The Buddha's Finger Bones at Famen-si and
the Art of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism

On August 24, 1981, a portion of the imposing Ming dynasty masonry pagoda at Famen-si (Dharma Gate Monastery), already weakened by an earthquake, collapsed following heavy rains (fig. 1). Six years later, on April 3, 1987, archaeologists excavating the foundations of the pagoda came upon an underground crypt. Constructed much like a traditional Chinese tomb, the crypt consisted of a steep down-ramp leading to an antechamber and three inner chambers, arranged along a north-south axis (fig. 2). Sequestered for centuries beneath the pagoda, the crypt managed to escape the attention of looters; no one appears to have breached the crypt since it was last sealed in 874 CE. The archaeologists found over 400 objects (not counting thousands of coins strewn about), including over 100 spectacular specimens of silver and gold metalwork, as well as rare Chinese and foreign glass, Yue ceramic wares, tea utensils, textiles, and more. Carefully ensconced among the densely packed contents of the crypt were four sets of nested reliquaries, each containing a "finger-bone" relic of the Buddha.

The discovery of the relics at Famen-si was momentous but not entirely unanticipated. The Famen monastery, located some 120 km. west of the old capital Chang'an (present day Xi'an, in Shaanxi Province), was renowned
throughout medieval times as home of a precious finger-bone relic of Śākyamuni Buddha. According to tradition, the relic was a gift of the Indian emperor Aśoka (r. 273-232 BCE), and the Famen-si pagoda was constructed at Aśoka's behest to house this treasure. Legend aside, little is known of the origins of either the monastery or its relic(s),¹ but by the medieval period the monastery had come to enjoy a cozy relationship with the court. In 497 CE, the Northern Wei general Tuoba Yu 拓拔余 (?-452) is reported to have opened the pagoda in order to worship the finger-bone; he is also credited with sponsoring a major restoration of the site. The monastery was severely damaged during the persecution of Buddhism in 577, but was rebuilt during the reign of Sui Wendi 隋文帝 (r. 581-604). In 625 the first emperor of the Tang, Gaozu 高祖 (r. 618-626), gave the monastery the name by which it is known today, Famen-si or "Dharma Gate Monastery." Gaozu's successor, Taizong 太宗 (r. 626-649), was the first of many Tang emperors to have the relic transported to the imperial palace for worship. He is also credited with the construction of the underground crypt to safeguard the relic. Several other Tang emperors paid homage to the finger-bone relic, including Gaozong 高宗 (r. 650-683) and the Empress Wu Zetian 武則天 (r. 690-705).⁴ Emperor Yizong 懿宗 (r. 859-873) had the crypt rebuilt following the persecution of Buddhism during the reign of Wuzong 武宗 (r. 840-846), and Yizong's young successor, Xizong 僖宗 (r. 873-888), had the crypt sealed for the last time in 874.⁵
Few other Chinese Buddhist monasteries could boast this level of imperial support over so long a stretch of history.

The periodic translation of the relic to the imperial palace was an elaborate affair accompanied by popular festivities and outpourings of piety. The sometimes lurid public spectacles surrounding the processions are commemorated in both painting and literature, most famously in a memorial to the throne by the renowned litterateur Han Yu 韓愈 (768-824) in 819. In his memorial, Han Yu, a proponent of traditional "Confucian" mores, castigates the Emperor for promoting superstition and condoning the barbaric worship of the Buddha's "decayed and rotten bone, his ill-omened and filthy remains." The outraged emperor considered executing Han Yu for the affront but settled on banishment instead.

The 1987 discovery of the crypt and its treasures captured the attention of historians, archaeologists, art historians, and scholars of Buddhism. The latter were particularly excited by early reports of the discovery of artifacts associated with Buddhist "Esoterism" (C. mijiao 密教, J. mikkyō), a complex ritual culture that was introduced to China in the eighth century by a succession of itinerant South Asian masters. Medieval Esoteric images and ritual objects are extraordinarily rare in China, and thus the Famen-si finds, which included invaluable gold and silver Esoteric artifacts donated by the imperial court,
promised to greatly expand our understanding of this historically important but still poorly understood tradition.

Accordingly, literally dozens of books and hundreds of articles on Famen-si have appeared in the last two decades, many of which focus on the intricately designed matryoshka-doll-like reliquaries. But despite the growing body of scholarship by Chinese, Japanese, and Western scholars, and despite the diversity of disciplinary perspectives brought to bear on the subject, it is my contention that analysis of the finds have been marred by dubious preconceptions concerning the nature of the relics, the status of Esoteric Buddhism, and the very notion of Buddhist "art." These preconceptions are so entrenched that scholars have failed to acknowledge, much less come to terms with, some of the most obvious aspects of the Famen-si finds. This article is a modest attempt at a corrective.

II.

To say that Chinese Esoteric Buddhism is still "poorly understood" is an understatement: there is little scholarly consensus concerning the referent of the expression "Esoteric teachings," and some have questioned whether such a tradition even existed in China, at least as an autonomous school or self-conscious movement. While Esoteric Buddhism is sometimes equated with Buddhist Tantra or Vajrayāna, these latter terms are more appropriately restricted to developments
in South Asia and Tibet. This is not to say that these various ritual traditions are unrelated: they can all be traced to sixth- and seventh-century innovations in Indian Buddhist practice that drew heavily on non-Buddhist forms of image worship (Sk. pūja). These innovations included the production of new scriptures, new ritual texts, new deities, and a new ritual technology that foregrounded the use of mandala (geometrical arrays of deities), mudrā (hand gestures), mantra (incantations), and visualization exercises. Shared attributes aside, the panoply of South Asian practices now known as Buddhist Tantra developed along independent trajectories in India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, and Japan, and the tendency to regard them as instances of a distinct, cohesive or self-conscious tradition has contributed to scholarly confusion.

Even when we limit our purview to East Asia, we are confronted with a range of phenomena that are not easily subsumed under a single rubric. Whatever Esoteric Buddhism may have been in the Tang Period, its influence was confined largely to the capital, Chang'an, and its impact on later developments in China was modest at best. Japan is a different story: a number of well-connected Japanese priests who arrived in Chang'an in the eighth century were drawn to these somewhat exotic practices. The Esoteric traditions they subsequently established in Japan left their imprint on all aspects of Japanese religious life, political culture, philosophy, and the arts. Esoteric practices became the mainstay of two major monastic traditions in Japan, the Shingon and Tendai schools, but
the vestiges of Esoteric thought and practice can be found in all of the principal
Japanese Buddhist sects, including Hossō, Kegon, Pure Land, Zen, and Nichiren.

Returning to China, little remains of the material culture of Esoteric
Buddhism from the medieval period; the elaborate altars, mandalas, sculpted
images, paintings, and ritual implements have largely disappeared. A few artifacts
thought to date from the Tang survive in Japan, but they are often of uncertain or
contested provenance. As a result, prior to the Famen-si discovery, virtually
everything known about the Tang "Golden Age" of Esoterism had to be
reconstructed on the basis of surviving scriptures and ritual manuals—genres that
are prescriptive rather than descriptive in nature. Given the centrality of ritual
performance, altars, icons, and sacred implements in the Esoteric tradition, the
paucity of material remains constituted a serious methodological hurdle. Thus the
Famen-si finds, which were reported to include ritual altars and mandalas along
with dated inscriptions, promised to open a new window onto the lived world of
Tang Esoteric culture. The new finds would, one would hope, help to wean
scholars from their dependence on anachronistic Japanese sources.

Unfortunately, the opposite occurred. The Famen-si materials themselves
came to be viewed through a Japanese looking-glass. To take one salient example:
in medieval Japan the vast panoply of texts, deities, and rites that comprise the
Japanese Esoteric tradition came to be organized into a single architectonic
system based on the "maṇḍalas of the two realms." In Buddhism, a maṇḍala is a prescribed group of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and sundry other deities set in a geometrical array on an altar or in a painting, or described in the narrative of the liturgy itself. The maṇḍalas of the two realms, namely the Diamond Realm Maṇḍala (Kongōkai 金剛界, Sk. Vajradhātu, fig. 3) and the Matrix Realm Maṇḍala (Taizōkai 胎蔵界, Sk. Garbhadhātu, fig. 4), depict dozens of major and minor deities spatially organized into various "families" and "assemblies."<figs. 3 and 4 about here> The details of the system are too arcane to delineate here; suffice it to say that these two maṇḍalas are said to represent and integrate the twin aspects of enlightenment, variously identified as active/static, immanent/transcendent, compassion/wisdom, and so on.

In Japan it had long been assumed that the two-maṇḍala system was of Chinese if not Indian origin, first brought from China to Japan by the Japanese founder of the Shingon school, Kūkai 空海 (774-835). Indeed, the legitimacy of Shingon teachings in particular, and Japanese Esoterism in general, was predicated on their Chinese bona fides. But Japanese scholars had been stymied by the absence of any explicit reference to the two-maṇḍala system in Chinese textual sources. There was simply no unambiguous textual, epigraphical, art historical, or archaeological evidence that the Chinese were ever aware of a two-maṇḍala system.
So the announcement that evidence of the two maṇḍalas had been discovered at Famen-si caused considerable excitement. Specifically, scholars claimed that two sets of nested reliquaries uncovered at Famen-si—the eight-reliquary set found in the rearmost chamber no. 3 (fig. 5) and the five-reliquary set uncovered in a secret niche beneath chamber no. 3 (fig. 6)—represented the Womb and Diamond Realm maṇḍalas respectively. <figs. 5 and 6 about here>

And the hour-glass-shaped base of a kneeling bodhisattva sculpture found in chamber no. 2 (fig. 7) was said to represent the doctrine of the "unity of the two [maṇḍala] divisions" (J. ryōbu funi 兩部不二); the base's upper dome is supposed to depict the Diamond Realm while the lower dome depicts the Womb Realm. <fig. 7 about here>

This two-maṇḍala reading of the Famen-si materials gained wide currency, in part because it was foregrounded in two influential sources: (1) the newly constructed museum at Famen-si, where an entire hall is devoted to explicating the Famen-si finds with reference to the two maṇḍalas; and (2) a lavishly illustrated Chinese volume by Wu Limin and Han Jinke, "Studies on the Tang Esoteric Maṇḍala of the Underground Palace at Famen-si."\(^{13}\) This volume is the most detailed and oft-cited visual record of the Buddhist objects and iconography found at Famen-si published to date.

The two-maṇḍala reading of Famen-si should serve as a cautionary tale of the dangers of the "seek-and-ye-shall-find" approach to research. To put it plainly,
interpretations of Famen-si iconography based on the two maṇḍalas are implausibly convoluted, rely on spurious identifications, and involve several leaps of faith. Viewed objectively and without recourse to the Japanese tradition, Famen-si provides no compelling new evidence that Chinese clerics were ever aware of a two-maṇḍala scheme. This is forcefully confirmed by I-mann Lai’s recent analysis—the most scrupulous work done to date on the iconography of the Famen-si reliquaries—which fails to find any evidence for the two-maṇḍala reading, thus mitigating the need to rehearse the technical details here. Hopefully her work will put this theory to rest once and for all.14

But the two-maṇḍala theory is not the only example of scholars being misled by the weight of the Japanese tradition. There is a more fundamental misconception that skews our approach to Chinese Esoterism and Chinese Buddhist material culture writ large. This requires another brief digression on the attempt to divine "inner" beliefs and dispositions on the basis of "outer" ritual performance and material forms.

III.

As the Tang government managed to open and secure the Central Asian silk routes, a multitude of new and exotic South Asian Buddhist deities and ritual practices made their way to the Chinese capital. There is no question that these new practices, which scholars group under the rubric "Esoteric," were influential
among the Buddhist ecclesiastical elite and their patrons in the capital. But as I have argued elsewhere, there is little evidence that these new practices were construed as an independent sect, tradition, or movement in the Tang.\textsuperscript{15} In short, there is little evidence that the icons, implements, and rites constituted a distinct teaching, and thus they should not be approached as the Chinese counterpart of Tibetan Tantra, or Japanese Shingon, for example, both of which are later developments. The new ritual texts and practices that were propagated by Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637-735), Vajrabodhi (Jingangzhi 金剛智, 671-741), Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705-774), and other South Asian missionaries are better approached as a new technology (technē) that was seen as complementing and supplementing, rather than superseding, the dominant Mahāyāna doctrinal traditions of the time.

Some have responded skeptically, saying, in brief, that too much is being made of a terminological quibble. Critics concede that there may have been an unfortunate tendency to view Chinese Esoterism through the prism of the Japanese or Tibetan traditions, but this does not mean that Tantra/Vajrayāna did not flourish for a brief but important moment in the Tang; nor does it mean that Tantra/Vajrayāna did not have a lasting legacy in China.\textsuperscript{16} In the final analysis, claim the critics, it does not matter what we call it as long as we can agree it was there; even if we reject the two-\textit{mandala} reading of Famen-si, the crypt still
provides plenty of evidence that Indian Tantric practices were current in Tang China. But this criticism misses the point. The way we frame the subject of our study, the questions we ask of the material, and the evidence we adduce are all determined by the categories we use. Our reading of the Esoteric or Tantric materials at Famen-si will depend on what we mean by "Esoterism" or "Tantrism."

The problem, in part, is the continued influence of timeworn "Protestant" presuppositions in the field, despite having been the subject of some three decades of sustained critique. The thrust of the critique is that, in delineating their object of study, scholars of religion tend to foreground doctrine, belief, and inner experience at the expense of lived practice, ritual performance, and material culture. When scholars do turn to the more embodied, performative, and material aspects of religion, they continue to view them as representations or enactments of ideology, or as means to instill and propagate faith. Hence the tendency to read ritual technology as religious theology. In effect, scholars are unwitting captives of a Cartesian metaphysic, wherein they can envision two and only two options: either (1) religious adherents view the outward (material) dimensions of religion as referencing inner (immaterial) dispositions, beliefs, and doctrines; or (2) the adherents are literalists who naively believe that divinity can be coextensive with material forms. In this latter case, the adherents are rendered "idolaters" in the throes of a category mistake (i.e., they are incapable of clearly distinguishing the
immaterial from the material), and this leads them to impute vitality to inanimate objects and magical efficacy to empty ritual.¹⁸

Scholars of Buddhism and Buddhist art now readily concede that modernist presuppositions can impede our understanding of pre-modern Buddhism. We appreciate that, for much of Asian history, "Buddhism" was associated not so much with inner faith and dispositions but with a range of somatic practices and technologies that revolved around consecrated images, objects, altars, and other matériel. We also recognize that while Buddhists did impute potency to material forms, they were not necessarily idolaters in the Biblical sense of the word. However, it is not always obvious how to proceed. Can we say something about embodiment, ritual action, vivified icons, and the other corporeal dimensions of Buddhism without immediately transcribing such phenomena into textbook accounts of inner meanings and beliefs?

This is not to say that scholars have ignored the ritual and material dimensions of the Famen-si site. A number of scholars have argued, for example, that the contents of chamber no. 3 constitute a mandala (fig. 8), and hence it must have been a site for Esoteric rituals such as abhiṣeka (C. guanding 灌頂, lustration/empowerment), although this interpretation has been subject to criticism.¹⁹ <fig. 8 about here> In the end, however, attempts to move from mute object to lived culture have been ungainly at best.²⁰
IV.

Nowhere is the ineluctable materiality of a religious object more apparent than in the finger-bone relics themselves. Like Han Yu before them, modern scholars presume that Chinese Buddhists regarded these objects—arguably the most hallowed objects in all of Chinese Buddhist history—as the corporeal remains of the historical Buddha. In other words, scholars assume those who venerated the finger-bone relics were literalists; they took the relics and their Aśokan origin myth at face value.

This establishes a seemingly insuperable gap between the world of the medieval clerics and ourselves. Few modern scholars would lend credence to the claim that the Famen-si relics are in fact the corporeal remains of the historical Śākyamuni Buddha presented to the Chinese court as a gift from the Indian King Aśoka in the third century BCE. At the same time, the provenance and composition of the relics has garnered little scholarly attention. This may be due to anticipated difficulties of research in this area; it is no easy job to trace the origin of a famous relic when those originally responsible for "discovering" it deliberately covered their tracks. But I think there is a more profound reason for this lack of interest in the material relics themselves, namely, the assumption that the meaning and significance of the bones—their authenticity, sanctity, and power—resides solely in the minds of the faithful. 21 Thus rather than focus on the bones
themselves, which are deemed of little intrinsic scholarly interest, all eyes have been on their elaborately crafted enclosures.

But this is to ignore the single most conspicuous feature of the Famen-si relics. Most Buddhist śarīra (relics of a Buddha or Buddhist saint) are natural objects of one sort or another, whether a bone or a tooth, a stone or a precious mineral, or some crystallized substance culled from a funeral pyre. But the four finger-bone relics found at Famen-si are patent fabrications—they were quite obviously fashioned by human hands. And this raises the possibility that the clerics who managed the crypt may not have been the crude literalists that some would suppose. In other words, they may not have regarded the Famen-si relics as the corporeal remains of a historical personage in any simple sense.

Let us review the evidence. First, four very similar relics were found at the site: two formed out of jade (those in chambers nos. 2 and 3, figs. 9 and 10) and two out of bone (those in chamber no. 1 and in the secret niche, figs. 11 and 12). To my knowledge, the historical record does not acknowledge more than one finger-bone relic at Famen-si; the existence of four very similar relics may or may not have been public knowledge. Moreover, the layout and furnishings of the crypt do not indicate which of the four relics might have been considered "authentic." Each appears to have been treated as a bona
fide śarīra, securely ensconced in a reliquary, with each reliquary placed in its own sealed chamber.²³

Some scholars have suggested that the bone relic found in the secret niche below chamber no. 3 was the true relic or "spirit bone" (linggu 靈骨), while the others were decoys or "shadow bones" (yinggu 影骨).²⁴ Presumably, one of the decoys would have been used in processions to the capital, thus preventing anything untoward from happening to the invaluable true relic, and no one outside of a handful of Famen-si clerics would have been any the wiser. This is a reasonable conjecture but conjecture nonetheless; there is no material or epigraphical evidence that the relic in the secret niche was regarded as more genuine than the others apart from its placement in the niche itself.

As for the physical composition of the relics, none is an actual finger phalange.²⁵ The two made of jade and the two made of bone are all similar in appearance: each is a polished hollow tube about forty mm. tall. To state the obvious, real finger bones do not resemble hollow cylinders: the bulbous joints or extremities on the ends of real phalanges are composed of smooth articular cartilage that seals in the softer cancellous bone on the inside. Even after the passage of many centuries, a finger phalange does not end up resembling a hollow tube. Finally, one of the relics—the squarish one made of jade in chamber no. 3 believed to have been the last to travel to the capital—has the seven stars of the
Northern Dipper (Beidou 北斗, Ursa Major, fig. 13) etched in black on the inside surface. <fig. 13 about here> Again, real finger bones do not have asterisms etched on their inner surfaces.26 Nor does this denote, even obliquely, any of the physical characteristics of a buddha enumerated in canonical lists.27

All of this—the multiple bones, the fact that two are fashioned in jade, the unnatural tubular structure, and the representation of the Northern Dipper on one of them—speaks to their intentional and conspicuous contrivance. This could not have been lost on the clerics who oversaw the contents of the crypt. To the literally minded, this suggests an element of bad faith if not subterfuge, which may explain why scholars have avoided the topic—there is no way to recover the facts or intentions behind this apparent deception. Or perhaps scholars feel that Buddhist relics or śarīra, being considered miraculous or otherworldly substances, should be exempt from our secularist expectations and norms. They are best regarded as the "natives" did: as objects of religious faith. So again we seem to be left with two choices: either the clerics in charge were duplicitous or they were naive.

But it is unlikely that the Tang clerics were either Cartesian dualists or Protestant literalists. Educated clerics in the Tang would have been familiar with the hundreds of Mahāyāna scriptures and commentaries that repeatedly affirm the emptiness of the buddha. These texts repeat ad nauseam the dictum that the real
buddha should not be sought in the manifest transformation or emanation body
(huashen 化身, yingshen 应身, fenshen 分身), but in the unmediated dharma
body (fashen 法身, Sk. dharmakāya). The term "buddha," according to this
dominant strand of medieval Mahāyāna thought, has the same referent as the
"absolute" (zhenru 真如, Sk. tathatā). 28

In China, the most celebrated expression of this teaching is found in the
Vimalakīrtinirdesa-sūtra, in which the sage Vimalakīrti remains silent upon being
asked to expound on the meaning of nonduality. But while the Chinese exalted the
virtues of silence, they also delighted in kataphatic expressions of this absolute. 29
What better expression of the "true body" (dharmakāya) of the buddha than a relic
whose center is empty and whose compass is the entire universe? Note how the
Northern Dipper etched on the relic's curved interior surface renders that surface
the canopy of heaven; thus the necessarily contingent and constructed relic is the
empty cosmos—the dharma body itself.

There is more: the dharma body is commonly identified with the world "as
such" (ruru 如如, Sk. tathatā), in contrast with the world apprehended by the
defiled mind. This dharma body allows of no mediation, and this doctrine
underlies the claim found in Mahāyāna sources that the historical Buddha did not
actually utter a word during his teaching career. 30 All teachings associated with the
Buddha are hence considered "skillful means" (upāya); in an oft-used metaphor,
they are fingers pointing to the moon. The wise student looks not at the finger but at where the finger is pointing. But at the same time, various Mahāyāna scriptures, including many of those most popular in China (notably the *Heart Sūtra*, *Diamond Sūtra*, and other Perfection of Wisdom scriptures), claim that there is no moon apart from the finger. In other words, *the moon is precisely the finger apprehended as contingent and empty*. Again, what better expression of this idea than a buddha relic in the form of an empty finger? Thus while the clerics of Famen-si may have recognized the finger-bone relic as a contrivance or artifice, this did not preclude their regarding it, at one and the same time, as an authentic relic of the Buddha.

The term used to refer to the relic in Famen-si crypt inscriptions is the "true body," a term most often associated with the transcendent "dharma body." Eugene Wang has suggested that this term entails a conundrum; in one sense the only true or authentic body of a buddha can be no body at all. But in my reading, the multivalent expression "true body" deftly captures the dialectical or "self-emptying" logic exhibited in the very design of the finger-bone relic. The term "true body," like the relic itself, must be understood as sublimely ironic.

In short, the Famen-si finger-bone relics might best be approached as sophisticated works of *art*. And this means coming to appreciate the creative, aesthetic, and playful dimensions of the crypt and its treasures.
V.

In referring to the Famen-si relics as works of art, I mean to draw attention to neglected aspects of their conception and design. I recognize, of course, that the term "art" is polemically charged, and that attempts to delimit or define it have been contentious and arguably unproductive. Some insist, following Wittgenstein, that efforts to define "art" are doomed to fail, as there is no reason to believe that there is some set of intrinsic properties, qualities, or attributes common to everything we subsume under the category. We are perfectly capable of using terms—of picking out apposite instances—that we are not able to define. Other theorists agree that attempts to delimit a set of intrinsic properties common to everything we call art is misguided, but they believe that conceptual clarity is nonetheless possible through a focus on extrinsic factors such as the way an artifact is culturally, socially, and institutionally constituted.

My point, in brief, is that the Famen-si relics qualify as "art" according to most any of the theoretical positions and definitions currently in circulation. To briefly mention some of the most salient features: the expressive elements evident in the design of the relics cannot be reduced to any utilitarian, ceremonial, or ritual function, or to their instrumental value alone. (That the relics and their enclosures simultaneously played a pivotal role in a religious economy in and of itself does not impugn their status as "art.") The relics appear to have been
intentionally designed so as to engage the viewer's aesthetic, affective, and intellectual interest. Following R. G. Collingwood, it is precisely such expressive elements—the use of representations to arouse, manage, and direct our emotional response—that connect the world of art to the world of magic.36

Secondly, the relics were designed, at least in part, to be appreciated by an elite audience versed not only in the subtleties of Buddhist doctrine, but also in the expressive possibilities of Buddhist visual and material culture. This audience, composed in large part of the elite monks and men of letters who designed, supervised, and patronized Buddhist architectural and artistic projects, constitutes what Arthur Danto calls the "artworld": the social and institutional sphere in which an artifact comes to be considered and valued for its aesthetic effects.37 Needless to say, in medieval China this community was relatively small and would not necessarily have included the pious multitudes who regarded the relics as sacred objects with supernatural powers. These masses would never have been in a position to get close to the relics, much less appreciate their conceptual elegance.38

Finally, the Famen-si relics are "about something," and this sense that they have something to say or express is registered as the presence or trace of "agency."39 But what is expressed is not explicit; the audience is presented with a gap that they are compelled to traverse—an ellipsis to be filled in. In the case of
the relics, this ellipsis involves, in part, the gap between one's expectations of what a desiccated relic looks like, and the actual appearance of the fabricated "finger-bones." The Famen-si relics are both "real" and "not real" at the same time; or rather, they are a play upon the notion of a real or authentic relic. The aesthetic delight lies, in part, in managing this gap, in making the required perceptual, conceptual, and emotional connections. One thinks of Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" or Andy Warhol's "Brillo Boxes"—those two twentieth-century "artworks" that have so bedeviled a generation of art theorists and philosophers. In both those cases, the aesthetic pleasure and cognitive demand lies in having one's expectations confounded and in the ensuing impulse to fill in the ellipsis.  

VI.

The set of eight nested containers found in chamber no. 3 is the most conceptually complex of all the objects recovered from the crypt, and is also the one that has garnered the most attention to date. This reliquary set, which contains the white jade relic with the Northern Dipper etched on the inside surface, was conceived and fashioned as an integrated whole, representing a single and singular artistic vision. This differentiates it from the five-container set found in the secret niche below chamber no. 3, the individual containers of which were apparently fashioned at different times. And while some reliquary sets found at other sites
may indeed have been constructed of a piece, such as the reliquaries discovered at Jingzhi-si, Ding County, Hebei, nothing unearthed to date approaches the Famen-si eight-container set in terms of compositional sophistication and intricacy. As such, an understanding of the artistic conception and vision behind this set, which is replete with Esoteric imagery, should contribute toward a broader understanding of Esoteric art in the Tang.

The nested boxes were placed toward the rear of chamber no. 3 (fig. 8). Situated at the north end of the vault, slightly in front of and above the small secret niche below, this reliquary set was arguably the focal point of the crypt complex at the time it was last sealed. Working from the inside out, the innermost container, which held the white jade relic within, is fashioned of gold in the shape of a small pagoda with doors on all four sides, topped with a lotus bud (fig. 14). A small silver post extends up from the center of the base to hold the relic in place. The second container is made of a soft alabaster-like stone and is decorated with red and green precious stones and pearls along with carvings of lotus-blossoms and birds (fig. 15). The third container is of pure gold, and like the second is adorned with precious stones, pearls, and lotus-blossom motifs (fig. 16). The fourth container, also pure gold, features two flying phoenixes on the lid (fig. 17). The complex iconography delicately chased on its
four sides includes a six-armed Cintāmaṇi Avalokiteśvara on the front (fig. 18), a buddha, possibly Vairocana, on the back, the Medicine Buddha on the left and Śākyamuni on the right. Each deity is surrounded by his assembly. The fifth container is of silver and gilt silver, with Śākyamuni inscribed on the front (fig. 19), Mañjuśrī mounted on a lion on the left, Samantabhadra on an elephant on the right, and a haloed buddha on the back.\(^\text{48}\) <fig. 19 about here> Again, each deity is surrounded by a celestial assembly. The sixth container is a plain silver box with no images, inscriptions, or marks of any kind (fig. 20). <fig. 20 about here> The seventh container is made of silver and gilt silver, with a pair of dragons circling a pearl chased on the lid (fig. 21).\(^\text{49}\) <fig. 21 about here> The four sides depict the four heavenly kings (\textit{tianwang;} S. \textit{lokapāla}); Vaiśravana is depicted frontally on the front. The other three heavenly kings—Virūpākṣa, Virūḍhaka, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra—each face left, surrounded by their assemblies, forming a procession behind Vaiśravana. The eighth box was made of sandalwood with silver hinges, "trimmed with gold and framed with silver" according to the inventory.\(^\text{50}\) This outermost container is now in pieces, and to my knowledge no photographic details have been published, but it is purported to have featured, among other things, an Amitābha paradise scene.\(^\text{51}\)

As mentioned above, there is nothing particularly original about the use of nested reliquaries per se. Many examples of such sets have come to light of late, including several examples from the Tang and earlier.\(^\text{52}\) Nested reliquary sets came
in many sizes and shapes: individual containers in the shape of pagodas, square boxes (often with chamfered lids), and traditional Chinese coffins are most common, all of which are in evidence at Famen-si. It is also common to find the individual containers of a single set composed of different substances. The outermost containers are often of stone or iron (presumably to protect the contents), while the inner containers can be made of wood, gold, silver, jade, alabaster, and so on.53

The Famen-si eight-container set is unique among the surviving medieval nested reliquaries in its iconographic complexity and its elaborate Esoteric imagery. While the Esoteric motifs have garnered considerable attention of late, less heed has been paid to the set's internal organization and artistic unity. Those scholars who do approach the eight-container set as a conceptual whole, including Wu Limin, Han Jinke, I-mann Lai, and Eugene Wang, are selective in their focus and tend to ignore altogether the sixth container in the series—the unadorned silver box. Indeed, with the exception of a single sentence by Eugene Wang, nothing has been written about the possible significance of this container to an understanding of the set as a whole.54

In my reading, the sixth container—the plain silver box—is key to reconstructing the inspiration behind the set's design. To understand how this is so
will require another brief digression, this time into the nature of Esoteric liturgies and ritual paraphernalia.

VII.

Esoteric rites are designed to harness powers associated with a myriad of divine beings. The elaborate ritual technology involves the construction of complex altars and the use of hundreds of intricate mudrā (hand gestures), cryptic mantras (incantations), vivified images, and consecrated implements. The construction and use of altars or platforms (tan 坛) are central to the enterprise, as is evident from a common Chinese term for this liturgical genre, namely, "altar methods" (tanjia 坛法).

The Chinese term tan is used for a variety of structures that modern scholars tend to group into two broad categories. First, there are tan used for ordination or precept rites (jietan 戒壇, tanchang 壇場), whether lay bodhisattva precepts or full monastic ordinations. Second, there are tan used in making ritual offerings or sacrifices to a deity, a category that includes virtually all rituals that are deemed "Esoteric." (The term tan is often used to render the Sanskrit term mandala, although the lexical issues are too complex to deal with here.) Scholars of Chinese Buddhism tend to translate tan as "platform" in the ordination context, and "altar" in the context of offerings to deities. In India, these two kinds of rites
may have required two distinct kinds of physical structures: in the case of ordination rituals, the precincts need not have been raised off the ground, since all that was required was a clearly bounded area (Sk. sīmābandha, sīmāmandala, C. jiechang 界場) that would not be transgressed during the ceremony. (Such spaces could be simply delineated by stone markers, a railing, and so on; a boat could be used as well since its boundaries were clearly marked and the space protected.)

Altars or *mandalas* used in the worship of deities, on the other hand, were typically raised platforms, often consisting of several stepped levels.

Some traditional Chinese exegetes, notably Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667), recognized the Chinese lexical confusion. They distinguish bounded areas from raised platforms by reserving the term *chang* 場 or "area" for the former, and *tan* 坛 or "platform" for the latter.\(^5\) But such scholastic labors had little impact on popular usage, and the Chinese continued to use the term *tan*, a Chinese word of considerable antiquity that clearly denoted a raised platform, either alone or in two-character compounds for a variety of structures, including both ordination platforms and worship altars.\(^6\) It appears that the Chinese did not make a clear distinction between the divine technology used to secure and consummate an ordination ritual, and the divine technology that we associate with invocation rites. In both cases, specially constituted and consecrated altars were used to
secure a precinct and prevent intrusions from things both mundane and supermundane.

I would note that the Chinese understanding of the apotropaic and sacrificial technology associated with tan is occluded in English when it is rendered "platform" in one context and "altar" in another. To take one example, the rise of interest in Esoteric altars in eighth-century China may have influenced the Chan use of the word tan in a variety of eighth-century texts, such as the Altar Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch, and Heze Shenhui's Altar Sermon on Direct Realization. These texts appear at roughly the same time as the proliferation of "altar rite" (tanfa) manuals that survive from Dunhuang.

In any case, to understand the nature of this new altar technology, we need to turn to the ritual manuals associated with early Tang Esoterism. As I have discussed these manuals in some detail elsewhere, my treatment here will be brief and to the point.

The Esoteric manuals prescribe the performance of invocation rituals wherein a powerful bodhisattva or buddha, along with his minions, are summoned into the presence of the worshipper. When the deities arrive, the worshipper makes oblations and partakes in the deity's grace and power, utilizing said power for both worldly and soteriological ends. In brief, these rites are structured, at least on the surface, as classical Vedic sacrifices, wherein the officiant uses the power of mantra to coerce the presence of the gods, and is then granted boons and
powers in return for offerings. The overt similarity to Vedic sacrifice was not lost on Chinese Buddhist exegetes such as Yixing 行 (683-727), who referred to the Buddhist fire ritual as "Buddhist Veda."  

As such, all of these rituals share a common narrative logic: the officiant enacts a drama in which he plays the part of the host, while the deity is the honored guest who is invited, welcomed, entertained, feted, and then sent on his way. This largely routinized dramatic structure is plainly seen in a variety of influential manuals translated and transmitted by Amoghavajra, including the Ritual Instructions for Discerning and Making Offerings to Immeasurable Life Tathāgata, Ritual Instructions for the Invocation of Cintāmanicakra Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, and the Yoga Practice for Cintāmanicakra Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. I mention these particular works as they are cited by Kūkai as influential in the creation of his own ritual manuals, and scholars believe that their status in Japan bespeaks their significance in China. That Cintāmanicakra Avalokiteśvara, who appears as the central deity (benzun 本尊) in a number of these manuals, is also the central deity on the eight-container set at Famen-si, seems to support this claim.

The ritual narrative described in these manuals opens with a series of rites that purify and consecrate (jiachi 加持, Sk. adhiṣṭhāna) the practitioner, the implements, and the precincts. Once the preliminary purifications and recitations
are complete, the practitioner begins a complex ritual sequence known as "securing (or binding) the domain" (jiejie 結界), which transforms the sanctuary and altar into a fortified and impregnable space in which to ensconce and fete the deity. I will focus on this particular segment of the ritual, as it is arguably crucial to an understanding of the eight-container set at Famen-si.

This process of securing the domain consists of a series of rites, each of which consists of a mudrā, mantra, and imaginative visualization (xiāng 想)."67 While the overview that follows is based on the Ritual Instructions for the Invocation of Cintāmaniśvara Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, the narrative structure seen here is more-or-less identical to that found in other Esoteric manuals dating to the same period.

The first rite connected with securing the domain is "securing the ground with an adamantine (Sk. vajra) spike."68 Here a mudrā-mantra combination is used to drive a flaming adamantine spike down through the center of the earth to the oceans below, transforming the practitioner's seat into an immovable adamantine throne (jingang zuo ⾦剛座) that cannot be disturbed by demons or other malevolent forces. Next is a rite called "securing the perimeter with an adamantine wall."69 A mudrā becomes an adamantine dagger that encircles the practitioner, establishing an impregnable wall that cannot be crossed by buddhas
and bodhisattvas, much less by demons and other evil beings. This is followed by a visualization that transforms the altar into a suitable abode for the deity:

Imagine that in the middle of the altar there is a lion throne set on top of a great eight-petaled lotus blossom. On the throne is a seven-jeweled tower bedecked with colorfully embroidered banners and jewel-covered pillars arrayed in rows. Divine garments are hung about and it is surrounded by fragrant clouds. Flowers rain down everywhere and music plays. Jeweled vessels hold pure water, there is divine food and drink, and a mani gem serves as a lamp.\footnote{70}

Next is the "Universal Offerings of the Great Sky-Repository" 大虚空藏普通供養, a mudrā-mantra combination that provisions the sanctuary, now transformed into a divine residence, with whatever offerings the practitioner brings to mind. This is followed by the "jeweled carriage" (baochelu 寶車輦), in which the practitioner employs mantra and mudrā to dispatch a royal carriage made of the seven jewels to the land of bliss (jile shijie 極樂世界)—the abode of the principle deity. The practitioner then imagines Cintāmanicakra Avalokiteśvara, surrounded by his assembly, ascending into the carriage which is suspended in midair. Then come two short rites: "entreating the carriage" (qing chelu 請車輦) and "entreating the principle deity and his assembly to descend into the sanctuary" (qing benzun sanmeiye jiangzhi yu daochang 請本尊三昧耶降至於道場), in
which the carriage returns to the sanctuary, hovers in midair, and the divine passengers are invited to alight.

In order to ward off obstacles and evil forces, the practitioner now summons the Luminous King Horse-Headed Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva of the Lotus Assembly 蓮花部明王馬頭觀自在菩薩 (Sk. Hayagrīva Vidyārāja, a wrathful emanation of Avalokiteśvara) to guard the precincts and ward off demons (Taishō 20:1085.205b8).

If you have followed the narrative sequence so far, you will note that the ground beneath the practitioner and the four walls have been rendered an indestructible adamantine enclosure. The ceiling, however, has been left open to facilitate the entry of the divine assembly. Now that the assembly is settled on the altar, mudrā and mantra are used to create an adamantine net (jingang wang 金剛網) to seal the top of the sanctuary and render it secure and indestructible. The final step in the "securing the domain" sequence is the "adamantine fire enclosure," in which one imaginatively creates three rings of fire that encircle the outside of the adamantine wall, adding a final layer of protection from malevolent forces.

Having invoked the presence of the main deity, and having secured the divine assembly in a fortified and impregnable "seat of enlightenment" (Sk. bodhimanda), the officiant is ready to proceed to the final climatic sections of the
rite, which include offerings (flowers, incense, light, unguents, food, and music), as well as mantra recitations and meditative trances.

VIII.

I have suggested that we cannot fully appreciate the culture that gave rise to the Famen-si crypt without acknowledging an obvious but largely ignored fact: the relics are not actual finger bones but are fabrications. There is a second equally obvious fact that is key to understanding the site: the crypt was intended to safeguard the relics—to protect them for future generations. It worked better than its designers may have imagined possible, as the crypt went undiscovered for over eleven hundred years.

The nested reliquaries were intended to add yet another layer of protection to the enclosed relics. And the protection was not merely physical: the Esoteric altar rites that were popular in the capital may have served as the inspiration behind the design of the eight-container set. These rites describe a procedure in which one imaginatively transforms a bounded area into an indestructible, inviolable, and majestic buddha-realm suitable for lodging the gods.

The "securing the realm" sequence outlined above is suggestive: it corresponds, albeit not precisely, with the sequence and design of the reliquary containers. At the heart of the reliquary set we find the "true body" of the buddha
—a hollow "finger" instantiating the "true body of the buddha" that is, at its center, an empty but fecund void. The deities and their minions on the remaining containers emanate from this void. This true-body relic is placed in a tiny pagoda—a venerable symbol of the Buddha's nirvāṇa. Next we find two similar box containers, each decorated with lotus-blossom motifs on the tops and sides. The lotus motif is suggestive: in Esoteric practices the central deities are imagined to issue from a lotus blossom that emerges, in turn, from a moon disk. (Seed-syllables, altars, and bejeweled palaces may also make an appearance in the sequence of transformations leading up to the appearance of the deity.) Thus the lotus blossoms on the second and third containers could be seen as emanating from the relic within the pagoda, and the lotus gives rise in turn to Cintāmanicakra Avalokiteśvara, surrounded by his assembly, as well as the three other buddha assemblies that adorn the sides of the fourth container.

The fifth container, in this reading, fills out the divine pantheon, placing the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra into this maṇḍala-like arrangement. The all-important sixth container—the unadorned silver box—would then constitute the adamantine enclosure that seals the deities ensconced within from harm. Outside this adamantine enclosure, on the seventh container, the four heavenly kings stand guard. Needless to say, the correspondence is not exact. The seventh container features Vaiśravaṇa rather than Hayagrīva, for example, and the sequence of the ritual manuals might lead one to expect the
guardians to be situated within the adamantine enclosure rather than outside of it —the manuals are not clear on this. These variances, however, are likely of little significance; Esoteric ritual manuals were not systematized in this period, as is evident from the profusion of structurally similar but iconographically diverse manuals that survive in the Chinese canon, at Dunhuang, and in Japan.

More to the point, there is no reason to presume that the reliquaries were directly referencing specific rites, or that they were intended to serve in the context of actual ritual performance. Rather, I am suggesting that the reliquaries, like the finger-bone relics themselves, were artistic creations that drew inspiration from Buddhist ideas, images, and practices current at the time. In designing a reliquary suitable for the hallowed true-body of the Buddha, the artisans drew upon the altar rites to create a housing that would at once glorify, protect, and preserve the relic. It is natural that they should turn to the occult practices, recently imported from India, that were intended to create an abode for the earthly incarnation of a transcendent being. In doing so these anonymous artists managed to give expression to the dialectical, self-negating, and playful logic entailed in the very notion of the "true body" of the Buddha.
IX.

In approaching Buddhist "sacred" objects, particularly artifacts associated with East Asian Tantric Buddhism, scholars have taken recourse in a variety of perspectives and approaches. Some view the objects as more-or-less rote material embodiments of the doctrinal teachings found in the surviving textual corpus. Accordingly, they focus on issues of iconography, dating, lineage, and so on. Others prefer to underscore the social and institutional context from which the artifacts emerged; they may foreground patronage, for example—the need to garner the support of wealthy and/or powerful sponsors who may not have had an appreciation for the subtleties of Buddhist doctrine. Or they may place the artifacts in the context of political machinations—as attempts to curry favor with, or advance the cause of, one political faction or another. Or they may focus on the functional or instrumental role of Buddhist objects in their original archaeological and ritual settings. Or they may try to weave multiple perspectives together into a tapestry that does justice to the complex social, institutional, and ritual settings that gave birth to these objects.

In the recent rush to historicize and contextualize, there has been increased resistance to dealing with Buddhist artifacts as "works of art." This is not due to the theoretical fuzziness of the term "art" alone. Equally influential is the strident post-colonial critique of the concept. The category "art," we are told, is a modern, ideologically laden concept that alienates objects from their proper historical,
social, and institutional contexts. The decontextualization results in a misplaced emphasis on *sui generis* artistic inspiration and creative expression on the production side, and aesthetic experience on the reception side. In viewing ancient artifacts under the rubric of art we wrest them away from their original lived contexts—the world of the temple, the court, the tomb. We become complicit in the wholesale theft of native property and the creation of the modern bourgeois museum. The analysis of medieval Buddhist objects under the anachronistic rubric of art is thus Orientalist, imperialist, and misguided.

But perhaps we have swung too far in the other direction, leaving us with relentlessly functionalist readings that are denatured and reductive. Scholars now focus on the role of Buddhist images in facilitating devotion, as props for ritual performance, as bearers of thaumaturgic or talismanic powers, as pandering to patrons and emperors. The emphasis on function and social context encourages us to view those who produced and traded in these artifacts as either benighted devotees or as crafty manipulators who preyed on the blind faith of the masses. But something seems suspicious when we deny those distant from ourselves the same capacity as we have for irony, wit, and imagination. In abandoning the rubric and logic of "art" we become blind to the more playful dimensions of Buddhist material culture. To dismiss the category "art" as parochial, romantic, Orientalist, imperialist, and intellectually bankrupt, may be to fall into another rut
that is equally parochial, romantic, Orientalist, imperialist, and intellectually bankrupt.

Consider, for the sake of comparison, an example drawn from Buddhist literature, namely, Case no. 3 of the *Gateless Barrier of the Chan Tradition* (*Chanzong wumen guan 禪宗無門闕*), a famous Song Dynasty collection of "public cases" (*gong'an 公案, J. *kōan*) compiled in 1228 by the Chan master Wumen Huikai 無門慧開 (1183-1260):

Whenever someone challenged [Chan Master] Juzhi (俱胝, d.u.) with a question, he would simply hold up one finger. Later an acolyte was asked by someone on the outside, "What is the master's essential teaching?" The acolyte also held up his finger. When Juzhi heard about this, he took out a knife and cut off the acolyte's finger. The acolyte cried out in pain and ran out, but Juzhi called him back. When the acolyte turned his head, Juzhi raised his finger. The acolyte suddenly understood.\(^7\)

Chan cases, popularly known in the West by the Japanese term *kōan*, were typically composed decades if not centuries after the death of the protagonists. While they are popularly thought of as verbatim records of historical events capturing the inscrutable antics of enlightened masters, the truth is far more complex. Chan masters did not capriciously cut off the fingers of their young attendants, any more than they capriciously slit the throats of kittens (see Case 14...
of the *Gateless Barrier of the Chan Tradition*, entitled, "Nanquan 南泉 kills a cat"). These anecdotes are best approached as literature intended for the training and edification of elite monastics: they were prized for their laconic sophistication, literary elegance, deft wordplay, and ironic humor. In but a few short sentences that conjure an arresting image, "Juzhi’s Finger" captures the central logic of the Mahāyāna teachings of skillful means (Sk. *upāya*) and emptiness: all teachings are "fingers pointing to the moon," but the moon to which the finger points is the understanding that there are, in the end, only fingers. When the young acolyte mistakes the master's finger for the teaching (i.e., confuses the signifier with the signified), the master cuts it off. But lest the acolyte conclude that the absence of a finger is better than a finger (i.e., that no-finger, or silence, or negation, is any less contingent than a finger), Juzhi holds up his finger again! 76

This Chan case illustrates the multivalence and complexity of the "finger" trope in Chinese Buddhism. Juzhi’s raised finger signifies, first and foremost, the Buddha's wordless teaching—the finger that points to the luminous moon which is, in turn, a metaphor for the naturally luminous mind. At the same time, Juzhi’s single digit denotes nonduality—the nonduality of subject and object, path and goal, *samsāra* and nirvāṇa. Finally, the acolyte's severed finger obliquely references the practice of self-immolation: the ritual act of burning off a finger that was the most prevalent form of self-mortification in Chinese Buddhism. 77
Such mortifications, which ranged from incinerating a single digit to immolating one's whole body, were ascetic ordeals—"offerings to the dharma"—intended to foster selflessness, patience, and forbearance in oneself, and to encourage faith in others. According to legend, the beginnings of the Chinese Chan tradition can be traced to the Indian master Bodhidharma accepting Huike as his disciple, but Bodhidharma refused to even acknowledge Huike's presence until Huike severed off his own arm and placed it in front of the master. In the case of Juzhi's acolyte, in order to grasp his teacher's finger he needed to lose his own.

The Famensi finger-bone relic was renowned for inspiring acts of self-mortification. In his derisive account of the procession of the relic to the capital in 819, Han Yu's memorial to the throne mentions zealots "burning heads and searing fingers by the tens and hundreds," and urges restrictions lest the faithful "cut off their arms and slice their flesh in the way of offerings." And Su E, a witness to the procession in 873, provides the following grizzly details:

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.  

Such practices were not the preserve of the unlettered masses alone; no less a person than Fazang (643-712), of later fame as a Huayan exegete and confident of the Empress Wu Zetian, burned off a finger as an offering to the Famen-si relic when he was only fifteen.  

The artists responsible for construing the Famen-si "true body" of the Buddha as an elegantly fashioned empty finger were thus working within this rich literary, mythological, and symbolic terrain, and their accomplishment was no less inventive, inspired, and indeed artful than was that of the anonymous author of the Juzhi story. Meticulously etching the Northern Dipper on the inside surface of the "buddha's finger," they accomplish in jade what the Buddhist "Perfection of Wisdom" (prajñāpāramitā) literature or the Chan cases do in words—a construal of buddhahood that slips through one's fingers the moment one tries to grasp it. The relic, suggestively fashioned of white jade, was then carefully ensconced within a series of eight exquisitely crafted nested "caskets" that reference an Esoteric altar ritual—part of the new "Buddhist Veda" or altar-binding technology that had become fashionable at court. What more fitting resting place for the
Buddha's empty finger than a reliquary fashioned as a miniature, impregnable buddha-realm?

In conclusion, the new-found fondness for explicating Buddhist artifacts and material culture in decidedly instrumental terms—the tendency to foreground the ritual function of objects, or their role in economic exchange relationships and in advancing institutional and political agendas—has yielded important and valuable new insights. But the single-minded focus on function and social context runs the risk of effacing the more sublime, ironic, self-referential, and aesthetic aspects of Buddhist material culture. In a word, it misses the art.
Notes

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The Tang period pagoda that once stood over the crypt collapsed in 1569; the Ming pagoda was constructed over a thirty-year period, from 1579-1609, under the patronage of Emperor Wanli 慶曆 (r. 1572-1620). There is no evidence that the Tang crypt was discovered during the Ming reconstruction.

The historical record mentions only one relic at Famen-si, but a total of four were discovered. For this apparent discrepancy see below.

The list of other emperors who worshipped the relic includes Zhongzong 中宗 (r. 684, and 705-710), Suzong 肅宗 (r. 756-762), Yizong 懿宗 (r. 859-873), and Xizong 僖宗 (r. 873-888).

This very brief historical overview borrows from the considerable

6 The relic is reported to have been transferred to the court in 631, 660, 705, 760, 790, 819, and 873.


8 On the *maṇḍalas* extant in Japan, for example, see note 12 below.

J. *ryōgai mandara* 兩界曼荼羅, also known as the "*maṇḍalas* of the two divisions," *ryōbu mandara* 兩部曼荼羅.

The first of these two *maṇḍalas* is supposedly based on the *Sarvatathāgata-tattvasamgraha-sūtra* (translated by Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra), being a section of the no-longer-extant *Vajraśekhara-sūtra*. The second is supposedly based on (a) chapter 2 and 9 of the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*; and (b) chapter 5 of Śubhākarasimha's commentary to this text.

The earliest extant example of a paired set of "*maṇḍalas* of the two realms" is the so-called Takao 高雄 pair that survives at Jingoji 神護寺 in Kyoto. This ninth-century set is purported to be a faithful copy of the pair that Kūkai 空海 brought back from China, but the genealogy of the set has been called into question. There is no compelling evidence, for example, that the "nine-assembly" Diamond Realm Maṇḍala that became standard in Japan was ever
known in China. And mention of the pairing and integration of the two mandalas is nowhere to be found in the large body of writings by Śubhakarasimha, Yixing, or Amoghavajra. In defense of traditional Japanese claims regarding the Chinese provenance of the two-mandala system, some Shingon scholars have argued that it originated with Kūkai's Chinese master, Huiguo 惠果 (746-805). This claim is defensible precisely because it is not refutable: little survives of Huiguo's teachings. We should be wary of traditional Shingon claims in this regard: extant Chinese sources controvert Kūkai's claim that Huiguo was Amoghavajra's leading disciple and heir, which alone should be sufficient to raise doubts concerning Kūkai's other pronouncements on the subject. The classic study of the Takao mandalas remains Takata Osamu 高田修, Akiyama Terukazu 秋山光和, and Yanagisawa Taka 柳澤孝, Takao mandara no kenkyū 高雄曼荼羅の研究 (Tokyo: Yoshikawa kōbunkan, 1967); for an overview of more recent scholarship see Elizabeth ten Groenhuis, Japanese Mandalas: Representations of Sacred Geography (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1999); and Cynthea J. Bogel, With a Single Glance: Buddhist Icons and Early Mikkyō Vision (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2009). For an English overview of the Japanese scholarship on the
origins of the two-*mandala* system, see Inui Hitoshi, "Kūkai's
Theory of Ryōbu," in *Esoteric Buddhist Studies: Identity in Diversity*
(Proceedings of the International Conference on Esoteric Buddhist
Studies, Koyasan University, 5 Sept. to 8 Sept., 2006; Koyasan
University, 2008), 31-34. For a somewhat strained attempt to read
the two-*mandala* system into an Indian Buddhist site, see John C.
Huntington, "Cave Six at Aurangabad: A Tantrayāna Monument?," in
*Kalādarśana: American Studies in the Art of India*, edited by Joanna
G. Williams (New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta: Oxford and IBH

13 Wu and Han, *Famen-si digong*.

14 Lai, "Relics, the Sovereign and Esoteric Buddhism."

15 Sharf, *Coming to Terms*, 263-278.

16 See, for example, Robert M. Gimello, "Manifest Mysteries: The
Nature of the Exoteric/Esoteric (*Xian 显/Mi 密*) Distinction in Later
Chinese Buddhism" (paper presented at the American Academy of
Religion, Washington D.C., November 21, 2006); and Charles
Orzech, "The 'Great Teaching of Yoga,' the Chinese Appropriation of
the Tantras, and the Question of Esoteric Buddhism," *Journal of
Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, Tomoko Masuzawa, and Robert Orsi are among the many scholars who have contributed to this critique.


This is also the conclusion of many recent attempts to use cognitive science to "explain" religion; see, for example, Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Human Instincts that Fashion Gods, Spirits and Ancestors* (London: Heinemann, 2001).

Luo Zhao 羅炤, for example, argues that it would have been impossible to perform rituals in such a small and cramped chamber, and besides, the contents of the crypt include both Esoteric and exoteric elements; therefore the crypt did not constitute a maṇḍala intended for Esoteric rites. See Luo Zhao, "Famen-si ta digong bushi mantuluo" 法門寺塔地宮不是曼荼羅, *Zhongguo wensu bao* (April 2, 1995); "Lüeshu Famen-si ta digong cangpin de gongjiao neihan" 略述法門寺塔地宮藏品的宗教內涵, *Wenwu* 6 (1995): 53-62; and "Zaitan Famen-si digong bushi mantuluo" 再談法門寺地宮不是曼荼羅, *Zhongguo wensubao* (Aug. 27, 1995). See also the discussions

See, for example, Lai, "Relics, the Sovereign and Esoteric Buddhism," 271-278, where she speculates on the sorts of rituals that would have gone on around the relic and the nested reliquary set at court.

Eugene Wang states this assumption up front, noting that "For historians of medieval Chinese culture, the relics hold little interest per se; rather, it is what the relics inspired and entailed in history ... that is more empirically compelling and cognitively intriguing" (Wang, "Of the True Body," 79).

To my knowledge, no one has yet identified the source of the bone in the bone relics. (Given the temple's claim that at least one of the bones is from the body of Śākyamuni, there is a strong disincentive to facilitate scientific analysis of the relics.) Note that Chinese scholars number the relics in order of their discovery; thus the relic in chamber 1 is labeled relic no. 4, that in chamber 2 is relic no. 2, that in chamber 3 is relic no. 1, and the relic in the secret niche is relic no. 3. As this is somewhat confusing, in this essay I refer to the relics according to the chamber in which they were found.
Wu and Han suggest that the four relics are associated with the four directional buddhas of the two-mandalas, but for reasons mentioned above I find this unconvincing (Wu and Han, *Famen-si digong*, 67).


According to the *Peoples Daily Online*, Nov. 11, 2005, the relic was "confirmed by archeologists as the middle finger of the left hand of Śākyamuni" ([http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200511/11/eng20051111_220641.html](http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200511/11/eng20051111_220641.html) [as of September 10, 2009]). No evidence or analysis accompanies this claim.

Various attempts have been made to explain the presence of the asterism on the Famen-si relic by reference to Buddhist and Daoist rituals devoted to Ursa Major. I-mann Lai, for example, argues that it is tied to cultic practices around the Dipper and the constellations (Lai, "Relics, the Sovereign and Esoteric Buddhism," 226-238). Eugene Wang is, to my mind, rightly skeptical about such theories (Wang, "Of the True Body," 115-116); there is simply no evidence of Northern Dipper practices anywhere in the Famen-si crypt, as Lai
herself acknowledges ("Relics, the Sovereign and Esoteric Buddhism," 274). I think the inscription of the Northern Dipper on the interior of the relic must be understood as evidence of what is appropriately called "artistic inspiration"; see below.

A buddha's physical body is said to possess the thirty-two major and eighty minor "marks" or "characteristics" (Sk. lakṣaṇa, C. xiang 相) of a "great man" (Sk. mahāpuruṣa, C. dazhangfu 大丈夫) or "wheel-turning sage-king" (Sk. cakravartī-rāja, C. zhuanlun shengwang 轉輪聖王). Of the total of 112 marks, the only ones that pertain to fingers are "long slender fingers" (Sk. dīrghāṅgulitva, C. xianzhangzhi-xiang 纖長指相), and "webbed fingers and toes" (Sk. jālāvanaddha-hasta-pāda, C. shouzuzhi manwang xiang 手足指縈網相), neither of which is of much help in explaining the appearance of the Famen-si relics.

On the various buddha-body theories in medieval China see Sharf, *Coming to Terms*, 100-111.


Sharf, *Coming to Terms*, Chapt. 2.
For reproductions of the rubbings, transcriptions, and analysis of two key inscriptions, see Wu and Han, *Famen-si digong*, 40-49; for an English translation of the so-called "inventory tablet" that lists the many royal gifts from the 870s, see Whitfield, "Famen Monastery," 397-398.

Eugene Wang opens his analysis of the Famen-si finds with a discussion of the term "true body," suggesting that the term itself is problematic and perhaps transgressive (Wang, "Of the True Body," 81-83). Wang notes that the Buddha is more properly thought of as a transcendent principle, realization, teaching, and not as a corporeal being. My own reading, based on the evidence of the crypt itself, sees the clerics as rather sophisticated in their approach to buddha relics; rather than being problematic, their use of the term "true body" for a relic of white jade is both sanctioned by scripture and artistically inspired.

For a critique of efforts to formulate a definitive theory or definition of art or aesthetics, see Morris Weitz, "The Role of Theory in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 15, 1 (1956), 27-35. Following Wittgenstein, Weitz argues that the concept "art" functions like the concept "game": there are no common properties that all instances of art have in common, but only "strands
of similarities" or "family resemblances."

Arthur C. Danto has argued, in a multitude of articles and books, that whatever makes art art cannot be an intrinsic or even a perceptual property, since there are cases in which we are confronted with two identical objects (like a urinal or a Brillo box, to give his favorite examples), in which one is "art" and one is "not art." Thus sensual experience alone cannot be the decisive factor; the ascription of the term "art" requires thought and reflection; see esp. Arthur C. Danto, "The Artworld," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 61, 19 (1964): 571-584; and *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981). Other approaches to the definition problem that foreground the role of social institutions and audience response include Theodor W. Adorno, Gretel Adorno, and Rolf Tiedemann, *Aesthetic Theory* (London and Boston: Routledge and K. Paul, 1984); George Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974); and George Dickie, *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art* (New York: Haven, 1984).

See Denis Dutton, "But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art," in *Theories of Art Today*, edited by Noël Carroll (Madison: University


37 See Danto, "The Artworld."

38 The inner members of the imperial household would, presumably, have been among the very few in a position to view the relics up close. Whether or not they should be numbered among the cognoscenti of the "artworld"—whether they would have had the background to appreciate the complex and overdetermined design of the relics—may be impossible to determine.


40 In the case of Duchamp's urinal and Warhol's Brillo boxes, the gap is between the utilitarian object of the work-a-day world and the virtually identical object declared, by its gallery setting, to be a "work of art." In those cases, it is the similarities that arouse our curiosity; the urinal and Brillo boxes are more-or-less indistinguishable from their "non-art" counterparts. In the case of the
relics, it is the obvious differences that count. Nonetheless, in both cases it is the element of surprise and the implicit ellipsis that garners our aesthetic interest.

The five-container set consists of (1) a white jade coffin-shaped box that held the relic, and was dedicated by Emperor Xizong; (2) a crystal sarcophagus (guo) associated with Empress Wu; (3) a lacquered sandalwood box with silver trim that is now largely destroyed; (4) a gilt-silver container illustrated with 45 deities from the Vajradhātu mandala; (5) an outer iron box.

Various theories concerning the genesis and meaning of the eight-container set have been offered to date, but I will forego a review of them here in the interest of proceeding apace to my own analysis. For two alternative theories in English see Lai, "Relics, the Sovereign and Esoteric Buddhism," 111 (where she speculates that the design of the eight-container set was likely overseen by the "recorders of the clergy, Yanchu and Qinglan or the abbot of the palace chapel, Sengche"); and Wang, "Of the True Body" (who believes that the set was crafted by court eunuchs so as to legitimate the enthronement of the twelve-year-old emperor Xizong in 873). Eugene Wang has an interesting although speculative explanation for
the number of containers in this set: the notion of eight caskets may have come from the legend of King Ajātaśatru, who died of grief when informed that the Buddha had passed away. Ajātaśatru's corpse was placed in a set of eight specially prepared nested caskets that brought him back to life; see Wang, "Of the True Body," 98, drawing on *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinayakṣudrakavastu*, Taishō 24:1451.399c.

The story of Ajātaśatru dying and coming back to life was apparently known in Central Asia: it is illustrated in wall paintings that survive at Kizil.

As noted above, the contents of this chamber, which include images of the divine kings and ritual water pots arrayed at the four corners, has frequently but unhelpfully been described as a mandala.

7.1 cm. high, 5.4 cm. wide, 184 grams.

10.2 cm. high, 7.3 cm. wide, 102.5 grams.

11.3 cm. high, 10.5 cm. wide.

13.5 cm. high, 13 cm. wide, 973 grams.

16.2 cm. high, 14.5 cm. wide, 1660 grams.

23.5 cm. high, 20.2 cm. wide, 2699 grams.


Wu and Han, *Famen-si digong*, 336; Shaanxi kaogu yanjiusuo et al. eds. *Fomen mibao*, 142.
Eugene Wang dates the use of nested reliquaries back to at least the sixth century, and suggests that they drew on the use of nested caskets in traditional Chinese burials (Wang, "Of the True Body," 97-98).

Han and Deydier discuss examples of nested reliquary sets, including some containing coffin-shaped containers, at the Iron Pagoda near the town of Zhenjiang, Jiangsu province, Qingshan-si near Xinfeng in Lintong county, Shaanxi province, and at excavations at Dayun-si, Jingchuan country, Gansu (Han and Deydier, Ancient Chinese Gold, 125-132). See also Sonya Lee, "Surviving Nirvana: Death and Transfiguration of the Buddha in Chinese Art" (unpublished manuscript, 2008), for a detailed description of the stone casket-shaped reliquaries found in 1969 in an underground crypt at Jingzhi-si 靜志寺, Ding County, Hebei.

One noteworthy exception is Eugene Wang, who sees the eight-container set as both legitimizing the reign of the twelve-year old emperor Xizong, and as representing the transformative journey of the deceased or soon-to-be deceased spirit of emperor Yizong, whose movement is from the outside toward the relic at the center of the set. Wang suggests that the plain silver box “serves as a boundary
that separates the numinous realm from the human world” (Wang, “Of the True Body,” 112).

Daoxuan, who devoted considerable energy to reconstructing the history, significance, and design of ordination platforms, argues that in India there was a clear distinction between ordination areas (chang) and ordination platforms (tan). In the Illustrated Scripture on the Ordination Platform Established in Guanzhong (Guanzhong chuangli jietan tujing 闕中創立戒壇圖經), for example, Daoxuan laments: "People today do not understand and confuse [chang and tan], regarding them as one and the same. They do not distinguish between the flat chang and the raised tan 今人不識混而雷同。平場高壇莫分二別," Taishō 45:1892.807c25-26; trans. Funayama Toru, "Guṇavarman and Some of the Earliest Examples of Ordination Platforms (jietan) in China" (paper presented at the conference "Images, Relics and Legends: Formation and Transformation of Buddhist Sacred Sites," University of British Columbia, October 15-16, 2004), 13, with changes. On Buddhist ordination platforms, in addition to Funayama, "Guṇavarman," see esp. Hirakawa Akira 平川彰, "Kaidan no gen'i," Indogaku bukkyōgaku kenkyū 10, 2 (1962), 276-296; Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信享, Bukkyō daijiten 佛教大辭典, 10 vols. (Tokyo: Sekai seitken kankō kyōkai, 1933-1936), vol. 1,

Different vinaya commentaries appear to use *jietan 戒壇*, *jiechang 戒場*, and *jiechang 戒場* for one and the same structure, i.e., an ordination platform; see Hirakawa, "Kaidan no gen'i," and Funayama, "Gunavarman."


that Ennin, who brought a copy of the *Altar Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch* back with him to Japan, groups the text in his catalogue not with Chan texts (of which there is a listing), but with "ordination texts"; see T. H. Barrett, "Buddhist Precepts in a Lawless World: Some Comments on the Linhuai Ordination Scandal," in *Going Forth: Visions of Buddhist Vinaya*, edited by William M. Bodiford (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 117.

On these texts see the forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation by Amanda Goodman (Buddhist Studies, UC Berkeley).


See, for example, the Goma chapter of the *Dapiluzhe'na chengfo jingshu* 大毘盧遮那成佛經疏, where Yixing says that the Buddhist fire ritual was based on its Vedic counterpart in order to convert followers of the Vedas to Buddhism: "The Buddha himself taught the very foundation of the Vedas, and in that way manifested the correct principles and method of the true Goma. This is the 'Buddha Veda' 佛韋陀" (*Taishō* 39:1796.779a19-21). See also the discussions in Toganoo Shōun 梶尾祥雲, *Himitsu jisō no kenkyū* 秘密事相の研究
[1935], reprint, Toganoo Shōun zenshu 梶尾祥雲全集, vol. 2

(Kōyasan: Kōyasan daigaku mikkyō bunka kenkyūjo, 1982), 85-86;
and Sharf, "Thinking Through Shingon."

Wuliangshou rulai guanxing gongyang yigui 無量壽如來觀行供養儀軌, Taishō 19:930.

Guanzizai pusa ruyilun niansong yigui 観自在菩薩如意輪念誦儀軌, Taishō 20:1085.

Guanzizai pusa ruyilun yuqie 観自在菩薩如意輪瑜伽, Taishō 20:1086.

Sharf, "Thinking Through Shingon."


On the meaning of terms such as xiang or "visualization" in an East Asian Esoteric context, see the analysis in Sharf, "Visualization and Maṇḍala."
Sonya Lee suggests that relic crypts such as the one at Famen-si are
best thought of as "time capsules." Those who constructed them
expected them to be opened after a passage of time, and they
designed and provisioned the crypts with this future audience in
mind; see Lee, "Surviving Nirvana."

Some have argued that the fourth container consists of Esoteric
dieties, while the fifth is confined to "exoteric" deities, but this
distinction may be forced; there is little evidence that Tang clerics
classified deities into two distinct pantheons, one "esoteric" and one
"exoteric."

For a full exploration of the gong'an genre see Robert H. Sharf,
"How to Think with Chan Gong'ans," in Thinking with Cases:
Specialized Knowledge in Chinese Cultural History, edited by
Charlotte Furth, Judith Zeitlin, Hsiung Ping-chen (Honolulu:
University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 205-243.
On self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism see esp. James A. Benn,
*Burning for the Buddha: Self-Immolation in Chinese Buddhism*,
Kuroda Institute studies in East Asian Buddhism no. 19 (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).


The use of white jade for two of the finger-bone relics was far from arbitrary. A genre of meditation practices in China, known as the "white bone contemplations" (*baigu guan* 白骨観), involve visualizing one's body as a "pure" skeleton bereft of all impure (subject to decay) flesh. The technique is described in detail in the various meditation sutras (*chan jing* 禪經) associated with Kumārajīva, such as the *Scripture on the esoteric essential methods*
of meditation (Chan miyao fa jing 禪祕要法經, T.613), as well as "discernment scriptures" (guan jing 觀經) such as the Scripture on the Ocean-like Samadhi of the Discernment of the Buddha (Guanfo sanmei hai jing 觀佛三昧海經, T.643). These texts describe the transformation of the white bones into white jade (bai yu 白玉) that emits light (see, for example, T.643: 15.692a). In his forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation, Eric Greene suggests that this may reflect Daoist practices aimed at strengthening and transforming one's bones into the white jade bones of the immortals. White jade was thus the ideal medium in which to fashion the immortal and luminescent relics of a buddha.