

Pregnant Metaphor: Embryology, Embodiment, and the Ends of Figurative Imagery in Chinese Buddhism

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FROM THE FIFTH CENTURY through the present day, Chinese Buddhists have discussed the need for aspirants seeking liberation to “nurture the embryo of sagehood” (*yang shengtai* 養聖胎).¹ On its surface, this understudied but widespread trope might seem puzzling: Buddhist liberation is typically understood to be a matter of enlightenment, not embodiment. Fetal gestation, moreover, is cast in many Buddhist scriptures as emblemizing bondage to cyclical rebirth. So what are we to make of this expression? Is it just a metaphor?

¹ Because the Chinese term *tai* 胎 may refer to either womb or embryo, I select one translation as contextually appropriate. The routine conflation of embryos and wombs in medieval Chinese Buddhist texts suggests the distinction was not important to the authors of these texts.

ABSTRACT: Nurturing the embryo of sagehood was a widespread trope in premodern Chinese Buddhism. From its inception in the fifth-century apocryphal *Sutra of Benevolent Kings*, medieval Chinese Buddhist exegetes, Chan Buddhists, and Daoist inner alchemists all used this trope as both a metaphor for enlightenment and a metaphysical figure of supernatural embodiment—sometimes within the same textual passage. This trope’s historical use reveals an overlooked commitment on the part of many Chinese Buddhist thinkers to the notion that liberation entails the conception, gestation, and birth of supernatural bodies. The case of the embryo of sagehood demonstrates the capacity of figurative language to move fluidly across the boundaries of metaphor and metaphysics, a capacity I argue was a constitutive feature of premodern Chinese Buddhist soteriology.

摘要：本文探討「養聖胎」的概念在中國佛教的出現與演變。自五世紀的偽經以來，註釋家、禪師與內丹家都以聖胎作為譬喻來代表覺悟，同時也把它理解為形而上超自然的身體。作者認為，聖胎的個案能夠闡明中國佛教形象化語言如何突破譬喻和形而上學之間的界線。

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In this article, I seek to answer this question by tracing the history of the concept “embryo of sagehood” (*shengtai*) from its inception in an apocryphal Chinese Buddhist scripture to its reception by medieval Chinese Buddhist exegetes, by Chan 禪 Buddhists,² and by practitioners of Daoist inner alchemy (*neidan* 內丹). I propose that the embryo of sagehood was never a straightforward metaphor. Instead, I show how the history of this concept’s use reveals an overlooked commitment on the part of many Chinese Buddhist thinkers to the notion that liberation entails the conception, gestation, and birth of a supernatural body or bodies. Even the approaches to liberation of those Buddhists who adopt a more metaphorical interpretation of the embryo of sagehood, I argue, are structured in important ways by the concept’s figurative specificity. In mediating between the discrete soteriological discourses of different religious communities, the trope of the embryo of sagehood thus also helps mold those discourses into a common shape.

More broadly, I suggest that the vexed metaphoricality of the embryo of sagehood raises larger questions about how premodern Chinese Buddhists used figurative language. Buddhist rhetoric has, of course, always relied on a vast repertoire of figurative tropes to advance persuasive soteriological arguments. Yet figurative images—and especially such bodily images as the embryo of sagehood—provide Chinese Buddhists with unsteady rhetorical support because they are inextricably bound up with Buddhist treatments of gender, sexuality, and the human body as urgent soteriological problems in their own right. These bodily images routinely breach the boundaries of disinterested metaphor and participate in metaphysical conversations about the relationship between liberation and embodiment. Indeed, such breaches are sufficiently common in premodern Chinese Buddhist literature that we can neither attribute the phenomenon to any single human agent nor dismiss it as a category error. On the contrary, I argue that the capacity of figurative language to pass between metaphor and metaphysics is a constitutive feature of Chinese Buddhist soteriology.

If many long-standing scholarly approaches to Buddhist soteriology are governed by the concept of enlightenment—if Buddhist liberation is largely assumed to hinge exclusively upon the epistemology of

² The Chan tradition emerged as an institution of special lineage transmission over and above the status of monastic ordination during the Tang (618–907). By the Song (960–1279), the tradition had developed a distinctive identity and body of literature.

mental awakening—then recent scholarship begins to demonstrate the importance of embodiment to the ways that Buddhists have historically understood liberation. Embodiment features in Buddhist soteriology not only negatively, as a site for the contemplation of impermanence and impurity, but also positively, in terms of the Buddha's extraordinary body or bodies.³ Buddha-body theory, as it came to be classically formulated, entails three distinct bodies—the dharma body or “body of the law” (Skt. *dharmakāya*; Ch. *fashen* 法身), the “body of recompense” (Skt. *sambhogakāya*; Ch. *baoshen* 報身), and the “body of manifestation” (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*; Ch. *huashen* 化身 or *yingshen* 應身). Even the most abstract of the Buddha's special bodies, namely the dharma body, is noteworthy simply for the fact that it figures the limits of reality and the pinnacle of liberation, not as an escape from embodiment, but rather as a kind of marvelous and inconceivable body.

The special modes of embodiment attributed in canonical Buddhist literature to buddhas and bodhisattvas are not metaphors for enlightenment; indeed, they are not reducible in any straightforward way to epistemology. They are metaphysical concepts explaining how buddhas and bodhisattvas remain in the world but not of it, compassionately rescuing sentient beings without being compromised by cyclical life and death. They are, moreover, gendered concepts that both respond to and participate in the often pejorative representation of women's bodies found in many Buddhist texts (though they are also susceptible to reappropriation by women practitioners). Embodiment, however, cannot simply displace enlightenment from our understanding of Buddhist soteriology. Instead, buddha-body doctrine demonstrates that embodiment is inseparably connected with knowledge, meditation, ethics, and other components of Buddhist soteriology, none easily reducible to any other.

Recent scholarship arguing that we take buddha bodies seriously also demands that we treat with care the metaphoricity of the embryo of sagehood.⁴ When and for whom is the trope of “nurturing the embryo of sagehood” a metaphor for tending to one's growing

³ See, for example, Susanne Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies: The Physical Dimensions of Morality in Buddhist Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), and John Powers, *A Bull of a Man: Images of Masculinity, Sex, and the Body in Indian Buddhism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

⁴ Cf. Michael Radich, “Perfected Embodiment: A Buddhist-Inspired Challenge to Contemporary Theories of the Body,” in *Refiguring the Body: Embodiment in South Asian*

enlightenment—in other words, a rhetorical or pedagogical device using the figure of a developing fetal body to explicate a transformation that is in the final analysis strictly epistemological? And when does it operate as something more closely resembling a metaphysics of embryonic buddha bodies? Chinese Buddhists' understandings of the connection between mind and body, and relatedly between epistemology and ontology, are demonstrably non-Cartesian.⁵ Of course, the fact of their non-Cartesian outlook does not mean they have no recourse to the categories of mind and body at all or that they lack any mechanism for distinguishing metaphorical from literal truth. On the contrary, Buddhist scriptures are full of explicit analogies, signaled in Chinese by words such as *yu* 喻 (metaphor) and *pi* 譬 (analogy).⁶ To give one of myriad examples, the Buddha is often described as a doctor, and his teaching as the medicine that he prescribes to sentient beings in order to heal the afflictions that arise from delusion. But just because premodern Chinese Buddhists knew of and used metaphor and analogy does not mean that they always did so in exactly the ways we might expect.

The embryo of sagehood is a case in point. Although, as we will see, it was sometimes understood as metaphor, it also sometimes figured a metaphysics of supernatural (or perhaps antinatural) rebirth as a buddha. This mode of rebirth is no neutral mirror of nature but—in a soteriologically loaded way—nature's opposite. Medieval Chinese Buddhist exegetes (as well as Daoist inner alchemists) used the figure of a gestating fetus not primarily to ground an otherwise abstract soteriological schema in terms of familiar bodily imagery. Rather, they used the figure of a fetus to present a radical alternative to “natural” birth, understood to be the locus of life's suffering, in the trope of sagely birth as a bodhisattva or buddha. The trope of the embryo of sagehood thus offered discursive space for the metaphysical juxtaposition of two categories of bodies: ordinary and liberative.

In this article, I examine the origins of the concept “nurturing

Religions, ed. Barbara A. Holdrege and Karen Pechilis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), p. 23.

⁵ Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the “Treasure Store Treatise”* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), p. 109.

⁶ Stephen Bokenkamp, “Chinese Metaphor Again: Reading—And Understanding—Imagery in the Chinese Poetic Tradition,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 109.2 (1989): 211–21.

the embryo of sagehood” (*yang shengtai*) in a fifth-century Chinese Buddhist apocryphal scripture and consider its relationship to the well-known Buddhist doctrinal framework of the “embryo of the thus-come one” (Skt. *tathāgatagarbha*; Ch. *rulaizang* 如來藏). I then address the embryo of sagehood’s reception by prominent medieval Chinese Buddhist exegetes. I argue that it operated as metaphysics for many of them, rather than as metaphor. I explore how, as the medieval period waned and the Chan tradition rose to increasing prominence, the embryo of sagehood assumed an important place in Chan literature and shaped the tradition’s soteriology, shedding its explicit metaphysical connections and turning into a pregnant metaphor for the nascent careers of Chan lineage members. Yet even as Chan Buddhists turned away from metaphysics, the particular bodily significance that had already been invested in the embryo of sagehood was not so easily cast off. I analyze how Daoist inner alchemists borrowed the concept of the embryo of sagehood from Chan Buddhists to describe their own soteriological programs of self-cultivation, criticizing Buddhists for failing to give birth to the immortal spirit bodies these inner alchemists viewed as fundamental guarantors of liberation. By looking outside the Buddhist tradition to the terms of soteriological contestation between specific groups of Buddhists and Daoists, I show that the stakes of embodiment surrounding the conception of the embryo of sagehood continued to play an important role in Chinese religious discourse during the Song and beyond.

The Embryo of Sagehood as Apocryphal Image

The concept of the embryo of sagehood presents us with a conundrum. Why would Chinese Buddhists have envisioned the process of attaining liberation as unfolding in the shape of a growing embryo or fetus in the first place? After all, many canonical Buddhist scriptures not only encouraged practitioners to view the material body as an object of disgust⁷ but also often treated the female body as especially impure.⁸

⁷ See Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*, chap. 5.

⁸ For example, Diana Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), esp. chap. 1; Alan Sponberg, “Attitudes toward Women and the Feminine in Early Buddhism,” in *Buddhism*,

Indeed, entire Buddhist scriptures were devoted to characterizing the womb as inherently repugnant and to portraying fetal gestation as the focal point of human suffering, a microcosmic performance of the cosmic drama of samsara (cyclical birth and death) in all its nauseating misery.⁹

I propose a resolution to this conundrum by exploring how the concept of the embryo of sagehood was invented during the fifth century in the context of larger Buddhist discourses on embryology. I focus on the differences between the embryo of sagehood (*shengtai*) and the better-known Mahayana doctrinal framework of the embryo of the thus-come one (Skt. *tathāgatagarbha*), because these concepts are sometimes conflated by scholars.¹⁰ Differences between the two concepts, I suggest, lay the groundwork for tensions lurking in Buddhist soteriology well beyond the fifth century.

The appeal of positively inflected embryological imagery to a religious community of celibate monastics might seem paradoxical at first glance. But in fact, it was precisely in conjunction with an understanding of the human womb as impure that Buddhists also developed increasingly elaborate descriptions of the Buddha Śākyamuni's conception, fetal gestation, and birth as categorically exceptional and wholly unlike ordinary birth. In the life story of the Buddha, his mother Queen Māyā was said to have become impregnated while dreaming that a white elephant entered her body. Her ensuing pregnancy was painless, and the Buddha was born from under her right arm.¹¹ These narrative elements helped establish the Buddha not only as different from ordinary people but more specifically as impervious to the pollution and suffering understood to ordinarily accompany sexual intercourse, fetal gestation, and birth. Moreover, these narrative devices also offered an example for later Buddhists to imitate. For example,

Sexuality, and Gender, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 3–36; and Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurings of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁹ Amy Paris Langenberg, “Like Worms Falling from a Foul-smelling Sore: The Buddhist Rhetoric of Childbirth in an Early Mahāyāna Sūtra” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008).

¹⁰ For example, Catherine Despeux, “Symbolic Pregnancy and the Sexual Identity of Taoist Adepts,” in *Transforming the Void: Embryological Discourse and Reproductive Imagery in East Asian Religions*, ed. Anna Andreeva and Dominic Steavu (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 151.

¹¹ For an overview, see Hsin-Yi Lin, “Dealing with Childbirth in Medieval Chinese Buddhism: Discourses and Practices” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2017), pp. 68–94.

Vasumitra's (fl. first–second centuries CE) *Samayabhedoparacanacakra* (Ch. *Yibuzonglun lun* 異部宗輪論; Treatise on the wheel of divisions of the doctrine) suggests that “all bodhisattvas, when entering their mothers' wombs, take the form of a white elephant; and all bodhisattvas, when exiting their mothers' wombs, depart from [their mothers'] right sides.”¹² In medieval China, hagiographies of eminent monastics also featured descriptions of their protagonists' miraculous conceptions, gestations, and births, which drew directly on the Buddha's example as well as upon indigenous Chinese tropes of auspicious birth.¹³

Descriptions of the Buddha's atypical experience in his mother's womb seem to have played a role in the emergence of doctrinal soteriologies that mean any Buddhist aspirant is capable of achieving liberation. Michael Radich argues that the doctrinal system surrounding the concept of the embryo of the thus-come one first emerged as a form of what he calls “material-miraculous” docetic buddhology.¹⁴ This doctrine deproblematizes the Buddha's participation in impure bodily activity (including gestation in his mother's womb) by explaining that both he and his mother possessed not ordinary material bodies but extraordinary miraculous bodies that were thus undefiled by these activities. Radich suggests that descriptions of Queen Māyā's womb as a palatial paradise within which the Buddha enjoyed a luxurious prenatal lifestyle, and Māyā herself as a kind of cosmic mother to all bodhisattvas, set the stage for the metaphysical idea that an embryo of the thus-come one—or, in a closely related formulation, “buddha-nature” (Skt. **buddhadhātu*; Ch. *foxing* 佛性)—lurks in the bodies of ordinary sentient beings.¹⁵

Yet in China, even as Indian Buddhist concerns about bodily impurity accompanying childbirth were taken up by Chinese Buddhists, the bodily and sexual connotations of the Indian Buddhist doctrine of the embryo of the thus-come one were lost in translation. For Chinese Buddhists, the concept of the embryo of the thus-come one—translated into the awkward Chinese phrase *rulaizang*, literally “storehouse

¹² 一切菩薩入母胎時作白象形；一切菩薩出母胎時皆從右脅；*Yibuzonglun lun*, in *Tai-shō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經, 85 vols. (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932) [hereafter *T.*], no. 2031, v. 49, p. 15, column c, lines 8–9 [hereafter, column letters and line numbers are written with the page number: p. 15c8–9].

¹³ Hsin-Yi Lin, “Dealing with Childbirth,” pp. 94–109.

¹⁴ Michael Radich, *The “Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra” and the Emergence of Tathāgata-garbhā Doctrine* (Hamburg: Hamburg University Press, 2015).

¹⁵ Radich, *The “Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra,”* pp. 124–28, 135.

of the thus-come one”—came to be overshadowed by the related concept of buddha-nature, which lacked any obvious figurative connection to embryology.¹⁶ Instead, buddha-nature evoked a constellation of preexisting Chinese discourses on the character of innate human nature (*xing* 性), discussed in Chinese classics, such as the *Mencius*.¹⁷ From the fifth century onward, Chinese Buddhist orthodoxy came to hinge upon the doctrine of universal buddha-nature, according to which all sentient beings inherently possess an already perfect buddha-nature latent within themselves.¹⁸

It was against this backdrop that the concept of the embryo of sagehood (*shengtai*) emerged in medieval China as entirely distinct from the Indian Buddhist concept of the embryo of the thus-come one (Skt. *tathāgatagarbha*) and its Chinese identification with buddha-nature, despite their ostensible similarity. The expression *shengtai* was first used in the *Renwang jing* 仁王經 (Sutra of benevolent kings), an apocryphal scripture composed during the fifth century under the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534).¹⁹ Though primarily concerned with making the case for secular rulers to support Buddhism, the *Renwang jing* also reinvented the Indian Buddhist notion of the path by which bodhisattvas gradually progress toward buddhahood. Whereas Indian Buddhist texts describe the bodhisattva path as consisting of a sequence of ten stages or “grounds” (Skt. *bhūmi*; Ch. *di* 地), the *Renwang jing* expands this sequence to include thirty additional preliminary stages or “minds” (*xin* 心). Progress through these thirty minds follows a practitioner’s initial formulation of the aspiration for buddhahood but precedes entry into the ten grounds, resulting in a greatly elongated bodhisattva path.²⁰ In describing the thirty minds, the *Ren-*

¹⁶ Zhu Qingzhi, “On Some Basic Features of Buddhist Chinese,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 31.1–2 (2008): 485–504.

¹⁷ Peter N. Gregory, *Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity: An Annotated Translation of Tsung-mi’s “Yüan jen lun” with a Modern Commentary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1995), pp. 10–11.

¹⁸ Kenneth S. Ch’en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 114–16.

¹⁹ The scripture’s full title is *Foshuo renwang boreboluomi jing* 佛說仁王般若波羅蜜經, in *T.*, no. 245, v. 8, pp. 825a–34a. See Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信享, *Bukkyō kyōten seiritsu shiron* 佛教經典成立史論 (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1946), pp. 425–41, and Charles Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The “Scripture for Humane Kings” in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Although these ten stages were separately discussed in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (Ch. *Huayan jing* 華嚴經), they were only put into sequence as constituting a single linear

wang jing also coins a new concept to represent them as a coherent unit, namely the “embryo of sagehood” (*shengtai*) that the practitioner gradually “nurtures” (*zhangyang* 長養).

Entry into the ten grounds marks the transition from “ordinary person” (Skt. *prthagjana*; Ch. *fan* 凡) to “sage” (Skt. *ārya*; Ch. *sheng* 聖), so these thirty minds—because they precede entry into the ten grounds—constitute an intermediate sequence of stages during which the aspirant’s sagehood is already “conceived” but nevertheless still “embryonic.”²¹ Thus, after listing the first ten of these thirty minds, the *Renwang jing* summarizes this transitional period of early bodhisattva development as follows:

In these [first ten minds], the bodhisattva is capable of transforming sentient beings in small measure and has already surpassed all of the good stages of the [lesser] two vehicles. All buddhas and bodhisattvas [in the course of their development] nurture these ten minds, which constitute an embryo of sagehood.

是為菩薩能少分化眾生，已超過二乘一切善地。一切諸佛菩薩長養十心，為聖胎也。²²

Here, the embryo of sagehood is said to encompass only the first ten minds, but a subsequent verse passage associates the transitional embryo period more broadly with all thirty minds:

伏忍聖胎三十人	[As for] the embryo of sagehood’s thirty stages of patiently subduing [passions],
十信十止十堅心	[Namely] the ten faiths, ten cessations, and ten firm minds,
三世諸佛於中行	Among all buddhas of the three times [past, present, and future] who have practiced within [them]
無不由此伏忍生	There are none who were not born from this patient subjugation [of passions]. ²³

bodhisattva path in China; Tōru Funayama, “Buddhist Theories of Bodhisattva Practice as Adopted by Daoists,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 20 (2011): 18.

²¹ On the distinction between *fan* and *sheng* and the notion that one becomes *sheng* upon attaining the first bodhisattva ground, see Tōru Funayama, “Buddhist Theories,” pp. 29–30.

²² *Foshuo renwang boreboluomi jing*, in *T.*, no. 245, v. 8, p. 826b28–30.

²³ *Foshuo renwang boreboluomi jing*, in *T.*, no. 245, v. 8, p. 827b18–19.

It is according to this broader association, with all thirty minds, that the embryo of sagehood went on to be known.

These two excerpts show that the concept of the embryo of sagehood is quite different from Chinese Buddhists' interpretation of the embryo of the thus-come one as equivalent to buddha-nature. Whereas buddha-nature stands for the buddhahood latently inherent in all sentient beings, the *Renwang jing* discusses the embryo of sagehood as measuring a high-level aspirant's progress along the bodhisattva path according to a gradual process of sagely fetal growth that marks mastery over the passions. Indeed, superficial similarities between Chinese interpretations of the embryo of the thus-come one and the embryo of sagehood mask subtle figurative differences that, however slight they might seem at first glance, nevertheless turn out to be quite consequential in determining the ways these tropes went on to be used in subsequent Chinese Buddhist discourse.

First, consider the similarities. In Chinese Buddhism generally, "sage" (Skt. *ārya*; Ch. *sheng*) and "thus-come one" (Skt. *tathāgata*; Ch. *rulai* 如來) both serve as epithets for the Buddha or buddhas.²⁴ Moreover, like the Sanskrit term *garbha*, the Chinese *tai* is ambiguous in its capacity to refer to either womb or embryo. One sixth-century translation of the Buddha's life story uses the term *shengtai* to refer to the embryonic Buddha Śākyamuni within Queen Māyā's womb.²⁵ This translation suggests that some Chinese Buddhists may have connected the embryo of sagehood to the Buddha's miraculous fetal gestation in a manner similar to Radich's proposal about the docetic origins of the Indian Buddhist concept of the embryo of the thus-come one.

Yet the Chinese term *shengtai* never seems to have been used to translate the Sanskrit word *tathāgatagarbha* despite its ostensive readiness to do so. Neither were the two terms used interchangeably in China; on the contrary, a crucial difference separated their respective receptions over the course of medieval Chinese history. The operative soteriological verbs used in relation to both the embryo of the thus-come one and buddha-nature were typically "to view" (*guan* 觀) or "to see" (*jian* 見).²⁶ This "soteriology of vision," to use Radich's

²⁴ On the figure of the "sage" (*sheng*) as a mediator between Buddhist and Chinese conceptual worlds, see Sharf, *Coming to Terms*, p. 112.

²⁵ *Fo benxing ji jing* 佛本行集經, in *T.*, no. 190, v. 3, p. 685b24–c3. This passage is reproduced in the *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林, in *T.*, no. 2122, v. 53, p. 343b20–c3.

²⁶ Radich, *The "Mahāparinirvāna-mahāsūtra,"* pp. 136–38.

expression,²⁷ is encapsulated in the popular Chinese Buddhist notion that liberation entails “seeing one’s [buddha-]nature and [instantly] becoming a buddha” (*jianxing chengfo* 見性成佛), a phrase first coined in a sixth-century Chinese Buddhist scriptural commentary.²⁸ The expression complicates any attempt to fully separate Buddhist understandings of epistemology and ontology into distinct domains: precisely in the moment of seeing one’s own buddha-nature, one *becomes* a buddha. Because becoming (*cheng* 成) is here understood to be instantaneous, it is not invested with any processual shape or heft; it is categorical, all or nothing.

In stark contrast to this soteriology, medieval Chinese Buddhist texts never mention “seeing” the embryo (or womb) of sagehood. Instead, the operative verbs used in conjunction with *shengtai* include “to enter” (*ru* 入), “to conceive” (or “be conceived within”; *tuo* 託/托), “to birth” (or “be born from”; *chu* 出), and most commonly “to nurture” (*yang* 養 or *zhangyang* 長養).²⁹ The coherence of “nurturing the embryo of sagehood” derives from the concept of “nurturing the embryo” (*yangtai* 養胎), a framework for prenatal care dating to antiquity.³⁰ As these verbs attest, *shengtai* retained closer semantic connections to literal embryology—hence its translation as “the embryo of sagehood”—than did the embryo of the thus-come one, which was understood in China as equivalent to buddha-nature.

Unlike the soteriology of sudden liberative vision associated with the concept of buddha-nature, the embryo of sagehood figured a soteriology of gradual development. Yet there is more to the difference between these two soteriologies than a reflection of debates about “sudden” (*dun* 頓) versus “gradual” (*jian* 漸) liberation that unfolded

²⁷ Radich, *The “Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra,”* p. 136.

²⁸ *Da banniepan jing jijie* 大般涅槃經集解, in *T.* no. 1763, v. 37, p. 490c26.

²⁹ Although *tuo* literally means “to entrust,” *tuotai* (托胎 or 託胎) acquired a technical meaning referring to the Buddha’s entry into Queen Māyā’s womb in one of the eight scenes (*baxiang* 八相) of his life story, and it was used interchangeably with *rutai* 入胎 (enter the womb) and *jiangtai* 降胎 (descend into the womb); see, for example, Zhiyi’s list of the eight scenes in his *Weimojie xuanshu* 維摩經玄疏, in *T.*, no. 1777, v. 38, p. 536c16–20. By the Tang, the phrase had come into casual use among non-Buddhists to refer to conception in a general way, for example in Sun Simiao’s 孫思邈 (581–682) medical text *Beiji qianjin yaofang* 備急千金要方, in *Zhongyi bidubaibu mingzhu, Beiji qianjin yaofang* 中醫必讀百部名著, 備急千金要方, ed. Li Junde 李俊德 and Gao Wenzhu 高文柱, 30 *juan* 卷 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2008), j. 27, pp. 492–93.

³⁰ Sabine Wilms, “The Transmission of Medical Knowledge on ‘Nurturing the Fetus’ in Early China,” *Asian Medicine* 1.2 (2005): 276–314.

over the course of medieval China.³¹ The embryo of sagehood emerged in close connection with the specific sequence of abstract linear stages of the apocryphal Chinese bodhisattva path. The concept of the embryo of sagehood lent to that path a nonlinear shape and trajectory of growth in metaphysical time and space, and the concept naturalized enlightenment as the slow gestation of a fetus in the womb. Just as importantly, as I show in the next section, the embryo of sagehood was used by medieval Chinese Buddhist exegetes to elucidate a vision of embodied liberation directly *opposed* to ordinary embryology.

The Embryo of Sagehood in Chinese Buddhist Exegesis

The *Renwang jing* was a popular text in medieval China, and the embryo of sagehood was discussed in numerous commentaries and treatises by leading Chinese Buddhist exegetes. The original text is often ambiguous, and scholars, both past and present, have relied on commentaries and the contexts of its reception to make sense of some of its more opaque passages, including passages that touch upon the embryo of sagehood. In this section, I examine medieval exegetical interpretations of the embryo of sagehood—both stemming from and independent of the *Renwang jing*—with special focus on the work of the famous scholar-monk Tiantai Zhiyi 天台智顛 (539–598). I argue that many of these scholiasts treat the embryo of sagehood as metaphysics rather than metaphor, for they use it in terms closely bound up with broader Buddhist attitudes toward human embodiment.

Charles Orzech, author of the only monograph-length study of the *Renwang jing*, focuses on the “retranslated” version of the scripture produced in eighth-century esoteric Buddhist circles.³² In the main commentary on this version of the scripture, its author—Liangbi 良贇 (717–777), a disciple of the famous esoteric Buddhist Amoghavajra (Ch. Bukong 不空; 704–774)—makes clear that he understands the embryo of sagehood to be a metaphor, a trope identifying the relationship between practitioners and the teachers who guide them: “That

³¹ See *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987).

³² Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom*.

which is called an ‘embryo’ [in this passage is so called because] one’s own seed[-nature] serves as the cause, while good friends serve as the condition.”³³ Orzech himself develops this metaphorical reading of the embryo of sagehood in terms of both religious and political relationships, suggesting that because kings are understood as capable of traversing the first ten minds (but no further), they themselves “are the maternal ‘womb’ in which the seed of the Buddha-fruit is nurtured. Kings are then likened to mothers, bodhisattvas to embryos, and Buddhas are thereby given birth. Kings, then, are *Tathāgatagarbha*.”³⁴ Orzech equates the embryo of sagehood with *tathāgatagarbha* (the embryo of the thus-come one), but for reasons already discussed, I do not think the two can be so easily identified with each other.

In certain earlier Chinese Buddhist texts as well, the concept of the embryo of sagehood was clearly understood to be a metaphor. For example, in a passage from the translated *Daśabhūmikasūtra śāstra* (Ch. *Shidi jing lun* 十地經論; Treatise on the ten-grounds sutra), its author Vasubandhu (Ch. Shiqin 世親, fl. ca. fourth–fifth centuries) describes the ten grounds of the original Indian Buddhist path of the bodhisattva as being “like pregnancy in a womb.”³⁵ The Chinese Buddhist scholar-monk Fashang’s 法上 (495–580) exegesis says:

[The phrase] “like pregnancy in a womb” takes women as an example and takes pregnancy as a metaphor. In the first month, [a pregnant woman] carries the embryo, and after ten months, [the embryo] is completely developed. Bodhisattvas are also like this: in the first ground, they attain the embryo of sagehood, and in the tenth ground, the body of sagehood is completely developed.

“如孕在藏” 借女人況懷胎為喻。初月懷胎十月滿足。菩薩亦爾：初地得聖之胎，十地聖體滿足。³⁶

Fashang connects the embryo of sagehood not to an apocryphal sequence of thirty minds preceding entry into the grounds—which, as we have seen, is what the *Renwang jing* does—but instead to the earlier

³³ 所言胎者，自種為因善友為緣；*Renwang huguo boreboluomiduo jing shu* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經疏，in *T.*, no. 1709, v. 33, p. 465c26–27. In Buddhist texts, “good friends” (*shanyou* 善友) typically refers to teachers.

³⁴ Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom*, p. 96.

³⁵ 如懷孕在藏；*Shidi jing lun*, in *T.*, no. 1522, v. 26, p. 124a20–21.

³⁶ *Shidi lun yishu* 十地論義疏，in *T.*, no. 2799, v. 85, p. 767b24–26.

Indian Buddhist understanding of the bodhisattva path as consisting only of the ten grounds themselves. Notwithstanding his suggestive use of the phrase “body of sagehood” (*shengti*) to describe the embryo of sagehood at its fullest maturity, in this passage Fashang clearly frames sagely pregnancy as a metaphor for the unfolding bodhisattva path, with each progressive month of pregnancy corresponding to one ground.

On the other hand, influential exegetes like Tiantai Zhiyi and others characterized the embryo of sagehood in terms that I argue are more metaphysical than metaphorical. Consider a passage from Zhiyi’s magnum opus *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 (Great [manual of] calming and contemplation)—a massive and synthetic work combining a broad range of doctrinal ideas from Buddhist scriptural tradition, including ideas about the bodhisattva path, with practical instructions for meditation. Zhiyi expounds on the regulation of form, breath, and mind as a necessary precondition for the practice of meditation, comparing the inextricability of these “three matters” (*sanshi* 三事) to the necessary presence of heat, allotted lifespan, and consciousness in order for the conception of a child to take place.³⁷ He continues:

If one can regulate [these] three matters [intrinsic to] the ordinary person and transform them into the three dharmas of the sage, then form will become the source that gives rise to precepts, breath will become the gate of entry into concentration, and mind will become the cause for the birth of wisdom. These precepts will enable one to cast off the ordinary, vulgar body of evil destinies and accomplish the completely developed dharma body of the six perfections. This breath will enable one to transform and dispel evil perceptions, accomplishing delight in dhyana and joy in the Dharma. Dhyana causes wisdom to arise, and sages take it [wisdom] as their lifespan. This mind will enable one to convert the life-and-death mind into bodhi mind, [constituting] the perfect and eternal knowledge of sagehood.

若能調凡夫三事變為聖人三法，色為發戒之由，息為入定之門，心為生慧之因。此戒能捨惡趣凡鄙之身，成辦聖人六度滿足法身。此息能變散動惡覺，即成禪悅法喜。因禪發慧，聖人以之為命。此心即能改生死心為菩提心真常聖識。³⁸

Zhiyi begins this description by drawing a comparison between fac-

³⁷ *Mohe zhiguan*, in *T.*, no. 1911, v. 46, p. 47b8–9.

³⁸ *Mohe zhiguan*, in *T.*, no. 1911, v. 46, p. 47b19–25.

tors conducive to meditation and to the conception of a child. Yet the image of conception very quickly begins to exceed the boundaries of metaphor or simile. When Zhiyi exhorts practitioners to cast off the vulgar bodies into which sentient beings are endlessly reborn while passing through the various “destinies” of samsara and attaining, in their place, a perfect dharma body, we can no longer easily reduce his discussion of conception to metaphorical status.

Even Zhiyi’s statement that sages take wisdom as their lifespan attests to a complex interconnection between liberative knowledge and embodiment, epistemology and ontology. Later exegetes who seem to have taken this notion quite literally include Changshui Zixuan 長水子璿 (965–1038): “The form body uses food [to sustain] its lifespan; the dharma body uses wisdom [to sustain] its lifespan.”³⁹ Zhiyi asserts that the dharma body can be attained by upholding the precepts in conjunction with developing concentration and wisdom—instead of being reborn into a “natural” body subject to birth and death. I suggest that, rather than reading this passage as simply extended metaphor, we read Zhiyi as passing fluidly from metaphor into a metaphysical juxtaposition of ordinary bodies and buddha bodies.

His rhetorical passage from metaphor to metaphysics becomes even clearer as Zhiyi continues to expound his instructions for meditation, asserting that “at the beginning [of meditation practice], these three dharmas join together to form the embryo of sagehood.”⁴⁰ The “three matters” (form, breath, and mind) that have been transfigured into the “three dharmas” (precepts, concentration, and wisdom) turn out, not simply to be *like* the three necessary elements for the conception of a child, but to be themselves the causal nexus of supernatural conception. Later, in the conclusion of the same section, after offering detailed practical instructions on the proper procedures for undertaking the threefold regulation necessary for meditation, Zhiyi returns again to the embryo (here, better rendered “womb”) of sagehood:

Practitioners who skillfully regulate these three matters cause [themselves] to be conceived within the womb of sagehood. Because the activity of

³⁹ 色身以食為命，法身以慧為命；*Jingang jing shuji kehui* 金剛經疏記科會，in *Xuzangjing* 續藏經，150 vols. (Taipei: Xinwenfeng, 1975) [hereafter X.], no. 491, v. 25, p. 406, column a, line 15 [hereafter, column letters and line numbers are written with the page number: p. 406a15].

⁴⁰ 始此三法合成聖胎；*Mohe zhiguan*, in *T.*, no. 1911, v. 46, p. 47b25.

their minds is not yet fully under their command, they ought to apply their minds to bringing together the father and mother of skillful means and the perfection of wisdom [respectively], who will conceive [them] within the womb of sagehood. Why would [such practitioners] allow themselves to be conceived within the wombs of denizens of hell, the three [unfortunate] destinies, or the realms of humans or gods?

行者善調三事，令託聖胎。如即行心未有所屬，應當勤心和會方便智度父母，託於聖胎。豈可託地獄三途人天之胎耶？⁴¹

The virtues of skillful means and perfect wisdom are personified as the practitioner's father and mother respectively, a trope not unique to China and used often in Indian Mahayana Buddhist scriptures.⁴²

Yet in this case, the metaphor is particularly pregnant, for here again Zhiyi implies that the embryo or womb of sagehood is not just an analogy for the practitioner's gradually growing enlightenment. Rather, it is a literal site for rebirth that he suggests ought to be considered highly preferable to rebirth in one of the canonical six destinies (*liuqu* 六趣) that together constitute existence in samsara. By again juxtaposing sagely rebirth against the destinies of samsara, Zhiyi reinforces the idea that the efficacy of meditation might be measured in terms of the embodied processes of conception, gestation, and birth. In Zhiyi's writing, these embodied processes prove capable of figuring not only cyclical bodily suffering but also its converse, embodied liberation.

Elsewhere in the *Mohe zhiguan*, commenting on an obscure passage in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (Ch. *Da banniepan jing* 大般涅槃經; Great *parinirvāṇa* sutra), Zhiyi again raises the embryo of sagehood for discussion through one of the alternatives in his "four unspeakables" (*si bukeshuo* 四不可說) tetralemma: nonbirth-birth (*busheng sheng* 不生).⁴³ The *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* itself gives the following less-than-clear description of nonbirth-birth: "peacefully abiding

⁴¹ *Mohe zhiguan*, in *T.*, no. 1911, v. 46, p. 48a9–12.

⁴² For example, Kumārajīva's translation of the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, in *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經, in *T.*, no. 475, v. 14, p. 549c2–4. Cf. Joanna Rogers Macy, "Perfection of Wisdom: Mother of All Buddhas," in *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, ed. Rita M. Gross (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1977), pp. 315–33; José Ignacio Cabezón, "Mother Wisdom, Father Love: Gender-Based Imagery in Mahāyāna Buddhist Thought," in *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, pp. 181–99.

⁴³ To form this tetralemma, Zhiyi chose four out of six propositions found in the original sutra. Zhiyi's remaining three alternatives are: nonbirth-nonbirth (*busheng busheng* 不生不生), birth-nonbirth (*sheng busheng* 生不生), and birth-birth (*sheng sheng* 生生). See

in worldly truth, when someone first emerges from the womb, this is called ‘nonbirth-birth.’⁴⁴ Chinese commentaries written shortly after the scripture’s translation interpret this passage simply to mean that—according to the mundane logic of worldly truth—when people are born, they go from being “not born” to being “born.”⁴⁵ More important for our purposes, however, is the way that Zhiyi interprets this passage in terms of sacred embryology:

Now to explain “worldly truth.” [This term refers to] when ignorance combines with dharma nature and all kinds of [mistaken] separations and distinctions are produced [in the mind]; thus it is called “worldly truth.” As for “peacefully abiding,” if by means of calming and contemplation [that is, meditation], one abides peacefully in worldly truth, then it [worldly truth] becomes an inconceivable object, and the stage of practicing observation is completed; thus it is called “peacefully abiding.” Because one peacefully abides, [this stage of practice] is called “being conceived within the womb of sagehood.” When one first activates one’s buddha knowledge and [buddha] vision and recognizes that [all things] are unborn (*wusheng ren* 無生忍),⁴⁶ this stage is called “exiting [or, being born from] the womb of sagehood.” Because [at this stage] one does not see worldly truth [through the lens of] ignorance, [the sutra] says “not born.” Because one obtains buddha knowledge and buddha vision, [the sutra] says “born.” The [*Great Wisdom*] *Treatise* (*Dazhidulun* 大智度論) says: “all dharmas are not born, but prajna is born,”⁴⁷ which is the [same] meaning [as the sutra’s nonbirth-birth].

今解世諦者，無明共法性，出生一切隔歷分別，故名世諦。安住者，以止觀安於世諦，即是不可思議境，觀行位成，故名安住。以安住故名託聖胎。初開佛知見得無生忍，名出聖胎。不見無明世諦，故言不生。獲佛知佛見，故名為生。論云：諸法不生而般若生。即其義也。⁴⁸

appendix A in *The Great Cessation-and-Contemplation (Mo-ho chih-kuan)*, trans. Paul L. Swanson (Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing, 2004), pp. 39–40.

⁴⁴ 安住世諦，初出胎時，是名不生生；*Da banniepan jing*, in *T.*, no. 374, v. 12, p. 490b2.

⁴⁵ *Da banniepan jing jijie*, in *T.*, no. 1763, v. 37, p. 518b15–16.

⁴⁶ On reading of *ren* 忍 (forbearance) in this particular compound as its homophone *ren* 認 (recognition), see Sakurabe Hajime 櫻部建, *Bukkyōgo no kenkyū* 佛教語の研究, 2nd ed. (Kyoto: Bun’eidō shoten, 1997), pp. 54–59.

⁴⁷ *Dazhidulun*, in *T.*, no. 1509, v. 25, p. 496c23–29. This passage actually originates in the *Mohe boreboluomi jing* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經, upon which the *Dazhidulun* provides commentary, in *T.*, no. 223, v. 8, p. 302c17–24.

⁴⁸ *Mohe zhiguan*, in *T.*, no. 1911, v. 46, p. 60a14–20.

Zhiyi draws together a variety of far-flung Buddhist discourses on birth, nonbirth, and the unborn in order to answer the question: How is buddhahood born? In particular, he seeks to reconcile the notion that all Buddhist aspirants must somehow give birth to wisdom with the idea that things are ultimately “unborn” (*wusheng* 無生). Zhiyi’s solution to this problem is to propose that at the precise stage on the bodhisattva path when aspirants realize the fundamentally unborn nature of all things, they are simultaneously born from the womb of sagehood. Zhiyi follows the tradition, found in some Buddhist scriptures, that recognition of the ultimately unborn nature of all things accompanies entry into the first bodhisattva ground.⁴⁹ As we have seen above, the first ground is also typically taken to mark entry into sagehood, so it makes sense to say it is this stage at which the practitioner is born as a sage.

On the other hand, Zhiyi’s analysis involves a novel interpretation of worldly truth, or conventional truth. In Buddhist two-truths doctrine, “worldly truth” refers to the conventional existence of discrete objects not considered “ultimately” real. But here Zhiyi argues that proper contemplation turns worldly truth into a space where one might peacefully abide. Thus, he suggests that the entire mundane world ceases to perpetuate the miserable cycle of rebirth, becoming instead a spiritual womb in which practitioners gestate and await their future birth as sages.

Zhiyi’s disciple Guanding 灌頂 (561–632) comments on his teacher’s interpretation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* passage:

“Peacefully abiding in worldly truth” has two meanings. According to the exoteric teaching of life and death, from the first thought of conception in a womb onward is called “peacefully abiding in worldly truth.” According to the esoteric teaching of nirvana, [a bodhisattva who is] at the stage of cultivating skillful means is called “peacefully abiding in worldly truth.” When cultivation gives rise to realization and ignorance is destroyed, this [moment] constitutes the first emergence from the womb; it is also nirvana, which is beginningless and yet is said thenceforth to begin.

安住世諦者有二義。若就生死外法，即是初念託胎來名安住世諦。若就涅槃

⁴⁹ The medieval Chinese Buddhist scholar-monk Jizang 吉藏 (549–623) summarizes the various divergent traditions about when on the bodhisattva path one recognizes that all things are unborn; see *Jingming xuan lun* 淨名玄論, in *T.*, no. 1780, v. 38, p. 866a26–b29. I thank Funayama Tōru for this reference.

內法，修習方便位名安住世諦。從修發證無明豁破，即是初出胎時，亦是涅槃無始而言於始。⁵⁰

Just as Zhiyi, in his *Mohe zhiguan*, juxtaposes rebirth via the womb of sagehood against rebirth in the six realms of samsara, here Guanding distinguishes exoteric and esoteric readings of the same scriptural passage in order to distinguish two kinds of birth: ordinary and sagely. By associating peacefully abiding in worldly truth with the cultivation of skillful means, Guanding reiterates Zhiyi's notion of worldly truth as a womb within which the practitioner grows as a bodhisattva.

Skillful means—the capacity to tailor Buddhist teaching to the circumstances and capacities of different audiences—is a pivotal Mahayana concept that distinguishes bodhisattvas and buddhas, who seek to save all sentient beings, from arhats and pratyekabuddhas, who pursue only their own liberation. Since skillful means require the capacity to use worldly truth in order to engage the worldly subjectivities of myriad sentient beings, it makes sense that Guanding sees worldly truth as the womb that brings bodhisattvas' capacity for skillful means to fruition. This interpretation echoes the first *Renwang jing* passage (considered above), in which bodhisattvas nurturing the embryo of sagehood are said to be “capable of transforming sentient beings in small measure.”⁵¹

As Paul Swanson shows, Zhiyi elaborated upon the traditional Mahayana doctrine of two truths to develop an original philosophy of threefold truth. The third and highest truth in Zhiyi's schema avoids the extremes of either substantialism or nihilism, instead suspending form and emptiness in a dynamic balance. In keeping with this vision of the highest truth, Zhiyi was comfortable with the idea that buddhahood might entail, not the total absence of form, but rather the presence of inconceivably wondrous forms.

The Buddha has severed all delusions and passions and thus cannot be “retributively” reborn in this samsaric world. However, Zhiyi denies that Buddhahood involves complete extinction: the Buddha does enjoy the fruits of his labours which are described with a quote from the *Lotus Sūtra* as “immeasurable, undefiled, and pure.”⁵²

⁵⁰ *Da banniepan jing shu* 大般涅槃經疏, in *T.*, no. 1767, v. 38, p. 157a21–25.

⁵¹ *Foshuo renwang boreboluomi jing*, in *T.*, no. 245, v. 8, p. 826b28–29.

⁵² Paul L. Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-T'ai Philosophy: The Flowering of the Two*

Indeed, from the passages in his *Mohe zhiguan* analyzed above we can see that Zhiyi envisioned practitioners who traverse the uppermost stages of the bodhisattva path via meditation practice as both giving birth to wisdom and escaping the relentless trajectory of mundane birth and death to be reborn in the dharma body. The two-truths doctrine upon which Zhiyi's philosophy was based already posited these truths "as both the content of, and ways of viewing, reality."⁵³ In these passages, Zhiyi embellishes this conflation of epistemology and ontology by portraying worldly truth as a womb-like space capable of hosting the practitioner's gestating embryo of sagehood.

Zhiyi was not the only prominent medieval Chinese Buddhist to construe the embryo of sagehood in metaphysical terms. Jizang, for example, glosses the *Renwang jing* passage (discussed above) about the first ten minds constituting the embryo phase of the bodhisattva path⁵⁴ by connecting the embryo of sagehood to Mahayana buddha-body theory in a manner similar to Zhiyi: "to create the seed of the Great Vehicle [Skt. Mahāyāna] dharma body is called the 'embryo of sagehood.'"⁵⁵ The *Shi moheyan lun* 釋摩訶衍論 (K. *Sōk mahayōn ron*, Treatise explaining the Mahayana), a commentary likely written in eighth-century Silla on the Chinese apocryphon *Qixin lun* 起信論 (Awakening of faith treatise), juxtaposes mundane and sagely wombs in a way that echoes Zhiyi's and Guanding's writings. The *Shi moheyan lun* explains that an advanced stage on the bodhisattva path is called the "[stage of a] true child of the Buddha" because at that stage one is "distantly separated from ordinary wombs, having already entered the womb of sagehood."⁵⁶

The medieval Chan scholar-monk Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 (780–841) also saw the embryo of sagehood in metaphysical terms. At first glance, the following line of Zongmi's verse commentary on the *Yuanjue jing* 圓覺經 (Sutra of perfect enlightenment) might seem

Truths Theory in Chinese Buddhism (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1989), p. 134 (romanization altered).

⁵³ Swanson, *Foundations of T'ien-T'ai Philosophy*, p. 1.

⁵⁴ *Foshuo renwang boreboluomi jing*, in *T.*, no. 245, v. 8, p. 826b28–30.

⁵⁵ 成大乘法身種子名為聖胎也; *Renwang bore jing shu* 仁王般若經疏, in *T.*, no. 1707, v. 33, p. 329b2–3.

⁵⁶ 名為真實佛子人, 遠離凡胎已入聖胎故; *Shi moheyan lun*, in *T.*, no. 1668, v. 32, p. 649a19. On the authorship of this treatise, see Mochizuki Shinkō, *Bukkyō kyōten seiritsu shiron*, pp. 651–70.

to attest to a metaphorical rather than metaphysical understanding: “the awakened mind is the embryo of sagehood.”⁵⁷ But in a later sub-commentary, Zongmi clarifies what he understands this identification of the awakened mind and the embryo of sagehood to entail:

When by means of but a single thought one awakens to this perfect and wondrous mind, the storehouse consciousness (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*) is thereupon impregnated with the seed of sagehood, though conditions have not yet brought it to external manifestation; thus, it is like the beginning of pregnancy.

但一念覺悟此圓妙心，即藏識中已熏成聖種，緣未彰現於外，故如始胎也。⁵⁸

Here, it becomes clear that Zongmi does not simply view the embryo of sagehood as a metaphor for enlightenment, and he does not use pregnancy as an incidental rhetorical device to describe an otherwise abstract metaphysical schema. Rather, he identifies a figurative resemblance between the embryo of sagehood and the impregnation of the storehouse consciousness, a concept from the Mahayana philosophical tradition of Yogacara. According to Yogacara metaphysics, the storehouse consciousness—a technical term encompassing various facets of sentient beings’ cognition—must become “impregnated” (*xun* 熏) with seeds of buddhahood in order for one to attain liberation.⁵⁹ Both the embryo of sagehood and the impregnation of the storehouse consciousness, in turn, figuratively resemble ordinary pregnancy, but this likeness only heightens the divide that separates them as soteriological opposites.

These medieval exegetes all sought to explain how buddhahood is born—and some grappled with the paradoxical relationship between buddhahood’s birth and the Mahayana notion that all things are fundamentally unborn. The resulting soteriologies combined meditation, wisdom, and embodiment in complex ways. For these exegetes, the body was not neutral discursive terrain but served as the figurative site for soteriologically loaded juxtapositions of purity and impurity,

⁵⁷ 覺心即是聖人胎; *Yuanjue jing daochang xiuzhengyi* 圓覺經道場修證儀, in *X.*, no. 1475, v. 74, p. 398b7.

⁵⁸ *Yuanjue jing daochang xiuzhengyi*, in *X.*, no. 1475, v. 74, p. 398b7–8.

⁵⁹ On storehouse consciousness, see, for example, Yu Tan 雨曇, “Weishixue shang zhi zhongzi yi” 唯識學上之種子義, in *Xiandai fojiao xueshu congkan* 現代佛教學術叢刊, 100 vols. (Taipei: Dasheng wenhua chubanshe, 1976–1979), v. 25, pp. 59–96.

suffering and bliss, subjugation and salvation. In particular, all of these exegetes clearly differentiated supernatural wombs capable of giving birth to sagehood (and by extension buddhahood) from the wombs of actual women living in the world. Thus, as with narrative descriptions of the Buddha Śākyamuni's extraordinary gestation and birth, the embryo of sagehood depends for its meaning on the female body as a foil for the representation of a cosmic womb of supernatural rebirth. Zhiyi argued that the embryo of sagehood could be conceived through nothing more than proper meditation, and Zongmi equated the embryo of sagehood with the awakened mind—only to explain that mental awakening as a metaphysical process by which the storehouse consciousness becomes impregnated with the seed of sagehood. For these exegetes, then, the properly harnessed mind of (normatively male) celibate monastics was understood to possess the unique power of giving birth to buddhahood.

The Embryo of Sagehood in Chan Buddhism

The emergence of the Chan tradition from the Tang through Song marked a turning point in Chinese Buddhist history, as religious authority began to shift from translated and apocryphal Buddhist scriptures to the recorded sayings of indigenous Chinese Chan masters. The soteriological approach that eventually prevailed in the mature Chan tradition of the Song period emphasized sudden over gradual enlightenment. It leaned heavily on the soteriological idea of seeing one's buddha-nature and instantly becoming a buddha (*jianxing chengfo*), which in turn was closely connected to the soteriology of vision in the Indian Buddhist doctrine of the embryo of the thus-come one and its Chinese reception. Chan Buddhists rarely rely on sexual or reproductive imagery in their writings and instead prefer a rustic aesthetic that foregrounds the immanence of buddhahood in mundane life. Nevertheless, and perhaps unexpectedly, the trope of the embryo of sagehood finds a prominent place in Chan teachings. Although Chan texts discussing the embryo of sagehood lack the explicit commitment to a metaphysics of supernatural bodies found in the writings of medieval Chinese exegetes and instead treat the embryo of sagehood as a metaphor, I show how Chan use of the con-

cept retains consequential traces of these earlier commitments—how the metaphor is pregnant with metaphysical implications. The figurative specificity of the embryo of sagehood, I suggest, lends Chan soteriology a particular shape that resists assimilation to a paradigm that juxtaposes sudden versus gradual enlightenment—a paradigm that, moreover, has guided most scholarly analysis of the Chan tradition’s approach to liberation.⁶⁰

The locus classicus of Chan interpretations of the embryo of sagehood is a widely quoted sermon attributed to the famous Hongzhou 洪州 school founder Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788). Mazu is best known for the slogan “this very mind is Buddha” (*jixin shi fo* 即心是佛). The passage survives within several major compilations, but I quote the earliest extant version from the *Zutang ji* 祖堂集 (Patriarchs’ hall collection; compiled 952). Mazu opens his sermon by saying that “this mind is precisely buddha-mind”—an early version of the phrase that would later become “this very mind is Buddha.”⁶¹ He continues:

That which is born in the mind is called form. Given that form is empty, birth is thus nonbirth. If you grasp this meaning, then at any time you can simply put on your clothes, eat your food, nurture the embryo of sagehood, allow fate to take its course, and pass the time. What more is there to do?

於心所生，即名為色。知色空故，生即不生。若躡此意，但可隨時著衣喫飯，長養聖胎，任運過時。更有何事？⁶²

In this passage, Mazu suggests that after one recognizes the ultimate emptiness of form and the identity of birth and nonbirth, there is no need to strive for any further accomplishment. Instead, one can simply live out one’s mundane life, as this enlightened recognition is now immanent in one’s performance of everyday activities. Yet amid his description of these leisurely postenlightenment activities—putting on clothes, eating food, and passing one’s time as fate takes its course—Mazu also suggests that one ought to nurture the embryo of sagehood. How should we understand the apparent incongruity of the embryo of sagehood’s presence in Mazu’s sermon?

⁶⁰ For an overview, see Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), esp. chap. 2.

⁶¹ 此心即是佛心; *Zutang ji*, ed. Sun Changwu 孫昌武, Kinugawa Kenji 衣川賢次, and Nishiguchi Yoshio 西口芳男, 20 *juan* in 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), v. 2, j. 14, p. 610.

⁶² *Zutang ji*, v. 2, j. 14, p. 611.

Although the *Zutang ji* dates from over a century after Mazu's death, the writings of Guifeng Zongmi that discuss the teachings of the Hongzhou school attest to the sermon's relatively early provenance. Zongmi's remarks also reiterate the apparent contradiction between Mazu's claim that enlightenment is instantaneous and need not grow or develop, on the one hand, and his use of an embryological trope originating in bodhisattva-path literature, on the other (although neither Mazu nor Zongmi explicitly cites the *Renwang jing* in their discussions of the embryo of sagehood). In his appraisal of different regional Chan lineages, Zongmi paraphrases the teachings of the Hongzhou school—of which he was especially critical—in the following terms: “[Buddha-]nature is like empty space, neither growing nor diminishing. By what means could it be supplemented?”⁶³ As we have seen, this understanding of buddha-nature aligns closely with the Chinese Buddhist interpretation of the embryo of the thus-come one's fundamentally atemporal and untarnished perfection, whose accompanying soteriology of vision involves sudden enlightenment to an already perfect buddha-nature. But Zongmi continues in his characterization of Hongzhou teachings: “In all times and places, one simply ceases to make karma and nurtures the spirit, [letting] the embryo of sagehood grow and manifest its inherent spiritual wondrousness.”⁶⁴ We are left to conclude that for the Hongzhou school, even if buddha-nature does not grow, the embryo of sagehood certainly does.

Although modern scholars long considered Mazu a radically antinomian figure—an understanding shaped perhaps as much by Zongmi's criticism of the Hongzhou school as by the study of Mazu himself—recent scholarship shows that Mazu's sermons are replete with allusions to canonical Buddhist scriptures.⁶⁵ Notably, Mazu's teaching on the embryo of sagehood may have been informed not only by the *Renwang jing*'s portrayal of the bodhisattva path, from which the phrase “nurturing the embryo of sagehood” originates, but also by the

⁶³ 性如虛空，不增不減，何假添補？*Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu* 禪源諸詮集都序，in *T.*, no. 2015, v. 48, p. 402c25.

⁶⁴ 但隨時隨處息業養神，聖胎增長顯發自然神妙；*Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu*，in *T.*, no. 2015, v. 48, p. 402c26–27.

⁶⁵ Jinhua Jia, *The Hongzhou School of Chan Buddhism in Eighth- through Tenth-Century China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 6; and Mario Poceski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way: The Hongzhou School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 5.

notion that enlightenment is closely connected with recognizing the unborn nature of all things. As we have seen, the sixth-century scholar-monk Tiantai Zhiyi interpreted the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*'s concept of nonbirth-birth (*busheng sheng*) as a paradoxical moment when a bodhisattva realizes all things are ultimately unborn and—through this realization—is simultaneously born from the womb of sagehood. Similarly, eighth-century Chan master Mazu teaches that “birth is thus nonbirth” (*sheng ji busheng* 生即不生) and describes comprehension of this insight as a sudden enlightenment, after which one may begin to nurture the embryo of sagehood. Mazu's analysis thus resembles Zhiyi's earlier interpretation, with everyday activity replacing Zhiyi's more abstract vision of worldly truth as the womb within which the embryo peacefully abides.

Yet Mazu and Zhiyi differ in their sequential ordering of the path. For Zhiyi the realization that all things are fundamentally unborn coincides with birth from the womb of sagehood, but for Mazu this realization allows one to begin the process of embryo-nurturing. In other words, for Zhiyi the instant of enlightenment is a kind of buddha birth, but for Mazu it is a moment of spiritual conception. Indeed, Mazu never describes what the *birth* of the embryo of sagehood might look like, instead leaving the process of embryo-nurturing without a fixed end point. Still, the simple fact that Mazu's sermon outlines a specific temporality of practice at all is important because Mazu's Hongzhou school is reputed to have eschewed any notion of progress toward liberation, favoring the idea of buddhahood's total immanence in mundane activity. But the passage under examination carries a clear sense of both causal and temporal differentiation: *if* you comprehend the teaching that birth is nonbirth, *then* you may nurture the embryo of sagehood in the midst of everyday life. The immanence of buddhahood in everyday life is only realized *after* attaining sudden enlightenment and *through* a gradual process of nurturing.⁶⁶

The sequential differentiation of sudden enlightenment followed by gradual nurturing of the embryo of sagehood resolves, at least partially and provisionally, the inherent tension between an instantaneous soteriology of vision and a slow soteriology of embryo-nurturing. This sequence bears some resemblance to Zongmi's notion of “sudden

⁶⁶ On “gradualist” elements in Hongzhou-school thought, see Poceski, *Ordinary Mind*, chap. 6.

enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation” (*dunwu jianxiu* 頓悟漸修).⁶⁷ Indeed, Song-era Chan Buddhists occasionally explicitly identified nurturing the embryo of sagehood with the gradual cultivation understood to follow sudden enlightenment according to Zongmi’s formulation.⁶⁸

But the specific figurative connotations that emerge from Mazu’s description of nurturing the embryo of sagehood exceed Zongmi’s abstract framework of gradual cultivation. For Zongmi, postenlightenment cultivation carries a clear sense of linear progress toward buddhahood. For Mazu, by contrast, embryo-nurturing is an expansive nonlinear process by which enlightenment is put to work in the world. If Mazu offers a vivid picture of nurturing the embryo of sagehood while performing such mundane tasks as putting on one’s clothes and eating one’s food, he does not offer any details about *where* this practice might be optimally performed.

By the tenth century, however, it became increasingly common for Chan monks to be described as nurturing the embryo of sagehood in isolated reclusion atop mountains or deep in forests. Thus, for example, the poet-monk Qiji 齊己 (860–940) versifies about “sitting on stones, gazing at clouds, and nurturing the embryo of sagehood.”⁶⁹ Elsewhere, he recounts a trip to the stone bridge deep in the Tiantai 天台 mountains in search of the legendary eighteen arhats, whom he imagines “sitting together on green cliffs, nurturing the embryo of sagehood.”⁷⁰

The association of nurturing the embryo of sagehood with forest and mountain settings likely derives at least in part from earlier texts associated with the Northern School of Chan that describe meditation masters “nurturing the spirit” (*yangshen* 養身) or “nurturing nature” (*yangxing* 養性) in isolated reclusion.⁷¹ The Northern School itself,

⁶⁷ For discussion of Zongmi’s use of this phrase, see Peter N. Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (1991; rpt., Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), pp. 192–96.

⁶⁸ *Gaoli guo Puzhao chanshi xiuxin jue* 高麗國普照禪師修心訣, in *T.*, no. 2020, v. 48, p. 1006c17–18.

⁶⁹ 坐石看雲養聖胎; Qiji, “Zi yi” 自貽, *Quan Tang shi* 全唐詩, 900 *juan* in 25 vols. (1960; rpt., Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), v. 24, j. 845, p. 9555.

⁷⁰ 共坐蒼崖養聖胎; Qiji, “Ji Nanyue zhu daoyou” 寄南嶽諸道友, in *Quan Tang shi*, v. 24, j. 846, p. 9574.

⁷¹ *Lengqie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記, in *Shoki no zenshi* 初期の禪史, ed. Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, 2 vols. (Tokyo: Chikuma shobō, 1971–1976), v. 1, pp. 67, 93, 268.

in turn, may have drawn these descriptions from an indigenous repertoire of tropes connecting what Robert Campany calls the “quest for transcendence” with isolated mountain residence.⁷² For now, these connections must remain hypothetical, but it is clear that by the early Song, the activity of nurturing the embryo of sagehood was firmly grounded in the Chinese cultural imagination of forested and mountain space. Though differing from Mazu’s characterization of nurturing the embryo of sagehood without regard to locale, these later descriptions of peaceful embryo-nurturing in idyllic natural surroundings retain Mazu’s sense of open-endedness and nonlinearity.

Before long, however, the Chan movement’s emerging institutional structure further refined the range of meanings attached to nurturing the embryo of sagehood. More particularly, the process became associated with a period of reclusion or aimless wandering undertaken by Chan monastics—after their enlightenment was certified by reception of Chan lineage transmission, but prior to returning to public life to take up the abbacy of a temple. After receiving transmission, Chan disciples formally became the equals of their masters and could thus no longer reside long-term in their masters’ monasteries. The obligation to depart, however, did not necessarily mean that they had anywhere specific to go. It was likely no easy task to attain appointment to the abbacy of a monastery, and the interim period separating their “graduation” from their masters’ monasteries and their attainment of an abbacy of their own may regularly have extended to several decades. No longer disciples but not yet masters, it was quite apposite that these Chan monastics were described as wandering without attachment and nurturing the embryo of sagehood in leisure.

Given that this concept may have emerged out of a conflation of teachings from the Northern and Hongzhou schools of Chan, it is perhaps no coincidence that the earliest uses of the phrase “nurturing the embryo of sagehood” to characterize this liminal period of unaffiliated wandering are found in Song-era biographies of disciples of both Shenxiu 神秀 (605–706), the patriarch of the Northern School, and

⁷² Robert Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009). For early medieval discussions, see the entry for Jieyu 接輿 in the *Lixian zhuan* 列仙傳, in *Zhengtong Daozang* 正統道藏, 36 vols. (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988) [hereafter *DZ*], no. 294, v. 5, j. 1, p. 11a, and Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (283–343) *Baopuzi* 抱朴子, in *Baopuzi neipian jiaoshi* 抱朴子內篇校釋, ed. Wang Ming 王明, rev. ed., 20 *juan* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), j. 5, p. 111.

Mazu, the patriarch of the Hongzhou School. Thus in the *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 (Song-period [collection of] biographies of eminent monks; published 988), the wandering monk Zhifeng 智封 (fl. ca. seventh–eighth centuries) is said to have met Shenxiu, whereupon

the ice of his doubts melted away. Deciding to nurture the embryo of sagehood, he quickly took his leave and, crossing the Pujin [ford], [took up residence in] the Anfeng mountains [in present-day Shanxi]. There he passed ten years, eating from trees and drinking from streams. [At that time,] the provincial governor Wei Wen ascended the mountain to invite him to return to the city, and [the governor] established the new Anguo Monastery for him [Zhifeng] to reside in. From that time on, he rushed about [performing public duties] in the padded robes [of a city monk].

遊行登武當山，見秀師會，疑水解泮。思養聖胎，倏辭出蒲津安峯山。禁足十年，木食澗飲。屬州牧衛文昇請歸城內，建新安國院居之。因茲奔走毳衣。⁷³

In a similar manner, the biography for the monk Taiyu 太毓 (747–825) describes him paying a visit to Mazu and undergoing a dramatic enlightenment experience: “in an instant, [he] suddenly accomplished the Great Way.”⁷⁴ In this moment of enlightenment, we are told, Taiyu walked shoulder to shoulder with all the worthies and sages who had come before him—and by implication received Chan lineage transmission from Mazu. Then, “aiming to broaden his experiences [of the world], he nurtured the embryo of sagehood in leisure.”⁷⁵ Taiyu eventually took up residence at Mount Furong 芙蓉山 (in present-day Jiangsu), remaining there until his growing reputation among government officials compelled him to abandon his wandering lifestyle and accept an appointment to the abbacy of Changding Temple 禪定寺 (in present-day Henan).⁷⁶

Over the course of the Song period, the trope of nurturing the embryo of sagehood during a lengthy—but typically finite—period of postenlightenment reclusion assumed the status of orthodoxy in Chan literature. A sermon in the *Guzunsu yulu* 古尊宿語錄 (Recorded sayings of ancient [Chan] worthies) attributed to Chan master Lizong 利

⁷³ *Song gaoseng zhuan*, in *T.*, no. 2061, v. 50, p. 759c9–12.

⁷⁴ 剎那而頓成大道; *Song gaoseng zhuan*, in *T.*, no. 2061, v. 50, p. 773c16.

⁷⁵ 俾廣聞見閑養聖胎耳; *Song gaoseng zhuan*, in *T.*, no. 2061, v. 50, p. 773c20.

⁷⁶ *Song gaoseng zhuan*, in *T.*, no. 2061, v. 50, p. 773c20–29.

蹤 (800–880), but likely dating from the Song period, surveys what had become the established convention by then:

Those people of old simply witnessed the Way—[by recognizing that] this very mind is Buddha, this very mind is Dharma—and thereupon shouldered their [newfound] faith and departed, living wherever they pleased in thatch-roofed huts or caves, nurturing the embryo of sagehood, just waiting for the fruit of the Way to mature.

他古人只見道箇即心是佛，即心是法，便承信去，隨處茅茨石室長養聖胎，只待道果成熟。⁷⁷

The explicit reference to famous teachings of Mazu (“this very mind”) confirms the Hongzhou school’s pivotal role in formulating the motif of postenlightenment embryo-nurturing. This sermon also clearly shows that by the Song, nurturing the embryo of sagehood had gained close associations with reclusion, which it did not have for Mazu.

Of course, the supposedly unbounded freedom that was said to accompany this embryo-nurturing period may have provided rhetorical cover for a time of anxious uncertainty facing recent recipients of Chan lineage transmission who aspired to secure their place in the lineage. Although acquisition of Chan transmission alone was extremely rare and prestigious in the grand scheme of Chinese Buddhism, it was only by being appointed abbot of a monastery that Chan monastics during the Song period could train disciples and, by propagating the lineage, ensure their long-standing place in it. The result, as Morten Schlütter observes, was that “the vast majority of Chan monks without abbacies were simply forgotten.”⁷⁸ We are thus probably justified—when we read that a Chan master spent ten or twenty years “nurturing the embryo of sagehood” in reclusion before being beckoned back to the world by enthusiastic government officials to assume an abbacy—in treating the phrase as a euphemism for this period of career uncertainty. A Chan lineage member’s appointment to an abbacy marked the end of this liminal period, and Chan masters serving as abbots were never described as nurturing the embryo of sagehood. Instead,

⁷⁷ *Guzunsu yulu*, in *X*, no. 1315, v. 68, p. 75a11–12.

⁷⁸ Morten Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), p. 66.

they were ritually treated as living buddhas.⁷⁹ Institutional circumstance thus provided closure to the open-ended process of embryo-nurturing first envisioned by Mazu.

What did recent Chan lineage recipients in the Song period actually do during this sometimes decades-long interim period? Ironically, given the association of embryo-nurturing with freedom and leisure, many Chan monastics likely spent this time diligently forging connections with patrons willing to sponsor their immediate activities and eventually help them secure an abbacy. Take, for example, a poem by the famous statesman and intellectual Wang Anshi 王安石 (1021–1086), entitled “Using a poem to detain Superior Man Rong at his departure” (“Rong shangren ju yu gui yi shi liu zhi” 榮上人遽欲歸以詩留之), that describes a visit from a (probably Chan) monk who has traveled all the way from the Tiantai Mountains. In a playful request that the monk stay longer, Wang writes:

已能為我迂神足 Since you are already capable of using your
 “spirit-feet” for my sake [to pay me a visit],
 便可隨方長聖胎 You are now free to nurture the embryo of
 sagehood wherever you like [and need not
 return to your original monastery].⁸⁰

Wang’s reference to spirit-feet (*shenzu* 神足) alludes to one of the six canonical spiritual powers (Skt. *abhijñā*; Ch. *shentong* 神通) in Buddhism—it allows arhats and other quasi-supernatural beings complete freedom of movement to fly or simply appear wherever they please. The half-flattering, half-joking implication here is that, because the monk has traveled so far to visit Wang, he must already be an enlightened master possessing “spirit-feet” and—thus having demonstrated that he has already attained enlightenment and conceived the embryo of sagehood—is therefore at liberty to nurture it wherever he pleases.

This reference probably also acknowledges an awareness on Wang’s part that the monk Rong has received Chan lineage transmis-

⁷⁹ For details of a Chan master’s ritual identity as a living buddha, see Robert H. Sharf, “Ritual,” in *Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 261–67.

⁸⁰ Wang Anshi, “Rong shangren ju yu gui yi shi liu zhi,” in *Quan Song shi* 全宋詩, 3785 *juan* in 72 vols. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1992), v. 10, j. 554, p. 6608.

sion but not yet been appointed to an abbacy. A growing body of scholarship demonstrates that the relationship between Chan Buddhists and lay literati was pivotally important to Chan's institutional success throughout the Song period.⁸¹ Supporting young and promising Chan lineage holders during this tenuous period of career uncertainty must have allowed literati to facilitate the appointment of like-minded monastics to prominent abbeys and to invest in early personal connections that could be maintained after these acquaintances went on to attain wider fame.

The Song-era Chan tradition's association of nurturing the embryo of sagehood with a finite period of postenlightenment reclusion resonated with early Chinese articulations of the sagely ideal: sages not finding worldly conditions suitable to their noble aims might temporarily hide from public view in order to await the right time to emerge and play their proper role benefiting society.⁸² This association likely held broad appeal among Song-period literati. Indeed, the image of Chan masters undertaking a decades-long postenlightenment nurturing period in isolated reclusion elicited praise even from the famous Learning of the Way (*Daoxue* 道學) philosopher and skeptic of Buddhism Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200).⁸³

Although the metaphysics of spiritual pregnancy and buddha bodies that guided much of the medieval reception of the embryo of sagehood faded from view and the trope took on a more pronouncedly metaphorical character for Chan Buddhists, metaphysics did not disappear from the scene entirely. By expanding our purview to consider Chan Buddhism in conversation with Daoist inner alchemy, whose emergence followed closely upon the rise of Chan, we can see that even after the medieval period, the embryo of sagehood continued to serve as a focal point for debates about the role of embodiment in the pursuit of religious liberation.

⁸¹ For example, Mark Halperin, *Out of the Cloister: Literati Perspectives on Buddhism in Sung China, 960–1279* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006); Albert Welter, *Monks, Rulers, and Literati: The Political Ascendancy of Chan Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Schlütter, *How Zen Became Zen*, chap. 3.

⁸² Alan J. Berkowitz, *Patterns of Disengagement: The Practice and Portrayal of Reclusion in Early Medieval China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 2–3, juxtaposes this Confucian model of reclusion with a Daoist one that spurns the world entirely.

⁸³ *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類, ed. Wang Xingxian 王星賢, 140 *juan* in 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), v. 8, j. 126, p. 3019.

The Embryo of Sagehood in Daoist Inner Alchemy

Buddhists were not the only religious aspirants in medieval China convinced that liberation entailed metaphysical rebirth. Already in the second and third centuries we find scattered references in Daoist texts to religious practices of “fostering the embryo” (*peitai* 培胎) or of nurturing an infant god that resides inside the body (called the “red child”; *chizi* 赤子).⁸⁴ These practices developed into formalized and complex meditative procedures for visualizing one’s own spiritual rebirth in the late fourth-century revealed scriptures of the Shangqing 上清 tradition.⁸⁵ Shangqing and other early medieval Daoist sacred embryologies might stem in part from the *Daodejing*’s 道德經 reverence for the undifferentiated primordality of prenatal gestation, but Kim Jihyun 金志珉 argues that these medieval Daoist texts transform the *Daodejing*’s metaphorical treatment of the infant into something more than metaphor.⁸⁶ Similarly, in his analysis of two such medieval Shangqing Daoist scriptures, Gil Raz remarks:

According to Daoist embryology, mundane gestation and birth from female wombs were the inevitable cause of death. They therefore advocated meditative techniques by which adepts could give birth to their perfect selves. . . .

. . . The idealized process of producing the perfected self is in fact a negation of the birth by a mother.⁸⁷

The polarity of Raz’s concluding sentence is strikingly similar to the

⁸⁴ Fabrizio Pregadio, “Early Daoist Meditation and the Origins of Inner Alchemy,” in *Daoism in History: Essays in Honour of Liu T’sun-yan*, ed. Benjamin Penny (Milton Park, Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), pp. 127–28, 135–39.

⁸⁵ The most comprehensive study of embryological imagery in Daoism is Katō Chie 加藤千恵, *Furō fushi noshintai—Dōkyō to “tai” no shisō* 不老不死の身体——道教と「胎」の思想 (Tokyo: Taishūkan shoten, 2002). See also Dominic Steavu, “Cosmos, Body, and Gestation in Taoist Meditation,” in *Transforming the Void*, pp. 111–46.

⁸⁶ Kim Jihyun, “Shōtai o meguru shisō to hyōshō—dōkyō to bukkyō o chūshin ni” 聖胎をめぐる思想と表象——道教と仏教を中心に, in *Koten kaishaku no Higashi Ajia-teki tenkai—shūkyō bungaku o chūshin ni* 古典解釈の東アジア的展開——宗教文献を中心として, ed. Fujii Jun 藤井淳 (Kyoto: Kyōto daigaku Jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 2017), p. 183.

⁸⁷ Gil Raz, “Birthing the Self: Metaphor and Transformation in Medieval Daoism,” in *Gendering Chinese Religion: Subject, Identity, and Body*, ed. Jinhua Jia, Xiaofei Kang, and Ping Yao (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), pp. 184, 198.

apposition found at the origins of the Indian Buddhist doctrine of the embryo of the thus-come one and in medieval Chinese Buddhist interpretations of the embryo of sagehood.

I focus, however, not on these intriguing early similarities between Buddhist and Daoist understandings of the soteriological significance of pregnancy, but on a later period in Buddho-Daoist history, when traditions of Daoist inner alchemy (*neidan*) that emerged during the late Tang and Song incorporated the Buddhist concept of the embryo of sagehood (*shengtai*) into their soteriological programs alongside elements borrowed from Shangqing Daoist materials. This incorporation formed part of inner alchemy's broader combination of vocabularies from external alchemy (*waidan* 外丹), mythology, correlative cosmology, and Buddhism (especially Chan) to create a soteriological program centered on individual self-cultivation that was synthetic yet novel. By analyzing the ways inner alchemists appropriated the concept of the embryo of sagehood in elaborating their own metaphysics of supernatural bodies, I show how the concept's metaphysical implications—latent in the writings of Chan Buddhists—were reactivated by Daoists holding strong commitments to a vision of liberation as embodied.

We have already gained a sense of what the embryo of sagehood meant to various Chinese Buddhists at different times, but what did it mean to inner alchemists? Though procedural details vary, the basic soteriological framework that inner alchemists developed around the embryo of sagehood can be found in some of their earliest writings—apparently the first Daoist texts ever to use the term *shengtai* (embryo of sagehood).

Zhen longhu jiuxian jing 真龍虎九仙經 (Scripture of the nine transcendents and the perfected dragon and tiger)—one of the earliest inner alchemical texts—contains commentaries attributed to Ye Fashan 葉法善 (616–720) and Luo Gongyuan 羅公遠 (fl. ca. early eighth century) but was likely not written until the ninth century.⁸⁸ The terse base text instructs practitioners to “imagine the true essence of the two kidneys merging into a single *qi* 氣, and the blood of the heart descending to combine [with it], whereupon the image of the

⁸⁸ Sakauchi Shigeo 坂内榮夫, “Shin ryūko kusen kyō’ no naitan shisō” 『真龍虎九仙經』の内丹思想, in *Sankyō koshō ronsō* 三教交渉論叢, ed. Mugitani Kunio 麥谷邦夫 (Kyoto: Kyōto daigaku Jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 2005), pp. 237–61.

infant is formed.”⁸⁹ The Ye-attributed commentary then states that the embryo of sagehood is formed out of the same substances—semen (*jing* 精) and blood—whose combination in sexual intercourse is understood to cause ordinary pregnancy. In this case, however, those substances are merged through the practice of visualization within the body of a single (normatively male) individual to form the embryo of an immortal body. Subsequently, the Luo-attributed commentary instructs that “after one has created the embryo of sagehood, one must refine the body of sagehood.”⁹⁰ After ten months the body of sagehood is fully refined, and “Luo” tells us that this body is then capable of exiting the practitioner’s mundane body from the crown of the head riding on a purple cloud and that it constitutes a second body identical in appearance to the material body.⁹¹

Similarly, the *Zhong Lü chuandao ji* 鍾呂傳道集 (Record of the transmission of the way from Zhong[li Quan] to Lü [Dongbin]), dating from the late Tang to early Song, describes how “the medicinal ingredients of the inner elixir (*neidan* 內丹) come from the heart and kidneys, which all people possess.”⁹² By combining them within oneself according to the proper timing and procedures, one “appropriates the efficacy of sexual intercourse between husband and wife, so that the embryo of sagehood is completed and true *qi* is born.”⁹³ As a result, “when the great medicine is complete, the yang spirit emerges and there is a body outside the body, like a cicada shedding its skin.”⁹⁴ This passage mixes several registers of imagery—most centrally those of alchemy and sex. Its basic sequence is: manipulating bodily substances originally found in the heart and kidneys toward the center of the body, where they fuse together; then refining the resultant inner elixir (*neidan*) or embryo of sagehood (the two concepts are

⁸⁹ 然後想真精兩腎合一氣，心血下結成，方成嬰兒象；*Zhen longhu jiuxian jing*, in *DZ*, no. 227, v. 4, j. 1, p. 9a.

⁹⁰ 凡結聖胎後，須鍊聖身；*Zhen longhu jiuxian jing*, in *DZ*, no. 227, v. 4, j. 1, p. 9b.

⁹¹ *Zhen longhu jiuxian jing*, in *DZ*, no. 227, v. 4, j. 1, pp. 10b–11a.

⁹² 內丹之藥材出於心腎，是人皆有也；*Zhong Lü chuandao ji*, in *Xiuzhen shishu* 修真十書, in *DZ*, no. 263, v. 4, j. 15, pp. 10b–11a. *Neidan* can be translated as “inner elixir” or “inner alchemy,” depending on context. Within early inner alchemical texts, *neidan* is usually read as “inner elixir,” but over time it became a metonym for the whole tradition.

⁹³ 修合効夫婦交接之宜，聖胎就而真氣生；*Zhong Lü chuandao ji*, in *Xiuzhen shishu*, in *DZ*, no. 263, v. 4, j. 15, p. 11a.

⁹⁴ 大藥成而陽神出，身外有身，似蟬脫蛻；*Zhong Lü chuandao ji*, in *Xiuzhen shishu*, in *DZ*, no. 263, v. 4, j. 15, p. 11a.

used interchangeably); and finally giving birth from the crown of the head to an immortal body, called the “yang spirit” (*yangshen* 陽神).⁹⁵ This sequence is very similar to the procedure described in the *Zhen longhu jiuxian jing* and is common to virtually all inner alchemical literature.

Inner alchemists drew upon a variety of inherited discourses, vocabularies, and images, which they deployed with such a dazzlingly fluid interchangeability that there might seem to be no fundamental ground of meaning undergirding inner alchemical writing. It is, as Isabelle Robinet puts it, an “effort to say the contradictory,” utilizing language in an intentionally elusive manner in order to confound the rational mind and enact the universe’s fluctuating volatility.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, inner alchemy still possesses a certain metaphysical trajectory and hierarchy of soteriological value. Thus, although Robinet’s analyses of inner alchemical textuality draw out its richness and sophistication, the soteriological stakes of inner alchemical practice sometimes end up limiting its capacity for textual free-play.

These stakes are particularly evident in the single most commonly voiced criticism that inner alchemists have leveled at Buddhism: because Buddhists supposedly focus exclusively on seeing their own (buddha) nature (*jianxing* 見性)—a reference to the soteriology of vision that I contrast with the soteriology surrounding the embryo of sagehood—but neglect to cultivate “lifespan” (*ming* 命), they fail to fabricate the yang spirit and, in the end, become nothing more than yin ghosts (*yingui* 陰鬼). For example, the *Zhong Lü chuandao ji* attaches the following polemic to its description of the lowest level of transcendents (*xian* 仙):

[Ghost transcendents (*guixian* 鬼仙) have] forms like withered trees and minds like dead ashes. They guard their spirit consciousness inside, never allowing their single-mindedness to disperse. Through concentration they

⁹⁵ Wm. Clarke Hudson, “Spreading the *Dao*, Managing Mastership, and Performing Salvation: The Life and Alchemical Teachings of Chen Zhixu,” (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2007), pp. 324–26. See also Stephen Eskildsen, *Asceticism in Early Taoist Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 8; Louis Komjathy, *Cultivating Perfection: Mysticism and Self-Transformation in Early Quanzhen Daoism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 16.

⁹⁶ Isabelle Robinet, “The Alchemical Language, or the Effort to Say the Contradictory,” in *The World Upside Down: Essays on Taoist Internal Alchemy*, ed. and trans. Fabrizio Pregadio (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011), pp. 17–43.

externalize their yin spirits, which become clear and numinous ghosts—but not transcendents of pure yang. Because they single-mindedly prevent the dispersal of their yin spirit, they are called “ghost-transcendents.” Although they are called transcendents, they are actually ghosts. When worshippers of the Buddha from ancient times to the present work diligently to reach this stage and then claim to have attained the Way, it is truly laughable.

形如槁木，心若死灰，神識內守，一志不散。定中以出陰神，乃清靈之鬼，非純陽之仙。以其一志陰靈不散，故曰鬼仙。雖曰仙，其實鬼也。古今崇釋之徒，用功到此，乃曰得道，誠可笑也。⁹⁷

Even inner alchemists explicitly enthusiastic about Chan Buddhism nevertheless often subordinated it to inner alchemy for similar reasons. Zhang Boduan 張伯端 (987?–1082), one of the most famous inner alchemists of the Song period, studied Chan texts extensively yet “ultimately presents in his work . . . , a synthesis of Buddhist and Daoist methods in which the former are assimilated to the latter, so that the final package is essentially Daoist.”⁹⁸ Zhang’s advocacy of the dual cultivation of nature and lifespan (*xingming shuangxiu* 性命雙修) implies the inadequacy of any Buddhist practice that focuses exclusively on witnessing buddha-nature.⁹⁹ A later legend about Zhang’s engagement in a contest with a Buddhist monk to see who could travel farther in an externalized spirit body narrates Zhang’s victory as due to his possession of a yang spirit, in contrast to the Buddhist only having a yin spirit.¹⁰⁰ Subsequent Song and Yuan (1260–1368) inner alchemists, such as Xue Daoguang 薛道光 (1078?–1191) and Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (b. 1290), both praised Chan Buddhism and explicitly criticized the notion, widespread among their Chan contemporaries, that seeing one’s own buddha-nature alone is sufficient to turn one into a buddha (*jianxing chengfo*). Xue, Chen, and others also claimed that famous Chan patriarchs, including Bodhidharma (Ch. Damo 達磨, fl. ca. sixth century),

⁹⁷ *Zhong Lü chuandao ji*, in *Xiuzhen shishu*, in *DZ*, no. 263, v. 4, j. 14, p. 3a–b. A similar criticism of Buddhists is attributed to the Quanzhen 全真 Daoist Qiu Chuji 丘處機 (1279–1368); Komjathy, *Cultivating Perfection*, p. 245.

⁹⁸ Joshua Capitanio, “Portrayals of Chan Buddhism in the Literature of Internal Alchemy,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 43.2 (2015): 139.

⁹⁹ Capitanio, “Portrayals of Chan Buddhism,” pp. 128–34.

¹⁰⁰ Capitanio, “Portrayals of Chan Buddhism,” pp. 140–42. Capitanio (pp. 124–26) also describes a text attributed to inner alchemist Peng Xiao 彭曉 (d. 955) that praises Chan Buddhism but still associates inner alchemy with yang methods and Buddhism with yin.

Huineng 慧能 (or 惠能, 638–713), and even the Buddha Śākyamuni himself, had practiced inner alchemy and only thereby achieved true liberation.¹⁰¹

Inner alchemists succeeded in investing embodiment with particular soteriological significance by setting themselves apart from their Buddhist peers primarily through their embodied concepts of lifespan, the embryo of sagehood, and the yang spirit—even while claiming to inherit what they saw as the true legacy of earlier Buddhist traditions.¹⁰² Inner alchemists, like both Shangqing Daoists and medieval Chinese Buddhists, viewed religious liberation as involving an inversion of ordinary pregnancy. A practitioner conceived, gestated, and gave birth to (or was reborn in) a supernatural body.

The specific grounds upon which Song-era inner alchemists criticized Buddhists are significant. Earlier anti-Buddhist polemics put forth by Daoists largely revolved around the idea that Buddhism was a “barbarian” religion unsuited to Chinese civilization.¹⁰³ In contrast, Song-era inner alchemists criticized Buddhist failure to fabricate their yang spirit—focusing on Chan Buddhists’ retreat from the detailed metaphysical explanations for buddha birth, which had proliferated in medieval China, in favor of a relatively streamlined emphasis on seeing one’s own buddha-nature. Of course, Buddhists did not stop writing about the embryo of sagehood just because Daoist inner alchemists made it a major feature of their own soteriological program.

The ongoing popular association of the embryo of sagehood with Buddhism and with Chan in particular, even during the late imperial period, is attested in a passage from the Ming (1368–1644) novel *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (Journey to the West), which contains the verse:

¹⁰¹ Capitanio, “Portrayals of Chan Buddhism,” pp. 149, 152; Hudson, “Spreading the Dao,” p. 451.

¹⁰² There were exceptions. Wu Shouyang 伍守陽 (fl. ca. sixteenth–seventeenth centuries), for example, asserted that the embryo is merely a metaphor and mocked those who spoke of a literal body outside the body; Mu Wang 王洙, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy: The Taoist Practice of Neidan*, trans. and ed. Fabrizio Pregadio (Mountain View, CA: Golden Elixir Press, 2011), p. 107.

¹⁰³ Anna Seidel, “Le sūtra merveilleux du Ling-pao suprême, traitant de Lao Tseu qui convertit les barbares (le manuscrit S. 2081): Contribution à l’étude du Bouddho-taoïsme des Six Dynasties,” in vol. 3 of *Contributions aux études de Touen-houang*, ed. Michel Soyumié (Paris: École française d’Extrême-Orient), pp. 305–52; Livia Kohn, *Laughing at the Tao: Debates among Buddhists and Taoists in Medieval China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 11–16.

禪門須學無心訣 In the Chan school, [aspirants] must learn the
 technique of mindlessness;
 靜養嬰兒結聖胎 Tranquilly nurturing the infant, they form the
 embryo of sagehood.¹⁰⁴

This passage equates the Buddhist embryo of sagehood with the Daoist concept of nurturing the infant and ascribes the entire program to Chan Buddhism, connecting it to the Buddhist idea of mindlessness. This conflation suggests that for people without vested institutional interest in either Buddhism or Daoism, the two understandings of spiritual pregnancy were seen as virtually interchangeable.

Buddhist monastics, for their part, did not take Daoist criticism lying down. Sometimes they openly competed over which tradition possessed superior spiritual bodies, as we see in a commentary by the Buddhist Jiaoguang Zhenjian 交光真鑑 (fl. ca. sixteenth–seventeenth centuries):

I have laughed at the fact that those who aspire to become [Daoist] transcendents take externalizing the yang spirit to be an excellent thing. Little do they know that the three mind-born bodies of Buddhism (which, for us, constitute but a superficial accomplishment) are incomparably superior and more wondrous. How much greater still are the more profound stages of [attaining] the ten [buddha] bodies? And they absurdly call these “yin spirits”! This is truly ignorant speech.

嘗笑學仙者以出陽神為勝事，不知釋宗淺位三意生身妙超無比，何況深位之十身乎？而顧妄謂陰神，真無知之言也。¹⁰⁵

Even as he vehemently disagrees with Daoist claims to spirit-body supremacy, Jiaoguang’s facility here with putting the two programs for embodied liberation into conversation reflects centuries of discursive developments in both Chinese Buddhism and Daoist inner alchemy that worked to render them commensurable. Moreover, Jiaoguang’s remarks suggest that negotiation over the role of embodiment in pursuit of spiritual liberation continued throughout Chinese history.

¹⁰⁴ Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩, *Xiyou ji*, 100 *hui* 回 in 2 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1980), v. 2, h. 58, p. 708.

¹⁰⁵ *Lengyan jing zhengmai shu* 楞嚴經正脈疏, in X., no. 275, v. 12, p. 454c20–21.

Conclusion

The concept of the embryo of sagehood first emerged in medieval China as a trope giving shape to the otherwise abstract bodhisattva-path schema invented in the apocryphal *Renwang jing*. From its origins, the concept operated along a distinct discursive trajectory from the better known and figuratively similar Indian Buddhist doctrine of the embryo of the thus-come one that came to be equated with buddha-nature in China. The embryo of sagehood implies the need not only to see one's inherent buddha-nature but also to nurture a buddha-hood that has to be conceived, gestated, and birthed. For many medieval exegetes, such as Tiantai Zhiyi, the embryo of sagehood served as an intermediate metaphysical figure connecting practitioners of meditation to the dharma body to which they aspired. With the rise of Chan Buddhism, nurturing the embryo of sagehood became a metaphor for a liminal period of idealized mountain and forest reclusion undertaken by those who had received lineage transmission but were still awaiting appointment to an abbacy. Yet even in Chan literature, the embryo of sagehood's figurative and processual specificity preserves traces of earlier Chinese Buddhist authors' and exegetes' concerns, a legacy that Daoist inner alchemists used and combined with Shangqing sacred embryology.¹⁰⁶

How did the embryo of sagehood, an image with unavoidable sexual and bodily connotations, emerge out of a tradition of celibate monastics with a penchant for portraying the body as an impermanent object of disgust? It is precisely in explicit juxtaposition with the mundane body, cast as locus of human suffering, that many Chinese Buddhists (and Daoists) exhort practitioners to aspire to a categorically different, supernatural mode of rebirth and embodiment. Why, asks Tiantai Zhiyi, would anyone wish to be reborn into the six destinies of samsara when a sagely alternative is available?¹⁰⁷ The embryo of sagehood helps answer the question of how buddha bodies come to

¹⁰⁶ The embryo of sagehood was equally important in Japanese Zen, where it assumed a similar place in describing Zen masters' periods of postenlightenment reclusion; see Kenneth Kraft, *Eloquent Zen: Daitō and Early Japanese Zen* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1992), pp. 41–47, and Victor Sōgen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), pp. 27–28.

¹⁰⁷ *Mohe zhiguan*, in *T.*, no. 1911, v. 46, p. 48a11–12.

be—a question that requires stepping onto the soteriologically thorny discursive terrain of sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and rebirth.

The concept, in turn, makes gender visible and significant in particular ways, raising the specter of female pollution and engaging the relationship between mothers and children. The embryo of sagehood depends for its soteriological meaning on an already established Buddhist characterization of the female body as especially impure. It also frames a uniquely indigenous Chinese Buddhist metaphysics according to which (normatively male) celibate monastics can give birth to buddhahood using nothing more than their minds.¹⁰⁸

What, finally, should we make of the blurry boundary between metaphor and metaphysics in the embryo of sagehood's history? This blurriness, I suggest, is symptomatic of larger tensions lurking in the figurative domains of gender, sexuality, and embodiment. On the one hand, bodily images—being so intimately familiar and close at hand—make appealing objects for the rhetorical elaboration of metaphor. Yet they also constitute fraught discursive arenas that rarely remain innocent for long. Instead, bodily images make pregnant metaphors. It is difficult to find a perfectly “clean” metaphoricity operating in the domain of bodily and sexual imagery, difficult to locate semantic content not inflected by the bodily form through which it is made known. Buddhists themselves were aware of this problem and often warned against the danger of mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself—that is, mistaking signifier for signified, mistaking the figure for the figureless experience of enlightenment it is supposed to represent. As we have seen, however, this warning did not stop even the most intellectually rigorous Chinese Buddhists from breaching the boundaries separating metaphorical and literal truth, nor did it prevent complicated ontologies from infiltrating their carefully crafted and supposedly totalizing epistemologies. The question, then, is not whether the embryo of sagehood is, once and for all, literal or metaphorical but rather how the boundaries between metaphor and metaphysics are constantly negotiated—and have been for centuries—in and through such figurative images as the embryo of sagehood.

¹⁰⁸ To my knowledge, the first extant case of a woman Chan master being said to nurture the embryo of sagehood is found in the seventeenth century; Beata Grant, *Eminent Nuns: Women Chan Masters of Seventeenth-Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), pp. 47–48.

In a doctrinal culture that leans heavily on binary oppositions (even when collapsing them)—ultimate and conventional truth, *samsara* and *nirvana*—perhaps no other image makes liminality as clearly visible as does the embryo of sagehood. Not only does it serve to connect the bodies and minds of ordinary people with those of buddhas and bodhisattvas, it also conjoined the soteriological quandaries of medieval Chinese Buddhist scholiasts with the Chan school's vision of enlightenment amid everyday life, provided rhetorical space for Chan lineage recipients awaiting appointment to an abbacy, and rendered buddha bodies commensurable with Daoist yang spirits. Yet even in this capacity as a mediator tying together various facets of Chinese religious culture, the embryo of sagehood is not just a shapeless vessel of meaning. Rather, its figurative specificity helps govern an intertwined nexus of religious discourses that understand all of life—from the lowest realms of rebirth to the loftiest pinnacle of freedom—to be embodied.