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Hubbard/Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood

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Introduction

The symbiotic relationships between charismatic religious individuals, the communities and institutions that grow around them, the society in which they live, and the state that seeks to control them have always been among the more revealing in Chinese history. Buddhism, with an arguably transcendent doctrine of individual perfection (the awakening of the individual in Buddhahood) as well as an emphasis on altruistic practice within the world (the practice of the bodhisattva) presents a particularly rich field for the investigation of these relationships. This book is concerned with the teachings of one such charismatic religious leader, Hsin-hsing 信心 (540–594), the popular and influential new religious community that formed around him (the San-chieh 三階 or Three Levels movement), and the persistent official proscription that they encountered. The focus of the study is not, however, the suppressions of Hsin-hsing’s teachings or the purely historical setting of his community; rather it is the way in which he drew from the wider context of normative Buddhist ideals in order to forge new soteriological opportunities and institutional practices that he believed uniquely resonated with that historical setting.

Anyone interested in the San-chieh teachings or related areas of Buddhist doctrinal and institutional history must begin with Yabuki Keiki’s epochal Sangaikyō no kenkyū published in the 1920s; unfortunately, most research ends there as well. Until now there has been no book-length study of the San-chieh materials in any language since Yabuki’s work more than a half-century ago, and precious few articles. The paucity of research should not, however, lead scholars to assume that Yabuki’s solitary study said it all—on the contrary, his study can only whet the intellectual appetite of the curious and patient student, for many questions remain unanswered. For example, what does it mean when a tradition that insists on a universal and abiding truth predicts its own demise? Is the decline tradition a teaching about external

1 Yabuki Keiki, Sangaikyō no kenkyū (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1927; reprint, 1974).
2 Just as I finished this manuscript Nishimoto Teruma’s outstanding new book Sangaikyō no kenkyū (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1998) appeared; I have endeavored to incorporate his research where appropriate.
historical events, or is it concerned with the internal, the moral condition of humankind—or, as I will suggest, something rather different altogether? How does this notion develop in China; what are its terms, texts, and dates, and what are the parameters of its discussion? What are the forms of the tradition (narratives, polemics, etc.)? How is it introduced and by whom? Is there a difference in understanding between the Chinese “consumers” of the idea of the demise of the dharma and the Indian “producers” of this idea? What spurred the Chinese to decide that the prophesied time of the destruction of the Buddha-dharma had actually arrived, and with what did they respond? What is the relationship of the three levels of Hsin-hsing’s teaching to the doctrine of three distinct periods of the Buddha Sakyamuni’s dispensation: the true doctrine (cheng fa 正法), semblance doctrine (hsiang fa 像法), and final doctrine (mo fa 末法)? Is mo fa an Indian Buddhist concept or solely a creation of the Chinese, an “apocryphal word,” as some have alleged? What was the political and institutional import of such a pessimistic assessment of one’s contemporaries? Given the importance of the doctrine of mo fa in East Asian Buddhism and significant new research on this topic, all of these questions, and more, demand thorough answers.

The same can be said of the doctrine of universal Buddha-nature, a teaching that, like the decline motif, undergirds much, if not all, of East Asian Buddhism. Unlike the apophatic terms of the Madhyamaka or the analytic approach of the Yogacāra, the universal capacity of all living beings for Buddhahood is an extremely positive teaching that has even been labeled “devotional.” How does Hsin-hsing’s expression of this doctrine as the refuge of the Universal Buddha compare to those of other teachers and schools, such as the Ti-lun, She-lun, or the later Hua-yen? What impact did his teachings have on other more rebellious movements of the time? How was the idea of the Universal Buddha realized in the institution of the sangha and what did this mean for the observance of the monastic regulations? The San-chieh teachings denied the Buddha-nature of the non-sentient, as did the later Hua-yen but T’ien-t’ai did not; is there any relationship between these schools on this matter? The topics of tathagatagarbha and Buddha-nature are receiving considerable attention these days, as new research refines the textual and doctrinal developments of the idea at the same time that more philosophically and critically motivated essays condemn it as a non-Buddhist resurgence of monism linked to nativism, social injustice, gender discrimination, and more. Does the San-chieh doctrine of the Universal Buddha similarly reflect the uncritical acceptance of an indigenous “topological” viewpoint?

The institutional is another area of the San-chieh movement that warrants closer investigation—for example, the support it enjoyed among the highest levels of the Sui and T’ang courts and the relationship of that support to
doctrinal arguments, liturgical cycles, and institutional presence. Related aspects include the emphasis on dàna and the above-mentioned eschatological orientation; the five suppressions of their teachings and practices over a two-hundred-year time span and, heuristically, questions of orthodoxy and church-state relations; their reformulation of Vinaya rules and bodhisattva practices as an institutional organ of social welfare (the charitable foundation of the Inexhaustible Storehouse 無盡藏, the forerunner of the pawnshop and other mutual aid societies in China and Japan); the fact that Hsin-hsing, the founder, abandoned his precepts yet continued to live a monastic life (obviously an important precedent for East Asian Buddhism); the emphasis on the dhátu and other ascetic practices, including begging and “sky burial” (i.e., leaving the dismembered corpse out under the open sky as an offering of food to the denizens of the animal and preta realms), topics more often discussed in the context of Southeast Asian forest monks yet very popular among the monks of the Northern dynasties (cultivated by Chih-i, among other luminaries of this period); their formulation of a graded system of doctrinal tenets and its relationship to the other such emerging systems of the Sui-T’ang scholastic schools, especially the Hua-yen (and thereby issues of imperial patronage also become interesting); the confessional and repentance practices of the Seven Roster Buddhánāma, Thirty-five Buddhas, the fang teng 方等, and other aspects of daily practice and liturgy, and their relation to T’ien-t’ai and Pure Land configurations of these widespread practices; questions of community membership and rules; the reliance on the Shiī lun ching 十輪經 and Kṣitigarbha devotion, and the political implications of both; the cult of the sixteen arhats (especially Piṇḍola) and their influence on the sixteen practices of the Inexhaustible Storehouse; and more. Particularly in light of the research of the last thirty years in the areas of the Tun-huang manuscripts, Ch’an and Hua-yen history, epigraphy, legal and administrative history, messianic Buddhist movements, and the like, it is necessary to re-present the history and doctrine of the San-chieh movement in order to open new directions of research as well as to reevaluate Yabuki’s pioneering work. Though I do not presume to answer all of these questions, I do hope to show why they remain important questions and thereby to stimulate further research on Hsin-hsing and the San-chieh movement.

**Methodological Considerations**

The accurate investigation of religious phenomena demands that they be viewed both in terms of their effect on the situations with which they articulate (i.e., as an independent variable) and in terms of the way that they are affected by the setting in which they are found (i.e., as a dependent vari-
able). In this approach Buddhism is neither merely a body of doctrines undergoing change and reformulation according to individual revelation and intellectual dispute, nor is it simply an institution swaying in the winds of social change and functional response to those changes. This approach to the study of Buddhism thus affirms the rhetorical value and agency of the insight claimed by the tradition at the same time that it encourages discussion of the institution’s relation to that agency and its functional interaction with the world. Therefore my research is concerned with that place at which the rhetorically ahistoric religious insight of the individual comes together with the social, historical world, and the religious doctrine and institutions born thereof. This also means that, although not primarily a study in rhetoric per se, this work tends to look at San-chień doctrine in terms of its rhetorical function, that is, as a public and social practice aimed at arguing a point or convincing an audience, and its institutions as attempts to embody that rhetoric in response to particular social contexts.

More and more we see how the literary tradition that has dominated scholarship represents a form of rhetoric not necessarily evidenced in institutional or cultic reality. So far, however, these insights have largely been received as “setting the record straight,” debunking the rhetoric, setting up an opposition between rhetoric and reality, or theoretically problematizing the use of literary materials as sources for studies of historical institutions. Of course, the monk of the (rhetorically) iconoclastic and anti-authoritarian Zen tradition that daily participates in the ritual invocation of the names of all the members of his lineage, prostrating in front of various icons of that lineage (which lineage itself is little more than rhetorical fabrication) sees no opposition, feels no contradiction, and, should he think of the issue, would probably be hard put to feel that his practice was “problematic.” This is not because of a blindness on the part of the monk but because rhetoric has always had its own functional role the world over, a role rarely restricted or tied to accurately depicting historical or institutional fact. It is well known to New Testament scholars, for example, that the gospels are just that: the “good news,” that is, evangelical or preaching documents, not to be taken as trying to record historical or biographical fact; to treat them otherwise says more about our understanding (or lack thereof) of rhetorical device than it does about the historical veracity of the New Testament.

It is to be lamented that in the post-Cartesian West the study of rhetoric has largely been displaced by a positivist and scientific historicism, in which “the facts are to speak for themselves,” as Max Weber put it, for although the study of rhetoric has lagged, its deployment surely has not. I am firmly convinced that without a sophisticated analysis of the forms and styles of religious rhetoric, much of the world’s contemporary religious language, a language increasingly bellicose and activist, will never be understood adequately, much
less engaged fruitfully. Thus too this study is unabashedly “Buddhological,” which is to say that I treat San-chien doctrine, practice, and institutional configuration largely in terms of the synchronic and diachronic vicissitudes of the Buddhist tradition, especially the doctrinal tradition. This is not because I am ignorant of or resistant to current scholarly fashion that finds this to be theoretically indefensible and often historically false, but more simply because it is the self-understanding of Hsin-hsing and his followers. That is, however much we know the Buddhist “tradition” to be an elusive, ever-changing, and usually self-serving construct, it nonetheless remains the construct deployed by Buddhists themselves. Hence it seems to me at least as reasonable an interpretive framework as the equally contingent and self-serving constructs of late-twentieth-century academics. As an example we may cite the persistent concern over the question of the “sinification” of Buddhism, which might, for example, interpret Hsin-hsing’s attempts to harmonize the teachings of degenerate capacity and innate Buddha-nature as a reflection of the ancient Chinese debate between Mencius and Hsün-tzu regarding the inherently good or evil nature of humanity. The fact remains, however, that this question was also vigorously debated in Indian Buddhist texts, and it is these Buddhist scriptures and not the indigenous Chinese texts that Hsin-hsing uses in his own arguments. So, too, I have very purposefully left the history of the suppressions of the Three Levels movement until the end—on the one hand because I do feel that human agency is involved in the creation of institutions (for better or, more often, for worse) and hence the worldviews and particularly the doctrinal propositions that help form those worldviews are an important factor in institutional history. On the other hand, before I present the facts of their suppression I want to present those aspects of their doctrine most frequently cited as their cause in order to show just how mainstream the Three Levels teachings were. In other words, as with cults and new religious movements in the contemporary world, it is the novelty, uniqueness—the deviations—that are most often cited in regard to the heretical status of Hsin-hsing’s ideas. When we look more closely at these ideas, however, we find little not in evidence elsewhere in the Buddhist tradition.

A secondary orientation of my work, born of the first, is that religious movements virtually always preclude overly simplistic labeling as “popular,” “elite,” “cult,” “shamanistic,” etc. The San-chien movement was born of many causes and conditions and exhibited many different sides during its

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one-hundred-fifty year history; economic questions, concern for social welfare and reform, theological sophistication, soteriological subtlety, liturgical innovation, institutional novelty, sectarian stridency, a cult of the founder, and more all played a part in the history of the movement. Any attempt to reduce it to a single framework necessarily discloses only part of that story and thereby does injustice to the organic integrity (or contradiction) of the whole. For example, the charitable efforts, the emphasis on the degenerate conditions of humanity, and the inclusion of Hsin-hsing’s works in the apocryphal sections of the sutra catalogues have led many scholars to evaluate his community as primarily a “practice” oriented movement, an opening of the Buddhist path to the “masses,” and thus too in the light of Pure Land teachings, though the facts clearly do not warrant such a one-dimensional categorization. Institutionally, for example, they found support among the highest levels of the government and society, from the Sui statesman Kao-chiung to the Empress Wu. On the doctrinal side, Hsin-hsing’s ideas shared affinities with the universalism and syncretism characteristic of the T’ien-t’ai and Hua-yen schools, which are usually labeled “academic” and “elite,” as much as with the Pure Land. All of this supports the thesis that the history of the San-chieh, as with most religious movements, is much too complicated to be subsumed under broad, sweeping generalizations.

For all of the broad guidance that these considerations have imparted to my work, the primary approach remains that of documentary history that aims to understand how San-chieh teachings influenced practices and institutions. It was, after all, the discovery of manuscripts in a cave that provided the opportunity and impetus for this study, and scholarship has not yet moved far beyond this initial stage.

Because of the many suppressions and the inclusion of its scriptures in the apocryphal section of the scripture catalogs (which determined the normative Buddhist canon in China), the San-chieh movement was literally excised from Chinese Buddhist history. Until the discovery of a number of the movement’s texts at the beginning of this century in Tun-huang and Japan, almost all knowledge of them came from the mere listings of text titles in the early scripture catalogs or the odd polemic by their contemporaries. Although this changed dramatically when the movement’s texts were discovered in a cave in the Central Asian oasis of Tun-huang, the researcher still faces an inordinate number of complex questions of dating, authorship, reading, and, because of the fragmentary and often damaged condition of the texts, even physical reconstruction.

Again, owing to the frequent suppressions, the textual tradition never was able to really stabilize, so that, for example, many catalogs simply refer to the tui ken ch’i tsa lu 對根起錄, “miscellaneous record of practice in accord with the capacity” in over thirty scrolls, whereas other catalogs break this...
“miscellany” into twenty-two or thirty-five separate works. This often makes even the identification of the extant texts tentative at best. In addition, we must account not only for their preservation at Tun-huang, far from their institutional headquarters in Ch’ang-an, but also for their transmission to Korea and Japan. Although no texts have been discovered in Korea to date (they were, however, recorded in the Korean *Sinpyŏn chejong kyojang ch’ongnok*), San-chieh texts were transmitted to Japan as early as the seventh century and continued to be copied as part of the normative canon as late as 1180, almost half a millennium after their final suppression in China. How and why this should have been the case is not yet fully answered—it was only in the past few years, for example, that such questions were raised anew when a manuscript copy of the official Chinese canon containing a number of San-chieh texts was discovered at the Nanatsu-dera temple in downtown Nagoya.

Perhaps, however, the most vexing problem in understanding the San-chieh texts is working in a total vacuum of commentarial literature to aid in their interpretation. This requires working in a virtual void of self-conscious commentarial reflection, that is to say, an interpretation handed down over the years within a given tradition as it reflects on its doctrines both synchronically and diachronically. Thus often the only way to understand a technical term or phrase in the San-chieh materials is through its use in other traditions, obviously as dangerous a practice as it is cumbersome, massively enlarging the scope of one’s research just as it greatly increases the possibility for serious misinterpretation. We can only sympathize with the medieval Tōdaiji scholar-monk Gyōnen (1240–1321), who wrote of his encounter with the San-chieh texts, “Within the canon is the Sangaishūroku in five chüan. It establishes its teachings by quoting directly from the various scriptures and commentaries, but the context is difficult and the beginnings and endings are confused; it is therefore hard to ascertain the meaning and difficult to understand their import.”

The ensuing centuries have not seen much improvement in the situation. Yet, at the same time, this lack of a commentarial tradition also proves to be a blessing for somewhat the same reason—there is no later tradition or lineage whose interpretations color one’s own.

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6 T #2339, 72.383a.
For all of these reasons I am acutely aware of the shortcomings of my work, particularly in the area of the specific Chinese context of San-chieh organization, doctrine, and practice. I hope that these same shortcomings will spur others to a more conclusive accounting of the textual tradition and thereby to an understanding of the more subtle nuances of the movement. Thus, too, the context that I provide is much larger in scope than I would like, and no doubt my presentations of this wider Buddhist context will strike many as overly simplified and others as unnecessary. For this very reason, then, the research presented here must be considered introductory, hopefully yielding aspects of the San-chieh movement that scholars working in other fields may use to provide greater context for their own endeavors, rather than properly presenting it in the more exact context of Chinese Buddhist religious or social history. For these reasons also (and especially in light of the Nanatsu-dera and other recent manuscript discoveries), I have decided to postpone to a separate volume the study of the textual history of the San-chieh manuscripts, including a discussion of their vacillating “apocryphal” status in the catalogs, transmission to and copying in Japan, external testimonium, and the like.

This book is divided into four parts. Part one, “The Origins of a Buddhist Heresy,” presents what we know of Hsin-hsing’s life and practices as found in the biographical sources with a particular aim of demonstrating how he is more representative of than deviant from the monastic tradition of his time. Part two, “The Rhetoric of Decline,” examines the notion of the demise of the dharma and the San-chieh systematization of that teaching. The majority of studies of the decline tradition see it as one way or another a moral indictment of corrupt sentient beings (including, most conspicuously, the sangha) that implies a moral failure of the ruler as well. Because I have a rather different view of the decline tradition, I have spent more space than is perhaps expected outlining its original production and early Chinese development in order to provide a framework for the later discussion of the rhetorical strategies and subsequent suppression of the San-chieh texts and practices. Thus chapters 2 and 3 discuss what I see to be the origins of the notion of the demise of the dharma (sectarian skirmishing over the issue of orthodoxy) and the early Chinese expansion of this tradition into a hermeneutic of soteriological and sectarian opportunity (p’an chiao 劈敘). Chapter 4 then recounts Hsin-hsing’s description of three different capacities for practice and realization, in particular our decayed capacity and the soteriological problem posed by such a belief. In a general sense this corresponds to Hsin-hsing’s central teaching of “recognizing evil” as the constitutive reality of each individual’s personal existence. Part three, “Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood,” is concerned with the other side of the coin, the doctrine of universal Buddha-nature that underlies the teaching and practice of “universal
respect” for the inherent perfection of all sentient beings other than oneself. Accordingly chapter 5 is an outline of the San-chieh teaching of the refuge of the Buddha appropriate to the third level, a teaching based on the doctrines of tathagatagarbha and Buddha-nature that provided the theoretical basis for their practices. The refuge of the Universal Dharma and the universal community of practitioners, that is, the “doctrine and practice in accord with the capacity,” which offers a solution to the obstacle imposed by our lowered capacity, is discussed in chapter 6. Having outlined the soteriological problem in part two and the theoretical basis of the solution in part three, part four, “The Economy of Salvation,” presents the movement’s implementation of that theory in the practice of the charitable institution of the Inexhaustible Storehouse. Chapter 7 presents the theory of this practice while chapter 8 details the institutional history of the Inexhaustible Storehouse, mostly centered around the Hua-tu ssu in Ch’ang-an, framed in terms of the issues surrounding the many suppressions of the San-chieh texts and practices. Finally, chapter 9 attempts to put Hsin-hsing’s teachings into a wider context in order to ask more general, comparative, and critical questions about the relevance of his teaching on the degenerate nature of humankind as a kind of eschatological, millennial, or apocalyptic doctrine on the one hand and on the other hand to look at his practical response to the degeneracy of humankind, that is, the doctrine of the “practice that arises in accord with the capacity” as a hermeneutic strategy.

Translations of three key manuscripts from the Tun-huang caves form the appendices. Appendix A contains a translation of the P’u fa ssu fo (The Refuge of the Four Buddhas of the Universal Dharma, Stein #5668), the basis of Hsin-hsing’s universalism, and Appendices B and C contain translations of the two manuscripts most important to a study of the Inexhaustible Storehouse, the Wu chin tsang fa lüeh shuo (Abridged Explanation of the Dharma of the Inexhaustible Storehouse, Stein #190) and the Ta sheng fa chieh wu chin tsang fa shih (Commentary on the Dharma of the Inexhaustible Storehouse of the Mahayana Universe, Stein #721).

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Conventions

In dealing with Sanskrit terminology I have followed in principle the list of Sanskrit words found in Webster’s Third New International Dictionary kindly provided by Roger Jackson. I have not, however, chosen

to follow Jackson’s suggestion regarding the use of diacritical marks with these terms, the same not being part of the English language (unless, of course, such words appear with diacritics in the titles of cited works or quotations). The romanization of Chinese follows the MLA style sheet, modified by the guidelines adopted by the Library of Congress, which basically is the Wade-Giles system without hyphens (except in the case of proper names such as San-chieh, Hua-yen, Chih-i, and the like) or the breve and circumflex diacritics. Chinese characters have been added in the text, when thought useful, at the first occurrence of a name or term. To avoid excessive clutter, additional Chinese characters have been added to terms in the index rather than to each term in the text.