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APOCRYPHA

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The term *apocrypha* has been used in Western scholarship to refer to Buddhist literature that developed in various parts of Asia in imitation of received texts from the Buddhist homeland of India. Texts included under the rubric of apocrypha share some common characteristics, but they are by no means uniform in their literary style or content. Apocrypha may be characterized collectively as a genre of indigenous religious literature that claimed to be of Indian Buddhist pedigree or affiliation and that came to acquire varying degrees of legitimacy and credence with reference to the corpus of shared scripture. Some apocrypha, especially in East Asian Buddhism, purported to be the BUDDHAVACANA (WORD OF THE BUDDHA) (that is, *sūtra*) or the word of other notable and anonymous exegetes of Indian Buddhism (*śāstra*). Others claimed to convey the insights of enlightened beings from India or of those who received such insights through a proper line of transmission, as in the case of Tibetan “treasure texts” (*gter ma*) that were hidden and discovered by qualified persons. Still others were modeled after canonical narrative literature, as in the case of apocryphal JĀTAKA (birth stories of the Buddha) from Southeast Asia. Thus, what separates apocrypha from other types of indigenous Buddhist literature was their claimed or implied Indian attribution and authorship. The production of apocryphal texts is related to the nature of the Buddhist CANON within each tradition. The Chinese and Tibetan canons remained open in order to allow the introduction of new scriptures that continued to be brought from India over several centuries, a circumstance that no doubt inspired religious innovation and encouraged the creation of new religious texts, such as apocrypha. The Pāli canon of South and Southeast Asia, on the other hand, was fixed at a relatively early stage in its history, making it more difficult to add new materials.

The above general characterization offers a clue as to the function and purpose of apocrypha: They adapted Indian material to the existing local contexts—be they religious, sociocultural, or even political—thereby bridging the conceptual gulf that otherwise might have rendered the assimilation of Buddhism more difficult, if not impossible. The perceived authority inherent in the received texts of the tradition was tacitly recognized and adopted to make the foreign religion more comprehensible to contemporary people in the new lands into which Buddhism was being introduced. Indeed history shows that some apocryphal texts played seminal roles in the development of local Buddhist cultures as they became an integral part of the textual tradition both inside and outside the normative canon. But not all apocrypha were purely or even primarily aimed at promoting Buddhist causes. Some Chinese apocrypha, for example, were all about legitimating local religious customs and practices by presenting them in the guise of the teaching of the Buddha. These examples illustrate that the authority of SCRIPTURE spurred literary production beyond the confines of Buddhism proper and provided a form in which a region’s popular religious dimensions could be expressed in texts.

Of the known corpus of apocrypha, the most “egregious” case may be East Asian Buddhist apocrypha that assumed the highest order of Indian pedigree, by claiming to be the genuine word of the Buddha himself. Naturally their claims to authenticity did not go unnoticed among either conservative or liberal factions within the Buddhist community. During the medieval period these texts became objects of contempt as well as, contrarily, materials of significant utility and force in the ongoing sinification of Buddhism. Thus Chinese Buddhist apocrypha epitomize the complexity of issues surrounding the history, identity, and function of Buddhist apocrypha as a broader genre of Buddhist literature.

Chinese Buddhist apocrypha

Chinese Buddhist apocrypha began to be written almost contemporaneously with the inception of Buddhist translation activities in the mid-second century C.E. According to records in Buddhist CATALOGUES OF SCRIPTURES, the number of apocrypha grew steadily every generation, through at least the eighth century. Most cataloguers were vehement critics of apocrypha, as can be gauged from their description of them as either “spurious” or “suspected” scriptures, or from statements that condemned these scriptures as eroding the integrity of the Buddhist textual transmission in China. Despite the concerted, collective efforts of the cataloguers and, at times, the imperial court to root out these indigenous scriptures, it was not until the compilation of the first printed Buddhist canon, the Northern Song edition (971–983), that new textual creation waned and eventually all but ceased. The production of apocrypha in China was thus a phenomenon of the manuscript period, when handwritten texts of local origin could gain acceptance as scripture and even be included in the canon, the result being an enigmatic category of scripture that is at once inauthentic and yet canonical.

Modern scholarship’s discovery of such “canonical apocrypha” testifies to the complexity and difficulty of textual adjudication as well as to the authors’ sophisticated level of comprehension and assimilation of Buddhist materials. It was never easy for traditional bibliographical cataloguers to determine scriptural authenticity. Success in ferreting out apocryphal texts—especially when the texts in question were composed by authors with extensive knowledge of Buddhist doctrines and practice and with substantial literary skill—required extensive exposure to a wide range of Buddhist literature. In addition, the task was at times deliberately compromised—as in the case of the *Lidai sanbaoji* (*Record of the Three Treasures throughout Successive Dynasties*; 597)—for no other reason than the polemical need to purge from the canon any elements that might subject Buddhism to criticism from religious and ideological rivals, such as Daoists and Confucians. The *Lidai sanbaoji* added many false author and translator attributions to apocrypha in order to authenticate those texts as genuine scripture; and once its arbitrary attributions were accepted in a state-commissioned catalogue, the *DaZhou kanding zhongjing mulu* (*Catalogue of Scriptures, Authorized by the Great Zhou Dynasty*; 695), the Chinese tradition accepted the vast majority of those texts as canonical. The *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* (*Record of Śākyamuni’s Teachings, Compiled during the Kaiyuan Era*; 730)—recognized as the best of all traditional catalogues—was critical of both these predecessors, but even it was unable to eliminate all these past inaccuracies due in part to the weight of tradition. Canonical apocrypha are therefore ideal examples of the clash of motivations and compromises reached in the process of creating a

religious tradition. These apocrypha thus added new dimensions to the evolving Buddhist religion in China due in part to their privileged canonical status, but also, more importantly, because of their responsiveness to Chinese religious and cultural needs.

There are some 450 titles of Chinese apocryphal texts listed in the traditional bibliographical catalogues. In actuality, however, the cumulative number of apocrypha composed in China is closer to 550 when we take into account both other literary evidence, as well as texts not listed in the catalogues but subsequently discovered among Buddhist text and manuscript collections in China and Japan. Approximately one-third of this total output is extant today—a figure that is surprisingly large, given the persistent censorship to which apocrypha were subjected throughout the medieval period. This survival rate is testimony to their effectiveness as *indigenous* Buddhist scripture and attests to the continued reception given to these texts by the Chinese, even such knowledgeable exegetes as ZHIYI (538–597), the systematizer of the Tiantai School of Chinese Buddhism. The vitality of the phenomenon of apocrypha in China also catalyzed the creation of new scriptures in other parts of East Asia, though to nowhere near the same extent as in China proper.

The extant corpus of apocrypha includes both canonical apocrypha as well as texts preserved as citations in Chinese exegetical works. Apocrypha were also found in the two substantial medieval manuscript collections discovered in modern times. The first is the Dunhuang cache of Central Asia discovered at the turn of the twentieth century, which included manuscripts dating from the fifth to eleventh centuries. The second is the Nanatsu-dera manuscript canon in Nagoya, Japan, which was compiled during the twelfth century based on earlier manuscript editions of the Buddhist canon. It was discovered in 1990 to have included apocrypha of both Chinese and Japanese origin. The most astonishing historical finding in this canon was the *Piluo sanmei jing* (*The Scripture on the Absorption of Piluo*), an apocryphon attested in the bibliographical catalogue compiled by the renowned monk-scholar Dao'an (312–385), but previously unknown. The Japanese manuscript is the only extant copy of this extremely early Chinese apocryphon. Other findings are no less valuable in ascertaining the overall history of apocrypha: Both the Dunhuang and Nanatsu-dera manuscripts included many titles with no known record in the catalogues, evidence indicating that indigenous scriptural creation was even more prolific than had previously been recognized. Moreover, scholars have suggested or identified convincingly some of the Nanatsu-dera apocrypha as Japanese compilations based on Indian texts or Chinese apocryphal materials. Thus the apocrypha extant in Japan serve as witness to the currency and impact of this contested, but obviously useful, material.

Texts and contents

The extant corpus of apocryphal literature defies simple description, as each text has its own unique doctrinal or practical orientation, motive, and literary style and technique. Some of the canonical apocrypha skillfully synthesized orthodox Buddhist material from India without any apparent indication of their native pedigree; others, however, propagated popular beliefs and practices typical of local culture while including negligible Buddhist elements, save for the inclusion of the word *sūtra* (*jing*) in the title. The majority falls somewhere between the two extremes, by promoting Buddhist beliefs

and practices as the means of accruing worldly and spiritual merit. A few scholars have attempted to make typological classifications of all extant apocrypha, but these remain problematic until the corpus is thoroughly studied and understood in its religious and sociocultural contexts. What follows therefore is a selected review of some of the *raison d'être* of apocrypha, which are reflected in the ways in which Buddhist teachings are framed and presented.

We will begin with two examples of apocrypha that assembled MAHĀYĀNA doctrine in ways that would support a theory or practice that had no exact counterpart in Indian Buddhism. First, the AWAKENING OF FAITH (DASHENG QIXIN LUN) reconstructed Buddhist orthodoxy by synthesizing three major strands of Indian doctrine—ŚŪNYATĀ (EMPTINESS), ĀLAYAVIJÑĀNA (storehouse consciousness), and TATHĀGATAGARBHA (womb/embryo of buddhas)—in order to posit an ontology of mind in which the mind could simultaneously be inherently enlightened and yet subject to ignorance. After its appearance in the sixth century, the *Awakening of Faith* became perhaps the most prominent example of the impact apocrypha had on the development of Chinese Buddhist ideology, as it became the catalyst for the development of the sectarian doctrines of such indigenous schools as Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan. The text is also a prime example of the ways in which an indigenous author selectively appropriated and ingeniously synthesized Indian materials in order better to suit a Chinese religious context. Second, the *Jin'gang sanmei jing* (*The Scripture of Adamantine Absorption*, or *Vajrasamādhisūtra*) is an eclectic amalgam of a wide range of Mahāyāna doctrine, which sought to provide a foundation for a comprehensive system of meditative practice and to assert the soteriological efficacy of that system. The scripture is also one of the oldest works associated with the CHAN SCHOOL in China and Korea, and is thus historically significant. Unlike other apocrypha discussed elsewhere in this entry, one study suggests that this sūtra is actually a Korean composition from the seventh century (Buswell 1989). This scripture, along with Japanese apocrypha mentioned earlier, is thus a barometer of the organic relationship that pertained between Buddhism in China and the rest of East Asia and demonstrates the pervasive impetus for indigenous scriptural creation throughout the region.

Other apocrypha incorporated local references and inferences in order to better relate certain Buddhist values and stances to the surrounding milieu. PRECEPTS are the bedrock of Buddhist soteriology and figure prominently as a theme among apocrypha, as, for example, in the FANWANG JING (BRAHMĀ'S NET SŪTRA). This scripture reformulated the Mahāyāna bodhisattva precepts in part by correlating them with the Confucian notion of filial piety (*xiao*), a conspicuous maneuver that betrays both the Chinese pedigree of the text as well as its motive to reconcile two vastly different value systems. It also addressed problems arising from secular control over Buddhist institutions and membership—a blending of religious instruction and secular concerns that was not atypical of apocrypha, as we will see again below.

Other apocrypha that have precepts as a prominent theme specifically targeted the LAITY; such texts include the *Piluo sanmei jing* (*The Scripture of the Absorption of Piluo*), *Tiwei jing* (*The Scripture of Tiwei*), and *Chingjing faxing jing* (*The Scripture of Pure Religious Cultivation*). These apocrypha taught basic lay moral guidelines, such as the five precepts, the ten wholesome actions, and the importance of DĀNA (GIVING), all set within a doctrinal framework of KARMA (ACTION) and REBIRTH. These lay precepts are at times presented as the sufficient cause for attaining buddhahood, a radically

simplified PATH that is no doubt intended to encourage the participation of the laity in Buddhist practice. These precepts are also often presented as being superior to the five constant virtues (*wuchang*) of Confucianism, or to any of the tangible and invisible elements of the ancient Chinese worldview, including the cosmological network of yin and yang, the five material elements, and the five viscera of Daoist internal medicine. The idea of filial piety is most conspicuous in the *Fumu enzhong jing* (*The Scripture on Profound Gratitude toward Parents*), which is based on the Confucian teaching of “twenty-four [exemplary types of] filial piety” (*ershihsixiao*). The text highlights the deeds of an unfilial son and exhorts him to requite his parents’ love and sacrifice by making offerings to the three JEWELS (the Buddha, the dharma, and the SAṄGHA). The scripture has been one of the most popular apocrypha since the medieval period.

The law of karma and rebirth mentioned above is a ubiquitous theme or backdrop of apocrypha. The text commonly known as the *Shiwang jing* (*The Scripture on the Ten Kings*) illustrated the alien Buddhist law to a Chinese audience by depicting the afterlife in purgatory. After death, a person must pass sequentially through ten hell halls, each presided over by a judge; the individual’s postmortem fate depended on the judges’ review of his or her deeds while on earth. This bureaucratization of hell was an innovation that mirrored the Chinese sociopolitical structure. This scripture’s pervasive influence can be gauged from the many paintings, stone carvings, and sculptures of the ten kings—typically garbed in the traditional attire and headgear of Chinese officials—that were found in medieval East Asian Buddhist sites.

Given that apocryphal scriptures were products of specific times and places, it is no surprise that they also criticized not only the contemporary state of religion but also society as a whole, and even the state and its policies toward Buddhism. Such criticisms were often framed within the eschatological notion of the DECLINE OF THE DHARMA, which was adapted from Indian sources. The RENWANG JING (HUMANE KINGS SŪTRA) described corruption in all segments of society, natural calamities and epidemics, state control and persecution of Buddhism, and the neglect of precepts by Buddhist adherents. The suggested solution to this crisis was the perfection of wisdom (*prajñā pāramitā*), whose efficacy would restore order in religion and society and even protect the state from extinction. The scripture was popular in medieval East Asia, especially among the ruling class, not least because of its assertion of state protection. The *Shouluo biqiu jing* (*The Scripture of Bhikṣu Shouluo*) offered a different solution to eschatological crisis: It prophesized the advent of a savior, Lunar Radiant Youth, during a time of utter disorder and corruption. Such a messianic message is of course not without precedent in Indian Buddhism—the cult of the future buddha MAITREYA is the ubiquitous example—but the suggestion of a savior in the present world might easily be construed as politically subversive, and as a direct challenge to the authority of the secular regime. This scripture is one of those lost apocrypha that was discovered among the Dunhuang manuscript cache some fourteen hundred years after the first recorded evidence of its composition. The preceding coverage has touched upon only a small part of the story of Buddhist apocrypha. Even this brief treatment should make clear, however, that apocrypha occupy a crucial place in the history of Buddhism as a vehicle of innovation and adaptation, which bridged the differences between the imported texts of the received Buddhist tradition and indigenous religion, society and culture. As such, they also offer substantial material for cross-cultural and comparative studies of scripture and canon in different religious traditions.

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