

# Tang Buddhist Tradition and Funeral Culture at Famen Temple's Pagoda Crypt

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## Abstract

Famen Temple, a Buddhist pagoda located in Fufeng County, China, has been a site of religious mystery and historical allure for the past few generations of modern scholars since the rediscovery of its underground crypt in 1987. The reasons for its scholarly appeal have revealed themselves in a range of aspects, and the exciting circumstances of its discovery are perhaps second only to the fascinating relics found sealed away within the crypt. The underground chamber beneath Famen Temple has long been called a "crypt" by modern scholars, however, many haven't considered the full extent to which the crypt can truly be considered a tomb by the standards of the Tang dynasty, during which Famen Temple enjoyed immense popularity and attention from the imperial court. The crypt can be perceived as a tomb from three aspects: the underground portion's tomblike architectural qualities and spatial organization, the purpose of the pagoda above the crypt being similar to that of a tomb marker, and the treatment of the relics as venerated bodily remains by the Tang court.

## The Language of Scholarship Surrounding Famen Temple

Before I get into the reasoning behind my argument, I would like to discuss the language used in this essay and in previous scholarship of Famen Temple and its architecture. I believe it is important to clarify this aspect of writing since the purpose of this essay is to try to define the pagoda crypt as a tomb to the understanding of the Tang court. The underground chamber that was excavated from under the remains of the

Famen pagoda has been called several names. One scholarly interpretation of the crypt is "underground palace" (or 地宫 *dìgōng*), but this term has been discredited by more recent scholars.<sup>1</sup> It has also been called a "stone chamber" (or 石室 *shíshì*) as it is written on the dedication tablet of the crypt.<sup>2</sup> In English, most scholars tend to refer to the subterranean chambers as a "pagoda crypt." This is the term I have chosen because it encompasses the definition of a tomb but will not confuse it with the more traditional tombs I will be comparing it to. Likewise, I

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<sup>1</sup> For further explanation on why this term has been deemed misleading, see Wang, Yuejin. "Of the True Body: The Buddha's relics and corporeal transformation in Sui-Tang China," *Body and Face in Chinese Visual Culture*. Cambridge (2005), 377-378.

<sup>2</sup> According to the discussion of the language used in reference to the underground crypt in Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda, Mysteries of Famen Temple," *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture*. Asian Civilizations Museum (2014), 18.

will be referring to the contents of the crypt as burial goods and bodily remains where appropriate.

As for the temple itself, the name 法門寺 *Fǎmén sì* was bestowed upon the temple by Gaozu, the founding emperor of the Tang dynasty. This is significant because it highlights the importance of the Tang's subsequent relationship with the temple; it is this strong relationship that largely defines modern scholars' understanding of the temple and its relics. 法門 *Fǎmén* is translated as a "gate of law" or, more frequently in reference to the Famen temple, "dharma gate." 寺 *Sì* can mean "temple" or "monastery." I will be using "temple" for this essay since that is the term most English-language scholars tend to use. Finally, continuing on the topic of language, I would like to remind the reader that pagodas and stupas were called by the same term, 塔 *tǎ*, during the Tang dynasty.<sup>3</sup> These linguistic notes will be helpful to understanding some of the points I will make further on in this essay.

### A Brief Contextualization of Famen Temple Within Funerary Context

The following is some crucial contextual information the reader will find helpful to understand as I expand upon my argument. This is not an all-encompassing contextualization of the temple (I will leave that to the scholars referenced in this essay) and only includes the background

information crucial to this text. The first piece of information regards the structures on the excavation site of the temple and their architectural history. The excavation that led to the discovery of the crypt and its relics began with the collapse of the temple's stone pagoda. Famen Temple has actually been the home of quite a few pagodas over the years. The stone pagoda that collapsed in 1981, was constructed during the Ming dynasty, but there had previously been a wooden one that stood during the Tang dynasty.<sup>4</sup> There is even some evidence of an earlier pagoda, indicating the temple's long history and place in Chinese Buddhism that has been covered by many scholar-historians. The general design of the Tang dynasty four-storied and five-bayed wooden pagoda is accepted to be visually represented in the miniature pagoda found in the crypt, shown in Figure 1. This is the structure I encourage readers to visualize, since most of my discussion will be in relation to the temple's Tang era.

<sup>3</sup> According to the discussion of the language used in reference to the pagoda in Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda," 10.

<sup>4</sup> Although it is not needed to fully understand the arguments I will make in this essay beforehand, readers are encouraged to see the brief history of the

temple, its pagodas, and underground crypt under the section titled "Famensi and Chinese Buddhist Esoterism" in Sharf, Robert H. "The Buddha's Finger Bones at Famensi and the Art of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism." *The Art Bulletin* 93, no. 1 (2011), 38.



Figure 1. Miniature version of the Tang dynasty pagoda found in the front chamber of the Famen Temple crypt, Fufeng County, Shaanxi Province, China. Gilded bronze. Tang dynasty. From Alan Chong, "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda, Mysteries of Famen Temple," *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture*. Asian Civilizations Museum, 2014. (fig.3)

Pagodas owe their multi-tiered architectural evolution to stupas of southern Asia, which are places of meditation that also serve as the burial grounds for Buddhist relics. Figure 2 is an image of the Great Stupa at Sanchi, India, and is an excellent visual example of a traditional stupa. As an East Asian form of this original structure, pagodas are also synonymous with Buddhist temples and are known for housing Buddhist relics. Relics themselves are objects associated with the Buddha or other important religious figures. These can include Buddhist *sutras*, belongings (such as an article of clothing or piece of the bodhi tree under which the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, reached enlightenment), or cremated bodily remains.

The relics at Famen Temple, three of which are shown with their reliquaries in Figure 3, fall under this third category. There are four in total, all described as cremated finger bones of Shakyamuni according to the inscription on the two steles found in the crypt (although modern scholars often note



that the relics are indeed not actual finger phalanges).



Figure 2. The Great Stupa at Sanchi, India. Stone bricks and mud mortar. 3rd century BCE. From "Great Stupa." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, December 4, 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Great-Stupa-Buddhist-monument-Sanchi-India>.

Figure 3. Finger bone relics and coffin-shaped reliquaries found in the Famen Temple crypt, Fufeng County, Shaanxi Province, China. Gilded silver, jade, and bone. From Sen, Tansen. "Relic Worship at the Famen Temple and the Buddhist World of the Tang Dynasty," *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture*. Asian Civilizations Museum (2014), 47. (figs 8-10)

Famen Temple is actually not unique for having an underground crypt for the purpose of housing relics, as there are a few other similar sites as well, including those of Qingshan Monastery in Shaanxi Province and Jinzhi Monastery in Hebei Province.<sup>5</sup> The thing that makes Famen Temple stand out among these other sites, however—to both modern scholars and historical appreciators of the temple—is the unique relationship it shared with the Tang court. Buddhism enjoyed a period of popularity during the Tang dynasty, a view that was encouraged by the Tang court's interest in the religious practices. The relics made recurring journeys to the imperial palace in ceremonial ritual, and the court often donated luxurious gifts to the temple and its relics. I will expand upon the importance of these burial goods later on.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly to the temple's history, it is important to note that it was during the Tang that the crypt was constructed and sealed for the last time, leading to its forgotten centuries and eventual rediscovery.<sup>7</sup>

### Pagoda Crypts & Imperial Tombs

The aspect of the Famen Temple pagoda crypt that is most often recognized by scholars to be tomblike is its physical structure. The space explicitly follows the architectural and construction plan of a typical Tang dynasty tomb. Many scholars have pointed out this conspicuous visual characteristic, but tend to gloss over the full extent to which the layout of Famen

Temple's crypt and similar pagoda crypts intertwine with that of Tang tombs. This recognition is most often limited to general appearance alone, and is not extended to the purpose, upkeep, and eventual fate of the crypt, but it is important nonetheless. Viewing a cross section of the crypt in comparison to a traditional Tang tomb makes the similarities very apparent. I have assembled a few comparable images here for this purpose. We'll start with Figure 4, which is a cross section of the temple crypt, and Figure 5, which is a cross section view of the tomb of Li Xian.

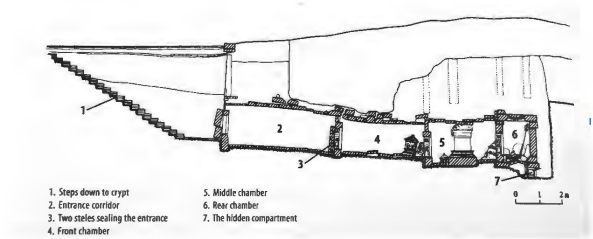
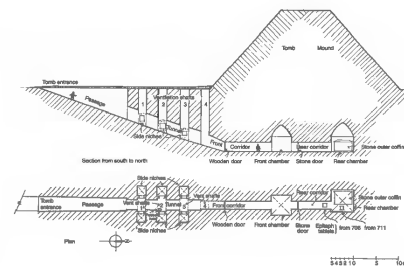


Figure 4. Cross section of the Famen Temple crypt. From Alan Chong, "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda, Mysteries of Famen Temple," *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture*. Asian Civilizations Museum, 2014. (fig.4)



<sup>5</sup> For information on how these three pagoda crypts are related, see Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda," 17.

<sup>6</sup> See Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda," 18.

<sup>7</sup> A full map and chronology of activity at *Famensi* and the imperial Tang court can be found in *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture*. Asian Civilizations Museum (2014), 25.

*Figure 5. Cross section of the Tomb of Li Xian, upper and lower sections. From Tonia Eckfeld, Imperial Tombs in Tang China. Routledge Curzon, 2005. (Figure 2.5)*

I have selected Li Xian's tomb as a suitable comparison for several reasons. The first is that, like the crypt under the Famen pagoda, this tomb was closely connected to the Tang court. The tomb is located in Qianling, an imperial burial complex that houses the tombs of members of the Tang royal family. Li Xian, the occupant of this tomb, was a Tang prince and the son of Empress Wu Zetian, whose name appears frequently in Famen Temple scholarship due to her role of patronage towards the temple. She is one of many Tang court rulers who were directly involved in the affairs of the temple. To further stress the connection between Famen Temple and the Tang court, it was Emperor Gaozu himself who ordered the construction of Famen Temple's pagoda crypt to safeguard the relics.<sup>8</sup>

The second and third reasons I have deemed Li Xian's tomb to be suitable are subsequent factors of the first. Qianling is located in the area around the historical Tang capital, Chang'an, situated just to the northwest of it. This also gives the tomb close proximity to Famen Temple, which is in Fufeng County in Shaanxi Province, just to the west of Chang'an (and to the south of Qianling). Finally, Li Xian's tomb was constructed between the years 705 and 706.<sup>9</sup> These years coincide with the period of time

during which Famen temple was open and active.<sup>10</sup>

At first glance, the general layout is the most clear point of comparison between the two cross section maps. According to the map legends, both tombs are situated on a north-south axis, with their entrances pointed south and their rearmost chambers pointed north. The entrances both consist of a stairway sloping down into the tomb below ground level. Visible above the stairway in Li Xian's tomb are the ventilation shafts used during the construction of the tomb's underground components. They can also be seen above the middle and rear chambers above the pagoda crypt, indicated on the map by vertical open spaces similar to those in Li Xian's tomb map. The shafts were for a practical purpose for construction: they allowed for the circulation of airflow into the subterranean chambers as they were being built. This extra air access was beneficial for the masons constructing the tomb and allowed them to breathe comfortably despite working in a cramped space below ground. All of these inclusions to the Famen crypt reveal that it shared the same level of complication as imperial Tang tombs in terms of the architectural development of tomb structures up until this point in time in Chinese funerary history.

The entrance stairway of each space is followed by an entrance corridor, with a secondary entranceway sealed in some form, with that form being the wooden door as seen in the Li Xian tomb map and the two

<sup>8</sup> Sharf, Robert H. "The Buddha's Finger Bones at Famensi," 38.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on Li Xian and Qianling, see Eckfeld, Tonia. *Imperial Tombs in Tang China*. Routledge Curzon (2005), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Li Xian's tomb was constructed between the restoration of the Tang dynasty and the return of a finger bone relic to the temple after Wu Zetian's rule. See *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda*, 25.

inscribed inventory steles in the Famen Temple crypt. Continuing northward, the two sites both house multiple chambers dedicated to containing different sets of subject matter, with each section's material value increasing the farther north they are, with the final chamber—Li Xian's coffin chamber in his tomb and the small compartment beneath the rear chamber in the pagoda crypt—being dedicated almost entirely to remains of the deceased. This is opposed to the previous chambers, which in the case of the pagoda crypt are each filled with numerous burial goods and a relic. I will explain this in more detail in the next section, dedicated to the burial goods and their organization within the chambers.

### The Burial Goods & Their Chambers

Even during the Tang dynasty, Chinese tombs had long been characterized by the separation of the spaces within the main architectural interior based on some type of spatial representation, at least for those families who could afford them. To name a few, the separation may follow one of several representations: they may have symbolized individual rooms in a palace, each meant for different aspects of life ranging from domestic activities such as eating or sleeping to object supply rooms such as arsenals and armories; areas of the tomb may also have been sectioned off artistically based on gendered spaces; or perhaps separated for

the purpose of creating personalized spaces for multiple occupants of the tomb. To use Li Xian's tomb as an example, the prince's mausoleum mirrored the Tang capital of Chang'an's three sectors—each section representing the outer sector, inner-walled compound, and a below-ground palace sector—through architectural references, artistic statues, and burial goods.<sup>11</sup> It is also clearly separated into multiple chambers, as we saw in the structure's cross-section map.

Famen Temple's chambers are also sectioned off very deliberately, forming distinct front, middle, and rear chambers, as well as a tiny space beneath the rear chamber that is often referred to as a "hidden compartment" or "secret niche."<sup>12</sup> Upon assessment of the goods in each chamber, Famen Temple's chambers are easily separated by the quantity of goods and the succession of time (rather than space) visible in each area.<sup>13</sup> The three treasury chambers are visually discernible by the amount of goods contained within them. The front chamber was relatively sparse of goods, while the rear chamber is described to have been practically overflowing with objects upon excavation.<sup>14</sup>

The reason for this difference is that the rear chamber was dedicated to donations from later Tang emperors, particularly Xizong and Yizong.<sup>15</sup> It was the untimely deaths of Yizong and several previous Tang

<sup>11</sup> For a full discourse on the organization and burial objects found in Li Xian's tomb, see Eckfeld, Tonia. *Imperial Tombs in Tang China*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Terminology derived from Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda," and Sharf, Robert H. "The Buddha's Finger Bones at Famensi."

<sup>13</sup> See *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda* for an extensive catalogue.

<sup>14</sup> For an overview of the objects in each chamber, see Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda," 12-14.

<sup>15</sup> See Sen, Tansen. "Relic Worship at the Famen Temple and the Buddhist World of the Tang Dynasty," *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture*. Asian Civilizations Museum (2014), 44.

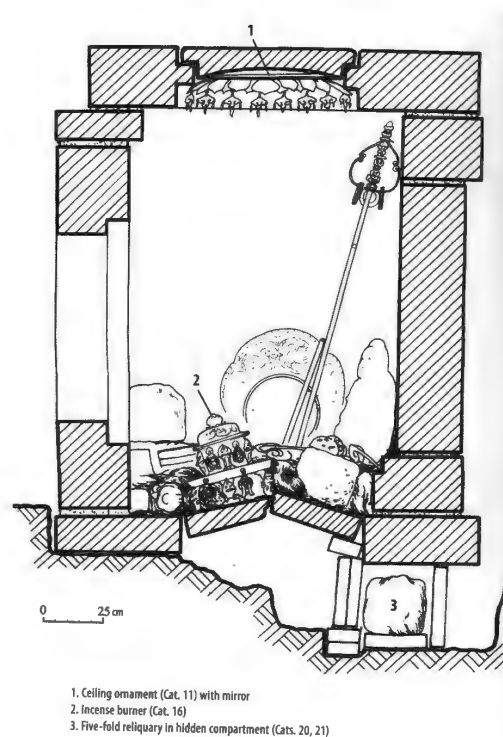


emperors that eventually led to the defamation of the ritual presentation of the finger bone relics, culminating in their permanent sealment inside the crypt in 874 until their rediscovery in 1987. Most of the luxurious objects found in the rear chamber were from the final ritual ceremony ordered by Emperor Yizong.<sup>16</sup> The rear chamber included images of the Buddha engraved into the surface of the walls alongside the names of donors, similar to what a stele would have had, in the fashion of a tomb of a deceased devout Buddhist.<sup>17</sup>

The earlier chambers, by contrast, contained objects that date centuries earlier than the crypt's final enshrinement, including several that predate the Tang. Each emperor responsible for opening the crypt and ordering the relic's ritual presentation left a number of donations—without desecrating the gifts left by previous donors, and at times even repairing them.<sup>18</sup> Each chamber is dedicated to goods endowed in distinct nearly-succeeding times, by distinct donors, and placed around a distinct relic. In this sense, the crypt's chambers commemorate each time period's veneration of the relic through the separation of time in a visible form. It is almost as if each chamber is a miniature tomb within the whole.

Before I move on, I believe it is necessary to address the “hidden compartment” that was found beneath the rear chamber. These two sections of the crypt can be seen more clearly in Figure 6, a detailed map of the rear chamber. As I stated earlier, most scholars tend to refer to this

small chamber under terms synonymous with “hidden” and “secret.” This makes sense to a generalized degree, since the compartment is situated beneath the wall of the rearmost of the three large chambers and is only accessible through the floor of the latter, however the terms constrain interpretation of the compartment by labeling it with a secretive connotation.



*Figure 6. Detail of the cross section map of the Famen Temple crypt depicting the rear chamber and small compartment. From Alan Chong, “Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda, Mysteries of Famen Temple,” Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture. Asian Civilizations Museum, 2014. (fig.10)*

<sup>16</sup> See Sen, Tansen. “Relic Worship at the Famen Temple” 42.

<sup>17</sup> See Chong, Alan. “Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda,” 20.

<sup>18</sup> See Chong, Alan. “Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda,” 21.

In reality, I doubt this secret compartment was meant to be any more *concealed* than the previous three. The first reason is that the relic and its compartment are not particularly hard to find if one is exploring the crypt and going through each area. In fact, the very first line of the inventory tablet describes the reliquary set that was contained in the so-called hidden compartment, in no attempt to hide its existence.<sup>19</sup>

Admittedly, the small compartment is made a little less obvious due to its diminutive size and the break in linear space it creates by having been constructed below the rear chamber rather than behind it. However, the small compartment does not completely break continuity between itself and the previous chambers—if you’ll notice, the dimensions of each chamber actually become smaller the further back they are located. The size of the compartment may be the culmination of this pattern. Furthermore, the entrance of the tiny chamber does not entirely differ from those of the previous chambers. *All* of the Famen Temple crypt’s chambers have interior spaces and entrances that are encompassed and obstructed by the stone steles and doors, countless priceless objects (including guardian figures), and even a shrine of rather large proportions.<sup>20</sup> By comparison, an opening in the floor is not much different than the previous entrances.

The multiple entrances, or more specifically, architectural points of sealment

and separation situated between the designated chambers of the crypt, are similar to those in a legitimate tomb. In a typical horizontal tomb, the final chamber is the most inaccessible. This is usually because it is farthest along the continuity of chambers and is concealed by the previous chambers by these sealment points, such as the doors seen in Li Xian’s tomb. Perhaps the small chamber in the pagoda crypt is not a unique “secret” compartment worthy of the term, but rather a continuation of the previous chambers acting as the final chamber of the tomb where the deceased typically sits. Although it is true that the previous chambers also contained a relic, it is worth noting that the smallest chamber was just large enough for the reliquary and a few small objects.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to the previous chambers, this tiny chamber was almost entirely dedicated to this single relic.

### The Pagoda as a Tomb Marker

There is another aspect of similarity between the pagoda crypt and traditional Chinese tombs that is not as evident from comparison of the tomb maps. This aspect, that the pagoda behaves similar to the tomb markers, is more apparent by viewing the foundations of Famen Temple in comparison with the map of Li Xian’s tomb. These can be seen in Figure 7, a photograph of the excavation site of the Famen temple pagoda in 1987. I would like to call the reader’s attention to the tomb mound located aboveground at the site of Li Xian’s tomb (as seen in Figure 5), and the fact that it was

<sup>19</sup> The inscription reads “one crystal coffin, one iron casket” according to Chong, Alan. “Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda,” 15.

<sup>20</sup> See Chong, Alan. “Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda,” 13.

<sup>21</sup> For information on the five nested reliquary containers, see Wang, Eugene. “The Emperor’s New Body,” *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture*. Asian Civilizations Museum (2014), 56.



constructed directly above the rearmost chambers of the underground section. This mound is not an uncommon characteristic of Chinese funerary architecture, and can be found throughout many locations and dynasties, not just tombs of the imperial Tang. Even in tombs upon which mounds were not constructed, it is common for them to be located inside a naturally occurring hill or other raised landform. These above ground structures typical of tombs served a few purposes, including being a marker of the tomb's location, providing the tomb with possible protection from looters, and acting as a symbol of the deceased's power.



*Figure 7. Foundations of the Tang pagoda (constructed 618-907 CE) and the Ming dynasty pagoda (1569-1620 CE), visible above the crypt at Famen Temple, photographed in 1987, Fufeng County, Shaanxi Province, China. From Alan Chong, "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda, Mysteries of Famen Temple," Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture. Asian Civilizations Museum, 2014. (fig.2)*

I would argue that the Famen crypt also had an above ground marker that served the same purpose—the pagodas that once

stood over the crypt. The foundations in Figure 7 show precisely where the two pagodas once stood. The larger, stone Ming pagoda whose collapse prompted excavation of the site in 1981, was supported by the raised squares that can be seen along the perimeter of the site. The foundations of the wooden Tang pagoda are evident in the circular depression.<sup>22</sup> As evidenced by the photograph, both pagodas were centered on the portion of the crypt that was fully underground (excluding the entrance and sloping passageway) much like Li Xian's tomb mound, and the older pagoda that stood during the Tang was positioned directly over the rearmost chambers of the crypt.

Not only were they in the right position, the pagodas also fit the possible purposes of an above ground tomb marker. Being a temple in itself, the pagodas, collectively, but especially the Tang pagoda, was a visual marker for Famen Temple's position, in terms of both location and status. Like the imperial mausoleums, the site was hugely popular with members of the Tang court, who regularly invested themselves and their wealth into the activities and upkeep of the temple and its crypt. The pagoda, just the same as a traditional tomb marker, was a reminder of what was kept beneath it and that its contents should be revered. It was certainly a symbol of power for the historical Buddha whose remains it housed and the respect with which they should be venerated.

In terms of a traditional tomb mound's purpose of defense, the pagoda temple and its clerics<sup>23</sup> were protectors of the

<sup>22</sup> For notes on the architectural design of the wooden Tang pagoda, see Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda," 10.

<sup>23</sup> See Sharf, Robert H. "The Buddha's Finger Bones at Famen," 44.

relics both before and after the tomb was finally sealed in 874 CE.<sup>24</sup> It is possible that the true relic never left the temple site, and that the relics sent to the imperial palace at Luoyang were merely stand ins. This conjecture follows the popular theory that the reason for having multiple relics at the site was that only one was the true Buddha relic and the other three were decoys. While this theory has been largely disputed over the years, we do know for a fact that all four relics were eventually fully sealed within the crypt in the same way a tomb is, complete with inscribed steles, guardian figures, and what can be considered burial goods that were in part donated by the royal family. This final sealment of the tomb beneath the pagoda just about confirms its role as such. In this sense, by definition the pagoda above the crypt is a tomb marker, and the structure below the pagoda is a tomb.

The final and arguably the most convincing piece of contextual evidence that likens the pagoda to a tomb mound is in the cultural history of pagodas themselves. Pagodas are the Chinese localization of stupas adopted from Indian Buddhist tradition. Stupas themselves were used as burial mounds for the remains of the Buddha, not unlike the pagoda at Famen Temple and other tomblike temple relics found in China. Burials and Buddhist shrines have been interconnected throughout Buddhism's history from its origin and integration into Chinese culture. Additionally, as I mentioned earlier, stupas and pagodas shared the same name during this time in China, 塔 *tǎ*, suggesting a certain lack of discrimination

between the two during the Tang dynasty. This is especially apparent when viewing the three structures in question. The Great Stupa at Sanchi (Figure 2) is not unlike the domed shape above Li Xian's tomb (Figure 5). The pagoda at Famen Temple was a sort of evolution from both structures—developing architecturally from a stupa and behaving similarly to the purpose of both the foreign stupa and local burial mounds.

### Counterarguing Notable Differences on Size and Function

There is, however, one notable difference between the two that stands out through comparison of maps of the Famen crypt and the tomb of Li Xian: size. The Famen temple crypt is roughly 20m long, while Li Xian's tomb is roughly 70m long. The size difference between the Famen crypt and the Tang imperial tombs is something that Alan Chong has brought up in his discussion of whether or not the Famen pagoda crypt should be considered a true tomb. Although Chong notes the inclination of comparison between the pagoda crypt and Tang tombs, he just as quickly and readily points out differences and alternative comparisons for the pagoda crypt, among the first being the crypt's significantly small size in comparison to the imperial Tang tombs.<sup>25</sup> While I do not disagree with this point, I would like to argue that this point is not significant enough to dismiss the idea that the crypt acts as a tomb in other ways.

My first point of reasoning is that imperial tombs, suited for members of the

<sup>24</sup> Found near the end of the chronological timeline in *Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> See Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda," 17. Readers are encouraged to see the section of this essay entitled "Treasury, Palace, or Tomb?" for

Chong's brief discussion of other structures the Famen crypt resembles and how scholars have referred to and should refer to the site linguistically in Chinese and English.

imperial family, were typically very large—larger than those of individuals ranking below them. Although Famen temple and its relics shared a close relationship with the Tang court, it was not a resting place for one of its family members. Therefore, it is not convincing to dismiss the pagoda crypt as something other than a tomb simply because it is smaller than a typical imperial tomb. Second, and along the same vein as the first reason, it is possible that the Famen pagoda crypt may have been sized to fit the spatial needs of the bodily remains it housed. The Buddha relics themselves are quite small, as they only represent mere finger bones.

Meeting the needs of the deceased and their afterlife is a well-known and consistent feature of Chinese tombs, including those built during the Tang. To use Li Xian's tomb as an example, the site is separated into sections based on the city planning of the Tang's capital city, a design suitable for an imperial prince.<sup>26</sup> The key ideas here are *intentionality* and the use of *designated space*. The Famen pagoda crypt is similarly separated into different sections, with each chamber being designated each to a different relic and with a different collection of items each. To finalize my point, the relics weren't in as much need for space as individuals like Li Xian. The relics are small, and so is the crypt. Like any tomb, it suits the needs of the deceased, with a small area and small coffins, and with Buddhist treasures and objects belonging to monks replacing the palatial objects and belongings of the deceased, similar to those found in the tombs of imperial family members.

### The Treatment of Venerable Bodily Remains: Relics and Rituals

Similarly to the small spatial area of the crypt are the miniature reliquaries that were used to seal each of the relics. In Figure 3, the three tiny reliquaries and their relics are shown in detail (the fourth is a miniature pagoda). As previous scholars have pointed out, the reliquaries are in the shape of lidded coffins. The coffins are each just large enough to contain the relic inside, perfectly meeting the spatial needs of the deceased's bodily remains just as the crypt itself does. In addition to the coffins—and the pagoda reliquary of the final relic—each relic was found in a nested box set, one of which being the example shown in Figure 8, that is not unlike the layering of coffins in traditional Chinese burials. In this way, the relics at Famen temple were strategically sealed inside multilayered coffins just like those of a traditional burial.



Figure 8. The fivefold reliquary set from the small compartment beneath the rear chamber (the third casket of deteriorated sandalwood casket is omitted) in the Famen Temple Crypt,

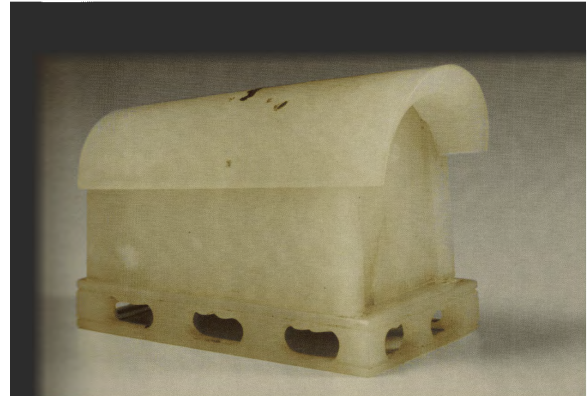
<sup>26</sup> For details on the contents of Li Xian's tomb, see Eckfeld, Tonia. *Imperial Tombs in Tang China*, 44.

*Fufeng County, Shaanxi Province, China. From Wang, Eugene. "The Emperor's New Body," Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture. Asian Civilizations Museum (2014), 57. (fig.3)*

One last point that likens Famen Temple's pagoda crypt to a traditional tomb is the aspect of immortality found in the relics and subsequently the tomb itself. A long-running theme found within Chinese tombs is the deceased's desire to achieve an immortal life through specific burial practices conducted by their tomb's constructors. Famen Temple's crypt also shares this aspect of immortality through the Tang's veneration of the relics. The main reason the relics were ritually presented to the imperial palace was because the court hoped the Buddha's remains contained some properties of healing and longevity.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, jade, which has been known for being related to the search for immortality in and out of funerary culture in China, is a central materialistic property of the relics themselves.

The materials that were used to create the relics and their coffins are visible from Figure 3. Viewers may have noticed that the coffin on the left, which is detailed in Figure 9, is made entirely of jade.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, two out of the four relics are made of white jade (those in the middle and rear chambers), as opposed to the other two of organic origin that are made of an unidentified bone (found

in the first chamber and the small compartment).<sup>29</sup> The presence of jade is highly important and is intrinsically linked to the ritual presentation and attempt at achieving immortality made by the Tang court.



*Figure 9. The coffin-shaped reliquary found in the compartment under the rear chamber of the Famen Temple crypt, Fufeng County, Shaanxi Province, China. Jade, 5 x 6.8 x 3.5 cm. Approximately 871 CE. From Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda: The Famen Temple and Tang Court Culture. Asian Civilizations Museum (2014), 102. (Cat. 21)*

Not surprisingly, other Chinese funerary rituals also made their way into the crypt. A few scholars have discussed a historical event in which multiple family members enshrined their hair inside the Famen Temple crypt in an aspiration for achieving immortality.<sup>30</sup> This act further strengthens the ties between the crypt and afterlife immortality. Additionally, the veneration of the relics themselves and

<sup>27</sup>See Chong, Alan. "Secrets of the Fallen Pagoda," 18.

<sup>28</sup> For details on the material forms of the coffin-shaped reliquaries and the four relics, see Sen, Tansen. "Relic Worship at the Famen Temple," 46.

<sup>29</sup> See Sharf, Robert H. "The Buddha's Finger Bones at Famensi," 44.

<sup>30</sup> See Wang, Yuejin. "Of the True Body," 91-92.

enshrining them as immortal objects—made of virtually imperishable materials that defied decay in an immortal fashion—is very much in line with practices and main goals of Chinese funerary culture and tombs themselves.

### Conclusive Remarks

Throughout its history, Famen Temple has held many points of interest for those who were alive during the height of its popularity and modern day scholars who find its popularity fascinating. The crypt's similarity to that of a traditional tomb is one of these many facets of interest, and can be perceived through its physical and ritual aspects. The layout of the tomb was designed and constructed in a similar fashion to an imperial Tang tomb, and its inner chambers are organized based on a distinct separation of the burial objects inside. The pagoda above the crypt acts similarly to that of a traditional tomb mound, and although the underground portion it protects is relatively small, the chambers meet the needs of the bodily remains of the deceased Buddha. The remains themselves, the finger bone relics, also reflect certain aspects of Chinese funerary culture in the way they were treated by the Tang court, including the coffins in which they were buried and the funerary aspiration for immortality they reflect in their materiality. While the general consensus among scholars remains in considering the temple crypt as nothing more than just that, and not a traditional tomb, the idea is worth exploring for the insight it gives into the Tang court's veneration of the relics, the combination of Buddhism and traditional indigenous funerary culture in the Tang

dynasty, and the court's fascination with the finger bone relics.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Fan Zhang for guiding me through the research and editing process of this project. Her expertise in art and archeology never fails to astound and inspire me to learn more.

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