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in Medieval China**



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THE IDOLIZATION OF
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I

This article is a preliminary attempt to make sense of the fact that a significant number of eminent Chinese Ch'an priests were mummified at death and enshrined in temple precincts as objects of worship.¹ The practice of preserving the bodies of famous Ch'an masters—turning their corpses into “icons of flesh”—is attested as early as the Western

An earlier draft of this article was presented at the panel “Rituals of Death and Immortality” held at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in New Orleans on November 18, 1990.

¹ My interest in this topic grew out of a collaborative research project with T. Griffith Foulk (University of Michigan), and Elizabeth Horton Sharf (McMaster University), concerning the function of Ch'an and Zen portraiture (see our jointly authored report: T. Griffith Foulk, Elizabeth E. Horton, and Robert H. Sharf, “The Meaning and Function of Ch'an and Zen Portraiture” [paper delivered at the annual meeting of the College Art Association, New York, February 15, 1990]; an extended version will appear in *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, in press). Section V of this article, which involves an analysis of funeral rites for Ch'an abbots in the Sung, emerges directly from our collaboration, and I would like to thank them for their assistance and for their permission to use the material here. I would also like to thank Bernard Faure (Stanford University) for generously sharing with me his work in progress, as well as for reading and commenting upon an earlier draft of this article. Faure's work on relic worship and the ritualization of death in Ch'an and Zen, which includes a discussion of Ch'an mummification, appears in his *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991). Last but not least, I would like to thank James Dobbins (Oberlin College) and Gregory Schopen (University of Texas), whose perceptive comments and suggestions on earlier drafts have significantly improved this study.

Chin dynasty (A.D. 266–316) and continues down to the present day.² (The most recent case may be that of Tz'u-hang, a native of Fu-chien who died in Taiwan in 1955 and was mummified four years later.)³ The fact that the remains of deceased Ch'an masters were quite literally "idolized" by their disciples may come as a surprise to some students of Ch'an. Given the belief, still widespread in the West, that Ch'an is precisely that school of Buddhism that sought to purge Buddhism of empty ritual and vulgar superstition, and given the popular conception of the Ch'an master as incarnate Buddha and iconoclastic sage destined for final *nirvāṇa* at death, the mummification and worship of the master's corpse seems curious indeed.

As I began my inquiry, I was confronted with a surprising dearth of scholarship on Buddhist mortuary rites in general. This may reflect the methodologically troubling tendency of Buddhist scholars to accept ideological assertion as historical description—to treat the prescriptive regulations found in canonical materials as ethnographic data.⁴ Given the "orthodox" Buddhist attitude toward death as represented in the canon, the general disinterest among Buddhologists in Buddhist funeral rites is not difficult to fathom. Buddhist doctrine teaches that at the moment of death the nonphysical or "mental" component of the *saṃtāna* (the psychophysical continuum) immediately separates from the physical body and, taking on a new physical form, is reborn in one of the six realms. This is true for all beings with the exception of Buddhas, arhats, and other enlightened sages. Such spiritually awakened or perfected individuals are "nirvanized" at death—their mental processes are instantly, utterly, and permanently annihilated. But whether enlightened sage or unenlightened fool, the corpse that remains behind is rendered a mere heap of decaying organic matter, to be quickly disposed of through cremation, burial, or by being cast to wild animals. The only lingering spiritual value to the corpse, according to this view, lies in its use as a reminder of the transience of life and the inevitability of decay and death.⁵

² The term "icon of flesh" is a rough translation of the Chinese *chen-shen hsiang* (literally, "true-body portrait") or *jou-shen hsiang* ("flesh-body portrait").

³ See Tz'u-hang Tang, *Tz'u-hang ta-shih shih-lüeh* (Taiwan: Tz'u-hang fa-shih yung-chiu chi-nien-hui, n.d.); and Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), vol. 5, pt. 2:300.

⁴ Gregory Schopen's recent work on Indian Buddhist monastic funerals goes a long way toward rectifying this situation. See esp. his "Burial 'Ad Sanctos' and the Physical Presence of the Buddha in Early Indian Buddhism: A Study in the Archeology of Religions," *Religion* 17 (1987): 193–225, "An Old Inscription from Amarāvati and the Cult of the Local Monastic Dead in Indian Buddhist Monasteries," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14 (1991): 281–329, and "On Avoiding Ghosts and Social Censure: Monastic Funerals in the Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 20 (1992): 1–39.

⁵ Tim Ward reports the case of a pious Thai Buddhist who donated the skeleton of her deceased mother to a local wat where it was displayed publicly as a reminder of the fate

Perhaps the most striking examples of the “canonical” attitude toward the corpse are the so-called meditations on impurity (Skt. *aśubha-bhāvanā*, Chin. *pu-ching kuan*). These practices are thought to be particularly efficacious in eradicating attachment to the body, whether it be lust directed to another or vanity with regard to oneself. The meditations on impurity involve locating an abandoned corpse by the roadside or in a charnel ground, taking up a position nearby, and contemplating the inherent repulsiveness of the body. The Buddhist scriptures enumerate ten meditations on impurity, distinguished according to the relative stage of decomposition of the corpse at hand, be it bloated, livid, festering, cut up, gnawed, scattered, hacked, bleeding, worm-infested, or skeletal. One classic description of these practices concludes with the following:

This is the body’s nature: it is a collection of over three hundred bones, jointed by one hundred and eighty joints, bound together by nine hundred sinews, plastered over with nine hundred pieces of flesh, enveloped in the moist inner skin, enclosed in the outer cuticle, with orifices here and there, constantly dribbling and trickling like a grease pot, inhabited by a community of worms, the home of disease, the basis of painful states, perpetually oozing from the nine orifices like a chronic open carbuncle, from both of whose eyes eye-filth trickles, from whose ears ear-filth, from whose nostrils snot, from whose mouth food and bile and phlegm and blood, from whose lower outlets excrement and urine, and from whose ninety-nine thousand pores the broth of stale sweat seeps, with bluebottles and their like buzzing round it, which when untended with tooth sticks and mouth-washing and head-anointing and bathing and underclothing and dressing would, judged by the universal repulsiveness of the body, make even a king, if he wandered from village to village with his hair in its natural wild disorder, no different from a flower-scavenger or an outcaste or what you will. So there is no distinction between a king’s body and an outcaste’s in so far as its impure stinking nauseating repulsiveness is concerned.⁶

This view of the corpse as a lifeless lump of fetid flesh to be disposed of posthaste is attested throughout the Buddhist canon. Yet we know that such accounts constitute only half of the picture: from the earliest period Buddhists have venerated the relics of the “special dead.” Relics of the Buddha and enlightened saints—typically bits of crystallized bone and ash collected from the funeral pyre—were zealously collected, enshrined in *stūpas* and on altars, and worshiped by Buddhists of every persuasion. Moreover, Indian scriptural, epigraphic,

that awaits everyone. See Tim Ward, *What the Buddha Never Taught* (Toronto: Somerville House, 1990), pp. 19–20.

⁶ From the *Visuddhimagga* by the early fifth-century Pali commentator Buddhaghosa, translated by Bhikkhu Ñyānamoli as *The Path of Purification* (Sri Lanka, 1956; reprint, Berkeley: Shambhala, 1976), 1:201–2.

and archaeological evidence points to the fact that such relics were considered to be living entities; as Gregory Schopen puts it, “they were ‘informed,’ ‘parfumée,’ ‘saturated,’ ‘pervaded,’ ‘imbued’ with just those characteristics which defined the living Buddha.”⁷ Moreover, Schopen has demonstrated that Buddhist relics were considered “legal persons” who enjoyed rights of property. And as objects of worship, the relics were functionally equivalent to a living Tathāgata, insofar as the merit accrued is identical in either case.⁸

Anthropological studies of mortuary ritual help us to make sense of the apparent gap between the descriptions of the festering corpse as an object of loathing and the adoration of relics as manifestations of Buddhahood.⁹ The sacred relics have been distanced from the corpse through a process of transformation and purification, namely, purification by the fire of the cremation pyre. There is evidence that in ancient India the corpse, particularly in the case of important personages, was actually mummified prior to cremation. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* sets forth the funeral procedures for the chief sacrificer of the *Agnicayana* (a complex Vedic fire sacrifice) in the event that he should die before the rite is complete. The funeral rites include removing the intestines, cleaning the internal cavity, anointing the body with ghee, and placing gold chips over the eyes, ears, mouth, and nostrils prior to cremation, all of which are practices associated with the preservation of the corpse.¹⁰ Moreover, according to the Pali *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, the remains of a Tathāgata are to be treated in the same manner as the remains of a *cakkavattin* king, which involves wrapping the corpse in 500 layers of carded cotton wool interspersed with 500 layers of “new cloth” and then placing the body in an “oil vessel of iron.” Only then is the body ready to be cremated upon a “funeral pyre of all kinds of perfume.”¹¹ Drawing upon such evidence, Mary Levin has argued that

⁷ Schopen, “Burial ‘*Ad Sanctos*,’” p. 204.

⁸ According to the Gilgit *Mūlasarvāstivādin vinaya*: “He who would worship a living [Buddha], and he who would worship one who has entered final Nirvāṇa, having made their minds equally devout—between them there is no distinction of merit” (ibid., pp. 209–10).

⁹ See esp. the classic study of “secondary treatment” by Robert Hertz, “A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death,” in *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney Needham and Claudia Needham (Aberdeen: Cohen & West, 1960), pp. 27–86.

¹⁰ See Mary Levin, “Mummification and Cremation in India,” *Man* (February 1930), p. 30.

¹¹ *Dīgha-nikāya* ii 142 and 162, translated by T. W. Rhys Davids and C. A. F. Rhys Davids in *Dialogues of the Buddha*, pt. 2, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, vol. iii, 5th ed. (London: Luzac, 1971), pp. 155–56, 182–83. See also the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* iii 57 ff., in which King Muṇḍa of Magadha, overcome with grief upon the death of his beloved queen, orders that her body be placed in an oil vessel “so that we shall see her body longer” (translation by E. M. Hare in *The Book of the Gradual Sayings or More-*

cremation was not merely a means of disposal in ancient India but a stage in rendering the deceased person immortal as well. The fire of the funeral pyre reanimates the reconstituted (i.e., the mummified) body, just as the sacrificial fire gives life to Prajāpati—the Lord of Creation—who is physically reconstituted in the Vedic altar. The relics are thus rendered the reconstituted immortal body of the enlightened.¹²

This is not the place to discuss early Indian mortuary ritual or the Buddhist cult of relics, areas in which I have little expertise. I merely want to make the following methodological point: studies of so-called Buddhist attitudes toward death should exercise extreme caution in their handling of canonical sources that tend to be prescriptive rather than descriptive. As soon as one takes into account the complex lived realities of actual Buddhist communities, one becomes painfully aware of the dangers inherent in the uncritical use of canonical scripture as source material for social history.

II

Ch'an Buddhists allegedly champion the rejection of empty and superfluous ritual procedures, including the worship of the Buddha or the patriarchs; in the words of Lin-chi: "If you encounter the Buddha, kill the Buddha; if you encounter the patriarchs, kill the patriarchs." Moreover, like most Buddhist meditative traditions, Ch'an teachings encourage a studied disregard for the physical body and utter dispassion in the face of death. The Ch'an master models this dispassion in his calm acceptance of his own death, and indeed, countless biographies record the master meeting death while sitting serenely in meditation posture surrounded by his closest disciples. Any attempt on the part of the disciples to preserve the master's body after death might appear, at first glance, diametrically opposed to the fundamental principles and religious spirit of Ch'an.

But we must look beyond the ideological and polemic formulations of the Ch'an tradition itself and bring our attention to bear upon what Ch'an monks actually do. The first problem we encounter is terminological, and concerns the meaning of the term "Ch'an master" (*ch'an-shih*)

Numbered Suttas, vol. 3, Pali Text Society Translation Series no. 25 [London: Luzac, 1961], p. 48). The latter account strongly suggests that immersing the corpse in oil was intended as a means of preservation.

¹² See the analysis in Levin. Note also the discussion of the relationship between the *nirvāna* of the Buddha and the *stūpa* in Jorinde Ebert, "Parinirvāṇa and Stūpa," in *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance*, Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung, band 55, ed. Anna Libera Dallapiccola (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980), pp. 219–37. In an examination of murals on early Buddhist *stūpas* Ebert finds evidence of a belief in the "immediate metamorphosis [at the time of cremation] of the burned human body into *stūpa* bodies, death-surpassing bodies" (p. 224).

itself. This compound originally referred not to members of any particular school or lineage but to charismatic and sometimes reclusive Buddhist “holy-men” and “miracle workers.”¹³ These charismatic figures, by virtue of their practice of austerities (*dhūtaguṇa*) and mastery of meditative trance (*dhyaṇa*), were treated as reservoirs of spiritual power; in Buddhist terms they were particularly potent “fields of merit.” In fact, the term “Ch’an master” continued to be used in precisely this sense well into the T’ang, the so-called golden age of Ch’an. Contrary to popular Ch’an and Zen mythology, there is virtually no evidence that the “Ch’an” monks of the T’ang had any consciousness of belonging to a distinct “Ch’an sect,” if by that we mean an institutionally or socially independent body.¹⁴

With the ascendancy of Ch’an ideology and the growth of Ch’an monastic institutions in the Sung (960–1279), the Ch’an master-qua-abbot takes center stage in what is largely an ancestral cult. The abbot of a Ch’an monastery is by definition the living descendant and representative of a sacred lineage of enlightened patriarchs who trace their ancestry back to the Buddha. The abbot’s primary religious duty consists in ritually enacting the role of Buddha. Indeed, according to Ch’an tradition the central Buddha icon in the Buddha Hall—the focal point of Chinese Buddhist monastic ritual—came to be replaced in Ch’an monasteries by the living person of the abbot, thereby obviating the need for a Buddha Hall altogether.¹⁵ The Ch’an abbot enacted the part of “living Buddha icon” on a regular basis in an elaborately choreographed ritual called *shang-t’ang*, or “ascending the hall.” During the *shang-t’ang* the abbot ascended an ornate throne (the “high-seat” or “ch’an-seat”) set high on an altar in the center of the Dharma Hall, received obeisance and offerings from the community, and delivered a

¹³ This is immediately evident when we turn to the sections on “Ch’an masters” or “Ch’an practitioners” in the various *Kao-seng chuan* collections (“Biographies of Eminent Monks”) dating to the medieval period. The hundreds of recorded biographies are invariably preoccupied with the fabulous powers wielded by these Buddhist saints and the miraculous events that punctuate their lives.

¹⁴ See the detailed argument advanced by T. Griffith Foulk in “The ‘Ch’an School’ and Its Place in the Buddhist Monastic Tradition” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1987).

¹⁵ See the *Ch’an-men kuei-shih*, T.2076: 51.251a6–10; and the discussion in Foulk, p. 374. It is simply untrue that all Ch’an monasteries did away with Buddha Halls, but this fact does not diminish the significance of the *Ch’an-men kuei-shih* account in Ch’an mythology. References to texts in the *Taishō daizōkyō* (T.) are cited hereafter by the text number followed by the volume, page, register (a, b, or c), and, when appropriate, the line number(s). References to texts found in the *Zokuzōkyō* (ZZ.) are indicated by the volume number in the 1968 Taipei reprint edition in 150 volumes (published by *Chung-kuo fo-chiao hui*), followed by the page and register (a, b, c, or d).

short and highly mannered sermon that, somewhat ironically, was meant to signify the spontaneous discourse of an awakened Buddha.¹⁶

It is then not surprising to find a connection between the Ch'an abbot and notions of the incorruptibility of the corpse. The fact that the body of a deceased monk did not decompose had long been considered a sign of high spiritual attainment in many parts of Asia, including Buddhist China. There are numerous records of eminent Chinese monks whose bodies miraculously showed no trace of decay after death. For months and years following their decease their unembalmed bodies continued to bear a healthy and lifelike countenance and give off a sweet perfume.¹⁷ One of the earliest examples in China is recorded in the *Kao-seng chuan*, and tells of the monk Ho-lo-chieh who died sitting up (i.e., in meditation posture with legs folded) in 298. While still sitting erect he was placed on the funeral pyre and burned for several days, yet his body remained untouched by the flames. His immutable corpse was then moved to a stone grotto, and visitors to the site many years later reported that it was still well preserved.¹⁸

Another illustrative early case is that of Tan Tao-kai, a monk originally from Tun-huang who seems to have been as much Taoist as Buddhist.¹⁹ When he died in 359 his disciples placed his body in a stone grotto on Lo-fu mountain. Four years later, when some of his disciples visited the grotto, they found his body perfectly preserved. One of them explained: "The teacher's conduct was unlike that of the masses, and [thus his body] is like the cast-off shell of a cicada."²⁰ The reference to the cicada's shell (*ch'an-t'ui*) alludes to the Taoist belief that the accomplished immortal sheds his body just as the cicada sheds his exuviae, leaving behind a mere husk as his spirit soars to the realm of

¹⁶ A description of the *shang-t'ang* rite can be found in the *Ch'an-yüan ch'ing-kuei*, an influential Sung monastic code. See the edited and annotated edition by Kagashima Genryū, Satō Tatsugen, and Kosaka Kiyū, *Yakuchū: Zen'en shingi* (Tokyo: Sōtōshū shūmichō, 1972), pp. 71–75. An extended "performative" analysis of the ritual can be found in my "Being Buddha: A Performative Approach to Ch'an Enlightenment" (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Anaheim, Calif., November 20, 1989).

¹⁷ I am particularly indebted to two important articles for many of the references to mummies in Buddhist canonical materials cited below: Kosugi Kazuo, "Nikushinzō oyobi yuikaizō no kenkyū," *Tōyō gakuho* 24, no. 3 (1937): 93–124; and Paul Demiéville, "Momies d' Extrême-Orient," in *Choix d'études Sinologiques* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 407–32 (originally published in *Journal des Savants*, Troisième centenaire [Paris, 1965], pp. 144–70).

¹⁸ T.2059: 50.389a12–16; see also Demiéville, pp. 410–11.

¹⁹ When young he is said to have stopped eating cereals, surviving instead on such things as cypress cones and pine resin for seven years, and he frequently associated with Taoist immortals. See his biography in *Kao-seng chuan* fascicle 9, T.2059: 50.387b1–c14.

²⁰ *Kao-seng chuan*, T.2059: 50.387c9–10.

the immortals.²¹ Indeed, it was not unusual in this period to draw an explicit connection between mastery of Buddhist *dhyāna*, possession of Taoist supernatural powers, and the natural “incorruptibility” of the body after death. We find this connection again in the biographies of the Ch’an masters Po Seng-kuang and Chu T’an-yu, both of whom were mountain-dwelling wonder-workers who possessed thaumaturgical powers commonly associated with Taoist immortals. The *Kao-seng chuan* reports that the bodies of both these monks suffered no decay, but remained “as if alive” long after their deaths in 385.²²

Buddhist hagiographic literature contains numerous examples of such “natural mummies,” although the explicitly Taoist interpretation of the phenomenon is soon dropped in favor of a more “orthodox” Buddhist exegesis. The miraculous preservation of the body of the Tantric master Shan-wu-wei (Subhākarasimha), for example, is understood in unambiguously Buddhist terms. Although he died in 735 at the ripe old age of ninety-nine, Shan-wu-wei was not buried until 740, at which time he was interred in the garden of the Kuang-hua Monastery in the western hills of Lung-men. According to his biography, his body was so “imbued with meditation and wisdom” that it suffered no decay in the five-year interval between death and burial.²³ Eighteen years later, in 758, his tomb was opened by a group of his disciples and his body recovered. Although the body had darkened in color and diminished in size, it remained well preserved and became the focus of a local cult, attracting the support of the emperor himself.²⁴

²¹ See the discussion in Kosugi, pp. 95–96. The term *ch’an-t’ui* is used to refer to another “natural mummy” (an untreated corpse that suffers no decay after death) in the biography of the monk Hui-yüan in fascicle 13 of the *Kao-seng chuan* (T.2059: 50.410a16).

²² Both men regularly communed with various miraculous beings, fierce animals, and Taoist immortals. See their biographies in *Kao-seng chuan* fascicle 11 (T.2059: 50.395c5–396b16); and the discussions in Kobayashi Taiichirō, “Kōsō sūhai to shōzō no geijutsu,” *Bukkyō geijutsu* 23 (1954): 14–15; and E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), pp. 145–56.

²³ Note that the term translated here as “imbued” (*hsün*) has a technical Buddhist usage: it refers to the “traces” or “infusions” (Skt. *vāsanā*) left in the “storehouse consciousness” (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*) as a result of volitional activity. A variety of Indian sources describe the relics of Śākyamuni in remarkably similar terms. An inscription from Kharoṣṭhī dated to A.D. 25–26, e.g., speaks of the Buddha’s relics as “infused [*paribhāvita*] with morality, infused with concentration, infused with wisdom” (Schopen, “Burial ‘Ad Sanctos’” [n. 4 above], p. 205). See also Gregory Schopen, “On the Buddha and His Bones: The Conception of a Relic in the Inscriptions of Nāgārjunikoṇḍa,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108 (1988): 531–33.

²⁴ See the biography of Shan-wu-wei in the *Sung kao-seng chuan*: “Shan-wu-wei’s body, which can still be seen, has shrunk with time. The black skin has dulled and the bones have become visible. Whenever a draught or flood has occurred in subsequent dynasties, people have gone to pray at the cave and have gotten results, so that many gifts [of gratitude] were laid there. The remains are covered with sheets of embroidered brocade as if he were asleep. Every time the remains are taken out of the cave, they are

The continued integrity of the body after death is thus associated with holiness and spiritual purity—the purity of mind simultaneously effects the purity of the physical body and the elimination of the defilements that lead to decomposition after death. The bodies of Buddhist masters who resisted decay after death were accordingly worshiped as reservoirs of meritorious karma and spiritual power. The possession of a “flesh icon” could transform an out-of-the-way temple into a thriving pilgrimage center, attracting Buddhist faithful from all quarters of China. The miraculous corpse and the temple that housed it might also become the focus of colorful legends and folktales, attesting to the miraculous powers and supernatural events associated with the mummy.

There would seem to be a considerable gap between the phenomenon of “natural mummies” that miraculously withstand decay without the aid of embalming, and man-made mummies produced through elaborate and time-consuming embalming techniques. Yet it appears that the latter process was originally conceived of as a mere extension of the former: artificial mummification was thought of as a means to preserve the remains of Buddhist priests whose innate spiritual purity was such that their bodies did not decompose after death.

The earliest known recorded case that involves the intentional mummification of a Buddhist priest in China is that of Tao-hsin (580–651), a Ch’an master later celebrated as the fourth patriarch of the Ch’an lineage. In his seventy-second year Tao-hsin, knowing that death was near, ordered his disciples to build a crypt. When he heard that his crypt was ready, he sat in meditation posture and peacefully passed away. According to his biography in the *Ch’üan fa-pao chi*, a text dating to the early eighth century: “On the eighth day of the fourth month [i.e., the same day as the Buddha’s *parinirvāna*] of the following year the stone doors [of his crypt] opened by themselves to reveal that his countenance looked just as dignified as it had been in life. His students then wrapped [his body] with lacquered cloth and left the doors of the vault open. They cut a stele and had it inscribed with a eulogy written by the Secretariat Director Tu Cheng-lun.”²⁵

placed on a low couch and bathed with a fragrant unguent. The rich people in Lo-yang give in competition *ch’an-po*, cleaning towels, and the toilet peas used in the bath. The present Emperor, when propitiating or praying for something, usually sends messengers to present gifts; and [his Majesty’s] desires have always been fulfilled.” (T.2061: 50.716a12–17; translation from Chou I-liang, “Tantrism in China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8 [1945]: 271–72.)

²⁵ See the edition of the *Ch’üan fa-pao chi* edited by Yanagida Seizan in *Shoki no zen-shi I*, Zen no goroku 2 (Kyoto: Chikuma shobō, 1971), p. 380; translation from John Robert McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism*, Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism, no. 3 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), p. 263. Compare the abbreviated account in the *Hsü kao-seng chuan*, T.2060: 50.606b26–28.

This biographical notice is significant for three reasons: First, it is the earliest known recorded case (of which I am aware) of a lacquered mummy in China. Second, the corpse belongs to a “Ch’an master” claimed by the later Ch’an tradition as the fourth patriarch. And finally, the mummification was supposed to have been done as a means to preserve for posterity the miracle of Tao-hsin’s natural incorruptibility.

A very different reason for mummification is given in the case of the most famous mummy in China, that of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng (638–713). According to legend, Hui-neng, knowing that he was about to die, bathed and then passed away peacefully in seated posture surrounded by his disciples. His body was interred at Nan-hua Monastery near Ts’ao-ch’i. According to the *Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu*, Hui-neng’s disciples applied lacquered cloth to his corpse in order to protect it from harm:

His disciples, recalling the Master’s prediction that someone would take his head, put an iron band and a lacquered cloth about his neck to protect it. Inside the *stūpa* was placed the “robe of faith” handed down by Bodhidharma, the robe and bowl presented by Emperor Chung-tsung, a portrait of the Master modeled in clay [*su-chen*] by Fang-pien, and various Buddhist implements. The *stūpa* attendant was placed in charge of these. On the third day of the eighth month of the tenth year of the K’ai-yüan period [September 18, 722], in the middle of the night, a sound like the dragging of iron chains was heard coming from the *stūpa*. The monks leaped up in surprise in time to see a man in mourning clothes running out from the *stūpa*. Later on they found that the Master’s neck had been injured.²⁶

The thief confessed to having been hired by a Korean monk to steal the head of the Sixth Patriarch so that it might be venerated in Korea. We also learn that the *stūpa*-mausoleum was completely destroyed by fire in the beginning of the K’ai-pao period, but Hui-neng’s body was protected by the monk in charge and survived unharmed. The mummified body of Hui-neng, showing, incidentally, no trace of an iron collar or damage to the neck, can still be seen at Nan-hua temple today.²⁷

²⁶ *Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu*, T.2076: 51.236c11–16; translation (with minor changes) from Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-huang Manuscript with Translation, Introduction, and Notes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 86.

²⁷ For an engaging account of a relatively recent visit to Hui-neng’s mummy, see John Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life: The Autobiography of a Western Buddhist*, 2d ed. (London: Rider, 1972), pp. 86–92. A photograph of the mummy is reproduced in Demiéville (n. 17 above), p. 416, as well as in Needham (n. 3 above), fig. 1330. The identity of the mummy is uncertain, but it most probably is not that of the historical Hui-neng. Scholars now believe that much of the biography of Hui-neng is later legend, and that he was relatively unknown in his own day. The appearance of the mummy and the various legends surrounding it were no doubt attempts to capitalize upon the later fame of the master. Note that according to the account in the *Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu*, a portrait of Hui-neng was included among the objects placed in his *stūpa*. The juxtaposition of portrait and mummy will figure prominently in the discussion below.

III

In fact, the attempt to prevent the decay of the corpse was by no means a Buddhist innovation in China—forms of mummification are well attested in China since the time of the Western Han (206 B.C.—A.D. 25). The ancient Chinese believed that just as the corpse decomposed slowly over many years, the soul or souls that dwelt therein also passed away slowly. Early texts contain scattered references to the notion that as the souls of the dead age, they gradually diminish in size. According to the *Tso chuan*, a Chou dynasty text compiled around the third century B.C., “The spirit of a newly dead is large and that of an old one is small.”²⁸ Yü Ying-shih, writing on early Chinese conceptions of the soul, notes the similar belief that the soul of a recently deceased person is heavier than that of the long dead. The soul apparently survives death, but gradually fades over time. “This materialistic conception of the soul explains the great importance ancient Chinese had attached to the body of the dead. As recent archaeology has shown, people in the Han period often went to all lengths to preserve the body of the dead. Evidently, ancient Chinese, just like ancient Egyptians, believed that the soul could not survive much longer unless the body itself were preserved.”²⁹

Other evidence for the antiquity of the notion that the corpse should be preserved so that it may continue to serve as a home for the soul comes from chapter 33 of the *Tao-te ching*. Eduard Erkes has argued that Lao-tzu’s expression “to die but not perish” (*ssu erh pu wang*) actually refers to “death without physical decomposition.” “The expression *ssu erh pu wang* may thus point to Taoist practices which tried to secure a kind of perpetual life after death by preserving the body and thereby enabling it to retain the enlivening soul and its power.”³⁰

²⁸ Ying-shih Yü, “O Soul, Come Back: A Study of the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, no. 2 (1987): 380. On early Chinese attitudes toward the spirit of the dead, see also Mu-chou Poo, “Ideas concerning Death and Burial in Pre-Han and Han China,” *Asia Major*, 3d ser., 3, no. 2 (1990): 25–62.

²⁹ Yü, p. 380.

³⁰ Eduard Erkes, “*Ssu erh pu wang*,” *Asia Major*, n.s., 3, no. 2 (1953): 158. Note that where the extant recension of *Tao-te ching* 33 reads *wang* (“perish”), both Ma-wang-tui manuscripts read the homophone *wang* (“forget”), yielding “to die but not be forgotten is [true] longevity.” In the preface to his recent translation of the *Tao-te ching*, Victor Mair maintains that the traditional reading of “perish” “does not really make sense, even in a religious Taoist context,” and argues that the correct reading is that found in the Ma-wang-tui texts (*Tao Te Ching: The Classic Book of Integrity and the Way* [New York: Bantam Books, 1990], p. xii). This, however, begs the issue: there is abundant archaeological evidence attesting to the fact that the Chinese did at times attempt to preserve the corpse from decay. The “vulgate” reading of “perish” for “forgotten,” despite the fact that it may represent any early scribal error, may well have been understood in the light of attempts to mummify the corpse.

Sometime in the Eastern Han or early Six Dynasties period, the rationale behind attempts to prevent the decay of the corpse came to be articulated in terms of the theory of three *hun* and seven *p'o* souls. These souls were believed to inhabit the body and animate the person, and the separation of the souls from the body led to sickness or death.³¹ The continued preservation of the corpse was thus necessary to maintain the integrity and the peace of the various souls after death, particularly the *p'o* souls, not only for the sake of the deceased but also for the sake of the living, since a homeless *p'o* could manifest as a dangerous ghost or *kuei*.³²

The belief in the lingering presence of the soul or souls may well explain a variety of ancient Chinese mortuary practices aimed at preventing the decomposition of the corpse. The Han Chinese apparently attained a high degree of technical sophistication in the art of preventing decay. The most impressive example of the ancient Chinese art of preservation is that of Lady Tai, who died in the Western Han around 186 B.C. (but not later than 141 B.C.). Lady Tai's corpse was discovered in 1972 in the Ma-wang-tui tombs near Ch'ang-ha (Hunan province). It was in a remarkable state of preservation by any standard. Joseph Needham comments: "When the body was finally uncovered it was found to be like that of a person who had died only a week or two before. The elasticity of subcutaneous tissues was conserved in an extraordinary way, for when the skin was pressed it at once returned to normal when the pressure was released. Similarly, preservative solutions when injected raised swellings which after a short time subsided."³³ Scientists do not yet fully understand the techniques used to preserve the body of Lady Tai; the body was, somewhat surprisingly, not embalmed in any obvious way (although Lady Tai's coffin, and the chamber in which the coffin came to rest, were both tightly sealed and filled with methane gas). One technique that was widely used in the Han by those who could afford it, however, was enshrouding the ca-

³¹ See, e.g., *Pao-p'u tzu* 2.10a: "All men, wise or foolish, know that their bodies contain *hun* souls and *p'o* souls, and that when some of them quit the body illness ensues; when they all leave him a man dies. In the former case, the magicians have amulets for restraining them; in the latter case, *The Rites* provide ceremonials for summoning them back" (translation from James Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine, and Religion in the China of A.D. 320: The Nei P'ien of Ko Hung [Pao-p'u tzu]* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1966], pp. 49–50, with minor changes). Among the many discussions of the *hun* and *p'o* souls, see esp. Carl Hentze, *Chinese Tomb Figures: A Study in the Beliefs and Folklore of Ancient China* (New York: AMS Press, 1974), pp. 1–19; Needham, pp. 85–92; and Yü, pp. 369–78.

³² See Anna Seidel, "Post-mortem Immortality—or: The Taoist Resurrection of the Body," in *Gilgul: Essays on Transformation, Revolution and Permanence in the History of Religions*, ed. S. Shaked, D. Shulman, and G. G. Stroumsa (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1987), pp. 228–29.

³³ Needham, p. 304.

daver in a jade suit, as jade was commonly believed to inhibit or prevent decay. More than ten complete burial shrouds have been recovered from Han tombs, five of which have been successfully restored, but despite the considerable skill and expense necessary to produce such a burial shroud, there is no indication that they were particularly effective.³⁴

Another technique of equally dubious value mentioned in the *Pao-p'u tzu* is placing jade or bone in the nine orifices of the body: "When gold and jade are inserted into the nine orifices, corpses do not decay. When salt and brine are absorbed into flesh and marrow, dried meats do not spoil. So when men ingest substances which are able to benefit their bodies and lengthen their days, why should it be strange that (some of these) should confer life perpetual?"³⁵

It may well be the case that religious Taoists continued to attempt to prevent the decomposition of the corpse in the medieval period, but there is no clear archaeological evidence one way or the other. What we do find are Taoist liturgies containing appeals to the celestial bureaucracy to "return the corpse and reassemble the bones" of the departed.³⁶ It would appear that when technology failed, the Taoists turned to ritual.

IV

In any case, the actual techniques used by Chinese Buddhists to mummify their revered masters were not related in any obvious way to the methods used in the Han. In fact, to my knowledge, the method employed by the Buddhists has no obvious precedent anywhere inside or outside China. The Buddhists wrapped the body of the deceased prelate in cloth that was impregnated with lacquer, turning the corpse into what was, in effect, an imperishable lacquer icon. Although there do not appear to be any surviving medieval documents describing the process in detail, it is possible to reconstruct the technique using medieval hagiographic literature in conjunction with ethnographic reports from scholars visiting China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁷

³⁴ Wang Zhongshu cites the *Hou-han shu* as evidence that the purpose of the jade suits was to preserve the corpse: "(The 'Biography of Liu Penzi') claimed that the bodies in jade shrouds in the imperial mausoleums of the Western Han were all so well preserved that they looked like living people. This is, of course, not true. Cao Pi was perhaps more on the mark when he said, in banning the practice, that the use of jade shrouds was a 'stupid and vulgar act'" (Wang Zhongshu, *Han Civilization* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1982], p. 182).

³⁵ *Pao-p'u tzu* 3.6a-b; translation from Needham, p. 284.

³⁶ Seidel, "Post-mortem Immortality," p. 234.

³⁷ I am intentionally avoiding the issue of the relationship between the mummification of Ch'an masters in China and the "self-mummified Buddhas" associated with Japanese esoteric Buddhism. A connection, no doubt, exists; Japanese self-mummified monks, who

From these sources we can piece together the following picture: although there were cases where lacquer was applied to the body shortly after death,³⁸ the common practice involved thoroughly cleaning and desiccating the corpse prior to mummification. This was accomplished by temporarily encoffining and burying the corpse, or storing it in a large iron or ceramic jar for anywhere from three to eight years. We also find mention of drying the corpse over a charcoal fire or sealing it in an urn filled with a salt brine, in effect, pickling the cadaver.³⁹ In any event, the body is later exhumed or retrieved from storage and wrapped in multiple layers of cloth made of hemp or ramie soaked in lacquer. The lacquer cloth could be applied directly on top of the monk's ceremonial vestments, or the vestments could be carved into the lacquer surface afterwards. The finished mummy could then be gilded and dressed in fine robes and adorned with the regalia proper to the position of "Ch'an master," such as a fly whisk or scepter. Holmes Welch, commenting on such mummies in the early part of this century, observed that "Usually they were gilded. Sometimes the lobes of the ears were lengthened and a dot was placed between the eyebrows. Golden skin, long lobes, and the *ūrṇā* dot were among the thirty-two sacred marks of a Buddha. The implication was therefore that in his lifetime the monk whose corpse the visitor saw before him had attained buddhahood."⁴⁰

usually belonged to the Yudono sect of Shugendō, took their inspiration from Kūkai, who, it is said, never died, but remains in perpetual *samādhi*. Nevertheless, the Yudono practice of self-mummification—which involved a prolonged fast designed to end in death through desiccation—ultimately comes to be situated in a very different network of religious significations peculiar to Japanese esoterism. (Actually, the term "self-mummification" is somewhat of a misnomer; even in Japan the full mummification of a monk who fasted to death required the postmortem treatment of the corpse.) The practice of embarking upon a rigorous fast in order to begin the mummification process prior to death was not unknown in premodern China (see J. C. H., "How to Make Dried Priests," *New China Review* 2 [1920]: 313–14), but the practice is not well attested in the medieval period. And where Chinese Buddhist mummies are typically associated with Ch'an, in Japan there is little connection between mummification and Zen. Among the many studies of Japanese mummies, see esp. Andō Kōsei, *Nihon no miira* (Tokyo: Mainichi shinbunsha, 1961); and Hori Ichiro, "Self-Mummified Buddhas in Japan: An Aspect of the Shugen-dō ('Mountain Asceticism') Sect," *History of Religions* 1, no. 2 (1962): 222–42.

³⁸ See, e.g., the case of Wang Lo-han, discussed below, who was lacquered three days following his death.

³⁹ See the descriptions in Demiéville (n. 17 above), pp. 413–14; Helmut Brinker, "Body, Relic and Image in Zen Buddhist Portraiture," in *Shōzō*, Kokusai kōryū bijutsushi kenkyūkai dairokkai kokusai shinpojiamu (Kyoto: Kokusai kōryū bijutsushi kenkyūkai, 1987), p. 47; and J. Prip-Møller, *Chinese Buddhist Monasteries: Their Plan and Its Function as a Setting for Buddhist Monastic Life*, 2d ed. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1967), p. 181.

⁴⁰ Holmes Welch, *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900–1950*, Harvard East Asian Studies, no. 26 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 343.

The lacquering process, which was costly, time-consuming, and dangerous (raw lacquer is highly toxic), was essentially identical to the dry-lacquer technique used to produce fine Buddhist sculpture. This technique, which was perfected in the T'ang, involved the application of layer upon layer of lacquer-saturated hempen cloth onto an armature of wood or clay. Each layer took considerable time to dry, and the entire process could take many months. In the end, the lacquer coating was of sufficient thickness and pliability to allow it to be finely modeled and delicately carved. The sculpture was then painted or gilded, and if a clay core was used it was dug out once the sculpture was complete. The finished product was quite durable: "The result is a rigid light shell that can be tumbled about by earthquakes and suffer only surface scars easily repaired. Neither insects nor dry-rot nor moisture affect it nor is it, like bronze, subject to corrosion."⁴¹ This time-consuming and highly sophisticated technique produced some of the finest Buddhist statuary found in East Asia.⁴²

To return to our mummy, the finished product could be interred in a *stūpa* or crypt, but it was more common to enshrine it on an altar in the Patriarchs Hall or Portrait Hall of a monastery, where it could be readily approached and worshiped.⁴³ The final effect is striking—the lacquered image, which is now a virtually imperishable icon, can be powerfully and hauntingly lifelike.

But why go to the trouble? What sense can we make of the attempt, at first glance so contrary to the canonical teachings of the Buddha, to resist impermanence and halt the decay of the corpse? Nowhere in the compendious literature of Ch'an—not in the scriptures, the recorded sayings, the biographical collections, the monastic codes, or in sermons or admonitions—is there any account of the whys and wherefores of

⁴¹ Langdon Warner, *The Craft of the Japanese Sculptor* (New York: McFarlane, Warde, McFarlane and the Japan Society of New York, 1936), p. 10. See also Langdon Warner, *Japanese Sculpture of the Tempyo Period: Masterpieces of the Eighth Century*, ed. James Marshall Plumer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), pp. 55–60; and Nishikawa Kyōtarō and Emily J. Sano, *The Great Age of Japanese Buddhist Sculpture, AD 600–1300* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Kimbell Art Museum; New York: Japan Society, 1982), pp. 48–49.

⁴² Although numerous dry-lacquer images produced in ancient Japan have survived to modern times, works from T'ang China are extremely rare. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York possesses a sculpture of Śākyamuni from the Tai-fu temple, Chengting, Hopei province dated to ca. 650, which may be the earliest extant example. See James C. Y. Watt, *The Arts of Ancient China* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990), p. 57.

⁴³ Kosugi discerns three stages in the evolution of structures housing such mummies. In the early period "natural mummies" were found in caves or stone crypts in remote mountain locales; in the second stage the preserved remains were placed in earthen tombs within cemetery grounds; and finally in the T'ang, when lacquering became common, mummies typically were enshrined within specially built *stūpa*-mausoleums or memorial halls (Kosugi [n. 17 above], p. 107).

mummification. In order to elucidate the phenomenon in greater detail, it is necessary to turn to Ch'an monastic codes that contain detailed descriptions of the funeral rites used in medieval monasteries. An examination of Ch'an mortuary ritual reveals a great deal about Chinese Buddhist attitudes toward death and the corpse. Although the monastic codes make no mention of mummification per se, they offer numerous clues to the meaning and function of this somewhat perplexing practice.

V

An overview of the funeral procedures used in the Sung for the Ch'an abbot can be found in the fourteenth-century monastic code entitled the *Ch'ih-hsiu pai-chang ch'ing-kuei* published in 1336. The text delineates a sequence of nine steps undertaken prior to the actual disposal of the body, a format that continues to be used with only minor alteration in Ch'an and Zen monasteries today: (1) encoffining the body, (2) transferring the coffin to the Dharma Hall, (3) sealing the coffin, (4) hanging a portrait of the dead in the Dharma Hall, (5) making formal expressions of grief, (6) offering libations of tea and hot water, (7) holding a small consultation in front of the departed spirit, (8) offering libations of tea and hot water, and (9) transporting the coffin to the cremation (or burial) ground (*T.2025*: 48.1128a22–26). One of the earliest Ch'an monastic codes, the *Ch'an-yüan ch'ing-kuei* of 1103, describes certain stages in the above process in considerable detail. In the following quotation, note particularly the use of the portrait, which serves as the resting place for the spirit of the deceased master:

When three days have passed [following the death of the abbot] put the body in the casket following the same procedure as that used for deceased monks [detailed above]. When putting the body in the casket, invite a venerable elder to carry the spirit seat [*ling-tso*]. At this time there is a talk on the Dharma. Place the casket on the west side of the Dharma Hall and on the east side set up a cot and robe rack with the personal implements [belonging to the deceased]. Hang the portrait [of the deceased] on the dharma-seat [in the center of the hall]. A ritual site for the ceremony should be prepared in the Dharma Hall with a plain curtain, white flowers, a lamp and candle set, and offerings placed in front of the portrait. The disciples remain behind the casket screen at the foot of the banners in their mourning robes and guard the casket.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ From the section on the "passing of a venerable elder [i.e., the abbot]" (*tsun-su ch'ien-hua*) in the *Ch'an-yüan ch'ing-kuei*, Kagashima, Satō, and Kosaka, eds. (n. 16 above), pp. 259–60. Similar descriptions of funerals for high abbots can be found in most *ch'ing-kuei* compilations, including the *Chiao-ting ch'ing-kuei* of 1204 (*ZZ.112.19d–21d*), the *Ch'ih-hsiu pai-chang ch'ing-kuei* of 1336 (*T.2025*: 48.1127a–1129a), and the *Sho ekō shingi shiki* of 1566 (*T.2578*: 81.659b ff.).

The *Ch'an-yüan ch'ing-kuei* goes on to describe the ensuing sequence of events: the portrait of the abbot, having been placed in the dharma-seat in the center of the Dharma Hall, is made the focus of offerings of incense and prostrations by all the monks in the monastery, and outsiders are also provided with an opportunity to do the same. Later, the portrait is placed in a specially constructed litter and carried to the site of cremation or interment, where it is again installed on an altar (or "pavilion" [*t'ing*]) to serve as a focus for worship. After returning to the monastery it is hung up in the Dharma Hall once again, and there is another round of offerings. The portrait is then removed to the abbot's quarters where all the members of the monastic community have yet another opportunity to prostrate before it. Until such time that a new abbot can be installed, the portrait is offered food and incense twice a day by the chief officers and close disciples of the deceased abbot. The times of these "feedings" coincide with the two main meals in the monastery. When the new abbot takes up residence the portrait is removed to the Portrait Hall (*chen-t'ang*), a building identical in function to what is later known as the Patriarchs Hall (*tsu-shih-t'ang*).⁴⁵

Greater detail concerning the events that take place at the actual grave or cremation site can be found in the *Ch'ih-hsiu pai-chang ch'ing-kuei*. This text delineates seven rites, but it is clear that they do not form a sequence, as some of them are alternative procedures depending upon whether the corpse is buried, cremated, or interred whole in a *stūpa*. If the corpse is cremated, the bone relics are collected and brought back to the monastery where they are temporarily installed, and only later are they permanently interred in a *stūpa*.⁴⁶

The first thing to note concerning the funeral rites for a Ch'an abbot is that they largely conform to the general pattern of Chinese funerary practice, with the important exception of cremation. Cremation was considered barbarous and unfilial by many educated Chinese, and at various periods the imperial government attempted to proscribe the practice.⁴⁷ In any event, numerous descriptions of non-Buddhist Chinese funerals

⁴⁵ See Kagashima, Satō, and Kosaka, eds., pp. 259–60; and the sections on funerals in the monastic codes mentioned in the note above.

⁴⁶ The list of rites reads as follows: (1) hanging the portrait in a pavilion outside the temple gate (at the grave or cremation site), (2) offering a libation of tea and hot water, (3) lighting the torch of the funeral pyre, (4) installing the bone relics following a cremation, (5) auctioning the robes of the dead monk to raise money to pay the costs of the funeral, (6) collecting the bones and installing them in a *stūpa* ten to fourteen days following the cremation, (7) installing (the tablet?) in the Patriarchs Hall, (8) placing the whole body in a *stūpa*, (9) scattering earth over the coffin (i.e., burying the corpse) (T.2025: 48.1128a22–26).

⁴⁷ On cremation in China, see esp. Kosugi, pp. 98–120; Anna Seidel, "Dabi," *Hōbōgi-rin: Dictionnaire encyclopédique du bouddhisme d'après les sources Chinoises et Japonaises*, sixième fascicule (Tokyo: Maison Franco-Japonaise), pp. 578–82; and

confirm the important place occupied by the portrait as home to the soul of the deceased from the moment the corpse is sealed in the casket.⁴⁸ Jan J. M. de Groot describes this practice in a description of upper-class funerals as he observed them in nineteenth-century Amoy: “If [the artist] can manage to have it ready before the burial, the family hang [the portrait of the deceased] on the wall just over the coffin, the idea being that it may serve the same purpose as the wooden soul-tablet, viz. as a seat for the spirit of the dead, an *alter ego* doing duty for the body now shut up in the coffin. With a view to this object, the family are always very anxious to obtain a good portrait. Hence the painter is in many instances compelled to do the face over and over again, until he succeeds in convincing them that the likeness is perfect.”⁴⁹

Ch’an materials provide us with clear evidence that the portrait of the deceased abbot indeed functions as a dwelling place for his soul or *ling*. The portrait occupies the abbot’s ceremonial ch’an-seat and receives offerings of incense and prostrations in the same manner as did the living abbot. The funeral rites even include a formal “consultation” with the deceased abbot: “In the Dharma Hall arrange a seat in front of the portrait for [the ceremony of] a minor consultation with the spirit [of the deceased]. When the evening bell rings, sound the drum and gather the assembly. The procedure for [officers of] the [east and west] ranks to leave their places [and come before the abbot to engage in

Patricia Ebrey, “Cremation in Sung China,” *American Historical Review* 95, no. 2 (1990): 406–28. Ebrey notes that, despite official opposition, by Sung times cremation had become popular even among those with no formal ties to the Buddhist church. Cremation proved particularly attractive in cases where a person had died far from home (the ashes could be transported with relative ease for later interment and memorial rites) and in cases where economic constraints made purchase of a grave site difficult.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., the description of the funeral rites in the *Chu tzu chia-li*, a ritual manual attributed to Chu Hsi (1130–1200) and widely circulated since the Southern Sung. The *Chia-li* records the opinions of Ssu-ma Kuang (1019–1086) concerning the custom of drawing an image of the deceased on the back of a silk “soul cloth” (*hun-po*) “as something for the spirits to rely on.” Ssu-ma Kuang condones this practice only in the case of men who had portraits made when alive, and only if the image is not embellished with the use of “caps, hats, clothes, and shoes” (Patricia Ebrey, *Chu Hsi’s Family Rituals: A Twelfth-Century Chinese Manual for the Performance of Cappings, Weddings, Funerals, and Ancestral Rites* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990], p. 78). The installation of the portrait next to the casket is also mentioned in the journals of Matteo Ricci; see the translation by Louis J. Gallagher, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci* (New York: Random House, 1953), pp. 72–73. A full description of the funeral rites as practiced at the turn of the century can be found in Jan J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China: Its Ancient Forms, Evolution, History and Present Aspect; Manners, Customs and Social Institutions Connected Therewith* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1892–1910), vols. 1–3. For a description of the funerary portraits, see esp. 1:113–14.

⁴⁹ De Groot, *The Religious System of China*, 1:113.

debate] follows the usual practice [i.e., the practice followed in minor consultations overseen by a living abbot].”⁵⁰

It is apparent that the funeral portrait is functionally equivalent to the *wei-p'ai* or “memorial tablet,” usually a small wooden tablet upon which is carved the name and office of the deceased. This identification of memorial tablet and portrait is made explicit in an “old commentary” cited by the Edo period Buddhist scholar Mujaku Dōchū (1653–1744) in his commentary to the *Ch'ih-hsiu pai-chang ch'ing-kuei*: “According to the ancient worthies, if the portrait has an inscription in which appears the name [of the deceased], then do not also use a memorial tablet.”⁵¹

VI

The Sung funeral procedures for the Ch'an abbot clearly indicate that the abbot's spirit remains in the vicinity of his corpse after death. In this regard, Ch'an mortuary ritual largely conforms to the standard Chinese model. This is not surprising, as Chinese mortuary ritual shows a high degree of uniformity irrespective of religious tradition, geographical locale, or epoch. James Watson has argued that funerals in China function as a centripetal force effecting cultural cohesion and standardization, and the proper performance of the rites usually took precedence over ideological or doctrinal concerns.⁵²

With Ch'an funerals, as with virtually all Chinese funerals, it is incumbent upon the mourners to provide a suitable resting place for the disembodied soul. The portrait, bearing the likeness of the deceased, serves as effigy for the dead and home for the spirit.⁵³ As such, one of the requirements of the portrait is that it be lifelike and realistic, and

⁵⁰ *Ch'an-lin pei-yung ch'ing-kuei*, ZZ.112.62c. See also the section on “minor consultations facing the spirit [seat]” in the *Chiao-ting ch'ing-kuei*, ZZ.112.20d.

⁵¹ Mujaku Dōchū, *Chokushū hyakujō shingi sakei*, ed. Yanagida Seizan (Kyoto: Chūbun shuppansha, 1979), p. 484.

⁵² James L. Watson, “The Structure of Chinese Funerary Rites: Elementary Forms, Ritual Sequence, and the Primacy of Performance,” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, ed. James L. Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 4.

⁵³ Note the common use of effigies in Buddhist funerals in nineteenth-century Amoy, described in a lengthy article by Jan J. M. de Groot, “Buddhist Masses for the Dead in Amoy,” in *Actes du sixième congrès internationale des orientalistes*, pt. 4, sec. 4 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1885), pp. 1–120. The effigy, called a *hun-shen* (“spirit-body”), is constructed of paper pasted over a bamboo frame and attired in the formal dress proper to the office of the deceased. It resides in a “kind of tabernacle” known as the *ling-ch'u* which occupies the central position in the main hall of the house (pp. 36–37). On the first day of the mass a ceremony known as *ch'i-ku* (“raising the drum”) or *chao-hun* (“hailing the soul”) is performed by a Taoist priest positioned at some distance from the home of the departed. The priest, beating upon a drum and calling out the name of the deceased, entices the spirit to return to his or her home and enter the effigy (pp. 49–50). From here the

great pains were taken in this regard. One of the common terms used for the portrait is *chen*, meaning “truth” or “true likeness,” and given the value placed on likeness, one could not find a more true-to-life effigy for the departed than his own corpse. It would seem that in the case of a particularly eminent master, the mummy replaced the portrait as the most appropriate abode for his spirit.⁵⁴

In fact, the prominent place given to funerary portraits of eminent Buddhist masters, and the cultic worship of said images widely attested in the medieval period, seems to have developed in conjunction with the practice of preserving the remains of the deceased.⁵⁵ In the Six Dynasties period, when the miraculously preserved corpses of eminent priests were frequently interred on a mountainside or in a cemetery on the outskirts of the city, the burial site would be marked with a *stūpa* or small chapel containing a portrait or effigy of the dead. One particularly illustrative case is that of Hui-shih, whose biography is preserved in the *Shih-lao chih*, a history of Buddhism and Taoism during the Northern Wei (386–534):

During T'ai-yen, as [Hui-shih] approached his end in the Pa-chiao ssu, he fasted and purified himself and sat upright and, with his monkish followers crowded by his side, calm and concentrated he expired. The corpse was kept for more than ten days. It remained seated without change, and its form and color were as before, and the whole world marveled thereat. Finally he was buried within the temple. In the sixth year of the Chen-chün period, when it was decreed that

spirit will participate in the ceremonies and receive various offerings from family members and friends. The mass ends with a rite known as *ch'e-ling* or *hsü-ling* (“removing the spirit”), believed to transport the soul to the Western Pure Land. At the culmination of this rite the effigy is set on fire along with its entire retinue, including paper retainers and servants, paper money, treasuries, luggage, food, wine, and other supplies provided for the comfort of the departed. De Groot comments: “The burning of the soul-body unmistakably of itself suggests that this thing is expected to do duty instead of the body of the dead also in Paradise. It is, indeed, most repugnant to the mind of the Chinese that the soul of a beloved deceased should roam about in the World of Shades without an artificial support which it could stick closely to, to thus prevent its evaporation and dissolution” (p. 106).

⁵⁴ There are interesting parallels between the ceremonial use of the funerary effigy of the Ch'an abbot and the effigies used in the royal funerals of English and French monarchs during the renaissance. See esp. Ralph E. Giesey, *The Royal Funeral Ceremony in Renaissance France* (Geneva: Librairie E. Droz, 1960), pp. 145–75; and Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 419–37. Giesey has noted the desire for lifelike realism in the construction of French royal effigies. In a discussion of the grandiose funeral procession of Francis I, Giesey comments: “Beyond doubt the eyes of everyone were on the effigy. Its realism was so great as to have been, perhaps, frightening: more than a few feet away from it, one could not have been sure that what he saw was not a living figure” (p. 13).

⁵⁵ On the relationship between the worship of eminent monks, the preservation of their remains, and the evolution of Buddhist portraiture, see esp. Kobayashi (n. 22 above).

no bodies were to be left buried within the city wall, he was reinterred outside the southern extremity. He had been dead just ten years. When the tomb was opened, he was solemn and not in the least decomposed. Those who accompanied his funeral procession were more than six thousand, and there was none who did not mourn him profoundly. The Secretariat Supervisor Kao Yün composed a biography in which he lauded his virtuous acts. Over Hui-shih's tomb was set a stone, and in a chapel his likeness was drawn. Throughout the time of the persecution of the Dharma [446–452] it still stood whole.⁵⁶

We similarly find an image used in the burial of the Ch'an practitioner Fa-ch'in who died in 773. Fa-ch'in's body was placed in an earthen burial jar, which was enshrined in a *stūpa*-mausoleum along with a lifelike effigy of Fa-ch'in leaning realistically against a small table. When his *stūpa* and effigy were discovered in 902, the jar was opened and his body was found to be fully preserved.⁵⁷ And we have already come across another example of a portrait being placed inside a *stūpa* housing a mummy, namely, that of the sixth patriarch Hui-neng (see the admittedly unreliable account of Hui-neng's death in the *Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu* biography quoted above).

We find, then, that the *stūpa*-mausoleums that housed the embalmed remains of a saint or marked the site of his interment were frequently outfitted with a portrait or effigy. It would appear that these modest mausoleums were the precursors of the substantial buildings known in later times as "memorial halls" (*ch'ung-t'ang*), "portrait halls" (*chen-t'ang*), or "image halls" (*ying-t'ang*).⁵⁸ Such halls functioned as the loci of a veritable "cult of the saints," providing an august environment in which to make regular offerings to the spirit of the departed master. With the development of dry-lacquer technology, the corpse of a particularly eminent sage could be transformed into a flesh icon, thereby negating the distance between holy relic and true-to-life effigy. The "iconized" remains, now rendered impervious to putrefaction, need no longer be deposited on a remote mountaintop or entombed in an

⁵⁶ From fascicle 114 of the *Wei shu* by Wei Shou; translation (with some changes) from Leon Hurvitz, "Wei Shou, Treatise on Buddhism and Taoism: An English Translation of the Original Chinese Text of *Wei-shu* CXIV and the Japanese Annotation of Tsukamoto Zenryū," in *Yün-kang: The Buddhist Cave-Temples of the Fifth Century A.D. in North China* (Kyoto: Kyoto University Institute of Humanistic Studies, 1956), 16:62–63. Compare Hui-shih's biographies in fascicle 10 of the *Kao-seng chuan* (T.2059: 50.392b3–c7) and fascicle 19 of the *Fa-yüan chu-lin* (T.2122: 53.428a25–b1), where he is called T'an-shih.

⁵⁷ Fascicle 9 of the *Sung kao-seng chuan* further records that Fa-ch'in's hair had grown so long that it covered his face (T.2061: 50.764b14–765a11). See also Kosugi (n. 17 above), pp. 109–10, where he discusses these and other cases of *stūpas* containing effigies.

⁵⁸ See the full discussion in Kosugi, p. 111.

outlying cemetery, but could be brought into the monastery grounds proper.⁵⁹

Note that transforming the corpse into a mummy, rather than into ash and bone relics, does not alter the underlying logical structure of the mortuary ritual. Mummification, like exhumation and secondary burial, which remains a common practice in south China, and like cremation, which came to be preferred among Buddhists, is a form of “secondary treatment.” The impure corpse, prone to putrefaction, is transformed over time into a pure, immortalized body.⁶⁰ As we have seen, the process of mummification typically involves first desiccating the body through temporary burial or storage, and then, after a period of several years, retrieving, lacquering, gilding, and otherwise adorning the corpse. Only then is it fit to be brought back into the monastic compound to join the ancestral community in the Patriarchs Hall, a place set aside especially for feeding and honoring the spirits of the “special dead.”

But, of course, such structural similarities do not help explain the obvious fact that a mummy is held to be more than an oversized relic, or a particularly faithful representation of the deceased intended to serve as a home for his spirit and as a focus for pious offerings. The mummy serves as material evidence of the exalted spiritual attainment of the departed master—it affirms the enduring nature of the master’s enlightenment by testifying to the incorruptibility of his corpse. That this is true even in the case of a corpse artificially preserved by being encased in lacquer requires further explanation.

VII

As we have seen, there is evidence that lacquering a corpse was originally thought of as an extension of a natural phenomenon, namely, that

⁵⁹ There is another means by which the distance between portrait and relic may be negated, namely, mixing the ash and bone relics of a cremated saint with clay and using the amalgam to model a portrait of the deceased known as a *ku-hui hsiang* (“image made of bones and ash”). There are no known surviving examples of *ku-hui hsiang*, but three cases are reported in the *Sung kao-seng chuan*, all dating to the T’ang. The earliest is that of the Korean Ch’an master Wu-hsiang (Korean: Musang, 684–762). Following his death a clay sculpture was made incorporating his relics and “over the following days sweat flowed over the entire face of the image” (*T.2061: 50.832c29–833a2*). The two other recorded cases are those of Mu-ch’a (*T.2061: 50.823b1–5*) and Shu-ts’ao (*T.2061: 50.857b2–13*; see also Kosugi, pp. 116–17). Yet another variation involves inserting a relic container inside a portrait sculpture, but a full discussion of this well-attested phenomenon would take us far afield. An informative discussion of one such example can be found in Itō Shirō, “Shoki tendaijū no shōzō chōkoku—Enchin zō o chūshin ni,” in *Shōzō*, Kokusai kōryū bijutsushi kenkyūkai dairokkai kokusai shinpojiamu (Kyoto: Kokusai kōryū bijutsushi kenkyūkai, 1987), p. 23.

⁶⁰ See Hertz (n. 9 above).

the bodies of certain charismatic *dhyāna* masters were miraculously immune to putrefaction after death. In the case of the fourth Ch'an patriarch Tao-hsin, the mummification was intended to preserve the master's naturally imperishable body. With the institutionalization of Ch'an in the Sung, the charisma and enlightenment of the master came to be embodied in ritual performance, and the ritualization of enlightenment was paralleled by the ritualization of the terminal incorruptibility of the corpse. But the claim that mummification was simply a means to augment the inherent incorruptibility of the corpse was more than simply hubris—it was not merely a case of passing off an artificially preserved corpse for a naturally preserved one. It appears that the process of mummification, which involved the difficult procedure of desiccating the corpse before the onset of putrefaction, occasionally, if not regularly, failed. Thus the successful mummification of a Ch'an abbot would itself constitute proof of his spiritual attainment.

There are several biographies of eminent monks that suggest that lacquer mummifications did not always proceed without difficulty. In one case, that of Hsing-hsiu, someone seems to have failed to properly lacquer the bottom of the seated corpse. This was not discovered until the spirit of the deceased monk complained to a local government official in a dream: "In the eleventh month of the third year of the Ch'ien-yu period [950] [Hsing-hsiu] became ill, but continued to move about as usual. In the middle of the night in the third month [of the following year] he died while seated. His patrons and disciples lacquered [his body], and it remains there to the present day. Later he appeared in a dream to Ch'en Jung, the Prefect of Mu Chou, and said: 'The area beneath me is not yet finished.' They examined it, and found that originally the bottom of the seated [monk] had not been lacquered. They added layers of [lacquer] to it."⁶¹

There is also the case of Wang Lo-han, whose mummy threatened to explode, perhaps because it had begun to rot under the lacquer exterior. Once again, according to our sources, the situation was discovered only after the spirit of the deceased alerted the congregation: "In the sixth month of the first year of the K'ai-pao period [968], [Wang Lo-han] suddenly died while seated. Three days later they lacquered his body. Suddenly, from between his cheeks they heard a shrieking sound. Everyone said [the mummy was about to] burst. In the evening he appeared to many people in a dream and said: 'The lacquer is dark and depressing. Why don't you open it up.' The next day they asked a

⁶¹ From the biography of Hsing-hsiu in fascicle 30 of the *Sung kao-seng chuan*, T.2061: 50.899a2–6; see also Kosugi, p. 112.

lacquer artisan to peel it off. The color of his flesh was reddish white, and round grains of *śarīra* fell down. These were collected and offerings were made. The flesh body (*jou-shen*) remains in the original temple down to the present day” (T.2061: 50.852b4–8).

It is difficult to discern what truth, if any, may lie behind these miracle tales. It is possible, however, that such stories are attempts to rewrite the grisly reality of lacquer mummifications gone awry.

Perhaps the most provocative case of a failed mummy is that of the Vinaya master Chien-chen (688–763), better known by his Japanese name, Ganjin, who is famed as the patriarch of the Ritsu school in Japan. In 750, during his unsuccessful fifth attempt to travel to Japan, Chien-chen paid a visit to Ts’ao-ch’i, where he was able to see the mummified remains of Hui-neng. Apparently Hui-neng’s mummy so impressed Chien-chen that he too wanted to be mummified at death, and we can assume that his disciples did their best to comply with his wishes. But something seems to have gone wrong with the mummy, and eventually Chien-chen’s remains had to be cremated. Tōshōdaiji, the temple founded by Chien-chen in Nara, contains an image of the master which is a masterpiece of the highly refined and true-to-life dry-lacquer technique. It would appear that this image served as a substitute for Chien-chen’s corpse after it refused to cooperate in the mummification process.⁶²

Indeed, there is reason to believe that the aspiration to be mummified at death may have been far more common than the few surviving mummies or stray textual references would lead one to suspect. We know from modern accounts, such as that of Tz’u-hang mentioned at the beginning of this paper, that an abbot would occasionally instruct his disciples to cure his corpse in an urn for a specified number of years. At the end of the specified period, the disciples were to open the urn and, depending upon the state of the remains, make a decision as to whether or not mummification was possible. These instructions would be known only to close disciples, saving both master and students the humiliation of publicly acknowledging the decay of the teacher’s corpse. It would seem that a successful mummification was rare and difficult to achieve, and required the cooperation of the corporal remains of the deceased. Thus, even in the case of a lacquered mummy, the transformation of the cadaver into an imperishable icon could be construed as evidence of spiritual attainment.

⁶² The major sources for Chien-chen’s biography, along with an analysis of the evidence for his mummification, can be found in App. A to this article.

VIII

There were also practical economic and institutional reasons for attempting to preserve and display the remains of an eminent Ch'an abbot. We must remember that the abbot of a Ch'an monastery not only functioned as administrative head and principle spiritual counsel; he was also *ex officio* an enlightened Buddha, and as such served as the center of the ritual and liturgical life of the Dharma Hall. The abbot was a "living icon," and his death threatened a serious rupture in the ritual life of the institution.

Moreover, the rupture threatened to extend far beyond the walls of the Dharma Hall. The abbot as awakened Buddha constituted a "pure field of merit," and as such was expected to attract the financial support from government and lay sources necessary for the maintenance of a large monastic establishment. Generous lay support was often essential for the continued fiscal health of a large monastery, which in the Sung period could house upwards of several thousand monks. The historical record confirms the fact that monasteries thrived or fell into decline depending upon the stature and reputation of the abbot in charge. Thus the death of a particularly charismatic abbot not only would have threatened the spiritual and ritual life of the resident monks but also could undermine the economic viability of the monastery itself.

The rites for the deceased abbot outlined in the monastic codes are carefully calculated to affirm the continued presence of the abbot as acting head of the monastic community even in death. Not only is the spirit of the abbot still present, abiding in his effigy, but he continues to function as the center of worship in the Dharma Hall, receiving offerings and holding consultations with his monks. Moreover, the abbot in effigy continues to reside in the abbot's private quarters, taking two meals a day with the rest of the monks. Only when a new abbot is ready to take his place will the deceased abbot be moved from the abbot's residence and join his dharma-relatives in the Patriarchs Hall or Portrait Hall.

But there remained a danger that the new abbot, being relatively "green," would not command the same respect among the laity as did his predecessor, especially if his predecessor was particularly illustrious. It would have been expedient to do whatever was possible to maintain the sacral presence of the prior abbot. The physical body of the abbot-qua-buddha constituted a pure reservoir of merit, and the temple stood to gain in wealth and prestige from preserving the abbot's remains. The collection of spirit tablets and portraits residing in the

Patriarchs Hall must be seen as a “stockpile of charisma”⁶³ to which the mummified body of a particularly charismatic abbot would have made a significant contribution.

This article began with the following problem: according to canonical Buddhism, any attempt to resist the inevitability of death and the impermanence of the body is a manifestation of attachment and ignorance. Indeed, the biographies of Ch’an masters provide numerous examples of enlightened patriarchs meeting death calmly and with utter dispassion. The Ch’an practice of mummifying the remains of particularly eminent masters then appears at best misguided, and at worst craven and vulgar.

But in drawing attention to the economic and institutional forces that may have contributed to the mummification of abbots, I do not mean to support the notion that mummification constitutes a violation of normative Buddhist ideals. In fact, the mummification of a deceased master contravenes neither the letter nor the spirit of Ch’an doctrine. Rather, the mummified master enshrined in the temple grounds gives concrete and vivid expression to the fundamental tension entailed in the goal of all Buddhist practice: *nirvāṇa*.

We must remember that in a cultural environment that holds to belief in rebirth, the *nirvāṇa* or “annihilation” of the historical Buddha is precisely that which makes his eternal presence *in this world* possible.⁶⁴ Enlightenment, according to Mahāyāna doctrine, is not a particular state or realm transcendent to this world, nor is it an object lurking behind particular “iconic” forms. In modern lingo, *nirvāṇa* designates not a signified but, rather, the emptiness of the signifier.

The enlightenment or Buddhahood of the Ch’an abbot is similarly not to be thought of as something lying behind any particular form or expression. Indeed, one common term used for the pictorial representation of the abbot, *ting-hsiang* (Jpn. *chinsō*), is intended to capture precisely this dialectical tension. The term *ting-hsiang* was coined as a translation for the Sanskrit *uṣṇīṣa*, an invisible protuberance on the top

⁶³ The phrase is borrowed from Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 129.

⁶⁴ The logic that affirms the Buddha’s continued presence after his *parinirvāṇa* is explored by John Strong in his article “*Gandhakuṭi*: The Perfumed Chamber of the Buddha,” *History of Religions* 16, no. 4 (1977): 390–406. According to Strong, the structure known as a *gandhakuṭi* served in India as the focus for devotional sweeping and ritualized offerings of flowers, incense and perfumes (whereby it was rendered a “Pure Land”), and ritually located or “framed” the presence of the Buddha in his very absence. See, however, Gregory Schopen’s critique of Strong’s analysis in “The Buddha as an Owner of Property and Permanent Resident in Medieval Indian Monasteries,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 18 (1990): 212–13, n. 60.

of the Buddha's head. The portrait of the abbot-qua-buddha is thus a representation of that which allows no representation; it is a signifier enmeshed in its own dialectical negation.⁶⁵

The abbot's "enlightenment" or "Buddhahood" lies precisely in the emptiness of his form, whether that form be the living abbot himself, his portrait, his *stūpa*, or his mummified remains. Indeed, the mummified abbot, who remains a very real and even lifelike presence in death, would seem an ideal expression of the dialectic of Buddhahood. A dead abbot, it would seem, serves as well as a living one to give form to the formless—provided, that is, that he can be kept from rotting away.

IX

In conclusion, we have seen that the mummification and idolization of the Ch'an master's corpse represents the confluence of a variety of factors, both Indian and Chinese. These include ancient Chinese attempts to prevent the decomposition of the corpse, the pan-Chinese belief that the soul must be furnished with a suitable resting place (such as a memorial tablet) after death, the Indian Buddhist cult of relics, the evolution of the Chinese ancestral portrait as a focus for offerings to the dead, the ritualization of the charisma of the Ch'an master, the economics of Chinese Buddhist monasteries, and the logic of enlightenment, particularly as understood in Ch'an exegesis and enacted in Ch'an monastic ritual. Of course, a detailed analysis of the historical, doctrinal, and religious significance of any specific flesh icon would require a great deal of "local knowledge"—the detailed reconstruction of the immediate social, historical, institutional, and semiotic context of a single mummy—a task that lies beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, in drawing attention to the complex and overdetermined nature of Ch'an Buddhist mummies, I hope to have underscored the dangers attendant upon the explication of "Buddhist" or "Ch'an" conceptions of death based solely upon the uncritical analysis of normative and prescriptive sources.

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APPENDIX A

EVIDENCE FOR THE MUMMIFICATION OF CHIEN-CHEN

There are two major extant sources that record the events surrounding the death of Chien-chen: the *Tō daiwajō tōsei den*, a work compiled in Japan in

⁶⁵ A full discussion of the significance of the term *ting-hsiang* as a designation for a Buddhist portrait can be found in Foulk, Horton, and Sharf (n. 1 above).

779 by Chien-chen's disciple Mabito Genkai, and the *Sung kao-seng chuan*, compiled in China by Tsan-ning in 988.⁶⁶ As these two texts differ considerably on the subject of Chien-chen's death, one would expect the purportedly earlier account, compiled by a personal disciple of Chien-chen, to be the more reliable one. But there is evidence that Genkai's version of Chien-chen's death is intentionally misleading.

According to the *Sung kao-seng chuan* biography, Chien-chen's body was preserved as a "flesh icon" following his death: "On the fifth day of the fifth month of the seventh year of the Japanese Tempyō-hōji period [763], in the absence of any illness [Chien-chen] bid farewell to his assembly and died in seated posture. His body neither sagged nor decayed, and from the first year of the Kuang-te reign period of Emperor T'ang Tai-tsung [763] down seventy-seven years to the present day, no hemp or lacquer has been applied to his body, [although] kings, nobles, and devout scholars do daub it at times with precious incense powder. The monk Ssu-t'ō composed the *Tōsei den* which relates all this in detail" (T.2061: 50.797c7–12).

The author of the *Sung kao-seng chuan*, Tsan-ning, most likely consulted Ssu-t'ō's (d. 805) *Tōsei den* while composing his own abbreviated biography. The original three-fascicle work by Ssu-t'ō, presumably written shortly after Chien-chen's death in 763, is now lost, but it evidently served as the primary source for the most complete surviving account of Chien-chen's life, the aforementioned *Tō daiwajō tōsei den* compiled by Genkai in 779. As Genkai, like Ssu-t'ō, was a direct disciple of Chien-chen, his text has always been considered a fairly reliable source. Yet Genkai's work departs sharply from the *Sung kao-seng chuan* concerning the details of Chien-chen's demise:

In the spring of the seventh year of the Hōji period [763] [Chien-chen's] disciple Jen-chi had a dream in which he saw the ridge-pole in the Lecture Hall break apart. He awoke alarmed and frightened, suspecting that it augured the impending death of the master. He thereupon directed all the disciples to model an image of the master. On the sixth day of the fifth month of the same year [Chien-chen] died seated with legs folded while facing west. He was seventy-six years old. The top of his head was still warm three days after his death, and therefore his funeral was delayed for a long time. At the time of his cremation, the mountains were permeated with the scent of incense. While still alive [Chien-chen] had instructed the monk Ssu-t'ō: "At my end I wish to die seated [in meditation]. You can establish a separate portrait hall for me at the Kaidanin [the site of the ordination platform], and give my old residence to the monks as living quarters."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ For a complete list of sources pertaining to the biography of Chien-chen, see Takakusu Junjirō, "Le voyage de Kanshin en Orient, 742–754," pts. 1, 2, 3, *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 28 (1928): 1–41, 441–72; 29 (1929): 47–62. Takakusu's study includes a French translation of the *Tō daiwajō tōsei den*. For a detailed textual study of the *Tō daiwajō tōsei den*, see Kuranaka Susumu, *Tō daiwajō tōsei den no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Ofūsha, 1976).

⁶⁷ T.2089: 51.994b4–10. In early Buddhist Japan it was not unusual to turn the founder's residence into a commemorative portrait hall upon his death. This was done in the case of the Shingon patriarch Kūkai, as well the Tendai abbots Ennin and Enchin. And contrary to Chien-chen's wishes, it seems that the portrait hall built during the Heian period to house his image was, ironically, located on the site of his original residence. See the discussion in Mōri Hisashi, *Japanese Portrait Sculpture*, trans. W. Chie Ishibashi (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd. & Shibundo, 1977), pp. 18–23.

Genkai's *Tō daiwajō tōsei den* unambiguously reports that Chien-chen's body was cremated. And given the fact that Genkai and Ssu-t'ō were fellow disciples of the Chinese master, and that Genkai is known to have drawn heavily upon Ssu-t'ō's three-fascicle biography in composing his own, scholars have assumed that Ssu-t'ō's *Tōsei den* also recorded the cremation. This raises the question as to why the author of the *Sung kao-seng chuan*, who also drew upon Ssu-t'ō's work, would claim that Chien-chen's body was mummified and placed on display for worshipers.⁶⁸ To add to the confusion, scholars have read Genkai's report of his master's instructions to Ssu-t'ō—that Chien-chen wants to die seated, and that a separate portrait hall be built for him at the Kaidanin—as indicating that Chien-chen hoped to be preserved as a “flesh icon.” It has been suggested that Chien-chen's visit to Hui-neng's mummy in 750 may have inspired this desire to be mummified and enshrined in the temple he founded.⁶⁹

There is a simple (although ultimately speculative) solution to the apparent discrepancy between the Chinese and Japanese sources. Let us assume that Chien-chen's body was in fact mummified and venerated after death. In this case the earlier account by Ssu-t'ō, which served as the source of Tsan-ning's biography centuries later, would no doubt have reported the mummification. Let us further suppose that sometime between 763 when Chien-chen died and Ssu-t'ō wrote the *Tōsei den*, and 779 when Genkai compiled the surviving *Tō daiwajō tōsei den*, something went wrong with the mummification and Chien-chen's corpse had to be cremated. The disciples then replaced the mummy in the Portrait Hall with a portrait sculpture, perhaps the very image that graces the Mieidō of Tōshōdaiji today.⁷⁰ The revised account of Genkai, written thirteen years after the original *Tōsei den*, would not exactly be lying when it reports that Chien-chen's body was cremated “after a long time.” Moreover, Genkai included an anecdote designed to authenticate the portrait that came to replace the mummy: we are told that the image of Chien-chen was made shortly before his death, the implication being that it is an “authorized” portrait that represents an accurate likeness of the master when he was still alive. If I am correct in my reconstruction, then Chien-chen's case vividly illustrates the ritual, structural, and functional interrelationship between “flesh icons” and dry-lacquer portrait sculptures of deceased Buddhist saints in the medieval period.

⁶⁸ See the extended discussion in Kosugi, p. 123, who puzzles over the conflicting sources.

⁶⁹ See, e.g., Inoue Tadashi, “Kōsō shōzō chōkoku no mondai ten,” in *Shōzō bijutsu no shomondai—kōsōzō o chūshin ni*, Bukkyō bijutsu kenkyū, Ueno kinenzaidan josei kenkyūkai hōkokusho no. 5 (Kyoto: Kyoto National Museum, 1978), p. 2; Brinker (n. 39 above), p. 48; and Kosugi, p. 122.

⁷⁰ The famous Tōshōdaiji sculpture of Chien-chen clearly dates to the late Tempyō era. During restoration in the 1930s it was found to be constructed using the hollow-core dry-lacquer technique described above, although it had been heavily restored with papier-mâché during the Edo period. See *Nara rokudaiji taikan*, no. 13, *Tōshōdaiji 2*, ed. Nara rokudaiji taikan kankōkai (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1972), pp. 40–43.

APPENDIX B
SINO-JAPANESE CHARACTER GLOSSARY

- Ch'an-men kuei-shih 禪門規式
 ch'an-shih 禪師
 ch'an-t'ui 蟬蛻
 Ch'an-yüan ch'ing-kuei 禪苑清規
 chao-hun 招魂
 ch'e-ling 徹靈
 chen 眞
 Ch'en Jung 陳榮
 chen-shen hsiang 眞身像
 chen-shen yüan 眞身院
 chen-t'ang 眞堂
 ch'i-ku 起鼓
 Chiao-ting ch'ing-kuei 校定清規
 Chien-chen (J. Ganjin) 鑑眞
 Ch'ih-hsiu pai-chang ch'ing-kuei 勅修
 百丈清規
 ch'ing-kuei 清規
 Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu 景德傳燈錄
 Chu T'an-yü 竺曇猷
 Chu tzu chia-li 朱子家禮
 Ch'üan fa-pao chi 傳法寶紀
 ch'ung-t'ang 崇堂
- ling-tso 靈座
 Mabito Genkai 眞人元開
 Mieidô 御影堂
 Mu-ch'a 木叉
 Mujaku Dôchû 無著道忠
 Pao-p'u tzu 抱朴子
 p'o 魄
 Po Seng-kuang 帛僧光
 pu-ching kuan 不淨觀
 Shan-wu-wei 善無畏
 shang-t'ang 上堂
 Shih-lao chih 釋老志
 Sho ekô shingi shiki 諸廻向清規式
 Shu-ts'ao 束草
 ssu erh pu wang 死而不亡
 Ssu-ma Kuang 司馬光
 Ssu-t'ô 恩託
 su-chen 塑眞
 Sung kao-seng chuan 宋高僧傳
 Taishô daizôkyô 大正大藏經
 Tan Tao-kai 單道開
 T'an-shih 曇始

Fa-ch'in 法欽	Tao-hsin 道信
Fa-yüan chu-lin 法苑珠林	Tao-te ching 道德經
Ho-lo-chieh 詞羅竭	t'ing 亭
Hsing-hsiu 行脩	ting-hsiang (J. chinsô) 頂相
Hsü kao-seng chuan 續高僧傳	Tô daiwajô tôsei den 唐大和上東征傳
hsü-ling 徐靈	Tôsei den 東征傳
hsün 熏	Tôshôdaiji 唐招提寺
Hui-neng 慧能	Tsan-ning 贊寧
Hui-shih 惠始	Ts'ao-ch'i 漕溪
Hui-yüan 慧元	Tso chuan 左傳
hun 魂	tsu-shih-t'ang 祖師堂
hun-po 魂帛	tsun-su ch'ien-hua 尊宿遷化
hun-shen 魂身	Tz'u-hang 慈航
Jen-chi 忍基	wang (forget) 忘
jou-shen 肉身	wang (perish) 亡
jou-shen hsiang 肉身像	Wang Lo-han 王羅漢
Kao-seng chuan 高僧傳	wei-p'ai 位牌
ku-hui hsiang 骨灰像	Wei Shou 魏收
kuei 鬼	Wei shu 魏書
Kuang-hua ssu 廣化寺	Wu-hsiang 無相
Lin-chi 臨濟	ying-t'ang 影堂
ling 靈	Yu-hsüan 幽玄
ling-ch'u 靈處	Zokuzôkyô 續藏經