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Mo Fa, The Three Levels Movement, and the Theory of the Three Periods

INTRODUCTION

Almost two and one-half millennia ago Aristotle identified “past fact” and “future fact” as universal *topoi* of human dialectical reasoning, and the time since would seem to bear out the truth of his observation. Among the past and future “facts” that have particularly excited human imagination and speculation we may count thinking on the beginnings and endings of things, cosmology and eschatology. Although the Buddhist tradition is usually seen within the context of a pan-Indian a-historical, “timeless,” or cyclical view of cosmology and eschatology, this is a rather limited approach to the many and varied narratives of time and history, cosmos and community found even within the documentary tradition, much less the numerous other aspects of the tradition. The prophesied disappearance of the Buddha’s teachings from the world, for example, puts a doctrine of historical and specific finitude (*saddhamma*) into rhetorical tension with an otherwise unbounded truth (*dharmatā*), ironically emphasizing the importance of the former through its prophesied disappearance (Hubbard 1996). In East Asia the disappearance of the dharma was understood as a slow, gradual process of decay through three distinct time periods, culminating in a prolonged period of difficulty and strife known as *mo fa* 末法, the “final period of the dharma.” Because of the great importance of the notion of *mo fa* and the three periods of the dharma for East Asian literary production, sectarian development, religious praxis, historiographical thinking, institutional organization, and the like, the precise terms of this tradition and their historical development have received a good deal of scholarly attention. Thus it is generally accepted that the idea of three periods of dharma ending in *mo fa* was based on a notion of the decline of the dharma that originated in India and was later systematized in China as the three periods of the True Dharma (*saddharma*, *cheng fa* 正法), the Semblance Dharma (*saddharma pratirūpika*, *hsiang fa* 像法), and the Final Dharma (*mo fa*). Because this systematization took place during the latter half of the sixth century it is also generally thought that it served to provide an important motivation for the emerging Pure Land and San-chieh-chiao 三階教 move-

ments, the latter's very name seen to incorporate the idea of the three periods of the dharma.

The San-chieh-chiao or "Teaching of the Three Levels" arose in China during the Sui and T'ang periods, but, in spite of its popularity among the powerful as well the poor, suffered a number of official suppressions and eventually disappeared. As the name implies, the Three Levels movement taught three distinct levels or capacities for realization, of which the third level is characterized by complete degeneration. Beings at this level, beset by attachments to the views of emptiness and existence, no longer have the capacity to apprehend the truth. A correspondence between the three periods and the three levels and particularly between the third level and *mo fa*, the third and final period of the dharma, has been assumed by virtually all who have written on the subject of *mo fa* or the San-chieh-chiao (including this author). Because this correspondence would indicate the widespread diffusion of the concept of *mo fa* and the three periods during the Sui and early T'ang, numerous studies have further used it as a reference for the dating of texts, authors, and other traditions. Recently, however, inspired by Jan Nattier's precise delineation of the terms of the decline tradition (Nattier 1991), I reinvestigated the extant texts of the Three Levels movement more carefully and discovered, rather to my chagrin, that *mo fa* barely figures in their writings at all and the three periods of the dharma not at all: the "three levels" have nothing at all to do with the "three periods!" That is, although the tradition of decline clearly dominates the Three Levels movement, the technical system of three periods of time culminating in a final period of *mo fa* does not, even in writings assumed to have been composed after the three period schema was widely reported by other Chinese Buddhists. In this brief paper I will present the few occurrences of *mo fa* found in the Three Levels texts and their context in order to demonstrate this thesis and then consider some of the implications of this finding.

THE TEXTS: ARGUING FROM SILENCE

What do I mean by when I claim that *mo fa* barely figures at all in the writings of the San-chieh-chiao? Simply that when we search through the extant texts attributed to the San-chieh-chiao, amounting to nearly two-hundred-thousand Chinese characters (roughly the equivalent of some one-hundred-twenty pages of the printed Taishō canon) we find but nine occurrences of the term and not a single usage in the context of the last or final of three periods or stages of the dharma's decline. There are, as always, a number of difficulties with a project of searching a corpus for a

particular term, and the first is the simple difficulty of arguing from silence. Although we have for our investigation a good number of San-chieh-chiao texts, because of the many suppressions of the movement and the inclusion of their scriptures in the apocryphal sections of the sūtra catalogs (which determined the normative Buddhist canon in China), the San-chieh-chiao has literally been excised from Chinese Buddhist history. Until the discovery of a number of their texts at the beginning of this century in Tun-huang and Japan, almost all knowledge of the San-chieh-chiao came from the mere titles of their texts listed in the old scripture catalogs or the odd polemic directed at them by their contemporaries. Although this changed dramatically when their texts turned up at Tun-huang, we still cannot presume to possess all or even a major portion of their writings.¹

A second problem that the researcher faces is the inordinate number of complex questions of dating, authorship, reading, and, due to the fragmentary and often damaged condition of the texts, even physical reconstruction of the texts. Thus, for example, to attribute any given manuscript or fragment to the Sui dynasty (or earlier) authorship of the founder (Hsin-hsing 540-594), is next to impossible at this point, thereby also rendering any conclusions about internal development of their doctrines or comparisons with other thinkers, schools, or texts problematic at best. Perhaps, however, the most difficult problem in understanding the texts of the San-chieh-chiao is working in a total vacuum of commentarial literature to aid in their interpretation. Often the only way to understand a technical term or phrase in the San-chieh-chiao materials is through its use in other traditions, obviously as dangerous a practice as it is cumbersome, massively enlarging the scope of one's research at the same time that it increases the already enormous potential for misinterpretation. The problems of this approach are well exemplified, I think, by my own and others' readiness to read the three levels through the lens of the systematized teaching of *mo fa* and the

1. This study is based on a survey of the Three Levels texts from Tun-huang and Japan edited by Yabuki (Yabuki 1927, appendix 1-415) and the scripture catalogues found in the Taishō canon. There are other individual texts which have been identified as from the Three Levels movement (e. g., the *Chih fa* 刺法, Pelliot 2849, identified by Dan Stevenson) and there is also the corpus recently discovered at Nanatsu-dera in Nagoya, Japan (at first look substantially the same as the earlier discoveries of Three Levels manuscripts in Japan). For this investigation I am indebted to Min Zhong, my research assistant who did the initial survey of the texts, Smith College for providing research funds that allowed the computer input of the Yabuki editions of Three Levels texts (enabling a more thorough search of the corpus), and especially to Professor Lewis Lancaster for facilitating that input process.

three periods; hopefully this paper will correct some of those errors while not introducing too many more. Nonetheless, for all of these reasons, although I am confident of my conclusions, they remain qualified conclusions. With these cautions, then, let us turn to the texts themselves.²

Wu chin tsang fa lüeh chi 無盡藏法略說

Our first two occurrences of the term *mo fa* are found in the *Wu chin tsang fa lüeh chi*, a text from the Stein collection of Tun-huang manuscripts (Stein #190) that describes the theory of the famous San-chieh-chiao charitable institution of the Inexhaustible Storehouse (Hubbard 1986, 213-217). Theoretically based on the universalism of the bodhisattva's "inexhaustible storehouse of merit" as taught in the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* and the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*, the institutional manifestation of the Inexhaustible Storehouse at the Hua-tu ssu in Ch'ang-an and Loyang also found sanction in the *vinaya* literature governing "inexhaustible goods" and is even considered the prototype of the pawnshop in East Asia (Hubbard 1986, 97-170). *Mo fa* occurs towards the end of the text, when the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Daśacakra* are cited in connection with a discussion of evil and virtue:³

The "Chapter on the Four Peaceful Practices" in the *Lotus Sūtra* [Chapter Fourteen] teaches that after the Buddha has left the world, the preachers of the latter dharma (*mo fa*) will explain many dharmas; within this the meaning of avoiding evil [persons] and drawing near to [persons of] virtue is illuminated most fully. In general this is as extensively taught in the various scriptures and Vinaya works. The best illustration of how the common person (*fan p'u* 凡夫, pṛtagjana) of the latter dharma (*mo fa*) will study discarding the false and entering the true nirvana, discarding the evil and entering the virtuous, and discarding the small and entering the great is found in the Shih lun ching-十輪經. (*Wu chin tsang fa lüeh chi*, 159; 法華經四安樂品教佛去世後末法法師說法。於內明遠惡近善法最具足。總而言之如諸經律戒品廣說。又末法凡夫學捨邪人正涅槃最顯。捨惡人善捨小人大十輪經最顯)

Both of the scriptures mentioned here are often summoned to service as prooftexts in San-chieh-chiao literature, and both are also associated with the rhetoric of the decline of the dharma.⁴ The *Lotus Sūtra* in particular

2. All references to San-chieh-chiao texts are to the editions in the appendix of Yabuki, 1927. Additional text-critical remarks may be found therein as well as in Hubbard 1986, *passim*.

3. The last few lines of *Wu chin tsang fa lüeh chi*, including those translated here, are also found on another, damaged, fragment in the Stein collection (Stein #2137); cf. Yabuki 1927, appendix, 3.

4. The *Shih lun ching* (*Daśacakra*) is often referred to in San-chieh-chiao

has often been cited by scholars as the locus classicus of the three period scheme, both because of its frequent allusions to the time when the “True Dharma is in the process of destruction” (Skt. *saddharma-vipralopa*) and its regular use of the two periods of True Dharma and Semblance Dharma. In addition, the Chinese translation by Kumarajīva actually does use the term *mo fa* in the same chapter cited by our text (T. #262, 9.37c), as does the *Shih lun ching* (T. #410, 13.700b, T. #411, 13.777a). Now, although the study of the tradition of decline in these texts is well beyond the scope of the present essay, two important conclusions of that study are worth noting. First, the *Lotus Sūtra* uses the two periods of True Dharma (*saddharma*) and Semblance Dharma (*saddharma-pratirūpika*) in an entirely different context than the decline motif (*saddharma-vipralopa*). The two are actually different *topoi*, with different origins and different rhetorical functions: whereas the two periods are rhetorically linked to the theme of the eternal lifetime of the Buddha and cyclical in nature, the *topos* of decline is linked to the polemic of *saddharma* or the cult of the book (Nattier 1991, 91-118; Hubbard 1986, 21-24). Secondly, in spite of Kumarajīva’s use of the expression *mo fa* (T. #262, 9.37c) in the chapter cited by our text (Chapter 14, “Ease in Practice”) and its appearance in the *Daśacakra* there is no tripartite scheme of the dharma’s duration presented in either the *Lotus* or the *Daśacakra*. Kumarajīva’s *mo fa* in the *Lotus* simply denotes the “latter age” or “after years,” that is, the period after the Buddha’s final nirvana; it is most likely a translation of *paścimakāle* (usually rendered *mo shih* 末世 or *hou shih* 後法) and not a third or final time period of the dharma (Nattier 1991, 90-94; Hubbard 1986, 21-22 n.19).⁵ The *Daśacakra* use of *mo fa* is likewise not part of a three-period literature (more than twenty-five references in the two fragments of the *San chieh fo fa* recovered from Tun-huang and more than 100 references in the four chüan *San chieh fo fa*). There are two extant versions of the *Shih lun ching*, one attributed to the Northern Liang (412-439; T. #410, translator unknown) and one translated by Hsüan-tsang (651, T. #411). The *San chieh fo fa* uses the earlier recension while later writings of the *San-chieh-chiao* (e. g., *San chieh fo fa mi chi*) uses Hsüan-tsang’s version (Yabuki 1927, appendix, 601). From the general comments made here I have been unable to trace which version our text used, although it fits well with the tenor of the earlier translation, especially in terms of “avoiding evil persons and drawing close to virtuous person” (e. g., T. 13.700a-c, *passim*). Hsin-hsing is also reported to have written two commentaries on this text, the *Shih lun i i li ming* 十輪依義立名 in two chuan, and the *Shih lun lüeh ch’ao* 十輪略抄 in one chuan (*K’ai yüan shi chiao lu*, T.55.678c).

5. There is also a rather glaring inconsistency in the notion of a period of the destruction of the dharma following the Buddha’s extinction, given the *Lotus Sūtra*’s insistence on the eternal lifetime of the Buddha. It is perhaps for this reason that the *Lotus* does not seem to have been a major influence in the

scheme but, as with the *Lotus*, simply indicates the “latter time” of decay—indeed, according to the *Taishō* indices, *hsiang-fa* or “semblance dharma,” the second period, does not even appear in either translation of the text.⁶ It is important to remember, however, that although these texts do not make use of a three period scheme of the dharma’s decline, the “latter age, after the Tathāgata’s extinction,” whether called *mo shih*, *hou shih*, or *mo fa*, is, in fact, rhetorically envisioned as the “time of the destruction of the true dharma” (*fa mieh* 法滅 *saddharmavipralope vartamāna*).⁷ In other words, I am not denying the connotative resonance of *mo fa* (or *mo shih*) as “latter dharma” with *mo fa* as the “final dharma” of three periods of the dharma, but more simply the presence of this latter scheme within the texts of the Three Levels movement.

Our main concern, however, is not the use of *mo fa* in the *Lotus* or *Daśacakra* but whether the San-chieh-chiao usage of *mo fa* indicates awareness of an already existing scheme of three periods, uses it to create such a scheme, or correlates it to its own third level. The answer must be no: the *Wu chin tsang fa lüeh chi* shows no awareness of a prior three period scheme, nor does it contain a three part periodization of the duration or decline of the dharma, nor does it attempt to construct one. It is also not used in conjunction with the other two periods of True Dharma and Semblance Dharma. In accord with the texts it cites, *mo fa* is used to refer not to a particular period in a formal system of time periods but simply the “after years,” the generalized time following the Buddha’s final nirvana: “after the Buddha has left the world the preachers of the latter dharma (*mo fa*) will explain many dharmas.” To what purpose, then, is such a usage in the *Wu chin tsang fa lüeh chi*? It is used as an adjective to describe the living beings of that time: “dharma teachers of the latter

Chinese systematization of the tripartite scheme. The great encyclopedia of Buddhist doctrine, the *Fa yüan chu lin* (668), for example, devotes one entire section to the “extinction of the law” and, although it gives over fifteen references to sources ranging from the *Āgama* and the *Vinaya* to Mahāyāna sutras and *sastras*, the *Lotus Sūtra* is not mentioned (*T.* #2122, 53.1005 ff); neither does Chi-ts’ang mention it in his summary of the decline tradition (*T.* #1824, 42.17c-18c), nor even Hui-ssu, the first to systematize the three periods and a patriarch of the T’ien-t’ai (*T.* #1933, 46.786c), a school premised on the final truth of the *Lotus*.

6. The *Daśacakra*-sutra is also not listed in the *Fa yüan chu lin*’s summary of texts that describe the destruction of the dharma (cf. note 5 above).

7. See, for example, *T.* #262, 9.38c (“In the later final age, at the time when the dharma is about to perish” 於後末世法欲滅時); the later Sanskrit reads, “*tathāgatasyaparinirvṛtasya saddharmapratikṣayāntakāle vartamāna*” (“After the extinction of the Tathāgata, at the time when the true dharma is in decay”), Kern and Nanjio 1912, 287.

dharma,” the “common person of the latter dharma.” The focus is on the beings living at such a time rather than the historical time in which they live.

San chieh fo fa 三階佛法, *chüan 2*

The third example of *mo fa* is found in another text in the Stein collection (Stein #2137), a fragmentary manuscript of one of the seminal San-chieh-chiao texts, the *San chieh fo fa* (Buddha-dharma of the Three Levels). A text of this or similar title has been recorded in virtually every scripture catalogue since the *Li tai san pao chi* composed in 597, a scant three years after the death of Hsin-hsing, the founder of the San-chieh-chiao (Hubbard 1986, 172-173).⁸ In the context of the teachings for the “evil world of the five corruptions, the sentient beings [attached to] the view of emptiness and the view of existence, the most evil world, the evil time and evil sentient beings,” the *San chieh fo fa* cites the chapter on “Four Peaceful Practices” of the *Lotus Sūtra* regarding the “latter, evil world, after the Tathāgata’s extinction, in the latter dharma, at the time of the extinction of the dharma” 於後惡世如來滅後於末法中法欲滅時 (*San chieh fo fa*, 24). Again, however, in this as in the previous reference to the *Lotus Sūtra*, there is no sense of *mo fa* as the third or final period of a three period timetable, no mention of the periods of True Dharma or Semblance Dharma, nor even any particular duration given for this time.⁹ As in the case of the *Wu chin tsang fa lüeh chi* discussed above, the *San chieh fo fa* is using *mo fa* in exactly the way that it was used in the *Lotus Sūtra*, that is, to refer to a generalized “evil time” of the “latter dharma” following the extinction of the Buddha.

Tui ken ch'i hsing fa 对根起行法

Our next occurrence of *mo fa* is found in the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa* (Stein #2446), one of the most important texts of the San-chieh-chiao, and perhaps one of the oldest as well (Kimura 1984, 175, Hubbard 1986, 207-213).¹⁰

8. In addition to fragments of the *San chieh fo fa* discovered at Tun-huang, a complete version of the text has been preserved in Japan, and manuscripts have also been discovered recently at the Nanatsudera in Nagoya. The Tun-huang versions do not match the Japanese versions, however, and there are numerous other difficulties identifying these texts. Cf. Hubbard 1986, 193-201.

9. The two periods of *cheng fa* and *hsiang fa* are, however, mentioned shortly afterwards in connection with the *Lotus Sūtra* chapter on the “Bodhisattva Never Despise;” there is not, however, any attempt to correlate this with the earlier use of *mo fa*.

10. Based on the match between the Tun-huang manuscript (Stein #2446) and the long testimonium in Chih-yen’s (602-668) *Hua yen wu shih yao wen ta* (T.

The *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa* extensively describes the different practices appropriate for each of the three levels and if there is any place that we would expect to find a delineation of the three periods of the dharma or identification of the Third Level with the period of *mo fa* it would be in this text. Yet we find only a single use of the term buried among various lists of sutras that teach of falsity, evil monks, perversions of the doctrine, and the like:

The seventh item is as taught in the *Ta pan nieh p'an ching* [*Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*]: in the age of the latter dharma the *icchantika* and [those who commit] the five grievous offenses will be [everywhere] like the great earth. (*Tui ken ch'i hsing fa*, 135; 七者如大般涅槃經說末法世時一闍提及五逆罪如大地土)

This portion of the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa* quotes from a number of different texts to support its contention about the pervasive evils of living beings, including the *Mahāsamnipātta*, the *Daśacakra*, the *Mahāmāyā*, and other texts prominent in the decline tradition. The text cited here, the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, is of course quite well-known for its strong sense of foreboding and contains a number of the different elements of the decline tradition (Mizutani 1960). Although I have not been able to find a passage similar to that cited in the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa*, there are numerous places throughout the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* that mention the *icchantika*, those who commit the five grievous offenses, and the like as a stylized description of the latter age after the passing of the Buddha (*paścimakāla*).¹¹ Still, there is no known example of its using the three period system or even the word *mo fa* in any version of the text, leading me to assume that either a) the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa* is relying on some other, no longer extant, recension of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, which seems unlikely considering the popularity that Dharmakṣema's text had already achieved in the North, or, more likely, b) the term *mo fa*, already accepted as a variant of *mo shih* as discussed above, was used by the authors of the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa* in exactly that sense, that is, to simply designate the "latter age," the time after the *parinirvāṇa* of the Śākyamuni Buddha. This, of course, should not surprise us in a scripture describing the Buddha's last words before entering *parinirvāṇa*.

Whatever the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*'s usage denotes, and whether or

#1869, 45.532b-534c), Kimura feels that we may reliably assume this text to have actually been composed by Hsin-hsing (540-594) as well as to preserve the original form of the text (Kimura 1984, 175).

11. In general the San-chieh-chiao relies on the so-called "Northern" version of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, translated by Dharmakṣema around 420.

not *mo fa* actually appeared in the text used by our author, it is clear that *mo fa* is not cited by the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa* to indicate a particular time span, nor as part of a tripartite scheme, nor even to systematize *mo fa* with its own three levels. Cited as the seventh item of a list of eleven sutras that teach of falsity and total perversion (which list is itself the seventh of twelve such listings of texts that explain the “recognition of evil”), the purpose is rather to create a basis of prooftexts that enumerate the evil nature of living beings.

For our purposes what is important to note is simply that, although the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa* does in fact use the term *mo fa*, it is not in the context of a historical period of particular duration, there is no mention whatsoever of preceding periods in conjunction with *mo fa*, and it does not even relate the term to its own third level, much less a third period. The impression is that it is used in a thoroughly non-technical fashion and refers simply to a world dominated by the *icchantika* and those that commit the five grave offenses. Since the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* contains many references to the difficult times after the Buddha's passing, the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa*'s use of *mo fa* to describe its teaching is probably another example of its referring simply to the “latter age” after the Buddha's passing—that is, as a synonym for *mo-shih*. Especially when taken within the overall context of building a foundation of prooftexts for “recognizing the evil nature of living beings” it is clear that the emphasis is not on any particular timespan or periodization but on the capacity—or, rather, the lack of capacity—of living beings, which is, after all, the focus of the *Tui ken ch'i hsing fa* (“The Teaching and Practice that Arises in Accordance with the Capacity”).

San chieh fo fa mi chi 三階佛法密記

The *San chieh fo fa mi chi* is a fragmentary manuscript of a commentary on the *San chieh chiao fo fa* in the Pelliot collection (Pelliot #2412).¹² Because the text quotes the Hsüan-tsang translation of the *Daśacakra-sūtra* (completed in 651) rather than the earlier translation (ca. 412-439, translator unknown) we can at least establish an earliest possible date of composition

12. Although there is no mention of this text in any of the scripture catalogues contained in the *Taishō*, it is recorded in a catalogue of Three Stages texts discovered at Tun-huang (Yabuki 1927, 225). A comparison of the contents with the extant manuscripts of the *San chieh fo fa* reveals it to correspond to the fragments of the second and third chuan of the Tun-huang text rather than the more complete Japanese manuscript. Unfortunately the part of the *San chieh fo fa* that the *Mi chi* comments on is not contained within the extant fragments.

of 651 (Yabuki 1927, appendix p. 601). A late composition date is also suggested by a more developed way of handling *mo fa* in comparison to the above texts.

Interestingly, two of the three occurrences of *mo fa* in the *San chieh fo fa mi chi* are found within the section that describe the teachings related to the practices of “universal respect” and “recognizing evil” for beings of the first level, the teachings for those sentient beings that have the capacity for Ekayāna (Yabuki appendix, p. 94); specifically, *mo fa* appears within a list of eleven items explaining the cultivation of the practices of universal respect and recognizing evil in the first level:¹³

[There are seven items that explain how one enters the path because of the practice of recognizing evil . . .] the third is because of seeing the Buddha scold the dharma teachers of the latter dharma (*mo fa*). . .” (*San chieh fo fa mi chi*, p. 95; 三唯由見佛訶末法法師).

Upon seeing that the people of the latter dharma (*mo-fa*) of the Third Level, *candala*, and the like do not fear that they are destined to fall into hell in the next world, [the sentient beings with the capacity for the First Level] investigate the teachings in the scriptures, realize that they should immediately fear their offenses and determine to obtain liberation; therefore they [realize that they must take up the practice of] recognizing evil.” (*San chieh fo fa mi chi*, p. 95; 現見末法第三階人旃陀羅等不畏後世定墮地獄與經符同驗經中說今時怕罪決得出世故須認惡).

The final occurrence of *mo fa*, near the end of the fragment, is in a section explaining why now is the time that one should copy the scriptures:

Question: the scriptures say that one should not give others [copies of the texts]; how so is it that in the latter dharma (*mo fa*) one should copy out [the texts]? (*San chieh fo fa mi chi*, p. 106: 問經言不餘人之手云何末法抄出).

The pattern we have seen in the previous usages of *mo fa* holds for the *San chieh fo fa mi chi* as well: there is no sense of *mo fa* as the third period of a three-part timetable, it is not used in conjunction with any actual timetables, nor is it used in conjunction with or contrast to the periods of *saddharma* or *saddharma pratirūpika*.¹⁴ Even this later text,

13. Two characteristic San-chieh-chiao practices of 1) universally recognizing all sentient beings as Buddhas (based on the teachings of the *Hua yen ching*, *tathāgatagarbha*, etc.) while at the same time 2) seeing oneself as only capable of evil (cf. Hubbard 1990, 91-92).

14. Indeed, *cheng fa* (*saddharma*) only appears once in this fragment (in the formulaic phrase “slandering the true dharma,” p. 104) and *hsiang fa* (*saddharma pratirūpika*) but twice, both times citing the title of the apocryphal *Hsiang fa*

then, makes no use of the three-part timetable of True, Semblance, and Latter Dharma.¹⁵ The one development in its usage of *mo fa*, however, is its explicit linkage of *mo fa* with the Third Level, seen in the second instance above (*mo fa ti san chieh jen* 末法第三階人). Given that the Third Level is that of degenerate beings of the time of the destruction of the true dharma (*saddharma vipralopa*), a destruction that takes place in the “latter age” after Śākyamuni’s passing, this is not surprising. The issue at hand is not whether the San-chieh-chiao considered the Third Level to be equivalent to that described in the various texts they cite, including those that characterize the time of *mo shih / mo fa* as the time of the destruction of the true dharma, but whether or not that means that they used or accepted the three-period scheme of True, Semblance, and Final Dharma. Thus, when compared to the other usages, the *San chieh fo fa mi chi*’s seeming equation of the Third Level and *mo fa* perhaps is a new development, though precisely because it links the Third Level to *mo fa* while yet virtually ignoring the other two periods it is in fact further evidence that this text was not using the three period scheme.

Sutra Catalogs

The last two occurrences of *mo fa* are found in the titles of San-chieh-chiao texts recorded in several catalogs; unfortunately, no manuscripts corresponding to these titles has yet been discovered:¹⁶

chüeh i ching 像法決疑經 (Sutra on Resolving Doubts in the Semblance Dharma).

15. This interpretation is further supported by the way that the *San chieh fo fa mi chi* does assign timespans to the Three Levels without ever mentioning the three periods of True Dharma, Semblance Dharma, and Final Dharma:

There are three separate divisions of time: [1.] when the Buddha is in the world the Buddha himself maintains and upholds the Buddha-dharma; this stage (*wei* 位) is determined as the time of the First Level; [2.] up to 1,500 years after the Buddha’s extinction, when sages and commoners with the good roots for the perfection of correct views maintain and uphold the Buddha-dharma—this stage is determined as the time of the Second Level; [3.] from 1,500 years after the Buddha’s extinction, the morality, concentration, and wisdom of commoners with good roots for particularistic understandings and particularistic practices will all be entirely false—this corresponds to the time of the Third Level. (*San chieh fo fa mi chi*, 75-76)

16. These titles are taken from the *Jen chi lu tu mu* 人集錄都目一卷, a catalogue of San-chieh-chiao texts from the Pelliot collection of Tun-huang MSS on the same roll as the *San chieh fo fa mi chi* (see above). Both texts are also recorded (with abbreviated titles) in the *Ta chou k’an ting chung ching mu lu* (T. #2153, 55.474c), the *K’ai yüan shi chiao lu* (T. #2154, 55.678b) and the *Chen yüan hsin ting shih chiao mu lu* (the San-chieh-chiao materials are not actually recorded in the Taishō edition of this latter catalogue, though they are recorded in the various versions transmitted in Japan, including the recently

1. *Ming shu ching chung tui gen ch'i hsing mo fa chung sheng wu fo fa nei fei hsing so yu fa* [The Teaching On the Reasons that the Living Beings of the Latter Dharma Flourish and Decay (Rise and Fall) Within the Buddha-dharma, Illuminated By the Scriptures According to Whether the Capacity is Shallow or Deep]. One chüan, 16 leaves. 明諸經中対根淺深末法衆生於佛法内麁興所由法 一卷 十六紙

2. *Ming shih chien wu cho wu shih chien mo fa wu shih shih wu chung sheng fu te hsia hsing wu tz'u shih shu chu tsu jen chung wei tang san ch'eng chi jen i shu ta ch'eng ching lun hsueh ch'iu shan chi chih hsueh fa p'u t'i hsin* [Clarifying How, in Accordance with the Mahāyāna Sūtras and Commentaries, Among the Virtues and Inferior Practices of the Ten Types of Evil Sentient Beings of the Evil Time of the Latter Dharma in the Age of the Five Corruptions, Those With the Capacity for the Triyāna Among the Four Types of Complete Persons Will Learn To Seek Virtuous Friends and Arouse the Mind of Bodhi]. One chüan, 46 leaves. 明諸世間五濁惡世界末法惡時十惡衆(生)福德下行於此四種具足人中謂当三乘器人依諸大乘經論学求善知識学發菩提心 一卷 四六紙

Unfortunately, with no extant text to go by, it is hard to know exactly what these instances of *mo fa* refer to. Although it might be too much to expect to find in the title itself a full reference to periods other than *mo fa* even if it were being used as part of the three periods scheme, still, we must note the absence of any such reference. The second title is somewhat more interesting, bringing together as it does the age of *mo fa* and the time of the five corruptions, a la Hui-ssu (515-577) and Tao-ch'ö (562-645; cf. Chappell 1980, 141-143). As with the former text, however, there is little to conclude except to note the lack of any sense of temporal periodization or three times associated with these usages of *mo fa*. Indeed, looking at the other titles a two-part schema of shallow / deep capacity is more noticeable than a three period scheme. The first text, for example, is listed between a number of texts with somewhat similar titles, such as *The Teaching on the Arousing of Bodhicitta, Illuminated By the Scriptures According to Whether the Capacity is Shallow or Deep* 明諸經中対根淺深發菩提心法, *The Teaching on Reverence for the Three Jewels, Illuminated by the Scriptures According to Whether the Practice is Shallow or Deep* 明諸經中対根起行淺深敬三宝法, *The Teaching on the Similarities and*

discovered Nanatsudera edition. Cf. Hubbard 1986, 180-188; Yabuki 1927, appendix, 227).

Differences, Illuminated by the Scriptures According to Whether the Capacity is Shallow or Deep 明諸經中对根淺深同異法, indicating perhaps that, simply denoting the “latter days” after the passing of the Buddha, there would be both those with shallow capacities as well as those with a “deep” capacity existing at the time of the “latter dharma.” Similar binary oppositions found in these titles include the “worldly” and “transcendental,” “inferior” and “superior” capacities, “good persons” and “evil persons,” and the like. One title even describes these opposites as the “two levels:” *The Teaching Within the Mahāyāna Sūtras that Clarifies the Similarities and Differences in Arousing Bodhicitta for the Two Levels of Sattvas, Worldly and Transcendental* 明諸大乘修多羅內世間出世間兩階人發菩提心異法. This would seem to be a clear case in which levels (*chieh* 階) refers not to a temporal division but to a distinction of capacity (*ken chi* 根機).

TEMPORAL DIVISIONS AND THE THREE LEVELS

Although the three levels of the San-chieh-chiao are not related to the formula of the three periods of the dharma, they occasionally are made to fit the various timetables of decline in the translated and indigenous scriptures available at that time.¹⁷ Even here, though, the lack of concern given to systematizing these various sources seem to indicate that it was not really a particular history or era that was at issue:

By way of these various illustrations it should be known that all of the sages and *sattvas* with good roots for the true, the virtuous, and correct views will be completely extinguished either [a] after the Buddha’s extinction, or [b] five-hundred years after the Buddha’s extinction, or [c] one thousand years after the Buddha’s extinction (*San chieh fo fa*, p. 303).

As here, when San-chieh chiao texts do utilize the timetables of decline they reflect the variety found in the scriptural sources. Thus the time of the First Level is given variously as when Śākyamuni himself is in the world (*San chieh fo fa mi chi*, p. 75), lasting five-hundred years following his extinction (*San chieh fo fa*, p. 302), or lasting fifteen-hundred years after his extinction (*Tui ken ch’i hsing fa*, p. 129). The Second Level is likewise given various durations of five-hundred years (*San chieh fo fa mi chi*, p. 75) or one-thousand years (*San chieh fo fa*, p. 302) after the Buddha’s extinction, though most often its duration is grouped together

17. Nishimoto (1992) sees the adaptation of the levels to a temporal scheme to be a development in the San-chieh-chiao tradition, not evidenced in the earlier writings.

with that of the First Level. Thus too the Third Level is listed variously as commencing one-thousand years after the Buddha's extinction (*San chieh fo fa*, p. 302), sixteen-hundred years after (*Tui ken ch'i hsing fa*, p. 129), or fifteen-hundred years after the *parinirvāṇa* (*San chieh fo fa mi chi*, 75-76).¹⁸ Most often, though, as seen in the text titles discussed above, for the San-chieh-chiao there really was only one distinction, that between the time when people of correct views could still be found and the time when all living beings were ensnared by false views:

Clarifying the time when the superior and inferior people will appear in the world according to the twelve types of scripture (*dvādaśāṅga-sāsana*), there are two times: 1) People of correct views will appear in the world while the Buddha lives in the world and for fifteen-hundred years after the Buddha's final extinction. 2) People of false views will appear in the world sixteen-hundred years after [the extinction of the Buddha]. (*Tui ken ch'i hsing fa*, 129)

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

With regards the San-chieh-chiao use of *mo fa*, then, we find that:

- it does not indicate any awareness of a prior or commonly used three part timetable of the dharma's decline;
- it is not used in the San-chieh-chiao texts as part of such a three part timetable of decline;
- it is not used in conjunction with *saddharma* or *saddharma pratirūpika*, the other two components of the three period scheme;¹⁹
- in fact *mo fa* is never used in the San-chieh-chiao texts with any timetable of specific duration or to denote a specific term of the dharma's duration / decline; I have also not found any example of a specific duration for the third level: although there are several different times

18. Cf. Hubbard 1986, 49-69.

19. Indeed, when we look at the occurrences of *cheng fa* and *hsiang fa* in the San-chieh-chiao texts we immediately see that they have nothing at all to do with the occurrences of *mo fa*. Not only are they used in completely different contexts, but, like *mo fa*, they are virtually never used with regard to specific timespans for the duration of the dharma. *Hsiang fa*, for example, occurs almost exclusively in the title of the *Hsiang fa ch'ueh i ching*, within its derivative text, the *Fo shuo shih so fan che yü ch'ieh fa ching ching*, or referring to the *Lotus Sūtra* chapter on the Bodhisattva Sadāparibhuta, and only once with an accompanying duration (*Hsin-hsing k'ou chi chen ju shih kuan ch'i hsu*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 198). This fits very well with Jan Nattier's conclusions about the Indian usage of *hsiang fa* and *mo fa* (or the latter's variant *mo shih*; see Nattier 1991, 95-110).

given to mark the *beginning* of the time when sentient beings with the capacity of third level will dominate, there is nothing to indicate that this is a period of fixed duration. Of course, with no duration given for the third level there is obviously no use of the 10,000 year motif (on which see Nattier 1991, 61 n. 90), telling in a search for indications of the three period scheme.

- *mo fa* is not used by the San-chieh-chiao to create a three-part timetable or schema of their own;
- it is not even used to identify its own third level, with the single exception of the later commentarial work, the *San chieh fo fa mi chi*.

We must conclude, then, that the San-chieh-chiao is not based on or even related to the “three periods of the dharma,” in spite of the latter’s having been systematized in Northern China at roughly the same time as the San-chieh-chiao took shape. This in turn has a number of implications for our study and understanding of the development of this important doctrine, first and foremost of which is simply that at this time the system of the three periods of the dharma was perhaps not as widely accepted as previously thought, perhaps not widely known at all. Hence, the dating of the widespread acceptance of this system *even in China* should be reconsidered. Inasmuch as the dating of many translations (e. g., those of Narendrayāśas) indigenous scriptures (e. g., the *Hsiang fa chüeh i ching*), and historical figures and their writings (e. g. Hui-ssu) are often tied to the dating of the advent of this scheme, much of this will need to be rethought if my conclusions are correct. For these reasons as well as to shift our association of the San-chieh-chiao with the three time periods I have also chosen to translate San-chieh-chiao as “the Teaching of the Three Levels” rather than “Three Stages,” and to use “latter dharma” to translate their use of *mo fa*, reserving “final dharma” or “final period of the dharma” for *mo fa* used as part of the three periods scheme.

On another level this conclusion raises a host of questions about the role of time and history in the Chinese Buddhist tradition and by implication in the Indian tradition as well. This is so because, in a way, of course, nothing has really changed—the Three Levels movement is still focussed on the rhetoric of decline. If, however, this decline is *not* concerned with time periods (and by extension historical thinking), just what is it concerned with? At this point I would answer that the primary meaning of each of the three levels is to be found in terms of levels of capacity of living beings and the dharma that is appropriate for each of those levels. Hence the appropriate framework for the three levels is not Buddhist historical

thinking per se but rather Chinese *pan chiao* systems, systems of grading the teachings according to the principle of *upāya*, a principle itself most fully expressed as a polemic or apologetic notion of capacity and teaching. This fits very well with the Three Levels' rhetoric of a "universal dharma" uniquely suited for beings with the capacity of the third level, or, as the Three Levels' texts put it, the "teaching and practice that arises in accordance with the capacity" (*tui ken ch'i hsing fa*). And this in turn fits extremely well with what I take to be the fundamental thrust of the decline tradition even in India, to wit, not a lamentation of the passing of the Buddha's dharma or an expression of naive historical awareness but rather a sophisticated polemic of orthodoxy (*saddharma*) later married to the equally polemic hermeneutic of *upāya*. Finally, I see a development in the decline tradition that seems to take place around this time, a development that, premised on the notion of the lowered or nil capacity of living beings to practice and realize the dharma, leads towards the dispensationalism indicated in the phrase *tui ken ch'i hsing fa* and so well known in the Pure Land traditions. Thus new doctrine and new practices in tune with the lowered capacity of living beings were not merely legitimized, but required. Both the tendency to see sentient beings as inherently lacking the capacity for realization and the soteriological imperative to a new orthodoxy / orthopraxy thus engendered had an immense impact on East Asian Buddhism. These, however, are topics for yet another time.

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