

THE LOSS OF AUTONOMY UNDER TOP-LEVEL INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS: A STUDY ON THE BUDDHIST ECOSYSTEM IN KAIFENG CITY UNDER THE BUDDHIST MANAGEMENT POLICIES OF THE MING DYNASTY

LICHANG CHEN♦

Abstract: Drawing upon the *dharmic* legacy of previous generations, the Ming dynasty established management systems, such as the three-types-of-monk Buddhism policy and the administrative Taoist system. By focusing on Buddhism in Kaifeng city during this era, it becomes possible to delve into the specific implications of implementing these Buddhist management policies on Urban Buddhist temples. From a *dharmic* perspective, it becomes apparent that the implementation of religious management systems may veer significantly from the intended goals outlined during their formulation.

Keywords: *Ming Dynasty, Buddhism, Dharmic Heritage Management Policy, Kaifeng City, Yuan Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang.*

1. Introduction

Religion holds a prominent place in the anthropological realm and remains an integral component of civilized human society as a social phenomenon. Its influence can either foster social stability or potentially trigger significant social unrest. The birth of the Ming Dynasty, for instance, can be traced back to the peasant uprising that occurred at the end of the Yuan Dynasty. This revolt was notably shaped by the religion's pivotal role held by Zhu Yuanzhang, who, being a monk by birth, possessed insights beyond those of ordinary individuals. Recognizing religious

♦ Lichang Chen is from School of History, Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou 450053, China; School of History and Culture, Zhengzhou Normal University, Zhengzhou 450053, China. E-mail: larrychlch@163.com.

policy as a key tool for governance, Zhu Yuanzhang prioritized aligning religion with his regime through a well-structured, top-level system. Learning from the strengths and weaknesses of Yuan religious governance, he shaped the Ming Dynasty's religious management by adapting and refining institutional models from both the Song and Yuan Dynasties.

Zhu Yuanzhang initiated institutional reforms by inheriting and refining the Yuan Dynasty's Buddhist management system. Aiming to reduce the political influence of religious institutions, he replaced the Councils of Monk and Taoist Affairs with the Division of Buddhism Affairs and the Division of Taoist Affairs, led by sixth-rank officials under the Ministry of Rites. Drawing from the Song system, he established a hierarchical structure including prefecture, state and county-level departments to oversee religious communities. This comprehensive system ensured centralized control and effective governance of religious affairs throughout the Ming Dynasty.

Zhu Yuanzhang sought to regulate monastic activities by classifying monks into three categories—Zen, lecturing, and teaching—each with clearly defined roles. He also introduced the role of Administrative Taoists, who managed all temple-government interactions. This system aimed to purify religious life and reduce secular interference. However, it also restricted monks' and Taoists' mobility and contact with officials. Only "teaching monks," who performed public rituals, were permitted broader interaction. While intended to foster a focused spiritual life, these regulations unintentionally limited the connection between the religious and secular communities.

Zhu Yuanzhang limited Buddhist expansion by allowing only one major temple per region to control unregulated religious groups linked to past uprisings. However, this policy proved impractical, as many cities had multiple temples, leading to enforcement challenges and resource waste, reflecting its lack of foresight in early governance. In the 24th year of Hongwu's reign, Zhu Yuanzhang ordered monks to avoid public interaction and merged smaller temples. Though restrictions remained, the policy became more flexible, reflecting pragmatism. Under Zhu Di, temple regulations eased, yet limiting the number of temples

stayed a key principle in Ming Buddhist policy.

The top-level design of Ming Dynasty religious policy, shaped by historical experience and Zhu Yuanzhang’s early reforms, remained largely consistent despite later administrative changes. This study argues that evaluating the system’s effectiveness requires examining not only shifts in political leadership but also its practical outcomes at the grassroots level. Given Buddhism’s central role in ancient Chinese society, the paper focuses on how Ming Buddhist policies and *dharmic* heritage influenced local religious life. Specifically, it investigates the Buddhist ecology of Kaifeng City, analyzing how these top-level policies impacted grassroots development, while excluding other regions from the current scope.

2. Buddhist Management Policies

Zhu Yuanzhang implemented strict Buddhist policies through the *List of Monks and Religious Regulations*, defining monastic roles, privileges and restrictions. Monks were forbidden from wandering to collect alms, and collaboration with secular officials was severely punished. Unauthorized laypersons seeking food or shelter at monasteries were also penalized. While limited state funding supported Buddhist institutions, Zhu emphasized isolation of monks from secular life. This contributed to the decline of grassroots Buddhism and led to homogenized temple patronage across the empire.

2.1. Early Ming Religious Policies in Kaifeng

Post-Yuan war devastation and restrictive religious policies limited temple construction in Kaifeng. Many older temples lacked funding for repair. Some, like Gui’er Temple, were repurposed for military use. Though temples like Qingshou, Yongning and Daxiangguo were restored, others – such as Hui’an and Balou – remained in ruins.

Zhu Yuanzhang initially chose Kaifeng as capital before relocating to Beijing. He appointed his son Zhu Su as feudal overlord of Zhou, granting Kaifeng fief status. Restoration continued under Zhu Su, including temples such as Dawa, Mituo and Yuantong. However, due to restrictions on temple numbers

and the consolidation of monks, Buddhism in Kaifeng never regained the vibrancy it had during the Song Dynasty.

2.2. Role of Local Power: Feudal Lords and Temple Patronage

As Kaifeng's leading landlord and donor, Zhu Su's views on Buddhism shaped the city's religious landscape. His support for temple reconstruction offset state restrictions. His interactions with monks, especially the legendary encounter with a monk demonstrating miraculous powers (such as teleportation), elevated public and elite engagement with Buddhism. One legend recounts Lord Ding meeting a mysterious monk at the Temple of the Heavenly King. The monk's miraculous act of producing food seemingly out of nowhere impressed the Lord, prompting generous donations. This myth, while likely symbolic, reflects the feudal elite's growing religious patronage and the popular appeal of monastic charisma.

2.3. The Life and Legacy of Sheng'an (Gufeng)

Known both as Sheng'an and Gufeng, this monk was respected for moral discipline, scriptural mastery and temple restoration. He preached *Mahayana sutras*, revived temples and drew noble followers. After relocating to Youguo Temple, he became a spiritual authority in Kaifeng. His death was followed by the appearance of radiant five-colored relics, further cementing his status as an "Eminent Monk of the Way." Historical records credit Sheng'an with restoring over forty temples. While only a few are explicitly named—such as the Pagoda of Po and Temple of the Heavenly King—his role in reviving Kaifeng's Buddhist landscape was very significant.

2.4. Hui Jin and Buddhist Scholarship

Hui Jin, born in Shanxi during the Yuan Dynasty, lost his family young and chose monastic life. During the Hongwu reign, he became Sheng'an's disciple and studied the *Huayan* and *Vijnaptimātratā* (Consciousness-Only) teachings. His deep scholarship earned imperial recognition, and he was later summoned to Nanjing by Emperor Taizong to explain Buddhist doctrines. Sheng'an's mentorship of Hui Jin demonstrates his

scholarly depth and spiritual influence. Training monks of Hui Jin’s caliber shows Sheng’an’s *dharmic* role in shaping early Ming Buddhism. His legacy extended nationally through such disciples, suggesting he held quiet but significant influence in imperial Buddhist circles.

2.5. Sustained Patronage in Mid-Ming Period

Despite official restrictions, the Lords of Zhou continued supporting Buddhist temples into the mid-Ming period. General Zhu Anhe oversaw temple renovations, such as the Bell Tower of Youguo Temple and Guoxiang Temple. These acts reflect a pattern of elite patronage motivated by tradition and public expectation. Records indicate a sustained interest in maintaining ancestral religious institutions. For example, officials like Li Meng and Zhang Nian mobilized efforts to restore the Sutra Pavilion at the Temple of the Heavenly King, with support from the then Lord of Zhou. This suggests that preserving monastic heritage was not merely personal devotion but a matter of political symbolism, *dharmic* heritage and social prestige.

2.6. Privileged Status of Elite Buddhism

While state policies restricted temple construction for commoners, feudal lords enjoyed considerable religious freedom. Examples include the existence of the Baiyi Nunnery within the Lord of Zhou’s residence and dedicated preceptors’ rooms. The rhythm of scripture recitations and drumbeats reflected an elite-sponsored monastic culture that thrived under private protection. This selective patronage highlights a two-tier system in Ming religious and *dharmic* policy – rigid control over common religious practice and significant autonomy for aristocratic and imperial-affiliated Buddhist institutions. Consequently, while grassroots Buddhism declined, elite-sponsored temples flourished, maintaining prestige and influence.

Zhu Yuanzhang’s top-down religious policies aimed to control and purify Buddhism but inadvertently marginalized its popular foundations. However, elite figures like Zhu Su and monks like Sheng’an preserved Buddhist vitality in Kaifeng through personal patronage, scholarship and spiritual charisma.

This dual structure—state restriction and elite support—defined the Ming-era Buddhist ecosystem, particularly in historically significant urban centers like Kaifeng.

3. Homogenization of Temple Patronage and the Erosion of Buddhist Autonomy

The Buddhist monastic system in Kaifeng became increasingly dependent on elite landowners due to restrictive Ming policies. While fostering relationships with powerful patrons like the feudal overlords of Zhou, this dependency weakened the autonomy and vitality of Buddhist institutions. For example, at Youguo Temple, the ritual of ringing a 6,000-pound bronze bell for three days upon a prince's death symbolized elite ritual privilege. Moreover, Lords such as Zhu Su exercised profound influence through financial control, as evident in rituals at Youguo Temple and the construction of Guanyin Temple, which served exclusively as the incense courtyard of the Zhou mansion, inaccessible to the public.

3.1. Monasteries as Private Domains

Newly constructed or renovated temples, such as Zongsheng Nunnery, often functioned as private religious estates. Religious professionals were frequently reduced to roles of caretakers or servants, further blurring the sacred-secular divide. Despite central imperial attempts to restrict the expansion of such temples, feudal lords continued to exert influence, often in defiance of Zhu Yuanzhang's guidelines.

3.2. Selective Religious Endorsement and Sectarian Interests

While Zhou rulers supported various religions, only Buddhist temples came under their direct control in urban areas. These acts of patronage extended beyond traditional funding, with temples increasingly reflecting elite interests. Such involvement often conflicted with imperial mandates that discouraged resource-intensive religious expansion among commoners.

3.3. Gentry Participation and Symbolic Ownership

Not only aristocrats but urban gentry also took part in shaping the Buddhist landscape. Zhang Wuzhong's family nunnery in

Daxiangguo Temple—complete with a tree planted in his youth and a monk employed to guard it—epitomizes this symbolic ownership. These acts enabled personal commemoration under the guise of religious piety.

3.4. Sacred Spaces as Social Arenas

Temples like Shangfang Youguo became elite social spaces. Literati such as Li Mengyang used them for poetry, leisure and banquets—contravening imperial edicts that forbade non-religious entry into monasteries. Their privileged access reflected the growing divergence between state-regulated monastic ideals and elite behaviors.

3.5. Confucianization of Buddhism

Inscriptional records emphasize donor virtue and Confucian morality rather than Buddhist merit, aligning monastic identity with gentry ethics. As the ideology of “three teachings unity” gained traction, Buddhism was increasingly relegated to a secondary role, functioning as a cultural appendage within Confucian society.

3.6. Decline of Monastic Independence

During the Ming era, Buddhist monasteries in Kaifeng experienced a significant decline in autonomy, largely due to their increasing economic reliance on the gentry class. This dependence blurred the line between genuine patronage and assertive control, as financial contributions were frequently tied to expectations of influence and preferential treatment—such as exclusive access to temple spaces and rituals. Simultaneously, restrictive state policies curtailed the participation of commoners, leading to a diminished public role for monasteries and severing their connection with the broader community. As a result, temples gradually lost their *dharmic* appeal and spiritual authority, contributing to Buddhism’s waning influence in urban society.

4. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the top-level design of the system is grounded in historical experience and addresses one’s response to the current problem. Subsequent administration often sees

significant changes, but the religious management system established during the Ming dynasty largely follows the initial formulation put forth by Zhu Yuanzhang. This phenomenon underlines the fact that the rationality of the top-level system should not only assess changes in upper-level political ecology but also examine whether the system itself can achieve the expected results in grassroots governance practice. In other words, the so-called continuity also reveals a deeper *dharmic* concern: the true rationality of such a system lies not merely in its association with shifting political currents at the top, but in its ability to fulfill its moral and practical aims in grassroots governance, ensuring just and effective management of religious life.

The Ming dynasty's policy regarding Buddhist officialdom progressively made 'formal' urban Buddhism increasingly reliant on a small group of patrons. Under the religious policy implemented by the court, the funding of 'formal' Buddhist monasteries was to be controlled by the government. Furthermore, the Ming dynasty imposed repeated restrictions on the extent of land that monasteries were permitted to own, aside from limiting the access of monks to the general populace. Consequently, monasteries found it exceedingly challenging to achieve financial independence, given that the construction and renovation of these establishments required substantial funds. As a result, many urban monasteries had no choice but to seek support from local landowners and affluent individuals.

While some famous temples did enjoy protection, they often resembled flowers and plants within a greenhouse able to endure all seasons but lacking vitality. For instance, the Pagoda of Po, which served as a royal temple in the Song dynasty, relied heavily on contributions from citizens, with even landlords donating livestock and vinegar vendors contributing vinegar. In contrast, during the Ming dynasty, major repairs were solely funded by the feudal lord of Zhou State or a few wealthy landowners. The statues and bricks themselves were all gifts from the feudal lord of Zhou. As for those monasteries that did not receive patronage from the wealthy and remained relatively unknown, their chances of survival were often limited. This

decline in Buddhist space in Kaifeng during the mid-to-late Ming dynasty can be partly attributed to these circumstances. From a *dharmic* perspective, this shift from collective, community-rooted support to elite-driven patronage reflects a departure from the principle of shared moral responsibility (*lokasaṅgraha*) that sustains a just and vibrant society; when the *dharma* of community participation is supplanted by dependence on aristocratic benevolence, religious institutions may survive in form but falter in spirit, losing their rootedness in the lived experiences and ethical contributions of the broader public.

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