Two recent archaeological finds in China, the Yu Hong sarcophagus from Taiyuan in Shanxi province and the An Jia funerary couch from Xi’an in Shaanxi, have inspired intense interest in the artistic products of Central and West Asian communities in China during the Northern Dynasties (386-581) and the Sui period (581-618). In particular, epitaphs of Yu Hong and An Jia indicate that they were probably both Sogdian saabao, officials appointed by the government to take charge of such communities in major Chinese cities. There is also evidence that they practiced Zoroastrianism: the two structures are decorated with Zoroastrian symbols, and excavators detected traces of Zoroastrian burial rituals in An Jia’s tomb. The two finds have further led scholars to revisit some famous stone carvings in museum collections and to revive an old argument, that these works were produced by Central Asian people, possibly sinicized Sogdians.

Some of these studies, conducted by Jiang Boqin, Zhang Qingjie and Rong Xinjiang, have been published in a recent conference volume (Wu, ed., pp. 3-72). Zheng Yan’s article in the same volume, however, introduces a new focus, namely, the architectonic forms and funerary function of these stone structures (Zheng, pp. 81-84). His discussion of the issue, though brief, is significant. My paper will follow this direction of research by focusing on a type of funerary structure that I call a ‘house-shaped sarcophagus’. Originating in Sichuan during the Han period (206 BCE-CE 220), this kind of sarcophagus gained wide popularity among Tang aristocrats after it reappeared in northern and northwestern China in the fifth and sixth centuries. The revival of this structure indicates a particular mode of cultural interaction through which an earlier Chinese architectonic form regained its currency in later Chinese art.

Seven house-shaped sarcophagi have been reported in archaeological literature; an extant example in a museum collection can also be identified as belonging to this type. Here, the term ‘sarcophagus’ stands roughly for guo – a type of Chinese funerary structure that encases a guan coffin, although in this case, the function of the house-shaped sarcophagi remains problematic. Before addressing this and other questions, let us first survey these individual examples in chronological order.

The earliest such sarcophagus so far found through scientific excavation, located three and a half kilometres southeast of Datong, Shanxi province, is a miniature stone house in the tomb of Song Shaozu, a Northern Wei (386-534) official who died in the first year of the Taihe reign (477) (Figs 1 and 2) (see the article by Liu Junxi and Li Li in this issue). The date of the tomb is carved both on the roof of the sarcophagus and on a brick buried in a vertical tunnel known as a tianjing. The sarcophagus occupied most of the floor space in the burial chamber at the end of a long passageway (Figs 3a and 3b). An elaborate masonry structure 2.4 metres high and 3.48 metres wide, it is constructed from more than 100 individual parts, imitating a wooden building that consists of a windowless chamber with a front corridor. The corridor has four columns supporting a horizontal beam, on which four groups of bracket sets called dougong in turn support a roof extension. A raised, U-shaped platform inside the room functioned as a couch or

(Fig. 1) Tomb of Song Shaozu showing part of the stone sarcophagus
Excavated in 2000 near Datong, Shanxi province
Northern Wei period, 477
Height 240 cm, length 348 cm
A particular feature of Chinese art, as illustrated in archeological collections, is the recurring theme of Chinese animals and birds, though in this case only two - the phoenix and the tigers remain. Let us follow the archeological order.

Though scientists visited the site in the southeast corner of the tomb, only the burial goods in the tomb and the inscription on the stele remain. The inscription on the stele is in the burial goods (Figs 3a, 3b, and 3c). An inscription on the stele reads 48 metres above ground level, giving the date of the inscription. An inscription on the stele reads 48 metres above ground level, giving the date of the inscription. The inscription on the stele reads 48 metres above ground level, giving the date of the inscription.

A raised, rectangular platform supported a couch or bed. The room has a stone gate about one metre high; the gate and the outer walls of the room are embellished with 22 puchou (animal masks) and some 100 round bosses, all in relief. The room's interior was originally covered with murals, but now only a few images on the north wall are still recognizable. Among the surviving images are two musicians playing a qin (lute) and a ruan (guitar). Both the instruments and the musicians' clothing are typically Chinese. However, the 117 figures found around the sarcophagus are all dressed in Xianbei costumes (Shanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo, 2001).

Our second example is from a group of four shiguomu - the Chinese term for 'stone sarcophagus burials' - found in close proximity to Zhijiaobao village south of Datong (Figs 4a and 4b). This particular sarcophagus is reported in detail because of its rich pictorial decoration. The tomb did not yield any written evidence for dating. But after comparing the floral patterns painted on the sarcophagus with similar designs at the nearby Yungang Caves, the excavators have dated the tomb to the early 480s, a few years after Song Shaozhu's tomb (Wang and Liu, p. 50). The stone structure in this tomb is much simpler than the Song Shaozhu sarcophagus. Because no room was left between the structure and the walls of the tomb chamber, painting was only applied to the interior and around the opening on the front wall. A couple in Xianbei costume are portrayed at the centre of the back wall, facing the entrance to the sarcophagus (see fig. 2 of the article by Zhang Qingjie in this issue). They are seated on a canopied couch, while male and female attendants stand on either side and behind. The two side walls bear further images of attendants, again divided by sex into two groups. Above them are flying immortals holding long banners. Flanking the central opening, an ox-drawn carriage and a riderless horse are painted on the inner faces of vertical slabs. The opening was originally blocked by an individual stone which is now painted with two female figures standing under a large lotus flower. Similar lotus patterns appear on the ceiling.

An interesting feature of this sarcophagus is that the lower sections of its interior walls are undecorated; even the vertical
vermilion lines that frame the back wall stop about thirty centimetres from the base. This indicates that a raised platform was originally built inside the chamber, like the one in Song Shaozu’s sarcophagus. In this case, however, the platform must have been made of wood and has completely disintegrated. This feature is also found in our next example, the famous Ning Mao ‘shrine’ (Fig. 5).

A treasure of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, this stone building has been called a shrine by many writers, including myself, but we should probably abandon this identification in favour of ‘sarcophagus’. This new identity now seems self-evident since the discoveries of the two previous examples and Yu Hong’s sarcophagus, which will be discussed later in this paper.

The Boston example is 2 metres long, 1.38 metres high, and 0.97 metres deep, and is therefore similar in size to the Zhijiaobao sarcophagus, which is 2.11 metres long and 1.13 metres deep (Yu Hong’s sarcophagus is only slightly wider). We know that it was found along with a stone epitaph inside a tomb near Luoyang, Henan province; Yu Hong’s tomb had the same components. Moreover, as with the Zhijiaobao example, an ox-drawn carriage and a riderless horse decorate the interior of the Ning Mao sarcophagus.
The extraordinary pictorial carvings of this sarcophagus have been discussed by a number of scholars (see Tomita, 1942). But two curious features were never explained. First, the lower section of the interior walls is undecorated. Based on the newly discovered sarcophagi, especially the one from Zhijiabao, I would suggest that originally a raised wooden platform was constructed inside the building and concealed this section, which therefore would not have needed to be decorated. Second, and most puzzling, while this sarcophagus is extensively decorated inside and out, the most important section of the structure—the focal point on the back wall—is blank.

To explain this feature I can propose two alternative hypotheses. The first is that certain images, most likely portraits of the Ning Mao couple, were originally painted in this position, as we find in the Zhijiabao sarcophagus, but have not survived because the painting was vulnerable to the elements. It was not unusual during this period for painting and carving to be used in combination to decorate a single object—the Yu Hong sarcophagus serves as an outstanding example. But why were the images in this section painted while the other images on the sarcophagus were carved? The Tokhungr tomb in Korea may provide a clue to solve this puzzle (Fig. 6). In this early fifth century Koguryo tomb, the back wall of the rear chamber is painted with a single portrait of the husband; the space to his left, which should be occupied by an image of his wife, is empty.

A common explanation is that because it was considered taboo to portray a living person in his or her tomb, the wife's portrait was not painted right away when her husband predeceased her and was buried in the tomb. But for some reason related to the family or the tomb, the wife's portrait was never added.

If we apply this explanation to the Ning Mao sarcophagus, we may posit that Ning Mao prepared the structure while he...
and his wife were still living. Thus the space for their images was left empty to be filled later with their painted portraits. These images had vanished by the time the sarcophagus was discovered 1,500 years later.

My second hypothesis is that the portraits were never painted at all: the empty space was left intentionally to symbolize the wei of Ning Mao and his wife, the ‘place’ of their posthumous souls. Empty tents painted in some Western Jin period (265-317) tombs at Foyemiaowan near Dunhuang, Gansu province, clearly reflect this artistic convention.

The fact that all these stone sarcophagi imitate timber structures naturally leads to the assumption that some sarcophagi at the time were made of wood. This assumption finds definite archaeological proof in a tomb at Shouyang in Shanxi province, which belonged to the Northern Qi (550-77) nobleman Kudihulu (Fig. 7). Unfortunately, what is left from the sarcophagus does not permit even a hypothetical reconstruction. But the remaining fragments, more than fifty in total (Fig. 8), suffice to suggest that it was an elaborate structure with carved ornamental details 3.82 metres long and 3.04 metres deep; it originally stood in the middle of the tomb chamber, similar to Song Shaozu’s sarcophagus discussed earlier and our final example, the celebrated Yu Hong sarcophagus found in 1999 in Taiyuan, Shanxi province (Fig. 9).

As mentioned earlier, Yu Hong was most likely a Sogdian immigrant. His epitaph yields important information about his colourful and illustrious life: before he arrived in China he served as the King of Ruru’s ambassador to Persia and Tuyuhun. After he went to the Northern Qi court around the mid-sixth century in a similar official capacity, he stayed in China and became an official in the governments of the Northern Qi, the Northern Zhou (557-81) and the Sui. His epitaph lists at least fourteen Chinese official titles with which these governments honoured him before he died in 592 (Shanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al., 2001; Zhang, 2001). Yu’s sarcophagus, again placed in the centre of the tomb chamber, consists of a tall rectangular platform base (57 cm high including the animal-shaped supports), a ‘chamber’ with a central opening at the front, and a heavy roof made of a single piece of stone in a typical Chinese architectural style. The body of the sarcophagus is 2.46 metres long and 1.37 metres wide, and is therefore similar to the Ning Mao and Zhijiaobao sarcophagi. Because the sarcophagus is decorated with many non-Chinese motifs, its discovery provides crucial evidence for studying the relationship between Chinese and Central/West Asian art traditions. These marvellous carvings and paintings, which have been studied by Zhang Qingjie and Jiao Boqin, make the stone structure a masterpiece of Sui art (Wu, ed., pp. 3-50).

The above survey of the eight sarcophagi, created over the 115 years from 477 to 592, leads us to consider three questions about their position in Chinese art history and their implications for studying this history. The first concerns the origin of this type of mortuary structure: although it is often said that a house-shaped sarcophagus such as Yu Hong’s was fashioned according to a ‘Chinese model’, we want to know the precise source or sources for this model. In addressing this question, we should think in terms of both architectural style and ritual function, and should be open to the possibility that multiple factors may have caused the differences between the individual examples.

We may link these sarcophagi to four kinds of funerary structures created before or during the Northern Dynasties period. The first is exemplified by the two stone chambers found in the tombs of the Western Han (206 BCE–CE 9) prince Lü Sheng (d. c. 113 BCE) and his wife Dou Wan. Each chamber was constructed in the rear section of a tomb to protect the remains of the dead, and was thus similar in function to some of the Northern Dynasties sarcophagi. But these chambers cannot be called sarcophagi because they were part of the overall burial structures, and contained sections such as a toilet (Wu, 1997).

The second structure with formal/functional similarities to the Northern Dynasties and Sui house-shaped sarcophagi is a coffin made of stone and often covered with decorative patterns and pictorial scenes. Called a huaxiang shiguan (‘pictorial coffin’), it appeared in the Shandong-Jiangsu area in eastern China as early as the first century BCE; but after the first century

(Fig. 9) Stone sarcophagus of Yu Hong
Excavated 1999 near Taiyuan, Shanxi province, dated 592
Height 217 cm, length 295 cm, width 137 cm
Collection of the Shanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology
(After Shanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo et al., p. 29)
CE it only survived in Sichuan, where it developed into a popular funerary structure. It is also in Sichuan that the earliest known ‘house-shaped sarcophagus’ was produced: an example from Leshan is fashioned as a free-standing building with a lid imitating a tiled roof (Figs 10 and 10a). Many Sichuan coffins dating from the second and third centuries are also carved with a symbolic doorway in the middle of one long side; some further embellish such ‘openings’ as the entrance to a building (see Gao, 1998, pls 15, 48, 89, 90, 93, 97-98, 105-107, 136, 141-42, 145-46, 149). We have observed similar features in the Northern Dynasties and Sui sarcophagi.

The third mortuary structure that may have inspired Northern Dynasties and Sui house-shaped sarcophagi is a Han dynasty stone shrine built above ground. As Zheng Yan has suggested, although serving different functions, these two structures are sometimes remarkably similar in terms of their architectural style and decorative scheme. A comparison between the Ning Mao sarcophagus and the so-called Zhu Wei shrine, or between the Zhijiaobao sarcophagus and another Eastern Han shrine at Xiaotangshan in Shandong province, seems to bear out this argument well (Fig. 11). But how could a Northern Dynasties sarcophagus be influenced by a shrine built four or five hundred years earlier? Zheng explains that many Han shrines were still standing in the open during the fifth and sixth centuries and were visited by people. Indeed, the Northern Wei geographer Li Daozuan recorded these structures in his *Shujing zhu* (Annotated Canon of Waterways); other Northern Dynasties visitors left inscriptions on these buildings (Zheng, pp. 82-83). Finally, a kind of ‘coffin pavilion’ existed during the Northern Dynasties and could have been copied inside tombs as free-standing sarcophagi. As depicted on a sixth-century stone coffin in The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, the main function of this type of above-ground timber structure was...
to shelter a coffin (Fig. 12). It thus shows significant parallels with the sarcophagus in Kudihulu’s tomb, also an elaborate timber structure built around a coffin (see Fig. 7).

Among these four kinds of structures, therefore, only the house-shaped coffin from Sichuan can be considered the prototype of the Northern Dynasties and Sui examples studied in this paper. The other three kinds did not contain the deceased in a tomb. Although they may have influenced the design and decoration of house-shaped sarcophagi, such impact was secondary and must be determined on an individual basis. Significantly, the revival of the Sichuan house-shaped sarcophagi in the Northern Dynasties was not an isolated phenomenon; the development of another type of funerary structure followed the same pattern of cultural transmission. This is the box-shaped stone coffin with a slightly curved roof, which enjoyed considerable popularity in the late Northern Wei, especially in the metropolitan area around Luoyang. Its closest prototype was again found in Sichuan. It seems that in adopting certain Chinese models in their funerary practices, some Northern Dynasties nobles were inspired by ideas and forms from this particular region.

But why Sichuan? And how could an earlier regional art tradition be transported to a later period and a different place? To make a long explanation short, I believe that the agent of this cultural transmission was a sect of religious Daoism called Heavenly Master Dao (Tianshi Dao) or Five Bushels of Rice Dao (Wudoumi Dao), which had its base in Sichuan in the second and early third centuries. I have demonstrated elsewhere that many popular forms of funerary art in this region during the Han, including various forms of stone coffins, were associated with this sect (Wu, 2000). From the early third century onwards, however, members of this sect steadily moved to Shaanxi and Shanxi, establishing new bases there. Under the strong leadership of Kou Qianzhi (365-448), Heavenly Master Daoism gained support from the Northern Wei royal house, and its influence penetrated the highest level of the Northern Wei elite. We can thus understand why Northern Wei coffins inherited not only typological features of Sichuan coffins but also many Taoist motifs, such as the dragon-tiger combination and the gate of Heaven. The appearance of the house-shaped sarcophagus should be viewed as part of this general cultural interaction.

This leads to my second question concerning the patronage of this type of funerary structure. Although we have only limited examples, it is significant that they were all found in the north and northwest: seven from Shaanxi and one from Luoyang. The majority of the deceased in these eight tombs were non-Chinese. Yu Hong was from the kingdom of Yu and most likely a Sogdian. Kudihulu was probably a Turkish Xianbei. The Northern Wei tombs at Zhijiajiao did not yield any biographical information about the deceased. But we can confidently identify the tomb occupants as Xianbei because all images painted in one of the sarcophagi, including both the deceased couple and their attendants, are dressed in typical Xianbei costumes.

Ning Ma’s case is more complex. His epitaph traces his family origin to Shandong, but states that his ancestors moved to the Western Regions (Xiyu) as early as the third century BCE, some time between Qin and Han. Only after some 700 years did his family move back to northern China to take positions in the Northern Wei court. Both Zhao Wanli and Guo Jianhang consider Ning’s remote Chinese ancestry a fabrication (Zha, vol. 2, p. 56; Guo, p. 39). Guo further points out that Ning Ma’s style name, Anian, clearly indicates a non-Chinese origin.

Among the eight cases, only Song Shaozu was an ethnic Chinese. But according to an inscription found in his tomb, he was a native of Dunhuang. Zhang Qingjie and Liu Junxi have thus connected him to the Song clan at Dunhuang and estimate that Song Shaozu most likely moved to the Northern Wei capital after 439, the year the Northern Wei conquered the Dunhuang area (Zhang and Liu, p. 61; see also Liu Junxi and Li Li’s article in this issue). Thus Song, although Chinese in origin, was also an immigrant from an outlying region. What these finds suggest, therefore, is that during the fifth and sixth centuries, house-shaped sarcophagi were not used by native Chinese who lived in central and southern China for generations, but were favoured by Xianbei, Sogdian and other people of either Chinese or non-Chinese origin who moved to northern China from the West. We are compelled to think about the psychology underlying their adaptation of an old regional funerary structure. It may be that these people, in their eagerness to seek an authentic ‘Chinese’ symbol of posthumous longevity, embraced this form of mortuary structure because it was associated with a prevailing Daoist tradition in the north.

My last question concerns the function of these sarcophagi. This seemingly simple problem turns out to be a thorny one. Among the examples we have examined, the Ning Mao and Zhijiajiao sarcophagi were not scientifically excavated and lack contextual evidence for determining their precise function. Kudihulu’s sarcophagus functioned as a traditional Chinese guo, containing a guan coffin in which the deceased lay. In the case of Song Shaozu and Yu Hong, no trace of a wooden coffin was found inside their stone sarcophagi, so one may assume that the corpses were put directly inside the sarcophagi. But this assumption is challenged by archaeological evidence. In Song Shaozu’s tomb, most of the skeleton remains of a deceased couple were found not inside the sarcophagus, but on its roof. One possible explanation is that because this tomb was robbed early on, the tomb robbers altered the location of the corpses. However, it is difficult to imagine that tomb robbers would move the corpses or skeletons onto the sarcophagus’ roof 2.4 metres above the ground but fail to take away the silver and amber ornaments worn by the deceased.

(Fig. 12) Detail of the carvings on a stone sarcophagus
Early 6th century
Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City
In Yu Hong's case, fragmentary bones were found at different spots in the tomb, not only inside and outside the sarcophagus but also under its platform base. Although one may again consider such random distribution a result of tomb robbery, here also it is hard to explain how some bones could get into the sarcophagus' base, which was sealed until the excavation. Faced with such puzzling phenomena, I think that we should not rush to a conclusion based simply on common sense or knowledge of general Chinese cultural norms. It is important to remember the extreme complexity of this period, in which different peoples intermingled, as did their customs and ritual conventions. An Jia's tomb encourages such caution. An Jia was a Sogdian, and his religious affiliation to Zoroastrianism is indicated by the fire altar carved above the entrance to the tomb chamber. His mortuary couch was placed in the chamber but it was empty, with no trace of a coffin or human body on it. The skeletal remains of the deceased were found behind An Jia's epitaph near the entrance. These remains included only a skull and part of a thigh bone; the latter shows clear traces of fire. It is also recorded in ancient texts and established by archaeological excavations that Sogdian funeral rituals included burning the bones of the dead. Since An Jia's tomb was never robbed, it is reasonable to conclude, as the excavators have done, that this Sogdian ritual was used in An Jia's burial (Shaanxi Sheng Kaogu Yanjiusuo, p. 25). But here we run into another question: what was the supposed function of the beautiful funerary couch in the centre of the tomb chamber? Following this line of inquiry we can also ask: what was the supposed function of the house-shaped sarcophagus of Yu Hong and Song Shaozhu if they were not used to contain the dead?

I will leave these questions to future research. What we are sure of at this moment is that the relatively uncommon and possibly unorthodox uses of house-shaped sarcophagi during the Northern Dynasties gradually entered the mainstream and became an official norm in the following century. Gradually, it was adopted by aristocrats and members of the royal family. Sixteen years after Yu Hong died, a beautiful house-shaped stone sarcophagus was made for a certain Boy Li (Li Xiaohai) (Fig. 13). 22 years later, the Tang nobleman Li Shou was buried in an extraordinary sarcophagus now in the Xi'an Forest of Steles Museum. However, very little Sogdian or Zoroastrian flavour survives in the decoration of these later sarcophagi. We may say that by this point, the house-shaped sarcophagus had resumed its traditional Chinese function of enclosing a dead body. But the gap between the Tang and Han examples seems to have been bridged by a group of outsiders who renewed an old Chinese regional art tradition in their effort to become insiders.

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