

1.

Hsin-hsing — A Buddhist Heretic?

THERE IS NO QUESTION that the official hostility towards Hsin-hsing's teachings and institutions is the most conspicuous aspect of their history. Although Hsin-hsing advocated no revolution, led no peasant mobs in uprising, and left behind no track record of immoral behavior by his community, within six years of his death in 594 the propagation of his texts was prohibited, and over the next 125 years four more edicts were issued banning various aspects of his followers' practice and organization. Part and parcel of the same program, his writings were declared heretical and banished from the canon as spurious—among the few scriptures so designated for reasons other than false attribution to an Indic original. Having gradually passed out of circulation, their rediscovery in a cave in a Central Asian oasis town a century ago was a momentous occasion, and served to refocus attention on Hsin-hsing's ideas and practices.

Because of the heretical status of Hsin-hsing's writings there has been a persistent tendency to discuss the uniqueness, innovation, or creativity of his teachings and movement—in other words, to see them as existing outside the mainstream. Perhaps the first example of this is Fei Chang-fang, writing shortly after Hsin-hsing's death in 594, who noted that “[Hsin-hsing's teaching and practice] are different from the virtues, understandings, and practices of old”;¹ this point is also picked up in Hsin-hsing's official biography in the *Hsü kao seng chuan* 續高僧傳: “[Hsin-hsing's] understandings and interpretations were unlike those of old.”² The extreme example of this treatment is the later branding of his teachings as heretical. While we should not downplay the original flavor of Hsin-hsing's teaching and practice, it is also important to recognize just how much the ingredients that he used were common to other Buddhist teachers of his time, both in the north (such as Tao-ch'ö, for example, central in the development of the Chinese Pure Land tradition, or the Ti-lun master Ling-yü) as well as in the south, including those associated with the founding of the Sui dynasty (such as Chih-i, founder of the T'ien-t'ai tradition). Hsin-hsing, too, likely would be quite

¹ T #2034, 49.105b.

² T #2060, 50.560a.

surprised to find his teachings and practices considered unusual or unique, for, as with all Buddhist teachers that I have ever known or studied, he himself took great pains to locate his doctrine and practice in the mainstream of normative Buddhism. In this chapter, then, I would like to introduce what we know of Hsin-hsing's life, and the practices that he cultivated, in order to set the stage for the fuller discussion of his teachings and institutions that follows in parts two through four.

HISTORY

Hsin-hsing

Hsin-hsing (540–594) was a native of Northern China who spent the last years of his life in Ch'ang-an, the capital of the newly unified Sui empire. The earliest records of his life come from his own writings, in particular the epistolary testimony of the *Hsin-hsing i wen* 信行遺文,³ reliquary inscriptions (including an inscription perhaps composed in 594, the year that Hsin-hsing died),⁴ and the *Li tai san pao chi* catalog of scripture issued in 597 (but emended through at least 600) that includes the first official record of his writings as well as the first record of the suppression of Hsin-hsing's teachings.⁵ Of a later date is his biography in Tao-hsüan's *Hsü kao seng chuan* (*Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*), compiled in 645, some fifty years after the death of Hsin-hsing.⁶ Still, because Tao-hsüan resided on Chung-nan shan 絡南山, the site of reliquaries for Hsin-hsing and many of his followers, and because of the generally acknowledged reliability of the *Hsü kao seng chuan*, this is an important source for the study of the San-chieh. As usual, Tao-hsüan relied on earlier source material in his biography of Hsin-hsing, in particular the account of his writings and the first suppression of his movement recorded in the *Li tai san pao chi* (ca. 600), miracles stories, and tomb inscriptions.⁷ Finally, there is a biographical sketch of

³ Stein #2137, included in Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, appendix, 1–7.

⁴ See Jamie Hubbard, "Chinese Reliquary Inscriptions and the San-chieh-chiao," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 14/2 (1991): 254–63; Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō*, 26–32.

⁵ T #2034, 49.105b–c.

⁶ Hsin-hsing's biography is contained in the section on monks who practiced meditation together with the biographies of three of his followers: P'ei Hsüan-cheng 裴玄證, Pen-chi 本濟, and Seng-yung 僧邕.

⁷ At the end of his biography of Hsin-hsing and the attached biography of P'ei Hsüan-cheng, Tao-hsüan added that there is yet another biography in the *Li tai san pao chi*, a fact

Hsin-hsing contained in the *Tales of Miraculous Retribution* (*Ming pao chi*, ca. 655)—significant because the author, T'ang-lin 唐臨 (600–659), was the grandson of Kao Chiung 高穎, Hsin-hsing's main patron in the capital, and often visited the Chen-chi ssu 眞寂寺, Hsin-hsing's residence in Ch'ang-an.⁸

Little is known of Hsin-hsing's family background other than that he was from Wei-chün 魏郡 (in the area of modern Anyang 安陽 in Henan province),⁹ and his family name was Wang 王.¹⁰ Other documents record his starting a community in Yeh 鄴 (also just north of modern Anyang), the capital of the Eastern Wei (534–550) and the Northern Ch'i (550–577), and also place him nearby in Hsiang-chou 相州 (near his birthplace in Wei-chün) in 583 and 587 (see below). Although nothing further is known of his family origins, we are thus able to locate his area of activity from the time of his birth until he was invited to Ch'ang-an in 589 in one of the most vibrant and dynamic areas of Northern China at the time, home to many influential Buddhist leaders and communities, as well as a destination for travelers bringing news and ideas from South and Central Asia. This geographical

confirmed by his own generous borrowing from the same. Although there are no other extant, verifiable sources for Hsin-hsing's biography in the *Hsü kao seng chuan*, it is almost certain that Tao-hsüan saw the memorial stele composed for him by Pei Hsüan-cheng at Chung-nan shan (cf. T #2060, 50.560a.26–27 and T #2060, 50.560b.2–3 and below, p. 14), and therefore it is possible that much of the biography that is not taken from the *Li tai san pao chi* is taken from this stele; cf. my “Chinese Reliquary Inscriptions.”

⁸ *Ming pao chi*, T #2082, 51.788a–c; see also the translation and study by Donald E. Gjetson, *Miraculous Retribution: A Study and Translation of T'ang-lin's Ming pao chi* (Berkeley: Center for South and Southeast Asia Studies, 1989), esp. 157–60. The *Ming pao chi* also contains stories about his follower Hui-ju 慧如 (T #2082, 51.788c).

⁹ *Hsü kao seng chuan*, T #2060, 50.559c; cf. the *Li tai san pao chi*, T #2034, 49.105b and the *Ku ta Hsin-hsing ch'an shih ming t'a pei* (Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, 7), both of which give Wei-chou 魏州. According to the *Sui shu*, however, in K'ai-huang 3 (583) Wen Ti abolished all of the military commanderies in an effort to break the power of local governments that had encroached upon the power of the central government. However, for much the same reason, his successor, Yang Ti, changed back to *chün* again at the beginning of his reign (604–617); cf. *Sui shu*, ch. 3, p. 8b, ch. 28, pp. 22b–23a and 32a; Woodridge Bingham, *The Fall of the Sui* (Baltimore, Waverly Press, 1941), 12; Wright, *The Sui Dynasty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 99; Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, 20, n. 21. All in all the geographical names of these records are confusing because of frequent name changes; e.g., the Hsiang-chou of the T'ang corresponds to the Wei-chün of the Sui, the Wei-chou of the T'ang corresponds to the Wu-yang chün 武陽郡 of the Sui, etc. What is important is that the general area of Hsin-hsing's birth and activity before he was invited to Ch'ang-an was in the area around the capital city of Yeh in the north, roughly corresponding to the northern tip of contemporary Henan and the southern tip of contemporary Hebei. The *Ku ta Hsin-hsing ch'an shih ming t'a pei* adds that Hsin-hsing was a “man of Wei Kuo” 衛國 (Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, 7), near modern-day Daming 大名 and Qingfeng 清丰 in Hebei province.

¹⁰ Perhaps Wang Shan-hsing 王善行 of Wei-chou and Wang Shan-hsing 王善性 of Chao-chou, the two “spiritual companions” mentioned in the *Hsin-hsing i wen* (see below), were relatives?

locus is an important fact that helps to put his teaching and practice in context.

In describing Hsin-hsing's life, the *Hsü kao seng chuan* reflects a typical concern for the didactic message of karmic retribution and tells us that although his mother had long been without child, after sincerely praying to the Buddhas she had a dream in which a spirit promised her a child. Indeed, upon waking she felt somehow different and discovered that she was pregnant. The *Ming pao chi* account is more specific, noting that his mother, grieving that she had not been able to have a child, happened to meet a monk who encouraged her to pray to Avalokiteśvara. This she did day and night, resulting in her pregnancy and the birth of Hsin-hsing.¹¹ The story as told in the *Ming pao chi* fits in well with the popular Chinese miracle tales centered around the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, whose benevolence and power were well known from the *Lotus Sutra*, in which the Buddha describes how Avalokiteśvara will aid those who call upon him.¹² Among other assistance promised by the *Lotus*, if a woman desires a baby boy and worships and make offerings to Avalokiteśvara, she indeed will be rewarded with a wise and virtuous son.¹³

True to Avalokiteśvara's promise, Hsin-hsing was "exceptional from birth,"¹⁴ and "as a child was intelligent and wise, and well versed in the sutras and sastras,"¹⁵ perhaps referring to the fact that Hsin-hsing's writings are typically described as consisting of citations from Buddhist scripture (a fact actually attested to in the extant manuscripts). His early compassion and even-mindedness is likewise commented on:

When [Hsin-hsing] was four years old, he saw an ox-cart in the road mired in the mud, straining and pulling. This aroused his sorrow and he cried and cried, wanting to push it out of the mud. If he came across a calf separated from its mother, or encountered thieving and deception, by nature he understood that all were equal and was not given to attachments and aversions. At eight years of age he was already showing signs of being extremely bright, clever, and out of the ordinary.¹⁶

Hsin-hsing's interest in the religious life does appear to have developed early, for in the *Hsin-hsing i wen* he declared that "when young I suffered

¹¹ *Ming pao chi*, T #2082, 51.788b.

¹² Gjertson, *Miraculous Retribution*, 13–14.

¹³ T #262, 9.57a.

¹⁴ T #2060, 50.559c.

¹⁵ *Ming pao chi*, T #2082, 51.788b.

¹⁶ T #2060, 50.559c.

because of a troubled mind, and was unfit for sitting meditation or chanting the scriptures. From [age] seventeen onward I sought spiritual friends.¹⁷ Although there is no mention of when or where Hsin-hsing actually left home or received the precepts,¹⁸ the *Hsü kao seng chuan* biography of Hui-tsan 慧瓚, a well-known master of meditation and Vinaya, records that a novice named Hsin-hsing 沙彌信行 came to study with him seeking the ten precepts. Hui-tsan turned him down, after which he studied under Hui-tsan's disciple Ming-yin 明胤 before returning to Yeh 鄴 (the capital city of the Wei and Eastern Ch'i in Hsiang-chou 相州) and beginning his own congregation (*pu chung* 部衆).¹⁹

It is hard to know what to make of Hsin-hsing's seeking to receive the ten precepts from Hui-tsan or what period of his life this refers to. Hui-tsan, born in Ts'ang-chou 滄州 (in contemporary Hebei, approx. 280 kilometers southeast of Beijing), was active in the north until approximately 577, when, as a result of Emperor Wu's persecution, he left for the south; in 580 he returned to the area around Chao-chou 趙州 (in Hebei, approx. 170 kilometers north of modern Anyang) and some ten years later resided at the Kai-hua ssu 開化寺 in Ping-chou 并州 (near Taiyuan 太原 in Shanxi, app. 270 kilometers northwest of Anyang). Hence this could refer to some time before Hui-tsan went to the south and before Hsin-hsing received the full precepts. On the other hand, as Michibata avers, it could also refer to the period after he returned from the south, from 581 to 583, possibly indicating that Hsin-hsing, who would have been over forty at this point and presumably would have been returned to lay status during the persecution of 574–577, was seeking to re-establish his precepts.²⁰ But if already a novice, why would he be seeking the ten precepts? This also seems strange in view of the fact that only a few short years later he discards the full precepts (see below).²¹ Given, too, that Hsin-hsing is reported to have founded his own

¹⁷ *Hsin-hsing i wen*, 7.

¹⁸ The *Li tai san pao chi* relates that “when he [Hsin-hsing] was small, he abandoned his pursuits [落采=落飾, i.e., to become a monk?] and extensively studied the scriptural collections” (T #2034, 49.105b). This parallels the later *Ming pao chi*: “as a child [Hsin-hsing] was intelligent and wise, and well versed in the sutras and sastras” (cited above), which makes no mention, however, of Hsin-hsing's “abandoning his affairs”; his biography likewise omits any reference to when or where he received the precepts.

¹⁹ T #2060, 50.575b.

²⁰ Michibata Ryōshū, “Dōshaku to Sangaikyō,” in *Chūgoku Jōdokyōshi no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1980), 125.

²¹ A thorough discussion of Hsin-hsing's attitude towards the precepts should also take into account the *Teaching on Receiving the Eight Precepts* (*Shou pa chieh fa* 受八戒法, Pelliot 2849R); see Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō*, 197–98, 578–600.

congregation after leaving Hui-tsan's disciple Ming-yin, this would seem to be a record of a later event in his life. Perhaps the record of Hsin-hsing's disciple Pen-chi is relevant, for this biography notes that in the first year of K'ai-huang (581), when Pen-chi was eighteen years old, he heard of Hsin-hsing's founding a new sect (*i pu* 異部) and joined him.²² In any case, it does indeed seem likely that Hsin-hsing would have sought out Hui-tsan, for there is no question that Hui-tsan's rigor, *dhūta* practice, and interest in the Vinaya, meditation, and penitential rites are reflected in Hsin-hsing and the practice of his community. Significantly, Hui-tsan was also Tao-ch'o's teacher, and we can perhaps see his influence in the passing on to both Tao-ch'o and Hsin-hsing the practice of the *fang teng* repentance (*fang teng ch'an fa* 方等懺法).²³ Like Hsin-hsing, Hui-tsan was invited to Ch'ang-an (in 602), and he also spent a good deal of time on Chung-nan shan, the site of Hsin-hsing's reliquaries.

Though we have little information on where or from whom Hsin-hsing received the monastic precepts, his biography tells us that he *discarded* the full monastic precepts (*she chü tsu chieh* 捨具足戒) at the Fa-tsang ssu in Hsiang-chou 相洲法藏寺, personally engaged in manual labor, made offerings to the Fields of Compassion and Respect (suffering sentient beings and the Three Jewels, respectively; see below, 28), and paid reverence to monks and laity alike.²⁴ Reminiscent of Shinran's claim to a status of "neither monk nor layman," the record of this event in the earlier *Li tai san pao chi* notes that:

[Hsin-hsing] discarded the two hundred and fifty precepts and lived below the position of a full monk but above that of a novice.²⁵

Although we do not know when Hsin-hsing discarded the precepts, a testimonial in the *Hsin-hsing i wen* indicates that in 583, when he was 44 years old, and possibly as late as 587, he still considered himself a monk:

²² T #2060, 50.578a.

²³ On San-chieh monks, Hui-tsan, and the *fang teng* repentance see Daniel Stevenson, "The T'ien-T'ai Four Forms of Samādhi and Late North-South Dynasties, Sui, and Early T'ang Buddhist Devotionalism," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1987, 170–72 and 181–87; on Hsin-hsing and Tao-ch'o see also David Chappell, "Tao-ch'o (562–645): A Pioneer of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1976, 63–70; Yamamoto Bukkotsu 山本佛骨, "Shingyō to Dōshaku no kōshō 信行と道緯の交渉," *Indogaku Bukkyōgaku kenkyū* 6/2 (1958): 540–43.

²⁴ T #2060, 560a.

²⁵ T # 2034, 49.105b.

In the 3rd year of K'ai-huang (583) the monk Hsin-hsing of Kuang-yen ssu 光嚴寺僧信行 in Hsiang-chou, for the sake of the emperors,²⁶ ... teachers, parents, and all sentient beings of the past, future, and present, abandoned body, life, and possessions, entrusting himself to all of the teachings of the sixteen kinds of eternal, joyous, self [and pure practices of the Inexhaustible Storehouse].... On the tenth day of the first month of the seventh year of K'ai-huang (587) the sramana Hsin-hsing of the Kuang-yen ssu 光嚴寺沙門信行 in Hsiang-chou said to the patron and governor of the Prefecture 州知事檀越: "When young I suffered a troubled mind and was unfit for seated meditation or chanting the scriptures. From [age] seventeen onward I sought spiritual friends, and until now, at age 48, thirty-two full years have accumulated, I have only found four people who have vowed to reject life and treasures and to immediately arrive at Buddhahood: the monk Hui-ting of the Kuang-yen ssu in Hsiang-chou 相州光嚴寺僧慧定; the monk Tao-chin of the Yen-ching ssu in Hsiang-chou 相州嚴淨寺僧道進; the [layman] Wang Shan-hsing of Wei-chou 魏州王善行 ... and the [layman] Wang Shan-hsing of Chao-chou 趙州王善性. Continuously practicing in this way without interruption will benefit the nation and profit the masses of living beings, and so I respectfully ask that you report this to the Imperial throne that I may receive their gracious permission."²⁷

If these records are accurate, they tell us that in 587 Hsin-hsing was still in Hsiang-chou, residing at the Kuang-yen ssu. It might also be significant that in the first instance Hsin-hsing refers to himself as a monk 僧 but in the second as a sramana 沙門, and that two of his four companions appear to be laymen.²⁸ One of Hsin-hsing's important disciples, P'ei Hsüan-cheng (d. ca. 634), is also described by Tao-hsüan as having been formerly a monk but in the end wearing layman's clothes.²⁹

As with much in Hsin-hsing's biography, it is hard to know exactly what to make of this record of his discarding the complete precepts and living "below a monk but above the laity." The natural tendency is to see him initiating a new sort of ecclesiastic position analogous to Shinran's "neither monk nor laity" mentioned above. Such an explanation appears particularly promising given the San-chieh emphasis on the tradition of the decline of

²⁶ The text is damaged here; three characters are missing.

²⁷ *Hsin-hsing i wen*, 3 and 7 (I have emended the reading slightly in line with the same list of spiritual friends given in the *Hsin-hsing i wen*, 5); see also Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, 11–14.

²⁸ On the basis of a colophon to a San-chieh manuscript in the lost Li Sheng-to 李盛鐸 collection of Tun-huang manuscripts composed in 586 at the Fa-tsang ssu in Hsiang-chou, Nishimoto has surmised that it was between 583 and 587 that Hsin-hsing discarded the precepts (*Sangaikyō*, 56).

²⁹ T #2060, 560a; see also below, p. 15.

the dharma and insistence that the sangha was composed of corrupt monks who break the precepts and harbor false views (see chapters 4 and 6, below). Thus in considering this and other aspects of Hsin-hsing's teachings in his study of the suppressions of the San-chieh movement Mark Lewis writes that "we must conclude that the Three Stages sect celebrated the reversion of monks to secular life as one expression of proper religiosity."³⁰

At the same time, however, this explanation goes against what we know of the rigor of Hsin-hsing's cultivation of a strict monastic regimen, including the austerities of the *dhūta* practices, penitential rites, liturgies, meditation, and especially the stern life of San-chieh communities, the regulations of which go so far as to bar membership to any who have even *considered* discarding the precepts (see chapter 6, 143–44).³¹ Considering his seeking ordination from Hui-tsan, a Vinaya master noted for his strict vigilance of the precepts, it seems hard to conclude that Hsin-hsing was attempting to eliminate the institution of monasticism. Other possible explanations, then, for Hsin-hsing's discarding the precepts could perhaps include his *high* regard for the precepts and a desire not to break them, either because he felt that as an evil person he could no longer be faithful to his vows or perhaps because of his desire to engage in manual labor and develop the social welfare enterprises that led to the creation of the Inexhaustible Storehouse (see chapters 7 and 8).³² Then again, perhaps this is simply a record of his abandoning the precepts during the general persecution of Buddhism by Emperor Wu that lasted from 574 to 577.

Although most of Hsin-hsing's life was thus spent in the area of the Northern Ch'i capital, his last years were spent in Ch'ang-an, the capital of the newly unified Sui empire. According to his biography, he was officially invited to the capital in the beginning of the K'ai-huang period (581–600), and the famous statesman Kao Chiung established a subtemple (*yüan* 院) for him in the Chen-chi ssu 眞寂寺.³³ Because Kao Chiung was still busy in the various campaigns to conquer the South, and because the Chen-chi ssu was not established until 583, this date should be emended to K'ai-huang 9 (589), following the *Hsin-hsing i wen* records (noted above) of Hsin-hsing's continued presence in Hsiang-chou in 587 and the biography of Hsin-hsing's disciple Seng-yung: "In K'ai-huang 9 (589) Hsin-hsing received an invitation to

³⁰ Mark E. Lewis, "The Suppression of the Three Stages Sect," in Robert Buswell, Jr., ed. *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1990), 220.

³¹ There is a grandfather clause to this rule that exempts anybody who had already abandoned the precepts; perhaps this clause was for Hsin-hsing himself, or perhaps for others forcibly returned to lay life during the persecution of 574–577.

³² Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō*, 56.

³³ T #2082, 51.788a; for details see chapter 8.

the capital and he went together with Seng-yung; after his arrival in the imperial capital monks and laity alike all received his teachings.”³⁴

According to his biography, once in the capital Hsin-hsing composed three works in more than forty *chüan*: the *Practice that Arises in Accord with the Capacity* (*Tui ken ch'i hsing* 對根起行), the *Collected Works on the Three Levels* (*San chieh chi lu* 三階集錄), and the *Assorted Rules for Community Regulation* (*Chih chung shih chu fa* 制衆事緒法).³⁵ The early records of Hsin-hsing's writings are not entirely consistent, in part because they were originally given orally and only subsequently written down by one of his disciples, and of course in part because of their proscription in 600.³⁶ This state of affairs is alluded to in the *Li tai san pao chi*, the earliest catalog of Hsin-hsing's writings, which, after recording the “miscellaneous records of practices that arise in accord with the capacity” (*tui ken ch'i hsin tsa lu* 對根起行雜錄) in thirty-two *chüan*, notes that, although these “miscellaneous records” are made up of accurate citations from the sutras and commentaries, the titles of the individual works (in the miscellaneous records) are not fixed. Nonetheless, there is a general consensus of nearly forty *chüan* of writings that seem to have been loosely gathered under two rubrics, a longer work dealing with the “practice in accord with the capacity,” and a shorter work dealing with the three levels. Although not specifically mentioned in the earliest records, the third text mentioned in Hsin-hsing's biography, the

³⁴ T #2060, 50.584a.

³⁵ T #2060, 50.560a. The *Chih chung shih chu fa* was actually written “east of the mountains” (*shan tung* 山東) referring not to modern Shandong province but to the area east of the T'ai-hang Mountains, in modern-day Shansi province. The only other mention of anything composed “east of the mountains” is the *Chi lu* 集錄, which, lacking a text, Hsin-hsing taught orally to his disciple Pen-chi 本濟 (T #2060, 50.578a); according to the biography appended to Hsin-hsing's, the disciple P'ei Hsüan-cheng 裴玄證 actually penned all of Hsin-hsing's writings (凡所著述皆委[裴玄]證筆).

³⁶ The *Li tai san pao chi* lists two works, the *San chieh wei pieh chi lu* 三階位別集錄 in three *chüan* and a *Tui ken ch'i hsing tsa lu* 對根起行雜錄 in thirty-two *chüan*, and Hsin-hsing's reliquary inscription mentions two works, the *Tui ken ch'i hsing chih fa* 對根起行之法 in over thirty *chüan* and a *San chieh fo fa* 三階佛法 in four *chüan*. The *Ta t'ang nei tien lu*, also composed by Tao-hsüan (author of Hsin-hsing's *Hsü kao seng chuan* biography), only lists two works attributed to Hsin-hsing, the *San chieh wei pieh chi lu* 三階位別集錄 and the *Tui ken ch'i hsing tsa lu chi* 對根起行雜錄集. T'ang-lin's *Ming pao chi* generally confirms this early literary tradition of Hsin-hsing, giving his works as a thirty-six-*chüan* *Jen chi lu* 人集錄 and a four-*chüan* *San chieh fa* 三階法. For an overview of the San-chieh literary tradition see Hubbard, “Salvation in the Final Period,” 171–260; Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, 141–92; Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō*, 155–238; Hubbard, “The Teaching of the Three Levels and the Manuscript Texts of the *San chieh fo fa*,” in *Nanatsu-dera koitsu kyōten kenkyū sōsho* Vol. 5: *Chūgoku Nippon senjutsusho* (Tokyo: Daito Shuppansha, 2000); Nishimoto Teruma, “Sangaibuppō' shohon no seiritsu to denpan ni tsuite,” in *Nanatsu-dera koitsu kyōten kenkyū sōsho* Vol. 5: *Chūgoku Nippon senjutsusho* (Tokyo: Daito Shuppansha, 2000).

Assorted Rules for Community Regulation, is found in later catalogs that detail the titles of the individual works that comprise the more than thirty *chüan* of the *Practice that Arises in Accord with the Capacity*.³⁷

Because the San-chieh texts were later banished from the official canon and the community itself eventually died out, these works have been lost for the better part of a millennium, with only their titles remaining in the catalogs. This situation changed dramatically with the discovery of their texts at Tun-huang and in Japan nearly one hundred years ago, though many problems of identification, physical reconstruction, dating, and interpretation remain. Although the full presentation of the textual history of Hsin-hsing's writings lies outside the scope of this study, it is notable that they are—as virtually all early sources agree—primarily composed of citations drawn from a wide reading of scripture. As a fragment of the *San chieh fo fa* 三階佛法 (*Buddha-dharma of the Three Levels*, Stein #2684) recovered from Tun-huang puts it, “The *San chieh fo fa* is entirely comprised of scriptural passages (*ching wen* 經文), excluding only nine words written by human beings (*jen yü* 人語): ‘the first level’ (*ti i chieh* 第一階), ‘the second level’ (*ti erh chieh* 第二階), and ‘the third level’ (*ti san chieh* 第三階).”³⁸ Indeed, although this is a bit of an overstatement and the rules for citation in Hsin-hsing's day were not quite the same as those imposed within contemporary academic writing, within the 30 leaves of this fragment of the second *chüan* of the *San chieh fo fa* (approximately 10 *Taishō* pages), for example, there are over 130 references to 35 different canonical sources, including the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* (31 references), *Daśacakraṣṭigarbha-sūtra* (16 references), the *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra* (17 references), as well as the *Hua-yen Sūtra*, *Kāśyapa-parivarta-sūtra*, *Śrīmaladevī-sūtra*, *Ekottarāgama*, *Daśabhūmika-sūtra*, and numerous other sutras and sastras. Interesting, too, is the careful separation of the words of the composer (*jen yü* 人語) and scripture (*ching wen* 經文). Could it perhaps reflect a sense of defilement of the commentator and therefore a wish not to pollute sacred writings by mixing them with the profane—thereby equivalent, perhaps, to the grievous offense of slandering the dharma? Or is Hsin-hsing simply showing that although he knows his arrangement of the Buddha's teachings into three levels is artificial and not found in the texts themselves it is undeniably based on scripture? Regardless of the reason, Hsin-hsing was indeed zealous in his recourse to scriptural authority.

After only five years in the capital Hsin-hsing's health began to deteriorate, though his rigorous and diligent practice did not:

³⁷ E.g., the *Ta chou lu*, T 2153, 55.475a and the *K'ai yüan lu*, T #2154, 55.678c.

³⁸ *San chieh fo fa*, 12; see also the Japanese text of the *San chieh fo fa*, 415.

Toward the end his illness became severe, but he struggled with all of his strength in the Buddha-hall, contemplating the image [of the Buddha]. When his energy had gradually waned, he had the image brought into his room and while lying on his side gazing at it he died. He had fifty-four springs and autumns [i.e., he was 54 years old].³⁹ This took place on the fourth day of the first month of the fourteenth year [of K'ai-huang, that is, 30 January 594].⁴⁰ After seven days his corpse was escorted from the Hua-tu ssu 化度寺⁴¹ to the Ch'ih-ming fu 鷓鳴阜 of Chung-nan shan 絡南山, and the wailing voices of monks and laity shook the capital.⁴²

At Chung-nan shan they “abandoned his body,” the so-called “sky burial” in which one’s body is left in the open as a food offering to the wild beasts—a final and fitting act for one who, as noted above, had vowed to abandon body, life, and possessions for the sake of all sentient beings. Although not a common practice, sky burial was far from unknown among Hsin-hsing’s contemporaries.⁴³ Tao-hsüan’s biography adds that when they later collected his bones, they discovered that his ears were directly across from each other! This curious note is explained by an episode in the tale of Hsin-hsing recounted in the *Ming pao chi*, which relates that after Hsin-hsing’s death, some of the teachers in the capital had misgivings about his teachings. After discussing the matter among themselves, they recalled that, according to the *Fu fa tsang ching*, if a person has heard the true dharma in the past then their ears would be directly across from each other. Upon checking Hsin-hsing’s skull, they discovered that his ears were indeed directly opposite each other and so they all were contrite and admitted their lack of faith.⁴⁴ Considering that the first suppression of the San-chieh movement took place only a few short years after Hsin-hsing’s death (in 600), it is interesting that the basic

³⁹ Hsin-hsing’s age should be emended to 55 as given in the *Ku ta Hsin-hsing ch’an shih ming t’a pei* (Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, 9); on Hsin-hsing’s age see Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō*, 40–41.

⁴⁰ This date later became important for the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse; see below, chapters 7 and 8.

⁴¹ The Chen-chi ssu was renamed the Hua-tu ssu in 620 (see chapter eight).

⁴² T #2060, 50.560a.

⁴³ A cursory check through the indices for the *Hsü kao seng chuan* turns up thirteen references to other monks who “abandoned their body” at death; nuns were also noted in this regard, as for example Hui-ch’iung 慧瓊, who specifically requested that her disciples leave her body as an offering for wild animals (T #2063, 55.930b); Chien-hsing 堅行 is a San-chieh nun buried at the site of Hsin-hsing’s reliquary whose disciples also gave her a sky burial (Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō*, 82–84).

⁴⁴ T #2082, 51.788c; see also Gjertson, *Miraculous Tales*, 159. The *Fu fa ts’ang yin yüan chuan* 付法藏因緣傳 was probably composed in China and figures in the tradition of the decline of the dharma; the story about the ears is found at T #2058, 51.322b.

point of this story, related in two biographies composed in the 650s, is to confirm that the doubts of the teachers in the capital had been allayed and that Hsin-hsing's teachings were indeed the "true dharma."

After gathering his remains, his followers erected a reliquary and put up a memorial stele, which, according to Tao-hsüan, was composed by Pei Hsüan-cheng 裴玄證 and is at the foot of the mountain.⁴⁵ Chung-nan shan was a popular spot among Sui and T'ang Buddhists, and also served as a reliquary site for many. A number of other San-chieh followers also had steles and stupas erected near Hsin-hsing, and in 767 the name of the site was changed from the Hsin-hsing ta-yüan 信行塔院 to the Pai-ta ssu 百塔寺, perhaps indicating that Hsin-hsing's reliquary stupa was no longer the focus of the site.

Community

Hsin-hsing left behind a substantial community of followers (*t'u chung* 徒衆) and institutional presence after his death.⁴⁶ He appears to have been a charismatic teacher and to have attracted followers from early on. As noted above, he was reported to have founded a congregation (*pu chung* 部衆) in Yeh after leaving Hui-tsan, and, in support of the idea that Hsin-hsing's community began at least as early as the K'ai-huang era, his reliquary inscription (likely composed in 594, the year of his death) records that a group of followers (*t'u chung* 徒衆) three hundred strong had been together with Hsin-hsing as "spiritual companions" (*shan chih shih* 善知識) for over twenty years, following his deeds of body, mind, and speech as "comrades in awakening" (*p'u t'i chih yu* 菩提之友). As noted above, Pen-chi is recorded as having joined Hsin-hsing's "new sect" (*i pu* 異部) in 581, and Seng-yung, another important disciple who led the community after Hsin-hsing's death, joined him at approximately the same time.⁴⁷ Hsin-hsing's charisma and skill at winning converts is mentioned in many of the records of his life; for example, Tao-hsüan records that adepts came from the four directions to his gate to question him, and because Hsin-hsing was always straightforward and never devious in his replies all who heard him believed him and were

⁴⁵ T #2060, 50.560a. The various memorial steles done in memory of Hsin-hsing and his followers form one of the more interesting and important sources of information for the study of Chinese Buddhism in general and the San-chieh movement in particular; for an introduction to these sources see Hubbard, "Chinese Reliquary Inscriptions."

⁴⁶ For a complete listing of his disciples and followers see Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō*, 77–119.

⁴⁷ T #2060, 50.584a.

converted.⁴⁸ The *Ming pao chi* likewise notes that all the “bold and determined scholars of the empire (*t’ien hsia yung meng ching chin chih shih* 天下勇猛精進之士) took Hsin-hsing as their master.”⁴⁹ Though these references seem to be but borrowed or shared literary tropes, they fit in well with other indications that Hsin-hsing was a charismatic leader around whom a founder’s cult developed.

Because of the emphasis on the decline of the dharma, the decay of human potential, and the mass appeal of Hsin-hsing’s charitable enterprise, there has been a persistent tendency to see his community as a popular movement that antagonized elite notions of orthodoxy. In fact, evidence of elite support is more forthcoming in the historical record.⁵⁰ We can cite, for example, the official invitation to teach in the capital and the patronage of the powerful minister Kao Chiung. Hsin-hsing’s appeal to the elite is perhaps also indicated by the stature of his disciples. Attached to the biography of Hsin-hsing, for example, is the biography of his disciple P’ei Hsüan-cheng (d. circa 634). Although originally a monk, P’ei is said to have worn layman’s clothes towards the end of his life. That he was of a relatively high station in life is evident from the fact that he is referred to as a “retired gentleman” 居士, that he compiled Hsin-hsing’s works, and that he composed not only Hsin-hsing’s memorial but his own as well!⁵¹ As a “retired official” or “gentleman,” it is possible that P’ei was of the great P’ei family of Ho-tung, which produced many literati and high officials during the T’ang dynasty (e.g., P’ei chü 裴矩, P’ei Chü-tao 裴居道, etc.) Other members of the P’ei clan, such as the wife of P’ei Hsing-chien 裴行儉, one of the highest officials of the early T’ang, were also buried at the Pai-t’a ssu 百塔寺, the place where the steles for Hsin-hsing, Seng-yung, P’ei Hsüan-cheng, and other San-chieh followers were erected, and there is even a record to the effect that a P’ei-kung 裴公 donated the land for the Pai-t’a ssu.⁵² If it is true that P’ei Hsüan-cheng came from such a powerful family, it would help to explain both the early power of the San-chieh and their revival in the early T’ang dynasty.

In any case, Hsin-hsing’s biography lists five San-chieh temples in the capital: the Hua-tu ssu 化渡寺, the Kuang-ming 光明, the Tz’u-men 慈門, the

⁴⁸ T #2060, 50.560a.

⁴⁹ T #2082, 51.788a.

⁵⁰ This is particularly true in the epigraphical record; see Hubbard, “Chinese Reliquary Inscriptions.”

⁵¹ There is also a record in the *Pao k’e ts’ung pien*, *chüan* 7, p. 19, of a memorial that Pei composed for Ching-ming 淨名, a disciple who is mentioned together with Seng-yung in the *Ku ta Hsin-hsing ch’an shih ming t’a pei*; cf. Hubbard, “Chinese Reliquary Inscriptions,” 255.

⁵² Tsukamoto, “Sangaikyō shiryō zakki,” *Shina Bukkyō shigaku*, 1/1–2 (Shōwa 12), 99.

Hui-jih 慧日, and the Hung-shan 弘善. Writing at roughly the same time as Tao-hsüan, the author of the *Ming pao chi* notes that from these five temples his followers proliferated and spread out, but they were still known as the “meditation masters of the five temples.”⁵³ Indicating that Hsin-hsing had followers in other temples as well, the biography adds, “In addition to these, the other temples as well followed their regimen of offering veneration at the six periods and begging for food.”⁵⁴ The widespread influence of the movement that Hsin-hsing began is also evident from records of the Inexhaustible Storehouse, which both attracted throngs from all over the empire as well as established branches throughout the provinces (see chapter 8). From its origins in the rigorous communities of monastic Buddhist practice of the north to its establishment in the imperial capital, and in spite of the official hostility that it encountered, the religious community founded by Hsin-hsing flourished in Ch’ang-an for well over one hundred years, and continued to exist perhaps as late as the tenth century (see chapter 8).

At this juncture we might pause briefly to ask what sort of social organization best characterizes Hsin-hsing’s community. As we have seen, the earliest references to Hsin-hsing’s community are *i pu* 異部 (“new sect, branch, faction, division, or offshoot”), *pu chung* 部衆 (“congregation, society, group, community”), *t’u chung* 徒衆 (“group of followers, supporters”), *shan chih shih* 善知識 (“spiritual companions”), and *p’u t’i chih yu* 菩提之友 (“comrades in awakening”). As such, I tentatively believe that we could use the term “sect” to describe the San-chieh movement. That is, I think that Hsin-hsing and his followers share some of the features typically associated with sectarianism as defined by Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Bryan Wilson, and others, namely, a slightly separatist group of exclusivist true believers focusing on personal rather than institutional charisma and more concerned with personal fellowship than with secular power. To consider Hsin-hsing’s community in terms of sectarian movements, then, has obvious heuristic value. Still, before “sect” or “school” can be used with any degree of accuracy more work on the basis and configuration of membership is needed. In any case, what we do not find is “School of the Three Levels” (*San-chieh tsung* 三階宗) or “Teaching of the Three Levels” (*San-chieh-chiao* 三階教). Although the latter designation in particular has become the standard name in English, in fact it is not attested until quite late (ninth century) and in reality is more an appellation made popular by Yabuki Keiki’s pioneering research early in the previous century, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū*. For this reason I refer to the “San-chieh movement,” the “San-chieh teachings,” the “San-

⁵³ T #2082, 51.788c.

⁵⁴ T #2060, 50.560a.

chieh community,” or “the teachings of Hsin-hsing” in order to avoid using “San-chieh-chiao” as a proper name.

TEACHING

Although the various accounts of Hsin-hsing’s life recounted above must be understood as a particular variety of religious or hagiographical writing, they do make clear that the majority of his life was spent in Northern China in the vicinity of the capital city of Yeh. He was thus born amidst the civil war so endemic to sixth-century China and no doubt experienced firsthand the decadent conditions of the monasteries and the attendant imperial suppression of Buddhism in 574, in which over two million monks and nuns were reportedly laicized. Such conditions had already given rise to a pervasive apocalyptic mood in China, a mood further kindled by translations that reflected the persecution of Buddhism in northwest India at the hands of the conquering Huns only slightly earlier. These historical events, combined with the spirit of eschatological expectation that had prevailed for several centuries in indigenous Chinese thought and practice, prompted many to teach that sentient beings were no longer capable of practicing the traditional Buddhist path. This dark period of history was variously known as the “latter time” or “final age” (Chinese *mo shih* 末世, Sanskrit *paścimakāla*), or the time of the “destruction of the true teachings” (Chin. *fa mieh* 法滅, Skt. *saddharma-vipralopa*) and its development into a full-blown doctrinal statement occupied many of the important Buddhist thinkers of the Sui and T’ang and had far-reaching consequences in the history of East Asian Buddhism. Hsin-hsing’s systematization of this idea is found in his doctrine of the “three levels,” the unique organization of spiritual capacity that is the hallmark—and the name—of his movement. For Hsin-hsing the important lesson of the decline tradition was that sentient beings were ensnared by bias and prejudice, a foundational bias that prevented discernment of truth and falsity, ultimately leading to the grave offense of slandering the dharma and cutting off all chance for awakening. Such a bias at the very core of their experience characterizes the beings of the third level, and it was to them that Hsin-hsing’s teachings were directed.

At the same time that the notions of *mo shih* and *fa mieh* were gaining currency, however, a much more positive understanding of the human condition was also having a profound impact on Chinese Buddhists. This, the teaching of universal Buddha-nature, proclaimed that all living beings, no matter how degenerate or sinful, were fundamentally of an awakened nature and would one day realize that enlightened nature. Thus the situation presented an interesting dilemma—on the one hand the universal capacity for

Buddhahood proclaimed an equal and ultimate human potential, yet on the other hand there is the decayed capacity for realization of that potential. Hsin-hsing, as with many others, transformed this dilemma into an opportunity for advocating new doctrinal and institutional configurations of traditional Buddhist practice. He did so under the banner of the “practice that arises in accord with the capacity” (*tui ken ch’i hsing fa* 對根起行法), a reformulation of the pragmatic Buddhist dictum to make the cure fit the disease, the doctrinal privileging inherent in the Buddhist rhetoric of teaching according to the capacity of the disciple (*upāya*), and the Chinese tradition of organizing the Buddhist teachings according to various chronological and pedagogical schemes (*p’an chiao* 判教). Thus, far from closing off the Buddhist path, the teaching of the latter age opened up a door of opportunity for doctrinal innovation, an opening that coincided with the great political and economic opportunities blossoming throughout the empire. In many ways San-chieh doctrines and institutions can be best understood as a calculated response to those opportunities.

Hsin-hsing’s biographies are strangely silent on the specific topic of the three levels, although his key doctrine of teaching according to the spiritual capacity is noted. Tao-hsüan, for example, wrote in the *Hsü kao seng chuan* that Hsin-hsing “considered the teachings in conjunction with the era and investigated humanity in accordance with its affliction.”⁵⁵ The *Ming pao chi* elaborates:

[Hsin-hsing] taught that what was contained in the Buddha’s sutras was for the purpose of salvation; some [scriptures] taught the path according to the basic nature and some determined the teaching in accordance with time and the situation. Now we are very far from the sage and [human] nature at this time is very different. If an inferior person practices the superior teachings the teaching will not match the capacity and they will easily be confused and mistaken. Thereupon [Hsin-hsing] collected passages from the sutras and commentaries, closely examining them in order to discover the dharma appropriate for people to study.... The purport [of his teachings is to] encourage people [to cultivate] universal respect (*p’u ching* 普敬) [of others] and recognition of [one’s own] evil (*jen o* 認惡) nature, contemplate the [universal] Buddha-nature, and dispense medicine in accord with the affliction. It is a sudden teaching of the One Vehicle.⁵⁶

This passage aptly summarizes Hsin-hsing’s teachings: human nature is no longer capable of practicing the superior dharma of the sages, and to

⁵⁵ T #2060, 50.559c–560a.

⁵⁶ T #2082, 51.788b.

attempt to do so will only bring harm. Therefore we must take “medicine in accord with the affliction,” that is to say, cultivate the “practice that arises in accord with the capacity.” As the *Ming pao chi* notes, the gist of his teachings is to be found in the complementary practices of seeing all sentient beings in terms of their essential Buddha-nature and therefore universally respecting all while at the same time seeing oneself solely in terms of our basically evil nature. For Hsin-hsing, the medicine dispensed in accord with the affliction—the affliction of bias and prejudiced views of reality—means cultivating a variety of contemplative, penitential, liturgical, and ascetic practices, practices that for the most part were staples in the monastic regimen of his day. The full description of the evil nature of the third level of living being and the essentially enlightened nature of all living beings—absolute delusion and perfect Buddhahood—constitute the bulk of parts 2 and 3; here let me briefly introduce some of the other practices of the San-chieh community as they are mentioned in Hsin-hsing’s biographies.

PRACTICE

Although Hsin-hsing’s writings give the best picture of his synthesis of Buddhist doctrine, the biographical materials contain many references to his practice and that of his community. In general we can say that these practices are typical of the time; dhyana and other contemplative exercises, the ascetic *dhūta* practices, liturgical practice of the six-period *pūjā*, and the penitentiary *fang teng* rite—all well-known practices of the time—are each mentioned. Practices more unique to Hsin-hsing—practices that form the bulk of this study—include the universal veneration of all sentient beings as Buddhas, the sixteen practices of the Inexhaustible Storehouse, and of course the teaching of the three levels themselves. Although the full presentation of the contemplative and liturgical life of the San-chieh communities lies outside the scope of the present work, a brief introduction is in order; let me begin with those practices that seem to have been widespread in the milieu of late sixth-century Chinese Buddhist communities.

Dhyana

Although Hsin-hsing himself noted that when he was young he “suffered a troubled mind and was unfit for seated meditation or chanting the scriptures,”⁵⁷ either this was a rhetorical humility (perhaps born of his

⁵⁷ *Hsin-hsing i wen*, 7.

teaching of “recognizing evil,” described below) or he overcame his difficulties when he got older, for concentration practices, contemplative exercises, and the cultivation of various samadhis were an important part of Hsin-hsing’s regimen. To begin with, we should remember that Hsin-hsing’s biography in the *Hsü kao seng chuan* is contained in the section reserved for *ch’an shih* 禪師, “masters of meditation.”⁵⁸ The *Ming pao chi*, too, reports that Hsin-hsing “exerted his strength in order to concentrate his mind, emptying the physical and bringing wisdom to maturity.”⁵⁹ The *Hsin-hsing i wen* gives brief but strict instructions for the practitioner of seated meditation, tersely summed up as: “sit constantly day and night, never lying down.”⁶⁰ Many of the San-chieh texts recovered from Tun-huang also mention seated meditation (*tso ch’an* 坐禪) and meditative concentration (*ch’an ting* 禪定),⁶¹ and a large portion of the *Chih fa* manual of San-chieh monastic practice is devoted to detailed instructions on seated meditation practice, about which it states bluntly: “Seated meditation alone should be the foundation [of practice] for all the evil monks of the evil world after the Buddha’s extinction.”⁶²

The specific content of the exercises vary in the San-chieh literature,⁶³ from the “contemplation of form and nothingness” (*wu hsiang san mei kuan* 無相三昧觀), reported in the *Chih fa*⁶⁴ to the more mundane practice of calming the mind in order to keep it from being distracted by the love of fine food when engaged in begging alms.⁶⁵ The *Practice that Arises in Accord with the Capacity* (*Tui ken ch’i hsing fa* 對根起行法), an early and central San-chieh text, includes detailed instructions on the *ssu nien ch’u o* 四念處惡, the “mindfulness of the four evil places,” including contemplation of one’s actions, body, breath, movements, corpse, etc.;⁶⁶ the *p’ing teng kuan* 平等觀,

⁵⁸ The biographies of Hsin-hsing’s disciples Seng-yung (T #2060, 55.583c–584a) and Pen-chi (T #2060, 55.578a–578b) are also in the section reserved for *ch’an shih*.

⁵⁹ T #2082, 51.788b.

⁶⁰ *Hsin-hsing i wen*, 6.

⁶¹ A cursory check of the extant manuscripts reveals well over fifty references to *tso ch’an* and *ch’an ting*.

⁶² *Chih fa*, 581; underscoring its importance, the *Chih fa* states that the monk appointed to oversee San-chieh communities—though regarding himself as evil and others as virtuous—was expected to cultivate the seated meditation of the “formless samadhi” (*wu hsiang san mei* 無相三昧). *Chih fa*, 579.

⁶³ See Nishimoto Teruma, “Sangaikyō no kanhō ni tsuite,” *Ōkurasan ronshū* 44 (1999), 85–121.

⁶⁴ *Chih fa*, 579, 582.

⁶⁵ *Practice in Accord with the Capacity*, 123 (cf. *ibid.*, 142); see also chapter 5.

⁶⁶ *Practice in Accord with the Capacity*, 117–20.

the “contemplation of equality” in which the practitioner of *dāna* sees neither giver nor recipient, neither precept holder nor precept breaker;⁶⁷ and the *wu men kuan* 五門觀, “the five gates of contemplation,” including the “contemplation of the four Buddhas” (*ssu fo kuan* 四佛觀), the “contemplation of all [sentient beings] as one’s relative” (*p’u ch’in kuan* 普親觀), the “contemplation of the impurity of one’s food” (*shih pu ching kuan* 食不淨觀), the “contemplation of emptiness and formlessness” (*k’ung wu hsiang kuan* 空無[无]相觀), and the “contemplation of impermanence” (*wu ch’ang kuan* 無[无]常觀).⁶⁸ The first gate, the contemplation of the four Buddhas, was particularly important in San-chieh practice and is detailed in a separate text translated in Appendix A, the *P’u fa ssu fo* 普法四佛 (Stein #5668).⁶⁹ The importance of contemplative practice is underscored in Hsin-hsing’s biography that reports that even as he was dying Hsin-hsing devoted himself to contemplation of the Buddha image; and in the suppression edict of 699 (see chapter 8, 205–206) seated meditation is one of the San-chieh practices permitted to continue.⁷⁰

Fang-teng

As mentioned above, it seems likely that Hsin-hsing studied with Hui-tsan, a Vinaya and meditation master also known for his cultivation of the *dhūta* and the *fang teng* 方等 penitentiary rite. The *fang teng* retreat was widely popular in Northern Chinese Buddhist circles and particularly important in T’ien-t’ai practice.⁷¹ Whether because of Hui-tsan’s influence or simply because of its widespread popularity is unclear, but Hsin-hsing and his followers also practiced the *fang teng* rite, a complex and lengthy (one week was standard, but longer periods are also provided for) ritual retreat consisting of extensive physical purification, offerings to and veneration of the Buddhas, confession of sins, circumambulation while chanting *dhāraṇī*, and seated meditation designed to remove obstacles and purify the mind.

⁶⁷ *Practice in Accord with the Capacity*, 145.

⁶⁸ *Practice in Accord with the Capacity*, 152.

⁶⁹ The *P’u fa ssu fo* is the subject of chapter 5 and is translated in Appendix A, below; see also Nishimoto, *Sangaikyō*, 205–16 and 609–22. Another text that details San-chieh contemplative exercises is Pelliot 2268, to which Nishimoto has given the title *The Abridged Teaching on the Contemplation of the Three Levels* (*San chieh kuan fa lüeh shih* 三階觀法略釋); see *Sangaikyō*, 216–19 and 623–49.

⁷⁰ T #2153, 55.475a.

⁷¹ Hui-ssu, Tao-ch’o, and Chih-i are only a few of the prominent teachers associated with the *Fang teng* rite; see Stevenson, “The T’ien-t’ai Four Forms of Samādhi,” 82–94, 175–88; see also 538–96 for a translation of Chih-i’s *Fang teng san mei hsing fa* 方等三昧行法.

According to the *Li tai san pao chi*, the purificatory *fang teng* repentance was practiced by all of Hsin-hsing's disciples,⁷² and the primary text for the rite, the *Ta fang teng t'o lo ni ching* 大方等陀羅尼經, is cited often in works attributed to Hsin-hsing.⁷³ As with much else in Hsin-hsing's life, his interest in this rite of confession places him well within the context of northern practice, where it was popular from the mid-sixth century onwards. It also fits in well with the overall tenor of contemplative and devotional cultus in Hsin-hsing's community, for as Stevenson noted in his study of T'ien-t'ai devotional and liturgical practice, the *fang teng* (a) tends to be used in conjunction with the practice of dhyana, as either a preliminary method of purifying the mind or as supplementary confessional practice; (b) is related also to liturgies of veneration that involve reciting rosters of Buddha-names; and (c) is connected to a precept ceremony tradition, all of which fit in well with the practice of Hsin-hsing and the San-chieh community as well.

Devotional liturgies at the six daily periods

In addition to longer and more intense forms of veneration and repentance ritual such as the *fang teng* retreat, Tao-hsüan also recorded that at the San-chieh temples in the capital everybody performed "devotional rituals at the six periods and begging for food (*liu shih li hsüan ch'i shih* 六時禮旋乞食)."⁷⁴ Rituals performed at the six periods (three during the day and three periods at night) seem to have primarily involved the rites of the *Seven Roster Buddhanāma* (*Ch'i chieh fo ming* 七階佛名) and related liturgies of veneration and repentance (*li ch'an* 禮懺), numerous manuals of which were discovered at Tun-huang.⁷⁵ In addition to worship at the six intervals there

⁷² T # 2034, 49.105b.

⁷³ The *Ta fang teng t'o lo ni ching* is mentioned often in the *San chieh fo fa*, for example pp. 313, 316, 334, 341, 363, and 368.

⁷⁴ T #2060, 50.560a; see also the *Ming pao chi*, T #2082, 51.788b.

⁷⁵ The *K'ai yüan lu* attributes to Hsin-hsing both an *Extensive Seven Roster Buddhanāma* (*Kuang ch'i chieh fo ming* 廣七階佛名) and an *Abridged Seven Roster Buddhanāma* (*Lüeh ch'i chieh fo ming* 略七階佛名); T #2154, 55.678c. The rosters of Buddhas in these texts were drawn from sutras such as the *Fo shuo Kuan Yao-wang Yao-shang erh p'u sa ching* 佛說觀藥王藥上二菩薩經 (T #2161) and the *Fo shuo chüeh ting pi ni ching* 佛說決定毘尼經 (T #325); the importance of the former is indicated by its incorporation into the title of the *Chi chieh fo ming* in several catalogs (e.g., the *K'ai yüan lu*, T #2154, 55.678c, and the *Jen chi lu tu mu*, included in Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, appendix 221). The original study of the *Ch'i chieh fo ming* was done by Yabuki, *Sangaikyō*, 512–36; subsequently a greatly detailed study of the rite and the numerous manuscripts was done by Hirokawa Akitoshi, "Tonkō shutsudo nanakai butsumyōkyō ni tsuite," *Shūkyō kenkyū* 251 (1982): 71–105. Tokiwa Daijō has cited Hsin-hsing's use of the *Ch'i chieh fo ming* rite as evidence that he studied with Ling-yü 靈裕 (518–605), the

were also provisions for longer periods of continuous practice over the six periods (*liu shih hsüeh hsiang hsü tso yeh* 六時學相續作業), and, reminiscent of the importance of physical purity and ablutions in the *fang teng* rite, the *Hsin-hsing i wen* tells us that “one who would venerate the Buddha (*li fo* 禮佛) should don clean robes and wash three times in the day and three times at night; excluding a brief rest after midnight and a meal during the day, they should engage in constant veneration night and day with no rest.”⁷⁶

The veneration of various rosters of Buddhas as an integral part of a ritual complex carried out over the six watches of the day was a common feature of the monastic regimen of the time, cutting across different communities and traditions. Though these liturgies varied considerably in detail, their general format is well known throughout Mahayana Buddhist practice to this day from such practices as the Seven-Limbed Puja (*saptapūjā*)⁷⁷ and includes many of the same structures as the *fang teng* rite: veneration of the Three Jewels, offerings of incense and flowers, chanting and hymns, praising the Buddha’s merits, veneration of specific Buddhas (seven rosters of Buddhas, sometimes expanded with yet other lists), confession of sins and the cultivation of virtuous mental attitudes, dedication or transference of merits accrued through the ritual, further verses of praise of the Buddha’s merits, and taking refuge in the Three Jewels.⁷⁸

As with the rites of the *fang teng*, the veneration and repentance of the *buddhanāma* and other liturgies function on many different levels, and Hsin-hsing’s procedural manuals recognize that the practice and result will

famous Ti-lun master, because the unique configuration of Buddhas that comprise the seven rosters of Hsin-hsing’s rite are also recorded precisely in Ling-yü’s cave temple engravings; Ling-yü also shared Hsin-hsing’s forebodings about the decline of the dharma; see Tokiwa Daijō, “Sangaikyō no bodai toshite no Hōzan-ji,” *Shūkyō kenkyū* 4/1 (1927), 44–47; Stevenson’s study of T’ien-t’ai meditation and liturgical manuals includes detailed descriptions of the rite and liturgical manuals and vividly shows how well San-chieh practice fits in with what was done by other teachers of his time (*The T’ien-t’ai Four Forms of Samādhi*, 270–81; *passim*); see also the section on the “veneration of the Buddhas at the six periods” in the *Chih fa* (585–586) and the invocation of the Buddha rosters in the *Shou pa chieh fa* precept manual (595–596).

⁷⁶ *Hsin-hsing i wen*, 6.

⁷⁷ The *saptapūjā* is a later Mahayana rite that became nearly ubiquitous in Tibetan practice and thereby is increasingly popular in Western Buddhist circles as well; it includes: (1) prostration; (2) offerings; (3) confession; (4) rejoicing; (5) requesting the Buddhas to teach; (6) entreating the Buddhas to remain in the world until all are awakened; and (7) dedication of merit.

⁷⁸ Hirokawa, “Tonkō shutsudo nanakai butsumyōkyō ni tsuite,” 78–82; for a detailed description and comparative analysis of Chinese and Indian liturgical procedures see Stevenson, *The T’ien-t’ai Four Forms of Samādhi*, 249–464c.

vary with the capacity of the practitioner.⁷⁹ We can think, for example, of the simple and settling influence of the physical training gained by circumambulation and prostration (prostration was also a frequently assigned punishment for infractions of meditation hall rules; see chapter 6); developing humility and respect through ritual ablutions, cleansing and adorning the ritual site, and building the altar; cultivating the power of concentration through offering, chanting, and visualization; and, of course, fostering an acute awareness of the unavoidable nature of sin through confession and repentance. There is even questioning the ultimate nature of sin and virtue, leading in turn to an awareness of emptiness through seated meditation. Chih-i's procedural manual for the *fang teng* rite states, for example, "defiled and pure comprise a single continuum wherein there is no purity to be found, no impurity to be found. It is like open space. This is known as 'ultimate purity.'"⁸⁰ Thus, broadly speaking, the practice of veneration and confession is not simply a magical "forgiveness of sins" nor a mere preliminary exercise in moral character building through remembering and confessing of sin and thereby coming to fear it (although both of these elements are present). Rather, it functions as a graded path of practice involving body, mind, and speech at every step, combining to effect a liminal experience in which the performer is transformed from sinner to Buddha. Stevenson's structural analysis of the "intimate relationship between devotional/confessional liturgy and meditative discernment" shows us how the repentance rite "orchestrates ... a threshold or moment of liminality, where the participant is stripped of the possibility of remaining in his former condition and has no recourse but to step into the new."⁸¹ This is important to remember for, as in all ritual, the formulaic nature of liturgical rite does not stifle individual participation and spiritual experience but fosters it.

Dhūtas

Between the *Hsin-hsing i wen* entries dated 583 and 587, Hsin-hsing recorded a request for permission to engage in four practices:

I request permission to cultivate the four inexhaustible practices;⁸² I request permission to rejoice in the happiness of others and to help them by practicing

⁷⁹ *Chih-fa*, 582–83; see also chapter 6.

⁸⁰ *Fang teng san mei hsing fa* 方等三昧行法, T #1940, 945a, cited in Stevenson, "The T'ien-t'ai Four Forms of Samādhi," 91–92.

⁸¹ Stevenson, "The T'ien-t'ai Four Forms of Samādhi," 416.

⁸² The first four of the sixteen inexhaustible practices; see below and chapter 7.

giving; I request permission to beg for food according to the twelve *dhūta*; I request permission to cultivate the practice of the [bodhisattva] Never Despise as found in the *Lotus Sutra*.”⁸³

As noted above, Hsin-hsing’s biography also commented on the practice of begging for food. Although begging for food was perhaps the sine qua non of the early monastic lifestyle, this faded as the main means of support as the community became more settled, leaving it among the more ascetic practices known as the twelve *dhūta* mentioned here.⁸⁴ Probably one of the most frequently mentioned practices of Hsin-hsing and his followers is that of the *dhūta* 頭陀, ascetic practices better known today from the forest traditions of Southeast Asia than from Chinese monasticism.⁸⁵ The *dhūta* practices are sociologically interesting as well, as they are generally seen to represent a radical impulse to ascetic renunciation and solitary practice in contrast to the even stronger tendency in the Buddhist community toward the settled life of the vihara. That is to say that they represent an extreme lifestyle and as such they have always been controversial. Representing the voice of the mainstream (the “middle path”), for example, Śākyamuni is depicted as having denied Devadatta’s request to make five of the *dhūta* practices mandatory.⁸⁶ So, too, it was not long before Śākyamuni’s “community of the four directions” came to dwell in permanent structures as corporate landowners, and it is primarily this cenobitic institution that is represented in doctrinal and institutional documents. Still, in all Buddhist cultures there has always been an interest in ascetic extremes. As sociologists and historians of religion have long recognized, the ascetic has also always been vested with great authority by lay supporters because they are seen as the site of true Buddhist spirituality and thereby also associated with reform movements that seek to curb monastic laxity in urban temples.⁸⁷ This broader context is perhaps relevant to the San-chieh movement, given the frequent attacks by the authorities as well as other Buddhists that they experienced.

Still, we should not be too hasty to think of Hsin-hsing as a radical ascetic and reformer, for although it is true that the practice of *dhūta* in China has

⁸³ *Hsin-hsing i wen*, 7.

⁸⁴ On begging generally see Jean Rahder, “Bunne,” *Hōbōgirin* II (1929–1930), 158–69; on begging and *dhūta* practices in China see John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), 33–35.

⁸⁵ *Dhūta-guṇa* (= *dhuta-guṇa*, Pali *dhutaṅga* or *dhūtaṅga*).

⁸⁶ *Cullavagga*, VII.3.14, in *Vinaya Texts* (trans. by T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, *Sacred Books of the East*, 1885, Motilal reprint, 1975), Part III, 250 ff.

⁸⁷ Cf. E. G. Kemper, “Buddhism Without Bikkhus: The Sri Lanka Vinaya Vardena Society” in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, ed. by Bardwell L. Smith (Chambersburg: Anima Books, 1978), p. 216.

not been as well commented on as the Buddhist involvement in financial activities, economic enterprise, military operations, and the like, Chinese monks have also often been noted for their *dhūta* practice. Chih-i and his disciples, for example, are well known for advocating the practices, as is Huitsan, mentioned above in connection with Hsin-hsing's seeking to receive the novice ordination. Indeed, the *dhūta* practices are mentioned in over thirty other biographies in the *Hsü kao seng chuan*, including those of Fa-tsan 法瓊, Chih-tsang 智藏, and P'u-yüan 普圓.⁸⁸

The *Hsü kao seng chuan*, though not specifically mentioning the *dhūta*, notes that Hsin-hsing “wore simple clothes and was sparing in his food in a manner exceptional for the times; he lived during the winter as though it were summer, zealously surpassing what was customary” and, as noted above, that at the San-chieh temples in the capital and elsewhere there were “none that did not perform devotional rituals at the six daily periods or beg for food.”⁸⁹ Two texts attributed to Hsin-hsing in the *K'ai yüan lu* are concerned with the *dhūta* and begging food,⁹⁰ and several San-chieh texts recovered from Tun-huang also deal with the subject.⁹¹ There are many different lists of *dhūta* practices, typically made up of either twelve or thirteen practices that deal with clothing, food, and shelter. The *Practice that Arises in Accord with the Capacity* gives twelve practices:

- 1 Eating only what is received as alms;
- 2 Not being selective in seeking alms (begging from house to house in order);
- 3 Eating only one meal a day;
- 4 Eating sparingly (eating only two-thirds, one-half, one-third, or one-fourth of your food);
- 5 Not eating after noon;
- 6 Always sitting and not reclining;
- 7 Sitting on whatever is offered;
- 8 Sitting in a cemetery;
- 9 Sitting at the foot of a tree (“forest dwelling”);

⁸⁸ T #2060, 50.506c; T #2060, 50.587a; T #2060, 680b, respectively.

⁸⁹ T #2060, 50.560a; Fa-tsang (637–714) is another San-chieh monk who cultivated the *dhūta* (see ch. 8).

⁹⁰ The *Tan t'ou t'o ch'i shih fa* 頭陀乞食法 and the *Ming ch'i shih pa men fa* 明乞食八門法, T #2154, 678c.

⁹¹ E.g., the *Ch'i shih fa* 乞食法 (a portion of Pelliot 2849R) identified by Nishimoto (edited and included in *Sangaikyō*, 592–95; see also 586–88); begging for food is also mentioned in the *Hsin-hsing i wen* (pp. 3, 6, 7); see also the discussion of how to give to the sangha in the *Commentary on the Inexhaustible Storehouse* translated in Appendix C.

- 10 Sitting in the open;
- 11 Wearing only donated robes;
- 12 Wearing only the three robes.⁹²

The fact that the various practices relating to food come first reflects a central concern with the rules for receiving alms and eating in the San-chieh community, and, inasmuch as I have no knowledge of Hsin-hsing or his followers practicing the *dhūta* relating to dwelling, perhaps indicates a preferential order as well. The *Li tai san pao chi*, for example, notes that “all of [Hsin-hsing’s] disciples cultivate the *dhūta*, begging for food and eating only one meal a day.”⁹³ That this sort of austerity continued to be an important San-chieh practice is indicated by the fact that begging for food, abstaining from grains, and prolonged fasting are among the San-chieh practices permitted to continue in the suppression edict of 699.⁹⁴

Universal respect

The practices described so far—various forms of meditative exercise, penitential rites, regular periods of daily worship, and the ascetic practices of the *dhūta*—all serve to locate Hsin-hsing in the general context of Buddhist practices popular in the northern dynasties during the late sixth century. Other practices mentioned in the biographical records, however, are more unique to Hsin-hsing and the San-chieh community. On the basis of the doctrine of universal Buddha-nature, for example, the *Ming pao chi* cited above referred to the doctrine of “universal respect,” the concrete practice of which is described in the *Li tai san pao chi*:

Wishing to emulate the Bodhisattva Never Despise in the *Lotus Sutra* they revere everybody they meet on the road, regardless of whether the person was a man or a woman.⁹⁵

In addition to the *Lotus Sutra*, the basis for Hsin-hsing’s universal reverence is to be found in the teaching and contemplation of the four Buddhas mentioned above. On the basis of the teaching of tathagatagarbha, Buddha-nature, and the holistic vision of the *Hua-yen Sūtra*, these four Buddhas were taught to be four aspects of the “Universal Buddha” inherent in all sentient

⁹² *Practice in Accord with the Capacity*, 121–24.

⁹³ T #2034, 49.105b.

⁹⁴ T #2153, 55.4758; see chapter 8, 205–208.

⁹⁵ T # 2034, 49.105b. On Universal Respect see also Nishimoto, *Sangaiikyō*, 319–20, 326–27.

beings.⁹⁶ In these teachings (detailed in part 3) the all-pervading truth of the *dharmadhātu* is seen to be the reality of all phenomena and all sentient beings, even as they exist in samsara; hence they are to be revered as Buddhas at this very moment. Universal reverence was not only a devotional form of greeting—it was also realized more concretely through offerings of material goods in the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse.

Tao-hsüan's biography of Hsin-hsing in the *Hsü kao seng chuan* tells us that after he abandoned the precepts “he made offerings to the various [Fields of] Respect and Compassion, venerating renunciants and laity alike.”⁹⁷ The “Field of Compassion” (*pei t'ien* 悲田) refers to sentient beings, the fertile field in which the bodhisattva sows seeds of compassion that come to fruition for the benefit of all; the “Field of Respect” (*ching t'ien* 敬田) refers to the Three Jewels, the fertile field in which sentient beings sow seeds of respect that come to fruition in the form of merit. Of course, both types of “seeds” are metaphorical, and what the biography is referring to is charity (*dāna*) and Hsin-hsing's practice of giving equally to ordinary sentient beings and to the Three Jewels. Although in the traditional model material *dāna* remained the provenance of the laity and was entirely uni-directional—the laity supported the sangha with material gifts in return for the spiritual rewards of merit and teachings—by Hsin-hsing's time numerous factors had begun to effect a change in this central doctrine. While standing squarely in the middle of these developments, the scope and success of Hsin-hsing's implementation of the doctrine of *dāna* in terms of a concrete practice were unprecedented. I am referring to the institution of the Inexhaustible Storehouse (detailed in part 3 of this study), a massive and wildly popular charitable lending institution born of a blending of Vinaya rules governing the receipt of material goods and the Mahayana doctrine of the “inexhaustible storehouse” of the bodhisattva's compassion. In Hsin-hsing's vision this spawned an empire-wide practice that materially benefited the poor and downcast while providing a model of spiritual practice taught to equal that of the great Ekayāna bodhisattvas. Conceived in terms of the sixteen eternal, joyous, true self, and pure practices to which Hsin-hsing committed himself at age 43 and whose material benefit was as inexhaustible as their spiritual benefit (see the testimonial cited above), it was this practice of universal giving that opened his community of *dhūta*-practicing monks to the participation of

⁹⁶ It should be noted that this is identical to the practice of *tangyōraihai* 但行礼拜, “to solely practice veneration,” cultivated today by members of the Nipponzan Myōhoji denomination of the Japanese Nichiren tradition; they greet all whom they meet with a deep bow in veneration of the Buddha-nature in all sentient beings and with recitation of the *daimoku*, “*Namu myōhōrengekyō*.”

⁹⁷ T #2060, 50.560a.

all sentient beings, that is to say, all sentient beings of the third level.

These then were the main practices that Hsin-hsing cultivated himself and fostered in the communal practice of his “spiritual friends.” As an example of the latter we may perhaps cite the disciple Te-mei 德美 (575-637).⁹⁸ Te-mei became a monk at age nineteen, and shortly after met and studied with Hsin-hsing’s close disciple Seng-yung. He traveled to the capital, where he met Mo Ch’an-shih 默禪師, another of Hsin-hsing’s disciples, with whom he studied for over ten years. He continued his teacher’s legacy of cultivating the “universal Field of Merit” (*p’u fu t’ien* 普福田), an inclusive term referring to both Hsin-hsing’s teaching of the Universal Buddha inherent in all living beings as well as the two fields of merit, that is, the field of respect (the Three Jewels) and the field of compassion (suffering sentient beings). Accordingly, Te-mei cultivated the practice of the Bodhisattva Never Despise from the *Lotus Sutra*, publicly reverencing all members of the Buddhist community, and used the donations of clothing and food that he received for both the fields of respect and compassion. In addition to universal reverence and charitable work, Te-mei is also known to have practiced the various austerities and liturgies discussed above, including the *fang teng* rite, yearly observance of the *Pratyutpanna* walking meditation (he is reported to have “walked without sitting for the entire summer”), penitential rites comprised of *buddhanāma* liturgies, maintaining silence for three years, and being sparing in his food (eating only one part in four). Te-mei thus well exemplifies the values and practices that Hsin-hsing sought to instill in his followers. After his death his body was abandoned at the spot of Hsin-hsing’s “sky burial,” and his bones were later collected and enshrined in a stupa.

In summary, Hsin-hsing’s community took shape largely during the turbulent years of the late sixth century, a time of great adversity as well as great opportunity for Chinese Buddhists. The tumultuous centuries of warfare and cultural change prior to the unification of the Sui and establishment of the imperial capital at Ch’ang-an saw both large-scale suppressions of Buddhism as well as the development of indigenous forms of Buddhist doctrine, practice, and institution. Indeed, it was one of the most fertile epochs in Chinese Buddhist history, setting patterns for the more formal systematizations of later dynasties. Hsin-hsing incorporated many of these currents into his own teaching and left behind a prospering community of like-minded practitioners. Hsin-hsing’s teachings and practices, then, can best be understood as reflecting his milieu rather than as unique or deviant. As the biographies, catalogs, and other records show, his ideas and the practices that he cultivated can be found elsewhere as well, including his concern for

⁹⁸ T #2060, 696c–697a; Te-mei also cultivated Pure Land devotional practices, and is said to have died with his “hands folded, invoking [Amida’s] name.”

fa mieh (the destruction of the dharma), sentient beings “blind from birth” and the attendant teaching of the decayed capacity of sentient beings; the doctrine of universal Buddha-nature; meditation; confession and repentance liturgies; the ascetic *dhūta* practices and rigorous monastic training; emphasis on the precepts and precept ceremonies, both for lay people and renunciants; *buddhanāma* litanies; preference for sutra teachings over commentaries and particular interest in the universalism of the *Nirvana Sutra*, *Lotus Sutra*, and *Hua-yen Sutra*. Similarly there is little in the social organization of his movement that is not evident in other figures and monastic institutions, including high levels of official patronage, lay participation and sponsorship of lay organizations, and development of institutions of social welfare. At the same time we cannot deny that Hsin-hsing’s configuration of these various elements—the practices that he stressed, the institutional organizations he designed, and the way that he derived them from the scriptural tradition—are unique. It is to this—the way in which Hsin-hsing drew from the normative scriptural tradition in order to “dispense the medicine in accord with the affliction”—that we now turn.