

# Chinese Buddhists in Search of Authenticity in the Dharma

MAX DEEG

THIS ARTICLE focuses on the interface of transmission, authority, and authenticity in Buddhism,<sup>1</sup> specifically early medieval Chinese Buddhism. These three terms are obviously and closely interrelated and entangled, and it is hard to exemplify any of them separately. But some general observations are in order before looking specifically at Buddhist conceptions and narratives of them. The Weberian understanding of authority as being constituted and defined by charisma may be challenged, and the focus rather be shifted to how and for what purposes the complex charisma-authority is construed in specific contexts. Most would surely agree that the transmission of religious teachings and doctrines is linked to their correctness, that is, their authenticity. It is exactly here that authority comes into play. It is also important to emphasize that authority is not restricted to human agents—even though it is most often represented by them—but can also find its expression in objects like texts (which have a more direct semantic connection to the transmitted religious message), the teaching or doctrine (dharma), and legitimizing symbolic paraphernalia such as robes<sup>2</sup> and relics.

If not in Buddhism's original Indian context,<sup>3</sup> at least in Buddhism's Chinese self-reflective environment—which depended on the authenticity and authority of the Buddhist scriptures (its vehicle)—authenticity of the dharma

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this complex, with a focus on transmission and authenticity, see Davidson 1990.

<sup>2</sup> See the example of the Buddha's robe and Mahākāśyapa referred to below in note 8.

<sup>3</sup> On the rather loose concept of Buddhist canonicity, see Harrison 2004; Salomon 2011.

in the most generic way was established by the designations *buddhavacana*, “word of the Buddha,” or *śāstuh śāsanam*, “teaching of the Master.”<sup>4</sup> In India this authenticity and authority may already have been recognized due to the presence of the standard opening formula of a sutra (*nidāna*), “Thus I have heard at one time . . .” (Skt. *evaṃ mayā śrutam ekasmin samaye*),<sup>5</sup> referring to the authenticity *in illo tempore* (*ekasmin samaye*) and *in persona* (the instrumental personal pronoun *mayā* normally taken to refer to Ānanda), but also by the spatial dimension of the name of the place—a “sacred” place connected to the life of the Buddha—that follows in the locative (e.g., Śrāvastīyām, “in Śrāvastī,” Rājagṛhe, “in Rājagṛha”).<sup>6</sup> This formula was, as is well known, then also applied to the (historically) later Mahayana sutras.

The Buddhist records of the first council (*saṃgīti*) after the *parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha, the council of Rājagṛha, sheds some further light on the Buddhist understanding of these aspects of authority and the authenticity of the transmission of the dharma.<sup>7</sup> It brought into play and initiated a lineage of personal and individual authority—in *personis* Mahākāśyapa<sup>8</sup> and Ānanda as well as the successive “patriarchs”—without which the legitimation and therefore stability of the dharma would have been inconceivable. Furthermore, Buddhist narratives give many examples of critiques of and challenges to authority, which reminds us that the insight that authority

<sup>4</sup> See Harrison 2004.

<sup>5</sup> See Davidson 1990, p. 294. On the problems that have arisen when interpreting this formula in different language traditions (and modern translations), see Brough 1950; Silk 1989; Allon 2001, p. 229; Nattier 2014. This formula was used in texts that are not sutras in the strict sense, e.g., narratives like the Jātakas and Avadānas. It seems that it may have even kept its authenticating function when it was linguistically de-individualized (without *mayā*), as, for instance, in *evo pariśravo* and *evo śuyadi* in the Gāndhārī *pūrvayogas*, i.e., stories about previous lives (Lenz 2003, pp. 147, 151). Gāndhārī sutras seem to have preserved the standard formula, *eva me rśoda* (Allon 2001, pp. 126, 135–36, 225–32), but interestingly also support evidence of abbreviated formulas found in some Sanskrit and Pāli texts (. . . *nidāna*) which seems to reflect a need to imply the formula even if not spelled out.

<sup>6</sup> Schopen (1997) has shown how this part of the formula was used and was necessary for a text’s authentication. Commentators even attempted to argue that it was present even if it was not expressed literally. See the example from a commentary in Tibetan on the *Triskandhaka* ascribed to Nāgārjuna, quoted and translated in Silk 1989, p. 161.

<sup>7</sup> On the Buddhist councils in general see Frauwallner 1952. On their authoritative function, see Hallisey 1991; Davidson 1990, pp. 297–303. On the council of Rājagṛha, see Przyluski 1926, Bareau 1955.

<sup>8</sup> The narratives surrounding Mahākāśyapa and his authority went far beyond his role as the first generation of patriarchs. The narrative of his stay on Mt. Kukuṭapada (Gurupada) to pass on the Buddha’s robe to his successor extends to the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya. See Deeg 1999b, Silk 2003, Tournier 2012.

is there to be questioned is not modern. These led to the ultimate form of variation, the split (schism) of the *saṅgha*,<sup>9</sup> the first attempt at which was allegedly made during the lifetime of the Buddha by the notorious Devadatta,<sup>10</sup> and then clearly appears in the narrative of the second council of Vaiśālī,<sup>11</sup> as well as of the third one in Pāṭaliputra under Aśoka's rule.<sup>12</sup>

It is evident that spatial transmission is the key to the spread of a religion, and Buddhism certainly is no exception.<sup>13</sup> Here again, authority and authenticity play an important role, this time in the construction of mission narratives in Buddhist contexts that are temporally and/or spatially close to the region or the time of the Buddha (Mathurā, Śrī Laṅkā, Gandhāra, Kaśmīr, Khotan, and Burma when seen as Suvarṇabhūmi), the Buddha himself<sup>14</sup> or an eminent representative of the dharma converts. In other cases, it is a patriarch in the transmission line who sends missionaries into distant regions.<sup>15</sup> When such direct authority could not be claimed due to either geographical or temporal distance, there remained potential uncertainty as to whether or not a community could claim legitimate and authoritative transmission of the dharma. In the case that such a direct claim of authority and authenticity could not be established, other mechanisms of reassurance had to be developed, one of them being transmission lineages leading back to the Buddha himself.<sup>16</sup> This, however, presupposed institutionalized "schools" with a certain central and individual authority that could be the link in an assumed transmission line going back to the Buddha. Here the authority and authenticity of the transmission was guaranteed by a successive chain of individuals, often called patriarchs (Ch. *fazu* 法祖), whose presence

<sup>9</sup> On Buddhist concepts and narratives of schism, see Silk 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See Bareau 1989–90, Mukherjee 1966, Deeg 1999a.

<sup>11</sup> See Hofinger 1946.

<sup>12</sup> See Deeg 2009b.

<sup>13</sup> On the transmission process of Buddhism, see Neelis 2011.

<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Buddha is even presented as converting others in the case of regions lying outside of Buddhism's heartland.

<sup>15</sup> See Deeg 2016a.

<sup>16</sup> On lineage in the Chan/Zen 禪 tradition see McRae 2003, pp. 1–9. His rule no. 2 (p. xiv) regarding these "polemical tools of self-assertion" should be kept in mind: "Lineage statements are as wrong as they are strong." It seems that sometimes the more distant in time and space a denominational historical context was from the origin (the Buddha himself), the more important lineages became. An example is Chan/Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes its Indian authenticity through the figure of its patriarch Bodhidharma (Ch. Putidamo 菩提達摩). On Bodhidharma see McRae 2003, pp. 22–28; Faure 1986. Lineages are, of course, found in South Asian Buddhist traditions as well, e.g., in the Theravāda/Pāli historiographical tradition (Mahāvamsa, Dīpavamsa).

determined and ensured that the doctrine taught and propagated was indeed the essence of the Buddha's dharma, the *buddhavacana*.

Such certainty of transmission, however, did not go unquestioned in China. Very often doubts about the correctness and authenticity of the dharma transmission were raised, and reassurance could only be gained by tracing the scriptures that contained the dharma back to an authentic origin—ideally, temporally back to the Buddha himself, or at least geographically back to the religion's heartland of the Gangetic Plain in Magadha. This search for authenticity can be seen in the phenomenon of the so-called Chinese pilgrim monks travelling to the sacred land of their religion between the late fourth and tenth centuries to visit its holy places, to study in the monastic centers of learning, and to bring back authentic Buddhist texts, some of which they then translated into Chinese. To understand how and why this movement “in the other direction” to bring the dharma back home—a “transportatio” rather than a “transmission,” if the latter term has a directional connotation of going from a center to a periphery—could take place, it is, however, important to keep in mind that it was preceded and accompanied by several discourses and tendencies in China which led Chinese Buddhists to feel the need to verify the authenticity and authority of their dharma transmission.

The authority of transmission, for Chinese Buddhists, was for the first few centuries clearly located in India, the land of the Buddha. This is reflected in the Chinese biographies of Buddhist monks from the first to the sixth century that were compiled into two collections: the *Gaoseng-zhuan* 高僧傳 (T no. 2059) by Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), and the *Xu-gaoseng-zhuan* 續高僧傳 (T no. 2060) by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667). The structure of the first collection recognizes Indian predominance and authority, as is noted prominently at the beginning of the translators' biographies:

That the dharma spread to the eastern land is clearly the merit of the translators [who] crossed the dangers of the sand [deserts] or drifted about in the huge waves [of the ocean], [and they] all did not consider [their] lives in order to die [for the sake] of the Way, [and] dedicated [their] lives to spreading the dharma. China became enlightened just because of them, [and] their virtue should be venerated—therefore [I] put them at the beginning of this work.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> 然法流東土，蓋由傳譯之勳，或踰越沙險，或泛濫洪波，皆忘形殉道，委命弘法。震旦開明一焉是賴，茲德可崇，故列之篇首 (*Gaoseng-zhuan* T no. 2059, 50: 418c–419a).

The vast majority of these early translators are either Indian or of Indianized Central-Asian origin.<sup>18</sup> For quite some time their authority to transmit the authentic dharma was not doubted.

Nevertheless—in a slightly paradoxical way—the diversity of the Buddhist teachings transmitted to China also led to the tradition's first shift of authority, from India to China. This can first be seen in Shi Daoan 釋道安 (312–385), whose activities could be described as a mixture of claiming his own authority and verifying the authenticity of the dharma.<sup>19</sup> Daoan's authority is clearly reflected in his catalogue of translations, the *Zongli-zhongjing-mulu* 綜理眾經目錄 (finished 374), the first such catalogue compiled in China, in which he distinguishes authentic (*zhen* 真) from suspicious (*yi* 疑) or even false (*wei* 偽) texts. This cataloguing activity, combined with Daoan's decisions regarding authenticity, was later taken up and continued by the imperial authorities,<sup>20</sup> a clear indication that by then the shift of authority to China expressed in his decisions regarding textual authenticity had been solidified to an extent that paradoxically excluded the agent of dharma transmission, the *saṅgha*.

This shift of authority to China, however, is already found earlier in developments like the formation of the Tiantai 天台 school and the systematization of Buddhism's various teachings and authoritative texts by its founder Zhiyi 智顗 (538–597).<sup>21</sup> The powerful impact of *panjiao* 判教 (gradually and soteriologically categorizing Buddhism's various scriptures<sup>22</sup>) on Chinese Buddhism assuming its own authority has, in my opinion, been underestimated. But it also cannot be denied that the authority of the Indian transmission continued to play a role in the religion. Until the middle of the Tang 唐 period (618–907) an indirect discourse between Chinese and Indian authority remained the rule. This only changed with the arrival of new doctrinal systems like the Consciousness-only (Vijñānavāda/Weishi 唯識), Yogācāra school of philosophy<sup>23</sup> and the Esoteric (Tantric) tradition.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> On these Chinese anthologies of monk biographies (or rather hagiographies), especially their hierarchical structure in which translators are placed top, see Wright 1990, pp. 77, 152, n. 7; Kieschnick 1997, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> On the activities of Daoan, see Zürcher 2007, pp. 186–99, and on scrutinizing and cataloguing sutras, pp. 195–97.

<sup>20</sup> See Tokuno 1990.

<sup>21</sup> On Zhiyi, see Hurvitz 1980.

<sup>22</sup> See Mun 2006.

<sup>23</sup> See Lusthaus 2002.

<sup>24</sup> See Orzech, Sørensen, and Payne 2011.

The Chinese side's claim to authority, however, was countered and challenged by the continuing influence of India and the persistent view that the latter was superior culturally and religiously, which was reflected in the so-called "borderland complex" of Chinese Buddhists. This term was coined by the Italian Sinologist Antonino Forte,<sup>25</sup> and refers to the fact that Chinese Buddhists, at some point, had no choice but to come to the conclusion that they were living in a borderland (Ch. *biandi* 邊地), that is, in a soteriologically less important region at the periphery of their religion's sacred geography, which was of course centered on the Gangetic plain. The Sanskrit name for this area *Madhyadeśa* was translated into Chinese as *Zhongguo* 中國, traditionally a name reserved for the Middle Kingdom, China, itself.

Most of the Chinese monks who traveled to India and left records on their return to China gave, as their motivation for undergoing the perilous and long journey, dissatisfaction with or doubts about the state of the dharma's transmission in China in terms of doctrinal teaching, monastic conduct, or religious practice. In this sense these monks were not pilgrims but were "searching for the dharma" (*qiufa* 求法) with a view to transmitting it to their homeland based on the authority of Buddhism's sacred center in India.<sup>26</sup>

The first traveler who left a record of his own, Faxian 法顯 (travelled 399–412<sup>27</sup>), clearly expresses this motivation for undertaking his journey:

Faxian, when he was in Chang'an, was depressed that the Vinaya-piṭaka was incomplete [in China]. Thereupon in the first year<sup>28</sup> of the era Hongshi, in the jilai-year of the sixty-year cycle, he agreed with Huijing, Daozheng, Huiying and Huiwei to go to India and search for the precepts [of the Vinaya].<sup>29</sup>

More than two hundred years later the biographer of Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664), Huili 慧立 (n.d.), indicated a similar reason for his master's journey to India:

<sup>25</sup> Forte 1985; Deeg 2016b; Chen 2012.

<sup>26</sup> See Deeg 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Faxian's biographical dates are normally given as ca. 340–422 which would set him on the road at the age of approximately sixty; for a different dating from ca. 360–440 see Deeg 2005, pp. 22–30.

<sup>28</sup> I have adopted the reading *yuannian* 元年 instead of the Taishō's "ernian" 二年; see Deeg 2005, p. 505, n. 2258.

<sup>29</sup> 法顯昔在長安，慨律藏殘缺。於是遂以弘始元年歲在己亥，與慧景、道整、慧應、慧暭等同契至天竺尋求戒律 (*Gaoseng-Faxian-zhuan* 高僧法顯傳, also known as *Foguo-ji* 佛國記, T no. 2085, 51: 857a). For more details on Faxian, his travels, and its context, see Deeg 2005, p. 505.

The dharma-master had already frequented many teachers everywhere, fully listened to their explanations, scrutinized their principles in detail, and saw that each of them held on to their sectarian superficial teaching [*zongtu* 宗塗]. When he scrutinized them against the sacred texts there were also hidden and obvious differences, so that he did not know which one to follow, and he thus made a vow to travel to the Western Region to ask about the points which were doubtful and then also obtain the *Shiqidi-lun* 十七地論 [Treatise of the Seventeen Stages, Skt. *Saptadaśabhūmi-śāstra*]<sup>30</sup>—which is now known as the *Yujiaoshi-di-lun* 瑜伽師地論 [Treatise of the Yoga-Masters, Skt. *Yogācārabhūmi-śāstra*]<sup>31</sup>—to clarify the many doubts he had. He also said: “Formerly Faxian, Zhiyan and also learned men of other times could search for the dharma and lead and benefit the living beings—how can one not enable a high-spirited individual to pursue the same lest the cool breeze of the dharma may be interrupted in the future? A man of fortitude and courage is able to continue [their efforts].” Thereupon he and like-minded men made [their intention] known, but an imperial order was issued that they were not allowed to go. All the other people withdrew, and only the dharma-master was unyielding. In order to get ready for his lonely travel and also recognizing the dangers of the road to the West, he tested his mind, but in order to tame all kinds of suffering among human beings, he endured the dangers and did not withdraw. Thus he first went to a *stūpa*, prayed and explained his intention, and implored all the saints to bestow on him their hidden power so that he could go and return without hindrance.<sup>32</sup>

In Xuanzang’s own report, the *Xiyu-ji* 西域記, “Records of the Western Regions,” no direct motive for the journey is given by the monk himself, but

<sup>30</sup> Translated by Paramārtha (499–569, Ch. Zhendi 真諦).

<sup>31</sup> T no. 1579, 30: 279a–882a. Translated by Xuanzang.

<sup>32</sup> 法師既遍謁眾師，備瀆其說，詳考其理，各擅宗塗，驗之聖典，亦隱顯有異，莫知適從，乃誓遊西方以問所惑，並取《十七地論》以釋眾疑，即今之《瑜伽師地論》也。又言：“昔法顯、智嚴亦一時之士，皆能求法導利群生，豈使高跡無追，清風絕後？大丈夫會當繼之。”於是結侶陳表。有壘不許。諸人咸退，唯法師不屈。既方事孤遊，又承西路艱險，乃自試其心，以人間眾苦種種調伏，堪任不退。然始入塔，啟請申其意，願乞眾聖冥加，使往還無梗 (*Datang-Daciensi-sanzang-fashi-zhuan* 大唐大慈恩寺三藏法師傳, T no. 2053, 50: 222c). Also found in the *Datang-gusan-zang-Xuanzang-fashi-xingzhuang* 大唐故三藏玄奘法師行狀 (T no. 2052, 50: 214c).



in the preface to the *Xiyu-ji* written by the Yu Zhining 于志寧 (588–665), a high and influential official under both emperors Taizong 太宗 (598–649, r. 626–649) and Gaozong 高宗 (628–683, r. 649–683), one finds the following:

The dharma-master, from his childhood until he had grown up, set his mind on [studying] the “Subtle Scriptures.” Famous learned and virtuous men before quickly transferred the [common] understanding of the [different] *nikāyas* [*buzhi* 部執<sup>33</sup>], they lost themselves in details and forgot the origin, picked the ornamental form and relinquished the truth, so that thereupon there were the deviant teachings of the North and the South [*nanbei-yixue* 南北異學<sup>34</sup>], the contradictions of truth and falsehood. These things have long been repeated and asserted, [but Xuanzang] was frustrated; and furthermore he was afraid that the transmission [*chuanyi* 傳譯]<sup>35</sup> was erroneous, contradictory, and had not been completely grasped or penetrated. However, as he fully wanted to understand the words of the “Fragrant Elephant” [*xiangxiang* 香象<sup>36</sup>], he longed to reveal the inventory of the *nāga*-palace [*longgong* 龍宮].<sup>37</sup> With his unsurpassed virtue and just when it was a time of prosperity he [took] his mendicant’s staff, arranged his robes, and left for more and more distant regions. He left behind the dark Ba 灞 [River]<sup>38</sup> and looked far ahead, directed his steps towards the “Onion Mountains” [Congshan 葱山<sup>39</sup>]. Rivers and land extended over a far distance, and he encountered much perilous terrain. He dismissed [the travels of the marquis of] Bowang 博望<sup>40</sup> as not very distant, and looked down [on the journey] of Faxian as limited. Of all the places he passed through he diligently studied the language, strove

<sup>33</sup> Refers to the division of the original Buddhist order and teaching in the different *nikāyas* (*bu* 部).

<sup>34</sup> As can be gathered by the usage of *yixue* elsewhere in the *Xiyu-ji*, this refers to Buddhist teachings Xuanzang did not consider to be in accordance with the essence of the dharma.

<sup>35</sup> Lit., “transmitting and translating,” in the Chinese context this refers to the transmission of the dharma, including its translation into Chinese.

<sup>36</sup> Skt. *Gandhagaja*. Here this appears to be an epithet of the Buddha.

<sup>37</sup> Refers more generally to the teaching of the Mahayana, perhaps especially the Yogācāra tradition, or the Prajñāpāramitā texts (I owe this suggestion to one of my anonymous peer reviewers).

<sup>38</sup> The Ba River is a tributary to the Wei 渭 River. According to Ji 1985, p. 25 n. 4, this refers to the area of Chang’an from where Xuanzang started his journey.

<sup>39</sup> Referring to the Pamir Mountains.

<sup>40</sup> Bowang-hou 博望侯, the famous Han explorer Zhang Qian 張騫 (n.d.–114 BCE).



to understand their character, and miraculously pushed across the fords [*jinhui* 津會<sup>41</sup>]. Thereupon he corrected [other's mistakes; *cihuang* 雌黃<sup>42</sup>], and his excellence flew through India. He transmitted his writing on palm-leaves [*bei-ye* 貝葉<sup>43</sup>], and quickly returned to China [*Zhendān* 振旦<sup>44</sup>].<sup>45</sup>

As one can see, a gradual shift of authority was behind this increasing tendency from the Western Jin 西晉 (265–420) to the first half of the Tang dynasty (seventh to early ninth century) to go to India, study in the monastic centers of learning like Nālandā, return with Buddhist texts for translation, and spread the dharma. Chinese Buddhists no longer accepted the happen-stance transmissions of Buddhist texts by Indian or Central Asian Buddhist masters but were actively looking for specific textual and doctrinal authentic traditions (Faxian: Vinaya; Xuanzang: Abhidharma, Yogācāra, and other texts)<sup>46</sup>—or in the case of the Sino-Korean monk Huichao 慧超 (first half of the eighth century), esoteric practices as well—at their claimed places of origin, mostly in Magadha in East India. With the “transportatio” and “translatio”<sup>47</sup> of the dharma by Chinese Buddhists also came an increased Chinese Buddhist self-consciousness and self-assuredness. Chinese Buddhism had become an authority in its own right and claimed its own authenticity.

<sup>41</sup> In this context, this means Buddhism.

<sup>42</sup> Originally referring to orpiment, which was used for correcting mistakes in writing (*Hanyu dacidian* 漢語大詞典, vol. 11, p. 839), the term *cihuang* came to mean to correct mistakes. Here it refers to Xuanzang's victories in debates over other Buddhist scholars.

<sup>43</sup> \**paġh*<sup>2</sup>: a transliteration-translation—*ye* 葉 semantically for “leaf”—of the Skt. *patra*.

<sup>44</sup> \**ṭṣin<sup>h</sup>-tan<sup>h</sup>*. A transliteration for the Indian expression for China (Skt. Cīnasthāna), based on the Pkt. Cīna(t)thāna.

<sup>45</sup> 法師自幼迄長，遊心玄籍。名流先達，部執交馳，趨末忘本，摭華捐實，遂有南北異學，是非紛糾。永言于此，良用撫然。或恐傳譯踳駁，未能筌究，欲窮香象之文，將罄龍宮之目。以絕倫之德，屬會昌之期，杖錫拂衣，第如遐境。于是背玄灞而延望，指蔥山而矯迹。川陸綿長，備嘗艱險。陋博望之非遠，嗤法顯之為局。遊踐之處，畢究方言，鐫求幽隲，妙窮津會。于是詞發雌黃，飛英天竺；文傳貝葉，聿歸振旦 (*Datang xiyuji* 大唐西域記, T no. 2087, 51: 868b; Ji 1985, pp. 23–24). Without going into details here, it should be mentioned that some editions attribute this preface, I think falsely, to Zhang Yue 張說 (667–730).

<sup>46</sup> This already seems to have happened earlier in the second half of the third century, as the case of the monk Zhu Shixing 朱士行 (n.d.) in the third century shows. He wanted to go to India to obtain a copy of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* but then he acquired it already in Khotan and did not travel on to India. See Zürcher 2007, pp. 61–63.

<sup>47</sup> I am not referring here, of course, to the translation of texts but to a transfer of religious symbols as in the case of, for example, the medieval transfer of relics for which the term was originally used.

## ABBREVIATIONS

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經. 85 vols. Ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai. 1924–34.

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