Of the True Body

The Famen Monastery Relics and Corporeal Transformation in Tang Imperial Culture

Chapter 3

Eugene Y. Wang

The "True Body" as a Misnomer

In 1987, the crypt of the Famen Monastery 法門寺 in Fufeng 扶風, seventy miles west of the modern city of Xi'an 西安, was reopened by Chinese archeologists for the first time since it was sealed in 874 CE.[1] The excavation uncovered four relics of the Buddha, allegedly Śākyamuni's "finger bones." One of them is widely believed to be authentic among the Buddhist community and laity. The discovery caused a sensation both inside and outside China. For many of the faithful, the relics provide a palpable physical link to the elusive figure known as Śākyamuni Buddha, who oscillates between being an ancient historical figure and an omnipresent god. To believe in the physical evidence itself, however, requires a leap of faith as well—which is what the relics are all about. For historians of medieval Chinese culture, the relics hold little interest per se; rather, it is what the relics inspired and entailed in history—the discourse, the activities, the artifacts, and the intriguing mechanism of the relic cult—that is more empirically compelling and cognitively intriguing. The question addressed in this chapter is why both the dedicatory and inventory tablets uncovered from the crypt and the received historical texts repeatedly refer to the relics as the "True Body" (*zhenshen* 眞身).[2] The term has largely been taken for granted. As a reference to the Buddha's relics, it did not

come into use in China until the seventh century and did not attain wide currency until the ninth century.[3] Moreover, when measured against Buddhist doctrines, the term is a glaring theological infelicity, if not an embarrassing and scandalous misnomer. For a religion that preaches the impermanence of the body and zealously tried to erase the bifurcation between bodily and nonbodily modes of being, to characterize and reinstate the bodily remains of the foremost renouncer of the body as a True Body comes across as ironic and odd.

This point is far from being philological hairsplitting or an armchair academic exercise. It is central to the daunting task of making sense of the mindset behind the crypt. The intricate decorative program on the reliquaries and their complex disposition in relation to one another bespeak an intentional conceptual scheme that has yet to be deciphered. Attempts to crack the code, so to speak, have generally been pursued by recourse to the universalizing or "standard" Buddhist iconography, but with little success.[4] The crypt has, for example, been analyzed as an esoteric Maṇḍala city,[5] although not everyone agrees. No explanations have been given, however, of the appearance of the celebrated set of eight caskets that enshrine one of the Buddha's relics or of the conceptual structure that underlies their decorative scheme. As I attempt to show in this chapter, the labeling of the relics as the "True Body" and the transgressive nature of this term are keys to understanding the problems arising from the crypt; the solution lies beyond doctrinal exegesis.

In what follows, I trace the historical process by which the perception of relics and the notions of body, initially two divergent conceptions in medieval China, gradually merged. The symbolic investment in the relics as the True Body accommodated and masked a variety of historical circumstances and secular interests in medieval China. For students of medieval Chinese religious culture and society, much of this history will be familiar. What may be surprising is the intensity of the passion aroused by—and the enduring fixation with—the body, and the tenacity, persistence, and intricacy with which earthly bodies managed to be correlated, often in a sublimated way, with the imaginary superbody. Since the symbolic correlation with the Other arises from a need to elide the indelicacy of laying bare the embarrassing, or naming the unnamable, or confronting the unthinkable, the correlation was often expressed in suggestive metaphors and sustained with a coy subtlety in extra-linguistic realms. Often acted out in ritual, it was more often articulated in the formal configuration of seemingly reticent artifacts. We need to attend to debates on the body, but we also need to heed the abundant visual eloquence of surviving artifacts, in particular, the riches excavated from the Famen Monastery crypt.

Bodies and Relics

Buddhism is known for its rejection of the physical body. An instruction for the meditative practice of "visualizing the impure body" paints an anatomic horror. One "sees in one's own body one's hair, nails, skin, arteries, veins, muscles, bones, marrow, spleen, kidneys, heart, lungs, liver, gall bladder, intestines, stomach, viscera in both states, fat, meninx, spittle, saliva, tears, pus, sweat, grease, phlegm, and skin ulcers."[6] The grossness of the body is supposed to make one yearn for a bodiless state of purity and transcendence. This rejection of the body does not, however, explain why the Buddha himself appeared in human form. The contradiction is overcome through the theory of tripartite or triple bodies.[7] A complete explication of the theory would take us far afield into doctrinal intricacies. Suffice it to say, one pole of the tripartite scheme is the Dharma Body, which is essentially a nonphysical, noumenal entity that permeates the universe. It is made accessible to mortal eyes through manifestations known as the Transformative Body, spectral reflections and projections of the Buddha essence, which occupies the other pole of the tripartite spectrum. The term *zhenshen* 眞身, "True Body," is a synonym of *fashen*法身, "Dharma Body."[8] In essence it is incorporeal: the very antithesis of body. The constant emphasis on the "real" or "authentic" aspects of this body is a reminder that the visible images of buddhas are ultimately not the True Buddha: they are simply transient manifestations of the Buddha, whose mode of existence is at once everywhere and nowhere.

This multibody scheme establishes a model for the faithful, who may thereby transcend their own bodily limits and the cycles of earthly vexations. By identifying with the True Body of the Buddha, who is in fact bodiless, mortal beings can imagine a similar state of being for themselves. Unshackled from the bondage of the flesh and senses, they eventually cease to feel the thrashing "pains of the flogging stick" of the human existence.[9]

Although the soteriological message embedded in this doctrine of the body is appealing, it also creates a problem for those who doubt the Buddha's existence. For medieval Chinese, the need to dispel their uncertainty concerning the existence of a god of a distant land and time had an additional urgency. If Buddhism indeed has the unrivaled magical powers it claimed and could promise salvation, asked one Chinese layman, "How is it that we do not see [the Buddha's] True Body in the world, and everything about it comes down to merely empty talk and insubstantial nothingness?"[10] "For the past six hundred years, since this foreign teaching [Buddhism] moved southward [to China]," wrote one unbeliever, "no one had been heard to say that he can see the Buddha."[11] In an early Chinese exegesis of the Buddha's body by Wei Shou 魏收 (506–72), we can sense

this dilemma and the effort on the part of the Buddhist community to reconcile the anti-body doctrinal impulse and the affirmation of the true existence of the Buddha:

> The Dharma Body (*Dharmakāya*) of the Buddha has two meanings: first, the true and real; second, the temporary and associate. As for the True and Real Body, it is said to be the utterly supreme form; mysteriously free from hindrances and bonds, and unable either to be limited to place or restricted to shape. When there is a stimulus it responds, [but] its form is ever pure. As for the temporary and associate body, it is said to deign to join with the Six Paths and to share the many forms of worldly existence. Birth and death come [for it] in their season, and its duration depends upon the form existence [that it occupies at any specific time]. Its shape arises as the result of a stimulus, but its form is without reality. Although the temporary shape perishes, the true form does not change. It is merely because times lack the mysterious stimulus that it is *not always visible*.

This exposition points to the immaterial world. Immediately following this, however, Wei Shou returns to the physical aspect of the body:

> It is clear that a Buddha's birth is not a real birth, and his death is not real death. When the Buddha left the world, his corpse was burned with fragrant wood. His divine bones broke up into bits the size of grains, which could not be crushed by blows or scorched by fire. At times, they had a gleam indicative of their divinity. In the foreign language they are called *sheli* 舍利 [*śarīra*]. The disciples received them respectfully and placed them in a precious urn. They paid them honor and respect with incense and flowers, and erected [for them] a building called a *ta* 塔 [stūpa]. *Ta* too is a foreign word [signifying something] like an ancestral shrine, so that people call [them] *ta*-shrines. A hundred years after this a certain king Aśoka by his royal power divided the Buddha-relics among the spirits and divinities to build [for them] 84,000 stūpas as gifts to the world. All were completed on the same day. The modern Luoyang 洛陽, Pengcheng 彭城, Guzang 姑臧, and Linzi 臨淄, all had a King Aśoka Monastery, and show remains of it. Although Sakya entered the Parinirvāṇa, he left shadow foot-prints, his nails, and his teeth in India. To this day they are still there. Travelers to and from Madhayadesa all speak of having seen them.[12]

This exposition betrays the difficulty, for Buddhists, in simultaneously elevating Buddha into an incorporeal and ethereal divinity and affirming his true existence. Caught between these two impulses is the idea of the True Body. In doctrinal terms, it is shapeless and "its form is without reality." But the Buddha is palpable, not only through the "temporary and associate body" that comes and goes, but also in the hard crystal *śarīra* (Ch. *sheli* 舍利), the "spirit bones" resulting from the cremation of his corpse.

Relics, however, do not fit well into the scheme involving the invisible True Body and its manifested Temporary Body. Equating them with the True Body is wrong since the True Body transcends physicality; but taking them as lasting material evidence of Buddha's true existence does not quite

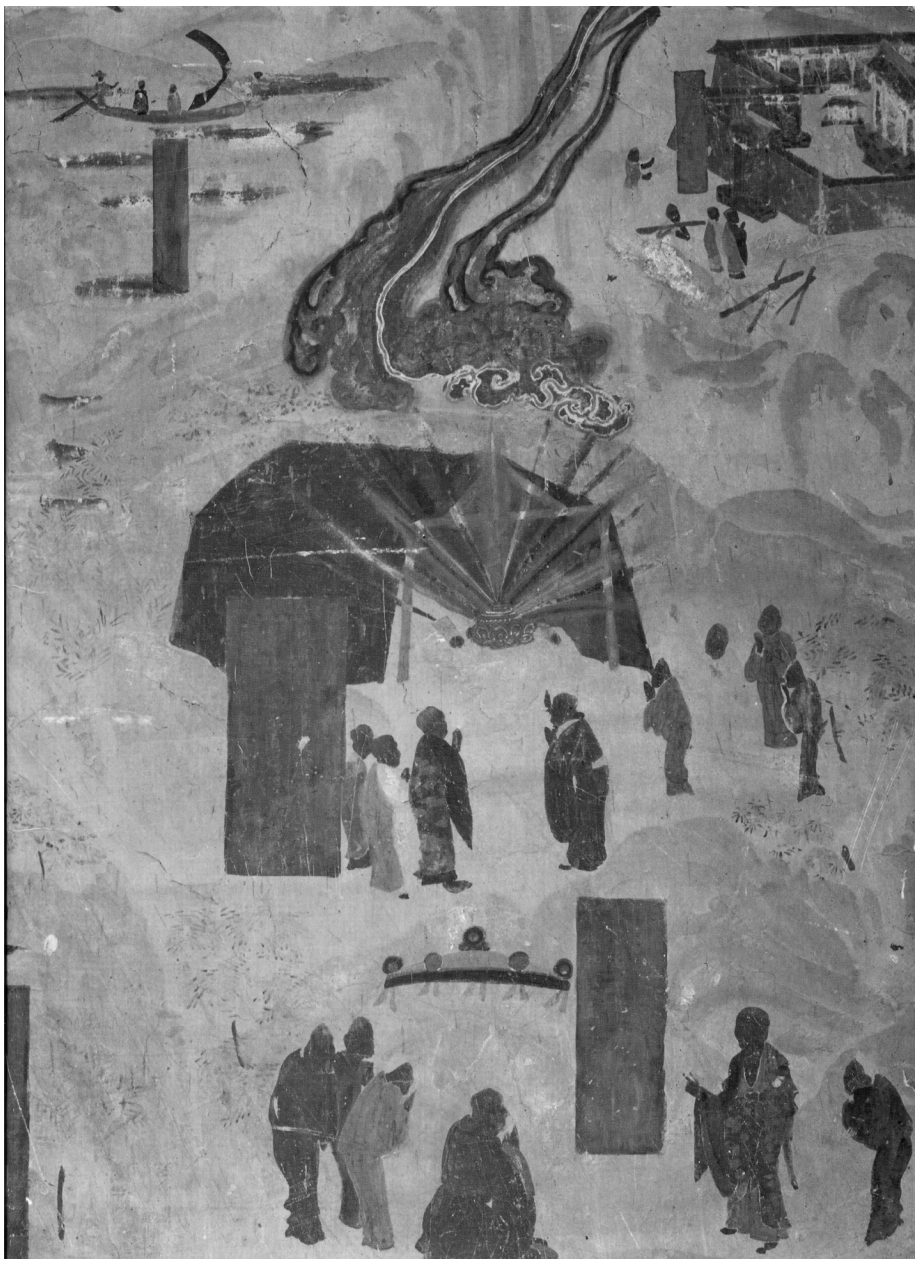

Fig. 3.1 The monk Kang Senghui produces luminous relics to convert the King of Wu. North wall of Cave 323 at Dunhuang (SOURCE: *Zhongguo bihua quanji Dunhuang*, vol. 5, pl. 132).

square well with the spectral character of the Temporary Body, which manifests itself as a complete form rather than as fragmented bones or ashes. Here the Buddhist doctrine of renunciation of the body and immateriality is at odds with its need to use Śākyamuni's bodily remains for purposes of proselytizing.

Relic lore as perpetuated in medieval China characterizes relics in terms of the dual qualities of optical elusiveness and physical substance. One

Fig. 3.2 The relic in the stūpa of the Renshou Monastery, Puzhou, radiating in response to monk Tanyan's prayer. South wall of Cave 323, Dunhuang (SOURCE: courtesy of Wenwu Press).

early account, dated to the sixth century, of the Chinese encounter with relics concerns Kang Senghui 康僧會, who visited the Wu吳 kingdom of south China in the mid-third century, and produced for Sun Quan 孫權, ruler of Wu, "relics of the Buddha's leftover bones." He did this by praying in a quiet room with a "bronze bottle" and with incense burning. It took 21 days of praying to get the bottle to "rattle with noise" and radiate "five-colored rays." A bronze tray shattered when relics were poured on it. "The awe-inspiring power of the relics goes beyond its luminous emanation," explained Kang Senghui; "it withstands the burning of fire and pounding of a diamond scepter." The king was converted.[13] A seventh-century illustration of the episode captures the optical wonder of the scene (see Fig. 3.1).

The same duality of qualities characterize the relics reported in a sixth-century account of the fourth-century monk Liu Huida's 劉慧達 search for Buddha relics in Jiankang 建康, the capital city of the Eastern Jin (317–420). A "radiant emanation" of a "preternatural color" from a stūpa site led him to dig deep into the ground; he found three stelae covering a set of nested caskets: an iron casket containing a silver one that in turn held a gold box. In the gold box were "three relics, a fingernail, and a lock of hair,

several feet (尺 *chi*) in length." The pagoda was identified as "one of the 84,000 stūpas erected by King Aśoka during the time of King Xuan of the Zhou dynasty."[14]

Both of these accounts emphasize the visual properties of the relics. Where the Kang Senghui story stresses the relics' substance, the Liu Huida account relies on an "archaeological" recovery. Although we cannot verify a fourth-century excavation, the account at least registers the sixth-century practice, corroborated by the modern archaeological discoveries of such burials.[15]

Huida's alleged findings of bodily remains and their burial anticipate the perception of relics as bodily remains that was to take root a few centuries later. In the sixth century, when the story was told, the perception of relics as luminous emanations still dominated. The perception continued well into the Tang dynasty, as evidenced by an early Tang pictorial representation of a relic pagoda (see Fig. 3.2).

Relic Translations During the Tang

The significance of relics and notions of Buddha's body came to a head in the debate during the Zhenguan 貞觀 era (627–49) between the Confucians and Daoists on the one hand and Buddhists on the other. The part of the debate that concerned relics and bodies turned on four themes: (1) the credibility of the Buddha's existence and its relevance to China; (2) the question of what is real; (3) the attitude toward the dead and the ways of disposing of dead bodies; (4) and provisions for the afterlife.[16]

It was perhaps no accident that as the debate on the Buddha's bodies became strident, the imperial court encouraged an excavation of the relics allegedly enshrined since the Zhou times at the Famen Monastery, initially known as the King Aśoka Monastery. The origin of this monastery is obscure.[17] During the nationwide relic enshrinement of the Renshou 仁壽 era (601–4), a pagoda was built on the site. It soon fell into obscurity, however. War and turbulence during the early seventh century left its precincts in ruins. In 631, Zhang Liang 張亮, prefect of Qi prefecture 岐州 and a pious Buddhist layman, visited the monastery and was struck by the sorry state of the pagoda, which lay in ruins with its basement exposed to the elements. Zhang subsequently petitioned the imperial court for permission to build a "cloud-gazing" structure on the site, a request that was granted. Tales of relics in the basement, presumably in circulation for a long time, began to resurface. Last enshrined thirty years earlier, they were said to have the power of "inspiring piety." With the court's permission, Zhang led an excavation. Digging ten *zhang* 丈 (about 30 meters) deep into the ground, the relic seekers uncovered the buried relics.[18] Seventh-century accounts of the event by both Daoxuan 道宣 and Daoshi 道世 register a typical medieval Chinese perception of relics. They were luminous emana-

tions, devoid of any physical shape. "Thousands of people laid their eyes on them at once," yet there was no consensus about the nature of the vision: "Some saw an object like a jade, completely transparent in body and lit by a white radiance; some saw a green color; some saw a Buddha image; some saw Bodhisattvas and holy monks; some saw a crimson light; some saw a medley of five colors; and some saw nothing at all."[19] The seventh-century writers come close to saying that relics were in the eye of the beholder. Some spectators even burned their hair and fingers so that they could catch a glimpse of the relics. One was so frustrated in his failure to see anything that he pounded his chest and wailed. After a sound beating and preaching by others, he followed the example of others by tying his thumb with a piece of flaxen thread and setting it on fire while circumambulating the pagoda: "All of a sudden, he was able to see [the relics]. . . . Once the burning stopped and he calmed down, he was again no longer able to see them." The relics were also said to restore eyesight to the blind.[20]

For all the imperial court's approval, Taizong, the emperor at the time, was not deeply involved in the process of opening the Famen Monastery crypt. Taizong, as we know, never quite warmed to Buddhism. In sharp contrast, the next two openings of the Famen Monastery crypt were sponsored by the imperial court. It was also in the context of these two openings that the perception of relics changed. In addition to being optical wonders—a long-standing perception that was still sustained—the relics took on explicit bodily associations.

In 659, Emperor Gaozong 高宗 (r. 649–83) sent the monk Zhicong 智琮 and others to the Famen Monastery to acquire relics. For four days, Zhicong assiduously circumambulated inside the pagoda, but to no avail. In the end, by burning charcoal on his arms and concentrating more intensely, he saw "an auspicious light surging inside the pagoda." Digging underground, the monks found the relics. These were sent first to Buddhist monasteries in the capital city of Chang'an, and then to the "Eastern Capital" of Luoyang the following year.

This second encounter with the relics is curious and distinctive in many ways. Since the previous opening of the crypt, the relics had acquired tangible qualities beyond their usual elusive "auspicious" luminance. They were seven small relics and one large relic. One of them, presumably the largest one, was apparently a hollowed-out object. It is described as having "an auspicious luster just as during the Zhenguan era, but it has the shape of a small finger. Its first joint is two *cun* [6 cm] in length. Its interior is square; so is its outside. At the top it is more ragged; at the bottom it tapers. Both its inside and outside are lustrous and pristine. It receives one's finger snugly."[21]

In the wake of this second excavation, Empress Wu had a set of "gold coffins and silver *guo*-encasements, nine in total, with elaborate carving and decorations that are a source of marvel" 金棺銀槨。數有九重雕鏤窮奇,

made to hold the relic(s).[22] Relics in China had traditionally been put in a set of containers, typically a stone casket and a nested set of jars or urns of bronze, silver, gold, and glass. The "gold coffins and silver *guo*-encasements" were a novelty for a reliquary design. Apparently based on mortuary practices, the new design suggests that the relics were being treated as bodies. The bodily association was accentuated by an additional event. As the relics from the Famen crypt were being escorted to Luoyang, "the Western Regions sent the Buddha's skull bone to the capital as a gift." The court decreed that both "the relics and the skull bone [be put] on display in a public procession. Monks commented: 'Here is Buddha's True Body.' "[23]

Despite being jointly displayed as one broad category of efficacious cult objects, "the relics and skull bone" were still referred to separately, as if "the Buddha's skull bone" (*fodinggu* 佛頂骨) was not a relic. The seventh-century authors probably still considered relics to be those elusive dazzling nuggets or glassy grains and found it hard to reconcile this view with the anatomically precise skull bone. Further, we do not know which of the two types of objects the monks pointed to as the True Body. These confusions are characteristic of an era in which the notion of the relic was shifting from a luminous radiance to a physical remnant of the Buddha's body. The literal view was gaining momentum, however, and for the first time in China the term "True Body," hitherto doctrinally interpreted as the invisible bodiless Buddha essence, was applied to the physical object of a relic. This theological blunder subsequently gained an increasingly wider circulation among the Chinese Buddhist community and laity. It was not a slip of the tongue by the seventh-century Chinese monks in the capital city. There were apparently outside pressures to enlarge the meaning of the term.

The imperial court's interest in the relics in the Famen crypt may have been piqued by the tradition that the crypt should be opened every 30 years. The opening of the crypt in 659 came close to fulfilling that requirement. Historical sources also seem to corroborate this. It was one of the reasons advanced by the monk Zhicong in his memorial to the throne. Zhicong had been invited to the imperial palace as a resident monk for his magical and efficacious skills in chanting mantra.

It was no accident that Zhicong was able to rekindle imperial interest in the relics in 659 following years of benign neglect. In 655, Wu Cairen 武才人, later known as Wu Zetian 武則天,[24] a concubine first of Taizong and then of his son and successor, Gaozong, managed to edge out Empress Wang and persuaded Gaozong to install her as empress. Her quest for power gained momentum from this point. In 656, one year after she became the empress, her son Li Hong 李弘 replaced Li Zhong 李忠, the son of another consort, as crown prince. She also began to clear the court of senior ministers who opposed her. By 659 the imperial administration was for all purposes under her control.

It was at this juncture that body became an issue. In 659, the emperor's health apparently worsened, and a year later the dizziness from which he was suffering became so unbearable that he handed all state affairs over to Wu Zetian. His illness even began to impair his vision.[25] This may explain the court's need for mantra-reciting monks in the imperial palace; the monk's effort to seek the Famen relics, which were known for their efficacy in restoring eyesight;[26] and the court's eagerness to have the relics at the imperial palace. It is telling that the emperor specifically instructed those dispatched to the Famen Monastery that an image of Aśoka "of [his] exact height" be made for the occasion.[27]

Body was as pressing a fixation for the empress as it was for the emperor, since Wu Zetian had designs on the throne. Any woman who wanted to rule as an emperor in seventh-century China faced a daunting problem of legitimation. Cultural opposition to a female ruler in medieval China was formidable. Confucianism subjugated women to submissive roles and subordinate status. Orthodox historiography had been relentlessly harsh on women who harbored political aspirations and often attributed dynastic downfalls to women's involvement in state affairs. Nor was Buddhism less sexist—a woman's body was an unfortunate temporary punitive incarnation, if not a curse, that women had to live with in the present life in the hope that they might be reborn in their next life as men.[28]

Wu Zetian needed a theory of body that would put her in a better light and apparently found one in the notion of the True Body. As a transcendent body of a higher order, the True Body makes all the physical body a passing and insignificant phantom. It follows that little weight should be attached to the current appearance of the physical body, be it male or female. Much of this is evidenced by Wu's campaigns during the final decades of the seventh century. The court's moves in connection with relics on the part around 660 clearly anticipated what was to come.

Although what sort of symbolic significance Wu Zetian at this stage attached to the notion of bodies is not entirely clear, her interest in the matter and her crucial role in highlighting the bodily aspects of relics are apparent. Certain attributes of the relics as they appear in the seventh-century accounts make better sense when we take her mediation and intervention into account. In 659, Zhicong first "obtained one piece 枚 (*mei*) of relic, notably bigger than a grain, bright, fresh, and pristine. Upon further scrutiny, he acquired seven more grains 粒 *(li*). Placed in a bowl of water, the singular piece (*mei*) spun on its own, circling the seven grains."[29]

Several possible associations may have been operative here. The seven grains of relics may evoke the Big Dipper, to which medieval Chinese attached a great deal of significance in foretelling matters both auspicious and inauspicious. They may stand for the Seven Buddhas of the Past; in that case the big relic would evoke Maitreya as the Future Buddha.[30] Most

likely, they alluded to the Seven Treasures of the Cakravartin 轉輪王, the wheel-turning kings, who were associated with the Buddhist cosmos centered around Mount Sumeru. Surrounding Mount Sumeru are four continents ruled by the wheel-turning kings.[31] Since China is only part of Jampudvīpa, the southern continent, Minggai 明槪, a seventh-century monk, could sneer at the Chinese emperors of Qin and Han as lesser sovereigns who "only ruled China as part of Jambudvīpa." Despite "their inferior virtues," fumed Minggai, these emperors had had the effrontery to "occupy the exalted station." The significance of the wheel-turning king's larger-than-life stature was not lost on Wu Zetian. The rule of the wheel-turning king flouted the conventional Chinese historical pedigree that barred Wu from power. Wu's career shows an increasingly deeper investment in the title. When she gave birth to Prince Li Dan in 662, she initially named the young prince Li Xulun 李旭輪 (literally, Li the Sun Wheel), a name she subsequently modified to Li Lun 李輪 (Li the Wheel).[32] This symbolic investment continued well into the 690s.[33]

In any event, the preoccupation with the bodily well-being of the emperor and the succession seem to underlie the extraordinary care with which the relics were reported and handled. For the first time, the relic was described as having "the shape of the little finger."[34] There is something pointedly significant about the modeling of the reliquary design after the traditional Chinese coffin,[35] a bold innovation for which Empress Wu was responsible. Relics were much more than elusive and mystifying visual wonders. Their original status as bodily remains was reinstated.

Meanwhile, Wu continued to capitalize on the visual aspects of relics. In 677, "a preternatural vapor" was spotted in the vineyard of the Radiant Residence Ward 光宅坊, which Wu frequented. A stone casket containing 10,000 grains of relics was dug from the ground. Wu immediately ordered the Radiant Residence Monastery built on the site and had packages consisting of 49 relics each distributed to monasteries throughout the country.[36] In 690, the acquisition of the relics was interpreted as a notable instance of the "spiritual response" and "a numinous testimony to Wu's maintenance of the Righteous Dharma-law."[37] The praise is couched in language derived from Aśoka lore. In 693, Wu, who had deposed her son and assumed the throne as emperor in 684, took on the honorary title of "Golden Wheel Sagely Divine Emperor."[38]

The conflict between understanding relics as visual wonders and seeing them primarily as substitutes for the body came to a head at the beginning of the eighth century.[39] Wu's patronage of a number of monks had a great impact on the history of Chinese Buddhism.[40] In particular, the monk Fazang 法藏 (643–712), who was to become the third patriarch of the Avataṁsaka sect,[41] was responsible for rekindling Wu's interest in relics. In 704, he reminded Wu of the Aśoka relics enshrined at the Famen Monas-

tery crypt. Wu sent him to reopen the crypt and escort the relic—probably the fingerbone, which a ninth-century author refers to as the "True Body"—back to the imperial palace. He also supervised the reenshrinement of the relics in 708.[42] The white-marble spirit canopy in the middle chamber of the Famen crypt bears his name.[43]

Fazang was a master of visual illusion. He once set up ten mirrors around a Buddha statue. Torches were lit so that the Buddha's image was bounced back and forth infinitely in an optical-virtual recession in the facing mirrors.[44] Fazang's obsession with visual wonders underlies his interest in relics. In 704, he and ten other eminent monks circumambulated the relic pagoda at the Famen Monastery for seven days and nights before opening the crypt. A dazzling "divine radiance" sprang forth.

> [Fazang] held the relic in his hands to display it to the monks and laity. The relic radiated far and near on his palms. How much of the supernatural one perceived depended on one's sanctity. Some saw the luster and sparkle of metals; some saw images of fine textiles or finely shaped and grained jade. The relic was now large, now small. When it appeared large, it was several feet in size; when small, it was only a few inches.[45]

This characterization of the relics is very much in keeping with those by the eminent seventh-century monks such as Daoxuan and Daoshi.

Whereas the monks perceived the relic in visual terms, Emperor Wu emphasized its therapeutic powers, at least in her final years. As in 659, the timing of this opening of the Famen crypt in the winter of 704 is significant in terms of the ruler's health. By the time the relic was escorted to Luoyang in the first month of 705, Wu Zetian was seriously ill.[46] In retrospect, it appears that the court sent for the relic only because of the emperor's decline. The relic was received with great fanfare and displayed in the Bright Hall. With the court orchestra playing and "incense burning, a thousand chariots paraded. A five-colored cloud rose, as a thousand court officials paid homage."[47] Emperor Wu "stayed close to the relic with her whole body and heart." Despite her frail health and her advanced years, she "fell prostrate with uttermost piety" and venerated the relic.[48] Apparently at this stage of her life, what she needed from the divine power of the relic was no longer a mandate to legitimize her rule or a notion of body that justified her occupation of the throne despite her gender. Instead, she needed to draw on its efficacy to restore her aging body to health. The relic did not help. She died later that year. This convergence between the ritual of relic translation and the emperor's desperate attempt to cure her illness, and between the relic ceremony and her death, strengthened the equation of the relic with the dying body.

With Wu's death, the Zhou dynasty that she had founded came to an end. Her son Li Xian 李顯, posthumously known as Zhongzong 中宗, was restored to the throne, and the Tang dynasty resumed. The Zhongzong

court, however, still honored the formidable Lady Wu, now referred to as "the Heaven-Conforming Great Sagely Empress" (Zetian dasheng huanghou 則天大聖皇后),[49] mainly because of the rise of Wu Sansi 武三思, Wu's nephew, who insinuated himself into the favor of the new emperor and empress and wielded great power. As a result, the veneration of Wu Zetian, after a brief period of interruption, continued. The Wu family ancestral shrine and the mausoleums of Wu's parents were properly refurbished.[50] Empress Wei 韋后, Zhongzong's wife, who harbored political ambitions, clearly modeled herself after Wu Zetian. These circumstances may help explain one curious fact. Although Buddhist ritual custom required the return of the relic to the monastic crypt after a brief period of "loan" to the palace, the Zhongzong court kept the Famen Monastery relic in the imperial palace until 708.[51] The reasons for the delay are not clear. The relic may in some way have evoked memories of Lady Wu, now believed to have certain magical powers.

The circumstances surrounding the re-enshrinement of the relic in the Famen crypt are worth noting in detail. On the fifteenth day of the second month of 708, the anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment, the relic was finally returned to the Famen Monastery and replaced in the crypt. There was a symbolic continuity of the opening of the crypt, for it was again Fazang who played a key role in the return of the relic.[52] The spirit canopy Fazang made for the occasion bears the inscription: "Monk Fazang and others have made this spirit canopy on the occasion of enshrining the relics in the pagoda. Written for the record."[53] The imperial family did something quite extraordinary for the occasion. The emperor, empress, crown prince, two princesses, and the empress's two sisters, each "cut off a lock of hair and buried it [under] the pagoda to venerate the relic." These words are from the votive inscription on a tablet, dated 708, discovered on the site of the Famen Monastery.[54] The locks of hair very likely were interred in the spirit canopy built by Fazang.[55]

The burial of locks of hair from living persons is bizarre in Buddhist terms. An individual is required to shave his or her hair when entering a monastic order. The action of the imperial family has therefore been interpreted as a symbolic act of renouncing the body to earn karmic merit.[56] Although this explains the action of haircutting, it begs the question why the locks of hair were buried and enshrined together with the relics, as if they were relics themselves. It is clear that the burial was inspired by both the notion of relics and the practice of relic enshrinement. The Buddha's relics were characterized as the "divided body" or "fragmented body"; so, too, the emperor and his relatives could divide their body and enshrine a part of it in the same fashion as a relic. In this way, locks of their hair attained the exalted status of a relic. Since relics were believed to defy decay, enshrinement of the locks of hair as quasi relics may well represent an aspira-

tion for immortality. Engraving the votive inscription on a memorial tablet may also be explained in this light.

The act was premised on the notion of the relic as body. Two years after the relic was re-enshrined, the emperor renamed the relic pagoda in the King Aśoka Monastery (Wuyouwangsi 無憂王寺; that is, the Famen Monastery) the Pagoda for the True Body of the Great Sage (Dasheng zhenshen baota 大聖眞身寶塔).[57] This was the first time that the Buddha's relics were explicitly named as the True Body. Henceforth the relics were unequivocally perceived and recognized as and called the True Body.

The historical circumstances added shades of nuance to the True Body. First, the crypt underneath the pagoda contained both the re-enshrined relics *and* the locks of hair of the emperor and his family members. The notion of relics as a body turned the enshrinement into a symbolic burial. As such, it required the burial of a company of attendants to serve the deceased in the afterlife, albeit in the form of symbolic substitutes, a long-standing custom in Chinese funerary practice. In other words, the emperor and his family members made an elaborate symbolic act of uttermost piety: substituting their hair for their body, they served as symbolic sacrifices to attend the Buddha permanently.

Although the name "True Body of the Great Sage" 大聖眞身 is to be taken as referring primarily to Śākyamuni's body, it recalls the title given to Lady Wu in 705: "the Great Sage Empress" 大聖皇后.[58] We ought not make light of this coincidence. Wu Zetian left an indelible mark on the relic. It was after all her decision to reopen the crypt in 704, and her death occurred during the tenure of the relic in the imperial palace. Members and partisans of the Wu family struggling to hold on to power after her death may have seen the relic as the last vestige of Wu, and hence their last symbolic link to her. These circumstances may have added more dimensions to the True Body of the Great Sage.

Although aspirations to immortality were likely among the motivations behind the hair burial, the event nevertheless had decidedly macabre overtones of an actual entombment, evidenced again in the memorial tablet, which was normally used in a tomb setting. In retrospect, subsequent historical events made this association chillingly relevant. In 710, two years after the hair enshrinement, Empress Wei poisoned her husband, Emperor Zhongzong, and attempted to usurp the throne. She was soon killed by a member of the Li royal family.[59] The burial of the hair of the emperor and the empress in 708 turned out to be a rehearsal of their real burial two years later.

The Tang court re-enshrined relics at the Famen Monastery four more times, in 760 during Suzong's reign, in 790 under Dezong, in 819 under Xianzong, and in 873 under Xizong. Modern scholars tend to see these events as the imperial court's conscious effort to fulfill the tradition that

the Famen crypt was to be opened and the relics re-enshrined every 30 years. This ritual, it was believed, ensured prosperity. Although the three relic translations in 760, 790, and 819 support this view to an extent, circumstantial pressures that may have precipitated the events tend to be overlooked.[60] In any event, the re-enshrinements seem to have been prompted by a general desire for supernatural protection and, in the case of Xianzong, a yearning for longevity.[61] The perception of relics as bodily remains had deepened. The context of these events is lost on us because the sources and the surviving material evidence are too scant to allow us to fathom the symbolic investment in relics on these occasions.

The Last Relic Translation Under the Tang

The last re-enshrinement in the Famen crypt is altogether a different story, perhaps not in kind, but certainly in the wealth of artifacts uncovered from the crypt by modern archeologists and the rich written accounts. Together, they yield a clearer picture of the significance attached to the relics.

The relics played an important role in helping articulate and reconcile divergent interests. By this time, the connection between the relics and the human body had been firmly established. The relics that were recovered, revered, and re-enshrined were not only unequivocally referred to as the "True Body" but also became a symbolic correlative of the emperor's body, albeit in an evocative if not altogether elusive way. Moreover, the whole process from the initial requisition of relics to the final re-enshrinement coincided with the quick and dramatic transition from an old to a new reign, from Emperor Yizong's 懿宗 (r. 859–73) death to his son Xizong's 僖宗 (r. 873–88) inheritance of the throne. Xizong was Yizong's fifth son, hence not the heir apparent, and his enthronement at the age twelve hints at palace intrigue. The facts that the donors of the objects accompanying the re-enshrinement were mostly eunuchs and the curious absence of the names of court officials from the votive inscriptions and lists of donations point to the eunuchs' active role. The stakes were high for the eunuchs, otherwise known as "white bodies," who had to be concerned with bodies. These factors imbue the identification of the relics as the True Body with layers of circumstantial significance.[62]

The planning for the relic translation started in 871. A miniature silver Bodhisattva was made on the fourteenth day of the eleventh month, the emperor's birthday, to hold the True Body.[63] A Buddhist master named Shiyi 師益 "set up an altar beneath the pagoda. Sure enough, he acquired the golden bone, exactly like the one of which the emperor had had prescience."[64] The official ceremony welcoming the relics into the capital city did not take place until 873. The delay may have been caused by overwhelming opposition from court officials. In the third month of 873, when

the emperor sent delegates to the Famen Monastery to greet the relics, "many court officials remonstrated against the decision." The emperor was undeterred: "If only I could see it in my lifetime, I would have no regret dying."[65]

The ceremony was the largest of its kind in history. The ninth-century author Su E 蘇鶚 left this dramatic eyewitness account in *Duyang zabian* 杜陽雜編 (876):

> On the eighth day of the fourth month of 873, the bone of the Buddha was welcomed into Ch'ang-an. Starting from the An-fu Building 安福樓 at the K'ai-yuan gate 開遠門, all along the way on both sides, cries of invocation to the Buddha shook the earth. Men and women watched the procession of the relic respectfully, while monks and nuns followed in its wake. The emperor went to the An-fu Temple, and as he personally paid his respects, tears dropped down to moisten his breast. He thereupon summoned the monks of both sides of the city to offer gifts of varying quantities to it. Moreover, to those venerable old men who had participated in welcoming the bone during the Yuan-ho era [806–20] he bestowed silver bowls, brocades, and colored silks. The prominent families of Ch'ang-an all vied with one another in ornamenting their riding carriages for this occasion. Streets in every direction were filled with people supporting the old and assisting the young. Those who came to see the spectacle all fasted beforehand in order that they might receive the blessings of the Buddha. At the time, a soldier cut off his left arm in front of the Buddha's relic, and while holding it with his hand, he reverenced the relic each time he took a step, his blood sprinkling the ground all the while. As for those who walked on their elbows and knees, biting off their fingers or cutting off their hair, their numbers could not be counted. There was also a monk who covered his head with artemisia, a practice known as disciplining the head. When the pile of artemisia was ignited, the pain caused the monk to shake his head and to cry out, but young men in the market place held him tight so that he could not move. When the pain became unbearable, he cried out and fell prostrate on the ground. With his head scorched and his deportment disorderly, he was the object of laughter of all the spectators.
>
> The emperor welcomed the bone into the palace chapel, where he built a comfortable couch with curtains made of golden flowers, a mat made of dragon scales, a mattress made of phoenix feathers; he burnt incense of the most precious quality, and offered cream made of the essence of milk, all material offered by Lalinga in 868. Immediately after welcoming the bone, the emperor decreed that in the capital and vicinity people were to pile up earth along the roadside to form incense posts to a height of ten to twenty feet. Up to about nine feet they were all decorated with gold and jade. Within the capital, there were approximately 10,000 of these posts. Legend has it that when these posts shook, rays from the Buddha and auspicious clouds lighted up the roadside, and this was regarded repeatedly as a supernatural sign by the happy people. Within the city the rich families one after another sponsored preaching assemblies, and along the streets they tied together silks to form pavilions and halls, poured mercury to form pools, set up gold and jade as trees, and competed against each other to assemble the monks or to establish Buddha images. They blew the conch-shell and struck the cymbals, they

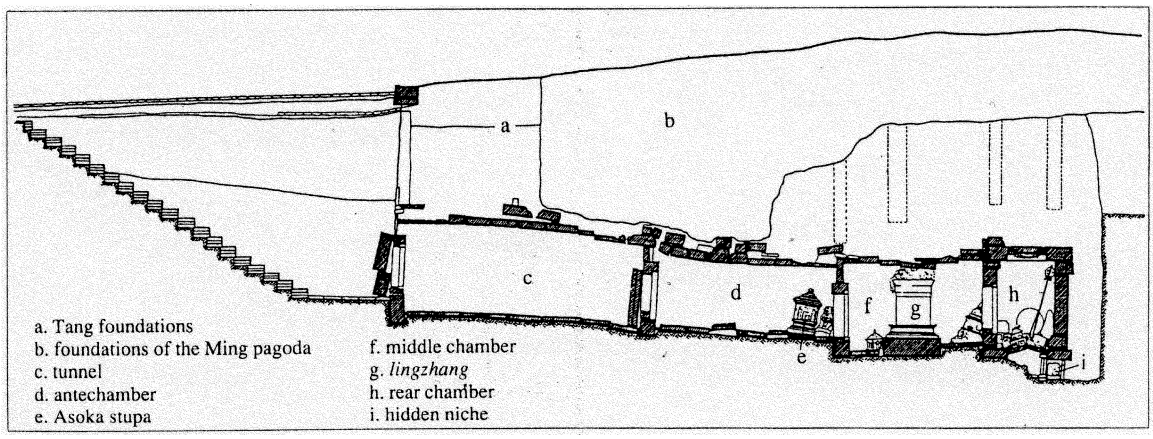

Fig. 3.3 Cross-section of the Famen Monastery crypt (SOURCE: Zhu Qizin, "Buddhist Treasures from Famensi: A Buddhist Architectural Masterpiece Unveiled," *Orientations* 21, no. 5 [1990]: 77).

lighted lamps and candles without interruption. They also ordered several barefooted children with jade girdles and golden headgear to sing praises and to play as they wished. Likewise they tied brocades and embroideries to form small cars to convey singers and dancers. In this fashion, they filled the imperial capital with their fun and gaiety, with the inhabitants of Yen-chou [Yanshou] Lane 延壽里 putting on the most gorgeous show.[66]

The relics were welcomed into the imperial palace in the fourth mouth. In the seventh month of the same year, the emperor died. His successor, Xizong, was enthroned "right in front of the coffin." Five months later, the relics were returned to the Famen Monastery.

The crypt remained sealed until its reopening in 1987. It consists of three chambers (see Fig. 3.3). Four relics have been recovered from the crypt. They were numbered by Chinese archeologists in the order in which they were discovered. The sets of reliquaries vary considerably from one another. Relic no. 4, which was found in the front chamber, comes from a white-marble Aśoka stūpa enclosing a bronze miniature pagoda, which holds a silver coffin containing the relic. Relic no. 2 was discovered in the middle chamber; the marble Spirit Canopy enclosed an iron casket that in turn held a silver coffin with the relic. The other two relics were found in the rear chamber, which was filled with a variety of artifacts donated for the re-enshrinement. Relic no. 1 was found in a set of eight caskets on the floor along the central axis, close to the north wall. Relic no. 3 was found in a nested set of five containers, recovered from a secret niche underneath the north wall (see Fig. 3.4).[67] Relic no. 3 from the secret niche and no. 4 from the front chamber are bones; the other two are made of jade. The relic in the secret niche is believed to be the "authentic relic"; the other three are considered "shadow bones" (*yinggu* 影骨).[68]

The very richness of the burial has posed serious challenges for interpretation. Although there have been numerous piecemeal exegeses of individual objects, there is as yet no comprehension of the master plan or unifying scheme underlying the disparate artifacts. Two major lines of

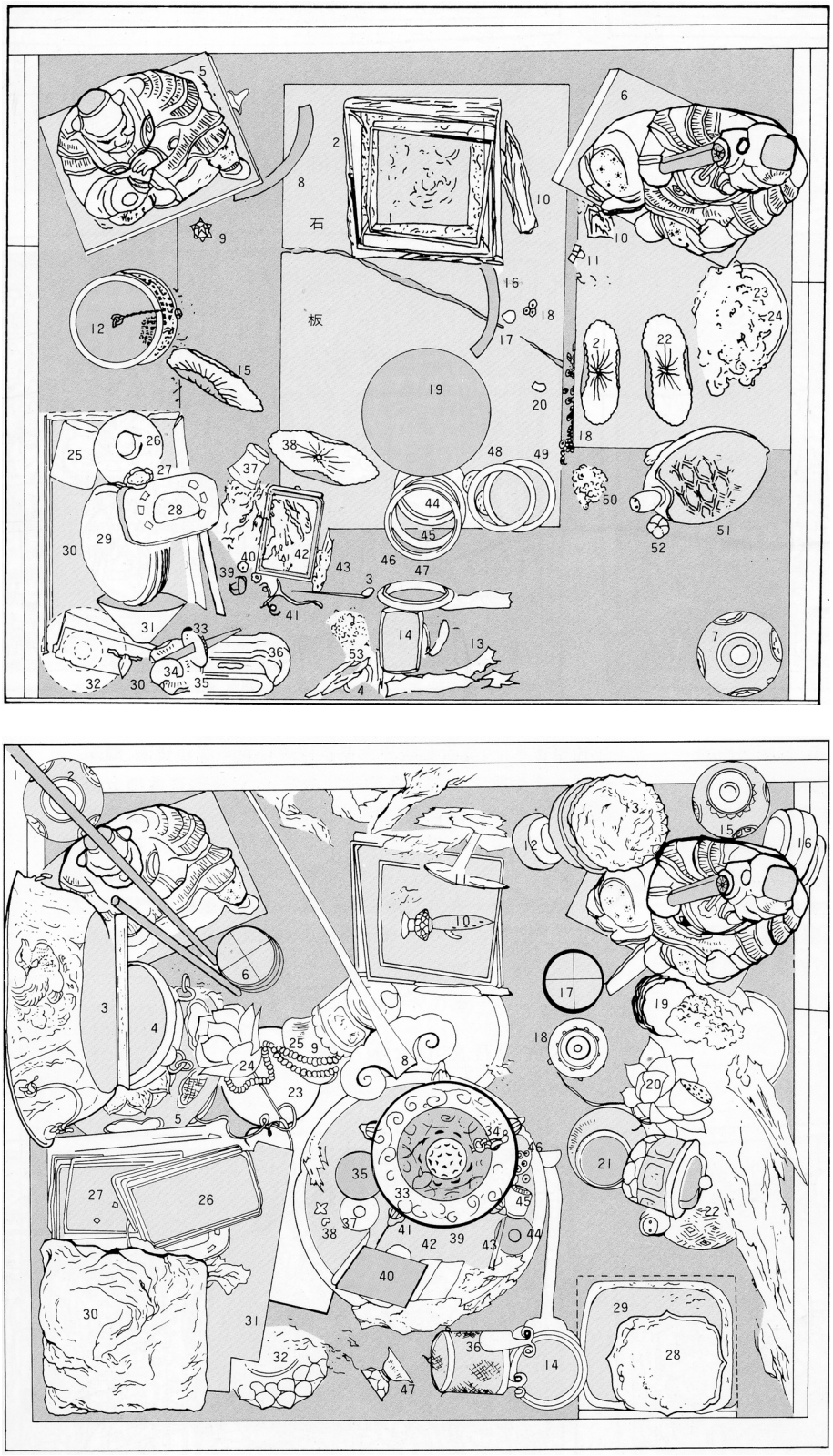

Fig. 3.4 Plan of the rear chamber of the Famen Monastery crypt (SOURCE: *FMDT*, p. 141).

interpretation concerning the disposition of the objects are beginning to emerge. One view holds that the abundance of esoteric elements suggests an underground maṇḍala governing the placement of the offerings. The identification of a maṇḍala on one casket and esoteric Buddhist密宗 iconography on other artifacts has led many to believe that the crypt itself is a maṇḍala space that allowed Tantric rituals to be conducted therein.[69] Opponents of this view point out that the small size of the crypt prevents one from standing upright in it and hence from conducting a full-scale maṇḍala ritual in it; that exoteric elements are present in the offerings; and moreover, that the structural layout of the crypt is modeled on that of imperial tombs.[70] In other words, the two rival interpretations boil down to whether the Famen crypt is primarily a Buddhist ritual space organized as a maṇḍala in a underground setting or essentially a modified traditional Chinese burial with Buddhist trappings.[71] The evidence supports both interpretations. Although the skeptics of the maṇḍala theory are right that the compact space precludes a maṇḍala ritual, it is equally true that maṇḍala iconography appears on some objects in the crypt.[72] Therefore a third interpretation that reckons with and reconciles both characterizations may be appropriate. Since the relics were the primary objects of enshrinement and the inscriptions recovered from the crypt repeatedly refer to the relics as the True Body, the issue of "body" ought to guide our interpretation.

What Do the Reliquaries Evoke?

Of the four reliquary sets, the two in the rear chamber are especially relevant to the concerns of this chapter.[73] Most of the items in these two sets, particularly those with a decorative program on them, were designed and made between 871 and 874.[74] The inventory and dedicatory tablets in the crypt, which can be matched with what we can learn from received texts, make it possible to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the last relic translation in 870s. Moreover, the artifacts themselves speak volumes.

Although the two reliquary sets share the common goal of relic enshrinement, and although both are products of the 870s and interred in the same chamber, their dispositions in the chamber, however, suggest differences in symbolic role and function. The eightfold set (see Fig. 3.5) was placed next to the center of the north wall on the floor, the fivefold set (Fig. 3.6) was buried beneath it in a secret niche (Fig. 3.3). Second, the innermost container of the eightfold set was a miniature stūpa made of gold; at the center of the five-piece set were the two nested coffins, in crystal and in jade.

The eightfold set is remarkable for its elaborate multiple-layer configuration. The use of nesting in reliquaries dates to at least the sixth century.[75] During the reign of Wu Zetian, the design for reliquaries was expanded to

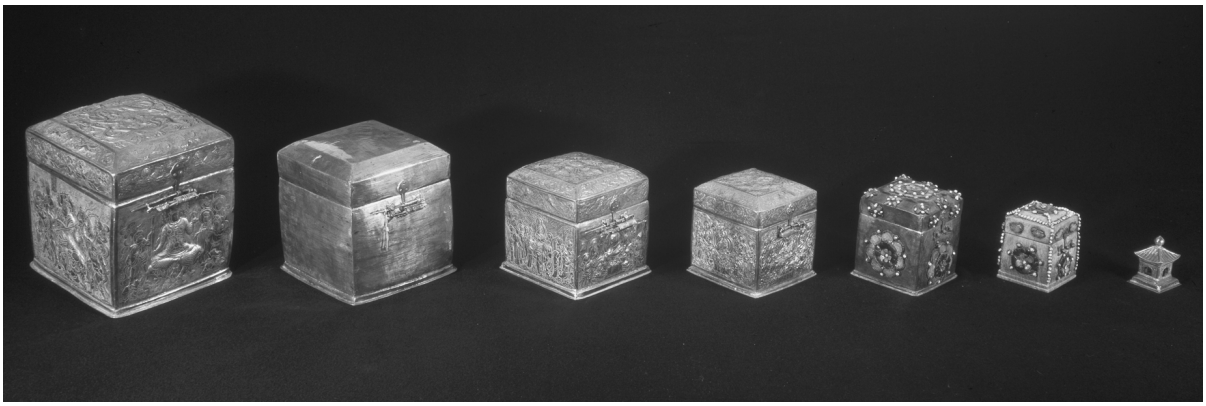

Fig. 3.5 The eightfold reliquary from the rear chamber of the Famen Monastery crypt. Ninth century. The first (outermost) casket of sandalwood carved with figures, which has disintegrated, is not shown here (SOURCE: courtesy of Wenwu Press).

a nested set of *nine* caskets,[76] and the miniature coffin began to replace the bottle used in earlier relic enshrinements for the innermost enclosure. The new design was apparently premised on the treatment of the relic as a deceased body and based on the traditional Chinese practice of enclosing the deceased in a nested set of coffins.[77] The theme of the deceased's flight to the land of the immortals that iconographically dominates the decorative program on coffins likewise informs the reliquary design. In the decorative program on coffins, the images on the multiple caskets combine to form an imaginary space across which the deceased travels, from the outer layer to the inner zone, the numinous other world in which he attains an afterlife.

This scenario of spiritual flight is deeply rooted in the indigenous tradition, but it may also have been corroborated or co-opted by Buddhist lore. The story of Ajātaśatru, king of Magadha, in the *Vinaya* was well known to medieval Chinese. In the wake of the Buddha's enlightenment, the story goes, Mahākāsyapa instructs Versākāra, a courtier of Magadha, on how to break the news to King Ajātaśatru. They fear that the king, who is still in the initial stages of enlightenment, may die from shock at the news. In preparation, they have a painting of Buddha's life story made, as well as eight caskets—the Chinese translation uses the character *han* 函—in the height of a human figure. Seven of them are filled with herbs; the eighth one contains "bovine-head sandalwood perfume." Upon seeing the painting and hearing that the Buddha has attained Nirvāṇa, King Ajātaśatru dies. His courtiers place his corpse successively in the seven herb-filled caskets and finally in the perfumed casket. The king comes to life again (a version of the story found in the wall paintings at Kizil is shown in Fig. 3.7).[78]

The story is relevant in that the caskets, although illustrated in the Kizil paintings as urns, appear in Yijing's 義淨 translation as "caskets" 函 *han*, the same measure word used in the inventory to refer to the caskets in the Famen crypt.[79] What the Kizil artists saw as urns, Yijing visualized as *han* caskets, when he translated the Vinaya text in the early eighth century.

Fig. 3.6 The five-fold reliquary from the secret niche under the north wall of the rear chamber of the Famen Monastery crypt (SOURCE: *FMDT*, p. 107).

The ninefold model designed around 660 under Wu Zetian was available for him to draw on in visualizing the text he was translating. Yijing may have brought the Wu Zetian–period caskets to bear on the text and saw a fit between the two. The process may have been reciprocal. The dramatic and vivid scenario of a dead human body passing through a succession of eight caskets fleshes out and visualizes the imaginary situation that had long existed in China: the deceased's soul traversing a numinous topography, headed for paradise. Moreover, the body is that of a king, which is significant for the Famen case. The reduction of the early Tang *nine*fold set—nine was a favored number in ancient China—to the late Tang *eight*-fold set of caskets has baffled modern scholars. The eight caskets in the Ajātaśatru story may well be among the plausible explanations, although

Fig. 3.7 The story of Ajātaśatru. Detail of mural in Cave 205 at Kizil (SOURCE: Albert Grünwedel, *Altbuddhistische Kultstätten in Chinesisch-Turkistan* [Berlin: G. Reimer, 1912], p. 166, fig. 383).

Fig. 3.8 The front face of the second casket of the eightfold reliquary with Vaiśravaṇa. Gold-gilt silver. H. 23.5 cm; W. 20 cm. Ninth century (SOURCE: *FMDT*, pl. 4).

we cannot be certain. In any event, the story reveals the mindset of its period and provides a specific way to approximate the kind of imaginary movement through the nested set of eight caskets from the Famen crypt.

On the outermost casket, which was made of sandalwood, is carved a ritual procession featuring a regal, haloed figure.[80] The identity of this figure will become clearer once we proceed into the inner caskets. The second casket, gilded, is engraved with the Four Guardian Kings (Lokapalas) of the world. The front face (the face with the lock) of the casket is dominated by Vaiśravaṇa, Guardian King of the North, who sits frontally (see Fig. 3.8). The Guardian Kings on the other three faces turn toward the left, thereby forming a one-directional lineup headed by Vaiśravaṇa (see Fig. 3.9). The

Fig. 3.9 Drawing of the four faces of the second casket: (*top left*) Vaiśravaṇa, the Heavenly King of the North; (*top right*) Virūpākṣa, the Heavenly King of the West; (*bottom left*) Virūḍhaka, the Heavenly King of the South; (*bottom right*) Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the Heavenly King of the East (SOURCE: FMDT, pp. 148–49).

figural design clearly indicates a procession headed by the Vaiśravaṇa assemblage. Moreover, not only is this face privileged by having its main icon, Vaiśravaṇa, seated frontally, in contrast with the other Heavenly Kings, but it also boasts iconographic features not shared by the other three faces.

In the foreground kneel two young celestials, symmetrically paired, on either side of Vaiśravaṇa, each attending to a jar and presenting a pearl-like object on his palm. The pearl-like objects can easily be identified by their association with the jar. None of the many surviving examples of the Vaiśravaṇa scene found elsewhere features the jars and the pearls. Rather, the jars and the pearls belong to the generic framework or iconographic conventions of reliquary decoration. On the face of the Lantian 藍田 relic casket, which represents the scene of Śākyamuni's relics being divided among the eight kingdoms, for example, is a person from the Western Regions reaching into a jar, surrounded by seated kings and chieftains (Fig. 3.10).[81] The jar is apparently a container of relics. Both the compositional scheme

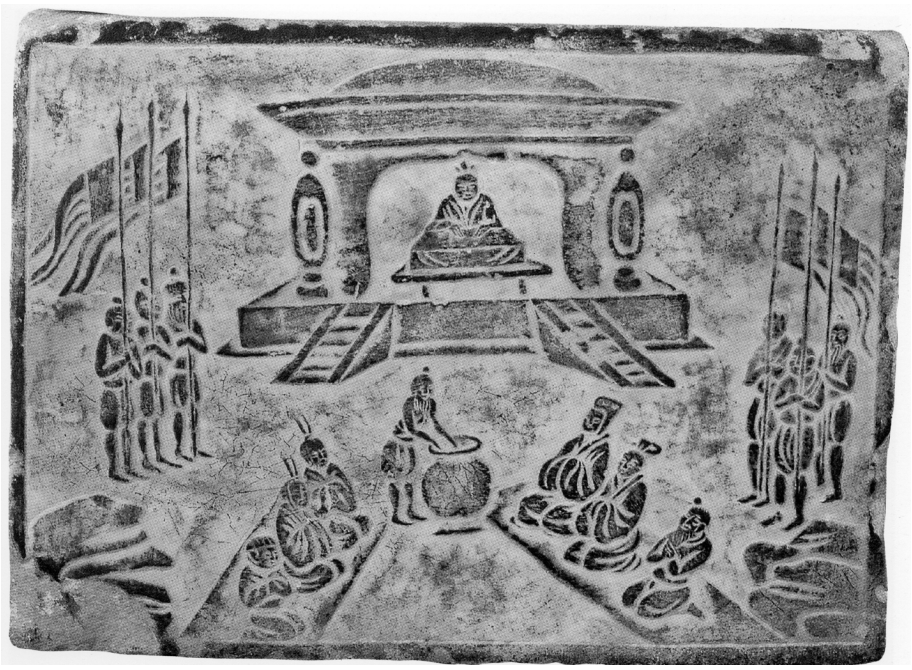

Fig. 3.10 Relic-division scene on marble reliquary casket from Lantian, Shaanxi. H. 32 cm; W. 32 cm. Seventh or eighth century. Institute of Cultural Relics Management (SOURCE: *Tō no jotei Sokuten Bukō to sono jidai ten: kyūtei no eiga*, pl. 34-1).

(the symmetrical pairing of seated recipients of relics) and certain iconographic details (the relic jar) are discernible in the Vaiśravaṇa scene on the Famen casket (Fig. 3.8), which appropriates relic-division iconography into the conventional Vaiśravaṇa composition.

The relic division is part of what Alexander Soper calls the "narrative cycle devoted to the whole sequence of events preceding and following the 'Great Release' [the Parinirvāṇa]."[82] The sequence comprises, in succession, a series of set scenes such as parinirvāṇa, cremation, the relic division, and stūpa construction.[83] Although variations exist, the narrative cycle culminates most often in the stūpa scene. In a way, the Vaiśravaṇa scene on the Famen casket conflates both the relic division and the stūpa scene. If the two kneeling celestials enact the relic division, the stūpa held by Vaiśravaṇa serves to represent the culmination of the sequence. This displacement results in a rather suggestive iconographic reconfiguration. The stūpa held by Vaiśravaṇa recapitulates, albeit partially, the parinirvāṇa sequence in which relic division leads to stūpa construction. Compressing the sequence into the Vaiśravaṇa scene makes the stūpa the default destiny for the relics held by the two celestials. In this way, another layer of displacement takes place here.

In the parinirvāṇa cycle, the enshrinement of the relics in stūpas brings the sequence to a close. In the Vaiśravaṇa context, the Northern Guardian King serves as a delegate from the numinous other world who is to usher the deceased's soul safely across the unfathomable sea to the other shore. The stūpa is the vessel used to transport the soul. It marks the threshold to

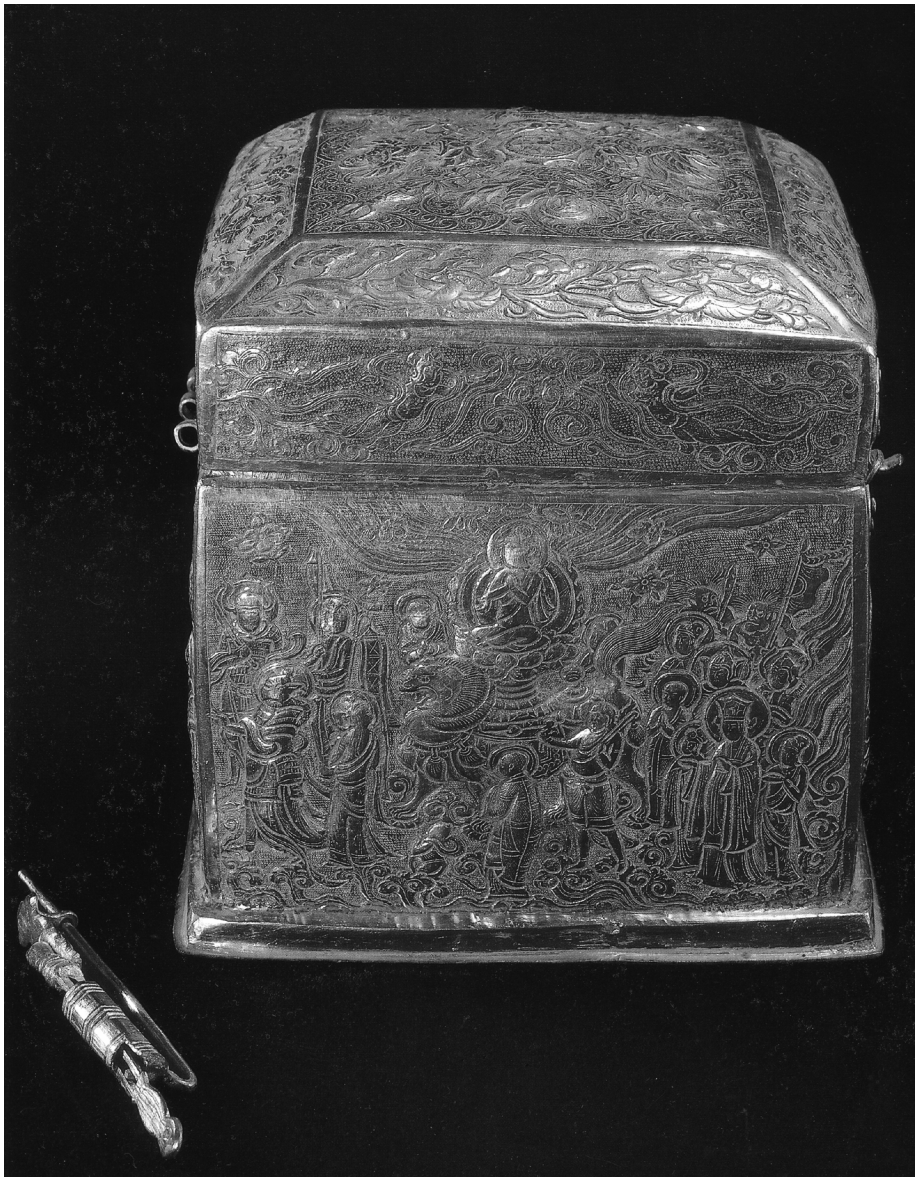

Fig. 3.11 Mañjuśrī-led procession on the fourth casket of the eightfold reliquary from the Famen Monastery crypt. Gold-gilt silver. H. 16.2 cm; W. 14.5 cm. Ninth century (SOURCE: *FMDT*, pl. 9).

the other world—hence the placement of the Vaiśravaṇa scene near the beginning of the set of eight caskets. The stūpa in the parinirvāṇa sequence is associated with relics; the stūpa Vaiśravaṇa holds is for the deceased's body. The conflation of the two conventions here indicates that the relics are treated as bodies and the term True Body was taken quite literally, very much against the doctrinal grain. The caskets that follow further confirm that the entire set of eight forms a virtual space in which the True Body is conveyed to its final destiny: a miniature stūpa (see Fig. 3.14 below) that visually echoes the one held by Vaiśravaṇa.

The placement of the undecorated third casket next to the Vaiśravaṇa casket is highly relevant. The Vaiśravaṇa casket marks the final stage on this side of the threshold; beyond it commences the progression to the other world. The plain casket constitutes the boundary proper. Its symbolic significance in the multiple encasement in a funerary context is best demonstrated in the Mawangdui set of coffins: the inner numinous space is separated from the outer world through a largely unadorned coffin in the middle.[84]

Indeed, once we pass the plain casket, the iconography on the fourth casket fulfills expectations. Again the casket follows the orientation established on the first two caskets by privileging the front face and thereby continuing the rectilinear movement along a virtual axis found on all the caskets. Moving toward and converging on the front face are symmetrically opposed processions on the left and right sides of the casket. One side shows Samantabhadra on an elephant; the other Mañjuśrī on a lion (see Fig. 3.11). This pair of deities have been familiar motifs in Buddhist mortuary iconography since the mid-Tang. In cave-shrines, they often flank the entrance on the inside wall and signal the initial stage in the journey of the deceased's soul to the Buddha world. When a medieval Chinese Buddhist became aware that his life was drawing to an end, he would "recite the Vow on [Following] the Mañjuśrī/Samantabhadra Course (*ayāna*)" 誦文殊普賢行願 in preparation for his postmortem journey.[85]

The Abhiṣeka *Ritual: A Bodhisattva's Transformation into the Dharma Body*

At first glance, the fifth casket does not fit the funerary procession posited thus far. Its apparent esoteric Buddhist elements have distracted scholarly attention from focusing on the funerary scenario and promoted the view that the crypt was the site of a grand maṇḍala ritual. A closer look reveals, however, that it, too, is part of a coherent design program.

The casket shows the six-armed Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara 如意輪觀音 on its front face (see Fig. 3.12a) and Vairocana 毗盧舍那 Buddha on its back (see Fig. 3.12b). Each of the two side faces has a Tathāgata with two rays emanating from his head. Since the front of the outer caskets is consistently the primary face, the fact that a bodhisattva—the Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara—takes precedence over a buddha on this casket poses an interpretive problem. It also presents a clue. If we consider the present casket in terms of a front-to-back orientation on the premise that a rectilinear inward progression gives a coherent order to the eight caskets, several questions arise. How are the Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara and Vairocana related? Why do they occupy the beginning and end of this segment of the

Fig. 3.12 The fifth casket of the eightfold reliquary from the Famen Monastery crypt, showing (12a, *left*) six-armed Cintāmaṇicakra Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin) on its front face and (12b, *right*) Vairocana Buddha on its back; each of the two side faces shows Tathāgata with his head radiating two rays. Gold. H. 13.5 cm; W. 13 cm. Ninth century (SOURCE: *FMDT*, pls. 11, 10).

progression? If these two images are elements of esoteric Buddhism—which features punctilious and elaborate rituals—what is the ritual significance of this iconographic program? If the entire symbolic progression ends with a relic of the True Body, how do these images relate to the notion of the body?

In combination, the scenes on the four faces of this casket represent an *abhiṣeka* ritual in which a bodhisattva attains the Dharma Body and becomes a buddha. According to Mahāyāna teachings, every human being has the Dharma Body, but "moral blindness" 無明 (*avidyā*) prevents us from seeing this truth. A bodhisattva is one who can remove these mental obstacles in order to realize and become the Dharma Body. Although different sūtras posit different steps in this process, the celebrated "Ten Stages" 十地 (*bhūmi*) either constitute the entire progression or mark the final segment of a more elaborate 52-step process.[86] The tenth stage is the *abhiṣeka-bhūmi*, or initiation stage.

The *abhiṣeka* originated in ancient Indian coronation rituals, which were transferred to Buddhism and reserved for august personages.[87] In the textual tradition, a bodhisattva goes through the final stage, the *abhiṣeka*, of the tenfold path to attain the supreme enlightenment, thereby realizing the Dharma Body and becoming a buddha.[88] Various Buddhist sects in medieval China based their initiation ritual on the model of a bodhisattva becoming a buddha The most elaborate enactment is found in esoteric Buddhism, as evidenced by the abundance of ritual prescriptions in its scriptures.

Fig. 3.13 The gold-gilded silver statue of a bodhisattva holding a tray used for relic display. H. 38.5 cm. Dated 871 CE (SOURCE: *FMDT*, pl. 2).

Descriptions of the *abhiṣeka* vary, but the central situation remains constant: it is a ritual process in which a bodhisattva becomes a buddha. In the Famen crypt, the bodhisattva's progress starts in the middle chamber. Close to the door into the rear chamber was a gilded silver statue of a bodhisattva holding a tray used to display the relics (see Fig. 3.13).[89] Then a bodhisattva figurine set atop the outermost casket of the eightfold reliquary (see Fig. 3.4 above). Four caskets later, the bodhisattva image appears again on the fifth casket *as a protagonist*, or a *main icon* (this contrasts with the appearance of the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra on the

side faces of the fourth casket apparently as facilitators rather than recipients of the ritual process). Not only does the bodhisattva occupy the front face (see Fig. 3.12a) here, but he is also aligned with the Vairocana Buddha (see Fig. 3.12b). Since the eight caskets present a rectilinear progression, these placements represent a process of becoming. The casket visualizes the final stage of a bodhisattva's transformation. In the textual tradition, the climax of the tenfold path is marked by a spectacle; as described in the *Flower Ornament Scripture* (Ch. *Huayan jing* 華嚴經; Sanskrit: *Avataṁsaka sūtra*):

> From the circle of hair between the eyebrows of the Buddhas radiate beams of light called possessors of omniscient superknowledge, . . . illumining all worlds in the ten directions. . . . As those light beams enter the enlightening being's head, the enlightening being is said to be crowned; in the realm of perfectly completely enlightened ones, having fulfilled the ten powers, the enlightening being enters the ranks of the perfect Buddhas. As soon as the enlightening being is crowned by those blessed Buddhas, the enlightening being enters the ranks of the truly consummately enlightened ones.[90]

This passage describes the precise events portrayed on the fifth casket: the Buddhas on the two side faces of the casket radiate light beams as the bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokiteśvara) (see Fig. 3.12a) becomes the Buddha Vairocana (see Fig. 3.12b).

The sūtras make it clear that the *abhiṣeka* ritual is analogous to the earthly ritual in which a king "takes the *golden pitcher* containing water from the four oceans and anoints the head of his son with the water, whereupon the son joins the ranks of the consecrated rulers."[91] The Buddhist *abhiṣeka* ritual retains the use of the pitcher—often called the *arghya* pitcher 閼伽瓶, or pitcher of scented water—to hold the water the master sprinkles on the head of the initiate. Four identical *arghya* pitchers were placed at the corners of the rear chamber of the Famen crypt, where the set of eight caskets was located (see Fig. 3.4 above). Three of them bear, inside a trumpet-shaped footring, an ink inscription respectively specifying "east," "south," and "north" and corresponding to their placement in the crypt.[92] The designation of directions distinguishes them from a routine burial item and suggests their specific ritual functions. More telling is the fact that these *arghya* pitchers were donated by Zhihuilun.[93] An inscription on a silver casket found in the rear chamber reveals the identity of this donor: "*bhikṣu* Zhihuilun, the Tripiṭaka master, the *abhiṣeka ācārya* [preceptor of the initiation ritual], the holder/transmitter of the Supreme Patriarchy of the Buddhist Tantrayāna, of the Daxingshan Monastery of the Western Capital City" (Shangdu Daxingshan si chuan zuishangshengzu Fo dajiao guanding asheli sanzang bichu Zhihuilun上都大興善寺傳最上乘祖佛大教灌頂阿闍梨三藏苾芻智慧輪).[94]

Amoghavajra (Ch. Bukong不空; 705–74), a founding father of the esoteric Buddhist sect in China, had resided at the Daxingshan Monastery af-

ter 756. The esoteric master performed the *abhiṣeka* ritual for both Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712–56) and Suzong 肅宗 (r. 756–62), as well as military governors and eunuch officials. In 768, an *abhiṣeka bodhimaṇḍala*, or baptistry, was established in the monastery with the imperial court's blessing.[95] The Japanese pilgrim Ennin 圓仁 (794–864) visited the monastery in 840 and "received instruction in the Great Law of the Diamond Realm World [Maṇḍala]." "Entering the Imperially Established Baptistry," he wrote, "I worshiped the various great maṇḍalas, made offerings, and received baptism." The experience made such a deep impression on him that that same night he dreamed of drawing a maṇḍala and spreading it out during a triumphant homecoming in Japan.[96]

Amoghavajra's torch passed to his third-generation disciple, the Indian monk Prajñācakra, or Zhihuilun 智慧輪 in Chinese, who was anointed as an *ācārya* (Ch. *a-she-li*阿闍梨), or preceptor, in the Daxingshan Monastery.[97] The eleven items, totaling 28 *liang* 兩 (1.0 kg) of gold and 155 *liang* (5.8 kg) of silver, that he donated for the relic translation and were interred in the rear chamber testify to his crucial role in the ritual aspects of the relic enshrinement. More relevant for the current discussion is that one inscription highlights his identity as an *abhiṣeka ācārya* 灌頂阿闍梨 (preceptor of the initiation ritual). Given the care and precision with which the *arghya* pitchers he donated were placed at the four corners—signifying the "waters of the four seas"—there is no doubt that an *abhiṣeka* ritual is implied here.[98] His brief biography particularly mentions that he had "practiced the method of Maṇḍala" since the Dazhong 大中 era (847–60) and that his theological forte was "rooted in Mahāvairocana."[99] It is hard not to sense Prajñācakra's input into the ritual process from the reliquary design, particularly the Mahāvairocana image on the fifth casket of the eightfold reliquary.

The identification of the *abhiṣeka* ritual, which involved the use of maṇḍalas, on the fifth casket does not refute the argument that these small crypts could not accommodate a maṇḍala ritual. A distinction should be drawn, however, between a real-life ritual and an imaginary process unfolding in a purely symbolic microcosm. The underground catacombs constitute no more than a symbolic space for the symbolic participants in the ritual—the figures engraved on the caskets. The ritual progression unfolds only at a symbolic or imaginary level.

The Womb and Diamond Realm Maṇḍalas on the Reliquaries

The bodhisattva's transformation into a buddha continues on the last three caskets of the eightfold set. The casket that depicts the *abhiṣeka* ritual is the last one in the set that has a figural representation. Each side of the gold-

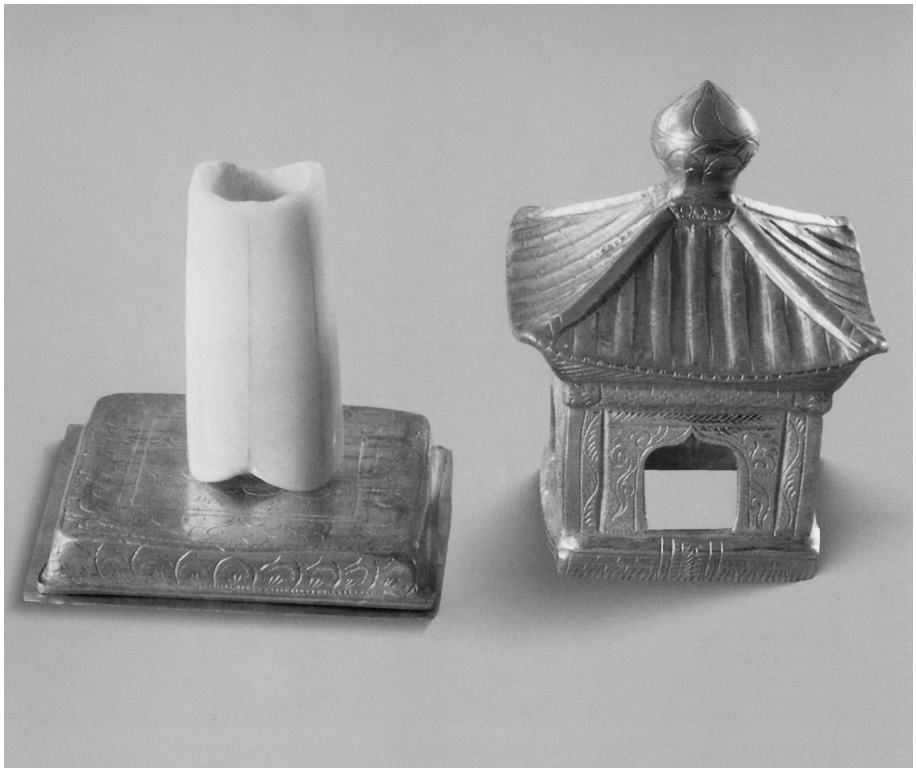

Fig. 3.14 Relic no. 1, measuring 4.03 cm in length, in white jade, enshrined in a miniature four-door gold stūpa, the innermost piece of the eightfold set (SOURCE: *FMDT*, pl. 3).

and-silver-gilded sixth and seventh caskets is dominated by a floral medallion made of red and green precious stones and pearls. They are followed by the miniature stūpa holding relic no. 1.

The difference in the material nature of the two rear-chamber relics and the ways in which they were enshrined are significant. Relic no. 1, in the eightfold set, is of white jade and enshrined in a miniature four-door gold stūpa (see Fig. 3.14); relic no. 3, from the secret niche, is bone and was encased in double miniature coffins of crystal and jade (see Fig. 3.6 above).

Again, the key for explaining these differences is the notion of the True Body. In the eightfold reliquary set, all the caskets discussed thus far were designed and arranged to constitute a symbolic space for the bodhisattva to acquire the True Body, which is found in the innermost container. The stūpa as the heart of a complex, multilayered configuration has parallels elsewhere. Examples of the Womb Maṇḍala 胎藏曼荼羅 often feature a miniature relic stūpa as the central icon at the heart of their concentric circles and squares (see Fig. 3.15). The stūpa stands for the Dharma Body, that is, the True Body.

Although the eightfold reliquary does not strictly fit any of the various compositional types of the Womb Maṇḍala, a number of conceptual schemes and formal features of the reliquary set do suggest references to the Womb Maṇḍala. First, one purpose of the Womb Maṇḍala is the

Fig. 3.15 A miniature relic stūpa as the central icon in the heart of the Womb Maṇḍala (SOURCE: *TZ* 1:491.a).

realization of the Dharma Body. It can be perceived both centripetally and centrifugally.[100] Its multiple-layered configuration implies, among other things, a symbolic movement from the outer layers to the inner core and facilitates the process of becoming the Mahā-Vairocana 大日如來, the Dharma Body. It is a field of action in which the bodhisattva, with his "parent-begotten-body," acquires first a Transformative Body and then a Dharma Body.[101] The "Inner Mansion" of the Womb Maṇḍala consists of the central icon of the Mahā-Vairocana Buddha surrounded by a circle made of four buddhas and four bodhisattvas, each occupying one petal of an eight-petaled-lotus pattern. The Inner Mansion is thus perceived as and called the "Eight Petal Mansion" (Ch. *bayeyuan*八葉院).

A total of eight lotus medallions adorn the four sides of the two caskets.[102] Normally, we would not attach too much significance to these decorative patterns. But the fact that all the other caskets in the eightfold series are carefully decorated with a referentially specific iconographic program should caution against taking these medallion-patterned caskets lightly. The sudden change from figural to floral representation makes the lotus-medallion patterns all the more significant. Together with the final enclosure, these two containers form a three-layer configuration: the two

caskets with the lotus medallions form the eight lotus petals, and the stūpa constitutes the representation of the Dharma Body.

Can we integrate the other five caskets into the Womb Maṇḍala? There are fuzzy approximations, of course, since figures such as Vaiśravaṇa and Samantabhadra are members of the Womb Maṇḍala cast. But to look for these is probably to miss the point of the whole set, which is not so much to configure a complete maṇḍala as to present an ad hoc approach to the transformation of the parent-begotten-body into the Dharma, or True, Body. The *abhiṣeka* ritual and the Womb Maṇḍala, which are often intimately related, are evoked to serve this larger purpose.

The ad hoc nature of the set is further confirmed by the fivefold reliquary series placed in the secret niche. It consists of, from outermost to innermost container, an iron casket, a silver casket, a sandalwood casket, a crystal coffin (or *guo*), and a white-jade coffin.[103] The engravings on the silver casket represent the Perfected Body Assembly, the first of the nine categories of the Diamond Realm Maṇḍala 金剛界曼荼羅.[104] This identification allows us to appreciate the raison d'être behind the crystal and jade coffins that enshrine the relic. Whereas the key metaphor for the Womb Maṇḍala is the eight lotus petals, the dominant image for the Diamond Realm Maṇḍala is the moon, with its pristine luster,[105] "as if it were shrouded in a light mist."[106] The *Miyan jing* 秘嚴經 paints an even more strikingly evocative image to illustrate the meaning of the Diamond Realm Maṇḍala: with the "manifestation of the Liberation Treasure, [the Buddha] lives in the palace with the dimensions of a finger, with a lustrous and pristine appearance."[107] The visual effect of placing a white-jade coffin inside a crystal one conveys this precisely.

Whose Transformation?

The identification of the two reliquary sets as representing, respectively and to varying degrees, the Womb Maṇḍala and the Diamond Realm Maṇḍala, does not close the case; rather, it raises more questions. If the eightfold reliquary set maps a progression toward the innermost stūpa and the transformation of a bodhisattva's parent-begotten-body into the Dharma Body of Vairocana, who, then, undergoes this transformation? If the *abhiṣeka* ritual and the Womb Maṇḍala facilitate this transformation, who is it that is being anointed and becoming a buddha? The relic at the end of the process clearly suggests that it is this True Body. But the True Body is by definition the Dharma Body. There is no need for it to go through a tortuous process to become what it already is. Even if we ignore the doctrinal equation of the True Body and the Dharma Body and consider the relic as the True Body in the sense of being Śākyamuni's bodily remains, the *abhiṣeka* is again unnecessary since it involves a bodhisattva

becoming a buddha. Śākyamuni does not need an *abhiṣeka* to become himself. The casket makes sense only if we are prepared to accept that the True Body has additional layers of references.

On the front face of the second casket, a monarchical figure standing immediately to the right of Vaiśravaṇa displays a relic on his right palm (see Fig. 3.8). This curious figure has a counterpart on each of the other three faces of the casket. The monarchs on the west, south, and east faces wear distinctly foreign costumes suggesting their identities as non-Chinese, whereas the dress of their counterpart on the north face identifies him as a Chinese ruler. A distinct manner of portraiture reinforces the sinocentric orientation. Only the Chinese emperor is crowned and haloed. Despite all these signs of his primacy, however, he is smaller in stature than the other monarchs. Another difference is that his three counterparts are accompanied by a consort (see Fig. 3.9).

This iconographic oddity is no accident. The appearance of a Chinese emperor should alert us to possible contemporary references. As noted above, the relics were welcomed into the capital city in the third month of 873. Four months later, Emperor Yizong died, and the palace eunuchs installed Yizong's fifth son, known to history as Xizong, as the new emperor.[108] In accord with Yizong's deathbed will, Xizong, made heir apparent one month earlier, succeeded to the throne "right in front of the coffin" with the deceased emperor's body in it.[109] At the time, the young monarch was only twelve years old and unmarried. In fact, the official Tang history never mentions that he had a consort.[110] As part of the eightfold set made during this period,[111] the north face of the casket captures the historical circumstances: here is the young ruler, shorter in stature than his counterparts on other faces and unattended by a consort. The scene is virtually a depiction of the young emperor's enthronement and his bidding of farewell to his deceased father.

The young monarch's association with Vaiśravaṇa is a felicitous analogy. Vaiśravaṇa and his assembly are said to have escorted Buddha's body in its passing into Mahāparinirvāṇa,[112] and the Guardian King's retinue often includes a *young child*. One explanation is that Vaiśravaṇa turns himself into a child out of his affection for his devotees.[113] Another version says that Vaiśravaṇa's son, Prince Sainnisi, manifests himself as a child to aid the devotee.[114] The Vaiśravaṇa lore that casts the child as a manifestation of a divine prince allowed a fitting analogy to be drawn between the mythical child-as-prince and the real-life one, the twelve-year-old Xizong.

In this light, the plain casket, as noted above, serves as a boundary that separates the numinous realm from the human world. As the inward progression crosses the boundary, it is greeted by Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra. Led by the lion-riding Mañjuśrī, a monarch moves forward amid a celestial retinue treading on clouds (see Fig. 3.11). This may well be a shadowy and

symbolic correlative to the dying, or already dead, Yizong. In fact, at the time of the relic translation, there were already "informed observers who pointed out that [the relic translation] was in fact an intimation of a grand funeral" to come for the emperor.[115] Modern historians similarly believe that the ceremony resulted from Yizong's feeling that his life was nearing its end.[116] The kinds of donated objects from, or in the name of, the imperial throne also reveal the nature of the relic enshrinement. The inventory tablet records two sets of offerings by the throne: a first set of 122 items donated in 873 following the arrival of the relic in the capital city, and a second set of 754 items "newly endowed" to mark the return of the relic to the Famen Monastery. The first set consists mostly of ritual and ceremonial paraphernalia. The second set, by contrast, consists of caps, shoes, clothing, tea utensils, bedding, games, and other everyday objects. It has been rightly suggested that the first set of offerings assumes the relic is part of the Buddha's body; the second set is premised on the relic as a human body,[117] or rather, a conflation of the Buddha's body and the emperor's body.

There were precedents for an analogy between an emperor and the bodhisattva. Both Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty 梁武帝 (r. 502–49) and Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty 隋文帝 (r. 581–604) took the layman's bodhisattva vows. At times their courtiers even referred to them as the "emperor bodhisattva," "the bodhisattva son of heaven,"[118] or "the Buddha's disciple who has taken the bodhisattva vows."[119] Wu Zetian's impersonation of various Buddhist deities was a more immediate model. By the late Tang, it was fairly common to liken a living person to a bodhisattva. Xue Diao 薛調 (830–72), a scholar at the Imperial Academy, was called a "living bodhisattva" 生菩薩 for his strikingly handsome looks.[120] More revealing is an event that took place two years before Yizong's death. In 871, the emperor's favorite daughter, Princess Tongchang 同昌公主, died. To console the heartbroken emperor, on the Buddha's birthday, the Anguo Monastery 安國寺, a prominent Buddhist monastery that the emperor had patronized, hosted a dance, choreographed by the famous artist Li Keji 李可及, called "Dance [Arranged to] the Bodhisattva Tune" 菩薩蠻舞. The spectacle had such a transporting effect that the audience felt "as if the Buddha had been [re]born."[121] This dramatization of the Buddha's birth in memory of a member of the imperial family was almost a rehearsal for depiction of the transformation of a bodhisattva into a buddha on the eightfold reliquary.

There were also precedents of *abhiṣeka* in which the emperor was baptized. As noted above, Amoghavajra was called to the imperial palace to conduct the *abhiṣeka* ritual for Xuanzong in 746 and Suzong in 758.[122] By the late Tang, *abhiṣeka* ceremonies had become fairly common. Within a year after his arrival in Chang'an in the ninth month of 840, the Japanese monk Ennin underwent three such rituals in various Buddhist monasteries.[123]

The exalted notion of the True Body was also integrated into daily experience. Luo Qiu 羅虯 (fl. 873), a poet active around the time of the relic translation, easily drew on the trope of the True Body in mourning for his courtesan-lover Red Flower, whom he had killed: "I recognized the True Body under the red flowers" 紅兒花下認眞身.[124] Such a flight of imagination effectively demonstrates the extent to which the Buddhist *imaginaire*—the bodhisattva, the birth of the Buddha, the True Body, and so on—were popularized and became an integral part of the late Tang grammar of motifs and the discursive repertoire.

The conflation of the relic—the True Body—and the emperor's body is most apparent in the text of the dedicatory tablet entitled "Memorial on Escorting the True Body of Qiyang during the Xiantong Era of the Great Tang" 大唐咸通啓送岐陽眞身志文, composed by the prominent monk Sengche 僧澈 of the Anguo Monastery.[125] Written in 874, upon the completion of the re-enshrining of the relics in the Famen crypt, the text traces the history of relic translations under Tang imperial patronage. In particular, it documents the welcoming of the relic to the capital city and its return to the Famen Monastery. The way Sengche quickly shifts from the emperor's ebullience over the relic's arrival to his death merits close attention. On the eighth day of the fourth month, Yizong welcomed the relic at the Anfu Gateway Tower. The sight of the relic, writes Sengche, "dissolved the flock's skepticism, melted the worldly heart," and reduced viewers to grateful tears. Those who saw it became dizzy with the "divine shadows flickering in lamplight and colorful patterns trailing the cloud, . . . flocks of cranes soaring and dancing." "The fragrance from [the relic] inside the canopy" was so real that it "mocks the fantasy about immortality by the Emperor Wu of Han. It illuminates the past and present and brings about the conversion of the entire world." At this climax, the text careens to the sober subject of the emperor's death, in tactful phrases couched in ethereal terms: "Suddenly growing tired of the worldly affairs, [the emperor] was bent for transcending the Ten Regions. He departed for good, heading toward the Nine Lotuses; *stepping on the Five Clouds*, he will never return. The Dragon Chart has been bequeathed to the Bright Ruler, and the Phoenix Pedigree will be continued by the filial branch."[126] Having narrated both the welcoming of the relic and the emperor's death, the author then describes the return of the True Body to the Famen Monastery. At this juncture, it is not possible to distinguish the ritual lamentation over Śākyamuni's entry into Nirvāṇa from the mourning for the deceased emperor: "The cloud sprinkled flowers from the Treasure Realms, which were teardrops sprayed from the celestial river." As the relic was interred in the crypt, it struck Sengche that "the imperial family's bountiful blessedness is boundless, and the Virtuous Seed [embodied in the relic] that had endured extensive kalpas defies decay." The votive text ends in a vein of a funerary memorial:

The whole Dhyana River is drenched in tears, the Bodhi Trees are shivering with sadness. . . . The monastery chimes reverberate in sync. At the thought that the golden gate is to be closed forever, [one is] overwhelmed by ten thousand kinds of pathos. Knowing the Excellent Body will last for eternity, [one is able to] take some consolation. The Meeting with [Maitreya and] the Three Groups Under the Dragon Flower Trees gathers all those who are there to see the Buddha; the fragrant [Pure Land of] Nine Lotuses greets those who transcend life and death.[127]

Here the description is almost a verbal parallel to the design of the lotus medallions on the inner casket, which visualize the final stage of the body's heavenward ascension, "treading the five clouds" in the sky.

The marks on the interior of the relic further reinforce this association. The dedicatory tablet provides a genealogy. A Chan master named Shiyi 師益 of Mount Jiuhua 九華山 had heard about the Famen relic(s). He set up an altar and prayed at the foot of the Famen pagoda. On the 29th day of the eighth month, twelfth year of Xiantong (871), he found relic(s) in the northwest corner of the old passage under the pagoda.

According to old records, it is one *cun* 寸three *fen* 分 [4.0 cm] in length. Its top is even, and its bottom rugged and irregular. Three sides are even [with one another], and one side is slightly higher. The central cavity has some hidden marks 隱跡 in it. It is white in color like jade, with a faint blue-greenish tint. Refined in texture, it has a luster. A big, square cavity runs through it lengthwise. Some barely discernible patterns 文 appear on its two corners.[128]

The "marks" and "patterns" inside the cavity turn out, archeologists have discovered, to be seven burned dots in the shape of the Big Dipper.[129] The plenitude of esoteric elements in the crypt has inclined scholars to see suggestions of maṇḍalas throughout. Since the Big Dipper Maṇḍala 北斗曼荼羅 is known to have existed in Tang times, some are quick to conclude that the relic refers to this maṇḍala.[130] Such a claim cannot be substantiated. First, the monk who retrieved the relic from the Famen crypt in 871 was a Chan Buddhist master, and the relic came with the marks. Second, as described in the dedicatory tablet of 874, the acquisition of this particular relic appears to be related to a general aspiration for immortality, the traditional flight-to-heaven and star-treading scenario: "The star(s) that once descended [to the world] now visit the Nine Heavens." Even if the marks had been appropriated in the 870s into the esoteric ritual, the Big Dipper Maṇḍala does not have a set iconography,[131] which makes it impossible to identify distinct iconographic features in the casket set related to the Big Dipper Maṇḍala. What we do know about this maṇḍala is its apotropaic function. A ritual manual of Big Dipper Homa 北斗七星護摩 promises those who practice the ritual that their "death will be canceled, and mortality reinstated," and that kings who set up such maṇḍalas in their court will enjoy peaceful and prosperous reigns, "free from catastrophes, anomalies, plagues, and epidemics. Enemies and rivals shall naturally be routed."[132] We sense an echo of this

in the dedicatory tablet's wish that the "barbarians of the eight quarters come in submission and the Four Seas remain unruffled."[133]

It is apparent that instead of regarding the reliquary sets and the arrangement of the enshrinement as conforming strictly to a maṇḍala, we should see the maṇḍalas as one among several symbolic schemes adapted to the general purpose of ensuring the well-being of the emperor. It is striking how susceptible to pragmatic manipulation these Buddhist rituals and iconographic formulas were.

To be sure, the two reliquary sets could indeed have been framed as a Womb Maṇḍala leading to a Diamond Realm Maṇḍala. This would contribute to our understanding of the burial, but it would leave many of their attributes unexplained. It is better to see the reliquaries as reflecting more of a general mortuary disposition and less of an esoteric scheme. The two sets display the traditional binary in the care of the deceased. The traditional division of the postmortem individual being into the *hun*-spirit 魂 and *po*-soul 魄still had currency in Tang times. The *hun*-spirit wanders in space above, and the *po*-soul stays with the corpse on earth.[134] The scheme underlies the popular understanding of the postmortem spirit's dual abodes in afterlife: the blue firmament above and the "Yellow Springs" 黃泉 below. As the poet Bo Juyi 白居易 (772–846) described Emperor Minghuang's 唐明皇 search for the departed soul of his beloved: "Ascending the heavens, entering into the earth, he sought her out everywhere. On high he traversed the sky's cyan drop-off, and below to the Yellow Springs."[135]

This in turn sheds light on the incorporation of the dichotomy of the Womb and Diamond-Realm maṇḍalas into the reliquary sets. The appropriation of the Womb Maṇḍala into the eightfold set is fitting in a number of ways. Premised on the transformation of a parent-begotten-body into the Dharma Body, it makes the emperor its logical beneficiary. Explicitly evoking the trope of "matrix" or "womb," it reinforces the desire for the rebirth of deceased's *hun*-soul in the Buddha's Pure Land located in some celestial spheres above and away from the earth. The first signs of upward movement are marked by the Four Heavenly Kings featured on the second casket (Fig. 3.8), who occupy and guard the four sides of Mount Sumeru, the *axis mundi* of the Buddhist cosmos. The procession on the fourth casket takes place on clouds (Fig. 3.11), "stepping on the Five Clouds," as Sengche described it. The lotus medallions on the sixth and seventh caskets, absent of any figural motifs, denote an even higher ethereal sphere (Fig. 3.5). The stūpa as the innermost terminus of the set of eight nested caskets (Fig. 3.14) and the marks of the Big Dipper carved in the cavity of the jade "fingerbone" enshrined in the stūpa combine to point to an astral sphere. Likewise, the quality of diamonds and the perfection of body in the Diamond Realm Maṇḍala carries the wish that the body, the *po*-soul, being buried in the lowest depth defy decay like a diamond.

The White Bodies: The Eunuchs' Role

One other layer of bodily interest was at stake. The real force behind all these activities was the eunuchs. This can be seen in the inventory tablet. The inventory first lists seven objects given by the Famen Monastery, then known as the Chongzhen Monastery 崇眞寺, such as Wu Zetian's embroidered skirt. This is followed by artifacts given by the imperial throne and then by imperial consorts. Next are listed gifts from other important donors, referred to in the tablet as "the chiefs" 諸頭 (*zhutou*), who are either eunuchs or monks. Heading this section are two major artifacts, the gilded silver bodhisattva that holds the display tray for the True Body, and a silver stūpa-shaped burner, donated by Yang Fugong 楊復恭, the official in charge of offerings during the relic translation. Yang was imperial secretary at the time and was one of the two most powerful eunuchs in Yizong court and Xizong reigns.[136] A host of other eunuchs are also named in the inventory, and most of them are listed before the eminent monks. In sharp contrast, none of the high-ranking officials of the outer court appears on the tablet.

Throughout the ninth century, the eunuchs' power reached a nearly unprecedented level.[137] Their control of the emperor was furthered by the wide range of responsibilities they assumed. As imperial secretaries, they had the power to deliberate on important decisions. As channels of communication between the inner court and the outside world, they often forged or changed the emperor's edicts to suit their needs. They controlled financial resources through their control of the privy purse. In addition to serving as supervisors of the provincial armies, they commanded the dreaded Shence Army 神策軍, the emperor's personal guard and the special force of the central government that helped them thwart many attempts by the outer-court bureaucrats to overturn their power. Seven of the eight Tang emperors after 820 were installed by the eunuchs,[138] and at least one emperor, if not two, was poisoned by them.[139] They could even humble the emperor. One emperor tearfully confided to a scholar that he paled in comparison with the most inept of ancient rulers: at least they had been lorded over by strong dukes and princes, whereas he was snubbed by the "household slaves," the eunuchs.[140]

Contrary to court officials, the majority of whom tended to remonstrate against the emperor's indulgence in Buddhism, the eunuchs were ardent patrons of that faith.[141] Their donations to the Famen crypt testify to that. The eunuchs undoubtedly had many reasons for being interested in Buddhism, but in the context of the relic cult, it is easy to surmise the motives behind their symbolic investment in the notion of the relic as the True Body. At the deepest psychological level, eunuchs were probably the social group in medieval China, next to women, who were most sensitive

to the issue of body. Their castrated body condemned them to carry a perpetual stigma. The Buddhist view of the individual's body as ephemeral, abominable, and a barricade to enlightenment must have carried a welcome message. The appeal to the eunuchs of the idea of the Dharma Body or True Body, which transcends individual bodies, is self-evident.

At the political level, the gains that accrued to them from exploiting the notion of the True Body are equally apparent. By the 870s, the succession to the throne was entirely in the eunuchs' hands. Their ability to ignore the time-honored practice of installing the emperor's oldest son as heir apparent and to choose Yizong's fifth son, a mere twelve-year-old, means that by this time the emperor was no more than a figurehead, a puppet they could manipulate. In fact, the eunuchs' loyalty was directed mostly toward the imperial throne in general rather than to individual emperors. This abstraction, or depersonalization, of the imperial power parallels the tenet of the de-individualized Dharma Body so closely that there is reason to suspect that the religious doctrine was in fact a displaced form of the political phenomenon. By the 870s, the True Body had acquired a range of elusive connotations beyond its basic sense of "relic." It resonated with both the dying emperor and the new emperor; ultimately it was a condition or state that the emperors could impersonate but not exclusively identify with. If the eunuchs could choose the emperor, they, too, could partake of the True Body, a power and a notion that thrives on anti-bodily or supra-bodily terms, qualities that suited them perfectly.

The True Body was a symbolic solution in this period of crisis, which witnessed a transition from a dying emperor to his twelve-year-old son and the usurpation of power by the White Bodies. Upholding and extolling an elusive and transcendent True Body had a range of symbolic resonances and reconciled many divergent interests. In the face of a transcendental power that is not limited to any individual's bodily identity, the death of the adult emperor and the succession of a minor were not matters of grave concern, since they were but passing embodiments of the True Body. The True Body links the past with the present and uses past authority to legitimate the present. The relic's defiance of decay, as celebrated in relic lore, promised a reassuring stability in a time of confusion and unrest. Both the nebulousness and the inclusiveness of the True Body allowed other forces, such as the eunuchs (not to mention would-be female emperors), who faced legitimacy problems in ruling, to assert their power. All these were exactly what was needed by the eunuch-dominated Chinese court around 874.