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Nunneries in China during the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties

Abstract

The article examines Buddhist nunneries (nissas) during the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties. The study of Buddhist nunneries is an essential piece of exploring the history of Buddhism in China. In medieval China, particularly during the Sui and Tang dynasties, nunneries played a significant role in the religious, social, and cultural life of society. It is shown that nissa served as places of residence and practice for Buddhist nuns (bhikkhuni) and constituted an important part of Buddhist temple complexes. The modern researches in this area are insufficiently systematic and clear. Based on an analysis of historical chronicles such as the *Chang'an Zhi* (Records of Chang'an), *Sita Ji* (Records of Temples and Pagodas), *Zizhi Tongjian* (Universal Mirror Aiding Governance) and others, the author examines the role of nunneries in the history of China during the Sui and Tang periods. The novelty of this study lies in its ability to identify for the first time using translated historical materials the primary functions of women's monasteries during the period encompassing religious, social, educational, historical, and political aspects. It is revealed in terms of religious functions that women's monasteries provided nuns with a place to practice and live, and they also provided spiritual guidance to female believers. It is shown that women's monasteries served as centers of Buddhist practice for women who aspired to devote their lives to religion. Nuns studied Buddhist texts and participated in meditation and rituals. It is suggested that monasteries contributed to the spread of Buddhism among women providing them with the opportunity to engage in teachings and practices. The social functions of women's monasteries are also explored. It is established that women's monasteries were not only places for nuns but also centers where ordinary believers could come to participate in religious life. It also reveals that nunneries served as important places for cultural exchange between China and other countries facilitating the spread of Indian and Central Asian cultures. Through architecture, art, and religious ceremonies, nunneries contributed to strengthening the cultural and spiritual identity of the state. The educational functions of nunneries are explored demonstrating that nunneries served as centers of Buddhist religious learning. In monasteries, women were able to receive education, including reading, writing, and the study of Buddhist texts. This was particularly important, as women's access to education was limited in traditional Chinese society. When examining the historical role of monasteries, it is determined that nunneries witnessed numerous historical events, such as political influence, cultural exchange, and social transformation, highlighting their multifunctionality. The political influence of nunneries associated with the imperial family or aristocracy is demonstrated. Women from noble families

sometimes entered monasteries, which enhanced their influence on politics and society. In some cases, monasteries played a role in maintaining ties between different regions or countries. Nunneries in China during the Sui and Tang dynasties were not only religious centers but also important social institutions that influenced various aspects of society. As places of residence and practice for bhikkhunis, monasteries played a vital role in the education and spiritual development of women, as well as in the preservation of cultural heritage.

Keywords

Medieval China, Buddhism, Chinese Sui (581–618) and Tang (Tang 618–907) dynasties, Buddhist nunneries (nissas), bhikkhuni, cultural exchange, jieshou (taking vows), temples of imperial merit, ??, ??, ?????, ?????, ???, ???, ???.

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