

Steles, temples, and female religious life: Quanzhen institutional space in Jin–Yuan North China

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Abstract. This article examines the resurgence of Quanzhen female Daoist clerics in North China during the Jin–Yuan transition. Drawing primarily on epigraphic records, Daoist texts, and historical documents, it estimates that women constituted approximately 32 percent of Quanzhen clerics and may have numbered more than 30,000 at the movement's height. Rather than attributing this expansion solely to religious tolerance or gender equality, the study argues that it resulted from the interaction of institutional, economic, social, familial, doctrinal, and moral factors. Quanzhen affiliation offered women protection from taxation and corvée labour, access to temple-based resources, and refuge amid warfare, widowhood, displacement, and the collapse of local social order. Female convents also functioned as spaces of welfare and social reconstruction, while elite women's ordination strengthened alliances among powerful families, Quanzhen institutions, and Mongol authorities. At the doctrinal level, Quanzhen teachings on purity, tranquillity, yin–yang balance, equality, and inner alchemy legitimized women's independent cultivation. Influential figures such as Sun Bu'er further enhanced female religious authority. However, this expansion did not amount to full gender equality, because female Daoist identity remained closely aligned with Confucian ideals of widow chastity, celibacy, and ascetic discipline. The phenomenon therefore reveals a complex relationship among women, religion, survival, and power.

Keywords: Quanzhen Daoism, Daoist epigraphy, temple space, female Daoists, Jin–Yuan North China

1. Introduction

At the turn of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, northern China experienced prolonged warfare, population displacement, and profound social transformation. Following the Jingkang Incident of 1127 and the Song court's retreat to the south, China entered a period of confrontation among the Jin, Song, and later Mongol regimes. Recurrent wars, social instability, ethnic tensions, and the burdens of taxation and corvée labour caused severe devastation in North China. Yet it was precisely within this turbulent environment that new Daoist movements developed rapidly, responding to widespread spiritual anxiety and the need for social protection and salvation.

During the Jin dynasty, several new Daoist traditions emerged in northern China, including Taiyi Daoism founded by Xiao Baozhen, Dadao Daoism founded by Liu Deren, and Quanzhen Daoism founded by Wang Chongyang. In the south under the Southern Song, movements such as Jingming Daoism, the Southern

Lineage of Inner Alchemy, and the Qingwei school also appeared. After the Mongol conquest and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty, relatively tolerant religious policies further promoted the integration and expansion of Daoism, eventually producing the configuration commonly described as "Quanzhen in the north and Zhengyi in the south".

Among these movements, the rise of Quanzhen Daoism was particularly significant. Founded by Wang Chongyang in the Jin dynasty, Quanzhen initially emphasized personal cultivation, purity and tranquillity, and ascetic practice. After Wang Chongyang propagated his teachings in Shandong, his seven disciples—Ma Danyang, Tan Chuduan, Liu Chuxuan, Qiu Chuji, Wang Chuyi, Hao Datong, and Sun Bu'er—became known as the "Seven Masters of Quanzhen". According to *The Record of the Immortal Origins of Ganshui* ("甘水仙源录") [1], Wang Chongyang received authentic teachings in the fourth year of the Zhenglong reign and later travelled to Shandong in the seventh year of the Dading reign to spread his teachings. During the leadership of Qiu Chuji, Quanzhen reached a major turning point. His journey westward to meet Genghis Khan brought recognition and political support from Mongol rulers, allowing Quanzhen Daoism to expand rapidly during the Yuan dynasty and become the dominant Daoist movement in northern China.

One of the most notable features of this expansion was the resurgence of female Daoists. The term *nüguan* refers to women who practised Daoism and were also known as *kundao*. Unlike the Confucian ritual order, in which the *guan* (冠, cap) symbolized male social status and was generally restricted to men, Daoism's veneration of female immortals and emphasis on the complementarity of yin and yang allowed female practitioners to adopt Daoist religious identities beyond conventional gender restrictions.

The historical presence of female Daoists was not a late development. Early references can be traced to the expression "the hairpin of the phoenix crown" (*fengguan zhi chai*) in *Wang Jia's Record of Gleanings* ("拾遗记") [2]. During the Tang dynasty, the term *nüguan* gradually became established as a specific designation for female Daoist practitioners. Although early Daoist texts sometimes used the character *guan* (官, official), the institutional differentiation between female court officials and female religious practitioners eventually led *guan* (冠, cap) to become the standard designation for female Daoists [3].

Women had already participated in Daoist religious communities during the early period of Celestial Masters Daoism. *The Code of the Celestial Masters of the Zhengyi Covenant* ("正一法文天师教戒科经") states that "men and women shall sit separately", indicating that women were incorporated into early Daoist communities and participated in religious practices [4]. During the Tang dynasty, Daoism received strong imperial patronage, and female Daoists experienced an important period of development. The participation of imperial princesses in Daoist institutions and the emergence of female Daoist poets such as Li Ye and Yu Xuanji demonstrate their active presence in religious and literary life. However, from the Song dynasty onward, changes in state regulation, Daoist institutions, and social conditions contributed to a decline in the visibility of female Daoists.

During the Jin–Yuan period, female Daoist communities experienced a renewed flourishing within Quanzhen Daoism. According to statistical studies of epigraphic materials, female Daoists constituted approximately 32 per cent of Quanzhen adherents during the Jin and Yuan dynasties, and their total number may have exceeded 30,000. Compared with other northern Daoist movements of the same period, such as Dadao Daoism and Taiyi Daoism, Quanzhen was particularly successful in attracting and incorporating women. Figures such as Sun Bu'er, one of the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, as well as Aodun Hongdao (Aodun Miaoshan, later known as Aodun Hongdao) and Wole Shoujian, demonstrate the close relationship between female Daoists and Quanzhen institutions.

Existing scholarship has extensively examined the development of Daoism during the Jin and Yuan dynasties, including the founding of Quanzhen Daoism, Qiu Chuji's political activities, the expansion of

Quanzhen monasteries, and Yuan religious policies. However, female Daoists as an independent historical group have received comparatively limited attention. Previous studies have mainly focused on the inner alchemical thought of individual figures such as Sun Bu'er or discussed women in Daoism from a broader perspective. A systematic analysis of why large numbers of Quanzhen female Daoists emerged during the Jin–Yuan period, how their identities were socially accepted, and what institutional and social mechanisms supported their development remains insufficient.

This article therefore investigates the historical causes behind the flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period. It asks whether their rise should primarily be understood as a consequence of the egalitarian elements commonly identified in Quanzhen teaching, or whether it was also shaped by women's practical strategies for survival, including seeking religious protection, avoiding taxation and corvée obligations, and obtaining institutional support amid wartime disruption. Furthermore, it examines whether this phenomenon represented an expansion of women's religious agency or resulted from the interaction among Quanzhen's organizational development, local social reconstruction, and elite family strategies.

Drawing upon statistical analysis of Jin and Yuan epigraphic materials and Daoist texts, this article first establishes the historical significance of the resurgence of female Daoists by comparing their development from the Tang to the Yuan periods. It then analyzes the phenomenon through multiple dimensions, including Daoist doctrine and cultivation systems, religious institutions and social structures, women's survival strategies, and theories of female inner alchemy. It argues that the flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period was not merely the result of internal religious transformation, but a historical outcome produced through the interaction of warfare, institutional change, local social reconstruction, elite family politics, and women's own religious practices.

2. Statistics on the number of female daoists during the Tang, Song, Jin, and Yuan dynasties

From the Tang dynasty to the Jin–Yuan period, the development of female Daoists showed clear fluctuations across different historical stages. Since this article aims to investigate the reasons for the flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period, it is first necessary to explain how Quanzhen female Daoists demonstrated a state of "flourishing" in comparison with female Daoists of earlier dynasties. This question may be inferred by comparing the numbers and relevant records of female Daoists during the Tang, Song, and Jin–Yuan periods.

It should be noted that, because of limitations in the preservation of historical sources and differences in statistical criteria, it is difficult to calculate precisely the number of female Daoists in each period. This article therefore provides only a rough estimate based on official records, epigraphic materials, and extant documentary sources. Rural Daoist practitioners who entered the Daoist tradition without undergoing officially prescribed legal procedures are not included within the scope of these statistics.

The Tang dynasty marked the first peak in the development of female Daoists. The rulers of the Tang dynasty revered Daoism, and the numbers of Daoist monasteries and Daoist clerics increased significantly. Du Guangting's *Record of Revering the Dao through the Ages* ("历代崇道记") records: "I have now examined the records from the beginning of the dynasty onward. More than 1,900 Daoist monasteries and temples were constructed, and approximately 15,000 Daoist clerics were ordained. The monasteries established through the donation of residences or estates by imperial princes and princesses, high-ranking officials, and commoners are not included in these figures" [1].

The entry on the Chongxuan Office in the *"Treatise on the Bureaucracy"* of the *New Book of Tang* ("新唐书") also records: "Throughout the empire, there were 1,687 Daoist monasteries, 776 male Daoist clerics, and 988 female Daoist clerics" [5]. Although the record that female Daoists outnumbered their male counterparts may have involved some exaggeration, it nevertheless reflects the considerable size of the female Daoist clerical community during the Tang dynasty.

The *"Biographies of Imperial Princesses"* in the *New Book of Tang* further records that thirteen women of the imperial family, including Princess Taiping, Princess Yuzhen, Princess Jinxian, and Princess Wan'an, entered the Daoist order. For example, it states: "Princess Taiping ... later requested permission to become a Daoist cleric ... Princess Jinxian ... and Princess Yuzhen both became Daoist clerics ... Princess Ankang became a Daoist cleric" [5]. In addition, the *Extensive Records of the Taiping Era* ("太平广记") contains accounts of female Daoists such as Bian Dongxuan and Qi Xuanfu [6].

Overall, female Daoists during the Tang dynasty came from a wide range of social groups, including imperial princesses, aristocratic women, palace women, common women, and even courtesans. The abundance of relevant materials and the large number of recorded individuals demonstrate the high level of activity of the female Daoist clerical community.

During the Song dynasty, female Daoists clearly entered a period of decline. In the early Northern Song, the rulers did not vigorously promote any particular religion. By the reign of Emperor Zhenzong of the Song, however, Daoism was promoted through activities such as the performance of the fengshan sacrifices and the reception of the Heavenly Texts, and consequently experienced a period of development. By the reign of Emperor Shenzong of the Song, the state strengthened its regulation of both Buddhism and Daoism. Religious communities were suppressed, some Buddhist and Daoist clerics were required to return to secular life, and their numbers declined.

During the Southern Song, although social upheaval and the development of Daoism in southern China contributed to the emergence of several new Daoist movements, female Daoists did not become a major focus of Daoist development, and relevant records in official documents were relatively scarce. Compared with the Tang dynasty, female Daoists during the Song dynasty showed a declining tendency in both their numbers and social influence.

By the Jin–Yuan period, the development of female Daoists underwent another turning point. Although Daoism developed in southern China under the rule of the Southern Song, records concerning female Daoists remained relatively scarce. By contrast, female Daoists within Quanzhen Daoism in northern China during the Jin and Yuan dynasties showed a clear tendency toward flourishing. In the section on Quanzhen Daoism in his *A Study of the New Daoist Movements in Hebei during the Early Southern Song* ("南宋初河北新道教考"), Chen Yuan observed: "When I previously read the collected writings of Quanzhen authors in the Daoist Canon, I frequently encountered poems and lyrics exchanged with such-and-such female Daoist masters. ... From this, one may understand the flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoist clerics. Those recorded in written sources were already so numerous; as for those who did not appear in written records, how could they have numbered only 3,070 [7]?" This demonstrates the considerable number of female Daoists within Quanzhen Daoism.

Because the officially compiled histories of the Jin–Yuan period provide no clear statistics on the total number of female Daoists, while internal Daoist texts such as the *Record of the Orthodox Lineage of the Golden Lotus* ("金莲正宗记") and the *Record of the Immortal Origins of Ganshui* primarily centre their narratives on male Daoist clerics, the number of female Daoists during this period can only be inferred indirectly from the writings of figures within the Daoist community, accounts by literati, and epigraphic materials. Yuan Haowen's *Record of the Qingzhen Abbey in Huaizhou* ("怀州清真观记") states: "At present,

those who wear the yellow cap constitute two-tenths of all under Heaven" [8]. The *Stele of the Jizhen Abbey* ("集真观碑"), included in the *Concise Collection of Daoist Epigraphy* ("道家金石略"), likewise records: "At present, the followers of Laozi, both men and women, number 300,000. Among them, the talented and the untalented differ in countless ways" [8]. In addition, according to the *Gazetteer of Hanoi County* ("河内县志"), included in the *New Collection of Quanzhen Daoist Stone Inscriptions from the Jin and Yuan Dynasties* ("金元全真教石刻新编"): "During the Yuan dynasty, those who wore the yellow cap were at their most flourishing, with Buddhism ranking second. Moreover, female Daoist clerics appeared among them in great numbers, intensifying the original situation to an even greater degree" [9].

Although these materials cannot provide precise figures, they are sufficient to demonstrate that the scale of the community of Quanzhen female Daoists expanded significantly during the Jin–Yuan period. The following discussion takes relevant inscriptions collected in the *Concise Collection of Daoist Epigraphy* and the *New Collection of Quanzhen Daoist Stone Inscriptions from the Jin and Yuan Dynasties* as its sample [8, 9], while also drawing in part on Peng Fen's statistical results, to provide a further estimate of the number of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin and Yuan dynasties. The results are presented in the following Table 1:

Table 1. Statistics on the number of female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period

Name of Inscription	Total Number of Names Inscribed	Number of Female Daoists Named	Proportion of Female Daoists
<i>Stele Commemorating the Restoration of the TianqingYanshou Palace</i> ("重修天庆延寿宫碑")	73	15	21%
<i>Stele Recording the Disciples of Perfected Qiuyan</i> ("栖元真人门众碑")	221	91	41%
<i>Stele on the Founding of the Huixian Abbey</i> ("会仙观起本碑")	25	10	40%
<i>Record of the Names of the Zhenyuan Association at the Great Chongyang Wanshou Palace on Mount Zhongnan</i> ("终南山大重阳万寿宫真元会题名记")	140	35	25%
<i>Inscribed Names of the Zhenyuan Association</i> ("真元题名")	117	34	29%
<i>Inscription on the Reverse of the Stele Recording the Yuqing Wanshou Palace</i> ("玉清万寿宫记碑阴")	30	13	43%
<i>Stele Commemorating the Restoration of the Baiyun Abbey</i> ("重修白云观碑")	83	26	31%
<i>Imperial Edict Stele at the Yongle Palace</i> ("永乐宫圣旨碑")	62	19	31%
Total	751	243	32%

From the statistical data presented in the Table 1, it may be roughly estimated that female Daoists accounted for approximately 32% of the total number of Daoist clerics within Quanzhen Daoism during the Jin–Yuan period. Cheng Yue estimates, on the basis of the number of Quanzhen monasteries and temples, that the total number of Daoist clerics within Quanzhen Daoism reached approximately 100,000 at the height of its prosperity [7]. Combining this estimate with the proportion of female Daoists calculated above, it may be roughly inferred that the number of female Daoists during this period may have reached as many as 30,000.

Certainly, the proportion of female Daoists whose names were recorded in inscriptions does not necessarily represent the proportion of female Daoists within the Daoist community as a whole. Therefore, this figure can serve only as a reference. Overall, however, compared with the decline of female Daoists during the Song dynasty, when their number was fewer than 10,000, female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period clearly entered another stage of flourishing.

3. An analysis of the reasons for the flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists

As important members of the Daoist community, female Daoists experienced a process of development from flourishing during the Tang dynasty to decline during the Song dynasty, before becoming active again with the rise of Quanzhen Daoism during the Jin–Yuan period. Traditional explanations have generally approached this phenomenon from such perspectives as religious policies, doctrinal equality, the cultivation of female inner alchemy, and the exemplary influence of outstanding female Daoists. These factors were certainly important. However, when this phenomenon is examined within the historical context of the dramatic social changes in North China at the turn of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, it becomes evident that the flourishing of female Daoists was not merely the result of internal religious development, nor was it entirely an expression of women's conscious pursuit of spiritual freedom. Rather, it was closely related to postwar social reconstruction, pressures arising from the fiscal and taxation system, the vacuum in local social order, the operations of elite families, and transformations in the discourse of ritual and moral norms. In other words, the flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period was shaped by the combined effects of multiple factors involving religion, institutions, the economy, family structures, and the gender order.

3.1. The institutional and economic dimension

The large-scale emergence of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period was, first of all, closely related to the severe institutional and economic conditions of the time. Existing scholarship commonly characterizes the preferential treatment granted by the rulers to religious personnel as "policy support". According to this interpretation, privileges enjoyed by male and female Daoists, including exemptions from taxation and corvée obligations and grants of land, attracted women to enter the Daoist order. However, when examined further from the perspective of institutional economics, such "policy privileges" should not be understood merely as benefits bestowed by the state. Under the highly coercive fiscal and taxation environment of North China at the turn of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, entering the religious order also constituted a rational strategy through which ordinary people, especially women, sought to avoid risks and preserve resources.

At the turn of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, North China experienced prolonged devastation caused by warfare, which severely disrupted the existing prefectural and county administrative system as well as the system for collecting taxes and corvée obligations. During the early Mongol period, local governance did not immediately establish a stable and standardized civil administrative system based on prefectures and counties. Instead, taxation and exactions were often imposed through multiple centres of authority, including appanage holders (*touxian*), hereditary military lords rewarded for their service, and tax farmers. Successive subcontracting and repeated exactions placed heavy fiscal and corvée burdens upon ordinary registered households. Household registration was also strictly controlled. Ordinary households found it difficult to withdraw legally from the registration system and even more difficult to escape military service, corvée labour, and various miscellaneous levies. Against this background, affiliation with a religious organization

capable of providing political protection became an important means by which some people sought to escape the oppressive burdens of taxation and corvée service.

It was within this institutional environment that Quanzhen Daoism acquired a distinctive position. After Qiu Chuji's audience with Genghis Khan, Quanzhen Daoism received recognition and preferential treatment from the Mongol rulers. In a related edict, Genghis Khan stated: "The monasteries and residences belonging to Immortal Qiu for the practice of cultivation are places where people recite scriptures daily and make supplications to Heaven". A subsequent record states: "In the *jiawu* (甲午) year, Daoist clerics throughout the realm were exempted from taxation" [3]. This policy was of crucial significance to the development of Quanzhen Daoism. It not only distinguished Quanzhen Daoist clerics from ordinary registered households in terms of their legal and fiscal status, but also provided a certain sphere of protection for the adherents, religious establishments, and landed property affiliated with Quanzhen monasteries and temples.

Therefore, for women at the turn of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, entering the Daoist order and becoming a female Daoist did not merely mean accepting a particular religious faith; it could also mean acquiring a quasi-deregistered and quasi-protected status. By entering the Daoist order, becoming a disciple, registering nominally with a Daoist monastery or temple, or residing in a Daoist convent, women could, to a certain extent, detach themselves from the status of ordinary registered households and avoid heavy taxation and corvée obligations. Particularly in a society marked by frequent warfare and inadequate protection of private property, the nominal ownership of property by Daoist monasteries and temples could also help some women preserve the basic resources necessary for their livelihood. As early as the Tang dynasty, there was an institutional provision stating that "each male Daoist cleric shall be granted thirty *mu* (畝) of land, and each female Daoist cleric twenty *mu*" [10]. This indicates that the religious identity of female Daoists had long been connected with land, property, and institutional protection. The "*Treatise on Food and Money*" in the *History of the Jin* also records: "... seized official lands or fallow, idle, and pasture lands, ... as well as lands in Daxing Prefecture and Pingzhou Circuit belonging to monks, nuns, Taoist priests, and female Taoist priests, were granted to households relocated to the Meng'an and Mouke units; furthermore, the people were required to participate in archery competitions, and the government collected the corresponding rent" [11].

Although this material concerns the state's redistribution of land belonging to Buddhist monks and nuns and male and female Daoists, it also indirectly demonstrates that female Daoists possessed land resources that were formally recognized by the state.

From this perspective, the identity of a female Daoist was itself a form of institutional economic status. In traditional society, ordinary women often found it difficult to own and dispose of property independently. Widows, in particular, faced a difficult position amid restrictions concerning inheritance of family property, control by their husbands' families, and remarriage. During the Yuan dynasty, the moral expectation that widows should preserve their chastity gradually intensified. If a widow remarried, she often faced complicated restrictions concerning her dowry property, the property of her deceased husband's family, and the inheritance rights of her children. Under such circumstances, entering the Daoist order and becoming a female Daoist could instead serve as a strategy for preserving a space of economic subsistence. For women who had lost their husbands, had no sons, or had lost the protection of their families, becoming a female Daoist could prevent complete dependence upon either their husbands' families or their natal families. It could also provide basic material security through Daoist monasteries, temples, and convents.

It can therefore be seen that the decision of a considerable number of women to enter the Daoist order did not necessarily arise from purely religious enthusiasm, but may instead have constituted a livelihood-driven form of "religious survival". In a certain sense, convents for female Daoists performed the functions of postwar social welfare institutions. They provided not only food, accommodation, and spiritual consolation,

but also the protection of an institutionally recognized identity. Zhang Fang has observed: "The ascetic doctrine of celibacy and rigorous cultivation followed by Quanzhen female Daoist clerics also corresponded to the moral expectations imposed upon chaste widows in Yuan society and therefore received extensive support from the upper strata of society" [12].

This observation indicates that the identity of female Daoists was socially accepted precisely because it simultaneously satisfied three types of need: economic survival, religious cultivation, and conformity with ritual and moral norms.

3.2. The dimension of local social

The second important reason for the flourishing of female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period was that the Quanzhen religious organization performed the function of a quasi-local organization in the postwar reconstruction of North China. The destruction caused by the Jin–Mongol wars was not limited to population loss and economic decline. More importantly, it resulted in the disintegration of the organizational system of local society. Prefectural and county administrations, local elites, lineage networks, and the social order of villages and communities were all affected to varying degrees. After the collapse of the original power structure, local society urgently required new organizational forces to undertake such functions as accommodating displaced people, stabilizing the population, reconstructing public life, and coordinating local resources.

It was against this background that Quanzhen Daoism expanded rapidly. It was not only a religious group, but also an important form of organizational infrastructure in postwar North China. The construction of Quanzhen monasteries and temples, the gathering of Daoist communities, the printing of Daoist scriptures, the performance of zhai and jiao rituals, and the organization of reburial activities all enabled Quanzhen Daoism to assume functions in local society that extended beyond religion itself. In particular, after Qiu Chuji received preferential treatment from the Mongol rulers, Quanzhen Daoism acquired political legitimacy and institutional resources, and its network of monasteries and temples expanded rapidly. By establishing monasteries, temples, and convents in different localities, Quanzhen Daoism effectively provided postwar society with new public spaces and nodes of social order.

In this process, the functions of convents for female Daoists were particularly prominent. Warfare produced large numbers of widows, orphaned girls, and displaced women. These women found it difficult to reintegrate into existing family structures and also lacked the ability to support themselves independently. Daoist monasteries and convents for female Daoists therefore became some of the principal spaces in which such women could be accommodated. The *Record of the Establishment of the Shenqing Convent* ("创建神清庵记") states: "It was established by Guo Shouwei, the Quanzhen female Daoist cleric known as the Recluse Miaozhen ... She then came amid warfare and social disorder to reside in this convent" [8]. This material clearly shows that the establishment of convents for female Daoists was directly related to the social background of "warfare and disorder".

The *Record of the Reconstruction of the Sacred Hall of the Xiuzhen Abbey* ("重建修真观圣堂记") further states: "The young woman of the Zhao family lost her husband and, in the fifth month of the jiashen year of the Zhengda reign, abandoned secular life and entered the religious order" [8]. The *Tomb Stele of Daoist Master Zuo, a Female Daoist Styled the Recluse Shouzheng Xuanjing* ("守真玄静散人女冠左炼师墓碑") likewise records: "During the military disorder in the region north of the Yellow River, she lost her husband and suffered bereavement ... Neither the noble nor the lowly had a secure place in which to live" [8]. Taken together, these materials demonstrate that warfare, widowhood, displacement, and the loss of social support were important practical reasons why large numbers of women entered the Daoist order.

Quanzhen Daoism was able to incorporate these women partly because it could reconcile religious discourse with family ethics. Traditional Confucian ethics emphasized women's responsibilities toward their parents, husbands, and families. Women who left their families to enter the religious order might therefore face accusations of being "unfilial" or of failing to observe proper female conduct. The Quanzhen Daoism, however, reinterpreted entry into the Daoist order as a higher form of ethical practice through such discourses as "repaying kindness", filial piety, cultivation toward perfection, and the performance of rituals for the salvation of the deceased. Women's entry into the Daoist order did not necessarily mean abandoning their families. Instead, they could continue to fulfil their ethical responsibilities by reciting scriptures, engaging in religious cultivation, performing rituals for deceased relatives, and repaying the kindness owed to their parents. In this way, the identity of female Daoists acquired a certain degree of legitimacy between religious cultivation and family ethics.

From the perspective of local social history, the flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists did not result simply from the attraction of the idea of "equality between men and women". Rather, the network of Quanzhen monasteries, temples, and convents incorporated women through its physical spaces and organizational structures. The greater the number of monasteries, temples, and convents, the more women they could accommodate; and the more fragmented local society became, the stronger women's demand for spaces of religious protection grew. In postwar North China, the Quanzhen religious organization assumed, to a certain extent, the role of a "contractor of social reconstruction", while the community of female Daoists formed an inseparable part of this system.

3.3. The dimension of family politics

In addition to lower-class women who entered the Daoist order because of warfare, corvée burdens, and pressures upon their livelihoods, the entry of upper-class women into the Daoist order during the Jin–Yuan period also deserves reinterpretation. Existing studies have already noted cases involving upper-class women such as Yuan Yan and Aodun Miaoshan. However, it remains insufficient to explain their entry into the Daoist order solely in terms of personal faith, family custom, or social esteem for Daoism. In fact, within the political structure at the turn of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, the entry of elite women into the Daoist order often carried a stronger significance in terms of family politics. These women were not only religious practitioners, but also important links through which their families established connections with the Quanzhen religious organization, local authorities, and even the Mongol regime. Women's entry into the Daoist order became an important means by which elite families made political investments, formed social alliances, and accumulated religious capital. The increase in the number of female Daoists among the upper strata of society was therefore not merely the result of an expansion of personal religious belief, but also the product of institutionalized cooperation among families, religious organizations, and political authorities.

At the turn of the Jin and Yuan dynasties, local power in North China was jointly constituted by hereditary military lords rewarded for their service, local strongmen, officials who had submitted to the Mongols, and religious organizations. To expand at the local level, Quanzhen Daoism required donations, land, political protection, and social recognition from local elites. Elite families, in turn, needed the religious prestige and social networks of Quanzhen Daoism, as well as the privileges of exemption from taxation and corvée labour recognized by the Mongol court, in order to consolidate their own positions. Within this mutually beneficial structure, the entry of women from elite families into the Daoist order became an effective means of forming alliances.

The *Stele Recording the Religious Career of the Female Daoist Master Lady Aodun* ("女炼师奥敦君道行碑") records: "The master's surname was Aodun, and she was a native of Sushen. Her original personal name

was Miaoshan, which was later changed to Hongdao. Her late father, whose personal name is withheld, had held the titles of Grand General Who Cherishes the Distant and Circuit Inspector of Ninghai. In the jiazi year, the fourth year of the Taihe reign, the entire family put on Daoist robes" [8].

Aodun Miaoshan came from a Jurchen aristocratic or military-official family. Her entry into the Daoist order was not an isolated personal act, but was connected with the fact that "the entire family put on Daoist robes". This indicates that entry into the Daoist order here represented a collective family choice. It was both an act of religious affiliation and a means of transforming family identity and allocating political resources.

Similarly, Yuan Haowen maintained close relations with members of Quanzhen Daoism. His *Collected Works of Yishan* ("遗山集") [8] contains numerous poems and writings presented to Daoist clerics, including *Seeking an Ancient Bronze Wine Vessel from a Daoist of the Divine Empyrean Tradition* ("觅神霄道士古铜爵"), *Painting of Daoist Li Retiring to Seclusion at Mount Song* ("李道人崧阳归隐图"), *Presented to the Daoist Immortal Wang Daocheng* ("赠王仙翁道成"), and *Presented to Daoist Master Zhang, Who Abstains from Grain* ("赠休粮张练师"). His daughter, Yuan Yan, entered the religious order and became a Quanzhen female Daoist after the death of her husband. This phenomenon should not be understood merely as a spiritual choice made in response to personal tragedy. For a literati family, a woman's entry into the Daoist order could both respond to the ethical expectation of widow chastity and establish a connection with the increasingly influential Quanzhen Daoism, thereby maintaining the family's cultural capital and network of social relations.

From the perspective of family politics, female Daoists were not merely "vulnerable women who were rescued"; they could also become instruments through which elite families mobilized social capital. Female Daoists of relatively high status, in particular, could often become religious patrons, heads of monasteries or convents, and coordinators of the resources of the religious organization. Quanzhen Daoism needed these women and their families to provide landed property, financial resources, and political endorsement. These women and their families, in turn, needed Quanzhen Daoism to provide religious prestige, social reputation, and institutional protection. A triangular relationship of reciprocal benefit thus developed among elite families, the Quanzhen religious organization, and Mongol political authority.

This relationship was even more clearly manifested among female Daoists connected with the imperial court. The *Stele Recording the Religious Career of the Female Daoist Master Lady Aodun* states that Aodun Miaoshan "earned a reputation among the nobility and those close to the throne through her sincerity, and was granted access to the inner palace for imperial audiences; the empress and other members of the court all summoned her on various occasions" [8]. The *Stele of the Burial Chamber of Perfected Lady Huang, DuanjingChongcui Tongmiao* ("端静冲粹通妙真人黄君寿藏碑") records: "In the seventeenth year of the Zhiyuan reign, Emperor Shizu issued an edict summoning the female Daoist Master Lady Shao from Linchuan. Empress Zhaorui Shunsheng was pleased by her teachings and retained her within the inner palace to preside over the private imperial shrine" [8].

The *Epitaph of Qian Shandao, Female Daoist and Master Shousu* ("守素大师女冠钱善道墓志铭") likewise records that Qian Shandao, "in compliance with the gracious decree of Empress Ruisheng, was ordered to reside in the Zhaoying Palace, was ordained as a female Daoist cleric, and was bestowed with a purple robe. Morning and evening, she recited scriptures and prayed for the longevity of the emperor, regarding the repayment of the favour she had received as her principal duty" [8].

These materials demonstrate that, within the imperial court and upper-class society, female Daoists not only performed religious functions such as praying for blessings, reciting scriptures, and presiding over private imperial rites, but also participated in the construction of relationships among imperial women, aristocratic women, and Quanzhen Daoism.

3.4. The dimension of doctrine

Certainly, an explanation of the flourishing of female Daoists solely in terms of institutions, the economy, and family politics would overlook the religious appeal of Quanzhen Daoism itself. As a newly emerging Daoist movement in northern China during the Jin dynasty, the doctrines and methods of cultivation of Quanzhen Daoism did provide relatively strong legitimacy for women's entry into the Daoist order. Compared with certain Daoist traditions that depended more heavily on hereditary transmission within families, the conferral of registers and ritual methods, or male-dominated religious networks, Quanzhen Daoism placed greater emphasis on leaving the household, pure and quiet cultivation, ascetic practice, inner alchemy, and the cultivation of mind and inner nature. This made it relatively easier for women to enter the religious system as individual practitioners.

From the early period of its establishment, Quanzhen Daoism attached importance to accepting and incorporating female adherents. Two important female adherents of early Quanzhen were Zhou Deqing, the mother of Wang Chuyi, and Sun Bu'er. Wang Chuyi once composed a poem concerning his mother's entry into the Daoist order: "Mother and son cultivate perfection and leave the household together, taking conformity with Heaven and emulation of the Dao as their way of life. Wherever they seek alms, divine powers offer assistance; as they repeatedly exhort others to practise goodness, blessings and longevity increase. Worldly attachments and emotional ties are no longer discussed, while the Dao and virtue of the Mysterious Gate remain forever unharmed. The inner numinous spirit ascends and transforms, entering the true realm; when their cultivation is completed in future, they will be praised upon the Isles of the Immortals" [13].

Rather than regarding his mother's departure from the household as a violation of family ethics, the poem takes pride in the fact that "mother and son cultivate perfection and leave the household together". This demonstrates that Quanzhen Daoism could reinterpret kinship relations through the practice of religious cultivation.

Sun Bu'er was originally Ma Danyang's wife in secular life and later entered the Daoist order after receiving instruction from Wang Chongyang. In *Refining Cinnabar Sand* ("炼丹砂"), Ma Danyang wrote: "I respectfully inform Lady Fuchun: do not follow me. Now you are no longer wife, nor am I husband. Each of us should independently complete the cultivation of our true countenance and escape the Three Evil Paths" [1].

The expression "you are no longer wife, nor am I husband" is particularly significant. It indicates that, after entry into the Daoist order, the former marital relationship was replaced by a relationship based on religious cultivation. The woman was no longer merely the wife of a man, but became an independent practitioner capable of "independently completing the cultivation of her true countenance". Ma Danyang also composed works encouraging women to enter the Daoist order, including *To Lady Wang of Chang'an* ("寄长安王姑"), *Playing with Cinnabar Sand: Presented to Lady Ma* ("玩丹砂·赠马姑姑"), and *Fragrance Filling the Courtyard: Presented to Lady Li of Xiaohu Village* ("满庭芳·赠小胡村李姑"). These works demonstrate that the early leaders of Quanzhen Daoism actively propagated their teachings among women.

Chen Yuan also observed in *A Study of the New Daoist Movements in Hebei* during the Early Southern Song: "Liu Changsheng's *Collection of Immortal Music* ("仙乐集") mentions Lady Ma; Tan Changzhen's *Collection of Water and Clouds* ("水云集") mentions Lady Yang and Third Lady Wang; Qiu Changchun's *Collection of Panxi* ("磻溪集") mentions Lady Tangkuo of Weiyang and Lady Zhan of Bozhou; Wang Yuyang's *Collection of Cloudlike Radiance* ("云光集") mentions Lady Xiaogong of Xufudian, Lady Liu of Fushan, Lady Jiang, Lady Sui, Lady Gao of Laiyang, and Lady Zhang of Dizhou. Ma Danyang's *Collection of Gold and Jade: Divine Radiance Shining Forth* ("金玉集·神光灿") contains an especially large number, including Lady Liang of Yaozhou, Lady Liu of E County, Lady Wang of Chang'an, the two female Daoists of

Jingyang County, Lady Xue, the Recluse of Songxi, Lady Yan, the Recluse of Shuangxi, Lady Wang, the Recluse of Auspiciousness, and Lady Wei, the Recluse of Penetrating Illumination. Such examples are too numerous to enumerate" [7].

This record shows that female adherents occupied a considerable position within the early transmission network of Quanzhen Daoism and were not merely a marginal or accidental phenomenon.

At the intellectual level, Quanzhen Daoism inherited the Daoist tradition of "valuing yin". Chapter 42 of *The Tao-te Ching* ("道德经") states: "The myriad things carry yin on their backs and embrace yang; through the blending of vital energies, they achieve harmony" [14]. Chapter 6 further states: "The valley spirit never dies; it is called the mysterious female. The gateway of the mysterious female is called the root of Heaven and Earth" [14]. These ideas provided a certain ontological legitimacy for women's Daoist cultivation.

Quanzhen Daoism also emphasized equality, purity and tranquillity, and the elimination of deceit and arrogance. It declared that "equality is the origin of the Dao and virtue and the foremost principle of purity and tranquillity" [1]. Another passage states: "Reduce deceit and arrogance, reduce deceit and arrogance; regardless of whether people are high or low, regard them all equally" [1]. Although these doctrines cannot necessarily be equated completely with gender equality in the modern sense, they at least provided intellectual resources that enabled female adherents to enter religious life and participate in practices of cultivation.

Therefore, the doctrinal causes of the flourishing of female Daoists should not be overlooked. The relatively open approach of Quanzhen Daoism to cultivation, its active incorporation of female adherents, and its emphasis on the balance of yin and yang, equality, and purity and tranquillity collectively strengthened the legitimacy of women's entry into the Daoist order. It should nevertheless be noted that this religious legitimacy did not operate independently, but was intertwined with the corvée and taxation system, the condition of local social order, and family politics of the period.

3.5. The dimension of female Daoists themselves

The flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period was also closely related to the development of the female Daoist clerical community itself. Female Daoists were not merely passive recipients of protection from the religious organization. Some outstanding women gradually became religious elites with practical influence through religious cultivation, preaching, presiding over Daoist monasteries and temples, administering religious affairs, and participating in religious activities at the imperial court. Their presence not only enhanced the social prestige of the female Daoist clerical community, but also provided models for more women to enter the Daoist order.

Sun Bu'er was undoubtedly the most representative figure among them. As the only woman among the Seven Masters of Quanzhen, she not only occupied a respected position within Quanzhen Daoism, but also continuously received official honorific titles in later periods. During the reign of Emperor Shizu of the Yuan, Sun Bu'er was granted the title "*Perfected One of Purity and Tranquillity, Profound Authenticity, and Compliant Virtue*". During the reign of Emperor Wuzong of the Yuan, she was further honoured as "*Primordial Lady of Purity and Tranquillity, Profound Constancy, Mysterious Emptiness, and Compliant Transformation*". Her status demonstrates that women could attain relatively high religious authority within Quanzhen Daoism and could be incorporated into a sacred lineage officially recognized by the state.

In addition to Sun Bu'er, the Jin–Yuan period also witnessed the emergence of female Daoists of relatively high status, including Aodun Miaoshan, Wole Shoujian, Huang Juqing, and Perfected Lady Shao. The *Stele of the Burial Chamber of Perfected Lady Huang, Duanjing Chongcui Tongmiao* records that Huang Juqing was appointed "General Supervisor of Female Daoist Clerics throughout the Circuits of Jiangnan, Abbess of the Xuanyuan Wanshou Palace in Dadu, and Administrator of the Dongting Abbey in the Fuzhou Circuit and the

Qianming Abbey in the Changde Circuit" [8]. This indicates that some female Daoists could already undertake the administration of female Daoist communities across different regions and were not confined to individual cultivation. The *Stele Recording the Religious Career of the Female Daoist Master Lady Aodun* further records: "The female Daoist clerics Xue Shouyuan and Jiang Shouchi submitted a formal petition requesting that she preside over the affairs of the Dongxiao Palace in Haozhou" [8]. These materials demonstrate that female Daoists played practical roles in the administration of monasteries and temples and in the affairs of the religious organization.

In their cultivation practices, female Daoists also established religious authority through rigorous asceticism. Sun Bu'er became widely renowned after many years of secluded cultivation within a small enclosed cell. Aodun Miaoshan was likewise recorded as having "lived within an enclosed cell for more than ten years, accumulating the strength required to nourish perfection", and as having "eaten only one meal each day and refrained from allowing her side to touch the bed for several years; she thoroughly investigated the teachings concerning inner nature and life, and was truly one who had attained the Dao" [8]. These accounts constructed an image of female Daoists as celibate, ascetic, diligent, and accomplished practitioners, thereby presenting them as conforming to the Quanzhen values of pure cultivation, internal refinement, and strict observance of religious discipline.

More importantly, the development of theories of female inner alchemy during the Jin–Yuan period provided women's Daoist cultivation with a specialized theoretical foundation. Before the Jin dynasty, Daoist cultivation methods such as grain avoidance, visualization, and sexual techniques were generally practised by both men and women, while alchemical cultivation underwent a transformation from external alchemy to inner alchemy. After the establishment of Quanzhen Daoism, greater emphasis was placed on inner alchemy and the cultivation of mind and inner nature. Female inner alchemy, also known as the theory of the Female Golden Elixir, likewise developed during this period. The Female Golden Elixir designed stages of cultivation according to women's bodily experiences, particularly physiological phenomena such as menstruation. The female body was therefore no longer merely an auxiliary object within male cultivation, but became the foundation upon which women themselves could cultivate the Dao and attain perfection.

The Dharma Discourses of Sun Bu'er ("孙不二法语"), attributed to Sun Bu'er, is regarded as an important text on female inner alchemical cultivation. It includes the fourteen poems of *Stages of Cultivation for Women Practitioners* ("坤道功夫次第") and the seven poems of *Women's Practice of Inner Alchemy* ("女功内丹"), which discuss in a relatively systematic manner such stages of cultivation as refining the self, regulating the talismanic fire, and severing the Red Dragon. Chen Yingning spoke highly of this work, describing it as follows: "Its language is elegant and refined, and its meaning is profound and substantial; it represents a superior form of alchemical instruction" [15]. The significance of the theory of female inner alchemy lay not only in its provision of specific methods of cultivation, but also in its granting of independent legitimacy to women's Daoist practice. It demonstrated that women could cultivate independently in accordance with the distinctive characteristics of their own bodies, without depending upon men or relying upon dual cultivation between men and women to fulfil their religious aspirations.

The flourishing of female Daoists at the level of the community itself therefore involved two aspects. First, outstanding female Daoists produced an exemplary effect through their religious cultivation, official titles, administration of monasteries and temples, and activities at the imperial court. Second, the theory of female inner alchemy provided theoretical support for women's independent cultivation. Together, these two factors promoted the expansion of the female Daoist clerical community during the Jin–Yuan period.

3.6. The dimension of confucian moral norms

However, while emphasizing the egalitarian elements of Quanzhen doctrine and the progressive significance of female inner alchemical theory, it is also necessary to avoid excessively romanticizing the flourishing of female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period. Although certain ideas of equality existed within Quanzhen Daoism, and women did obtain more space for religious participation than ordinary women, this space did not mean that they had truly escaped the traditional gender order. On the contrary, the widespread acceptance of female Daoists in Jin–Yuan society was largely made possible by the compatibility between the Quanzhen ideal of celibate ascetic cultivation and the increasingly influential discourse of widow chastity at the time.

During the Jin–Yuan period, and particularly from the Yuan dynasty onward, moral expectations concerning female chastity, lifelong widowhood, and sexual abstinence gradually intensified. For women who had lost their husbands, entering the Daoist order could both avoid controversies surrounding remarriage and demonstrate chastity and virtue through pure cultivation, fasting, observance of religious precepts, and the recitation of scriptures. The Quanzhen ideals of purity and tranquillity, the reduction of desires, the severance of worldly attachments, and ascetic cultivation toward perfection provided chaste widows with a religious mode of expressing these moral qualities. In other words, women's entry into the Daoist order may, on the one hand, have expanded the range of choices available to them; on the other hand, it may also have become a means through which the Confucian moral order incorporated and regulated women.

Zhang Fang offers a relatively clear-sighted assessment of this issue. She points out that the restrictions imposed by the moral values of Yuan society meant that women's religious activities increasingly required female religious specialists. At the same time, the Quanzhen female Daoists' commitment to celibacy and rigorous ascetic cultivation corresponded to the moral expectations placed upon chaste widows in Yuan society and therefore received extensive support from the upper strata of society. Nevertheless, even within Quanzhen Daoism, which proclaimed the principle of equality, women found it difficult to attain genuine equality [12]. This argument reminds us that the flourishing of female Daoists was not merely the result of an enhancement of women's agency, but may also have been a product jointly shaped by the Confucian moral order and the religious order.

From this perspective, the identity of female Daoists possessed a dual character. On the one hand, it enabled women to move beyond ordinary familial roles and acquire a religious identity, social prestige, economic protection, and opportunities for spiritual pursuit. On the other hand, it required women to demonstrate their value through celibacy, ascetic cultivation, widow chastity, and purity and tranquillity. Women could become female Daoists, but doing so often required them to renounce marriage, bodily desires, and secular life. The social recognition they received did not arise because society genuinely acknowledged women's freedom, but because their image as religious practitioners conformed to the expectations of male-dominated society and the Confucian moral order regarding the "chaste woman".

The flourishing of female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period carries a bit of historical irony. Quanzhen Daoism appeared to provide women with a religious path beyond the family, yet this path was socially recognized precisely because it operated in conjunction with the ethics of widow chastity, ascetic norms, and the moral expectations of patriarchal society. The identity of a female Daoist was both a path of escape from the constraints of Confucian moral norms and a means of repositioning women within the Confucian moral order itself.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period cannot be attributed simply to "support from the rulers", "doctrinal equality", or "women's pursuit of freedom". More precisely, it was a comprehensive product of the dramatic transformation of the social structure of North China at the turn of the Jin and Yuan dynasties.

At the institutional and economic level, the identity of a female Daoist functioned as a survival strategy that enabled women to avoid taxation and corvée obligations, preserve property, and obtain protection from Daoist monasteries and temples. At the level of local society, the Quanzhen religious organization filled the vacuum in local social order left by warfare, while convents for female Daoists became important spaces for accommodating widows, orphaned girls, and displaced women. At the level of family politics, the entry of elite women into the Daoist order served as a means of forming alliances among elite families, the Quanzhen religious organization, and Mongol political authority. At the doctrinal level, the Quanzhen emphasis on pure cultivation, equality, the valuing of yin, and inner alchemy did provide legitimacy for women's Daoist cultivation. At the level of female Daoists themselves, outstanding figures such as Sun Bu'er, Aodun Miaoshan, and Wole Shoujian, together with the development of theories of female inner alchemy, increased the appeal of entering the Daoist order to women. From the perspective of the history of Confucian moral norms, however, the flourishing of female Daoists also operated in conjunction with the discourse of widow chastity and the ethics of sexual abstinence, and therefore did not mean that women had attained genuine and complete equality.

The flourishing of Quanzhen female Daoists during the Jin–Yuan period was therefore both the result of women's search for survival and spiritual stability in a time of upheaval and a historical phenomenon jointly shaped by the expansion of the Quanzhen religious organization, the reconstruction of local society, the political investment of elite families, and the reorganization of the Confucian moral order. Its significance lies not only in the increase in the number of female Daoists, but also in the complex and subtle relationships among women, religion, and power that it reveals within Jin–Yuan society.

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