Hui-neng tearing up the scriptures

1) Introduction: Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

Hsüan-tsang with a backpack full of scriptures

1 For other online publications click here.

2 This paper is partly based on materials in Jamie Hubbard, Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood: The Rise and Fall of a Chinese Heresy (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2001), and Jamie Hubbard, “Buddhist Philosophy, Critical Thinking, and the True Dharma,” presented to the International Conference on Buddhism and the 21st Century Digital Society. Dongguk University, Seoul, Korea, 2000. An abridged version was originally presented at McMaster University in 2006 and I am grateful for that opportunity and the hospitable delights provided by my hosts!
One might justifiably wonder if the title of this essay is not an oxymoron—am I really suggesting that orthodoxy is heresy? Besides, how can there be a Buddhist heresy in the first place? If there is anything that seems to be taken for granted these days it is that Buddhism is and always has been a religion marked by tolerance and acceptance in all areas. Related to this is the wide-spread notion that, unlike Christianity, for example, Buddhism has always had an open-minded approach to doctrine and scripture, allowing and even encouraging the ongoing production of sacred text without the sort of closure—assumed of the Christian canon—that brands some texts as spurious, others as apocryphal, and still others as downright heretical. This is underscored by the further claim that Buddhism is a practice-centered religion rather than a belief or doctrine-centered religion—that is, Buddhism is about orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, what one does, not what one believes.

Indeed, Buddhism, unlike the Brahmanic tradition from which it emerged, has nearly always denied scripture as a valid source of knowledge (pramāna), preferring direct experience (pratyakṣa) and valid inference (anumāṇa). The natural culmination of this tendency is to deny even the one whose words are enshrined in scripture, as in the famous saying, “If, on the path to awakening, you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.” The picture of Hui-neng tearing up the scriptures represents this, because, as is well known from the Zen tradition, truth “does not depend on the words and letters” of doctrine and texts but is rather the direct experience of a truth specifically transmitted outside of the scriptures. This is the position that is best known in the West, and fits well with the anti-institutional spirituality and anti-intellectual experientialism that characterizes much of New Age religiosity and postmodern philosophy. Stuart Smithers, for example, recently wrote that the decline of Buddhism in India was occasioned by a shift in emphasis from liberation to monastic concerns, precepts, and learning, because real “Buddhism is defined not as much by an orthodoxy ... as it is by an orthopraxis.”

3 Stuart Smithers, “Freedom's Just Another Word” in Tricycle 2/1 [Fall 1992], 38–39. Although Smithers writes that it was seen to be a “shift in emphasis” to precepts and learning that led to the demise of liberation, accounts of the demise of the dharma typically write more simply that while liberation, practice, and learning are present in the beginning, by the final period only learning remains. That is, learning is fully present in the beginning together with liberation and there is neither a “shift in emphasis” that causes the decline nor is learning itself demonized. While there clearly are examples of belittling the study of the dharma, the tradition of the decline of the dharma is not one of them.
Saints of India (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) argues that the paradigmatic saint in Buddhism is a wandering meditator that was in constant tension with the textual and precept orientation of settled monasticism, which he clearly sees as a betrayal of the true spirit of Buddhist practice.4

This downplay of the importance of doctrine is also supported by scholarship that argues that different doctrinal lineages are inconsequential in monastic life. Paul Williams, for example, has written that, “differences of doctrine as such are a personal matter. In theory a monastery could happily contain monks holding quite different doctrines so long as they behaved in the same way—crucially, so long as they adhered to the same monastic code.”5 He is building on the work of Heinz Bechart, who has argued that schisms in the Buddhist community were never a matter of doctrinal dispute and always stemmed from legal issues, that is, matters of vinaya, the monastic code: “It is now clear that saṃghabheda [dividing or splitting the monastic community] does not mean ‘schism’ in the sense known from Christian Church history, where it nearly always implies dissensions in the interpretation of dogma. In Buddhist tradition, ‘splitting the Sangha’ always refers to matters of monastic discipline.”6

On the other hand, less well-known perhaps but thankfully more often practiced than the assassinations of Buddhas met upon the path, nearly every collection of Buddhist scriptures—from the recitation by Ananda at the very first council to the edition of the tripitaka prepared at the Sixth Council in Myanmar some fifty years ago to the publication of the many digital versions of the Buddhist scriptures that monks and scholars now use—were prompted by the heartfelt desire to accurately preserve and thereby transmit the scriptures containing the words of the Buddha. Indeed, if you travel to Buddhist Asia you

4 I think that Ray also shows his own preference for what he construes as the “crazy wisdom” tradition of his teacher, Chogyam Trungpa. Although Trungpa may not have followed the monastic percepts, he was a very learned man, including time spent at Oxford University and founding his own university (Naropa University, a fully accredited university, itself modeled on the great Buddhist university of Nalanda). My personal experience of contemporary “forest dwellers” in several traditions is that they are much more rigorous in their precepts and scholarship than the average “city” monk. I think that this is a false dichotomy.

5 Paul Williams, Mahayana Buddhism (New York : Routledge, 1989), 4-5.

6 Heinz Bechart, “The Importance of Asoka’s So-Called Schism Edict,” in Indological and Buddhist Studies, L. Hercus et al. (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982), p. 65.
will see prayer flags with scriptural verses fluttering in the wind, symbolically spreading
the word of the Buddha to all directions; vast libraries of Buddhist texts everywhere, some
contained in giant drums thirty or more feet around that can be revolved in order to
circulate the Buddhist scriptures throughout the universe; painted depictions of scriptural
stories; and of course monks and laity alike reverencing the scriptures in a multitude of
ways, from memorization, chanting, study, and commentary to copying, ornamenting, and
other ritualized forms of honoring the text. Even in the highly scholastic tradition of
Tibetan debate—which closely follows the logical systems that deny scripture validity as a
means of knowledge—recourse to scriptural authority is the most common—and
unassailable—means of proof. The Lotus Sutra goes so far as to declare that any who even
copies a single line of the text will attain innumerable merits and eventually achieve perfect
enlightenment, an attitude that aptly reflects what has come to be called the “cult of the
book.” It is thus no accident at all that in Chinese the collection of Buddhist texts is called
ta tsang ching 大藏經, the “Great Treasure House of Scriptures.” This attitude is
represented by the image of Hsüan-tsang carrying a backpack full of scriptures. Hsüan-
tsang, like others before and after, obviously felt quite strongly that the words of the
Buddha were not to be torn up or used for firewood—on the contrary, as with Buddhists
everywhere and in every time, Hsüan-tsang was willing to go to great lengths to secure the
accurate transmission of the Buddha-dharma.

What I would like to do here is to explore this lesser-known and less appreciated role of
document and scripture in the Buddhist tradition. To do so I will would like to first make
some comments on orthodoxy, known in the Buddhist tradition as saddhārma, the “true or
correct teachings, doctrines” (正法, cheng-fa) and then turn to the issue of canon and
scriptural authority in China and an example of texts that ran afoul of this orthodoxy and
got “kicked out of the canon.”

2) Orthodoxy (saddhārma) in India: transcendent and literal

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7 There are many works that explore the question of doctrinal legitimacy and authority, including: Graeme
MacQueen, "Inspired Speech in Early Mahāyāna Buddhism" in Religion 12 (1982), 49-65; Ronald Davidson,
"An Introduction to the Standards of Scriptural Authenticity in Indian Buddhism" in Chinese Buddhist
Apocrypha ed. by Robert Buswell (Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press, 1990), 291-325; James P. McDermott,
“Scripture as the Word of the Buddha” in Numen 31 (1984), 22-39; Steven Collins, “On the Very Notion of
the Pali Canon” in Journal of the Pali Text Society, 15 (1981), 89-126; and José Ignacio Cabezón,
To begin with the true teaching or **saddhārma** there are many, many usages of this term in classic texts as well as contemporary works—a quick search of the web turned up over 39,000 references to the English term, 69,000 for the Pali and Sanskrit, and over two million for the Chinese. Of course these hits are all over the map, from the *Srimad Bhagavata*’s sense of “true righteousness established in the world by Krishna” to one of my favorites, a discussion of the “true Dharma bum” in *Hippies from A to Z*, that is, “open-minded folks when it comes to religion [who] study many of the world's religions and take what makes sense and enhances personal freedom and reject the dogma. . . [including in their search] Christ, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Krishna, Gandhi, even some latter-day saints like [John] Lennon, [Tim] Leary and [Jim] Morrison [of the Doors].”

Far-fetched as it may seem, we’ll see that the hippie sense of “true Dharma” is not, in fact, so far from one important sense of the Buddhist usage.

In Buddhist texts too there is a broad range of meaning given to **saddhārma**. Thus **saddhamma** can simply mean a good or auspicious thing as, for example, the “seven saddhamma” of faith, shame, appreciation of consequence, learning the teachings, vigor, mindfulness, and wisdom. Broadly speaking, however, there are two different understandings of **saddhārma**. The first understands dharma in a transcendent sense to refer to truth per se or dharmatā (making the idea of “true dharma” somewhat redundant) or to anything that embodies that truth and hence is conducive to its realization. The second meaning refers more literally to the word of the Buddha, buddhavacana, especially those teachings as preserved in the sanctioned collection of sutra, vinaya, and commentary. This is close to the dogma rejected by the “A to Z Hippies” and is closer to a sort of orthodoxy not usually expected of the Buddhist tradition.

a) Transcendent sense of orthodoxy: Dharmatā

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The first, transcendent sense of *saddharmā*, understands the dharma to be more than the literal words of the Buddha and points to truth per se—that is to say, *dharmatā* (法性), the real nature of things: interdependent, impermanent, and without abiding self-nature or essence. This concern for the philosophical truth-value of things as opposed to their contingent historical nature is more typical of the Mahayana, and likely reflects the awareness that Mahayana scriptures represent a transcendent rather than literal account of the historical Buddha’s teaching (although they usually do claim to represent a literal form of *buddhavacana* as well, as, for example, in the story of Nagarjuna recovering the PPS literature from underneath the waters or using the standard phrase “Thus have I heard”).\(^\text{10}\) Hence Mahayana scriptures, obviously written long after the passing of the Buddha, nonetheless can still claim to be the word of the Buddha (*buddhavacana*), because they represent the *truth* of the Buddha’s awareness, inasmuch as anything spoken from the vantage point of that awareness gains the same truth-value as that spoken by the Buddha. By resorting to transcendent standards of “truth” a text also avoids (or subverts) all historical concerns about authentic authorship, etc. and even, given the varying nature of doctrinal claims to truth in the Buddhist tradition, avoids all need to accord with any particular dogma.

Related to this is the idea that the Dharma is what liberates, including the teachings of the previous Buddhas, the many bodhisattvas, and enlightened disciples. In this view the truth-value of the dharma is not so much doctrinally based as it is practical or pragmatic. Hence even John Lennon’s lyrics, if considered to have a liberating effect, can be seen as the word of the Buddha. This attitude also allows the *content* of True Dharma to be infinitely variable, admitting of doctrinal diversity, continually adapting to new horizons of spiritual insight as well as new challenges of interpretation at the same time the category of True Teaching continues to be valid. Called by some a “philosophy of accommodation,” it is also a recognizable variant of what contemporary philosophers of religion call a strategy of “inclusivism.” Here too we can see the expansive vision of the Buddhist tradition, leading naturally to the declarations in the *Sukhavativyūha* or Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra that

\(^{10}\) For a discussion of the ongoing importance of orality in Mahāyāna scriptures see Donald Lopez, *Authority and Orality in the Mahāyāna* (*Numen* 42, 1995), 21-47.
in the purified realm of the Buddhas even the leaves on the trees and the water of the rivers constantly teach the True Dharma, softly whispering “dissatisfaction, emptiness, impermanence, anātman.” It is often remarked that whereas in the Theravāda all that the Buddha spoke is considered to be true, in the Mahāyāna all that is true is understood to be the word of the Buddha, thus including not only music of John Lennon but even the trees and mountains around us if seen to have a liberating effect. This was indeed the conclusion of Dōgen, the famous Japanese Zen teacher, who, in wondering about several important Zen texts that had long been considered of doubtful origins, concluded that not only are heretical sutras the word of the Buddha when considered by an awakened person, but “also everything in nature—the sun, moon, stars, mountains, water, trees, stones—is considered a sutra in itself.” From this point of view, what phenomena are not marked by Buddha-nature for those who but have eyes to see, ears to hear? And so Gary Snyder, author of the “Smoky the Bear Sutra,” felt no compunction in using “sutra” in the title and

11 See, for example, the Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra: 「其摩尼水流注華間尋樹上下。其聲微妙演說苦空無常無我諸波羅蜜。復有讚歎諸佛相好者。」《佛說觀無量壽佛經》卷 1 (CBETA, T12, no. 365, p. 342, b29-c2).

12 On the idea that all that is true (“well-spoken”) is spoken by the Buddha is not absent from the Theravāda; see Steven Collins, “On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon,” p. 94; Lopez, Authority and Orality in the Mahāyāna, 27-28.

13 Mizuno, Buddhist Sutras (Tokyo: Kōsei Publishing, 1982), p. 121. He is referring to the 佛經 chapter of the Shōbōgenzō 正法眼藏; cf. the online version at Shōmonji 松門寺: 「桃花をみて悟道し、竹響をききて悟道する、および見明星悟道、みなこの経巻の知識を生長せむるなり…いはゆる経巻は、盡十方界これなり。経巻にあらざる時處なし…山河大地をもて経をうけ経をとく。日月星辰をもて経をうけ経をとく。」 But see also the later Dōgen who criticized this point of view in the Shizen-biku 四禪比丘 volume of the twelve-fascicle Shōbōgenzō 十二卷本 正法眼藏, especially the identification of the natural world with the Tathāgata. For example, 「あるがいはく、諸仏如來ひろく法界を證するゆゑに、微塵法界、みな諸仏如來の所證なり。。。山河大地、日月星辰、四倒三毒、みな如来の所證なり。山河をみるは如来をみるなり、三毒四倒佛法にあらずといふことなし。微塵をみるは法界をみるにひとし。。。かくのごとくいつもとがら、大宋國に稻麻竹葦のごとく、朝野に遍満せり。しかあれども、このともがら、たれ人の兒孫といふことあきらかならず、おぼよそ佛祖の道をしらざるなり。」 As Steven Heine put it, “Indeed, in ‘Shizen biku’ Dōgen specifically criticizes the hongaku-oriented identification of mountains and rivers with ultimate reality—a view that he frequently expresses in the 75-fascicle text—as an example of the substantialist Senika heresy.” Steven Heine, “Critical Buddhism and Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō,” in Hubbard and Swanson, eds., Pruning the Bodhi Tree (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1997), p. 269. Matsumoto Shirō, of course, has made the same point; cf. his “Critical Considerations on Zen Thought.”
concluding with the well known words, “Thus have we heard,” signifying that what has been reported is the word of the Buddha.\(^{14}\)

Finally we can note that in this sense of dharma as that which accords with reality and hence contributes to the liberation of sentient beings, the True Dharma is eternal and unchanging, unaffected by historical contingency. As is well known from the Samyutta-nikāya, the stability and way of dhamma (dhamaṭṭhitatā, dhammaniyāmatatā) will remain the same whether the tathagatas were to appear or not to appear.\(^{15}\) As the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra (which puts the notion of True Dharma or saddharmā into its very title) also tells us through the trope of infinitely recurring cycles of Buddhas and their True Dharma, the duration of the True Dharma is immeasurable, as is the lifetime of the Buddha himself.\(^{16}\) The Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, too, makes a distinction between the conventional or worldly dharma (世法) that can be destroyed and the ultimate dharma (第一義法) that cannot (T #374, 12.472a). Hence Ching-ying Hui-yüan 淨影慧遠 (523–592), for example,

\(^{14}\) Speaking precisely to the point, one version prefaces the sutra with: “Divined through the Bodhisattva Gary Snyder, with help from Fudo Myoo.” The ongoing importance of this issue is shown in a recent exchange between the eminent Buddhist scholars Richard Hayes and Franz Metcalf. Richard: “Such discoveries [that some Buddhist scriptures are false attributions] are deeply unsettling to me, since they make me fear that some scholarly hotshot, in eagerness to get tenure, may try to show that the Smokey the Bear Sutra may not be Buddha-vacana.” To which Franz replied: “It does not matter *who* wrote the Smokey-the-Bear Sutra; it emphatically remains Buddha-vacana in my view. What does it matter from which orifice the dharma issues? Buddhadharma is Buddhadharma, and here it is: [link]. Thus have I spoken, Franz Metcalf.” From “[Buddha-l] Smokey the Bear Sutra,” posted to the Buddha-l Discussion List, Wednesday November 20, 2006; available to subscribed members from the Buddha-l archive: [link].

\(^{15}\) See Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), vol. 1, pp. 551-2; C. A. F. Rhys Davids, trans., The Book of the Kindred Sayings (London: The Pali Text Society, 1982), part II, p. 21. For the Pali see Samyutta-nikāya II.12.20 (from the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click [here](http://www.smokeythebearsutra.com/) for the Chattha Saṅgāvana CD edition published by the Vipassana Research Institute). For another, online, English translation see the translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu: Paccaya Sutta--Requisite Conditions (Access to Insight). Here the “stability of dhamma (dhammaṭṭhitatā)” and “way or fixed course of dhamma (dhammaniyāmatatā),” refers to conditionality (idapaccayatā); the same expression is used in the Anguttara-nikāya to refer to the three aspects of all conditioned phenomena (impermanence, non-self, and suffering), and in a later Mahāyāna text the same expression is used with dharmatā to refer to śūnyatā. For an extended treatment of dharmatā/dharmatā, see Walpola Rāhula, “Wrong Notions of Dhammatā (Dharmatā)” in Cousins, Kunst, and Norman, eds., Buddhist Studies in Honour of I. B. Horner (D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1974), 181-191.

\(^{16}\) There are, actually, two different usages of saddharmā in the Lotus, one related to its unchanging nature and another that speaks to its decline in history; cf. Jamie Hubbard, “A Tale of Two Times: Preaching in the Latter Age of the Dharma.” Numen 46 (1999), 186–210.
lamenting the lot of the Buddhist church at the hands of Emperor Wu, is reported to have said,

This is the fate of our time. . . it is truly lamentable that we are unable to attend [the Buddha-dharma] at this time, but the dharma is actually not annihilated \[法實不滅\]! I ask that you virtuous ones please understand this and not be overly grieved.  

This transcendent sense of the dharma, then, need detain us no further for it is unchanging and will outlive all canonical collections, oral as well as written, printed as well as digital. Let me briefly turn, then, to another sense of saddharm, the more mundane and historically contingent sense of the saddharm as the literal word of the historical Buddha as preserved and transmitted in the texts, for this gives us a rather different picture, a picture more like that of Hsüan-tsang and more like the reality found on the ground in the Buddhist world.

b) Saddharm as literal buddhavacana

The second sense of saddharm is much more conservative and looks to an almost fundamentalist sense of what constitutes the True Dharma, and finds it in buddhavacana, the teachings given by the historical Buddha and those approved by the historical Buddha. This tradition considers the faithful transmission of each and every word of the historical Buddha’s teaching of utmost importance, and strives to be as literal as possible, adding nothing and leaving nothing out. It isn’t hard to see where this attitude came from. All religions face a turning point after the passing of the founder, when the sectarianism implicit in the founding of a new movement manifests itself internally but the followers may no longer turn to the founder's authority for ultimate understanding. Although disputes over the understanding of the teachings no doubt arose during the lifetime of the Buddha, the question of interpretation grew much more acute after his passing. It was the need for a standardized body of teachings that led to the first “recounting” of the teachings

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\[\text{\textsuperscript{17}}Hsū kao seng chūan, CBETA, T #2060, 50.490c.\]

\[\text{\textsuperscript{18}}\text{See, for example, the poignant story in which Ānanda, who is credited with having recited all of the Buddha's discourses from memory at the first council, attempts to correct the mistaken recitation of a monk; failing to correct his recitation, Ānanda concludes, “There is no one who can get him to change. The Buddha’s disciples Sāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, and Mahākāśyapa have all entered nirvāṇa; to whom could I now turn to as an authority? I shall also enter nirvāṇa”; cited in John Strong, The Experience of Buddhism (Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1995), p. 89.\]
(sangīti, usually translated as “council” but in fact meaning “group recitation”) after the passing of the Buddha, and institutionalized questions of interpretation again and again carved new communities and movements out of the original sangha. It is no doubt in such a doctrinally competitive context that the very concept of saddhama/saddharama or “correct teaching” arose, and within the rhetoric of the preservation of the saddharama it refers exclusively to in-house orthodoxy vis-a-vis its natural enemy, internal dissension about what are the correct teachings—the orthodoxy—and how to best preserve and transmit it. 19

One text from the Aṅguttara-nikāya, for example, shows a concern for literal orthodoxy and warns against “the wrong expression of the letter (of the text) and wrong interpretation of the meaning of it,” which would lead to the “confusion and disappearance” of the true dharma, for “if the letter be wrongly expressed, the interpretation of the meaning is also wrong.” On the other hand, “if the letter be rightly expressed, the interpretation of the meaning is also right” and this leads to the “establishment, the non-confusion, to the non-disappearance of true Dhamma.” 20

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19 Guarding the authenticity of the teachings (i.e., those teachings “uttered by the Tathāgata,” buddhavacana) and determining the interpretation of those teachings (neyattha, niṭṭattha) were important elements in the early rhetoric and constitution of orthodoxy. Betraying the concern for orthodoxy, the Aṅguttara-nikāya, for example, tells us that we must guard not only against those who would claim, “as utterances of the Tathāgata, what he never said or uttered, and he who denies what was said or uttered by the Tathāgata,” but also against the one “who proclaims as already explained a discourse which needs explanation (neyattha): and he who proclaims as needing explanation a discourse already explained (niṭṭattha).” The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara-nikāya ii.3.3-6), translated by F. L. Woodward (London: The Pali Text Society, 1979), vol. 1, p. 54; click here for the English version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click here for the Pali version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click here for the Chattha Saṅgāyana CD edition published by the Vipassana Research Institute; cf. T #2, 592c–593a. As with the New Testament, such evidence of sectarianism can be used to judge later material in the canon, indicating as it does the existence of conflict over different interpretations of the teachings. Cf. Govind C. Pande, Studies in the Origins of Buddhism (Allahabad: University of Allahabad, 1957), who judges the Aṅguttara-nikāya passages considered here late for just this reason, i.e., the evidence of sectarian disputes (p. 236).

20 The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara-nikāya 2.2.20-21), vol. 1, p. 53; click here for the online English version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click here for the online Pali version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click here for the Chattha Saṅgāyana CD edition published by the Vipassana Research Institute).
analyzing, and practicing the *dhamma* would lead to its disappearance.\(^{21}\) The order—
hearing and mastering first, practice last—clearly indicates the priority of orthodoxy over orthopraxy.\(^{22}\)

In this context too we should remember that the preservation of the Buddha’s teachings was no small task, especially in the oral culture of early Buddhist monasticism. Indeed, a major portion of a monks’ practice—hearing and reciting texts—is as intimately related to the preservation of approved scriptures as it is to a monastic program of mental cultivation and awakening. And, if we look at the monastic codes of the various nikāya schools we in fact do find legal mechanisms for deciding which scriptures would be recited and taught, as well as punishments for those monks who abandon this task.\(^{23}\) We must remember, then, that doctrines are not just disembodied ideas floating through the air—as Joseph Walser noted in his recent study of the institutional context in which Mahāyāna texts were produced, they are “manufactured goods produced by monasteries . . . [requiring] allocation of the resources of time and labor, [and for written texts the expenditures for] pens, paper, and ink. Furthermore, storage space had to be devoted to their preservation.”\(^{24}\)


\(^{22}\) This is not the only voice in the canon, however, and other passages put the cultivation of meditation or cultivation of the brahmavihara as most important in the preservation of the True Dharma, e.g., *The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara-nikāya 5.8.73),* translated by E. M. Hare (London: The Pali Text Society, 1973), vol. 3, pp. 70–72; click [here](#) for an English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu online at [Access to Insight]; click [here](#) for the online English version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click [here](#) for the online Pali version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click [here](#) for the Chatttha Saṅgāyana CD edition published by the Vipassana Research Institute. For the decline trope that cites the lack of cultivation of the four brahmavihara as the cause see *The Book of the Kindred Sayings (Saṃyutta-nikāya 47.3.3.2-3)*; click [here](#) for the online English version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click [here](#) for the online Pali version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click [here](#) for the Chatttha Saṅgāyana CD edition published by the Vipassana Research Institute. Although there are, in this way, different causes given for the decline of the True Dharma, my point remains that a) the underlying concern is for the preservation of teachings, of *true* teachings; and b) learning and studying is one of the primary ways to preserve it.


\(^{24}\) Walser, *Nāgārjuna,* p. 123.
Maintaining orthodoxy in such an oral tradition demands great attention to the “words and letters,” or the forms in which the tradition is heard and taught, for the performance of the tradition becomes in good part the tradition itself. Thus the Aṅguttara-nikāya elaborates the forms of the teaching, warning that not mastering the “sayings, psalms, catechisms, songs, solemnities, speeches, birth-stories, marvels, [and] runes . . . leads to the confounding, the disappearance of the True Teaching,” as does not teaching it in detail to others “as heard, as learned,” and not speaking or repeating it in detail “as heard, as learned.”

In the same way that the particular literary forms of the tradition must be safeguarded, popular literary forms are to be eschewed, for the study of “those discourses that are mere poetry composed by poets, beautiful in words and phrases, created by outsiders, spoken by [their] disciples” will cause the discourse of the Buddha to disappear.

This leads to an attitude complimentary to the concern for the accurate preservation of saddharma, that is, anxiety about its disappearance, a worry that, ironically, spawned a great series of doctrinal and practical innovations, particularly in East Asia. This tradition of the “decline of the saddharma” is among the most important in the history of Buddhism and, in the form of the “three periods of the doctrine,” is well known. Because of the vast

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26 Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), vol. 1, p. 709; cf. The Book of the Kindred Sayings [Saṁyutta-nikāya 20.7], translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids (London: Pali Text Society 1972), part II, 178–79; click here for the online English version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click here for the online Pali version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click here for the Chattha Saṅgāyana CD edition published by the Vipassana Research Institute). The Book of the Gradual Sayings (Aṅguttara-nikāya 5.8.79) translated by E. M. Hare (London: The Pali Text Society, 1973), vol. 3, p. 85 has the same pericapae; click here for an English translation by Thanissaro Bhikkhu online at Access to Insight; click here for the online English version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click here for the online Pali version of the Śrī Lanka Buddha Jayanti Tipitaka Series; click here for the Chattha Saṅgāyana CD edition published by the Vipassana Research Institute). It is interesting, of course, to speculate on who might have been guilty of producing such “poetical styles,” though the producers of the Mahayana clearly thought they were the targets: “At some future time bhikṣus and bodhisattvas who are conceited, who have not cultivated their bodies, not cultivated their minds, not cultivated morality, not cultivated wisdom, who are immoral, do not accept the precious definitive meaning (Skt. nītārtha) of the True Dharma . . . will say. . . `Sūtras like this are fabrications, they are poetic inventions; they were not spoken by the Buddha’” (Paul Harrison, The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present [Tokyo: The International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1990], 55–56.
importance of this topic, especially in terms of East Asian doctrine and practice, much has been written on the subject, usually pointing to a deficiency in morality or meditation practice as the cause for the eventual disappearance of Śākyamuni’s teachings, leading eventually to a world of chaos and destruction where once the saddharma reigned. Here I would like to point out that, however much moral or other laxity contributed to the concern for the state of the dharma, the rhetoric of its decline was really brought about by concern for the transmission and preservation of the True Teachings—that is, orthodoxy.

These theories of decline are clearly concerned with the worldly fate of Buddhist scripture (āgama) rather than either truth per se (dhammatā) or even attainment of that truth (adhigama), and the Theravāda tradition affirms the centrality of “authoritative teachings” over and above practice as the arbiter of saddhamma, perhaps not surprising inasmuch as our documents are those preserved in the canon. Buddhaghosa’s commentary on the Aṅguttara, for example, claims that the True Teachings will not disappear so long as the “authoritative teachings” (pariyatti) remain, because “truly, even if a hundred or a thousand monks were found to undertake the practice of meditation (vipassanā), without learning [the teachings] there would be no realization of the Noble Path.”27 As John Ross Carter puts it, the Pāli tradition claims “the words of the Buddha as they had been passed down from generation to generation (pariyatti) and not practice (paṭipatti) formed the basis with regard to the Teacher's instruction.”28

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28 John Ross Carter, Dhamma: Western Academic and Sinhalese Buddhist Interpretations, A Study of a Religious Concept (Tokyo: Hokusaidō Press, 1978), 131–32; see also Walpola Rahula, History of Buddhism in Ceylon (Colombo: M. D. Gunasekera & Co. Ltd, 1956), 158-164. A nearly identical view (and likely shocking to those who hold to the transcendent view of the Dharma) is that Buddhism will not exist without material property: “[For there to be] religion [literally, “the teachings,” jiao 教] one must first nourish it; [for there to be] an undertaking, [one] must supply food. . . Sacrificing to the Buddha and bringing peace to the masses are simply impossible without property.” Ciu Lian, Putuo shanzhi, cited in Timothy Brook, “Institution,” in Donald S. Lopez Jr., ed., Critical Terms for the Study of Buddhism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 149-150. Although my personal nature tends to the anti-institutional, teaching some twenty-odd years in a women-only educational institution has given me an appreciation for the institution—a concrete university that requires donors, buildings, salaries, and the like—as that which permits access to the personal fulfillment promised by teachers of all stripes. Only the politically clueless could deny this.
And so the preservation and accurate transmission of the correct teaching—saddharma—has long been a central concern of Buddhists everywhere. The records of the first council called after the Buddha’s passing recount this concern, as do the pilgrimages of Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, and Japanese monks, crossing mountains, deserts, and oceans in search of the true scriptural tradition. So too the first commitment of the scriptures to writing, in Śrī Lanka in the late first century BC, was prompted by fear that the orthodoxy was being corrupted by false scriptures of heterodox monks.29

Certainly one of the most striking responses to the anxiety about the disappearance of the teachings was the carving of the sutras on stone slabs to preserve them through the long dark age. In 605, for example, Ching-wan 靜琬, a disciple of Hui-ssu 慧思, built the Yun-chu ssu 雲居寺 in the Fang-shan 房山 area approximately seventy-five kilometers southwest of modern-day Peking. He then began the project of carving the entire tripitaka in stone. As his record of 628 states:

The true teaching and the semblance teaching will last 1500 years. Now, this 2nd year of the Chen-kuan period (628) corresponds to the 75th year of the period of the final teaching. In the future, when the teachings of the Buddha have been totally destroyed, may these sutras carved in stone appear and be made known in the world.30

The staggering enormity of the task aside, these texts, as Ching-wan wished, now serve as an unequalled source of information about the Chinese canon, unadulterated by the

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29 Mahavamsa, chapter 33; many also think that this “closed” the tripitaka in the Theravāda tradition; cf. Collins, “On the Very Notion of the Pali Canon,” pp. 95-100; on the innovation of writing, see Lopez, “Authority and Orality,” pp. 29 and 39-42. While Collins notes that the “fixing” of the Pali canon at this time includes the “crucial political element of closure: nothing can be added or taken away” (Collins, p. 101), he also agrees with others that we cannot know the actual content of that canon until the time of Buddhagosa (Collins, 95-96). I myself am not so sure that this brief mention of committing the scriptures to writing actually closed the Theravādin canon; I am still looking for catalogs and lists of actual texts as well as specific examples of texts from any particular Indian Buddhist school or nikāya that would indicate even a “softer” sort of closure in the simple sense of a list of what was physically there or what a collection ought to contain.

30 Quoted in Michibata Ryōshū, Chūgoku Bukkyōshi (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1939), 104. Although Ching-wan was not able to complete his task of carving the entire Tripitika, the project was continued until the Ming dynasty, with a total of 1,031 texts in 3,474 chuan carved on 15,143 separate stone slabs entombed as a precaution against the disappearance of the Buddha-dharma. See Li Jung-hsi, "The Stone Scriptures of Fang-shan," Eastern Buddhist 12/1 (1979), 104; and Lewis R. Lancaster, “The Rock Cut Canon in China: Findings at Fang-shan,” in Tadeusz Skorupski, ed., The Buddhist Heritage (Tring, U.K.: The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 1989); see especially 154-56 for an assessment of the value of this canon for Buddhist textual studies. Here is a blog entry of a recent visitor to the site: http://cn.cshoo.com/user/dydy/200682585918.html
interpolations and redactions of later ages. Other rock-carved canons are known as well, motivated by the same fear the scriptures will pass into oblivion.\textsuperscript{31} As recently as the late 1800’s the Burmese, concerned about the fate of the Buddha’s scriptures under colonial rule, convened the Fifth Buddhist council and carved a complete set of the Pali texts into stone and stored them in some four-hundred and fifty different pagodas.\textsuperscript{32}

Of course, the impulse to preserve texts is limited neither to the past nor the Buddhist tradition, as shown by the fund-raising project of Terrence Cunningham, a Unitarian who wants to build a rocket ship to deposit “an indestructible copy of the Holy Bible on the moon for safekeeping” to ensure that “the Bible would be preserved against tampering or in case civilization is destroyed on Earth from plagues, wars, or, in his words, ‘acts of God.’”\textsuperscript{33} Buddhists, too, continue their efforts. Sharon Salzberg, one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society, noted that one of their mandates in founding the IMS meditation center in Barre, Massachusetts was the preservation of the dharma. Still, she seems ambivalent about what this means, as she noted that on one of her visits to Burma, somebody took her “to a place where they had donated a great deal of money to construct an area for stone slabs on which the entire tripitaka (the original Buddhist canon) was being engraved. It was like a graveyard, stone slab after stone slab, with people etching out every word in order to preserve the dharma. On a deeper level the dharma is preserved only through the realization of beings. It’s not preserved as a body of knowledge but in the

\textsuperscript{31} Another monk of a slightly earlier date who felt the same impulse to preserve the teaching in stone was Ling-yü (518-605). In 589 Ling-yü established a monastery atop Pao-shan and proceeded to carve a Buddha image and to engrave the walls with sections from well-known sutras such as the Śrīmālādevī-sūtra, the Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra, and the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra. His sense of concern for the preservation of the True Dharma is clearly indicated by the prominent position given the chapter on the “Destruction of the True Dharma” from the Yüeh tsang fen. See Michibata, Chūgoku Bukkyōshi, 106; Tsiang, Katherine, “Monumentalization of Buddhist Texts in the Northern Qi Dynasty: The Engraving of Sūtras in Stone at the Xiangtangshan Caves and Other Sites in the Sixth Century” in Artibus Asiae, Vol. 56, No. 3/4. (1996), pp. 233-261. See also Kamata Shigeo, Chūgoku Bukkyōshi vol. 5 (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1994), 504–510 for other examples of scriptures carved in stone.

\textsuperscript{32} Mizuno, Buddhist Sutras, p. 114.

buddhahood of each realized being.”\textsuperscript{34} As noted above, this was surely not the attitude of either the Buddhist monks or the pious laity involved in this huge endeavor.

It was also in Burma that a “sixth council” was convened in the 1950’s with the express purpose of “preserving the original word of the Buddha” and the \textit{frontispiece} to their edition of the canon boldly dedicates this purpose: “\textit{Ciraṃ Tiṭṭhatu Saddhammo— May the True Teaching Endure for A Long Time!”} The \textit{frontispiece} also cites two passages from the scriptures concerning the preservation of the \textit{saddhamma}: "There are two things, O monks, which make the True Teaching endure for a long time, without any distortion and without (fear of) eclipse. Which two? Proper placement of words and their natural [correct] interpretation. Words properly placed help also in their natural [correct] interpretation” and “. . . the dhammas [truths] which I have taught to you after realizing them with my super-knowledge, should be recited by all, in concert and without dissension, in uniform version collating meaning with meaning and wording with wording. In this way, this teaching with pure practice will last long and endure for a long time. . .”\textsuperscript{35}

So we can safely conclude, then, that although an anti-dogmatic and anti-authoritarian epistemology has received more attention, a concern for a more literal form of orthodoxy has also been central to the Buddhist tradition since its inception, for if the Buddha’s teachings are not preserved and transmitted accurately, how can anybody expect to have access to the release from suffering promised within those teachings? As the oft-used expression has it, “liberation is possible for those who go forth under the doctrine and discipline proclaimed by the Tathāgata,” rather than “liberation is available to anybody who blindly stumbles across it.”

We can also note that the examples I have given are arguing more for the very notion of orthodoxy (\textit{saddhamma}) rather than for the specifics of that orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{36} In other words, the rhetoric of true teachings and their decline is not used to establish which doctrines are

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Tricycle} 2/3 (Spring 93), p. 22.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Dhammagiri-Pāli-Ganthamālā} (Iagpuri: Vipassana Research Institute, 1994), vol. 33 frontispiece.

\textsuperscript{36} As Collins put it, “the actual importance of what we know as the Pali Canon has not lain in the specific texts collected in that list, but rather in the idea of such a collection, the idea that one lineage has the definitive list of buddha-vacana.” From “The Very Notion of a Pāli Canon,” p. 104.
true and which are false or which scriptures are *buddhavacana* and which are not but rather the importance of the preservation and transmission of orthodoxy as a category in and of itself. It is an interesting fact that while, as seen above, there were obviously vigorous debates about what constitutes *buddhavacana* throughout the history of South Asian Buddhism, we do not, in fact, have records of texts that were banned or even declared non-canonical in India at this time. This might be due to the simple reason that we really don’t have lists of the texts that were circulating in India. That is, while we have general schema such as the *tripitaka* or *dvadasanga* which list genres of texts, we do not have catalogs of which texts were considered part of these divisions. Further, while there is the possibility that the Theravāda canon was closed by committing it to writing at the time of the Mahāviśrava/Abhayagiri dispute (during the reign of Vaṭṭagāmiṇī, 1st century BC) or even later, at the time of Buddhagosa (5th century AD),37 we must remember that the Theravāda was only one among many schools of Buddhism in South Asia. As Vasubandhu noted in his defense of the Mahayana as *buddhavacana*, the collections of all the schools were already quite different from one another by the fourth century, many texts had already been lost entirely, and even the same text often had different divisions and content from one version to another.38 And so here I think we can say that while there was huge concern for orthodoxy and canonicity in India, it didn’t result in anybody actually getting “kicked out of the canon.” The situation couldn’t be more different in China, however, and so let me now turn to the Chinese model of canonicity and some actual examples of getting kicked out of the canon.

3) China

There already existed a well-defined notion of the authoritative or “classic” text in China well before Buddhist ideas and texts began to be translated into Chinese. The terms *ching* 錫 and *tien* 典 had long been used to refer to texts that were classics in the sense of being authoritative sources for ideas and values, and these terms include in their


38 Cabezon, “Vasubandhu’s Vyākhya-yukti,” p. 227. I have asked many scholars of South Asian Buddhism for examples of detailed lists of texts that were considered part of the sutta collection or other collections, or library catalogs, and have yet to hear of any at all.
etymologies the notions of standards, rule, regulation, and norm. So too compilations of
texts in standardized collections—chi 集 and later tsang 藏—had already come into
existence, referring to collections of ching that contained the sayings and teachings of the
sage-kings that provided norms for society. So as pilgrims and travelers made their way
along the trade routes and Buddhist scriptures began to be translated into Chinese, it was
only natural that they were called ching to give them the authority of the Chinese classics
and, not knowing the organizational structure of “tripiṭaka,” they also came to be organized
into standardized collections along the Chinese model of chi and tsang. And while a
“collection of sutras” in itself was never seen to be a closed corpus—new collections
continue to be compiled to this day, including some texts and excluding others (and volume
85 of the Taishō Daizōkyō even includes texts banned from earlier collections)—there still
were many factors that contributed to these collections taking on a normative or
prescriptive status well beyond what we see in India. That is to say, the “great treasure
house of scriptures” took on the function of a closed canon.

   a) The discipline of bibliography

   One factor that contributed to a more closed canon was, ironically, the very
bibliographic zeal of the Chinese, their enthusiasm for collecting scripture, and their great
skill in building and organizing libraries. Whereas in India the early economics of
preserving buddhavacana meant that it was the duty of each monk in a monastery to
contribute to the recitation, memorization, and thereby the preservation of the texts, the
written nature of the Buddhist texts in China dictated that they were often collected
according to standardized catalogs. In sharp contrast to the lack of library catalogs in early
Buddhist India, the Chinese had from a very early date begun the practice of compiling
bibliographies or catalogs of library collections—ching lu 經錄 or mu lu 目錄, and texts
within these bibliographies were separated according to canonical status, with the ching
accorded special status. Eventually the Chinese bibliographic zeal developed into the study
of canons per se through the compilation of bibliographies or catalogs of collections not
necessarily reflecting collections of actual libraries. This discipline, mu lu hsüeh 目錄學,
also came to dominate collections of Buddhist texts, and so, naturally, when monasteries
sought to augment their libraries, they turned to these catalogs for collection direction. This is especially true in the case of rulers who, as an act of piety as well as the promotion of orthodoxy, had the Buddhist scriptures copied and distributed throughout the empire—indeed, when the printed canons of Buddhist scriptures began to appear in the tenth century, nearly all examples were produced under imperial authority. This points us to a second aspect of the Chinese canon.

b) Politics and scripture

This second, related, factor that influenced the shape of the Chinese canon is the political nature of scripture in China. The importance of literary texts in imperial China is well commented on, and the central relationship between political power and literary texts long preceded the introduction of Buddhism. As I mentioned, the very terms used for the classic texts included the idea that these texts provided the norms and rules for society. And, just as it is the rulers who arbitrate the norms and rules for society, the Chinese early on (by the third century BC) had accepted the idea that “the definition of a canon and the propagation of its truths was a central role of government.” Whereas in India—with the possible exception of Aśoka’s intervention—questions of orthodoxy seem to have largely


41 The tradition holds that at the third council and in keeping with his Kausāmbī edit Aśoka expelled 60,000 heretics from the sangha. See Bechert, “The Importance of Aśoka’s So-called Schism Edict,” in Indological and Buddhist Studies: volume in honour of Professor J.W. de Jong on his sixtieth birthday L. A. Hercus et
been argued amongst the different Buddhist groups, in China imperial authority was brought to bear on the idea of the legitimacy and dissemination of Buddhist texts. This happened in several different ways, including state sponsorship of pilgrimages to India to bring back texts as well as state sponsorship of translations teams such as those of Kumārajīva and Hsüan-tsang. And it also happened through the state sponsorship and dissemination of official and clearly defined catalogs of Buddhist scriptures, that is, official catalogs of scriptures compiled at the order of the Emperor and distributed throughout the land as the official, imperially sanctioned, canon of Buddhist scriptures, catalogs which separated true or authentic scripture from the false.

c) Doubtful scriptures and spurious scriptures

Catalogs of scripture began to be compiled from almost the inception of Buddhism in China and nearly one-hundred catalogs have been compiled to this day. One of the earliest catalogs, the 綜理衆經目錄 by Tao-an 道安 (312-385) in the fourth century, is the first that we know to have made judgments about the authenticity of scriptures in circulation at the time—judgments that were always among the primary reasons for compiling catalogs. For example, Chih-sheng 智昇, perhaps one of the most well-known catalogers, commenting on the tradition of sutra catalogs, wrote:

Now as far as the inception of catalogues is concerned, they were intended to distinguish the genuine from the spurious, [and] clarify what is authentic and unauthentic, record the period of the translation, indicate the number of sections and chuan, add what was omitted, and eliminate what was superfluous. They sought to make [Buddhist literature in China] correspond to the principles of the orthodox teaching [cheng chiao 正教] and golden speech [of the Buddha]. . . However, since the teachings of the dharma originated in the remote past, as the net of proselytization widened, the datings of the translations were changed and their periods altered, scriptures were often dispersed or lost, and chuan were arranged out of order. Moreover, from time to time odd persons added spurious and fallacious [scriptures to the canon], scrambling [the genuine and the spurious] and making it

al., (Canberra: Australian national university, 1982), pp. 61-68; M. B. Vocye, ‘The King’s Enforcement of the Vinaya Pitaka: The Purification of the Saṅgha under Aśoka,” in Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte 37, no. 1 (1985), pp. 38-57. As both of these articles clearly show, more information is needed on the relation between royal authority and the Buddhist sangha is needed; if even Aśoka, famed for his pan-dharmic religious tolerance, could intervene so decisively in sangha matters, I imagine that other rulers exercised even greater control. Collins, for example, notes “repeated book-burnings by pro-Mahāvihārin kings” (Collins, “On the Very Idea,” p. 98).
difficult to ascertain their identity. This is why former sages and scholars compiled these catalogues.42

A related concern was that the Chinese found themselves the heirs to the anxiety of the tradition of the decline of the saddharma described above, with the crucial difference that this rhetoric of decline that originated in India as a rhetoric of legitimacy functioned in China as a given fact. In other words, what was rhetorically predicted for the future in a sort of struggle over orthodoxy in India was received in China as a historical fact that needed to be addressed. Thus, just as with the carving of the canon in stone in an attempt to preserve the true teachings, the decline tradition lent urgency to the need to weed out the spurious in order to defend the true.43 One of the earliest catalogs and the first to clearly delimit canonical and spurious scriptures, the fourth-century catalog compiled by Tao-an, makes this exact point:

When monks in foreign countries are trained in the teachings [of Buddhism], they kneel down and receive it orally. The teacher confers on his disciples the teachings exactly as he received them from his own teacher by repeating it ten or twenty times. If even one word deviates [from the accepted transmission], it is revised after mutual conference and [the wrong word] is immediately deleted. . . It has not been long since the [Buddhist] scriptures reached the land of Chin [viz., China]. . . [and numerous forgeries have appeared. . . ] Now I list what I regard in my mind to be non-Buddhist scriptures [fei fo-ching, 非佛經] in order to warn future aspirants, so that they will all know that these scriptures are despicable.44

In addition to the simple fact of damning these scriptures by declaring them suspicious or spurious and even “despicable,” Imperial edicts could ban scriptures and prohibit their circulation,45 heretical books were burned,46 and the catalogers themselves sometimes explicitly proscribed the copying of such scriptures.47

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42 Kai-yüan shih chiao lu, CBETA, T #2154, 55.477a4-10; cited in Tokuno, p. 32.

43 See, for example, Seng-yu’s comments in the Ch’u-san-tsang chi-chi, T #2145, 55.38c17; cited in Tokuno, 35-36.

44 CBETA, T #2145, 55.38b7-16; cited in Tokuno, 34.

45 As happened with the texts of the San-chieh chiao; see below; also Hubbard, Absolute Delusion, esp. Chapter Eight; see also Hubbard, The Manuscript Remains and Other Materials for the Study of the San-chieh Movement.
Over time we see scriptures divided into the categories of “doubtful scriptures,” *i ching* 疑經, referring to scriptures of doubtful origins, and “fake or spurious scriptures,” *wei ching*, 伪經, referring to scriptures that were judged in fact to be falsely attributed to Indic originals, and *i ching* 異經, “deviant or heretical scriptures.” By the time the *K’ai-yuan shih chiao lu* 開元釋教錄 was compiled in 730 the catalogs had grown quite extensive and detailed, with descriptions of the contents of spurious scriptures, the circumstances of their composition, and damning judgments of their authenticity. In this catalog, whose organization and verdicts influenced virtually all subsequent orderings of Chinese texts—including the Taishō canon compiled in early twentieth-century Japan and still used by scholars world-wide as the standard Chinese collection of scriptures—over one-third of the scriptures listed (392 of a total 1076) are deemed spurious and several more (14) are listed as doubtful. Given the authority of these catalogs we can say that, whereas in the early Buddhist tradition discussed above the oral transmission and recitation of scriptures was key to their survival, in China, that role was given over to a canonical status dictated by the catalogers. As Stephen Teiser put it, “Canonical status was an assurance not only of textual authenticity . . . but also of physical survival.”48 The effectiveness of this level of closure to the Chinese Buddhist canon can be seen in the fact that over 80% of the texts that were labeled spurious in the various catalogs were eventually lost.49

d) Criteria for doubtful and spurious scriptures

We have seen the concern for orthodoxy in Indian Buddhism but also noted the lack of specificity and the attendant lack of condemnation of actual texts by name. In China, however, the catalogers name names, and they also give us precise criteria for their

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46 Five-hundred fascicles of spurious scriptures were reported to have been burned and destroyed during the early Sui period; cf. *Ta T’ang nei-tien lu*, CBETA, T #2149, 55.333c27; cited in Tokuno, p. 70 n. 83; see also Collins, “On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon,” p. 41 on

47 For example, the *Chung-ching mu-lu* of 602: “Separately compiled [abridged scriptures], suspicious [scriptures], and spurious scriptures must not be copied.” CBETA, T #2147, 55.150b3.


49 Mochizuki, *Bukkyō kyōten seiritsu shi ron*, pp. 315-339; the discoveries at Tun-huang and more recently at Nanatsu-dera have restored many of these lost works to our libraries.
judgments. In general there are two sorts of texts that were kept out of the canon as either suspicious or spurious: a) the first and greatest concern was with texts whose authorship was considered to be falsely attributed, which usually meant indigenous Chinese compositions falsely represented as translations from Indic originals, a judgement itself based on both style and content, and b) texts judged doctrinally deviant or socially harmful by the authorities in charge of defining the orthodox Buddhist canon. As with the process of canon creation in Jewish and Christian communities, these seemingly straightforward concerns were often overridden by then-current notions of orthodoxy and heresy, and so in China texts could move in and out of canonical status as times and standards changed. The need for legitimacy vis-à-vis Taoist rivals, for example, led the important and influential Li tai san pao chi 历代三寶記 to arbitrarily assign names of eminent translators to many texts previously labeled anonymous or even spurious. So too commentaries and treatises that were clearly known to be works of Chinese monks, not attempting to pass themselves off as translations from Indic originals, were also sometimes kicked out of the canon as heretical and sometimes allowed in, depending on which way the social-political winds were blowing.

e) Use of the expression “apocryphal sutras”

As an aside, I would like to comment on the recent scholarly trend to call these indigenous texts “Chinese Buddhist apocrypha” or “apocryphal scriptures.” I find this usage to be misleading, even if one is familiar with the original meaning or use of the term in Biblical studies. There, although apocrypha does include the sense of spurious or false (and the adjective “apocryphal” even more so), its most common use is to refer to the books which, while inspired, are not strictly considered part of the Bible—the Pseudepigrapha and books included in the Vulgate, for example. So there is a good case to be made for avoiding the term apocrypha for Buddhist texts for the simple reason that i ching and wei ching, doubtful sutras and spurious sutras, are used in a much more damning way by the Chinese catalogers. Even if you understand “apocrypha” to refer to scriptures of false attribution, however, not all of the works labeled spurious are actually false attributions to Indic originals, as is the case with San-chieh texts that we will look at shortly and texts extracted or abridged from Indic originals and circulated separately, another large category of texts often labeled i ching. Hence I don’t see how “apocryphal” has any utility
at all in the case of Chinese Buddhist works unless its use is carefully restricted to refer to sutras labeled “i ching” or “wei ching” in the Chinese catalogs themselves. For contemporary scholarship almost all Buddhist sutras are of false attribution and should therefore be considered apocryphal. To select out only one set of texts as spurious seems to buy into the same sectarian concerns as those that drove the original catalogers. Of course, this is not unheard of in modern scholarship, as for example the great scholar Mizuno Kōgen who, in his superb book Buddhist Sutras, divided indigenous Chinese scriptures into two categories: those that are “genuine,” that is, conform to orthodox Buddhist doctrine because they “embody the true spirit of Buddhism,” are “composed with the intention of disseminating the teachings of Buddhism more correctly,” and do not deny “the doctrinal validity of the sutras” (note the use of “true,” “more correctly,” and “valid”). On the other hand are those that are spurious, that is, sutras that “either fail to encompass the true spirit of Buddhism or include statements patently inconsistent with the Buddhist teaching.” To me this taxonomy only muddies the waters further, because in this schema some of the texts declared spurious in the catalogs are considered genuine while some texts long considered genuine in the catalogs here find themselves labeled spurious. Just as with other pejoratives used within the Buddhist tradition (like Hīnayāna) I would say that we should restrict our usage to the exact terms used by the catalogs—i ching, and wei ching or their direct translations (doubtful sutras and spurious sutras) and further yet restrict our usage of these terms to describing actual records in actual catalogs where a given text has been so labeled. For example, “The Fan-wang ching, or Sutra on Brahma’s Net, considered by contemporary scholars to have been composed in China around the 4th century AD, was labeled a “doubtful text” in the Chung-ching mu-lu of 594 but


51 Mizuno, p. 117.

52 Mizuno, p. 118.

53 Mizuno, p. 118. He further divides these spurious texts into four categories: “(1) sūtras expounded by someone in the throes of some sort of fanatic possession claiming to reveal the word of the Buddha; (2) sūtras expounded in order to take advantage of Buddhism for some purpose; (3) sūtras created in order to palm folk beliefs off as the word of the Buddha and (4) sūtras that were merely simplified abridgments of the more complex, repetitive translated sūtras.”
was accepted as canonical in the later *Chung-ching mu-lu* of 602.” For general academic discourse, however unwieldy it may seem to some, I recommend we stick with “indigenous scriptures” to describe scriptures determined to have been composed in China or elsewhere (including India) and leave the question of their conformance to orthodoxy—that is to say, their apocryphal status—to theologians.

f) Political and shifting nature of orthodoxy

I mentioned that the category of “deviant text” was heavily influenced by changing standards of orthodoxy, standards that swayed in the winds of contemporary political considerations, for, as noted earlier, imperial authority and canonical authority were intimately intertwined. This is what happened to the texts of the the San-chieh or the Three Levels movement. They were included within the register of canonical texts in two catalogs, while considered aberrant in at least two others, and, as recent manuscript discoveries in Japan show, they were restored to the canon once more in 800, only to be yet again kicked out of the canon in a later version of the the very same catalog that had restored them to canonical status. Let me turn, then, to the Three Levels as an example of getting “kicked out of the canon.”

4) The San-chieh movement

The Three Levels 三階 movement took form during the turbulent years preceding the Sui reunification of the Chinese empire (581-617). The three-hundred years of continuous warfare and cultural change prior to the Sui saw both imperial suppressions of the Buddhist church and the emergence of new and indigenous expressions of Buddhist doctrine, practice, and institution. Indeed, it was one of the most fertile epochs in Chinese Buddhist history, setting the patterns for the more formal systematizations of Chinese Buddhist schools in later dynasties. Hsin-hsing 信行 (540-594), the founder of the Three Levels movement, incorporated many of those new directions in his movement, and thus their study sheds much light on an early stage of these indigenous Chinese contributions to the Buddhist tradition.
Precisely because its doctrines so well reflected the concerns of the times, the Three Levels movement was immediately popular in the capital city of Chang-an, and counted among their patrons powerful statesmen, imperial princes, and even Empress Wu, the only woman to ever occupy the Imperial throne in China. The movement was also extremely popular among the masses, and there are secular records of throngs of people attending their temples in the capital as well as in the provinces.

In spite of their popularity and the inclusion of their writings in the canon of 597, subsequent records detail five separate imperial suppressions of Three Levels texts and practices between 600 and 725. From the various sutra catalogs:

a) *Li tai san pao chi* 历代三寶紀, compiled by Fei Chang-fen 長房録 in 597; 2 works in 35 chüan; recorded in the chronological catalog of the Great Sui (歷代大隋録): CBETA, T #2034; 49.105b.

b) *Ta T'ang nei tien lu* 大唐內典録, compiled in 664 by Tao-hsüan 道宣; two works in 40 chüan; recorded in the catalog of Buddhist sutras transmitted during the Sui dynasty (隋朝傳譯佛經録): CBETA, T #2149; 55.277c; and in the chronological catalog of commentaries composed by monks and laity (歷代道俗述作注解録): CBETA, T #2149; 55.332a.

c) *Ta Chou k'an ting chung ching mu lu* 大周刊定衆經目録, compiled in 695 by Ming-ch'üan 明佺 and 70 others at the orders of Empress Wu; 22 works in 29 chüan; listed in the register of spurious sutras (偽經目録): CBETA, T #2153, 55.474c-475a.

d) *K'ai-yüan shi chiao lu* 開元釋教録, compiled in 730 by Chih-sheng 智昇; 35 works in 44 chüan entered in the catalog of the spurious and false that confuse the true (偽妄亂真録): CBETA, T #2154, 55.678b-679a.

e) *Chen-yüan hsin ting shih chiao mu lu* 貞元新定釋教目録, compiled by Yüan-chao 圓照 in 800 San-chieh texts are recorded in the “table of contents” as included in the tenth fascicle, that is, a chronological catalog of the “collected catalog of sutras, vinaya, and commentaries produced by monastic and lay translators of the three eras of the Chou [557-581], Ch’en [557-589], and Sui [589-618]” 周陳隋三代緇素譯人所出經律論及傳集錄 (*CBETA, T #2157, 55.774c*); there then is a mention in the tenth fascicle of thirty-five texts in forty-four fascicles recorded in both the catalog of texts doubtful texts and the catalog of the canon (*CBETA, T #2157, 55.845c*) but actually not found in either section of the text. However, in a manuscript discovered in Japan, two texts in seven fascicles are listed in the catalog of the canonical works compiled by the sages (賢聖集傳入藏目録).*55

f) *Shōsō-in Bunsho* 正倉院文書, records of actual texts in the Shōsō-in; 4 works in 15 chüan; dated 747.*56

g) *Sinp’yon chejong kyojang ch’ongnok* 新編諸宗教藏總録, compiled by Ui’chon 義天 (1055-1101); two works in 6 chüan; recorded in the “catalog [of commentaries and sectarian works] of which the texts are extant and circulating in Korea” (海東有本見行録; *CBETA, T #2184, 55.1178b*).

The *K’ai-yüan lu*, the fourth catalog listed, was particularly influential, and the result of its including the Three Levels records in the catalog of spurious works was that the movement finally died out and, as with most texts labeled spurious or deviant in the

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catalogs, all of their scriptures were lost, no longer copied or circulated as part of the official canon (at least in China). It is hard to know the exact causes of such persistent imperial hostility, although they probably include such things as their rather strident and exclusivist claims to doctrinal relevancy, the economic success and popularity of the movement, and, perhaps more than anything, their proximity to power—their first suppression, in 600, for example, occurred immediately after the fall from power of their patron Kao-chiung, the finance minister of the Sui who had donated his palace for their first temple, and two other suppressions came at the hands of Empress Wu, who was also one of their institutional supporters. I think that we can say that both the ephemeral nature of orthodoxy and the political nature of canonicity are clearly shown by the treatment accorded the movement of the Three Levels.

At any rate, the historical record of the Three Levels movement begins to dim after their final suppression in 725, for the damning record of the authoritative K’ai yuan lu was passed down in subsequent catalogs, so that before long the little that was known of the Three Levels movement came, ironically, from those few records in the very catalogs that condemned them and the occasional polemic directed at them in the writings of other sectarian movements. The closure of the canon was compounded with the transition from the manuscript period to the printed canon in the tenth century—printed canons that were largely based on the K’ai-yüan lu. This closure was effected by the fact that these printed versions of the canon were virtually always published by the state until the seventeenth century, thus bringing the full weight of imperial authority to their judgments. Until the discovery of a huge cache of manuscripts, including many such banished and lost texts, in the caves of the oasis town of Tun-huang at the beginning of this century, we knew little more about this popular movement than I have just described. Again ironic—as well as speaking to the power that the catalogs had in determining the shape of the canon and especially the physical preservation of texts—because the San-chieh texts were restored to


canonical status in the later Chen-yüan lu (noted above) that was often used in Japan as the source of a temple’s collection of scriptures, they continued to be copied in Japan as late as the 12th century. When I was doing research in Japan in the ‘90’s I had the excitement of actually being present when several of these long-lost texts—texts kicked out of the canon on several occasions—were discovered in an old temple in downtown Nagoya. But that is another story. 59

5) Conclusion

To conclude I can note that as scholars our relation to questions of orthodoxy and canonicity are obviously rather different than that of early Buddhists or the Chinese catalogers. To begin with we could simply note the fact that the presence of disagreement and controversy are precisely the sort of evidence that helps us chart the development of the Buddhist tradition. Indeed, as Robert Buswell has noted, many of the “seminal contributions made by the Chinese to the Buddhist culture were, in fact, not results of continually more refined exegeses of translated Indian and Serindian materials . . . [but rather a] response to indigenous concerns.” 60 These “seminal contributions” are exactly what are documented in the works deemed spurious by the catalogers as well as other scriptures which, while long accepted by the official catalogs, have been shown by modern scholarship to be in fact indigenous works. Just as all Mahāyāna scriptures are spuriously attributed to the Buddha, some of the most influential works in East Asia are indigenous—that is, scriptures composed in China and falsely attributed to Indic originals, sometimes allowed into the canon and sometimes judged doubtful or spurious. These include scriptures such as the Sutra of Brahma’s Net (Fan wang ching 梵網經), which became the norm for monastic life in East Asia, the Vajrasamādhi Sutra (Chin kang san mei ching lun, Kūmgang sammaegyŏng non 金剛三昧經論) of the Zen school, The Awakening of Mahayana Faith (Ta sheng ch’i hsin lun 大乘起信論), a seminal text for all of East Asian


60 Buswell, Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha, p. 2.
Buddhism, the *Meditation Sutra* (*Kuan Wu-liang shu ching 観無量壽經*), foundational for the Pure Land school, and many more. Today, as with the Dead Sea Scrolls, Nag Hamadi texts, and other recently discovered manuscripts of early Christianity, the study of indigenous scriptures has become one of the most important fields in Buddhist Studies.

Hence I would simply like to reiterate my opening point: although the Buddhist tradition has long been seen as doctrinally tolerant with little concern for the sort of closed canon assumed of other religions, in fact Buddhists everywhere and at all times have been concerned with both orthodoxy as well as canonicity. I think that recognizing this allows us to make the observation that those who see Buddhism as more concerned with orthopraxy than orthodoxy are themselves espousing a form of orthodoxy, that is, an attempt to prescribe what is in fact the True Dharma and guard it against what they see to be the deadening affect of concern with scripture and its study. On the other hand, though, the recognition that Buddhist concern for orthodoxy and canonicity is in fact evidence of diversity and a way to chart developments in the Buddhist tradition also means that, in the end, there has been no single orthodoxy or canon that prevailed. In fact, in the Buddhist tradition, orthodoxy and canonical open-endedness go hand in hand. I suspect that the same is true for other religions.