EMBRACING THE CIRCLE: DOMICAL BUILDINGS IN EAST ASIAN ARCHITECTURE CA. 200-750

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reconceptualizes the notion of built environment against the religious culture of East Asia in the early medieval period. Through a study of domical building forms in brick, cave and timber, the author argues, as interior devices domical forms are central to the architectural tradition of East Asia in the creation of sacral spaces.

At the heart of this dissertation are three significant case studies which transcend religious and national boundaries. Starting with Buddhist cave temples preserved at Dunhuang in northwestern China, the author probes into the beginning and early permutations of a particular cave type (fifth through the late sixth centuries), which, despite its square plan, evinces artistic endeavors, plastic and painterly, to inscribe a domed circular space within the square. The next case study takes place in eighth-century Nara, then the newly established capital of Japan, where the earliest timber “circular” buildings on record are found, with the qualification that they are, in fact, octagonal in plan and yet are almost unanimously considered circular in contemporaneous documents. Finally, larger issues pertaining to technology, ideology, and the domical form are explored in the contexts of mortuary and ritual buildings in China. On the one hand, the author charts technological advancement in brick construction which laid the ground for the emergence of a complete cosmos in Chinese tombs at the dawn of the Common Era. In the meantime, however, discussions of the series of failed attempts to construct the domical ritual structure of the Bright Hall from this period onwards reveal a case of how excessive expectations on the dome’s capacity to signify undermined its own realization in material form.
These three case studies, viewed jointly, also afford a picture of the material culture of religious practice in East Asia in this period. Architectural forms are shown to be no mere physical spaces in which religious images are placed. Rather, as representations and enclosures, they enjoyed a meaning and status equivalent to their pictorial or sculptural counterparts.
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The legendary painter Wu Daozi is said to have been able to draw a perfect circle on one go. He would do so with such swiftness and conviction, as Zhu Jingxuan relates the story more than a century on, that those there to witness Wu’s feat were all convinced that he received heavenly assistance (shenzhu). Writing a dissertation is hardly swift business. And conviction, as anyone who has gone through the same process would testify, is constantly in short supply. This dissertation is a testimonial to the godly assistance that I have been blessed with over the past seven years.

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Chapter 5

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Chapter 1: Zaojing, Qionglong, Fudou: an Introduction to the Dome in China

Buildings in Pre-Modern Asia are rectangular, axially organized and frontally oriented. At least that is the impression our surveys of East Asian architecture often give [Fig. 1-1]. However, such an impression is belied by a millennia-old building tradition in Asia of constructing radially symmetrical interiors that culminate in domical spaces atop the ceilings. Granted that a vast majority of these domes are invisible from an exterior view, and that they are also rare, such rarity is, nevertheless, in inverse proportion to their significance, reserved for buildings of a sacred nature. In this dissertation, I argue that as interior devices, domical forms are central to the architectural tradition of East Asia in structuring hierarchical spaces within buildings, and they are where certain religious impulses are expressed in most compelling terms. To this end, this dissertation takes as its core three significant case studies which transcend religious and national boundaries. It begins with Buddhist cave temples preserved at Dunhuang in the earliest stage of this site (fifth through the late sixth centuries) in northwestern China. I will probe into the beginning and early permutations of a particular cave type, which, despite its square plan, evinces artistic endeavors, plastic and painterly, to inscribe a domed circular space within the square (or rectangle). The next case study takes us across the ocean to eighth-century Nara, then the newly established capital of Japan, with the earliest timber “circular” buildings on record, with the qualification that they are, in fact, octagonal in plan and yet are almost unanimously considered circular in contemporaneous documents. Finally, I will explore the intricate relationship between ideology and domical architecture in the contexts of mortuary and ritual
buildings. While technological advancement in brick construction seems to have laid the ground for the emergence of a complete cosmos in Chinese tombs at the dawn of the Common Era, the series of failed attempts to construct the ritual structure of the Bright Hall from this period onwards reveals a case of how excessive expectations on the dome’s capacity to signify undermined its own realization in material form. The epilogue weaves together the salient themes explored in previous chapters, un masks hidden patterns of development in religious architecture after the eighth century, and suggests further dimensions for future research.

It has to be acknowledged at the outset that a study of this nature cannot be, nor is it intended to be, comprehensive. This is not a history of East Asian architecture in the early medieval period, nor a survey of domical architecture in East Asia. Either would exceed the scope of a single book, of which this dissertation is but a stepping stone. The seemingly arbitrary choice of materials can be justified by their novelty in each respective period, and the Aristotelian urge to consider “things in their first growth and origin.” But there is more. In place of narrative coherence, I have opted for tensions and the opportunity to explore them — tensions between the different building materials and the architectural forms they construct; between the same religious impulse to impose hierarchy on architectural space and impute meaning to its acme, and its different manifestations in architectural contexts; and between construing the three sites as inherently parochial events, tied to their respective local histories and cultural/religious needs, and the inevitable temptation to see them standing for more. My purpose is not to resolve these tensions, but to navigate and articulate them. The three case studies are not meant to be building blocks of a tower, one keyed to another to reach a lofty summation. Nor are they columns of the Parthenon, standing side by side to support and delineate the area of the same
superstructure. Rather, they are three facets (if one follows the process in which a cave temple is excavated) emanating from the same domical center which, when subject to scrutiny, shed light on both the other facets of the same cave and on the mysterious center itself.

In this chapter, I work out the contours of what may first appear to be a nebulous subject. The problematics of the notion “dome” are but the tip of a methodological iceberg which has yet to be excavated adequately in any language. This dissertation is my contribution to the discussion of the mediating role of architecture in salient systems of signification that bridge the mundane with the sacred, and how the dome, as a heuristic device, articulates these lines of reasoning. Here I make a claim for the naming rights of structures which may strike the reader at first hardly qualified as domes. A brief historiographic sketch, however, shows that our fixation with the “canonical dome” is only belied by its shifting formal attributes and semantic associations, which continue to expand and implode within the narrow definitional space we usually allow. What we are ultimately dealing with is not only the now familiar incommensurability between the signifier and the signified, but rather the former’s partial success of taming the latter. This dissertation is meant to further dilute the cultural prejudices normally reserved for the dome, to the point that at least one day this structure [Fig. 1-2] would be included amongst the set of images that the notion dome elicits in some readers’ minds.

Polemicism is unwarranted if its only effect is to unsettle. In this dissertation, I have chosen to amplify certain themes—interior space, typology over chronology, and architecture as means of signification—in order to explore new methodological possibilities for the young field of Chinese architectural history. It is a field that has been until very recently dominated by an orthodoxy that valorizes a particular model of stylistic history, with its emphases on the facade
and certain construction details. In this version of historiography, such details are studied, analyzed, and tabulated often with the sole purpose of having them keyed into chronology. This approach, despite its great success in the past, has increasingly proved to be limiting, not in the least often contributing to the effect of self-orientalizing. In this chapter, I discuss the historical circumstances that gave birth to the study of Chinese architecture as a discipline, the methodological legacy that was shaped under these circumstances, and how this dissertation contributes to brand new areas of inquiry.

But before all of this, I will first introduce a short episode of cultural amnesia outside the chronological framework of this dissertation. This interlude into the eleventh-century affords a point of departure for this chapter, as two scholar officials present us their speculations about a domical device for the interior. Both of them are of the same conviction that the device imparts significance to the interior. But equally, both are quite unsure of its origin and precise meanings.

1.1 Under the Wooden Firmaments: an eleventh-century interlude

In *juan* 8 of the twelfth-century building manual *Yingzao fashi* (The Building Manual, hereafter *YZFS*), the author Li Jie 李诫 describes the construction of an octagonal *zaojing* (*douba zaojing* 鼓八藻井). The problem is obvious: to raise a dome-like structure in the highly reticulated interior of a (often rectangular) Chinese building, some form of transition between the square and the circle has to be found. Further, the wooden form, of which Li here writes, almost dictates that the hemispherical outline of the dome can only be approximated. The
solution is a simple albeit elegant one. Upon a square area, are laid layers of eight beams that are raised and inset on corbel-like brackets and arranged in an octagonal plan. Finally, eight curved beams—or yang horses (yang ma 陽馬)—to use a term that Li here borrows consciously from third-century phraseology\(^1\)—rise from the tips of the octagon to meet at the apex [Fig. 1-3].\(^2\)

For the most part, Li’s language is succinct and matter-of-fact. His primary concerns are with the numerical precision that not only informs the construction, but also regulates the labor it consumes (gongxian 功限, “work limit”). Beyond the technical aspects, Li is less informative.

At the beginning of this section, we are given three other, and perhaps earlier, names for the domical form: simply an “embellished well (zaojing),” a “round fount (yuanquan 圓泉),” or a “square well (fangjing 方井).”\(^3\) As if to standardize terminology and eliminate unnecessary ambiguities these other names may bring, Li concludes emphatically: “[It is what] here/now is

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\(^1\) In the zongshi or General Terminology section of the Yingzao fashi, Li lists a number of references to the term or similar structural components. Yangma makes its earliest appearance in the Rhapsody on the Hall of Great Blessings (Jingfudian fu 景福殿賦) by He Yan 何晏 (d. 249): “Received by corner beams, Joined to the round and square [承以陽馬，接以方側].” To which, the Tang commentator Li Shan 李善 adds: “yangma, are the long beams [that support] a four-slope roof [陽馬，四阿長檐也].” In juan 5 of the YZFS, Li Jie gives different specifications for the beam in varying scale of construction. See Li Jie 李誠, Yingzao fashi 營造法式 (1925), juan 1, 10b-11a, juan 5, 5b-6a.


\(^3\) Li Jie, in the YZFS, also makes similar attempts to gloss other terms. See Feng Jiren, Chinese Architecture and Metaphor: Song Culture in the Yingzao Fashi Building Manual (Honolulu, 2012), p. 121.
called an octagonal *zaojing.*” [今謂之八藻井] The contemporaneity of the term is further attested in *Brush Talks from Dream Brook* (*Mengxi bitan* 夢撰筆談), an almost contemporaneous text by Shen Gua 沈括 (1032 – 1096), under a section that deals mostly with ancient vessels and other curiosities (*qiyou* 器用):

The layered beams on top of a house, the ancients call it “patterned well,” or “embellished well,” or sometimes “upturned ocean.” *Today in official parlance it is termed “eight petals.”* [my italics] People of the Wu region [modern Jiangsu Province] call it “engraved ceiling.” It is only constructed in palatial halls and temples.

The last sentence underscores the symbolic significance of the form, which seems to be taken for granted in the *YZFS.* Li Jie has only the following to say: “All *zaojing* should be applied to [the ceiling] either in front of the partition screen within the palatial hall, or inside the coffers [on the ceiling] before the front door.” [凡藻井，施之於殿內照壁屏風之前，或殿身內前門之前平幕之內] Both texts limit the raising of the *zaojing* to palatial settings, and in the context of the *YZFS,* the highest-ranked construction projects possible. Further, the partition screen (照壁屏風) is an interior device often placed behind the throne of the dignitary, and to

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4 Shen Gua 沈括, *Mengxi bitan* 夢撰筆談, item 335, *juan* 19; for the interpretations of some of these terms, I rely on Hu Daojing 胡道靜, *Mengxi bitan jiaozheng* 夢撰筆談校正 (Shanghai, 1956), pp. 641-2.

5 The importance of the *zaojing* form can be further gleaned from imperial sumptuary codes, which would have been familiar to our eleventh-century commentators. The Tang *Yingshan ling* 营繕令 (Code of Construction) expressly prohibits the use of *zaojing* and double-layered bracket arms in residences of those whose ranks are below prince and duke [凡王公以下屋舍，不得施重拱藻井]. See Wang Pu 王溥, *Tang huiyao* 唐會要 (Shanghai, 1991), vol. 1, p. 671. See also Alexander Coburn Soper, "The 'Dome of Heaven' in Asia." *Art Bulletin* 29.4 (1947): 240.

6 Li Jie, *Yingzao fashi*, *juan* 8, 3a.
raise the *zaojing* “in front of the partition screen” simply means “above the throne.” The focal function that the *zaojing* serves is matched by its visual impact, as Shen Gua, again, observes: “of all the administrative buildings inside the imperial compound, the *mige* (the hall in which “Confidential Archive” is housed) is the grandest. [The *zaojing*] beneath the roof is arched, hovering above, and open. It goes under the name of ‘wooden firmament.’”[

For our purpose, however, both texts lack a historical dimension for a fuller understanding of the structure. The handful of various terms enumerated by Li and Shen may themselves come from different time periods and cultural/linguistic regions, and though their full semantic scopes are now difficult to chart, it is significant that most of them carry an association with water. That in itself is hardly surprising. Timber buildings, which constitute the main stock of palatial architecture in China, are prone to catch fire. Since at least the Eastern Han period (25-220 AD), in a much larger scheme of things the ceiling has played a role, both practical and symbolic, in repelling fire. Li Jie shows his awareness of this early tradition by glossing the term *zaojing* with the following quotation from a first-century text: “Palatial halls follow the shape of the Eastern Well. [Upon the ceiling] are carved lotus blossoms and water caltrops. Water caltrops

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7 One of the variants Li Jie gives for the *zhaobi pingfeng* is *huangdi* 皇邸 or “imperial residence,” a term originally from the *tianguan* 天官 section of the *Zhouli* 周禮, clearly betrays the imperial connotations of the device. *Ibid., juan* 6.

inhabit the waters and can therefore repel fire.”9 [殿堂象束井形，刻作荷菱，菱水物也，所以厌火] Li further quotes another passage from a later text to the same effect. Fire, or rather, means of resisting fire, will prove the perennial concern in the Chinese architectural tradition.10 Or possibly, as is hinted in Shen’s text, such terms that he enumerates may also represent regional variations. But as this dissertation will demonstrate, an almost talismanic presence to shield the building from fire is only one of the roles that a domical ceiling plays.

In the foregoing discussion, I have chosen not to translate the term zaojing. The semantic complexity of the term, as Nancy Steinhart has pointed out recently, is one reason.11 But more importantly, to render it into any English equivalent would tend to foster the (false) impression that the form has remained unchanged since the term first comes to attention in second-century description of imperial architecture, and encourage it to be applied anachronistically, as is often done in archaeological literature.12 What the two quoted texts provide is a glimpse of the twelfth-century zaojing: its construction, context, and possible meaning. By leaving it as it is, I wish to highlight its temporal specificity. My dissertation is a study of the various architectural cousins

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9 YZFS, juan 2, “zongshi xia 总释下.” The passage is originally from Fengsu tong 风俗通, a work of encyclopedic nature by Ying Shao 恩劭 (fl. latter half of the 1st century).


12 One potential danger of quickly equating a form with a name mentioned in an early text is of course that this connection is sometimes used to argue that other later forms that bear formal resemblance to it must have had its origin in the same cultural context in which the textual account is found. For an example of such a line of argument, see Dieter Kuhn, “Liao Architecture: Qidan Innovations and Han-Chinese Traditions,” T’oung pao, vol. 86, 4/5 (2000): 341. Similar problems that pertain to terminologies of Buddhist cave types will be explored in Chapter 2, pp. 42-49.
of the zaojing form, a family of devices whose function was to mark sacred interiors. It is an attempt to deal with, in the East Asian context, efforts to mount domical ceilings in the interior as a focal device, from the second through the eighth centuries, of which the twelfth-century zaojing described above is but one later permutation.

1.2 “The Dome of Heaven in Asia,” Form, Meaning, and Diffusionism

The subject of the domical form in Asia was once taken up by Alexander Soper more than sixty years ago, albeit with a different slant. Soper’s study was intended to be an “extended postscript” to Karl Lehmann’s “The Dome of Heaven (1945),” in which Lehmann demonstrated the pagan roots of the depiction of heaven on vaults and ceilings in early Christian art. Likewise, Soper’s study was largely argument qua demonstration. With masterful strokes, he showed how “forms and combinations associated with the 'Dome of Heaven' concept in Western architecture penetrated eastward far beyond the limits of Roman authority or of orthodox Christianity,” making their way from India across Asia to finally reach the Pacific. Today, it

13 Soper, "The 'Dome of Heaven' in Asia,” 225-48. The significance of Soper’s study lies in that it not only provides the point of departure for this dissertation, but by choosing the very subject matter and the interpretative strategies to tackle it, it has a lot to say about the study of religious art in the first half of the twentieth century. Its larger intellectual background and relevance for my study will be further explored in the second chapter of the dissertation.


may not be quite so convincing to explain the migration of form based on contact alone. Partly,
diffusionism as a model of interpretation has lost much of its methodological purchase since the

Diffusionism as an interpretative model for human history has its roots in the late 19th century, when
disillusionment with progress after the industrial revolution led to the belief that change of any kind is inimical
to society. This in turn spawned the rather pessimistic view that human beings are not by nature inventive and
most inventions in history are likely to have been made only once. Cultural change, in such a light, came to be
explained primarily by diffusion and migration, sometimes in these terms alone. Half a century on, these ideas
remained extremely influential in Soper’s days in the fields of history, archaeology, anthropology and historical
linguistics, just to name a few. V. Gordon Childe, the Australian archaeologist and in many ways a very
original thinker, constantly fell back to the diffusionist model in his immensely popular Man Makes Himself
[note: “man” as singular] of 1937. Writing about the spread of the Urban Revolution across the globe, Childe
allowed that Egypt, Sumer and India were able to develop quasi-independently (he did not rule out the
possibility that these fountainheads of civilization had engaged in interchange of goods and ideas early on).
However, he continued, with a tinge of colonialist rhetoric: “But once the new economy had been established
in the three primary centres, it spread thence to secondary centres, much like Western capitalism spread to
colonies and economic dependencies. First on the borders of Egypt, Babylonia, and the Indus valley - in Crete
and the Greek Islands, Syria, Assyria, Iran, and Baluchistan - then further afield, on the Greek mainland, the
Anatolian plateau, South Russia, we see villages converted into cities and self-sufficing food-producers turing
to industrial specialization and external trade. And the process is repeated in ever-widening circles around each
secondary and tertiary centre.” Moreover, we would do well to remember that when Soper’s “Dome of
Heaven” was published in the late 1940s, the origin of the Chinese civilization was by no means a debate - it
was almost unanimously agreed that it had to come from the West and the questions were simply how and
when. In 1923 as J. G. Andersson fixed his gaze on the flamboyant pottery vessels recently excavated from the
village of Yangshao, Henan Province, he was convinced that what he witnessed there constituted part of “a
neolithic civilization and, as it spread all over the Near East of Asia and in Russian Turkestan, it is likely
enough to have found its way across Asia via Chinese Turkestan into China.” The priority for future research,
in his view, was to fill the material lacunae in our record, as it were, finding new dots between origin and
destination. And indeed, for a brief while, it seems history followed its due course. Two decades later, Ludwig
Bachhofer was equally certain that “[i]t was the last phase of the painted pottery in eastern and southeastern
Europe that provided the patterns for the painted pottery of China. And since it is not vessels that wander, but
men, there must have been a powerful stimulus which drove the Vase Painters, as they have been called, from
their homes in Europe across the steppes of Asia to China.” The drawbacks of the diffusionist model lie not
only in its problematic premise, but also the methodological teleologism it encourages. When contact/migration
is the only assumed catalyst for diffusion, it also marks the end of the inquiry - that is, once contact
is established and lines are drawn between dots, one is filled with a false sense of closure. However, what to
some is the end may become the beginning/point of departure for others. Borrowings are not necessarily
arbitrary. What local circumstances encouraged the recipient culture to readily accept the import in the first
place? What kind of changes were called for both to the imported material/idea and the local conditions, to
facilitate its assimilation/dissemination [if it ever gets assimilated/disseminated]? These are admittedly hard
(and sometimes impossible) questions, but they will further complicate our understanding of intercultural
exchange of ideas and materials. See Bruce G. Trigger, A History of Archaeological Thought (Cambridge,
Bachhofer, A Short History of Chinese Art (New York, 1946), pp. 18-9. On J. G. Andersson, see also Magnus
Fiskesjö and Chen Xingcan, China Before China: Johan Gunnar Andersson, Ding Wenjiang, and the
Discovery of China’s Prehistory (Stockholm, 2004). For a taste of an exemplary study premised on
monogenesis and diffusionism in Soper’s time, see I. J. Gelb. A Study of Writing: The Foundations of
Grammatology (Chicago, 1952). Finally, I would note that to reject diffusionism is not to deny the importance
diffusion per se.
1950s. In the meantime, archaeological excavations in the last half-century also cast a long
shadow of doubt upon the eastward march of the domical form over the Asian continent.\textsuperscript{17}

However, to pose the question of origin in the manner of “Asia or the West” only scratches the surface of the problem. Granted, Soper’s subject — the particular forms of domical construction and the celestial symbols that decorate them which are found in Asia\textsuperscript{18} — is the product of the international cultural transmission that flourished since the first century BCE, and its presence throughout the continent is in itself the sign of the incredible influence of these forms. But how does one account for such influence? Ancestry could hardly be equated with explanation. After all, when the “dome of heaven” reaches Heian Japan (where geographically and temporally Soper ends his discussion) in the form of the Tantric Mandala, it is at the terminus of a much-tried journey. What universal appeal did it hold to the builders across the continent? On the opposite end of the spectrum, how do we explain change – that is observable changes in architectural form that took place along this journey? What kind of local explanations are there for these changes? What kind of local beliefs and influences were at play? These are questions that Soper left largely unaddressed.

\textsuperscript{17} As early as in 1950, Baldwin E. Smith already expressed skepticism over Soper’s Eurocentric bias: “[Soper] in reviewing the evidence for a ceiling of heaven in the East perhaps over-emphasizes what he considers to be Western influences.” Baldwin E. Smith, The Dome: A Study in the History of Ideas (Princeton, 1950), p. 79n.96. Smith’s own study was in many ways a more cautious response to Lehmann, as he deemed it equally important to consider religious beliefs that are non-Christian which may have also attached meanings to the domical shape. Nevertheless, writing in the 1940s and having virtually no access to Asian materials (nor did he read any Asian languages), he reserved a mere two pages for “Asiatic Tradition” in his otherwise quite magisterial review of “domical forms and their ideology.” On the other hand, for perspectives on domical construction in the Hexi area during the Six-Dynasties period, see Chen Jing 陈菁, “Han Jin shiqi Hexi zoulang zhuangmu qiongding jishu chutang 漢晉時期河西走廊佛塔礦頂技術初探,” Dunhuang yanjiu 敦煌研究, no. 3 (2006): 23-26; Wang Jie 王潔, “Dunhuang zaoqi fudouding ku xingshi chutang 敦煌早期覆斗頂窟形式初探,” Dunhuang yanjiu 敦煌研究, no. 3 (2008): 19-24; Susan Beningson, "Shaping Sacred Space: Studies in the Ritual Architecture and Artistic Programs of Early Buddhist Cave Temples and Their Relation Tombs in Fifth Century China," Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2009.

\textsuperscript{18} Here, however, Soper at best only hinted at what “celestial symbolism” meant to him in the Asian context.
circumstances that at once encouraged the adoption of the form, but in the meantime made change desirable?

Finally, the role of religion: in Soper’s narrative, Buddhism served as the essential vehicle that carried the dome of heaven into Asia, by virtue of the religion’s catholic aspirations, which made it “readier to accept a part…of the classical repertory of celestial symbolism.” Such a notion of Buddhism was very much a product of its time. For the time being, however, even if we subscribe to Soper’s argument, another problem ensues. The metaphor of a vehicle is one that is predicated on a highly essentialized, monolithic “Buddhism” that remained unchanged from Mauryan India and Tang China to Three-Kingdom Korea and Heian Japan. Since the time of the publication of Soper’s article, studies of East Asian religions have not only rendered such a notion increasingly untenable, but also complicated our understanding of the role religion plays in society in general. The linkage between religion and architectural form is more often assumed than carefully demonstrated. For our purpose, the contexts in which domical forms appear – tombs, cave temples and religious buildings – do suggest that domical forms are often associated with sacred meanings or used to emphasize importance in palatial, religious and mortuary settings. However, the multiplicity of such contexts advises caution against putting

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19 Soper, "The 'Dome of Heaven' in Asia," p. 226. However, throughout his study, Soper never seems to be concerned about what would have been the reception of such a “classic repertory of celestial symbolism” in the Asian context; nor, as far as I know, does he try to.

20 As our notions of Buddhism (as it was understood and practiced over different time periods and places) and the society in which it operated (India/China/Korea/Japan) changed over time, the lines we used to draw between them also continued to erode. For an overview of the developments in the field of Chinese Buddhology since Soper’s time, developments which led to more nuanced understandings of how religion and society interacted, see Stephen F. Teiser, “Foreword,” in E. Zürcher, The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China, 3rd ed. (Leiden, 2007), xii-xxxvii.
one’s finger on any single religious persuasion. Our eleventh-century witnesses, while adequate, at times even quite precise on other aspects of the *zaojing*, are rather disappointingly reticent on its religious significance. Nor do those we encounter in the earlier periods address these problems. Each of the three case studies employed in this dissertation serves a different religious purpose. Both their larger historical backgrounds and local urgencies can be reconstructed. In a way, each chapter goes back and forth between these larger backgrounds and the domical buildings to work out, to my best knowledge, the more specific charges, artistic and religious, they fulfilled. In lieu of an overarching argument that explains what domical architecture in East Asia is, and what it is for, I hope that the contribution of this dissertation will be precisely how questions and answers can be worked out in this manner.

1.3 Defining the Subject

“Dome” and “East Asia” may seem an uneasy pairing at best, not the least because the former easily conjures up such powerful images of St. Peter’s, Hagia Sophia, Taj Mahal and

21 This seems less of a problem for students of medieval European architecture. For instance, Abbot Suger seems perfectly comfortable of telling his readers how both the parts and whole of St. Denis should be understood, as Richard Krautheimer points out: “Not once, it will be remembered, does Suger refer to the revolutionary problems of vaulting and design in his new building at St. Denis… Time and again Suger discusses the dedications of altars to certain Saints. Questions of the parts of a structure are prominent; questions of its dedication to a particular Saint, and of the relation of its shape to a specific dedication or to a specific religious – not necessarily liturgical – purpose. The ‘content’ of architecture seems to have been among the important problems of mediaeval architectural theory; perhaps indeed it was its most important problem.” Richard Krautheimer, “Introduction to an ‘Iconography of Mediaeval Architecture,’” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 1.
other Christian or Islamic monuments that an “Asian dome” would be an eccentric novelty which could only appear in the fantastical treatises of William Chambers. The history of European architecture from the Treasury of Atreus to Pier Luigi Nervi’s Olympic Sports Palace also gives the impression that domical forms have always been there and “dome” the all-encompassing term to describe them. The roots of this partiality to the perfect spherical dome run very deep. That the Pantheon became one of the basic points of departure for design in the Renaissance certainly played a massive role [Fig. 1-4].

A postwar/modernist strain in our accounts of Renaissance architecture has also underscored its alliance with geometry as its inherent content, undercutting the significance of any other deviations from the norm. A history of “domical” architecture would, in such a conventional view, be an introvert one, comprised of a lineage of buildings that, as it were, “take after” the Roman Pantheon. But that would also be an extremely parochial history, one that is dictated by a modern, and anachronistic definition of the dome.

It may come as a surprise that “dome” did not become the standard term for a hemispherical vault in the English language until fairly recently. Originally from the Latin *domus* for house, “dome” gradually acquired its present (and narrower) descriptive specificity when the structure itself, often the defining feature of eminent sacred structures, became synonymous with *Domus Dei*, the house of God in the eighteenth century. The two-fold meaning of the term

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22 For how the Pantheon became an important reference point in the history of European architecture, see William L. MacDonald, *The Pantheon* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp. 94-132.


24 Smith, *The Dome*, pp. 5-6.
therefore makes any study of the dome at once one of an idea (“Domus Dei”) and a shape (“hemispherical vault”).

Even in formal terms, some of the most original designs in the Western tradition rather thrive on powers of allusion, a play on the dialectic between form and meaning. Guarino Guarini's (1624-1693) Chapel of the Santissima Sindone at the Cathedral of Turin showcases this master of artifice at his best [Fig. 1-5]. His eclectic design of the dome broke all the rules, and with the lower spaces of the chapel that merge void with pendentives and walls under arch, Guarini is determined to astonish the viewer.25 On the other hand, with the stacked construction of the drum, a device he may have borrowed from the Slavonic tradition, Guarini produced a powerful allusion to the dizzying height of the Heavenly realm. And yet, here again, the ever resourceful Guarini designed the rings of superimposed arches with diminishing heights as they approach the apex of the ceiling, thus lending a more hemispherical look to the otherwise conical framework. At once an architectural allusion to Heaven, and a perspectival illusion.26

Modern designs often engaged with the same dialectic. Those that deliberately played on earlier conventions often ended up subverting them. The saddle-type hyperbolic paraboloid seen in Félix Candela’s (1910-1997) Chapel Lomas de Cuernavaca (1958) shows just how a design that had its ultimate roots in the Pantheon could be in its form so far from its Roman ancestor [Fig. 1-6].27 Nancy Holt’s (1938-2014) domical Annual Ring (1980-1), in one of many alleged efforts of the same artist to bring “the sky down to earth,” illustrates ironically the arbitrary 

nature of the alliance between astronomical ordering and its architectural projection [Fig. 1-7].

The interior courtyard of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC, which almost invites the viewer to complete the celestial dome that is not there, stands to attest the compelling power of projection in all of us to associate form with meaning [Fig. 1-8].

Likewise, in the East Asian tradition, it would appear that it was also a similar equation of the pinnacle of an interior with that of the beyond that sustained the evocative powers of the dome. The Chinese (and Japanese) term *qionglong* or *kyūryū* 穹隆 (頂), what in modern parlance is used to designate domes, and employed, as we saw, by Shen Gua to describe the ceiling of the Northern Song Confidential Archive, has an equally prominent pedigree. The earliest instance in our record of the binome being used to unequivocally denote the domical shape occurs in Zheng Xuan’s 鄭玄 (127-200) annotation to a passage in the *Kaogong ji* 考工記, which he takes to mean that the domical belly of a musical drum occupies one third of its entire length. It is perhaps not a coincidence that in the same

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28 Designed allegedly to recall T. S. Eliot’s “still point in a turning world.” Lucy Lippard, “Tunnel Visions: Nancy Holt’s Art in the Public Eye,” Alena J. Williams et al, *Nancy Holt Sightlines* (Berkeley, 2011), p. 64. About Nancy Holt’s intentions of bringing “the sky down to earth” (and to inscribe or cast a pattern of sun and shadow on the ground) in her work, see her interview with James Meyer in ibid., p. 233.

29 On this almost universal notion, that man tends to conceive of each house as a likeness of the universe, and by extension, the center, or the ceiling that is immediately under Heaven/sun is the center of the universe, Coomaraswamy once elegantly argued thus: “In the same way the center of every habitation is analogically the center, an hypostasized center, of the world, and immediately underlies the similarly hypostasized center of the sky at what is the other pole of the Axis at once of the edifice and of the universe it represents.” Here he was influenced (as he acknowledges himself) by Paul Mus. See Ananda Coomaraswamy, “The Symbolism of the Dome,” in *idem.*, *Essays in Architectural Theory* (Delhi, 1995), p. 11.

period, qionglong was used to describe the shape of Heaven, as Yang Xiong 杨雄 (53 BCE - 18 CE) puts it: “Heaven is arched and vaulted [qionglong], but everywhere it reaches the lower parts.” However, by the early decades of the first millennium, the idea that Heaven is a domed canopy that folds over the earth was already a very old one, though perhaps by then more heatedly debated than ever. In The Mulberry’s Tender Leaves (桑柔), a poem collected in the Book of Songs (Shijing 詩經), the poet breathes a sigh of despair, after a description of an almost apocalyptical imagery of disaster and disorder: “[w]ith no more strength to spend, I turn to those high-vaulted heavens.” The scarcity of archaeological and textual evidence left to us from this early period makes any sort of generalization nothing more than mere speculation. However, it might be argued that the semantic value of qiong to describe a domical shape of any kind—a drum, a wooden ceiling or the interior of a tomb—was a carryover of its association with Heaven and its shape that had long occupied the collective imagination of the Chinese.

What was also established was the sense of grandness of qiong, by virtue of its association with Heaven. Erya, a lexicon/thesaurus dated perhaps to the third century BCE, lists qiong with two dozens of other terms to mean “grand (da 大).” To this, the Han commentator

32 The rise of this cosmographic model will be discussed in more details in Chapter 4.
34 Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303), in the voice of the deceased, describes what becomes of his eternal abode: “The piled-up hills, how they tower!The dark hut skulks beneath them.All-encompassing, [Earth] extends to the Four Limits;High-vaulted spreads the azure Heaven.” [重阜何崔嵬, 玄廬窺其間; 旁薄立四極, 穹隆放蒼天] We will return to this poem at the end of Chapter 4.
Guo Pu 郭璞 (276-324) added the following annotation: “Broad and far-reaching is the Cosmos, arched and vaulted to staggering heights. That is also grand.”

As if to underscore what was by his time a tenacious link between the shape of the heaven and its descriptive qiong, later in the same text, Guo elaborated “Arched and Blue: that is the blue sky” with “the shape of the Heaven is arched and vaulted, and its color is blue. Hence the definition.”

Therefore, many of the domes discussed in this dissertation do not conform to the classic image of the hemisphere of the Pantheon. Often times they are at best approximations of the circle. Nor do all of them take built forms. Many are painted, sculpted, and imagined spaces that are illusions of, or allusions to, the domical form. In this dissertation, I define domical architecture as any radially symmetrical space that has a ceiling design which alludes to the impression of a circle, a circle that recedes upwards. I define the dome in such a manner so that we do not lose sight of the dome, in its original and etymological reckoning, as a signifying device in a sacred interior. I do not wish to suggest that that all domes are necessarily linked with sacred meanings. The subject of this dissertation is why and how domical devises were used to mark sacred spaces in East Asia.

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35 Erya zhushu 竹雅詮疏, juan 1, Li Xueqin 李學勤 (ed.), Shisanjing zhushu 十三經詮疏 (Beijing, 1999), vol. 24, p. 12.

36 Ibid., juan 6, in Li Xueqin (ed.), Shisanjing zhushu, vol 24, p. 182.
On the other hand, the modernist definition of the dome, intractable by virtue of its ties with geometric purity, is not one that seems to have concerned the ancients. In the East Asian context, buildings that are perfectly round and carry hemispherical domes are far and few between [Figs 1-9, 1-10]. They often stand out as exceptions, and to account for their singularity sometimes became the only reason for us to ask questions. But with a more liberal definition of the dome, we will begin to discern an otherwise hidden substrate of continuities, one that sometimes links interiors with sacred meanings. This does not make buildings like the Temple of Heaven any less special. Nor does it make us see domes everywhere. It does, however, make it possible for us to ask new questions.

1.4 The Larger Picture

A study of the domical form also helps ask larger questions with regard to the general development of Chinese architecture, questions that so far have largely escaped our attention. The study of Chinese architecture remains by and large the study of Chinese wooden architecture. This somewhat skewed orientation is part and parcel of the heritage shaped by the unusual historical circumstances in which the field of Chinese architectural history first came into being in the early twentieth century. It is a period that saw accelerated cultural importation

37 For instance, Gregory of Nyssa of the 4th century once described an octagonal church plan as “a circle with eight angles.” See Krautheimer, “Introduction to an‘Iconography of Medieval Architecture,” pp. 5-6.
(China/Japan/West), heightened international rivalry, and the rise of the architectural profession in both China and Japan. As is made plain by Cary Liu’s study, the choice of wooden construction as Chinese architecture *par excellence* was likely shaped by nationalistic rivalry between China and Japan over the earliest surviving Tang-period architecture. Likewise, a cultural pride sensitized by the presence of “Western modernization” in late-Meiji Japan helped elevate timber construction to the status of national symbol, a self-conscious demarcation from the masonry West. We have only just begun to fathom the full impact of the fin-de-siècle anxieties on the modern historiography of Chinese architecture.

To be sure, the rigorous research on the subject coupled with indefatigable fieldwork over the past century has not only led to the discovery of early buildings that had been hitherto unknown, but also greatly enriched our understanding of them. What we have in turn is a stylistic history of Chinese wooden architecture – of the structural members that partake in a general paradigm, and the variations within that paradigm that pertain to historical or regional

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significance. It is a history not without its conceits, however. For one, when wooden architecture is not readily available, building forms in other materials fill in as substitutes, sometimes to the point that their architectural interest is defined only in terms of their relevance to wooden construction. Another, it leads to the belief that the Chinese building tradition is one so recalcitrant that all other concerns must yield to its Procrustean bed. Religious or liturgical function is no exception, as is implied in the following comment on the nondescript nature of Taoist architecture:

[S]ince ancient times, religious architecture has turned to residential construction for its first models. When their status is roughly equivalent, individual Buddhist and Taoist halls replicate not only each other but also the form of a Chinese palace, and the arrangement of buildings in a large, well-founded complex - regardless of the particular religion - imitates that of a multi-hall Chinese palace.

All of this leaves one with the impression that what defines Chinese architecture is an enduring “archetype,” an almost precocious “structural rationalism (結構理性主義)” that is expressed in its millennia-old post-and-lintel timber construction, its spatial emphasis of

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41 On Han tombs, Liang Sicheng: “The subterranean structures [of Han tombs] are never architecturally treated and are thus of little architectural interest... The ch'üeh and the shrine are the only items of architectural interest.” Yet on a group of 12th-century stone tombs: “The incidental discovery of a few twelfth-century tombs in the neighborhood of I-pin and Nan-hsi, Szechuan Province, has revealed the high degree of architectural treatment of tombs of the Southern Sung dynasty. These small ashlar funeral chambers are given architectural elements that closely imitate wooden construction of the time.” Liang Sicheng, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 168.

horizontality over verticality, and changes could only occur within this larger paradigm in technical and incremental terms [Fig. 1-11]. Much of this may be true, and Liang Sicheng once argued that for an architectural historian capturing what precisely this archetype was would be like hitting the bullseye (不失正鹄). However, that some of the same conclusions were already drawn as early as 1932, even before most of the fieldwork was conducted in China, should at least alert us to the potential circularity of our logic. We may have set out to confirm our own presumptions.

What led to these intellectual commitments, in addition to fin-de-siècle geopolitics, had also to do with concerns that threw the pioneers of the field of Chinese architectural history forward. Like Liang Sicheng, many of those that helped fashion this image of Chinese architecture frozen in time were also themselves trained architects. They had set their sights on a future for Chinese architecture in new materials, for new purposes, but ultimately deriving its momentum from the past. In a recent study, Zhu Tao draws an interesting parallel between Liang and the French architect and theorist Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879). Both, he argues,


tried to disguise highly idealized and abstract design principles in the form of historicism.\textsuperscript{47} This is not so surprising considering the former’s training in the Beaux-arts tradition at the University of Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{48} Nowhere else is this spelled out more clearly than Liang’s diagram illustrating the “Evolution of the Chinese ‘Order’” in his \textit{Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture} (1946) \textbf{[Fig. 1-11]}.

And yet once a paradigm is established, any change within it has to be accounted for. In Liang’s account, a scale of values was embedded in the name of “structural rationalism.” His partiality to earlier structures in which the bracket sets served structural purposes was a result of his encounter with modernism.\textsuperscript{49} Between Lin Huiyin’s 林徽因 (1904-1955) manifestoes encouraging the readers to appreciate that the aesthetics of Chinese (timber) architecture are derived purely from its structural principles (結構原則),\textsuperscript{50} and Liang Sicheng’s diagram [Fig. 1-11], one can certainly feel a kindred spirit that recalls a similarly phrased binarism by their counterparts in America. Like the evangelists of the International Style, Lin and Liang were grappling with the same problem of finding an architectural form which, “[i]n the handling of the problems of structure… is related to the Gothic, [and] in the handling of the problems of

\textsuperscript{47} Zhu, \textit{Liang Sicheng yu ta de shidai} (Guilin, 2014), pp. 81-100.


\textsuperscript{49} Zhu, \textit{Liang Sicheng yu ta de shidai} (Guilin, 2014), pp. 94-6.

\textsuperscript{50} Lin, “Lun Zhongguo jianzhu zhi jige tezheng,” p. 166.
design...is more akin to the Classical.” It goes without saying that in the history of Chinese architecture that Lin Huiyin and Liang Sicheng were co-authoring, the problems of structure and aesthetics were one and the same.

Consequently we have inherited a history that often trades facade details for any serious discussions of the interior. Surface over enclosure. Quite representative of such an inclination, the drawing Liang Sicheng used in his 1946 text to illustrate a Tang Buddhist temple hall, which has since become canonical, was in fact from an engraving on the lintel of a structure that was conceived in drastically different spatial terms [Fig. 1-12]. Our inherited history may indicate a distinct Chinese idiom has long dictated the appearance of a building. But this is only part of the picture. Structures [Figs 1-13, 1-14, 1-15] may look alike by virtue of embracing the post-lintel construction and the bracketing system (even just as decor), but these facades (surfaces) tell us little about the kind of architectural space they enclose. If the present scholarship has provided us with a picture of the evolution (or devolution, depending on one’s aesthetic preferences) of the changing surface of Chinese architecture, relatively little attention has been paid to the study of buildings as interiors.53


52 A byproduct of this approach is the familiar story of the Sinification of the Buddhist stupa. In the epilogue, I discuss why this “simple” story is in fact not so simple.

53 In his Die Entwicklungsphasen der neueren Baukunst, originally published in 1914, Paul Frankl established “spatial composition” as the foremost of the four critical categories of his history of European architecture, for he believed that the spatial form is where the purpose of a building is crystalized. Through studying the spatial form, the architectural historian is able to grasp the building’s “spiritual import, its content, its meaning.” See Paul Frankl, trans. by James O’Gorman, Principles of Architectural History: The Four Phases of Architectural Style, 1420-1900 (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), p. 1.
With this short excursion into the general methodological issues, I wish now to underline a characteristic of the dome, which I have so far refrained from discussing. It is a structure almost always predicated on a centralized [radially symmetric] interior space [Fig. 1-16]. Yet even with the Buddhist introduction of the pagoda, centralized buildings/interiors are relatively rare in the East Asian architectural tradition. Ever since the earliest archaeologically excavated imperial palace in China, Chinese, and I dare say, Japanese architecture of the period under review, has always been concerned with axiality and frontality [Fig. 1-1]. A centralized building topped with a dome is at best equivocal at expressing such ideals.

In such a light, to raise a dome within the interior of a more typical axially-oriented building presents some form of intrusion [Fig. 1-17]. In the antechamber of the eleventh-century hall at the Baoguo 保囲 Monastery in Ningbo 宁波, a location that is incidentally in agreement with the building manual by Li Jie, the builders opted for a scheme that, above anything else, emphasizes the symmetrical nature of the building. In addition to the large dome in the center, they raised two additional domes, of diminished scale, as if to flank it. Here, we have what is close to a visual counterpart to the verbal accounts by Li Jie and Shen Gua, the same ambivalence and uneasiness with regard to the domical form. And yet, the significance of the domical form had by then become so naturalized beyond interrogation that for the builders the dome was a force of habit.

But if the dome represents a drastically different conception of spatial arrangement to the established ideals, it was nevertheless there to stay [Fig. 1-18]. How did it manage to negotiate its way into the building in Fig. 1-17? Through what kind of historical process were these ideals
reconciled? Is spatial form a meaningful category in the analysis of Chinese architecture? Should the answer be positive, how could one develop the kind of rhetorical strategies to chart the development of spatial forms? This dissertation will by no means provide the definitive answers to all of these questions. Some of them pertain to much larger issues in the study of Chinese architecture. However, by studying the domical form in the given period, in this dissertation I hope to delineate the boundaries of a new field of inquiry, one that transcends the traditional material divide between wooden and other forms of architecture, and one with a focus beyond exterior elevation and conceptualizes architecture from the outside as well as from the inside.
2.1 Introduction

This chapter considers a modern cave typology, the so-called fudou ku (cave with a “overturned-funnel ceiling”). Examples belonging to this type already appeared in the earliest group of caves in Dunhuang on present evidence. The fudou type persisted throughout the millennium (5th-15th c.) during which the site was active. While such modern terminologies as fudou adopted in modern scholarly literature to describe the typology are admittedly facile, I argue that the formal features that caves under this category share do hold symbolic meanings which elude the heuristic device of archaeological typology.\footnote{The typological categories by which Buddhist cave temples are usually studied will be discussed below on pp. 45-49.} The formal trappings that consistently define these caves, though perhaps intractable with our modern tools, are held together by their function and repetition as architectural backdrops for icons, architectural backdrops that as a type nevertheless convey meaning. This more subtle order of typological meaning derives from or indeed sustains the referential nature of pre-modern artifacts. That is, if we construe them within a model of the substitutional chain, on which artifacts stand in for each other as tokens of a particular type, of which no single moment of origin exists.\footnote{Christopher Wood, \textit{Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art} (Chicago, 2008), pp. 12-3.} In other words,
for forms of religious material culture where each artifact is potentially a reference to an earlier one of its type, or indeed, to an archetype or “prime object,” a linkage is formed via the "substitutional chain" in a formal typology.³ While the idea of typological models germinated in studies of other cultural subjects and periods, they speak to a set of concerns that is not dissimilar to, or even amenable or germane to, the study of Buddhist art, wherein “reference by type” is not just implied but explicitly stated.⁴ And it is also the belief in this substitutional chain of objects (just imagine all the Udayana images in East Asia that are purportedly copies of the original, or sometimes claim to be the original) that in turn sustains the stability and continuity of a collective religious memory.

In this chapter, I argue that the pseudo-domical fudou ceiling plays precisely such a role in structuring, and sustaining the portent meaning of the cave interior at Dunhuang. Responding to previous scholarship, which often considers the surfaces of the cave walls as the primary semiotic fields where meanings are sought, I contend that during the earliest periods at Dunhuang (the late fifth century—to the beginning of the seventh century), cave ceilings are where the most lavish of artistic efforts are invested, and where dynamic changes occur. It is also worth noting that in contrast to the wall surfaces, where stylistic inconsistency and the haphazard division of spaces into smaller “canvases” make it difficult, if not impossible, to infer a single unifying “program” of design, the ceilings of this period often give the impression of having


been executed on one go. This has partially to do with the sociology of religious economy. Walls of larger caves are treated as fields of merit, divided amongst discrete and yet sometimes related groups of patrons. However, the sum of parts does not amount to an intelligible overall design.

The ceiling, on the other hand, is probably the first part of the cave proper to be excavated, following the initial tunnel, and the rest of the cave is, as it were, scooped out downwards. It is also highly likely that the painting of the ceiling is done during this stage to abrogate the necessity of scaffolding. Such an aspect of the excavation process may account for the stylistic and iconographic integrity of ceiling designs of this period.5

The changes observed in the designs of the ceilings in this period in turn reflect the changing conceptions of what may be conceived of as the cave interior. In three stages, I will chart early developments of the domical fudou cave type during this early period. In each case, I will examine each period’s possible architectural and painterly frame of reference, and its symbolic significance. In contrast to previous scholarship that tends to privilege exteriors of cave architecture as replications of timber structures, I intend to understand the cave temples as enclosures, interior spaces that require to be studied on their own terms. Therefore, a brief excursus on the means by which we may conceptualize cave temples as sacred interiors is in order.

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5 For speculations on construction methods at Dunhuang, see Xiao Mo 萧默, *Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu 敦煌建築研究* (Beijing, 1989), pp. 59-60; Peng Jinzhang 彭金章, *Dunhuang Mogao ku beiqu shiku 敦煌莫高窟北区窟* (Beijing, 2000-2003), 3 vols. Though documentary evidence is equally scarce, Lyn Rodley has speculated that a similar process may have been adopted to excavate the rock-cut churches in Cappadocia, whereby after a tunnel was dug into the rock surface, the craftsmen would then start at the top and proceed downwards and carve out the architectural details from top to bottom. See Lyn Rodley, *Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 224-5.
2.2 Sacred Interiors

The medium of rock-cut cliff and the architectural procedure—by excavation rather than construction—notwithstanding, cave temples (and most often, their facades) in China are often studied as if they were surrogates, that is, representations of contemporaneous wooden structures, to fill the material (timber) lacunae in our record. However, insofar as they evoke allusions to timber architecture, these allusions are almost never literal [Figs 2-1, 2-2]. The example from Petra (first century CE), and its precocious “Baroqueness,” is here employed as an instructive analogy. The lessons we draw from it and the facade of Cave 43 at Maijishan are the same: as facades, they only pay lip service to structural necessities, and rules are evoked only to

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allow transgression. Future studies of such facades should therefore treat those cases of deviation, as well as adherence, with equal interest.²

More pertinent to our purposes here, the almost exclusive attention to facades in the study of cave temples makes it easy for one to lose sight of the fact that they are mere facades. As such they are only foils to, and sometimes literally frames for, an interior, an interior that gives expression to a drastically different spatial conception.³ If the carved facade in Fig. 2-1 depicts a pseudo-timber antechamber of trabeated construction, little hint does it afford of what comes after it: first an oval main chamber topped by a domed ceiling, succeeded by a rectilinear back

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² The comparison here makes plain that the impulse to assimilate architectural languages into one of ornament is universal, producing the kind of a-tectonic fantasy architectural facade on rock-cut cliffs. So too is the temptation to study such representations as substitutes for real buildings, though not without misgivings in the European context. In her study of Pompeian frescoes, Margaret Lyttelton concedes that they may have represented only ideal buildings, and in some cases “may have preceded actual constructions since painting takes less time than building, and is less subject to delays.” Margaret Lyttelton, Baroque Architecture in Classical Antiquity (London, 1974), p. 17. In marked contrast, pictorial representations of architecture have long been studied under the premise that they invariably represent contemporaneous timber architecture (just like cave temples are their rock-cut counterparts), and in a number of cases, are taken as critical criteria for dating paintings. For a recent attempt to undermine the hitherto unquestioned confidence of such approaches, see Jerome Silbergeld, “All Receding Together, One Hundred Slanting Lines: Replication, Variation, and Some Fundamental Problems in the Study of Chinese Paintings of Architecture,” in Shanghai Museum 上海博物馆 (ed.), Qiannian danqing: Xidu Zhong Ri cang Zhongguo Tang, Song, Yuan huaihua zhenpin 千年丹青: 细读中日藏中国 唐宋元绘画珍品 (Beijing, 2010), pp. 15-29.

³ It is intriguing that in the earliest Indian examples, the cave temples in West Deccan from the 2nd c., BCE, the surviving facades (some carved in stone but in forms that patently emulate timber construction) almost always match the interior inside, the ogival arched entrance illustrative of the often barrel-vaulted space of the basilica-like chaitya interior. See Vidya Dehejia, Early Buddhist Rock Temples (London, 1972), pp. 71-113.

⁹ One hastens to point out that even as they allude to details of timber constructions, the carvings here already took on wings of fantasy, looking more like embroiled tendrils disguised as brackets.
chamber with a barrel vault. To be fair, the transition from the facade to the interior presents a methodological problem: it underscores the inadequacy of our formal language to cope with such spatial juxtapositions. The relatively new field of Chinese architectural history descended from, and as a result thrived upon, the efforts to understand and collate (against extant buildings) the Northern Song imperial construction manual, the *Yingzao fashi* 营造法式. But it has also inherited its partiality to post-and-lintel construction in timber. One way to transcend the parochialism that comes almost inevitably with such a methodological legacy is to devise a new rhetorical strategy to describe cave architecture as enclosure, and to chart the development of its interior design over time.

Similar to the caves at Maijishan [Fig. 2-1], Cave 7 of Southern Xiangtangshan in Hebei province also has a finely carved stone porch. With its lotus-lobed columns and individually honed rafters, the facade conceals the spatial arrangement of the interior with almost equal effectiveness [Fig. 2-3]. Here, however, unlike the more reticulated facade seen at Maijishan, a fiery jewel on its acme, intimates the presence of a radially symmetrical or domed space behind the front porch. The visual similarity between the front porch and contemporaneous

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10 The peculiar presence of the back chamber is difficult to account for. It is sometimes thought to be the burial chamber of Yifu, Queen consort of Emperor Wen of Western Wei. See Fu, “Maijishan shiku,” p. 109.

11 The larger methodological issues that resulted from this historical beginning are discussed in Chapter 1, pp. 21-28.

12 I thank Dr. Katherine Tsiang for first alerting me to the design of this cave. She also speculates that caves 4, 5, and 6 on the second level of the southern Xiangtangshan site, may have originally also been adorned with the same porch design. See Katherine R. Tsiang, “The Xiangtangshan Caves: Buddhist Art and Visual Culture in the Northern Qi Dynasty,” *Echoes of the Past* (Chicago, 2010), p. 44.
representation of the stūpa in pictorial form has been pointed out. For the moment, I wish to resist the conclusion that this visual analogy suggests that the Xiangtangshan cave is simply also a stūpa, but rather would prefer to underline its formal and conceptual similarities to Cave 43 at Maijishan. In this case, like previously at Maijishan, architectural forms of different spatial principles are juxtaposed, and the interior was completely eschewed by the facade. In contrast, at Cave 7 at Xiangtangshan the interior is ambiguously indicated (if rather confusingly so). In a clearer fashion, what remains of the face of Cave 1 at Tianlongshan suggests the interior presence of a timber rectilinear antechamber (now perished) preceding the domical interior of the Northern Zhou cave.

These three individual examples (Cave 43 Maijishan, Cave 7 Southern Xiangtangshan, and Cave 1 Tianlongshan) date to roughly the same time period (mid-sixth century CE), and geographically span from Gansu to Hebei. Nevertheless, they share the same spatial conception: an antechamber, though in the first two cases they are pictorial allusions in the form of carved

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13 See *idem.*, “Bodies of Buddhas and Princes at the Xiangtangshan Caves,” Ph. D. dissertation (University of Chicago, 1996), pp. 221-2, here adducing the example of stūpa painting on the west wall of the Northern Zhou cave of T428 at Dunhuang.

14 The artist responsible for the pagoda depicted in the aforementioned cave (T428) seems to have (unwittingly?) flattened the two successive spaces (rectangular antechamber and domed interior) in his depiction of the top level: for here, the Buddha is seen to inhabit the same space with the two flanking dvārapāla, who, as door-guardians (守門天), are almost always found in the antechamber. Without any hint of depth in this picture, the Buddha who resides in the center of the domed interior has been brought to the front.

15 In my view, therefore, the depiction of the stūpa at T428 at the Mogao caves, may have been the result of the confusion on the part of the painter to transcribe such a design. We can imagine him copying from a pattern book, without really having understood the spatial relationship between the two structures.

16 Li Yuqun 李裕群 and Li Gang 李剛, *Tianlongshan shiku 天龍山石窟* (Beijing, 2003), pl. 1; for the ground plan of the cave, see fig. 4 on p. 11.
relief, over a rectilinear ground-plan which implies a longitudinal axis that meets the cliff at the transverse. As porches, these antechambers orient the pilgrim/viewer in expectation of an axial, controlled, and partitioned space, which in fact did not exist in the interior. Inside, in what may have struck one first as an incomprehensible void, the longitudinal axis is subsumed by a vertical one, one that projects through the center of the domical ceiling. What further heightens this dramatic experience of space is the fact that from the outside, the domical interior remains hidden from view.17

Nothing illustrates this paradigm of spatial design better than the eighth-century Sŏkkuram 石窟庵 (“Stone cave chamber”), in the modern city of Gyeongju, South Korea.18 Sŏkkuram is entered through a wooden porch, which seems to extend from a rectangular

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17 This buildup of anticipation of space and, in turn, the negation of that anticipation seem to be a familiar strategy elsewhere too. The most famous example being, of course, the Roman Pantheon in its original setting: the ground level would have been lower than what it is now surrounding the Pantheon, the porch would have as a result blocked almost entirely the view of the rotunda behind; moreover, the Pantheon was originally preceded in the south by a colonnaded forecourt, which not only provided a much more controlled approach to the building, but the two wings of the colonnades would have also concealed the drum of the rotunda at the ground level. See William L. MacDonald, The Pantheon (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 62-7; Siegfried Giedion, Architecture and the Phenomena of Transition (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 144-6.

Once inside, the viewer is immediately engaged head-on by the colossal image of the Shakyamuni Buddha, framed between two octagonal pillars which at once draw attention to the main icon itself and impair any further view of the interior [Fig. 2-4]. On a level closer to the viewer, sculptural reliefs of varying degrees of articulation fill up the wall surfaces. Those of the Eight Classes of Beings (八部衆), Diamond Bearers, Heavenly Guardians, Brahma and Indra, outside in the antechamber and the corridor, provide the prelude to a parade of images that continues into the circular main chamber. The entry into the main chamber is accompanied by a dramatic rise in vertical height: on the ground level ten disciples of the Buddha surround the main image in the center, and on the frieze and over the disciples, a running gallery of semi-circular niches enclose seated figures which meet at the nimbus behind the Buddha. The ten niches held presumably images of bodhisattvas and the like, of which only eight remain today. Immediately above, the wall surfaces begin to draw inwards and eventually culminate in the dome whose apex is marked by a lotus blossom.

This is a singular example of construction that displays almost too much artifice in trying to conform to a particular paradigm of building. Unlike in India, Afghanistan, or China, where

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19 The current wooden structure was erected during the restoration in 1961-1966. Whether the original cave site was fronted by a timber porch remains a matter of debate. However, a painting of Mount Toham by Chŏng Sŏn (1676-1759) shows two caves with timber structures in front. Based on this evidence, decision to build the current antechamber during the restoration was made. See Yi Song-mi, “Problems Concerning the Sŏkkul-am Cave Temple in Kyŏngju,” Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 1 (1988), p. 30. The painting is in a private collection, and is reproduced in Munhwajae Kwalliguk 文化財管理局 (ed.), Sŏkkul-am suri kongsa pogosŏ 石窟庵修理工事報告書 (Seoul, 1967), pl. 22 [Fig. 2-31].

20 The Buddha image has also been identified as that of Amitabha. For discussions of different theories with regards to the iconography of the images inside Sŏkkuram, see Yi, “Problems Concerning the Sŏkkul-am Cave Temple in Kyŏngju,” 32-9.
cave temples were hollowed out, making them therefore architecture-in-subtraction, at Sŏkkuram
everything was built additively from ground up. To construct the Sŏkkuram, hundreds of pieces
of granite were painstakingly carried uphill, and then carefully assembled. To underscore its
authenticity as “cave architecture,” and therefore to undermine the process by which it was built,
layers of pounded earth were packed on top of Sŏkkuram to cover the entire edifice, with only
the mound hinting at the domed space below. Therefore, as with the sixth-century examples from
China, the viewer is afforded only a partial (if any) view of what is to come. While it is difficult
to completely restore the Sŏkkuram to its original eighth-century landscape setting, the route of a
modern-day pilgrimage is marked by a continual rise in altitude, first from the Bulguk-sa 佛國寺
temple at the foot of Mount Toham (도향산 무송산) to its top, where the Sŏkkuram overlooks
this foremost monastery of the Unified Silla. The final approach involves another short climb to
reach the timber antechamber [Fig. 2-5]. The vertical elevation engages the viewer effectively in
an angle at which the timber facade almost completely conceals the mound over the stone
chamber. Again, what appears to be a liminal zone between the exterior and interior, in both
material and spatial conception, and the surprise resulting from the absence of any exterior hint
of the domical interior, are very much in play here as well. The contrivance and artifice of the
Sŏkkuram only further underscore the distance that the Silla builders went to follow a sacred
building paradigm or typology that may have had origins outside of Korea.

Elsewhere, the same spatial typology continues to be relevant in later periods across Asia.
In his diary, the Japanese monk Ennin 円仁 (794-864) records the following description of the
Diamond Cave (金刚窟) during his pilgrimage to Mount Wutai in Shanxi, China at the first half of the ninth century:

The grotto is on the side of the valley. Buddhapāla, a monk of the Western Lands, came empty-handed to the entrance of the mountains, and Monju (Mañjuśrī), appearing in the guise of an old man, would not let him enter the mountains but instructed him to go to the Western Lands and get the Butchō-sonjō-darani-kyō (The Dhāraṇī Scripture of the Jubilant Corona). The monk went back to India and got the scripture and came back to this mountain, whereupon Monju led him and entered with him into this grotto. When [Buddha]pāla entered, the entrance of the grotto closed of itself, and it has not opened to this day.

The grotto wall is hard and has a yellow tinge, and there is a high tower [against the face of the cliff] where the gate of the grotto would be. The grotto mouth is at the base of the tower, but no one can see it. East of the tower is an Offering Cloister. Up in the tower at the grotto entrance is a revolving repository made as a hexagon.21

[窟在北邊。西國有僧佛陀波利空手來到山門，文殊現老人身不許入山。更教往西國取佛頂尊勝陀羅尼經。其僧卻到西天，取經來到此山。文殊接引，同入此窟。波利才入，窟門自合。於今不開。窟岩堅密，帶黃色。當窟

21 Translation modified from Edwin O. Reischauer, Ennin’s Diary (New York, 1955), pp. 246-7. In the footnote, Reischauer cites Goodrich, that “this is one of the earliest mentions of revolving bookcases to hold Buddhist scriptures.”
Ennin’s uncharacteristic burst of narrative impulse does not afford us a description of the interior of the Diamond Cave [though it may be interesting to speculate that the hexagonal sutra repository on the upper story of the tower might mirror the centralized design of the cave interior.] Nevertheless, the quoted passage does account for why the interior of the Diamond Cave is off limits in the first place: it pertains to the sacred presence of the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, who had been long believed to reside in Mount Wutai, and under whose image the mountain was at the height of being transformed into a sacred topography in this very period. The specificity of the narrative involving Buddhapāla anchors the Bodhisattva’s luminosity to this location: he may well reside inside the Diamond Cave, and entry into its interior is contingent upon one’s level of enlightenment as indicated in the story by Buddhapāla’s retrieval of the dhāraṇī text. The high tower (almost certainly built of timber) which shields the opening (here and elsewhere) is a...
liminal zone that is at once inviting and proscribing. The use of a wooden facade to mark a liminal zone in front of a cave interior is also known at Dunhuang. However, while numerous beam-end sockets on the cliff surface suggest that it was once peppered by timber porches, the earliest extant example as such is dated to the tenth century. Where it may have been absent, substitutes for such liminal zones in other forms seem to have been employed to intimate a similar spatial distinction. The interiors of Northern-Wei central-pillar caves, for example, often evince the same distinction by adjoining two separate yet adjacent spaces. The two spaces are literally demarcated on the ceiling: the front half of the cave is topped by a gabled-ceiling, on which sometimes pictorial imitations of wooden rafters are drawn; this is in marked contrast to the adjacent areas surrounding the central pillar, the cave interior proper. Around the central pillar are zones and tunnels for circumambulation that are distinguished by flat, painted, ceiling-coffer panels that represent miniature domes [Fig. 2-6].

What we have just described may be a loose typology of sorts, one that pertains to the partition of space within Buddhist cave architecture. The larger significance of this typology (and its variations) is beyond the purview of this dissertation. It would be interesting to ask whether this was an East Asian [or a “Sinified”] idiosyncrasy. Another potentially fruitful but separate line of inquiry would be to study how typology of interior space and its relationship with icon

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24 In the same entry, citing an inscription he found on the cliff, Ennin gives us an alternative explanation, that the cave houses a large ensemble of heavenly musical instruments and a myriad of precious jewelries, a legend that is first recorded in the 7th-century text Gu Qingliang zhuán 古清涼傳. See Huixiang 惠祥, Gu Qingliang zhuán 古清涼傳, T 2098, 51: 1092c-1100c.

25 Prior to this period, a similar division inside the chaitya interior into a larger rectangular hall for congregation and a hemispherical sanctum for housing the stūpa also emerged in the late Gupta period (c. late 5th c.), which may have been the Indic “origin” of this spatial partition. See, for instance, Cave 19 of Ajanta.
(and the practice of icon worship) was understood through free-standing structures. While original freestanding timber buildings hardly survive from this early period, textual sources abound. However, if the foregoing observation concerning caves identifies an essentially bipartite division of space, a distinction decidedly marked by the use of different materials and spatial orientations, the question that follows is what constitutes such a sacred cave interior? Our inquiry shows that it is often the concept of the domical ceiling that distinguishes an inner sanctum from its antechamber. But how does the ceiling design inform us of how this interior space was understood? With a view to addressing these questions relating form and meaning, I will first review how different terms, in both Western and Chinese scholarship have been used to define the centralized design that in Chinese is often known as the fudou cave.

### 2.3 Definitions

A typological definition is a metaphorical description whose artifice manifests on two levels. On the one hand, it introduces a linguistic isomorphism to link a particular category of items whose formal relationship may be extremely superficial, but can also be highly significant. On the other, it gestures beyond the limitation of category, pointing to things that fall outside its purview, thereby creating an artificial fissure between these and those, us and them. As such, the definition of a typology at once sets in motion and harnesses one’s imagination. The category of

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26 This is a subject that will be explored in the epilogue, where I discuss how domical centralized buildings were constructed to enclose monumental icons.
*Fudou* cave is no exception. But before we look at its etymology and etiology in the Chinese language, we shall first look at a European term that was evoked to describe cave ceilings.

Alexander Soper (1947) engaged the term *Laternendecke*, literally “lantern ceiling,” to describe the combination of decked squares and diamonds as seen on the ceiling of T272. By so doing, he also introduced an element of contention. Early on in the same essay, he acknowledged that the term was borrowed from Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941), but intentionally or not, did not address its ideological implications. Half a century before, Strzygowski had published the polemical *Orient oder Rom* (1901), in which he advanced the view that early Christian art owed much of its formal apparatuses to the Orient. With regards to Christian architecture, in his *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* (1918) and *Ursprung der christlichen Kirchenkunst* (1919), Strzygowski further formulated this theory based on the morphological evolution of the dome on a square base, which, with its origin in the Iranian rituals of circumambulating the fire, was disseminated to the West. He therefore contended that Christian architecture was not Hellenistic, as is often believed, but of Mazdean origin in its signification, and of Iranian origin in its form.

The *Laternendecke* form (“the dome over square”) in particular derives from wooden construction “after the Aryan immigration into Iran.” The architecture of Armenia, with the

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Laterendecke as its defining feature, played the critical role of the intermediary between Iran and the Christian West. Strzygowski’s highly radical views and their racialist implications (famously embraced by Adolf Hitler) made him taboo to architects and historians alike, and most likely the tremors of the debate must have still been palpable when Soper wrote in 1947. By subscribing to Strzygowski’s notion of Laterendecke, and describing ceilings from Kashimir, Dunhuang and Koguryo tombs, which would have been otherwise described as fudou in Chinese, Soper in effect mounted the domical bearings on a similar architectural crusade to the Far East, this time riding on the chariot of Buddhism. One suspects that the imperialist overtones in Strzygowski’s original enactment of the term may have escaped Soper.

The metaphor of an opening for light (which is, after all, what a lantern is for) is completely lost in the notion of fudou. The idea of a lantern ceiling (“Laterendecke”) being an opening for light is completely absent from the latter, which is self contained and closed to light. The Chinese term is also a metaphor which is introvert, and which reclassifies this cave type

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30 Josef Strzygowski, Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa (Wien, 1918); Grigor, “Orient oder Rom? Qajar 'Aryan' Architecture and Strzygowski's Art History,” 565. By 1919, Strzygowski seems to have already been aware of the fact that such constructions are ubiquitous. But this did not shake his belief in the single origin of the form in the Near East. In a footnote to his description of the Laterendecke form in Ursprung der christlichen Kirchenkunst, he cites a Korean example recently published in the Japanese art journal Kokka, to illustrate “the spread of such reproduction to the East.” See Strzygowski, Origin of Christian Church Art, p. 59n1.

31 In this light, Karl Lehmann’s “Dome of Heaven” may have been a deliberate effort to resuscitate the debate, though it seems, Soper’s study notwithstanding, he managed to attract few followers or detractors.

32 Strzygowski certainly felt no qualms about pushing the dissemination of the form further east, though he seems to have got only as far as India and Kashmir. But it is here where Soper picked up his momentum and the term, See Strzygowski, Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa, p. 622.
amongst a different order of things. Xiao Mo 蕭默 is the first Chinese scholar that tries to study cave typologies at Dunhuang in a systematic manner. In his monumental study of Dunhuang architecture (1989), Xiao divides the caves into six general categories: 1. the central-pillar type; 2. the vihāra type; 3. the *fudou* (inverted-funnel) type; 4. the nirvāṇa cave; 5. the grand Buddha type; and finally, 6. the screen type. Amongst these, the central-pillar, *fudou*, and screen types make up the vast majority at Dunhuang.\(^{33}\)

Like other heuristic devices, these categories/typologies are ultimately interpretive constructs. Xiao arrives at this system by singling out certain formal features—the existence of a central pillar or back screen, a particular form of spatial division predicated on its alleged function (*vihāra*), ceiling type (*fudou*), the iconography of the enshrined image therein (*nirvāṇa*), and the unusual scale of the icon and the architectural accommodations it necessitates (*grand Buddha*)—whereby boundaries are drawn. In the case of Xiao Mo’s cave typology, however the chosen criteria do not follow a consistent and mutually exclusive standard; this results almost inevitably in confusion and overlap: for instance, T487 is at once a central-pillar cave and a *vihara*; T285 a *vihara* and a *fudou*; and the issue of the entire category of the back screen type—whether it in fact is derived from the *fudou* or the central-pillar type—remains debatable.\(^{34}\)

It is unclear when the term *fudou* was first used to describe cave ceilings. In his *Records of the Mogao Caves* (漠高窟記, hereafter *Records*), Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899-1983) never once evoked it; his purpose was to provide an inventory of the painted and sculpted images

\(^{33}\) Xiao, *Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu*, pp. 33-59.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 54.
found therein, and the Record gives the impression of cataloging the caves into neatly compartmentalized surfaces.\textsuperscript{35} For ceilings, he only described the central panels as zaojing, another loaded term.\textsuperscript{36} Likewise, the term fudou is also absent in Xie Zhiliu’s 謝稚柳 (1910-1997) descriptive lexicon of the Dunhuang caves.\textsuperscript{37} The only contemporaneous catalogue that does mention fudou is Shi Zhangru’s 石璋如 (1902-2004) Plans of Mogao Caves (莫高窟形).\textsuperscript{38} However, while Shi’s measurements of the caves were taken in 1942, the editing and publication of his work were to transpire much later in Taiwan in 1996. The editorial preface makes it quite clear that, in both dating and cave classification, Shi’s publication has followed the work done in Mainland China since the 1980s.\textsuperscript{39}

Xiao Mo’s use of the term fudou to describe cave ceilings is the adoption of a metaphor twice removed from its original referent. It first appears in the second-century lexicon Shi ming (釋名) in which the author Liu Xi 劉熙 used it to gloss the word “small canopy” or xiao zhang 小帳: “a small canopy is called a ‘funnel canopy,’ by virtue of its resemblance to an overturned

\textsuperscript{35} Zhang Daqian completed the manuscript in the spring of 1943. However, it was not published until 1985. See Zhang Daqian 張大千, Mogao ku ji 漢高窟記 (Taipei, 1985).

\textsuperscript{36} The term zaojing appears not infrequently in Han poetic descriptions of palatial buildings. Without any surviving examples of Han palaces, however, we cannot be sure whether all the ekphrases in our record necessarily describe the same structure. By the eleventh century, we find efforts to gloss zaojing, which suggests that zaojing may have been a more parochial term than we previously thought. What we are able to say with more certainty is that the aquatic overtones of zaojing (a “vegetalized well”) speaks to concerns over fire (which is only only to be expected of timber architecture), and the belief that the zaojing structure will somehow protect the building from such hazards.

\textsuperscript{37} Xie Zhiliu 謝稚柳, Dunhuang yishu xulu 敦煌藝術敘錄 (Shanghai, 1955).

\textsuperscript{38} Shi Zhangru 石璋如, Mogao ku xing 莫高窟形 (Taipei, 1996).

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 3.
funnel [小帳曰斗帳，形如覆斗也].” In its original context, Liu Xi was by no means describing a ceiling type. Fudou is therefore a borrowed descriptive term that originally referred to something else. The convenience of borrowing such a layered metaphor in modern archaeological literature is that it cuts in more than one direction: for the term is used to describe both the shape of the ceiling, a “truncated pyramid” with four slopes converging on a central panel, and the decorative motif that often appears therein, a canopy [Fig. 2-7]. Xiao Mo argues that fudou ceilings are imitations of such canopies in a cave context. However, in the Shi ming, fudou is classified under the section “Glosses on Beds and Canopies (释牀帐).” In other words, it suggests a more restricted (and domestic) sense of the word “canopy,” as the piece of ornamental/protective cloth over the bed. The religious or ceremonial setting—for which the word baldachin may be more appropriate—is notably missing. Also missing is any form of acknowledgement that the same ceiling form appears almost everywhere across the Eurasian continent. While Soper began with Central Asia and looked East to trace the dissemination of the Laternendecke ceiling, Xiao looks in the same direction for its sources.

Further, although naming practices initially appear somewhat arbitrary, they often end up carrying ideological baggage. In this case, however, one suspects that it may have been intended from the start. One consequence is that Buddhist cave temples that fall under the fudou category have been deemed almost necessarily architectural emulations of an inherently Chinese prototype. This argument is made all the more compelling by twentieth-century Chinese historiography that has long considered the Liangzhou region, of which Dunhuang is the

40 Liu Xi 刁熙, Shi ming 释名 (Beijing, 1985), p. 94.
41 Xiao, Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu, p. 44.
foremost citadel, as the bulwark of “Han” Chinese culture upon the collapse of the Western Jin in 317. However, it is my contention that the earliest example of the *fudou* cave typology at Dunhuang suggests that it may actually be a borrowed form, one that represents an alternative means of erecting a dome within a cave chamber. While its formal features were to undergo dramatic changes over time, the persistence of this ceiling type is a defining marker of a sacred space, and makes the experience of a cave temple at once familiar and bewildering.

2.4 The Central Asian Beginnings

Dated to the Northern Liang period (397-439), T272 is one of the earliest caves excavated at Dunhuang [Fig. 2-8]. It is also the earliest full-flung *fudou* cave surviving at the site. At

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42 The anchor of this historiography, and what has already become a classic, is Chen Yinque 陈寅恪, *Sui Tang zhidu yuan yuan lüelun gao* 隋唐制度淵源略論稿 (Beijing, 1963). For a classic exposition of Chen’s ideas in the field of cave archaeology, see Su Bai 宿白, “Liangzhou shiku yiji he ‘Liangzhou moshi’ 涼州石窟遺跡和涼州模式,” in *idem.*, *Zhongguo shikusi yanjiu* 中國石窟寺研究 (Beijing, 1996), pp. 39-51.

43 Like many other caves at Dunhuang, T272 was repaired during the Five Dynasties, when the ceiling of the connecting tunnel was repainted. See Dunhuang wenwu yanjiusuo 敦煌文物研究所, *Dunhuang Mogaoku neirong zonglu* 敦煌莫高窟內容總录 [Hereafter NRZL] (Beijing, 1982), p. 110.

44 Duan Wenjie 段文傑, “Zaoqi de Mogaoku yishu 早期的莫高窟藝術,” in *Dunhuang Mogaoku* 敦煌莫高窟 (Beijing, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 173-4. There are different opinions about which is the earliest *fudou* cave on site. Xiao Mo in fact considers T249 as the earliest, and T272 as a transition between the domical form (穹窿頂) to the classic *fudou* form as exemplified by T249. See Xiao Mo 蕭默, “Dunhuang Mogaoku de dongku xingzhi 敦煌莫高窟的形制,” in *Dunhuang Mogaoku* (Beijing, 1984), vol. 2, p. 193. However, the curved transition as observed at T272 is seen in such later caves as T266 (Sui), undermining the chronology and teleology argument. See Fan Jinshi 樊錦詩(ed.), *Dunhuang shiku quanji: Mogaoku di 266-275 ku kaogu baogao* 敦煌石窟全集: 莫高窟第266-275窟考古報告 (Beijing, 2011), vol. 1, pp. 41, 147.
the pinnacle of the ceiling, a combination of beamed rotated squares (what Soper would call a
_Laternendecke_ or “lantern ceiling”) is set into a hollowed square. This is a pictorial reference,
here underscored emphatically in stucco, to the practice of stacking beamed squares, each
inscribed and rotated by 45 degrees to suggest a rising, ever receding interior dome. Such an
impression is further strengthened by the four walls that lean slightly inward, and the curved
transition between the wall surfaces and the ceiling. As if to highlight the illusionistic effect of
the ceiling design, the painter treated the vertical and horizontal surfaces of the outer square
frame differently [Fig. 2-9]: vertical surfaces are given a geometric design of green and black
triangles, while the horizontal surfaces are graced with two different sets of floral scrolls.
Spatially, the rest of the ceiling is divided awkwardly into four discrete slopes. However, the
pictorial designs on the four slopes suggest otherwise. Here the illusionistic depiction of
balustraded gallery around the four sides of central square, which later becomes a popular
design, makes its first appearance. Seemingly self-conscious celestials, sashed and haloed,
inhabit the encircling gallery. The awkward treatment of the corners reveals the painter’s
dilemma of fitting a circling composition into an essentially square format. This radial
symmetrical tendency is also mirrored in the general layout of the cave [Fig. 2-8]: the main icon,

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45 The same structural element is most notably found in the Eastern Han tomb in Yinan,
Shandong, which has led many scholars to argue that here too, the ceiling design has its ultimate
origin in Han tombs. However, the practice of using such stacking to create an illusion of circular
recession has such a wide geographic distribution (from the Near East to the Korean peninsula)
that one wonders whether it had one source of origin. Nevertheless, as is argued below, for the
specific design of T272, there are compelling examples elsewhere to suggest that Dunhuang was
on the receiving end of artistic “influence.” For an overview of this ceiling design over the entire
region of East Asia, see Kim Pyŏng-mo 全秉模, “Malgakchojŏng ūi sŏngkyŏk e daehan
chaekŏmt’o: Chungguk kwa Hanbando e chŏnpa doegi kkaji ūi paegyŏng 抹角藻井의 性格에
a Buddha statue resides in the niche on the west wall beneath a canopy, seated with legs pendent, a characteristic suggesting that the statue may well be that of Maitreya. He is flanked by large bodhisattvas, painted on the curved surface of the niche. The same composition is repeated on the north and south walls, each furnished with a preaching scene within a panel, dominated by a seated Buddha with two attending bodhisattvas.

The almost identical design is found at Bāmiyān, modern Afghanistan, a site in Central Asia that is perhaps best known for the two colossal statues of Buddhas that once stood there. Cave 621 is the southernmost among the group of smaller caves at the left foot of the West Colossal Buddha [Fig. 2-10]. Therefore, unlike a typical cave at Bāmiyān, which normally has a north-south orientation, the entrance of Cave 621 faces west. The plan is generally square, though slightly longer on the north-south side (it is about the same size as T285, so on the larger side by Dunhuang standards). Like T272, the four walls lean inward to meet at the ceiling. If at Dunhuang, part of the ceiling design has been reduced to pictorial (painted and stucco) rendition (and hence appears akin to ornamental flourish), everything here is articulated in sculptural relief. Similarly, immediately above the large wall niches, a gallery of trefoil topped niches runs across the four walls. A large mortise is found in each gallery niche, suggesting that they all once sheltered images of deities, Buddhas, Bodhisattvas or perhaps celestials that are not unlike the
ones we find in T272.\footnote{A molded image of a seated Buddha, now in the collection of Musée Guimet, is believed to have belong to the group of images that have once occupied these niches. Brought back by the mission of J. Hackin, this small icon is now missing its head, the entire left arm, as well as the right hand. The upper body of the Buddha is covered entirely by a monastic robe, which extends to and hangs over his crossed legs. See Z. Tarzi, \textit{L'Architecture et le décor rupestre des grottes de Bāmiyān} (Paris, 1977), vol. 2, p. 66, pl. B136.} Again, the vestigial beams of the lantern ceiling still project in ornamental reliefs.

Except for the west wall, each of the other three walls has a tri-lobed niche [Fig. 2-11], as if it were the larger mirror image of its smaller counterparts on the cornice, reinforcing the vertical axis of the interior. Inside each niche, two rows of three mortise holes can still be found. From them one might surmise that three sculpted images may have once been placed here. Again, even in terms of the sculptural program inside the cave there is resounding similarity with T272.

Another example, Cave 471, in which the original murals partially survive, presents a variation on the same theme [Fig. 2-12]. Around the base of its ceiling, one notable difference from Cave 621 is the absence of the sculpted tri-lobed arcade. However, immediately below the sculpted ceiling, are arranged rows of similar Buddhas seated in meditation, suggesting a similar division of space is in play here.

The visual comparison raises the possibility that T272 and the Bāmiyān group are typologically related. However, the dates of the Bāmiyān site remain highly contested. Cave 621
can be placed variously in the fifth century (Higuchi et al.),
the sixth-seventh century (Tarzi, Rowland), or the beginning of the seventh century (Klimburg-Salter), immediately before Xuanzang’s visit in 622. This makes it highly problematic to establish any direct causal link (indeed “who influenced whom?”), though the painterly quality of the lantern ceilings at Dunhuang does seem to suggest that it may have derived from the plastic form found at Bāmiyān. The numerical difference as well as consistency of design also hints at the possibility that Dunhuang inherited this novel ceiling form. At Bāmiyān, the lantern ceiling also crowns caves that are also circular or octagonal, and not only square in plan [Fig. 2-13]. Earlier, I


49 The dating of the Bāmiyān complex remains problematic to this day. Attempts to fix dates on the entire site have often relied on isolated criteria (pictorial motifs, architectural elements, numismatic evidence and etc.) and in turn arrived in conclusions that are not easily reconciled. For a critical review of these efforts, see Deborah Klimburg-Salter, The Kingdom of Bāmiyān (Naples, 1989), pp. 12-17.

50 On the other hand, in both cases, the rock-cut context of the architecture makes any reference to structural forms ultimately a metaphor that is not held structurally responsible. Can we still see plastic forms as truer than painterly ones?

51 Centrally-planned caves with elaborate ceiling designs are by no means common at Bāmiyān. Of the 750-odd caves (according to the numbering system devised by the Kyoto University team), only 92 are square, octagonal or round in plan, while the vast majority are rectangular with flat or vaulted ceilings. However, the rarity of the type only testifies to its significance, as among the 50 or so caves that bear images of any kind, 35 belong to this type. Higuchi, Bāmiyān, vol. 1, pp. 158, 168. On the other hand, one cannot rule out the probability that both Dunhuang and Bāmiyān are branches of the same tree, and we have yet to grapple with where the trunk is. This underscores our lack of knowledge when it comes to addressing how architectural forms travelled. The itinerant craftsmen aside, who must have played a critical role in such transmissions, about whom, again, we know almost nothing, but what of other forms, coinage, drawings, or models? And how did the difference in format factor into how the architectural form was in turn received and adapted?

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described the lantern ceiling as a device using interlocking squares to create an approximation of a domical ceiling of diminishing space. It seems as though the combination of the lantern ceiling and the running arcade of painted or carved image niches help mediate the boundaries amongst radially symmetrical forms: square, octagonal, or circular.

Both T272 at Dunhuang and Cave 621 at Bāmiyān are meant to represent a highly stratified interior space, centered around a domical lantern ceiling, from which emanate images of Buddhas. At Dunhuang, the privileging of the back wall with a recessed niche and a plastic image rather than a painted one, may in fact be an aberration in an otherwise centrally conceived interior, and one that is centered around a vertical axis.

We may further understand this conceptualization of a sacred cave space by introducing an example that is roughly contemporary to T272 and presents a parallel yet inverse configuration. The group of Northern Liang stone miniature stūpas, found in Jiuquan, Dunhuang and Turfan, and dedicated mostly in the first half of the fifth century, presents an instructive parallel [Fig. 2-14]. Despite differences in formal features (no two extant examples are identical) and scales, all extant examples display the same hierarchical scheme: a multi-domical roof, here represented by the parasols, encircled immediately below by a ring of image niches. The loop-shaped niches are reminiscent of the tri-lobed arches we see at Bāmiyān. Moreover, below, under a drum on which a sutra passage and a dedication are often inscribed, eight images of deities are

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52 For studies of this group of stone stūpas, the meaning of its typology, and their possible use in local ritual contexts, see Yin Guangming 殷光明, Bei Liang shītā yānjū 北涼石塔研究 (Xinzhu, 2000); Eugene Y. Wang, “What Do Trigrams Have to Do with Buddhas? The Northern Liang (397-439) Stupas as a Hybrid Spatial Model,” RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics 35 (1999): 71-91; Stanley Abe, Ordinary Images (Chicago, 2002), pp. 123-171.
carved on the faces of the octagonal base. This is analogous to the image niches around the interior cave walls. The same analogy can be found in an even more compelling example, a votive stūpa from the Mathura region [Fig. 2-15], dated to circa 420 – 440, based on the symmetrical drapery of the small Buddha figures. It is also likely the Indic prototype of the Northern Liang stone stūpas. The exterior form exhibits a transition from a plain dome on top to a square (rectangular) plan at the base, in between there is inserted an octagonal level that accommodates seated Buddhas. In a positive to negative, or exterior to interior relationship, the same transition corresponds to the interior of T272 as well, though not spelled out in explicitly visual form. One conclusion borne out by the comparison above is that the interior spaces of T272 and Cave 621 are spatially inverted reconfigurations of a stūpa. We may further speculate that like their portable stone counterparts, T272 may have served more of a votive function. They may have been the object being offered and consecrated in fulfillment of a vow, rather than a ritual space that invites the devotee to participate in worship. The implications of this formal resemblance for the understanding of cave interior will be further explored at the end of this chapter.


54 Despite their foreign forms, Abe argues that they were not used as votive stupas as their Indic counterparts were. Rather, they were part and parcel of a much more complex local milieu, and the combination of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist elements thereupon served the needs of local patrons. See Abe, *Ordinary Images*, pp. 156-171.

55 The north and south walls are peppered with some small triad scenes of the Buddha preaching that are often accompanied by a vow. For instance, the third preaching scene from the entrance on the north wall was dedicated by a nun by the name of Huisheng with the wish to enjoy the “sublime bliss of being born in the Pure Land, and to advance to the upmost Enlightenment [往生妙樂，齊登正覺].” Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院, *Dunhuang Mogaoku gongyangren tiji 敦煌莫高窟供養人題記* (Beijing, 1986), p. 116.
2.5 The Mortuary Interlude

Caves T249 and T285 are dated to the 530s. The intervening century between them and the earlier construction of T272 saw major changes that were introduced to the arrangements of the *fudou* ceilings [Fig. 2-16]. The four large trapezoidal slopes that meet at the lantern ceiling are a transition between the walls and the ceiling, which had only been hinted at in T272. They provide the canvas on which the artist(s) indulged their imaginations to produce a vast swath of fantastical imagery, the iconography of which, however, is still in doubt.\textsuperscript{56} Except for the outer square frame, the rest of the lantern ceiling is reduced completely to painted patterns. It stands in stark contrast to the dramatic shading of the running arcade of painted niches, which in previous examples are located immediately below the lantern ceiling, but now appear along the tops of the walls, above the thousand-Buddha motifs. This new design lends the cave not only a centripetal focus with the lantern ceiling as the apex, but also a sense of much greater height. This is accentuated by four painted “beams,” which extend from the corners of the lantern ceiling to the walls, acting, one could only assume, as though they were hip rafters of a pyramidal ceiling. The swirling and spiraling traces of the brush on the ceiling, however, appears only to revolt against these clearly delineated beams.

Compared with many of the later caves, T249 is of moderate size, and it is highly likely that what remains of T249 represents an integral design: that is, it was both conceived and executed as a whole and on one go. The style of painting is consistent throughout, and iconographically, symmetry seems to have been the rule. The ceiling slopes, despite their rather confused arrangements and muddled subjects, are clearly informed by parities and contradistinctions. Likewise, both the north and the south walls conform to a rather rigid visual hierarchy; above is the Thousand Buddhas motif framing two (rather small) depictions of the Buddha preaching, while below are rows of patrons and yaksas, of which only traces remain. The transition from the walls through the niched gallery to the slopes is relatively fluid.

Duan Wenjie is the first to try to read some kind of iconographic program into the ceiling design. He interprets the west and east slopes as depicting Buddhist subjects. On the west slope, there is a four-armed Asura set against Mount Sumeru (upon which the half-opened gate represents the entrance into the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods) [Fig. 2-17]. On the east slope, the composition centers on two demigods lifting a lotus platform crowned by a mani jewel. The south-north pair of ceiling slopes, on the other hand, is predominantly “Daoist” in Duan’s interpretation, with Queen Mother of the West, and her counterpart King Father of the East, making their earliest appearances at Dunhuang in full regalia [Fig. 2-18]. The result, he argues, is a pictorially, fully harmonized convergence of Buddhism and Daoism, characteristic of the Hexi region of the period (especially in the realm of mortuary art).57 Recently Saitō Rieko challenges Duan’s interpretation and tries to reverse it: the cart-driven pair, while they do tempt one to view

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them as Queen Mother of the West and King Father of the East, the rather agitated manner in
which they are shown is a far cry from the static frontal pose they often assume in local mortuary
art. Moreover, their orientation is off. They should appear on the east-west axis per convention.
Even if we grant the possibility that the orientation has been deliberately adapted to
accommodate the east-facing cliff (and therefore direction of the cave entrance), the orientation
of the cardinal animals — the White Tiger on the south slope under the “Queen” and the Dark
Warrior and the Red Bird on the east slope — is telling. In other words, against convention,
nothing is where it is supposed to be. Therefore, Saitō argues that here the traditionally Chinese
themes are appropriated to enrich and be subsumed by a Buddhist paradise and their original and
cardinal meanings were lost.  

This resembles an earlier reading by Shi Weixiang, who argues
that the King-Queen pair is rather a local artist’s shorthand for Indra and his consort. Having
little knowledge of the Indian deity, the artist chose to substitute Chinese imagery for them. But
the purpose was still to depict Buddhist subjects.

T285 is a close cousin of T249, albeit on a much grander scale (now 6.3 x 6.4 x 5 meters)
[Fig. 2-19]. In addition to the increased scale, in the center of the chamber, a large pedestal,
resembling a mound, was added later. Modern conservation work has nevertheless considerably
changed its form. Four “meditation cells” were pierced into each of the side walls. In the

58 Saitō Rieko 齊藤理恵子, trans. He Xiaoping 賀小萍, “Dunhuang di 249 ku tianjing Zhongguo
tuxiang neihan de bianhua 敦煌第249窟天井中國圖像內涵的變化,” Dunhuang yanjiu 68

59 Shi Weixiang 史苇湘, “Dunhuang fojiao yishu chansheng de lishi yiju 敦煌佛教藝術產生的
歷史依據,” Dunhuang yanjiu [test run] (1981): 129-153. Up to this day, the iconographic
reading of the ceiling remains anything but resolved. The Dunhuang shiku neirong zonglu 敦煌
石窟內容總錄, published in 1996, rather confusingly describes the figures as Indra (King Father
of the East) and Consort of Indra (Queen Mother of the West).
easternmost cell on the south wall, there remains the pedestal of a broken pagoda, and the inner walls are decorated what appears to be Yuan-period painting.

The designs on the four ceiling slopes are driven by the same fascination, almost dictated by a sense of *horror vacui*, with swirling bodies, busy action, and splendid colors, all executed by the most accomplished of hands [Fig. 2-20]. Like at T249, on the east and west slopes, each is aligned along a central subject: a pedestal seated on lotus blossoms and with icings of variations of the palmette (west), and a *cintāmani* jewel on a similar pedestal harnessed by two deities (east) [the existence of halos suggests that they must have been deities of some sort, although the their precise identities still elude us]. In contrast, echoing the direction of movement on the north and south slopes in T249, in general, despite some local symmetrical centers, the north and south slopes in T285 are characterized by a similar orientation in movement towards the west, away from the east [Fig. 2-21].

There is one notable difference in T249 that further encourages this sense of movement across all four slopes. The ceiling is no longer segmented by painted architectural members in the corners, which are replaced by tassels hanging from the corners of the lantern ceiling canopy. In this way the painters dealt with the corners quite remarkably to create the illusion that the four slopes together make up one integral space, rather than four separate canvases. The four tassels that hang from the central canopy are the earliest instance at Dunhuang. Here the canopy fringe has two bands of colored triangles (painted representations of fabrics), which help soften the
transition to the slopes. What they also do is to, again, enhance the vertical as well as horizontal continuity of the ceiling design by leading the viewer’s eye to the canopy.  

The parade of heavenly musicians and the *trompe l'oeil* architectural space they inhabit are gone [Fig. 2-21]. They are replaced by a more somber and stoic image: the four walls now meet the slopes at what appears to be an undulating fabric border resembling bunting, punctuated by half-palmettes. Rising together with the slopes are meditating monks or Buddhas, seated inside caves or cave-shaped niches against minimalist pictorial descriptions of mountain ranges (one notable aberration is found on the south wall, second cave from the west, in which an apsara is seated with left knee raised and the right leg pedant, slightly cross-legged—close to the so-called “royal ease” posture often associated with Guanyin). If anything, they seem to be completely oblivious of the hubbub of divine processions taking place above.

As at T249, the ceiling appears also to include non-Buddhist subjects. Fuxi and Nüwa, the mythological progenitors of the cosmos, are identified by their half-human, half-snake/dragon forms [Fig. 2-20]. While the scissors which Nüwa holds in her right hand appears to be

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Tassels as such become an essential part of the trappings of sculptural images of Bodhisattvas, starting in our material record from the mid-sixth century. Like many other decorative motifs that found themselves out of their original contexts and into DH caves, it seems that they appeared in the painter’s vocabulary fairly early on. For one such example, see Denise Patry Leidy and Donna Strahan (eds), *Wisdom Embodied: Chinese Buddhist and Daoist Sculpture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York, 2011), pp. 75-8.

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The illusionistic projections found at T249, reminiscent of beam-ends which here are rendered in one-point perspective, may have originated in Ajanta and became a pervasive pictorial motif in the Pan-Asianist visual culture of Buddhism. See Rob Linrothe, “Landscape Elements in Early Tibetan Painting,” Martin Powers and Katherine Tsiang (eds), *Looking at Asian Art* (2012), p. 165, and fn 11.
an iconographical aberration, it seems to be part of a regional pictorial convention. Other mythological beings abound: on the same slope, the thirteen-headed Kaiming known from the Shanhai jing (Classic of Mountains and Seas), the “monsters of thunder” immediately below the canopy on the west slope, and the “monster of thunder” near the bottom of the north slope [Fig. 2-21]. The list goes on.

The abundance of “Chinese” mythological images at T249 and T285 has naturally led scholars in the past to speculate on their roles in allegedly “Buddhist” cave temples. Duan Wenjie has on various occasions argued that the amalgamation of Buddhist deities and what he calls “Daoist” motifs is itself a reflection of the confluence of the two religions in this period. More recently, emphasis has been shifted to the mortuary symbolism that these motifs draw from, a persistent aspect of Han-period material culture that is shown to have begun to transcend the boundary between tombs and cave temples. A mural tomb, which was excavated at Dingjiazha, Jiuquan county, not far from Dunhuang, and dated roughly to the beginning of the fifth century, plays a critical part in such narratives [Fig. 2-22]. The ceiling design of the tomb

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62 Zhang Qianyi 張倩儀, Wei Jin Nanbeichao shengtian tu yanjiu 魏晉南北朝升天圖研究 (Beijing, 2010), p. 208.


65 Gansu sheng wenwu kaogusuo 甘肅省文物考古所, Jiuquan Shiliuguo mu bihua 酒泉十六國墓壁畫 (Beijing, 1989).
shares a number of features with T249 and T285 including a fudou shape, a range of mountains defining the bottom of the slopes, slopes filled with figures of varying scales, cloud scrolls and other similar forms of decorative motifs, although the relationships between them are often not easy to understand. Moreover, on the west and east slopes, the Queen Mother of West, and the King Father of East appear in the frontal seated postures, more familiar to us from similar examples in Han tombs. Based on this visual analogy, Susan Beningson and Zhang Qianyi, independently, have reached a similar conclusion: that the mythological figures as observed on the cave ceilings of T249 and T285 are not only leitmotifs from Han tomb imagery, but they also carry over their functions to “activate the spiritual journey of the deceased or the devotee,” and to serve as apotropaic images. They guide the ascension of the soul to “the immortal realms of Kunlun” or “the bountiful paradise,” or in Zhang’s words, they are the pictorial signposts to paradise (升天圖), before the full-fledged conceptions of Pure Lands in both ideological and pictorial terms were to be attained in the Tang. Nevertheless, there is currently no evidence whatsoever that any form of burial was performed inside Cave 285; in other words, there was no journey to the afterlife that would require the escort of these ferocious deities. While the practice of Buddhist burials inside caves does exist elsewhere, and we have only begun to note its presence, at least at Dunhuang, none seems to have been conducted inside painted caves.


67 Zhang, Wei Jin Nanbeichao shengtian tu yanjiu, p. 214.

One pictorial element inside the Dingjiazha tomb, one that is perhaps of little iconographic import, further challenges us to think twice on this argument about the one-way traffic of influence from tombs to caves. On the top of each slope, a frontal depiction of a dragon-like bust is found perching precariously on the slope’s edge. In each case, it is shown upside-down in relation to the rest of the slope [Fig. 2-23]. Viewed on its own, it is hard for the viewer to place the deity within the space of the slope, which otherwise constitutes a relatively flat plane with its own clearly defined ground line (the mountain peaks at the bottom). On each slope, the painters placed figures either frontally or in profile, showing relatively little interest in depicting either how they relate to each other or how they relate to the picture plane. These dragon-like deities, by contrast, recall an interest at Dunhuang of artists in trying to utilize the ceiling as a fictitious architectural space or an illusion of heavenly space, showing deities overlooking a painted “balustrade” [Fig. 2-24; see also Fig. 2-9]. Here at Dingjiazha, these spatially ambivalent dragon deities are, one suspects, a telling sign that the craftsmen in the Hexi region were tapping into a larger pictorial repertoire used for both tomb and cave designs. It may be a little reductionist to attribute the source of influence simply to one or the other, when artists seem to have been quite comfortable switching between them.

It has been long acknowledged that a large corpus of images of auspicious deities or monstrous beings in the Six Dynasties period have their origins in Han mortuary motifs. And

we continue to be baffled by the wide geographic distribution of such imagery. Therefore, it is only to be expected that part of a shared visual vocabulary was to intrude into the space of a Buddhist cave temple. However, would they have necessarily served the same function, if their counterparts in Han tombs did indeed play a role in initiating a journey of the deceased to the afterlife? The ambiguity of the term tian 天 as heaven or paradise facilitates this open reading. Indeed it remains unclear: what sort of heaven/paradise is the devotee (presumably Buddhist) expected to ascend to, especially since it is such a motley crew of Buddhist and Daoist deities? Unlike the Dingjiazha tomb, barring the Asura on the west slope of the ceiling at T249, no other figure appears frontally. Moreover, in T249, the Xiwangmu/Dongwanggong pair does not appear on the west and east slopes. Nor do the cardinal animals correspond to their respective directions. In other words, the identity of the deity does not seem to factor into how and where they are placed. Rather, the meaning of these figures can only be grasped when they are taken as a whole: the design of the ceiling is a pictorial enumeration of deities in a dazzling, incantational manner to awe and perhaps to edify. This is indeed a continuation of a Han-period tradition (or even earlier!), though, I believe, not necessarily from its mortuary strand. Wang Yanshou 王延壽 (active. second century CE) in his Rhapsody on the Hall of Numinous Brilliance in Lu (鲁靈光殿賦) informs us just as much:

Divine immortals straightly stand amongst the purlins,

The Jade Girl, peeping from a window, looks below.

... Above, they record the Opening of Chaos,
The beginnings of remote antiquity.
The Five Dragon flying wing to wing,
The Nine Sovereigns of Men,
Fuxi’s scaly body,
Nügua’s serpent torso;
Vast chaos simple and crude,
Its form dimly descried... 71

The ceiling of the Palace of the King of Lu is but another example of a particular Han notion of architectural hierarchy which has been eloquently articulated by Wu Hung in his study of the Wu Liang shrine.72 However, the appearance of such a notion of interior space inside Dunhuang caves still requires an explanation. I believe that spatial hierarchy implied in the ceiling design of T272 may have derived from similar designs in Central Asia,73 and the four slopes that resulted from the transition from wall surface to ceiling may have encouraged the artists of T249 to project a more familiar structural scheme, as if they were the slopes of a pyramidal ceiling corner beams or painted hip rafters. However, the partitioned ceiling of T249

73 For instance, as we saw on pp. 51-52, Caves 621 and 471 at Bāmiyān.
does not sit well with what is in the last analysis a “domical form.” In turn, as we see at T285, partitions are abolished in favor of circulating movements around the domical center.

2.6 The “Life Cycles” or the Narrative Turn

The third group of examples are dated to the Northern Zhou period (557-581). The distinguishing feature of the ceiling designs in this group is the appearance of continuous pictorial narratives occupying the ceiling space. It is a practice that continues to flourish into the Sui Period (581-618).

By the Northern Zhou, narrative paintings are by no means rare at Dunhuang. On the north wall of T275, a cave believed to contemporary to T272, five jataka tales are illustrated in the “monoscopic mode.” Similar examples also abound outside Dunhuang, particularly at Kizil. Continuous narrative in the scroll format also appeared as early as the Northern Wei period. However, it was towards the end of the sixth century that we begin to see pictorial narrative beginning to dominate ceiling spaces. The harbinger of this general trend is found, rather curiously, in a central-pillar cave [Fig. 2-25].

T290 is a central-pillar type cave with a trapezoid plan. It is as deep as it is wide at the back, with the front being about one meter narrower. Architecturally, it varies little from its

74 For reproduction, see Dunhuang yanjiuyuan 敦煌研究院, Dunhuang shiku quanji 3: bensheng yinyuan gushi huajuan 敦煌石窟全集3: 本生因緣故事畫卷 (Hong Kong, 1999), pp. 18, 26-29.
Northern Wei counterparts \textit{[cf. Fig. 2-6]}: the space before the central pillar is covered by a gabled ceiling, and the ceiling areas to the sides and back aisles around the pillar are flat and painted with minimalist lantern ceiling patterns. Its only divergence from Northern Wei practice is, however, remarkable: among Northern Wei examples, the central pillar almost is invariably surrounded on all four sides by flat ceilings, in a series of flat lantern ceiling designs (including T259, T251, etc. Like the Northern Wei examples, in each lantern-ceiling design the corner spandrels between the outer square and the inner rotated square are filled by apsaras rather than vegetal motifs). The artists responsible for the ceiling of T290 used a different design for the area immediately above the frontal face of the central pillar. Rather than more lantern ceiling patterns, it is filled by a flat panel depicting Shakyamuni lecturing in the Deer Park.

The panel is in turn adjacent to another novel feature: on the two slopes of the gable ceiling, in lieu of the usual practice of dividing each slope into vertical slabs (often decorated with apsaras and floral motifs) against a painted simulacra of wooden beams, the painter here transforms the space into the ground for six horizontal registers of continuous pictorial narrative on the life of the Shakyamuni Buddha \textit{[Fig. 2-26]}. This is the earliest instance of a narrative painting on a ceiling. In eighty-nine picture frames, it is also by far the most complete surviving pictorial rendition of the life of the Buddha of the time.

The manner in which the narrative is depicted is by no means straightforward. The story begins at the southern end of the east slope, in the top-right corner, with a palatial scene showing Queen Maya in bed. It is an understated allusion to, rather than an illustration of, the Buddhist version of the annunciation, of the Queen’s dream of an elephant with six tusks entering the right
side of her torso [Fig. 2-27]. Much of the original paint does not survive. The orange-red lines in
which most forms are delineated here are what were originally the preliminary outlines. And
with no form of pictorial punctuation to break the narrative into space cells, architectural
enclosures as such serve as the visual anchors upon which individual episodes become
intelligible to the viewer. From here, the story then proceeds in a boustrophedonic manner, that
is, it moves towards the left until the end is reached, drops down to the the register below and
continues in the opposite direction, and so on. Thus the narrative on the east slope concludes on
the northern end, bottom-left, with a scene depicting Prince Siddharta returning to the palace on
horseback. Likewise, this pictorial biography resumes on the top-right corner of the west slope
and then zigzags its way to the diagonal end of the slope [Fig. 2-26]. The last scene depicts the
conversion of the first five disciples of the Buddha, and yet the narrative is all but concluded
here. The epic ending (or rather, the beginning of it all) is found on the strip of flat ceiling in
front of the central pillar, where Shakyamuni is portrayed as giving his first sermon at the Deer
Park in Vārāṇasī [Fig. 2-28]. The transition from an episodic mode of narration to a stately (and
symmetrically aligned) iconic image of the Buddha may seem abrupt at first. But it also makes
sense. Doctrinally, the free flow of the narrative mode comes to a halt as Prince Siddharta,
having achieved enlightenment, also transcends time. Some sort of pictorial continuity is also
achieved when the artist, in depicting this last moment of the Deer Park sermon, echoes the
seated composition of the last scene at the bottom left of the west slope.

The pictorial program here is essentially a fusion of two narrative modes. In Vidya
Dehejia’s terminology, the depiction runs from sequential/continuous to the monoscenic/
epiphany. But it also illustrates how one can in fact build upon the other; the augustness of the latter derives from how the static depiction captures and in turn absorbs the narrative momentum of the former.

One passage in the *Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya* has the Buddha expressly prescribe that “Under the eaves [of the cloister] will be painted *jataka* episodes [著下画作本生事].”

On this rare occasion, the Buddha lays down how a monastic building in the newly established monastery Jetavana (祇園精舍) should be adorned to the inquisitive Anāthapiṇḍada (給孤[獨]長老). He enjoins this generous donor to have the life of the Buddha rendered in pictures under the eaves, in addition to various other designs to adorn the doors and walls. He does not specify under the eaves of which buildings or precisely where the jataka tales should be painted. Nor does he tell us why, as he sometimes does elsewhere. The same rejoinder says nothing of the manner in which the narrative should be rendered, nor how it should be experienced by the viewer.

Viewing the entire narrative in T290 seems to be predicated on a set of bodily movements choreographed by the arrangement of the painting. And this most likely takes place at the end of a visit to the cave. The viewer begins the jatakas by facing the entrance of the cave, and lets his eye follow the movement of the narrative. Once he is finished with the east slope, the viewer

75 Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art* (New Delhi, 1997), pp. 3-35.


77 In the same passage, for instance, he tells Anāthapiṇḍada that an old monk should be painted inside the lecture hall to preach the essence of the Dharma, or that yakṣa holding food and jewels should be painted on the doors of the refectory and the storage respectively.
turns around and continues with the west slope, until he arrives at the final scene at Deer Park, at which point his eyes meet again those of the seated Shakyamuni inside the main niche of the central pillar. In such a way, the pictorial narrative on the two slopes seems to reenact a second round of circumambulation, by the mind and the eye, centered right underneath the gabled ceiling, presumably preceded by the circumambulation of the central pillar.

However, all of this hardly prepares one for the complexity of the pictorial narratives on the fudou ceiling of T296 [Fig. 2-29]. The comparatively larger size of the cave means more ceiling space to fill, and the artist’s solution is to resort to the familiar and replicate in quantity. The result is a concentric arrangement, with no fewer than eight rings of pictorial motifs outside the central lantern ceiling. Noticeably, a ring of seated Buddhas intercede, or indeed intrude into, a space between the fringes of the canopy and the recessed lantern ceiling, recalling the ceiling design of T272. Outside the canopy is first a ring of floral motifs (or dissipated lotus blossoms) which, during this and earlier periods, was often found as decoration on the gable ceilings in central-pillar caves (compare T428 (N. Zhou), T248 (N. Wei)). Here for the first time they are arranged horizontally. After another ring of meditating Buddhas, further down the slopes and closer to the eye level, the painters adapt the pictorial narrative trend seen in T290 to a fudou ceiling. In the surviving record, this new tradition began with T290, with two registers of pictorial narratives. The subjects of these narrative scrolls are mostly adapted from the Scripture of the Wise and the Dumb, or Xian yu jing, compiled in 445, which became one of the
most popular mural subjects in Dunhuang, particularly in this period. The painters of the scrolls have chosen the tip of the western niche as the pivotal point to structure the narratives. The first narrative relates one of the past lives of Shakyamuni, the jātaka of Prince Good Conducts (善事太子), when the Prince journeys into the sea to seek the Mani Jewel that would benefit the poor. Having obtained the jewel, the Prince is blinded by his jealous brother, who incidentally, is named Prince Evil Deeds. But all is well at the end, as the prince not only regains his sight and has his former status restored, but eventually he also becomes Shakyamuni. Unlike on the gable slopes of T290, where we saw the biographic scenes of the Buddha move in a horizontal sequence, the narrative here begins to the left of the mandorla and proceeds by skidding to-and-fro between the two registers [Fig. 2-30]. In this manner, one jātaka tale covers half the registers of the west slope and entire south and east slopes. Likewise, a second tale, that of the bhikṣuṇī Weimiao or Wonderful Nun’s (微妙比丘) sins, trepidation, and eventual salvation, commences immediately to the right of the mandorla, and goes on to cover half of the north slope. The rest of the north slope is based on a different textual source, the Scripture of Various Fields of Merits 諸德福田經, which illustrates seven different methods of accumulating merit. Unlike a traditional painting scroll, one that gains narrative momentum by treating the horizontal scroll as a continuous pictorial space, the viewer of the ceiling paintings jumps between the two horizontal registers in a zigzag fashion to follow the stories. And it is often hard to tell at first glance where one tale ends and another begins. On the north slope, for instance, the two

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78 According to Sun Xiushen’s study, the painting on the north wall, which depicts the previous life of the Buddha as Prince Sujata, is also based on The Wise and the Dumb. See Sun Xiushen 孫修身, “Dunhuang Mogao ku di 296 ku ‘Xusheti gushi’ de yanjiu 敦煌莫高窟第296窟《須闍提故事》的研究,” *Dunhuang yanjiu* no. 1 (1992): 1-11.
narratives are separated only by four half-filled petals of a blossom. They are the only pictorial punctuation marks found on the entire ceiling. The cartouches, which may have borne inscriptions describing individual episodes, would have made the experience a little easier. However, they hardly give any indication as to in what sequence the three stories should be viewed, or, indeed, if there should be one.

However, the confused arrangement of the visual narratives may betray the original architectural settings from which they are taken. Continuous narratives as such first appeared in India at stūpa sites towards the end of the first century BCE. They are often used to adorn surfaces of gateway architraves, dome slabs, and railings. Though it is not always the case, the viewing order of these narratives is sometimes tied to architectural design. As is described by Vidya Dehejia:

A stupa is circumambulated in clock-wise manner, both from the exterior of the sacred area, and from within its railed enclosure. When outside the sacred area, the pilgrim will view the reliefs on the railing (its outer face) from right to left, and its narratives generally follow this direction of movement. Once the pilgrim enters the railed enclosure, he will view the narratives on the same railing (its inner face) from left to right, while experiencing reliefs placed against the stupa itself from right to left. Thus the direction of movement in a narrative frieze or painting may commence from either left or right, depending on its position relative to the stupa or other sacred object.\textsuperscript{79}

Exactly how such images may have been transmitted to Dunhuang still eludes us. We may safely assume that the portable intermediaries, if any, have long vanished. At Dunhuang, these narrative formats on the ceiling surfaces, in their idiosyncratic manners (boustrophedonic, boustrophedonic,

skidding between registers), may have served as devices that were intended to replicate the architectural experience of viewing both sides of a railing (first right to left and then left to right) or different parts of a structure. If the changing movement of the narrative corresponds to a changing bodily relationship between the viewer and the stūpa, the ceiling narratives choreograph the steps that a visitor takes to circumambulate the central space defined by the ceiling. In such a scheme, the domical ceiling holds equal significance as the absent stūpa.

As in the case of T272, the dome inside T296 may be an enactment of the stūpa form, and by extension of the Buddha himself. And like the stūpa, the dome inside a Buddhist cave interior is a "mesocosm" that "forms ‘a magical structural milieu’ for a cultic operation which ‘can evoke or make real the absent Buddha in Nirvāṇa.’"80 By John Strong’s reckoning, architectural constructions like the stūpa belong to a host of other such "mesocosms" as "the Buddha image, the Dharma, the Bodhi tree and…the king" that were essentially evoked to deal with the key paradox in Buddhism. That is, the absence left behind by the Buddha’s nirvana, whose ontological status is now open to question. Does he exist or not exist, both or neither? Artistic interventions like painting and architecture addressed the question by leveling it into a matter of enactments and re-enactments without producing any forthcoming answer. The Buddha’s presence always takes the form of an enactment or reenactment of his absence.

Here underneath the dome, the cave interior functions as "a space of absence," elegantly put by Richard Etlin in his study of funerary architecture of the French Enlightenment: "[it is] a place of paradoxes, neither of this world nor of the next, neither the space of the living nor the

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place of death…a void whose overwhelming message is the absence of the dead person, no longer with us in life and yet somehow present within the aura of the monument.”

The dome is a perennial reminder of that aura.

2.7 Conclusion

Writing in the first half of the sixth century, the renowned monk and biographer Huijiao 慧皎 (497-554) of Southern Liang (502-557) recounts a brief history of Buddhist icon production and worship from the inception of the religion in India to his own day, in what by then must have been a familiar and much-rehearsed series of episodes: sandalwood and gold images to render the Shakyamuni Buddha’s likeness, and icons, buildings to enshrine tokens of blessing bestowed by him, already appeared during his life time; the division of the Buddha’s relics upon his Parinirvana and the subsequent construction of the ten caiya to house them; The proselytizing efforts of King Asoka and his daughters that “transformed the Eastern Regions through imagery [ 影化東川];” and the mission of Cai Yin 蔡愔 and Qin Jing 秦景 during the Han Emperor Ming’s reign that first introduced to the Middle Kingdom the pictorial tradition of

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rendering the Buddha’s likeness; Ever since, images, icons, stūpas, and temples have flourished in China, and all the more so under the Liang rule.

Huijiao’s ostensible purpose here is to provide the reader with an overview of the promotion of merit through the agency of icon worship, and the prominent pedigree of such practice to which the eminent monks he sets out to commemorate also belong. What he also makes clear for us is insofar as Buddhism is a religion based on the transmission of texts, it is also premised on the dissemination of sacred icons. That it is a “religion of images” or xiangjiao 象教, as it came to be called since the Han. Such dissemination, however, is conditioned by both time and space, as each stage of the dissemination also marks a step further removed from the original.

The diffusion of Buddhist images did not stop in China. As Buddhism was introduced to Korea and Japan, it is hardly surprising that the import of icons was highlighted in our records of the initiations of the religion in those two states. The tremendous resilience of Buddhism, as well as the vigor with which it managed to spread far and wide, was partly engendered by the scriptures, mediated through the Chinese script, the lingua franca of the learned elite across East

83 Huijiao 慧皎, Gao seng zhuan 高僧傳, juan 13, T 2059, 50:413a-413b; on Huijiao’s text, see John Kieschnick, The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography (Honolulu, 1997), pp. 1-15.

Asia; but more importantly, and on a more democratizing level, it was through connections, real or imagined, of images to their (real or imagined) Indic archetypes, that Buddhism was able to aspire to a degree of [what Dietrich Seckel calls] “Oecumenical Unity.” This has in turn defined the reality for the modern art historian, whose task has been to catalogue a warehouse of copies (the majority of which, however, he may never know are copies of what) though they are not necessarily arranged in as neat a fashion as Hujiao’s account would suggest. For an art historian, the study of any Buddhist icon entails locating it on a spectrum with Indic/original and local/adaptation on the two ends.\textsuperscript{85}

In comparison, the subject of Buddhist architecture remains understudied along these lines. One reason is rather obvious: in contrast with painting or sculpture, architecture is not portable, and therefore any effort to copy an architectural design would entail a more complicated and elusive process. Methodologically, even if one allows that architectural designs do travel, it begs more questions to bear on what exactly we mean by architecture, and what gets disseminated in that process. This is exacerbated by the non-representational nature of architecture, whose “subject-matter,” as it were, is much harder to grasp. However, seeking to understand Buddhist buildings through this logic of dissemination would help us get closer to understanding what gave them such compelling powers to those who experienced them, once we have set aside our modern obsession with veracity and dating. Like paintings and scriptures,

Buddhist architecture was and still is a means employed by believers in negotiating their belatedness. Their belatedness in hearing the Dharma, and more importantly, of not meeting the Buddha in person. It helps them come to terms with the pathos and promise generated by the tension between the rūpakāya (absence) and the dharmakāya (presence). Some of these issues will be explored in the next chapter through a case of building at the border of dharma transmission, and of how a group of octagonal buildings served the function of pacifying such anxieties over belatedness.

In this chapter, I have attempted to locate Dunhuang, and its cave architecture in particular, within this long chain of transmission of artistic ideas. To describe Dunhuang cave architecture as confounding is an understatement in comparison with the extreme regularity of Chinese timber architecture. Nevertheless, I have tried to demonstrate that there is a certain consistency in the ever-changing design of the cave interior. That consistency is found in the ceiling. For the period under discussion, it is the defining architectural feature that structures how meanings of the cave interiors may be perceived. With a few notable exceptions aside, this vibrant development in ceiling design seems to have lost much of its momentum after the seventh century, when visual interests and sites of signification shift to the walls. Exactly how

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86 Dao’an 道安 (c. 312-385) in his preface to the Yin chi ru jing 隱持入經 (Sutra on the Aggregates, Realms, and Fields): “Our time does not chance upon a living Buddha, and it is made worse by the fact that we live in a country on the periphery [世不值佛，又處邊國].” And again, this time, the eminent Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664) allegedly at Bodhgaya: “When the Buddha attained Enlightenment, there was no knowing of whence I would drift. Now only in the age of the Semblance [Dharma] have I finally reached hither [佛成道時，不知漂淪何趣。今於像季方乃至斯。].” See Sengyou 僧佑, Chu sanzang ji ji 出三藏記集, juan 6, T 2145, 55:45a; Huili 慧立, Da Tang Da Cien si Sanzang fashi zhuan 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳, juan 3, T 2053, 50:236c.
this dialectic between the ceiling and the walls was played out is an interesting question to ponder. Two trends develop in terms of ceiling designs after the seventh century: one tends to favor greater ornamentation, where vibrant colors, geometric patterns often derived from other mediums, and decorative motives devoid of meaning become dominant; in contrast, an Esoteric Buddhism inflection tends to its opposite, with efforts designed, meticulously and emphatically, for meaning. In the epilogue, we will visit some of these later evocations briefly to suggest future directions for research.
Chapter 3: Many Lives of the Hakkakuendō: Domical Buildings, Sacred Icons, and Hagiography in Eighth-Century Nara

This chapter tells the stories of three wooden domical octagonal buildings that first appeared in eighth-century Japan, known nowadays as the hokuendō 北円堂 of the Kōfuku-ji 興福寺 Temple, the Yumedono 夢殿 of the Hōryū-ji 法隆寺 Temple, and the hakkakudō 八角堂 of Eizan-ji 楠山寺 Temple. The former two are located in the then recently founded capital of Heijōkyō 平城京 (modern city of Nara). The Eizan-ji lies outside the immediate sphere of the capital, approximately 24 miles to its southwest. I argue that these domical halls were part and parcel of the nation’s efforts of securing its place in a larger Buddhist sacred landscape. By virtue of their understood connection to bodhisattvahood, these buildings were believed to be situated at the edge of the dharma transmission and participated in a process of creating a localized notion of sainthood, of elevating local patrons to a place on a par with those enlightened beings (i.e., bodhisattvas). They thus formed a bridge between the realms of men and deities, but also, as will be explored in this chapter, between the portraiture of the sacred and the mundane. What

1 This is a striking case in which the historical figure became quickly superscribed by layers of fiction, to such a point that in recent scholarship on the subject, there is an increasing self awareness on the part of scholars to make a distinction between the real person of Kamitsumiya or Umayado, as he was known in his life time, and the legendary figure of “Shōtoku.” In this chapter I deal almost exclusively with the latter, and therefore the appellation “Prince Shōtoku” is used in most cases. For a discussion of the man and the myth as well as the formation of the cult, see, among others, Ōyama Seiichi 大山誠一, Shōtoku taishi no tanjō 聖徳太子の誕生 (Tokyo, 1999); Sone Masato 曽我正人, Shōtoku taishi to Asuka bukkō 聖徳太子と飛鳥仏教 (Tokyo, 2007); Michael Como, Shōtoku: Ethnicity, Ritual, and Violence in the Japanese Buddhist Tradition (Oxford, 2008); Donald F. McCallum, The Four Great Temples: Buddhist Archaeology, Architecture, and Icons of Seventh-Century Japan (Honolulu, 2009), pp. 1-21.
was known later as “the cult of Prince Shotoku” took shape in this period.1 But as will be made patent in this chapter, it was by no means the only such cult that was in gestation at the time.

3.1 Snapshot

Buildings with circular plans are rare in the East Asian architectural tradition. The octagonal Hokuendō is a close approximation, and those in eighth-century Japan had no qualms in seeing it as such circular [Fig. 3-1]. Raised on a platform finished with finely hewn granite blocks, the hall is pierced on four sides with doors, in accord with cardinal directions. The twin windows juxtaposed in between, with a color scheme of subdued green set against the red and white of the walls and columns, lend to an otherwise solemn looking façade a sense of liveliness and rhythm. The squat appearance of the building may be the result of the rather low level at which the doors and windows meet the bracket sets on the entablature, and the relatively steep-pitched eaves, a result of structural alterations that took place in the thirteenth century. This,
however, gives a somewhat false impression of the interior, for it is not sealed up at the
entablature level, and the space goes all the way up to the roof [Fig. 3-2]. In a concentric fashion
that literally parallels the outer façade columns, another set of eight inner columns enclose an
octagonal dais, leaving a passage in between.

The dome in the interior is raised above the dais, doubling the geometric center marked by
the icon below. It is braced by bracket sets atop the inner columns, each bearing two transverse
bracket arms projecting towards the center. The upper arm reaches out further to carry an
octagonal panel that marks the pinnacle of the interior. The lotus blossom at the center, once fully
coated in gold foil, is a familiar motif that we find on other domes in the Pan-Buddhist world
[Fig. 3-3]. This simple exposed bracketing system underscores a vertical axis in the center of the
building [which might otherwise have been obscured by ceiling panels designed to shield the
roofing]. In such a manner, the raised domical center in the interior echoes the dome on the
exterior, its “slope” marked by the eight tiled ridges.

“Octagonal circular halls 八角円堂 (Jp. hakkakuendo),” as they are known in the records
from the eighth century, this oxymoronic appellation illustrates the novelty of an architectural
form that easily invites confusion. On the other hand, the emphasis on the circularity of an
otherwise octagonal building suggests that the shape of the plan may have metaphorically
referred to the Perfect Teaching (圆教 Ch. yuanjiao Jp. enkyō), a perfect whole complete in all its

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2 For domical ceilings similarly decorated with lotus blossoms, see, for instance, the so called
Lotus Cave at Longmen, dated to c. 500 CE, in Liu Jinglong 劉景龍 (ed.), Lianhua dong: Longmen shiku di 712 ku 莲花洞: 龙门石窟第712窟 (Beijing, 2002), pl. 153; and further west,
Cave 1 at Haibak, Afghanistan, in Mizuno Seiichi (ed.), Haibak and Kashmir-Smast Buddhist
Cave-Temples in Afghanistan and Pakistan Surveys in 1960 (Kyoto, 1962), pl. 6.
parts, which was understood to transcend other lesser teachings of Buddhism under different systems of doctrinal classification (panjiao 判教) that began to appear in China in the Six Dynasties period (220-589).³

Nevertheless, within our knowledge of Buddhist building typologies these buildings do not slot comfortably into any straightforward definition, unless that definition is comprised of a string of negatives: as monastic buildings, they do not hold the main icons of their respective temples; in fact, none is on the central axis of a monastic compound, being either relegated to one side or built in a completely different precinct altogether. Such buildings were commissioned to commemorate deceased personages, which make them suspect imitations of the stūpa form. However, the similarity seems to stop here, for in both form and function, they are a far cry from either the Indic original or its sinified cousin (the pagoda).⁴ Invariably, the person commemorated was not an inducted member of the Buddhist saṃgha/ecclesia, and his burial was conducted elsewhere. In fact, we learn from the following comment on the Yumedono [Fig. 3-4], a structure contemporaneous to the Hokuendō, that by the thirteenth century, while the significance of the octagonal form was not lost on the mind of its author, the monk Kenshin (act. 13th c.; not the more eminent Tendai monk by the same name, active a century earlier), its exact meaning seems to have already escaped him:

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⁴ Timber pagodas of this period are mostly square in plan. See for example the so called three pagodas of Ikaruga: the five-storied pagoda at Hōryū-ji Monastery, the three-storied pagoda at the Hokki-ji Monastery, and the three-storied pagoda at the Hörin-ji Monastery, all in Ikaruga, Nara Prefecture, Japan.
On the [form of the] Sacred Hall there are two views: Some say that it has been octagonal since the time of the Prince [Shōtoku]; Some claim that it was changed into an octagon during the time of Emperor Shōmu, and it had been a rectangular hall in the past. But [the truth is] that it was already octagonal in the Prince’s time. During Emperor Shōmu’s time, the Steward [別當], upon the Superintendent Monk Gyōshin’s memorial, and that the East Palatial Precinct [斑鳩宮?] was admired by the chief minister [Fujiwara no] Fusasaki, permission was granted to repair [the Sacred Hall]. When Soga no Iruka burned the The Imperial Precinct of the Upper Palace to the ground, one does not speak of setting fire in the Dream Hall. Its archive halls have all perished. Their traces/remains now can be found in the field in front of the Main South Gate.

Of course, it would be presumptuous for one to claim to have solved this puzzle. Nevertheless, it appears to me that we do have enough pieces, which, once shuffled around, would afford us an intriguing, and adequately recognizable/comprehensible picture; and enough pieces for us also to speculate on the missing ones. In contrast to our examples in the previous chapters, we do know reasonably well about those who commissioned these buildings, under what circumstances, and in some cases, how images were arranged and displayed inside them, even when these same patrons remain essentially silent on the buildings themselves. Therefore, in this chapter, I resist the temptation to subsume these octagonal halls under any single typological group, either in terms of a “hierarchical economy” of buildings (stūpa) or

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5 The East Palatial Palace here refers to the palace in the region of Ikaruga where Umayado (Shōtoku) allegedly resided. The “Upper Palace (上宮院)” mentioned later in this passage refers to the same precinct. As we will see later in this chapter, this is where the precinct of the Yumedono was founded in the eighth century partly to restore the former glory of the Prince.

“numerological semblance of eight (burial),” as if they were a formal series to be treated in a
historical vacuum.⁷ Rather, I hope to anchor them squarely in the newly founded city of
Heijōkyō, and its relation with the Tang on the continent, set against the backdrop of a century
permeated by the religion of Buddhism. Therefore, this chapter departs from previous ones in
attending to finer historical textures, to the actors whose resolve to tackle pressing religious and
political concerns led to the creation of this group of domical octagonal buildings. It is a study of
architectural symbolism in an age when architectural settings attained the same iconicity as that
of the images they held, or rather, the two formed an imbricating/imbricated circuit upon which
they fed on each other for definitions of religious sanctity.

We shall see that in the midst of surging assertiveness on Japan’s part in its cultural and
religious affairs, these octagonal buildings belie the other side of the same coin, a sense of
insecurity and ambivalence of equal measure: at the end of the transmission of Buddhism, both
temporally and geographically, the newly reformed nation was in desperate need of a local
kernel, some form of verifiable proof that despite its distance from India, efficaciousness of the
religion held equally strongly, and the miracles thus induced should inspire as much belief and

⁷ Both conceptual schemes have long shaped our conception of these buildings. Related
historiographic issues will be discussed below.
awe as anywhere else.⁸ Like their formidable patrons, these octagonal halls, by attending to those religious and geopolitical needs, were important protagonists in this formative period of Japanese history (Nara Period, 710-794).

3.2 Literature Review

Scholarship on these octagonal halls in the English language is still preliminary, partly because timber buildings of this period are rarely studies purely on their own terms, often being forced to serve as surrogates of Tang-period Chinese architecture that no longer survives.⁹ More typical monastic buildings like main Buddha halls and pagodas, grander in scale, are chosen as

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⁸ This is essentially the motivation behind Monk Keikai’s compilation of the *Nihon ryōiki*, to reassure his readers that the miraculous tales they read elsewhere in Chinese texts of the same genre did transpire in Japan as well. See Kyoko Nakamura’s introduction in Keikai, *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973). Japan’s historical relationship to India and China continued to engage Buddhist thinkers beyond the Nara period. Their discussions often revolve around the uneasy double axes of *Sangoku* (India-China-Japan), a construct that could cut both ways by either emphasizing or undercutting Japan’s position at the end of the chain, and the notion of *mappō* or end of the dharma, a period of decline which to some thinkers had already begun as soon as Buddhism reached Japan. For some of these views in the subsequent Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1333) periods, see Mark L. Blum, “The *Sangoku-Mappō* construct: Buddhism, Nationalism, and History in Medieval Japan,” in Richard K. Payne and Taigen Dan Leighton (eds), *Discourse and Ideology in Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (London, 2006), pp. 31-51. See also Sueki Fumihiko 末木文美士, “Bukkyōteki sekaikan to esunosentorizumu 仏教的世界観とエスノセントリズム,” in *Nihon bukkyō shisōshi ronkō 日本仏教思想史論考* (Tokyo, 1993), pp. 94-124. Similar sentiments of being remote from the origin of the dharma, which were expressed by their Chinese counterparts, are discussed briefly in Chapter 2, p. 79.

subjects to reflect contemporaneous building practice on the continent. The octagonal halls, while striking in their singularity, do not play a significant part in such narratives. In his volume in the Pelican History series, for a long time a standard textbook used in the English-speaking world, Alexander Soper mentions these octagonal buildings only in passing. Though at one point he suggests that they represent “T’ang [Tang] sophistication,” Soper does not introduce a single Chinese example. Nor does he make any further comment on this rather profound claim. More recently, Edward J. Kidder takes note of the emergence of the octagonal halls in the 8th century, in a study that is otherwise devoted to the Hōryū-ji temple in the seventh century. However, on the sources that may have inspired the type, he decides to leave for the reader to ponder.

On the other hand, the earliest scholarly efforts in Japan to make sense of the Nara octagonal halls tended to view them through the rosy lens of Pan-Asianistic Romanticism, embodied in Okakura Tenshin’s all-too-familiar proclamation: “Asia is One.” Hashikawa Tadashi traces the origin of the form to the cult of Mount Potala in Japan, whereby the octagonal

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13 Okakura Kakuzo, Ideals of the East (New York, 1903), p. 1. In 1905, an hexagonal hall based on his design was constructed in Izura, Ibaraki prefecture. This may be Okakura’s own architectural commentary on this view. For the latter, see Kumada Yumiko, “Tenshin to rokkakudō: Chūgokku kenchiku taiken wo chūshin ni chakusōgen wo saguru 天心と六角堂:中国建築体験を中心に着想源をさぐる,” Izura ronsō 5 (1998): 9-28.
halls served the role of local surrogates for the Indic site.\textsuperscript{14} Tanaka Shigehisa argues, in a volume
tellingly entitled \textit{Studies of Indic Artifacts in Japan}, that the hakkakuendō form may have
originated from the circular hall seen on the relief on the Bharhut stupa, or the circular building
in which a Buddha tooth was enshrined at the Nirvana Temple, Polonnaruwa, in modern Sri
Lanka.\textsuperscript{15} Both scholars (and indeed many after them) agree that the octagonal halls are derived
from the stupa, and are, in other words, approximations of the circular form.

Postwar scholarship is enriched by a new strand of inquiries that search for indigenous
roots of this architectural form, often in ancient funerary practices of Japan. This developed in
tandem with a tendency in Japanese academia to redefine Japan’s identity and role in East Asia
after the great ruptures of the war. Despite the Buddhist monastic settings of the octagonal halls,
the scholars in this camp tend to shift their attention away from Buddhism. Gorai Shigeru, an
ethnographer of Japanese folk religions, challenges the hitherto prevalent belief that the
octagonal form is derived from the stupa. Rather, he proposes, it has its origin in the ancient
tradition of “exposure burials” (風葬) whereby an octagonal coffin was fashioned out of aucuba
branches. This provided the model for the eighth-century octagonal halls.\textsuperscript{16} In his study of
octagonal Kofun-period tombs, Aboshi Yoshinori speculates on the connection between the
Buddhist octagonal halls and Chinese ritual buildings in which the worship of Heaven was

\textsuperscript{14} Hashikawa Tadashi 橋川正, \textit{Nihon Bukkyō bunkashi no kenkyū} 日本仏教文化史の研究
(Kyoto, 1924).

\textsuperscript{15} Tanaka, Shigehisa 田中重久, \textit{Nihon ni nokoru Indo-kei bunbutsu no kenkyū} 日本に遺る印度系文物の研究 (Tokyo, 1943).

\textsuperscript{16} Gorai Shigeru 五来重, \textit{Kōyaji-jiri} 高野聖 (Tokyo, 1975).
traditionally performed. This in turn elicited a response from Katata Osamu, who protests why external influence was necessary at all to induce the Japanese to build in octagonal shapes. By meticulously sifting through ancient myths contained in the eighth-century text Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters), Katata proposes that the number 8 had been a sacred number to the Japanese long before the introduction of Buddhism, which must have had a decisive influence in the Japanese building tradition. A reiteration of Katata’s argument is found in a recent study of Japanese numerology by Miyazaki Kōji.

Two recent studies in the Japanese language attempt to neutralize the tensions in the previous scholarship, and in turn, have arrived at more nuanced conclusions. Ono Kayo proclaims that, since no structure has thus far been found in India that bears formal resemblance to the octagonal halls, their connections with the stupa can never be made with any certainty. While she still believes the octagonal form is inspired by Buddhism, Ono suggests that one

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18 Katata Osamu 坚田修, “Hakkakudō kō 八角堂考,” in Ōtani daigaku kokushigakkai 大谷大学国史学会 (ed.), Ronshū Nihonjin no seikatsu to shinkō: Ōtani Daigaku Kokushigakkai sōritsu 50-shūnen kinen 论集日本人の生活と信仰: 大谷大学国史学会創立50周年記念 (Kyoto, 1979), pp. 72-98. Still, Katata concedes elsewhere in the article that, in the same way that Buddhism lent corporeal form to Japanese indigenous deities (honji suijaku 本地垂迹 or the paradigm of original ground and subsidiary manifestations), the impulse to construct octagonal halls may have also been stimulated by the Chinese notion of “eight” in the Feng and Shan sacrifices, the Mingtang, as well as octagonal pedestals in Buddhism. For an introduction to how this paradigm could be used to understand Shinto/Buddhism syncretism in Medieval Japan, see Susan Tyler, “‘Honji Suijaku’ Faith,” Japanese Journal of Religious Studies 16.2/3 (1989): 227-250.

19 Miyazaki Kōji 宮崎興二, Naze Yumedono wa hakkakukei ka: kazu ni kodawaru Nihonshi no nazo なぜ夢殿は八角形か: 数にこだわる日本史の謎 (Tokyo, 1995)
should look for its prototypes in the intermediaries of China and Korea. Through her careful reading of textual descriptions of Buddhist structures, particularly those in *vinaya* texts, Ono teases out a hierarchical economy of architectural iconography, in which the form and grandeur of a sacred building are in direct proportion to the significance and merit of the person, whom the building commemorates. In such light, the octagonal hall is but a miniaturized version of the octagonal pagoda in China, reserved for humbler subjects. However, her most important contribution, one I believe is key to understanding the building of Octagonal halls in the Nara period, is pointing out how the Nanendō, a building of an early ninth-century date shortly after the Nara period, became a paradigm upon which a gamut of meanings were conferred, and became a prototype in its own right which was copied and imitated by the members of the Fujiwara clan well into the Heian period. This chapter visits the eighth-century prelude to such an “afterlife.”

Yim Namsu’s study may be read in part as a response to both Katata and Ono. First, he points out that little evidence exists to show that the octagonal halls were ever perceived as pagodas of diminished stature, as they are always referred to in the contemporaneous records as “halls (堂),” and never as “pagodas (塔).” Rather, upon completion they were clearly put to use as ritual settings where readings of the Lotus Sutra were held. Second, he has settled once and for all, in my opinion, the question of whether these buildings should be construed as octagonal or circular. While the term itself, hakkakuendō “octagonal circular hall,” may seem open to both interpretations, he argues, the wording implies that “octagonal” here serves as the modifier of

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“circular.” In other words, they were perceived first and foremost as circular halls, with their octagonal appearances just a minor qualification. Thereupon, he arrives at a conclusion that was not dissimilar to Aboshi’s: the circular form derives from the Chinese notion of the Heaven being circular, and the tradition of imperial ritual architecture (i.e., structures like the Hall of Prayers for Harvest in Beijing) associated with that notion.21

One does not need to be persuaded by either of Yim’s arguments. Moreover, they do little to achieve rapprochement between the diverse views on this matter. They also do not explain how a building form that was closely associated with imperial notions of public display of the utmost reverence towards Heaven was so seamless incorporated into an architectural enterprise that was ultimately of a private nature, private in the sense that it was built not only as a place for commemoration, but as place to hold private reading rituals, and, most importantly, to display a new form of piety defined by the new religion of Buddhism. Indeed, is a discussion of form, when divorced from function, or vice versa, even desirable? This is not to criticize Yim on the ground of logical fallacy, or methodological naiveté. In fact, both his arguments are presented with clarity, based on rigorous research. The seemingly irreconcilable gap they leave open is, however, instructive in its own right.

The question of origin, one which addresses the past of these octagonal buildings, has almost completely engrossed scholars of previous generations (often to the degree that it becomes the only question worth asking). This has in turn, I believe, overshadowed their eighth-century present. Admittedly, the domical octagonal hall was probably an inflection of a foreign

form, as I argue in this chapter. However, it had to re-invent itself in Japan. The circumstances in which this re-invention took place make a compelling narrative. The varied and yet ambivalent roles that these buildings played in their own time cannot be easily explained or explained away by their origin, whatever conclusion we may arrive at. But what resisted the hermeneutic closure makes these buildings fascinating subjects of study, for in them are united a nexus of political, social and religious concerns that seek no easy resolutions. Shall we turn the table and look at them differently? We already have the evidence in these domical structures themselves, and we may only need to articulate alternative questions. In what follows, therefore, I will first provide a small sketch of the historical backdrop—the city/state of Nara in the early eighth century—against which these domical octagonal halls suddenly sprang to life.

### 3.3 Overview

In Wadō 1 和銅 (708), an edict was issued to prepare a new capital, Heijōkyō, on the northern rim of the Nara plain, thus to leave Fujiwarakyō after a short spell of less than two decades. The new royal metropole, officially occupied from 710, was to be twice as large as the Asuka capital. Though it appears that the decision was made not without misgivings, the precise rationale behind the move is perhaps open to debate. It came at a time when the state garnered great confidence after decades of reform. The first known set of legal codes [ritsuryō 律令]

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22 Gemmei, mother of the reigning monarch Monmu, has expressed her concerns over the costs of the move. Alternately, this passage in the Shoku Nihongi may also be read as a rhetorical strategy to justify the move, despite the expenses incurred. See Joan Piggott, *The Emergence of Japanese Kingship* (Stanford, 1997), pp. 188-9.
modeled on the Chinese were promulgated under Temmu 天武 (r. 672-686) and another was approved at the beginning of the eighth century. A system of kami-worship, elaborated into four tiers of hierarchies, was articulated to grant the king religious authority. Internationally, after the great saga of war and unification on the Korean peninsula finally came to a close in 688, and the perceived threats of either a Tang or Silla expansionist campaign had subsided, Japan was once again ready to participate in the international traffic of goods and knowledge. Traffic that in the previous century had provided the greatest impetus for the nation’s political and cultural developments. A mission to the Tang was dispatched shortly after 710, and six more followed before the capital was removed to Heian in 784.

The logistical difficulties and expenses incurred during the move were unprecedented. Temple building also entered a new era. Three of the four so-called “Great Temples” of the Asuka period were transferred to the new capital, though largely in nominal terms. Kōfuku-ji 兴福寺 temple, the only new monastery replacing the Asuka-period Kawaradera 川原寺 temple,

23 For a study of the Ritsuryō laws and their role in the integration of peripheries into the imperial realm, see ibid., pp. 167-235.

24 For an overview of the Nara period, and its foundations, tangible and intangible, laid down in the preceding decades (esp. under Temmu), see John Whitney Hall, The Cambridge History of Japan, vol. 1, pp. 221-267. For an introduction to the growing literature on the cultural exchange mediated through these ambassadorial missions in this period, see Wang Zhenping, Ambassadors from the Islands of Immortals (Honolulu, 2005).

25 The nature of the “transfer” had long been a hotly debated subject. Recent archaeological excavations have shown that most of the original structures were left in situ, and the monasteries also flourished into the Nara period and beyond. However, to what extent do the new monasteries hark back to their earlier counterparts (and why) remains an interesting and unresolved question. Of all three that were built in Nara, only the Yakushi-ji temple copied the original plan, albeit on a much grander scale. For issues surrounding the transfer of the “Great Temples,” see McCallum, The Four Great Temples, pp. 251-7.
was the first to be constructed around 710, owing largely to the power of its patron Fujiwara no Fuhito 藤原不比等(659-720), Minister of the Left under Gemmei and de facto orchestrator of the move. According to recent studies, initial stages of the construction took decades to complete. The new temples were to completely outshine their Asuka predecessors, in both splendor and scale. This narrative of triumph culminates in the erection of the Tōdai-ji 東大寺 Temple in 752, under Emperor Shōmu 聖武, the first monarch to receive tonsure.

The same narrative, read differently, is also one of growing assertiveness on the part of Japan to leave its own mark on the tradition of Buddhist icon and architecture making in East Asia. This sentiment is well encapsulated in the following statement, made by Ōhashi Katsuaki 大橋一章 in the conclusion to his emphatically titled An Essay on the History of the Founding of Nara Art (奈良美術成立史論): “It all began with the arrival of temple builders and icon makers from Paekche in Mindatsu 6 (578). The craftsmen of our nation have acquired hitherto unknown knowledge and techniques of building from the nodal origin of Buddhist culture and art, China. Through the periods of Asuka, Hakuhō, and Tempyō, the arts of Nara has produced the gigantic metal bronze image of the Rushana [Vairocana] Buddha, and the equally impressive wooden

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27 This triumphant narrative often coincides with the rise of the Japanese state. This is not by accident. Literature on this period often conceives the religion of this period under the rubric of “state Buddhism,” the completion of the Tōdai-ji Monastery often becoming the final climax in this narrative. For an incisive and insightful critique of this model, see Bryan Daniel Lowe, “Rewriting Nara Buddhism: Sutra Transcription in Early Japan,” Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2012, pp. 1-45.
structure, Daibutsuden, to enclose it, both unseen, unattempted in China. [Japan has been] tracing the steps of, and finally overtaken the master that is China.”

Grand narratives as such have often eclipsed the early histories of individual monasteries, and we are only beginning to reconstruct this body of knowledge. It is a body of knowledge without which our understanding of the octagonal buildings would not be complete. Likewise, the domical octagonal halls have long lived under the long shadow cast by the monumental Daibutsuden of the Tōdai-ji. Their modest size and scale mismatched against the enormous Buddha hall, which along with the Vairocana Image that it once housed, provides an almost perfect material embodiment of, or the almost necessary denouement to, this triumphalist narrative. It is my contention that the significance of the three domical octagonal halls discussed in this chapter is disproportionate to their scale. Moreover, their stories may introduce a human element—of anxiety and uncertainty—to this narrative.

### 3.4 Structures

The Hokuendō was completed in the eighth month of Yōrō 養老 5 (721), according to Yamashina ruki 山階流記 (hereafter Ruki), a text compiled in the twelfth century but believed to have drawn heavily from inventory records from the eighth century. A year before, Fujiwara no Fuhito 藤原不比等 (659-720), who was instrumental in the planning of and ultimate transfer to the new capital, had passed away. The record in the Ruki, allegedly from the Hōji 宝字 era

\[28\] Ōhashi Katsuaki, Nara bijutsu seiritsu shiron, p. 437.
(757-765), marked this down as an occasion of great honor. The octagonal hall was built to
commemorate Fuhito at the behest of both the reigning monarch, Empress Genshō 元正, and the
Empress Dowager Gemmei 元明. In all likelihood, the octagonal hall was the fourth major
structure to be built in the precinct of Kōfuku-ji Temple, immediately after the core buildings of
the monastery: the Middle Kondō 金堂 (“Golden Hall” reserved for the main image of

29 The event, however, cannot be verified in the *Shoku Nihongi*. The only possibly relevant entry
in the *Shoku Nihongi* speaks of the establishment of an office related to the construction of a
Buddhist hall at Kōfuku-ji Temple [始置養民造器及造興福寺仏殿三司] in the tenth month of
Yōrō 4 (719). The passage has spawned a host of different readings, particularly with regards to
what building the “Buddhist hall” refers to. See Aoki Kazuo 青木和夫 *et al* (eds), *Shoku Nihongi*
統日本紀 (Tokyo, 1990), vol. 2, pp. 79-81. According to the *Ruki*, the Empress intended it (for
Fuhito’s sake?) “to exterminate forever the afflictions of worldly bondage, and stand as a
perennial symbol of the unparalleled, constant bliss [of Nirvana?] [永滅有緣之塵勞, 長證無等
之常樂]. See Kōfukuji ruki 興福寺流記, in DNBZ 84: 298.
veneration), Lecture Hall, and the Middle Gate, as well as the covered corridor which completes the enclosure.\textsuperscript{30}

The present-day Hokuendō stands aloof [Fig. 3-1], making its relationship with the rest of the Kōfuku-ji monastery difficult to discern [Fig. 3-5]. It is not on the central axis with the Middle Kondō, the first structure to be built on site. Nor does it align horizontally, on the east-west axis with the main icon hall. Moreover, while the remaining major buildings align symmetrically on axes parallel to the central one, each plays off a corresponding counterpart; for example, the two (west and east) auxiliary Kondōs on the east and west sides (only the East Kondō now stands), and the early ninth-century Nanendō 南円堂 (South Circular Hall) on the

\textsuperscript{30} In her study of the formative period of the Kōfuku-ji Temple, Kobayashi Yuko has postulated the following scenario prior to the completion of the Hokuendō: owing to Fuhito’s influence within the court, siting and preliminary work had already begun even before the transfer of the capital in 710; construction was to start in earnest following the move, and the Middle Kondō must have been completed before 714, as later texts record that offerings were made at Kōfuku-ji in that year. The building of the Lecture Hall soon followed, and was completed by 717; another three years would have been necessary to construct the Middle Gate and the corridor. Her hypothesis is based on a revisionist (and almost inevitably selective) reading of the textual evidence, a close study of the report of archaeological excavations conducted on site (whose conclusion she in fact refutes), and a particular model on temple building in early Japan, closely associated with Ōhashi Katsuaki. In this paradigm, it is presumed that in at the inchoate stage of temple building in Japan (when Asukadera was built), only one major building could have been worked on at one time, and generally a minimum of five years would have been necessary to complete the building. Starting in the second half of the seventh century, temple builders had improved both in number and skills, but the scale of the building also increased accordingly. Therefore, while there would have been enough manpower to work on multiple buildings at the same time, it would have still taken four years to finish one building. Kobayashi relies heavily on this model in her reconstruction of the early history of Kōfuku-ji temple. See Ōhashi, \textit{Nara bijutsu seiritsu}, esp. pp. 439-446. For our purpose, we do not need to be convinced of the compartmentalized building schedule which Kobayashi proposes. However, the sequence in which these structures came to be built does seem to have followed general conventions. See Kobayashi, \textit{Kōfukuji sōkenki no kenkyū}, pp. 37-63; see also Ōoka Minoru 大岡実, \textit{Nanto shichi daiji no kenkyū 南都七大寺の研究} (Tokyo, 1966).
west paired with the Five-story Pagoda to the east. The Hokuendō, however, lacks a noticeable counterpoint. Its corresponding location seems to have been occupied by a refectory in the Nara period, whose excavated remains match in scale its description in the Ruki. However, a refectory seems hardly the apposite complement to a structure like the Hokuendō.

The name Hokuendō itself is a later invention, presumably after the construction of the Nanendō in 813. The Hōjiki 宝字記 (Record of the Hōji period, included in the Ruki) refers to it as the Circular Hall of the West Precinct (sain endō 西院円堂) or the tautologically sounding “Circular Hall of the Circular Hall Precinct (endōin endō 円堂院円堂).” As both terms suggest, however, it was originally enclosed by a covered corridor. This is corroborated by an undated drawing in the collection of the Himuro Jinja 氷室神社, possibly dated to the Kamakura period (1185-1333), which depicts the Hokuendō surrounded by running galleries on the four sides, with only one opening at the south [Fig. 3-6]. This somewhat “marginal” location of the structure inside a monastic compound characterizes all three buildings under discussion in this chapter. This marginality is offset by its walled enclosure, as if the Hokuendō had been placed off axes only so that its significance could be underscored again. A designed effect that plays on the tension between expectation and singularity.

Likewise, the name Yumedono attached to our second building is also a later invention [Fig. 3-4]. In eighth-century records, the building is identified simply as an octagonal Buddha hall (八角仏殿). However, almost from the outset, the building was closely associated with one individual, Prince Umayado 厳戸, better known as Shōtoku 聖徳 (572-622), who, almost

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31 To my knowledge, however, the main icon of the building was a bodhisattva from the outset, which makes the name Hakkaku butsuden a misnomer.
immediately following his passing, became the fountainhead of ever elaborate mythification, and who by the eighth-century, was already deemed to have been the savior of the Buddhist religion.\textsuperscript{32} In what was one of the earliest stages of this mythification, the title Yumedono became attached to the building from the tenth century onwards. This is based on an episode from what was to become the most frequently cited hagiography of the Prince, \textit{Shōtoku taishi denryaku 聖徳太子伝略} (hereafter \textit{denryaku}).\textsuperscript{33}

In the story, the Yumedono serves as a space reserved exclusively for the Prince’s own religious edification. It was not any mundane interior either. We are told that the Prince would enter, three times each month, but only after having properly purified himself. Often “men clad in metal would arrive to impart profound teachings [常自/目金人到，告以妙義也].” On one occasion, Prince Shōtoku stayed inside the Yumedono for seven straight days without any sustenance. On the morning of the eighth day, when he finally appeared, he did so with a copy of the Lotus Sutra. This copy, as the story continues to unfold, was the one which the Prince studied in a previous life, when he was a monk at Mount Heng of China. A copy of the same scripture was brought back the year before by Ono no Imoko 小野妹子 (early seventh century), returning from his ambassadorial duties in China. However, what the undiscerning Imoko fetched was a copy that belonged to Shōtoku, or rather his erstwhile self’s student. Whilst inside the

\textsuperscript{32} Como, \textit{Shōtoku}, p. 5; Kevin Gray Carr, \textit{Plotting the Prince} (Honolulu, 2012), pp. 3-6.

Yumedono, the Prince’s spirit left his body in a trance and went to Mount Heng, where he picked up his own, and therefore authentic, copy.\(^{34}\)

We do not know whether this story was already current in the eighth century. If it was, the contemporaneous inventory record (Hōryū-ji tō-in shizaichō 法隆寺東院資材帳) does not yet acknowledge the legend and uses the more pedestrian sounding “octagonal Buddha hall,” instead of the name Yumedono. The tenth-century date of the denryaku makes it difficult to argue that the eighth-century “octagonal Buddha hall” was meant to be a recreation of the legendary Dream Hall. Or whether the unusual shape of the building itself, and its growing stature as the center of the emerging Shōtoku cult became the fountainhead of the legend after the eighth century.

Suffice it to say that by the time of the denryaku, the legend and the site certainly fed on each other. And the Yumedono had come to be believed to hold miraculous powers, powers that had not only granted the Prince unmatched wisdom and penetration, but also transformed him into an enlightened being not unlike a bodhisattva, and who was capable of coming to one’s succor—and in this story he is said to be able to travel great distances with amazing speed for this purpose. I shall come back to this point about the transformative power of the Yumedono later.

In comparison, sources closer to the eighth-century tell a slightly more mundane, if equally compelling, story. An “origin tale” (Hōryūji tōin engi 法隆寺東院縁起, hereafter Tōin engi) with an alleged date of 747 relates that in Tempyō 11 (739), upon the petition of Gyōshin 行信 (fl. first half of the eighth century), the then abbot of Hōryū-ji, Princess Abe (daughter of Shōmu

and Kōmyō 光明, and later Empress Kōken 孝謙) commanded Fujiwara no Fusasaki 藤原房前 (681-737) to begin the construction of what is now the Yumedono and the Eastern Precinct. The site chosen was that of the erstwhile residence of Prince Shōtoku, which, since its destruction by Soga no Iruka 蘇我入鹿 (d. 645) in 643, had over the century fallen into decrepitude. The inception of construction seems to be the culmination of a series of related developments which had begun a few years earlier. In Tempyō 天平 7 (735), upon the behest of Princess Abe, a lecture service on the Lotus Sutra took place at Hōryū-ji, in honor of the “august spirit of Prince Shōtoku (聖徳尊霊).” Another service was performed the following year that in all likelihood shadowed the one before it in pomp and circumstance. This time, however, Queen Kōmyō and Abbot Gyōshin led the proceedings, with the eminent monk Dōji 道慈 (d. 744) as head lecturer and more than three hundred monks and nuns in the audience. Just a year after, Kōmyō made a substantial donation to the Hōryū-ji, which included what was to become the main icon of the Yumedono, a wooden image of the Bodhisattva Avalokitēvara, “in the same scale of the Prince of the Upper Palace (i.e. Prince Shōtoku) [上宮王等身観世音菩薩木像].” Therefore, despite

35 Hōryūji tōin engi 法隆寺東院縁起, DNBZ 85: 127. The text is fraught with a host of problems, most notably that according to Shoku Nihongi, Fusasaki had already passed away two years earlier in 737. According to Hayashi Mikiya’s study, the first part of the text, which tallies well with contemporaneous records otherwise, was likely part of the inventory record of the Hōryū-ji, dated 761; the name dropping of such dignitaries as Princess Abe (who had reigned as Empress Kōken until three years earlier and was to reign again as Shōtoku three years later) and Fusasaki was to grant further weight to Gyōshin’s feat. The second half of the text seems to be compiled much later, as it draws references from a number of texts dated to 9th and 10th centuries. Nevertheless, it must have arrived at its present form more or less in the second half of the 11th century. Hayashi Mikiya 林幹彌, Taishi shinkō no kenkyū 太子信仰の研究 (Tokyo, 1980), pp. 26-31.

36 Hōryūji tōin engi shizaichō 法隆寺東院資料帳, Dai Nihon komonjo 4:510, cited in Hayashi Mikiya, Taishi shinkō no kenkyū, p. 11.
the tenth-century date of the appellation “Yumedono,” it would seem that from its inception, the
eighth-century domical octagonal hall inside the East Precinct of the Hōryū-ji Monastery was
imbricated with the legend of Shōtoku. These acts of devotion are, in a nutshell, what eventually
led to the establishment of the Eastern Precinct of the Hōryū-ji. The unusual layout of the
compound—placing, as it were, an octagonal hall and an icon with particularly personal ties at
its center—makes its specific characters difficult to pinpoint [Fig. 3-7].

Unlike Kōfuku-ji and Hōryu-ji, the location of Eizan-ji is removed from the immediate
sphere of the Heijō capital. Approximately 24 miles southwest of the modern city of Nara,
outside the township of Gojō, Eizan-ji is founded on a small irregular patch of land, carved out
by the Yoshino River on its south and a stretch of hills on the north [Fig. 3-8]. Such early texts as
the eighth-century Kojiki and Manyōshū万葉集 testify to the importance of the area in regional
and national traffic, a site frequented by royals. The impression of a modern traveller is,
however, quite the opposite. The remote location keeps most casual tourists away, and the
monastery seems to be poorly maintained, with crowds expected only during the short intervals
when the main icon, the Medicine Buddha, is on display, during two semiannual services in April
and October.

Again, unlike in the previous cases, in the absence of a near-contemporary founding tale
(engi 緣起) or inventory record (shizaichō 資材帳), the early history of the monastery is
shrouded in uncertainties. For the following reconstruction of the early history of the monastery
and its domical octagonal hall, I am indebted to Fukuyama Toshio’s study in 1950. Since the

37 Fukuyama Toshio 福山敏男 and Akiyama Terukazu 秋山光和, Eizanji hakkakudō no kenkyū
tenth century at the latest, Fujiwara no Muchimaro (680-737), has been credited with the founding of the Eizan-ji. Most famously, an Order of the Council of State (taijōkanbu 太政官符) dated Eien 永延 3 (989), citing land donations made in 765 by Muchimaro’s offsprings to the monastery, names the “Great Patriarch [of the nanke or south branch of the Fujiwara clan], Recipient of the Title of the Head of State Council and Prime Minister [大祖太政大臣],” i.e. Muchimaro, as the founder of the monastery.\textsuperscript{38} A century later, in a vow dated to the eighth month of Jōtoku 承徳 2 (1098), the Steward (別当 Jp. bettō) of Eizan-ji, a monk by the name of Jikkyō 實經, cites the Yōro 3 (719) as the year in which the monastery was founded.\textsuperscript{39} This remains the most prevalent belief to this day.

However, such attributions leave unaccounted a peculiar fact. In his biography of Muchimaro, Monk Enkyō 延慶 (fl. eighth century) makes no mention whatsoever of the Enzan-ji, despite the author’s efforts to underscore the chancellor’s patronage of Buddhism elsewhere. He does relate a temple, a kami shrine-temple (jingūji 神宮寺) in Koshinomichi (越前国) founded by Muchimaro in 715 [which is, incidentally, the first jingūji in our record].\textsuperscript{40} Enkyō authored the biography in the 760s, most likely under the instruction of Muchimaro’s second son Nakamaro 仲麻呂 (706-764), and is now part of the Tōshi kaden 藤氏家伝, which is believed to have been compiled by Nakamaro. This makes the former Muchimaro attribution highly

\textsuperscript{38} Dai Nihon shiryō 大日本史料 2.1: 418-421, cited in Fukuyama and Akiyama, Eizanji hakkakudō no kenkyū, p. 6.

\textsuperscript{39} Dai Nihon shiryō 3.5: 125-129, cited in Fukuyama and Akiyama, Eizanji hakkakudō no kenkyū, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{40} Okimori Takuya 沖森卓也 et al, Tōshi kaden: Kamatari, Jōe, Muchimaro den chūshaku to kenkyū 藤氏家伝 (鎌足、貞恵、武智麻呂伝) 注釈と研究 (Tokyo, 1999), pp. 350-354.
unlikely, a piece of after-the-fact fiction that had become widely accepted by the tenth century. The attributed founding date of Eizan-ji also becomes questionable. At least one author believes that it not only postdates the death of Muchimaro in 737, but also that of his son Nakamaro.\textsuperscript{41} However, a document dated 765 from the Shōsoin corpus shows that by then not only was the monastery extant and staffed with appointed administrators, it also possessed scriptures that were on loan from Tōdai-ji.\textsuperscript{42} In contrast, according to Adachi Yasushi, the founding of the temple may have dated considerably earlier, perhaps to the three decades between Muchimaro’s twilight years in the 730s and Nakamaro’s fall from grace and execution in 764.\textsuperscript{43} The monastery is mentioned in the Shōsoin document by the name \textit{Sakiyamadera} 前山寺, which Fukuyama Toshio has shown, almost certainly refers to Eizan-ji before it was replaced by the characters


\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Dai Nihon komonjo} 大日本古文書 5:519 (\textit{Zokushū besshū} 続集別集 7:14)

Eizan-ji 荣山寺 in the tenth century. Nevertheless, afterwards the temple continued to be known as Sakiyama well into the early Edo period.\(^{44}\)

In comparison, we seem to be on much firmer footing when it comes to dating the construction of the Hakkakudō in Eizan-ji [Fig. 3-9]. The same vow made by Jikkyō in 1098 relates that the octagonal hall was built by Nakamaro in memory of his deceased parents [是仲麻呂奉為先考先妣所建立也]. This would put the date to before 765. In the Shōsoin collection there is an epistle addressed to the Tōdai-ji Construction Agency (zō Tōdaiji shi 造東大寺司), requesting two drawing tables [畫機], from a certain Office for the Construction of the Circular Hall [zō endō sho 造圓堂所]. The letter bears the date of the twelfth month of Tempyō Hōji 7 (764), that is, nine months before Nakamaro was executed.\(^{45}\) Even more strikingly, the request was made by the Minister of Civil Affairs (n/minbu kyō 仁[氏]部卿), held at the time by none

\(^{44}\) Fukuyama and Akiyama, *Eizanji hakkakudō no kenkyū*, pp. 2-8. For his part, Fukuyama favors an earlier date. He argues that the 719 date in Jikkyō’s vow is a scribal error, which originally recorded that in that year Muchimaro was granted land by the court, but in turn was miswritten as Muchimaro donating the land to the monastery. The error was perpetuated through succeeding temple records and by Jikkyō’s time in the late 11th century, it was misinterpreted that Muchimaro had founded Eizan-ji in 719. On the other hand, an eave-end tile excavated near the south gate of the monastery has led Fukuyama to speculate that Eizan-ji, or its predecessor, may have already existed earlier. In both size and decor, it suggests a close connection with tiles excavated from Moto-Yakushi-ji, believed to have been built in the last decades of the 7th century. In parentheses, Fukuyama cites Ishida Mosaku who has discovered tiles of the same type at the Yakushi-ji Temple in Nara, which would put the date in the 720s [a date that would in fact corroborate the now much-maligned 719 date]. However, he goes on to dismiss it by suggesting that the tiles found in the Nara site were most likely transferred from the original site in Fujiwara-kyō. We have now come to know that the “transfers” of the Great Temples at the beginning of the 8th century were largely nominal. In hindsight, it may be premature to dismiss Ishida’s evidence. Instead, perhaps we may find it necessary to relax the chronological parameters of dating by style/typology of roof tiles.

\(^{45}\) *Dai Nihon komonjo* 5:463 (Seishū 正集 45-9).
other than Fujiwara no Asakari (d. 764), Nakamaro’s third son. In all likelihood, the
document refers to the octagonal hall at Eizan-ji.

Before we move on to discussions of the structures, a short recapitulation is in order. A
number of themes emerge out of the early histories of these monasteries, especially with regard
to the circumstances under which the domical octagonal halls were constructed. One is the
commemorative nature of all three structures, and the subjects of commemoration were all
founding patrons of their monasteries; but it is more than that. In each case, there was invested a
strong *personal* tie to the building: the rulers of the state in commemorating their extremely
competent caretaker in a time of uncertainty (Kōfuku-ji Hokuendo); Empress Kōmyō’s
admiration for Shōtoku and her personal involvement in the latter’s cult (Hōryū-ji Yumedono);
and finally an architectural statement of a tie between a son and his deceased parents (Eizan-ji
Hakkakudō). In contrast to the grander architectural projects of this period, these are buildings on
a more humane and intimate scale. Second, despite their smaller scales, all three buildings were
commissioned and built with the utmost urgency, as if they embodied some talismanic presence
to be secured for each monastic compound. As for their importance, the Hokuendo was one of
the earliest monastic buildings to be completed at Heijō-kyō (Nara), at a location that overlooked
the new capital; the Yumedono was possibly constructed in tandem with the rebuilding of the
West Precinct of the Hōryū-ji, which had burned down in 670; and the significance of the Eizan-
ji structure is underscored by the fact that it is the best documented structure of the monastery,
then and now. Finally, a third salient theme that all three have in common is the level of
involvement of the Fujiwara clan, as both a *de facto* force behind the buildings and the subjects
they commemorate. We will come back to this last point later in this chapter.
While both the Hokuendō and the Yumedono underwent significant alteration during the Kamakura period, the Eizan-ji octagonal hall preserves much of the original eighth-century building. The description that follows will be primarily based on this building. It is meant to present the Hakkakudō as a template to which both the Yumedono and the Hokuendō belong.

Hokuendō: The present structure is a reconstruction, second time around. The original Nara-period building was destroyed by fire in Eishō 永承 4 (1049). Though it was rebuilt in Kanji 宽治 6 (1091), it soon succumbed to fire again in Chishō 治承 4 (1180). The present building was constructed in Jōgen 永元 4 (1220). Over the years, its constant exposure to the elements has called for repairs of varying degrees of magnitude. However, according to the report of the last major repair in 1966, no major change has been made to the 13th-century structure. The vow made on the occasion of the Jōgen rebuilding underscores the importance of adhering strictly to the original Nara design. The 1966 repair has shed further light on the relationship between the Jōgen building and the Nara original, and lent more credit to that claim. Wear and scorched marks on the tufa (gyōkaigan 凝灰岩) paving stones (shiki-ishi 敷石) suggest that they had been recycled from the eleventh-century Kanji-period structure. Furthermore, underneath the initial surface, a layer of shards of foundation stones mixed with pounded earth (hanchiku 拌築), mostly likely from the original Nara construction, has also been found in the earth mound that comprised the original foundation, thus providing good evidence that the location of the building, notwithstanding the two rebuilding efforts, has remained more or less unchanged. The distance between any two neighboring pillar base stones on the outer rim, if converted to Nara-period measurements, is approximately 16.4 shaku, also close to the 1 jō 7 shaku described in the Hōjiki of the Ruki. See Naraken Bunkazai Hozon jimusho 奈良県文化財保存事務所, Jūyō bunkazai kōfukuji ooyuya kokuhō dō hokuendō shūri kōji hōkokuho 重要文化財興福寺大湯屋・国宝同内円堂修理工事報告書 [Hereafter HSKH] (Nara, 1966), pp. 48, 58-60. Yumedono: while minor repairs and alterations were conducted whenever needed since the 8th century, the first recorded major rebuilding of the Yumedono took place in Kangi 宽喜 2 (1230). Allegedly “old” materials were used; we do know that among other things, extra elevation of the building was introduced, which greatly altered the original Tempyō-period form. In the Keichō period (1596-1614), most of the structures at the Eastern Precinct went through a spell of major rebuilding. However, there was no recorded change made to the Yumedono in this period. In the next few centuries, again, piecemeal alterations were made to the building, until Shōwa 12 (1937), which the first modern and also most recent efforts that completely took apart the building and restored it back to its 13th-century form (解体修理). See Nara rokudaiji taikan kankōkai 奈良六大寺大観刊行会 (ed.), Nara rokudaiji taikan 奈良六大寺大観 [Hereafter NRT] (Tokyo, 1999-2001), vol. 5, pp. 9-10; See Kokuken kenzōbutsu hōryūji yumedono oyobi tōin kairō shūri kōji hōoku 国寶建造物法隆寺夢殿及東院迴廊修理工事報告 (Tokyo, 2004), pp. 50-62, 74-88.
When the first modern-period repair was conducted at the Eizan-ji Hakkakudō in 1910-1911, the team of architectural historians, under the aegis of Amanema Shunichi, discerned no major structural change that had been made since the Nara period. Before the early twentieth century, there is only one recorded repair, which was conducted by the hands of the aforementioned Jikkyō in 1091, who allegedly restored the much-damaged roof. Some piecemeal restorations were also made, as the restorers came to discover during the Meiji-period repair, and new architectural features added, which were consequently removed during the restoration. In addition, remains of painting (Akiyama dates it to the late eighth-century) can still be found on a number of structural members.

The plinth on which the Hakkakudō stands is of the danjō zu mi kidan 壇上積基壇 type [Fig. 3-10], a form that had already appeared in the late sixth century; known for its durability, it was reserved only for important structures. At times, however, the arrangements appear haphazard in comparison with the more standard construction at Hokuendo and Yumedono. At the Kōfuku-ji building, long and relatively smaller base slabs (jifuku-ishi 地覆 石) are first laid horizontally along the contour of the prepared earth mound, following a shallow trench that has been dug before. The hameishi panels 羽目 石 are then set on the jifuku-ishi stones, standing vertically on their smallest surfaces, to cover the sides of the foundation. They are punctuated by


48 We might liken it to the ship of Theseus, whereby each time a plank is replaced by an identical twin after it has deteriorated, and therefore its integrity as the “same ship” remains intact over time even after all the original planks are long gone (though our case fares a lot better).

49 McCallum, The Four Great Temples, pp. 45-6.
slightly narrower struts called *tsukaishi* 来石, which also round up the corners. A further layer of *kazuriishi* 葛石, laid horizontally on top of the mound around the edge, lock the panels firmly in place [Fig. 3-11]. The pavement on the surface of the foundation is divided into two parts, with the inner ring circumscribed by the octagonal hall, and the outer ring surrounding it. For the outer ring, like the foundation, granite slabs, partially dressed for decor, are spread out in the *shihanjiki* 四半敷 manner, whereby squarish stones are laid on the diagonal so that they meet the four sides on the cardinal directions at a 45 degree angle, while on the other four sides they meet on their edges. The Inner part, where tufa rather than granite slabs are used, constitutes the flooring of the building proper. While the pavement of the outer sanctum (*gejin* 外陣) follows the same *shihanjiki* method as the granite pavement outside, that of the inner sanctum (*naijin* 内陣) is much more haphazard, especially towards the center where the image platform was [Fig. 3-12].

On the other hand, at Eizan-ji Hakkakudō, the *jifukuishi* 基覆石 base slabs have oval rather than the more common rectangular (?) cross-sections; and the *hameishi* 栽石 panels set on top are buttressed on the side by small pebble-like stones (*kuriishi* 棟石). The stone pavements on top of the plinth, both on the outer sanctum (*gejin*) within the building and without, appear to be

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50 This is strictly speaking, not the real *shihanjiki* method, the description of which only fits the paving of a rectangular surface. According to JAANUS, it is a method widely used by Zen monasteries from 13th century onwards. Is the Hokuendō the earliest instance where this method was used? Was it adopted here, precisely to accommodate the octagonal shape of the plan?

51 The authors of the 1966 report surmise that the stones that appear worn and divergent in size at the center are probably from the 11th century structure that were left untouched during the Kanji-period rebuilding. See HSKH, p. 62.
original, though a layer of wooden flooring had been added to the sanctum at a much later date but was removed during the Meiji repair.52

Above the paving, the interior of the building is divided into a corridor-like outer space, and a central sanctum (naijin). The Eizan-ji structure is exceptional, however, in that the naijin is square instead of octagonal, with each side about 11 feet long. The four pillars delineate the tips of a raised wooden dais, enclosed on the four sides by balustrades. The naijin sanctum is topped with a canopy (tenjō 天井) with painted coffers, which partially blocks an otherwise open-beamed ceiling [Fig. 3-13]. Remains of original paint and inscriptions are found inside some coffers.

The entire dais was restored during the Meiji repair, the balustrades were modeled on details from the octagonal pedestal in the Hokkedō of Tōdai-ji (the balustrades prior to the restoration were much higher, and and most likely constructed after Kamakura period, and were therefore removed). Intriguingly, the dais did not seem to be considered the geometric center of the interior immediately before the restoration. Instead, a wooden niche was built behind the two northern pillars of the naijin, transforming the interior of the octagonal hall from a centralized space, which may have prescribed the peripatetic mode of circumambulation, into a walled space for still contemplation. A statue of the Vairocana Buddha, originally of the Stupa-Hall, was found inside the niche, flanked by two seated sculptural portraits (one larger than the other) of Kūkai 空海 (774-835). The restorers judged the niche to be a feature added in the late Edo period and had it removed during the restoration.

52 Fukuyama and Akiyama, Eizanji hakkakudō no kenkyū, p. 18.
Above the canopy, now hidden from view, is the superstructure that supports the ceiling [Fig. 3-14]. The *naijin* pillars, each puncturing one corner coffer of the canopy, rise a further three feet, and are bound by horizontal tie beams (*kashiranuki* 頭貫) which penetrate and are keyed into their tops [Fig. 3-15]. Large blocks, measuring 9.5 inches tall, are then installed to hold four chamfered rainbow beams (*kōryō* 虹梁) which make up a square frame for further elevation. The horizontal tie beams and the rainbow beams, here as well as elsewhere in the building, are crucial in transferring the weight of the roof structure to the load-bearing pillars. Two smaller blocks sit on top of each of the rainbow beams to receive an octagonal frame, each serving as a tip of the octagon. They are placed approximately 4.5 feet from each other, which accounts for the length of each side of the octagon. Now the interior framework of the ceiling has almost reached its pinnacle. It is also from here that a complete revamp was introduced during the Meiji-period restoration. A long beam traverses west to east, resting squarely on the octagonal frame [Fig. 3-16]. On its center, an octagonal kingpost, reinforced with metal braces, is installed to receive the ends of the eight main hip rafters (*sumigi* 隅木). The hip rafters radiate from the kingpost, spanning the entire distance between the pinnacle of the roof and purlins atop the outer-column corner brackets [Fig. 3-17]. The aforementioned octagonal kingpost rises further to the roof truss to support the exposed roof rafters (*nosumigi* 野隅木), and is finally crowned on the exterior by the limestone combination of an octagonal *roban* (霧盤 “dew-receiver”) base plate and jewel (宝珠) finial [Fig. 3-18].

Standing at 14.5 feet tall, the eight *gejin* outer pillars measure approximately 4 feet shorter than their *naijin* counterparts. Like the *naijin* pillars, they are also of octagonal cross sections,
and taper towards the top; on the other hand, unlike the naijin pillars which stand perpendicular to the ground, the gejin pillars lean slightly inwards. On different levels, they are intersected and bound together by horizontal beams (kashiranuki, uchinorinageshi 内法長押, jifukunageshi 地覆長押, and under the windows koshinageshi 腰長押). Atop each outer pillar is a large block, which in turn carries two bracket arms, one of which, here visible from the inside, is set into, and thus its two arms are angled at 135 degrees to follow the contour of the walls [Fig. 3-17]. Another bracket arm extends to the exterior of the building to receive the main hip rafters under the eaves [Fig. 3-19]. It is this three-pronged corner bracket design that ties the structural members of the octagonal hall together: the square naijin with the octagonal gejin, the roof support above the ceiling canopy with the corner bracketing, and the interior timber framework and the eave support on the outside. The longitudinal wall bracket arms are surmounted by three blocks, two on each end, and one at the center atop each pillar. On the interior, the block in the center receives a short rainbow beam that traverses the gejin. Together, they carry a chamfered purlin support arm, upon which purlins, meeting on the corners, rest. There is also additional support in the form of intercolumnar struts [Fig. 3-15].

Outside, the roof eave rafters (jidaruki 地垂木), oval in cross section, are laid on the outer-column purlins at intervals of about 1 foot, and at their tops, they intersect with the corner hip rafters. Their outward projection helps support (kioi 木負) the flying rafters (hien daruki 飛檐垂木), which are rectangular in cross section. This difference in the cross sections seems to have followed a Nara-period convention. Both layers of rafters are sheathed on top with white painted
boards. The so-called kayaο 茅 負 eave supports rest on the flying rafters, upon which roof tiles are laid [Fig. 3-19].

One difference immediately noticeable between the Eizan-ji building and the other two is that of scale. Both the Hokuendō and the Yumedono are close to 16 feet on each side as opposed to the more humble 11 of the Eizan-ji Hakkakudō. Additional elevation which was part of their respective Kamakura rebuildings resulted in impressions of further grandeur. At the Yumedono, a new layer of bracketing, comprised of blocks beneath the purlins both at corners and between pillars, was added, which is clearly visible from the exterior [Fig. 3-4, cf. Fig. 3-9]. Likewise, even in the absence of any textual records, we may speculate with reasonable confidence that a second layer of bracketing on the Hokuendō, here complete with the “trident” bracket sets and struts, was most likely added during the Jōgen-period rebuilding of 1220 [Fig. 3-1]. Moreover, the Yumedono now stands on a two-tier octagonal plinth which mirrors the design of the dais inside. But according to Kenshin, whom we encountered at the beginning of this chapter, there was only one tier on the outside during his time.

On the inside, both buildings are anchored by octagonal, rather than square (Eizan-ji) inner sanctums. Inside the Hokuendō [Fig. 3-2], the central dais is crowned by an octagonal ceiling board which, as it were, rests on corbeled bracket sets that extend from the tops of the eight inner pillars. The design on the board, once covered with golden foil, is a flat impression of a radiating.

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53 The bettōki 別当記 records that in Kangi 2/5/23 (1230) “one layer of beams, and one layer of lintels” were added [棟上桁一重, 鴨居一重加増之矣]. Hōryūji shiryō shūsei: eibon 法隆寺史料集成: 影印本 (Tokyo, 1985), vol. 3, p. 44; NRT, 5: 9.

flower canopy often seen atop images of deities [Fig. 3-3]. On the other hand, the interior of the Yumedono continues the cascading elevation as seen on the outside with a two-tier stone dais. Rather than dividing the interior into a walking corridor and an inner sanctum, as is observed elsewhere, the inner pillars stand awkwardly on the first tier of the dais. It is as if the wooden structure had been imposed upon a separately conceived design of four rings of stone pedestals, which culminates, ironically, in an octagonal miniature shrine (舎子 Jp. zushi) that alludes visually to the timber building it resides in [Fig. 3-20]. The present miniature shrine was a product of the Genroku 元禄 period (1688-1704), modeled presumably on an original from the eighth century. The garish color of the seventeenth-century structure was restored in the early twentieth century to the much more solemn tone we see today.\textsuperscript{55}

3.5 Icons

Like the timber structures that enclose them, the images that were once housed inside these octagonal halls are equally susceptible to fire and other forms of calamities. Most have indeed perished over the centuries. Later copies and similar works give us some idea of what they may have looked like. For the most part, however, our knowledge about iconographic programs, manners of display, and viewers’ responses needs to be reconstructed through texts.

The Hōjiki relates that a sculptural ensemble was dedicated along with the Hokuendō, to be installed therein, by courtesy of Genshō and Gemmei. It includes an image of Maitreya, two attending Bodhisattvas, two arhats and four heavenly kings. On the same day, Fuhito’s widow

\textsuperscript{55} NRT 5:12.
Tachibana (no) Sukune no Michiyo 橘宿彌三千代 dedicated another Maitreya ensemble to the Middle Kondō, one that is even more elaborate than the one at Hokuendō. Both sets of images have been reduced to ashes during the conflagrations that have beset the monastery over the years. The earliest surviving images from Hokuendō date to the thirteenth century, wrought by the hands of the famous Kamakura master Unkei 運慶 (d. 1223). However, even of this later group, only the main icon Maitreya [Fig. 3-21] and the two “arhats,” alleged portraits of Vasubandhu and Asaṅga survive.

Aside from iconographic identifications, the Hōjiki affords us little information with regards to the original eighth-century group. We do not know, for one thing, the materials from which they were made. However, the respective heights of the images it provides are rather intriguing: the main icon, a (presumably) seated image of Maitreya is listed as 3 feet 9 inches, or 1.15 meters, hardly dwarfing (as it should) the attending Bodhisattvas which were at 3 feet 6.5 inches; the arhats and heavenly kings are much taller by comparison, at 5 feet 5 inches and 5 feet 8 inches, respectively. The height of the Maitreya image is corroborated by a vow dated 1207 made on the occasion of the last reconstruction. Curiously, the Enryakuki 延暦記, an inventory record of the properties of the Kōfukuji Temple, from the period of 782-805, lists the Maitreya image as 6 feet. While it is quite likely that, a possibility that has indeed been entertained by Kobayashi Yuko, the contradictory scale recorded in the latter text may have been a mistake on the part of the author, who may have had taken it for granted that by this time, almost all of the main images at Kōfukuji were 6 feet tall. It is equally possible, I believe, that the author of the Enryaku-period record may in fact have left us the height of the image including the pedestal that

56 Kobayashi, Kōfukuji, p. 62.
the Maitreya image was seated on. This way, the main icon would have towered above other members of the ensemble.

Another area of contention, one that is more germane to our interest here, has to do with the identity of the original main icon. The case of Maitreya is a particularly confused one. His status as the next Buddha lends him to representations in both Buddha and Bodhisattva forms. The present seated image of Maitreya in Buddha form dates to the thirteenth century, and to some it is enough to substantiate the belief that the eighth-century original must have also been a Buddha image.\(^{57}\) However, as early as the 1940s, Adachi Yasushi has raised doubts about the present identification, as a close reading of relevant textual records shows that through the centuries, even up to as late as the early Edo period, identification of the original main icon is far from unanimous.\(^{58}\) There are other reasons why we may speculate that the building may have been occupied by a bodhisattva. As I will argue later in this chapter, the hakkakuenō form is an architectural marker that is closely related to the ideal of bodhisattvahood.

An early Kamakura-period painting may give us some clues regarding how the images were originally displayed [Fig. 3-22]. This small hanging scroll casts a birds-eye view from the south of the entire monastery of Kōfuku-ji, set against a lush landscape of the Kasuga region. In lieu of building exteriors, images of deities coated in gold foil are used as visual anchors to identify each monastic building. It is a stylistic convention which underscores the function of such paintings as aids for meditation by means of facilitating direct visual engagement with the

\(^{57}\) Ibid., pp. 130-4.

deities. The Hokuendō is located on the top-left corner of the scroll: the four Heavenly Kings stand on four corners, flanking the entrances (though only the southern one is shown); closer to the center, the Maitreya image is seated on a high lotus pedestal, attended in front by two half-kneeling Bodhisattvas, while two standing images of the Buddha’s disciples look on from behind [Fig. 3-23, detail of Fig. 3-22].

The World-Saving Avalokiteśvara (救世観音 Jp. Kuze Kannon) of the Yumedono is the only extant image we have that was once part of the original setting [Fig. 3-20]. Now enclosed within the aforementioned miniature shrine, the image is open to public view only twice a year for a very brief period of time. In fact, before the infamous “re-discovery” of the icon in 1884 by Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908) and Okakura Tenshin (1862-1913), the Kuze Kannon had long been treated as a “secret Buddha (hibutsu 秘仏).” It was wrapped in hundreds of yards of cloth, and was never shown to anyone, not even to the clergy itself.\(^5^9\) Today, the entire ensemble of images inside the Yumedono also include a Heian-period Shō Kannon (聖観音 Sacred, or Model form of Avalokiteśvara), a dry-lacquer portrait of Monk Gyōshin, dating to the second half of the eighth century, and a Heian-period clay portrait of Monk Dōsen 道宣 (d. 873), who was instrumental in the repair of the Yumedono in 859.\(^6^0\)

We learn from our records that as early as the late Heian-period, the Kuze Kannon had already assumed the status of a “secret Buddha,” barred from view by the shut doors of the miniature shrine and other forms of paraphernalia. *Shichi Daiji Nikki* 七大寺日記 (Diary of

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60 Carr, *Plotting the Prince*, p.195 fn.29.
[visits to] the Seven Great Temples), a twelfth-century text commonly attributed to Ōe no Chikamichi 大江親通 (d. 1151), has the following to tell about its author’s visit to the Yumedono:

Therein [i.e. Yumedono] is enshrined the standing image of the Kuze Kannon in the same scale [of Prince Shōtoku]. It is installed inside a jeweled canopy, and I was not able to enter to see it. On its east and west are hung painted portraits of the Prince in his lay garments. In [one such] portrait, to the right of the Prince is a portrait of the Monk Eji (d. 623); in front of the Prince’s seat is the great minister Soga no Umako (d. 626), to his left the great minister Ono no Imoko (active early 7th c.), and on the right are the great master from Kudara O Deok and others. These can all be seen. On the Oxen-Tiger [northeast] corner is a wooden portrait of the great abbot Gyōshin in his measurements. This can be seen.

This group portrait, centered inevitably around the figure of Shōtoku, is a pictorial celebration of what had become deeply entrenched in the cultural memory of the time, that of the official recognition of Buddhism in Japan through the efforts of the Prince and the eminent figures portrayed therein: Monk Eji 惣慈, who came to Japan from Koguryō in 595 and subsequently became the tutor of the Prince; Soga no Umako, as the Nihon shoki would have it, along with the Prince defeated the anti-Buddhist faction led by Mononobe no Moriya 物部守屋 (d. 587) in 587, an event of equal moment to the history of Buddhism in Japan to that of the Battle of Milvian Bridge in the history of Christianity; and Ono no Imoko, who is among the first emissaries dispatched by the Prince to China in 607. What is striking from this description is the

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61 Shichi Daiji niki 七大寺日記, in Fujita (ed.), Kōkan bijutsu shiryō:jiin hen, vol. 1, p. 27. The identity of the Kudara monk O Deok is not clear.
abundance of “portraits [ 彩 Jp. ei; Ch. ying]” then installed inside the building. In fact, by the thirteenth century, it is already a commonly-held belief that the Kuze Kannon itself was also a portrait of Prince Shōtoku.\(^{62}\) The source of this belief goes further back, as the *Tōin engi* describes the image as “the World-Saving Avalokiteśvara bearing the imperial visage, which was made during the time of the Prince [太子在世造御影救世観音像].”\(^{63}\) Admittedly, by the tenth century, the *denryaku* already unequivocally equates the Prince with the Kuze Kannon.\(^{64}\) However, the dual nature of the image—that it is at once a portrait of a person and an icon of a deity—is already implied from the very beginning in the wording of the eighth-century inventory record *Hōryū-ji tō-in shizaichō*: “a wooden image of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara in the same scale of the Prince of the Upper Palace.”\(^{65}\) The hagiography only elaborated on what had been


\(^{63}\) *Hōryūji tōin engi*, DNBZ 85: 127; the notion of a “world-saving Kannon” and its equivalence with Shōtoku first appears, like many other layers that are now part of the Cult of the Prince, in the 10th-century *denryaku*. For relevant passages, see Fujiwara Yūsetsu (ed.), *Shōtoku taishi den*, pp. 71, 88-9.

\(^{64}\) At the beginning of the biography, the Kuze Kannon pays Princess Anahobe no Hashihito, Shōtoku’s mother, a visit. After revealing his identity, the Bodhisattva makes it known that he wishes to reside inside her womb so that he can be reborn to save the world. See *Shōtoku taishi denryaku*, in *Shōtoku taishi*, p. 71; Carr, *Plotting the Prince*, p. 32.

\(^{65}\) Hayashi, *Taishi shinkō*, p. 11; Fujii Yuriko in her study of evolving textual sources on the Prince makes the compelling argument that these ever more elaborate accounts (marked first by the appearance of the *denryaku* in the 10th century) cast Shōtoku into a paragon of Mahayanist ideals, best exemplified by his pairing with the *kuze kannon* in the *denryaku*. And this took place after the founding of the *tendai* school by Saichō 穴徳 (767-822), and what she calls a *Lotus Sutra* “Weltanschauung” was increasingly gaining currency. For this reason, she is more inclined to believe that the equation of Shōtoku with the *kuze kannon* or Bodhisattvahood in general only appeared after the 9th century. However, I argue here that the *denryaku* itself only brought into relief the same kind of associations which the Yumedono icon and its description in the inventory record had set in motion in the 8th century. See Fujii Yukiko 藤井由紀子, *Shōtoku taishi no denshō* 聖徳太子の伝承 (Tokyo, 1999), pp. 12-35. For the early development of Pure Land belief in Japan as the backdrop to the cult of Shōtoku, see also Como, *Shōtoku*, pp. 33-54.
articulated in visual terms: the rhetoric of likeness lends an ecumenical, albeit foreign, deity a more familiar human face. The power of this visual equation is equally potent in the opposite direction: dubbing an image of a Bodhisattva that of a portrait of Shōtoku set in motion a process of apotheosis that would see the latter join the host of Bodhisattvas—paragons of the Mahayanist ideal who choose to delay their escape from samsāra and dedicate their efforts to assist others achieve enlightenment—but here also locally bound by the visual analogy, a savior of Japan and for Japan.

Unfortunately, we have no record whatsoever of the iconographic program that once adorned the Hakkakuendō at Eizan-ji in the eighth century. While traces of painting remain on the four inner pillars and the four beams which support the painted canopy, and are of great interest in their own right, what has survived from the eighth century is not sufficient to help us reconstruct what the main icon, or what other auxiliary images there may have been. Between the early twentieth-century repair and as late as the 1950s when Fukuyama’s study was conducted, the Vairocana image, which was recovered from the northern niche during the Meiji restoration, was enshrined on the dais as the main icon of the building. Two seated statues of Amida, whose provenances are unclear, face east and west. Another seated image, that of Jizō 地蔵 (Kṣitigarbha), occupies the last cardinal position, towards north. In addition, the smaller sculptural portrait of Kūkai, which had been to Vairocana’s right inside the niche, is now allocated at a spot on the southwestern corner of the dais [Fig. 3-24]. However, during my visit to the monastery in the summer of 2012, the seated Amida, originally on the west, became the main icon, and in all likelihood, is the only image that remains from the ensemble we saw in Fukuyama’s photograph [Fig. 3-25, cf. Fig. 3-24]. We do not know what prompted the change of
the main icon and the sculptural program of the octagonal hall, nor when that change took place.

Nor do we seem to know the whereabouts of the Vairocana icon. For it was not restored to the
Stupa-Hall/Dainichi Hall, as one would presume, where it had once belonged. However, records
from the temple archive, starting from the Muromachi period, suggest that a tradition of
venerating a sculptural portrait of Muchimaro, whom the octagonal hall honors, was already
firmly established by then. Can we presume that it is a tradition that may have continued from
the eighth century, as the case of Shōtoku and the Yumedono may suggest? By the Genroku
period, it appears that a portrait of Kūkai was added, creating a second point of focus in the
building.⁶⁶

3.6 Continental Links

While no contemporaneous counterpart to the Nara octagonal halls survives in China, we
do have depictions of buildings which bear striking resemblance to them [Fig. 3-26]. This small
vignette from the south wall of T217 in Dunhuang is datable to the late seventh century on
stylistic grounds. Barring the absence of intercolumnar struts, the octagonal building in the
painting is clearly reminiscent of the Eizan-ji Hakkakuendō in both bracketing and decor [cf Fig.
3-9]. The palette also provides a good match. Through the opened door we catch a glimpse of a
figure, likely in lay garments, seated on a wooden dais. The azure-colored areas on the walls

⁶⁶ Fukuyama and Akiyama, Eizanji hakkakudō no kenkyū, p. 15.
probably allude to the existence of windows, rather than solid painted blocks. The figures around the building hint at a narrative here. However, the inscription that used to appear inside the cartouche next to the building has all but perished. To further confound the viewer, like the wooden octagonal halls in Nara, these pictorial examples often occupy minor positions in the compositions, which makes their meanings difficult to interpret [Fig. 3-27]. It is nevertheless safe to assume that these painted examples are intended to represent structures found in otherworldly realms, as they begin to grow in numbers in the eighth century. Some give the impression that as the building form became more familiar, stylistic conventions that bore on their depiction become more relaxed, often eschewing most architectural details [Fig. 3-28].

A wooden octagonal hall dated to circa 1000 affords us a look at the “after-life” of the octagonal halls in China. Or conversely, it gives us ground to speculate that this Chinese example and the three domical octagonal halls from Nara may perhaps share a typology, a lineage to a prototype that is not so dissimilar in both form and function [Fig. 3-29]. The building in question was discovered in the 1970s inside a dilapidated Daoist temple at the foot of Mount Sanwei, which overlooks the much more famous Mogao Caves in Dunhuang. This small building was moved to the vicinity of the Mogao caves in the 1980s for purposes of preservation, and has since lived literally under the shadows of the caves. Apart from a preliminary report by Xiao Mo, who initially discovered the building, this octagonal hall has, to the best of my knowledge, never once surfaced in the literature on Chinese architecture, within or outside China.

67 Eugene Wang understands those cloud-shrouded structures as belonging to the Summit of Being (Akaniṣṭha Heaven), which corresponds to the topmost tier of the Realm of Form. This certainly supports my view that these octagonal buildings are often associated with Bodhisattvas. See Eugene Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra* (Seattle, 2004), pp. 102-9.
By a close study of the bracketing details, Xiao Mo dates the building to the early Northern Song period (960-1127). Unlike the octagonal halls in Nara, the Dunhuang structure should be conceived as a wooden frame that was built to enclose an octagonal earthen mound, pierced on one side with a gate to allow the installing of an icon. In other words, the timber exterior only served as a veneer, the structural details rendered faithfully to give order to a pseudo-circular interior that is less common. The original icon inside has long perished. However, a placard bearing the original name of the building—labeling it “the pagoda of the Compassionate One [慈悲之塔]”—indicates that the octagonal hall once enshrined a statue of Maitreya, Cishi or the Compassionate One being one of his epithets. This further lends credence to the argument that the building type up to as late as the early eleventh century was still closely associated with bodhisattvas, as it was in Nara Japan.

Like their counterparts in Japan, the Chinese were equally preoccupied with image making of various forms. Out of the bustle of the first two centuries of the Tang dynasty (618-907) emerged a similar confluence of imperial portraiture and religious icons, which we discussed earlier in the context of the Kuze Kannon of Yumedono. Likewise, Chinese examples in this period constellated a nexus of concerns that are not dissimilar to those observed in Nara: the filial commemoration of deceased parents, the urge to portray the likeness of a person in the guise of a deity.

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68 Xiao Mo 蕭默, Dunhuang jianzhu yanjiu 敦煌建築研究 (Beijing, 1989), pp. 303-5.

69 The use of non-structural timber details as decorative motifs to cover circular interiors is a subject we will return to in the Epilogue.
Precedents are few and the early history of imperial portraiture is at present poorly understood. However, it seems that it is under the Tang in particular, that imperial portraits began to take on new meanings. In the early 1960s, Edward Schafer notes an aspect of Tang imperial portraiture that had long been overlooked. Anticipating that his title “The T’ang [Tang] Imperial Icon” must appear provocative, he explains:

“If I call some formal representations of the imperial face and figure ‘icons’, I am not just using a fashionable critical term for artistic constructions, but attempting to show that some pictures of the T’ang [Tang] sovereigns were indeed worshipped, serving as surrogates for their illustrious originals, just like images of the gods.”

These portraits do not just appear in painted forms, but also in the round in wood and metal. More recently, Dora Ching speculates that these portraits may have been placed in temples presumably for family rituals of a more private nature. Such a practice seems to have reached an apogee in the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (712-756), when in the third year of the Tianbao 天寶 period (744) bronze images of Laozi and the Buddha in “Xuanzong’s scale” (玄宗等身天像及佛) were distributed to officially sanctioned provincial Daoist and Buddhist monasteries. The recipients of these images, the Kaiyuan Temples (開元寺) and Kaiyuan Abbeys (開元觀) belonged to a new incarnation of the nationwide monastery network introduced recently by Xuanzong in 738, a system with a much earlier pedigree.

effort was made to insert the imperial likeness in the form of enlightened sages into local
monastic compounds demonstrates considerable conceit on the part of the emperor on the one
hand, and the increasing state control of the Sangha on the other, which is an often rehearsed
argument. What is equally striking is how seamlessly the notion of “in the scale of” (等身), the
same notion that was used to describe the kuze kannon in the Yumedono, was internalized into a
practice that sought to aggrandize the crown.

The nationwide distribution of the imperial likeness had early precedents in Sui Wendi 隋文帝 (r. 581-604) of the early seventh century, and its connection with Tang practices is more
than just facetious. The notion of dengshen deserves further comment, however, before we can
proceed. For it destablizes the referential link between the portrait and its subject. The pedigree
of the term seems difficult to trace. When it is not preceded by a human agency as the above “玄
宗等身天像,” it denotes the literal and often hyperbolic valence (here used in the sense of the
combining power of imbricated affinity between two elements: icon as person and person as
icon) of “in the same measurements” between the deity and the person. For example, Shijia
Fangzhi 釋迦方誌, a mid-seventh century text relates a stone chamber atop Vulture Peak, where
“the Buddha had often preached...and now an image in his measurements is made [佛住世五十年,
多居斯室說法，今作等佛身像。]”74 Xuanzang’s 玄奘 (602-664) Da Tang xiyu ji 大唐西域記, finished roughly the same time, describes this image in similar terms: “[its] volume is

73 This Naba interprets as a telling sign for the increasing despotic nature of Tang rulership. See
Naba Toshisada 那波利貞, Tōdai shakai bunkashi kenkyü 唐代社會文化史研究 (Tokyo, 1974),
pp. 49-53. See also Hida Romi 肥田路美, Shotō Bukkyō bijutsu no kenkyū 初唐仏教美術の研
究 (Tokyo, 2011), pp. 192-199.

74 Daoxuan 道宣, Shijia Fangzhi 釋迦方誌, T 2088, 51:964a.
equal to the body of the Tathagata [等如来之身].” Though never stated explicitly, such dengshen images seem to be in sculptural forms, as paintings are mentioned only as exceptions to the norm. Volume, and by extension a close attention to corporal representation, may have been an important factor. This appears to be the first order of meaning of the notion dengshen.

A second order of valence entails overlapping identities, that is, an image of the Buddha in the scale of an emperor [or vice versa]. It is not clear when the term dengshen was first used in this sense. Daoxuan’s 道宣 Ji Shenzhou sanbao gantong lu 集神州三寶感通録 records a pair of “same-scale images of the Liang emperor Gaozu (r. 502-549) in gold and silver (梁高祖等身金銀像),” which has been interpreted as an early precedent. The description seems to suggest that the conjugation of Gaozu’s connection with the image is still characterized at this early stage as pertaining to possession. In other words, these are two dengshen image still in the first sense: images in the same measurements of the Buddha Shakyamuni, here were commissioned and owned by Gaozu. The double imbrication of sacred meanings in icon making may have been a

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75 Xuanzang 玄奘, annotated by Ji Xianlin 季羡林 et al, Da Tang xiyu ji jiaozhu 大唐西域記校註 (Beijing, 1985), p. 725.

76 In a typical return-to-life tale recorded in the Taiping guangji 太平廣記, after having been absolved of a crime he never committed, a monk by the name Jizhi 濟之 was nevertheless exhorted by the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha to make efforts to accumulate merit. A good start would be to open a new monastery and commission seven dengshen images [等身像七擊]. However, should he fail to muster enough financial support, “paintings would do equally well [彩畫亦得].” See Li Fang 李昉 et al (eds), Taiping guangji 太平廣記 (Beijing, 1961), p. 672.

77 Daoxuan 道宣, Ji Shenzhou sanbao gantong lu 集神州三寶感通録, T 2106, 52:413b; Hida Romi, Sho Tō bukkyō bijutsu no kenkyū, p. 196.

78 The text relates how the devout Shizu [Gaozu?] of Liang would often invite eminent monks to discourse on abstruse doctrinal matters, and who, in turn, had two dengshen images in gold and silver made [每引高僧談藹幽旨, 又造等身金銀像兩幅]. See Daoxuan, Ji Shenzhou sanbao gantong lu, 52:420a.
practice that was first observed outside China. Xuanzang relates that during his stay in Kanyākubja in Central India, a gold image in the scale of the King Śilāditya (金像量等王身) was placed inside a jeweled terrace, at a monastery on the West bank of the River Ganges. King Śilāditya (戒日王, r. c. 606-647) was de facto ruler of India and Punjab in the seventh century, and a magnanimous patron of Buddhism. He must have impressed the visiting Xuanzang as a new incarnation of a Wheel-Turning King (轉輪王), in the mold of King Asoka. Through the descriptions of his achievements and the spectacles of the Buddhist assemblies held under the aegis of the King, Xuanzang most likely intended to construct a paragon for Emperor Taizong (唐太宗, r. 626-649) of the recently united Tang to follow. Likewise, in a passage attributed to Faxian (法顯, 337-422) now only preserved in the Song encyclopedia Taiping yulan (太平御覽), the Chinese pilgrim mentions in passing a gold image of the Buddha in the scale of the King of the otherwise unknown state of Sengniluo (僧尼羅). The passage in question is not found in the inherited edition of Faxian’s travelogue Foguo ji (佛國記). It is unclear whether it is a passage that is missing from the inherited edition of the text, or a later interpolation which was in turn incorporated into the Taiping yulan.

79 The King had previously established a grand monastery west of the River. On its east he had a jeweled terrace raised to over one hundred feet tall. Within it is a gold Buddha image in the same measurements of the King [王先於河西 建大伽藍，伽藍東起寶臺，高百餘尺。中有金佛像量等王身]. See Xuanzang, Da Tang xiyu ji jiaozhu (大唐西遊記)，p.440.

80 Hida Romi, Sho Tō bukkō bijutsu no kenkyū (初唐佛教美術研究), p. 195.

81 The King of Sengniluo had an image forged in his own measurements in gold [僧尼羅國王以金像等身而造像]. Li Fang 李昉 et al (eds), Taiping yulan (太平御覽) (Taipei, 1959), juan 657: 2907-8.
It is only from the Tang that such a practice of creating “double/imbricated portraits” began to proliferate.82 Xuanzong’s pompous project to distribute his likeness through a recently established national network of Buddhist and Daoist institutions has already been mentioned.83 Gaozong is known to have had a triply imbricated image made—an image [of the Buddha] [in a semblance of which was made by] King Asoka in Gaozong’s own scale (等身阿育王像)—after a piece of relic was procured at a stupa in Fufeng 扶風 county, modern Shaanxi.84 It was a triply imbricated image set on strictly sanctioned criteria, of scale, style, and iconography. In his section on imperial patronage of Buddhism in the Fayuan zhulin, Daoshi extends such practices to Taizu and Gaozong, Tang emperors who are often known to be less sympathetic to the Buddhist cause.85 In all likelihood, Daoshi, now writing in the second half of the seventh century, was intentionally conjuring up a narrative arc to explain, after the fact, the flourishing of Buddhism in his day. Yet this also underscores both how important and persuasive the visual rhetoric of the “double portrait” had come to be.

In most cases, we do not know much about the architectural contexts in which such “double/imbricated portraits” were displayed: what kind of buildings housed them, and where exactly in the interior they were placed, and within what sort of religious iconography they were

82 See Lei Wen 雷聞, Jiao miao zhi wai 郊廟之外 (Beijing, 2009) for a discussion of how imperial likenesses played not only an increasingly important role in state rituals, but also through state sanctioned institutions became extensions of the imperial person into local Buddhist temples and Daoist abbeys.

83 For a list of recorded portraits of Xuanzong in monastic settings, see ibid., pp. 121-5.

84 Daoxuan, Ji Shenzhou sanbao gantong lu, 52:406b-407c.

85 Daoshi 道世, Fayuan zhulin 法苑珠林 [Hereafter FYZL] (Beijing, 2003), juan 100, pp. 2894-7.
situated. Most sources only mention names of temples or abbeys. Presumably, the dual nature of such images would have made each the main icon of a monastery. However, it appears that architectural interventions were at least sometimes made to create new spaces to accommodate these images. In 709, Li Dan 李旦, the future Ruizong 睿宗 (r. 684-690, 710-712), had a Precinct of Sacred Visage (聖容院) built for an image of his that he bestowed on the Zhaofu Temple 招福寺 in Chang’an. Likewise, an image of Xuanzong in the guise of Laozi is recorded to have been enshrined inside the Precinct of Imperial Visage (御容院), of curiously a Buddhist temple. Little exists for us to go on to reconstruct what these precincts were like, their scale, or their exact locations within their respective monasteries. However, that both are precincts (院)—independent and enclosed units within monastic compounds—is reminiscent of the architectural settings of the octagonal halls at Kōfuku-ji and Hōryū-ji.

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86 However, the discovery of the remains of an octagonal building in Luoyang, dated to the 8th century, suggests that they may well have been octagonal. See Nancy Steinhardt, “The Sixth Century in East Asian Architecture,” *Ars Orientalis* 41 (2011) pp. 56-7. According to the 1978 excavation report, each side of the octagonal hall is about 13.2 meters. This is much bigger than any of the Nara octagonal buildings.


88 Duan Chengshi 段成式, *Si ta ji 寺塔記*, in Lu Fusheng 盧輔聖 et al (eds), *Zhongguo shu hua quanshu 中國書畫全書* (Shanghai, 1992), vol. 1, pp. 184-5. Duan’s narrative implies that this imperial gesture was only occasioned by the miraculous appearance of a dengshen image (in the first sense) at the same monastery a few years before. Another case of double imbrication, but one step removed and several years apart?


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We do not seem to have any direct evidence to show how any knowledge of these structures and images in Tang China could have travelled to Japan. But we may safely assume that the concentrated activities in image making and various architectural interventions between the reigns of Taizong and Xuanzong must have attracted the attention of the Japanese emissaries. Indeed, they may have impressed a Buddhist monk by the name of Jōei (643-666), who arrived in Chang’an in 653 together with over one hundred others on the same mission. He studied with a certain priest called Shentai at the Huiri Monastery, in the Huaide ward. On the west side of the city, it was not far away from some of the images/monasteries mentioned above, and to which our young monk from Nara may have had easy access. Jōei left Chang’an in 666, but he never returned home, as he was poisoned during a sojourn in Paekche en route to Japan. Jōei was the son of Fujiwara no Kamatari (614-669), and elder brother to Fuhito, whose Hokuendō at the Kōfuku-ji, as we saw earlier, was the first of the three domical octagonal halls to be completed. A short biography of Jōei is preserved as an addendum in a collection of biographies of the Fujiwara clan, compiled towards the second half of the eighth century. It is to this particular project, a group portrait as it were, that we turn our attention in the last section of this chapter.

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91 Okimori et al, Tōshi kaden, pp. 263-6.
92 Yang Hongnian, Sui Tang liang jing fangli pu (Shanghai, 1999), pp. 455-6; See also the map volume in Hiraoka Takeo and Imai Kiyoshi (eds.), Chōan to Rakuyō 長安と洛陽 (Kyoto, 1956).
In the Buddhist scheme of things, the cyclic existence of an individual (輪廻 Ch. lunhui Jp. rinne) transcends each individual transmigration, and is in turn transcended by the ultimate awakening—one’s passing into Nirvana and thus out of the cycle of transmigration. Death, therefore, as the well-worn expression would have it, is only the beginning. To better understand our octagonal halls, buildings built to commemorate the dead, we need to heed another form of commemoration—writing in the form of biography—which developed in tandem with these structures in the eighth century. In fact, those commemorated by the octagonal buildings also happen to be some of the earliest individuals to have received biographical attention in this inchoate stage of the tradition. The Tōshi kaden 藤氏家伝 or The Family Biographies of Fujiwara (hereafter kaden) records the biographies of Fujiwara no Muchimaro, in whose name the hakkakuendō of Eizan-ji was built, his grandfather Kamatari and Kamatari’s eldest son, who was inducted into the Buddhist order at a tender age and appears therefore in the text under his ordination name Jōei. The text also makes a mysterious reference to a biography of Fuhito, Muchimaro’s father, who was the subject of commemoration of the Hokuendō at Kōfuku-ji. Allegedly Fuhito’s biography exists elsewhere but was not included in the Kaden, which is believed to have been compiled under the supervision of Nakamaro around 760. The second son of Muchimaro, Nakamaro was also personally responsible for the biography of Kamatari therein. Near the end of Kamatari’s biography, Nakamaro relates the following scene which took place at Kamatari’s cremation:
On the sixth day of the ninth month (also an intercalendrical month) of the kōgo year [669], [Kamatari] was cremated at the monastery of Yamashina...At that time, there were clouds in the sky, whose shapes resembled purple canopies. Music of strings and bamboos could be heard from above. Those that witnessed this exclaimed that this had never happened before.

庚午年閏九月六日，火葬于山階之舍...于時，空中有雲，形如紫蓋。系竹之音，

Scholars have long noted the use of models and precedents from the Chinese textual
tradition in the kaden.⁹⁵ Earlier on, Kamatari is said to be a voracious reader of the Six Strategies
(Liu tao 六韬), a text on military tactics attributed to the legendary minister Lü Wang 吕望 of the
late 2nd millennium BC. Even at a tender age, Kamatari would not only parse the text, but also
read the passages aloud to himself repeatedly [每誦太公六韜未嘗不反覆誦之].⁹⁶ The
description is drawn from the biography of Zhang Liang 張良 (d. 186 BC) in the Han shu 漢書,
which seems to set up Zhang as Kamatari’s model. Any lingering doubt is dispelled as later in the
biography, as Prince Naka no Ōe 中大兄, the future Tenji 天智 Emperor (r. 668-671), clearly
enthused by the consul of Kamatari says: “You are indeed My Zifang 子房 (Zhang Liang) [誠吾
之子房].”⁹⁷ A biography thus written constructs a persona by means of a bricolage of highly
prized cultural traits.⁹⁸ The potency of these traits does not wear from repetition. Instead, like
with all models, it is repetition that proves the rule.

⁹⁴ Okimori et al, Tōshi kaden, p. 250.
⁹⁵ Okimori Takuya 沖森卓也, “kaden no jussaku 家伝の述作” in Okimori et al, Tōshi kaden,
pp. 431-439.
⁹⁶ Okimori et al, Tōshi kaden, p. 127.
⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 150.
⁹⁸ Denis Twitchett, “Problems of Chinese Biography,” in Arthur Wright and Denis Twitchett
To come back to the quoted passage above, the clouds in the shape of a purple canopy and the music of strings are clear references to the Heavenly realms, as they often appear in scriptures. The implication here is that the deceased Kamatari has attained rebirth there. The description dovetails with a eulogy by Emperor Tenji, quoted a little earlier in the biography, in which the grieving monarch imparts his wish that Kamatari “ascend to the Tuṣita Heaven, listening, day and night, to the marvelous teachings of Maitreya.”

The canonical references aside, it also seems that this particular description of auspicious signs at one’s death had already a literary convention in the early biographical tradition, becoming a repeatable model. A similar passage in the Nihon shoki describes similar auspicious scenes upon the murder of Yamanoshiro no Ōe 山背大兄 (d. 643) at the hands of Soga no Iruka in 643.

Both passages are, in the absence of a Buddhist hagiographic tradition in Japan at the time, some of the earliest records that testify that a monastic ideal of merit making in life would lead to rebirth in a Buddha realm.

The Yamashina monastery, it would seem, could not have been a better place to hold the cremation. According to the Ruki, which is contemporaneous with Nakamaro and the Kaden

99 Ibid., p. 243. In The Sutra of the Buddha’s Expounding On Visualizing the Maitreya Bodhisattva’s Birth up in the Tuṣita Heaven, believed to have been translated into Chinese in the 5th century, the Tuṣita Heaven, where the Bodhisattva Maitreya resides before he becomes a Buddha, is described as where string instruments resound exquisite music of their own accord, and assorted flowers rain down only then to transform into flower canopies. See Fo shuo guan Mile pusa shangsheng doushuaitian jing 佛說觀彌勒菩薩上生兜率天經, T 452, 14:418b-420c.


101 John Kieschnick, The Eminent Monk (Honolulu, 1997).
and quoted from earlier in this chapter, it was Kagami no Ōkimi 鏡女王, Kamatari’s wife, who first established the temple to install an ensemble of images that Kamatari had earlier commissioned. Yamashina’s location was near both the then capital Ōtsu 大津 and Oumi Province 近江国, a region that was of particular significance to the careers of both Kamatari and Muchimaro. But more importantly, the same text weaves Yamashina monastery into a lineage of Fujiwara-related temples, which culminated in the Kōfuku-ji temple in Heijōkyō, over whose initial planning Fuhito had exerted an ever so large influence.

However, all of this appears to be part of a larger process of myth-making when read against other sources of this period. The Nihon shoki, a text that was completed in 720, does not record the cremation. Nor is the location Yamashina mentioned. Moreover, despite efforts by archaeological excavation to locate the sites of the Yamashina Temple and its alleged successor Umayasakadera 厳坂寺 at Takaichi 高市, as well as claims made by various localities to be close contenders, no information concerning their whereabouts is forthcoming about these forerunners of Kōfuku-ji. In fact, before Nakamaro’s time, evidence of Kamatari’s devotion to Buddhism is so thin and the contrast to his elaborate biography in the kaden is so striking that any effort to defend it appears hopeless. In this respect, the Kaden appears to have played a similar role as that of the Denryaku in the early tenth century in placing Kamatari as the

103 Kōfukuji ruki, in DNBZ 123: p. 276.
104 Kobayashi, Kōfukuji, p. 28.
fountainhead of a continuing lineage of eminent patrons of Buddhism, as an ever-present figure in the religious landscape of Japan. It is therefore hardly surprising that by the mid-Heian period at the latest, an Abbey of Saintly Spirit [聖靈院] was already in existence near Kamatari’s tomb at Tōnomine 多武峰, where a wooden portrait of Kamatari was worshiped.106

3.8 Coda

A physical portrait of likeness needs to be complemented by a biographical portrait. If the apotheoses/deification of Kamatari and Shōtoku (we are less certain of Fuhito and Muchimaro) were set in motion by means of building and image-making, textual biographies made such an apotheosis certain. From this perspective, the eighth century is a critical moment in the religious history of Japan, when patrons of Buddhism were lifted out of this mundane world to connect with the sacred, while conversely, the pantheon of religious deities donned more familiar guises [Fig. 3-20].

This process was facilitated by the building of domical-octagonal structures in monastic precincts as a means of commemorating these eminent figures. This particular building type, as I argue in this chapter, may have first originated in China and had long been associated with bodhisattvahood. But it also had to be reinvented and reimagined in Nara to fulfill the role of helping those in Japan deal with their remoteness from India and their own belatedness of

106 Though from a much later text, the Tōnomine engi attributes retroactively the tradition to Kamatari’s own time. See Tōnomine engi 多武峯縁起, DBNZ 737, 85: 249.
coming to know the Buddha and the dharma. The same association between the domical-octagonal type and bodhisattvahood also transformed the nature of the icons placed inside these structures. In certain cases, these images became doubly-imbricated portraits of both the deity and the person.

The afterlives of this building type in the ensuing Heian period would be another interesting story to tell. I have only room here to give one or two quick snapshots. The domical-octagonal structure of the Yumedono became an integral part of the cult of Shōtoku, which not only continued to be disseminated through pictorial renditions in the medieval and early modern periods, but built structures that allude to its form and its association with the powers of the Prince also existed. The construction of the Rokakudō 六角堂 (Hexagonal Hall) in Heian-kyō (Kyoto) and the formulation of the origin tale Rokakudo engi 六角堂縁起 in the twelfth century belonged to one such effort to retrospectively tap into the same pool of architectural iconicity. This engi text attributes the building to a time prior to the founding of the Shitenno-ji Monastery

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107 On how Buddhist art and architecture helped one come to terms with such a sense of belatedness, see Chapter 2, pp. 75-80.

108 In another such case whereby the boundary between funerary portraiture and religious icon may have been crossed, Tanabe Katsumi argues boldly that the invention of the Buddha image in the Kushan period was the result of the contact between the Kushans and Gandharan Buddhism: it originated in Parthian/Zoroastrian worship of the portrait-statues of dead kings, where their souls (urvan-fravashi) reside. Tanabe Katsumi, “Iranian Origin of the Gandharan Buddha and Bodhisattva Images: thee Catalytic Contribution of the Kushan Buddhists,” Bulletin of the Ancient Orient Museum 6 (1984): 1-27; see also Juhyung Rhi, “Images, Relics, and Jewels: The Assimilation of Images in the Buddhist Relic Cult of Gandhāra: Or Vice Versa,” Artibus Asiae 65.2 (2005): 169-211, esp. 203-204.

by the Prince in 593, which was then miraculously transferred to its present location in the Heian capital.

Even more intriguingly, there was also persisted a bifurcation of the tradition between an association of the architectural typology with the Fujiwara clan and the trope of filial piety, albeit in a less discernible manner. Already in the later entries to its section in the Kōfuku-ji ruki, the Nanendō, the domical-octagonal structure completed under Fujiwara no Fuyutsugu 藤原冬嗣 (775-826, then the patriarch of the Northern Branch 北家 of the Fujiwara clan) that now forms the counterpoint to Hokuendō, began to appear as a palladium for the Fujiwara clan. One such entry notes: “The prosperity of the Fujiwara clan hinges upon the Buddha-Power therein [藤原氏繁昌，従此佛力也].”¹⁰ The ninth-century Nanendō and the domical octagonal hall that it typifies was to become in the late Heian period a paradigm of architectural copying, much in the same way that the Holy Sepulchre informed the construction of baptisteries in Western Europe during the Medieval Period.¹¹ It became the embodiment of a collective memory, a memory that was perhaps sustained as much by a shared lineage as a common religious inclination. Fujiwara no Michinaga 藤原道長 (966-1028), descendant of Fuyutsugu and father of Yorimichi 賴通 (992-1074) wrote of the newly completed octagonal hall at the Hōjō-ji Monastery in a way that recast it in the image of the Nanendō: “This hall is likewise an octagonal structure, to inscribe

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¹⁰ Ono, Kōfukuji nanendō, p. 77.

[here] the foundation of the numinous spot that is the Nanendo [堂亦八角之構，徧寫南圓靈勝之基].”

\[112\] Ono, Kōfukuji nanendo, p. 78.
Chapter 4: The Architectural Charge of “Circular Above, Square Below:” Domes in Mortuary and Ritual Spaces

What connects thinking to imagination, imagination to drawing, drawing to building, and buildings to our eyes is projection in one guise or another, or processes that we have chosen to model on projection. All are zones of instability — Robin Evans, *The Projective Cast* (1995), xxxi

The previous chapters were designed as focused studies of two types of domical architecture, both Buddhist by nature, and their subject matters more closely bound by time and space—Dunhuang between the fifth and seventh centuries on the one hand, Nara in the eighth century on the other. In this chapter, on the other hand, I am less committed to a fixed group of materials and their meanings within specific historical contexts. Instead, this chapter reconsiders the issue of signification in architectural form from a broader vantage point through two different yet related scenarios. In both these scenarios, domical constructions can be understood as responding to particular ways in which sacred architecture is meant to model itself on cosmology. Starting from the Han period (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), both mortuary and state ritual spaces came to be presided over by the same overarching ideology. The notion of “circular above, square below” was part of a larger cosmological view that began to encroach upon
building construction.\textsuperscript{1} In such a view, such spaces became increasingly conceived of as cosmos in and of themselves. While this view took hold in that period, in order to draw out its broader implications for the creation of sacred space through domical forms, I shall also extend my discussions to later periods.

The first half of this chapter provides a short sketch of the emergence of this “complete cosmos” in Chinese tombs. Scholarship on the history of Chinese mortuary architecture abounds.\textsuperscript{2} The discussion in this part of the chapter would not have been possible without these studies. However, a fuller account of the development of domical construction in tombs would necessarily have to be more inclusive. There are a number of histories, each partly independent, and yet also overlapping early histories which could be written of the dome in Chinese mortuary space: one would look at the structural evolutions and innovations, from humble beginnings of trabeated arch (long empty-core bricks serving as a segment of the arch) to the emergence of barrel vaults, cloister vaults and corbeled domes, structures that give full expression to the Han cosmology of the geometric projections of Heaven and Earth; one would also need to look at the development of that cosmology itself, vying schools of thought and how they bear on

\textsuperscript{1} The Han date merits a comment, as the ideology itself was already in place in the Pre-Qin period. However, our discussion in this chapter begins with the Han partly because of the absence of materials, in both textual and archaeological sources, of this earlier period. Or as is discussed below, it is only during the Han did it become technologically feasible to project what had previously been lofty metaphysical speculations onto architectural space.

\textsuperscript{2} Just to name a few, though oftentimes they do not confine themselves to architecture alone, more recent studies include Wu Hung, \textit{The Art of the Yellow Springs: Understanding Chinese Tombs} (Honolulu, 2010); Zhongguo kexue yuan 中國科學院, \textit{Zhongguo gudai jianzhu jishu shi} 中國古代建築技術史 (Beijing, 2000); Huang Xiaofen 黃曉芬, \textit{Han mu de kaoguxue yanjiu} 漢墓的考古學研究 (Changsha, 2003); He Xilin 賀西林, \textit{Zhongguo mushi bihua shi} 中國墓室壁畫史 (Beijing, 2009); Zhang Zhuoyuan 張卓遠, \textit{Handai huaxiang zhuang shi muzang de jianzhu xue yanjiu} 漢代畫像磚石墓葬的建築學研究 (Zhengzhou, 2011).
architectural forms; finally (though this by no means exhausts all the alternatives), there is the issue of pictorial expression on architectural surface, how pictorial conventions developed over time, and sometime at odds with the architectural spaces they inhabited. In a perfect world, the three histories would develop separately but interdependently, and culminate and align at the same point, one perfect structure with the perfect pictorial renditions given to the most current/mature system of thought—a perfect endgame for teleology and triumphalism.¹ In what follows in this chapter, I have only room to sketch an outline of the first of these histories. The latter two have been dealt with by others before, though, not always in the context of the construction of sacred space.⁴

If the first half of the chapter demonstrates a steady development towards such a domical sacred space underground that is closely aligned with cosmology, the second half undermines the assurance of this alliance. The point is also to show that, insofar as architectural forms are geometric projections that seek to capture nature as a given (Heaven is domed/round, Earth is flat/square), the artifice of the two make such a perfect equilibrium impossible to reach. In fact, no such perfect equilibrium could exist. In the second half of this chapter, this point will be

³ A perfect model of this would probably be Rudolf Wittkower’s *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, which parses a body of architectural theory in which function, form, and cosmological moment [though the former two are ultimately governed by the latter] form a self-contained system. See Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (London, 1949).

argued through a discussion of the free standing structure of Mingtang (The Bright Hall), a structure more often enshrouded in myths and controversies than is actually constructed.

4.1 Bricks, Arches, Vaults, and Domes in Early Chinese Tombs

A letter to the editor of *Architectural Review* in January 1957, by R. D. G. Faudree of Oxford, alerted the readers to a recently published tomb in China, which “has two large pointed domes set on the square and using the squinch, (more usually known to us in Persian architecture), barrel vaults, round, elliptical, and pointed arches with keystones, all in a highly sophisticated technique of stone and brick construction.” The early date of this tomb is of great interest to the architectural historian—dated to “the Han Dynasty and can be no later than A.D. 200”—based on orthographic evidence.

Though the names of Strzygowski and Rivoira are mentioned, Faudree said that he by no means wished to resuscitate the *Rom oder Orient* debate, for “both are inconclusive.” However, the discussion quickly shifted to the question of “[w]hether curvilinear architectonics originated in the Far East or the Middle East,” and if the entire history of Eurasian architectural exchange could “be investigated a little more thoroughly in this country [meaning Britain] and with less parochialism.”

A year later, Alexander Soper wrote to the same journal with “a note of emendation.” The novel structural innovations to which Mr. Faudree alluded seem to be either

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5 For a brief discussion of this debate, see Chapter 2, pp. 43-45.

his misinterpretation of the published photographs, and/or simply wishful thinking to see things that are not there.\(^7\)

The center of this argument is a brick tomb excavated at Wangdu 望都, in modern Hebei province [Fig. 4-1]. What the excavation of 1952 brought to light, in addition to what appears to be advanced brick construction, is a group of fine line drawings, which have since become regular fixtures in any history of Chinese painting.\(^8\) The tomb is datable to the Eastern Han period by a piece of an epigraph inscribed on one of the side tunnel walls.\(^9\) Soper was correct when he pointed out that the large pointed domes do not exist. One suspects that Mr. Faudree may have gained such an impression from the two drawings of the cross-sections. One shows the three chambers on the longitudinal axis, each crowned by a barrel vault and the barrel vault of the middle chamber is transverse [Fig. 4-2]; the other drawing shows the middle chamber on a transverse axis, with its flanking side chambers (whose vaults are transverse) [Fig. 4-3].\(^10\) Mr. Faudree may have read them as two intersecting cross-sections and therefore believed that the middle chamber is topped by a dome.\(^11\) Moreover, as the drawings show (and something that was


\(^8\) In a recent textbook, the painting of the Wangdu tomb is cast into a crucial moment in stylistic development: “…Unlike earlier muralists, who employed a linear drawing style, the artist who created this portrait combined lines with bold inkwash. This new style, most evident in the treatment of the garment, created a strong sense of volume seldom seen in other Han murals.” See Richard Barnhart *et al*, *Three Thousand Years of Chinese Painting* (New Haven, 1997), p. 33.

\(^9\) According to Guo Moruo, the author of the excavation report, this epitaph follows a set formula of the Eastern Han period, and was very likely written by a follower of the deceased. See Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Wangdu Han mu bihua 望都漢墓壁畫* (Beijing, 1955), pp. 13-14.

\(^10\) These are Figs 7 and 8, respectively, of the said report.

\(^11\) This still does not explain why he would have seen two pointed domes.
not missed by the perspicacious Soper, who hastened to point it out), whenever the barrel vaults meet those of the chambers on an intersection (for instance, where the longitudinal tunnels meet the middle chamber, or the transverse tunnels and the middle chamber), they invariable defer to the latter, which spring from a higher level. Therefore, unlike in some accounts of Han tomb constructions, where the emergence of the dome is explained as the result of merging two intersecting barrel vaults, thus forming a cross vault, such methods are absent (if not deliberately avoided) here.

Compared with the highly enthusiastic Faudree, Soper was unimpressed. After pointing out that bricks of the tunnel vaults were “laid lengthwise instead of in the voussoir sense familiar in the west,” he went on to reason that the Chinese did not devise something close to the squinch until the six-dynasties. Like Faudree, Soper had the Romans in mind, if not explicitly as the source of these structural innovations, but nevertheless as an important frame of reference. While they may have disagreed fundamentally on the whereabouts of inventions and the direction of transmission, Faudree and Soper shared the same historical model informed by a strong teleology, in which structural forms evolved towards the same endgame. But what is this endgame in the Chinese context?

To answer this question would take us away, for the moment, from the immediate Han context, to a tomb in Shanxi Province, datable to the 570s [Fig. 4-4]. This tomb belongs to Lou Rui (d. 570), a valued military commander of the Northern Qi house, who ruled this part of China at this time, and who was, not incidentally, also related to the royal family through his

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aunt.\textsuperscript{14} The design of the tomb gives the impression of a self-contained world, crowded with symbols, pictorial allusions to this world and beyond.\textsuperscript{15} The main chamber is preceded by an “exhibition space,”\textsuperscript{16} a long sloping entryway that was furnished lavishly with mural paintings on both sides [\textbf{Fig. 4-5}]. The murals depict long processions, with Lou Rui and his wife rendered prominently, with a following and paraphernalia that befit a man of his stature. The processions are shown on the two walls in opposite directions, one leading away from the main chamber while the other towards it. The subject-matter of the painting is hardly surprising, given that travels as such were part and parcel of the itinerant life of a nomadic general.\textsuperscript{17} On the other hand, the motifs of “departure” and “return” may be understood more figuratively as forming a posthumous journey, a bipartite division of the \textit{hun} and \textit{po} at burial, with the first ascending to Heaven and the second remaining on earth, entombed and sealed.\textsuperscript{18} The two readings are by no means mutually exclusive. Rather, they thrive on an ambiguity, only possible in visual terms, which transforms the literal reading into a pun of the figurative reading.

\textsuperscript{14} For a discussion of Lou Rui’s biography and the tomb stele discovered inside his tomb, see Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo 山西省考古研究所, \textit{Bei Qi Dong’an wang Lou Rui mu 北齊東安王妻睿墓} (Beijing, 2006), pp. 172-6, 188-192.


\textsuperscript{16} See Wu Hung’s discussion of this entry space and its symbolic meaning as spiritual “passage” or limbo space between the world of the living and the world of the dead, from its embryonic stage in the second century and its culmination as a regular feature in Tang imperial tombs in Wu, \textit{Art of the Yellow Springs}, pp. 211-217.

\textsuperscript{17} Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo, \textit{Bei Qi Dong’an wang Lou Rui mu}, p. 19.

The main chamber was found in a state of inundation during the excavation, and what remained of the painting on the four walls has since flaked off and deteriorated [Fig. 4-6].\textsuperscript{19} Their various subject matter was reconstructed based on line drawings that were made during the excavation and a description left by Su Bai when the tomb was initially opened.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, the recently excavated Xu Xianxiu tomb, constructed only a year after Lou Rui’s, provides substantial evidence that artists responsible for the decoration of the two tombs were following similar pictorial programs, though in this latter case, the painting seems to have been executed by inferior hands [Fig. 4-7].\textsuperscript{21} The pomp and circumstance depicted in the entryway continue inside the main chamber, albeit in quasi-domestic garb. On the north wall, opposite the entrance, Xu Xianxiu and his wife are seen seated underneath a sashed canopy, enjoying the delicacies that have been laid in front of them on a low table. Servants, musicians, and grooms fill up the space on the rest of the wall (in Xu Xianxiu’s case, in a flat, itemized manner), and with procession paraphernalia, continue to dominate the other walls in the same chamber. In Xu’s tomb, just above the mundane banquet, lotus blossoms, assuming avian guises on borrowed acanthus wings, dance around the mundane scenes. These ornamental flourishes may have been the artists’ attempt to bracket out the scene below, and as boundary markers they intimate the prospect of something quite different above. Unfortunately, this is where the mural painting gets cut off.

\textsuperscript{19} Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo, \textit{Bei Qi Dong’an wang Lou Rui mu}, p. 68.


\textsuperscript{21} For the excavation report, see Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo 山西省考古研究所, “Taiyuan Bei Qi Xu Xianxiu mu fajue jianbao 太原北齊徐顯秀墓發掘簡報,” \textit{Wenwu}, no. 10 (2003): 4-40. Compare with plates and line drawings in the earlier publication of Lou Rui’s tomb, \textit{Bei Qi Lou Rui mu 北齊劉墓} (Beijing, 2004).
Whatever was painted above does not survive [Fig. 4-8 IMG: overhead view of the chamber]. To reconstruct anything above this level, we have to return to Lou Rui’s tomb.

The architectural solution for enclosing the space at Lou Rui’s tomb is a corbeled dome. About 2.8 meters from the floor, over the rise of the arched gate, layers of bricks, with each jutting slightly inward, are stacked horizontally to form rings of diminishing size. The dome rises in this manner for another 4 meters, and when the spans become more manageable, are closed with six rings of bricks [Fig. 4-9]. The curved ceiling surfaces thus formed are then plastered to form a canvas. The little painting that now remains may have also been part of the same composition that once decorated the ceiling of Xu Xianxiu’s tomb. On the east wall, at the cornice level, one finds what appears to be a thundegod, enclosed inside his circle of drums. To his right is the torso of a large dragon. A shoe that disappears into a baggy robe suggests that the dragon is a mount of some sort. Another leg to its left shows that the dragon may be guided by a winged figure/immortal [Fig. 4-10]. Above them was depicted a procession of the twelve zodiac animals, though only two have survived [Fig. 4-11]. They are punctuated by what appear to be auspicious animals enclosed in flames. If they had been colored, the pigment no longer remains, leaving only the outline in black ink and the red sketching below. But here is a compelling example of how in the hand of an accomplished painter, lines alone also have the descriptive power to give figures roundness. Higher still, the pinnacle of the dome is given to depictions of celestial bodies: the Milky Way, running from northwest to southeast divides the space into two roughly equal halves; each is then populated by constellations [Fig. 4-9].

22 The authors of the excavation report note the resemblance of the celestial depictions here to the ceiling design of Yuan Yi’s tomb dated some fifty years earlier. Shanxi sheng kaogu yanjiusuo, *Bei Qi Dong’an wang Lou Rui mu*, p. 82.
the mural subjects on the four walls below are *representations* that refer back to their own subject matter, if not specific events, then certainly specific individuals. On the domed ceilings, however, are depicted *projections*, visual markers that thrive on different means of signification. Here are ranks of anthropomorphized deities that regulate the ebbs and flows of natural phenomena, celestial bodies twice abstracted and now taking on new zoomorphic forms, and finally the night sky, rendered with great realism, a realism which, however, belies its indecipherability.

Unable to interpret how this disarray of imageries relate to each other, the authors of the excavation report defined the entire ceiling space as representing a “heavenly kingdom” of some sorts, with a tint of Buddhist influence. To postulate their conclusion in this way also suggests that the authors of the report felt no qualms about juxtaposing two traditions, one that is a full-fledged cosmograph of an indigenous origin, the other, a foreign tradition that exerted influence upon it, by nature of the intrusion of unfamiliar deities. The fusion of different Heavenly markers in mortuary and other forms of sacred space is an interesting problem, and it has been discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. But what is this local notion of a cosmography in tombs, and how did it first emerge in China?

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23 *Bei Qi Dong’an wang Lou Rui mu*, pp. 81-82.

In and of itself, the domical mortuary space embodies the notion that Heaven is a domed canopy (Ga
tian 盖天) that embraces Earth.²⁵ It is an elaboration of the ancient, and far more vague notion of “Heaven is round; Earth is square (天圆地方).” Fang Xuanling 房玄龄 (579-648), in what was perhaps the first systematic exposition of the theory (by no means new in his time), construes a lineage of the theory that includes such patriarchs as Baoxi (Fuxi) and the Duke of Zhou.²⁶ The inherent geometric problem of this cosmological model, of erecting a dome over a square plan, did not go unnoticed. Earlier authors seem to have had trouble envisioning this model in architectural/practical terms. For instance, Qu Yuan famously raised questions over how Heaven is fastened to Earth in such a model:

Then was the round and manifold [Heaven], who devised and calibrated it?
What an achievement that was! Who first fashioned it?
The revolving cords, where are they tied?
The eight pillars, where are they based? In the southeast, why is there a gap?
Where lie the borders of the nine fields of heaven, and where do they connect?

圆則九重，孰營度之。
惟兹何功，孰初作之。
幹維焉系，天極焉加。
八柱何當，東南何虧。
九天之際，安放安屬。²⁷


Likewise, when similar questions were put to him by his inquisitive student Shan Juli, Zeng Shen, Confucius’ disciple, did not quite know how to respond, but rather repeated the predicament: “If indeed Heaven is round and Earth is square, then the four corners cannot be covered [如誠天圓而地方，則是四角之不裁也].”28 The geometrical problem is also being rigorously worked out as one on the intersection of circle and square in the *Zhou bi suan jing* 周髀算經 (The Zhou Gnomon).29 What would have remained as irreconcilable shapes in two dimensions, it would seem, are “miraculously” closed off in three dimensions, in the manner described above of Lou Rui’s tomb. The technological innovation in the manner of the Romans, soliciting enthusiasm from Faudree and skepticism from Soper, viewed in this light was also an architectural solution to an age-old metaphysical problem. Or was it? It would seem rather ironic that as vaulting techniques matured in the late Han, the metaphysical model quickly moved on. As a means of conceptualizing the universe the Canopy Heaven model began to lose ground and was to be replaced by the Spherical Heaven/Huntian paradigm.

Nevertheless, with the model of Lou Rui’s tomb (and certainly this was an accomplishment that was achieved much earlier than the mid-sixth century) as a sort of defining paradigm, it is hard not to sketch a history of tomb construction in the Han period without a teleology at play, one informed by a compelling cosmology. [Explain why the following narrative in that teleological strain is still necessary] It is a familiar enough story that in the

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28 Seeing no way out of this problem, Zeng Shen then cites a past conversation with Confucius, who puts a metaphysical spin on the notion: Heaven and Earth become the Way of Heaven (天道), and the Way of Earth (地道), and in the same scheme, yuan and fang no longer describe shapes, but are rather understood as brightness and darkness. *Da Dai liji jiegü* 大戴禮記解詁 5:98-99; Lillian Tseng, *Picturing Heaven in Early China* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), p. 50.
Western Han period the chamber tomb, constructed laterally underground often in the form of a room, began to overtake the hitherto prevalent “casket tomb,” which was essentially a pit at the bottom of a vertical shaft. Lesser known is the role of building materials, namely bricks of various kinds, in the architectural transformation of the underground mortuary space. The following sketch is intended as an outline of what remains an important and understudied (at least in the English language) subject of Han material culture.

The use of ceramic material in China could be traced back to as early as the Neolithic period. Sun-dried adobe was a prevalent material in Chinese architecture, an indispensable material even now in large parts of China. Fired bricks appeared in the Western Zhou, in the forms of large, hollow bricks and small, solid strips, presumably for flooring and walls. Pre-Han findings are sporadic, and often are not substantial enough to sustain more than a vague picture of how they were used. Hollow bricks seem to have been employed almost exclusively in tombs. Both types coexisted in the Han tombs, though hollow bricks were gradually replaced by solid strips. This change was important because it not only signaled an eventual separation of brick making from pottery, as workshops that specialized in making bricks began to emerge in the Western Han, but also because it radically recast the pattern of envisioning the interior of the

30 Wu Hung, *Art of the Yellow Springs*, pp. 20-33; Huang Xiaofen, *Han mu de kaoguxue yanjiu*, pp. 70-95.


tomb. The labor-intensive, highly skilled art of hollow bricks, gave way to specialized workshops that now worked on solid strips of regulated sizes. This change in itself is an apt commentary on the growing centralization of the Han state. Scale has become the measure of all things.

But more important is how differently the role of the brick is construed. To put forth a generalization that is a little simplistic and specious, it changed from ornamental, that is as decorated surfaces folded into form, to a structural member, which though stripped of its ornamental autonomy, nevertheless, can now be coalesced into structural forms (and hence also canvases) of novel shapes and grander scales.

In our earliest findings, hollow bricks provide little more than facings of a rectangular casket, laid level on bottom and sides at the end of a vertical shaft [Fig. 4-12]. Flat and hollow (each measuring about 1x0.4x0.15 meters), they were of less structural integrity in terms of compressive or tensile strength, but rather as surfaces of decoration they carry patterns that resemble the Union Jack. But as architectural forms, these hollow brick tombs deviate little from their timber counterparts [Fig. 4-13]. What we witness is a relatively new material still tied to a design based on an erstwhile material that was once the norm [Fig. 4-14]. The entire space seems to have been conceived as little more than lithic demarcation of an underground space for the burials of body and goods alike. Changes in mortuary practices in the Western Han soon began to stretch the limits of such an architectural convention: on the one hand, the growing

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popularity of double or triple burials within the same mortuary space made the distance of spanning a pressing issue for tomb designers;\footnote{Nickel, \textit{Gräber der Han-Zeit in Luoyang}, pp. 191-195.} On the other hand, a dramatic shift to conceptualizing the tombs themselves as ritual spaces, displacing ground structures, demanded that tombs become more spacious.\footnote{Wu Hung, “From Temple to Tomb: Ancient Chinese Religion and Art in Transition,” \textit{Early China} 13 (1988): 78-115.} It would seem that the discovery of the brick as a structural member coincided with the search and discovery of a new spatial form.

In the princely tombs of the Western Han, we already see experiments in spanning larger interior spaces. The monumental tomb dug into a mountain cliff at Mancheng, belonging to Liu Sheng 劉勝 (d. 113 BCE), Prince of Zhongshan, has a rear chamber that was constructed out of stone slabs in the shape of a gabled house.\footnote{Zhonguo shekeyuan kaogusuo 中國社科院考古所, \textit{Mancheng Han mu fajue baogao 滿城漢墓發掘報告} (Beijing, 1980), pp. 17-21; On the unusual feature that the stone slabs were cut and polished as if they were timbers, Wu Hung speculates that the builders may have been carpenters that improvised with the relatively unfamiliar material of stone. His purpose is to underscore the use of stone for the burial chamber as a material marker for the “eternal world of the dead.” See Wu Hung, \textit{Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture} (Stanford, 1995), pp. 130-133. For a small spin on this argument based on Song tombs which imitate timber structures, see Lin Wei-cheng, “Wooden Architectural Structure in Brick: A Changed Perspective from Life to Death in 10th-13th Century China,” \textit{Archives of Asian Art} 61 (2011): 3-36.} Likewise, another cliff tomb in Jiangsu contemporaneous to that of Liu Sheng’s, which likely belonged to a regional prince, comprised of largely chambers that were similarly structured with such stone-slab ceilings [\textbf{Fig. 4-15}].\footnote{For the excavation report, see Xuzhou bowuguan 徐州博物館, “Xuzhou Beidongshan Xi Han mu fajue jianbao 徐州北洞山西漢墓發掘簡報,” \textit{Wenwu} no. 2 (1988): 2-18, 68.} This seems to have become the norm for princely burials across the country. But it was in brick tombs of humbler scale that seeds for further innovation were sewn. Among one of the earliest
groups of tombs at Shaogou, near Luoyang, [a group upon which we will have further
opportunities to comment later in this chapter] M102 introduces an interesting employment of
hollow bricks. While for the walls and flooring, smaller solid strips were used, the ceiling was
constructed entirely out of hollow bricks [Fig. 4-16]. The hollow bricks seem to have been
designed especially for spanning the width of the chamber, as a set of three—two long and one
short—make up a small gable-shaped bracing, so to speak, which was then multiplied (26 per the
excavation report) to enclose the entire space below.\(^{41}\) That each component follows more or less
a uniform size suggests that the construction was conceived in a modular manner.\(^{42}\) Moreover,
both ends of a long strip were fashioned into mortises which would then fasten them onto the
side walls on one end, and the short, horizontal ridge on the other [Fig. 4-17], a legacy from
timber construction.\(^{43}\) Likewise, it is bricks predisposed for tenon joinery that take center stage at
a group of Han tombs near Xinye county, Henan province. Here, solid strips, smaller in scale
than their counterparts at Shaogou and shaped into trapezoids, were joined in groups of three to
span the longitudinal space of a grave [Fig. 4-18].\(^{44}\) Both cases (Shaogou and Xinye) show that,
perhaps by trial and error, tomb designers have begun to understand how forces behave in
construction. While they may have construed the following in different terms, the key to span

\(^{41}\) Zhongguo kexue yuan kaogu yanjiusuo 中國科學院考古研究所, *Luoyang Shaogou Han mu*
洛陽澗溝漢墓 (Beijing, 1959), p. 30.

\(^{42}\) The long strip is 1.14 meters, the short one 0.54. *Ibid.*

\(^{43}\) For what may have been an earlier effort to enclose a tomb with a gable ceiling, but with
hollow bricks with similar tenon-and-mortise arrangements, see Luoyang shi di’er wenwu
gongzuodui 洛陽市第二文物工作隊, “Luoyang Beimang 45 hao kongxinzhuan mu 洛陽北邙45

\(^{44}\) Henan sheng Nanyang diqu wenwu yanjiusuo 河南省南陽地區文物研究所, “Xinye Fanji
Shaogou M102, the bricks here are much less standardized in both shape and size.
longer distance lies in transforming the tensions that result from trabeated construction into compressions that are shared by members of a proto-arch, which is what they essentially are.\textsuperscript{45} But old habits die hard. In the same way that the Romans introduced the Greek orders as an ornamental language to their constructions, the designers of the tombs at Xinye furnished the front end of each grave with brick facings that are reminiscent of much earlier designs [\textbf{Fig. 4-19}]. On the surfaces of these large, and sometimes hollow, lintels and posts are designs that were stamped from prefabricated molds.

The three-piece design described above is sometimes called a gable ceiling (\textit{wudian ding} 屋殿頂), by virtue of its resemblance to the shape of a gable end.\textsuperscript{46} However, the speciousness of the definition soon becomes obvious once the number of members in such a design is multiplied to form a false arch [\textbf{Fig. 4-20}], even though again the attachment of large hollow bricks with prefabricated pictures to the front as facing obscures the structural design of the tomb.\textsuperscript{47} By this point, it would seem that the appearance of the true arch would just be a matter of time, once the solid strips are replaced by voussoirs (\textit{qixing zhuan} 楔形磚). And this is exactly what one finds in the north chamber of M36 at Xinye, where the barrel vault ceiling was constructed with voussoirs of the same size [\textbf{Fig. 4-21}]. We are told by the archaeologists responsible for the excavation that, these voussoirs still retain the tenons and mortices that we saw in earlier

\textsuperscript{45} One wouldn’t be surprised at all if someday it could be established that such designs first appeared in civil works—bridges would be the most likely candidate. In fact, timber bridges built upon the same principles can still be found in regions of southern China that thrive on networks of small rivers.

\textsuperscript{46} Huang Xiaofen, \textit{Han mu de kaoguxue yanjiu}, p. 159.

\textsuperscript{47} The designs on the two vertical slabs, according to the authors of the excavation report, were printed from the same mold, although their sizes differ somewhat owing to uneven cutting. See “Xinye Fanji Han huaxiangzhuan mu,” p. 485.
constructions. It is also interesting to note that here the barrel vault coexisted with the three-piece gable ceiling, which encloses the neighboring south chamber.

Our narrative, one of the ever-expanding mortuary interior as if in seeking of expressions of cosmic significance, seems to find its climax (or the beginning) at Shaogou, where the earliest use of hollow bricks to construct “gable ceilings” was recorded [Fig. 4-16]. In terms of its size, M632 is one of the largest at Shaogou, although the modest quality of the tomb furnishings suggests that the three buried here did not necessarily enjoy a higher status than contemporaneous burials at the site [Fig. 4-22].

No orthographic evidence could help us safely date the tomb. The pottery found inside, as well as tomb typology (based on the plan), seems to suggest that M632 was built towards the end of Western Han. The burials are found at the back of the main chamber, to which two pairs of subsidiary chambers were added to store burial goods. The entire interior is covered with barrel vaults. Such an arrangement obviously presented the same problem of dealing with two intersecting barrel vaults that we saw at Wangdu at the beginning of this chapter. There the solution that the builders devised was to raise one vault above the other [Fig. 4-2]. The Shaogou builders, however, only resorted to this method at the first intersection from the back [Fig. 4-23]. At the second intersection where the transverse vault meets the longitudinal vault (which is lower at this point), the builders raised what essentially is a cross vault by making the bricks form interlocking herring-bone patterns at the corners [Fig. 4-24].


49 Nickel, *Gräber der Han-Zeit in Luoyang*, p. 223; *Luoyang Shaogou Han mu*, pp. 229-239.
It is perhaps a moot question to wonder what made the builders of M632 change their minds and improvise at the second intersection. Whatever it was, their improvisation was successful, as the tomb for the most part was structurally intact during the excavation of 1953. Their efforts resulted in a low domical ceiling, and one that strays somewhat between the circular and the square. It is not the near-hemispherical dome of Lou Rui’s tomb. Nor does it bear any pictorial markers of the celestial realm. However, the humble beginning at Shaogou M632 does seem to have set the stage for an emerging paradigm that was to take hold in the next century.  

4.2 All the Bright Halls That Were Never Built

The Mingtang 明堂, variously translated into English as “The Bright Hall,” “The Hall of Light” and the “Southern Hall,” is often considered one of the most important ritual halls in which sacrifices to heavenly deities and (sometimes) imperial ancestors took place. The present Altar to Heaven complex in Beijing may be close to a Mingtang in both form and function. While no structure of its kind seems to have survived from before the nineteenth century, archaeology has since the 1950s yielded a few possible sites of earlier Mingtang, one near

modern Chang’an (attributed to Wang Mang) and two Luoyang (respectively attributed to Guangwu of Han and Empress Wu).\footnote{Various modern reconstructions based on the excavations have been attempted. However, with little to go on, these archaeological reconstructions partake in the same process of re-imagination, discussed below, of parsing the same vague textual evidence and producing designs that only matched our expectations. The result is of course that reconstructions as such are hotly debated in modern times, just as their ancient predecessors would have been at the court.}

What follows is not meant to be a history of Mingtang buildings. Not that this has not been attempted by others elsewhere.\footnote{Fascination with the history of Mingtang began almost as early as the first documented structure was built in the second century BCE, which was already considered an effort to “restore” a form that had long been lost. Interest in the subject continued almost unabated into the modern period. While it is difficult to pinpoint a cutoff point, one might credit Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877-1927) as the first modern scholar to have dealt with the subject in a thorough (though largely philological) manner. See Wang Guowei, “Mingtang miao qin tongkao 明堂廟寝通考,” in Wang Guowei xiansheng yishu 王國維先生遺書 (Shanghai, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 137-158. In English, William Edward Soothill’s study places the subject under the larger purview of calendrical studies and imperial legitimacy. See William Edward Soothill, The Hall of Light: A Study of Early Chinese Kingship (London, 1951). More recent studies along the same lines have tried to reconstruct not only the changing forms of the Mingtang buildings over the ages, but also the rituals that took place within them. Some also tend to focus on the intellectual and political contexts of specific periods as they relate to Mingtang projects. See Zhang Yibing 張一兵, Mingtang zhidu yanjiu 明堂制度研究 (Beijing, 2005); idem., Mingtang zhidu yuanliu kao 明堂制度源流考 (Beijing, 2007); Nancy Steinhardt, “The Han Ritual Hall,” in Chinese Traditional Architecture (New York, 1984), pp. 70-77; James T. C. Liu, “The Sung Emperors and the Ming-t’ang or Hall of Enlightenment,” Etudes Song in memoriam Etienne Balazs, serie II, Civilisation (Paris, 1973), pp. 45-63; Antonio Forte, Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock: The Tower, Statue and Armillary Sphere Constructed by Empress Wu (Roma, 1988); Minimizawa Yoshihiko 南澤良彦, “Tōdai no myōdō 唐代の明堂,” Chūgoku tetsugaku ronshū 36 (2010): 1-27; idem., “Hokugi to Sui no myōdō 北魏と隋の明堂,” Tetsugaku nenpō 70 (2011): 133-165.} Nor is my discussion meant to shed light on the
reconstruction of architectural complexes that have been excavated [Fig. 4-25]. Rather, I wish to engage the construction of Mingtang on a discursive level through snippets of debates over its form and function. For it was almost always more than a design problem.

Since as early as the first century BCE, the design of the Mingtang began to follow the period visualization model of the cosmos. That is “Heaven is Round, and Earth is Square.” A domical ceiling on a square plan. Under this brief, the architecture of the Mingtang no longer served as simply a ritual space alone, but its form was also charged with the tall order of being an embodiment of the harmonious workings of Heaven and Earth, a mediation between the gods above and men below. An order that was often too tall to fill, as it turned out. The simple or perfect geometry of the design—the square plan topped by a circular/domical ceiling invite projections of meaning which in time became impossible for it to accommodate. For the accretion of meanings attributed to the domical form created an architectural paradox: it was called upon to meet demands of signification, and yet too much expectation outweighed the

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54 One might argue that such debates often took place when there was an “identity crisis” in the realm of elite culture; for in addition to provide legitimacy to rule, Mingtang projects were often called for in the wake of destruction, as a sign for revival, which in turn provided opportunities to define and refine “our culture (si wen 斯文)” in new terms. The surges of debates over the Mingtang in the Han, early Tang, early Northern Song, and finally in the late Qing and early Republic periods, all coincided with times when the mainstream literati culture seemed to be at stake.
design, and undermined its capacity to signify [is it impossible to realize the intent of signification or the extent of it].

Our written record documents a history of Mingtang buildings that failed to be substantiated. A pattern repeats itself. Plans were debated, revised, tabled, and then abandoned, to be revived again, but then again, revised, tabled and abandoned.\textsuperscript{55} More often, the Mingtang was a structure that existed only in numbers and fantasies. It was a chimera that would require a re-imagination each time; in a tradition where the power of words is ever more resilient than building materials that are ephemeral by comparison, every re-imagination almost invariably took the form of textual criticism. The Mingtang therefore, much like a text, becomes a palimpsest upon which doubts, anxieties, and occasionally convictions are folded into the past. The premises are often simple, even though their parameters shift each time, and it is with those simple premises that produced some of the richest and most creative forms of imagination.

Like its meanings, the functions of the Mingtang become cumulative over time. By the second century CE, there was already embedded in the Mingtang a conglomeration of all sacred and stately functions. The Mingtang was a structure that may have acquired its significance by its singular dedication to the Heavens, its function as site for sacrificial rituals performed to appease the gods beyond. This is certainly the impression conveyed by the writings of those close to the Wudi of Han 漢武帝 (r. 141-87 BCE). The Han emperor is often credited to have rescued the

\textsuperscript{55} Barring the earliest recorded examples in the 1st century BCE, only three Mingtang were constructed under unified regimes before the end of the first millennium of the Common Era. Curiously, of the three built examples, two were constructed by usurpers, and in both occasions, were executed with such lightning speed that they were completed before any opposition could garner strength. One may argue that only those whose legitimacy of rule is in question would have the conviction and desperation to force the completion of a Mingtang, despite the inherent incommensurability between form and meaning.
structure from the mythical golden age. Like many after him, Wudi must have solicited opinions
from the erudite scholars both within and beyond his inner court. The *Huainanzi* 淮南子,
compiled under the auspices of Liu An 劉安 (179?-122 BCE), King/Prince of Huainan and uncle
of Wudi, attributed the origin of the Mingtang to the legendary Shennong. Its description of the
structure also provides the prototype of the *rusticus* paradigm which is to form an important part
of all future Mingtang debates:

In ancient times, when the Divine Farmer ruled the world
…
sweet rains fell in their season;
the five grains multiplied and prospered.
In the spring there was birth, in summer growth;
in the fall, harvest; in the winter, storage.
He inquired monthly and investigated seasonally;
when the harvest ended, he reported the achievements.
Each season he tasted the grain offerings
and sacrificed in the Mingtang.
The construction of the Mingtang was [such that] it had a roof but no sides.
Wind and rain could not assail it;
cold and heat could not harm it.56

[昔者神農之治天下也…甘雨時降，五穀蕃植，春生夏長，秋收冬藏。月省時
考，歲終獻功，以時當谷，祀於明堂。明堂之制，有蓋而無四方，風雨不能
襲，寒暑不能傷]

The picture is one of reciprocity. Through the humble hut that is his Mingtang, the Divine
Farmer performed sacrifices to render his gratitudes to Heaven for setting in motion the wheel of
life in regulated order. Sima Qian 司馬遷 (139-86 BCE) described in similar terms a *Diagram of
the Mingtang*, submitted by a master of method under the name of Gongyu Dai 公玉帶, and

56 Liu Wendian 劉文典, *Huainan honglie jijie* 淮南鴻烈集解 (Beijing, 1989), juan 9, 1:271;
One critical change made to the translation: originally, the translators understood the object of
Shennong’s sacrifice as his ancestors. I cannot concur here.

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which allegedly depicted the Mingtang constructed by another legendary Patriarch, the Yellow Emperor. The same diagram presumably provided the model of Wudi’s own Mingtang at the foot of Mount Tai in 109 BC:

The diagram depicts a hall/palace, without a wall on its four sides, covered with thatch and drilled to allow water through, which then surrounds the palatial walls; it is then furnished with double passageways, and above there is one tower. One enters from the southwest. [The entry] is called Kunlun. The Son of Heaven enters thus in order to sacrifice to the Lord on High.\(^57\)

[明堂圖中有一殿，四面無壁，以茅蓋，通水，圓宮垣為複道，上有樓，從西南入，命曰昆侖，天子從之入，以拜祠上帝焉]

We have no way of knowing whether Sima Qian’s description was based on his own witness of the diagram or a verbal description he inherited, though one suspects the latter was more likely the case.\(^58\) The description alone also makes it difficult to visualize what the compound may have looked like. It gives a list of structures and yet hardly notes how each is related to the others as a whole. Rather, its fastidious naming of typologies—in that a tang may be different from a dian, or a gong may encompass a lou—would have been more suggestive of the forms of these structures to Sima Qian’s readers than to us. To the modern reader, it is hard to know if Wudi’s Mingtang here was one complex or one structure, and if the former, how many structures there were. For one, the description seems to suggest that the dian here was thatched,
which makes it hard to relate it to the *lou* on top. What is also intriguing in this description is the complete absence of what would have become thorny problems in almost all later debates, of numerology and geometry, and of how they are keyed into the workings of the universe. Instead, of note here is how the architecture provided the space through which the subject performed a ritual—the Son of Heaven paying obeisance to the Lord on High—and, importantly, the architecture of the Mingtang was to choreograph his movements.

In the last analysis, the significance of the Mingtang, or Huangdi’s Mingtang, as borne out by the *diagram* and Wudi’s structure which was modeled on it, lay in its role of channeling communication between Man, not any man but the son of Heaven, and Heaven itself. The formal aspects of the architecture, in comparison, were irrelevant. Indeed, if our interpretations of both passages are correct, Wudi’s *Mingtang* was meant to bespeak humility, and any extravagance invested on its form would have undermined that very purpose. Here is already an interesting paradox: possibly the most important structure of the Han imperium, one reserved for the emperor and the emperor only, was to take a form of humility in inverse relation to its significance.

However, such a divide between man and Heaven was to become untenable, as both realms became increasingly embroiled in an elaborate system of signification. In time, that significance associated with the Mingtang structure was to be conferred onto the human world, and what could better bridge those two realms and therefore convert that significance into mundane/political terms than an architecture that merges both into a microcosm, its rhetorical purchase contingent on that comprehensiveness, which mirrors what was happening in the
construction of mortuary spaces. This is encapsulated by the views of the scholars at the Eastern Han court, who participated in the famous debate of the White Tiger Hall in 79 CE:

The Son of Heaven erects the Bright Hall so that he may enter into communication with the spiritual forces, undergo [the influence of] Heaven and Earth, keep the four seasons on the right track, and put forth his reformist teaching... The Bright Hall is round at the top and square at the bottom. It has eight windows and four doors. It is the building where the orders of the state proceed, and it is situated south of the capital. The top is round in imitation of Heaven, and the bottom is square in imitation of Earth. The eight windows represent the Eight Winds, the four doors the Four Seasons; the nine chambers the Nine Provinces, the twelve seats the Twelve Months, the thirty-six door-leaves the Thirty-six Rains, the seventy-two window-openings and Seventy-two Winds.59

[天子立明堂者，所以通神靈，感天地，正四時，出教化...明堂上圓下方，八窗四闕，布政之宮，在國之陽。上圓法天，下方法地，八窗象八風，四闕法四時，九室法九州，十二坐法十二月，三十六戶法三十六雨，七十二門法七十二風。]

And yet, in the case of the Mingtang, the boundary thus breached between Heaven (as a space that both embodies and enacts) and Man (as a space where emperors pay worship to their ancestors, men to men) would always sit uncomfortably with the more puritanical and conservative-minded, who found such a lack of architectural decorum simply unacceptable.

Form follows function. That conservatism partially derives from concerns over what happens inside the Mingtang. From the Eastern Han, the debate took the form of whether the Mingtang and the Taimiao (太廟), or the Grand Shrine, where sacrifices were made to the imperial ancestors, should in fact be one and the same. Of course, almost like all such debates, proponents on either side engaged mostly textual sources, culling from the Confucian classics to bolster their

arguments. Cai Yong 蔡邕 (132-192 CE), whose opinion on the matter was to have lasting influence for later centuries, strongly believed that the two should be the same: “That which is called the Mingtang is in fact the Grand Shrine of the Son of Heaven. It is where he makes offering to his ancestors, as auxiliaries (that is, they serve as auxiliary subjects) to his offerings to the Lord on High.” [明堂者，天子太廟。所以宗祀其祖，以配上帝者也] He went on to explain that the plethora of terminologies from ancient texts like qingmiao (清廟 “Pure Shrine”), taishi (太室 “Grand Chamber”) and of course, Taimiao and Mingtang, are but different names, albeit with subtle differences in their emphases, of essentially the same thing. Therefore, Cai also accorded this building of cosmological significance with formal features of deserving grandeur. The Mingtang, by his reckoning, is a square building that has a domical upper room. This upper room, which he called a tongtian wu 通天屋, or a room for communicating with Heaven, is of nine zhang in circumference, [徑九丈，隂陽九六之變也], and eighty-one chi in height, which is the squaring of nine and the length of the pitch Yellow Bell [九九黃鐘之實]. It is buttressed by “twenty-eight pillars on the four sides, representing the twenty eight lunar lodges with seven in each quarter of the sky.” [二十八柱列於四方，亦七宿之象也] The notion “four sides” gives us pause here, as it suggests a possibly rectilinear plan. However, the strong celestial symbolism that these pillars embody—the lunar lodges are traditionally how the ancient Chinese mapped the night sky to track the movement of the moon—implies that they belong to the upper and circular structure, the tongtian wu. In the same way, the rest of Cai’s description is

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60 Cai Yong 蔡邕, “Mingtang yueling lun 明堂月令論,” Cai Zhonglang wenji 蔡中郎文集, juan 10 (Sibu congkan edition), unpaginated.

61 Ibid.
very much in line with the quotation we saw earlier from the *Baihu tong.*\(^{62}\) It is unclear whether Cai’s text, titled *Mingtang yueling lun* 明堂月令論 or *Treatises on the Bright Hall and Monthly Observances*, is a description of the Bright Hall that he saw in Luoyang, or an idealized notion that he extracted from earlier text, which therefore was more of a paradigm than a description. Modern archaeologists sometimes take the former view in their efforts to reconstruct the Bright Hall in Luoyang.\(^{63}\) But we know that officials at the Chinese court of later periods tended to prefer the latter.\(^{64}\) Whichever the case, we see how eager Cai Yong was to attribute meanings to the Bright Hall and its dome, to “fill out the basic cosmological diagram with abundant symbolic details” in architectural terms.\(^{65}\)

Likewise, those on the other side of the debate, who propounded that to place the space of Heavenly communication together with the space of the human dead, that of the ghosts of imperial ancestors, would be a transgression of the utmost kind, had equally compelling evidence from ancient sources. Yuan Zhun 表准 (third century), who wrote perhaps half a century after Cai, had the following to say:

> The Bright Hall, The Ancestral Shrine, Daxue, they are all that which rituals are based on. Things in the world have their different purposes, and should therefore be left to different devices. And yet some who are eager to make their points heard argue that they should be all combined into one. They rely on unrestrained passages and sentences that appear to be canonical from the *Book of Songs* and the *Book of Documents* to reach their conclusions. But if one examines the reasoning of man, then [one finds that their arguments] could not be further


\(^{64}\) Zhang Yibing, *Mingtang zhidu yanjiu*, pp. 386-388.

\(^{65}\) Tseng, *Picturing Heaven in Early China*, p. 69.
from the truth. The Ancestral Shrine is the space of the most revered of men. It is the abode of ghosts and spirits, and should be secluded and uncluttered...[The Bright Hall, on the other hand] is a most humble building, unadorned, and with only thatches and timbers. To place Sun and Moon, the Jade Chariot [of the Emperor] inside is to make it into something that is not of its kind.

We have no way of knowing what the Bright Hall should look like to Yuan, for what remains of his corpus is now only preserved in later collectanea and encyclopedias. It makes no mention of any formal aspects, though presumably they would not be too different from those of Wudi’s mingtang, a simple thatched two-storey structure, discussed earlier through Sima Qian’s description. The notion of something “not of its kind [fei qi lei ye 非其類也]” speaks to a concern of decorum that pertains to how form is related to function. At the same time, the target of Yuan’s criticism is an almost quixotic optimism that the architecture of the mingtang could indeed be so encompassing to enclose the abode of the deceased spirits, the Sun and the Moon, chariots of the imperial retinue, etc. A misalignment of form and expectations of what it should mean.

Such expectations accrued over time. Like the officials at Wudi’s court, when access to actual surviving mingtang buildings was denied, those charged with building the Bright Hall had to resort to textual sources to feed on their imaginative powers. But as we shall see, those

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66 Yuan’s notion 茅茨采椽 here is a reference to a description of the humility of King Yao in *Han Fei zi*. See Wang Xianshen 王先慎 (ed.), *Han Fei zi jijie* 韓非子集解 (Beijing, 1998), p. 443.

67 Yuan Zhun 袁准, *Zheng lun* 正論, originally of 19 fascicles, only fragments are now preserved later texts like the *Liji zhengyi* 礼記正義. See Kong Yingda 孔穎達 et al, *Liji zhengyi*, juan 31, in Li Xueqin 李學勤 (ed.), *Shisanjing zhushu* 十三經註疏 (Beijing, 1999), vol. 14, p. 1085.
technical details were filled in only to serve the same basic paradigm which imposed an
encyclopedic charge on the building itself, that its form (“Circular above and square below”)
embraces all there is between Heaven and Earth. Voices like Yuan Zhun’s would remain in the
minority. Indeed, they were hardly to be heeded.

When China was finally reunited under the Tang (618-907), following the brief rule of
Sui (581-618), Emperor Taizong 唐太宗 (r. 626-649) turned to the building of a new Bright Hall
in 631 CE, with a view to consolidate the legitimacy of the new ruling house. Taizong’s
ambitions did not come to fruition. Neither did those of his immediate successor, Gaozong (r.
649-683). They were thwarted by raging debates over the form of the building. We shall see that
these debates took place essentially along the same lines as those in the second and third
centuries CE.

It should not surprise us that the first extensive discussion of the mingtang form in our
records from this period already took the form of a rebuttal. Kong Yingda’s 孔穎達 (574-648)
argument was a response to an earlier proposition by Lu Kuan 處 宏 (seventh century) and Liu
Bozhuang 劉伯莊 (fl. mid-seventh century) that the Bright Hall should be divided vertically into
the realms of Heaven and the mundane, where by two levels should be devised, with the upper
one reserved for sacrifices to Heaven and the lower one for the administration of the State [上層
祭天，下堂布政]. Theirs followed the same principle endorsed by Cai Yong, which we saw
Yuan Zhun argued vehemently against, that a building like the Bright Hall should in fact stretch
to include affairs of different worlds. It is not to this principle that Kong Yingda objected. Rather,
he wondered whether those two worlds should be segregated at all in architectural terms:
Your humble servant believes that for when the ancients conducted important affairs, they treated them in the same manner they would communicate with deities. Therefore, be it granting imperial interviews or making sacrifices to Heaven, everything took place inside the Hall. How could they have made offerings to their ancestors [and Heaven] at the top, and attended court affairs below?

[臣以古者敬重大事，與接神相似，是以朝覲祭祀，皆在廟堂，豈有樓上祭祖，樓下視朝？]

The Bright Hall being what it is, Kong seemed to imply, should be exactly the kind of architectural space in which energies would flow between different worlds. He also pointed out that philologically/linguistically speaking, a hall (tang 堂) is the space upon a foundation (ji 基), whereas what lies above that building is a watchtower (guan 観). He had never heard of any reference to an upper room in a multi-level structure as a tang. [基上曰堂，樓上曰觀，未聞重樓之上而有堂名] The designs of Lu and Liu were obviously aberrant. Kong admonished Taizong to adhere to ancient precedents, embodied in these philological conventions and described by texts like the *Huainanzi*.

While the symbolism of the Bright Hall would continue to hold the imagination of those at the Tang court, Kong Yingda’s would be one of the last occasions upon which one could appeal to ancient texts for a direct model. In the same debate, Wei Zheng 魏徵 (580-643) entreated Taizong to relinquish Kong’s kind of fastidiousness to ancient sources, but instead to come up with a new design [自我而作，何必師古]. Centuries of debating must have led to the belief that canonical sources, whilst useful, also induced selective reading. Yuan Zhun, as we saw, already faulted his opponents for the same reason in the third century. But although smaller details should be left to the emperor and his ministers, the larger paradigm had not lost its grip:

[Your humble servant would] entreat you to build a two-level structure with five chambers. It should be circular above, square below, for in form this would be entrenched in a symbolic anchor, and [the legitimacy of] the affairs [to transpire therein] supported by canonical references. The lower chamber would be where the administration of the state takes place; and the hall above would be for making sacrifices to Heaven. There would be no transgression between [the realms of] men and gods. And it would also befit the rituals.\(^69\)

This, Wei Zheng argued, would be to arrive at a compromise between two extremes that made any practical implementation of their ideals impossible. In the same way that all such “reconstructions” of the Bright Hall derived their legitimacy from textual criticism, Wei adopted a literary metaphor:

If one were to follow Cai Yong’s treatise, it would be akin to [in writing] losing the utmost truth in a surfeit of verbosity; if one were to heed the opinions of Pei Wei,\(^70\) [the design] would then be found wanting in its simplicity.\(^71\)

[若據蔡邕之說，則至理失於文繁；若依裴頠所為，則又偏於質略]

Wei Zheng’s reasoning is one of pragmatism. Not only did he believe that the tyranny of the canonical texts had long hindered the construction of the Bright Hall, but more importantly, as the above quotation reveals, it was the idealist vision of an encyclopedic architecture that lay at the heart of the problem. No conclusion was reached following the 631 debate. Twelve years later, in his memorial to the throne, Yan Shigu 顏師古 (581-645) supplied further ammunition to


\(^70\) Pei Wei’s (267-300)’s proposal that the Mingtang should only have one single chamber, devoted entirely to ritual sacrifices to Heaven, with deceased imperial ancestors as auxiliaries is cited in Yuwen Kai’s 宇文愷 biography in Wei Zheng 魏徵 et al, *Sui shu* 隋書, “liezhuan” 列傳 33 (Beijing, 1973), juan 68: 1592.

Wei’s argument. Yan, whose name ironically means “learning from the Ancients,” put interpretive license over bookish fastidiousness (two sides of the same coin of pragmatism over idealism). But above all, he argued, that indecision on the part of the emperor would be more costly:

Your servant holds the uninformed opinion that between the times of the Five Thearchs and the two Han periods, the scales and shapes [of the Bright Halls]—tall or short, square or circular—never followed one another. It is crucial that Your Majesty should be given the liberty to devise. Once a Bright Hall of the Great Tang is created, it will stand for thousands of generations to come. Why should one dwell on such questions of numbers of windows and doors, or the widths of yards and stairs? If Your Majesty indulged the scholars to hold onto their arguments, and did not arrive at a decision before long, it would only delay the grand ceremonies [to be held therein].

The debate was to continue and the advice of the likes of Wei Zheng and Yan Shigu would also go unheeded. In time, plans that were even more elaborate than the ones dreamed up by the likes of Cai Yong were devised and revised for Taizong’s successor, Gaozong, in 651 and 667. Supposedly, a miniature model was even made for the 651 design, following earlier precedents. These were plans that attributed down to the last bracket arm a part in a grand

cosmological order of things. Reading between the lines, one could not help but feel that the real purpose of the glossing, may perhaps have been demonstrative rather than prescriptive, that is it was intended to explicate and collate, what would otherwise simply be lost to the observer: the correspondence (the formal and numerical) between the Mingtang building and what it truly represented (the cosmological). But it came to pass that Gaozong was never to see these designs put to work. As he died in 683, they still remained on paper, where idealistic buildings as such will forever remain. It would take the reckless conviction of a usurper to see a Mingtang rise, rendering practically more than half a century of deliberation obsolete in the process. But that would be a very different building, and the beginning of a very different story.

4.3 Some Reflections

Just to give one some flavor of these designs: In the 667 edict, for instance, in addition to the twenty-eight pillars on the second level of the building, which as we saw earlier in Cai Yong’s treatise, another thirty-two pillars make up a third level, which symbolize the eight seasonal changes, the eight aspects of government, the eight winds (or winds from eight directions), and the eight classes of musical instruments [八節、八政、八風、八音]; that the total number of flying-eave rafters should be seven hundred and twenty nine, for it is the number from the zi hour (hour of the rat) to the wu hour (hour of the horse) [that is, three to the power of six]. And therefore, it is “based on the images of celestial bodies and modeled on the utmost number of the spherical Heaven.” [從子至午，其數七百二十九，故置七百二十九枚。所以采辰象之宏模，法周天之至數] Both codes are derived from the “lüli zhi” 律歷制 of the Han shu. See Liu, Jiu Tang shu, juan 22: 859, 861; Ban Gu 班固, Han shu 漢書 (Beijing, 1962), juan 21: 963-965.

For a discussion of Empress Wu and her two Bright Halls, see Antonio Forte, Mingtang and Buddhist Utopias in the History of the Astronomical Clock (Rome, 1988).
Cosmology and sacred architecture forge easy alliances, if not simply because of the almost primordial urge in all of us to seek meaning in the space we inhabit. But the Chinese particularities, long entrenched in a mode of correlative thinking, have also encouraged us to see that the stars, as it were, find perfect alignment with their symbolic projections on earth. The short sketch at the beginning of this chapter of a particular cosmography emerging in Han and Post-Han mortuary space corroborates this. We also find such assurances in the voices we excavate from textual sources, for instance, in the following poem by the third-century poet Lu Ji 陸機 (261-303):

The piled-up hills, how they tower!
The dark hut skulks beneath them.
All-encompassing, [Earth] extends to the Four Limits;
High-vaulted spreads the azure Heaven.
By my side I hear the hidden river's flow;
On my back, I gaze at the heavenly well suspended.
How lonely is the wide firmament!
The great night, how will it ever come to dawn?  

The poet ponders the question of the subterranean life (one that also bears on the ontological status of the afterlife) in this dark but articulate piece of ventriloquy. Insofar as poets lodge voices in created personas and alter egos, a vast number of poetic works from this period may be regarded as ventriloquy. But in this case, the analogy is perhaps more apt, for here, Lu Ji

77 See Paul Mus's discussion in Chapter 1, p. 18.
inhabits the body of a deceased man, who by definition no longer possesses a voice of his own.

The quoted passage belongs to the last of a series of three “coffin-pullers’ songs (wange shi 終歌詩).”79 Here, in a fashion which first began a few decades earlier with Miao Xi 繪羲 (186-245), the bystander of Lu’s second poem is suddenly given to the voice of the deceased, now six feet under, fully ensconced at the bottom of this “dark hut,”80 in dead silence. His description of the interior of the grave is in the familiar language of Han cosmological thinking, as we saw earlier,
one that projects the shapes of Heaven and Earth into simple (and yet perfect) geometric forms.\(^{81}\)

But it also lends itself to an architectonic reading: \(li\) (立) articulates how structural forces being directed down the brick walls, which carry the barrel vault or domical ceiling in the same way that one’s legs carry one’s torso; \(qionglong\) 穹隆, a term as old as the \(Book of Odes\),\(^{82}\) describes these novel domical structural devices which begin in this period to crown an ever higher interior, and upon which the celestial realm is given its fullest pictorial expression; \(fang\) 放, while possibly a stand-in for its homonym \(fang\) (to model on), translated as “spread” however, feels like an understatement. \(Project\) may be more apt.

While Lu Ji finds the idea that the lone soul is to inhabit a perfectly matched cosmos under the ground unsettling, we find in his poem a perfect mapping of a microcosmic universe in a mortuary space that lent the deceased at once a “metaphysical environment” and a voice at its center.\(^{83}\) But in the sense that cosmography is always ideal, never real, there can be no real cosmography in any architecture. The cosmological mandate imposed on the Mingtang building provided the coordinates of an ideal paradigm, that its domical ceiling is to be the embodiment of all things Heavenly, and its Square shape below all else. The brief set the stage for all debates

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\(^{81}\) In particular, the couplet “All-encompassing, [Earth] extends to the Four Limits; High-vaulted spreads the azure Heaven [旁薄立四極。穹隆放蒼天]” is clearly an allusion to a passage in Yang Xiong’s 楊雄 (53 B.C. – 18 A.D.) \(Taixuan jing\) 太玄經 (Classic of Mystery), a divination text modeled on the \(Book of Change\). The passage in question comes from the last of the author’s 10 autocommentaries: “Heaven is arched and vaulted, but everywhere it reaches to the lower parts. Earth in all directions thins out at the edges, but it faces the upper regions [天穹隆而周乎下，地旁薄而向乎上].” See Michael Nylan, trans., \(The Elemental Changes\) (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1994), p. 374.

\(^{82}\) See discussion of the term in Chapter 1, pp. 18-19.

\(^{83}\) Wu Hung, \(The Art of the Yellow Springs\) (Honolulu, 2010), p. 64. Though it seems to me that in what remains of the poem Lu Ji in fact finds that juxtaposition ironic, in that the soul of the deceased is left to be at the center of a world that he would have no hope of returning to.
that were to follow since the beginning of the first millennium. But its promise is also the Mingtang’s conceit, its encyclopedism. The dome buckles under its own weight of meanings and expectations.

This irony is captured by Huangfu Mi 皇甫谧 (215-282), a recluse, medical expert, and a voracious reader of the classics (or a renaissance man of his time), in his preface to Zuo Si’s 左思 (fl. second half of the third century) *Three Capitals Rhapsody* (三都賦), wherein Huangfu gave an overview of the development of *fu* genre, and his assessments. At its conclusion, he expressed his criticism of the hyperboles of some Han *fu* rhapsodies:

Its versification is far-fetched, deceitfully extravagant, [and yet] empty and repetitive. At its grandest, it encloses all that peppers the surface of Heaven and Earth; and at its finest, it penetrates into the depth of the most minuscule. Even a [large] chariot driven by four horses would not be able to carry them; A wide hall with rolls of beams would have been capacious enough to contain.

[其文博誕空類。大者罩天地之表，細者入毫纖之內，雖充車聯駟，不足以載；廣夏接榱，不容以居也]^{84}

Indeed, literary expressions often fall short of their grand ambitions. But one also cannot help but feel that Huangfu’s use of an architectural analogy may have been intentional. After all, with the raging debates over the Mingtang, the predicament of the Chinese emperors, as Hamlet puts it, as kings of infinite space “bounded in a nutshell,”^{85} was not lost on a sharp-witted critic like Huangfu.

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^{84} *Wen Xuan*, juan 45, p. 2039.

Chapter 5: Epilogue

In 1208 the clergy of the Kōfuku-ji, led by the steward monk Jōjitsu 盛実 penned a petition to restore the Hokuendō that had been lost to the fire of 1180. This was to lead to the building of the current structure that was completed in 1220. This petition described the original eighth-century structure in terms that underscored its circularity, for the Hokuendō “encapsulated a circular heaven [within] the eight pillars and four windows of this jeweled palace.”¹ Like the rest of the petition, the description here thrives on metaphors and hyperboles. But these metaphors and hyperboles are sustained by the belief that architectural form—the domical-octagonal hall and the windows and pillars that are part of it—could reach symbolically far beyond its immediate material contexts. The term “encapsulate” is suggestive of its function as lodging, as an earthly marker of sacral meanings.

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated such use of the dome in different architectural contexts to delineate sacred space within the interior, sometimes without the kind of direct testimonials cited above. However, it would be facetious to say that we have now come full circle. The three case studies in this dissertation were meant to both improve our knowledge on these three subjects and help us explore domical building as a meaningful typology in the study of East Asian architecture. In this epilogue, after a summary of the previous chapters, I intend to briefly explore some of their broader implications for future study.

¹ NRT, 1:20.
Chapter 1 served as a preamble to the three case studies presented in this dissertation. I have attempted to carve out some theoretical space to revise two prevalent understandings on the subject that have often left materials discussed in this dissertation out of their purviews. The first is an ultimately anachronistic definition of the dome, saturated in both modernist formalism and Western essentialism, that has significantly narrowed the scope of any discussion of domical architecture. The other is a scholarly paradigm in the study of East Asian architecture that has privileged the study of the timber facade at the price of the interior, of which the dome is sometimes an essential part. Instead, I argued that an equally strong association between the domical form and the Heavenly realms also held true in East Asia. In Chapter 2, I have argued that a domical device in the form of a lantern ceiling provided the critical structure through which the meanings of the cave interiors are to be understood at Dunhuang. Despite its likely Central Asian origin, this domical device became a consistent feature in early caves at the Dunhuang site, upon which pictorial allusions to the heavenly realms were projected over time. And the fudō cave typology based on this domical device, I further argued, was an essential part of what, architecturally, transformed these caves into sacred spaces. The theme of the transformative power of the dome was continued in Chapter 3, where I placed the emergence of another building type—the domical-octagonal structure known as the “octagonal circular hall (hakkakuendō)”—within the larger religious landscape of the eighth-century Nara. I showed that these buildings not only became sacred sites where eminent patrons of the Buddhist religion (whom these structures commemorated) underwent a process of deification; but in certain cases, these domical-octagonal halls, by virtue of their association with bodhisattvahood, also cast the images placed therein with overlapping identities, of both the deity and the person. Like the
fudou domical device discussed in Chapter 2, this building type was part of the religious material culture that sustained a collective religious memory that ultimately found its locus in India. In Chapter 4, I looked at domical architecture in both mortuary and state ritual contexts in China through the twin axes of building-technology and form-meaning. From a technological point of view, the emergence of the dome within tombs, result of innovation in the use of brick, played a critical part in forging a complete cosmos inside the mortuary space. This would seem an architectural response (albeit belatedly) to the cosmological charge of “circular above, square below.” However, the same charge could not find a ready answer in the Confucian state ritual structure of the Mingtang (Bright Hall). The case of the Mingtang, as I argued, disclosed the blind spot of architectural signification, where a particular form—here the dome and its square base that defined the paradigm of the Mingtang—was overloaded with meanings, meanings that gave rise to demands which any single architectural solution could no longer accommodate.

These three case studies were not designed to speak to a unified meaning that pertains to the dome in East Asia. Individually, however, they helped shed light on local truths. Chapter 4, on the other hand, demonstrated the presence of fractures even within what would otherwise appear to be coherent local truths. Before I move on to discuss the methodological implications that these three case studies suggest collectively, perhaps a few comments on what has been left out are in order.

The cutoff at the eighth century caps one period for the beginning of the next. The ascendency of Esoteric Buddhism ushered in a new, or perhaps one should say, a more assertive alliance between architecture and geometry. The domical ceiling designs as a result call for
different methodological approaches [Fig. 5-1]. In no small measure, this would entail a corresponding study of the doctrinal sanctions on architectural space. Theories and ideas with regards to ritual space which had only loose connections to design began to be articulated and systematized after the eighth century. To what extent did they bear directly on architecture and the visual arts, however, remains an open question. Likewise, we still know relatively little about Esoteric Buddhism and Esoteric Buddhist art in China in the eighth century and immediately after. Japanese sectarian historiography has cast a long shadow over them, subjecting them to anachronistic categories. This observation perhaps pertains more to doctrinal studies. If anything, the visual arts may in fact provide some room for Esoteric Buddhism in China to be studied on its own terms.

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2 This also implies that the scope of the study needs to be further expanded. At Dunhuang, only three out of the 492 painted caves are furnished with pictorial programs completely devoted to esoteric iconography. Otherwise, esoteric images blend in/are assimilated into other caves on a piecemeal basis, although oftentimes they mainly appear in corridors and antechambers. See Neil Schmid, “Dunhuang and Central Asia (with an Appendix on Dunhuang Manuscript Sources),” in Charles D. Orzech et al (eds), *Esoteric Buddhism and the Tantras in East Asia* (Leiden, 2011), pp. 365-378.

3 For instance, Tomishima Yoshiyuki in a recent study argues that in medieval Japan, two different systems of “space” existed side by side: 1) the make-shift, provisional space constructed for ritual purposes (ones that performed for the purposes of state protection and kanjō灌溉lustration (sk. abhiṣeka); 2) the “doctrinal” space, permanent and prescribed by scriptures as perennial enactments and re-enactments of sacred presences [“mandalas”]. See Tomishima Yoshiyuki 富島義幸, *Mikkyō kūkan shiron 密教空間史論* (Kyoto, 2007), pp. 4-29.


Despite what already is a crowded cast of *dramatis personæ* that appeared in the discussion of the Nara domical-octagonal halls, the story narrated in this dissertation revolved around only the moment of inception of this building type in Japan. However, as some of the Heian sources cited at the end of Chapter 3 suggest, the domical-octagonal type continued to engage the imagination of those who saw, read about, and replicated it. The Heian period witnessed the perpetuation and further domestication of the form in service of the cult of Shōtoku in the more public realm [Fig. 5-2 Rokkakudō at Chōhō-ji, Kyoto], and on the other hand, appropriation of a more private nature by the descendants of Fujiwara no Kamatari as an architectural palladium. This sequel to the eighth-century beginning begs the fascinating question of how an architectural form of a more universally inclined understanding became gradually unmoored from its original meanings and contexts in favor of local needs.

The complicated issues of triangulating form, meaning, and technology discussed in Chapter 4 naturally would demand a widened perspective to locate them within the larger cultural contexts in which they operated. That the dome appeared to be where interests in cosmology, geometry, and architectural construction met is a subject that was only alluded to in this dissertation. Another problem that needs to be addressed, one that is closer to the field of art history, is the relationship between painting and the architectural surface it covers. For instance, how did the transfer of heavenly motifs on other surfaces to the dome change both the ways in which they were depicted and understood [Figs 5-3, 5-4]?

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6 Ono Kayo 小野佳代, *Kōfukuji nanendō to hōsō rokusozō no kenkyū* 興福寺南円堂六祖像の研究 (Tokyo, 2008), pp. 56-92; see also the discussion in Chapter 3, pp. 141-144.

7 See Chapter 4, pp. 156-157.
At the heart of this dissertation is the notion of architectural typology. The shared criteria of, or the common denominators of the examples studied in this dissertation may be quite simple: the dome, as I defined it in chapter one, is an interior ceiling design that makes the impression of a circle; this in turn implies that its projection on the ground, or its base, is not necessarily circular, but rectilinear or octagonal; finally, a vertical axis in the interior that implies a spatial hierarchy, thus making the interior a centralized one, though that center may or may not be occupied. Such reasoning is to some extent determined by sets of dichotomies, circle/rectilinear, exterior/interior, foreign/native. I would like to suggest that these dichotomies are not oppositions, but rather like the pictorial solutions to fill the circle with a square or vice versa explored in the *Zhoubi suanjing*, that at points and intervals they converge and meet, and at others they diverge and retreat. They are each other’s dialectic halves. For the rest of this chapter, I intend to explore the tensions within these dichotomies, with primarily one example, the Guanyin Pavilion (觀音閣) at the Dule Monastery (獨樂寺), Jixian, Hebei Province [Fig. 5-5]. This is a building that at first sight could not be more different from most of the examples we saw in this dissertation.

Taking one to the Guanyin Pavilion also returns one to the beginning of the modern study of Chinese architecture. When it was first closely studied by Liang Sicheng in 1932, this tenth-century structure was the oldest datable timber structure in China. But perhaps more
significantly, at that point, it was also a structure that was closest in time to the Song treatise *Yingzao fashi*. For Liang, in particular, the Guanyin pavilion provided an exemplar that cut both ways—at once a formal echo of robust Tang architecture and, as a magisterial exegesis of the *Fashi*, an embodiment of structural rationalism canonized in this Song treatise—the two periods that made up in Liang’s reckoning the golden age of Chinese architecture.\(^8\) Interestingly, little was known to Liang about buildings of either period at this time. But the Guanyin Pavilion afforded him a wedge to drive right at the center of a theoretical paradigm that was already taking shape.

What struck Liang especially was what he called its pure structural logic [“建築邏輯”]. He marveled at how the Guanyin pavilion was braced by 24 different kinds of individual bracketing components each serving its own purpose. In the meantime, the management of the construction was made simple by a modular system that reduced the thousands of timber parts to only six different scales.\(^9\) Liang’s illustrations often served to underscore the almost purely structural functions of the bracketing sets, an impression of “structural rationalism” that was further fleshed out by his line drawings [Fig. 5-6: original figs 37-40]. To this day, the Guanyin Pavilion continues to be lauded as an engineering feat.\(^10\)

Rightly so. Seen from the right angle, the structural components of the building also bring immense aesthetic pleasures in their own right [Fig. 5-7, note that the the vertical bracing under

\(^8\) Liang Sicheng 梁思成, “Jixian Dule si guanyin ge shanmen kao 翼縣獨樂寺觀音閣山門考,” *Zhongguo yingzao xueshe huikan* 3.2 (1932): 17.


the corner bracket is a feature added during the eighteenth century]. However, new questions present themselves, once we turn to other aspects, many pertaining to questions of space, interior, and meaning, of the Guanyin pavilion. For instance, what was the function of the mezzanine, in addition to providing an extra level in the interior which is hidden from view on the exterior? How is the statue of the Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara, the icon that resides within, related to the architectural space inscribed by the Pavilion? How is the Guanyin Pavilion itself related to the monastic compound of the Dulesi, being, as it were, neither a Buddha Hall nor a Pagoda? And this further begs the question of what defines the nature of a ge structure in general for this period, before and after? Again, like in previous discussions, we only have room to sketch some brief answers to these questions. The purpose here is to demonstrate their methodological implications.

The current structure of the Guanyin Pavilion was built in 984, on account of a stele in situ. We now have evidence to believe that the Liao-period restoration may have been modeled on an earlier Tang predecessor. The existence of a similar structure earlier is also corroborated by the icon that is placed inside. Despite later repainting, the Eleven-Headed Avalokiteśvara can be stylistically dated to the Tang [Fig. 5-8]. Today, the Guanyin pavilion dominates the monastic compound of the Dulesi Monastery, defining, as it were, its central axis with the other Liao-period structure, the Mountain Gate, to which later structures were added [Fig. 5-9]. There is no

reason to believe that it should have been otherwise in the tenth century. I will come back to this point presently.

The precocious structural purism of the Guanyin Pavilion, fleshed out by the multitude of close-up shots and streamlined in Liang’s drawings, manages to obscure another important aspect of the building. These carefully designed and executed columns, beams, and brackets constitute only the exterior foils of an enclosure, an interior that is structured around the enormous statue of Avalokiteśvara at its center. This interior has a vertical axis that proceeds upwards and culminates at the small dome over the head of the statue. This axis is to be perceived independently of the horizontal symmetry of the facade. Nowhere is this better seen than in the diagram which illustrates how this pavilion, over 23 meters in height, was essentially the result of three layers of single-level construction stacked one on top of another [Fig. 5-10]. Granted such use of the stacking mechanism to create vertical space was bound by the structural limitations of timber construction of this time. No timber column was longer than the height of one level. Nancy Steinhardt notes in her study that buildings like the Guanyin Pavilion are rather unusual in their verticality. She may be right. But the stacking here does more. It also takes the form of a vertical transition from rectangle at the bottom to an uneven hexagon at the mezzanine, and finally, to the circular dome at the top [Figs 5-11, 5-12].

None of this can be seen from the outside, where the eaves over the first level seem to divide the facade right in the middle. The columns on the ground level are considerably taller than those of the upper two. In fact, the purlins which support the lower eaves spring from

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midway in the columns of the mezzanine level, and the tilings on the outside help conceal the rest from view [Fig. 5-5]. We are confronted with the same bewildering spatial juxtaposition which we saw earlier in the case of cave temples, of a vertically-oriented domical interior and a flat orderly facade that hardly discloses what lies behind.\(^{15}\)

Recently, Lin Wei-cheng gives a reconstruction of an eighth-century multi-level structure, the Golden Pavilion at Jin’ge Monastery on Mount Wutai, which he considers a precedent for the Guanyin Pavilion. To ascend the Golden Pavilion, Lin argues, would have allowed one to penetrate a three-dimensional Vajradhātu mandala, from the Five-Syllable Mañjuśrī, the main icon on the first level of the building which anchored this sacred topography to Mount Wutai, to the five buddhas personifying Śākyamuni’s five forms of wisdom on the second level, and finally to the Five Wheel-Turning Kings at the top, as if they had emanated from the Vairocana Buddha at the center of the assembly on the second level.\(^{16}\) No canonical sources allow a similar reading of what remains of the iconographic program at the Guanyin Pavilion at Dule Monastery. And yet the centralized interior that is projected from the dome on top, with its focal point as the monumental statue of Avalokiteśvara underneath it, suggests a similar ascension to enlightenment.

\(^{15}\) See Chapter 2, pp. 32-42.

\(^{16}\) Lin Wei-cheng, Building a Sacred Mountain (Seattle, 2014), pp. 143-53; for a similar reading of the program inside the Timber Pagoda of Ying county, Shanxi Province, contemporaneous to the Guanyin Pavilion, see Steinhardt, Liao Architecture, p. 397.
Then there is the question of building type. What exactly does the notion of ge, here translated as “pavilion,” entail? Etymology alone does not give us a ready answer. One also suspects that whatever definition earlier sources may give us, the function of a ge underwent an important Buddhist inflection around the Tang Dynasty (618-907). It would seem that starting in the Tang, the term ge may have been used to refer to structures that are not unlike the Guanyin Pavilion, tall buildings with interiors centered around a monumental icon.

Moreover, the tenth century, when the Guanyin Pavilion was first built, appears to be a time when the ge type was particularly popular. The proliferation of this ge typology is seen on the contemporaneous mural painting in Dunhuang. The ten-century pilgrimage panorama of Mount Wutai on the west wall of T61 is peppered with structures like the Guanyin Pavilion. Notably, almost all of the ten monasteries that are labeled “Great Monasteries (大~之寺)” of Mount Wutai


18 A rather telling tale, preserved in the Song collection of extraordinary tales, the Taiping guangji, relates the story of a Sui monk by the name of Chengkong 慈空, whose efforts to forge a 70-foot iron image of the Buddha twice came to naught. Finally, a third attempt which saw the monk dedicate his own life by jumping into the gigantic mold designed for the casting of the image, brought this arduous enterprise to a successful ending. With now the image successfully cast came the new problem of sheltering, as it would take an even larger enclosure—a double-eaved/leveled ge to house the icon. It came to pass that fifty years later, Li Hao 李髙, a military commissioner of Taiyuan, was moved by the site of the iron image (now dilapidated), and donated one million strings of coin to have a double-eaved ge built. The text does not speak of a similar dome atop the building of this ge structure, but I suspect that, like the tenth-century Guanyin Pavilion, it most likely did. See Li Fang 李昉 et al (eds), Taiping guangji 太平广记 (Beijing, 1961), p. 794.

19 To the example of the Guanyin Pavilion, one could also add others like the Puxian (Samantabhadra) Pavilion of Shanhua Temple in Datong, Cishi (Maitreya) Pavilion of Longxing Temple in Zhengding, Hebei, as well as such later restorations of Liao-Jin period structures as the pair of Guanyin, and Dizang (Kṣitigarbha) Pavilions of Huayan Temple in Datong.
are shown to be centered around ge pavilions [Fig. 5-13]. This may have been a pictorial convention in Dunhuang at this time. At present we do not have enough evidence beyond Dunhuang to see whether this was a local convention. However, the fact that the ge became the center of an iconography (even just locally) is good testament to its currency.

Is the fervor of a domed (on the interior) centralized building in the tenth century, built as if it were simply the radial extension of the monumental icon enshrined inside, a brief interlude in the established narrative that we often tell of the evolution of monastic architecture in East Asia, from the stūpa (pagoda) to the Buddha Hall?20 Or should our narrative be now revised to accommodate what would otherwise seem an apt successor to, or like the fudō caves discussed in Chapter 2, an echo of the stūpa? We sometimes find comfort in this narrative for it has long become a staple exemplar of the Sinification of Buddhism, an unruly architectural tradition not only tamed by the timber frame, but also ultimately giving way to the discipline side of the “Chinese mind,” more disposed toward the gridiron, the orderly, and the regular.21 If the ge structures do not give us pause here, perhaps the following example from two centuries earlier might.

The Stūpa of Monk Fanzhou (泛舟禪師塔) [Fig. 5-14], found at what was once the site of the Baoguo-si Monastery in Shanxi Province, is enchanting and unsettling in equal measure. On

20 Nancy Steinhardt has attributed the flourishing of octagonally-planned structures in this period to their special symbolic meanings to the Liao ruling house. This may well be true, in that the Khitan rulers may have projected meanings onto the form in the same way that the Fujiwara clan did with the Nanendō and the building type with which it was associated in the late Heian period. However, I hope the discussion of circular/polygonal construction in this dissertation, and the complexity of the issue of architectural signification involved, demonstrate that it is now difficult to argue that as a “style,” it must have been a Liao invention; or indeed, to attribute any form easily to mono-originational behavior. See Steinhardt, Liao Architecture, pp. 274-281, 389-405.

the surface of this late eighth-century memorial stūpa, the timber frame looks like an afterthought. On similar structures we saw earlier [Figs. 3-1, 3-29], pillars define but also break up approximations of a circular plan. Here, however, as surface decor (and therefore bearing no structural responsibilities) they hug the perfect circular contour. There are few bracketing details. The shallow carving made them appear as if they had grown from within, rather than a cultural statement imposed from without to lend a sense of familiarity [Fig. 2-3].

As an example, the Fanzhou stūpa is rare. In fact, it is the only surviving stūpa or pagoda from the Tang Dynasty with a circular plan. During this period and before, pagodas are predominantly square [Fig. 5-15]. The rare exceptions, polygonal examples which like the Fanzhou stūpa are of brick construction and pay only lip service to the timber frame, are often considered immediate offsprings of Indic parentage [Fig. 5-16]. They may be rare, but they also appear to be precocious. More than three decades ago, Liu Dunzhen made the interesting observation that while square may have been the prevalent plan for stūpas and pagodas alike in the eighth century, two centuries later it became overshadowed by the octagon. Does this mean that contrary to the Sinification thesis, the development of the pagoda form veered towards a return to its Indic origin? Or perhaps, like in many of the examples discussed in this dissertation, this emphasis on the interior centrality and verticality, underscored by the deployment of the dome, became an important substrate in the architectural (sub-)conscious of China.

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Figure 1.16. Reconstruction drawing of a palatial-style architectural complex at Fengchu, Qishan, Shaanxi province, Western Zhou period.
FIG. 1-5
FIG. 1-6
FIG. 1-8
FIG. 1-10
FIG. 1-11
FIG. 1-12

A TEMPLE HALL OF THE T’ANG DYNASTY
AFTER A RUBBING OF THE ENGRAVING ON THE TYMPANUM OVER THE WEST GATEWAY OF TA-YEN TA, TZU-EN SSÜ, SI-AN, SHENSI

唐代佛殿圖　茅女陝西長安大雁塔西門阿闍羅石畫像
FIG. 1-16
FIG. 1-17
FIG. 1-18

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FIG. 2-4
FIG. 2-5
FIG. 2-15

MINIATURE BUDDHIST STUPA
GUPTA-PERIOD
FROM - MATHURA
FIG. 2-17
FIG. 2-18
FIG. 2-20
FIG. 2-23
FIG. 2-24
FIG. 2-26
FIG. 2-27
FIG. 2-28
FIG. 2-30
FIG. 3-3
FIG. 3-6
FIG. 3-9
FIG. 3-11
FIG. 3-12
FIG. 3-16
FIG. 3-18
FIG. 3-20
FIG. 3-23
FIG. 3-28
FIG. 4-6
FIG. 4-9
FIG. 4-10
FIG. 4-15
FIG. 4-16
河南省南阳地区文物研究所: 新野汉墓画像砖墓

图四  M23 平、剖面及墓门正视图

FIG. 4-18
FIG. 4-19
FIG. 4-20

图九  M16 平、剖面及墓门正视图
1. 墓  2. 人  3. 合盖  5. 墓门、棺

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FIG. 4-23
FIG. 4-25

1.3a-b. Reconstruction of the Bright Hall in Chang'an by Yang Hengnan.
(a) Plan of the first floor, (b) Plans of the second floor and the roof.
FIG. 5-1
FIG. 5-3
FIG. 5-7
FIG. 5-10
FIG. 5-13