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The Creation of *Jiansi*: Study on the Buddhist Monastic Supervision System during the Sui and Tang Dynasties

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Abstract: Besides the internal monastic supervision system of the “Three Principal Monks” already prevalent in the Sui and Tang dynasties, an additional lay-involved supervision system of *jiansi* was further added to the state religious policy to strengthen the control over the autonomy of the Buddhist community. This *jiansi* system can be seen once in the period of Gaochang Kingdom (449–640) in the Turpan region, and is traceable to the role of the Lay Rectifier of Monks created by Emperor Wu of Liang (r. 502–549) in the Southern dynasty. It is then officially created by Emperor Yang of Sui (r. 604–618) but failed quickly in the Tang dynasty. In the late Tang dynasty, it re-emerged in response to the state’s need to strengthen the control over Buddhist affairs and extended to new grassroots monastic officials such as Monastic Minister and Samgha Regulator in the Dunhuang area during the Tibetan occupation period and the Guiyi Army period. Thus, the development and evolution of the *jiansi* system in this period was both a reflection of the state-religion tension and a sinicization process of Buddhism.

Keywords: Buddhism in the Sui and Tang dynasties; monastic supervision system; state-religion relation; sinicization of Buddhism



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1. Introduction

The Sui and Tang dynasties were an important stage in the evolution and development of the monastic official system in Chinese history, as well as a period when Buddhism flourished in China and finally completed its sinicization. The monastic official system in this period not only inherited and fused the monastic official system of the Northern and Southern dynasties, but also laid down a basic form for later dynasties, which had a profound influence on the history of feudal bureaucracy and Buddhism in China.

As for monk officials, they are selected by the state from Buddhist community for the purpose of managing and supervising its order, administering the monks and nuns in performing pujas and so on. According to their power levels, they could be divided into central, local and grassroots power structures. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, the titles, authority and management structure of monastic officials at all levels varied greatly in different periods and regions, whereas the grassroots monk officials were basically composed of the “Three Principal Monks” (*sangang* 三綱) and the monastic supervisors (*jiansi* 監寺).¹

However, although a number of overall researches have been made on the study of monastic official system during the Sui and Tang dynasties since the 1930s and 1940s (Yamazaki 1942, pp. 538–674; He 1986; Moroto 1990; Xie 2009), the discussions related to monastic officials at the grassroots level are abbreviated and lack of in-depth explorations, which could only give us a basic understanding about the structures, functions and transformations of this issue at the central and local level. Then, with the continuous compilation and usage of materials such as Dunhuang and Turpan documents, Buddhist historical materials, and inscriptions on statues, regional studies towards monastic official system have also been accomplished by many scholars (Xie 1991b, pp. 52–61; Tian 1996,

pp. 99–100; Tian 1997, pp. 123–27; Wang 2008, pp. 185–89; Yang 2014, pp. 292–303), drawing a more detailed and diverse image of monastic officials in the whole country during this period. But when looking at these existing research findings, the elaboration on the grassroots monastic posts is still insufficient and indistinct and scholars have always analyzed the monastic official system during the Sui and Tang dynasties as a whole, mixing the central, local and grassroots monastic official systems in one period while ignoring some deeper issues involved in the monastic official system at all levels.

Thus, regarding the system of grassroots monastic officials, it is acknowledged that the grassroots monastic officials from the Sui to early Tang as well as in the mid and late Tang consisted of the *sangang* and the *jiansi* of each monastery, which clarified that the grassroots monastic structure and composed staffs have all become more organized and secularized during the Sui and Tang dynasties (Xie 2009, p. 126). But there are still more questions and points that lack further and specialized discussions, such as the finalization of the system of the *sangang*, the implementation, abolition and development of the system of the *jiansi*, the relationship between the *sangang* and *jiansi*, the development of the monastic supervision system and the regional differences of the grassroots monastic officials throughout the country.

In this paper, I attempt to take the grassroots monastic official system, or more precisely, the monastic supervisory system during the Sui and Tang dynasties as the main research object. By compiling relevant historical materials, this study will restore some specific aspects of the establishment and development of grassroots monastic officials at that time, and then cuts into some larger issues like the relationship between Buddhist magisterium and secular kingship, and the historical process of the sinicization of Buddhism from the perspective of the monk officials.

2. Overview of the Grassroots Monastic System during the Sui and Tang Dynasties and the Historical Situation of the *Sangang* System

According to the record of *Tang liudian* 唐六典 [Compendium of the Sixfold Administration of the Tang Dynasty] fascicle 16 *Weiye Zongzheng Temple* 衛尉宗正寺, the complete proclamation for setting up grassroots monastic posts during the Sui and Tang dynasties is as follows:

Sui set up the Department of Chongxuan and its ministers. Emperor Yang changed every Buddhist monastery into a manda and every Daoist abbey into a mysterious altar, with each setting up a supervisor and a prime minister. The Tang dynasty also set up the Department of Chongxuan and its officials, and set supervisors of each temple and abbey, which belonging to the Honglu Temple. Thus, each monastery and abbey had one supervisor and this policy was abolished in the period of Zhenguan. 隋置崇玄署令、丞。煬帝改佛寺為道場，改道觀為玄壇，各置監、丞。皇朝又為崇玄署令。又置諸寺、觀監，隸鴻臚寺，每寺、觀各監一人。貞觀中省。²

From historical sources, the above record is exactly the same as the one noted in the *Sui shu* 隋書 [Sui History]—“Emperor Yang reigned, with much reform . . . Buddhist temples in counties were changed into mandas, and Daoist abbeys were changed into mysterious altars, all setting up a supervisor and a prime minister” 煬帝即位，多所改革 . . . 郡縣佛寺，改為道場，道觀改為玄壇，各置監、丞。³—which shows that Emperor Yang of Sui 隋煬帝 (r. 604–618) took the lead in setting up supervisors and ministers in Buddhist temples and Daoist abbeys within his realm for the purpose of strengthening the management and consolidation of the monastic order. Then, the *Tang liudian* further points out that the system of monastic officials in the early Tang dynasty was inherited from the Sui dynasty, and the official supervisors were also set up in Buddhist temples and Daoist monasteries, but this system was abolished in the middle of Zhenguan 貞觀. Moreover, the statements in the *Tongdian* 通典 [Comprehensive Account]⁴, the *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 [New Tang History]⁵, the *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 [Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government]⁶,

and the *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考 [Documentary General Examination]⁷ are all highly consistent with the passages quoted above. It can be seen that these important historical texts are quite clear and affirmative about the establishment of the post of *jiansi* in monasteries throughout the country from the Sui dynasty to the early Tang dynasty.

Accordingly, in terms of official historical records, there is not much controversy on the fact that the grassroots monastic officials were consisted of the *sangang* and the *jiansi* during the Sui and Tang dynasties. The so-called “Three Principal Monks”, namely, the *sthavira* 上座, the *vihāra-svāmin* 寺主 and the *karma-dāna* 都維那, are clearly explained in the legal text Calling the Daoist Priests and Ladies-in-waiting 稱道士女官 in fascicle 6 of the *Tanglü Shuyi* 唐律疏議 [The Tang Code with Annotations]. And the annotation of it is explained that “each temple has one top seat, one monastery chief, and one administrator, which is named as the *sangang*” 寺有上座、寺主、都維那，是為三綱。⁸ This shows that the name and status of *sangang* as the legitimate monastic officials have already been recognized and ranked in the early Tang dynasty. Thus, *sangang* are three respectable and competent monks that can lead the rest monks and take charge of the affairs in Buddhist temples; that is, the *sthavira* is appointed by a senior monk with great virtues, the *vihāra-svāmin* is responsible for all practical and administrative affairs of the communities, and the *karma-dāna* concerns with enforcing monastic disciplines and maintaining the order.

The origin of the *sangang* in Chinese Buddhism could be traced back to the Eastern Jin and the Sixteen Kingdoms Period 東晉十六國時期 (304–439). Wang Su has examined the Buddhist monasteries in Gaochang Commandery (Gaochang Jun 高昌郡, East of Turpan) based on Turpan documents and concluded:

The system of the *sangang* was established during the Gaochang Jun Period, in other words, the Eastern Jin and the Sixteen Kingdoms Period. It was during this period that Buddhist monasteries were built and expanded in China, creating the conditions for the establishment of a clear division of labor among the three principal positions of a monastery. At that time, *cizhu* 祠主 had the highest status and was known as one of the “Three Principle Monks” of the monastery, along with the rector 維那 and the upper seat 高座, who were in charge of the external and internal affairs of the Buddhist community together. Then, in the later period of the Gaochang Kingdom, the name and status of the *sangang* changed somewhat—the top seat 上座 emerged and gained the highest status; *cizhu* was confirmed by the name of the monastery chief 寺主 with the second highest status; and the *di-anzuo* 典座 replaced the rector and had the lowest status—whereas the duties of these new titles were the same as those in previous years. (Wang 1985)

Hence, based on the historical materials of the Western Regions 西域, the embryonic form of the *sangang* system is very likely to be established at the end of the 4th century in Chinese monasteries. Then, going through the stage of development and evolution during the Northern and Southern dynasties as well as the Sui dynasty, this system finally takes shape in the Tang dynasty. Bai Wengu also agrees with this opinion and explains that although the *vihāra-svāmin* and the *sthavira* have been set up in the Northern and Southern dynasties, there are no fixed regulations towards the *sangang* system, which is quite different from the case in the Tang dynasty (He 1986, p. 275). For example, in fascicle 43 of the *Jiu Tang shu* 旧唐書 [Old Tang History], we read:

Within the realm, the number of Buddhist temples must be regulated by the government and qualified monks would be appointed to serve as the “Three Principal Monks” of every monastery. To summarize, there are 5358 temples, 3235 monks and 2122 nuns in all the *zhou*, with each temple placing a *sthavira*, a *vihāra-svāmin* and a *karma-dāna*. 凡天下寺有定數，每寺立三綱，以行業高者充。諸州寺總五千三百五十八所，三千二百三十五所僧，二千一百二十二所尼。每寺上座一人，寺主一人，都維那一人。⁹

The quoted passage clarifies that the *sangang* system has been widely implemented within the domain of the Tang dynasty. In addition, Buddhist historical materials also re-

main numerous records of senior monks who took up the position of the “Three Principal Monks”. For example, in fascicle 3 of the *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [Supplement to the Biographies of Eminent Monks], it writes that “Venerable Hui Jing, the sthavira of Jiguo Temple, has a far-reaching reputation and is well known for his profession” 紀國寺上座慧淨法師名稱高遠, 行業著聞.¹⁰ And in fascicle 15, there is “Shamen Tanxian, who possessing the national prestige, established Cibe Temple and recommended (Shi Xuanhui) as the vihāra-svāmin” 沙門曇獻道開國望, 造慈悲寺, 奏(釋玄)會以為寺主.¹¹

The above-mentioned evidence illustrates that the composition, appointment criteria, number and duties of the “Three Principal Monks” have been clearly documented in the Tang dynasty. Moreover, owing to the decrees and regulated practices of the Tang dynasty, the *sangang* of important monasteries should be ordered by the emperor, such as Tanzang 曇藏 (567–635) was selected by Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618–626) to be the sthavira of the Huichang Monastery 會昌寺.¹² Whereas local and ordinary monasteries’ *sangang* would be raised by military commissioners 節度使 or other officials. Under such circumstances, we can understand that nearly all the monasteries are under the jurisdiction of the state and have been incorporated into the national administrative system. In this way, the state has enabled the control and management of Buddhist monasteries through the way of appointing monastic officials, so that the establishment of monastic officials during the Sui and Tang dynasties is mainly for the benefit of the dynasty instead of samgha’s own interests.

Consequently, the grassroots monastic officials, including the *sangang* and the *jiansi*, have played an important role in the interaction between Buddhism and imperial authority as well. The above is the summarization of the historical situation of the *sangang* system, we will then move to the *jiansi* system, which is the main focus of this paper, and try to analyze the origin, implementation, abolition and evolution of this monastic supervisory system during the Sui and Tang dynasties.

3. The Origin of the *Jiansi* System before Emperor Yang’s Implementing

Firstly, we have to look at the potential sources that formed the *jiansi* system, which may shed some light on the background of why and how this system appeared in the context of ancient China. Due to the lack of relevant materials, few studies have addressed this question until now and among these previous findings, I disagree with Xie Chongguang’s view that *jiansi* can be compared with the official messenger of the monastic supervision (*jiansishi* 監寺使) set in the *sheyi* 社邑 during the Sui and Tang dynasties. He claims that:

As a community organization laid on the basis of Buddhist beliefs, the *sheyi* always borrows the titles of monk officials to form the name of its own administrators. And the *jiansishi* could be a role who is in charge of the matters such as supervising the construction of monasteries of the community. Therefore, the *jiansishi* is a kind of temporary dispatching position originated from the community, which has been implemented earlier than Emperor Yang of Sui. Inspired by this practice, Emperor Yang similarly created the *jiansi* system to strengthen his management over the religious forces, and named it as the supervisor of the Buddhist monasteries (or Daoist abbeys). (Xie 2009, pp. 98–99)

In fact, Xie’s statement cannot be supported by corresponding historical texts, and he does not provide a detailed explanation and analysis of his viewpoint. From the results of Hao Chunwen’s research on nearly 250 documents of the *she* associations (*sheyi wenshu* 社邑文書) during the period of the Eastern Jin and the Northern and Southern dynasties, a total of 192 of these materials mentioned the important positions in a *sheyi*, such as the head of *yi* 邑主, the rector, which may generally reflect the basic information of the leaders of the *sheyi* in the meantime. Among these documents, there is no record of the *jiansishi* or *jiansi* as a member of the community (Hao 2019, pp. 110–13). This demonstrates that Xie Chongguang’s speculation about this issue may not in accordance with the historical facts of the *jiansi* system during the Sui and Tang dynasties, but he innovatively leads us to think about the relation between the lay-involved supervision system and the *sheyi*, from

which the rector of *sheyi* bears more similarities with the *jiansi* instead of the non-existing *jianshishi*.

Strictly speaking, it has to be admitted that the current research is not possible to draw some definite conclusions about the origin of the *jiansi* system. Since the records about the monastic officials who have similar titles and functions as the *jiansi* or *jianshishi* can hardly be discovered at present, it may be feasible for us to explore this issue through the functions of the *jiansi* system. Along this line of thinking, we then notice that the grassroots monastic posts, who are likely to be the service staffs or administrators of Buddhist monasteries, have existed in the period of Qu's Gaochang Kingdom (449–640). For example, in the Turpan document “Zhai Mou, a shrine master, presents the matter of eating wheat” (*cili zhaimou cheng wei shimaish* 祠吏翟某呈為食麥事), we read:

□(month) 1st□□□

□ ate 1920 liters of wheat. Transcended one person who came from the fields and lived at the ancestral hall . . .

□, □ ate 8 liters of wheat, the total cost was 64 liters. The whole spending was 1914 liters. Please note.

shrine master

□□

recorder

shrine official Mr. Zhai ○

□ 月一日□□□

□ 食麥十九斛貳鬥。超度一人，從田地來，住祠八

□, □ 食麥八升，合陸鬥四升。都合十九斛鬥四升。請記識。

祠主 度

□□ 祠吏翟○ 呈¹³

Thus we can see that monastic officials of the Gaochang Kingdom have to record the amount of wheat spent during their merit-making activities. And this type of paperwork must signed by monastery's masters and recorded by the shrine officials, who would most probably be the lay people rather than monks or nuns from the secular name “Mr. Zhai” in the quoted texts. Under the monastic management system of that time, there may have been a situation in which the laity also participated in the management of Buddhist communities and reported daily affairs to the higher authorities of the monastery. Nonetheless, one point needs to be made clear here is that the *cili* in this document must be distinguished from the lay brother (*jingren* 淨人)¹⁴ who always plays an essential role since the early stage of the Buddhism. This is due to the fact that although they both belong to the laity, the former is required to report to state agencies while the latter only have to serve the community, which indicates the different nature of their duties.

Moreover, except for the precedents in the Turpan region, the Lay Rectifier of Monks (*baiyi sengzheng* 白衣僧正) which intends to be established during the reign of Emperor Wu of Liang (r. 502–549) in the Southern dynasty¹⁵, is also a kind of monastic official wishing to be served by the laity (the emperor) and participate in the management of various matters linked to the monastic communities. In the fascicle 5 of the *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, we read:

In the midst of Datong in the Liang dynasty, the Three Jewels are revered, whereas profits still affect the mortals' heart. The social atmosphere is impetuous and people are reaching for wealth recklessly. In the meantime, the Buddhist community also cannot abide by the precepts strictly. Hence, Liang Wudi intended to take up the position of the monk official to maintain the Buddha Dharma. He said: I think the monks and nuns don't study the *vinaya* at present. If the Lay Rectifier of Monks could not understand these precepts and restricts the monks and nuns by secular laws, the consequence will be very damaging. So I wish to assert myself as a Lay Rectifier of Monks and establish a new law codex based on the *vinaya*. 逮梁大同中，敬重三寶，利動昏心。澆波之儔，肆情下達。僧正憲綱，無施於過門。帝欲自御僧官，維任法侶。 帝曰：比見僧尼多未誦習，白衣僧正不解科條，俗法治之，傷於過重。弟子暇日欲自為白衣僧正，亦依律立法。¹⁶

Faced with the rapid expansion of the monastic community and the disobedience of the *vinaya* by the monks and nuns, Emperor Wu of Liang wanted to appoint himself as the *baiyi sengzheng*, whose obligation is to rectify the order of the monastic community according to a new law codex with the status of a secular emperor. Though Liang Wudi's assumption did not come true due to the strong resistance from the Buddhist power at that time, his thoughts about the Buddhist and imperial authority still reflect that the relationship between Buddhism and the state is always a complex and influential problem in Chinese history, and emperors have made various efforts to integrate Buddhism into their political administrative regimes. And among such practices, the establishment of monk officials is absolutely a simple but effective attempt, which may inspire the Emperor Yang of Sui to carry out a supervisory system of Buddhist authority like the Liang Wudi's *baiyi sengzheng* at a later time.

4. The Abolition of the *Jiansi* System in the Early Tang Dynasty and Its Possible Reasons

It is logical that we should then discuss the implementation of the *jiansi* system. However, in the absence of historical records of the *jiansi* system during the Sui and early Tang dynasties, it is inevitable for us to question that whether it had implemented in Buddhist monasteries throughout the country exactly as the historical books, such as the *Tang liudian* suggests. For example, Shaolin Monastery has well-recorded its historical events and other important information in the inscriptions and documents, among which we also could not find the trace of the *jiansi*. In the Shaolin Temple's Baigu Valley Certificate (*shaolinsi baiguwu zhuangdie* 少林寺柏谷塢莊牒), thirteen Shaolin monks' names were recorded while none of the secular names appeared:

Granted by the Emperor Taizong in the 4th year of Wude (621)

The names of meritorious monks in the Shaolin Temple's Baigu Valley

The sthavira monk Shan Hu

The vihāra-svāmin monk Zhi Cao

The karma-dāna monk Hui Yang

The great military monk Tan Zong

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Pu Hui

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Ming Song

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Ling Xian

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Pu Sheng

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Zhi Shou

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Dao Guang

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Zhi Xing

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Man

Monk jointly accomplished achievements Feng

唐武德四年（621）太宗文皇帝敕授

少林寺柏谷莊立功僧名

上座僧善護

寺主僧誌操

都維那僧惠瑒

大將軍僧曇宗

同立功僧普惠

同立功僧明嵩

同立功僧靈憲

同立功僧普勝
 同立功僧智守
 同立功僧道廣
 同立功僧智興
 同立功僧滿
 同立功僧豐¹⁷

According to this list, there were thirteen Shaolin monks who not only contained the *sangang*, but also included some ordinary monks, participated in the capture of Wang Renze 王仁則 and received commendation from the Emperor Taizong 太宗 (r. 626–649). And it is not difficult to find that this list is arranged in accordance with the status of these monks, from which we can have a general understanding of the structure of the Shaolin monastic order during the early Tang dynasty, and speculate that the Shaolin Monastery at that time may not set up the position of *jiansi*; otherwise, it is very likely that his name would also appear in this list, just like the *sangang*. From this, we may learn from a small case that the *jiansi* system might not have been implemented successfully as the governor intended, reflecting the disconnect between the national policy and the actual practice.

If this hypothesis holds true, then the quick abolition of the *jiansi* system during the Zhenguan reign may also support our analysis from the standpoint of the results. Thus, we will have to examine the possible reasons for the rapid abolition of this system from various aspects afterwards.

First of all, the total number of Buddhist monasteries during the Sui and Tang dynasties is always large and this situation obviously poses a considerable challenge to the implementation of this Buddhist supervisory policy. The Emperor Wen of Sui 隋文帝 (r. 581–604) believed in Buddhism and established monasteries wherever monks and nuns lived, then by the time of the Emperor Yang, the total number of monasteries reached nearly 4000. In the Tang Dynasty, although the scale of Buddhist monasteries was restricted by the emperors, this number also maintained at around 4000 to 5000.¹⁸ The statistics of the number of Buddhist monasteries in the country during this period is as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1. The number of monasteries during the Sui and Tang dynasties.

Time	The Total Number of Monasteries	The Number of Monasteries per Zhou
618	3985	30
648	3716	10.4
650–683	4000	11.4
713–755	5358	16
842–845	4600	—

If the dynasty set up one supervisory official in each temple, the total number of the grassroots monastic posts (including the *sangang* and the *jiansi*) in the whole country would reach nearly 20,000. Whereas the *sangang* could receive necessary supports from their religious communities and society, the *jiansi*, who is a secular monk official appointed by the government, could only receive income from the government. Therefore, once implemented, the Sui and Tang dynasties must bear the salaries of these four or five thousand monastic officials, which will obviously impose a heavy burden on the empire's finances. This may be one of the reasons that affected the widespread implementation of the *jiansi* system in the Sui and early Tang.

Secondly, in terms of the practical significance of establishing the *jiansi* system, such grassroots monastic officials are bound to serve the needs of secular kingship and to fulfill the political intentions of the feudal dynasty to strengthen the management of Buddhist monastic communities. Since Buddhism in the Tang dynasty as a whole was subordinated to the control of the state¹⁹, other religious policies may also satisfy the needs of the rulers in some degree, regardless of whether there were monastic supervisors or not. For example,

as far as the below document suggests, the inspector (*jianjiao* 檢校) related to Buddhist affairs may be, to some extent, an alternative role to the *jiansi*. In the inscriptions of the *Datang jingyusi gu dade fazang chanshi taming* 大唐淨域寺故大德法藏禪師塔銘 (Pagoda of the passed bhaddanta, Chan Master Fazang of the Jingyu Monastery in the Tang dynasty) written by Tian Xiuguang 田休光, we read:

In the first year of Ruyi (692), Empress Wu hearing about the reputation and capacity of the master (Fazang) and asked him to inspect the inexhaustible treasure (*wujinzang*) of the Great Fuxian Monastery in the East Road. Later, in the first year of Chang'an (701), Fazang was ordered to inspect the *wujinzang* of Huadu Monastery again. 如意元年（692），大聖天后聞（法藏）禪師解行精罪（最），奉製請於東路大福先寺檢校無盡藏。長安元年（701），又奉製檢校化度寺無盡藏。²⁰

From the text of this pagoda inscription, it is clear that during the reign of Empress Wu, the Chan Master Fazang (643–712)²¹ was required to inspect the monastic financial and banking institutions, *wujinzang yuan* 無盡藏院 of the Great Fuxian Monastery and Huadu Monastery, where a lot of possessions were stored.²² Though he did not belong to these two monasteries, he also had to go and supervise them temporarily by the appointment of the emperor. When this work was completed, he would return to his original monastery and did not have to stay at the monastery he inspected. This form of temporary appointment was objectively more efficient and focused than the implementation of the *jiansi* throughout the country, and can greatly reduce the financial burden caused by the expansion of the state bureaucracy. As a result, this practice was quite common during the Tang dynasty, not just in the administration of Buddhist affairs.

In fact, the practice of temporarily dispatching officials to oversee Buddhist affairs was not an institutional innovation of the Tang dynasty, but a form of governance that had already been used since the Northern and Southern dynasties. For example, in the *Wei shu* 魏書 [Wei History], we read:

In the winter of the first year of Shengui (518), the Minister of Works, the Chief of the Secretarial Staff, King of Rencheng, Yuan Cheng presented: ... I dispatched secular officials Lu Chang and Cui Xiaofen to examine the number of Buddhist monasteries in the capital and cities. 神龜元年冬，司空公、尚書令、任城王（元）澄曰：... 輒遣府司馬陸昶、屬崔孝芬，都城之中及郭邑之內檢括寺舍。²³

Yuan Cheng (467–519) assigned two secular officials to check on the number and establishment of Buddhist monasteries and reported the results to the central government. In this way, he also hoped to strengthen the national control over Buddhism and limit the privileges of the monastic community.

Thirdly, it is probable that the Buddhist side would reject the royal authority's desire to strengthen religious administration and make efforts to preserve its relative independence and autonomy within the realm.²⁴ The *jiansi* system was a radical measure taken by the state to further strengthen its supervision of Buddhist monasteries throughout the country, so it is not surprising that it might have suffered setbacks in the implementation and finally moved to abolition.

5. The Re-Emergence of the *Jiansi* in the Mid and Late Tang Dynasty

As above mentioned, the system of *jiansi* was abolished in the Zhenguan period, however, in the mid and late Tang dynasty it appeared in Buddhist monasteries again. In the fascicle 506 of the *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 [Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau], in April of the 12th year of the Dali 大曆 (777), a document submitted by the *duzhi* 度支 (officer in charge of fiscal revenues and expenditures) recorded that “the monthly salary of every monastery's *jiansi* was 1917 *wen* 文” 諸寺監（各一千九百一十七文）。²⁵

The *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 [Complete Literature Works of Tang Dynasty] also records many supervisors of different monasteries and their brief deeds in the mid and late Tang dynasty. I will give three examples below:

- (1) The master's dharma name is Xingbiao and his secular name is Fang. His grandfather's name is Rong and his father's name is An. He comes from a prosperous family in Putian. He was born in the second year of Jianzhong (781) and was extremely intelligent from a very young age. Then, at the age of nine (789), he retreated from the world to follow the *jiansi* Shenjiao of the Yujian Monastery. 師法號行標，俗姓方，祖榮父安，莆之盛族也。師生於建中二年辛酉，韶齡即穎悟，異於諸童。九歲投玉潤寺監寺神皎出家。²⁶
- (2) At the beginning of Taihe (827–835), the *jiansi* Huiming and the monk Daolin saw the destruction of the monastery and said to the community: "Buddhism was introduced to China from the west, and the statue of Buddha was regarded as the dharma. Now that the statues are scattered, what can we rely on to worship the Buddha and his teachings? So, we should ask the vihāra-svāmin to contact the people who had traveled here in the past, and raise money together for building new statues. 太和初，監寺僧惠明與寺僧道琳等見三門破壞，乃言於眾曰：此教東流，設象為法，牢落如是，瞻仰何依？乃請今寺主僧常誼昔旅於是者，戮力誓心，募緣祈化。²⁷
- (3) In the second year of Qianfu (875), the military commissioner of Youzhou escorted the two provinces deputy envoy, inspecting secretary and imperial secretary, the Purple Goldfish Bag Owner Dongkuo and Youzhou Lintan Vinaya Master Weixin and Zhuozhou Shijing Monastery *jiansi* Vinaya Master Hongyu, etc. 乾符二年，有幽州節度押兩蕃副使檢校秘書兼御史中丞賜紫金魚袋董廓及幽州臨壇律大德沙門僧惟信并涿州石經寺監寺律大德宏嶼等。²⁸

Thus we find direct evidence for the existence of *jiansi* in Buddhist monasteries during the mid and late Tang dynasty, such as Shenjiao 神皎 of the Yujian Monastery 玉潤寺 in Putian 莆田 area, Huiming 惠明 of the Daquan Monastery 大泉寺 in Runzhou 潤州, Hongyu 宏嶼 of the Shijing Monastery 石經寺 in Zhuozhou 涿州, etc. As they were located in different monasteries and regions, we may assume that many monasteries of that time carried out such a system and established a *jiansi* to deal with various affairs of the community.

In addition, in the *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji* 入唐求法巡禮行記 [Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Dharma] written by a Japanese pilgrim-monk Yuanren 圓仁 (793–864), the establishment of the *jiansi* system in the late Tang has also recorded carefully as follows:

- (1) On August 24, the fifth year of Chenghe (838): We went to the Kai Yuan Monastery While visiting, nearly all the monks arrived and greeted us, including the sthavira Zhiqiang, the vihāra-svāmin Linghui, the *dushi* Xiuda, the *jiansi* Fangqi and the kusi Lingduan. 承和五年八月廿四日：詣開元寺。 登時，三綱並寺和上及監寺僧等赴集。上座僧志强、寺主令徽、都師修達、監寺方起、庫司令端慰問。²⁹
- (2) On January 18, the fourth year of Kaicheng (839): In the Tang dynasty, there are three kinds of monastic officials, that is, *senglu*, *sengzheng* and *jiansi*; *senglu* takes charge of all the monasteries throughout the country and organizes the Dharma of Buddhism; *sengzheng* manages the monasteries in regional districts; *jiansi* only administers one monastery. 開成四年正月十八日：凡此唐國有僧錄、僧正、監寺三種色：僧錄統領天下諸寺，整理佛法；僧正唯在一都督管內；監寺限在一寺。³⁰

According to the records of Yuanren, the system of *jiansi* has already been confirmed as a management method for grassroots monasteries in the late Tang. And in general, the monastic official system eventually developed into a three-tier structure of jurisdiction, with *senglu*, *sengzheng* and *jiansi* performing their role and function respectively. Thus, central government strengthened its overall supervision and management of Buddhist affairs and communities.

However, it is worth noting that monks, rather than laymen, occupied the position of *jiansi* at this time, and they could also be called Supervisory Monks (*jianseng* 監僧), which was far from the original situation. Therefore, the adjustment of the identity of *jiansi* may be regarded as a result of a compromise between the feudal imperial power, which wanted

to strengthen the management of monasteries, and Buddhism, which wanted to guarantee the autonomy of the monastic community. Afterwards, *jiansi* gradually took hold of the functions of the monastery chief, and always appeared in the rules of the Chan School since the Song dynasty. For instance, in the *Chanyuan qinggui* 禪苑清規 [The Pure Rules for the Chan Monastery], it mentioned *jianyuan* many times and introduced its main duties as follows:

The prior manages various affairs of the monastery, including supplies and petitions to government officials, greeting such officials, the ceremony performed by the assembly of circumambulating the hall with incense, visits to donors, extending congratulations and condolences, financial loans, the annual budget, monitoring of grain storage, bookkeeping, and providing for meals year by year. The prior is entrusted with the purchase of grain as well as the making of vinegar and pastes and sauces according to the season. He should carefully tend to the production of oil and grinding. He must organize feasts for monastic assemblies with the utmost skill and effort. He must show attentive hospitality to guests from all for directions. The winter solstice feast, the New Year feast, the retreat-ending feast, the retreat-commencement feast, and the eggplant-roasting feasts are managed by the prior, provided that the given ceremony is within the means of the monastic budget. If a festival requires work beyond his capabilities, the prior enlists the aid of others. He manages minor or routine affairs unilaterally, but for greater matters and for those cases where the reputation of the monastery may be at stake, he consults the administrators and the chief officers and reports back to the abbot before carrying them out. 監院一職，總領院門諸事。如官中應副及參辭謝賀，僧集行香，相看施主，吉凶慶弔，借貸往還，院門歲計，錢穀有無，與收出入，準備逐年受用齋料米麥等，及時收買；並造醬醋，須依時節；及打油變磨等，亦當經心；眾僧齋粥，常運勝心；管待四來，不宜輕易。如冬齋、年齋、解夏齋、結夏齋、多茹會，如上齋會若監院有力，自合營辦；如力所不及，即請人勾當。如院門小事及尋常事例，即一面處置。如事體稍大及體面生劄，即知事頭首同共商量。³¹

Therefore, *jiansi* transformed into a position responsible for managing many miscellaneous matters in the Chan monasteries in the Song dynasty. The result was, as Xie Chong-guang says, the original intention of Emperor Yang's creation of *jiansi* had been completely lost by this time (Xie 2009, p. 100). While on the other hand, it has finally integrated into the monastic system and survived until now.

As we know, the system of *jiansi* re-emerged in the mid and late Tang, specifically, during the Dali period of Emperor Daizong 代宗 (r. 762–779). And this leaves us a new question about how it was implemented again at this time. Lin Yunrou 林韻柔 have considered this before and inferred that the recovery of *jiansi* may coincide with the establishment of the Commissioners of Merit and Virtue of the Left and Right Avenues of the Capital (*zuoyoujie gongdeshi* 左右街功德使), from which the General Supervision Institute (*zongjianyuan* 總監院) developed to manage all monastic supervisors (Lin 2012, p. 181). In the description of the *zongjianyuan* in the *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji*, we read:

At 7–9 a.m. on August 24, the fifth year of Kaicheng (840): Then monks followed officials to go from the north side of the Honglu Temple, passed four blocks (*fang*), entered the Wangxian Gate, and then entered the Xuanhua Gate. After passing through the Neisheshi Gate and the *zongjianyuan*, we crossed another gate and arrived at the south gate of the office. 開成五年（840）八月廿四日辰時：僧等隨巡官人使御從（鴻臚）寺北行，過四坊，入望仙門，次入玄化門。更過內舍使門及總監院，更入一重門，到使衙南門。³²

Hence, the *zuoyoujie gongdeshi* and *zongjianyuan* are the central management officials and organizations of Buddhism in the mid and late Tang. Through these practices, the state increased its authority and efficiency of dealing with Buddhist affairs from top to

bottom, which contributed to the strengthening of feudal kingship over Buddhist power throughout the country, despite the empire was facing the crisis of collapsing.

Besides, the influence of the monastic supervision system also extended to the borders of the empire in the mid and late Tang dynasty. Take the Buddhist monasteries in the Dunhuang area³³ as an example, in addition to the *sangang*, some new grassroots monastic posts appeared during this time, such as Monastic Minister (*siqing* 寺卿), Samgha Regulator (*sengzheng* 僧政), Senior Monk (*falü* 法律) and Administrative Assistant (*panguan* 判官), etc. (Xie 1991b, pp. 53–56; Wang 2008, pp. 185–89; Sørensen 2021, pp. 18–20). In P.3600 Record of the Number of Nuns in Puguang and Other Monasteries in the xunian 戊午 of Tibetan Reign (*tubo xunian puguangsi deng ju dangsi yingguan nishu die* 吐蕃戊午普光寺等具当寺应管尼数牒), the final signature of this document sent to the highest monastic authority in Dunhuang reads as follows:

(this document) Sent by *siqing* Suoxiu in Nov. □, Xunian
 sizhu Zhenxing
 falü Faxi
 戊年十一月□日寺卿索岫牒
 寺主 真行
 法律 法喜

In contrast to the names of *sizhu* and *falü*, *siqing* Suoxiu 索岫 is likely to be a secular man whose work responsibility is to manage daily affairs of the monastery and report to the higher institutions. Thus we find that there are many similarities between the *siqing* and *jiansi*, which probably indicates that the appearance of *siqing* was drawing on the experience of *jiansi* during the Tang dynasty (Xie 1991b, p. 53). In this way, the highest monastic authority in Dunhuang, *dusi* 都司 could effectively manage the affairs of each monastery through the records of *siqing*.

Then, during the period of the Guiyi Army 歸義軍時期, the relationship between secular regime and Buddhism was still tense, with the rulers exercising tight control over the religious power through restricting the number of monks and nuns, managing Buddhist economy and so on, whereas the establishment of grassroots monastic officials was also an important approach for governors in Dunhuang to use. As a result, we see the development of various monastic officials during this period, such as the *sengzheng*, *falü* and *panguan*, all of whom performed their administrative duties and were directly responsible to the higher officials (Wang 2008, p. 189). It was through this hierarchical subordination that the effective management of the Buddhist order by the secular regime was thus realized.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, the system of monastic officials during the Sui and Tang dynasties consisted of the *sangang* and *jiansi* at the grassroots level, in which secular posts were in charge of the affairs of Buddhist communities together with the monks. In my opinion, the origin of the *jiansi* system may be traced back to the Eastern Jin and the Sixteen Kingdoms Period as the *cili* established in Turpan region was a kind of secular administrators who managed monastic matters and recorded for the higher authority. And this practice shared similarities with the rector of *shenyi* and the *baiyi sengzheng* proposed by Emperor Wu of Liang. Therefore, it is clear that the monastic official system was implemented to strengthen the power of the state and weaken the autonomy of the monastic community, which could be seen as a concrete reflection of the relationship between Buddhism and the state in Chinese history.

In the Sui dynasty, Emperor Yang created the system of *jiansi*, which was inherited by the founder of the Tang dynasty, but was soon abolished during the Zhenguan reign. As for the quick abolition of this supervisory system, it may be explained in terms of the scale of Buddhist monasteries in the Sui and Tang dynasties, the substitution who can perform similar duties and the resistance of the Buddhist community. In any case, the

implementation and abolition of this system could be seen as struggle between the secular kingship and Buddhist power.

Then, in the mid and late Tang dynasty, the *jiansi* system appeared again throughout the country and even affected the monasteries at the border. With the demand of strengthening centralized authority, the rulers of Tang at this period carried out a series of policies, among which the management of Buddhism was an important dimension and thus, *jiansi* was appointed by political forces to each monastery for the purpose of strengthening the central government's overall supervision and management of Buddhist affairs and communities. Through these practices, the state guaranteed its authority and efficiency of dealing with Buddhist affairs from top to bottom. However, under such circumstances, the post of *jiansi* was held by monks rather than laymen, which was different from the original intention of its establishment and perhaps represented a compromise between the imperial power and religious power, with monastic officials serving as the bridge and intermediary between these two sides. Hence, the development and evolution of the *jiansi* system was closely related to the kingship, religious power and the sinicization of Buddhism in the Sui and Tang dynasties, which could not only reflect the conflicts between political and religious dimensions in detail, but also comply with the historical process of Buddhism's sinicization.

Ultimately, by studying the development of the *jiansi* system during the Sui and Tang dynasties, the general trend was that the Buddhist power became increasingly subordinate to, subject to, and in the service of the secular kingship, and thus Buddhism finally completed its process of sinicization. So at the political level, Buddhism was gradually incorporated into the state's governance system and serve for the political purpose of maintaining regime stability and social stability.

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Notes

¹ For more on the establishment of monk officials see: Shigeo (1994, pp. 203–35).

² *Tang liudian* 唐六典 [Compendium of the Sixfold Administration of the Tang Dynasty], fascicle 16. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1992, p. 467.

³ *Sui shu* 隋書 [Sui History], fascicle 28. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1973, p. 802.

⁴ *Tongdian* 通典 [Comprehensive Account], fascicle 25. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1988, p. 704.

⁵ *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 [New Tang History], fascicle 48. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1975, p. 1252.

⁶ *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 [Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Government], fascicle 215. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1956, p. 6871.

⁷ *Wenxian tongkao* 文獻通考 [Documentary General Examination], fascicle 55. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2011, p. 1629.

⁸ *Tanglü shuyi* 唐律疏議 [The Tang Code with Annotations], fascicle 6. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1983, p. 144.

⁹ *Jiu Tang shu* 旧唐書 [Old Tang History], fascicle 43. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1975, p. 1831.

¹⁰ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [Supplement to the Biographies of Eminent Monks], fascicle 3 (T50n444b).

¹¹ *ibid.*, fascicle 15 (T50n542c).

¹² *ibid.*, fascicle 13 (T50n525c).

¹³ *Tulufan chutu wenshu* 吐魯番出土文書 (Turpan Documents), fascicle 1. Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe 文物出版社, 1981, p. 155.

¹⁴ For more on the descriptions of *jingren* see: Xie (1991a, pp. 133–41).

¹⁵ For more on the relationship between Wudi and Buddhism see: Mikisaburō (1956). See also Janousch (1999).

¹⁶ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [Supplement to the Biographies of Eminent Monks], fascicle 5 (T50n466b).

- 17 *Songshan shaolinsi beike xuan* 嵩山少林寺碑刻選 (*Selected Inscriptions in Shaolin Temple, Songshan*). Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe 中國廣播電視出版社, 1992, p. 60.
- 18 For more on the number of Buddhist monasteries in the Sui and Tang dynasties see: Zhang (2005, pp. 6–8).
- 19 For more on Buddhism under the Tang dynasty see: Weinstein (1987).
- 20 *Jinshi cuibian* 金石萃編 (*Compilation of Bronze and Stone Inscriptions*), fascicle 71. Beijing: Zhongguo shudian 中國書店, 1985, pp. 2–3.
- 21 For more on the biography of Fazang see: Chen (2005, pp. 11–84).
- 22 For more on Buddhist economy and the development of *wujinzang* see: Gernet (1995). See also Hubbard (2001, pp. 153–222).
- 23 *Wei shu* 魏書 [*Wei History*], fascicle 114. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1974, pp. 3044–45.
- 24 For more on the state-religion relation in the Tang see: Weinstein (1987).
- 25 *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 [*Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau*], fascicle 506. Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe 鳳凰出版社, 2006, p. 5756.
- 26 *Quan Tang wen* 全唐文 [*Complete Literature Works of Tang Dynasty*], fascicle 826. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 1983, p. 8701.
- 27 *ibid.*, fascicle 764, pp. 7940.
- 28 *ibid.*, fascicle 813, pp. 8558–59.
- 29 *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji* 入唐求法巡禮行記 [*The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law*], fascicle 1. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019, p. 35.
- 30 *ibid.*, fascicle 1, p. 98.
- 31 *Chanyuan qinggui* 禪苑清規 [*The Pure Rules for the Chan Monastery*], fascicle 3 (X63n530a). The translation of this quoted passage references: Yifa (2002, p. 150).
- 32 *Rutang qiufa xunli xingji* 入唐求法巡禮行記 [*The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law*], fascicle 3. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中華書局, 2019, p. 335.
- 33 For more on the relations between administration, clergy and lay people in the 8–11th century of Dunhuang see: Taenzer (2016, pp. 19–53).

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