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PERFORMING CENTER IN A VERTICAL RISE

Multilevel Pagodas in China's Middle Period

1

Qianxun Pagoda and its two subsidiary pagodas. Chongsheng Monastery, Dali, Yunnan, circa 9th century. Photo from Jiang Huaiying and Qiu Xuanchong, *Dali Chongshengsi san ta* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998), front cover

Abstract

An unprecedented number of multilevel pagodas were built in China from the tenth through the thirteenth century. This growing emphasis on verticality, in contrast to the usual horizontal sprawl of China's building tradition, raises questions about what "height" meant in the history of Chinese architecture. This essay argues that the height of the multilevel pagoda was necessarily performative—not so much because the pagoda served as a means of ascending to that height, but because it drew the attention of the faithful. Its levels, centrality, and indeed, height are architectural components that were key to its performativity, through which its religious significance was revealed and its ritual efficacy enacted. Ultimately, we should see the multilevel pagoda as a structured mechanism, or a performing center in a vertical rise, that prompted the faithful to ascend and to circumambulate around the pagoda, from the periphery to the center, if only conceptually.

Introduction

Derived from the Indian *stūpa*, the Chinese pagoda inherited the *stūpa*'s original function as an architectural structure that enshrined holy relics, but transformed it into a taller and thinner version.¹ From the beginning, the style and material of the Chinese adaptation varied; it could be four-sided or polygonal and made of timber, brick, or masonry. However, the freestanding, multilevel structure towering above the horizon (fig. 1) has been the most recognizable pagoda type in China's cultural territory and throughout its building history.² It asserts itself in the language of verticality that gloriously manifests Buddhism as a religion deeply entrenched in premodern China, reshaping the physical landscape and reconfiguring its sacred topography as an inseparable part of the building environment and tradition. Yet with its unique form, the sky-high, multilevel pagoda also raises pointed questions about architecture and religion.

In an architectural tradition predominated by timber frames and characterized by horizontal sprawl, building upward was particularly challenging both technically and materially. A higher vantage point is the usual justification for constructing tall buildings such as watchtowers. Elevating viewers to a great height, however, was not one of the multilevel pagoda's major functions. Furthermore, constructing in materials other than wood was not any easier in a region that rarely needed to deal with the heavier weight of a tall structure that pressed down from above and could cause the building to break laterally.³ The pagoda's visual and architectural properties, which seem foreign in contrast to Chinese architectural tradition and vocabulary, thus beg further investigation.

2A

2B

2A

Pagoda at the Songyue Monastery.
Mount Song, Henan, 523. Photo
by author

2B

Pagoda at the Songyue Monastery:
front elevation, floor plan of
the lower level, and a section of
the *chattra* showing the crypt
locations. Diagrams after Liu
Dunzhen, *Zhongguo gudai
jianzhushi*, 2nd ed. (Beijing:
Zhongguo jianzhu gongye
chubanshe, 1984), figures 60-1 and
60-2. The section of the *chattra*,
from Henansheng gudai jianzhu
baohu yanjiusuo, "Dengfeng
Songyuesi ta tiangong qingli
jianbao," *Wenwu* 1 (1992), 26

Take the brick pagoda at the Songyue 嵩岳 Monastery as an example (figs. 2A–B). Dated 523, it is the earliest extant pagoda built in the true multilevel style.⁴ The twelve-sided structure consists of a tall, lower-level shaft and fourteen densely placed upper levels, topped by a parasol-finial (*chattra*) mounted on a lotus pedestal. The lower shaft has four large entrances open to the four cardinal directions, setting off eight other sides, each of which has a false-arch entry. All fourteen upper levels are similarly decorated with regularly placed false windows and doors. The entire pagoda reaches a height of 39.9 meters. Despite all of these details, this physically imposing structure serves no practical purpose. No facilities for climbing were built inside or outside, and none of the windows and doorways is truly functional other than the four entrances on the ground level.⁵ The pagoda is essentially a hollow shell that has neither interior spaces nor actual levels.

One might argue that, though nonfunctional, the pagoda is significant in its symbolism, including that associated with its height. Many have proposed non-Chinese sources for the form and height of the pagoda at the Songyue Monastery, and its unusual dodecagonal structure may represent attempts by Chinese builders to construct a circular Indian *stūpa*.⁶ Nonetheless, the pagoda's curving profile, gracefully created by a diameter that decreases from the lower level upward, has no Indian counterpart. The style of tightly constructed eaves up to the finial is also a unique feature that is specific to Chinese pagodas throughout history. Called *miyan* 密簷 in Chinese, the closely piled eaves, though physically nonfunctional, appear to visually compress the building levels and consequently enhance or exaggerate the pagoda's soaring verticality.⁷ At stake in this compression and exaggeration of multiple building levels was height, one of the most important features of Chinese pagodas.

Built over a relic crypt, the pagoda at the Songyue Monastery is profusely symbolic. In an early eighth-century stele, the pagoda was extolled for its vertical dimension, dodecagonal shape, and building details, all religiously important for

outwardly manifesting the relics enshrined inside.⁸ The height of the pagoda, however, draws attention to more than its exterior and symbolism. In 1989, two crypts (fig. 2B) were found inside the *chattrā*. The evidence from the crypts points to a mid-tenth-century date for their construction, about four hundred years after the pagoda was built.⁹ What do we make of these two crypts, which builders or devotees went to the trouble to construct at the very top of the pagoda, invisible from the outside and inaccessible from below? In other words, by the tenth century, the pagoda was asserting itself vertically not just visually with its exterior but physically with its interior, although it was nothing but an airshaft.

I argue that the height of the multilevel pagoda is necessarily performative because it engages devotees in ways that other traditional Chinese architectures did not. Here, the term *performative* refers not to the pagoda actually acting or performing in motion but to its engagement with the visitor in ways that communicated its symbolic meanings and enacted its religious functions.¹⁰ Early in China's history, multilevel structures, including pagodas, were made possible by the available building technologies. Yet it was in the pursuit of height that pagodas became much more effective and active, not only because they visually enticed visitors but because they physically engaged practitioners through their interior spaces and multiple levels. This was particularly so during China's Middle Period, when the greatest number of multilevel pagodas were constructed, with more elaborate relic depositories and iconographic programs than ever before.¹¹ New ritual practices and concepts of relics in relation to the pagoda were important factors in this history. I contend that the vertically oriented, multilevel pagoda was built with "agency,"¹² i.e., the pagoda interacted with and instructed the practitioner in the ritual efficacy it was built to fulfill. The term *agency* is used here to indicate the multilevel pagoda's means of achieving height—through such features as its elevation, levels, and centralized structure—that concurrently affect the ways it interacts with visitors and reveals its religious significance.¹³ The multilevel pagoda, in other words, did not just carry symbolism or ritual functions, but it performed them.

This study is not meant to be a comprehensive survey of all pagodas from the Middle Period; in fact, it draws many examples from the Liao (947–1125) territory in the north and northwest part of China, where one finds a great number of multilevel pagodas.¹⁴ Instead, the goal is to locate the essential factors, both religious and nonreligious, from this period that made the multilevel pagoda a much more enticing and demanding architectural structure. Unlike the majority of the Liao pagodas, many multilevel pagodas built in China during this period had an accessible interior. To a significant degree, however, the ways in which the multilevel pagoda was conceptualized and the performative manner in which it engaged the user were consistent and comparable, regardless of its style, form, or function.

3

3

A *taixie* structure, engraved on a bronze vessel. Warring States period (475 and 221 BCE). Image from Fu Xinian, “Zhanguo tongqi shang de jianzhu tuxiang yanjiu” in *Fu Xinian jianzhushi lunwen ji* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2003), 86

In this essay, I first investigate how height came to be an exceptional building quality and what it meant in the history of Chinese architecture until the Middle Period. I will then demonstrate how the multilevel pagoda, from the inside out, can be considered a “structured mechanism” that performs, acts, and interacts with visitors in the context of Buddhism and its ritual practice. It structurally activates the faithful’s vertical ascendance, prompts their movements from the periphery to the center, and unpacks the religious import of the iconography and relics that the pagoda enshrines. In this last sense, I will discuss the much-studied Timber Pagoda of Yingxian (1056). I propose that it should be regarded as a vertically oriented “performing center” in its engagement with visitors and transformation of onlookers into practitioners, while it transcends its physical structure to become a material manifestation of the Vairocana Buddha’s dharma body.

Chinese Architecture in Terms of Height: The Case for Towers (*Lou*)

One does not usually begin the history of Chinese architecture with a discussion of height. The chief features of China’s building tradition—the timber-frame structure and the post-and-lintel system—do not lend themselves to structures with great height or spacious interiors. Instead, one speaks of a grid system of columns, brackets, flexible spatial units, symmetry, and horizontal expansion. Early on, vertical buildings that required a different technology formed a separate building typology.¹⁵ Because it was beyond the architectural norm, however, a tall structure drew attention—as much to its building form as to the particular functions its height was meant to serve. A full discussion of a history of Chinese architecture in terms of height would take us far afield, but a brief review of the architectural terminology and ways in which tall buildings engaged viewers and spawned meaning during the Middle Period will help this investigation.

The earliest Chinese term to suggest multilevel structures is *taixie* 臺榭, a compound word that means kiosks (*xie*) built over a terrace (*tai*), though *xie* here may refer generally to any timber structure.¹⁶ The construction of *taixie* can be traced as early as the Warring States Period (circa 450–221 BCE), and the style was still in currency by the end of the Western Han (202 BCE–9 CE). The architecture of the *taixie*, however, was not truly multilevel. Many architectural images engraved on bronze vessels from the fourth and third centuries BCE depict two- or three-story buildings

4

4
Theoretical reconstruction of a building with a *taixie* foundation. Diagram by Sijie Ren, from Nancy S. Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture in an Age of Turmoil, 200–600* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2014), figure 2.11. Courtesy of Nancy S. Steinhardt

5
A three-level *ge* (pavilion), rubbing of a stone engraving. Feixian, Shandong, Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). Image from Shandongsheng bowuguan and Shandongsheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Shandong Han huaxiangshi xuanji* (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1982), plate 187

(fig. 3), likely *taixie*, in which figures in profile are engaged in formal or ritualistic activities. Columns on different levels often are not aligned vertically, suggesting a disconnection between the levels.¹⁷ While bronze imagery from this early period should not be read as accurate representation, archaeological evidence indicates the same disconnection.¹⁸ To construct such a building, a pounded-earth core would be raised to a certain height, and around it, rings of columns were erected to build gallery spaces in stacks that simulated multiple stories. Finally, the earthen core was crowned with a timber structure, seen as the top story (fig. 4). The result was a perfectly impressive multilevel structure on the exterior with very little functional space in the interior, except for the freestanding structure atop the earthen core. The exterior stairs visible in the diagram of the reconstructed building (fig. 4) were vestiges of the technology that made exterior architectural verticality possible without a corresponding interior connection or traffic between levels.

Architecture of early *taixie* demonstrates an intention to build upward even if the building technology was insufficient to realize it. Obviously uneconomical, this particular building type was nonetheless desirable and demanded by kings and lords as a symbol of their political power.¹⁹ In this undertaking, visual presentation of tall buildings had primacy, and architectural height was commensurate with one's position in the political hierarchy. The architecture was thus built to separate and elevate the privileged. As it developed, many high terraces in lofty elevation were constructed to lure immortals. It is recorded that Emperor Wu (reigned 141–87 BCE) of the Western Han commissioned an extremely tall terrace named “Communicating with Heaven” (Tongtian 通天), for “if the [terrace] were not [physically] tall and [visually] prominent, the divine would not descend.”²⁰ Though built on manmade terraces, towering structures were considered to be places of engagement with the divine.

By the Eastern Han period (25–220 CE), the laborious construction of the pounded-earthen core eventually was replaced by tall timber frames that were sturdy enough to elevate wooden structures, termed *ge* 閣 (pavilions). Structural issues regarding vertical supports would be resolved in the following centuries,²¹ but the use of timber frames was a significant first step in achieving true multilevel architecture. A stone engraving from an Eastern Han tomb in Shandong depicts a *ge* (fig. 5), an elevated structure that has a lower level with porches open on its

6A

6B

6A

Mingqi, a seven-level structure, excavated from a tomb. Yingyang, Henan, Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). Photos from Zhang Songlin, “Yingyang Weihecun Handai qiceng taolou de faxian he yanjiu,” *Zhongyuan wenwu* 4 (1987), 45

6B

Cross section of the *mingqi* tower. Yingyang, Henan, Eastern Han dynasty. Diagram from Zhang, “Yingyang Weihecun Handai qiceng taolou,” 46

three sides and two upper levels.²² The purpose of the two upper levels is unclear, but although they seem to increase the building’s height, their diminished scales and sizes do not seem to allocate much interior room in comparison to the lower level. The eaves and rooftop of the elevated pavilion, however, were ideal locations for phoenixes to perch and immortals to visit, as indicated by the stone engraving.

A similar building structure (figs. 6A–B) is the miniature funerary object known as *mingqi* 明器, a general term for all artifacts made specifically for the dead in the burial chamber.²³ This low-fire earthenware object consists of three lower levels and four shorter upper levels with the size of the eaves diminishing successively upward to the hipped roof.²⁴ A cross section of the *mingqi* shows the limited interior space of each upper level, in contrast to the space in the apparently functional lower floors. The importance of the seemingly nonessential levels, it appears, lay not in their interior footprint but in the vertical elevation they were built to attain.

The shorter top levels observed in the last two examples (figs. 5, 6) recall the densely piled eaves of the pagoda at the Songyue Monastery (see fig. 2). All share the visual language of height by creating a building profile that tapers upward with seemingly compressed levels. The four top levels of the *mingqi*, moreover, also point to another architectural type, called a *lou* 樓 (tower).²⁵ A *lou* is a true multistory structure with one story built directly on top of the roof truss of another story. The height of each story is consistent, but the perimeter is smaller, with each successive story as observed in the central tower inside the walled compound of the *mingqi* complex (fig. 7). Building *lou* was popular during the Eastern Han, though the structures were rather narrow with restrained interior spaces, likely due to the builders’ still limited experience with true multistory architecture.²⁶ Thus, the *lou* often was reserved for surveillance purposes, such as watchtowers, lookouts, or gate towers, for which a higher vantage point was desirable, and the building technology was improved to increase the height. The elevated vantage point, one should note, also gradually shifted people’s focus from the building and its vertical rise to the expansive view that a low-rise building could not offer. Indeed, from early on, *lou* were associated with ascending high for a view into the distance (*denggao*

7

7

Mingqi with high central tower and four corner towers, excavated from a tomb. Leitai, Wuwei, Gansu, Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). Photo from Gan Bowen, “Gansu Wuwei Leitai Donghan mu qingli jianbao,” *Wenwu* 2 (1972), plate 8-2

linyuan 登高臨遠).²⁷ When the pagoda at the Yongning 永寧 Monastery in Luoyang, then the capital of the Northern Wei (386–534), was completed, many were attracted by its extraordinary height. It became the most celebrated tower in early medieval China and was said to touch the clouds and rain. In 517, the emperor and the empress dowager, who initiated the project, could not resist climbing the pagoda, where they were able to “see the entire palace as if in their own palms and the entire capital [i.e., Luoyang] as if their own backyard.”²⁸

The wooden tower—built to a considerable height entirely with a timber-frame structure, climbable, and spacious enough to accommodate activities—required two more technological innovations. First, a substructure in the form of a raised platform called *pingzuo* 平座 (flat base) was built between stories. The *pingzuo*, in fact, already had been seen in *mingqi* as early as the Han dynasties, but it did not become essential for stabilizing and strengthening connections between levels until buildings grew taller.²⁹ Second, instead of a quadrilateral building, high-rise structures increasingly were built in a polygonal shape, either a hexagon or an octagon. Structurally, the timber frame (rather than the walls) was the primary weight-bearing component; the taller the wooden structure, the heavier the load the framework needed to carry. A polygonal structure had the advantage of providing more points of vertical support than a quadrilateral one. Both technological innovations were factored into the construction of multilevel buildings beginning in the late Tang, when building trades in China flourished and more spectacular towering buildings were recorded than ever before.³⁰

It is not a coincidence that we find abundant imagery of tall towers during this same period, i.e., the tenth through thirteenth century, particularly in poetry. Many multistory towers were built in private gardens, on hills, beside lakes, or even on city walls. They were called *lou* 樓 or *louge* 樓閣 interchangeably, for the previous distinctions between *lou* (tower) and *ge* (pavilion) were no longer applied; both now referred to multiple elevated levels.³¹ In literature, the towering profile was the trope that—along with the moon, flowing water, misty fogs, and sunset, for example—served as a seductive device with poetic meanings. Ascending through the

8

8

Mingqi, a two-story structure topped by a finial of discs, excavated from a tomb. Xiangfan, Hutbei, third century CE. Photo from Xiangfanshi wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, "Hubei Xiangfan Fancheng Caiyue Sanguo mu fajue jianbao," *Wenwu* 9 (2010), 8

levels to reach the highest vantage point, where views of different distances could all be seen, was still the major theme.³² The expansive scene that one couldn't otherwise obtain, in stark contrast to the restrained interior and narrow stairs of the manmade tower, was awe-inspiring but also encouraged contemplation. The high-rise structure reoriented one's viewpoint; as one looked on the world below, while remaining separate from it, the top of the tower became a site of solitude,³³ and the perception of the tower's vertical elevation was psychologically enhanced and extended.

This was also the era in history when building projects by named architects were better documented than they had been before. An early Northern Song architect named Yu Hao 喻浩 (active 965–89) was best known for the faultless calculations of his design.³⁴ When he completed the wooden pagoda at the Kaibao 開寶 Monastery (built in 989) in the capital, Kaifeng, the tower's slight lean to the northwest puzzled people who flocked to see it. Yu answered by noting, "The terrain of the capital is flat without hills, and the wind comes most often directly from the northwest. The pagoda will be blown and become straight in less than a hundred years."³⁵ The account describes Yu's skill as an architect as well as the technological and sophisticated knowledge a high-rise building entailed.

Building technology was instrumental for raising high structures, but it also affected how people saw, experienced, and conceived them. Their physical presence, vertical rise, and visual imposition set tall structures apart from China's usual low-rise architecture and introduced the Chinese—and non-Chinese, who also built in this tradition—to different ways of interacting with architecture. The building was a means for exploring height, and to a great extent, its significance (i.e., its visual, physical, and poetic meanings) dwells not so much on the structure itself as on its capacity to reorient the viewpoints of its visitors. To be sure, high-rise

9

9

Pagoda carved in relief on stone. Shifang, Sichuan, late Eastern Han dynasty (25–220). It shows the network of the columns and the location of the central pillar. Photo from He Yun'ao, *Fojiao chuchuan nanfang zhilu* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1993), plate 3

buildings were never the norm in China, but when built, they were the center of attention, while diverting people from their structural properties to their exterior surroundings and spatiality (i.e., the ways in which the sense of space was created). In the case of Buddhist pagodas, rather than this “outward” centrality, it was the interiority that drew attention to the structure and was the key to the multilevel pagoda’s performativity. The technology advanced for high-rise architecture was thus not just the *means* but, as will be discussed, the important *agency* of the building’s performance.

The Chinese Pagoda (*Ta*): A Vertical Centripetal Structure

Based on the visual and literary evidence, two features, namely the multilevel structure and an axial pole, characterized Chinese pagodas in the early period. One of the earliest accounts of Buddhist monastic architecture describes a central structure within a monastic precinct built around 200 CE: “Above were nine golden plates strung in a stack; below is a double-story building.”³⁶ Certainly single-story pagodas were built,³⁷ but multilevel ones seem to have been most typical. The combination of a multilevel structure topped by a finial of discs likely was derived from the Indian *stūpa*.³⁸ A *mingqi* (fig. 8) from the same period, which has a double-story pavilion with a prominent finial, suggests that the foreign *stūpa* style was quickly adapted to China’s high-rise building tradition.³⁹ An image carved on a stone (fig. 9), uncovered in Sichuan and dated to the Eastern Han dynasty, shows a three-story tower built with a timber-frame structure, similarly topped by a finial decorated with discs.⁴⁰ In all likelihood, the image depicts a pagoda, for its multilevel structure defined the most distinct Buddhist monuments in early medieval China.

The axial pole also had an Indian origin.⁴¹ Known as a *yaṣṭi*, the pole was erected centrally inside the early dome-like *stūpa*; rising above the *stūpa*’s semispherical dome, the *yaṣṭi* also signified spiritual ascendance beyond the secular world (*samsāra*).⁴² It anchored the structure’s interior at the sacred depository of relics buried underneath, while stretching upward above the dome and ending with a finial decorated with umbrella-like discs (*chattra*). We cannot be sure if early Chinese pagodas such as the ones in figures 8 and 9 similarly contained an axial pole. The textual evidence, however, indicates that a central pole was used and that its erection was a necessary step in the building of a pagoda.⁴³

10

Cross section of a five-level pagoda, showing the central pillar. Hōryūji, near Nara, Japan, after 670. Diagram after Zhang Shiqing, “Falongsī jianzhu de damu jishu,” in Zhang Shiqing, *Zhong ri gudai jianzhu damu jishu de yuanliu yu bianqian* (Tianjin: Tianjin daxue chubanshe, 1992), 42

During the Sui dynasty (581–618), Empress Wen (reigned 581–604) famously ordered the building of pagodas in 112 monasteries nationwide in order to enshrine relics that had miraculously been found.⁴⁴ The style of pagodas was uniformly designed by the state, and its construction was invariably carried out according to that style. It was recorded that to build the pagoda, first a foundation was built and a stone reliquary was laid at its center. A central pole (*chazhu* 剎柱) was then erected, followed by the ritual enshrinement of relics; only after this was the upper structure of the pagoda constructed.⁴⁵ Unfortunately none of the 112 pagodas still stands, but wooden pagodas built with a central pole survive in Japan, such as the five-story Gojū-no-tō 五重塔 at Hōryūji 法隆寺 near Nara (fig. 10).⁴⁶ This pagoda, built no earlier than 670, is a four-sided, timber-frame structure. Each of the upper stories sits on the roof structure below, while the perimeter of each story diminishes successively. No raised platforms (*pingzuo*) were built between stories to facilitate climbing. The central pole (*shinbashira* 心柱), erected over an underground crypt that contains relics, does not interlock with the wooden frame of each floor, and thus does not support the structure’s vertical load.⁴⁷ Invisible from outside, the pole was placed at the very center of the structure and was more symbolic than pragmatic in its suggestive movement of ascension.⁴⁸

On the flip side, many pagodas built without an axial pole but around a hollow center should be considered in the same symbolic terms. The brick pagoda at the Songyue Monastery is such a structure. Is the role played by its hollow core similar to that played by the axial pole in other structures? The relic depositories inside the pagoda yield some relevant information. When the pagoda was built, an underground crypt was constructed at its very center.⁴⁹ It was refurbished in the early 730s with new murals that, though now largely damaged, may depict a ritual scene. In the mid-tenth century, as briefly mentioned earlier, two aboveground crypts containing relics were built inside the *chattra* (see fig. 2B), while several broken statues were treated as relics and enshrined in the underground crypt.⁵⁰ No textual records survive to help disclose the circumstances under which additional relics were added and crypts constructed, but the religious significance of the central elevation doubtlessly was established with the new additions by the tenth century, even without an actual axial pole. Between the underground crypts and those inside the finial, the hollow core now should be understood as the equivalent of the axial pole in a conceptual sense, and its ascending levels inside correspond to the eaves and levels outside that guide one’s eyes up to the finial. The pagoda, with its exterior/interior and height/elevation, interacts with the visitor. And given the sacred relics deposited at its center, the multilevel pagoda no longer can be understood merely as a functional or material structure; instead, it becomes an “architectonic expression”⁵¹ and symbolically charged. Its structural components,

11
Cross section of Qianxun Pagoda, Chongsheng Monastery, Dali, Yunnan, circa 9th century. after Jiang Huaiying and Qiu Xuanchong, *Dali Chongshengsi san ta* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998), diagram 4

12
Cross section of White Pagoda, Dule Monastery, Jixian, Hebei, before 1058. Diagram after Tianjinshi lishi bowuguan kaogudui and Jixian wenwu baoguan suo, "Tianjin Jixian Dulesi ta," *Kaogu xuebao* 1 (1989), 86

13
Cross section of Ruiguang Pagoda, Ruiguang Monastery, Suzhou, Jiangsu, early 11th century. Diagram after Zhang Buqian, "Suzhou Ruiguangsi ta," *Wenwu* 10 (1965), 60

accordingly, will be understood as the major "actors" of the expression (or performance) that engage with visitors and communicate the symbolism of the sacred center to them.

Unlike the high-rise tower, the multilevel pagoda draws attention inward to the center of its structure. This centripetal propensity was developed during the tenth through the thirteenth century, when multilevel pagodas were built with an increasingly elaborate iconography and relic depositories, as evidenced by the additional crypts inside the pagoda at the Songyue Monastery. Multilevel pagodas during China's Middle Period were built in the same architectural tradition and with the same technology that constructed high-rise towers, but they engaged the visitor differently. As will become clearer later in the discussion, they were built in either the *louge* 樓閣 (tower-pavilion) or *miyan* 密簷 (closely piled eaves) style; both types were similar in height and their central axis, which helped assert the vertical rise. In what ways can we consider the pagoda's central axis—whether in the form of a physical pole, a solid core, or a hollow airshaft—in performative terms, and what exactly did it perform?

Rising in Elevation: The Pagoda's Central Axis

The earliest dateable underground pagoda crypt uncovered in China was built in 481, during the Northern Wei dynasty. It is not always clear, however, if axial poles were constructed inside pagodas in this early period, since most aboveground structures did not survive.⁵² In comparison with the underground crypt, scholars are much less certain about when aboveground crypts were constructed inside pagodas. Although there might have been precedents from the Tang dynasty, it was not until the tenth century that the inclusion of one or more aboveground crypts in the center of the pagoda structure became widespread.⁵³ Aboveground crypts, built in addition to the underground one, provided more space for sacred relics. More significant, their inclusion inside the pagoda aligned vertically along the central axis, which altered the manner in which the axial pole was conceived and used.

14A

14A
Guanyin Pavilion, Dule Monastery.
Jixian, Hebei, 984. Photo from Chen
Mingda, *Jixian Dulesi* (Tianjin:
Tianjin Daxue chubanshe, 2007),
color plate 39

14B

14B
Front section of Guanyin Pavilion,
Dule Monastery. It shows the central
empty core through the three interior
levels that accommodates the
towering statue of the bodhisattva.
Diagram from Chen, *Jixian Dulesi*,
plate 59

14C
Floor plan of the ground level of
Guanyin Pavilion. Diagram from
Chen, *Jixian Dulesi*, plate 47

A general survey of the many extant brick pagodas built during China's Middle Period suggests that there was a consistent structural layout in both the floor plan and vertical section throughout the broader cultural territory of China, encompassing the lands ruled under the Song, Liao, Jin, and, later, Xi Xia.⁵⁴ The floor is either a single-ring plan (*danco* 單槽) or double-ring plan (*shuangcao* 雙槽) that contains a central core enclosed by an exterior wall. Its vertical section consists of an underground crypt, central hollow or solid core, aboveground crypts, and the *chattra*, from bottom to top in a continuous rising elevation.⁵⁵ For example, the Qianxun 千尋 Pagoda, built in the late tenth century at Chongsheng 崇聖 Monastery in Yunnan of the Dali State (937–1094), has a hollow core that rises from the crypt in the foundation to the sunken ceiling, which then turns into the basis of the *chattra* (see figs. 1, 11).⁵⁶ Another example built before 1058, the White Pagoda of the Dule 獨樂 Monastery in Jixian, Hebei, has a solid core enclosing two aboveground crypts and an axial pole (which turns into a short finial) built above the sunken ceiling of the top crypt (fig. 12).⁵⁷ Similarly, the Ruiguang 瑞光 Pagoda, dated to the early eleventh century, at the Ruiguang Monastery in Suzhou (fig. 13) has a central solid core, around which an interior aisle was built on each level with stairways constructed between. The solid core, which contains a crypt on the third floor, rises to the fifth level and becomes the basis of an axial pole that turns into a *chattra*.⁵⁸ In all these examples—and there are many other variations in structural components or forms of sacred depository⁵⁹—the vertical axis as the sacred and secret center became increasingly complex in both its content and the suggested upward elevation. While the crypt content will be the main topic in the next section, here I will consider the religious significance of the central axis with a slightly different example.

The example, not a pagoda, is the Guanyin 觀音 Pavilion at Dule Monastery (figs. 14A–B), one of the earliest extant multilevel wooden buildings in China, dated to 984.⁶⁰ Pavilions are closely related to multilevel pagodas; the two forms share some essential structural and spatial characteristics. The Guanyin Pavilion is a five- by four-bay timber-frame structure, appearing as a two-story exterior with a *pingzuo* level built inside between the floors. Each of the interior levels has a double-ring plan, with two rings of columns, inner and outer, that form a three- by two-bay central area (*neicao* 內槽), surrounded by one-bay aisles (*waicao* 外槽) (fig. 14C). The

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15
The head of the eleven-headed Guanyin on the third interior level of Guanyin Pavilion. Photo from Chen, *Jixian Dulesi*, color plate 102

16

16
White Pagoda, Dule Monastery, viewed from window of the third interior level of Guanyin Pavilion. Photo from Chen, *Jixian Dulesi*, plate 139

three interior levels create a central empty core that rises from the ground floor to a hexagonal sunken ceiling (*zaojing* 藻井) just under the roof structure, not dissimilar to the type of pagoda with a central hollow core. Unlike the pagoda, however, the central space inside the pavilion was structured to fully accommodate a sixteen-meter painted clay statue of the main image, the eleven-headed Guanyin, soaring to the ceiling.⁶¹ Flights of stairs on the right side of the building were built to facilitate the visitor's ascendance to observe the statue's towering presence. Anyone who climbs up successive levels traverses the interior space vertically along with the body of the bodhisattva, from its feet to its eleven heads on the top floor (fig. 15). The ascension is revelatory, and thus the central core, whose height is equivalent to that of the sacred statue, is not just negative, empty space; it engages and guides the devotee through the physical structure and enacts the iconography built into the architecture.⁶²

Certainly, we cannot ignore the major differences between pagodas and pavilions built with a central core. Most apparent, the pavilion has a functional interior for climbing, while the pagoda's core is not always accessible. Yet vertically traversing a multilevel building such as the Guanyin Pavilion must have been suggestive to the Buddhist faithful who encountered a towering structure. It has been pointed out that if one stands on the top floor of the Guanyin Pavilion, looking through the window at the statue's eye level, one can see the White Pagoda (see fig. 12) rising high above the largely horizontal cityscape about 380 meters to the south (fig. 16).⁶³ The visual connection between the two multilevel buildings was intentional, such that one's physical elevation through the levels of the Guanyin Pavilion might have inspired a conceptual ascension inside the White Pagoda, through its interior crypts and up to the finial. Height in both buildings, particularly at the moment when they interact with each other, is simultaneously visual, physical, and religious, suggestive of a spiritual ascendance. The vertical axis is therefore more than a marker of a sacred locale or a way of fixing the orientation; it is part of the pagoda's overall architectonic expression and performance of the multivalent significance embedded in its structure.

Two Acts of the Pagoda: Iconography and Ritual

To a great extent, the two aforementioned features—the multilevel structure and the vertical axis—use the same vocabulary, although one is exterior, visible, and

17A

17B

17A

North Pagoda. Chaoyang, Liaoning, 1043–44. Photo from Liaoningsheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Chaoyang beita* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2007), plate 1

17B

Cross section of North Pagoda, Chaoyang. Diagram after Liaoningsheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Chaoyang beita*, figure 66

physical, while the other is interior, hidden, and conceptual. Beginning in the late Tang dynasty, two more factors became important. First, the content of the depository in interior crypts became richer and more elaborate. In addition to physical relics, it grew to include ritual and devotional items, which complicated the nature of the pagoda and the ways in which it worked as a ritual center.⁶⁴ Second, the pagoda was clad with more sophisticated iconography, such as those in the Liao territory built with relief images that in effect dress their exteriors.⁶⁵ Both the interior and exterior of the Liao pagodas have been topics of research in the past ten or so years. It has been suggested that the key to understanding the specific symbolism and ritual function of the Liao pagoda lies in the correlation and intercorrelation between the exterior and interior.⁶⁶

While I am indebted to this scholarship, my purpose here is to explore how the multilevel pagoda *acts* out its symbolism and function. I will treat iconography and ritual as two religious “acts” or events that provide a specific context in which the pagoda engages and communicates with the visitor. Through these acts, we shall observe the multilevel pagoda—its components and characteristics (i.e., exterior/interior and level/elevation)—performing as a “structured mechanism” that acts out its symbolic and ritual functions to the visitor.

Let’s start with the iconography. The set of icons that appears most conspicuously on the exterior of many pagodas from the Liao period is known as the Buddha of the Four Directions (*sifangfo* 四方佛).⁶⁷ The four Buddhas refer to the Ratnasambhava (Baosheng 寶生) Buddha in the south, Amitābha (Amituo 阿彌陀) Buddha in the west, Amoghasiddhi (Bukong chengjiu 不空成就) Buddha in the north, and Akṣobhya (Achu 阿閼) Buddha in the east, as seen on the four exterior walls of the North Pagoda (figs. 17A–B) in Chaoyang 朝陽, Liaoning, dated to 1043–44. Made entirely in brick, the four-sided pagoda has an elevation typical of the Liao pagoda of this period, consisting of a tall base, shaft, and a series of close-set eaves (*miyan*, usually thirteen in total), ending with the finial.⁶⁸ The image

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18

The Samaya Assembly of Diamond World Mandala, included in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō zuzō*, ed. Genmyō Ono and Junjirō Takakusu (Tokyo: Daizō Shuppan, 1933), volume 1, *besshi* (separate sheets)

19

Detail of the Vairocana Buddha, in the Mandala of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas and Vairocana Buddha, found inside a pagoda-shaped sutra container excavated from the aboveground crypt of North Pagoda, Chaoyang, after Liaoningsheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Chaoyang beita*, plate 44

of each Buddha is prominently carved on the side of the shaft facing the cardinal direction with which the Buddha is associated. The four directional Buddhas on the exterior also demarcate the central position, evoking the Vairocana Buddha at the very center; together, the group comprises the Five Wisdom Buddhas (*wuzhi rulai* 五智如來, or *pañcatathāgata*) that constitute the Diamond World Mandala in the tantric tradition.

Considered with this iconographic scheme, the Chaoyang North Pagoda may have been built to realize the mandala in architectural form, with the pagoda itself representing the Vairocana at the center.⁶⁹ This is supported by the schematic diagram of the mandala. In the Samaya Assembly of the Diamond World Mandala, the Vairocana Buddha is represented at the very center with the emblem of a pagoda (fig. 18).⁷⁰ In this light, the secret center of the pagoda evokes not only the rise along the axial elevation but one related to the centrality and interiority of the Vairocana Buddha, whose eternal and unchanging body symbolizes the true teaching (*dharmakāya*); it is invisible and formless but equated to the entire cosmos.⁷¹ It is then only logical to find some evidence of the Vairocana Buddha represented inside the pagoda.

In 1988, a stone crypt was found inside the twelfth eave of the Chaoyang North Pagoda (see fig. 17B) with a great number of treasures, including relics of different forms, ritual accoutrements, and devotional objects. Of the iconographic components inside the upper crypt, the most important one is a mandala of the Vairocana Buddha surrounded by the Eight Great Bodhisattvas (*bada pusa* 八大菩薩, or *aṣṭa-upaputra*) carved on the north (main) wall.⁷² Although the details of the central Vairocana are not completely decipherable, as Youn-mi Kim suggests in her thorough study of the pagoda, a gold plate from the crypt depicts a similar mandala, in which the central deity is clearly identified as the Vairocana Buddha with the *vajra-mudrā* (*zhiquan yin* 智拳印), i.e., the left-hand index finger encased in the right fist (fig. 19).⁷³ The canonical source for the combination of the Vairocana Bud-

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Cross section of Liaobin Pagoda, Xinmin, Liaoning, 1114. Diagram after Shenyangsi wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, "Shenyang Xinmin Liaobin ta gong qingli jianbao," *Wenwu* 4 (2006), 48

21

Vairocana Buddha carved in brick relief, inside the lower crypt of Liaobin Pagoda, 43 x 33 cm. Photo from Shenyangsi wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, "Shenyang Xinmin Liaobin ta," plate 18

dha with the Eight Great Bodhisattvas in a mandala is likely the ritual manual (*yigui* 儀軌) devised for reciting the *Superlative Dhāraṇī of the Buddha's Crown*, translated and redacted by Amoghavajra in 764.⁷⁴ In the manual, the Vairocana Buddha is called upon specifically to reside at the center of the mandala. In other words, the Vairocana Buddha inhabits the center of two concentric mandalas: one with the four directional Buddhas on the exterior and the other with the Eight Great Bodhisattvas in the interior.

As it turns out, the four directional Buddhas and Eight Great Bodhisattvas are among the images most frequently seen on the exterior of pagodas, in particular, the octagonal ones from the Liao territory.⁷⁵ And either of the iconic sets on the exterior needs the Vairocana Buddha as the conceptual center of the pagoda to be complete. A useful example in this regard is the Liaobin 遼濱 Pagoda, built in 1114, in modern Xinmin, Liaoning.⁷⁶ An octagonal structure (fig. 20), the pagoda also has a base, central shaft, and thirteen closely piled eaves, typical of the Liao pagoda around this time. Each of the eight sides has a Buddha inside a niche; the four niches on the cardinal sides are flanked with images of the Eight Great Bodhisattvas. Inside the structure are three evenly distributed aboveground crypts aligned along the central axis. Most significant, both the lower and middle crypts were set up as ritual spaces, with reliquaries and other ritual objects (e.g., incense burners, rosary, banners, and others) on an altar table. Inside the lower crypt, the altar is placed in front of an image of the Vairocana Buddha in brick relief (fig. 21), the object of ritual veneration.⁷⁷ Installed at the center of the pagoda, the relief image inside, otherwise invisible from outside, materializes the very presence of the Vairocana Buddha, whose power could potentially be called upon in a ritual. The iconography deployed throughout provides a ritual context in which the pagoda's interior and exterior components are not simply correlated in architectural terms but act out that iconographic significance, for the building's symbolism and ritual functions cannot be fully enacted without each other.

One issue, however, arises in regard to the crypt as a ritual space. With an area of less than one square meter and a height of only 1.05 meters, the lower crypt of the Liaobin Pagoda likely was not intended for actual rituals; sealed from outside,

22A

22B

22C

22A

White Pagoda of Qingzhou. Balin Right Banner, Inner Mongolia, 1049. Photo from De Xin, Zhang Hanjun, and Han Renxin, "Neimenggu Balinyouqi Qingzhou Baita faxian Liaodai Fojiao wenwu," *Wenwu* 12 (1994), 5

22B

Cross section of the *chattra* of the White Pagoda, showing the location of the interior crypt. Diagram after De, Zhang, and Han, "Neimenggu Balinyouqi Qingzhou Baita," 9

22C

The five chambers of the interior crypt inside the *chattra* of the White Pagoda. Photo from, De, Zhang, and Han, "Neimenggu Balinyouqi Qingzhou Baita," color plate 1

the crypt would not have allowed people to enter. What, then, was the purpose of creating a ritual space inside the pagoda? Youn-mi Kim raises a similar question about the crypt of the Northern Pagoda in Chaoyang. Inside its upper crypt (see fig. 17B), measuring 1.14 by 1.17 square meters with a height of 1.26 meters, there is a mandala of the Vairocana Buddha with the Eight Great Bodhisattvas engraved on the north wall. One wonders for whom this mandala was prepared, if it were to be used in a ritual as instructed in the manual for reciting the *Superlative Dhāraṇī of the Buddha's Crown*. Not coincidentally, two sets of the very *dhāraṇī* to be recited during the ritual were also found in the crypt. Accordingly, Kim has persuasively argued that the crypt may have been a self-perpetuating ritual space, for certain Buddhist ritual devices, including the mandala and *dhāraṇī*, could remain efficacious even in the absence of human actors. In a sense, concealed from without, the crypt—installed as a secret ritual arena—transformed the pagoda into a virtual, eternal mandala of the *Superlative Dhāraṇī of the Buddha's Crown* that itself *performed* the salvific power accorded to the ritual.⁷⁸

This argument is suggestive. Still, the crypt is but one part of the "structural self" of the multilevel pagoda. That is, if we take into account the performative potential of the pagoda's multilevel structure, the agentic power of the building may supplement the lack of human agency inside the crypt.

An example in this regard is the White Pagoda in Qingzhou 慶州 (fig. 22A), built in 1049 in present-day Balin Right Banner, Inner Mongolia.⁷⁹ The White Pagoda is an octagonal brick structure, consisting of a double-level base, seven stories, and a *chattra*. In the *lounge* style, the brick pagoda, constructed with details that imitate the timber-frame architecture, tapers upward through stories, each of which, except for the first floor, has a distinct *pingzuo* and a ring of eaves. Inside the pagoda is a solid core that contains several unconnected aboveground crypts at heights that correspond to the exterior levels. All interior crypts yield relics, but most of those in the sacred depository would be found only after someone climbed the entire height of the pagoda and reached the five-chamber aboveground crypt located in the midsection of the *chattra* (fig. 22B). Contained within the five chambers, one at the center surrounded by four others in the four cardinal directions (fig. 22C),

23

23

Silver sheet incised with a section of *Dhāraṇī Inside the Cavity of Chattra*, retrieved from the central chamber of the interior crypt inside the *chattra* of the White Pagoda. Photo from Hsueh-man Shen, ed. *Gilded Splendor: Treasure of China's Liao Empire* (New York: Asia Society, 2006), plate 63. Courtesy of Asia Society

were sutra scriptures, *dhāraṇī* texts, offerings, and ritual banners. Most significant, more than a hundred miniature pagodas were enshrined in the four flanking chambers, each encasing a copy of the *dhāraṇī* with the title *Dhāraṇī Inside the Cavity of the Chattra*.⁸⁰ The purpose of the miniature pagodas is indicated in an inscription incised on a silver sheet inside the central chamber (fig. 23). It instructs the pious to enshrine ninety-nine copies of the *dhāraṇī* inside the cavity of the *chattra* (*xianglun tang* 相輪槩); in return, they will receive merits ten thousand fold. The inscription thus should be read as a self-referential instruction for depositing the *dhāraṇī* at such an elevated position. The instruction incised on the silver plate, however, is only partial. In fact, the inscription itself is an excerpt from the *Great Dhāraṇī Sutra of Stainless Pure Light*, the most popular sutra enshrined in the pagoda crypt during the Liao period.⁸¹ What is not included in the extracted section is what one should do after the installment of the *dhāraṇī*. According to the sutra, after the *dhāraṇī* is placed inside the pagoda, anyone who circumambulates the pagoda clockwise, prostrates himself in front of it, and makes offerings with flowers, incense, bells, banners, and canopies will accumulate countless blessings.⁸² This ritual veneration at the pagoda, therefore, completes the *dhāraṇī* rite (*tuoluoni fa* 陀羅尼法).

The crypt inside the *chattra* of the White Pagoda was not set up exactly as a ritual space, as were the crypts inside the Chaoyang North Pagoda and Liaobin Pagoda. Yet rather than seeing the interior crypt as *the* ritual center, I propose that the multilevel pagoda as a whole should be considered a ritual structure. Perhaps more precisely, it is a structured mechanism, the source of spiritual power in the crypt whose building components enable the pagoda to engage the faithful in the performance of the ritual. While the finial contains a merit-gaining device or system, however, it is the ritual circumambulation performed by the faithful, who in effect turn on the pagoda's mechanism, that enacts its symbolic meaning and salvific power for ritual efficacy.

The Engaging Act: Ritual Circumambulation

Though circumambulation is practiced almost by rote in Buddhism, one should note that “circling around” was not usually a way people physically moved about a Chinese-style tower. Circumambulation (*raoxing* 遶行, or *pradakṣiṇa*) was a ritual act that had been imported from India early on; it was the most fundamental way

for a Buddhist to engage with the pagoda. Some sutras and ritual manuals provide instructions as to how one should move around the pagoda to receive merits and enact the sacred presence. Through the specific bodily gymnastics, a practitioner was able to enter a spiritual relationship with the pagoda.⁸³ However, as the multilevel pagoda evolved over time in both its depository content and iconography, the ritual circumambulation also took on different and more elaborate implications.

In particular, as pagodas became more likely to receive deposits of sutra scriptures as a form of relics, or dharma relics (*fa sheli* 法舍利),⁸⁴ their architecture was recognized as equivalent to the dharma-body (*fashen* 法身, or *dharmakāya*), the transcendent form and truth of the Buddha. For instance, among the scriptures found in the depository of the White Pagoda is a scroll of the Lotus Sutra wrapped inside a pouch, on which an inscription states: “The whole of the Lotus Sutra as the whole-body relic is in this pagoda.”⁸⁵ This is actually stipulated by the sutra itself:

Wherever [this sutra] may be preached, or read, or recited, or written, or whatever place a roll of this scripture may occupy, in all those places one is to erect a pagoda of the seven jewels, building it high and wide and properly decorated. There is no need even to lodge a [relic] in it. What is the reason? Within it there is already a whole body of the Thus Come One [i.e., the Buddha].⁸⁶

This understanding of the pagoda—as the dharma-body in architectural form that contains the whole-body relic—dovetails well with the central position of the Vairocana Buddha inside the pagoda. As noted previously, the Vairocana is the Buddha who personifies the *dharmakāya*. The circumambulation around the pagoda enables a practitioner to comprehend the dharma-body of the Buddha in a way that conceptualizes his teachings.

Indeed, in this sense the circumambulation of the pagoda is not unlike the liturgical rites associated with the *Lotus Sutra*, in which a devotee would not only read and recite but also circumambulate the sutra.⁸⁷ In both rituals, the very act of circumambulation evokes the notion and practice of “turning the wheel (of the dharma)” (*zhuan falun* 轉法輪, or *dharmacakra-pravartana*), the revelatory act of the dharma. As Charlotte Eubanks aptly describes, “It is this metaphor of ‘turning the wheel’ that Buddhist technologies of reading preferentially literalize in their material forms.” We accordingly should see “reading as an instance of circumambulation,” by which the devotee turns the text into motion and action, thus ritually animating the sutra.⁸⁸ Circling the holy text thus was a crucial way of bringing about the efficacy of its sacred content.

24A

24B

24C

24A-C

Revolving Sutra Cabinet according to *Yingzao fashi*, *juan* 23, including the reconstructed section and plan. Diagrams after Qinghua Guo, "The Architecture of Joinery: The Form and Construction of Rotating Sutra-Case Cabinets," *Architectural History* 42 (1999), figure 1. Courtesy of Qinghua Guo

One Buddhist technology of sutra reading that materializes this animation in an actual structure is the Revolving Sutra Cabinet (*zhuanlun jingcang* 轉輪經藏), a type of small-scale wooden pavilion (fig. 24A) that typically is hollow and has eight sides. The method for building these cabinets was included in the official architectural treatise during the Northern Song period.⁸⁹ According to the treatise, the timber-frame structure was constructed around a central wooden pillar, or axle, and had a series of concentric components, including wheels that rotated the cylindrical cabinet and rings of columns that formed the inner (*neicao*) and outer areas (*waicao*) (fig. 24C). Inside the cylindrical cabinet were drawers that could accommodate copies of the entire Buddhist canon. In practice, the devotee physically turned the entire apparatus clockwise to revolve the cabinet—literally “turning the wheel.” One revolution accrued the same merits as one reading of all the teachings, the entire dharma-body.⁹⁰ The technology was thus functional for sutra keeping and readings; more important, it was also religious in its ability to trigger the structural mechanism that resulted in karmic rewards for those who rotated the sutra cabinet round and round.

Turning, encircling, and rotating all seem to have been important ritual acts in medieval Buddhism, performed to activate the sacred center. The turning of sutra scrolls or the rotating of Tibetan prayer wheels operated in the same circular movement, enlivening the otherwise linear text or formulaic prayer.⁹¹ The objects being turned, encircled, and rotated all had a similar structure: a circular form that spun or rolled around a central spindle (or the like). They seem to have prescribed how the faithful should act upon or react to them, that is, the mechanism by which these

25A

25B

25A

Timber Pagoda. Fogong Monastery, Yingxian, Shanxi, 1056. Photo by author

25B

Cross section of Timber Pagoda, showing the five iconic sets aligned along a vertical axial from the seat of the Śākyamuni Buddha on the first level to the head of the Vairocana Buddha under the sunken ceiling (*zaojing*) on the top level. Diagrams after Liu Dunzhen, *Zhongguo gudai jianzhushi*, figure 121-4

25C

Floor plan of the ground level of the Timber Pagoda. Chen Mingda, *Yingxian muta* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1966), diagrams 4-5

objects (i.e., wheel, scroll, rotating cabinet) operated also shaped the ways in which people engaged with them to achieve the intended religious goals.⁹² The same can be said about the pagoda, which practitioners walked around. The difference is that the multilevel pagoda engaged the practitioner kinetically with its scale, space, iconography, and most important, its elevation and centrality.

The Timber Pagoda of Yingxian as a Conceptual Emanation of the Vairocana Buddha

Close to the architectural style of the White Pagoda in Qingzhou and the Rotating Sutra Cabinet is the eight-sided Timber Pagoda (*Muta* 木塔), built in 1056 at the Fogong 佛宮 Monastery in Yingxian, Shanxi (fig. 25A).⁹³ Structurally, however, the Timber Pagoda is more similar to the Guanyin Pavilion (see fig. 14); both contain a true multistoried interior that one can enter and ascend. The tallest and oldest surviving wooden pagoda in China, the Timber Pagoda has five interior stories, and a mezzanine level that serves as the *pingzuo* was built between every two stories. All five interior stories have a similar octagonal structure, with two interior rings of columns that define an outer aisle (*waicao*) built with flights of stairs and a central area (*neicao*) that contains the sanctum and enshrined images (fig. 25C). Each story features an elaborate set of the iconic group on a raised, octagonal platform located at the center, together providing five different emanations of the Buddha in an interconnected series as either the Vairocana or Śākyamuni Buddha (fig. 25B). On the first level, sitting on a throne of lotus petals, is an oversized Śākyamuni Buddha, although its identity has been debated, an issue to which I will return. The second level features the Śākyamuni Buddha attended by four bodhisattvas. The third level is the hall for the Buddhas of the Four Directions. The fourth level has a set of seven statues with the Śākyamuni Buddha at the center. At the fifth level, the Vairocana Buddha is surrounded by the Eight Great Bodhisattvas. The interpretation of the iconography in the pagoda has been a point of discussion.⁹⁴ I contend, however,

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26
Section of Śākyamuni statue on fourth level of the Timber Pagoda, showing the central tubular space inside that contains sutras and other treasures. Diagram after Guojia wenwuju wenwu baohu kexue jishu yanjiusuo, et al., "Shanxi Yingxian Fogongsi muta nei faxian Liaodai zhengui wenwu," *Wenwu* 6 (1982), figure 2

27

27
Buddhas of the Four Directions on the third level of the Timber Pagoda, around an empty center, Chen, *Yingxian muta*, plate 96

that we cannot fully understand the iconographic program without considering the agency of the multilevel pagoda: how it structures the iconography as part of its religious mechanism, and how it engages visitors.

If we focus on more than the Buddhist statues, we begin to see how vigorously the multilevel structure intervenes in the reading and experience of the iconography. At first glance, the wooden structure that contains the statues is definitely different from the crypts in the brick pagodas, in regard to religious function and aspiration. A close look changes that initial impression. Inside the pagoda, all five iconic sets enshrined in the most central area of their respective floors are aligned perfectly along the central axis, around which the iconographic program and architectural space revolve. In a sense, interior floors of the Timber Pagoda resemble the crypts inside the brick pagodas, evoking and facilitating a vertical rise along the central axis.

The resemblance does not end there. Although it has no interior crypts, the Timber Pagoda incorporates the sacred depository in a less conspicuous yet equally effective manner. Each of the sizable statues of Śākyamuni on the second and fourth levels contain sacred items inside the torso; the one on the second level has a cavity with relics in a silver case, while the other has a tubular space (fig. 26) built with wooden boards that stores more than 160 objects, mostly sutra scriptures, i.e., dharma relics.⁹⁵ With these relics, the two Buddhist statues—the main images of their respective iconic sets—should also be regarded as reliquaries, whose hollow interiors are aligned with and thus comprise part of the pagoda's central axis. Interestingly, on the third level, the Buddhas of the Four Directions, each facing its respective cardinal direction, physically enclose a central empty space (fig. 27). As explained earlier, having the four directional Buddhas represented on the exterior of the multilevel pagoda implies the absence of the Vairocana Buddha in the center. Indeed, the empty center is essential in locating the

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Timber Pagoda, showing the measured perfection of the dimensions and their converging point at the third level. The width of third floor between the two exterior columns, marked in gray, was the modular unit that decided the pagoda's height. Chen, *Yingxian muta*, figure 21

structure's vertical centrality, which conceptually extends into the hollow interior of the statues and throughout the entire pagoda. Eighteen scrolls of *Lotus Sutra* were included in the interior depository of the statue on the fourth level, further affirming that the pagoda is the dharma-body realized by the Vairocana Buddha. This realization, nevertheless, is more critically manifested through the architecture of the pagoda.

In his research on the Timber Pagoda, published in 1980, the eminent Chinese architectural historian Chen Mingda 陳明達 suggested that a module unit had been used in the timber-frame structure and that it decided the pagoda's front elevation. Accordingly, we measure the height of the pagoda against the width of the third floor between the two outer eave columns. Calculated from the front elevation, the same floor is also the converging point of various proportional relationships among different building parts (fig. 28).⁹⁶ In this light, enshrining the four directional Buddhas on the third level must have been a deliberate design choice, and the Vairocana Buddha, while not physically represented, is the center that unifies the entire pagoda, in both religious and architectural terms.

Now, let us return to the iconography of the pagoda. The colossal Buddha on the first floor has been recognized as the Śākyamuni Buddha given the fact that images of six equally gigantic Buddhas appear on the six interior walls (fig. 29). Together, the seven Buddha images on the first floor refer to the preceding six previous Buddhas and the Śākyamuni Buddha at the center, called Seven Buddhas of the Past (*saptāṅgavidhi*).⁹⁷ In her 2001 article, Hsueh-man Shen, however, identifies the central statue on the first floor as the Vairocana Buddha based on the throne of lotus petals (fig. 30), each of which is painted with a small Buddha image, representing the numerous coexisting worlds revolving around the Lotus Petal Treasure World (Lianhuatai zang shijie 蓮花台藏世界) where the cosmic Buddha presides.⁹⁸ Either identification makes sense, but neither one interprets the icon with the

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The colossal Buddha mural on the southwest wall of the inner sanctum, first level, Timber Pagoda. Photo by author

building structure in mind. When considered only on its level, the colossal Buddha flanked by the six past Buddhas painted on the walls is likely to be Śākyamuni. But if one takes the pagoda as a whole with its heart at the third level, the main icon on the first floor, which is now only part of the entire iconographic program, should be identified as the Vairocana. This identification echoes that of the Vairocana Buddha on the fifth floor, accompanied by the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, so identified with its protruding topknot or crown (*ding* 頂, or *uṣṇīṣa*), indicative of the superior wisdom of the supreme Buddha (fig. 31).⁹⁹ If we take all the iconographic elements together, the pagoda can be conceptualized as the ultimate emanation of the Vairocana Buddha's dharma-body, manifested via the iconic sets and rising from the lotus seat on the first level through the central axis of the second, third, and fourth levels up to the topknot of the Vairocana statue on the fifth level under the sunken ceiling (see fig. 27B).

This conceptual Vairocana, however, would not have been revealed to visitors in ways that have been explained here. In addition, Liao visitors could not use a diagram, such as the frontal section in figure 25B, to guide their visit. Yet upon entering the pagoda, visitors immediately would be prompted by the flights of stairs built in the aisle on all five levels to ascend, clockwise as if in circumambulation, while observing the five sets of icons in a continuous sequence. It is worth noting that while the stairs were built on the non-cardinal sides, alternating between levels to evenly distribute the weight they create, only those leading to the third level take the visitor to the south (front) side of the altar.¹⁰⁰ Emerging from the stairwell to the third level, the visitor would come to the front of the Buddhas of the Four Direc-

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The small Buddha image painted on the lotus petal, detail of the throne of the Śākyamuni Buddha on the first level of the Timber Pagoda. Photo by author

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Vairocana Buddha, the central icon surrounded by Eight Great Bodhisattvas, on the fifth level of the Timber Pagoda. Chen, *Yingxian muta*, plate 131

tions and venerate them face to face, thereby contemplating as well as enacting all the multivalent significance of the absent space they enclose at the very center of the pagoda.

Conclusion: The Multilevel Pagoda as a Performing Center

Without question, structurally the multilevel pagoda is no more than a tall building constructed vertically around a center. Yet when its height did not elevate men and its center served no functional purpose, its building components no longer can be taken as mechanical results of the construction process. Instead, those components become “actors” that engage the visitor and communicate meanings, engendering the multilevel pagoda’s performative potential. In this regard, when thinking about architecture’s performativity, it is not so much about what a building looks like (i.e., in terms of form, style, or decoration) as what it does to, or acts upon, a user—that is, its agency. On one hand, it would be a mistake to generalize all multilevel pagodas built during China’s Middle Period only in performative terms. On the other hand, with all the variety in form, style, material, and function, the fact that most multilevel pagodas from this period share a similar “architectonic expression” in their axial elevation, centralized plan, levels, and height is revealing. It suggests a far-reaching “knowledge space” of the technology for building multilevel pagodas in regions where Buddhism was practiced, although the pagoda might have been constructed differently in each region.¹⁰¹ It would be wrong, too, to use iconography and ritual as the only contexts for deciphering the symbolic meanings of multilevel pagodas, since not all of them were built for the same religious purpose. Instead, we ought to find in each case proper “acts” in which the pagoda’s height and building components can be deemed as performing in ways that convey its meaning and function.

In his recent work on the iconographic program of the Timber Pagoda, Luo Zhao 羅炤 carefully analyzes the logic and meanings of the iconic units on each of its five levels. Considering how its iconography is intrinsically unified throughout the pagoda, Luo proposes that the five levels may be best reconceived as five image halls built along a north-south central axis, as seen in a typical Buddhist monastery.¹⁰² The icons on the five levels thus can be experienced as if one is going through a sequence of image halls laid out axially on a level ground. This comparison between a multilevel pagoda and a multiple-hall monastic complex is effective and suggestive, but it overlooks the architecture—the height, levels, and centrality—that make the multilevel pagoda a uniquely structured mechanism. The architecture turns it into a performative center that engages the faithful in a vertical rise and through their circumambulation of the concentric structure to reveal the pagoda's religious meanings and enact its ritual efficacy.

Built high, the multilevel pagoda required a complicated building technology, but its structure was never separate from the user's experience. It was by virtue of its towering form and multilevel interior spaces that the pagoda was able to function as sacred architecture. It invited the visitor to enter, to ascend, and to circumambulate, that is, it was a structured mechanism that solicited or prescribed visitors' actions so they could unpack the meanings of the iconography. True, it was the user who entered and circled the pagoda, but the pagoda also performed; its structured space around a sacred center rising in elevation engaged and transformed the visitor into a practitioner, thereby enacting the religious symbolism embedded in the building. Put another way, the pagoda's circular centrality led the practitioner, to borrow from Bernard Faure, "from periphery to center, from bottom to top, from the senses to the spirit, from multiplicity to oneness."¹⁰³

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NOTES

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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- 1 Though it is an important topic, the full story of the transmission of the Indian *stūpa* to the Chinese pagoda has not been completely explored. A useful article is Lothar Ledderose, "Chinese Prototypes of the Pagoda," *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, ed. Anna Libera Dallapiccola (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980), 238–48. See also Nancy Steinhardt, "Early Chinese Buddhist Architecture and Its Indian Origins," *The Flowering of a Foreign Faith: New Studies in Chinese Buddhist Art*, ed. Janet Baker (New Delhi: Marg, 1998), 38–53; Li Yuming, "Zhongguo zaoqi fota suyuan" [中國早期佛塔溯源] (Tracing origins of early Chinese pagodas), *Gugong xueshu jikan* 6, no. 3 (1989), 75–104.
- 2 For lack of a better term, I use "China's cultural territory" throughout this essay to refer to a broader territory in which China was the major cultural influence. The recognition of this expanded cultural territory was particularly important during the Middle Period, when China's actual political territory was relatively limited. Building towering pagodas was not limited to Song China (960–1279) but was pervasive in the greater span that included the Liao (947–1125), Jin (1115–1234), Xi Xia (1038–1227), and Dali (937–1254), where Buddhism was practiced.
- 3 For a discussion on the construction of architecture vertically in brick, see Zhongguo kexueyuan ziran kexueshi yanjiusuo, *Zhongguo gudai jianzhu jishushi* [中國古代建築技術史] (History of Chinese Architectural Technology) (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2000), 188–213.
- 4 As many of the tall buildings discussed in this essay only *appear* to have more than one story, yet have no actual floor space inside, I use "multilevel," rather than "multistory," to describe the multiple levels that can be distinguished from outside. I reserve "multistory" only for buildings that have more than one interior story. For the investigational report on the pagoda at the Songyue Monastery, see Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo, "Dengfeng Songyuesi ta kance jianbao" [登封嵩岳寺塔勘测简报] (A brief investigational report on the pagoda at Songyue Monastery, Dengfeng), *Zhongyuan wenwu* 4 (1987), 7–20.
- 5 On even-numbered levels, beginning on the fourth level, the door facing south can open to the exterior, but the opening is rather small, approximately 50 × 50 cm; it was not likely built for looking out. With a limited light source and no other features, there seems to be no reason to build stairs inside the pagoda. Based on traces still visible on the interior wall, some scholars have suggested that wooden stairs must have been installed; if so, it is unclear if the interior stairs were put in place when the pagoda was first built in the sixth century. As explained later in the introductory section, an aboveground crypt was added inside the *chattrā* during the late Tang or early Song period, which likely is when the interior stairs were constructed. The investigational report

- published in 1987, however, argues against this speculation and concludes that no stairs were built in the entire history of the pagoda; see “Dengfeng Songyuesi ta kance jianbao,” *Zhongyuan wenwu*, 17–18.
- 6 See, for example, Nancy Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture in an Age of Turmoil, 200–600* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2014), 204; Sun Ji, “Guanyu Zhongguo zaoqi gaoceng fota zaoxing de yuanyuan wenti” [关于中国早期高层佛塔造型的渊源问题] (The formal origins of China’s early multilevel pagodas), in his *Zhongguo shenghuo: Zhongguo gu wenwu yu dongxi wenhua jiaoliu zhong de ruogan wenti* (Shenyang: Liaoning jiaoyu chubanshe, 1996), 289–91.
 - 7 This visual compression is discussed in Zheng Yan, “Ta yu cheng: guankui Zhongguo zhongguo ducheng de liti xingxiang” [塔与城：管窥中国中古都城的立体形象] (Pagodas and Cities: looking for the three-dimensional form in China’s medieval cities), *Cong kaoguxue dao meishushi* (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin chubanshe, 2012), 164–68.
 - 8 On the *Songyue si bei* [嵩岳寺碑] (Stele of the Songyue Monastery), written by Li Yong (674–746), the section about the pagoda reads as follows: “The fifteen-story pagoda ... towers up from the ground in four directions and soars sky high with the Buddha’s eight manifestations in a full circle. It has a twelve-sided interior built with hundreds of windows, manifesting the relics through the tenures of the six abbots.” *Quan Tang wen* [全唐文] (Complete texts of the Tang), *juan* 263.
 - 9 See Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo, “Dengfeng Songyuesi ta tiangong qingli jianbao” [登封嵩岳寺塔天宫清理简报] (A brief excavation report on the aboveground pagoda crypt at Songyue Monastery in Dengfeng), *Wenwu* 1 (1992), 26–30.
 - 10 Here performance is not related to the performing arts, in which “performers” act before an “audience”; rather it refers to buildings as more than physical entities, perceived in both spatial and temporal dimensions as an architectural act or event at which their potential can be located and their meaning analyzed. Architectural performativity thus points to the “agentic power” of architecture that, with its structural, visual, and spatial properties, prompts the user to act—by turning him or her into an actor through orchestration of various architectural components, both material and immaterial (space, scale, etc.). This notion of performativity was established by J. L. Austin in his landmark work *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), in which he defines spoken language as more than descriptive or linguistic; rather, it should be understood as “speech acts” that actually do something. A recent edited volume that explores how performativity can be used in art historical analysis is Peter Gillgren and Märten Snickare, eds., *Performativity and Performance in Baroque Rome* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).
 - 11 See Zhang Yuhuan, *Zhongguo fota shi* [中国佛塔史] (History of Chinese Pagodas) (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2006). In Zhang’s estimation, there are still 25,000 premodern pagodas standing in greater China, and the construction of pagodas reached its climax during the eleventh century during the Northern Song period (960–1127); see p. 102.
 - 12 Here I use the term “agency” in a Gellian sense, that is, elements of art in a particular network of social relations that actually make the viewer do things. In my case, it is the character of the multilevel pagoda, or the building components that make a multilevel pagoda, that gave the pagoda a certain “agency,” prompting the visitor or ritual practitioner to act accordingly in the network of the religious practice under consideration. See Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998).
 - 13 As I will make clear later in the text, “technology,” although referred to as methods of building ideas and material productions in response to environmental restraints or challenges, is not disassociated from the significance of the building it creates. Rather, the technology of construction should be considered as an “architectonic expression,” to borrow Kenneth Frampton’s phrase, that ensures architecture derives its symbolism, meanings, and style from the very act of its making. See Kenneth Frampton, *Studies in Tectonic Culture: The Poetics of Construction in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Architecture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995). For more on the issue of tectonic aesthetics, see Mitchell Schwarzer, “Ontology and representation in Karl Bötticher’s theory of tectonic,” *JSAH* 52, 267–80; Gevork Hartoonian, *Ontology of Construction: On Nihilism of Technology in Theories of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
 - 14 Admittedly, this essay does not cover every single pagoda built in this period, as many may have been built for more purposes than the religious. I also do not discuss many other pagodas in southern China, the Dali Kingdom in Yunnan, and west in the Xi Xia State. Yet it is telling that, though built in different regions, pagodas from this period were characterized by verticality—in terms of both

- height and level—which begs for more explanation. For a general survey of the pagodas in China, see Zhang Yuhuan, *Zhongguo fota shi*; for pagodas in the Yunnan region, see Zhang Jun, *Yunnan guta jianzhu* [云南古塔建筑] (Kunming: Yunnan meishu chubanshe, 2008); for pagodas in the Xi Xia region, see Lei Runze et al., *Xixia fota* [西夏佛塔] (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1995). Also not included in the current discussion, but an important reference, are examples of multilevel pagodas in Japan; see Takushū Sugimoto, *Buttō no kenkyū: Ajia Bukkyō bunka no keifu o tadoru* [仏塔の研究: アジア仏教文化の系譜をたどる] (Tokyo: Daiichi Shobō, 2002).
- 15 See Wang Guixiang, “Luelun Zhongguo gudai gaoceng mugou jianzhu de fazhan” [略论中国古代高层建筑的发展] (On the development of the multilevel architecture in premodern China), in *Zhongguo gudai mugou jianzhu bili yu chidu yanjiu*, ed. Wang Guixiang et al. (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 2011), 10–23.
 - 16 See the section that discusses *taixie* in Fu Xinian, “Zhongguo tongqi shang de jianzhu tuxiang yanjiu” [中国铜器上的建筑图像研究] (Research on the imagery of architecture on China’s bronze vessels), *Fu Xinian jianzhushi lunwen ji* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2003), 99–102; Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture*, 51.
 - 17 The architectural imagery engraved on bronze vessels is the topic of Fu, “Zhanguo tongqi shang de jianzhu tuxiang.”
 - 18 Zhou Xueying, “Handai gaotai jianzhu jishu yanjiu” [汉代高台建筑技术研究] (Research on building technology for tall terraces during the Han dynasty), *Kaogu yu wenwu* 4 (2006), 66–72.
 - 19 See Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 102. For instance, Duke Ling of the Jin State (Jin linggong 晉靈公, reigned 620–7 BCE) was said to have built a nine-storied terrace; see Sima Qian, *Shi ji* 史記, *juan* 79, 2403.
 - 20 Wu, *Monumentality*, 168.
 - 21 The issues were primarily of two kinds: the allocation of columns, e.g., the network of interior columns, and the bracketing system applied to support the weight from above. See Zhou Xueying, “Cong chutu wenwu tantao handai louge jianzhu jishu” [从出土文物探讨汉代楼阁建筑技术] (Investigation of the building technology of towers and pavilions based on excavated artifacts), *Kaogu yu wenwu* 3 (2008), 65–71.
 - 22 See Shandongsheng bowuguan and Shandongsheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Shandong Han huaxiangshi xuanji* [山东汉画像石选集] (Selection of pictorial stone engravings of the Han from Shandong) (Jinan: Qilu shushe, 1982), pl. 187.
 - 23 On the topic of *mingqi*, see Qinghua Guo, *The Mingqi Pottery Buildings of Han Dynasty China, 206 BC–AD 220* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).
 - 24 Detailed measurements of the *mingqi* can be found in the excavation reported in Zhang Songlin, “Yingyang Weihecun Handai qiceng taolou de faxian he yanjiu” [荥阳魏河村汉代七层陶楼的发现和研究] (The uncovering and research on the seven-story pottery tower of the Han period from Weihecun, Yingyang), *Zhongyuan wenwu* 4 (1987), 45–47.
 - 25 For a related discussion based on the textual and pictorial sources, see Miu Zhe, “Chongfang louge” [重訪樓閣] (Revisiting Towers and Pavilions), *Meishushi yanjiu jikan* 33 (2012), 2–111.
 - 26 According to *Erya* 爾雅, the earliest lexicographical work, dated to the third century BCE, a *lou* refers to a tall building that is “narrow [in its interior] and slender.”
 - 27 Literary examples about ascending tall structures can be gleaned from some early lyric poetry, such as Wang Can’s 王粲 (177–217) *Ode of Ascending the Tower* (“Denglou fu” 登樓賦) and Xie Lingyun’s 谢灵运 (385–433) *Climbing the Towers Over the Pond* (“Dengchi shanglou” 登池上楼). See Pauline Yu, *The Reading of Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987).
 - 28 It is recorded in Yang Xuanzhi 杨衒之 (died 555), *Luoyang qielan ji* 洛陽伽藍記 (*A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*), volume (*juan*) 1, compiled in 547, annotated and translated in Yi-t’ung Wang, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-yang* (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1984), 20. My translation is adapted from Wang’s.
 - 29 See Chen Mingda, *Zhongguo gudai mujiegou jianzhu jishu: Zhanguo—Beisong* [中国古代木结构建筑技术: 战国—北宋] (Chinese pre-modern building technology for timber-frame architecture: from the Zhanguo period to Northern Song) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1990), 50–51.
 - 30 For the building trade as it flourished from the late Tang into the Northern Song dynasty, see Jiren Feng, *Chinese Architecture and Metaphor: Song Culture in the Yingzao Fashi Building Manual* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012).
 - 31 This is also briefly discussed by Nancy Steinhardt: “In modern Chinese parlance, the term ‘lou,’ a reference to a high building that need not be associated with Buddhism, merged with ‘ge’ into ‘louge,’ a generic name for a multistory building that is not a pagoda”; see

- Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 42. See also Lü Jiang, "Tang Song lounge jianzhu yanjiu" [唐宋楼阁建筑研究] (Research on lounge architecture of the Tang–Song period), *Jianzhushi lunwen ji* 10 (1988), 22–56.
- 32 For a discussion on the prominent role of the high-rise tower in late Tang and Song poetry, see Han Xiwu, "Tang Song ci zhong de lou yixiang jiqi yingyou yishu" [唐宋词中的楼意象及其营构艺术] (The art configured through the imagery of towers in Tang–Song poetry), *Henan shifan daxue xuebao* 25, no. 6 (1998), 74–78.
- 33 It is in this regard that particularly high towers were often described in poetry as "dangerous towers" or *weilou* 危樓.
- 34 For Yu Hao, see Feng, *Chinese Architecture and Metaphor*, 60–63.
- 35 The account is recorded in Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), *Guitian lu* 歸田錄 (*Notes on retiring to farming*), *juan* 1.
- 36 This is recorded in Chen Shou, *Sanguo zhi* 三國志 (*Record of the Three Kingdoms*), *juan* 49; Fan Hua, *Houhan shu* 後漢書 (*History of the Later Han*), *juan* 73.
- 37 For example, the well-known Four Entry Pagoda, or Simenta 四門塔, from Shentong Monastery in Licheng was built in 544; see Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture in an Age of Turmoil*, 209–13.
- 38 See Heinrich G. Franz, "Stūpa and Stūpa-Temple in the Gandhāra Regions and in Central Asia," in *The Stūpa*, 39–58; Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture in an Age of Turmoil*, 97–105. This combination may be taken as an earlier predecessor of pagodas built with a *chattrā* that became popular during the period of the current discussion.
- 39 For the *mingqi*, see Xiangfanshi wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, "Hubei Xiangfan Fancheng Caiyue Sanguo mu fajue jianbao" [湖北襄樊樊城菜越三国墓发掘简报] (A brief excavation report on the tomb of the Three Kingdoms period from Fancheng, Xiangfan in Hubei), *Wenwu* 9 (2010), 4–20.
- 40 See Xie Zhicheng, "Sichuan Handai huaxiangzhuan shang de fota xingxiang" [四川汉代画像砖上的佛塔形象] (The imagery of pagodas as seen on pictorial bricks of the Han period in Sichuan), *Sichuan wenwu* 4 (1987), 62–64. See also Steinhardt, *Chinese Architecture in the Age of Turmoil*, 78–79.
- 41 For a useful discussion on the symbolic meanings of *yaṣṭi* in its Indian origin, see John Irwin, "The Axial Symbolism of the Early Stūpa: An Exegesis," in *The Stūpa*, 12–38.
- 42 See Irwin, "The Axial Symbolism"; Michael W. Meister, "Access and Axes of Indian Temple," *Thresholds* 32 (2006), 33–35.
- 43 See Fu Xinian, *Zhongguo gudai jianzhushi: Liangjin, Nanbeichao, Sui-Tang, Wudai jianzhu* [中国古代建筑史：两晋、南北朝、隋唐、五代建筑] (History of Chinese Premodern Architecture: Architecture of the Two Jins, Northern and Southern Dynasties, Sui and Tang, and Five Dynasties) (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye chubanshe, 2009), 535.
- 44 For a detailed discussion on relic distribution during the Renshou reign (601–4) of Emperor Wen, see Jinhua Chen, *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics* (Kyoto: Scuola Italiana di Studi sull'Asia Orientale, 2002), chapter 2; Sonya Lee, *Surviving Nirvana: Death of the Buddha in Chinese Visual Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 202–23.
- 45 Records of the building accounts can be found in *Guanghong mingji* 廣弘明集 (*Expanded anthology of extended brilliance*), *juan* 17, collected in *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 (The Buddhist canons, *Tripitaka*, in Chinese; hereafter *T.*), 52: 2013.213a–221a.
- 46 The relationship of the architecture built in Hōryūji—including its main image hall (*kondō* 金堂), middle gate (*chūmon* 中門), and the five-story pagoda—to the Buddhist architecture in China around the same period is discussed in two articles by Nancy S. Steinhardt: "The Monastery Hōryūji: Architectural Forms of Early Buddhism in Japan," in *Transmitting the Forms of Divinity: Early Buddhist Art from Korea and Japan*, ed. Washizuka Hiromitsu et al. (New York: Japan Society, 2003), 154–67; "Seeing Hōryūji Through China," in *Hōryūji Reconsidered*, ed. Dorothy C. Wong and Eric M. Field (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 49–98. The five-story pagoda and the relics enshrined underneath are also the topic of Akiko Walley's paper, "Instant Bliss: Enactment of Miraculous Appearance of Relics in the Hōryūji Nested Reliquary Set," in this issue of *Ars Orientalis*.
- 47 This is observed in the analysis by Eric M. Field, "The Central Core Structural System: A Three-Dimensional Analysis of the Five-Story Pagoda of Hōryūji," in *Hōryūji Reconsidered*, 27–47. For more discussion of this freestanding central pole, see Lotthar Ledderose, *Ten Thousand Things: Module and Mass Production in Chinese Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 121–27.
- 48 The nonstructural but indispensable central pole also was found inside the earthen core of the nine-story pagoda at the Yongning Monastery of the Northern Wei. See Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan kaogu yanjiusuo, *Beiwei Luoyang Yongningsi: 1979–1994 nian kaogu fajue*

- baogao* [北魏洛阳永宁寺：1979–1994 年考古发掘报告] (Yongning Monastery of the Northern Wei: Excavation reports from 1979–1994) (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaiké quanshu chubanshe, 1996).
- 49 See Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo, “Dengfeng Songyuesi ta digong qingli jianbao” [登封嵩岳寺塔地宫清理简报] (A brief excavation report on the underground pagoda crypt at Songyue Monastery in Dengfeng), *Wenwu* 1 (1992), 14–25.
- 50 On the uncovering of the aboveground crypts, see Henansheng gudai jianzhu baohu yanjiusuo, “Dengfeng Songyuesi ta tiangong qingli jianbao.” Found in the underground crypt were several broken statues, the earliest of which has the year 523. It has been used to date the construction of the crypt. Depositing broken statues inside underground pagoda crypts as a form of relic, however, was a popular practice from the tenth to the twelfth century in the broader territory of China. In this light, the inclusion of the broken statues in this case, rather than taking place when the crypt was constructed in the sixth century, likely would have coincided with the construction of the aboveground crypts, which also contain tenth-century relics. I discuss the practice of burying broken statues in China’s Middle Period in Wei-Cheng Lin, “Broken Bodies: The Death of Buddhist Icons and Their Changing Ontology in 10th- to 12th-Century China,” forthcoming.
- 51 For more on the phrase “architectonic expression,” see the discussion in note 13.
- 52 See Xu Pingfang, “Zhongguo sheli taji kaoshu” [中国古代舍利塔基考述] (Investigation on China’s pagoda foundations), in *Chuantong wenhua yu xiandaixing* 4 (1994), 59–74.
- 53 See a most recent study of this topic, Ran Wenli, *Zhongguo gudai sheli yimai zhidu yanjiu* [中国古代舍利瘞埋制度研究] (Research on the practice of relic depository in premodern China) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2014).
- 54 This is based on primarily Zhang Yuhuan, *Zhongguo fota shi*; Guo Daiheng, ed., *Zhongguo gudai jianzhu shi*: Song, Liao, Jin, Xixia jianzhu 中国古代建筑史：宋、辽、金、西夏 (Beijing: Zhongguo jianzhu gongye, 2009), 465–522.
- 55 There are, of course, many different ways of categorizing the pagodas built from this period, for example, by shape, structure, material, or forms of interior stairs. Variations should not be overlooked, but my purpose here is to locate a basic structural form that communicates the symbolism of the multilevel pagoda through its exterior/interior and level/elevation. The double-ring floor plan is not universal, for example, and there are several examples of single-ring plans that have only a layer of wall built up as a cylindrical tube, such as the pagoda at the Songyue Monastery. In that case, the floor plan still is laid out around a center, similar to that of the double-layer floor plan.
- 56 For Qianxun pagoda, see Jiang Huaiying and Qiu Xuanchong, *Dali Chongshengsi san ta* [大理崇圣寺三塔] (Three pagodas at Chongsheng Monastery in Dali) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1998).
- 57 See Tianjinshi lishi bowuguan kaogudui and Jixian wenwu baoguansuo, “Tianjin Jixian Dulesi ta” [天津蓟县独乐寺塔] (Pagoda at Dule Monastery, Tianjin), *Kaogu xuebao* 1 (1989), 83–119.
- 58 See Zhang Buqian, “Suzhou Ruiguangsi ta” [苏州瑞光寺塔] (The pagoda at Ruiguang Monastery, Suzhou), *Wenwu* 10 (1965), 57–64.
- 59 One notable variation has a pagoda built over another smaller and earlier pagoda, so that the smaller pagoda has become the sacred center that has a vertical dimension. The best-known example of this type of pagoda is Feiying 飞英 Pagoda in Huzhou, Hebei, built in the twelfth century; see Guo Daiheng, *Zhongguo jianzhu shi*, 499–505. The type of nested set of pagodas made during this period was often made in miniature as a reliquary, such as the one uncovered from Ruiguang Monastery; see Seunghye Lee, “Framing and Framed: Relics, Reliquaries, and Relic Shrines in Chinese and Korean Buddhist Art from the Tenth to the Fourteenth Centuries” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2013), chap. 2.
- 60 See Chen Mingda, *Jixian Dulesi* [蓟县独乐寺] (Dule Monastery in Jixian) (Tianjin: Tianjin Daxue chubanshe, 2007); Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture*, 31–56.
- 61 For a discussion of the eleven-headed Guanyin, see Marilyn L. Gridley, *Chinese Buddhist Sculpture under the Liao: Free Standing Works in Situ and Selected Examples from Public Collections* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1993), 108–10. See also Sherman E. Lee and Wai-Kam Ho, “A Colossal Eleven-Faced Kuan-yin of the T’ang Dynasty,” *Artibus Asiae* 22, nos. 1/2 (1959), 121–37.
- 62 This three-story structure built for an iconographic program was preceded by Jin’gesi built at Mount Wutai in the eighth century; see Wei-Cheng Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain: The Buddhist Architecture of China’s Mount Wutai* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), chap. 5. Constructed at the same time as the Guanyin Pavilion at Dule Monastery was a similar building, a three-story Guanyin Pavilion dated to the Liao era at

- the Great Minzhong Monastery (Da Mingzhongsi 大悯忠寺) in Youzhou (Beijing). According to the *Record of Xijin* [析津志], the pavilion was 20 *zhang* tall and a colossal statue of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara stood in the middle; and a visitor could not see the head of the bodhisattva until he reached the top floor.
- 63 This is noted in Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture*, 53–56. Steinhardt also includes another example, the Guanyin Pavilion in Fuzhou, Fujian, which has a similar window at the eye level of the colossal bodhisattva statue; see Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture*, 100.
- 64 See, for example, Xu Pingfang, “Zhongguo sheli taji kaoshu.”
- 65 See Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture*, 387–97.
- 66 See three works by Hsueh-man Shen: “Buddhist Relic Deposits from Tang (618–907) to Northern Song (960–1127) and Liao (907–1125),” (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2000); “Realizing Buddha’s ‘Dharma’ Body: A Study of Liao Buddhist Relic Deposits,” *Artibus Asiae* 61, no. 2 (2001), 263–303; and *Gilded Splendor: Treasures of China’s Liao Empire* (907–1125) (New York: Asia Society, 2006). Also Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture*, 383–405; Youn-mi Kim, “Eternal Ritual in an Infinite Cosmos: The Chaoyang North Pagoda (1043–1044) (PhD diss., Yale University, 2010).
- 67 In the case of the Qianxun pagoda (see figs. 1, 11), dated to the late tenth century in Yunnan, the set of Four Directional Buddhas and the Vairocana Buddha were represented in sculpture form, buried in its interior crypts; see Jiang Huaiying and Qiu Xuanchong, *Dali Chongshengsi san ta*, 71–74.
- 68 See Liaoningsheng wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, *Chaoyang beita* [朝阳北塔] (The Northern Pagoda in Chaoyang) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 2007).
- 69 This has been proposed in Hsueh-man Shen, “Realizing Buddha’s ‘Dharma’ Body,” 270, and Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture*, 395–97.
- 70 For the specific mandala, see Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, *Japanese Mandalas: Representations of Sacred Geography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i, 1999), 43.
- 71 In her discussion of the Chaoyang North Pagoda, Youn-mi Kim suggests that it is the empty interior inside the pagoda, rather than the pagoda structure, that represents the Vairocana Buddha; see Kim, “Eternal Ritual in an Infinite Cosmos,” 72–73.
- 72 For the discussion of this set of bodhisattvas, see Michelle C. Wang, “From Dhāraṇī to Maṇḍala: A Study of Mogao Cave 14 and Esoteric Buddhist Art of the Tang Dynasty (618–907)” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2008), 82–101. The iconography of the set of Eight Great Bodhisattvas carved in the relics crypt of the Chaoyang North Pagoda is likely based on the *Sutra of the Mandala of the Eight Bodhisattvas* (*Bada pusa mantuoluo jing* 八大菩薩曼陀羅經, T. 20: 1167), translated by Amoghavajra (aka Bukong, 705–774).
- 73 This is discussed in Kim, “Eternal Ritual in an Infinite Cosmos,” 127–29.
- 74 The ritual manual is called *Foding zunsheng tuoluoni niansong yigui fa* 佛頂尊勝陀羅尼念誦儀軌法, or *The Rite for the Recitation of the Superlative Dhāraṇī of the Buddha’s Crown*, in T. 19, 972. For a discussion on the ritual manual, see Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain*, 139–43. See also Kuo Yiying, “Bucchōsonshō darani no denpa to gishiki” [佛頂尊勝陀羅尼の伝播と儀式] (The Dissemination and Rituals of the *Sutra of the Superlative Dhāraṇī of the Buddha’s Crown*), *Tendai gakuhō*, special issue (October 2007), 1–39; Paul Copp, *The Body Incantatory: Spells and the Ritual Imagination in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
- 75 This is observed in Sekino Tadashi and Takeshima Takuichi, *Ryō, Kin jidai no kenchiku to sono butsuzō: zuban* [遼金時代の建築とその仏像：図版] (Architecture of the Liao–Jin period and its Buddhist icons: Illustrations) (Tokyo: Tōhō Bunka Gakuin Tōkyō Kenkyūjo, 1934), 1–6.
- 76 See Shenyangshi wenwu kaogu yanjiusuo, “Shenyang Xinmin Liaobinta tagong qingli jianbao” [沈阳新民辽滨塔塔宫清理简报] (A brief excavation report on the interior crypts of Liaobin Pagoda, in Xinmin, Shenyang), *Wenwu* 4 (2006), 47–57.
- 77 A comparable example is the Relic Pagoda of Stainless Pure Light (Wugou jingguang sheli ta 无垢淨光舍利塔), also located in Shenyang. Inside are three aboveground crypts; the middle crypt was set up as an altar with a bronze statue. The statue is most likely Vairocana Buddha, although its mudra is a slight variant from the Vairocana image inside Liaobin Pagoda in fig. 21. See Shenyangshi wenwu guanli bangongshi and Shenyangshi wenwu kaogu gongzuodui, “Shenyang Tawan Wugoujingguan shelita tagong qingli baogao” [沈阳塔湾无垢淨光舍利塔塔宫清理報告] (An excavation report on Relic Pagoda of Stainless Pure Light in Tawan, Shenyang), *Liaohai wenwu xuekan* 2 (1986), 2146–155.
- 78 See Kim, “Eternal Ritual in an Infinite Cosmos,” 159. Indeed, scholars have reminded us about this performative aspect in mandalas and *dhāraṇī*; see Eugene Wang, “Ritual Practice without Its Practitioner? Early Eleventh-Century *Dhāraṇī* Prints in the Ruiguangsi Pagoda,” in *Tenth-Century China and*

- Beyond: Art and Visual Culture in a Multi-Centered Age*, ed. Wu Hung (Chicago: Center for the Art of East Asia, 2012), 179–211; and Copp, *The Body Incantatory*.
- 79 See De Xin, Zhang Hanjun, and Han Renxin, “Neimenggu Balinyouqi Qingzhou Baita faxian Liaodai Fojiao wenwu” [內蒙古巴林右旗庆州白塔发现辽代佛教文物] (Buddhist artifacts uncovered from White Pagoda of Qingzhou, in Balinyouqi, Inner Mongolia), *Wenwu* 12 (1994), 4–33.
- 80 See Hsueh-man Shen, “Praying for Eternity: Use of Buddhist Texts in Liao Buddhist and Funerary Practices,” in *Gilded Splendor*, 82–84.
- 81 The sutra, *Great Dhāraṇī Sutra of Stainless Pure Light*, is titled, in Chinese, *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing* 無垢淨光大陀羅尼經 (*Raśmivimalaviśuddha-prabhānāma-dhāraṇī-sūtra*), in *T.* 19, 1024. The sutra includes five great *dhāraṇīs*, one of which is *Dhāraṇī Inside the Cavity of Chattra*, or *Xiangluntang zhong tuoluoni fa* 相輪幢中陀羅尼法, in *T.* 19, 1024.719a9–b4. See Shen, “Praying for Eternity,” 84.
- 82 See *Wugou jingguang da tuoluoni jing*, *T.* 19, 1024.719a24–28.
- 83 For a discussion on the ritual circumambulation around a pagoda, see Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain*, 25–27; Eugene Y. Wang, “Watching the Steps: Peripatetic Vision in Medieval China,” in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 123–30.
- 84 Dharam relics refer to Buddhist texts deposited into the pagoda and treated as relics. The origin of the relationship between text and pagoda can be traced back to the fifth and sixth centuries in China, but as Hsueh-man Shen suggests, the practice of depositing sutra texts inside the pagoda was conducted with particular rigor during this period, especially in Liao territory; see Shen, “Realizing Buddha’s ‘Dharma’ Body” and “Praying for Eternity.” For the early relation between text and pagoda, see Katherine R. Tsiang, “Monumentalization of Buddhist Texts in the Northern Qi Dynasty: The Engraving of Sūtras in Stone at the Xiangtangshan Caves and Other Sites in the Sixth Century,” *Artibus Asiae* 56, nos. 3/4 (1996), 233–61. In addition, based on examples from around the tenth and eleventh centuries, found in Dunhuang and elsewhere, scriptures such as the *Lotus Sutra* were written in patterns that formed a pagoda shape; see Yang Baoyi, “Taxing jing tantao” [塔形經探討] (A review on the pagoda-shape scripture), *Gugong wenwu yuekan*, no. 373 (April 2014), 74–85.
- 85 De Xin, Zhang Hanjun, and Han Renxin, “Neimenggu Balinyouqi Qingzhou Baita,” 19.
- 86 See the *Lotus Sutra*, *T.* 9, 262.31.b26–29. My translation is adapted from Charlotte Eubanks, *Miracles of Book and Body: Buddhist Textual Culture and Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 178.
- 87 The ritual related to the *Lotus Sutra*, for example, can be found in Zhiyi 智顗 (538–598), *Fahua sanmei chanyi* 法華三昧懺儀 (The Procedure for [Performing] the Lotus Samādhi Repentance), *T.* 46, 1941; see Daniel B. Stevenson, “The Four Kinds of Samādhi in Early T’ien-t’ai Buddhism,” in *Traditions of Meditation in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1986), 45–97; Shi Shengyan, “Zhongguo fojia yi Fahuajing wei jichu de xiuxing fangfa” [中國佛教以法華經為基礎的修行方法] (The methods of religious practice based on the *Lotus Sutra* in Chinese Buddhism), *Chung-Hwa Buddhist Journal* 7 (1994), 2–14.
- 88 Eubanks, *Miracles of Book and Body*, 177–78.
- 89 Its construction method was included in the building treatise for the first time during the Northern Song period, in *juan* 23 of the *Yingzao fashi* 營造法式, or *Building Treatise*, compiled in 1103. See L. Carrington Goodrich, “The Revolving Book-Case in China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7, no. 2 (1942), 130–61; Qinghua Guo, “The Architecture of Joinery: The Form and Construction of Rotating Sutra-Case Cabinets,” *Architectural History* 42 (1999), 96–109; Zhang Shiqing, “Zhong ri fojiao zhuanlun jingcang de yuanliu yu xingzhi” [中日佛教转轮经藏的源流与形制] (The transmission and style of the rotating sutra cabinet in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism), *Jianzhu shi lunwen ji* 11 (1999), 60–71.
- 90 See Eubanks, *Miracles of Books and Body*, 181–83.
- 91 See Charlotte Eubanks, “Circumambulatory Reading: Revolving Sutra Libraries and Buddhist Scrolls,” *Book History* 13 (2010), 1–24. For the Tibetan prayer wheels, although the discussion is later, see *The Wheel of Great Compassion: The Practice of the Prayer Wheel in Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Lorne Ladner (Boston: Wisdom Publication, 2000).
- 92 Although used in a different context, here “mechanism” is a kind of technology that facilitates human actions; this idea is explored insightfully in Bruno Latour, “Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer,” in *Rethinking Technology: Reader in Architectural Theory*, ed. William W. Braham and Jonathan A. Hale (London: Routledge, 2007), 308–24.

- 93 See Chen Mingda, *Yingxian muta* [应县木塔] (Timber pagoda in Yingxian) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1966); Steinhardt, *Liao Architecture*, 103–21.
- 94 See the discussion in Shen, “Realizing the Buddha’s ‘Dharma’ Body,” 292–294.
- 95 See Shanxisheng wenwuju and Zhongguo lishi bowuguan, *Yingxian muta Liaodai micang* [应县木塔辽代秘藏] (The secret treasures from the Timber Pagoda in Yingxian) (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1991), 11–17.
- 96 Chen Mingda, *Yingxian muta*, 36–40.
- 97 There are different combinations of the seven Buddhas of the past; the most commonly referenced set includes Vipāśyin, Śikhin, Viśvabhū, Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni, Kāśyapa, and Śākyamuni.
- 98 See Shen, “Realizing Buddha’s ‘Dharma’ Body,” 292–93.
- 99 The concept and importance of *ding*, or the Buddha crown, is detailed in Lin, *Building a Sacred Mountain*, 135–38.
- 100 Chen Mingda, *Yingxian muta*, 34.
- 101 The term “knowledge-space” is borrowed from David Turnbull, *Masons, Tricksters and Cartographers: Comparative Studies in the Sociology and Indigenous Knowledge* (Singapore: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000).
- 102 Luo Zhao, “Yingxian muta suxiang de zongjiao chongbai xitong” [应县木塔塑像的宗教崇拜系统] (The system of religious veneration for the sculpture inside the Timber Pagoda in Yingxian), *Yishushi yanjiu* 12 (2010), 189–216.
- 103 Bernard Faure, “The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (spring 1998), 809.