

The economic, religious and political implications of Empress Xiao of the Sui Dynasty and her younger brother sponsoring the stone sutra carving led by Jingwan

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Abstract. The stone sutra project at Yunju Temple in Fangshan, Beijing, was initiated during the Daye reign of Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty and lasted for nearly a thousand years. It consumed incalculable manpower and materials, eventually forming the largest surviving and most completely preserved group of stone-carved Buddhist scriptures in the world. Empress Xiao of Emperor Yang and her younger brother Xiao Yu donated a total of 1,500 bolts of silk to fund the stone sutra carving undertaking. Why did the Xiao siblings donate silk bolts instead of copper coins or silver. What was the purchasing power of these 1,500 bolts of silk. Was this donation merely intended to support the sutra carving. Through rigorous textual research and analysis of historical documents concerning Sui politics, economy and military affairs, this paper explores the multi-layered implications behind the donation made by Empress Xiao and Xiao Yu.

Keywords: Fangshan Stone Sutras, Empress Xiao, Xiao Yu, rent and taxation system, parallel circulation of coins and silk bolts, bad money driving out good money, Emperor Yang's campaigns against Goguryeo

1. Introduction

The stone sutras at Yunju Temple in Fangshan, Beijing, were first launched in the Daye reign of the Sui Dynasty by the eminent monk Master Jingwan, who carved Buddhist texts on White Belt Mountain. The project spanned six dynasties: Sui, Tang, Liao, Jin, Yuan and Ming, lasting nearly a millennium. In total, 14,278 stone slabs were inscribed with more than 35 million characters, covering the Tripitaka of Buddhist sutras, vinaya and treatises. This collection constitutes the largest surviving and most fully preserved set of stone-carved Buddhist scriptures worldwide. Master Jingwan and his successors quarried stones at the foot of the mountain for sutra carving, excavated caves atop the mountain to store the inscribed slabs, and successively erected numerous monasteries in the surrounding areas. The project was enormous, requiring countless laborers and materials—far beyond the financial capacity of ordinary monks or Buddhist temples. In the seventh year of the Daye reign (611 CE), Empress Xiao of Emperor Yang and her younger brother Xiao Yu donated 1,500 bolts of silk to fund the sutra carving. This marked the first imperial donation to the Fangshan Stone Sutra project and laid a critical foundation for its advancement.

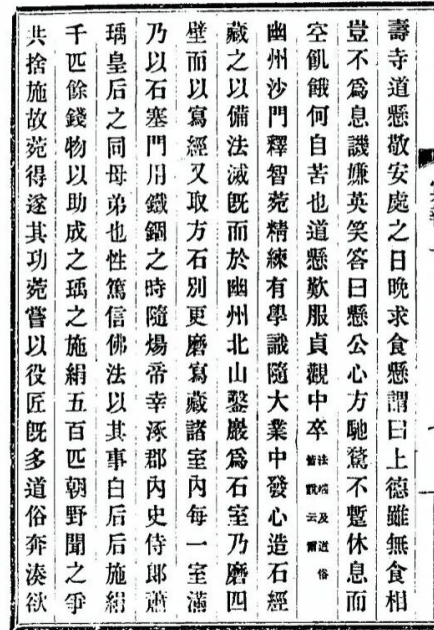


Figure 1. Volume 1 of *Records of Karmic Retribution*, page 14

As recorded in *Records of Karmic Retribution* (Volume 1) compiled by Tang Lin of the Tang Dynasty (Figure 1): "A monk named Zhiwan from Youzhou, erudite and accomplished in Buddhist practice, resolved in the mid-Daye reign to carve stone sutras for preservation against the decline of the Dharma. He chiseled rock chambers in the northern mountains of Youzhou, polished the four chamber walls to inscribe scriptures, and cut separate stone slabs which he also polished and inscribed for storage inside the chambers. Once a chamber was filled, its entrance was sealed with stone slabs and locked with iron bands. At that time, Emperor Yang visited Zhu Commandery (the vicinity of present-day Fangshan in Beijing and Zhuoxian in Hebei). Xiao Yu, Vice Director of the Palace Secretariat, was Empress Xiao's uterine younger brother and a devout Buddhist. He reported Master Zhiwan's undertaking to the Empress. The Empress donated one thousand bolts of silk plus other money and goods to assist the project; Xiao Yu donated five hundred bolts of silk. Upon hearing this, officials and commoners vied to make offerings, enabling Zhiwan to complete his work" [1]. According to *Old Book of Tang*, "Tang Lin, native of Chang'an in Jingzhao, was the grandson of Jin, Director of the Palace Secretariat of the Northern Zhou Dynasty"; "Upon Emperor Gaozong's ascension to the throne, he was appointed Acting Vice Minister of Personnel"; and during Emperor Gaozong's reign, "he was soon promoted to Minister of Punishments, granted the title Golden Purple Splendid Grand Master, and subsequently served as Minister of War, Minister of Revenue and Minister of Personnel in sequence" [2]. *Records of Karmic Retribution*, completed roughly during the reign of Emperor Gaozong of the Tang Dynasty, records numerous Buddhist tales of karmic causation. The passage documenting the monk Zhiwan (Jingwan) carving stone sutras in Youzhou during the Sui Daye reign describes how Empress Xiao and her brother Xiao Yu donated one thousand and five hundred bolts of silk respectively to Master Jingwan in the seventh year of Daye (611 CE), when Emperor Yang toured Zhu Commandery accompanied by Empress Xiao. Given Tang Lin's high official standing and the relatively short interval between the completion of his book and the seventh year of Daye, this textual record bears high credibility. The donation of silk bolts by Empress Xiao and her brother is not merely a much-told story in Buddhist history, but also an authentic reflection of Sui politics, economy and religious life. Nevertheless, several questions arise: Why did the Xiao siblings choose silk bolts rather than

copper or silver coins for their offering? What purchasing power did these 1,500 bolts of silk hold at the time? Were their donations driven solely by devotion to Buddhism?

2. Why silk bolts became the "hard currency" of the Sui Dynasty

2.1. Statutory endorsement and social recognition of silk bolts

As verified by preeminent silk scholar Zhu Xinyu: "China was the world's earliest producer of sericulture and silk textiles, and for a long period the sole such producer. As early as more than 3,000 years ago, peoples of the Shang and Zhou dynasties practiced sericulture. Archaeological excavations in Shang Dynasty tombs have uncovered exquisitely carved jade silkworms, as well as residual silk fabric preserved by bronze corrosion on bronze vessels" [3]. Zhu Xinyu further defines silk terminology: "Prior to the Han Dynasty, the character *bo* served as the general term for silk textiles; in the Han Dynasty, *bo* and *zeng* were used interchangeably. Dyed silk fabrics were termed *caibo*, while figured silk fabrics were called *wenzeng*" [4]. "Most ancient silk textiles can be categorized by weave structure: sha, xiao, wan, su, gao, ti, jian, chou and shi are all plain undecorated fabrics differing only in thickness and density, and may be generally referred to as *juan* (silk bolt) in certain contexts; dyed plain fabrics are known as *caijuan*" [3]. It is evident that *juan* and *bo* represented the most basic undyed, unpatterned plain silk varieties in ancient China.

Zhu Xinyu also confirms that silk production fell under state supervision from an early age. As early as the Western Zhou Dynasty, specialized official artisans oversaw handicraft production, as inscribed on the Cai Gui bronze vessel: "The King commands Cai to administer all craftsmen" [4]. Sericulture constituted one of these state-managed crafts, known as "silk-processing artisans". In the early Eastern Han Dynasty, silk bolts were already awarded as rewards to meritorious border soldiers. By the late Eastern Han Dynasty at the latest, silk bolts were widely produced [4]. In the ninth year of the Jian'an reign (204 CE), the Cao Wei regime issued a regulation: "Each household shall submit two bolts of silk and two jin of silk floss", which foreshadowed the household tax system and established the basic model for the Western Jin household tax levied in silk and silk floss [4].

From the Northern and Southern Dynasties through the Sui Dynasty, physical goods including silk bolts and grain remained central to state taxation. Two core economic policies underpinned the Sui economic system: the Equal Field System and the Rent and Taxation System. *Book of Sui · Treatise on Food and Goods* records: "All nobles from princes down to military governors were granted permanent hereditary fields in varying quantities—up to one hundred qing for the highest ranks, no less than forty mu for the lowest. Permanent hereditary fields and open farmlands for adult and semi-adult males followed the regulations of the Eastern Qi Dynasty, with mandated mulberry, elm and jujube trees planted on the land. Residential plots were allocated at a rate of one mu per three persons, or one mu per five servants. For a household headed by an adult male, the rent was three shi of grain. Regions planted with mulberry trees levied silk bolts as tax; hemp-growing regions levied hemp cloth. Each silk bolt was accompanied by three liang of silk floss; each bolt of hemp cloth by three jin of hemp. Single adult males and servants paid half the standard tax. Those who had not received land were exempted from taxation" [5]. "Capital officials were additionally allocated official stipend fields: First-rank officials received five qing, with each subsequent rank reduced by fifty mu, down to three qing for fifth-rank officials, two qing and fifty mu for sixth-rank officials" [5]. "Each descending rank reduced stipend fields by fifty mu, ending at one qing for ninth-rank officials. Local officials also received stipend fields, plus public office fields to cover administrative expenses" [5]. This describes the Equal Field System of the Sui Dynasty: nobles and officials of all ranks received varying amounts of permanent hereditary land, which they rented to peasant laborers for cultivation. Households then paid statutory taxes to the state:

grain tax (*zu*) levied on adult males, and silk or cloth tax (*diao*)—the Rent and Taxation System, inherited by Emperor Wen of Sui from Northern and Southern Dynasties tax frameworks. *Book of Sui · Treatise on Food and Goods* states: "The dynasties of Song, Qi, Liang and Chen all retained this system. All miscellaneous supplies required for state military and civil affairs were temporarily collected as tax or purchased according to local produce, with no fixed statutory regulations" [5]. "All tenant households were registered under their master's household register. Tax levies for adult males included two zhang of silk or hemp cloth, three liang of raw silk, eight liang of silk floss, eight chi of official salary silk, three liang and two fen of official salary silk floss, five shi of grain rent, and two shi of official salary grain; adult women paid half each category" [5]. It is clear that taxation paid in silk bolts and grain formed statutory state policy across the Northern and Southern Dynasties and the Sui Dynasty.

Silk bolts also served as the official benchmark for commuting criminal penalties. *Book of Sui · Penal Code* records: "Penalties of two years or longer constituted servitude, requiring convicts to labor according to their skills. Those sentenced to five years of hard labor with hair shorn and iron neck collars, plus two hundred strokes of the cane, could commute their sentence by paying sixty bolts of silk for male offenders" [6]. "Commutation for the death penalty required two jin of gold, or sixteen bolts of silk for male offenders. Commutation for five years' hard labor with hair shorn, iron neck collar and two hundred cane strokes required one jin and twelve liang of gold, or fourteen bolts of silk for men; four years' labor required one jin and eight liang of gold, or twelve silk bolts; three years' labor required one jin and four liang of gold, or ten silk bolts" [6]. The penal code explicitly permitted commutation of punishment via payment of gold or silk bolts.

Sui official salaries also followed Northern and Southern Dynasties conventions, calculated in silk bolts, with thirty percent of salaries disbursed as silk. *Book of Sui · Officials II* notes: "First-rank officials received eight hundred bolts of silk annually, disbursed in installments of two hundred bolts. Second-rank officials received seven hundred bolts, disbursed in installments of one hundred and seventy-five bolts; second-grade officials received six hundred bolts, disbursed in installments of one hundred and fifty bolts" [7]. This scale continued downward, concluding with "twenty-four bolts annually for ninth-grade minor officials, disbursed in six-bolt installments. Salaries were split equally three ways: one-third silk, one-third grain, one-third copper coins" [7].

Imperial rewards to officials and commoners frequently took the form of silk bolts alongside grain and coinage. "In the third year of the Kaihuang reign of Emperor Wen, Niu Hong, Director of the Palace Library, submitted a memorial requesting envoys be dispatched to collect rare texts; each scroll recovered was rewarded with one bolt of silk" [8]. *Biography of Cui Peng in Book of Sui* records: "The Emperor, commending his integrity, bestowed five hundred bolts of silk upon him" [9]. *Biography of Yuwen Bi in Book of Sui* states: "When the Emperor hosted a banquet for his retinue at Fenyang Palace, Yuwen Bi alone received a special reward of five hundred silk bolts" [10]. Similar records of silk bolt rewards pervade Sui historical texts.

In summary, silk bolts functioned as a statutory physical currency for large-value payments, endorsed by imperial law and universally accepted across all social strata, both in top-down institutional design and daily social practice.

2.2. The monetary system of parallel circulation of coins and silk bolts

Copper coins had been widely circulated since the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, including knife coins, spade coins and ant-nose coins. Why, then, did copper coins fail to gain absolute market dominance in the Sui Dynasty? Shortly after founding the dynasty, Emperor Wen of Sui unified the currency

system to resolve the chaotic heterogeneous coinage inherited from preceding regimes, casting new Wuzhu coins. *Book of Sui · Treatise on Food and Goods* records: "After ascending the throne from the Northern Zhou, Emperor Wen, troubled by inconsistent weights of circulating currency, ordered new coins to be minted. Each coin bore the inscription 'Wuzhu' on both obverse and reverse, with full circumferential rims, and weighed precisely five zhu as inscribed. One thousand coins weighed four jin and two liang" [5]. The imperial court standardized coin specifications, yet complications quickly emerged: "Shortly after the new coins entered circulation, private citizens began melting and recasting them illegally" [5]. "All circulating coins required admixture of tin and lead; tin and lead being cheap, profiteers engaged in rampant private counterfeiting that the state could not fully suppress" [5]. Private counterfeiting remained pervasive throughout the reign. By the middle and late Daye reign of Emperor Yang, successive massive corvée projects and military campaigns destabilized imperial governance: "After the start of the Daye reign, state discipline deteriorated; unscrupulous powerful figures mass-produced counterfeit coins, which grew increasingly thin and debased. Initially, one thousand coins still weighed two jin, later declining to merely one jin. Some even cut iron sheets, cut leather or pasted paper to fabricate counterfeit currency, which circulated alongside legitimate coins" [5]. The credit of copper coins collapsed during the Daye reign. Historical precedent existed for this loss of monetary faith: under Emperor Shenwu of Northern Qi, rampant debasement of currency led to "copper coins falling out of use north of Jizhou, with all commercial transactions conducted in silk and cloth" [5]. When coinage lost credibility, society universally turned to silk bolts as a replacement medium of exchange, with copper coins retained only for small daily purchases due to portability.

Thus the Sui Dynasty operated a dual monetary system of parallel coin and silk circulation, covering all facets of daily life and accepted by all social classes. Silk bolts served as a universal equivalent; unlike volatile copper coins undermined by unregulated counterfeiting, silk maintained uniform standards and stable, transparent value, rendering it preferable to the general public. The phrase "parallel circulation of coins and silk" appears frequently in Tang Dynasty documents. Yuan Zhen wrote in *Collected Works of Yuan Zhen*: "Since the Yuanhe reign, imperial decrees first banned copper production for private utensils, then mandated parallel circulation of coins and silk in all transactions, followed by limits on the maximum quantity of copper coins any household could hoard" [11]. An imperial edict recorded in *Tang Huiyao*, issued on the twenty-ninth day of the ninth month in the twentieth year of the Kaiyuan reign of Emperor Xuanzong, states: "Silk, damask, ramie cloth and all miscellaneous goods shall be interchangeable in all market transactions. Reports claim market vendors demand cash exclusively, which violates principle. Henceforth coins and silk goods shall circulate equally; violators shall be punished per statute" [12]. Modern monetary historians Peng Xinwei dedicated sections of *A History of Chinese Currency* to the evolution of parallel coin-silk circulation, while Li Yan elaborated on the Tang Dynasty system in his essay *A Brief Discussion on the Tang Dynasty's Parallel Circulation of Coins and Silk*.

2.3. Absolute monopoly of the silk industry

Silk textiles possessed inherent currency attributes due to a uniquely Chinese historical advantage: China monopolized sericulture technology from the Han Dynasty onward. The Sui silk industry flourished, employing vast numbers of workers and forming a core pillar of the national economy. *Book of Sui · Treatise on Food and Goods* records: "Each spring, according to local seasonal timetables, farmers were ordered to tend mulberry and silkworm cultivation. From spring through autumn, all males aged twenty-five and above held farmland; during silkworm-rearing seasons, all females aged fifteen and above managed sericulture" [5]. Historical records document the abundant state reserves of silk and grain under Emperor Wen's Kaihuang reign: "The Sui state granaries at Western Capital Luoyang, Eastern Capital Jiayi, Luokou, Yongfeng in Hua

Prefecture and Taiyuan in Shan Prefecture each stored tens of millions of shi of grain at maximum, no fewer than several million shi at minimum. Community charitable granaries across the realm were likewise full. Imperial treasuries in the capital and Bing Prefecture each held tens of millions of bolts of silk and cloth" [13]. Silk bolts ranked alongside grain as core state reserve commodities. Silk also constituted a primary Sui export commodity for frontier trade. The central government traded silk and tea for military horses with neighboring ethnic regimes, sustaining national military capacity. *Book of Sui* records: "In the fourth month of the third year of the Daye reign, Emperor Yang visited Yulin; Qimin Khan and Princess Yicheng attended his temporary palace, presenting three thousand horses in tribute. Delighted, the Emperor bestowed thirteen thousand bolts of silk as reward" [14]. After the Anshi Rebellion of the Tang Dynasty: "In the eighth month of the seventh year of the Dali reign, Uyghur envoys departed their homeland escorted by more than one thousand carriages bearing imperial diplomatic gifts. Exploiting their military merit, from the Qianyuan reign onward the Uyghurs conducted annual horse trades, exchanging one horse for forty bolts of silk, often importing tens of thousands of horses at a time" [15]. Mass production and consistent quality standards defined Sui and Tang silk output. As an exclusive Chinese export commodity along the Silk Road, silk naturally acquired monetary properties, functioning domestically and internationally as a strategically vital commodity for the Central Plains regime.

3. What was the purchasing power of the 1,500 bolts of silk donated by Empress Xiao and her brother

3.1. Grain prices and supply during wartime

Grain prices fluctuated drastically across the Sui and Tang dynasties in response to climate and warfare; long-distance transport costs also created significant regional price disparities within the same time period. Historical records only document grain prices during famines or wartime localized crises. Grain prices remained stable nationwide under the unified, peaceful governance of Emperor Wen of Sui. By the middle and late reign of Emperor Yang, successive military campaigns drove grain prices to astronomical heights. *Zizhi Tongjian* records: "Since the previous year, the Emperor had planned campaigns against Goguryeo, issuing edicts to establish military prefectures in Shandong to raise horses for military service. He conscripted civilian laborers to transport grain stockpiled at Luhe and Huaiyuan garrisons; almost all carts and oxen dispatched never returned, more than half the porters and soldiers perished, farmland lay untilled, and widespread famine sent grain prices soaring—prices were especially exorbitant along the northeastern border, with one dou of grain costing hundreds of coins. Transported grain was often inferior in quality, forcing porters to purchase replacement grain at their own cost to fulfill quotas. Additionally, over six hundred thousand haulers were conscripted; two men pushed three shi of grain together, yet the hazardous, lengthy journey exhausted their personal provisions before reaching the garrisons. Unable to deliver their assigned grain, they fled in fear of punishment. Exploited by corrupt officials, the common people fell into destitution, their wealth exhausted. Remaining at home meant freezing and starvation; banditry offered a fleeting chance of survival, prompting groups of refugees to form outlaw bands" [16]. In the seventh year of Daye, immediately preceding the first campaign against Goguryeo, grain prices surged in Zhu Commandery—the primary military staging ground for the eastern campaigns—accompanied by widespread social unrest. *Biography of Zhang Xutu in Book of Sui* states: "During the Daye reign, Zhang Xutu served as Administrator of Qi Commandery. As the Liaodong military campaigns commenced, commoners lost their livelihoods compounded by severe famine that drove grain prices skyward. Zhang Xutu intended to open public granaries

for relief, yet his subordinates argued: 'We must await an imperial edict; unauthorized distribution is forbidden'" [17]. Military campaigns consumed enormous grain reserves, creating acute supply shortages and price inflation. The state exercised strict control over grain as a critical military resource, rendering it an impractical offering for sutra carving.

3.2. Exchange ratios between silk bolts and copper coins

Book of Wei · Treatise on Food and Goods records that under the Northern Wei Dynasty, "all civil and military official salaries were calculated in silk and disbursed as coins, with one bolt of silk valued at two hundred coins" [18]. *New Book of Tang · Treatise on Food and Goods* notes that in the fifth year of the Tianbao reign, "the realm prospered; one dou of grain cost thirteen coins, merely three coins per dou in Qing and Qi Prefectures, and one bolt of silk exchanged for two hundred coins" [19]. During stable, prosperous eras with standardized coinage, the exchange rate of two hundred coins per silk bolt remained consistent across the Northern and Southern Dynasties through the Tang Dynasty. By the seventh year of Daye, however, prior construction of the Great Wall, excavation of the Grand Canal, and campaigns against Tuyuhun compounded rampant coin debasement, inflating the market value of silk bolts far above two hundred coins each. Empress Xiao's one thousand bolts of silk equated to well over two hundred thousand coins, likely exceeding three hundred thousand coins in total purchasing power. Per *Book of Sui · Officials II*, "First-rank capital officials received nine hundred shi of grain annually, with each subsequent rank reduced by one hundred shi down to three hundred shi for fourth-rank officials" [20]. Calculated at three hundred coins per shi of grain, this single donation matched the full annual salary of a first-rank minister.

3.3. Exchange ratios between silk bolts and labor

Sui Dynasty wage records for laborers are sparse in official histories, but estimates can be drawn from comparable Tang Dynasty sources. *Old Book of Tang* records, during the reign of Emperor Gaozong: "Taxes were levied according to local produce, including silk, damask and cloth. Each adult male owed twenty days of corvée labor annually; those unable to serve commuted their labor by paying silk at a rate of three chi per workday" [21]. Across the Sui and Tang dynasties, one bolt of silk (forty chi) represented approximately thirteen full days of labor. Empress Xiao's one thousand bolts of silk equaled thirteen thousand workdays, sufficient to employ thirty artisans for an entire year—explaining how Master Jingwan sustained uninterrupted progress on the stone sutra carving project with this funding.

3.4. Comparison between Xiao Yu's official rank, salary and his donation

Xiao Yu held the post of Vice Director of the Palace Secretariat during the Daye reign. Per *Book of Sui · Officials II*, "Vice Director of the Palace Secretariat, Right Household Administrator of the Crown Prince, Gentleman of Broad Communication, Left and Right Gate Guard Generals, Gentleman of Court Dispensation, and Marquis of Founding rank as Fourth Grade Primary" [20]. Sui official statutes stipulated an annual salary of three hundred shi of grain for Fourth Grade Primary officials. Calculated at one shi of grain per bolt of silk, his yearly salary equaled roughly three hundred silk bolts. His five hundred-bolt donation represented nearly one and a half years of his full salary, constituting an extremely substantial offering.

As Vice Director of the Palace Secretariat, a core central government post responsible for drafting imperial edicts and participating in confidential state deliberations, Xiao Yu held eminent political standing. As the Emperor's brother-in-law, he attained high rank through imperial kinship yet demonstrated genuine devotion to Buddhism through his sizable donation. His offering reflected both personal religious piety and the immense wealth available to senior Sui aristocrats.

4. The profound significance of donating silk bolts

4.1. Perfect integration of religious belief and political motives of Empress Xiao and her brother

Emperors Wen and Yang of the Sui were lifelong devout Buddhists, a well-documented historical fact requiring no further elaboration. Empress Xiao and her brother descended from the Lanling Xiao clan, the former imperial house of the Western Liang Dynasty, a family with centuries of Buddhist faith. Beginning with Emperor Wu of Liang, the Lanling Xiao clan established a statecraft framework centered on Buddhist governance. *Book of Wei · Biographies of the Southern Dynasties Rulers Xiao Daocheng and Xiao Yan* records: "Xiao Yan fervently embraced Buddhism, constructing the Tongtai Temple in Jianye, the Guangzhai Temple on his ancestral estate, the Da'aijing Temple at Zhongshan, plus the Ganying and Qian'an Temples, all crafted with extravagant craftsmanship at ruinous cost to common folk" [22].

Empress Xiao maintained profound personal ties to Buddhism dating to her time as Crown Princess. *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks · Meditation Masters II* records a pivotal episode involving Princess Xiao and Master Zhiyi of the Tiantai School: "Princess Xiao suffered an untreatable illness. The Prince dispatched Director Liu Guyan with a letter pleading for the master's intervention to cure her ailment. Zhiyi assembled his disciples to conduct a seven-day Golden Light Repentance ritual. On the sixth evening, an unusual bird flew into the ritual altar, lay lifeless briefly, then departed. A pig's wail was heard by all attendees. Zhiyi declared: 'This omen foretells the Princess's recovery'. The next day, her illness fully abated. The Prince rejoiced greatly. Upon returning to the imperial court after the ritual, he traveled back to Tiantai Mountain, reconvened the monastic assembly to repeat the repentance ceremony, and swore an oath: 'I shall dedicate the remainder of my life to all endeavors benefiting the Three Jewels'" [23]. Some modern scholars hypothesize Master Jingwan was a disciple or fellow practitioner of Zhiyi, securing imperial patronage through this connection, though most contemporary researchers reject this claim. Regardless, this account confirms Empress Xiao's deep early connections to Buddhist institutions.

Xiao Yu, a prominent minister across both the Sui and Tang dynasties, owed his standing not merely to imperial kinship but to exceptional political talent and state service. Historical records note: "In the ninth year of the Zhenguan reign, Xiao Yu served as Vice Director of the Department of State Affairs. At a palace banquet, Emperor Taizong remarked to Fang Xuanling: 'After the sixth year of the Wude reign, the Retired Emperor harbored intentions to replace the heir apparent. I faced mortal peril from my brothers, living in constant fear of meritorious service going unrewarded. Xiao Yu could not be swayed by lavish bribes nor intimidated by execution—truly a minister loyal to the state'. The Emperor composed a poem for him: 'When fierce winds blow, sturdy grass stands firm; in times of turmoil, loyal ministers reveal their worth'. Xiao Yu bowed in gratitude: 'I am blessed to receive your guidance and your recognition of my integrity; I shall live as though immortal even upon my death'" [24]. This high praise from Emperor Taizong attests to Xiao Yu's acute political discernment, and his public advocacy for Buddhism carried substantial political undertones. Xiao Yu inherited the clan's Buddhist devotion, "fond of Buddhist teachings" [25]. *New Book of Tang* records that while serving as Chancellor, he vigorously debated the anti-Buddhist memorial submitted by Grand Historian Fu Yi before the imperial court: "The Buddha is a sage. Fu Yi's proposal rejects the sage, defying all moral law—he deserves severe punishment" [26]. His uncompromising defense of Buddhism reflected deeply held convictions.

Nevertheless, the Xiao siblings' silk donation to Master Jingwan's sutra carving cannot be attributed solely to personal religious devotion. Emperor Yang's tour of Zhu Commandery in the seventh year of Daye was no casual inspection, but a critical military mobilization ahead of the first campaign against Goguryeo. *Book of Sui · Annals of Emperor Yang I* records: "Gao Yuan of Goguryeo failed to fulfill his tributary obligations,

prompting the Emperor to plan a punitive expedition to Liaodong to manifest imperial prestige. Though resolved to launch the campaign, he first conducted an inspection tour of Zhu Commandery to pacify the local populace" [27]. Yet severe social unrest plagued Shandong and Hebei in advance of the imperial tour: "The Emperor embarked on a northern inspection tour. He conscripted hundreds of thousands of laborers to build the Great Wall from Yulin eastward to Zhihe River, a thousand-li stretch that claimed more than half the laborers' lives. In the fourth year of Daye, over one hundred thousand laborers from Hebei were ordered to divert the Qinshui River south to the Yellow River and north to Zhu Commandery. Male laborers grew scarce, forcing women to perform corvée labor" [5]. During the imperial visit to Zhu Commandery, "catastrophic floods in autumn submerged more than thirty prefectures across Shandong and Henan, driving commoners to sell their children into slavery", and "troops and grain transport porters bound for Liaodong crowded the roads day and night; those crushed by labor hardships began forming outlaw bands" [27]. As the primary military hub for the eastern campaigns, Zhu Commandery hosted massive concentrations of troops and grain supplies routed via land and the Grand Canal before deployment to Liaodong and Goguryeo. Stabilizing local popular sentiment constituted an urgent political priority for the Emperor on the eve of full-scale war.

Buddhism commanded an extensive following in the Youzhou region during the Sui Dynasty. *Per Buddhist Temples and Pagodas of Beijing*: "Buddhism reached Youzhou no later than the Western Jin Dynasty, evidenced by records of the Da'an, Muyan, Youshengjiao and Tiankai Temples appearing in Northern Wei texts" [28]. *Complete Tang Prose · Record of Reintering the Buddha Relics* states: "The Buddha relics were originally placed in a five-story wooden stupa at Zhiquan Temple in the forty-fourth year of the Renshou reign of the Sui Dynasty by Dou Kang, Duke of Chen and Governor of Youzhou, located more than one hundred paces east of the eastern city gate along the main thoroughfare. The temple was founded in the first year of the Yuanxiang reign of the Eastern Wei by Governor Wei Changming, originally named 'Prefect Wei's Temple', later renamed Zhiquan Temple. Under Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty it became Dayun Temple, and in the Kaiyuan reign it was renamed Longxing Temple" [29]. *Expanded Collection of Great Dharma Records · Volume Seventeen: Memorials of Relic Miracles* documents that Emperor Wen distributed Buddha relics to prefectures nationwide in the second year of the Renshou reign: "The memorial from Youzhou states: 'On the twenty-sixth day of the third month, the Buddha relic stone casket was enshrined at Hongye Temple. When the stone slabs were polished and washed, they became transparent as mirrors, radiating purple light'" [30]. It is clear the Sui imperial house prioritized supporting Buddhist institutions in Youzhou, a policy that secured goodwill among local residents—especially the vast Buddhist lay community—and stabilized regional order ahead of the Goguryeo campaigns. By donating silk bolts to fund Master Jingwan's sutra carving, the imperial house demonstrated sincere devotion to Buddhism, cultivated a public image of benevolent rule, and displayed imperial wealth and authority, laying groundwork for social stability during the looming military campaigns against Goguryeo. This act aligned religious piety with core state political objectives.

4.2. Embodiment of social trust

Beyond its material utility, silk bolts derived core value from universal social trust in their function as currency. The Xiao siblings selected silk rather than gold, silver or copper coins precisely because silk maintained stable, widely recognized market value amid the wartime inflation inevitable when hundreds of thousands of troops converged on Zhu Commandery. The administrative territory of Zhu Commandery encompassed nine counties with a registered household population of eighty-four thousand and fifty-nine, translating to roughly four hundred to five hundred thousand permanent residents [31]. The sudden influx of vast military numbers risked severe price volatility, and the stable silk monetary system became critical to maintaining social order. This trust-based silk currency system collapsed entirely following the Sui's three

failed campaigns against Goguryeo and the onset of nationwide civil war at the end of the dynasty. *Zizhi Tongjian* records the siege of Luoyang by Tang armies: "The city was encircled by trenches and fortifications. Food ran scarce within the city; one bolt of silk exchanged for merely three sheng of grain, ten bolts of cloth traded for one sheng of salt, and fine garments and rare curios were valued no higher than mud and chaff" [32]. This stark disparity exemplifies the total breakdown of commodity monetary trust amid dynastic collapse.

4.3. Material foundation for cultural inheritance

Master Jingwan initiated stone sutra carving with the core purpose of "preserving the Dharma through its eventual decline". The Xiao siblings' 1,500 bolts of silk provided the first substantial material foundation for this monumental cultural project. While modest relative to the millennium-long scale of the Fangshan Stone Sutra undertaking, the imperial donation delivered far more than direct financial support: it conferred official imperial endorsement, instantly elevating the national renown of the stone sutra project. As the text records, "Upon hearing this, officials and commoners vied to make offerings, enabling Zhiwan to complete his work" [1]. Sustained financial contributions from all social strata followed the imperial lead, permitting uninterrupted progress on the sutra carving. In subsequent centuries, the Fangshan stone sutra project secured patronage from successive imperial houses, noble clans and wealthy merchants. The surviving stone slabs constitute an irreplaceable resource for researching Buddhist canonical texts and ancient Chinese calligraphy, with the Xiao siblings' silk donation marking the pivotal starting point of this thousand-year cultural endeavor.

5. Conclusion

The donation of silk bolts by Empress Xiao and Xiao Yu to fund Master Jingwan's stone sutra carving is far more than a celebrated anecdote in Buddhist history: it serves as a vivid microcosm of Sui Dynasty economic and political life. As statutory physical currency, silk bolts fulfilled multifunctional roles in taxation, commercial exchange and state reserve stockpiles, their value upheld by imperial institutions and broad social consensus. The dual monetary framework of parallel coin and silk circulation defined Sui economic operations. Further, the Xiao siblings' offering cannot be reduced to a simple expression of personal Buddhist piety; it was inextricably tied to the empire's pre-Goguryeo campaign national agenda, embodying a mutually beneficial partnership between the imperial court and Buddhist religious institutions during a critical historical juncture. Study of the Yunju Temple stone sutras reveals not only the profound depth of Buddhist culture, but also the unique silk-based economic system of the Sui Dynasty, alongside the enduring interconnectedness of political power and religious institutions in pre-modern China.

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