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"Later Mādhyamika" in China: Some Current Perspectives on the History of Chinese *Prajñāpāramitā* Thought

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To aid in understanding the contributions of recent Japanese scholarship on San-lun Buddhism, this short paper will review Hirai Shun'ei's study on Chi-tsang (549–623), *Chūgoku hannya shisō-shi kenkyū* (A Study on the History and Thought of Chinese *Prajñāpāramitā*, Tokyo: Shunjū-sha, 1976). As a work meant for the specialist, Hirai's study deals with conceptual problems, philological and historical issues, and is highly involved in academic debates concerned with one development of Chinese Buddhism between the North-South period (ca. 400–581) and the Sui and early T'ang dynasties (ca. 589–700 A.D.). Various aspects of this development are studied by Hirai, and the present introduction does not seek to recapitulate all the finer details of his large study. Instead, the focus will be on the religious dynamics and problematic that surrounded and defined the direction of the Sinitic understanding of prajñā and the emptiness doctrine.

Hirai's research is significant because it presents an opportunity to address again the relationship between the Indian Mādhyamika and the Sino-Japanese San-lun (Sanron) traditions. It is especially timely to rethink this question because Hirai's study is based on the premise that San-lun Buddhism should no longer be identified simply as a "version of Indian Mādhaymika" or even as "Sinitic Mādhyamika."[1] As suggested by the title of his work, Hirai's basic argument is that it is both misleading and improper to associate the two traditions, for San-lun and Mādhyamika are entirely different in the problems associated with conceptualization, the foci of investigation

(what determined what was studied), and above all, theoretical development. The underlying problem thus posed by Hirai's study concerns one's stance toward the historical nature of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought itself, for by *hannya* Hirai does not mean the translation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* canon into Chinese.[2] Rather, a central issue in his study is the Indian versus the Chinese input in the development of a genuinely Sinitic response to the *Prajñāpāramitā* Dharma, which came to be known in East Asia as San-lun.

This issue may be illustrated by the positions taken by W. T. Chan and Richard Robinson. Both are concerned with the question of Chi-tsang's orthodoxy—how much of his understanding was Indian and how much of it was Chinese? Such questions have often been posed and just as often summarily answered. For example, the thesis that Indian and Chinese elements retain their intrinsic individuality is presented by Chan:

> Ironically, Chi-tsang's success was at the same time the failure of his school, for it became less and less Chinese. As mentioned before, Seng-chao was still a bridge between Taoism and Buddhism. He combined the typical Chinese concept of the identity of substance and function, for example, with the Buddhist concepts of temporary names and emptiness. In Chi-tsang, substance and function are sharply contrasted instead. In that, he was completely Indian in viewpoint, although he quoted Taoists. As a systematizer and transmitter of Indian philosophy, he brought about no cross-fertilization between Buddhist and Chinese thought.[3]

The above notion of acculturation (Sinicization) tends to place too much emphasis on heterogeneous factors, is uncritical about the process of change, and implies that "Sinicized" Buddhism is a deviation from some "Indian norm." It is also often impressionistic, and is challenged by several facts presented in Hirai's study. For example, in Hirai's analysis of the unfolding of San-lun doctrine (Part II, Chapters 2, 3, 4), it is fascinating to observe the process by which Chi-tsang developed his system. He did not consider that he was establishing a new form of Buddhism for the sake of making Indian Buddhism indig-

enous, more palatable, or popular in China. Indeed, there is no mention in Chi-tsang's writings of the problems involved in bringing a religious tradition from one cultural setting to another, no suggestion of the obstacles of language, custom, and conceptual patterns which had to be resolved if Indian Buddhism was to be realized in the Chinese experience. The assertion that Chi-tsang's system, following Seng-chao, was a regression to the Indian viewpoint ignores the question of how his system, with its peculiar concerns and problematics, emerged. It also creates the impression that the significance of Chinese monks like Chi-tsang is to be found in their development of a "cross-cultural" perspective. It is unlikely that Chi-tsang, who simply claimed to transmit the *Buddhadharma,* and who described his thought as a continuation of the earliest Chinese tradition of prajñā study,[4] would himself have claimed to be a bridge between Buddhist and Chinese thought.

Those favoring the "Indian input," quite naturally, point out that Chi-tsang's theories had their textual base in the Indian śāstras, and that these texts themselves had roots deep in the Indian tradition. Robinson, for example, writes: "The Three Treatises tradition is quite simply a restatement of Nāgārjuna's teaching in a new vocabulary, with a few additional theses on matters such as the Two Truths where Nāgārjuna was too brief and vague."[5] This emphasis on scriptural fidelity also tends to treat Chi-tsang's thought in isolation, that is, apart from the greater *Chinese* Buddhist tradition. In a sense, to conclude that San-lun is a "restatement" is perfectly all right, given Robinson's belief that, "It cannot be assumed that the structure of language corresponds to the structure of thought, or that all thoughts can be represented by symbols, or that language is the only kind of symbolic system."[6] At the same time, however, such approaches have a major methodological drawback—they tend to give the impression of the mere continuity of ideas, that the significance of Chi-tsang's thought lies in his transmission of some acculturated form of Mādhaymika. This purist view of San-lun also makes the very questionable assumption that religious ideas and ideals are cut off from historical and social realities, that San-lun, as "later Chinese Mādhaymika," somehow transcends history. If *a priori* paradigms may not seem rich enough to encompass the reality of later Sui and

T'ang Buddhist traditions, it is not because they lack some structuring principle. Robinson's model of assimilation[7] is axiomatic, and, as he states, the crucial point is to differentiate between piecemeal accommodation, creative synthesis, and a stage when a system of thought has been critically assessed and transcended. "Restatement," however, is an overstatement, and is again challenged by several problems dealt with in Hirai's study. At least two major areas may be isolated as illuminating: 1. the historical background and religious dynamics involved in the San-lun development of the two truths theory; and 2. the influence of the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* and its doctrine of universal enlightenment, Buddha-nature (*buddhadhātu*).

To determine the sources for and motives behind the San-lun tradition, Hirai examines in detail the relationship between Chi-tsang's thought and the writings of the earliest Chinese tradition of *Prajñāpāramitā* scholarship, centered in Ch'ang-an during the Eastern Ch'in period (ca. 400–420). Heretofore, most studies have assumed that, as a "systematizer" of San-lun doctrine, Chi-tsang represents: 1. the so-called "Neo-San-lun" school which emerged during the latter part of the North-South period; or 2. an unbroken line of thought which began with Kumārajīva and Seng-chao. Hirai's study advocates the second point of view with the following qualifications:

First, neither Chi-tsang nor his forerunners even used the term "San-lun" to refer to their scholastic tradition. Instead, Chi-tsang spoke of his tradition as the "She-ling transmission." The term refers to Seng-lang, the first patriarch of this tradition, who settled on Mt. She near the southern capital of Chin-ling (Nanking) and bean teaching the *Prajñāparamitā* doctrine sometime during the Sung period (ca. 476 A.D.). In contrast, the earlier tradition, of Kumārajīva and his disciples, was referred to as the "Kuan-chung" (or "Kuan-ho") tradition. The term "San-lun" is therefore anachronistic, a result of later Japanese sectarian needs (pp. 25–57). While most earlier studies have tended to view this genealogy in less-than-historical terms, a legacy of ideas rather than actual historical personalities, Hirai's position is that the "Kuan-chung"—"She-ling" connection is historical as well as a history of ideas. In this respect, Hirai's study attempts to clarify a number of untested historical assumptions by correctly identifying the individuals listed, for

example, in Robinson's "Epilogue" (*Early Mādhyamika*, Chapter VIII, "The Lineage of the Old Three Treatise Sect," pp. 162–73), and by assessing the role each played in the historical development of the "She-ling" tradition.[8]

Second, Hirai also notes that, while Chi-tsang had at his disposal the insights and intuitions of the men who were first exposed to a new system of Buddhist thought, there was an intervening period of more than a century between Seng-chao and Chi-tsang. During this time, and in particular, during the Liang dynasty (502–577), *Prajñāpāramitā* studies in China were overshadowed by the study of the *Ch'eng-shih lun* (*Satyasiddhi*?), a text attributed to Harivarman and translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva during his later years. The scholastic tradition based on this text reached its peak during the Liang period, and while advocates of this tradition had long passed from the Buddhist horizon by Chi-tsang's time, many of their ideas and concepts continued into the Sui period. From Chi-tsang's essays and commentaries (some thirty-four works are currently extant), it is clear that he was quite anxious to refute what he regarded as the erroneous views of this tradition. After the translation of the *Ch'eng-shih lun* in the Eastern Ch'in, the text was regarded as Mahāyāna in content and often thought of as a variation of the *Middle Treatise* because its ideas on the emptiness of dharmas so closely approximated the Mahāyāna notion of emptiness. In Chi-tsang's writings, however, the Ch'eng-shih theories are criticized as Hīnayāna in theory and practice, and while a number of issues were debated, a crucial issue which divided the two traditions was the interpretation of the two truths and the middle path doctrine. Although almost all of the Ch'eng-shih writings are not extant, it appears that a sizeable amount of pen and ink was spent on conceptualizing the two truths, a result of confusing ontological distinctions with epistemological ones. This misalignment of the two modes of discourse led to an understanding of the two truths as two realities, two objective principles, and was an assessment of the middle path doctrine uncalled for in the original Indian śāstras. According to Hirai, Chi-tsang's significance lies not only in his renewal of interest in the *Three Treatises* and the *Prajñāpāramitā* canon, but also in his instigation of the historical debate between the two traditions, which stimulated innovative specula-

tions, new vocabulary, and models to express the two truths that had no precedent in Indian Mādhyamika thought.[9] The debate is also significant because it provides one with an historical and theoretical context in which to understand the dynamics behind the distinctive San-lun interpretation of the two truths. Although the inspiration was Indian in origin, the selective emphasis was Chinese and should be seen as a purely internal, that is, Sinitic issue.[10]

In assessing this issue, Hirai's study corrects, for example, the notion that *t'i* and *yung* (essence and function) are sharply contrasted in Chi-tsang's thought. It is doubtful that this specific concept as it applies to Chi-tsang was popular at Seng-chao's time. While it is clear that a basic Chinese paradigm of "origin and end" (*pen-mo*) and its variants (e.g., "root and trace," *pen-chi*) became the Buddhist framework for the analysis of doctrine from the North-South period on, Hirai's study and the research by Shimada Kenji,[11] for example, suggest that *t'i* and *yung* do not appear together in any of Seng-chao's essays. In examining the Buddhist development of this concept, Shimada established two conditions: first, the two terms are always used together, and second, they are used in the sense of interdependency (*pratītyasamutpāda*). On this basis, Shimada has concluded that the terms may have come into vogue during the latter part of the North-South period, and Hirai and Shimada agree that this concept is found primarily in the Buddhist writings of the Liang Ch'eng-shih tradition. This is not to suggest that terms and concepts corresponding to the paradigm of *t'i-yung* were not used during the earlier period, for throughout Seng-chao's essays there is a vocabulary which consistently fits the pattern. However, although the proximity of *t'i-yung* to the basic paradigm of *pen-mo* is true enough, the linkage of the terms as they apply to the two truths and the middle path doctrine was not made in the Chinese *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition until Chi-tsang. In this respect, Hirai sees Chi-tsang as the successor of Seng-chao's thought, and as strongly influenced by modes of expression developed during the Liang period. Since there is no known precedent in Indian thought for the *t'i-yung* concept, the input in this instance is clearly Chinese and not simply a borrowed Indian viewpoint. Even if Chi-tsang con-

sciously held to this viewpoint, how could he claim to transmit Buddhism if he altered fundamental Buddhist doctrine, especially if the *t'i-yung* model was understood in the Taoist sense of a "primordial source"? For Chi-tsang, *t'i* is not the source of the phenomenal many (*yung*), and there is no "root" antecedent external to the "traces" as they presently exist. His attempt to discuss the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* by using Chinese terminology is clearly a synthesis of Buddhist and Chinese thought. It is more than just a matter of using Chinese terms, though, for as Hirai's analysis shows (pp. 130–144; 405–448), Chi-tsang's whole approach to Buddhist concepts can be reduced to essence and function terms.

Third, although Chi-tsang's explanation of the two truths does not, in substance, differ radically from that of the Indian śāstras, what came to dominate Chinese intellectual thought during the fifth and sixth centuries was not Nāgārjuna and the *Middle Treatise*, but the Mahāyānist *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*. The impact of this sūtra on Chinese thought and the subsequent rise of the so-called "Nieh-p'an" (*Nirvāṇa*) schools have been well documented,[12] but what has been overlooked in previous Western and Japanese sumaries is the specific influence of the sūtra's Buddha-nature doctrine on Chi-tsang's thought. Although Chi-tsang is simply remembered as one of the most eminent San-lun scholars in Chinese Buddhism, Hirai's survey of his writings shows that he wrote extensively on various Mahāyāna issues like *ekayāna*, tathāgatagarbha, and Buddha-nature. Among Chi-tsang's writings, some fifteen works are devoted exclusively to the exegesis of texts like the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Śrīmāladevī-sūtra*, and the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*, to name but a few. The San-lun attraction to the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* in particular was not due to the influence of the then emerging *p'an-chiao* (doctrinal classification) system, which saw this text and the *Lotus Sūtra* as the final ("complete") teaching of the Buddha. Instead, interest in the text goes back to the time when the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* was closely aligned with the Liang Ch'eng-shih tradition, which presented problematic interpretations of the two truths, the middle path and Buddha-nature. Beyond these polemical considerations, Hirai suggests that Chi-tsang's study of the sūtra began almost simultaneously with his study of the Indian treatises and argues

that the Buddha-nature doctrine significantly influenced the manner in which the two truths, prajña, and emptiness were interpreted.

The most noteworthy influence was the adoption of the distinction between the empty (*śūnya*) and not-empty (*aśūnya*) aspects of the Buddha-nature (or tathāgatagarbha) found in such texts as the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* and *Śrīmāladevī-sūtra*. What is significant in this analysis is the peculiar use of the term emptiness. Although in the *Prajñapāramitā* canon and the Mādhyamika treatises all dharmas whatsoever are said to be empty of own-being, texts like the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* make a point of emphasizing that the Buddha-dharmas are not-empty. In traditional San-lun sources, not-empty is used solely as a synonym for *svabhāva*, the antithesis of *pratītyasamutpāda*. In Chi-tsang's writings, however, *aśūnya* means, in its particular and concrete sense, prajñā as it is applied to the empirical order, and the differences between the Buddha-nature and the traditional San-lun perspectives on prajñā is in many ways characteristic of the different emphasis between Mādhyamika and texts like the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* which affirm the phenomenal reality of Buddha-nature. This understanding of prajñā, *aśūnya*, as Buddha-nature represents an innovation in doctrine having no corresponding Mādhyamika antecedent, and this change reflects a Sinitic response to the *Prajñāpāramitā* Dharma which contributed to the view of the reality of the phenomenal order. Chi-tsang, as both Hirai and Kamata Shigeo have noted, would also take this discussion of prajñā to a new degree of explicitness by arguing that even the non-sentient world of "wood and stone" also had the potentiality for enlightenment.[13]

If it is correct to argue that San-lun Buddhism is not simply a Chinese version of Mādhyamika, then it is necessary to rethink the nature and limits of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought in its East Asian context. By describing the historical background of San-lun thought and by pointing out that a substantial portion of its doctrine is heavily indebted to the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* and other *ekayāna* texts, Hirai's study provides a more contextually sympathetic evaluation of certain larger trends in the unfolding of San-lun. Its many-sided investigation facilitates some tenative judgments about the nature of Buddhism during a heretofore neglected period of Chinese intellectual thought and leads one

to conclude that one must continue to focus on the Sinitic response to all the changes noted above.

NOTES

1. Cf., for example, Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 84; Francis H. Cook, "Chinese Academic Schools and Doctrinal Innovations," in *Buddhism: A Modern Perspective*, ed. Charles S. Prebish (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), p. 202; and W. T. Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1963), p. 357.

2. Cf. Edward Conze, *Prajñāpāramitā Literature* ('Sgravenhage: Mouton, 1960; reprint ed., Tokyo: Reiyūkai, 1977), pp. 19–23, regarding one perspective.

3. Chan, *Source Book*, p. 358. Chan's perspective on Chinese thought is, needless to say, much more complex than herein cited. The paragraph should only serve to facilitate our understanding of San-lun methodology.

4. Referred to as the "old theories of Kuan-ho" in Chi-tsang's writings and meaning Kumārajīva, Seng-chao, Seng-jui, etc. See Hirai, *Chūgoku hannya*, pp. 55–72, for a discussion of this earlier tradition and suggestions that the term "San-lun" is itself somewhat anachronistic and too purist.

5. *The Buddhist Religion* (Belmont, Calif.: Dickenson, 1970), p. 84. See, also, note 3.

6. *Early Mādhyamika in India and China* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1967), p. 15.

7. Ibid., pp. 13–14.

8. One aspect of this development has been closely studied by Whalen Lai in his articles, "Further Developments of the Two Truths Theory in China: The *Ch'eng-shih lun* Tradition and Chou Yung's *San-tsung-lun*," *Philosophy East and West* 30, no. 2 (April 1980), pp. 139–161, and "Chou Yung vs. Chang Jung (on *Sūnyatā*): The *Pen-mo Yu-wu* Controversy in Fifth Century China," *Journal of the International Association for Buddhist Studies* 1, no. 2 (1979), pp. 23–44. Although in many instances Lai's research parallels that of Hirai's study, Lai sees less of a connection between Seng-chao and Chi-tsang in the spread of the *Three Treatises* to the south. Based on the fact that the Japanese Sanron tradition excludes Seng-chao from the orthodox "She-ling" line, Lai has argued persuasively that the heretofore unexplored writings of a lay Buddhist scholar, Chou Yung, will help us to contextualize Chi-tsang's writings. Cf. also Leon Hurvitz's account of early Chinese speculations on the meaning of the two truths and emptiness, "The First Systematization of Buddhist Thought in China," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 2, no. 4 (1975), pp. 361–388. Though rich in detail, it should be noted that the study somewhat anachronistically explains Chinese developments by deferring to Indian systems and excludes from consideration the Ch'eng-shih tradition, the historical/doctrinal context for both Chou Yung and Chi-tsang.

9. Some examples include the use of serial negation ("three or four levels of two truths"), the use of Chinese modes of expression like "*ti* and *yung*," "horizontal and vertical," and the use of rhetorical categories (e.g., "four methods of interpretation").

10. Western scholars have also begun to investigate the development of the two truths theory from the Ch'eng-shih point of view, and in particular, the writings of Whalen Lai have been illuminating. Lai's major contribution is his attempt to give the Ch'eng-shih theories a fair hearing, since what we now know of this tradition has, for the most part, been preserved almost entirely in Chi-tsang's writings. Lai's basic argument is that Chi-tsang, in various ways, may have consciously manipulated the Ch'eng-shih theories as a foil to present his own doctrine. This aspect of Chi-tsang's thought is not clearly articulated in Hirai's study, and one reason is that Hirai sees Chi-tsang's writings on the two truths concerned with the experimental quality of prajñā and not simply with the manipulation of ideas embedded in what has heretofore been seen as a philologically obscure polemical tract.

11. "Taiyū no shisō no rekishi ni yosete," *Bukkyō shigaku ronshū* [Tsukamoto Commemorative Volume] (Kyoto, 1961), pp. 416–430.

12. The most detailed and comprehensive study to date is by Fuse Kōgaku, *Nehanshū no kenkyū*, 2 vols. (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1976). Given Fuse's methodology and his reporting on San-lun, a more "radical" characterization of "San-lun" might place it under the rubric of a Sui "Nieh-p'an" tradition, excluding *Prajñāpāramitā* altogether.

13. *Chūgoku Kegon shisō-shi no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1965), pp. 434–443.