

Article

Building and Rebuilding Buddhist Monasteries in Tang China: The Reconstruction of the Kaiyuan Monastery in Sizhou

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Abstract: This article explores regional Buddhist monasteries in Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) China, including their arrangement, functions, and sources for their study. Specifically, as a case study, it considers the reconstruction of the Kaiyuan monastery 開元寺 in Sizhou 泗州 (present-day Jiangsu Province) with reference to the works of three prominent state officials and scholars: Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), Li Ao 李翱 (772–841), and Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824). The writings of these literati allow us to trace the various phases of the monastery’s reconstruction, fundraising activities, and the network of individuals who participated in the project. We learn that the rebuilt multi-compound complex not only provided living areas for masses of pilgrims, traders, and workers but also functioned as a barrier that protected the populations of Sizhou and neighboring prefectures from flooding. Moreover, when viewed from a broader perspective, the renovation of the Kaiyuan monastery demonstrates that Buddhist construction projects played a pivotal role in the social and economic development of Tang China’s major metropolises as well as its regions.

Keywords: regional monasteries; Tang Buddhism; stela inscriptions; Kaiyuan monastery; Sizhou; ordination platforms



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1. Introduction

China’s Buddhist community gained extraordinary power and imperial patronage during the Tang Dynasty, which facilitated an unprecedented spread of monasticism throughout the empire¹. Historical records indicate that there were 4600 state monasteries and approximately 40,000 smaller, private institutions by 845². Tang rulers appreciated that this network of Buddhist monasteries had the potential to sustain the imperial state’s power, protect the legitimacy of the ruling clan, boost the economy, and maintain central control over the regions. Consequently, the ruling elite lavishly sponsored new building projects as well as the reconstruction of monasteries that had fallen into disrepair. Moreover, members of the imperial family, officials, and eunuchs all donated their private mansions to the state for conversion into monasteries (Forte 1983). Often enormous in scale, state monasteries could easily accommodate dozens of resident monastics, and the senior monks were increasingly recognized as key members of the upper echelons of Tang society.

To date, scholars have tended to focus on the histories, networks, patronage, and architecture of court-sponsored monasteries that were located in the capitals of successive Chinese dynasties: Pingcheng 平城, Luoyang 洛陽, Yecheng 鄴城, and Chang’an 長安 (e.g., Forte 1992; Xiao 2003; Gong 2006; Zhang 2008; He 2013b; Chen 2015). In contrast, China’s regional monasteries have received relatively little attention³. This article takes a close

¹ The literature on monasticism during this period is vast. See, among many other sources: (Goossaert 2000; Heirman and Stephan 2007; Xie and Bai 1990).

² These are the official figures of monastic institutions that were dismantled and destroyed during the Huichang 會昌 persecution of Buddhism (840–46). See (Weinstein 1987, p. 134).

³ There are a handful of exceptions to this rule, including Evelyne Mesnil’s excellent study on the Dashengci monastery 大聖慈寺 in Chengdu (Mesnil 2006).

look at the Kaiyuan monastery 開元寺 in Sizhou 泗州 (present-day Jiangsu Province), an important regional institution that was dedicated to the cult of the Buddhist monk Sengqie 僧伽 (628–710) and housed a Buddha tooth relic. After becoming a thriving pilgrimage site in the middle of the eighth century, the monastery was destroyed by fire towards the end of that century, which led to demands for its reconstruction among the local citizenry and foreign pilgrims alike. These calls were eventually answered at the start of the next century with the launch of a large-scale restoration project that was chronicled by three state officials, Bai Juyi 白居易 (772–846), Li Ao 李翱 (772–841), and Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824), who documented the work on behalf of the monastery’s clergy. These scholars’ detailed accounts demonstrate that the rebuilt Kaiyuan monastery soon became a grand, multi-functional institution, an important ordination center, and one of the major drivers of southern China’s religious, social, and economic development during the first half of the ninth century. Moreover, they highlight the significance of China’s regional monasteries as sites of considerable influence and power within a broad network of state monasteries that stretched across the Tang Empire.

2. Buddhist Monasteries in Tang China

2.1. Functions

Tang Buddhist monasteries were typically established by the ruling elite to secure supernatural protection for the dynasty through the good offices of communities of authoritative monks. Therefore, many of the religious rites they performed were formulated to protect the emperor and his ancestors from harm, to maintain the prosperity and stability of the imperial state, and to obtain posthumous peace for loyal soldiers who had died in battle (Zürcher 2014, p. 98). In addition, emperors and princes sometimes established state monasteries for more specific purposes, such as to commemorate or safeguard a beloved parent or spouse (Forte 1983, p. 686). A number of scholars have demonstrated that state monasteries were not merely centers of religious activity but also functioned as social, political, and economic institutions (e.g., Yang 1950; Twitchett 1956; Gernet 1995). James Robson provides a useful summary: “Chinese Buddhist monasteries, in addition to being places for traditional Buddhist contemplative practices, also served as granaries, mills, treasuries, orphanages, pawnbrokers, land stewards, auction houses, and sites of marketplaces and community festivals” (Robson 2009, p. 44). Moreover, as they played a crucial role in the translation of Buddhist scriptures, they became important centers of general scholasticism and education. Erik Zürcher has demonstrated that some monasteries started to combine their religious activities with secular education as early as the fourth century (Zürcher 1989), but the phenomenon reached its height during the Tang Dynasty, when many monastic institutions served as educational retreats where scholar-officials could take sabbaticals from their official duties to study a variety of secular as well as religious subjects (Yan 1992, pp. 271–316). In sum, Tang Buddhist monasteries’ myriad functions within many areas of religious, social, and political life were closely linked with their architectural development.

2.2. Architecture

Scholarship on medieval Chinese Buddhist architecture demonstrates that the layout of state monasteries was strongly influenced by the urban architecture of Tang China’s capital, Chang’an, especially the *Mingtang* 明堂, a central hall of imperial palace where all important ritual ceremonies and secular events were held, and the palace-city (Ledderose 1980, pp. 238–48; Wang 2000; He 2013a, pp. 5–6). A compound (*yuan* 院)—that is, a rectangular courtyard enclosed by rammed-earth walls or a portico—was the basic unit of every typical medieval Chinese Buddhist monastery. As places that had to accommodate both devout religious observance and the practicalities of daily life, the compounds of large monasteries included a number of separate buildings, each of which served a particular function. He (2013b, pp. 61–63) provides detailed descriptions of the main and auxiliary buildings within a typical monastic compound. The main buildings consisted of a middle

gate (*zhongmen* 中門), an enclosing corridor (*lang* 廊), a roofed corridor (*langwu* 廊廡), a continuous rammed-earth wall (*hangtuqiang* 夯土牆), a pagoda (*ta* 塔), a Buddha Hall (*fodian* 佛殿), and a lecture hall (*jiangtang* 講堂). Among the auxiliary buildings, there were quarters (*sengfang* 僧房), meditation rooms (*chanshi* 禪室), *sūtra* halls (*jingtang* 經堂), and a bell tower (*zhonglou* 鐘樓).

In his diagram of an ideal monastic compound (Figure 1)⁴, the eminent *vinaya* reformer Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) also includes oil and flour depositories, kitchens, a bathing house, and toilets⁵. Moreover, he insists that monastic ordinations within a monastery must be conducted on an ordination platform (*jietan* 戒壇)—a five-tier structure that would serve as a divine location for the Buddha’s presence (McRae 2005, pp. 72, 90–93). Many of these structures were established within the main compounds of China’s monasteries in the decades after Daoxuan’s death (McRae 2005, p. 88). In the early eighth century, government officials realized that fortunes could be made by authorizing ordinations of those who were willing to pay for the privilege in order to secure exemption from taxes and corvée labor (Ch’en 1964, p. 242). Hence, regional governors adopted the lucrative practice of purchasing ordination certificates and then selling them for personal gain (Barrett 2005, pp. 101–22; Gernet 1995, pp. 48–62; McRae 2005, pp. 69–93; Weinstein 1987, pp. 92, 109), which accelerated the establishment of ordination platforms within monastic complexes throughout China.

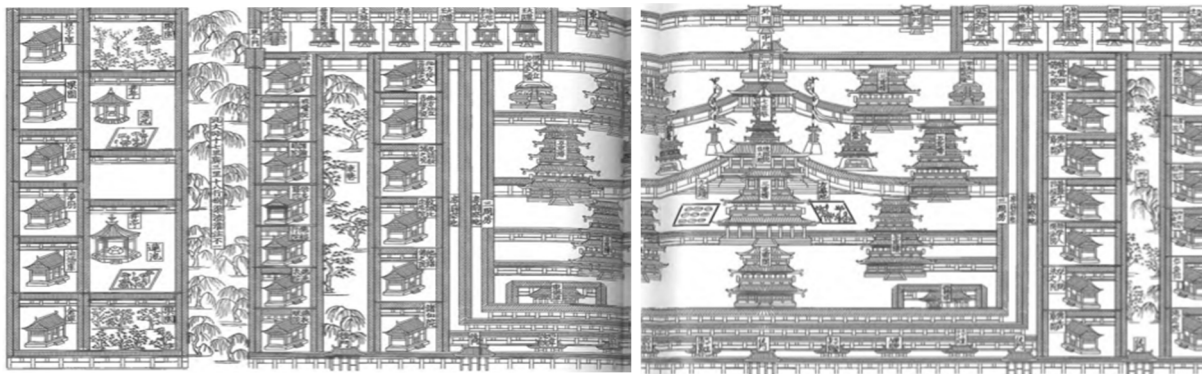


Figure 1. Diagram of Daoxuan’s ideal monastery, based on his vision of the Jetavana monastery. Source: (Teiser 2006, pp. 138–39), adapted from Daoxuan’s original drawing (T no. 1892.45: 811b10–813b29).

The “multi-compounds” and “multi-halls” layout came to dominate Chinese Buddhist monastic design between the fifth and seventh centuries. This development was closely linked to the evolution of city planning at that time. The typical city was laid out in a grid pattern, with all of the buildings—aside from the Imperial Palace and the most important government buildings—arranged around courtyards, the courtyards grouped into wards (*fang* 坊), and each ward forming a single block (see Figure 2). Lothar Ledderose stresses:

Each ward contained one or several courtyards, depending on their size and function. Inside were public agencies, monasteries, ancestor temples, and countless larger and smaller residences . . . The similarities in the layout of the courtyards made it easy to exchange functions—for instance, to convert a private residence into a monastery or a monastery into a government office.

(Ledderose 2000, p. 115)

⁴ See Daoxuan’s *Zhong Tianzhu Sheweiguo Qihuansi tu jing* 中天竺舍衛國祇洹寺圖經 (Diagram and Sūtra on the Jetavana Temple of Vaiśālī in Central India), which includes a sketch of his vision of the ideal monastery, the Jetavana monastery in India, where the Buddha lived and preached (Ho 1995). See (Teiser 2006, pp. 140–41) for descriptions of the individual buildings within the complex.

⁵ On Daoxuan’s inclusion of bath and toilet houses on his diagram, see (Heirman and Torck 2012, pp. 37–40).

As monasteries' power increased and their range of social functions steadily grew, their monastic complexes started to expand, too. Moreover, the urban grid pattern meant that new compounds could be inserted into a cityscape with relative ease. For instance, archaeological excavations and historical documents clearly show that a Buddhist monastery was embedded in Luoyang's grid in the early sixth century (He 2013b, p. 201). By the following century, the multi-compound layout had surpassed all others as the preferred form of monastic design in China. The great imperial monasteries might boast a dozen or more compounds, and thousands of buildings, within their confines. For instance, in Chang'an's famous Daci'en monastery 大慈恩寺:

There were multi-story buildings, halls towering high, and densely built houses. A total of ten or more compounds with one thousand eight hundred and ninety-seven houses altogether.

重樓複殿，雲閣洞房。凡十餘院，總一千八百九十七間。⁶

A number of drawings from Dunhuang 敦煌 murals indicate that Tang monasteries typically consisted of several compounds separated from one another by walls or porticoes, with each major compound usually having its own hall (see Figures 3 and 4).

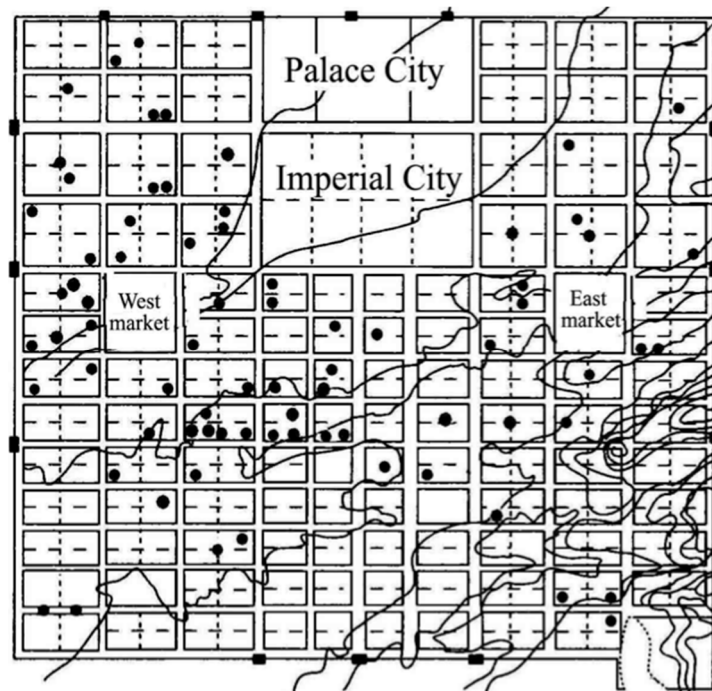


Figure 2. Map of Chang'an, early Tang period, illustrating the distribution of Buddhist monasteries and nunneries in every ward. Source: Adapted from (He 2013b, p. 199).

⁶ Huili 慧立 (615–c. 677) and Yancong 彦棕 (fl. 688), Da Tang da Ciensi sanzang fashi zhuan 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 (Biography of the “Master of the Three Canons,” Dharma Master [Xuanzang] of Great Cien Monastery [under] the Great Tang), T no. 2053.50: 258a16–17 (He 2013b, p. 71).

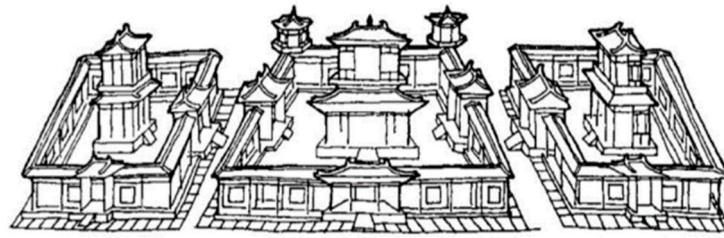


Figure 3. Monastic complex in a line drawing of Dunhuang mural, north wall of Cave 231, mid-Tang period. Source: Adapted from (Xiao 2003, p. 70).

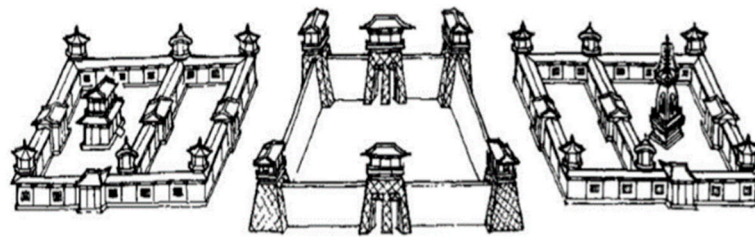


Figure 4. Monastic complex in a line drawing of Dunhuang mural, west ceiling of Cave 85, late Tang period. Source: Adapted from (Xiao 2003, p. 70).

These images are considered to be accurate representations of Tang monastic complexes in the major metropolises of Chang’an and Luoyang as well as Dunhuang itself (Xiao 2003, pp. 35–81). As a result, they are crucial sources of information on the layout of medieval state monasteries, especially in the absence of any major archaeological discoveries. Locally produced sources, such as carved stelae (*bei* 碑) and gazetteers (*difangzhi* 地方誌)⁷, are similarly important, as some of them include images of Song Dynasty (960–1279) or later regional monasteries and temples that bear a remarkable resemblance to the institutions depicted in the Dunhuang murals. For instance, a Song stele etching of the Daoist Zhongyue Temple 中嶽 in Dengfeng 登封, near Mount Song 嵩山, Henan Province (Figure 5), and a sketch of the Fangguang monastery 方廣寺 on Mount Hengyue 衡嶽, Hunan Province, in a Ming (1368–1644) gazetteer (Figure 6) both depict an enclosed, rammed-earth monastic compound. Both of these religious institutions were also active throughout the Tang era. Finally, we can supplement this visual evidence with information gleaned from written records that Tang state officials composed on behalf of local monastic communities. Although they lack images, these texts provide comprehensive, eyewitness accounts of regional Buddhism that enable us to trace the development of the monasteries’ functions and architectural patterns throughout the empire.

⁷ Local gazetteers are major sources of information on local monasteries from the Song Dynasty onwards. The term “local gazetteers” was often used collectively to refer to various kinds of geographical texts. These works played a crucial role in reinforcing the links between China’s central government and the provinces. Moreover, they provided vital information on strategic locations and military matters because they included comprehensive reports and maps of the whole empire. As a result, they were produced in vast quantities in China’s provinces. On the historical development of local gazetteers, see, among others, (Hargett 1996).

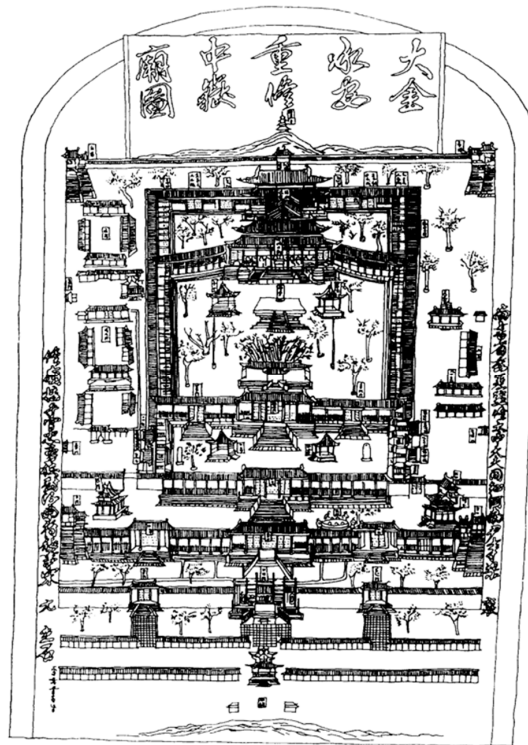


Figure 5. “Da Jin Chengan zhongxiu Zhongyue miao tu bei” 大金承安重修中嶽廟圖碑 (“Stele with a Depiction of the Newly Rebuilt Zhongyue Temple during the Cheng’an [Era] of the Great Jin [Dynasty]”), dated 1200. Source: (Xiao 2003, p. 74).

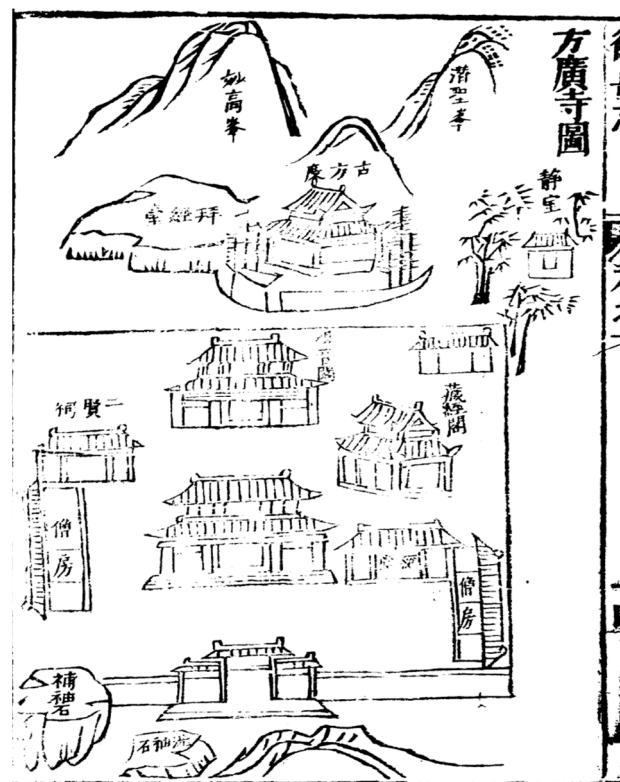


Figure 6. Hengyue zhi 衡嶽志 (Gazetteer of [Mount] Hengyue), compiled by Peng Zan 彭簪 (?-?), dated 1528. Source: Siku quanshu cunmu congshu 四庫全書存目叢書, vol. 229, p. 266.

2.3. Textual Sources of Information on Regional Monasteries

Texts composed by state officials during the Tang Dynasty—both prose and poetry—are unusually rich sources of information on the growth of regional monasticism in medieval China. In particular, scholar-officials' records (*ji* 記) and inscriptions (*beiming* 碑銘) contain a wealth of data on local monastic institutions in the Tang period⁸.

The long-standing system of temporary administrative and military appointments as well as the collapse of central government in the wake of a rebellion launched by General An Lushan 安祿山 (703–757) in 755 contributed to an unprecedented dispersal and circulation of the elite to all corners of the empire, especially the southern regions. This mass migration of state officials to the provinces and their subsequent engagement with regional Buddhist communities in the middle of the eighth century led to the emergence of two new literary genres—records and inscriptions—as the relocated administrators supplemented their incomes with commissions from local monks and monasteries⁹. The earliest anthologies of Tang prose—*Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (*Blossoms from the Garden of Literature*)¹⁰ and *Tang Wencui* 唐文萃 (*The Finest Prose of the Tang Dynasty*)¹¹—contain numerous records¹² and inscriptions¹³, with specifically “Buddhist” works categorized as “*shishi* 釋氏” in the *Wenyuan yinghua* and “*shi* 釋” or “*fo* 佛圖” in the *Tang Wencui*. These texts are then subdivided into subjects such as “inscriptions for *sūtra* collections” (*jingzang bei* 經藏碑), “inscriptions for monasteries” (*sibei* 寺碑), “inscriptions for *śāriira stūpas*” (*sheli ta bei* 舍利塔碑), “inscriptions for Buddhist statues” (*xiang bei* 像碑), “inscriptions for Buddhist masters” (*dade bei* 大德碑, *heshang bei* 和尚碑, or *shi bei* 師碑), and so on. In itself, the fact that the anthologies' compilers deemed it necessary to distinguish “Buddhist” texts from the rest signals the scale of the literati's engagement with provincial Buddhism as well as the extent of Buddhist building projects in the regions. In addition, many of these scholar-officials exchanged poems (*shi* 詩) and letters (*shu* 書) with Buddhist monks, particularly in the Jiangnan region 江南¹⁴ (Mazanec 2017). This wealth of correspondence constitutes another valuable source of information on eighth- and ninth-century Buddhism. Taken together, these texts allow us to reconstruct the histories of numerous regional monasteries, visualize their layouts, identify their leaders, and locate them within a broader picture of Buddhism's unprecedented expansion during the Tang era.

3. The Kaiyuan Monastery in Sizhou, Jiangsu Province

3.1. Textual Sources

The Kaiyuan monastery was established in 696 under the name Puguangwangsi 普光王寺 by an imperial decree of Emperor Zhongzong 中宗 (656–710), as recorded by

⁸ For a comprehensive study of monastic records and stela inscriptions composed by literati during the Tang and Song dynasties, see (Halperin 1997, 2006).

⁹ For further information on the mid-Tang literati's development of literary genres while in exile from the capital, see, for instance: (McMullen 1988; Tackett 2014; Shields 2015).

¹⁰ *Wenyuan yinghua* was compiled by a team of scholars led by Li Fang 李昉 (925–996) after 980 but not published until 1201–1204. For details of the strategies used in the selection of texts for the *Wenyuan yinghua* as well as the anthology's compilation and transmission, see: (Owen 2007, pp. 259–326; Ling 2005).

¹¹ *Tang Wencui* was the work of a single compiler, Yao Xuan 姚 (968–1020), who completed it in 1011. His son presented the manuscript to the emperor in 1020, but it was not published until 1039. See (Shields 2017, pp. 306–35) for recent research into this anthology.

¹² The *Wenyuan yinghua* includes five scrolls of specifically Buddhist *ji* (juan 817–821). The *Tang Wencui* boasts a total of nine Buddhist *ji* on a single scroll (juan 76).

¹³ The *Wenyuan yinghua* contains no fewer than nineteen scrolls of monastic stela inscriptions (juan 850–868). Five of the *Tang Wencui*'s total of fifteen scrolls of inscriptions cover Buddhist topics (juan 61–65). It is striking that the sixth-century literary anthology *Wen Xuan* 文選 (A Selection of Refined Literature), compiled by Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–531), an important precursor to the *Wenyuan yinghua* and the *Tang Wencui*, contains no texts that could be described as *ji*. Moreover, it contains just five stela inscriptions, only one of which—the “*Toutuosi beiben*” 頭陀寺碑文 (“Stela Inscription for the Toutuo Monastery”), composed by Wang Jin 王巾 (?–505)—was written for a Buddhist monastery. This points to an unprecedented proliferation of both of these literary genres in the Tang era. For more details, see (Sokolova 2021, pp. 40–43).

¹⁴ Jiangnan (literally, “South of the River”) refers to the area south of the Yangtze River that stretches from Suzhou and Hangzhou in the east to Nanchang and Jiujiang in the west. This region provided a safe haven for thousands of intellectuals in the wake of An Lushan's rebellion.

the scholar-official Li Yong 李邕 (678–747) on a commemorative stele inscription¹⁵. The designation was changed to Kaiyuan—the era name of the first phase (713–741) of Emperor Xuanzong’s 玄宗 (r. 712–756) reign—a few decades later. The monastery’s founder was a renowned Central Asian monk and thaumaturge named Sengqie 僧伽 (628–710) who lived in Sizhou in the early eighth century. Following his death, his body was preserved in lacquer and housed in a *stūpa* within the monastery as a relic¹⁶. In his seminal study on the Kaiyuan ordination scandal¹⁷, Tim Barrett suggests that Sengqie’s cult continued to grow until, by the start of the ninth century, masses of pilgrims were visiting the monastery to pay homage to its founder (Barrett 2005, pp. 105–6). In addition, a contemporaneous travelogue written by the Japanese pilgrim–monk Ennin 圓仁 (793–864), the *Nittō guhōjunrei kōki* 入唐求法巡禮行記 (*Record of a Pilgrimage to Tang China in Search of the Law*), attests that the Kaiyuan monastery housed a Buddha tooth relic that similarly inspired mass worship and generated lucrative donations from the faithful¹⁸. Moreover, as Sizhou was a strategically important city on several international trade routes, the monastery came to the attention of hordes of merchants, which served to boost both its coffers and its reputation. After the original Kaiyuan complex burned to the ground towards the end of the eighth century, the local government, in conjunction with the monastery’s clergy, decided to reconstruct the monastery on a much grander scale and thereby laid the foundations for it to become one of southern China’s foremost centers of religious, social, and economic life.

The earliest surviving text that recounts the reconstruction of the Kaiyuan monastery is a bell inscription composed by Li Ao 李翱 (772–841) in 799¹⁹ and entitled “Sizhou Kaiyuansi zhongming bingxu” 泗州開元寺鐘銘 (並序) (“Bell Inscription, with Preface, of the Kaiyuan Monastery in Sizhou”)²⁰. The previous year, Li Ao had passed the imperial examination prior to traveling around southern China in search of an administrative post in local government—a common strategy among new graduates at the time (Barrett 1992, p. 70). When the young scholar arrived in Sizhou, a monk from the newly rebuilt monastery, Chengguan 澄觀 (?–?), asked if he would be interested in writing the bell inscription²¹. Li Ao’s response is preserved in a letter entitled “Da Sizhou Kaiyuansi seng shu” 答泗州開元寺僧書 (“A Letter to Answer the Master of the Kaiyuan Monastery in Sizhou”)²². The following year, 800, a friend of Li Ao, the famous Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824)²³, recorded a meeting with Chengguan in Luoyang in a poem entitled “Song seng Chengguan” 送僧澄觀 (“Seeing off Master Chengguan”)²⁴. Li Ao’s inscription and Han Yu’s poem contain a wealth of information on the “first phase” of the reconstruction of the Kaiyuan monastery during the late eighth and early ninth centuries.

Our main source of information on the “second phase” of the reconstruction project (806–827) is a stele inscription entitled “Da Tang Sizhou Saiyuansi lintan lüde Xu, Si, Hao, san zhou sengzheng Mingyuan dashi tabeiming bingxu” 大唐泗州開元寺臨壇律德徐泗濠三州僧正明遠大師塔碑銘 (並序) (“Stele Inscription, with Preface, for the Superintendent of Three Prefectures, Xu, Si, [and] Hao, Vinaya Master Mingyuan, Preceptor of the Kaiyuan Monastery in Sizhou of the Great Tang [Dynasty]”)²⁵ that the eminent scholar-official, Bai

¹⁵ See Li Yong’s “Da Tang Sizhou Linhuai xian Puguangwangsi bei” 大唐泗州臨淮縣普光王寺碑 (“Stele Inscription for Puguangwang Monastery in Linhuai County in Sizhou of the Great Tang [Dynasty]”), *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 263, pp. 2672–73.

¹⁶ Juean 覺岸 (1286–1355), *Shishi jigu lue* 釋氏稽古略 (*An Outline of Historical Researches into the Śākya Family Lineage*), T no. 2037.49: 817c24–25.

¹⁷ This scandal is discussed later in this paper.

¹⁸ Nittō guhōjunrei kōki 4.137.

¹⁹ For a comprehensive study on Li Ao, including his ties with Buddhism, see (Barrett 1992).

²⁰ *Wenyuan yinghua* 789, p. 4981; *Quan Tang wen* 637, p. 6427. The prominent Tang literatus Liang Su 梁肅 (753–793) composed an earlier inscription for the Kaiyuan monastery, as is documented by Cui Gong 崔恭 (?–?) (*Tang Wencui* 92, pp. 381–82; *Wenyuan yinghua* 789, p. 49881), but this was probably lost in the fire that destroyed the monastery itself.

²¹ (*Tang Wencui* 85, pp. 291–292; *Wenyuan yinghua* 688, p. 4269).

²² (*Wenyuan yinghua* 688, p. 4269; *Quan Tang wen* 637, pp. 6423–24).

²³ For a study on Han Yu, see (Hartman 1986).

²⁴ See *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩 342, p. 3831.

²⁵ Bai Juyi’s inscription for Mingyuan is missing from both the *Tang Wencui* and the *Wenyuan yinghua*. A version of the text is included in the *Quan Tang wen* 678, pp. 6935–6936, but I follow the version contained in the Bai Juyi *jijianjiao* 白居易集箋校 (ed. Zhu 1988, pp. 3729–30).

Juyi 白居易 (772–846)²⁶, composed to commemorate Kaiyuan’s abbot, Mingyuan 明遠 (765–834). Bai Juyi almost certainly witnessed the final stages of this phase of the great reconstruction project at first hand as he was Prefect of Suzhou (*Suzhou cishi* 蘇州刺史) in Jiangsu between 825 and 827. However, he composed the inscription several years later, in 834, during his retirement in Longmen 龍門, near Luoyang, in response to a request from two of the recently deceased abbot’s disciples, Liang 亮 and Liangsu 亮素. This text, which was based on “a biographical sketch of the master” that these two monks sent to Bai Juyi (今按弟子僧, 僧亮, 亮素行狀)²⁷, sheds considerable light on the layout, functions, and architecture of the new monastic complex.

3.2. The First Phase of the Reconstruction: Master Chengguan

The reconstruction of the Kaiyuan monastery began under the supervision of the local monastic who commissioned Li Ao to write his bell inscription, Chengguan. This monk should not be confused with another Chengguan (738–839), who was an esteemed patriarch of the Huayan Buddhist school in the same period. Tim Barrett identifies Chengguan of the Kaiyuan monastery as a *vinaya* master who was probably a disciple of Jianzhen 鑑真 (688–763), a famous missionary to Japan (Barrett 1992, p. 79)²⁸. Although this Chengguan is less renowned than his illustrious namesake, it seems that he still enjoyed considerable authority in his own region. In his bell inscription, Li Ao writes that “Chengguan, along with several fellow monks, oversaw the reconstruction of the monastery as well as the casting of a bell for the monastery in the fifth year of the Zhenyuan era (799)” (僧澄觀與其徒僧若干, 複舊室居, 作大鍾。貞元十五年, 厥功成)²⁹. The following year, in the preface to the poem he sent to Chengguan, Han Yu alludes to the monk’s establishment of Sengqie’s *stūpa* (澄觀建僧伽塔於泗州)³⁰. Given that Chengguan oversaw a major reconstruction project as well as the casting and delivery of a new bell, it is safe to assume that he was Kaiyuan’s abbot at this time³¹. It also seems that both he and the monastery enjoyed the patronage of Wang Zhixing 王智興 (758–836)³², an officer in Wuning Circuit 武寧 (Jiangsu), who probably viewed the reconstruction enterprise as a means to maximize donations from devotees of Sengqie’s cult (Barrett 2005). Chengguan fled to Luoyang after Wang Zhixing seized control of this circuit. However, he returned to the region near the end of his life and participated in a rather less ambitious building project—the construction of a well parapet in Li Yang 溧陽 (Jiangsu) in 811³³. Thereafter, there are no further traces of him.

3.3. Further Reconstruction and Expansion under Mingyuan

3.3.1. Mingyuan’s Early Career: Expansion of the Kaiyuan Monastery and Its Function as a Flood Barrier

Mingyuan succeeded Chengguan as abbot of the Kaiyuan monastery in 806. Bai Juyi’s inscription, which is our main source of biographical information on this master, indicates that he was a native of Cuo 鄆 District in Qiao 譙 County (present-day Anhui Province) and that his secular clan name was Bao 暴. However, in 772, at the age of seven, he renounced the secular world under the guidance of Chan Master Pei (*Pei Chanshi* 霽禪師) in his local monastery. Interestingly, Chengguan—the aforementioned Huayan patriarch, not Mingyuan’s predecessor as abbot of Kaiyuan—had done the same under a Chan monk

²⁶ There has been extensive research into Bai Juyi’s life and work, as well as his involvement with Buddhism. For the best studies, see: (Chan 1991; Feifel 1961; Xie 1997; Waley 1951; and Seo 1993).

²⁷ Bai Juyi *jijianjiao*, p. 3729.

²⁸ Jianzhen was originally from Guangling 廣陵 in Jiangsu. For his biography, see Zanning 贊 (919–1001), *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks [Compiled] under the Song Dynasty), T no. 50.2061: 797a24–c11.

²⁹ *Wenyuan yinghua* 789, p. 4981. *Quan Tang wen* 637, p. 6427.

³⁰ *Quang Tang shi* 342, p. 3831.

³¹ Typically, only abbots had sufficient authority to commission bells. See (Burdorf 2019, p. 325).

³² For Wang Zhixing’s biography, see *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 156, pp. 4138–41.

³³ Han Chong 韓崇, *Baotiezhai jinshi wen bawei* 寶鐵齋金石文跋尾 (Colophons on Inscriptions on Bronze and Stone from the Baotiezhai [House]), cited in (Barrett 1992, p. 80).

of the same name in the Baolin monastery 寶林寺 on Mount Yingtian 應天 (in Zhejiang)³⁴ at the age of eleven in 749³⁵. Imre Hamar identifies Chengguan's Master Pei as Hongpei 洪霏 (?-?), who also mentored one of Daoxuan's disciples, Xuanyan 玄儼 (Hamar 2002, pp. 32–33). Hence, if Mingyuan renounced under the same master some twenty-three years later, then he may have belonged to an extensive monastic network that also included the patriarch Chengguan³⁶. Either way, in his inscription, Bai Juyi characterizes Mingyuan as one of southern China's foremost Buddhist authorities.

In 784, at the age of nineteen, Mingyuan received full ordination from an otherwise unknown *vinaya* master named Lingmu 靈穆 (?-?) in Sizhou. He engaged in extensive study of the *Dharmaguptaka vinaya*³⁷ and the *Abhidharmakośa-bhāṣya*³⁸ as part of his monastic training before “ascending the lecturer's seat, then assuming the leadership of the ordination platform” (乃升講座，乃登戒壇)³⁹. Thereafter, as Bai Juyi reports in his inscription, Mingyuan was appointed abbot of Kaiyuan, then Great Monastic Rectifier (*sengzheng* 僧正)⁴⁰, which gave him the authority he needed to initiate and supervise the construction of new lecture halls and monastic compounds:

In the first year of the Yuanhe era (806), he was asked by the multitude to become the abbot of this monastery, the next year he was appointed by the government [authorities] as Great Monastic Rectifier in the region, overseeing the twelve divisions. Two hundred steps north from the Kaiyuan monastery, [he] built seven lecture halls [and] six monastic compounds.

元和元年，衆請充當寺上座，明年官補本州僧正，統十二部。開元寺北地二百步，作講堂七間，僧院六所。⁴¹

There is evidence that Mingyuan was an active participant in another large building project during his tenure as abbot of Kaiyuan: the founding of the Lingju monastery 靈居寺 in Yangzhou 揚州 in 813⁴². However, his home monastery remained the main focus of his construction efforts. For instance, under the patronage of the local prefect Su Yu 蘇遇 (?-?), he supervised the building of a major new monastic ward with the express intention of mitigating the flooding that blighted the area each year. Bai Juyi's inscription includes a vivid account of this scheme:

There are heavy rains in the low land between the Huai and Si [prefectures]; they cause yearly floods. The Master [Mingyuan] planned with Su Yu, a commandery governor, [and] other [officials] to establish a monastic ward in the wasteland to the west of the Shahu [area] in order to prevent water flow. [They] constructed two hundred [buildings, including] gates, corridors, halls, kitchens, [and] stables; [they] planted ten thousand pine, cedar, willow, [and] cypress trees. Since then, the monks and the laity have been in no danger of flooding.

又淮泗間地卑多雨潦，歲有水害，師與郡守蘇遇等謀於沙湖西隙地創避水僧坊，建門廊廳堂廚廩二百間，植松杉楠檉檜一萬本，由是僧與民無墊溺患。⁴³

³⁴ Song gaoseng zhuan, T no. 2061.50: 737a6.

³⁵ See the biography of Chengguan in Song gaoseng zhuan, T no. 2061.50: 737a5–6.

³⁶ For a discussion of this network, see (Hamar 2002, pp. 31–42).

³⁷ Daoxuan's Sifen lü 四分律, Dharmaguptaka vinaya (Vinaya in Four Parts; T no. 1428.567), is frequently cited in stela inscriptions and the biographies in Song gaoseng zhuan as a text that monks were required to study prior to ordination and to qualify as *vinaya* masters.

³⁸ Xuanzang 玄奘 (600?–664) translated Vasubandhu's fifth-century text Jushe lun 俱舍論 (Treasury of the Abhidharma; full title Apidamo jushe lun 阿毘達磨舍論; T no. 29.1558), one of the most important classical Indian works on abhidharma, into Chinese in 651.

³⁹ Bai Juyi jijianjiao, p. 3728.

⁴⁰ The Great Monastic Rectifier was a monastic supervisor whose principal responsibility was to maintain the moral standards of his fellow monks and nuns. He was recruited from within the *saṃgha* and appointed by the emperor. See (Forte 2003) for further details.

⁴¹ Bai Juyi jijianjiao, p. 3928.

⁴² Shu Sunju 叔孫矩 (?-?) “Da Tang Yangzhou Liuhexian Lingjusi bei” 大唐揚州六合縣靈居寺碑 (“Stele of the Lingju Monastery in the Lingju County in Yangzhou of the Great Tang [Dynasty]”), Quan Tang wen 745, p. 7714.

⁴³ Bai juyi jianjiao, p. 3728.

This passage illustrates that the Kaiyuan monastery was actually an extensive complex with multiple wards. The new flood-barrier ward would have consisted of a group of main buildings around a central courtyard as well as numerous auxiliary structures. This sort of multi-compound architectural design allowed for almost infinite rearrangement and expansion. In the case of the Kaiyuan monastery—which, as we have seen, attracted an unusually large number of religious and secular visitors on account of its relics and its location on major trade routes—it may be assumed that the new ward served a dual function. In addition to protecting the local population from flooding, these buildings would have greatly increased the monastery’s capacity to accommodate the crowds of pilgrims and traders who made their way to Sizhou each year.

3.3.2. The Ordination Platform and the New Complex

After Mingyuan’s construction of the new flood-barrier ward, the whole monastic complex was once again destroyed by fire, as Bai Juyi reports:

Soon after that, the monastery burned in a fire. For a few years, the monastery was in a state of disrepair, the statues were destroyed, [and] the monks scattered.

旋屬災焚本寺，寺殲像滅僧潰者數年。⁴⁴

However, Wang Zhixing seized power in Wuning Circuit 武寧 in 822⁴⁵, whereupon he gave Mingyuan religious authority over the whole region. The two men then wrote to the imperial court to request permission to establish an ordination platform in the Kaiyuan monastery. Approval was granted and the platform was erected right next to Sengqie’s pagoda in 824⁴⁶. This location was no accident, as the intention was to maximize donations from pilgrims to Sengqie’s shrine. That said, Wang Zhixiang and Mingyuan’s next fundraising scheme was even more lucrative, not to mention scandalous. They decided to sell ordination certificates to anyone who was willing to pay the requisite fee, regardless of the applicant’s devotion to Buddhism, study of the scriptures, or monastic training. Indeed, they did not even bother to hold an ordination ceremony: each applicant simply handed over the money and received his certificate. Demand was high, because ordained monastics were exempt from taxation: in total, some 600,000 men bought one of the false certificates⁴⁷. Each (genuine) monk who participated in the scam was then rewarded with 2000 in cash from the proceeds⁴⁸. Although Wang Zhixing was reported to the emperor for selling ordination certificates for personal gain⁴⁹, Bai Juyi suggests that the money was actually used to rebuild the Kaiyuan complex. He writes:

The Master [Mingyuan] and Wang [Zhixing], a military commander in Xuzhou, were destined [to meet]. United in their intentions, [they] joined forces to rebuild the monastic compound. Thus, the master was invited to accept the position of Rectifier of Monks of the three prefectures [and] a petition was presented [to the emperor] with a request to establish an ordination platform without delay. The profits from the donations enabled [rebuilding] on a larger scale, the Palace Attendant [Wang Zhixing] also assisted [by donating] household goods amounting to ten thousand [in cash], [and the reconstruction] was completed.

⁴⁴ Bai juyi jianjiao, p. 3728.

⁴⁵ Jiu Tangshu 156, pp. 4139–40.

⁴⁶ A commentary by Hu Sanxing 胡三省 (1230–1302) (Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑 234, p. 7840) reads: “There is a stūpa of the Great Sage (Sengqie) in Sizhou, it is venerated by the people, therefore Wang Zhixing requested permission to establish an ordination platform right next to it” (泗州有大聖塔，人敬事之，故王智興請於此置戒壇). According to the Shishi jigu lue, T no. 2037.49: 835c14–15, Wang Zhixing established the platform in the twelfth month of the fourth year of the Changqing 長慶四年 era (i.e., 824) in honor of the emperor’s birthday.

⁴⁷ See Li Deyu 李德裕 (787–859), “Wang Zhixing du sengni zhuang” 王智興度僧尼狀 (“Memorial on the Ordination of Buddhist Monks and Nuns by Wang Zhixing”), Quan Tang wen 706, pp. 7242–43. For English translations, see (Weinstein 1987, pp. 60–61; Barrett 2005, pp. 103–4).

⁴⁸ See Cefu yuangui 府元龜 689, p. 7940.

⁴⁹ See Cefu yuangui 689, p. 7940.

師與徐州節度使王侍中有緣，遂合願力，再造寺宇，乃請師三郡僧正，奏乞連置戒壇，因其施利，廓其規度，侍中又以家財萬計助而成之。⁵⁰

As Bai Juyi explains in this passage, the monks' and Wang Zhixing's fundraising efforts—whether legitimate or not—meant that the monastic complex could be rebuilt on a much grander scale. Moreover, he reports that the work proceeded at an unprecedented pace, as it “began in the spring of the fifth year of Changqing era (825), and it was completed in the autumn of the first year of Taihe era (827)” (長慶五年春作，太和元年秋成)⁵¹. When it was finished, the complex boasted more than two thousand individual structures, including main and auxiliary buildings, which meant that it now exceeded some of the great monasteries of Chang'an and Luoyang in size. Bai Juyi describes what must have been a truly impressive sight:

From tower halls, residential halls, corridors, kitchens, [and] granaries to houses for monks, servants⁵², workers, [and] livestock. There were a total of two thousand and several hundred buildings. Inside [these buildings], there were ample statues [and] utensils . . . Star-shaped decorations adorned the buildings; [they seemed to have] emerged from beneath the earth, or descended from heaven. Donations arrived every single day; the sound of bells and chanting never ceased. The four *varga*⁵³ know [where to find] refuge, [an] uncountable [number of] people [have] converted [to Buddhism].

自殿閣堂亭廊庖藏，洎僧徒臧獲傭保馬牛之舍，凡二千若干百十間，其中像設之儀，器用之具，一無闕者 . . . 輪奐莊嚴，星環棋布，如自地踴，若從天降。供施無虛日，鍾梵有常聲，四眾知歸，萬人改觀。⁵⁴

From this description, it is evident that the new complex could accommodate hundreds of pilgrims and merchants as well as many local workers who were essentially the monastery's employees. Thus, by the late 820s, Kaiyuan had not only reestablished its reputation as a major pilgrimage site but also broadened its range of social activities. Moreover, it had become an important ordination center for the vast region that lay between the Jiang 江 and Huai 淮 rivers. Bai Juyi's record of Mingyuan's career attests that the abbot observed eight ordination ceremonies and gave fifteen lectures on *vinaya* to a total of thirty thousand monks and nuns⁵⁵. All told, he “carried out the Teaching in the Jianghuai [region] for forty years” (江, 淮行化者四十年)⁵⁶.

The Kaiyuan monastery remained the undisputed focal point of the Sengqie cult and continued to house the Buddha tooth relic long into the Song Dynasty. Indeed, a number of Song emperors initiated further building and renovation projects at the monastery⁵⁷. However, it was Mingyuan's two building programs that enabled Kaiyuan to establish itself as a major center of Sizhou's religious, social, and economic life for centuries to come.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this paper has discussed the reconstruction and expansion of the Kaiyuan monastery in Sizhou during the late eighth and early ninth centuries. These grand building projects illustrate the prevailing tendencies in Buddhist architectural design as well as the Tang imperial elite's monastic construction and renovation strategies. The Kaiyuan monastery became an important hub within the network of Buddhist institutions

⁵⁰ Bai Juyi *jijianjiao*, p. 3928.

⁵¹ Bai Juyi *jijianjiao*, p. 3928.

⁵² The precise meanings of *zang* 臧 and *huo* 獲 are uncertain here, although both were used as abusive terms for slaves. Pu (2016) has demonstrated that individual monks and monasteries acquired slaves during the Tang Dynasty, and the Chang'an's slave-market was the largest in the world at the time. It seems highly likely that Sizhou, which was an important center of trans-Asian trade during the Tang era, would have had a similar market.

⁵³ The four groups of every monastic community: monks, nuns, male devotees, and female devotees.

⁵⁴ Bai Juyi *jijianjiao*, pp. 3928–29.

⁵⁵ Bai Juyi *jijianjiao*, p. 3929.

⁵⁶ Bai Juyi *jijianjiao*, p. 3929.

⁵⁷ On the history of the Kaiyuan monastery during the Song Dynasty, see (Zhang 2013).

that spread across medieval China's landscape in a wave of mass building. Benefiting from its strategically important location in the city of Sizhou, during the eighth century the monastery gained renown as the final resting place of Sengqie and the home of a Buddha tooth relic. As a result, when it burned down at the end of that century, the Tang court, the local government authorities, the monks themselves, and countless devotees launched an extensive reconstruction campaign. This was overseen by two successive abbots—Chengguan and Mingyuan—under the auspices of the local authorities and especially Wang Zhixing, a powerful provincial general. Over the course of nearly thirty years, their combined efforts secured Kaiyuan's status as a key pilgrimage site, ordination center, and economic force in southern China.

Descriptions of the Kaiyuan monastic compound in contemporary sources, especially Bai Juyi's stele inscription for Mingyuan, reveal that it conformed to the multi-compound design that typified Chinese state monasteries in the Tang period. New lecture halls and monastic compounds were erected alongside the main compound during the "first phase" of reconstruction. Thereafter, an entirely new ward of two hundred buildings was constructed on low-lying wasteland to act as a flood barrier and provide accommodation for the monastery's numerous pilgrims. This enlargement of the monastic complex demonstrates the inherent flexibility of the typical grid-based design, so it is certainly feasible that similar expansion projects were proceeding elsewhere in regional China around the same time.

Although Kaiyuan suffered another devastating fire halfway through the "second phase" of reconstruction, by the end of the 820s, the monastery boasted more than two thousand buildings and performed a wide variety of social as well as religious functions. This grand architectural project was funded by unprecedented donations from the local population, pilgrims to Sengqie's shrine and the Buddha tooth relic, and passing merchants, along with the highly lucrative sale of ordinations, which were performed on the platform that Wang Zhixing and Mingyuan established in 824.

The biographies of Kaiyuan's two abbots, Chengguan and Mingyuan, help to illuminate regional monks' contributions to monastic and other construction projects in the Tang period. Although our information on Chengguan is rather limited, it seems that he was a well-traveled and well-connected monk who studied under the cosmopolitan missionary Jianzhen, migrated to Luoyang, and exchanged letters and poems with state officials. Mingyuan, in contrast, spent his whole life in his home region yet still managed to attain the esteemed positions of abbot of the Kaiyuan monastery and Great Monastic Rectifier. In part, this was because he enjoyed the support of Wang Zhixing, the region's civil governor, and shared the latter's ambitious economic and political goals. Thus, in the course of his fifty-year career, he became not only a major monastic authority in southern China but also a prominent member of the local elite.

Finally, in addition to shedding light on the histories of local monastic institutions and allowing us to locate their leaders within broader intellectual networks, the information contained within inscriptions, records, poems, and letters obliges us to reassess non-canonical literature's ability to supplement and enrich our knowledge of monasticism in medieval China. These sources reveal that monasteries assumed a range of religious, social, and political functions and adopted an almost infinitely flexible form of architectural design that enabled them to become powerful forces for urbanization, economic growth, and development throughout the regions of the Tang Empire.

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