



**Jinhua Chen, *Legend and Legitimation: The Formation of Tendai Esoteric Buddhism in Japan***

Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques, vol. 30. Brussels: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 2009. xviii + 423 pp. Appendix, bibliography, index, list of figures. Paperback, €45.00/\$66.00. ISBN 978-2-9600076-2-6.

RESEARCH on Japanese Tendai Esoteric Buddhism is still an almost totally undeveloped field, even in Japanese scholarship (with the exception of a few scholars such as MISAKI Ryōshū [1988] and ŌKUBO Ryōshun [2004]). Thus the publication of this study is very welcome. Some of Chen's arguments and conclusions appeared in his PhD dissertation (McMaster University, 1997) and in a solid article in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* (21/1: 21–76, 1998), but here we have a detailed presentation and convincingly argued study of the early development of Tendai Esoteric Buddhism, focusing on the two “dharma-transmission documents” and the three *siddhi* texts (T no. 905–907) that were allegedly connected with Saichō's initiation into Esoteric Buddhism in China. Chen concludes that these texts were actually composed in Japan to strengthen the legitimacy of the esoteric Buddhist tradition of Saichō and Tendai.

The first part of this study focuses on the two dharma-transmission certificates (*fuhōmon*) allegedly received by Saichō during his initiation in China. Chen provides a detailed analysis of the historical background with regard to Esoteric Buddhism both in China and Japan before, during, and after Saichō's time. He concludes that these certificates were fabricated by some Tendai monk(s) to provide legitimization of the Saichō/Tendai esoteric lineage, the first not too long after Saichō's death, and the second by a Tendai monk in Ennin's line around the mid-ninth century. The significance of this second certificate is that it was supposedly witness to a triple esoteric transmission (adding the *soshitsuji* to the dual *taizōkai* and *kongōkai*), making it superior to the transmission received by Kūkai.

The second part examines in great detail the three *siddhi* texts, arguing for the primacy of the shortest text (T no. 907), showing how the texts incorporate various sources (including passages from a work by Annen, as well as some sentences from Zhiyi's commentaries on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*), and concluding that the earliest and basic apocryphon (T no. 907) was compiled by Annen between 891 and 902. He

shows how the other two texts (T no. 905 and 906) expand on the basic core of the shorter (T no. 907). Chen also provides a long discussion of the use of the Chinese pattern of “five phases” (*wuxing* 五行: wood, fire, earth, metal, fire) as a basic conceptual framework for these texts.

The dense and detailed appendixes contain textual analysis and annotated translations of the three *siddhi* texts, and further discussion on the use of these texts in both the Tendai and Shingon traditions, and finally a translation of verses on the “five syllables.”

Chen’s research brings up a number of interesting issues. One is the role of apocryphal texts in Japanese Buddhism. Much work has been done on the importance of apocryphal Buddhist texts in China (and Korea), but in the past I have claimed (in comments to my translation of a Shugendō-related apocryphal sutra; see SWANSON 1990) that apocryphal texts are relatively rare in Japan. Chen shows that they may not be as rare or unusual as has been thought, and opens up the possibility of finding such texts in other contexts.

Again, what are the implications of Chen’s conclusions? How important is it (not the least for people in the Tendai Buddhist tradition) to still insist on an actual historical event for a proper lineage? In the current social and cultural milieu of modern Japan, are appeals to traditional lineages of any relevance at all? The historical Saichō vs. Kūkai quarrel means little or nothing to most people and to the current activities of Buddhist temples in Japan. These assertions may be a bitter pill to swallow for those who seek to maintain the authority of a traditional lineage, but from an academic perspective, Chen’s research provides exciting new insights into the development of Japanese Buddhism, not only for Tendai but also for Shingon and the wider *ken-mitsu* Buddhism of medieval Japan. As Chen points out, “It is my hope that these negative conclusions can be turned into a positive agenda for future research. Now that we know how most of the documents regarding Saichō’s esoteric transmission were composed sometime after his death, we can begin a more focused historical investigation of the evolution of Tendai Esoteric Buddhism in Japan. Scholars can turn from a fruitless search for the roots of Tendai Esoteric Buddhism in China to look more closely at the local Japanese context” (249). Chen is to be congratulated for such groundbreaking work, and I believe we can look forward to more insightful research from him in the future.

#### REFERENCES

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