

Buddha's Bones: Buddhist Relics and Political Imagination in Contemporary China

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Abstract: This paper based on ethnographic evidence analyses the complex relationship between the Buddha's bone relics in a Chinese Buddhist temple *famen si* and the imagined political cosmology around this relic. This political cosmology, on the one hand, is deeply embedded in the Buddhist concepts of resonance and karmic return, and on the other hand rooted in the spontaneous political wave of the revival of Chinese Buddhism in the popular society of China. This is also involved in the political agenda of the Chinese government in the revival of 'Traditional Chinese Culture'. The idea of 'inheritance' is particularly highlighted in this cosmology indicating the religious legitimacy of the Chinese state.

Key Words: Buddha's Bones, Sarira, political cosmology, Chinese state, relics, religion, inheritance

1. Introduction

The imagined power of holy objects is almost universal to all religions and magical practices all over the world, especially holy body parts of saints and religious leaders. The consecration of holy bodies and body relics in a lot of cases becomes important enterprise not only for religious

communities because of its ritualistic and religious significance, but also for a government and even a state due to its strong political influences. The English historian of ancient Rome Charles Freeman's (2011) well-known book *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* comprehensively shows how Christian holy relics, the bones of saints and martyrs, were treasured as magical and efficacious objects that provided power and protection for West European and Byzantine empires during the medieval period. Holy bone relics were even integrated into Medieval European families' everyday life and the worship of material objects like this was interwoven into their cosmological understanding of state-politics (Smith, 2012). In a word, the consecrations of religious objects like bone relics encompass material and somatic objects into human being's social life and become part of the imagined reality of individuals and communities. Especially in the case of religion, material objects that are considered magical or miraculous often immediately bring up social and political effects after they enter the sphere of the society; religious objects are believed to possess 'actual' power that can directly work on human affairs (Fleming & Mann, 2014).

Thus when saying 'imagined political cosmology' derived from religious objects, it does not imply that imagined cosmologies are something false, unreal, or only exist in individual human being's day dreams. Borrowing Harari's (2011) idea of "collective imagination", it is our human nature to use imaginations to create worldviews—cosmologies—and realities. That is to say, human realities are always "imagined" and can never escape imagination, especially for political cosmologies in religion, in which religious doctrines and belief justify cosmology on both empirical and metaphysical levels and create truth for individuals and communities in a society (Holbraad, 2012). Only based on this can we start to understand the intricate processes in which political cosmologies are generated in religious phenomena, how these processes work and how they influence human life. This article is an experiment on understanding political cosmologies in religion, particularly the political cosmology voiced by lay believers of Chinese Buddhism in China regarding the consecration of Buddha's finger bone relics in a state sponsored temple the Famen Temple in Xian Province, which in return influenced how religious and political authorities understood the Chinese state. Based on my fieldwork in Famen Temple, I shall exhibit this social process that created the imagined reality of the revival of Traditional Chinese Culture as an imperialist trend in contemporary China.

2. The Consecration of the Holy Bodies in Chinese Buddhism

The consecration and enshrinement of the bone relics of the holy figures in a religion are not only seen in Buddhism. The Catacomb of Rome contains many complicatedly decorated and enshrined martyrs' and saints' skeletons as the subject of worship and the symbol of the Christian cosmology (Koudounaris, 2013). The incorruptible bones and the entire skeletons of the martyrs are preserved and venerated as the proof of the immortal flesh of the pure human beings. For the Buddhist holy bone relics in Asia, the form of the relics is quite different. *ar ra* (or *sarira*, *sheli zi* 舍利子) is generally defined as the bodily remnants of Buddha himself or the eminent monks. The Sanskrit word *sarira* refers to the motionless body, or the strong bones. In the Buddhist scriptures, *sarira* refers to both the sayings and teachings of Buddha, the

“Dharma Sarira”, and the miraculous body relics, the “Somatic Sarira” (Werner, 2009). The body relics of Buddha mainly refers to the crystalized bone and body part remains of Buddha’s body after his death. The worship of somatic *sarira* is widely seen in the temples in East and Southeast Asia. There are generally two different types of the Somatic Sarira, the body relics of Buddha and monks after cremation, and the whole incorruptible corps of monks, mainly the skeletons, inner organs and skins remained (Martin, 1994). The origin of *sarira* worship in Buddhism is recorded in a legend in the theravada scripture *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* (*Da niepan jing* 大涅槃經), saying that after Buddha’s cremation, his bodily substance became crystalized and was divided into ten portions and were enshrined by eight Brahman houses in ten stupas (Guo, 2010). Then the king A oka Maurya destroyed eight stupas of the ten, and further divided the *sarira* and put them into 84,000 boxes. He made the order to spread these *sariras* all over the continent in order to transmit Buddha’s teachings¹. The worship of Buddha’s bone relics was at its very early age in India a political and imperial enterprise.

The *sarira* of Buddha’s body is seen as the physical proof of the accomplishment of his cultivation and a magical item whose consecration will bring merit and bless traditionally believed to possess the power of bringing stability to a kingdom or state, thus they were highly venerated by East Asian elites since they were brought in (Mohan, 2005). In East Asian beliefs, any offering to *sarira* will bring this person the salvation from bad reincarnations and the promise of Buddhist accomplishment, because *sarira* as a part of Buddha’s body is believed to be connected to the realm of Buddhahood, or the “Dharma Realm” (*dharmadh tu* or *fajie* 法界) and by seeing it a person is connected to that realm and its power (Copp, 2014). In China, the worship of *sarira* is generally believed to start from the Three Kingdom period (220-228) and became part of Chinese local elites’ ritualistic repertoire soon after the wide spread of Buddha’s bone relics in China, especially during the high time of Chinese Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty (618-907) (Chen, 2002). Towers and temples were built to keep the holy relics and these buildings were immediately attached with magical and protecting power for local communities and even the state because of the holy relics (Barret, 2001). Interestingly, almost all the reception and consecration of *sarira* occurred on a governmental level. Gradually the court became the exclusive sponsor for the reception and preservation of these holy bones. The intention behind such a governmental support was never implicit: to bring the merit and blessing (*gongde* 功德) from protecting *sarira* to the whole country. Emperor Yang of Sui Dynasty Yang Guang 楊廣 (569-618) clearly stated that it was for the purpose of the felicity of every individual in this country that he supported the consecration of *sarira*.²

In fact, the accumulation of Buddhist merit in China has always involved governmental administrations and participations. Early at the beginning of the Tang dynasty, the court already set up an office called “the Administration of Merit Supervision” (*gongde shi* 功德使司) which was made of monks, nuns and Daoist priests who were called “Merit Supervisors” (*gongde shi* 功德使) (Bai, 2003). This office lasted until the collapse of the Yuan Empire (1271-1368), and

¹ The whole story can be found in the Chinese edition of this scripture, see *Da niepan jing* 大涅槃經, juan 1, 900-903.

² For the story of this in history see *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林, juan 100, 1024.

its major function was to register and administrate religious clergies and religious affairs and at the same time monitoring the accumulation and transmission of “merit”. In other words, any increase of obvious merit in the state including the donation to temples, the printing of scriptures, the support of temple rituals, and any other contributions to religious matters. Individual merit is thus always under the national surveillance and absorbed into the national collection of merit. Jayasuria (2008) points out that on a doctrinal level, Mahayana Buddhism contains strong political messages and conceptual frameworks for statecraft construction that allows does not clearly separate secular states from religious power. In the case of Buddha’s bone relics worship in Chinese history, the magical power of the bones has always been fused with state power and the “imagined reality” of a state under the protection of Buddha.

3. Buddha’s Bones in Modern China: The Case of Famen Temple

The two most famous temples where Buddha’s Sarira are preserved are the “Dharma Gate Temple” (*Famen si* 法門寺) in Baoji in Shanxi province and the “Miraculous Illumination Temple” (*Lingguang si* 靈光寺) in Beijing; Buddha’s finger bone *sarira* was found in the underground hall of Famen Temple and Buddha’s tooth *sarira* was found in the stupa in Lingguang Temple (Chen, 2009). Famen Temple is so far the most famous temple in China because of the discovery of four Buddha’s finger *sariras* in the 1980s.³ There were also another tantric Buddhist alters and mandalas excavated from the underground palace of Famen Temple as the material evidence of the Tang court and government worship of *sarira*. As a royal temple for more than a thousand years old, Famen Temple has a reputation among contemporary lay Buddhists as being one of the most efficacious temples in China, which magically responds to the wishes of its believers and pilgrims. Because of the discovery of the finger *sarira*, the Chinese government has invested more than 5 billion RMB on its renovation and the construction of the new stupa for the *sarira*, along with billions of private donations.⁴ Famen Temple is currently under the administration of the Famen Temple Administration Committee, which is composed mainly by the senior monks from the temple and local officials. Famen Temple is also famous for its connections with the highest political leaders in Beijing, for it has received almost all the important officials in the CCP since the *sarira* was found. Thus during my fieldwork, many tourists and local Buddhist said that Famen Temple is still a royal temple.

³ See its official website for the information of the excavation of the relics: <http://www.famensi.com/fzsl.asp>

⁴ See the newsletter on popular Chinese website “Shanxi famen si touzi wushi yi yu dazao shijie fodu 西法門寺投資五十億欲打造世界佛都”: <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-10-26/143616502321s.shtml>



Figure 1. Buddha's finger *sarira* in Famen Temple⁵



Figure 2. Newly constructed *sarira* palace in Famen Temple⁶

⁵ <http://history.eastday.com/h/20170607/u1a13026129.html>

⁶ <http://www.daoistics.com/dongtianfudi/show-374.html>

During my fieldwork, Famen Temple received thousands of visitors and Buddhists every day. Among them, many came to show their respect to the holy relics and hope for its blessing and efficacy, this included many political figures and local entrepreneurs. Donation from the visitors, regardless of their religious preference, were always made out of the hope for certain kind of protections from the relics or particular wishes in life. Many people who visited the Famen Temple did not see the *sarira* merely as a cultural heritage from the past. “A cultural heritage for China” (*zhongguo wenhua yichan* 中国文化□□) was the label that both the local and central government use to describe the Famen Temple *sarira*. Yet for many people, especially among a large number of lay believers I visited, this is only an excuse. The high figure in the financial investment on the *sarira* and the governmental support for many people means the longing for the merit for the current establishment. Their explanation was surprisingly unanimous: such an intention was against the official ideology of the Marxist materialism. Thus culture became a convenient word to camouflage the actual intention for the merit of protecting the *sarira*.

This view was not only held by one or two persons who visited the Famen Temple but many. People even mentioned these views when having conversations with strangers in the Temple. Their consensus was based on the stories and rumours spread about the miraculous phenomena about the Famen Temple and the *sarira*. One of the most popular ones is that when the most important and eminent political leaders of the country went down to the underground hall immediately after the *sarira* was found, strong light radiated from the body of the *sarira* in front of these leaders, and on the walls of the hall, the *sarira* “multiplied” (*zengsheng* 增生). This means that new *sarira* appeared on the wall with different colours and textures, and it is regarded as one of the miraculous features of *sarira* in general. This story was also confirmed by an old monk in Famen Temple who claimed that he was there in the retinue when this happened. From both the conversation between different tourists, among whom there were both Buddhist believers and non-believers and the comment made by the monk, they all mentioned that these miracles meant that the “merit” in the *sarira* has now been inherited by this country. In this sense, no matter how much money the government put in the temple and on the *sarira*, the intention behind the money is the same with any individual’s donation to the temple, for merit. Here we see a type of “cultural intimacy” in Herzfeld’s (1996) sense that people believed in their imagined relationship between the government and religious objects in real life, that the government actually believed in or convinced by the power of Buddha’s finger bone relics in private, but publically announced their support of its consecration as an endeavour in promoting Chinese culture. In people’s eyes, the government leaders publically denied their private beliefs in *sarira*. Steinmüller (2010) argues that this kind of cultural intimacy is often seen in China, especially on religious issues closely related to people’s everyday life and local culture but are against the overall Marxist ideology.

For many people, and even for many local officials in Shanxi, the generous financial and political supports from the central government was a sign that the bone relics had the power to protect itself and even quell a regime. They thought that the current CCP governments support in the restoration of the *sarira* palace in Famen Temple had no difference from the imperial supports in Chinese history. The government was aiming at the merit of protecting Buddha’s holy legacy, the merit that could bring stability and prosperity to the Chinese state. As one of the

pilgrims said, the culture of *sarira*, its history and legends, were tools for the government to reinforce the belief in its merit. Therefore, the consecration of the *sarira* was the key point where the merit was concentrated and then transmitted. The *sarira* that was regarded as a powerful and efficacious ancient object was believed to unite the state and the people in its merit. The merit was composed of first the power of the *sarira*, and then the state contribution to the enshrinement and preservation of it, and the state members' belief in the merit. One of the administrative staff of the temple management committee, who was not a Buddhist nor a religious person told me that he partially believed in the merit of the *sarira* because there were just too many strange phenomena about it (*qiyi de xianxiang* 奇异的□象). Any decision on it should be really careful and sophisticated on the administrative level. Because he said and I quote, "that China now like all the other dynasties in the past relies on whatever power that lies in the Sarira to maintain peace" (*xianzai de zhongguo he lichao lidai yiyang, xuyao sheli zi lai weihe heping* □在的中国和□朝□代一□, 需要舍利子来□□和平). "It must be a kind of fate that the Sarira was brought to China and preserved in the underground hall for thousands of years, and then our government has inherited it now" (*sheli zi laidao zhongguo jiqian nian bei baoliu xialai yiding shi yizhong mingyun, er women de zhengfu xianzai bata jicheng dao shoushang*

舍利子来到中国几千年被保留下来一定是一种命运, 而□在我□的政府把它□承到手上). Many people believed that the *sarira* was the material proof of the unbroken vitality of China throughout history, that the return of *sarira* to the public promised an imminent prosperous era. Even the most official news website Xinhua Net *Xinhua wang* 新□网 has released a special article to introduce the miracles in the Famen Temple and around the *sarira* from the early of Tang until the present. The tone of this article also insinuates that the miraculous power of the *sarira* has constantly influenced Chinese society throughout history.⁷

4. The Cosmology of Inheritance

The Terma tradition of rediscovering hidden treasures in Tibetan Buddhism that reflects a view of historical returning and the circular movement of time (Zivkovic, 2013). Digging out treasures from the glorious past is believed to have the power of restoring it. The idea of inheritance in people's understanding of the holy bone relics in Famen Temple also indicates a common belief of the "returning of merit" underlying their perception of the contemporary Chinese state. The merit of the *sarira* was believed to be inherited by the current establishment as well as the people in the Chinese society. The collective inheritance of the merit was understood as the transition of the miraculous power from the past to present that will protect the whole society like it did in the previous dynasties. The reappearance of the *sarira* was voiced as the manifestation of the power behind the circular movement of history, which juxtaposes the contemporary establishment of China with the dynasties in the past. Many visitors of the temple told me that they believe Buddhism would revive in China fully and would restore its glorious time in the Tang dynasty, and the Chinese state would be the same. More than that, the powerful *sarira* reflects a tendency that in many Chinese people's political imaginations, China is a cosmological state. This state, similar to Taussig's (1997) idea of "magic state", is believed to be under the control of the Buddhist cosmology in which everything is operated by a karmic merit system. Miraculous phenomena and the merit related to the *sarira* which influences the society as a whole implies

⁷ http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2017-06/06/c_129625698.htm

that there are certain kinds of invisible power influencing the Chinese state. In other words, the power that has influenced the previous dynasties in China continuously influences the contemporary state. Thus what is inherited in the discovery of the *sarira* is not only a history, a culture, but also the guarantee of the state's future. Thus the contemporary regime is nothing but an imperial dynasty in many people's eyes.

Chinese religions, especially religions in popular society, suffered from severe suppression during Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, but gradually embraced revival since 1980s, and this revival has to be accompanied by or even led by the rise of a new ideology of the revival of Traditional Chinese Culture (*chuantong wenhua* 传统文化) and Chinese imperialism (Goossaert & Palmer, 2010). Recently new Confucian movements from popular society even attempted to abandon the established social discourse on political as well as religious topics, trying to build up a new discourse based purely on the "traditional" worldviews (Billioud & Thoraval, 2014). This means that lay followers of different religions in China started to apply their own cosmologies in understanding the world, the Chinese state and themselves. In my fieldwork, many lay believers who visited the temple and prayed to the bone relics asserted that Marxism was only a "karmic phase" (*yeli de yihuan* 力的一环) for China, and this was just how the world worked. Prosperity is always preceded by downfalls. In their cosmology, there has always been a grand plan for the Chinese state, and the rediscovery of Buddha's finger bone relics is the proof that this plan is working. Very often people in the Famen temple mentioned the Buddhist saying "Karmic retributions are never in vain" (*yinguo buxu* 因果不虛), indicating that the merit of preserving and protecting Buddha's finger bone relics will never disappear but will always reward this state in due course. The belief in the actual power of the *sarira* renders the consecration of the relics religious and cosmological significance; people do not simply take *sarira* as a legacy of culture. This made many local officials very careful in their use of phrases related to the relics when conversing with lay Buddhists. In formal occasions and Buddhist forums, they often addressed the importance of the relics in terms of "the light of Buddha protects China" (*foguang you zhonghua* 佛光佑中国), symbolic phrases that bridged official Marxist ideology and lay Buddhists' cosmology. Clearly, political authorities did not wish to antagonise lay Buddhists and tried their best to accommodate their new social discourse. After all, thinking China as an imperial dynasty will only reinforce the government's agenda of Chinese imperialism.

5. Conclusion

The rediscovery of Buddha's bone relics *sarira* in the Famen Temple in China became part of the emerging political cosmology in China regarding the Chinese state as the recipient of religious power. This cosmology takes the magical and efficacious Buddhist relics as a powerful object in protecting and strengthening the power of the state, and in return reaffirming Buddhist doctrines and influences. Lay Buddhists' cosmology of "inheritance" asserts that karmic merits of protecting and enshrining Buddha's bone relics are substantial and more than a cultural concept and that the Chinese state today inherited these merits from the glorious imperial dynasties in the past. A national support in consecrating *sarira* is seen as a sign of the power of it conquering the state, as well as protecting it. Historically speaking, the consecration of the *sarira* was always a state monopolised enterprise in China, and the government often publically

announced their interest in the merit of doing so. Against current Marxist ideology, this is according to the lay believers camouflaged under the agenda of “promoting culture”. Yet, the lay believers treat such cultural intimacy as a sign of the state collecting merit. This political cosmology maximises the power and importance of religious object to an extent that it overrules the power of the state, and this cosmology even influenced the way in which political authorities in China view the *sarira* and the state.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest

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