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On May 25, 2004, a relic, the Buddha's finger, was flown to Hong Kong from China. It had been unearthed in 1987 at Famen Temple near Xi'an in Shaanxi Province after over 1,100 years underground. I was invited to attend the closing ceremony on June 4, and filmed it. The finger had been displayed for ten days at the huge Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center in its miniature gold pagoda since the Buddha's birthday on May 26 (Figure 1). Over one million devotees had prostrated before the relic and made offerings.

This relic has a richly documented history. The last time it saw the light of day was in 873, when it was re-interred in the Famen Temple crypt by the Tang Emperor Yizong (reigned 859–73). Scholar Eugene Wang points out that

FIG 1
Buddha's Finger relic on the altar in Hong Kong.

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the relic was called the True Body or Zhen Shen, which represented a shift from understanding the Buddha's relics as metaphysical objects that glowed and produced other special effects (of the Dhammakaya) to being actual bits of Gautama's physical body proper (Rupakaya) (Wang 2004: 79–81). It provides a perfect object for meditations upon the concept "body."

Our analytic purview in the study of religious life has been vastly expanded by the turn in the human sciences toward embodiment, by a grasping of the sensuous body itself as key in the post-structuralist critique of the Enlightenment. The turn to embodiment has helped mitigate a legacy of over-reliance upon reason and intellect for forming an understanding of human life. The study of religion has seen an analogous turn from analysis based upon doctrine and belief, themselves categories linked to Protestant religion, to "practice" or "lived religion." And central to lived religion is precisely that aspect of the human being that not only thinks but also lives and dies, feels and reacts, through the mortal body and its moral fate.

Rematerializing the study of religion from its long-term commitment to scripture and theology means returning texts to their con-texts of objects, images, and spaces wherein texts are found and used. There we also find, animating this whole magnificent panoply of things, the actual people who produce objects and then render them dynamic in practice. I would venture that it is these people themselves (the faithful, the disciples, the sangha, the congregation, the umma, and their various clergy) who constitute the most powerful creations upon which religions lay claims of stewardship, subjects among objects. It is through the practical, ritual, and moral maintenance of embodied persons that religions thrive or fail, and this maintenance does entail an enormity of material sustenance/support/contrivance. But at its center, as its motor and goal, lay the energy and the puzzle of the embodied human self.

Thus, religious worlds are full of representations and discussions about bodies while simultaneously being created by bodies. We can think of this double configuration as the "body as sign" and the "body as site." Religious philosophers, theologians, and rule-makers have spent enormous energy representing ideas about correct conduct and discipline for both insider clerical virtuosi and common practitioners. In post-Enlightenment Europe, the habit of self-consciously conceiving of humankind as primarily rational creatures devoid of embodied necessities resulted in some very entertaining displacements of embodiment into organizing metaphors for the rest of

the world—the body as sign. Indeed, the human body has functioned and continues to function as a powerful organizing metaphor for nature, society, and self in many social contexts, to the point that we have forgotten this stratum in our own language (Harrington 2009: 106–7).

But when we conceive of the body as site, we draw a distinction between the activities of metaphorization from a corporeal body to another domain (society, nature, the cosmos) and the situation of the lived body itself as a location for various practices, performances, and disciplines that shape and subjectify the self. (Noting again that body metaphors are themselves powerful organizers of such practices and appreciating this can enliven our readings of texts that purvey those metaphors.) This framework implies a dynamic looseness in the relations among the various materialities in play: images, texts, objects, and bodies. One might apply it to embodiment in any number of social domains quite fruitfully. I hope to provide a short illustration of its usefulness in a religious context, while also asking, conversely: what does taking up the body religious offer that might be especially useful or interesting to the general theorization of social life?

Buddhism provides an excellent case in point for several reasons. During its 2,000-year history, it has spread through several continents, doctrinally transforming, artistically elaborating, and politically ramifying itself, bending and shaping national cultures along the way. But the human body and its dispositions have remained at the core of all its many forms. The Buddha was famously clear in this regard: "I declare that it is in this fathom-long carcass, with its perceptions and thoughts/That there is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the path leading to the cessation of the world" (Anguttara Nikaya Sutta of the Pali Canon, AN 4:45). Buddhism's lack of external divinity meant perforce emphasizing humanity's continued incarnation into consciousness as an essential factor in the cosmos. Yet Buddhism is equally famous for decrying the body as a source of suffering. Its soteriological contradiction: preaching impermanence of the body and harping upon it as a source of defilement (especially in the Vinaya, or monastic codes) was accompanied by recognition of the body's necessary role as vehicle for making consciousness/mind available for enlightenment. If there is no physical form, then there can be no negation, no "not physical form." The logic of early Mahayana philosopher Nargarjuna was implacably sticky, elegantly severe in this conundrum (Williams 1997)!

As befits a religion with a human founder, the Buddha's own body became an early source of doctrinal

speculation. Fundamental Theravada doctrine provides him with two bodies. The first is the Dhammakaya, or Body of Truth, the body of the oral teachings, texts, images, and other representational means of transferring the dharma. The second is the Rupakaya, the Buddha's Body of Form: the physical Gautama Siddhartha, and the relics of his incarnation among humans (Collins 1997). (The later Mahayana, in its usual Greater Vehicle fashion, expands upon these two, but within this basic classificatory binary.) Thus Buddhism also provides a salient example for understanding "body" because it enfolds into itself a notion of the corpus of representations that recognizes their living dynamic force in the production of religious selves.

Judging from texts, carvings, and paraphernalia on the temple site, Wang puts the ceremonial treatment of the Famen Temple relic in 873 somewhere between the Buddhist abhiseka, the ritual process whereby a (human) bodhisattva becomes a (supra-human) Buddha, and a Chinese funeral. That is, the relic seems to focus two very different streams of ritual activity, creating a deliberate (con)fusion between the (supra-human) Buddha and the (all-too-human) presiding emperor. There was a crisis of succession in the late ninth century, and a faction of eunuchs was bent upon putting Yizong's 12-year-old son on the throne. This particular bone, the very one that came to Hong Kong in 2004, was treated as though it stood in for not only the body of the Buddha, but also the body of the emperor: "The True Body was a symbolic solution in this period of crisis, . . . [it] links the past with the present and uses past authority to legitimate the present. The relic's defiance of decay, as celebrated in relic lore, promised a reassuring stability in a time of confusion and unrest" (Wang 2004: 118).

In 873, in order to do this earthly job of stabilizing connections among the faithful, between them and their cosmic order, and in linking it all to the imperial center, the relic needed to be rethought of as an actual body bit, and treated ritually as re-embodied. This historically accomplished corporealization made it completely available to modern practitioners and their bureaucratic governors for what seemed to be a close rerun of politics in times of crisis in Hong Kong in 2004.

Overseas critics accused the People's Republic of China (PRC) of deploying the relic for political purposes: one Australian headline read, "Buddha's finger goes up Hong Kong's nose." But it was touted by newspapers in China as a powerful benevolent governmental kindness. The relic had traveled to Taiwan in 2002, performing some of the same sorts of cross-straits religious

diplomacy. At the opening ceremony, after copious thanks to all bureaucracies, the monk Kok Kwang, head of Hong Kong's Buddhist Association, said: "We must wholeheartedly and with deep feeling be thankful for the Motherland's solicitude for the people of Hong Kong" (Jue Guang 2004). Cynics noted that the PRC had just squashed Hong Kong's hopes for continuation of local free elections—and were literally throwing the populace a "bone."

At the Hong Kong event there were several kinds of bodies and embodied situations. The Buddha himself was present in both his bodies: as Dhammakaya in his sutras and his images, as Rupakaya in his relic finger bone. Thousands of faithful participated in a beautifully choreographed ceremony for themselves and for one another. Thus, the "site" gathered the exemplary body of the (deified) leader, the body of the self, and the bodies of others—all in ritualized relationship.

But simultaneously the entire ceremony was filmed from several angles for TV, projected on the jumbotron, and photographed by lay practitioners and monk participants alike. People kept whisking digital point-and-shoot cameras out of the sleeves of their robes. Part of the ritual itself was the constant production of further representations of the various bodies who were participating—bodies as signs. When faced with a swiftly moving event of this sensory magnitude, one realizes that site and sign are dialectically intertwined as mutually productive. Here I will discuss briefly how a sense of hierarchical unity was created and displayed.

The hierarchy of differences among the participants was clearly displayed in clothing and position: monks wore robes of brown, yellow, or orange; shaved heads gleaming in the golden spotlights while processing up the central aisle or onstage. The laity were in the darkened audience below, yet most of them wore simple robes over their street clothes in grey or black in a style that mimicked those of the monks, both different and same.

The most intricate part of the ceremony was the passing along hand to hand, from the monks through the lay disciples and back up to the monks, of offerings of glittering bowls of water and platters filled with food, flowers, fruit, candy, some of the piles wrapped round with mala prayer beads of pearls and other precious stones (Figure 2). People knelt, prostrated or stood at their own rhythm, while managing to be ready when the next heavy platter arrived. Chanting and music provided a continuous background. One felt immersed in a seething, moving synchrony of people seized with a momentary will to cooperate. This impression was reinforced by the

FIG 2
Monks passing offerings up to the altar.

overhead jumbotron's instant reflection of the sangha and the scene. Again difference is maintained, yet encompassed by the whole of the group.

A sense of hierarchical unity is, of course, just what the mainland government has attempted to impose upon Hong Kong since 1997. Over and again, in every speech by official or monk, we were reminded that we gathered in the presence of the Buddha's own body fragment to imagine metonymically the power of the greater whole of his dharma, a mysterious process of law, duty, pedagogy, and triumphant cooperation with our own karma. This hierarchy was repeatedly and explicitly linked to Hong Kong's political relationship to the PRC. Indeed, our own morning was spent with the relic, but that evening with the same friends was spent commemorating Tiananmen in the park by candlelight vigil.

Kok Kwang once again:

> When we gaze upon the relic ourselves, it is like personally seeing the Buddha, to receive his grace with feeling, to be bathed in his compassionate light, to experience his wisdom, to deeply plant his karma which will transform the heart/minds of our people. His mercy and his treasures will support us and lead us to unity, dissolve any rebellious wind, finding people's hearts pacified, society pacified, business prospering, the mother country thriving, the Nation safe, the people safe, the world at peace. (Jue Guang 2004: 4)

The event displayed the Chinese Humanist Buddhist commitment to the conundrum that only through our embodied physicality can we make visible our intuition of the things beyond it: be they our own capacity for transformation, the Buddha's compassion, good luck in

the future, or one's membership in vast invisible collectives like "all sentient beings" or nation-states. The shared "fathom-long carcass, with its perceptions and thoughts" was celebrated, yet provided the site for constantly gesturing beyond its many connected selves. As Durkheim maintained long ago, the social life of human beings may be a hauntingly elusive matter to grasp, but religious life provides one place where it is most deeply felt and most obviously displayed, even as people find themselves in their own devotions and offerings. Concentration upon embodied life allows us to concretize this old Durkheimian point quite dramatically.

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