

The Northern Pagoda in Chaoyang, Liaoning Province, northern China, is one of the important monuments of the period of the Liao Dynasty. The Liao reconstruction and rededication (in 1043–1044) was probably a project of the Empress Dowager Qin'ai. Its foundations date from the late 5th century (Northern Wei period); after a fire it was re-built in the Sui and T'ang periods. The exterior structure as we see it today dates from the middle of the 11th century, with some later modern restorations and changes. One of a pair of Liao-period pagodas currently remaining in the city, the northern one still preserves a substantial amount of its original relief decoration. During the restorations of 1984–92, its untouched relic chamber inside the twelfth eave was opened, revealing a treasure

trove of objects, now displayed in a new museum at the site. The complexity of the textual and decorative elements of the structure, the richness of the enshrined relics, and their association with liturgical practice are especially noteworthy, as Youn-mi Kim has demonstrated in her dissertation, which should soon be forthcoming as a book. With the exception of one photograph which she has supplied, the images here (best viewed in color in the on-line version of this journal) were taken by me during a visit to Chaoyang in 2009 as a member of a “northern borderlands” study tour organized by the Silkroad Foundation and Beijing University. While the objects in the museum are well displayed, the nature of the lighting does not always permit good photography of some of the most interesting pieces. Captioning is minimal, based primarily on the museum’s published guide.

— Daniel C. Waugh

References:

Youn-mi Kim. “Eternal Ritual in an Infinite Cosmos: The Chaoyang North Pagoda (1043-1044).” Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2010. I am grateful to the author for sharing with me a paper she gave on the pagoda during our visit to Chaoyang, for her several corrections to my annotations here, and for her photograph of the silver relic casket. She is now an Assistant Professor in Art History at The Ohio State University.

Chaoyang City Northern Tower Museum. *Chaoyang Northern Tower*. Ed. Du Bin. Jilin Photographic Press, 2006. ISBN 7-80606-530-X. In Chinese and English, well illustrated.



Facing page: The pagoda from the south.

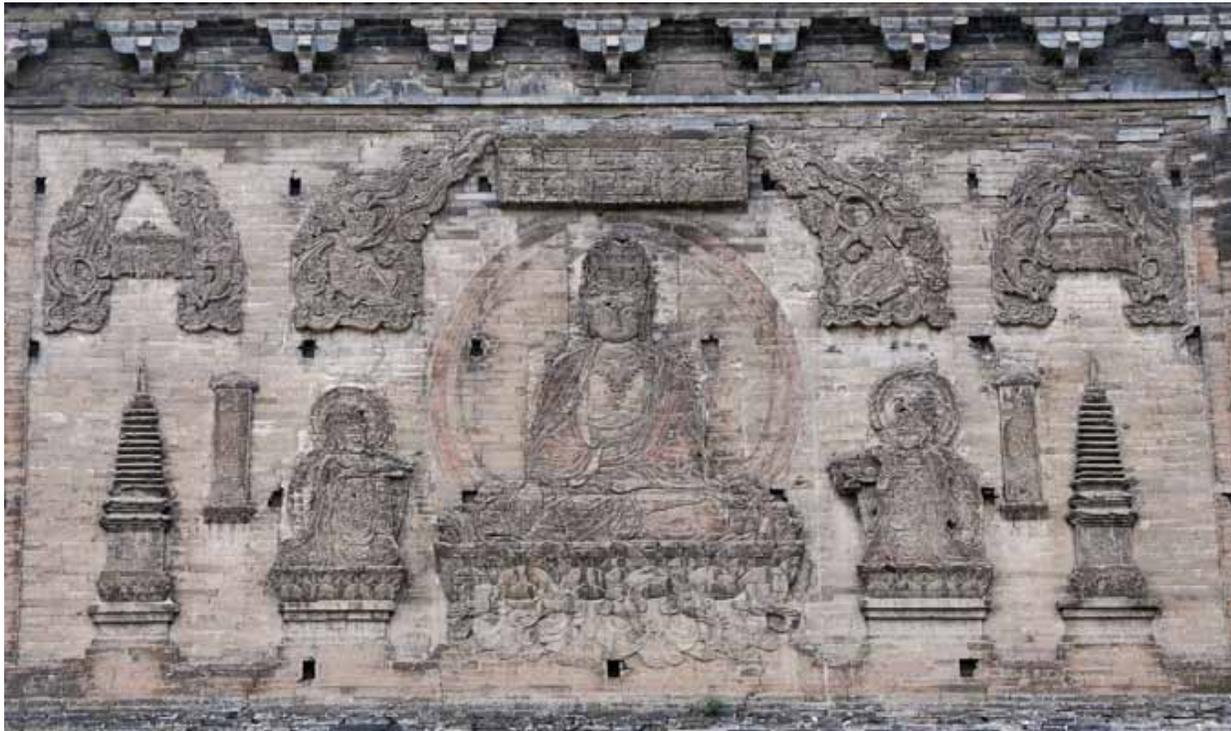
Right: The pagoda from the southwest.

Below: closeup of the south face. The central figures on the four faces are the Dhyani Buddhas of the four directions, here Ratnasambhava. The fifth Dhyani Buddha, Vairocana, is represented by the pagoda itself, which thus stands at the center of a cosmic mandala.





The west face (above) with Amitabha Buddha and east face (below) with Aksobhya Buddha. The flanking pagodas mark the eight most important Buddhist sites in India but also are images of the chaoyang North Pagoda itself.





Around the outside of the pagoda at the level of the path for circumambulation is a sculpted frieze with images of dancers and musicians flanking various other auspicious symbols.



At each corner are coiled dragons.





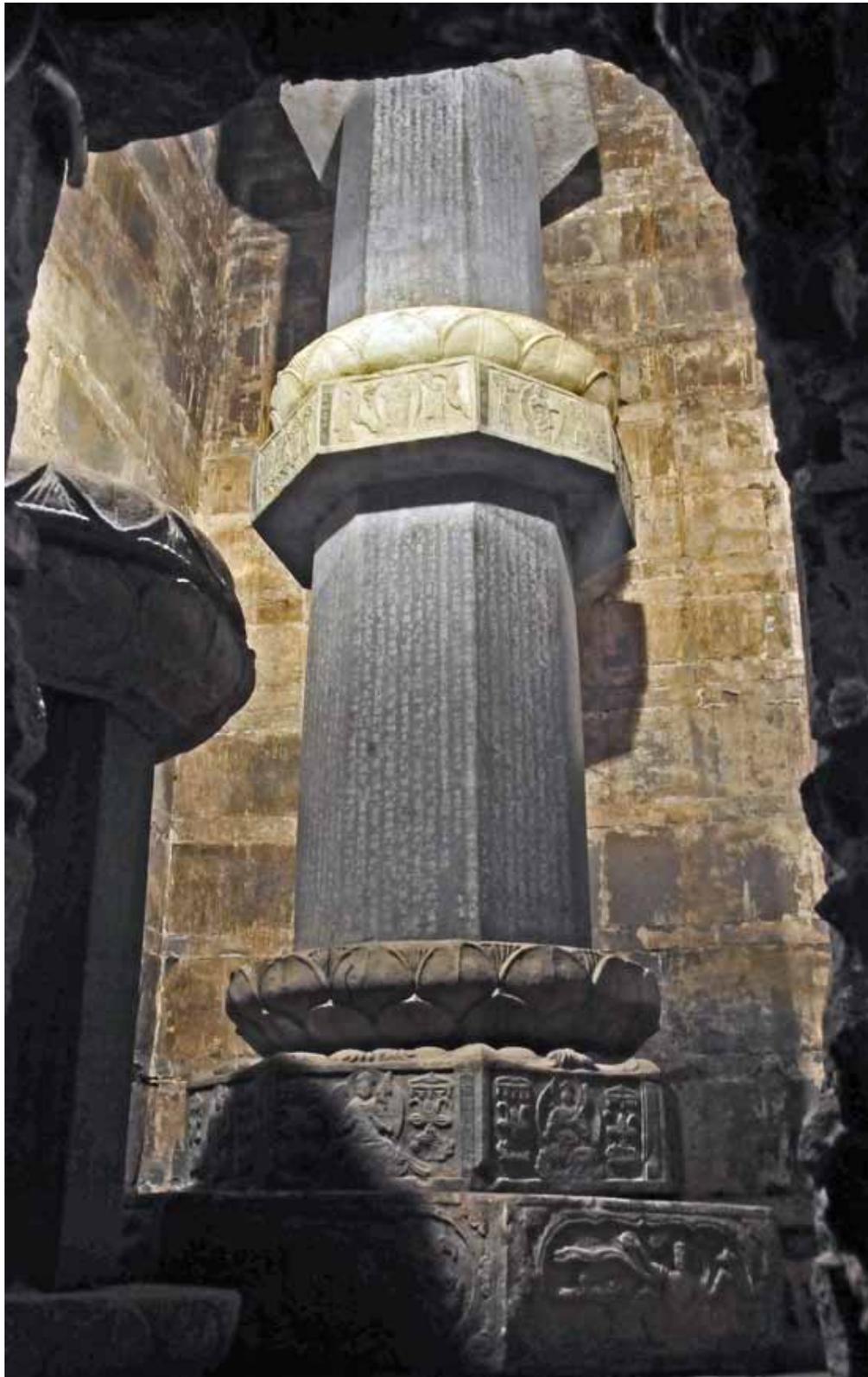
Above is a detail of a relief showing a bodhisattva. Right and below: In the centers of three of the sides are symbolic doors, flanked by guardian figures.





Models in the museum reconstruct the pagoda as it might have looked when first built under the Northern Wei and later in its urban setting in the period of the Qing Dynasty.





At the center of the base of the pagoda is a four-story dharani pillar carved with sutras and images, including the Eight Great Bodhisattvas (first story base), the Seven Buddhas of the Past (second story base), and the eight Kings dividing the Buddha's relics (fourth story base).



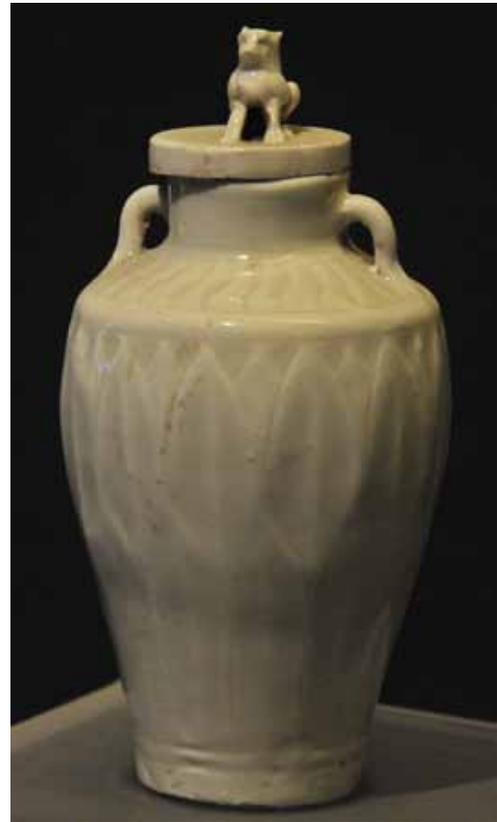
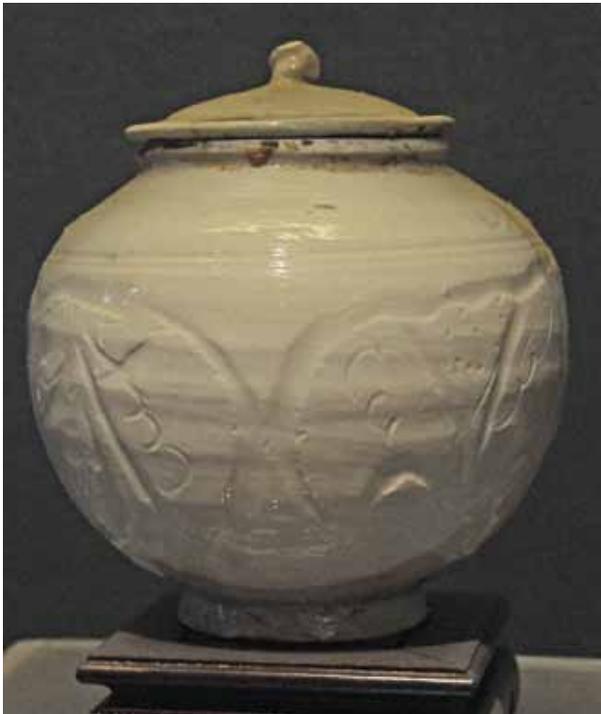
Photo copyright 2009 Youn-Mi Kim

Facing page, top: Photographs taken of the relic crypt located inside the twelfth eave of the pagoda, when it was uncovered during the restoration work of the 1980s.

Various forms of relic containers were found including a box faced with repoussé silver sheets. On one end of it the royal couple of Liao are depicted worshipping the Buddha Sakyamuni, whose parinirvana is on another side of the box. A round miniature stupa for dharma relics contained rolled silver sheets inscribed Ushisa Vijaya Dharani.







In the relic crypt were various ceramic and carved vessels. A porcelain pot (above) contained a second pot, in which had been placed herbs which may have been connected with the home rituals. The vessel shown on the lower right is from the Jin Dynasty, presumably added later in the lower relic chamber..

Arguably the most impressive object found in the relic chamber was the jewel-net stupa, constructed by stringing pearls and other precious stones around a frame. It had fallen apart over the centuries and was reconstructed as shown here on the facing page.



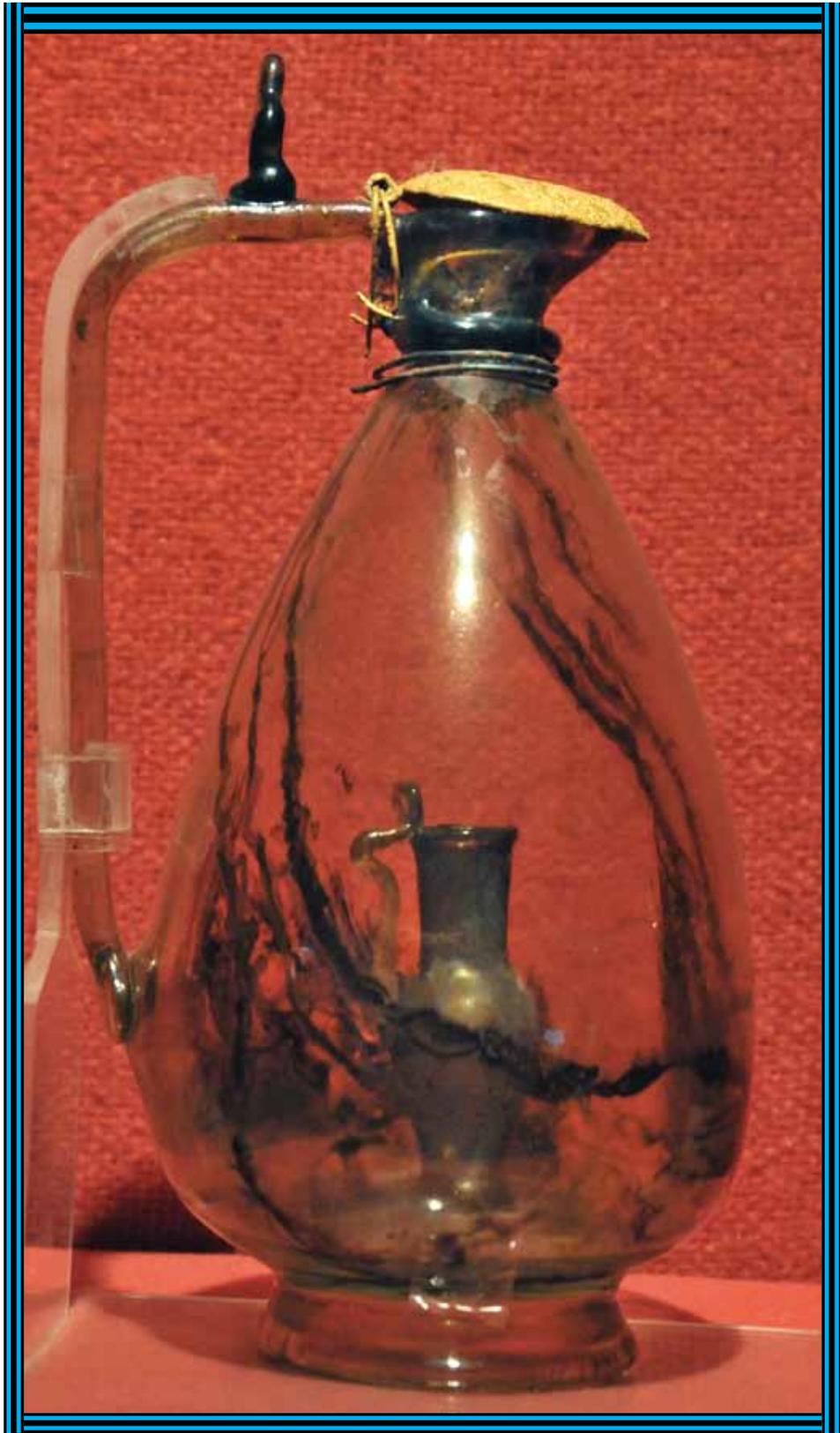


Among the most exquisite objects are this agate calyx and an agate relic container with gold lid.





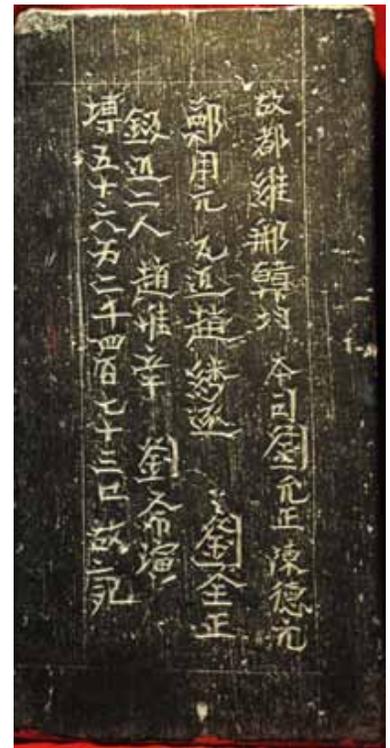
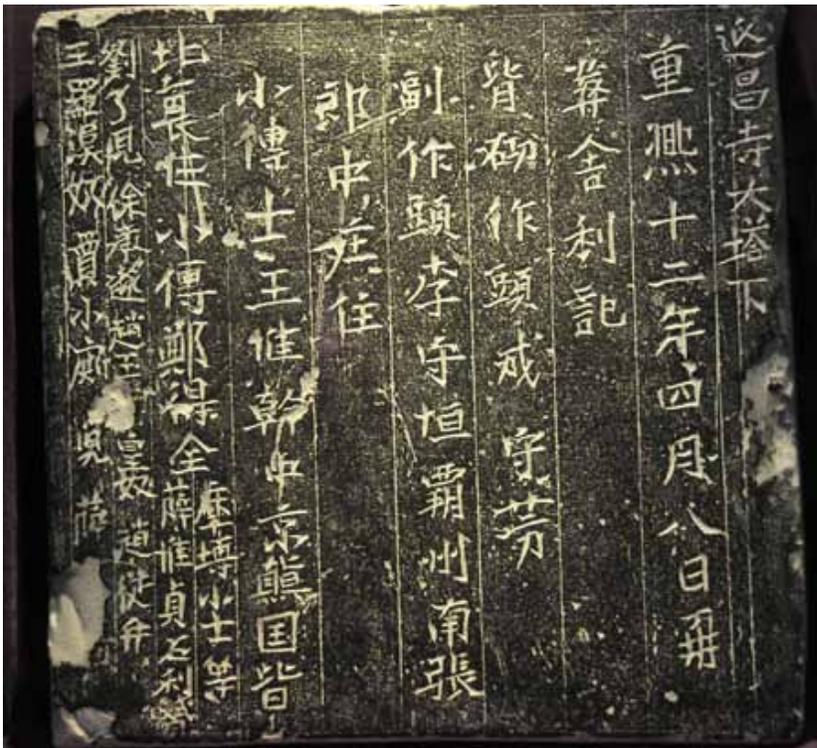
The small objects, some best seen through a magnifying glass, include the lion and chopper (agate), the rabbits and bears (crystal), the apsarā and dragon (jade). The beads are glass, and the bodhi trees (whose form is exactly that shown on the silver-clad relic box), are silver.





The relic crypt also contains evidence of long-distance trade along the "Silk Road." Western glass had been much treasured in China at least as early as the Han Dynasty. Here are fragmentary remains of a glass bowl and an extraordinary intact Persian glass pitcher, into which a miniature ewer had been inserted.

Inscribed bricks help us to write the history of the pagoda.





What are considered to be true relics of the body of the Buddha Sakyamuni (one of which is believed to be a relic made of blood of the Buddha by the populace) were probably donated to the pagoda by Emperor Wen of the Sui dynasty. The new museum complex includes a worship hall resplendent with gilt and colored lighting. Its centerpiece is a gilded miniature stupa containing the Buddha's blood, which, guides will insist, emits of itself a kaleidoscope of changing colors

