SHIFTING MARGINS OF THE SACRED REALM
: COMMONALITIES BETWEEN TOMBS AND BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE IN THE 10th–14th CENTURIES

Over the past several years, I have been working on funerary art of the middle period (10th–14th centuries). Although the focus of my writing has largely been on images of a specific motif, i.e., theatrical performance, the central issue in my studies has been on their relationship to the space in which they were installed, placed, or painted. While this particular theme helped me explore distinctive ways in which the netherworld was conceived by contemporaries, I have also discerned an intriguing mode of seeing embedded in the tomb space. This mode of seeing is quite complex and promises numerous ramifications on my research. In the workshop, I would like to introduce one of these new venues of research, a large question that concerns how middle-period Chinese visualized and materialized sacred realms.

This interest was first triggered in the winter of 2005 when I was examining several tombs built during the 12th and 13th centuries in southern Shanxi province. The interior walls of these tombs were completely covered with exquisite brick reliefs emulating the components of wooden architecture, such as brackets, columns, or lattice doors of houses or temples. Upon stepping inside, I realized that the conventional terminology used among scholars for referring to this type of tomb structure, i.e., “fangmu” (wood-architecture imitation), had been obscuring an important characteristic of such a structure: an overwhelming sense of disorientation, constructed by the very simulation. In other words, the simulating effect dislocated my sense of space. This was partially due to the fact that some architectural elements were conventionally used for the exterior of a building, and partially because of the vividness of the projected relief surface that made me wonder about the “space” beyond the underground tomb walls. Most scholarly interests in such tombs have been focused on searching for above-ground architecture on which the “fangmu” structure may have been modeled, assuming that the represented architectural surfaces
were meant to resonate with a whole structure of the living, functional architecture. But the on-site research—in which I could examine the scale, mechanics, and overall composition of the seamless layout of the relief blocks—led me to shift from the model-searching trend to considering the ways in which the simulated wall surface interacted with and reshaped the physical space within the tombs. What did the designers and/or sponsors of the tombs try to achieve by making the varying yet subtle degrees of the depth of the relief among the architectural components? My impression was that these differences in projection effectively blurred the fixed boundary between indoor and outdoor spaces.

A chance to push this research in a specific direction came when I was recently surveying building models and miniature architecture. In particular, the so-called “tiangong louge” (literally “tower pavilions of the heavenly palace”) in Buddhist temples in northern Shanxi, such as the Sutra Library in Lower Huayan Monastery (1038) and the main hall in Jingtu Monastery (1184), a downscaled architectural structure that symbolically occupies and decorates interior walls. In the case of the Sutra Library, several sets of architectural models in wood occupy the entire interior walls, connected by an uninterrupted band of balustrade, which is projected from the surface far enough to be seen as an organic structure of its own, yet not enough to function as an actual architectural space. I found a striking similarity between the spatial logic underlying this “architecture” installed on the surface, which integrates itself into the whole interior space, and that of the tomb interior researched earlier. Just as in the brick-relief tombs, a strong sense of displacement is felt here as well, similarly conditioned by both the presence of exterior views inside the building and by the spatial illusionism of the architectural structure only halfway jutting out of the walls. In short, despite their differences in both physical and ritual contexts—one as an underground funerary space, the other as an above-ground religious space—they both keenly play out the spatialization of the wall surface.

This seems to be a phenomenon that emerged and developed during the tenth through thirteenth centuries, which has much potential to help explore other related issues on visuality and religiosity of the time period. What can this shared practice tell us about, in terms of visualizing the realms beyond the everyday world in middle-period China? What kinds of spatial experiences contributed to the contemporary interests in surface and boundary? How were the boundaries of the other world visualized, and were there multiple layers of boundaries imagined within a single mortuary space? Was there any intrinsic logic in each ritual discourse (mortuary
and Buddhist) that drove such architectural development, and did they perhaps accidently intersect (and, if so, what made them overlap)? How could the concept of “spatialization” of the surface help differentiate what may be considered a simple extension of the traditional structure from something newly attuned to the conception of the particular space specific to the middle period?

Currently I am working on two issues immediately related to this project: first, a historical survey on the conceptualization of the wall surface and medieval/middle-period imaginations of the space beyond that surface; second, an examination of patrons and users of such spaces, as well as potential ritual practices within the spaces. In the workshop, I would like to discuss the commonalities between two different ritual spaces seen through a practice that I call the spatialization of surface. I also hope to bring up relevant methodological issues and challenges in understanding ritual spaces as more of a visually and spatially “practiced” domain than as an architectural manifestation of prescriptive ideals confined in strictly funerary or religious contexts.