CHAPTER THREE

MOLIZHITIAN—THE WARRIOR GODDESS IN CHINA
(SEVENTH CENTURY)

The Collected Dhāraṇī-sūtras

THE SEVENTH CENTURY TANG DYNASTY

For the first time in 370 years, China became unified with the establishment of the Sui Dynasty in 581 A.D. The Sui was short-lived, however, and in 618 gave way to the Tang dynasty. Ruled by the Li family, the Tang, was arguably one of the most influential dynasties in the history of China and its effects are still felt in the Far East. Spanning three centuries (618–907) the Tang can be divided into three periods, each unique to their own century. In the seventh century the Chinese expanded their control of the East Asian mainland via conquests and settlement. Upon destroying the Sui and other rivals they moved on to conquer areas of current day Manchuria, Korea, and Mongolia as well as a large swath of Chinese Turkestan. Foreign goods, peoples, and cultures from Western and Central Asia, India, and Persia streamed into China via this corridor. Chinese migrated into the lands of the south (now central and south China) seeking new opportunities. Political change occurred as the nouveau-landed gentry of the south obtained positions in the government via the examination system. Buddhism, already a fixture in the Central Kingdom, proliferated and its newest philosophical schools became established institutions. Along with Indian mathematics, astronomy/astrology, and medicine, a continual flow of foreign goods and luxuries spread throughout the Chinese populace. This first period ended with the reign of Empress Wu and her establishment of the short-lived Zhou dynasty (690–705).

Under the first Tang rulers, Buddhism held steady, neither radically expanding nor declining. During the Northern and Southern dynasties of the previous centuries, few rulers had attempted to repress Buddhism and

---

1 Moving west from Mongolia, Chinese Turkestan covers the area of central Asia bordered by Siberia on the north; Tibet, Afghanistan, and Iran, on the south; and the Caspian Sea on the west.
efforts to restrict its influence had been relatively minor. The Sui dynasty in fact promoted Buddhism. However, the first two Tang rulers—Gaozu (r.618–626) and his son Taizong (r.626–649)—showed little enthusiasm towards Buddhism. Anecdotal information states that Emperor Gaozu rewarded the spear-wielding monks of the Shaolin Temple (Ch. Shaolin-si) with a monument in 621 for assisting in the suppression of Sui general, Wang Shichong. This would seem to indicate a close relationship between the first Tang emperor and Buddhism. In reality, however, the early Tang emperors’ attitudes toward the Buddhist Dharma were lukewarm at best, but they understood that its large following among the Chinese made Buddhism impossible to ignore. Consequently, they circumscribed the authority of the Buddhist church by sponsoring the construction of monasteries (especially those near recent battlefields) while simultaneously restricting the total number of Buddhist. In addition, the early Tang emperors promoted Daoism over Buddhism, a policy which continued until the later part of the seventh century.

THE PROLIFERATION OF ESOTERIC BUDDHISM IN CHINA

In the seventh century efforts were made to unify the large, disorganized pantheon of esoteric worthies, their mandala, and the ritualistic “tools” of spells and hand gestures (mudra) into fixed orders. Two works that exemplify this combination of Buddhist philosophy, mystical utterances, and ceremony were the Collected Dhāraṇī-sūtras, a work compiled and translated in China by Atikūṭa, and the Yiqian fadinglin wang jing, translated into Chinese by Bodhiruci. Both texts tried to systematize the many deities incorporated into Mahayana-cum-Mantrayāna. At the same time the foundation of mandala organization was developed and began to appear in texts, and pictorial, systematic representation of the esoteric pantheon.

Maricī as Molizhitian appears in various Chinese Buddhist scriptures of this era as a minor character. Occasionally these brief references shed light on her significance as a worthy in the esoteric pantheon. However, in


\[\text{3 The Chinese, Adichuduo 阿地瞿多 (Var. Wujigao 無極高), has sometimes been returned to Sanskrit as Atigupta. Atikūṭa was a monk from Central India who arrived in China in 652 A.D. The Collected Dhāraṇī-sūtras, which he completed in 654, is the only known text to be translated by him.}\]