

DHĀRAṆĪ AND SPELLS IN MEDIEVAL SINITIC BUDDHISM

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It has become common for scholars to interpret the ubiquitous presence of dhāraṇī (*tuoluoni* 陀羅尼) and spells (*zhou* 呪) in medieval Sinitic Buddhism¹ as evidence of proto-Tantrism in China². For this reason, information associated with monk-theurgists and thaumaturges has been organized in a teleological manner that presupposes the characteristics of a mature Tantric system and projects them backward over time onto an earlier period. Recently, however, scholars such as Robert H. Sharf have begun to point out the limitations of this approach to understanding the nature of Chinese Buddhism and religion³. This essay will address two inter-related questions: (1) How did eminent monks in medieval China conceptualize dhāraṇī and spells? And (2) did they conceive of them as belonging exclusively to some defined tradition (proto-Tantric, Tantric, or something else)?

In this essay I will present a more nuanced view of the mainstream Sinitic Buddhist understanding of dhāraṇī and spells by providing background on the role of spell techniques and spell masters in Buddhism and medieval Chinese religion and by focusing on the way three select

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¹ In this essay I deploy word “dhāraṇī” following traditional Buddhist convention in both the singular and plural senses. I also use the word “medieval” rather loosely to refer to the period extending from the Northern and Southern Dynasties period through the end of the Tang, roughly 317-907 C.E.

² In this essay I use the words “proto-Tantric” and “Tantric” instead of the commonly-deployed but problematic term “Esoteric Buddhism” (*mijiao* 密教). For problems with the word *mijiao* see my essay “Is There Really ‘Esoteric’ Buddhism?” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27, no. 2 (2005): 329-356.

³ See, for instance, Robert H. Sharf’s essay “On Esoteric Buddhism in China,” which comprises Appendix 1 to his *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 263-278.

intellectuals conceptualized them: Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠 (523-592), an influential sixth-century scholiast and dhāraṇī practitioner; Daoshi 道世 (ca. 596-683), the seventh-century compiler of an important Buddhist encyclopedia; and Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705-774), the third of the three “Tantric” masters of the eighth century. I selected these three individuals because each one composed an essay on dhāraṇī following different approaches. Huiyuan represents the emerging Chinese Buddhist intellectual community that mastered Sino-Indian literature, Daoshi embodies the mature community in the mid-seventh century that seeks to demonstrate how Buddhism is Chinese, and Amoghavajra serves as a spokesperson of the putative “Tantric” perspective. In this essay I will not attempt to define the terms “dhāraṇī” and “spell” but will let the literature speak for itself. The literary evidence will demonstrate that dhāraṇī were not conceptualized as “proto-Tantric” in medieval Sinitic Buddhism. In fact, to the contrary, defined as “spell techniques” (*zhoushu* 呪術), they were a common component of mainstream Chinese religion.

For much of the twentieth century scholars have debated the nature and definition of dhāraṇī and their problematic association with Tantric Buddhism. There are essentially two ways that researchers have approached this topic: theoretically and historically. Most scholarship on dhāraṇī has followed the theoretical approach, but this also falls roughly into two camps: (1) scholars following the work of Étienne Lamotte, who hold that dhāraṇī are actually mnemonic devices or codes for storing or maintaining information⁴; and (2) those following the writings of L. Austine Waddell and Guiseppe Tucci, who hold the teleological position that “dhāraṇī represent the kernel from which the first Tantras developed.”⁵ Much of

⁴ See Lamotte, trans., *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra)*, 5 vols. (Louvain: Institut orientaliste, Université de Louvain, 1944-1981), 4:1854-1869; Jens Braarvig, “Dhāraṇī and Pratibhāna: Memory and Eloquence of the Bodhisattvas,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 8, no. 1 (1985): 17-29.

⁵ See L.A. Waddell, “The ‘Dhāraṇī’ Cult in Buddhism, Its Origin, Deified Literature and Images,” *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift* 1 (1912-1913): 160-165, 169-178; for some early translations of dhāraṇī from Tibetan sources see L. Austine Waddell, “The Dharani or Indian Buddhist Protective Spell,” *Indian Antiquary* 43 (1914): 37-42, 49-54, 92-95; and, for the quote, see Guiseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, An artistic and symbolic illustration of 172 Tibetan paintings preceded by a survey of the historical, artistic, literary and religious development of Tibetan culture with an article of P. Pelliot on a Mongol Edict,

the scholarship dealing with dhāraṇī is sectarian in nature. Japanese sectarian scholars of the Shingon school 真言宗, for the most part, understand dhāraṇī as precursors to their own Tantric system⁶. Although some perniciously false sectarian views are now being discarded, many scholars still hold to the position that the “true” understanding and usage of dhāraṇī is in the Tantric or “Esoteric” context⁷.

There are a few scholars who, viewing the literary materials and archeological remains historically, suggest a contrary reading of the evidence. Gregory Schopen, who deploys a strict definition of Tantric Buddhism, has demonstrated that some dhāraṇī actually used in the Indian cultural sphere should not be classified as “Tantric” because there is nothing Tantric about them⁸. Also, Arthur Waley suggested that dhāraṇī did not become associated with Tantric Buddhism until the eighth century and coined the term “Dhāraṇī Buddhism” to describe the Buddhism of Dunhuang 敦煌 from the fifth to the eighth centuries⁹. These scholars, however, represent the minority.

the translation of historical documents and an appendix on pre-Buddhistic ideas of Tibet, vol. 1 & vol. 2 (Roma: La Libreria Dello Stato, 1949), 1:224.

⁶ See Sharf, “On Esoteric Buddhism in China,” 263-278, which contains an overview of early and important Japanese scholarship; see also, for instance, Takubo Shūyo 田久保周譽, *Shingon Daranizō no kaisetsu* 真言陀羅尼藏の解説 (An Explanation of the Shingon Dhāraṇī Storehouse) (Tokyo: Kanoen 鹿野苑, 1967); and Ujike Kakusho 氏家覚勝, *Darani no sekai* 陀羅尼の世界 (The World of Dhāraṇī) (Osaka: Tōhō Shuppan 大阪東方出版, 1984).

⁷ See, for instance, Abé Ryūichi, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 152-157, 165-177, 182.

⁸ Schopen suggests that most dhāraṇī are not Tantric “if by ‘Tantric’ we mean that phase of Buddhist doctrinal development which is characterized by an emphasis on the central function of the *guru* as religious preceptor; by sets — usually graded — of specific initiations; by esotericism of doctrine, language and organization; and by a strong emphasis on the realization of the goal through highly structured ritual and meditative techniques. If ‘Tantric’ is to be used to refer to something other than this, then the term must be clearly defined and its boundaries must be clearly drawn. Otherwise the term is meaningless and quite certainly misleading.” See Schopen, “The Text of the ‘Dhāraṇī Stones from Abhayagiriya’: A Minor Contribution to the Study of Mahāyāna Literature in Ceylon,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 5, no. 1 (1982): 105; see also Schopen, “Bodhigarbhālaṅkāraḥ and Vimaloṣṇīṣa Dhāraṇīs in Indian Inscriptions: Two Sources for the Practice of Buddhism in Medieval India,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens* 39 (1985): 147.

⁹ See Waley, *A Catalogue of Paintings recovered from Tun-huang by Sir Aurel Stein* (London: Printed by the Order of the Trustees of the British Museum and of the Government of India, 1931), xiii-xiv.

For the case of China, mainstream scholarship has also tended toward the teleological view that dhāraṇī, spells, and their associated rituals are proto-Tantric. Based in part on Japanese sectarian scholarship, scholars have suggested that a Tantric Buddhist “school” was established in China in the first half of the eighth century through the ministrations of the “three Tantric masters” — Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 635-735), Vajrabodhi (Jin’gangzhi 金剛智, 671-741), and Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705-774). However, Tantric Buddhism apparently disappeared as a distinct “school” in China a little more than a century later. This view was established in western scholarship by Chou Yi-liang in his groundbreaking article “Tantrism in China.”¹⁰ Michel Strickmann, in some of his writings, fleshed out this view by emphasizing connections to Daoism, which he suggests assimilated and preserved Tantric Buddhist elements and practices¹¹. Other recent studies attempt to account for the supposed disappearance of Tantric Buddhism in China by demonstrating how Tantric ideas diffused throughout Chinese Buddhism¹².

While these and other works provide much stimulating detail they tend to ignore the views that prominent Buddhist intellectuals espoused and promoted concerning dhāraṇī and spells in their exegetical works and in the hagiographical literature written about them. Only a few works of scholarship have touched on this type of material from this perspective¹³.

¹⁰ See Chou Yi-liang, “Tantrism in China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8 (1945): 241-332; Kenneth Ch’en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 325-337.

¹¹ See Strickmann, *Mantras et mandarins: le bouddhisme tantrique en Chine* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996), 52-53, 428 n. 70, 73-74, 120-124; and *Chinese Magical Medicine*, ed. Bernard Faure (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002); see also Strickmann, “The Cosmological Sūtra: A Buddhist Book of Spells,” in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1990), 80-81.

¹² See the important and comprehensive work of Lü Jianfu 呂建福, *Zhongguo Mijiaoshi* 中国密教史 (History of Chinese Tantric Buddhism) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1995).

¹³ See Ujike Kakusho, *Darani shisō no kenkyū* 陀羅尼思想の研究 (Research on Dhāraṇī Thought) (Osaka: Tōhō Shuppan 大阪東方出版, 1987); Naomi Gentetsu 直海玄哲, “Kosōden no ju” 高僧傳の呪 (Spells in the *Gaoseng zhuan*), *Tōyō shien* 東洋史圖 33 (1989): 32-48; and John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: A Kuroda Institute Book, University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 82-92.

Spells and Spell Masters in Buddhism and Medieval Chinese Religion

Spells and thaumaturgy were already integral aspects of Chinese religion long before the introduction of Buddhism to China¹⁴. This aspect of the complex structure of practices, beliefs, and rituals comprising Chinese religion in Han 漢 times (ca. 206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.) and before has been characterized as “the search for personal welfare.”¹⁵ Many male and female shamans, spirit mediums, diviners, and thaumaturges, as well as hermits and recluses, enjoyed local cult followings due to their skills in using spells and talismans to control ghosts and illnesses, and in elixirs, medicines, and gymnastic practices for inducing longevity and, so they claimed, “immortality,” from the third century B.C.E. to the third century C.E.¹⁶. Many of these thaumaturges were believed to be transcendent beings, immortals, or sylphs (*xian* 仙, *shenxian* 神仙). They were often patronized by local elites who desired to learn their techniques and some enjoyed great followings¹⁷. Both Daoist masters and Buddhist monks competed with these figures and presented their own spells and practices to prove the efficacy of their respective religious paths; hence, adept monks and bodhisattvas were popularly conceived of as both miracle workers and sylphs¹⁸.

¹⁴ Sawada Mizuho 澤田瑞穂, *Chūgoku no juhō* 中国の呪法 (Chinese Spells), rev. ed. (Tokyo: Heika Shuppansha 平河出版社, 1984); Donald Harper, “Spellbinding,” in *Religions of China in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 241-250.

¹⁵ Mu-chou Poo, *In Search of Personal Welfare: A View of Ancient Chinese Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

¹⁶ Rolf A. Stein, “Religious Taoism and Popular Religion from the Second to Seventh Centuries,” in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*, ed. Anna K. Seidel and Holmes H. Welch (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 53-81.

¹⁷ Robert Ford Campany, *To Live As Long As Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 85-97, and *passim*.

¹⁸ Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆, *Shina Bukkyōshi kenkyū: Hokugi-hen* 支那佛教史研究：北魏篇 (Studies in Chinese Buddhist History: Northern Wei) (Tokyo: Kōbundō, 1942), 564-571, 571-581, 581-594, 605-609; see also Hattori Machihiko 服部克彦, “Hokugi Rakuyō jidai ni miru shinsen shisō” 北魏洛陽時代にみる神仙思想, in *Dōkyō kenkyū ronshū: Dōkyō no shisō to bunka: Yoshioka Hakushi kanreki kinen* 道教研究論集：道教の思想と文化：吉岡博士還暦記念 (English title: Collected Essays on Taoist Thought and Culture), comp. Yoshioka Yoshitoyo Hakushi Kanreki Kinen Ronshū Kankōkai 吉岡義豊還暦記念論集刊行会 (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai 国書刊行会, 1977), 193-212; Mu-chou Poo, “The Images of Immortals and Eminent Monks: Religious Mentality in Early Medieval China,” *Numen* 42 (1995): 172-196.

The supernormal powers traditionally attributed to ordained monks advanced in meditative cultivation, and more especially associated with bodhisattvas, placed these figures in both comparison to and competition with their Chinese counterparts. These powers or “spiritual penetrations” (*shentong* 神通), as they became known in China, come in lists of five or six, and include: the ability to work miracles, supernormal hearing, the ability to read minds, recollection of one’s past lives, the ability to discern the previous lives of others, and comprehension that one’s spiritual state is no longer plagued by any form of defilement¹⁹. One of the earliest references to, if not the locus classicus of, this term is a short Hīnayāna sūtra translated by An Shigao 安世高 (fl. 148) titled *Sūtra on the Brahmans’ Avoiding Death* (*Poluomen bisi jing* 婆羅門避死經), which tells how four brahman monk-sylphs (*xianren* 仙人, a common translation for ṛṣis or Indian thaumaturges), cultivated various wholesome dharmas and the five spiritual penetrations and were able to allay death; thus demonstrating to the Chinese audience of this sūtra that physical immortality is possible²⁰. Even though the *Sūtra on the Brahmans’ Avoiding Death* is a

¹⁹ The five spiritual penetrations (Ch. *wu shentong* 五神通, *wutong* 五通, Skt. *pañca-abhijñāh*) are the 1) divine eye (*divyacakṣus*, *tianyan tong* 天眼通), 2) divine ear (*divya-śrotra*, *tianer tong* 天耳通), 3) knowledge of the thoughts of others (*para-citta-jñāna*, *taxin tong* 他心通), 4) recollection of former incarnations (*pūrvanirvāsānusmṛti*, *suzhu tong* 宿住通), 5) “deeds leading to magical power and release” (*ṛddhivimokṣakriyā*) or “direct experience of magical power (*ṛddhisākṣakriyā*, *shenjīng tong* 神境通). See *Apidamo da piposha lun* 阿毘達磨大毗婆沙論 ([Abhidharma-]Mahāvibhāṣā) 411, T 1545, 27.728b12-24; 727b22-24. The six spiritual penetrations (Ch. *liu shentong* 六神通; Skt. *ṣaḍ-abhijñāh*) are 1) psychic power (*ṛddhi-vidhi-jñāna*, *shenzu tong* 神足通), magical power; 2) heavenly ear (*divya-śrotra-jñāna*, *tianer tong* 天耳通), supernormal hearing; 3) cognition of others’ thoughts (*para-citta-jñāna*, *taxin tong* 他心通), the ability to read minds; 4) recollection of past lives (*pūrvā-nirvāsānusmṛti-jñāna*, *suming tong* 宿命通), 5) heavenly eye (*divyacakṣus-jñāna*, *tianyan tong* 天眼通), the ability to discern the previous lives of others; and 6) cognition of the extinction of outflows (*āsrava-kṣaya-jñāna*, *loujin tong* 漏盡通), a state in which one is no longer plagued by any form of defilement. See *Apidamo da piposha lun* 102, T 1545, 27.530a18-b10; and *Dazhidu lun* 28, T 1509, 25.264a-266b; see also Étienne Lamotte, trans., *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, 4:1809-1838. By means of the spiritual penetrations a bodhisattva purifies his *buddhakṣetra*; see *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 2a, T 1911, 46.14a-b.

²⁰ *Poluomen bisi jing*, T 131, 2.854b. For more discussion on early Chinese Buddhist scriptures that demonstrate Daoist and Chinese religious interests see Henri Maspero, *Le taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, préface de Max Kaltenmark (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 446; in English see Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 411.

“Hīnayāna” scripture, the powers attributed to monk-adepts became important characteristics ascribed to Mahāyāna monks in the Sinitic cultural sphere.

Scholars have long emphasized the role that Buddhist monks such as the Central Asian thaumaturge Fotudeng 佛圖澄 (or Fotucheng, d. 348) played in the conversion of the Chinese to Buddhism. Fotudeng arrived in North China around 317 when a confederation of Huns, led by the hegemony Shi Le 石勒 (d. 333) and Shi Hu 石虎 (d. 349) of the Later Zhao 後趙 (319-352), thrust the Jin 晉 (265-317) out of the Central Plain, the ancient Chinese heartland. Fotudeng became famous for his ability to foretell the future and to know the particulars of events taking place hundreds of miles away. He used spell techniques to win Shi Le’s support of Buddhism: he took his begging bowl, filled it with water, burned incense, and chanted a spell over it. In a moment blue lotus flowers sprang up, the brightness of which dazzled the eyes. Later, Shi Hu had a son named Bin 斌, whom Shi Le treated as a foster son. Le loved Bin very dearly, but Bin was taken ill unexpectedly and died. After two days had passed, Le called for Fotudeng and charged him with bringing the boy back to life. The monk enchanted a toothpick by means of a spell. Bin was able to get up almost immediately and recovered fully after a short time²¹. Accounts of marvels performed by monks circulated by word of mouth and eventually were amassed in collections of miracle tales. Along with laudatory information gleaned from stele and stūpa inscriptions, these anecdotes became the basic source material for the hagiographies contained in the *Lives of Eminent Monks*’ collections (*gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳)²².

After the time of Fotudeng Chinese people became infatuated with India and Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Sanskrit spells of Mahāyāna

²¹ *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 9, T 2059, 50.383b21, c9; 384b24; 385a4, a6, a10, b19; Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Han Wei liang Jin Nanbeichao fojiao shi* 漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史 (History of Buddhism during the Han, Wei, Two Jin, and Southern and Northern Dynasties) (Shanghai, 1938; rpt. Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian 上海書店, 1991), 121-186; Arthur F. Wright, “Fo-t’u-teng: A Biography,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 11, nos. 3-4 (December, 1948): 321-371; see also Tsukamoto Zenryū, *A History of Early Chinese Buddhism*, trans. by Leon Hurvitz, 2 vols. (Tokyo, New York, San Francisco: Kodansha, 1985) 1:257.

²² Koichi Shinohara, “Two Sources of Chinese Buddhist Biographies: Stūpa Inscriptions and Miracle Stories” in *Monks and Magicians: Religious Biographies in Asia*, ed. Phyllis Granoff and Koichi Shinohara (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1988), 119-228.

Buddhist thaumaturges of the fourth and fifth centuries became so popular that the Daoist Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure, Spiritual Treasure) tradition, which flourished in the fifth and sixth centuries, produced a series of revelations containing incantations in the “Hidden Language of the Great Brahmā.” Mimicking the Sanskrit sounds of Buddhist dhāraṇī, these Daoist spells claimed to be celestial language, the secret names of the gods, by which adepts were able to draw upon the powers of the Heavens. So attractive was the potent language of the exotic western lands that fierce competition between Buddhists and Daoists in the field of efficacious spells continued throughout China’s great cosmopolitan age of the Tang 唐 (618-907)²³. However, this is not the only view presented in Buddhist literature. One anecdote suggests that Buddhists first began to use spells in response to harassment by Daoists. The hagiography of Tanxian 曇顯 (fl. 504-550), a mysterious monk remembered for his prowess as a miracle worker, says that Buddhists did not at first learn thaumaturgy (*fangshu* 方術), but only did so since Daoists (*daoshi* 道士) chanted spells to pester Buddhist monks — causing their begging bowls to be thrown into the air and to fall tumbling to the ground and causing the bridges in a given region to fall to the ground and to stand on end. Hence, Buddhists were forced to defend themselves by cultivating the powers of spiritual penetrations²⁴.

Monks from India and Central Asia were held in high regard and were esteemed greatly for their knowledge of real Buddhism. Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, such as Faxian 法顯 (d. after 423), spent years traveling around the Indian cultural sphere and recorded many facets of Buddhist belief, doctrine, and practice so that his fellow monks could institute “real” Mahāyāna Buddhism in China²⁵. While these writings are certainly important

²³ Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Taoist Scriptures* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 385-389.

²⁴ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 23, T 2060, 50.625b5-6, 18.

²⁵ Faxian traveled throughout the Indian cultural sphere from 399-414 C.E. For the biography of Faxian see *Gaoseng zhuan* 3, T 2059, 50.337b-338b; see also, James Legge, trans. *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1886; rpt. New York: Dover, 1965), 1-8; and Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, 89-91. See also “*Dharmasucher*” – *Reliquien – Legenden. Der älteste Bericht eines chinesischen buddhistischen Pilgermönchs über seine Reise nach Indien: Das Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan als religionsgeschichtliche Quelle* (Untersuchungen zum Text und Übersetzung des Textes) (Würzburg, 1997; unveröffentlichte

documents in any attempt to understand medieval India we must remember that they were written to be read by an audience fluent in literary Chinese! As these books were written by Chinese Buddhists for consumption in the Sinitic cultural sphere they may indeed tell us more about Chinese interests and concerns than what was really going on in India. We should also remember that the evidence for Buddhism in India proper suggests that it was never dominated by the Mahāyāna; however, the Mahāyāna was the Buddhism of choice in many Central Asian oasis towns and city-states along the Silk Route and in Kashmir. Many of the important early Buddhist translators and exegetes in China were from these areas and, as has been demonstrated by several scholars, crafted their presentation of Buddhism to Chinese tastes²⁶.

One such work crafted for a Chinese audience is perhaps the single most important document for understanding Buddhism in medieval China: *The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom (Dazhidu lun 大智度論)*. There is nothing in Indian Mahāyāna literature that remotely approaches the authority this work enjoyed in medieval Chinese Buddhism. It is a large compendium of Mahāyāna views and practices attributed to the monk-scholar Nāgārjuna (Longshu 龍樹, ca. 150-200)²⁷. It was translated into Chinese between 402 and 406 by Kumārajīva (Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什, 344-413), the famous Central Asian translator and explicator of Buddhism

Habilitationschaft; Publikation der aktualisierten Fassung vorgesehen für das Jahr 2001). I would like to thank Chen Jinhua for the reference to this recent German scholarship.

²⁶ See Henri Maspero, *Le taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, 277-291, 436-448; see also Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, 249-262, 400-412; see also Eric Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adoption of Buddhism in Medieval China*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972); Tsukamoto, *A History of Early Chinese Buddhism*.

²⁷ There is a great debate as to whether Nāgārjuna actually existed or whether he is a literary creation concocted by Mahāyāna writers. This is unimportant to our discussion because he existed to the Chinese. In India Nāgārjuna is referred to variously as the author of one or another particular essay. However, in China, when a Buddhist exegete says “Nāgārjuna” he is alluding almost invariably to the *Dazhidu lun*. For the problem of Nāgārjuna’s existence and dating in Indian literature see Joseph Walser, “Nāgārjuna and the *Ratnāvalī*: New Ways to Date an Old Philosopher,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 25, nos. 1-2 (2002): 209-262. On the image of Nāgārjuna in China, see Stuart Young Hawley, “The Dragon Tree, The Middle Way, and the Middle Kingdom: Images of the Indian Patriarch Nāgārjuna in Chinese Buddhism” (M.A. thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2000).

to the Chinese and founder of Madhyamaka philosophy in China²⁸. The recent dissertation of Po-kan Chou presents a strong case for a “partly Chinese” authorship of the work, since the hand of Kumārajīva’s editor and amanuensis Sengrui 僧叡 (352-436) can be seen in the translation and because some subjects treated by Kumārajīva appear to be responses to questions by Sengrui and the project’s sponsor Yao Xing 姚興 (365-416), sovereign of the Later Qin 後秦 dynasty (384-417)²⁹. It was one of the most widely read and oft-quoted Buddhist exegetical works from the fifth through the eighth centuries.

In this text, the writer describes the skills that should be cultivated by ordained monks. Beyond meditating and strictly observing monastic rules, a monk develops skills in such varied fields as mixing herbs and medicines, planting cereals and trees, and being accomplished in observing the stars, the sun and the moon, as well as the movements of clouds and thunder and lightning. Not only does he fathom the impurities of mundane existence, but he understands portents, such as the speech of animals and signs of the four cardinal directions. Finally, he is also a student of all spell techniques (*zhoushu*), divination practices, charms, and talismans³⁰. Furthermore, the writer emphasizes the acquisition of all manner

²⁸ See Étienne Lamotte, trans., *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna*. On the many different names by which this text was known in medieval China and on the attribution of the text to Nāgārjuna see Paul Demiéville’s review of the second volume of Lamotte’s translation (originally published in 1950), in *Choix d’études bouddhiques (1929-1970)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), 470, n. 1, 475-476.

²⁹ Some of the most notable evidence provided by Chou is that the *Dazhidu lun*’s commentary on the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* follows Chinese word order rather than Indian and that the whole of the commentary is in the form of a dialogue. Dialogue was not only commonly employed in Sarvāstivādin commentarial literature, with which Kumārajīva was familiar, but also in contemporary *xuanxue* 玄學 (“dark learning” or “learning of the mysterious”). Questions appear to be written into the text and answered as the text proceeds. Furthermore, Sengrui appears to have written down everything that Kumārajīva said and perhaps, due to other concerns, did not edit out old translations of technical terms; hence, both old and new Buddhist terms remain in the *Dazhidu lun*. Thus, the *Dazhidu lun* seems to reflect the work-in-progress nature of this translation. See Chou Po-kan, “The Translation of the *Dazhidulun*: Buddhist Evolution in China in the Early Fifth Century” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2000), 62, 68, 74-77, 78, 80, 81-84. I would like to thank James Benn for referring me to this recent dissertation.

³⁰ *Dazhidu lun* 3, T 1509, 25.79c-80a; see Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, 1:199-202.

of dhāraṇī (listing ten different types) as one of the most prominent qualities of the bodhisattva³¹.

Not surprisingly, this definition of the traits of a Buddhist monk is very similar to the traditional qualities associated with brahmins, the chief competition of Buddhist monks in medieval India; but these traits are also shared with a lot of other religious specialists, particularly the shamans, diviners, thaumaturges, and Daoist mages in China. Virtuosity in chanting spells and working miracles, particularly those associated with healing, protection, and other aspects of personal welfare, was an important characteristic or quality for a monk to develop. Kumārajīva's hagiography contains an account that in the year 413, days before his death, Kumārajīva chanted a spirit-spell (*shenzhou* 神呪) three times in hopes that he would be healed of his illness. He had his foreign (Indian) disciples chant on his behalf as well, but it was to no avail. He died a few days later³². Yet even this failed attempt at healing by means of spells foreshadows their popularity and important role in personal welfare in medieval China.

Modern scholars typically classify monks who specialized in such things as divination, astrology, spells or talismans, as "proto-Tantric" or "Tantric" practitioners³³ — but here, in a mainstream and widely influential medieval Buddhist text these qualities are presented as quite ordinary and

³¹ *Dazhidu lun* 5, T 1509, 25.95c-96c; see Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, 1:316-321.

³² *Gaoseng zhuan* 2, T 2059, 50.332c25.

³³ The idea that modern scholars have labeled monastic practitioners of divination, astrology, alchemy, spells or talismans as "proto-Tantric" or "Tantric" has a long tradition in Buddhist scholarship and is indelibly connected to the Japanese Shingon sectarian conceptualizations of "impure" or "miscellaneous" esotericism (*zōmitsu* 雜密) and "pure" esotericism (*junmitsu* 純密). Practitioners of Buddhist thaumaturgy from the third through the early eighth centuries were labeled practitioners of "miscellaneous esotericism" (proto-Tantric) because they putatively did not really understand the true purpose of "tantric" Buddhism. "Pure esotericism" or real tantrism was then said to have been instituted in China through the ministrations of the "three Tantric masters": Śubhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra. See Ōmura Seigai 大村西崖, *Mikkyō hattaatsushi* 密教発達史 (Tokyo: Bukkyō Kankōkai Zuzōbu, 1918), 1:4, 1:19, 1:21-23, and especially 1:41-42, and *passim* in vols. 1 and 2; Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, *An Introduction to Buddhist Esotericism* (Bombay, 1932; rpt. Benares, 1964), 32-42; and Matsunaga Yūkei, *Mikkyō no rekishi* 密教の歴史 (History of Esoteric Buddhism) (Tokyo: Heirakuji Shoten, 1969), 13, 22-29, 29-38, 38-53, 131-154; and also Matsunaga, "Tantric Buddhism and Shingon Buddhism," *The Eastern Buddhist* n.s. 2, no. 2 (Nov., 1969); for a brief discussion of the problem see Robert

approved for all monks. It also seems that many medieval Indian and Chinese monks felt the same way.

Dhāraṇī in Jingying Huiyuan's *Mahāyāna Compendium*

The eminent sixth-century Buddhist scholiast and dhāraṇī practitioner Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠 (523-592) analyzed dhāraṇī in detail in his collection of doctrinal exegesis called the *Mahāyāna Compendium* (*Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章). The treatment of dhāraṇī by this exegete learned in all the major sūtras and treatises of the late sixth century relied heavily on two mainstream sources of Buddhist doctrine: Dharmakṣema's (Tanwuchen 曇無讖, 385-433) Chinese translation of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, *The Stages of the Bodhisattva* (*Pusa dichì jīng* 菩薩地持經, translated ca. 414-421) and the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* mentioned previously.

Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, 265-267. Although Abé Ryūichi recently has suggested that scholars need to abandon this sectarian idea (see note 7 above), it has long since left its mark on and continues to mar and mislead scholarship. Most writings in English are derivative of sectarian Japanese scholarship, particularly Omura and Matsunaga, mentioned above. See, for instance, Kiyota Minoru, who presents the idea that the *Lotus Sūtra* and the Perfection of Wisdom literature are "miscellaneous tantra" because they include "incantations" and that Nāgārjuna's deployment of mantras, not to mention Fotudeng's use of incantations, makes these men tantric practitioners. Furthermore, he says that this early tantrism incorporated "astronomy, astrology, phrenology, music, art, and folklore;" see *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice* (Los Angeles and Tokyo: Buddhist Books International, 1978), 6-7, 13-18. Yamasaki Taikō makes a similar argument in his *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism*, trans. Richard and Cynthia Peterson, ed. Yasuyohi Morimoto and David Kidd (Boston: Shambhala, 1988), 15-17. Though ostensibly not dependent upon Japanese scholarship, Chou Yi-liang suggests a similar connection between tantrism and monks who practice dhāraṇī and spells; see "Tantrism in China," 241-248. Instead of scuttling this misleading and completely a-historical discrimination, Michel Strickmann merely renames "miscellaneous esotericism" (*ésoterisme éclectique*) as "proto-Tantrism" (*prototantrisme*) and "pure esotericism" as "Tantric;" see *Mantras et mandarins*, 48, 53, 72-79, and *passim*. This incredibly loose conceptualization of Tantric practitioners provides the basis for and yet complicates the issue of conceptualizing "Tantricism" and "siddhas" in such recent compilations as *Tantra in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); David Gordon White, *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 66-77; and Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

As a translator, Dharmakṣema was instrumental in spreading Buddhism in Northwestern China during the short-lived Northern Liang 北涼 regional regime (397-439) in the early fifth-century before it was conquered by the Northern Wei 北魏 (386-534) in 439. He was so famous for his knowledge of spells that he acquired the title “Great Spell Master” (*dazhou shi* 大呪師). He emphasized the importance of spirit-spells in expelling the ghosts and goblins responsible for illness and calamity to an unconvinced, evidence-seeking Juqu Mengxun 沮渠蒙遜 (368-433), the most important hegemon of the Northern Liang. As soon as Dharmakṣema chanted a spell a ghost appeared right in their company, startling the king, but the monk explained how these ghosts could be expelled by means of spells chanted by wholesome monks who kept the precepts³⁴. Prior to his death in 592, Jingying Huiyuan commanded his disciples that twice a day, before the morning and afternoon lecture assemblies, the entire congregation of monks and others participating in the lecture should chant the Prajñāpāramitā or Perfection of Wisdom spell (*bore poluomi zhou* 般若波羅密呪) fifty times³⁵. This probably refers to the spell found at the end of Kumārajīva’s translation of the *Heart Sūtra*³⁶.

Following Dharmakṣema’s translation of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, Huiyuan classified dhāraṇī in four groups: dharma (*fa tuoluoni* 法陀羅尼), meaning (*yi tuoluoni* 義陀羅尼), spell technique (*zhoushu tuoluoni* 呪術陀羅尼), and acquiescence (*ren tuoluoni* 忍陀羅尼)³⁷. This taxonomy of dhāraṇī was employed by several translators and exegetes in medieval China, such as the eminent translators Bodhiruci (Putiliuzhi 菩提流支, fl. 508-527) and Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 600-664)³⁸. Dharma and meaning dhāraṇī are associated with hearing, completely maintaining, and not forgetting the Buddhadharmā, the Buddhist teaching. These two types of dhāraṇī may best be thought of as “codes.” Spell-technique dhāraṇī, he explains, rely on spiritual efficacy (*shenyan* 神驗) and are something bodhisattvas produce to dispel all adversity. Huiyuan explains that they are

³⁴ *Gaoseng zhuan* 2, T 2059, 50.335c20, 336a5-7, b11.

³⁵ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 8, T 2060, 50.492c18.

³⁶ *Mohe bore poluomi damingzhou jing* 摩訶般若波羅蜜大明呪經, T 250, 8.847c.

³⁷ *Dasheng yizhang* 11, T 1851, 44.685a27-28; cf. *Pusa dichi jing* 8, T 1581, 30.934a-b.

³⁸ *Shidijing lun* 十地經論 11, T 1522, 26.191c-192c, translated by Bodhiruci ca. 506; and *Yuga shidi lun* 瑜伽十地論 45, T 1579, 30.542c-543b, translated by Xuanzang ca. 646-648.

an important by-product of dhyāna or meditative trance and that their spiritual efficacy is due to various types of instructions and that there are many applications. Huiyuan's conceptualization of the role of spiritual efficacy was a common view held by other Buddhist writers of the sixth century³⁹. Acquiescence dhāraṇī, the final type, allow a bodhisattva to maintain his place on the bodhisattva path and abide peacefully or acquiesce with the true reality of dharmas (i.e. that they are utterly empty of self nature and are neither produced nor destroyed) — not disappear into the quiescence of nirvāṇa — so that they may stay in the world to benefit other beings⁴⁰. In the Sanskrit version of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, the term that Dharmakṣema translated as “spell-technique dhāraṇī” is the compound *mantra-dhāraṇī*⁴¹. It is clear from the context that the writer of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi* conceived of “mantra” as a type of dhāraṇī. Sinitic Buddhist intellectuals inherited and maintained this expansive view of dhāraṇī.

Huiyuan explains three reasons why monks and bodhisattvas are able to obtain spell-technique dhāraṇī: (1) they rely on the power of cultivation and habitual practice in the present, (2) they rely on the efficacy of dhyāna-meditation, and (3) they depend on real knowledge deeply penetrating into the approach of the spell-technique dharmas; in other words, they understand the emptiness and interconnection of all things and the efficacy of the words of dhāraṇī⁴². Thus, to Huiyuan, the acquisition of dhāraṇī, including magic spells and incantations, is a natural outgrowth of a bodhisattva's religious cultivation, particularly samādhi or meditative absorption, and is a mark, ornament, or adornment of a bodhisattva's

³⁹ See, for instance, Huijiao's definition of meditation in his “Critical Essay” (*lun*) on meditation in the *Gaoseng zhaun* (T 2059, 50.400b-c), which is discussed in Jan Yun-hua 冉雲華, “Zhongguo zaoqi chanfa de liuchuan he tedian – Huijiao, Daoxuan suozhu ‘xichan pian’ yanjiu” 中國早期禪法的流傳和特點 – 慧皎道宣所著習禪篇研究 (The transformation and characteristics of the early Chinese meditation traditions: A study of two treatises on meditation practices by Huijiao 慧皎 [497-554] and Daoxuan 道宣 [596-667]), in his *Zhongguo chanxue yanjiu lunji* 中國禪學研究論集 (Taipei: Dongchu Chubanshe 東初出版社, 1990), 3-10. I would like to thank Chen Jinhua for this reference.

⁴⁰ *Dasheng yizhang* 11, T 1851, 44.685a-b; cf. *Pusa dichi jing* 8, T 1581, 30.934a-b.

⁴¹ *Bodhisattavabhūmi*, ed. U. Wogihara (Tokyo, 1930), 272, 12ff; see also, Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953; Rpt. Delhi: Motilal, 1998), 2:284 (s.v. dhāraṇī).

⁴² *Dasheng yizhang* 11, T 1851, 44.685b-c.

spiritual attainment. The ability to work wonders is presented as a sign of a true bodhisattva.

In his study of the term “spell” (Jap. *ju/shu* 呪) as it appears in Huijiao’s 慧皎 (497-554) *Lives of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, completed ca. 519-554) collection, Naomi Gentetsu isolates the idea that “spiritual efficacy” (Jap. *reigen/reiken*; Ch. *lingyan* 靈驗) resides in the spells themselves, but he stresses that monks need “charisma” to access the power in the spell⁴³. While his emphasis on the connection between the spiritual power of monks and of the spells themselves is fundamental, I am hesitant to apply this Weberian term. Weber stresses that charisma is an inborn trait, “a highly individual quality” “that rejects as undignified all methodological rational acquisition.”⁴⁴ However, Buddhist intellectuals, such as Jingying Huiyuan, continually stress that dhāraṇī and spells may be learned, cultivated, and developed as a by-product of meditation and that their power may be unlocked through a variety of means.

Anecdotal evidence from Chinese Buddhist literature, particularly Daoxuan’s 道宣 (596-667) *Further Lives of Eminent Monks* (*Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳, completed in 649 and further revised and edited later), supports the assertion that the acquisition of dhāraṇī and proficiency in spells were important characteristics of eminent monks, particularly monks remembered as adepts in meditation. In the first quarter of the sixth century, for instance, the Northern Indian monk Bodhiruci, mentioned above, was renowned for his linguistic skills and translation abilities in the service of the Northern Wei. He is perhaps most famous in Sinitic Buddhism as the monk who converted Tanluan 曇鸞 (ca. 448-554) to the worship of Amitābha; but he was also gifted in Buddhist spell techniques. A monk who happened to see him causing well-water to boil by means of a spell wanted to offer special reverence to him. Bodhiruci forbade him saying that all Indian monks cultivate these skills⁴⁵.

Chinese monks followed their Indian exemplars quickly in mastering spell techniques. For instance, the Chinese exegetical monk Sengfan 僧範

⁴³ Naomi Gentetsu 直海玄哲, “Kosōden no ju” 高僧傳の呪 (Spells in the *Gaoseng zhuan*), *Tōyō shien* 東洋史園 33 (1989): 36-37.

⁴⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, trans. and ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968; rpt, 1978), 2:1113.

⁴⁵ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 1, T 2060, 50.428c-429a; see also Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*, 87.

(476-555) is remembered as a polymath with a penetrating intellect. In the late fifth century, at the young age of twenty-three, he is said to have mastered astronomy, mathematics, and Indian spell-techniques (*Tianzhu zhoushu* 天竺呪術)⁴⁶. In the mid-sixth century, Sengchou 僧稠 (480-560), who is famous for his advanced meditation techniques and as a favorite of Emperor Xiaowu 孝武 of the Northern Wei (r. 532-534) and Emperor Wenxuan 文宣 of the Northern Qi 北齊 (r. 550-559), chanted a spell to reveal to Emperor Wenxuan his former incarnation as a king of evil demons (*luocha* 羅刹, Skt. *rākṣasa*)⁴⁷. In the early seventh century, a number of monks renowned for their spiritual abilities used spells to serve the Sui Emperor Wen 隋文帝 (r. 581-604) and the Sui imperial house. The Tiantai monk Zhiyue 智越 (543-616) was a resident of Guoqing Monastery 國清寺 on Mount Tiantai 天台山 and is remembered as a specialist in meditative trance. The first Sui emperor ordered him to the palace in Chang'an to chant spells and to supervise a vegetarian feast the day of the death of his beloved empress, Wenxian 文獻 (née Dugu 獨孤, 553-602)⁴⁸. Of course, spell masters were not limited to monks adept in meditation and academics. Later, the monk-theurgist Faqi 法齊 (ca. 615), for instance, healed an illness in the Sui imperial palace by enchanting water by means of a spell and having everyone in the complex drink it. Faqi was a favorite of Sui Emperor Wen and for whom the re-unifier of China reportedly built Xiangtai Monastery 香臺寺 in Chang'an⁴⁹.

The monk Huibin 慧斌 (574-645) of Hongfu Monastery 弘福寺 in Chang'an was also a monk remembered for his skill in meditation. From the time that he entered the Buddhist religion, his hagiography remarks, he was constantly engaged in practice. For the most part he made "spell skills" (*zhouye* 呪業) the heart of his religious cultivation, he chanted the names "Śākyamuni" (Shijia 釋迦) and "Avalokiteśvara" (Guanyin 觀音), and he also practiced a "Mañjuśrī repentance ritual" (*Wenshu huifa* 文殊悔法)⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 8, T 2060, 50.483b21-22.

⁴⁷ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 16, T 2060, 50.555b7; see also Chen Jinhua, "An Alternative View of the Meditation Tradition in China: Meditation in the Life and Works of Daoxuan (596-667)," *Toung Pao* 88, nos. 4-5 (Dec. 2002): 346-349.

⁴⁸ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 17, T 2060, 50.570c16.

⁴⁹ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 25, T 2060, 50.646a29.

⁵⁰ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 20, T 2060, 50.591c8. The compound *zhouye* appears only twice in the Taishō canon; and in both cases it refer to sundry spell skills; see *Dafaju tuoluoni*

In 688, in the preface to his comprehensive biography of Xuanzang, Yancong 彦棕 (d. after 688), a disciple of the famous monk-pilgrim, emphasized the practice of meditation, the observance of monastic discipline, and the employment of dhāraṇī or spell techniques (*zhoushu*) as but three of the myriads of ways leading to the one goal of dispelling illusion and benefiting sentient beings⁵¹. Xuanzang's chanting the *Heart Sūtra* and its spell for protection throughout his famed journey to the Indian kingdoms is well known⁵². However, what is not well known is that in his biography, recorded by his colleague Daoxuan in *Further Lives of Eminent Monks*, his translation of the *Sūtra on the Six Approach Spirit Spell* (*Liumen shenzhou jing* 六門神呪經) is listed among his important works and translations. This refers to a short dhāraṇī text called the *Sūtra on the Six Approach Dhāraṇī* (*Liumen tuoluoni jing* 六門陀羅尼經, *Saṃmukhīdhāraṇī*) preserved in the Buddhist canon⁵³. If there was not a wide interest in spells and dhāraṇī in this period in Sinitic Buddhism and if they were not important to Xuanzang, why would Daoxuan have bothered to record it among all the possible choices? Not counting his translation of the *Heart Sūtra*, Xuanzang translated at least eight texts on dhāraṇī and spells that are preserved in the “Esoteric Section” of the Taishō⁵⁴. Among these, he also translated a spell text on Amoghapāśa, the lasso-wielding version of Avalokiteśvara titled *The Spirit-Spell Sūtra of Amoghapāśa* (*Bukong*

jing 大法炬陀羅尼經 13, T 1340, 21.718c; *Bukongjuansuo tuoluoni zizai wangzhou jing* 不空羼索陀羅尼自在王呪經 2, T 1097, 20.424b. With respect to the “Mañjuśrī repentance ritual, it may have been derived from the now-lost *Wenshu huiguo jing* 文殊悔過經 (Sūtra on Repentance of Excesses [taught by] Mañjuśrī), also called the *Wenshu chanhui jing* 文殊懺悔經 (Sūtra on Repentance [taught by] Mañjuśrī), which was translated by Kumārajīva; see *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄 14, T 2154, 55.636c18-19; *Zhenyuan xinding shijiao mulu* 貞元新定釋教錄 24, T 2157, 55.971b17-18; and *Yiqie jing yinyi* 一切經音義 46, T 2128, 54.609a-b.

⁵¹ *Da Tang Daciensi sanzang fashi zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳, T 2053, 50.220c.

⁵² Aurthur Waley, *The Real Tripitaka and Other Pieces* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1952), 17, 19, and 98; Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 235; Sally Hovey Wriggins, *Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 119-120; Jan Nattier, “The Heart Sūtra: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15, no. 2 (1992): 153-223.

⁵³ *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 4, T 2060, 50.455a24; it refers to the *Liumen tuoluoni jing*, T 1360, 21.878a.

⁵⁴ See T nos. 1034, 1071, 1094, and 1162 in vol. 20; and T nos. 1360, 1363, 1365, and 1395 in vol. 21.

juansuo shenzhou xin jing 不空羼索神呪經) — which should not be surprising granted his long interest in the Bodhisattva of Compassion⁵⁵.

Dhāraṇī in Daoshi's Buddhist Encyclopedia

In the mid-seventh century, the Chinese Buddhist monk Daoshi 道世 (ca. 596-683), produced a Buddhist “encyclopedia” called *A Grove of Pearls in the Garden of the Dharma* (*Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林; in 668)⁵⁶. He included two fascicles in this great work of one hundred fascicles that dealt with the topic of dhāraṇī. The first of these two rolls begins with an overview of the topic of dhāraṇī — he uses the term “spell techniques” (*zhoushu*) — that was probably widely held among educated Buddhists of the day, because the encyclopedia was compiled under imperial patronage⁵⁷. Daoshi viewed dhāraṇī as an ordinary and important aspect of mainstream Sinitic Buddhism. The overview of the topic presents the subtle manner in which the Chinese assimilated dhāraṇī and understood them in a non-technical sense.

In summary, Daoshi says that dhāraṇī promote a believing mind in place of ignorance, they further develop truth into wisdom, they rend

⁵⁵ *Bukong juansuo shenzhou xin jing*, T 1094, 20.402b-405c. Xuanzang's work is found in the middle of the other translations of Amoghapaśa dhāraṇī literature: T nos. 1092-1098 in vol. 20. Xuanzang's translation was the second; the first was by Jñānagupta during the Sui period, T no. 1093. For an English translation of a Tibetan recension see R.O. Meiszahl, “The *Amoghapaśa-hṛdaya-dhāraṇī*,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 17 (1962): 267-328, esp. 289-300.

⁵⁶ For discussion on Daoshi's dates see Chen Jinhua, *Monks and Monarchs, Kinship and Kingship: Tanqian in Sui Buddhism and Politics* (Kyoto: Italian School of East Asian Studies, 2002), 24-25, n. 39. For more on the *Fayuan zhulin* see Stephen F. Teiser, “T'ang Buddhist Encyclopedias: An Introduction to *Fa-yüan chu-lin* and *Chu-ching yao-chi*,” *T'ang Studies* 3 (1985): 109-128; Chen Yuzhen 陳昱珙, “Daoshi yu *Fayuan zhulin*” 道世與法苑珠林 (Daoshi and the *Fayuan zhulin*), *Zhonghua foxue xuebao* 中華佛學學報 5 (July 1992): 233-261; see also Kawaguchi Gishō 川口義照, “*Hōen shurin* ni mirareru isson besonkyō ni tsuite” 法苑珠林にみられる逸存・別存經について (On the Lost and Variant Versions of Sūtras preserved in the *Fayuan zhulin*), *Nanto Bukkyō* 37 (Nov. 1976): 82-100; and “*Kyōroku kenkyū yori mita Hōen shurin*”: Dōshi ni tsuite 經錄研究よりみた法苑珠林: 道世について (Research on Sūtras from the Viewpoint of the *Fayuan zhulin*: Centering on Daoshi), *IBK* 24, no. 2 (1976): 974-977. I would like to thank James Benn for introducing me to the *Fayuan zhulin* and these secondary sources on this important work many years ago as we attended graduate school together.

⁵⁷ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.734c13.

massive obstacles into nothingness, and they exterminate bad karma that has piled up over eons of lifetimes. Daoshi demonstrates his understanding of dhāraṇī in a technical sense, as well as how it was understood by Buddhist exegetes, by saying that “dhāraṇī” is, of course, an Indic word, which, if translated literally into Chinese would be called *chi* 持 (to hold, to support, to maintain). Thus, he says that dhāraṇī “are chanted to hold on to what is wholesome and not lose it and to hold on to what is unwholesome so it will not be produced.”⁵⁸

With these explanatory doctrinal underpinnings he moves to what is important to him: that the unseen forces of the natural world may be controlled by means of speaking or chanting particular spells. If the spells are administered and performed in accordance with their prescribed methods, one will recognize immediate merit and effects. People will be able to work miracles, or, in other words as he says “to smash rocks or pluck out trees, remove illness and eradicate disease.” Also, people may control the spirits, take a ride on dangerous and destructive flood dragons, and rouse the clouds to open and fertile rains to fall⁵⁹.

Following his overview of dhāraṇī, Daoshi catalogs some of the most important, well-known, and efficacious spells of the mid-seventh century. (1) He begins with a section on dhāraṇī used in repentance rituals. (2) He then turns to spells used to invoke the power of the Buddha Amitābha and the bodhisattvas Maitreya and Avalokiteśvara (in that order). (3) He concludes with dhāraṇī chanted to eradicate sins. For instance, he says that in order to repent you must first set up a ritual space called an “enlightenment site” (Ch. *daochang* 道場, Skt. *bodhimaṇḍa*), cover it with a silk cloth and place a parasol on top of it. Secure various types of incense and perfume, close your doors, clean your house, keep visitors and intruders away, bathe, hold blended perfume in your mouth constantly, and pray to the buddhas of the ten directions for repentance. If you are not lazy, he promises, you will have an experience and will cease to doubt⁶⁰.

Dhāraṇī were chanted during repentance rituals long before the seventh century and were produced by the participants to demonstrate the efficacy

⁵⁸ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.734c17-23.

⁵⁹ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.734c23-28.

⁶⁰ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.735a6-11.

of their repentance. For instance, Buddhist spells deriving originally from dhāraṇī sūtras were an integral aspect of repentance rituals developed by Tiantai Zhiyi 天台智顛 (523-597) and he is also reported to have “manifested” dhāraṇī as a consequence of performing a repentance ritual based on the *Lotus Sūtra*⁶¹.

The final section presents dhāraṇī chanted for the eradication of sins (*miezui bu* 滅罪部). It is by far the longest section, comprising more than six pages in the standard edition of the Buddhist canon, and includes thirty-six dhāraṇī⁶². All manner of dhāraṇī and the ritual procedures for their efficacious use are included in this section. All of the spells address the ordinary needs and concerns of the common people and the elite in medieval Chinese society. For instance, Daoshi includes a spell for women that causes them to stop menstrual bleeding and other awkward and embarrassing bodily functions⁶³; a spell that protects against all manner of calamities, perversities, defilements, and poisons⁶⁴; a spell that causes one to remember what he has heard for a long time⁶⁵; a spell invoking Avalokiteśvara in order to fulfill one’s wishes or designs (*yuan* 願) while traveling on the road (apparently in order to get there safely)⁶⁶; a spell for curing a toothache⁶⁷; and a spell summoning Avalokiteśvara for protection against poisonous snakes⁶⁸. There is even a spell for protection against all manner of leprous diseases and exposed wounds, which was also taught by Avalokiteśvara. The instruction, included by Daoshi, for people who would use this spell technique is to chant the associated

⁶¹ For spells in Zhiyi’s repentance rituals see *Fangdeng sanmei xingfa* 方等三昧行法 (The Method of Vaipulya Samādhi), T 1940, 46, 943c-944a. The spell procedures outlined in the foregoing text are based on the *Dafangdeng tuoluoni jing* 大方等陀羅尼經 (The Great Vaipulya Dhāraṇī) 4, T 1339, 46.656a-661a, a dhāraṇī sūtra translated by the śramaṇa Fazhong 法衆 of the Northern Liang regime. I would like to thank the reviewer for reminding me of this connection. For his manifestation of dhāraṇī see *Sui Tiantai Zhizhe dashi biezhuan* 隋天台智者大師別傳, T 2050, 50.192a6-7; see also Linda Penkower, “In the Beginning ... Guanding 灌頂 (561-632) and the Creation of Early Tiantai,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 23, no. 2 (2000): 261.

⁶² *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.737c11-743c25.

⁶³ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.741b8-17.

⁶⁴ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.741b29-c9.

⁶⁵ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.741c19-24.

⁶⁶ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.741c28-742a5.

⁶⁷ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.742a22-b1.

⁶⁸ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.742b23-27.

dhāraṇī and repent with all their heart and they will be healed immediately. If there are open wounds, they are instructed to enchant some dirt or mud with this spell and to place the mud on the wound and it will be healed immediately⁶⁹. The ritual prescriptions for these dhāraṇī suggest that their efficacy is due to two types of factors: first, the inherent magic power of the words themselves, and, second, the power or merits of gods and bodhisattvas; yet in both cases the desired-for result is obtained through faith, sincerity, and correct ritual application. From this standpoint we can understand why dhāraṇī were popular among the Buddhist faithful of both the commoner and cultured elite social classes of medieval China. More importantly, due to Daoshi's insights, we can contextualize accurately curious anecdotes about dhāraṇī and spells in medieval Chinese society. For instance, Liang Emperor Yuan 梁元帝 (r. 552-554), son of the fabled Buddhist Emperor Wu 梁武帝 (r. 502-549), wrote that he had memorized several Buddhist spells during his childhood⁷⁰.

The entire second roll of Daoshi's work is devoted to retelling stories about thaumaturges and ordinary people who performed miracles by chanting spells. In essence, it emphasizes that dhāraṇī are just like Chinese spells (*zhou*). Daoshi culled these proofs from a panoply of materials ranging from collections of miracle tales, to Buddhist hagiography, to official dynastic histories. But what is most important is that he makes no distinction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist spells, which suggests that the Chinese (at least Daoshi) did not perceive of dhāraṇī as a completely foreign commodity. There is nothing inherently unique about his deploying anecdotes to support his views because Daoshi's *modus operandi* in the encyclopedia is to present doctrinal passages first and then present examples (*ganying* 感應; "stimulus and response" or "resonance") that demonstrate the validity of his doctrinal explanation. Of the twenty-two stories presented in this section only six are Buddhist from Buddhist sources.

⁶⁹ *Fayuan zhulin* 60, T 2122, 53.742c25-743a6.

⁷⁰ For emperor Liang Yuandi's (504-554) statement on his childhood interest in dhāraṇī see *Jinlūzi* 金縷子 (var. *Jinlouzi* 金婁子) 6:24a5-b2; in *Yingyin Wenyuange siku quanshu* 影印文淵閣四庫全書 (Photofacsimile reprint of the Wenyuan Pavilion Copy of the *Siku quanshu*), 1,500 vols. (Taipei: Shangwu, 1983-1986), 880:800; cf. Chou Yi-liang, "Tantrism in China," 244.

For instance, Daoshi selects tales from the *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 and the *Liezi* 列子, demonstrating his willingness to utilize materials that in his time had become associated with Daoism, which was supported and promoted as the imperial cult of the Tang dynasty⁷¹. The anecdote he includes from the *Baopuzi* is about General He 賀將軍 of the ancient state of Wu 吳, who is sent to deal with mountain marauders. However, one of the thieves is adept in protective measures (spells) against weaponry and the rules and procedures of their efficacy. General He knows that if he and his men are armed with sharp swords the bad guys will be able to work spells against them. So they get rid of all their weapons and outwit the marauders⁷². The account from the *Liezi* is about King Mu of Zhou 周穆王 (r. 1001-946 B.C.E.), who is visited by a magician (*huanren* 幻人) from the extreme western countries (*xiji* 西極). The thaumaturge is able to live underwater, penetrate metal and rock, overturn mountains, move cities, ride in the sky, strike hard and sharp objects and not be hurt, and so forth. King Mu treats him as a spiritual being worthy of veneration⁷³.

When we compare the flavor of the doctrinal account of Buddhist spells presented in the first fascicle with the examples presented in the second fascicle, Daoshi seems to suggest that the efficacious use of dhāraṇī can become an ordinary aspect of one's religious practice. Buddhist spells are not seen as foreign so much as extremely beneficial to one's personal welfare. The exotic Sanskrit-like sounds must have also been a factor in their popularity. Perhaps most importantly, Daoshi is able to demonstrate a long history of spell-chanting and miracle-working in China that

⁷¹ At the time of their composition, though, the *Baopuzi* and *Liezi* were probably not connected with the then-existing religious Daoist tradition of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi 天師). The author of the *Baopuzi* Ge Hong's 葛洪 (283-343) knowledge of this tradition is sketchy and the next religious Daoist tradition, the Supreme Purity (Shangqing 上清) tradition, the revelations of which were first recorded in 364-370, had not yet been "revealed." The southern literatus Ge Hong represents a tradition of Chinese religious practitioners of various techniques, alchemy in particular, who sought to become divine transcendents (*xian* 仙, *shenxian* 神仙). His writings had an impact on the development of the Supreme Purity Daoist tradition. See Isabelle Robinet, *Histoire du taoïsme: des origines au XIV^e siècle* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1991), 85-117; in English, Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: The Growth of a Religion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 78-113; Campany, *To Live As Long As Heaven And Earth*, 18-97; Stephen R. Bokenkamp, *Early Daoist Scriptures* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997), 7.

⁷² *Fayuan zhulin* 61, T 2122, 53.748c24-749a3.

⁷³ *Fayuan zhulin* 61, T 2122, 53.749c15-18.

embraces and subsumes, while still paralleling, the Buddhist cult of dhāraṇī. Perhaps better than any other source, this shows the assimilation of pre-Buddhist Chinese practices into Buddhism and the integration of Buddhism into mainstream Chinese religion.

Amoghavajra's Imperially-Decreed Definition of Dhāraṇī

Zanning's 贊寧 (919-1001) *Lives of Eminent Monks compiled in the Song* (*Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, compiled 982-988 and further edited and revised) records that during the eighth century, the Indian monks Śubhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi, and Amoghavajra enjoyed renown for their ability to make rain and to defeat other magicians and astrologers in displays of magic power by means of their Sanskrit spells⁷⁴. Since the efficacy of these monks' spells seems to play a prominent role in their hagiographies scholars have presumed that spells were somehow indelibly connected to Tantrism. However, as we have seen above, Buddhist monks and lay people conceived of dhāraṇī and spells as a common part of their practice and encouraged lay people to learn and use them as well.

In the second half of the eighth century, the third of the three Indian Tantric masters in China, Amoghavajra, was ordered by the Tang emperor, probably Daizong 代宗 (r. 762-779), to provide an official definition of dhāraṇī, in conjunction with other terms associated with the magical powers attributed to advanced monks and all bodhisattvas. When completed it was called the *Encomia on a General Interpretation of the Meaning of Dhāraṇī* (*Zongshi tuoluoni yizan* 總釋陀羅尼義讚). This short essay not only attempts to define dhāraṇī, but relates and equates dhāraṇī to three other classes of terms: “true words” (*zhenyan* 真言) and “esoteric words” (*miyan* 密言) — which are both translations of “mantra” — and “clarities” (*ming* 明, Skt. *vidyā*). Amoghavajra's definition of dhāraṇī shares much with that of his predecessors and yet, most surprisingly, shows a conscious desire to de-emphasize the role of spells. He follows intellectual convention by placing dhāraṇī in four classes: dharma maintenance (*fachi* 法), meaning maintenance (*yichi* 義持), samādhi maintenance (*sanmodi*

⁷⁴ *Song gaoseng zhuan* 1, T 2061, 50.711c, 713c; and fasc. 2, T 20601.50.715c. See also Chou Yi-liang, “Tantrism in China,” 268, 274, 291-292.

chi 三摩地持), and word or pattern maintenance (*wenchi* 文持)⁷⁵. Like Jingying Huiyuan, Amoghavajra emphasizes the role of samādhi in the development of the five spiritual penetrations, the supernatural powers of the bodhisattva⁷⁶. Most importantly, however, the word “spell,” *zhou*, or any term with that character, is entirely missing from his discussion. This exegesis on dhāraṇī was probably composed in the later years of Amoghavajra’s life, some time in between 762 and 774. Since it provides an explanation of many terms associated with dhāraṇī from a putatively “Tantric” standpoint it should be a crucial piece of evidence for understanding how the early Tantric Buddhist masters differentiated their doctrines and practices, if at all, from the preexisting Mahāyāna tradition.

Twice in this short essay Amoghavajra says that dhāraṇī and all related terms — including *zhenyan* mantras — are explained in the “exoteric teachings” (*xianjiao* 顯教). In the first case he says that they have been “explained in the exoteric teachings in the Mahāyāna teachings.” In the second case, found in the final paragraph of the encomia, he says that they have been “explained also in the exoteric teachings.”⁷⁷ What does Amoghavajra mean by “exoteric teachings” here? My research on the meaning and usage of the concepts of “esoteric” and “exoteric” in medieval Sinitic Buddhist exegesis suggests that both terms are deployed polemically by scholiasts. “Esoteric” refers to what the writer holds to be a superior teaching; it is often interchangeable with “the Mahāyāna,” and in particular is linked to the concept of “acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas.” “Exoteric” refers to ordinary Buddhist teachings, and the teachings of the “Hīnayāna” sūtras as well as some Mahāyāna sūtras, such as the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñāpāramitā*) literature⁷⁸. Thus, what Amoghavajra means by dhāraṇī having been explained in the “exoteric teachings” is that many kinds of dhāraṇī are contained in earlier Buddhist literature, such as Abhidharma literature⁷⁹, but they are not the most

⁷⁵ *Zongshi tuoluoni yizan*, T 902, 18.898a11-12.

⁷⁶ *Zongshi tuoluoni yizan*, T 902, 18.898a19-20.

⁷⁷ *Zongshi tuoluoni yizan*, T 902, 18.898a13, b21-22.

⁷⁸ See my article “Is There Really ‘Esoteric’ Buddhism?”

⁷⁹ See, for instance, *Apidamo da piposha lun* 25, T 1545, 27.130a, which says that spells (*zhou*) able to cure people of illnesses are called clarities (*ming*, Skt. *vidyā*), and spells able to cure people of the sickness of all defilements are also called clarities; and fasc. 102, T 1545, 27.529b-c, which speaks of all manner of spells (*zhongzhong zhou* 種種呪): the

important dhāraṇī in his estimation. In other words, he is attempting to differentiate between the dhāraṇī found throughout earlier Buddhist literature, such as the Perfection of Wisdom literature and the dhāraṇī rituals described by Daoshi, and the dhāraṇī in the writings he views as superior.

In his concluding remarks, Amoghavajra says that the “esoteric teaching” (*mijiao* 密教) — read as “the Mahāyāna” — has many types of its own “true words,” referring to mantra, that may be referred to using the “four designations.”⁸⁰ The context suggests that he means the four terms he just defined: dhāraṇī, true words, esoteric words, and clarities as found in Mahāyāna literature. Amoghavajra’s definitions of these terms are unusually uniform to the point that one could consider each one to be almost identical to the others. That is not surprising for the case of true words and esoteric words, but less so for dhāraṇī, which, as we have seen, was described differently and with greater precision by Jingying Huiyuan and as virtually interchangeable with “spells” by Daoshi. The significant thing is that he inverts the relationship between dhāraṇī and mantra presumed by the Chinese intellectual tradition. As we have seen above, spell techniques (*zhoushu*, viz. mantra) were conceptualized traditionally as a type of dhāraṇī. However, Amoghavajra says that all these terms are just types of true words (*zhenyan*). This is amplified by his stating that they may be both incredibly short (one syllable) or incredibly long (ten thousand syllables)⁸¹. This is fundamentally different from the way in which scholars usually attempt to define terms such as dhāraṇī, mantra, and *vidyā* using concise and precise language. In support of Amoghavajra’s loose definition of mantra, a Tang-period translation of a ritual text by a certain Putixian 菩提仙 (*Bodhiṛṣi, d.u.) deploys the terms “true word” (*zhenyan*), “esoteric word” (*miyan*), and “clarity” (*ming*) interchangeably for mantras of various lengths⁸². Another interesting aspect of this exegesis

peacock clarity (*kongque ming* 孔雀明), dragon and snake clarity (*longshe ming* 龍蛇明), image-hooking clarity (*xianggou ming* 象鉤明), fire clarity (*huo ming* 火明), water clarity (*shui ming* 水明), asterism clarity (*xing ming* 星明), and the bird clarity (*niao ming* 鳥明).

⁸⁰ *Zongshi tuoluoni yizan*, T 902, 18.898b22-23.

⁸¹ *Zongshi tuoluoni yizan*, T 902, 18.898b23-24.

⁸² For *zhenyan* see *Da shengmiao jixiang pusa mimi bazi aluoni xiuxin mandaluo cidi yigui fa* 大聖妙吉祥菩薩祕密八字阿羅尼修行曼荼羅次第儀軌法, T 1184, 20.786b-790b; for *miyan* see 788b, 789a-c, and 790b; and for *ming*: *hrdaya-vidyā* (*xinming* 心密明) see 786c1, and “esoteric pearl clarity” (*mimi zhuming* 祕密珠明) see 790c.

is that all of Amoghavajra's definitions in one way or another make room for mantras of the seed-syllable (*bīja*) variety, the one-syllable true words. These had been introduced previously as "esoteric speech" (*miyu* 密語) in a retranslation of a Perfection of Wisdom sūtra by Vajrabodhi⁸³, although this expression was not included in Amoghavajra's definition of terms.

Amoghavajra's expansive definition of dhāraṇī as true words resonates with Śubhakarasiṃha's inclusive taxonomy of *zhenyan* in his *Commentary on the Sūtra on Mahāvairocana's Attaining Buddhahood* (*Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 大毘盧遮那成佛經疏), whose narration was "recorded" by his disciple/colleague Yixing 一行 (673-727). Śubhakarasiṃha explains that there are five kinds of *zhenyan*: (1) those explained by Tathāgatas (*rulai shuo* 如來說); (2) those explained by bodhisattvas and vajra[sattvas] (*pusa jin'gang shuo* 菩薩金剛說); (3) those explained by [adherents of the] Two Vehicles, (*ersheng shuo* 二乘說), i.e. arhats and pratyekabuddhas; (4) those explained by all the deities (*zhutian shuo* 諸天說); and (5) those explained by earth-dwelling deities (*dijutian shuo* 地居天), such as dragons (*nāgas*), birds, and asuras (titans)⁸⁴. The important point I am trying to make here is that although Amoghavajra's exegesis is hypothetically about dhāraṇī, the point he cleverly emphasizes at the end is that they are really just *zhenyan* (true words). This is a break with the earlier tradition, and it appears that it was something not easily accepted or understood in China. We know that the Chinese did not differentiate between dhāraṇī and mantra in the earlier tradition and this is reflected in the use of dhāraṇī, spell, and true word interchangeably in translations as late as the early eighth century⁸⁵. Although externally Amoghavajra's exegesis seems to be an attempt to clarify the confused application of the terms, it is a fundamentally polemical document that cleverly privileges the notion of *zhenyan* from what we might call in retrospect a "Tantric point of view." Perhaps this also gives us some insight into a reason why the Tantric masters retranslated Mahāyāna sūtras including revised or updated dhāraṇī⁸⁶. Were

⁸³ *Jin'gangding yuga liqu bore jing* 金剛頂瑜伽理趣般若經, T 241, 8.779a-781b.

⁸⁴ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 7, T 1796, 39.649a.

⁸⁵ Takubo Shūyo 田久保周譽, *Shingon Daranizō no kaisetsu* 真言陀羅尼藏の解説 (An Explanation of the Shingon Dhāraṇī Storehouse) (Tokyo: Kanoen 鹿野苑, 1967), 29, 36-37.

⁸⁶ For example, when Amoghavajra retranslated the *Sūtra of Benevolent Kings* (*Renwang jing*) in the eighth century he added in a dhāraṇī that does not appear in the fifth-century

they attempting to appropriate them, adding new *zhenyan* components to them? Since they did not see their message fundamentally as different to the Mahāyāna teaching I do not think this was part of some hidden agenda to promote an “Esoteric Buddhism” by replacing the preexisting tradition. But the question remains: what is different about dhāraṇī in this putatively “Tantric” point of view?

Amoghavajra provides a crucial clue to understanding what is different when he says that all these dhāraṇī “mutually resonate with the approach of the three esoterica” (*sanmimen xiangying* 三密門相應)⁸⁷. What I call the “approach of the three esoterica” (*sanmi men*) — sometimes called the “three mysterious gates” or “three mysteries” (Jap. *sanmitsu* 三密, Skt. *tri-guhya*) — in this case probably refers to the replication of the body, speech, and mind of the Dharmakāya Buddha⁸⁸. Although the exact terminology is not used, Abé Ryūichi suggests that this idea may be found in the *Sūtra on Mahāvairocana’s Attaining Buddhahood*, in which the Buddha Vairocana displays his enlightenment in language encouraging ritual replication “in the gestural sequences of mudrās, the chanting of mantras, and the visualization of maṇḍala images.”⁸⁹ Perhaps more importantly, these ideas were also expressed in Yogācāra literature translated and introduced into Sinitic Buddhism by Xuanzang during the seventh century, which may suggest why what academe calls “Tantric Buddhism” is thoroughly intermixed with what was called the teachings of the “Yoga” school (*yuga* 瑜伽) in China during the Song 宋 period

text. See *Renwang huguo banruo boluomiduo jing* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經 2, T 246, 843c19-844a9; cf. Charles D. Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture for Humane Kings in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 269 n. 76.

⁸⁷ *Zongshi tuoluoni yizan*, T 902, 18.898b25.

⁸⁸ The term *sanmi* appears to have been interpreted differently in different exegetical traditions, such as between Tendai (Taimitsu) and Shingon (Tōmitsu) esotericism, but a discussion of this is beyond the scope of the paper. See Kubota Tetsumasa 窪田哲正, “Nihon Tendai no yusō sanmitsu hōben setsu” 日本天台における有相三密方便説 (On arguments about the meaning of *sanmitsu* [Three Mysteries] in the Japanese Tendai Sect), *Nihon Bukkyō gakkai nenpo* 日本仏教学会年報 57 (May, 1992): 145-162; and Ōkubo Ryōshun 大久保良峻, “Taimitsu no sanmitsu ron” 太密の三密論 (The Three Mysteries Theory of Taimitsu), *Tendai gakuho* 天台学報 34 (Sep., 1992): 109-113; and Ōtsuka Nobuo 大塚伸夫, “Sanmitsu shisō nit suite” 三密思想について (On the concept of the *tri-guhya*), *IBK* 34, no. 1 (Dec. 1995): 174-176.

⁸⁹ *Da Puluozhena chengfo jing* 1, T 848, 18.4a-5a; see Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra*, 129.

(960-1279)⁹⁰. This kind of specialized use of mantras by a practitioner under the guidance of a guru inside a maṇḍala as part of a ritual meant to replicate the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha for the purpose of making him a Buddha immediately is what is actually different about Tantric Buddhist practice! Although this procedure is described in a “sūtra” and not a “tantra,” it resonates with Schopen’s more precise and useful definition of “Tantric Buddhism” alluded to above. Even though all the components for such a ritual practice (maṇḍala, mudrā, mantra, and gurus) had existed for a long time before in Mahāyāna Buddhism they had not been constructed in such a concise manner for a specific religious purpose. This seems to be the real break with the preexisting tradition, at least for the case of China.

Furthermore, since the Tantric masters did not claim that their message was anything other than that of the Mahāyāna, it should not be a surprise that they possessed dhāraṇī and were adept in the types of ritual practice that were common and widespread among Mahāyāna adherents in the areas where the Mahāyāna tradition held sway. In other words, the fact that Amoghavajra could work miracles or foretell the future by means of spells does not indicate an inherent connection between spells, thaumaturgy, divination and Tantric Buddhism. Rather, his success with dhāraṇī and spells provides evidence of the efficacy of his path of practice in attaining quickly the magic powers associated with enlightenment. The thaumaturgic skills possessed by the Indian Tantric masters in China, as we have seen, had long been heralded as the qualities of advanced monks and bodhisattvas in mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism in medieval China, not to mention religious adepts outside of Buddhism. The Tantric masters differed in the promotion of special ritual to reproduce the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha in order to attain Buddhahood quickly. Hence, I would suggest that Buddhist spells, dhāraṇī or mantra, used in that confined context should be seen as “Tantric.” Outside of that special ritual milieu, dhāraṇī and spells used in Buddhist thaumaturgy, divination, merit-making, healing practices and repentance rituals, and the invocation of buddhas and bodhisattvas for the destruction of unwholesome karma, as well as in astrology and other occult sciences,

⁹⁰ See Lü Jianfu, *Zhongguo Mijiaoshi*, 432-513.

were common features of Chinese Buddhism specifically and Chinese religion in general.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay I have emphasized hitherto ignored evidence from Buddhist literature that strongly suggests that Buddhist intellectuals and eminent monks conceptualized dhāraṇī and spells as integral components of mainstream Sinitic Buddhism. *Zhoushu*, “spell techniques,” was one of the most prevalent translations of “dhāraṇī” used by Buddhists in medieval China. Seminal Buddhist literature describes an ordinary monk as a student of spell techniques and the acquisition of dhāraṇī as a prominent quality of a bodhisattva. Dhāraṇī have a firmly established position in the Mahāyāna doctrine of the bodhisattva path. They were perceived to be part of an ordinary monk’s religious cultivation and a by-product of meditation. In this respect they are closely associated with an advanced monk or bodhisattva’s acquisition of the spiritual penetrations, supernormal powers and the ability to work miracles.

The sixth-century scholiast Jingying Huiyuan promoted the view that spell-technique dhāraṇī were an ordinary by-product of meditation. Following convention Jingying Huiyuan conceptualized spell techniques (mantra) as a type of dhāraṇī. Many Indian and Chinese monks held a similar point of view regarding dhāraṇī and were renowned for their prowess in working wonders by means of spells. The seventh-century encyclopedist Daoshi endorsed dhāraṇī rituals for all people and he used examples of the efficacious use of spells from Buddhist and, more importantly, non-Buddhist literature to demonstrate that dhāraṇī are just like native Chinese spells — only better. The eighth-century Tantric master Amoghavajra, however, avoided the word “spell” in his imperially-sanctioned definition of dhāraṇī. Instead, this eminent monk attempted to reclassify dhāraṇī as a type of mantra or “true word” (*zhenyan*).

Dhāraṇī were not proto-Tantric in medieval Sinitic Buddhism; in fact, as spells, they were a common component of mainstream Chinese religion. Daoshi’s demonstration that Buddhist spells correspond well with native Chinese practices provides nuance and perspective to the ubiquity of spells and incantations in Chinese religion and to the Daoist borrowing

of Buddhist Brahmā language in the Lingbao tradition. Dhāraṇī and spells were so pervasive that they transcended the confines of strict affiliation with Buddhism and also caused proponents of what in retrospect we may call “Tantric” Buddhism in China to relinquish the word “spell” and to differentiate their practices from mainstream Buddhist and Chinese spells and dhāraṇī. Dhāraṇī and spells were functional and fashionable in medieval Sinitic Buddhism and their role in Chinese religion has continued to the present. They were understood and used as powerful practices to promote the Buddhist teaching and to protect the personal and spiritual welfare of believers. Yet, the very success of Buddhist spells was probably due to the long-standing value of spells and talismans in Chinese religion.