



BUDDHISM AND IMPERIAL AUTHORITY UNDER WU ZETIAN: INSTITUTIONALISING THE SANGHA AS POLITICAL STATECRAFT IN EARLY TANG CHINA

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Abstract :

This study investigates how Empress Wu Zetian (r. 690–705 CE), China's only female emperor, strategically restructured the Buddhist Sangha to consolidate imperial authority in the early Tang period. While earlier scholarship often emphasizes Wu's use of Buddhist prophecy and personal devotion, this article foregrounds the **administrative and institutional transformations** that embedded Buddhism within statecraft. Drawing on primary sources—including imperial edicts in the *Jiu Tang shu* and *Xin Tang shu*, Dunhuang manuscripts, monastic biographies, and apocryphal scriptures such as the *Great Cloud Sutra*—the analysis reconstructs how the Sangha was bureaucratised through monk-official appointments, ordination examinations, and temple registration, and how its economic base expanded through land endowments and fiscal privileges. Theoretically, the article integrates Max Weber's model of charismatic and routinized legitimacy with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of religious capital to conceptualise Buddhist institutions as both ideological producers and administrative instruments. Findings reveal that Wu Zetian's mobilisation of Buddhism was not only a strategy of female legitimization in a Confucian patriarchal order, but also a catalyst for the centralisation of Tang religious governance. This case thus contributes to broader debates on **religion and state formation**, the **political uses of Buddhist institutionalisation**, and the **gendered dynamics of religious legitimacy** in imperial China.

Keywords: *Wu Zetian, Sangha Governance, Buddhist Polity, Religious Legitimacy, Tang Buddhism, Gendered Authority*

INTRODUCTION

The reign of Empress Wu Zetian (624–705 CE) remains a singular phenomenon in Chinese history. Ascending the throne in 690 CE as the only female emperor, Wu confronted the challenge of legitimising her authority in a political culture grounded in Confucian orthodoxy, which prescribed male rulership. Against this backdrop, Buddhism—especially its millenarian and cosmological traditions—emerged as a critical resource for constructing a discourse of divine rule and universal kingship (Forte, 2005; Guisso, 1978).

However, Wu Zetian's use of Buddhism went far beyond symbolic or ideological posturing. Recent scholarship has shown that her reign was marked by a profound **institutional transformation of the Sangha**, whereby Buddhist communities were reorganised into an extension of state administration (Cheng, 2010; Jia, 2012). Through mechanisms such as the appointment of monk-officials (*sengguan* 僧官), the transfer of jurisdiction over monastic affairs to the Ministry of Rites, and the economic expansion of monasteries through land grants, the Sangha became a semi-bureaucratic body embedded in Tang governance (Du, 2004; Huang, 2011).

This study builds on, but also moves beyond, previous interpretations that highlight Wu Zetian's reliance on Buddhist prophecy and self-representation as the reincarnation of Maitreya or the Devi of Pure Radiance (Chen, 2001/1932; Huang, 2017). While such ideological strategies were crucial, they were inseparable from concrete administrative reforms that bureaucratised religious life and tied the legitimacy of Buddhism to the centralising project of the Wu Zhou state (Zhang, 2018; Shi, 2023).

Accordingly, this research addresses three interrelated questions:

1. How did Wu Zetian restructure the Sangha's administrative and economic systems to serve imperial governance?
2. In what ways did this transformation contribute to her political legitimacy, particularly as a female ruler constrained by Confucian gender norms?
3. What were the reciprocal effects of this State–Sangha alliance on Buddhist autonomy during and after her reign?

The central argument advanced is that Wu Zetian did not merely patronise Buddhism but actively engineered its **institutional apparatus** to function as an auxiliary structure of the imperial State. This process can be described as *administrative sacralisation*—the use of bureaucratic mechanisms to embed religious legitimacy into statecraft while simultaneously subordinating the Sangha to imperial control.

Methodologically, the study draws upon Buddhist scriptures (e.g., the *Great Cloud Sutra*), imperial chronicles (*Jiu Tang Shu*, *Xin Tang Shu*), Dunhuang manuscripts, and epigraphic inscriptions, while adopting a prosopographical approach to trace the careers of monastic elites such as Degan, Xue Huaiyi, and Fazang. Theoretically, it integrates Weber's (1978) typology of political legitimacy with Bourdieu's (1991) concept of religious capital, thereby situating Wu Zetian's reign within a broader comparative framework of how rulers harness religious charisma to produce institutional authority.

This research contributes to three fields of inquiry. First, it enriches Tang Buddhist historiography by shifting attention from doctrinal or textual prophecy to institutional governance. Second, it expands comparative religion–state studies by highlighting how imperial power bureaucratises religious charisma in non-Western contexts (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011). Finally, it offers insights into the **gendered dimensions of Buddhist legitimation**, showing how Wu Zetian leveraged Buddhist doctrines of non-duality and bodhisattva imagery to challenge Confucian patriarchy and claim sovereign rule (Rothschild, 2015).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Wu Zetian's (624–705 CE) Buddhist policies and the institutionalisation of the Sangha during her reign has a long and diverse historiography. Over the last century, scholars have approached the subject from

various perspectives, including philological, ideological, institutional, economic, sectarian, and gendered. This review organises that scholarship into six clusters: (1) historiographical foundations, (2) textual and ideological approaches, (3) institutional and bureaucratic studies, (4) economic analyses of monasticism, (5) sectarian patronage and religious networks, and (6) gendered interpretations. It concludes with a synthesis of research gaps that frame the present study.

Historiographical Foundations (1930s–1970s)

Early studies laid the groundwork by assembling documentary sources and offering initial interpretations of Wu Zetian's relationship with Buddhism. Chen Yinke (1932/2001) was the first to systematically explore Wu Zetian's Buddhist policies, linking them to both filial piety and political expediency. His classic essay, later reprinted as *Wu Hou Yu Fojiao*, remains foundational in Sinophone historiography. In the Anglophone sphere, R. W. L. Guisso (1978) published *Wu Tse-t'ien and the Politics of Legitimation in T'ang China*, which argued that Buddhism provided Wu with the ideological resources to transform personal charisma into dynastic orthodoxy. These works, while pioneering, broadly cast Buddhism as an ideological backdrop, portraying the Sangha as a passive beneficiary of imperial support rather than an active participant in statecraft.

Textual and Ideological Studies (1980s–2000s)

A second generation of research shifted focus toward Wu Zetian's use of prophecy, apocrypha, and cosmological symbolism. Forte (2005) demonstrated through Dunhuang manuscript S.6502 that the *Great Cloud Sutra* (*Dayun jing* 大雲經) was deliberately edited to portray Wu Zetian as the Devi of Pure Radiance, thereby sanctifying her political claims. Japanese scholars, including Shinohara (1998) and Senoo (2006), further explored the political function of apocryphal sutras in Tang legitimation strategies. Wechsler (2008) analysed monumental projects such as the Ming Hall in Luoyang, interpreting them as "cosmological theatre" that projected cakravartin kingship. This scholarship illuminated the symbolic repertoire Wu Zetian employed, but it privileged textual prophecy and ideological imagery, often neglecting the institutional and administrative mechanisms that sustained legitimacy (Singh, 2025).

Institutional and Bureaucratic Approaches (2010–present)

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined the bureaucratisation of the Sangha and its integration into Tang governance. Cheng (2010) traced the development of the *sengguan* 僧官 (monk-official) system, arguing that Wu Zetian institutionalised monastic offices as extensions of civil administration. Jia (2012) reconstructed Tang Buddhist institutional frameworks, highlighting ordination registers, temple registration, and bureaucratic oversight. Shi (2023) contrasted Tang chronicles with Song-period compilations such as the *Zizhi tongjian*, showing how Confucian editors retrospectively downplayed Wu Zetian's Buddhist policies. In Anglophone scholarship, Twitchett (1970) identified parallels between civil examinations and monastic credentialing, while Liu (2015) documented the political roles of monks under the Tang. Together, these works demonstrate that Wu Zetian's reign was a watershed in the development of bureaucratic systems within the Sangha. However, they rarely connect institutional change to the ruler's unique challenges to gendered legitimacy.

Economic Dimensions of Monasticism

Parallel to institutional studies, scholars have explored the fiscal base of Tang Buddhism under Wu Zetian. Du (2004) documented the proliferation of Dayun Temples and their endowment with *ointment lands* (香火田) and water-mill estates. Di Renjie's memorials, preserved in Tang histories, warned that temple estates drained taxable acreage, though exact figures remain debated. Broader studies by Zürcher (2007) and Wang (2020) examined monastic wealth and its integration into Tang state centralization, including the famous Vairocana statue at Longmen, as both an artistic and fiscal investment. While these works highlight the economic power of monasteries, they often remain disconnected from analyses of political legitimation, treating wealth as material rather than symbolic capital (Nguyahambi & Rugeiyamu, 2025).

Sectarian Patronage and Religious Networks

Wu Zetian's reign was also pivotal in shaping the dynamics of sectarianism within Chinese Buddhism. Fazang (643–712), the patriarch of the Huayan school, rose to prominence as the *National Teacher* (*guoshi* 國師). His *Huayan jing tanxuan ji* was mobilised to interpret Wu Zetian's rule as the embodiment of cosmic harmony (Zhang, 2018; Lai, 1990). At the same time, Shenxiu's Chan lineage enjoyed significant court patronage, though later Chan polemics reframed his role (McRae, 2003). Comparative studies note that Wu Zetian strategically balanced patronage across schools to consolidate legitimacy, though systematic analysis across sects remains limited. These works demonstrate that sectarian networks served as vehicles for religious capital, but they have not been fully integrated into analyses of bureaucratic control.

Gendered Interpretations

Since the 2000s, feminist historiography has reframed Wu Zetian's Buddhist politics through the lens of gender. Rothschild (2015) argued that Buddhism offered symbolic flexibility compared to Confucian discourse, particularly through bodhisattva imagery and doctrines of non-duality. Huang (2017) analysed how Wu Zetian's appropriation of prophecy and cosmology enabled her to transcend patriarchal norms. Comparative works situate Wu alongside other female rulers, such as Japan's Empress Suiko, but emphasise her unique mobilisation of Buddhist symbolism. These studies highlight gender as a crucial analytical category, but they tend to focus on symbolic imagery rather than the intersection of gender with Sangha bureaucratisation.

Identified Research Gaps

From this survey, three critical gaps emerge:

- 1) Separation of ideology and institution: Scholarship on prophecy and cosmology often sidelines the bureaucratic machinery that embedded religious legitimacy into state governance.
- 2) Disconnect between economy and legitimacy: Studies on monastic wealth and estates rarely analyse how economic resources are translated into symbolic and political authority.
- 3) Under-theorised gender–institution nexus: Feminist scholarship underscores Wu Zetian's symbolic strategies but seldom examines how her gendered position shaped and was shaped by the bureaucratisation of the Sangha.

This study addresses these gaps by synthesising ideological, institutional, economic, and gendered perspectives through Weber's theory of routinised charisma and Bourdieu's concept of religious capital. By doing so, it reinterprets Wu Zetian's Buddhist politics as a process of administrative sacralisation that transformed the Sangha into both a symbolic and bureaucratic instrument of imperial rule.

METHODOLOGY

This article employs a composite theoretical framework that integrates Max Weber's theories of political legitimacy with Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of religious capital, enabling a nuanced analysis of how Wu Zetian's imperial regime instrumentalised Buddhist institutions—particularly the Sangha—for both symbolic and administrative purposes. The framework is operationalised through a tri-layered model—Power, System, Practice—which captures the multidimensional interaction between religion and State during the Wu Zhou dynasty (690–705 CE).

Weberian Legitimacy and Charismatic Rule in a Patriarchal Order

Weber's (1978) classic tripartite model of authority—traditional, legal-rational, and charismatic—provides a crucial entry point for understanding Wu Zetian's extraordinary rise to power. As a woman claiming the Mandate of Heaven in a Confucian patriarchal system, Wu Zetian could not rely on the "traditional authority" available to male emperors. Instead, she cultivated charismatic legitimacy, positioning herself as the prophesied Devi of Pure Radiance foretold in the *Great Cloud Sutra* (*Dayun jing* 大雲經), an apocryphal Mahāyāna text promoted and circulated under her reign (Forte, 2005; Huang, 2017).

Unlike Weber's archetype of unstable charisma, Wu Zetian's charismatic claims were institutionally stabilised through concrete innovations. She ordered the construction of Dayun Temples, orchestrated Buddhist lectures by sanctioned monastics, and sponsored monumental projects such as the Ming Hall, whose cosmological architecture mirrored Mount Sumeru and symbolically enshrined her as a universal sovereign (Wechsler, 2008). These strategies embedded charisma within bureaucratic and ritual frameworks, transforming an exceptional personal claim into routinised orthodoxy.

Recent scholarship has emphasised that Wu Zetian's case demonstrates how charisma can be routinised not only through secular administration but also through religious cosmology and ritual spectacle (Shi, 2023). In this sense, Buddhism functioned as a doctrinal and institutional scaffold for sustaining female charisma in a Confucian patriarchal context.

Bourdieu's Religious Capital and Symbolic Exchange

While Weber illuminates the macro-political logic of legitimacy, Bourdieu's (1991) concept of religious capital explains how legitimacy was negotiated within the religious field. For Bourdieu, religious authority is produced within a field of symbolic goods, where agents struggle over orthodoxy, legitimacy, and control of doctrine (Rey, 2004).

Applying this model, Wu Zetian's court emerges not simply as a patron but as an active agent within the Buddhist field. By endorsing select figures such as Fazang of the Huayan school or Xue Huaiyi of the Chan lineage, the court effectively monopolised legitimate religious discourse. State regulation of ordination procedures, temple property, and monastic titles constituted what Bourdieu describes as a process of symbolic monopolisation, converting Buddhist prophecy and ritual authority into political legitimacy (Cheng, 2010; Jia, 2012).

This symbolic exchange was reciprocal. Monks gained titles, property, and prestige, while Wu Zetian secured their ideological validation and ritual support. For example, Fazang's *Huayan jing tanxuan ji* reinterpreted cosmic harmony in ways that aligned with Wu's political sovereignty (Zhang, 2018). The relationship thus illustrates what Bourdieu termed the convertibility of capital—religious

charisma transformed into political power, and political patronage into religious prestige.

The Power–System–Practice Model

Building on Weber and Bourdieu, this study proposes a three-level model—Power, System, Practice—to analyse Sangha–state relations under Wu Zetian.

1) Power (Ideological Construction of Legitimacy)

At this level, Buddhist doctrines and scriptures were repurposed to construct a divine image of Wu Zetian. The *Great Cloud Sutra* was edited to present her as a saviour figure, while monumental works like the Ming Hall and the Vairocana at Longmen projected her as a cakravartin sovereign (Forte, 2005; Wang, 2020). This dimension illustrates Weber's notion of charisma, as cosmological symbolism enabled Wu to overturn gender and dynastic norms.

2) System (Institutional and Bureaucratic Transformation)

Wu Zetian restructured the Sangha through administrative reforms. She shifted monastic oversight from the Honglu Temple (responsible for foreign religions) to the Ministry of Rites (Zongbu), expanded the monk-official (*sengguan* 僧官) system, and standardised ordination examinations. These reforms represent the routinization of charisma through bureaucratic mechanisms, paralleling Bourdieu's notion of state control over religious fields (Cheng, 2010; Jia, 2012).

3) Practice (Local Implementation and Reciprocal Bargains)

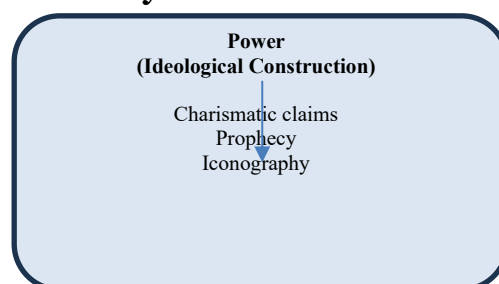
On the ground, monastic and imperial agents engaged in reciprocal negotiations. Monks such as Fazang, Degan, and Yijing provided doctrinal interpretation, ritual services, and legitimising narratives. In return, they received material patronage, administrative authority, and protection. This dimension highlights the agency of local Sangha communities, demonstrating that Wu's religious policies were not imposed unilaterally but rather mediated through practical bargains.

This three-level model moves beyond the dichotomy of patronage versus co-optation. It demonstrates that Wu Zetian's Buddhist politics constituted a layered process of administrative sacralisation, in which charisma was institutionalised, symbolic capital exchanged, and imperial and monastic interests aligned—though asymmetrically.

Comparative Reflections

Wu Zetian's case resonates with broader patterns of religio-political fusion in world history. Similar dynamics can be observed in Ashoka's India, where Buddhist edicts sacralised imperial power (Strong, 1983); in the Sakya–Yuan alliance, where Tibetan hierarchs provided legitimacy to Mongol rulers (Petech, 1990); and in Heian Japan, where temple networks became instruments of state ritual (Grapard, 1992). What makes Wu's case distinctive is the gendered dimension: as the only female emperor in Chinese history, her reliance on Buddhist charisma and institutionalisation illustrates the flexibility of Buddhist cosmology compared to the rigidity of Confucian orthodoxy.

Theoretical Framework: Power-System-Practice Model



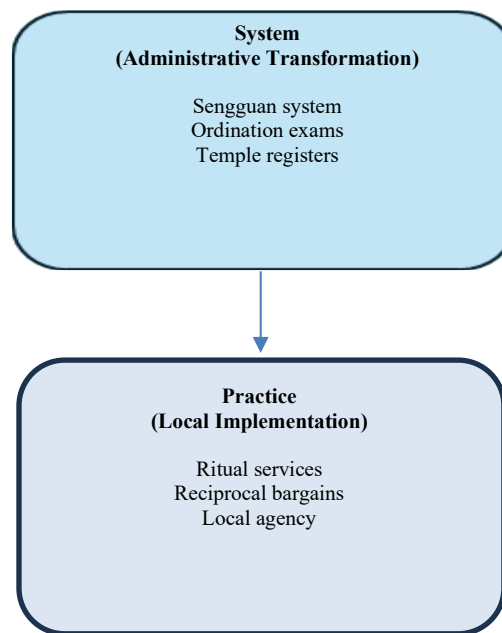


Fig. 1: Theoretical Framework

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a historical-comparative qualitative method, underpinned by textual analysis, institutional history, and prosopography, to examine how Wu Zetian restructured the Buddhist Sangha and mobilised it as an instrument of imperial governance. The research design triangulates multiple source genres—imperial edicts, monastic biographies, epigraphic data, and canonical as well as apocryphal Buddhist scriptures—to reconstruct the processes by which religious institutions were bureaucratised and sacralised during the Wu Zhou dynasty (690–705 CE).

Research Design and Rationale

The central objective of this study is to analyse how Wu Zetian reconfigured the religious field—not only for ideological projection but also for administrative control. Rather than treating Buddhist texts, rituals, or institutions in isolation, the study employs a multi-source integrative approach, situating discursive, doctrinal, and ritual elements within broader institutional processes.

This methodological strategy builds on the traditions of socio-historical religious studies (Orsi, 2005), the study of Chinese religious modernity (Goossaert & Palmer, 2011), and Tang institutional history (Twitchett, 1970; Ch'en, 1973). It is further enriched by theoretical triangulation using Weberian legitimacy theory and Bourdieusian sociology of religious capital (see Section 3).

By combining state-centered sources (imperial chronicles and edicts) with religious-centered sources (sutras, hagiographies, epigraphy, and Dunhuang manuscripts), the methodology seeks to bridge the analytic gap between ideology and institution—a gap often present in earlier studies of Wu Zetian's Buddhism.

Source Corpus

The primary sources are divided into five interrelated categories:

1) Imperial Chronicles and Edicts

The *Jiu Tang shu* 舊唐書 (*Old Book of Tang*), *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 (*New Book of Tang*), and *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (*Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance*) provide official records of Wu Zetian's policies, including monk appointments, temple construction, and Sangha regulations. These are cross-referenced with **court memorials**, such as those of Di Renjie, which critique monastic land accumulation and political entanglements between monks and the throne (Guisso, 1978).

2) Buddhist Scriptures and Apocrypha

Special attention is given to the *Great Cloud Sutra* (大雲經, *Dayun jing*), which presented Wu Zetian as the prophesied Devi of Pure Radiance. Dunhuang manuscripts (e.g., S. 6502, P. 3645) are analysed for signs of court redaction and doctrinal instrumentalisation (Forte, 2005; Shinohara, 1998). Other texts, such as the *Baoyun jing* and the *Huayan jing* (*Flower Garland Sutra*), are examined for their reinterpretation during this period.

3) Monastic Biographies and Prosopographical Records

Hagiographies and stele inscriptions related to figures such as Fazang (法藏), Xue Huaiyi (薛懷義), and Degan (德感) provide insights into how monks accrued political authority, were granted estates and titles, and served in administrative roles. Prosopographical reconstruction enables the study to identify typical trajectories in monk–state interactions (Zhang, 2018; McRae, 2003).

4) Dunhuang Manuscripts and Temple Records

Administrative documents from Dunhuang—including ordination rosters, temple inventories, and Sangha census registers (e.g., S. 1783, P. 2380)—are examined to reconstruct the operational structures of monastic economies and recruitment systems. Although geographically peripheral, these records provide critical evidence for how central policies were implemented at the local level (Huang, 2011).

5) Epigraphic and Archaeological Evidence

Inscriptions from the Longmen Grottoes and Dayun Temples serve as material corroboration of textual accounts. Dedicatory inscriptions often reference imperial sponsorship, fiscal exemptions, or connections to Wu Zetian's cosmological claims, thereby providing independent evidence of the intertwining of material patronage and ideological legitimation (Wang, 2020).

Analytical Approach

The study employs a thematic and comparative coding strategy to identify recurring motifs related to state control, monastic authority, and doctrinal adaptation.

Key thematic clusters include:

- 1) Legitimacy and prophecy (e.g., use of apocryphal sutras to sanctify female rule).
- 2) Bureaucratisation of religious personnel (e.g., transfer of Sangha jurisdiction to the Ministry of Rites in 694 CE).
- 3) Monastic landholding and fiscal policy (e.g., the Dayun Temple network).
- 4) Sectarian patronage (e.g., Huayan vs. Chan lineages at court).
- 5) Ritual integration in imperial life (e.g., Buddhist ceremonies at the Ming Hall).

A chronological mapping method situates these themes in relation to major policy shifts, such as the 690 decree elevating Buddhism above Daoism or the 694 reorganisation of Sangha administration.

Prosopographical analysis is applied to monastic figures closely associated with the court, tracing how their careers advanced or declined depending on political alignment. This allows for the identification of patterns of Analytical Approach between imperial authority and monastic actors.

Table 1: Source Corpus with Thematic Coding Thematic Coding

Source Category	Examples	Thematic Coding
Imperial Chronicles and Edicts	Jiu Tang shu, Xin Tang shu, Zizhi tongjian; court memorials (e.g., Di Renjie)	State decrees, monk appointments, temple construction, and Sangha regulation
Buddhist Scriptures and Apocrypha	Great Cloud Sutra (Dayun jing); Dunhuang MSS S.6502, P.3645; Baoyun jing; Huayan jing	Prophecy and legitimacy; doctrinal adaptation; scriptural editing
Monastic Biographies and Prosopographical Records	Fazang, Xue Huaiyi, Degan hagiographies; stele inscriptions	Career trajectories, political authority, land and title grants, and administrative roles
Dunhuang Manuscripts and Temple Records	Ordination rosters, temple inventories, Sangha census registers (e.g., S.1783, P.2380)	Recruitment procedures; temple economy; implementation of central policies
Epigraphic and Archaeological Evidence	Longmen Grottoes inscriptions; Dayun Temple dedicatory inscriptions	Imperial sponsorship; fiscal exemptions; cosmological legitimation

This table summarizes the primary sources used in the study, along with representative examples and their corresponding thematic coding. It is formatted for direct insertion into the manuscript.

Limitations and Scope

The study acknowledges several methodological limitations.

1) Fragmentary sources

Many documents from the Wu Zhou period survive only in later compilations or edited forms, often coloured by Confucian historiography hostile to Wu Zetian (Shi, 2023).

2) Geographic bias

While Dunhuang manuscripts provide rich administrative data, they represent frontier practices rather than central norms. This limitation is mitigated by **triangulating sources** across genres (chronicles, sutras, inscriptions) to establish convergent patterns.

3) Temporal scope

The primary focus is Wu Zetian's reign (690–705 CE), but the study also considers Sui–Tang precedents (e.g., early Sangha registration) and later Tang continuity (e.g., Xuanzong's restrictions) to contextualize the reforms.

Despite these challenges, the methodological design enables a robust reconstruction of how Wu Zetian transformed the Sangha into a **semi-bureaucratic apparatus of the imperial State**, embedding charisma into institutional practice. **GS**

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The empirical findings are organised according to the tri-layered model of **Power, System, and Practice**, illustrating how Wu Zetian integrated Buddhist cosmology, institutional reforms, and monastic negotiations to consolidate her imperial legitimacy.

Power: Ideological Construction of Legitimacy through Buddhist Cosmology

At the ideological level, Wu Zetian mobilised **Buddhist cosmology** to craft a sacred narrative legitimising her unprecedented status as a female emperor. Central to this project was the **appropriation of scriptural prophecy**. The *Great Cloud Sutra* (《大雲經》), an apocryphal Mahāyāna text, prophesied the appearance of a cakravartin ruler who would restore cosmic order during a degenerate age; in specific variants, this savior was described as a woman (Forte, 2005). Under imperial sponsorship, the text was repurposed to identify Wu Zetian with the **Devi of Pure Radiance** (光明女菩薩), thereby sanctifying her rule as cosmologically predestined (Huang, 2017).

Evidence from **Dunhuang manuscripts**, such as S. 6502, demonstrates editorial interventions aligning the devi figure with Wu Zetian's biography (Forte, 2005). This textual reworking was reinforced by **ritual architecture**, particularly the construction of the **Ming Tang** (明堂) and **Tian Tang** (天堂) in Luoyang. These structures were designed to mirror **Mount Sumeru cosmology**, visually enacting Wu Zetian's role as Dharma-ruling sovereign (*fa wang* 法王) (Wechsler, 2008).

Wu Zetian also **harnessed visual iconography**. The colossal Vairocana Buddha in the **Fengxian Cave at Longmen Grottoes** (c. 675–676 CE) is widely interpreted as a coded portrait of Wu Zetian herself, embodying her as a universal ruler in Buddhist guise (Zürcher, 2007; Wang, 2020). Inscriptions accompanying the statue record sponsorship from court elites loyal to Wu, embedding her charismatic authority within Buddhist visuality.

This symbolic construction addressed the Confucian contradiction of female rulership by reframing sovereignty in **Buddhist cosmological terms**. The emperor ceased to be merely the *son of Heaven* (*tianzi* 天子) and was reimagined as a **cakravartin**, a Dharma king whose legitimacy transcended gender and dynastic convention.

System: Institutional and Bureaucratic Transformation of the Sangha

At the systemic level, Wu Zetian advanced a profound **bureaucratisation of the Sangha**, transforming Buddhist institutions from recipients of patronage into regulated arms of the imperial State. This transformation unfolded through four interlocking policies:

1) Transfer of Sangha Oversight

In 694 CE, Wu Zetian transferred jurisdiction over Buddhist affairs from the **Honglu Temple** (鴻臚寺)—responsible for foreign religious contacts—to the **Ministry of Rites** (宗正寺). This domesticated monastic governance within the bureaucratic framework of civil administration (*Jiu Tang shu*, vol. 183). The State thereby monopolised ordination, temple construction, and clerical discipline, integrating the Sangha into the machinery of governance.

2) Expansion of the Monk-Official (*sengguan*) System

Wu Zetian revitalized the *sengguan* system by appointing monks such as **Xue Huaiyi**, **Degan**, and **Fazang** to bureaucratic positions. These monk-officials administered local monasteries, inspected temples, and transmitted

imperial edicts to the populace. For instance, Degan, as *Dade sengtong* (大德僧統), combined religious authority with fiscal management of temple assets (Liu, 2015). This blurred the boundary between religious charisma and bureaucratic power.

3) **Codification and Surveillance of Ordination**

Ordination procedures were standardised through literacy examinations and registration in central records, echoing the **civil service examination system**. Dunhuang manuscripts (e.g., P. 2380) document ordination quotas and exam results, evidencing how Buddhist credentialing became a state-controlled practice (Jia, 2012).

4) **Fiscal and Land Control**

Temples were endowed with **ointment lands** (香火田) and water-mill estates in exchange for ritual services and loyalty. Nevertheless, these privileges came under state surveillance, as temples were required to submit annual inventories of assets. Dayun Temple registers attest to such fiscal oversight. **Di Renjie's memorials** (in *Zizhi tongjian*, vol. 206) criticised the excessive landholdings of monasteries, underscoring tensions between fiscal rationality and religious patronage.

Through these reforms, Wu Zetian transformed the Sangha into a **semi-state apparatus**—subordinate to bureaucratic oversight but indispensable to the ideological and fiscal order of the Wu Zhou state.

Practice: Local Negotiations and Reciprocal Bargains

At the practical level, Wu Zetian's policies materialised in **reciprocal bargains** between the throne and individual monastic elites. Rather than pure co-optation, these relationships reflected negotiated exchanges of **religious legitimacy for political patronage**.

1) **Fazang (法藏)**

As patriarch of the Huayan school, Fazang was granted official titles and composed commentaries such as the *Huayan jing tanxuan ji*, which equated Wu Zetian's rule with the cosmic harmony of the Avatamsaka universe (Zhang, 2018). His court lectures aligned Huayan metaphysics with political orthodoxy, demonstrating doctrinal adaptation in service of imperial legitimacy.

2) **Xue Huaiyi (薛懷義)**

Originally a court favourite, Xue was tonsured and elevated to *Da Biqu* (Great Bhikshu). He oversaw multiple temples and public works in Luoyang, using Buddhist sermons and temple inspections to disseminate imperial propaganda (Du, 2004). Although his later downfall reveals political volatility, his career illustrates the instrumentalisation of **personal relationships** in Sangha administration.

3) **Degan (德感)**

Serving as *Sangtong* (僧統, Sangha Superintendent), Degan managed ordination and temple regulation in the capital. His administrative role integrated temple economies into urban fiscal networks and coordinated ritual labour for state ceremonies (Cheng, 2010).

At the **grassroots level**, provincial temples adapted their hagiographies and dedicatory inscriptions to align with imperial narratives. Inscriptions at Dayun Temple and Faxiang Temple invoke the phrase "offering merit for the Devi Sovereign," reflecting how religious devotion was discursively fused with political loyalty.

These practices demonstrate a system of **negotiated hegemony**: monks secured protection, prestige, and patronage, while Wu Zetian consolidated legitimacy through ritual services, doctrinal validation, and symbolic representation.

Integration of Findings

Table 2: Power – System – Practice

Dimension	Key Mechanisms	Effects on Wu Zetian's Legitimacy	Effects on the Sangha
Power (Ideology)	Scriptural prophecy (Great Cloud Sutra), cosmological architecture (Ming Tang, Longmen Vairocana), sacred imagery (Devi of Pure Radiance)	Reframed sovereignty beyond Confucian patriarchy; legitimised female rule as cosmologically predestined	Enhanced symbolic authority through imperial sponsorship; association with sacred prophecy and imagery
System (Institution)	Transfer of Sangha oversight (694 CE), monk-official appointments, codified ordination exams, fiscal land control, and temple registers.	Embedded Sangha within state bureaucracy; routinised charisma through administrative structures	Loss of autonomy under state surveillance; integration into the fiscal and administrative apparatus
Practice (Local)	Reciprocal bargains between throne and monks (Fazang, Xue Huaiyi, Degan), temple inscriptions aligning merit with imperial legitimacy	Localized enactment of imperial ideology; secured loyalty through ritual services and doctrinal validation	Access to patronage, titles, land, and opportunities for political influence via negotiated loyalty

This table synthesises the empirical findings across the three dimensions of the analytical framework (Power, System, Practice). It highlights the key mechanisms employed, the effects on Wu Zetian's legitimacy, and the consequences for the Sangha. The structure prepares the ground for the subsequent Discussion section.

DISCUSSION

The empirical findings reveal a **sophisticated, multi-layered interaction between religion and State** under Wu Zetian, one that cannot be adequately explained by the binary of *patronage versus co-optation*. Instead, the combined application of **Weber's theory of charismatic and routinised legitimacy** and **Bourdieu's theory of religious capital** enables a nuanced reading of how imperial authority and Buddhist institutions were **co-constructed** in the early Tang. The Power–System–Practice model proposed here demonstrates how legitimacy was simultaneously ideological, institutional, and negotiated in practice.

Charisma Institutionalised: Weberian Legitimacy in Practice

Wu Zetian's invocation of **Buddhist prophecy and sacred kingship** constitutes a textbook case of charismatic legitimacy. Nevertheless, unlike her male predecessors, who could rely on dynastic lineage, Wu had to construct **cosmic legitimacy** through alternative symbolic means. The *Great Cloud Sutra*, with its prophecy of a female saviour, and monumental projects such as the **Ming Tang** were central to this redefinition of sovereignty as **cosmologically ordained** (Forte, 2005; Wechsler, 2008).

As Weber (1978) predicts, charisma must undergo **routinisation** to be sustainable. Wu Zetian institutionalized her charisma through the creation of Dayun Temples, the codification of ordination procedures, and the incorporation of Buddhist cosmology into architectural forms. These mechanisms stabilised a radical claim—**female rulership in a Confucian order**—by making it appear as institutional orthodoxy.

Significantly, **Buddhism provided the theological and institutional scaffolding** that Confucianism denied. Its doctrines of non-duality and gender-neutral soteriology allowed her claims to be framed as spiritually legitimate, illustrating the adaptability of Buddhism in contexts of political innovation (Rothschild, 2015; Huang, 2017).

Religious Capital and Symbolic Exchange: A Bourdieusian View

Bourdieu's concept of **religious capital** further explains how legitimacy was negotiated within the Buddhist field. Wu Zetian's regime did not simply patronise Buddhism; it actively **reshaped the field of religious production**. By elevating figures such as Fazang, Xue Huaiyi, and Degan, regulating ordination, and controlling temple landholdings, the State effectively **monopolised legitimate religious discourse** (Cheng, 2010; Jia, 2012).

In return, monastic elites received **symbolic capital** (titles, visibility, doctrinal authority) and **material capital** (land, tax exemptions, temple patronage). This reciprocal exchange illustrates Bourdieu's (1991) insight that capital is **convertible across fields**: monks transformed religious charisma into political authority, while Wu Zetian converted political patronage into spiritual validation.

Importantly, this process was not unidirectional. Monks such as **Fazang** used imperial support to advance their sectarian visions—particularly **Huayan cosmology as a model for universal harmony**—demonstrating that Buddhist actors retained agency and strategically leveraged imperial power (Zhang, 2018). Thus, Wu Zetian's Buddhist governance was characterised by **bidirectional symbolic exchange**, not mere top-down control.

Toward a Model of Religious Governance in Early Imperial China

The **Power–System–Practice model** provides a structured lens for synthesising these findings.

1) At the **Power level**, Buddhist cosmology and iconography reframed Wu Zetian's rule as cosmologically predestined and gender-transcendent.

2) At the **System level**, Sangha institutions were reorganised into a quasi-bureaucratic arm of the State, stabilising charismatic claims through legal-administrative oversight.

3) At the **Practice level**, reciprocal bargains between court and monks translated imperial ideology into local ritual enactment, inscriptions, and doctrinal adaptations.

This tripartite model moves beyond functionalist readings of religion as "mere ideology." It highlights the **institutional embeddedness of charisma** and the **strategic agency of monastic elites**, showing how religious and political legitimacy were **co-produced** in Wu Zhou, China.

Comparative and Theoretical Implications

The findings carry broader implications for the study of **religion–state interaction in East Asia**. Wu Zetian's mobilisation of Buddhism resonates with other historical patterns of religio-political fusion:

1) **Ashoka's Maurya Empire** (3rd c. BCE), where Buddhist edicts sacralised imperial rule (Strong, 1983).

2) The **Sakya–Yuan alliance** (13th–14th c.), where Tibetan hierarchs legitimised Mongol rule (Pete, 1990).

3) **Heian and Tokugawa Japan**, where temple networks became integrated into state ritual and population registration systems (Grapard, 1992).

Wu Zetian's case, however, stands out for its **gendered configuration of power**. By leveraging Buddhist doctrines of universality and non-duality, she stretched the boundaries of what was politically possible in a Confucian patriarchal system. This demonstrates that **religious legitimation is not only a tool of rulers but also a discursive space where gendered authority can be renegotiated**.

Theoretically, the study underscores the value of combining **Weberian legitimacy theory** with **Bourdieuian field analysis**. Weber highlights the structural necessity of routinising charisma, while Bourdieu illuminates the symbolic and material exchanges within the religious field. Together, they explain how **imperial charisma was institutionalised, exchanged, and enacted** through a Buddhist framework.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

This study has explored how Wu Zetian (r. 690–705 CE), China's only female emperor, reconfigured the Buddhist Sangha as both a symbolic and institutional instrument of rule. Through a close reading of textual, epigraphic, and institutional evidence, guided by Weber's theory of charismatic and routinized legitimacy, together with Bourdieu's sociology of religious capital, the analysis has demonstrated that Wu Zetian's Buddhist politics constituted neither mere patronage nor simple co-optation. Instead, her regime was characterised by a dynamic process of **mutual constitution**, in which imperial authority and monastic institutions reinforced one another within a multi-layered field of power.

At the level of ideology, Wu Zetian mobilised Buddhist prophecy, cosmology, and iconography to transform the apparent anomaly of female rulership into a divinely sanctioned necessity. The *Great Cloud Sutra*, monumental ritual spaces such as the Ming Tang, and the Longmen Vairocana statue collectively reframed sovereignty in cosmological rather than genealogical terms. This ideological construction was not a rhetorical ornament, but a foundational resource for legitimizing a political order that Confucian orthodoxy could not support. Buddhism's doctrines of universality and gender transcendence supplied precisely the theological flexibility needed to stabilise her charismatic claim to power.

However, charisma alone could not sustain an imperial regime. As Weber anticipated, legitimacy required routinisation. Wu Zetian's transformation of the

Sangha into a semi-bureaucratic arm of the State achieved precisely this. By shifting monastic oversight to the Ministry of Rites, expanding the monk-official system, regulating ordination through examinations, and supervising temple landholdings, she embedded Buddhist institutions within the machinery of governance. These reforms institutionalised charisma, translating extraordinary claims into administrative routines and thus rendering female sovereignty a matter of bureaucratic orthodoxy as well as cosmological truth.

At the same time, the empirical findings reveal that the court's interaction with the Sangha was not a unilateral imposition but a **reciprocal negotiation**. Monks such as Fazang, Xue Huaiyi, and Degan capitalised on imperial support to advance their own doctrinal visions, secure patronage, and expand sectarian influence. In return, they provided the State with ritual services, doctrinal commentaries, and public demonstrations of loyalty. Temple inscriptions and provincial hagiographies further attest to the fact that local communities actively aligned their religious practices with imperial narratives. The resulting system was one of negotiated hegemony: Wu Zetian relied on the Sangha for legitimacy, while monks relied on imperial patronage for symbolic and material capital.

Implications

The broader implication of this analysis is that Wu Zetian's reign exemplifies how **religion and politics were co-constructed in early imperial China**. The Sangha was not merely an ideological ornament or a passive beneficiary of state favour, but an active participant in shaping and sustaining imperial authority. By mobilising Buddhist cosmology at the level of power, embedding monastic administration within bureaucratic systems, and negotiating ritual and doctrinal exchanges at the local level, Wu Zetian created a multi-layered model of religious governance that integrated charisma, institution, and practice.

Comparatively, this model resonates with other instances of Buddhist statecraft in Asia—whether Ashoka's sacralisation of kingship in India, the Sakya–Yuan alliance in Tibet and Mongolia, or Tokugawa Japan's danka system. Nevertheless, Wu Zetian's case is distinctive in its gendered dimension. By appropriating Buddhist doctrines of non-duality and cosmic universality, she transcended the patriarchal limits of Confucian legitimacy and established an unprecedented form of female rulership. Her regime demonstrates not only the adaptability of Buddhism to political innovation but also the potential of religious cosmology to expand the boundaries of what was politically possible.

Theoretically, this study shows the value of combining Weber and Bourdieu in the analysis of religion–state relations. Weber illuminates how charisma can be institutionalised, while Bourdieu reveals the mechanisms of capital exchange within the religious field. Together, they clarify how imperial charisma was stabilised, converted, and enacted through Buddhist institutions. Historically, the findings contribute to our understanding of Tang religious governance, highlighting Wu Zetian's role in shaping the bureaucratisation of the Sangha, which would influence Tang policies long after her reign.

Ultimately, Wu Zetian's Buddhist statecraft illustrates that religious institutions are not peripheral to politics but integral to the constitution of authority. By embedding charisma in cosmology, routine, and ritual exchange, she demonstrated how religious legitimation could sustain even the most radical political experiment: the rule of a female emperor in a Confucian world.

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