What about Rats? Buddhist Disciplinary Guidelines on Rats: Daoxuan’s Vinaya Commentaries

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Abstract: Buddhist texts generally prohibit the killing or harming of any sentient being. However, while such a ban may seem straightforward, it becomes much more complex when annoying or dangerous animals are involved. This paper focuses on one such animal—the rat. These rodents feature prominently in monastics’ daily lives, so it should come as no surprise that both Indian and Chinese Buddhist masters pay attention to them. In the first part of the paper, we investigate the problems that rats can cause, how monastics deal with them, and what the authors-compilers of Buddhist vinaya (disciplinary) texts have to say about them. In the second part, we focus on how Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667)—one of the most prominent vinaya masters of the early Tang Dynasty—interprets the vinaya guidelines and their implementation in Chinese monasteries. As we will see, he raises a number of potential issues with regard to strict adherence to the Buddhist principles of no killing and no harming, and so reveals some of the problematic realities that he felt monastics faced in seventh century China.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhist monasticism; Daoxuan; rats; vinaya

1. Introduction

As is well known, Buddhism calls for the protection of all living beings, humans and animals alike. Yet, what at first sight may seem a straightforward stipulation becomes much more complicated in circumstances involving dangerous and/or annoying animals. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Buddhism’s monastic guidelines contain extensive advice on how to deal with such animals. This paper focuses on a particularly disturbing group of creatures—namely, rodents. First, it investigates early Indian vinaya (disciplinary) texts’ recommendations on the subject of rats and mice; then it explores how Chinese commentators, notably the vinaya master Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), interpreted these instructions.¹

In order to understand how early Indian disciplinary masters attempted to regulate monastics’ responses to rodents, we must look closely at the vinaya texts. There are six full, extant vinayas. Four of these survive only in Chinese translation; there are Chinese, Sanskrit and Tibetan versions of the fifth; and the sixth is extant only in the Pali language. In chronological order of translation, the five Chinese vinayas are:² the Shisong lu 十誦律 (T no. 1435, 23; Sarvāstivāda vinaya); the Sifen lu 四分律 (T no. 1428, 22; Dharmaguptaka vinaya); the Mohesengqi lu 摩訶僧祇律 (T no. 1425, 22; Mahāsāṃghika vinaya); the Mishasai bu hexi wufen lu 彌沙塞部和芻五分律 (T no. 1421, 22; Mahīśāsaka vinaya); and the Genbenshuoyiqieyou bu pinaye 根本說一切有部毘奈耶 (T nos. 1442–1451, 23–24; Yijing’s 義凈 (635–713) translation of large parts of the Mulasarvastivāda vinaya).³ The first four of these texts were translated in the fifth century CE, whereas Yijing translated the fifth much later, at the beginning of the eighth century. By then, however, a number of influential Buddhist masters had already started to promote the Dharmaguptaka vinaya; in consequence, this became the principal reference point for monastic discipline in China.⁴ Arguably the most important of these masters was the monk Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667), who wrote extensive commentaries and accounts in which he meticulously analyzed the vinaya...
guidelines and introduced them to Chinese audiences. He studied every vinaya translation that was available to him, and although he repeatedly stressed that the Dharmaguptaka vinaya was paramount, he urged his followers to consult the others when necessary (T no.1804, 40: 上 1.2b19–20). Information was thus, gleaned from various texts to inform a detailed exposition on the correct interpretation and implementation of Buddhist guidelines. Potential regional differences among the various traditions were consequently not considered, as all of the guidelines were regarded as the words of the Buddha himself. This paper focuses on Daoxuan’s most renowned commentary—Sifen lü shanfan buque xingshi chao 四分律刪繁補闕行事鈔, An Abridged and Explanatory Commentary on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya (T no. 1804, 40).

In general, all of the Buddhist disciplinary texts, Indian and Chinese alike, regard every living being as a creature to be protected: that is, they should never be harmed or killed. However, they do permit humans to safeguard themselves against dangerous and/or annoying animals. When addressing the subject of dangerous animals, all of the vinaya texts focus primarily on snakes, which are often discussed in conjunction with scorpions, centipedes, and venomous insects. In addition, the Dharmaguptaka vinaya (T no. 1428, 22: 3.585b21–22, 3.586c5) defines places where there are tigers, wolves, lions, bears, and other “evil animals” (zhu e shou 諸惡獸), including ants, as “difficult” (nan 難).

While these ferocious animals may pose a mortal danger to monastics, annoying creatures—especially insects, such as mosquitoes, flies, ants, and bedbugs—have the capacity to plague their lives on a daily basis. In this context, the Mulasarvastivāda vinaya advises monastics to avoid “dangerous” (jing 驚) places, which are defined as places that house thieves; “dreadful” (bu 怖) places that are inhabited by tigers, leopards, and wolves; and “perilous” (weinan 畏難) places that are blighted by mosquitoes and flies, snakes, and scorpions, or wind and heat (T no. 1442, 23: 24.756c18–20). Indeed, any environment where snakes, scorpions, insects, and/or ants congregate is deemed unsuitable for monks (T no. 1442, 23: 12.688b29–c1).

As we shall see in the first part of this paper, the vinayas are less restrictive on the subject of rats and mice, either or both of which may be meant by the term shu 鼠 in the Chinese translations. For instance, monasteries are not required to find locations that are entirely free of these creatures, nor relocate if they infest an established community. Instead, the vinayas provide recommendations on how to live alongside them, such as how to avoid or repair damage they may cause without harming the animals themselves. It is self-evident from these texts that rodents were pervasive in monastic buildings, so handling them was a daily concern. The presence of food in monasteries particularly attracts these annoying animals, and the damage they cause can be very substantial. It is as such no surprise that they are seen as a nuisance, and that measures need to be taken.

The second part of the paper focuses on how these guidelines were interpreted and extended in Tang China, particularly by Daoxuan. For instance, there was increasing domestication of dogs and cats around this time in China, often specifically for pest control, which led to a prohibition against Buddhists keeping them. Here again, rodents provoke strong antipathy, leading to intense discussions on the fate of these animals.

2. Rats in the Vinaya Texts

As mentioned, the Chinese translations of the vinaya texts do not differentiate between rats and mice, so hereafter, for the sake of simplicity, this paper will use the term “rats” in reference to both. As we will see, rats can cause a great deal of trouble in monastic communities: they eat leftover food, gnaw on clothes and mats, and make holes in the floor or walls. Moreover, they epitomize uncleanness. Yet, Buddhism treats them in precisely the same manner as it treats all other animals: they should not be harmed, but gently removed. That said, the vinaya stories do not cast rats in a positive light. For example, they often portray them as evil thieves. On the other hand, there are occasional references to their loyalty and cleverness, particularly with regard to their ability to outwit their worst enemies—cats.
2.1. Annoyances Caused by Rats

2.1.1. Eating Leftover Food

All of the vinayas categorize storing leftover food as a pācittika offense. The Mahāsāṃghika vinaya (T no. 1421, 22: 8.54b1–7) explains that this prohibition was drafted because insects and rats (chong shu 虫鼠) may damage the monks’ lodgings by chewing through the walls to gain access to the leftovers. Moreover, if laypeople were to see the resulting holes in the walls, they would likely deduce what had attracted the rats and criticize the monks’ overabundance of food. Monastics are warned not to hoard other edible goods, too. For instance, the Pali vinaya (Vin III, pp. 250–51) cautions against storing medicines such as ghee, butter, oil, honey, and molasses in pots and bags that are liable to leak. Should that happen, the monastery would be overrun by rats (undura), which would lead to rebukes and criticism of the monks’ luxurious lifestyle.

Notwithstanding these two examples, the vinayas contain surprisingly few references to rats eating human food, so it seems that this was not considered a major problem. Moreover, a parallel text that served as a moral code for lay Buddhist followers (the Youposai jie jing 優婆塞戒經; Upasakaśīla Sūtra; Sūtra on Upasaka Precepts, translated by the monk Dharmarakṣa between 424 and 426 CE), goes so far as to encourage compassion towards rats (and sparrows) that eat grain in fields or barns. It says (T no. 1488, 24: 5.1059a21–23):

復觀田倉多有鼠雀犯暴穀米。恒生憐愍復作是念。如是鼠雀因我得活。念已歡喜無觸惱想。當知是人得福無量。

If, when [a person] sees many rats and sparrows damaging grain in his field or barn, he always feels compassion for them and then thinks, “In this way, rats and sparrows are able to live because of me,” and if, after thinking this, he feels joyful and has no thoughts of harming them, you should know that this person will attain immeasurable blessings.

Clearly, in this text, compassion and the merit it ensures override any annoyance a rat may cause.

2.1.2. Gnawing on Mats and Robes

While the vinayas rarely address the issue of rats eating the monastics’ food, they are much more concerned with the damage they can do to mats and robes, especially when these items are improperly stored. The Pāli vinaya, for instance, mentions that rats—and often also ants (upacikā)—have a tendency to gnaw on robes, mats, bags, and even fastenings made out of creepers and cords that are used to tie doors to walls, while the Mahāsāṃghikha vinaya (T no. 1425, 22: 9.308b13–17; p.309a16–20) warns that birds and rats are liable to pilfer mats that monks store incorrectly. Similarly, the Pinimu jing 毘尼母經 (*Vinaya Mātrkā Sūtra), a vinaya commentary that was translated into Chinese in the second half of the fourth or the start of the fifth century CE, states that insects and rats will gnaw on abandoned mats (T no. 1463, 24: 4.824a9–14). Consequently, the Buddha urged monks to beat mats clean and fold them neatly prior to leaving a room. Meanwhile, the Mulasarvāstivāda *Vinayasanggraha—*Viśeṣamitra’s (?–?) commentary on the Mulasarvāstivāda vinaya that the aforementioned Yijing translated into Chinese—insists that robes must be handled with care and stored in places where they will not be eaten by insects (including ants), chewed on by cows, or gnawed on by rats (T no. 1458, 24: 5.554b1–3). Similarly, the Binaie 鼻奈耶 (a transcription of vinaya)—a vinaya text that was translated into Chinese in 383 CE—cautions against storing surplus robes in a pile as this will cause them to rot, and insects, moths, and mice (chong du shu 虫蠹鼠) will gnaw on them. Should laypeople witness this, they will surely criticize the monks. As a result, the Buddha prohibited the accumulation of extra robes and categorized any breach of this rule as a nihṣargika pācittika (T no.1464, 24: 6.874b19–27).
Clearly, then, rats are viewed as opportunists that will take full advantage of monks’ neglect of their belongings by gnawing at them and so rendering them unclean (bu jìng 不淨). The Mahiśāsaka vinaya (T no. 1421, 22: 21.142a22–24) hints at this when advocating the use of an underskirt (chen shen yi 撓身衣; probably a simple piece of cloth) to protect the main monastic robes from soiling (bu jìng) with mud, as this would attract rats.19 Similarly, the Mahāsāṃghika vinaya urges monks to ensure that their seating material is not soiled (bu jìng) by insects, rats, dirt, or dust (T no. 1425, 22: 14.342c3–11).

Given that a monastic robe becomes unclean from the moment when a rat gnaws on it, some of the vinaya texts consider whether such a tainted item may still be worn. This discussion is inextricably linked to the subject of pāṃśukūla (cīvāra) robes—otherwise known as “refuse rags”—which were fashioned from material retrieved from a “dust-heap” (pāṃśu-kūla)20 and worn by some members of the monastic community in accordance with one of the twelve (or thirteen) ascetic practices (dhūtaguna).21 Many of these dust-heaps were located in cemeteries, while others were adjacent to washing places or simply on the roadside.22 The monks and nuns who wore refuse rags did so to demonstrate their detachment from property and beauty, which they insisted overrode any negative connotations of filth and waste. Here, though, it is important to note that robes are a highly sensitive issue in the vinaya texts, as they are said to represent the reputation and purity of the monastic community. As Gregory Schopen points out: “To be accepted as a Buddhist monk one must not present in public an unkempt appearance or be seen in disreputable robes.” (Schopen 2007, p. 70.). Similarly, Steven Collins emphasizes that a monastic’s social position rests on “a spotless performance.” (Collins 1997, p. 198). Therefore, as a general rule, any dirty robe should be thoroughly washed.23 That said, as Nicholas Witkowski has demonstrated, monastics who chose a dhūtaguna lifestyle felt that it was incumbent on them to wear nothing but refuse rags, or at least transform them into respectable robes. However, this leaves the question of whether monastic robes that have been defiled by rats may be considered as legitimate refuse rags and repurposed accordingly.

There is a distinct lack of consistency on this issue not only across the vinayas but sometimes within individual traditions. In the Pāli vinaya, any robe that rats or ants have gnawed is classified as “destroyed” (nattha cīvara), which means it may be replaced (Vin III, p. 213). However, such a robe may still be considered an acceptable refuse rag. Indeed, in the same vinaya’s Parivāra chapter, robes that have been gnawed by rats appear in a list of acceptable (Pāli) pāṃśukūla robes (Vin V, p. 129).24 There are comparable guidelines in the Mūlasarvāstivādā tradition: while the Mūlasarvāstivādā vinaya (T no. 1442, 23: 17.715c10–13; T no. 1443, 23: 8.947a25–28), the Mūlasarvāstivādā Vinayakārīka (T no. 1459, 24: 626c17–20),25 and the Mūlasarvāstivādā *Vinayasamgraha (T no. 1458, 24: 5.552a20–23) all include robes gnawed by rats in their lists of legitimate refuse rags (fen sao yi 糞掃衣—that is, pāṃśukūla robes), the latter text also notes that clothes that have been damaged by insects and rats should be considered “lost” (T no. 1458, 24: 6.557b3–4). In contrast, the Sarvāstivādā vinaya includes rags gnawed by rats in two separate lists of inappropriate refuse rags (T no. 1435, 23: 51.371a7–8 and 56.413c23–25),26 while the Sapoduo pīṇi piposha 蘇婆多毘尼毘婆沙 (a commentary on this vinaya) urges monastics not to accept or offer gifts of robes that rats have gnawed (T no. 1440, 23: 5.531c20–21 (accept); T no. 1440, 23: 7.546b22–23 (offer)).27 Nevertheless, the latter text clearly acknowledges that some monastics do own such items as it includes them in a list of monks’ possessions (T no. 1440, 23: 4.526c23–25). In contrast, again, the Mahiśāsaka and Dharmaguptaka traditions are at least internally consistent, as their respective vinayas (T no. 1421, 22: 21.143b13–17; T no. 1428, 22: 39.850a22–23 and 60.101b26–28) not only permit monks to wear rags that have been gnawed by rats but also include them in their lists of permissible refuse rags.

Overall, then, while most of the vinaya traditions consider clothes gnawed by rats as problematic, the guidance on their use often remains a matter of debate.
2.1.3. Making Holes in Floors and Walls

The holes that rats make in floors or walls are another cause for concern for the authors-compilers of the six vinayas. For instance, the Sarvastivada vinaya characterizes areas with holes made by snakes, centipedes, venomous insects, and rats as “difficult” (nan 難; T no.1435, 23: 3.20c16–18).28 Similarly, both the Mahasanghika vinaya (T no. 1425, 22: 34.505c21–23) and the Dharmaguptaka vinaya (T no. 1428, 22: 33.802b15–16 and 49.931b1) advocate filling in rats’ holes with mud.29 The latter vinaya also explains that while monastics should usually abstain from digging the ground or even asking someone else to do so, there are some exceptions to this rule, such as when cleaning the floor or removing earth that rats have disturbed (T no. 1428, 11.641b20–24).30

The maintenance of a spotlessly clean environment was probably the primary motivation behind these injunctions to fill in rats’ holes and tunnels and therefore, eliminate the most visible signs of their presence. However, doing so clearly would have had the added, more practical benefit of making it more difficult for them to reenter and traverse the monastic compound.

2.2. How to Deal with Rats

Unsurprisingly, given the annoyance, damage, and disruption to Buddhist practice that rats can cause, the vinayas offer a series of guidelines for monastics on how best to protect themselves and their belongings from these persistent pests. First, though, all of them reiterate that no member of the Buddhist community should intentionally kill any living creature, including rats, and that violating this stipulation constitutes a pacittika offense:

若比丘故殺畜生命者波逸提。

If a bhikusu [monk] deliberately breaks off the life of an animal, he commits a pacittika.31

Moreover, the Mulasarvastivada *Vinayasangraha explicitly states that this rule encompasses birds, snakes, and rats (T no. 1458, 24: 12.595a9–10). However, the injunction against killing does not imply that monks and nuns must remain completely defenseless against annoying animals.32 Indeed, some of the vinayas actively encourage the removal of rats from monastic buildings. For instance, the Dharmaguptaka vinaya (T no. 1428, 42.870c16–19) relates that a group of monks were frightened (jing wei 驚畏) by an infestation of rats, which prompted the Buddha to assure them that they were permitted to startle (jing 驚) the animals and drive them out of the monastery. He also sanctioned catching the creatures in a box, on the condition that they were subsequently released and not left to die.33 Protecting the lives of rats and snakes is similarly inviolable in the Mulasarvastivada Vinayakarika (T no. 1459, 24: 3.647c15–20), which states that such creatures must always be considered with “compassionate thoughts” (bei nian 悲念). However, if necessary, they can be gently removed and released in a safe place where there are no people. The Mahasanghika vinaya (T no.1425, 22: 14.343b8–19) adopts a slightly different perspective by focusing on what might motivate a rat’s removal. After specifying that a monk who drives a fellow monastic out of a room commits a pacittika offense, the vinaya goes on to explain that banishing a snake or a rat while feeling anger or hatred (chen hui 瞋恚) toward it is also an offense, albeit a less serious one, termed a yuepini zui 越毘尼罪.34 On the other hand, if the monk calmly announces, without anger or hatred, “It is a useless thing” (wu yi zhi wu 無益之物) prior to driving it out, he commits no offense.35 Therefore, the injunction is clearly against acting maliciously, rather than the act itself.

Some of the vinayas go further than these prohibitions against harming the creatures themselves and warn against damaging or blocking their habitats. For instance, the Pali vinaya (Vin III, p. 151) insists that no rat’s nest (iṣaya) should be destroyed during the construction of a new building. The same goes for the homes of ants, termites, snakes, scorpions, and many other creatures, too. Meanwhile, according to the Mulian wen jielü zhong wu bai qing zhong shi 目連問戒律中五百輕重事, Five Hundred Questions Asked by
Maudgalyāyana on Light and Heavy Vinaya Issues, which was translated into Chinese between 317 and 420, (Demiéville et al. 1978, p. 126) an interior rat’s hole may be blocked on condition that it leads to another hole outside the house. If only one hole is found, it must remain unblocked (T no. 1483, 24: 983b25–27 and 995b24–27).

In summary, all Buddhists must take great care not to harm any living creature, including rats, even if they are a nuisance. However, they can be gently driven away or captured, taken to a safe place, and released, if necessary.

2.3. The Rat’s Reputation

As mentioned earlier, the vinayas have a generally negative attitude toward rats, often characterizing them as bad-mannered creatures or thieves. On the other hand, they sometimes allude to rats’ supposed loyalty to other animals, and consequently to their role in defeating Devadatta—the Buddha’s cousin and rival, who came to be seen as the embodiment of evil behavior.36

2.3.1. Rats’ Bad Manners

The Mahāsāṃghika vinaya is especially concerned with rats’ bad manners in its guidelines on how monastics should walk and eat. For instance, when a monk enters a layman’s house, he should not shake his head as “prostitutes, rats, and wolves” do because his host will associate this with the behavior of evil men (huai bai ren 坏敗人) (T no. 1425, 22: 21.401b14–17). In addition, monks should not lap up food with their tongues and allow spit to dribble out of their mouths because this is how negligent people (fang yi ren 放逸人), snakes, rats, dogs, and cats eat. Once again, this sort of vulgar conduct is associated with evilness (T no. 1425, 22: 22.404b22–25). Similarly, monks who chew noisily are bracketed with pigs and rats (T no. 1425, 22: 22.406a4–7).

2.3.2. Thieving Rats

Several vinayas portray rats as thieves that hide their booty in their holes, which naturally raises the question of what monks should do if they come across the stolen items. For instance, if monks collect them for their own use, have they themselves committed theft? In general, the vinayas classify stealing as a pārājika offense—the most serious category, which is usually punishable by loss of monastic status.37 Yet, the Mahāsāṃgha vinaya (T no. 1421, 22: 28.183c26–28) states that if a monk finds a bag of money in a rat’s hole and seizes it in the knowledge that he is stealing, he commits a less serious (although still grave) sthūlātyaya offense, just as he would if taking something that he knew belonged to a bird or some other creature.38 So, while rats are not accorded the same status as human victims of theft, seizing their possessions is still considered an offense.

The Dharmaguptaka vinaya’s guidelines on this issue are more complex, so it illustrates them with two distinct stories (T no. 1428, 22: 55.978a24–29). First, it tells of a group of rats that gathered walnuts in the local village and stored them in the monastery. When the monks found the nuts and took them, knowing that they were stealing, they committed a pārājika offense. The circumstances—and the judgment—in the second story are rather different. The monks in the Jetavana monastery found a number of rats’ holes, so they sent an attendant to fill them in, whereupon the attendant found medicine and pieces of silk that he handed to the monks.39 Unsure whether they should accept these items, the monks petitioned the Buddha for advice. The Buddha decreed that the animals had no use for the medicine or the silk, so the monks had not committed a (pārājika) offense. Nevertheless, they should still not accept such items as gifts. There are several important aspects to this story. First, by ordering an attendant to destroy the rats’ holes, rather than doing it themselves, the monks seem to avoid any responsibility for a deliberate act of destruction. Second, as the monastics had no knowledge of the medicine and silk prior to the moment when the attendant handed them over, they cannot be accused of intending to steal these items. Third, unlike the walnuts in the first story, medicine, and silk are said by the Buddha to be of no use to rats (although one could of course wonder whether rats might not have
liked to use the silk as bedding, for instance). Thus, it is clear that the Dharmaguptaka vinaya is primarily concerned with the monks’ intentions, and the extent to which animals need what they have gathered, rather than the status of rats.

The Sarvastivada vinaya (T no. 1435, 23: 58.431a20–29) raises another issue in relation to theft: whether one has the right to recoup one’s stolen belongings. In the illustrative story, the monastery’s storeroom contains food, drinks, and precious objects. A group of rats make their way inside, steal (tou) these items, and carry them to their holes. They also seize pieces of material. At first, the monks do not know who or what is stealing their belongings. However, one day, a monk deposits the alms he has received while begging in the storeroom. Later, when he returns for the food, he sees a group of rats scurrying off with it. The monk chases the rats, destroys their holes, and collects not only the food they had taken from him (i.e., his possessions) but other items, too (i.e., the rats’ possessions). His fellow monks decide that he has committed a parajika offense, but the accused monk doubts this ruling. The Buddha decrees that he has not, in fact, committed a parajika offense; nevertheless, he should have taken only his own belongings. Therefore, the Sarvastivada vinaya permits a victim of theft to recoup their own—but not others’—stolen goods (at least from rats).

The very next story in the Sarvastivada vinaya (T no. 1435, 23: 58.431a29–b11) begins with a monk sleeping in his room. A rat enters with food and places it under the monk’s bed. In the morning, the monk washes his hands and receives the food from an attendant (jing ren). The other monks rarely see this monk begging for alms, yet they notice that he still has food. When they ask him about this and he tells them what happened, they decide that he has committed a parajika offense because the rat itself did not offer him the food. However, the Buddha explains that the rat who brought the food was the monk’s father in a previous life, so in this instance the monk has committed no offense. Nevertheless, the message is clear: monks cannot simply take rats’ food whenever they wish. Indeed, under normal circumstances, this would be considered a parajika offense.

In summary, several vinayas discuss rats’ thieving nature and provide various guidelines on how monks should deal with it. Although there are some slight differences across the texts, all of the traditions consider intentional theft from a rat as a punishable breach of the monastic code, albeit not always a parajika offense. In addition, the Sarvastivada vinaya permits monks to recoup their stolen belongings.

2.3.3. Rats’ Loyalty and Cleverness

The Mulasarvastivada vinaya, which is renowned for its colorful stories, includes three in which a rat plays a major role. On each occasion, the rat defeats Devadatta after the Buddha’s evil cousin has tricked his companions. All three of these tales appear in the Samghabhededavastu (T no. 1450, 24), the chapter on schisms.

In the first story (T no. 1450, 24: 17.188a29–c20), a rat, a snake, a lion, and a number of other animals all fall into a pit. The lion knows that he is the strongest creature there, but he also understands that they are all in the same predicament, so he chooses not to harm any of the others. A hunter then comes across the pit. First, he helps out the lion, who thanks him and informs him that one of the creatures in the pit is an insect with a black head (hei tou chong) is ungrateful, so the hunter should not bother to save it. However, the hunter disregards this advice and saves all of the other stranded animals, including the insect. Later, each of the formerly trapped animals “profits”—that is, acquires something—and offers it to the hunter. For instance, an owl steals jewelry from the king and his courtiers while they are sleeping in a garden, then presents it to the hunter. The black-headed insect hears of this and tells the king where he will find the jewels, whereupon the furious king tracks down the hunter and seizes hold of him. The hunter swears that he has never stolen anything, explains that the jewels were a gift from the owl, and returns them to the king. Nevertheless, the king still imprisons him. The rat sees this and alerts the snake, who hatches a plan: he will bite the king so that the hunter can use a charm to save the monarch’s life; the grateful king will then release the hunter and give him a
reward. The rat dutifully relays the plan to the hunter, who plays his part perfectly, saves the king, and receives his reward. Finally, it is revealed that the hunter is the Buddha while the duplicitous black-headed insect is his cousin Devadatta. However, perhaps the most interesting aspect of this tale is that the rat is characterized as loyal and grateful, rather than annoying and larcenous.

The second story (T no. 1450, 24: 17.188c22–189a15) similarly highlights rats’ fidelity. A weasel (shu lang 鼠狼), a rat, and a venomous snake all seek shelter in the same hole during a downpour. The weasel wants to attack the rat, but the snake points out that they are all in the same predicament, so they should not harm each other. The weasel and the snake then ask the rat to venture outside and collect some food. The rat complies with their request, but the weasel still vows to eat him should he return empty handed. However, the snake warns the rat, which enables him to escape from the weasel following his failure to find food. The rat is the Buddha, who is loyal and trusts his companion, the snake. The weasel is Devadatta.

The third and final story (T no. 1450, 24: 20.201c10–202a7) focuses on the king of the rats, who uses his cunning to defeat his worst enemy, a cat (mao猫). The king has five hundred subjects, all of whom live in the vicinity of an old cat. The cat killed many rats in his younger days, but now he finds it much more difficult to catch them, so he devises a new strategy. He sits, seemingly in meditation, in front of the rats’ hole. When the rats emerge, they ask the cat what he is doing, and the cat replies that he committed many offenses in the past, but now he wants to atone for those crimes. The rats are happy to hear that the cat has decided to follow a more virtuous path, so they honor him by walking three times around him. The cat watches quietly until almost all of the rats have passed by but then pounces and eats the final rat. This happens a number of times until the king of the rats realizes that some of his subjects are missing. He also notices that the cat seems to have much more energy than previously. Upon investigating the cat’s excrement, the king finds evidence of his fellow rats’ hair and bones, and his suspicions are confirmed when he catches the cat in the act of eating one of his subjects. He wishes the cat peace, but announces that he will no longer be able to feed on rats. The false cat is Devadatta.

Interestingly, this story not only discusses rats but also focuses on a cat—an animal that rarely features in the vinaya texts. A short anecdote in the Mulasarvastivāda vinaya (T no. 1442, 23: 32.799c23–801b12) in which a young man sets himself on the road to wealth by offering a dead rat to a cat’s owner suggests that at least some people kept domesticated cats. And two separate passages in the Mahāsāṃghika vinaya mention cats spying on rats. Otherwise, though, cats are notable by their absence. One possible explanation for this is that they were rarely kept as fully domesticated animals in Indian monasteries or laypeople’s homes. However, they were widely used for pest control in China, which meant that Chinese vinaya commentators felt duty bound to tackle the issue of whether it was advisable or even permissible for monasteries to keep cats and other animals for that purpose.

3. Rats in Chinese Vinaya Commentaries

The sudden abundance of translated disciplinary texts in fifth century China soon prompted local masters to write extensive commentaries in which they analyzed the vinayas and introduced them to the domestic monastic audience. This paper focuses on the commentaries and guidelines of one of these early Chinese Buddhist masters, Daoxuan (596–667), who effectively established the benchmark for monastic behavior in China for the next millennium and beyond. In his works, Daoxuan strongly adheres to every aspect of the Indian vinaya texts, including their prohibitions against deliberately harming or killing any living creature. In addition, though, he provides detailed guidelines on issues that the original Indian texts fail to address, including the common Chinese practice of keeping cats and dogs for the sole purpose of killing rodents.
3.1. Daoxuan’s Vinaya Commentaries

All of Daoxuan’s commentaries, including his foremost work, the *Sifen lü shanfan buque xingshi chao*, An Abridged and Explanatory Commentary on the Dharmaguptaka Vinaya (T no. 1804, 40), explore the vinaya guidelines in forensic detail. When discussing the vinayas’ guidelines on animals, his primary focus is on acting with intent to cause harm, and the karmic consequences of doing so. For instance, after acknowledging that the vinayas classify deliberately killing an animal as a pācittika offense, Daoxuan goes further and suggests that the karmic consequences of committing such an offense cannot be entirely expunged merely by observing the stipulated vinaya protocols. He writes (T no. 1804, 40: 下 1.104b17–18):

即使三悪道罪不除。如比丘殺畜。罪報猶在。

Even if one repents the offenses that lead to the three evil destinies [hell, hungry ghost, and animal], [the karmic effect] is not annulled. This is the case when a bhikṣu kills an animal. The retribution for the offense remains.

Here, as throughout Daoxuan’s commentaries, the intent of the perpetrator is paramount. Hence, the karmic impact is undiminished because the monk deliberately killed an animal, even though he subsequently regrets committing a pācittika offense and atones for that offense by performing the requisite penance. This message is reiterated in another section of the same text (T no. 1804, 40: 中 1.49a9–14):

如明了論述云。有四種惡言犯罪。一者濁重貪瞋癡心。二者不信業報。三者不惜所受戒。四者輕慢佛語。故心而造則得重果。以此文證。由無惭愧初無改悔。是不善心。故成論害心殺蟻。重於慈心殺人。由根本業重。決定受報縛繫眾罪。業道不除。

As mentioned in the *Mingliao lun*, there are four kinds of despicable acts that are recorded as offenses: one, being greedy, angry, or foolish with a contaminated mind; two, showing disbelief in the workings of karma; three, not cherishing the precepts one has accepted; and four, belittling the words of the Buddha. If one acts intentionally, one experiences a heavy karmic effect. As this text explains, since there is no shame and not even a beginning of repentance, this is a non-benevolent state of mind. Therefore, the Cheng lun 成論 (*Tattvasiddhiśāstra*) [says] that killing an ant with an evil state of mind is worse than killing a person with a compassionate state of mind. Since the karmic effect will be heavy, one certainly receives retribution, even if one expiates the pācittika offense (duo zui 墮罪). The karma will not be annulled.

This conviction that intentionally harming animals has serious karmic consequences informs Daoxuan’s analysis of several of the vinaya passages that discuss rats. Although he does not refer to many of the problems that rats may cause, he mentions them briefly during a discussion of clothes that are gnawed or burned, and adds that such items of clothing are considered taboo in India and consequently thrown away (which may be taken as a hint that Chinese monastics did not have such a taboo) (T no. 1804, 40: 下 1.112a13–14). Later, when discussing the prohibition against monastics digging the ground, he echoes the Dharmaguptaka vinaya’s exception that they may remove earth that rats have disturbed (T no. 1804, 40: 中 3.76c25–28; T no. 1806, 40: 中 4.43c16–20). Similarly, he asserts that holes made by snakes and rats in a *stūpa* should be filled (T no. 1804, 40: 下 3.134b12). Finally, he endorses the Mahāsāṃghika vinaya’s guideline that rats may be driven out of a building on condition that this is not done in a state of anger (T no. 1804, 40: 中 5.78b5–6) as well as the Dharmaguptaka vinaya’s recommendation that they may be removed as long as they are released safely (T no. 1804, 40: 下 4.148b7–8).

On the subject of taking animals’ possessions, and specifically those belonging to rats, Daoxuan discusses whether this should constitute a pārijjaka offense. Although he does not directly address the Dharmaguptaka and Mahāsāṃghika vinayas’ contrasting views on this
issue, he offers an explanation for the former’s somewhat harsher ruling (T no. 1804, 40: 中 1.59a18–21):

> 有人斷同大重者，胡律云。鼠故桃積成大聚。比丘盜之。佛言波羅夷。故有解。非望畜生還望本主。以鼠鼠疑豫未決望人猶是本主。故還就人結重。

Some people judge that [the theft of animals’ possessions] is similar to a grave offense [in this case a pārājika offense]. Therefore, [the Dharmaguptaka] vinaya says, “Rats steal walnuts and pile them up on a big heap. A bhikṣu steals them. The Buddha says that he commits a pārājika offense.” The reason can be explained. It is not judged from the perspective of the animal, but it is still judged from the perspective of the original owner, because, when the rat steals, it is not yet certain and not yet decided [who the true owner is]. Thus, the [issue] is still judged by regarding the person [whose walnuts the rats stole] as the original owner. Therefore, with reference to the person, [the theft] is seen as a grave offense.

Thus, Daoxuan’s interpretation of this passage is that the Dharmaguptaka vinaya must consider that the walnuts’ original human owner is still their rightful owner, regardless of the fact that a rat has stolen them, so any subsequent theft from the rat would still constitute theft from the person—that is, a pārājika offense. The implication of this analysis is that stealing something that truly belongs to a rat (as opposed to something the animal has stolen) may be considered a lesser offense, because no transgression has been committed against a previous human owner. In this way, Daoxuan deftly reconciles the Dharmaguptaka and Mahiśāsaka vinayas’ seemingly incompatible guidelines on the subject of stealing from animals.

3.2. Daoxuan’s Comments on the Situation in China

Much of Daoxuan’s renown stems from the fact that he was a fervent defender of Buddhism. This is reflected in his texts, where he frequently advocates strict adherence to the vinaya guidelines on the grounds that they constitute a first line of defense against the decline of the Dharma. For instance, in his biographical work Further Biographies of Eminent Monks (Xu gaoseng zhuan 續高僧傳; T no. 2060: 621a14–15), he states:

> Vinaya is the life of the Dharma. If one propagates it, the life [of the Dharma] is complete; now, if one does not intend to promote [vinaya], the True Dharma will be extinguished.

Daoxuan also warns against the decline of the Dharma in the Sifen lü shanfan buqe xingshi chao (T no. 1804, 40: 上 2.23c8–15):

> 滅法不久。寺家庫藏庫所多不結淨。適俗通濁淨穢混然。立寺經久。網維無數。忽聞立淨惑耳驚心。豈非師僧上座妄居淨住導引後生同開惡道。或畜貓狗專擬殺鼠。牛杖馬鞭刦獸。如是等類皆是惡律儀。難心雲。惡律儀者流注相續成也。善生成論。若受惡律儀則失善戒。今寺畜貓狗。並欲盡形。非惡律儀阿也。同畜一無戒。

[If the aforementioned behavior continues], the disappearance of Dharma is not far away. The storage rooms and kitchens of monasteries have often not been designated as purified [places] (jie jing 結淨). Monastic and laity intermix [throughout the monasteries], and what is pure or dirty becomes indistinguishable. Monasteries have been established for a long time, but regulations have not been taught. When [monastics] suddenly heard of [the correct procedure for] establishing a purified [storage room and kitchen], they were confused and shocked. Is it not that teachers and seniors, completely oblivious of a pure life, lead the younger generation on a journey down an unwholesome path? Some keep cats and dogs with the specific intention of killing rats, or they [have] sticks for cattle, reins for horses, halters and pegs. All such acts are evil deportment (e lü yi 惡律儀). The Za xin 雜心 (*Samyuktābhidharmahṛdayaśāstra) says that
“evil deportment” (e lü yi) means that there is a flow of unwholesome acts, continuously being accomplished. The Shansheng 善生 (Upāsakaśīla Sūtra) and the Cheng lun 成論 (Tattvasiddhiśastra) leave no doubt that if one embraces evil deportment, one loses good morality. Now, monastics keep cats and dogs in their monasteries, intending to have them for their whole lives. If this is not evil deportment, what else can it be? If the whole community together raises [cats and dogs], [then] the entire community is lacking [vinaya] rules.

In this lengthy extract, Daoxuan builds a strong argument that all animals should be treated well, and certainly that cats and dogs should not be kept to hunt other creatures, including rats. Indeed, he draws on several texts to explain why the latter practice contradicts Buddhist principles. First, he refers to a passage in the *Samyuktābhīdhamahārājaśāstra (T no. 1552, 28: 3.890b12–c3)* that addresses the issue of “restraint and non-restraint” (lü yi bu lü yi 律儀不律儀; i.e., good and evil deportment). This text asserts that both good and bad morality (shan ji bu shan ji 善及不善戒) flow and that they are continuously or successively accomplished (liu zhu xiang xu cheng 流注相續成), then explains that good morality should be displayed toward all living beings and that it is a prerequisite for monastic ordination. Its much more detailed definition of “non-restraint” (bu lü yi 不律儀; i.e., evil deportment and thus bad morality) includes a list of twelve “evil” occupations, many of which relate to animals: slaughterer of sheep, chicken-keeper, pig-keeper, bird-catcher, fisherman, hunter, slaughterer of dogs, and game warden (i.e., chief hunter), along with thief, executioner, jailer, and dragon-charmer.

Next, Daoxuan cites the Upāsakaśīla Sūtra (T no. 1488, 24: 7.1069c8–1070a2), which states that those who follow good precepts (shan jiie 善戒) receive many blessings, whereas those who follow incorrect precepts (e jie 惡戒) amass inmeasurable faults. The Upāsakaśīla Sūtra equates “incorrect precepts” with “evil deportment” (e lü yi) and illustrates this with a list of fifteen improper occupations that is broadly similar to the aforementioned list in the *Sanmyuktābhīdhamahārājaśāstra.* Interestingly, the same sūtra specifically prohibits keeping dogs for hunting (and thus killing) purposes and suggests that anyone who does this, or follows one of the other banned careers, is sure to accumulate a great deal of bad karma throughout the life course. Daoxuan seems to share this view, as he asks how keeping cats and dogs in monasteries can be anything other than evil deportment.

Finally, Daoxuan supports his argument with reference to a philosophical treatise, the Tattvasiddhiśastra. He does not include a quotation at this point, but he is most likely thinking of two passages that contrast the benefits of good deportment (shan lü yi 善律儀) with the unwelcome repercussions of bad deportment (bu shan lü yi 不善律儀) (T no. 1646, 32: 8.302b21–303c3).

In another commentary, the Liang chu qing zhong yi 章處輕重義, Models for Measuring and Handling Light and Heavy Property (T no. 1895, 45: 845b22–c19), Daoxuan distinguishes between animals that are economically useful, even in a monastery, and those that are not. First, he mentions domesticated animals—such as camels, donkeys, cows, and sheep. These animals may be kept as long as they are treated properly, without recourse to whips or sticks. Next, he insists that all wild animals—including monkeys and apes, deer, bears, pheasants, rabbits, mountain cocks, wild ducks, and geese—should be released into nature. He then introduces a third and final group of animals: those that monasteries keep for the express purpose of killing rodents. Once again, Daoxuan is unequivocal on this issue (T no. 1895, 45: 845b26–27):

> 善惡律儀即狗鴉鵪鶉鼠蟲鼠弩弓殺具等。及弓箭五兵機羅殺具者。

Keeping [these animals] is [a sign of] evil deportment (e lü yi): cats, dogs, owls, and hawks. Poison and crossbows [are also used to kill] rats, as are cages, and so on. And bows and arrows, five kinds of weapons, traps and snares, [all] instruments to kill.

Later in the same text, he explains (T no. 1895, 45: 845c9–19):
As for things [connected] to evil deportment to evil deportment, there are not so many in this category. At times, in remote as well as central regions, a lack of knowledge is evident. Some people keep and use [such things]. And since these things exacerbate the offense [against living beings], they should be burned and rejected. It is just as much against the Dharma as a hut made out of mud, [which must be destroyed]. Therefore, the *Shanjian lü piposha* 舍見律毘婆沙 says that if one is offered weapons, the *sāṃgha* should destroy them, and one cannot sell them. If one sells [weapons] to a person prior to their committing murder, then the karmic retribution for the seller is the same [as the murderer]. In commentaries [it is said that] if one keeps things that go against the rules, then the monastic managers destroy them, so they do not increase wealth or fault. The correct position is that [these things] are clearly proscribed; this is doubtless the standard to use. There are also those who raise and keep cats and dogs, specifically to kill [rats]. The *sūtras* and commentaries proscribe this as “evil deportment.” Together keeping these [animals for pest control], one diverges from the good precepts. If one sells them, the karmic retribution will be even worse, since they are living beings. If one gives them to someone else, this still perpetuates harmful intentions (*hai xin* 善心) and ultimately manifests [karmic] bondage. The deep wilds of fitting release let them come and go as they please. The manifest yoke of forced bondage further increases their hardship. Only by following the previous determination we can both [i.e., the animals and the monastics] feel at ease, thus calming the enemy of birth and death and newly establishing a holy residence of compassion. (As for birds of prey, they should be dealt with according to the same principle, and released into the open.)

It may come as a surprise that people kept dogs as rat-catchers, but there is clear evidence that they were domesticated in China as early as the Shang era (c. twelfth century BCE onwards), and they were certainly associated with pest control prior to the start of the Common Era. For example, there is a beautiful illustration of a dog catching a rat in a Han Dynasty tomb in Sichuan (see Figure 1). It is generally agreed that the domestication of cats—and their use as rat-catchers—was a somewhat later development, although opinions differ on precisely when this began. The debate centers on how best to interpret the term *li* 獸, which at one time may have encompassed everything from wild cats, to other small felines, to completely different species, such as raccoon dogs. Nevertheless, von Kispal insists that *li* was used—if not exclusively—in reference to domesticated cats from at least the third century BCE onwards. By contrast, Barrett and Strange argue that the previous, broader definition may have persisted long into the Common Era. Either way, it seems likely that the domestication of wild cats was a slow and gradual process. That said, as Wilt Idema has demonstrated in his study and translation of Chinese animal fables, there is evidence that not only keeping but breeding cats became increasingly popular over the course of the Tang Dynasty. This may explain why Daoxuan felt the need to comment on the animals’ use in pest control. Moreover, several entries in the Chinese Buddhist dictionary *Yiqijing yinyi* 一切經音義 (Sounds and Meanings for all [the Words in the] Scriptures; 7* no. 2128, 54), begun by the seventh century monk Xuanying 玄應 and completed in the early ninth century by his fellow monk Huilin 慧琳, hint that the breeding of rat-catching cats (by now termed *mao*) was fairly commonplace in Buddhist circles, if not necessarily in wider Chinese society.

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Other sources similarly point to the presence of cats in Tang monasteries. For instance, von Kispal cites a number of poems in which scholar–monks praise the cat’s aptitude for catching rats,83 while Barrett and Strange quote a number of historical sources that contain references to the animal’s “duty” (zhi 職) to catch rodents and protect grain supplies (Barrett and Strange 2019, pp. 88–93). All of these sources indicate that domesticated cats’ primary task was to keep rodents at bay. For instance, there is very little evidence that Daoxuan’s contemporaries either viewed them as pets or attempted to turn them into friendly, gentle companions.84 Interestingly, an eighth century medical treatise, the Ben cao shi yi 本草拾遺 (Additions to Materia Medica) by Chen Cangqi 陳藏器 (?–757), cited in Zhenglei bencao 證類本草 (Collected and Classified Materia Medica), a book on pharmacology written by the Song scholar Tang Shenwei 唐慎微 (1056–1093), includes details of a medical experiment in which cats were fed nothing but rice. Unsurprisingly, the experiment was a total failure, as the animals’ bones decayed so dramatically that they were left unable to walk.85 There is no evidence that Chinese monastics either knew of this experiment or attempted to replicate it with their own cats (and dogs), but even if they had, they surely would not have succeeded in keeping the animals away from meat for very long.86

This brings us back to Daoxuan’s concerns about monasteries’ use of cats and dogs for pest control, and whether this is consistent with Buddhist principles. He was not alone. For instance, one of the Fanwáng jíng 梵網經’s precepts,87 which concerns the assistance that Buddhists should extend to both the living and the dead, explicitly encourages compassion (ci xin 慈心), for example by releasing captive animals and safeguarding all living creatures.88 It also specifically condemns the rearing of cats, swine, and dogs.89

Figure 1. Image of a rat-catching dog in a cliff tomb, Qijiang 蜀江 region of Sichuan Province, Han Dynasty. Reprinted from (Dai 2018), http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1001742/7%2C000-years-of-the-dog-a-history-of-china’s-canine-companions (accessed on 6 July 2021).
Nevertheless, rats were widely despised for the annoyances they caused both within and outside monasteries. This antipathy is evident in a number of Buddhist texts that discuss rebirth as a rat, such as the fifth–sixth century *Shan’è yinguo jing* 善惡因果經 (*Sūtra of the Outcome of Good and Bad Deeds*), which was found at Dunhuang. In particular, this *sūtra* connects current misdeeds and wrongful attitudes to a previous life as a rat (T no. 2881, 85: 1382a25–26):

穿牆竊盜貪財健怨無有親者從鼠中來

[A person who] breaks walls, steals, is avaricious, and displays anger, and who has no close or distant relatives, comes from the life of a rat.

Meanwhile, Daoists—who were often heavily influenced by Buddhist concepts—drew the same connection, but in reverse. For instance, the *Taishang dongxuan lingbao yebao yinyuan jing* 太上洞玄靈寶業報因緣經, *Scripture of the Most High from the Dongxuan Lingbao Canon Regarding Retribution and Karmic Causes*, which dates to the Sui Dynasty (589–618) at the latest, suggests that rebirth as a rat is karmic retribution for living the life of a greedy human (DZ 336, Vol. 10, p. 366b8). This notion is reiterated in the popular seventh century *Dongxuan lingbao sandong fengdao kejie yingshi* 洞玄靈寶三洞奉道科戒營始, *Regulations for the Practice of Daoism in Accordance with the Scriptures of the Three Caverns, a Dongxuan Lingbao Canon* (DZ 1125), which asserts that “life as a rat or a weasel (you 鼬) comes from greedily devouring the leftovers from rites of purgation, drinking alcohol, and eating meat.” Clearly, then, rats’ problematic behavior is directly associated with and explained by negative karma and retribution in both the Daoist and the Buddhist traditions.

Finally, it is worth taking a moment to look at the mysterious rat that adorns the mid-Tang southern wall of Yulin Cave 25 (see Figure 2), which represents the paradise of Amitābha Buddha. This rat—with characteristic bloated body, sharp nose, long tail, and sleek feet—seems to be sneaking surreptitiously into a monastery at the foot of a pillar, so it may represent an unwelcome intruder. On the other hand, Vaiśravana, the god of wealth as well as a forceful protector of Buddhism, is sometimes depicted in the company of a rat, and he also appears in Yulin Cave 25. However, his image is on the northern wall—the direction with which he is commonly associated—so in this instance a direct connection with the rodent seems unlikely. Maybe the rat simply represents the practical difficulties that all Chinese monasteries were facing, given the damage that rodents could cause; or perhaps there is a deeper meaning to its unsettling presence. Either way, it probably provoked the customary reactions of revulsion and fear among anyone who caught a glimpse of it.
Rats are rarely seen as friendly animals. Although a handful of Indian and Chinese fables portray them as loyal companions, they are usually cast as badly behaved pests. Similarly, the vinaya texts address a number of the annoyances with which rats are commonly associated, such as their voracious appetite for leftover food and the damage they can cause to floors and walls in their attempts to reach it. This allows the vinayas to highlight the issue of greedy monastics who gather more food than they need, to the dismay of lay followers. Rats thus represent two distinct but interconnected problems: on the one hand, they damage monastic buildings; on the other, they are a visible sign of monks’ and nuns’ improper behavior, which damages the image of the sangha.

At least one Buddhist text (Youposai jie jing; Upāsakaśīla Sūtra; Sūtra on Upāsaka Precepts), which was primarily directed at laypeople, calls for compassion toward rats and insists they should be allowed to live their natural lives and eat their fair share of grain. Unfortunately, though, they also gnaw greedily on mats, robes, and other material, which reinforces their reputation for uncleanness (bu jing)—an unwelcome trait that the vinayas are keen to eliminate. This further extends what Suzanne Mrozik terms the “physiomoral” discourse, i.e., the physical body being both a manifest cause and effect of (un)ethical behavior. In our case, it is an unclean robe that signifies an unclean mind, so the presence of rats is not merely annoying but potentially dangerous because it undermines the purity that every monastic community seeks to display. On the other hand, dirty or threadbare robes can also signify a strong commitment to asceticism and a lack of attachment—another monastic ideal. Consequently, the vinaya texts are forced into a compromise: while they express an aversion to robes that rats have gnawed, they do not fully prohibit their use. This highlights the delicate balance that Buddhist monastics are expected to maintain between wearing humble clothing (and, by extension, living a humble life) and presenting an exemplary, spotless appearance to the outside world.
The vinaya texts are clear on the subject of rats’ presence in monasteries: they are disruptive nuisances, so they are unwelcome. However, they are also sentient beings, which means they are covered by the prominent Buddhist injunction against harming or killing any living creature. Although killing an animal is not of the same magnitude as killing a human being, the vinaya masters are still keen to promote it as a general principle by which all monastics should abide. As a result, monks and nuns are obliged to devise inventive strategies to dissuade rats from entering their monasteries—or to capture and release them—without causing them any harm. It is important to note that people are expected to carry out these tasks without the assistance of rat-catching animals, such as weasels or cats, which are scarcely mentioned in the vinayas. From this, it may be assumed that such animals were not yet used for pest control at the time when the vinayas were written.

Finally, the vinayas draw parallels between rats’ behavior and some undesirable traits. Notwithstanding occasional references to the animals’ loyalty, and the prominent role they play in a couple of stories in which the Buddha’s evil cousin Devadatta is vanquished, the prevailing attitude toward them is overwhelmingly negative. For example, the Mahāsāṃghika vinaya deems their scurrying and messy eating socially unacceptable and therefore evil. That said, this and the other vinaya texts are most concerned with rats’ larceny, although they do not go so far as to sanction depriving the animals of all their possessions as punishment for their bad behavior. Indeed, while stealing from a rat is generally not classified as a grave (pārājika) transgression, every vinaya that addresses it still considers it an offense.

Following the translation of the vinayas into Chinese, a number of local masters, such as Daoxuan, analyzed the texts and added their own comments and interpretations, in part to make the guidelines more relevant to the seventh century Chinese monastic context. For instance, in a general discussion on animals (T no. 1804, 40: 下 3.141a24), Daoxuan reminds his readers:

念一切眾生同是佛因。起不殺行。即是敬信信知因果。作長壽緣

Remember that all living beings are equally endowed with the potential to Buddhahood. That is why we should not kill. This is to respect the teaching, to put trust in the law of cause and effect, and so secure a long life.

Therefore, every sentient being, including rats, should be protected from harm. Here and elsewhere, Daoxuan’s primary focus is on the intent behind the act, rather than the act itself, as he warns his audience that the karmic consequences of committing an offense against animals cannot be entirely expunged merely by following the recommended vinaya procedures. Hence, it is no surprise that he strictly prohibits each and every form of animal abuse. Moreover, he broadens this injunction to encompass the use of cats and dogs for pest control and hints that this might be a double offense because, in addition to being held in captivity, the animals are encouraged to kill (or at least intentionally threaten) other sentient beings. To Daoxuan’s mind, this is a clear example of “evil deportment” and a sad reflection of the decline of the Buddhist Dharma. Given the strength of his comments, it seems safe to assume that Tang monasteries had few qualms about using cats to keep rats at bay, to the dismay of at least some vinaya masters. Indeed, this may have been a contentious issue long before Daoxuan was even born, as the Fanwang jing, a fifth century text that was aimed at both monastics and laypeople, condemns the domestication of cats and dogs and advocates the release of all captive animals. In other words, all Buddhists, not just monks and nuns, have an obligation to treat all animals, including rats, with compassion.

Although Daoxuan and his fellow vinaya masters may have convinced at least some of their readers to abide strictly by this principle, the general antipathy toward rats persisted in China, as is reflected in both Buddhist and Daoist reincarnation tales. These stories invariably present rebirth as a rat as karmic retribution for misdeeds in a previous life, while typical rat-like characteristics, such as larceny, greed, and anger, may resurface as human flaws. Did the artist who painted the southern wall of Yulin Cave 25 have this in mind when he added the image of a rat to his mural? Or was his intention to draw
attention to one of the many challenges that Chinese monastics had to face each day? Either way, the rat seems to be sneaking surreptitiously into the monastery, whereupon Daoxuan would have insisted that the monks were duty bound to avoid it, carefully remove it, or simply tolerate it, in accordance with the Buddhist principle of treating all living creatures with respect and compassion.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Acknowledgments:** I am grateful to Tim Barrett, Faling, Philip Parr, Stuart Young, and the anonymous reviewers at *Religions* for offering useful suggestions for improvement.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Abbreviations**


**Notes**

1 Later sets of rules, such as the so-called ‘rules of purity’, qìng guì清規, a new genre that started to develop in China from the eighth century onwards and that aims at the practical organization of large public monasteries, fall beyond the scope of the present study. Research on these later developments can further shed light on the step by step formation of a Chinese Buddhist identity.

2 For further details, see: (Yuyama 1979; Clarke 2015).

3 A Tibetan translation of the Mulasarvāstivāda *vinaya*, as well as many Sanskrit sections of the same text, are also extant. For details, see (Yuyama 1979, pp. 12–33; Clarke 2015, pp. 73–81).

4 See, among others, (Heirman 2007, pp. 192–95; Zou 2019, pp. 188–207).

5 For more information on the *vinaya* texts’ views on annoying and dangerous animals, see: (Schmithausen and Maithrimurthi 2009; Heirman 2019).

6 Dogs are also classified as dangerous, but nearly always in the context of meat consumption. This is considered dangerous on the grounds that they are likely to attack members of the monastic community if they fear they will be killed for their meat (see Heirman and Rauw 2006, pp. 60–61).

7 On insects in a Buddhist context, see (Heirman 2020).

8 See also T no. 1450, 24: 8.139c9–11: monastic dwellings should be quiet, with moderate heat and wind, and no mosquitoes, flies, snakes, or scorpions.

9 Biologically, the difference between a mouse and a rat is rather nebulous, with size being the most important factor. On the Chinese terminology, see, among others, (von Kispal 2015, pp. 39–40), who argues that problematic rodents in medieval China were usually relatively large, so she prefers the translation “rats”.


11 The term undura is usually translated as “rat” (cf. Rhys et al. [1921] 1992, p. 137, s.v. undura). The Pāli *vinaya* commonly uses this term. Still, it also mentions a māsikā, which is usually translated as “mouse” (Rhys et al. [1921] 1992, p. 540, s.v. māsika/māsikā). The māsikā is classified as a creeping creature, alongside snakes, scorpions, centipedes, spiders, and lizards (Pāli *vinaya*, Vin II, p. 110).

12 Translated after (Shih Heng-ching Bhiks.un. ¯ı 1994, p. 126) (with minor changes). The text emphasizes the importance of bodhisattva practice of lay Buddhists. As pointed out by (Shih Heng-ching Bhiks.un. ¯ı 1994, p. 1), “the sutra concludes that lay bodhisattvas encounter more difficulties in following the precepts than ordained bodhisattvas.” The compassion lay Buddhists show is therefore highly valued.
In his account of a long and difficult journey to India that he undertook between 399 and 412, Faxian (Witkowski 2017) tells of a rat that caused even more damage by chewing on a lamp’s wick and starting a fire in the Jetavana monastery (Gaoseng Faxian zhuan 唐僧法顯傳, Record of the Eminent Monk Faxian; T no. 2085, 51: 860b25–27). For translations, see: (Li 2002, p. 182; Deeg 2005, p. 537).


See (Clarke 2004) for further information on the Pinima jing. The affiliation of this text is unclear.

See (Witkowski 2017) for a discussion on the practice of pāmśūkūla.

The affiliation of this text remains a subject of debate, but it is generally thought to be Sarvāstivādī (Clarke 2015, p. 72).

Vihārīka pācittika rules relate to objects that are unlawfully obtained and therefore must be surrendered.

See (Heirman 2002, pp. 515–17), note 197 for a discussion on this method of protecting monastic robes.

See (Kieffer-Pülz 2007, pp. 15–21) for further information on both terms.

In his account of a long and difficult journey to India that he undertook between 399 and 412, Faxian (Witkowski 2017) detailed discussion on this commentary tradition.

In the non-Pāli traditions, a monk or a nun may be permitted to retain a minor position within the monastic community after incurring a pārājika offense; see (Clarke 2000, 2009a). On remaining a monk, albeit in another monastery, see (Clarke 2009b). For a critical response to Clarke’s hypothesis, see (Anālayo 2017).

A failure to commit a pārājika offense is commonly classified as a sthūlātīyāga offense. The latter is still a grave offense, but less serious than a pārājika.

A shou yuan ren 守園人 (lit. “gardener”; arūmiṇa) is a (lay) attendant in a monastery (cf. Heirman 2002, p. 497, note 48 and p. 854, note 53). His functions can sometimes overlap with those of a jing ren 淨人 (kalpikāraka), a layperson who, among other duties, makes situations “pure”—that is, acceptable or permissible—for a monk, such as by accepting donations on the monk’s behalf. See (Kieffer-Pülz 2007, pp. 15–21) for further information on both terms.
The Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinayasamgraha* contains a similar guideline (T no. 1458, 24: 2.536c25–26).

See (Liang 2010, pp. 251–80) for more information on this story and several alternative versions.

The cat’s owner repaid the young man with some garden peas. See (Barrett 1998, pp. 18–19) for more information on this anecdote.

T no. 1425, 22: 2.238b9 and 27.445a8.

See (von Kispal 2015, pp. 21–33) for a detailed history of the cat in Asia.

See (Heirman 2020, pp. 28–34) for a detailed discussion on how Daoxuan interprets the proscription against killing animals.

Daoxuan uses the abbreviation “*Cheng lun* 成論” to refer to the *Chengshī lun* 成實論 (*Tattvasiddhiśāstra; The Treatise that Accomplishes Reality; T no. 1646, 32). See (Heirman 2020, pp. 32–33 for further details). This is a philosophical treatise compiled by the Indian monk Harivarman in the middle of the third century CE, and translated into Chinese by the monk Kumārajīva at the beginning of the fifth century (see Demiéville et al. 1978, p. 139; Potter 1999, pp. 255, 741, note 317). The passage in question can be found at T no. 1646, 32: 7.291a11–13.

Both *bao* 報 and *baoting* 報應 are routinely translated as “retribution,” even though the karmic effect of an evil act is seen as a natural consequence, rather than a punishment. Therefore, a preferable translation might be “repercussion.” Many thanks to Peter Harvey for this suggestion.

The technical term *duo zui* 報罪 may refer to either a *nīḥsargika pācittika* (or variants thereof)—an offense that must be expiated while surrendering an object that is prohibited or has been improperly acquired (see Heirman 2002, pp. 138–41)—or a *pācittika* (or variants thereof)—simply an offense that must be expiated (see Heirman 2002, pp. 141–47). In this case, it probably refers to the aforementioned *pācittika* rule on the killing of animals.

For more information on cleanliness and the purity of robes, see, among others: (Schopen 2007; Heirman 2014; Witkowski 2017).

This guideline is contained within the *Sifen lü biqiu hanzhu jieben* 四分律比丘舍戒本 (T no. 1806, 40), Daoxuan’s commentary on the Dharmauguptaka *Vinaya*’s bhikṣuśprātimokṣa.

The term *lu lu* 胡律 is problematic. It may be presumed that the character *lu* 胡 (“foreign”) in the Taishō edition should be *gu* 故 (“therefore”), which appears in the same position in the alternative *gong* 宮 and *jia* 甲 editions (the former, which dates from the Song Dynasty, is housed in the Japanese imperial library (*Kunaishō* 宮書); the latter dates from the Tokugawa period, 1603–1868). Likewise, a few characters later, the term *gu tao* 故桃 (“reason-peach”) in the *Taishō* text should presumably be *hutao*胡桃 (“walnut”), as we find in the *jia* edition. In other words, it seems that the scribe of the Taishō edition transposed *lu* 胡 and *gu* 故. This conclusion is corroborated by the fact that the original Dharmauguptaka passage concerns rats stealing walnuts (*hutao*胡桃) (T no. 1428, 22: 55.978a24–29).

With many thanks to Sakda Hemthep and Max Deeg for their constructive comments on this passage.

See, for instance, (Zou 2019, pp. 150–207).

The Taishō edition actually reads *bu yu* 由 or *bu hong* 不欲弘 (“if one does not intend not to promote [vinaya]”), rather than *bu yu hong* 不欲弘 (“if one does not intend to promote [vinaya]”). However, the latter reading is found in the so-called “three editions,” commonly dated to between the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries, as well as the *gong* edition. All of these editions are related to a *tripitaka* edition that was compiled and printed between 1080 and 1176 in Fuzhou, southern China (cf. Mizuno 1982, pp. 176–77). These latter readings make much more sense than the double-negative clause in the Taishō edition.

Translation based on (Lin 2014, p. 102).

The term *jie jing* 结净 signifies that a particular location has been officially designated (*jie* 结) as a “purified place” (*jing di* 净地). In this case a monastery’s storage room and kitchen should be *jie jing* 结定 before food is stored and prepared in them (potentially by laypeople as well as the monks themselves). In this way, behavior that is not ordinarily permitted in a monastery may be “purified”—that is, made acceptable. All of the *Vinayas* outline their own versions of the *jie jing* procedure. For instance, the Dharmauguptaka *Vinaya* (T no. 1428, 22: 43.874c8–18) states that a purified place must be designated by a *bai er jien* 白二羯磨 (*jiaptīdhitavyā karman*), a formal procedure consisting of one motion (*jiapti*), one proposition (*karmanācānā*), and a conclusion. Similarly, the traveler–monk Yijing, translator of the Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*, stresses the importance of cooking and eating in a proper, well-marked place, as is found in every Chinese monastery (T no. 2125, 54: 2.216c22–217a23; translated by (Li 2000, pp. 80–82)).

The term *e lü yi* (asamvara) refers to bad practices that go against *vinaya* (Muller, Digital Dictionary, s.v. *e lü yi* 惡律儀, http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=%E6%83%A1%E5%BE%8B%E5%84%80 (accessed on 22 January 2021).
Two improper occupations, with slight variations, in several Buddhist texts (see Dessein 1999, Vol. 2, p. 155, note 65). It is intriguing to see how Daoxuan, himself a firm promoter of Mahāyāna practices (discussed in, for instance, Zou 2019, pp. 191–97) refers for his argumentation to both abhidharma texts and lay bodhisattva texts. It testifies of his broad knowledge and of his encompassing view on Chinese Buddhism.

There are lists of improper occupations, with slight variations, in several Buddhist texts (see Dessein 1999, Vol. 2, p. 155, note 265). It is unclear which of these inspired the list that appears in the Upāsakaśīla Sūtra.

It is difficult to know which species Daoxuan means by the phrase diao xiao ying yao 鷹梟鷂鷢 as both diao 鷹 (another term for chi 鷹) and xiao 椒 are general terms for “owl,” while ying 椞 and yao 鷢 are general terms for “hawk” (although Schafer 1958, pp. 309–10) specifically identifies ying as a goshawk and yao as a sparrowhawk; see (Wallace 2012, p. 102) for more on the use of these two species in Chinese falconry. However, in the context of this passage, the important point is that all of these are birds of prey, so they could have been domesticated and used to kill rodents. Hunting with eagles, hawks, and falcons (in conjunction with dogs) was possibly introduced into China from the west in the final few centuries BCE. It had become quite a popular pastime among the Tang elite by Daoxuan’s lifetime. Some markets even specialized in the sale of these birds. See (Schafer 1958; Wallace 2012; De Troia 2020, pp. 153–58).

The term wu bing 五兵 (“five weapons”) is a general term for a list of five different types of weapon. All of these lists mention daggers, lances, and spears, whereas only some of them include bows and arrows (see 1986, p. 132, s.v. 五兵).

Two vinayas (Mahāsāsaka vinaya, T no. 1421, 1.5b1–21; Dharmaguptaka vinaya, T no. 1428, 22: 1.572b6–c4) prohibit the construction and use of mud huts (in wu 克屋; “tile hut”), as does the Shanqian lü piposa 善見律品娑沙 (T no. 1462, 24: 8.727b2–c2?), which is related to Pāli vinaya, Vin III, pp. 41–42; see note 70), a text that Daoxuan mentions in the next sentence. All of these sources tell the story of a monk named Dhaniya whose thatched hut was destroyed by people collecting firewood. In response, Dhaniya made tiles by burning mud on a wood and cow-dung fire, then used the tiles to build a new hut. When the Buddha saw this, he explained that such mud huts testify to a lack of compassion (ci xin 慈心, ci min 慈愍, ci bei 慈悲) towards living creatures, as animals may be killed in the fire or when digging up the mud. Consequently, he not only banned their construction but insisted that existing mud huts should be destroyed. (Another interesting aspect to this story lies beyond the scope of this paper. Dhaniya questions whether his offense is sufficiently grave that his home should be destroyed, and ultimately accepts this ruling only because it originated with the Buddha himself. This may be an interesting first instance of an investigation into the authority of the Buddha’s commands and regulations.)

The Shanqian lü piposa (T no. 1462, 24) is sometimes presented as a direct translation of the Pāli Samantapāsādikā, a commentary on the Pāli vinaya that is traditionally attributed to the monk Buddhaghosa. (See von Hinüber 1996, pp. 103–4 for further information on this attribution and why it may be problematic.) The Chinese translation, which was completed in 488–489, is attributed to the monk Samghabhādra. Its relationship to the Pāli text is far from straightforward and has been widely debated. (See Pinte 2011 for further details on the Chinese text and its relationship to the Pāli Samantapāsādikā.) The passage that Daoxuan mentions (T no. 1462, 24: 13.762c4–6) discusses fighting implements. If received as gifts, such items must not be used as weapons or sold, but they may be rendered ineffect and repurposed; then they can also be sold (see Bapat and Hirakawa 1970, p. 368 for a translation).

A monastic manager, zhong zhu 衆主, might be the monastery’s quartermaster; the term is sometimes used as a translation of the Indian word vaipāpyrtyakara, a kind of manager–monk (cf. Silk 2008, p. 48).

This translation is very tentative. The term shenglun 正論 (translated as ‘the correct position’) might as well be an abbreviation of Apiadamo shanzhenglun 阿毘達磨順正論 (“Nyāyānusāra, T no. 1562, 29), an abhidharma text compiled in the late fourth or early fifth century by the monk Samghabhādra (?–?) and translated in Chinese in 653 by the monk Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664). For a detailed study of this text, see (Collett 1995). Still, I could not identify a corresponding passage.

Doxuan expresses these thoughts on birds of prey in a supplementary note.

See, for instance, (Sterckx 2019, p. 49).

For further details, see (Xu 1993, p. 4; Peintinger 2001, pp. 397–98; von Kispal 2015, pp. 42–43). Smoke was also used to drive out rats, as were exorcisms. Roel Sterckx describes one of these rituals in his study of animals in early China: in the first lunar month, the head of the household would “behead” (or cut open) a rat, suspend it in the middle of the house, and chant an exorcistic prayer (Sterckx 2002, pp. 64–65, 152–53, 266–67, note 90).

The authors add that there is increasing evidence that the rat catchers of early China were Chinese varieties of the Bengal cat. One seems to have tried to tame their kittens, without being very successful (Barrett and Strange 2019, p. 85, note 4). See also (Müller 2009, pp. 50–60) for further details of the various interpretations of li and the domestication of cats in China.

von Kispal (2015, pp. 43–61). The implication is not that there were no (wild) cats in China prior to this time; rather, that this was when humans started to keep them in their homes. That said, it seems certain that cats had previously lived in close proximity to people, attracted by the prey opportunities that human environments generated (see also Barrett and Strange 2019, p. 85).

See (Barrett and Strange 2019, pp. 84–87). See also (Barrett 1998, pp. 16–19; 2010, pp. 109–10).

Idema (2019) Idema.


T no. 2128, 54; 11.371c18–19; 14.394a23–24; 24.458b22; 27.485b17–18; 31.513a5; 32.525c4–5; 68.754c14. See also: (Barrett 1998, p. 36, note 74; von Kispal 2015, p. 55). Later, from at least the twelfth century onwards, a myth started to circulate that the monk Xuanzang (who traveled to India between 629 and 645) introduced the cat to China specifically to safeguard the Buddhist scriptures from suffering damage due to hungry rats (Barrett 1998, pp. 15–16; von Kispal 2015, pp. 59–60; Barrett and Strange 2019, p. 88; Idema 2019, pp. 38–39). Xuanzang himself does not refer to cats catching rats, but he must have seen at least one in a monastery because a seventh-century biography by Huili 慧立 and Yancang 悠然 quotes him comparing a non-Buddhist ascetic smeared with ash to a cat (maoli 猫狸; here used as a composite term) sleeping on a kitchen range (T no. 2053, 50: 4.245a27–28; translation in (Li 1995, p. 132)).

von Kispal (2015, pp. 131–32). See also (Spring 1993, pp. 49–75) for details of late Tang stories that draw parallels between cats and the domestication of cats in Chinese society by the ninth century. All such animals were kept primarily for the purpose of catching rodents.

Barrett (2010, p. 109) suggests that the practice of keeping cats as pets may have begun at the very end of the Tang period, in the late ninth and early tenth centuries. See also (Barrett and Strange 2019, pp. 91–93).

Young cats and dogs were used in this experiment. See ZLBC, scroll 26, p. 1012, b4 (translation in Huang 2000, p. 581): “Prolonged consumption of rice weakens the body; feeding [polished] paddy or glutinous rice to young cats and dogs will so bend their legs that they will not be able to walk.” See also (Barrett 2010, p. 109).

Of course, in addition to eating humans’ gifts of food, both cats and dogs are well equipped to hunt and kill other animals. That said, some monastics may have hoped that cats’ mere presence would cause rats to give their monasteries a wide berth, which would absolve the monks of any blame in the rodents’ demise. (Prip-Møller 1967, pp. 128, 369–71) found evidence of this type when humans started to keep them in their homes. That said, it seems certain that cats had previously lived in close proximity to people, attracted by the prey opportunities that human environments generated (see also Barrett and Strange 2019, p. 85).

The Fanwang jing (Brahma’s Net Sūtra; T no. 1484, 24), which was aimed at both laypeople and monastics, was probably composed in China around 420. Its second fascicle comprises a list of fifty-eight so-called bodhisattva precepts. See (Muller and Tanaka 2017, p. xix).
See also Heirman (2014) discussion on the washing and dyeing of monastic robes.

See (Mrozik 2007, pp. 61–81) for a discussion. See also (Powers 2009), who identifies a strong correlation between virtue and

This is also the opinion of the editors of (Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan Dunhuang Academy, p. 124).

Vaiśravaṇa is invariably accompanied by a mongoose (symbol of riches) in Indian iconography, but in China the companion

is sometimes described as a shi 鼠 ("rat" or "mouse"). See (Shahar 2015, pp. 153–58), who suggests that shi signified wealth

in China, just as the mongoose did in India. Similarly, the editors of (Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan Dunhuang Academy, p. 124) believe

that rats generally symbolize good fortune. On the other hand, (Anderl 2018, p. 289) suggests that the association with

Vaiśravaṇa may derive from a story about the god’s defense of Anxi, a western protectorate of the Tang Empire, in which a pack

of rats assists him by devouring the enemy’s weapons. See (Pisammen yì gui 毘沙門儀軌, Ceremonies in the Worship of Vaiśravaṇa

(supposedly translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by the eighth-century master Amoghavajra), T no. 1249, 21: 228b26; see also

(Granoff 1970, pp. 150–151 for a discussion).

This is also the opinion of the editors of (Dunhuang Yanjiuyuan Dunhuang Academy, p. 124).

See (Mrozik 2007, pp. 61–81) for a discussion. See also (Powers 2009), who identifies a strong correlation between virtue and

physical beauty in jātaka (birth) stories.

See also Heirman (2014) on the washing and dyeing of monastic robes.

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