

Article

Biography or Hagiography: The Story of Sengya 僧崖 in the Continuing Biographies of Eminent Monks

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Abstract: This paper examines how Daoxuan 道宣, the Tang Dynasty Buddhist historian and founder of the Nanshan Vinaya School, meticulously constructed the saintly image of Sengya 僧崖—a monk renowned for his auto-cremation—in his *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳). Drawing on a range of sources—including the now-lost *Biography of the Bodhisattva Sengya* and regional texts such as the *Collection of Miscellaneous Records from the Shu Region*—Daoxuan reconfigured Sengya’s narrative, presenting his auto-cremation as a profound religious sacrifice emblematic of transformative spiritual commitment. The analysis explores how Daoxuan navigated the doctrinal tensions between this extreme practice and the Vinaya precept of non-killing by emphasizing the practitioner’s mental state over the physical act. In doing so, he reframed self-immolation not as an aberration but as a legitimate, even exalted, path to liberation. This reinterpretation is situated within the broader context of Chinese Buddhist thought—particularly the ideas of the indestructibility of the spirit and the cosmological framework of “Heaven–Man Correspondence”—highlighting the interplay between religious symbolism, doctrinal adaptation, and lived practice. Crucially, this paper treats Daoxuan’s narrative not merely as biography, but as hagiography—a literary mode in which historical memory and religious narrative are inextricably entwined. By examining the rhetorical and ideological dimensions of this genre, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how religious hagiography functioned as a tool for shaping sainthood, authorizing extreme religious practices, and negotiating the spiritual and social landscapes of medieval China.



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Keywords: Buddhist hagiography; the *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳; the *Hongzan fahua zhuan* 弘贊法華傳; Daoxuan 道宣; Sengya 僧崖; self-immolation; auto-cremation

1. Introduction

The *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (*Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*, consisting of 30 scrolls, hereafter referred to as the XGSZ), is a compilation authored by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), a Buddhist historian of the Tang dynasty and the founder of the Nanshan Vinaya School 南山律宗.¹ This work documents the lives of eminent Buddhist monks active from the early 6th to the mid-7th century.² Notably, Scroll 27 includes the “Chapter on Self-Immolation”, which features biographies of ten to twelve monks renowned for their extreme religious practices culminating in death by various forms of self-immolation. Among these accounts, the detailed narrative of Sengya 僧崖 (488?–559?)—who performed auto-cremation in Yizhou 益州 (present-day Chengdu, Sichuan) during the Northern Zhou 北周 period (circa 493–562)—has attracted significant attention from modern scholars.³

Sengya’s biography appears not only in the XGSZ but also in the *Hongzan fahua zhuan* 弘贊法華傳 (*Biographies Which Broadly Extol the Lotus*, hereafter referred to as the HFZ) by

Huixiang 慧祥 (d. after 667).⁴ Both works were composed approximately a hundred years after Sengya's death. The biography of Sengya within the XGSZ (hereafter referred to as the XGSZ biography) is particularly regarded as crucial; its completion and dissemination solidified Sengya's image as a saint. Consequently, narratives of Sengya in the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties have all relied primarily on the XGSZ as their source. Although it is believed that both version of Sengya's biography in the XGSZ and the HFZ were based on the now-lost *Sengya pusa zhuan* 僧崖菩薩傳 (*Biography of the Bodhisattva Sengya*)⁵, significant differences exist between the two (see Chi 2024).

These differences may be attributed partly to the fact that the XGSZ was not based solely on the *Sengya pusa zhuan* but also incorporated information from the *Shubu jiyi ji* 蜀部集異記 (Collection of Miscellaneous Records from the Shu Region)⁶ and other sources that Daoxuan acquired during his travel in the Shu region. A more fundamental cause, however, might lie in Daoxuan's deliberate intent to construct a sacred image of Sengya. In composing the XGSZ biography, Daoxuan appears to have intentionally crafted a saintly persona for Sengya, who was of Rang ethnicity 獯族, emphasizing his supernatural abilities and moral resolve to elevate him as a paradigmatic religious figure.

This paper explores how Daoxuan constructed Sengya's saintly image in the XGSZ by examining the historical, cultural, and doctrinal motivations that informed his portrayal. In doing so, I approach the XGSZ not merely as a biographical record but as a form of Buddhist hagiography—a genre in which historical memory and devotional imperatives are deeply entwined. While the term *Zhuan* 傳 (“biography”) suggests a historiographical function, such texts often serve didactic and inspirational purposes, presenting exemplary lives as models for emulation rather than as objective historical records. Recognizing this overlap between biography and hagiography is essential for understanding Daoxuan's rhetorical strategies and his construction of religious authority.

The selection of Sengya as a case study is motivated by the richness of his narrative, the complexity of its ritual and cosmological elements, and the enduring influence it exerted on later Buddhist historiography. Among the various figures in the “Chapter on Self-Immolation”, Sengya's biography stands out for its narrative depth, regional specificity, and integration of doctrinal themes such as self-sacrifice, karmic purification, and the bodhisattva ideal. By focusing on this case, this paper highlights the rhetorical strategies through which Daoxuan constructed sanctity and negotiated competing visions of religious authority. In doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of the interplay between historical documentation and religious veneration, offering insight into a transformative period in Chinese Buddhist history.

2. Formlessness and Form: The Debate Between Sengya and the Esteemed Monks

The biography of Sengya within the HFZ (hereafter referred to as the HFZ biography) recounts the life of Sengya, who originated from a minority ethnic group living in the mountains near Yizhou during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Despite his minority background, Sengya was drawn to Han Chinese culture and lifestyle, which led him to leave his tribal settlement for Yizhou. There, after enduring numerous hardships, he became a Buddhist monk and devoted himself to promoting the transcription of Mahayana sutras, eventually performing auto-cremation to fund the construction of stūpas and temple halls.⁷ This account portrays Sengya as a simple and sincere man, deeply devoted to his faith. It makes no mention of his proficiency in Buddhist doctrines, his role in educating the masses on ethical norms, or the exhibition of any mystical powers.

In stark contrast, the XGSZ biography presents an idealized image of Sengya that extends beyond the narrative provided in the HFZ biography. His act of self-immolation

is not merely depicted as an extreme act of devotion but as a practice rooted in the wisdom of emptiness, described as “Formlessness in Form”. Moreover, it is portrayed as an altruistic act aimed at spreading the ethical norm of “practicing kindness by ending flesh consumption 行慈斷肉” among both monks and the laypeople. This section will explore the contents of the XGSZ biography, examining the practical theories and ethical standards that Sengya developed and eloquently propagated to monks and the public.

According to the XGSZ biography, one day in the sixth month of the first year of the Wucheng 武成 era of the Northern Zhou Dynasty (559), Sengya suddenly appeared on the streets west of Yizhou City and, without any prior indication, set fire to his hands wrapped in oil-soaked clothes. Witnessing this unusual behavior from an unknown foreign monk, the onlookers initially could not comprehend the spectacle unfolding before them. Questions arose, such as “Doesn’t it hurt?” and “Are you in your right mind?”. Contrary to his former reputation for being inarticulate and behaving almost childishly, Sengya responded that pain is merely an illusion created by the mind, and if the mind is not captivated by this illusion, then the fingers won’t feel pain either. He further argued, based on the Prajna concept of emptiness, that the body fundamentally consists of the four elements and is perceived through the five sensory organs; neither the four elements nor the five senses truly capture the essence of the body.⁸

Similar discussions on this theme are also found in the final part of the XGSZ biography, where his post-mortem debates are recorded.⁹ His interlocutor, Baohai 寶海, a prominent monk from the Longyuan Temple 龍淵寺 in Yizhou¹⁰, questioned why Sengya showed no signs of pain despite being burned by fire, and how one could effectively take on the suffering of all sentient beings—who endure pain as a result of their sins—by burning one’s body, which seems unrelated. Sengya argued that if one is truly determined to take on the suffering of others, it is indeed possible; when people witness such resolve and action, it instantly generates goodwill in their hearts, thereby eliminating malevolence and preventing evil deeds and their resultant negative karma. Another monk raised a question about whether one should achieve Buddha’s wisdom through mastering the concept of “formlessness 無相” or by diligently combating earthly desires. Sengya responded that since Buddha himself is not a concept that can be grasped, it is futile to cling to various fixed concepts in the pursuit of Buddha’s wisdom.¹¹

Baohai pressed further, asking if, by asserting that neither Buddha nor his form can be confined to fixed concepts, Sengya was implying he was an incarnation of the Buddha or the Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. Sengya clarified that he was merely an ordinary man who sincerely wished to alleviate the suffering of sentient beings and aid them in achieving enlightenment. Baohai countered, noting that while other bodhisattvas, such as the Medicine King Bodhisattva, had attained enlightenment and saved others, Sengya was still attempting to save others without having achieved enlightenment himself. He questioned whether Sengya considered himself superior to those enlightened bodhisattvas and saints. Sengya responded that those saints achieved enlightenment because people of their times fully understood the true intentions of the bodhisattvas and were thus saved. However, he observed that those currently in front of him did not fully grasp his efforts, but he believed they would eventually come to appreciate his words, much like flowers naturally falling after blooming.¹²

These debates vividly illustrate the confrontation between the esteemed monks, who pursue Buddhist truth and wisdom through scripture, concepts, and scholarship, and Sengya, who represents the Practitioners faction, advocating for bodhisattva acts based on altruistic vows. Although it is unlikely that Sengya advocated self-immolation based on the philosophy of emptiness, this narrative places him as a representative of the Practitioners, challenging Baohai and symbolizing the emerging trends of Buddhism in Yizhou

during the Northern Zhou. This was in contrast to the still-dominant doctrinal Buddhism represented by Baohai.

The pivotal moment in their confrontation came when Master Dui 兌法師 of the Xi-aoai Temple 孝愛寺 publicly supported Sengya by presenting him with a robe during his act of self-immolation, declaring that true understanding of Prajna extends beyond mere words. This endorsement likely swayed the outcome of the debate in favor of Sengya and the Practitioners.¹³ This gifting of the robe, a tradition also significant in later Chan Buddhism, symbolized the ecclesiastical legitimacy of Sengya's actions within the Buddhist community of Yizhou.

This support was further affirmed when Sengya undertook a full-body auto-cremation. Master Dui, representing “discipline and austerity among the elderly monks”, gifted him a purple shoulder cloth and a six-ring staff, while Sengyuan 僧淵 from nearby Jianwei County 犍爲郡 sent a seven-strip patchwork robe made from colorful fabric. In response to such expectations from the Buddhist community, Sengya donned the patchwork robe, draped the purple cloth over his shoulder, and held the staff as he performed the ultimate auto-cremation.¹⁴

3. The Advocacy of Compassion and Cessation of Meat Consumption: The Conflict Between Sengya and the Rang Tribe

The XGSZ meticulously conveys the message that Sengya—widely recognized for his legitimacy by the local religious community—strived to share with the public. Endowed originally with mystical powers, Sengya was renowned among the laypeople for his ability to heal diseases. Yet, his primary motivation for self-immolation was to promote the transcription and dissemination of Mahayana sutras. He is believed to have underscored the importance of these sutras while emphasizing the necessity of practicing offerings, a core element of the Bodhisattva path.

Moreover, the XGSZ biography consistently highlights Sengya's affirmation and promotion of Buddhist norms, particularly the “practice of compassion and the cessation of meat consumption”. This ethical stance predates his formal embrace of Buddhism and reflects his strong opposition to the lifestyle prevalent in his native Rang tribal settlement—a lifestyle that, through the Buddhist lens of karma, is condemned with the dictum that “killing is bad karma”.¹⁵

During his lifetime, Sengya fervently advocated for a lifestyle centered on compassion and abstinence from meat—not only at the site of his auto-cremation but also, notably, in posthumous teachings. Indeed, his posthumous discourses account for nearly one-third of the thirteen stories recorded in the XGSZ biography. His influence extended beyond Yizhou, where his auto-cremation occurred, reaching even to the distant homelands of the Rang tribal settlements.¹⁶

According to records, in the eighth month, one month after Sengya's auto-cremation, Mu Nandang 牟難當, a hunter from the Rang people, encountered a remarkable sight while hunting on Jiuqiao Mountain. Sengya, believed to have perished in Yizhou, appeared before him riding a black deer and urged him to forsake hunting, an activity inherently linked to killing, and to adopt agriculture instead. Later that winter, Sengya's nephew reported witnessing him walking with two monks in the mountains; when he pursued them, his supposedly deceased uncle sternly admonished him. According to Sengya's teaching, animals such as pigs and chickens, though different in appearance and vocalization from humans, share the same Buddha nature. They are born as animals as retribution for their past bad karma. Consequently, Sengya instructed that to avoid such retribution, people should focus solely on agriculture and abandon animal husbandry.¹⁷

In doing so, Sengya promoted the ethics of “non-killing 不殺生” from the perspective of Buddhist karma and retribution, urging the people of the Rang tribal settlements to completely abandon traditional practices such as hunting and animal husbandry. Essentially, his advocacy calls for a vegetarian lifestyle that entirely eschews meat consumption. The ideological foundation for this stance is rooted in the philosophy of compassion and the egalitarian belief that “all sentient beings have Buddha nature 一切衆生悉有佛性”. This concept is elaborated in the *Niepan jing* 涅槃經 (*Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*) and was echoed in the *Duan jiurou wen* 斷酒肉文 (Document on Abstaining from Alcohol and Meat) proposed by Emperor Wu of Liang 梁武帝 in the early 6th century. According to this edict, meat consumption was to be entirely banned for monastics, with legal penalties imposed for non-compliance. Recent scholarship has clarified that this doctrinal shift—grounded in the ethical and soteriological teaching of the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and distinct from earlier forms of vegetarianism based solely on compassion or lay precepts—began to take hold already during the late Northern and Southern Dynasties (see [Chen 2023](#)). Sengya’s case should thus be viewed as part of this broader transformation rather than as a precursor to changes that occurred only around the Sui-Tang period. While opposition from proponents of Indian Vinaya traditions (which allowed the consumption of three types of “pure meat”) persisted, the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*’s interpretation of vegetarian ethics gradually gained traction among Chinese monastics. By the Sui-Tang period, vegetarianism had become more widely institutionalized in temples across the country, but its doctrinal and rhetorical foundations had already been laid in the 6th century.

By the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, as illustrated by cases documented in the XGSZ biography such as Foyu 佛與 from Xiaoi Temple, it was evident that not all monastics had fully embraced abstention from alcohol and meat. Influenced by Sengya’s auto-cremation and an encounter with an unidentified yellow figure, Foyu chose to renounce these substances. The narrative contends that consuming the meat of any sentient being—whether animal or fish—is tantamount to consuming the meat of all sentient beings, including one’s own past parents and relatives reincarnated within the cycle of rebirth. As a mental deterrent against meat consumption, one is advised to envision it as maggots emerging from a corpse.¹⁸

Although Sengya himself is not directly involved in this latter narrative, the ethical norm of abstaining from meat based on reincarnation is advanced on his behalf by a yellow celestial figure. This perspective, which regards all sentient beings as one’s past parents and relatives¹⁹, is echoed in several Mahayana sutras ([Funayama 2002](#), p. 326, notes 103–4.) that advocate for vegetarianism, as well as in the *Fanwang jing* 梵網經 (*Brahmanet Sutra*, the 20th Light Precept, Scroll 2)²⁰, which promotes the release of living beings. Notably, previous studies have highlighted that the XGSZ biography extends the call to abstain from meat beyond monastics, encompassing lay believers as well ([Kieschnick 1997](#), p. 25).

4. Identification of Sengya as Guangming Bianzhao Baochang Bodhisattva

As noted above, the legitimacy of Sengya’s words and actions was reinforced by the gifting of a robe, a patchwork robe, and a staff from virtuous monks. In the XGSZ biography, Sengya’s religious practices are depicted as having been validated by ecclesiastical authority, though there is no explicit reference to endorsement by secular officials. This omission likely reflects the XGSZ’s deliberate intent to situate Sengya’s religious practices within a realm of “higher-dimensional authority” that transcends worldly power.

This thematic choice serves an underlying motif throughout the XGSZ biography. It not only infuses Sengya’s portrayal as a bodhisattva with a transcendent and sacred

quality—emphasizing his charismatic presence as an eminent monk and his various mystical abilities—but also seeks to anchor his teachings and actions in a cosmology that appeals to higher-dimensional authority beyond the human world.

4.1. Establishment of ‘Bodhisattva Sengya’: From Sengya to Guangming Bianzhao Baochang Bodhisattva

In the XGSZ, it is not uncommon for eminent monks to be referred to as “bodhisattvas” based on their merits and the specific contexts of their lives. For instance, Huijing 慧淨 is called the “Bodhisattva from the East 東方菩薩” (Scroll 3), Tanwuzui 曇無最 is designated the “Bodhisattva from the Eastern Lands 東土菩薩” (Scroll 23), and both Xuanwan 玄琬 and Cizang 慈藏 are identified as “Dharma-protecting Bodhisattvas 護法菩薩” (Scrolls 22 and 24, respectively). Tanluan 曇鸞 and Chan Master Da 達禪師 are honored as the “Bodhisattvas in flesh 肉身菩薩” (Scroll 16). However, it is extremely rare for someone like Sengya—whose biography is distinctly titled as “Bodhisattva Sengya 僧崖菩薩”—to be portrayed with a fully realized bodhisattva persona that endures from his lifetime into the afterlife. Previous research has often drawn parallels between Sengya’s life and those of Huineng 慧能, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, and Master Fu 傅大士.²¹ It seems that the elements incorporated into Sengya’s biography merge the living bodhisattva image depicted in Master Fu’s biography with the exalted persona of Huineng, thereby crafting a monastic version of “Bodhisattva Biography” that elevates Sengya’s stature within Buddhist hagiography.

First, we should explore when and how Sengya came to be known as a “bodhisattva”. According to the XGSZ biography, soon after his discourse on “pain arising from the mind”, people began to address him as “Bodhisattva Sengya”. However, many monks and laypeople initially harbored doubts about the true intent behind his actions until his endorsement by Master Dui. It appears unlikely that the image of a “bodhisattva” was firmly established before these suspicions were dispelled. The XGSZ biography suggests that Sengya, who became widely recognized overnight due to his act of auto-cremation, was already regarded as a “living bodhisattva” and venerated as an object of faith during his lifetime.

The portrayal of Sengya in the XGSZ presents him as an eminent monk who actively propagated his own teachings, which were grounded in the ethical concept of “practicing compassion and ceasing meat consumption” as well as the philosophical tenets of emptiness. Unlike typical bodhisattvas, who undergo extensive learning and training, Sengya is depicted as originating from a higher dimension, expected to manifest supernatural abilities. One such ability, as highlighted in the text, is the control of sensory functions through mental concentration. Prior research has noted that Sengya’s understanding of “pain arising from the mind” reveals a mechanism by which highly proficient meditators can block sensations, such as pain, during deep meditative absorption—a critical insight underpinning not only the practice of auto-cremation but also other forms of religious self-sacrifice (Benn 2006, p. 427).

Furthermore, the various mystical abilities that Sengya exhibited both before and after his death align closely with five of the six supernatural powers traditionally attributed to buddhas and bodhisattvas in Buddhism—except for uniquely Buddha-specific “leak-free 漏盡通” power. For example, one day Sengya visited a layman’s house to confer precepts. Amid a gathering, Mrs. Yang considered donating her hair ornament but hesitated for fear of her husband’s reproach. Perceiving her inner conflict, Sengya gently inquired, “Are you considering joyfully giving up your treasure?” While the others remained unaware, Mrs. Yang was moved to donate on the spot.²² Moreover, at the site of his auto-cremation—amid a crowd that included skeptics of his sanctity—Sengya identified one doubter by name and warned that when the Buddha comes to save sentient beings, he

may appear in various forms, including those who are ugly, sickly, or even animal-like.²³ This admonition underscored his profound understanding and the depth of his teachings.

Sengya also appears to have been endowed with the ability to perceive the thoughts of others (他心通), a form of mind-reading. Episodes in the XGSZ biography suggest that he not only possessed this insight but also had exceptionally keen hearing (天耳通) and observational skills (天眼通). For instance, while scriptures were being chanted during the incident of his hand-burning, he detected whispers among the crowd. Sternly addressing the murmurers, he questioned why they failed to cherish the opportunity to listen attentively to the sublime teachings. He recalled his past as an illiterate mountain dweller and contrasted that with his current profound resonance with the scriptures—a stark reminder of the importance of attentiveness.²⁴ His ability to discern distant whispers in a crowded environment highlights his supernatural perceptual power.

Later, as preparations for his auto-cremation were underway, Master Dui of Xiaoi Temple and Sengyuan from Jianwei County contributed ceremonial items of great significance—a six-ring staff 六度錫杖, a purple shoulder cloth 紫披, and a patchwork robe 班納, respectively. Although many materials and offerings from monks and laypeople were accumulated, these particular items were specifically noted. On the morning of his auto-cremation, Sengya deliberately instructed his attendants to retrieve these items. Dressed in Sengyuan's patchwork robe, wielding the six-ring staff, and draped in Master Dui's purple shoulder cloth, he proceeded to the site of his auto-cremation.²⁵ This careful selection and use of ritual objects further demonstrate his meticulous attention to symbolic details and his profound commitment to his spiritual journey.

At the end of the XGSZ biography, thirteen additional anecdotes enrich the narrative with eyewitness accounts and spiritual experiences from the residents of Yizhou and its surrounding counties, offering further insights into Sengya's life. One notable account from Pi County 郫縣 describes a miraculous vision in which a column of five or six hundred monks appeared along the Pi River. At the forefront of this celestial procession was a carriage bearing Sengya, adorned in a yellow patchwork robe with a purple shoulder cloth draped over one shoulder, wielding a staff. The procession was seen vanishing into the western sky.²⁶ The description of Sengya “vanishing into the western sky 乘空西沒” evokes imagery of a journey to the Western Pure Land—a common motif in Pure Land Buddhist narratives. However, the XGSZ biography does not explicitly frame this vision as evidence of his rebirth in the Pure Land; rather, it emphasizes his ability to traverse physical space effortlessly, highlighting his enduring spiritual presence.

The bodhisattva image of Sengya, already established through a series of miraculous episodes, was conclusively affirmed when he revealed his “true identity”. This pivotal moment occurred during an encounter with a monk named Huisheng 慧勝, who had fallen ill and was unable to witness Sengya's auto-cremation. While bedridden, Huisheng experienced a vivid dream in which Sengya appeared alongside a boy monk, preparing to light four equally divided piles of sandalwood incense around him. Overwhelmed by fear and misunderstanding the purpose, Huisheng protested, believing that he was being asked to auto-cremate. Calmly, Sengya reassured him, explaining that the incense was intended solely to cure his illness. As the incense burned completely and Huisheng's condition improved significantly, he requested an auspicious sign from Sengya. It was at that moment that Sengya disclosed his true celestial identity for the first time, revealing that although he had been known as “Ya” in this world, he was in fact the “Guangming Bianzhao Baochang Bodhisattva 光明遍照寶藏菩薩”.²⁷

4.2. Auspicious Signs and Relics—Seeking Validation from Higher-Dimensional Authority

As discussed earlier, the episodes surrounding Sengya's deification in the XGSZ biography typically involve personal, localized interactions that later become widely known. The detailed accounts—complete with the names of people, places, and specific circumstances—not only lend credibility and relatability to the narratives but also, as James Benn has noted, mark the emergence of “Sengya's cult” (Benn 2006, p. 444). According to Benn, the continued circulation of transcendent anecdotes, even from distant locales after Sengya's death, is part of a deliberate effort to elevate him from a local hero to a universally revered figure, thereby broadening the regional influence of his cult. Although this movement initially emerged from a clergy-centered organization, over time both Han Chinese and non-Han Chinese communities increasingly participated in venerating Sengya (Benn 2006, p. 442).

His assertion contains two crucial implications. First, Sengya's auto-cremation should not be viewed merely as an isolated historical event or religious ritual, but rather as a comprehensive phenomenon that has given rise to a movement known as “Sengya's cult”. Second, although this religious movement was initiated by Sengya and his monastic partners, for it to evolve into a fully developed social phenomenon it must transcend the boundaries between monastics and laypeople, as well as ethnic divisions, and gain the active recognition and participation of a broad public.

The auto-cremation events in Yizhou, which occurred on two separate occasions, attracted a diverse range of participants—from government officials to monks and ordinary citizens. This widespread participation not only influenced Yizhou but also extended to the surrounding counties of Shu 蜀, Jianwei 犍爲, and Guanghan 廣漢, even reaching Tongzhou 潼州. Such a broad-based movement depended not only on Sengya's charismatic leadership and mystical abilities he demonstrated during his missionary activities but also on a crucial factor: the “legitimacy” and “validity” of his religious acts. In both the HFZ and the XGSZ, the justification for Sengya's auto-cremation is anchored in appealing to higher authority. This difference in approach may account for the diverging portrayals of Sengya in these texts.

In this context, “authority” refers to three sources: ecclesiastical authority, secular official authority, and the distinctively Chinese cosmological concept of “Heaven's Will”, which embodies a holistic consensus encompassing nature and society (heaven, earth, and humanity). Both the HFZ and the XGSZ acknowledge ecclesiastical endorsement of Sengya's auto-cremation. For example, the HFZ states that each instance of his auto-cremation was intended to raise funds for transcribing scripture and constructing temple halls²⁸, while the XGSZ emphasizes the legitimacy of his religious devotion through the recorded gifts of a robe, a patchwork robe, and a staff from ecclesiastical authorities.

Notably, the HFZ also recounts Sengya's interactions with local officials before his auto-cremation, detailing how he accommodated their scheduling needs and conducted his rites under supervision—a scenario explicitly recorded in the text.²⁹ In contrast, the XGSZ omits any mention of official acceptance or involvement. This omission likely reflects Daoxuan's intention to root the justification for Sengya's auto-cremation in a higher-dimensional authority—namely, “Heaven's Will”—that transcends secular power. In the XGSZ, this transcendent authority is vividly illustrated through various supernatural manifestations, including great serpents, bright moons, auspicious lights, celestial flowers, and relics; all serve to validate Sengya's decisions and resonate with cosmic responses to his prophecies.

The first supernatural event recorded in the XGSZ biography involves the dramatic appearance of a giant serpent that catalyzed Sengya's decision to leave his tribal settlement and embrace monastic life. Described as red at both head and tail, the serpent emerged sud-

denly from the water as the villagers were constructing a dam for fish farming. It quickly grew to a length of ten meters and a diameter of five to six feet, leaping from the water and casting a brilliant red light across the plains before the dam ultimately collapsed.³⁰ The serpent's emergence, likely representing a local deity, may symbolize nature's warning against environmentally destructive human activities. The collapse of the dam—despite this forewarning—reflects a broader loss of harmony within the ecosystem.

This event also intersects with the social dynamics of the Shu Region, which at the time was marked by conflicts between ruling classes (comprising foreign regimes and local elites) and marginalized non-Han ethnic minorities. As these minorities—whose distinct ethnic cultures, languages, and customs were under threat—found themselves increasingly disenfranchised by the expanding Han society, the serpent's dramatic departure from its aquatic habitat and its subsequent disappearance into the air could metaphorically represent these overwhelming socio-political trends. Sengya's decision to follow the serpent out of his tribal settlement may have symbolized his recognition that aligning with "Heaven's Will" was the only viable path forward.

On the night of his auto-cremation, auspicious signs further underscored the sanctity of Sengya's act. In the street of Yizhou, his hands—wrapped in oil-soaked cloth—burned steadily from noon until evening, reducing his fingers to bare bones. Despite the intense physical pain, Sengya continued to preach passionately to a crowd numbering in the tens of thousands, his deep reverence for the Mahayana scriptures fueling his extreme sacrifice to promote their transcription. As dusk settled and a gentle drizzle began, the exposed bones of his scorched palm, vulnerable to the rain, underwent a miraculous transformation during a deep meditative state. Under a clear moonlit sky, the blackened bones began to regenerate, sprouting new phalanges as white and pristine as snow. This extraordinary sight convinced the assembled monks of the sacredness of these relics, and Sengya promptly distributed them³¹, thereby reinforcing his legacy and the sanctity of his sacrifice.

Benn has provided further insight into the symbolic representations throughout the biography, noting how elements such as weather phenomena, celestial flowers, earthquakes, and unusual lights contribute to a dramatic narrative in which Sengya appears to stir a cosmic whirlwind across the Shu region. Such imagery vividly illustrates the notion of a divine response to the transcendence of an individual in medieval Chinese Buddhist literature (Benn 2006, p. 433).

One significant point raised by Benn concerns the regeneration and subsequent relic formation of Sengya's finger bones. While this event evokes the re-growth of Medicine King Bodhisattva's arms in the *Lotus Sutra*, the immediate transformation into relics presents an innovative twist. This underscores a deliberate effort to construct a superior image of Sengya—one that transcends conventional heroic figures in Mahayana literature (Benn 2006, pp. 433–34).

Benn also suggests that while manipulation and relic production can be viewed as separate phenomena, they may also be understood as part of a continuous sequence that provides further insights into Sengya's transcendent status. Once an obscure monk of foreign origin, Sengya's extreme actions could have been easily dismissed as fanaticism or madness. However, Master Dui of Xiao'ai Temple was the first to publicly defend Sengya's actions, asserting the ecclesiastical judgment of right and wrong and thereby validating his auto-cremation.

The account of Sengya's auto-cremation amid ongoing religious debates—particularly with figures like Baohai—adds further layers to the narrative. The overcast skies and drizzle during his act symbolically represent the doubts and skepticism of both monastic and secular communities regarding the legitimacy of his extreme measures. The dramatic shift

in weather that followed his deep meditation, culminating in a clear, moonlit sky that triggered the miraculous regeneration of his charred hand bones, served as a cosmic affirmation of his righteous path. This supernatural event, reminiscent of the veneration of relics at the Famen Monastery 法門寺 in Chang'an, signifies a divine endorsement of his actions and casts him both as a martyr and a figure whose sacrifices are sanctified by higher-dimensional powers.

The regeneration of Sengya's finger bones—and their transformation into relics—transcends a mere validation of his sanctity; it embodies the principle of “Heaven-Man Correspondence” 天人感應. This concept, deeply embedded in Chinese philosophy, holds that human actions are intimately connected with the cosmos, and that divine signs, such as miraculous healings, serve as affirmations of this symbiosis. By turning his own body into a relic, Sengya not only provided tangible evidence of his divine endorsement but also countered the skepticism of his critics. His act of self-sacrifice thus ensured that his message and intentions were unmistakably clear to all.

Finally, the XGSZ recounts several other miraculous events surrounding Sengya's auto-cremation. On the 14th day of the 7th month, strange celestial phenomena—loud noises suggesting the splitting of the heavens, the shaking of the earth, and visions of giant sheep, dragons, snakes, and military instruments—heralded the moment for his self-sacrifice.³² Unlike the HFZ biography, which explicitly mentions the involvement and permissions of local government officials, the XGSZ deliberately omits such details. This omission underscores Daoxuan's intention to base the justification for Sengya's auto-cremation solely on auspicious signs, rooted in “Heaven's Will.”

On the pyre, constructed with four gates possibly symbolizing a stūpa, none dared to ignite the fire, leaving Sengya to do so himself—a scene reminiscent of Buddha's own cremation (Benn 2006, p. 437, notes 94–95; Funayama 2002, p. 338). As flames engulfed the pyre, a miraculous scene unfolded: a canopy appeared above Sengya's head, with monks standing beneath a burst of multi-colored lights. Colorful petals rained down from the sky, only to vanish when touched³³—an ephemeral sign of divine presence. The pyre's design, rigged to drip oil from the top that burst into flames upon contact with fire, made the spectacle visible even from the distant Great Jianchang Temple 大建昌寺.³⁴ Amidst the blazing flames, Sengya continued to bow in reverence. By his second bow, his face and body were already charred black, yet he attempted a third bow before collapsing irretrievably.³⁵ Even before the auto-cremation, he had declared, “Even if my body is exhausted, my heart will not break”, a statement whose true meaning was only later understood when his still-red heart relic was found the ashes. When this heart relic arrived at the Xiao'ai Temple, all the flowers in its grounds bloomed simultaneously, and a radiant light emanated from the relic, illuminating the temple roof and the sky above.³⁶ These auspicious signs—like the moonlit regeneration of his finger bones—function as religious symbols that reframe and reaffirm Sengya's auto-cremation within a cosmology of Heaven–Man Correspondence.

Furthermore, the concept of “Heaven–Man Correspondence” is considered a complex interplay among human society, the natural environment, and a transcendent authority that encompasses both. In many cases, phenomena attributed to Heaven–Man Correspondence serve to communicate messages of prohibition, warning, encouragement, or promotion to human society through anomalies or auspicious signs in nature. These signs elicit strong emotional responses such as joy, caution, or fear, thereby reinforcing faith among the masses. Although some representations of Heaven–Man Correspondence in the XGSZ biography evoke helplessness or obstacles—such as the great serpent, rain clouds, and drizzle—the more common manifestations are those that inspire awe and stir emotions. This effect is partly due to the synergistic influence of faith and economics inherent in the worship of Sengya. In the XGSZ, the emphasis on religious devotion sometimes over-

shadows the economic benefits, which are described in terms of large gatherings and the accumulation of offerings. The *HFZ*, for instance, plainly states that Sengya's acts of auto-cremation were initially intended to promote the transcription of Mahayana sutras and ultimately served as fundraising events for the construction of stūpas and temple halls. The economic impact was significant: one account describes "the roads being blocked by crowds and offerings piled high 囑施填委", while another recounts "rare treasures stacked in abundance 珍賄山積"—all contributing to temple income and the enhancement of religious infrastructure.

In sum, the interplay of faith and economics resulting from the worship of Sengya did not cease with his auto-cremation; it continued to intensify as his cult spread regionally. For example, at Lingguo Temple 靈果寺 in Tongzhou, a monk named Huice 慧策 commemorated Sengya's demise with a large-scale vegetarian feast. During this event, two five-colored dragons appeared in the southeastern sky, and the air filled with celestial flowers and fragrant smoke.³⁷ Similarly, after recovering from an illness, Huisheng held a memorial service for Sengya. Initially, when no auspicious signs appeared, he lamented that perhaps their sins were too great. However, shortly thereafter, a large ring of celestial flowers began to fall like snowflakes, growing larger and glowing gold.³⁸ These events not only underscore the immediate benefits experienced by those who worshiped Sengya but also reveal an ongoing competition in the magnitude of effects and benefits among his devotees.

Ultimately, these narratives emphasize the religious and economic synergy that accompanies Sengya's worship. They demonstrate that the regional spread of his cult was not only a matter of spiritual significance but also a source of considerable economic benefit, as evidenced by the large gatherings and offerings used for temple and stūpa construction. Thus, the story of Sengya is framed not only as an account of religious devotion but also as a complex interplay of faith, economics, and cosmic endorsement, reflecting the deep interconnections in traditional Chinese cosmology between the divine, the natural world, and human society.

5. Concluding Remarks

This paper has demonstrated how Daoxuan meticulously crafted the image of Sengya as a saint in the *XGSZ*. A key question that emerges is why Daoxuan felt compelled to undertake such an endeavor. His motivation appears to derive from the contemporary acceptance of self-immolation—or more specifically, auto-cremation—as a legitimate expression of religious devotion. This view was partly grounded in scriptural precedents found in texts such as the *Jātakas* and the *Lotus Sutra*, even though such acts seemingly contravened Vinaya precepts against bodily harm and killing. For Daoxuan, however, the extremity of these acts could be justified by the purity and intention behind them, and this justification became the foundation upon which Sengya's sanctified image was constructed.

Crucially, Daoxuan did not regard the physical act of self-sacrifice as spiritually efficacious in itself. Rather, he emphasized the inner state of the practitioner's mind—its clarity, resolve, and detachment—as the ultimate criterion for spiritual merit. Despite the visceral nature of self-immolation, Daoxuan's narrative foregrounds mental cultivation and transcendence. In doing so, it reflects a broader spiritual orientation in Chinese Buddhist thought that valorized the endurance of insight and intention beyond physical dissolution. While this orientation is sometimes described in terms of "the indestructibility of the spirit", it is important to clarify that this phrase does not assert the existence of a metaphysical self. Instead, it reflects a culturally specific discourse on spiritual continuity and

karmic efficacy—one that coexisted with, and occasionally diverged from, Indian-derived formulations of *anātman* (non-self) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness).

It is also worth noting that, according to Master Dui’s evaluation, Sengya’s own understanding may have been grounded in the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. This association introduces a distinct doctrinal layer to the hagiographic portrayal, highlighting the tensions—and potential harmonizations—between Madhyamaka thought and Chinese formulations of sanctity. Daoxuan’s depiction of Sengya thus brings together multiple interpretive threads: Mahāyāna soteriology, localized cosmological beliefs (such as Heaven–Man Correspondence), and literary strategies of sanctification.

As Funayama has shown in his work on the concept of *sheshen* (捨身, self-sacrifice), such acts carried multivalent meaning in Chinese Buddhism: literal bodily sacrifice (self-immolation), symbolic renunciation, a euphemism for death, and a mode of meditative practice. Most monastic auto-cremations followed a structured ritual sequence, typically consisting of a preparatory phase, the act of cremation, and postmortem narratives that framed the event’s spiritual meaning (Funayama 2002, pp. 350, 339–40). Sengya’s auto-cremation, as depicted in the XGSZ, follows this typical model closely. It is presented as a carefully ritualized event—divided into preparatory stages, the day of cremation, and richly elaborated posthumous accounts—that situate his death within a broader cosmological and ritual continuum. This ritual structure is not incidental but central to Daoxuan’s narrative strategy and his construction of Sengya’s sanctity.

The XGSZ biography thus functions not merely as a historical account but as a hagiography—a form of Buddhist sacred biography intended to inspire devotion, legitimize practices, and transmit religious ideals. By encoding Sengya’s self-immolation within a symbolic universe of signs—celestial omens, relics, miraculous powers—Daoxuan constructs a narrative in which the boundary between human history and sacred truth is deliberately blurred. Within this rhetorical and cosmological framework, the act of ultimate self-sacrifice becomes a liminal moment: a site where the sacred and the secular, the living and the dead, visibly converge.

To dismiss these elements—celestial flowers, auspicious clouds, giant serpents, heart relics, and supernatural abilities—as mere medieval superstition or generic hagiographic ornamentation would be to overlook critical clues of how Buddhist sanctity was imagined, narrated, and authorized. Rather than incidental embellishments, these features should be understood as part of a distinct Buddhist literary mode that blends historical memory with religious idealism. This study calls for renewed attention to the formal and rhetorical dimensions of Buddhist biography as hagiography, and to the cultural logic through which figures like Sengya were made into saints. Such an approach not only deepens our understanding of Daoxuan’s work but also offers insight into the broader religious imagination of medieval China.

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Abbreviations

T = Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎, and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭 et al., eds. 1924–1934. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 [Buddhist Canon Compiled during the Taishō Era (1912–1926)],

100 vols. Tōkyō: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai 大正一切經刊行會. Digitized in CBETA (v. 5.2) and SAT Daizōkyō Text Database. Available online: <http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/satdb2015.php> (accessed on 1 April 2025).

Notes

- ¹ For an in-depth study of Daoxuan's life, see [Fujiiyoshi \(2002\)](#).
- ² For a more detailed textual studies of the *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, see [Chi \(2013\)](#).
- ³ For studies on Sengya, see [Maruyama \(1986\)](#); [Benn \(1998, 2006, 2007\)](#); [Chi \(2014, 2024\)](#); [Saitō \(2021\)](#); for scholarship on self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism, see [Jan \(1965\)](#); [Cai \(1996, pp. 85–88\)](#); [Kieschnick \(1997, pp. 35–50\)](#); [Zhang \(2000, pp. 341–50\)](#). [Lin \(2001\)](#); [Funayama \(2002\)](#).
- ⁴ The *Hongzan fahua zhuan* 弘贊法華傳, authored by Huixiang (慧詳 or 慧祥), documents the transmission of the *Lotus Sutra* from the Eastern Jin through to the Tang dynasty. The latest entry in this compilation refers to an event from the second year of the Shenlong 神龍 era (706) of the Tang dynasty, suggesting that the treatise was likely compiled after this year.
- ⁵ Regarding Wangming 亡名 and his *Sengya pusa zhuan*, see [Chi \(2014\)](#).
- ⁶ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680b21–22. *Chu sanzang ji ji*, T no. 2145, 55: 3. 20b19–21.
- ⁷ *Hongzan fahua zhuan*, T no. 2067, 51: 5. 25a22–b5. For a more detailed discussion about the HFZ biography, see [Chi \(2014\)](#).
- ⁸ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 678c20–26.
- ⁹ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679c11–17.
- ¹⁰ The biography of Baohai is documented in the 9th scroll of the XGSZ.
- ¹¹ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679c17–21.
- ¹² *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679c21–29.
- ¹³ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 678c26–679a1.
- ¹⁴ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679a24–b1.
- ¹⁵ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 678b19–22.
- ¹⁶ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680b9–14.
- ¹⁷ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680b14–20.
- ¹⁸ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679b26–c9.
- ¹⁹ [Funayama \(2002\)](#) points out that “the idea that ‘all sentient beings are my parents, and I am the parent of all sentient beings’ developed in Chinese Buddhism in two distinct directions. The first and more mainstream direction asserts that one should cultivate compassion towards all sentient beings and should not give rise to hatred or resentment. A typical example of this is the meditation on compassion (cibei guan), one of the ‘Five Methods for Stillness of Mind’ (wu tingxin guan). Furthermore, when this same logic is extended and combined with the tathāgatagarbha doctrine, which holds that ‘all sentient beings possess Buddha-nature’, it ultimately leads to the argument for the prohibition of meat consumption.” (326–27). Funayama highlights how this conceptual development influenced ethical and meditative practices in Chinese Buddhism, particularly in fostering compassion and promoting vegetarianism.
- ²⁰ *Fanfang jing*, T no. 1484, 24: 2. 1005b10–13.
- ²¹ On the similarities between Sengya and Huineng, see [Benn \(2006, pp. 423–25, 423, note 51, pp. 429, 442\)](#). On the similarities between Sengya and Fu Dashi, see [Benn \(2006, p. 432\)](#).
- ²² *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679b24–26.
- ²³ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680a3–6.
- ²⁴ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679a7–11.
- ²⁵ See above note 14.
- ²⁶ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680a12–15.
- ²⁷ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680a20–27.
- ²⁸ *Hongzan fahua zhuan*, T no. 2067, 51: 5. 25b3–5.
- ²⁹ *Hongzan fahua zhuan*, T no. 2067, 51: 5. 25b5–8.
- ³⁰ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 678b22–29.
- ³¹ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679a1–21.
- ³² *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679a21–24.
- ³³ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680a6–11.
- ³⁴ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679c9–11.
- ³⁵ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679b9–16.
- ³⁶ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 679b16–19; 680a19–20.
- ³⁷ *Xu gaoseng zhuan*, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680a15–19.

38 Xu gaoseng zhuan, T no. 2060, 50: 27. 680a27-b4.

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