, how far extends my reverence

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<sup>28</sup> Sircar, D.C. 41

<sup>29</sup> Sircar, D.C. 74

<sup>30</sup> Sircar, D.C. 40

for and faith in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha...”<sup>31</sup> and proceeds to list seven sacred Buddhist texts that he recommended both clergy and laity to read. Indeed, the legendary depictions of Ashoka like the *Sutra of King Ashoka* all emphasize his Buddhist-ness above everything else.

Truly, in his actions and policies, one might argue that Ashoka essentially *defined* the concept of the chakravartin from then on, and it was tales of his exploits and virtues that made him a powerful invocative figure for Chinese Buddhists like Wendi.

## **Chinese Links to Ashoka, and Chinese Buddhist Emperorship Before Wendi**

Upon its arrival in China, Buddhism gradually became popular among what Zürcher considers “the gentry” - well-educated families who were well-educated in classical Chinese literature, the courtly exams, and other hallmarks of the literati.<sup>32</sup> While the prevalence of Buddhism among the cultured élite helped lend the foreign religion a semblance of legitimacy, China’s “pronounced tendency to venerate [a religion’s] antiquity”<sup>33</sup> caused early Buddhists to establish a suitably grand story for its introduction to the Middle Kingdom - certainly, stories were created attempting to date Buddhism’s introduction to centuries prior to its first “infiltrations” of Chinese society between the first

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<sup>31</sup> Sircar, D.C. 38

<sup>32</sup> Zürcher, E. 4-7

<sup>33</sup> Tsukamoto, Zenryu. *A History of Chinese Buddhism*. (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1985) 51

century BCE and the first century of the common era.<sup>34</sup> (This is hardly a feature unique to Chinese Buddhism - Japanese royal historians invented similarly apocryphal narratives for the introduction of Buddhism to Japan, as recorded in the *Nihon Shoki*)<sup>35</sup> Zürcher lists seven such apocryphal traditions (with Tsukamoto corroborating), the first of which attempts to date Buddhism's introduction to the time of the first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang (reigned 221-208 BCE), by missionaries sent by Ashoka.

Zürcher and Tsukamoto quotes Fei Zhangfang's *Record of the Three Jewels Throughout the Ages*, (歷代祖師紀), written in 597 CE (during Wendi's reign) as the first publication to make that claim (however, it in turn cites a journal allegedly dating from the Wei Dynasty four centuries previous). In it, Fei writes of the visit by foreign missionary monks to Qin Shi Huang's court, where they were imprisoned. Recent scholars such as Liang Qichao have attempted to identify the monks as missionaries sent by Ashoka,<sup>36</sup> and Tsukamoto notes that the conception that "it was by no means impossible that a religion with a missionary *élan*... should proceed even so far as China, given the circumstance that a convert king [Ashoka] was now an eager sponsor laboring for Buddhist proselytization outside India."<sup>37</sup> The official dynastic record *The History of Sui* corroborated early claims

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<sup>34</sup> Zürcher, E. 19

<sup>35</sup> Deal, William. *Buddhism in Practice: Buddhism and the State in Early Japan*. (Princeton: PUP, 1995) 218

<sup>36</sup> Tsukamoto, Zenryu. 52

<sup>37</sup> Tsukamoto, Zenryu. 51

that Buddhist sutras and texts had entered in pre-Han periods, except for the fact that “they encountered the calamities of the Qin [Dynasty], and were burned and destroyed.”<sup>38</sup>

Legendary accounts such as *the Sutra of King Ashoka* portray him specifically as an “iron-wheeled *chakravartin*,” with the meaning of one who rules Jambudvīpa, one of the “continents” of the universe in Buddhist cosmology,<sup>39 40</sup> and having built the 84,000 stupas throughout this cosmological entity (by contrast, the term “India” is never used in doctrinal texts). With some interpretations of the term “Jambudvīpa” including all of the known world (including China) within it, this account availed early Chinese Buddhists an opportunity to think of China as having had been influenced by Ashoka. Therefore, we see accounts like the one in the *Essay on Clarifying Buddhism* (明佛論), one finds the painter Cong Ping writing of what he considers the existence of stupas built by Ashoka in Shandong and Shansi (accounts of which we will return to later on in this paper). In Zhejiang Province, for instance, the *King Ashoka Mountain Monastery* claims to have been built in 405 CE by Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty over the remains of “a stupa containing one of Shakyamuni Buddha’s relics, being one of the 84,000 built by King Ashoka.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Li, Guorong. 李國榮 *Emperors Under the Buddha’s Radiance*. 佛光下的帝王 (Beijing: Tuanjie Chuban She 團結出版社, 1995) 8

<sup>39</sup> Strong, John. *The Legend of King Asoka*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 50

<sup>40</sup> Li, Rongxi. Trans. *The Biographical Scripture of King Asoka*. (Berkeley: Numata Center, 1993) 11

<sup>41</sup> Guo, Zizhang. 郭子章 *Records of King Ashoka Mountain Monastery*. 阿育王山寺志 (Yangzhou: Guangling Shushe 廣陵書社, 1500s, 2006)

Though these works all cite questionable sources, they can be considered examples of religious propaganda meant to give credence to Buddhism as an ancient religion with strong links to China. They serve as cogent instances where early Buddhists saw themselves as being part of a tradition that was ultimately traced to India and Ashoka, and sought to frame their religion's existence in China around that tradition. Their work laid the foundation for what scholars like Hu Shih (胡適) have termed the "Indianization of China"<sup>42</sup> - the gradual acceptance of new and novel Buddhist ideas, philosophical traditions, and indeed, methods of governing, much of which drew upon Ashoka for inspiration. The importance that Chinese Buddhists attributed to Ashoka can be seen in the retellings of the monk Faxian's travels to India in 399 CE, where he paid special attention to documenting the ruins of Ashoka's palace at Patna – documentation that would certainly have been widely circulated among Buddhists in China.<sup>43</sup>

In the accounts of Ashoka's life and deeds, however, it must be noted that significant differences exist between extant historiographical literature on Ashoka's life and deeds and religious retellings of those same events, with Strong noting that "Buddhists the world over have known virtually nothing about the [historical] Ashoka... Instead, their enthusiasm for Ashoka was based almost entirely on the Buddhist legends that grew up around him."<sup>44</sup> We must keep this in mind in our later observation of Wendi's ardor to emulate Ashoka.

As such, the two most broadly circulated accounts in China of Ashoka's exploits during Wendi's life would have been *The Sutra of King Ashoka* (阿育王經), and *The*

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<sup>42</sup> Wales, H.G. *The Indianization of China*. (London: Bernard Quaritch, Ltd., 1967) 147

<sup>43</sup> Wales, H.G. 13

<sup>44</sup> Strong, John. 5

*Biography of King Ashoka* (阿育王傳). With the Sanskrit title of the *Ashokarajasutra*, *The Sutra of King Ashoka* was translated into Chinese by the monk Samghapala (僧伽婆羅) in 512 CE and *The Biography of King Ashoka* was translated by the Parthian monk An Faqin (安法欽) in 281 CE.<sup>45</sup> Therefore by the time of Wendi's birth there were two circulating accounts of Ashoka's stories, both of which were for the most part religious legend in nature. No hard dates or historical citations can be found in either of these accounts - rather, they serve as religious works propagating Buddhist ideals of the chakravartin and kingship, and in them numerous miracles and other supernatural events are commonplace, elevating Ashoka from a mere ruler to an individual of semidevine status - an intermediary between the spiritual and mundane worlds. Yet, it was also these stories that most affected Wendi's ideals and actions as emperor.

Wendi was hardly the first "Buddhist" emperor of China - there were numerous emperors before him who at least nominally supported Buddhism in some form, including the emperors of Northern China that were his predecessors. Buddhism was especially favored by those emperors who were considered "barbarians" by the Chinese of the Central Plains - they saw the universalist religion as a means of eradicating the ethnic prejudice commonplace in their newly conquered territories<sup>46</sup> (with Emperor Daowu of Northern Wei's (北魏道武帝) actions as a prime example).<sup>47</sup> On a more personal level of spirituality, Emperors Xiaojing of Eastern Wei (東魏孝靜帝) and Wen of Western Wei

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<sup>45</sup> Li, Rongxi. 1

<sup>46</sup> Wales, H.G. 54

<sup>47</sup> Li, Guorong. 172

(西魏文帝) both regularly convened assemblies of monks and court ministers alike to discuss the sutras and doctrinal ideas.<sup>48</sup>

Yet, the impact of these emperors was arguably much more limited than the efforts Emperor Wen was able to bring about. Like the minor Indian kings Bimbisara and Ajatashatru before Ashoka, these Chinese “emperors” were merely one out of many concurrent rulers, each claiming to be the legitimate governing entity of China. Their relatively small territorial sizes and political influence had a commensurate effect on their ability to influence Chinese Buddhism, and frequent military coups and political assassinations made it difficult for an emperor (or his dynasty) to effect any lasting change. Furthermore, the existence of separate Buddhist regimes in the south saw the evolution of Buddhism in distinct, yet familiar ways. However, like Ashoka’s unification of India under the Mauryan Dynasty, it was Wendi’s unified Sui Empire which for the first time possessed the both the large centralized government and ambition to make a unified Buddhist monarchical theory a central part of its governing ideology.

### **Defining Emperor Wen’s Emperorship**

*“I owe my success to the Buddhadharma.” - Emperor Wen of Sui<sup>49</sup>*

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<sup>48</sup> Li, Guorong. 212-213

<sup>49</sup> Han, Sheng. 韓昇 *A Biography of Emperor Wen of Sui*. 隋文帝傳 (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe 人民出版社, 1998) 33

Compared to the majority of Chinese emperors, Yang Jian's background was characterized by two distinguishing factors: He was steeped in Buddhist ideologies and teachings from young, rather than merely being necessitated to engage and confront the Buddhist monastic community and temples when becoming emperor. Secondly, he was one of the few individuals as emperor to have taken Buddhism seriously as a personal faith, placed it above Confucianism in imperial discourse, and sought to recreate Ashoka's exploits in his empire, rather than solely as a medium by which to demonstrate imperial might and authority. These two factors would prove to be instrumental at differentiating Wendi from previous and subsequent monarchs.

The story of Wendi's birth as recorded in the official dynastic history the *Book of Sui* (隋書) is inevitably grand much like the birth accounts of many other emperors-to-be, with "auspicious animals appear[ing], a purple vapor fill[ing] the room..."<sup>50</sup> and stories of the young child transforming into a dragon.<sup>51</sup> Yet, unlike the other narratives, Wendi was born in Prajna Monastery (般若寺), a fairly important Buddhist temple of the Western Wei Dynasty and his fervently Buddhist parents had prayed to the Buddhas for his successful birth and childhood.<sup>52</sup> Even more uniquely, the *Book of Sui* tells of a bhikshuni (Buddhist nun) who approached Wendi's mother at his birth, saying, "this child's origins are peculiar indeed, hence he cannot be placed among worldly matters."<sup>53</sup> Later identified as Zhixian

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<sup>50</sup> Wright, Arthur F. *The Sui Dynasty*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1978) 55

<sup>51</sup> Han, Sheng. 31

<sup>52</sup> Han, Sheng. 28-31

<sup>53</sup> *The Book of Sui, Chapter: Gaozu (1)* 隋書, 高祖上: 「此兒所從來甚異, 不可於俗間處之。」

(智仙), this nun proceeded to raise Yang Jian by herself in the monastery, separated from his parents. In fact, Zhixian was so fond of him that she gave him a Sanskrit nickname - Narayana (meaning “firm and stable”, transliterated 那羅延). The name *Narayana* in Buddhism referred to the *vajra* warriors who protected Buddhism and the Buddhadharma, and it was this sense of duty that Zhixian imparted to the young Yang Jian, telling him at the age of seven that “the destruction or success of the Buddhadharma rests solely with you.”<sup>54</sup>

As none of these accounts of Wendi’s upbringing are contemporaneous, we have to infer that they involved a mixture of both the legendary and historical. Han points out that the embellishments of birth were likely added by Sui scholars, but believes that the stories of Wendi being born in a Buddhist temple and being raised by Zhixian are factual, and that it was relatively uncommon for the scions of the elite to grow up in a monastery. However, the construction of this narrative served to cement a idea that Wendi possessed the supernatural backing of the Buddha - clearly a different way of defining monarchical authority than the traditional Confucian concept of the Mandate of Heaven (天命). Indeed, Wendi took his nickname very seriously, firmly believing that he was the “God-King Narayana,” a person with a supernal destiny to protect Buddhism, like his namesake.<sup>55</sup> Further underlining his rejection of Confucian scholars and literature, Wright notes that Wendi hardly gave the Confucian classics any interest during his reign, characterizing him as possessing a deep “anti-intellectualism.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Han, Sheng. 33

<sup>55</sup> Han, Sheng. 33

<sup>56</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 56

Like Ashoka, Wendi's preference for and elevation of Buddhism certainly was greatly influenced by his wife, Dugu Qieluo (獨孤伽羅, the latter also a Sanskrit name - *tagara*). Han writes of her as also from a deeply Buddhist family, and more importantly, "possessing similar views on government and religion."<sup>57</sup> Further solidifying his bond to Buddhism was the persecution of the religion by Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou (北周武帝) - after an imperial study which ranked Buddhism and Daoism of lesser importance to Confucianism, Emperor Wu sought to centralize his regime around the latter ideology. According to the *Book of Zhou*, he ordered for "the destruction of Buddhist and Daoist images, the defrocking of shramanas (Buddhist monks and nuns) and priests. Further prohibited are all lewd (sic) [Buddhist and Daoist] services and all rituals not specified in the ritual classics."<sup>58</sup> The persecution must have greatly impacted Wendi, as even his childhood mentor Zhixian was forced to conceal herself in the Yang family home to avoid a forced return to secular life.<sup>59</sup> It is extremely likely this incident likely also had a huge hand in shaping his distaste for Confucianism, with Wendi later writing, "in the past during the time of [Emperor] Wu of Zhou, the Buddhadharma was persecuted and destroyed. I [at that time] made a solemn vow to protect and uphold it."<sup>60</sup>

Though Wendi was raised as a Buddhist, he, like the Ashoka before the battle of Kalinga had little compunction about using force to achieve his own political aims. As I

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<sup>57</sup> Han, Sheng. 50

<sup>58</sup> *The Book of Zhou, Roll 5. Chapter: Emperor Wu (1)*. 周書，卷五，武帝上

<sup>59</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 57

<sup>60</sup> Lan, Jifu. 藍吉福 *Chronicles of Buddhism in the Sui Dynasties*. 隋代佛教史述論 (Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan Gongsi 台灣商務印書館公司, 1974) 9

have noted previously, the fleeting transience of regimes among the Northern Dynasties (and their rulers) frequently forced any individual of political stature to resort to underhanded means in order to avoid getting killed. After an attempt to kill his daughter (the empress) and an effort by the ruling emperor to assassinate him failed,<sup>61</sup> Wendi began taking steps towards seizing the throne by recruiting soldiers and summoning close allies. However, several generals of the Northern Zhou regime resisted, and under the leadership of Weichi Jiong (尉遲迥), rebelled against Wendi. Wendi was able to suppress Weizhi's rebellion, but at great cost - the specifics of the last battle and confrontation are not enumerated upon in great detail in the official histories (*The Book of Sui* laconically states: “[General] Wei Xiaokuan defeated Weichi Jiong at Xiangzhou... Causing his organization to be pacified.”)<sup>62</sup>

Han, however, believes the actual confrontation and aftermath to have been a much bloodier event than the histories, quoting from a monastic compilation of history: “A million prisoners-of-war were rounded up in the Youyu Park to the north and executed the following morning... The bodies [were dumped] in the river, causing it to become clogged and no longer flow. For a month it was a river of blood with ghosts wailing nightly, sadly bemoaning those who had killed them. When news of this matter reached the Emperor [Wen], the Emperor said: ‘This massacre was indeed a senseless tragedy, for while the only criminal was Weichi Jiong, the others were drawn into the conflict and also killed. It was unbearable for me at the time... As this event occurred during the establishment of our

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<sup>61</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 59

<sup>62</sup> *The Book of Sui, Chapter: Gaozu (1)* 隋書, 高祖上: 「韋孝寬破尉遲迥於相州, 傳首闕下, 餘黨悉平。」

nation, I was not able to release those killed... A “Great Compassion Monastery” may be erected in Youyu Park... With round-the-clock ceremonies to the Buddha, and additional bowing [ceremonies] for those who were wrongly killed in the park.’ The monastery was built... And the cries of vengeful anguish ceased after.”<sup>63</sup> As with accounts of Wendi’s life previous, though this account possesses exaggerations (it describes a six hundred thousand soldiers as having been thus massacred, while Wright quotes Weichi’s force at the time to be just one hundred and thirty thousand<sup>64</sup>), it encapsulates the feelings and regrets that Wendi later felt regarding the manner in which he came to power - using language almost identical to Ashoka’s proclamations post-Kalinga.

Even more strikingly, the choice of words in another proclamation made to another is extremely similar to the legendary accounts in *The Biography of King Ashoka*. In one legend in that text, Ashoka is finally converted by the monk Candagirika and demolishes a hellish prison that he has built, with Candagirika proclaiming in verse that “the great king of men/Should have a mind of pity/For all living beings/And grant them freedom from fear.”<sup>65</sup> Compare this to Wendi’s *Edict for the Establishment of a Monastery at the Battleground of Xiangzhou*, which states: “...When I was chancellor, my virtues were lacking and thus things [the rebellion] were made to happen. The people were as if trapped in a net, and with sincere admission of my own offenses, I only saw the weeping of the innocent... I forever am mindful of all the beings that have undergone the suffering of conflict’s sword, and harbor an ambition to cause them to prosper in the [Buddhist] Way

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<sup>63</sup> Han, Sheng. 102

<sup>64</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 61

<sup>65</sup> Li, Rongxi. 18

and gain salvation. ...[I wish] those who rebelled may leave the dark and enter the light... and together leave samsara (the cycle of rebirth).”<sup>66</sup> The juxtaposition of contrition for evil deeds formally done in the name of gaining power, coupled with a universal wish that all beings could gain Buddhist liberation was no accident - in doing so, Wendi was evoking Ashoka’s putative apologies.

Indeed, it was this “Ashokan” sense of guilt and wrongdoing of the way in which he gained power that fueled Wendi’s efforts at promoting Buddhism in his empire.

## **Imperial Support for Temples**

*“First and last in his edicts and his orders, the Buddhist teachings were given the highest position.”*<sup>67</sup>

As emperor, Wendi took a hands-on approach to the organization of the Buddhist sangha and of the temples, granting them a prominence rarely seen in Chinese society previous. Not three years into his reign, Wendi issued an edict offering 120 imperial plaques to any individual constructing a Buddhist temple in his new capital Daxing Cheng, (大興城) allowing for the use of imperial treasury funds to build and maintain those

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<sup>66</sup> Han, Sheng. 103

<sup>67</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 131

temples.<sup>68</sup> A key symbol of the enormous disparity between imperial support of the three religions was the enormous presence of Buddhist institutions in Daxing - Wright lists “Buddhist headquarters [as occupying] a whole ward, [while the] Daoist, across the street, occupied far less than a ward.”<sup>69</sup>

Chief among these temples was the *Benevolent Temple of Great Prosperity* (大興善寺), the foremost temple of the nascent city. While many other temples built during the Sui era were named Daxing, the appellation of the word “benevolent” signified the grand status granted to it - indeed, many of Wendi’s most prominent Buddhist displays of faith were held here, and its imperial charter proclaimed “[the placement] of the Benevolent Temple of Great Prosperity is for the practice of the [Buddhist] Way for the sake of our nation, and from here [Buddhism] shall gradually disseminate to all within the four seas.”<sup>70</sup>

However, despite the establishment of such large Buddhist centers of learning and worship, Wendi’s initial demonstrations of faith were not immensely *Buddhist per se*, for many Northern Dynasty emperors had afforded Buddhist temples equally prominent locations in their national capitals, and very few names of locations in Daxing had Buddhist names.<sup>71</sup> In the fifth year of Kaiyuan (586 CE), however, Wendi announced a nationwide amnesty, pardoning over twenty thousand criminals in order to celebrate his receiving of the Bodhisattva Precepts (菩薩戒). Derived from the *Sutra of Brahma’s Net*

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<sup>68</sup> Han, Sheng. 403-405

<sup>69</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 89

<sup>70</sup> Gu, Zhengmei. 古正美 *From a Tradition of Divine Kings to One of Buddhist Kings. 從天王傳統到佛王傳統* (Taipei: Shangzhou Chuban 商周出版, 2003) 169

<sup>71</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 88

(梵王經), Gu identifies Wendi's strong emphasis for this occasion with a passage from that same sutra: "The Buddha said: 'If a disciple of the Buddha accepts the position of a national king or that of a *chakravartin*... [he] should first receive the Bodhisattva Precepts.'" <sup>72</sup> In the same edict declaring the amnesty, Wendi further declared, "the Buddha has entrusted the proper Dharma to the kings, and as I am one honored by people, I have received an entrustment from the Buddha." While it was a ceremony to receive the Bodhisattva precepts, Gu contends that it can in fact be interpreted to have signified "a ceremony for ascending to the position of a *chakravartin*." <sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the edict's language mirrors and cites a phrase found in *The Biography of King Ashoka*, where the monk Upagupta tells Ashoka, "The great king should know, that the Buddha has entrusted the proper Dharma to you and to me." <sup>74</sup> <sup>75</sup> By claiming this mantle of entrustment of the proper Dharma, Wendi was claiming Ashoka's mantle as a protector of the Dharma and a *chakravartin*.

Under Wendi, imperial support for Confucianism can be compared to Ashoka's support for the Vedic religion. Both sovereigns provided tacit support for their respective pre-Buddhist religions, and utilized their monarchical ideals - Ashoka using *devānampiya*, "beloved of the gods" and Wendi claiming the Mandate of Heaven - but in a larger context, both faiths were quickly marginalized in favor of Buddhism. For example, Wendi

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<sup>72</sup> Gu, Zhengmei. 167

<sup>73</sup> Gu, Zhengmei. 166-168

<sup>74</sup> *Biography of King Ashoka, Roll 1*. 阿育王傳卷第一: 「大王當知。佛以正法付囑於汝亦付囑我。」

<sup>75</sup> Gu, Zhengmei. 167

promulgated an edict in March of the first year of the Kaiyuan (開元) era (581 CE), declaring: “Prostrating in humble obeisance to the transformation of the [Buddhist] Way and harboring pure intentions, [I order] that a monastery for the sangha be placed at each of the bases of the Five Sacred Mountains (五嶽).”<sup>76</sup> The Five Sacred Mountains were of particular importance to both Confucians and Daoists, and its eastern mountain Mount Tai (泰山) had often been identified as being a seat of imperial authority since Zhou times (references to Mount Tai abound in the *Analects*, for example). By situating Buddhist temples (a “teaching of the barbarians,” as Confucian scholar Han Yu (韓愈) would scathingly declare a century later<sup>77</sup>) at each, Wendi was demonstrating a fair amount of disregard for Confucianism and as Wright puts it, “to order Buddhist monks to serve the cults of these holy places was a dramatic indication of the new dynasty’s religious preference.”<sup>78</sup>

Confucianism soon found itself marginalized in other, less material, ways. Due to the Sui’s promotion of sutra-copying, the number of Buddhist texts in circulation among the people was perhaps “a thousand times” greater than that of the Confucian *Six Classics*. (六經) Wendi also sought to emulate Ashoka in his promotion of vegetarianism and non-violence towards animals, with an edict in the third year of Kaiyuan (584 CE) saying “The root of kingly governance lies in the love of life and the fear being killed... With life being of paramount importance, all under Heaven are exhorted to save and cherish it.” The edict

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<sup>76</sup> Gu, Zhengmei. 168

<sup>77</sup> Han Yu, *A Petition Against Receiving the Buddha’s Relics*. 諫迎佛骨表: 「佛本夷狄之人。」

<sup>78</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 129

established a week in the first, fifth, and ninth months where “people near and far [from the temples] are prohibited from killing all those with life.”<sup>79</sup> On his birthday in the last year of his reign (third year of Renshou, 604 CE), he issued an edict further prohibiting the slaughter of all animals in order to repay the kindness of his parents – fulfilling the Confucian ideal of filial piety but in a distinctly Buddhist manner.<sup>80</sup>

Finally, Wendi sponsored immense “campaigns of giving” like Ashoka in which the imperial family would donate large amounts of money and material goods to the temples of the capital. In the first year of Kaiyuan, the emperor donated “14,000 rolls of silk, 5,000 units of cloth, 200 rolls of damask silk, 20 sheets of brocade” while empress Dugu Qieluo donated “5,000 strings of cash, 50 collars of felt, and 50 shaving razors.”<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, he sponsored vegetarian feasts for the monks, echoing the *Biography of King Ashoka’s* description of his sponsorship of a massive feast for Buddhist sages.<sup>82</sup>

## Wendi’s Stupa-Construction Campaigns

Yet, these numerous instances of governmental support for Buddhism were relatively minor compared to Wendi’s massive undertaking towards the end of his reign in the

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<sup>79</sup> Gu, Zhengmei. 169

<sup>80</sup> Lan, Jifu. 12

<sup>81</sup> Guo, Peng. 郭朋 *Buddhism in the Sui and Tang Dynasties*. 隋唐佛教 (Xinhua: Qilu Shushe 齊魯書社, 1982) 25

<sup>82</sup> Li, Rongxi. 41

clearest sign yet of his emulation of Ashoka. Marking his sixtieth birthday in 601 CE, Wendi issued two startling edicts: The first dismantled much of the Confucian academic system that Wendi himself had established: With the exception of a single central academy, all provincial and grand academies were abolished.<sup>83</sup> It was perhaps the greatest single act of imperial disapproval towards Confucianism that had been issued since the Han Dynasty.

More importantly, however, was the enactment of another edict the same day - this time ordering for the deployment of emissaries to all thirty provinces of the empire to distribute sharira (舍利, relics of the Buddha) for enshrinement.<sup>84</sup> It seems as if Wendi's fixation with sharira was not new, with an account telling that he had been given a relic prior to his coronation by an Indian monk proclaiming "this is the relic of the Great Awakened One's body... In the future, it will bring boundless blessings."<sup>85</sup> Wendi likely saw the construction of stupas as an immensely large guarantor of the Buddha's protection for the Sui Empire.

"Never before since King Ashoka's construction of his stupas has there existed such a grand and glorious event of sharira distribution," proclaimed the imperial records of Wendi's stupa-construction campaigns.<sup>86</sup> Furthermore, the stupas were built according to standards of Ashoka's stupas,<sup>87</sup> and relics were also sent abroad to the three Korean states of Goguryeo, Baekje and Silla. On the day of the official enshrinement, "all offices of

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<sup>83</sup> Han, Sheng. 413

<sup>84</sup> Han, Sheng. 414

<sup>85</sup> Han, Sheng. 472

<sup>86</sup> *Guang Hong Ming Ji, Roll 17*. 廣弘明集卷第十七: 「育王建塔已來。未有分布舍利紹隆勝業。」

<sup>87</sup> 廣弘明集卷第十七: 「依育王造塔本記。」

government in the capital and country save the military were to suspend operations...<sup>88</sup> while the emperor performed a solemn ceremony affirming his oaths to protect the Buddhadharma. Immediately after, the emperor and all civil and military officials were treated to a vegetarian banquet. During the entire period of stupa construction and relic propagation, Han notes “it was as if the entire empire had been thoroughly soaked in the vapor of Buddhist devotion.”<sup>89</sup>

There were, however, more campaigns to follow in 602 and 604 CE, adding another eighty-three stupas to the previous thirty. With many references to Ashoka in each edict authorizing their construction,<sup>90</sup> each stupa served as a symbol of the emperor’s self-comparison to Ashoka and his devotion to Buddhism. However, Han critiques that the recently-turned-widower Wendi was overly dependent upon such grand acts of religious extravagance in order to reassure himself of his regime’s stability,<sup>91</sup> while Wright terms them “dramatizations for all to see of the Sui commitment to Buddhism, a reminder that its ruler had indeed brought peace and unity, and that he should be revered as a great Son of Heaven and Defender of the Faith.”<sup>92</sup> Regardless of one’s views of these three campaigns, it was indeed a level of unprecedented self-identification with Ashoka.

## **Ashoka’s and Wendi’s Legacy**

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<sup>88</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 135

<sup>89</sup> Han, Sheng. 474

<sup>90</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 136

<sup>91</sup> Han, Sheng. 476

<sup>92</sup> Wright, Arthur F. 136

Wendi did not live long after the conclusion of the third stupa construction campaign - he fell ill in the summer of 604 CE and died soon after. Less than two decades after Wendi's death, the Sui Empire disintegrated, largely due to the extravagant expenditures of his successor Yang Guang and failed military expeditions against Goguryeo. Despite the inability of Wendi's stupas to secure a lasting empire for his descendants, his contributions to the propagation of Buddhism sowed the seeds for a flourishing of Buddhist literature, art, and culture during the Tang, its successor dynasty. Rightly called one of the golden ages of China's history, it is unlikely that Tang Buddhism would have been able to achieve the levels of brilliance it reached without Wendi's contributions to temple infrastructure and monastic life.

The fate of the Mauryan Dynasty was strikingly similar to the Sui, disintegrating within fifty years of Ashoka's death. Unfortunately for Ashoka, the Buddhism he had so earnestly supported soon entered a period of decline after his dynasty had perished, with the end result of Buddhism's *de facto* extinction in India today. In fact, the very memory of Ashoka was soon forgotten in India, and it was only after British excavations of his rock edicts in the 19th century that his kingship became held as a national symbol of India's glorious past.

Perhaps, in the end, it is not the material objects that both emperors donated that defined their place in history - their legacy of a strong, global Buddhist community persists today, largely due to their efforts in creating a united religious ideology and governmental structure under which Buddhism could reach the greater populace.

Further avenues of research may include an analysis of the economic toll Wendi's support of Buddhism entailed, as well as a comparative analysis of the distinct differences in Buddhist administration between Wendi and his son. I am unaware as to whether she made any formal claims to being a chakravartin, but another comparable study could be of Wu Zetian, the Tang empress who (like Wendi) solidified her power with claims to Buddhist kingship and spiritual mandate.

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*Please note that Sanskrit names have been substituted for their Pali equivalents to ensure consistency. Furthermore, to avoid an over-use of diacritics, Āsoka has been rendered as “Ashoka” within this paper, and Wéndì as “Wendi.” I’d also like to thank my high school Chinese teacher Rev. Jin Fan for helping me look over my Classical Chinese translations.*

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