



BRILL

NAN NÜ 25 (2023) 3-16

NAN NÜ

男女

brill.com/nanu

Literati Encomia on Embroidered Buddhist Icons, c.700-900 CE

T.H. Barrett

School of Oriental and African Studies, London, United Kingdom

tb2@soas.ac.uk

Abstract

This study examines all the surviving examples of short prose pieces written in praise of embroidery depicting Buddhist objects of worship between circa 700 and 900. The process whereby they were transmitted to the present is traced wherever possible, and the main themes are indicated by means of the identification of recurrent vocabulary items. Typically, the embroideries described are said to have been created by women for the posthumous benefit of their family members, both male and female; the male writers involved, whose work was generally deemed to possess literary merit, were usually connected by family or other ties to the creators of the embroideries. One or two pieces that seem to be less typical are also discussed, though the restriction of the total size of the corpus to a score of pieces by a handful of writers makes the task of establishing the scope of the conventions observed difficult to determine. But as a genre in which men praised the cultural production of women these texts may merit further research.

Keywords

Tang dynasty embroidery – *Wenyuan yinghua* anthology – unseen world – karmic benefit – Buddhist images – women as embroiderers

Chinese Buddhist Embroidery

Embroidery, the practice of adding decoration to a textile or similar base with stitching produced usually with needle and thread, is an art dating back to antiquity, with surviving examples from China originating in the pre-imperial

Published with license by Koninklijke Brill NV | DOI:10.1163/15685268-02512016

© T.H. BARRETT, 2023 | ISSN: 1387-6805 (print) 1568-5268 (online)

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [CC BY 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Downloaded from Brill.com03/20/2023 03:01:01PM
via free access

era.¹ Needlework has predominantly been carried out by women rather than men, so that embroidery has at times served to document the history of women, for example in Britain from the early modern era.² As we shall see, in China during the two centuries that are considered below, men may perhaps have occasionally produced the type of embroidery that is the topic of our particular interest here as well as women, but for the most part the generalization that this was women's work in China as in the West holds good, and certainly as the tale of "Miss Ren" 任氏傳 shows, an inability to sew might indicate that a woman was not as she seemed to be a human being but actually a fox spirit, suggesting indirectly that sewing skills were reliably familiar to the majority of housewives.³ For humans the effort required had, it seems, overtones of secular or even spiritual devotion, as in Britain the "slow, hard concentrated labour" required by embroidery has been seen as instilling the ethics of Protestantism.⁴ In China an intricately embroidered text famously could embody devotion to an absent husband, as in the case of Su Hui 蘇蕙 (fl. late fourth century), who constructed a lengthy palindromic text in this form.⁵ But it could also be used to produce Buddhist scriptures with painstaking devoutness. In her study of Buddhist art objects as relics in medieval China Hsueh-man Shen mentions one surviving example of these meticulously created works, Pelliot collection manuscript P. 4500.⁶ But in fact we know that under the Zhou 周 dynasty (690-705) of Wu Zetian 武則天 (624-705) five thousand scrolls worth of Buddhist texts were reproduced stitch by stitch in this way.⁷

Of this great enterprise, not a stitch survives. Even so, embroidery is relatively easy to disseminate, so that Chinese examples were apparently available in Britain as early as the seventeenth century, to influence local designs.⁸ Much

-
- 1 Jocelyn Chatterton, *Chinese Silk and Sewing Tools* (London: Jocelyn Chatterton, 2002), 9.
 - 2 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (new edition; London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010).
 - 3 Rania Huntingdon, *Alien Kind: Foxes and Late Imperial Chinese Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003), 123.
 - 4 Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 86.
 - 5 Linghu Defen 令狐得分, et al., *Jinshu* 晉書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1974), 96:2523. Though this poem was clearly created in textile form, the usual word for embroidery is not used here. Please see too: Qiaomei Tang, "From Talented Poet to Jealous Wife: Reimagining Su Hui in Late Tang Literary Culture," *Nan Nü: Men, Women and Gender in China* 22.1 (2020): 1-35.
 - 6 Hsueh-man Shen, *Authentic Replicas: Buddhist Art in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019), 59, 66.
 - 7 T.H. Barrett, *The Woman Who Discovered Printing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 93.
 - 8 Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, 106.

earlier, embroidered Buddhist icons of the period and type discussed below came to be preserved both at Dunhuang 敦煌 and in Japanese temples, as has a mid-eighth century record pinpointing the importation of such a work from China to Japan.⁹ Smaller, secular examples of embroidery of the Tang period have also ended up in North American collections.¹⁰ According to Dorothy C. Wong, who draws on art historical studies to which I have not had access, embroidered devotional images commemorating deceased husbands and children date back to before the Tang dynasty.¹¹ To speak of devotional images is to employ language that could be transferred to the practices of medieval European women, but within a Buddhist environment such as that of Tang dynasty China assumptions about images were not necessarily the same as elsewhere across Eurasia. The creation of an image of a Buddha or bodhisattva in thread as in other media entailed the coming into being of a form of the Buddha's presence which would typically not be discussed in aesthetic terms but rather in terms of the positive karma generated by its creator for the dedicatee, and indeed for all sentient beings.¹²

A full consideration of early religious embroidery in China and of the role of women therein would no doubt extend to monographic length, but here only one aspect of that fuller topic is examined, namely the way in which eminent male writers of the eighth and ninth centuries described this practice of creating embroidered religious images in short, formal compositions, though it is undoubtedly the case that the authors of these accounts would have had earlier models of writing on this topic to draw upon. One such earlier piece by the renowned scholar Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513) dated to 488 may be found, for example, in a collection of Buddhist apologetic writings put together in the seventh century, in the form later taken up under the Tang of an encomium (*zan* 贊) with a preface.¹³

9 For full page illustrations, see Dorothy C. Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks as Agents of Cultural and Artistic Transmission* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018), 152, 153; and for the import, see page 233.

10 Chatterton, *Chinese Silk*, 12, 13.

11 Wong, *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks*, 281, n. 63.

12 For a useful discussion of the way in which items such as embroidered images would have been considered at the time, see John Kieschnik, *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 52-82.

13 Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667), ed., *Guang Hongming ji* 廣弘明集 16: 212b-c, in *Taishō Canon*, vol. 52, no. 2103.

A Corpus of Encomia on Buddhist Embroidery

Such writings from the eighth and ninth centuries amount to no more than a score of items, but they emanate from persons at least well known in their times, and indeed almost every case concerns an individual whose fame has persisted till our own day. How and why did they praise what was predominantly women's work? One or two studies have already touched on some of these pieces, and a few translations or summaries have already appeared, but there are some advantages to treating them as a group in such a way as to illuminate common themes or issues. The following remarks do not aim at a comprehensive treatment of what may be learned from this material; rather, they are designed simply to suggest the benefits of assembling a corpus of works of this type, and to comment on its origins and transmission. It would be wrong to suggest that in this case the task of gathering all relevant materials together was particularly complex. Several of the encomia happen to have been preserved only because they became at some point part of the collected works of a famous man, but the majority, seventeen in all, were already selected in the late tenth century for inclusion in a large anthology of Tang (and some earlier) literature, the *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (Finest flowers of the preserve of nature; hereafter, *WYH*), even if what principles governed their selection is something that unfortunately simply cannot be known.

A recent Ph.D. thesis by Kevin W. Tahmoresi explains in some detail that this massive literary compendium was after an initial compilation completed in 986 further modified in 1007 and 1009, following which its contents were carefully checked for textual accuracy against the original sources still available before it was printed in 1204; about fifteen per cent of this edition survives and was combined with a later edition of 1567 to create the standard 1966 photolithographic edition used here.¹⁴ The collation carried out at the time of the 1204 printing means that even in the cases where the collected works of the author survives the textual notes provided frequently refer to editions older than those we now have, and even where no other source survived then there is still an alternative reading noted in at least one instance, suggesting access

14 Kevin W. Tahmoresi, "The *Wenyuan yinghua*: Selecting Refined Literature" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 2020). The discussion of the transmission of the text occupies pages 27-49. For the purposes of identifying the corpus of materials brought together here I have not used other textual sources, such as the manuscript mentioned in D.C. Twitchett, *Financial Administration under the Tang Dynasty* (second edition; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 356, which might be useful in checking the texts for any future translation of this material.

at least to fragmentary materials.¹⁵ Tahmoresi also shows that by comparison with its predecessor, the *Wenxuan* 文選 (Selections of refined literature), the *WHHY* has many more *zan* (written here as 讚), though many of these are short pieces in praise of historical figures in its seven hundred and eightieth fascicle.¹⁶ The next two fascicles and the opening of a third are devoted to Buddhist encomia, plus one or two Daoist pieces, of which a large number are allocated to painted or sculpted icons, and it is here that we find the descriptions of embroidery included with encomia devoted to these other media. All these fascicles as reproduced today derive from the Ming edition rather than the surviving Song fragments.

Once the three pieces now included in “Collected Works” are added in, it is possible to construct a catalogue of encomia on embroidery as set out below. Precise dates are given where these are included; generally, they are not. Subjects are given in abbreviated form; piece B for example concerns a specific manifestation of Guanyin 觀音. By following the order in the *WHHY* a strictly chronological ordering of the authors by date is not completely observed.

- A. Su Ting 蘇頌 (670-727), 710. *WHHY* 781.2b-3a. Amitābha.
- B. Wang Wei 王維 (699-759). *Collected Works*, 20.¹⁷ Guanyin.
- C. Gao Shi 高適 (ca. 700-65). *Collected Works, prose*.¹⁸ Ashoka.
- D. Liang Su 梁肅 (753-93). *WYYH* 781.8b-9a. Guanyin.
- E. Liang Su *WYYH* 781.9a-b. Dizang – needlework mentioned in text, not title.
- F. Liang Su *WYYH* 781.9b-10a. Medicine Buddha.
- G. Liang Su *WYYH* 781.12b-13a. Amitābha’s Paradise.
- H. Mu Yuan 穆員 (*jinshi* 793), 790. *WYYH* 782.1b-2a. Dizang.
- I. Mu Yuan, 792. *WYYH* 782.2b-3a. Shakyamuni.
- J. Mu Yuan. *WYYH* 782.3a-b. Medicine Buddha and Guanyin.
- K. Mu Yuan. *WYYH* 782.3a-b. Medicine Buddha.
- L. Mu Yuan, 795. *WYYH* 782.3b-4a. Amitābha’s Paradise.
- M. Mu Yuan. *WYYH* 782.4a-4b. Guanyin.
- N. Quan Deyu 權德輿 (759-818). *WYYH* 782.9a-b. Amitābha.
- O. Dugu Ji 獨孤及 (725-77), 762. *WYYH* 782.9b-10a. Guanyin.
- P. Lü Wen 呂溫 (772-811), after 804. *WYYH* 11a-12a. Medicine Buddha.

15 Li Fang 李昉, comp., *Wenyuan yinghua* 文苑英華 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1966), 782.5a4.

16 Tahmoresi, “*Wenyuan yinghua*”, 64.

17 For this I have consulted the bilingual edition of Paul Rouzer, *The Poetry and Prose of Wang Wei* (Boston and Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2020), vol. 2, 286-91.

18 I have consulted Sun Qinshan 孫欽善, ed., Gao Shi 高適, *Gao Shi ji jiaozhu* 高適集校注 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1984), 304-5.

- Q. Bai Juyi 白居易 (772-846). *WYYH* 783.2a-2b. Amitābha
 R. Bai Juyi. *WYYH* 783.3a. Guanyin.
 S. Bai Juyi. *WYYH* 783.4a. Amitābha's Paradise.
 T. Sikong Tu 司空圖 (837-908). *Collected Works, prose*, 9.¹⁹ Dizang.

Obviously, this list may be put to various uses, for example by art historians. Here however the emphasis is on how these pieces by literary figures describing an activity normally associated with women came into being. It is simply a preliminary sketch, though as indicated above, a certain amount of very helpful discussion of some of these pieces has been published already. In 2007 the scholar-nun Zhiru published a study of Kṣitigarbha, the bodhisattva known in Chinese as Dizang 地藏, that comments on all three of the embroidery descriptions here that feature this bodhisattva, namely pieces E, H and T. She first identifies Mu Yuan, the least well-known of the authors represented in our corpus, from his brief biographies combined with those of his kin in the Standard Histories.²⁰ His literary fame, which seems to have been considerable during his own short life, did however persist until the eleventh century, since a compilation of his writings in ten fascicles, the *Mu Yuan ji* 穆員集, is listed in the bibliographical treatise of the *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (New Tang history).²¹ Nine fascicles were also preserved in the imperial collection of the eleventh century, though we may suspect that they did not survive the looting of that library by invaders in 1126.²² Traces of his writings and reminiscences about him are scattered throughout the Tang materials that have come down to our own day; for present purposes the most significant information about him is probably that when he was a fellow-student with Bai Juyi and his friends his writings were not without their influence upon them, suggesting that in his time he was by no means a minor figure, for all the subsequent disappearance

-
- 19 Sikong Tu, *Sikong Biaosheng wenji* 司空表聖文集, 9.3a-b (*Sibu congkan* 四部叢刊 edition; Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1919-36).
 20 Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva: Dizang in Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 205-6.
 21 Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, ed., *Xin Tangshu* 新唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975), 6021605; in this history Mu is also mentioned in 163:5015, 5016 as a talented member of a literary family. Compare Oliver Moore, *Rituals of Recruitment in Tang China* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2004), 210, n. 86, for one ramification of this family link. See also above, n. 15, for some evidence that Mu's writings as such had been lost by the Southern Song but survived in part at this point.
 22 Wang Yaochen 王堯臣 (1003-58), *Chongwen zongmu* 崇文總目 5:348 (*Guoxue jiben congshu* 國學基本叢書 edition; Taipei: Taiwan Commercial Press, 1967). For the loss of the library, see John H. Winkelman, *The Imperial Library in Southern Sung China* (Philadelphia, PA: American Philosophical Society, 1974), 11.

of much of his work.²³ As Zhiru makes clear, the items of embroidery praised in source H were created by female members of his immediate family for others, including one who was a nun, who died before their time.

The next case she takes up is that of another literary figure with strong Buddhist connections, Liang Su, whose writings as a collection have now also disappeared, though in fact a substantial Buddhist work under his name has been preserved for posterity, largely thanks to a seventeenth century Japanese reprint; again it is made clear that the embroidery is a memorial piece, this time made by a woman named Wang 王 for the benefit of her late mother.²⁴ To judge from the notes in *WYYH*, source E and his other pieces were checked against a surviving copy of his writings in the Southern Song (1127-1279). Finally, she turns to Sikong Tu's work, source T, which she cites from a modern critically edited version unavailable to me, and for which she provides a full translation of the encomium itself; again, the embroidery is a memorial made by a young woman, the author's wife, for an older male relative, her father. Noting also the other encomia concerning embroideries recorded in the *WYYH*, she concludes that sewing the images in her sources relating to Dizang was evidence of a practice of filial piety in the families of officials whereby merit was transferred to dying or deceased family members. This would seem to be a fair summary of the contents of the materials used. What is less apparent in her discussion is the status of the writers of these pieces: sometimes they are clearly related to the women who are praised, but sometimes the relationship is not so obvious.

The situation is also complicated by the examples in our catalogue selected by Yuhang Li for her study of the cult of Guanyin among Buddhist women in late imperial times, which includes a detailed chapter on embroidery, especially images into which women stitched embroidery using their own hair, to involve themselves yet more closely with Guanyin.²⁵ Here the Tang examples are chosen to illustrate the broader background to this practice that may be traced to much earlier times. Only two sources are discussed, but both are slightly anomalous when compared to the accounts used by Zhiru. In the first instance Li summarizes the information given by Lü Wen, who describes how

23 Note Yang Jun 楊軍, *Yuan Zhen ji biannian jianzhu* 元稹集編年箋注 (Xi'an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2002), 309, at n. 39, an 810 reminiscence of Bai's student days by Yuan Zhen 元稹 (779-831).

24 For some basic details on Liang and the transmission of his largest work, see T.H. Barrett, "A Short History of an Abbreviated Tang Tiantai Text", *Hualin International Journal of Buddhist Studies* 4.1 (2021): 178-214.

25 Yuhang Li, *Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 108-17.

he was sent on a diplomatic mission to Tibet in 804.²⁶ In a notorious incident of 787, less than two decades earlier, the Tibetans had kidnapped an entire embassy sent to make peace with them, so he probably set out with considerable misgivings.²⁷ His wife therefore applied herself to the creation in embroidery of an image of the Medicine Buddha, Yaoshi Rulai 藥師如來 or Bhaiṣajyaguru, to which when finished she addressed her prayers for his safe return.²⁸ After his eventual homecoming he duly praises this Chinese Penelope for her actions, but Li notes that it is her devoted hard work that is described, not her technique or skill.²⁹ Unlike the works treated by Zhiru, this embroidery was created for a living person, though it may well be that Lü's wife had assumed the worst about his fate.

The second Tang item she takes up, source O by Dugu Ji, is even more anomalous. As she explains, Dugu describes how a former county magistrate, on reaching the age of retirement at sixty, devoted himself to making an embroidery of Guanyin, incorporating also embroidered writing, which she takes to be a male touch.³⁰ The merit-making produced by the task is directed to the relief of his own suffering in her analysis, as it would seem. But the Guanyin image is described as 'life-size' (*Deng Guanyin quanshen* 等觀音全身), which raises for me the possibility that despite the lack of mention of any women this rather large image was sponsored rather than executed by the ex-magistrate in person, and that the merit gained was for the common good, not personal benefit. It is of course the case that elderly persons might devote themselves to merit making by creating sutras as a private and personal enterprise.³¹ But even though Dugu had become by 762 a committed Buddhist, who was to accumulate more than half a dozen Buddhism-related pieces to his name, his praise

26 The immediate diplomatic background and outcome of this mission are discussed in Wang Zhenping, *Tang China in Multi-polar Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), 184.

27 The incident is described in Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia* (second edition; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 151.

28 On this Buddha, see the classic study by Raoul Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha* (revised edition; Boston, Shambhala, 1989), especially Chapter 4.

29 Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 109.

30 Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 114.

31 For a significant case study, see Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture of the Ten Kings and The Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994), 121-28, on the 'Old Man of Eighty-five', whose activities are documented in the Dunhuang manuscripts.

as far as we can tell from the text of his composition is more likely to have been for a public-spirited gesture rather than for an act of individual devoutness.³²

This is not the only encomium to make no mention of women. That by Su Ting, created in mid-710, source A, is written on behalf of an imperial son-in-law whom I have failed to identify named Wei Gang 韋綱, in honour of a deceased emperor *xiansheng* 先聖, perhaps Zhongzong 中宗, and is very much an official piece for a state occasion rather than a record of domestic piety. It dates itself squarely in a period of extraordinary political volatility for the Tang, very shortly after the murder of Zhongzong's apparent killer, Empress Wei 韋后 (d. 710), to whom Wei Gang may have been related, which would explain his disappearance from our records.³³ This in itself makes the entire piece somewhat exceptional; it presumably survived simply because Su Ting did, living on to become one of the court stalwarts of the ensuing era of Tang political revival, though as with the case of Mu Yuan his writings (to judge from the *WYYH* annotation) did not last from the Northern (960-1127) into the Southern Song.

All the other encomia on our list follow the pattern outlined by Zhiru, and it may be argued that Lü Wen's piece does as well, given that his wife evidently counted him as probably deceased, though there is more that needs to be said on that score. Some of the majority domestic group are slightly unexpected, for example that by Gao Shi, source C, the transmission of which is not well attested since it lies outside his collected poems, though there is no obvious reason why it might have been wrongly attributed to him. What makes it unusual is neither the persons mentioned, since a woman is creating a piece of embroidery for a deceased aunt, nor the sentiments expressed, but rather the topic. The Indian ruler Ashoka (304-232 BCE), though well known in China as a legendary patron of Indian Buddhism, is not to the best of my knowledge usually regarded as a bodhisattva figure capable of providing succour to beings in distress. But inscriptional evidence from the sixth century shows that as a world ruler ('chakravartin') who was held to have included China in his domains and to have distributed the Buddha's relics throughout the land in such a way as to sanctify it with the Buddha's posthumous but still potent

32 For Dugu's shift from Daoism to Buddhism by this point, see page 312 of David McMullen, "Historical and Literary Theory in the Mid-Eighth Century", in Arthur F. Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds., *Perspectives on the Tang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 307-42.

33 See the narrative of these events in Richard W.L. Guisso, "The Reigns of the Empress Wu, Chung-tsung and Jui-tsung (684-712)," in Denis Twitchett, ed., *Cambridge History of China*, vol.3, part 1: *Sui and Tang China*, 589-906 AD (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 290-332.

presence he was accorded a position of unusual respect.³⁴ Perhaps one should not discount also influence from contemporary Daoism, whose high gods are usually depicted in imperial terms.³⁵ For the rest, the predominance of popular objects of devotion in embroidered form such as Amitābha and Guanyin, both out-topping Dizang and the Medicine Buddha by six to three each, comes as no surprise, given what we know of Tang popular devotion.

Exploring the Vocabulary of the Encomia

A complete concordance to the materials collected here would presumably allow a variety of patterns of linguistic usage in these texts to be revealed. Here however only a quick survey of the occurrence of some of the most salient terminology is attempted, but even so some distinctive features emerge. The terms tabulated start with *you* 幽 (hidden) and *ming* 冥 (dark), the graphs used to describe the unseen world of the spirits, here indicated as Y and M.³⁶ Next is the well-known word *fu* 福, meaning in this context something like 'karmic benefit', recorded as F. Mentions of filial piety, to adopt the conventional translation of *xiao* 孝, are recorded as X. Finally, since not all embroidery production seems to have been aimed at post-mortem benefits, I have listed as S a couple of instances of *shou* 壽 (long life). The results are set out below, though for the purpose of simplifying comparisons no attempt is made to quantify the number of times any specific vocabulary item is mentioned within a piece.

Vocabulary distribution

- A. Su Ting, Amitābha.
- B. Wang Wei, Guanyin. M F
- C. Gao Shi, Ashoka. Y M F X
- D. Liang Su, Guanyin. M F X
- E. Liang Su, Dizang. F X
- F. Liang Su, Medicine Buddha. M F X
- G. Liang Su, Amitābha's Paradise. Y F

34 Hou Xudong 侯旭東, *Wu-liu shiji beifang minzhong fojiao xinyang* 五六世紀北方民衆佛教信仰 (revised edition; Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2015), 273.

35 Vincent Goossaert, *Bureaucratie et salut: Devenir un dieu en Chine* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 2017), 48-61.

36 This is translated by Paul Rouzer in his rendering of piece B by Wang Wei as 'ignorance', which does not strike me as entirely apposite.

- H. Mu Yuan, Dizang. Y M F
- I. Mu Yuan, Shakyamuni. M F
- J. Mu Yuan, Medicine Buddha, and Guanyin. F S
- K. Mu Yuan, Medicine Buddha. F S
- L. Mu Yuan, Amitābha's Paradise. Y M F
- M. Mu Yuan, Guanyin. M F
- N. Quan Deyu, Amitābha. M F X
- O. Dugu Ji, Guanyin.
- P. Lü Wen, Medicine Buddha. Y M
- Q. Bai Juyi, Amitābha. M F
- R. Bai Juyi, Guanyin. Y M F
- S. Bai Juyi, Amitābha's Paradise. Y M F
- T. Sikong Tu, Dizang. Y X

One feature of this distribution that is immediately apparent is that the two items that do not mention women, piece A by Su Ting and piece O by Dugu Ji, do not seem to share in the dominant discourse of domestic commemoration or merit making at all. They are evidently 'public' pieces that followed a different set of conventions, though with only two examples to consider it is very hard to discern what those conventions were. Beyond that matters become more complex. To his wife, it seems, Lü Wen in piece P had quite literally been to hell and back; Tibet was perhaps not part of any normal reality, hence the use of language suitable to post-mortem situations, even though he lives to write his encomium. But what are we to make of the sparseness of the references to filial piety? Bai Juyi and Mu Yuan, who account for about half of our corpus, simply do not use the word. Could it be that to use the term with reference to one's own kin was accounted hubristic and best avoided? Our corpus is still too small to leave us with more than guesswork.

But even within the narrow selection of writings on icon embroidery that has come down to us, it is quite clear that these compositions reflect a broad range of circumstances, and that there is for instance no fixed pattern by which they were commissioned by the families of the embroiderers or of the dedicatees, though these normally were the same group. One or two are obviously intensely personal, as is the case with Lü Wen's record, though this records an exceptional event. In some ways more typical, but also unusual, is piece R by Bai Juyi, describing a Guanyin he reports as having been less than full size at 5 *chi* 尺, or somewhat over one and a half meters, but still a substantial undertaking. It was written to record the effort of his sister-in-law on behalf of his late brother, Bai Xingjian 白行簡 (776-826), following whose demise Bai Juyi had taken in his entire family, and it is apparent that both the widow's work and

Bai's note were labours of love.³⁷ But his remarks are brief, and to the point: he simply allows the facts to speak for themselves. Elsewhere, in piece S, he is more explanatory and does comment on the superior value of needlework as more demanding than bronze casting or painting (*Fu fantong shehui, buruo cixiu wen zhi jingqin ye* 夫範銅設繪，不若刺繡文之精勤也), but not here.

Dedicatees in the Corpus

Another element in our corpus worthy of comment is the status of the person for whom the icon is sewn. Half of those with specific dedicatees are described as having been created to provide posthumous succour for males in the family, and half for females in various relationships senior to the embroiderer, as below.

- A. Su Ting, Amitābha. Male
- B. Wang Wei, Guanyin. Male
- C. Gao Shi, Ashoka. Female
- D. Liang Su, Guanyin. Male
- E. Liang Su, Dizang. Female
- F. Liang Su, Medicine Buddha. Female
- G. Liang Su, Amitābha's Paradise. Male
- H. Mu Yuan, Dizang. Female
- I. Mu Yuan, Shakyamuni. Female
- J. Mu Yuan, Medicine Buddha, and Guanyin. General
- K. Mu Yuan, Medicine Buddha. Female
- L. Mu Yuan, Amitābha's Paradise. Female
- M. Mu Yuan, Guanyin. Male
- N. Quan Deyu, Amitābha. Male
- O. Dugu Ji, Guanyin. Male/General
- P. Lü Wen, Medicine Buddha. Male
- Q. Bai Juyi, Amitābha. Female
- R. Bai Juyi, Guanyin. Female
- S. Bai Juyi, Amitābha's Paradise. Male
- T. Sikong Tu, Dizang. Male

37 On Bai Juyi and his taking responsibility for his late brother's family, see Arthur Waley, *The Life and Times of Po Chü-I* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1949), 169.

In this table at least one other anomalous item emerges once the relationship between author and embroiderer is checked. Mu Yuan's piece J turns out to describe a double embroidery created by his youngest sister for whom no dedicatee is listed, so the good karma to be derived from her needlework must be understood as accruing to her own benefit, plus that of all sentient beings, and rather than constituting a memorial piece, the aim was apparently to secure long life in this world. In piece K this sister by contrast creates another piece specifically for their mother, apparently while she was still alive. But once the exceptions are accounted for, all but a handful of these records do relate to forms of ancestral observance, though again circumstances vary. How the embroiderer was related to the author is not always obvious at first glance, and though the complex entanglements of the Tang elite make it likely that some form of kinship was often involved, relationships of patronage or friendships such as fellow studentship with a male relative may also have played a part in some instances.

Sometimes this latter type of connection is announced by the author. In the case of piece G, created by the widow of a one-time prefect of Huazhou 華州, Liang Su tells us at the end of his preface that he is praising her work because he had once been a literary companion of the husband: *Su chang yi wenmo, cong Huazhou zhi you* 肅嘗以文墨，從華州之遊. Quan Deyu chooses to inform us at the end of his piece N that the widow of the excellent fellow commemorated through her needlework is the daughter of a maternal uncle of his, but we have no means of knowing if giving out such information was his regular practice. In other cases, extended research might make it possible to work out some form of kinship, or maybe other obligations beyond kinship ties. In the case of our earliest item A, Su Ting was plainly simply doing what he was told, as no doubt many writers of funerary inscriptions for the high and mighty were, though in that genre money too seems to have been a consideration at other times. The creation of embroidery was after all, but one minor facet of a much wider Tang commemorative culture.

Even so, this collection of encomia with their prefaces do afford us a glimpse into the world of the elite Tang needlewomen which other materials do not. Uniquely, it seems, they were able to promote the karmic benefit of kinfolk, male and female, through their diligent application to a recognised Buddhist practice, and the best writers of the day were prepared, whether from motives ranging from family aggrandisement to personal respect we cannot tell, to record their appreciation of these long-vanished artefacts. There is much that these documents can reveal to us in the language used to describe embroidery, even if many of them are not particularly forthcoming on this point, for though Western writing on Chinese needlework already dates back more

than a century there is still much more to be said on the topic.³⁸ The Buddhist figures rendered by the embroiderers are also well known, but most of our knowledge of their deployment in Tang life comes from public spaces such as temples, whereas these sources give us some important clues as to how religious imagery was incorporated into domestic settings. But, to repeat, the main aim of the foregoing remarks has been to provide a preliminary sketch of how these sources came into being and how they were transmitted; the hope is that future research can improve on these initial findings.

38 There is already a substantial and informative article in English by the medical officer Arthur Stanley (1869-1931), "Embroidery", in Samuel Couling, ed., *The Encyclopedia Sinica* (Shanghai: Kelly and Walsh, 1917), 161-63.