

IS THERE REALLY “ESOTERIC” BUDDHISM?

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In his seminal book *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault makes an important observation on a methodological problem associated with classification:

Historians want to write histories of biology in the eighteenth century; but they do not realize that biology did not exist then, and that the pattern of knowledge that has been familiar to us for a hundred and fifty years is not valid for a previous period. And that, if biology was unknown, there was a very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by *natural history*.¹

In contemporary Western scholarship, the concept of “Esoteric Buddhism” has become part of a three-fold grid of knowledge deployed to describe the history of Buddhism. For instance, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* presents three general essays titled: “Hīnayāna,” “Mahāyāna,” and “Esoteric Buddhism.”² In this case the classification “Esoteric Buddhism” is clearly a euphemism and replacement term for “Buddhist Tantrism” or “Tantric Buddhism,” a problematic classification repeatedly shown by scholars in recent years to be largely a product of nineteenth-century Western Orientalist imagination.³ For this reason, perhaps, many scholars now favor the category of “Esoteric Buddhism.” It also may be because

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* [A translation of *Les mots et les choses*] (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 127-128.

² See the book *Buddhism and Asian History*, ed. Joseph M. Kitagawa and Mark D. Cummings (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 195-256, which is comprised of selections from *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, editor in chief, 15 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

³ See, for instance, Hugh B. Urban, “The Extreme Orient: The Construction of ‘Tantrism’ as a Category in the Orientalist Imagination,” *Religion* 29 (1999): 123-146; and Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sūtra* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 78-104.

the classification suggests a relationship with the Sanskrit word *guhya* (secret, esoteric) and implies that this form of Buddhism was taught secretly and is for and understood by the initiated only. Many scholars in Asia and the West are confident that there was a separate “Esoteric Buddhism” that was known by various names in East Asia and that it is related directly to the teachings of three masters: Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637-735), Vajrabodhi (Jin’gangzhi 金剛智, 671-741), and Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705-774).⁴ However, this classification is equally problematic because the interpretation of the category or classification “Esoteric Buddhism” (Jap. *mikkyō* 密教) may in reality be a product of Japanese sectarian Buddhism, the influence of which on Western scholarship on Buddhism cannot be understated.

My purpose here, however, is not another Foucaultian deconstruction of a problematic scholarly category. Bob Sharf’s essay “On Esoteric Buddhism in China” accomplishes this purpose nicely.⁵ My aim here is to explore, in a more nuanced way, how Buddhists in the Sinitic cultural sphere from the fifth to the eighth centuries C.E. and beyond, including some figures whom historians want to categorize as the earliest “Esoteric” or

⁴ The classic example is Ōmura Seigai 大村西崖, *Mikkyō hattatsushi* 密教發達史 (History of the Development of Esoteric Buddhism) (Tokyo: 1918; rpt. Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1972). For a discussion of Ōmura’s work and other Japanese scholarship on Esoteric Buddhism see Robert H. Sharf, “On Esoteric Buddhism,” in *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 263-266. See also Taganoo Shōun 梅尾祥雲, *Himitsu Bukkyōshi* 秘密佛教史 (History of Esoteric Buddhism) (1933; Rpt. Tokyo: Ryūbunkan, 1981); Chou Yi-liang, “Tantrism in China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8 (1945): 241-332; Lü Jianfu 吕建福, *Zhongguo Mijiaooshi* 中国密教史 (History of Esoteric Buddhism in China) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe, 1995); Abé Ryūichi, *The Weaving of Mantra: Kūkai and the Construction of Esoteric Buddhist Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Charles D. Orzech, “Seeing Chen-yen Buddhism: Traditional Scholarship and the Vajrayāna in China,” *History of Religions* 29/2 (1989): 87-114; “Maṇḍalas on the Move: Reflections from Chinese Esoteric Buddhism Circa 800 C.E.” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 19/2 (1997): 209-244; or his *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom: The Scripture of Humane Kings in the Creation of Chinese Buddhism* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 135-136 n. 1; and Michel Strickmann, *Mantras et Mandarins: le bouddhisme tantrique en Chine* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996) and *Chinese Magical Medicine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁵ See Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), 263-278.

“Tantric” Buddhists in China, deployed the ideas of “esoteric teaching” (*mijiao* 密教) and its mate “exoteric teaching” (*xianjiao* 顯教) and related concepts to describe and classify Buddhist teachings.

The grid of knowledge established by intellectual Buddhist monks in medieval China was openly biased toward the Mahāyāna. Based on the rhetoric of Mahāyāna scriptures, such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, they understood the teachings of Buddhism as being comprised of three vehicles: 1) the Śrāvakayāna (*shengwensheng* 聲聞乘), the vehicle of the disciples; 2) the Pratyekabuddhayāna (*bizhifosheng* 辟支佛乘), the vehicle of the solitary buddha; and 3) the Bodhisattvayāna (*pusasheng* 菩薩乘), the vehicle of the bodhisattvas. The first two vehicles (*ersheng* 二乘) were conceptualized as inferior; hence, they were labeled with the pejorative title Hīnayāna, the Lesser Vehicle (*xiaosheng* 小乘). The vehicle of the bodhisattvas was conceived of as superior; hence it enjoyed the designation Mahāyāna, the Greater Vehicle (*dasheng* 大乘).⁶ This polemical dualism presents an interesting irony since the prevailing mode of doctrinal discourse projects a view of reality that is ultimately non-dual or indivisible. Although the duality is ultimately transcended, it is still fundamentally polemic. The idea of ultimate non-duality is projected onto these differentiated Buddhist teachings through the concept of the One Vehicle (*yisheng* 一乘, Skt. Ekayāna) or the Buddha-vehicle (*fosheng* 佛乘, Skt. Buddhayāna), which, though not really different than the bodhisattva vehicle mentioned above portrays the Mahāyāna as subsuming, comprehending, and transcending the Hīnayāna. The most famous explication of this approach to the Buddhist teachings is the famous “Parable of the Burning House” in the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁷ Furthermore, other Mahāyāna sūtras proclaimed the superiority of the Mahāyāna in ways that influenced Sinitic Buddhist exegetes’ conceptualizations of the development of the Buddhist doctrines. The *Samdhi-nirmocana Sūtra*, for instance, explains that the Buddha “turned the wheel of the dharma” (*zhuan falun* 轉法輪) three times: the first being the Hīnayāna teaching of the Four Noble Truths in Deer Park, the second being

⁶ See, for instance, *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 1, T 262, 9.8a, fasc. 2, T 262, 9.18b; cf. Leon Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture on the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sūtra)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 34, 95.

⁷ See, for instance, *Miaofa lianhua jing* 2, T 262, 9.13c; cf. Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture on the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma (The Lotus Sūtra)*, 63-64.

the early Mahāyāna teaching of “emptiness” (*kong* 空, Skt. *śūnyatā*) of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, and the third and final teaching being the advanced Mahāyāna teaching that “all dharmas lack substantial marks (*tixiang* 體相, *svabhāva-lakṣaṇa*), are neither produced nor destroyed but are in quiescence and that their self-nature is nirvāṇa.”⁸

The concepts of “esoteric” and “exoteric” must be understood as functioning within this polemical context. They refer not only to the ideas of being secret, hidden, or concealed versus being explicit, evident, or manifest, but also implicitly to the inherent superiority of the Mahāyāna teachings to the Hīnayāna. However, in the second sense, esoteric also refers to a fundamentally transcendent kind of knowledge that represents the bodhisattva’s comprehension of ultimate reality, the emptiness of all dharmas, their fundamental lack of self-nature and marks and their original quiescence — “the acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas” (*wushengfa ren* 無生法忍, Skt. *anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti*)⁹ — but also that the Buddha employed skillful means (*upāya*) to lead aspirants to understand the esoteric teaching. In other words, esoteric teachings are, by definition, advanced Mahāyāna teachings suited to bodhisattvas.

Northern and Southern Dynasties Period (317-589)

The most explicit examples that employ the polemical rhetoric that the Mahāyāna is esoteric and the Hīnayāna is exoteric are found in 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, T 1509).¹⁰ There is nothing in Indian Mahāyāna literature that

⁸ *Shenmi jietuo jing* 深密解脫經 2, T 675, 16.673c; cf. John Powers, trans., *Wisdom of Buddha: The Saṃdhinirmocana Mahāyāna Sūtra* (Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1995), 138-141. See also Paul Williams, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2000), 153-154.

⁹ Obtaining the “acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas” (*wushengfa ren* 無生法忍) is the phrase commonly used in the Mahāyāna teachings to reflect an adherent’s awakening to the ultimate truth of reality, the way things really are; see *Weimoji suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 1, T 475, 14.539a, 540c; fasc 2, 14.546a.

¹⁰ See Étienne Lamotte, trans., *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra)*, 5 vols. (Louvain: Institut orientaliste, Université de Louvain, 1944-1981). On many different names by which this text was known in medieval China

remotely approaches the authority this work enjoyed in medieval Sinitic Buddhism. It is a large compendium of Mahāyāna views and practices attributed to the monk-scholar Nāgārjuna (Longshu 龍樹, ca. 150-200).¹¹ It was translated into Chinese between 402 and 406 by Kumārajīva (Jiuluoshi 鳩摩羅什, 344-413), the famous Central Asian translator and explainer of Buddhism to the Chinese and founder of Madhyamaka philosophy in China.¹² The recent dissertation of Chou Po-kan presents a strong case for a “partly Chinese” authorship of the work, since the hand of Kumārajīva’s editor and scribe 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.¹³ Nāgārjuna’s views on the ideas of esoteric and exoteric teachings provide the original context for the discussion of this issue in medieval Sinitic Buddhist exegesis:

and on the attribution of the text to Nāgārjuna see Paul Demiéville 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.

¹¹ 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* 25/1-2 (2002): 209-262.

¹² For the biography of Kumārajīva see *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 2, T 2059, 50.330a-333a; see also Kenneth Ch’en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 81-83.

¹³ 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 Chinese “Neo-Daoism.” (This is a misleading translation of *xuanxue* 玄學, “dark learning” or “learning of the arcane/mysterious,” which is to be preferred.) 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 involvements, 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.

There are two kinds of Buddhadharmā (*fofa* 佛法): 1) esoteric (*mimi* 祕密) and 2) exoteric (*xianshi* 現示). In the exoteric [form], the Buddha, pratyekabuddha, and arhat are all fields of merit since their defilements have been exhausted without residue. In the esoteric [form], it is explained that bodhisattvas obtain the acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas, the absolute cessation of defilements, and all of the six spiritual penetrations (*liu shentong* 六神通, Skt. *ṣaḍ-abhijñāḥ*)¹⁴ to benefit sentient beings. According to the exoteric dharma (*xianshi fa* 現示法), the arhats are mentioned first [in the sūtra] and the bodhisattvas are mentioned after.¹⁵

To Nāgārjuna/Kumārajīva, the “exoteric dharma” is simply the teaching of the Two Vehicles, the Śrāvakayāna, the goal of which is becoming an arhat, and the Pratyekabuddhayāna. The “esoteric dharma” is the totality of the Mahāyāna approach to the “three teachings” of Buddhism: morality, meditation, and wisdom. The wisdom aspect as explained as the bodhisattva’s enlightened comprehension of the non-production of dharmas, the emptiness of all conceptualizations and the non-dual nature of reality; the morality aspect corresponds to the complete cessation of defilements; and the meditation aspect matches up with the acquisition of the six spiritual penetrations, which are thaumaturgic powers putatively acquired as a by-product of the cultivation of meditative absorption (*samādhi*).

In some editions of the text the compound *xianshi* is written using the character we are more familiar with in later discourse. The two characters, both pronounced *xian* 現/顯, mean the same thing and are often used

¹⁴ The six spiritual penetrations (Ch. *liu shentong* 六神通; Skt. *ṣaḍ-abhijñāḥ*) 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 (*pūrva-nīrvāsānūsmṛti-jñāna*, *suming tong* 宿命通), 5) heavenly eye (*divya-cakṣus-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; cf. Étienne Lamotte, trans., *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra)*, 5 vols. (Louvain: Institut orientaliste, Université de Louvain, 1944-1981), 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.

¹⁵ *Dazhidu lun* 4, T 1509, 25.84c-85a; cf. Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, 1:235.

interchangeably. The writer employs the idea of the “esoteric dharma” a few more times later in his translation and, due to the foregoing explanation, we can understand that he is referring generally to advanced teachings of the Mahāyāna.¹⁶ At the end of this long exegesis the writer attempts to be more explicit with respect to what about the Mahāyāna is and is not “esoteric.” However, the odd construction of the passage leaves room for much interpretation. The passage is as follows: “The *Prajñāpāramitā* is not an esoteric dharma (*mimi fa*), and yet all the sūtras, such as the *Lotus Sūtra*, explain to the arhats that they will become buddhas.”¹⁷ Based on this statement, some later exegetes understood this passage to mean that the *Lotus Sūtra* is “esoteric” but that the Perfection of Wisdom literature was “exoteric.”

The idea of an esoteric dharma or esoteric teaching referring to Mahāyāna teachings and techniques was employed in several seminal translations of Buddhist scriptures in the first quarter of the fifth century. Faxian 法顯 (d. after 423), the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who traveled to India during the years 399-414,¹⁸ in his translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Daban nihuan jing* 大般泥洹經, T 376, completed ca. 417-418) consistently utilizes the idea of an “esoteric teaching” (*mijiao* 密教) to refer to the central teaching of the Mahāyāna sutras, including the Buddha’s stratagems or “skillful means” (Skt. *upāya*; Ch. *fangbian* 方便). In several places the translation refers to the Mahāyāna variously as “the esoteric teaching of the Tathāgata’s skillful means” (*rulai fangbian mijiao* 如來方便密教), “the Buddha’s esoteric teaching” (*fo mijiao* 佛密教), “the esoteric teaching of the Vaipulya [scriptures]” (*fangdeng mijiao* 方等密教), and “the esoteric teaching of the Vaipulya Mahāyāna [scriptures]” (*fangdeng dasheng mijiao* 方等大乘密教).¹⁹

¹⁶ See *Dazhidu lun* 76, T 1509, 25.597b16, for the usage “the Buddha’s esoteric dharma” (*fo mimi fa* 佛祕密法).

¹⁷ *Dazhidu lun* 100, T 1509, 25.754b20-21.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ *Daban nihuan jing* 1, T 376, 12.853b, 853c; fasc. 2, T 376, 12.867c-868a, 868b; fasc. 3, T 376, 12.870a, 872a; fasc. 4, T 376, 12.879c; fasc. 5, T 376, 12.884a-b, 886a, 887a, 890a; fasc. 6, T 376, 12.894b, 898c, 899a.

A few good examples of the way “esoteric teaching” is used in this text to refer to the various skillful means learned by the bodhisattva according to the Mahāyāna are as follows:

Since the Tathāgata entices sentient beings to make [spiritual] progress, for the sake of sentient beings he explains all dharmas and cultivates practices of no-self. When one cultivates no-self one eradicates and forsakes views of the self. Having eradicated views of the self one enters nirvāṇa. Forsaking the worldly self, for this reason, is not my esoteric teaching of skillful means (*fangbian mijiao*). Nevertheless, I have explained that the nature of the Tathāgata is called “the self of the truth of leaving behind the world.”²⁰

In other words, here, the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* says that although all of the Buddha’s teachings are skillful means, the ones that entice people to leave the mundane world and forsake the self are not esoteric teachings. This being said, teachings that inspire people to seek the bodhisattva path are the “esoteric teaching” because these expedients lead them to understand the true nature of reality, the emptiness of all dharmas. The scripture is more explicit in another passage:

The Buddha told [me] Kāśyapa that the first thing that I [the Buddha] preached was namely the esoteric teaching of the Tathāgata’s skillful means (*rulai fangbian mijiao*). He said that all the śrāvakas did not obtain nirvāṇa. For this reason you should know all [things] by means of this *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* and that “parinirvāṇa” is merely a Buddha-sphere (*fo jingjie* 佛境界).²¹

This second passage from the scripture supports an important issue for Sinitic Buddhist exegetes, particularly those associated with formulating doctrinal classification taxonomies (*panjiao* 判教): that immediately after the Buddha became enlightened he taught the Mahāyāna initially and only later taught the Śrāvakayāna because his disciples could not understand his superior teaching. Since the greater path of skillful means employed by the bodhisattva was not understood by the śrāvakas it was called the esoteric teaching because it was comprehended by bodhisattvas only.

²⁰ *Daban nihuan jing* 5, T 376, 12.883c.

²¹ *Daban nihuan jing* 6, T 376, 12.895b.

Dharmakṣema’s (Tanwuchen 曇無讖, 385-433)²² translation of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Daban niepan jing* 大般涅槃經, T 374, completed 414-421), though better known for its support of Daosheng’s 道生 (ca. 360-434) views about all beings possessing Buddha-nature,²³ also uses “esoteric teaching” in the same manner as Faxian’s translation but employs a few new compounds such as “the fine esoteric teaching of the Vaipulya Mahāyāna [scriptures]” (*fangdeng dasheng weimi zhi jiao* 方等大乘微密之教), “the Buddhas and Tathāgatas’ fine esoteric teaching” (*fo rulai weimi zhi jiao* 佛如來微密之教), and “the esoteric teaching of the Mahāyāna Vaipulya [scriptures]” (*dasheng fangdeng mijiao* 大乘方等密教).²⁴

Furthermore, Buddhahadra’s (Fotuobatuoluo 佛馱跋陀羅, 359-429)²⁵ translation of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Dafanguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經, T 278, completed 418-422) uses “esoteric teaching” to refer to its presentation of the advanced Mahāyāna teachings. In this scripture we find such constructions as “the Tathāgata’s deep and broad esoteric teaching” (*rulai shenguang mijiao* 如來深廣密教), “the Buddha’s fine esoteric teaching” (*fo weimi jiao* 佛微密教), and “the dharma of the Buddha’s esoteric teaching” (*fo mimijiao fa* 佛祕密教法).²⁶ The *Buddhāvataṃsaka*, which claims to be the sūtra taught first by the Buddha after his enlightenment and which was not understood by the śrāvakas, was considered to be an “esoteric teaching” along with the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa Sūtras*. Buddhist sūtras and treatises contain more examples of the ideas of “esoteric” and “exoteric” deployed as polemical interpretive devices. They often appear in lists.²⁷

²² For the biography of Dharmakṣema see *Gaoseng zhuan* 2, T 2059, 50.335c-337b; see also Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, 88, 114.

²³ See, for instance, Young-ho Kim, *Tao-sheng’s Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 17-18, 24, 34-38, 61, 65-66; Whalen Lai, “Tao-sheng’s Theory of Sudden Enlightenment Re-examined” in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, edited by Peter Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1987), 169-200.

²⁴ *Daban niepan jing* 1, T 374, 12.366a-b, 368c; fasc. 8, T 374, 12.415c; fasc. 9, T 374, 12.417a; fasc. 10, T 374, 12.427a; fasc. 11, T 374, 12.431a.

²⁵ For the biography of Buddhahadra see *Gaoseng zhuan* 2, T 2059, 50.334b-335c; see also Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, 107, 109.

²⁶ *Dafanguang fo huayan jing* 1, T 278, 9.395b; fasc. 4, T 278, 9.419b; fasc. 6, T 278, 9.434a; fasc. 14, T 278, 9.621a; fasc. 51, T 278, 9.720a; fasc. 58, T 278, 9.773c, 774b.

²⁷ Dharmakṣema’s translation of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi* (completed between 414-421, or 426) briefly employs an “hidden esoteric explanation” (*yinmi zhi shuo* 隱密之說) and an

Although few Chinese scholastic works from the Northern and Southern dynasties period remain, there is evidence to demonstrate that monastic intellectuals made use of “esoteric teaching” to refer to Mahāyāna ideas. A natural place to begin is the *Collected Exegesis on the Mahā-parinirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Daban niepan jing jijie* 大般涅槃經集解, T 1763) compiled by the monk Baoliang 寶亮 (444-509) and others early in the Liang 梁 period (502-557). At this stage in the development of Chinese Buddhist scholarship, monks understood the “esoteric teaching” to refer to things that can only be understood if one grasps the Mahāyāna perspective. For instance, in one passage that explains “the esoteric teaching of the Tathāgata’s skillful means,” the monk Sengzong 僧宗 (438-496) explains: “[The Buddha] manifests the Three Vehicles by skillful means; the One Vehicle (*yisheng* 一乘, Skt. Ekayāna) is the practice of reality (*shixing* 實行). The sixteen-foot [body of the Buddha] is for saṃsāra (*youwei* 有爲); the Dharmakāya is for nirvāṇa (*wuwei* 無爲).”²⁸ Although complicated by its use of “matched meaning” (*geyi* 格義) terminology, a problematic system of translation drawing upon concepts from native Chinese Daoists and scholars of Dark Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學) in an attempt to make Buddhist ideas more intelligible to a Chinese audience, Sengzong understands “esoteric teaching” to refer to what is ultimate and real behind what is manifest to ordinary beings. What is “esoteric” is the fact that the skillful means employed by the Buddha to get his message across to sentient beings is merely a shadow of underlying reality. In other words, although the Buddha taught the Three Vehicles (Śrāvakayāna, Pratyekabuddhayāna, and Bodhisattvayāna), there is only really the One Vehicle of the Buddhayāna. This same understanding of

exoteric “lucid explanation” (*ming shuo* 明說); see *Pusa dichi jing* 菩薩地持經 3, T 1581, 30.905a. In a list of 27 *upāya* for teaching the Buddhadharma in his translation of the *Yogācāra-bhūmi* (completed between 646-648) Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 600-664) refers to an esoteric method (*yinmi shuo fa* 隱密說法) and an exoteric method (*xianliao shuo fa* 顯了說法) as numbers 15 and 16; see *Yuqie shidi lun* 瑜伽十地論 37, T 1579, 30.497a. Prajñā’s (Bore 般若, fl. late 8th century) forty-fascicle version of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra* (presented to the Tang emperor in 798) includes a list of various comparative and opposing terms in which an exoteric “lucid explanation” (*mingliao shuo* 明了說) and “esoteric explanation” (*yinmi shuo* 隱密說) are two, see *Dafangguang fo huayan jing* 5, T 293, 10.683c. There are certainly other examples of this kind of usage; the foregoing are the most representative examples.

²⁸ *Daban niepan jing jijie* 2, T 1763, 37.386b29-c3.

“esoteric teaching” is deployed elsewhere in this text to explain why the Buddha gave the appearance of being sick although it is known from the Mahāyāna point of view that the Buddha is permanently free from illness and that the Buddha seemed to die although it is known that it is impossible for the Buddha to die.²⁹

Sui and Early Tang Period (589-712)

In the late sixth century the great Mahāyāna scholiast Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠 (523-592)³⁰ inherited his understanding of “exoteric teaching” and “esoteric teaching” directly from the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* and used it often in his works on seminal Mahāyāna scriptures. Although the words “esoteric teaching” are not found in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* (*Weimoji suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經, T 475), many exegetes beginning with Huiyuan found the polemical categories to be a useful heuristic device they could employ to explain why crucial Mahāyāna teachings were taught to śrāvakas and to evaluate the respective merit of the competing systems of Buddhism. In his *Record on the Meaning of the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* (*Weimo yiji* 維摩義記, T 1776) Huiyuan grapples with the issue of why śrāvakas are listed before the bodhisattvas in the scripture:

Summarizing differences in merit is also called summarizing differences in teachings. As Nāgārjuna explained there are two kinds of teachings: 1) the exoteric teaching (*xianshijiao* 顯示教), which displays marks and conceals reality, and 2) the esoteric teaching (*mimijiao* 祕密教), which rejects marks and manifests reality. In the exoteric teaching, it is proclaimed that arhats and pratyekabuddhas, like the Buddha, have exhausted [all their] outflows. It proclaims that a bodhisattva manifests [karmic] actions, that his defilements have not been cut off and that they all bear fruit. With respect to this [esoteric] teaching, if one hears of bodhisattvas they are superior people with reference to the arhats and many are astonishing and extraordinary. For this reason [the scriptures] first list the śrāvakas and afterward list the bodhisattvas. If one relies on this extremely deep teaching that manifests reality, the virtuous honor of the bodhisattva, in principle, should come first

²⁹ *Daban niepan jing jijie* 8, T 1763. 37.411c, and fasc. 26, T 1763, 38.476c.

³⁰ For the biography of Jingying Huiyuan see *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 8, T 2060, 50.489c-492b.

and the inferior practices of the śrāvaka should come afterward just as in the *Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra*.³¹

Instead of saying that the reason arhats are listed before bodhisattvas in the scripture is mere literary convention, as many modern scholars would suggest, Huiyuan uses this as an opportunity to differentiate between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna. From an exoteric Hīnayāna point of view, he says that the adherents of the Two Vehicles (arhats [disciples] and pratyekabuddhas) are listed first because they are presumed to be more advanced than bodhisattvas. However, from the esoteric Mahāyāna point of view in which bodhisattvas are superior to the Two-Vehicle adherents, they are listed afterwards because they are of higher and more extraordinary quality. It is merely the case of listing teachings in the order of increasing significance. The important issue for us is that the “esoteric teaching” is clearly associated with the path of the bodhisattva. However, this does not mean that Chinese Buddhist exegetes did not invert or play with these categories from time to time in formulating their arguments for the superiority of the Mahāyāna path. Notice how the ideas of exoteric and esoteric are first affirmed then then reversed in the following passage from Huiyuan’s *Mahāyāna Compendium* (*Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章, T 1851):

Some say that the Hīnayāna is intelligible and that the Mahāyāna is unintelligible. The Hīnayāna is rough and exoteric (*cuxian* 麁顯) so it is said to be intelligible. The Mahāyāna is secret and esoteric (*mimi* 祕密) so it is said to be unintelligible. Some say that the Mahāyāna is intelligible and that the Hīnayāna is unintelligible. [Since] the Mahāyāna manifests (*xian* 顯) reality it is said to be intelligible. [Since] the Hīnayāna obscures (*fu* 覆) reality it is said to be unintelligible.³²

From the enlightened perspective of the advanced Mahāyāna teachings, the bodhisattva comprehends reality the way it really is — this is the great secret of Buddhism.

Tiantai Zhiyi 天台智顓 (538-597),³³ in his *Literary Passages of the Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing wenju* 妙法蓮華經文句, T 1718), says that the

³¹ *Weimo yiji* 維摩義記 1A, T 1776, 38.426a.

³² *Dasheng yizhang* 11, T 1851, 44.679b.

³³ For the biography of Zhiyi see *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 17, T 2059, 50.564a-568a; see also Leon Hurvitz, *Chih-i 智顓 (538-597): An Introduction to the Life and Ideas of a Chinese*

Two Vehicles taught before the *Lotus Sūtra* are an “exoteric explanation” (*xianshuo* 顯說) of the Buddhadharmā and that what was taught to the assembly in the *Lotus Sūtra* was an “esoteric explanation” (*mishuo* 密說).³⁴ As is well known, Zhiyi employed the concept of a “secret” or “esoteric teaching” (*mimijiao* 祕密教) in his multi-tiered doctrinal classification system.³⁵ In his *Arcane Commentary on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* (*Weimojing xuanshu* 維摩經玄疏, T 1777) he outlines the four teachings but gives a different order than is usually presented in scholarship: 1) sudden teaching, 2) gradual teaching, 3) indeterminate teaching, and 4) esoteric teaching.³⁶ Zhiyi’s explanation of “esoteric teaching” portrays an attempt on his part to express the meaning of “esoteric teaching” in its transcendent sense. It is the culmination of his classification of the four teachings:

4) The esoteric teaching. The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says that [when] the Buddha first achieved enlightenment he turned the wheel of the Dharma of the Four Noble Truths in Deer Park.³⁷ In the teaching he presented on the road he clarified [the understanding] of the 5 people who saw the Truth and obtained the fruit of the *srota-āpanna* [stream-winner] and 80,000 people obtained the Purity of the Dharma-Eye.³⁸ [As for] the esoteric teaching, immeasurable bodhisattvas heard him explain the Mahāyāna

Buddhist Monk, *Melanges chinios et bouddhiques* (Bruxelles: l’Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1962), and Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, 303-313.

³⁴ *Miaofa lianhua jing wengou* 4A, T 1718, 34.48a.

³⁵ Due to the evidence that follows, I am confused by Bob Sharf’s statement that “the place of a ‘secret teaching’ within the T’ien-t’ai tenet-classification is a matter of some complexity and debate.” See Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism*, 340, n. 21.

³⁶ *Weimojing xuanshu* 6, T 1777, 38.561c29-562a1. The traditional order is: 1) sudden teaching, 2) gradual teaching, 3) secret teaching, and 4) indeterminate teaching. See Hurvitz, *Chih-i 智顓 (538-597)*, 247; Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, 308.

³⁷ Cf. *Dazhidu lun* 2, T 1509, 25.62a; fasc. 7, T 1509, 25.109b-c, fasc. 22, T 1509, 25.225c; cf. Lamotte, *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna*, 1:49-51, 1:415-421, 3:1405-1406.

³⁸ The Purity of the Dharma-Eye (*fayan jing* 法眼淨, Skt. *anutpattika-dharma-kṣānti*) has different connotations in the non-Mahāyāna and Mahāyāna traditions. In the non-Mahāyāna or Śrāvakayāna tradition it refers to attaining the first of the four attainments of the śrāvaka, the fruit of the *srota-āpanna*, or the stage of the stream-winner; see *Za ahan jing* 雜阿含經 15, T 99, 2.104c. In the Mahāyāna it refers, as the quote above, to obtaining the acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas (*wushengfa ren* 無生法忍), see *Weimoji suoshuo jing* 1, T 475, 14.539a, 540c fasc. 2, 14.546a.

and obtained the acquiescence to the non-production [of dharmas]. After that, from his first moment of enlightenment until his nirvāṇa he constantly explained the Prajñā [literature] at night, [but only] some were able [to comprehend] its meaning. This scripture (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*) says: “The Buddha preaches the Dharma by means of one sound / Sentient beings, according to their class, are each able to obtain liberation.”³⁹ This is also a mark of the esoteric teaching. If there is a time in which all the masses are unable to hear or see [understand the Buddha’s teaching], then this is an esoteric teaching.⁴⁰

Zhiyi’s explanation of “esoteric teaching” is inextricably tied to his understanding of the chronological classification of sūtras, and yet it still refers directly to the advanced teachings of the Mahāyāna. It is an esoteric teaching because even though people may hear it they cannot understand unless they have the spiritual capacity of a bodhisattva. Although not stated explicitly, the “exoteric teaching” is what is heard by people of limited spiritual capacity and refers to the Four Noble Truths. An adherent of the Two Vehicles can attain the stage of a stream-winner, a benefit of the exoteric meaning of the teaching. This is contrasted to the bodhisattva who is able to comprehend the esoteric meaning of the teaching that causes the acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas, the defining characteristic of an advanced bodhisattva’s wisdom on the Mahāyāna path.

Jizang 吉藏 (549-623),⁴¹ the famous scholar-monk of the Chinese Madhyama tradition (Sanlun 三論), also wrestles with the concept of “esoteric teaching” in many works and, like his colleagues, draws inspiration from the seminal exegesis attributed to Nāgārjuna. To him, an esoteric teaching was a dharma entrusted to bodhisattvas only. In his *Commentary on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* (*Weimojing yishu* 維摩經義疏, T 1781) he problematizes the matter in the form of a dialogue:

Question: The *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* says that the *Lotus Sūtra* was the first esoteric dharma (*mifa* 密法) because it was entrusted to bodhisattvas. The Prajñā (*bore* 波若) [literature] is not an esoteric dharma

³⁹ *Weimoji suoshuo jing* 1, T 475, 14.538a.

⁴⁰ *Weimojing xuanshu* 6, T 1777, 38.562a.

⁴¹ For the biography of Jizang see *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 11, T 2059, 50.513c-515a; see also Ch’en, *Buddhism in China*, 132-134.

⁴² Cf. *Dazhidu lun* 100, T 1509, 25.754b20-21.

because it was entrusted to śrāvakas.⁴² If this scripture was not yet clear to śrāvakas when they received prophecies of [their future] attainment of Buddhahood then it is not an esoteric dharma (*mimifa* 祕密法). Why was it entrusted to bodhisattvas?

Answer: There are two types of Prajñā [literature]: 1) [that preached to the people] of the Three Vehicles together and 2) that explained to the bodhisattvas only. Having searched through the *Large [Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra] (dapin* 大品), [I found that] it is taught to the people of the Three Vehicles together because it was entrusted to śrāvakas. Even though this scripture (*Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*) is not esoteric it is only understood by bodhisattvas as an inconceivable approach to the Dharma. It is not what can be known [by people] of inferior ranking [viz. spiritual capacity]. How can the [teachings] of the Two Vehicles be fathomed? — because they are entrusted to bodhisattvas; they do not bother with śrāvakas.⁴³

In the foregoing passage we can see that Jizang attempts to refine the definition of the concept of an “esoteric teaching” to include teachings in the Prajñā literature understood only by bodhisattvas. Jizang understands that not all Mahāyāna scriptures are subsumed in the “esoteric teaching” because many scriptures contain both Mahāyāna and non-Mahāyāna teachings, but more importantly because, according to his understanding, the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* suggests that the Prajñā literature is not esoteric and that the *Lotus Sūtra* is. This should not be surprising because intellectual concern with doctrinal classification systems reached its zenith during the seventh century in China. We have seen how previously Zhiyi incorporated “esoteric teaching” into his doctrinal classification system. According to Jizang’s definition, since the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* was entrusted to both bodhisattvas and śrāvakas it is not an “esoteric teaching.” However, he says that since the principles taught in the scripture are fundamentally “inconceivable” to śrāvakas it should be viewed as in the same general class as the *Lotus Sūtra*, which he takes to be a prototypical “esoteric teaching” entrusted to and understood only by bodhisattvas.

Elsewhere in his writings, however, Jizang attempts to explain the esoteric teaching in causative terms as what transforms śrāvakas into bodhisattvas. For instance, in his *Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra (Fahua*

⁴³ *Weimojing yishu* 6, T 1781, 38.990c.

yishu 法華義疏, T 1721), Jizang says: “[To] Śrāvakas [who rely on the] esoteric teaching (*mijiao shengwen* 密教聲聞), the Buddha, as a Dharma King, appears as a self-transforming bodhisattva and now he causes the Hīnayāna to enlarge into the great path (*dadao* 大道), transforming them into bodhisattvas.”⁴⁴ Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, in his *Arcane Discourse on the Lotus Sūtra* (*Fahua xuan lun* 法華玄論, T 1720) Jizang labors to demonstrate that both the *Lotus Sūtra* and Perfection of Wisdom literature have exoteric and esoteric components. It should not be a surprise that he would attempt to portray the “exoteric teaching” of the Prajñā literature as just as important as the “esoteric teaching” since it serves as the scriptural basis for the Chinese Madhyamaka tradition. He understands the ideas of exoteric and esoteric polemically since the “esoteric teachings” of the *Lotus* and *Nirvāṇa Sūtras* were taught “exoterically” — explicitly, openly — to bodhisattvas.⁴⁵ Also in his *Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra*, Jizang uses “esoteric teaching” to explain the superiority of the Mahāyāna to the Hīnayāna, which he calls the “Vehicle of Men and Gods” (*rentiansheng* 人天乘). The “esoteric teaching” fits nicely into this heuristic role representing the Mahāyāna in the “ten teachings in five pairs” (*wushuang shijiao* 五雙十教): sudden [*Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra*] and gradual [Vehicle of Men and Gods up to the *Lotus Sūtra*] (*dun-jian* 遁漸); mundane [Vehicle of Men and Gods] and supra-mundane [*Lotus Sūtra*] (*shi-chushi* 世出世); great and small (*da-xiao* 大小); exoteric and esoteric (*xian-mi* 顯密); and self and others (*zi-ta* 自他).⁴⁶

In the second half of the seventh century, Kuiji 窺基 (632-682),⁴⁷ a close disciple of Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 600-664) and the founder of the Ci'en 慈恩 or Faxiang 法相 (Dharma Characteristics) school of Chinese Yogācāra, also elucidated his views on the dual ideas of esoteric and exoteric dharmas. In his commentary, *Hidden Praise of the Heart Sūtra* (*Bore poluomiduo xin jing youzan* 般若波羅密多心經幽贊, T 1710) he makes the following observation:

⁴⁴ *Fahua yishu* 7, T 1721, 34.552a.

⁴⁵ *Fahua xuan lun* 3, T 1720, 34.383b.

⁴⁶ *Fahua yishu* 7, T 1721, 34.552b-c.

⁴⁷ For the biography of Kuiji see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 4, T 2061, 50.725b-726c; see also Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 320-321.

Only those hastening in the Mahāyāna turn the wheel of the hidden and secret [esoteric dharma] (*zhuan yinmi lun* 轉隱密輪), which explains that all dharmas, each and every one, is devoid of self nature, is neither produced nor destroyed, and is originally nirvāṇa. Even though [dharmas] are still curious and miraculous, they are as if their meaning is not intelligible. Also, all [dharmas] have been demonstrated as existing in a state of complete tranquility. Now, those propounding all vehicles (*yiqie cheng* 一切乘) [turn] the wheel of the exoteric [dharma] (*xianliao lun* 顯了輪), which is unexcelled and featureless, and in its surpassing meaning it is the teaching that meaning is truly intelligible (*zhenliaoyi jiao* 真了義教). [In this teaching] not all [dharmas] are explained as existing in a state of complete tranquility.⁴⁸

Kuiji’s definition of these ideas also suggests that what makes a particular teaching esoteric or exoteric depends on the way that it views dharmas. If the view of dharmas coincides with the advanced Mahāyāna doctrine that they lack self nature, then it is an esoteric teaching because the great secret is that all dharmas are originally in a state of quiescence. This is the transcendent approach of the One Vehicle, the Buddhayāna. When viewed from the perspective of the teachings of all the various vehicles, however, if dharmas are explained as existing and as being intelligible, then it is an exoteric teaching — no matter how profound.

The influential Buddhist scholiast Wōnhyo 元曉 (617-686),⁴⁹ from the Korean state of Silla 新羅, deploys the polemical concepts of esoteric and exoteric as a heuristic device to indicate superior and inferior approaches to the Buddhadharmā. In his *Thematic Essentials of the Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* (*Muryangsu-gyōng chongyo* 無量壽經宗要, T 1747), he uses the polemical ideas to explicate the passage in the *Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* that encourages the practice of *buddhānusmṛti* (*yōmbul*, Ch. *nianfo* 念佛), the “ten recollections” (*simnyōm*, Ch. *shinian* 十念).⁵⁰ He explains that there is both an “esoteric meaning” (*ūnmil ūi*, Ch. *yinmi yi* 隱密義) and an “exoteric meaning” (*hyōllyo ūi*, Ch. *xianliao yi* 顯了義) to this practice.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Bore poluomi duo xin jing youzan* 般若波羅密多心經幽贊 1, T 1710, 33.523b.

⁴⁹ For the biography of Wōnhyo see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 4, T 2061, 50.730a-c; *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 4, T 2039, 49.1006a-c; see also Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Formation of Ch’an Ideology in China and Korea: The Vajrasamādhi-Sūtra, A Buddhist Apocryphon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 41-73.

⁵⁰ *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經 1, T 360, 12.268a.

⁵¹ *Muryangsu-gyōng chongyo*, T 1747, 37.129a.

To describe the esoteric meaning of the ten recollections Wōnhyo gives a list of ten practices drawn from a now-lost text titled the *Scripture on Questions asked by Maitreya (Mile fawen jing 彌勒發問經)*.⁵² Being concerned with compassion toward other beings, not slandering the teachings and practices of others, and cultivating the thought of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*), there is nothing “secret” about any of the ten practices.⁵³ Wōnhyo explains that they are descriptive of bodhisattvas above the first stage (*bhūmi*). The point is that Wōnhyo calls them “esoteric” because they are superior and are practices of the bodhisattva. The exoteric meaning of the “ten recollections” refers to the practice of chanting the name of the Buddha Amitāyus ten times or for ten thought-moments, paying

⁵² The *Mile fawen jing* has a complicated genealogy that discussed briefly by Matsubayashi Kōshi 松林弘之, “Chōsen Jōdokyō no kenkyū: Miroku somon no jūnen o meguru gimon” 朝鮮淨土教の研究：彌勒所問の十念をめぐる疑問 (Study of Korean Pure Land: Focusing on the issue of the ten recollections of the *Mile sowaen*). *Ryūkyoku Daigaku Bukkyō bunka kenkyū kiyō* 龍国大學佛教文化研究紀要 6 (1967): 82-85; Matsubayashi had published similar findings earlier as “Shiragi Jōdokyō no ikkōsatsu: Gangyō no jōdokyō shisō o megutte” 新羅淨土教の一考察：元曉の淨土思想をめぐる (An inquiry into the Pure Land teachings of Silla: With an emphasis on Wōnhyo’s Pure Land teachings and thought), *IBK* 15/1 (December, 1966): 196-198. Later scholarship on Wōnhyo’s ten recollections derives from Matsubayashi’s work: for instance, see Chōng Hakkwon 鄭學權, “Gangyō Taishi no jūnengi ni tsuite” 元曉大師の十念觀について (On Master Wōnhyo’s view of the ten recollections), *IBK* 25/1 (December, 1976): 269-271; and Kakehashi Nobuaki 梯信暁, “Shiragi Jōdokyō no hatten (1): jūnen-ron ni chakuganshite” 新羅淨土教の發展 (一)：十念論 (The development of Silla Pure Land teachings (1): Looking at the theory of the ten recollections), *IBK* 42/2 (March, 1994): 650-653.

⁵³ *Muryangsu-gyōng chongyo*, T 1747, 37.129a-b. The ten recollections according to the *Mile fawen jing* are as follows: “1) Constantly arouse thoughts of compassion toward all beings. Do not slander the practice of all beings, for if you do slander their practice, you will never be reborn in the Pure Land. 2) Deeply arouse thoughts of sympathy toward all beings. Forsake remaining harmful intentions. 3) Arouse the thought of protecting the dharma without begrudging your body or your life. Do not slander any of the dharmas. 4) Produce a mind of assurance with regard to everything you are enduring. 5) With your mind profoundly pure, do not covet profit and gain. 6) Arouse a mind of omniscient wisdom. Constantly reflect (*yōm*) on these day after day without faltering. 7) Arouse thoughts of honor and respect toward all beings. Forsake all sentiments of self-conceit and be humble when you speak. 8) Do not take pleasure in worldly gossip. 9) Stay close to the thought of enlightenment and deeply arouse all the conditions of wholesome faculties. Stay far away from thoughts that are troubled, tumultuous, scattered, and chaotic. 10) Visualize the Buddha with the correct recollection (*yōm*) and forsake all doubts.” The *Yu simallak to 遊心安樂道* (Traveling the Path to Mental Peace and Bliss), a later text attributed to Wōnhyo, which is based on the *Muryangsu-gyōng chongyo*, contains this same passage; see T 1965, 47.114c.

⁵⁴ *Guan Wuliangshou jing* 1, T 365, 12.346a12-22.

homage to the Buddha, as explained in the *Book on the Visualization of the Buddha Amitāyus* (*Guan Wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經, T 365),⁵⁴ which, from the context, Wōnhyo considers an inferior practice to becoming a bodhisattva.

In his *Thematic Essentials of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (*Yōlban chongyo* 涅槃宗要, T 1769), Wōnhyo deploys these concepts heuristically to discuss the meaning of nirvāṇa:

The concept “nirvāṇa,” verily, contains two meanings: that which we may call an “esoteric expression” (*mirō*, Ch. *miyu* 密語) and an “exoteric expression” (*hyōllyōō*, Ch. *xianliaoyu* 顯了語). Relying on the exoteric expression, it is the straight translation “liberation [through the] extinction [of outflows]” (*myōlto*, Ch. *miedu* 滅度) If we rely on the esoteric expression, it contains many instructions.⁵⁵

Wōnhyo then proceeds to discuss a few aspects of the meaning of nirvāṇa. For instance, he treats nirvāṇa’s association with the concept of death (*samyōl*, Ch. *simie* 死滅) as an “exoteric expression” and as belonging to the “esoteric expression” of nirvāṇa he includes the idea of “a lack of suffering” (*mugo*, Ch. *wuku* 無苦).⁵⁶ In this case, esoteric and exoteric do not refer to the polemical distinction between the Mahāyāna and the Hīnayāna, but instead suggest the literal distinctions between “hidden” and “apparent.” Although not used frequently in this manner, there is ample evidence of “esoteric” and “exoteric” being used this way in Buddhist scriptures.⁵⁷ Also, Jiakai 迦才 (fl. 645), for instance, employs the com-

⁵⁵ *Yōlban chongyo*, T 1769, 38.240c-241a.

⁵⁶ *Yōlban chongyo*, T 1769, 38.241a.

⁵⁷ Dharmakṣema’s translation of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi* (completed between 414-421, or 426) briefly employs an “hidden esoteric explanation” (*yinmi zhi shuo* 隱密之說) and an exoteric “lucid explanation” (*ming shuo* 明說); see *Pusa dichi jing* 3, T 1581, 30.905a. In a list of 27 *upāya* for teaching the Buddhadharmā in his translation of the *Yogācāra-bhūmi* (completed between 646-648) Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 600-664) refers to an esoteric method (*yinmi shuo fa* 隱密說法) and an exoteric method (*xianliao shuo fa* 顯了說法) as numbers 15 and 16; see *Yūqie shidi lun* 瑜伽十地論 37, T 1579, 30.497a. Prajñā’s (Bore 般若, fl. late 8th century) forty-fascicle version of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra* (presented to the Tang emperor in 798) includes a list of various comparative and opposing terms in which an exoteric “lucid explanation” (*mingliao shuo* 明了說) and “esoteric explanation” (*yinmi shuo* 隱密說) are two, see *Dafangguang fo huayan jing* 5, T 293, 10.683c. There are certainly other examples of this kind of usage; the foregoing are the most representative examples.

⁵⁸ *Jingtu lun* 2, T 1963, 47.90b.

pound *yinxian* 隱顯 to refer to hidden and manifest interpretations in his *Pure Land Treatise* (*Jingtu lun* 淨土論, T 1963).⁵⁸

The concepts of “esoteric” and “exoteric” were understood as polemical terms by medieval Sinitic Buddhist exegetes. While they were deployed most commonly to explain the supreme Mahāyāna teaching on the true nature of dharmas as being empty of self-nature, they were also used to promote the superiority of the bodhisattva. Thus, for three hundred years the polemical heuristic device known as the esoteric teaching or esoteric dharma had been employed regularly by Buddhist exegetes to promote the superiority of the advanced Mahāyāna teaching of the emptiness of all dharmas and the acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas, the transcendent knowledge acquired through skillful means cultivated by adherents to the bodhisattva path. Furthermore, the *Buddhāvataṃsaka*, *Lotus*, and *Nirvāṇa Sūtras* were held to embody the esoteric teaching.

High Tang through the Late Tang (712-907) and Beyond

The putative first true “Esoteric” master, Śubhakarasiṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637-735)⁵⁹ arrived at the Tang capital early in the reign of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 712-756), probably around the year 716, and, with the help of the brilliant Buddhist polymath Yixing 一行 (673-727),⁶⁰ translated the *Sūtra on Mahāvairocana’s Attaining Buddhahood* (*Da Piluzhena chengfo jing* 大毘盧遮那成佛經, Skt. **Mahāvairocanaabhisambodhi Sūtra*, T 848), which they completed in 725. Before Yixing’s death in 727, and probably in the process of translating the sūtra, they composed the first “Esoteric” Buddhist exegesis: the *Commentary to the Scripture on Mahāvairocana’s Attaining Buddhahood* (*Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 大毘盧遮那成佛經疏, T 1795).

⁵⁹ For the biography of Śubhakarasiṃha see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 2, T 2061, 50.714b-716a; see also Chou Yi-liang, “Tantrism in China,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8 (March, 1945): 251-272.

⁶⁰ For a study on Yixing see Jinhua Chen, “The Birth of a Polymath: The Genealogical Background of the Tang Monk-Scientist Yixing (673-727),” *Tang Studies* 18/19 (2000-2001): 1-39.

⁶¹ The sūtra introduces the term “mantra vehicle” (*zhenyansheng* 真言乘, Skt. *mantrayāna*) to describe this approach to the Dharma; see *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing* 1, T 848,

The sūtra describes rituals and practices for the use of mantra (*zhenyan* 真言) in a new role as helping generate the three esoterica (*sanmi* 三密, Skt. **tri-guhyā*) or three mysteries: the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha.⁶¹ These are new developments that the commentators develop further in the exegesis.⁶² However, in each of the six times “esoteric teaching” is used in the commentary it is deployed in a way not fundamentally different than the preexisting tradition as representing advanced Mahāyāna teachings.⁶³ For certain, the idea of secrecy is emphasized, but they do not claim that the point of the secrecy is somehow different than obtaining the acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas.

For example, after providing a list of code words, some gendered and some not, in which the concept of “female” or “woman” (*niiren* 女人) is explained as meaning “*prajñā*, the mother of the buddhas” (*bore fomu* 般若佛母), the commentators say: “This esoteric teaching cannot be proclaimed directly since there is much secret language (*yinyu* 隱語). Scholars presently consider it to be coarse.”⁶⁴ In this passage, since other “esoteric teachings” of the Mahāyāna have been proclaimed directly previously, only because this new esoteric teaching contains gendered language offensive to contemporary Buddhist scholars is it taught secretly. The way the category of “esoteric teaching” is used resembles that of the earlier intellectual tradition. Note the following example:

18.5c; fasc. 7, T 848, 18.51b (uses *dasheng zhenyansheng* 大乘真言乘, “mantra vehicle of the Mahāyāna”), and 54c. For the “approach of the three esoterica” (*sanmi men* 三密門) see *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing* 7, T 848, 18.51c, 52b.

⁶² For example, the concept of the “three esoterica” is discussed 19 times, beginning with *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 1, T 1796, 39.579b-c. It is also interesting to note that the term “mantra vehicle” (or *mantrayāna*) is deployed three times; see *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 4, T 1796, 39.625c25, c27 (here *dasheng zhenyansheng*), and fasc. 9, T 1796, 39.671a12; “mantra teaching” is used four times (usually *zhenyan jiaofa* 真言教法, *zhenyan-jiao* 真言教 once); see *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 7, T 1796, 39.651a5, b26; fasc. 10, T 1796, 39.688a25; and fasc. 14, T 1796, 39.724a17 (here *zhenyanjiao*); and “vajra vehicle” (*jin’gangsheng* 金剛乘; Skt. *vajrayāna*) is found once; see *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 5, T 1796, 39.629a11.

⁶³ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 1, T 1796, 39.579c29; fasc. 3, T 1796, 39.614a19; fasc. 4, T 1796, 39.616c27; fasc. 5, T 1796, 39.627a26; and fasc 20, T 1796, 39.787a10, 13.

⁶⁴ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 1, T 1796, 39.579c-580a.

⁶⁵ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 20, T 1976, 39.787a9-12.

You should dwell in non-profligacy (*bu fangyi* 不放逸) and you will inherit and take up the previously[-mentioned] text (in other words, you will be entrusted with the *sūtra*), this esoteric teaching of the Mahāyāna (*ci dasheng mijiao* 此大乘密教), and you will be an inheritor of the mark of the Dharma (*faxiang cheng* 法相承).⁶⁵

There is no attempt on the part of Śubhakarasiṃha or Yixing to differentiate their “esoteric teaching” from the advanced Mahāyāna teachings; rather, they emphasize that it is an “esoteric teaching of the Mahāyāna.” Nevertheless, it is difficult to transmit and they are clear that to receive and observe their esoteric teaching requires special spiritual capacities. Aspirants and adherents are sternly warned not to give in to profligacy and lust because the ritual practices introduced in the scripture use the senses to overcome the senses. Seen from this perspective, one can see how to many Chinese Buddhists, the esoteric teachings of the *Sūtra on Mahāvairocana’s Attaining Buddhahood*, which emphasize recreating the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha directly as the “esoteric teaching,” are no more esoteric than the teachings of the *Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra* or the *Lotus Sūtra*, because one could easily understand that acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas means fundamentally the same thing as acquiring or reproducing the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha.

Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705-774),⁶⁶ the third of the three “Esoteric” masters, deployed the concepts of esoteric and exoteric teaching in a short essay he composed on the meaning of dhāraṇī titled *Encomia on a General Interpretation of the Meaning of Dhāraṇī* (*Zongshi tuoluoni yizan* 總釋陀羅尼義讚, T 902), which was probably written sometime between 762 and 774. At the beginning of the exegesis, after listing four types of dhāraṇī he says: “Relying mostly on the exoteric teaching (*xianjiao*) they are explained in the Mahāyāna teaching (*dashengjiao* 大乘教).” At the end of this short piece, after detailing four kinds of Buddhist vocative devices: dhāraṇī (*tuoluoni* 陀羅尼), true words (*zhenyan* 真言), esoteric words (*miyan* 密言) — both are Chinese translations of the word “mantra” — and *vidyā* (*ming* 明), he says that they are all based

⁶⁶ For the biography of Amoghavajra see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 1, T 2061, 50.712a-714a; see also Chou, “Tantrism in China,” 284-307.

⁶⁷ *Zongshi tuoluoni yizan*, T 902, 18.898a-b.

on words in the Indian language and that they “have been explained repeatedly in the sūtras of the exoteric teaching (*xianjiao*).” He then goes on to say that “true words” have been “explained in the esoteric teaching (*mijiao*)” using the above four designations and that they resonate with the “approach of the three esoterica” (*sanmi men* 三密門).⁶⁷ At first glance Amoghavajra’s statements seem to support the idea of a separate esoteric teaching, but since he does not explain what he means by either esoteric teaching or exoteric teaching we are left to conclude that his deployment of these terms follows the standard intellectual interpretation. He recognizes that dhāraṇī and several other related terms for spells and codes are found commonly in Buddhist literature; probably a tacit reference to their deployment in Prajñāpāramitā literature, which was held by many to be an exoteric teaching. “True words” occupy a special place in his “esoteric teaching” but it is not conceptualized as anything more than an advanced Mahāyāna teaching, resonating with the approach of the three esoterica, the same as with the commentary by Śubhakarasiṃha and Yixing mentioned previously.

Although scholars have become accustomed to describing Sinitic Buddhism around the time of the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion (ca. 755-763) as generally dominated by “Tantric” or “Esoteric” Buddhism in the capital and Chan 禪 (Zen) in the outlying areas, we must remember that Buddhist exegetes throughout the Sinitic cultural sphere continued to digest Xuanzang’s translations and retranslations of Yogācāra materials and that the Yogācāra and Huayan 華嚴 intellectual traditions were still influential. In the Yogācāra literature, the concept of “esoteric” was, as before, connected to the understanding of the true nature of reality. For example, the writings of Tullyun 遁倫 (a.k.a. Toryun 道倫, d.u.), a Yogācāra monk in the Korean kingdom of Silla who lived during the eighth century, suggest that “esoteric teaching” continued to refer to the Mahāyāna doctrine that dharmas lack self-nature. In his *Record of the Yogācāra-bhūmi* (*Yuga-ron ki* 瑜伽論記, T 1828) Tullyun says: “The esoteric meaning (*mirūi*, Ch. *miyi* 密義) is explained summarily that all dharmas, each and every one, has no self-nature and is neither produced nor destroyed, etc. [Hence,] they are called scriptures of unintelligible meaning.”⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *Yuga-ron ki* 20B, T 1828, 42.776a.

Later, during the ninth century, Pei Xiu 裴休 (797-870), the famous Buddhist layman and Chan advocate explains the term *xian-mi* 顯密, literally “exoteric-esoteric,” in his “Preface to the *Annotated Commentary to the Book of Perfect Enlightenment*” (*Da fangguang yuanjue xiuduoluo liaoyi jing lueshu zhu shu* 大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經略疏註序, T 1795), which was composed by his friend Zongmi 宗密 (780-841), the well-known Huayan and Heze 荷澤 Chan patriarch.⁶⁹ Pei Xiu, however, defines this concept in a straight-forward Mahāyāna way: “exoterically explained and esoterically preached” (*mi shuo er xian yan* 密說而顯演).⁷⁰

Bob Sharf has demonstrated that it was not until the late tenth century, during the Song 宋 period (960-1279), that Chinese Buddhist exegetes first began to group together particular ritual practices and the monks who promoted those practices — which is somewhat close to present-day academia’s “Esoteric Buddhism.” The earliest evidence is from Zanning’s 贊寧 (919-1001) *Lives of Eminent Monks compiled in the Song* (*Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳, T 2061), which was commissioned in 983 and completed in 988, and further reedited. In a brief editorial comment following the hagiography of the three “Esoteric” masters he classifies them as among those who promulgated the “Wheel of Instruction and Command” (*jiaoling lun* 教令輪), which Sharf identifies as “one of the earliest known expressions used to characterize the teachings and practices of these prelates.” Perhaps more importantly, Zanning also says that they “claim to teach the great doctrine of Yoga” (*yuqie dajiao* 瑜伽大教).⁷¹ Perhaps this explains why Buddhist thaumaturges, usually thought to be “Esoteric Buddhists,” are often referred to as “Yoga monks” (*yuqie seng* 瑜伽僧) in Buddhist literature compiled during the Song and succeeding periods.⁷² The fact that Zanning coins a new classification and does not employ the idea of “esoteric teaching” is circumstantial evidence that

⁶⁹ For more on Zongmi and Pei Xiu see Peter N. Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 27-90.

⁷⁰ *Da fangguang yuanjue xiuduoluo liaoyi jing lueshu zhu shu*, T 1795, 39.523b28-c2.

⁷¹ Sharf, “On Esoteric Buddhism in China,” 269-270; *Song gaoseng zhuan* 1, T 2061, 50.714a15-18.

⁷² See Lü Jianfu, *Zhongguo mijiaoshi*, 432-513. For an example in Korean Buddhist hagiographical literature compiled about 1285 by Iryōn 一然 (1206-1289), see *Sanguk yusa* 2, T 2039, 49.972b.

“esoteric teaching” still simply referred to the advanced teachings of the Mahāyāna.

The earliest conceptualization of “esoteric teaching” in exegetical materials that seems to support the ideas commonly-held by scholars today regarding “Esoteric Buddhism” is found in a work titled *Anthology on the Essentials of the Heart of Attaining Buddhahood and the Perfect Interpenetration of the Exoteric and Esoteric* (*Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji* 顯密圓通成佛心要集, T 1955). This text was also treated briefly by Sharf.⁷³ It was compiled by a Liao 遼 monk named something like Daoe 道殿 (a.k.a. Daozhen/Daochen 道殿, fl. 1085-1096), who lived at Jinhesi 金河寺 on Mt. Wutai 五臺 in Shaanxi 陝西 Province in North China.⁷⁴ Since his name is so uncommon he may have been non-Chinese, but since he resided at this famous pilgrimage site he probably knew Indian and Tibetan Buddhists, and he may have been somewhat familiar with tantras. Nevertheless, Daoe’s work is full of allusions to the writings of Fazang 法藏 (643-712), referred to here as “Xianshou” 賢首 (Worthy Head), and especially to Huayan doctrine. After discussing the “mantra teaching” (*zhenyan jiao* 真言教), explaining it in Huayan terms, Daoe says:

As for the essentials of the heart of the second esoteric teaching (*er mijiao xinyao zhe* 二密教心要者), they are said to be the commentarial documents

⁷³ Sharf, “On Esoteric Buddhism in China,” 273-275.

⁷⁴ For more on Daoe see Lü Jianfu, *Zhongguo mijiaoshi*, 472, 485-489; and Nogami Shunjō 野上俊静, *Ryō Kin no Bukkyō* 遼金の佛教 (Kyoto: Heirakuji Shoten, 1953), 42-45, 70, 108, 165, 166, 169. The Taishō and Japanese secondary sources use the character 殿, but Lü, probably following the *Xinxu gaoseng zhuan* (compiled in 1884) uses another rare character 殿, which suggests his name may be pronounced either Daozhen or Daochen. See Yu Qian 喻謙 (aka Yu Mei’an 喻味庵), *Xinxu gaoseng zhuan siji* 新續高僧傳四集 (Taipei: Liuli jingfang, 1967), 4: 19a-b (modern edition in four volumes; Daoe’s biography is found in 1: 237-238).

⁷⁵ Spiritual transformations (*shenbian* 神變) refer to miraculous powers displayed by the Buddha in teaching and converting sentient beings. It is often interchangeable with “spiritual penetrations” (*shentong* 神通), the six supernormal powers obtained by Buddhist adepts as a by-product of meditation (samādhi). See *Apidamo jushe lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論 27, T 1558, 29.143c-144a; and *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 7, T 262, 9.60a.

⁷⁶ The practices of Samantabhadra (*Puxian xing* 普賢行) commonly refer to all the expedient means cultivated by the bodhisattva in the 52 stages of the Huayan conceptualization of the bodhisattva path. See *Dafanguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經 33, T 278, 9.607a-611a; *Dafanguang fo huayan jing* 49, T 279, 10.257c-262a; cf. Thomas Clearly, trans. *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, one-volume ed. (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), 952-970.

on spiritual transformations⁷⁵ and the commentarial documents on maṇḍala, both of which demarcate the teaching of dhāraṇī, which is [the tradition of] esoteric perfection (*mīyuan* 密圓). The previous perfect tradition of the exoteric teaching (*xianjiao yuanzong* 顯教圓宗, viz. Huayan) necessarily precedes awakening in the dharma-sphere of Vairocana. Thereafter, depending on his awakening [the practitioner] cultivates the whole ocean of practices of Samantabhadra,⁷⁶ is able to abandon [the cycle of] rebirth and death, give evidence to the completion of the ten bodies,⁷⁷ and [acquire] the unhindered fruit of buddhahood.⁷⁸

Although this description of “esoteric teaching” begins to approach what academics conceptualize as “Esoteric Buddhism,” it is in a late work and one not held to be of particular significance in the academy’s imagined “Esoteric” tradition because it is so thoroughly mingled with Huayan doctrine. But what is more interesting is that Daoe separates the practice of *zhenyan* mantras and dhāraṇī into two different types of “esoteric teachings,” the essentials of both he explains using Huayan doctrine. Certainly, monks in the Sinitic cultural sphere did not conceive of “Esoteric Buddhism” the same way that scholars of the present-day do.

Some Concluding Remarks

In medieval Sinitic Buddhist exegesis “esoteric teaching” is not a descriptive term or titular designation of what academics presently call “Esoteric Buddhism.” The polemical concepts of “esoteric” and “exoteric” are hermeneutical devices employed generally to laud the merits of the Mahāyāna over the so-called Hīnayāna. Although there is not complete uniformity in the explanations of “esoteric teaching” and “exoteric teaching” in the writings of the Sinitic Buddhist exegetes from the fifth through the eighth centuries C.E. there is a definite congruity of meaning

⁷⁷ The ten bodies (*shishen* 十身) are 1) the sentient being body (*zhongsheng shen* 衆生身), 2) the [Buddha-]land body (*guotu shen* 國土身), 3) the karma-reward body (*yebao shen* 業報身), 4) the śrāvaka body (*shengwen shen* 聲聞身), 5) the pratyekabuddha body (*bizhifo shen* 辟支佛身, *dijue shen* 獨覺身), 6) the bodhisattva body (*pusa shen* 菩薩身), 7) the tathāgata body (*rulai shen* 如來身), 8) the wisdom body (*zhishen* 智身), 9) the dharma body (*fashen* 法身), and 10) the emptiness body (*xukong shen* 虛空身). See *Dafangguang fo huayan jing* 26, T 278, 9.565b; *Dafanguang fo huayan jing* 38, T 279, 10.200a.

⁷⁸ *Xianmi yuantong chengfo xinyao ji* 顯密圓通成佛心要集 1, T 1955, 46.993c.

to the point that we can state confidently that through the eighth century the object of the interpretation of such terms as “esoteric teaching” or “esoteric dharma” was the advanced Mahāyāna teachings and that “exoteric teaching” or “exoteric dharma” referred to the non-Mahāyāna tradition and usually also to the Perfection of Wisdom literature. The evidence also suggests that despite some scholars attempts to refine the definition of “esoteric teaching” it remained basically synonymous with “advanced Mahāyāna teaching” throughout the medieval period.

An even more significant point is that the so-called “Esoteric” masters did not attempt to redefine the terms “esoteric teaching” and “exoteric teaching.” The esoteric teaching they advocated, conceptualized as the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha, though not readily accepted or understood by contemporary scholars and most individuals, was on all counts harmonious with the general message of the Mahāyāna. This suggests that they used “esoteric teaching” in the same way it was deployed in earlier Mahāyāna literature and Sinitic Buddhist exegesis: that “esoteric” means “the best,” that it refers to advanced Mahāyāna teachings, that it is only intelligible to individuals with the spiritual capacity of bodhisattvas, and that it employs *upāya* (skillful means) as a means of causing the practitioner to obtain “the acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas” — which seems to be the great secret of the Mahāyāna. Thus, the three “Esoteric” masters did not presume to establish a new teaching that was fundamentally different than the advanced Mahāyāna, they merely claimed a privileged place within the expansive Mahāyāna teaching for their ritualized approach to overcoming duality and desire to achieve buddhahood. That this was conceptualized as “esoteric” along with other advanced Mahāyāna teachings is axiomatic and the polemics of the Mahāyāna demanded it. This may be a reason why there is no clear documentary evidence for a separate or distinct “Esoteric School” in the Sinitic cultural sphere during the Tang.

The grid of knowledge deployed by Buddhists in medieval China and Korea always conceptualized the idea of “esoteric teaching” as referring generally to the advanced teachings of the Mahāyāna, particularly to the way the bodhisattva understands the nature of reality. Furthermore, Buddhists in the Sinitic cultural sphere did not begin to develop a tentative classification for “Esoteric Buddhism” (not to mention the classifi-

cation “Tantric Buddhism”) until at least the tenth century and they never deployed a classification comparable to that which developed in either Japan or Tibet. We scholars need to be careful about either applying or projecting models developed from Indian, Tibetan, or Japanese sectarian developments backward onto Buddhist history in China and Korea.

So, in conclusion: Is there really “Esoteric” Buddhism? There are two possible answers: 1) Yes, it is the advanced teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and 2) No, it just means the advanced teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism. Observed from this perspective, “Esoteric Buddhism” may not be any better than “Tantric Buddhism” as a category. In medieval times it never really meant what sectarian scholars impute to it but was instead employed as a polemical device to claim that what it represented — the advanced teachings of the Mahāyāna — was the best or most superior form of Buddhism. All of the Buddhist exegetes who used the term imputed an esoteric quality to the teachings they held to be superior in their analyses. While classifications are indispensable tools to facilitate understanding, they may often cause us to overlook the complex relationship between dynamism and continuity that is a defining characteristic of medieval Sinitic Buddhism.