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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstinence halls (*zhaitang* 齋堂) in lay households in early medieval China

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Most of what we know of religion in early medieval China concerns religious virtuosi, the spiritual and intellectual elite. But often, in texts focused on them, we glimpse the activities of some of the surrounding laypersons whose responses to virtuosi are in many cases the reason we have the texts in the first place. We possess normative writings of various kinds prescribing how laypeople should or should not practice religion. Evidence of how they actually *did* practice religion is harder to find. This modest article attempts to fill a very small part of this gap. I argue that, from at least the late third century, some households in China were furnished with a special room reserved for Buddhist observances, in effect a domestic shrine. I will show what these rooms were used for and something of the significance they were thought to have.

Keywords: *zhai* 齋; *poṣadha*; Chinese Buddhism; miracle tales; Piṇḍola; Buddhist ritual; lay Buddhist piety

Background: the abstinence ceremony (*zhai* 齋)

Modern scholarship on the history of Buddhist religion has foregrounded the study of great texts, commentaries, and systems of thought to the point of almost completely ignoring much of what ordinary Buddhists actually thought and did. Michel Strickmann could thus rightly declare in 1990 that ‘Chinese Buddhism remains a largely unknown subject.’¹ Much has changed since then. But one aspect of early medieval piety that is still not well understood, despite its importance in both lay and monastic practice, is the *zhai* 齋, which I will provisionally and rather clumsily translate as ‘abstinence ceremony’ when not leaving it untranslated. In order to grasp the significance of the set-apart rooms in lay households that are the focus of this paper, we must first grasp what *zhai* observances were about and discern their significance in the rhythms of Buddhists’ lives and in the Buddhist *imaginaire*.

Sylvie Hureau, a scholar who has done much work on the *zhai*, begins a recent discussion by terming it ‘the ceremony which played the greatest role in the life of communities of [Buddhist] believers, laity and monks alike.’² Xi Chao 郗超 (336–377) considered it important enough to place it third in the sequence of topics in his *Essentials in Upholding the Dharma* (*Feng fayao* 奉法要), preceded only by the triple refuge and the five precepts.³ But its importance to Buddhists in early medieval China is strikingly out of proportion to the scant treatment it has received in modern scholarly literature.⁴

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The word *zhai* itself, sometimes written 齋, is attested in late Warring States texts as denoting an ensemble of practices undertaken to ritually purify oneself before performing a sacrifice, an ensemble featuring abstention from certain foods and from alcohol.⁵ Similarly, in Vedic contexts in India the words *poṣadha*, *poṣatha*, and *upoṣadha* denoted a sacrifice done on full moon and new moon days, before which the celebrant would ritually purify himself. Buddhists in India borrowed these words to designate a periodic self-purifying ritual done by monks and laity alike – without, of course, an accompanying sacrifice. When early translators of Buddhist texts needed a Chinese equivalent for these words, *zhai* was therefore a natural choice.

In Indic Buddhist contexts, *poṣadha* was conducted by both monks and laity. The monastic version entailed a compulsory semimonthly gathering of monks, who, having washed and been meticulously counted, recited the many rules of the *prātimokṣa* or monastic code and confessed any violations. The gathering took place in a space in the monastery dedicated to this purpose, known in Chinese sources as the *bua tang* 布薩堂, *bua* being one of the common transliterations of *poṣadha*. Lay households performed a parallel rite on the evenings of the 8th, 14th, and 15th of each fortnight – in theory six times a month – and, additionally, three long ceremonies during the first fortnight of the first, fifth, and ninth months of each year. For the Chinese Buddhist laity, performing *zhai* entailed adherence to eight prohibitions (hence the occasional use of the term *baguan zhai* 八關齋), some of which, however, numbered among the standard five lay precepts: no killing, stealing, sexual intercourse, lying, drinking alcohol, using perfumes and flowers, sleeping on high beds, or eating after noon. The prohibitions against sex and post-noon eating, in particular, had the effect of moving lay observance temporarily closer to the monastic rule. Lay performances of *zhai* were not merely a set of abstentions, however. They included collective recitation of the precepts; reflection on one's transgressions, followed by confession (*chan* 懺); attendance at a nocturnal sutra recitation as well as a discourse or sermon by the senior monastic guest invited for the occasion; and the feeding by the host family of their monastic and lay guests, a meal that apparently closed (or opened) with a blessing, spell, or prayer (*zhouyuan* 咒願).⁶ Note that while hosting this meal was certainly a central element of the ceremony and was a key reason it was believed to earn merit for the hosts, the term *zhai* denoted this entire cluster of periodic activities, not just the pre-noon meal. This is why I eschew the frequent practice of rendering *zhai* as 'vegetarian feast.'⁷ 'Fast,' on the other hand, the other common way of rendering *zhai*, at least has the benefit of highlighting the abstention from eating after noon as a key element of the observance.⁸

So, from a lay point of view *zhai* can be seen as a temporary but periodic intensification of normal devotional practice. But the significance of *zhai* observances in the eyes of contemporaries had to do, in part, with the theological and cosmological context they were understood to have. Sutras speak of a system in which four celestial kings (*si tianwang* 四天王) or their representatives descend on the days of the observance (as determined by the lunar cycle) to conduct tours of inspection and note the meritorious or sinful actions of the human populace.⁹ They also speak of 'spirits of goodness' or 'beneficent spirits' (*shanshen* 善神) – indeed the indigenously composed *Consecration Sutra* (*Guanding jing* 灌頂經) mentions these no fewer than 39 times. Usually these spirits were imagined as descending from the heavens to protect those who obeyed the precepts, but they were believed to abandon those who did evil deeds. The indigenously composed *Sutra of the Four Celestial Kings* (*Si tianwang jing* 四天王經) portrays five spirits per precept encircling and protecting the lay practitioner.

It is this cosmological and divine context for the *zhai* – the hovering presence of divine beings just beyond the veil of ordinary sight, a presence that varied with the calendar as well as in response to people’s deeds and intentions – that sets up what is surely the most striking aspect of how these observances are represented in early medieval narratives: as *a portal between the seen and unseen worlds*, that is, as ‘stimuli’ (*gan* 感) that elicit divine ‘responses’ (*ying* 應).¹⁰ In the early medieval miracle tales the following scenario occurs numerous times: a *zhai* ceremony is underway in a lay household when a strange monk unexpectedly appears. Often he is dirty, wears a frayed robe, breaks the order of seniority in seating, and otherwise seems to violate protocol. The scenario then branches: either the lay host recognizes or suspects the strange guest is a ‘divine monk’ (*shenseng* 神僧) and pays appropriate obeisance, and is sometimes rewarded for doing so; or else he fails the test and watches in chagrin as the monk leaves in a way that manifests his divine nature, often by flying off into the sky.¹¹ We need not understand all these mysterious figures to have been the arhat Piṇḍola, on whom more below.¹² But when, in a body of stories, the same narrative pattern recurs repeatedly, we know something important is being said. What these stories clearly show is that proper, suitably pious performance of the *zhai* was argued to constitute a stimulus powerful enough to draw forth this sort of miraculous response from the unseen world. Other story patterns similarly suggest that channels of contact between the seen and unseen worlds were maximally open on *zhai* days. These are the days, for example, on which several stories depict dead family members periodically returning to visit their living kin, warning them of retribution for sins and urging them to stricter practice. Hureau has shown that some early translators of Buddhist scriptures similarly carried out their projects mostly on *poṣadha* days and that, when the dates of Buddhist preaching are mentioned in early medieval Chinese documents, they are usually *poṣadha* days.¹³

There always lurked the possibility that the mysterious and seemingly ill-behaved monastic guest at the *zhai* was none other than Piṇḍola (a name variously transliterated in Chinese texts, often as Bintoulu 賓頭盧), one of the circle of senior arhats who were the initial followers of Gautama Buddha and who was variously ‘regarded as one of the [a] rhats who had voluntarily remained in the world to protect the [Dharma] until the coming of Maitreya’¹⁴ or else ‘said to have illegitimately demonstrated his supernatural powers . . . and for this reason . . . [was] not allowed to enter *nirvāṇa*’.¹⁵ Either way, the power attached to him in the Buddhist *imaginaire* derived from the fact that he was still alive and active in this world. His attendance at a *zhai* ceremony meant a direct, personal connection back to the time of the living presence of Gautama Buddha, and thus functioned in a way parallel to Buddha relics (of body or of possession), icons said to have been portraits from life, or sutras, preserving the Buddha’s actual words on some particular occasion. Piṇḍola was the focus of the rite of ‘bathing the monk’ (*yu seng* 浴僧), as well as of the practice of leaving the highest-ranking seat open at *zhai* meals lest the arhat should appear. At these meals he was also sometimes represented by an icon. These customs are prescribed in the brief mid- to late-fifth-century ritual text *Method for Inviting Piṇḍola* (*Qing Bintoulu fa* 請賓頭盧法).¹⁶ A body of lore grew up around cases in which Piṇḍola was concluded to have invisibly attended the *zhai* meal, leaving behind traces of his presence to be found afterwards.¹⁷

The net effect of these narrative motifs was to reflect and reinforce a view of the heightened devotional setting of the *zhai* as capable – not routinely, but on certain rare occasions – of penetrating the veil of the unseen, eliciting a striking response. The dedicated time and ritual household space of these observances might open a portal

through which normally unseen but ever-present beings passed into fleeting visibility, impacting witnesses in ways recorded in the tales.

Zhaitang 齋堂 and other terms for spaces inside lay households: evidence from miracle narratives

More than a few narratives from the pre-Tang and early Tang periods mention rooms or spaces in lay households that seem to have been dedicated to the performance of the *zhai*. Before presenting a selection of them here, a brief methodological discussion is needed.

In reading such narratives as evidence for extra-textual ritual practice, it is important to keep two hermeneutical principles in mind. First, such stories, although often treated by historians of literature as prototypes of modern fiction, are in fact crystallizations of social memory. The events they narrate may not really have occurred as told, but they were believed by many hearers, readers, story collectors, and copyists to have done so. More importantly, the sorts of social and spatial settings depicted in them were familiar to contemporaries, not fictive creations sprung from lone authors' minds.¹⁸ Second, what Jan Nattier terms 'the principle of irrelevance' applies here – that is, these are situations 'when incidental mention is made of items unrelated to the author's primary agenda,'¹⁹ items that must have been familiar to contemporary readers since no explanation is offered of them. In other words, these stories do not argue that households *should* have special rooms dedicated to *zhai* performance, nor do they register surprise or admiration that a few exceptional households did have them. Rather, in mentioning the existence of such rooms in passing as a matter of course, the stories clearly imply that they were commonplace, at least among the sorts of official-class, Buddhist-oriented families often featured in such tales.

Consider, for example, this story, collected by the official and lay Buddhist Wang Yan 王琰 into his *Records of Signs from the Unseen Realm* (*Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記) around the year 490.²⁰

Jin-era Minister of Works He Chong 何充, styled Cidao 次道, was a native of Lujiang. From his youth he believed in the Dharma and was very disciplined in his practice of mental cultivation. He habitually placed in his abstinence hall [*zhaitang* 齋堂] an empty seat covered by a mat and a floral canopy²¹ decorated with jewels. He kept it set up for many years, and several spirit-anomalies occurred.

Later on one occasion there was [in this hall] a large gathering of monks and laypersons, very crowded. Among the monks sitting in order [of seniority] was one whose face and robe were filthy, his apparent level of spiritual attainment very base. This monk emerged from the assembly, climbed up onto the seat, joined his palms together and simply remained silent. He said nothing. The entire hall full of people were shocked and thought he must be deranged. Chong, too, was uneasy, his embarrassment showing in his face. When the midday meal was taken, this monk ate on the high seat.²² When the meal was concluded, he picked up his alms bowl and left the hall. On his way out he looked at Chong and said, 'To what end have you been exerting yourself so vigorously in the practice?'²³ He then tossed his bowl into the air, and he and it rose up and away into the sky. Chong and the other laypersons and monastics present hurried behind to look at him. He gave off a beautiful, bright radiance that dazzled the eyes, then disappeared from view. Those chasing after the strange monk were all regretful, and for days afterward they prostrated themselves and made confession.

A *zhaitang* 齋堂 is here mentioned in passing – in a way that implies it was nothing remarkable or unique, save perhaps in this host's assiduous maintenance and lavish

adornment of it – as a permanent element of He Chong’s home. The context makes clear that it was, as its name suggests, a space dedicated to the frequent performance of the *zhai*.²⁴

We have here an example of the motif of a strange monk appearing at a *zhai* gathering. Presumably the participants’ reactions as noted in the last few lines were due to their realizing that they had failed to recognize and pay due respect to Piṇḍola or whoever the mysterious figure had been. On the other hand, the story clearly functions to praise He Chong’s devotion, which is what triggered the monk’s appearance in the first place. In this case we have the added submotif of a visiting monk throwing his alms bowl into the air and flying off in its wake. This association of the alms bowl with paranormal flight is also evidenced in several transformation texts (*bianwen* 變文) found at Dunhuang in which the monk Maudgalyāyana (Mulian 目蓮) flies off after his bowl in exactly the same fashion.²⁵

The alms bowl was itself a potent symbol, as we see in the next story,²⁶ also from Wang Yan’s *Records*:²⁷

During the Jin there lived one Que Gongze 關公則, a native of Zhao.²⁸ He lived quietly and undisturbed, devoting himself only to the service of the Dharma. During the time of Jin emperor Wu, he died in Luoyang. Monks and laity with one accord hosted a gathering for him at the White Horse monastery. That night they chanted sutras. At midnight they heard in the air overhead the sound of someone singing hymns.²⁹ Looking up, they saw a person of imposing and dignified appearance, smartly attired, who said: ‘I am Que Gongze. I have now been reborn in the realm of peace and bliss in the West.³⁰ In the company of several bodhisattvas I have come to listen to the sutras.’ Everyone in the hall was stunned and leapt for joy; all were able to see him.

Around the same time there was also one Wei Shidu 衛士度, a native of Ji commandery.³¹ He, too, was a zealous lay practitioner, and was Gongze’s teacher. His mother also was deeply pious; she recited sutras and performed the long periods of abstinence³² and often fed monks at her home. Once it was approaching midday when his mother went out of the abstinence hall [*zhaitang* 齋堂] along with a group of nuns and monks and looked off in the distance. Suddenly she saw something fall from the sky and land directly in front of her. It was an alms bowl full of rice, the fragrance filling the surrounding air. Everyone from the hall was filled with reverential awe and simultaneously performed respectful obeisance. The mother decided to circulate the bowl among those present for the abstinence ceremony to feed them. None of them were hungry again for the next seven days.³³ It is said that this alms bowl still exists somewhere in the north.

Shidu was highly literate. He composed a confession text for the ceremony of the eightfold abstinence.³⁴ Toward the end of the Jin, those observing the abstinences still used it. When he died during the Yongchang period (322) there were also numinous anomalies. Hao Xiang 浩像 in his *Traditions of Sages and Worthies* records them in detail.³⁵ That text says that Shidu, too, was reborn in the western land.

It was to these two figures that Wang Gai 王該 of Wuxing in his “Candles in Daylight”³⁶ was referring when he wrote:

Que, peerless, surmounted the empyrean;
Weidu followed in his tracks.
Both are now carefree in the state of no rebirth,
Both sloughed off their skeletons and achieved deathlessness.

Again we have here an incidental mention of a permanent space in a family household designated *zhaitang* 齋堂. The detail about Wei Shidu’s mother leaving the *zhaitang*

before serving the meal to her monastic guests suggests that, in this case and perhaps generally, the *zhaitang* was not the location in which the meal occurred but was instead reserved for the other parts of the ceremony. Both in the passage about hymn-singing and in the narration of the alms bowl incident we see clear indications of the clouds of celestial, cosmic witnesses imagined by early medieval practitioners (as well as depicted in some Mahāyāna sutras themselves) as hovering over and around them as they performed their devotions, sometimes even joining in their devotions. This is itself an aspect of the practice and *imaginaire* of Buddhism in this period that deserves more considered attention.³⁷

In the same text we find the story of Wang Yi 王懿,³⁸ a native of Taiyuan and possibly one of Wang Yan's own ancestors, though this is not indicated.³⁹ After telling of a couple of miraculous instances earlier in Wang's life, the story continues:⁴⁰

Later he went from being a minister in the ministry of war to serving as regional inspector of Xuzhou. Once he was about to host an abstinence ceremony. On the night in question he sprinkled and swept, set out flowers and incense, and arranged a number of sutras and images. Suddenly he heard the sound of the recitation of sutras and hymns coming from the Dharma hall [*fatang* 法堂]; the sound was pure and melodious. When Yi went to look he saw five monks before the Buddha seat, of dignified and unusual appearance, radiating an air of spiritual attainment. Yi knew they were no ordinary monks, and his heart was full of joy and respect. The monks turned around, continued chanting, but then, before [Yi] had made sense of the words, the monks suddenly flew up into the sky and departed. Between the friends, relatives, and guests who were present, there were many who saw this. They all leapt for joy and redoubled their efforts toward faith and enlightenment.

Here we have what is clearly the same sort of household ritual space, reserved for *zhai* performances, now designated *fatang* 法堂. We note the nocturnal timing and the host's careful preparations of the ritual space – his adornment of the room with flowers, incense, sutra copies, and icons. The appearance of the spirit-monks during the *zhai* is another indication that pious performance of the abstinence ceremony is a stimulus (*gan* 感) that elicits such a divine response (*ying* 應).

Yet another *Mingxiang ji* story reads:⁴¹

Liu Ling 劉齡 lived during the Song; his family's place of origin is unknown. He lived in Lucheng village in eastern Jinling.⁴² He was quite observant of the Dharma. In his home he established an oratory [*jingshe* 精舍], and he sometimes hosted abstinence gatherings. On the twenty-seventh day of the third month of the ninth year of Yuanjia [15 May 432], his father suddenly fell ill and died. A spirit-medium and an invocator⁴³ both warned that his family would soon experience three more deaths.

In a neighboring family there was a libationer who served the Dao named Wei Po 魏叵. He often made petitions and talismans so as to hoodwink and win over the villagers. He told Ling, 'The disasters due to befall your family are not yet over. They are due to your having served a Western barbarian god. If instead you serve the great Dao, you will surely receive fortune; but if you do not change your ways, your entire family will be wiped out.' So Ling began to perform libations with wine and no longer observed the Dharma. Po told him, 'You should rid yourself of all your sutras and images. In this way further calamity can be avoided.' So Ling closed up the doors to his oratory and started a fire inside it. The fire burned for several days. But only the room was burned; the sutras, images, banners, and hanging scrolls remained completely intact, and the images moreover glowed brightly at night.

At the time there were over twenty libationers nearby. Some of them, awed and cowed by this numinous confirmation [*lingyan* 靈驗], snuck away. But Po and his disciples were determined and were not to be deterred. He let down his hair, performed the steps of Yu,⁴⁴ and, brandishing his ritual sword and whip, said that the Buddha was ordered to return to his

barbarian country, that he was forbidden to remain in China harming the people. That night Ling felt as if someone were raining blows on him, and he fell to the floor. When family members lifted him up, he was still breathing, but he was henceforth crippled and could no longer walk. As for the master of the Dao Wei Po, he developed internal ulcers at that same time. Each day he lost two liters [of blood] and within a month he had died a very painful death. All of his followers developed leprosy.

One of Ling's neighbors, the governor of Dong'an,⁴⁵ Shui Qiuhe 水丘和, transmitted this story to Dongyang Wuyi 東陽無疑.⁴⁶ And there were many who saw the events at the time.

In this dramatic story of conflict with Celestial Master Daoism we have what is clearly the same sort of room, dedicated to the same purpose and containing the same ritual items. In this case the room is designated *jingshe* 精舍, which I translate as 'oratory.' The term *jingshe* was usually in the early medieval period reserved, along with *si* 寺, of course, for monasteries or else small cells within monasteries, but it was occasionally, as here, used to mean a dedicated ritual space inside a lay family's home.⁴⁷

Another *Mingxiang ji* story relevant for our purposes centers on a monk named Daojiong 道罔. After narrating an episode in which he was saved by calling on the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin, the story continues:⁴⁸

In Yuanjia 19 [442–443], Prince Kang of Linchuan [Liu Yiqing 劉義慶⁴⁹] was serving as Defense Commander in Guangling and invited Jiong to a merit feast [*qing Jiong gongyang* 請罔供養].⁵⁰ In the ninth month of that year, [Jiong] was performing a ten-day Guanshiyin abstinence ceremony in [Yiqing's] western abstinence hall [*yu xizhaizhong zuo shiri Guanshiyin zhai yi* 於西齋中作十日觀世音齋已]. It was the ninth day. That night, when the fourth watch was ending, all the monks were sleeping. Jiong rose and performed obeisance.⁵¹ Returning, he was about to begin sitting meditation when he suddenly saw monks without number, their bodies half protruding from the four walls, and a Buddha with a conch topknot,⁵² all very distinct and clear. There was one tall personage who wore a pillbox-shaped cap and a jacket and trousers ensemble made of sheer cloth,⁵³ brandishing a sword, his countenance very imposing and strange. He plucked out a stick of incense [from a bundle] and handed it to Jiong, who, however, hesitated to take it. The monks in the wall responded, 'Master Jiong, you should accept the incense for the benefit of your host.' Then in a moment they all faded away and were no more to be seen. While this was happening, he looked but could see none of the monks in the assembly. All he could see was the processional image [*xing xiang* 行像] of Śākyamuni that had been placed there.

Here we see another striking divine response triggered by pious performance of the *zhai*. The normally hidden cloud of spirit-beings attending a *zhai* is here momentarily made visible, like a forest clearing suddenly illuminated by a flash of lightning. In this case the ceremony lasts ten days and is dedicated to Bodhisattva Guanyin; *zhai* devoted to particular bodhisattvas, especially Guanyin or Samantabhadra, were common in the period. We see that, as expected, a Buddha image is present in the ritual space. And the space, here (as occasionally elsewhere) denoted in abbreviated fashion by the single term *zhai*, is very clearly a discrete room with four walls. The locution 'western abstinence hall' implies that Liu Yiqing's home contained at least two such rooms. Another example of such usage appears below (item 124), where the area in question is an *eastern* abstinence hall.

For brevity's sake I will summarize a few other relevant *Mingxiang ji* passages.

Story 113:⁵⁴ A diligent practitioner, Fei Chongxian 費崇先, who had received the bodhisattva precepts, is mentioned as participating as a guest on one occasion in a *zhai* hosted in another layman's home when certain anomalies related to a spirit-monk occurred. 'Throughout the twenty-four days⁵⁵ he was attentive day and night. Each time

he listened to the sutra recitation, he placed a magpie tailfeather incense burner before his knees. During the first three evenings of the abstinence ceremony he saw a person of unusual countenance and clothing come toward him, pick up the incense burner, and take it away.’ Later in the same story he is mentioned as again on another occasion attending *zhai* at someone else’s home.

Story 124:⁵⁶ A young man named Dong Qingjian 董青建 in a Buddhist household died. ‘His body was laid out before the abstinence hall to be prepared for burial. That night a spirit-medium said,⁵⁷ “The paths of the living and dead diverge. Do not place him before the abstinence hall. An image-making monk will soon come and retrieve the body for burial.”’ The monk indeed arrived, and Qingjian was buried beside a local monastery. Afterward the family undertook a long *zhai* and maintained a vegetarian diet, apparently (though this is not stated) so as to transfer the merit earned thereby to the young man. Qingjian’s father, Xianming, then saw his son in a dream; the son said, ‘It is my wish that you go out to [reside in] the eastern abstinence hall for a short time.’ Perhaps this is because Qingjian preferred to appear to his father only in that ritually purified space. The story continues:

Xianming then bathed in fragrant water, observed the abstinence prohibitions, and went out [to stay in] the eastern abstinence hall. On the night of the fourteenth,⁵⁸ while sleeping he could hear Qingjian calling him. Sitting up with a start, he saw Qingjian before the abstinence hall, just as he had been in life. His father asked, ‘Where have you gone to?’ Qingjian replied, ‘Since my death I have resided in the palace for the refinement of spirits.⁵⁹ After I have completed one hundred days there, I am to be reborn in the *trāyastriṃśa* heaven.⁶⁰ I cannot bear to see you, Mother, and my brothers weeping and in such pain. On the twenty-first day [in the sequence of funeral rites] you should pay obeisance to all Buddhas and bodhisattvas, invite the Four Celestial Kings,⁶¹ and I will thus be able to return temporarily. It is my wish that you and Mother from now on cease wailing and making sacrificial offerings for me.

Story 84:⁶² Two sisters aged nine and eight, ignorant of Buddhism, suddenly disappeared on the eighth day of the second month (one of the days on which the Buddha’s birthday was often celebrated), then reappeared three days later speaking of having seen the Buddha. On the fifteenth day of the ninth month they vanished again. Upon returning ten days later they could recite sutras and write Sanskrit. The next year, on the fifteenth day of the first month they disappeared once more, this time returning only after a month and with their heads shaven, wearing monastic robes. They said they had seen the Buddha and undergone ordination at the hands of a senior nun. ‘At once they dismantled and got rid of their family’s altar to spirits⁶³ and set up in its place an oratory.⁶⁴ At night⁶⁵ they practiced abstinence there and recited sutras.⁶⁶ Each night there appeared a multi-colored light that flowed around and encircled them like candle flames.’ Note that each of the three dates mentioned in this story was a regular day of *zhai* observance. The implication is thus that the girls were being mysteriously elevated to some sort of celestial or Pure Land abstinence ceremony (or perhaps we should understand that they were whisked to an imagined India and back). Note, too, in this case the replacement of the family’s former altar to spirits (*guizuo* 鬼座) with a space reserved for Buddhist observances. This important element in the story suggests that, at least sometimes, having a *zhaitang* in one’s home was seen as incompatible with maintaining a household altar to non-Buddhist gods.

There is a story concerning Wang Huan 王奐⁶⁷ that I believe to be incorrectly attributed to the *Mingxiang ji*.⁶⁸ Set in the Qi era, it describes its protagonist as a profound believer in Buddhist scriptures but also as very jealous and resentful. It mentions that he

had his concubine comb his moustache in his abstinence hall (!) and later had her unfairly executed. She filed a complaint in the unseen world, and he later paid the price of his unjust act. This appears to be more a classic story of ghostly revenge than the sort of tale attested elsewhere in *Mingxiang ji*. Whatever the source of the story, the strange moustache-combing incident clearly serves to illustrate Wang's inappropriate behavior: *zhaitang* were not to be used for such purposes.

Sutra passages

Zhaitang and similar terms are found in a number of early medieval Chinese sutra passages, in both translated texts and ones initially composed in China. Judging from context, this term in such passages again clearly indicates a dedicated ritual space inside a lay family's dwelling. I am at this writing aware of only a very few uses of *zhaitang* to mean a room in a monastery.⁶⁹

The use of this term in sutra texts indicates that, whatever the Sanskritic equivalents may have been, translators and sutra authors in China knew that devoted laypersons might often have such a room in their houses. Even more importantly, they assumed their readers would recognize what the terms meant without providing further explanation. Here I give just a few examples from relatively early texts:

Fo benxing ji jing 佛本行集經 3.739a:

爾時，馬王乾陟鳴喚，城內所有一切人民，悉在自家，各聞其聲聞已，一切所有人民，及兩宮內諸嫖女等，作如是心，謂言天子迴還入城。是時人民及以宮內所有嫖女，或開窓牖，或撥門簾，以歡喜心，遙望太子。時彼人民及宮嫖女，唯見馬王及以車匿離別太子獨自而來，見已各還閉窓門戶，退入家內，稱冤大哭。時，淨飯王以愛苦惱逼切身故，思惟欲見悉達太子，即入齋堂，潔戒淨心，修持苦行，憂愁悵快，內心日夜求守一切諸天諸神，復作種種方便因緣，欲求見子以慰心故。

Zheng fahua jing 正法華經 9.124b:

設使有人，齋此經行講讚書寫，思惟奉宣著於竹帛，若在精舍齋堂室宅，大林樹下若在水邊，當起塔廟。所以者何？則為如來所處之地，觀是道場佛所坐樹，則當察之，一切如來正覺所遊，群聖世雄轉法輪處，十方諸佛在中滅度，等無差特。

Zengyi ahan jing 增一阿含經 2.829b :

王聞婆羅門言，大用愁憂不樂，却入齋室，思念此事。王有夫人名曰摩利，就到王所，問王：「意故何以愁憂不樂，妾身將有過於王耶？」

Sheweiguowang mengjian shishi jing 舍衛國王夢見十事經 2.871a:

王聞婆羅門解夢如是，王即大愁憂，却入齋室思念。是王有一夫人名摩利，就到王所齋室問：「王何為入齋室愁憂，我身將有過失？」王即言：「若莫問，儻聞者，令若愁。」。。。

Fo shuo sheweiguowang shi ming jing 佛說舍衛國王十夢經 2.872b:

王聞道人語，愁怪驚愕憂亦不樂，却入齋室思惟是事。王有夫人名曰摩利，就到齋室中問：「王何以晝入齋室，顏色不和憂乃爾，誰有過於王？」王對曰：「汝莫問是事，但汝怖怯耳，非汝所知。」。。。

Liudu ji jing 六度集經 3.3b:

王曰：『誠哉斯言也。』即遣之去。退入齋房，靖心精思，即醒寤曰：『身尚不保，豈況國土妻子眾諸，可得久長乎？』即撰錄佛經誦文釋義，心垢照除，進貞臣，納忠諫，大赦其國，還民寶，序群僚，議寬正。謂群臣曰：『夫不覩佛經

妙義重戒者，其為聾盲矣！彼理家富，唯我貧矣！』即勅國界散出財寶，賑給貧困，恣民所欲，立佛廟寺，懸繒燒香，飯諸沙門，身自六齋。如斯三年，四境寧靖，盜賊都息，五穀熟成，民無飢寒。王後壽終，即上生第二天。

Fo shuo yueming pusa jing 佛說月明菩薩經 3.411c:

時，王第一太子，字若羅衛(漢言智止)。智止白王：『王莫悲、莫愁、莫憂，人之血肉，最為賤微，世人所重，道無所違。』王答太子：『善哉，善哉！』太子默然，還入齋室，持刀割髀，取肉及血，持送與比丘。比丘得服之，瘡即除愈，身得安隱。

Fo benxing ji jing 佛本行集經 3.738c:

時彼人民及宮嫒女，唯見馬王及以車匿離別太子獨自而來，見已各還閉窓門戶，退入家內，稱冤大哭。時，淨飯王以愛苦惱逼切身故，思惟欲見悉達太子，即入齋堂，潔戒淨心，修持苦行，憂愁悵快，內心日夜求守一切諸天諸神，復作種種方便因緣，欲求見子以慰心故。。。。

Jiu Za biyu jing 舊雜譬喻經 4.515a:

昔有四姓，藏婦不使人見。婦值青衣作地窟，與琢銀兒相通。夫後覺，婦言：「我生不行，卿莫妄語。」夫言：「當將汝至神樹所。」婦言：「佳。」持齋七日入齋室，婦密語琢銀兒：「汝當云何？汝詐作狂亂頭，於市逢人，抱持牽引之。」夫齋竟便將婦出，婦言：「我生不見市，卿將我過市。」琢銀兒便抱持，臥地，在所為，婦便哮喘呼其夫：「何為使人抱持我？」夫言：「此狂人耳。」夫婦俱到神所，叩頭言：「生來不作惡，但為此狂所抱耳。」。。。(This passage is also quoted, with some variants, in *Fayuan zhulin* 849b.)

In some of the cases above, we have to deal not with a room reserved for specifically Buddhist observances but rather a quiet, pure chamber within the royal palace where the king or prince retired to reflect. But the use of *zhaitang* in these translation contexts again suggests the assumption that the texts' readers were already familiar with this sort of room in lay households and with this designation for it. In other words, although the royal figures depicted in these passages were not (yet) shown as observant Buddhists carrying out the *zhai* in special chambers, the term *zhaitang* or its equivalent would have suggested to Buddhist readers in China the sort of ritual space they were accustomed to, and was presumably chosen on that basis.

Conclusion

We have good evidence for thinking that lay Buddhist families in early medieval China – at least those with sufficient means – had a room in their domiciles reserved exclusively for performing the various components of *zhai* observances. Some wealthy households had more than one such room. They were commonly known as *zhaitang* 齋堂 or simply as *zhai* 齋, but were sometimes denoted by other terms. They were furnished with an altar or seat bearing a relatively small Buddha image, and were adorned with incense burners, lamps, canopies, and at least one elevated seat for the senior officiating monk as well as a stand for sutras (with other guests presumably seated on mats). They were likely cleaned and swept before each *zhai* performance. Their installation in a house was sometimes understood to be incompatible with, or to replace, an altar to gods or spirits in the same household.

During the periodic performance of *zhai*, these rooms carried a heavy charge of expectation, instinct with the hovering presence of unseen spirits. They were the domestic space in which a Buddhist family might hope for a divine response to the stimulus of their devotional performances. If the family members' devotion was of sufficient intensity, it

might, in theory, prompt a visit by a still-living arhat who had personally followed the Buddha, or be graced with the sudden appearance of some from among the normally invisible, silent cloud of witnesses believed to observe their devotions in the *zhaitang*. Stories such as those surveyed here both reflect such beliefs about the *zhaitang* and helped shape them.

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Notes

1. Strickmann, “The Consecration Sūtra,” 75.
2. Hureau, “Buddhist Rituals,” 1213.
3. See *Hongming ji* 13.86 and Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 164–5.
4. See Hureau, “Buddhist Rituals,” 1213–30, the most detailed overall discussion of which I am aware at this writing; Hureau, “The Recitation of Precepts for Lay Followers according to the *Zaijiaren busa fa* 在家人布薩法,” the most detailed, in-depth presentation of a manual for *zhai* performance (an imperially commissioned manuscript dating to 519 now owned by a private Japanese collector and closely related to a Dunhuang text [Pelliot 2196] concerning lay rites for receiving the bodhisattva ordination); Hureau, “Preaching and Translating on *Posadha* Days,” 102; Hureau, “Bouddhisme chinois”; Martin, “Les Bouddhistes laïcs, leurs idéaux et leurs pratiques,” 537–53; Gernet, *Buddhism in Chinese Society*, 257–59; Soymié, “Un calendrier de douze jours par an dans les manuscrits de Touen-houang”; Soymié, “Les dix jours de jeûne de Kṣitigarbha”; Ji Zhichang, “Dong Jin jushi Xie Fu kao,” 69–72; and, for a useful study of the lay practice of inviting monks and nuns to their households, Shinohara, “Taking a Meal at a Lay Supporter’s Residence.” On the ‘long *zhai*’ see Antonino Forte and Jacques May, “Chōsai,” usefully emphasizing the wide variety of meanings attached to the terms *zhai* and *changzhai* in Sino-Japanese Buddhist texts. Studies of the sorts of ritual documents associated with these periodic observances (*zhaiwen* 齋文 and *yuanwen* 願文, with considerable debate over the proper usage of these terms) along with other ritual performances denoted by the term *zhai*, include Hao Chunwen, “Guanyu Dunhuang xieben *zhaiwen* de jige wenti”; Hao Chunwen, “Dunhuang xieben *zhaiwen* ji qi yangshi de fenlei yu dingming”; Tai Shiwen, “Shilun *zhaiwen* de biaoyanxing”; Tai Shiwen, “Wei wangzhe yuan”; Magnin, “Donateurs et joueurs en l’honneur du Buddha”; Wang Sanqing, *Cong Dunhuang zhaiyuan wenxian kan fojiao yu Zhongguo minsu de ronghe*; Wang Sanqing, *Dunhuang fojiao zhaiyuan wenben yanjiu*; Zhang Guangda, “Tanfo yu tanzhai”; and Teiser, “Ornamenting the Departed.” On confession, which was a key element of *zhai* observance but was also practiced in many other contexts, see the widest-ranging available study by Kuo, *Confession et contrition dans le bouddhisme chinois du Vè au Xe siècle*, as well as the more narrowly focused works by Wang Juan, *Tang Song guyi fojiao chanyi yanjiu* and *Dunhuang lichanwen yanjiu*, and Sheng Kai, *Zhongguo fojiao chanfa yanjiu*.
5. In a famous dialogue in chapter 4 of *Zhuangzi* 莊子, Confucius tells Yan Hui 顏回 that he should ‘fast’ 齊. Yan asks Confucius whether not having consumed wine or eaten strongly flavored foods can count as ‘fasting,’ and Confucius replies that ‘this is the “fasting” one does before a sacrifice, not the “fasting” of the heart/mind’ 是祭祀之齊，非心齊也.
6. On the place of *zhouyuan* in the proceedings, see Shinohara, “Taking a Meal at a Lay Supporter’s Residence,” 25, 30–1.
7. For further discussion on this point see Company, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 52.
8. *Da fangbian fo baoen jing* 6.159c, for example, says: ‘Among the *zhai* regulations, [the rule of] not eating past noon is the essence’ 齋法，過中不食為體. My thanks to Sylvie Hureau for pointing out this passage.
9. See, for example, *Shi ji jing* 世記經 (section 30 of *Chang ahan jing*, 20.134b–135a); *Da loutan jing* 4.298b; *Fanguang banruo jing* 7.46a and *Daoxing banruo jing* 2.431b–c (although here only their protection of those who uphold the sutra is mentioned, not their inspection of merit and sin); and in particular *Si tianwang jing*, an indigenously composed

- sutra, on which see Sørensen, “Divine Scrutiny of Human Morals in an Early Chinese Buddhist Sutra.” More research is needed to determine whether the motif of the kings’ periodic inspection is found in translated materials or only in sutras produced in China.
10. On the key notion of *ganying*, see Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, 77–133, and Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 31–2, 48–9, and *passim*.
 11. In *Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記, a text dating to around 490 CE, such stories include the items numbered 11, 16, 19, 20, 27 (solo visit), 29 (cf.), 43, 76, 108, 109, and 113 in Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*. Two other stories (18, 19) focus on other sorts of anomalies during *zhai* gatherings.
 12. For example, embedded in the *Traditions of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳) biography of the monk nicknamed Beidu 杯度 (so called because of his habit of magically crossing rivers in a cup) is an anecdote about how he barged in on a family surnamed Li 李 while they were hosting a *zhai* service, even though he had no prior acquaintance with them and had not been invited. He set his thatch vase down in the middle of the abstinence hall. The hosts tried to move it over against a wall but were unable to budge it. After he had finished eating, the monk casually picked up the vase and started out the door, but not before revealing what seem to be the four celestial kings themselves, in miniature size, arrayed inside the vessel. See *Gaoseng zhuan* 390b, and compare *Shenseng zhuan* 961c.
 13. See Hureau, “Preaching and Translating on *Posadha* Days,” esp. 103–13.
 14. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 391 n. 73.
 15. Shinohara, “Taking a Meal at a Lay Supporter’s Residence,” 29.
 16. These same customs were treated in texts listed by Sengyou in his catalogue, including his now-lost compendium on Buddhist ritual practices (see for example *Chu sanzang jiji* 4.23b24, listing *Qing Bintoulu fa*; 4.33a24, listing a *Bintoulu qubo jing* 寶頭盧取鉢經 in one scroll; and 4.4.35c28, listing a *Yuseng gongde jing* 浴僧功德經 in one scroll; in the table of contents of his now-lost *Fayuan zayuan yuanshi ji* 法苑雜緣原始集 preserved in chapter 12 of the same work are listed several other relevant texts from which Sengyou had excerpted passages on the origins of customs, such as the *Yuseng yuan ji* 浴僧緣記 listed as extracted from a *Wenshi jing* 溫室經 [12.92a6] and a *Gongyang shengseng yuanji* 供養聖僧緣記 listed as extracted from *Bintoulu jing* 寶頭盧經 [12.92a8]. See also Lévi and Chavannes, “Les seize arhat protecteurs de la loi”; Strong, “The Legend of the Lion-Roarer”; Georgieva, “Buddhist Nuns in China from the Six Dynasties to the Tang,” 148–9, 167; Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 243–4; Shinohara, “Taking a Meal at a Lay Supporter’s Residence,” 28–35; Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 194; Link, “The Biography of Shih Tao-an,” 34–5; Mochizuki, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 4333–5; Joo, “The Ritual of Arhat Invitation during the Song Dynasty,” 85–6; and Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, 100–1. On the *Method of Inviting Piṇḍola*, which existed by the end of the fifth century (see *Chu sanzang jiji* 4.23b24) whether or not it was really translated by Huijian 慧簡 (also credited with ‘translating’ the *Consecration Sutra*), see Lévi and Chavannes, *ibid.*, 216ff.; Strong, *ibid.*, 76, 79–81; and Shinohara, *ibid.*, 29.
 17. See the *Gaoseng zhuan* (12.409a3) biography of the monk Daolin 道琳 (448–519), also anthologized in *Shenseng zhuan* 971a22 and *Fayuan zhulin* 42.617a8), summarized and discussed in Shinohara, “Taking a Meal at a Lay Supporter’s Residence,” 33, and the *Biqiuni zhuan* (4.945a) biography of the nun Jingxiu 淨秀, for example.
 18. For further elaboration of this point see Campany, *Strange Writing*; Campany, *Making Transcendents*, 8–22; Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 17–30; and Campany, *A Garden of Marvels*, xix–xli.
 19. Nattier, *A Few Good Men*, 66.
 20. Translated and discussed as item 16 in Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 102–4. Source texts: *Fayuan zhulin* 42.616a-b [section ‘[monks] receiving invitations [from laity]’ (*shouqing* 受請 – the Taishō edition has 愛請 but 愛 is clearly an error for 受, as can be confirmed by checking this heading against the parallel one in *Zhujing yaoji* (also a Daoshi work) 1.1b1]; Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, 387; Wang Guoliang, *Mingxiang ji yanjiu*, 16; Wakatsuki, Hasegawa, and Inagaki, *Hōon jurin no sōgōteki kenkyū*, 211–2. Additional texts: *Gaoseng zhuan* as quoted in *Fayuan zhulin* 19.428b; *Ji shenzhou sanbao gantong lu* 3.433a.
 21. Here ‘canopy’ renders *zhang* 帳, a term sometimes more suggestive of ‘curtains’; a similar term in this and similar texts is *gai* 蓋. Both terms refer to tent-like suspensions of fabric over a seat or couch to mark it as an opulent place of honor (as well as to perform more utilitarian

- functions, such as keeping out insects and heat). See Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization*, 301–3, and Sheng, “From Stone to Silk.”
22. ‘High seat’ translates *gaozuo* 高座. The term was used to denote a range of ritual structures, from an elevated *seat* or platform to an *altar* on which images and sutras were placed (see Mochizuki, *Bukkyō daijiten*, 1043b–c). Modeled on the jeweled seat from which the Buddha is said in many sutras to have discoursed, in monastic or monastic-lay assemblies this elevated seat was reserved for the monk who was expounding the Dharma, pronouncing the precepts, or lecturing to the assembly of monks or monks, nuns, and laity combined. Salient passages describing these structures may be found (to cite a few examples) in *Renwang banruo poluomi jing* 825b, 829c–830a; *Fanwang jing* 1008a; *Gaoseng zhuan* 353b24. It would be useful to have a good study of the *gaozuo* in Chinese Buddhist literature and ritual practice.
 23. In other words, although your practice is ‘by the book’ you have failed to recognize the presence of an august personage in humble guise. You follow the rules but lack discernment.
 24. Compare a passage in the biography of the nun Fabian 法辯 in *Biqiuni zhuan* 940b–c, where she is said to have become utterly lost in meditative absorption on one occasion in a *zhaitang* and to have remained there after the service had ended, unable for some time to be jostled out of her deep mental state. (It is unclear, however, whether this *zhaitang* was located in a lay home or in her monastery.) He Chong (292–346) was a major figure in the early fourth-century network of official-class Buddhist laymen so often mentioned in writings from the period, men for whom an allegiance to Buddhist teaching and discipline was inseparable from their political, social, and familial ties. He is on record as having participated in a 340 debate on whether monks should be required to bow before rulers. He donated a residence to the sangha, and the structure became the first nuns’ convent on record in China. The well-known monk Zhi Dun 支遁 (314–366), in his preface to a collection of poems about the *zhai*, mentions He Chong as having often taken part in such gatherings. See Pan Guiming, *Zhongguo jushi fojiao shi*, 87–88; Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 106–10, 116–7, 160–3; Hureau, “Réseaux de bouddhistes des Six Dynasties,” 48–9, 51–52. For general discussions of Zhi Dun see Tang Yongtong, *Han Wei liang Jin nanbeichao fojiao shi*, 125–8; Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 116–30; and Tsukamoto, *A History of Early Chinese Buddhism*, 338–61.
 25. See Mair, *Tun-huang Popular Narratives*, 90–1, 104, 112, 114, and Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*, 160.
 26. For more on the alms bowl and its power, see Company, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 104.
 27. Translated as item 18 in Company, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 106–8. Source texts: *Fayuan zhulin* 42.616b–c [section “[monks] receiving invitations [from laity]” (*shouqing* 受請)]; *Ji shenzhou sanbao gantong lu* 3.432a; Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, 388; Wang Guoliang, *Mingxiang ji yanjiu*, 18; Wakatsuki, Hasegawa, and Inagaki, *Hōon jurin no sōgōteki kenkyū*, 215–8. Additional texts: *Yiyuan* 5.36; *Wangsheng ji* 2.142c; *Hongming ji* 3.19a. Partially translated in Palumbo, “Dharmarakṣa and Kaṇṭhaka,” 176; I did not locate this translation until after having prepared my own. Discussed in Pan Guiming, *Zhongguo jushi fojiao shi*, 77, who uses this story to argue for the early-attested establishment of Pure Land Buddhism in China and its appeal to laity; Mai, “Visualization Apocrypha and the Making of Buddhist Deity Cults in Early Medieval China,” 30–1; and Company, “Notes on the Devotional Uses and Symbolic Functions of Sutra Texts,” 62 n. 35.
 28. A commandery located in today’s Gaoyi district, Hebei province.
 29. Translating *chang zan* 唱讚. Hymn-singing was an important aspect of Chinese Buddhist devotional practice and one that has yet to be well researched. See, for example, Lin Renyu, *Dunhuang fojiao gequ yanjiu*.
 30. Translating *xifang anle shijie* 西方安樂世界, a common appellation for the western Pure Land.
 31. Now Ji district, Henan province.
 32. ‘Long periods of abstinence’ translates *changzhai* 長齋; although this term was used to denote a great many specific practices (see Forte and May, “Chōsai”), here it probably simply means that Wei Shidu’s mother faithfully participated in the thrice-annual long periods of abstinence for laity (carried out in the first fortnight of the first, fifth, and ninth months), seemingly an indication of unusually pious practice. See further Hureau, “Buddhist Rituals,” 1215–6.
 33. In *Fayuan zhulin* 572c this substory is cited (in slightly different wording) from the early fifth-century *zhiguai* collection *A Garden of Marvels* (*Yi yuan* 異苑) compiled by Liu Jingshu 劉敬叔.

34. *Guang hongmingji* 30 collects several such texts (*chan wen* 懺文) dating as early as the Jin. As mentioned above, the phrase ‘the ceremony of the eightfold abstinence’ (*baguan zhai* 八關齋) is simply another way of referring to the standard abstinence ceremony for laypersons. For an overview of ways in which it is mentioned in early medieval *zhiguai* texts, see Chen Hong, “Fojiao baguanzhai yu zhongguo xiaoshuo.” Wang Sanqing (*Cong Dunhuang zhaiyuan wenxian kan fojiao yu zhongguo minsu de ronghe*, 8–9) points to this story as one of the earliest bits of evidence of the use of written documents during abstinence observances in China.
35. This text, *Shengxian zhuan* 聖賢傳, is not only lost; no other mention of it or of its author seems to have survived.
36. No other mention of this author or quotation of this work, *Rizhu* 日燭, appears to have survived. There was another Wang Gai in the Jin period, mentioned at several points in the *Jin shu*, but he was a native of Xindu.
37. I plan to devote an article or a chapter of a forthcoming book to it.
38. Official biographies of Wang Yi may be found in *Song shu* 46.1390–93 and *Nan shi* 25.671–74.
39. Taiyuan was a commandery located in the northwest part of what is now Taiyuan district, Shanxi province. The Taiyuan Wangs were an important and powerful aristocratic clan in these centuries, and Wang Yan himself may have been descended from them.
40. Translated as item 43 in Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 144–5. Source texts: *Fayuan zhulin* 65.785b–c [section ‘saving from danger’ (*jiue* 救厄)]; Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, 404; Wang Guoliang, *Mingxiang ji yanjiu*, 44. Additional texts: *Fayuan zhulin* as cited in *Taiping guangji* 113.4. Previously partially translated in Campany, “Notes on the Devotional Uses and Symbolic Functions of Sutra Texts,” 36.
41. Translated and discussed as item 86 in Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 207–8. Source texts: *Fayuan zhulin* 62.760c [section ‘divination and physiognomy’ (*zhan xiang* 占相)]; Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, 431; Wang Guoliang, *Mingxiang ji yanjiu*, 87. See also *Fayuan zhulin* as cited in *Taiping guangji* 113.8. Previously discussed in Campany, “Notes on the Devotional Uses and Symbolic Functions of Sutra Texts,” 42.
42. Jinling was a district in what is now Wujin district, Jiangsu province.
43. Translating *wuzhu* 巫祝. It is possible, though unlikely, that *wuzhu* here functions as a compound term somewhat redundantly denoting one person, not two. Often the roles were understood as distinct, with the *zhu* functioning as a sort of master of ceremonies and the *wu* as a medium channeling communication with spirits – as seen today (under different nomenclature) in many ritual performances. See von Falkenhausen, “Reflections on the Political Role of Spirit Mediums in Early China,” 293, and Harper, “Contracts with the Spirit World in Han Common Religion,” 243.
44. The ‘steps of Yu’ (*Yu bu* 禹步) was an exorcistic dance modeled on the myth of the ancient thearch Yu and his taming of the cosmic flood (on which see most recently Lewis, *The Flood Myths of Early China*). The dance, long (and still today) associated with Celestial Master and other Daoist ritual, is thought to have originated with shamans as early as the Warring States period. See Harper, “Warring States, Qin, and Han Manuscripts,” 240–3; Harper, “Warring States Natural Philosophy,” 872–3; and Campany, *To Live as Long as Heaven and Earth*, 250.
45. Located in what is now Zhesui district, Shandong province.
46. Dongyang Wuyi was the compiler of a *zhiguai* collection titled *Qi Xie ji* 齊諧記 (*Qi Xie’s Records*), on which see Wang Guoliang, *Wei Jin nanbeichao zhiguai xiaoshuo yanjiu*, 323; Li Jianguo, *Tang qian zhiguai xiaoshuo shi*, 387–9; Campany, *Strange Writing*, 80–81; and Campany, *A Garden of Marvels*, 24–28.
47. Another example can be seen in the early Tang work *Mingbao ji* 冥報記 (T 2082, 51.790b), where a father and son set up a *jingshe* and use it as a pure space in which to copy the *Lotus Sutra*. Yet another related term is *busa tang* 布薩堂 or ‘*poṣadha* hall.’ At this writing I am unaware of any uses of this term to designate non-monastic spaces; it occurs in the story of the monk Huian 慧安 (*Gaoseng zhuan* 10.393a, *Fayuan zhulin* 31.518c) as well as in several vinaya texts, in all cases clearly indicating a room within a monastery dedicated to performing the *poṣadha*.
48. Translated as item 98 in Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 222–3. Source texts: *Fayuan zhulin* 65.784c–785a [section ‘saving from danger’ (*jiu e* 救厄)]; Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen* 437; Wang, *Mingxiang ji yanjiu*, 99. Additional texts: *Xi Guanshiyin yingyan ji* 60 (Makita, *Rikuchō kōitsu Kanzeon ōkenki no kenkyū*, 52); *Fayuan zhulin* quoted in *Taiping guangji* 111.5.

49. Liu Yiqing (403–444), an imperial prince, is best known for having ordered his officials to compile the collection of witty anecdotes known as *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 or *Recent Anecdotes from the Talk of the Age*, on which see Mather, *Shih-shuo Hsin-yü*. My translation of the title of the work is borrowed from Jack Chen. Liu is mentioned at several points elsewhere in *Mingxiang ji*, sometimes as an interlocutor or witness to events narrated there. For a recent biographical sketch, see Knechtges and Chang, *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature*, 588–90.
50. The sense here might be that Liu Yiqing *habitually* invited Daojiong to his *zhai* events.
51. Presumably to the image installed on the altar for this ritual – probably in this case an image of Sound Observer.
52. *Luoji* 螺髻, that is, with his hair tied atop his head in a spiral-shaped topknot resembling a conch shell, in the style of South Asian monarchs. This passage could describe quite well the cave chapels carved into hillsides and riverbanks by artisans hired by medieval Chinese Buddhist donors.
53. ‘Sheer cloth’ translates *jianbu* 筧布. ‘Jacket and trousers ensemble’ renders *kuxi* 褲褶, a fashionable style of dress during the period, probably introduced by the Xianbei people who ruled northern China for much of this era but soon popular even among civil and military officials in the south; see Dien, *Six Dynasties Civilization*, 319–20.
54. Translated in Campamy, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 239–40. Source texts: *Fayuan zhulin* 24.467a–b [section ‘speaking and listening’ (*shuo ting* 說聽)]; *Chuxue ji* 25.606 (only a very truncated excerpt of the story is given here); Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, 445; Wang Guoliang, *Mingxiang ji yanjiu*, 114; Wakatsuki, Hasegawa, and Inagaki, *Hōon jurin no sōgōteki kenkyū*, 160–2. Additional texts: *Fayuan zhulin* cited in *Taiping guangji* 114.1.
55. Was this perhaps one of the three annual ‘long *zhai*’? They normally lasted 15 days, but Forte and May (“Chōsai”) note that much variation occurred in the length of such observances in practice.
56. Translated in Campamy, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 253–6. Source texts: *Fayuan zhulin* 52.677b–c [section ‘family’ (*juanshu* 眷屬)]; Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, 454; Wang Guoliang, *Mingxiang ji yanjiu*, 126. Additional texts: *Fayuan zhulin* as quoted in *Taiping guangji* 114.6; *Liudao ji* 1.112c. Translated: Mai, “Visualization Apocrypha and the Making of Buddhist Deity Cults in Early Medieval China,” 356–60; my translation borrows some phrasing from Mai’s and differs mostly in the translation of a few technical terms.
57. Translating *lingyu yun* 靈語云. This phrase might perhaps indicate (though I doubt it) not a spirit medium proper but a message derived from the spirit world in any fashion – for example, by some method of divination. The speaker might be understood as Qingjian, or else as the medium channeling his message; thus the ensuing statement may be read in either the first or the third person. Cf. the similarly worded passage in item 78 of the same text (Campamy, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 196–7).
58. Note that this is three days after the dream. Three-day liminal periods were very common in rebirth situations and in contact between the living and the dead. Note further that the 14th of any month would have been a night of *zhai* observance. As remarked above, such times are often represented as particularly suited for communication between the seen and unseen realms.
59. Translating *lianshen gong* 練神宮, a term I find attested nowhere else except in iterations of this same story, and one that attests in interesting ways to the interweaving of indigenous and Buddhist themes. One finds numerous mentions of the ‘refinement’ of spirits in texts such as the *Xiang’er* 想爾 commentary to the *Daode jing*; see Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures*, 46–48, 102, 135, and Rao Zongyi, *Laozi Xiang’er zhu jiaozheng*, 21 (where the phrase *lianshen zhi gong* 練神之宮 is used).
60. *Daoli tian* 忉利天 (sometimes differently transliterated), the heaven of the 33 *devas* or gods, ruled by Indra from his palace atop the cosmic Mount Meru; one of the multiple levels of the heavens that are comprised in the world of desire. The term can also refer to the gods dwelling in this level of the heavens. In the cycle of stories concerning Gautama Buddha, it is this level of the heavens to which he ascends to preach to his mother Māyā; his redescend to this world down a celestial staircase was often depicted in Buddhist art. See Kloetzli, *Buddhist Cosmology*, 29; Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism*, 20, 32, 182, 686; Collins, *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities*, 297–304, 311–316; Wang, *Shaping the Lotus Sutra*, 318–320;

- Wang, “Pictorial Program in the Making of Monastic Space,” 89 and fig. 3.11; Strong, *Relics of the Buddha*, 139-141.
61. That is, the *si tianwang* 四天王. As mentioned above, in China these were conceived as celestial beings who personally or via envoys checked on the merits and sins of living persons on the days of *zhai* observances; hence the rationale for holding those observances on their particular days of the calendar. They functionally paralleled the indigenous Director of Allotted Lifespan or *Siming* 司命 and, before him, Heaven 天 itself: all of them adjusted human lifespan (and, in the Buddhist case, additionally meted out reward or punishment) in accordance with the noted and recorded sins of individuals, and all depended on a system of regular reportage of sins upward. The Four Kings’ activities were presented in detail in the *Da loutan jing* as well as in a fifth-century indigenous scripture, the *Sutra of the Four Celestial Kings* or *Si tianwang jing* 四天王經, on which see the study and translation in Sørensen, “Divine Scrutiny of Human Morals in an Early Chinese Buddhist Sutra.”
 62. Translated in Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 203–5. Source texts: *Fayuan zhulin* 5.304a–b [section ‘the six paths [of rebirth]’ (*liudao* 六道)]; *Fayuan zhulin* 22.453b [section ‘entering the [monastic] path’ (*ru dao* 入道)]; Lu Xun, *Gu xiaoshuo gouchen*, 430; Wang Guoliang 85; Wakatsuki, Hasegawa, and Inagaki, *Hōon jurin no sōgōteki kenkyū*, 42–45. Additional texts: *Biqiuni zhuan* 3.941c–942a (tr. Tsai, *Lives of the Nuns*, 67–68); *Ji shenzhou sanbao gantong lu* 3.433c. Discussed in Campany, “Buddhist Revelation and Taoist Translation,” 3–4.
 63. *Fayuan zhulin* 5, *Fayuan zhulin* 22, and *Ji shenzhou sanbao gantong lu* alike call this structure *guizuo* 鬼座.
 64. *Fayuan zhulin* 5 at this point terms this a *jinglu* 精廬, *Fayuan zhulin* 22 a *jingshe* 精舍.
 65. *Fayuan zhulin* 22 has ‘day and night.’
 66. In their behavior they thus replicated the central activities of the *zhai*.
 67. On Wang Huan, see Chittick, *Patronage and Community in Medieval China*, 74–5.
 68. See *Fayuan zhulin* 75.852a5–22.
 69. One of them occurs in *Mingxiang ji* item 109, referring to an imperially sponsored monastery and *zhai* performance; see Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 235. Another occurs in the compilation *Wangsheng ji* 149b–c, where someone is said to have lived ‘inside an old [or former] *zhaitang*’ beside a monastery – but this is a Ming-era story.

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<i>Bianzheng lun</i> 辯正論	2110	52
<i>Biqiuni zhuan</i> 比丘尼傳	2063	50
<i>Chang ahan jing</i> 長阿含經	1	1
<i>Chu sanzang jiji</i> 出三藏記集	2145	55
<i>Da fangbian fo baoen jing</i> 大方便佛報恩經	156	3
<i>Da loutan jing</i> 大樓炭經	23	1
<i>Daoxing banruo jing</i> 道行般若經	224	8
<i>Fanguang banruo jing</i> 放光般若經	221	8
<i>Fanwang jing</i> 梵網經	1484	24
<i>Fayuan zhulin</i> 法苑珠林	2122	53
<i>Fo benxing jijing</i> 佛本行集經	190	4

<i>Fo shuo sheweiguo wang shimeng jing</i> 佛說舍衛國王十夢經	147	2
<i>Fo shuo yueming pusa jing</i> 佛說月明菩薩經	169	3
<i>Gaoseng zhuan</i> 高僧傳	2059	50
<i>Guang hongming ji</i> 廣弘明集	2103	52
<i>Guangding jing</i> 灌頂經	1331	21
<i>Hongming ji</i> 弘明集	2102	52
<i>Ji shenzhou sanbao gantong lu</i> 集神州三寶感通錄	2106	52
<i>Jiu za biyu jing</i> 舊雜譬喻經	206	4
<i>Liudao ji</i> 六道集	Z1645	88
<i>Liudu ji jing</i> 六度集經	152	3
<i>Miaofa lianhua jing</i> 妙法蓮華經	262	9
<i>Piyu jing</i> 譬喻經	217	7
<i>Qing Bintoulu fa</i> 請賓頭盧法	1689	32
<i>Renwang banruo poluomi jing</i> 仁王般若波羅蜜經	245	8
<i>Shenseng zhuan</i> 神僧傳	2064	50
<i>Sheweiguo wang mengjian shishi jing</i> 舍衛國王夢見十事經	146	2
<i>Si tianwang jing</i> 四天王經	590	15
<i>Wangsheng ji</i> 往生集	2072	51
<i>Zengyi ahan jing</i> 增壹阿含經	125	2
<i>Zheng fahua jing</i> 正法華經	263	9

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