

## Early Buddhist Monastic Architecture in Context

Mountain cults in China may have developed long before the creation of the written word.<sup>1</sup> Since antiquity, mountains were thought to embody the mythical and primordial power and energy that created cosmological order, structured geographical hierarchy, and sanctioned political authority. Soaring between heaven and earth, mountains were considered not only places inhabited by the divine but divinities themselves.<sup>2</sup> As China's dynastic history unfolded, mountains with extraordinary features found their way onto the imperial map as physical and territorial markers and anchors of the land under heaven within which the emperor ruled.<sup>3</sup> Mountains received sacrifices and revealed the heavenly mandate, for the greater a mountain was, the more spiritually potent it became, as the epigraph taken from Ge Hong's *Master Who Embraces Simplicity* emphasizes. The myth, the imagined, and the imaginary were forged to cultivate the natural into something admirable, awesome, and sacred; myth and history in this case were equally important in the formation of what has been termed Chinese mountain culture (*shan wenhua*).<sup>4</sup> After Buddhism arrived in China in the first century CE, however, this culture, with its conception of mountains and the practices of mountain cults, was significantly modified, and took a very different trajectory.

Never before in China had a mountain cult been established because a specific, named deity was said to reside in the mountain and assist and benefit religious practitioners. Mount Wutai was the first to be accorded recognition as *the* Buddhist "sacred mountain," and it was granted this status because the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, or Wenshu Pusa, one of the great bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism, was believed to live there.<sup>5</sup> This recognition, in a land where Buddhism was initially a foreign religion, began no earlier than the fifth century CE and continued into the Tang dynasty (618–907), as Mount Wutai developed not only as the domicile of the bodhisattva but eventually as one of the most important Buddhist centers in Tang China, drawing pilgrims from neighboring nations such as India, the birthplace of Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> The importance and popularity of the new "sacred mountain" cult at Mount Wutai is evident in the restructuring of Buddhist

*All mountains, whether larger  
or smaller, have gods and spir-  
its. If the mountain is large, the  
god is great; if the mountain is  
small, the god is minor.*

—Ge Hong, *Master Who  
Embraces Simplicity* (Baopuzi)

sacred geography after the identification of Mount Wutai as a Buddhist mountain, when Buddhism's geographic center in India gradually shifted to China from the fifth through the tenth centuries.<sup>7</sup> What is more, Mount Wutai was only the first of four mountains recognized in premodern China as associated with specific Buddhist bodhisattvas, and the pattern by which it was built into a Buddhist sacred site became the model for the later three.<sup>8</sup> It is not an overstatement to say that Mount Wutai occupied one of the most prominent positions in China's religious geography and played a paramount role in the early Buddhism of medieval China, from the end of the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) until the end of the tenth century.<sup>9</sup>

Mount Wutai's development into a Buddhist sacred mountain involved a complex historical process that domesticated and localized the sacred presence of the foreign deity in ways that show how Buddhism was realized, practiced, and expressed in the religious landscape of medieval China. When the history of Mount Wutai is examined against long-standing Chinese mountain culture, several fundamental questions arise: How was Mount Wutai, a native mountain whose early history was relatively unknown, converted into a Buddhist mountain? How was its natural terrain sanctified in Buddhist terms and its sacrality revealed to believers? And what did the transformation of the site and maintenance of its sacrality entail? Did monastic architecture, built or unbuilt (e.g., in visionary experience), help establish Mount Wutai as *the* sacred mountain by reconfiguring and reconceiving its topography and thus affirming its sacrality?

Studies of sacred sites have often begun with issues related to pilgrimage, placing much emphasis on the history and legends of site, saints, or miraculous events.<sup>10</sup> Concepts such as rites of passage or *communitas* have also been evoked, focusing on the transformative experience of pilgrimage to the site but not on the site itself.<sup>11</sup> A sacred site, however, also belongs to a spatial category—located at a geographical place, characterized by its topographic features, and delimited in a specific space—such that the sacrality of the site is also necessarily bound and explicated in spatial concepts and physical terms.

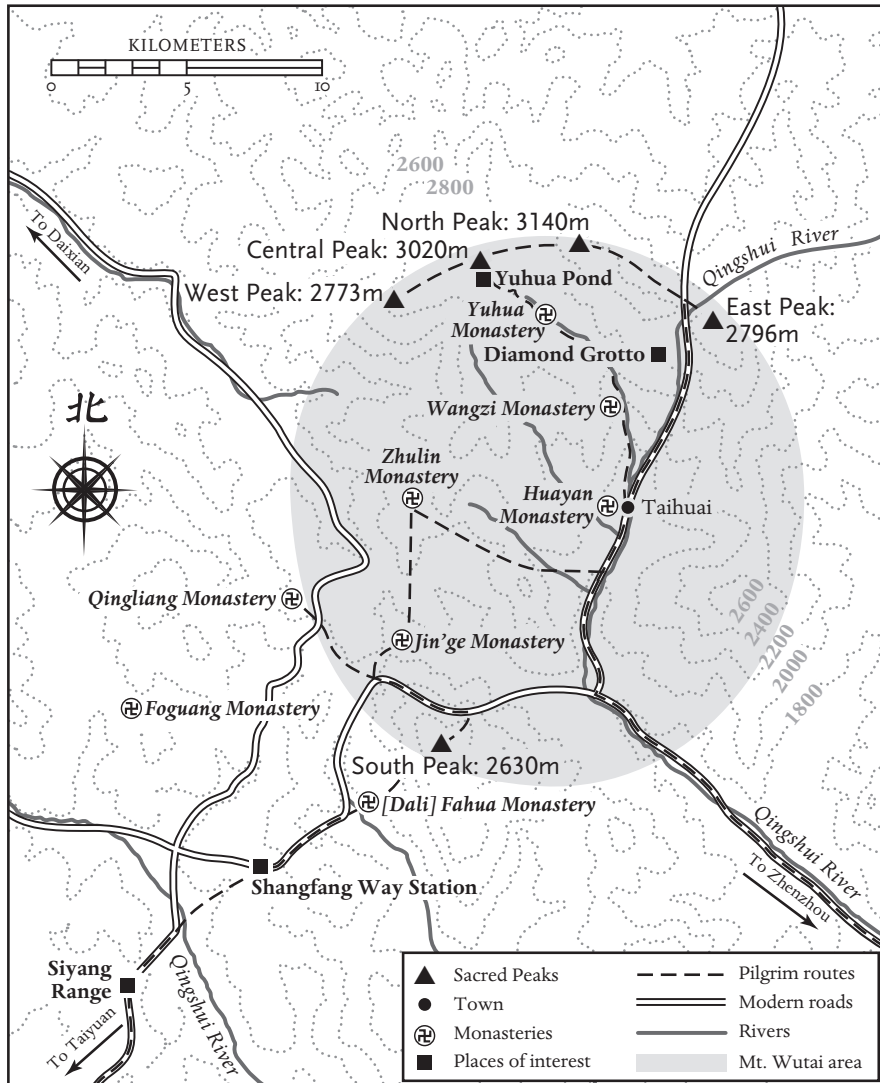
It was a deeply rooted view in ancient Chinese mountain culture that all mountains were potentially numinous and potent. At least two sets of determinants influenced the construction of sacred mountains. First were their intrinsic qualities. Mountains inspired spiritual associations by virtue of their extraordinary topographies—tremendous mass and height or unusual features such as grottos, caverns, chasms, and so on—suggesting not only solidity and endurance but also a mythical interior of secret treasures, energy, or power. Also, mountains were surrounded by clouds and emitted vapors, as if they were breathing, so were thought of as the source of life that nurtures all things and beings. Mountains, moreover, contain spectacular rock formations and harbor strange flora and fauna. All these natural and physical characteristics are intrinsic to mountains and can be cultivated, revealed, and explored. The second set of qualities is extrinsic. They include apparitions and visions peculiar to the mountain; relics, images, or texts originating elsewhere yet miraculously uncovered there; or steles, shrines, or other buildings that mark the site—all exterior to the mountain proper but weav-



ing layers of significance into the mountain topography. These also bring about particular viewpoints—bureaucratic, historical, and religious or related to myth, memory, and imagination—in dialogue with intrinsic characteristics to provide the language with which sacred mountains can be described and their sacrality defined.

Located in present-day Shanxi Province in northern China (map 1), the sacred area of Mount Wutai extends over an extensive mountainous region, approximately 336 square kilometers in size.<sup>12</sup> Although it is referred to as a mountain

MAP 2. The area of Mount Wutai, bounded by West, Central, North, and East Peaks in the north and the South Peak in the south.



(shan), Mount Wutai is actually a cluster of mountains with five towering peaks, each with a high and roughly domed or terrace-like grassy mountaintop—as indicated in its Chinese name, Wutaishan, which literally means “mountain of five terraces.” Although not corresponding exactly to the cardinal directions, the five peaks have since the mountain’s earliest history been designated based on their relative positions: Western, Central, Northern, and Eastern Peaks clustered in the north, and the Southern Peak in the far south (map 2). The highest of the five peaks is the Northern Peak at 3,140 meters above sea level; the lowest, the Southern Peak at 2,630 meters. Together, the five peaks encircle and demarcate the area known as Mount Wutai.

Mount Wutai’s prominent topography would have appeared to Buddhist practitioners in medieval China as more than merely natural; it would have also had

some numinous and spiritual quality. Ennin (794–864), a Japanese pilgrim monk, who arrived at Mount Wutai in 840, was deeply moved when he first saw the sacred mountain: “[As soon as] I saw the Central Peak while heading toward the northwest, I prostrated myself on the ground and worshiped it. Here was the realm presided over by Mañjuśrī. Its five [sacred] peaks were round and tall, yet without vegetation, shaped thus like overturned bronze bowls. Gazing at them from afar, my tears rained down involuntarily. Plants and flowers that grew here were rare and different from elsewhere; how extraordinary this place was!”<sup>13</sup> The looming peaks were unmistakably the five sacred markers of the holy domain where the rare flora grew; but the power of the extraordinary place lay, more importantly, in the presiding bodhisattva, who had come to reside at the mountain site and whose presence its landscape evoked. As Ennin concluded: “This is Mount Qingliang [Mount Wutai], the Golden World [Pure Land of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī], who manifests himself right here for our benefit.”<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the process of Mount Wutai’s changing identity from native mountain to a Buddhist sacred site can be characterized as a shift from a *place*-oriented conception to a *presence*-oriented one. As has been suggested by scholars, hagiography in miraculous legends, acts, or visions necessarily includes a spatial dimension, which establishes the meaning and spiritual import of sacred topography.<sup>15</sup> The conversion of Mount Wutai involved a historical process of reappropriating, reinterpreting, or even replacing the intrinsic determinants of the sacred site with extrinsic ones.<sup>16</sup> Thus the initially foreign deity, Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, was seen and located in the native mountain through ritual, vision, and architecture. In this regard, the monastic architecture at Mount Wutai was built not so much to partake in the numinous qualities intrinsic to the sacred site as to construct and construe the sacrality of the site by virtue of its own built environment. Buddhist architecture was one of the primary, if not the most prominent, means of cultural and material intervention through which Mount Wutai was developed into the first Buddhist sacred mountain in medieval China.

In recent years, studies of Chinese sacred geography have departed from the earlier practice of separating the sacred and the profane into exclusive categories,<sup>17</sup> instead seeing the sacred as constructed and contested by various influxes, not only religious or spiritual but also sociopolitical and historical. In addition, studies on space and place have contributed analytical terms and methodologies for understanding how the sacred could be valorized in spatial experience and localized in place.<sup>18</sup> This “spatial turn,” which recognizes the critical role of space and place in the perception and conception of the sacred, is also coupled with a strong emphasis on the temporal aspect of the sacred geography; that is, in recognizing the multiple histories and multivalent significance of a sacred site as it evolves and fluctuates in the *longue durée*, as we know from several recent studies.<sup>19</sup> The different religious traditions coexisting at Mount Heng (Hengshan), also known as the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue), has been analyzed from a microhistorical viewpoint. A “cultural stratigraphy” has been proposed to account for the multilayered narratives of pilgrimage that have accumulated around Mount Tai (Taishan), or

the Eastern Sacred Peak (Dongyue). Likewise, attention has been drawn to the “complex amalgam” of nature, history, religion, and human experiences in the historical development of Mount Emei (Emeishan) as a Chinese sacred mountain.<sup>20</sup> This book shares with those studies a view of sacred geography as multifaceted, requiring an approach both contextual and interdisciplinary to unravel its complexity. Architecture—its site, space, image, and built environment—provides a critical point of access to this complexity, as well as to the essential concepts, practices, and history of Chinese sacred mountains.

This use of architecture as the primary lens of investigation is also apt for my topic, particularly in the context of the broader religious and material culture of this period. Medieval China, already enthusiastic for material luxuries, developed a fascination with the material world without negating the potential of that world as the agent, sign, form, or embodiment of the divine.<sup>21</sup> Material objects or things were not rejected but often considered indispensable to the understanding and attainment of the immaterial. For example, it was thought that miracle-performing relics could inspire the “corporeal imagination” and living icons could elicit a “visceral vision”; in these cases, the corporeal and visceral rendered the sacred and potent more immanent and experiential.<sup>22</sup> In the same vein, architecture was not simply the building of structures; it was material-spatial construction that could structure and represent the divine presence in its fullest manifestation. By extension, the larger, built environment of a monastic complex and the mountain landscape, reconfigured and reconceived by the building of monasteries, could also reveal the manner in which the devotee perceived the divine.<sup>23</sup> An icon from Mount Wutai depicting Mañjuśrī mounted on the back of a lion was known as the “icon of the true presence of Mañjuśrī” (*Wenshu zhenrong xiang*). Despite its materiality, the statue was believed to be able to manifest the true divinity of the bodhisattva. A monastic structure or “image hall” was then built to enshrine the icon at the very place where the bodhisattva was recorded to have been frequently encountered. Named after the icon, this image hall was called the Cloister of Mañjuśrī’s True Presence (*Wenshu Zhenrong Yuan*), its purpose to locate the amorphous presence of the divine, realized not only in the materially bound icon but also in the space of the physical building. The hall was built on the highest ground of the monastery, at the very center of the sacred mountain area. In this symbolic and spatial functionality, the architecture mediated the ways in which the icon would be perceived, approached, and venerated, while the icon itself, in the built environment of the monastery, would in turn make the faithful feel as if they were in Mañjuśrī’s true presence, at the center of his terrestrial domicile.

Monastic architecture, in its multiple capacities and functionalities, is the key to Mount Wutai’s sacrality, as it developed from a natural mountain into a Buddhist one. Serving as it did a new belief system, the Buddhist monastery, as an instance of Chinese architecture, cannot be properly discussed except in the context of the new religion. Since China had never before produced a separate building style or tradition exclusively for Buddhism, a monastery could be so identified only by the monastic functions it served or the divinity it accommodated. Thus, as I examine

the roles that monastic architecture played in transforming Mount Wutai, I will use the history of the sacred site to provide contextual frameworks in which this architecture can be analyzed and defined. It is in such an intercontextual investigation that we begin to see the emergence of the sacral architecture, or architecture of the sacred,<sup>24</sup> in medieval China, one that was developed and built alongside the rise of Buddhism.

### Beyond Physical Structure: Foguang Monastery in Its Modern and Historical Context

By its most straightforward definition, architecture is the art or practice of designing and constructing buildings, and it concerns itself most directly with the physical form, building material, and architectonic structure of buildings, built or unbuilt (as in the case of architectural plans, representations, the imagination, etc.). Architecture also refers to various “ideas” of the building—as dwelling or living space, sacred or secular, real or utopian.<sup>25</sup> Sacral architecture incorporates both these definitions, in that it goes beyond physical structure, encompassing building as defined, portrayed, or revealed in text, legend, image, or vision in direct relation to the discourse of sacrality. Monasteries are often discussed as mere architectural “containers” for the actions of a religious community. Yet, as Buddhist textual records testify, a monastery is also described in terms such as the setting of the natural or urban landscape; its contents of relics, statuary, paintings, and powerful deities that fill the architectural space; and the history accrued through such means as hagiography, divine presence, and imperial recognition.<sup>26</sup> Monastic architecture in this regard is not just a building structure but an integral component in dialogue and dialectic relation with other monastic components, which together gave form and substance to the monastery as a religious/sacred institution—in medieval China, as elsewhere.

A diary left by an unnamed pilgrim who traveled to Mount Wutai in the early tenth century includes an itinerary of his visit. Although fragmentary, it provides a glimpse into one of the most famous monasteries of the sacred site, the Monastery of Buddha’s Radiance (Foguangsi):<sup>27</sup>

After traveling for forty *li* I arrived at Foguang Monastery. At night on the twenty-seventh day of the fifth lunar month, I witnessed [at the monastery] luminous lanterns in a cloud form [flying] in the dark [sky] eighteen times. Meanwhile [I also worshiped at] the Main Buddha Hall, a building with a seven-bay facade, containing a Buddha triad in the middle, flanked by Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī on one side and Bodhisattva Samantabhadra on the other. At the Maitreya Pavilion, a three-story building with a seven-bay facade, [I venerated] seventy-two worthies, ten thousand bodhisattvas, and sixteen Lohans. There were also the relics pagoda of Monk Jietuo [561–642] and another one for Suozigu [n.d.]. They were said to have been Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra reincarnated [in this world]. The grand building of the Constant Abiding

[Changzhu] Cloister had a five-bay facade; its upper story was used as a sutra repository, and the lower section, living quarters for the assembly, daily lodging more than five hundred people. In addition, the monastery also had many other rooms, corridors, halls, various structures, and several other cloisters; there were simply too many to count every meritorious devotion and ritual taking place inside the monastery.<sup>28</sup>

As suggested in this pilgrim's account, the monastic architecture at Foguang Monastery appeared as part of its overall religious scene and landscape. Not separate from visions (e.g., flying lanterns), icons, or legends, the "sacral architecture" included the ritual ensemble and the ambience, helping the practitioner envision the transcendent reality of Mount Wutai and experience the holy presence of the presiding bodhisattva.

Focusing beyond the physical building and its textual representation, therefore, this book tracks and analyzes the building of the monastic architecture of the site from idea to actuality as a process of thinking, expression, and practice of the religion. Also, because representation operates in motifs and vocabularies, how the monastery was represented cannot be separated from the motifs and vocabularies with which it was discussed and built, nor the motifs and vocabularies from the monastery. It is thus important, when we consider the study of medieval Chinese architecture, to do so with this new set of agendas in mind.

To students of Chinese architecture, Mount Wutai will not be unfamiliar, for it retains one of the nation's oldest surviving timber structures, the Great Buddha Hall (Da Fodian) at Foguang Monastery (plate 1), the same monastery visited by the tenth-century pilgrim quoted above.<sup>29</sup> Dating from 857, the Great Buddha Hall is one of only four timber structures surviving from Tang-era China, and it is the grandest in scale and highest ranked in structural style. It was brought to light in 1937 by members of the Institute for Research in Chinese Architecture (Zhongguo Yingzao Xueshe) led by the preeminent architectural historian Liang Sicheng (1901–72).<sup>30</sup> Its "discovery" in the modern era as the then earliest surviving example of Chinese traditional timber structure guaranteed it attention then, and continues to attract it today. Its reentry into history in the 1930s, however, also brought it into a completely different context. Architectural historians since Liang Sicheng have focused on its timber-frame structure. The building was studied carefully, its structure examined and compared with the official medieval building manual, *Treatise on Architectural Methods* (Yingzao fashi), promulgated in 1103, with regard to its building method and formal features.<sup>31</sup> Liang produced precise and detailed diagrams (figs. 1.1a, 1.1b) to illustrate the structural principles and form, facilitating a more abstract analysis, which transformed an age-old building craft into a modern discipline. With its striking profile and style, the Great Buddha Hall at Foguang Monastery embodies the excellence of its historical heritage, in which it serves as the "iconic prototype" of its own architectural tradition and pedigree.<sup>32</sup> For Liang Sicheng and many of his colleagues and later students, rather than merely a Buddhist monastic complex, Foguang Monastery was more importantly

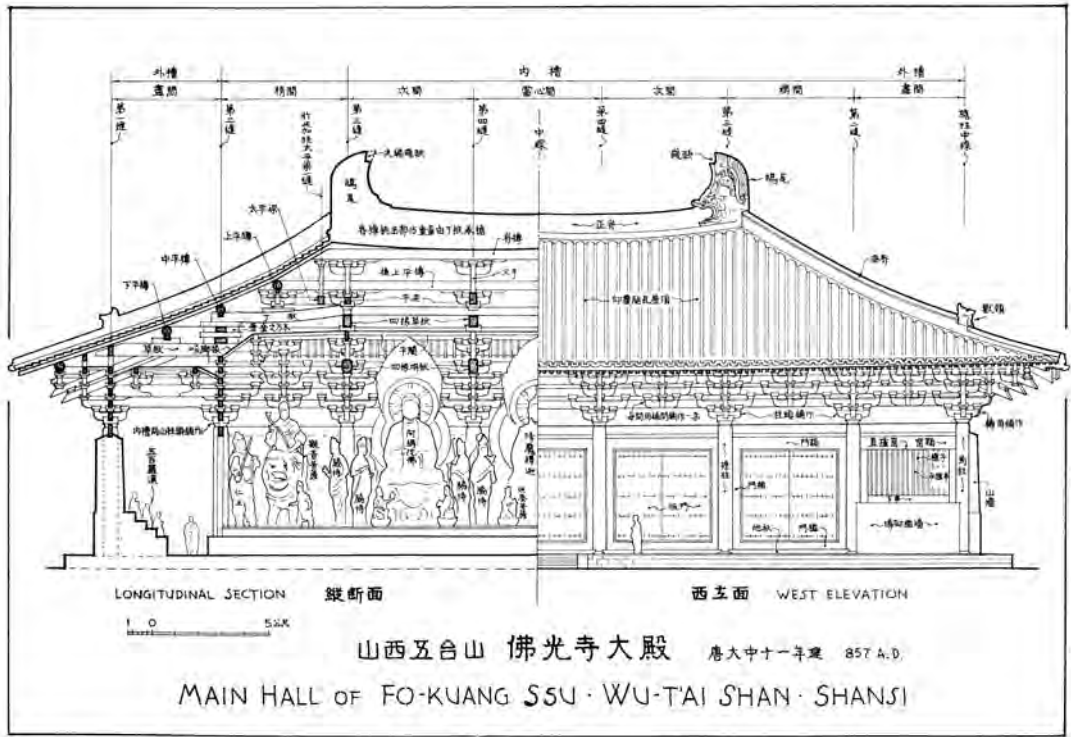


FIGURE 1.1a. Section and elevation of the Great Buddha Hall, Foguang Monastery, Mount Wutai. 857 ce. From Liang, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, fig. 24j. Diagram courtesy of Lin Zhu.

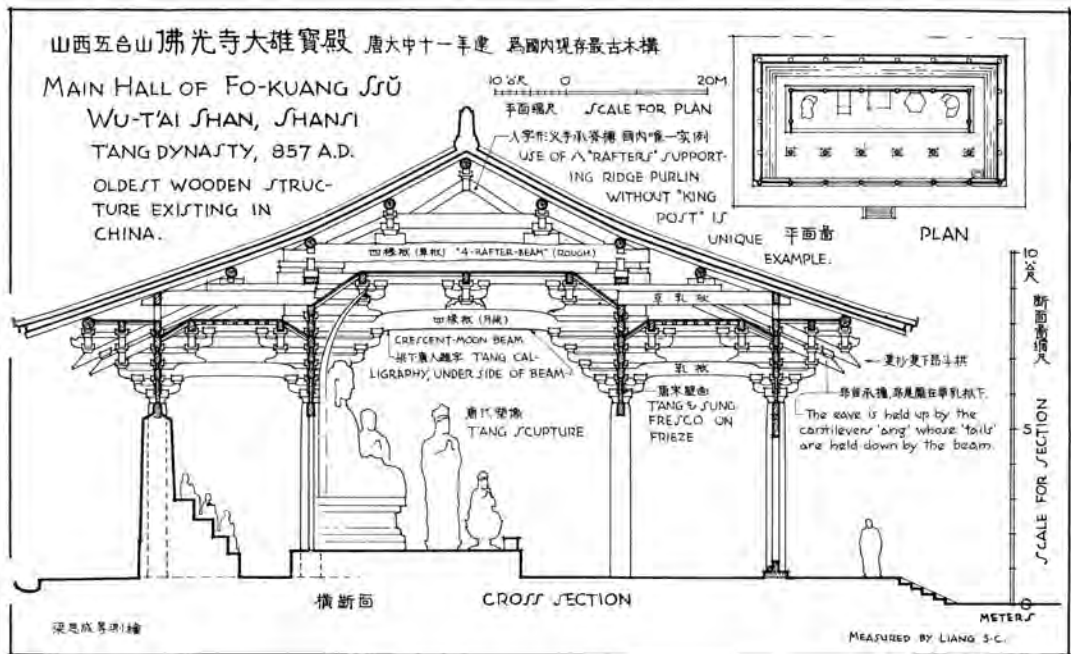


FIGURE 1.1b. Cross section of the Great Buddha Hall, Foguang Monastery. From Liang, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, fig. 24k. Diagram courtesy of Lin Zhu.

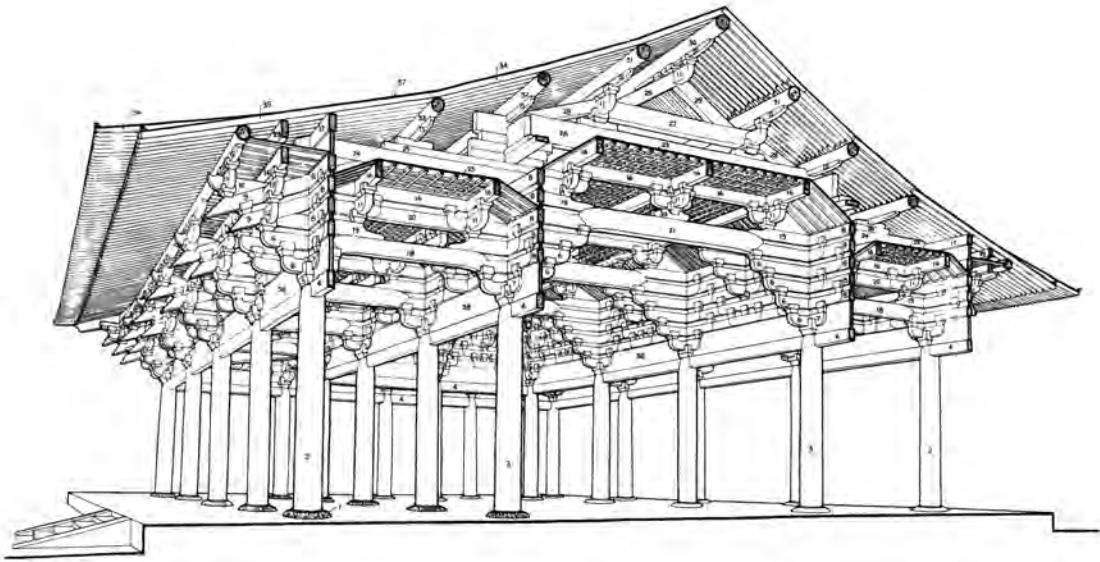


FIGURE 1.2.  
Orthogonal view of  
the Great Buddha  
Hall, Foguang  
Monastery. After Fu  
Xinian, “Wutaishan  
Foguangsi jianzhu,”  
fig. 4. Diagram  
courtesy of Fu  
Xinian.

a *locus classicus* in China’s architectural history. It is in this new, modern context that the significance of the building was discovered anew.

While the Great Buddha Hall continues to captivate scholars as a cultural relic, the modern discovery of Foguang Monastery also raises questions. The Great Buddha Hall was investigated in an analytic framework that was largely predetermined by a focus on its structural system and historical evolution, and the terms of analysis were much aligned with the modernist emphasis of Liang Sicheng’s times on structural rationalism and formalism.<sup>33</sup> After Liang’s death in 1972, though the historical circumstances greatly changed, the structural approach and vocabulary that Liang introduced continued to be dominant. The structural framework of Chinese wooden buildings is visualized even more rigorously, illustrated in the fully detailed orthogonal perspective (fig. 1.2) created by Liang’s students, which turned the three-dimensional building into an abstract simulacrum. Most recently, from 2004 to 2006, a research team from the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University (the program founded by Liang Sicheng in 1946), using X-ray scanning tools, conducted a scientific investigation of the Great Buddha Hall, measuring each structural component and its current condition and revealing different modular systems used throughout the building.<sup>34</sup> We have gained much more knowledge since 1937 about the structural skeleton of the Buddha Hall and its importance in the history of Chinese wooden architecture, but at stake is the cultural and religious context inscribed in the skin of the building, so to speak, which has faded almost into oblivion.

The Great Buddha Hall is a single-story structure, seven bays across and four bays deep, standing on a foundation of 34 by 17.66 meters.<sup>35</sup> It matches the scale of the main image hall described in the travel diary of the tenth-century pilgrim. As the diary recorded, the Great Buddha Hall contains the original triad of the three Buddhas, Śākyamuni, Amitābha, and Maitreya, flanked by two bodhisatt-



FIGURE 1.3. Main icons enshrined in the Great Buddha Hall, Foguang Monastery. 857 CE. The central three main deities visible in back row, from right to left, are the Buddhas Maitreya, Śākyamuni, and Amitābha; they are in turn flanked by the bodhisattvas Mañjuśrī at the farther end of the altar and Samantabhadra at the closer end outside the picture. Each of the three main Buddhas is also flanked by two attending (standing) bodhisattvas and two kneeling bodhisattvas presenting offerings. From Chai and Chai, *Shanxi gudai caisu*, 37. Photograph by permission of Wenwu Press.

vas, Mañjuśrī and Samantabhadra (fig. 1.3). Also surviving at Foguang Monastery (fig. 1.4) are an early-Tang relics pagoda (*shenta*), likely one of the two pagodas mentioned in the diary, and two sutra pillars (*jingchuang*), one of which bears the date 857 and engravings of a *dhāraṇī* sutra pivotal in the history of Mount Wutai.<sup>36</sup> A smaller structure, the Hall of Mañjuśrī (Wenshu Dian), enshrining a statue of Mañjuśrī riding a lion (fig. 1.5), was built in 1137 during the first revival period in the monastery's post-Tang history. The statue, in an iconic style of the bodhisattva's "true presence" specifically tied to the sacred mountain, may have been the reason Foguang Monastery was later renamed the Chan Monastery of the True Presence of Buddha's Radiance (Foguang Zhenrong Chanyuan), as stated on the large Ming-period plaque hanging over the central entrance of the Great Buddha Hall (fig. 1.6; see also fig. C.2).<sup>37</sup>

Stepping outside the monastery in 1937, Liang Sicheng was awed by the magnificent view of the mountains surrounding the Tang monastic complex. A similar

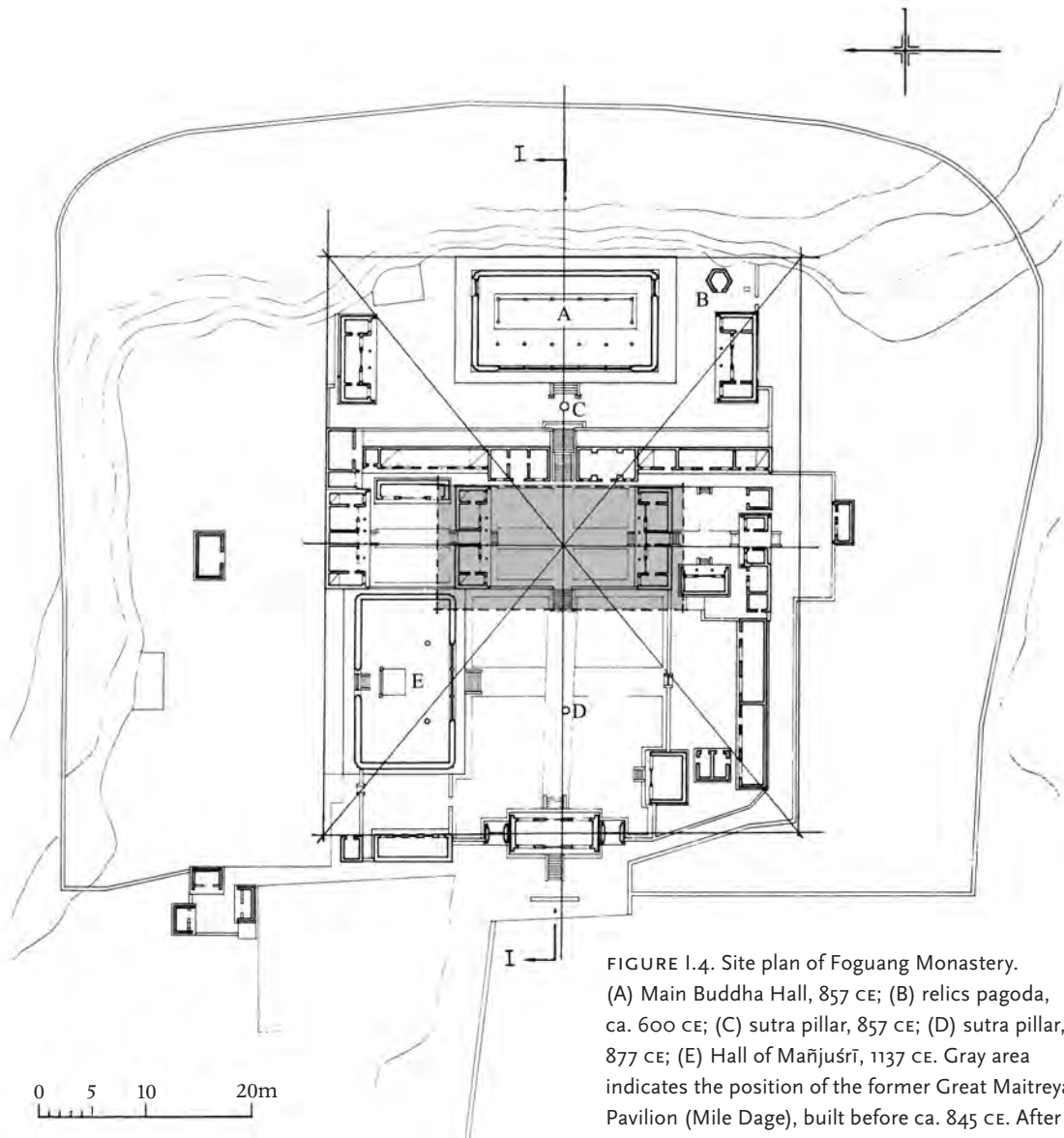


FIGURE 1.4. Site plan of Foguang Monastery. (A) Main Buddha Hall, 857 CE; (B) relics pagoda, ca. 600 CE; (C) sutra pillar, 857 CE; (D) sutra pillar, 877 CE; (E) Hall of Mañjuśrī, 1137 CE. Gray area indicates the position of the former Great Maitreya Pavilion (Mile Dage), built before ca. 845 CE. After Fu Xinian, “Wutaishan Foguangsi jianzhu,” 235. Diagram courtesy of Fu Xinian.

landscape also inspired Zhencheng (1546–1617), author of the Ming gazetteer of Mount Wutai, to describe the monasteries at the sacred site in 1595: “Of the monasteries at Mount Wutai, some are embraced amid the five peaks, some emerge between mountains, some arise from rocky peaks, and some soar high atop the clouds. Pavilions and towers of monasteries appear in the misty air; temple bells chime and resound in the smoke of incense fragrance. The Golden Pavilion floats aloft as if a heavenly city manifests itself. . . . In such an inconceivable realm the sacred land looms miraculously.”<sup>38</sup> Chiming bells, smoking incense, and monastic buildings were all part of the sacred landscape of Mount Wutai, creating a reli-



FIGURE 1.5. The “true-presence” (*zhenrong*) icon of Mañjuśrī riding a lion, Hall of Mañjuśrī (Wenshu Dian), Foguang Monastery. 1137 CE. From Liang, “Ji Wutaishan Foguangsi de jian-zhu,” *Wenwu cankao ziliao*, pl. 42.

gious aura and aspiring to the inconceivable. But only through monasteries did the sense of the sacredness of the site become more perceivable and experiential.

The intimate correlation between the mountain and monasteries at Mount Wutai is suggested in an enormous mural that depicts a panorama of Mount Wutai inside a tenth-century image cave in Mogao near Dunhuang, an important Buddhist center lying at the western border of Tang China, approximately three thousand kilometers from Mount Wutai.<sup>39</sup> Ten building complexes labeled as “great” (*da*) monasteries are depicted across the width of the mural, and among them is a walled cloister enclosing a two-story building and identified in the accompanying cartouche as Foguang Monastery (plate 2). Neither isolated from the surroundings nor separated from a large monastic network, Foguang Monastery was built within the sacred terrain of Mount Wutai and the historical matrix of the site. Yet Foguang Monastery as depicted in the mural bears no resemblance to any of the existing

FIGURE 1.6. Name plaque inscribed “The Chan Monastery of the True Presence of Buddha’s Radiance,” over the entrance to the Great Buddha Hall, Foguang Monastery. 1614 CE. Photograph by author.



structures; in fact, the Mount Wutai in the visual representation yields no obvious cartographic reference to its reality except for the five sacred peaks. As a representation, however, the mural with its visual vocabularies and tropes (see chapter 6) was meant to transform the sacred site into an “image” that mediates between viewer and the depicted architecture, spatial practice, spiritual experience, and the evoked visions, all together as a holistic experience. Integrated in the cohesive and hegemonic landscape of the sacred mountain, the monastic architecture in both reality and imagery served to structure physically, symbolically, and representationally the access to the sacrality of the site.

To address the gap between our understanding of Chinese Buddhist monasteries and the ways monasteries were represented in history as sanctified institutions or numinous sites,<sup>40</sup> this book brings both textual and visual representations of the monastery into discussion. Yet monasteries at Mount Wutai were also physical structures built at the mountain site as part of the religious landscape in both architectural and topographic terms. The physical site, topography, and building structures, forms, and practices all substantiate the perceptual representation and conceptual discourse of monasteries. Outside the scope of this study are the building styles, structural details, and trades involved in timber-frame architecture in medieval China, the analysis of which would in any case be limited by the small

number of examples surviving from this early period. Instead, I concentrate on identifying the ways in which the Buddhist “sacral architecture” developed in medieval China, in order to illuminate both the ontological and contextual roles of monasteries — as built, recorded, visualized, or imagined — in the historical trajectory in which Mount Wutai was transformed into *the* sacred mountain.

### Toward an Intercontextual Study of Monastic Architecture at Mount Wutai

Even before the excursion taken by Liang Sicheng and his colleagues into the mountainous area of Mount Wutai in 1937, several Japanese scholars had already ventured to the sacred site, photographing mountain scenery and monastic buildings, including the Great Buddha Hall of Foguang Monastery. As early as the 1920s, Japanese scholars in Buddhist history and art and architectural history had published articles about Mount Wutai.<sup>41</sup> What most interested them were the long-standing history of the sacred mountain and the structures and artifacts surviving in situ that witnessed the rise and fall of the ancient site. Their photographs and writings depicted monasteries at Mount Wutai as part of the site’s religious history, activities, and topography (fig. I.7). But detailed research on specific monasteries or a historical overview of monasteries built at Mount Wutai had not yet been attempted.

The first monograph to take a more inclusive approach, aiming to provide a historical survey of Mount Wutai’s past and present, is the landmark work *Godaisan* (Mount Wutai), coauthored by two Japanese scholars, Ono Katsutoshi (1905–88) and Hibino Takeo (b. 1914) in 1942.<sup>42</sup> Realizing the enormous spatial expansion of the mountain range and the wealth of its visible and invisible histories and legends, Ono and Hibino decided to divide their book into two sections: the first gives a history of the site (*rekishi*), and the second, their personal observations of Mount Wutai as they found it, written in the form of travelogue (*kikō*).<sup>43</sup> Brought together, the two halves ably recapitulate the long history of Mount Wutai. Informative and historical as it is, however, this first book-length research on Mount Wutai fits better in the category of the traditional gazetteer, although supplemented and updated with photographs, building diagrams, site plans, maps, and bibliography. The two different sections also testify to the fact that Mount Wutai in the early twentieth century was already a very different site from the medieval one that the authors tried to retrieve.

At the start of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), indeed, Mount Wutai was revitalized after a short period of decline but with a rather different religious outlook.<sup>44</sup> The Manchu emperors, pious believers of Tibetan Buddhism (which like Chinese Buddhism regards Mount Wutai as an extremely important sacred site), supported the monastery authorities and sponsored extensive building projects in the mountains, converting major monasteries into centers of Tibetan Buddhist practice throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The increasing presence of Tibetan Buddhism decisively changed the practices, traditions, and schools with



FIGURE 1.7. View of the valley and the town of Taihuai, the geographic center of Mount Wutai and the site of its largest monastic complex, Great Huayan Monastery (Da Huayansi), during the Tang period. Early 20th century. From Tokiwa and Sekino, *Shina bukkyō shiseki*, vol. 5, pl. 4.

which the monasteries had previously been associated. Over time, Mount Wutai was altered so much that its present state little resembles the well-documented religious landscape when the sacred mountain cult first flourished in the Tang dynasty; the physical structure remains, in the five peaks, the famous (numinous) places, and buildings and icons such as the Great Buddha Hall and statues inside Foguang Monastery. The challenge for any historical project of the sacred mountain is how to reinstate its historical past and reconstruct the earlier context buried under layers of its new political and religious fabric.<sup>45</sup>

Accordingly, this book examines the monastery in three critical and interrelated contexts. First, monasteries at Mount Wutai were built foremost as efficacious places of practice. The monastic layout, icons, buildings, and topography were all important constituents of each monastery, organized to create a liminal space for encountering the divine and collaboratively aspiring to the transcendent. Second, monasteries at the sacred mountain were never isolated; they were part of a large network created by different factors, most prominently the pilgrimage. The monastic network or system restructured the ways in which mountain terrains were conceived and the sacred topography was configured. Third, each monastery was bound by the physical context of Mount Wutai—its five peaks, orientation, and range—but as a sacred site, it could not be deciphered or comprehended without

monasteries that functioned as the “spatial syntax” of its sacred topography. Monasteries at Mount Wutai were not only the context of the religious practice but also the content and components of the larger sacred mountain context.

More broadly, “building a sacred mountain” as a topic of inquiry considers space, place, and building as interrelated notions, which address different ways in which monastic architecture served as a cultural intervention in the process of site making.<sup>46</sup> To a greater degree than other genres of art or artifacts, a building is inextricably tied to the site upon which it stands, and yet, unlike some other sacred objects (texts, relics, icons, etc.),<sup>47</sup> its presence and immobility activate the divine and saturate the space, turning the initially unqualified site into a particular place. Moreover, architecture in its actuality is site-specific, and since it can’t be moved, it necessarily entails travel (as in pilgrimage) across space, establishing a broader spatial relation and hierarchy critical to the experience and imagination. More specifically, in Buddhism, the pilgrimage journey was often taken metaphorically as a path (*mārga*) to get from “this shore” to “the other,” from this world to the next. In this regard, the liminality of the sacred mountain was not only temporal but also spatial in its topography and architecture, and those who traveled to Mount Wutai could experience the divine presence in that liminal space. The totality of the interrelations among space, place, and building made Mount Wutai more perceivable as a sacred site. Sacrality, after all, is “a category of emplacement.”<sup>48</sup> And it is through a conception of this totality that it became possible to reproduce a Mount Wutai that takes *place* elsewhere, and by extension, to reconceptualize Mount Wutai as a particular kind of place—that of “the” monastery.

To explore the multiple contextual and functional roles of the monastery in building a sacred mountain at Mount Wutai, the book’s chapters revolve around twin foci: monastery and mountains. Each focus has its separate tradition and history, within the larger context of Buddhist expansion in China, for certainly, monasteries had already been built at mountains elsewhere in China when Mount Wutai became identified as a Buddhist sacred mountain. The book is thus conceived to explore the intricate and changing relations between monastery and mountains that not only led to the building of Mount Wutai but also developed it into one of the most important features of Buddhism in medieval China.

Chapters 1 and 2 answer two related questions: How was “building” monasteries at Mount Wutai from the fifth and sixth centuries onward different from the earlier building efforts, and why may these monasteries be seen as the pivotal means of intervention that changed people’s perception of the mountains? In answer, I will show the monastery as a particular place where the practitioner began to encounter and understand the presence of the initially foreign divinity, and posit that Mount Wutai, recognized as *the* sacred mountain, was developed against a specific historical and regional background. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 reconstruct the history of the bodhisattva cult at Mount Wutai during the seventh through the ninth centuries. Each of these chapters, using one major monastery as the focus of analysis, takes on a particular factor—topography, vision, and iconography—in its exploration of how the monastery was conceived and built to mediate critical

aspects of the bodhisattva cult at the sacred mountain. Together these three chapters suggest that the development of Mount Wutai during the period when the bodhisattva worship climaxed is a history of its sacral architecture. From a different viewpoint, chapter 6 investigates the pilgrimage at Mount Wutai. As a kind of “spatial practice,” the increasingly popular pilgrimage conceptually transformed the mountain site—its five sacred peaks and monasteries—into a structured totality, conducive to both literary and visual representation. Eventually Mount Wutai could no longer be experienced without the mediation of this representation, the “metamonastery,” which reveals the divine origin and presence, vision, ideology, and history—the essential components and qualities of monasteries that built Mount Wutai into the Buddhist sacred mountain.

As the first monograph dedicated to the early history of Mount Wutai in medieval China, *Building a Sacred Mountain* posits a complex historical process that involved factors both intrinsic and extrinsic to the mountains, arguing that this complexity cannot be properly unraveled without taking into account the functioning and ontological role of the monastery in the transformation of Mount Wutai into a sacred mountain. The book thus offers a methodological departure from previous scholarship on Mount Wutai by shifting the focus of analysis from the site to the sight of divinity and from mountains to the monastery, a shift that enables us to investigate both the religious and the cultural inventions that made Mount Wutai a sacred site. In using the monastery as an analytical lens, the discussion is not limited to the physical structure of architecture but includes icons, murals, space, and ritual, as well as topography and vision, stressing not only the monastery’s material properties and liturgical functions but also its visionary and discursive potentials as understood in medieval Buddhism. To a great extent, *Building a Sacred Mountain* challenges the current scholarship in the history of traditional Chinese architecture by introducing an intercontextual strategy or approach—architecture is always a context itself and the content of a larger context—to explore the multivalent significance of Buddhist architecture other than just its building structure. The timber frame of a monastic structure can be distinguished in terms of regional or period style and practice, but often not its particular religious or spiritual meaning, which, in a historical process, was layered onto the structure by inscribing, naming, decorating, or spatializing it for particular monastic purposes. In examining the layers of meanings of monastic architecture at Mount Wutai, this book provides an alternative perspective from which to study and write the history of Chinese sacral architecture in medieval China.

## Building the Monastery, Locating the Sacred Presence

In 248 CE, during the Three Kingdoms Period (220–65), a monk of Sogdian ancestry named Kang Senghui (d. 280) arrived in Jianye, present-day Nanjing, the capital of the Wu Kingdom in the south. Buddhism was not yet popular then in southern China, and Kang, determined to establish the practice there, “built a hermitage, set up images, and performed rituals.”<sup>1</sup> One version of the story tells that when he was interrogated by the suspicious Wu ruler, Sun Quan (182–252), who demanded evidence to prove the divinity of the foreign god he worshiped, Kang replied, “It has been more than a thousand years since the Thus-Come-One [*rulai*]<sup>2</sup> passed away, but the bone relics he left behind still shine divinely and beyond measure. Long ago King Aśoka erected as many as 84,000 stupas [to hold the Buddha’s relics], for building stupas was the means to manifest the salvific influence [of the Buddha] bequeathed to later generations.”<sup>3</sup> Kang was referring to the tale of the Indian king Aśoka (ca. 304–232 BCE), the devout and ideal Buddhist ruler who, with the help of *yakṣas* (nature spirits), distributed the relics of the Buddha throughout the Indian subcontinent in a single day in order to promote Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> Sun was skeptical but was willing to build a stupa if Kang could indeed produce relics and prove himself; if he failed, he would receive due punishment. After Kang performed several concentrated rituals and said prayers in a quiet room for twenty-one days, his entreaties were answered: relics miraculously appeared, rattling in a bottle and emanating a five-color radiance. Sun Quan held up the bottle and tipped the relics onto a bronze tray, but they smashed the tray as soon as they struck it. Sun was awed, uttering, “Such a rare omen!” Keeping his promise to enshrine the relics, Sun subsequently built a stupa, which then became the first Buddhist monastery, named Monastery of the First Built (*Jianchusi*).<sup>5</sup>

While the story is a fabrication written retrospectively to account for the early patronage and spread of Buddhism in southern China, it nonetheless epitomizes the basic components and pattern of reception, understanding, and practice of this initially foreign religion in the first centuries after its arrival in China. It also points to the importance

*Upon seeing the building, one is inspired to take vows to become a Buddhist; looking at it, one no longer thinks of returning. A building as such that increases one’s meritorious rewards and promotes one’s goodness is called “monastery.”*

—Daoshi, *Jade Grove of the Dharma Garden* (Fayuan zhulin)

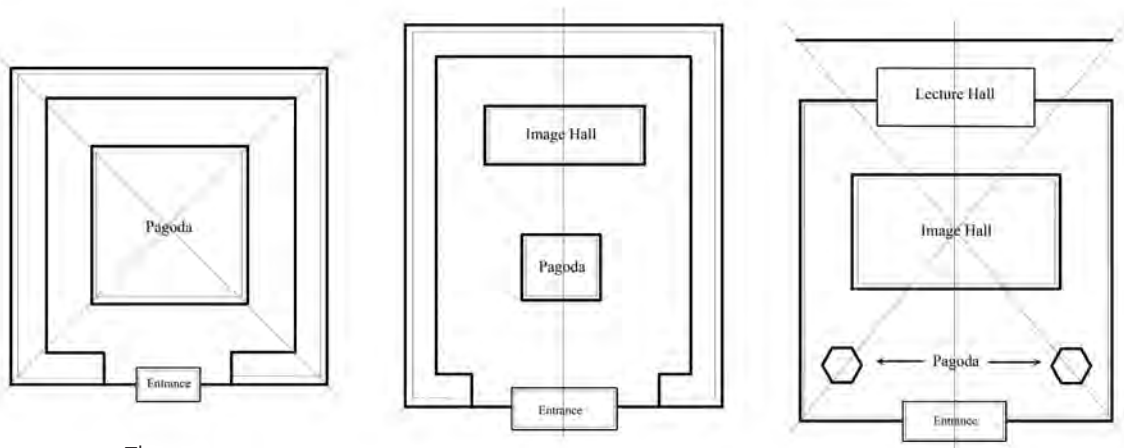


FIGURE 1.1. Three basic layouts of early Buddhist monastic compounds based on the position of the stupa or pagoda and its relation with the main image hall. Diagram by author.

of the divine presence in the origin of the monastery, as manifested in the tangible form of images and relics, as well as to a particular architecture built to accommodate the Buddhist divinity. Before Buddhism, neither relics nor images were worshiped religiously in China, nor was the stupa (or pagoda, its narrower and taller counterpart in East Asia) a traditional building type. In the centuries following the founding of Jianchu Monastery, other monasteries were built and various forms of practice developed, including liturgical ritual, precept observation, and icon-focused meditation and visualization, along with prolific translation of sutras and the production of images. All this activity firmly established Buddhism as a “practice religion” in China.<sup>6</sup> Monastic architecture in China also developed, beginning with the pagoda for enshrining relics. At the same time, Buddhist monasticism became more and more elaborate, following monastic regulations and liturgical procedures devised to assist practitioners to see and comprehend the divine presence of the Buddha in a monastic, that is, ritualistic environment. As the architectural layout and space of the monastery evolved, it was increasingly perceived as a sanctioned, effective field of religious practice. By the end of the sixth century it was within the four walls of the monastery that the divine was observed, venerated, and reenacted. In other words, monastic practice was intimately correlated with architecture during this early period in the shaping of Buddhist monasticism, centered on the conception and experience of the divine presence.

Scholarly research on Buddhist monastic architecture in its initial stage in China is relatively sparse—understandably, since there is a lack of surviving material.<sup>7</sup> The primary approach has been textual, augmented by evidence from archaeological sites and building remains. Much of the research has also looked at the building types of early Indian Buddhist construction—stupa, *caitya* (worship hall), and *vihāra* (assembly hall)—and how these were transmitted eastward and eventually adapted to a Chinese architectural style and vocabulary. The general consensus among scholars is that monastic architecture developed in three stages, transitioning from a stupa/pagoda-centered layout, to a binary plan of pagoda and additional Buddha (image) hall, to a monastic precinct centered on the Buddha hall (fig. 1.1).<sup>8</sup> In terms of spatial configuration, the earlier plan centered on a

stupa/pagoda gradually gave way to an axial plan, with a symmetrical disposition of buildings within a four-sided enclosure—in accordance with long-standing practices in Chinese architecture.

While this account of early monastic architecture is viable and its general conclusion still holds, the implications in terms of the “content” of the early Buddhist monastery is quite limited.<sup>9</sup> For instance, some have argued that the stupa, which was the most important symbolic structure of early Chinese Buddhism but which originated outside of China, posed challenges to the Chinese tradition of architecture because of its height and shape.<sup>10</sup> In this view, early Chinese monastic architecture made critical changes in the stupa to answer these challenges: the foreign-style building was gradually adapted to conform more to China’s own multistoried architecture of the period and eventually became the tower-like pagoda known today; its centrally located position inside the monastery was, moreover, gradually superseded by the Buddha hall. Some regard the change in the focus of monastic layout, from the stupa that held the relics to the Buddha hall that housed the icons, as resulting from a doctrinal shift in ritual focus, from relics to icons.<sup>11</sup> The evidence, however, seems to suggest otherwise. Beginning very early on in China, both relics and icons were primary objects of veneration, and both were equally fundamental in their role as religious agents.<sup>12</sup> The veneration of relics continued to be a key element in monastic practice well into the Tang dynasty (618–907), long after the main Buddha hall began to take the central position in a typical Chinese monastery. In addition, although Buddhist monastic architecture eventually developed in accordance with Chinese building conventions, its historical trajectory was most likely also determined by other important factors, in particular, issues related to creating or marking a sacred precinct where the Buddhist divine presence could be observed and worshiped.

Originally, the word “stupa” referred to a funeral mound built over cremated bodily remains, or relics (*śarīra*), a practice already existing in Vedic tradition before the Buddha’s time.<sup>13</sup> In Buddhism, the most venerated stupas were those containing relics of Śākyamuni Buddha, preserved after his death, which was understood as his entrance into nirvana, a state of enlightenment transcending the world of cyclic reincarnation.<sup>14</sup> The enshrined relics were therefore a physical testimony to his spiritual transformation. As such, the stupa was never a sign of death, and veneration of the stupa (*śarīra-pūjā*) was performed as if the Buddha were still alive. Through ritual and worship, the stupa was “a symbol of divine presence” as manifestly powerful as an image of the Buddha.<sup>15</sup> The stupa, insofar as it possessed in its physical form the same iconic economy as the sacred presence without depicting it directly, could be viewed as “an iconography without an icon,” one that evoked, as a statue or painting might, the presence of the Buddha here and now and stipulated the ritualistic actions of the practitioner around the Buddha’s presence.<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly, the earliest monasteries in China were built around relic legends. In addition to the relics said to perform miracles, the alleged discoveries of “relics of Aśoka” (some of the 84,000 relics that according to legend were distributed

by the Indian king Aśoka) were also reported in several urban centers, leading to the building of pagodas at the many “Aśoka monasteries” (Ayuwangsi). These relic legends might have been the result of an urge on the part of the Chinese to validate the position of the “Central Kingdom” (China) in the map of the Buddhist continent (i.e., Jambudvīpa), over which the relics were distributed.<sup>17</sup> More important, the marvelous appearance of the Buddha’s relics on Chinese soil also confirmed that a ritual practitioner could come into Buddha’s presence, as Kang Senghui did so many years before. The consequent building project at the site of the miracle served to unite the presence with the locality and to connect the architecture to the site, so the practitioner might partake in the presence of the Buddha in the here and now. The application of the Chinese term, *si*, for Buddhist monasteries captures this point precisely. Used as early as the third century CE, *si* designated specifically “the very place where a foreign deity was present,” in contrast to *ci*, which referred to temples for local deities.<sup>18</sup> Making this presence perceivable is at the heart of the early development of Buddhist monasticism and architecture, working in tandem with each other and with monastic disciplines in the built environment.

As Buddhism developed in China, indeed, divine presence was no longer limited to relics. Alongside the miraculous stories of found relics, there grew up stories of found images, as in the so-called Aśoka images (*Ayuwang xiang*), often described in early Buddhist texts as golden statues in the Indian style, extrapolated as originating from the devout Indian king’s dissemination of the belief.<sup>19</sup> Other images included steles with Sanskrit inscriptions, or parts of Indian stupas—finials or golden discs, for example—that were found by chance; their dislocation and appearance in China attracted native patrons and eventually led to the building of monasteries.<sup>20</sup> This “sacred archaeology” placed the sacrality of the foreign religion firmly in China and thus established the country as the land of the Buddha.<sup>21</sup> More specifically, each monastery, marking the locus of the Buddha’s presence, not only functioned as an efficacious place for spiritual pursuit but itself partook in the spiritual quality of the divine presence as sacred place. It is not unusual to read about radiant statues glowing through the night inside the image hall and icons arriving of their own volition to reside at specific monasteries. In the monasteries of this early period, agencies (i.e., relics and icons), story, ritual, and place of the divinity could not be clearly separated.

The early development of Buddhist monastic architecture in China is intricately connected to the content of monastic practice and spirituality evolving around the issue of divine presence. This emphasis on presence highlights not only the religious function of presence but also the anxiety of Chinese Buddhists about living in a time and place without the Buddha. Seeing the Buddha here and now, or any other deities in the enlarged Mahayana pantheon after Buddhism became transmitted eastward, compensated for the spatiotemporal distance from the original sources, lent authority to particular monastic orders, or *saṅghas*, and sanctioned their spiritual disciplines and practice. Monastic architecture that developed in tandem with the evolving Chinese Buddhist monasticism would necessarily in some way be indicative of the monastic spirituality and expressive of its religious

ideology—as is suggested in the definition of a monastery that appears in the epigraph to this chapter, from the scholar-monk Daoshi in his encyclopedic work *Jade Grove of the Dharma Garden*, compiled in 668. Unfortunately, the dearth of surviving evidence has prevented us from substantiating in detail the direct connection between monasticism and the monastic architecture that was designed at this early stage to promote and facilitate it. What can be claimed, however, is that the early monastic architecture did not evolve along a simple trajectory (i.e., from the pagoda to image hall), but reflected the ways in which the legend, ritual, and place were correlated to help the practitioner comprehend the sacred presence. It is through this correlation that we may investigate how monastic architecture structured monasticism spatially and symbolically within its built environment.

### Monastery: The “Sacred Presence” in Devotional and Liturgical Buddhism

The third through the sixth centuries were a transformative period in China, and critical in the development of Buddhist monasticism.<sup>22</sup> After the fall of the Han dynasty and before the Sui-Tang unification—the period of the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern dynasties (220–581)—China was divided among short-lived political regimes engaged in constant military conflict and warfare, and none of the regimes conquered more than half of China’s territory.<sup>23</sup> This social and political instability likely would have encouraged people to seek spiritual refuge; Buddhism, which offered universal salvation, seemed to have attracted Chinese followers and garnered support from regional rulers under these circumstances. Monastic communities were established in several urban centers in both the north and south and so began to change the religious landscape in China.<sup>24</sup> Although the textual evidence about early monastic communities is less than clear, an emphasis on spiritual praxis in both ritual and devotional forms seems to have been a major part of monastic life. The style of monastic discipline, characterized as “liturgical” and “devotional,” suggests a growing engagement with a host of different rituals that had a strong devotional purpose.<sup>25</sup> Monastic spirituality was cultivated through prescribed liturgical procedures and meditative instructions—for example, the veneration of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, incantations, offerings, praise, vows, and confession—that engaged iconic images for the visionary experience of the divine presence. By the sixth century, monastic praxis had developed in response to the needs and circumstances of Chinese practitioners, and visionary experience with the sacred was paramount in transforming Buddhism in early medieval China.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout the various Buddhist traditions, devotional acts developed from the earliest forms of veneration of the historical Śākyamuni Buddha, as practiced in his lifetime and continued after his death. In the Theravāda tradition of Southeast Asia, rituals of veneration were conducted primarily through relics (as well as texts and images in later periods) to mediate the Buddha’s continual and symbolic presence. This tradition maintained that the historical founder had passed out of this world and could best be accessed through “physical proximity to the remains

of the Buddha.”<sup>27</sup> In contrast, the Mahayana tradition that took root in East Asia affirmed the simultaneous existence of countless Buddhas and bodhisattvas who could interact directly with devotees, and were thus not subject to particular locations. In both traditions, the Buddha’s presence received through devotional acts was held as the chief spiritual aspiration, but it is a distinctive characteristic of Mahayana Buddhism that liturgical performance was conducted as well to evoke the sacred presence of one or a host of deities, and, depending on the nature of the liturgy and its purpose, to bring about a vision of transcendent reality. The attainment of this vision in a monastic environment rests on this notion of “presence,” which was essential to devotional activities of the early Buddhist period in China. Before moving ahead with the discussion of monastic practice, therefore, let us consider how the notion developed.

During the early medieval period, marvels such as the radiant and rattling relics in the legend of Jianchu Monastery were not unheard of in China. In early Chinese literature, there were fantastic fables, strange tales, and reports of supernatural occurrences, heralding a literary genre known as “recording the strange” (*zhiguai*) that was popular in the early post-Han era.<sup>28</sup> Working in a similar literary language and narrative structure were Buddhist miracle tales about an occult presence in instances of timely divine intervention or karmic retribution.<sup>29</sup> For instance, the widely celebrated Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin), was often characterized as a savior because of his unfailing and immediate response (*ying*) to the urgent prayers of the devout believer. The religious economy and power of divine presence in the form of marvelous wonders or holy apparitions derived from the fact that the presence could be seen in ordinary life and not in “some specially demarcated ‘sacred’ realm.”<sup>30</sup> These qualities no doubt contributed to the popularity of the bodhisattva cult during the early period.

The very same qualities, however, could undermine the authenticity of sacred presence. For not only could tales of the supernatural elicit skepticism, but too many alleged encounters with deities could dilute the efficacy (*ling*) of this presence. The rise of organized monasticism revolving around the sacred presence during this period hence can be seen as an ecclesiastic action to institutionalize the economy of presence and the issues surrounding it. This is not to say that there was a clerical strategy to subdue superstitious or cultic practices, because the learned monks in this early period were often also the experts in evoking and receiving those miracles.<sup>31</sup> Instead, as the monastic communities were formed and developed, monastics were meant to observe the sacred presence in a sanctioned practice and space. Indeed, because the “ideology of presence”<sup>32</sup> rested on both the efficacy of the presence and the karmic wholesomeness of the beholder to perceive it, monastic discipline was instituted to ensure that the presence be realized as desired. Furthermore, when properly invoked in a correct practice following ritual observance and procedure, the intended visionary experience with the divine would have an important salvific significance that other forms of divine manifestation did not.

Seeing the presence thus was not only potentially beneficial to the practitioner

in his or her spiritual pursuit, but also essential to justifying the religious program and legitimizing the monastery as the place that could bring about spiritual fulfillment. The *Gaṇḍavyūha Sutra* repeatedly stresses the importance of seeing a Buddha:

All obstructions are removed when a Buddha is seen,  
Increasing the immeasurable virtue whereby enlightenment will be attained.  
The sight of a Buddha severs all the doubts of sentient beings,  
And fulfills all purposes, mundane and transcendent.<sup>33</sup>

The scholar-monk Daoshi, quoted earlier in this chapter, said of the monastery that “upon seeing [*du*] it, one is inspired to take vows to become a Buddhist; [and] looking [*jian*] at it, one no longer thinks of returning.”<sup>34</sup> The value of seeing is explicitly stated, but what is implied is that the vision of the sacred presence is attainable, once one enters the monastery. Indeed, because the monastery was built to facilitate the structured liturgical and devotional praxis that would assist the practitioner in seeing the divine, its architecture also symbolically embodied the manifestation of the divine presence and spatialized the vision of a transcendent reality.

#### Entering the Monastery: Spatializing the Sacred Presence

The veneration of stupas is a practice that originated in India, where it always involved material offerings and physical gestures. The most ubiquitous offerings were garlands and incense, which were dedicated along with mental or verbal recitations. A flower-offering ritual based on an early Indian tradition went as follows: The devotee first removed both shoes before entering the area of greater purity; then she or he would approach the stupa, assuming a formal posture of reverence, usually the *añjali* gesture—placing the palms of the hands together with extended fingers pointing upward. The devotee could then circumambulate the stupa clockwise three times, keeping the right arm facing the stupa as a sign of respect. She or he would pause at the four cardinal directions and perform a gesture of respect such as standing with hands in *añjali*, stooping, kneeling, or fully prostrating the body. The ritual of relic veneration, as has been pointed out, may have been modeled after acts of obeisance and material offering directed toward the Buddha during his lifetime.<sup>35</sup> In other words, the ritual confirms that the Buddha, after entering nirvana, could still manifest through his relics enshrined in that very stupa, but it was also the devotional act itself performed by the practitioner that made the sacred reality present. Between the presence and ritual performed to enact the presence, the sacred space around the object of veneration became perceptible.

To a surprising extent, the devotional ritual directed toward a pagoda in medieval China is consistent with that found in the roots of Theravāda tradition in India. A fifth-century sutra stipulated flowers, incense, and lamps in the devotional offering (*gongyang*) to a pagoda.<sup>36</sup> With concentration, it continues, the devotee

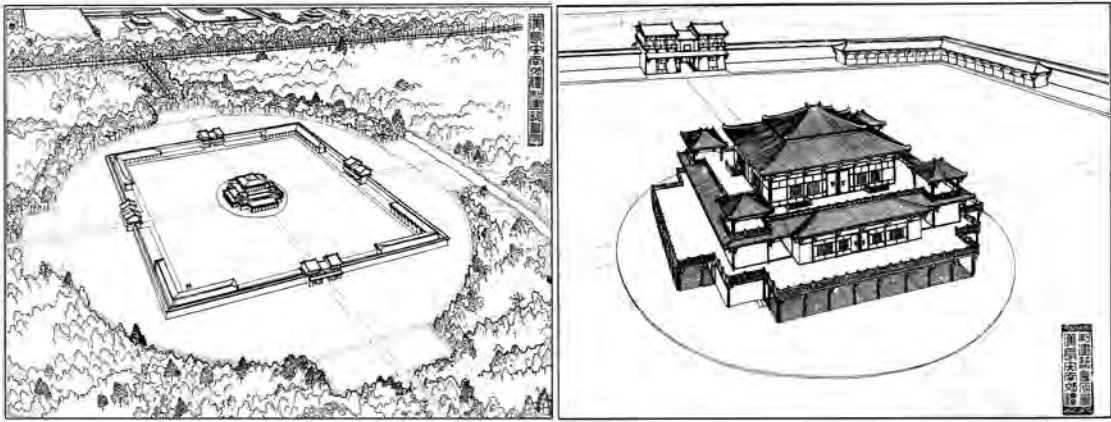


FIGURE 1.2. A reconstruction of Wang Mang's (45 BCE–23 CE) Bright Hall (Mingtang), Chang'an. Xin dynasty. 4 CE. From Wang Shiren, "Han Chang'an cheng nanjiao lizhi jianzhu," figs. 20–21.

should walk clockwise starting from the west, with the right shoulder respectfully toward the Buddha (i.e., the pagoda), for three, seven, ten, or one hundred circumambulations. This ritual performance was dedicated to the transcendent presence of the Buddha, manifested through the pagoda, by repeating and reenacting the symbolic gestural and bodily movements peculiar to the typological ritual of relics. Ritual circumambulation around a building (Sanskrit: *pradakṣiṇā*; Chinese: *raoxing* or *xingdao*) was not a Chinese tradition. The plan of a pagoda, however, finds a precedent in the Bright Hall (Mingtang) in the capital city of Chang'an during Wang Mang's interregnum (9–23 CE) (fig. 1.2), an important building of state ritual constructed to symbolically embody and govern the universe. Consisting of a series of twelve rooms in a concentric plan, the Bright Hall symbolically mapped the cyclic rotation of twelve months; moving through the sequence of rooms clockwise, the ruler was able to keep the celestial time harmoniously.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the interior movement inside the Bright Hall, which had a greater, exterior cosmological implication, Buddhist circumambulation was primarily exterior, practiced to confirm and partake in the divine presence at the sacred center. The pagoda, marking the sacred locus of the relic depository, in turn, fixed the direction and orientation of the ritual (walking clockwise starting from the west) toward the center of the divine presence, thus turning the initially undefined space of the site into a sacred place.

The early Buddhist monastery, centered on the pagoda, differed in its spatial conception and symbolism from other architectural spaces in China. A centrally positioned pagoda creates its space by stipulating a walking circuit around the center, one that complicates the axial and symmetrical pattern. Because most early pagodas were four-sided (*sifang shi*), corresponding to the four cardinal directions,<sup>38</sup> a walk around the pagoda in real time—for example, three circumambulations with veneration made at the four cardinal points—brings to the sacred center a spatiotemporal dimension that bears a range of symbolic meanings. In addition to the threefold temporal order of past, present, and future, a threefold circumambulation around a pagoda invokes several other sets of three in traditional Buddhist

thinking: it symbolizes and acts out one's reverence to the Three Jewels—Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha (Sanbao)—and brings about the eradication of the three evil afflictions, removal of the three karmic obstructions, and elimination of the three evil destinies.<sup>39</sup> The ritualistic and cyclical walk in circumambulation arouses one's mental and karmic state so that it may activate the symbolism implicated in the space and perceive the sacred presence upon entering the monastic precinct. The walking circuit makes the pagoda the architectural center of the monastic precinct, but it is also the spiritual path for attaining favorable karma and an act of monastic endeavor in the presence of the Buddha.

The early monasteries in China were built under varying circumstances, and many of them may have been converted from nonreligious structures and complexes.<sup>40</sup> The development of early monastic architecture and its expansion in subsequent centuries is hence quite difficult to chart with any accuracy. Four enclosing walls and pagoda that was centrally positioned (at least in religious terms), however, seem to have been the basic vocabulary that defined the monastic precinct and its sacred space. The spatial differentiation of inside from outside made the entry into the monastery a particular spiritual threshold. In his commentary on the *Nirvana Sutra*, Daoshi explicates: "What we call entering the monastery requires one to abandon swords, staffs, and other sundry items before making entry into the monastery. To abandon weapons is to eradicate [the three evil afflictions of] anger, malice, and hatred toward the Three Jewels; to casting away sundry items humbles one's mind for the Three Jewels. Only when these two faults are removed can one enter the monastery."<sup>41</sup> Entry into the monastery was then followed by a threefold circumambulation around the Buddha's presence (i.e., pagoda). The commitment to take the arduous path to spiritual liberation was further affirmed by a formal act of taking the Threefold Refuge (S: *Triśaraṇa*; C: *Sanzigui*) in the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha, because one was to devote oneself to becoming a Buddhist disciple, figuratively entering the monastery (*rumen*). It is from here that the sacred center at the pagoda became the point of departure for monastics to learn and to see the sacred presence.

### Monasticism: Monastic Practice in the Sacred Presence

Although there is little available material evidence for monastic architecture in the earliest periods, beyond a central pagoda surrounded by four walls, the life and practice in the monastic community, the saṅgha, would have required more than just those structures. As it developed, the saṅgha was not just an assembly of world renouncers, but a religious community regulated by codified rules that would not only confer a proper or legitimate monastic identity upon those who followed them but also aid the monastic in her or his spiritual achievements. The monastic rules (i.e., discipline and behavioral codes), or *vinaya*,<sup>42</sup> were thus fundamental to the development of the early Buddhist monastic community. Although no "complete *vinaya*" (*guanglü*) was fully translated in Chinese until the fifth century, these religious communities were concerned from very early on with proper

monastic conduct and performance, observance of the precepts, repentance, and other religious aspirations as part of the ritual and liturgical devotion observed daily in the early monastery.

A text of particular significance in this regard is a set of monastic guidelines titled *Regulations for Monastics* (Sengni guifan), compiled by Daoan (312–85). An eminent monk influential in Buddhist communities of both northern and southern China, Daoan, famously stressing the precepts as the foundation of the faith, was one of the first Buddhist masters to have undertaken translations of saṅgha regulations.<sup>43</sup> Daoan participated in the translation of several Sanskrit *vinaya* texts, an endeavor that led him to realize that pragmatic guidelines specifically for the monastic community of his time were also needed. *Regulations for Monastics* thus was compiled as a supplement of the *vinaya* tailored to the experience and needs of monasteries in China; during and after Daoan's time, these guidelines were "adopted by monasteries throughout the entire country."<sup>44</sup> The complete text itself is no longer extant, but parts of it survive in later monastic codes, in particular, those compiled by the *vinaya* master Daoxuan (596–667), of the Tang dynasty.<sup>45</sup> The *Regulations for Monastics* is perhaps too early to be representative of the monastic tradition, and the fact that so little survives of it hinders any extensive application or interpretation of the text. But if examined along with other texts of later monastic codes and rules, what remains can, nevertheless, still elucidate some essential forms and structures of the monastic disciplines in early Buddhism and help identify a sacred field of spiritual cultivation definable inside the monastery.<sup>46</sup>

The *Regulations for Monastics* specified three different procedures for the monks to follow. First, the procedure for offering incense while circumambulating the hall, taking one's seat, and preaching the sutra; second, the procedure for daily practices to be performed at six periods of the day, including circumambulating the image, taking meals, and chanting at mealtimes; and third, the procedure for fortnightly confession and the ritual of repentance.<sup>47</sup> That studying and preaching the sutra precede other practices should suggest the importance of learning and wisdom in the monastic training. The second procedure concerns routine activities that regularize monastic life and ritual on a fixed schedule, whereas the confession and repentance of the last procedure are primarily for purposes of purification and recommitment to the faith on special occasions. These three aspects of the monastic discipline, though different in nature and purpose, together structured the monastery into a ritual field of time and space, in which the key intentions are communal, habitual, and performative.

The three procedures set up a ritual field in which practitioners could practice in and before the divine presence. All three presumed that the Buddha or other deities presided at the very site of the monastery. The doctrinal learning specified in the first procedure commonly included the invocation of the name of the deities and recital of scriptures prior to the lecture. Daoan is credited for the use of incense as a liturgical prelude to the procedure, called "offering incense" (*xingxiang*), which might include offering and scattering flowers and incensing the hall while circumambulating it and engaging in ritual prostrations and chanting. Incensing

was a symbolic act to invite or summon the presence of deities to the assembly.<sup>48</sup> After the monks or nuns had circumambulated the hall to enact the sacredness, and the bell was struck to start the lecture, they would take their seats, chanting praise verses and reciting sutras. The priest (*fashi*) and the reciter (*dujiang*) would then ascend to high seats, bow to the statues, seat themselves on each side of the main images, and begin the lecture.<sup>49</sup> The deity, the priest, and the attendants were united in a liturgical relationship ensured by the prescribed procedure and performance. The Buddha was present to oversee and lend his authority to the words being preached, recited, and chanted, which all together activated the scriptures throughout the entire procedure.<sup>50</sup>

In the confessional ritual (S: *posadha*; C: *busa*) of the third procedure, a similar relationship between the practitioner and the Buddha was created.<sup>51</sup> Before the ritual, the selected site in the monastery would be cleansed, incensed, and adorned, and thus be turned into a delimited place for a liturgical purpose. Monks and nuns performed the ritual separately. To begin, the precept master (*lüshi*) was called after participants were convened; then, the master would ascend to the high seat, and monks on duty would sprinkle water and scatter flowers for purification. The rector (*weinuo*) then offered incense while reciting scriptural verses (S: *gāthā*; C: *ji*) devoted to and invoking “Innumerable Buddhas of the Ten Directions.”<sup>52</sup> At this point, novices not yet fully ordained were requested to leave; those who remained would then recite the precepts and make confession. This was followed by the return of novices to chant the verses of praise to conclude the ritual. The ritual was of paramount importance because offenses could result in unfavorable karmic retribution or obstructions to spiritual advancement. Although transgressions were not necessarily against particular Buddhist deities, confession and repentance could be effectively and ritually confirmed only in the presence of the Buddha(s), invoked as witness, guarantor, and expeditor to amend one’s karma. Simultaneously the distinctions of gender, seniority, and monastic status were also affirmed, such that the “monastic body” of each practitioner through the liturgical process literally embodied the institutional discipline and spiritual hierarchy in relation to the divine presence.<sup>53</sup>

As important as the other two procedures were in assisting the monastic to perceive the sacred presence in the monastic space, it was the second procedure, of daily worship at six designated intervals of day and night, on which the monastery was centered and by which it was temporally regulated. Every liturgical day was divided into three daytime periods (dawn, noon, and sunset), and three nighttime periods (early night, midnight, and late night).<sup>54</sup> Each period, at least during the time of Daoan, would begin with a rite of worship, entailing circumambulation around images of the Buddha and probably other deities. By the sixth century, the liturgical routine, which had become unmistakably devotional, would include such stock ritual components as offerings, taking refuge in the Three Jewels, hymns, invocations, veneration, confession, and vows, each of which might vary according to scheduled periods. Before each of the communal meals, which were served twice a day, monastics would follow a simplified procedure—incensing,

circumambulating, and chanting. These and other scheduled disciplines routinized the daily liturgical cycle, which inculcated the frame of mind and habit of body that were subjected to a transcendent order and aspiring to a higher spiritual realm.<sup>55</sup> In particular, the repetition of the daily ritual necessarily imparted a temporal rhythm, a cyclic infinity that was timeless. It was precisely through the cycle of liturgical routine that one was able to do away with the endless continuation of worldly impermanence that was bound in the secular time of day and night.

This temporal implication also has a spatial dimension. The focal point of the daily liturgy was the veneration of the Buddhist deities. Depending on the texts in use, at each designated ritual period the monastics would intone the names of different sets and ranks of Buddhas, either six, seven, eight, ten, thirty-five, or fifty-three in number, as well as those of various bodhisattvas.<sup>56</sup> These Buddhas and bodhisattvas were regarded in Mahayana Buddhism as celestial deities residing in different times and universes, yet correlating to the ritual site at the cardinal directions. By eliciting their presence from the ten directions (the four cardinal ones, those between them, and the directions up and down), the ritual site was perceived as constructing a dharma field (S: *bodhimāṇḍa*; C: *daochang*)—literally a site of enlightenment or ritual enactment that operated in its own (celestial) temporal and spatial order. It was in such “sacral spatiotemporality,” at once outside and beyond regular time and space, that the monastic was able to reorient himself or herself and practice in the divine presence.

Without a particular frame of reference, cultural, religious, or political, ritual acts are meaningless in themselves. When enacted in context, ritual performance becomes expressive and efficacious, mediating meaning and power through bodily movement, symbols, or other implementations. As far as monastic learning and discipline are concerned, the ritual or ritualized lifestyle provided “body techniques,” that is, bodily protocols sanctioned by the monastic authority to shape the identity of the practitioner and to prepare her or him for higher spiritual attainment.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, it is also the practitioner’s body that enters, circumambulates, prostrates, recites, chants, repents, and so on; that is, by virtue of devotional performance, the practitioner literally embodies the relation with sacrality and enacts its manifestation inside the monastery. A monastery was built not just to provide a space for different regimental disciplines and liturgical activities but to create a sort of “spatial liminality” that took the built environment as its physical realization and yet negotiated this world with the transcendent by making the divine presence perceivable within the four walls of the monastery.

### Seeing the Sacred Presence: Meditative Visualization

Examining Daoan’s guidelines closely, one may be surprised by the absence of some components often associated with Buddhist monastic practices. For one, there is no explicit instruction in regard to icons, although the use of Buddhist images is implied. For another, there is no mention of meditation (S: *dhyāna*; C: *chan*), a mental (spiritual) discipline that had most likely been practiced since Bud-

dhism was first transmitted to China. The textual evidence, however, indicates that early in his career Daoan was interested in scriptures and treatises that introduced Buddhist meditation; and according to his biography, he would also have been familiar with the use of icons in a monastic setting.<sup>58</sup> Their exclusion from the monastic guidelines thus seems to suggest that practices with icons and meditation were separated from other monastic routines because they had different religious purposes. The two missing components in Daoan's guidelines would merge in the next centuries, since the practice of meditation was increasingly involved with the use of icons, to give monastics an important access to the sight and insight of the divine presence. In particular, meditative visualization became an indispensable element of the more advanced practices devised to assist the monastic in taking the bodhisattva path, as expounded in some newly translated Mahayana scriptures.<sup>59</sup>

Daoan established his monastic community in the metropolis Xiangyang (in present-day Hubei), and lived there from approximately 365 to 379; it was here that he compiled his monastic guidelines. A local magistrate donated his mansion to be converted into what was later named Tanxi Monastery (Tanxisi), to which was added a five-story pagoda and accommodation for four hundred monastics. In this same period, accounts of miraculous icons related to Tanxi Monastery began to circulate.<sup>60</sup> Another donation of ten thousand catties of bronze was, by Daoan's request, used to cast a sixteen-*chi* statue of the Buddha that correctly showed the Buddha's perfect and minor body marks. It was said that every night the statue emitted light that completely illuminated the hall; one night the statue even moved out of the hall under its own power and had to be brought back to the monastery. The statue was widely recognized for its marvelous acts, but it was the divinity manifested through the statue (by its automation and levitation) that was vital to the monastic spirituality. Daoan's most celebrated pupil, Huiyuan (334–416), later wrote a eulogy about the statue: "To represent a supernatural model prepares the heart for its final crossing [into salvation]. An iconographically-correct form divinely imitated opens the way to an understanding of all wisdom."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, in another account, an archaic and foreign-looking statue was found to contain a radiant relic when the rounded protuberance or topknot that is traditionally represented on top of the Buddha's head (*uṣṇīṣa*) was removed at Daoan's instruction; the statue was thus sanctified by the presence of the hidden relic. Even without the miracles or a special origin, the divine presence that could be mediated through a statue gave the icon a lasting legacy as the primary agent of divinity. Indeed, if the stupa/pagoda in the foregoing discussion can be seen as a metaphysical body, or an "architectural body,"<sup>62</sup> of the Buddha activated by the enshrined relics, an icon turns this bodily connotation of the presence into a primacy of vision. And it was by the practice of meditative visualization through the liturgical veneration of icons in a monastic setting during the fifth and sixth centuries that Chinese Buddhists began to learn to "see" the divine presence.

One of the earliest sources for this meditative practice is from the record of Huiyuan's veneration of another statue, that of Amitābha Buddha, documented in his biography.<sup>63</sup> In 402 CE, Huiyuan assembled 123 monks and laymen at Mount

Lu (Lushan, in today's Jiujiang, Jiangxi); after a ceremonial fasting and recitation of liturgy, Huiyuan and the assembly collectively made a vow in front of an image of Amitābha Buddha to strive for rebirth in his Pure Land (Sukhāvātī), the blissful world located in the extreme west of the universe, where this Buddha resides. This emphasis on vow taking and the ultimate aim of being reborn in Amitābha's Pure Land most likely were inspired by one of the three main scriptures in the Pure Land tradition, the *Amitābha Sutra* (Amituo jing), that had just been translated into Chinese at this time.<sup>64</sup> To vow and veneration, a new element was added in Huiyuan's practice: an intense meditative concentration on the iconic image as an efficacious technique for coming into the actual presence of the Buddha in vision.

This meditative visualization most likely originated in a practice that helped the practitioner recollect the attributes of the Buddha and call to mind his presence, a meditation known as *buddhānusmṛti* (C: *nianfo*).<sup>65</sup> The practice of *buddhānusmṛti* can be traced back to pre-Mahayana Buddhist history in India, but already in its early form, it was performed to see the Buddha in one's mind and be constantly in his presence even after he was no longer available to his followers. To acquire this "mental seeing," the practitioner is instructed to recite the ten epithets of the Buddha, a list of titles and qualities of the Enlightened One as a means to concentrate the mind on the attributes of the Buddha, until the practitioner "comes to feel as if he were living in the Master's presence . . . as though he were face to face with the Master."<sup>66</sup> It was on this vision of the presence that the style of Huiyuan's meditative practice was based.

The meditative practice of *buddhānusmṛti* is derived from the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra* (Banzhou sanmei jing), translated by Lokakṣema (fl. 168–88) in 179 CE.<sup>67</sup> According to this sutra, the practitioner entering a secluded place should become fully mindful of Amitābha Buddha by concentrating on the ten epithets of the Buddha and, additionally, by visually recollecting thirty-two major marks and eighty minor excellences of the Buddha's body. To effectively visualize the Buddha's physical form, the sutra instructs the practitioner to use a statue or an image of the Buddha. How the actual mental recollection is aided by the image is not detailed in this sutra, but it is explicated in some other contemporaneous works, including a short meditation manual, *Abridged Method of Meditation* (Siwei lueyao fa). In this manual, the visualization process is described as follows:

When you see a beautiful image that looks like a real Buddha, carefully note every sign—from the topknot on the Buddha's head [*uṣṇīṣa*] and curls between his eyebrows [*ūrṇā*] to the feet and back from the feet to the topknot on his head—and then go to a quiet place, close your eyes, and fix your mind on the image, with no other thoughts. . . . When you have thus meditated until you can see the image whenever you wish, this is to attain to *samādhi* by meditation on an image. . . . Only after this will you be able to see the living body of the Buddha, no different from being face to face with him.<sup>68</sup>

A Buddhist term related to meditation, *samādhi* (C: *sanmei*), refers more specifically to a state of mental concentration, or ecstasy, and/or the spiritual discipline

designed to cultivate and experience such a mental state. A meditator, in other words, could begin the practice with a mental concentration on abstract and non-figural or aniconic attributes of the Buddha, and follow this by visualizing the physical or iconographic form of his perfect body, until an image of the Buddha's living body would arise in an ecstatic vision. Practicing meditation in this form leads to *samādhi*, in which the practitioner feels as if he or she is standing presently face to face with the Buddha. In the meditative process, the "tactility" of the iconic image gained through intensive concentration on the physical qualities of the body form gradually gives way to the visuality of the divine presence. The physical icon (the statue or image) that mediates this face-to-face encounter with the Buddha also gives primacy to the eidetic image of the divinity.

The term *buddhānusmṛti* is most often rendered as "mindful recollection of the Buddha" (*nianfo*) in Chinese, a usage also applied in Huiyuan's meditative practice, called "Samādhi in Mindful Recollection of the Buddha" (*nianfo sanmei*).<sup>69</sup> "Mindful recollection" (*nian*) had a double emphasis, on both the mental and the eidetic or calling-to-mind aspects of the meditative act of contemplating and recalling the image of the Buddha. In the case of Huiyuan's vow before a statue of Amitābha in 402, however, although the splendor of the Buddha's Pure Land was contemplated and imagined, it is unclear how the icon was meditated upon by Huiyuan and his followers to evoke the vision and ensure a collective rebirth there. When another scripture of the Pure Land tradition, the *Sutra on the Visualization of Amitāyus* (Guan wuliangshou fo jing), was translated into Chinese by Kālayāśas between 424 and 442, the visualization of the Buddha practiced in front of the icon was evidently a subject of instruction.<sup>70</sup> The immediate goal of the practice was more than a favorable rebirth in the future as in Huiyuan's practice; it was to induce a theophany, a direct revelation of the divine in an unmediated vision, where one comes face to face with the divinity: "Those who practice *samādhi* will be able to see [*jian*] in the present life Buddha Amitāyus [i.e., Amitābha] and the two great Bodhisattvas."<sup>71</sup> The reception of the sacred vision was thus not only a crucial sign for a successful meditative practice, but also necessarily salvific in terms of monastic spirituality, that is, it would lead to both the present cultivation and the future salvation of the practitioner.

Seeing the Buddha and being in his presence in early medieval China would no doubt be tremendously significant however they occurred. Yet, although seeing the Buddha is certainly a visionary experience, it may not necessarily be a consequence of systematized visualization.<sup>72</sup> The vision could appear as a divine intervention according to karmic law or manifest as a result of the Buddha's miraculous power to benefit the practitioner's spiritual progress. In either case, the occult vision acting on the religious practitioner is "gratuitous, unsought, given."<sup>73</sup> In comparison, the divine presence activated or enacted in visualization could be sought out to make sacred reality present for salvific or other spiritual goals. In a monastic context, the sight of the divine is closely related to "insight." The word *guan* for meditation could also imply "contemplating" or "discerning," a mental comprehension leading to awareness, knowledge, and ultimately a discerning vi-

sion.<sup>74</sup> In this sense, seeing the Buddha is equated with seeing the Dharma, a result also of the process of visualization that proceeds from observing first the physical form of the Buddha (*rūpakāya*), then the eidetic or recollected image in vision, and eventually the Buddha's formless body of transcendent reality — the dharma-body (*dharmakāya*). Rather than seek the presence that manifests voluntarily, the quest of sacred vision for a monastic is to acquire a capacity for seeing, an ability to correctly visualize and perceive the sacrality in order to gain ultimate truth and awakening.

Although not included in the earliest records of monastic routines and disciplines, meditative practice, and meditative visualization in particular, developed into the mainstream of monastic spirituality during the fifth and sixth centuries. Meditation, though it may have involved additional sutra recitations or bodily movements, was integrated in an extended ritual procedure, comprising such activities as offering of incense, veneration of the Buddhas, confession, dedication of merits, and profession of the bodhisattva vow. The liturgical and devotional components provided purification and catharsis that served to purge the gross forms of bondage such as craving, hatred, and jealousy — mental afflictions often described in Buddhist discourse as diseases of the eye. The clarity and substantiality of the vision determined whether the meditative visualization could be performed correctly and successfully. As another important meditation text, the *Ocean-Like Samādhi of Buddha Visualization Sutra* (Guanfo sanmei hai jing), has it: “If one keeps in mind polluted, evil, and bad thoughts, or if one has broken the Buddha's precepts, one sees an image [of the Buddha] as pure black, like a man of charcoal. . . . When [one] repents to the Buddha, [one's] spiritual eyes open, and see the Buddha's magnificent and refined physical body, like light from [Mount] Sumeru illuminating the ocean.”<sup>75</sup> In turn, effective visualization would remove karmic obstructions, remit sins, and improve spiritual vision so that the monastic could come into relation with the Buddha face to face in the monastery.

In the next centuries, as we have seen, the monastery developed along with the emerging practice of icon veneration and a complex program of meditative visualization was devised to solicit the divine presence, marking an increasing emphasis on the visual, vision, and visionary experience. This visual emphasis, though not diminishing the role of the body, had significant implications for the ways the early monastery was perceived. We have also seen how devotional monasticism in early medieval China lent itself to a number of symbolic equivalences among pagoda (with its relics), icon, and scriptures in terms of divine presence in a liturgical context. Attempts to make that presence perceivable, however, also implied that the Buddha was actually absent. The primacy of seeing was thus not unrelated to an intention to negotiate this absence and the desire to acquire a spontaneous vision face to face with the divine, which became more important over time in the religious career of the monastic. By locating the divine presence and seeing him face to face in ritual circumambulation or meditative visualization, the practitioner transformed the Buddha from the “one who has thus gone,” or *tathāgata* (C: *rulai*, one of the traditional epithets of the Buddha) to truly the “one

who has thus come.” This sacred vision of the divine presence would thus confirm a “monastic utopia” in the monastery, ideal for both spiritual and salvific ends. As a sacred, utopian realm, the monastery could be built anywhere; it was not fixed at any particular locus, but it would have to be actualized both spatially in an architectural layout and temporally in the ritual structure of *the* monastery. This monastic utopia eventually led the elite sponsors and the ever-growing number of Buddhist believers of the Northern Dynasties to envision a city of the Buddha that could be realized in this world through material dedications and monastic undertakings. Beginning with the pagoda and its ritual choreography, Chinese architecture for the first time in history was conceived, built, and acted upon as a place of the foreign divine.

#### Monastic Architecture:

##### The Sacred Presence at the Center of a Structured Space

The stage set for this development was the northern dynasty Northern Wei (386–534), founded by the Tuoba (Tabgach), who originated from a tribal branch of the Xianbei. After taking control of present-day Shanxi and Hebei, this new, non-Chinese regime established its capital at Pingcheng (today’s Datong), just inside the Great Wall in northern Shanxi. In 439, the Tuoba swept into the Gansu area, then ruled by the Northern Liang (398–439), and completed its unification of north China, providing a much-needed period of stability that led to its cultural and religious prosperity. Except for a brief setback of nationwide persecution against Buddhism during 446 to 452, the Buddhist community developed steadily and extensively under the favorable policy and royal patronage of the Northern Wei regime. In this history, the watershed event of northern Buddhism was the conquest of the region in today’s Gansu.<sup>76</sup> A stronghold of Buddhism since the early third century, the Gansu area controlled much of the traffic of Buddhist teachings and missionaries going through the Hexi corridor that linked China with the Western Region (as the regions beyond the border were called) and boasted some of the earliest Buddhist cave temples along its route. During the Northern Liang, the area around its capital at Guzang (present-day Wuwei), known as Liangzhou, was built into a center of scripture translation, housing several foreign ecclesiastics of Indian and Central Asian origin. These ecclesiastics introduced tales of the Buddha’s previous lives (*jātaka*), the concept of nirvana, the Mahayana pantheon, and bodhisattva precepts, some of which were subsequently widely spread and practiced in China. The pivotal activities advocated in the region were those related to stupa worship and meditation, developing a style of Buddhism, as well as architectural and iconographic features, that has been termed “Liangzhou style.”<sup>77</sup> After the annexation of the Gansu region in 439, a massive deportation of the Northern Liang population brought artisans and Buddhist religious zeal to Pingcheng, where “the teaching by images spread far and wide.”<sup>78</sup>

With the arrival of Liangzhou Buddhism and the ending of persecution began a flowering of Buddhist piety in both teaching and images among all levels of society.

Tanyao (fl. 450–90), a well-versed master from Liangzhou, was especially instrumental in implementing the Buddhist revival.<sup>79</sup> Appointed the controller of clergy (*shamen tong*), supervising national Buddhist affairs and communities, Tanyao established a system of Buddhist households (*sengzhi hu*), recruiting anyone who could make yearly donations of grains to the monastery for helping the poor and needy. This was instituted to provide a “merit field” of compassion, by which Buddhist householders were able to become affiliated with the monastic community and thus participate in their own future salvation.<sup>80</sup> The monastic clergy, in turn, played a contributory role in organizing and initiating common-class believers into the Buddhist charitable society (*yiyi*), in which monks served as monastic advisors or preceptors. In the north of the fifth and sixth centuries, lay patrons and clerical members of the charitable societies were responsible for a proliferation of cave temples, steles, and votive images as part of the collective meritorious acts and undertakings. It was this material devotion and visual piety of both (wealthy) laity and clergy that helped substantiate a Buddhist vision in the Northern Wei.<sup>81</sup>

The ambition to bring the vision into practice, however, could not have been carried out without imperial support. By the end of the 470s, about one hundred monasteries were built inside the capital city alone, many of which were officially sponsored monasteries said to have been constructed with multistory pagodas.<sup>82</sup> Although none of the monasteries has survived, we can still learn much about how a monastic space was structured architecturally from other indirect but related evidence. A primary source is the cluster of cave temples at Yungang, formerly known as Mount Wuzhou (Wuzhoushan), sixteen kilometers west of Pingcheng. According to *History of the Northern Wei* (Weishu), the building of the earliest caves, Caves 16–20, in Yungang began during the 460s at Tanyao’s petition to dedicate five caves to each of the five previous Northern Wei emperors (fig. 1.3).<sup>83</sup> More relevant to this discussion are the major cave temples built over the next twenty years until 494, when the Northern Wei capital was relocated southward to Luoyang. The caves temples were decorated abundantly with motifs, carved in the rock, of timber-frame architecture, evidently following the model of the monasteries being built in this same period in the capital.<sup>84</sup>

Most of these caves, Caves 1–13, came in pairs or sets and were built on comparable plans (fig. 1.4). Compared with the initial five caves, each accommodating a group of colossal images (14–16.5 m high), the later caves are smaller in scale, yet feature a more complicated iconographic program and better-articulated architectural space. Most of them are either single or double chambers, with either a central pillar (Caves 1, 2, 6, 11) or a large Buddha (Caves 5, 9, 10) centrally located for circumambulation; Caves 7, 8, and 13, however, have neither.<sup>85</sup> The iconographic images and motifs in these caves do not form a schematic whole (fig. 1.5). In addition to the primary icons and carvings of lotuses and flying celestial beings (*S: apsaras; C: feitian*) on the coffered ceiling, many dedicatory images offered by lesser clerics and local residents fill the available wall surface, and are only tenuously related to the overall image program in the cave. The dazzling profusion of imagery nonetheless is delimited by its architectural setting.



FIGURE 1.3. Bird's-eye view of the caves at Yungang, Shanxi, with the colossal Buddha of Cave 20 in the foreground. 460s–480s CE. From *Yungang Shiku Yanjiuyuan*, *Yungang shiku*, 87–88. Photograph by permission of Wenwu Press.

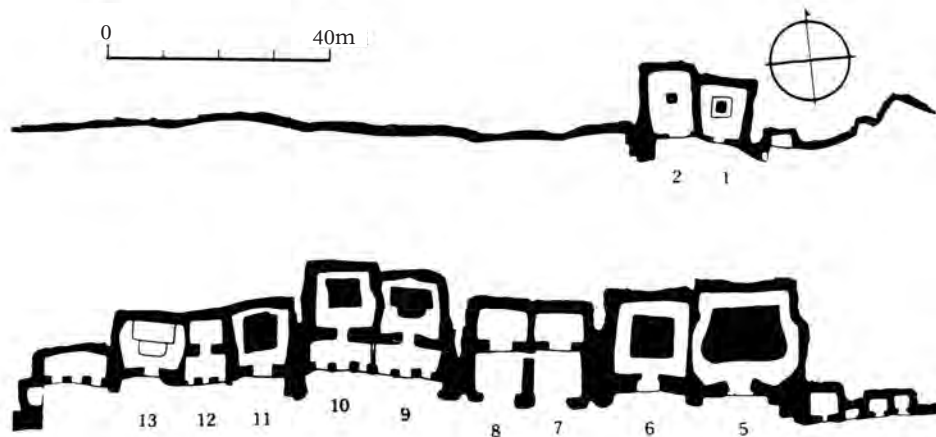


FIGURE 1.4. Plans of Yungang Caves 1–13, including four paired caves. 470s–480s CE. Two unfinished caves, Caves 3 and 4, are not shown in the diagram. From Soper, “Imperial Cave-Chapels of the Northern Dynasties,” 249. Diagram courtesy of *Artibus Asiae*.



FIGURE 1.5. South interior wall of Cave 5, Yungang. 486–495 CE. The twin Buddhas, Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna, can be seen in a small niche in the sidewall of the window above the arched entryway, and the two monks meditating under a tree are just below, on the sidewall of the entryway. From *Yungang Shiku Wenwu Baoguansuo*, *Yungang shiku*, vol. 1, pl. 42. Photograph by permission of Wenwu Press.

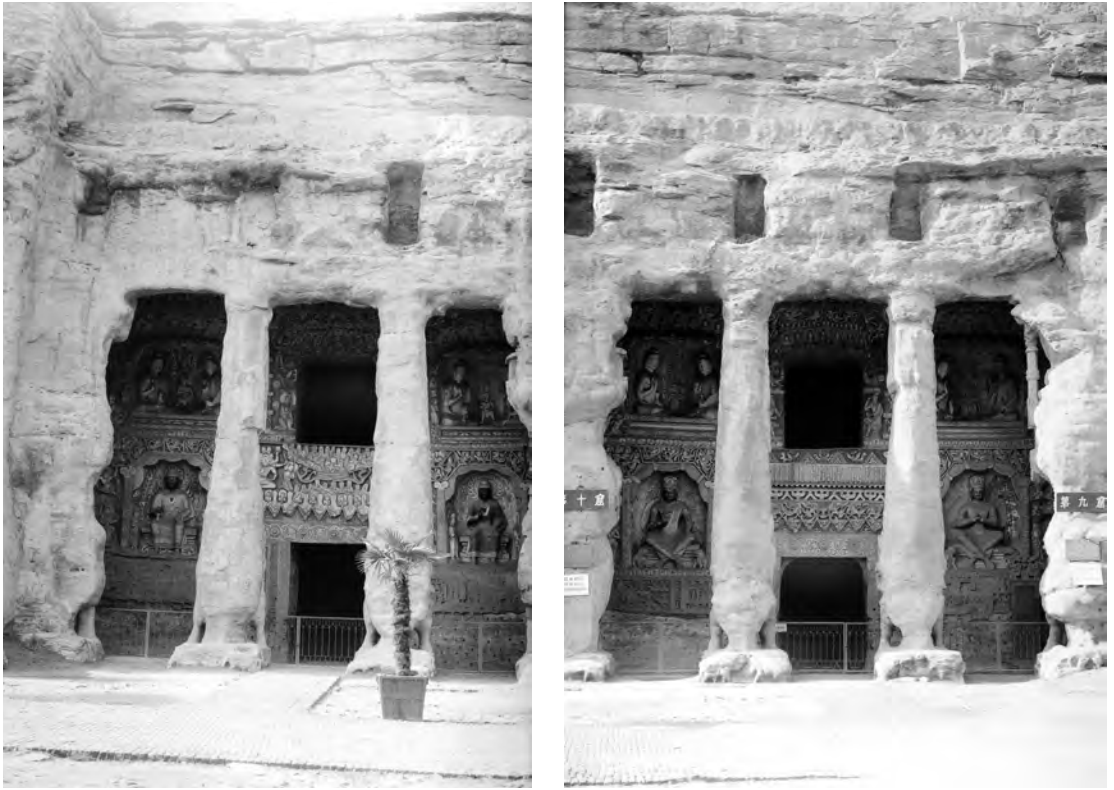
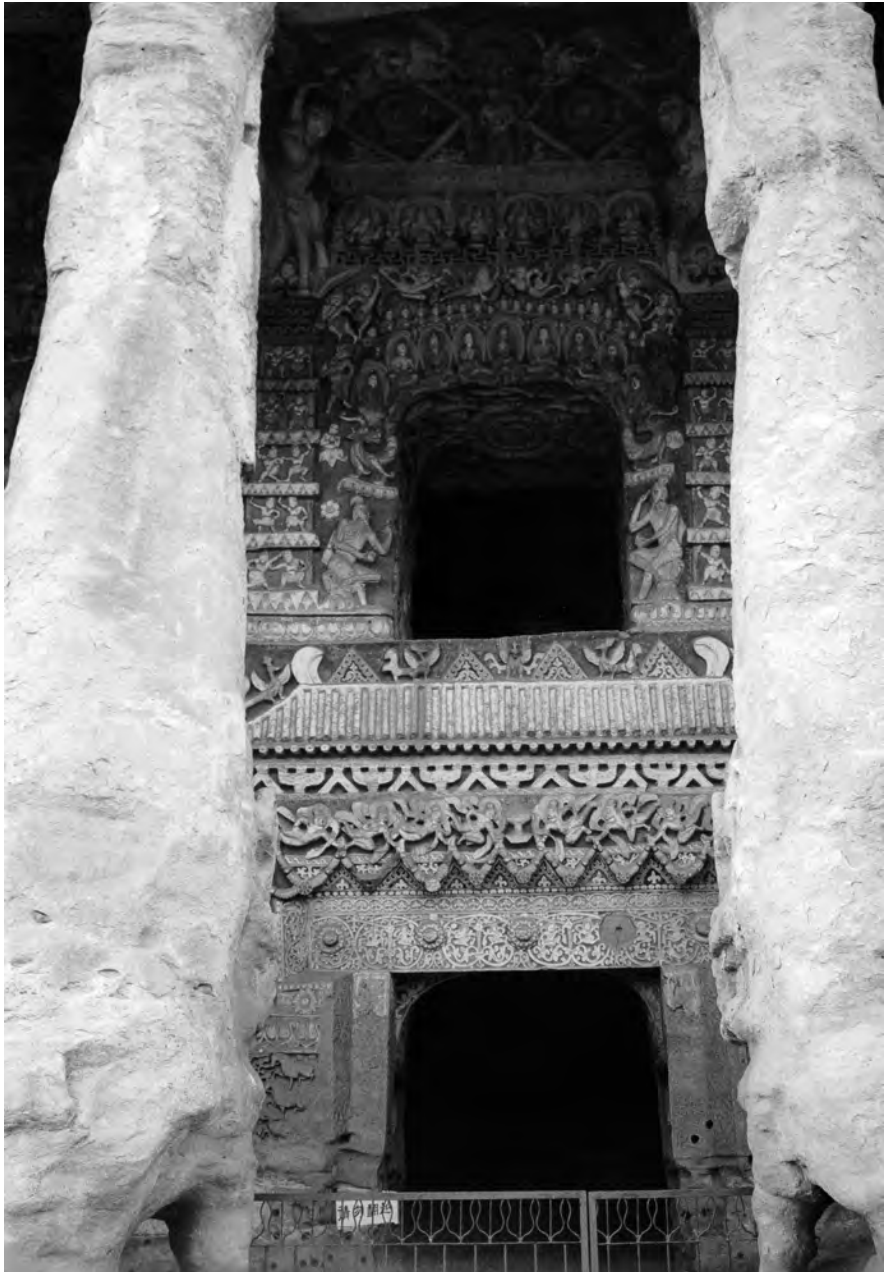


FIGURE 1.6. Exterior of Caves 9 (right) and 10 (left), Yungang. 470s–480s CE. The cliff facade of the twin caves was originally carved in the form of wooden columns and brackets, with additional wooden eaves fixed into the sockets above the columns. From *Yungang Shiku Wenwu Baoguansuo*, *Yungang shiku*, vol. 2, pl. 2. Photograph by permission of Wenwu Press.

Most of the thirteen caves in Yungang had a proper facade of original rock carved to resemble wooden architectural features, a feature not seen in the first five imperial caves (Caves 16–20). Although most of these cave facades are now corroded or altered, the single facade shared by Caves 9 and 10 (fig. 1.6) still retains its initial form, indicative of the layered architectural view and spatial depth that one would have encountered (and still encounters) when approaching the caves.<sup>86</sup> The entryway into the chamber of each of the thirteen caves is accessed from the antechamber behind the facade, as in Caves 9 and 10, each entryway having a window above it to allow more light into the cave. Accordingly, to arrive at the cave interior, whether it was a single- or double-chamber cave, one needs to pass through the facade and antechamber, and then through the entryway, before reaching the centrally located icon or pillar. One's movement through space is structured by the architectural features, which in turn add a symbolic significance to the cave temple. Of the architectural features, the entryway with the aperture above it would have been the most critical.

The importance of the entryway is signaled not only by its position in the ar-

FIGURE 1.7. Detail of the entryway to Cave 9, Yungang. 470s–480s CE. Decorative patterns border the door frame and a small tiled roof supported by brackets projects over the lintel. From Yungang Shiku Wenwu Baoguan-suo, *Yungang shiku*, vol. 2, pl. 3. Photograph by permission of Wenwu Press.



chitectural layout but also by the decorative and iconographic images arranged around it. In Cave 9 (fig. 1.7), the palmette patterns bordering the door frame and architectural elements such as the small projecting tiled roof supported by brackets over the lintel formally acknowledge the entry as important. Inside the entrance, instead of architectural elements, there are figures carved in high relief: the portal is decorated with modeled figures of Buddhas, most prominently the Buddhas of the three times (past, present, and future) and the Seven Buddhas (Śākyamuni and his six predecessors) (fig. 1.8), iconography signifying specifically



FIGURE 1.8. South interior wall of Cave 10, showing the motif of the Seven Buddhas above the entryway. 470s–480s CE. From Yungang Shiku Wenwu Baoguansuo, *Yungang shiku*, vol. 2, pl. 65. By permission of Wenwu Press.

a world of transtemporality beyond the entrance.<sup>87</sup> Entering the cave through the gateway is therefore both transitional and transformative. One iconography that may have served to articulate this threshold is the motif of the twin Buddhas Śākyamuni and Prabhūtaratna.<sup>88</sup> Cave 5 provides an example (see fig. 1.5) in the two Buddha figures visible in a small niche in the sidewall of the window, which is surrounded by carved images of a thousand Buddhas; these images signal the success of the devotee's meditative practice as instructed in the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>89</sup> The sight of the twin-Buddha image is the result of the meditation indicated by the two medi-

tating monks depicted under a tree on the sidewall of the entryway just below, a scene that symbolically indicates a transitional point of spiritual progression. The physical process of entering the cave was thus analogous to the process that prepares one for a vision of the divinity. Passing over the threshold, indeed, one enters to the ritual circumambulation, around either a main icon or a pillar located centrally in the cavern, demarcated as a transcendental and sacred realm, for an opportunity to meet the divine face to face. The cave temple, in short, was an architecturally defined ritual field with a centralized divine presence that could be perceived and experienced through both the iconographic program and symbolically organized space.

No traces of the monastic architecture have survived from Pingcheng, the first Northern Wei capital, but archaeologists have uncovered and, since 1976, investigated the precinct of a royal monastery at Mount Fang (present-day Mount Siliang) about twenty-five kilometers north of Pingcheng. It was the Buddhist Monastery of Contemplating the Past (Siyuan Fosi), commissioned in 479 by Empress Wenming (442–90), also known as Lady Feng. A devout Buddhist, the empress was also the chief force behind the construction of the Yungang cave temples.<sup>90</sup> Facing south, the monastery occupied a large rectangular area, consisting of two tiers of terraces with the upper level close to the north end of the lower one (fig. 1.9).<sup>91</sup> Each terrace could be accessed from a south-facing ramp aligned along a central axis; at the top of the second ramp was a freestanding entrance gate (*shanmen*), inside which lay the main monastic ground. A large centrally located pagoda (see fig. 1.9, at point 1), whose base was constructed on a square pounded-earth core, would have dominated the monastery. The elevation of the pagoda cannot be estimated, but rows of column plinths around the earthen core indicate an interior walkway built at ground level that could have been used for circumambulation. Fragments of sculptural images uncovered around the foundation, moreover, suggest that Buddhist statues would have been installed inside the pagoda. The archaeological report of the site also reveals the foundation of a seven-bay-by-two-bay Buddha hall (*fodian*; in fig. 1.9, point 2; “bay” refers to the space between two columns) immediately to the north of the pagoda and constructed on the same central axis and some building remnants farther to the north, possibly for lodgings.<sup>92</sup> It is unclear whether the monastery was built for specific Buddhist or monastic practices, but the walkway inside the pagoda would have provided a further entry into the sacred center to observe its iconography. The central pagoda and the Buddha hall behind it, the two fundamental monastic buildings, aligned on the same axis with the main entrance are also an early example of the major monastic plan in the next centuries. Yet this layout of Siyuan Monastery, with its centrally located pagoda, strongly recalls the layout of the Yungang caves of the same period just discussed, which were also centered on an icon or pillar, which stood for the stupa in the cave.<sup>93</sup> One’s entry into the monastery was, as in the cave temples, structured by the architecture, with the entrance gate as the point of transition, beyond which one could arrive at the pagoda, enter the sacred center, and proceed to the ritual circumambulation.

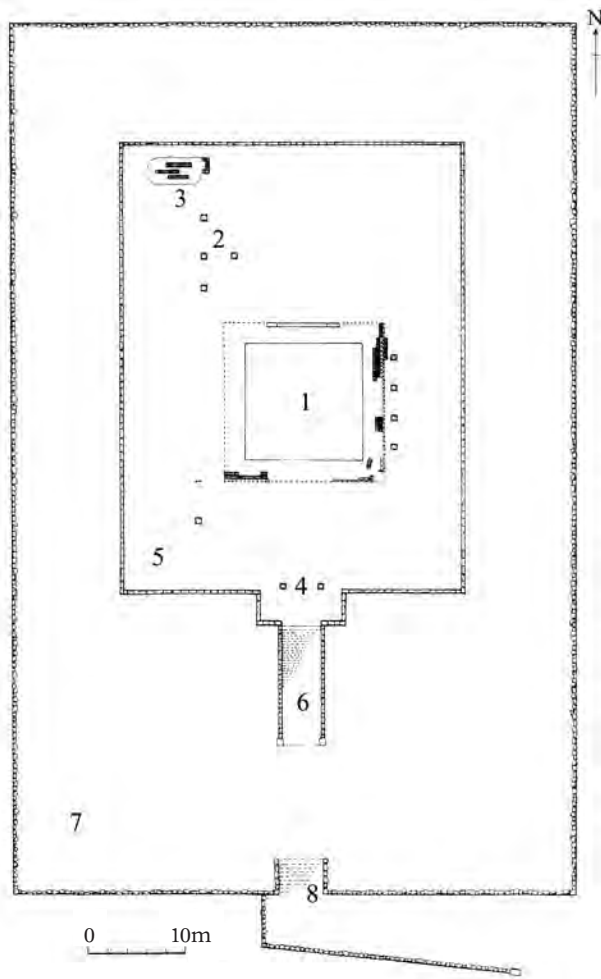


FIGURE 1.9. Site plan of the Buddhist Monastery of Contemplating the Past (Siyuan Fosi), Datong, Shanxi. Commissioned in 479 CE. (1) Pagoda; (2) Buddha Hall; (3) dormitories; (4) entrance gate; (5) upper terrace; (6) ramp leading down from the higher terrace; (7) lower terrace; (8) ramp leading down from the lower terrace. After Datongshi Bowuguan, “Datong Beiwei Fangshan Siyuan Fosi,” fig. 5. Diagram by permission of Wenwu Press.

On the other hand, unlike the central pillars or icons in the cave interiors at Yungang, the soaring structure of the pagoda at the Siyuan Monastery would have functioned as a visual marker of the divinity that could be seen from afar. The same could be said about the pagodas of the many grand monasteries built in the Northern Wei capital, Pingcheng. Li Daoyuan (ca. 470–527), the author of the *Commentary on the Waterways Classic* (Shuijing zhu), remarked on the Buddhist monuments of Pingcheng during the 480s: “The way of Buddhism in the capital had greatly flourished. The magnificent pagodas [were decorated] with numinous imagery, their towering profiles echoing each other. They are the superior sign for the turning of the dharma wheel [*dharmacakra*] in the eastern land [i.e., China].”<sup>94</sup> As though vertical measurement indexed religious devotion, pagodas were built for height: the higher the pagoda, the greater the implied devotion. Already in 467, the largest imperial monastery, the Monastery of Eternal Peace (Yongningsi), was built on the south side of the city; it boasted a seven-story pagoda, “more than three hundred *chi* high [approx. 82 m], with a wide foundation and spacious structure, ranked the grandest in the land under heaven.”<sup>95</sup> This verticality provided a

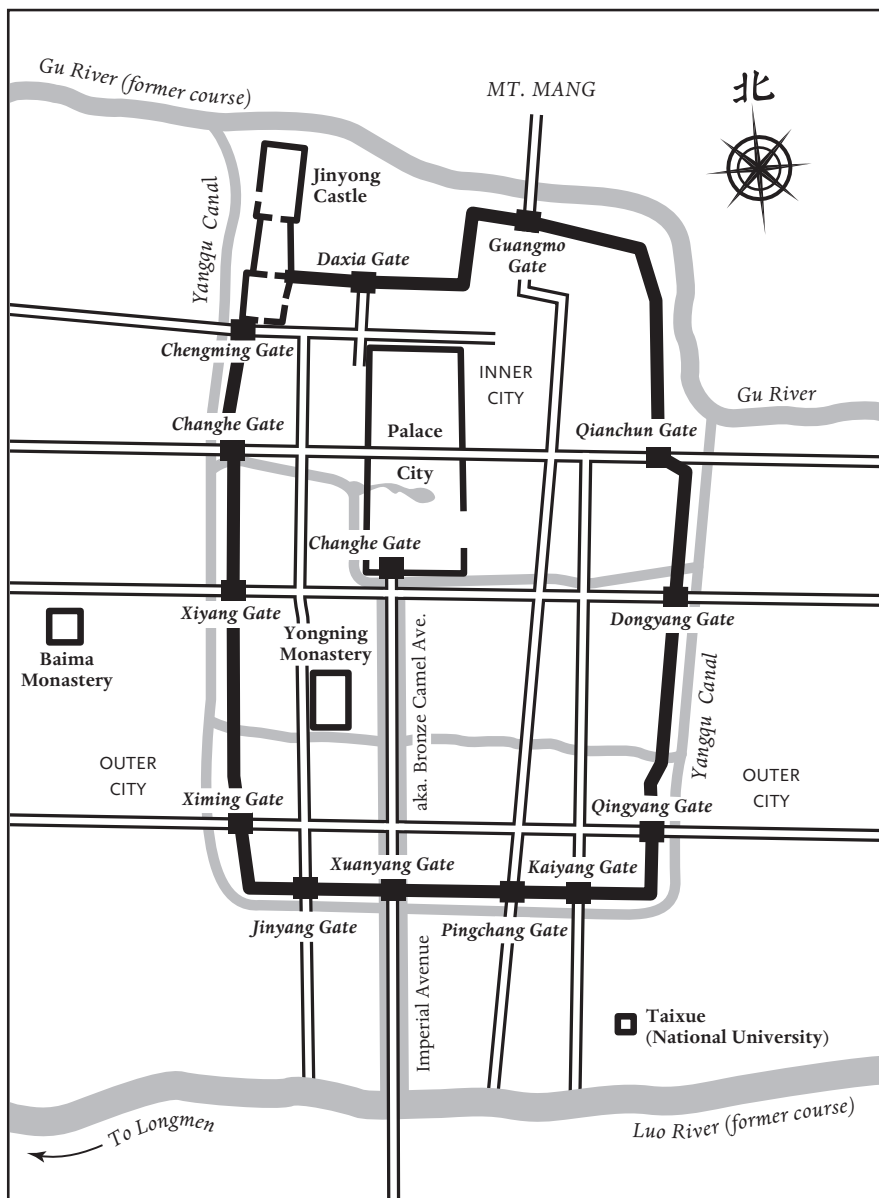
new vocabulary for monastic architecture in the cityscape of the Northern Wei capital, but its multivalent significance was not fully explored until the new capital was moved to Luoyang after 494.

### City of the Buddha: Remaking the Capital

The relocation of the capital to the central Yellow River Valley that occurred under Emperor Xiaowen (r. 471–99) had far-reaching political and cultural implications and consequences. Moving to Luoyang, the site of the ancient capital of such great dynasties as the Zhou (770–256 BCE), Eastern Han (25–220 CE), and Jin (265–316), the Tuoba Wei symbolically refashioned itself as comparable with, if not equal to, the Chinese dynasties that ruled from the center of the land.<sup>96</sup> Different reforms in areas such as administration, ritual, and customs were initiated and new state architectural projects implemented, placing the non-Chinese Tuoba Wei regime in the position that traditionally defined a Chinese empire. In art and architecture, a more Sinicized style replaced the Central Asian mode of expression and supplied the Northern Wei with a new symbolic language to represent its political power. To this project of reshaping the central authority, the Northern Wei added a few new elements—a retooled monasticism and a religious vision on a national scale that had developed over the past decades.

The rebuilding of the capital city in Luoyang was itself an elaborate task that took almost twenty years to complete.<sup>97</sup> Unlike the former Luoyang, the new plan included one palace-city (*gongcheng*) inside an inner city (*neicheng*), while a second city wall was built to enclose a much larger area, the outer city (*waicheng*) (map 3). The expanded city range was then divided by four east-west and north-south arteries, with the forty-two-meter-wide Imperial Avenue (Yujie), also known as Bronze Camel Avenue (Tongtuo Jie), running along the major north-south axis, through the three south gates of the palace, inner city, and outer city. In brief, the new Luoyang was structured by lateral expansion, a prescribed axiality, and an imperial center, reinforced by the triple-wall system—a layout that later became typical for Chinese imperial cities.

In a different respect, Luoyang of the Northern Wei was ultimately a Buddhist city. A former resident, Yang Xuanzhi (d. 555), compiled accounts of Buddhist monasteries, devotions, and popular tales and legends of the city from 494 until 534 in a work titled *Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang* (Luoyang qielan ji), dated 547. According to Yang, Luoyang during the Jin dynasty, between 307 and 313, had only forty-two temples inside its city perimeter, but the number swelled dramatically to 1,367 under the Northern Wei. The city limits were much expanded by the time of the Northern Wei, and the space was rapidly filled with religious structures. Yang stated, “Buddhist temples were built side by side; pagodas rose up in row after row. People competed among themselves in making or copying the sacred images. Golden pagodas matched the imperial observatory in height, and Buddhist lecture halls were as magnificent as the Ebang Palace [of the Qin Empire].”<sup>98</sup> The huge growth of Buddhist buildings was accompanied, as Yang notes,



MAP 3. Luoyang during the Northern Wei era, based on an archaeological report of the city site conducted in 1973. Adapted from Tsiang, "Antiquarianism and Re-envisioning Empire," 132. Reproduced courtesy of Katherine R. Tsiang.

by a proliferation of Buddhist images, most of which were donated by residents of the city for gaining karmic rewards. Yet this very urban piety was also necessarily material (expressed through buildings and images), turning the new capital and its monasteries into the main stage of tangible devotion and a locus of spiritual vision and transformation.<sup>99</sup>

In fact, the rebuilding of the city was on a par with the measures undertaken to materialize its Buddhist vision. After Emperor Xiaowen's death in 499, Emperor

Xuanwu (r. 499–515) began his reign by building three major official monasteries.<sup>100</sup> The new emperor also continued to sponsor the building of cave temples at Longmen, a major cave site about thirty-two kilometers to the southwest of Luoyang, constructed after the relocation of the capital. In 505, the emperor was said to have already visited the cave site to oversee the construction of the Binyang Central Cave, dedicated to his parents, Emperor Xiaowen and Empress Dowager Wenzhao.<sup>101</sup> He also received the Indian monks Bodhiruci (d. 527) and Ratnamati (d. ca. 513) when they arrived at Luoyang in 508 and sponsored their sutra translations in the palace. Among their works is the *Commentary on Ten Stages Sutra* (Shidi jing lun), expounding the ten stages of the bodhisattva path as discussed in a chapter of the *Flower Garland Sutra* (Dafangguang fo Huayan jing), the scripture that identified Mount Wutai as the sacred mountain of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.<sup>102</sup>

The most ambitious project was still to come, after the death of Emperor Xuanwu, and was commissioned by one of his concubines, Lady Hu. Raised in a Buddhist family, Lady Hu, who later became the empress dowager, was a pious follower of the religion.<sup>103</sup> Soon after taking power as the de facto ruler, she launched more large architectural projects, including erecting pagodas in existing monasteries, building extravagant new monasteries, sponsoring the construction of the Longmen caves, and, above all, commissioning the imperial monastery, Yongning Monastery.<sup>104</sup> In 516, the empress dowager handpicked a location close to the center of the entire city, about five hundred meters south of the palace-city and two hundred meters west of Imperial Avenue, as the site of the monastery (see map 3). In a public ceremony, she led a host of officials to lay the foundation, and later, it is told, in the course of excavation, thirty golden statues turned up deep underground, a discovery that was taken as an auspicious sign.<sup>105</sup> The result of this endeavor was a spectacular nine-story, four-sided pagoda. In the *Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang*, it is described as a towering structure decorated with precious stones, jeweled inlays, and golden plates for collecting dew, rising to an unprecedented height.<sup>106</sup> The account continues: “[Its architecture] embodied the best of masonry and carpentry, and its design reached the limit of ingenuity. Its excellence as Buddhist architecture was almost unimaginable. Its carved pillars and gold doorknockers fascinated the eye. When the bells chimed in harmony deep in a windy night, they could be heard over ten *li* away.”<sup>107</sup>

The Yongning Monastery took its name from the imperial monastery of the former capital in Pingcheng, but its architectural plan was much more ambitious. According to the report of the excavation, which began in 1979,<sup>108</sup> the Yongning Monastery of Luoyang occupied a rectangular lot with a longer north-south axis, enclosed by four walls, each presumably having a gate at its center (fig. 1.10); the northern gate has not yet been located. Within its four walls, there was a Buddha hall to the north, and a high-rising pagoda prominently located at the center. This “centrality” was also symbolically built into the temple’s architectural program, both inside and outside. Inside the pagoda, at its center, was an underground crypt (*digong*) used as the relic depository that would physically and religiously mark the very center of the monastic complex. Outside the pagoda, four exterior ramps at

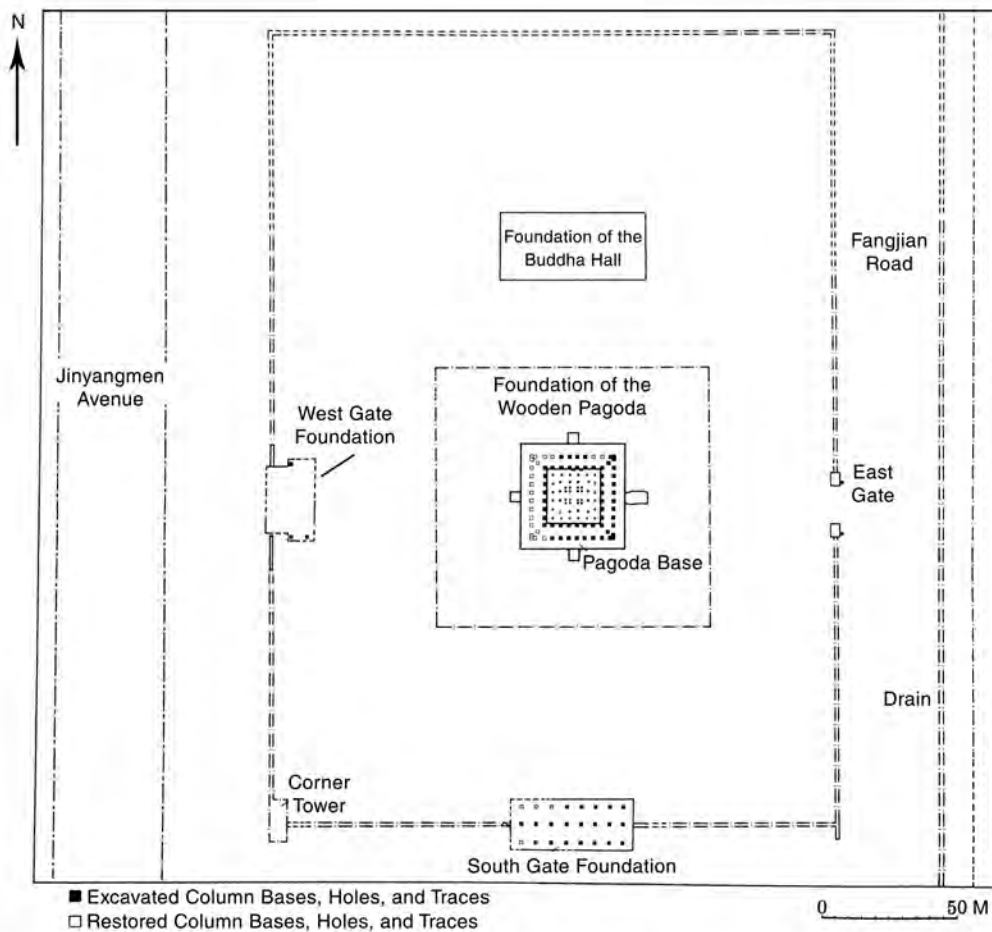


FIGURE 1.10. Site plan of the excavation of Yongning Monastery, Luoyang, Henan. 516 CE. The foundation of the pagoda is located at the center of the site. From Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Yanjiuyuan, *Beiwei Luoyang Yongninsi*, fig. 4. Diagram courtesy of the Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

the four cardinal directions were constructed for accessing the interior, which was built around the earthen core, leaving a one-bay interior space around the core decorated with carved niches and clay sculptures. This centralized scheme with its circumambulatory interior recalls the similar plan of the Yungang caves. The spatial arrangement of the pagoda and Buddha hall, aligned on the same axis with the main gate, also follows the model in the Siyuan Monastery.<sup>109</sup> At Yongning Monastery, however, the scheme of centrality seems to have been devised with a larger context in mind.

During the archaeological excavation at Yongning Monastery, more than two thousand fragments of polychrome clay sculpture were found around the foundation of the pagoda, suggesting that an elaborate image program had once been installed. The largest figures would have been as much as three meters in height, and others were either near life-size or smaller, indicating some hierar-

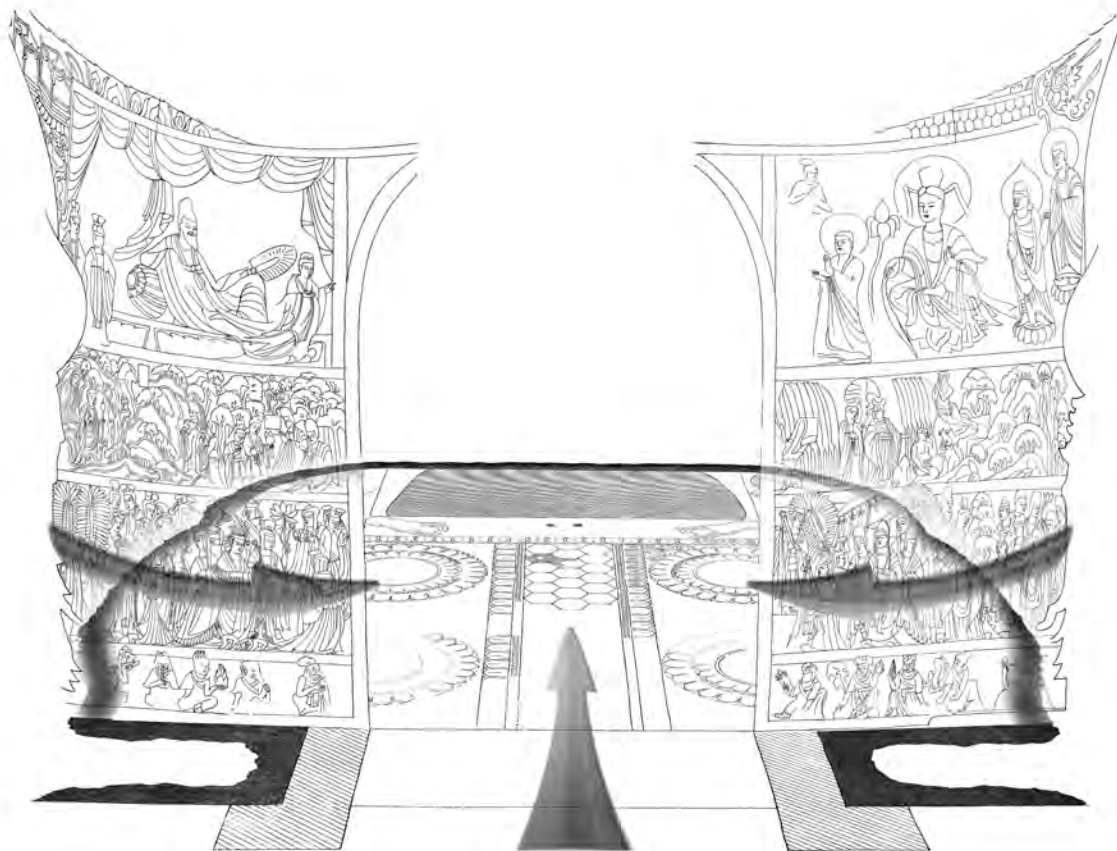


FIGURE 1.11. Reconstruction of the east wall reliefs from the viewpoint of the entering visitor, Binyang Central Cave, Longmen, Henan. 523 CE. The relief depicting the imperial procession of the emperor is located in the second register from the bottom to the right side of the cave entrance; the relief of the procession of the empress is in the same register on the other side of the entrance. The two processions face each other in opposite directions (indicated by the arrows), as if marching into the viewer's space when one enters the cave. After Mizuono and Nagahiro, *Kanan Ryūmon sekkutsu no kenkyū*, figs. 13, 18, 19.

chical arrangement of the iconography.<sup>110</sup> Sculptural fragments were also found that may have been part of the narrative scenes about the life of Śākyamuni and other miracle stories; other images include reliefs of an imperial procession led by members of the royal family. While most of the finds were typical for a Buddhist monastery, the last group of images was specific to the Yongning Monastery and emblematic of its imperial sponsorship.<sup>111</sup> Given their appearance in the same space as other sacred icons, they not only testify to imperial patronage but also indicate that members of the imperial household took part in devotional and ceremonial processions here. The original scene of the imperial procession that took place at Yongning pagoda cannot be recreated, but the same subject was also represented in devotional cave temples elsewhere, including Binyang Central Cave and Huangfu Cave in Longmen, and Caves 1, 3, and 4 in Gongxian, Henan,

all constructed around this time under imperial patronage.<sup>112</sup> The procession would have consisted of richly dressed aristocratic figures with courtiers, Buddhist clerics, and servants bringing offerings, all arranged in a line and facing the same direction, as though moving from one end to the other. It has been argued that the composition of the imperial processions modeled in Binyang Central Cave, as well as their positions in the cave, creates multiple optical illusions that give “the impression they are moving forward into the viewer’s space” (fig. 1.11).<sup>113</sup> Although each of these caves has a different spatial arrangement for the display, the procession seems to also lend an important performative thrust to the image program that would participate in the visitor’s veneration of the Buddha figures.

Located at the center of the new Luoyang, the Yongning pagoda was intended to be beheld, entered, circumambulated, and used for worship. Entering the city from the south, one would follow the ceremonial Imperial Avenue and pass through gates of both outer and inner city walls to finally reach the Yongning Monastery (see map 3). In a larger spatial scheme of the city, the journey, punctuated by gates, or thresholds, would turn the cityscape into a “sacred topography,” at the center of which soared the Yongning pagoda. One’s walk into the monastery and entering the pagoda would be anticipated by the sculptural relief of the imperial procession that would accompany one inside the sacred center to complete the journey. Arriving from Central Asia, the Persian monk Bodhidharma (ca. 461–534) was said to have been amazed by the “divine work” (*shengong*) of Yongning pagoda after “seeing the golden plates making dazzling reflections of the sunlight and shining into the clouds, and having heard the ringing of bejeweled bells lofted into the sky by the wind.” The foreign monk concluded that though he had visited every corner of the world, “[he] had never seen anything like the monastery [in China].”<sup>114</sup> Built when urban piety in Luoyang was at its height, the Yongning pagoda was the ultimate symbol of divine presence, and the imperial procession, though only in representation, set in motion the act of offering worship around the sacred center of the city.

It is interesting to note that in *Record of the Monasteries of Luoyang*, Yang Xuanzhi begins his account by mapping out all the city gates in its four walls, thus demarcating the boundary of the city within. This is then followed by the main narrative, which recounts anecdotes or histories of various monasteries of particular interest. As it continues, the narrative appears to follow an itinerary that takes its readers through the city in a certain sequence; not surprisingly, the tour begins from Yongning Monastery in the inner city and proceeds to the suburbs of the outer city in a clockwise route—east, south, west, and north. This “itinerary” clearly prioritizes the inner city, but it no less explicitly indicates that the rest of the journey was designed to circumambulate the center, which, in a sense, assimilates the city to a monastery built as the locus of the sacred presence. Writing fourteen years after the demise of the dynasty, Yang could produce his account only from memory; but this effort to recall the sight of the city once replete with architectural wonders and miraculous icons enabled him to reconstruct the image, or imagination, of an idealized city. In religion, a utopia such as nirvana or heaven

is often conveyed through the image of a city—not a material-historical city, but an imaginary and unconditioned realm to which a human city can aspire.<sup>115</sup> Not to discount other political and cultural factors, Luoyang under the Northern Wei was built through its imperial support and monastic endeavors to create a utopian city of the Buddha on earth.

Urban piety and popular devotion were not enough to sustain the dynasty through political turmoil in its last years after the death of Empress Dowager Hu in 528. Luoyang fell to its rival in 534; in the same year, the Yongning pagoda was struck by lightning and burnt to ashes. Pagodas continued to be built, but never again on the same scale. Despite the intention and ambition to build the city into a Buddhist utopia, the divine presence envisioned was not fixed in the city and, with the fall of the dynasty, the divinity began to be perceived in different forms and manifestations. Replacing Luoyang, Ye in present-day Linzhang, Hebei, became the next political center as the capital of the Eastern Wei (534–49) and Northern Qi (550–77) that succeeded the Northern Wei in northeastern China. Like Luoyang, the new capital also developed into a hub of Buddhist activities; however, the spiritual pursuit was restaged, not only in the urban center, but in mountain areas, remapping the Buddhist sacred geography in a very different manner. Mount Wutai, located in the vicinity adjacent to Pingcheng (see map 5 in chapter 2), would likely have been a site for monasteries during the Northern Wei, though it was not yet an important one.<sup>116</sup> In the reduced territory of the Eastern Wei and Northern Qi, Mount Wutai was also close to the central region of the restructured sacred geography. While many eminent monks left the cities for mountains to practice meditative concentration in seclusion, Mount Wutai began to draw dedicated practitioners not only for its natural beauty and serenity, but also for a potential encounter with the presence of a particular Buddhist deity, the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, offering a localized utopia and unending hope for salvation within the native Chinese terrain.



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Frontispiece is a detail of Plate 10: Mount Wutai west wall mural, Mogao Cave 61.  
Courtesy of Dunhuang Academy.

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