

The Spell of the Great, Golden Peacock Queen: The Origin, Practices, and Lore of an Early Esoteric Buddhist Tradition in China

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INTRODUCTION

THIS ESSAY IS DEVOTED to a discussion of the origin, practices, and esoteric Buddhist lore as taught in the early versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* transmitted in China. For that purpose I shall remain focused on the three earliest versions of the text that have come down to us, that is, *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (大正新修大藏經, *Taishō Tripiṭaka*; hereafter *T.*) 986, 987, and 988, while addressing the later and extended Liang dynasty version (*T.* 984) whenever necessary. Reference will be made in passing to the two Tang translations by Yijing (義淨, 635–713) and Amoghavajra (705–774), respectively, which in many ways represent an entirely new and different transmission of esoteric Buddhism than that represented by the earlier recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*.

The main reason why I have singled out this scripture for discussion here is due to the unique status it has enjoyed among practicing Buddhists in East Asia down through the ages. Secondly, it is one of the earliest scriptures in China reflecting the phenomena that we shall refer to as proto-esoteric Buddhism in the following.¹ The importance of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* as an early scripture of esoteric Buddhism in India has been noted by several scholars before, while its role in the context of Chinese religion has notably been signaled by Kenneth Eastman and Michel Strickmann. The latter, in the posthumously published study *Chinese Magical Medicine*,² refers to the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* (Book of the Peacock Spell) on a number of occasions.³ While Strickmann obviously did not make a detailed study of the scripture's textual history—in particular the early versions—he nevertheless felt confident in pronouncing it “first in date and

influence” as regards Buddhist spell literature in China.⁴ While both of these assertions are mistaken, he was absolutely correct when insisting that “the *Book of the Peacock Spell* served both as an inspiration and as a direct model for many medieval Chinese books of spells, and was also a principal source for the powerful *nomina barbara* that were essential to an effective manual of demon-quelling.”⁵

According to the Japanese researcher Watanabe Kaikyoku, the origin of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* is the *Āṭānāṭiya-sutta*, a Hinayana work written in Pāli.⁶ He had earlier proved that the Sanskrit version of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* as transmitted in the Bower Manuscript⁷ corresponded in part with the Liang translation by Saṅghabhara, i.e., T. 984 mentioned above.⁸ What is most important to note here is that the core of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, that is, the concept of a benign and divine peacock and its associated spell for the removal of poisons, is a rather early occurrence in the Indian Buddhist tradition evidently pre-dating the rise of Mahayana. Scholarly interest the scripture in Europe can be found in the work of the French researcher Sylvain Lévi, who used the Liang version of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* for establishing the origin of its demonology in the Indian context.⁹ In the early 1970s the Japanese scholar Takubo Shuyo made a revised edition of the long version of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*,¹⁰ and although it does not significantly contribute to a new understanding of the development of the scripture, neither in the context of Indian Mahayana, nor in the rise of esoteric Buddhism in China, it is useful for comparative purposes. Kenneth Eastman, a promising student of Lewis Lancaster who did research on the cult of *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* during the 1980s, has shown that a whole series of scriptures belonging to the Hinayana tradition, including the *Cullavagga*, the *Samyutta-nikāya*, the *Samyutta-āgama*, and the *Upasena-sūtra*,¹¹ as well as at least two important *vinaya* texts, the *Dharmaguptaka vinaya*¹² and *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*,¹³ feature accounts of monks who get bitten by snakes and who (in some of the cases) receive protection from peacocks.¹⁴ Obviously the need for protection against snake bites was a major issue for Buddhist monks living in the forests of India. Hence, this situation should undoubtedly be understood as the actual origin for the rise of the Mahāmāyūrī cult.

Despite the concern and scope of these earlier studies on the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, little serious attention has been given to the three early recensions of the scripture as transmitted in the Chinese

Buddhist tradition only. This is rather peculiar, since they must be considered both close to the Indian Mahayana Buddhist tradition of that time and as early representatives of esoteric Buddhist scriptures in the Chinese cultural context. Without a detailed study of them, much of the lore found in the later versions of the *Mahāmāyūrī-sūtra* makes little sense.

1. ON THE TEXTUAL HISTORY OF THE *MAHĀMĀYŪRĪVIDYĀRĀJŪ-SŪTRA*

Below follows a chronological survey of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū*. It is important to note that it is only the Chinese Buddhist canonical tradition that has preserved the three early recensions that are the focus of the present study. Only with the extended Liang dynasty translation do we have a more or less matching text in a classical Indian language. The extant recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū* are as follows:

- *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū-sūtra* (大金色孔雀王咒經) by an unknown translator. It is listed in the *Qin lu* (秦錄, 350–431 CE). *T.* 986.19, pp. 477–478. *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū-sūtra* (大金色孔雀王咒經) by an unknown translator. It is also listed in the *Qin lu*. *T.* 987.19, pp. 479–481. *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū-sūtra* (孔雀王咒經), said to have been translated by Kumārajīva between 402–412 CE. *T.* 988.19, pp. 481c–484c.
- *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū-sūtra* (孔雀王咒經) in two scrolls. Translation by Saṅghabhara done sometime between 502–520 CE during the early Liang dynasty. *T.* 984.19, pp. 446b–459a.
- *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū-sūtra* (孔雀咒王經). Translation by Yijing done during the early eighth century. *T.* 985.19, pp. 459–477.
- *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū-sūtra* (大孔雀明王經). Three-volume translation by Amoghavajra done sometime during the second half of the eighth century. *T.* 982.19, pp. 415–439.

The earliest historical record to mention the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū* is the *Chu sanzang jiji* (出三藏記集, Collated Records Lifted from the Tripiṭaka; hereafter *CSJJ*) compiled during the early sixth century.¹⁵ This scriptural catalog contains references to two early versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū-sūtra* that are referred to as the *Da Kongque wang*

shenzhou (大孔雀王神咒, Divine Spells of the Great Peacock King) in one scroll, and the *Kongque wang za shenzhou* (孔雀王雜神咒, Miscellaneous Divine Spells of the Peacock King) also in one scroll, respectively.¹⁶ Both are said to have been “produced” by the leading monk (Ch. *gaozuo*, 高座) Śrīmitra (尸梨蜜, fl. first half of the fourth century),¹⁷ a prince of Kyzil (龜茲國) in the Western Capital (Chang’an) sometime during the reign of Emperor Yuan (r. 317–322) of the Eastern Jin (東晉).¹⁸ This information confirms the early presence of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* in some form on Chinese soil during the fourth century and also provides us with an approximate date of its actual composition, which probably would have taken place in India sometime during the late third century if not earlier. Note, however, that the *CSJJ* refers to texts of spells, not sutras, an observation deserving of more attention as will be seen in the following excerpt:

- [a.] The *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-dhāraṇī* (大孔雀王神咒), one roll.
 [b.] The *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-dhāraṇī* (孔雀王雜神咒), one roll.

The above two groups [of texts] consist of two scrolls. During the time of the first emperor of the [Eastern Jin], the high-ranking monk, Śrīmitra from the western countries, made them [available in China].¹⁹

As regards his mastery of *dhāraṇīs*, the *CSJJ* has the following to say:

Formerly Śrīmitra lived in frugal solitude, on a double seat he chanted in a barbarian tongue three times [a day?]. The Sanskrit sounds rose above the clouds; his intoned spells [consisting] of several thousand words sung in a loud voice, were harmonious and clear. [All the while] the expression on his face remained unchanging.²⁰

The image of the Indian monk here is typical of the class of thaumaturges populating the Chinese compilations of life stories of famous monks from this period. And whether or not the *CSJJ* is transmitting a hagiographical stereotype of Śrīmitra—an account that was after all written down more than one hundred fifty years after he is said to have lived—it does give us a picture of a practicing *mantrin*, i.e., a Buddhist monk specializing in *dhāraṇīs* and the associated effectuation of miracles. Similar accounts fill part of the *Kaoseng zhuan* (高僧傳, Accounts of Famous Monks), where they are in many cases classified as performers of miracles.²¹ The standard account among these is the

celebrated case of Fotudeng (佛圖登, fl. first half of fourth century), the Kashmirian court magician of the barbarian ruler Shi Le (石勒, r. 319–333) of the Northern Zhao kingdom.²² In the case of Śrīmitra and his purported practice of spells in order to achieve magical results, we are certainly helped by the early recensions that—as we shall presently see—essentially constitute the textual evidence we need to support the traditional claim for his thaumaturgical practices. All in all this provides us with information to the effect that there were Buddhist monks in the Nanbeizhao period—foreigners as well as Chinese—who specialized in process magic by using spells and rituals on some level of elaboration, and that they were seen and understood by their contemporaries as representing a separate class of monks famous for their practice of magic. We need not go so far as to classify these monks as proto-*tantrikas* or esoteric Buddhists in an institutionalized sense, but surely they were early practitioners of what we can only term “esoteric Buddhism” whether they called themselves so or not.²³

The fate of the two versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* attributed to Śrīmitra is not known, nor is their relationship clear with the two early recensions of the scripture (*T.* 986 and *T.* 987), if indeed such a relationship ever existed. The early information on Śrīmitra and a supposed connection with two different translations of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* is interesting, however. It indicates that there were two versions of the scripture in circulation in China during the fourth century, and from this we may infer that they in all likelihood represented two distinct textual traditions. Incidentally, the early existence in China of two different text traditions relating to the cult of Mahāmāyūrī tallies—as we shall see below—with information supplied by the three extant recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*.

2. THE MAHĀMĀYŪRĪVIDYĀRĀJÑĪ OF *T.* 986

Let us now turn our attention to the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* recension as represented by *T.* 986. The text opens with a brief narrative sketch, but without the usual “thus have I once heard” or the characteristic presentations of locale and assembly known from most standard sutras. Instead the scripture opens with the Buddha addressing his disciple Ānanda:

In the past there was a golden-colored peacock king living on the southern [slopes] of the Himalayas, king of mountains, [when] I dwelt

there. Those who wish to practice this Great Peacock King of Spells should say it in the morning as self-protection while making a [ritual] boundary, then they will attain peace. In the evening they should say it as self-protection, and they will be at ease in mind and body during the night.²⁴

This brief passage is essentially all the narrative we find in the text, and with the exception of a few dialogue passages between the Buddha and his disciple Ānanda, all the rest consists of spells and ritual instructions for their use. The Chinese translation of the *jātakas*, i.e., the *Sheng jing* (生經, Scripture on the [Previous] Lives [of the Buddha]),²⁵ dating from 285 CE, contains the story of Buddha as a peacock king.²⁶ However, beyond peacock imagery this story has basically no narrative relevance to the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*.

As already stated, *T. 986* is a composition made up of various spells and invocations. Following the opening brief narrative, a spell for self-protection is given. Following the Peacock Spell the scripture sets forth four additional spells or *dhāraṇīs* uttered by the Bodhisattva Maitreya, the gods Brahma and Indra, and the Four Heavenly Kings, respectively.²⁷ Following the utterance of the Indra Spell, the text specifies the nature of the evil against which the spell is to be used:

Order that all evil [demons/spirits] will be brought to complete submission, their hands and feet bound [so that all] parts are restrained and they are unable to move. This should include the Gods of Thirty-three.²⁸

This is an interesting passage because it shows that all evil is considered as belonging under the jurisdiction of Indra in his role as king of the gods dwelling on Mt. Meru. The Gods of Thirty-three, whom the text specifies are directly under the authority of Indra, appear as potentially harmful if not controlled. By this the text indicates the ambivalence with which gods and demi-gods were being envisaged by Buddhists of that time. Moreover, each spell section contains a prayer for long life.

The spells contained in *T. 986* are overwhelmingly of the phonetic type rather than the epistemological type. In fact, they are partly phonetic and partly lists of names. They also incorporate Chinese text, rather unmotivated, such as invocation of the Buddha in the middle of a string of nonsensical syllables. Both the words *namo* and *svahā*

occur. This indicates that whoever translated this recension of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* was already moving away from a pure transcription of the Sanskrit wording of the spells in the text.²⁹

One of the core sections of *T. 986* features a long list of supernatural practitioners of spells who are referred to as *shenxian* or “spirit immortals” (神仙, Skt. *ṛṣi*). The text reads that they “Always practice ascetic practices on mountains and in forests, such as the *siddhi* for the ending of suffering, *siddhi* of recollection, and the *siddhi* of the mantric arts.”³⁰ The text goes on to explain that possessing and holding the names of these *mahārṣis* listed in the text enables the practitioner to attain supernatural powers, i.e., *siddhis* (Ch. *chengjiu*, 成就), such as the power to manifest responsive transformations (Ch. *ganbian*, 感變), attain the five supernatural powers (Skt. *pañcābhijñā*), and travel through the air at will.³¹

This may be one of the earliest references in Chinese to the type of yogic mastery of supramundane powers connected with the use of spells (in this case the invocation of the names of *mantrins*) that we encounter with greater and greater frequency in the later esoteric Buddhist literature. Incidentally, the section discussing the *mahārṣis* is virtually identical in all the six versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* presently at our disposal. The implication of this is that this section was considered central to those following the practices described in the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*.

The ritual function of *T. 986* is evident throughout. For instance, the instructions to the effect that the practitioner must [first] “cordon off the altar (Ch. *jièjiè*, 結界) while intoning it [the Peacock Spell] seven times” indicates beyond any doubt that we are dealing with a ritual situation.³² Despite this, no description of the altar or how to construct it are given in the text. This may indicate that such ritual instructions were found elsewhere, perhaps in the form of a commentary or perhaps orally transmitted. In contrast both *T. 987* and *T. 988* provide instructions on how to construct the altar to be used in the ritual for invoking Mahāmāyūrī and the other relevant divinities.

In this regard the conspicuous absence from the text of demons or a list of their names may serve as an indicator that additional textual material was used in the rite or rites for which *T. 986* was evidently used. Hence, the sudden and rather unexpected occurrence of the title of the *Mouniluotanjing* (摩尼羅奩經, *Maṇiratna-sūtra*)³³ in the invocation at the very end of the scripture may serve as a clue to explain this odd

absence. *T. 986* reads: “*Mouniluotan jing*, Mahāmaudgalyāyana Bhikṣu,³⁴ may the *Mahāmāyūrī King of Spells* remove the enemies of sickness, suffering, and danger.”³⁵

As to why the *Mouniluotan jing* crops up here we can of course only guess. However, since this sutra consists of an extensive list of demons and the afflictions they are thought to cause (including of course a divine antidote to their depredations), it would seem logical that an advocator of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, which also deals with demonology and exorcism, would seek to emulate this scripture. The *Mouniluotan jing* is not a *dhāraṇī* sutra in the usual sense since it contains no *dhāraṇīs* or spells as such. However, it is clear from its contents that the entire text was considered a spell. In other words, a recitation of it functioned in much the same way as a normal spell or *dhāraṇī*. For this reason it may be considered a proto-esoteric Buddhist work. Moreover, it appears older in both style and contents when compared to the slightly later *dhāraṇī* sutras among which we count the early recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*. Here we should also remember that there is no list of demons in *T. 986*, while the *Mouniluotan jing* has it in abundance. Likewise, there are spells in the former, but none in the latter. Hence the two scriptures are in fact a perfect match from the point of view of exorcistic ritual. In light of these observations, I am of the opinion that the incorporation or adaptation of the *Mouniluotan jing* in *T. 986* may indicate that the two scriptures in so far as they supplement each other were used in tandem for exorcistic rites rather early in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

The appearance of the *Mouniluotan jing* at the very end of *T. 986* means that this recension of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* does not date from the early fourth century, although it is in all likelihood based on one of the versions of the scripture attributed to Śrīmitra. And why? Because the former sutra is stated in the scriptural catalogs as having been translated much later than the latter, in fact sometime between 381–395 CE.³⁶ This leaves a gap of fifty-plus years down to the early Eastern Jin when the earliest recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* first appeared on Chinese soil. Most probably *T. 986* represents a later version of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* that appeared or was modified in China sometime during the late fourth to early fifth century. Although the *Mouniluotan jing* appears in *T. 986* with title only, it is obvious that whoever composed or redacted the latter already had access to the former. In any case the appearance of the title of the *Mouniluotan jing*

must be understood as a later addition to the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* of T. 986. This also means that we must concede that there were more versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* around than indicated by the Chinese canonical catalogs. Whatever the case, T. 986 is an archaic text that does not take into account the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* recension represented by T. 987 to which we shall presently turn.

Despite the various problems in placing T. 986 as the earliest recension of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* in China, as already noted, the scripture displays several traits that point to a relatively early date, the late fourth century at the latest. First of all, it does not feature any list of demons, a point that immediately sets it apart from the later recensions of the scripture. And as already stated, this may be why it invokes the *Mañiratna-sūtra* at the end. Secondly, the textual parts it shares with the two other early versions, T. 987 and T. 988, indicates that it does not post-date the fourth century. Thirdly, T. 986 contains a number of archaic methods of transcribing Sanskrit, something that is apparent in both the terminology used and in the phonetics used in the spells and *dhāraṇīs*. Fourthly, the story of Svati is missing (more on this below), including any indication that whoever composed the text had any direct knowledge of it. Fifthly, if we discount the phonetics as seen in the spells and invocations, T. 986 contains no direct Sinitic elements. However, all the later recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, including T. 987, do. It is not unlikely that T. 986 was originally envisaged as a sort of abbreviated ritual devoted to Mahāmāyūrī, perhaps a sort of ritual guide. In any case its format and structure would seem to presuppose a more fully developed sutra or scriptural narrative no longer extant.

3. THE MAHĀMĀYŪRĪVIDYĀRĀJÑĪ OF T. 987

This recension of the scripture under discussion opens with an invocation to the Three Jewels followed by the names of the Seven Buddhas of the Past. This is followed by a lengthy passage that does not appear to have been part of the original sutra. It consists of an address to all the good and evil spirits believed to inhabit the world. It is in effect a listing of the various kinds of demons believed to inhabit or able to invade the human sphere. This address, the tone of which is threatening, warns of the power of the Peacock Spell to subjugate and control. However, as is typical for similar such rituals in esoteric Buddhism, the injunction is tempered with a mixture of threat and

appeasement. While the text on the one hand warns the demons to behave and to cease their depredations in the human sphere, on the other hand it also offers them the Triple Refuge as well as abundant offerings of food, flowers, and incense. On the practical level this is also what happened when local Buddhists both prayed and made offerings to the demons in order to avoid having any problems with them. As such *T. 987* fits well with other similar scriptures belonging to the category of spell texts since the most important feature in Buddhist demonology is to identify—that is, to name—the afflicting demon or ghost. Hence a list of demons' names was a highly useful tool for the exorcising monk.

Then follows the sutra part of the text that contains the well-known opening words: “Once I have heard (Ch. *ershi woben*, 爾時我聞).”³⁷ This narrative of what may be considered the original sutra, or rather part of the same, is relatively short, but is nevertheless the most full-bodied text among all the three early so-called *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtras*.

While the story of the Golden Peacock King as found in *T. 986*, barely given in outline form, could have been lifted from a *jātaka*, and most likely was, the central narrative of the two other early recensions features a rather different narrative plot. This plot, which serves as the occasion for propagating the spell, or rather series of spells, around which the scriptures revolve, concerns the story of the young monk Svati. It goes as follows:

While the Buddha is staying at Śrāvastī, there is a young monk by the name of Svati in the congregation. One day Svati goes in search for firewood to be used in heating the water for the sangha. While trying to break off a branch of a fruit tree a large, black snake emerges from a hole in the bottom of the tree and bites him. Svati falls to the ground in a poisoned swoon and is about to die. Ānanda, who happens to be in the vicinity and sees the incident, runs to ask the Buddha for help. Buddha thereupon gives Ānanda a lengthy instruction in the recitation of the Spell of the Great Peacock King, which will effectuate the cure of the poisoned Svati. The text then proceeds to relate the story of Buddha, who in one of his former lives was a king of peacocks by the name Suvaṇṇabhāsa.³⁸ That last piece of information of course links our scripture with the story of the Peacock King as told in the *jātakas*. Then follows a description of the wonders and protective qualities of the Peacock Spell, and so on.

Here I would like to return to the list of demons invoked at the beginning of the scripture. Among the list of demons' names we find the names of fourteen *rākṣasīs*. Their names are given in a mixture of foreign and Chinese sounds and meanings. The names of these demonesses partly reveal the nature of their functions, which are described as follows:

1. Heian (黑闇, Darkness)
2. Zuoheian (作黑闇, Making Eclipses)
3. Kumbhāṇḍa (鳩槃荼)³⁹
4. Baiqu (白具, Naked Body)⁴⁰
5. Huayan (華眼, Flower Eye)
6. Quzi (取子, Snatching Children)⁴¹
7. Qufa (取髮, Snatching [by the] Hair)⁴²
8. Zuohuang (作黃, Making Yellow)⁴³
9. Chuixia (垂下, Hanging Down)⁴⁴
10. Jichuixia (極垂下, Hanging Down from the Ridgepole)
11. Cishi (伺使, Reporting Messenger)⁴⁵
12. Yāma's Messenger (閻羅使)⁴⁶
13. Yāma Rakṣa (閻羅羅刹)⁴⁷
14. Kangui (瞰鬼, Spying Demon)⁴⁸

Despite the overall malevolent nature of these demonesses, the practitioner is nevertheless directed to offer his or her prayer for protection to them together with offerings of flowers, incense, and food as mentioned above. The way the demonesses appear here is akin to the fifteen baby-snatching demonesses of the *Fo shuo hu zhu tongzi tuoluoni jing* (佛說護諸童子陀羅尼經, Buddha Speaks the Scripture on the Dhāraṇī that Protects All Children; hereafter *HZTTJ*),⁴⁹ a scripture that arrived in China slightly later than the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*. While the main list of demons occurring in the passage of *T. 987* are generic in nature, i.e., identified according to typology or type of affliction rather than by actual name, the manner in which the female demons are highlighted—and named in the text—indicates that this category of “snatchers” of life and vitality were particularly feared. Here it is also interesting to note that the Kumārajīva text, *T. 988*, also features the list of the fourteen demonesses, some of whom also occur in the *HZTTJ*. Apart from the sketchy narrative the main part of *T. 987* is devoted to spells and instructions for their use. In other words, we are essentially

dealing with a ritual text incorporating a minimum of narrative as contextual legitimization just as we saw with *T. 986*. Moreover—and perhaps most significantly—the final third of the scripture consists of text passages lifted from a variety of other Buddhist sources that were originally unrelated to the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*. They include:

- *Jieshuo jing xia jie zhouyu* (解說經下結咒語, Spell-words for Securing the Altar). This matches the part found in the appendix to *T. 986*⁵⁰ and indicates a preparatory stage in the development of rituals directed to Mahāmāyūrī.⁵¹
- *Foshuo zhou ze jing* (佛說咒賊經, Buddha Speaks the Scripture on Putting Spells on Robbers).⁵² This short and rather peculiar scripture, better known as *Pichu zehai zhou jing* (辟除賊害咒經, Scripture on the Spell for Removing Suffering [Caused by] Robbers),⁵³ is said to be among the works translated by An Shigao (安世高, fl. late second to early third centuries).⁵⁴ It has remained popular in East Asian Buddhism until recently.
- *Fahua shenzhou jing* (法華神咒經, Divine Spell of the Lotus Sūtra). This *dhāraṇī* is a variant of that spoken by the Bodhisattva Bhaiṣajyarāja in Kumārajīva's translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka-sūtra*.⁵⁵
- *Pishamen tianwang suoshuo zhou* (毘沙門天王所說咒, Spell Spoken by the Heavenly King Vaiṣravaṇa). Like the previous *dhāraṇī* this also comes from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*.⁵⁶
- *Chiguo tianwang suoshuo zhou* (持國天王所說咒, Spell Spoken by the Heavenly Kings Protecting the Kingdom). Also lifted from the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*.⁵⁷
- *Luocha nu suoshuo zhou* (羅剎女所說咒, Spell Spoken by Rākṣasī Women). These ten demonesses occur in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* from which this spell has also been lifted.⁵⁸ Hārītī, Mother of Demon Children, is sometimes considered as part of this group although not counted among the ten *rākṣasīs*.
- *Da Niepan jing zhou* (大涅槃經咒, Spell of the Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra).⁵⁹

This section of spells and ritual instructions reveals that by the late fourth to early fifth centuries Chinese Buddhists were becoming increasingly aware of spells and *dhāraṇīs* as specialized and powerful

tools in the fight against the demonic influences perceived in their everyday lives. It is also clear that traditional sutras, such as the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa*, were being “mined” for their *dhāraṇīs* that were then utilized in different contexts and for different purposes than originally intended. In my view this provides us with rather concrete and contextualized evidence that the formation of esoteric Buddhism as a distinct—although not separate—tradition in Chinese Buddhism was gradually taking shape by the time *T. 987* was being compiled. By “distinct” I mean that it was becoming recognized as a tradition or formation of Buddhist practice in its own right. This nascent Buddhist esotericism was eventually to give rise to full-blown esoteric Buddhism some two centuries later in China.

4. “KUMĀRAJĪVA’S TEXT” (*T. 988*)

As the last of the three early recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* to be discussed here, Kumārajīva’s text is a curious one indeed, and I am of the opinion that it is essentially not a real translation of a Sanskrit original into Chinese. Rather, it is a redacted text consisting of an “original” Indian core, or rather parts, onto which has been grafted various other textual bits and pieces, some of which are Chinese in origin. There are—we shall presently see—several weighty arguments to support this view. First of all, the text is not a real sutra per se, and in this sense *T. 988* follows the loose structure that we also see in two earlier recensions. This is obvious both from its form as well as from its contents (including the peculiar absence of the Svati narrative although he is mentioned by name). Secondly, it is not a purely Indian (or Central Asian) scripture either. This is evident from the opening prayers addressed to the Dragon Kings and other deities that structurally follow the traditional Chinese cosmological system of groups of five. Included among these we also find invocations to a group of purely Chinese deities, namely the Five Directional Spirit Generals (Ch. Juntou, 軍頭).⁶⁰ The importance of dragon-kings or *nāgarājas* throughout the text would seem to underscore a dual feature of Kumārajīva’s text, namely that the early cult of *Mahāmāyūrī* in China was both geared towards the protection against poisonous snakes as well as control over rain. The latter feature of course hinged on magical control over the dragons believed to bring or withhold rain, something that was a major thaumaturgical concern for both Buddhists and Daoist

adepts of the arcane laws throughout the medieval period. In contrast, mentioning of dragons/*nāgas* is completely absent in *T. 986*.

Hence, whoever compiled or redacted *T. 988* would appear to have had a special interest or need in incorporating elements of Chinese cosmology into the text. This was undoubtedly done in order to cater to a local audience. We also encounter many assimilated Hindu deities in addition to the host of dragon-kings and demons also included in *T. 987*. Thirdly, *vajrapālas* for the five directions occur under the title of “Secret Trace Vajra[-holding] Men (Ch. Jingang mijishi, 金剛密跡士).”⁶¹ This is one of the earliest appearances of this “new” category of esoteric Buddhist protectors in a Chinese context. When these points have been made, it needs also be said that Kumārajīva’s *Mahāmāyūrī* text does have many elements in it that obviously have been lifted from or are otherwise based on a supposed “real” version or versions of the sutra in question.

I should also like to add that Kumārajīva’s *Mahāmāyūrī* text was in all likelihood not compiled nor “translated” by him. A major reason for believing thus is that it was not included under his name in the *CSJJ*. This view has also been brought forth by Lü Jianfu (呂建福), who believes that the *Mahāmāyūrī* text attributed to Kumārajīva was actually compiled sometime during the Liang dynasty.⁶² While agreeing with him that *T. 988* was not from Kumārajīva’s hand, I nevertheless consider a Liang dating much too late. In the following I shall endeavor to elucidate this further.

Whether or not Kumārajīva had anything to do with *T. 988*, it nevertheless bears all the traces of an early esoteric Buddhist scripture with all the archaic traits associated with such texts, undoubtedly because it has many things in common with the two earlier recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* discussed above as well as many other scriptures belonging to the early Buddhist spell literature in China.

Among the peculiar features of *T. 988* is the great importance attributed to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā*, which the text refers to in connection with a series of four divine spells uttered by dragon or *nāga* kings.⁶³ This may reflect an early stage in the belief that condensed the *Perfection of Wisdom* into a *dhāraṇī* proper and eventually into one seed syllable (Skt. *bīja*).⁶⁴ It is unclear, however, whether “*mahāprajñāpāramitā*” as it appears in the scripture refers to a text-corpus or whether it is simply the glorification of the perfection of wisdom as one of the six *pāramitās*. This uncertainty is compounded by

the fact that the text of the spell is not actually given in the text itself but is only referred to. It is not unlikely that the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* is understood as a spell.

In addition to the *Divine Spell of the Mahāprajñāpāramitā* (摩訶般若波羅蜜神咒), something that could be seen as a pointer in the direction of Kumārajīva in light of his preoccupation with scriptures and doctrines belonging to this tradition, the scripture refers to other spells, the texts of which are also not given. Among others it presupposes knowledge of the *Guanshiyin pusa tuoluoni shenzhou* (觀世音菩薩陀羅尼神咒, Divine Spell of the Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva Dhāraṇī),⁶⁵ which may be identical with the *Guanshiyin pusa tuoluoni* (觀世音菩薩陀羅尼, Dhāraṇī of Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva) found in the *Tuoluoni zaji*.⁶⁶

The invocation of four directional buddhas in *T. 988* provides us with an interesting perspective on Chinese Buddhist cosmology at the time the scripture was being composed. This unusual group of buddhas includes Fixed Light of the southern direction, Hall of Seven Precious Things of the northern direction, Amitāyus of the western direction, and Bhaisajyārāja of the eastern direction. Their retinue is completed by the Eight Great Bodhisattvas and the Four Heavenly Kings, followed by various lesser gods of Hindu origin such as Indra, Brahma, Nārāyaṇa, Maheśvara, etc., and a host of demons. Interestingly, the spirits of the elements earth, water, fire, and wind are Indian in origin rather than Chinese, which underscores the hybrid nature of *T. 988*. Also invoked are lesser divinities, such as the personified planets including the sun, moon, and the five planets. Here it is interesting to find the spirits of the Twenty-eight Lunar Mansions invoked together with Hārītī, the Mother of Demon Children.⁶⁷

Also to be invoked are “immortals, demons, great sorcerers, and spell-holding kings, etc.” (Ch. *xianren gui da huan chizhou wang*, 仙人鬼大幻持咒王等).⁶⁸ These “spell-holding kings” can hardly mean anything other than *vidyārāja*, “kings of knowledge.” Their occurrence here points to a semi-divine origin of this class of beings. Moreover, the *vidyārāja* (Ch. *mingwang*, 明王) as a distinct and personified class of esoteric Buddhist protectors most probably did not come about until well into the sixth century.

First, after the long invocation, unique to *T. 988*, we find again the opening prayer to the Triple Jewels, the Seven Buddhas of the Past, and the host of human and non-human spirits that opened *T. 987*.⁶⁹ The

passage has slight variations, but it is so similar that we may safely talk about it as the same textual passage. It was mentioned above that *T. 988* incorporates major parts of *T. 987*, including some of its invocations and most of the important spells. The fact that the spells found in the latter work are more complete or at least longer and structurally make more sense indicate a later date for *T. 988*. Comparison between the two texts indicates that whoever compiled the *Kumārajīva* text did not actually use *T. 987*, but did use a similar text. This becomes clear when the phonetic characters used for the spells in the two texts are compared. As was the case with *T. 987*, the *Kumārajīva* text also features the list of the fourteen female demons, some of whom can also be found in the *Huzhu tongzi tuo luoni jing*.

Whereas we found several embedded spells in *T. 987* lifted from other Buddhist scriptures, *Kumārajīva*'s text includes only one, namely the *Fo shuo kuangye guishen Atuopoju zhou jing* (佛說曠野鬼神阿吒婆拘咒經, Scripture on the Spells of Āṭavaka, the Demon of the Wilderness).⁷⁰ This is a most interesting piece of information, as it constitutes a direct link between the cults of *Mahāmāyūrī* and that devoted to the demonizing Āṭavaka.⁷¹ This discovery is moreover important for placing *T. 988* later than the earliest known scriptures featuring Āṭavaka as their hero, including the text of his spell. In contrast the earlier version of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* as represented by *T. 987* does not include the Āṭavaka Spell. This information gives us good reason to believe that the cult of Āṭavaka developed in China between the time that the two versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* became popular. What is of the greatest significance, however, is that the Āṭavaka Spell as contained in *Kumārajīva*'s text is more or less identical with the version we find in the *Azhapoju guishen dajiang shang fo tuoluoni jing* (阿吒婆拘鬼神大將上佛陀羅尼神咒經, Scripture on the High Buddha Dhāraṇī of the Great Demon-General Āṭavaka) embedded in the *Tuoluoni zaji*.⁷² Given the relatively early date of much of the material contained in this *dhāraṇī* compendium, it would appear that the version of the *Āṭavaka Scripture* utilized by the compiler of the *Kumārajīva* text was available in China no later than the mid-fifth century.

Kumārajīva's text uses *zhou* (咒), i.e., *spell*, for both proper *dhāraṇīs* as well as for invocations of a more Sinitic character; however, *tuoluoni* (陀羅尼) for *dhāraṇī* also occurs.⁷³ Actually, it does not distinguish between mantras, spells, *dhāraṇīs*, or spell-like invocations in Chinese, all of which occur without any seeming order or internal structure.

This feature is common to many of the translated and redacted *dhāraṇī* sutras ascribed to the fourth to fifth century. As such they may reflect the early stages in the adaptation of Sanskrit liturgy to the Chinese cultural context, or perhaps the adaptation of Chinese ritual concerns to the orthodoxy of the Indian script.

5. ON THE LATER DEVELOPMENTS OF THE MAHĀMĀYŪRĪVIDYĀRĀJŪĪ

Finally I shall say a few things about the last of the extant *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājūī* recensions from the Nanbeizhao period, namely the comprehensive two-volume version, the translation of which has been attributed to the Indian monk Saṅghabhara.⁷⁴ This translation is said to have been done sometime between 502–520 CE during the early Liang.⁷⁵ This version of the sutra is first mentioned in the *Gujin yi jing tuji* (古今譯經圖紀, A Sketchy Record of Translators of Sutras from the Past and Present), dating from 664–665 CE, and is later found in the more comprehensive Tang catalog, the *Zhenyuan xinding shijiao mulu* (貞元新定釋教目錄, Newly Established Catalog of the Buddhist Teaching of the Zhenyuan Era).⁷⁶ On this background we may safely consider Saṅghabhara's text as having appeared and eventually circulated in China during the first half of the sixth century.

When compared with the three earlier recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājūī* discussed above, Saṅghabhara's version is in many ways a radically different text. In fact, while the earlier versions appear strangely incomplete and unorthodox in both contents and structure, the Liang recension in comparison is considerably better organized and coherent. Nevertheless, it is still far from being textually heterogeneous in the same way more traditional sutras are. In the following I shall provide a brief overview of the contents of the scripture and in this process point out the various anomalies and peculiarities it contains.

Despite being a more comprehensive text, *T. 984* is—like the three earlier recensions—a ritual text with basic narrative elements to link the diverse parts of the text together. In this sense it is closer in style and format to the earlier versions than to proper sutras. However, the narrative(s) of *T. 984* include all the diverse parts of the earlier versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājūī*, i.e., both the Svati story as well as the story of the Peacock King.

In terms of ritual practices and invocations all the *dhāraṇīs* and mantras found in the earlier texts have been included in Saṅghabhara's

text, which has also added a number of more formal ritual passages in the form of prayers and invocations. First of all we find a general prayer directed to all the *devas*, spirits, and demons listed in the text: “I pray that you may grant me a long life of one hundred years and that I may see one hundred springs (Ch. *yuan shou baishui, jian yu bai chun*, 願壽百歲見於百春).”⁷⁷ This prayer is also not found in the earlier versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*. The prayers also have an almost pleading tone, using the term “have compassion with me (Ch. *ciwo*, 慈我)” when addressing the various divinities and spirits.⁷⁸ The text also lists the names of twenty-eight *yakṣa*-generals together with their respective mantras.⁷⁹ Similar lists, but without the mantras, can be found in *T.* 987 and *T.* 988. This is a good example of the kind of textual amplification we see in *T.* 984.

We also find a lengthy section on dragon/*nāga* kings that is not found in the three earlier recensions. This section would appear to have become central to the later versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*.⁸⁰ This may be taken as an indication that in the process of its development, the scripture gradually shifted its attention from protection against poisonous snakes to the command of dragons/*nāgas*. This must of course be seen from the perspective of control over rainfall, as indeed large parts of the sutra are concerned with praying for rain. Generally speaking this new or rather extended focus includes control of all non-human beings inhabiting the watery element. In order for the invocations to be effective, both buddhas and *arhats* are invoked.⁸¹

The expansion of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* as seen here is not only caused by an expansion of the scripture’s ritual parts, but can also be seen in its more orthodox format as a proper sutra. As examples of this we can refer to the fact that the virtue and power of the Peacock Spell is widely discussed and extolled and that all the various demons and non-human beings it is effective against are named. Interestingly, it also refers to Śākyamuni’s enlightenment under the Bo tree at Bodhgāya.⁸²

The cult of the Four Heavenly Kings in conjunction with the utterance of the Peacock Spell are prominently extolled in the scripture, both as encouragement to worship and as part of the ritual procedures set forth in the text.⁸³ As we have seen with *T.* 986, arguably the earliest extant recension of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, the importance of these four world rulers in the context of our scripture has remained constant down through the ages. Furthermore, the Peacock Spell’s power in protecting kingdoms is a standard feature in many of the later esoteric

Buddhist sutras. The names of hundreds of kingdoms—mostly mythical ones—are given.⁸⁴ This lengthy section is nowhere found in any of the earlier recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*.

When compared with the earlier three recensions, Saṅghabhara's extended text is noteworthy for providing much richer data on the host of demons that the sutra's *dhāraṇī* is supposed to counteract. It is especially interesting to find that the list of female demons such as *yakṣasīs* and *rākṣasīs* found in the earlier material has now been expanded to include several lists of female demons, in fact more than one hundred different names. Moreover, this inflation of demons' names that we find in the Saṅghabhara version of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*—something that actually amounts to a creation of a demonic geography—is repeated with minor differences in Amoghavajra's lengthy eighth-century translation.⁸⁵ Hence, from the perspective of demonology Saṅghabhara's version essentially constitutes the culmination of this development.

The Saṅghabhara recension does not provide any information on or instructions as regards the iconography of Mahāmāyūrī comparable to that found in Yijing's or Amoghavajra's versions of the scripture. This may be taken as a strong indication that the conflation of text, ritual, and iconography in the later two versions took place after the compilation of T. 984, probably sometime during the first half of the seventh century.⁸⁶ However, the ritual appendix of Saṅghabhara's text gives us some hints as to how the ritual sphere, i.e., the altar, was to be constructed and some additional information on the performance of the rite itself. The appendix under the title *Jie zhou jie fa* (結咒界法, Method for Binding the Ritual Sphere with Spells) reads:

Śrīmitra formerly established that one should make a three-layered round sphere [altar] with lime and dry soil scattered on the ground. [Then] one should proceed from the north-eastern corner to the south-eastern, etc. At the corner of the eastern direction one should place the Gandharva King. "General Dhṛtarāṣṭra, you of the spirits, Great General of the Army, protect the eastern wall!" [Then] proceed from the south-eastern corner to south-western, etc. In the southern side one should place the Kumbhāṇḍa King.⁸⁷ "General Virūḍhaka, you of the spirits, Great General of the Army, protect the southern wall!" [Then] proceed from the south-western corner to north-western, etc. In the western side place the Great Nāga King. "General Virūpākṣa, you of the spirits, Great General of the Army, protect the western wall!" [Then] proceed from the north-western corner to north-

eastern, etc. In the northern side place the Yakṣa King. “General Vaiśravaṇa, you of the spirits, Great General of the Army, protect the northern wall!” Having finished putting a spell on the ritual space and bound all oppressive demons, [one should say:] “I now command you in the ritual space to listen to and follow my will.” [Then] go [to a distance of] five paces, cut [dig?] five holes, [and place] five-colored banners on five poles [in them]. Twenty-one arrows, twenty-one lamps, and five mirrors [should be used for the altar].⁸⁸ Place incense [such as] *kundurū* incense, and sprinkle the ground with fragrant, hot water. [Comment:] The unorthodox ones [i.e., the Hindus] put spells on cow dung, which they spread on the ground [as a basis for their altars].⁸⁹ [Then throw] mustard seeds into the burning fire.⁹⁰ Fire will then blaze forth from the bodies of the evil spirits. Paint an image of the spirit, hold it down with a stone, and flog it with a branch. Blood will then flow from the evil spirits’ mouths.⁹¹

Here it is interesting to see that the altar/mandala used in the rite is circular and in three layers. Moreover, the manner in which the Four Heavenly Kings appear as guardians of the four cardinal directions indicate that the altar/mandala is a miniature or at least function as a symbolic representation of Mt. Meru, the cosmic mountain of Hindu and Buddhist mythology. The use of ritual implements in groups of five may be seen as an early instance of the kind that later became the division we know as the Five Buddha Families. Here it should also be noted that the above directions only indicate the basic rite for consecrating and purifying the ritual space. The ritual worship of Mahāmāyūrī herself is discussed elsewhere in the text.

In contrast to the earlier recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, in Yijing’s three-chapter version from 705 CE the opening section in which the ritual proceedings are set forth appears as a sort of introduction divorced from the sutra itself.⁹² This would seem to indicate that Yijing was well aware that the opening section was not originally part of the scripture. Incidentally, there are other indicators that such was indeed the case. There is a note below the title that reads, “[with] the practical methods in front [of the text] (Ch. *qian fangbian fa*, 前方便法).”

The fact that almost two centuries divide Saṅghabhara’s translation from that of Yijing provides us with a perspective on the historical development of the cult of Mahāmāyūrī, and in a wider sense with important information on the manner in which esoteric Buddhist rituals developed during this rather lengthy period. In addition to the extended ritual discourse of the text, one of the most significant

changes is that which pertains to iconography. Whereas the exact nature, including the gender and looks of Mahāmāyūrī, are unclear in the earlier material, the Yijing text answers these questions in full. However, in the setting up of the altar and the ritual space, we find that Śākyamuni Buddha and not Mahāmāyūrī is still the main icon. Moreover, the text gives a full description on how to paint the deity and mentions her four arms and the attributes they hold, including the peacock feathers. Here it is interesting to note that the peacock itself, i.e., the mount of the divinity as it occurs in the Amoghavajra text, is not mentioned.⁹³

The expansion and redaction of the ritual material in Yijing's version, including a number of *dhāraṇīs*, mantras, prayers, and verses not found in the Saṅghabhara text, show a conscious development towards systematization and ritual coherence not seen previously. This is emphatically revealed in the strong sense of internal structure of the text and the ritual procedures it sets forth.

6. THE MAHĀMĀYŪRĪVIDYĀRĀJŪ AND EARLY ESOTERIC BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES IN CHINA

The importance of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū* for the development of early esoteric Buddhism in China can hardly be overestimated. As early as the end of the fourth century it shows up in the *Jizhiguo jing* (寂志果經, Scripture on the Fruits of Aspiring for Quiescence),⁹⁴ another translation attributed to Tanwulan. This scripture contains references to the use of spells and incantations, and mentions in passing the Peacock Spell.⁹⁵ Although we do not know further details on the context of this scripture, it seems all but certain that a Peacock Spell tradition was already gaining in popularity in China at that time. Unfortunately, we do not know to which recension of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājū* the *Jizhiguo jing* was referring.

Thanks to Strickmann's fascination with the apocryphal *Guanding jing* (灌頂經, Scripture of Consecration),⁹⁶ several pieces of information on the impact of the Mahāmāyūrī cult and its scripture(s) on Chinese Buddhist apocrypha during the Nanbeizhao period are now at hand. Already in the first chapter of the *Guanding jing*—in effect a separate scripture with the title *Qiwān erqian shenwang hu piqiu jing* (七萬二千神王護比丘經, Scripture on the Twenty-seven Thousand Spirit Kings Protecting Monks)—we find the story about Svati and the poisonous

snake in a new and greatly expanded version.⁹⁷ One can actually argue—with considerable justification—that the *Qiwān erqian shenwang hu piqiu jing* is a re-work of the Svati story. In other words, the central message of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* has here been incorporated into an apocryphal scripture of the fifth century.⁹⁸ However, in his work on the *Guānding jing* Strickmann devotes much more attention to the *Mouniluotan jing* (which we have already encountered above) than he does to the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*.⁹⁹ The former scripture—in a greatly expanded recension—constitutes the eighth chapter of the *Guānding jing*.¹⁰⁰ Strickmann's focus on this scripture over the early recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* is rather peculiar, especially since the list of demons and spells contained in the *Guānding jing*'s version of the *Mouniluotan jing* was lifted almost verbatim from the earlier *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*.¹⁰¹ Here we should remember that the earliest recension of the latter work, *T. 986*, does not include the list of demons. This means that the *Mouniluotan jing* as a scripture developed in tandem with the later versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, probably a version or recension identical with or close to *T. 987*. Nevertheless, these facts show that there is a direct and rather close link—historically as well as textually—extending from the early versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* to the *Guānding jing*. Granting that the *Guānding jing* is easily one of the most important scriptures in the spell literature of fifth-century China, the incorporation of parts of the earlier text corpus relating to Mahāmāyūrī into this—partly—apocryphal work constitutes rather solid proof that during the middle of the Nanbeizhao period the cult of the Peacock Queen had already spread well beyond the textual confines of its own recensions to be embraced by the developing esoteric Buddhist tradition.

Finally I should like to mention that the earliest known iconographical representations of Mahāmāyūrī are found in the Ellora Caves near Aurangabad in the Deccan. They consist of two nearly identical sculptural groups in high relief, which have been tentatively dated to the early seventh century. Both reliefs are in the form of scriptural tableaux, i.e., they contain narrative elements in contrast to the more formal, monolithic buddha groups (figs. 1–2).¹⁰² Interestingly these early Indian depictions of Mahāmāyūrī reflect the early esoteric Buddhist iconography in India only. Evidently the prototypes that were later transmitted to China and East Asia belonged to different iconographical traditions.¹⁰³

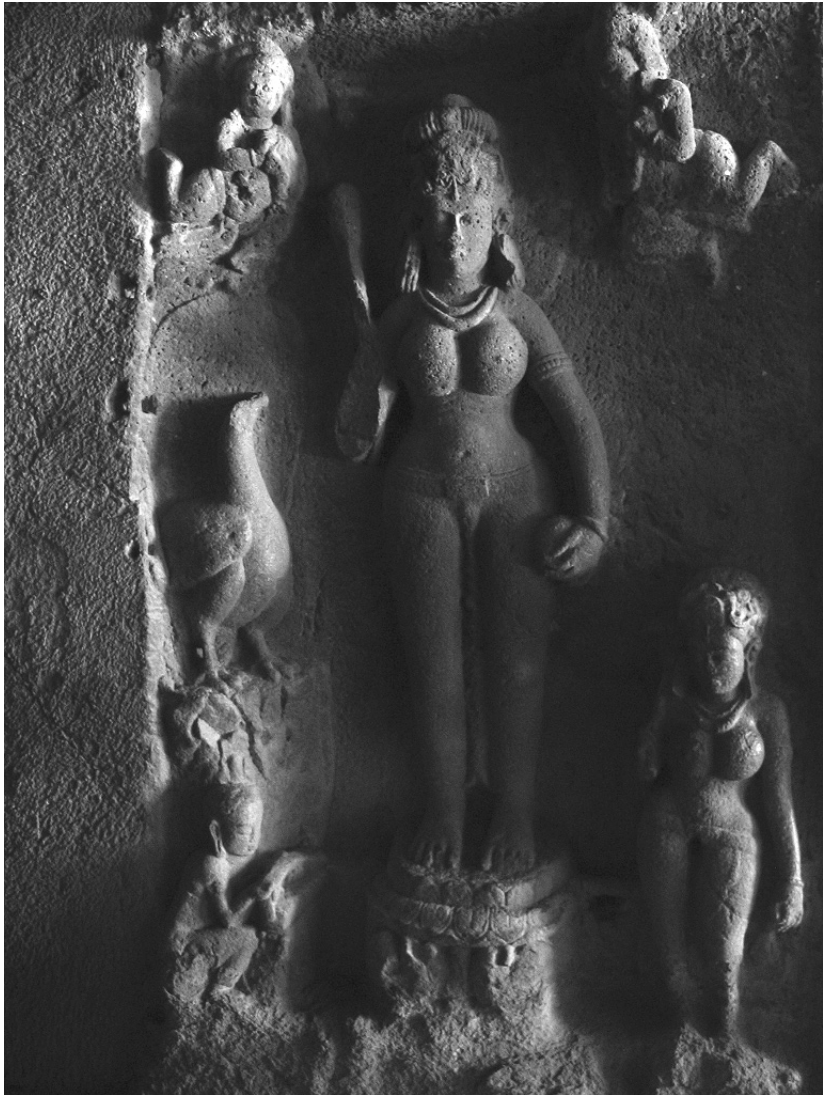


Fig. 1. Mahāmayūrī tableaux. Cave no. 8 Ellora.
Late sixth century. Photo by author.



Fig. 2. Mahāmayūrī tableaux. Cave no. 6 Ellora.
Late sixth century. Photo by author.

CONCLUSION

Curious as it may seem, all the three early versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* are actually not authentic sutras, at least not in the traditional sense of the word as Buddhist works from India or Central Asia. As we have seen they all lack the formal structure expected of a bona fide sutra, and the basic narrative contained in all three texts has been reduced to something akin to catchwords. In fact only *T. 987* contains what can be said to vaguely resemble a formal narrative such as that found in all the later versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, while *T. 986* does not even refer to the Svati story. This leads me to conclude that none of these texts are in fact translations of proper sutras, but rather are loose compositions based on some sort of incomplete Sanskrit manuscripts, possibly even based on some sort of oral transmission. I believe that some kind of Sanskrit background is behind all of the three recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, but while all three compositions bear similarities and share a number of more or less identical text-passages, including of course many of the various spells, they are structurally and contents-wise too dissimilar for us to consider them as belonging to the same textual tradition. Even the two Qin versions are sufficiently dissimilar to be considered as such.

Should the three early *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* texts then be considered apocryphal sutras? No, I do not think so—at least not in the usual manner of understanding. And why? Because they are not really fabricated with the aim of promoting a particular religious group or a political agenda as is the case with most apocryphal Buddhist scriptures in Chinese history. The main purpose of all three texts is to promote the Mahāmāyūrī Spell(s). Moreover, none of them features a special doctrine that indicates—fully or in part—purely Sinitic concerns, with the possible exception of the Sinitic elements in Kumārajīva’s text, the majority of which are ritual in nature rather than devoted to doctrine. That said, we must conclude that all the three early versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* are variant examples of early *dhāraṇī* scriptures. As such they resemble a host of other similar—including authentic Indian Buddhist—sutras. Furthermore, they all contain authentic—albeit modified—parts that originally would seem to have been part of more fully developed Indian Buddhist scriptures. In this sense we may consider the three early Chinese versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*

as being authentic representatives of early esoteric Buddhist practice in India as well as in China.

It is unclear to what extent the three early *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* recensions relate to the now lost Sanskrit material on which they appear to have been based. There can be little doubt that Peacock King narrative (*T.* 986) was based on a Prakrit version similar to that included the Pāli *Dīgha-nikāya*. Moreover, it is highly likely that this text was indirectly influenced by the story of Buddha's former existence as a peacock king according to the *jātakas*. However, the actual relationship between the narrative of the Peacock King and that of Svati is not clear. Possibly the imagery of the peacock combined with the magic spell—which is also found in the Pāli material—is what linked the two narratives together. What we do know is that by the time the recension of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, on which the Kumārajīva text is based, had come about—probably sometime during the mid to late fourth century—the narrative of the Golden Peacock King is not mentioned at all, while the Svati story is only referred to.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the former story did not disappear, as it forms part of Saṅghabhara's Liang recension of the scripture. The story of Svati is completely absent from *T.* 986, while Kumārajīva's text does mention Svati and his problem with poison, but leaves out the actual story. This means that *T.* 988 presupposes the existence of *T.* 987, which contains the earliest reference to Svati, or at least indicates familiarity with the narrative in some form. In addition, a careful comparison between the mantras/spells in Kumārajīva's text and those found in the later recension of the sutra reveals that *T.* 988 follows *T.* 987 to a considerable degree. This means that we are now able to understand the historical relationship between the two scriptures and that *T.* 987 is clearly the older of the two. In concluding the text history of the three early recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, we are now able to establish that *T.* 986 is the oldest existing version in Chinese, followed by *T.* 987 with its Svati narrative. The Kumārajīva text, which is essentially a ritual text presupposing *T.* 987 or is otherwise based on some unknown but largely similar Sanskrit version, should therefore be considered the youngest of the three early *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* recensions.

All of the three early recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* are ritual texts. However, none of them appears to be complete. In fact it is clear that all of them are somewhat truncated and textually heterogeneous. While *T.* 986 and *T.* 987 share several things in common

and appear more “Indic” in tone and style, *T. 988* is clearly more Chinese in style and format with its several instances of pure Sinitic elements, indicating a conscious adaptation to the local culture on the part of the translator. This is clearly a sign that this recension is later and therefore more developed than the two other texts. A survey of *T. 988* reveals that we are not dealing with a proper sutra, but rather with a ritual composition based on an earlier version of a *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra*. Kumārajīva’s text can in fact be seen as a sort of ritual commentary on a supposedly “real” *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra*.

On the basis of the findings presented here the importance of the Chinese translations of Indian Buddhist texts and other derivatives can hardly be overestimated. In fact it is abundantly clear that for the period covering the second to sixth centuries, the Chinese Buddhist material is essential for our understanding of the developments of doctrines and practices in medieval Indian Buddhism. I will even go so far as to claim that no serious research on Gupta and early post-Gupta Buddhism would be complete without a thorough consultation with the Chinese material. While this generally holds true for Mahayana Buddhism in general, it is absolutely vital when dealing with the history and development of esoteric Buddhism. Without the Chinese translations and compositions based on Indian Buddhist scriptures, research into the history of early esoteric Buddhism on the Indian Subcontinent makes little sense.

APPENDIX

Five versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* are mentioned in the *Zhenyuan xinding shijiao mulu* (貞元新定釋教目錄, Catalog of the Newly Established Buddhist Teaching of the Yuanzhao [Era])¹⁰⁵ by Yuanzhao (圓照, fl. eighth century).¹⁰⁶ They are as follows:

1. *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* (孔雀王咒經). This is Kumārajīva’s text, which is also called the *Scripture of the Great, Golden-hued Peacock King with Method for Setting Up the Ritual Space*, i.e., *T. 988.19*.
2. *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* (大金色孔雀王咒經) by an unknown translator and listed in the *Qin lu*. This refers to either *T. 986.19* or *T. 987.19*.

3. *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* (孔雀王咒經). This is the two-volume translation by the Indian monk Saṅghabhara done during the early Liang, T. 984.19.
4. *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* (孔雀咒王經). This is the three-volume translation by Yijing done during the early eighth century, T. 985.19.
5. *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī-sūtra* (大孔雀明王經). This is the three-volume translation by Amoghavajra done sometime during the second half of the eighth century, T. 982.19.¹⁰⁷

This leaves one of the early recensions unaccounted for. The reason for this omission is not known.

NOTES

1. This term, as well as the alternative “proto-tantra” suggested by Michel Strickmann, is a coined term used to define a particular stage in the development of esoteric Buddhism in both India and China. It is not to be understood as a hermeneutic identifier used by the practitioners themselves. Although early practitioners of esoteric Buddhism may not have referred to themselves as “esoteric Buddhists,” their practices are nevertheless “esoteric” in nature as they involve secrecy, belief in magic, and supernatural powers attained through spells and ritual manipulation of objects. For Strickmann’s views, see *Mantras et Mandarins: Le Bouddhisme Tantrique en China* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 17–58.
2. Michel Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, ed. Bernard Faure, *Asian Religions and Cultures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). See also Henrik H. Sørensen, “Michel Strickmann on Magical Medicine in Medieval China and Elsewhere (A Review of Michel Strickmann: *Chinese Magical Medicine*),” *Journal of the History of Religions* 43 (May 2004): 319–332.
3. Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 108–109, 115, 220–221.
4. *Ibid.*, 108. For some reason Strickmann considers the earliest translation of the scripture into Chinese as having been done in the third century. It was not done before the fourth century. Cf. *ibid.*, 109.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Cf. Kaikyoku Watanabe, *Studien über die Mahāmāyūrī* (Tokyo: Shūkyō Daigaku, 1912), 357–404.
7. See A. F. Rudolf Hoernle, *The Bower Manuscript* (Calcutta: India Office, 1893–1912) and *Manuscript Remains of Buddhist Literature Found in Eastern Turkestan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1916).
8. Kaikyoku Watanabe, “A Chinese Text Corresponding to Part of the Bower Manuscript,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1907, 261–266.
9. See Sylvain Lévi, “Le catalogue géographique des Yakṣa dans le Mahāmāyūrī,” *Journal Asiatique* 11, no. 5 (1915): 19–138.
10. Cf. *Ārya-Mahā-Māyūrī Vidyā-Rājñī*, ed. Shūyo Takubo (Tokyo: Sankibo, 1972).
11. T. 505.14. This scripture was not available in China until the tenth century and must be considered entirely unrelated to the development of the cult of Mahāmāyūrī in East Asia.
12. T. 1428.22. Translated by Buddhayaśas and Zhu Fonian (竺佛念, fl. late fourth to early fifth century) in 405 or 408 CE. The early date of this translation makes its information interesting in relation to the early recensions of the

Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī. However, it is doubtful whether any direct textual connection can be found between them.

13. T. 1442.22. Translated by Yijing (義淨, 635–713) during the early eighth century.

14. This information was presented by Kenneth Eastman at a lecture in the East Asian Institute, University of Copenhagen on September 7, 1989. Note, however, that most of these scriptures were not available in China at the time the early recensions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* first appeared.

15. T. 2145.55, 1a–114a.

16. *Ibid.*, 10a.

17. Also written 帛尸利蜜多羅. For biographical data, see T. 2145.55, 98c–99a. This account also mentions the Peacock Spell. Cf. *ibid.*, 9a. See also FDC 4:3195c–3196a.

18. A brief but highly relevant discussion of the role of Śrīmitra in the spread and popularization of the use spells in fourth-century China can be found in John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals in Medieval Chinese Hagiography*, Studies in East Asian Buddhism 10 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 84–85.

19. T. 55.2145, 10a.

20. *Ibid.*, 99a.

21. See Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk*, 67–111.

22. See Arthur F. Wright, *Studies in Chinese Buddhism*, ed. Robert M. Somers (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1990), 34–68.

23. The term *mijiao* (密教) that we today translate with “esoteric Buddhism” of course came about much later.

24. T. 986.19, 477c.

25. T. 154.3, 70a–108c.

26. *Ibid.*, 104b–105a.

27. T. 986.19, 478ab.

28. *Ibid.*, 478a.

29. It is possible that the highly divergent, inconsistent, and often strange transcriptions we encounter in many spells and *dhāraṇīs* in Chinese, sometimes to the point of textual corruption, came about due to the fact that the spells were transmitted orally—not only from Sanskrit to Chinese, but also from Chinese to Chinese across regional boundaries and between different dialects. Hence, there was a greater chance for mistakes to enter. If this is the

case, it would go a long way in explaining why irregularities are particularly numerous in transcribed *dhāraṇīs*.

30. T. 986.19, 478b.

31. Ibid.

32. T. 986.19, 478a.

33. T. 1393.21, 910b–911a. For a discussion of this scripture, see Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 109–113. Strickmann remained undecided as to whether or not the scripture was a genuine Indian work or a Chinese apocrypha. In light of its numerous anomalies and many Chinese elements, I am of the opinion that it is most certainly not a real translation. Moreover, it may have had nothing to do with Tanwulan, its alleged translator. It is possible that it is based on some sort of Sanskrit text, but the early version of the scripture as represented by T. 1393 is in any case a composite.

34. Written in the text as “Moheqiantuo (摩訶乾陀).” Exactly how and why this famous *arhat* is being invoked in the connection with the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* I have not been able to figure out.

35. T. 986.19, 478c.

36. Tanwulan (曇無蘭, fl. late fourth century), to whom the translation of the *Mouniluotan jing* has been attributed, has several translations of *dhāraṇī* scriptures to his name. He is said to have worked in China between 381–395 CE. For additional information on this important monk, see FDC 7:6233c–6234a.

37. T. 987.19, 479a.

38. This in fact refers to an existing tale in the *jātakas*.

39. A class of horse-headed demons who robbed men of their vital energy. In the mature esoteric Buddhist tradition of the Tang, they can be found among the minor divinities of the Dharmadhātu Mandala. For additional information, see FDC 6:5708c–5709b.

40. This translation is tentative, but it appears more plausible than “ordinary utensil.”

41. Here the name of the demoness is directly indicating its nefarious function.

42. Probably indicating the manner in which this demoness is believed to carry off her victims.

43. Probably referring to the affliction of jaundice common to newborn babies. It could also indicate yellow fever.

44. The meaning of this and the following name eludes me. Perhaps the idea is that this demoness is lurking inside the house under the roof.

45. I believe that the text of *T.* 987 has been altered at this point, probably by an old scribal error. *Bian* (便) makes no sense here; clearly *shi* (使) is the correct character to form the name Cishi.

46. The messenger of the king of the netherworld who is sent to the world of humans to summon the spirits of those who have died. Usually it is described as a male spirit, not a female. A much feared and hated spirit within the Chinese cultural sphere. For vivid medieval Chinese accounts of the activities of this messenger, see Donald E. Gjertson's important study, *Miraculous Retribution: A Study and Translation of T'ang Lin's "Ming-pao chi"* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1989).

47. Actually the name usually reserved for the king of the netherworld. Given that we are dealing with a group of female demons, it is most likely Yāmī who is intended here. This is in fact a good sign that we are dealing with an early scripture, since it shows that the developed Chinese conception of the netherworld in the form of a parallel world, complete with halls and tribunals, as well as judges under King Yāma, had still not come about at the time *T.* 987 was being translated and redacted. For a discussion of the concepts and logic behind the operation of the netherworld, see also Henrik H. Sørensen, "Optional Causality: Karma, Retribution, and the Transference of Merit in the Context of Popular Chinese Buddhism," *Hōrin* 6 (1999): 171–189.

48. *T.* 987.19, 479a.

49. *T.* 1028A.19, 741b–742c.

50. *T.* 986.19, 478a.

51. *Ibid.*, 481a.

52. This scripture is mentioned as having existed in two versions in the *CSJJ*. See *T.* 2145.55, 31c. For additional information, see *FDC* 4:3116bc.

53. *T.* 1406.21, 922a. By an unknown translator. In terms of style and contents it bears many similarities with the early *dhāraṇī* sutras. The *Taishō* version is by and large identical with the version embedded in *T.* 987.

54. *T.* 2154.55, 480b, 481c.

55. *T.* 262.9, 58bc.

56. *Ibid.*, 59a.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, 59ab.

59. *T.* 987.19, 481ac.

60. *T.* 988.19, 482a.

61. Ibid., 482a. For more on these protectors, see Michel Soymié, “Notes d’iconographie bouddhique—des *Vidyārāja* et *Vajradhara* de Touen-houang,” *Cahiers d’Extrême Asie* 3 (1987): 9–26. See also FDC 5:4483c–4484b.
62. See Lü Jianfu, *Zhongguo mijiao shi*, 124–125.
63. T. 988.19, 482b.
64. For a discussion of this phenomena, cf. *The Short Prajñāpāramitā Texts*, trans. Edward Conze (London: Luzac, 1973), vi–vii. See also Donald S. Lopez, Jr., “Inscribing the Bodhisattva’s Speech: On the *Heart Sūtra*’s Mantra,” *Journal of the History of Religions* 29, no. 4 (1990): 351–372.
65. T. 988.19, 482c.
66. T. 1336.21, 636bc.
67. Ibid., 482c.
68. Ibid., 483a.
69. T. 987.19, 479a.
70. The main spells of the two extant early Āṭavaka scriptures as represented by T. 1237.21 and T. 1238.21, both of which vary considerably from each other, are only partially identical with that found in the Kumārajīva text. This fact indicates that the *Fo shuo Kuangye guishen Atuopoju zhou jing* as found in T. 988 was in all probability based on another version of the Āṭavaka Spell.
71. For extensive information on the cult of this demon protector, see Robert Duquenne, “Daigensui (Myōō),” *Hōbōgirin* 6 (1983): 610a–640b. He is the first of the *yakṣa* generals in the retinue of Vaiśravaṇa, the Heavenly King of the Northern Direction. For some reason Duquenne has failed to mention the *Kuangye guishen Atuopoju zhou jing* in this otherwise noteworthy and meticulous study.
72. See T. 1336.21, 628c–630b. There are minor variations in the use of characters for transcription of Sanskrit as well as a few omissions of sounds, but otherwise the two spells are identical. This establishes the *Tuoluoni zaji* version of the Āṭavaka scripture as earlier than those of T. 1237.21 and T. 1238.21.
73. T. 988.19, 481a.
74. When looking at the other sutras translated by Saṅghabhara, we find only one other *dhāraṇī* sutra in addition to the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*. This indicates that he was not a proponent of esoteric Buddhism as such. Cf. T. 2151.55, 364b.
75. T. 984.19, 446b–459a.
76. T. 2157.55, 929ab.

77. T. 984.19, 449b.
78. Ibid., 447a.
79. Ibid., 452ac.
80. Ibid., 447bc.
81. Ibid., 449abc.
82. Ibid., 449a.
83. Ibid., 449c.
84. Ibid., 450a–451c.
85. T. 982.19, 415a–439b.
86. If the two sculptural tableaux featuring *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī* as found in the Ellora Caves are anything to go by, we have a fixed iconographical type of the divinity in the Deccan around 650 CE (at the latest).
87. The *kumbhāṇḍa* is a class of horse-headed demons. Cf. *FDC* 6:5708c–5709b.
88. This arrangement constitutes the establishment of the outer boundaries of the ritual space.
89. This comment on what can only be referring to traditional Hindu practices in connection with establishing an altar is highly interesting as it indicates that originally Indian Buddhists did not use cow dung for their makeshift altars. Of course, in the later esoteric Buddhist tradition—such as that represented by the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra*, etc.—cow dung was universally recommended for esoteric Buddhist altars. Despite this, it is open to debate whether this practice ever became popular among Chinese Buddhists. In the later Shingon tradition of Japan, mud covered with plaster was commonly used as a substitute for dung.
90. This is a very early reference to the use of a *homa* or sacrificial fire in the context of esoteric Buddhism in China.
91. Ibid., 458c–459a.
92. T. 985.19, 459ac.
93. Ibid., 476b.
94. T. 22.1.
95. Ibid., 273c.
96. T. 1331.21. See Michel Strickmann, “*The Consecration Sūtra: A Buddhist Book of Spells*,” in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 75–118.
97. T. 1331.21, 495b, etc.

98. This is the date assigned by Strickmann to the *Guanding jing*. Cf. “*The Consecration Sūtra: A Buddhist Book of Spells*,” 90–93. I have not yet made up my mind whether I agree with this early date or not, but let us accept it as such for the time being.

99. T. 1393.21. Given the textual and structural independence of this scripture from the early versions of the *Mahāmāyūrīvidyārājñī*, it is debatable whether it can be considered a translation in the real sense of the word. As for its purported date, we are in need of more precise data. It is not mentioned in the *CSJJ*, but occurs for the first time as an independent scripture in the *Gujin yijing tuji* (古今譯經圖紀, Record with Diagrams of Old and Recently Translated Scriptures) compiled by the monk Jingmai (靖邁, fl. seventh century) dating from 664–665 CE. Cf. T. 2151.55, 356a. Hence, there is good reason to consider its early dating a later attribution.

100. Strickmann, *Chinese Magical Medicine*, 109–113.

101. *Ibid.*

102. One way of reading the iconography and history of the Indian Mahāmāyūrī images extant in the Deccan can be found in Geri H. Malandra, *Unfolding a Maṇḍala: The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora* (Stony Brook: SUNY, 1993), 96–97. Although this study is both an interesting and inherently meaningful undertaking, it is fraught with formal and informal mistakes. Most severe is the author’s superficial understanding of the history and development of esoteric Buddhism in India, which after all is a cornerstone in understanding the Buddhist art of Ellora. For a review of this book see Henrik H. Sørensen, review of *Unfolding a Maṇḍala: The Buddhist Cave Temples at Ellora*, by Geri H. Malandra, *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* 7 (1994): 105–108.

103. For a discussion of this material, see Henrik H. Sørensen, “A Ming Statue of the *Vidyārāja* Mahāmāyūrī in the Collection of the National Museum of Copenhagen,” *Oriental Art* 37, no. 3 (1991): 137–147.

104. T. 988.19, 483a.

105. T. 2157.55, 771a–1048a.

106. For biographical data on this monk, see *Zhongguo fojiao renming da cidian* (Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Personal Names), comp. Zhenhua Fashi (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 1999), 873ab.

107. T. 2157.55, 929ab.