Death and the Degeneration of Life
Exposure of the Corpse in Medieval Chinese Buddhism

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The past two decades have witnessed a growing interest in the impact of Buddhist beliefs and practices upon the Chinese cult of the dead, with numerous scholars publishing important works on subjects such as the Ghost Festival, the cult of the Bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha [Dizangwang pusa 地藏王菩薩], works of fiction and drama describing the filial Buddhist son Mulian 目連, and the *Scripture on the Ten Kings* [*Shiwang jing* 十王經].[1] However, relatively little research has been done on Buddhist mortuary practices, particularly the ways in which members of the *saṅgha* and lay Buddhists disposed of their own dead.[2] Moreover, scholarship on cremation, mummification (including so-called "flesh-bodies" or *roushen* 肉身), and relic worship has focused on the Tang and Song dynasties,[3] meaning we still know relatively little about the mortuary practices Buddhist believers performed while their religion was gaining popularity throughout China during the early medieval era.

In this paper, I attempt to augment our understanding of Chinese Buddhist practice by providing an in-depth discussion of two forms of exposure of the corpse [*loushi zang* 露屍葬,

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This paper is largely based on my work about medieval Buddhist mortuary ritual published in *Ta-lu tsa-chih*. I have also consulted additional scholarship, particularly in Western languages, and relevant works are cited in the notes and bibliography. I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Robert F. Campany, John Kieschnick, John McRae, and the anonymous reviewer for *Journal of Chinese Religions* for their many helpful comments and suggestions.

[1]See, for example, Hayami, *Jizō shinkō*; Johnson, "Actions Speak Louder than Words"; Ma, *Mingjie zhushen*; Manabe, *Jizō*; Sawada, *Jigoku hen*; Teiser, *Ghost Festival* and *Ten Kings*; and Wang-Toutain, *Kṣitigarbha*.

[2]As Robert H. Sharf and Erik Zürcher point out, many Buddhologists have tended to focus their efforts on doctrinal issues discussed in canonical texts, while overlooking non-canonical sources which emphasize actual practice, especially behavior which many members of the *saṅgha* and even some modern scholars considered unacceptable. See Sharf, "Idolization" and "Buddhist Relics"; and Zürcher, "Perspectives."

[3]See the following studies: Demieville, "Momies"; Ebrey, "Cremation"; Faure, *Rhetoric of Immediacy* and "Relics and Flesh Bodies"; Huang Min-chih, "Huozang xisu"; Miyazaki, "Chūgoku kaso ko"; Naba, "Kasohō"; Seidel, "Dabi"; Sharf, "Idolization"; and Yang and Chen, "Huozang." These works often mention earlier examples of such practices, but usually treat them as background material for the study of Tang-Song Buddhism.

literally "exposure burial"] which gained increasing popularity among medieval Buddhists: cave exposure [*shishi yiku* 石室瘞窟, literally "burial in a stone chamber inside a cave"], and forest exposure [*linzang* 林葬, literally "forest burial"]. I trace the ways in which first cave exposure and then forest exposure entered China during the early medieval era, as well as how these practices spread throughout both north and south China during the medieval era. While many of the sources used in this study date from the Tang dynasty, biographical and epigraphic data on members of the *saṅgha* and lay Buddhists provide important information on the early growth of cave and forest exposure, while on-going archaeological research continues to uncover additional evidence. Exposure of the corpse gradually gained acceptance throughout medieval Chinese society, with members of northern dynasty imperial courts as well as renowned monks such as Falin 法琳 (572-640), Huiyuan 慧遠 (334-417), and Zongmi 宗密 (780-841) participating in these practices. Forest exposure spread among lay believers in north China largely due to the proselytizing efforts of leaders of the Three Stages Movement [Sanjie jiao 三階教], a fact which further reinforces our appreciation of the important role mortuary ritual played in the growth of sectarian movements. I also focus on how cave and forest exposure interacted with and even contributed to the development of other Chinese Buddhist mortuary practices such as cremation, relic worship, and mummification. Another problem concerns possible links between cave exposure and the so-called "escape by means of a simulated corpse" [*shijie* 尸解] in early Taoism.[4]

Detailed descriptions of exposure of the corpse presented below are also intended to provide a means for dealing with the theoretical implications of these practices. One important question has to do with what cave and forest exposure reveal about Buddhist attitudes towards gender and the body. The epigraphic data that I have collected to date suggests that while some Chinese felt reluctant about exposing their dead, members of the *saṅgha* and lay Buddhists attempted to justify their actions based on doctrines drawn from both canonical and apocryphal scriptures, thus following a pattern noted by other scholars who have studied Chinese Buddhist self-immolation and self-mortification.[5] In addition, the data clearly show that exposure of the corpse in both caves and forests enjoyed high popularity among women, including both nuns and lay Buddhists. The motives these women gave for their actions often centered on ideas of purity, something I discuss in detail below.

I also consider the theoretical importance of Chinese Buddhist exposure of the corpse in light of what has been written to date on funeral rites in China and throughout the world, particularly as regards double burial, asceticism, and the roles women play in mortuary ritual.[6]

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[4]I follow Robert F. Campany's translation here. See Campany, "Living Long Off and On the Books."

[5]See, for example, Benn, "Where Text Meets Flesh"; Birnbaum, *The Healing Buddha*; Gernet, "Suicides par le feu"; Jan, "Buddhist Self-Immolation"; Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*, 35-50; and Yü, "P'u-t'o Shan," 226-234.

[6]See, for example, Ahern, *Cult of the Dead*; Bloch, "Death, Women, and Power"; Bloch and Parry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*; Freedman, *Chinese Lineage and Society*, 118-154; Gnoli, "Dakhma"; Hertz, "Collective Representation of Death"; Levin, "Mummification and Cremation";

However, the data I present here suggest that exposing the dead had less to do with fertility and the so-called "regeneration of life" than with the desire to achieve accelerated destruction of the corpse. These forms of exposure were clearly linked to Buddhist meditation and asceticism, and were spread to China by Buddhist monks from India and Central Asia who practiced an ascetic regimen or discipline known as *dhūtā* or *dhūtāṅga* [*toutuo* 頭陀]. In addition, exposing the dead frequently constituted the first stage in a process of double or even triple burial. Some Buddhists had their remains stored in caves following the successful completion of forest exposure. As for women, their active participation in exposure practices does not seem to have been linked to concerns about fertility, but rather to a desire to achieve the same level of spiritual accomplishment as practicing males by means of destroying the very body which they felt was a source of their pollution.

Finally, some caveats about sources. In studying Chinese Buddhist exposure of the corpse, I have relied mainly on two types of texts: biographies of eminent monks in Huijiao's 慧皎 (497-554) *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (T 2059) and Daoxuan's 道宣 (596-667) *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (T 2060), as well as epigraphic texts such as funerary or tomb inscriptions [*muzhi* 墓誌] and funerary inscriptions carved on stūpas [*taming* 塔銘]. In using the first type of source, one soon discovers that there are more accounts of exposure practices in *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* than in *Gaoseng zhuan*, and that the majority of Daoxuan's biographies concern monks who lived in north China. This is probably because exposure of the corpse had yet to become widespread at the time Huijiao was composing his work, and because most of Huijiao's biographies concern monks from south China, where exposure of the corpse was apparently less common than in the north. In contrast, Daoxuan lived during a time when exposure practices had become relatively popular, and had visited many areas in north China where this practice flourished.[7] Epigraphic texts are a valuable supplement to the biographies because they contain data on ordinary members of the *saṅgha* and lay believers. However, these sources demonstrate a geographic bias, in that many come from the capitals of Luoyang and Chang'an and their environs. This bias is due not only to the obvious fact that Buddhism flourished near the capitals, but also came about because late Qing and early Republican epigraphers tended to make or collect rubbings from these areas. While an increasing amount of archaeological work has been done on Buddhist sacred sites in rural areas,[8] our knowledge of the geographic range of exposure practices remains limited. Epigraphic texts are also biased in terms of social class, inasmuch as only wealthy or well-connected Buddhists could usually afford the construction of a stūpa or tomb containing an inscription written in classical Chinese. Only a few texts describe commoners exposing their dead.[9]

The limitations of these sources make it difficult to adequately assess the relative popularity of exposure of the corpse and other forms of Buddhist mortuary ritual in medieval

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Parry, "Sacrificial Death"; Tsu, "Religious Ethnography," 113-128; Watson, "Of Flesh and Bones"; and Watson and Ebrey, *Death Ritual.*

[7]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 73.

[8]Liu Shufen, "Art, Ritual, and Society."

[9]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 129.

China. My research on Buddhist biographical and epigraphic texts reveals that accounts of exposure of the corpse outnumber those of cremation, which in turn suggests that the former type of mortuary ritual enjoyed greater popularity than the latter. One useful exercise would involve tabulating the accounts of different forms of burial in order to provide a statistical analysis of their relative popularity, but this is a task I have yet to undertake. Moreover, even if such an analysis could be completed, the fact that the sources are biased in terms of region and social class would immediately cast doubts on the representativeness of the data. For example, biographical data presented below indicate that due to imperial restrictions on cremation this practice proved relatively uncommon among eminent medieval monks who lived near urban centers; whether this proved to be the case among monks who lived in rural areas for which we have no data is another matter entirely. Thus, while I feel confident in maintaining that exposure of the corpse gained popularity in medieval China, the actual extent to which it was practiced throughout China and the degree to which it may have been more or less widespread than other forms of Buddhist mortuary ritual remain in doubt.

Exposure of the Corpse: A Brief Introduction

In this paper, I use the term "exposure of the corpse" to refer to the practice of placing the corpse in an unsheltered place where it could be consumed by animals and insects. Different methods of exposing the dead have been used throughout much of the world, including Central Asia, Southeast Asia, India, Iran, and Tibet. In most of these cases, the practice of exposing the dead seems to have been intended to hasten the decay of the corpse and the pollution it represents, as well as serving as the first stage of double burial.[10] Probably the best known example of exposing the dead involves the *dakhma* or "towers of silence" built by Zoroastrian communities in Iran and Parsi communities in India. These towers of rock contained a platform slanting towards a central pit, as well as three concentric circles for the corpses of men, women, and children. The bones were collected on a biannual basis. In some cases, they were kept in an ossuary; in others, they were thrown into a pit of lime, where they gradually turned to dust and were washed away via four canals which evacuated the dust and rainwater into subterranean pits.[11]

For the purposes of this paper, however, we shall devote our attention to Buddhist practices of exposing the dead. We should begin by acknowledging that the Buddhist view towards death tends to be somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the corpse should be disposed of as quickly as possible; at the same time, however, the remains of eminent Buddhist practitioners which have been purified by means of cremation or exposure can become the object of veneration.[12] One example of the first view is the "meditations on impurity" or *aśubha-bhāvanā* [*bujing guan* 不淨觀], which include meditating on a corpse.

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[10]Bloch and Parry, *Death and the Regeneration of Life*; Hertz, "Collective Representation of Death"; Parry, *Death in Benares*; and Thomas, "Funeral Rites."

[11]Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*; Gnoli, "Dakhma"; and Thomas, "Funeral Rites."

[12]Sharf, "Idolization," 3-4.

Numerous examples of the second view may be found in the relic cults which flourished in both India and China.[13]

When we turn our attention to mortuary ritual, we find that while most Indian Buddhists practiced cremation, burying the corpse as well as river and forest exposure were also options. The following passage from *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya* (which Gregory Schopen dates to the Middle Period of Indian Buddhism, from the beginning of the common era to the late fifth century) describes how the bodies of deceased monks were to be dealt with:

> Although the Blessed One had said that the funeral ceremonies for a deceased monk should be performed, because the monks did not know how they should be performed, the Blessed One said: "A deceased monk is to be cremated."... Although the Blessed One had said a deceased monk is to be cremated, when wood was not at hand the monks asked the Blessed One concerning this matter, and the Blessed One said: "The body is to be thrown in a river." When there is no river, the Blessed One said: "Having dug a grave, it is to be buried." When it is summer and the earth is hard and the wood is full of living things, the Blessed One said: "In an isolated spot, with its head pointing north, having put down a bundle of grass as a bolster, having laid the corpse on its right side, having covered it with bunches of grass or leaves, having directed the reward to the deceased, and having given a recitation of the dharma of the three sections [*tridaṇḍaka*], the monks are to disperse."[14]

When Xuanzhuang 玄奘 (602-664) visited India during his pilgrimage in search of Buddhist scriptures, he also noted the presence of these forms of mortuary ritual: "There are three methods [in India] of paying the last tribute to the dead: 1) by cremation—wood being made into a pyre, the body is burnt; 2) by water—the body is thrown into deep flowing water and abandoned; 3) by desertion—the body is cast into some forest-wild, to be devoured by beasts."[15] It seems highly significant that cave exposure is not mentioned in these and other sources on Indian Buddhism, although many sacred sites and their associated relic cults in India were centered on caves.[16] Cave exposure appears to have been initially practiced in China by Central Asian monks, but we have no information on how this form of exposure of the corpse was undertaken in their native lands. In fact, Daoxuan's *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* does not list cave exposure as having been practiced by Central Asian Buddhists, leading one to

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[13]Faure, "Relics and Flesh Bodies" and *Rhetoric of Immediacy*; Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* and "Death"; and Sharf, "Idolization."

[14]Schopen, "Death," 489; see also Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 218, 234. It is interesting to note that the Malayo-Polynesian communities described by Hertz and Thai monks described by Stanley Tambiah and Kamala Tiyavanich also practiced forest exposure (see below, pages 6-7); the links between these practices and forest exposure in India have yet to be determined. The same holds for river exposure practiced by Hindus.

[15]Beal, *Si-yu-ki*, 86. The monks Faxian 法顯 (ca. 399-416) and Yijing 義淨 (fl. 671-695) also reported on the practice of cremation during their pilgrimages to India; see Seidel, "Dabi," 575, 577. Neither monk mentions river or forest exposure.

[16]Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 165-203.

wonder the extent to which this practice may have been shaped by China's indigenous religious traditions.

In terms of Buddhist doctrine, the practice of exposure of the corpse was most frequently justified by reference to the concept of giving [*dāna*; *bushi* 布施] and *dhūtāṇga* asceticism. Buddhists frequently distinguished between two main types of *dāna*: *dāna* of the living [*shengshi* 生施] and *dāna* of the dead [*sishi* 死施]. *Dāna* of the living included giving alms to the *saṅgha* and donating one's wealth to a Buddhist sacred site (often referred to in Chinese as *caishi* 財施), as well as various forms of self-sacrifice [*sheshen* 捨身] such as offering one's living body to feed wild animals, burning or cutting off a part of one's body, and the highest level of sacrifice, total self-immolation. Many Buddhists appear to have been inspired by the example of the Śākyamuni Buddha, who in one of his previous incarnations offered his body to wild animals.[17] *Dāna* of the dead was to be accomplished by offering one's body to living creatures through exposure in either rivers or forests. We have little information on the actual practice of exposing the dead in India, but it seems to have been most common among ascetics, especially those who practied the rigorous regimen known as *dhūtāṇga* These ascetics generally adhered to a set of twelve practices, some of the most important being wearing garments made of rags, deriving food solely from begging and eating only once a day, living in a forest or other unsheltered place, and practicing meditation in a charnel ground where corpses were exposed [*śītavana*; *shituolin* 尸陀林].[18]

Although scholars like Gregory Schopen properly point out that the asectic ideals expressed in Buddhist scriptures may only rarely have been carried out to the letter,[19] these practices still persist among ascetic Buddhist monks (including those practicing *dhūtāṇga*) in countries like Thailand.[20] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah has observed that such practices afford "the opportunity to be mindful of death, to vanquish fear and dread, and to observe the very *process* of decaying and of becoming, a true antidote to the fallacies of reification."[21] Kamala Tiyavanich's field research on ascetic monks in Thailand confirms this point and contains many moving accounts of how monks who practiced *dhūtāṇga* [Thai *thudong*] and resided in charnel grounds attempted to overcome their emotions.[22] One monk named Juan encountered an exposed corpse in a forest back in 1943. He recalls his experience in the following words:

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[17]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 24-25.

[18]Dutt, *Early Monastic Buddhism*; and Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*, 34-35, 160. *Śītavana* has also been translated as *hanlin* 寒林, or "cold forest," which also refers to a part of Buddhist and Taoist altars set aside in *pudu* 普度 rituals for hungry ghosts. In some Mulian dramas, Hanlin even became personified as a hungry ghost or vengeful spirit. See Johnson, "Actions Speak Louder than Words"; and Pang, "The *P'u-tu* Ritual."

[19]Schopen, "Death," 473, 475.

[20]Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints*, 33-37, 84-96.

[21]Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints*, 37. Italics in original.

[22]Tiyavanich, *Wandering Monks*, 96-105. One is tempted to compare these practices to Aghori asceticism of Hindu India, which includes the rite of *śava-sadhana*, or meditation while sitting on a corpse, as well as smearing one's body with the ashes from funeral pyres and at times even the

> It stank so badly... [I thought] I have come across a treasure which is hard to find. I should use it as a subject of meditation.... The intestines were infested with maggots. Vultures and crows must have scrambled for it. Both eyes were full of maggots and the mouth full of worms. Chest and both legs were also infested with worms. The urinary organs and anus were full of maggots. The stench was strong.[23]

His account strikingly resembles Daoxuan's description of exposure in *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* (see below, page 8).

Many ascetics who lived in cemeteries or meditated on corpses sought inspiration from canonical texts describing Śākyamuni Buddha as having done so, as well as *vinaya* codes which describe the importance of *dhyāna* meditation performed while contemplating corpses in cemeteries.[24] It may also be significant that the few examples of forest exposure described in Indian Buddhist texts often state that this form of exposing the dead could precede cremation, a pattern which also persisted in medieval China.[25]

By the third and fourth centuries, Indian and Central Asian forms of Buddhist mortuary ritual had spread to China. In the "Abandoning the Body" [*yishen* 遺身] chapter of his *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, Daoxuan describes five forms of mortuary ritual practiced by Buddhists in China and Central Asia, including cremation, cave exposure, forest exposure, river exposure, and burial in the earth. Daoxuan goes on to note that "One only hears of forest exposure and burial in the earth as having been transmitted to China [here referred to as Dong Xia 東夏, "Eastern Xia"]. There are few signs of exposure in rivers and cremation."[26] Daoxuan's observations prove highly significant for our understanding of the history of Buddhist mortuary practices in China, for while many scholars have focused on the history of cremation it appears that such practices did not gain widespread popularity until the tenth and eleventh centuries.[27] Moreover, Anna Seidel has shown that accounts of cremation do not appear in Chinese sources until the fifth century, and that most of these texts describe Buddhists who came to China from India and Central Asia.[28] It is also highly likely that cremation was less prevalent in areas near those imperial courts which objected to the practice. For example, one account in *Gaoseng zhuan* states that following the execution of the Liangzhou monk Xuangao 玄高 in 444 his disciples attempted to cremate his remains, only to be told by the Northern Wei emperor Taiwu 太武 (r. 435-452) that "state laws did not allow this" [*guozhi buxu* 國制不許]. The disciples then chose to bury their master.[29] Another

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consumption of such ashes. Aghoris are even rumored to have eaten the flesh of corpses, although there is little evidence that this actually took place. See also Parry, *Death in Benares* and "Sacrificial Death."

[23]Tiyavanich, *Wandering Monks*, 104.

[24]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 25-27; and Tambiah, *Buddhist Saints*.

[25]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 26.

[26]T 2060, 50.685a-b.

[27]Ebrey, "Cremation."

[28]Seidel, "Dabi," 575, 578. For more on the roles of Central Asian monks in transmitting Buddhism to China, see Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*.

[29]T 2059, 50.398a.

case involves the Tang monk Yiwan 義碗. Just before his death in 731, he told his disciples to place his corpse in the monastery's garden and wait thirty-five years for a meritorious official to petition the emperor for permission to cremate his remains. His wish was fulfilled in 767, thanks to the efforts of the Tang general Guo Ziyi 郭子儀(697-781).[30] Other renowned Tantric monks such as Amoghavajra also had to request imperial permission before being cremated, although the extent to which such practices were adhered to in areas further from the imperial center is not clear. Nevertheless, the data in *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* and epigraphic sources strongly suggest that despite the controversial nature of exposure of the corpse this practice might have been more common than has been previously recognized, and may have influenced the development of related practices such as relic worship and mummification.

The *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* also contains a graphic description of forest exposure which combines Daoxuan's admiration of the ideals underlying this practice with a sense of revulsion at its actual undertaking:

> Placing the corpse in a forest can reduce or eliminate miserly thoughts. Creatures that walk, crawl or fly can eat their fill of it, while spirits and hungry ghosts can be saved by it. It can nourish all manner of living things, allowing them to fully attain what they need. Thus, insects and worms swarm all over the flesh, while the birds peck and swallow at will. Wasting away in the wilds—it is a sight to inspire compassion and pity.[31]

The perceived horrors of forest exposure appear to have prompted some Buddhists and their disciples or family members to choose cave exposure instead, because while this practice also involved the exposure of the corpse to the ravages of living creatures, such acts took place in a setting largely hidden from view. *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* contains the biography of a Yongzhou (Shaanxi) monk named Faxi 法喜, who died in 632. He had instructed his disciples to expose his corpse in a forest, but they felt reluctant about doing so and prepared a cave instead. However, while proceeding to the cave they encountered a sudden snowstorm that blocked their path. Faxi's spirit then descended,[32] and rebuked them for disobeying his wishes. The disciples persisted in their course of action though, and finally succeeded in placing his corpse in the cave.[33] The disciples of the early sixth-century monk Zhishun 智順, who resided in the Cloud Gate Monastery [Yunmen Si 雲門寺] in Shanyin (Zhejiang), disobeyed his orders to expose a corpse in a forest and instead buried it next to the temple.[34] Another example may be found in the case of the nun Fayuan 法願, who died near Chang'an in 663. Despite the fact that she had clearly expressed her desire "to give my body to be torn

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[30]*Jinshi cuibian* 金石萃編 55:6-8, "Funerary Inscription for the Meditation Master Yiwan" [Yiwan chanshi muzhi 義琬禪師墓誌].

[31]T 2060, 50.685a-b. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[32]The Chinese term is *jiangshen* , which suggests that Faxi's appearance involved some form of spirit possession.

[33]T 2060, 50.587c.

[34]T 2059, 50.381b.

at by the birds, and entrust my form to be gnawed at by animals," her siblings (who apparently were not practicing Buddhists) felt so distressed at this idea that they eventually chose to bury her in a cave.[35] Some non-Buddhists even balked at the idea of cave exposure. One funerary inscription describes what happened after the death in 701 of a lay Buddhist woman from Luoyang whose maiden name was Changsun 長孫 and who had married into the aristocratic Wang family of Runzhou (Jiangsu). She had requested to be exposed in a cave, but her son agonized over the decision for over two years before carrying it out.[36]

Despite some differences between cave and forest exposure, these two practices did share a number of points in common. First of all, both forms of exposing the dead were based on the ideal of self-sacrifice. As one biography which describes the cave exposure of the Chang'an monk Fachun 法純 states, "A cave was excavated for his corpse. Its door was left open, so that his body could be given to all creatures that walk, crawl, and fly. When people looked inside, they saw that the flesh had been totally consumed while the bones were in good order."[37]

Another common facet of these forms of exposing the dead involved their constituting the first stage of double or even triple burial. Once various living creatures had completed their grim task of consuming the corpse's flesh, the bones were disposed of in one of the following ways: burial in the earth, veneration in a stūpa, cremation followed by veneration in a stūpa, or cremation followed by scattering of the ashes. The entire process could take anywhere from a few months to many years, depending on the time required to allow for total consumption of the flesh, overcome objections from the deceased's relatives or disciples, and complete the construction of a stūpa.

Cave Exposure

The term most frequently used by Chinese archaeologists to describe cave exposure, *shishi yiku*, is in fact a modern exonym. The sources I have used for this study refer to this practice by a number of different terms, including niche [*kan* 龕], stone niche [*shikan* 石龕], stone cave [*shiku* 石窟], niches and caves [*kanku* 龕窟], and stone chamber [*shishi* 石室]. Some texts from the Guanzhong region near Chang'an also contain the term *kong* 空, usually as part of the compound *yingkong* 營空, which apparently derives from that era's local dialect. Another term which appears in epigraphic sources is burial den [*yixue* 瘞穴], although this describes smaller caves (usually no more than 50 centimeters high) used to house the remains of cremated Buddhists.[38]

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[35] *Jinshi cuibian* 54:27-29, "Funerary Inscription for the Nun Fayuan of the Monastery of Complete Salvation" [Jidu Si ni Fayuan muzhi 濟渡寺尼法願墓誌].

[36] *Baqiongshi jinshi buzheng* 49:13, "Funerary Inscription for Woman Changsun, Wife of Wang Meichang, Regional Inspector of Runzhou" [Runzhou cishi Wang Meichang qi Changsun shi muzhi 潤州刺史王美暢妻長孫氏墓誌]. See also *Tangdai muzhi huibian*, 1029-1030.

[37] T 2060, 50.576a.

[38] Li and Yang, "Longmen shiku"; and Liu Shufen, "Shishi yiku."

Of all the terms for cave exposure mentioned above, the one richest in meaning and cultural significance is stone chamber [*shishi*]. Han dynasty and medieval sources indicate that this term could describe places used to store books,[39] as well as sites where Xianbei 鮮卑 peoples stored ancestral tablets.[40] Rolf Stein's monumental study of sacred space and cosmology in East Asia also reveals that some sūtras describe the Buddha as staying in a stone chamber before preaching. Perhaps even more importantly, *shishi* was another term for the grotto-heavens [*dongtian* 洞天] or grotto-chambers [*dongshi* 洞室] where immortals/transcendents were believed to reside.[41] Stein and subsequent scholars such as Stephen R. Bokenkamp and Franciscus Verellen have explored the symbolic importance of Taoist grotto-heavens as sites of refuge, initiation, and ultimately transcendence.[42] Similar ideas may have influenced the ways in which medieval Chinese Buddhists practiced self-cultivation in caves.[43] For example, the Dunhuang monk Tan Daokai 單道開, who resembled Taoist ascetics by abstaining from cereals, was placed in a stone chamber on Mount Luofu following his death in 359. When his disciples discovered a few years later that his corpse had remained intact, one employed Taoist terminology to explain this miraculous occurrence by stating this his master had "molted like a cicada" [*chantui* 蟬蛻].[44] This term appears in Taoist texts describing escape by means of a simulated corpse,[45] and its presence in Huijiao's *Gaoseng zhuan* suggests a marked degree of intermingling between Buddhist and Taoist traditions.[46] It is true that cave exposure and escape by means of a simulated corpse differed in many important ways, especially since the former practice was intended to accelerate the decomposition of the corpse while the latter's goal involved the attainment of immortality. At the same time, however, the importance of stone chambers in both cave exposure and escape by means of a simulated corpse, as well as examples of overlapping terminology such as the one above, suggest that some practitioners may have combined elements of the two. Research by Robert Campany, Isabelle Robinet, Anna Seidel, and Michel Strickmann reveals that escape by means of a simulated corpse could be linked to self-cultivation in a cave, and that the signs of successful attainment of corpse-escape included the flesh refusing to rot or the five viscera failing to decay.[47] One frequently cited passage from the *Declarations of the*

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[39]*Shiji* 130.3296; and *Hou Hanshu* 66.2174.

[40]*Jinshu* 19.605; and *Weishu* 13.328 and 180.2738.

[41]Stein, *The World in Miniature*, 288, 292, 345.

[42]Bokenkamp, "Peach Flower Font"; and Verellen, "Grotto-Heavens."

[43]Birnbaum, "Secret Halls of the Mountain Lords."

[44]T 2059, 50.387c.

[45]Campany, "Living Long Off and On the Books," 20 n. 46; and Robinet, "Deliverance from the Corpse," 58.

[46]For more on Buddho-Taoist interaction in medieval China, see Bokenkamp, "The Yao Baoduo Stele"; Seidel, "Le sutra merveilleux du Ling-pao"; Verellen, "Evidential Miracles"; and Zürcher, "Buddhist Influences on Early Taoism."

[47]See, for example, Robinet, "Deliverance from the Corpse"; and Seidel, "Post-mortem Immortality." For a new interpretation of some forms of *shijie* as a form of subterfuge by means of an object that is merely a simulacrum of a corpse, see Campany, "Living Long Off and On the Books."

Perfected[48] contains detailed instructions for scrutinizing bodies to determine if escape by means of a simulated corpse has occurred. This scripture also describes the case of the adept known as Zhao Chengzi 趙成子, who apparently passed away in a stone chamber. Five or six years after his death someone saw his corpse in this chamber. The flesh had rotted away but the bones and five viscera remained intact, with the blood and other bodily fluids preserved inside them.[49]

Man-made and natural caves used to expose the corpses of deceased Buddhist practitioners were usually between 1 and 1.5 meters in height and just over a meter wide, and ranged from between 1 and 3 meters in length. The most elaborate caves were constructed by boring into the sides of cliffs, ironically often due to a desire on the part of squeamish Buddhists or their relatives to make such locations less accessible to living creatures. Textual and archaeological evidence reveal another significant aspect of cave exposure, namely that the corpses of some found in caves were in sitting and reclining postures, particularly those used in meditation.[50] This suggests that cave exposure may well have been considered to be part of a Buddhist regimen of self-cultivation intended to help the adept escape the cycle of karmic retribution or achieve rebirth in a Buddhist paradise or Pure Land. The data presented below also include examples of monks dying in their caves while practicing meditation there, and it is tempting to speculate that cave exposure may have begun as a response to the discovery of the remains of ascetics who passed away inside their caves. Accounts of monks who practiced *dhūtāṅga* and ended up being exposed in their stone chambers persisted during the northern dynasties,[51] and Kamala Tiyavanich's work on Thai ascetic monks contains examples of monks dying of disease in the isolated caves they had selected as sites for meditation.[52] Chinese Buddhists do not appear to have intentionally exposed their corpses in caves until the sixth century.

The earliest surviving accounts of cave exposure reveal that it was first practiced by *dhūtāṅga* monks from Central Asia.[53] *Gaoseng zhuan* tells of the late third-century monk Heluojie 訶羅竭, who had "left the family" [*chujia* 出家] as a youth and gained renown for "practicing *dhūtāṅga* and living alone in the wilds." He journeyed to Luoyang in 291, and practiced *dhyāna* meditation in an isolated stone chamber for seven years before passing away in a meditation posture. His disciples attempted to cremate his corpse, but it remained untouched by the flames for several days. They eventually had no choice but to return him to his chamber, and later visitors reported that his corpse remained well preserved.[54] This

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[48]*Zhen'gao,* HY 1010; TT 637-640; CT 1016.

[49]*Zhen'gao* 4.15b-17a. See also Robinet, "Deliverance from the Corpse," 64; Strickmann, "T'ao Hung-ching," 130, 182-184. In certain contexts, Taoist caves could represent wombs or tombs; see Stein, *The World in Miniature*, 91-95, 325. For the symbolic significance of caves in non-Asian civilizations, see Green, "Tombs"; and Miller, *Heavenly Caves*.

[50]T 2060, 50.595a, 654a, 688c; see also Zhang, "Longmen shiku Tangdai yiku."

[51]T 2060, 50.557c,680c.

[52]Tiyavanich, *Wandering Monks*, 123-126, 144-148.

[53]Some of these sources are also discussed in Sharf, "Idolization," 7-8.

[54]T 2059, 50.389a.

account implies that Heluojie's death in a stone chamber may not have been inadvertent, and that his disciples had attempted to cremate his corpse against his wishes. Another example of early cave exposure concerns the monk Faxu 法緒 from Turfan [Gaochang 高昌], who practiced *dhūtāṅga* in the mountains of Sichuan, frequently staying in a stone chamber where he pursued *dhyāna* meditation and chanted scriptures like the *Lotus Sūtra* and *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*. Although he passed away in this chamber during midsummer, his corpse not only failed to rot but emitted a fragrant odor from his left side. Moreover, for ten consecutive nights after his death a glowing light which could be seen for miles around shone from the corpse. These miraculous occurences prompted local villagers [*cunren* 村人] to build a funerary stūpa [*zhongta* 塚塔] outside the stone chamber. Whether or not this became a site for the worship of his flesh-body or relics is not mentioned.[55]

Cave exposure became increasingly widespread by the sixth and seventh centuries, with biographical and epigraphical data indicating that by this time cave exposure was being practiced in Dunhuang, Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, Sichuan and Zhejiang. However, the bulk of our data derives from a number of sites near Chang'an and Luoyang.[56] Epigraphic sources from both of these areas reveals that many members of the *saṅgha* had devoted much of their monastic careers to reciting the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, one of the most popular scriptures in medieval Buddhism. The disciples of some of these Buddhists also erected *dhāraṇī* pillars [*jingchuang* 經幢] in caves in order to provide for the salvation of the deceased.[57] Non-Buddhists, including members of the aristocracy, also practiced cave exposure. For example, the corpse of the Eastern Wei Prime Minister Gao Huan 高歡 was exposed in a cave, but in a rather un-Buddhist gesture the artisans who built the cave were put to death and buried with him.[58]

In reading accounts of cave exposure, one is soon struck by the fact that the majority of individuals engaged in this practice were women, including both nuns and lay Buddhists. Consider, for example, the case of the Chan nun Jianxing 堅行 from the Monastery of

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[55]T 2059, 50.396c-397a. Cave exposure also appears to have been common among Dunhuang monks. For example, the renowned "meditation master" [*chanshi* 禪師] Zhu Tanyou 竺曇猶, who possessed thaumaturgical powers and the ability to commune with fierce animals as well as divine beings (including immortals), practiced *dhūtāṅga* and *dhyāna* meditation in a stone chamber in Zhejiang's Tiantai mountains. He passed away in a sitting position during the late fourth century, and visitors to the site over 30 years later reported that his corpse remained intact (T 2059, 50.395c-396b). A similar biography may be found in the case of the meditation master Bo Sengguang 帛僧光 (T 2059, 50.395c). A monk from Central Asia (Samarkand or Kangju 康居) named Huiming 慧明 who journeyed to Zhejiang one century later during the Southern Qi dynasty (479-502) was so inspired by Zhu Tanyou's example that he meditated and chanted scriptures alongside Zhu's corpse until his own death at age 70 (T 2059, 50.400b). See Sharf, "Idolization," 7-8; and Zürcher, *Buddhist Conquest*, 145-146.

[56]The latter location features both cave exposure and the burial of ashes of cremated Buddhists in caves [*yixue*].

[57]For more on *dhāraṇī* pillars, see Liu Shufen, "Tangdai zunsheng jingchuang."

[58]*Zizhi tongjian* 160.4957. See also T 2060, 50.669c. This cave is also mentioned in *Yongle dadian* 13824.10. For more on the practice of human sacrifice at Chinese imperial funerals, see Huang Zhanyue, *Zhongguo gudai de rensheng yu renxun*.

Proclaiming Transformations [Xuanhua Si 宣化寺] in Chang'an. Prior to her death in 724, she is said to have "ordered her disciples to build a cave for sacrificing her body." Nine years later, her disciples "gathered her bones and buried them in a stūpa" [*shougu zangta* 收骨葬塔].[59] The nun Huideng 惠燈, who passed away in 731 near Longmen, had her corpse exposed in a cave named after her which measured 1.46 meters high, 1.16 meters wide, and 1.02 meters in depth.[60] Another interesting example of cave exposure involves the nun Facheng 法澄. During the early Tang, her father Xiao Yu 蕭禹 had served as Grand Guardian of the Heir Apparent [Taizi taibao 太子太保] despite also being a member of the Three Stages movement.[61] Her older and younger sisters, as well as her brother and one niece, had also joined the *saṅgha*. Following her death in 729, her corpse was exposed in a cave [*kong*] near Chang'an.[62] One of the earliest examples of lay Buddhist practice of cave exposure involves the Empress Yifu 乙弗, wife of Emperor Wendi of the Western Wei (r. 535-551). She had been forced to become a nun by her husband after he took a new wife from the Rouran 柔然 people[63] as part of a strategic alliance. The emperor later blamed Yifu for allegedly conspiring to help a Rouran invasion, and ordered her to commit suicide in 540.[64] Her body was exposed in a cave on Mount Maiji 麥積, which has been determined to correspond to Cave 43.[65]

The most moving example of female Buddhists choosing to expose their corpses in caves may be that of Madam Song, who married into an aristocratic family at age fifteen only to see her husband pass away early in their marriage. According to her funerary inscription:

> Although they had planned on growing old together and enjoying their longevity, who would have expected that her husband would descend to the path to the springs [the underworld] in his middle age. He died having only reached the position of Palace Attendant, passed away without having enjoyed the fruits of longevity. After extended weeping, she suddenly turned to Buddhism. In order to gain salvation in the future, she increasingly pursued the path of dedicated self-cultivation. She [eventually] achieved enlightenment and the completion of *dhyāna*, and attained perfection in her home near the capital. This was on the sixth day of the ninth lunar month of the fourth year of the Tianbao reign (745), when she was age fifty-seven. Her beloved sons were by her side, and her filial daughters in attendance. She instructed them as follows: "I have devoted myself to the pursuit of purity, and my heart is free of all cares. Would you heed the *Book of Odes* about [husband and wife] being buried

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[59] *Jinshi cuibian* 78:21-22, "Stūpa Inscription of the Chan Nun Jianxing" [Jianxing Chanshi taming 堅行禪師塔銘].

[60] Wang, "Longmen shiku," 121-122.

[61] For more on Xiao, see Yabuki, *Sangai-kyō*, 52-54.

[62] *Jinshi cuibian* 78:2, "Stūpa Inscription of the Nun Facheng from the Monastery of Flourishing Sagehood" [Xingsheng Sini Facheng taming 興聖寺尼法澄塔銘].

[63] Different scholars identify the Rouran as being either Xianbei or Xiongnu.

[64] *Beishi* 13.506-507.

[65] Fu, "Maiji shan shiku."

> together while forgetting Laozi's [idea] of each returning to its own?"... They built a stūpa for her in an old graveyard, where she gradually turned to dust...[66]

Her funerary inscription concludes with the following statement: "She was neither encoffined nor entombed; just purity and quietude." I will have more to say on ideas of purity and pollution and their links to gender issues in the conclusion.

Most examples of lay cave exposure I have located to date come from Longmen, which features thirty-nine caves containing a total of four surviving inscriptions, three of which are dated. I have also found an additional four examples of lay cave exposure from Chang'an. Except for one case, all involve lay women, including Xiao Yu's grand-daughter and the woman Changsun mentioned above. One lay woman who died in 754 asked for her corpse to be exposed in the cave containing the remains of her exposed husband.[67] Another woman was exposed in a cave by her bereaved husband,[68] while yet another's remains were later removed from her cave by her son to be buried next to her husband in their ancestral cemetery.[69] There is also the touching story of Madam Dong, who while on her deathbed in 657 told her son: "After I die, I will not require a coffin or burial. Put me in a cave atop a peak, so that I can see far into the distance." Her son was initially reluctant to comply, but in the end respected his mother's dying wish and exposed her in a cave in the mountains near Chang'an.[70]

Most of the lay Buddhists who were exposed in caves near Longmen and Chang'an appear to have belonged to upper class families, and some inscriptions describe the performance of elaborate Buddhist funeral rituals prior to the commencement of cave exposure.[71] Some also chose to have their remains reburied around the stūpas of eminent monks who had practiced cave exposure. One funerary inscription dedicated to a Madam Xue [Xue furen 薛夫人] quotes her as giving the following instructions to her descendents: "Choose a proper [burial] site [*zhaisuo* 宅所], but it must be near my master, and with a clear view into the distance, so that I may rest in peace."[72] There is also the case of Feng Bao 封抱, who died in 695 during the reign of the Empress Wu and asked to be exposed in a cave from which he could view the stone chamber of the monk Pinggong 平公.[73] Similar phenomena marked the practice of forest exposure as well, particularly in cases involving Three Stages masters and their disciples.

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[66]*Quan Tangwen buyi*, 3d ser., 79-80.

[67]*Tangdai muzhi huibian*, 1706, "Cave Funerary Inscription and Preface for Woman Liu, Wife of Administrator Lord Huang of Anxiang Prefecture during the Great Tang" [Da Tang gu Anxiang jun changshi Huang fujun furen Pengcheng (Liu shih) kanming bing xu 大唐故安鄉君長史黃府君夫人彭城劉氏龕銘並序].

[68]*Luoyang chutu lidai muzhi jisheng*, 278.

[69]Zhao and Zhu, "Anpu muzhi chutan."

[70]*Quan Tangwen buyi*, 376-377.

[71]Zhang, "Longmen shiku Tangdai yiku," 160.

[72]*Baqiongshi jinshi buzheng* 56:14, "Stupa Inscription of Merit for the Lay Buddhist Madam Xue" [Xue shi youpoyi gongde taming 薛氏優婆夷功德塔銘].

[73]*Tangdai muzhi huibian*, 880, "Funerary Inscription of Deceased Lord Feng of the Great Zhou" [Da Zhou gu Feng fujun muzhiming 大周故封府君墓誌銘].

The evidence presented above shows that cave exposure gained increasing popularity throughout China between the third and eighth centuries. This practice attracted numerous adherents, including members of the *saṅgha* and lay Buddhists, especially women. We have also seen that this practice may have been linked to mummification and some forms of deliverance by means of a corpse, as well as double burial. In the pages below we will consider another form of corpse exposure with striking links to relic worship—forest exposure.

Forest Exposure

The practice of forest exposure appears to have entered China between the fifth and sixth centuries. Moreover, contemporary examples from this time period all involve monks who resided in south China (Jiangxi, Sichuan, and Zhejiang), which suggests that this practice may have come to China via Sichuan or perhaps the Ocean Silk Route.[74] A fascinating case of early forest exposure concerns none other than the renowned southern monk Huiyuan. A stickler for meditation and monastic discipline, he refused to partake of medicines when ill. In desperation, his disciples offered him a mixture of thickened sugar water, but he refused to drink it until the monastery's *vinaya* master had combed through the scriptures to see whether this was allowed. Before he had accomplished his task, however, Huiyuan passed away. His corpse was laid out in mourning for seven days, following which it was "...placed under a pine tree, as per his last instructions. Afterwards, his disciples collected [the remains] for burial."[75] Forest exposure continued to be practiced in south China during the Sui-Tang era.[76] One even finds the occasional example of forest exposure intermingling with cave exposure and beliefs about flesh-bodies. When the monk Zhilin 智琳 passed away during the early Sui (613), his disciples exposed his corpse in a forest. However, living creatures refused to touch the corpse, which was eventually exposed in a cave many months later.[77]

Most of our data on forest exposure from the seventh through ninth centuries concerns north China, being based on epigraphic sources from the region and Daoxuan's *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*. In this section, I will first discuss forest exposure as practiced by the *saṅgha*, and will then turn to how it was practiced by members of the Three Stages movement.

I have collected data on forest exposure from eight north China monasteries, seven of which were located in and around Chang'an and one of which sat on Mount Zhongnan. In reading the sources from these sacred sites, it soon becomes clear that forest exposure often spread along networks involving renowned monks and their disciples. For example, the monk Tanyan 曇延 of the Monastery of Extended Prosperity [Yanxing Si 延興寺] originally belonged to an aristocratic family in Puzhou (Shanxi) but became a monk after hearing a

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[74]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 28-29.
[75]T 2059, 50.361b.
[76]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 78-79.
[77]T 2060, 50.504a.

sermon about the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. Following his death in 588, his corpse was exposed in a forest, after which his remains were burned and scattered to the winds.[78] Tanyan's disciple Huihai 慧海 from the Meditation Abbey of Quietude and the Dharma [Jingfa Chanyuan 靜法禪院], which had been founded by the elder sister of the emperor Sui Wendi (r. 581-604), was also exposed in a forest. A similar pattern may be found in the case of the meditation master Tanqian 曇遷, whose disciples in Chang'an and on Mount Zhongnan also practiced forest exposure.[79] The funeral rites and subsequent exposure of eminent monks were often elaborate affairs. Tanyan's funeral procession to the site where he was to be exposed on Mount Zhongnan was attended by civil and military officials of the Sui court as well as some of the leading monks from the region, while over 1,000 individuals are said to have marched in the funeral procession for the monk Huiyin 慧因.[80]

Another significant aspect of forest exposure is that the remains of some monks who had been exposed in forests could be worshipped after being placed in stūpas. The clearest example of this phenomenon involves the monk Xuanhui 玄會, who resided in the Monastery of Mercy and Compassion [Cibei Si 慈悲寺] near Chang'an. He passed away in 640, whereupon his disciples first exposed his corpse in a forest and subsequently "erected a brick stūpa for the veneration [of his relics]."[81]

Forest exposure among members of the *saṅgha* continued well into the ninth century. Perhaps the most prominent example involves the Chan master Zongmi, whose life and teachings have been thoroughly researched by Peter Gregory. According to Zongmi's funerary inscription, following his death on the sixth day of the first lunar month in 841 (February 1), his corpse retained its living hue for seven days, following which it was placed in a container [*han* 函].[82] Prior to his death, he had commanded that: "After my death I wish to be given to insects and dogs, and then have my bones burned and scattered; [do not build] a grave or a stūpa, as this would disrupt [our] meditations." His followers respected his wishes and exposed his corpse on the twenty-second day of the first lunar month (February 17), following which the remains were cremated on the thirteenth day of the second lunar month (March 4). They found seven round and glowing relics among the ashes, and these were subsequently stored in a stone chamber.[83] *Song Gaoseng zhuan* (T 2061) also records that the Luoyang Chan master Congjian 從諫 had his corpse exposed following his death in 866, but it retained

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[78]T 2060, 50.489b.

[79]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 77. For Tanqian's biography, see T 2060, 50.573a.

[80]T 2060, 50.522b.

[81]T 2060, 50.543a.

[82]Gregory, *Tsung-mi*, 89-90. Although Gregory translates the term *han* as coffin, it appears to refer to a container used to move corpses to the sites where they were to be exposed rather than a container in which the body was buried. I have yet to locate an example of the term *han* being used to describe a coffin (usually referred to in funerary inscriptions as *jiu* 柩).

[83]*Jinshi cuibian* 114:26, "Inscription and Preface of the Dharma Transmission of the Tang-dynasty Chan Master of Firm Benevolence of Guifeng" [Tang gu Guifeng Dinghui Chanshi chuanfa bei bing xu 唐故圭峰定慧禪師傳法碑並序].

a living hue and all living creatures refused to touch it. He was eventually cremated, and his remains placed inside a stūpa.[84]

The spread of forest exposure among other members of the *saṅgha* and especially lay Buddhists appears to have been largely the result of proselytizing efforts on the part of the Three Stages movement. This history of this popular Buddhist movement has been extensively studied by Japanese and Western scholars,[85] so I will not treat it in detail here. However, it is worth noting that while numerous scholars have studied the sect's beliefs about the Final Age of the Dharma [*mofa* 末法], its emphasis on giving [*dāna*; *bushi*] and the Inexhaustible Treasury [*wujin zang* 無盡藏], as well as its attempt to break down divisions between the *saṅgha* and the laity, relatively little attention has been focused on the Three Stages movement's role in promoting forest exposure.[86] If one carefully peruses available biographical and epigraphic data on members of this movement, though, one soon discovers that many men and women had begun practicing forest exposure following the death of the movement's founder Xinxing 信行 (540-594). This practice spread among believers from the movement's birthplace at Baoshan 寶山 (Henan) to Longmen and Mount Zhongnan. Three Stages members viewed the stūpas of eminent sect members who had been exposed in forests as important sacred sites, and frequently chose to have their exposed remains stored in stūpas of their own which dotted the landscape around such sites.[87]

Like the Buddhists who burned their bodies or had their corpses exposed in caves, Three Stages members sought scriptural justification for their actions. In this case, a key text was the "apocryphal sūtra" [*yijing* 疑經 ; *weijing* 僞經] entitled *The Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha on the Importance of Practice of Self-Sacrifice* [*Foshuo yao xing sheshen jing* 佛說要行捨身經]. This brief text, which was apparently composed during the latter half of the seventh century, portrays Śākyamuni Buddha as encouraging all Buddhists to expose their corpses, or at the very least to meditate in a charnel ground. More "orthodox" members of the *saṅgha* considered this sūtra to be a work popular among "heterodox gangs" [*xiedang* 邪黨].[88] Nine copies of this scripture have been preserved at Dunhuang, the earliest of which was hand-copied in 729.[89] More significantly, some copies of this text include a two-page *Vow to Practice [Exposure of the Corpse] in a Charnel Ground Where Corpses are Exposed* [*Shituolin fayuan wen* 尸陀林發願文], which expresses the Buddhist believer's desire to sacrifice his or her flesh on behalf of living creatures. Part of this text reads as follows: "May

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[84]T 2061, 50.779c. For more on Buddhist funerals, especially in Chan Buddhism, see Cole, "Upside Down/Right Side Up."

[85]See for example, Hubbard, "San-chieh-chiao"; Lewis, "Suppression of the Three Stages Sect"; Ōtani, "Sangai-kyō bōzenshi"; Tsukamoto, "Sangai-kyō" and "Zoku Sangai-kyō"; and Yabuki, *Sangai-kyō*.

[86]For example, Mark Edward Lewis simply cites Tsukamoto's work to note that "the skeletons of monks of the sect [*sic*] and lay followers, both male and female, were buried together." See Lewis, "Suppression of the Three Stages Sect," 221.

[87]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 81-82, 116.

[88]Makita, "*Yōgyō sumi kyō*."

[89]See, for example, S 2044, 2624, 4318, 6577.

all living creatures partake of my flesh so that they may survive. By eating my flesh, may they not experience hunger and thirst."[90]

Three Stages members practiced forest exposure at five temples founded by Xinxing at Mount Zhongnan, including the Monastery of the Merciful Order [Cimen Si 慈門寺], the Monastery of Luminous Light [Guangming Si 光明寺], and the Monastery of the Dharma of Salvation [Jifa Si 濟法寺].[91] Probably the earliest site where forest exposure was practiced was the so-called Monastery of One-Hundred Stūpas [Baita Si 百塔寺] at Mount Zhongnan,[92] which was none other than the site where Xinxing's own corpse had been exposed. According to Xinxing's biography in *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, when his corpse was taken to be exposed in the forests of Mount Zhongnan the mourning cries of his followers could be heard as far off as the city of Chang'an. Later, his disciples collected his bones and placed them in a stūpa in the foothills of Mount Zhongnan. A stele inscription was also erected in front of the stūpa.[93] Thirteen years later, in the year 607, Xinxing's disciples and other members of the movement began exposing their corpses and having their remains placed in stūpas surrounding Xinxing's. One of these individuals was the monk Jingyuan 彭淵, whose disciples included Falin, the author of the *Bianzheng lun* 辯正論. It was Falin who helped sponsor the construction of a stūpa for his master following the completion of forest exposure.[94] By the Tang dynasty, forest exposure at this site had begun to include cremation and relic worship. Take, for example, the meditation monk Fazang 法葬, who passed away in 714. His corpse was first exposed in a forest, following which the remains were cremated and the remaining relics (the term *sheli* 舍利 or *sarīra* is used) were enshrined in a stūpa where they could be worshipped.[95] A "stūpa abbey" [*tayuan* 塔院] was built at the site in 767, and was reported to be extant by the Song dynasty.[96]

As I mentioned above, one of the most striking characteristics of the Three Stages movement involved its active attempts to reduce or even obliterate distinctions between the *saṅgha* and lay Buddhists. Indeed, some masters even encouraged monks to abandon their monastic careers and resume life as laymen.[97] It should thus come as no surprise that many lay members of this movement, including a significant number of women, also practiced forest exposure. Lay forest exposure at Mount Zhongnan was often practiced by members of the same family, including the Guan 管, Liang 梁 , and Pei 裴 lineages. This includes Xinxing's chronicler Pei Xuanzheng 裴玄證, a member of an aristocratic lineage from

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[90]Makita, "*Yōgyō sumi kyō*," 189-190. A photographic reprint of this document may be found in Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 133.

[91]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 117, 118, 122.

[92]This was renamed the Abbey of Promoting Teachings [Xingjiao yuan 興教院] during the early Song dynasty.

[93]T 2060, 50.560a.

[94]T 2060, 511c-512a.

[95]*Jinshi cuibian* 71:1-3, "Stupa Inscription for the Chan Master Fazang" [Fazang Chanshi taming 法藏禪師塔銘].

[96]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 116-117.

[97]Lewis, "Suppression of the Three Stages Sect," 220.

Hedong (Shanxi) who joined the *saṅgha* but returned to lay life after becoming Xinxing's disciple. The Peis were also responsible for establishing an Inexhaustible Treasury at the Monastery of Transformation and Deliverance [Huadu Si 化度寺] in Chang'an.[98]

The other major center of forest exposure by Three Stages members was at Baoshan, located near Anyang (where China's world-famous oracle bones were discovered in Shang tombs) in Henan.[99] Clusters of stūpas containing the remains of monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists whose corpses were exposed in forests have been located near the Monastery of the Numinous Spring [Lingquan Si 靈泉寺; known as the Baoshan Si 寶山寺 until the reign of Sui Wendi], which was founded in 546. Although the Three Stages movement was outlawed at the end of the Sui dynasty, the fact that this monastery lay far from the capital enabled it to escape state persecution relatively unscathed. Two spots near the monastery, known as the "Stūpa Forests of Baoshan" [Baoshan talin 寶山塔林], contain dozens of stūpas, many of which also feature funerary inscriptions. I have located fifty-eight inscriptions from the late sixth century which describe Three Stages monks and nuns whose corpses were exposed in forests. An additional twelve inscriptions composed between the years 645 and 664 concern the forest exposure of lay members.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this large body of epigraphic data is the frequent occurrence of the Chinese term for relics, *sheli*, as this clearly indicates the presence of relic veneration centering on the remains of members of the *saṅgha* who joined the Three Stages movement and were exposed in forests.[100] One of the most interesting examples of this practice concerns Xinxing's discipline Lingchen 靈琛 (554-628). According to his funerary inscription:

> While still healthy he prepared his last will, [which stated that] he was to be buried in a forest according to the scriptures, in order to achieve the limitless path... Full of grief at their loss, [his followers] took him to this mountain [Baoshan]. When his flesh and fluids had been totally consumed, his relics were enshrined in a stūpa.[101]

A number of Three Stages nuns also had their corpses exposed in forests, including at least seven from the Monastery of the Luminous Heavens [Guangtian Si 光天寺].[102] I have also found examples of nuns sponsoring stūpas to house the remains of their lay parents who had undergone forest exposure.[103] One nun named Zhijue 智覺, daughter of the Hongdong District Magistrate Sun Boyue 孫佰悅, did so expressly in order to "commemorate my parents' benevolence in raising me, while also being mindful of the path towards

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[98]Liu Shufen, "Linzang," 121-122. Pei's biography may be found in T 2060, 50.560a-b.

[99]For more on this site's links to the Three Stages Sect, see Ding, "Anyang san chu shiku de zaoxiang ticai"; Ōuchi, "Hōsan Reisenji"; and Tokiwa, "Sangai-kyō no botai."

[100]See, for example, *Baoshan Lingquan Si*, 90; and *Tangdai muzhi huibian*, 56-57.

[101]*Tangdai muzhi huibian*, 17.

[102]*Baoshan Lingquan Si*, 75-96.

[103]*Baoshan Lingquan Si*, 85, 93, 96.

deliverance."[104] Some lay women also had their corpses exposed in forests, including one (referrred to as an *upāsikā* or *qingxinnu* 清信女) whose corpse was exposed after her death in 651; her bones were placed in a stūpa in 655.[105]

Conclusion

The evidence presented above has shown that exposure burial became a popular practice among Han and non-Han peoples in China during the medieval era. People from both north and south China, including members of the *saṅgha* and lay Buddhists began to have their corpses exposed in forests and caves on a widespread basis from the fifth and sixth centuries onward. The fact that most of our epigraphic data concerns members of medieval China's upper classes makes it difficult to determine how popular these practices were among commoners, but the occurrence of the term *shituolin* in some inscriptions and the presence of clusters of stūpas surrounding the stūpas of leading members of the *saṅgha* suggests that cave and forest exposure gradually gained acceptance among members of Han and non-Han society. Even so-called "Confucian" concerns about the destruction of the body did not prevent men and women from engaging in these practices, and while there were cases of relatives and descendents hesitating and even failing to carry out the wishes of Buddhist members of their families, we also saw examples of family members being exposed together, or willingly accepting the exposure of their loved ones.

We also witnessed many cases involving the remains of exposed Buddhists being placed in stūpas, often after having been cremated. The Chinese terms for relics [*sheli*] and veneration [*gongyang* 供養] appear in a number of biographies and funerary inscriptions, which indicates that the appearance and spread of relic worship in China may have resulted as much from cave and forest exposure as it did from cremation.[106] The same holds true for mummification and the worship of flesh-bodies. While the practice of lacquering the corpses of eminent monks and enshrining them in stūpas or temples does not appear to have taken hold until the middle of the seventh century, a number of accounts presented above clearly state that the corpses of some monks (especially those exposed in caves) did not decay and/or were not consumed by living creatures. Such corpses were often placed inside stūpas, which appear to have become sacred sites in their own right. All this suggests that it might be necessary to reevaluate our views about the so-called Buddhist cult of the dead in medieval China, and that our understanding of this important topic needs to be grounded upon a firm grasp of both belief and practice. While it is now common knowledge that Buddhist ideas about karma and the afterlife as well as rites for saving the souls of the dead began to gain increasing popularity during China's medieval era, few scholars have paid attention to the fact that forms of mortuary ritual which gained popularity among contemporary Buddhists were

[104] *Baoshan Lingquan Si*, 85.

[105] *Baoshan Lingquan Si*, 94.

[106] Scholars such as Patricia B. Ebrey and Robert F. Sharf have already touched on this important point. See Ebrey, "Cremation," 413 n. 37, 39; and Sharf, "Idolization," 7-8.

not necessarily restricted to cremation but also included cave and forest exposure. The significance of the nearly simultaneous spread of these beliefs and practices presents a problem which should occupy the efforts of social and cultural historians for years to come. For example, Gregory Schopen makes the important point that in both Indian Buddhism and early Christianity the "clustering of mortuary deposits around a central structure" reflects both eschatological concerns and the belief that the central tomb or shrine contained a living presence.[107] The extent to which such concerns affected cave and forest exposure in medieval China has yet to be determined, and given the limited amount of relevant evidence which has survived, may never be fully understood.

In addition, the spread of cave and forest exposure throughout medieval China has important implications for the debate concerning the so-called sinicization of Buddhism or Buddhist conquest of China. As Patricia B. Ebrey states in her important article about cremation in Song China, "If it could be shown that Buddhism led to changes in the ways that ordinary people handled the dead, the magnitude of its impact on Chinese culture would be confirmed."[108] While both native and foreign religions in China frequently had to modify doctrinal niceties in order to gain widespread acceptance, the fact that medieval Chinese men and women willingly consigned their corpses to the ravages of living creatures indicates that the magnitude of Buddhism's impact can hardly be understated.

On a broader theoretical level, cave and forest exposure also raise a number of key issues concerning Chinese ideas of gender and the body. Robert F. Sharf's research on medieval mummification indicates that Buddhists may have overcome the apparent gap between loathing of the corpse and the veneration of relics by distancing relics from the corpse "through a process of transformation and purification, namely purification by the fire of the cremation pyre."[109] This may be true in cases where Buddhists practiced cremation, but the examples of cave and forest exposure discussed above indicate that purification could also be achieved through giving [*dāna*; *bushi*], both during one's lifetime and after one's death. Thus, the body was more than a source of pollution; it could also serve as one means for the attainment of enlightenment and salvation.

These ideas are related to another important issue: the question of what Buddhist beliefs and practices involving the exposure of the corpse might have meant to medieval Chinese women. We have seen above that both Buddhist nuns and lay women often chose to expose their corpses in caves and forests, often over the objections of their husbands or children. Perhaps equally if not more significant are the nine examples I have discovered so far of Tang-dynasty widows who had converted to Buddhism and expressly chose not to be buried alongside their deceased husbands.[110] These include three confirmed cases of cave exposure (including the example of Madam Dong described above), and two other possible cases of cave exposure. Another widow who had requested to be cremated was buried alongside her

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[107]Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, 122-124. See also Brown, *Cult of the Saints*; Geary, *Furta Sacra*; and Wilson, *Saints*.

[108]Ebrey, "Cremation," 408.

[109]Sharf, "Idolization," 4.

[110]Liu Shufen, "Shishi yiku."

husband instead, while another told her son to first bury her next to her husband but later cremate the bones and scatter the ashes. In nearly all of the nine cases these widows appear to have been driven by a pursuit for purity [*qingjing* 清淨 ; *pariśuddhi*].[111] Thus, we can clearly see that the pursuit of purity for many medieval women not only involved Buddhist self-cultivation while alive, but Buddhist practices intended to destroy what many considered a major source of pollution—their own bodies.

Scholars such as Diana Y. Paul have pointed out the ambivalence towards women in Buddhist traditions, which combine a "tension between sexual prejudice and religious ideals."[112] Thus, while certain texts relegate women to the sensual realm, associate them with the evils of sexuality, or confine their roles to the fulfillment of motherhood, others emphasize the asexual nature of self-cultivation and the androgynous nature of certain buddhas and bodhisattvas (particularly Amitābha Buddha and the Bodhisattva Guanyin). In the case of Chinese Buddhism, Glen Dudbridge and Daniel Overmyer have both made the important observation that Buddhism and sectarian movements often provided late imperial and modern women with an alternative to, and even means of resisting subordination to, patriarchal authority and its underlying ideologies.[113] The evidence presented here may well strengthen their arguments, and help us extend them into the medieval era.

At the same time, however, it is important to remember that such resistance was neither absolute nor complete, as may be seen in the numerous examples discussed above of women being buried or exposed alongside their husbands. This should not be a surprise to scholars who have studied the links between resistance and Chinese religion, as Robert P. Weller's book on the subject has clearly shown that many beliefs and practices combine elements of both resistance and accomodation.[114] Perhaps the most eloquent analysis of the complex relationship between religion and resistance to gender roles may be found in Brigitte Baptandier's study of the cult to Lady Linshui [Linshui furen 臨水夫人], said to be a shamaness from northern Fujian during the medieval era who unsuccessfully attempted to avoid marriage and died as a result of a miscarriage while performing a rain-making ritual. As Baptandier points out, the hagiography of the Lady (and even some autobiographical accounts of her mediums today) represent both a form of resistance against marriage yet also a warning of its inevitability.[115]

Finally, this study can help us in reconsidering some of the conventional wisdom concerning death and mortuary ritual. Much of the scholarship on death has focused on the following theoretical issues: the ways in which mortuary ritual helps reconstitute the mourners; the ways in which mortuary ritual helps achieve the negation of or victory over death (at times, even the achievement of immortality); the links between women and the putrescence of the corpse; and the relationship between death, feminity, and fertility. Maurice

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[111]See Douglas, *Purity and Danger*; and Hosokawa, "Shōjō to iu go ni tsuite."

[112]Paul, *Women in Buddhism*, 309.

[113]Dudbridge, *Miao-shan*; and Overmyer, "Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature." For more on this problem, see Faure, *The Red Thread*.

[114]Weller, *Resistance, Chaos, and Control*.

[115]Baptandier, "Lady Linshui," 133.

Bloch's research on Merina funerary practices centers on a dichotomy of the flesh of the deceased as being feminine and polluting, as opposed to the bones, which are male and possess the power of fertility.[116] James Watson's path-breaking study of Cantonese funeral rites and double burial also touches on these issues, but goes on to suggest that women (specifically married-out daughters and daughters-in-law) may expose themselves to the pollution of the corpse in order to absorb the fertility of the deceased into their own flesh.[117] My study of medieval Buddhist exposure practices does not intend to deny the validity of these arguments; nevertheless, it does appear significant that the data we have examined above reveals a very different picture of death and the pollution of the corpse. For many medieval Chinese, including women, the exposure of their bodies in caves and forests does not seem to have involved concerns over groups of mourners, the negation of death, or the enhancement of individual or familial fertility. Instead, this practice was intended to accelerate the degeneration of the corpse in order to achieve the ultimate goal of resting in peace, finding purity and solitude, and achieving salvation for both oneself and other sentient beings.

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[116]Bloch, "Death, Women, and Power," 223-226.

[117]Watson, "Of Flesh and Bones," 173, 174, 182; see also the field studies in Watson and Rawski, *Death Ritual*.

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