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**Benn/Burning for the Buddha**

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## Introduction

For a few weeks in late December 526 and early January 527, a monastery on Mount Ruona 若那山 in Eastern Yangzhou 東揚州 played host to a series of remarkable and anomalous events.<sup>1</sup> The monastery and its environs echoed with mysterious sounds and were bathed in multicolored rays of light. Crowds of pilgrims in unprecedented numbers were drawn to the mountain, where they enthusiastically participated in ceremonies affirming their commitment to the Buddhist path. Flocks of birds were observed behaving in an unusual yet portentous manner. At the center of this web of activity that extended into both the natural realm and human society was the death of a single monk.

The events began on the third day of the eleventh lunar month of the seventh year of the Putong 普通 reign period (December 22, 526) when the monastery bell started ringing of its own accord. Five days later it rang again. On the twenty-third day (January 11, 527) a monk by the name of Daodu 道度 (462–527) invited a hundred of his fellows to his nearby mountain retreat to join him in religious practices. More than 300 people, both monks and laity, answered the call and 170 formally marked their affiliation to Mahāyāna Buddhism by receiving from him the bodhisattva precepts.

Having made these conversions and thereby formed karmic connections with those he would leave behind him, Daodu ceased eating. Each day he drank no more than a pint of water that he drew from the well with a bucket that was normally reserved for the monks' bathing water. On the morning of January 13th, Daodu's fellow monks were astonished to discover five-colored rays of light and multicolored vapor emanating from this humble vessel. Four days later the abbot and several other monks entered Daodu's meditation chamber and found a purple glow radiating from a niche within it. Towards evening on the same day, January 17th, a vast flock of birds, some five or six hundred strong, suddenly descended on the monastery. The birds perched together on a single tree before simultaneously taking off and flying together towards the west.

In the early hours of that night the whole monastery complex was illuminated by vivid displays of light that lit up the buildings for several hours.

Around midnight, from the summit of the mountain came the sound of a stone chime being struck and someone reciting verses on impermanence. The monks heard the crackling sound of wood starting to burn. Scrambling up the mountain to investigate, they discovered their comrade Daodu seated calmly with his palms together facing the west. His whole body was engulfed in flames.

Some time later, the local governor, the prince of Wuling 武陵王, ordered what remained of Daodu's incinerated body to be gathered up, cleaned, and interred beneath a pagoda.<sup>2</sup> By taking such extraordinary care with the remains, the prince was honoring Daodu with a funeral appropriate for an eminent monk. (Most ordinary monks in medieval China probably had their remains disposed of rather unceremoniously in unmarked graves.)<sup>3</sup> Even after Daodu's death, anomalies continued to be reported in the area. The clear and penetrating sound of a stone chime was frequently heard on the mountain. A large, old withered tree under which Daodu had practiced meditation suddenly flourished again, although it had been dead for ten years.

So much we can glean from Daodu's epitaph and the accounts of his life and death that appear in medieval Chinese sources, but can we say what *really* happened on Mount Ruona fifteen hundred years ago? Given the fact that our materials were composed by medieval authors with a strong interest and belief in the miraculous, it would now be impossible to discover any meaningful "objective" viewpoint or to reconstruct events in a way that could satisfy the sensibilities of the twenty-first-century reader. We can, however, try to understand the ways in which Daodu's contemporaries and later medieval Buddhists thought about what had happened, and how they made sense of these events. Daodu's death certainly did make sense to those who wrote and read about it: This was not the random act of a disturbed individual, but rather a single manifestation of a deeply rooted set of ideas and ideals in Chinese Buddhism that blossomed again and again in the history of premodern China.

Let us begin by pulling back the focus from Daodu's last days and contemplating his life as a whole to appreciate his standing in medieval society. Although he is not known now, in his own day Daodu was by no means an obscure monk; he was a religious figure of distinguished lineage who maintained connections with the royal family of the Liang 梁 dynasty (502–556), a pro-Buddhist polity that ruled most of South China for the first half of the sixth century. Daodu's death at the age of sixty-six is presented in our sources not as a spontaneous act of folly but the culmination of a lifetime of practice. In these narratives his fiery exit from the world is marked as a moment of cosmic significance accompanied by a plethora of auspicious signs that cast the monastery and the mountain as numinous sites. Daodu's persona, or his cha-

risma, did not go up in flames with his flesh but continued after his cremation to be remembered and celebrated by both monks and laity.

The most detailed source that survives for Daodu's life is his funerary inscription, composed by (or at least in the name of) Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–551), the Liang prince who became the emperor Jianwendi 簡文帝 (r. 549–551). We are very fortunate to have this text—as we shall see, although many self-immolators had such epitaphs composed for them, very few inscriptions have survived. This rare document begins, as biographies of monks usually do, with the native place and surname of its subject: Daodu was a native of Pingyang 平陽, and before he became a monk his surname was Liu 劉.<sup>4</sup> He was credited with a famous ancestor in the shape of Liu Bo 劉勃 (d. 143 BCE), Prince Jibei 濟北王 of the Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE).<sup>5</sup> Both Daodu's grandfather and father had served under the Northern Wei 北魏 dynasty (386–534), a non-Chinese and largely pro-Buddhist regime that ruled North China for a century and a half. Daodu became a monk at twenty *sui* 歲 (in 481) and was trained at the monastery Fawang si 法王寺 under the meditation master Bhadra (Fotuo 佛陀, d.u.).<sup>6</sup> Daodu acquired a reputation for pursuing his vocation with constant and demanding practice as well as for choosing to dwell high in the mountains. He first arrived in the state of Liang in 502 and stayed close to the capital at Dinglin si 定林寺 on Zhong shan 鐘山, where he practiced *dhyāna* (meditation).<sup>7</sup> It was at this monastery that he first forged links with the imperial house: The emperor Liang Wudi's 梁武帝 (r. 502–549) stepbrother, Prince Anchengkang 安成康王, became his disciple.<sup>8</sup>

The inscription suggests that Daodu drew his inspiration for burning himself to death from the *Lotus Sūtra*, a major Mahāyāna scripture that contains (among other celebrated and influential stories) the most famous literary example of a living cremation, that of the Bodhisattva Medicine King (Yao Wang 藥王; Skt. Bhaiṣajyagururāja). Daodu first aspired to become a monk because of this scripture and in 518 he copied out the lengthy *sūtra* one hundred times.<sup>9</sup> Such concentrated and painstaking acts of physical devotion to the *Lotus* were by no means uncommon in medieval China; they indicate how strenuously Chinese Buddhists tried to enact and make real what they imagined to be the world of that particular scripture.

Daodu's dedication to his practice won the respect of Liang Wudi himself. On January 11, 526, he was granted a personal audience with the emperor in the palace chapel, where he explained what he planned to do and why:<sup>10</sup>

“The body is like a poisonous plant; it would really be right to burn it and extinguish its life. I have been weary of this physical frame for many a long day. I vow to worship the buddhas, just like Xijian 喜見 (Seen with Joy).”<sup>11</sup>

Although at first glance his statement may appear so allusive as to be almost completely opaque, Daodu was in fact making explicit reference to the *Lotus Sūtra's* Bodhisattva Medicine King, who was known as “Seen with Joy by Sentient Beings” when he set fire to his own body as an act of homage to the buddhas. But Liang Wudi, who must have caught the allusion and understood all too well what Daodu intended to do, disapproved:

If you really desire to create merit for beings, you ought to follow conditions in order to cultivate the Way. When your body and life become impermanent, then you should have your corpse cast into the forest. By donating it to the birds and beasts one completely perfects *dānapāramitā* and also makes good *karma*. Because of the eighty thousand worms it is not appropriate to burn yourself. It is not something to be encouraged.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, Wudi was offering Daodu an alternative mode in which to employ his body as an offering. Rather than burn oneself alive, would it not be better to donate one's dead body to sentient beings?

Before we analyze the content of this dialogue between eminent monk and pious emperor, it is worth pondering the nature of the exchange itself, which can be seen to function on a number of levels. First, it seems to echo a trope found in the Indian Buddhist literature particularly concerned with heroic self-sacrifice, or the “gift of the body.” As Reiko Ohnuma's analysis of this literature has shown, there are many tales in which the bodhisattva announces his intention to make a gift (*dāna*) of his body or parts of it.<sup>13</sup> The selflessly generous bodhisattva is often opposed by someone who attempts to persuade him not to offer himself.<sup>14</sup> Ohnuma identifies four classes of people in particular who oppose the gift of the body, the first of which are the officials and ministers, whom she sees as representing worldly political interests.<sup>15</sup> In the Indian tales the bodhisattva does not surrender to such forces but selflessly and dramatically offers his own body for the benefit of beings. This particular tension between the worldly and the nonworldly could not be rendered in quite the same way in Chinese accounts of self-sacrifice. The bodhisattvas who made gifts of their bodies in the Indian literature were usually represented as kings rather than renunciant monastics, and thus they were possessed of temporal as well as spiritual power in a way that Chinese monks were not.

Second, the exchange between Wudi and Daodu provides a succinct example of a doctrinal problem in Chinese Buddhism that often came to the surface in the history of self-immolation. This problem was sometimes made explicit in the form of the question of whether or not self-immolation was an

appropriate practice for monks in particular as opposed to laypeople. Daodu presented his intended auto-cremation in terms of an explicit imitation of a scriptural model—that of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, a lay bodhisattva whose fiery offering of his own body is extolled at length in the *Lotus Sūtra*. As we shall see, this model, located as it is in one of the most important scriptures of East Asian Buddhism, provided inspiration, justification, and a template for many self-immolators.

Liang Wudi denied Daodu permission to burn himself for two specific reasons: (1) it would be better for Daodu to make a gift of his body after dying a natural death than by killing himself, and (2) by burning his body he would actually harm the parasites (“eighty thousand worms”) that live in it. The first reason is perhaps somewhat specific to Daodu’s time and place and requires some explanation. It reflects a mortuary practice popular among early medieval Chinese Buddhists that consisted of exposing the corpse for wild animals to eat rather than burying or cremating it.<sup>16</sup> Wudi’s second reason—that cremation of the living body necessarily entails the murder of many minuscule beings—was drawn from the codes that regulate the practice of monks (*Vinayas*).<sup>17</sup> In other words, Wudi’s objections to self-immolation are perhaps not what we might expect of an emperor. They were not grounded in secular authority or Confucian morality but rather were drawn from popular Buddhist practice and monastic regulations—aspects of religious life in which Wudi apparently took a strong interest.

In front of some of his subjects Liang Wudi may sometimes have played the role of a humble disciple of the Buddha, but he was still an emperor. In the encounter related above it is not difficult to detect an undercurrent of the tension between religious and secular authority.<sup>18</sup> In a hierarchical and structured society like that of medieval China, there was little acknowledgment that people were free to do as they chose with their own lives, and monks who made offerings of their bodies always posed a potential danger to state control. Quite apart from the fact that the state could hardly be seen to condone or encourage suicide, there was the danger that a heroic monk could become the center of a cult that might threaten political stability or at least draw attention and support away from the emperor.

As we know, Daodu disobeyed Liang Wudi’s edict and burned himself, although his *lèse-majesté* does not seem to have posed a problem for the prince of Wuling and Xiao Gang, nor for the officials who supervised the interment of his relics and the composition of his funerary inscription. It seems that relations between state and *saṃgha* were by no means clear-cut in medieval times, and both sides often had to adapt to rapidly changing situations as they negotiated a balance of power that was often precarious.

But the tensions and accommodations of the relationship between the *samgha* and the state or between a monk and his ruler are not the only themes that can be drawn from this account. We can also discern some inconsistencies and fragments of evidence that offer tantalizing glimpses of the religious landscape of medieval China, and we shall pursue them at length in this study. For example, Daodu pointed to a glorious scriptural precedent for his act, but apparently he chose to burn himself in secret. Also, his self-immolation was the cause of miracles that appeared before, during, and after his final act. There is even some evidence that suggests a postmortem cult to Daodu: His relics were enshrined, the sound of his chime was heard on the mountain, and a dead tree was restored to life. Finally, Daodu had close links with the royal family that endured even after he apparently disobeyed an imperial edict.

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the text to which Daodu was so devoted, and in which we must imagine he was thoroughly immersed after having copied it out so many times, the Medicine King burns his body not in secret on a mountain but as a public act of devotion to the buddhas. As we shall see, auto-cremation in China could often take the form of a well-advertised performance, ritually staged in front of an emotional audience. The fact that Daodu and others resorted to more furtive ways of offering their bodies suggests that self-immolators were sometimes faced with active opposition to their plans.

### Self-Immolation and Sympathetic Resonance

The lack of interest in the moment of death (or transformation) especially in contrast to the attention devoted to recording auspicious signs in Daodu's epitaph and many other accounts of auto-cremation alerts us to a fundamental assumption about the nature and efficacy of self-immolation. Although we do not find this assumption clearly articulated in Daodu's biographies, it seems that self-immolation was understood to operate according to the mechanism of "stimulus-response" or "sympathetic resonance" (*ganying* 感應), a paradigm that was all-pervasive in every aspect of medieval thought.<sup>19</sup> As Robert Sharf writes, "The notion of sympathetic resonance is deceptively simple: objects belonging to the same class resonate with each other just as do two identically tuned strings on a pair of zithers."<sup>20</sup> The miracles that occurred before, after, and during Daodu's auto-cremation indicated that his actions were stimulating (*gan*) a response (*ying*) from the cosmos, thus proving that his auto-cremation was efficacious and hence "right." Self-immolation, far from being a disrupting force, was an act that was supremely in harmony with the universe in which medieval people lived.

As we shall see, the paradigm of *ganying* offers us a way to make sense of

many of the cases of self-immolation we shall examine. But to apply this model we need to bear in mind that *ganying* can operate at several levels simultaneously. First, within human society, interactions between inferior and superior (typically between rulers and their subjects) are predicated on the rulers responding to the needs of the people. This aspect of *ganying* may help us understand why members of the royal family treated Daodu with such reverence in death: They could not afford to ignore or disparage the sincerity of his actions, lest they be seen to violate the cosmic and human order.

Second, *ganying* determines the relationship between the realm of humans (*ren* 人) and heaven (*tian* 天): It is understood that human actions and emotions can and do cause cosmic response and transformation. Acts that are the most sincere because they are selfless (for example, self-immolation) will cause the cosmos to respond in accordance with the petitioner's intention. We shall see many examples of this in accounts of self-immolators who burned themselves to bring rain or to end famine or other human disasters.

Third, the relationship between beings and the Buddha was conceived of in China as one determined by *ganying*. Chinese Buddhists found in Mahāyāna *sūtras* such as the *Lotus* the idea that buddhas and bodhisattvas were capable of assuming different forms and manifesting among humans in response to their needs. In the material that we shall examine there are frequent hints, and sometimes overt declarations, that self-immolators were in fact advanced bodhisattvas who had manifested to teach the *dharmā* in a way appropriate to the age. But also, self-immolation offered a way of becoming a buddha—a response to the stimulus of the selfless offering that was promised in the *Lotus* and other Mahāyāna texts.

### A History of Self-Immolation

The story of Daodu is but a part of a longer history of the ideals and practices of “abandoning the body” that weaves its way through the Chinese Buddhist tradition from the late fourth century to the early years of the twentieth century. For that period of some sixteen hundred years, we have accounts of several hundred monks, nuns, and laypeople who made offerings of their bodies for a variety of reasons, and in different ways. They represent the full spectrum of the *saṅgha* in China. Chan masters, distinguished exegetes, proselytizers, wonder workers, and ascetics as well as otherwise undistinguished or unknown monastics and laypeople all participated in the practice. The deeds of self-immolators were usually witnessed by large audiences; government officials and sometimes even emperors themselves attended the final moments, interred the sacred remains, and composed eulogies that extolled

their acts. The act of burning the body in particular was frequently a dramatically staged spectacle, and its performance and remembrance took a strong hold on the Chinese Buddhist imagination.

Examining the representations of self-immolators, their motivations, and the literary crafting of their stories will help us better to understand the larger issue of the role of the body in Buddhism. We shall discover that self-immolation, rather than being an aberrant practice that must be explained away, actually offers a bodily (or somatic) path—a way to attain awakening and, ultimately, buddhahood. This path looks rather different from those soteriologies that stress practices of the mind (such as meditation and learning), which have probably received the most attention from Western scholars in Buddhist studies. Nonetheless, as we shall see, it was a path to deliverance that was considered valid by many Chinese Buddhists.

The remarkable history of self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism is a subject that has not received a great deal of sustained scholarly attention. Although it was touched upon in surveys of topics such as “suicide” by the founding fathers of Buddhist studies, to date, only three short studies have appeared in Western languages: those of Jacques Gernet and Jan Yün-hua published in the early 1960s and more recently my own article.<sup>21</sup> The pioneering works of Jan and Gernet are rather narrowly focused in terms of the primary material upon which they draw, and both are now somewhat out of date given the advances made in the study of Chinese Buddhism in the last forty or so years. My own article is specifically concerned with the role of apocryphal *sūtras* in auto-cremation and other body-burning practices. Prior to the recent appearance of a detailed article on self-immolation in the early medieval period by Funayama Tōru, Japanese studies tended to be brief and narrowly focused.<sup>22</sup> Chinese scholars began to show an interest in self-immolation only from the late 1990s.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Terminology of Self-Immolation**

“Self-immolation” is the term most often used by scholars for the range of practices we are interested in, but it may be worth paying some attention to the meaning of the word. In its strictest sense, it means “self-sacrifice” and is derived from the Latin *molare*, “to make a sacrifice of grain.” It does not mean suicide by fire, although the term is now commonly used in that sense.<sup>24</sup> With these usages in mind, I shall employ the term “auto-cremation” to refer to the practice of burning one’s own body, and “self-immolation” for the broader range of practices that we shall discuss, such as drowning, death by starvation, feeding the body to animals or insects, and so forth.

Three Chinese terms are commonly encountered in our sources, and they are used more or less interchangeably: *wangshen* 亡身, meaning “to lose or abandon the body” or perhaps “to be oblivious (*wang* 忘) to the body”; *yishen* 遺身, meaning “to let go of, abandon, or be oblivious to the body”; and *sheshen* 捨身, “to relinquish or abandon the body.” Here the word *shen* (body) also implies “self,” or the person as a whole. These binomes are also used to translate terms found in Indian Buddhist sources such as *ātmabhāva-parityāga*, *ātma-parityāga* (abandoning the self), and *svadeha-parityāga* (abandoning one’s own body).<sup>25</sup> Thus, at least at the doctrinal level, self-immolation may be considered a particular expression of the more generalized Buddhist ideal of being detached from the deluded notion of a self. Auto-cremation is usually marked with expressions such as *shaoshen* 燒身 (burning the body) and *zifen* 自焚 (self-burning), but these terms are deployed for the most part descriptively rather than conceptually. That is to say, in our sources auto-cremation is treated as a way of abandoning the self but is not usually discussed as a separate mode of practice or as an ideal in its own right.

To understand how the somatic path of self-immolation was conceived and enacted we shall be obliged to take seriously a great deal of material that has largely been untouched by scholarship. To make sense of how acts of self-immolation were intended and how they were remembered, we shall examine them first in the context of medieval Chinese society and religion and then against the background of the later development of Buddhism in China.

Abandoning the body, or letting go of the self, took a variety of forms in Chinese history and not all of them involved death or self-mutilation.<sup>26</sup> For example, in Buddhist and Taoist texts and inscriptions, *sheshen* was paired with the term *shoushen* 受身 (to receive a body) to indicate what happened at the end of one lifetime in the endless round of *saṃsāra*—as one relinquishes one body, one obtains another.<sup>27</sup> *Sheshen* can also stand as an equivalent for the common Buddhist term *chujia* 出家, literally, “to leave the household,” which means to become a monk or a nun. In a more extreme case, the pious emperor Liang Wudi actually gave himself as a slave to the *saṃgha* on a number of occasions and his ministers were obliged to pay a hefty ransom to buy him back.<sup>28</sup> This kind of offering of the body, which was not uncommon, was also referred to as *sheshen*.

But “abandoning the body” also covers a broad range of more extreme acts (not all of which necessarily result in death): feeding one’s body to insects; slicing off one’s flesh; burning one’s fingers or arms; burning incense on the skin; starving, slicing, or drowning oneself; leaping from cliffs or trees; feeding one’s body to wild animals; self-mummification (preparing for death so that the resulting corpse is impervious to decay); and of course

auto-cremation. Thus, although the title of this book is “Burning for the Buddha,” it is a study not just of auto-cremation, but of a broader mode of religious practice that involved doing things to or with the body. As we shall see this mode was by no means static; it was constantly being shaped and reformulated by practitioners and those who told their stories. At times auto-cremation was cast as the dominant form of self-immolation, at other times it receded into the background.

### Self-Immolation in China

The fluid nature of the concept of self-immolation was partly a historical accident: It was not consistently defined or explained in canonical sources available to medieval Chinese Buddhists. It was also a consequence of the ways in which Chinese Buddhist authors composed their works. Of the three types of historical actors we shall consider in this study—practitioners, biographers, and compilers of exemplary biographies—the compilers were the most important in the invention of self-immolation as a Chinese monastic practice. By grouping biographies of exemplary individuals under the rubric of self-immolation, they created the appearance of unity from a diversity of practices, but in their reflections on the category they were often reluctant to draw precise boundaries around the tradition they had created. The difficulties of determining what actions constituted self-immolation, what mental attitude was required, and what purpose self-immolation served are not just ones that we face as scholars now; they also plagued Buddhist authors who were much more closely involved with self-immolators.

Two related questions will recur throughout our inquiry. First, why did these compilers group together the biographies that they did? Second, how did they justify the transmission of biographies of self-immolators as records of eminent monks (that is to say, models of monastic behavior) if the monastic regulations condemned suicide? There is no simple or single answer to such questions. Buddhist authors always struggled with these problems and were often preoccupied with other concerns that shaped their view of exemplary practice. The attitude of the state towards the *samgha* as a whole or towards certain types of practice; orthodoxy as presented in scriptural materials; orthopraxy as reported by Chinese pilgrims to India: These and other factors colored the views of those who wrote about self-immolators.

In the following chapters I aim to give a historical account of the complex construct of self-immolation by examining both text and practice in some detail. By reintegrating a better understanding of self-immolation into our larger conception of Buddhist practices in China, we may allow a fuller picture to

emerge of the Buddhist tradition as a whole. By looking in detail at some specific cases of how the body was used in Chinese Buddhism, we may gain an appreciation of the broader range of possibilities for the body in religion.

Of all the forms of self-immolation, auto-cremation in particular seems to have been a primarily Sinitic Buddhist creation that first appeared in late fourth-century China. Although there seem to have been some Indian practitioners who burned their bodies, Buddhist auto-cremation became a distinct mode of practice in China, as evidenced by the acts of particular monks and nuns recorded and celebrated in Chinese hagiography.<sup>29</sup> Rather than being a continuation or adaptation of an Indian practice, as far as we can tell, it was constructed on Chinese soil and drew on a range of ideas, such as a particular interpretation of an Indian text (the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, or *Lotus Sūtra*) and indigenous traditions, such as burning the body to bring rain, a practice that long predated the arrival of Buddhism in China.<sup>30</sup> The practice of auto-cremation was reinforced, vindicated, and embellished by the production of Chinese apocryphal *sūtras*, by the composition of biographies of auto-cremators, and by the inclusion of these texts in the Buddhist canon as exemplars of heroic practice. As time went on, more biographies were composed and collected. The increasing number and variety of precedents provided further legitimation for the practice. Although acts of extreme asceticism by non-Buddhist practitioners are well attested in Indian Buddhist sources and visible in contemporary Indian religious life, in China auto-cremation became a mode of practice that was accessible to Buddhists of all kinds.<sup>31</sup>

Self-immolation can thus be considered part of the larger process of the Sinification of Buddhism. In recent years the doctrinal side of this process has been explored at some length and is now better understood and appreciated.<sup>32</sup> A study of self-immolation affords us an opportunity to examine not just the ways in which elite monks made sense of the complex soteriologies they found in Buddhist literature, but also some of the modes in which Buddhist ideas and ideals were put into practice. In the following chapters we shall encounter a wide variety of bodily practices as performed in life and death by Chinese Buddhists, and we shall attempt to understand how and why these men and women aspired to embed and enact the teaching of the Buddha in China with their bodies. It will become apparent that their somatic devotions were not aberrant, heterodox, or anomalous, but part of a serious attempt to make bodhisattvas on Chinese soil.

What can a study of self-immolation tell us about the greater shape of Buddhism in premodern China? More than twenty years ago Erik Zürcher made some important remarks about the state of the field, which he cast in the form of three paradoxes:

First, that our view of Chinese Buddhism as a historical phenomenon is greatly *obscured* by the abundance of our source materials. Second, that if we want to define what was the normal state of medieval Chinese Buddhism, we should concentrate on what seems to be *abnormal*. Third, if we want to complete our picture of what this Buddhism really was, we have to look outside Chinese Buddhism itself.<sup>33</sup>

I have tried to keep Zürcher's advice in mind throughout this study. By concentrating on the practice of self-immolation we may cut through much of the mass of material produced by Buddhists that obscures our view of the overall shape of the religion. Self-immolation as an apparently "abnormal" practice throws into relief the normal (or normative) state of Chinese Buddhism. Finally, to understand the political and social contexts of self-immolation in this study, I have striven to include official historiographical sources as well as Buddhist materials.

Self-immolation resists a single simple explanation or interpretation. Cases of self-immolation were not simply recorded and filed away but continued to inspire and inform readers and listeners. Monks and nuns, emperors and officials, thought about the practice in different ways at different times. On the whole Buddhists tended to support their co-religionists who used their bodies as instruments of devotion, whereas the literati (at least in public) often regarded such acts with disdain or disapproval. But conversely, we shall see many literati who participated in the cults of self-immolators, and some Buddhist monks who were bitterly opposed to the practice. Self-immolation brought out tensions within the religion—and in society at large. Each case, in a sense, had to be negotiated separately, and there were clearly regional variations. The cults of self-immolators were both local—celebrated in particular places by shrines, *stūpas*, images, and steles—and made universal through accounts in collections of monastic biographies and in more popular works that celebrated acts of devotion to particular texts such as the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus a study of self-immolation requires us to contemplate Buddhism in China from multiple perspectives.

### Sources

Much of the material studied here is preserved in collections of the genre known as *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 (Biographies of Eminent Monks). Biographies of self-immolators in these collections were, for the most part, based on the funerary inscriptions composed for their subjects rather than on sources such as miracle tales and anecdotes. Some of these funerary inscrip-

tions are preserved in other collections or in the form of the actual stelae, although in most cases this type of material evidence is sadly lost. Biographies of eminent monks, especially in the first *Gaoseng zhuan* collection, were largely based on epitaphs written by prominent men of letters (usually aristocrats in the medieval period) and so, not unnaturally, they stress the monks' contacts with the court.<sup>34</sup> Thus it is difficult to recover data on the everyday practice of ordinary people in medieval China; unfortunately most of our sources remain silent on such matters. This study, then, does not pretend to offer an account of "popular" Buddhist practice (however we wish to define that term); for the most part, its focus is on members of the monastic elite such as Daodu.

The scholarship to date on self-immolation has concentrated largely on materials contained within one early twentieth-century Japanese edition of the Buddhist canon with some occasional references to supporting evidence drawn from the mass of data preserved in Chinese secular sources.<sup>35</sup> This particular edition of the Chinese canon does, of course, contain much useful data that can be employed to reconstruct the history of Buddhist practice in China, but the texts chosen by the *Taishō* editors may give a somewhat lopsided picture of Chinese Buddhist history as seen from the perspective of the later Japanese sects. The immediate problem lies in the fact that the biographies of self-immolators in the *Taishō* canon are only collected in an easily accessible form for roughly the years 350 to 988. In particular, the absence of a specific category for self-immolators in the *Da Ming gaoseng zhuan* 大明高僧傳 (Great Ming Biographies of Eminent Monks, compiled by Ruxing 如惺 [fl. 1617], T 50.2062), such as is found in the first three *Gaoseng zhuan*, has led to the mistaken impression that self-immolation either occurred less frequently from the tenth century onward or that it was less frequently recorded in Buddhist sources.<sup>36</sup> In fact, when we consult materials in other editions of the Chinese canon, it is immediately evident that self-immolation continued to be practiced and recorded well beyond the end of the Five Dynasties 五代 (907–960) through the Song 宋 (960–1279), Yuan 元 (1279–1368), Ming 明 (1368–1644), and Qing 清 (1644–1912). Self-immolation was not just a medieval form of piety that was supplanted by other forms of devotion; it has remained significant until today. Although auto-cremation in China is now very rare, monks and laypeople continue to make offerings by burning their fingers in both China and Korea.<sup>37</sup>

No matter how diligent we are in gathering materials, we cannot assume that self-immolation lies waiting to be uncovered in these "primary sources"; rather, it was their compilers who created and perpetuated self-immolation as an object of knowledge when they placed the biographies of various individuals

under that rubric. For example, the same biography could be assigned to different categories in different collections, as is the case with Jing'ai 靜藹 (534–575), who is classified as a self-immolator in the *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 (A Grove of Pearls in a Dharma Garden, compiled by Daoshi 道世 [596?–683], preface dated 668), but as a protector of the dharma (*hufa* 護法) in Daoxuan's 道宣 (596–667) *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 (Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks).<sup>38</sup> These collections themselves do not claim to be exhaustive, and it is not hard to find brief notices of other self-immolators who are not accorded biographies in the *Gaoseng zhuan* collections.<sup>39</sup>

As we shall see, self-immolation remains a somewhat elastic category that is usually not very well articulated in the individual biographies of self-immolators. The compilers of biographical collections also took rather a circumspect approach to the topic in the critical evaluations (*lun* 論) in which they discussed the practice. Therefore, rather than beginning with any a priori assumption of what self-immolation is and picking out textual material that confirms this assumption, we ought to allow the contours of the practice to emerge from the material. What follows then may be regarded as a kind of textual ethnography that is sensitive to setting, time, place, and detail. Any attempt at defining the meaning (or meanings) of self-immolation must be contingent on a thorough investigation of what at first appears to be a mass of incidental detail.

### Self-Immolation in the Literature of the Mahāyāna

Biographers often represented individual acts of self-immolation like that of Daodu as if they were predicated on a literal reading of certain texts, particularly *jātaka* tales (accounts of the former lives and deeds of Śākyamuni) and the *Lotus Sūtra*. But, one might ask, how else should Chinese of the early medieval period have taken these heroic tales, other than literally? In the Mahāyāna literature especially, the Chinese were presented with the blueprints for making bodhisattvas, and those blueprints said repeatedly and explicitly that such acts of extreme generosity were a necessary part of the process. For example, one of the most influential Mahāyāna texts known to the medieval Chinese, the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise), which was attributed to the great Indian thinker Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–250 CE), says:

What is to be understood by the fulfilment of the perfection of generosity appertaining to the body which is born from the bonds and *karma*? Without gaining the *dharmakāya* (dharma body) and without destroying the fetters

the bodhisattva is able to give away without reservation all his precious possessions, his head, his eyes, his marrow, his skin, his kingdom, his wealth, his wife, his children and his possessions both inner and outer; all this without experiencing any emotions.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, according to a text that was often referred to by medieval Chinese Buddhists, the bodhisattva has to surrender dispassionately his own body and even his loved ones long before he reaches awakening (gaining the *dharmakāya*). The text continues by recounting the stories of Prince Viśvantara, who famously gave away his wife and children; King Sarvada, who lost his kingdom to a usurper and then surrendered himself to a poor brahman so he could collect a reward from the new king; and Prince Candraprabha, who gave his blood and marrow to cure a leper.<sup>41</sup> The stories of these heroes are presented in a matter of fact manner as paradigms of true generosity. Medieval Chinese readers surely ought not to be blamed for the fact that the stories were originally composed in a literary environment that was clearly very different from that of their own classical heritage.

That difference is all too apparent to the twenty-first-century scholar, who can survey a vast range of textual material, but must have been almost impossible to perceive at the time. The fact that Chinese Buddhists received the teachings of the Mahāyāna not as a single corpus of texts with a curriculum and reading guide attached, but piecemeal over many centuries probably only contributed to the problems of interpretation that came along with their sincere desire to make sense of material that was widely divergent and often flatly contradictory. Medieval Chinese Buddhists could not recognize Indian rhetoric when they saw it because they were not aware of the larger literary culture of India of which the Mahāyāna texts were but a part. They were, however, acutely aware that these precious teachings had emerged from the golden mouth of the Buddha himself. They could point to many places in the *sūtras* where the Buddha had more or less explicitly instructed them to do what they or their compatriots did with such enthusiasm.

An important theme that runs through this study is the way in which the miraculous world described in Buddhist *sūtras* and represented in Buddhist artworks took root in Chinese soil. This may be seen, for example, in the development from early accounts of monks emulating *jātaka* stories and the *Lotus Sūtra* to later direct and unmediated encounters with the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in China and the increasing prevalence of the spontaneous combustion of eminent monks. We may also trace this process by paying attention to the mention of relics in the biographies. Broadly speaking, in early accounts relics hardly ever appear; later the relics of the Buddha start to play

significant roles, but by the tenth century self-immolators themselves were commonly depicted as being able to produce relics in vast quantities, sometimes spontaneously while still alive. I would see the changing nature of relics as part of an ongoing process in which Chinese monks grew more confident of their abilities to create bodhisattvas in China. The rise of Chan Buddhism is just the best-known example of this process, but the present study may suggest other ways in which this could happen.

### Contents and Scope of the Volume

The limited scope of this book means, unfortunately, that many interesting cases have been excluded. I do not discuss in any detail, for example, the case of the holy figure of Liu Benzun 柳本尊, active in Western Sichuan around the late ninth and early tenth century. Beautifully executed three-dimensional reliefs of his “ten austerities” (the burning and cutting of various parts of his body) are still to be found in Dazu 大足 and Anyue 安岳 county.<sup>42</sup> I touch on the mass auto-cremations of the followers of Mahāsattva Fu (Fu Xi 傅歙, 497–569) only in passing.<sup>43</sup> I do not have room to discuss the case of the eminent Song-dynasty Tiantai 天台 master Siming Zhili 四明知禮 (960–1028), who in 1017 vowed to burn himself along with ten of his companions and, despite a lengthy correspondence on the matter with the literatus Yang Yi 楊億 (974–1020), ultimately did not go through with his plan.<sup>44</sup> There are also references to self-immolation and auto-cremation in dynastic histories I have not pursued because they are not directly related to the cases I have chosen to study.<sup>45</sup>

There are a couple of examples of faked auto-cremation known to me. An unnamed Tang 唐 (618–907) monk is said to have conspired with the famous general Li Baozhen 李抱真 (733–794) to fleece pious donors by staging a fake auto-cremation. The plan was that the general would collect donations from the onlookers and set the pyre ablaze while the monk made his escape from a tunnel hidden beneath. However, the general had the tunnel sealed up, thus ensuring the death of the monk and not having to share the spoils with an accomplice.<sup>46</sup> The following story is found in the *Shasekishū* 沙石集 (Collection of Sand and Pebbles, 1279–1283), a Japanese work of edifying tales. An old lay priest from Hitachi province knew a “beggar monk” who made a tidy living out of performing the “Body Lamp Ritual.” A fake dead body was covered in firewood while the hoaxer escaped through a tunnel and slipped into the crowd. The monk took the money and rice that were given as donations. Once the monk only barely escaped alive. Later he met a devout layman who had seen him apparently burn to death; the monk tricked him a

second time by fooling him into believing that the layman had actually died himself and that they were meeting in the intermediate existence between rebirths. Convincing the man that he could return him to the land of the living, the beggar monk relieved him of his clothes.<sup>47</sup>

But these episodes aside, there remains a great deal of material for us to explore. Because this book is intended to be a history of self-immolation, its six chapters run in more or less chronological order. The first offers a detailed examination of the earliest accounts of self-immolation as presented in the biographies of eminent monks and nuns from the fifth century. Chapter 2 examines the importance of the *Lotus Sūtra* (and related Mahāyāna literature) as a source of inspiration for auto-cremation in medieval China and investigates records of self-immolation as they appear in biographical collections of *Lotus* devotees.

By the sixth century Chinese Buddhists had both a large corpus of translated texts and a growing repertoire of well-established practices like self-immolation on which to draw. Some were also becoming conscious that the teaching of the Buddha, which the *saṃgha* had worked so hard to plant and nurture in Chinese soil, was not only under threat from secular forces, but also losing efficacy because of the ever-increasing temporal distance between themselves and the Buddha. In Chapter 3 I explore how the political realities of a newly reunited empire, combined with fears of the decline of the *dharma*, affected the practices of self-immolation.

Although most of the book concentrates on bodily practice as recorded in biographical materials, the doctrinal and ethical dimensions of self-immolation as interpreted by Chinese monks also deserve consideration. A particularly interesting justification of self-immolation by the tenth-century monk Yongming Yanshou 永明延壽 (904–975) is the focus of Chapter 4. Although Daoshi had offered a spirited defense of the practice in the mid-seventh century, Yanshou's work provides the most extended discussion of the doctrinal meaning of self-immolation that we now possess, and as such it deserves an extended examination.

By the eighth century self-immolation was a well-established practice in China, but the increasingly unstable and fragmented state of the empire in the late Tang and Five Dynasties meant that it was often deployed for immediately local ends or to shore up a collapsing imperium. Chapter 5 examines cases of self-immolation during this often tumultuous period.

In Chapter 6 I survey the later history of self-immolation from the Song dynasty until the early Republic—that is to say, from the tenth century to the early twentieth. The variety of cases that have been preserved for this long period of history shows that self-immolation continued to be a well-attested

form of Buddhist practice that was still open to reinterpretation. In particular I note the types of self-immolation that were performed at major critical and traumatic points in Chinese history, such as the loss of North China to the Jurchen Jin in 1126, the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1644, and the end of Imperial China in 1911. In the Conclusion I offer some final reflections on the importance of self-immolation in the history of Chinese Buddhism and suggest ways in which to rethink our perspective on religious practice in China and East Asia as a whole.

There are two appendices. The first provides synopses of all the biographies I have studied in the order in which they originally appeared in biographical collections. To give some idea of how biographies of self-immolators were disseminated beyond the monastic community, I have included in the appendix details of the biographies that were reproduced in such popular Buddhist collections as the *Shishi liutie* 釋氏六帖 (The Buddhists' Six Documents) and the *Liuxue seng zhuan* 六學僧傳 (Biographies of Monks by the Six Categories of Specialization). I also present the biographies contained in the *Hongzan fahua zhuan* 弘贊法華傳 (Biographies Which Broadly Extol the *Lotus*), an important Tang collection of pious practices centered on the *Lotus Sūtra*.

The second appendix contains complete, annotated translations of the critical evaluations by the compilers of the first three *Gaoseng zhuan* collections. I have supplied translations because the allusive language and subtle arguments presented in these documents defy easy summary. I think it is important for us to know exactly what these men said about the acts documented in their collections.