

# A Study of the Apocryphal Sutras as Popular Sutras

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## Abstract

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*The present paper is aimed at investigating the apocryphal sutras which are originated in China. Historians have questioned the authenticity of the apocryphal sutras. These scholars had to determine whether these sutras were originated from India and who composed these sutras. Initially the cataloguers were critical of apocryphal sutras and they believed that these sutras might mislead understanding the teaching of the Buddha. However, the number of apocryphal sutras sharply increased and they are beloved by people.*

*The reason why many apocryphal sutras composed in China and the extent of their influence can be examined through the Buddhism history and belief in China.*

*And the types of apocryphal sutras are various and they show different characteristics. There are the apocryphal sutras such as the sutras which were translated in completion and cite the contents from the original, but increase or decrease the content of the original, and have added opinions of the translator which are integrated with the contents from other sutras.*

*And depending on the abilities of the composer and the social milieu, the sutras may have various characteristics. These might be considered a yardstick for understanding the specifics of what each age needed. Those who*

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*International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* February 2009, vol. 12, pp. 109-123.

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*composed the Buddhist catalogues decided that the contents of the apocryphal sutras were false and that the apocryphal sutras should not be included in the Tripitaka.*

*Nevertheless, they enjoyed popularity and widely circulated at that time. Through this phenomeno, we can ascertain that the apocryphal sutras as significant sources for understanding Chinese Buddhism and their religious beliefs.*

Key words: Apocryphal sutras, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Kaiyuanlu.

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## I. Introduction

The Chinese Buddhist sutras were translated from Indian and Central Asian literature. Thus the content and form of these sutras were characteristic of Indian thought at that time.

Over the ensuing centuries many sutras were composed in China and these sutras were based on Chinese thought, culture, tradition and custom. The sutras originating from Indian and Central Asian literature are known as the true sutras, whereas the apocryphal sutras are those which originated in China.

At more than one point in history scholars have questioned the authenticity of the apocryphal sutras. The first to do so were those who were entrusted with the job of cataloguing the Buddhist sutras. These scholars had to determine whether the various sutras were translations of Indian sutras and if so, who translated them and when they were translated. Initially the cataloguers were critical of apocryphal sutras, believing that these later sutras may be misleading in understanding the teachings of the Buddha. But over time, the number of apocryphal sutras greatly increased and they became popular among the people.

Why were so many apocryphal sutras composed in China, and what was the extent of their influence? These questions are significant to any

examination of Buddhist history and folk beliefs in China.

In this essay the author will first investigate the historical background to Chinese thought in regard to the establishment of the apocryphal sutras; secondly, examine the intention behind composition of the apocryphal sutras and finally, will take a look at the various kinds of Confucian and Taoist Buddhist sutras in existence. As a result of this investigation we are able to find the nature of the relationship between Buddhism and the populace in other words, we begin to understand how Buddhists in those times came to believe in the Buddha's teaching through the apocryphal sutras.

## **II. Historical significance of the apocryphal sutras**

### **A. Background to the apocryphal sutras**

Surely nobody today believes that the Buddhist sutras were written either by the Buddha or by Ananda who is said to have dictated what the Buddha said during his lifetime. As we know, after the Buddha's parinibbana 500 disciples gathered together with Kassapa as the head of the sangiti and recited what they could recall of what the Buddha had said. The outcome of this meeting established the basis of the first Buddhist sutras and the sangitis were then held three or four more times over the ensuing centuries.

It is generally said that the Mahayana sutras were established around Christian Era and that these sutras were established in Central Asia as well as in India. So how is it that we accept these Mahayana sutras as 'true' sutras? And if they are all strictly apocryphal sutras which were not directly preached by the Buddha himself, then almost all Buddhist sutras, including the *Avatamsaka*, *Saddharmapundrika*, *Parinirvana*, *Prajna* sutras are surely apocryphal sutras? But let's not jump to conclusions here without first examining the historical context and trying to ascertain a proper attitude to the apocryphal sutras.

When Buddhism was first introduced to China it was entirely a foreign

religion and had its opponents, not least the adherents of Confucianism which was broadly popular in China and, under various dynastic rulerships, was designated the national religion.

The Taoist traditional religion was also widespread which made it difficult at first for Buddhism to get a foothold in China.

While Indian Buddhist thought was meditative and offered a transcendent teaching for liberation, Chinese religious thought was a more worldly teaching. This meant that Buddhism had to struggle to establish itself in China and one of ways they achieved this was through the apocryphal sutras.

Scholars sought to present classical Buddhist thought in the language and norms of Chinese culture and tradition. For instance, the *Fumuenzhongjing* 父母恩重經 introduced the Confucian ethics of filial piety, and the *Yanmingjing* 延命經 was composed in an attempt to harmonize with the Taoism's pursuit of longevity. Both were apocryphal sutras written with the express purpose of making Buddhist thought more culturally idiomatic and thus accessible to Chinese people.

### B. Intention of composing the apocryphal sutras

In order to better understand what ideas and teachings were most important and popular with the Chinese and thus likely to offer Buddhism a means to take root in China, Buddhists studied Chinese thought and observed Chinese life and mores, culture and traditions. In the 8th century more than 1,000 apocryphal sutras were composed and these sutras were based on eschatology and the View of Defiled World in Chinese Buddhism. In this section we will investigate the intention of composing the apocryphal sutras by referring to previous studies.

Dr. Makida, who has greatly contributed to the study of the Chinese apocryphal sutras, classifies the apocryphal sutras into 6 classes based on the *Kaiyuanlu* 開元錄.

In the first group are the apocryphal sutras which are aimed at justifying the political activities of China's ruling emperors. One example is

the sutra known as *Dayunjing* 大雲經 which justifies the coup d'état by Queen Zetian.

In the second level of this classification there are the apocryphal sutras which criticize various emperors' political policies. An example here is the *Renwangpanruoboluomijing* 仁王般若波羅蜜經 which is for protection of country and is composed in 3 sutras. The *Fanwangjing* 梵網經 preaches the Mahayana vinaya and the *Xianfajueyijing* 像法決疑經 which is the main sutra to the Three Stages Order, also belong to the second class. The third category comprises sutras which were composed in an attempt to harmonize with traditional Chinese thought and exemplify the superiority of Buddhism. Taoist scholars also borrowed from the Buddhist sutras in composition of their own Taoist sutras and Buddhism did likewise; the *Qingjingfahangjing* 清淨法行經 and the *Jingdusanmeijing* 淨度三昧經 are examples of this practice.

In the fourth group are the sutras which propagated specific doctrines and beliefs. For example, the *Avalokitesvara* belief which is based on the *Saddharmapundarika* sutra in particular, the *Samantukha* chapter flourished with great influence among the Chinese common people. There were also sutras such as the *Guanshiyinsanmeijing* 觀世音三昧經, *Guanshiyinshida yuanjing* 觀世音十大願經, *Guanshiyinpusajiukujing* 觀世音菩薩救苦經 and *Guanshiyinsuoshuohangfajing* 觀世音所說行法經 which have not survived.

The fifth class contains the sutras which are named after specific persons, such as the *Gaowangguanshiyinjing* 高王觀世音經. When it is named after a person it reveals itself transparently as an apocryphal sutra. This sutra is still circulating in China and Korea which shows that the *Avalokitesvara* belief has been strongly influential. The sixth and final level of classification lists sutras concerned with superstition and which preach about how to cure diseases and attain safety and happiness. Not surprisingly, these sutras have been very popular with the common people and the largest number of the apocryphal sutras belongs to this type of sutra. In the view of traditional Buddhism, these sutras have no doctrinal bases, nevertheless, their influence cannot be ignored, as in the *Tiandibayangshenzhonjing* 天地八陽神呪經.

### III. Apocryphal sutras as teachings for the common people

#### A. Appearance of Confucian Buddhist sutras

It is generally said that Chinese culture is based on filial piety and this has been a significant ethic for the Chinese people from ancient times. But Buddhist ethics deny worldly reality and assert Suffering, Emptiness and Non-Self. Furthermore, it is a religion which renounces worldly life and seeks the path of enlightenment.

Confucianism regards ethics as very important for the people, and worldly ethics including filial piety are most significant to the fulfillment of human life. The Buddhist practice of renunciation could not be understood from a Confucian perspective, and other Buddhist teachings such as celibacy and discouraging relations between parents and children were considered to be serious anti-ethical acts. Of course, it is natural that Confucian ethics criticized Buddhist ethics for their denial of traditional Chinese ethics like filial piety. And as far as Chinese society is based on ethics like filial piety, Buddhism could not ignore this central ethic. In view of this, the *Fumuenzhongjing* was composed which was the Buddhist attempt at a sutra on filial piety.

So who composed these sutras and when and where were they composed? *Fumuenzhongjing* first appears in *Dazhoulu* 大周錄 and according to *Dazhoulu* the *Fumuenzhongjing* was probably composed in 664 CE, the same year in which the *Datangneidianlu* 大唐內典錄 was composed. The *Dazhoulu* was written in 695 CE. After an apocryphal sutra was composed it took a great deal of time to capture people's interest and to then be mentioned in a catalogue of sutras. There are some who say therefore, that it is possibly not accurate that the *Fumuenzhongjing* was established in the year of the *Datangneidianlu*. I myself, do not agree with those who think that the *Fumuenzhongjing* was composed much earlier than the year of establishment of the *Datangneidianlu*, but I partially favor the opinion that it would be problematic to conclude that the *Fumuenzhongjing* was composed in the year of the *Datangneidianlu*. The reason for my opinion is that it would seem not

possible that the *Fumuenzhongjing* is excluded, while there is mention of both the *Chusanzangji* 出三藏記集 and the *Fajinglu* 法經錄.

The particular characteristic of the *Fumuenzhongjing* is that it is unlike previous sutras concerning filial piety and is clearly for the common people, not for aristocrats. This would probably have contributed another positive view to the sutras for filial piety.

There are many versions of the *Fumuenzhongjing* which shows that the sutra was very popular. The contents of this sutra have never been altered and it is the most popular sutra in China, as well as in countries where Chinese culture spread after it was composed, as a teaching to oppose the strict thought of Confucian filial piety.

Zhu Fahu is the author of *Yulanpenjing* 盂蘭盆經, another sutra on filial piety, but some other catalogues such as the *Chusanzangji* mention the author of this sutra as unknown. Later records, such as the *Dazhoulu* and the *Kaiyuanlu* say that the author of the sutra is Zhu Fahu and it might therefore, be possible that the sutra was also composed in China.

The author of the *Foshuofumuennanbaojing* 佛說父母恩難報經 which was translated by An Shigao 安世高 in the later Han dynasty, is not known in the other catalogues, including the *Chusanzangji*, but Chinese ethics such as filial piety may have been added. According to the sutra, children should do as follows to reward for parental love:

Carrying father on his right shoulder and mother on the left shoulder, cleaning up evacuated matter and providing parents with food without grudge, children cannot reward a parent's love (*Foshuofumuennanbaojing*, T.16.779a).

After preaching this, the sutra concludes by recommending that children make their parents believe in the teaching of the Buddha, to respect monks and have mercy on people.

In other words, the Buddhist view of filial piety is that one should encourage his parents to believe in Buddhism, because the final purpose of Buddhism is deliverance and nirvaṇa. To become a Buddhist one must observe

the Five Precepts and the Three Refuges and the point in this sutra is to harmonize the Five Precepts with the Five Ethical Qualities of Confucianism. In many sutras, such as *The Agama sutra*, the Five Precepts are preached, but we also find them in many of the apocryphal sutras.

While the number 5 of the Five Precepts corresponds with 5 in the Five Ethical Qualities, it is also consistent with the five fundamental elements in traditional Chinese thought. Buddhism used the number 5 to try and spread its doctrine in China and thereby harmonizing the teaching with Chinese thought in order to make Buddhism more attractive and accessible to the Chinese people. This is the reason for composing apocryphal sutras which preached the Five Precepts.

The *Tiweibolijing* 提謂波利經 composed by Tanjing 曇靖 in the Northern Wei dynasty, played a great role in spreading Buddhism in the northern Chinese province and in particular, popularizing Buddhism among lay people. This was the first time a sutra was composed that related the Five Precepts with the Five Ethical Qualities. So how did Tanjing correspond with these two? The sentences lost in the *Tiweibolijing* are shown in the *Jinguangmingjingwenju* 金光明經文句 and the *Renwangjingshu* 仁王經疏 and, in addition to the Five Precepts and the Five Ethical Qualities, these two sources also mention the Five Stars, Five Mountains, Five Organs, Five Emperors, Five Qualities and Five Colours, which are considered as the same view. The Five Precepts and the Five Ethical Qualities are contrasted as follows:

<i>Jinguangmingjingwenju</i> 金光明經文句		<i>Renwangjingshu</i> 仁王經疏	
No Killing	Benevolence	No Killing	Benevolence
No Stealing	Righteousness	No Stealing	Wisdom
No Wrong Intercourse	Propriety	No Wrong Intercourse	Righteousness
No Drinking Alcohol	Wisdom	No Drinking Alcohol	Propriety
No Telling a Lie	Sincerity	No Telling a Lie	Sincerity

Table. 1.



While the *Jinguangmingjingwenju* tried to make correspondences of the Five Ethical Qualities to the Five Precepts, the *Renwangjingshu* conversely, did the Five Precepts to the Five Ethical Qualities. Regardless of the different order, *Shilaozhi* 釋老志 of the Northern Ji dynasty explained that the Five Precepts and the Five Ethical Qualities are the same:

The Five Precepts are to renounce killing, stealing, wrong intercourse, telling a lie and drinking alcohol. These general ideas are the same as the Five Ethical Qualities but the names are different (*Shilaozhi*, vol. 114 of *Weishu*).

Zongmi 宗密 of the Huayan Sect, named correspondences of the Five Precepts to the Five Ethical Qualities in *Yuanrenlun* 原人論 as follows:

No Killing	Benevolence
No Stealing	Righteousness
No Wrong Intercourse	Propriety
No Drinking Alcohol	Wisdom
No Telling a Lie	Sincerity

Table. 2.

Thus, the Five Precepts and the Five Ethical Qualities were significant subjects for discourse and scholarship when Buddhism found its early roots in China.

## B. Appearance of Taoist Buddhist sutras

The New Taoist Thought was flourishing from the Three Dynasties to Wei and Jin Dynasties 魏晉, in reaction to the prevalence of Confucianism in the Han Dynasty. At first, Buddhism tried to explain itself through the New Taoism. For example, the teaching of Emptiness 空 was explained through the Nothingness 無 in the New Taoist Thought, even though these two concepts were different. This is called “Buddhism clarifying meaning” 格義, in other

words, Taoist Buddhism.

So what are the Taoist sutras? We should first mention the *Woliangshoujing* 無量壽經, the major sutra of the Pure Land School, because the Taoist influence is clearly seen in the title of the sutra. In this section we will only consider the sutras which are influenced by Taoism. Firstly, the *Jingdusanmeijing* is not included in the Chinese *Tripitaka*, but the first volume of the sutra is included in the *Xuzangjing* 續藏經 volume 87, and the later part of the sutra is also included in the version of Dunhuang 敦煌. This sutra is cited in the *Fayuanzhulin* 法苑珠林.

Where words such as *bawangri* (八王日), *dishi* (帝釋), *sizhendawang* (四鎮大王), *simingsilu* (司命司錄), *wuluodawang* (伍羅大王), *bawangshizhe* (八王使者) frequently occur in a sutra it may be considered a Taoist sutra.

This sutra is first included in the *Chusanzangji* and 4 translations are mentioned in the *Kaiyuanlu*. Among these 4 translations, that of *Tanyao* (曇曜) in the Northern Wei Dynasty 北魏 is considered to be most influential and could be regarded as *Tanyao*'s own translation. In the next place, the *Zhanchashaneyebaojing* 占察善惡業報經 is mentioned in the *Lidaisanbaoji* 歷代三寶記 as follows:

The title of the *Zhanchashaneyebaojing* does not appear in various catalogues for the sutras, and while the sutra was translated by foreign monks, it seems to have been recently translated. This sutra, which is included in *Tripitakas*, is cited and circulated at present (*Lidaisanbaoji*, T.49.106c).

In other words, the sutra is included in the *Tripitaka* as an original sutra and frequently cited. The *Fajinglu* is included in various Sutra Catalogues in the section of doubtful sutras, but the *Kaiyuanlu* considers the sutra to be an original because of the following:

There are 80,000 Buddhist teachings and various paths according to truths. These profound truths cannot be manifested by the Buddha himself. The catalogue to all Buddhist sutras was published by the monk, *Mingchuan* 明詮 who stayed at the *Foshoujisi* 佛授記寺 in the first year of *Tiancewansui* 天冊萬歲 in the Tang Dynasty by the

order of the emperor. It has been included at that time, and therefore, there is no reason to doubt that the sutra is an original (*Kaiyuanlu*, T.55.51a).

*Dazhoulu* says that the sutra is original so we don't need to doubt it. But of the translator, Putideng 菩提燈, it is not known when he came to China and when and where the sutra was translated. It is also expected that if he was from India there would be other versions of the sutra, but there is only one translated sutra.

The content of the *Zhanchashaneyebaojing* is on the teaching of the Dizangputsa 地藏菩薩 responding to the Jianjingxinputsa 堅淨信菩薩 who asked how to cultivate sentient beings in the degenerated age. In the sutra, various practical methods are preached such as mulunfa 木輪法, gongyangfa 供養法 and chanhuifa 懺悔法.

The mulunfa is the method of making marks of good and the evil on pieces of wood and through these markings suffering and happiness, good luck and ill luck are forecast. And the gongyangfa is a practical method that emphasizes the significance of offering to *Trigems*, offerings are made to sarira and stupas. After reciting “*namo kstigarbha mahasattva*” 南無地藏菩薩摩訶薩 1,000 times, he made the following wish:

I wish that you remove all defilements for all sentient beings and I remove all defilements improve our belief, and that our desired wish will be accomplished (*Zhanchashaneyebaojing*, T.17.903a).

Following this, he threw a wooden piece onto pure objects. This is a practical method that emphasizes reciting the name of the *Kṣtigarbha mahasattva* and making wishes. The chanhuifa is practiced on 7 days, 27 days, 37 days and 77 days, and it is said that those who have committed serious crimes can obtain purity after practising 100 days, 200 days and 1,000 days. Through these methods, the sutra has rapidly been spread and circulated among people.

According to the *Lidaisanbaoji*, these practices flourished in Guangzhou (廣州) but are also popular in other areas such as Qingzhou (清

州, 山東省) because the two areas were connected by sea route. It would have been easy and possible that the practice that started in Shandong (山東) was introduced to Korea. According to *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事, it is said that Master, Won-gwang (圓光) regularly managed the Buddhist organization (Jeomchalbo 占察寶) which held meetings for Buddhist forecasting. Bhiksuni, Jihye (智惠) did the Buddhist ritual biannually, and Master, Jinpyo 眞表 practiced the method of confession based on the *Zhanchashaneyebaojing*. It shows the popularity of the sutra that the Buddhist ritual based on *Zhanchashaneyebaojing* that started from Shandong was introduced to Korea.

The record of the sutra title in the Buddhist catalogue shows that this sutra itself is an apocryphal sutra, because forecasting is not part of Buddhist teachings. Additional Taoist sutras apart from *Sitianwangjing*, *Sanpindizijing* and *Tiandibayangshenzhoujing* are enumerated as Taoist sutras.

#### IV. Conclusion

We have investigated questions about the apocryphal sutras composed in China. We may be wrong that the sutras were composed by Chinese, and that they were simply popular and considered to be apocryphal sutras that is, if we heed the opinions of those who composed the Buddhist catalogues and who insisted that the only originals were those sutras which were translated from Sanskrit texts. Considering the nature of Chinese Buddhism, the opinions of those who composed the Buddhist catalogues should be viewed with caution.

For instance, what does it mean that over time the number of the apocryphal sutras was increasing? Is it not possible that in the Chinese point of view, the apocryphal sutras could only be made useful for improving their spiritual life by translating the foreign religion of Indian Buddhism into Chinese Buddhism? In other words, Buddhism had to be harmonized and integrated with the Confucianism and Taoism systems of thought in order to become traditional Chinese thought as a religion for Chinese people.

The types of apocryphal sutras are various and they show different

characteristics. There are the apocryphal sutras such as the sutras which were translated in completion and cite the contents from the original, but increase or decrease the content of the original, and have added opinions of the translator which are integrated with the contents from other sutras. And depending on the abilities of the composer and the social milieu, the sutras may have various characteristics. These might be considered a yardstick for understanding the specifics of what each age needed. Those who composed the Buddhist catalogues decided that the contents of the apocryphal sutras were false and that the apocryphal sutras should not be included in the *Tripitaka*.

Nevertheless, instead of the apocryphal sutras disappearing, they have enjoyed popularity and been widely circulated even today they are read extensively. Through this phenomenon we can ascertain that the Chinese composed these non-orthodox sutras and the apocryphal sutras as significant sources for understanding Chinese Buddhism and their spiritual life.

To conclude, I just want to mention that I am not entirely satisfied that I have done justice to the study of the apocryphal sutras in this paper and recommend a more thorough analysis of each text. A comparative study of the apocryphal sutras in Korea and China may well shed more light in the field of studying apocryphal sutras.

## Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese)

An Shigao (C) 安世高

Bawangri (C) 八王日

Bawangshizhe (C) 八王使者

Chanhuifa (C) 懺悔法

*Chusanjangiji* (C) 出三藏記集

*Datangneidianlu* (C) 大唐內典錄

*Dayunjing* (C) 大雲經

- Dazhoulu* (C) 大周錄  
*Dishi* (C) 帝釋  
*Dizangpusa* (C) 地藏菩薩  
*Dunhuang* (C) 敦煌  
*Fajinglu* (C) 法經錄  
*Fanwangjing* (C) 梵網經  
*Fayuanzhulin* (C) 法苑珠林  
*Foshoujisi* (C) 佛授記寺  
*Foshuofumuenanbaojing* (C) 佛說父母恩難報經  
*Fumuenzhongjing* (C) 父母恩重經  
*Gongyangfa* (C) 供養法  
*Guangzhou* (C) 廣州  
*Guanshiyinpusajiukujing* (C) 觀世音菩薩救苦經  
*Guanshiyinsanmeijing* (C) 觀世音三昧經  
*Guanshiyinshidayuanjing* (C) 觀世音十大願經  
*Guanshiyinsuoshuohangfajing* (C) 觀世音所說行法經  
*Jeomchalbo* (K) 占察寶  
*Jianjingxinpusa* (C) 堅淨信菩薩  
*Jihye* (K) 智惠  
*Jin* (C) 晋  
*Jingdusanmeijing* (C) 淨度三昧經  
*Jingguangmingjingwenju* (C) 金光明經文句  
*Jinpyo* (K) 眞表  
*Kaiyuanlu* (C) 開元錄  
*Lidaisanbaoji* (C) 歷代三寶記  
*Mingchuan* (C) 明佺  
*Mulunfa* (C) 木輪法  
*Putideng* (C) 菩提燈  
*Qingjingfahangjing* (C) 清淨法行經  
*Qingzhou* (C) 清州  
*Renwangpanruoboluomijing* (C) 仁王般若波羅蜜經  
*Samguk yusa* (K) 三國遺事

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- Shilaozhi* (C) 釋老志  
*Simingsilu* (C) 司命司錄  
*Sizhendawang* (C) 四鎮大王  
*Tanjing* (C) 曇靖  
*Tanyao* (C) 曇曜  
*Tiancewansui* (C) 天冊萬歲  
*Tiandibayangshenzhonjing* (C) 天地八陽神呪經  
*Tiweibolijing* (C) 提謂波利經  
*Wei* (C) 魏  
*Weishu* (C) 魏書  
*Woliangshoujing* (C) 無量壽經  
*Won-gwang* (K) 圓光  
*Wuluodawang* (C) 伍羅大王  
*Xianfajueyijing* (C) 像法決疑經  
*Xuzangjing* (C) 續藏經  
*Yanmingjing* (C) 延命經  
*Yuanrenlun* (C) 原人論  
*Yulanpenjing* (C) 孟蘭盆經  
*Zhanchashaneyebaojing* (C) 占察善惡業報經  
*Zhu Fahu* (C) 竺法護  
*Zongmi* (C) 宗密

