

The Architectural Types and Cultural Connotations of Esoteric Buddhism in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region[1]

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Abstract: As a significant cultural region in northern China, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region, with its unique geographical location and historical-cultural background, has provided favorable conditions for the spread and development of Esoteric Buddhism of Chinese Tradition. Esoteric Buddhist architecture in this region exhibits distinct localized characteristics, making it a valuable sample for studying religious dissemination and adaptive architectural design. Due to the profound and abstruse doctrines of Esoteric Buddhism, coupled with the widespread tendency of integration between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism after the Tang Dynasty, many Esoteric Buddhist buildings were often integrated into the system of Exoteric Buddhist temples, and their characteristics gradually became vague and indistinguishable. This study takes the mandala cosmic schema as its theoretical framework, integrates methodologies such as iconological analysis, textual research, and field investigation, and systematically examines the spatial practice and formal evolution of Esoteric Buddhist architecture in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region by sorting out the development context and regional transformation characteristics of such architecture.

Keywords: Esoteric Buddhist architecture; Type comparison; Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei; Cultural integration; Mandala; Vajra world

Introduction

The Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Region has been a core area for the spread of Buddhism since ancient times. The architecture of Han - transmitted Esoteric Buddhism is a creative combination of Esoteric Buddhist doctrines and Han - region architecture, forming a rich artistic landscape of Buddhist architecture in the Beijing - Tianjin - Hebei region and preserving a complete sequence of Han - transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture from the Tang and Song Dynasties to the Ming and Qing Dynasties. However, after the events of Emperor Wuzong of Tang's persecution of Buddhism (841 - 846) and Emperor Shizong of Later Zhou's persecution of Buddhism (955), Tang Dynasty Esoteric Buddhist architecture and related documents were almost destroyed, and there is a lack of empirical evidence. There is controversy over whether many ancient buildings contain Esoteric Buddhist semantics. At present, the academic community's definition of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture is ambiguous, and systematic research achievements are relatively scarce. The relevant research on the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region mainly focuses on buildings with obvious Esoteric Buddhist characteristics, such as Dharani sutra pillars. There is less attention paid to other types of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture in this region, such as Miyan towers and pavilion halls. The renowned scholar Mr. Fang Yong once mentioned in the 1990s that "the second impact of Western architectural culture brought about by Esoteric Buddhism has not been given sufficient attention by the academic community so far".[2] The architectural theorist Pitera once emphasized that "architectural typology needs to decode both the material form and the spiritual will simultaneously".[3] Esoteric Buddhist architecture is like a code book written in brick and wood. We have cracked its structural grammar but have not yet understood its religious semantics. This paper conducts a mutually verifying study by combining the archaeological discoveries of Esoteric Buddhist sites in China and abroad with documentary records, focuses on investigating the localization characteristics of mandala elements in the Buddhist architecture of this region, makes a comparison of Chinese and foreign types, reveals the special forms of the localization of Esoteric Buddhism in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, and outlines this unique architectural type on the eastward extension of the "Silk Road". This will contribute to the understanding of the mutual learning among civilizations in the context of the "Belt and Road Initiative" and has special significance for the political history, the history of religious architecture, and traditional Chinese culture.

1 The Origin and Evolution of Esoteric Buddhist Architecture

1.1 The Mandala Cosmic Model



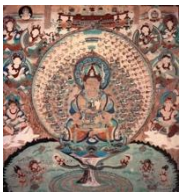


				
<p>1.1 Diagram of the Heavens in the Buddhist Small World</p>	<p>1.2 Japan, the Kamakura period (1185 - 1333) Tang and Five Dynasties periods (9th C - 10th C) Name: Mandala (altar city) Origin: Mogao Caves Library Cave (Cave 17) Collection place: Stein's Dunhuang paintings collected by the British Museum, UKNumber: 1919,0101,0.174 Ch.00186</p>	<p>1.3 Manjushri Mandala in Cave 361 of the Mogao Caves in the Middle Tang Dynasty. Picture source: Complete Collection of Dunhuang Grotto Art, Esoteric Buddhist Paintings/Compiled by the Dunhuang Academy. - Shanghai: Tongji University Press, January 2016, Page 72</p>	<p>1.4 Gilt-bronze Cloisonné Mandala in Chengde Mountain Resort. Picture source: Self-taken by the author</p>	<p>1.5 Bronze Mount Sumeru in Yonghegong Lama Temple, Beijing. Picture source: Sohu.com. "Perspectives on Construction: A Brief Account of Mount Sumeru in Ancient Architecture", published in July 2023.</p>

Figure 1. Mandala

Mandala is derived from Sanskrit and is translated into Chinese as "altar city". It originated from the altars in ancient India, and the ancient Indian scripture *Vedas*[4] narrates the myth of the formation of Mandala. The *Manusmriti of Brahmanism*[5] in the 2nd century BC records that the picture depicting the Mandala dojo is an altar-type building with a combination of squares and circles, symmetrical along the cross-axis, and divided into nine palaces, with the core symbol being the "model of Mount Sumeru in the universe".[6] Religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Shintoism all adopt this cosmology: The world spreads horizontally with Mount Sumeru as the center, surrounded by seawater, mountains, the four great continents, and forms a closed space with the Iron Encircling Mountains as the outermost boundary. Vertically, it has a basic structure of overlapping wheels of wind, water, gold, and earth, with the three realms of Desire, Form, and Formlessness arranged in a total of thirty-three heavens (Figure 1.1). Esoteric Buddhism has absorbed this worldview of Brahmanism: When Esoteric Buddhists practice Dharma, they build an earthen altar to prevent the invasion of "demonic crowds" from heterodox. Various Buddha statues are placed in the center to represent the gathering of all Buddhas or the completeness of the wheel of perfection. Mandala altars all have a basic framework of "square inside and round outside". The center is the main deity (such as Vairocana Buddha), and the periphery is surrounded by symbolic elements such as flames, vajras, and lotus flowers, representing the order and sacredness of the Buddha's realm, and serving as a cosmic model for practitioners to visualize. The Mahabodhi Stupa (Mahayana Buddhism), which

was built in the 5th - 6th centuries, highlights the cosmology of Mount Sumeru as the center of the world. On this basis, Esoteric Buddhism transformed it into a Vajrasana Pagoda. The seven-story pyramidal main tower retains the cosmic symbolic meaning of Hindu temples, and the exterior - decorated Esoteric Buddhist statues were added in later generations (the 9th - 11th centuries), reflecting the new form of temple architecture under Esoteric Buddhist rituals (Figure 2.3).[7] After Esoteric Buddhism was introduced to the Central Plains in the east, it formed an independent sect system during the Kaiyuan period of the Tang Dynasty. The silk paintings of the two Mandalas of the Womb Realm and the Diamond Realm, which were spread to and preserved in Japan, demonstrate the cosmology of Esoteric Buddhism with their precise composition (Figure 1.2). Many mural paintings of the transformation of the Avalokiteshvara Sutra in the Mogao Caves, especially the Mandala illustration of the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara sitting cross-legged on Mount Sumeru, confirm the standardized dissemination of Esoteric Buddhist images (Figure 1.3). The Mount Sumeru Mandala altar in Tibetan Buddhism, as a 3D presentation of the spatial philosophy of Esoteric Buddhism, is in the same lineage as Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism (Figure 1.4 & 1.5).

1.2 The Formation of Esoteric Buddhist Architecture in India




In the mid-7th century, two major Esoteric Buddhist sects emerged successively in Indian Buddhism. It is generally believed that the *Mahāvairocana Sūtra* originated in southwest India in the first half of the 7th century, while the *Vajraśekhara Sūtra* originated in southeast India at the end of the 7th century.[8] From the 8th to the 12th century, Indian Buddhism prevailed in the Pala Dynasty[9] of eastern India. During this period, Buddhism itself developed into a new stage—the Esoteric Buddhist Vajrayana stage. Nalanda Temple was transformed into an academic center of Vajrayana and became an important ritual site for Esoteric Buddhism (Figure 2.1). Three famous Vajrayana Temples were also founded: Vikramasila Temple, Uddandapura Temple, and Somapuri Temple. Each of these temples was comparable in scale to Nalanda, and together they were known as the "Four Great Temples of Indian Buddhism (Esoteric Buddhism)". The center of each temple featured a cross-shaped main hall (Table 1).

Temple Name	Period	Location	Central Main Hall
Nalanda Temple	The early 5th century (Gupta Era)	Bihar Pradesh, India	Cross-shaped Central Temple
Uddandapura Temple	8th century (the First Gopala Dynasty)	Bihar Pradesh, India	Cross-shaped Central Temple Building
Vikramasila	8th century (the	Bihar Pradesh, India	The center is the

	Second Dharmapala Dynasty)		Avalokiteshvara Hall; it is a square-shaped temple
Somapuri Temple	9th-12th centuries (the Third Devapala Dynasty)	Bahapur Ruins, Northern Bangladesh	Cross-shaped Central Temple Building
Natishvara Ruins	8th century (Deva Dynasty, 750-800 AD)	Vikrampur Ancient City, East-Central Bangladesh	Octagonal Cross-shaped Central Temple Building
Vajrasana Temple	Founded in the 5th-6th centuries (Gupta Dynasty); Reconstructed in the 13th century (by Burmese Kings)	Southern Bihar Pradesh	Great Vajrasana Stupa

Table 1. Esoteric Buddhist Vajrayana Temples in India

In November 2017, Researcher Chai Huanbo from the Hunan Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology led a team to Bangladesh, where they joined hands with the Oitihya Onneswan Archaeological Research Center to conduct a joint archaeological excavation at the Nateshwar Ruins of the ancient Vikrampur City. A cross-shaped central temple built around 929-979 AD was unearthed (Figure 2.4). This fully open cross-shaped central temple with five Buddhas is distinctly different from the traditional Mahayana temples in India. It is a brand-new creation of Vajrayana Buddhism and can be called "Vajrayana Architecture".[10] This cross-shaped central temple structure spread to Tibet, Nepal, Indonesia and other regions along with the dissemination of Vajrayana doctrines, forming "mandala-style" architectural complexes. Examples include the Uzi Main Hall of Samye Temple in Tibet, the Langbalangze Lhakhang of Tholing Temple, the Kumbum Stupa of Palcho Temple, the Boudhanath Stupa in Kathmandu, Nepal, and the Borobudur on the island of Java, Indonesia. All of these are regional variations of this mandala architecture (Figure 2).

		
2.1 7th century, Nalanda Mahavihara Site. Source: Nalanda in India, People's Pictorial, 2019-08-13. http://article.xuexi.cn/	2.2 8th–13th centuries, Vikramasila Temple. Image Source: Weibo account of @Hanjiang. 2024-06-11. https://weibo.com/1260849850/OiwFdCs ed	2.3 5th–6th centuries (reconstructed in the 12th century), Mahabodhi Stupa. Image Source: Drawn by Dong Qingxin


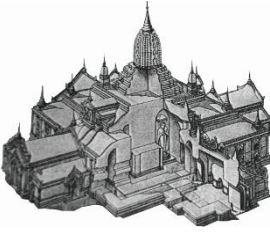
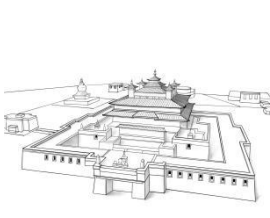
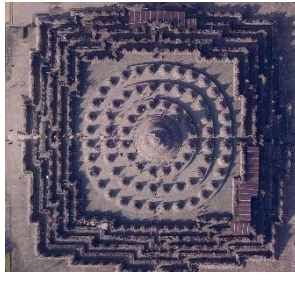


		
<p>2.4 Late 8th Century–Early 13th Century, Nateshwar Ruins of Ancient Vikramapura City. Image Source: China News Service. Photographed by Jia Yingjie / Guangming Images</p>	<p>2.5 Reconstruction Map of Bahapur Temple Building. Image Source: Chai Huanbo / Wenbo China</p>	<p>2.6 8th century, Samye Temple. Image Source: CNU. Studio 105</p>
		
<p>2.7 8th Century AD, Borobudur in Indonesia. Image Source: https://www.sohu.com/a/722062356_121124399</p>	<p>2.8 Late 10th Century, Langbalangze Lhakhang of Tholing Temple. Image Source: Official Weibo Account of Culture and Tourism Bureau of Ngari Prefecture, Tibet. https://weibo.com/u/2254916223</p>	<p>2.9 Kumbum Stupa of Palcho Temple (founded in 1414). Image Source: Zhihu. https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/616836262?utm_id=0</p>

Figure 2. Mandala Architecture

1.3 The Core Spatial Vocabulary of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist Architecture

The essential characteristic of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist Architecture lies in that its spatial composition follows the mandala system in Esoteric Buddhist doctrines. Kūkai's *Secret Storehouse Notes* and other classics regard the mandala as a "cosmic model," whose spatial structure directly influences the layout of temples. This cosmic schema originating from India has materialized through the spatial layout of architecture, the arrangement of statues, and decorative symbols. Its core characteristics are manifested as follows: A mandala-style planar layout, which forms a centripetal spatial structure with the main hall as the center. The "Zhongtai Bayuan" (Eight Courts Around the Central Platform) corresponds to the building complex along the central axis of the temple. A three-dimensional practice space, where vertical ritual procedures are realized through pavilion-style buildings. For example, the "Five Buddhas and Five Wisdoms" system of the Vajra Realm Mandala influences the hierarchical design of the Five-story Pagoda. A symbolic decoration system, which transforms doctrines into visual artistic forms. Ritual spaces with specific functions, such as dedicated venues like the homa altar and abhisheka altar. The core characteristics of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist Architecture include mandala layout, guardian deity

statues, and Esoteric-Exoteric integrated structure. It not only retains the religious symbols of Indian Esoteric Buddhism but also achieves localization through the architectural language of the Han region.

2 Historical Context: The Introduction and Localization of Esoteric Buddhist Architecture

2.1 Political Strategies of the Central Court

The prosperity of Buddhism is often closely tied to the political strategies of rulers, and it was a common tactic for rulers to legitimize their governing status by deifying it through religious power. Therefore, with the strong promotion of the Central Court, Esoteric Buddhist Architecture—acting as the materialized expression of doctrines—was rapidly constructed in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. During the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty, Esoteric Buddhism was revered as the state religion. It became a prominent state-protecting Dharma gate of the Tang Dynasty and flourished vigorously. In the 27th year of the Kaiyuan era (739 AD), Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty issued an imperial edict, ordering that each prefecture across the realm establish a Kaiyuan Temple. These temples served as state-protecting ritual venues for national ceremonies, with a hall dedicated to Vairocana Buddha (i.e., Mahāvairocana Buddha) and a mandala altar built within them. The Esoteric Buddhist scripture *The Sūtra of the Bodhisattva Lion Sovereign Majestic Inquiring* records: "A square altar, named mandala, shall be erected at the ritual venue, with its size adjusted according to circumstances." Based on this, Kaiyuan Temples, as state-sponsored state-protecting ritual venues, naturally incorporated Esoteric Buddhist elements. *Zhenyuan Catalogue* records that in the 13th year of the Tianbao era (754 AD), Esoteric Buddhist master Amoghavajra established a mandala ritual venue at Kaiyuan Temple in Liangzhou, where he conducted abhisheka ceremonies and translated scriptures.[11] The connection between Esoteric Buddhism and Kaiyuan Temples is thus obvious. According to research, a total of 85 cases of Kaiyuan Temples from the Tang Dynasty have been identified in various documents, distributed across 85 prefectures.[12] At least 10 Tang Kaiyuan Temples in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region have been recorded in historical documents: there were Kaiyuan Temple (Fayuan Temple) and Shunyi Kaiyuan Temple in Youzhou; Kaiyuan Temple in Yixian County, Kaiyuan Temple in Zhengding County, Kaiyuan Temple in Zhaoxian County, and Kaiyuan Temple in Dingzhou in central Hebei; and Kaiyuan Temple in Xingtai City, Kaiyuan Temple in Jizhou City, Kaiyuan Temple in Weizhou City,

and Kaiyuan Temple in Cangzhou City in southern Hebei. Most of these Kaiyuan Temples still retain Esoteric Buddhist relics today, such as Dhvaja pillars (Jingchuang), inscriptions of Dhāraṇī Sūtras, and multi-eaved pagodas. Another Esoteric Buddhist temple constructed by imperial order in the Tang Dynasty was Tianwang Temple. According to *The Rituals of Vaiśravaṇa* translated by the Tang-era monk Amoghavajra, in the first year of the Tianbao era of the Tang Dynasty (742 AD), the city of Anxi (present-day Kuqa County, Xinjiang) was besieged by foreign troops. Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty (Li Longji) ordered Amoghavajra to perform rituals to invoke Vaiśravaṇa, the Northern Heavenly King, to lead divine soldiers for rescue. In an instant, the city of Anxi shook violently, divine soldiers descended from heaven, and the foreign troops were thoroughly defeated. This record is undoubtedly a mythological legend. However, Li Longji used this to claim that he had received assistance from the Heavenly King, and thus issued an imperial edict ordering that Vaiśravaṇa, the Heavenly King, be enshrined at the north gates of all prefectural and county cities. A Tianwang Temple was also built north of Youzhou City, which is today's Tianning Temple in Beijing. Emperor Daizong of the Tang Dynasty continued to venerate Esoteric Buddhism. In the 11th year of the Dali era (776 AD), he issued an imperial edict ordering all monks and nuns across the country to recite the *Dhāraṇī Sūtra of Supreme Victory* 21 times daily, and to report the total number of recitations on the first day of the first lunar month each year. Thus, the Supreme Victory Dhāraṇī spread to temples throughout the land. A large number of Dhvaja pillars inscribed with the Supreme Victory Dhāraṇī (Jingchuang) from the Tang and Liao dynasties found in the Yanjing region serve as material evidence for this historical record.[13]

After the Song and Liao dynasties concluded the Chanyuan Alliance, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region entered a peaceful development period lasting over a century. Both the Northern Song Dynasty in the south and the Liao Dynasty in the north built Buddhist temples in border areas and took exchanging envoys to visit each other's major temples as a form of etiquette. Thus, temples became a means for both sides to demonstrate their national strength. The Liao Dynasty, which ruled northern China, carried forward the legacy of Esoteric Buddhism from the Tang Dynasty. The royal family's emphasis on and preference for Esoteric Buddhism promoted its popularity in the Yanjing region, leading to an unprecedented boom in the construction of Esoteric Buddhist temples. Master Daochenshu's *Collection on the Essentials of Achieving Buddhahood through the Unification of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism* simplified Tang Dynasty Esoteric Buddhism and integrated Huayan Buddhism

with Esoteric Buddhism, forming a localized Chinese Esoteric Buddhist thought with characteristics of the era.[14] Following the Tang dynasty, a large number of multi-eaved pagodas that integrate both Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism within the Liao Dynasty's territory represent another construction boom in the development of Esoteric Buddhist architecture in the northern Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region. The Song Dynasty, which ruled southern China, also attached great importance to supporting Buddhism. It established a Scripture Translation Institute, translated many Esoteric Buddhist scriptures, and for the first time, the government took the lead in compiling and publishing the Buddhist Canon—an undertaking that included a great deal of Esoteric Buddhist content. This promoted the spread of Esoteric Buddhism and enabled its revival and development. However, the Song Dynasty adopted a policy of integrating Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism. Although, with the promotion of the imperial court, Esoteric Buddhist beliefs became widely popular among all social classes in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region, the construction of Esoteric Buddhist buildings was basically integrated into Exoteric Buddhism. Esoteric Buddhism still held significant influence during the Jin Dynasty. Among the Jin-era stone carvings at Yunju Temple in Fangshan, Esoteric Buddhist texts accounted for an extremely high proportion—this reflects that Esoteric Buddhism was still valued by the government during the reign of Emperor Zhangzong. During the Jin Dynasty, Buddhist architecture in North China generally showed a "Sinicization" trend, and the characteristics of Esoteric Buddhist architecture were not prominent. Kublai Khan, Emperor Shizu of the Yuan Dynasty, honored Phags-pa as the Imperial Preceptor and established Tibetan Buddhism as the state religion, forming a "unity of religion and politics" model whose influence extended to the Ming and Qing dynasties. Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist temples, having lost political support, gradually declined. Esoteric Buddhism did not form an independent sect in the Ming Dynasty. However, Cishou Temple, Wanshou Temple, and Dahui Temple—all constructed by imperial order of the Ming royal family—contained abundant Esoteric Buddhist elements. Together, these temples reveal the systematic absorption of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism by the Ming imperial court. In the Qing Dynasty, Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism mainly attached itself to the system of integrating Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism, and it was still valued by the imperial court—an example being the Foxiang Pavilion in the Summer Palace.

2.2 The Construction Efforts by Esoteric Buddhist Masters

From the Western Jin Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty, the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region served as a Buddhist sacred site. It witnessed frequent Esoteric Buddhist activities, and historical

records on the deeds of relevant Buddhist monks are quite abundant. During the Western Jin Dynasty, Fotucheng (232-348), a master of Esoteric mantras from the Western Regions, traveled to Xiangguo (present-day Xingtai City). He received strong support from Shi Le, Emperor of the Zhao State, for promoting Buddhist teachings, and spread Buddhism across various parts of Hebei. "He established 893 Buddhist temples in all the prefectures and counties he passed through." [15] According to records in *Biographies of Monks*, he was associated with many miraculous events. He was skilled in reciting divine mantras, practiced both Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism, and was widely venerated. Thanks to his influence, Esoteric mantras gradually became known to the world. In the early years of the Yuanjia era of the Song Dynasty (426 AD), Dharmamitra, a monk from the Western Regions, arrived in Jianye. He translated *The Sutra of the Divine Mantra of Akasagarbha Bodhisattva* in one scroll and transmitted the portrait of Kapila [16], a deity in Esoteric Buddhism. Lingyu of the Northern Qi Dynasty was a native of Dingzhou. The people of Xiangzhou called him "Bodhisattva Yu," and he enjoyed great fame in Hebei. In the 10th year of the Kaihuang era, Emperor Wen of the Sui Dynasty intended to appoint him as the "Guotong" (national leader) of Buddhism. In the 9th year of the Kaihuang era, he protected the Dharma and engraved Buddhist scriptures in the Baoshan Grottoes. On the walls on both sides of the grotto entrance, Esoteric Buddhist deities such as Vaiśravaṇa and Kapila were carved. This grotto is also known as the "Narayana Grotto Maintained by the Vajra Nature and Power".

Yi Xing [17], the Second Patriarch of Esoteric Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, was a native of Julu in Hebei. He was the first Han monk to obtain the qualification of holding an altar for abhiṣeka (initiation) and accepting disciples. According to Huang Chunhe in *A Study of Buddhist Temples in Youzhou City During the Sui and Tang Dynasties*, Yi Xing, a leader of Esoteric Buddhism, once visited Youzhou. *The Unified Gazetteer of the Yuan Dynasty* states that Yi Xing once founded Xingshan Temple [18] within Youzhou City. Yi Xing inherited both the Matrix Realm (Garbhadhātu) and the Vajra Realm (Vajradhātu) of Esoteric practices and integrated the two into one system. He had a profound influence on the spread of Esoteric Buddhism in China and was worthy of being regarded as a great virtuous master of Esoteric Buddhism. During the Kaiyuan era of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty (713-741 AD), Yi Xing compiled *The Commentary on the Mahāvairocana Sutra*—an authoritative work on Esoteric Buddhism—in twenty scrolls. This marked the beginning of the formal transmission of Chinese Esoteric Buddhism. [19] Although there are few records of Yi Xing's

activities in Hebei, the incident of his temple construction in Youzhou proves that Esoteric Buddhist buildings already existed in Youzhou at that time.

During the Northern Song Dynasty, the Anuttarayoga Tantra school emerged in India. A large number of monks came to China, bringing Esoteric Buddhist scriptures and rituals to the Han-inhabited regions. These monks exerted great influence among the people and had many followers. Major Buddhist temples established Esoteric Buddhist ritual sites and frequently practiced Esoteric rituals. As recorded in *The Stele Inscription of the Divine Pagoda for Sakyamuni's Sarira Built by Imperial Decree* compiled by Monk Ruyi Xiangmai of the Yuan Dynasty, Dao'an presided over the construction of the "Divine Pagoda for Sakyamuni's Sarira" at Yong'an Temple in the 2nd year of the Shouchang era (1096 AD). The enshrinement of the sarira in the pagoda was arranged by him in accordance with Esoteric Buddhist rituals. He practiced both Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism throughout his life and was conferred the title of "Master of the Unification of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism" by Emperor Tianyou. He summarized his lifelong cultivation achievements and left *Collection on the Essentials of Achieving Buddhahood through the Unification of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism* for later generations.

The prosperity of Esoteric Buddhism in the Liao Dynasty not only saw the emergence of many temples and monks dedicated to spreading Esoteric Buddhism but also witnessed the integration of Esoteric Buddhism with other Buddhist sects, forming the distinctive feature of combining Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism. Esoteric Buddhism declined in the late Liao Dynasty. During the Jin Dynasty, the documented figures associated with it included Fachong and Zhiling. Zhiling learned the Dharani method from Shaolin Temple on Songshan Mountain. Later, during the Huangtong era (1141–1149 AD), he resided at Ganhua Temple on Panshan Mountain in Hebei and specialized in propagating Esoteric Buddhism. It is said that Fachong defeated the Taoist priest Xiao Shouzhen in a contest of strength in the 3rd year of the Dading era (1163 AD). The propagation of Esoteric Buddhism in Zhongdu (the capital of the Jin Dynasty) still has traces to follow. Its main propagators included Yibing, a great virtuous master specializing in Esoteric teachings from Guijing Temple on Baota Mountain in Zunhua, Jizhou, and his disciple Chenghui. According to records in *Supplementary Continuation of Biographies of Eminent Monks* of the Yuan Dynasty, during the Zhiyuan and Dade eras of the Yuan Dynasty (late 13th century to early 14th century), there was a monk named Zhicheng. He was honored as the Seventh Patriarch, studied the main idea of both Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism, and upheld mantras of various Esoteric texts. He "accepted

disciples and guided the faithful, and his reputation as a virtuous master grew increasingly prominent." This indicates that Zhicheng promoted traditional Esoteric Buddhism. Yanjing was once a center of Esoteric Buddhism during the Liao Dynasty and even the Jin Dynasty. Tracing back from the Seventh Patriarch, his lineage can be extended to the late Liao Dynasty. The Esoteric Buddhism he transmitted bore the characteristics of Liao Dynasty Esoteric Buddhism and carried the traits of Tang Dynasty Esoteric Buddhism. Since the Yuan Dynasty, Esoteric Buddhist monks have occasionally carried out propagation activities in the Beijing area. However, they ultimately failed to exist as an independent sect because it was difficult to clearly distinguish them from Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism. The development of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism showed an evolutionary trajectory of "declining from prosperity and gradually becoming marginalized," and the dissemination of Tang Dynasty Esoteric translations was limited to the imperial court and the circle of a small number of eminent monks. A mixed phenomenon emerged in Han-region temples, where Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist and Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist statues and rituals coexisted. Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism gradually lost its independence, and Esoteric Buddhism became generalized and integrated into Exoteric Buddhism.

3 Types and Cultural Connotations of Han-Transmitted Esoteric Buddhist Architecture in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei Region.

Amoghapāśa	Eleven-Faced Guanyin	Thousand-Armed Guanyin (Great Compassion)	Bodhisattva Manjushri
The Scripture of the Mantra of the Unfailing Lasso, translated by Jnanagupta in the Sui Dynasty.	In the fourth year of Baoding of the Northern Zhou (564), Yasogupta translated the Eleven-Faced Guanyin Divine Spell Sutra.	In the Tang Dynasty, Bhagavaddharma translated the Sutra of the Great Compassion Heart Dharani of the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin Bodhisattva, Vast, Perfect, and Unobstructed.	In the Tang Dynasty, Bodhiruci translated the Sutra of the Dharani of Manjushri's Treasury of the Dharma.
The Heart Sutra of the Divine Spell of the Unfailing Lasso, translated by Xuanzang in the Tang dynasty.	In the first year of Xianqing of the Tang (656), Xuanzang translated the Heart Sutra of the Eleven-Faced Divine Spell.	Amoghavajra translated the Sutra on the Vajra Peak Yoga Ritual Procedure for the Practice of the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin Bodhisattva.	Amoghavajra translated the important Esoteric Buddhist scripture The Sutra on the Adornment of the Meritorious Virtues of the Buddha-Land by the Great Sage Manjushri Bodhisattva.
The Scripture of the Miraculous Transformation Mantra	Amoghavajra of the Tang Dynasty translated the Ritual	In the Tang Dynasty, Sanmei Suwoluo translated The Sutra of	Amoghavajra translated the Ritual Procedure for Offering to Manjushri

of the Unfailing Lasso, translated by Amoghavajra.	Procedure for Recitation of the Esoteric Heart Mantra of the Eleven-Faced Guanyin.	the Secret Method of the Thousand-Light-Eyed Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva as Spoken by the Buddha.	Bodhisattva in the Yoga of the Vajra Peak Sutra.
			Amoghavajra translated the Vajra Peak Sutra on Surpassing the Three Realms: On the Superior Signs of Manjushri's Five-Syllable Mantra.

Table 2. Translations of Avalokitesvara-category Esoteric Buddhist scriptures

3.1 Pavilion - Threefold Cultivation Space

During the Miscellaneous Esotericism period, Vidyadhara Esoteric Buddhism encompassed scriptural and ritual lineages, including the Manjushri and Guanyin categories. After the eighth century, Esoteric Buddhism increasingly revered Guanyin Bodhisattva; with further translations by Tang-dynasty esoteric masters, a systematized corpus of Guanyin esoteric scriptures took shape (Table 2). In many temples, Guanyin pavilions are often built as separate structures, within which a monumental standing statue of Guanyin is enshrined. Such monumental standing statues required the construction of tall, hollow buildings, directly spurring the development of multi-story timber architecture. Among historically recorded pavilion-style Buddhist halls of the greatest height and scale, the foremost is the “Heavenly Hall” built in Luoyang in 695 by Empress Wu Zetian of the Tang Dynasty. According to historical records, its height reached “one thousand chi”; the enormous Buddha statue filled the building’s interior, with such tall and narrow architectural space serving to accentuate the Buddha’s greatness and immeasurability. According to documentary records, Jinge Temple at Mount Wutai—the Esoteric Buddhist center petitioned by Amoghavajra and erected by imperial decree of Tang Emperor Daizong—was built under the supervision of Master Chunyue of Nalanda Temple in India. The construction followed canonical architectural and ritual prescriptions, and its principal structure, the Guanyin Hall dedicated to the Thousand-Armed and Thousand-Eyed Avalokiteśvara, was a grand three-story pavilion-style great Buddha Hall. Multiple extant examples of such grand Guanyin halls remain; notable ones include the Great Compassion Pavilion of Longxing Temple in Zhengding, Hebei; the Guanyin Pavilion of Dule Temple in Ji County, Tianjin; and the Great Buddha Hall of Dahui Temple in Beijing (Figures 3-1, 3-2, 3-3).

In his book *Research on Esoteric Buddhism in Dunhuang during the Period of Tibetan Rule*, Dr. Zhao Xiaoxing points out that there are two Tang dynasty translations concerning the Esoteric Buddhist “Jeweled Pavilion”: one by Amoghavajra, the *Sutra of the Well-Abiding Secret Dharani of the Great Treasure Extensive Pavilion*, and another by Bodhiruci, the *Sutra of the Well-Abiding Secret Dharani of the Vast Jeweled Pavilion*, both of which mention the corresponding altar rites. The “Jeweled Pavilion Mandala” is a central great Buddha pavilion with mandalic characteristics, generally constructed as a three-story structure. Within the Esoteric Buddhist system, a three-tiered space often corresponds to the vertical stages of cultivation, such as the “three mysteries” of body, speech, and mind, or the threefold realms of the Womb Realm Mandala. Built in the eighth century, the great Esoteric Buddhist temple Samye—also called the “San Yang Temple”—features a three-story Utse Hall at the central, with each story designed in a distinct architectural style, which is also called the “Sanyang Pavilion” or the “Three-Style.” The great hall of the Akki Temple of Esoteric Buddhism, built in the eleventh century, is likewise three-story structure. At the newly built Tang Esoteric Buddhism Jinge Temple on Mount Wutai, the central Guanyin Pavilion was a three-tiered pavilion-style building; at Fayuan Temple in Youzhou in the Tang Dynasty, the Minzhong Pavilion placed a standing statue of the Great-Compassion Guanyin at its center. *Rixia Jiuwen Kao* records it as “seven bays in width and three stories high.” For example, the three-story Great Compassion Pavilion of Longxing Temple in Zhengding from the Song Dynasty, the Wanfo (Ten-Thousand-Buddha Pavilion) of the Yonghe Temple in the Qing Dynasty, the Great Buddha Hall of Chanfu Temple in Beihai, and the Tower of Buddhist Incense in the Summer Palace (Figure 3-4) are also three stories, while the five-story Mahayana Pavilion at Puning Temple is called the “Sanyang Pavilion.” Over a millennium of transformation, the ritual characteristics of the Esoteric Buddhist great pavilion have changed, yet its core symbolic system remains clearly discernible.

			
<p>3.1 Liao Dynasty Dule Temple — Guanyin Pavilion. Image source: photographed by the author.</p>	<p>3.2 Early 20th century, Longxing Temple — Great Compassion Pavilion. Image source: <i>Shina Cultural Historical Sites</i>.</p>	<p>3.3 Ming Dynasty, Dahuisi — Great Compassion Treasure Hall. Image source: Baijiahao, “Wind Blows Grass Speaks.” July 2020. Old photograph: 1938 Beijing Dahuisi (Great Buddha Temple).</p>	<p>3.4 Qing Dynasty, Summer Palace — Tower of Buddhist Incense of the Great Temple of Gratitude and Longevity. Image source: Baijiahao, Ning Yingjiang, 2025-04.</p>
			
<p>3.5 Dule Temple, Guanyin Pavilion—Ekādaśamukha (Eleven-Headed) Avalokiteśvara. Image source: Lu Yu, digital illustration.</p>	<p>3.6 Bronze-cast statue of the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin at Longxing Temple. Image source: Zhang Lin, tablet painting.</p>	<p>3.7 Thousand-Armed Guanyin statue at Beijing Dahuisi, prior to its destruction by fire. Image source: Zhang Lin, tablet painting.</p>	<p>3.8 Ming Dynasty Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin Bodhisattva at the Tower of Buddhist Incense. Image source: Weibo, “Chanli Chanqu.”</p>

Figure 3. Guanyin Halls and Pavilions

In the Great Compassion Pavilion of Longxing Temple, a 21.3-meter-tall bronze-cast statue of the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin (Great-Compassion Bodhisattva) is enshrined. Its forty-two arms each hold a ritual implement, embodying the Esoteric Buddhist ideal of “a thousand eyes to observe the world and a thousand hands to protect sentient beings,” in accordance with the Tang Dynasty Esoteric Buddhist scripture, the *Sutra of the Great Compassion Heart Dharani of the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin Bodhisattva, Vast, Perfect, and Unobstructed*, translated by Bhagavaddharma. The three-story timber-structured Great Compassion pavilion adopts a construction logic of “image-determined pavilion,” with the interior space organized around the colossal bronze statue of the Thousand-Armed Guanyin, forming a 3D mandala structure. The three-tiered galleries employ a “mirror lighting” technique that keeps the face of the Guanyin statue perpetually bathed in soft light, symbolizing the Esoteric Buddhist cultivation state of “light pervading everywhere.” At its initial construction, the Great Compassion Pavilion employed a “golden-casket, dou-base bay-ring” system[20] and a circumferential column grid. The inner bay ring served as the central space for the Great-Compassion Bodhisattva, while the outer bay ring functioned as the circumambulatory worship space. The corridor space in the shape of the character hui (回) formed an encircling mode of Buddhist devotion. As an architectural work of an Exoteric Buddhist temple, the Great Compassion Pavilion integrates Esoteric Buddhist construction principles, clearly attesting to the widespread diffusion of Esoteric Buddhist building practices within territories under Song jurisdiction.

Esoteric Buddhist temples in China proper are now exceedingly rare. Dule Temple in Jizhou is likely the sole surviving Liao Dynasty example of an Esoteric Buddhist temple that takes the Eleven-Faced Guanyin as its principal deity. Viewed from the outside, the Guanyin Pavilion appears two-storied, but it contains a concealed intermediate level, making it in fact three stories, in accordance with the Esoteric Buddhist “Three-Style” construction principle. Given that the Eleven-Faced Guanyin at Dule Temple serves as the temple’s principal deity, its sectarian affiliation is obvious. Su Bai’s article, published in the journal *Wenwu* in 1989 pointed out that Dule Temple is an important remnant of a Liao Dynasty Esoteric Buddhist

Temple.[21] Throughout the complex, the Guanyin Pavilion (constructed in 984) functions as



Image 1. Wisdom King mural in the Guanyin Pavilion of Dule Temple, painted by Zhao Yuqing.

the main hall, forming a centrally organized, square layout that is both orderly and rigorous. Its essential quadrangular plan recalls that of Jinge Temple—the Tang Dynasty Esoteric Buddhist temple on Mount Wutai—which exemplifies the architectural typology of Tang–Liao Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist monastic design. At the outside chamber of the Shanmen (main gate), two statues of Vajra Guardians are enshrined, while within the inner chamber stand the

Four Heavenly Kings. This arrangement corresponds precisely to the ritual prescription described in the *Guangda baolouge shanzhu mimi tuoluoni jing (Sutra of the Vast Jeweled Pavilion and the Well-Abiding Secret Dhāraṇī)*, which states: “The two protectors on the left and right are Vajrapāṇi Bodhisattva and Mañivajra Bodhisattva, and the four directional guardians are the Four Heavenly Kings.” The interior space of the Guanyin Pavilion is organized around a 16-meter-tall statue of the Eleven-Faced Guanyin, forming a complete ritual circuit. On the walls flanking the entrance are paintings of two Esoteric Buddhist Wisdom Kings (Figure 4). The remaining wall paintings depict the Sixteen Arhats. The names of the Sixteen Arhats first appear in Xuanzang’s translation *Record of the Abiding of the Dharma as Spoken by the Great Arhat Nandimitra*, which bears an intellectual lineage linked to Esoteric Buddhist thought. In the *Five Hundred Arhats* in Southern Song Dynasty, the piece *Emanational Guanyin* portrays the Eleven-Faced Guanyin manifesting, attended by four arhats on either side, indicating that by the Song Dynasty the arhats had already been incorporated into the Esoteric Buddhist pantheon. With respect to the verification of the square dimensional characteristics of Dule Temple, Wang Nan of the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University authored a dedicated article, “*Rules and the Square-and-Circle, Measuring the Image to Build the Structure—An Analysis of the Compositional Proportions of the Guanyin Pavilion, Shanmen, and Sculptures at Dule Temple in Jixian*,” which points out that the spacing between the Shanmen and the Guanyin Pavilion, together with the pavilion’s platform base and overall frontage, constitutes an approximately square

composition. This further confirms that it is a typical Esoteric Buddhist mandala characterized by cruciform symmetry and a pronounced center.

In Laiyuan, Hebei, the Great Hall of Manjusri at Geyuan Temple was constructed during the Liao dynasty. The development of Manjushri devotion in the central mainland is closely connected with Esoteric Buddhism: “one of the salient features of Esoteric Buddhism is the veneration of Bodhisattva Manjushri and the emphasis on Manjushri’s Esoteric Buddhist methods.” Esoteric Buddhism and Manjushri devotion constitute an organic whole.[22] In the seventh year of Dali (772), after Amoghavajra translated the *Sutra of Manjushri’s Meritorious Virtues*, he submitted a memorial requesting the establishment of Manjushri cloisters throughout the realm, such as the Manjushri Pavilion at Daxingshan Temple in Chang’an. The Liao Dynasty inherited Tang Esoteric Buddhism, and Manjushri devotion became increasingly widespread and emerged as a major hallmark of Liao Buddhism.[23] Manjushri halls, pavilion-temples, and Manjushri terraces arose across various locales. In *Wuxiang Lun*, square sanctuaries and monastic buildings composed of 64, 81, or more or fewer small grid cells are termed mandalas (vāstumandala, square mandala), which are regarded as the dwellings of a principal deity together with his retinue and the temple’s protective deities. The excavated remains of the central main hall at Qinglong Temple—the ancestral seat of Esoteric Buddhism—are square in plan; the central Esoteric Jeweled Light Hall at Qutan Temple in Qinghai, a Sino–Tibetan syncretic site, is likewise square. In the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region, vestiges of square Esoteric Buddhist great halls survive to this day (Figure 4).

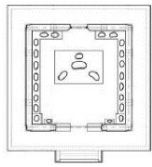

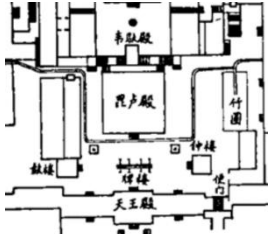
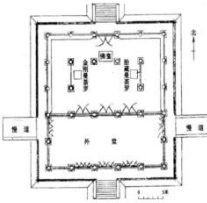
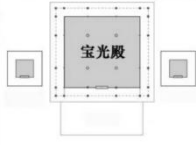
				
<p>4.1 Guanyin Hall of Kaiyuan Temple, Yixian</p>	<p>4.2 Manjushri Hall of Geyuan Temple</p>	<p>4.3 Vairocana Hall of Yunju Temple, Beijing</p>	<p>4.4 Qinglong Temple, Site No. 4 (Early Phase)</p>	<p>4.5 Qutan Temple in Qinghai (Tibetan Buddhist tradition)</p>

Figure 4. Square Mandala Great Hall

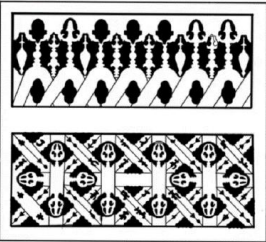
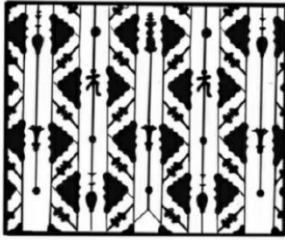
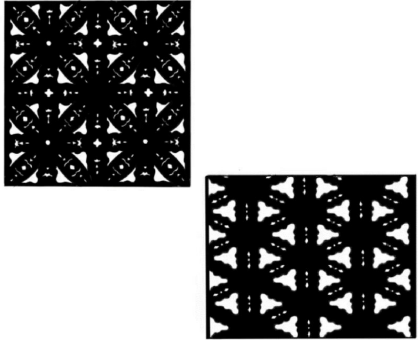
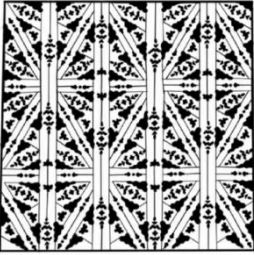

		
<p>Liao Dynasty, Geyuan Temple — central transom window lattice.</p>	<p>Liao Dynasty, Geyuan Temple — detail of a door panel.</p>	<p>Jin Dynasty, Shuozhou Chongfu Temple — window lattice of the Amitabha Hall.</p>
		
<p>Jin Dynasty, Shuozhou Chongfu Temple — door panel detail of the Amitabha Hall</p>	<p>Jin Dynasty, Shuozhou Chongfu Temple — door panel of the Amitabha Hall.</p>	

Figure 5. Esoteric Buddhist window lattice (painted by Zhang Yingfang)

The most salient Esoteric Buddhist features of the Manjushri Hall at Geyuan Temple are its door leaves and window lattices. The sole surviving lattice door uses a three-interlocking six-diagonal pattern, with openwork carvings of Sanskrit letters and Esoteric Buddhist ritual implements such as the vajra bell, vajra (scepter), treasure vase, and blue lotus. The Sanskrit letters encircle the implements, forming a protective mantra configuration with a central sun disc.[24] The letters should be a “dharma mandala.”[25] *The Compendium of Essentials for Attaining Buddhahood through the Perfect Integration of Exoteric and Esoteric Teachings* emphasizes that, in recitation rituals, one must first visualize and chant the Sanskrit letter: this letter is suffused with light, like a luminous pearl or a full moon, able to purify the three karmic activities and eliminate all karmic obstructions. As shown in the figure, the lattice of the central transom window is carved with a three-pronged vajra and a blue lotus, constituting Manjushri Bodhisattva’s “Samaya Mandala”; the imagery of the central transom window chiefly expresses the combined-altar homa rite. The ritual-implement images on the transom

windows of the secondary bays to the east and west, by contrast, convey the intention of peripheral protection.

This type of window-lattice carving bears notable similarities to the transom woodcarvings of the Guanyin Hall (now destroyed) at Kaiyuan Temple in Yixian, adjacent to Laiyuan County, dating to the late Liao period; it represents a window-lattice type formed under the influence of Esoteric Buddhism (Figure 5). The inscription on the Stele of the Shakyamuni Relic Pagoda at Linggan Temple, erected in the sixth year of Tianqing under the Liao Emperor Tianzuo (1116) in Xingzhong Prefecture (present-day Chaoyang, Liaoning Province), states: “Thus, wherever even a single speck is touched and wherever a single shadow is cast, the benefit and joy to the faithful are not in vain!” The notion of “dust touching and shadow covering” is a characteristic expression in the detailed decorative treatment of Esoteric Buddhist architecture.

Dahuisi in Beijing in the Ming dynasty is a Han-transmitted Buddhist temple. First built in the eighth year of Zhengde (1513), its main hall—the Great Compassion Treasure Hall—has a double-eaved hip roof, five bays in width (approx. 25 m), and three bays in depth (approx. 15 m), oriented north–south (facing south) and employs a typical Ming large-timber structural system. As the highest-ranked form of imperial architecture, the double-eaved hip roof carries symbolic import that resonates potentially with the Esoteric Buddhist cosmology of the “mandala” (tancheng). Within the hall, the principal image is a polychrome standing statue of the Eleven-Faced, Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin, created in the eighth year of Zhengde (1513), five zhang in height, with figures of a boy acolyte and the Dragon Girl beneath it, and two symmetrically placed attendant bodhisattva standing images in front; along the north wall and the lower sections of the east and west walls are twenty-eight polychrome guardian deities, some holding ritual implements (such as vajra scepters and treasure vases), as well as a Sinicized image of the Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist deity Daheitian (Mahakala). *The Great Compassion Dharani Sutra* records that the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin possesses twenty-eight retinue groups and their names. The conception of the ensemble—its combination, arrangement, and layout—is meticulous; encircled by murals on all sides, it forms a “3D mandala” configuration that may imply Esoteric Buddhist mandala thought. The pairing of the principal Thousand-Armed Guanyin with the twenty-eight guardian deities may accord with the cosmological structure of the “Central Terrace Eight-Petaled Court” in the Esoteric Buddhist “Womb-Realm” mandala. The enclosed spatial character of the main hall accords with the mandala spatial concept

required for Esoteric Buddhist cultivation and exhibits the features of a self-contained altar space for Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist rites. This high-specification architectural arrangement of the Great Compassion Treasure Hall may well be a unique surviving Ming Dynasty exemplar continued from Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist temple and is exceptionally precious (Figure 3.3).

3.2 Central Cruciform Hall Pagoda

The enclosed cruciform sanctuaries that took shape during the 10th–13th-century Vajrayana phase of Indian Esoteric Buddhism are a concrete embodiment of its cosmology. After Esoteric Buddhism spread to East Asia, the cruciform typology fused with East Asian structural systems, producing Esoteric Buddhist architecture with distinctive Eastern characteristics. The “cruciform” Great Golden Hall at Kongo-ji of Japan’s Shingon Esoteric Buddhism is a representative example of this type (Figures 6.9). It was first built in 816 when Kukai founded the school, and its cruciform design was likely influenced by Tang Dynasty Esoteric Buddhist architecture. The cruciform Mani Hall at Longxing Temple, begun in the fourth year of Huangyou of the Northern Song (1052), stands at the temple’s center; its plan is nearly square, with on each of the four sides a forward-facing hipped-gable “turtle-head” bay projecting outward to form a cross. Western Xia Yulin Cave 3 is a typical Esoteric Buddhist cave, whose murals depict a cruciform building identical to the Mani Hall. Evidently, the cruciform format of the Mani Hall has an inherent connection with Vajrayana and constitutes a new architectural form developed from the mandala under the Song Dynasty context of the integration of Exoteric and Exoteric Buddhism. In the Ming Dynasty, Hebei’s Pilu Temple[26] likewise has at its center a cruciform great hall; within it the principal deity enshrined is Vairocana Buddha (called Mahavairocana in Esoteric Buddhism), the fundamental Buddha of Esoteric Buddhism. The Sanskrit term “Pilu” means “all-pervading light.” The mural images of the Ten Great Wisdom Kings inside the hall (such as Yamantaka) reach up to 1.5 meters in height and employ the Esoteric Buddhist specific iconography of wrathful forms, corroborating the presence of Esoteric Buddhist elements at Pilu Temple. The Pilu Hall adopts a cross-shaped plan (cruciform hip-and-gable roof), with projecting baosha to the front and rear, and is built upon a 1-meter-high yuetai (raised terrace). Evidently, its architectural typology, like that of the Mani Hall, stands in the same lineage as the cruciform great halls of the Vajra Realm at Esoteric Buddhist centers such as Nalanda Temple and Chaojie Temple; viewed in plan from above, their cruciform configurations are strikingly similar (Figure 6).


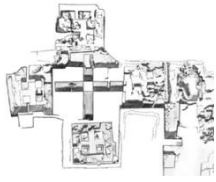
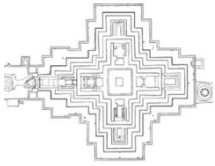

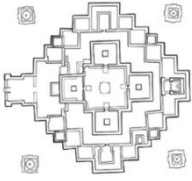
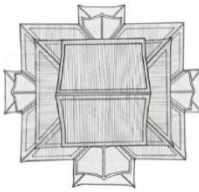
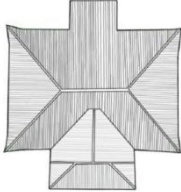
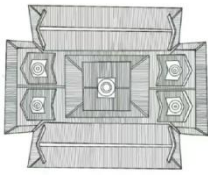
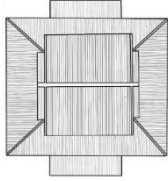
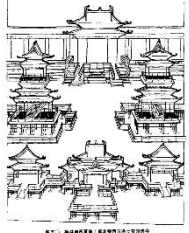
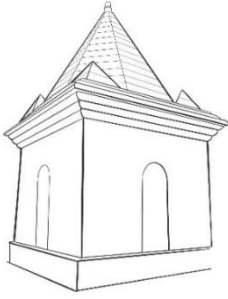
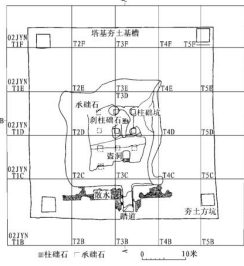
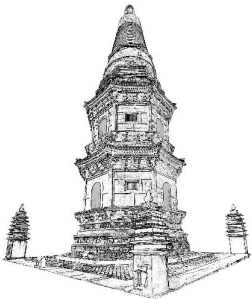
				
<p>6.1 Japan, Kamakura period — vajra (ritual scepter). Image source: Hou Xin.</p>	<p>6.2 Nateshwar archaeological site, 10th–12th centuries. Image source: Hou Xin.</p>	<p>6.3 8th century — Chogyo-ji central cruciform great hall. Image source: Hou Xin.</p>	<p>6.4 Five Dynasties period — Dunhuang Cave 17, “Mandala.” Image source: Hou Xin.</p>	<p>6.5 Northern Song — Central Great Hall of Tholing Temple. Image source: Hou Xin.</p>
				
<p>6.6 Song Dynasty — Mani Hall of Longxing Temple (Image source: Yang Yating).</p>	<p>6.7 Ming Dynasty — Great Hall of Pilu Temple, Hebei (Image source: Yang Yating).</p>	<p>6.8 Qing Dynasty — Falun Hall of Yonghe Temple (Image source: Yang Yating).</p>	<p>6.9 Japan — Golden Hall of Kongo-ji (Image source: Yang Yating).</p>	<p>6.10 Yulin Grottoes, Cave 3 (Western Xia). Image source: Xiao Mo, Research on Dunhuang Architecture, Cultural Relics Press, Oct. 1989, p. 91.</p>

Figure 6. Cruciform Great Hall

<p>Five-Pagoda Ensemble</p>			
	<p>7.1 Che'erying Village, Beijing — Northern Wei Four-Gate Pagoda. Illustrated by Zhang Boxuan.</p>	<p>7.2 Plan of the pagoda foundation at the Northern Dynasties Buddhist temple site of Zhaopengcheng. Yecheng Archaeological Team. “Excavation of the Northern Dynasties Buddhist Temple at the Zhaopengcheng Site, Yecheng Ruins, Linzhang, Hebei.” Kaogu (Archaeology), no. 7, 2010.</p>	<p>7.3 Liao Dynasty — North Pagoda of Yunju Temple. Image source: Dong Qingxin.</p>






Many Treasures Pagoda			
	7.4 Mid-Tang — Esoteric Buddhist cave, Mogao Cave 361 (781–848). Image source: illustrated by Zhang Yu.	7.5 Tang–Northern Song — Flower Pagoda of Guanghui Temple. Image source: Dong Qingxin.	7.6 Korea — Esoteric Many Treasures Pagoda at Bulguksa, Silla period, AD 751. Image source: CNU.105 Studio.
Mandala			
	7.7 Qing Dynasty — model of the Pavilion of Rectifying the Mirror (completed in 1761). Image source: CNU.105 Studio.	7.8 Biyun Temple — Arhat Hall (Sino–Tibetan syncretism). Image source: CNU.105 Studio.	7.9 Biyun Temple — Vajra Pagoda, Qing Qianlong period. Image source: Toutiao account “Daguan Pindu.”

Figure 7. Composite Pagodas

Many Treasures Pagodas are a form of Esoteric Buddhist architecture. The name derives from the Lotus Sutra and embodies Esoteric Buddhist thought and cosmology. They chiefly appear after the seventh century. In the Middle Tang, the Mogao Caves contain numerous Esoteric Buddhist Many Treasures Pagodas; Cave 361 is an important Middle Tang (Tibetan rule over Dunhuang) Esoteric Buddhist cave. The Many Treasures Pagoda on the west wall symbolizes the fusion of Lotus devotion and Esoteric Buddhist ritual. Within the pagoda is an inner Buddha Hall where Shakyamuni and the Many Treasures Buddha are seated together. The two Buddhas seated together inside expresses the doctrinal principle and embodies the Esoteric Buddhist mandala concept of “Buddha within the stupa.”[27] This exemplifies the integration of Esoteric Buddhist doctrinal principles into the Tang realm. At its four corners stand upright subsidiary pagodas set on Sumeru pedestals, constituting the style of a Vajra Throne Pagoda. The Flower Pagoda of Guanghui Temple is explicitly recorded as a “Many

Treasures Pagoda” in the Record of the Reconstruction of the Jeweled Pagoda from the twelfth year of Wanli in the Ming (1584); the Qing *Gazetteer of Zhengding County* and poems composed by the Qianlong Emperor likewise retain this name, such as “*Guanghui Temple Many Treasures Pagoda on the Day after the Full Moon in the Eleventh Month of Winter.*” Among Esoteric Buddhist structures, the most ornate and sumptuous is the Many Treasures Pagoda. In the “*Appearance of the Jeweled Stupa*” chapter of the Lotus Sutra it is said: “All beheld Buddha Many Treasures seated upon a lion throne within the jeweled pagoda, his entire body undispersed, as if in meditative absorption.” This is likely the symbolic import of the lion images on the first story of the Many Treasures Pagoda, indicating that the pagoda is a concrete embodiment of Buddha Many Treasures preaching the Dharma. The Many Treasures Pagoda represents Buddha Many Treasures; in other words, it is the architectural expression of the theme of the two Buddhas seated together. At Mogao Cave 361, the Many Treasures Pagoda is of the stupa-form, with more curvilinear lines, and small subsidiary pagodas are painted beside it (Figure 7.4); it should also be a type of Vajra Throne Pagoda. Xiao Mo writes in *Research on Dunhuang Architecture*: “This Esoteric Buddhist style, though executed in brick and stone, is no less ornate and sumptuous than timber construction.” Inside the central cella on the third story of the Flower Pagoda at Guanghui Temple are displayed two Tang Dynasty stone seated Buddhas. *The Record of the Many Treasures Pagoda of Guanghui Temple in Zhenzhou* notes: “Within the pagoda there are stone images of the two Tathagatas, Many Treasures and Shakyamuni. An event is fully recorded in the ‘Jeweled Stupa’ chapter of the Lotus Sutra: as Shakyamuni preached the Dharma, a jeweled pagoda surged up from the earth.” It is thus evident that these two images are of Many Treasures and Shakyamuni, and that the Flower Pagoda’s alternate name, “Many Treasures Pagoda,” also derives from this.

			
8.1 Mahavairocana at the Flower Pagoda of Wanfo	8.2 Mahavairocana	8.3 Image of the	8.4 Vairocana at Pilu

Hall. Image source: Personal Library; account: Andong Laowang, “Fangshan Ancient Pagodas,” “Beijing Fangshan Wanfo Hall Flower Pagoda (Liao; National Protected Cultural Relic),” 2017-12-20.	on the south face of the body of the Tianning Temple Pagoda. Image source: cnu105 Studio.	Cundi Buddha-Mother on the north face of the Tianning Temple Pagoda. Image source: cnu105 Studio.	Temple, Zhengding. Image source: author’s own drawing.
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Figure 8. Mahavairocana Images in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei Region

The Five-Pagoda ensemble in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region originated in the Northern Wei Dynasty, developed through the Liao, Jin, Yuan, and Ming dynasties, and by the Qing Dynasty had formed a complete system, spanning a millennium. The Northern Wei Four-Gate Pagoda at Che’erying Village in Beijing has small pyramidal towers at the four corners of the stone eaves and a large pyramidal tower at the exact center. As an early pagoda typology, Esoteric Buddhist (Mikkyō) elements lack direct textual attestation; the four-gate configuration may implicitly symbolize Mount Sumeru in Buddhism. In 2011, the Institute of Archaeology of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Hebei Provincial Institute of Cultural Relics conducted a joint archaeological excavation at the Dazongchi Temple site in Yecheng, Linzhang, Hebei, and inferred that it dates to the late Northern Dynasties.[28] The temple’s plan is nearly square; when reconstructed, it features a large central pagoda encircled by four smaller ones. The scholar Guo Jiqiao considers it an early Esoteric Buddhist “Vajra Throne Pagoda” type.[29] Built in the Tang Dynasty, Yunju Temple—one of the great northern temples—has long received little scholarly attention regarding its Esoteric Buddhist elements. Its North Pagoda was rebuilt in the Liao Dynasty, with its foundation dating to the Tang Dynasty. The base is an octagonal brick Sumeru pedestal; the pagoda body is divided into two parts: the lower half is a two-story, pavilion-style hollow pagoda, and the upper half is a dome-shaped stupa body. This “Sino–Tibetan hybrid” configuration was common during the Liao period, when Esoteric Buddhism flourished; for example, the White Pagoda at Qingzhou in Inner Mongolia likewise fuses Exoteric Buddhist and Esoteric Buddhist styles. The hemispherical stupa (“lama pagoda”) is a hallmark element of Esoteric Buddhism, suggesting that the North Pagoda may have been influenced by Esoteric Buddhist ritual. At each of the four corners of the North Pagoda’s octagonal plan stands a small, dense-eaved Tang-style pagoda, echoing the octagonal-cruciform great-pagoda layout of Vajrayana architecture unearthed at Viharapur in Bengal, and reflecting a reconstructive awareness in Esoteric Buddhist architecture as it integrated Chinese traditions with Indian prototypes. The eight-bodhisattva reliefs and elaborate ornamentation of the Flower Pagoda at Guanghui

Temple fully exemplify the characteristics of Esoteric Buddhist architecture.[30] During the Ming and Qing Dynasty, Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist architecture—such as Biyun Temple’s Arhat Hall, the Pavilion of Rectifying the Mirror, and the Vajra Throne Pagoda—had developed into highly mature mandala architecture (Figure 7).

3.3 Dense-eaved Pagoda - Central Great Pagoda




During the Liao Dynasty (AD 907–1125), Esoteric Buddhist architecture to some extent avoided the direct impact of the late Tang–Five Dynasties suppressions of Buddhism in the Central Plains. Pagoda construction inherited the formal norms and ritual prescriptions of the square, thirteen-story, dense-eaved pagoda within the Tang Esoteric Buddhist system, reflecting a deep integration between architectural typology and the belief system. Taking the North Pagoda at Chaoyang as an example: its extant Esoteric Buddhist features were formed chiefly during the 10th to 13th years of Chongxi under Emperor Xingzong of Liao Dynasty (AD 1041–1044), through large-scale rebuilding and encasing renovation based on the Tang Dynasty Kaiyuan Temple pagoda. This marked a departure from the Tang convention of plain-bodied, platform-based dense-eaved pagodas, giving rise to a distinctive preference for elaborate carving. Upon a lofty base was set a richly ornamented Sumeru pedestal, and the figural decoration across the pagoda body became remarkably sumptuous—signaling a major transformation in dense-eaved pagoda podia from austerity to opulence. Situated at the temple’s center with monumental square dimensions, it is covered with Esoteric Buddhist reliefs. With the Five Buddhas of the Vajra Realm and the Eight Great Stupas as principal motifs, the Esoteric Buddhist implication is clear and explicit, making it a quintessential Vajra-Realm pagoda.[31] Scholar Yu Bo points out that the scripture pagoda excavated from the reliquary (“tiangong”) of the Chaoyang North Pagoda is engraved with an Eight Great Stupas mandala. By surveying Esoteric Buddhist texts such as *the Susiddhikara (Suxidi Jialuo) Sutra*, *the Mahāyāna Bensheng Xindi Guan Sutra*, and *the Sutra on the Names of the Eight Great Stupas*, he fully demonstrates that the Eight Great Stupas imagery carries profound Esoteric Buddhist mandala significance; accordingly, the Eight Great Stupas have become one of the most recognizable features for establishing the Esoteric Buddhist character of Liao pagodas.[32] Such square, dense-eaved great pagodas of the Liao period are mainly concentrated in the Chaoyang area (Figure 9.1). The pagoda body typically symbolically enshrines Vairocana, the fundamental Buddha of Esoteric Buddhism, or the pagoda itself (as with the Yunjie Temple Pagoda) serves as the embodiment, expressing the notion that the

pagoda is the Buddha. Taking this as the core, Esoteric Buddhist images—such as the Five Buddhas of the Vajra Realm, the Eight Great Stupas, and related bodhisattvas—are systematically arranged on the four sides of the pagoda body and at specific locations, thereby constructing a 3D mandala, reflecting the transmission and development of Tang-Esoteric Buddhist faith in the Five Buddhas of the Five Directions. Professor Liu Zhiping, a scholar of historic architecture, states: “The Liao people mostly built brick dense-eaved pagodas; the lower portions of the pagoda bodies often bear Esoteric Buddhist images.”[33] Undoubtedly, such square, large dense-eaved pagodas of the Liao period are Vajra-Realm pagodas that clearly embody the Esoteric Buddhist mandala conception, signaling that Tang Esoteric Buddhist architecture reached maturity in the Liao and developed a distinctive style.

Beginning in the mid-Liao Dynasty, apart from the five square pagodas in Xingzhong Prefecture, virtually all Liao pagodas were octagonal, solid, dense-eaved types (with a very few hexagonal). The figural decoration on their bodies commonly featured the Eight Great Bodhisattvas and the Eight Great Stupas. The octagonal form was better suited to the placement of Buddha. The Tang-style square pagoda gradually gave way, transforming into the octagonal solid dense-eaved pagoda, which became the mainstream in pagoda construction. The predominance of the octagon was grounded chiefly in the mandala scene described in the fundamental scripture of the Esoteric Womb Realm, the Great Sun Sutra: “At that moment, in the Buddha-lands ... at the eight corners are erected jewel banners; the waters of the eight meritorious qualities are fragrant and brimming; innumerable birds—mandarin ducks, geese, and swans—emit harmonious, elegant sounds. ... In the eight directions, garlands of the five precious substances are linked together; the ground is soft like cotton; all who touch or tread upon it experience joy. ... The square altar has four gates, open and accessible to the west. Encircling boundary paths, within which appears the mind-born Great Eight-Petaled Lotus King. ... There, within the filaments, are: in the east, the Tathagata Jeweled Banner; in the south, the Tathagata Flower-Blossom King; in the north, the Tathagata Drum-Sound; in the west, the Tathagata Infinite Life; in the southeast, Bodhisattva Samantabhadra; in the northeast, Bodhisattva Guanyin; in the southwest, Manjushri the Youth; and in the northwest, Bodhisattva Maitreya.” This laid the foundation for the octagon to become the principal form of Liao dense-eaved pagodas.

Continuing the Tang form of the thirteen-story dense-eaved pagoda, it became the highest grade of imperially commissioned construction and was likely connected with the Esoteric

Buddhist scriptures translated by Ci Xian. In those Esoteric Buddhist texts, the Great Mandala is described as follows: in the first court are the Five Buddhas and the four Pāramitā Bodhisattvas, with Mahavairocana at the center, four Buddhas in the four directions, and four bodhisattvas at the four corners; in the second court, the Eight Great Bodhisattvas; in the third court, the twelve offering bodhisattvas and the Ten Great Wisdom Kings. Offering powder-altar rite: At the center of the inner court stands a Buddha-relic stupa; in the east, a Tathagata; in the south, Vairocana; in the west, Amitayus; in the north, Akshobhya. At the four gates of the inner court, the Eight Great Bodhisattvas are arrayed in powder; in the second court, four goddesses each hold a treasure. The Da Banruo Yin Qian Jing records: “The Buddha told Ananda: erect a seven-treasures pagoda ... in all, thirteen stories.” In the Huayan Sutra, the number “thirteen” corresponds to the consummate stage of practice. In the twentyfold Huazang World, the thirteenth tier—where humans dwell—is the Saha world, taught by Shakyamuni. The thirteen tiers of eaves symbolize the level of the world inhabited by humans. Moreover, traditional Chinese architecture esteems odd numbers of stories as signifying the supremacy of “Yang”. Thirteen, as the “utmost yang number,” accords with classical aesthetics. Therefore, the Liao thirteen-story dense-eaved brick pagoda should be regarded as a concrete, localized embodiment of the integrative Exoteric–Esoteric Buddhist ideal. It also signifies that Esoteric Buddhist dense-eaved pagodas reached their flourishing in the Liao Dynasty (Figure 9.2).

<p>9.1 Transmission</p>			
	<p>Chaoyang North Pagoda — Liao, 13th year of Chongxi (1044), hollow interior.</p>	<p>Chaoyang South Pagoda — Liao, 2nd year of Dakang (1067), hollow interior.</p>	<p>Chaoyang Great Treasure Pagoda — hollow interior.</p>







9.2 Flourishing			
9.3 Disappearance			
	Tayingzi Pagoda, Liaoning — Liao, 3rd year of Taiping to 1st year of Qingning (1023–1055), solid interior.	Chongxing Temple Twin Pagodas, Liaoning — Liao, Qingning–Tianqing period (1055–1123), solid interior.	Guangji Temple Pagoda, Liaoning — Liao, 3rd year of Qingning (1057), solid interior.
	Nanan Temple Pagoda, Yu County — Liao, 1st year of Tianqing (111), solid interior.	Tianning Temple Pagoda — Liao, 9th to 10th years of Tianqing (1119–1120), solid interior.	Cishou Temple Pagoda — 4th year of Wanli (1576), solid interior.

Figure 9. Thirteen-Story Dense-Eaved Pagoda (Image source: CNU.105 Studio)

The Tianning Temple Pagoda adopts the typology of an octagonal, thirteen-story, dense-eaved brick pagoda and is a representative example of dense-eaved pagodas in the Youzhou area in the late Liao period. The entire pagoda is divided into four parts—base, body, eave tiers, and finial—consistent with the overall structural composition of early Liao pagodas, yet its details exhibit clear differences and pronounced regional characteristics. First, the foundation of the Tianning Temple Pagoda is broad and, compared with early Liao pagodas in the Chaoyang area, conspicuously lower. In the Chaoyang region, the dense-eaved pagodas have foundations of great vertical dimension, reflecting the Liao Dynasty’s aesthetic predilection for power and grandeur. At Tianning Temple, by contrast, the podium is reduced in scale, the forceful monumental beauty is diminished, and a momentum of dignified splendor is emphasized. In comparison with the Chaoyang dense-eaved pagodas, whose

body-level Buddhist images are enormous, the Esoteric Buddhist images on the pagoda body of Tianning Temple—representative of this type—are smaller in scale (Figure 8), with appearing of narrative themes, and the carving is more luxuriant and refined. The brick-carved decorative treatment of the pagoda body exhibits greater refinement in technique, higher sculptural mastery, and a heightened sense of vitality in form. Esoteric Buddhist elements are more implicit, multicultural influences are more evident, and the relief decoration is richer, as seen, for example, on the Ming Dynasty Cishou Temple Pagoda (Figure 9.3).

3.4 Pagoda–Banner Symbolic System

Esoteric Buddhism regards the Dhāraṇī pillar, a product of combining a centrally symmetrical structure with inscriptions from the Dhāraṇī Sūtra, as a 3D manifestation of the mandala. It is a type of banner-pagoda that integrates scripture inscription and image-making and serves a religious function. Its rise, spread, and decline are closely tied to the emergence and development of Esoteric Buddhism.[34] In China, there are as many as 495 Dhāraṇī pillars with explicit documentary attestations. They are mostly distributed across North China, Central China, and East China, as well as in Shaanxi Province and parts of the eastern coastal provinces.[35] Since the Tang Dynasty, Dhāraṇī pillars have been distributed throughout the northern, central, and southern parts of the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region. The scale and splendour of these Dhāraṇī pillars are among the most outstanding in China. According to Sun Xingyan’s *Huanyu Fangbei Lu* (Table 3) in Qing Dynasty, a total of 88 Tang–Song Dhāraṇī pillars have been found in this region: 68 in Youzhou, 2 in Tianjin, and 18 in Hebei.[36] The profusion of such Dhāraṇī pillars, on the one hand, attests to the vigorous flourishing of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism in this area. On the other hand, it provides material evidence for studying Esoteric Buddhist architectural typologies.

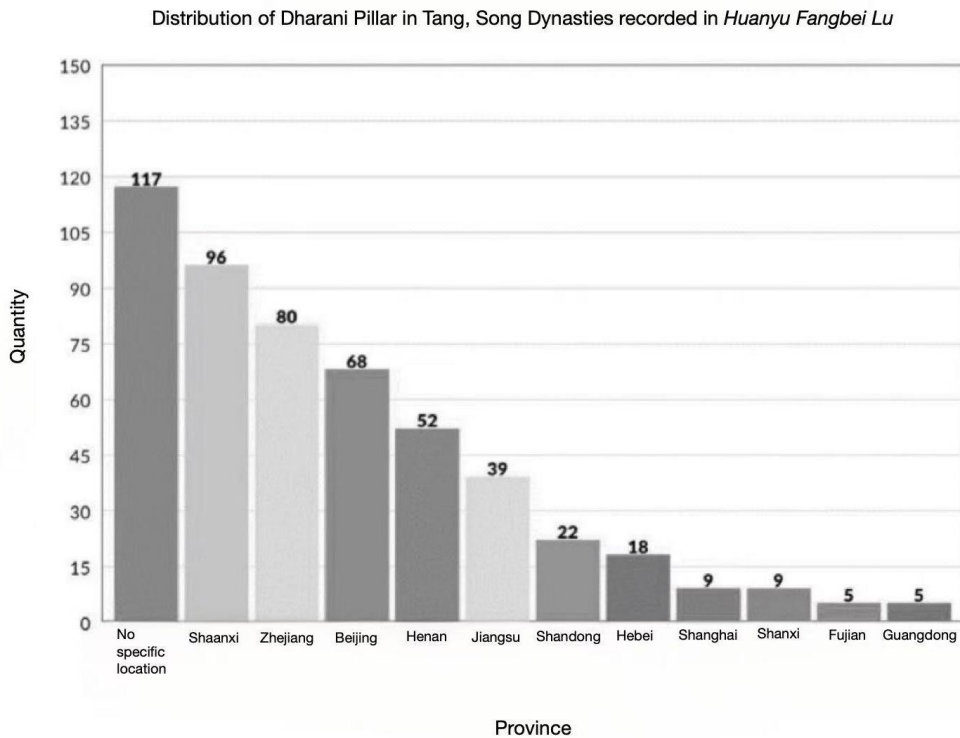

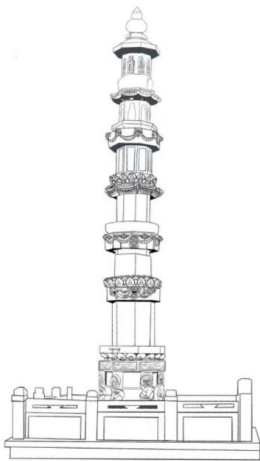




Table 3. Distribution Map of Tang—Song Dhāraṇī Pillars

The earliest dated Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī pillar discovered to date is in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region—the “Buddha-Top Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī pillar” recorded at Benyuan Temple in Huolu, Hebei (702). The most canonical example is the Tang Dynasty Great Buddha-Top Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī pillar at Lulong, Hebei (Figure 10.2 & Image 2), which is more ornate than most pillars elsewhere: octagonal with six tiers, exquisitely carved, its exterior showing dragons coiling around jade-like columns, supported by eight auspicious dragons. From the Kaiyuan era of the Tang Dynasty, the surviving portion of the Tianhu Dhāraṇī pillar stands 5 meters high; the main body is octagonal, the top has been damaged, and on the south face is inscribed, “Respectfully constructed the Buddha-Top Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī pillar for the nation” (Figure 10.3). Another Kaiyuan-era example is the Dhāraṇī pillar at Kaiyuan Temple in Xingtai, Hebei (built in 762; Figure 10.1), with extremely rare feature: 16 faces. Compared with those of the Tang dynasty, Song Dynasty Dhāraṇī pillars are larger in scale. Examples include the Buddha-Top (Uṣṇīṣa) Dhāraṇī pillar built in Lincheng in the fifth year of Jiayou of the Northern Song (1060); the Dhāraṇī pillar for the relics of Master Qinggong in Baoding, Hebei; the Dhāraṇī pillar at Tianning Temple in Xingtai; and the Xiyīngjīng Dhāraṇī pillar in

Handan, Hebei (Figure 10.4). The most renowned is the Zhaozhou Dhāraṇī pillar from the fifth year of Jingyou of the Northern Song (1038), standing 16.44 meters high. It is the largest and tallest known extant Dhāraṇī pillar in China (Figure 10.5), marking the zenith of Dhāraṇī pillar construction. According to scholarly statistics, a total of 109 Dhāraṇī pillars are known to have been built during the Liao Dynasty.[37] Extant Liao Dynasty Dhāraṇī pillars number in the dozens, including the Haihui Temple pillar at Beizheng Village, Fangshan District, Beijing (5th year of Yingli under Emperor Muzong of Liao); the pillar at the base of the Liao-period Jinguang Śarīra Stupa in Shunyi District, Beijing; the Liao stone pillar at Shuanglin Temple in Zhaitangchuan Village, Mentougou; and the Dhāraṇī pillar in Baodi District, Tianjin (Figure 10.7). A more canonical example is the Liao Dynasty pillar at Gu'an, Hebei (Figure 10.6), made entirely of white marble (hanbaiyu) and approximately 7 meters high. The pillar body is octagonal and divided into four tiers; from bottom to top it is inscribed with the Uṣṇīṣa Vijaya Dhāraṇī Sūtra in raised regular script. It attains a high level of artistic accomplishment and reflects the ritual practice of Esoteric Buddhism in North China.

			
<p>Sixteen-faced Dhāraṇī pillar at Kaiyuan Temple, Xingtai.</p>	<p>Great Buddha-Top Dhāraṇī Pillar at Lulong, Hebei.</p>	<p>Tianhu Dhāraṇī Pillar at Jingxing, Hebei.</p>	<p>Xiyingjing Dhāraṇī Pillar, Handan City, Hebei Province.</p>
<p>During the Kaiyuan era of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang.</p>	<p>Yifeng era (676–679) under Emperor Gaozong of the Tang; rebuilt in the Jin.</p>	<p>Fifteenth year of Kaiyuan of the Tang (AD 727).</p>	<p>Northern Song</p>
<p>10.1</p>	<p>10.2</p>	<p>10.3</p>	<p>10.4</p>




			
Zhaozhou Dharani Pillar.	Liao Dynasty Dharani Pillar at Gu'an, Hebei.	Dhāraṇī Pillar in Baodi District, Tianjin.	
Fifth year of Jingyou of the Northern Song (1038).	Late reign of Emperor Shengzong of the Liao (982–1031).	Liao, first to fifth years of the Kaitai era (1012–1016).	
10.5	10.6	10.7	

Figure 10. Dhāraṇī Pillars in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei Region (illustration by Zhang Shiyu)

4 Characteristics of Han-Transmitted Esoteric Buddhist Architecture in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei Region

4.1 Integrative Nature

A salient hallmark of Esoteric Buddhism is its aptitude for absorbing local religious elements and remaking itself accordingly. In the course of its development, Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture continually absorbed and integrated elements of traditional Chinese culture, building techniques, and other religious cultures, thereby forming a distinctive style. For example, the Great Compassion Pavilion at Longxing Temple follows an “image-determined pavilion” schema: a mandala space designed to accommodate the Song Dynasty bronze statue of the Thousand-Armed, Thousand-Eyed Guanyin. Its three stories correspond to the stages of cultivation associated with the Buddha’s Three Bodies (trikaya), and its five tiers of eaves symbolize the cosmology of the Five Buddhas of the Five Directions, making the building itself a walkable mandala-altar—an ethos of “the pavilion is the image, and the image is the pavilion.” Externally, the Guanyin Pavilion at Dule Temple appears as a two-story hip-and-gable-roofed structure, but internally it comprises three concealed levels, forming the distinctive configuration of “two externally, three internally.” This design implicitly accords with the Womb-Realm mandala’s symbolic system of a “three-tiered

pavilion.” A multi-religious synthesis is also evident—for example, the murals in the Great Hall of Pulu Temple in Hebei present a distinctive cultural landscape of the integration of the Three Teachings: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. As a religious architectural form unique to Esoteric Buddhism, the Dharani pillar’s core function and symbolic significance were gradually absorbed and adapted by various schools of Han-transmitted Buddhism over the course of history, giving rise to a phenomenon of “generalization.” The four small hexagonal pagodas attached at the four corners of the main tower of the Flower Pagoda at

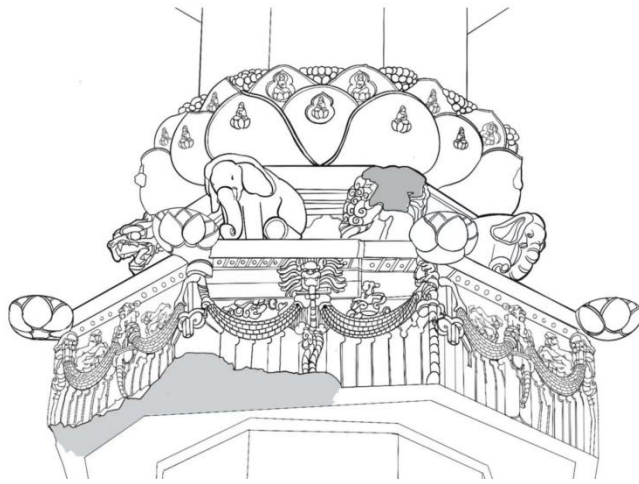


Image 2. Detail of the Tang-dynasty Great Buddha-Top Dhāraṇī Pillar at Lulong, Hebei (Image source: cnu105).

Guanghui Temple constitute an early form of the Vajra Throne Pagoda, symbolizing the mandala layout of the “Five Buddhas of the Five Directions.” The 248 brick-carved lotus blossoms on the conical “bouquet tier” of the main tower’s fourth story echo the Exoteric Buddhist Huayan thought of the “Lotus contain World,” while the sculptures of eight lions and eight elephants create a visual unity of the “Vajra Realm” and the “Womb Realm.” The body of the

bell at Beijing’s Fahai Temple is inscribed with Tibetan-script mantras, yet its knop bears Han-style dragon motifs, embodying the Ming Dynasty integration of Han and Tibetan Buddhist ritual, with practice still centered on the *Great Compassion Dharani* of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism. The *Imperially Bestowed Stele Record of Fahai Chan Temple* within the temple explicitly records its construction principle of “adhering to Han norms while incorporating Esoteric Buddhist methods.” Localization is the result of the dissemination and cultural adaptation of Esoteric Buddhism. Characterized by mandala-form reconstruction and multi-religious integration, Esoteric Buddhism gradually became generalized and diffused— “Every sect has Esoteric Buddhism inside.” This process of generalization reflects the overarching trend in Chinese Buddhism toward the harmonious integration of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism.

4.2 Mystical Nature

Esoteric Buddhism created a complete symbolic and sign system to express its doctrinal ideas, which is difficult for non-initiates to comprehend. Sanskrit bīja are often carved on caisson ceilings or integrated into painted motifs, and the architecture itself frequently cultivates a

mysterious ambience. For example, the caisson ceiling in the Mahavira Hall adopts a mandala-style structure based on the bīja of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism. At the center is a depiction of Vairocana, encircled by the eight classes of dharma protectors, embodying the Esoteric Buddhist cosmology of “one Buddha encompassing all.” Some halls within Esoteric Buddhist temple are arranged in a relatively concealed manner and may be entered only after specific rites and permissions, imparting an air of unfathomable mystery. The integration of painted Esoteric Buddhist murals with indigenous architectural forms embodies localized mysticism. The Sanskrit bīja painted on the beam framework of the Revolving Sutra Repository pavilion in the Great Compassion Pavilion at Longxing Temple together constitute a symbolic system of the “harmonious integration of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism.” Under the skylight illumination within the dim interior of the pavilion, this symbolic system creates an Esoteric Buddhist visualization experience of “the Buddha appearing in the light.” The Great Compassion Pavilion, together with the flanking Revolving Sutra Repository Pavilion and Maitreya Pavilion, forms a “one principal, two attendants” layout that implicitly accords with the Esoteric Buddhist mandala cosmological model of “a central Buddha stupa plus four directional guardians.” The octagonal, thirteen-eaved dense-eaved pagoda of Tianning Temple symbolizes the “eight-petaled lotus throne” in Esoteric Buddhism, corresponds to a mandala attended by the Eight Great Bodhisattvas, and represents the Esoteric Buddhist “Thirteen Heavens” sequence of practice. Through the axial layout of Chinese Buddhist Temple, the centrally symmetrical structure of Indian Esoteric Buddhism is transposed. Esoteric Buddhist architecture takes the mandala as its prototype; the symmetrical composition of towers and pavilions directly reflects the Esoteric Buddhist cosmology, with the center emphasizing the centrally symmetrical structure of the tower/pavilion, as at Dule Temple, Tianning Temple, and Wanshou Temple. Axial symmetry: taking the pagoda or Buddha Hall as the axis, subsidiary halls, bell and drum towers, etc. are arranged symmetrically on both sides, forming a pattern of “one principal, two attendants,” as in the Tianning Temple Pagoda in Liao dynasty, which exhibits centrally radiating symmetry. The eight-curve-beams caisson ceiling above the Guanyin statue composes a mandala pattern of the “eight-petaled lotus,” which, together with the Sixteen Arhats in the Ming dynasty murals, forms a visual system of “dual cultivation of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism”.

5 Cultural Significance of Han-Transmitted Esoteric Buddhist Architecture in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei Region

5.1 Religious Significance

Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region constitutes important material evidence for the study of Chinese religious culture. They not only embody the religious characteristics of Esoteric Buddhism itself but also reveal a distinctive path of integration between Buddhism and traditional Chinese culture. The religious significance of these buildings is manifested both in their symbolic systems and their functions in spiritual practice and is likewise reflected in their multifaceted value as witnesses to history and as cultural bearers.

5.2 Artistic Value

Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture integrates the architectural techniques and artistic styles of China and India and possesses exceedingly high artistic value. Its distinctive architectural forms, exquisite decorative art, and rich cultural connotations provide precious primary material evidence for the study of ancient Chinese architecture, painting, sculpture, and other artistic forms. The proposal of this architectural type can link together the long-silent fragments of Esoteric Buddhist architecture in history to form a systematic typology of Esoteric Buddhist architectural forms and can also advance the interpretation of related numinous structures in other regions, such as Jinan's Longhu Pagoda, the Jiuding Pagoda, the Yingxian Wooden Pagoda, and the Flower Pagoda at Dunhuang. Research, involving the survey and excavation of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region helps to protect and bring to light the region's Buddhist architectural cultural heritage; Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture still holds very important historical status today, is imbued with rich cultural connotations, and may be regarded as a precious Buddhist cultural resource. Therefore, effectively utilizing the architectural remains of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhism can accurately reveal the national cultural spirit, cultural inclusiveness, and cultural confidence embodied therein, provide a diversified supply of cultural content, and strengthen the nation's spiritual strength.

5.3 Significance of Cultural Exchange

The formation and development of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture stand as an important witness to cultural exchange between China and other lands. It not only absorbed the architectural elements and cultural connotations of Indian Esoteric Buddhism

but also integrated with traditional Chinese culture to form a distinctive style. This cultural exchange has fostered mutual understanding and integration among different cultures, enriching the treasury of human civilization. The “Silk Road” is also known as the “Buddhist Road.” Ancient Buddhism spread eastward from Chang’an along the Silk Road, and the Esoteric Buddhist architecture that took shape in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region—with its rich and resplendent appearance—stands as historical testimony to the bonds of friendship between the Chinese people and the peoples of neighboring Buddhist countries. In advancing the Belt and Road Initiative, these precious architectural remains can play a positive role in promoting integration among different religions and cultures, fostering interaction among ethnic groups, and facilitating exchanges across regions. Therefore, research involving the survey and excavation of Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region is of great significance for enhancing the nation’s cultural soft power.

Conclusion

In sum, Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region can be broadly divided into four types: 1. Guanyin-category pavilion/hall type, such as the Guanyin Pavilion of Dule Temple from the Liao, the Great Compassion Hall of Longxing Temple from the Song, and the Great Compassion Treasure Pavilion of Dahuisi in Beijing from the Ming; 2. Central octagonal thirteen-eaved pagoda type, such as the Tianning Temple Pagoda of the Liao and the Cishou Temple Pagoda of the Ming; 3. Treasure-pagoda type, such as the Flower Pagoda of Guanghui Temple and the Flower Pagoda of Wanfo Temple from the Tang–Song; 4. Dhāraṇī-pillar type. This paper demonstrates the correspondences between each architectural form and Esoteric Buddhist doctrine (e.g., mandala thought), as well as the characteristic integration of Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism. It innovatively proposes a localization paradigm for Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture: an architectural language that fuses traditional ceremonial systems with Esoteric Buddhist liturgies. This study fills the gap in the systematic research on Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture and provides a typological basis for cultural-heritage conservation in the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region. Research limitations include the spatiotemporal unevenness of extant architectural samples, the absence of surviving Tang Dynasty architectural artifacts, and the subjectivity inherent in interpreting non-textual sources (e.g., decorative motifs). Future research may be extended to a comparative study of the Jiangnan belt of Esoteric Buddhist architecture, or further to the connections between Han-transmitted

Esoteric Buddhist architecture and the dissemination of Buddhism along the Silk Road, to refine the spatiotemporal trajectory of the development of Chinese Buddhist architecture. As an important testimony to the pluralistic unity of Chinese civilization, the Han-transmitted Esoteric Buddhist architecture of the Beijing–Tianjin–Hebei region urgently requires in-depth exploration of its historical value, artistic achievements, and cultural connotations.

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