

is no way that I am leaving [China]."¹⁷³ Similar distinction between Indians and other foreigners in China is reported to have been offered by the famous Chinese translator Yancong during the Sui dynasty. "The *hu* [people]," Yancong says, "are originally the offspring of various barbarians, but the *fan* [people] are the descendants of the true sages."¹⁷⁴ Such Chinese views on Indians and their attractions toward Buddhist sites in South Asia exemplify the spiritual bonds that linked and, at the same time, stimulated the interactions between India and China during the seventh century.

CHAPTER TWO

The Emergence of China as a Central Buddhist Realm

Devaputra, it is because of the numberless roots of good that you have planted, that now you have obtained so luminous a light and it is because of this, oh Devaputra, that in the last period following my Nirvāṇa, in the fourth five-hundred year period, when the Law is about to fade away, you, in the country of Mahācīna in the north-eastern region of this Jambudvīpa, will be in the position of Avaivartika. Since in reality you will be a Bodhisattva, you will manifest a female body and you will be the sovereign head.

—*Baoyu jing*

The unique nature of official exchanges between India and Tang China is evident. While the materialistic needs of the Chinese clergy prompted some of the court missions to the Buddhist heartland in Middle India, others were dispatched by Tang rulers captivated by the prospects of finding longevity drugs and establishing religious merit. This conspicuous spiritual undercurrent of Sino-Indian diplomatic relations during the middle of the seventh century reflected the vibrant Buddhist traffic between the two countries and the prominence Buddhism had attained in China by the time of the Tang dynasty. Indeed, Buddhist relations between India and China during the Tang period is usually epitomized by the impressive count of monks travelling between the two regions and the large number of Buddhist texts translated into Chinese.

Although the movement of monks and the translation of Buddhist texts augmented interactions and facilitated the exchange of ideas between the two countries, two parallel developments during the

Tang period had an appreciable effect on Sino-Indian relations. First, the evolution of indigenous Buddhist schools under Tang China generated new ideas and practices unique to the Chinese Buddhist community. The rapid adoption of such ideas and practices transformed Buddhist doctrines in China to such a degree that they became radically distinct from their Indic origins. This transformation of Buddhism, a process often referred to as "sinicization," rendered Buddhist doctrines more susceptible to the requirements of the Chinese clergy and lay society. At the same time, however, it abated the Chinese aspirations for doctrinal input from Indian Buddhist community, thereby retrenching the cultural transmissions from India to China through Buddhism. By the eleventh century, the contribution of Buddhism to Sino-Indian exchanges dwindled and the spiritual undercurrent driving the interactions between the two countries diminished.

Second, in the eighth century, China itself emerged as a leading center for disseminating Buddhist teachings and texts in East Asia. At the same time, it was also recognized as the abode of worthy Buddhist divinities (such as Kṣitigarbha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mañjuśrī). Consequently, members of the Buddhist communities in the neighboring East Asian kingdoms frequented Chinese monasteries and mountains either on pilgrimages or in search of Buddhist teachings. More importantly, even Indian monks, who in the past had been travelling to China to transmit the teachings of the Buddha, now arrived especially to pay obeisance to famous bodhisattvas purported to be residing in China. This recognition of China as a legitimate pilgrimage site by the Indian monastic community dispelled the borderland complex that had tormented the Chinese clergy since the third and fourth centuries.

Together, these two developments gave definitive shape to indigenous Buddhist ideas and practices and ensured, as is discussed in Chapter 3, the survival of Buddhism during periods of intellectual and social change in post-Tang China. They were also instrumental in positioning China as the foremost Buddhist center by the time Indian monastic institutions and pilgrimage sites, in the twelfth century, fell into destitution due to invasions by Islamic forces. This chapter demonstrates how the Chinese clergy, by propagating the presence of the deceased Buddha Śākyamuni, the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī (Ch. Wen-shushili), and the future Buddha Maitreya (Ch. Mile), transformed China into a legitimate Buddhist realm. While in the short term this process stimulated the exchange of Buddhist monks and parapher-

nalities between India and Tang China, it also gradually unraveled the spiritual bonds that were sustaining Sino-Indian interactions for over seven centuries.

The Remains of Śākyamuni: The Link to the Deceased Buddha

While translated texts and foreign monks assisted the Chinese clergy in establishing the teachings of the Buddha (*dharma*) and the community of monks (*samgha/sangha*), two of the "Three Jewels" (*triratna*) of Buddhism, a direct link to Śākyamuni Buddha—the first Jewel—was attempted through the veneration of his images and relics.¹ This desire to venerate the relics of the Buddha not only prompted Chinese monks to visit Indian monasteries and sites related to the life of the Buddha, but also triggered the export of the sacred remains and other related items from India to China.² In fact, the veneration of Buddhist relics in China served several purposes. For example, it fashioned merit-making activities, stimulated material transactions, propagated the building of commemorative monuments, and contributed to the formation of political links between the state and the monastic community. More importantly, the relics, which are categorized as bodily relics (*sarīrika cetiyam*), items used by the Buddha (*uddesika cetiyam*), and objects built in commemoration of the Buddha (*pāribhogika cetiyam*), provided Buddhist followers in China an opportunity to come into physical contact with objects that were supposed to be either the bodily remains of the Buddha or things closely associated with him. Indeed, the close proximity between the Buddha relics and Chinese adherents realized one of the basic purposes of relic veneration: the bridging of the temporal and spatial gap between the followers and the sites and times of the founder of their faith; which, in turn, sustained the establishment of a Buddhist world in a foreign land.³

The *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (Skt. *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*), which narrates the last few days of the Buddha's life, contains the famous story of the struggle among Indian rulers to retrieve the bodily remains of the Buddha. The work notes,

And when the Lord's body was burnt, what had been skin, under-skin, flesh, sinew, or joint-fluid, all that vanished and not even ashes or dust remained, only the bones remained. . . . And

King Ajātasattu Vedehiputta of Magadha heard that the Lord had passed away at Kusinārā. And he sent a message to the Mallas of Kusinārā: 'The Lord was a Khattiya (=Skt. Kṣatriya, the warrior/ruling class) and I am a Khattiya. I am worthy to receive a share of the Lord's remains. I will make a great stupa for them.' The Licchavis of Vesālī heard, and they sent a message: 'The Lord was a Khattiya and we are Khattiyas. We are worthy to receive a share of the Lord's remains, and we will make a great stupa for them.' The Sakyas of Kapilavatthu heard, and they sent a message: 'The Lord was the chief of our clan. We are worthy to receive a share of the Lord's remains, and we will make a great stupa for them.' The Bulayas of Allakappa and Koliyas of Rāmagāma replied similarly. The Brahmin of Veṭhadīpa heard, and he sent a message: 'The Lord was a Khattiya, I am a Brahmin . . .', and the Mallas of Pāvā sent a message: 'The Lord was a Khattiya, we are Khattiyas. We are worthy to receive a share of the Lord's remains, and we will make a great stupa for them.'⁴

To settle this conflict, it was decided that the remains of the Buddha would be distributed equally among each of the eight contenders. After receiving their share of the remains, which included the Buddha's canine teeth and his collar and frontal bones, the eight kings enshrined them in separate *stūpas* commemorating the deceased founder of the doctrine. Also enshrined were the urn that had contained the remains of the Buddha and the embers used to cremate the body of the Buddha. In this way, it seems, began the practice of venerating the remains of the Buddha and the parallel development of building *stūpas* by secular rulers to commemorate the deceased Buddha.

The early history of relic veneration, especially the monastic participation in the worship of the remains of the Buddha, however, is a topic of intense scholarly contention. Some have maintained that the members of the monastic community were initially prohibited from venerating the relics of the Buddha. Others argue that the relics of the Buddha were being worshiped by both lay and monastic followers shortly after the death of the Buddha.⁵ Similar debate has also ensued regarding the archeological evidence for early monastic participation in the veneration of relics. Gregory Schopen and Kevin Trainor have convincingly demonstrated that donative inscriptions from Sāñcī and Bhārḥūt, in eastern India, and rock-cut monas-

teries from western India reveal that the members of the monastic community were venerating *stūpas* and relics since at least the end of the second century B.C.E.⁶

Rarely contested, however, is the role played by Buddhist legends of King Aśoka in the expansion and geographical spread of the relic cult. The Mauryan king Aśoka was recognized as the ideal Buddhist ruler who undertook the pious act of transmitting the teachings of the Buddha into foreign lands. One of the most famous Buddhist deeds ascribed to the Mauryan king was his building of 84,000 *stūpas*. After gathering all the relics that were dispersed following the cremation of the Buddha, King Aśoka is said to have redistributed them and, within one day, built 84,000 commemorative *stūpas* across the Jambudvīpa. Although historically questionable, the pious actions of the Indian king have been emphasized by the members of the foreign Buddhist communities to substantiate the early and legitimate transmission of the doctrine. In Sri Lanka, for example, the establishment of the Buddhist doctrine is linked to a mission from King Aśoka and his donation of Buddhist relics (including a branch from the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha is supposed to have attained enlightenment) to the Sri Lankan ruler Devānampiyatissa (r. 250–210 B.C.E.). The Aśoka story was also used by the Sri Lankan clergy to authenticate the remains of the Buddha enshrined in that country.⁷

The story of King Aśoka building 84,000 commemorative *stūpas* was similarly employed by the Chinese Buddhist clergy as evidence of early transmission of the doctrine and the "presence" of its founder in their land. "The Chinese naturally concluded," as Zürcher points out, "(1) that China, being a part of the Jambudvīpa, had in the past belonged to Aśoka's empire and consequently had been converted to Buddhism under this king; (2) that the soil of China, if carefully investigated, might appear still to contain some traces of this golden age of Buddhism: remains of the *stūpas* or even the holy relics themselves."⁸ While the former notion was often used to validate the belief about the early transmission of Buddhism to China (some going as far back as the Zhou dynasty, 1045?–256 B.C.E.), the latter belief was employed to authenticate relics discovered in China. The alleged miraculous power of the relics, evident from the reports of emission of multicolored lights to the stories describing the restoration of eyesight to blind worshipers of the relics, provided further proof of the authenticity and efficacy of the Buddha relics.

The Chinese Buddhist catalogue *Chu sanzang jiji* (Collection of Records Concerning the Translation of the Tripiṭaka, T.2145), compiled by the monk Sengyou (435–518) in 515, suggests that the story of Aśoka building 84,000 *stūpas* was known to the Chinese since at least the reign of King Sun Quan (r. 222–252) of the Wu kingdom (222–280). The Sogdian monk Kang Senghui (d. 280), in a dialogue with Sun Quan, is supposed to have narrated Aśoka's accomplishment of building the commemorative monuments. When challenged by the Chinese ruler to demonstrate the power of the Buddha's remains, the Sogdian monk, after three weeks of fasting, produced a miraculous, five-color-emitting relic. Sun Quan then employed various means, including burning the relic in fire, to judge its authenticity. Awed by the fact that the relic was indestructible and indeed miraculous, the Chinese ruler is reported to have constructed the first Buddhist *stūpa* in China at his capital Jianye (present-day Nanjing).⁹

It has been rightly explained by various scholars that this episode of the miraculous appearance of the relic and the construction of the *stūpa* is spurious, "perhaps no more than a popular tale."¹⁰ The story, instead, may illustrate the growing popularity of relic veneration in China during the sixth century, when Sengyou compiled his work. The Buddhist deeds of King Aśoka, particularly his veneration of the relics, became popular in China in the fourth century when a number of hagiographic accounts of the Indian king were rendered into Chinese.¹¹ In the ensuing period, Aśoka's distribution of the remains of the Buddha and the significance of relic veneration in India were being confirmed and promoted by Chinese pilgrims visiting Buddhist sites in South Asia. Faxian, who made a pilgrimage to India in the early fifth century, for example, not only narrates Aśoka's Buddhist deeds in his travelogue *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan*, but also gives detailed accounts of the veneration of Buddha's images in Khotan; his spittoon, alms-bowl, and tooth relics in Kucha (both these sites are in Central Asia); the shadow of the Buddha, his parietal bone, and other relics in Uḍḍiyāna, his alms-bowl in Purushapura (both in northern India); and his tooth relic in Sri Lanka. Moreover, one of the texts Faxian translated upon his return to China was the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, which, as noted above, contained the story of the distribution of relics and the building of reliquary monuments by secular rulers.

The *Lotus Sūtra*, perhaps the most influential and widely circulated Buddhist text in China, the first translation of which appeared in 255, advocated making offerings to the relics of the Buddha and

erection of decorated *stūpas* as means to accumulate merit.¹² Other Buddhist texts translated/compiled between the fourth and sixth centuries also explained the methods and merits of venerating relics, the erection of *stūpas*, and the making of Buddhist images. While, for example, in the *Jin'guangming jing* (*Suvarṇaprabhāsa*[*uttamarāja*] *Sūtra*, T. 663) the Buddha propounds that venerating his relics would help establish the "most superior field of merit" (*zuishang futian*),¹³ in the apocryphal text *Tiwei Poli jing* (*Sūtra of Trapuṣa and Bhallika*), the Buddha explicitly says that circumambulating *stūpas* can produce five types of merits: (1) a good complexion in the next life, (2) a fine voice, (3) rebirth in heaven, (4) rebirth in a wealthy or noble family, and (5) a path leading to nirvāṇa.¹⁴

A related development taking place subsequent to the first translations of the Aśoka legend and texts promoting the merits of relic veneration was the frequent "discoveries" in China of miraculous images, sacred remains, and *stūpas* built or relics deposited by the pious Mauryan king.¹⁵ One of the famous stories was about the Chinese monk Huida, who, during the Ningkanng reign period (373–376) of the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–419), discovered the Buddha's hair and fingernails preserved in a golden casket buried at the base of a *stūpa* in Jiankang (originally Jianye, i.e., present-day Nanjing). It was determined that the *stūpa* was one of the 84,000 that King Aśoka had built and the relics were in fact also deposited by the Indian king.¹⁶

Less than two centuries later, Emperor Wu (r. 502–549) of the Liang dynasty (502–557), recognized as the one of the most devout Buddhist rulers of China, rebuilt the Aśoka *stūpa* at Jiankang and lavishly venerated the relic housed there.¹⁷ During the veneration, the emperor discovered a golden image at the *stūpa* which, according to an inscription on the object, was sponsored by the daughter of King Aśoka.¹⁸ As Zürcher has concluded, "the 'relics of Aśoka' and the miraculous happenings connected with their discovery served a dual purpose: they proved the existence of a Buddhist period in ancient Chinese history, thus providing the Buddhist clergy with the necessary pedigree and thereby enhancing its prestige, and at the same time they could be interpreted as auspicious omens evoked by the virtuous conduct of the secular ruler."¹⁹ Indeed, Emperor Wu craftily used such Buddhist rituals and paraphernalia to secure the support of the monastic community and the lay Buddhists in asserting his imperial authority over a chaotic and fragmented China.²⁰

The popularity of relic and *stūpa* veneration between the fourth and sixth centuries and its key role in political legitimization and in bridging the spatial separation between the Buddhist worlds of India and China are epitomized in the Buddhist activities of Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty.²¹ In 580, the very first year of his rise to power in the state of Northern Zhou (557–581), Yang Jian (i.e., Emperor Wen), the future unifier of China, revoked restriction against the Buddhist community that had been instituted by the previous ruler of the kingdom. Then, between 581, when he had taken the title of “Emperor” and established the Sui dynasty, and 589, when he finally managed to consolidate power in both northern and southern China, Emperor Wen authorized the building of new Buddhist monasteries and allowed the renovation of old ones. These monastery-building campaigns were part of Emperor Wen’s larger goals of using the doctrine to legitimize his own leadership and for unifying the entire nation under Buddhist ideology.²²

Emperor Wen seems to have taken a number of other prudent steps to realize his political goals through the use of Buddhist ideology and paraphernalia. First, the Indian monk Narendrayāśas, who lived at the state-sponsored Daxingshan Monastery, produced a translation, sections of which implied that the Sui emperor was a reincarnated bodhisattva.²³ This translated work, known as *Foshuo Dehu zhangzhe jing* (*Śrīgupta Sūtra?*, T. 545) and completed in 583, also implied that the Sui Empire was part of the imaginary Indic continent Jambudvīpa (see below). Two years later, the emperor himself claimed that he had been entrusted by the Buddha to rule China.²⁴ And after he had unified the northern and southern regions of China and continued his support for Buddhist activities, Emperor Wen was lauded by members of the Chinese clergy as the ideal Buddhist ruler (Ch. Falun wang=Skt. *cakravartin rāja*)—a title commonly associated with King Aśoka.²⁵ In fact, in order to emulate the Indian king’s meritorious deed of erecting 84,000 *stūpas*, Emperor Wen ordered empire-wide distribution of the Buddha’s relics on three occasions during the Renshou reign era (in 601, 602, and 604).²⁶ Arthur Wright summarizes the instructions given by the court on how the processions headed by eminent monks were to travel to various prefectures to erect the commemorative monuments:

En route they (the eminent monks) were to be accompanied by a secular official, by two servants and five horses, and they

were each to carry one hundred twenty pounds of frankincense. They were to take with them holy relics and upon arrival select a suitable and important site and there build a reliquary pagoda. Noon of the fifteenth day of the tenth month was set for the simultaneous enshrining of the relics in the thirty pagodas; all the monks and nuns of the empire were to adhere to strict abstinence, and all offices of government in the capital and the country save the military were to suspend operations for seven days while their members engaged in religious services in honor of the relics.²⁷

The distribution of relics was followed by reports from prefectures confirming the arrival and enshrining of relics. These reports also included notices of miracles, such as the emission of pentachrome light and healing of diseases, commonly associated with the veneration of relics.²⁸

The actions of Emperor Wen, in conjunction with other events of the fourth to sixth centuries, contributed not only to the establishment of the relic/Aśoka cult in China, but, more importantly, they are purported to have attracted Indian clergy to the Buddhist world in China. Already by the beginning of the Sui period there were reports of monks from the Indian subcontinent making pilgrimages to the “Aśokan *stūpas*” in China.²⁹ During the Renshou period, an Indian monk from Magadha named Shetisina (Jātisena?) is noted to have arrived in China especially to participate in the relic-distribution campaigns undertaken by Emperor Wen. The monk explained that he had come to China after a stone inscription discovered in his native country foreboded Emperor Wen’s relic-distribution campaigns. The inscription, according to Jātisena, stated that, “In the kingdom of Zhendan (i.e., China) in the East, [under the dynasty] called the Great Sui, [in the] city called Daxing, the king named [Yang] Jian would plan to establish [the teachings of] Three Jewels [and] erect reliquary *stūpas*.”³⁰ Moreover, in a move to bolster this perception of China as a legitimate Buddhist realm, Emperor Wen (as noted in the previous chapter) ordered the translation into Sanskrit of at least two Chinese works describing his empire and the relics enshrined in Sui territories. The Sanskrit translations of these works, entitled *Guojia xiangrui lu* and *Sheli rui tu jing*, were said to have been sanctioned on the request of an Indian monk from Rājagṛha.³¹

Although the validity of the above episodes implying the knowledge of or the desire to learn about Emperor Wen's Buddhist activities among the Indian clergy is difficult to ascertain, the partial success in projecting China as a sacred Buddhist land can be discerned from the requests by the Korean kingdoms, Koguryō, Paekche, and Silla, to the Sui court for the relics of the Buddha.³² It must be admitted, however, that the absence of a strong Buddhist state in contemporary India, a situation that persisted until the establishment of the Pāla dynasty in Bengal in c. 750, could have made the flourishing Buddhist world of China during the Sui, and then under Empress Wu in the latter half of the seventh century, immensely attractive to the Indian clergy as well.³³ In fact, the strongest evidence of Indian recognition of China as a legitimate Buddhist realm comes from the pilgrimage activities of South Asian monks at Mount Wutai during the Tang dynasty, a topic discussed later in this chapter.

Relic Worship at the Famen Monastery

The practice of relic veneration in China evolved and diversified rapidly after the sixth century. Some of the most significant developments were the penetration of acts of self-immolation/self-mutilation of body parts into the relic-veneration ceremonies. The use of relics for their therapeutic values, the emphasis on the number and size of the relics, and the employment of the relics in esoteric rites also became widespread. Many of these developments are apparent in the relic veneration at the Famen Monastery, located in what once was the Fufeng commandery in the Qi prefecture during the Tang dynasty (present-day Fufeng county, Shaanxi province).

The Famen Monastery relic, purported to be the finger bone of the Buddha, is known to have been venerated inside the Tang imperial palace on six separate occasions. The records of the imperial procession carrying the relics from the Famen Monastery to the Tang court, a distance of about one hundred and fifty miles, the severe criticism by the Confucian official Han Yu (768–824) against the court's participation in the lavish veneration activities, and the recent excavation of the crypt of the Monastery containing the Tang relic along with a large number of precious gifts have all given notoriety to the Famen Monastery relic and the activities surrounding its veneration.

THE BEGINNING OF RELIC VENERATION AT THE FAMEN MONASTERY

The origin of relic veneration ceremonies at the Famen Monastery is a complex issue that must be addressed at the outset because it clearly illustrates the ingenuity of the Chinese in recasting Buddhist ideas and practices transmitted from India. Since there are no comparable notices of imperial veneration of the relic housed at the Famen Monastery before or after the Tang dynasty, the question that arises is why did the Monastery and the finger bone of the Buddha housed there attract the attention of the Tang rulers?

In his attempt to explain a similar question, Huang Chi-chiang has suggested that the Tang rulers opted to follow the tradition of venerating finger bone relics, common among the previous rulers of northern China, over the worship of tooth relics, popular with the courts in the south.³⁴ Huang concludes, "If there were indeed two traditions in the imperial worship of the Buddha's relics, apparently the monks at the Fa-men ssu (Famen si) wanted to make the finger bone the dominant tradition because they claimed that the finger bone at the temple was the same bone relic that had been worshipped by the emperors in the Northern Wei and the Sui. They managed to build this link between the T'ang and the pre-T'ang relic of the Fa-men ssu by reaffirming the lore, using it to substantiate the continuity of the northern tradition."³⁵ Huang's explanation, although plausible, lacks contemporary evidence to confirm that the Tang rulers preferred finger bone relics over other types of bodily remains of the Buddha circulating in China.

The earliest sources on the Famen relic are extremely vague about the type of the remains housed at the Monastery.³⁶ In fact, no specific mention of a finger bone was made when the relic was first discovered by Zhang Liang (d. 646),³⁷ the governor of the Qi prefecture, in the fifth year of the Zhenguan reign era (631). Daoxuan, writing around 664, reports that the governor had retrieved a "bone" (*gu*) relic of the Buddha along with two inscribed tablets dated to the [Northern] Zhou-[Western] Wei period.³⁸ Then, thirty years later in 660, when the relic was brought to the imperial palace for the first time for special veneration by the emperor, the sacred remains from the Monastery is described only as "shaped like a small finger" (*xingzhuang ru xiao zhi*).³⁹ Other sources mention the existence of several relics, sometimes as many as eight or nine, at the Monastery. In addition, the

first imperial veneration of the Famen relic in 660 was conducted together with a parietal bone (*dinggu*) of the Buddha, that was brought from India by Wang Xuance.⁴⁰ While the Famen relic was placed in a golden casket and returned to the monastery in the second year of the Longshao reign era (662), the parietal bone remained at the palace.⁴¹ There is no indication from Daoxuan's notice of this initial imperial veneration of the Famen relic that the Tang emperor in any way distinguished or attached more importance to the finger bone than to the parietal-bone relic. It will be apparent from the discussion below that the emperor may have been less interested in the specific type of relic he venerated than about its efficacy.

Even the reports on the next two occasions of court-sponsored veneration of the Famen relic, in 704 and 760 respectively, fail to reveal the Tang rulers' preference for the finger bone to other bodily remains of the Buddha.⁴² In fact, the veneration of a variety of other bodily remains of the Buddha seems to be common during the Tang period. Daoxuan reports of at least fifteen sites throughout the Tang empire that contained what he calls "true body" (*zhenshen*) of the Buddha.⁴³ In 841, according to the Japanese monk Ennin, there were four monasteries in the Tang capital that housed tooth relics, all of which attracted lavish donations from the public.⁴⁴ Ennin also notes that there were three other monasteries in China that held finger bone relics, none of them, however, attracting similar attention from the Tang rulers.⁴⁵

Rather, there may have been an alternate justification for the exceptional fame of the Famen relic during the Tang period. It seems that the site of the Famen Monastery itself had a close association with the Tang rulers. In fact, the Qi prefecture as well as the Fufeng commandery, the site of the Famen Monastery, had special meaning to Emperor Taizong—the reigning emperor at the time the relic was first exhumed. Taizong's father, Emperor Gaozu, served as a prefect of the Qi prefecture under the Sui government. Taizong himself was born in Wugong County, located near the Fufeng commandery. At the age of four, when Taizong and his father were in the Qi prefecture, a scholar predicted that by the age of twenty Taizong would "bring relief to the contemporary world and pacify the people" (*jishi anmin*). It is from this prediction, we are told, that Emperor Taizong got his first name "Shimin."⁴⁶ Then, in early 618, a few months before his father officially founded the Tang dynasty, Taizong had successfully defeated the rebel forces of Xue Ju at the

Fufeng commandery.⁴⁷ Daoxuan reports that Taizong, prior to leading his army into the battle, had ordained eighty monks from the local region, suggesting, perhaps, that Taizong's victory against the rebel forces had derived from his meritorious act. Having no place to reside in the war-torn region, the newly ordained monks were invited to live at the Famen Monastery. Within a few years, however, the Monastery began to crumble after a rampant fire reportedly destroyed many of its halls.⁴⁸

The fortunes of the Monastery revived soon after Zhang Liang paid a visit to the dilapidated halls in 631. Noticing that the Monastery had only an unfinished *stupa* foundation, the governor sought permission from the emperor to complete the structure. The *stupa* that Zhang erected with Taizong's consent and financial help seems to have been the first commemorative monument actually established at the Famen Monastery.⁴⁹ Since Emperor Taizong had little personal interest in Buddhism at this time and had a few months earlier issued an edict questioning some of the practices of the Buddhist clergy,⁵⁰ it is unlikely that he would have readily provided funds for Buddhist activities at an obscure monastery. It is possible, therefore, that Taizong may have sanctioned the renovation of the monastery because the governor successfully reminded the emperor of his past connections to the Fufeng region and especially the monks he had ordained before his victory against the rebel forces.

During the construction work, Zhang, it is reported, learned about an "ancient legend" claiming that the relic underneath the *stupa*—when publicly displayed every thirty years—would make all sentient beings joyful and virtuous.⁵¹ Upon learning about this legend, the governor requested, and was subsequently granted, permission from the emperor to put the relic on public display. Thus began, without any Indian antecedent, the tradition of venerating the Famen relic every thirty years.

When exhuming the relic, Zhang Liang had also discovered (as noted above) two inscribed tablets dating from the sixth century.⁵² These two inscriptions seem to have played a salient role in linking the Famen Monastery to the Tang rulers. Although Daoxuan reports that the two tablets, now lost, were undecipherable, they were the likely source for two later inscriptions installed at the Monastery. A *stupa* inscription of 778 records that in 555, the regional governor of Qi prefecture, named Tuoba Yu, performed Buddhist ceremonies, renovated religious monuments, and ordained monks. The second

inscription, dated to the ninth century, similarly reports that Tuoba Yu laid the foundation for a *stūpa* at the Famen Monastery and made offerings to the site in the sixth century.⁵³

These inscriptions also report that during the Kaihuang reign period (581–604) of the Sui dynasty and again at the end of the Renshou period, Li Min (576–614), the grandson-in-law of the Sui Emperor Wen, renovated the *stūpa* foundation and the Famen monastic complex. Li Min was a nephew of the famous Sui general Li Mu, who claimed to have descended from the Longxi Li clan.⁵⁴ Kegasawa Yasunori's study of an epitaph from the Northern Zhou period found within the Famen monastic complex suggests that Li Mu and his family members similarly used the area for religious purposes.⁵⁵ Since the Tang rulers also claimed to have descended from the Longxi Li clan,⁵⁶ the Famen monastic complex may have been of special familial interest to the reigning Tang rulers. This would perhaps explain why Taizong and the later Tang rulers paid greater attention to the Famen Monastery and the relic housed therein than scores of other bodily relics available throughout China and even those especially brought from Indian monasteries.

THE ALTERNATING USAGE OF THE FAMEN RELIC

In 659, the members of the Chinese clergy seeking to put the Famen relic on public display for the second time invoked the legend of venerating it once every thirty years. Emperor Gaozong not only gave permission to display the relic to the public, but also brought it into the palace for special veneration. The reason for this unique act of "welcoming the relic" (*yinggu*) inside the palace for veneration may be related to Emperor Gaozong's poor health. Since the beginning of 657, the emperor had been unable to fulfill his court duties and was nursing his sickness at the eastern capital, Luoyang. In the seventh lunar month (August-September) of 657 the emperor had expressed an interest in the Indian longevity doctor Nārāyaṇasvāmin. Court officials, as pointed out in the previous chapter, discouraged the emperor from taking drugs concocted by the Indian doctor and had him return to India. Failing to recover from his sickness in the next two years, the emperor seems to have turned to the remains of the Buddha for miraculous relief. Indeed, in East Asia, the healing of sickness and the regeneration of the body of the ruler were considered to be some of the main potencies of the remains of the Buddha.⁵⁷ Even within the Indian Buddhist tradition, the relics of the

Buddha were proclaimed to have worked miraculous cures for the diseased and plague-infected population.⁵⁸

As noted previously, the Famen Monastery relic in 660 was venerated in the palace together with the parietal bone brought from India. The two relics, however, failed to work a miracle cure because within months the emperor suffered a massive stroke leaving him temporarily paralyzed and with impaired vision.⁵⁹ The inefficacy of the relic may have been one of the reasons why the practice of displaying the Famen relic every thirty years was temporarily discontinued. This is evident from the fact that Empress Wu Zetian, who employed various Buddhist paraphernalia to legitimize her usurpation of the Tang throne in 685 (see below), seemed uninterested in displaying the relic after thirty years had elapsed. It is possible that in addition to the relic's questionable efficacy, she associated it with the Tang rulers and not her own newly established Zhou dynasty.⁶⁰

It was, however, in 704, when Wu Zetian had become seriously ill and had turned to Daoism to find life-extending elixir,⁶¹ that the Famen relic was again displayed to the public and venerated inside the palace. The relic was first brought from the Famen Monastery to the Western Capital, Chang'an, and housed at the Chongfu Monastery—which functioned as the ancestral temple of Empress Wu. Then, early in the new lunar year, the relic was welcomed into the "Divine Capital"—Luoyang—and placed in the *mingtang* (Luminous Hall).⁶² Since the third story of this Luminous Hall functioned as, and was meant to symbolize, a Buddhist *stūpa*,⁶³ it was an appropriate location to house the relic. The Famen relic remained in Luoyang until 708, even after the deposing and subsequent death of Wu Zetian.⁶⁴

It must be pointed out here that the person in charge of bringing the relic to Empress Wu's palace was Fazang (643–712), a monk of Sogdian origin and one of the most important figures in the Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism. Fazang had intimate connections to the Famen Monastery before he became one of the favorite monks of Wu Zetian. At the age of sixteen *sui* (i.e., in 658), Fazang is said to have burned one of his fingers as an offering to the relic at the Famen Monastery.⁶⁵ And in 704, when he arrived at Famen Monastery to retrieve the relic, Fazang is reported to have "destroyed his liver" (*huigan*) as an offering to the sacred remains.⁶⁶

Fazang, however, was not the first one to perform such acts of self-mutilation at the Famen Monastery. When Zhang Liang first

displayed the relic in 631, a few members of the audience are also reported to have burnt their fingers as offerings to the relic.⁶⁷ The public display of the relic in 704 is also known to have prompted several acts of self-mutilation by visitors and onlookers. In fact, the practice of burning fingers at the Famen Monastery continued during the later periods as well.⁶⁸ James Benn seems correct in observing that these episodes of burning of fingers and mutilation of body parts were associated with “overzealous cultic practice” and derived from “Sinitic apocrypha.”⁶⁹ The intent of these self-mutilators may have ranged from the desire to establish good merit to other religious purposes.

According to one anecdote, a person who burnt his finger when the Famen relic was first displayed to the public did it because the relic was invisible to him. However, as soon as he offered his finger, the relic became distinctly visible.⁷⁰ A more metaphysical reason behind the acts of self-mutilation in front of Buddhist relics is given by John Kieschnick. He suggests that through self-mutilations the adherents attempted to draw on perceived power of the relic and “transfer or internalize the sanctity of the sacred objects.” Kieschnick further explains this point by stating that, “Self-mutilation before relics of the Buddha was not only a sacrifice; it was an appropriation. By burning himself, the adept drew on the power of the Buddha’s body, purifying his own body and transforming himself into a holy, living relic. Hence, while negative Buddhist attitudes towards the body as a source of defilement certainly encouraged the destruction and mutilation of the body, there was at the same time a more positive interpretation of the act.

“In other words, as in the case of cremation, self-mutilation and suicide were not merely attempts to destroy an impure body, but also to create a new and better one.”⁷¹

During the time the Famen Monastery relic was first displayed in 631 and until 708, when Emperor Zhongzong, after the death of Wu Zetian, returned the relic to the Monastery, a number of new and indigenous practices had become part of relic veneration in China. While some of these practices seem to be unique to the veneration of the Famen Monastery relic, others point to the continued evolution of Buddhist doctrine in China. The displaying of the Famen relic every thirty years and venerating it inside the imperial palace were, for example, unique to the Famen Monastery relic. The practice of mutilating body parts as offering to the relic, on the other hand, testifies to the amalgam of relic veneration and indigenous practices.

It can be also assumed from the first two episodes of relic veneration by the Tang rulers that neither Gaozong nor Wu Zetian employed the Buddha’s remains for the legitimization of temporal authority, as had been done in the past by Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty. Rather, the two Tang rulers seem to have been more interested in the relic’s purported therapeutic value. Indeed, the relic was displayed and welcomed into the palace not at a time of political instability or natural disasters, but when the two rulers were suffering from severe illnesses and searching for a miraculous cure. In the case of Gaozong, the veneration of the Famen relic coincided with his interest in an Indian longevity doctor and the merit-making mission to India undertaken by Wang Xuance (see the previous chapter). Furthermore, in 705, when the relic was brought to the palace for Wu Zetian, perhaps as a last resort, she had already taken up residence in the Longevity Hall (*Changsheng yuan*), the ancestral chamber and room where the Tang rulers would pass their final days of life.⁷²

A plausible link can also be established between the therapeutic function of the Famen relic, the act of burning fingers at the Monastery, and the Buddhist practice of invoking Bhaiṣajyaguru, the bodhisattva of healing. Those seeking good health, remedy from severe sickness, and longevity commonly performed rituals invoking Bhaiṣajyaguru. The *Lotus Sūtra* records that in one of his past lives, Bhaiṣajyaguru, in order to pay homage to the remains of the Buddha, burnt his hands in front of 84,000 *stūpas*. “This act,” as Raoul Birnbaum explains, “can be seen as the ultimate in the practice of *dāna-pāramitā*, the ‘perfection of giving.’” Birnbaum also points out that, while the act described in the *Lotus Sūtra* was symbolic, the East Asian clergy took it in a “literal sense,” meaning that it “served for some as justification for actual suicide or for the offering of fingers to the Buddha.”⁷³ Thus, while those performing acts of self-mutilation during the veneration of the Famen relic may have sought to achieve perfect merit for themselves, the Tang rulers seemed more interested in seeking remedies from sickness and to prolong their lives.

The practice and the objective of relic veneration at the Famen Monastery underwent significant change after the middle of the eighth century. The last four episodes of imperial veneration by the Tang rulers (in 760 by Suzong [r. 752–762], in 790 by Dezong [r. 779–805], in 819 by Xianzong [r. 805–820], and by Yizong [r. 859–873] in 873) indicate that esoteric rituals and the notions of

huguo (protection of the nation) and bringing peace and prosperity to the people had permeated the practice.⁷⁴ While the introduction and subsequent popularity of esoteric Buddhism was responsible for the former development, the use of the relic for national protection and to address the concerns of the society can be attributed to the recurrence of political upheavals in China. In 757, for example, a few days after the rebel leader An Lushan was assassinated, bringing to an end one of the most forceful and devastating rebellions against the Tang empire, Emperor Suzong ordered that the Famen relic be brought to the imperial palace for veneration.⁷⁵ The emperor, who gave credit to the supernatural powers of Buddhism for the victory against the rebel forces and was himself consecrated as a *cakravartin* king, may have sought the help of the relic to preserve peace and tranquility during the recovery phase of the empire.⁷⁶

The spread of esoteric doctrines catalyzed the ritualistic aspect of Buddhism in China, reinforced the image of Buddhism as thaumaturgy, and significantly expanded the list of Buddhist-related items traded between India and China. The systematic and successful transmission of esoteric doctrines owes much to the work of three Indian monks in eighth-century China, Shanwuwei (*Śubhakarasiṃha*, d. 735), Vajrabodhi, and Bukong Jin'gang (*Amoghavajra*, d. 774).⁷⁷ Although none of these monks seems to be directly involved in the veneration of the Famen Monastery relic, the impact of their esoteric teachings is evident from the objects enclosed in the crypt of the Monastery.⁷⁸

Han Jinke's meticulous study of the excavated objects, many of them made of gold and silver and donated during the last Tang veneration of the relic, illustrate that they were arranged in the form of a *mandala*, a concentric layout symbolizing the Buddhist universe.⁷⁹ Maṇḍalic diagrams or altars were employed by esoteric masters in rituals as means to link a patron to the cosmic reality. Gold and silver objects, gems, crystals, and other precious materials, items found in the Famen Monastery crypt, were commonly used as accessories in such esoteric ceremonies. The engravings on many of the donated objects also indicate the use of maṇḍalic symbolism and the presence of various esoteric imagery and deities, including Vairocana, Gaṇeśa, and Kṣitigarbha. Suffice it to say that when the crypt at the Famen Monastery was sealed for the final time in the ninth century, the veneration of the finger relic was conducted according to esoteric rites.

Following the fall of the Tang dynasty, however, the Famen relic was never again displayed to the public, nor did it attract comparable attention from subsequent ruling families. Probable reasons for this neglect are: (1) the severe criticism leveled by Han Yu, a noted Confucian official, against the ceremony and the "excessive reaction" it reportedly evoked among the public; and (2) the misfortune the performance of relic-veneration seems to have brought upon the reigning emperors.

Angered by both the imperial participation in relic veneration and those who engaged in self-mutilation, Han Yu, in a memorial presented to Emperor Xianzong in the first lunar month of the fourteenth year of the Yuanhe period (January-February 819), deprecated Buddhism as a "barbarian" and "fraudulent" doctrine. The Buddha, Han Yu argued, did not dress like the Chinese, did not speak the language of the sagely kings of China, did not follow the virtues of loyalty and filial piety, and thus was an immoral person. As to the specific ceremony of venerating the Famen relic, Han Yu criticized the excessive exuberance of the gift-givers and the abnormal practice of self-mutilation during the public display of the relic. He especially voiced his displeasure with the emperor's participation in the veneration and the act of housing the relic in the imperial palace. Pointing to the Confucian emphasis on maintaining a spatial distance between the living and the dead, he asked, "This dry bone is left over from his (the Buddha's) baneful funerary remains. How could it be proper that it should be caused to enter the forbidden apartments of the imperial palace?"⁸⁰ The immediate reaction to Han Yu's criticism was so severe that the emperor at once ordered his execution. Within six days, however, the sentence was reduced and the critic was exiled to the southernmost territory of the Tang empire. After a few months, when Han Yu offered a formal apology, Emperor Xianzong, wanting eventually to pardon the exiled minister, transferred him to a province near the capital.

Little more than a year after Han Yu had presented his memorial and before he could receive a full pardon, Xianzong died of an overdose of longevity drugs. The emperor's death shortly after the veneration of Famen relic, in some ways vindicated Han Yu's contention about the dire consequences of housing the finger bone in the imperial palace. Thus, when Emperor Muzong (r. 820-824) succeeded to the Tang throne, he brought Han Yu back to the capital and appointed him to a high-ranking position. A few decades later,

in 844, Emperor Wuzong (r. 841–846) banned all offerings and pilgrimages to sites housing the relics of the Buddha, including the Famen Monastery.⁸¹ Then, in the third lunar month of the fourteenth year of the Xiantong period (March–April 873), when Emperor Yizong ordered monks to revive the tradition of venerating the Famen Monastery relic inside the imperial palace, it is reported that yellow mud started pouring down with rain.⁸² Alarmed by the inauspicious sign, officials quickly reminded the emperor that Emperor Xianzong, almost a half a century before him, had died soon after he venerated the relic at the palace, and advised him to rescind his order.⁸³

The adamant emperor, however, remarked that he would venerate the relic even if it meant his death and had the relic brought to the imperial palace. The lavish rites that followed and the donations that poured in are evident from the objects discovered in the Famen crypt. Found inside the crypt, for example, were more than one hundred and twenty gold and silver ritual vessels, twenty objects made of glass (many of them imported), about sixteen ceramic utensils, and scores of silk garments.⁸⁴ An accompanying inscription listing the names and titles of the donors and the date of donation reveals that a majority of these donations were given during the ceremony ordered by Yizong. Within three and a half months of the ceremony, however, Emperor Yizong died of a severe sickness. Court officials did not formally bring up the relevance of his death to the veneration, but the finger bone at the Famen Monastery never regained royal favor.

The evolution of relic worship in China had, from the third century to the time Emperor Yizong venerated the Famen relic in the ninth century, unfolded through at least four stages. In the first stage (in the third and fourth centuries), relic worship and the legends of King Aśoka were intimately linked. Together they were employed to establish the presence of the Buddha and legitimize the spread of Buddhist doctrines to China. During this stage, Indian and other foreign monks played a crucial part in supplying the relics to China and translating canonical texts that explained the merits of venerating the relics of the Buddha.

In the second stage, from the fourth to the sixth centuries, relics were not only used by the Chinese rulers to legitimize their political authority, but widely venerated by the laity in order to establish religious merit. The frequent use of relics, *stūpas*, and other Buddhist paraphernalia during this phase helped to bridge the tem-

poral and spatial gaps separating the Buddhist worlds of India and China. In fact, by the late sixth century, the relics venerated by the Chinese may have already accomplished their elementary role of asserting the presence of the Buddha in China.

With the presence of the Buddha fully asserted, in the third stage, from the seventh through the mid-eighth centuries, relic veneration in China assumed a momentum of its own. The reasons for venerating the remains diversified and indigenous practices, such as self-mutilation, were injected into the ceremonies. Relics thus functioned less as objects that legitimized political authority or the doctrine itself, but rather were venerated mostly for their therapeutic and merit-bestowing values.

The fourth stage of relic veneration, from the middle of the eighth to late ninth centuries, witnessed the prevalence of esoteric Buddhism and the resumption of political upheavals in China. The esoteric rites and rituals popularized in China by Indian esoteric masters seem to have resulted in the extensive use of relics. In fact, relics became one of the key ingredients of esoteric rites. They were used in rituals ranging from protecting the state to curing sicknesses. The esoteric texts even professed that in the absence of the remains of the Buddha, gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, or even clean sand and bamboo or wood shaped like relics could be substituted.⁸⁵ The expanded use of relics and its broad definition by the esoteric masters not only furthered the trade in religious items between India and China, but also ensured the everlasting presence of the deceased Buddha in China.

Because the increasing availability of relics, either through miraculous discoveries or their frequent supply by Indian monks, envoys, and traders, assured the Chinese Buddhist community of the presence of the Buddha in their own realm, the attraction toward the remains of the Buddha housed in Indian monasteries and the aspiration to visit those sites gradually abated in China. In fact, throughout the process of the evolution of relic veneration, it had been a resolute desire of the Chinese clergy to affirm China's position as an extension of the Buddhist world, inhabited in the past, present, and future by important Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and temporal followers of the doctrine. The relics miraculously discovered in China not only proved the early and legitimate transmission of the doctrine, but also offered the Chinese adherents an opportunity to experience the presence of the Buddha in their own land. The Chinese prophecies

about the appearance of Mañjuśrī at Mount Wutai in Shaanxi province, the identification of Avalokiteśvara with Mount Putuo in Zhejiang,⁸⁶ the portrayal of Mount Emei in Sichuan as an abode of Samantabhadra, and Mount Jiuhua as that of bodhisattva Kṣitigarbha, on the other hand, served to transform China into a true Buddhist realm.⁸⁷ The focus of the next section is on Mount Wutai because in the eighth century it had emerged as one of the most important Buddhist pilgrimage sites outside South Asia.

Mount Wutai, the Abode of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī

The origins of Mañjuśrī, the bodhisattva of meditation and perfect wisdom, are obscure. He is often associated with the celestial musician called Pañcaśikha (Five Peaks), and usually described as a bodhisattva dwelling in a mountain with five peaks.⁸⁸ Mañjuśrī comes to prominence and is best known for his role in the *Vimalakīrtinirdēśa Sūtra*, a text compiled no later than the first century of the Common Era. In the first half of this text, Mañjuśrī emerges as the only competent bodhisattva, among all other prominent buddhas, bodhisattvas, and disciples of the Buddha, qualified to visit the lay Buddhist Vimalakīrti and inquire about his illness. In the second half of the text, Mañjuśrī, serving as an interlocutor, prompts Vimalakīrti to expound the major teachings of the Mahāyāna tradition. While the primary aim of the text was to outline the main themes of Mahāyāna teachings, it was also instrumental in popularizing the image of Mañjuśrī.⁸⁹

In other Mahāyāna texts, Mañjuśrī appears as one of the most learned and benevolent beings. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, for example, he is portrayed as more knowledgeable than even the future Buddha. He is also known as a bodhisattva with awesome power to protect, a savior of people destined for purgatory, and a skilled converter of sentient beings to the teachings of the Buddha.⁹⁰ Stories about the bodhisattva and his abilities seem to have spread to China by the latter half of the second century when the Scythian monk Zhi Chan (Lokakṣema?) translated the now lost version of *Sūramgamasamādhi Sūtra* (*Shoulengyan jing*) into Chinese.⁹¹ During the same period, Yan Fotiao completed one of the first translations of the *Vimalakīrtinirdēśa Sūtra* (which like Lokakṣema's *Sūramgamasamādhi Sūtra* is no longer extant).⁹² But it was the translation of *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (T. 463),

attributed to the fourth-century lay Buddhist Nie Daozhen, which promoted the initial belief in the bodhisattva's presence in China.⁹³

THE EMERGENCE OF MOUNT WUTAI AS THE PRESENT DWELLING OF MAÑJUŚRĪ

In *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, Mañjuśrī is prophesized to appear at the so-called "Snow Mountain" (Ch. Xueshan; Skt. Himavat) four hundred fifty years after the nirvāṇa of the Buddha. It is also foreboded in this text that after his own nirvāṇa, the remains of Mañjuśrī would be found at the Diamond Peak (*Vajrakūṭa*) in the Fragrant Mountain (Ch. Xiangshan; Skt. Gandhamādana).⁹⁴ Although the Snow and Fragrant mountains originally were thought to be part of the ranges in the Himalayan chain, the Chinese clergy, no doubt deliberately, construed that the prophecy meant the Chinese mountain Wutai. There were, in fact, a number of analogies between the mountains mentioned in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* prophecy and Mount Wutai that the Chinese clergy (and their South Asian collaborators) ingeniously used to support their claim. For example, the fact that Mount Wutai was covered with snow throughout the year, even during the summer months, was used to draw a comparison to the "Snow Mountain" in the prophecy. Moreover, the five terraces of Mount Wutai and the lake located within the Middle Terrace fit the description of the five peaks of the mythical mountain Gandhamādana surrounding the lake Anavatapta in the center. And finally, translated, the word "Wutai" (Five Terraces) could be equated to Pañcaśikha (Five Peaks), the original Indian name of bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.⁹⁵

In the first quarter of the fifth century, Buddhahadra's compilation of the *Dafangguang fo huayan jing* (*Avatamsaka Sūtra*, T. 278) appears to have furnished further justification for those trying to associate Mañjuśrī's prophetic abode with Mount Wutai. The *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, parts of which were written in Central Asia,⁹⁶ notes that, "In the northeast there is a place where bodhisattvas live. It is called Clear-and-Cold Mountain. In the past, various bodhisattvas would often dwell within [this mountain]. Now present there is the bodhisattva called Mañjuśrī."⁹⁷ Clear-and-Cold Mountain (*Qingliang shan*) was in fact an alternate name for Mount Wutai. Étienne Lamotte has persuasively argued that Buddhahadra and his collaborators deliberately interpolated this reference to Clear-and-Cold Mountain when rendering the Indian text into Chinese.⁹⁸ In time, this passage in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* became the most commonly used "canonical"

reference for the Chinese clergy emphasizing the significance of Mount Wutai as the abode of Mañjuśrī.⁹⁹

The fact that the Chinese mountain had already become renowned as the abode of Mañjuśrī in the seventh century is evident from the following report given by Daoxuan in around 664:

Mount Wutai, in southeastern Dai prefecture, has been known since ancient [times] as an abode of divine spirits. The mountain is three hundred tricens square [in area]. The [mountain]-peak has precipitous slopes [and is] lofty and steep. [It also] has five tall terraces. Grass and trees do not grow on their summits; and pine and cypress, along with other splendid trees, flourish in the valleys below. The mountain is extremely cold. [In the] south it is known as the Clear-and-Cold Mountain. [A] Clear-and-Cold prefecture [has also been] established there.

It is clearly noted in *Sūtras* that Mañju[śrī] will, with five hundred divine beings, [after the nirvāṇa of the Buddha] proceed to the Clear-and-Cold Snowy Mountain. This [mountain] is that very site. That is why, since the ancient times scholars seeking the Way have frequented this mountain. Historical traces and numinous grottos which are distinctly visible [on the mountain], were not established in vain.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, by manipulating Buddhist texts and adding Indic paraphernalia to the mountain, the Chinese clergy had, by the mid-seventh century, successfully transformed Mount Wutai into a sacred Buddhist site. In fact, they had created an Indic landscape and a miniature Buddhist world on the Chinese mountain. Each of the terraces of the mountain were known to provide marvelous views of the earthly as well as the imaginary Buddhist worlds—from the river Ganges to the Japanese islands, and to the region beyond the Northern Dipper. The mountain itself resembled *Ḡḍhrakūṭa*, the hill which is often portrayed in Buddhist texts as one of the sacred sites where the Buddha disseminated his teachings. Within the hills and gorges of the Chinese mountain were temples, halls, and caves, places where the past seven Buddhas, divine dragons, and other Buddhist divinities manifested themselves. Mount Wutai also contained the dwelling cave of the Nārāyana, the Buddhicized Brahmanical god Viṣṇu, the Diamond Grotto which purportedly led to the realm of paradise, and the site where Mañjuśrī and Vimalakīrti allegedly discussed the main teach-

ings of Mahāyāna. The whole mountain, moreover, was said to be covered by the aroma of Indian incense.

Because the mountain had been recognized as a sacred pilgrimage site, Chinese clergy, as Mary Anne Cartelli has correctly observed, did not have to “travel to India to encounter the Buddhist doctrine; the experience could be obtained firsthand at Mount Wutai.”¹⁰¹ The Chinese mountain, however, not only enticed the Chinese clergy, but also drew the attention of the members of Indian and other foreign Buddhist communities. By the ninth century, Buddhist pilgrims from Japan, Korea, and South Asia were frequenting Mount Wutai, acknowledged by the contemporary clergy as one of the holiest sites in the Buddhist realm.

INDIAN MONKS AND MOUNT WUTAI

One of the first South Asian monks to make a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai was Shijiamiduoluo (*Śākyamitra?*, 569–?). Originally a native of Sri Lanka, *Śākyamitra* studied at the Mahābodhi Monastery in India before arriving in China during the Linde reign period (664–666). The ninety-four-year-old monk was first lodged at the Court of State Ceremonial, where he undertook translation activities. Then, in the second year of the Qianfeng period (667), he travelled to Mount Wutai.¹⁰² Later, during the Yifeng reign period (676–679), two unnamed Indian monks are also reported to have visited Mount Wutai.¹⁰³ A fourth South Asian monk, called Juduo (*Jīta?*), made a pilgrimage to the Chinese mountain during the Xianheng reign period (670–674).¹⁰⁴ Indeed, by the last quarter of the seventh century, as evidenced by the Chinese pilgrim Yijing’s record (describing his travels in India between 671 and 695), the members of the Indian Buddhist community were apparently aware of the legends surrounding the presence of Mañjuśrī at Mount Wutai.¹⁰⁵

Three seventh-century South and Central Asian monks in Tang China, the Khotānese Shichanantuo (*Śikṣānanda*, 652–710), the South Indian Putiliuzhi (*Bodhiruci*, d. 727?), and the Kāśmīri monk Fotuoboli (*Buddhapāli?*), seem to have played a significant role in legitimizing the Mañjuśrī lore at Mount Wutai and its dissemination to India. These monks arrived in China at a time when Empress Wu had usurped the Tang court and, as is detailed below, was employing Buddhist doctrines to legitimize her authority. Extensive use of Indic themes and paraphernalia and an unprecedented growth of Buddhist doctrines and practices in China marked Empress

Wu's reign. Within this context, the affirmation of Mañjuśrī's presence in China by South Asian monks served a dual purpose. First, it contributed to Wu Zetian's temporal goal of creating a Buddhist world in China in which she could be portrayed as a *cakravartin* ruler. Secondly, for the Chinese clergy, the attestation contributed to dispelling their borderland complex. Śikṣānanda, Bodhiruci, and Buddhapāli were all part of this endeavor to transform China into a central Buddhist realm ruled by Empress Wu, who, as we shall see in the next section, was presented as the female incarnation of the future Buddha.

Among these three monks, only Buddhapāli is reported to have made a special pilgrimage—not once but twice—to Mount Wutai. The Indian monk is noted to have heard stories about the presence of Mañjuśrī at Mount Wutai when he was still in Kaśmīr. In the first year of the Yifeng reign period (676), he reached China with the specific aim of paying obeisance to the bodhisattva dwelling at Mount Wutai. Pouring tears of joy in realization that his wish was about to come true,¹⁰⁶ Buddhapāli prostrated himself facing Mount Wutai when, as various versions of the Kaśmīri monk's pilgrimage tells us, an old man suddenly emerged from the mountain. Speaking in an Indian language (*Pohuomen yu*), the old man asked if the Indian monk had brought a copy of [*Sarvadurgatīparīśodhana*] *uṣṇīṣavijayā dhāraṇī* (*Foding zunsheng tuoluoni jing*) with him.¹⁰⁷ That specific text, according to the old man, was the only one that could atone for the bad deeds committed by the sentient beings in the "land of the Han" (*Handi*, i.e., China). When Buddhapāli replied that he had only come to pay obeisance to Mañjuśrī and carried no texts with him, the old man, apparently an incarnation of Mañjuśrī, instructed that if the monk really wished to see the bodhisattva he must first return to the Western Kingdom (*Xiguo*, i.e., India), fetch the *dhāraṇī* text, and have it translated into Chinese.

In the second year of the Yongheng reign period (683), Buddhapāli returned to China, this time with the *dhāraṇī* text mentioned by the old man. He then sought Wu Zetian's permission to translate the text into Chinese.¹⁰⁸ With the court's support, we are told, the text was translated and the original Sanskrit version returned to Buddhapāli. Taking the original text, Buddhapāli travelled to Mount Wutai and entered the Diamond Grotto never to come out again.¹⁰⁹ This story is narrated in the preface to the Chinese translation of the *Uṣṇīṣavijayā dhāraṇī* (T. 967) attributed to Buddhapāli. The tale became widely popular among the Buddhist pilgrims visiting Mount

Wutai in the eighth and ninth centuries.¹¹⁰ It is unclear, however, if the story of Buddhapāli's return to India was real or a fabrication of the contemporary Buddhist clique attempting to authenticate the text by indicating the existence of a Sanskrit original.¹¹¹ It is likely that the story was concocted by the Chinese clergy to promote Mount Wutai as the abode of bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. In fact, Antonino Forte has suggested that this entire episode was "an integral part of a far-reaching political project whose aim was to transform China from a peripheral to a central area of Buddhist civilization."¹¹²

The arrival and subsequent contributions of Śikṣānanda to the Mount Wutai lore are more conspicuous. The Khotanese monk was personally invited by Empress Wu to retranslate the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*. Śikṣānanda arrived in China in 695 and was housed a monastery in Luoyang with a telling name—Monastery of the Buddha's Prophecy (Foshoujisi). It was at this monastery that many of the activities related to legitimizing Empress Wu's usurpation through Buddhist prophecies were carried out by monks including Xue Huaiyi (d. 695), Bodhiruci, and the famous Chinese pilgrim Yijing.¹¹³ Within four years, Śikṣānanda produced a new rendition of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, with sections that were clearly interpolated in China. In the new translation, the episode about Mañjuśrī's appearance at Mount Wutai (recorded as Clear-and-Cold Mountain) in China was distinctly laid out.¹¹⁴ In fact, shortly after the translation was completed, Empress Wu, by sanctioning the restoration of the Clear-and-Cold Temple at Mount Wutai,¹¹⁵ seems to have officially endorsed the link between the Mañjuśrī prophecy and the Chinese mountain.

The most resounding case for Mañjuśrī's presence at Mount Wutai, however, was presented in Bodhiruci's *Foshuo Wenshushili fabaozang tuoluoni jing* (T. 1185a). Also partly, if not entirely, composed in China,¹¹⁶ the work gives the following prophetic account of Mañjuśrī's appearance in China translated into English by Raoul Birnbaum:

[Then the bodhisattva Lord of the Vajra's Secret Traces said to the Buddha,] "O Lord, you often have said these words to me in the past—'After my final passing away, when a woe some age has fallen upon the Rose Apple Continent (Jambudvīpa), Mañjuśrī with broad abilities will benefit limitless sentient beings, and he will do the Buddha's work.' My sole wish, O Lord, is that you clearly and extensively describe to me in what place

he shall dwell and further in what region he shall practice these beneficial acts. Due to your compassionate sympathy and upholding protection for all sentient beings, I wish you will speak of it."

Then the Buddha told the bodhisattva Lord of the Vajra's Secret Traces: "After my final passing, in this Rose Apple Continent in the northeast sector, there is a country named Mahā Cīna. In its center there is a mountain named Five Peaks. The youth Mañjuśrī shall roam about and dwell there, preaching the Dharma in its center for the sake of all sentient beings. And at that time countless nāgas, devas, yakṣas, rākṣasa, kinnaras, mahorāgas, and other human and non-human shall encircle him, making worship offerings and revering him. This youth Mañjuśrī has limitless majestic virtues, including psychic abilities, the ability to transform himself, and the sovereign adornments. With these broad abilities, he will abundantly benefit all sentient beings. The force of his complete and perfect auspicious merits is inconceivable. . . ."117

Reconstructed prophecies such as this work may have permeated into India along with other reports of Mañjuśrī's presence at Mount Wutai. The fact that the Mañjuśrī cult in China had become widely known to the Buddhist community in South Asia is evident from the increased pilgrimages to Mount Wutai by Indian monks in the eighth and ninth centuries. The Kapiśa monk Bore (Prajña, 744-c. 810) for example, is known to have made a special trip to China to pay obeisance to Mañjuśrī in the late eighth century.¹¹⁸ Later, in mid-ninth century, the Japanese monk Ennin, on his pilgrimage to Mount Wutai, also recounts the previous visits and his own meetings with Indian monks at the mountain.¹¹⁹ And the *Guang Qingliang zhuan*, an eleventh-century work on Mount Wutai, records the presence of five hundred Indian monks (*fanseng*) at the Yuhua Monastery at Mount Wutai.¹²⁰

Credit for the notoriety of the Mañjuśrī cult in China must also be given to Amoghavajra. In fact, the esoteric master was instrumental in establishing Mañjuśrī as the national deity of Tang China.¹²¹ Under the patronage of Emperor Daizong (r. 763-779), Amoghavajra successfully obtained funds to renovate existing and erect new temples dedicated to Mañjuśrī at Mount Wutai.¹²² He also emphasized the ancestral link between the Tang rulers and the region sur-

rounding Mount Wutai in order to advance his goal of elevating the status of Mañjuśrī as the protector of the emperor and the nation.¹²³ The success of Amoghavajra in propagating the Mañjuśrī cult is evident from the imperial edict issued by Emperor Daizong in the seventh year of the Dali reign era (772), which ordered the construction of a Mañjuśrī cloister in every monastery in the empire.¹²⁴ Amoghavajra's inclination toward this specific Buddhist figure has led Birnbaum to suggest that Mañjuśrī may have been the esoteric master's "principal personal deity, under whose protection and inspiration he carried out his mission."¹²⁵ Indeed, his personal commitment to the bodhisattva not only prompted Amoghavajra to propagate the Mañjuśrī cult and deliberately link the Buddhist figure to the ruling family and nation, but also motivated him to translate a large number of Buddhist texts highlighting the theological significance of the bodhisattva.¹²⁶

One of Amoghavajra's leading disciples Hanguang (fl. eighth cent.) also played a key role in the expansion of the Mañjuśrī cult at Mount Wutai. Hanguang is known to have overseen, on orders from Emperor Daizong, the construction of the esoteric Jin'ge Temple at Mount Wutai. Both he and Amoghavajra are reported to have worked closely together in performing esoteric rites related to the protection of the state on behalf of Emperor Daizong. The construction of Jin'ge Temple, under the supervision of Hanguang, was no doubt also connected to the performance of such state rituals. When the construction of the temple was completed, Hanguang seems to have been appointed as its first abbot.¹²⁷ This temple has been described as "a headquarters for tantric Buddhist practice on the mountain and a principal center for Amoghavajra and his disciples."¹²⁸

Hanguang is also associated with a spurious story regarding the reverse transmission of Buddhist doctrines from China to India.¹²⁹ When at Mount Wutai, either in 766 or 767, or some time after 774, Hanguang reportedly met Zhanran (711-782), a leading propagator of the Tiantai school in Tang China. In a work attributed to Zhanran, the Tiantai monk recounts his meeting and, for our purposes, extremely fascinating conversation he had had with Hanguang at Mount Wutai. The dialogue between the two monks, as narrated by Zhanran, went as follows:

It just so happened that I was then paying a visit to Mount Wutai together with over forty monks from the Jianghuai areas.

Thus, I met a disciple of the "Master of the Three Canons" Bukong, Hanguang, who, by imperial command, was overseeing the construction [of a temple] on the mountain. He told me, "While traveling in India with 'Master of the Three Canons' Bukong, I met a monk who asked me, '[I heard that] the teachings of Tiantai are circulating in the Great Tang. They are best at distinguishing the heretic from the orthodox, showing [the difference between] the one-sided and the perfect. Could you have the Tiantai works translated into Sanskrit and bring the translations to this country?'"¹³⁰

This conversation between Zhanran and Hanguang is included in the biographies of both these monks compiled during the Song period, and was also introduced into Japan by Saichō (767–822), the transmitter of Tiantai doctrines to Japan. This story is reminiscent of the king of Kāmarūpa's purported interest in the *Daode jing* and the teachings of Daoism and the Sui Emperor Wen's orders to translate Chinese texts introducing the Buddhist realm he ruled to the Indian public. These accounts are no doubt indicative of the predicament the Chinese in general had in their encounter with the Indian civilization. The genre of reverse transmission of Buddhist doctrines from China to India is specifically part of the attempt made by the Chinese clergy to validate the indigenous schools of Buddhism and their larger goal of establishing a Buddhist realm in China. In fact, Chen Jinhua has convincingly demonstrated that the above dialogue between Zhanran and Hanguang was interpolated and the alleged fame of Tiantai doctrines in India forged by the adherents of the Tiantai school in order to promote their sectarian interests. It was used in both China and Japan, Chen explains, to promote the prestige, interest, and legitimacy of the Tiantai (Jp. Tendai) school.¹³¹

The argument for a reverse transmission of Buddhist doctrines made by the Chinese clergy also may have had some connections to the prophecies that foreboded the demise of Buddhism in India. The imminent decay and decline of Buddhist doctrines (Skt. *saddharma vipralopa/ śāsanāntardhāna*; Ch. *mofa*) in its homeland was purportedly predicted by the Buddha himself. As detailed in the next section, this view of the doctrine's impending demise was an integral and important part of Buddhist theology in both South and East Asia. On one of his missions to Middle India, the Tang diplomat Wang Xuance is reported to have learned from the abbot of the Mahābodhi

Monastery about a belief among Indian clergy that when corrupt doctrines eventually eclipse the Indic lands, genuine Buddhist doctrines will continue to flourish in the peripheral east.¹³² In other words, after the disappearance of Buddhist doctrines from India, China would emerge as the new Buddhist realm. If this is indeed a true reflection of views of the seventh-century Indian clergy and not a fabrication of the Chinese Buddhists, it would not only explain the attempts by some of the South and Central Asian monks to authenticate the presence of bodhisattva Mañjuśrī at Mount Wutai, but also the increasing number of Indian and foreign monks making pilgrimage to China.

The pilgrimages of some of these foreign monks to the Chinese mountains are vividly described in the mid-ninth-century diary of the Japanese monk Ennin, in the poems and travelogues written by Chinese and foreign devotees, and illustrated in the paintings drawn on the walls of famous Buddhist caves in Dunhuang and temples in Taiyuan. The pilgrimage activity also prompted the growth in the demand for Mount Wutai paraphernalia within China and in the neighboring countries.¹³³ The Tibetans, for example, are reported to have sent special envoys to the Chinese court seeking paintings of Mount Wutai.¹³⁴ Additionally, it has been suggested that the emergence of the Mañjuśrī cult in China and its subsequent recognition in India may have even been responsible for the development of Mañjuśrī imagery in South Asia.¹³⁵

The fact that South Asian monks recognized China as the abode of Mañjuśrī and travelled there expressly to make pilgrimage at Mount Wutai can be discerned from non-Chinese sources as well. Captions to the illustrations of Mañjuśrī in two eleventh-century Nepali manuscripts (now housed at the Asiatic Society in Calcutta), for example, indicate the popularity of the Wutai cult in contemporary South Asia. The first manuscript (Ms. VIII), which dates from 1015, has a caption next to the figure of Mañjuśrī describing him as the "Mañjughoṣa (i.e. Mañjuśrī) of Great China" ("*Mahācīne Mañjughoṣaḥ*"). The caption in the second manuscript (Ms. X), bearing the date of 1071, identifies the illustration of Mañjuśrī as "Vāgīrāṭṭa (mistake for Vādirāt, i.e., Mañjuśrī) of Five-Peaked Mountain" ("*Pañcaśikha-parvate Vāgīrāṭṭa*"). Apparently, as A. Foucher has acknowledged, the references here are to the abode of Mañjuśrī at Mount Wutai.¹³⁶

Of equal significance are the tenth-century Sanskrit-Tibetan formulary (P. 3531) and the Sanskrit-Khotanese bilingual manual

(P. 5538) in the Pelliot Collection housed in France. These works were compiled under the guidance of Indian pilgrims visiting Mount Wutai, especially, it seems, to aid monks travelling to China through Tibet and Central Asia.¹³⁷ P. 5538, for example, incorporates a conversation between an Indian monk and a native of Ganzhou (present-day Zhangye, Gansu province), a Chinese border town. This dialogue, given in both Sanskrit and Khotanese, reads:

Whence have you come?
 I have come from Khotan.
 When did you come from India?
 Two years ago.
 Where did you stay in Khotan?
 I stayed in a saṅghārāma.
 In which saṅghārāma did you stay? Did you duly
 see the king or not?
 I duly saw him.
 Now where are you going?
 I am going to China.
 What is your business in Chinā?
 I shall see the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.
 When will you return here?
 I shall see China and afterwards return.¹³⁸

These sources imply that the reports of Indian pilgrims at Mount Wutai were not mere fabrications of the Chinese clergy. The emergence of Mount Wutai as a famed Buddhist center inspired Indian clergy to travel to China, it seems, not as transmitters of Buddhist doctrines, as had been the case previously, but as pilgrims to a country formerly dismissed as peripheral and an inappropriate dwelling place for the Buddha. In other words, the acceptance of Mount Wutai as a sacred pilgrimage site by the Indian Buddhist community seems to have finally legitimated the Chinese claim to an important place in the Buddhist world.

Maitreya and the Regeneration of the Buddhist World in Tang China

China's claim to a legitimate part of the Buddhist realm in the seventh and eighth centuries was bolstered by the prevailing view that

the doctrine had entered its decadence phase in India. The absence of a strong temporal support for the Buddhist cause and the gradual revival of Brahmanism in India reinforced the belief in the imminent demise of the doctrine. Moreover, urban decay in parts of northern India and the resulting contraction of long-distance commerce made it difficult for the Indian clergy to sustain the once flourishing monastic institutions and Buddhist towns along some of the trade routes.¹³⁹ The impecunious state of Buddhist sites and the dilapidated nature of Buddhist institutions in various regions of India can be discerned, and was available to the Chinese clergy, from the writings of Chinese pilgrims visiting India, including Xuanzang's *Da Tang Xiyu ji*.

While the demise of Buddhism in India seemed apparent, in China the doctrine had gained a strong foothold and thrived under rulers such as Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty, and Wu Zetian in the seventh century. Despite the frequent criticisms leveled against Buddhism by Confucian scholars and a few episodes of persecution by Chinese emperors, monastic institutions prospered throughout China. The translation of Indian Buddhist texts and production of Chinese apocryphal works, the construction of Buddhist monuments, and the proselytizing activities increased from the fourth through the seventh centuries. Within this context of the blossoming of Buddhism in China, the prophecies of the imminent decline of the doctrine were also a concern for the Chinese clergy. At the same time, however, they found an opportunity to link the prophecies to the declining state of the doctrine in India and argue for its renaissance in China. This section examines the ways in which the prophecies of the imminent demise of the Buddhist doctrine went through modifications in China, how they were employed to legitimize the usurpation of Empress Wu Zetian, and used to present China as the site for the resurrection of genuine Buddhist doctrines.

THE SYNCRETISM OF BUDDHIST APOCALYPTIC PROPHECIES

The prophecy that the true teachings (Pāli *saddharamma*; Skt. *saddharma*; Ch. *zhengfa*) of the Buddha would eventually degenerate was an early and fundamental aspect of Buddhism.¹⁴⁰ It was prophesied that at certain point in the future, the exact time for which varied from text to text, invasion of India by foreigners, the ensuing destruction of Buddhist monuments, or corruption within the monastic

organization would lead to the disappearance of Buddhist doctrines. While human beings were purported to have had a life span of 80,000 years during the time of the past Buddha Vipasyin some ninety-one eons (*kalpas*) ago, it was reduced to 100 years in the current eon of Śākyamuni Buddha, and when the true doctrines are eventually destroyed, anywhere from five hundred to one thousand years after the death of Śākyamuni, human life span would extend to only 10 years. It was also predicted that when the true teachings of the Buddha are destroyed, the world would be rampant with greed, chaos, disease, and starvation.¹⁴¹

When the true teachings have disappeared and the level of human existence had reached its all-time low, the Buddhist prophecies on the demise of the doctrine tell us, the renovation of the doctrine and the world would begin. There would be a *cakravartin* king called Śaṅkha, who would establish peace and tranquility, rule righteously, provide the seven precious jewels (*saptaratna*; Ch. *qibao*) to the public, thus bringing happiness to all the sentient beings. At the peak of this period of prosperity under King Śaṅkha, and when the human life span has reverted to 80,000 years, the future Buddha Maitreya, currently residing in the Tuṣita Heaven, would descend on earth and attain enlightenment. The teachings of Maitreya would, then, spread to all sentient beings.¹⁴³

Although the Buddhist teaching of impermanence would seem a logical source for the prophecies on the eventual demise of the doctrine, internal polemics concerning the orthodoxy of the doctrine and sectarian movements may have played a more important role in their formation.¹⁴⁴ In fact, there seem to be two major strains of prophecies concerning the decline of the doctrine. One line of argument emphasized the internal decay of the monastic community and the ineffectiveness of the doctrine leading to the disappearance of the true teachings. The Buddha's prediction about the dire consequences of admitting women into the monastic community is an early example from this set of prophecies.¹⁴⁵ The Buddha is supposed to have told Ānanda, one of his leading disciples, that,

[If] women had not retired from household life to the houseless one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by the Tathāgata, religion, Ānanda, would long endure; a thousand years would the Good Doctrine abide. But since, Ānanda, women have now retired from household life to the houseless

one, under the Doctrine and Discipline announced by the Tathāgata, not long, Ānanda, will religion endure; but five hundred years, Ānanda, will the Good Doctrine abide.¹⁴⁶

Also among this set of prophecies is the so-called Kauśāmbī story, in which a sectarian dispute between Buddhist factions at the city of Kauśāmbī leads to the emergence of counterfeit teachings (*pratirūpaka dharma*; Ch. *xiangfa*) followed by the eventual disappearance of the doctrine.¹⁴⁷

A second group of prophecies on the decline of the doctrine highlighted invasions by foreign rulers. In the Chinese translations of *Samyuktāgama* (*Za Ahan jing*, T. 99) and *Aśokarājavadāna* (*Ayu wang zhuan*, T. 2042), for example, invading forces of Greeks (*yavana*), śaka, Parthians (*pahlava*), and Tukhārians (Ch. *Toushaluo*=Skt. *tuṣāra*) are prophesized to destroy Buddhist monasteries and the community.¹⁴⁸ Jan Nattier points out that these predictions date from the second to fourth centuries of the Common Era, two to four hundred years after the actual invasion of India by the foreign groups mentioned in the prophecies had taken place.¹⁴⁹ She suggests that since some of these foreign invaders had become avid supporters of Buddhism during later periods, the prophecies related to the conquests may have originated from the destruction caused by their initial invasions.¹⁵⁰

In fact, the original inspiration for Maitreya, the Buddha of the post-decline phase of the doctrine, may have been the Zoroastrian cult of savior (Saōsyant) or the Persian-Greek Messiah Mithrās Invictus, introduced into India by some of the same foreign groups blamed for the eventual destruction of Buddhism.¹⁵¹ Victor H. Mair has explained that the names Maitreya and Mithra mean the same and go back to the same Indo-European root. In Brahmanical tradition, Mitraḥ ("friend"/"companion") is a god of friendship, who is often invoked as an upholder of order, punisher of falsehood, supporter of heaven and earth, and bringer of rain. Similarly, in Buddhism, Maitreya (Pāli *Metteyya*) means "the Benevolent (Friendly) One," a bodhisattva who is also the Buddha of the future. The Persian-Greek Mithrās (from Avestan *Mithrō*; Old Persian *Mithra* i.e., "contract") is the God of Light and guardian against evil who was widely worshiped in the Roman empire, especially among the military (legionaries), during the early Christian centuries. Sanskrit *Mitraḥ*, Avestan *Mithrō*, and Old Persian *Mithra*, Mair argues, are all from Indo-Iranian **mitra*-, meaning friend(ship),

contract, god of the contract.¹⁵² Indeed, as Romila Thapar points out, the popularity of the Maitreya cult in the northern tradition of Buddhism may have derived from a complex historical situation that resulted in the "juxtaposition of a number of competing religions along the routes linking India, Iran, central Asia, and east Asia."¹⁵³

Maitreya emerges as an important figure in the *Mahāvastu*, a canonical text of the Mahāsaṃghika school, compiled between the second century B.C.E. and the third or fourth century C.E. In this text, he bears the given name Ajita and the family name Maitreya,¹⁵⁴ described as the "Universal Monarch" (*cakravartin*), and noted as the fifth among the one thousand buddhas destined to appear in the current eon.¹⁵⁵ Among the early Mahāyāna literature, Maitreya appears prominently in the *Lotus Sūtra* and *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*. In the latter text, for example, he is noted as residing in Tuṣita Heaven as a bodhisattva and acknowledged as the successor to Śākyamuni Buddha waiting to descend on earth.

Between the second and tenth centuries, as the Buddhist prophecies regarding the demise of the doctrine and the appearance of the future Buddha dispersed to the rest of Asia, Maitreya assumed multiple roles. He was regarded as the savior of sentient beings, the usher of a utopian age, and the figure responsible for sustaining the Buddhist doctrines in the future age. The most fundamental feature of the Maitreyan prophecies and myths of the later periods, however, was the anticipated encounter between the Buddhist believers and the future Buddha. Although merit-making was the most commonly accepted prerequisite for such an encounter, there were disagreements over when and where the believer would eventually meet him. Nattier's survey of various Maitreyan prophecies has resulted in four logically possible scenarios about the time and place believers expected to encounter the future Buddha:

1. *Here/now*: the believer will meet Maitreya on earth, in his or her present lifetime.
2. *Here/later*: the believer will meet Maitreya on earth, but in a future rebirth.
3. *There/now*: the believer will meet Maitreya in his current abode at Tuṣita Heaven during present lifetime.
4. *There/later*: the believer will meet Maitreya in Tuṣita Heaven in a future lifetime.¹⁵⁶

Nattier points out that of these four scenarios, the here/now versions were a "distinct minority," and limited to the Chinese context. Indeed, the belief in the imminent appearance of a messianic figure on earth proved especially attractive to the Chinese rebels who emphasized Daoist apocalyptic and millennial views.

Several Chinese rebellions, since at least the fifth century, can be linked to the Buddhist eschatological ideas that had fused with the indigenous (especially Daoist) messianic tradition.¹⁵⁷ The amalgam of Buddhist and Daoist eschatological ideas seems to have begun during the late Han period, when translation of the first group of Buddhist texts containing the prophecies on the decline of the doctrine and the advent of Maitreya coincided with rebellions incited by Daoist messianic ideas. The prevalent Daoist messianic belief of that time predicted that when the world comes to the verge of destruction and the sun and moon have disappeared, the savior Li Hong would appear. He would then save a few "chosen people" from destruction and chaos and eventually establish an ideal state, in fact a realm of paradise that would last for thousands and millions of years. The advent of Li Hong was predicted to take place in either 392, 403, or 452.¹⁵⁸

In all likelihood the here/now version of Maitreyan prophecy was a product of the Chinese syncretism of Buddhist views on the decay of doctrine and the preexisting belief in the advent of Li Hong. The amalgamation of Buddhō-Daoist prophecies probably developed at the folk level and were primarily spread through apocryphal texts.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, none of canonical texts translated into Chinese advocated the imminent advent of Maitreya in the world during the present lifetime. Nor, in fact, did the major Maitreyan cults in China share the view of encountering the future Buddha in the present lifetime. Rather, the traditional belief in meeting Maitreya in Tuṣita Heaven through the accumulation of merit was more widespread among the members of the Chinese clergy.

Like the transmission of other Buddhist doctrines, the notion of a future Buddha had also entered China through the trade routes linking India and China. The cult of Maitreya is known to have flourished along both the northern and southern branches of the Silk Road. In the kingdom of Khotan, for example, many of its kings were considered to be the incarnations of Maitreya. The Maitreya cult seems to have been equally popular in Turfan on the northern rim

of the Taklamakan desert.¹⁶⁰ In fact, the Northern Liang (397–439) occupation of Turfan and surrounding regions in the fifth century may have facilitated the spread of the Maitreya cult from the trading outposts in Central Asia to the Chinese hinterland. While a few Buddhist texts illustrating the role of the future Buddha were translated into Chinese in the third century, a large number of Maitreya texts date from the late fourth and fifth centuries.¹⁶¹

The translated texts from the fourth and fifth centuries highlight either the here/later or there/later versions of Maitreya prophecies. The popularity of these texts and the Maitreya cult itself during this period can be discerned from the rituals and practices (such as meditation, taking of vows, and invoking the name of Maitreya in order to attain rebirth in Tuṣita heaven or the earthly paradise of the future Buddha) performed by some of leading Buddhist monks in China, the increase in the number of Maitreya images installed by the royalty, and the large number of inscriptions dedicated to Maitreya by the lay Buddhist.¹⁶²

But, as Erik Zürcher points out, this is also the period when the role and perception of Maitreya seriously deviated from his original location in a realm of paradise existing in a very distant future. In the second half of the fifth century, Maitreya emerges as a messianic figure, whose imminent arrival would purportedly end the chaos and decay ravaging the contemporary world. This view of a messianic Maitreya became an inspiration for antiestablishment movements and rebellions, and, at the same time, prompted individuals to proclaim themselves as incarnations of Maitreya.¹⁶³ One of the earliest rebellions in China in which the leader reportedly claimed that he was an incarnation of Maitreya dates from the late fifth century.¹⁶⁴ While it is not clear what specific ideas or apocryphal texts may have instigated this rebellion, a similar uprising by a monk called Fachuan in 515 was clearly inspired by the apocryphal version of *Yueguang tongzhi jing* (*Chandraprabhakumāra Sūtra*, T. 534).

The earliest canonical version of this text, translated by Dharmarakṣa in the third century, portends the future appearance of the lesser known Buddhist figure called Yueguang (Chandraprabha) as a *cakravartin* ruler. According to the text, at the end of Chandraprabha's fifty-two-year reign, Buddhist texts and writings will gradually disappear, monks will give up their monastic life and return to lay society, and eventually Buddhist doctrines would be completely destroyed.¹⁶⁵ The apocryphal versions of the Chandraprabha prophecy were already

circulating in China in the fourth and fifth centuries. It appears, for example, in the text called *Foshuo shenri jing* (*Chandraprabhakumāra Sūtra*, T. 535), where the Buddha predicts that one thousand years after his death, Chandraprabha will be reborn as a great sage-ruler of China (*Qinguo*). He will, then, restore the Buddhist doctrine in China and in the neighboring region and convert everyone to Buddhism.¹⁶⁶

Antiestablishment movements based on the Buddhō-Daoist prophecies concerning the advent of Maitreya and Chandraprabha became more widespread in the seventh century. In the first lunar month of the sixth year of the Daye period (January-February 610), for example, a large group of bandits, led by someone they called Maitreya Buddha, attacked the imperial palace of the Sui dynasty. Three years later, a person named Song Zixian and a monk called Xiang Haiming proclaimed the advent of Maitreya and led separate rebellions against the state. Similar uprisings by people either proclaiming themselves as incarnations of Maitreya or those taking on the role of a savior in order to establish a new Buddhist kingdom also occurred in 715, 1047, and 1337.¹⁶⁷ In fact, these antiestablishment movements associated with the Maitreya/Chandraprabha prophecies may have been the source for the later, more famous, millennial activities of the White Lotus Society during the Yuan (1279–1368), Ming, and the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.¹⁶⁸

The use of here/now versions of Maitreya/Chandraprabha prophecies, however, was not confined to the antiestablishment rebels. The rulers of some post-Han kingdoms also attempted to identify themselves with the two messianic Buddhist figures. The non-Chinese rulers of the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534), for example, supported the belief of Maitreya's imminent descent in the present lifetime. "It was hoped," as Kenneth Ch'en points out, "that this descent would occur during the reign of the Northern Wei Dynasty, so that Maitreya would make use of that dynasty to pacify and unify the world."¹⁶⁹ Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty, on the other hand, was presented as an incarnation of the savior Chandraprabha in the Buddhist text called *Foshuo Dehu zhangzhe jing*. In this text, the Buddha is noted to have given the following prophecy:

When the Buddhist doctrine is in its final phase, in the Great Sui Kingdom of Jambudvīpa, [Chandraprabha] will become the great king called Daxing. He will be able to lead all the sentient beings of the Sui Kingdom to believe in the Buddhist doctrine

and plant the roots of various good [deeds]. At that time, King Daxing will venerate my Alms-bowl with the heart of great faith and the power of resolute virtues. Thus, within few years, my Alms-bowl will reach the Great Kingdom of Sui from [its present location in] Shale (Kashgar).¹⁷⁰

The same prophecy also describes the Sui king as a noble worshiper of the Buddha's Alms-bowl relic,¹⁷¹ and a generous sponsor of Buddhist texts, images, and *stūpas*. Buddha then predicts that because of his great deeds, the Sui king will eventually become a *cakravartin* ruler.

As Erik Zürcher has noted, this prophecy about Chandraprabha's advent as the king of the Sui dynasty was interpolated by Narendrayaśas when he was translating the Indian text under the patronage of Emperor Wen. The Indian monk did so, Zürcher suggests, for the purpose of "political propaganda on behalf of the Sui emperor Wen."¹⁷² Indeed, as pointed out earlier, Emperor Wen, after reunifying China in 589, had employed a variety of Buddhist paraphernalia to legitimize his new empire. The distribution of relics, the building of *stūpas*, and the manipulation of Buddhist texts by translators working under the auspices of the state were part of such plans. By the late sixth century, as Emperor Wen's actions indicate, Buddhist eschatological ideas had not only permeated Chinese society, they had also become efficacious political tools. Thus, almost a century later, when Empress Wu used the Maitreya and Chandraprabha prophesies for her own political propaganda and legitimization, she was simply following an established precedent. In fact, Empress Wu was a close descendant of Emperor Wen and many of her Buddhist propaganda activities were modeled after the Sui emperor.¹⁷³

WU ZETIAN: THE FEMALE MAITREYA AND THE RULER OF JAMBUDVĪPA

In rising from the status of a concubine of Emperor Taizong to the first empress of the succeeding Tang ruler Gaozong, Empress Wu had demonstrated tremendous political acumen. Relegated to a Buddhist monastery after the death of Emperor Taizong in 649, Wu Zetian quickly reentered the palace as the concubine of Gaozong. The new emperor, it seems, had prior attractions toward his father's concubine. From around 654, after she had given birth to the first son of Gaozong and had become the emperor's favorite concubine, Wu

Zetian began insisting on receiving the formal status of empress. Despite the fact that the court officials adamantly opposed her requests on the ground that she came from a lowly family and because she had been the concubine of the previous emperor, Gaozong, in 656, nonetheless bestowed the title of empress on Wu Zetian. Thereafter, Wu Zetian tactfully dismissed leading Tang officials whom she considered hostile, and also seems to have planned the deaths of the first empress Wang and Gaozong's other leading concubine, Xiao Liangdi.¹⁷⁴

In 660, when Emperor Gaozong became severely ill, Wu Zetian was actively engaged in making political decisions for the Tang court. Even after the emperor recovered and resumed his duties, Wu Zetian continued to participate in court affairs as "an equal partner in government."¹⁷⁵ In 674, soon after Emperor Gaozong's illness relapsed, Wu Zetian created a special and unprecedented title of "Heavenly Empress" ("Tianhou") for herself. And when the emperor died in 683, she emerged as the *de facto* ruler of China. Subsequently, she installed Li Dan (i.e., Ruizong [r. 683–684]) as the puppet emperor, and ordered changes to imperial symbols and paraphernalia used by the Tang rulers. The color of dress worn by court officials, for example, was changed, mythical names from the pre-Common Era Zhou dynasty replaced the Tang official titles, and the city of Luoyang was proclaimed the "Divine Capital" (*Shendu*).¹⁷⁶ Six years later, in the eighth lunar month (September) of 690, perhaps in order to consolidate her authority, she eventually usurped the Tang throne, declared the founding of the Zhou dynasty, and took the title of "Holy and Divine Emperor" for herself.

Between 685 and 695, Wu Zetian secured crucial support from the Buddhist clergy to legitimize her authority and her formal role as the "emperor" of China. Stanley Weinstein has suggested that Wu Zetian turned to Buddhism because it, unlike Confucianism (which provided no scope for women to hold the position of emperor) and Daoism (whose founder was supposed to be an ancestor of the ruling Li family Tang dynasty), "had no vested interest in the maintenance of the Tang dynasty."¹⁷⁷ It is not clear, however, exactly when Wu Zetian devised the plan to use Buddhism as a means to legitimize her authority. The declaration of Buddhism as the state religion of China in 674 by Emperor Gaozong, perhaps on the urging of Wu Zetian, may have won her initial backing from the Buddhist clergy. Additionally, her "affaire" with the Buddhist monk Xue Huaiyi starting in

685 may have also made it easier for her to employ Buddhist personnel and paraphernalia for political purposes.¹⁷⁸ In fact, Huaiyi played a leading role in legitimizing Wu Zetian's usurpation through the manipulation of Buddhist texts and prophecies.

Wu Zetian's plans to use Buddhism, especially the Maitreya/Chandraprabha prophecies, to legitimize her authority were evident by the late 685. This is when Wu Zetian ordered the construction of the religious tower known as *tiantang* (Celestial Hall) within the Luminous Hall complex at Luoyang. Antonino Forte, who has examined in detail the background to and the process of constructing the Celestial Hall, argues that this architectural structure essentially served as a "Maitreyan tower." Huaiyi, the chief architect of the hall, Forte points out, was himself a leader of a contemporary Maitreyan movement. The principle text used by Huaiyi and his fellow followers of the Maitreyan cult was *Puxian pusa shuo zhengming jing* (The Attestation Sūtra Spoken by Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, T. 2879), an apocryphal text compiled between 560 and 589.¹⁷⁹

This text contains a prophecy about Maitreya's descent from his current abode in the Tuṣita Heaven into a "magical city" with majestic city-walls, decorated pavilions, and a magnificent tower. The text professes that only those who were destined for salvation would be admitted into this city.¹⁸⁰ It seems that the planned construction of the Celestial Hall and the naming of Luoyang as the "Divine Capital" were based on the description of the "magical city" in *Puxian pusa shuo zhengming jing*. In fact, in 689, when the Celestial Hall was finally completed, it featured a lacquer statue of Maitreya two hundred seventy meters high.¹⁸¹ Less than two years after the Celestial Hall was completed, Wu Zetian usurped the Tang throne and established her own Zhou dynasty.

The fact that the Buddhist clergy working under the leadership of Huaiyi attempted to link Wu Zetian to Maitreya is also apparent from a Buddhist commentary presented to the court two months before the Tang dynasty was overthrown. The commentary, which seems to have been called *Dayun jing Shenhuang shouji yi shu* (Commentary on the Meaning of the Prophecy about Shenhuang [Divine Emperor, i.e., Wu Zetian] in the *Dayun jing*; hereafter *Commentary*),¹⁸² explicitly implied that Wu Zetian was an incarnation of Maitreya born to rule the continent of Jambudvīpa. Although the *Commentary* purports to explain Dharmakṣema's fifth-century translation of the canonical work *Dayun jing* (*Mahāmegha Sūtra*, T. 387),¹⁸³ it incorpo-

rates numerous passages from the apocryphal *Puxian pusa shuo zhengming jing* to substantiate Maitreya's arrival in China.

At the core of the *Commentary* was a prophecy concerning the reincarnation of Devī Jinguang (Vimalaprabha), one of the Buddha's female disciples, as a *cakravartin* ruler. In the prophecy, which is drawn from the canonical text *Dayun jing*, the Buddha predicts that Devī Vimalaprabha would be reborn to become a powerful, compassionate, and pious Buddhist ruler of the entire Jambudvīpa.¹⁸⁴ The authors of the *Commentary* used this prophecy to argue that Wu Zetian was in reality the same female *cakravartin* professed to rule Jambudvīpa. This argument may have been employed specifically to address the fact that no woman in China had previously attained the position of emperor. Additionally, the authors of the *Commentary* cited the passage on the Magic City in *Puxian pusa shuo zhengming jing* to suggest that Maitreya was predestined to arrive in Luoyang, the Divine Capital of Wu Zetian. In fact, when presenting the *Commentary* to the court, one of its authors openly declared that Wu Zetian was an incarnation of Maitreya on earth and a ruler of the entire Jambudvīpa.¹⁸⁵ In short, the *Commentary* and its authors portrayed Wu Zetian as both a female *cakravartin* and an incarnated Maitreya, reborn to rule over all the kingdoms in Jambudvīpa.

Through an edict dated August 16, 690, the *Commentary* was distributed to Buddhist monasteries across the Tang empire, no doubt in preparation for the imminent usurpation of the Tang throne by Wu Zetian. Indeed, exactly two months later, Wu Zetian ended Tang rule and proclaimed her own dynasty.

Five years after the circulation of the *Commentary* and the usurpation of the Tang throne, Wu Zetian formally added the name Maitreya (Cishi) to her title.¹⁸⁶ In the meantime, the attempt to legitimize her usurpation through other Buddhist prophecies continued. In 693, for example, the Indian monk Bodhiruci produced a text called *Baoyu jing* (*Ratnamegha Sūtra*, T. 660), which contained interpolated passages, as cited in the epigraph to this chapter, predicting the appearance of a female bodhisattva-*cakravartin* ruler of Jambudvīpa in China.¹⁸⁷ Curiously, however, Wu Zetian in this text was linked to the bodhisattva Chandraprabha and not Maitreya.

It seems that both the *Commentary* and the *Ratnamegha Sūtra* were produced at Wu Zetian's behest and by people closely associated with her. Xue Huaiyi, Zetian's lover, for example, was personally responsible for setting up the group that compiled the *Commentary*. Bodhiruci,

on the other hand, had arrived in China on Wu Zetian's personal request. Antonino Forte, however, has cautioned us about the distinct functions of these two Buddhist works employed to sanction Wu Zetian's authority. He points out that the use of the Buddhist prophecies by Wu Zetian was not aimed at supporting the apocalyptic views concerning the advent of Maitreya in the present lifetime. In fact, Wu Zetian had banned one of the leading apocalyptic sects of Buddhism, the Sanjie jiao (Three-Stage sect), during her reign. The passages in *Ratnamegha Sūtra*, Forte suggests, were deliberately interpolated in order to clarify her ideological position. Thus, while the *Commentary* was produced for the purpose of political propaganda, *Ratnamegha Sūtra* offered Wu Zetian's own belief in the orthodox Buddhist views on there/ later version of Maitreya prophecy. Indeed, within a month of the incorporation of Maitreya in her title, Wu Zetian had the monk Huaiyi murdered, because, as Forte suggests, "of his unyielding political extremism" (perhaps related to his support for the apocalyptic view on Maitreya's imminent arrival),¹⁸⁸ and renounced her title which bore the name of Maitreya.¹⁸⁹

No matter what specific ideological function these two texts served, or to what extent the Buddhist propaganda was successful in legitimizing Wu Zetian's usurpation, the political use of Buddhist motifs and paraphernalia provided tremendous stimulus to Sino-Indian exchanges during the last two decades of the seventh century. In order to portray Wu Zetian as the legitimate ruler not only of China but the entire continent of Jambudvīpa, the Chinese Buddhist clique working on behalf of the empress seems to have sought the help of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist Indian nationals. As mentioned earlier, Wu Zetian herself is known to have personally invited monks from India and Central Asia to China for this purpose. Anguished by the lack of support from powerful rulers or states, the Indian clergy in the sixth and seventh centuries might have accepted the dire fate of Buddhism as foreboded in the prophecies of the demise of the doctrine. Some of these disgruntled members of the Indian monastic community were undoubtedly drawn to the emerging Buddhist world in China endowed with sacred sites (such as Mount Wutai) and ruled by ideal Buddhist rulers (such as Emperor Wen and Empress Wu Zetian). Additionally, the political stability and the economic prosperity attained by the Tang dynasty in the second half of the seventh century made China an immensely attractive destination for Indian monks. In fact, several Indian expatriates in China

collaborated with the Chinese clergy to not only legitimize the political authority of pro-Buddhist rulers, but also transform China into a sacred Buddhist realm.

The most telling evidence for the presence and involvement of Indian nationals in Wu Zetian's political propaganda comes from a colophon found on the Dunhuang manuscript of the *Ratnamegha Sūtra* (S. 2278).¹⁹⁰ The colophon records the names, functions, and titles of people who participated in the translation of the *Sūtra* under the supervision of monk Huaiyi. Of the thirty people listed on the colophon, nine were Indian nationals. The names, titles, and roles of these Indians are given in Table 2.

Antonino Forte has extracted extremely important biographical information about some of these Indian natives from contemporary Chinese sources. Huizhi, Forte points out, was an Indian born

Table 2. Indian nationals working under Huaiyi

Damoluzhi (Dharmaruci, i.e., Bodhiruci)	Monk from South India	Expounder and explainer of the [original] Sanskrit text (<i>xuanshi fanben</i>)
Monk Fanmo (Brahmā?)	The envoy from the king of Middle India	Co-expounder of the [original] Sanskrit text (<i>jianxuan fanben</i>)
Huizhi (?)	Monk from the Foshouji Monastery	Proofreader of the translated language (<i>zheng yiyu</i>)
Damonantuo (Dharmānanda?)	Monk from Tiangong Monastery	Proofreader of the Sanskrit words (<i>zheng fanwen</i>)
Bore (Prajña?)	Indian monk	Philological assistant (<i>zhengyi</i>)
Dupoju (?)	Indian official	Copier of the Sanskrit text (<i>xie fanben</i>)
Jiaye Wudan (Kāsapa Uddyān?)	Indian official	Copier of the Sanskrit text
Chali Wutai (Ksatriya Udaya?)	Indian official	Copier of the Sanskrit text
Li Wuchan (?)	Indian official	Translator (<i>yiyu</i>)

in China of a Brahman father. His teacher in China seems to have been Lokāditya, the Kaśmīri longevity physician invited to China by Emperor Gaozong. In addition, Huizhi is reported to have met Buddhapāli, the famous Indian pilgrim to Mount Wutai. He also composed poems in Sanskrit that augmented the political goals of Empress Wu, and, at the same time, helped dispel the borderland complex of the Chinese clergy. In fact, Forte argues that Huizhi's poetry in Sanskrit was "part of the one logic and the one programme: to make China a sacred place of Buddhism and her sovereign (i.e., Wu Zetian) a Cakravartin."¹⁹¹

Li Wuchan, on the other hand, was a native of Lampāka. Originally belonging to royalty, he is reported to have worked on Buddhist translation and also on propagating Wu Zetian's political cause in China together with the Kaśmīri monk Baosiwei (Manicintana?), the Kapiśa clergy Shilinantuoshe (Śrīnandaśarman?), and monk Shilimoduo (Śrīmitra?) from India.¹⁹²

Specific mention, in connection to Wu Zetian's employment of Indian nationals,¹⁹³ must also be made of Gautama Luo (Rāhula?), an Indian astronomer who held the position of Director of Astronomy (*Tai shi ling*) between 665 and 698. The first of three famous Gautama family astronomers to work at the Tang court, Rāhula is known to have compiled two calendars during his tenure.¹⁹⁴ The fact that an Indian held the highest position in an important office that was in charge of interpreting heavenly phenomenon on behalf of the Chinese ruler is noteworthy. Mathematical techniques used by Indian astronomers are usually credited for their employment at the Tang astronomical bureau. However, it is likely that the initial interest in Indian astronomers was connected to Wu Zetian's plans to legitimize her authority. As Forte has observed, the correct calculation of time, especially the period from Buddha's nirvāṇa to the prophetic decline of the religion and the advent of Maitreya, constituted an important component of Chinese Buddhism.¹⁹⁵ In fact, the construction of the Celestial Hall, which functioned as an astronomical clock, by Wu Zetian may have been done for this specific purpose. It is possible that in around 665, when Wu Zetian had emerged as the leading contender to the Tang throne, she personally installed Rāhula as the Director of Astronomy for the legitimization of her authority.

Even the Indian embassy of 692 (discussed in the previous chapter), which is reported to have consisted of royalty from various regions of India, may have been part of Wu Zetian's attempt to legit-

imize her rule. Indeed, a tribute mission from India, led personally by kings from the land of the Buddha, should have been instrumental in confirming Wu Zetian's position as the *cakravartin* ruler of the entire Jambudvīpa, with China no longer as its periphery. Although it is unlikely that Indian kings would leave their kingdom and travel to China, the episode is nonetheless indicative of Wu Zetian's use of Indic paraphernalia to legitimize her usurpation. The list of activities related to India initiated by Wu Zetian is, in fact, a lengthy one. It included, for example, her sponsorship of Buddhist translation projects, the construction of Buddhist monuments, and the installation of numerous Buddhist figures at the Longmen cave temple. Suffice it to say that Wu Zetian's reign was one of the most propitious periods for the Buddhist community in China. It was arguably the most vibrant era in the history of Sino-Indian interactions, and a phase that perhaps marked the highest point in Indic influences on Chinese society.

It must be recognized, however, that the last quarter of the seventh century also witnessed the emergence of Mount Wutai as a pilgrimage site for Indian clergy, strengthening the view that after the demise of Buddhism in its homeland the doctrines would continue to flourish in China. Additionally, the claim of Wu Zetian as the *cakravartin* ruler of Jambudvīpa may have contributed immensely to firing the Chinese clergies' zeal to carve out their place in the Buddhist world. Clearly, Sino-Indian relations during the Tang period were exceptional not only for their intensity, but also because of the intricate process through which Buddhist ideas and paraphernalia were assimilated into and adapted to the Chinese society. In fact, on one hand, the Tang period epitomizes the pattern of Sino-Indian intercourse during the first millennium: it illustrates the military and spiritual interests that prompted closer political contacts between the two countries, and it also testifies to the transmission of ideas through the movement of people and the translation of Buddhist texts, and demonstrates the ways in which Indic ideas were adopted, syncretized with indigenous beliefs, and subsequently diffused throughout the Chinese society. On the other hand, however, it is unique because this period marks the declaration of China, according to Forte, as "the actual center of the Buddhist world."¹⁹⁶