

Genèse d'un apocryphe bouddhique: le Sūtra de la pure délivrance

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Paris: IHE Chinoise, December 2016.

ISBN-10: 2857570767

ISBN-13: 978-2857570769

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Chinese Buddhist apocrypha have long been depreciated by orthodox scholarly monks and Buddhist cataloguers for their inauthentic nature as forgeries of Indian Buddhist scriptures. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, leading scholars such as Robert Buswell called for a reassessment of their value, arguing that they actually provide significant material relating to less-explored facets of the development of Buddhism outside traditional philosophical and doctrine-centred study. Noting that the Chinese apocryphal scriptures are made up of diverse traditions, Buswell in particular reminded us that, “Exclusive focus on national traditions all too easily conceals the manifold points of symbiosis between those traditions, which can be of immense value in detailing both the evolution of the national varieties of Buddhism and the indigenous texts that reflect that evolution.”¹

Coincidentally, a collection of medieval manuscripts of Buddhist scriptures was uncovered in 1990 at the Nanatsu-dera 七寺, Nagoya, Japan. Among them is the previously missing second juan of the three-juan version of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* 淨度三昧經 (‘*Samādhi-Sūtra* of Liberation through Purification’). This *sūtra*, composed from miscellaneous origins, has long been regarded by scholars as one of the most important Chinese indigenous apocryphal scriptures epitomizing the Sinification and popularization of Buddhism during the period

¹ Buswell, Robert E. ed. *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990, p. 22.

of the Northern-Southern dynasties. Classified as apocryphal during the medieval period, the *sūtra* was excluded from the Chinese Tripiṭaka, and the full text was subsequently lost, although modern scholars had tried to recover it from quotations in secondary texts and the fragmentary manuscripts excavated at Dunhuang. The discovery of the Nanatsu-dera manuscripts has now made it possible to reconstruct a complete version of all three juans.

Costantino Moretti's *Genèse d'un apocryphe bouddhique: le Sūtra de la pure délivrance* ('The Genesis of a Buddhist Apocrypha') is a monograph based on his PhD thesis, which seeks to update our understanding of the making of the *Jingdu sanmei jing*. It is one of several attempts in Western languages to reassess this particular *sūtra* at the PhD level since the discovery of the Nanatsu-dera manuscripts.

The reconstructed *Jingdu sanmei jing* was first studied by the research team of *The Manuscripts of Nanatsu-dera* in Japan.² Harumi Hirano Ziegler's PhD thesis at UCLA in 2001 (supervised by R. Buswell and published by UMI), "The Sinification of Buddhism as Found in an Early Chinese Indigenous *Sūtra*: A Study and Translation of the Fo-shuo Ching-tu San-mei Ching," is the pioneering work in a Western language on the recovered three-juan version. It surveys the origin and composition of the *sūtra*, and aspects of Sinification, and it includes a full English translation of all three juans. Ziegler challenges a view held by some previous scholars that the *sūtra* was probably composed by Tanyao 曇曜 (fl. 453 – 499 CE), a leading figure in the resurrection of Buddhism after its persecution by Emperor Taiwu 太武帝 of the North Wei 北魏 during 446 – 452 CE. Tanyao had first been mentioned as one of several translators of different versions of the *sūtra* in the *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶記, a somewhat unreliable Buddhist catalogue by Fei Changfang 費長房 (fl. 562 – 598 CE). The assumption was generally based on comparison of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* with another significant apocryphal scripture, the *Tiwei jing* 提謂經 ('The *Sūtra* of Trapuṣa and Bhallika'), composed by Tanjing 曇靖 during 453 – 464 CE in the Northern Wei; both scriptures display a similar mixture of Buddhist and indigenous Chinese beliefs and they share some content, such as the "Account of the Days of the Eight Kings 八王日". From a close reading of the earliest existing bibliographical source, the *Chu sanzangji*

² Ochiai Toshinori 落合俊典 ed. *The manuscripts of Nanatsu-dera*. Kyoto: Italian School of East Asia Studies, 1991. Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮 ed. in chief & Ochiai Toshinori 落合俊典 managing ed. *Nanatsudera koitsu kyōten kenkyū sōsho chūgoku senjutsu kyōten (sono2)* 七寺古逸經典研究叢書 中國撰述經典(其之二). Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1996.

ji 出三藏記集 ('Collection of notes on the translated Tripitika'), compiled by Sengyou 僧祐 (445 – 518 CE), Ziegler established that, while several versions of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* were available in South China prior to 515 CE, three *sūtras* translated by Kinkara 吉迦夜 and Tanyao in 472 CE in the Northern Wei had not at that date been transmitted there, due to the division of territory by the northern and southern polities. The later attribution to Tanyao in the *Lidai sanbao ji* therefore seems unlikely. Given that the three-juan version of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* contains a wide range of Buddhist ideas and references, Ziegler held that it could only have been composed in South China, where scholarly sources were more easily available than in the Northern Wei after the persecution of Buddhism.

Ziegler's approach to dating the *sūtra* rests on the assumption that this reconstructed three-juan version is the original text. However, the three-juan version was not first mentioned in the *Chu sanzangji ji*, but attributed to Baoyun 寶雲 (376–449 CE) in the *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄 by Fajing 法經 in 594 CE, and versions of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* with different numbers of juan had already been recorded earlier, some supposedly having been subject to later modification. The *Chu sanzangji ji* includes a note asserting that the "Record of the Origin of the Abstinence Days of the Eight Kings" 八王日齋緣記 comes from the *Jingdu sanmei jing*. The same account is also in the *Tiwei jing*. This suggests to me that the "Record of the Days of the Eight Kings" was once in the earliest stratum of the *sūtra*. In my DPhil thesis (University of Oxford 2010),³ I inspect the origin of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* by examining this particular feature. Textual analysis of the "Record of the Days of the Eight Kings" shows that its content was probably formulated and developed through the integration of the Buddhist text of the Four Great Kings 四天王經 with the eight seasonal days stipulated by the *Laozi zhong jing* 老子中經 ('Central Scripture of Laozi'). The *Laozi zhong jing* is an early Daoist scripture on self-cultivation (dated by Kristofer Schipper not later than the fourth-century *Baopuzi* 抱朴子),⁴ which proclaims that the human lifespan can be prolonged by the visualization of deities on the associated part or organs of the body on associated festive days, particularly the eight seasonal days. Both texts were based on parallel religious ideas about periodic abstinence days and associated metaphors of the inspection and recording of human deeds by otherworld bureaucratic deities.

³ Chen, Frederick Shih-Chung. *The Transformation of Concepts of Bureaucratization of the Other World in Early Medieval China: From Buddhist Perspectives*. DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2010, pp. 92 – 176.

⁴ Schipper, Kristofer. "The Inner World of the Lao-Tzu Chung-Ching." in Huang, Chun-Chieh and Zürcher, Erik ed. *Time and Space in Chinese Culture*. Leiden: Brill, 1995, pp. 118 – 119.

Analysis also reveals that the Eight King Messengers 八王使者 in the *Jingdu sanmei jing* are actually a Buddhist adoption of the Eight Trigram Deities, the invocatory deities recommended by the *Laozi zhong jing* for life-prolonging visualizations on the eight seasonal days. Furthermore, this account is probably the textual source of the identities of the enigmatic Eight Trigram Deities depicted on the bottom of the Northern Liang votive *stūpa* 北涼石塔 below the line of the *Foshuo shi'er yinyuan jing* 佛說十二因緣經 ('Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha on Twelve Co-dependent Originations') and also of the images of the seven past Buddhas and the Buddha of the future — Maitreya. The function of *stūpas*, as Peter Harvey has concluded, is a visualization of "representing the Dhamma (teaching, path and realizations) and the enlightened personality embodying the culmination of Dhamma-practice."⁵ As the doctrines of Twelve Co-dependent Originations and the Eight Buddhas are both meditative objects for enlightenment according to Buddhist practice,⁶ the Eight Trigram Deities below them on the Northern Liang *stūpa* therefore epitomize a Buddhist adoption of visualization objects from Daoism. The inclusion of the meditative term *samādhi* 三昧 in the title of the apocryphal scripture might imply such religious practices in Northern Liang. The early core stratum of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* was very likely composed during this period by monks from the Northern Liang, such as Baoyun who later moved to the south.⁷

I was not able to access Moretti's thesis before my article on the Eight Kings in the *Jingdu sanmei jing* appeared in *Asia Major*,⁸ as it was still under revision. Therefore I was extremely excited to learn about this publication. It is a well-researched book that presents in encyclopedic detail an extensive range of primary and secondary sources relating not only to the *Jingdu sanmei jing*, but also to issues concerning other early medieval and medieval indigenous Chinese Buddhist scriptures. Moretti explores the origin of the *sūtra* by considering

⁵ Harvey, Peter. "The Symbolism of the Early Stūpa." in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1984, pp. 67 – 93.

⁶ *Zuochan sanmei jing* 坐禪三昧經 by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什. T. 15, no. 614, 282c – 284; *Foshuo guanfo sanmei hai jing* 佛說觀佛三昧海經. Buddhahadra 佛陀跋陀羅 (359 – 429 CE) T. 15 no. 643, ch.10, p. 693.

⁷ Leading features in the resurrection of Buddhism in the Northern Wei, such as Tanyao, were also originally from the Northern Liang.

⁸ Chen, Frederick Shih-Chung. "Who Are the Eight Kings in the Samādhi-Sūtra of Liberation through Purification? Otherworld Bureaucrats in India and China." *Asia Major*, 3rd ser., 26, no. 1 (2013): 55–78.

four aspects: its place in bibliographic catalogues, its content and philological borrowings, the narration of hells, and specific elements such as the pantheon, practice and worship. The book also includes a French translation of the first juan of the *Jingdu sanmei jing*.

The first chapter surveys bibliographic catalogues relating to the *Jingdu sanmei jing*. Of these, Moretti considers that the *Lidai sanbao ji* by Fei Changfang, the first to mention the one-juan version translated by Tanyao, gives the most information about its origin. His argument, based on the views of such scholars as Tsukamoto Zenryū 塚本善隆 and Makita Tairyō 牧田諦亮, posits a strong link between the *Jingdu sanmei jing* and the *Tiwei jing*. Their similarities of style, content and doctrine, not to mention philological and linguistic features, suggest that the two texts could have been conceived in the same environment. Moretti is confident that Tanyao, if not the true “editor” of the *Jingdu sanmei jing*, was at least the person responsible for its “making”.

The second chapter elucidates the content and philological borrowings in the *Jingdu sanmei jing* in three sections. It starts with a detailed illustration of how the *sūtra* of three juans was reconstructed from the surviving manuscripts in Dunhuang and the Nanatsu-dera and summarizes the content. Secondly, it traces the content and context of quotations from the *Jingdu sanmei jing* that survived in secondary sources (encyclopedic works, religious commentaries and treatises). The survey is summed up in a meticulous illustrative table of the contents of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* and corresponding quotations from associated manuscripts and secondary sources (pp. 110 – 115). The third section analyzes the linguistic and stylistic borrowings manifest in the *sūtra*. The overall examination shows heterogeneity in the choice of translation styles and forms, ranging from the very complex phonetic transcriptions that characterize some translators to the Sinicized forms that mark the style of others. For example, in certain cases, instead of using the translation style of Kumārajīva (344 – 413 or 350 – 409 CE), which was closer in time to the formation of the *sūtra*, more archaic forms by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 (230? – 316 CE) were chosen. These inconsistencies, from Moretti’s viewpoint, confirm the apocryphal character and heterogeneous features of the *sūtra*. With regard to the usage of certain terms that are not specifically Buddhist, Moretti points out that these typically Chinese religious expressions, which some translators chose to use and others tried to avoid, were generally familiar to lay people. Their inclusion suggests to him that this apocryphal *sūtra* was aimed at an audience mainly composed of lay people.

The third chapter investigates the enumeration of hells in the *Jingdu sanmei jing*, particularly the thirty hells, drawing comparisons with previous Chinese Buddhist texts. First indicated by Saitō Takanobu 齊藤隆信, the thirty hells were formulated through a combination of parallel narrations mostly from three earlier Buddhist scriptures, namely the *Tiecheng nili jing* 鐵城泥犁經 (T.1, no. 42), the *Nili jing* 泥犁經 (T. 1, no. 86), and the chapter on the visualization of hells as meditative objects for liberation in the *Xiuxing daodi jing* 修行道地經 (the *Yogācārabhūmi*, the ‘Ground of Meditation Practitioners’ T. 15, no. 606).⁹ Moretti explores in minute detail the parallels between each of the thirty hells enumerated in the *Jingdu sanmei jing* and those in the previous scriptures, summarizing his findings in a clear diagram. He elucidates the description of each hell and the religious moral and practice that lay behind it.

The fourth chapter surveys featured elements of the *Jingdu sanmei jing*, including the pantheon, practice and worship, via a threefold examination of the five precepts, the Days of the Eight Kings and the concept of self-salvation. First, it traces the association between the Buddhist five precepts and the five officials of Chinese indigenous deities and the twenty-five guardian deities who protect keepers of the precepts. While the five officials were probably an expansion of the three celestial officials in early Chinese religions to match the religious symbolism of the number five, the twenty-five guardian deities of the five precepts were first mentioned in earlier Buddhist scripture. Such associations with the five precepts are further extended to other symbolic instances of the number five in Chinese religion, such as the five viscera, five elements, and so on, presented in the *Tiwei jing* and other similar Buddho-Daoist scriptures. Secondly, Moretti examines content relating to the Abstinence Days of the Eight Kings in this three-juan version of the *Jingdu sanmei jing*, considering such issues as the observance of precepts, consequent reward and punishment in terms of increased or decreased lifespan, and the bureaucratic deities involved in inspecting and recording human actions. Although all these examples show clearly that the Days of the Eight Kings, derived from the eight seasonal days in Daoism, were considered particularly important by the Daoist tradition, Moretti maintains that the complexity of the interplay between Buddhism, Daoism and

⁹ Saitō Takanobu 齊藤隆信. “Jōdo sanmaikyō no kenkyū: Anrakushū to Kannen hōmon no baai 『浄度三昧経』の研究—『安楽集』と『観念法門』の場合.” *Bukkyō Daigaku Sōgō Kenkyūjo kiyō* 佛教大学総合研究所紀要, no. 3, 1996, pp. 218–219. The *Xiuxing daodi jing* is a Śrāvākayāna 聲聞乘 treatise for meditation practitioners (*yogācāra*) on the practice of calm and insight 寂觀 (*śamatha-vipaśyanā*) for attaining *nirvāṇa*.

Chinese popular religious beliefs makes it difficult or even dangerous to trace the roots of “Daoist contamination” on the basis of insufficient information: “We should avoid claiming that elements traditionally considered typical of Chinese thought are mixed up in the *Jingdu jing* with Indian ideas, like the idea of the inspection of deeds by deities, which are associated in this text with certain days of the year, the eight seasonal days, where different ceremonies, assimilable in part into popular religion and into Daoism, but also into Buddhism, took place” (p. 328). The chapter ends with a brief discussion of the issue of self-salvation.

In his conclusion, Moretti reiterates that the *Jingdu sanmei jing* should be considered a treatise (in the form of a *sūtra*) for lay disciples or else a textbook by which the Buddhist clergy could teach and convert lay people. He assumes that the concept of *samādhi* is not approached in an explicitly doctrinal way in the *sūtra*, so that the use of the term in the title is merely emblematic, intended to add Indian colour and an authentically “exotic” stamp to the Chinese apocrypha. In his view, the highlighting of such practices as the observance of precepts during abstinence days and the making of offerings at non-Buddhist as well as Buddhist festivals associates the text with the development of organized Buddhist communities and lay associations such as *yiyi* 邑義 and *yihui* 邑會 during the same period. These heterogeneous doctrines and practices, expounded in the *Jingdu sanmei jing*, laid the foundation for the further development of popular religions in medieval China.

The three-juan version of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* is made up of diverse and complex religious texts derived from heterogeneous traditions. With painstaking effort, Moretti pieces them together and demonstrates a clear and detailed map of the structure of the *sūtra* and related references. This provides a very rich and useful guide to the study of the *Jingdu sanmei jing* and Chinese apocryphal scriptures. Such hard work deserves tremendous credit.

Given that the title refers to the genesis of this Buddhist apocryphal scripture, it is clear that Moretti’s conclusions on this central issue are quite at odds with those of the other two most recent works on the *Jingdu sanmei jing*. Makita Tairyō cautiously assumed that it is not possible to identify its translator solely from bibliographic catalogues and suggested that the attribution to Tanyao is probably due to his having been the leading figure in the restoration of Buddhism when the *Tiwei jing* was translated by Tanjing, also in the Northern Wei.¹⁰ Moretti, by

¹⁰ Makita Teiryō 牧田諦亮. *Gikyō kenkyū* 疑經研究. Kyoto: Kyōto Daigaku Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyūjo, 1976, p. 249.

contrast, is more confident that Tanyao was at least responsible for the “making” of the *Jingdu sanmei jing*. In this, he apparently disagrees with Ziegler’s point that, while scriptures co-translated by Tanyao and Kinkara were not available in South China due to the dynastic division, the *Jingdu sanmei jing* had already been circulating in the South. Moretti is also unusual in placing so much weight on the *Lidai sanbao ji* by Fei Changfang as the key bibliographic catalogue. Most scholars regard the *Lidai sanbao ji* as less trustworthy, particularly because of the many new ascriptions for canonical texts seemed to be added arbitrarily by Fei. Michael Radich has recently voiced serious concern at its careless use.¹¹ Moreover, it should be noticed that, in the *Lidai Sanbao ji*, Fei actually made a note on the *Jingdu sanmei jing* attributed to Tanyao, saying that this Northern version of one juan was the second translation. Although roughly abbreviated, it is essentially the same as the two-juan version translated by Baoyun (which was based on an Indic manuscript brought by Faxian 法顯, d. 418 – 423 CE).¹² See the catalogue by Daozu. 淨度三昧經一卷 (第二出。與寶雲譯二卷者同。廣略異耳。見道祖錄).¹³ Therefore Fei Changfang’s comment does not support but in fact undermines Moretti’s idea that Tanyao was the most likely editor, if not translator, of the three-juan *sūtra* which comprises such a broad range of contents and doctrines. Moretti’s claim is based not on any substantial newfound sources but on wishful thinking.

On the issue of the specific messenger and other secondary deities mentioned in the Account of the Days of the Eight Kings in the *Jingdu sanmei jing*, Moretti is insightful in comparing the parallel narrative sentences about “The Lord of the Grand One 太一君”, who is the also Lord of human beings, residing in the human navel, along with the Grand General of the Pillar of Heaven 柱天大將軍, Specially Promoted War King or Lord King 特進兵王 (特進君王) and the eight messengers, the Eight Trigram Deities (pp. 290 – 291) mentioned in the *Tiwei jing* and the *Shichan boluomi cidifamen* 釋禪波羅蜜次第法門 (Understanding Dhyāna Pāramitā: A Method in Stages), written by the founder of the Tiantai School 天台宗, Zhiyi 智顗 (538 – 597 CE). On the other hand, he fails to note that this parallel narration is actually an abbreviated quotation from the thirteenth chapter (the thirteenth Immortal 第十三神仙) of the *Laozi zhong jing* about the

¹¹ Radich, Michael. “Fei Changfang’s Treatment of Sengyou’s Anonymous Texts.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 139.4 (2019): 819 – 841.

¹² 淨度三昧經二卷 (法顯齋。梵本來。見竺道祖雜錄). *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀. T. 49 no.2034: 89c18

¹³ 淨度三昧經一卷 (第二出。與寶雲譯二卷者同。廣略異耳。見道祖錄). *Lidai sanbao ji* T. 49 no.2034: 85a 24.

Eight Trigram Deity who reports the record of human beings to the Grand One on “the eight seasonal days.” My own article had already pointed out that, not only this passage about the Lord of the Grand One and his Eight Trigram Messengers in the *Tiwei jing* (col. 107 – 109 of Dunhuang Manuscript P. 3732), but also the whole paragraph addressing the correspondence between deities and human organs (col. 105 – 115) are abbreviated quotations from the 13th, 17th, 18th, 19th, etc., chapters of the *Laozi zhong jing*.¹⁴ The quotation in the *Shichan boluomi cidifamen* also comes from a passage which consists of similar abbreviated sentences from the *Laozi zhong jing*. As this quotation by Zhiyi includes the following sentence “Together, they are the (so-called) Nine Ministers 合為九卿” in the *Laozi zhong jing*, it appears that Zhiyi’s comment derives from his knowledge of more direct sources of the *Laozi zhong jing*, rather than from the *Tiwei jing*. Also, the *Jingdu sanmei jing* and the *Tiwei jing* are probably the two earliest Buddhist scriptures to mention both the Grand General of the Pillar of Heaven and the Specially Promoted War King or Lord King along with the Grand One.

These parallels suggest a close link between the content related to the eight seasonal days in the *Laozi zhong jing* and the Account of the Days of the Eight Kings in both the *Jingdu sanmei jing* and the *Tiwei jing*. Nevertheless, apart from one brief reference to the two deities on shoulders 肩背神二人 included in Yao Changshou’s 姚長壽 article (p.283), there is no further mention of the *Laozi zhong jing* in this book.¹⁵ Moretti does not even include the *Laozi zhong jing* in his bibliography, despite listing quite a number of textual sources and information related to the eight seasonal days, but mostly from the later period. While he advises us against attempting to trace the origins of the account in the *Jingdu sanmei jing*, due to the complexity of the textual sources on the eight seasonal days in his list and lack of sufficient information, it seems to me incomprehensible that this book should totally omit such an early and closely related primary source on the eight seasonal days as the *Laozi zhong jing*. His summary directly disagrees with the argument and approach of my article in *Asia Major* which highlights the importance of the *Laozi zhong jing* and the Buddhist text of the Four Great Kings in the formation of the Account of the Days of the Eight Kings (although my article is not mentioned in this context, but is merely noted as “a hypothesis” in a brief footnote in another part of this book (p. 248)).

¹⁴ Chen (2013), p.66. Makita (1976), pp. 186 – 187.

¹⁵ Yao Changshou 姚長壽. “Jingdu sanmei jing yu rentianjiao 淨度三昧經與人天教.” in the *Zhonghua foxue xuebao* 中華佛學學報, no. 12, Oct. 1999, p. 89.

Furthermore, Ziegler's thesis included a specific analysis of a range of Buddhist scriptures with the title of *samādhi-sūtra*.¹⁶ Had Moretti paid attention to it, he would probably have gained a broader understanding of scriptures with *samādhi-sūtra* in the title and thought twice before jumping to the common and convenient conclusion that the term merely functions as an emblem of "exotic" origin, simply based on preoccupation with national traditions.

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¹⁶ Ziegler (2001), pp. 205 – 237.

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