

**The Emergence and Spread of Relic Veneration in Medieval China:
Reconsidering the significance of the tripartite classification suggested by Daoxuan**

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Abstract: As a unique mode of existence after the Buddha entered his *parinirvāṇa*, relics have always been at center of Buddhist devotion. Current researches on Buddhist relics in East Asia are mainly confined to field of art history and of archaeology. These studies were concerned with the form of reliquaries, the procedure of the relic interment, and the political performance of the relics in the imperial ceremonies. It is worth noting that the earliest excavated relic casket in China dates back to the year of 453 CE. If one considers the fact that Buddhism was introduced to China around the 1st century CE, there are many miracle tales which provide arguably the sole source of how the relic veneration emerged and spread in the following several centuries.

Buddhist scholars, when talking about the Chinese relic tradition in its earliest phase, often cited later accounts casually, or equated the legends with historical facts. Since the narratives of miracles have undergone a series of copying, alterations, and additions to the plot, it is necessary to treat these documents with caution. Among all the miracle collections, *Ji Shenzhou Sanbao Gantonglu* ("A Collection of the Miraculous Responses (of the Three Treasures in the Divine Land)") by Daoxuan is of crucial importance. Fascicle one of this work is devoted to the miracle tales about relics, which the author further divided into three sections: first is the relics of Aśoka's stūpa; second is so-called "Miraculous Responses of the Relics in Divine Land *Cīna-sthāna*"; and lastly, the relics bestowed during the Renshou campaign of relic distribution.

The tripartite classification reveals Daoxuan's insight into the entire tradition of relic veneration in China. It implies three different ways of invoking and performing the relics, and roughly corresponds to the periods in which the three types of relic were most favored and prevalent. This lecture will focus on the second category, namely the relics obtained in a mechanism of stimulus-response. Based on a scrutinized survey, I argue that the legends of the imperial worship of the relics which took place before the 3rd century are, without exceptions, later inventions. Two excavations, i.e. the alleged mural paintings of relics in an eastern Han tomb at Horinger, inner Mongolia, and the stūpa-shaped bronze vessel at Gongyi, Henan, have no direct connections with the relic worship. Based on the data at our disposal, we draw a tentative conclusion that the relic veneration originated around 3rd century in the vicinity of Luoyang, the capital, and spread to the south after the collapse of western Jin. The initial worshippers included both monks and lay Buddhists, including merchants or lower-ranking officials. The members of imperial family did not begin to show any interest in relics until the 5th century, with such significant examples as Prince Linchuan and Emperor Ming of the Liu Song dynasty.

This timeline is worth pondering when we compare the chronology of relic veneration in the greater Gandhāra, of which Chinese Buddhism was under the sustained and strong influence. The rise of relic veneration in China postdates the counterpart in Gandhāra for two or three centuries. Compared with the cult of image or of book, the relic veneration is also a tradition that emerged quite late. The reluctance to adopt relics as worship objects can be partly explained by (the mahāyāna) Buddhist doctrines and the Chinese cultural mentality.

In most cases, the relics were installed beneath the stūpa or within the *uṣṇīṣa* of the Buddha statue, with many precedents found in Gandhāra. On the other hand, we find some unique

manifestations of the relics as well, such as the practice of making them float on water and rotate clockwise, for which the canonical justification remains to be verified.

Keywords: relic veneration, miracle tales, Daoxuan, stimulus-response