

Scientific article

DOI 10.28995/2073-0101-2026-3-651-673

For citation

Markhanova, T. F. (2026). Nunneries in China during the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties, *Herald of an Archivist*, no. 3, pp. 651-673. DOI 10.28995/2073-0101-2026-3-651-673

Markhanova, T. F., Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist, and Tibetan Studies of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences

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

Abstract

The article examines Buddhist nunneries (nisas) 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 nisa 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, ??, ??, ?????, ?????, ???, ???, ???.

Download the article: [markhanova_doi](#)

References

Bokshchanin, A. A. (2010). Rulers of China. IN: Blyumkhen, S. I. (Comp. and ed.) Scientific Notes of the China Department, Society and State in China, XL Scientific Conference, iss. 2, Moscow, Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies publ., pp. 71–79.

Torchinov, E. A. (2000). The Chinese Worldview and Buddhism, on the Question of the Nature of the Interaction between the Cultures of China and India. IN: Kolesnikov, I. A. (Ed.). (2000). History of Philosophy, Culture, and Worldview. A Collection of Articles for the 60th Anniversary of Professor A. S. Kolesnikov, iss. 3, St. Petersburg, St. Petersburg Philosophical Society publ., URL:

https://portalus.ru/modules/philosophy/rus_readme.php?subaction=showfull&id=1109258262&archive=0217-2&start_from=&ucat=& (Accessed: 11.07.2026).

Ulanov, M. S., Badmaev, V. N. (2024). Women's Buddhist Monastic Community in modern Chinese history, Cultural Studies, no. 3, pp. 54–61.

Khabdaeva, A. K. (2015). First Chinese Buddhist Monks and the Forming Monk Organisation in China, Bulletin of Kalmyk University, no. 1 (25), pp. 85–90.

Kharnsky, K. (1927). China from Ancient Times to the Present Day. Khabarovsk, Vladivostok, Knizhnoe Delo publ., 440 p.

Yangutov, L. E. (1998). Chinese Buddhism, Texts, Research, and Dictionary, Ulan-Ude, Buryat State University publ., 159 p.

Duan, Chengshi (???). (1981). Records of Temples and Pagodas (???), Beijing, Zhonghua publ. (?????), Juan 5, URL: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=994716> (Accessed: 15.03.2025).

Duan, Chengshi (???). (1981). Notes from Yuyang, Notes on Temples and Pagodas (lower part) (????). (????), Beijing, Zhonghua publ. (?? ????), Juan 10, URL: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=539485> (Accessed:21.03.2025).

Ennin (??) (1993). Notes on a Pilgrimage to Tang in Search of Dharma (????????), Integrated Collection of Digital Buddhist Texts, Digital Buddhist Texts Foundation (????????????????), Juan 3, URL: <https://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT/sutra/B/B0095.pdf> (Accessed:

20.03.2025).

Guo, Haiwen (???) (2012). A multifaceted study of female Buddhist monasteries in the Chang'an area during the Sui and Tang eras (?????????), Xi'an University Herald, Social Science Publication (????????????????, no. 4, pp. 57–60, URL: <https://wendang.xuehi.cn/doc/5anmryk1zhy2fwezwx62n0xyuob93d8.html> (Accessed: 18.03.2025).

Guo, Haiwen (???). (2017). A Preliminary Study on the Reasons for the Construction of Buddhist Nunneries in Chang'an during the Sui and Tang Dynasties (????????????????), A Study of Chan Buddhism and Human Civilization (????????), no. 2, pp. 19–34.

Gong, Guoqiang (???) (2006). A Study of Buddhist Temples in Chang'an during the Sui and Tang Dynasties (?????????), Beijing, Wenwu chubanshe (????????), 305 p., URL: <https://book.douban.com/subject/1965340/> (Accessed: 15.03.2025).

Hui, Li (??)., Yan, Congjian (???). (1983). Biography of Xuanzang of Daqien Monastery (????????), Beijing, Zhonghua publ. (??, ???), Juan 8, URL: https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T2053_008 (Accessed: 20.03.2025).

Li, Baiyao (???) (2003). History of Northern Qi (???), Beijing, Zhonghua publ. (?????), Juan 9, URL: <http://www.guoxue123.com/shibu/0101/00bqs/008.htm> (Accessed: 20.03.2025).

Liu, Xu (??) (1975). Old History of Tang, Section "Basic Records of the Reign of Emperor Daizong" (??? ???), Beijing, Zhonghua publ. (?????), Juan 11, URL: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=816833> (Accessed: 15.03.2025).

Li, Yuzhen (???) (1989). Buddhist nuns (bikkhuni) of the Tang Dynasty (?????), Taipei, Xuesheng publ. (?????), 248 p., URL: <https://book.douban.com/subject/10519005/> (Accessed: 20.03.2025).

Sima, Guang???? (1965). *A Universal Mirror to Aid Management*, Tang Chronicles, Section 39 (???? ????). Beijing, Zhonghua publ. (?????), Juan 223, URL: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=412980&remap=gb> (Accessed: 20.03.2025).

Song, Minqiu (???). Xin, Deyong (???). Lang, Jie (??). (2013). *Description of Chang'an with illustrations* (??????), Xi'an, Sanqin publ. (??????), Juan 8, URL: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=98366> (Accessed: 22.03.2025).

Wang, Pu (??). (1955). *Code of Tang Establishments* (???). Beijing, Zhonghua publ. (??, ???). Juan 48, URL: <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=en&chapter=275761> (Accessed: 18.03.2025).

Wang, Qinruo (???). Zhou, Xunchu (???). (2006). *Library Treasures, Imperial Biographies Section* (???? ????), Nanjing, Fenghuang publ. (??????), Juan 51, URL: <https://www.sanmin.com.tw/product/index/001239818> (Accessed: 18.03.2025).

Zhang, Gong (??). (1997). *The cultural history of Buddhist monasteries in the Han and Tang dynasties* (??????), Beijing, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences publ. (????????), 570 p., URL: <https://www.sklib.cn/booklib/bookPreview?SiteID=122&ID=7100455&fromSubID=843> (Accessed: 14.03.2025).

Charleux, I., Goossaert, V. (2003). *The Physical Buddhist Monastery in China*, *Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient*. In: Pichard, P., Lagirarde, F. (?d.). *The Buddhist Monastery, a Cross-cultural Survey*, pp. 305–350, URL: <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00006205v1> (Accessed: 18.03.2025).

Georgieva, V. (1996). *Representation of Buddhist Nuns in Chinese Edifying Miracle Tales during the Six Dynasties and the Tang*, *Journal of Chinese Religions*, no. 24, pp. 47–96.

Georgieva, V. (2000). *Buddhist Nuns in China, From the Six Dynasties to Tang*, Leiden publ., 386 p.

Heirman, A. (2015). Buddhist Nuns through the Eyes of Leading Early Tang Masters, *The Chinese Historical Review*, no. 22 (1), pp. 31–51.

Shih, P. C. Shih, P. C. Tsai, K. A. (1994). *Lives of the Nuns, Biographies of Chinese Buddhist Nuns from the Fourth to the Sixth Centuries*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii publ., 216 p.

About authors

Markhanova Tatyana Fridrikhovna, PhD in History, Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist, and Tibetan Studies of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMBTS SB RAS), junior researcher, Ulan-Ude, Russia, +7-924-777-30-34, tatiya6a@mail.ru

ORCID 0009-0003-0449-1484

Grant information

The paper was prepared within the framework of the state assignment “Broadcasting and modernization of Buddhism in the context of its unity and diversity in Russia and the countries of East and Inner Asia”, No. 126020516675-9, https://vk.com/wall-219251042_1265

The article was received in the editorial office on 4.04.2025, recommended for publication on 20.06.2026

You can read completely article in the russian historic-archival magazine “The Herald of an Archivist”. Read more about terms of subscription [here](#) .

Полностью материал публикуется в российском историко-архивоведческом журнале ВЕСТНИК АРХИВИСТА. Ознакомьтесь с условиями подписки [здесь](#) .