Regional Buddhism and Restoration Policy in Tang-Dynasty China: Wei Gao 韋皋 (745–805) and His Buddhist Activities in Xichuan

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Abstract

This article investigates the Buddhist projects that Wei Gao 韋皋 (745–805), Military Governor of Xichuan 西川 Circuit (central part of present-day Sichuan Province), undertook in the region’s capital, Chengdu, with a primary focus on three major enterprises that he launched in the final four years of his life: the renovation of a Buddhist statue; the dissemination of a vinaya commentary; and the establishment of a Buddhist monastery. These projects are explored in the local religious context of mid- to late Tang Xichuan as well as the broader political context of the imperial regime. In particular, the paper explores Wei Gao’s Buddhist enterprises against the political background of Emperor Dezong’s 德宗 (r. 779–805) efforts to reassert imperial authority and strengthen court–region relations following the collapse of Tang power in the mid-eighth century.

Introduction

On ascending the imperial throne, Emperor Dezong 徳宗 (r. 779–805) was determined to re-establish the Tang court’s power, which had collapsed in the wake of General An Lushan’s 安祿山 (703–757) rebellion in 755, and regain economic control over what had become a decentralized and fragmented empire.¹ This article traces the significant role played by Buddhism in the Emperor’s efforts to achieve these goals. In particular, it assesses the extent of imperial influence in Xichuan 西川 Circuit (central part of present-day Sichuan Province) by exploring three large-scale Buddhist projects that Wei Gao 韋皋 (745–805), the Military Governor of Xichuan from 785 to 805,² undertook in Chengdu (the

¹ For one of the best overviews of Dezong’s provincial policies throughout his reign, see Peterson 1979: 497–514.
² For biographies of Wei Gao, see JJS 140.3821–3828; and XTS 158.4933–4938.
region’s capital) on behalf of Dezong in 801, 802 and 804. The first two of these projects had been initiated some three decades earlier by a powerful clique of monks and pro-Buddhist state officials in the imperial court of Dezong’s father, Emperor Daizong (r. 762–779), while the third was devised by Wei Gao himself. Consequently, it may be said that the Governor supervised the realization of two important Buddhist projects, then initiated a third, all in the space of four years.

Under the lavish patronage of Emperor Daizong, the Buddhist community accumulated unprecedented power and immeasurable wealth at a time when the economic resources of the Tang state had been stretched to the limit. When Dezong ascended the throne, he sought to curtail the power of China’s Buddhist institutions and simultaneously buttress the fiscal position of the central administration through a series of economic measures. His first step was to impose a local quota system that obliged the country’s regions to provide the imperial government with fixed, regular revenue. As part of this policy, he took a stand against China’s wealthy Buddhist institutions by initiating a series of drastic reforms that included banning the establishment of new monasteries, halting all monastic ordinations, and banishing Esoteric Buddhism from

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3 The first phase of Dezong’s reign has traditionally been characterized as anti-Buddhist: see, for instance, Weinstein 1987: 89–94. However, more recent scholarship has suggested that his support for the Buddhist clergy was merely less generous than Daizong’s, in part because he was sceptical of the “magical” aspects of Buddhism that had interested his father; see Goble 2019b: 222–231; Orzech 1998: 202–205; Chen 1999. Indeed, there are several accounts of Dezong’s engagement with Buddhist activities during the first half of his reign. For example, shortly after ascending the throne, he reportedly invited the Pure Land Buddhist Fazhao (法照) to the imperial court to teach his new method of intoning the name “Amitābha;” see Fazhao’s Jingtu wuhui nianfo songjing guanxing yi (Ritual for the Practice of Contemplation of the Pure Land [Fivefold Assembly] for Invoking the Buddha and Chanting the Scripture), T 85, no. 2827: 1266a1. In addition, the collation of a synthesized commentary on vinaya – a project that was initiated during the reign of Daizong – was not completed until 780, one year after Dezong had succeeded his father. See below for a discussion of this project.

4 On the implementation and consequences of Dezong’s tax reforms, see Twitchett 1965.

5 JTS 12.321. Several influential officials urged Dezong to reduce the size of China’s Buddhist and Daoist clergies and curb the power of a number of religious institutions. For example, Li Shuming (李叔明) suggested closing all of Xichuan’s small monasteries and limiting the number of residents in the region’s larger institutions. His memorandum is cited in his XTS biography (XTS 147.4758) and reproduced in full in QTW (394.4005) under the assigned title Qing shantai seng dao shu 慶删汰僧道疏
the imperial court.⁶ Some of Dezong’s officials advocated even more radical anti-Buddhist policies, but before these could be implemented a number of powerful provincial leaders started to express their displeasure over the new tax system, which they interpreted as a blatant attempt to re-establish central control over what had become their personal fiefdoms.⁷ A complex series of revolts erupted almost immediately in the north-east, followed by a number of secondary rebellions in Henan that persisted from 781 to 786. As a result, the Tang court’s fiscal security and its control over many of China’s provinces were critically weakened, rather than strengthened. That said, central financial control was maintained throughout the Yangtze Valley (including Xichuan) (Peterson 1979: 501), and the region’s military governors (jiedu shi 節度使) continued to proclaim their allegiance to Dezong’s court, albeit only after receiving assurances that their positions were secure and there would be no diminution of their considerable personal authority.⁸

(Memorandum with a Request to Eliminate Buddhist and Daoist [Monasteries]). Emperor Dezong not only approved this request but sanctioned implementation of similar policies across the whole empire (XTS 147.4758). In response to Li Shuming’s proposal, another official, Peng Yan 彭偃, suggested even more drastic measures such as imposing taxes on Buddhist and Daoist monks and making them liable for corvée labour. Peng Yan’s memorandum is included in the QTW (445.4544) under the assigned title Shantai seng dao yi 刪汰僧道議 (Discussion of the Shantai seng dao). Similarly, Pei Bo 裴伯 proposed a ban on the ordination of all women and men of reproductive age on the grounds that the Buddhist practice of celibacy threatened the traditional Chinese custom of familial continuity. Moreover, he advocated the laicization of all existing monks and nuns of reproductive age as this would force a large proportion of the empire’s monasteries to close, which in turn would allow the state to seize an abundance of valuable property. Pei Bo’s memorandum is cited in the biography of Li Shuming (XTS 147.4758).

Esoteric rituals were regularly performed at the imperial court in the aftermath of the An Lushan Rebellion as it was believed that they provided divine protection for the state and the ruling dynasty. When Dezong ascended the throne, many monks of the palace chapel were practitioners of Esoteric Buddhism – a tradition involving yasheng 厌勝 black magic and sorcery. The biography of Li Mi 李泌 (722–789), an academician in the Hanlin Academy during the reign of Emperor Daizong, asserts that Dezong abhorred such rituals (JTS 130.3623). This suggests that the latter Emperor did not harbour any enmity towards Buddhism, as such, but rather was suspicious of the “magical” aspects of Esoteric Buddhism.

⁶ For a discussion of provincial leaders’ responses to Dezong’s tax policy, see Peterson 1979: 500–501.

⁷ For a discussion of provincial leaders’ responses to Dezong’s tax policy, see Peterson 1979: 500–501.

⁸ On the appointment of provincial governors and their staffs in Tang provinces, see Watanabe 1993; Tackett 2008: 122–123; Tonami 1962; and Graff 2000. For a discussion
After acknowledging that he had to change tack, Dezong abandoned most of his ambitions to restore the Tang Empire to its pre-rebellion state and focused instead on enhancing his own status as China’s sovereign ruler, consolidating the territorial centre in and around Chang’an, and strengthening the imperial court’s links with those provinces that had remained loyal to the dynasty. As part of this policy, he dispatched eunuchs to the provinces to supervise political, military and administrative affairs, including the appointment of personnel, in the hope that this would enable him to exercise more direct, personal control over the local administrations.\(^9\) He also drastically altered his policy towards Buddhism after belatedly realizing that the religion was a major cultural and political force in the empire.\(^10\) Thereafter, he presented himself as a devout ruler and Buddhism’s chief patron in China. He demonstrated his formal commitment to the religion in 786 by accepting the bodhisattva precepts under Master Daocheng 道澄 (?–803),\(^11\) and subsequently introduced a series of pro-Buddhist reforms and projects. For instance, in 788, he established an Institute for the Translation of Buddhist Scriptures (Yijing Yuan 譯經院), which hosted a translation team headed by the Kashmiri translator Prajñā (Ch. Bore 般若; 734–810?).\(^12\) The following year, he issued an edict that proclaimed the sanctity of all Buddhist monasteries

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9 Peterson 1979: 512–513. Census figures from around the turn of the ninth century suggest that Dezong’s attempts to reassert central control over the provinces ultimately failed. In 781, at the start of his reign, census officials recorded a total of 3,855,076 households. By contrast, in 807, shortly after Dezong’s death, they were able to register a mere 2,440,254 households – the second-lowest figure in the whole of the Tang era (THY 84.1551–1552).

10 According to Peng Yan’s biography (JTS 127.3581), he advised Dezong to promote Buddhism and Daoism due to their popularity among the population, rather than attempt to suppress them.

11 See the biography of Daocheng in Song gaoseng zhuàn (Biographies of Eminent Monks [Compiled] under the Song Dynasty), by Zanning 贊寕 (919–1001), T 50, no. 2061: 806b9–25.

as well as Daoist temples, and another that ordered the restoration of dilapidated monasteries. A third edict stipulated that services should be held annually in all of the country’s major provinces on the anniversary of his father’s death (CFYG 52.548). In 790, he commissioned a group of monks to escort a famous relic of the Buddha’s finger from the Famen Monastery 法門寺 in Shaanxi to the imperial court for a large-scale veneration ceremony. He also provided support to individual Buddhist monks. For instance, in 795, he awarded the esteemed Huayan patriarch Chengguan 澄觀 (738–839) the honorary title preceptor of state (guoshi 國師). The following year, he made a decisive intervention in an ongoing dispute between rival factions of the Chan tradition by declaring that Shenhui 神會 (684–758) should be considered the seventh Chan patriarch. Clearly, then, Dezong’s patronage of Buddhism increased significantly during the latter half of his reign. Although there is no reason to think that this shift towards a more devout reign was insincere, that does not preclude the possibility that Dezong also viewed Buddhism as an effective means of bolstering his personal authority. Moreover, the writings of Wei Gao suggest that the Emperor’s somewhat belated enthusiasm for the religion was shared by at least some of the empire’s powerful regional authorities.

Located on the border with the hostile Tibetan Empire (Tubo 吐蕃), Xichuan was a highly militarized region with a sizeable army and a burgeoning economy. Its continuous expansion as a military and economic centre throughout the Tang Dynasty meant that successive emperors were increasingly eager to assert imperial control over the province’s economic, social and religious life. Emperor Dezong’s principal lieutenant in strengthening the court’s relationship with Xichuan was Wei Gao, who served as the region’s Military Governor between 785 and 805. The

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13 *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 (Complete Chronicle of the Buddha and Patriarchs), by Zhipan 志磐 (1220–1275), T 49, no. 2035: 379c20–22. This edict is contained in QTW (52.564) under the assigned title *Xiuqi siguan zhao* 修葺寺觀詔 (Decree to Repair Monasteries and Temples).


15 See *Fozu tongji*, T 49, no. 2035: 381a5.

16 See *Yuanjue jing dashu shiyi chao* 圓覺經大疏釋義鈔 (Great Exegesis on the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment), by Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 (780–841), XZJ 4.553.
longevity of his tenure allowed him to build a significant personal power base, yet his loyalty to the Emperor never wavered throughout his two decades in office.\footnote{17} In return, Dezong bestowed a string of honorary titles upon his faithful official in appreciation of his exemplary service. The two men also displayed considerable affection for each other through the frequent exchange of gifts. However, it was their shared devotion to Buddhism that lay at the heart of their symbiotic personal and political relationship. Wei Gao’s accounts of his Buddhist projects in Xichuan indicate that they should be considered as expressions of official Tang religious policy during the reigns of two successive emperors – Daizong and Dezong.

Overall, the following examination of Wei Gao’s three Buddhist projects in Xichuan in the early years of the ninth century reveals that they had far-reaching symbolic as well as political consequences as they came to symbolize the military glory of the Tang state following the Military Governor’s victory over the Tibetans in 801. Moreover, they may have been instrumental in enabling Dezong to maintain a strategic alliance between the central government in Chang’an and Xichuan. Hence, they surely appealed to an Emperor who was keen to reinforce Buddhism and consolidate imperial authority in the regions. In addition, their successful implementation suggests that high-ranking provincial officials understood the benefits of nurturing cordial relations with local Buddhists and supporting their monasteries. Finally, although closely related to the imperially endorsed Buddhism that prevailed in the territorial centre of Tang China, Wei Gao’s projects were also deeply rooted in a specifically Xichuanese form of Buddhism that encompassed a number of local traditions and practices.

\footnote{17} Other provincial military governors were not so loyal. Indeed, several launched rebellions in the hope of seizing power for themselves. For instance, in 783, General Zhu Ci 朱泚 (742–784), Military Governor of Lulong 區隆 Circuit (headquartered in modern Beijing), established a rebel regime in Chang’an. Dezong was forced to flee the capital and establish a temporary court in Qizhou (Fengtian 奉天), in the upper valley of the Wei River. The following year, Li Huaiguang 李懷光 (729–785), one of the imperial generals who had helped to quash Zhu Ci’s rebellion, launched one of his own at Hezhong 河中, to the east of the capital. For further details of these uprisings, see Zhang 1986.
Wei Gao and his Buddhist activities in Xichuan

– Military Governor of Xichuan

Wei Gao is renowned as a successful government official who defended Xichuan against repeated attacks by the Tibetan Empire and helped to pacify the belligerent Kingdom of Nanzhao 南詔.\(^{18}\) Having started his military career as an officer (canjun 參軍) in Huazhou 華州 (Shaanxi), he progressed rapidly to become General of the Imperial Guards (Da­jiangjun 大將軍) (JTS 140.3821–3822). Xichuan was the target of repeated Tibetan incursions into Tang territory.\(^{19}\) In 785, having recognized Wei Gao’s military prowess, Dezong appointed him Military Governor of Xichuan (Xichuan Jiedu Shi) and tasked him with halting the Tibetan raids (JTS 140.3822). The Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑 (Comprehensive Mirror for the Aid of Government) provides a detailed account of Wei Gao’s military crusades in Xichuan, from which it is clear that the fight against the Tibetan Empire defined his official career in the region. For instance, in 788, the Tubo launched a massive campaign during which they captured over ten thousand people.\(^{20}\) The next year, Wei Gao instigated a counter-attack and defeated the Tibetans on their own territory in Qinghai 青海. In the meantime, he also established communication with the Kingdom of Nanzhao, which was a Tubo vassal at the time. These efforts eventually persuaded Nanzhao’s ruler, King Yimouxun 異牟尋 (r. ca. 779–807),\(^{21}\) to switch allegiance and submit to the Tang in 791.\(^{22}\)

\(^{18}\) Nanzhao flourished in what is now southern China and Southeast Asia during the eighth and ninth centuries. At the start of the latter century, the kingdom, which was based in Yunnan, expanded rapidly and launched attacks on neighbouring territories.

\(^{19}\) For further details of the continuous warfare between the Tang state and the Tibetan Empire in Xichuan, and relations between the Tang state and the Kingdom of Nanzhao, see: JTS 195.5219–5268; XTS 216.6071–6110; Wang 2017: 97–130; Herman 2007; Twitchett 2000; Pan 1992; Beckwith 1987; Li 1982; and Backus 1981.

\(^{20}\) See entry for Nanzhao in JTS 197.5280–5287. The most extensive extant account of Wei Gao’s resistance against the Tibetans, including the events discussed here, is in ZZTJ at 233.7513, 7519, 7515–7516, 7524; 234.7537; and 236.7598.

\(^{21}\) According to JTS (197.5281, 5284), Yimouxun reigned from the fourteenth year of the Dali 大歷 era until the second year of the Yuanhe 元和 era, which roughly corresponds to 779–807.

\(^{22}\) Nanzhao’s return to the Tang alliance was not finalized until the tenth year of the Zhenyuan 貞元 era (794); see JTS 197.5283.
following year, Wei Gao and Yimouxun joined forces to attack the Tubo. In 801, Dezong ordered Wei Gao to launch yet another campaign against the Tibetan Empire. He and Yimouxun again consolidated their forces and attacked a number of Tibetan outposts, killing over ten thousand Tibetan soldiers in the process. This assault finally turned the decades-long conflict in the Tang’s favour, and two years later Wei Gao negotiated the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations between Tibet and the Tang Empire. This victory not only secured the western border but also played a key role in helping the Tang Empire regain access to the Silk Road (see Zhao 2016).

Wei Gao enjoyed great prestige and earned numerous honours for his military and diplomatic efforts against the Tibetans. For instance, in 796, Dezong granted him the honorary title Joint Manager of Affairs with the Secretariat-Chancellery (*Tong Zhongshu Menxia Pingzhangshi* 同中書門下平章事) (ZZTJ 235.7570). Five years later, he received three more prestigious titles: Acting Member of Three Excellences (*Jianjiao Situ* 檢校司徒), Secretariat Director (*Zhongshu Ling* 中書令) and Prince of Nankang (*Nankang Junwang* 南康郡王) (ZZTJ 236.7598). These honorifics boosted his already substantial authority in Xichuan. Indeed, shortly after his death in 805, the locals started to revere him as a local deity (*tushen* 士神) (ZZTJ 236.7620).

Wei Gao was celebrated as a great patron of Buddhism as well as a predestined protector of Xichuan: according to a popular Song Dynasty myth, a foreign monk (*huseng* 胡僧) predicted that the infant Wei Gao would grow up to safeguard the land of Shu 蜀. The scant information relating to his Buddhist activities in the region suggests that he engaged closely with local monks and indeed was a devout Buddhist himself. For instance, in *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (*Biographies of Eminent Monks [Compiled] under the Song Dynasty*), Zanning 贊寧 (919–1001) asserts that Wei Gao was both a patron and a disciple of the Buddhist monk Jingzhong Shenhui 淨衆神會 (720–794/5), who in turn was a direct disciple of the Korean monk Wuxiang 無相 (Kor. Musang; 684–762). In addition, we know that Wei Gao exchanged poems with

24 See *Song gaoseng zhuan*, T 50, no. 2061: 764b11–12.
Guangxuan 廣宣 of the Longhuashan Monastery 龍華山寺, a cosmopolitan poet-monk who was an active member of an extensive network of prominent Tang literati (see He 2012: 156). Moreover, Wei Gao’s Buddhist contacts stretched far beyond Xichuan. For instance, he was on good terms with the aforementioned Master Chengguan and may even have commissioned him to write a series of Buddhist essays (see Hamar 2002: 59).

Although Wei Gao’s contacts seemingly extended all the way to the capital, it was in Xichuan where he earned his reputation as a great Buddhist patron. First, in 789, shortly after Emperor Dezong’s embrace of Buddhism, the Military Governor ordered the resumption of work on the Leshan Giant Buddha (Leshan Da Fo 樂山大佛). This statue – which remains the tallest stone Buddha in the world – was surely Wei Gao’s greatest achievement in the field of Buddhist patronage. He composed the Jiazhou Lingyun si da Mile shi xiang ji 嘉州凌雲寺大彌勒石像記 (Record of the Great Stone Statue of Maitreya in the Lingyun Monastery in Jiazhou) to commemorate the statue’s completion in 803, although the authenticity of this record was not confirmed until 1984, when the original inscription was discovered on the adjacent cliff. The record indicates that construction began in 723 – one of many lavish Buddhist projects that the monk Haitong 海通 (date unknown) initiated on behalf of Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–756) – and then proceeded in three distinct phases: first under Haitong’s supervision in the 720s; then under the patronage of Zhangqiu Jianqiong 章仇兼瓊 (?–750), Military Governor of Jiannan 剑南 from 739 until 746, when he was summoned to the imperial court in Chang’an; and finally to completion in 803, following Wei Gao’s donation of five hundred thousand cash (qian wushi wan 錢五十萬) (Gan 1997: 17) to the project in 789.

25 This record was omitted from the standard literary collections – the WYYH, the TWC, and the QTW – but it does feature in local gazetteers: the Jiading fuzhi 嘉定府志, the Leshan xianzhi 樂山縣誌, and the Sichuan tongzhi 四川通志. A collated version is in Gan 1997: 17–18.

26 For archaeological reports and further discussions, see Luo 1986; Luo 1989; Wei 1993; and Gan 1997.
Wei Gao’s next Buddhist undertaking was relatively modest: in 793, he commissioned a stupa to house the relics of his beloved pet parrot.27 Thereafter, though, his ambition reached new heights as he sponsored and supervised a trio of large-scale religious projects in Xichuan. First, in 801, he ordered the restoration of a statue of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra (Ch. Puxian 普賢) in the Dashengci Monastery 大聖慈寺; the following year, he provided the Baoyuan Monastery 寶園寺 with a “new” commentary (xinshu 新疏) on the Dharmaguptakavinaya, composed by Huaisu 怀素 (624–697);28 and finally, in 804, he established the Baoli Monastery 寶曆寺. Careful investigation of these three projects sheds new light on the political factors that motivated Wei Gao’s pro-Buddhist activities in Xichuan in the final four years of his life as well as the extent of the Tang court’s influence in this remote corner of south-west China at the turn of the ninth century. As we shall see below, the first two projects may well have been initiated by patrons and associates of elite monks at the imperial court some three decades earlier. If that were indeed the case, they surely would have reflected some aspects of the religious and political agenda of the imperially supported Buddhist community. Moreover, all three projects were linked to the resurgence of Buddhism within the court of Dezong from the mid-780s onwards.

— Amoghavajra’s legacy in Xichuan

Wei Gao’s pro-Buddhist activities in Xichuan were consistent with a series of projects that the imperial court of Dezong’s father, Daizong,

27 In a record entitled Xichuan yingwu sheli ta ji 西川鸚鵡舍利塔記 (Record of a Parrot Śarīra Stūpa in Xichuan), WYYH 820.5165–5166, QTW 452.4631–4632, Wei Gao asserts that he taught the parrot to chant the name “Amitābha.” After it died, he ordered its cremation. More than ten relics remained after this ceremony, which prompted Wei Gao to erect a stupa in Lingshan 靈山 (in present-day Mianyang 綿陽, Sichuan Province) in which to house them.

28 The Sifen lü 四分律, or the Dharmaguptakavinaya (T 22, no. 1428), was an important text that was used extensively in ordination ceremonies during the Tang Dynasty. In this era, two commentaries on the Dharmaguptakavinaya – the “old” commentary, composed by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) and Fali 法礪 (569–635), and the “new” commentary, composed by Huaisu – both circulated widely. On the formation of the Dharmaguptakavinaya tradition in China and its rise to prominence during the Tang period, see Satō 1986: 116–327; and Heirman 2002.
had initiated in the 760s and 770s, when the influence of the Esoteric adept Amoghavajra (Ch. Bukong jin’gang 不空金剛; 704–774) was at its height.²⁹ While there is no evidence that these earlier ventures were specifically or exclusively Esoteric in nature, they could be considered as emblematic of the policies of a powerful monastic-bureaucratic clique that formed around Amoghavajra at that time.

Following his arrival at the court of Emperor Xuanzong in 721, Amoghavajra studied under Master Vajrabodhi (Ch. Jin’gangzhi 金剛智; 671–741) until the latter’s death in 741,³⁰ then gradually enhanced the popularity of his particular form of Esoteric teaching among the Tang elite.³¹ In the course of serving three emperors – Xuanzong, Suzong 肅宗 (r. 756–762) and Daizong – he introduced a wide variety of rituals

²⁹ The principal sources of biographical information on Amoghavajra are Song gaoseng zhuan, T 50, no. 2061: 712a24–714a20; the Da Tang gu dade zeng sikong Dabianzheng Guangzhi Bukong Sanzang xingshuang 大唐故大德贈司空大辨正廣智不空三藏行狀 (Account of the Conduct of the Former Great Worthy Bestowed with the Title Minister of Works, Dabianzheng Guangzhi Trepiṭaka Bukong of the Great Tang), T 50, no. 2056: 292b1–294c13; and a stele inscription composed by Amoghavajra’s disciple Feixi 飛錫 in 774 and included in Yuanzhao’s 圓照 (718–800) Daizong chao zeng sikong Dabianzheng Guangzhi Sanzang heshang biaozhi ji 代宗朝贈司空大辨正廣智三藏和上表制集 (Memorials and Edicts of the Venerable Monk Dabianzheng Guangzhi Trepiṭaka, Bestowed [with the Title] Minister of Works by the Daizong Court), T 52, no. 2120: 848b14–c3. For comprehensive studies on Amoghavajra, see Orlando 1981 and Goble 2019a.

³⁰ Tang-era accounts of Amoghavajra’s life are notoriously inconsistent with regards to his origins. For instance, two of the five biographies that were produced in the decades immediately after his death – a stele inscription composed by Feixi 飛錫 (fl. 742–805) and an account of conduct (xingzhuan 行狀) written by Zhao Qian 趙遷 (fl. 774–776) – assert that he was the son of a “north Indian brahman.” By contrast, a stele inscription by Quan Deyu 權德輿 (795–818) and a catalogue of scriptures compiled by Yuanzhao 圓照 (728–809) suggest that he was Sri Lankan, while Yan Ying 嚴郢 (?–783/4), in an inscription for Amoghavajra’s memorial cloister in the Xingshan Monastery 興善寺 in Chang’an, simply states that he was “a person of the Western Regions.” Moreover, these sources are similarly undecided about whether Amoghavajra met Vajrabodhi at the imperial court or arrived in China with his teacher. For a discussion, see Goble 2019a: 623–624.

³¹ Although Xuanzong and his court fled to Xichuan when An Lushan’s army entered Chang’an in 756, Amoghavajra remained in the capital, finding refuge in the Daxingshan Monastery 大興善寺, where he performed secret rituals with the aim of extirpating An Lushan and his troops. After the restoration of imperial power in Chang’an in 757, it was widely assumed that Amoghavajra’s services had played a pivotal role in ousting the rebels from the capital. In consequence, he became the pre-eminent monk at court and was granted the title preceptor of state (guoshi 國師). For a summary of this rise to power, see Goble 2019b: 157–173.
and ceremonies in direct response to the government’s demands for rites that would help to sacralize imperial sovereignty. Moreover, his apotropaic rituals and mass consecrations for the royal family, civilian officials, and generals allowed him to mediate among the military elite, bureaucrats and the imperial household. As a result, Esoteric Buddhism became institutionalized in the territorial heartland of the empire during the reign of Daizong. Indeed, it could be said that it was the dominant force in mid-Tang Buddhism, especially in the decade following the final defeat of the An Lushan Rebellion. This is not to suggest that Amoghavajra’s teaching was promoted to the exclusion of every other Buddhist tradition throughout the empire, but there is some evidence that his followers were firmly established in Xichuan, at least, by the late 760s. For instance, he requested the transfer of a monk named Daoyu 道遇


33 Over recent decades, there has been considerable debate over scholars’ use of the term “Esoteric Buddhism.” For instance, Goble 2019b defines it as a distinct “school” associated with three Esoteric monks: Śubhākarasimha (637–735), Vajrabodhi (671–741), and Amoghavajra. By contrast, Sharf 2002 and 2017 argues that the texts and techniques that these three monks promoted were not perceived as a distinct doctrinal or literary category in Tang China, so the “school of Esoteric Buddhism” is a misnomer. Similarly, Shinohara 2014 and Sørensen 2011 have both suggested that although there was a specific moment when Indian missionaries introduced this “Buddhist tradition” to the Tang court, related practices and ideas had been circulating within China for several centuries prior to that date. Meanwhile, in his study “The ‘Great Teaching of Yoga,’ the Chinese Appropriation of the Tantras, and the Question of Esoteric Buddhism,” Charles Orzech stresses that, while there is no evidence that Amoghavajra intended to establish a new “sect” of Esoteric Buddhism, he and his first generation of disciples did consider themselves practitioners of a particular “Yogic” tradition with distinct initiation and ritual services that was closely linked to the Vajraśekharasūtra (Jin’gangding jing 金剛頂經; T 848); see Orzech 2006: 57. In addition, both Orzech 2006 and Chen Jinhua 2010 have challenged the established view that the first Esoteric lineages were formulated in the Song Dynasty by demonstrating that there was a coherent notion of a Yogic lineage as early as the mid-Tang era. In view of the complexity of this debate, I mainly use “Esoteric” as a heuristic term to designate specific forms of Buddhism and related ideologies promoted by Amoghavajra, his direct disciples, and secular patrons in the imperial court and nationwide.

34 While there is ample evidence of the widespread adoption of the Esoteric tradition among Amoghavajra’s followers and patrons in Chang’an and its environs, we know relatively little about its impact in the provinces during the Tang era, with the notable and well-documented exception of Mount Wutai, which Amoghavajra chose as a new centre for Esoteric teaching during the reign of Emperor Daizong. See, for instance, Birnbaum 1983: 14–16, 25–38; Weinstein 1987: 80–83; and Goble 2021. The evidence presented
from the Jingzhong Monastery 淨眾寺 in Chengdu (a local centre for Chan Buddhism) to Chang’ an’s Daxingshan Monastery in 764. In addition, a certain Weishang 惟上 (date unknown), another Xichuanese monk, travelled to Chang’an to study under Huiguo 惠果 (746–805) – a pupil of both Amoghavajra and the latter’s esteemed disciple Tanzhen 曇貞 (fl. 724–777) – before returning to Chengdu to propagate Esoteric teaching there. Moreover, it seems that the dissemination of Amoghavajra’s thinking continued long after the master’s death. For example, we know that the monk Hongzhao 洪照 (795–872) also studied under Huiguo prior to relocating to Xichuan in 833. Finally, there is an intriguing piece of evidence in the Southern Song grotto at Baodingshan 寶頂山 (in the present-day municipality of Chongqing). It is generally accepted that the monk Zhao Zhifeng 趙智風 (1159–1249) supervised the construction of the Baodingshan complex as a centre for a particular form of Buddhism with Esoteric overtones. A stele within the complex contains a carving with a biography of Liu Benzun 柳本尊 (855–907), composed by the layman Zujue 祖覺 (1087–1150), in which Amoghavajra and Liu Benzun are identified as the fifth and sixth “patriarchs” of Esoteric Buddhism, respectively (Howard 2001: 73 and 173). Hence, this source seems to attest to the widespread circulation and adoption of Amoghavajra’s form of Esotericism in Xichuan in the late Tang era.

At this point, it is also worth considering Henrik Sørensen’s proposition that members of Xichuan’s Baotang Chan faction (Baotang zong 保唐宗) embraced and practised Amoghavajra’s form of Esoteric Buddhism. Sørensen bases this theory on a stele inscription composed by

here is rather more fragmentary, but it still suggests that Amoghavajra’s teaching enjoyed significant support in Xichuan during the reign of Daizong.

36 Huiguo will be discussed in greater detail later in this paper.
37 For a brief biography of Weishang, see Chen 2010: 119–120.
38 See Huang 2008 and Zhao 1998.
39 For a study of Baodingshan, see Howard 2001.
41 See Sørensen 2011. For comprehensive studies of the Baotang faction, see Adamek 2002; Adamek, 2007; Yanagida 1983; and Jan 1972.
the Korean scholar Ch’oe Chiwŏn 崔致遠 (857–?) for the Korean monk Hyesŏ 慧昭 (774–850). According to this text, Hyesŏ studied Esoteric Buddhist techniques in Tang China that were based on teachings ascribed to Śubhākarasiṃha (Ch. Shanwuwei 善無畏; 637–735) – the third great Esoteric master in the court of Xuanzong, alongside Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra – under the Chan master Yunxiu Shenjian 雲秀神鑑 (?–844),42 who in turn was a direct disciple of the Chan master Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788) (Sørensen 2011: 302). Given that Mazu Daoyi hailed from Xichuan and associated with members of the Baotang faction, Sørensen suggests that there was probably some sort of connection between the Śubhākarasiṃha-Vajrabodhi-Amoghavajra lineage and the Mazu branch of Southern Chan.43 He supports this theory with reference to the Chan chronicle Lidai fabao ji 歷代法寶記 (Record of the Dharma-Jewel through the Ages), composed by adepts of the Baotang group, which states that Master Wuzhu 無住 (714–774), their leader, regularly recited the SarvadurgatipariśodhanoṣṇīṣẠvijayādhāraṇīsūtra, one of the most important and influential Esoteric Buddhist scriptures.44 This sūtra was undeniably important to Amoghavajra, too, which might explain why his chief patron, Daizong, decreed that it should be recited by the Buddhist clergy twenty-one times each day.45 As Liu Shu-fen has demonstrated, dhāraṇī pillars featuring the sūtra also spread across Tang China (Liu 1996). However, Lothar Ledderose has demonstrated that the sūtra was present in Wofoyuan 臥佛院, Xichuan, as early as 733, well

42 For his biography, see Song gaoseng zhuan, T 50, no. 2061: 842a12–26.
44 Although this text had an apotropaic function and was widely adopted by Esoteric adepts, including members of Amoghavajra’s circle, it was prevalent across the Chinese landscape and was not linked to a single religious tradition. The Buddhist lexicographer Huilin 慧琳 (737–820) lists a total of eight Chinese translations of the sūtra, dating the earliest version to the Northern Zhou era (557–581). See Ledderose 2016: 117.
45 This decree, which was issued in 776, two years after Amoghavajra’s death, is cited in Daizong chao zeng sikong Dabianzheng Guangzhi Sanzang heshang biaozhi ji, T 52, no. 2120: 852c9–13. For an overview of the use of the SarvadurgatipariśodhanoṣṇīṣẠvijayādhāraṇīsūtra in imperial pro-Buddhist policies, including during Daizong’s reign, see Copp 2014: 158–166, esp. 164–165.
before Amoghavajra rose to prominence (Ledderose 2016: 115). Furthermore, according to Kuo Liying, the new version that is closely associated with eighth-century Esoteric Buddhism is not attested epigraphically until 869, in Zhejiang (Kuo 2014: 358), whereas one of the older versions exerted an influence on Dunhuang art from the early eighth century onwards (Kuo 2014: 367). Overall, then, the popularity of the Sarvadurgatiparisodhanosṇīṇisāvijayād dhāraṇīsūtra in eighth-century Xichuanese Chan circles reflects a complex and heterogeneous religious landscape that incorporated various local cults with no definitive links to Amoghavajra’s form of Esotericism. That said, such a landscape may well have been receptive to his teachings in the mid- to late Tang era.

We know that high-ranking, pro-Buddhist state officials who were patrons of Amoghavajra at the court of Emperor Daizong actively engaged with Buddhism in Xichuan. For instance, one ex-Chancellor, Du Hongjian 杜鴻漸 (?–769),46 was sent to the region in 766 to suppress an uprising led by Cui Ning 崔寧 (a.k.a. Cui Gan 崔旰; 723–783),47 who had previously organized a highly effective defence against the Tibetans. During his year-long tenure in Xichuan, Du Hongjian patronized Master Wuzhu, the leader of the Chan Baotang faction,48 while his generous patronage of the Dashengci Monastery was commemorated with a portrait in the institution’s gallery.49 In addition to being an influential advocate of Amoghavajra’s teaching at the imperial court,50 Du Hongjian was a close associate of another powerful Chancellor, Yuan Zai 元載 (713–777).51 The latter was a tireless proponent of Buddhism, and specifically the Esoteric tradition favoured by Amoghavajra’s group, which he viewed as an integral component of his strategy to consolidate imperial power.52

46 For biographies of Du Hongjian, see JTS 108.3282–3285 and XTS 126.4422–4424.
47 For biographies of Cui Ning, see JTS 117.3397–3403 and XTS 144.4704–4708.
48 Lidai fabao ji, T 51, no. 2075: 188b21–189b22.
49 This is one of the earliest artworks in the monastery, along with portraits of Cui Ning and Wei Gao. See Yizhou minghua lu in SKQS 812.500.
50 On Du Hongjian’s support for Amoghavajra, see Goble 2016: 123–139.
51 For biographies of Yuan Zai, see JTS 118.3409–3416 and XTS 145.4711–4715.
52 Yuan Zai enjoyed almost total control over China’s central administration between 766 and 777. His overriding concern during his period in office was to bolster the country’s defences against the Tibetan threat. To achieve this, he delegated greater authority to the provinces and encouraged them to strengthen their borders while simultaneously
For instance, he oversaw the construction of chapels and altars to accommodate Amoghavajra’s ritual projects,53 promoted Buddhism in Xichuan through his support for the Baotang faction54 and commissioned an ordination platform for Chengdu’s Baoyuan Monastery 宝園寺 (see below). We also know that both Du Hongjian and Yuan Zai revered the teaching of the aforementioned Korean monk Wuxiang,55 who had close links to the Baotang group (QTW 617.6233–6234).

Clearly, then, an influential group of monks and politicians with links to Amoghavajra’s circle were active in the Xichuanese religious landscape during the reign of Emperor Daizong. As the rest of this paper will demonstrate, Wei Gao not only joined this network but endeavoured to realize several unfinished projects that the previous generation of government officials and monastics had initiated in Xichuan several decades earlier.

– The restoration of the statue of the bodhisattva Samantabhadra in the Dashengci monastery

In 801, Wei Gao composed a record entitled Zai xiu Chengdufu Dashengci si jintong puxian pusa ji 再修成都府大聖慈寺金銅普賢菩薩記 (Record of the Reconstruction of the Gold and Copper [Statue of] the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra in the Dashengci Monastery in Chengdu) (WYYH 818.5153–5154; QTW 453.4628–4629), in which he described his restoration of this sculpture. Emperor Xuanzong expedited the construction of the Dashengci Monastery in 756–757 following his exile to Xichuan during the An Lushan Rebellion to express his gratitude to the Shu people consolidating the territorial centre of the empire. He viewed Buddhism as a useful tool that would allow him to unify the empire and reinforce the Emperor’s sovereign status, so his support for the religion was lavish. However, the end result of his policies was a radical decentralization of the Tang state that Daizong’s successor, Dezong, struggled to overcome at the start of his reign. See Peterson 1979: 496–497.

53 On Yuan Zai’s consistent support for Amoghavajra, see Goble 2019b: 153–156.
54 Yuan Zai and Du Hongjian are named in the Lidai fabao ji as patrons of Wuzhu. For an overview of their relationships with this master, see Adamek 2007: 220–221.
55 For further details, see Wuxiang’s biography in Song gaoseng zhuan, T 50, no. 2061: 189b22–190b16.
for their hospitality.\footnote{56 The Dashengci Monastery was proposed by a local monk named Yinggan 英幹 (date unknown) and the eunuch Gao Lishi 高力士 (684–762), who arranged the Emperor’s exile. Xuanzong is said to have personally inscribed the monastery’s plaque and to have donated one thousand \textit{mu} 畝 of agricultural land to the project (one \textit{mu} 畝 equated to 540 square metres during the Tang Dynasty); see Wilkinson 2012: 557. On the establishment of the monastery, see \textit{Fozu tongji}, T 49, no. 2035: 376a4–8. For biographies of Gao Lishi, see JTS 184.4753–59 and XTS 207.5858–61.} This gift was made in response to a request for a new monastery from the Korean monk Wuxiang, who was introduced to the exiled court by his patron Zhangqiu Jianqiong.\footnote{57 Zhangqiu Jianqiong participated in the war against the Tibetans and actively engaged with Buddhism in Xichuan. For instance, he was a patron of the local Baotang group. For his biographies, see JTS 196.5234 and XTS 216.6086. As mentioned above, Zhangqiu sponsored and supervised the second phase of the construction of the Leshan Giant Buddha between 739 and 746, during his tenure as Military Governor of Xichuan. For further details of Zhangqiu and Buddhism, see Yanagida 1976: 282–283. According to Wuxiang’s biography in \textit{Song gaoseng zhuan}, T 50, no. 2061: 832c6, when Zhangqiu introduced the monk to the exiled court of Xuanzong in Xichuan, he proposed several monasteries: “[Wuxiang] urged the donors to establish the Jingzong, Daci, Puti, Ningguo and other monasteries” (由是遂勸檀越造淨眾大慈菩提寧國等寺).} Dashengci subsequently became one of the largest monastic complexes and depositories in China between the ninth and tenth centuries. Emperors, local governors, prominent painters and architects were all involved in its expansion and upkeep by adding new structures, enlarging and restoring existing buildings and sponsoring artworks.\footnote{58 For a history of the Dashengci Monastery in the medieval period, see Mesnil 2006.} It is therefore no surprise that Wei Gao contributed to the monastery by restoring its statue of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. In his record of the restoration, he writes:

\begin{quote}
Formerly, at the beginning of the Dali [era] (7 December 766–10 February 780), there was a monk of lofty conduct and of unknown origins who said: “In ten years this statue will be removed, in twenty years it will be restored.”
\end{quote}

昔大厯初有高行僧，不知何許人，曰：斯像後十年而廢，二十年而復興。\textit{(WYYH 818.5153; QTW 453.4628)}

From this passage, it follows that the statue was established by 766 but removed a decade later: that is, at some point after 776 (\textit{WYYH 818.5153; QTW 453.4628}). Its removal possibly reflected the short-lived but significant influence of Li Shuming 李叔明 (?–787), an anti-Buddhist
governor of neighbouring Dongchuan 東川 between 778 and 786 (XTS 147.4758). The Tang Huiyao 唐會要 (Institutional History of the Tang) recounts that Li Shuming initiated the suppression of Buddhism shortly after his arrival in Dongchuan (THY 47.837). Wei Gao not only commissioned the statue’s restoration in 801 but also built a main hall (kai zheng-dian 開正殿) in the Dashengci Monastery in which to house it. In his record, he writes:

My present Imperial Sage conceived a plan; [he] issued an edict that monasteries in the four directions [that are] old and decrepit should be repaired. This is his sagacious effort. Therefore, [Wei] Gao, in order to celebrate the Emperor’s birthday, reverently gathered fellow officials [and] assembled military to perform the ritual of zhai 齋 in this monastery for the great blessing of the Emperor.

I 今皇帝神聖纂圖, 頒四方藍宇修舊起廢, 斯其明效也. 皋因降誕慶辰, 肅群寮戒武旅上崇景福齋於斯寺. (WYYH 818.5153; QTW 453.4629)

At the end of his record, he declares that he undertook the statue’s restoration in part to honour Dezong, who had given him the opportunity to preside over Xichuan for almost two decades:

It has been seventeen years since [Wei] Gao received the appointment of Military Governor [of Xichuan]. [I] have searched [for something with which to] praise the Emperor’s wise course of action. [I] have aided the Great Transformation, spread [it] to the hearts of ten thousand people. [The fact that they] turn to goodness, [even though I] do not rely upon admonition, points to the greatness of the Buddha’s doctrine.

皋受命方鎮. 十有七年. 求所以讚皇猷. 神大化. 嚐以萬人之心. 不俟懲誡. 靡然歸善者. 證氏之教宏矣. (WYYH 818.5154; QTW 453.4629)

In addition, it is conceivable that Chengguan persuaded his close associate Wei Gao to repair the statue, given that the Huayan patriarch had previously travelled to Mount Emei 眉峨 in Xichuan – widely acknowledged as the centre of Samantabhadra’s cult – with the express purpose of beseeching the bodhisattva to materialize.60

59 The term zhai 齋 may refer specifically to a vegetarian diet or to other forms of abstention.

In her study of the medieval history of the Dashengci Monastery, Eve-lynne Mesnil has demonstrated that several niches at the institution were dedicated to Samantabhadra, another bodhisattva – Mañjuśrī – and the Avataṃsakasūtra (Huayan jing 華嚴經) (Mesnil 2006: 101), which raises the possibility that the two bodhisattvas may have been related to the cult of this sūtra. That said, Samantabhadra – as well as with other bodhisattvas such as Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara – was promoted as a nationally important deity in the court of Emperor Daizong at the time when it was dominated by Amoghavajra and his secular patrons, that is, precisely the period when the statue of Samantabhadra was established in the Dashengci Monastery. This clique initiated a number of large-scale projects relating to these bodhisattvas, whom they bestowed with symbols of imperial sovereignty in portraits, statues and texts. For instance, in 769, Amoghavajra lobbied successfully for the promulgation of an imperial decree that ordered every monastery to install an image of Mañ-juśrī. Similarly, the following year, he requested imperial funding for the installation of images of Samantabhadra in the imperial monasteries of Taiyuan 太原, ancestral home of the ruling Li 李 family (XTS 49.6371). He was also determined to advance the cults of Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra by translating texts relating to both deities. For instance, after 756, when Emperor Suzong summoned him to the Daxingshan Monastery in Chang’an to pray for victory over An Lushan’s army, he translated a poem entitled Puxian pusa xing yuan zan 普賢菩薩行願贊 (Praise of the Practice and Vows of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva). Bart Dessein has demonstrated that this poem is actually a modified version of the Mañjuśrīpraṇidhāna, which Buddhabhadra (359–429) translated between 418 and 420 on the basis of a Khotanese manuscript (T 278 in the Taishō Canon); Amoghavajra simply substituted Samantabhadra for Mañjuśrī.

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61 Scholars have traditionally interpreted Amoghavajra’s activities on Mount Wutai as an attempt to establish Esoteric Buddhism as China’s national religion, inspired by his personal devotion to the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. See, for instance, Birnbaum 1983: 25–38, 30. More recently, Geoffrey Goble’s careful analysis of Daizong’s decrees has suggested that Amoghavajra’s activities on the mountain were actually responses to the Emperor’s investment in Mount Wutai as a new imperial Buddhist site; see Goble 2021.

62 Daizong chao zeng sikong dabianzheng guangzhi sanzang heshang biaozhi ji, T 52, no. 2120: 837a26–b17.

Mañjuśrī (Dessein 2003: 322–329). Although the later poem ostensibly lauds Samantabhadra as a supreme deity, it is in fact a thinly veiled eulogy for Suzong (Dessein 2003: 332).

As mentioned above, Wei Gao’s record of his restoration of the statue of Samantabhadra may indicate that it was erected at Dashengci around 766. This raises the possibility that those who installed the artwork – and possibly even those who created it – were motivated by Amoghavajra’s promotion of Samantabhadra’s cult in the imperial court and his efforts to enhance the Emperor’s authority by conflating him with the bodhisattva. Wei Gao writes:

The statue of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra in the Da[sheng]ci Monastery was originally made by Śramaṇa Tiyuan, the transmitter of the teaching\(^{64}\) [of] Master Dazhao.

大慈寺普賢像，蓋大照和尚傳教沙門體源之所造也. (WYYH 818.5153; QTW 453.4628)

Clearly, then, according to Wei Gao, the statue’s creator – Tiyuan 體源 – was a disciple of a certain Master Dazhao 大照. It is reasonable to assume that this was Meditation Master Dazhao 大照禪師 – the posthumous title of Master Tanzhen 曇貞 (fl. 724–777), Amoghavajra’s disciple,\(^{65}\) who became a dhāraṇī chanter at the palace chapel in Chang’an’s

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\(^{64}\) Chuanjiao shamen 傳教沙門, “śramaṇa – transmitter of the teaching,” is a term that occurs frequently in accounts of Chinese adepts of Esoteric Buddhism. For example, the Esoteric master Haiyun 海雲 (?–834?) refers to himself as a “chuanjiao shamen” in the Xifang tuoluoni zang zhong jin’gangzu amilituo junzha li fa 西方陀羅尼藏中金剛族阿蜜哩多軍吒利法 (Vajra Kundalī Method Contained in the Indian “Dhāraṇī-pitaka”). Specifically, the text reads: “Haiyun called himself śramaṇa who transmits the teaching” 海雲自稱梵字傳教沙門 (T 21, no. 1212: 49c9). Haiyun explains that he “transmitted” Esoteric texts by translating the oral Sanskrit chants of his master Yicao, then transcribing them: “[When] Yicao chanted a Sanskrit text, Haiyun wrote it down” 義操誦出梵文, 海雲筆受 (T 21, no. 1212: 49c11). In another treatise entitled Liangbu dafa xiangcheng shizi fufa ji 兩部大法相承師資付法記 (Record of Successive Masters Transmitting the Methods of the Great Dharma Characteristics of the Two Classes [of Mandalas]), Haiyun again refers to himself as “śramaṇa – the transmitter” (T 51, no. 2081: 785c4).

\(^{65}\) Although two Northern Chan masters – Puji 普寂 (651–739) and his disciple Guangde 廣德 (date unknown) – also bore the honorific Dazhao 大照, scholars unanimously agree that, in the context of Esoteric Buddhism, Meditation Master Dazhao must be Master Tanzhen. This conclusion is based on a stele inscription that Kūkai 空海 (774–835) composed for Huigu 圓果 (746–806), one of Tanzhen’s disciples. In this text, Kūkai
Qinglong Monastery 青龍寺, a flourishing centre of Esoteric Buddhism,66 following his arrival there in 752 (Chen 2010: 116). Moreover, if the statue was installed either shortly before or in the first year of the Dali era, its establishment would have coincided with the year that the official Du Hongjian – Amoghavajra’s disciple and patron at the imperial court – spent in Xichuan to suppress an uprising led by Cui Ning. However, the latter redoubled his efforts to seize power following Du Hongjian’s departure from the region in 767, and Chancellor Yuan Zai soon decided that the best means of exerting at least some control over the rebellious warlord was to grant him an official position – hence he was appointed Military Governor of Xichuan.67 Thereafter, Cui Ning not only maintained local government support for the Baotang group68 but established the Puti Monastery 菩提寺, which was dedicated to Master Wuxiang.69 Therefore, it may be said that all three of these high officials – Du Hongjian, Yuan Zai and Cui Ning – were important patrons of Xichuanese Buddhism. Furthermore, given Du Hongjian’s and Yuan Zai’s close association with Buddhist leaders at the imperial court, it is reasonable to suggest that they – and latterly Cui Ning – promoted an imperially sanctioned Buddhist agenda as part of their efforts to implement government policy in the region.

Wei Gao’s renovation of the statue of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra in 801 clearly indicates his determination to continue the pro-Buddhist policies of his political predecessors in Xichuan. Moreover, if we are correct in identifying “Dazhao” – the master of the statue’s creator refers to Huigu’s teacher (i.e. Tanzhen) as Dazhao. For a detailed discussion of this honorific title in the contexts of the Chan and Esoteric traditions in Tang Buddhism, see Chen 2010: 148–152. On Tanzhen himself, see Iwasaki 1997. For an English translation and discussion of Kūkai’s inscription, see Green and Mun 2015.

66 The Qinglong Monastery was one of the two main centres of Esoteric Buddhism in China, the other being the Daxingshan Monastery 大興善寺. For a detailed discussion of the monastery and its Esoteric activities, see Chen 2010: 178–180.

67 Cui Ning remained in this position until 779. See Wu 1980: 966–968.

68 Section 21 of the Lidai fabao ji (T 51, no. 2075: 189b22–190b16) is devoted to Cui Ning’s audience with Master Wuzhu, the leader of the Baotang group.

69 According to the official Duan Wenchang 段文昌 (773–835), Cui Ning constructed the Puti Monastery at the start of the Dali 大曆 era (766–779). See Duan Wenchang, Puti si zhili ji 菩提寺置立記 (Record of the Establishment of the Puti Monastery), QTW 617.6233–6234.
Tiyuan – as Amoghavajra’s disciple Tanzhen, then it seems safe to assume that the artwork’s installation was related to the cult of Samantabhadra that Amoghavajra was cultivating in the imperial court around that time. Hence, it could be said that Wei Gao’s restoration reflects the enduring popularity of such projects long into the reign of Daizong’s successor, Dezong. This should come as little surprise, as many of the key figures in the Buddhist elite under Daizong were still active and influential at court more than two decades after his death. For instance, the Japanese pilgrim-monk Kūkai 空海 (774–835), who arrived in Chang’an in 804, asserted that he studied Sanskrit under Tanzhen during his two-year residence in the capital (Chen 2010: 151). Similarly, Tanzhen’s and Amoghavajra’s disciple Huiguo served as one of Dezong’s chief spiritual advisors and was widely credited with safeguarding the nation from invasions, droughts and floods.\(^{70}\) In addition, he taught several other important leaders of the Esoteric tradition within the imperial court. One of those disciples, Master Yicao 義操 (?–830?), became a prominent translator of Esoteric texts and helped to export Esoteric teaching to Japan via Kūkai.\(^{71}\) In turn, one of Yicao’s disciples, Faquan 法全 (date unknown) (Chen 2010: 131–132), became an important Esoteric leader at the Qinglong Monastery, where he bestowed the precepts upon the esteemed pilgrim-monk Ennin 圓仁 (793–864) in 840 (Chen 2010: 134).

The reverence in which Samantabhadra was held at the imperial court and within Amoghavajra’s extensive network, not to mention the promotion of his image as a symbol of imperial authority, might well explain why Wei Gao was motivated to restore the bodhisattva’s statue at Dashengci. In addition, the project could be understood as a personal declaration of Wei Gao’s devotion to Emperor Dezong, and a celebration of his victory over the Tibetans in 801, which was a triumph of national significance. It could also be seen as a pragmatic undertaking to aid the development of local Buddhism and support the monastery itself – common trends among government officials in Xichuan in this period. That said, it should not be understood solely as the realization of a pro-government – or pro-Esoteric

\(^{70}\) On Huiguo, see Chen 2010: 114–118; Imai 1997; and Green and Mun 2015.

\(^{71}\) On Yicao, see Chen 2010: 126.
WEI GAO AND HIS BUDDHIST ACTIVITIES IN XICHUAN 383

– agenda. As we saw earlier, the religious landscape of mid-Tang Xichuan encompassed numerous traditions, such as the cult of the *Avatamsakasūtra*, which was closely related to the cult of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra. This raises the possibility that Wei Gao may have adhered to some specifically Xichuanese customs in parallel with his efforts to advance official government policy.

It is worth adding that the Dashengci Monastery’s Samantabhadra Pavilion became an important centre for key Buddhist activities in Xichuan over subsequent decades. For instance, in *Song gaoseng zhuan*, Zanning reports that a Xichuanese monk named Zhixuan 知玄 (811–883)72 delivered a lecture there in 823 that attracted an audience of some ten thousand laypersons and monastics (講談于大慈寺普賢閣下 ... 黑白眾日計萬許人).73 Subsequently, Zhixuan, who was clearly an authoritative monastic figure in Xichuan from an early age, became an important Buddhist leader on a national scale. Indeed, when Emperor Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840–846) launched his persecution of Buddhism, Zhixuan was one of the monks who participated in a crucial debate on the religion during the first month of the Huichang 會昌 era (February–March 845) in Chang’an.74 Although the government’s intention was to use this debate as a platform to criticize Buddhist teaching and humiliate Buddhist monks, Zhixuan presented such a robust defence that the anti-Buddhists were left humbled. The fact that such an eminent monk had previously lectured at the Samantabhadra Pavilion attests to the enduring significance of the Dashengci Monastery as a centre of Buddhist learning in Xichuan and beyond, and to the enduring popularity of the cult that revered the bodhisattva.

72 For Zhixuan’s biography, see *Song gaoseng zhuan*, T 50, no. 2061: 743b4–744c14.
73 T 50, no. 2061: 743b21–23. According to Zanning, this lecture took place in the first year of Du Yuanying’s 杜元颖 (775–838) tenure as Military Governor of Xichuan (時丞相杜公元頴作鎮西蜀). Du Yuanying held this position from 823 until 829, as confirmed by Wu 1980: 976. Of course, if the date of Zhixuan’s birth and the date of the lecture are both correct, the conclusion must be that he addressed the crowd at just twelve years of age. Therefore, it seems likely that at least one of these dates is incorrect and that he was somewhat older when he delivered the lecture.
74 On this debate, see Chen 2004: 101–173.
In 802, Wei Gao composed a record entitled *Baoyuan si chuanshou pini xinshu ji* 寶園寺傳授毗尼新疏記 (*Record of the Transmission of a New Commentary on Vinaya at the Baoyuan Monastery*, QTW 453.4630–4631) in which he explains that he provided the Baoyuan Monastery in Chengdu with a number of copies of the “new” commentary (*xinshu* 新疏) on the *Dharmaguptakavinaya*. Composed by Huaisu 懷素 (624–697), both this commentary and the alternative “old” commentary (*jiushu* 舊疏), composed by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) and Fali 法礪 (569–635), had enjoyed increasing popularity throughout the eighth century.

These “old” and “new” commentaries were often used interchangeably in China’s monasteries, which generated considerable confusion among the monks. Hence, in 778, Emperor Daizong convened a council of vinaya scholars in the hope of producing a single, definitive commentary. Headed by Master Rujing 如淨 (date unknown), fourteen eminent monastics gathered in the Anguo Monastery 安國寺 in Chang’an, where they worked to collate a synthesized commentary based on both the “old” and the “new” versions. However, there is some evidence that the imperial court continued to promote Huaisu’s “new” commentary even after the project to collate a “standard” edition had been launched.

Chancellor Yuan Zai – as we have seen, the dominant figure at court in 75 The date of the foundation of the Baoyuan Monastery is unknown, but Daoxuan mentions it in his biographies of Masters Xuanxu 玄續 (536–650), T 50, no. 2060: 530c28–531a27, and Sengzhuan 僧崖 (?–559/560), T 50, no. 2060: 678b14–680c10, both in the *Xu gaoseng zhuan*續高僧傳 (*Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*). Hence, we may assume that the monastery was functioning in the early Tang era.
76 For Huaisu’s biography, see *Song gaoseng zhuan*, T 50, no. 2061: 792b25–793a10. This text asserts that he started to study vinaya with the prominent monk and translator Xuanzang 玄奘 (602/3–664) when the latter arrived in Chang’an in 645 following a sixteen-year pilgrimage to India. Under Xuanzang’s supervision, Huaisu – with considerable help and guidance from the “old” commentary – became an expert on the *Dharmaguptakavinaya*. However, he disagreed with some aspects of Daoxuan and Fali’s interpretation of the text and so felt compelled to produce his own version. This “new” commentary circulated widely and was soon heralded as at least the equal of the earlier version.
77 See *Song gaoseng zhuan*, T 50, no. 2061: 801a27–28.
78 For Rujing’s biography, see *Song gaoseng zhuan*, T 50, no. 2061: 801a16–801b2.
the final few years of Daizong’s reign – was the chief advocate of Huaisu’s text (see ZZTJ 224.7266). According to Rujing’s biography in Song gaoseng zhuàn, the Chancellor greatly admired the author’s vinaya expertise and therefore ordered Rujing to act as “master of the ‘new’ commentary” (xinshu zhu 新疏主: i.e. the leading expert on the text) and compile a report on it (國相元公載篤重素公崇其律教. 乃命淨為新疏主作傳焉) (T 50, no. 2061: 801b1–2). Similarly, in the Baoyuan si chuan­shou pini xinshu ji, Wei Gao asserts that Yuan Zai supported the ongoing dissemination of Huaisu’s commentary and instructed Rujing to focus on that text:

In the middle of the Dali era (766–779), the late Chancellor Yuan [Zai] was a minister who promoted the teaching. [He] transmitted [and] cherished [it], expanded [and] sustained [it]. He was worried that the Sweet Dew would be diluted with water, that the taste would lose its authenticity. Therefore, he ordered Master Rujing of the Jianfu Monastery to produce a report on the commentary by [Huai]su.

大曆中故相國元公以大臣秉教，授屬宏持，慮水雜甘露，味亡純正，愛命薦福寺大德如淨，以為素公之疏傳矣. (QTW 453.4630)

There is also some evidence that a number of influential monastics in the imperial court not only participated in the vinaya reform process but were also advocates of the “new” commentary. For instance, we know that some of the monks who helped to produce the “standard” commentary were members of Amoghavajra’s network. In Daizong chao zeng sikong Dabianzheng Guangzi Sanzang heshang biaozhi ji 代宗朝贈司空大辨正廣智三藏和上表制集 (Memorials and Edicts of the Venerable Monk Dabianzheng Guangzi Trepiṭaka, Bestowed [with the Title] Minister of Works by the Daizong Court), Amoghavajra’s disciple and biographer Yuanzhao 圓照 (728–809) names a certain Rujing in a list of forty-nine monks whom Amoghavajra summoned from other temples to the Daxingshan Monastery – the principal Esoteric centre in Chang’an – in 764 (T 52, no. 2120: 830c10). If this was the same Rujing who headed the team responsible for the collation of the “standard” commentary in 778, then he must have been a key member of Amoghavajra’s circle at the imperial court in the 760s. As mentioned earlier, Rujing collaborated closely with Yuan Zai, Amoghavajra’s principal patron, on the dissemination of Huaisu’s commentary, while Yuanzhao not only participated in
the collation of the “standard” commentary but also composed a written record of the project.\textsuperscript{79}

Emperor Daizong died before the “standard” commentary was completed, but the work continued after his son Dezong ascended the throne in 779, even though the new Emperor introduced a host of anti-Buddhist policies around the same time. Indeed, his support for the collation project was one of very few examples of personal sympathy for Buddhism prior to 788 – a fact that highlights the esteem in which the enterprise must have been held. Rujing and his band of scholars eventually produced a ten-scroll text entitled the \textit{Xin jianding shu} 新僉定疏 \textit{(Collectively Defined New Commentary)} that they presented to Dezong in 780 (\textit{T 50}, no. 2061, p. 805, b7). However, China’s monastics continued to follow the guidelines of the “old” and the “new” commentaries long after the “standard” commentary was collated. Indeed, in 781, Emperor Dezong proclaimed that the two earlier commentaries should continue to be circulated in equal measure (\textit{T 50}, no. 2061, p. 805, b7--8). Moreover, the monk who petitioned for both commentaries to circulate was none other than Rujing,\textsuperscript{80} who, as we have seen, was one of the foremost advocates of the “new” commentary under Dezong’s predecessor. Therefore, it is undeniable that Huaisu’s text continued to be held in high regard within the imperial court, alongside both the “old” commentary – which retained considerable influence in monasteries throughout the Tang Empire – and the recently collated “standard” version. The ongoing circulation of the “new” commentary in its own right was likely due to the fact that the promoters of Huaisu’s text during Daizong’s reign continued to hold positions of considerable power and influence in his son’s court. For instance, Masters Rujing and Yuanzhao were highly respected figures in the courts of both emperors. Indeed, Dezong awarded the latter a purple robe and an honorary court rank as well as lavish gifts of property.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{79} Both Yuanzhao’s biography and his account of the collation process are contained in \textit{Song gaoseng zhuang}, \textit{T 50}, no. 2061: 804b18–805c21.

\textsuperscript{80} The corresponding passage in Rujing’s \textit{Song gaoseng zhuang} biography reads as follows: “The presentation of a request, in the second year of Jianzhong, that both commentaries be kept in circulation, was the work of [Rujing] 至建中二年奏二疏並行, 淨之力也. \textit{T 50}, no. 2061, p. 801, a29.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{Fozu tongji}, \textit{T 49}, no. 2035: 379a23–24.
In the *Baoyuan si chuanshou pini xinshu ji*, Wei Gao confirms that Yuan Zai encouraged the dissemination of Huaisu’s commentary throughout Xichuan during the reign of Emperor Daizong. For instance, he reports that the Chancellor ordered the establishment of an ordination platform in the Baoyuan Monastery during the Dali era in the expectation that it would be used to promulgate the “new” commentary. This undoubtedly formed part of Yuan Zai’s general strategy to promote the “new” commentary over the “old.” That said, there is ample evidence that the “old” commentary was in wide circulation throughout southern China in the second half of the eighth century, more than a century after the firm establishment of Daoxuan’s lineage, which can be traced to shortly after the master’s death. For instance, in 771, the Tang statesman and calligrapher Yan Zhenqing 頭真卿 (709–785) composed a record entitled *Fuzhou Baoying si lüzang yuan jietan ji* 撫州寶應寺律藏院戒壇記 (*Record of the Ordination Platform of the Vinayapitaka Hall in the Baoying Monastery in Fuzhou*) in which he describes Huiqin 慧欽 (date unknown) as heir to Daoxuan’s vinaya tradition and its chief promoter in Jiangxi in the immediate aftermath of the An Lushan Rebellion. Similarly, in *Xilin si Yongge yuan lü dade Qilang heshang bei* 西林寺永閣院律大德齊朗和尚碑 (*Stele Inscription for Vinaya Master Qilang of the Yongge Hall in Xilin Monastery*, QTW 747.7736–7737), a government official named Zheng Suqing 鄭素卿 (date unknown) mentions that the Prefect of Jingzhou 荊州 (Jiangxi), Cui Yan 崔衍 (date unknown) established an ordination platform at the local Kaiyuan Monastery 開元寺 in 794 and invited vinaya monks from other parts of

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82 QTW 453.4630. Numerous Tang officials established ordination platforms in the regions as a quick means of raising revenue for the central government or for personal gain. On these officials’ engagement with provincial ordination procedures, see, for instance, Barrett 2005 and Gernet 1995: 48–62.

83 On the establishment of Daoxuan’s vinaya lineage throughout southern China, and particularly in Jiangxi, see Sokolova 2019.

84 For biographies of Yan Zhenqing, see JTS 128.3589–3598 and XTS 153.4854–4861. For a comprehensive study of his life, see McNair 1998.

85 QTW 338.3422–3423. On the vinaya lineage presented by Yan Zhenqing, see Chen 2017. For more information on the establishment of Daoxuan’s lineage in the south, see Sokolova 2019.

86 This could be the scholar-official Cui Yan, whose biography appears in XTS at 164.5041–5043. However, this text does not mention any postings to Xichuan.
Jiangxi to officiate at the opening ceremony (QTW 747.7737). Later in the same text, Zheng Suqing reports that some of the monastery’s monks attended an ordination ceremony at the Donglin Monastery 東林寺 on Mount Lu 廬山 in 798 (QTW 747.7737). All of these monks adhered to a single vinaya tradition based on Daoxuan’s commentaries on the Dhammaguptakavinaya. Nevertheless, Wei Gao’s record indicates that the imperial elite persisted with their efforts to encourage southern monastics to adopt Huaisu’s “new” commentary, or use it in conjunction with the “old” version, at least in Xichuan.

Zanning used Wei Gao’s record of his donation of forty copies of the “new” commentary to the Baoyuan Monastery as a source for his biography of Huaisu in Song gaoseng zhuan. However, although he quotes a short passage from the Military Governor’s account almost verbatim, he seemingly misread the text as he attributes the gift to Yuan Zai, rather than Wei Gao himself:

In the middle of the Dali era, Chancellor Yuan Zai sent a memorandum to the throne regarding the establishment of an ordination platform in the Baoyuan Monastery in Chengdu [and] the transmission of a new commentary.

There is strong evidence that Zanning’s interpretation is erroneous because, elsewhere in his record, Wei Gao not only reports that he served under Yuan Zai at the start of his government career (and so witnessed the latter’s plans to advance Buddhism) but then gives a detailed account of how – and, crucially, when – the monastics of Baoyuan received their copies of Huaisu’s text:

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87 For a detailed discussion of these monks’ identities, see Sokolova 2019: 332–334 and 336–337.
88 T 50, no. 2061: 793a4–5. See also Huaisu’s biography in Song gaoseng zhuan, T 50, no. 2061: 793a4–9.
89 Interestingly, neither Wei Gao’s nor Yuan Zai’s biography mentions the two men working together. However, according to JTS (118.3410), Yuan Zai held the post of Overseer of Military Farming (Yingtianshi 管田使) at the start of Daizong’s reign in the early to mid-760s. It must have been around this time that Wei Gao served on Yuan Zai’s staff and witnessed his establishment of an ordination platform in the Baoyuan Monastery.
[Wei] Gao is guarding the borderland [of the Tang Empire. When] I am not occupied with military affairs, I personally read the sagely teaching, benefiting significantly, [I] think … How can we prioritize the vocabulary at the expense of the correct [meaning]? Only the new commentary by [the master from the] Jianfu [Monastery], which is refined and easy to follow, is credible. In the past, [I, Wei] Gao, served as administrator of a military colony, assisting Lord Yuan [Zai in the region to the] right [west] of the Huai 淮 [River], and saw that his lordship’s understanding of the perfect doctrine from the West [Buddhism] is excellent indeed. Although generations have passed, [and that] man has perished, the bequeathed will is here. Now, I [wish to] expand the transmission [of the “new” commentary] and equally praise the sagely intention. Therefore, from my own salary, I ordered forty copies of the “new” commentary, as well as thirty copies of commentaries on the *Lotus sūtra*. I entrusted Master Guangyi 90 of the Baoyuan Monastery [with the task of] distributing and implementing them.

Wei Gao’s message is clear: it was he, rather than his former master Yuan Zai, who realized the latter’s ambition to promote Buddhism in the “western region” by making a generous donation of forty copies of the “new” commentary to the monks of the Baoyuan Monastery in 802.

In summary, it may be said that Yuan Zai, Rujing and Yuanzhao were all staunch advocates of Huaisu’s “new” commentary. The two monasteries coordinated most of the large-scale projects relating to vinaya in the Tang Empire in the final third of the eighth century, including the major enterprise of collating a “standard” commentary on the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* under the auspices of two successive emperors, Daizong and Dezong, which suggests that they must have wielded considerable authority and enjoyed significant influence in the courts of both rulers. Moreover, it seems that Huaisu’s text, which Yuan Zai and Rujing promoted during the reign of Daizong, remained the more popular commentary at court even after his son acceded to the throne in 779. In addition, given that Rujing and Yuanzhao were close associates of Amoghavajra and his

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90 I have been unable to identify this monk.
powerful patrons in the imperial court, it seems likely that other members of the court’s pro-Esoteric clique were equally keen supporters of the “new” commentary. Finally, the enduring popularity of Huaisu’s text long into the reign of Emperor Dezong may explain Wei Gao’s decision to finance its distribution among the monks of Xichuan out of his own pocket and thereby fulfil Yuan Zai’s mission to spread the teaching that he had begun almost four decades earlier.

As with the Dashengci Monastery, there is ample evidence that the Baoyuan Monastery remained an important Buddhist institution well into the ninth century. For instance, the epigraphic collection *Baoke congbian* 寶刻叢編 (*Compendium of Precious Inscriptions*), compiled by Chen Si 陳思 (1225–1264), records that a stele was erected for the monastery’s Vinaya Master Zhigao 智誥 (date unknown) in the ninth year of the Yuanhe 元和 era (814).91 The monument’s inscription was composed by a high official named Duan Wenchang 段文昌 (773–835) who had served on Wei Gao’s staff at the start of his government career.92 Therefore, almost ten years after Wei Gao’s death, the Baoyuan Monastery was still an active ordination centre that continued to enjoy the support of the local authorities. Furthermore, given Wei Gao’s generous donation of forty copies of Huaisu’s “new” commentary in 802, it is reasonable to assume that its ordinations and other vinaya-related activities were conducted in accordance with that tradition.

— The Baoli monastery: Wei Gao’s final tribute to Emperor Dezong

In 804, one year before his death, Wei Gao launched another ambitious Buddhist project in Xichuan when he established the Baoli Monastery

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91 *Baoke congbian* in SKQS 5.745. I have been unable to identify this monk.

92 When Duan Wenchang arrived in Xichuan in the nineteenth year of the Zhenyuan 貞元 era (801), he served as Commandant (Wei 尉) of Lingchi 靈池 County on Wei Gao’s staff until the latter’s death in 805. Later in his career, Duan himself served as Military Governor of Xichuan on two separate occasions – from 821 to 823 and from 832 to 835 (dates confirmed in Wu 1980: 975–976 and JTS 167.4368–4369). For biographies of Duan Wenchang, see JTS 167.4368–4369 and XTS 89.3763–3764. His inscription for Master Zhigao has been lost, but the *Baoke congbian* gives its title as *Baoyuan si gu lintan dade Zhigao lüshi bei* 寶園寺故臨壇大德智誥律師碑 (*Stele for the Late Vinaya Master Zhigao from the Baoyuan Monastery*). See SKQS 5.745.
The details of this enterprise are recorded in the *Baoli si ji* 寶曆寺記 (Record of the Baoli Monastery, QTW 453.4629–4630). In this text, Wei Gao explains that he decided to found the monastery as a tribute to Emperor Dezong, who had given him the opportunity to serve in Xichuan for almost two decades:

Minister [Wei] Gao has been defending [and] administering Western Shu [Xichuan] for almost twenty years. I regard [this opportunity] as a sagacious gift [from the Emperor]. [During this period, I] have pacified the remote barbarians; the army has halted [military conflict] at the frontier; the people’s profits and wealth have multiplied; that was at the behest of the Celestial Treasury. [Now, when] I think of the past, what was my contribution? My rank is growing more prestigious day by day, [and] my allowance grows day by day. [Therefore,] I have been thinking of expanding the sagely teaching to repay my good fortune. So, out of my official salary, I bought a tract of auspicious land to the south-east of the official residence [in Chengdu], [and] built a monastery. [I] gave it the name Baoli.

Wei Gao sent the Emperor a memorandum in which he requested permission to establish this monastery. Dezong approved the project and dispatched a silver board for the new institution to confirm his decision. Wei Gao writes:

I sent a memorandum to the Emperor [regarding the establishment of a monastery], [and] the Emperor assented [to the request]. [The Emperor] bestowed a silver board, with heavenly writing shining on it, as a manifestation of [his] sincerity.

The establishment of this monastery was at least as significant and symbolic as Wei Gao’s restoration of the statue of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra in the Dashengci Monastery and his donation of forty copies of Huaisu’s commentary on the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* to the Baoyuan Monastery. It served as a formal expression of his unwavering loyalty to Dezong, celebrated his own glorious military achievements and

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93 A *pang* 榜 is a monastic noticeboard.
commemorated his and the Emperor’s fruitful, long-term professional and personal relationship.

According to the *Yizhou minghua lu* 益州名畫錄 (*Record of Famous Paintings in Yizhou*), composed by Huang Xiufu 黃休復 (fl. 1006), two statues of the Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra – both attributed to the same artist, Du Hongyi 杜宏義 (date unknown) – were transferred from the Dashengci Monastery to the Baoli Monastery. In light of this, it is feasible that the statue of Samantabhadra was the same artwork that Wei Gao restored in 801. If this statue was originally installed by a disciple of the Esoteric master Tanzhen as an imperial symbol in Dashengci, it seems likely that such symbolism persisted following its transferral to the new institution.

As with Wei Gao’s other pro-Buddhist projects, his founding of the Baoli Monastery helped to secure his legacy in Xichuan long into the ninth century. Zanning’s biography of a monk named Zhiguang 智廣 (date unknown) in the *Song gaoseng zhuan* includes a description of a Nanzhao assault on Chengdu in the middle of the Xiantong 咸通 era (860–874). The text records that a heavenly king (*Tian Wang* 天王) manifested as a huge śramaṇa, around five zhang 丈 tall, who terrified the invaders and caused them to retreat. Later, to commemorate their miraculous reprieve, the local people installed an equally tall representation of a śramaṇa inside the Baoli Monastery. Clearly, then, the institution that Wei Gao founded remained an important religious and social centre in Chengdu for at least six decades after his death.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored the background to Wei Gao’s pro-Buddhist activities in Xichuan – a subject that previous generations of scholars have tended to overlook. Yet, as we have seen, these projects comprised

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94 *Yizhou minghua lu* in SKQS 812.498.

95 Many Chinese monasteries erected statues of the *Tian Wang* 天王 (Sanskrit: *devarāja*), a powerful king of the spiritual realm, in the belief that he would protect them from danger.

96 A zhang 丈 is a unit of measurement that equates to 4.158 metres, so the apparition would have been over 20 metres tall.

97 *Song gaoseng zhuan*, T 50, no. 2061: 882a27–b2.
an integral part of the Military Governor’s successful collaboration with Emperor Dezong, so it could be said that they helped to reinforce the strategic alliance between the central government in Chang’ an and a remote province on the south-west border of the Tang Empire.

Between the years 801 and 804, Wei Gao initiated, implemented and recorded three large-scale Buddhist projects in Xichuan’s capital, Chengdu. Viewed in the context of Dezong’s pro-Buddhist policy, these projects were clearly centre-oriented. Moreover, this study has shown that they were linked to the ideology and related policies promoted by elite monks in the imperial courts of two successive emperors, Daizong and Dezong. These monastics had a profound impact on the courts’ prevailing ideology, which they formulated under the patronage of a number of prominent state officials.

The evidence presented in this paper has demonstrated that Xichuan was the starting point for numerous military campaigns against powerful exterior foes, which explains why high-ranking courtiers were determined to maintain a political and ideological trajectory in the region that mirrored the one they had already established in the capital. For instance, members of the pro-Buddhist elite in Emperor Daizong’s court, including two chancellors – Du Hongjian and Yuan Zai – either supported or personally initiated a number of pro-Buddhist projects in Xichuan, especially during the Dali era (766–779). Unsurprisingly, these schemes complemented those that Amoghavajra, the supreme Buddhist authority at the imperial court at that time, and his circle were conceiving and implementing within Chang’ an and across the imperial heartland.

We have seen that Wei Gao was closely related to this pro-Buddhist political elite. For instance, we know that he served under Yuan Zai at the start of his government career and witnessed the latter’s pro-Buddhist activities in Xichuan, such as his construction of an ordination platform in the Baoyuan Monastery. Later, he maintained a close connection with the court of Dezong while serving as Military Governor of Xichuan, where his local initiatives correlated with the central government’s pro-Buddhist policies. To a large extent, these projects could be seen as continuations of schemes initiated by the imperial court on the advice of Amoghavajra and his disciples, many of whom retained their positions of authority for many decades after their master’s death in 774.
As this paper has demonstrated, Wei Gao restored the statue of the Bodhisattva Samantabhadra in the Dashengci Monastery in 801, then, the following year, presented forty copies of Huaisu’s “new” commentary on the *Dharmaguptakavinaya* to the Baoyuan Monastery. Both of these projects were entirely in keeping with the pro-Buddhist policies of the imperial court at the turn of the ninth century. We have seen that the statue was created around 766 by a monk named Tiyuan, a disciple of Tanzhen, who in turn was one of Amoghavajra’s disciples. Therefore, it surely possessed the imperial symbolism attributed to the deity. Similarly, the Buddhist elite at the imperial court enthusiastically promoted the “new” commentary throughout the latter half of the eighth century. For instance, Yuan Zai – Daizong’s pro-Buddhist Chancellor during the Dali era – utilized Amoghavajra’s network of disciples, associate monks and patrons to distribute Huaisu’s text; and Amoghavajra himself summoned Rujing to the Daxingshan Monastery in Chang’an in 764 (around the time when Yuan Zai entrusted the monk with the task of promoting the “new” commentary and some fourteen years before he was appointed to lead the team that collated the “standard” edition). Moreover, Amoghavajra’s disciple and biographer Yuanzhao was a member of Rujing’s collation team. From this, it is clear that Wei Gao’s donation of the “new” commentary to the monks of the Baoyuan Monastery was directly related to a policy that elite monks and their patrons at the imperial court had initiated more than thirty years earlier. The fact that Wei Gao turned his attention to these two enterprises almost as soon as he had eliminated the threat of invasion from the Tibetan Empire suggests that they were projects of national as well as local significance.

Next, in 803, Wei Gao had the satisfaction of presiding over the completion of the Leshan Giant Buddha – an enormous undertaking that had lain dormant for more than forty years prior to the Military Governor’s decision to resurrect the project in 789. Finally, in 804, in part to celebrate his victory over the Tibetans, he established the Baoli Monastery and dedicated the new institution to Dezong. This monastery would eventually accommodate statues of the Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra. If, as seems likely, the latter was the statue that Amoghavajra’s followers had created and installed at the Dashengci Monastery in the Dali era, and that Wei Gao had restored in 801, it undoubtedly retained
much of its profound imperial symbolism following the transfer to its new home.

It is important to stress that Wei Gao’s projects in Xichuan should not be perceived solely as manifestations of central government policy or attempts to implement the imperial court’s pro-Buddhist agenda. They were also deeply rooted in local, Xichuanese Buddhism, which had prevailed in the region long before Amoghavajra’s rise to power in the middle of the eighth century. For instance, the cults of the Bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra may well have been related to the earlier cult of the *Avatamsakasūtra*, as is attested by dedicatory niches in the Dashengci Monastery, and the latter deity was also closely associated with Mount Emei. In addition, Wei Gao’s initiatives were surely aspects of a personal socio-political strategy to write his name into Xichuanese history by linking himself to significant local institutions, including the Dashengci Monastery, just as his political predecessors had done.

In summary, Wei Gao was a key player in a network of Buddhist patronage in Xichuan that was emblematic of the pro-Buddhist tendencies that prevailed in the courts of two successive emperors, Daizong and Dezong. By launching and completing three important projects, he helped to ensure that the dominant ideology of the imperial court was widely disseminated in the region he governed for two decades.

**Abbreviations**

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Bibliography


