

# Maritime Transmission of the Monastic Order of Nuns to China

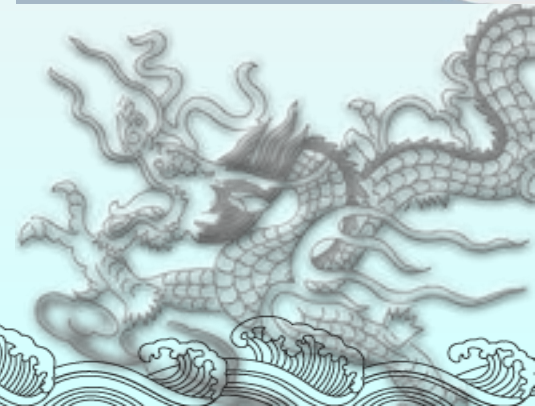
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# Introduction

◆ This short paper is a study of the issues concerning the maritime transmission of the proper dual Bhiksuni Ordination to China from Sri Lanka. It is important because according to the Buddhist tradition, a woman becomes a proper Bhiksuni, a fully ordained nun, only when she has obtained ordination first from ten fully ordained Buddhist nuns and then from ten fully ordained Buddhist monks. It is called dual ordination. However, before 433, there was no such properly ordained Bhiksuni in China and the women such as Jingjian 淨檢 who became nuns obtained the ordination from Buddhist monks only. It was only when a group of fully ordained Buddhist nuns headed by Devasara came to China by the ship of a merchant named Nanti from Sri Lanka in 433 that the proper dual ordination for nuns could be performed. As a result, more than three hundred women got dual ordination and thus the proper Bhiksuni Order was established in China and it has continued till this day. So maritime trade played an important role in the transmission of Bukkhuni Order to China.



# Sources

◆ Sources for this study are scarce as much of the information is lost because of the various historical reasons. However, we have some records survived in Chinese for us to have a glimpse of the issues concerning the Bhiksuni Ordination in China and the maritime trade between China and South Asia.

The first important work on Bhiksuni Order is Baochang's 寶唱 (467-534?) ***Biqiunizhuan*** 《比丘尼傳》 (**the Biography of Nuns**) (T50, no. 2063) written 517 and it records 95 nuns in total with 65 full biography and 30 others mentioned in his book.

According to the Daoxuan's 道宣 *Xu Gaosengzhuan* 《續高僧傳》 (Continuation of the Biography of Eminent Monks), Baochang became a Buddhist monk under the well known Buddhist master Sengyou (445-518) who wrote several important works such as the *Chu Sanzang Jiji* (《出三藏記集》 Collected Records of the Tripitaka) which includes short biographies of leading Indian, Central Asian and Chinese monks involved in translation work and the *Sapoduo shizi zhuan* (《薩婆多師資傳》 Biographies of the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya Teachers) which recorded more than ninety Vinaya teachers of the Sarvāstivāda School. But unfortunately the work is lost and we have no means for access it. Therefore, Baochang accessed a good deal of information for his work of Buddhist nuns.

# Sources

- ◆ The second is Huijiao's 慧皎 (497-554) ***Gaosengzhuan 《高僧傳》 (the Biography of Eminent Monks)*** (T50, no. 2059) as it includes the biographies of Gunavarman 求那跋摩 and Sanghavarman 僧伽跋摩 who were involved with the first dual-ordination for Bhiksunis.
- ◆ The third is Daoxuan's 道宣 (596-667) ***Sifenlü shanfan buque xingshichao (Digest on Conduct with Abridgements and Emendations to the Dharmaguptaka-Vinaya)***. **《四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔》** (T40, no. 1804) as it records briefly the beginning of Bhiksuni ordination. The work was completed in 626 and revised in 630. Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667), the great Chinese master, was respected by all Chinese Buddhists as an authority and specialist on Vinaya from his life time.



慧皎 (497-554)



道宣 (596-667)

# Sources

- ◆ The fourth is Dajue's 大覺 (lived during the seventh to eighth century) *Sifenglu Xinshichao Pi* 《四分律行事鈔批》 (Notes on the Digest on Conduct of the Dharmaguptaka-vinaya) (X42, no. 736) which is a detail commentary on Daoxuan's work so it explains in detail about the beginning of Bhiksuni ordination. Dajue also quoted from Sengyou's *Sapoduo shizi zhuan* (《薩婆多師資傳》 Biographies of the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya Teachers) when he explained the transmission of nun's ordination.
- ◆ Although there are discussions on the transmission of the Bhiksuni ordination to China in the commentaries on Daoxuan's Digest written by Buddhist monks in Song, Ming and Qing dynasties such as the Vinaya master Yuanzhao 元照 (1048-1116), but they just copied the information from either Daoxuan or Dajue and there is no new information added. So this study is mainly based on the above four books.

## The Main Sources

	Title	Author
1	<i>Biqiunizhuan</i> 《比丘尼傳》 (the Biography of Nuns) (T50, no. 2063)	Baochang 寶唱 (467-534?)
2	<i>Gaosengzhuan</i> 《高僧傳》 (the Biography of Eminent Monks) (T50, no. 2059)	Huijiao 慧皎(497-554)
3	<i>Sifenlü shanfan buque xingshichao</i> 《四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔》 (Digest on Conduct with Abridgements and Emendations to the Dharmaguptaka-Vinaya). (T40, no. 1804)	Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667)
4	<i>Sifenglu Xinshichao Pi</i> 《四分律行事鈔批》 (Notes on the Digest on Conduct of the Dharmaguptaka-vinaya) (X42, no. 736)	Dajue's 大覺 (7~8 <sup>th</sup> Century)

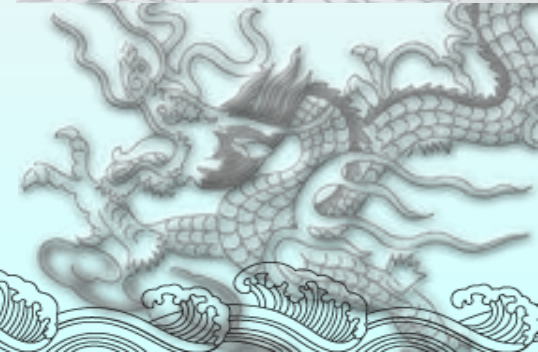
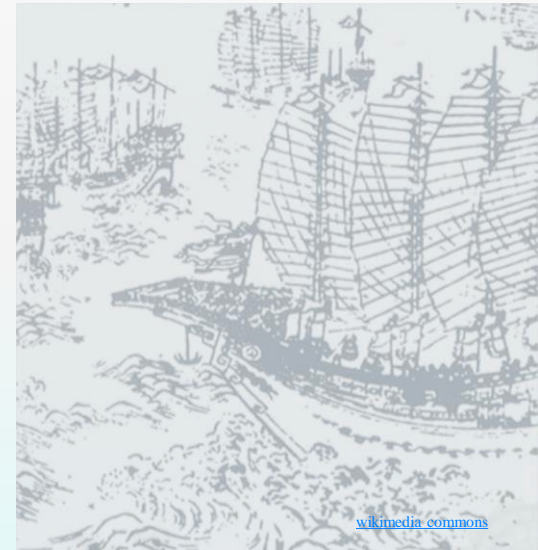
# The Transmission of Bhiksuni Ordination

- ◆ According to Baochang's 寶唱 (467-534?) *Biqiunizhuan* 《比丘尼傳》 (the Biographies of Nuns), an Indian merchant named Nanti 竺難提 came to China by ship and he brought together with him a group of Buddhist nuns from the Lion Kingdom (Sinhala) and they reached the capital of Song (Jianye, present Nanjing) in 429. These nuns stayed in Jingfu 景福寺 nunnery in the capital and a few days later they asked a nun named Sengguo 僧果 whether there were other foreign nuns arrived earlier and the answer was no. They again asked if the nuns in the nunnery had dual ordinations and the answer was that they had only higher ordination from the monks.



These foreign nuns told Sengguo that it was a skillful means for special cases to have higher ordination from monks only, just as Mahāpajāpati had only the eight special rules as her higher ordination and five hundred other Sakya women got higher ordination from her. But Sengguo still had doubt hence she again inquired from a Tripitaka Master about the matter and the Master explained the same. Sengguo further asked the Tripitaka Master whether she could get higher ordination again and the former said that it was better to have the higher ordination again.

- ◆ Then in the year 433, the same merchant Nanti came back with a group of eleven nuns headed by Tiansaluo (Devasara) from the Lion Kingdom. The foreign nuns who arrived earlier had already learned the language of Song (Chinese) and thus they invited Sanghavarman to serve as the chief master of Vinaya ceremony and the Chinese nuns got dual higher ordination again in sequence in Nanlin monastery.



# Ten nuns brought by merchant Nandi but two died

- ◆ This is the story about the first recorded proper higher ordination for women. However there are a few things we need to clarify.
- ◆ First, according to Dajue's *Sifenglu Xinshichao Pi* 《四分律行事鈔批》, the number of the first group of nuns brought by the merchant Nandi was originally ten for the special purpose of confirming higher ordination for Chinese women, but two died on the way. We trust this account because Dajue quoted the information from Sengyou's *Sapoduo shizi zhuan* (《薩婆多師資傳》 Biographies of the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya Teachers). The second group of nuns brought by the merchant Nandi is three headed by Devasara. So the total of foreign nuns was eleven who came to China for women's higher ordination.

*Sifenglu Xinshichao Pi*  
《四分律行事鈔批》

*Sapoduo shizi zhuan*  
《薩婆多師資傳》





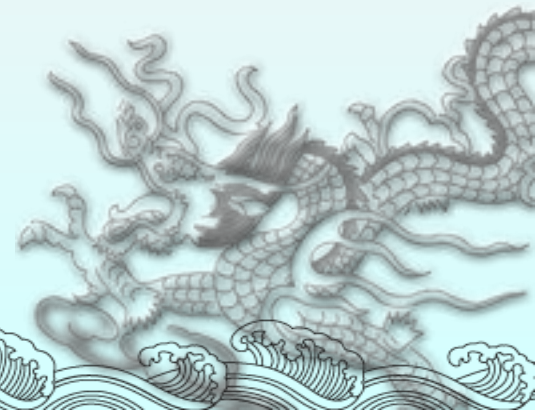
# Gunavarman

- ◆ Second, the Tripitaka Master to whom the Chinese nuns enquired about the dual ordination was **Gunavarman** who came to China together with the merchant Nanti. According to Huijiao's 慧皎 (497-554) *Gaosengzhuan* 《高僧傳》 (the Biography of Eminent Monks), Gunavarman was a well known master and the Chinese monks Huiguang 慧觀 and Huicong 慧聰 requested the Emperor Wendi of Song to invite him to China. But Gunavarman already embarked on the merchant Nanti's ship with a purpose of reaching a small country, but they were brought to Guangzhou by wind. Knowing Gunavarman was in Nanyue (Guangzhou), the emperor Wendi sent an envoy to invite him from Yangzhou, the lower capital, and thus Gunavarman arrived in the Song capital in 431. This is confirmed with the account in Daoxuan's *Sifenlü shanfan buque xingshichao* (Digest on Conduct with Abridgements and Emendations to the Dharmaguptaka-Vinaya) 《四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔》, according to which, Gunavarman arrived first in Yangzhou in 430 and translated a few Vinaya texts.



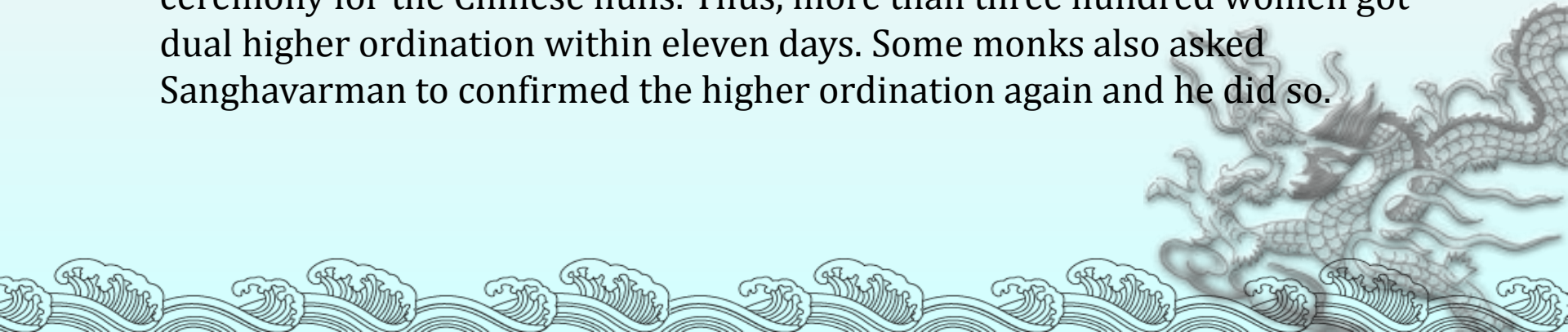
# Nandi wan requested to get more nuns

- ◆ According to Daoxuan, the Chinese nuns in the capital requested Gunavarman to confirm the dual higher ordination for them as there were eight nuns from the Lion Country, but the former told them that according to Buddhist Vinaya, there must be ten nuns to hold ordination ceremony and the foreign nuns did not know Chinese as well. So these foreign nuns were asked to learn Chinese and at the same time they ordered that more nuns should be invited from the Middle Kingdom in order to fulfill the required number of ten nuns for holding the ordination ceremony. A few years later, three nuns including Devasara came to the capital from the Lion Kingdom and dual higher ordination ceremony was held and many nuns were ordained.



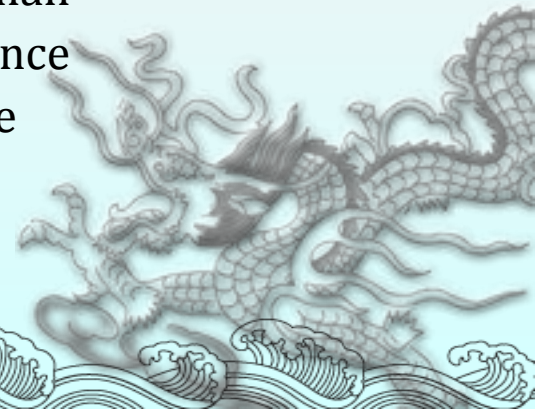
# Sanghavarman

- ◆ According to Dajue, it was again the merchant Nanti who was requested to perform the job and he brought back three nuns from the Loin Kingdom to China in 433, and the first nuns who arrived earlier already learned Chinese, thus there were eleven nuns for the purpose of higher ordination.
- ◆ Third, according to both Dajue's *Sifenglu Xinshichao Pi* 《四分律行事鈔批》 and Huijiao's 慧皎 (497-554) *Gaosengzhuan* 《高僧傳》 (the Biography of Eminent Monks), Gunavarman died Jeta monastery in 432 before the second group of nuns arrived in 433. Thus he did not fulfill purpose of dual higher ordination for the Chinese nuns. But according to the Huijiao's 慧皎 *Gaosengzhuan*, Sanghavarman arrived in the Song capital from the overland desert road in 433 and was invited to perform the higher ordination ceremony for the Chinese nuns. Thus, more than three hundred women got dual higher ordination within eleven days. Some monks also asked Sanghavarman to confirmed the higher ordination again and he did so.



# The higher ordination ceremony was taken place on boats

- ◆ The higher ordination took place on boats in a river. This tradition is still kept in Sri Lanka today as some higher ordinations only take place on boats in rivers or lakes. According to both Dajue's *Sifenglu Xinshichao Pi* 《四分律行事鈔批》, Sanghavarman held the higher ordination ceremony for the Chinese nuns on boats in a river.
- ◆ At that time, some monks also wished to take the higher ordination again with Sanghavarman as the preceptor, but a monk named Huiyi 慧義 was not happy about holding the higher ceremony on boats in a river. It was only when Sanghavarman explained the importance of a quiet place without disturbance for higher ordination, then Huiyi accepted and also took the higher ordination again.



# The merchant Nandi

- ◆ Fourth, the merchant Nanti played an important role in the transmission of bhiksuni ordination as mentioned above. The sea route from India and Loin Kingdom (modern Sri Lanka) to China was open for a long time and merchants traveled back and forth frequently. Faxian 法顯 (337-422) went to India from the over land desert road and visited the Lion Kingdom and came back to China by ship from the south sea in 412. However, the sea route is also full of danger as Faxian was brought Shandong by wind instead of his intended landing place Guangzhou. The same happened to Gunavarman also as we mentioned above. So it must take a few years for a merchant to have a returned trip from China to the Loin Kingdom.
- ◆ As the merchant Nanti came to the Song capital by ship in 429 and then he was requested to go back and bring more nuns so he did not stay long and probably went back in the same year as he did not have any particular purpose to stay long. He only returned to the Song capital again in 433 after he brought another three nuns. So it took him a total of four years for the return trip. Therefore, I think that Gunavarman came to China with the first group of nuns in the same merchant Nanti's ship in the same year 429 as there cannot be two trips for the same merchant.



# Other Sources speaks of an earlier date for the transmission of nuns ordination

- ◆ According to Dajue's *Sifenglu Xinshichao Pi* 《四分律行事鈔批》, the dual higher ordination of Bhiksunis was transmitted to China during the end of Latter Han and the beginning of Wei. There were fifteen Bhiksunis embarked on the desert road to China for the purpose of transmission of the bhiksunis ordination, but three died on the Snow Mountains and two died in the dark valleys, so only ten arrived in the Wei capital. They performed the bhiksunis higher ordination there and afterwards, they went to the Kingdom of Wu and also performed bhiksunis higher ordination. This is the beginning of bhiksuni higher ordination. However, Dajue did not give the sources of his account and later Buddhist historians did not quote this story. So this is probably just some orally transmitted stories which is not trust worthy.

THREE KINGDOMS (262 AD)



# Conclusion

In conclusion, as evidenced above, the transmission of bhiksuni ordination to China is clearly recorded in the Chinese Buddhist texts. It was introduced from Sri Lanka with a group of Sri Lankan nuns in the early fifth century and this tradition of dual ordination has continued till this day without interruption. Therefore, it is quite important for the revival of bhiksuni ordination for Theravada countries.

