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THE MYSTERIES OF BODY, SPEECH, AND MIND:
THE THREE ESOTERICA (*SANMI*) IN MEDIEVAL SINITIC BUDDHISM

RICHARD D. MCBRIDE, II

When observed through a Japanese Shingon lens the “three esoterica” or “three mysteries” (Ch. *sanmi*, Jpn. *sanmitsu* 三密, Skt. **tri-guhya*) is generally considered a seminal component of the radical, ritual-oriented approach of “Tantric” or “Esoteric” Buddhism¹ by which a practitioner attains buddhahood in this very body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛). The three esoterica, as a ritualized replication of the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha, is seen as a key practice described in the *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing* 大毘盧遮那成佛經 (*Sūtra on Vairocana’s attaining buddhahood*, T 848), which Kūkai 空海 (774–835) mastered during his visit to China.² Because of its centrality in “esoteric” ritual, the meaning of the three esoterica was a source of debate in the medieval Tendai Esoteric tradition

An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the panel “Tantric Buddhism through the Chinese Looking Glass,” at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, D.C., November 21, 2006. The author of this article would like to thank George A. Keyworth, III, Charles D. Orzech, and the peer reviewer, whose comments and suggestions greatly improved the quality of this essay.

¹ Although the category Tantra/Tantric is a modern scholarly invention, I still prefer it to Esoteric Buddhism, which is just as problematic. On problems with the term Tantra see Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2003) 271–281; see also McBride, “Is there really ‘Esoteric’ Buddhism?” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 27/2 (2004) 329–356.

² See Ryūichi Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra* (New York: Columbia University Press 1999) 129–132. Abé also notes that Kūkai wrote three short essays on the body, speech, and mind – *Sokushin jōbutsugi* 即身成佛義 (Attaining buddhahood in this very body, or Transforming one’s body into the realm of enlightenment) T 2428, 77; *Shōji jissōgi* 聲字實相義 (Voice, Letter, Reality) T 2429, 77; and *Unjigi* 吽字義 (On the Sanskrit Letter Hūṃ) T 2430, 77 – which represent the “core of Kūkai’s philosophy.” See Ryūichi Abé, “Buddhahood in this Lifetime,” in *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (London: Penguin 2004) 497.

(Taimitsu 台密): Rival interpretations deriving from Tiantai Zhiyi's 天台智顛 (538–597) commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra* and the views of Tendai thinkers influenced by Shingon 眞言 (Tōmitsu 東密) texts vied for supremacy.³ If so important in Japan, what of this concept when viewed through a Chinese looking glass? This paper will address three questions – how did medieval Chinese Buddhist intellectuals understand the term, how did early Tantric practitioners understand it, and did its meaning change?

In this paper I address these interrelated questions by analyzing several of the most instructive instances of the use of the term “three esoterica” and related terms by Buddhist scholiasts in medieval Sinitic Buddhism.⁴ After first discussing the origins of the term in Chinese Buddhist literature during the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (Nanbeichao, ca. 317–589), I will analyze the term as it was used by eminent translators and scholars of the Sui-Tang transitional period (ca. 589–712), the High Tang period (ca. 712–756), and the mid and late Tang period (ca. 756–907). The concept of the three esoterica has not been examined in detail by Western scholars of either mainstream Chinese Buddhism or Chinese Tantric/Esoteric Buddhism.⁵ In earlier research I have sought to place the

³ See, for instance, Kubota Tetsumasa 窪田哲正, “Nihon Tendai no okeru yusō sanmitsu hōben setsu” 日本天台における有相三密方便説 (On arguments about the meaning of *sanmitsu* [Three Mysteries] in the Japanese Tendai Sect), *Nihon Bukkyō gakkai nenpo* 日本仏教学会年報 57 (1992) 145–162; Ōkubo Ryōshun 大久保良峻, “Taimitsu no sanmitsu ron” 台密の三密論 (The Three Secrets Theory of Taimitsu), *Tendai gakuho* 天台学報 34 (1992) 109–113; Ōtsuka Nobuo 大塚伸夫, “Sanmitsu shisō ni tsuite” 三密思想について (On the concept of the *tri-guhyā*), *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 34/1 (1995) 174–176.

⁴ What I call China's medieval period refers to the years between 317 and 907 C.E.

⁵ Tajima Ryūjun treats the three mysteries from a Japanese Shingon perspective but not the earlier exegetical tradition in his *Étude sur le Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (*Dainichikyō*) (Paris: Adrien Maisonneuve 1936) 44–54, 91–98; see also Tajima, “A Study of the Mahāvairocana-sūtra,” in *The Enlightenment of Vairocana*, trans. and ed. Alex Wayman (Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass 1992; rpt. 1998) 245–247, 293–298. Much more detailed assessments are available, of course, in Japanese. A detailed treatment may be found in Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信亨, ed., *Bukkyō dai jiten* 佛教大辭典 (Encyclopedia of Buddhism), rev. ed. 10 vols. (Kyoto: Seikai Seiten Kankō Kyōkai 1954–1963) 2:1682c–1684b, s.v. “sanmitsu” and “sanmitsu kaji.” Nakamura Hajime 中村元 only treats the *mikkyō* interpretation in his *Bukkyōgo dai jiten* 佛教語大辭典 (Dictionary of Buddhist technical

rhetoric and practices of the nascent Tantric tradition within the context of mainstream Sinitic exegetical Buddhism.⁶ This, I believe, is a fruitful approach to understand what is shared and what is new and provides important insight into the dynamic nature of medieval Sinitic Buddhism. By understanding the exegetical and rhetorical usage of the term over time we can better understand how the Tantras were seen as a continuation of the Mahāyāna and we can discern those points that appeared novel, because the term always described a complex intellectual understanding of the nature of buddhahood.

Before I launch into my study of the three esoterica I should explain why I choose to translate *sanmi* as “three esoterica,” rather than the more common “three mysteries.” The use of “three mysteries” derives ultimately from the French *trois mystères* used early on by Tajima Ryūjun and, in places, by Étienne Lamotte.⁷ Lamotte, nevertheless, did not always find that translation suitable because he also uses *trois secrets*. Perhaps following Lamotte, Yamasaki Taikō and Kenneth R. White translate the concept more or less consistently as “three secrets.”⁸ Although Hakeda Yoshito uses “three mysteries,” by contrast, Kiyota Minoru prefers the more Sanskritic reconstruc-

terms) (3 vols., Tokyo: Tōkyō Shoseki 1975; 1 vol. rpt. Tokyo: Tōkyō Shoseki 1999) 490b–c, s.v. “sanmitsu.” Lü Jianfu 吕建福 has examined the “three esoterica” in early Tantric literature (viz. T 848). See his *Zhongguo Mijiaoshi* 中国密教史 (History of Esoteric Buddhism in China) (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe 1995) passim, esp. 97–99, 242–244.

⁶ McBride, “Is there really ‘Esoteric’ Buddhism?” (cf. n. 1 above); and McBride, “Dhāraṇī and Spells in Medieval Sinitic Buddhism,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 28/1 (2005) 85–114.

⁷ See Tajima Ryūjun, *Étude sur le Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (cf. n. 5 above) 93–94, *passim*, and Étienne Lamotte, trans., *Le traité de la grande vertu de sagesse de Nāgārjuna (Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra)*, 5 vols. (Louvain: Institut orientaliste, Université de Louvain 1944–1981) 1:19–20.

⁸ Lamotte, trans., *Le traité* (cf. n. 7 above) 1:560; Yamasaki Taikō, *Shingon: Japanese Esoteric Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala 1988) 30–32, 106–122. Kenneth R. White, in his *The Role of Bodhicitta in Buddhist Enlightenment Including a Translation into English of Bodhicitta-sāstra, Benkimitsu-nikyōron, and Sammaya-kaijo* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press 2005), typically employs the translation “three secrets,” although he also calls them “three mysteries” in a few places (pp. 199, 441). White also translates *adhiṣṭhāna* (*kaji* 加持) as “three secrets practice,” which I find problematic.

tion *tri-guhya* or his translation “three secret acts.”⁹ More recently, with the rise of Daoist and Chan/Zen studies, scholars have also become accustomed to translating the word *xuan* 玄 as “mystery,” as in *chongxuan* 重玄 (twofold mystery) and *sanxuan* 三玄 (three mysteries).¹⁰ Both *sanmi* and *sanxuan* should not be the “three mysteries” because *mi* (secret, intimate, confidential) and *xuan* (dark, arcane, profound, subtle), though similar in some respects, ultimately invoke different meanings and I think that *xuan* is more appropriately “mysterious.” My more technical translation of “three esoterica” allows for a wide range of meaning to be added to the term. Furthermore, it also permits a linguistic link to the related polemical terms *mi* 密 (esoteric) and *xian* 現/顯 (exoteric), which figure in any discussion of scholastic and Tantric Buddhism in East Asia.

I will not treat the views of the Japanese monk Kūkai in this study. Kūkai’s views on the three esoterica are varied, complex, and deserving of their own study, but they do not jibe with my present purpose.¹¹ My reasons for this are twofold. First, I do not find the position compelling that Kūkai preserves unaltered the views of his Chinese master Huiguo 惠果 (746–805), with whom he studied a mere six months. Second, Kūkai did not participate in the continental

⁹ Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press 1972) 87–93, 97, 152, 225–235, 251; Kiyota Minoru, *Shingon Buddhism: Theory and Practice* (Los Angeles and Tokyo: Buddhist Books International 1978) 175–176; and Kiyota, *Tantric Concept of Bodhicitta: A Buddhist Experimental Philosophy (An Exposition based upon the Mahāvairocana-sūtra, Bodhicitta-śāstra, and Sokushin-jōbutsu)* (Madison: South Asian Area Center, University of Wisconsin–Madison 1982) 153.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Robert H. Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press 2002) 47–71.

¹¹ See, for instance, *Kongō hannya haramitsukyō kaidai* 金剛般若波羅蜜經開題, T 2201, 57.1c, 2c; *Nihonkyō kaidai* 日本經開題, T 2211, 58.4c; *Kongōjō kaidai* 金剛頂開題, T 2221, 61.4b–c; *Rishukyō kaidai* 理趣經開題, T 2236, 61.612a; *Himitsu mandara jūjūshinron* 祕密曼陀羅十住心論 1, T 2425, 77.303a, roll 10, T 2425, 77.361b; *Sokushin jōbutsugi* (six editions) T 2428, 77.381c, 383a, 385a, 386a, 387b–c, 389c, 393c, 391b, 395b, 400a–b (Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* [cf. n. 9 above] 225–234); *Shōji jissōgi* 聲字實相義, T 2429, 77.401c (Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works*, 239); and *Unjigi* 吽字義, T 2430, 77.405b (Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works*, 257); *Heianjō taijō tennō kanjōmon* 平安城太上天皇灌頂文, T 2461, 78.1a, 2a, 2c; and *Benkenmitsu nikyō ron* 辨顯密二教論, T 2427, 77.375a (Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works*, 152).

discourse on intellectual Buddhism after his return to Japan. As Abé Ryūichi has shown, he created a new Buddhist discourse. No one on the continent was familiar with his work and they probably would have been surprised at some of his conclusions because they reflect Kūkai's (successful) attempt to change the views of the proponents of Nara's 奈良 exegetical schools (Nanto Bukkyō 南都仏教). Furthermore, because later Shingon proponents placed many doctrinal arguments and positions in Kūkai's mouth I am sufficiently skeptical of including him here.¹²

The origins of the concept of “three esoterica”

The first scripture to mention the three esoterica individually is the *Miji jin'gang jing* 密迹金剛經 (*The Sūtra on the Vajrasattva Esoteric Traces*),¹³ which was translated by Dharmarakṣa (Fahu 法護, ca.

¹² See Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra* (cf. n. 2 above) 152–154; Ōmura Seigai 大村西崖, *Mikkyō hattatsushi* 密教発達志 (History of the development of Esoteric Buddhism) (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai 1918; rpt. Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha 1972) 373–375 and passim; Yamaori Tetsuo 山折哲雄, “Sannin no nittōsō to komikkyō” 三人の入唐僧と古密教 (Three monks who went to Tang China and old Esoteric Buddhism) in *Chingo kokka to jujutsu: Nihon Bukkyō no hajimari* 鎮護国家と呪術: 日本仏教の始まり (State protection and spell craft: The origins of Japanese Buddhism), ed. Uehara Shōichi 上原昭一 and Yamaori Tetsuo (Tokyo: Shūeisha 1989) 143–146. Misaki Ryōshū 三崎良周, *Taimitsu no kenkyū* 台密の研究 (Research on Tendai Esoteric Buddhism) (Tokyo: Sōbunsha 1988) 146–150, gives an overview of these problems in a short discussion of the problems regarding the late terms *junmitsu* 純密 (pure esotericism) and *zōmitsu* 雜密 (mixed esotericism).

¹³ Although cited by Kumārajīva, could the *Miji jin'gang jing* really date from the time of the later Bodhiruci (d. 727)? The evidence suggests that such a *sūtra* did exist because it was known to Kumārajīva, Lushan Huiyuan 廬山慧遠 (334–417), and Sengzhao 僧肇 (374–414). The earliest references to the scripture are from the early fifth century. Kumārajīva quotes from or alludes to the *sūtra* four times; see *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論 1, T 1509, 25.59a, roll 26, T 1509, 25.248b; roll 57, T 1509, 25.466b; and roll 88, T 1509, 25.684a–b. Huiyuan and Kumārajīva discussed it in their correspondence; see *Jiumoluoshi fa dayi* 鳩摩羅什法師大義 1, T 1856, 45.125c; roll 2, T 1856, 45.130b. Sengzhao refers to it twice in his *Commentary on the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra*; see *Zhu Weimoji jing* 注維摩詰經 5, T 1775, 38.371a7–10; and roll 9, T 1775, 38.404b. The scripture was also known to and used by scholars of the sixth century. Sengyou 僧祐 (445–518) was familiar with a *Miji jing*, in five rolls, also known as *Miji jin'gang jing*, in either five or seven rolls. He gives the date on which the translation was completed as the eighth day of the tenth month of the ninth year of the Taikang 太康 reign period (October 18, 288), and he included it in

265–316)¹⁴ and later collected in the *Dabaoji jing* 大寶積經 (*Mahā-ratnakūṭa*, T 310) by Bodhiruci (Putiliuzhi 菩提流支, fl. 693–727):¹⁵

At that time [the Bodhisattva] Quiescent Thoughts (Jiyi 寂意) again questioned the Vajrasattva Esoteric Traces (Miji jingang lishi 密迹金剛力士): “The Tathāgata possesses a few things that are secret and important. They are those things that all *śrāvakas* and all *pratyekabuddhas* are unable to access. How much more so for the ilk of the common masses and the benighted [*icchantika*]! Well done!”

Esoteric Traces desired to think of a blissful abode [*sukhavihāra*]. He promulgated the Tathāgata’s secret and important [things] everywhere.

All the living beings assembled together and desired to hear them. The Vajrasattva Esoteric Traces addressed Quiescent Thoughts saying, “Listen up! Listen up! Ponder this well. I will now discourse on the Tathāgata’s secret and important [things]. There are three things (*sanshi* 三事). What do we call these three? The first is called body-esoterica (*shenmi* 身密), the second is called speech-esoterica (*yumi* 語密), and the third is called mind-esoterica (*yimi* 意密).¹⁶

This scripture goes on to provide many details on the Buddha’s body-esoterica. In particular, it repeatedly refers to the Buddha’s ability to manifest his physical majesty everywhere. In essence the scripture introduces these three types of esoterica to rationalize many of the more unbelievable aspects of the Buddha Śākyamuni’s ministry and supernormal powers as described in the fully developed leg-

his catalog *Chu sanzang jiji* 出三藏記集 2, T 2145, 55.7b18. Bodhiruci (Putiliuzhi 菩提流志, ca. 508–535) alluded to portions not discussed by previous scholars in his translation of the *Mile pusa suwen jing lun* 彌勒菩薩所問經論 3, T 1525, 26.245a23–25. The *sūtra* was also used by Jizang 吉藏 (549–623) in his *Weimo jing yishu* 維摩經義疏 6, T 1781, 38.983b; and Guanding 灌頂 (531–632) in his *Daban niepan jing shu* 大般涅槃經疏 19, T 1767, 38.147c. Hence, the evidence strongly suggests that a *Miji jing* did exist prior to the later Bodhiruci’s inclusion of it in the *Dabaoji jing*.

¹⁴ For the biography of Dharmarakṣa see *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 1, T 2059, 50.326c2–327a12; see also Eric Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1972) 1:65–70.

¹⁵ For the biography of Bodhiruci see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 宋高僧傳 3, T 2061, 50.720b4–c12.

¹⁶ *Miji jingang lishi hui* 密迹金剛力士會 (The convocation of the Vajrasattva Esoteric Traces), in *Dabaoji jing* 大寶積經 10, T 310, 11.53b9–15; see also Stanley Weinstein, *Buddhism under the T’ang* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1987) 44, 49.

end of the Buddha's life. The scripture does not develop the meaning of these three types of esoterica in any systematic manner, however. The Vajrasattva Esoteric Traces' intent, it seems, is to cause the members of the crowd to accept these logical inconsistencies as aspects of the wondrous power of the Buddha. This scripture is a suitable beginning in that Dharmarakṣa does not use the term "three esoterica" (*sanmi*). Instead he calls them "three things."

As with many seminal terms and topics of interest among Mahāyāna Buddhists in the Sinitic cultural sphere, the locus classicus of the term is, in fact, found in the first roll of Kumārajīva's (Jiunoluoshi 鳩摩羅什, 343–413) *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論 (Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom, T 1509), attributed to Nāgārjuna (Longshu 龍樹, ca. 50–150 C.E.):¹⁷

Just as the buddha body is immeasurable, bright and clear sounds and echoes are also immeasurable. Morality, meditation, wisdom, and so forth, all the meritorious virtues of all the buddhas are immeasurable. Likewise, in the *Sūtra on Esoteric Traces*, the three esoterica (*sanmi*) are mentioned. In this [scripture] they are described in great detail. Furthermore, when the Buddha was first born he fell to the ground and walked seven paces. From his mouth, by himself, he uttered speech. When his speech ended he was then silent just like all infants and he neither walked nor spoke. He ate mother's milk for three years. All of his mothers raised him and he grew up gradually. Nevertheless, buddha bodies are without number and exceed [the number of] all world systems. Because there are living beings they [buddhas] appear like ordinary people. This is because when ordinary people are born their bodies divide all roots and their [capacity for mental] consciousnesses is immature.¹⁸

¹⁷ See Lamotte, trans., *Le traité* (cf. n. 7 above). On many different names by which this text was known in medieval China and on the attribution of the text to Nāgārjuna see Paul Demiéville's review of the second volume of Lamotte's translation (originally published in 1950), in *Choix d'études bouddhiques (1929–1970)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill 1973) 470, n. 1, 475–476. 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. 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.

¹⁸ *Dazhidu lun* 1, T 1509, 25.59a2–8; cf. Lamotte, *Le traité* (cf. n. 7 above) 1:19–20.

At this stage of the project, Kumārajīva conceptualizes the three esoterica as one of the virtues of a buddha that enable him to do things with his body, speech, and mind that are beyond the capabilities of ordinary living beings and alludes, of course, to the *sūtra* treated above. Later in the work, Kumārajīva further develops the idea of the three esoterica when he analyzes a scriptural passage stating that the spiritual power of the Buddha Śākyamuni is his ability to appear in the Sahā world system in the desire realm to preach the Prajñā-pāramitā (Perfection of wisdom) to the bodhisattva-mahāsattvas. Nevertheless, the Buddha's real preaching is accomplished without speech. Kumārajīva explains that the Buddha's method of preaching is produced from his awakened observation – but awakened observation is a coarse thing. He elucidates further:

The Buddha does not move, but constantly abides (*ru* 入, lit. “enters”) in *dhyāna*-meditation. Because of causal connections due to meritorious virtues of previous lifetimes, the edges of his body emit sounds and resonate with objects like echoes. Just like a heavenly skilled musician [*gandharva*] produces sounds spontaneously and, furthermore, just as a *maṇi*-jewel gives a person whatever he wants instantly – if he wants clothing and quilts, food and drink, or music, personal lusts and necessities, he acquires them all spontaneously. The Buddha is also like this. From the edges of his body, all the pores of the skin, there are sounds in accordance to his thoughts that preach the Dharma spontaneously. The Buddha does not reflect upon these things and also he does not distinguish between them. It is just like that which he preached in the *Sūtra on the Vajrasattva Esoteric Traces*: “The Buddha possesses three esoterica – body-esoterica, speech-esoterica, and mind-esoterica.” All gods and humans neither comprehend nor know them.

[If] there is a single assembly of living beings, some see the Buddha's body as yellow gold, white silver, or all the colors of miscellaneous treasures. [If] there are people who see the sixteen-foot body of the Buddha, some see one *li*, ten *li*, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand, up to something boundless, measureless, everywhere in space. Things like this, and so forth, are called body-esoterica.

As for speech-esoterica, [if] there are people who hear the sounds of the Buddha's voice at one *li*, there are those who hear them at ten *li*, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand, numberless, measureless, everywhere in space. In an assembly, some hear [the Buddha] preach about giving liberally [*dāna*], others hear him preach about observing the precepts,

and others hear him preach about enduring abuse, making seminal progress, *dhyāna*-meditation, and wisdom. [It is] like this up to the twelve sections of the canon.¹⁹ In a dharma assembly of 80,000, what each person hears is in accordance to their mind. This is called speech-esoterica.²⁰

Kumārajīva then goes on to illustrate how the sounds of the Buddha's voice may be heard anywhere and everywhere in the universe by relating a story about the Buddha's disciple Mahāmaudgalyāyāna (Mulian 目連). This monk famous for his psychic power (*shenzuli* 神足力) desired to know if the sounds of the Buddha's voice are near or far. So, at this instant he manifested his mental power and produced an immeasurable number of buddha world systems. He reportedly heard the sounds of the Buddha's voice no different than if he were nearby. In the world systems he produced the buddhas and the people in the great assemblies were very large in stature. Because of this Mahāmaudgalyāyāna stood on his bowl out of respect. The disciples of those buddhas insultingly asked those buddhas about the small people²¹ of other world systems like Mahāmaudgalyāyāna. They wanted to know where the insects on the heads of these people came from and why they were allowed to walk around wearing the

¹⁹ The twelve sections of the canon (*shierbu jing* 十二部經, also *shierfen jing* 十二分經) are (1) *sūtra* (*xiuduoluo* 修多羅, scriptures, discourses), (2) *geya* (*qiye* 祇夜, long poems), (3) *vyākaraṇa* (*shoujijing* 受記經, scriptures about those receiving prophesies of future buddhahood), (4) *gāthā* (*jiatuo* 伽陀, verses, songs of praise), (5) *udāna* (*youtuona* 優陀那, song of joy, utterance), (6) *nidāna* (*yinyuanjing* 因緣經, scripture on the causal connections or origins of something), (7) *avadāna* (*apotuona* 阿波陀那, parables, metaphors, stories, illustrations), (8) *itivṛttaka* (*rushiyujing* 如是語經, scriptures in which the Buddha tells of the deeds of his disciples and others in previous lives), (9) *jātaka* (*benshengjing* 本生經, stories of the previous lives of the Buddha), (10) *vaipulya* (*guangjing* 廣經, broad scriptures, general scriptures), (11) *adbhuta-dharma* (*weizengyoujing* 未曾有經, scriptures telling about the inconceivable spiritual penetrations of the Buddha), (12) *upadeśa* (*lunyijing* 論議經, treatises and exegeses). See *Dazhidu lun* 33, T 1509, 25.306c16–20.

²⁰ *Dazhidu lun* 10, T 1509, 25.127c, cf. Lamotte, *Le traité* (cf. n. 7 above) 1:559–560.

²¹ The large sentient beings in the other world systems referred to beings of ours and other world systems – such as Mahāmaudgalyāyāna in this story – in a derogative manner as “small people” (*xiaoren* 小人) because their stature was considerably smaller than the people in the other systems. The implication is that beings who reside in world systems that are considerably impure possess bodies that are small in size and the lengths of their lives are comparatively short.

clothing of *śramaṇas*. Those buddhas responded saying, “Do not take these people lightly. From here, in the eastern region, crossing over measureless buddha lands, there is a Buddha called Śākyamuni. Here is that Buddha’s disciple who specializes in psychic power.” That buddha told Mahāmaudgalyāyāna, “You are investigating where the sound of the Buddha crosses over measureless, hundreds of thousands of kalpas – but one is able to ascertain their bounds and limits. Once again, the Buddha leaves the world to resolve the doubts of living beings; hence, he preaches the Dharma. Here he does not respond to the difficulty of explaining how this is possible just like he does not respond to the question how does one remove ignorance? The Buddha is also like this. He does not respond to the question what is Buddha by answering.”²²

For Kumārajīva, the concept of the “three esoterica” is essentially a convenient way to talk about the inconceivable properties of buddhahood. Although living beings continually produce the “three types of karma” (*sanye* 三業, Skt. *tri-karma*): referring to karma produced via the body (*shenye* 身業, *kāya-karma*), speech (*yuye* 語業, *vāk-karma*), and the mind (*yiye* 意業, *manah-karma*), what a buddha produces with his body, speech, and mind is incomprehensible by ordinary, rational thought. Perhaps because a buddha acquiesces to the non-production of dharmas and does not infuse a misplaced notion of self into his actions – hence, in this sense he does not “act” like ordinary beings – what a *tathāgata* does fundamentally transcends what ordinary people can do and, thus, can be used like an expedient means (*fangbian* 方便, *upāya*) to preach the Buddha-dharma. The three esoterica are also related to the emerging doctrine of the three bodies of the buddha (*sanshen* 三身) and how the true body (*zhenshen* 真身) or Dharma body (*fashen* 法身, *dharmakāya*) produces other types of bodies in response to the needs of living beings.²³

²² *Dazhidu lun* 10, T 1509, 25.127c–128a; cf. Lamotte, *Le traité* (cf. n. 7 above) 1:560–562.

²³ See, for instance, Sharf, *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism* (cf. n. 10 above) 100–111; and David W. Chappell, “Chinese Buddhist Interpretations of the Pure Lands,” in *Buddhist and Taoist Studies I*, Asian Studies at Hawai’i 18, ed. Michael Saso and David

Kumārajīva's translation of the *Renwang jing* 仁王經 (*Book for humane kings*, T 245) also introduces other concepts that will be conflated with the three esoterica by later scholiasts. In this connection, the scripture says: "Of the Tathāgata's three types of karma, there is no limit to his virtue."²⁴ Furthermore, "The so-called three types of karma are the same as morality (*jie* 戒), the same as sight (*jian* 見), and the same as learning (*xue* 學)."²⁵ By linking this specialized conceptualization of karma to a buddha or bodhisattva's "virtue" (*de* 德), the concept of the three esoterica is primed to frame the true meaning of *nirvāṇa* to a Mahāyāna bodhisattva.

The Sui and early Tang period

In the late sixth century, Tiantai Zhiyi²⁶ used the concept of the "three esoterica" to describe the fruits attained by a bodhisattva practitioner who magnifies his practice continually and cultivates the virtues associated with buddhahood. In his *Miaofa lianhua jing wenju* 妙法蓮花經文句 (*Passages from Lotus Sūtra of the Sublime Dharma*, T 1718), Zhiyi concretized the one Buddhist path leading to *nirvāṇa* in terms of the three actions, which calls to mind the three virtues, the three esoterica, and other lists of three. The three esoterica are the fruit of cultivating the three types of karma appropriately:

In summary, these three actions²⁷ are the path to *nirvāṇa*. In summary, with respect to the condition of the three virtues (*sande* 三德) in practice, the

W. Chappell (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1977) 23–53.

²⁴ *Renwang bore boluomi jing* 仁王般若波羅蜜經 1, T 245, 8.828a3.

²⁵ *Renwang bore boluomi jing* 2, T 245, 8.831b6.

²⁶ 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 Buddhist Monk*, *Melanges chinios et bouddhiques* (Bruxelles: l'Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises 1962), and Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (cf. n. 17 above) 303–313.

²⁷ The three actions (*sanxing* 三行) are essentially interchangeable with the concept of the three types of karma (*sanye*). They refer to body-actions (*shenxing* 身行), speech actions (*kouxing* 口行), and mind actions (*yixing* 意行). See *Dazhidu lun* 36, T 1509, 25.325b21–26.

condition is designated as “peace and bliss” and the path is designated as “practice.”

The *Treatise on the Great [Perfection of Wisdom]* says: “The bodhisattva, from his initial arousal of the *bodhicitta* (*faxin* 發心), constantly visualizes the path of practice [leading to] *nirvāṇa*.”²⁸ When the seed [is planted], he uses this dharma of the three practices, [and] instructs about the three types of karma (*sanye*) by practice. Because the three types of karma are pure, they are pure in the six roots.²⁹ If the six roots are pure, by giving rise to the marks and resembling the understanding [of an enlightened being], they enter into reality. When they are brought to fruition they are called buddha eyes, ears, and so forth. The seed is called the practice of calmness and the fruit is called the virtue of severing (*duande* 斷德). The seed is called the practice of insight [visualization] and the fruit is called the virtue of wisdom (*zhide* 智德). The seed is called the practice of compassion and the fruit is called the virtue of kindness (*ende* 恩德).

Furthermore, if the seeds are called the three types of karma, the fruits are called the three esoterica (*sanmi*). When the seed [is planted] compassion leads to benefiting others by means of the three types of karma. When it comes to fruition, it is called the inconceivable transformation of the three wheels (*sanlun* 三輪). Like this, when in visualization, he does not discriminate between things. All dharmas possess the quality of peace and bliss. All living beings will then [attain] great *nirvāṇa*, quiescence from which it is impossible to return. Practicing in the wrong path (*feidao* 非道) [the mundane world], he completely accomplishes the path to buddhahood. This then is the incomparably bright practice of peace and bliss. This practice accords with the meaning of *nirvāṇa*.

That [the *Lotus Sūtra*] says: “Again, [if] there is a single practice, this is a *tathāgata* practice. A *tathāgata* is a person and peace and bliss is a dharma. *Tathāgatas* are people of peace and bliss. Peace and bliss is the *tathāgata*’s dharma.” Speaking of it in summary, its meaning is not different and its particulars also are not different.³⁰

²⁸ Typically *Da lun* 大論 is a reference to the *Dazhidu lun*. This is not a direct quote; however, it bears similarities with the following passages: *Dazhidu lun* 41, T 1509, 25.362c27–363a26 and *Dazhidu lun* 54, T 1509, 25.448b28–c3.

²⁹ The six roots (*liugen* 六根) are those of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind that respond to sense objects.

³⁰ *Miaofa lianhua jing wenju* 8, T 1718, 34.118b27–c18.

Zhiyi implies that when one arouses the *bodhicitta* and becomes a bodhisattva that places him on the path toward *nirvāṇa*. The cultivation of appropriate bodhisattva practices of body, speech, and mind is like planting a seed that will eventually and inevitably bear fruit causing that person to acquire the three esoterica described in detail in the *Dazhidu lun*. Zhiyi introduces the concepts of the “three virtues” and “three wheels” as roughly interchangeable with the three esoterica. The three wheels are defined as referring not only to the karma produced by body, speech, and mind,³¹ but also to magical power (*shenzu* 神足), preaching the Dharma (*shuofa* 說法), and remembrance and recollection (*yinian* 憶念),³² which bear a close resemblance to the spiritual penetrations (*shentong* 神通) acquired by advanced bodhisattvas and manifested by enlightened beings. The spiritual penetrations come in lists of five or six, and include the ability to work miracles, supernormal hearing, the ability to read minds, recollection of one’s past lives, the ability to discern the previous lives of others, and comprehension that one’s spiritual state is no longer plagued by any form of defilement.³³ The spiritual

³¹ See *Dabaoji jing* 大寶積經 52, T 310, 11.303c9–11; roll 86, T 310, 11.493b17–24; *Dafangguang fo huayan jing shu* 大方廣佛華嚴經疏 16, T 1735, 35.621a4–7; and roll 19, T 1735, 35.642b8–9.

³² See *Dafangguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經 6, T 278, 9.435c13; roll 31, T 278, 9.596b27–28; and *Dafangguang fo huayan jing shu* 11, T 1735, 35.574b15–16. Later, during the Song period they were described as an enlightened being’s spiritual penetrations (*shentong*), or powers of bodily transformation, which is associated with the body; his discriminating mind (*jixin* 記心), which is able to understand the thoughts of others, which is associated with mind (*yi*); and his oral powers of teaching and warning (*jiaojie* 教誡) or correct teaching (*zhengjiao* 正教), associated with speech (*kou*). See *Jin’gang jing zuan yao kanding ji* 金剛經纂要刊定記 1, T 1702, 33.178c18–21.

³³ The five spiritual penetrations (Ch. *wu shentong* 五神通, *wutong* 五通, Skt. *pañca-abhijñāḥ*) are the 1) divine eye (*divyacakṣus*, *tianyan tong* 天眼通), 2) divine ear (*divyaśrotra*, *tianer tong* 天耳通), 3) knowledge of the thoughts of others (*paracittajñāna*, *taxin tong* 他心通), 4) recollection of former incarnations (*pūrvanirvāsānusmṛti*, *suzhu tong* 宿住通), 5) deeds leading to magical power and release (*ṛddhivimokṣakriyā*) or direct experience of magical power (*ṛddhisākṣātkriyā*, *shenjing tong* 神境通). See *Apidamo da piposha lun* 阿毘達磨大毗婆沙論 ([*Abhidharma-|Mahāvibhāṣā*]) 411, T 1545, 27.728b12–24; 727b22–24. The six spiritual penetrations (Ch. *liu shentong* 六神通; Skt. *ṣaḍabhijñāḥ*) are 1) psychic power (*ṛddhividhijñāna*, *shenzu tong* 神足通), magical power; 2) heavenly ear (*divyaśrotrajñāna*, *tianer tong* 天耳通), supernormal hearing; 3) cognition of others’

penetrations are marks or proofs of an advanced bodhisattva and aid him in liberating beings.

In the *Guanyin xuanyi* 觀音玄義 (*Arcane meaning of Avalokiteśvara*, T 1726), which is reportedly a discourse spoken by Zhiyi that was recorded by his disciple Guanding 灌頂 (561–632),³⁴ Zhiyi is even more explicit in his practical application of the three esoterica and his conflation of them with the spiritual penetrations:

Next, as for spiritual penetrations, if he desires to convert others he displays the three esoterica. Spiritual penetrations are displaying the material body [*rūpakāya*] and, by expedient means, displaying thoughts similar to living beings.³⁵ Preaching the Dharma is displaying vocal [*karma*] in accordance to its various sounds. This is the second order of converting others. Making offerings to all the buddhas forms one's conduct. Not only flowers, incense, and the four things [food, clothing, bedding, and medicine] are offerings: in accordance with cultivated conduct is the offering of the Dharma. With respect to offerings, the greatest, the *sūtras* say: "If you follow my words, then make offerings to the Buddha."³⁶ He practices by requesting to teach. This forms his personal conduct. As for perfecting living beings, this forms the conversion of others. Among the four dignified rites of the bodhisattva,³⁷ he still does not forget living beings. How much more so does he enter all ap-

thoughts (*paracittajñāna*, *taxin tong* 他心通), the ability to read minds; 4) recollection of past lives (*pūrvanīrvāsānusmṛtijñāna*, *suming tong* 宿命通), 5) heavenly eye (*divyacakṣuṣ-jñāna*, *tianyan tong* 天眼通), the ability to discern the previous lives of others; and 6) cognition of the extinction of outflows (*āsravakṣayañāna*, *loujin tong* 漏盡通), a state in which one is no longer plagued by any form of defilement. See *Apidamo da piposha lun* 102, T 1545, 27.530a18–b10; and *Dazhidu lun* 28, T 1509, 25.264a–266b; see also Lamotte, *Le traité* (cf. n. 7 above) 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.

³⁴ For the biography of Guanding see *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 19, T 2060, 50.584a25–585b11. See also Chen Jinhua, *Making and Remaking History: A Study of Tiantai Sectarian Historiography*, *Studia Philologica Buddhica Monograph Series no. 14* (Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies 1999); Linda Penkower, "In the Beginning ... Guanding 灌頂 (561–632) and the Creation of Early Tiantai," *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 23/2 (2000) 245–296.

³⁵ Literally, "[beings possessing] passions/affections" (*qing* 情).

³⁶ Cf. *Da niepan jing* 大涅槃經 5, T 374, 12.396a2.

³⁷ The four dignified rites of the bodhisattva (*siwei yi* 四威儀) refers to all the actions and practices of a bodhisattva, but particularly walking (*xing* 行), resting (*zhu* 住), sitting (*zuo* 坐), and lying down (*wo* 臥). See *Dafangguang fo huayan jing* 5, T 278, 9.424a28.

proaches to Dharma and pure buddha lands. All [bodhisattvas] liberally benefit all living beings. Hence, this one expression forms the conversion of others.³⁸

The three esoterica are what the advanced bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara actually manifests when he appears in the mundane world and performs actions to save and benefit living beings. Bodhisattva actions are the three esoterica because they lead living beings to accept the Buddhadharmā. Zhiyi's position, mediated by Guanding, bears some surprising similarities to that which will be expounded by the early Tantric masters a century later. A bodhisattva, such as Avalokiteśvara, uses the three esoterica when he does what the Buddha would do to convert others. If he manifests in physical form or gives of himself to benefit beings, or if he makes offerings to the Buddha, that is body-esoterica. If he uses his voice to preach the Dharma, that is speech-esoterica.

In his own writings, Guanding equates the three esoterica to the supreme dharma or superior teaching, the final teaching of the Buddha as described in Dharmakṣema's (Tanwuchen 曇無讖, 385–433)³⁹ "Northern Translation" of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*. In his *Daban niepan jing shu* 大般涅槃經疏 (Commentary on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, T 1767), Guanding explains that although there are three esoterica, they are no different than the four virtues of constancy, joy, personality, and purity. These are the fundamental characteristics possessed and taught to living beings by the Buddha:

Next, as for the Abhidharma (*duifa* 對法), this, verily, is the three esoterica. Life-force (*ming* 命) is the mind-esoterica, the pacification of physical power [lust] is body-esoterica. Non-obstruction is speech-esoterica. They [the three esoterica] are also called the four virtues.⁴⁰ Mind is the virtue of constancy.

³⁸ *Guanyin xuanyi* 觀音玄義 2, T 1726, 34.888b20–28.

³⁹ For the biography of Dharmakṣema see *Gaoseng zhuan* 2, T 2059, 50.335c–337b; see also Ch'en, *Buddhism in China* (cf. n. 17 above) 88, 114.

⁴⁰ The four virtues (*side* 四德) are constancy or permanence (*chang* 常); joy (*le* 樂); personality, the soul or the self (*wo* 我); and purity (*jing* 淨). Dharmakṣema's "Northern Translation" of the Mahāyāna *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* discusses these four terms as a group 135 times beginning with *Daban niepan jing* 大般涅槃經 1, T 374, 12.365a21; see also *Daban niepan jing shu* 大般涅槃經疏 1, T 1767, 38.44b5–6.

Body is taking pleasure in the self. Speech is verily the virtue of purity. If one can obtain this [state of] mind, all dharmas everywhere are nothing but these five. The Buddha is [also] endowed with these five; hence, he bestows them on people. He bestows the five constancies⁴¹ also without exhaustion. What I mean by “without exhaustion” is verily the five fruits.⁴²

Although Guanding’s numbered list games become muddled because he conflates the three esoterica with the four virtues and also the five constancies and five fruits, it is clear that he conceptualizes them as representative not only of appropriate bodhisattva practice but also of the manifestation of the fruits leading to buddhahood. Guanding uses the concept of the three esoterica to correspond to three aspects of the attainment of enlightenment in another passage in this commentary:

The old one [Faxian’s translation of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*?] says this chapter illuminates the three esoterica and does not illuminate the three virtues. It also says this chapter illuminates the three virtues and does not illuminate the three esoterica. Furthermore, it says that it only illuminates the three esoterica, which verily explain the three virtues. It explains that speech-esoterica is *prajñā*, it explains that body-esoterica is the Dharma body, and it explains that mind-esoterica is liberation. The [understanding of these] three depend on [each other] but are not the same, and yet are three expressions. Presently my elders use these three expressions to extinguish [reliance on]

⁴¹ The five constancies (*wuchang* 五常) are (1) humaneness (*ren* 仁), which is equated to not killing; (2) righteousness (*yi* 義), which is equated to not stealing; (3) propriety (*li* 禮), which is equated to not misusing sex or participating in licentiousness; (4) wisdom/knowledge (*zhi* 智), which is equated to not drinking alcoholic beverages; and (5) faith (*xin* 信), which is equated to not using false speech. See *Guang hongming ji* 廣弘明集 3, T 2103, 52.107b22–25.

⁴² *Daban niepan jing shu* 3, T 1767, 38.57c6–10. The five fruits (*wuguo* 五果, Skt. *pañcaphalāni*) are (1) fruit ripening divergently (*yishuguo* 異熟果), which refers to the idea that pleasure and wholesomeness are in different categories and that one’s present situation accords in pain and pleasure with past wholesome and unwholesome deeds; (2) fruit of the same order (*dengliuguo* 等流果), which refers to wholesomeness reborn from previous wholesomeness; (3) present position and function fruit (*tuyongguo* 土用果), which refers to the rewards of meritorious actions from previous lives; (4) superior fruit (*zengshangguo* 增上果), which refers to one’s position arising from previous seminal progress and spiritual capacity; and (5) fruit in freedom from miscellaneous bonds (*zaxiguo* 雜繫果), which refers to the fruit of *nirvāṇa*. See *Apidamo jushe lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論 (*Abhidharmakośa*) 17, T 1558, 29.91a25–b8.

literary descriptions. Nevertheless, they are named the three esoterica also [because] they are mutually similar. Following many classifications I regard them as the three esoterica.⁴³

In spite of the fact that neither Faxian's nor Dharmakṣema's translations use either the term "three esoterica" or "three virtues," the point of Guanding's rhetoric is obvious. Although the three esoterica are often equated to the three virtues, they are, in fact, a slightly different way of describing the characteristics of an enlightened being. Each of the three concepts equated individually to the three esoterica correspond to different ways of describing the ineffable goal of bodhisattva practice. The attainment of *prajñā* is the new goal of the Mahāyāna bodhisattva described verbally in the Prajñāpāramitā literature and other Mahāyāna *sūtras*. The Dharma body – the *dharmakāya* or *dharmadhātu* – the universe – is the very bodily form of reality as it is with all of its endless transformations. And liberation is, for lack of a better way to express it, the state of mind enjoyed by advanced bodhisattvas. These three esoterica are what bodhisattvas seek and use in their practice of converting others. Guanding describes this clearly in the final passage we will observe from his commentary on the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*:

If there are bodhisattvas who dwell peacefully below, the second [issue I treat here] broadly illuminates converting others in four [practices]. First, transforming their bodies to be like the Buddha; second, returning to their original location; third, severing other's delusion; and fourth, manifestation of the three esoterica.

This manifestation, furthermore, is of four kinds: first, speech-esoterica; second, body-esoterica; third, doubly illuminating speech-esoterica; the former, verily, is a different adaptation to all sounds and the present one illuminates a different adaptation to all dharmas; and fourth, mind-esoterica.⁴⁴

In other words, bodhisattvas are expected to manifest the three esoterica while they abide in the world and it is what they use to convert beings.

⁴³ *Daban niepan jing shu* 9, T 1767, 38.86c28–87a4.

⁴⁴ *Daban niepan jing shu* 22, T 1767, 38.167a9–13.

The Chinese Madhyamaka (Sanlun 三論) exegete Jizang 吉藏 (549–623)⁴⁵ uses the concept of the three esoterica as a heuristic device to describe the symbolic and practical importance of the name of Avalokiteśvara in the famous “Gateway to everywhere” chapter (*pumen pin* 普門品) of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Rather than regarding the three virtues and the three esoterica as different aspects of the same thing, in his *Fahua xuan lun* 法華玄論 (*Arcane treatise on the Lotus Sūtra*, T 1720), Jizang combines them and introduces the concept of the “virtues of the three esoterica” (*sanmide* 三密德) to describe the latent power in the name of the bodhisattva:

Fourth is one pair of name virtues. Avalokiteśvara is said to have three kinds of names. The “Gateway to everywhere” chapter calls them the virtues of the three esoterica (*sanmide*). The three names are: first, the sound “observer of the world” produces wholesome verbal karma in living beings; second, the thought “observer of the world” produces wholesome mental karma in living beings; and third, the body “observer of the world” produces wholesome physical karma in living beings.

The virtues of the three esoterica of the “Gateway to everywhere” chapter are: first, knowing the thoughts of others everywhere; second, preaching the Dharma everywhere; and third, [manifesting] spiritual penetrations everywhere. If the three names, it is said, produce the three wholesome [actions] in living beings, then they produce wholesome meaning in their environs. The virtues of the three esoterica then respond to living things and exhaust wholesomeness.⁴⁶

The *Lotus Sūtra* does not actually use the term “virtues of the three esoterica.” Nevertheless, as we have seen before, the concept of the three esoterica had become a catch phrase to describe the powers, capabilities, and responsibilities of bodhisattvas. In his *Fahua yishu* 法華義疏 (*Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra*, T 1721), Jizang uses the three esoterica in roughly the same manner used by Kumārajīva – to explain the special powers possessed by advanced bodhisattvas and buddhas. He invokes the three esoterica in the tenth of ten general

⁴⁵ For the biography of Jizang see *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 11, T 2059, 50.513c–515a; see also Ch’en, *Buddhism in China* (cf. n. 17 above) 132–134.

⁴⁶ *Fahua xuan lun* 10, T 1720, 34.447b20–26.

meanings of the doctrine that the Buddha dwells constantly in purity and meditation:

Tenth, the three esoterica benefit living beings. It is said that mind-esoterica is entering meditation, body-esoterica is emitting light, and speech-esoterica is preaching the Dharma. Furthermore, if one is quiescent, it is used for leaving [*samsāra*]. If used being quiescent, [it] becomes entering [*samādhi*]. For this reason, the function of quiescence is non-hindrances; hence, it is a name for leaving and entering.⁴⁷

He then goes on to describe how the act of entering *samādhi* is the manifestation of mind-esoterica. In other words, the three esoterica are manifestations of the Buddha in *samādhi* responding in accordance to circumstances. Entering *samādhi* is thus understood as the “good medicine” causing a practitioner to cultivate unexcelled *bodhi*.

In his *Niepan jing youyi* 涅槃經遊意 (*Musings on the Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, T 1768), Jizang not only reconfirms the connection between the three virtues, three esoterica, and the three types of karma but explains how the three esoterica demonstrate that the bodhisattva has transcended the cycle of rebirth and death (*samsāra*):

Furthermore, I will clarify that the three virtues are explained as the three esoterica of the Tathāgata. Hence, Kāśyapa asked desiring that the Buddha would explain the “subtle esoterica” (*weimi* 微密) in detail and preach it to living beings. Just like this, the three esoterica and the class of the four marks⁴⁸ are an example. Also, these match the three types of karma of ordinary people because the three types of karma of ordinary people are not esoteric (*mi*). Furthermore, by matching them to the three hindrances of *samsāra*⁴⁹ one illuminates the three virtues of *nirvāṇa*. By matching them to the hindrance of recompense [the inability to hear the Dharma due to bad rebirth because of unwholesome karma] one clarifies the Dharma body. By matching them to the hindrance of karma [the inability to accept the Dharma be-

⁴⁷ *Fahua yishu* 2, T 1721, 34.469a1–4.

⁴⁸ The class of the four marks (*sixiang pin* 四相品) here probably refer to birth (*sheng* 生), abiding existence (*zhu* 住), change (*yi* 異), and extinction (*mie* 滅).

⁴⁹ The three hindrances of *samsāra* (*sanzhang* 三障, Skt. *āvaraṇatraya*) are the hindrance of karma (*yezhang* 業障), the hindrance of defilements (*fannaozhang* 煩惱障), and the hindrance of recompense (*baozhang* 報障), also called the hindrance of ripening (*yishuzhang* 異熟障). See *Apidamo jushe lun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論 17, T 1558, 29.92b23–24.

cause of language, behavior, mind], one clarifies liberation. By matching them to the hindrance of defilements, one clarifies *prajñā*. Because *samsāra* is merely the three hindrances, *nirvāṇa* only has the three virtues.⁵⁰

Once again we return to the idea that the three esoterica manifested by buddhas and the three types of karma produced by ordinary living beings are correlated. But to Jizang the three esoterica have another meaning apart from referring to the powers of body, speech, and mind produced by advanced bodhisattvas and buddhas. As with Guanding, they also compare with the three virtues of Mahāyāna-style enlightenment – Dharma body, *prajñā*, and liberation.

In his *Jin'guangming jing shu* 金光明經疏 (*Commentary on the Sūtra of golden light*, T 1787), Jizang is even more explicit in his promotion of the three esoterica as a heuristic device to classify and explain the significance of the preface to the *sūtra* and its relation to the rest of the *sūtra*:

“Vulture Peak in Rājagrha is like the constant Śākyamuni...”

There is a difference, in particular, between what is introduced in the preface (*xu* 序) and the remaining scriptural prologue (*yujingxu* 餘經序). Merely take the mystical endowment (*mingjia* 冥加) of the three esoterica as the prologue. The three esoterica are the esoterica of body, speech, and mind (*shen kou yi mi* 身口意密). When he wants to preach this *sūtra*, his body resides in Vulture Peak and explains the superiority of this *sūtra*. Verily, this is the body-esoterica. His mind recollects the name of dharmas and protective maintenance⁵¹ of the four buddhas up to procedures for repentance, and so forth. Verily, this is mind-esoterica. Furthermore, he desires to preach these deep procedures [dharmas] in the future. This, verily, is speech-esoterica. Take this as a form of faith in the mystical endowment of the three esoterica. Hence, the form of faith is suspicious, resonates with the buddhas of the four directions,⁵² and preaches on the fruit of limitations of lifespan. Furthermore,

⁵⁰ *Niepan jing youyi* 1, T 1768, 38.237a15–21.

⁵¹ Protective maintenance (*huchi* 護持, Skt. *anupālānā*) is a by-product of practicing *prajñāpāramitā*. It is a type of recollection that enables bodhisattvas not to begrudge their physical bodies and their lives. See *Dazhidu lun* 74, T 1509, 25.578a28–b10.

⁵² The buddhas of the four directions according to the *Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra* are Akṣobhya (Achu 阿閼) in the East, Jeweled Marks (Baoliang 寶相) in the South, Amitāyus (Wuliangshou 無量壽), in the West, and Subtle and Miraculous Sounds (Weimiao-

the form of faith in the three esoterica resonates with dreams and preaches procedures of repentance, and so forth. This is because the Four Heavenly Kings and so forth made a vow to magnify the *sūtra* up through preaching the chapter on forsaking the body. It is said that the three esoterica are promoted in the prologue.⁵³

Because the current preface to the *Jin'guangming jing* 金光明經 (*Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra, Sūtra of golden light*, T 663) by the Chan 禪 monk Cijue 慈覺 dates to the Five Dynasties period (ca. 907–960) and because the passage Jizang quotes at the beginning is not found in any extant version of the scripture, I am not sure whether Jizang refers here to an earlier preface that circulated with the *sūtra* or to the long *gāthā* that comprises the prologue to the *sūtra* (*jingxupin* 經序品).⁵⁴ Although the concepts of body and mind (*shen yi*) appear toward the end of the *gāthā*, nowhere is there a direct reference to the idea of the mystical endowment of the three esoterica. Nevertheless, the three esoterica serves conveniently and successfully as a classification device.

Like Jizang, the Chinese Yogācāra (Faxiang 法相) monk Ci'en Kuiji 慈恩窺基 (632–682),⁵⁵ a disciple of Xuanzang 玄奘 (ca. 600–664), uses the concept of the three esoterica to explain how the Buddha appears to do things although, in actuality, he is constantly in meditation. Also, like Jizang, in his *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanzan* 妙法蓮花經玄贊 (*Arcane praise of the Lotus Sūtra of the sublime law*, T 1723), Kuiji emphasizes the three esoterica as comprising the tenth and final proof of this situation:

Question: The Buddha has his mind in complete meditation and his conduct [is to] dwell permanently in meditation. He manifests majesty by not giving rise to meditation on extinction. What does he need now enter?

Answer: There are ten meanings. First, entering and leaving, he moves following connections because in stillness he benefits living beings. Second,

sheng (微妙聲) in the North. See *Jin'guangming jing* 金光明經 1, T 663, 16.335b12–13.

⁵³ *Jin'guangming jing shu* 1, T 1787, 39.160c17–25.

⁵⁴ *Jin'guangming jing* 1, T 663, 16.335b5–c15; see 335c12 for body and mind.

⁵⁵ 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* (cf. n. 17 above) 320–321.

if he does not enter meditation, he emits light without cause and manifests auspicious signs. If he does not enter meditation he fears that there will be no auspicious signs of buddhahood. Third, when he wants to preach the Dharma he shows that he deliberates opportunity. Fourth, because he manifests the bizarre profundities of the Dharma he enters meditation and insight causes reverence. Fifth, manifesting wisdom necessarily attests to principle (*li* 理); entering meditation he is actually able to arouse it. An instructor later teaches him causing him to cultivate meditation: hence, [producing] wisdom. Sixth, showing meditation is a fullness of wisdom. Preaching the Dharma shows a fullness of wisdom. This is because entering meditation manifests a fullness of meditation. Seventh, due to the regulations of the final age [of the Dharma], persons who preach the Dharma must first calm their minds themselves. Eighth, he shows wholesome pensiveness and the marks of intelligence. Also, he causes other people to examine phenomena. Ninth, he enters meditation, manifests auspicious signs, and gives rise to three questions and answers. If not this then he will ask questions without Maitreya and so forth.⁵⁶ Tenth, he manifests the three esoterica. This is because entering meditation is mind-esoterica. Emitting light, and so forth, is body-esoterica. Preaching the Dharma is speech-esoterica.

The ode says: accordance, auspiciousness, examination, profundity, instructor, fullness, pensiveness, question, esoterica.⁵⁷

By associating the three esoterica to entering meditation, emitting light, and preaching the Dharma, the evidence suggests that although Jizang and Kuiji belonged to different exegetical traditions, they shared a common understanding of the meaning of the three esoterica as indicative of the enlightened state of advanced bodhisattvas and buddhas.

The monk Wōnch'ŭk 圓測 (613–696) of the Korean state of Silla 新羅 was a fellow disciple of Xuanzang with Kuiji at Ximingsi 西明

⁵⁶ The context alluded to in this passage seems to refer to the belief, commonly held among medieval Buddhist scholars and proponents of Yogācāra especially, that by entering into *samādhi* one can ascend to Tuṣita heaven, see Maitreya, ask him questions, and receive his clarifications regarding their doubts concerning the complex and often contradictory doctrines contained in Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures. See Étienne Lamotte, *Historie de Bouddhisme Indien* (Louvain: Publications Universitaires 1958) 787.

⁵⁷ *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanzan* 2, T 1723, 34.679b3–15.

寺 in the Tang capital Chang'an 長安.⁵⁸ In his *Inwang-gyōng so* 仁王經疏 (*Commentary on the book for humane kings*, T 1708), Wōnch'ūk suggests that the three esoterica is the initial theme covered by the first *gāthā* in Kumārajīva's translation of the *Renwang jing*,⁵⁹ although more direct connections may be found at the end: "Of the Tathāgata's three types of karma, there is no limit to his virtue."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Wōnch'ūk locates the three esoterica even in epithets applied to the Buddha:

The first two phrases eulogize the Buddha's three esoterica. The first one of these phrases eulogizes the esoterica of the Buddha's body, which contains all virtues. Because [he] is honored and esteemed by living beings he is called "World-Honored One." Because his marks are good, perfect, and full, and [because] he leads and guides living beings, [he] is called "The Guide" (*tosa*, Ch. *daoshi* 導師). Because his body does not decay and is similar to adamant (*kūṅgang*, Ch. *jin'gang* 金剛, *vajra*) it is called the "essence of adamant" (*kūṅgangch'e*, Ch. *jin'gangti* 金剛體).

Later phrases eulogize two other kinds of esoterica. The first four characters eulogize his mind-esoterica (*ūmil*, Ch. *yimi*), because it is internally realized true thusness and, marked by the ability to forsake, it is called quiescence of mental practice.

The later three characters eulogize the speech-esoterica (*ōmil*, Ch. *yumi*). It is heard the same both far and near, without being obstructed and it is called "turning the wheel of the Dharma." If you want more detailed distinctions go to the *Sūtra on the Three Esoterica* (*Sanmi jing* 三密經).⁶¹

The *Sanmi jing* alluded to by Wōnch'ūk no longer exists. Excerpts from this scripture – the full title of which was probably *Rulai sanmi jing* 如來三密經 (*Sūtra on the Tathāgata's three esoterica*) – are preserved, however, in two passages from the *Boredeng lun shi* 般若燈論釋 (*Prajñāpradīpamūlamadhyamakavṛtti*, *Analysis of the treatise*

⁵⁸ For the biography of Wōnch'ūk see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 4, T 2061, 50.727b5–14; see also Shotaro Iida, "The Three Stūpas of Ch'ang An," in *Papers of the First International Conference on Korean Studies* (Seoul: Academy of Korean Studies 1979) 484–497.

⁵⁹ *Renwang bore boluomi jing* 1, T 245, 8.827b8–828a8.

⁶⁰ *Renwang bore boluomi jing* 1, T 245, 8.828a3.

⁶¹ *Inwang-gyōng so* 仁王經疏 2A, T 1708, 33.393a8–15; HPC 1.68b17–c2.

on the torch of *prajñā*, T 1566).⁶² The original treatise was putatively written by Nāgārjuna and then explored by the Bodhisattva Bhāvaviveka (Bhavya, Fenbieming 分別明, d.u.). It was translated by Prabhākaramitra (Borepomiduoluo 波羅頗蜜多羅, d.u.) into Chinese in 632.⁶³ In particular, the second passage quoted from the *Sūtra on the three esoterica* refers to several wondrous qualities of the Buddha's body. Because no other exegete refers to this *sūtra* it was probably not well known.

In his *Haesimmil-gyōng so* 解深密經疏 (*Commentary on the Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra*),⁶⁴ Wōnch'ūk alludes to the three esoterica to explain the existence of various transformation bodies (*hwasin*, Ch. *huashen* 化身, Skt. *nirmānakāya*), reward bodies (*suyongsin*, Ch. *shouyongshen* 受用身, Skt. *sambhogakāya*), buddha bodies and buddha lands, spiritual penetrations, Brahmā sounds (*pōmūm*, Ch. *fanyin* 梵音), and so forth:

Mental dharmas are trifling and forsake wisdom. They do not resonate with explanations of the One. The one sound, and so forth, verily, is the body- and speech-esoterica of the three esoterica of the Tathāgata. With respect to body-esoterica, it is like it says in the first roll of the *Treatise on the [Great] Perfection of Wisdom*:

When the Buddha first turned the wheel of the Dharma it resonated with and was maintained by the bodhisattvas. When it came from others, they desired limited buddha bodies. Ascending and transcending empty space and measureless buddha lands he arrived in the Lotus World System (*hwasang segye*, Ch. *huashang shijie* 華上世界). Because he saw the thusness of the Buddha's body, he preached a *gāthā* and eulogized a lament.⁶⁵

⁶² *Boredeng lun shi* 11, T 1566, 30.108c23–29; and roll 13, T 1566, 30.121a20–b4. The *Torch of Prajñā* later became one of the principal commentaries adopted by the Nara schools in Japan. See Abé, *The Weaving of Mantra* (cf. n. 2 above) 214.

⁶³ For the biography of Prabhākaramitra see *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 3, T 2060, 50.439c26–440c3; see also Mochizuki, *Bukkyō daijiten* (cf. n. 5 above) 5:4277c–4278a. For a biography of Bhāvaviveka see Mochizuki, *Bukkyō daijiten* 3:2761c–2762a.

⁶⁴ Although Wōnch'ūk was considered an outsider in China, his commentary on the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sūtra* (*Sūtra on freeing the underlying meaning*) was influential later in Tibet. See Matthew T. Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000) 78–83.

⁶⁵ *Haesimmil-gyōng so* 1, HPC 1:131c18–23.

At this point Wōnch'ūk quotes verbatim the discussion of the three esoterica as found in the *Dazhidu lun*'s précis of the *Sūtra on Vajrasattva Esoteric Traces*.⁶⁶ The intellectual heritage and exegetical importance of the *Dazhidu lun* continued through the seventh century. No matter what other directions exegetes directed their interpretations of this concept, Kumārajīva's work remained the basis.

At this point, let us summarize the views held by the exegetes of the Sui and early Tang period. The three esoterica refer to the three types of karma, the three virtues, three wheels, and so forth, which are produced and manifested by buddhas and bodhisattvas. In order to explain the term "three esoterica of the Tathāgata" (*rulai sanmi* 如來三密), medieval Buddhist scholars connected the three esoterica to several numbered doctrinal conceptions on the nature of buddhahood. The three esoterica are related to the spiritual achievements and acquisitions of advanced bodhisattvas – Avalokiteśvara in particular. It is representative of the enlightened state and the powers associated with enlightenment. Although its role was not emphasized previously, the three esoterica appears to have been a term whose importance was emerging in mainstream Sinitic Buddhism to describe the nature of buddhahood.

The High Tang Period

Because the mature Japanese Esoteric tradition emphasizes the ritual replication of the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha as a key component of the Vajrayāna, I originally expected that the concept of the three esoterica would receive its most explicit explanations in the writings of the early Tantric masters on efficacious ritual practices. Śubhākarasīṃha (Shanwuwei 善無畏, 637–735)⁶⁷ and Yixing's 一行 (683 or 673–727)⁶⁸ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* (*Com-*

⁶⁶ *Haesimmil-gyōng so* 1, HPC 1:132a–b; cf. *Dazhidu lun* 10, T 1509, 25.127c–128a.

⁶⁷ For the biography of Śubhākarasīṃha see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 2, T 2061, 50.714b–716a; see also Chou Yi-liang, "Tantrism in China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 8 (1945) 251–272.

⁶⁸ For a study on Yixing that provides a compelling argument that Yixing was actually

mentary on the *Sūtra on Vairocana's attaining buddhahood*, T 1796), for instance, uses the term more than twenty times, suggesting that it was a major theme in practices the early Tantric master sought to promote during the first half of the eighth century. The *sūtra* on which their study is based, their translation of the *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing* (also called *Dari jing* 大日經, T 848), completed in 725, however, only uses the term “approach of the three esoterica” (*sanmi men* 三密門) twice in the seventh roll.⁶⁹ This is significant because the seventh roll is comprised of ritual procedures not found in the later Tibetan translation of the *sūtra*.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, body, speech, and mind are alluded to repeatedly throughout the *sūtra*.⁷¹ The opening of the *sūtra* alludes to important thematic concepts associated with the three esoterica:

Because of the empowerment (*jiachi* 加持, *adhiṣṭhāna*) of the Tathāgata Vairocana, there was an exhibition of supernatural power (*fenxun* 奮迅, *vikrīḍita*), the storehouse of the inexhaustible ornamentation of the body (*shen wujin zhuangyanzang* 身無盡莊嚴藏). Like this, there was [another] exhibition of supernatural power, the storehouse of the inexhaustible ornamentations of the universality of speech and mind (*yu yi pingdeng* 語意平等). It is not produced from the body, or speech, or mind of the Buddha Vairocana. All places (*chu* 處, *sthāna*) arise [from it]; [and as for its] destruction, its fringes are unattainable.

Yet, all of Vairocana's bodily acts (*shenye*), all of his vocal acts (*yuye*), and all of his mental acts (*yiye*), [and] all places and all times are proclaimed as true words (*zhenyan* 眞言, mantra), spoken phrases of Dharma (*daojufa* 道句

born in 673 and not 683 see Jinhua Chen, “The Birth of a Polymath: The Genealogical Background of the Tang Monk-Scientist Yixing (673–727),” *T'ang Studies* 18/19 (2000–2001) 1–39.

⁶⁹ The concept of the “approach of the three esoterica” (*sanmi men* 三密門) is alluded to twice; see *Da Piluzhena chengfo shenbian jiachi jing* 大毘盧遮那成佛神變加持經 7, T 848, 18.51c10, 52b2.

⁷⁰ For an English translation of this chapter see Chikyo Yamamoto, trans., *Mahāvairocana-Sūtra* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan 1990) 175–199; see also Rolf W. Giebel, trans., *The Vairocanābhisambodhi Sūtra* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research 2005) 227–277.

⁷¹ There are 10 references to body, speech, and mind clustered, more or less, in two rolls of the *sūtra*. See *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing* 1, T 848, 18.1a24, 6a25–b8; and roll 5, T 848, 18. 31b1–20, 36c8.

法) in the realm [of living beings] who possess passions (*youqing jie* 有情界).⁷²

Once again body, speech, and mind are linked with supernatural powers. In this instance, the miraculous power is attributed to Vairocana. Following the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*, the *sūtra* repeatedly uses the concept of universality (*pingdeng* 平等): That these attributes of Vairocana are, in fact, a common heritage of all living beings and of the nature of the universe itself.⁷³ Furthermore, this passage alludes to the idea that the Tathāgata has inexhaustible body, speech, and mind, which also seems to draw upon themes found in the *Avataṃsaka Sūtra*.⁷⁴ Although it is not described clearly in the *sūtra*, there are hints of connecting the three types of karma to particular ritualized practices, such as mantras.

Several passages in the commentary describe the three esoterica in detail. Although there is a new frame emphasizing mantra, Śubhākarasiṃha and Yixing's understanding of the three esoterica is actually quite similar to the views held by the great exegetes of the Sui and early Tang period in the late sixth and seventh centuries:

Entering the approach of mantra (*zhenyan men* 眞言門) may be summarized as being comprised of three phenomena: The first is the approach of body-

⁷² *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing* 1, T 848, 18.1a25–b2; cf. Tajima, *Étude sur le Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (cf. n. 5 above) 44–45, 53–54.

⁷³ I translate the Chinese term *pingdeng* 平等 as “universality” and “universal.” This term is often employed as a translation for such Sanskrit words as *sāmānya* (universal, equal, common, joint), *sāmya* (equipoise, equality), and *sādhāraṇa* (universality, common to all), and so forth. The concept of *pingdeng* is used 517 times in the 60-roll version of the *Huayan jing*, T 278; 636 times in the 80-roll version of the *Huayan jing*; and 20 times in the *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing*, T 848. Although the concept of the “universality of body” (*shen pingdeng*) is found twice in *Huayan jing*, T 278, and 9 times in *Huayan jing*, T 279, the concepts of universality of speech and mind are not found in either translation of the *Huayan jing*.

⁷⁴ Body, speech, and mind (*shen yu yi*) are alluded to 56 times in the *Huayan jing*, T 279. See, in particular, the chapter on “Pure Practices” (*jingxing pin* 淨行品), *Huayan jing* 14, T 279, 10.69b20–c22, which emphasizes the fundamental purity of body, speech, and mind. In the Tibetan version of the *sūtra*, Alex Wayman says this idea is found in the “Arising of the Tathāgata” chapter; see *The Enlightenment of Vairocana* (cf. n. 5 above) 49. See also Stephen Hodge, trans., *The Mahā-Vairocana-abhisambodhi Tantra, with Buddhaguhya's Commentary* (London: RoutledgeCurzon 2003) 49.

esoterica, the second is the approach of speech-esoterica, and the third is the approach of mind-esoterica. These phenomena will be explained in detail below. The practitioner should regard these three expedients (*fangbian*) as three kinds of karma that are pure of themselves and [he] will verily be empowered by the three esoterica of the Tathāgata and he will be able [to attain buddhahood] in this life, satisfy the [ten bodhisattva] stages and the [ten] *pāramitās*, not have to pass through successive numbers of kalpas, and cultivate in preparation all antidotal practices. Hence, the *Large perfection of wisdom sūtra* (*Dapin* 大品) says: If there is a bodhisattva, when he initially arouses the mind [*bodhicitta*] he verily ascends the bodhisattva levels and attains [the stage of] non-backsliding. When someone initially arouses the mind he verily attains unsurpassed *bodhi* and then turns the wheel of the Dharma.

Nāgārjuna regarded these as distant practices. A person riding a goat will arrive after a long, long time. A horse, then, provides a difference in speed. If someone rides a person with spiritual penetrations, he will arrive where he is going in the instant he gives rise to the thought. He is not able to say when he gave rise to the thought or how he arrived. The marks of the spiritual penetrations, and so on, do not resonate with or produce doubt, which, consequently, is the profound purpose of this *sūtra*.⁷⁵

The three esoterica are still related to the three types of karma, but they are inherently pure; they are expedients; and they are associated with the transcendent nature of buddhahood that transforms beings. Rather than being something that the practitioner does on his own, the three esoterica are a way of referring directly to the spiritual penetrations of the Buddha. By relying on these powers – by being empowered by them – the practitioner is spiritually transformed into an enlightened being. The powers associated with the three esoterica are universal and inherently pure. Universality is one of the primary themes of the *sūtra* and resonates with the popular doctrines of the inherence of Buddha nature (*foxing* 佛性) in all living beings, the Tathāgatagarbha (*rulaizang* 如來藏). This concept is described more fully in the following passage, in which we can see how the previous

⁷⁵ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 1, T 1796, 39.579b27–c7; cf. Tajima, *Étude sur le Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (cf. n. 5 above) 91–92.

understanding of the three esoterica is extended to indicate their manifestation in the practitioner through ritual and empowerment:

What was the Dharma preached by the Buddha at this time? Verily it is the Dharma Approach of the triple universality of body (*shen*), speech (*yu*), and mind (*yi*). Whatever the nature of the Tathāgata's three kinds of karma, they all arrive at the edge of the sublime extreme of primordial reality. Body is equivalent to speech. Speech is equivalent to mind (*xin*). It is similar to the great ocean's extending the same saline flavor everywhere it goes. Hence, it is said to be universal. The term in Brahmic [Prākṛit?] is *pada* (Ch. *botan*, Kor. *paltam* 鉢曇)...

Thus, empowerment by the esoterica (*mimi* 秘密) of body, speech, and mind, which are universal, is the approach of entry. It is said to be the esoteric seal [*mudrā*] of body universality (*shen pingdeng* 身平等), the true word [mantra] of speech universality (*yu pingdeng* 語平等), and the sublime visualization of mind universality (*xin pingdeng* 心平等). Because they are expedients one is caused to see the reward body (*shouyong shen* 受用身, *saṃbhogakāya*) of empowerment.

Like this, the reward body of empowerment, verily, is Vairocana, the omnipresent body. The omnipresent body, verily, is the body of knowledge of the universality of the practitioner. For this reason, those who abide in this vehicle go without going and arrive without arriving, which is the name of the phrase "universality." All beings that have entered therein have, in actuality, neither penetrated it nor been penetrated by it. Hence, it is called universality. The Dharma Approach of Universality is the main intent of this *sūtra*.⁷⁶

The reward body of empowerment represents what Buddhists generally consider to be the type of buddha that they worship; the type of buddha represented in icons and images. It is the buddha who resides in a buddha land (*buddhakṣetra*), displays the physical marks of his position, and is constantly in meditative absorption (*samādhi*). Through the process of equating concepts, because of their universality, the commentators link this reward body not only to Vairocana, the symbolic representation of the universe as it is in buddha form, but also to the universality of knowledge residing in the

⁷⁶ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 1, T 1796, 39.583a12–15, 20–27; cf. Tajima, *Étude sur le Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (cf. n. 5 above) 93–94.

practitioner. In essence, the practitioner is transformed into an icon for the period of ritual practice, which alludes to a new dimension to practice and understanding. Can the universality of knowledge be anything other than an allusion to the Tathāgatagarbha?

The language of the commentary suggests that the three esoterica are an expedient and also spiritual power used by Vairocana. This power transforms and purifies the three types of karma produced by living beings. In other words, the power of this expedient turns mundane human karma into the acts of an enlightened being. This power, ultimately, is none other than the inherent Buddha nature that resides within the practitioner. Nevertheless, the power of the expedient is dependent upon recognizing the innate purity of original nature. Another passage in the commentary relates:

As for bringing expedients to their ultimate conclusion, this means that the myriad practices are perfect, reach the extreme, and are impossible to augment. The power to resonate with/respond to material objects, examine exhaustively, and be competent [lit. “able in phenomenal affairs”], verily, is ghee,⁷⁷ the profound fruit, the source of the three esoterica. Furthermore, those who purify the *bodhicitta* may be compared to pure gold. Their original nature is bright and clean, forsaking all excesses and evil. Great compas-

⁷⁷ “Ghee” (*tihu*, Jpn. *daigo* 醍醐) is clarified butter. Traditionally an offering poured over sacred icons, it means the “cream” (Skt. *maṇḍa*) and symbolically suggests the goodness of the Buddha and the excellence of man’s talents. Essentially, “ghee” functioned as a referent to buddhahood, enlightenment, the cream or best of what the Buddhadharmā had to offer. For instance, in a passage from his *Arcane Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra of the Sublime Dharma*, which uses “ghee” 29 times, Zhiyi said, “Hence, it is said that the Buddha/buddhahood is like ghee.... If you are able to cultivate the eightfold [path] and then see your Buddha nature it is called obtaining ghee.... By means of the principle and wisdom of the middle path you become ghee.” Zhiyi also explains that the perfect teaching (*yuanjiao* 圓教), as he describes it, is also “ghee.” See *Miaofa lianhua jing xuanyi* 妙法蓮華經玄義 5, T 1716, 33.739c–740b. Another extensive discussion of ghee is found in the final roll of the same work. Here Zhiyi says that those who embody the perfect and sudden [teaching] (*yuandun* 圓頓) and become awakened, verily, are ghee; see roll 10, T 1716, 33.807a21–22. Also, “Acquiring the acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas is performing like ghee”; see roll 10, T 1716, 33.807b6. “Again, as for what we refer to as ‘ghee,’ it is after the taste of the throngs [of sentient beings]; *nirvāṇa* is designated as ghee;” and, of course, the lotus is ghee; see roll 10, T 1716, 33.808a19–20, a25. Surprisingly enough, to Zhiyi, even *arhats*, *pratyekabuddhas*, and *buddhas* are like ghee; see roll 10, T 1716, 33.810b26.

sion is like learning an ingenious skill. Taking all manner of medicinal drugs and practicing cures up to a “mirror penetrates softness, pliability, and self-existence” [are all examples of expedients]. Expedients are like the completion [*siddhi*] of ingenious arts. What one creates is all completed according to one’s wishes.⁷⁸

This rhetoric on the original cleanliness and purity of one’s original nature and that all practices lead toward this goal sounds surprisingly similar to what will emerge in Chan discourse later. In fact, corollaries to the three esoterica, the three mysteries (*sanxuan* 三玄) and the three essentials (*sanyao* 三要) developed within the Chan 禪 tradition during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms 五代十國 (907–978) and Northern Song 北宋 (960–1127) period.⁷⁹ A description of a practical procedure for developing the three esoterica is only alluded to at best, although the commentators are convinced that they describe it in detail:

Now, this approach of mantra is comparable to memorizing and chanting (*chisongzhe* 持誦者), which is also like this. It is described in detail in the text below. In accordance to cultivating and practicing the three esoterica, you attain and complete all peculiarities and inconceivable phenomena. Even though you scrutinize among the connections of each and every thing, in the end you forsake four-part [differentiation].⁸⁰ The Dharma, and so on, is like this. [It is] no different than the pure mind.⁸¹

A practitioner develops the three esoterica in the same manner that he learns and practices mantras: memorizing and chanting. The by-product of this practice is the cessation of discriminating mental con-

⁷⁸ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 1, T 1796, 39.587a27–b4; cf. Tajima, *Étude sur le Mahāvairocana-sūtra* (cf. n. 5 above) 97–98.

⁷⁹ See George Keyworth, “The Body, Speech, and Mind of the Patriarchs: The Three Mysteries and Three Essentials of Chinese Chan Buddhism,” a paper delivered at the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies, Phoenix, Ariz., October 11, 2003. He is currently revising the paper for publication.

⁸⁰ Four-part differentiation (*siju fenbie* 四句分別) is the standard Mahāyāna intellectual conceptualization of phenomena as being existent, non-existent, neither, or both; or phenomenal, noumenal, neither, or both; double, single, neither, or both. See *Fayuan zhulin* 5, T 2122, 53.306a.

⁸¹ *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 3, T 1796, 39.607a3–9.

ceptualization and the awakening of the pure mind. Practices involving *maṇḍala* are described briefly in the following passage:

I now also desire to continue the works of the Tathāgata by following that which has been practiced by the Buddha. For this reason, draw this *maṇḍala*.

Even though I have not yet attained everything like unto a Tathāgata, nevertheless, because I am empowered by the three esoterica of Vairocana, I will also be able to manifest the Dharma body and universally (*pu* 普) collect a great assembly of all *maṇḍalas*. For this reason, you should now also manifest evidence [of your buddhahood] and cause all demons to be unable to oppress or dwell within you.⁸²

Śubhākarasiṃha and Yixing describe the three esoterica as playing a dual role in this commentary. On the one hand they are described as something outside of the practitioner, the three esoterica of Vairocana, which purifies and empowers him. On the other hand, by means of the *maṇḍala* the practitioner is supposed to ritually recognize his dominance over an interior realm populated by demons.⁸³ This duality is transcended, however, because all enlightened beings are no different than Vairocana at the moment of awakening. It is the inherent Buddha nature within that, when it is activated, empowers the practitioner. Within this symbolic context, demons represent defilements. By activating the three esoterica the practitioner manifests evidence of his buddhahood, symbolically represented as the suppression of demons. Hence, defilements are subdued immediately and recognized as inherently powerless.

In his *Zunsheng foding xiu yuga fagui yi* 尊勝佛頂修瑜伽法軌儀 (*Ritual procedures for cultivating yoga by means of the Paramount Buddha Crown [spell]*, T 973), Śubhākarasiṃha describes numerous ritual procedures using *dhāraṇī*, mantra, *maṇḍala*, and homa. The ninth chapter, “Manifesting evidence of *yogasiddhi* [yogic accomplishment by means of] the Paramount Mantra” (*zunsheng zhenyan*

⁸² *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 4, T 1796, 39.619c6–10.

⁸³ On the practice of dominating an interior realm populated by demons see Ronald M. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press 2002) 113–144.

zheng yuga xidi 尊勝真言證瑜伽悉地), contains an instructive passage:

The three types of karma, verily, are the three esoterica. The three esoterica, verily, are the three bodies [of the Buddha]. The three bodies, verily, are the wisdom of the Tathāgata Mahāvairocana. If you acquire, in this manner, the body of Vairocana and if you attest that the Dharma realm everywhere manifests form bodies [*rūpakāya*], it is the same as a Dharma realm [*dharmadhātu*] and the same as a *svabhāva* [essential nature]. Outside of the One Mind, moreover, there is not one material object that can be established. All buddhas [possess] the mark of emptiness. Emptiness [is] also the markless mind, [and it] is the same as emptiness; hence, those who cultivate [the practices of] the yogin are also the same as the essence.

In an instant, the length of a single thought, you transcend the three absurd graspings⁸⁴ and transcend *trikalpāsaṃkhyeya* [worth of] practices. When you initially arouse the mind [*bodhicitta*] you will then achieve complete buddhahood (*zhengjue* 正覺, *saṃbodhi*). Verily, this is the body of *siddhi* (*xidi* 悉地, accomplishment, completion). This, among the markless *siddhi*, is the dharma of the most superior *siddhi*.⁸⁵

The language of this passage is surprisingly straightforward and clear. Employing the concept of universality, the practitioner's own karma of body, speech, and mind produces the three bodies of the buddha, which is merely another name for Vairocana. Although unstated, the concept of acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas (*wushengfa ren* 無生法忍, Skt. *anutpattikadharmakṣānti*)⁸⁶ is alluded to by such positions as no material forms can be established outside of the mind and all buddhas possess the mark of emptiness. Śubhākarasiṃha's explanation that the achievement of buddhahood is as immediate as the arousal of the *bodhicitta* – in which the three esoterica play a central role – is actually quite similar to some as-

⁸⁴ The three absurd graspings (*sanzhi* 三執) are grasping the concept of self, grasping the concept of the dharmas, and the delusion of ignorance. See *Da Piluzhena chengfo shenbian jiachi jing* 1, T 848, 18.3a.

⁸⁵ *Zunsheng foding xiu yuga fagui yi* 尊勝佛頂修瑜伽法軌儀 2, T 973, 19.380a25–b3.

⁸⁶ 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; roll 2, 14.546a.

pects of the doctrinal position held by Huayan 華嚴 proponents. Instead of suggesting that all ten or fifty-two bodhisattva stages are interconnected, Śubhākarasiṃha promotes a position influenced by the rhetoric of subitism. In the realm of reality, complete enlightenment is instantaneous. This is the most superior of all spiritual attainments.

The third great Tantric master, Amoghavajra (Bukong 不空, 705–774),⁸⁷ adds new attributes to the three esoterica that accord with aspects of Tantric doctrine and practice he promotes. Just as Śubhākarasiṃha emphasized universality with respect to the esoterica of body, speech, and mind, Amoghavajra accentuates its constancy and firmness. In his *Dale jin'gang bukong zhenshi sanmeiye jing bore boluomiduo liqu shi* 大樂金剛不空真實三昧耶經般若波羅蜜多理趣釋 (*Analysis of the principle and intention toward Prajñāpāramitā and the Sūtra on the samaya [coming together] of great bliss, vajra non-emptiness and true reality*, T 1003), for instance, he likens it to vajra or adamant:

Vajra (jin'gang 金剛, adamant) attests to attaining the state of buddhahood in which all dharmas are self-existent. One attains and attests to the *vajra* [adamantine nature] of the three esoterica of body, speech, and mind. Within the storehouse consciousness [*ālayavijñāna*] one cultivates the [religious] path, defilements [*kleśa*], and habits [*vāsanā*]. “Firmness” accords with *vajra* and is difficult to destroy. One should employ the *samādhi* on the *vajra*-knowledge of great emptiness and attest to and attain the Dharma body, the universal radiance of glorious brightness (*guangming bianzhao* 光明遍照), the Tathāgata Vairocana.⁸⁸

My understanding of this passage is that enlightened beings should manifest *vajra*-like *samādhi*. The primary purpose of ritual involving the body, speech, and mind is to develop the *samādhi* that will render the practitioner – actually the practitioner’s mind – firm, immove-

⁸⁷ For the biography of Amoghavajra see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 1, T 2061, 50.712a–714a; see also Chou, “Tantrism in China” (cf. n. 67 above) 284–307.

⁸⁸ *Dale jin'gang bukong zhenshi sanmeiye jing bore boluomiduo liqu shi* 大樂金剛不空真實三昧耶經般若波羅蜜多理趣釋 2, T 1003, 19.607b25–28.

able, and bright in nature, making him thereby functionally no different than Vairocana.

Amoghavajra's translation of the *Wuliangshou rulai guanxing gongyang yigui* 無量壽如來觀行供養儀軌 (*Ritual procedures for making offerings related to the visualization practice of the Tathāgata Amitāyus*, T 930) suggests another way in which the concept of the three esoterica came to be understood in the nascent Tantric tradition: It was used as a key phrase encapsulating the approach to Buddhist practice that uses *dhāraṇī* and mantra:

At that time the Bodhisattva Vajrapani resided in the midst of the great assembly of the Buddha Vairocana. Arising from his seat he joined palms and respectfully addressed the Buddha saying, "World Honored One, for the sake of living beings plagued by unwholesome karma in world systems characterized by sundry defilements (*zaran* 雜染, *saṃkleśa*) in the future during the age of the decline of the Dharma (*mofo* 末法), I will preach the *dhāraṇī* of the Buddha Amitāyus [by which one] cultivates the approach of the three esoterica (*sanmi men*), attests to [the power of] the *buddhānusr̥ṭi-samādhī* (*nianfo sanmei* 念佛三昧), acquires rebirth in the Pure Land, and enters the proper position/level of the bodhisattva.⁸⁹

One does not acquire rebirth in that *kṣetra* by means of a few meritorious [deeds] and expedients devoid of wisdom. For this reason, if one relies on this teaching and cultivates this practice with correct contemplation (*zhengnian* 正念), he will assuredly be reborn in the highest grade of the highest class of the world-system Sukhāvātī and attain the initial stage [of the bodhisattva path].

If one is either a householder or a renunciant who desires rebirth in the Pure Land, he should first enter the *maṇḍala* and obtain consecration [*abhiśeka*]. Thereafter he should receive the *Ritual guide on chants and intonations* (*Niansong yigui* 念誦儀軌)⁹⁰ from his master. On either a superior site or

⁸⁹ The proper level or position of the bodhisattva (*zhengwei* 正位, Skt. *niyāma, samyaktva*). See *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經 1, T 475, 14.542b; roll, 2, 545c; roll 3, 553c.

⁹⁰ The *Niansong yigui* referred to here, if it does not refer to the current text, probably refers to the *Wuliangshou rulai niansong yigui* 無量壽如來念誦儀軌 (*Ritual guide on chants and intonations of the Tathāgata Amitāyus*), twelve sheets in one roll, translated by Amoghavajra, which, though now lost, was listed repeatedly in catalogs prepared by Yuanzhao 圓照 (fl. 794): *Da Tang zhenyuan xukaiyuan shijiao lu* 大唐貞元續開元釋教錄

residence paint, wipe, and cleanse [the area] and set up a square altar. Spread a heaven-shaped [round] covering on top and hang banners around the circumference. The top of the altar is divided into an eight[-sectioned] *maṇḍala*. Grind white sandalwood incense paste and smear it on the positions of the holy [deities]. Enshrine an image of Amitāyus on the western face of the altar. He [the aspirant] sits on the east of the altar. He sits facing west opposite the image. I either spread a reed mat or sit with my legs on a small table.

Three times a day scatter various types of flowers, burn various types of incense, and place two *queqie* 闕伽-dishes. Either use bowls or cups and utensils of gold, silver, bronze, stone, earthenware, tile, and so forth. Fill one that has not yet been used with perfumed water and place it on top of the altar. Enshrine four worthy [wish-fulfilling] vases on the four horns [corners] of the altar. Burn incense, light lamps, daub incense, and [make sure that] food and drink, in accordance to their power, are set out. Empower (*jiachi* 加持, *adhiṣṭhāna*) [the objects] one by one and attentively make offerings.

The practitioner [should] wash or bathe daily and put on new clean clothes. [If he cannot] he should use the empowerment of the true word (*zhenyan jiachi* 真言加持, mantra-empowerment) to render them clean. In pensive visualization all beings possessing desires are originally clean and pure: for all are covered over with transient dust. [If] they have not awoken to the truth, they are deluded and have lost *bodhi*. They are drowning in life and death [*samsāra*] and endure immeasurable suffering.

For this reason, I preach the empowerment of the three esoterica (*sanmi jiachi* 三密加持). Now both self and others may attain cleanliness and purity. Taking a lotus flower in one's two hands and joining the palms one should then intone the 'True word that purifies the three kinds of karma' (*jing sanye zhenyan* 淨三業真言) three times."⁹¹

This guide provides one of the most succinct descriptions of ritual procedures for cultivating the three esoterica and ritual empowerment by means of the three esoterica. What is striking is the similarity between the stated goals and benefits of this ritual and the

1, T 2156, 55.749b12; roll 3, T 2156, 55.767b20; *Zhenyuan xinding shijiao mulu* 真元新定釋教目錄 1, T 2157, 55.772b29; roll 15, T 2157, 55.879c18; roll 21, T 2157, 55.924c12–13; and roll 27, T 2157, 55.1011a14–15.

⁹¹ *Wuliangshou rulai guanxing gongyang yigui* 1, T 930, 19.67b–c.

purposes of mainstream Sinitic Pure Land practice.⁹² Although the rhetoric of empowerment (*jiachi*) pervades, the fundamental goal is rebirth in Sukhāvātī and attainment of the aspirant's proper bodhisattva level. It is merely a repackaging of mainstream Mahāyāna ritual with flashy new terminology and ritual accoutrements. Efficacy (*lingyan* 靈驗) is the critical issue here. The name of the mantra the aspirant is supposed to chant is also significant because the chanting of the spell is said to ritually purify the three types of karma produced by the aspirant, thus transforming them from ordinary karma into the three esoterica. It is both the “*dhāraṇī* of the Buddha Amitāyus” and the “True word that purifies the three kinds of karma.” In this manner the aspirant ritually becomes a bodhisattva by the power of the *dhāraṇī*/mantra and is assured rebirth in the Pure Land. In this connection we can see that the concept of the three esoterica as used in the early Tantric literature of the High Tang period encapsulates the universal approach of the Mantrayāna or Vajrayāna within the larger context of mainstream Mahāyāna Buddhism. In other words, the three esoterica becomes a catch-phrase to refer to the putatively more efficacious approach utilizing mantra, *dhāraṇī*, *maṇḍala*, and so forth.

Amoghavajra's most straightforward statement on the meaning of the three esoterica is found in his translation of *Jin'gangding yugazhong fa anouduoluo sanmiao sanputi xin lun* 金剛頂瑜伽中發阿耨多羅三藐三菩提心論 (*Treatise on producing the thought of anuttarā-samyaksambodhi in the yoga of the vajra-crown* [vajraśekhara], T 1665).⁹³ This undated discourse, erroneously attributed to Nāgārjuna

⁹² For more on this ritual manual and its procedures see Charles D. Orzech, “A Tang Esoteric Manual for Rebirth in the Pure Land: *Rites for Contemplation of and Offerings to Amitāyus Tathāgata*” (forthcoming in a festschrift for Roger Coreless). I would like to thank Charlie for sharing his study of this interesting text with me.

⁹³ Abé Ryūichi translates the title as *Discourse on the Enlightened Mind*; see *The Weaving of Mantra* (cf. n. 2 above) 255. Ken White calls it the *Bodhicitta Śāstra* and provides an annotated translation of the entire text in his *The Role of Bodhicitta in Buddhist Enlightenment* (cf. n. 8 above) 209–235. I agree with White that the text was spuriously attributed to Nāgārjuna (ca. 150–200 C.E.), but wonder why he holds to an Indian heritage for the document? See White, *The Role of Bodhicitta in Buddhist Enlightenment*, 13 n. 5, 33.

(Longshu 龍樹, ca. 150–200),⁹⁴ was probably composed in China because it alludes to Śubhākarasiṃha and Yixing's *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu*.⁹⁵ The title suggests it is an exegesis on the *vajraśekhara* literature, although the body quotes a passage from only one such text towards the end (*Jin'gangding yuga jing* 金剛頂瑜伽經, T 865).⁹⁶ It may date to after the rebellions of An Lushan 安祿山 and Shi Siming 史思明 (ca. 755–763). In my opinion, the short treatise was crafted for a non-specialist audience – probably Tang scholar-officials – because it briefly describes the meaning of ritual practices from the *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing* in a straightforward manner and squarely within the conceptual and practical framework of the bodhi-sattva path found in mainstream Mahāyāna scriptures, by quoting and alluding to such works as the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, and *Lotus Sūtra*. Its explanation of the three esoterica comes toward the end:

Generally, practitioners who cultivate yogic visualization (*yuga guan* 瑜伽觀) should necessarily cultivate all the practices of the three esoterica (*sanmi xing* 三密行) and give evidence of and awaken to the meaning of “completing the body of five marks.”⁹⁷ With respect to the three esoterica, the first is

⁹⁴ 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. For the problem of Nāgārjuna's existence and dating in Indian literature see Joseph Walser, “Nāgārjuna and the *Ratnāvalī*” (cf. n. 17 above).

⁹⁵ *Jin'gangding yugazhong fa anouduoluo sanmiao sanputi xin lun*, T 1665, 32.574a23; cf. *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing shu* 14, T 1796, 39.723b.

⁹⁶ *Jin'gangding yugazhong fa anouduoluo sanmiao sanputi xin lun*, T 1665, 32.574c11–13. The *Jin'gangding yuga jing* is another name for the *Jin'gangding yiqie rulai zhenshi she dasheng xianzheng dajiaowang jing* 金剛頂一切如來真實攝大乘現證大教王經 (*Sarvatathāgatatatvasaṅgraha*), in three rolls. The portion paraphrased in this essay is from roll 1, T 865, 18.207c7–10.

⁹⁷ “Completing the body of five marks” (*wuxiang chengshen* 五相成身) is also called “completing the body of five dharmas” (*wufa chengshen* 五法成身) and “completing the body of five turnings” (*wuzhuan chengshen* 五轉成身). The five marks are (1) the penetrating and accomplishing mind (*tongda xin* 通達心), (2) [cultivating] the bodhicitta (*[xiu]putixin* 修菩提心), (3) [achieving] the vajra mind (*[cheng] jin'gang xin* 成金剛心), (4) [giving evidence of] the vajra body (*[zheng] jin'gang shen* 證金剛身), and (5) giving evidence of unsurpassed bodhi (*zheng wushang puti* 證無上菩提). Ultimately, manifesting the five marks was tantamount to “achieving the body of the Tathāgata Vairocana in the

body-esoterica (*shenmi*), like binding seals (*qi Yin* 契印, *mudrā*) and summoning the saintly assembly here. The second is speech-esoterica (*yumi*), like secretly chanting true words (*zhenyan*, mantra). The passages are clear and distinct and devoid of obstruction and error. The third is mind-esoterica (*xinmi*), like abiding in yoga, mutually resonating with the white and pure full moon and visualizing (*guan*) *bodhicitta* (*putixin* 菩提心).⁹⁸

This passage is the most succinct statement on the nature and purpose of the three esoterica in the early Tantric tradition. The three esoterica are clearly labeled as the ritualized practices of making *mudrā*, chanting mantra, and abiding in yogic meditation and are said to produce the ultimate goal of enlightenment – “completing the body of the five marks.” Although concise, when seen in the context of other passages in *sūtras* and commentaries of the time, it is far from being a representative statement about the three esoterica. Amoghavajra’s views presented here later became the orthodox position in the mature Esoteric traditions in Japan. I think it is both important and ironic that a discourse probably composed as a simplified statement to promote aristocratic and official support for his form of Mahāyāna Buddhism would ultimately exert so much influence on the understanding of three esoterica.

Mid and late Tang Period

By the mid-Tang period the meaning of three esoterica as used in the growing literature used in the circles of early Tantric practitioners appears to have become relatively fixed. This is because there was no need for translators and scholars to explain what the three esoterica were or referred to in either the newly translated *sūtras* or in prefatory or exegetical materials. Not only was the meaning fixed but the concept of the three esoterica was presented as one of the primary teachings of the Tantric movement. This is the way the Silla

Vajra Realm (*jin’gangjie* 金剛界) See *Jin’gangding yugazhong fa anouduoluo sanmiao sanputi xin lun*, T 1665, 32.574b17–20.

⁹⁸ *Jin’gangding yugazhong fa anouduoluo sanmiao sanputi xin lun*, T 1665, 32.574b11–16.

monk Hyech'o 慧超 (704–d. after 780),⁹⁹ one of the recognized disciples of Amoghavajra, uses the concept of the three esoterica in his preface to the *Dasheng yuga jin'gang xinghai Manshushili qianbei qianba dajiaowang jing* 大乘瑜伽金剛性海曼殊室利千臂千鉢大教王經 (*Sūtra of the king of the great teaching, the thousand armed thousand alms-bowl carrying Mañjuśrī who possesses an ocean of yoga vajra nature in the Mahāyāna*, T 1177A). Hyech'o considers himself one who has been consecrated to transmit the three esoterica by covenant.¹⁰⁰ Amoghavajra's translation of this *sūtra*, which Hyech'o calls for short the *Sūtra of the thousand alms-bowl carrying Mañjuśrī*, refers to the three esoterica in a variety of constructions: an approach of the three esoterica (*sanmi men*), as it is found in Śubhākarasiṃha and Yixing's translation of and commentary to the *Da Piluzhena chengfo jing*; and in lists of euphemisms for Buddha nature: “minds of the thus-come buddhas, the three esoterica, the thirty branches,¹⁰¹ the *vajra*-wisdom mirror, the way of the sages, and the ocean of the *bhūtatahata* [the all-containing immaterial nature of the *dharmakāya*],” and so forth.¹⁰² Another example is the Tang Emperor Daizong's 代宗 (r. 762–779) preface to Amoghavajra's retranslation of the *Renwang jing*. Here the concept of the three esoterica is again used as a term encompassing the Tantric approach to Mahāyāna practice: “The trepiṭaka [master of the Tripi-

⁹⁹ See *Daizong chaozeng sikong dabian zheng guangzhi sanzang heshang biao zhiji* 代宗朝贈司空大辯正廣智三藏和上表制集 3, T 2120, 52.844b1–3; for a brief biography of Hyech'o see Yang Han-sung, et al., trans., *The Hye Ch'o Diary: Memoir of a Pilgrimage to the Five Regions of India* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press 1984).

¹⁰⁰ “Taesūng yuga kūngang sōnghae Mansusilli ch'ōnbi ch'ōnbal taegyowang kyōng sō” 大乘瑜伽金剛性海曼殊室利千臂千鉢大教王經序, HPC 3.381c9, 382a3.

¹⁰¹ The thirty branches (*sanshizhi* 三十支) is a term found only in this *sūtra*, where the term appears 18 times, not counting Hyech'o's use of it in the preface. It always appears in lists following the “approach of the three esoterica” (*sanmi men*) and usually precedes the concept of *samādhi* (*sanmodi* 三摩地). See *Dasheng yuga jin'gang xinghai Manshushili qianbei qianba dajiaowang jing* 1, T 1177A, 20.725c12–13, 727c2–3; roll 5, T 1177A, 20.750a9, 750a25, 750a29; roll 6, T 1177A, 20.752, c9–10.

¹⁰² “Taesūng yuga kūngang sōnghae Mansusilli ch'ōnbi ch'ōnbal taegyowang kyōng sō,” HPC 3:382a3; T 1177A, 20.724c20–21; see also *Dasheng yuga jin'gang xinghai Manshushili qianbei qianba dajiaowang jing* 1, T 1177A, 20.725c2–3, 727c2–3, roll 2, T 1177A, 20.731a29–b1, and so forth.

taka] studies and researches the two truths [absolute truth and conventional truth] and teaches and transmits the three esoterica.”¹⁰³

The monk Liangben 良賁 (717–777)¹⁰⁴ was also a disciple of Amoghavajra and served on his team that executed the retranslation of the *Renwang jing* in 765–766.¹⁰⁵ This exegete served as a bridge between mainstream Sinitic intellectual Buddhism and Amoghavajra’s Tantric tradition. As in commentaries on Kumārajīva’s translation above, Liangben’s *Renwang huguo bore boluomiduo jing shu* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經疏 (*Commentary on the Perfection of wisdom sūtra for humane kings who wish to protect their states*, T 1709) locates the concept of the three esoterica in references to the three types of karma:

Question: The Buddha does not have frivolous thoughts. They are completely and entirely fixed [in meditation] (*dīng* 定). Why then does this scripture repeat the word “enter” [as in enter *samādhi*]?

Answer: The Buddha does not have frivolous thoughts. Because he is an instructor he manifests wisdom in accordance to meditation. For this reason he showed his first entrance [into *samādhi*]. For this reason he dually cultivates meditation and wisdom and he neither falters nor moves [from *samādhi*]. When he enters meditation he emits light and, in regard to preaching the Dharma, the three types of karma (*sanye*), he instructs, are verily the three esoterica (*sanmi*).

The Tathāgata constantly [abides in the] Dharma and reveres *prajñā*. He desires to discourse and show respect for the rites. Profound *samādhi* only the Buddha alone attains; hence, it is claimed to be “profound.” As for *samādhi*, this is said to be “universal maintenance” [*samādhi*] (*dengchi* 等持). Its substance is separate from sinking or shaking; hence, it is said to be “universal.” It solely fixes on one position; hence, it is said to be “main-

¹⁰³ “Renwang huguo bore boluomi jing xu” 仁王護國般若波羅蜜經序 T 246, 8.834b8.

¹⁰⁴ For the biography of Liangben see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 5, T 2061, 50.735a26–c22.

¹⁰⁵ For historical background to the translation of this *sūtra* and detailed study and translation of this *sūtra* see Charles D. Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press 1998). In this book Orzech refers to Liangben as Liang-pi; the logograph *ben* 奔 can also be read as *bi* and *fen*.

tained.” Because its universality is maintained it is also said that the meaning of *samādhi* is the same as “ground/stage/*bhūmi*” (*di* 地).¹⁰⁶

As before, the Buddha’s power to emit light, preach the Dharma, and abide in *prajñā* for the benefit of beings is described as the three esoterica. Liangben holds that the Buddha is absorbed in a constant state of *samādhi* in his pure land and that this *samādhi* is universally maintained or, in other words, pervades everywhere. The three esoterica are the three types of karma of the Buddha because the Buddha has never really left *samādhi* in his pure land. He is grounded there and by means of the three esoterica seems to do the things he does. His teaching skills, compassion, and even his first entrance into *samādhi* are all a show: He has never left *samādhi*. He is grounded in the unaltered stage or *bhūmi* of buddhahood. This point is reiterated later, when he comments on the following passage from one of the scripture’s *gāthās*:

The abodes of the three worthies¹⁰⁷ and ten saints¹⁰⁸ are fruition rewards.¹⁰⁹

A buddha only is the one person that dwells in a pure land.

All living beings have temporary abode rewards

[Yet] when they ascend to the adamantine source they dwell in pure lands.

The virtue of the Tathāgata’s three kinds of karma (*sanyede* 三業德) is immeasurable.

Consequently all living beings equally receive his compassion.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ *Renwang huguo bore boluomiduo jing shu* 2, T 1709, 33.449a4–16.

¹⁰⁷ The three worthies (*sanxian* 三賢) are bodhisattvas, prior to the *bhūmis*, who have achieved the level of the ten abidings (*shizhu* 十住), the ten practices (*shixing* 十行), and the ten transferences (*shi huixiang* 十回向). See *Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章 17A, T 1851, 44.788b27–28.

¹⁰⁸ The ten saints (*shisheng* 十聖) are bodhisattvas above the sage of the ten transferences (*shi huixiang*). See *Renwang bore boluomi jing* 1, T 245, 8.827b12; 828a1.

¹⁰⁹ A fruition reward (*guobao* 果報, Skt. *phala*, *vipāka*) is retribution for good or evil deeds, implying that different conditions in this life or any other life are the fruits of seeds sown in one’s previous life or lives. See *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮花經 (*Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra*) 7, T 262, 9.56a8–9.

¹¹⁰ *Renwang huguo bore poluomiduo jing* 1, T 246, 8.838a1–3; for an alternate translation see Orzech, *Politics and Transcendent Wisdom* (cf. n. 105 above) 234. The same passage in the earlier recension of the *sūtra* (T 245) reads: “The abodes of the three worthies and ten saints are fruition rewards / A buddha only is the one person that dwells in a

Liangben interprets the meaning of the virtue of the Tathāgata's three kinds of karma as follows:

Because the eulogy speaks of 'virtues,' the foregoing virtues of the three types of karma are verily the approach of the three esoterica (*sanmi men*). In this function of affairs, verily, [they are] the three extraordinary occurrences.¹¹¹

The three extraordinary occurrences (*san shidao* 三示導, Skt. *trīṇi prātihāryāṇi*) refer to three miraculous ways that bodhisattvas respond to living beings suffering in hell (*diyu* 地獄) and work to save them. For the most part these are manifestations of the inconceivable power of the spiritual penetrations. The first is the employment of spiritual transformation or magical performance (*shenbian shidao* 神變示導, *ṛddhiprātihārya*) demonstrating the bodhisattva's ability to manipulate the phenomenal world because of his acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas. The second is the use of mind-reading (*jixin shidao* 記心示導, *ādeśanāprātihārya*) in order to observe the spiritual state of the audience so as to gage his remarks appropriately to encourage them to convert. Third is the miracle of admonition (*jiaojie shidao* 教誡示導, *anuśāsanaprātihārya*) through which the bodhisattva's compassionate mind reaches out to strike a chord with a listener causing the latter to destroy his desires for mistaken views and practices that lead to unwholesome consequences.¹¹² Liangben's position is fundamentally and strikingly mainstream Mahāyāna, especially for a disciple of Amoghavajra commenting on a putatively "Tantric" or "esotericized" recapitulation of the *Renwang jing*. His equating the three esoterica to the three extraordinary occurrences demonstrates that the inclusive spirit of the earlier intellectual approaches to defining this concept were preserved within the cadre of monks associated with the early Tantric masters.

pure land / All living beings have temporary abode rewards / [Yet] when they ascend to the adamantine source they dwell in pure lands / The virtue of the Tathāgata's three kinds of karma (*sanyede*) is boundless (*wuji* 無極) / I now, by the light of the moon, worship the three treasures [Buddha, Dharma, *saṅgha*]." See *Renwang bore boluomiduo jing* 1, T 245, 8.828a1–3.

¹¹¹ *Renwang huguo jing shu* 3, T 1709, 33.427a5–8.

¹¹² See *Apidamo jushelun* 阿毘達磨俱舍論 27, T 1558, 29.143c7–144a23.

The Tiantai monk Zhanran 湛然 (711–782),¹¹³ heir to the exegetical tradition of Zhiyi and Guanding, followed the example of scholars of the times in locating the three esoterica in the earlier *sūtras*. In his *Weimo jing lüe shu* 維摩經略疏 (*Concise commentary on the Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, T 1778), Zhanran comments on the first *gāthā*-verse (*jiesong* 偈頌) in the first chapter, “Buddha Land” (*foguo pin* 佛國品), of Kumārajīva’s translation of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra* (T 475). The second half of the *gāthā* uses the terms “ten powers” (*shili* 十力) and “spiritual power” (*shenli* 神力) repeatedly, alluding to the Buddha’s employment of his spiritual penetrations in preaching the Dharma. Zhanran’s analysis begins in this part of the verse:

Question: The Great Saint, over the next fifteen lines,¹¹⁴ specifically describes and praises the three esoterica of the Buddha in three passages. In the first two lines he praises the body-esoterica. In the next six lines he praises the speech-esoterica. And in the next seven lines he praises the mind-esoterica.

The three esoterica verily are the inconceivable transformations (*busiyihua* 不思議化) of the three wheels. The three are not lost and the three cannot be protected. The throngs who take refuge in the Great Saint and the Dharma King are those who praise the superior response of the Dharma body.¹¹⁵

A passage from his *Fahua wenju ji* 法華文句記 (*Record of literary passages from the Lotus Sūtra*, T 1719) explains what Zhanran means by equating the three esoterica to the three wheels:

In order to differentiate their changing functions, it is said that the three types of karma, and so forth, are called by the different names of the types of karma, three esoterica, three wheels, and the three virtues. Mind-esoterica

¹¹³ For the biography of Zhanran see *Song gaoseng zhuan* 6, T 2061, 50.739b9–740a16. For more on Zhanran see Chen Jinhua, “One Name, Three Monks: Two Northern Chan Masters Emerge from the Shadow of Their Contemporary, the Tiantai Master Zhanran 湛然 (711–782),” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 22/1 (1999) 1–91. See also Chen, *Making and Remaking History* (cf. n. 34 above).

¹¹⁴ Zhanran reports that it is the part of the verse beginning with *jin feng shizun* 今奉世尊; see *Weimo jing lüe shu* 2, T 1778, 38.587b8; cf. *Weimoji suoshuo jing* 1, T 475, 14.537c25–538a14.

¹¹⁵ *Weimo jing lüe shu* 2, T 1778, 38.587b18–22.

(*yimi*) is namely *prajñā*. Speech-esoterica (*koumi*) is namely liberation. Body-esoterica (*shenmi*) is namely the Dharma body.¹¹⁶

His position is essentially the same as Zhiyi's.

The diction of a passage in Zhanran's short exegesis titled *Shi buermen* 十不二門 (*The ten non-dual approaches*, T 1927) strongly suggests that, with respect to his understanding of the three esoterica, he was somewhat influenced by the literature translated or composed by Śubhākarasimha and Amoghavajra. The primary thrust of the exegesis is to demonstrate the ultimate non-duality of reality, the "consummate interfusion and entry into the sublime" (*rongtong rumiao* 融通入妙). Although these terms, consummate interfusion, in particular, seem to indicate a Huayan scriptural or exegetical setting, they are actually found repeatedly in the writings of Zhiyi and other early exegetes, including Amoghavajra. In this connection, the three esoterica or three types of karma are ultimately interchangeable with the Dharma body and Vairocana:

8. The non-dual approach of the three kinds of karma. With respect to the approach of transforming others, phenomena (*shi* 事) are divided into the three esoterica. Accordingly, the principle of material objects (*wuli* 物理) acquire the designation "not the same." The mind-wheel (*yilun* 意輪, "thought") mirrors potentiality and the two [other] wheels establish/engender transformation. The presently-appearing body preaches the Dharma and does not have a hair's difference [from the true Dharma body]. With reference to this body, distinctions lie between the true (*zhen* 真) and the false (*ying* 應). With reference to the Dharma, distinctions lie between expediency (*quan* 權) and reality (*shi* 實).

If the two bodies are different, why then do we call it the "Dharma body"? If the two types of preaching are perverse, why then do we say "all complete the Path to Buddhahood"? If only the Dharma body responds and does not condescend to the [mundane] world and if there is only the Path to Buddhahood, who exhibits/bestows the Three Vehicles? The body is still a non-body and the preaching [is] necessarily a non-preaching. Body and speech are universal (*pingdeng*) and are equal to that mind-wheel. Mind forms are all thus, they transform without a [pre-determined] plan. Are there not a hundred spheres in one mind? All these spheres are nothing but the three types

¹¹⁶ *Fahua wenju* ji 9, T 1719, 34.317a6–8.

of karma. A sphere still is a recollection (*nian* 念, “thought”); so how are the three types of karma peculiar? The function of a result never deteriorates; its cause must be designated a result [of some other cause]. If you believe in causes and results, you should know that the three esoterica are the basis. The hundred spheres and the three types of karma are fully prepared in emptiness (*kong* 空), the provisional (*jia* 假), and the mean (*zhong* 中). Hence, by employing the designation that is appropriate everything goes to fruition. Each and every response form, each and every word sound are nothing but the hundred spheres and the three types of karma all complete. Transformation repeatedly begets transformation: Thus it is said! Hence, one recollection is every mind and already possesses the nature of principle (*lixing* 理性) and the ocean of marks of the three esoterica. One mote of dust recompenses form and the same resides in the original principle Vairocana. Forthwith they are named as the three indistinguishables. This, by means of self and others, completes the approach of non-duality.¹¹⁷

In Zhanran’s own words the three indistinguishables (*san wuchabie* 三無差別) are those of the mind (*xin* 心), the Buddha (*fo* 佛), and living beings (*zhongsheng* 衆生).¹¹⁸ This is a grand statement on the fundamental non-duality of phenomena with respect to the nature of ultimate reality. The three esoterica, which in the beginning are equated to the three types of karma, are quickly substituted for the nature of all manifested phenomena. Yet these manifested phenomena – people, things, objects, ideas that have meaning in provisional contexts – are merely mental phantasms produced by the mind and are ultimately indistinguishable from body, speech, and the realm of reality. This is essentially the same as the refrain of the Huayan tradition’s cosmic ecology (but which was also shared in most of the mature exegetical traditions as well as Chan): all in one and one in all. The three esoterica are the cause of the transformations of all things and yet they are indistinguishable from Vairocana, the nature of reality, because they are ultimately empty of self-nature.

¹¹⁷ *Shi buermen* 1, T 1927, 46.704a26–b11.

¹¹⁸ *Fahua xuanyi shiqian* 法華玄義釋籤 6, T 1717, 33.858c2.

What are the three esoterica?

We are now ready to return to the questions that have guided our investigation of the concept of the three esoterica. First, how did medieval Chinese Buddhist intellectuals and early Tantric practitioners understand the significance of this term? The evidence is clear that the three esoterica recalled much more than the ritualized approach of *mudrā*, mantra, and yogic meditation. In medieval Sinitic Buddhist scripture and exegesis the three esoterica have many snugly-packed layers of meaning. Although single layers of meaning can be peeled off, no one layer can account for the wide range of semantic usage. Many of the major scholar-monks of the medieval period sought to locate traces of the three esoterica in scripture and used them as a heuristic device to talk about unexplainable aspects of the Buddhadharmā and, especially, the nature of the actions of enlightened beings such as bodhisattvas and buddhas.

The idea of the three esoterica first appeared in an early Mahāyāna scripture in the early fourth century, the *Miji jing*. Its basic contours, however, were actually set in Kumārajīva's *Dazhidu lun*, because most exegetes alluded to this work's presentation of the three esoterica as referring to the inexplicable spiritual powers of the Buddha as a result of his constantly abiding in *samādhi* and manifest in his preaching the Dharma. Kumārajīva also linked the three esoterica to the concept of the virtue of the three types of karma. Zhiyi built upon this foundation by using the three esoterica as a heuristic device to talk about the three types of karma, three virtues, three wheels, which he associated with the spiritual penetrations, and general bodhisattva actions employed in preaching the Dharma. Guanding expands upon his master's position by describing the three esoterica as bodhisattva powers and virtues and connecting them to other lists, such as the four virtues, five constancies, five fruits, and four bodhisattva practices, which all describe either the enlightened state or the method by which a bodhisattva converts others. In Guanding is also found an interpretation of the three esoterica shared by Jizang: that the three esoterica refer to *prajñā*, the Dharma body, and liberation: all terms to describe absolute reality.

Jizang applied the three esoterica directly to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara to speak of his spiritual penetrations and wholesome actions to convert living beings. He suggests that they refer to the bodhisattva's entering meditation, emitting light, and preaching the Dharma: a view he shares with Kuiji. Jizang compares them to the three virtues, but adds another list, the four marks, to explain their meaning. He also refers to a mystical endowment of the three esoterica by which buddhas and bodhisattvas preach *sūtras* and convert beings by making their message fit the audience. Wōnch'ūk also explains the three esoterica as associated with the spiritual powers used in preaching the Dharma, referring directly information in Kumārajīva's *Dazhidu lun*. He also connects them to the adamantine (*vajra*) nature of the Buddha's body and as what enables buddhas to turn the wheel of the Dharma while remaining in *samādhi*.

This leads us to the question: Did its meaning in Sinitic Buddhist literature change prior to its use in Tantric literature and ritual? The simple answer is yes. In medieval Sinitic Buddhism, the three esoterica came to represent not only the method but the means of bodhisattva practice: the way by which bodhisattvas both resonate with and manifest the Dharma body. In other words, the term was used to account for the essence and function of enlightenment. The three esoterica were not completely redefined in the newly emerging Tantric literature. The Tantric masters use slightly different terms but the semantics are essentially the same. Furthermore, there is no literary evidence of disputes over the meaning of the term. New meaning is simply added to the term. The whole of the preexisting exegetical tradition's understanding was preserved and new meanings were assimilated with the translation of new *sūtras* and the production of new commentaries. Some were conceptual like universality (*ping-deng*), as found in Śubhākarasiṃha and Yixing's translation of and commentary on the *Da Piluzhena jing*, and others were practical. Perhaps because the practical definition applied by Amoghavajra, equating the three esoterica to the *mudrā*, mantra, and yogic meditation, is the most simple to understand and put into practice it later became a preferred understanding of the term. Among exegetes, however, this was merely one of a many of ways of describing the term and certainly not the most common.

The early Tantric master Śubhākarasiṃha and Yixing attempted to remove the mystery surrounding the three esoterica by clearly labeling them as expedients by which one is empowered to attain buddhahood in this life. Like previous exegetes, the two scholar monks also directly associated them with arousing the *bodhicitta* and turning the wheel of the Dharma. Although they still refer to the three types of karma, Śubhākarasiṃha also combines them with concepts that resonate more fully with his message: *śūnyatā* (emptiness), *sambodhi*, and *siddhi*. By employing the concept of universality, he made more concrete ideas developed in earlier exegesis: their being what resonates with and responds to things, their ability purify the *bodhicitta*, and their explanation as the Dharma body and Vairocana himself. The three esoterica are put into action in practices involving *maṇḍala* and mantra, which cultivate a pure mind and provide for interactions with all things. Following Kumārajīva, Vajrabodhi saw the three esoterica as associated with constancy and firmness, the *vajra*-like nature of *samādhi*. They still refer to the three types of karma, of course, but they also refer to Vairocana, the Dharma body. Vairocana is not an exterior entity; he is the buddha within that is manifest when the practitioner cultivates the three esoterica.

In the mid-Tang period, Hyech'o described the three esoterica in language recalling Buddha nature: the mind of the thus-come ones, the way of the sages, the *vajra*-wisdom mirror, and the Dharma body. Liangben shows that the ideas of the earlier exegetical tradition still had currency by combining the newly employed concept of universality with older ideas of entering *samādhi*, abiding in *prajñā*, emitting light, and preaching the Dharma. They are still the three types of karma and their association with the spiritual penetrations is found in his explanation of them as the three extraordinary occurrences. Zhanran merges ideas found in the writings of Zhiyi (the three wheels) and Guanding (*prajñā*, liberation, the Dharma body) with concepts introduced by the early Tantric masters (universality, Vairocana, the Dharma body) – all within the context of the commonly shared exegetical frame of consummate interfusion and entry into the sublime (the realm of reality), the nature of principle.

All of the Buddhist exegetes linked the three esoterica with the three types of karma produced by Tathāgatas, the three virtues, the three wheels, and so forth. The workings of these three esoterica are ultimately inexplicable and beyond human understanding. For this reason, I think that they understood them as representing the perfectly interfused reality of emptiness in active form and as resonating with mainstream Mahāyāna doctrinal concepts such as the Dharma body (*dharmakāya*), the *dharmadhātu* (the realm of reality), and Vairocana. The three esoterica are expedients (*upāya*) and are also directly linked to the spiritual penetrations manifested by buddhas and bodhisattvas. These powers are associated not only with the marks of spiritual attainment but also with the way these Buddhist figures preach the Buddhadharma and convert living beings. The strong connection to the spiritual penetrations may explain why it was an increasingly important topic in exegesis and account for its importance in nascent Tantric literature.

The meaning of the three esoterica eludes simple definition. Being empty of individual meaning, it was freely interconnected and interfused with any and all terms defining the nature of buddhahood. The term was conceptualized as transcending duality and, ultimately, as the perfect manifestation of the universality that enables living beings to be fundamentally and functionally not different from Vairocana, or the nature of the universe as it is. As a pithy catch phrase it came to represent the inherent potential for buddhahood in all things, as well as the buddhahood manifested in the actions of all living beings, and recalls what Buddhist scholiasts typically and more familiarly render as “Buddha nature” or the “Tathāgatagarbha.” In this connection it is indelibly tied to the great secret or esoteric teaching of the Mahāyāna, the one mind, the one vehicle, the Mahāyāna vision of reality, and, because it is a product of constantly dwelling in *samādhi*, the bodhisattva’s “acquiescence to the non-production of dharmas.”

What are the implications for the study of Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism in China? This research questions some assumptions that have been made about the nature and contributions of Tantric Buddhism in East Asia. First, Sinitic Buddhist scholiasts had a sophisticated understanding of the ineffability of the Dharma body – Vairo-

cana, the *dharmadhātu* – long before the arrival of the Tantric masters, so the claim cannot be advanced that this was a Tantric doctrinal innovation.¹¹⁹ Also, the concept of the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha, the three esoterica, is not a unique or defining characteristic of Tantric Buddhism in China without some important qualifications. In other words, we cannot make a strong case for Tantric Buddhism as a distinctly different tradition using exegetical materials or in intellectual history because what we see in the literature is also highly influenced by or indicative of the Huayan rhetoric of universality and consummate interfusion. Nevertheless, efficacy in ritual and Indianness are key themes. It is presented as more efficacious than mainstream Sinitic Buddhist cultic practices to which it bore many superficial similarities, such as the use of *dhāraṇī* and other types of ritual procedures to accomplish particular purposes. It was fresh from India and seemingly promoted as such. Do we underestimate the importance of its exoticness to its Chinese audience? Although agreement on a tighter definition of Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism may be impossible for specialists, I think the evidence for the role of the three esoterica in mainstream interpretations of Buddhist practice strongly encourages us to limit it to include the replication of the body, speech, and mind of the Buddha, within the narrower context of rituals involving mantra, *mudrā*, and meditation performed in new specialized *maṇḍala* under the auspices of a master to produce enlightenment immediately. A broad definition, in my opinion, makes it hard to distinguish from mainstream Sinitic Mahāyāna.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Matsunaga Yūkei 松長有慶, “Esoteric Buddhism: A Definition,” in *Mikkyō: Kōbō Daishi Kūkai and Shingon Buddhism (Bulletin of the Research Institute of Esoteric Buddhist Culture*, special issue, Kōyasan: Research Institute of Esoteric Buddhist Culture, Kōyasan University, October 1990) 23–40, esp. p. 25: “In *The Differences between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism* Kūkai states that Esoteric Buddhism differs from the earlier Nara schools and the Tendai school in regard to the following four points: 1) it asserts the possibility of becoming a Buddha in this very body; 2) it recognizes that the *dharmakāya* may preach; 3) it asserts the effability of the state of buddhahood; and 4) the benefits deriving from its teachings are superior to those of Exoteric Buddhism.”