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By

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Committee in charge:

Professor Robert Sharf, Chair
Professor Alexander von Rospatt
Professor Robert Ashmore

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Abstract

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This dissertation presents a study of the writings and thought of the controversial Chinese Buddhist teacher Xinxing (ca. 540–594 C.E.). It also charts the reception of Xinxing's writings after his death and the development of his teachings by his followers, often called the Three Levels movement. Drawing on recently discovered manuscripts by Xinxing, I present a new interpretation of his intellectual aims. I argue that Xinxing's primary concern was to achieve certainty in scriptural interpretation. To that end, he developed a unique conception of how and for whom Buddhist scripture was authoritative, suggesting that the interpretation of scripture must be governed by the explicit instructions of the Buddha as transmitted in scripture itself. In Xinxing's view, one of the primary injunctions conveyed by scripture was that parts of scripture should only be read, used, and interpreted by the audience for whom the Buddha intended them. This conception led Xinxing to compile passages of scripture according to a complex set of interpretive criteria, yielding a set of mature writings meant to function as a reduced Buddhist canon for his followers. I argue that Xinxing's attempt to modify and delimit the corpus of authoritative Buddhist scriptures was unique and controversial in the context of sixth- and seventh-century China. I show that, in many cases, the writings of Xinxing's later followers center around attempts to defend Xinxing's authority to make such a modification. I conclude by suggesting that the projects of Xinxing and his followers constituted important interventions in a broader debate over the nature and identity of authoritative scripture in sixth- and seventh-century China.

To Kaya

Table of Contents

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Conventions

Individual Chinese words are romanized using *pinyin* without diacritics, while Sanskrit words are given in the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). In both cases, words are given in italics, unless they are proper nouns. Words of Sanskrit origin that have become accepted English terms (defined as words appearing in the abridged digital Merriam-Webster Dictionary, e.g., "nirvana," "sangha") are treated as such—i.e., they are given un-italicized and without diacritics. Citations from the *Taishō* canon (see Takakusu 1924–1932) are indicated by 'T.', followed by text number, volume, page, register, and line number.

Chapter One: Introduction, Previous Literature, and State of the Field

The sixth-century Buddhist teacher Xinxing 信行 (ca. 540–589 C.E.) was one of the most polarizing figures in Sui-Tang Buddhism. By turns celebrated and vilified, Xinxing, Xinxing's teachings, and Xinxing's followers were prominent fixtures of the religious landscape of China for more than two hundred years. In chapters to come, I will survey the writings of Xinxing and Xinxing's devotees in order to provide a reconstruction of Xinxing's thought. I will argue that the core of Xinxing's thought consisted of a unique project of scriptural reform. I will sketch a history of that project's development, explain its mature formulation, and chart its posthumous reception, before concluding with some comments on the ways in which Xinxing's project related to the broader topography of Buddhist thought in Sui and Tang China. My discussion of Xinxing's writings thus amounts to an intellectual history of Xinxing and Xinxing's movement. Before delving into the history of Xinxing's thought, however, it will be useful to give a brief synopsis of Xinxing's life and career, as well as an account of the activities of his self-proclaimed followers after his death. This history has been explained in exhaustive detail in recent Chinese and Japanese language scholarship;[1] I will only recapitulate those findings here.

Born in 540 in northern China, Xinxing's family background and early career in the sangha are unclear, though later biographers equipped his biography with standard hagiographical motifs—a miraculous birth; childhood displays of compassion and wisdom; and various auspicious visual and olfactory omens. Setting these aside, there are hints that Xinxing sought ordination at a young age, suffered during the Northern Zhou 周 persecution of Buddhism in the 570s, and eventually founded his own congregation in the area of Ye 鄴, the capital of several northern dynasties. It is possible that Xinxing's early career was marked by certain irregularities—one biography says that Xinxing renounced the full monastic precepts and assumed an intermediate status between that of a novice and that of a full monk; another source suggests that his initial teacher refused to ordain him. Regardless, by the late 580s Xinxing was prominent enough to have several disciples and to engage in official correspondence with the local magistrate. Perhaps as a result of that correspondence, by 589 Xinxing had moved to Chang'an 長安, capital of the recently established Sui 隋 dynasty. There, he received the patronage of the powerful Sui minister, Gao Jiong 高熲 (d. 607).[2] While in residence in the capital, Xinxing attracted many disciples, including Sengyong 僧邕 (543–631), a prominent monk with a reputation for skill in meditative practice and austerities.[3] During his metropolitan

[1] See especially Nishimoto 1998, Zhang Zong 2013, and Yang 2017 for the history of Xinxing and his followers. For an English language overview of Xinxing's life and activites, see Hubbard 2001, 4–17; for government suppressions, see Hubbard 2001, 189–223.

[2] Modern scholars occasionally infer that Xinxing and Gaojiong had a deep and exclusive patron-client/student-teacher relationship. However, Xinxing was one of many prominent monks invited to the capital by the Sui regime, and one of several to be patronized by Gao Jiong, so this is unlikely. See Yang 2017, 67.

[3] Unlike Xinxing, whose social background is notoriously obscure, it is clear that Sengyong came from an elite background (see Yang 2017, 136); moreover, Sengyong was only a few years younger than Xinxing. When Xinxing moved to the capital, he initiated contact with Sengyong and invited him to join him. When Xinxing died, Sengyong appears to have acted taken over the leadership of at least some of Xinxing's disciples, and remained in a prominent position at Xinxing's metropolitan temple. Thus, serious questions remain about the nature of the relationship between Sengyong and Xinxing. Although our sources always place Sengyong in a subordinate role, it seems possible that theirs was more a partnership than a teacher-student relationship.

period, Xinxing furiously composed texts, adding to a body of work that he had begun before his invitation to the imperial center. Many of these metropolitan texts center on the 'Three Levels' (*sanjie* 三階), a unique taxonomy of Buddhist practitioners and Buddhist teachings through which Xinxing hoped to stabilize the use and interpretation of Buddhist scripture (for more on this taxonomy, see below).

Xinxing died in 594 at the age of 54;[4] some have theorized that Xinxing had a chronic, debilitating illness that resulted in his relatively early death.[5] At his death, he left several dozen fascicles of writings and, by some accounts, several hundred followers. At the direction of Sengyong, Xinxing's corpse was transported to the Zhongnan mountains 終南山 south of the capital. There it underwent 'forest burial' (*linzang* 林葬, i.e., deliberate exposure to the elements, natural decay, and scavenging by wild animals), a method of excarnation often applied to the bodies of Chinese Buddhist monastics in the sixth century. Later, his relics were gathered and entombed beneath a stupa memorial. Xinxing's gravesite in the Zhongnan mountains became the nucleus of a major Buddhist necropolis. Beginning in the early 600s, devotees of Xinxing—both lay and monastic—had their remains entombed beneath stupas next to Xinxing, often after undergoing 'forest burial' themselves. This necropolis eventually became known as the 'Hundred Stupa Temple' (*Baita si* 百塔寺).

Xinxing died fairly young, only a few years after the start of his metropolitan career. However, he attained a vigorous and enduring afterlife through the influence of his ideas and his followers. Sengyong remained active in the capital until his death in 631, and several other direct disciples of Xinxing appear to have administered their own networks of disciples in the early 600s. Although there is little surviving material that can be directly attributed to these direct disciples, it is clear from biographical notices that many remained explicit devotees of Xinxing and Xinxing's teachings. Self-professed followers of Xinxing appear in epigraphy, bibliography, and biography throughout the seventh and eighth centuries. Xinxing's followers appear to have been particularly active in the late seventh century, when we find a flurry of textual activity. The late seventh century also saw the construction of an elaborate cave shrine memorializing Xinxing's teachings—the Jinchuanwan 金川灣 cave shrine in what is now Shaanxi. After a period of abeyance in the early eighth century, Xinxing's teachings appear to have experienced a revival in the late eighth century under the emperor Dezong 德宗. In the ninth century, Xinxing's followers and Xinxing's teachings fall from view. It seems likely that living traditions surrounding Xinxing's teachings did not survive the Huichang 会昌 suppression of the 840s, and it is clear that the transmission of texts related to Xinxing ceased in China with the fall of the Tang.

Although Xinxing's followers had moments of prominence throughout the Tang, they also attracted the hostile attention of the Sui and Tang imperial regimes, which issued edicts curtailing the group's activities at least five times between 600 and 725.[6] One edict goes so far as to call the movement a "perverse three jewels," and compares Xinxing to the Buddha's murderous cousin, Devadatta.[7] To a degree unique among elite Buddhist groups in pre-modern China, Xinxing's followers were repeatedly targeted by imperial regimes for suppression. Fragments or accounts of suppressive edicts survive from 600, from the period of Wu Zetian's

[4] There is some dispute about Xinxing's age at death. He may have been, instead, fifty-five, which would place his date of birth in 539. See Nishimoto 1998, 62–65.
[5] Yang 2017, 42–44.
[6] For the suppressions of the Three Levels, see Hubbard 2001, 189–222. See also Lewis 1990.
[7] See T.2154.679a6.

武則天 ascendancy, and from the reign of Xuanzong 宣宗. In tandem with these suppressive edicts, bibliographers began classifying the writings of Xinxing and his followers as 'fraudulent' (*wei* 偽). By 730, Three Levels texts appear as spurious scriptures in Zhisheng's 智昇 scriptural catalogue, the *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄.[8] Although Yuanzhao's 圓照 catalogue of 800 eventually reclassified Xinxing's texts as part of the normal Buddhist scriptural corpus, the influence of the *Kaiyuan* catalogue helped ensure that Xinxing's writings fell out of later transmissions of the Buddhist textual corpus in East Asia. There is no evidence that Three Levels texts continued to be transmitted in China after the tenth century,[9] and until the discoveries at Dunhuang they were largely considered lost. Today almost all extant manuscripts by Xinxing and his followers come from Dunhuang or from Japanese monastic collections.

What then, did Xinxing and his followers teach? The taxonomy of "Three Levels" is perhaps the best known feature of Xinxing's thought; in pre-modern sources, Xinxing's teachings are sometimes referred to as the "Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels" (*sanjie fofa* 三階佛法), and modern scholarship often uses the neologism 'Three Levels movement' (*sanjie jiao* 三階教) as the standard label for the social formation comprised of Xinxing's teachings, Xinxing's followers, and the institutions with which they are associated. (For reasons described below, I generally avoid this term, preferring instead to maintain a terminological distinction between Xinxing, his teachings, and his multifarious and by-no-means unified followers.) Although the Three Levels taxonomy is related to concepts of Dharmic decline, it is important to note that it does not correspond directly to the famous tripartite model of three eras of decline.[10] Fundamentally, the Three Levels taxonomy postulates three distinct categories of practitioners that correlate with three distinct categories of Buddhist teachings. These categories are defined, in part, by the spiritual faculties (*gen* 根) of the practitioners—sentient beings of more sophisticated faculties (beings of the first level) can fruitfully engage with more complex teachings. Less sophisticated practitioners require less sophisticated practices. These intertwined categories, in turn, are loosely linked to particular times and places of practice.[11] As I will demonstrate in Chapter Three, Xinxing feels that this taxonomy is implicit in received scripture; for Xinxing, the Buddha manifests this taxonomy in scripture by explicitly linking particular teachings to particular types of practitioners, particular times, and particular settings of practice. According to Xinxing, one can extract this taxonomy from scripture by paying close attention to the intratextual setting of the Buddha's sermons and the Buddha's explanations of a given teaching's intended audience. The Three Levels taxonomy is thus closely linked to a rigid method of reading scripture and encountering the Buddha's intent.

Although Xinxing's mature writings outline the qualities of both the first and second levels, his real concern is sentient beings of the third level, for in his view these comprise most (if not all) of the sentient beings alive today. Third-level beings lack the ability to discern the correct from the incorrect, have deep attachments to faulty conceptions of emptiness and existence, and struggle to uphold the monastic precepts. Because of their natural inability to identify practices that are appropriate to their capacities, if they engage in Buddhist practice on their own it will lead to rebirth in hell. Crucially, Xinxing believed that the Buddha *did* teach

[8] T.2154.55.477a-723c.

[9] For a summary of the suppression and slow disappearance of the Three Levels movement, see Hubbard 2001, 189-222.

[10] *Contra*, e.g., Waley 1927, Ch'en 1964, Hubbard 1986; Hubbard makes very clear in Hubbard 2001 that the Three Levels do not correspond to the tripartite scheme of Dharmic decline. On the tripartite model, see Nattier 1991.

[11] For a definitive treatment of the Three Levels taxonomy, see Nishimoto 1998, 239–298.

practices for third-level beings, and his writings attempt to collect and codify those practices. In his mature writings, Xinxing refers to these teachings as the 'universal teachings' (*pufa* 普法) or the 'teachings for beings born blind' (*shengmang fofa* 生盲佛法), among other labels. Many of these practices might be grouped under two headings: universal reverence (*pujing* 普敬) and acknowledging evil (*ren'e* 認惡).[12] Universal reverence is conceived of as the antidote for nihilistic views, which in Three Levels thought are generally associated with people who fail to have faith in buddha-nature. A common means of practicing universal reverence was to bow to everyone one met, regardless of social class or clerical status, with the understanding that the person so reverenced was a buddha-to-be, possessed of buddha-nature. Acknowledging evil, in contrast, was meant to counteract essentialist views, which Xinxing and his followers associated with arrogance and self-conceit. Consequently, acknowledging evil meant recognizing oneself as fundamentally debased, unable to understand, lecture on, or interpret scripture. Xinxing and his followers sometimes refer to monks who avoid scriptural interpretation and acknowledge evil as 'mute-sheep monks' (*yayang seng* 啞羊僧); they occasionally apply this label to themselves. In the most extreme cases, 'acknowledging one's evil' may have entailed a total refusal to speak at all.[13] Xinxing also championed the practice of canonical austerities (*dhutaṅga* 頭陀) like begging for food and eating only one meal a day. Finally, Xinxing and his followers emphasized the importance of drawing close to 'good spiritual friends' (*shanzhishi* 善知識). This emphasis appears to have had a negative function—drawing close to good spiritual friends entailed avoiding bad ones; in practice, this meant that many of Xinxing's followers avoided consorting with co-religionists who were not part of their distinct community. The division of practice into a scheme of 'universal reverence' and 'acknowledging evil' appears to have been closely associated with Xinxing and his teachings, as were the terms 'Three Levels,' 'universal teachings,' and 'mute-sheep monk.'

Previous Scholarship

In the foregoing section, I have given a straightforward (and deliberately oversimplified) overview of Xinxing's life and the later history of his movement. That overview is derived from the most recent scholarship on this topic, primarily in Japanese and Chinese. The scholarship from which this overview is extracted is the culmination of more than one hundred years of continuous research on Xinxing and his followers. The progress of that research has been slow, halting, and often inconsistent. In some ways, it is miraculous that we can say anything about Xinxing at all. As we touched on above, Xinxing was an intensely polarizing figure, proclaimed a Chinese Buddha by some and a Chinese Devadatta by others. One the one hand, self-professed devotees of Xinxing were active in elite circles throughout the Tang dynasty, and at times received substantial imperial support. On the other hand, Xinxing's teachings and followers were also repeatedly targeted by suppressive imperial edicts, and occasionally became the subject of vicious criticism from less sympathetic parts of the Chinese Buddhist establishment. The polarized reception of Xinxing, his followers, and his teachings left a deep scar on the received historiography of Chinese Buddhism. Historical, bibliographical, and biographical sources attest to the deep impression that Xinxing made on his contemporaries, and preserve fragmentary accounts of his teachings and legacy. At the same time, the controversy surrounding Xinxing

[12] For universal reverence, see Nishimoto 1998, 315–332. For acknowledging evil, see ibid., 333–375.
[13] For a study of a Three Levels text that advocates silence on the part of practitioners, see Lewis 1990.

seems to have had a dramatic effect on the transmission of his teachings: once well known and widely distributed, the writings of Xinxing and his followers eventually ceased to be reproduced; after the Tang dynasty, Xinxing's textual legacy entirely dropped out of the received corpus of Chinese Buddhist literature. Thus, for early modern historians of China and Chinese Buddhism, Xinxing was a cipher: clearly a teacher of powerful impact, his teachings themselves were almost completely lost, preserved only in isolated, abbreviated, and often hostile comments scattered throughout the received documentary tradition. Xinxing and his followers drifted through the story of Sui and Tang Buddhism like silent phantoms—lurid figures that arrest one's attention, but cannot speak.

Over the course of the twentieth century, however, this situation changed completely. Through painstaking philological and archaeological research, Japanese, Chinese, and Western historians have gradually brought to light a host of new sources for the study of Xinxing and his followers. Crucially, many of these new sources are texts internal to Xinxing's movement—texts by Xinxing and his followers that explain their teachings, their religious practice, and their institutional life in great detail. Through these texts, scholars can hear Xinxing and his followers in their own words for the first time in more than a thousand years. Now, more than one hundred years after the discovery of the first manuscript witnesses to Xinxing's writings, these once silent phantoms can be coaxed into conversation.

Scholarly research on Xinxing and his followers began in the early twentieth century in Japan and has continued down to the present day. Because of the idiosyncrasies of Xinxing's teachings, his teachings' repeated suppression by imperial edict, and the association between Xinxing, Xinxing's followers, and the charitable institution known as the 'Inexhaustible Storehouse' (*wujinzang* 無盡藏), the history of Xinxing and his followers has attracted the attention of a wide range of scholars—some from far outside the precincts of Buddhist Studies.[14] There are many scholarly articles and books on Chinese history, the history of Buddhism, and economic history that mention the Three Levels movement. In many cases, however, these works engage only superficially with Xinxing's thought and with the primary textual sources. We will largely ignore those sources here, focusing instead on work that identifies or publishes primary sources or that uses those sources to reconstruct the history of Three Levels thought and practice.

It is useful to divide scholarship on Xinxing and his followers into two main periods, each centering on a wave of manuscript discoveries and publications. The first period stretches from the early 1900s to the early 2000s. This period begins with initial Japanese articles on the Three Levels in the early twentieth century, culminates with the pathbreaking work of Yabuki Keiki and his publication in 1927's *Sangaikyō no kenkyū* 三階教之研究 (hence, Yabuki 1927) of more than a dozen rediscovered texts by Xinxing and his followers; this first period continues for roughly the next seven decades, encompassing many articles and a few monographs that digest, develop, or recapitulate Yabuki's monumental work. The second period begins in the early 1990s with a fresh wave of manuscript identifications and transcriptions, most made by Nishimoto Teruma and published in his 1998 monograph, *Sangaikyō no kenkyū* 三階教の研究 (hence, Nishimoto 1998; note that the title of Nishimoto's monograph differs from Yabuki's in

[14] The farthest afield is no doubt David Graeber's book on the history of debt. Graeber takes an interest in what he calls the 'Three Stages Sect' because of its connection to the institution of the Inexhaustible Storehouse. He writes, e.g.: "Nowhere was this [tendency to express spiritual truths in the language of the marketplace] so true as in those schools, such as the School of the Three Stages, that adopted the notion of 'karmic debt'—that each of the sins of one's accumulated past lives continues as a debt needing to be discharged…All that was required was to make regular donations to some monastery's Inexhaustible Treasure" (Graeber 262–263; see also 265, 441–442n35).

its orthography). This second wave received fresh impetus with the discovery of texts by Xinxing at the Jinchuanwan cave site in Shaanxi; the study and publication of these Jinchuanwan texts is still ongoing. This second period extends to the present day, as scholars attempt to flesh out our understanding of Xinxing and his followers by integrating the evidence of these new sources with the (still unexhausted) material rediscovered during the first wave.

Early Scholarship and the First Wave

Initial scholarship on Xinxing and his followers is almost entirely Japanese. Academic articles on Xinxing and his followers started to appear immediately following the advent of modernist Buddhology in Japan in the early twentieth century. The Shinshū priest *cum* Buddhologist Kōno Hōun published an overview of Xinxing and his teachings in 1909.[15] Further articles by Japanese Buddhologists appeared throughout the 1910s,[16] including Sasaki Gesshō's 'The Three Levels Movement and Pure Land' 三階教と浄土教 in 1913;[17] Sasaki's article represents the earliest published reference to Xinxing's teachings and movement as the 'Three Levels movement" (三階教).

This very early work by Kōno, Sasaki, and others was based on accounts of Xinxing and his followers found in contemporaneous historical sources and anti-Three Levels polemic, not in sources internal to Xinxing's movement itself. The discovery and consideration of internal sources did not occur until the work of the Buddhologist and Jōdoshū priest Yabuki Keiki. Yabuki was the first to identify and study Xinxing and Three Levels texts in the Dunhuang manuscript corpus, and thus the first to undertake substantial research on Xinxing's teachings as represented in Xinxing's own writings. Following trips to Europe to consult European collections of Dunhuang manuscripts, Yabuki published a substantial multi-part article on the thought of the Three Levels movement in 1917/1918.[18] This was followed, in 1922, by his doctoral dissertation on the Three Levels, and finally in 1927 by his landmark monograph, *Studies in the Three Levels Movement* (*Sangaikyō no Kenkyū* 三階教之研究, republished 1973; Yabuki was originally slated to publish a version of this text in 1923, but his draft was destroyed in the Great Kantō Earthquake of September of that year).[19] Yabuki's 1927 monograph surveys the history of Xinxing and his followers, attempts to reconstruct some of their major doctrines and intellectual preoccupations, and places this history in relation to non-Three Levels Buddhism, particularly early Pure Land thinkers. In an appendix, Yabuki also published transcriptions of several major Three Levels texts, drawn from both Dunhuang manuscripts and manuscripts preserved in Japan.

At the same time or shortly after Yabuki was undertaking his research, Kanda Kiichirō[20] and Tsukamoto Zenryū[21] published some of the first research on epigraphical sources on Xinxing and Xinxing's followers, Ōya Tokujō published an edition of the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*,[22] and Tokiwa Daijō proposed that the cave shrine complex and necropolis at

[15] Kōno 1909.
[16] E.g., Iwasaki 1917.
[17] Sasaki 1913.
[18] Yabuki 1917/1918.
[19] For an overview of Yabuki's life and the troubled publication history of Yabuki 1927, see Zhang Zong 2013, 4–6
[20] Kanda 1922a–d, Kanda 1923.
[21] Tsukamoto 1937a and 1937b.
[22] Ōya 1925, Ōya 1929.

Baoshan was closely associated with the Three Levels.[23] These early Japanese books and articles—particularly Yabuki's monograph—laid the foundations and set the terms for all ensuing scholarship on the Three Levels.[24,25]

Over the next several decades, scholars working in Japanese, Chinese, Korean[26] and Western languages digested these early discoveries, integrated them into historiography on Chinese Buddhism, used them to propose novel theories about Xinxing's thought and the suppression of his teachings, and (in the case of non-Japanese scholars) summarized and popularized Japanese scholarship in non-Japanese languages. The most significant examples of this literature is surveyed below.

In Japan, an intermittent stream of articles on the Three Levels appeared between the 1920s and the 1990s. Some of these articles introduced important new sources or offered new interpretations of Three Levels history, and remain vital resources today. After 1927, Yabuki continued publishing articles on the Three Levels, including an article comparing the Three Levels with Kamakura-period Japanese Buddhist sects.[27] Tsukamoto[28] and Hayakawa Michio[29] both published articles on the economic institution of the 'Inexhaustible Storehouse.' Michibata Ryōshū published articles exploring the relationship between Shandao and the Three Levels[30] and Daochuo and the Three Levels.[31] In 1938, Ōtani Shōshin published an article on a partial manuscript from Dunhuang (Pelliot 2550) that appeared to describe the life and work of a Dhyāna Master affiliated with the Three Levels. Ōtani transcribed and published this text, giving it the name "Life and Works of a Certain Three Levels Dhyāna Master" (三階某禪師行狀始末).[32] Kimura Kiyotaka touched on Xinxing several times, including in an article on the links between the Three Levels and the Huayan thinker Zhiyan 智儼 (602–668),[33] as well as in an article on Xinxing's concept of time.[34] In the latter article, Kimura made several proposals for future research on the Three Levels. (Several of these proposals would later be taken up by his student, Nishimoto Teruma.) Hayakawa Michio wrote several articles on Xinxing and the Three Levels, including an important article on the emergence of a cult around Xinxing following his death.[35] Three Levels manuscripts, including a witness to the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three*

[23] Tokiwa 1927.

[24] It is worth pointing out that many of the early Japanese Buddhologists interested in the Three Levels (including Kōno and Yabuki) were also ordained Buddhist priests from Pure Land sects (see Zhang Zong 2013 4–6, Nishimoto 1998, 9). Before the manuscript discoveries at Dunhuang, some of the most detailed sources on Xinxing and his followers were polemical Pure Land works critical of the Three Levels movement. No doubt some of the reason that Kōno and Yabuki became interested in Xinxing and his followers was because they were familiar with anti-Three Levels polemic from the Pure Land tradition.

[25] As the Chinese art historian Zhang Zong wrote in his book on the Three Levels, "When it comes to research on the Three Levels—whether from the perspective of Dunhuang manuscripts, manuscripts preserved in Japan, or epigraphy—it is largely Japanese scholars who played the seminal role. If one wants to analyze and discuss this field of scholarship, it's first necessary to understand the achievements of Japanese scholars." (See Zhang Zong 2013, 67. Translation mine.)

[26] For a very brief overview of Korean-language research on Xinxing and his followers, see Nishimoto 12–13.

[27] Yabuki 1930.

[28] Tsukamoto 1926.

[29] Hayakawa 1988.

[30] Michibata 1932

[31] Michibata 1933.

[32] Ōtani 1938.

[33] Kimura 1978.

[34] Kimura 1982.

[35] Hayakawa 1991.

Levels, were discovered at the Buddhist temple Nanatsu-dera in Nagoya in the 1980s; discussions of these texts and the Nanatsu-dera corpus can be found in publications by Ochiai Toshinori.[36]

The Sinosphere also saw important research on the Three Levels emerge in the wake of Yabuki's work.[37] Tang Yongtong published a brief review of Yabuki's *Sangaikyō no Kenkyū* in 1931; the review praises Yabuki's work, points out some areas with potential for future research, and argues that Yabuki misread a term in the *Kaiyuan* catalogue.[38] Tang Yongtong expanded this review into a section on the Three Levels movement in his collected papers on the history of Sui and Tang Buddhism; that section is notable for pointing out that other Sui-Tang scholiasts, including Jizang, seem to have been associated with ideas of an 'Inexhaustible Storehouse,' and consequently the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse should not be seen as exclusive to the Three Levels.[39] Lin Ziqing's encyclopedia article on the Three Levels movement (originally published in the 1950s, and later republished in the 1980s in the series series *Zhongguo fojiao* 中国佛教) exerted great influence as the standard starting point for Chinese researchers on the Three Levels throughout the second half of the twentieth century.[40] Important work on Xinxing and his followers emerged in the Sinosphere in the 1980s and 90s; some of this work paved the way for the 'second wave' of scholarship in the late 90s and early 2000s (see below). In 1985, Chen Zhalong identified Pelliot 2849 as a Three Levels text.[41] In 1988, Ding Mingyi mentioned in passing that the Jinchuanwan cave site in Shaanxi preserved inscribed manuscript witnesses of texts by Xinxing.[42] In Guo Peng's 1994 collection of papers on Chinese Buddhist history, he touches on Xinxing and the Three Levels and makes several astute observations, including that one of the core dynamics in Three Levels thought was Xinxing's treatment of scripture and his curious insistence on excerpting scripture.[43] Also in 1994, Yang Cengwen published an analysis of Three Levels thought in which he identifies the core of Xinxing's teachings as *mofa* 末法 thought, a *panjiao* 判教 consisting of three levels, and a theory of a 'universal dharma' (*pufa* 普法).[44] In 1998, Fang Guangchang 方广锠 published an edition of the *Inexhaustible Storehouse* in the series, *Non-Canonical Buddhist Manuscripts* (藏外佛教文献).[45] In 2000, Liu Changdong 刘长东 published an article on the relationship between Pure Land thought and the Three Levels; among other points, he makes the intriguing suggestion that the eighth-century monk Feixi's 飛錫 treatise on contemplation of the Buddha (*Nianfo sanmei baowang lun* 念佛三昧寶王論, T.1967) attempts to reconcile Pure Land thought with Three Levels doctrine.[46] Finally, in 2008,

[36] See Ochiai 1991, Ochiai and Makita 2000.
[37] Before Yabuki's work became widely known in China, the Buddhist reformer and modernist Taixu 太虛 (1890–1947) touched on the Three Levels in the course of discussing the history of Pure Land Buddhism in China. See Zhang Zong 2013, 20.
[38] Tang 1983, 45–47.
[39] Tang 2016, 196–200.
[40] Lin 1980. On the influence of this article, see Zhang Zong, 31.
[41] See Chen 1985. Nishimoto would later independently identify, transcribe, and publish this text, the *Zhifa* 制法, in his 1998 monograph.
[42] Ding 1988.
[43] Guo 1994.
[44] Yang 1994. Although I quibble with Yang's use of the term *panjiao*, many of his remarks in this essay are quite perceptive. I agree with Yang's analysis that one of the major points of conflict between the Three Levels and other Chinese Buddhists was Xinxing's approach to scripture and canon.
[45] Fang 1998.
[46] Liu 2000.

Liu Shufen's exhaustive study of mortuary practices in medieval China discusses, at great length, epigraphy related to Xinxing and his followers. Liu discusses the strong association between Xinxing's followers and 'forest burial' (*linzang* 林葬); she also suggests that many monks and laypeople memorialized at Baoshan were followers of Xinxing.[47]

A small number of Western-language scholars produced work on Xinxing and his followers in the twentieth century. Arthur Waley reviewed Yabuki's monograph in 1928, correctly pointing out its importance (unfortunately, his summary of its contents was highly misleading).[48] Jacques Gernet mentions the Three Levels movement in his 1956 monograph on Buddhism in Chinese society in the course of discussing the Inexhaustible Storehouse.[49] Kenneth Ch'en devotes several pages to the "Sect of the Three Stages" in his 1964 *Buddhism in China* (Ch'en appears to take his cues from Waley, and consequently this discussion, too, presents a distorted picture of Xinxing and his followers).[50] Antonino Forte discusses some of the purported activities of Xinxing's followers in his 1976 *Political Propaganda and Ideology in China at the End of the Seventh Century*,[51] and he addresses the Three Levels directly in a short 1985 article[52] and in his 1990 article, "The Relativity of the Concept of Orthodoxy in Chinese Buddhism: Chih-sheng's Indictment of Shih-li and the Proscription of the Dharma Mirror Sūtra."[53] In a perceptive essay, Mark E. Lewis attempts to relate Three Levels thought and practice to the movement's repeated suppression.[54] Daniel Stevenson discusses the Three Levels and repentance rituals in his dissertation on Chinese repentance rituals.[55] Bruce Williams likewise discusses Three Levels repentance rituals and possible links between Three Levels devotees and other North Chinese monks.[56] Adamek's *Mystique of Transmisson* touches on the Three Levels and its antinomian qualities.[57] Finally, Alan Cole discusses the nature of Xinxing's authority and the possible relationship between the Three Levels and the Chan movement. Although Cole's engagement with Three Levels documents is superficial, his comments on the structure of Xinxing's movement and the significance of Xinxing for later Chinese Buddhist history are

[47] Liu 2008. Liu's discussion of forest burial and Xinxing's followers is invaluable. However, she adopts a particularly generous standard for labeling someone a follower of the Three Levels (see Adamek 2018). It is likely that many of the Baoshan burials that Liu associates with the Three Levels are not, in fact, so associated. For an English-language overview of the research in Liu 2008 related to corpse-exposure and Xinxing's followers, see Liu 2000.

[48] Waley's review is laudatory and correctly assesses the importance of Yabuki's work ("This is the most important work on the Tun-huang manuscripts since Pelliot and Chavannes' *Un Traité Manichéen Retrouvé en Chine*," Waley 1928, 162). Unfortunately, Waley conveys a very hazy impression of Yabuki's monograph. Many of his statements about Xinxing and the Three Levels are exaggerations of Yabuki's own (much more defensible) positions. Waley says, incorrectly, that the 'Three Stages' (三階) refer to a the tripartite scheme of Dharmic decline (162), that Xinxing's followers lived in courtyards and out-houses rather than monastery buildings (164), that they disregarded images and Buddhist scripture (164), and that the manuscripts Yabuki rediscovered were (with one exception) attestations of texts dating to the Tang dynasty and postdating Xinxing (166). Waley appears to have read Yabuki's book with only partial understanding. Regrettably, many of his distorted impressions of Xinxing and his followers exerted a powerful (if largely invisible) influence on Western language scholarship for the rest of the twentieth century.

[49] Gernet 1995, 210–217, 228.

[50] Ch'en 1964, 297–300.

[51] Forte 1976.

[52] Forte 1985.

[53] Forte 1990.

[54] Lewis 1990.

[55] See Stevenson 1987, 170–200, passim, 263–279, passim.

[56] Williams 2002 and Williams 2005.

[57] Adamek 2007, 120–128.

highly perceptive.[58] Françoise Wang-Toutain identified a fragmentary text by Xinxing, the 人集錄依諸大乘經中略發願法, in her catalogue of the Dunhuang documents.[59] In a 2008 article on early Chan, Eric Greene discusses the relationship between debates about the nature of Chan and what it means to be a Chan master in relation to the Three Levels.[60] Greene argues that some comments in Daoxuan's 道宣 (596–667) work are veiled attacks on Three Levels practitioners. Greene's article deals with ambiguous comments and Greene presents his conclusions as tentative. When we bring evidence from Xinxing's writings to bear on Daoxuan's writings, however, Greene's conclusions are greatly strengthened. There are strong parallels between Daoxuan's criticism (particularly his suggestion that meditation should be performed in quiet places)[61] and elements of practice by Xinxing and his followers. The material surveyed by Greene—and the issue of the relationship between Xinxing's followers and early Chan in general—deserves further research. In a 2010 article on Xinxing's curious use of the term 'mute-sheep monk' as a description for his followers, James Benn identifies the *locus classicus* of this term in the *Scripture of the Ten Wheels* and makes some observations regarding the term's significance.[62] In a 2015 dissertation on the Tang Pure Land writer Huaigan 懷感, Kendall Marchman touches on Huaigan's polemic against the Three Levels.[63]

Finally, the most important figure in Western language scholarship on the Three Levels is Jamie Hubbard. Hubbard's 1986 dissertation gives an excellent overview of then-known Three Levels manuscripts and of previous modern scholarship on the Three Levels; it also raises many important questions for future research.[64] In a series of articles in the 90s and early 2000s, Hubbard gave a concise introduction to Three Levels epigraphy,[65] an overview of Three Levels texts among the manuscript finds at Nanatsu-dera,[66] raised some questions about the relationship between the three stage scheme of Dharmic decline and the Three Levels movement,[67] and examines the relationship between dharma-preaching and Dharmic-decline theories, touching on the Three Levels.[68] A short introduction to the Three Levels by Hubbard appears in Buswell 2004.[69]

Hubbard's 2001 monograph, *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood*, remains the standard introduction to the Three Levels movement in a Western language.[70] *Absolute Delusion, Perfect Buddhahood* makes three major interventions in Three Levels scholarship. First, Hubbard uses the Three Levels movement to explore the logic of theories of decline in Buddhism. He makes a compelling case that such theories are always polemical, serving to exalt one version of Buddhist practice over others by holding that program of practice out as uniquely

[58] Cole 2009, 30–56. Many of the observations in Cole 2009 are presaged in Cole's review of Hubbard 2001; See Cole 2001.
[59] Wang-Toutain 1995, 114–117. This manuscript is now held in the Beijing Library as 北 8422
[60] Greene 2008.
[61] Greene 2008, 56.
[62] Benn 2010.
[63] Marchman 2015. Marchman's interest is Huaigan and Pure Land, and he does not engage with Japanese or Chinese scholarship on the Three Levels.
[64] Hubbard 1986.
[65] Hubbard 1991B.
[66] Hubbard 1991A, 2000.
[67] Hubbard 1996.
[68] Hubbard 1999.
[69] Hubbard 2004.
[70] Hubbard 2001.

suited to the conditions of the age of decline. Second, Hubbard surveys the suppressions of Xinxing's texts and complicates our understanding of their cause (or causes). Hubbard suggests that these suppressions may have had more to do with contingent political causes than with the ideological content of Xinxing's teachings. Finally, Hubbard situates Xinxing and his followers in the context of sixth and seventh century Chinese Buddhism, suggesting that many of their practices were part and parcel of the 'mainstream.' The most important function of Hubbard's book, therefore, is to 'domesticate' the Three Levels, modulating our image of the movement from one of heresy, religious populism, and wild unorthodoxy to that of an elite reform movement. Given the image of the Three Levels presented by Waley and Ch'en (an image that had colored Western scholarship throughout the twentieth century), Hubbard's more grounded and moderate interpretation of the place of the Three Levels in Sui-Tang Buddhism is a vital corrective.

Recent Scholarship and the Second Wave

The scholarship surveyed above largely builds off of Yabuki 1927. A small subset of scholarship in this first period identified other manuscripts related to Xinxing and his followers (e.g., Ōtani, Chen, and Fang), but most of the work in this period amounts to elaborations on Yabuki's fundamental work. However, beginning in the 1990s, a fresh wave of sources on Xinxing and his followers revolutionized this field of scholarship. This wave centered on two main sets of sources: first, newly discovered Three Levels texts in the Dunhuang corpus, most of which were identified, transcribed, and published by Nishimoto Teruma; and second, the Jinchuanwan cave site in Shaanxi, which preserves eight Buddhist texts inscribed on its stone walls, including four composed or compiled by Xinxing.

The dominant figure in this second wave of scholarship on Xinxing and his followers is the Japanese scholar Nishimoto Teruma. Nishimoto began his academic career with research on the Three Levels. His unpublished masters thesis surveys the treatment of the group in the work of the Pure Land thinker Huaigan.[71] His dissertation research entailed a renewed search through the Dunhuang corpus for previously undiscovered Three Levels texts. This research yielded dozens of new manuscript identifications that, in combination, attested to several new Three Levels texts. Nishimoto published articles on this research throughout the nineties;[72] much of this work was integrated into his 1998 monograph, *Sangaikyō no Kenkyū* 三階教の研究.[73] Building off of Yabuki's work, Nishimoto 1998 offers a comprehensive overview of the history of Xinxing and his followers, provides an in-depth discussion of the nature of the Three Levels taxonomy and key themes in Xinxing's thought, and includes transcriptions of six previously unidentified texts as well as a new edition and modern Japanese translation of an important Three Levels text, the *Practice Matched to Faculties* (*Duigen qixing fa* 對根起行法). Among the six previously unidentified texts published in Nishimoto 1998, particularly notable is the

[71] The results of this thesis were later summarized in a short article. See Nishimoto 1990a..
[72] See Nishimoto 1990b for the first published version of his translations of the *Practice Matched to Faculties*, Nishimoto 1991 for comments on *mofa* thought in the Three Levels, Nishimoto 1992 for an exploration of the meaning of 'level' in Three Levels texts, Nishimoto 1995a for the Three Levels and *panjiao*, Nishimoto 1995b for the structure of Three Levels thought, Nishimoto 1995c for an overview of the recently discovered text on Three Levels discipline, the *Zhifa* 制法, Nishimoto 1995d for the Three Levels texts in Pelliot 2849, Nishimoto 1997a for an overview of the texts discovered in the course of his survey of the Dunhuang documents, and Nishimoto 1997b on the issue of whether the Three Levels constituted a heretical sect.
[73] Nishimoto 1998.

transcription (and preliminary study) of what appears to be a set of monastic regulations composed by Xinxing.[74] Much like Yabuki 1927, Nishimoto 1998 represents a watershed in the study of Xinxing and his followers; it remains unsurpassed as a study of the institutional history of the movement, and its study of Three Levels thought functions as an encyclopedic overview of key terms and themes in Xinxing's writings. Following his 1998 monograph, Nishimoto continued his research. Major post-1998 publications include a comprehensive bibliography of extant Three Levels manuscripts,[75] a discussion of Three Levels contemplative texts,[76] and the identification of a text by Xinxing attested in a manuscript in the Kyō'u 杏雨 collection (as it turns out, this manuscript is also attested at the Jinchuanwan cave site; the two manuscript attestations allow for an almost complete reconstruction of the text).[77]

At the same time as Nishimoto's scholarship publicized and popularized a new set of Three Levels texts drawn from the Dunhuang corpus, another source for the Three Levels gradually came into scholarly focus: the Jinchaunwan cave site in Shaanxi. Built during the mid-Tang, this site seems to have fallen into obscurity by the end of the Tang, and is mentioned sporadically in premodern accounts after that; in the mid-twentieth century, the site was damaged during the Cultural Revolution. Jinchuanwan first appears in passing in modern scholarship in 1988;[78] a notice in *Zhongguo wenwu bao* 中国文物报 in 1997 brought greater attention to it.[79] The cave began receiving archaeological examination in 1999,[80] and articles connecting the site to the Three Levels appeared in the early 2000s.[81] The Chinese art historian Zhang Zong published several articles on this site, culminating in his 2013 monograph on the history of the Three Levels movement. This book offers an overview of Three Levels history, integrating insights from the texts preserved at Jinchuanwan. The monograph includes the first published edition of the text *Bodhi Matched to Capacities*,[82] which is largely preserved at Jinchuanwan.[83] (Zhang Zong supplemented the Jinchuanwan text with material from the Kyō'u collection identified by Nishimoto). Further work on the Jinchuanwan site emerges in the work of the Buddhist Stone Sutras in China project. In their 2020 volume on Shaanxi, this project provides complete transcriptions and translations of the texts on the east wall of the Jinchuanwan site, including three of the four texts by Xinxing.[84] The volume includes an article by Zhang Zong[85] as well as an article by the present author on the contents and intellectual significance of the texts at Jinchuanwan.[86] A forthcoming volume covering the west wall of the cave will appear in 2023.

This second wave of sources has made possible a fresh understanding of Xinxing and his followers. Several scholars have produced monograph-length treatments of Xinxing and the Three Levels that attempt to grapple with this new material. Nishimoto's 1998 monograph, of course, represents a pathbreaking synthesis of new Dunhuang materials. Zhang Zong's 2013

[74] Nishimoto 1998, 578–601.
[75] Nishimoto 2003 and 2013a.
[76] Nishimoto 1999b.
[77] Nishimoto 2012.
[78] Ding 1988.
[79] Tiao 1997.
[80] Shaanxi 1999.
[81] Zhang 2002, Tao 2005.
[82] Zhang 2013, 686–706.
[83] Zhang Zong supplemented the Jinchuanwan text with material from the Kyō'u collection identified by Nishimoto 2012.
[84] Ledderose 2020.
[85] Zhang 2020.
[86] Brandstadt 2020.

monograph pays close attention to material evidence for the history of the Three Levels, and begins to consider the contents of the Jinchuanwan texts. Finally, a 2017 monograph by Yang Xueyong attempts to give a definitive treatment of the history of the Three Levels in light of all available sources.[87]

Recent Chinese and Japanese language articles have begun to take stock of the interpretive possibilities opened up by the second wave of Three Levels sources. These include studies of Three Levels repentance rites,[88] studies of Three Levels conceptions of 'giving rise to bodhi mind' (發菩提心),[89] a discussion of the relationship between Zhisheng and the Three Levels movement,[90] an overview of the possibility that the Tang Pure Land texts known as the *Nianfo jing* 念佛鏡 and the *Nianfo sanmei baowang lun* 念佛三昧宝王論 attempt to reconcile Three Levels positions with Pure Land thought,[91] further research on mentions of the Three Levels in Huaigan's writing,[92] and the intriguing suggestion that Three Levels thought may have influenced the textual formation of the *Platform Sutra*.[93]

Several Western language articles and book chapters have also utilized this second wave of sources to update our understanding of Xinxing and his followers. In her book on Dizang in medieval China, Zhiru tempers Yabuki's suggestion that the cult of Dizang was fundamental to Three Levels practice and vice versa.[94] In her work on the Baoshan necropolis, Wendi Adamek has explored evidence of Three Levels activity at the site; Adamek tentatively suggests that there is less clear evidence of association between the Three Levels and Baoshan than indicated by earlier scholars (such as Tokiwa 1927 and Liu 2008).[95] Adamek also touches on the Three Levels in her monograph on Baoshan 'practicescapes.'[96] Lin 2019 examines the place of Xinxing's meditative techniques in the landscape of medieval China.[97] Finally, a recent article by Bi Bo and Nicholas Sims-Williams has identified, transcribed, and translated a bilingual eighth-century epitaph for a Sogdian-Chinese lay female devotee of Xinxing's teachings.[98]

State of the Field

As outlined above, scholarship on Xinxing and his followers has advanced in two main stages, corresponding to two main waves of sources. The first period centers on Yabuki Keiki's 1927 monograph and the rediscovered texts (from Dunhuang and Japanese holdings) that he brought to light. Yabuki's interpretation of this corpus of materials dominated scholarship on the Three Levels throughout the twentieth century. Yabuki's philological achievements remain foundational to the study of the Three Levels, and many facets of his presentation of Three Levels history and thought remain valid. In Western-language academia, the main interpreter of

[87] Yang 2017.
[88] Yanai 2019; see also Yang 2016 for Three Levels repentance rites in relation to 'buddha-name' repentance liturgies.
[89] Yanai 2020.
[90] Aoyagi 2018.
[91] Kato 2018, Kato 2019.
[92] Nagao 2020a, Nagao 2020b.
[93] Ibuki 2021.
[94] Zhiru 2007, 57–67.
[95] Adamek 2018.
[96] Adamek 2021, 89–99.
[97] Lin 2019.
[98] Bi and Sims-Williams 2020.

the sources presented by Yabuki has been Jamie Hubbard. Hubbard's crucial intervention in the study of Xinxing and his followers has been to place the Three Levels in the context of Sui-Tang Buddhist thought and practice. Hubbard has stressed that, contrary to initial impressions, the Three Levels appears in fact to have had considerable overlap with 'mainstream' Buddhism. As part of this intervention, Hubbard has suggested that the suppressions of the Three Levels do not have a simple ideological explanation—in Hubbard's view, these suppressions have more to do with the vagaries of medieval court politics than with the content of Xinxing's teachings.

The second period begins in the late twentieth century with Nishimoto Teruma's identification of a fresh batch of Three Levels texts in the Dunhuang corpus and the simultaneous rediscovery of the Jinchuanwan cave site in Shaanxi. Considerable work has been done on these new sources. Nishimoto's 1998 monograph goes a long way toward digesting the rediscovered Dunhuang texts and using them to reconstruct Xinxing's thought and the history of his movement. Zhang Zong and Yang Xueyong have produced monographs integrating both Dunhuang materials and materials from Jinchuanwan into our understanding of the institutional and social history of the Three Levels. Despite the work of Nishimoto, Zhang, and Yang, however, this second wave of sources has yet to be fully exhausted. As I hope to show, a consideration of all known texts by Xinxing and his followers allows us to come to a comprehensive understanding—more comprehensive than has yet been offered—of what Xinxing was trying to accomplish and how Xinxing's project fits into the larger context of Sui-Tang Buddhism.

The purpose of this dissertation is to offer such a synoptic interpretation of the Xinxing corpus. In the course of that interpretation, I will hone in on Xinxing's understanding of the authority of scripture and the proper use of scripture. In brief, I argue that at the heart of Xinxing's teachings lies a highly idiosyncratic understanding of the nature of scriptural authority in Buddhism. That understanding revolves around a skeptical challenge to the very possibility of using and understanding scripture correctly. Xinxing's anxiety about the impossibility of correct engagement with scripture led him to embark on a unique project of codifying a small set of scriptural passages as truly and exclusively authoritative—an attempt, one might say, to take what had been a nebulous corpus of Buddhist scripture and extract a truly closed canon. In the landscape of sixth-century Chinese Buddhism, Xinxing's project was unique, and electrifying. This scriptural project—more than any program of practice or set of philosophical positions—accounts for the fervent but divided reception of Xinxing and his followers in Sui and Tang China. For his followers, this project held out the prospect of resolving longstanding issues related to the interpretation of Buddhist scripture and the locus of authority in Chinese Buddhism. Its internal contradictions (born, perhaps, from the impossibility of ever truly 'closing' a 'canon') also committed them to an ever-evolving and increasingly radical attempt to defend Xinxing's writings. For Xinxing's detractors, in contrast, this scriptural project represented absurd exegetical excess and a rejection of the overwhelming majority of Buddhist teaching. Many of the mysteries surrounding Xinxing and his followers—the imperial state's vacillation between patronizing and suppressing them, the 'deification' of Xinxing by his later followers, the exclusion of Xinxing's texts from the mainstream literary transmission, and the very structure of Xinxing's texts themselves—resolve into relative clarity once we see that the core of Xinxing's teachings consisted of a reconceptualization and reorganization of Chinese Buddhist scripture.

This dissertation consists of five chapters and a set of appendices and appended translations. In this first chapter, I have surveyed previous literature on Xinxing and his followers

and explained how this dissertation fits into the state of the field. In the second chapter, I consider some methodological problems inherent to discussing ‘canon’ and ‘scripture’ in relation to the history of Buddhism, and propose an alternative set of terminology centered on the concept of authority. In the third chapter, I examine Xinxing’s writings and give an account of his fundamental project. In the fourth chapter, I chart the reception of Xinxing’s project on the part of his later followers. In the fifth, concluding chapter, I sketch a picture of the broader religious and ideological landscape that made Xinxing’s project particularly compelling and explosive, and I propose some avenues for future research.

Chapter Two: Conceptual History and the Problem with Canon

One of this dissertation's primary arguments is that Xinxing's project rested on an idiosyncratic and controversial understanding of the nature of Buddhist scripture in China. Xinxing's unique approach to scripture led him to try to extract, from the broad mass of Buddhist literature, a core set of teachings appropriate for himself and his contemporaries; in his mature work, Xinxing presented this core set of teachings in texts of imposing complexity and baroque design. As we shall see, these mature writings were both highly influential and intensely controversial. Understanding why they were conceived, how they were constructed, and how they were received will occupy the main chapters (chapter three and chapter four) of this dissertation.

Before considering the problem of Xinxing's texts, however, we must address a problem of terminology and methodology. When analyzing Xinxing's work, it is tempting to articulate his project in terms of 'canon.' We might argue that Xinxing's writings emerge from a milieu in which the canon of Buddhist scriptures in China was increasingly debated and doubted. We might suggest that Xinxing's unique approach to scripture represented an intervention in this debate. In the fast-moving and highly fraught sixth-century discussion over the nature of the Buddhist canon, Xinxing raised the possibility of *closing* that canon—perhaps we could say that his extraction of a core set of teachings amounted to the proposal of a new, abbreviated Buddhist canon. Xinxing's project has, occasionally, been described in this way;[99] a description of Xinxing's project in terms of canon would, moreover, fit squarely within mainstream religious studies approaches to Buddhist scripture and Buddhist intellectual history. However, I think that such a description should be applied with extreme caution. The concept of canon is nebulous. As I will suggest, canon as a term of scholarly analysis emerges from the history and theology of Protestant Christianity. Even there, 'canon' may be more of an edifying fiction than a coherent conceptual tool; outside of that intellectual milieu, 'canon' often distorts more than it reveals. Instead of discussing Xinxing's project primarily in terms of canon, I would insist that we analyze Xinxing's writings—and the intellectual history of Buddhism more broadly—in terms of the nature and structure of 'authority.' Questions of 'canon' must be subordinated to this broader conceptual category. Below, I will interrogate the concept of canon, explain how this concept entered into religious studies and Buddhology, explain why the concept is often inappropriate in the Buddhist context, and sketch out an alternative method of analysis based around the concept of 'authority.' At the same time, I will try to flesh out the scholarly field within which this dissertation should be situated—a field I refer to, generally, as 'conceptual history.'

Problems with 'Canon'

Before pinpointing the problems with canon as a term of analysis, we need to come to some understanding of how scholars of the humanities have been using this concept and why it came to be used in this way. Doing so will entail surveying discussions that have taken or continue to take place in several fields of the humanities. These are mainly Anglophone conversations, centered in North American universities, that began in the 1970s and have

[99] See Brandstadt 2020 for such a description; although many of the conclusions in this article are consonant with the argument of this dissertation, I now believe that the concept of 'canon' needs to be handled with greater circumspection.

continued with varying degrees of intensity until the present day.[100] In the course of this survey, we will see that the concept of 'canon' is itself a subject of study and controversy; that is, 'canon' itself has become long been a problem for humanists. For ease of reference, I will refer to these discussions and controversies collectively as 'the canon conversation.'[101] Later, I will refer to 'canon studies,' 'canon criticism' and 'canon wars.' These are subsets of the canon conversation as a whole.

As a launching point, we will note that the word 'canon' has a long pedigree stretching back to Ancient Greek ([*ὁ*] *κανών*),[102] and that throughout its history it tends to be used in three ways relevant to our purposes:[103] in the first, the canon is a rule or standard;[104] in the second, the canon is a *set* of things that are brought together by some standard;[105] and in the third, the canon is a set that itself functions as a standard.[106] The first usage, 'canon as rule or standard,' is

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[100] These American discussions, particularly those in literary studies, have in turn influenced (and sometimes directly initiated) analogous debates in a variety of languages that also take the term 'canon' or its direct translation as their theme. Limitations of space prevent me from discussing the non-Anglophone literature. Entrée to some of that literature can be had through Backe 2015 (for German), Hui 2021 (Chinese), Loucif 1993 (French), Lecercle 2006 (French), D'haen 2011 (Dutch), and Foukkema 1993 (for 'Europe' as a whole). An introduction to the German language reception of Anglophone theologians' discussion of canon can be found in Reventlow 1983.

[101] The prominence of the term 'canon' stems in part from German-language debates among Protestant theologians and Biblical philologists in the 18th and 19th centuries. Our 'canon conversation' is distinguished from those debates (which nonetheless form an important part of its prehistory) by the fact that it emphasizes interrogating canon *qua* concept. Preeminent Biblical philologists like Harnack and Zahn wrote definitive histories of the development of the canon of Christian scriptures (viz., the Bible). In doing so, they helped to develop the concept of a 'canon,' but they did not problematize it. See Metzger 1987, 11–24.

[102] The Greek term appears to be a Semitic loanword whose basic meaning is 'reed.' Cognates to the Greek appear in Classical Hebrew, Assyrian and Ugaritic, as well as their linguistic descendants. This root "derives in turn from the even more ancient non-Semitic Sumerian (*gi, gi-na*), with the same basic import" (Sheppard 1987).

[103] The semantic field of the Ancient Greek term includes but is not limited to these usages. Meanings derived from the basic metaphor of a 'standard or rule for measure' include the "*chief epochs* or *eras* [in chronology], which served to determine all intermediate dates," "the monochord, by which all other tonal relationships are controlled," and a "schedule or ordinance fixing the amount of grain...to be paid by a province...[thereby coming] to mean a (yearly) *tax*" (Metzger 1987, 290). For a definitive English treatment of κανών, see Beyer 1964–1976. Medieval extensions of the term yielded 'cannon,' "the straight metal tube directing a gunpowder projectile" (Ibid., 290), and 'canon' in the sense of a genre of music (e.g., Pachelbel's *Canon*) (Bridge 1881).

[104] E.g., T.S. Eliot: "[The poet] will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past...not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the *canons* [i.e., standards] of dead critics" [emphasis mine]. (Eliot 1982, 38).

[105] See, e.g., J.M. Robertson's *The Shakespeare Canon* (1922), or Walter Skeat's *The Chaucer Canon, With a Discussion of the Works Associated With the Name of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1900). These works attempt to define the 'canons' of Shakespeare and Chaucer, respectively, by the standard of authorship—i.e., they propose collections of texts that include all extant works actually written by Shakespeare or Chaucer, while excluding works falsely attributed to them.

[106] Christian discussions of collections of scripture often use the term in this sense: "In 367 Athanasius identified which books [of Christian scripture] are in fact the canonical books in opposition to the apocrypha...this is the earliest listing of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament" (Metzger 1987, 292). When Athanasius identifies certain books as *canonical*, he is saying that they are equivalent to or representative of a *canon of faith* (*ὁ κανὼν τῆς πίστεως*)—that is, a *standard* or *rule* for Christian life (See Metzger 1987, 291). Many discussions of 'the canon' in literary studies also assume that the set of texts at issue will serve as standards or models for future authors and students. E.g., Henry Louis Gates, Jr. on the 'canon' of African-American literature: "I wrote and rewrote verbatim [James Baldwin's] elegantly framed paragraphs, full of sentence that were at once somehow Henry Jamesian and King Jamesian...I try to remind my graduate students that each of us turned to literature through literal or figurative commonplace books...The passages in my commonplace book *formed my own canon*...And a canon, as it has functioned in every literary tradition, has served as the commonplace book of our shared culture [emphasis mine]" (Gates 1993, 21).

etymologically prior to the latter two. I will preemptively state that the latter two usages, which might be rephrased as 'a set formed by a standard' and 'a standard formed from a set,' respectively, are difficult to disentangle and are often used interchangeably.[107] It is primarily in these latter two senses that the term appears in the 'canon conversation.'

The canon conversation ranges primarily across five relatively autonomous areas of scholarship: 1) theology, 2) religious studies, 3) the 'conceptual history'[108] wing of fields like classics, East Asian Studies, Buddhist Studies and Islamic Studies, 4) literary fields (English, Comparative Literature) and their philosophical permutations (critical theory, literary theory, postmodern philosophy, [insert name *du jour*]), and 5) legal studies.

The aims and methodologies of these five fields differ considerably, and so their usage of and interest in the concept of 'canon' diverge. I lump their labors together under the heading of 'canon conversation' because each has influenced the others to some degree. A complete history of the Anglophone canon conversation would involve accounts of each of the five subfields and their interrelations. However, each 'sub-conversation' occasionally withdraws into itself, ignoring the others and conducting its inquiries on its own terms, before turning its attention outward, reengaging with its cousins, taking stock of developments elsewhere, and sharing its private insights. This dynamic would make an exhaustive account quite lengthy and intricate. But for my purposes a complete history is not necessary. This dissertation is primarily interested in the canon conversation in the third field, 'conceptual history.' There, a systematic, comparative inquiry into the concept of 'canon' is often called for and occasionally announced.[109] For ease of reference, that inquiry might be called 'canonics.' One of my aims in this chapter is to critique 'canonics' as developed in this field, and show that this project cannot accomplish its goals (which are interesting and laudable) unless its focus is redirected from 'canon' to a well-developed concept of 'structures of authority.' However, while we will not need to give a *complete* account of the canon conversation in order to critique and refine the 'canonics' project, it is nonetheless difficult to understand that project's history and quirks without reference to the other four partners in the conversation, particularly the first (theology) and second (religious studies). The fourth field (literary studies) is also relevant to my critique, though in a much different way than the first and second. The canon conversation in the fifth field, legal studies, is highly derivative of literary studies and raises no issues distinct from those

[107] See, e.g., Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994), in which Bloom describes a list of literary works that *are* timeless ('a set formed by a standard'—the set of timeless books), and that in turn *will remain* timeless because his list will shape the sensibilities of future readers ('a standard formed by a set'—exemplars of timelessness).

[108] More on this term below. Some practitioners of what I call 'conceptual history' would call themselves philologists, textualists, historians of ideas, or practitioners of comparative philosophy.

[109] See, particularly, Brown 2007. (Note that field four, literary studies, on rare occasions refers to reflections on their canon conversation as 'canon studies' [e.g., Hui 2021]. Field four's 'canon studies' refers to a much different project that field three's 'canon studies.') The proposed project of 'canon studies' closely parallels and is sometimes paired with other comparative projects, including 'comparative hermeneutics/exegesis' (see, e.g., Henderson 1991, Van Zoeren 1991, Bruns 1992) or its permutation, 'comparative doctrinology' (see, e.g., Christian 1987, Griffiths 1994; the term is my own, though I do not think Christian or Griffiths would dispute the label), and 'comparative scholasticisms' (see, e.g., Cabezón 1998). I will return to these sister projects later. The three topics of 'canon,' 'hermeneutics' and 'interpreter/scholiast' are inextricably linked and must, in the end, be discussed together. But for now, our account will be greatly simplified by treating 'canon studies' in strict isolation from 'comparative hermeneutics' and 'comparative scholasticism.'

broached by literary theorists' discussion of canon. I will make only cursory mention of that field.[110]

Canon: Theology, Religious Studies, Literary Studies

The proximate origins of the canon conversation in the first three fields lie with North American Protestant theology. Beginning in the 1960s, a coterie of Biblical scholars, most seeing themselves as Reformed (i.e., Protestant) Christians, mounted an attack on received understandings of Christian scripture. They held that that understanding, which was outlined by early modern German historical-critical philologists and which grounded interpretation of the scriptures in a reconstruction of the 'real history' behind their formation, failed to establish a coherent locus for interpretation, and hence made rigorous theology impossible.[111] The most prominent and influential of these scholars was Brevard Childs, whose 1970 *Biblical Theology in Crisis* laid out the problem and largely set the terms of ensuing debate.[112] As Childs later wrote, "it should be incontrovertible that there was a genuine historical development involved in the formation of the canon and that any concept of canon which fails to reckon with this historical dimension is faulty. [But] the available historical evidence allows for only a bare skeleton of this development. One searches largely in vain for solid biblical or extra-biblical evidence by which to trace the real causes and motivations behind many of the crucial decisions."[113] Childs saw this impasse as a crisis for mainline Protestant theology, which he held to be 'Biblical theology'—that is, theology that centered on the Bible while admitting its historical development.[114] He attempted to rescue 'Biblical theology' with a 'canonical approach,' writing, "the canon of the Christian church is the most appropriate context from which to do biblical theology...[T]he appeal to the canon understands Scripture as a vehicle of divine reality, which indeed encountered ancient people in the historical past, but which continues to confront the church through the pages of Scripture."[115] This 'canonical approach' entailed a complex and somewhat opaque hermeneutical process that moved between the (purported) final received form of scripture and the history of the canonization process itself, interpreting each in light of the other.[116] Whether Childs' technique succeeded in placing his Biblical theology on a firm

[110] Although the canon conversation in legal studies is largely irrelevant to my concerns, it is by no means uninteresting. Those who wish to explore the legal canon conversation might begin with Primus 1988, Mootz 1994, Ledwon 1996 or Balkin 2000. A convenient starting point for more recent discussions can be had in Amar 2011, Greene 2011 and Larson 2011. The touchstone for legal literature on canon is the jack-of-all-trades post-modern theorist Stanley Fish. Fish began his career as a scholar of medieval literature, but quickly extended his work on 'interpretive communities' from the university classroom (see, Fish 1980) to the court of law (see, e.g., Fish 1991, Fish 2008, Fish 1982).

[111] Childs 1979, 52–68.

[112] Childs 1970.

[113] Childs 1979, 67.

[114] As opposed to Catholic theology, which privileges the magisterium of the Church, or to non-mainline Protestant theologies that either preach Biblical inerrancy or downplay the Bible altogether.

[115] Childs 1970, 99 ff.

[116] See the conclusion to Childs 1992, "A Holistic Reading of Scripture." Childs sketched this approach in *Biblical Theology in Crisis* and developed it in many further works (e.g., Childs 1979), culminating in the monumental *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Childs 1992).

foundation is unclear;[117] regardless, it was massively influential in the 1970s and 80s, inspiring many publications both for and against.[118]

The theological debate launched by Childs is not relevant to the present discussion. What is important is Childs' championing of the concept 'canon' and the way in which he used this term. By the late 1960s, when Childs announced his interventions, the history of the Biblical 'canon' (in the sense of the 'fixed set of normative Christian scriptures') had been an object of philological study in English, German, French and other European vernaculars for nearly 300 years.[119] However, while these discussions use 'canon' as a term of analysis, they do not problematize the concept of 'canon' itself. When they reflect on how to conceptualize the status of the Bible, it tends to be in reference to its status as 'holy scripture.'[120] Childs, in contrast, insists that understanding how the Bible functions 'as canon' is distinct from the question of its status 'as scripture,' and is central to its interpretation. He is also particularly concerned with drawing out the theological implications of how and when the Christian canon and its sub-canons were 'closed'—that is, when in history lists of certain scriptures became fixed, and who fixed them.[121] Notably, despite the central place of the canon concept in his writings, Childs' use of the term is markedly inexact. Although he mainly uses 'canon' in the sense of a closed set of norm-giving scriptures, he also uses it in the sense of 'standard or norm *simpliciter*' and frequently to mean 'the final form of a scripture.' As a critic of Childs would later write, "the reader is struck by the seemingly indiscriminate way in which the word 'canonical' is attached to a vast range of words, creating a kind of mystique."[122] Although Childs insists that Biblical theology depends on

[117] That Childs was the last major theologian before the catastrophic decline of mainline American Protestantism suggests that it was not. On that decline, see Hutchison 1991. On possible causal links between the liberalism of a congregation's theology and its decline, see Haskell 2016.

[118] For an attack on Childs' approach, see Barr 1983. For some mature reflections on Childs' method and its impact, see the essays in Bartholomew 2006. Childs' often slogan-like exhortations to "appeal to the canon" (see, e.g., Childs 1970, 106) or to do theology "within the context of the canon" (ibid., 100) led some detractors to dub his methodology 'canon criticism' or 'canonical criticism' (see, e.g., Oswalt 1987, Brueggemann 1989). Childs himself seems to have avoided these labels.

[119] See Metzger 1987, 11–24. Usages of 'canon' in this literature range across the three usages we surveyed above—canon as standard, canon as standard that forms a set, and canon as set that forms a standard.

[120] This point is brought out in the literature review in Swanson 1970, 4–10. Swanson, perhaps under the influence of Childs and his acolytes, is at pains to emphasize that interrogating the Bible *qua* scripture and Bible *qua* canon are different conceptual problems.

[121] Childs 1992, 58: "There is full agreement that the Jewish canon was *closed* at least by AD 100, but debate continues as to whether it was *closed* at an earlier date, indeed by the end of the first century BC [emphasis mine]." The description of fixing the list of canonical scriptures as 'closing the canon' appears to originate with nineteenth century Biblical philologists. See, e.g., Buhl 1892, 27: "The result is therefore this, that even the third part of the Old Testament writings, which in the time of Ben Sirach was as yet without firmly determined limits, had its canon finally *closed* even before the time of Christ, although we know nothing as to how or by whom this was accomplished... [emphasis mine]." Indologists and Buddhologists appear to have adopted this locution from their forebears in Biblical Studies as early as the 1890s. See, e.g., Rhys Davids: "So also with regard to the earliest Buddhist book *after the canon was closed*, the very interesting and instructive series of conversations between the Greek king, Menanda (Milinda), of Baktria, and Nāgasena, the Buddhist teacher [emphasis mine]" (Rhys Davids 1896, 40).

[122] Metzger 1987, 36. Metzger continues in a footnote: "The word 'canonical' [in Childs] qualifies nearly thirty different words, including addressee, approach, collection, concern, context, corpus, editors, fashion, function, harmony, intention, interpretation, issue, model, perspective, problem, process, reading, referentiality, rendering, role, setting, significance, shape, stage, stance, and unity" (ibid., 36, fn. 84).

encountering the Bible 'in the context of canon,' he does not always leave the reader with a clear sense of what a canon *is*.[123]

For the purposes of this inquiry, Childs' fixation on 'Bible as canon' had two important results. First, the obvious vagueness of Childs' concept of canon spurred a competition between his supporters and detractors to clarify what canon meant, both philosophically and etymologically. Bruce Metzger's *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origins, Development, and Significance* (a definitive and very useful English-language treatment of both the history of the New Testament canon and the development of the concept of 'canon' in apostolic and patristic writings) appears to have been written partly to undermine Childs' 'canonical approach.'[124] Another product of this effort was a 1987 entry on 'canon' in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.[125] Written by Gerald T. Sheppard, a supporter of[126] and collaborator with Childs,[127] this entry proposes that the concept of 'canon,' "despite its association with Christianity, can prove to be an illuminating heuristic device in describing other world religions and their principal texts," noting that "analogies with the formation of Western religious canons provides an attractive, yet to be fully explored, way of thinking about religion in general."[128] Sheppard makes explicit the differing senses of canon that Childs so insistently blurs. Sheppard writes, "The term inherently vacillates between two distinct poles, in both secular and religious usage. On the one hand, it can be used to refer to a rule, standard, ideal, norm, or authoritative office or literature, whether oral or written. On the other hand, it can signify a temporary or perpetual fixation, standardization, enumeration, listing, chronology, register, or catalog of exemplary or normative persons, places, or things."[129] Sheppard calls these senses 'Canon 1' and 'Canon 2,' respectively. (Note that my own typology of the senses of 'canon' modifies Sheppard's.) Sheppard's promulgation of a distinction between 'Canon 1' and 'Canon 2' has had a profound impact on subsequent academic discussions and remains current in the history of religions (including the history of Buddhism) down to the present day. We will return to it later.

The second pertinent result of Childs project: Childs' stature in theology and Biblical Studies exerted an influence on other Anglophone academic fields, leading some scholars in

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[123] Although Childs' approach contains severe ambiguities, it should not be casually dismissed. Childs is grappling with the problem of how Christian scripture can be authoritative for a reader who is aware that it is historically conditioned and who admits that there is no way of seeing behind scripture's history to the original 'objective reality' that produced it. This is not a trivial problem. Indeed, it is a type (perhaps the original type) of the fundamental problem of modernity and post-modernity, and Childs' good-faith attempt to resolve this issue is analogous to 'hermeneutic' accounts of history and experience given by serious philosophers like Heidegger and Gadamer. Childs' most lucid account of this problem can be found in "Excursus: The Theological Problem of Old Testament History," the insightful fifteenth chapter of *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testament* (Childs 1992, 196–207). As that chapter makes clear, Childs is amply aware of the parallel efforts of hermeneutic philosophers, especially Gadamer.

[124] In Metzger's exhaustive survey of prior scholarship on the New Testament canon, Childs' work is the final entry. The otherwise understated and evenhanded Metzger is dismissive of Childs' understanding of the history of the New Testament and openly mocks Childs' imprecise use of the word 'canon' (Metzger 1987, 35–36). Metzger's conclusion explicitly refers to Childs and offers a rival account of the theological significance of canonical history (ibid., "Questions Concerning the Canon Today, 267–288).

[125] Eliade 1987.

[126] See Sheppard 1974. Sheppard's entry on 'canon' in Eliade 1987 explicitly cites Childs' work.

[127] Childs refers to Sheppard throughout his work, often thanking him by name for contributions to his thinking (see, e.g., Childs 1979, 79). Notably, Sheppard is one of the three dedicatees of Childs *magnum opus*, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Childs 1992, iv).

[128] Sheppard 1987, 64.

[129] Sheppard 1987, 64.

those disciplines to take longstanding inquiries on the sacred scriptures of world religions and reframe them as studies of 'canons.' It was in the wake of the publication of Childs' *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*[130] that Jonathan Z. Smith delivered the first draft of his "Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon,"[131] a paper that would prove seminal for the canon conversation in religious studies. In "Sacred Persistence," Smith makes three notable contributions to the 'canon conversation' in religious studies. First, he defines 'canon' as, primarily, a list of culturally significant items. He writes, "Canon is a subtype of the genre *list*…[w]hen lists exhibit relatively clear principles of order, we may begin to term them *catalogs*…[and t]he only formal element that is lacking to transform a catalog into a *canon* is the element of closure: that the list be held to be complete."[132] Second, drawing on Freud, Smith suggests that the canon is a list that is "capable of bearing obsession"[133]—a set of things that both invites and sustains repeated, almost pathological interpretation and reinterpretation. In this sense, "[w]here there is a canon, it is possible to predict the *necessary* occurrence of a hermeneute, of an interpreter whose task it is continually to extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that exists *without* altering the canon in the process."[134] Finally, he declares that he knows "of no comparative study of canon," but holds out the possibility that 'canon' should be a term of analysis for comparative religions—many religious cultures apart from the Abrahamic religions have 'canons,' including such counter-intuitive examples as non-literate Aboriginal Australians.[135] Smith calls for a comparative project centered on canons and their interpretations, writing, "I look forward to the day when courses and monographs will exist in both comparative exegesis and comparative theology, comparing not so much conclusions as strategies through which the exegete seeks to interpret and translate his received tradition to his contemporaries."[136] In demarcating the conceptual territory of 'canon' with these three boundary markers—canons are closed, structured lists, canons

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[130] Childs 1974.

[131] Smith 1982, "Sacred Persistence." As Smith writes in the acknowledgments to the volume of collected papers in which the final version of "Sacred Persistence" appears, the initial draft of this paper "was delivered at a meeting of the Max Richter Conversation on Ancient Judaism, Brown University (1977)" (Smith 1982, ix). Childs' influence on Smith is not difficult to infer, although he does not cite Childs in this or any other publication (an omission so complete as to be suspicious). Smith did his graduate work at the Yale Divinity school, taking his doctorate in 1969; as Childs was on the faculty of the Yale Divinity School throughout Smith's time there, it is hardly conceivable that Smith was unaware of Childs and his work. And although "Sacred Persistence" does not reference Childs, it begins by acknowledging the work of the historian of Judaism Jacob Neusner (Smith 1982, 36). (Neusner was on the faculty at Brown University from 1968 to 1990, and seems to have been the chief organizer of the 'Max Richter' series of conferences that occasioned the first draft of "Sacred Persistence.") Neusner was an acknowledged admirer of Childs' 'canonical approach' (which he calls 'redaction-criticism'), writing an ecstatic review (Neusner 1976) of Childs' *The Book of Exodus* (Childs 1974). We might speculate that Smith framed "Sacred Persistence" around canon in part as a response to Neusner's interest in Childs. This would account for Smith's treatment of the concept of 'canon' in "Sacred Persistence," which on reflection is somewhat odd. Despite the title of the work, Smith does not focus on 'canon' until the final section of the paper, throughout which he attempts to reduce the concept of canon to the concept of 'list.' Indeed, Smith appears far more interested in the idea of 'lists' as a comparative category of religion than he is in 'canon.' One might guess that Smith's first drafts of this paper were about sacred lists and divination, and he later reworked it as an essay about 'canon.' This would account for Smith's total lack of reference to any part of the literature on the etymology and concept of canon in Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, which by 1977 was voluminous.

[132] Smith 1982, 44–48.

[133] Smith 1982, 46.

[134] Smith 1982, 48.

[135] Smith 1982, 44–49.

[136] Smith 1982, 52.

presuppose interpretation and interpreters, and canons are cross-cultural, constitutive features of religion—Smith exerted a seminal, incisive, and not entirely salutary effect on the canon conversation in religious studies. When scholars attempt to analyze non-Western traditions through the lens of 'canon,' it is to Smith's article that they often turn. We will return to and reassess Smith's contributions later.

In Buddhist Studies, Lewis Lancaster's 1979 paper, "Buddhist Literature: Its Canons, Scribes, and Editors," was one of the first to highlight 'canons' and 'canonization' as unique problems in Buddhist literature.[137] Lewis suggests that Buddhism stands out among world religions for the size and 'complexity' of its canon, writing, "simply put, the Buddhist sacred texts closely resemble a library and bear little similarity to the scriptures of the Western Asian religions...there is the equally outstanding feature that in Buddhism not one, but a multitude of separate canons have been assembled."[138] He goes on to give a history of canon formation in Buddhism, from Śākyamuni to Japanese bibliographers. This paper and subsequent work by Lancaster[139] have proved touchstones for the 'canon conversation' in Buddhist Studies, contributing the idea that Buddhism is distinctive for the size of its canon, as well as suggesting that at least parts of that canon are 'open' rather than 'closed.' The image of the Buddhist canon presented by Lancaster—an image of a structured, closed set of writings—bears obvious similarities to Smith's 'redescription' of the canon. Again, we will reassess Lancaster's contributions later.

So far, I have sketched four connected episodes in the broader 'canon conversation:' a) the theologian Brevard Childs' proposal that scripture *qua* canon provided the key to Biblical exegesis, b) the reaction to Childs' project among theologians like Sheppard and Metzger, which resulted in an attempt to clarify, both philologically and theologically, the meaning of the canon concept, c) the ramification of this canon conversation into religious studies with Smith's "Sacred Persistence," and d) its introduction into Buddhist Studies by Lewis Lancaster.[140] My account of these four episodes will largely suffice as a foundation for my primary goal: a critique of so-called 'canonics' as practiced in the 'conceptual history' wing of fields like classics, East Asian Studies, Buddhist Studies and Islamic Studies. Before proceeding to that critique, let me

[137] I cannot document a direct filiation between Lancaster and the Childean 'canon conversation' in theology, although other Buddhologists, taking up and reacting to Lancaster's work, have definitely been influenced by Childs' collaborator Sheppard (see Silk 2015, "Canonicity," which adopts Sheppard's Canon 1/Canon 2 schema by way of Kraemer 1991). But the shifts in terminology over the course of Lancaster's career are suggestive. His dissertation and his first published articles focus on 'Buddhist scripture' or 'Buddhist *sūtras*' and use the term 'canon' rarely if at all (see Lancaster 1968, Lancaster 1969, Lancaster 1974, and Lancaster 1981 [originally presented at the University of Calgary in 1978]). The edited volume in which "Buddhist Literature: Its Canons, Scribes, and Editors" appears is itself called *The Critical Study of Sacred Texts* (O'Flaherty 1979), and no contribution other than Lancaster's highlights 'canon' or 'canonicity.' It is only in 1979 that Lancaster begins to highlight the concept of 'canon' rather than that of 'scripture.' It is not unreasonable to suspect that Lancaster's new focus was driven by wider trends in religious studies and Biblical Studies stemming from Childs. Some may object that Buddhologists have long conceptualized Buddhist scriptural literature as a 'canon' analogous to Judeo-Christian scriptures, even investigating the date of the canon's 'closure' along the lines of Biblical scholars (See Rhys Davids 1893) Certainly, Chinese Buddhist literature was described as a 'canon,' by analogy to the 'Pāli Canon,' as early as 1923 (see Lévi 1923). However, Lancaster 1979 is the earliest Buddhological publication I am aware of that makes 'canonization' a central term of analysis and comparison—a curious coincidence.

[138] Lancaster 1979, 215.

[139] See especially Lancaster 1987, as well as Lancaster's preface to Wu 2016.

[140] I must stress that I do not claim that Lancaster has introduced the word 'canon' into Buddhist Studies (references to the 'Buddhist canon' or 'Pali canon' appear very early on; see fn.121 above); rather, his work appears to be the first place in Buddhology in which the concept of 'canon' itself becomes a topic of comparative theoretical concern.

make a few brief comments about discussions of 'canon' in literary studies, which I highlighted above as one of the major fields in which the 'canon conversation' is taking place.

From the early 1960s on, scholars of literature in the Anglosphere have been engaged in ongoing debates about the nature of literary criticism, the possibility of interpretation, and the proper university curriculum for literary studies. Since at least the early 80s, major segments of these debates have come to be understood as branches of 'the canon debate.' The term 'canon,' as used in literary studies, refers to the set of works culled from the overwhelming mass of our cultural products that should be taught to students in the university curriculum, either to assimilate students to a cultural and aesthetic norm, or to 'give voice to' and 'represent' the diverse constituents of our population. The 'canon debate' in literary studies, simply put, centers on which works should be included in the literary canon, how those works should be interpreted, and who should decide on these two questions.[141] As I explain elsewhere, this part of the canon conversation has much different origins than those native to theology, religious studies, and conceptual history.[142] The components of the canon debate in literary studies—what should be taught, how should it be interpreted, who should decide—certainly predate Childean canon criticism in theology; although the label 'canon debate' and the term 'literary canon' itself seem to postdate Childs' theological work, there is no clear evidence that literary scholars' adoption of these terms had anything to do with Childs. However, once these terms had become dominant in literary studies, the two branches of the 'canon conversation' swiftly became aware of one another. Literary scholars took greater interest in theology and religious studies than the latter did in literary studies, although influence, to some extent, has flowed both ways. For our purposes, focused as they are on the spheres of religious studies and conceptual history, the canon conversation in literary studies is most important as a case study, rather than as an interlocutor. In their approach to literary and cultural canons, literary theorists are more analogous to our *objects* of study—religious traditions and their exegetes—than they are to scholars of religion themselves. Like Buddhist hermeneutes, Christian commentators, or Confucian bibliographers, literary scholars find themselves primarily concerned with first-order questions about authoritative corpuses of literature: what should be in the corpus of authoritative texts (i.e., 'canon')? How should it be interpreted? Who should decide? Historians of religions, in contrast, are primarily interested in second-order questions: is the process of canonization dependent on sociological processes? What general philosophical questions can be retrieved by comparing different traditions of exegesis and canonization? Is 'canon' a valid comparative category? Later, we will revisit the canon conversation in literary studies in its capacity as a species of the genus 'hermeneutic/canonic activity.' For now, it suffices to note a curious philological fact: the evolution of the usage of the term 'canon' in literary studies is precisely parallel to the evolution of the term in Christian theology—it begins as a term meaning 'standard' or norm,' and ends as a term meaning 'set that exemplifies/constitutes a regulating ideal.' (For substantiation and further discussion of these claims, see Appendix C).

Conceptual History and 'Canon'

We are now in a position to discuss and critique 'canon studies' in the conceptual history wing of disciplines like Buddhist Studies. This discussion is predicated on recognizing the

[141] A small but vocal number of participants in this debate would add a fourth question: whether there should be a 'canon' at all. I ignore this question here.
[142] See Appendix C and Appendix D.

overlap between fields like classics, East Asian Studies, Buddhist Studies and Islamic Studies. To the layperson, these fields may appear unrelated. But as scholars in these areas are well aware, they are closely interrelated both genealogically and methodologically. All share deep roots in philology, or the study of how languages, in all their dimension, change over time—from the most minute elements, like orthography and punctuation, to standard linguistic features, like grammar, syntax, and vocabulary, to very high order phenomena, like philosophical concepts, rhetorical conventions, and literary genre. Some share direct genealogical filiations—Buddhist Studies, for example, originated as a branch of Indology, which originated in Greco-Roman classics; Islamic Studies originated in the philology of the Hebrew Bible.[143] And although each of these fields has a wide range of subfields devoted to variegated methodologies and political projects, each retains a wing broadly committed to philological practice as outlined above. Scholars in these 'philological' wings have referred to themselves with a variety of labels.[144] Since they have tended, over the past seventy years, to favor the investigation of changes in higher order dimensions of linguistic phenomena, especially 'philosophical concepts,' I will refer to them as 'conceptual historians.' Despite the diversity of their subject matter, they are united in the following methodological commitments:

> 1) Conceptual historians are interested in reconstructing historically specific linguistic meanings, i.e., how a word or sentence would have been understood at a specific moment, by a specific person or type of person. For example, they wish to retrieve how Cicero would have understood *religio*, or how a fifth-century Chinese Buddhist would have understood *chan* 禪. Almost all such historians believe that reconstructions of this kind are in principle possible, although they admit that the process is usually arduous and often precluded by paucity of evidence. This amounts to an anti-skeptical or non-critical hermeneutic stance toward meaning—language has definite meanings, and these meanings are sometimes retrievable across vast cultural and temporal divides. For this reason, conceptual historians often find themselves at odds with critical theorists and postmodernists, who tend to be semantic skeptics and cultural incommensurabilists.
>
> 2) Although language has definite, retrievable meanings, the recovery of these meanings is complicated by the fact that fragments of language change their meaning over time. Just because Descartes and Cicero both use the term *religio*—often in similar contexts—does not mean that they are referring to the same concept. Retrieving the meaning of *religio* in a passage of Descartes does not ensure that we have retrieved the meaning of *religio* in a passage of Cicero. In this sense, conceptual historians are non-dogmatic about particular meanings—it is ordinary and perhaps inevitable for the semantic content of language to shift, even

[143] For a thorough history of these fields as branches of philology, and for a survey of philology's role in the formation of the modern humanities, see Turner 2014.

[144] Scholars whom I consider conceptual historians refer to themselves in a variety of ways—'philologist,' 'intellectual historian,' 'historian of ideas,' and 'cultural historian' all come to mind. I avoid the term 'intellectual historian' because of the problems pointed out by Darnton. 'History of ideas' is discreditable because of its association with the conceptual Platonism of Arthur Lovejoy (See Lovejoy 1936). 'Cultural historian' is in-apt because it suggests a historian of 'popular culture,' which is obviously not the aim here. 'Philologist' is serviceable, but highly unfashionable.

if linguistic form is fixed. This commitment often placed the forebears of conceptual historians, the classical and Biblical philologists, in conflict with various dogmatic religious authorities who were invested in freezing not just the form but the content of religious texts.

3) The conceptual historian is committed to the principle that the meaning of language changes—it is historically conditioned. Similarly, they hold that instantiations of language, like texts, and physical manifestations of language, like manuscripts and books, are also historically conditioned. Over the course of its transmission, a text like the Gospel of Luke may change its form, either because of errors in reproduction or because of deliberate editorial intervention. Texts may be transmitted with erroneous accounts of their origins. Sometimes, they are even produced with the intent of being so transmitted—they are forgeries. In this commitment, too, conceptual historians are skeptics. Just because a text is presented, either by itself or its bearers, as an edict of the Emperor Constantine does not mean that it really originates in its received form from the hand of the real Emperor Constantine. Such claims must be tested and verified. The ancestors of conceptual historians, the philologists, also held this skeptical stance toward the received history of texts, and consequently often found themselves in the crosshairs of both secular and religious authorities.

4) Retrieving particular meanings requires placing their bearers—words and sentences—*in context*. Conceptual historians often disagree about what satisfactory contextualization entails, but it is always a complex process. Contextualization usually requires situating a sentence in the historically specific form of a larger piece of writing; this may demand interrogating and rearranging the received form of a text, thereby reconstructing its 'original' form, or its form at a particular moment of reception. This reconstructed text, in turn, must be read in relation to its broader genre, as well as in the context of contemporary polemical debates. Contextualization also requires understanding the social climate in which a text was produced, and reconstructing the expectations of the original author and reader. Finally, contextualization will entail careful etymological research—how was a word or phrase previously used? Does the inertia of its prior usages favor or contraindicate the possibility that it has taken on a particular novel meaning in the instance at issue? When is the earliest unambiguous usage of a word in a new sense? Much of a conceptual historian's labor consists of fulfilling this commitment to 'contextualization.'

5) Because of their commitment to linguistic and etymological contextualization, their skepticism about semantic continuity, and their skepticism about continuity of transmission, conceptual historians place a premium on consulting sources in their original languages and often in their original manuscript attestations. For the conceptual historian, a translation from the original language is always untrustworthy, and a transcription or reproduction of the original manuscript is always prone to error.

Practitioners of what I call 'conceptual history' share these five methodological commitments (albeit with varying degrees of emphasis). These five commitments allow us to identify commonalities between scholars working in very different fields, ranging from classics, to Buddhist studies, to the 'Cambridge School' of political intellectual history, to the German proponents of 'conceptual history' (*Begriffsgeschichte*).[145] They also allow us to place today's conceptual historians in a clear relationship with their philological forebears, from the German Biblical philologists of the eighteenth century to the Renaissance classicists.[146] Practitioners of conceptual history today often do not share a well-developed sense of this commonality; nevertheless, their community is evidenced by the fact that methodological critiques and innovations in one subject-area of conceptual history often filter quickly into the others. For

[145] The so-called 'Cambridge School' focuses on the history of early modern political thought, and is closely identified with Quentin Skinner and J.G.A. Pocock. The German school of 'conceptual history' focuses on the evolution of essential legal, philosophical, and cultural concepts in Western thought from early modernity through the Second World War. The magnum opus of this school is the encyclopedic *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* ('Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany;' see Brunner 1972–1997); its most representative member is the historian Reinhart Koselleck. Neither the Cambridge School nor the German conceptual historians are often connected to 'philology,' in part because they rarely partake of that stereotypical activity of philologists, the production of critical editions of manuscripts. This lack stems in part from the fact that both groups focus on the early modern period. Consequently, their sources tend to be relatively plentiful, in good condition, and in little need of supplementation with a formal philological apparatus. Nevertheless, no one familiar with the methodologies of Skinner (see Skinner 1969, Skinner 1972), Pocock (see Pocock 1957), or Koselleck (see Koselleck 2002, Koselleck 2011) will fail to recognize that they operate according to the five commitments described above. Skinner, in particular, has striven to explicitly articulate several of these principles as guiding lights for his methodology (see especially Skinner 1969). Perhaps because of the clarity with which Skinner specifies these principles, philologists/conceptual historians in other fields occasionally declare themselves to be 'Skinnerians' or adherents of the methodology of the Cambridge School. John Dunne, for example, nods to Skinner's approach in his monograph on Dharmakīrti (see Dunne 2004, 5). Joseph Walser does likewise in his study of the origins of Mahāyāna Buddhism (see Walser 2018, 6). When such avowals take place in fields with longstanding philological wings, like Buddhist Studies, we cannot help but find it ironic: the employment of philological methods in these fields long predates their articulation by Skinner and Koselleck. Unless scholars are adopting Skinner or Koselleck's more nuanced metaphysical views regarding the super-existence of concepts (and this is rarely what scholars wish to announce when they call themselves 'Skinnerians'), then they are mistaken in crediting their basic philological methodology to the Cambridge School or the German practitioners of *Begriffsgeschichte*. Philologists are not Skinnerians; rather, *Skinnerians are philologists*, if inordinately self-conscious and articulate ones. Indeed, one of the reasons for the preeminence of Skinner and Koselleck in their fields is that they made novel, forceful applications of philological methods to an area where they had rarely been used before—the history of early modern political thought. The novelty of this approach amounts to recognizing that the early scions of modern political theory (figures like Machiavelli, Hobbes, Boudin, Grotius, and Pufendorf) are as alien to the 20th and 21st century as Aristotle and Plato are to the Renaissance, the Gospels are to eighteenth-century Germany, the *ḥadīth* of Muhammad are to the Islamic 'Golden Age,' and the Mahāyāna sutras are to the modern Westerner. Philological method is always employed in response to the recognition of one's alienation from the authorities of one's own tradition. Skinner and Koselleck are adopters, not progenitors, of that method.

[146] The assumptions undergirding what I call 'conceptual history' are largely the same as those favored by earlier philologists, with one notable caveat. Earlier philologists did not labor under the shadow of the semantic skepticism propounded by 20th century critical theorists, postmodernists, and hermeneutic philosophers. As a result, they endeavored (naively, from the contemporary perspective) to use philological methods to reconstruct 'historical reality'—the real facts of the life of Jesus, for example. (The growing recognition in the late nineteenth century that this project had failed may, in part, have led to the rise of postmodern skepticism.) Today, therefore, very few conceptual historians would claim the reconstruction of historical reality as their goal. Instead, such historians purport to be reconstructing 'discourse' or 'concepts,' and they approach texts less as evidence for an external historical reality than as 'fossils' of linguistic discourse. See Silk 2002 for a parallel usage of the analogy between texts and fossils.

example, the 'principle of embarrassment'[147] originated in New Testament Studies[148] but has since thoroughly permeated the other subject-areas.[149] One such innovation, spreading rapidly today, is the idea that 'canon' is a fundamental concept of analysis in the toolkit of the conceptual historian. It is to this idea that we now turn.

As we have seen, the concept of 'canon' emerged as a scholarly fixation in the 1970s with the 'canonical approach' of the theologian Brevard Childs. In the midst of this 'canon conversation,' Jonathan Z. Smith introduced the term into religious studies, and the term also filtered into the conceptual history wings of fields like Buddhist Studies. Scholars in several such fields have since produced useful studies of the 'canon' of their various subject areas. David Kraemer and Moshe Halbertal have written on canon in Judaism,[150] Laurie Patton has edited a collection of papers on the Vedic canon,[151] Kendall Folkert has written an important article on 'canons' in Jainism,[152] Bruce Metzger, S.B. Chapman and David Brakke, among many others, have reflected on the origins of the canon of the New Testament,[153] Martin Kern has written on the 'canon' of early Chinese literary culture,[154] and Jonathan Brown has written a thoughtful study of the canon of Sunni *ḥadīth*.[155] And Arie van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn have edited a very useful volume on comparative 'canonization and decanonization,' with articles covering African religions, early Hebrew religion, Rabbinic Judaism, Early Christianity, Islam, East Asian Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism.[156]

Buddhologists are well-represented in this literature. With regard to East Asia, Paul Swanson has written on 'canonicity' and Tiantai Zhiyi,[157] L. Dolce has written on canonicity in Medieval Japanese sectarian Buddhism,[158] Jiang Wu and Lucille Chia have edited a volume on the Buddhist canon in East Asia,[159] and Tanya Storch has written on the formation of the Chinese Buddhist canon,[160] to say nothing of Lewis Lancaster's pioneering contributions.[161] Outside of East Asian Buddhism, Steven Collins has applied modern reflections on 'canon' to the Pali Canon,[162] Martin Seeger has documented controversies surrounding the Pali Canon in

[147] The 'principle of embarrassment' is an interpretive heuristic stating that when an author or discourse community would be embarrassed by a particular fact or account, but nevertheless insists on reproducing this fact or account, then that fact or account is likely to be true. A paradigmatic use-case for the principle of embarrassment is the crucifixion of Jesus—despite the fact that crucifixion was a shameful punishment reserved for the most repugnant criminals of the Roman world, all the Christian gospels agree that Christ was crucified. According to the principle of embarrassment, this suggests that the Crucifixion did in fact take place—there is no reason that early Christians would invent such an embarrassing episode for their Messiah. The Crucifixion must have, in fact, occurred, and they feel obliged to admit and explain it.

[148] See Porter 2004 for a history of this heuristic. The approach itself appears as early as the late 1800s, while the term 'principle/criterion of embarrassment' first appears in the 1990s.

[149] For a canonical employment of this principle in Buddhist Studies, see Nattier 2003, 63–66.

[150] Kraemer 1991, Halbertal 1997

[151] Patton 1994.

[152] Folkert 1989.

[153] Metzger 1987, Chapman 2003, Brakke 1994.

[154] Kern 2001.

[155] Brown 2007.

[156] Kooij and Toorn 1998. Kooij and Toorn's volume is one of the most significant attempts to place the canon concept at the heart of comparative religions.

[157] Swanson 1998.

[158] Dolce 1998.

[159] Wu 2016.

[160] Storch 2014 and Storch 2015.

[161] Lancaster 1979, 1981, 1987, and 2012.

[162] Collins 1990.

Thailand,[163] Mark Allon has written on canonical formation as portrayed in Gandhari manuscripts,[164] Ruixuan Chen has written on the Buddhist canon in Khotanese,[165] and Shimoda Masahiro has written a theoretical reflection on the relevance of the concept of canon for scholars of Indian Buddhism.[166] Both Jonathan Silk and Paul Harrison have written reflective encyclopedia articles on the concept of 'canon' in Buddhism.[167]

All of these authors, in using the term 'canon' the way that they do, owe a debt to the 'canon' conversation that began with Childs—it was through that conversation that the contemporary conception of 'canon' as a cross-cultural term of analysis emerged. This concept includes the idea that a 'canon' may be open or closed, that the 'formation' of a canon is an identifiable process, and that canons always have something to do with a norm or standard—a connection inscribed in the complex etymology of the term 'canon' itself.

Many, although not all, of the conceptual historians listed above acknowledge the general origins of their concept of 'canon.' Few reference Childs, although many cite Childs' collaborator Sheppard and his seminal distinction between 'canon 1' and 'canon 2.' Many also reference Smith's definition of a canon as a fixed list of things that 'bear obsession.' Some of these scholars have attempted to further specify and articulate the canon concept. Kendall Folkert, for example, complicates the distinction between Sheppard's 'canon 1' and 'canon 2,' pointing out that type-2 canons are their own "vector of religious authority," and often come to act as objects of ritual reverence, rather than texts to be interpreted. He further insists that the 'type-2 canon' is a primarily Protestant phenomena, and should used with extreme caution when considering non-Western and pre-Reformation religious traditions.[168] Moshe Halbertal proposes the principle that "canon and heresy are twins"—a canon is always defined against a heretical counter-canon.[169] He also suggests that the Principle of Charity—the interpretive principle whereby a text is assumed to be as coherent as possible—be used as measure for canonicity: "the degree of canonicity of a text corresponds to the amount of charity it receives in its interpretation."[170] Finally, in a brief article, Theo Hettema suggests that the defining feature of canonicity is the ability to fascinate—a point similar to Smith's observation that canons are lists of things that 'bear obsession.'[171]

The scholar of Islam Jonathan Brown has written the most lucid synthesis of these reflections on canon. Brown explicitly endorses many previous articulations of the canon concept, including Sheppard's, Folkert's, Smith's, and Halbertal's. He further stresses that canons are always intertwined with an interpretive community, and that such communities will always share a 'canonical culture.' Such a culture "trains readers or listeners to interpret a canonical text in a reverential manner and with suitable awe…and obliges readers to treat the canon with charity. Unlike grammar or linguistic convention in a speech community, however, a canonical culture cannot be taken for granted or unconsciously defended…A canonical culture

[163] Seeger 2007.
[164] Allon 2018.
[165] Chen 2021.
[166] Shimoda 2020.
[167] Silk, 'Canonicity.' Harrison
[168] Folkert 1989, 173. Folkert does not actually use the terms 'canon 1' and 'canon 2,' and he does not cite Sheppard. However, his typology maps exactly onto Sheppard's. Folkert's typology is quoted with approval in Jonathan Z. Smith's later reflection on the concept of canon, "Canons, Catalogues and Classics" (Smith 1998).
[169] Halbertal 1997, 5.
[170] Halbertal 1997, 28–29.
[171] Hettema 1998.

would demand that interpreters of the canon observe certain respectful formalities, accord the text and its authors the proper accolades and gloss over possible flaws."[172] Brown sees 'canon' as a fundamental comparative concept, writing, "Regardless of their specific qualities, canons can be studied as a unified phenomenon that appears when communities authorize certain texts, radically changing the ways they are interpreted and used."[173] In other words, canons and canonical culture can be identified and studied by a third-party observer: "Like a language…one can identify the rules of canonical culture and recognize certain violations of its grammar. By measuring the charity extended, one can observe the construction of a canonical culture as it seeks to cast a text, and perhaps even its author, in the best possible light. Once one gains a familiarity with this canonical culture, one can detect lapses and even perceive its participants interacting with its boundaries and demands."[174] For Brown, a constitutive feature of such a community is that it demarcates and maintains a *closed* canon—a fixed set of texts, with fixed rules of interpretation. Brown sees many of his predecessors in the canon conversation ('canon studies') as implicitly engaging in this sort of inquiry, and he applies it, with great effect, to the history of the Sunni *ḥadīth* canon.

Although he does not use these terms, the field and method of study that Brown identifies and refines might be referred to as 'canonics;' the comparison of different canonical cultures would be 'comparative canonics.' The field-cum-method of 'canonics' appears, at first glance, to promise great explanatory power—something like 'canon' and corollary concepts like 'canonization,' 'decanonization' and 'canonical culture' do appear at first glance to be cross-cultural, trans-temporal phenomena, especially in the cultural traditions we normally refer to as 'religions.' Indeed, at the beginning of this chapter, I gave a provisional statement of this dissertation's thesis in terms of canon, i.e., in the way that such a 'canonics' would demand. Nevertheless, I claimed that this canonic approach was unsatisfactory, and insisted on centering the concept of 'authority' instead. I will now explore why 'canonics,' although apparently promising, is in fact a red herring as a cross-cultural mode of analysis.[175]

Buddhism, Buddhology and Canon

We can begin to get a grasp on the inadequacy of the 'canonic' method by recognizing the ambivalence with which some Buddhologists have approached the term 'canon.' As Paul Harrison writes, "the concepts of canon and canonicity are especially problematic in Buddhism, given the wide geographical spread and great historical variety of the religion, together with the

[172] Brown 2007, 44.
[173] Brown 2007, 20.
[174] Brown 2007, 44.
[175] My rejection of canonics here may be misconstrued as an attack on Brown. In fact, Brown has given a careful, measured, and reasonable account of what canonic methodology can accomplish. He consistently restricts his application of this methodology to the history of the formation of the *ḥadīth* canon in Sunni Islam. ("The present study is neither theory-driven nor comparative. To the extent possible, the story of the ḥadīth canon must be read on its own." Brown 2007, 38.). And as Brown's exceptional study demonstrates, this methodology appears to be highly appropriate to that history. However, Brown also claims that this methodology is truly valid cross-culturally. ("[A]ny canon represents the interaction of text, authority and communal identification." Brown 2007, 38.) In making this claim, Brown is no doubt responding to figures like Sheppard and Smith, who both suggest that 'canon' *should* become the basis for a comparative methodology. I reject this claim. As I will show below, if we wish to make comparisons of the kind that Smith, Sheppard, and Brown have in mind, it will be necessary to resort to a concept that subsumes 'canon'—a higher order 'covering term.' I propose later that the appropriate 'covering term' is 'structures of authority.'

absence of any central authority."[176] He goes on to note that Buddhists recognize a vast swath of texts as authoritative, and that these texts are moreover organized into a broad array of corpuses. These corpuses (canons?) relate to each other in wildly divergent ways at different times and in different places. Like Lancaster, Harrison suggests that Buddhism has an 'open' canon. Unlike Lancaster, he recognizes that there is something fishy about this term: "Buddhism functioned from early on with what is almost a contradiction in terms, an 'open canon,' in which commonly accepted principles of authenticity take the place of a rigidly defined and bounded set of texts in a given linguistic form."[177] Jiang Wu shares some of Harrison's apprehensions. He wonders "whether the Chinese canon is simply a library, archive, or mere collection of a series of selected texts in comparison with the Western canonical traditions."[178] He is also ambivalent about the 'openness' of the canon, writing, "a close look at the canon formation process in East Asia revels that after the initial 'opening' phase of a few centuries, the Chinese canon appears to have reached a point of closure in the mid-eighth century with a series of attempts to create a standardized 'Register of Canonical Texts'…despite the fact that the canon has continued to grow, this core body has remained stable, without much alteration." Wu continues, "It is perhaps better to describe the Chinese canonical tradition as a dynamic interplay of openness and closure to avoid simplistic categorizations."[179] Wu, it seems, is undecided about whether the Chinese Buddhist canon is 'closed' or 'open,' and even about whether Chinese Buddhist scriptures comprise a 'canon' at all, as opposed to a mere 'archive' or textual corpus.

Wu and Harrison's problems with 'canon' cluster around the concept of 'closure.' Buddhist textual corpuses, it seems, have rarely been delimited as clearly as, say, the contemporary received corpus of Sunni *ḥadīth*, or the Bible of Martin Luther. The nearest approximation to a clear, 'closed' canon in the Buddhist world is the so-called Pali Canon of Theravada Buddhism, but Steven Collins has convincingly shown that this canon, too, is something of a mirage. At best, he writes, "the actual importance of the Pali Canon has not lain in the specific texts collected in that list [viz., the definitive, fixed set of scriptures promulgate in the first half of the first millennium by the monks of the Mahāvihāra], but rather in the *idea* of such a collection, the idea that one lineage has the definitive list of *buddha-vacana*."[180] As Silk's survey of 'canons' in the Buddhist world shows, it is the rule rather than the exception for Buddhists to lack an agreed upon fixed list of scriptures.[181] At a more basic level, Buddhist classical languages seem to lack a close analogue to the word 'canon' itself.[182] If almost no Buddhist community has had a closed list of scripture, or even an obvious term for 'canon,' can Buddhism be said to have a canon at all?[183]

At this point, it might be suggested that Buddhologists simply dispense with the canon concept. It is apparent (this line of argument holds) that we shall at least have to discard the notion of closure—Smith's idea of 'canon' as a 'closed list' clearly does not apply to Buddhism. Most major Buddhological engagements with the 'canon' concept flirt with this step, implicitly or explicitly—hence their tendency to refer to the Buddhist canon as 'open.' Perhaps we could

[176] Harrison 2004, 111.
[177] Harrison 2004, 112.
[178] Wu 2016, 35.
[179] Wu 2016, 37–38.
[180] Collins 1990, 82.
[181] Silk 2015.
[182] See Wu 2016, 35, and Lancaster 2012.
[183] See Salomon for an exhaustive overview of Buddhist 'canons.' One effect of Salomon's overview is to call into question the validity of the concept of canon for the study of Buddhism (Salomon himself raises this possibility).

adopt the stance that Folkert occupies in relation to Jain 'canons'—Buddhists do not have a 'canon 2' (a definite list of scriptures), but they do have a 'canon 1' (*rules* or *norms,* some of which govern the recognition of authentic Buddhist teachings). In this case, we could ignore the 'canonics' sketched by Brown entirely. Since that methodology assumes a closed canon, it is irrelevant to the study of Buddhism.

At the same time, it seems as if we cannot so easily escape the shadow of the 'canon' concept and its corollary, 'closure.' For even if Buddhists have never had a closed canon in practice, it is clear that, at crucial moments in the history of various Buddhist communities, the option of such a closure was on the table. For example, even as Collins deconstructs the idea of a closed Pali Canon, he substantiates the idea that such a closure became a powerful, politically important ideal for Theravadins. It is also noteworthy that Sheppard, without any substantial acquaintance with the example of Buddhist history, identifies the tension between 'norm of recognition' and 'normative set' as an inherent feature of 'canons,' and that this feature in fact appears in the history of Buddhism. It seems that 'canon,' despite its problems as a term of analysis, has some genuine cross-cultural purchase. How then, shall we proceed?

Authority: Canon, Criterion, Critic

We can resolve this conundrum by slightly shifting the angle of our lens of analysis. Throughout our discussion of 'canon,' another concept has been lurking in the background: the concept of 'authority.' Throughout the canon conversation, scholars have been repeatedly constrained to define 'canon' in terms of authority. For example, in Sheppard's seminal article on 'canon,' he eventually identifies two fundamental definitions of canon: a canon is a standard *or authority,* or it is an *authoritative* set of texts. Likewise, Brown repeatedly defines canon and canonical communities in terms of authority. Indeed, it is clear that the constitution of a canonical community is primarily a matter of establishing investing a particular set of texts with *authority* and establishing *authority* over interpretation.[184] Could it be that the confusion inherent to the canon conversation may stem, in part, from a failure to look more closely at this more fundamental concept?

If we redirect our attention to authority, I believe we will see that this concept—rather than the concept of 'canon'—provides much greater analytic power with much less cross-cultural confusion. (It will also allows us to use the concept of canon when necessary—but only when necessary.) Let us recognize, first, that the fundamental role of 'authority' is to provide a justification in argument.[185] When we talk about canon in Sheppard's sense of a 'set of authoritative texts,' we are talking, in part, about a set of texts that can act as justifications in an

[184] E.g., "Since the advent of the novel and the bourgeois tragedy in the eighteenth century, the fixed canon of classical literature has dissolved amid debate over which works of literature merit the title of masterpiece and who possesses the *authority* to pronounce them canonical" (Brown 2007, 23–24, emphasis mine). Also: "Through canonizing a set of texts, a tradition can deposit religious *authority* in a manageable and durable form. Later interpreters of that tradition can then bring the *authority* embodied in this canon to bear on new issues" (Brown 2007, 26, emphasis mine).

[185] It may be objected that authority, like 'canon,' is a concept with a specific historical genealogy that is limited in its cross cultural utility. It may be objected, too, that 'authority' is imprecise and vague, just like canon. I contest both of these objections in Appendix D. There, I attempt to show that the concept that operates under the sign 'authority' is, in fact, a constitutive feature of human experience. I also attempt to give a granular account of how this feature of human experience operates and how it can be analyzed. Throughout this dissertation, when I use the term 'authority,' I use it with the meaning explored and expounded in this appendix.

argument. The early Lutheran, for example, points to Biblical text as *justification* for the rejection of the efficacy of works—a passage from the Bible (because it is part of the set of *authoritative* scriptures)—can be employed as a final reason in relevant argument.[186] Likewise, many discussions about canon in Buddhism are often really discussions about what counts as authoritative for a particular tradition, not about defining a set or 'canon.' For example, does a passage from the *Saṃdhinirmocana Sutra* have authority over a practitioner in medieval China? If this issue is in dispute, who has the *authority* to decide? If two apparently authoritative texts conflict, who has the authority to resolve the dispute? If we wish to limit the set of texts that are authoritative for a particular group, what higher authority decides on and enforces the contents of that set? What *rule* or *reader* determines the content of the set of *buddhavacana*?

When we redirect our attention from canon to the more fundamental concept of 'authority,' we gain a vocabulary for analyzing religious history that is both much more flexible and much more concrete. We can move easily from discussions of texts or sets of texts to consideration of the readers or rules that use, reject, or delimit those texts. Indeed, I would suggest that many controversies and conflicts in the history of any given religious tradition cannot be understood except as disputes over the *locus* of authority—the question of what person, text, or image has the power to serve as a final reason in a given field of discourse.[187]

At the same time, foregrounding 'authority' allows us to salvage a useful (though limited) concept of 'canon.' Let us stipulate that a canon is a set of authoritative texts; let us emphasize, too, that such a set of authoritative texts *always* presupposes external authorities that define the set—authoritative *rules* or *readers*. (Below, I will call authoritative rules 'criteria,' and authoritative readers 'critics.') With this cluster of concepts in mind, we might attain a fresh understanding of the concept of 'closure' as well. When historians of religion talk about 'closing' a canon, they are really identifying a moment in which the authority that constitutes a canon relocates from one criterion or critic to another, or a moment in which the constitutive criterion/critic is made explicit for the first time. And when we find a historical agent 'closing' a

[186] See Simpson 2007.

[187] If Buddhology cannot dispense with 'canon' and 'closure,' the project of 'canonics' also cannot easily ignore the insights of Buddhology and other non-Western traditions. If canonics wishes to maintain comparative purchase outside of the Abrahamic religions, it, too, must modify or demote the idea of 'closure' and 'canon' and recognize the priority of the concept of 'authority.' And, indeed, such a recognition will assist canonics with some of its perennial problems. For example, scholars of comparative canonics have long recognized that the 'closing' of a 'canon' tends to immediately shift religious focus away from the canon onto commentarial literature and hermeneutical rules, thereby vacating the practical authority of the canonized literature. In parallel to this process, whenever a community comes to view a canon as 'closed,' it tends to begin 'articulating' the canon—subdividing it into sub-canons, silently focusing on specific parts of the canon to the exclusion of others (a 'practical' canon), or explicitly promoting a core part of the canon over the others ('canon-within-a-canon'). Those, like Brown, who adopt 'canonic' methodology as it currently stands (with its assumption that canon-formation yields a closed canon and that canonical cultures work to promulgate and maintain such closure), lack a way of satisfactorily accounting for these phenomena. Sometimes, they ignore these patterns in the development and reception of canons. Other times, they attempt to account for these processes by describing them (vaguely) as openings or re-openings of the canon. These complications can be easily dealt with by placing processes of opening and closing canon in the larger framework of shifts in a tradition's structure of authority. The ascendency of commentarial literature and hermeneutic theory reflects the displacement of the authority of a set of texts onto the rules that define it (i.e., authority relocates from 'canon' to 'criterion'). Likewise, the sudden prominence achieved by the custodians of a set of texts reflects the relocation of authority onto a reader or group of readers (i.e., authority relocates from 'canon' to 'critic'). Such relocations are natural parts of the development of any given structure of authority, and giving a history of a particular cultural tradition consists (largely) of charting these relocations.

canon, we are really witnessing an arrogation of authority that had previously resided somewhere else.

It is in precisely this way that we should understand the controversy surrounding Xinxing and his teachings. As I hope to show in the following chapter, Xinxing's mature writings constitute an attempt to more precisely define the set of authoritative texts in Chinese Buddhism—an attempt, in a sense, to 'close' a canon of Buddhist scripture for the first time in China. Such gambits are always controversial. They are, after all, attempts to modify the structure of authority in a cultural tradition—and a shift in a structure of authority always entails winners and losers, material and symbolic triumphs and defeats. As we shall see, Xinxing's intervention in the structure of authority of Chinese Buddhism initially rendered him politically and religiously ascendant; later his followers fought tooth and nail to protect that ascendance by proposing their own renovations to Buddhism's structure of authority.

Chapter Three: Xinxing's Thought and Writings

As our introduction shows, modern scholarship on Xinxing and the Three Levels movement has treated the history of the movement at some length. There is now a critical mass of secondary scholarship (especially Japanese- and Chinese-language scholarship) on the life of Xinxing, the identity of his major followers, and the profile of their religious and political activity over the course of the Sui and Tang. The study of the thought of Xinxing and his followers has also advanced significantly since the discovery of Three Levels texts at Dunhuang and in Japan, although this aspect of the movement is less well-understood than the history of its institutions and devotees. Yabuki, Hubbard, Nishimoto, and Zhang Zong have done considerable work in reconstructing the major doctrines, practices, and institutional ideals of Xinxing and his followers. This work relies both on contemporary discursive accounts of or attacks on Xinxing and the Three Levels (materials like biographies, letters, and epitaphs), as well as on the contents of Xinxing's own texts. There is a significant imbalance in volume between these two types of sources. Xinxing's extant texts dwarf the discursive accounts, running to well over a hundred thousand characters. The discursive accounts, in contrast, amount to a few thousand. However, if we look at the way in which modern scholars have used these two types of sources, we will find that the imbalance shifts in the other direction. Some scholars privilege the discursive accounts, sometimes ignoring the content of Xinxing's writings entirely.[188] Very often, when Xinxing's writing is consulted, it is interpreted through the lens of external discursive accounts of Xinxing's thought. There is a very good reason for this. The writings of Xinxing are not straightforward. Their structure is complex, their phrasing is strange and laden with jargon, and their motivation and general argument is, quite often, frustratingly opaque. The rebarbative nature of Xinxing's writings was explicitly noted as early as the Kamakura period, when the Japanese scholar-monk Gyōnen 凝然 (1240–1321 C.E.), after consulting Three Levels texts at Tōdaiji, lamented that "their meaning is hard to discern, and their central point is hard to grasp."[189] Consequently, as modern scholars have reconstructed the history and thought of the Three Levels movement, the voluminous writings of its founder have not taken on the central role that might be expected. Although the most significant treatments of Three Levels thought and practice—those of Yabuki, Hubbard, and Nishimoto—delve deeply into Xinxing's writings, many blank spots remain. Apart from the interpretation of certain problematic words and phrases, there are large, outstanding questions that await an answer: what is the reason for the strange style and structure of many of Xinxing's texts? Do the individual texts serve a cohesive overarching project and, if so, what is the nature of that project? Is the nature of Xinxing's writing related to the controversy that surrounded him and his followers?[190]

In this chapter, I will place Xinxing's writings front and center and attempt to answer these questions, at least partially. In doing so, I will of course draw heavily on the work of previous scholars. My attempt to read Xinxing's writings in their own terms will be greatly aided by evidence from texts by Xinxing preserved at the Jinchuanwan cave shrine. Scholarly recognition of this evidence postdates the major monographs on Xinxing's thought by Yabuki,

[188] See, e.g., Yang 2017.

[189] 義意難見。宗旨難得。(T.2339.72.384a5.)

[190] The most extensive engagement with Xinxing's writings to date can be found in Nishimoto 1998, 239–406. My own account of Xinxing's thought is deeply indebted to this foundational work.

Hubbard, and Nishimoto;[191] consideration of the Jinchuanwan texts will therefore allow me to push my account of Xinxing's project beyond the seminal work of those scholars.

To anticipate my own conclusions, I will suggest that Xinxing's project (evident from his earliest writings to his latest) consisted of an attempt to isolate teachings from Buddhist scripture that remained effective for the degraded beings of sixth-century China. This project seems to have shifted over time; by Xinxing's death, it had assumed an especially rigid, imposing form—one that assumed that scripture, while the sole means of access to the salvific powers of the Buddha, was itself exceptionally dangerous. In his mature texts, Xinxing seems to have undertaken not just to identify but to *quarantine* the teachings and practices appropriate for his followers. Xinxing developed both a method for identifying these teachings in scripture and a genre of text that presented these teachings to the reader in isolation, separated from dangerous, inappropriate teachings. In tandem, Xinxing theorized a taxonomy of Buddhist practitioners that explained the nature and limitations of the community he imagined would use his texts. Like Xinxing's collection of appropriate teachings, this community of intended practitioners needed to be separated and isolated from other kinds of Buddhists. In his final formulations, Xinxing used the term 'Three Levels' (*sanjie* 三階) to refer to both his taxonomy of scripture and his taxonomy of practitioners. Xinxing saw his writings as, primarily, a presentation of the teachings of the lowest level, the Third Level; his followers, likewise, were beings of the Third Level. We might say that Xinxing's ultimate aim was to produce a closed canon of Buddhist teachings, and to found a closed community composed of the practitioners for which that canon was intended. Xinxing's mature writings are instantiations *cum* justifications of this project.

The prominent place that scripture, rather than practice, takes in my description of Xinxing's thought may surprise some readers. Outside of a small pool of Three Levels specialists, scholars have generally treated Xinxing and his followers as fundamentally oriented toward practice;[192] the Three Levels is usually seen as distinctive, influential, and controversial because of its unique institutions and program of practice. Xinxing indeed advocates for certain extreme practices, and his followers were associated with certain unusual institutions and forms of monastic organization. I would suggest, however, that Xinxing's distinctive attitude toward the authority of scripture is *as* if not *more* important than his well-known program of practice; in fact, Xinxing's endorsement of particular practices may have been subsidiary to his idiosyncratic understanding of how to use and interpret Buddhist scripture. I would further suggest that Xinxing's treatment of scripture represented a decisive attempt to stave off a looming crisis of scriptural authority in sixth-century Chinese Buddhism. Xinxing's project should thus be seen as a peer and rival to better-studied systems like *panjiao* exegesis, Pure Land praxis, and renewed programs of scriptural translation. In this fervent atmosphere of crisis and innovation, Xinxing stands alone for his insistence on the supremacy of scriptural authority and for his obsessive quest to achieve certainty in scriptural interpretation. In the context of Sui-Tang Chinese Buddhism, these distinctive features of Xinxing's thought proved electrifying. It was Xinxing's attitude toward scripture—far more than any particular program of practice—that set Xinxing

[191] Nishimoto has done important work on portions of this newly discovered material. See, e.g. Nishimoto 2012.
[192] Lin 1980, an article that has served as the introduction to the Three Levels for many Chinese scholars, opens by saying, "The Three Levels movement took austerities and *kṣānti* as the main idea of their sect" (355). The fanciful description of the Three Levels movement in Ch'en 1964—which has functioned for English-language scholarship much as Lin 1980 functions for Chinese-language scholarship—similarly stresses that the Three Levels was a praxis-oriented group. Hubbard 2001, while finely attuned to Xinxing's literary activities, consistently foregrounds his program of practice and his institutional reforms.

and his followers apart from their peers, attracting admiration, influence, vitriol, controversy, and suppression.

Some Obstacles to Thinking and Writing About Xinxing

In analyzing Xinxing's thought and writing, we confront several obstacles that make it difficult to give a clear, concise, and straightforward account. Before proceeding to a more detailed consideration of Xinxing's thought, it will be useful to acknowledge these obstacles and dispose of them if possible. There are four main obstructions: the opaque style and structure of many of Xinxing's texts, internal inconsistencies in Xinxing's thought resulting from its development over time, distorted or one-sided presentations of Xinxing's thinking in the writing of his later followers, and misreadings or misunderstandings of Xinxing's project on the part of outside observers (pre-modern and modern).

Obstacle One: Opaque Structure and Style of Xinxing's Writings

The first obstacle has already been noted: Xinxing's texts are stylistically and structurally unusual. Consequently, as Gyōnen once pointed out, "their meaning is hard to discern, and their central point is hard to grasp."[193] The opacity of Xinxing's writing makes itself felt on several fronts. The most immediate is its structure. Many of Xinxing's texts take the format of a 'branching list.' Such a 'branching list text' begins with a list of its own main sections (in Xinxing's writings, these sections are usually called *duan* 段). It then proceeds to restate the heading of the first main section, which usually contains several subsections; the headings of these subsections will then be listed. It will then proceed to restate the heading of the first subsection, which, again, may contain several subsubsections; these subsubheadings will then be listed. This process may continue for many iterations until, finally, we reach the end of a branch. When a branch terminates, the text returns to the lowest order subheading that remains unexpounded, and begins the process again. When mapped out, the structure of such a text resembles a file directory rather than the linear outline of the chapters of a book.

The branching list format is common in the Buddhist writings of East Asia, particularly in scholastic texts like commentaries and treatises. Many of Xinxing's branching list texts, however, are exceptionally complex, containing thousands of termini and branches that are ten or more subsections 'deep.' Moreover, Xinxing sometimes refrains from embedding any discursive content at all in these branches—they are simply long chains of headings and subheadings. Generally, the termini of such branches are not discursive remarks, either—instead, they are citations or paraphrases of scripture. Because Xinxing gives so little discursive explanation of the specific meaning or general importance of these terminal citations, the significance of these terminal items must be inferred from the headings of the sections, subsections, and subsubsections within which they are nested. To give a sense of the experience of trying to make sense of such a text, consider the following example—a nearly complete branch extracted from one of Xinxing's best preserved texts, the *Practice Matched to Capacities*:[194]

[193] See fn. 189 above.
[194] See discussion of this text below, ##.

[1] 第一大段明能行人者，於內有兩子段。一者明驗能行人普別兩根分齊義。二者明能行人見所行法及時節分齊義。
First main section: the person who practices. Herein, there are two subsections. One: evidence for the principle of the parameters of the two kinds of faculties—particular and universal—for the person who practices. Two: the principle of the parameters by which the person who practices sees the teaching practiced, and the time [in which it takes place].
…[*In order to present just one branch of this branching list, I omit 1.1 {'the two kinds of faculties'} and all its subordinate sections, proceeding directly to 1.2*]
[1.2] 第二段明能行人見所行法及時節分齊義者，於內有七種。
Second: the principle of the parameters by which the person who practices sees the teaching practiced, and the time [in which it takes place]. Herein, there are seven kinds. [
…[*Omitting 1.2.1, 1.2.2, and proceeding directly to the 'third kind,' 1.2.3*]
[1.2.3] 三者，二種出世境，於內有二種。
Three: the two kinds of transmundane objects. Herein, there are two kinds.
…[*Omitting 1.2.3.1, and proceeding directly to the 'second kind,' 1.2.3.2*]
[1.2.3.2] 二者，行普，有七段。
Two: the practice of the universal, which has seven sections.
…[*Omitting 1.2.3.2.1–1.2.3.2.3, and proceeding directly to the 'fourth section,' 1.2.3.2.4*]
[1.2.3.2.4] 四者，普大、普小。
Four: the universally greater, and universally lesser.
[1.2.3.2.4.1] 普大者，於他身內，莫問大小俱作大乘菩薩解。何以故。如像法決疑經說，制諸比丘不作諸惡，唯除菩薩利益眾生。是故於他身內，莫問善惡俱作大乘解。[195]
The universally greater: with regard to others, regardless of whether they are greater or lesser, one understands them to be bodhisattvas of the greater vehicle. What of it? As the *Scripture on Resolving Doubts in the Semblance Dharma* explains, "Restrain the evil *bhikṣus* from performing evil, with the exception of the bodhisattvas when they benefit beings." Thus, with regard to others, whether it is good or evil, we understand them to be [of] the Greater Vehicle.

Based on the structure of the *Practice Matched to Capacities* as a whole, as well as the relationship of this text to Xinxing's other writings, we can form some understanding of what the terminal item at 1.2.3.2.4.1 means: Xinxing is saying that his followers should practice a form of universal reverence in which they view others, regardless of their phenomenal qualities, as Mahāyāna bodhisattvas; he further specifies that evidence for the nature of this practice, as well as its suitability, comes from the text *Scripture on Resolving Doubts in the Semblance Dharma*.[196] However, if we view item 1.2.3.3.2.4.1 in isolation, it makes very little sense. Even when we consider the entire branch of which 1.2.3.3.2.4.1 is a terminus, we find ourselves somewhat disoriented without the broader context of the *Practice Matched to Capacities* as a whole. The branching structure of texts like the *Practice Matched to Capacities* makes them

[195] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 127–130.
[196] *Xiangfa jueyi jing* 像法決疑經 (T.2870).

challenging subjects around which to build arguments and write analyses. In the course of such argument, it is naturally necessary to present quotations from these texts to the reader; as the above example shows, however, extracting such a quotation from its context tends to render it almost meaningless. In my presentation of Xinxing's thought, I will do my best to mitigate this problem by summarizing the context of each quotation. I regret that such a summary cannot stanch the loss of meaning entirely.[197]

Besides their structure, Xinxing's writings are opaque at the level of the sentence. Xinxing's writings often contain phrases that are much longer than normal Sinitic sentences; such phrases are usually composed of long compounds that stretch the grammar of literary Sinitic. For example, consider the following sentence from the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*:

> 莫問歸一切三寶、度一切眾生、斷一切惡、學一切善、解行等多少，乃至未得法忍已來，皆悉普常一向唯得純徧學同一切世間內一切第三階佛法內。[198]
> Regardless (莫問) of the extent (多少) of their understanding and practice (解行) of [matters like] taking refuge in all Three Jewels (歸一切三寶), liberating all beings (度一切眾生), cutting off all evil (斷一切惡), and studying all that is wholesome (學一切善), so long as (乃至) they[199] have yet to attain (未得) the patience [arising from knowledge of the non-arising of] dharmas (法忍), then they all (皆悉), universally (普), are only and ever (常一向唯) permitted the pure, exclusive study (得純徧學) of what accords with (同) what is entirely mundane (一切世間內) and entirely within the fold of the buddha-dharma of the third level (第三階佛法內).

From the perspective of literary Sinitic and even Buddhist Chinese, this sentence has several alarming features. These include its overall length, the string of modifiers (皆悉普常一向唯) preceding the auxiliary verb (得), the inordinate space intervening between 'regardless' (莫問) and 'of the extent' (多少), and the use of what at first glance appear to be long adjectival phrases (一切世間內, 一切第三階佛法內) as nominal compounds.[200] Xinxing's later work is filled with sentences similar in construction and grammar to this one. Because of their length and unusual construction, even modern language translations of such sentences can be difficult to parse—they do not make for easy reading. Unfortunately, such sentences appear in many passages crucial to my argument and will be cited at length throughout this chapter. (To facilitate understanding of these passages, I will frequently embed the Chinese in my translation as a gloss

[197] To some extent, all scholars working on pre-modern scholastic or commentarial literature confront this problem, especially those working on Chinese Buddhism. Many Chinese Buddhist scholastic texts are written in the branching list format. Xinxing's branching list texts, however, are often especially complex in structure, rich in jargon, and lacking in any discursive content, rendering this problem unusually acute.

[198] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 260.

[199] Xinxing is referring to beings of the lowest capacity; this sentence is one in a long string of phrases explaining some of the qualities of these beings. The grammatical subject 'they' is carried over from this previous string of phrases.

[200] The unusual grammatical and lexical features of Xinxing's later writings deserve further research. It is possible that some of these features reflect vernacular speech—biographical sources suggest that Xinxing composed some of his texts by dictation. As with many pre-modern Chinese Buddhist exegetes, it is likely that at least some of Xinxing's extant texts originated in notes taken by disciples of his lectures or oral instructions.

on my parsing of the sentence, as I did in the example above. For the sake of space and fluidity of reading, I will refrain from providing this embedded gloss in every translation.)

Finally, Xinxing's texts are also sometimes perplexing at the level of the individual word. Xinxing uses common words in unusual ways.[201] He also draws from a wide repertoire of technical terms and jargon unique to his writing (e.g., he often refers to his followers as 'mute-sheep monks,' *yayang seng* 瘂羊僧,[202] a descriptor unique to Xinxing). Although Xinxing's idiolect can be daunting to the uninitiated, it is much less of a problem than his texts' unusual grammar and structure. Given the large corpus of writings by Xinxing, we can decipher the meaning of most of his individual technical usages, no matter how strange.[203] Nevertheless, Xinxing later texts are especially dense with jargon. (For reasons of space, when I present quotations of Xinxing's texts in this chapter, I will gloss his technical terminology only when necessary to the argument.)

Thus, Xinxing's texts present certain difficulties at the level of structure, sentence, and even individual word. These difficulties pose challenges to the scholar writing about Xinxing's texts—when removed from their context, individual passages will often appear meaningless, and in many cases the grammar and terminology of these passages require a significant commentarial apparatus to understand. I will try to ameliorate these difficulties in the ways described above, though they cannot be completely eliminated. I beg the reader's patience: although Xinxing's articulation of his ideas is far from inviting, the ideas themselves, insofar as they can be reconstructed, are often unusual and interesting. As we shall see, Xinxing's final writings touch on topics that modern readers are likely to find philosophically compelling—how to repair a failing source of authority, how to achieve certainty in the midst of radical doubt, and how to tie inferences to premises that are certain. And although one might not guess it from their off-putting presentation, these texts were highly popular, influential and controversial in medieval China. They were copied and celebrated. Devotees took the trouble of having some of them carved, in their entirety, in stone.[204] And their author was, at points, hailed as a Buddha. Xinxing's thought demands the attention of historians, despite the opacity of the texts in which it is preserved.

Apart from the difficulties that Xinxing's writings pose to presenting Xinxing's thought to readers, it is worth making a brief note about the challenges these texts pose to scholars themselves. The opacity attendant on the texts' structures, sentences, and individual words all make the process of reconstructing Xinxing's thought challenging. The 'branching list' structure of Xinxing's presents especially pressing philological problems. When we possess complete branching list texts by Xinxing, we can consider the entire text and map the complete structure; even so, it is sometimes difficult to maintain a grip on the implicit argument of such unwieldy texts. In many cases, however, we do not possess the complete text—substantial portions may be damaged, in which case we may 'lose the thread' of the branching lists and become unable to

[201] See 'Certain Teachings, Uncertain Teachings,' below.
[202] See Benn 2010 on Xinxing's use of this term.
[203] The necessity of such deciphering should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with pre-modern scholastic literature, particularly of the Chinese variety. To some extent, all Chinese Buddhist scholiasts developed and employed idiosyncratic jargon as a way of distinguishing themselves from peers and rivals and signaling their own mastery. Xinxing's use of jargon should be seen in this light. The most comprehensive treatment of Xinxing's technical terminology can be found in Nishimoto 1998. The fourth chapter of that work, "The Basic Structure of Three Levels Thought" (三階教思想の基本構造), can be read as a primer on or encyclopedia of essential technical terms in Xinxing's writings. (See Nishimoto 1998, 226–406.)
[204] See Ledderose 2020.

reconstruct the entire structure. It is especially disastrous when the first portion of a text is missing—the initial passages of a branching list text contain the outline of the texts' main sections; this outline is usually not reproduced elsewhere in the text, and hence it becomes impossible to know how many main sections there were and where, in the general structure, an individual subsection is located.[205] Thus, from the perspective of the philologist, branching list texts have an exceptionally delicate structure; this structure makes them vulnerable to the vagaries inherent in stitching together lost texts from damaged manuscripts. The fact that Xinxing's most important texts were written in this format, combined with the fact that they are often only attested by partial manuscripts, means that reconstructing his thought is an always tentative and, at points, futile endeavor. The endeavor is only made more difficult by the strangeness of Xinxing's grammar and his ample use of unique jargon. In the absence of specific commentarial explanations of difficult points and the lack of a living transmission of Xinxing's teachings, many passages in Xinxing's works will likely remain impossible to meaningfully decipher. All scholars who have attempted to study Xinxing's writings and thought have been constrained by these challenges to proceed tentatively and provisionally, with the awareness that some of what they say will later found to be in error. Naturally, my attempt to reconstruct Xinxing's thought is similarly constrained, and should be read as similarly provisional.

Obstacle Two: Internal Inconsistencies in the Xinxing Corpus

Another obstacle to understanding 'Xinxing's thought' is that Xinxing's thought, as preserved in extant writings, does not appear to be a singular, fully-formed system. Over the course of Xinxing's fifty-four years, his ideas clearly changed considerably. On certain points, his texts contradict or abrogate one another. A generous interpretation of this situation might hold that the inconsistencies we find in Xinxing's writings are the natural result of a multi-stage and highly inventive career as a Buddhist teacher. It is obvious that a thinker's views will evolve and shift over their lifetime, and we might assume that the literary remains of some of Xinxing's peers, like Zhiyi and Jizang, were originally as multifarious. The work of these thinkers, however, seems to have been pruned, edited, and tidied after their deaths, such that their received works demonstrate greater internal coherence than the Xinxing corpus.[206] Xinxing's writings apparently come to us 'uncontaminated' by this postmortem process of tidying up.[207] It is even possible that the manuscripts and manuscript families now recognized by scholars as the writings of Xinxing are in fact witnesses to several distinct textual traditions, each purporting to convey Xinxing's original compositions. The existence of competing transmissions would only have exacerbated existing discrepancies in Xinxing's original body of work, leading to the present state of his corpus.

A more pointed interpretation of the inconsistencies in these texts might suggest that Xinxing was an especially frenetic thinker, trying out any idea that seemed as if it could solve the spiritual problems facing sixth-century Chinese Buddhists, regardless of their consistency or

[205] Our current edition of the *Practice Matched to Capacities* suffers from this defect—no text witness preserves the text's opening passages. Consequently, we cannot reconstruct its overall structure.
[206] Cf., e.g., Penkower 1997.
[207] This may stem in part from the fact that Xinxing apparently left behind neither a clear successor nor a single cohesive community at his death. Institutions that Xinxing founded or was associated with carried on after his passing, and individuals claiming to be followers of Xinxing and his teachings appear in historical records until the end of the eighth century. However, these institutions and followers do not seem to have formed a single, coherent movement.

coherence. Such an interpretation has the benefit of allowing us to understand the staggering array of theories, institutional arrangements, and practices associated with Xinxing's name. Biographical sources suggest that Xinxing engaged in a wide variety of sometimes contradictory practices—some suggest that he abandoned the full monastic precepts, was unable to meditate or lecture because of ill health, was able to and accomplished in meditation, and founded a unique form of monastic community;[208] Xinxing's own writings find him instituting unique rules of monastic discipline, declaring that meditation is the only secure basis for monastic practice, reorganizing Buddhist scripture, introducing the thitherto unknown practice of 'universal reverence,' codifying repentance rituals, and advocating for the radically austere practices known as *dhutaṅgas*. If we adopt this less generous interpretation, we will be compelled to consider that Xinxing's corpus contains inconsistencies because he made no effort to avoid contradiction—he tried anything and everything that might be effective.

Based on my reading of Xinxing's extant texts, I lean toward the more generous interpretation, though I do allow that Xinxing's early career and early writings seem to bear witness to a man hounded from one extreme of religious practice to the next. Some problems in the Xinxing corpus can be resolved by stratifying his texts chronologically—texts that are clearly early are distinct in their approach from texts that are clearly later. (I explain the details of this chronological division below.) In that sense, the corpus indeed bears witness to a thinker in motion. That motion is not simply frenetic, random, and desperate, however. Xinxing's mature texts pluck out threads already present in his early writings and weave them into a textual system that is, in broad outline, remarkably coherent. These later works contain many minor discrepancies in terminology, but also evince a general unity in terms of structure, theme, and overarching goal. It is easy to imagine that, had Xinxing's writings fallen into the hands of a sole custodian, or had the transmission of his texts continued past the Tang and become monopolized by one or more clearly defined lineages, the discrepancies in these later works would have been ironed out by furtive editing or commentarial intervention; the earlier works, perhaps, would have been discreetly modified, concealed, or destroyed, yielding a self-consistent corpus of texts.

Obstacle Three: Distortion by Xinxing's Followers

At Xinxing's death in 594, he appears to have had a significant number of followers, including laypeople, other monastics (some quite well-connected and prestigious), and government officials. After his death, some of these followers clearly continued his work under their own initiative, and people born long after Xinxing's death referred to themselves and others as devotees of Xinxing and his teachings. Institutions associated with or founded by Xinxing also remained in operation, in some cases for centuries. And Xinxing's texts continued to be transmitted until the end of the Tang dynasty, and even later in Japan and Korea. Modern scholars have sometimes described the enduring activities centered on Xinxing as the 'Three Levels Movement' (*sanjie jiao* 三階教), giving the impression that Xinxing presided over and left behind a unitary, coherent organization.[209] This is misleading—Xinxing left no obvious successor and there is no clear evidence that a single person or institution monopolized his legacy. In the absence of decisive evidence to the contrary, it is safest to assume that the enduring activity surrounding Xinxing and his legacy was maintained and advanced by a diverse

[208] See Nishimoto 1998, 25–65.
[209] Some imperial edicts related to Xinxing's texts and followers also give this impression. See Nishimoto 1998, 130–137..

and decentralized set of actors, sometimes with tenuous or hostile relationships to one another, and sometimes with no mutual connection at all beyond a shared devotion to Xinxing.[210]

These followers of Xinxing produced texts of their own, some of which are still extant. Some of these texts are commentaries on texts by Xinxing; others draw on or expand on Xinxing's ideas; still others represent polemical defenses of Xinxing, his texts, or his purported successors. Because these texts (like the texts of Xinxing himself) were excluded from standard transmissions of Chinese Buddhist literature, they afford a rawer and more unvarnished look at the landscape of Chinese Buddhism in the seventh and eighth centuries than one is accustomed to find in the texts of the Taishō canon. The textual heritage of Xinxing's followers also provides invaluable evidence for the legacy of Xinxing's life and ideas. I would suggest, however, that it is a mistake to accept these texts as unbiased or especially privileged expositors of Xinxing's own writings. Xinxing's followers clearly had their own agendas, distinct from Xinxing's own. Later commentaries on Xinxing's texts invariably emphasize certain aspects of Xinxing's writings over others. Judging by divergences in the points of emphasis of these texts, it would appear that different groups of followers focused on different parts of Xinxing's corpus—some focused on the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*, others on Xinxing's writings on the Inexhaustible Storehouse, and still others on Xinxing's compilations of teachings matched to faculties. Although these texts are important sources for the history of the reception of Xinxing's writings, they are not necessarily reliable witnesses to the actual content of those writings. In my presentation of Xinxing's thought, I will try as much as possible to avoid reference to the testimony of the writings of Xinxing's later followers.

Obstacle Four: Misreadings by Outsiders, Pre-Modern and Modern

Xinxing's followers were not the only people reading and writing about Xinxing and his thought. At the time of his death, Xinxing was one of the most prominent monks in Sui China; naturally, many people who did not consider themselves Xinxing's devotees took notice of Xinxing's career, wrote about his activities, and produced their own representations of his thought. These 'outside observers' included monastic biographers, rivals of Xinxing and his followers, bibliographers, and government officials; in their attitude toward Xinxing, they vary from mildly laudatory to studiously neutral to overtly hostile. These outside reports comprise the bulk of the 'discursive accounts' I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. As with the writings of Xinxing's followers, we should not assume that these sources faithfully represent Xinxing's ideas. Consequently, we should be extremely cautious in how we use these external sources. With access to Xinxing's own writings, we can see that some of these outside observers indeed render accurate portrayals of Xinxing's thought (although such portrayals are often too concise to allow for a real reconstruction of Xinxing's thought in the absence of Xinxing's own texts). For example, the author of the *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀, Fei Changfang 費長房 (fl. 6th century), is famous for including inaccurate, distorted, and outright deceptive bibliographic information in his scriptural catalogue. However, the brief biography of Xinxing that he appends to his catalogue entries for Xinxing's texts appears, in the light of Xinxing's own writings, to give a very fair synopsis of Xinxing's methodology.[211] Some of these external sources, however,

[210] For this reason, I generally avoid casual use of the term 'Three Levels Movement.' See discussion in Chapter Four, fn. 374.

[211] 信行此途，亦是萬衢之一術也。但人愛同惡異，緣是時復致譏。此錄並引經論正文，而其外題無定准的。雖曰對根起行幽隱，指體標牓於事少潛。來哲儻詳幸知有據。

are quite misleading. The mid-Tang exegete Fazang 法藏 (643–712), for example, describes Xinxing as the promulgator of a *panjiao* 判教 system based on a division between the One Vehicle and the Three Vehicles described in the *Lotus Sutra*. In Fazang's description, the followers of the 'Three Vehicles' study 'particular' (*bie* 別) teachings and proceed from one to another gradually, while the followers of the 'One Vehicle' study 'universal' (*pu* 普) teachings that subsume all others.[212] Based on an actual reading of Xinxing's extant texts, this characterization is a distortion of Xinxing's thought. Xinxing never describes his writings as a *panjiao* system. As we shall see below, his extant texts also lack many of the features and underlying assumptions of *panjiao* texts. Finally, Fazang's description of Xinxing's '*panjiao*' as containing a correlation of the Three Vehicles with a particular, gradual path and the One Vehicle with a universal, sudden path finds no basis in Xinxing's texts—though he uses all of these terms, none of them match up as neatly as Fazang suggests they do. It would appear that Fazang has shoehorned Xinxing into his own doxography of *panjiao* systems without much regard for Xinxing's own thought. It would be a mistake, therefore, to trust Fazang's presentation of Xinxing's ideas.

As I point out at the beginning of this chapter, these 'outside accounts' are often much more clearly written than Xinxing's own texts. Moreover, many were also included in officially transmitted corpora of Chinese Buddhist literature, unlike the texts of Xinxing and his followers. Consequently, they have historically supplied the most easily available and easily comprehensible testimony concerning Xinxing's thought and practice, and have accordingly played an outsize role in explaining Xinxing's thought and legacy. In modern accounts of the Three Levels (particularly those produced by non-specialists), we often find statements about Xinxing that have their basis only in outside accounts and are either unsupported or contradicted by Xinxing's own writings. Such statements include the idea that Xinxing espoused a One Vehicle/Three Vehicle *panjiao* system,[213] that Xinxing personally founded a charitable institution known as the Inexhaustible Storehouse,[214] and that Xinxing led a popular millenarian movement along the lines of a White Lotus group.[215] Some modern accounts mix unsupported

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This path of Xinxing's is also a singular technique with a myriad highways. Still, people love what is familiar and revile what is different, and for that reason this age repeatedly makes mockery [of his method]. These records [of his] combine citations of the correct text of the scriptures and treatises, though their headings are of uncertain regularity.Though they claim that the practice that accords with faculties is hidden, the essence of their point flaunts things seldom concealed. If wise ones to come investigate them, by chance we will learn that they are well-founded. (T.2034.49..105b28–c3.)

[212] 九依梁朝光宅寺雲法師立四乘教，謂臨門三車為三乘，四衢所授大白牛車方為第四。以彼臨門牛車亦同羊鹿俱不得故。餘義同上辯。信行禪師依此宗立二教。謂一乘三乘。三乘者，則別解別行及三乘差別。并先習小乘後趣大乘是也。一乘者，謂普解普行，唯是一乘。

The ninth [system] is based on [that of] the Liang dynasty Dharma Master Yun of the Guangzhai Temple, who posited a teaching of Four Vehicles—the three carts outside the gate [in the parable of the burning house in the *Lotus Sutra*] are the Three Vehicles, while the Great Cart of the White Ox, bestowed in the street, is the Fourth [Vehicle]. He held that the ox-cart outside the gate was not [what was] attained [by the children], just like the goat- and deer-carts. His other teachings are the same as those discussed above. The Dhyāna Master Xinxing posited two teachings on the basis of this principle—[that of] the One Vehicle and [that of] the Three Vehicles. The Three Vehicles have particular understandings, particular practices, and distinctions between the Three Vehicles, and [entails] first cultivating the Lesser Vehicle and then moving on to the Greater Vehicle. The One Vehicle [entails] universal understanding, universal practice, and there is only One Vehicle. (T.1866.45.481a6–13.)

[213] See Fazang's interpretation, fn. 212, above.

[214] See Ch'en 1964.

[215] See Ch'en 1964.

claims in outside accounts with biased, distorted, or unrepresentative descriptions by Xinxing's later followers,[216] leading to portrayals of Xinxing and his movement that border on fanciful. Such chimeras include the image of Xinxing as antinomian, anti-literary, iconoclastic, populist, or overtly rebellious.[217] Although it is only fair to ascribe these modern distortions to the generally poor state of scholarly knowledge about Xinxing that prevailed during much of the twentieth century, it will be useful to categorically deny them here: Xinxing's life and thought are marked by several unusual and even salacious qualities; however, antinomianism, aversion to text, iconoclasm, populism, and rebellion are not among them. Judging from his extant texts, Xinxing was in fact rigidly supportive of many features of Buddhist monastic discipline, deeply reverent towards scripture, enthusiastic about images, oriented toward elite patrons and elite practitioners, and, on the surface at least, fawningly supportive of established power. Finally, some modern accounts have identified Xinxing's 'Three Levels' with the tripartite scheme of Dharmic decline that proved so influential in Japan.[218] When Xinxing's writings were unknown or largely unstudied, this identification was a reasonable conjecture, given outside accounts of Xinxing's teachings. Now that Xinxing's texts are better understood, however, this thesis can be discarded. While Xinxing was keenly interested in taxonomies of Dharmic decline, he appears to have subscribed to no set theory.[219] As we shall see, he occasionally explains his 'Three Levels' taxonomy in terms of temporal distance from the Buddha, but it does not map easily onto any fixed schema of Dharmic decline, let alone the tripartite theory.

Major Extant Texts Attributed to Xinxing

Having acknowledged some of the challenges inherent in thinking and writing about Xinxing, let us proceed to Xinxing's actual writings. As I emphasize above, my reconstruction of Xinxing's thought will privilege these texts above all other sources; the writings of Xinxing's followers and the accounts of outsiders will play a secondary role.

As stressed in the introduction, the writings of Xinxing and his followers were not transmitted in China after the Tang; consequently, his texts do not appear in received pre-modern corpora of Chinese Buddhist literature. However, manuscript witnesses of texts apparently produced by Xinxing were discovered in the early twentieth century at Dunhuang and Japan. More texts were discovered in the late-twentieth century in the form of inscribed texts carved into the walls of the Jinchuanwan cave temple in Shaanxi. The rediscovery of these texts made it

[216] Lewis 1990.

[217] Occasionally, non-specialists have described the Three Levels movement as antinomian, messianic, populist, anti-elite, and anti-literary—a sort of amalgam of Christian antinomianism and Chinese White Lotus millenarianism. Kenneth Ch'en went so far as to depict them as a kind of know-nothing religious populist movement, claiming that its members "did not live in monasteries but in the courtyards or outbuildings, and spent their time mingling with the crowds in the market places. They had little respect for images and books" (Ch'en 1964, 299). Terms like 'antinomian' or 'messianic' are quite imprecise. (Populist in what way? Anti-literary in what way?) Insofar as these labels convey actual content, they are often completely inaccurate as descriptors for the Three Levels. (As Hubbard has convincingly shown, the Three Levels was certainly not antinomian or anti-elite—in fact, it has many marks of an elite movement [Hubbard 2001, 15 *passim*].) Ch'en's description borders on fantasy. As we shall see, Xinxing and his followers had enormous respect for images, and Xinxing's devotion to 'books' was intense, although it assumed an idiosyncratic form.

[218] See Waley 1928.

[219] Xinxing occasionally explains his 'Three Levels' taxonomy in terms of temporal distance from the Buddha, but it does not map easily onto any fixed schema of Dharmic decline, let alone the tripartite theory. See Nishimoto 1998, 239–298.

possible for historians to attempt a genuine reconstruction of the history and thought of Xinxing and his followers. However, the reemergence of these texts also raised a host of philological and bibliographical problems. Most pressing is the discrepancy between bibliographic records and recently unearthed manuscripts.

Biographies and bibliographical catalogues give conflicting testimony regarding Xinxing's writings. During the Sui and Tang it seems to have been widely accepted, within Xinxing's movement and without, that Xinxing's corpus contained a text called something like the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* 三階佛法 and a lengthy text or collection of texts called something like the *Collected Records of Humankind* 人集録. Various numbers are given for the fascicles comprising this corpus, ranging from thirty-five to forty-five. The first non-Three Levels catalogue completed after Xinxing's death in 594 was Fei Zhangfang 費長房's *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀, which was submitted to the court in 598. There, we find Xinxing's texts listed as the *Collected Records on the Distinction of the Ranks of the Three Levels* (*Sanjie weibie jilu* 三階位別集錄), in three fascicles, and the *Miscellaneous Records on Practice Matched to Faculties* (*Duigen qixing zalu* 對根起行雜錄), in thirty-two fascicles. In their titles and length, these texts are very similar to the major works listed in the most important extant epitaph for Xinxing, the *Inscribed Stupa Stele for the Late Dhyāna Master Xinxing* (*Gu da Xinxing chanshi ming tabei* 故大信行禪師銘塔碑). Likely composed shortly after Xinxing's death by his close disciples, the epitaph says that he "compiled teachings on practice matched to faculties" that amounted to more than thirty fascicles, and "also produced the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* in four fascicles."[220] The Tang literatus Tanglin's 唐臨 (600–659) biography of Xinxing mentions that he called his compilations of teachings matched to human faculties, "collected records of humankind," and that they amounted to thirty-six fascicles.[221]

A Three Levels catalogue discovered at Dunhuang, the *Outline of the Collected Records of Humankind* (*Ren jilu dumu* 人集録都目), backs up these general identifications. It lists thirty-six texts in forty-five fascicles,[222] including a text called the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*. The list includes no single text called the *Collected Records of Humankind*. Instead, as Tanglin's biography suggests, one is left with the impression that the listed texts *are* the *Collected Records of Humankind*—that 'collected records of humankind' is simply the aggregate name for Xinxing's writings, possibly excluding the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*. (I will return below to the significance of unusual term 'collected records of humankind.') In addition to these collected records, several bibliographies and biographies also stress that Xinxing wrote a

[220] 撰對根起行之法三十餘卷，又出三階佛法四卷。
He compiled the *Teachings on Practice Matched to Faculties* in more than thirty fascicles, and he also put out the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* in four fascicles. (Transcription Nishimoto 1998, 36.)
[221] 若以下人修行上法，法不當根，容能錯倒。乃鈔集經論，參驗人法。所當學者，為三十六卷，名曰人集錄。
If a lower person practiced a superior teaching, the teaching does not match the faculty, and they may make a mistake. So [Xinxing] collected excerpts from the scriptures and treatises, checking the identity [of the practitioner] against the teaching. What was appropriate for study amounted to thirty-six fascicles, which he called the 'Collected Records of Humankind.' (T.2082.51.788b6–8.)
[222] There is some ambiguity in the exact number of texts listed—the catalogue begins with 人集錄都目一卷 and ends with 都目一卷. It is unclear whether these two entries are distinct categories or simply the title and colophon of the catalogue itself.

monastic code called something like *Teachings on Institutions* (*Zhifa* 制法).[223] A *Teachings on Institutions for the Great Vehicle* (*Dasheng zhifa* 大乘制法) in fact appears in the aforementioned Three Levels catalogue, the *Outline of the Collected Records of Humankind*.[224]

In sum, bibliographic information that is contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous with Xinxing leaves the impression that his work included at least two discrete texts, the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* and his monastic code, the *Teachings on Institutions*. In addition, he produced a larger text or mass of texts called the *Collected Records of Humankind* or the *Collected Records on Practice Matched with Faculties*. The records leave us uncertain about whether Xinxing and his followers considered this third work a single large text or a collection of smaller texts. They are also unclear about whether this third work was distinct from or encompassed the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* and the *Teachings on Institutions*.

Modern scholarship is aware of manuscript attestations of all three of these texts or sets of texts. Yabuki identified two distinct manuscript families that present themselves as the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*[225] as well as a host of manuscripts that seem to be subtexts or parts of the *Collected Records*, including one text that Yabuki provisionally titled simply the *Teachings on Practice Matched with Faculties*.[226] Other texts that seem to belong to the 'collected records' have continued to come to light throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century—Nishimoto identified and published several such texts, and the major texts at the Jinchuanwan cave site should also be placed in this category. Finally, Nishimoto identified, transcribed, and published the *Teachings on Institutions* in Nishimoto 1998.[227] In addition to texts known from bibliographic materials, scholarship now recognizes at least one manuscript attestation of a Xinxing text that has no clear bibliographic correlate.[228] When all is said and done, we possess eleven texts that are both plausibly attributable to Xinxing and that survive in a condition complete enough not merely to read but to interpret. These texts are:

1) 三階佛法 *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* (Dunhuang version) [Abbr., Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*][229]
2) 三階佛法 *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* (Japanese version) [Abbr., Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*][230]

[223] Daoxuan makes note of the *Zhifa* 制法 apart from the *Collected Records*, writing that Xinxing compiled his collected records on the Three Levels and practice matched to faculties *in addition to* "teachings on institutions for the affairs of the assembly 制眾事諸法." (T.2060.50.a17.)
[224] For a concise overview of the bibliographic record on Xinxing and his followers, see Hubbard 1986, 172–190.
[225] Most importantly, Yabuki identified two versions of the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*, one partially preserved at Dunhuang, and one preserved nearly *in toto* in Japan. See Yabuki 1927, Appendix. Nishimoto suggests that the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* in fact represents a mistitled transmission of a different text by Xinxing. See Nishimoto 1998.
[226] See Yabuki 1927, Appendix.
[227] The precise relationship between these manuscript attestations and the traditional bibliographic entries is highly vexed. (See Nishimoto 1998.) The text witnesses themselves present a host of philological problems. Many are damaged or fragmentary.
[228] This is Xinxing's correspondence, recording basic aspects of his teachings and his biography, with the local magistrate. The letter is one of several texts preserved in the set labeled *Xinxing yiwen* 信行遺文 by Yabuki. See Yabuki 1927, appendix, 3–7.
[229] Transcription in Yabuki 1927, appendix, 9–70.
[230] Transcription in Yabuki 1927, appendix, 255–415.

3) 對根起行法 *Teachings on Practice Matched with Faculties* [Abbr., *Practice Matched to Faculties*][231]
4) 明諸經中對根淺深發菩提心法 *Elucidation of the Shallow and Profound Teachings, Matched to Spiritual Faculties, on Giving Rise to Bodhi-Mind* [*as found*] *in the Scriptures* [Abbr., *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*][232]
5) 大集月藏分經略抄出 *Brief Excerpts from the Moon-store Section of the Great Collection Scripture* [Abbr., *Excerpts*][233]
6) 大乘無盡藏法 *Teachings on the Inexhaustible Storehouse of the Greater Vehicle* [Abbr., *Inexhaustible Storehouse*][234]
7) 'Xiangzhou Dossier'[235]
8) 制法 *Teachings on Institutions* [Abbr., *Institutions*][236]
9) 乞食法 *Teachings on Begging for Food*[237]
10) 受八戒法 *Teachings on Receiving the Eight Precepts*[238]
11) 七階佛名經 *Scripture on the Buddha Names in Seven Tiers*[239]

These texts can be grouped and regrouped into various subcategories based on their content, structure, assumed order of production, and the place where their manuscript witnesses have been discovered.[240] The first three texts form a clear group. They appear to be later works, and I will use them as primary sources for my reconstruction of Xinxing's mature thought. Scholars generally agree that the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, and the *Practice Matched to Faculties* were produced at the very end of Xinxing's life, after he had taken up residence in the Sui capital.[241] They take the form of lengthy, extremely complex 'branching list texts. This structure makes them challenging to read and interpret. They use a set of terminology that is unique to Xinxing's final formulation of his project, including the term 'Three Levels' (*sanjie* 三階) and an emphatic usage of the dyad 'universal'/'particular' (*pu* 普 / *bie* 別). As I will explain below, these texts represent the culmination of Xinxing's attempt to extract from scripture a reliable taxonomy of Buddhist practitioners, as well as his attempt to identify and isolate scriptural teachings appropriate to these practitioners.

The fourth and fifth texts in this list, *Bodhi Matched to Faculties* and the *Excerpts*, form another clear set. Both are attested only in inscribed texts at the Jinchuanwan cave site. *Bodhi Matched to Faculties* is in the branching list format, while the *Excerpts* is a 'non-branching' series of thirty-one non-consecutive passages excerpted from the 'Moon-Store Section' of the *Great Collection Scripture*. These texts appear to be slightly earlier than Xinxing's mature works, as they do not employ the distinctive terminology found in those writings. However, they

[231] Transcription in Yabuki 1927, appendix, 109–152.
[232] Transcription in Ledderose 2020, 516–527.
[233] Transcription in Ledderose 2020, 536–543.
[234] Transcription in Yabuki 1927, appendix, 163–176.
[235] Transcription in Yabuki 1927, appendix, 3–7, where it appears with the provisional title 『信行遺文』.
[236] Transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 578–592.
[237] Transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 592–595.
[238] Transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 595–601.
[239] Transcription in Yabuki 1927, appendix, 177–188.
[240] Texts 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 are attested in the Dunhuang corpus. Text 2 is attested in Japan. Texts 4 and 5 are from the Jinchuanwan cave shrine.
[241] See Nishimoto 1998, 227.

are closely aligned with those works—in structure and in content, if not in jargon, they clearly serve the larger project that finds final expression in the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma* and the *Practice Matched to Faculties*. In the course of describing that project below, I will rely heavily on these two texts as well as Xinxing's final three compositions.

The sixth and seventh texts in our list belong to a strata of Xinxing's work that is distinctly earlier than the first five. The *Inexhaustible Storehouse* employs the branching list format that is Xinxing's calling card, but its structure is simpler than those of Xinxing's later texts. It also incorporates much more discursive content; its extant portions thus read much more like a traditional Chinese Buddhist scholastic work. The seventh text is a fascinating but problematic document. The 'Xiangzhou Dossier' appears to consist of multiple short texts by Xinxing, at least some of which are formal documents composed over the course of several years and addressed to government officials.[242] Several of these documents are addressed to the magistrate of Xiangzhou, where Xinxing was living before he moved to the Sui capital. In these documents, Xinxing gives a basic description of his religious career, his main teachings and practices, and lists some of his associates. He also requests official government endorsement of certain practices, as well as material support for his community. Even in this dossier—clearly meant to be read by someone outside the Buddhist monastic order—Xinxing often slips into the format of a branching list. In terms of content, both the sixth and seventh texts contain a description of sixteen 'inexhaustible' practices that seem to have represented a summation of Xinxing's teaching at this time; some of these practices clearly formed the basis for the charitable institution later known as the Inexhaustible Storehouse.[243] I will examine these teachings in my discussion, below, of Xinxing's 'early' project.

Texts eight through eleven are institutional and ritual texts. They are not in the branching list format, but are instead discursive in structure and style. Of Xinxing's extant writings, these are written in the most conventional way and are quite comprehensible compared to Xinxing's other texts. The first deals with monastic discipline in Xinxing's community; the other three describe Three Levels practice, including rituals of repentance. It seems likely that the *Teachings on Institutions* is a fairly early text, composed before Xinxing moved to the capital in 589. Where the other texts belong in the stratification of Xinxing's corpus is unclear.

When we consider all eleven of these texts together, Xinxing demonstrates a very wide range of interests. These interests span the major topics of concern for sixth-century Buddhists in Northern China—Xinxing discusses meditation and contemplative techniques, meditative repentance rituals, monastic discipline, how to find a spiritual mentor, obstacles to Buddhist practice stemming from temporal and spatial distance from the historical Buddha, the universality of buddha-nature, practices for *dāna*, and radical austerities like the *dhutaṅgas*. Xinxing also touches on issues that seem unique to him. These include the practice of universal reverence, the nature of the 'universal teachings,' and the extreme danger posed by the sin of 'maligning' (*feibang* 誹謗) the Three Jewels. The range of intended reader of Xinxing's texts is also very broad. At different points in his career, Xinxing addresses his writings to a vast array of audiences—worldlings (*fanfu* 凡夫), bodhisattvas of lower faculties (*xiagen pusa* 下根菩薩),

[242] It is unclear who compiled these documents into a single text and why they did so. However, the 'Xiangzhou Dossier' is attested in at least two manuscript witnesses. Those manuscript witnesses also contain other, self-contained scholastic texts by Xinxing, suggesting that the 'Xiangzhou Dossier' was preserved by Xinxing's devotees and may have been consulted for its religious content. See Yabuki 1927, appendix, 3–7.
[243] On this institution, see Nishimoto 1998, 121–124.

mute-sheep monks (*yayang seng* 瘂羊僧), precept-breaking *bhikṣus* (*pojie biqiu* 破戒比丘) and, in his mature work, to beings of the 'Third Level' (*disanjie zhongsheng* 第三階眾生).

Although Xinxing's texts evince great topical breadth, Xinxing's attitude toward and general remarks on many of these topics are fairly consistent over time. Even the multifarious intended readership of his texts is consistent—all such intended audiences are, in some schema or other, the lowest kind of Buddhist practitioner. There is, however, a clear evolution from early texts to late in the systematicity with which Xinxing presents his ideas. In his early texts (the *Inexhaustible Storehouse* and the 'Xiangzhou Dossier'), Xinxing touches on many of the aforementioned topics, and singles out a small core of 'inexhaustible' teachings as essential. He vaguely suggests that these practices are especially appropriate for 'worldlings' (*fanfu* 凡夫) of the present, degraded age. Beyond this, however, it is unclear why Xinxing endorses these practices and teachings, why they present compelling spiritual choices for the reader, and why the core teachings he presents are essential.

In Xinxing's middle and late texts (texts 1.– 5., especially 1. Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, 2. Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, and 3. *Practice Matched to Faculties*), Xinxing presents these teachings and practices as elements in an overarching, systematic project. I have already gestured toward the nature of this project: Xinxing sifts the received corpus of Buddhist scriptures with the intent of extracting and isolating a canon of teachings explicitly marked as appropriate for beings of the lowest faculties. In the context of this broader project, Xinxing is able to present a core set of teachings as exclusively essential; he justifies this selection by *sole* reference to the overarching intent of the Buddha as preserved in the bare text of scripture. This project thus places several onerous constraints on Xinxing: such teachings must be linked explicitly to scripture, and they must be justified by reference either to explicit intratextual evidence of their appropriateness or to inferences from such evidence. These constraints help to explain the extravagant structure and tortured language of Xinxing's later texts.

In due course, I will explain in detail the nature of and motivation behind Xinxing's final project, as well as the assumptions about scriptural authority that undergird it. Before doing so, however, it will be useful to examine Xinxing's early texts. As already mentioned, these texts are less systematic in their structure. However, they provide interesting hints of the preoccupations that would come to dominate Xinxing's later writings. The stylistic discrepancy between these early texts and Xinxing's later writings also provides crucial evidence for the intentionality of Xinxing's mature project—Xinxing was perfectly capable of writing straightforward, comprehensible scholastic texts; in his mature work, however, he apparently felt constrained *not* to compose such texts. The disjuncture between Xinxing's early and late writings signals the radical nature of Xinxing's later attitude toward scripture and scriptural authority.

Xinxing's Early Project

The *Inexhaustible Storehouse* is likely Xinxing's earliest extant major work.[244] In the surviving portions of this work, we already find Xinxing attempting to extract from the broad mass of 'teachings' (*fa* 法) a discrete subset that are appropriate for degraded beings in the here and now. In the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, he calls these teachings by several names, most prominently the "Inexhaustible Storehouse of Permanence, Joy, Self, and Purity" (常樂我淨无盡藏) The use of the phrase Permanence, Joy, Self, and Purity (常樂我淨) is salient; it comes

[244] Nishimoto 1998, 227.

from the *Nirvana Sutra*, where the Buddha uses it as an emblem of the teaching of the *Nirvana Sutra* as a whole.[245] In the context of sixth-century China, this emblematic phrase, and the *Nirvana Sutra* itself, came to symbolize the enduring possibility of soteriological progress *despite* the apparent absence of the Buddha. The teachings that Xinxing gives under the heading of Permanence, Joy, Self, and Purity have no connection in terms of content to these four concepts or to the *Nirvana Sutra*; instead, it appears that Xinxing gives them this label because, in their *function*, they fulfill the promise of the *Nirvana Sutra*'s emblematic phrase—they guarantee soteriological progress despite the Buddha's manifest absence. In the crucial eighth section of the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, Xinxing explains that there are, in general, sixteen such practices fit for "present study" (*xianxue* 現學). He writes:

> 第八明現學多少者。明法雖塵沙，總説十六。
> Eighth: the quantity of [teachings] presently studied [i.e., teachings fit for the current time period]. Though the teachings (法) are [as numerous as] the sands, when the general [items] (總) are discussed, [there are] sixteen.[246]

Xinxing proceeds to give a list of sixteen 'inexhaustible' or 'non-ceasing' (*wujin* 無盡) teachings. In brief, these are:

1. Making offerings to the Buddha (供養佛).
2. Making offerings to the Dharma (供養法).
3. Making offerings to the Sangha (供養僧).
4. Making offerings to Beings (供養衆生).
5. Parting from all that is evil (離一切惡).
6. Cultivating all that is good (脩一切善).
7. Giving fragrance (施香).
8. Giving light (i.e., lamps and candles) (施光明).
9. Giving bathing supplies (施洗浴).
10. Giving 'tones' (i.e., bells and conch shells) (施音聲).
11. Giving clothing (施衣服).
12. Giving shelter (施房舍).
13. Giving bedding (施床坐).
14. Giving eating utensils (施食器).
15. Giving charcoal (施炭火).
16. Giving food and drink (施飲食).[247]

Xinxing then goes on to explain who should practice these sixteen 'inexhaustible storehouse' practices, and what kind of spiritual benefits they will accrue. Xinxing concludes the entire text with a curious passage explaining the relationship between the teaching of the *Inexhaustible*

[245] See Brandstadt and Nishimoto 2023 (forthcoming).
[246] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 155.
[247] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 155–156.

Storehouse and other possible teachings, as well as these teachings and the scriptural corpus as a whole:

> 此十一段義文裏唯明有義不出空文，然解義之徒見有達空，並知不少。普別義亦如是。 唯明諸大乘經裏普行法，不出其別。 普法者，如摩訶衍經四攝等，廣明普施法。別法者，普遍一切脩多羅，略明少分。[248]
> In the meaning and text of these eleven sections [of the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*], I have elucidated the meaning of the existent, but not put forth the text on emptiness. The disciple who understands the meaning, however, will reach emptiness when they see the existent; they will understand both without deficiency. The meaning of the universal and the particular is also like this. I have only elucidated the teachings on the Universal Practice within the scriptures of the Greater Vehicle. I have not put forth [the teachings on] the particular. As for this teaching on the universal, I have explained in detail the teaching on universal giving in accord with the "Four [Methods] of Gathering In," etc., in the scriptures of the Mahāyāna. As for the teaching on the particular, it is spread uniformly through all the *sutras*, and I will briefly elucidate a few of its parts.

Thus, the sixteen 'inexhaustibles' are apparently an essential part of a larger class of teachings, the 'universal teachings' (*pufa* 普法). These teachings stand in juxtaposition with 'particular teachings' (*biefa* 別法). Xinxing concludes the *Inexhaustible Storehouse* with a brief explanation of 'particular' teachings as explained in various scriptures. These include the idea that monks who uphold the precepts and monks who break the precepts should not consort with one another, the idea that practitioners should seek 'good spiritual mentors' and avoid bad ones, and a variety of formulations of the idea (already expressed in the list of sixteen 'inexhaustibles') that one should part from evil and draw close to good. This section on the particular teachings concludes with the following statement:

> 又末法凡夫學捨邪入正涅槃最顯，捨惡入善捨小入大十輪經最顯。[249]
> Moreover, for worldlings of the Final Dharma studying the renunciation of the perverse and the entrance into the correct, the *Nirvana* [*Sutra*] is clearest; [for the study] of the renunciation of evil and the entrance into the good, the renunciation of the lesser and the entrance into the greater, the *Scripture of the Ten Wheels* is clearest.

Here, we find Xinxing singling out two scriptures, the *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Scripture of the Ten Wheels*, as particularly useful for 'worldlings of the Final Dharma.' Particularly noteworthy is Xinxing's comment that the *Nirvana Sutra* helps worldlings with the "renunciation of the perverse and the entrance into the correct."

In summary, the *Inexhaustible Storehouse* presents a small set of essential, 'universal' teachings (the 'sixteen inexhaustibles'), which are suitable for present study. It contrasts these teachings with a less well-enumerated set of 'particular' teachings. Xinxing makes a loose effort

[248] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 158.
[249] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 158.

to tie all of these teachings to specific scriptures and gestures broadly toward the idea that 'worldlings of the Final Dharma' (末法凡夫) may find some scriptures more useful than others.

Let us now turn to Xinxing's other early text, the 'Xiangzhou Dossier.' As mentioned above, the 'Xiangzhou Dossier' consists of several short, formal pieces of correspondence addressed to government officials. Several of these texts recapitulate points made in the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*. In the first document in the dossier, Xinxing reproduces the Sixteen Teachings. He writes that he has, "for the sake of Their Imperial Majesties of past, present, and future, for the ministers and hundred officials, for the masters, for parents, and for all beings, given his body and possessions entirely to all the teachings, such as the Sixteen Teachings of Permanence, Joy, Self, and Purity."[250] He then gives a list of the sixteen teachings; this list is almost identical to the sixteen teachings given in the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*.[251] Xinxing presents these teachings to his correspondent as if they are the essence of his teaching; the rest of the document explains and expands upon them.

This first document in the dossier shares with the *Inexhaustible Storehouse* the list of sixteen essential teachings. Unlike the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, it does not contain an explanation of the 'universal' and 'particular' teachings, nor does it make reference to particular scriptures. However, the next document in the dossier makes an interesting remark about Xinxing's teaching and its relationship to scripture. That document says:

> 信行自思量，無始生死，徒致羈纏，皆由無知，不依聖典。今得遭逢，還復不依，恐增生死，永無解脫。所以今日隨力隨分，依傍大乘，具足真軌，如說修行。大乘法者，義雖塵沙，大判不過有四。一者境盡；二者行周；三者人是；四者處當。[252]
>
> Xinxing reckons: Beginningless birth-and-death only leads to the binding afflictions. All this stems from ignorance, from not basing oneself in the Sagely Canon. In our present predicament, we still do not base ourselves [on the scriptures]. I fear this will aggravate birth-and-death, and we will be forever lacking in liberation. Therefore, in these days, in accord with our power and in accord with our lot, rely on the Greater Vehicle, equip oneself with the True Track, and practice as [the scriptures] say. As for the teaching of this Greater Vehicle, although its meanings are [as numerous as] the sands, a general analysis yields no more than four [principle components]: one, the exhaustion of the field; two, the bounds of practice; three, identification of the person; four, matching of the place.

This document from the 'Xiangzhou Dossier' attests to an interesting development in Xinxing's thought. Xinxing here recapitulates some ideas already found in the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*. Just as in the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, he compares the contents of the scriptures to the numberless sands—an image meant to evoke both awe and hopeless confusion. In both texts,

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[250] 普為過去、未來、現在皇帝陛下、臣僚百官、諸師、父母，乃至一切眾生頓捨身命財屬十六種常樂我淨法等一切法。Yabuki 1927, appendix, 3.

[251] This list is almost exactly the same as the list given in the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, except for slight differences in wording and the order of the teachings. The only significant different is that, instead of the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*'s 'Parting from all that is evil (離一切惡)' and 'Cultivating all that is good (脩一切善),' the dossier's version gives 'sitting in *dhyāna* (坐禪)' and 'the twelve *dhutaṅgas* (十二頭陀).' (See Yabuki 1927, appendix, 3–4.)

[252] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 5–6.

Xinxing presents his own teachings as a way of organizing these shifting sands. In the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, the solution is the sixteen teachings. Here, however, the solution seems to consist of four parameters: 'fields' or 'objects,' 'practices,' types of 'people,' and 'places.' (The remainder of this short document expounds on these parameters, sometimes in a terse and cryptic fashion.) Of even greater interest is Xinxing's attitude toward scripture in this document. In the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, Xinxing makes loose efforts to tie his teachings to scripture in general; occasionally, he even specifies particular scriptures. In this part of the 'Xiangzhou Dossier,' Xinxing seems to hint at a more rigid conception of how Buddhist practice should relate to Buddhist scripture, writing that the suffering of the samsaric realm stems entirely from ignorance *and* not basing oneself in the written 'canon' of the Buddha. Xinxing's own teaching, he writes, is 'dependent on' the Greater Vehicle—a statement strongly implying a close connection to Mahāyāna scripture. A subtext of these remarks is that other Buddhists in China may *not* be appropriately basing themselves in scripture.

Our examination of Xinxing's early texts reveal a loose set of priorities. Xinxing is interested in identifying a core set of teachings that will be soteriologically effective for beings far-removed from the time and place of the Buddha. He conceives of these practices as somehow 'universal' (*pu* 普). He also seems vaguely concerned about how we justify these teachings—what we 'base ourselves on' (*yi* 依) when we endorse them. In Xinxing's earliest text, the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, he makes a modest effort to explain how his chosen teachings derive from scripture. In the 'Xiangzhou Dossier,' he states explicitly that the present difficulties (今得遭逢) of practitioners are linked to the fact that they do not appropriately base themselves in scripture. Finally, he hints that, although the teachings (*fa* 法) are as numerous as the sands, it is still possible to compress, contain, and order them. Xinxing presents a few different ways of systematizing Buddhist teaching in his early writings, including the sixteen practices and his four parameters.

There is a clear continuity between these early writings and Xinxing's later compositions. Many of the specific phrases, teachings, and incipient systems that appear in the early writings also appear in later texts.[253] And some of the loose concerns in these texts—identifying practices appropriate for low level beings, taming the welter of teachings, and tying one's teaching closely to scripture—become overwhelming in Xinxing's later texts. These later texts attest to a new project, one that draws on the themes and concerns of Xinxing's early work but reaches toward unprecedented systematicity, scope, and comprehensiveness.

Xinxing's Mature Project: Some Fundamental Assumptions

Xinxing's final textual project, which involved the compilation of his 'middle works,' and culminated in his final three texts, took him far afield of the textual activity considered

[253] Xinxing does not seem to use the schema of 'sixteen inexhaustible teachings' in his later texts; however, almost all of the individual practices in this list of sixteen do reappear. (See Nishimoto 1998, 314–374). Elements of the 'four parameters' in the 'Xiangzhou Dossier' also reappear. Two of these categories (境盡 and 行周) appear in one of Xinxing's middle texts, the *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*. Although the specific terms used in the 'four parameters' do not appear in Xinxing's mature texts (the Dunhuang and Japanese *Buddha-Dharma* and the *Practice Matched to Faculties*) much of the content they are designed to summarize does appear there. The taxonomy of universal and particular teachings, which already appears in a loose form in the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*, achieves a position of structural and ideological dominance in Xinxing's later writings.

'normal' by his peers. This project entailed several unusual preconceptions about scripture and how it should be engaged with.[254] The six most important assumptions are as follows:

1) **The Buddha is Supreme.** The structure and content of Xinxing's later writings presuppose that, at the time and place in which Xinxing taught (i.e., late sixth-century China), buddhas (particularly the historical buddha, Śākyamuni) are the primary and possibly sole authority for Buddhist thought and practice. To an unusual degree, Xinxing subordinates philosophical reasoning *and* meditative experience to the authority of the transmitted words of the Buddha. Consequently, Xinxing fixates on texts that present themselves as reported *buddhavacana*—i.e., sutra and vinaya material. Xinxing almost wholly disregards commentarial texts, even texts that his contemporaries treat almost as authoritative scriptures like the *Chengshi lun* 成實論 and the *Da zhidu lun* 大智度論.

2) **Bare Scriptural Text is the Primary Reliable Means of Access to the Buddha**. Xinxing treats bare scriptural text as the primary (possibly sole) means of access to the Buddha. He has little interest in alternative ways of accessing the Buddha's influence. He demonstrates no interest in the personal testimony of Indian monks or reports of conditions in India, and shows little regard for ongoing 'revelations' of the Buddha's teaching like visions, dreams, or omens. His reliance on scripture as a source of the Buddha's intent is buttressed by a non-skeptical attitude toward the bare text of received sutraic literature. He seems untroubled by doubts about the reliability of existing translations, and possesses a confidence in the untutored intelligibility of individual scriptural passages and sentences that borders on naïve. He prefers to present his own articulation of Buddhism in the form of unmodified quotations or close paraphrases of Buddhist sutras.

3) **Specific Teachings are Intended for Specific Audiences**. Like most contemporaneous exegetes, Xinxing felt that to understand scripture was to understand the Buddha's intent (*foyi* 佛意). However, Xinxing places special emphasis on the doctrine, widely shared by Mahāyāna Buddhists, that when Buddhas give their teachings they modulate their message according to the intended audience. For Xinxing, the Buddha's idea of a teaching's intended audience is a crucial part of his 'intent.' To disregard information about the teaching's intended audience is to disregard the Buddha's intent.

4) **Scripture is Dangerous**. Xinxing's contemporaries all recognize that it is important to interpret and apply scripture correctly. Xinxing, however, is uniquely sensitive to the danger of misinterpretation. By developing an unusually broad conception of the widely acknowledged sin of 'maligning' (*feibang* 誹謗) the Buddha and Dharma, Xinxing turns the misinterpretation or misapplication of scripture into a deadly sin. This expansive understanding of maligning results in a fixation on matching appropriate teachings to their intended practitioners. It also results in an unusual reverence toward the text of scripture, and accounts for Xinxing's rigid citational practices.

5) **Discernment of Categories (Including Categories of Practitioners) is Uncertain**. Individual practitioners have an inborn aptitude for Buddhist practice. This aptitude varies from

[254] In extant texts, Xinxing never baldly expresses the assumptions underlying his unique treatment of scripture, nor does he neatly summarize his overarching project. Unfortunately, then, it is impossible to extract from Xinxing's writings a single, pithy account of his attitude toward scripture. However, a close reading of the corpus of Xinxing's extant texts reveals several assumptions. Sometimes, Xinxing explains these presuppositions in isolated, scattered remarks. Other presuppositions are expressed diffusely in the structure and style of his texts. Some need to be inferred from negative evidence (i.e., the fact that Xinxing almost never cites treatises [*lun* 論], only sutras [*jing* 經]).

person to person. An essential component of this aptitude is the ability to 'discern' (*bie* 別) correctly. Xinxing uses 'discern' to mean something like 'draw correct distinctions between categories.' Discernment extends from matters of scriptural interpretation—discerning whether a practice is appropriate or not, or even discerning the meaning of a passage—to the discernment of classes of practitioners. Different practitioners vary in their ability to draw distinctions correctly. Consequently, a practitioner may not recognize that a teaching is unsuited to them, with disastrous results. Even more radically, a practitioner may not have the ability to correctly discern the category of practitioner to which they themselves belong. Thus, just as practitioners are liable to misinterpret scripture, they are also liable to misinterpret *themselves*.

6) **Certain Teachings, Uncertain Teachings.** Some teachings (*fa* 法) in Buddhist scripture are certain or infallible, while others are uncertain and fallible. Xinxing is especially interested in isolating infallible teachings. He expresses the distinction between certain teachings and uncertain teachings with several terms, but the most common words employed are 'universal' (*pu* 普) as opposed to 'particular' (*bie* 別). A 'universal' (i.e., 'certain' or 'infallible') teaching will benefit any practitioner regardless of their faculties, at any place, and at any time. Universal teachings cannot be misinterpreted or misapplied. Often, however, these teachings are blunt instruments—painful and slow-acting. In contrast, a 'particular' (i.e., 'uncertain' or 'fallible') teaching will be tremendously beneficial to the right type of person when they use it in the right way, in the right place, and at the right time. In the right situation, such a teaching may be *more* beneficial than a 'universal' teaching. In such circumstances, particular teachings are effective and easy. In other circumstances, however, particular teachings are liable to be misinterpreted or misapplied. In this way, they are like deadly weapons—useful in the right hands, self-defeating in the wrong ones.

As we shall see, these assumptions will help us account for the otherwise perplexing structure, style, and content of Xinxing's middle and late texts. They will also allow us to specify the difference between Xinxing and his contemporaries. Although many of Xinxing's individual practices are not out of step with 'mainstream' Sui-Tang Chinese Buddhism, the textual project by which Xinxing justifies them is highly unusual. Xinxing's treatment of scripture in his middle and late texts almost certainly accounts for much of the controversy surrounding Xinxing and his followers.

Because these six assumptions are crucial to my interpretation of Xinxing's thought and the history of the development and reception of Xinxing's movement, I will discuss them at some length below. In each case, I will substantiate the assumption in question with passages from Xinxing's texts and explain how the assumption is shared with or distinct from Xinxing's contemporaries. I will also point to statements in contemporaneous descriptions of Xinxing's work that reflect these fundamental assumptions (albeit sometimes in a distorted way).

1) The Buddha is Supreme

Xinxing treats the Buddha (especially the historical Buddha Śākyamuni) as a supreme authority in matters of Buddhist thought and practice. He never makes this point explicitly, probably because the issue of the Buddha's supreme authority was an implicit commonality among sixth-century Chinese scholiasts—unquestioned and so unremarked upon.[255] However,

[255] Swanson makes a very similar point about Tiantai Zhiyi's implicit position on the nature of scriptural authority: "If [Zhiyi] calls or relies on the authority of the sutras, it is valid to question the nature of that authority. I suspect

the structure of Xinxing's texts suggest that he felt an unusual compulsion to explicitly ground all practices and doctrines in the Buddha's authority. As mentioned above, most of Xinxing's later texts consist of highly elaborate branching lists. Almost invariably, these lists terminate in a citation, quotation, or paraphrase of Buddhist scripture. Thus, Xinxing would have been able to justify almost every practice or doctrine that he endorses in his writings by referring to a passage of scripture.[256] This structure suggests that Xinxing was quite serious when he wrote in the 'Xiangzhou Dossier' that "[suffering] stems from ignorance, from not basing oneself in the Sagely Canon 皆由無知，不依聖典。"[257]

It is clear, moreover, that Xinxing's reverence for scriptural text is simply a form of reverence for the Buddha. He finds scripture interesting precisely insofar as it preserves the words of the Buddha and transmits his authoritative teachings, not because it is beautiful, philosophically sophisticated, or intrinsically interesting.[258] (We will consider, below, a very clear passage in which Xinxing movingly portrays scripture as the thread linking us with the compassionate foresight of the long-departed Buddha.) Conversely, Xinxing seems completely disinterested in scriptural text that does *not* present itself as a report of the direct speech of the Buddha. As both modern and pre-modern readers of Xinxing's writings have noted, Xinxing is a prolific and scrupulous citer of scripture. Less often noticed, however, is that Xinxing almost exclusively cites sutraic literature (*jing* 經)—that is, scripture that purports to record the direct speech of the Buddha, and which contains a frame story explaining where, why, and to whom the Buddha spoke. Xinxing also sometimes cites vinaya material (*lü* 律), another genre of text that presents itself as a record of the Buddha's direct speech. Notably, Xinxing almost never cites 'treatises' (*lun* 論) like commentary or abhidharma compendia—i.e., the traditional subtype of Buddhist scripture that is *not* straightforwardly the reported speech of the Buddha.[259]

Occasionally, Xinxing makes a statement that he justifies by reference to the testimony of "all the scriptures, laws, and treatises" (一切經律論)—that is, the theoretical complete set of the Buddha's teachings, as preserved in the canonical three genres of Buddhist scripture. It is likely, therefore, that Xinxing would acknowledge, or at least not deny, the authority of some treatises. Nonetheless, his writings demonstrate a remarkable lack of interest in this type of text. In Xinxing's extant corpus, he gives *thousands* of citations of dozens of named Buddhist scriptures. Of those thousands of citations, only *sixteen* are citations of texts that would be considered

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that [Zhiyi], if so challenged, would answer that the authority is based on the idea that the sutras and canonical text signify or reflect the words of the Buddha (*buddha-vacana*)." (Swanson 1998, 254).

[256] It is common for sixth-century scholiasts to back up their arguments with references to scriptural passages. Xinxing is uncommon, however, for always doing so. (See Swanson 1998, 253, where he remarks that Zhiyi's writings "generally follow the pattern of presenting certain ideas, and closing the section by quoting from various sutras and Buddhist texts as 'witness' or 'proof' of the validity of his teachings or interpretations.")

[257] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 5.

[258] There is a clear tension here between Xinxing's scriptural fundamentalism and his peers' more flexible understandings of what counts as authoritative for Buddhists. Again, Swanson provides the implicit position of Zhiyi: "[Zhiyi's] posture, to the best of my knowledge, is typical of the Buddhist commentators of his day in that he simply failed to raise the question whether an authentic translation of an Indian original differs in authority from one known to be inauthentic. Far more important for him than the origin of a text was its content." (Swanson 1998, 253.)

[259] Some biographical sources say that Xinxing excerpted the "scriptures" (*jing* 經) *and* the "treatises" (*lun* 論). On rare occasions, Xinxing does cite "treatises," so these sources are not incorrect. However, insofar as they suggest that Xinxing gave equal weight to "scripture" and to "treatise," they are misleading. It is noteworthy that Xinxing's major extant epitaph, erected by his disciples shortly after his death, says that his texts were composed of citations from "the twelve kinds of scripture" (十二部經). It does not specifically mention citations of "treatises." (See Nishimoto 1998, 36.)

'treatises.' Seven times, he justifies his writing by reference to the "Treatise on the Scriptures of the Mahāyāna" (摩訶衍經論) (this title is otherwise unattested, but may be an alternative name for the *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論[260]). By my reckoning Xinxing cites "the abhidharma," as a general class, two times. He cites the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* (*She dasheng lun* 攝大乘論) once. And he cites the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi-śāstra* (*Pusa dichi lun* 菩薩地持論) seven times.[261] So far as I know, Xinxing also never cites the treatises of Nāgārjuna, an omission so unusual in the context of sixth-century Chinese Buddhism that it must be deliberate. Thus, although Xinxing reveres scripture, his citational affection is apparently restricted to sutra and vinaya texts. It is hard to explain this restriction except as an expression of Xinxing's commitment to the authority of the literal words of the Buddha—an authority that 'treatises' lacked. Thus, the structure of Xinxing's texts and the citational practices they instantiate reflect Xinxing's meticulous attempt to ground practice in the words of the Buddha.

We can also infer that Xinxing regarded the Buddha's authority not only as supreme, but also as singular. If one reads Xinxing's extant corpus with an alert eye, one will notice that he always justifies his statements by direct reference to scripture (and hence to the Buddha), never to philosophical principle, to personal revelation, or to meditative experience. (Xinxing of course draws inferences from passages of scripture, although such chains of inference tend to be extremely short and explicitly marked. For an example of such chains of inference, see Appendix B). For Xinxing, the testimony of the words of the Buddha was a necessary, sufficient, and unique form of justification.

2) Bare Scriptural Text is the Primary Reliable Means of Access to the Buddha

As we have seen, Xinxing's texts consist of branching lists that almost always terminate in citations or quotations of Buddhist scriptural text, particularly text that purports to record the direct speech of the Buddha. We suggested that this structure implies that Xinxing felt the need to justify almost all of his statements by reference to the words of the Buddha. This is a particularly stringent standard in the context of sixth-century China. (Xinxing's contemporaries write and behave as if the Buddha's words are *an* ultimate authority. Xinxing writes as if the Buddha's words are *the* ultimate, necessary authority—not only *can* beliefs and practices be justified by reference to the Buddha, they *can only* and *must* be so justified.) Furthermore, for Xinxing this stringent standard of justification coincides with a restrictive understanding of the possible means of accessing the Buddha's words. We might imagine that the Buddha's words could be accessed by many means. We could consider oral tradition preserved by an Indian monk, or privilege ongoing revelations of the Buddha's words like visions, dreams, or omens. Xinxing evinces complete disregard for these alternative modes of access to the Buddha. For

[260] See Nishimoto 1998, 341, for an examination of the parallels between one of Xinxing's citations of the *Moheyan jing lun* 摩訶衍經論 and a passage in the *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論. The passages are parallel but not identical.

[261] The place of the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi* in the Tripitaka typology is ambiguous, and was recognized as ambiguous by sixth-century Chinese commentators. Although translators initially presented the text as a 'treatise' (*lun* 論), the text presents itself as a transmission of a teaching given by the Buddha Maitreya to the scholiast Asaṅga. Consequently, it was also often called a sutra or scripture (*jing* 經). Xinxing always refers to the text as the *Bhūmi-śāstra* (*Dichi lun* 地持論). It is unclear whether he considered the text a 'treatise' or a 'sutra.' Regardless, the fact that the text purports to be a record of a Buddha's direct teaching fits well with our argument that Xinxing privileged the reported word of the Buddha over philosophical treatises with more ambiguous origins.

Xinxing, access to the Buddha's words comes by means of received scripture alone—the Buddha's Dharma is always a written text.[262]

Xinxing, then, holds received scripture in singularly high regard. His esteem for scripture is buttressed by a non-skeptical attitude toward the bare text of received sutraic literature. No extant comment from Xinxing expresses doubts about the comprehensibility of the bare text of scripture. Unlike other sixth-century exegetical writings, none of Xinxing's extant texts contain commentarial notes on the meaning of individual words or phrases in scripture—Xinxing presents quotations of scripture as if their literal meaning is completely transparent. (Although his general project, as we shall see, assumes that their deeper meaning and significance are *not* transparent and require explanation.) Nor does Xinxing raise concerns about the reliability of scripture's Chinese translation. Xinxing appears untroubled by the fact that the texts he cites are set in India and all of the personages they depict spoke non-Chinese languages. He treats received translations of scripture as reliable reports of the words of the Buddha.[263]

Thus, Xinxing combines a reverence for scriptural text, a disregard for other possible means of accessing the words of the Buddha, and a non-skeptical attitude toward the comprehensibility of scripture's words and phrases, yielding a conviction that received Buddhist scripture is the primary reliable means of accessing the Buddha's teachings. Consequently, Xinxing treats the bare text of scripture as sacrosanct. As we have already noted, Xinxing prefers to articulate his understanding of Buddhism in the form of direct, unmodified citations from scripture. To a degree unique among his contemporaries, Xinxing avoids unmarked paraphrase of scripture. When he does 'paraphrase,' he announces so explicitly.[264] And Xinxing's citations demonstrate a remarkable fidelity to the precise wording of their source scriptures; in most cases, they exactly match the wording of the texts as they exist today (a testament to the scrupulous transmission of much of the Sui and Tang scriptural corpus). Most importantly, Xinxing takes pains to rigorously distinguish his own headings, subheadings, and concluding comments from the correlated scriptural text.[265] Xinxing employs a variety of unique phrases to highlight this distinction. These include "above are human words, below is the text of scripture" (上人語，下經文),[266] "above is a citation of scripture in human words [i.e., a paraphrase], below is strictly scriptural text" (已上人語引經説，已下唯是經文説),[267] and "below is strictly an explanation,

[262] In a surviving repentance ritual, Xinxing enjoins the penitent to seek absolution in the ritual presence of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions, the Bodhisattvas, all the Sages and Worthies, the heavenly deities, the monastic assembly, and *the twelve-fold scriptures* (十二部經). See Nishimoto 1998, 461–466.

[263] This naïve faith in the reliability and availability of scripture represents a point of divergence between Xinxing and some adherents of *mofa* 末法 theory. Some variants of 'final dharma' ideology suggest that the visible text of scripture will eventually disappear. Xinxing seems completely unconcerned about the possibility that this has or will happen. See Nattier 1991, 250: "And even the letters of the scriptures will become invisible."

[264] Xinxing's contemporaries were often quite loose in paraphrasing scripture or modifying the wording of their citations. When Zhiyi cites scripture, he varies between adhering precisely to the wording of the received text and modifying it to fit his argument. (See Swanson 1997.) Daochuo's citations are notoriously lacking in fidelity. He presents his primary composition, the *Anle ji* 安樂集, as a compilation of scriptural passages related to the Pure Land. However, these passages are extensively reworked and modified. See Conway 2021 for a description of these practices, as well as a defense of Daochuo's techniques of citation as examples of an incipient *panjiao* system.

[265] This, too, distinguishes Xinxing from his peers. For example, "There are many cases in which [Zhiyi] does not specifically say 'in the sūtras' 経曰 or identify the source he is quoting, but in fact he is either quoting or summarizing a scriptural source." Swanson 1997, 20.

[266] Among others, see Ledderose 2020, 593, heading to section 4.4.1.

[267] Among others, see the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 266.

in human words, of a citation of scripture" (已下唯是人語引經釋).[268] Notably, Xinxing almost never partitions his own words from scripture with the otherwise standard expression "scripture says" (經云).[269] We might infer that this expression is unacceptably vague for Xinxing. In the hands of his fellow exegetes, the phrase "scripture says" introduces a paraphrase as often as it does an exact quotation. Xinxing seems to want to avoid all such ambiguity. When Xinxing quotes scripture, he says so, and proceeds to reproduce the original text exactly. When he paraphrases, he also says so—suggesting that he wants no one misunderstanding his modified version for the original text. And when Xinxing makes a remark or comment that is wholly his own, he also marks that, although Xinxing explicitly suggests that such remarks are very rare. In a key passage of the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma,* Xinxing claims that only nine characters of the buddha-dharma of the Three Levels are truly 'human words'—the rest is 'scriptural text.' Those nine characters (which amount, in English, to six words), are "First Level," "Second Level," and "Third Level." He writes:

> 又一切三階佛法，唯除第一階、第二階、第三階九字是人語已外，餘者悉是經文，與一切章疏問答，由安人語故始得廣說，一種相似。此句准依凡夫人說法，軌則驗之。[270]
>
> Furthermore, as for the buddha-dharma of the Three Levels, with the sole exception of nine characters (九字)—the first level, the second level, the third level (第一階，第二階，第三階)—that are human words (人語), all of the rest is scriptural text (經文). It is comparable in kind (一種相似) to the essays, commentaries, and dialogues, to how one only gets a detailed explanation by applying human words. This phrase ("first level, second level, third level") is based on the dharma-preaching of a worldling human, and is evidenced by rule (軌則驗之).[271]

Here, Xinxing claims (perhaps with a touch of exaggeration) that the only true human innovation introduced into his text is the concept of the Three Levels—the rest is paraphrase or direct citation of the Buddha. Xinxing seems to believe that his 'collected records' are merely re-presentations of the unmodified words of the Buddha. As we shall see, Xinxing seems to have felt that even his system of re-ordering and re-presenting the Buddha's words was itself described and explained by the Buddha—Xinxing's writings merely make manifest what the Buddha himself describes in isolated remarks throughout Buddhist scripture.

Because Xinxing considers bare scriptural text of paramount authority, his later writings take great pains to tie their statements to scripture. In this context, Xinxing specifies the logical connections between his statements. Most often, he ties them directly to a set of scriptures or scriptural passages. In the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, for example, he writes:

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[268] Among others, see Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 266.

[269] Rarely in the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma,* Xinxing uses the phrase 經文遵. See Yabuki 1927, appendix, 60.

[270] Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma,* Yabuki 1927, appendix, 12.

[271] The use of the term 'rule' (*gui* 軌) here is unique in Xinxing's writings. We may surmise that its use represents a concession to the fact that the taxonomy of the 'three levels' is indeed primarily Xinxing's invention, and does not come from the direct words of the Buddha.

三者明如摩訶衍經、佛藏經、思益經等三部經明一切利根空見有見眾生，文義最大廣、最大具足。文當，无量无邊諸佛菩薩等不能廻得一切利根空見有見眾生。

Three: the three scriptures known as the *Mahāyāna Scripture*, the *Scripture of the Buddha-treasury*, and the *Scripture of the [Brahma Abundance-of-Thought]*, discuss all those beings of keen faculties who misconceives emptiness or existence. In text and meaning they are most capacious and most complete. Their text attests: immeasurable, limitless buddhas and bodhisattvas are unable to retrieve any being of keen faculties who misconceives emptiness or existence.[272]

However, Xinxing also constructs chains of inferences based on these passages. Based on overlaps or similarities between passages, Xinxing builds up certain trans-scriptural categories. For example, in the following passage, Xinxing uses a string of inferences to prove that those who engage in the "perversely wholesome buddha-dharma" are "as numerous as the particles of dirt in the worlds of the Ten Directions." No scripture says such a thing directly. But the beings who engage in the "perversely wholesome buddha-dharma" are clearly equated, at points, with a beings with "conceptions of emptiness and conceptions of existence." Because *those* beings are that numerous, we can conclude that those who engage in the perversely wholesome buddha-dharma are numerous as well. He writes,

一者明，雖作眾善、求名求利、求勝他故，一切邪善佛法。

One: although they do much good, because [those beings] seek fame, because they seek personal benefit, and because they seek to be better than others, they are [beings of] the perversely wholesome buddha-dharma.

二者明，唯偏將一切利根空見有見眾生一切邪善佛法，作是一切利根真聖及凡夫正見成就九種人一切正善佛法，作非一切邪善佛法，多少淺深寬狹長短分齊亦與下兩部經內所說一切惡，一種相似。

Two: to only and exclusively treat the perversely wholesome buddha-dharma of the beings of keen faculties who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence as the correctly wholesome buddha-dharma of the sages and worldlings of keen faculties (who are the nine kinds of people provisioned with correct conceptions), to consider [the perversely wholesome buddha-dharma] as *not* the entirely perverse buddha-dharma—the quantity, depth, width, and breadth [of this sin] is comparable to the evil discussed in the two scriptures below.

何以故。明以空見驗有見，相作不定。明一切利根空見有見眾生能起一切邪善佛法人。多少分齊既與十方世界所有地土，一種相似。如上如下多段說。

What of it? We take 'misconceptions of emptiness' as evidence for 'misconceptions of existence.' Each proves the other without being definitive. We state that beings of keen capacities who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence, people who can give rise to the perversely wholesome buddha-dharma, [such beings are] in quantity comparable to all the dirt in the world-systems of the ten directions, as many sections [of this text] both above and below explain.

[272] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 257.

> 文顯易識，以人驗所起一切邪善佛法多少分齊亦與十方世界所有地土，一種相似，類以可知。
> The text is clear and easy to understand. It uses 'people' as evidence for the fact that those who give rise to the perversely wholesome buddha-dharma are in quantity comparable to the earth in the world-systems of the ten directions. We know [this] by means of similar [passages].[273]

In this passage, Xinxing equates beings who have affinities for the 'perversely wholesome' buddha-dharma with beings who have misconceptions of existence. Once these categories are equated, Xinxing can declare that beings with a misconception of existence are (like the beings who misconceive emptiness) equivalent in number to the dirt of the worlds of the ten directions. Xinxing uses such transitive reasoning to build up 'trans-scriptural categories.' He identifies a type of being specified by the buddha in scripture, and then uses analogy and transitive reasoning to 'flesh out' what this category looks like. Here, he adduces a statement in one scripture to infer a characteristic of one of his trans-scriptural categories, the 'beings who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence':

> 三者，以前驗後，以少一切驗多一切[274]。一切菩薩俱不能救得空見有見眾生。何以故。(已上人語引經說，已下唯是經文說。) 彌勒為上首，一切皆悉起，欲有留難時，我等不能遮。(已下人語引經說。) 以此文驗，所以得知，一切菩薩俱不能救得空見有見眾生。准依大集月藏分經第十卷說。
> Three (we use the former as evidence for the later, we use the few as evidence for the many): no bodhisattva can rescue the beings who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence. What of it? (Above is citation of scripture in human words. Below is strictly scriptural text.) "Maitreya was at the head [of the assembly] and all arose… 'When times of difficulty are imminent, we will not be able to hold them back.'[275] (Below is citation of scripture in human words.) Our understanding comes from this textual evidence. No bodhisattva can rescue the beings who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence. Based on what it says in the tenth fascicle of the 'Moon-Store Section' of the *Great Collection Scripture*.[276]

Earlier, in this text, Xinxing has already demonstrated that 'later' (後) and 'many' (多) are qualities pertinent to 'beings who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence,' while 'early' (前) and 'few' (少) are qualities of the assembly in which Maitreya is speaking. Here, Xinxing adduces statements made by Maitreya in a context that is 'early' and 'few' to the context of 'later' and 'many'—the context in which beings who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence find themselves. Because Maitreya refers, in this passage, to a future time (後), his statement is applicable to those beings. Xinxing holds that this passage provides

[273] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 312–313.
[274] While 以少驗多 appears frequently in Xinxing's writings, the phrase 以少一切驗多一切 appears nowhere else, and I suspect the latter phrase is a scribal error for the former.
[275] T.397.13.377a10–16.
[276] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 60–61.

evidence for an important quality of beings who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence—such beings cannot be saved by any bodhisattva. This sort of transitive reasoning is pervasive in Xinxing's mature texts (see Appendix B); reasoning of this kind allows Xinxing to build up very complex taxonomies, while claiming that everything is based in scripture. If we find his method of inference persuasive, then his texts are, in some sense, simply compilations of 'the words of the buddha.'

There is ample evidence from contemporaneous or near-contemporaneous observers of Xinxing's project that his writings were seen as, primarily, compilations of scriptural extracts. All four of the major biographical sources on Xinxing mention that he 'compiled' (*zhuan* 撰) or 'combined' (*bing* 並) 'extracts' (*chao* 鈔), 'citations' (*yinwen* 引文), or 'teachings' (*fa* 法) drawn from Buddhist scriptures in order to create his writings. His epitaph says that he "compiled, from out of the twelve kinds of scriptures, the *Teachings on Practice Matched to Faculties* in more than thirty fascicles, and he also put out the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* in four fascicles…"[277] The *Lidai sanbao ji* says that "these records [of his] combine citations of the correct text of the scriptures and treatises, though their headings are of uncertain regularity."[278] The *Xu gaoseng zhuan* says that he "quoted scriptural sources so that parallel types were evident, glancing like the wind at the early and later, and gathering them into an aggregate."[279] Finally, the *Mingbao ji* claims that Xinxing "made excerpt collections of the scriptures and treatises, referencing personal identity against teaching; what was fit to study amounted to thirty-six fascicles, which he called the *Collected Records of Humankind*."[280]

Xinxing, it seems, was well-known for making compilations of excerpted scriptural passages. It also appears that these compositions were not seen as fitting easily into existing genres of Chinese Buddhist literature. Biographical sources and Three Levels catalogues often call his writings "collected records" (*jilu* 集錄, an otherwise unattested type of text) or "collections" (*ji* 集).[281] In contrast, Xinxing's compositions are never described, by his followers or by outside observers, as 'commentaries' (*shu* 疏), 'essays' (*zhang* 章), 'notes/annotations' (*ji* 記) or 'treatises' (*lun* 論). Further evidence for the generic distinctiveness of Xinxing's writings comes from their ambivalent treatment in scriptural catalogues. His texts appear in the *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 under the category "miscellaneous collections" (*zaji* 雜集).[282] Infamously, some catalogues, beginning with the *Dazhou kanding zhongjing mulu* 大周刊定衆經目錄, categorize Xinxing's compositions as "fraudulent scriptures" (*weijing* 偽經).[283] It is worth stressing here, however, that Xinxing's texts clearly rest uneasily in this category; the compilers

[277] 於十二部經中，撰對根起行之法三十餘卷，又出三階佛法四卷。Nishimoto 1998, 36.
[278] 此錄並引經論正文，而其外題無定准的。T.2034.49.105c1–2.
[279] 援引文據，類敘顯然。前後望風，翕成其聚。T.2060.50.560a17–18.
[280] 乃鈔集經論，參驗人法。所當學者為三十六卷，名曰人集錄。T.2082.51.788b7–b8.
[281] The only other major Sui-Tang scholastic text known as a "collection" is Daochuo's 道綽 *Collection on the [Land of] Bliss* 安樂集. It is clear from biographical and polemical sources that early Pure Land thinkers and Xinxing's followers were acutely aware of one another. Many modern scholars have conjectured that Daochuo's work was influenced by Xinxing's (see Michibata 1933). Apart from overlaps in content, Xinxing's greatest influence on Daochuo may have come from providing a model for an unusual type of text—a collection of scriptural passages—which Daochuo replicated in the *Anle ji*. (Although, as Michael Conway has documented, Daochuo's *Anle ji* does not reproduce Xinxing's meticulous citational practices. See Conway 2021.) The generic overlap between Daochuo's text and Xinxing's texts deserves careful research.
[282] T.2122.53.1020b15
[283] T.2153.55.474c15–a15.

of the *Dazhou* catalogue have some difficulty in explaining exactly why the texts of Xinxing and the Three Levels count as "fraudulent scriptures." The classification of all the other texts in this category is justified quite easily—as the bibliographers explain, they are not "the Buddha's preaching" (*foshuo* 佛說), even though they present themselves as such.[284] In contrast, when it comes to Xinxing's texts, the *Dazhou* cataloguers do not give their own reasoning. Instead, they cite Zhou imperial edicts that explicitly order that these texts be classed as "fraudulent." These edicts conspicuously refrain from saying that Xinxing's texts are not "the Buddha's preaching." Instead, they say that they are "contrary to the Buddha's intent" (違背佛意). Grasping at an unnatural category, the edicts classify them as "miscellaneous talismans" (雜符籙).[285] Xinxing's texts seem to have flummoxed government curators as much as they baffled his co-religionists.

The fact that Xinxing embraced remarkably fastidious citational practices, as well as the fact that many outside observers made special notes of his compilation activity, should suffice to show that Xinxing held bare scriptural text in special esteem. He seems to have felt that scripture provided unique access to the Buddha; he also felt that the text of received scripture should not be modified or tampered with. (We will see why shortly, when we see that Xinxing considered scripture both salvifically powerful and profoundly dangerous.)

3) Specific Teachings are Intended for Specific Audiences

Almost all forms of Mahāyāna Buddhism stress the facility of buddhas and bodhisattvas for 'expedient' (Skt. *upāya*, Ch. *fangbian* 方便).[286] At its most simple, the concept of 'expedients' suggests that the Buddha comports his teaching to the needs and abilities of a given audience—the words and surface message change, but the underlying intention (ferrying beings to liberation) remains the same; this underlying intention maintains the coherence of the Buddha's otherwise divergent teachings.[287] In more complex formulations, the concept suggests that buddhas and bodhisattvas change their physical form in ways spiritually salubrious for the objects of their compassion—bodhisattvas appear, for example, as beggars or lepers in order to spur sentient beings along the Path. At its most expansive, 'expedient' becomes a cosmological mechanism—the entire phenomenal world is a kaleidoscopic contortion of the Buddha's expedient forms, and the whole cosmos is the ludic unfolding of the buddhas' liberation of themselves.[288]

The concept of the Buddha's expedients is not articulated in the same way or to the same degree at all points in the Mahāyāna tradition. In general, however, the nearly universal recognition of the Buddha's use of expedients entails that Mahāyāna Buddhists agree on a few facts about Buddhist scripture and practice. First, 'expedient' implies (and justifies) the fact that Buddhist scripture contains substantively different teachings that often, at least superficially, contradict one another. Second, the Buddha's modulation of his teaching implies that Buddhist

[284] In the *Dazhou* catalogue's section of fraudulent scriptures, there are three sets of texts, each of which is followed by an explanation of why the texts in question are considered fraudulent. The first set consists of revelations from the Buddha to a Chinese nun—the catalogue denies that these texts are, in fact, the words of the Buddha, suggesting in effect that they are false revelations. (T.2153.55.47sb16–21.) The second set consists of texts falsely passed off as translations of real scriptures (T.2153.55.474c11–14). The third set consists of Three Levels texts.
[285] T.2153.55.474a9–a15.
[286] For overviews of this concept, see Jackson 2004 and Pye 1978.
[287] On the hermeneutic import of *upāya*, see Lopez, "Introduction."
[288] For a philosophical exposition of *upāya* in this broad sense, see Ziporyn 2000, 145–170.

practitioners vary in spiritual aptitude and inclination—the teachings are manifold because the audience is manifold. An 'expedient teaching,' therefore, always implies a correlated 'intended audience.' Third, the concept of expedient implies that it is good (perhaps essential) for teaching and audience to be tuned to one another.

Needless to say, 'expedient' also functions as a bedrock concept for Mahāyāna hermeneutics. The idea that the Buddha says and does different things in front of different people provides a ready means of rescuing the coherence of Buddhist scriptures from perceived contradictions.[289] We should note that the general concept of 'expedient' is so vague that it places almost no restrictions on the definite contents of exegesis; different exegetes have used 'expedient' to justify diametrically opposed interpretations of scripture.[290] The concept's only concrete hermeneutic entailment is that it hedges against scriptural literalism—the literal meaning of any given scriptural passage is likely a mere expedient, a subtle expression of the Buddha's 'real' intent of advancing a given audience along the Path.

Sixth-century Chinese Buddhist writers share all of these basic presuppositions and consistently rely on the concept of 'expedient' in their exegetical endeavors. In broad outline, Zhiyi, Daochuo, and Xinxing would all agree that the Buddha's teachings vary in conformity with intended audience, and it is good for practitioners to utilize an appropriate practice. All medieval *panjiao* systems depend in part on this assumption, as does so-called *mofa* thought. But beyond these commonalities, we encounter fateful variations. As many scholars have noted, Xinxing and Pure Land thinkers like Daochuo differ substantially from other sixth-century thinkers because they focus on identifying and promulgating the teachings of the Buddha that are aimed at the lower grades of Buddhist practitioners.[291] Xinxing, furthermore, stands alone in several regards. First, Xinxing treats Buddhist scripture as if the proper unit of 'expedient' analysis is the passage or sentence, rather than the scripture as a whole—the Buddha does not merely modulate his teaching from scripture to scripture, he sometimes modulates his teaching *within* the frame of a single sermon. Thus, if one wished to systematically organize the scriptural corpus according to intended audience, one would sort passages (*wen* 文) or teachings (*fa* 法) rather than whole scriptures (*jing* 經). Xinxing's later texts gather passages and teachings from a wide range of scriptures and unite them in a single framework. This methodology sets Xinxing's texts apart from other hermeneutic deployments of the concept of 'expedient;' *panjiao* texts, for example, organize scriptures or large divisions of scriptures, rather than individual passages.[292]

Second, Xinxing considered a 'mismatch' between faculties and teachings to be not merely suboptimal but to be very spiritually unhealthy, perhaps fatally so. In the *Practice Matched to Faculties* he writes:

> 一者，第一階凡夫正見人等，合學上法，而行下法，廢出世无障道罪。
> One: the worldling people of the first level with correct conceptions are fit to study the higher teachings. But if they practice the lower teachings, [that is] the sin of abandoning the unobstructed path to transcendence.

[289] Most modern studies of Buddhist hermeneutics emphasize, correctly, the foundational role of the doctrine of expedient teachings in Buddhist exegesis. See the essays collected in Lopez 1988, especially Lopez's introductory essay: "a belief common to the major schools of Buddhist thought in Asia is that the Buddha did not teach the same thing to all, but rather expediently adapted his message to meet the specific needs of his audience" (Lopez, "Introduction," 5).
[290] See again Lopez 1988, "Introduction."
[291] See Chappell 1980.
[292] Gregory 1991.

二者，第二階三乘正見人等，唯合學當位法。不學上一乘人所行法，而行之者，由下人學上法不當根錯故，障道受苦。
Two: the people of the second level who [possess] correct conceptions and [are suited for] the Three Vehicles are fit only to study the Dharma that matches their rank. They do not study the higher teaching practiced by the people of the One Vehicle. Were they to practice it, because of the error of a lower person studying a higher teaching that does not match their faculties, they would obstruct the Path and experience suffering.

三者，第三階斷出障者，唯得學一人、一境、一行、一相續、一身業、一意業、一口業。若異是學，行上兩階佛法，不當根故，雖行佛法，念念之中唯長邪錯，作无窮无盡阿鼻地獄等業，受无間苦。
Three: the removal of obstacles for the third level. They may only study 'one person,' 'one object,' 'one practice,' 'one continuance,' 'one physical act,' 'one mental act,' and 'one verbal act.'[293] If, diverging from this, they study and practice the buddha-dharma of the two higher levels, because it does not match their faculties, even though they practice the buddha-dharma, in each and every thought, they only augment their errors. They will commit unconstrainable, inexhaustible karmic acts [linked to] the *avīci* hells, and they will experience uninterrupted suffering.[294]

In this passage, Xinxing is very clear that each kind of practitioner in his Three Levels taxonomy suffers spiritual harm from practicing a teaching not matched to their faculties (不當根)—first level beings commit the sin of "abandoning the unobstructed path to transcendence," second level beings "obstruct the Path and experience suffering," and third level beings create karmic ties to the *avīci* hells, where "they will experience uninterrupted suffering." However, Xinxing does not explain *why* such a mismatch leads to spiritual retrogression, as opposed to mere failure to progress along the Path.

To understand the connection between mismatched practice and 'sin,' we must take account of the third way that Xinxing's understanding of 'expedient teaching' and 'intended audience' is unique. At certain points in his writings, Xinxing emphasizes that we *know* the intended audience of a particular teaching by one means alone: the Buddha tells us explicitly within the text of scripture. Xinxing does not sort teachings by reference to the testimony of anyone but the Buddha, nor does he use complex inferences or reference to philosophical ideals. We know a teaching is intended for us because the Buddha says so directly, or because the Buddha, within the *nidāna* frame of a sutra, [295] gives the teaching in a setting analogous to our own.[296]

[293] These are technical terms for Xinxing's preferred form of practice. See Nishimoto 1998, 210, 317.
[294] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 126.
[295] See Walser 2005, 153–157, Brough 1950, Nattier 2014. For an emic explanation of the significance of the *nidāna*, see the discussion by Zhiyi at T.1698.33.76a23–c9.
[296] Elsewhere, I have called this Xinxing's 'hermeneutic;' because 'hermeneutic' has different implications in different contexts, I wish to be specific about what sort of intellectual principle is entailed by Xinxing's idea that the Buddha explicitly tells us the intended audience for specific teachings. This idea does indeed constitute Xinxing's primary criterion for sorting and interpreting Buddhist texts. If we take 'hermeneutic' to mean a 'principle of

Xinxing explains this criterion of interpretation clearly in one of the texts discovered at Jinchuanwan, *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*. In that text, Xinxing explains this criterion as follows:

> 經中但使浅深相對說者，皆是為明上下浅深義。何以故？或就時明上下。好時為上，惡時為下。好時者佛在世，惡時者佛滅後。或就世界明上下。淨土為上，穢土為下。或就人明上下。說諸佛菩薩一處獨說者為上，與凡夫二乘一處共說者為下。或就世間出世間明上下。出世間為上，世間為下。或就初後明上下。後者為上，初者為下。或就多少明上下。多者為上，少者為下。為上菩薩說上法，為下菩薩說下法。[297]
>
> In the scriptures, whenever it explains something through a contrast between shallow and profound, this serves to elucidate shallow and profound principles [as related to] higher or lower. How so? Sometimes it elucidates higher and lower in terms of time period. A good time period is higher, and a baleful time period is lower. A good time period is when the Buddha resides in the world, and a baleful time period is after the Buddha has passed away. Sometimes it elucidates higher and lower in terms of world-system. A pure land is higher, and a defiled land is lower. Sometimes it elucidates higher and lower in terms of people. When it says that buddhas and bodhisattvas are somewhere speaking on their own, it is higher. When they are somewhere speaking together with ordinary worldlings [who follow] the two vehicles, it is lower. Sometimes it elucidates higher and lower in terms of mundane or transmundane. The transmundane is higher, and the mundane is lower. Sometimes it elucidates higher and lower in terms of what begins and what comes later. Later [on the Path] is higher, and the beginning [of the Path] is lower. Sometimes it elucidates higher and lower in terms of quantity. Numerous is higher, and scarce is lower. For higher bodhisattvas, it preaches higher teachings. For lower bodhisattvas, it preaches lower teachings.

In this passage, Xinxing gives a list of paired characteristics. He holds that these features indicate the relative sophistication of a passage of Buddhist scripture, which in turn reveals the intended audience. For example, consider a passage in which someone preaches only to Buddhas and bodhisattvas. By Xinxing's logic, this marks the passage as profound, which means it contains a higher teaching appropriate only to higher practitioners. A passage set in an assembly where worldlings are also present would be shallow, contain a lower teaching, and is safe for the

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interpretation,' then this criterion is, indeed, a hermeneutic. However, philosophers and historians of religion occasionally use 'hermeneutic' to refer to a well-developed theory of meaning or interpretation—a philosophy of how 'meaning' is made, whether in reading or in experience. In this sense, Xinxing's criterion is not really a hermeneutic, but merely an exegetical heuristic. Beyond the vague notion that different people may vary in their capacity to read and understand text, Xinxing puts forward no theory of meaning or philosophy of interpretation. By the standards of serious Chinese hermeneutic thinkers like Wang Bi 王弼, and even by the standards of some contemporaneous Buddhist exegetes like Zhiyi, Xinxing's hermeneutic stance is quite naïve. This naïve hermeneutic attitude helps us account for the strange discrepancy between Xinxing's apparent anxiety that the Buddhist scriptural corpus was difficult to understand and interpret with his apparent comfort with merely reproducing the bare text of scripture without paraphrase or commentary—for Xinxing, the relationships between the parts of that corpus were the loci of confusion, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation; individual sentences, in contrast, were easy to understand. Rearrangement of the parts of the whole was most pressing; line-by-line commentary on individual words and phrases was not.

[297] Ledderose 2020, 519.

perusal of less sophisticated practitioners. For Xinxing, then, passages of Buddhist scripture contain clues to their own classification. Such clues come in the form of setting, sequence, or the use of keywords like 'later' or 'transmundane' by the speaker. If you can spot one of these key identifying features, you understand the intended audience of the passage.

Xinxing explains the step-by-step application of this principle in each main part of the fourth section of *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*. Here, Xinxing explains how he knows that a particular passage of the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* is meant for beings of lower faculties. The passage in question is Vimalakīrti's elucidation of eight practices that ensure bodhisattvas will achieve rebirth in a pure land. Vimalakīrti gives this lesson in response to a question about how the bodhisattvas of the Sahā world-sphere (a "defiled land," *hui tu* 穢土) might achieve a better rebirth. Xinxing writes:

> 第六明下根菩薩行菩薩行法者，如維摩經說。何以故。淨穢相對，淨土是上，穢土是下。若為淨土菩薩請菩薩行，明知所為者即是上人。既為穢土菩薩請菩薩行，明知所為者即是下人。是故知為下根菩薩說。[298]
> Sixth, we elucidate the teachings on the bodhisattva practices undertaken by the bodhisattva of lower faculties, as the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* explains. How? In the contrasting terms "pure" and "defiled," the pure land is higher and the defiled land is lower. When [someone in scripture] inquires about bodhisattva practices aimed at bodhisattvas of a pure land, we know clearly that those for whom they are intended are higher people. And when [someone in scripture] inquires about bodhisattva practices aimed at bodhisattvas of a defiled land, we know clearly that those for whom they are intended are lower people. We know, therefore, that [the following teaching from the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*] is preached for the sake of bodhisattvas of lower faculties.

As we can see, Xinxing is methodical. He reminds us that "defiled land" carries the valence, "lower," while "pure land" is equivalent to "higher." He further specifies how these terms function in the scriptural passages where they might appear. A given teaching might be "intended for bodhisattvas of a pure land." Such a teaching should be understood as higher, and consequently as intended for "higher people." Xinxing concludes that, since the following passage of the *Vimalakīrti* is "intended for bodhisattvas of a defiled land," it is a lower teaching, "intended for the bodhisattva of lower faculties."[299] Xinxing inserts similar justifications throughout his mature writings.

Even when Xinxing does not "show his work," it is clear that this interpretive technique is operating in the background of many of his writings. For example, we can

[298] Ledderose 2020, 523.

[299] In offering this conclusion, Xinxing omits two facts that he assumes are already known to the reader, namely that the passage in question marks itself as "intended for bodhisattvas of the Sahā realm" (the interlocutors are indeed inquiring about the practices appropriate to Sahā bodhisattvas) and that the Sahā world-sphere is by definition a "defiled realm." Xinxing is fully justified in reading the original passage in this way. It opens with bodhisattvas from another world system inquiring about the customary practices in Śākyamuni's world-sphere (*Vimalakīrti Sutra*, *Weimojie suo shuo jing* 維摩詰所說經; T#475, 14: 553a16–19). In case there is any doubt about whether "Śākyamuni's world-sphere" is in fact the Sāha realm, Vimalakīrti states the fact explicitly (T#475, 14: 553a22). The defiled nature of the Sāha realm is emphasized throughout the passage.

glimpse Xinxing silently applying his methodology in the very first section of the *Excerpts from the Moon-store Section*. That section reads, in its entirety:

> 一者明供養三寶時節。上人語，下經文。若復有諸衆生，若現在世及未来世。[300]
> One: the time period for making offerings to the Three Jewels. Above are human words, below is scriptural text: "If there are beings who, *in the present age or in ages to come…*"

At first glance, this short snippet of the *Moon-store Section* may not seem like it warrants a section all its own in the *Excerpts*. In fact, however, it provides Xinxing with justification for all of the excerpts that he includes in this text. It consists of the first clause of a long statement by the Buddha in which he describes the rewards bestowed on those who provide particular forms of support to the Buddhist order. While the practices are interesting, and the rewards enticing, it is the Buddha's specification of the period to which the statement applies that is fundamental. When the Buddha says, "…or in the future…" (及未來世), Xinxing almost certainly reads him as meaning, "in a baleful time period" (惡時)—one of Xinxing's many key words. For Xinxing, this phrase is a beacon, flashing across ten centuries from the Buddha's time to his own, saying, "The following is meant for beings of lower faculties." The subsequent sections of the *Excerpts* are safe to study and practice only because they receive the imprimatur of these four words.

In Xinxing's view, the presence of such a signal in a passage is not an accident of its production or transmission; instead, it is a deliberate insertion by the Buddha himself, with full awareness of its crucial role in unlocking the passage's meaning for future students. To come upon such a feature in a Buddhist text is to encounter the compassionate forethought of the omniscient mind of the ancient Sage. Xinxing seems fully aware of the religious appeal of this possibility. For example, in discussing the application of his methodology to a passage of the *Lotus Sutra*, the *Chapter on the Practices of Peace and Bliss*, Xinxing points out that the chapter begins with Mañjuśrī asking how sentient beings in future ages should preach the Dharma. For Xinxing, this reference to the era after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* is a tag, placed there by the Buddha's careful design, that removes any doubt that the intended audience is indeed the benighted "bodhisattva of lower faculties." He writes:

> 大須得此段經意，一一行初，皆言，如来滅後於惡世中。何以故？如来了知末法世中行佛法、住持佛法、滅佛法。法師最勝最上无與等者。所以慇懃慇懃，至到至到，段段具說，於我滅後，當如是說法。如法華經第五卷、安樂行品中說。此依經引義，非次第抄文。[301]
> It is quite necessary to grasp the intent of these passages of scripture. At the beginning of each of the practices it says, "After the Thus-come One has passed away, during a baleful age…"[302] Why? The Thus-come One understood very clearly that in the age of the Final Dharma, [with regard to] practicing the buddha-dharma, preserving the buddha-dharma, or destroying the buddha-dharma, the Dharma master is supreme, most high, and without equal. Thus, meticulously,

[300] Ledderose 2020, 536.
[301] Ledderose 2020, 524.
[302] Note that the phrase 如来滅後 appears in *Chapter on the Practices of Peace and Bliss* 15 times.

> ever-so meticulously, and carefully, ever-so carefully, in each and every [one] of these passages he always says, "After I pass away, one should preach the Dharma in such a way." As is explained in the "Chapter on the Practice of Peace and Bliss" in the fifth fascicle of the *Lotus Sutra*.[303] [Note:] This [section] has drawn out the meaning on the basis of the scripture. It is not a word for word copy of the text.

As we can see, Xinxing is convinced that the Buddha himself has marked a particular set of teachings in the *Chapter on the Practices of Peace and Bliss* as appropriate for beings in the "baleful age" after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*—i.e., for Xinxing and his followers.

So far, all of the examples of Xinxing's discussion and application of this interpretive criterion have been drawn from his 'middle texts,' preserved at Jinchuanwan. However, there is ample intratextual evidence that most of Xinxing's later texts are constructed on the basis of the same criterion: they merely make explicit and orderly the Buddha's own understanding of his teachings. In the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, we find the following passage in which Xinxing explains that teachings given by particular buddhas or bodhisattvas in particular circumstances are 'fit to study':

> 又一切經律論內能起教諸佛菩薩。若為一乘世界、佛在世、一乘眾生、最大好世界、好時好眾生、起教即常樂我淨、諸佛菩薩、盧舍那佛、釋迦牟尼佛、毗盧遮那佛、普賢菩薩摩訶薩、為上首等，合學之。准依大方廣佛華嚴經一部等通上及下第一第二卷、楞伽經第一卷等說。
> Furthermore, the buddhas and bodhisattvas in all the scriptures, codes, and treatises who establish the teaching [that is fit to study]. If [the teaching is set in] a One Vehicle world-system, if the Buddha is present in the world, if it is One Vehicle beings [in attendance], if it is a most excellent system, an excellent age, with excellent beings, if the teaching established is [that of] Permanence, Joy, Self, and Purity, and <u>if the buddhas or bodhisattvas at the head [of the assembly] are the Buddha Bishena [Vairocana], the Buddha Śākyamuni, the Buddha Biluzhena [Vairocana-*qua*-dharma-body], or the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva Puxian [Samantabhadra], then [the teaching in question] is fit to study</u>. Based on what it says in the entirety of the *Great Expansive Scripture on the Flower Ornament of the Buddha* (from top to bottom, and [in the first and second fascicle], and in the first fascicle of the *Laṅkāvatāra Scripture*.
>
> 若為五濁諸惡世界、佛滅度後、空見有見眾生、最大惡世界、惡時惡眾生、起教即苦无常无我不淨、諸佛菩薩、釋迦牟尼佛、地藏菩薩摩訶薩、為上首等，合學之。准依大方廣十輪經、兼准依大集經訖盡、大集月藏分經、四阿含經、諸部戒律、諸部阿毗曇論等說。[304]
> If [the teaching is set in] the baleful world-systems of the Five Impurities, if it is after the Buddha has passed into liberation, if there are beings with conceptions of emptiness and conceptions of existence, if it is the most baleful world-system, a baleful age, with baleful beings, if the teaching established is [that of] Suffering,

[303] Paraphrase of T.262.9.37a1–38c29.
[304] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 23.

> Impermanence, Non-Self, and Impurity, and if the buddhas or bodhisattvas at the head [of the assembly] are the Buddha Śākyamuni or the Bodhisattva-Mahāsattva Dizang [Kṣitigarbha], then [the teaching in question] is fit to study. Based on what it says in the *Great Expansive Scripture of the Ten Wheels*, and at the same time based on the entirety of the *Great Collection Scripture*, the 'Moon-Store Section' of the *Great Collection Scripture*, the Four Āgama Scriptures, the various precepts and codes, and the various *abhidharma* treatises.

In a manner similar to his explanation of his criterion in the *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*, in this passage Xinxing adds that the fact that a teaching is given by a particular *buddha* may make it suitable for study. Clearly, the criterion he explained in the *Bodhi Matched to Faculties* was still in operation in later texts like the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*.

Many accounts by Xinxing's followers, as well as outside accounts, reference Xinxing's idea that practice should be matched to faculties and, if practice was mismatched, disaster could result. Xinxing's epitaph reads:

> 信知學不當根，甘露以之成毒。藥應其□，□寶所以名珍。[305]
> When the faithful and knowledgeable study what does not match their capacities, then sweet nectar thereby becomes a poison. If the medicine accords with their [disease?], [then the precious?] jewel is therefore considered a gem.

The literatus Tang Lin makes a similar remark in the *Mingbao ji*. He also makes clear that Xinxing's desire to match teachings to faculties led him to compile excerpts of scripture, writing,

> 今去聖久遠，根時久異。若以下人修行上法，法不當根，容能錯倒，乃鈔集經論，參驗人法。所當學者，為三十六卷。名曰人集錄。[306]
> We are now a long time and a long way away from the Sage, and faculties [of practitioners] and [conditions of] the age have long shifted. Consider an inferior person who practices a superior teaching—the teaching does not match their faculties, they could easily err or mix things up. So, [Xinxing] collected excerpts from the scriptures and treatises, matching person to teaching. What was fit to be studied amounted to thirty-six fascicles, which he called the *Collected Records of Humankind*.

Later, Tang Lin gives an even pithier summary of Xinxing's activities: "He dispensed medicine that matched the sickness."[307]

Intriguingly, there is almost no evidence that Xinxing's readers—be they followers or outsiders—understood the criteria by which he matched teachings to faculties and selected his 'excerpts.' No texts outside of Xinxing's own writings discuss Xinxing's unique method of accessing the Buddha's intent. Many of Xinxing's peers clearly disagreed with the idea that Xinxing was articulating the Buddha's intent at all, arguing instead that Xinxing's re-ordering of scripture merely reflected his own subjective exegetical agenda. Let us note, however, that when the Zhou regime ordered Xinxing's writings to be classified as "fraudulent scriptures," they did

[305] Nishimoto 1998, 36.
[306] T.2082.51.788b5–8.
[307] 當病授藥。T.2082.51.788b11–12.

so on the basis that they were "contrary to the Buddha's intent."[308] Xinxing was long dead by the time of the Zhou edicts. We might surmise, however, that he would have been horrified by this criticism. According to Xinxing's own presentation of his texts, they completely conform to the Buddha's intent *as explicitly articulated in the text of scripture itself*.[309]

Xinxing's unique application of the general Mahāyāna idea of expedient teachings helps account for the structure of his writings. We are left to wonder, however, why he took such pains to organize his writings as compilations of scriptural quotations. If the Buddha clearly explains which teachings are intended for which audiences, why not write something more discursive? Why did Xinxing rigidly demarcate his own comments and organizational headings from the bare text of scripture? To understand this rigidity, we must understand one of Xinxing's most unusual ideas: the misinterpretation or misuse of scripture is immensely dangerous.

4) Scripture Is Dangerous

As we have seen above, Xinxing feels that Buddhist scripture is a unique locus of supreme authority for Chinese Buddhists. For Xinxing, if liberation is possible in sixth century China, that possibility derives, ultimately, from scripture. Scripture's bare text is thus pregnant with liberatory potential. However, that potential coincides with exceptional spiritual danger. Xinxing articulates the danger of scripture in terms of three closely linked potential sins. The primary sin is 'maligning' (*feibang* 誹謗) one or all of the Three Jewels; to the sin of 'maligning,' Xinxing conjoins 'impure dharma-preaching' (*bujing shuofa* 不淨說法), and 'suspicion' or 'loathing' (*xian* 嫌) someone's engagement with a correct practice. Although all of these sins were recognized as such by contemporaneous scholiasts, Xinxing understood 'maligning,' 'impure preaching,' and 'loathing' in uniquely expansive ways. In combination, Xinxing's conception of these three sins helps to account for some of the unusual aspects of the his activities , including his unusually rigid treatment of scriptural texts.

For Xinxing, if a reader misinterprets or misapplies scripture, they will commit the deadly sin of 'maligning' (*feibang* 誹謗) one or all of the Three Jewels. Maligning the Three Jewels inevitably incurs dire spiritual retrogression, including lengthy privations in the *avīci* (*wujian* 無間) hells. In the *Practice Matched to Capacities*, Xinxing explains how damaging the sin of maligning can be:

> 還於无量无邊諸佛所，謗佛謗法，由謗佛法滅，爾許時行行善根盡，墮十方一切阿鼻地獄。一一方各有八大地獄，一一地獄徑三千六百萬億歲受无間苦，上火徹下下火徹上。[310]
>
> Returning to the presence of unlimited, innumerable buddhas, [the beings in question] malign the Buddha, they malign the Dharma, and because they malign the Buddha, the Dharma is destroyed. At such moments, the good roots of each and every practice are extinguished, and they fall into the *avīci* hells of the Ten Directions. In each direction, there are eight great hells, and in each hell they

[308] 違背佛意。T.2153.55.475a10.

[309] It is no coincidence that Xinxing begins his comments in *Bodhi Matched to Faculties* by referencing the "intent" of scripture: "It is quite necessary to grasp the intent of these passages of scripture." 大須得此段經意。Ledderose 2020, 524.

[310] *Practice Matched to Faculties*, Yabuki 1927, Appendix, 117.

> spend three-thousand, six-hundred, myriad, million years experiencing uninterrupted torment, with fire above piercing down and fire below piercing up.

The danger of 'maligning' the Dharma was well-known to Chinese Buddhists of the sixth century. Most would have agreed with Xinxing that this sin has dire spiritual repercussions. Pure Land thinkers like Tanluan, Huaigan, and Shandao, for example, were deeply concerned that the sin of 'maligning' might bar one's path to rebirth in the Pure Land.[311] Although 'maligning' was a common topic of concern, however, the content of this transgression was not precisely defined. For most sixth-century commentators, *feibang* 誹謗 seems to have had the general sense of '*apavāda*,' its antecedent in Indic Mahāyāna texts. *Apavāda* has the primary sense of 'bad-mouthing' or 'rejecting,' and appears in a technical sense in texts like the *Lotus Sutra* to refer to a rejection of a genuine teaching of the Buddha (e.g., the Mahāyāna scriptures, especially the *Lotus Sutra*) as fraudulent or inauthentic.[312]

Like Pure Land thinkers, Xinxing was deeply interested in (and anxious about) the sin of 'maligning.' Like almost all sixth-century thinkers, he uses 'malign' to refer to a rejection of the Buddha's legitimate teachings. Unlike other sixth-century exegetes, however, Xinxing operates with some precise and unusual theories about the activities that qualify as 'maligning.' One such theory is that practicing an 'inappropriate' (*budang* 不當) teaching amounts to maligning the Dharma. Xinxing makes this connection explicitly in the *Practice Matched to Capacities* in the course of discussing some of the spiritual obstacles open to his contemporaries:

> 一者，一切佛不救空見有見顛倒眾生，得值无量无邊諸佛，於諸佛所行六波羅蜜，由學佛法不當根謗佛法僧，不免墮十方一切阿鼻地獄，一切佛不能救。[313]

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[311] See Ogawa 2019 for a useful discussion of Shandao's attempt to deal with mentions of 'maligning' in the Pure Land sutras. Ogawa also gives an overview of the other Pure Land exegetes engagement with the term, including Huaigan and Tanluan.

[312] The conceptual content of the term 'maligning' (*feibang* 誹謗) and the philological history of this term are understudied topics in the history of Chinese Buddhism. The term appears to translate Indic antecedents like *apavāda*. While *apavāda* can mean maligning or calumny, its more precise function in Indic Mahāyāna texts is as a label for those who reject or deny the validity of parts of the Buddha-Dharma, particularly parts that have only recently been discovered or composed, like the Mahāyāna scriptures in the context of Buddhist communities in India during the second and first centuries B.C.E. (See Walser 2005.) In this way, 'rejection' is a negative correlate of the fundamental Mahāyāna concept of 'expedient'—'expedient' functions to justify the appearance of the previously unknown Mahāyāna scriptures and explain their differences with the mainstream scriptural corpus; the Mahāyāna movement presents the sin of 'rejection' as a threat against those who would reject these previously unknown scriptures. The semantic range of the Chinese term *feibang* 誹謗 clusters tightly around the idea of 'maligning,' as opposed to denial, rejection, or refutation, and English translations of Chinese Buddhist texts usually translate *feibang* 誹謗 as 'malign' or 'slander' rather than 'rejection.' In Chinese translations of Buddhist scripture, however, the term clearly corresponds to *apavāda* in the sense of 'reject;' when the term appears in Xinxing's writings, it also has this sense, rather than the sense of 'maligning.' Because 'rejection' lies so far outside the normal semantic range of *feibang* 誹謗, I will continue to use the translation 'malign.' However, the reader should consider this to be a technical usage of 'malign' with the idiosyncratic meaning of 'malign as false what is in fact true or valid, thereby causing harm.' Note that 'malign,' in this usage, does not require intent to deceive or reckless regard for the truth—if someone rejects a genuine part of the Buddha's teaching as fraudulent, it may be a case of *feibang* 誹謗, even if they truly believe that the teaching in question is not authentic. Xinxing clearly imagines that it is possible to malign the Buddha's Dharma unintentionally.

[313] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 134.

> One: the beings of the inversions who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence [i.e., the typical Buddhist practitioner in sixth-century China] and are not rescued by the buddhas. [Even if] they get to meet with innumerable, unlimited buddhas, and they practice the *paramitās* in the presence of the buddhas, [still] because they study a buddha-dharma that does not match their faculties, they malign the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and they inevitably fall into the *avīci* hells of the Ten Directions. No buddha can rescue them.

Xinxing never explains overtly why studying inappropriate teachings amounts to the sin of maligning. As we discussed above, however, Xinxing is acutely sensitive to the connection between appropriate practice and the Buddha's intent. In Xinxing's view, the Buddha uses scripture not only to convey specific doctrines and practices, but also to explain when, where, and by whom these specific doctrines and practices should be studied and implemented. We might surmise that to disregard this information is to reject the genuine, explicit teachings of the Buddha—i.e., it is a form of 'maligning,' just as rejecting the *Lotus Sutra* as a whole constitutes maligning. A consideration of later Japanese Buddhists' use of the concept of 'malign' will strengthen this supposition. Both Hōnen and Nichiren use the idea of maligning in a way similar to Xinxing. For both thinkers, the injunction against 'maligning/rejection' also applies to the rejection of the Buddha's instructions about when, where, and by whom his teachings should be implemented. For Hōnen, this means that the benighted beings of the age of the Final Dharma are bound to engage exclusively in *nenbutsu* practice; for Nichiren, it is 'maligning' to fail to acknowledge the supremacy of the *Lotus Sutra* and the chanting of its title (*daimoku* practice). Like later Japanese Buddhist sectarians, Xinxing seems to have expanded the traditional concept of maligning/rejecting the Dharma to include maligning/rejecting the Buddha's explanation of a particular teaching's intended audience.[314]

Xinxing clearly sees maligning as one of the primary traps into which a lowly practitioner can fall. In the *Practice Matched to Faculties*, Xinxing gives a list of twelve 'inversions' (*diandao* 顛倒) that keep low-level practitioner mired in confusion. Xinxing suggests that recognizing these inversions within oneself is a primary component of Buddhist practice. This practice of recognition constitutes 'recognizing evil' (*ren'e* 認惡) or 'cutting off evil' (*duan'e* 斷惡); together with its corollary, 'universal reverence' (*pujing* 普敬) or 'the cultivation of the good' (*xiushan* 修善), this concept serves as a primary category by which Xinxing organizes and articulates his understanding of the Buddhist Path. The twelve inversions are, therefore, central to Xinxing's thought. It is noteworthy that the very first inversion listed consists, primarily of 'maligning':

> 一，其心顛倒常錯謬、常行誹謗語。心緣第三階佛法以去，更作餘心，即是顛倒常錯謬。口唯得說如來藏佛法，更作餘語，即是常行誹謗語。[315]

[314] See Stone 2012 for a thorough survey of Nichiren's use of the 'maligning' concept and its connections to other Kamakura Buddhist thinkers, including Hōnen. Although Stone does not mention the Three Levels movement, there are uncanny parallels between Xinxing and Nichiren in their treatment of maligning. I should be clear: there is no evidence that Japanese Buddhists were directly influenced by Xinxing and the Three Levels. Rather, we might interpret the parallel between the thought of Xinxing and the thought of Japanese sectarians like Hōnen and Nichiren as the results of independent elaborations of certain conceptual possibilities latent in the idea of 'maligning.'

[315] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 133.

> One: the mind is inverted and always in error, and one constantly engages in malignant speech. Once the mind connects with the buddha-dharma of the Three Levels, to produce other intentions beyond that is to be inverted, to be always in error. One's mouth may only speak of the buddha-dharma that is the Treasury of the Thus-Come One; to produce other statements beyond that is always to engage in malignant speech.

Xinxing's discussion of maligning in this section reveals an interesting connection. He clearly aligns the verbal sin of maligning with a mental sin of 'error' (*cuomiu* 錯謬), suggesting that the 'maligning' that consists of rejecting the Buddha's teaching may be merely a verbal expression of a disordered mental orientation. Xinxing makes this connection in other places as well. At a different point in the *Practice Matched to Capacities*, Xinxing discusses two kinds of beings 'whom no Dharma can rescue.' These are beings who commit the verbal sin of maligning and beings who commit a mental sin of 'suspicion' (*xian* 嫌). He writes:

> [2] 二者，一切法不能救，有二種。
> Two: those whom no Dharma can rescue, of which there are two.
>
> [2.1] 一者，大乘小乘各各誦得八萬四千法聚，由心一念嫌他學十二頭陁比丘即滅爾許善根盡，墮阿鼻地獄，如大集經說。
> One: those who have memorized eighty-four thousand groupings of dharma from both the Greater and the Lesser Vehicle, but who, because they have a single thought in which they suspect other *bhikṣus* who study the twelve *dhutaṅga*, immediately destroy these good roots entirely and fall into the *avīci* hell, as the *Great Collection Scripture* explains.
>
> [2.2] 二者，讀誦十二部經不免謗佛，現身墮十方一切阿鼻地獄，如涅槃經說。故名一切法不救。(Yabuki 1927, appendix, 148)
> Two: those who, in reciting the twelve types of scripture, inevitably malign the Buddha, and in the current lifetime fall into the *avīci* hells of the Ten Directions. As the *Nirvana Sutra* explains. Thus we say, 'no Dharma will rescue.'

In the first item in this passage, Xinxing explains that erudition does nothing to stave off the karmic debt incurred by being 'suspicious' of another *bhikṣu* who engages in correct practice. In this case, Xinxing specifies the maligned practice as the twelve *dhutas*, or radical austerities, and suggests that even a single suspicious thought about such practice will plunge one into *avīci* hell. This means that, for Xinxing, orthodoxy is not merely a matter of publicly available utterance—private thought, too, must not fall into certain dangerous states.

Xinxing explicitly discusses the three sins of maligning, mismatched study, and 'suspicion' in a section of the *Practice Matched to Faculties* on the 'semblance Path' (*sidao* 似道). Drawing on statements in scripture, Xinxing emphasizes that mismatched practice leads to serious sins like maligning and suspicion. He also introduces two ideas: that lust for fame and fortune may mislead one into mismatched study and hence into maligning, and that Buddhist teachers may accidentally lure their students into committing sins like maligning. He writes:

[1] 似道惡者，於內有五段。
The evil of the semblance path. Herein, there are five sections.

[1.1] 一者，從得入佛法已來，恒順本貪瞋學一切佛法，聞十二部經內說菩薩摩訶薩行不可思議諸佛所歎世人敬重多得名利，復順本貪心，即捨頭目手足，於无量无邊諸佛菩薩所，行六波羅蜜不免謗佛，墮十方一切阿鼻地獄。
One: after having entered the buddha-dharma, one always goes along with fundamental craving and ignorance in studying the buddha-dharma. We learn from the twelve types of scripture that if bodhisattva-*mahāsattvas* who practice the inconceivable principle, and the worldly people whom the buddhas praise, value attaining much fame and fortune, and furthermore go along with their feelings of craving, then even were they to give up their head, their eyes, their hands, their feet, and practice the six *pāramitās* in the presence of innumerable and unlimited buddhas and bodhisattvas, they would inevitably malign the Buddha and fall into the *avīci* hells of the Ten Directions.

[1.2] 二者，讀誦十二部經，不免謗佛，現身墮阿鼻地獄。
Two: in reading the twelve types of scripture, they inevitably malign the Buddha and fall into the *avīci* hells in the present life.

[1.3] 三者，誦大乘小乘各八萬法聚，由一念嫌他蘭若比丘尼墮大地獄，從地獄出受惡羅剎身，現身值佛懺悔，罪由不滅，未得出羅剎身，復不得受記。
Three: they recite eighty thousand groupings of the dharma of both the Greater and the Lesser Vehicles, but because, for a single moment, they suspect the *bhikṣuṇīs* of other *āraṇyas*, they fall into the Great Hell. Emerging from hell, they take rebirth as a vile *rākṣasa*, and though in that body they meet with the Buddha and confess, their sin is still not extinguished, they do not escape from their life as a *rākṣasa*, and moreover they cannot obtain a prophecy.

[1.4] 四者明，講說大乘小乘法師攝師徒眾弟子，度得六百四萬億，由為求名利故，嫌他謗真學佛法比丘，由學不當根謗他真修道人故，師及弟子及與檀越六百萬億人同墮十方一切阿鼻地獄，出即隨出，入即隨入。
Four: Dharma Masters who lecture on the teachings of the Greater Vehicle and the Lesser Vehicle collect teachers, followers, and disciples, and liberate six hundred four myriad million, but because it is for the sake of fame and fortune, they despise others and malign the *bhikṣus* who truly study the buddha-dharma, and because they are studying that which does not match their faculties, they malign other people who are truly cultivating the Path, consequently the master along with his disciples and donors—six hundred myriad million people—alike fall into the *avīci* hells of the Ten Directions. When he escapes, they escape as well, and when he enters, they enter as well.

此五段雖學善法，由所學解行不當根故，善雖學道相似，念念之中作阿鼻地獄等業。(Yabuki 1927, appendix, 143–144.)

> In these five sections,[316] although [the subjects] study wholesome dharmas, because they study practices and understandings that do not match their faculties, although they study the semblance of the Path, in each and every thought they are creating karma for the *avīci* hells.

This passage is quite suggestive. First, it confirms that Xinxing sees maligning and suspicion as closely linked to each other, as well as to the mismatched study of inappropriate teachings. The upshot is clear: for Xinxing, orthodoxy and orthopraxy are duties, and true orthodoxy and orthopraxy require matching the Buddha's teaching to their intended audience. Second, Xinxing makes clear that these are not just private duties, but social ones as well—if teachers 'malign' or 'suspect,' their pupils will be implicated in their crimes. Elsewhere, Xinxing refers to the sin of heterodox teaching by the name 'impure dharma-preaching.' Like maligning, impure dharma-preaching is a serious sin:

> 一者，不淨說法得罪如殺三千大千世界滿中眾生。(*Practice Matched to Faculties*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 115–116.)
> One: impure dharma-preaching incurs sin similar to killing the beings filling the *trichiliocosm*.

Xinxing's *locus classicus* for 'impure dharma-preaching' is the *Scripture of the Buddha-Treasury* (*Fozang jing* 佛藏經), where the Buddha explains to Śāriputra that, in the future, certain beings will mislead their followers "using their own conception" (憶想分別). The *Scripture of the Buddha-Treasury* classifies 'impure dharma-preaching' as a kind of maligning; the impure dharma-preacher is an 'evil spiritual mentor' (惡知識).[317] In the *Practice Matched to*

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[316] I have omitted the fifth section, which is not related to issues of maligning.

[317] (已上人語引經說，已下唯是經文說。) 舍利弗，如群盲人捨所得物，欲詣大施而墮深坑，我諸弟子亦復如是。捨麤衣惡食而逐大施求好供養，以世利故，失大智惠，而墮深坑阿鼻地獄。(已下人語引經說。) 又已下猶是上經文次第未盡 (已上人語引經說，已下唯是經文說。)
(Above is citation of scripture in human words, below is solely scriptural text.) Śāriputra! Just as a host of blind people abandon what they have acquired and intend to go to a Great Almsgiving but fall into a deep pit, my disciples, too, in just this way give up coarse clothing and vile food and go to a Great Almsgiving in pursuit of fine offerings. For the sake of worldly gain, they lose Great Wisdom, and fall into the pit of *avīci* hell. (Below is citation of scripture in human words.) Further below the scriptural passage above continues, as the following [passages] had yet to be finished. (Above is citation of scripture in human words. Below is solely scriptural text.)

舍利弗，是名佛法第一義門，謂无憶想分別，无此无彼，而是癡人在大眾中說於邪見，自以憶想分別教人，此是佛法，此是聖道。如是癡人則為誹謗過去未來現在諸佛，如是癡人名惡知識，不名善知識。
Śāriputra! This is what we consider the teaching on the fundamental principle of the buddha-dharma, namely the lack of conceptuality and analysis (*samjñā-vikalpa*, 憶想分別), the lack of a 'this or that.' Yet these fools preach misconceptions in the assembly, using their own *samjñā-vikalpa* to instruct others, [saying,] 'this is the buddha-dharma, this is the sagely Path.' These fools thereby engage in maligning towards the buddhas of past, future, and present, and these fools are considered evil mentors, not good spiritual mentors.

舍利弗，怨雖奪命，但失一身。如是癡人不淨說法，千萬億劫為諸眾生作大衰惱。是人癡冥覆佛菩提本心，貪著還復熾盛相續不斷，以貪著故往來五道，无善逕路生死不斷。
Śāriputra! Although hatred may take life, only a single life would be lost. But these fools, with their impure dharma-preaching, create immense sorrow for beings for a thousand myriad million *kalpas*. The benightedness of these people obscures the fundamental kmind of the buddhas and bodhisattvas. Their craving revives and thrives

Faculties, Xinxing quotes the *Scripture of the Buddha-Treasury* at length. Paraphrasing the scripture, he writes that 'impure dharma-preachers' would be better off cutting out their own tongue than discussing the Buddha's teachings:

> 是故當知，是人寧自以利刀割舌，不應眾中不淨說法，如佛藏經第三卷減半已前說。[318]
> Know, therefore, that this person would be better off cutting off their own tongue with a sharp knife than preaching the dharma impurely in the assembly. As explained in the first half of the third fascicle of the *Scripture of the Buddha-Treasury*.

Although Xinxing gives precise examples of each of the three sins of maligning, suspicion, and impure dharma-preaching, he often presents these sins as intertwined; they clearly sometimes blend together in his thought, placing a uniform, rigid demand on the practitioner for correct practice and correct belief. But Xinxing seems to suggest, at times, that the danger of these sins stems from engaging with scripture itself. In the following passage, Xinxing notes that even if one can read scripture and maintain orthodoxy and orthopraxy, merely reading scripture can delude and derange the mind:

> 又讀經誦經，雖无邪錯，謗佛謗法通凡及聖惡，亦能得生一切貪瞋煩惱，復不能得與一切无名相法相應，所以乃至讀經誦經亦名不淨說法。(Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 314)
> Moreover, when reading the scriptures or reciting the scriptures, even if one is without the evil of mistakes, or of maligning the buddha, the dharma, or worldlings and sages, one still can give rise to the afflictions of desire and anger, and furthermore one will not be able to come into contact with the nameless and formless dharma. Consequently, even reading the scripture or reciting the scripture is considered impure dharma-preaching.

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continuously without cease. Because of this craving, they come and go among the Five Paths, being born and dying ceaselessly without any wholesome course.

是故舍利弗，不淨說法者得罪極多，亦為眾生作惡知識，亦謗過去未來今佛。舍利弗，置此閻浮提眾生，若人悉奪三千大千世界眾生命，不淨說法罪多於此。何以故。是人皆破諸佛阿耨多羅三藐三菩提，為助魔事，亦使眾生於百千萬世受諸衰惱，但能作縛不能令解。當知，是人於諸眾生，為惡知識為是妄語，於大眾中謗毀諸佛，以是因緣墮大地獄，教多眾生，以邪見事，是故名為惡邪見者。
Consequently, Śāriputra, the impure dharma-preacher accrues sin in extreme quantities, both serving as an evil mentor for beings and maligning the buddhas of the past, future, and present. Śāriputra! I entrust these beings of Jambudvīpa [to you?]. If someone were to take the lives of the beings in [every world of] the trichiliocosm, the sin of impure dharma preaching would be greater than that. Why? Such a person would destroy the *anuttarasamyaksambodhi* of the buddhas, give aid to the deeds of demons, and cause beings to suffer immense suffering for a hundred thousand myriad lifetimes. They only create fetters, and cannot bring about liberation. Know that this person is an evil mentor for beings and lies to them. They malign the buddhas in the great assembly, and for these reasons, they will fall into the great hells. They teach misconceptions to many beings, and so they are called 'those of evil misconceptions.'"
(This passage appears in the *Practice Matched to Faculties* in Yabuki 1927, 356–357. The source text appears at T.653.15.794b25–c13.)

[318] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 342.

Perhaps, then, it would be better for most Buddhists *not to read scripture at all*. Indeed, many of Xinxing's later writings appear to be designed to present Buddhist 'teachings' while sidestepping the pitfalls inherent in coming into contact with Buddhist scripture itself.

Xinxing's interest in maligning and related sins far exceeds that of other sixth-century scholiasts. Although Jingying Huiyuan, Zhiyi, and Jizang all mention maligning, they do so only peripherally, and never as insistently as Xinxing.[319] In general, these exegetes use 'malign' to refer to the rejection of a specific philosophical position that is essential to Buddhism, like the belief that cause and effect are connected, or the belief that there is a path to liberation. None adopt Xinxing's expansive understanding of 'malign,' which expands the scope of the sin to include the rejection of the Buddha's instructions about which passages and practices should be used by which sorts of people. The concept of maligning, therefore, appears to have occupied a uniquely central place in Xinxing's thought in comparison to other sixth-century thinkers. Xinxing's epitaph, composed and erected by his close disciples, makes poetic reference to this centrality, stating that Xinxing "alone pulled out the cords of desire, withdrew and coursed in the regions of faith and *maligning*,"[320] and that he "rescued the mistaken, benighted beings, and stilled their libelous, *malignant* mouths"[321] (emphases mine).[322]

Xinxing's conception of these three sins—maligning, suspicion, and impure dharma-preaching—is exceptionally broad. Taken seriously, they force the practitioner to adopt an especially rigid attitude toward Buddhist scripture, Buddhist practice, and the intersection of scripture and practice.[323] The study of a mismatched teaching constitutes 'maligning.' Conveying a mismatched teaching to students constitutes 'impure dharma-preaching.' Purely internal, momentary doubt of another person's practice, if that practice turns out to be correct, constitutes the sin of 'suspicion.' As Xinxing makes abundantly clear, each of these transgressions entails dire karmic punishment.[324] Merely giving into the afflictions of desire and anger *while reading*

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[319] Jingying Huiyuan's 大乘義章 contains 57 references to *bang* 謗; Zhiyi's 摩訶止觀 contains 17, and Jizang's extant texts contain 25. Xinxing's corpus contains over 150 references to *bang* 謗.

[320] 獨拔恚愛之纆，孫遊信謗之域。Nishimoto 1998, 36.

[321] 救邪錯之迷情，息讒諂之謗口。Nishimoto 1998, 36.

[322] Tantalizingly, the 'Xiangzhou Dossier' may have contained a treatise by Xinxing devoted solely to the question of maligning. So far as I know, no text witness of the 'Xiangzhou Dossier' ends with a colophon marking the end of the text, suggesting that we do not have the complete Dossier. In one text witness (S.2137), the last official document is followed by a text called "Teachings on the Four Malignings" (四謗法). Only two lines of this text remain, but the first line appears to preserve the table of contents. This line reads (tentatively): "-Malign [Idea] that the Path Increase -Malign [Idea] that the Path Does Not Diminish -Malign [Idea] of the Sophistry of 'Not Existent and Not Non-Existent' -Malign [Idea] of the Contradiction of 'Both Existence and Non-Existence' (若道有增益謗 若道无損減謗 非有非无戲論謗 亦有亦无相違謗). It is possible that this text is part of the Dossier. The format of the title makes it plausible that this is a text written by Xinxing or imitating Xinxing. There is no mention of this text, or any text on maligning, in extant Three Levels catalogues. (For transcription, see Yabuki 1927, appendix, 7.)

[323] At places in Xinxing's writings and in the history of the Three Levels, the conception of orthodoxy allowed for by the concept of 'maligning' approximates the rigidity and inflexibility associated with the concepts of heresy, blasphemy and apostasy in Abrahamic religions.

[324] Xinxing is also not sanguine about the possibility of eliminating the sin incurred by these infractions. He points out in the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma* that the elimination of this sin is, basically, not available to ordinary beings:

何以故。明得滅一切謗佛謗法通凡及聖罪時節分齊。
What of it? The length of time [pertinent to] the destruction of the sin of maligning the Buddha, and maligning the Dharma, extending even to worldlings and sages.

constitutes a transgression. Thus, for Xinxing, scripture is both the sole means of access to the Buddha (and thus to liberation) and also something immensely dangerous.

Given this danger, we may hazard a guess at the motivation behind some of the bizarre features of Xinxing's later texts. In these writings, Xinxing strives to present the Buddha's liberatory scripture to potential practitioners. However, these practitioners must be exposed *only* to appropriate passages lest they sleepwalk into deadly sins like maligning and suspicion. Xinxing himself, as the human author of these texts, is likewise walking a fine line—if he presents a mismatched scripture to his readers, he, too, will have committed the sin of maligning, not to mention 'impure dharma-preaching.' We may surmise that Xinxing's expansive conception of what it means to 'malign/reject' the Buddha's teachings easily encompasses mis-citation, misinterpretation or distortion of scripture—a possible explanation for his rigid citational practices and insistence on tying all of his statements directly to the reported words of the Buddha.

Xinxing is convinced that scripture is dangerous. Scripture becomes a medicine, rather than a poison, only when the correct practice is matched to the appropriate type of practitioner. Discerning distinct categories of scripture is therefore of the utmost importance. Unfortunately, Xinxing sees the ability to discern correctly as fatally lacking for beings of the lowest spiritual faculties. This lack of discernment poses a nearly insurmountable obstacle to correct practice.

5) Discernment of Categories (Including Categories of Practitioners) is Uncertain

Throughout his later writings, Xinxing consistently emphasizes that beings of the lowest faculties cannot correctly draw distinctions between different categories—including categories of supernatural beings (e.g., Buddhas and demons), categories of Buddhist teachings (e.g., higher teachings and lower teachings), and categories of practitioners (e.g., low-level practitioners and high-level practitioners). These beings are, as it were, 'blind from birth' (*shengmang* 生盲). This inability stems, in part, from demonic interference. Drawing on passages in the *Nirvana Sutra*, Xinxing suggests that the things we encounter in the phenomenal world—including Buddhist scripture, Buddhist teachers, and Buddhist practitioners—are often not what they appear. Occasionally, what appears to be true and correct is, in truth, a demonic deception, while what appears to be false and impure is the expedient activity of a buddha or bodhisattva. As Xinxing writes in the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*:

一者明，若准依佛藏經第三卷滅半已後說，唯有過十萬億歲在於佛所懺悔已後，復得值九十九億佛已去，方始得滅罪證驗。

One: if we rely on what it says in the second half of the third fascicle of the *Scripture of the Buddha-Treasury*, it is only by passing ten myriad million years repenting in the presence of the buddhas, and then meeting with ninety-nine million buddhas, that one attains the verification of the destruction of one's sin.

二者明，若准依大方廣十輪經第六卷過半已前說，唯有得得法忍已去方始得滅罪證驗。

Two: if we rely on what it says in the first half of the sixth fascicle of the *Great Expansive Scripture of the Ten Wheels*, it is only after achieving the forbearance [born of the understanding of the non-arising] of dharmas that one attains verification of the destruction of one's sin.

(Yabuki 1927, appendix, 380.)

> 准依大般涅槃經四依品，佛滅度後聖人隱不現時，邪正品，佛滅度後七百年，邪魔作佛作出家人。[325]
> According to the 'Chapter on the Four Reliances' in the *Great Parinirvāṇa Scripture*, "At the time, after the Buddha's passing away into liberation, when the Sage is hidden and not manifest…", [and according to] the 'Chapter on Correct and Incorrect,' "Seven hundred years after the Buddha's passing away into liberation, perverse demons will appear as buddhas and appear as renunciants."

He quotes the *Nirvana Sutra* in the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*:

> (已上人語引經說，已下唯是經文說) 爾時增上慢人偏執者多，惡魔又復迷惑在家出家者心，令執非法。[326]
> (Above is citation of scripture in human words. Below is solely scriptural text.) "At that time, overly proud people and those with biased attachments were numerous. The evil demons, moreover, confused the minds of both renunciants and those in household life, causing them to hold to what is not the dharma."

Xinxing naturally felt that he lived in exactly the conditions described in the *Nirvana Sutra*: the True Sage was occulted, while demons ran amok, impersonating the wise and deluding the foolish. For Xinxing, a constitutive feature of the least-capable class of Buddhist practitioners is that they cannot see through such false appearances. Consequently, they will inevitably succumb to demonic deception, or mistake concealed bodhisattvas for genuine demons. He writes in the *Practice Matched to Faculties*:

> 普凡者，一切邪魔變形作一切諸佛菩薩形像，凡夫生盲不別……由凡夫無明不別得邪魔故，故名普凡。[327]
> As for the 'universal' worldlings, when the perverse demons change their shape into the form of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, the worldlings who are born blind do not discern [them]… Because the worldlings are ignorant and do not discern the perverse demons, so they are considered 'universal worldlings.'[328]

And again in the *Practice Matched to Faculties*:

> 一切聖內多有邪魔、一切凡內多有諸佛菩薩凡夫生盲不能別得。[329]
> Among the sages, there are many perverse demons, and among worldlings, there are many buddhas and bodhisattvas. Worldlings who are blind from birth are unable to discern which [is which].

To mistake a buddha for a demon and a demon for a buddha is to get things exactly wrong—to 'invert' the correct and the incorrect. We mentioned above that a central point of concern for

[325] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 34.
[326] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 353.
[327] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 130.
[328] The worldlings are 'universal' because they are fit only to practice the 'universal' dharma; I will discuss this in detail in the section on 'Certain Teachings and Uncertain Teachings.'
[329] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 133.

Xinxing is enumerating the 'inversions' to which worldlings are subject. He states explicitly that one of the principle inversions is the inability to sort the salvific from the demonic:

> 一者，一切邪魔作諸佛菩薩形像顛倒眾生，於內唯見其善不知是邪魔，邪魔非是諸佛菩薩，非善見善故名顛倒。[330]
> One: beings who are deluded about the evil demons taking the shape of buddhas and bodhisattvas. Therein, [the beings] only see what is good, and they are not aware they are evil demons. The evil demons are not buddhas or bodhisattvas. Because they see what is not good as good, it is called an inversion.

For Xinxing, then, the lowest class of beings are prone to mistake demons for buddhas and vice versa. Xinxing is not unique among sixth-century Chinese Buddhists for being concerned about the malign influence of demons on Buddhist practice. In general, however, concern about the influence of demons is restricted to discussions of meditation and meditative visions—those charged with interpreting meditative and ritual visions must be alert to the possibility that such visions are produced by demons.[331] Xinxing's extant texts do not contain much evidence of concern with demonic influence on meditative visions. Instead, Xinxing takes this hermeneutic anxiety and applies it to Buddhist practice in general. At points he makes it quite clear that it is the *dharma* that demons disorder, not simply visions or appearances.[332]

The 'inversion' of the demonic and salvific is only one inversion to which beings of lower faculties are prone. They are liable to make all sorts of mistakes, both practical and theoretical. Citing a crucial passage of the *Nirvana Sutra*, Xinxing writes:

> 如大般涅槃經說 (已上人語引經，已下唯是經文說) 若有眾生，我見无我、无我見我、常見无常、无常見常、樂見无樂、无樂見樂、淨見不淨、不淨見淨、不滅見滅、滅見不滅、罪見非罪、非罪見罪、輕罪見重、重罪見輕、乘見非乘、非乘見乘、道見非道、非道見道、實是菩提見非菩提、實非菩提謬見菩提、苦見非苦、集見非集、滅見非滅、實見非實、非實見實、是世諦見第一義諦、第一義諦見是世諦、諦見非諦非諦見諦、以真佛語名為魔語、實是魔語以為佛語、如是之時諸佛乃說大涅槃經 。[333]
> As the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa* explains. (Above is a citation of the scripture in mortal words, below is strictly scriptural text.) "When there are beings who view what has a self as selfless, view the selfless as having a self, view the permanent as impermanent, view the impermanent as permanent, view the joyful as joyless, view the joyless as joyful, view the pure as impure, view the impure as pure, view the inextinguishable as extinguishable, view the extinguishable as inextinguishable, view the sinful as unsinful, view the unsinful as sinful, view superficial sin as grave, view grave sin as superficial, view the Vehicle as not the Vehicle, view what is not the Vehicle as the Vehicle, view the Path as not the

[330] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 133.
[331] See Greene 2012 for some remarks on 'demons' in the context of visionary experiences in Chinese Buddhism, especially 77–78, 196, and 216.
[332] In his discussion of the 'universal dharma,' Xinxing explains that this teaching is immune to demonic attack: "Placed therein, there is no perverse demon able to enter there." 於中无有邪魔得入其中 (*Practice Matched to Faculties*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 132).
[333] Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 272. The root text appears at T.374.12.472c7–16.

> Path, view what is not the Path as the Path, view what is really bodhi as not bodhi, mistakenly view what is really not bodhi as bodhi, view what is suffering as non-suffering, view the aggregation [of suffering] as not the aggregation, view cessation [of suffering] as non-cessation, view what is real as unreal, view the unreal as real, view what is the worldly truth as the ultimate truth, view the ultimate truth as worldly truth, view the true as untrue, view the untrue as true, consider what is truly the word of the buddha as the word of demons, and take what is really the word of demons as the word of the buddha—it is at times like these that the buddhas preach the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa*."

We have seen that Xinxing's broad conception of maligning leads him to believe that it is a religious *duty* to adhere to some orthodoxy and orthopraxy. It is clear, however, that low level beings' tendency to take the incorrect for the correct and the correct for the incorrect may prove an obstacle to their ability to understand and implement an orthodoxy at all. To make matters worse, Xinxing suggests that these beings' inability to correctly discern extends to matters of their own self-conception. Xinxing believes that his contemporaries are systematically miscategorizing *themselves*—they do not understand what kind of Buddhist practitioner they are. From Xinxing's perspective, this lack of self-awareness is disastrous. As we have seen, in Xinxing's worldview, matching appropriate teaching to intended audience is a matter of vital spiritual importance. Beings lacking in discernment, however, can never accomplish this task—they cannot identify the appropriate teachings in part because they cannot understand what category of practitioner they themselves belong in.

Xinxing expresses this anxiety in a complex argument about the proper interpretation of the *Nirvana Sutra*. The argument centers on a crucial passage in the scripture in which the Buddha claims that, after his liberation, the beings who will be capable of achieving nirvana and having appropriate faith in the *Nirvana Sutra* itself will be as few as the particles of soil that can be held in a fingernail; in contrast, those who cannot follow the teachings of the *Nirvana Sutra*—the *icchantika*—will be as numerous as the particles of soil in all the world-systems of the Ten Directions. Xinxing paraphrases that passage as follows:

> (已下唯是經文說，少有隔越) 佛觀，眾生具足善法及不善法，是人雖具如是二法，不久能斷一切善根，具不善根。有人捨身還得人身，捨三惡身得受人身，諸根完具，生於中國，具足正信能脩集道，脩集道已能脩正道，脩正道已能得解脫，得解脫已能入涅槃，護持禁戒精勤不懈，不犯四重不作五逆，不用僧鬘物，不作一闡提，不斷善根，信如是涅槃經典，如扙上土。
> (Below is strictly scriptural text, with a few omissions and jumps.) "The Buddha observes: there are beings equipped with both wholesome dharmas and unwholesome dharmas. Such a person, though equipped with these two [types] of dharmas, may before long cut off all good roots, and be possessed of unwholesome roots. There are those who, casting off this life, again obtain a human body, and those who, casting off bodies of the Three Evil [Destinies], obtain a human body. Complete in their faculties, they are born in the Central Realm. Possessed of correct faith, they are able to cultivate the Path of Aggregation; having cultivated the Path of Aggregation, they are able to cultivate the Correct Path; having cultivated the Correct Path, they are able to achieve liberation; having achieved liberation, they are able to enter nirvana. They uphold

the precepts, are vigorous and not indolent, do not commit the Four Grave [Crimes], do not perform the Five Betrayals. They do not use *sengman* objects. They do not act as *icchantikas*. They believe in this scripture of the *parinirvāṇa*. [Beings like this] are [as numerous] as the soil held on a fingernail.

捨人身已得三惡身，捨三惡身得三惡身，身根不具生於邊地，信邪倒見脩集邪道，不得解脫，常樂涅槃毀戒懈怠，犯四重禁作五逆罪，用僧鬘物作一闡提，斷諸善根不信是經，如十方界所有地土。[334]
Those who, having cast off their human body, obtain bodies in the Three Evil [Destinies], and having cast of their body of the Three Evil [Destinies] obtain [again] bodies in the Three Evil [Destinies], who, being unequipped with the [necessary] physical faculties, are born in the borderlands, who believe in the perverse, inverted conceptions, who cultivate and aggregate the perverse Path, who do not obtain liberation, who always lust after nirvana, who defile the precepts, who are indolent, who transgress the Four Grave [Crimes] and perform the sins of the Five Betrayals, who use the *sengman* objects, who act as *icchantikas*, who cut off good roots, and do not have faith in this scripture—these are [as numerous] as all the particles of soil in the worlds of the Ten Directions."

In this passage, the Buddha gives a prediction about the relative quantity of good Buddhist practitioners and bad ones at a future time. According to the prediction, the bad will be extraordinarily numerous, while the good will be infinitesimally few. Xinxing (as well as many of his contemporaries) believed that they lived in the future era predicted by the Buddha—an era in which true practitioners would be rare and *icchantika* numerous. Xinxing makes the following observation about how his peers interpreted this prediction:

又有人言，信大般涅槃經唯如抓上土，即一切道俗等信者是，不信大般涅槃經如十方世界所有地土，即一切六道眾生中，不得聞不得見，及得聞得見不信者是，乃至一切聖人中斷常未盡者俱是。
There are those who say: " 'Those who believe in the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa* are [as numerous] as the soil held on a fingernail'—all the lay and religious who believe in it are [what this statement refers to]. 'Those who do not believe in the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa* are [as numerous] as all the particles of soil in the worlds of the Ten Directions'—[they believe that] those among all the beings of the Six Paths who have not seen or heard [the scripture], or who have seen or heard it but have not believed it are [what this statement refers to], and even those among the sages who have yet to extinguish [conceptions of] nihilism and eternalism are also [what this statement refers to]."

如十方世界所有地土，此語不然。何以故。經文說，作一闡提，斷諸善根，不信是經，如十方世界所有地土。人中鈍根者尚非是一闡提，何況得就六道眾生說，天中猶尚不斷善根，何況得就聖人說。文當，斷善根者，非是下劣愚鈍之人，亦非天中及三惡道，破僧亦爾。驗之所以得知。[335]

[334] Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 41. The root text appears at T.374.12.563a27–b10.
[335] Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 41.

> With regard to [the statement] "like all the particles of soil in the worlds of the Ten Directions," their words are not correct. Why? The text of the scripture says, "[Those who] act as *icchantikas*, cut off their good roots, and do not have faith in this scripture are [as numerous] as all the particles of soil in the worlds of the Ten Directions." Even among humans who are of dull faculties there are [those who are] not *icchantika*. How much more can this be said of [all] the beings in the Six Paths. Even among the gods, there are those who do not cut off good roots. How much more can this be said of the Sages! The text attests: "Those who cut off good roots are not the inferior, dull-witted people, nor those among the gods and the Three Evil Paths—it is those who destroy the sangha."[336] By this evidence, we know.

Xinxing here suggests that his peers are interpreting this passage incorrectly on its face. They pay no heed to the actual content of the prediction or the *Nirvana Sutra*'s explanation of what it means to be an *icchantika* or to cut off good roots, and imagine that it refers to a beings who have not yet encountered the scripture. Xinxing goes on to suggest that it we should not be overly optimistic about where, in the predicted dichotomy of good and bad practitioners, we ourselves may fall. He writes:

> 又經文遵，信不具足名一闡提。從年廿得聞大乘經，至年五十四，唯見道俗利根解佛法者，信大般涅槃經所說，最大多善，自言我信涅槃，我信佛性，故知非是一闡提。不見有一箇道俗利根解佛法者，信大般涅槃經所說，最大多惡，自言我是一闡提，以一闡提多少分齊驗之。即是信不具足，故名為一闡提，如十方世界所有地土。[337]
>
> Moreover, the text of scripture says, "Those unequipped with faith are considered *icchantika*." From my twentieth year, when I got to hear the scriptures of the Great Vehicle, until my fifty-fourth year, I have only seen keen-facultied interpreters of the buddha-dharma, lay and religious, who believe that what the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa* says is that the great majority [of people] are good. They say of themselves, "I have faith in the *Nirvana* [*Sutra*], I have faith in buddha-nature, so I know that I am not an *icchantika*." I have never seen a single keen-facultied interpreter of the buddha-dharma, lay or religious, who believes that what the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa* says is that the great majority [of people] are evil, who say of themselves, "I am an *icchantika*—I take the quantity of *icchantikas* as evidence for it." This [i.e., to think one is not an *icchantikas*] is to be unequipped with faith, and so to be considered an *icchantika*, which are [as numerous] as all the particles of soil in the worlds of the Ten Directions.

The *Nirvana Sutra* says that the *icchantika* will be inconceivably numerous, while those of proper faith will be infinitesimally few. To admit that one lives in the midst of such a distribution of *icchantika* and properly faithful, and to blithely assume that one is a member of the few, rather than the many, is presumptuous. Yet Xinxing remarks that he has never, in his career as a Buddhist practitioner, ever heard someone admit that they might be an *icchantika*. Xinxing

[336] T.374.12.570c15–18.
[337] Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 41–42.

suggests that such wanton presumption *itself* constitutes a 'lack of faith' in the *Nirvana Sutra*'s prediction, and hence qualifies one as an *icchantika*. We might call this bit of reasoning 'Xinxing's Gamble': the Buddha predicts that an overwhelming majority of future practitioners will be unfaithful; in light of such odds, isn't it itself a mark of faithlessness in the Buddha's omniscience to assume that one is on the side of the faithful, rather than the faithful? Isn't the faithful thing to do to *assume* that one is on the side the faithless?

Xinxing then proceeds to add another two classes of people to those who fall under the *Nirvana Sutra*'s prediction: those who study and explain the buddha-dharma out of venal motives, and those who comment on and analyze the buddha-dharma when they do not have the capabilities to do so. He writes:

> 又於佛法中或由信不具足故，或由不合受好名利徒眾勝他，而為求名利徒眾勝他等故學佛法，或由不合分別解說佛法是非好惡長短，而分別解說佛法是非好惡長短等者，俱不免作佛法外邪魔六師外道空見一闡提，不信大般涅槃經，如十方世界所有地土。[338]
>
> Moreover, with regard to the buddha-dharma, whether because one is unequipped with faith, or whether because one is not fit to receive favors, fame, disciples, and superiority over others, yet studies the buddha-dharma in pursuit of fame, disciples, and superiority over others, or whether because one is not fit to analyze and explain the rights and wrongs, the good points and bad points, and the strong points and weak points of the buddha-dharma, yet one *does* analyze and explain the rights and wrongs, the good points and bad points, and the strong points and weak points of the buddha-dharma—all [such people] inevitably act as *icchantikas* who are outside the fold of the buddha-dharma, who are perverse demons, who are followers of the Outer Paths of the Six [Non-Buddhist] Masters. [Such *icchantikas*] do not have faith in the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa*, and are [as numerous] as all the particles of soil in the worlds of the Ten Directions.

By adding these classes of people, Xinxing joins his own concerns about misanalysis and venal teaching to larger issue of lack of faith. All such people, Xinxing suggests, are *icchantika*; as we know from the *Nirvana Sutra*, they are now as numerous as the atoms of the universe. Xinxing's reasoning throughout this passage is a warning to the reader: you may assume that your Buddhist activities are conducted faithfully and correctly, but such an assumption is foolhardy. You should instead assume that your activities are performed faithlessly and incorrectly—the Buddha himself has predicted as much.

Xinxing's reasoning about classes of beings—and about how to place oneself among these classes—is consistently probabilistic. Xinxing never denies that one *may* be 'one of the good ones'—one of the atoms on the fingernail, rather than the innumerable other atoms of the universe. (After all, the Buddha himself has announced this distribution, and Xinxing would be loath to contradict the Buddha.) However, finding such a being would be like finding a needle in a haystack, or a real jewel in a pile of counterfeits:

[338] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 42.

多少分齊如扴上土、如此段初說。喻如一切偽寶內猶有真寶在、一種相似。[339]

In quantity, they are as [scarce as] the amount of earth held on the tip of a fingernail, as the beginning of this section explains. By analogy, it is comparable to how, in a great mass of false treasures, there will still be some real ones.

Xinxing offers no method for determining one's class.[340] He explains no ritual, describes no confirmatory vision, and endorses no interpretive criterion that will sort the real jewels from the false jewels, or that will show the practitioner which side of the balance they fall on. In such a situation, the danger of 'mismatched practice' seems inescapable. Nevertheless, Xinxing himself endorses practices and teachings, suggesting that this mismatch can be escaped. In the absence of certainty about the nature of one's faculties, how does one proceed?

6) Certain Teachings, Uncertain Teachings

Above, we saw how Xinxing endorsed a broad understanding of 'maligning;' this broad understanding held that misuse or misinterpretation—especially the study of a 'mismatched teaching'—constitutes 'maligning.' Maligning, moreover, is an extremely dangerous sin—one we must at all costs avoid. In the previous section, we saw that maligning poses a particular problem for beings of lower faculties, because such beings are deficient in their ability to discern different categories. By drawing out some of the probabilistic features of a crucial prophecy in the *Nirvana Sutra*, Xinxing makes the problem of lower beings a problem for *any* potential reader—there is no way to know what kind of practitioner one is. Xinxing has caught his reader in an urgent dilemma.

However, Xinxing seems to feel that his texts offer a way out. Xinxing refers to the sets of teachings he recommends to beings of lower faculties by a variety of terms. He sometimes calls them 'inexhaustible' (*wujin* 無盡) or 'teachings of the Buddha for beings born blind' (*shengmang zhongsheng fofa* 生盲眾生佛法). Frequently, Xinxing calls such teachings 'universal teachings' (*pufa* 普法) or 'teachings of the Buddha that are universally true and universally correct' (*puzhen puzheng fofa* 普真普正佛法). Let us examine some of these teachings to see why Xinxing feels that they escape the twin dangers of maligning and non-discernment.

In a crucial section of the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Xinxing gives a list of twenty-four 'articles' (*duan* 段) that are appropriate to beings who are constrained to study the 'universally true and universally correct buddha, dharma, and sangha.' Utilization of these 'articles' allows lowly beings to function as if they were a being of much greater capabilities. Xinxing introduces them by writing:

莫問一切利根鈍根、有知解无知解、歸一切三寶、度一切眾生、斷一切惡、修一切善解行等多少，但使常一向唯純偏學一切世間內一切第三階佛法內一切廿四段等、一切最下下得惡得苦普真普正佛法僧眾生斷惡修善解行等、常

[339] Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 262.
[340] In making the 'reading' of the *person* into a problem, Xinxing is drawing on a long line of Chinese precedent. Many issues related to hermeneutics in traditional Chinese thought are framed in terms of reading *people* rather than reading texts. See Ashmore 2010, esp. 212–214.

正常不錯、常不誹謗一切正法、常不毀呰一切賢聖乃至一切凡夫等、常一向唯純益无損佛法、亦名常一向唯純偏學一切生盲眾生佛法。
Regardless of whether [practitioners] are of keen faculties or dull faculties, whether they have understanding or lack understanding, or the extent of their practices and understandings, such as taking refuge in the Three Jewels, liberating all beings, cutting off evil, or cultivating what is wholesome—[regardless of all that,] just have them always and ever solely, exclusively and purely study the practices and understandings relating to cutting off evil and cultivating the wholesome that [consist of] the twenty-four articles found within the buddha-dharma of the third level for all mundane [worlds], and which are pertinent to the beings who are lower than the lowest, who suffer from evil and pain, and who are [suited for] the buddhas, the dharmas, and the monks that are universally true and universally correct; [let them be] always correct and always without error, never maligning the True Dharma, never defaming the sages and worthies or even worldlings, and always and ever exclusively and purely benefitting and not harming the buddha-dharma—which is to say, always and ever exclusively and purely studying the buddha-dharma for beings who are blind from birth.

皆悉普名有大智惠常行正法、能如實語諸沙門等、皆悉普名行法行王、皆悉普名多聞持戒五德具足比丘、皆悉普名真善剎利、皆悉普名真善輔相大臣、皆悉普名真善沙門、皆悉普名真善婆羅門、皆悉普名真善居士、皆悉普名持戒清淨有功德者、皆悉普名住大乘者、皆悉普名持戒多聞言辭清辨、皆悉普名與如此人對相歡娛則心悅樂、諮問義論敬受教誨等。[341]
[If they do that then] they will be universally considered *śrāmaṇas* who possess great wisdom, who always practice the True Dharma, who speak in accord with reality, all are considered kings who engage in the practice of Dharma, all are universally considered *bhikṣus* of erudition, who uphold the precepts, who are endowed with the five virtues, all are universally considered truly wholesome *kṣatriyas*, all are universally considered truly wholesome prime ministers and high officials, all are universally considered truly wholesome *śrāmaṇas*, all are universally considered truly wholesome brahmans, all are universally considered truly wholesome householders, all are universally considered possessors of merit who keep the precepts pure, all are universally considered dwellers in the Great Vehicle, all are universally considered those who uphold the precepts, who are erudite, and whose speech is pure and incisive, all are considered those one is delighted to meet and who gratify the mind, whom one inquires of, debates with, and from whom one respectfully receives instruction.

In other words, regardless of a practitioner's situation, if they study the twenty-four articles that are aimed at those who are "lower than the lowest" then they will be placed on the same plane as the best Buddhist practitioners—"*śrāmaṇas* who possess great wisdom…*bhikṣus* of erudition…dwellers in the Great Vehicle." What is this miraculous medicine?

[341] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 290–291.

In the following pages, Xinxing proceeds to list these 'twenty-four articles.'[342] Xinxing presents each item with the following two formulae:

> 得頓滅、從无始世界乃至未得法忍已來……
> "It is possible, immediately, that [the following] be extinguished, from beginningless time and so long as one has yet to attain the forbearance [borne of the recognition of the non-arising] of dharmas…[content of teaching]"
>
> 得頓不滅、從无始世界乃至未得法忍已來……
> "It is possible, immediately, that [the following] not be extinguished, from beginningless time and so long as one has yet to attain the forbearance [borne of the recognition of the non-arising] of dharmas…[content of teaching]"

After the content of the teaching is given, Xinxing concludes with a coordinate formula. If the teaching is about something negative (i.e., a particular dharmic obstruction or affliction), he will write: "they all, universally, may disappear entirely and not arise [again]."[343] If the teaching is about something positive, he concludes with the following formula: "they all, universally, may *not* disappear."[344]

Although at first glance it may appear that Xinxing is listing twenty-four practices, in fact he is listing twenty-four *facts about* Buddhist practice, Buddhist practitioners, Buddhist institutions, and aspects of Buddhist soteriology. They include the fact that 'universal reverence'[345] and the repair of old and decrepit Buddhist stupas and images[346] will "universally *not* disappear." However, they also include facts about what is attainable for the Buddhist practitioner. For example, the first article states that it will always be possible to eradicate "all higher and lower births, all perverse conceptions of emptiness or conceptions of existence, all of the perverse Three Poisons, all perverse conceptions of self, all perverse self-aggrandizing and slighting of others, all perverse self-affirmations and denials of others."[347] The fifteenth article states that there will always be monks.[348] The twenty-second states that supernatural agents like *nāgas* will continue to protect the Three Jewels.[349] These twenty-four articles are thus quite heterogeneous. They are united, however, by the fact that they are perduring—they are 'in force' permanently and (it would seem) universally. They are teachings that are "universally true and universally correct" (普真普正)—an updated version of the "universal teachings" that Xinxing had already taken an interest in in his early writings.

Some scholars have read Xinxing's fixation on 'universal' teachings as evidence for his interest in abstract principles that subsume all phenomena.[350] In fact, however, when Xinxing uses the term 'universal,' he seems to mean teachings that are universally applicable, and hence do not fall under the ban on 'mismatched' practice. They are, therefore, beneficial while still being perfectly safe—a medicine that cannot be poisonous. Xinxing says as much in the *Practice*

[342] The twenty-four articles appear at Yabuki 1927, appendix, 291–303.
[343] 皆悉普得滅盡不起故。
[344] 皆悉普得不滅故。
[345] Article 11, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 295.
[346] Article 24, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 303.
[347] Article 1, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 291.
[348] Article 15, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 297.
[349] Article 22, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 299.
[350] See especially Hubbard 2001.

Matched to Faculties. There, he gives a slightly different list of 'universal' teachings. This time, all are straightforwardly practices. He writes:

> 行學普法淳益无損者，有三種。
> Practicing and studying the universal dharma is purely beneficial and devoid of harm. There are three issues.
>
> 一者，自身見破戒惡，他身見如來藏佛性、善得受信心檀越、飲食、衣服、臥具、種各十萬不足為多，如涅槃經說。
> One: one sees oneself as one possessed of the evil of destroying the precepts, while one sees others as possessed of the Treasury of the Thus-Come One, of the Buddha-Nature, and thinks it insufficient for them to obtain a myriad each of faithful *dānapatis*, of comestibles, of garments, and of bedding. As the *Nirvana Sutra* explains.
>
> 二者，行不輕行，增上慢四眾，莫問善惡邪正，俱敬作當來佛，從是以後世世值佛乃至成佛，淳有說益、不說有損，乃至打罵者，損少益多，後得入菩提道。
> Two: engaging in the practice of non-disparagement. As for the overly-prideful four assemblies, regardless of whether they are good or evil, incorrect or correct, one venerates them as the Buddha-To-Come, as from this moment on, meeting the Buddha in life after life, and finally becoming a Buddha. It says only that there is benefit [in this], and it does not say that there is harm. Even for those that strike and scold, the harm is small and the benefit is great, and later they will enter into the Path of Bodhi.
>
> 三者，如維摩經說，明八法淳說有益，不說有損。
> Three: as the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* explains. As for the eight teachings,[351] it purely says that there is benefit [in this], and it does not say that there is harm.
>
> 我見學此普法淳益无損、淳善无惡，故知生盲凡夫不識邪正唯合行普淳益无損法，不合行別損益俱者。[352]
> I see that, in studying these universal dharmas, it is purely beneficial and devoid of harm, purely good and devoid of evil. Thus, we know that worldlings who are born blind and do not distinguish between the correct and incorrect are fit only to practice the universally, purely beneficial and non-harmful teachings, and they are not fit to practice the particular, which is possessed of both benefit and harm.

In these passages, Xinxing singles out three distinct items as 'universal' teachings: seeing oneself as an evil precept breaker and others as possessors of buddha-nature, engaging in the practice of 'non-disparagement,' and the 'eight teachings' on rebirth in the Pure Land described in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. Xinxing specifies that these universal teachings are "purely beneficial and

[351] These are teachings on rebirth in the Pure Land contained in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. See Brandstadt 2020 for a discussion of these teachings.
[352] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 149.

devoid of harm, purely good and devoid of evil." It is this quality that makes them the *sole* fit practice for "worldlings who are born blind and do not distinguish between the correct and incorrect" (生盲凡夫不識邪正). In a set of question-and-answers at the end of the *Practice Matched to Faculties*, Xinxing states explicitly that the universal dharma allows us to sidestep the hermeneutic anxiety naturally entailed by living in a demon infested world. He composes the following dialogue:

> 問曰，末世學道邪魔至多，不畏壞其善根。
> Question: in studying the Path in the Age of Decline, evil demons are extremely numerous. Aren't you afraid of [them] destroying [others'] good roots?
>
> 答曰，不畏，但此普法乃是出魔境界。何以故。由行法具足故。敬他身上八種佛法，自知己身有十二種顛倒，瞋即不生，作一切空觀不淨觀故貪即不起，已貪瞋无故癡亦不生，貪瞋癡无故一切惡自然息。喻如一切草木因地生長，若地壞已一切草木亦皆墮壞，一切諸惡亦復如是，因三毒故能生諸惡。[353]
>
> Answer: no, we are not afraid, given that this universal teachings are beyond the scope of the demonic. What of it? Because one is provisioned with methods of practice. One reveres others in terms of the eight kinds of buddha-dharma, and one knows that one possesses the twelve kinds of inversions, so anger does not arise. One engages in the contemplation of emptiness and the contemplation of impurity, so craving does not arise. Since craving and hatred are absent, delusion also does not arise. Since craving, hatred, and delusion are absent, all evil naturally ceases. It is just as all plants sprout and grow because of soil. If the soil is destroyed, then any plants will also succumb to destruction. All evils are also just like this, because it is the Three Poisons that are capable of giving rise to evils.

Although the universal teachings are always effective and always safe, even under the constraints of a demon-infested world, they are not necessarily 'better' or 'more true' than other teachings. Xinxing again makes this clear in a question-and-answer set at the end of the *Practice Matched to Faculties*. Here, Xinxing juxtaposes universal teachings with their correlate, 'particular teachings' (*biefa* 別法). As we can see, Xinxing does not consider particular teachings intrinsically inferior to universal teachings; in fact, he implicitly suggests that by many metrics they are *superior*. He openly admits as much in this dialogue:

> 問曰，普別何解，今更有疑。但是一切佛法皆是好是上，汝今所言唯道學下有何意。
> Question: how does one understand the universal and the particular? At the moment, there are further uncertainties. If it were the case that all the buddha-teachings were fine and superior, what is your intent [behind] your present statement, in which you say to study only the 'inferior'?

[353] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 150.

答曰，佛法是勝上，不用下者，為汝喻說。譬如世人種菜欲得好菜，必須屎糞而得生長大堪人食用，癡人見之便作是言，菜是人食，若用糞屎云何可食，名聲可惡，欲得好菜應用金銀七寶等糞現相交，好菜必勝。上智者見之即皆訶言，癡人不如是也。何以故。一切好菜皆從屎糞而得生長，若道現相大惡用七寶泥得好菜者，无有是處。七寶雖好體同瓦石，不潤物云何糞菜，若欲糞菜必殺於菜，不能增長。嫌於下行學上法亦復如是。如經說，高原陸地不生蓮華，卑溼淤泥乃生此華，上好佛法不生於道，下惡佛法乃有道生，一種相似。[354]

Answer: the buddha-dharma is beyond 'superior, no use for the inferior.' I will explain it for you with an analogy. Consider: when people of the world plant a vegetable, wishing to get a fine crop, they must use manure to get it to grow and mature so it can be eaten by people. A deluded person would see this and speak as follows: 'Vegetables are people's food! If you use manure, how will it be edible? It will have an execrable reputation. If you wish to obtain fine vegetables, you should use precious metals and the Seven Jewels, exchanging them for manure, and the vegetables will certainly be superior.' A very wise person, seeing this, would scold them, saying, 'Fool! It is not like this. Why? All fine vegetables grow from and mature out of manure. If you claim that exchanging these very vile things for a paste of the Seven Jewels you will get fine vegetables, that is not the case. Although the Seven Jewels are fine, they are essentially the same as tiles and stones. How could something un-moist fertilize the vegetables? If you fertilize the crops [with the Seven Jewels], you will certainly kill them, and they will not grow. Detesting the inferior and studying the superior teachings is also just like this. As the scriptures say, the dry land of the steppe does not grow lotus flowers, but lowly heaps of silt give rise to this flower. The superior, fine buddha-dharma does not give rise to the Path. Rather, the lesser, vile buddha-dharma gives rise to the Path. [These two cases] are comparable.

Although the particular teachings are, in some sense, superior to the universal teachings, they are problematic for those of the lowest faculties. Because these beings are 'born blind' and incapable of discernment, they go astray when they try to practice a particular dharma. In a manner precisely opposite to their study of a universal teaching, the study of the particular brings only harm, never benefit.

別法就根者，有二義。

'The particular dharma is addressed to [different] faculties.' There are two issues.

一者，對根明淳益无損。但使一切經教內嘆學別法利益者，唯是第一第二兩階、一乘三乘人是別根當位。學法由稱根故淳益、无損。

One: explaining pure benefit and lack of harm in terms of faculties. When, in the teachings in the scriptures, it praises the benefits of studying the particular dharma, it is only the people in the two levels, the first and second, and in the One Vehicle and the Three Vehicles who are in the appropriate rank for the particular.

[354] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 150–151.

The study of this dharma is purely beneficial and without harm because it matches those faculties.

二者，不當根學別法，淳損、无益。何以故。由不當根下人行上人所行法故。但使一切經教內明學別法損者，皆是學法不當根。
Two: the study of the particular teaching when it does not match the faculties is purely harmful and without benefit. Why? Because, not matched to faculties, the inferior person practices the dharma that is to be practiced by the superior person. When, in the teachings in the scriptures, it explains the harms of studying the particular dharma, they are all [cases] of studying a dharma that does not match one's faculties.

此兩段義喻說，顛倒眾生若別[355]有損者，喻如盲人射墮，由不見故，射物不着即射殺人，淳損、无益。顛倒眾生若學普法，淳益、无損者，喻如盲人射地，放放皆着，不射殺人，淳益、无損。[356]
Analogical explanation of the principle behind these two sections: the beings of the inversions are harmed when they [study] the particular. It is like a blind person shooting an arrow. Because they do not see, the arrow does not hit its target, and they shoot and kill someone—purely harmful, and not beneficial. If the beings of the inversions study the universal dharma, it is purely beneficial and without harm. It is like a blind person shooting an arrow at the ground. Every shot hits, and they do not shoot and kill anyone—purely beneficial, and not harmful.

Thus, the study of the particular is harmful in part because it can result in a 'mismatch.' (For further discussion of the harms of the particular, and broader context for this passage, see Appendix A.) As we have seen, mismatched practice for Xinxing is related to maligning of the Buddha's intent. Xinxing again explicitly links maligning, mismatched practice, and the study of particular teachings in the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*. He writes:

莫問一切利根鈍根有知解无知解歸一切三寶、度一切眾生、斷一切惡、修一切善解行等多少，但使常一向唯純偏學一切世間內、一切第一第二兩階佛法內、一切七十種等所說、一切最上上、得好得樂、別真別正佛法僧眾生、斷惡修善解得行等，常邪、常錯、常謗佛、常謗法、通凡及聖。[357]
Regardless of whether they are of keen faculties or dull faculties, or whether they have understanding or lack understanding, or the extent of their taking refuge in the Three Jewels, in liberating beings, and in their practice and understanding of the cutting off of all evil and the cultivation of all good, if [one] is allowed to study, always and ever, purely and exclusively the understanding and practices on cutting off evil and cultivating good [pertinent to] beings of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha which are true in the particular and correct in the particular, by which joy and happiness are attained, which are higher than the highest, which are discussed in the seventy kinds in the buddha-dharma of the first and second levels

[355] In parallel with the following sentence, I read a 學 here.
[356] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 149–150.
[357] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 259.

of all mundane worlds, [then one] will always go wrong, always make mistakes, always malign the Buddha, and always malign the Dharma, as well as the worldlings and the sages.

The study of this particular dharma is liable to arouse the passions of practitioners, leading to disaster. Xinxing writes:

> 明一切道俗、亦名一切利根空見有見眾生，由分別一切別真別正佛法故，唯偏將一切利根空見有見眾生一切邪善佛法作是，一切利根真聖及凡夫正見成就九種人一切正善佛法作非。唯瞋唯罵唯打唯殺等者皆悉普是。若更分別一切別真別正佛法內、一切惡一切善佛法，轉更增長一切邪錯、謗佛、謗法、凡及聖。喻如一切生盲眾生學一切書盡、作一切田種、作一切工巧、作一切興生販賣及一切征陣等，一種相似。[358]
>
> All lay and religious, which is to say all beings of keen faculties who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence, by delving into the buddha-dharma which is true in the particular and correct in the particular, will only ever affirm the perversely wholesome buddha-dharma of beings who have keen capacities and misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence, and deny the correctly wholesome buddha-dharma of those of keen faculties who are true sages and worldlings, the nine kinds of people provisioned with correct views. It's always only the case that they will become angry, scold, strike, and kill. If they further delve into the evil and wholesome buddha-dharmas in the buddha-dharma which is true in the particular and correct in the particular, then they will further increase their perverse mistakes, their maligning of the buddha, of the dharma, and of the worldlings and sages. By analogy, it is comparable to when someone blind from birth studies books exhaustively, cultivates the fields, engages in a craft, engages in business and selling, or even in military campaigns.

Xinxing reiterates this point again and again:

> 一者，文當，明一切道俗，亦名一切利根空見有見眾生、由分別真別正佛法內一切惡一切善佛法故，常起一切貪瞋煩惱无量无邊。若更分別一切別真別正佛法內一切善佛法，轉更增長一切貪瞋煩惱，喻如一切噎病及一切大小便不通，眾生返更多食、多飲漿水，一種相似。[359]
>
> One: (attested by text) all lay and religious, which is to say beings of keen capacities who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence, by analyzing the evil and the wholesome buddha-dharma in the buddha-dharma which is true in the particular and correct in the particular, always give rise to immeasurable, unlimited afflictions of anger and desire. If they further analyze the wholesome buddha-dharma within the buddha-dharma which is true in the particular and correct in the particular, then they in turn further increase the afflictions of desire and hatred. By analogy, it is comparable to when one is choking, or when the

[358] Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 315.
[359] Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 372.

> greater and lesser bodily excretions do not pass, but one actually eats even more or drinks even more liquid.

Thus, Xinxing makes clear that particular teachings, while effective in some cases, are disastrous for those without the ability to discern correctly, or who are unable to engage in analysis without give rise to afflictive passions. When such beings engage with the particular teachings, spiritual disaster results. In contrast, all beings can engage with the universal teachings—these are a universal medicine that is purely beneficial, never harmful.[360] In a world of hermeneutic uncertainty, these teachings are certain to work.[361] Given the difficulty of determining what

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[360] In the *Ren jilu dumu* 人集録都目, we find the following title: *Teachings on the Universal Medicine for Faculties* 根機普藥法 in two juan. It seems that Xinxing may have provided a synoptic treatment of this idea. Nishimoto has argued that the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma* is in fact such a text, mislabeled as the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*. See Nishimoto 1998, 183.

[361] We find evidence for Xinxing's concern with teachings that are certain or all-encompassing in some of the strange locutions found through his writings. Xinxing frequently uses modifiers like "all" (*yiqie* 一切), "entirely" (*jiexi* 皆悉), "completely/thoroughly" (*jin* 盡), "universally" (*pu* 普), "exclusively" (*wei* 唯), and "always" (*chang* 常). Xinxing uses these modifiers in highly unnatural ways; if we interpret these words in normal ways, many of his phrases are not easily parsed as well-formed literary Sinitic sentences. Consider one sentence from Xinxing's corpus, chosen more or less at random. Here, Xinxing describes one quality of beings of the lowest spiritual faculties:

六者常唯認一切最大輕罪、不認一切最大重罪、金剛與一切虛空大地等、若作十惡、若驅破戒邪善持戒比丘還俗、若瞋罵打破戒邪善持戒比丘、若殺破戒邪善持戒比丘、若犯四重五逆罪、若食用三寶飲食財物、若誹謗正法毀訾賢聖。
Six: they *always* (常), *exclusively* (唯) acknowledge *all* (一切) of the most superficial sins, and they do not acknowledge *any* (一切) of the gravest sins—[this fact about lowly beings] is adamant [i.e., certain and secure], and equal to the sky and earth. [It applies] to the performance of the Ten Evils, to the forced laicization of *bhikṣus* who break the precepts or who uphold (well or wrongly) the precepts, to the scolding and striking of *bhikṣus* who break the precepts or who uphold (well or wrongly) the precepts, to the killing of *bhikṣus* who break the precepts or who uphold (well or wrongly) the precepts, to the commission of the Five Grave Sins and the Five Betrayals, to the consumption of the supplies of the Three Jewels, to the maligning of the True Dharma and the defamation of the Sages and Worthies. (Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 44.)

Another example, in which Xinxing explains why we should take '*bhikṣu*' to mean 'renunciants who shave their heads and wear the *kāsāya*':

於一切經律論、皆悉普唯見將剃頭著袈裟出家人作比丘、不見有多部大部經律論、將俗人作比丘者、所以肉眼凡夫唯敢依一切多部經律論說。[361]
In the scriptures, codes, and treatises, we entirely (皆悉), universally (普), and exclusively (唯) see that they consider renunciants who shave their heads and wear the *kāṣāya* to be *bhikṣus*. We do not see many or significant scriptures, codes, or treatises that consider laypeople to be *bhikṣus*. Consequently, worldlings with eyes of flesh dare only (唯) rely on the more numerous scriptures, codes, and treatises. (Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 27.)

Another example, in which Xinxing explains that 'mundane principles' are preached for the sake of a certain class of people:

世間之義為一切第三階佛法內、一切利根空見有見斷一切善根、皆悉普盡一闡提眾生說。[361]
The mundane principles are preached for the sake of *all* (一切) those within the fold of the Buddha-dharma of the Third Level, *all* (一切) beings of keen faculties with conceptions of emptiness or existence, who have cut off *all* (一

‘kind’ of being one is, why not restrict oneself to the lowest common denominator, the universal teaching, which all beings can practice without harm?

Modern scholarship tends to see the centerpiece of Xinxing’s teaching as the taxonomy of the Three Levels.[362] While this taxonomy was clearly important, and was closely identified with Xinxing and his followers, there is some evidence that it was Xinxing’s theory of a ‘universal teaching’ that was seen as Xinxing’s primary innovation. In his epitaph, the centrality of a ‘universal teaching,’ suitable for those ‘born blind,’ is repeatedly emphasized. His disciples write:

> 扵是以法驗人，以時言教。邪正旣別，善惡區分。信知學不當根，甘露以之成毒，藥應其□，□寶所以名珍。愍茲常倒之流，啓茲普真之路，開生盲之眼目，殖定死之根機，使識賢聖之法門，令知凡夫之行處，遂扵十二部經中，撰對根起行之法三十餘卷，又出三階佛法四卷，並行之扵世。[363]
>
> Thereon, he used Dharma to prove the person, and used time period to express the teaching. Perverse and correct being separated, good and evil were distinguished. When the faithful and knowledgeable study what does not match their capacities, then sweet nectar thereby becomes a poison. If the medicine accords with their [disease?], [then the precious?] jewel is therefore considered a gem. Fostering this stream of the always inverted, cutting the path of the universally true, opening the eyes of those blind from birth, cultivating the faculties of those fixed in death, causing them to recognize the Dharma Gate of the worthies and sages, allowing them to know the place of practice for the worldlings, he finally compiled, from out of the twelve kinds of scriptures, the *Teachings on Practice Matched to*

切) of their potential for good, and who are *entirely* (皆悉), *universally* (普) and *thoroughly* (盡) *icchantika*. (Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, Yabuki 1927, appendix, 261.)

These are not normal usages of qualifiers like ‘all’ and ‘universally.’ In translating Xinxing’s work, it is often necessary to silently emend or omit these qualifiers in order to produce readable English sentences.[361] When faced with sentences like this, one understands Gyōnen’s comment that Xinxing’s writings were “difficult to understand.” Perhaps, however, Xinxing uses these terms in unnatural ways because he wishes to express concepts that are not ordinarily marked in the literary Sinitic of the sixth-century: concepts of total exclusion, total inclusion, and certainty. We have seen above how Xinxing considers the reading and interpretation of scripture to be a matter of grave importance. Misinterpretation of scripture—particularly ‘mismatched’ study—leads to the deadly sin of maligning the Dharma. Given that assumption, it makes sense that Xinxing would seek to remove *all* ambiguity from his articulation of how scripture should be used, how it should be interpreted, and by whom it should be read—i.e., Xinxing wants a *certain* interpretation. Hence, his unusual use of modifiers. Xinxing wishes to express in the third example given above, for example, that the ‘worldly meaning’ is preached for *all* the *icchantika* of the Third Level, not just some; there can be no ambiguity. In the first example, Xinxing tries to explain a quality of the lowest level of beings, namely, that they will acknowledge ‘superficial sins’ but not ‘grave’ ones. Xinxing feels constrained, in making this assertion, to say that they always, exclusively, acknowledge *all* superficial sins, while not acknowledging *any* grave ones. In the second example, Xinxing attempts to draw a conclusion about the meaning of the term *bhikṣu* (*biqiu* 比丘); again, he employs terms of universal exclusion and inclusion to do so.

Usages like this are not rare—Xinxing uses terms like ‘all’ (*yiqie* 一切) and ‘exclusively’ (*wei* 唯) in this way thousands of time throughout his extant texts. Xinxing’s idiosyncratic usage of terms of certainty—terms of total exclusion and total inclusion—should be seen as a fundamental feature of his style of writing.

[362] See Nishimoto 1998, 239 passim, Hubbard 2001, 76–89.

[363] Nishimoto 1998, 35.

> *Faculties* in more than thirty fascicles, and he also put out the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* in four fascicles, and he circulated these throughout the world.

In addition, epitaphs for devotees of Xinxing as late as the mid-eighth century emphasize, not the Three Levels, but the 'universal dharma.' One epitaph mentions that the laywoman in question became a devotee when she "heard that there are two kinds of buddha-dharma—the universal and the particular."[364]

The distinction between universal teachings and particular teachings should be seen as foundational to Xinxing's thought. The dyad of universal/particular appears already in his earliest writings. However, this dyad becomes the key to Xinxing's scriptural project in his later writings.

Xinxing's Mature Project: Definition of a Scriptural Canon for Chinese Buddhism

We have excavated and examined several assumptions that, implicitly or explicitly, undergird Xinxing's later texts. These assumptions are:

1) **The Buddha is Supreme.**
2) **Bare Scriptural Text is the Primary Reliable Means of Access to the Buddha**.
3) **Specific Teachings are Intended for Specific Audiences.**
4) **Scripture is Dangerous**.
5) **Discernment of Categories (Including Categories of Practitioners) is Uncertain**.
6) **Scripture Contains Certain Teachings and Uncertain Teachings.**

These assumptions help us to understand the structure of Xinxing's texts and the broader project that made them compelling and controversial. As we can now see, that project involved a specification and reconceptualization of *why* Buddhist scripture was authoritative and *how* it should be engaged with. Xinxing assumes 1) that scripture is authoritative because it reports the words of the Buddha. He is interested almost exclusively in scripture that presents itself as such a report. Next, he assumes 2) that the bare text of scripture is the sole means of accessing the words of the Buddha. Xinxing entertains no other method for accessing authoritative Buddhist teaching, and his texts are constructed so that every statement can be tied directly to the words of the Buddha preserved in scripture. Like all of his contemporaries, Xinxing also assumes 3) that received scripture contains different teachings for different audiences. Xinxing's peers generally hold that it is salubrious for teachings to be matched to their appropriate audience. Xinxing, uniquely, holds that they *must* be so matched. In part, this is because Xinxing is acutely preoccupied with the idea that the intended audience is an integral part of the Buddha's intent. To mismatch a teaching, therefore, is to contradict the Buddha's intent. In part based on this expansive understanding of the Buddha's intent, Xinxing further assumes 4) that scripture is dangerous. If we misuse, misinterpret, or mismatch scripture, we may inadvertently commit a grave sin like 'maligning' the Three Jewels. Scripture is especially dangerous for beings of lower faculties, because 5) beings of limited faculties are limited in their ability to correctly discern categories of practitioners and categories of Buddhist teachings. They are liable to misinterpret

[364] 聞有普別兩種佛法。 See Bo 2020, 805 for transcription.

scripture, misinterpret themselves, and therefore engage in mismatched practice. In response to this conundrum, Xinxing attempts 6) to identify and isolate teachings in scripture that *cannot* be mismatched—such teachings are 'universal,' 'inexhaustible,' or appropriate for 'those born blind.' These teachings, therefore, are perfectly safe, even for beings of the lowest faculties.

We have already noted that outside observers describe Xinxing as collecting, compiling and sorting 'excerpts' from scripture. If we examine the titles of Xinxing's non-extant texts, as well as the content of his extant ones, we can see that there is an element of truth in this description. Although Xinxing's best known texts have fairly pithy titles (e.g., *Practice Matched to Faculties*, the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*), most of the others are more elaborate. Consider the full title of *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*, one of the most important of Xinxing's texts at Jinchuanwan:

> *Elucidation of the Shallow and Profound Teachings, Matched to Spiritual Faculties, on Conceiving an Aspiration for Bodhi* [*as found*] *in the Scriptures* (*Ming zhu jing zhong duigen qian shen fa putixin fa* 明諸經中對根淺深發菩提心法)

This title is not poetic; but what it lacks in poetry, it makes up for in sheer, prosaic functionality. The full title of *Bodhi Matched to Faculties* reflects Xinxing's fundamental aim of matching match teachings (*fa* 法) to their appropriate practitioners (*ren* 人). *Bodhi Matched to Faculties* represents Xinxing's attempt to match the Buddha's teachings on a single topic, the conception of an aspiration for *bodhi* (*fa putixin* 發菩提心), to their intended audience. If the teachings he organizes in this work constitutes precious but dangerous medicine, then the lengthy titles of the texts are like labels on a pill-bottle. And just as the labeling on medication tells us its use, the intended patient, and the ingredients, the title of each of these texts tells us {A} the topic of the teachings contained therein, {B} the categories by which they are organized,[365] and {C} the original source of the teachings.

Using this scheme, we can analyze this title as follows: {A} teachings on conceiving an aspiration for *bodhi* that are {B} sorted according to whether they are profound or shallow (*qian shen* 淺深) and matched thereby to practitioners' varying levels of spiritual faculties (*dui gen* 對根). The teachings are drawn ultimately from {C} the scriptures (*zhu jing zhong* 諸經中).

In the same way, we can deconstruct the full title of another of Xinxing's texts at Jinchuanwan, *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*. The full title of that text reads:

> *Elucidation of the Differences in the Teachings on Conceiving an Aspiration for Bodhi* [*with regard to*] *Two Levels of People, the Mundane and the Transmundane,* [*as found*] *in the Sutras of the Great Vehicle* (*Ming zhu da sheng xiuduoluo nei shijian chu shijian liang jie ren fa putixin tongyi fa* 明諸大乘修多羅內世間出世間兩階人發菩提心同異法)

Again, in this text Xinxing compiles {A} different teachings on conceiving an aspiration for *bodhi* (*fa putixin tongyi fa* 發菩提心同異法), and sorts them by {B} their intended audience, which can be stratified into two levels of people (*liang jie ren* 兩階人), the mundane (*shijian* 世

[365] Such categories always correspond, either directly or indirectly, to graded classes of practitioners. Hence, {B} ultimately tells us the intended audience.

間) and the transmundane (*chu shijian* 出世間). Finally, these teachings originate in {C} the sutras of the Great Vehicle (*zhu dasheng xiuduoluo nei* 諸大乘修多羅內).

The regularity of the labels of these two texts is not accidental—it appears to be a deliberate system applicable to a whole class of Xinxing's. Consider just two of the many other similar titles in a Three Levels catalogue, the *Outline of the Collected Records of Humankind* (*Ren jilu dumu* 人集録都目):[366]

(I) *Elucidation of the Shallow and Profound Teachings on Venerating the Three Jewels for Practice Matched to Spiritual Faculties,* [*as found*] *in the Scriptures*
(*Ming zhujing zhong dui gen qixing qianshen jing san bao fa* 明諸經中對根起行淺深敬三寶法)

(II) *Elucidation of the Teachings, Shallow and Profound, Matched to Spiritual Faculties, on the Reasons for the Rise and Fall of Sentient Beings in the* [*Fold of*] *the Buddha-dharma* [*During*] *the Declining Dharma,* [*as found*] *in the Scriptures*
(*Ming zhujing zhong dui gen qianshen mofa zhongsheng yu fofa nei fei xing suoyou fa* 明諸經中對根淺深末法衆生於佛法內廢興所由法)

We can read (I) as follows: {A} teachings on the veneration of the Three Jewels (*jing sanbao fa* 敬三寶法) sorted by {B} depth (*qianshen* 淺深) in relation to practice when matched with spiritual faculties (*dui gen qixing* 對根起行) and {C} drawn from all the scriptures (*zhujing zhong* 諸經中).

(II) will be parsed similarly: {A} all of the teachings (*suoyou fa* 所由法) on the topic of the rise and fall of sentient beings in the fold of the Buddha-dharma during the period of the Decline of the Dharma (*mofa zhongsheng yu fofa nei fei xing* 末法衆生於佛法內廢興) and {B} sorted by depth (*qianshen* 淺深) in relation to spiritual faculties (*dui gen* 對根). The teachings are drawn from {C} all of the scriptures (*zhujing zhong* 諸經中).

Among Xinxing's extant and non-extant texts, we also find texts of a slightly different nature: 'excerpted scriptures' or 'scriptural abridgments.' One such text survives at Jinchuanwan:

Brief Excerpts from the Moon-store Section Scripture of the Great Collection
(*Da ji yuezang fen jing lue chao chu* 大集月藏分經略抄出)

Although this is the only extant such text by Xinxing, he clearly produced others. Three Levels scriptural catalogues record other texts with very similar titles, such as the *Outline of the Moon-lamp Sutra* (*Yuedeng jing yaolüe* 月燈經要略) and the *Brief Excerpts from the Collected Records of Humankind on the Great Extensive Sutra of the Ten Wheels* (*Da fangguang shi lun jing ren jilu lüe chao chu* 大方廣十輪經人集錄略抄出).[367]

Based on the content of the extant texts, both these abridgments and the *Bodhi Matched to Faculties* texts appear to be middle works. (None mention the 'Three Levels,' nor do they contain some of the lexical and semantic peculiarities of Xinxing's later texts.) Based on our understanding of Xinxing's assumptions about scripture—both its potential and its danger—

[366] The transcription can be found in Yabuki 1974, appendix, 221–224.
[367] Both of these titles are also found in the *Outline of the Collected Records of Humankind* (*Ren ji lu dumu* 人集録都目). Yabuki 1974, appendix, 221–224.

these texts have a certain logic. They clearly fall into two categories: teachings on many topics derived from a single scripture, and teachings on a single topic derived from multiple scriptures. We might surmise that Xinxing compiled these texts as a sort of sub-canon of Buddhist literature. They are designed in such a way that the lower-level practitioner can access appropriate teachings on desired topics without encountering dangerous, mismatched passages.

What, then, of Xinxing's three great, late texts, the *Practice Matched to Faculties,* the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma*, and the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*? These texts are also, in a sense, compilations of teachings. However, they are somewhat more than that. We have seen that, in many passages of these texts, Xinxing inveighs against maligning and the misinterpretation of scripture. There is every reason to believe that Xinxing felt himself subject to these same constraints. Consequently, he presents his later writings *as if they are self-authoring unfoldings of the Buddha's original design*. Xinxing wants his taxonomy to be, not his, but entirely the Buddha's.

In a complex manner, these texts present themselves as the unfolding of the Buddha's original design—they are, as it were, transformations of the Buddhist scriptural corpora into a defined, closed canon of appropriate teachings. Part of the reason for their tortured structure and language is that Xinxing is constrained by his own assumptions about scriptural interpretation to present these texts as almost self-justifying and self-composing.[368] The point of this entire section is, simply, that third-level beings should practice universal reverence. The section, however, is written in a tortured, self-referential, and hyper self-aware language, resulting in it's length and complexity. This structure is entirely born of Xinxing's self-imposed exegetical constraints—the statement "third-level beings should practice universal reverence" never appears directly in scripture. Xinxing wishes to show, however, that a synoptic reading of scripture and a true fidelity to the Buddha's intent will reveal that this is what the Buddha wished to say. Above, we discussed the criteria of interpretation by which Xinxing selects certain teachings as appropriate for lower level beings—he believes, basically, that the Buddha marks these teachings himself. So, too, has the Buddha intended intertwined taxonomy of teachings and practitioner that are embedded in Xinxing's later texts—the 'Three Levels' that were to become the emblem of Xinxing and his followers.

This may account for the difficulty that bibliographers and biographers had in categorizing Xinxing. Xinxing's texts themselves were, notoriously, classified as 'fraudulent' scriptures in the *Dazhou* catalogue and in later bibliographers. It is clear, however, that his texts were not straightforward forgeries—they do not present themselves as anything other than compilations *by* Xinxing, a Chinese monk. They do not purport to be original compositions of the Buddha. They sit uneasily alongside regular forgeries in the bibliographies, and bibliographic notes make this distinction clear. In other ways, however, they *are* suspect. Xinxing makes very strong claims about his warrants for his texts. He implies, essentially, that they are presentations of Buddhist teachings *as the Buddha intended them to be presented* in circumstances like those obtaining in medieval China. Like a Buddhist Marcion or Luther,[369] Xinxing's attempt to 'close the canon' was rife with paradox.

There is also some indication that these texts were meant to supplant received scripture. We have already seen how Xinxing writes that third-level beings must be very careful in

[368] See, for example, the section in the Dunhuang SJFF on who 'gives rise to the teaching' of universal reverence (*nengqijiao ren* 能起教人).

[369] On Marcion, the first-century C.E. Christian thinker who promoted a definitive, circumscribed Christian Bible, see Metzger 1987. On Luther and the paradoxes inherent to scriptural literalism, see Simpson 2007.

engaging with scripture. At points, he seems to suggest that merely *reading* scripture will result in sin. The only reasonable inference from Xinxing's later writings is that *these* texts, to the exclusion of all others, should serve as the basis for Buddhist teaching and practice. A few polemical outside accounts in fact accuse Xinxing's followers of heterodox beliefs about reading. A discussion in Huaigan's Pure Land compendium says that Xinxing's followers believe that the "scriptures of the Greater Vehicle" are "particular," and hence they should not be read:

> 唯合行普真普正佛法得生十方佛國。若行別真別正佛法。及讀誦大乘經等。即是不當根法。墮於十方地獄。[370]
> [They hold that] it is fitting only to practice the buddha-dharma that is universally true and universally correct, and [thus] achieve rebirth in the buddha-realms of the Ten Directions. If one practices the buddha-dharma that is true in the particular and correct in the particular, or reads the scriptures of the Greater Vehicle, then that is a teaching not matched to faculties and one will fall into the hells of the Ten Directions.

An anecdote in the *Shimen zijing lu* says the same thing about a monk named Xiaoci, a devotee of Xinxing. Apparently,

> 說三階佛法時常言。不合讀誦大乘經。讀誦者入十方阿鼻地獄。急須懺悔。[371]
> When he preached the buddha-dharma of the Three Levels, he would always say: "It is not fitting to read the scriptures of the Greater Vehicle. Those who read [them] will fall into the *avīci* hells of the Ten Directions, and must urgently repent."[372]

These anecdotes suggest that at least some of Xinxing's followers understood his teachings to mean that they should not read texts outside of the Xinxing corpus—in other words, they treated Xinxing's writings much like a genuinely closed canon. It is to Xinxing's followers that we now turn.

[370] T.1960.47.48a18–20.
[371] T.2083.51.806b6–7.
[372] Greene 2008 discusses possible references to the Three Levels in Daoxuan's *Evaluations of Chan Practitioners*. Some of these references seem to indicate that Daoxuan's unnamed targets (whom Greene believes to be Three Levels devotees) "reject both the lesser and the greater [vehicles]" (89) and "rarely read the true scriptures" (91).

Chapter Four: Xinxing's Followers and the Afterlife of Xinxing's Project

In the previous chapter, I outlined Xinxing's project and the assumptions that undergird it. Xinxing's project begins in the shadow of hermeneutic skepticism and ends with a triumphant methodology for defeating that skepticism and achieving textual certainty. As we have seen, Xinxing is deeply reverential toward scripture. After all, it is scripture alone that gives us access to the Buddha. This reverence, however, mingles with fear. Because of his expansive understanding of what it means to 'malign/reject' (*feibang* 誹謗) the Buddha's Dharma, Xinxing feels that it is imperative that scripture be read and interpreted correctly. The slightest misstep may send the mismatched practitioner to the *avīci* hells. Scripture is all the more terrifying because of the degraded interpretive faculties of beings in the age of dharmic decline. In this degenerate age, beings are utterly devoid of the ability to discriminate (*bie* 別) between categories correctly. They are liable to misinterpret scripture and misinterpret themselves, and are defenseless against the depredations of evil demons (*mo* 魔) intent on deceiving them. Xinxing thus confronts his contemporaries with a fateful dilemma: we are trapped between the urgent need to use scripture and the obvious inability to use it correctly. To make no move is to consign oneself to samsara; to make a wrong move (and, for Xinxing, it is probable that any move will be wrong) is to condemn oneself to hell. Faced with a need for scripture's liberatory power but beset by an utter inability to access it safely, the being of the latter age finds itself paralyzed by skepticism and fear.

Xinxing's career as a Buddhist practitioner and teacher was devoted to finding some means of escaping this dilemma. It is clear that the details of Xinxing's proposed solution changed over the course of his career; however, he was quite consistent in his formulation of the problem and his general vision of how it should be dissolved. All of his extant writings demonstrate an interest in identifying and isolating a core set of teachings in scripture that are appropriate for anyone—a 'universal teaching' (*pufa* 普法) that will even be effective for a 'being born blind' (*shengmang zhongsheng* 生盲眾生).[373] Xinxing's mature works represent a final, unique formulation of this project. In these works, Xinxing identifies scriptural passages that, in his view, present the Buddha's own description of how future beings should practice *and* how these future beings should use scripture. Using only scriptural citation and direct inference from these passages, Xinxing builds up a towering textual edifice that makes manifest the Buddha's universal teachings—a revamped corpus of scripture that is finally safe for degraded beings to put to use. Using these texts, Xinxing suggests, the practitioner can move from the vale of doubt and sin to the safe ground of certain practice. For those sympathetic to Xinxing's presentation of the dilemma of scripture, the prospect of interpretive certainty inherent in these final texts must have held enormous appeal.

Xinxing died in 594 at the relatively young age of 54. However, his influence long outlived him. Like "the shadow of the waxwing slain / by the false azure in the windowpane" that "lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky," Xinxing's project took on a life of its own after his death. Self-proclaimed followers of Xinxing achieved great political and religious influence in the seventh century, maintained their stature into the eighth, and did not disappear until the ninth century. These followers championed Xinxing's project, sometimes in the face of overt state

[373] See Yabuki 1927, 473–485 for a discussion of the importance of the concept of 'universal teaching' for Xinxing.

suppression. However, they also developed and modified it, sometimes in highly divergent ways. Some writings by Xinxing's followers demonstrate an acute sensitivity to Xinxing's understanding of scripture as a portal through which we access the Buddha; others deemphasize scripture and celebrate Xinxing himself, suggesting that for some followers Xinxing's writings and teachings came to be seen as equal to or even superior to the received scriptural corpus. In the most radical texts, we find Xinxing's skeptical dilemma ramifying into a full-fledged rejection of the possibility of knowledge, scriptural or otherwise, and a corresponding emphasis on mere faith in Xinxing's salvific power.

All of these elaborations on Xinxing's work emerge from tensions and lacunae that are present, but undeveloped, in Xinxing's mature writings. Most importantly, they attest to Xinxing's followers' increasing awareness of the fact that Xinxing's final works have a highly ambiguous relationship to the scriptures from which they nominally derive their authority. Xinxing's project places scripture on a high pedestal and carefully restricts access to it. At times, Xinxing's curation of scripture suggests that he himself is above and beyond it. Needless to say, this raises serious questions about Xinxing's own status. In the following chapter, I will examine the ways in which Xinxing's followers talked about Xinxing's project, defended it against outside attacks, and developed an uneasy understanding of the radical implications of his skeptical dilemma. The evolving, multifarious reception of Xinxing's writings after his death attests to the explosive potential inherent in attempts to reconceptualize scriptural authority, defend against hermeneutic skepticism, and attain interpretive certainty.

Later 'Three Levels' Texts

There are several major sources on the thought and practice of self-professed followers of Xinxing and his teachings. These include the epitaphs of his followers, the cave temple at Jinchuanwan, and several texts (some quite lengthy, and at least one nearly complete). For our purposes, we will focus on six sources or sets of sources:

1) 大乘法界無盡藏法釋 *Explanation of the Teachings on the Inexhaustible Storehouse of the Dharma-Realm of the Greater Vehicle* (Abbr.: *Inexhaustible Explanation*)
2) The Jinchuanwan 金川灣 Cave Site
3) 三階佛法密記 *Secret Records on the Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* (Abbr.: the *Secret Records*)
4) 'Account of an Unnamed Dhyāna Master' (Abbr.: the 'Account of the Dhyāna Master')
5) 窮詐辯惑論 *Treatise on Investigating Falsehoods and Resolving Delusions* (Abbr.: the *Treatise*)
6) Three texts on contemplating (*guan* 觀) buddha-nature (Abbr: *guan* 觀 texts)

Below, I will examine each of these sources and describe how they approach, present, and modify Xinxing's project. Before doing so, however, it is worth commenting on their commonalities and interrelations.

All of these sources mention Xinxing or his teachings and refer to him as an authoritative or even divine figure, hence their identification as 'Three Levels' sources. They all also seem to date to the mid-Tang; although few of these sources can be precisely dated, their textual references and usage of taboo characters place them firmly after 650 and (likely) before 750. It is

likely that most of these sources date to the height of Three Levels[374] activity and influence between the mid-seventh century and the early eighth century.[375]

Beyond their shared interest in Xinxing and their rough dating, however, the relationship between these sources is unclear. None of the textual sources has a surviving authorial attribution. None of these sources directly refers to any of the others. Some refer to authoritative figures other than Xinxing, suggesting that these figures, too, are followers of Xinxing.[376] The texts, however, seem not to share these references—apart from Xinxing himself, none mentions the monks or teachers discussed in the others. And although all of the sources refer approvingly to Xinxing and his teachings, they diverge in the way they discuss him and the teachings that they emphasize. Finally, the sources are also quite distinct in their style and structure. (The *Inexhaustible Commentary* and the *Secret Records* are commentaries on root texts by Xinxing; the *Treatise* is a polemical dialogue; the 'Account of the Dhyāna Master' is a hagiographical biography *cum* collection of sayings of a later Three Levels teacher; the *guan* 觀 texts are discursive texts of indeterminate structure; the Jinchuanwan Cave Site is not, in itself, a 'text,' though it preserves a set of inscribed texts by Xinxing in the branching list format and will be

[374] Since the 1920s, secondary scholarship has habitually referred to Xinxing, his followers, and their associated teachings and institutions as the 'Three Levels movements' (*sanjiejiao* 三階教). As I stressed in the last chapter, it is clear that Xinxing himself did not lead a unitary movement, and his thought and the composition of his followers changed over time. It is clear, too, that his later followers developed and explained his teachings in ways that Xinxing may not have expected. Moreover, these followers seem to have quarreled among themselves. It is therefore seriously misleading to use the term 'Three Levels movement' as a label for a well-organized, ideologically coherent, institutionalized movement—no such movement existed. The label, moreover, centers the taxonomy of the 'Three Levels' of sentient beings. While this taxonomy did indeed assume a crucial place in Xinxing's later writings as well as in the thought and self-description of some of his followers, it is not clear that all of Xinxing's followers applied this label to themselves or even conceived of the Three Levels taxonomy as central to Xinxing's thought. While some of Xinxing's followers are described as students of the Three Levels, they are often described as adherents of the 'universal teachings' (*pufa* 普法), disciples of Dhyāna Master (*chanshi* 禪師) Xinxing , or readers of the 'collected records' (*jilu* 集錄), with no mention of the 'Three Levels' at all. Consequently, it is also somewhat misleading to describe Xinxing's followers as, invariably, adherents of the 'Three Levels.' Just as Xinxing's own thought was multifarious, Xinxing's followers, too, had varying ideological and philosophical commitments. The quality that unifies these figures is their commitment (however nebulous or ill-defined) to the authority of Xinxing and his writings. As much as possible, therefore, I refer to such figures as 'Xinxing's followers,' rather than adherents of the 'Three Levels.' A collective term that foregrounds this shared devotion to Xinxing and therefore better captures the nature of Xinxing's followers would be 'Xinxing-ite;' the loose movement surrounding his life and teachings would better be called 'Xinxing-ism' or 'the Xinxing movement.' Unfortunately, I feel constrained to refer to them, instead, by the entrenched label of 'Three Levels' or 'Three Levels movement.' Obviously, constructions like 'Xinxing-ite' make for extremely unpleasant English expressions. Moreover, 'Three Levels' and 'Three Levels movement' have become firmly embedded in modern historiography, and adopting a new label would be needlessly confusing. Consequently, when I must refer to Xinxing's followers collectively, I will use the term 'Three Levels.' The reader should be aware, however, that I endorse neither the idea of a unitary movement nor the idea that Xinxing's followers were unified by a commitment to the 'Three Levels' taxonomy. The 'Three Levels movement' appears to have been a fractious network rather than a well-defined institution (see below), and some of Xinxing's followers seem to have been intensely interested in Xinxing's broader project while being completely uninterested in the Three Levels taxonomy.

[375] Daoxuan, in his *Datang neidian lu* 大唐內典錄, records that, although Xinxing's texts were suppressed and forbidden to circulate in 600, "their followers spread widely, and the whole world esteems them" (然其屬流廣，海陸高之。T.2149.55.278a9.)

[376] The *Secret Records* approvingly cites a certain 'Dharma Master Nian' (諗法師), one of the *guan* 觀 texts cites the verbal teachings of a certain Honorable Pei 裴公, and the 'Account of the Dhyāna Master' refers to five unnamed people from the capital who studied the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* in the 'five assemblies,' as well as one Daoshu 道樹.

read, for our purposes, as a sort of textual object.) Thus, although it is possible that these sources were produced by a unified, coherent movement of Xinxing's followers, it seems more likely that they were produced by a loose network of devotees. There is strong evidence that this network was riven by internal divisions and factional disputes.[377] Some clusters of followers may have been almost entirely cut off from the others—indeed, it is possible that certain religious entrepreneurs with no institutional or personal affiliation to Xinxing or his close disciples invented their own 'Three Levels' identity from whole cloth, siphoning prestige and influence from the well-known Dhyāna Master by adopting the practices, affectations, and tropes with which he was associated.[378] If the 'Three Levels movement' after Xinxing's death was, in fact, a fractious network instead of a well-organized institution, this would account for the differences in style, structure, and emphasis that we find in the post-Xinxing 'Three Levels' texts. In the following discussion, I assume (given the absence of evidence to the contrary) that these sources were in fact produced by groups or individuals who shared only a devotion to Xinxing's teachings; I assume that they were otherwise unaffiliated or even hostile to one another.

I will now survey these sources and describe how they each relate to Xinxing's writings and broader project. I will focus particularly on how they use scripture, how they consider issues of error, maligning, and discrimination, and to what extent they ascribe authority to Xinxing himself.

1) *Inexhaustible Explanation*

The *Inexhaustible Explanation* presents itself as a commentary on an early text by Xinxing, the *Teachings on the Inexhaustible Storehouse of the Mahāyāna* (大乘無盡藏法; we encountered this text in the previous chapter, where it constitutes text 6, the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*). As we have seen, Xinxing's root text is a highly structured branching list text that attempts to present and justify a core set of practices that Xinxing refers to as 'inexhaustible storehouse' practices. These sixteen practices include making offerings to the Three Jewels, making offerings of particular donations, 'cultivating good,' and 'cutting off evil.' The *Inexhaustible Explanation* does not share the idiosyncratic structure of Xinxing's mature texts. Although the complete *Inexhaustible Explanation* is not extant, it appears to be structured as a traditional medieval Chinese Buddhist commentarial text; the three sections for which headings survive are "Second: Analyzing the Name" (第二辨名), "Third: Establishing the Meaning" (第三立義), and "Fourth: Explaining the Text" (第四釋文).[379] The first section, of which only the

[377] For a theory of the disputes following Xinxing's death, see Yang 2017.

[378] The 'Account of the Dhyāna Master' is often read as an account of 'Three Levels' practice. As we shall see, however, it is more likely that this interesting text is a hagiography of an energetic religious entrepreneur who amalgamated the affectations of a Three Levels acolyte with a grab-bag of other religious tropes and Buddhist practices, all in order to bolster his own idiosyncratic program of Buddhist practice. This hagiography contains many clues that the *dhyāna* master in question had a non-existent or even hostile relationship with other devotees of Xinxing.

[379] It is likely that this fourth section is the final section; it is common for medieval Buddhist commentaries to conclude with a section that is tied directly to the root text (see, among many examples, the final section in Fazang's commentary on the *Huayan jing*, the *Record of Probing the Abstruse [in Relation to] the Huayan jing*: "Ten, Explanation that Follows Along With the Text" 十隨文解釋 [T.1733.35.107b26]). The *Secret Records*, another Three Levels commentarial text, also concludes with a section called "Explaining the Text" (釋文) and is analogous in form and intent to this final fourth section of the *Inexhaustible Commentary*.

end is extant, appears to center on the "necessity" of or motivation behind[380] engaging in the practice of the inexhaustible storehouse; we might surmise that this first section would have been called something like "Establishing the Teaching" (起教) or "Giving Rise to the Intention" (發心). The *Inexhaustible Storehouse* also appears to be interested primarily in the practice of 'giving' (*shi* 施), particularly the act of making donations at the Huadu Temple (化度寺) in Chang'an. While giving is central to Xinxing's original set of sixteen inexhaustible storehouse practices, it is not the only focus of those practices. Moreover, Xinxing's *Inexhaustible Storehouse* was written before Xinxing moved to Chang'an and took up residence in the Huadu Temple; naturally, it makes no reference to this temple or the significance of making donations there. Thus, the *Inexhaustible Commentary* represents a significant renovation of Xinxing's original *Inexhaustible Storehouse*. (As we shall see, part of that renovation entails a complete reconceptualization of the status of Xinxing himself.)

For the purpose of understanding the evolving reception of Xinxing's broader project, the *Inexhaustible Explanation* has several salient features. First, the commentary is based on one of Xinxing's early texts; in those early texts, Xinxing does not utilize his later taxonomy of the Three Levels. The *Inexhaustible Explanation* likewise makes no mention of this taxonomy.[381] As the *Inexhaustible Explanation* clearly postdates Xinxing's mature work, this suggests that at least some of Xinxing's later followers were loath to introduce Xinxing's later taxonomy into their understanding of his earlier texts. (It may be that these followers, in fact, emphasized Xinxing's earlier writings to the exclusion of later texts. It is possible that the designers of Jinchuanwan [see below] held this position.)

Second, the *Inexhaustible Explanation* freely combines its explanation of Xinxing's root text with its own quotations from scripture. The text quotes from the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament*, the *Vimamalkīrtinirdeśa Scripture*, the *Śrīmālādevī Scripture*, the *Scripture on Resolving Doubts in the Semblance Dharma*, the *Brahmajāla Scripture*, and the *Account of the Hells* (*Diyu zhuan* 地獄傳). Some of these scriptures, such as the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament*, the *Vimalakīrti*, and the *Nirvana Sutra*, are frequently quoted by Xinxing himself. Others, such as the *Account of the Hells*, are not quoted in Xinxing's extant writings. In our discussion of Xinxing's thought, I suggested that Xinxing's mature writings are meant to provide a curated and reduced corpus of 'safe' scriptural passages, beyond which the being of lower faculties need not tread. The author of the *Inexhaustible Explanation* clearly read and used texts outside of this corpus, suggesting that not all of Xinxing's followers subscribed to his final vision of a severely reduced corpus of scriptures.

Third, despite the fact that the author of the *Inexhaustible Explanation's* apparently ignores or rejects much of the substance of Xinxing's later writings, they clearly share Xinxing's preoccupation with avoiding error (*cuo* 錯) and discriminating the correct from the incorrect (*xie*

[380] The section ends with the statement, "For the sake of these two principles, it is necessary to engage in the [practice of] the inexhaustible storehouse." (為此二義故，須作无盡藏。). The final part of the section appears to preserve the second of these two principles, which is described as "how one gives rise to the mind for bodhi" (云何發菩提心。). For transcription, see Yabuki 1927, appendix, 164.

[381] It does refer to "people of the *four* levels" (四階人。 Yabuki 1927, appendix, 172) but this reference is ambiguous. 'Level' is a standard scholastic term for a category, and is used in this non-technical sense throughout Three Levels writings. Given that much of the *Inexhaustible Commentary* is non-extant, it is impossible to say that this reference to 'four levels' is not somehow related to Xinxing's canonical Three Levels taxonomy. However, given that the addition of a fourth level would constitute a major renovation of Xinxing's final taxonomy and is not attested in any other text, it is safer to assume that 'level' is here used in a non-technical sense.

zheng 邪正). Xinxing's root text seeks to preempt error by identifying sixteen 'inexhaustible' practices that are suitable for everyone. The *Inexhaustible Explanation*, however, has a different solution: we avoid error by doing as Xinxing commands and partaking of his merit. Indeed, in the *Inexhaustible Explanation*, Xinxing attains an exalted status as a 'One Vehicle Bodhisattva' (*yisheng pusa* 一乘菩薩). The text suggests that one of the reasons that the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse is karmically effective is that it links the practitioner to Xinxing. The text states:

> 第二云何發菩提心。同菩薩行作得度因緣者，謂共信行禪師及一切國界一乘菩薩，同其一行作得度因緣。但一切國界一乘菩薩於念念中有福德智慧二行滿足，成佛放光召集有緣，假使自身造罪墮三惡趣下至阿鼻地獄，由同此无盡藏一行與諸佛菩薩有緣故，蒙佛光照，拔出三塗，生人天中。[382]
> Second: how does one give rise to the intention for bodhi?[383] Sharing the practice of a bodhisattva acts as a causal condition for attaining liberation, which is to say, when one joins with the Dhyāna Master Xinxing and the One Vehicle Bodhisattvas of all the realms, sharing one practice of theirs acts as a causal condition for liberation. The One Vehicle Bodhisattvas of all the realms are replete with the two practices of merit and wisdom in each and every moment. When they accomplish buddhahood, they emit a light that summons those with a karmic connection [to them]. Even if one has committed sins and fallen into the Three Evil Destinies, or even into the *avīci* hells, because one has shared in this one practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse and has karmic connections to the buddhas and bodhisattvas, one will be graced by the light of the Buddha shining [on one], will be plucked from out of the Three [Evil] Paths, and will be born among men or gods.

Here, the *Inexhaustible Explanation* makes clear that Xinxing is a bodhisattva of great liberatory power. Such bodhisattvas are destined for buddhahood and, once they achieve it, they bestow karmic rewards on those with whom they have a karmic connection. Engaging in the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse is a means of forming such karmic connections—Xinxing, after all, was the initiator of this practice, and those who share this practice with him will partake of his merit and attract his salvific attention. Needless to say, Xinxing's own root text does not describe him as a One Vehicle Bodhisattva, nor does it ascribe the efficacy of the inexhaustible practices to a karmic link with such a bodhisattva. The *Inexhaustible Explanation* thus represents a dramatic reconceptualization of the rationale for the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse, turning this practice into a *dāna*-cult of Xinxing.

Intriguingly, although the *Inexhaustible Explanation* proposes that the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse is effective because it links the practitioner with Xinxing, it maintains Xinxing's original obsession with avoiding error in the shadow of doubt about our capacity to correctly discriminate. Xinxing's root text suggests that the inexhaustible practices preempt error by being suitable for everyone as revealed by the Buddha; the *Inexhaustible Explanation*,

[382] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 164.
[383] We only possess the latter half of the section from which this passage is drawn. Consequently, it is not entirely clear what the significance of 'giving rise to the intention for bodhi' is in this context. It appears that this act destines one for buddhahood, and one of the ways of becoming destined for buddhahood is sharing in the practice of a One Vehicle Bodhisattva like Xinxing.

however, suggests that they preempt error because they link the practitioner with Xinxing, who, unlike the ordinary person, was himself capable of discriminating (*shibie* 識別) correctly. Here, the text emphasizes that Xinxing 'understood the truth' because of his capacity for discrimination:

> 本云，第一明初起行人者，信行是。
> The root [text] says, "First: the person who initially engaged in this practice—Xinxing."
>
> 釋曰，是即一乘根機菩薩。此具三義，一解眞、二行深、三病輕。
> Explanation: [Xinxing] is a bodhisattva whose faculties [are suited for] the One Vehicle. He possessed three principles. One, he understood the truth. Two, his practice was profound. Three, his sickness was superficial.
>
> 言解眞者，謂識別相似、空有、大小、染淨、違順、邪正、善惡、六度等，乃至法界相似法亦如是。是為解眞。[384]
> When we say that he understood the truth, we mean that he could distinguish semblances, between emptiness and existence, between larger and smaller, between polluted and pure, between the contradictory and the amenable, between incorrect and correct, between the wholesome and the evil, between the Six Liberations, and he was even [capable] in this way with regard to the Dharma Realm and the Semblance Dharma (相似法). This is 'understanding the truth.'

In contrast to Xinxing, today's practitioners lack the 'three principles,' including the principle of 'understanding truth' through 'discrimination.' In the form of a dialogue, the text explains that today's practitioners partake of Xinxing's capacity for understanding the truth by partaking of the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse:

> 問，如今化作无盡藏人皆未有解眞、行深、病輕三義，若為相應。
> Question: Today, those engaged in [the practice of] the Inexhaustible Storehouse all lack the three principles (understanding of truth, the practice that is profound, and the sickness that is superficial). How will [the practice] resonate with them?
>
> 答，但施无盡藏者，悉應教云，入信行禪師法界普无盡藏。又非直共信行禪師同行，亦共一切過去未來現在十方虛空法界等一切國土一切一乘菩薩，同此一行。由信行禪師等一切菩薩正故，但同行隨喜見聞等四階人並正，如蛇入竹筒，筒直蛇亦直。然共信行禪師等同此无盡藏行故，由所同正故能同亦正，不畏邪錯。[385]
> Answer: even those who donate to the Inexhaustible Storehouse entirely accord with the teaching and enter the Universal Inexhaustible Storehouse of the Dharma Realm of the Dhyāna Master Xinxing. Moreover, they do not just join with Dhyāna Master Xinxing and share his practice, they also join with all the One

[384] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 171.
[385] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 171.

> Vehicle Bodhisattvas of all the Dharma Realms in the space of the Ten Directions in the past, future, and present and share with them this one practice. Because Dhyāna Master Xinxing and all the bodhisattvas are correct, then those people of the Four Levels who share their practice and take attendant joy in seeing or hearing [of it] are correct along with them. It is like a snake that enters a bamboo tube—the tube is straight, and the snake is straight, too. So, because one joins with Dhyāna Master Xinxing and shares in this practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse, because he with whom one shares is correct, the sharer is also correct, and one does not fear error.

In this passage, we find the *Inexhaustible Explanation* gesturing toward the fear of error that is so omnipresent in Xinxing's own writings. As we have seen, Xinxing seeks to avoid error by isolating 'universal' teachings like the practices of the Inexhaustible Storehouse. The *Inexhaustible Explanation*, however, has a much simpler solution—we avoid error by conforming to the practice of those who are secure and certainly correct, like Xinxing and other One Vehicle Bodhisattvas. The *Inexhaustible Explanation* likens this process of conformity and correction to a snake entering a bamboo tube—by virtue of the shape of the tube, the snake becomes straight. So too, by virtue of conformity to the practice of the One Vehicle Bodhisattva, does the deluded being avoid error (*xiecuo* 邪錯) and become 'correct' (*zheng* 正). The image is one that makes the practitioner an almost entirely passive recipient of external salvific influence. That external influence is Xinxing's. The text again stresses this point when it explains why the Huadu Temple is the appropriate place for practice:

> 要在京城化度寺大處，由人是處當，具十六種事，方可辨。不畏邪錯，以同禪師相續眞故。[386]
> One must be at this Great Place, the Huadu Temple in the capital. Because the person is correct and the place apt, one is possessed of the sixteen kinds of things and can finally discern (*bian* 辨) [correctly]. One does not fear error, for one shares in the continuous truth of the Dhyāna Master.

Again, the *Inexhaustible Explanation* presents the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse as a solution to the dilemma originally posed by Xinxing—how does a degraded being avoid error in the absence of discriminative ability? Again, the *Inexhaustible Explanation* maintains the form of Xinxing's solution (practice a core set of infallible teachings, like the Inexhaustible Storehouse) but completely modifies the spirit behind that solution. Xinxing justified his core set of teachings by reference to the Buddha's intent as preserved in scripture. The *Inexhaustible Explanation* justifies these teachings by reference to *Xinxing himself*. Access to truth, and avoidance of error, thus becomes a gift bestowed by and through Xinxing ("One does not fear error, for one shares in the continuous truth of the Dhyāna Master").

When we consider the *Inexhaustible Explanation* in relation to Xinxing's project, we find that it promotes and maintains an early iteration of that project, namely, Xinxing's sixteen practices of the Inexhaustible Storehouse. However, the text justifies those practices by reference to a structure of authority much different from Xinxing's own. For the *Inexhaustible Explanation*, the practice of the Inexhaustible Storehouse works because it was instituted by

[386] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 173.

Xinxing; Xinxing, therefore, is the real conduit to liberation, not the practices themselves. At the same time, the *Inexhaustible Explanation* seems to ignore or reject Xinxing's later, rigid understanding of the authority and danger of scripture. As we have seen, the text freely quotes from the received scriptural corpus, including texts other than those quoted and selected by Xinxing. It may be that the *Inexhaustible Explanation* is unaware of or rejects Xinxing's later work and its implications for reading and using scripture. Regardless, the text's understanding of proper sources of authority and justification evinces a pattern that will reappear in other later Three Levels texts: the authority of the received scriptures is deemphasized in favor of the authority of Xinxing himself. This shift in emphasis seems to remove some of the rigid prohibitions on scriptural use and interpretation that Xinxing himself championed. For the author of the *Inexhaustible Explanation*, after all, partaking in Xinxing's practice means partaking of his correct discernment. Consequently, the *Inexhaustible Explanation* "does not fear error" (不畏邪錯).

2) Jinchuanwan 金川灣 Cave Site

The Jinchuanwan Cave Site is a lone cave shrine at the foot of Mount Zhong 仲山 in Chunhua County 淳化縣, Shaanxi Province. Located around one hundred kilometers northwest of the site of the Tang capital, Chang'an, the site was constructed under the reign of the Tang emperor Gaozong 高宗, sometime between 662–670. The large cave (roughly seven meters deep, seven meters high, and ten meters wide) has a highly unusual design: the east and west walls are devoid of images or ornament, and are instead covered with inscribed texts. The south wall, facing the (now collapsed) north entranceway, features a large buddha image, carved nimbus, and several small buddha images set into the wall. The cave would have required considerable resources to construct; colophons for some of the texts mention low-ranking Tang officials, confirming the participation of metropolitan elites and suggesting that the construction may have received imperial support.[387]

The inscribed texts, which feature prominently in the design of the cave, are a mix of sutraic texts and texts by Xinxing. There are four texts inscribed on the east wall of the cave, and four on the west wall. The texts on the east wall are the 1) *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*, 2) *Bodhi for the Mundane and Transmundane*, 3) *Excerpts from the Moon-store Section*, and the 4) *Great Expansive Sutra of the Ten Wheels* (T.410). The texts on the west wall are the 5) *Scripture on the Buddha-Names in Seven Tiers*, the 6) *Diamond Sutra* (T.235), the 7) *Scripture on the Thus-Come One Teaching King Prasenajit* (T.515), and the 8) *Lotus Sutra* (T.262).[388] Of these texts, the first, second, third, and fifth were compiled by Xinxing and are marked as such. The fourth and eighth (the *Ten Wheels* and the *Lotus Sutra*) are texts central to Xinxing's teachings; they are cited throughout Xinxing's corpus and play a foundational role in his mature project. The sixth and seventh texts are not prominently featured in Xinxing's writings. We should note that texts by Xinxing appear on both of the inscribed cave walls.

Because of the presence of texts by Xinxing, the Jinchuanwan cave has been called a 'Three Levels' site. It is important to note, however, that none of the texts by Xinxing at Jinchuanwan mention the 'Three Levels' taxonomy. (*Bodhi Matched to Faculties* employs a taxonomy of two classes of people: the bodhisattva of higher faculties and the bodhisattva of

[387] Zhang Zong 2020, 24–26.
[388] Zhang Zong 2020, 37–38.

lower faculties. *Bodhi for the Mundane and Transmundane* uses a taxonomy of two levels, corresponding to those aiming for mundane rewards [i.e., liberation] and those aiming for transmundane rewards [i.e., karmic rewards and advantageous rebirth].) We should be cautious, therefore, in labelling the site a 'Three Levels' shrine. It is clear, however, that the cave is meant to aggrandize Xinxing's teachings and was likely designed and financed by his devotees.

The individual texts by Xinxing inscribed at Jinchuanwan are invaluable for helping us understand Xinxing's teachings and the evolution of his thought. (We have already discussed one of those texts, *Bodhi Matched to Faculties*, at some length in the previous chapter. As I and other scholars have argued elsewhere, these texts likely predate Xinxing's mature texts.[389] As I argue in the previous chapter, they also likely postdate his early work, like the *Inexhaustible Storehouse*. The texts at Jinchuanwan therefore attest to a middle formulation of Xinxing's project.) The Jinchuanwan site as a whole, however, constitutes a witness to a particular interpretation, at a particular moment in time, of Xinxing's project on the part of some of his followers. The layout of the site, as well as the selection of texts, allow us to draw some inferences about how the Jinchuanwan group used and modified Xinxing's teachings.

First, it is intriguing that the cave features Xinxing's middle texts, rather than his later work. Much like the *Inexhaustible Explanation*, the Jinchuanwan program attests to a group of Xinxing's followers who focused on a particular subset of Xinxing's writings.

Second, the Jinchuanwan program is again similar to the *Inexhaustible Explanation* insofar as it mixes Xinxing's writings with received scripture, including scriptures that Xinxing did not emphasize (like the *Diamond Sutra*) or would not have known about (the *Scripture on the Thus-Come One Teaching King Prasenajit* was translated by Xuanzang in 649, well after Xinxing's death.)[390] Again, we find that the designers of Jinchuanwan did not feel completely bound to restrict themselves to Xinxing's selections and passages. Nevertheless, it is striking that the cave's program places Xinxing's texts alongside sutraic material. Although there are several examples of inscriptions of sutras in stone in Northern China during the sixth century, I know of no other site where the works of a Chinese monk are placed alongside scripture.[391] Xinxing's texts appear on both walls—that is, his texts and sutraic material are not segregated. This program suggests that, for the designers of Jinchuanwan, Xinxing's writings are on par with the Buddha's.

3) 三階佛法密記 *Secret Records on the Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* (Abbr.: the *Secret Records*)

The *Secret Records* is a commentary on the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*, likely composed sometime after 650.[392] The Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* is one of Xinxing's last texts. Along with the Japanese *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* and the *Practice Matched to Faculties*, it represents Xinxing's final formulation of his solution to the dilemma of scripture. In self-referential, tortured prose, the text purports to show that Buddhist scripture stratifies itself according to a taxonomy of Three Levels of beings. The *Secret Records* uses a traditional Chinese Buddhist commentarial format to give an overview of

[389] See Brandstadt 2020.
[390] Wenzel 2023, 27.
[391] There is the example of the Jingtai 靜泰 catalogue carved, partially, at Wofoyuan. The significance of that carving, however, is extremely difficult to discern. See Zacchetti 2016.
[392] Cf. Nishimoto 1998, 227, 258.

this idiosyncratic root text; along the way, it clarifies obscure parts of the text, through both line-by-line commentary and interludes of question-and-answer discussion. The *Secret Records* is a crucial philological source for its root text, as it contains an outline of the complete Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*. (Since parts of the root text are no longer extant, the *Secret Records* provides the only insight into the structure of that text as a whole.) More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, the *Secret Records* also bears witness to the later reception of Xinxing's mature work; in fact, no other extant post-Xinxing text engages with his mature work in such a substantive way. The *Secret Records* demonstrates that at least some of Xinxing's followers read and understood his last writings. The text evinces a deep understanding of Xinxing's attitudes toward scripture; it recognizes that Xinxing's final texts amount to compilations of scriptural passages and citations, and it is acutely sensitive to the interpretive apparatus by which he selected those passages. However, like all of the sources we survey in this chapter, the *Secret Records* also justifies Xinxing's teachings in part by ascribing him an exalted spiritual status. The commentary is, therefore, a useful window into the evolving reception of Xinxing's mature work, and testifies to a widespread awareness (even among Xinxing's most sympathetic and well-attuned readers) that a defense of that work required, in part, a deification of Xinxing.

The *Secret Records* maintains Xinxing's position (which he emphasizes again and again in the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*) that degraded beings are prone to maligning the Dharma. The *Secret Records* elegantly expresses the way in which the sin of maligning emerges from mental disorder. It writes:

> 倒雖塵沙，略說唯是其心，謂內心體迷取着顛倒，倒心發語，即成誹謗起，自无始迄今不絕，故名為常无一正念，故名唯。[393]
> Though the inversions are [as numerous as] dust and sand, what we discuss, in brief, are strictly [the inversions] of one's mind.[394] That is to say, the essential confusion (體迷) internal to the mind grasps and attaches to the inversions; the inverted mind emits speech, i.e., it gives rise to maligning. From beginningless time until now, [this process] has not ceased, so we say that [degraded beings] have never had a single correct thought, and we call them 'solely [inverted].'

As we have noted repeatedly, Xinxing's concept of maligning is the engine that powers his entire project, necessitating the isolation of universal teachings that match any faculty, including degraded beings of the third level. The *Secret Records,* naturally, makes note of this feature of Xinxing's texts, stating:

> 第三子段明第三階人出世行，於中明第三階人正合學普真普正八種佛法兼觀住持三寶，是有緣根機當根破病。[395]
> The third subsection [of the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*] explains the transmundane practices of the people of the third level. Therein it explains, that people of the third level are properly fit (正合) to study the eight teachings of the

[393] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 84.
[394] The passage is drawn from a larger discussion of 'acknowledging evil;' according to the *Secret Records,* the primary targets of 'acknowledging evil' are the mental inversions. ("In terms of what is essential, one studies the acknowledgment of the inversions of one's mind." 就體，學認其心顛倒。)
[395] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 77.

> buddha that are universally true and universally correct, along with the contemplation and maintenance of the Three Jewels. This is an antidote (破病) that matches the faculties of those with karmic connections to this [type of] faculty.

Elsewhere, the text notes that the purpose of an essential part of the universal teachings—'acknowledging evil'—is to stop maligning ("It is in order to stop maligning" 止誹謗故).[396] It is clear, therefore, that the author of the *Secret Records* understands Xinxing's project as an attempt to isolate universal teachings and thereby avoid maligning. The author is also clear that this project ultimately centers on citation, extraction, and rearrangement of scriptural text. The *Secret Records* contains a question-and-answer passage that is very frank in admitting that the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* amounts to a collection of excerpts. The question with which this passage begins also explicitly raises the issue of how Xinxing's scriptural excerpts relate to scripture proper. The passage reads:

> 問，抄出三階佛法，為經中有故抄出，為无故抄出。若爾何失。若經已有，何須抄出。若經中无，何得抄出。[397]
> Question: When [the root text] excerpts the buddha-dharma of the Three Levels, is it excerpted because it is in the scriptures, or is it excerpted because it is not? How can you get out of this [dilemma]? If it's in the scriptures, why is it necessary to excerpt it? If it is not in the scriptures, why is it *permissible* to excerpt it?

We have noted repeatedly that Xinxing's critics were uneasy with his treatment of scripture. The *Secret Records* confronts this criticism head on. It admits that Xinxing's text consists of excerpts from scripture, but insists that Xinxing's treatment of scripture is not only permissible but necessary. In answer to the question above, it states:

> 答，有同而異。同故得抄出，異故須抄出。異有三義。[398]
> Answer: There are 'commonalities' and 'differences.' Because of the commonalities, we it is permissible to excerpt [the buddha-dharma of the Three Levels]. Because of the differences, it is necessary to excerpt them. There are three main facets with regard to 'differences.'

The *Secret Records*' defense of Xinxing's scriptural practices leads into an explanation of how Xinxing (and the commentator) understand the ways in which the Buddha speaks in scripture. It also leads the commentator to explain how chains of inferences, grounded in discrete scriptural passages, allow Xinxing to reduce the welter of contradictory terms and labels in scripture to a set of stable, trans-scriptural categories—the Three Levels taxonomy. The commentator's answer to his imagined interlocutor suggests that construction-by-excerpt is permissible because of 'commonalities' in scripture; he insists it is necessary because of 'differences.' As we shall see, by 'commonalities' and 'differences,' the commentator means that different passages of scripture

[396] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 84.
[397] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 79.
[398] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 79.

use different words to refer to the same category of being or teaching—i.e., different labels for beings should in fact be understood as variant terms for, say, Third Level beings. Moreover, the fact that third level beings have different interests and needs than the original audience of the Buddha's sermons in turn require Xinxing to rearrange scriptural passages. Thus, through Xinxing's intervention, surface differences yield to a deeper commonality. The *Secret Records* outlines three main facets of 'difference' present in scripture. It lists these as:

> 一者，所為人不同。二者，所說法不同。三者，為人說法廣略兼正不同。[399]
> One: a difference in the person for whom [the text] is intended. Two: a difference in the teaching preached. Three: the difference laying in the fact that the dharma is preached for people in detail and in brief, and both [forms] are correct.

The commentator identifies three 'differences' that justify Xinxing's rearrangement of scripture. The first is a difference in their intended audience; the second is the teaching itself; the third is the degree of detail with which the teaching is explained. The commentator places these three differences in relation to the Three Levels taxonomy that (both Xinxing and the commentator insist) lies barely concealed beneath the surface of scripture. The *Secret Records* states:

> 佛為第一第二階上根人說出世義，微細、淺近、真身、應身、一乘、三乘、大乘、小乘、普、別俱說，為第三階位上邪見成就不可轉人說世間義，不為說真實法出世義。今正為第三階位前人說出世義，兼為第一第二階下根人同說普真普正佛法。
> [Differences in the people for whom the teaching is intended, and differences in the teaching preached.] For the people of the superior faculties in the first and second levels, the Buddha preached the transmundane principles. He preached both the subtle and the superficial, the true body and the response body, the One Vehicle and the Three Vehicles, the Greater Vehicles and the Lesser Vehicle, the universal and the particular. For the people in the rank of the third level—provisioned with misconceptions and impossible to transform—for these he did not preach the transmundane principles of the True Dharma. Now, it is correct to preach the transmundane principles for the people in the ranks of the third level, and also to preach the same buddha-dharma that is universally true and universally correct to the people of lower faculties in the first and second levels.

> 又廣略不同。佛廣說第一第二階，略說第三階。今廣說第三階，略說第一第二階故，須別為第三階人抄略，為廣說。[400]
> Moreover, the difference of 'detailed' and 'brief.' The Buddha preached the first and second levels in detail, but preached the third level [only] in brief. Now, we preach the third level in detail and we preach the first and second levels in brief, so it is necessary, for the sake of the people of the third level, to separately excerpt what was abbreviated and to preach it for them in detail.

[399] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 79.
[400] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 79–80.

The commentator's answer consistently juxtaposes the current moment with the moment when the Buddha originally preached, and notes that these moments are different along all three axes: intended audience, teaching conveyed, and degree of detail. In the Buddha's time, his teachings were directed toward beings of great spiritual acuity, they were not meant to convey the 'transmundane principle' to beings of lower acuity, and they only touch on matters pertaining to the third level 'in brief.' However, 'now' (今) we wish to explain in detail what was before only explained in brief. It is necessary, therefore, to extract from scripture these 'brief' explanations and weave them into something more detailed.

In defending Xinxing's practice of excerpting scripture, the *Secret Records* walks a fine line. On the one hand, it is obvious that Xinxing's texts are at least formally distinct from scripture, and possibly distinct in their content as well. On the other hand, Xinxing is fastidious in explicitly linking his teachings to scriptural passages—when possible, he presents the words of scripture itself. The *Secret Records* vacillates between insisting that Xinxing teaches nothing not already present in scripture and admitting that his excerpts and rearrangements have added something. In the passage above, the *Secret Records* admits that there are differences between the Buddha's time and today, and these differences justify Xinxing's elaboration of the merely implicit Three Levels taxonomy. Immediately following this passage, however, the commentary insists that the Three Levels taxonomy has already been 'completely' discussed in two scriptures: the *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament*. One of these scriptures explains the taxonomy to beings of the third level, while the other explains it to beings of the first level. It writes:

> 普真普正出世義依諸甚深大乘經者，謂大般涅槃經、大方廣佛華嚴經。此明所依甚深大乘大部廣教究竟了義，顯非己見、人語、妄語。此兩部經俱具足明三階佛法。涅槃經中對三階根說三階法，華嚴經中對第一階人說三階法。[401]
>
> "The universally true and universally correct transmundane principle relies on the deeply profound scriptures of the Greater Vehicle,"[402] meaning the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa*, and the *Great Expansive Scripture of the Flower Ornament of the Buddhas*. This means that what is relied upon—the final, complete meaning of the detailed teaching of the greater works of the deeply profound Greater Vehicle—clearly refutes conceptions of self, human speech, and deluded speech. These two scriptures fully discuss the buddha-dharma of the three levels. The *Scripture of the* [*Pari*]*nirvāṇa* discusses the dharma of the three levels for those with the faculties [suited to] the third[403] levels. The *Flower-Ornament Scripture* explains the dharma of the three levels in terms of the people of the first level.

The *Secret Records* goes on to explain that certain metaphors in the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament* and the *Nirvana Sutra* refer to the Three Levels. In the *Nirvana Sutra*, we find a passage that explains the Buddha's expedient teachings by likening his intended audience to three sons: one son who is faithful and of keen faculties, one who is faithless but of keen

[401] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 80.
[402] This is likely a quotation from a portion of the root text that is no longer extant.
[403] Reading 第三 for 三.

faculties, and one who is faithless and of dull faculties. Just as the parents deal with these sons differently, the Buddha modulates his teaching depending on whether the intended audience is composed of bodhisattvas, *śrāvakas*, or *icchantikas*.[404] For Xinxing and the *Secret Records*, this metaphor, among others in the *Nirvana Sutra*, represents a scriptural basis for the Three Levels taxonomy; the *Nirvana Sutra* thus provides a warrant for Xinxing's practice of excerption. The commentary remarks:

> 又如下文正出經中具說三階處，以為所依。喻如三子法說，於十二部經內微妙之義為諸菩薩說，淺近之義為聲聞說，世間之義為一闡提五逆罪說……驗之所以知。[405]
>
> Furthermore, the passages (處) in the following text, which are rightly extracted (正出) from scripture, all discuss the Three Levels, and we use them as [scriptural] bases (所依). In the teaching of the Metaphor of the Three Sons, [the Buddha] says that the subtle meaning in the twelve-fold scriptures are preached for the bodhisattvas, the superficial meaning is preached for the *śrāvakas*, and the worldly meaning is preached for the *icchantikas* and those [burdened with] the sin of the Five Betrayals…Our understanding is based on this evidence.

Because Xinxing and his commentator believe that '*icchantika*' is functionally a synonym for 'beings of the third level,' the Buddha's comments in the Metaphor of the Three Sons in the *Nirvana Sutra* authorize Xinxing to read any teaching in any scripture that is directed toward *icchantikas*, or marked as 'worldly,' as directed, in fact, at beings of the third level. According to the *Secret Records*, a metaphor in the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament* also provides such warrant. The commentary writes:

> 華嚴經中對第一階人說真身諸佛應機度一切眾生三階法盡，一部廣說。正出所依經文，即取第廿九卷如來性起品。[406]
>
> In the *Scripture of the Flower-Ornament*, it explains to the people of the first level, exhaustively (盡), the teaching on the Three Levels (三階法) by which the Buddhas of the True Body respond to capacities to liberate all beings. When we rightly extract (正出) the scriptural text we rely upon, we affirm (取) the 'Chapter on the Arising of the Nature of the Thus-Come One' in the twenty-ninth fascicle.

The *Secret Records* proceeds to give the relevant passage from the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament*:

> 譬如日出先照一切諸大山王，次照一切大山，次照金剛寶山，然後普照一切大地。如來亦復如是，成就无邊智慧日輪，常放无量智慧光明。先照菩薩摩訶薩等諸大山王，次照緣覺，次照聲聞，次照決定善根眾生，隨應受化，然後悉照一切眾生乃至邪定，為作未來饒益因緣。[407]

[404] On this passage and its importance for the Three Levels, see Nishimoto 1998, 255–256. The passage appears in the *Nirvana Sutra* at T.374.12.560b19–c4 and T.375.12.806c15–807a1.
[405] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 82.
[406] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 83.
[407] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 83. Root text at T.278.9.616b14–23.

> "It is like, by analogy, when the sun comes up, it initially shines on the great king-mountains. Next, it shines on the great mountains. Then, it shines on the adamantine mountains. Then, it shines uniformly on the whole earth. The Thus-Come One is just the same. The sun which is his accomplished, limitless wisdom always dispenses the light of unreckonable wisdom. Initially, it shines on the great king-mountains, such as the bodhisattva-*mahāsattvas*. Next, it shines on the *pratyekabuddhas*. Next, it shines on the *śrāvakas*. Next, it shines on beings with definite good roots, dispensing transformation as convenient. Then, it shines on all the beings, even those who are definitely incorrect, in order to lay down causal conditions for benefit yet-to-come."

The *Secret Records* immediately follows this quoted metaphor with the following comment:

> 經文雖无三字，由與涅槃經喻說法說義同无別，驗之所以得知。(一切同故，一部中具說三階故，抄出唯依兩部甚深大乘經。有同有異故，非一處具說故，引證通一切經律論。)[408]
> Though the scriptural text [of the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament*] lacks the word 'three,' the meaning it expresses (說義) is identical and without distinction (同无別) from the teaching in the metaphors [on the Three Sons, Three Fields, etc.] in the *Nirvana Sutra*. Our understanding is based on this evidence. (Because they are entirely identical, and because the entire text discusses the Three Levels, our excerpting and extracting (抄出) is authorized only (唯依) by these two deeply profound scriptures of the Greater Vehicle. Because they have both commonalities and differences, and because they do not discuss [the Three Levels] as a single unit, we cite from all the scriptures, codes, and treatises as confirmation.)

Thus, the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament*, like the *Nirvana Sutra*, contains a metaphor that implies the Three Levels taxonomy. The scriptures themselves represent articulations of this taxonomy and explanations of its liberatory potential, one directed at first level beings and the other directed at third level beings. The two scriptures' metaphors, in combination with the fact that the 'entire work' (一部) of each of the two scriptures discusses the three levels, provides justification for Xinxing's practice of excerpting passages from other scriptures. (Note that the two scriptures provide the basis for excerpting [抄出唯依兩部甚深大乘經]; other scriptures, in contrast, are the raw material that is excerpted and cited [引證].) Thus, according to the *Secret Records*, Xinxing is justified in extracting and rearranging scriptural passages. Following this passage, the *Secret Records* triumphantly declares that Xinxing has used scripture to make manifest the Buddha's implicit taxonomy of beings, revealing the divisions between beings when they were previously reckoned as one. It writes:

> 第三明教所詮義者，即引一切經律論證一切眾生乃至俱有三階根機不同所由義是。前就法立名，即是依經以立教。此就義立名，即是依義而引文。依經

[408] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 83. The parentheses here denote a comment in half-size characters in the manuscript.

> 以立教是一部之惣名，依義而引是一卷之別目。未立三階已前，眾生一揆。既立三階已後，根性區分。於一切佛法乃至一々法即是。[409]
> Third: the principle expounded by the teaching, which is the principle, certified (證) by citations of all the scriptures, codes, and treatises (引一切經律論), that undergirds (所由) the differences among all beings, even those possessed of the faculties for the Three Levels. Formerly, we established the categories (名) in relation to teachings, i.e., we established the teaching on the basis of scripture (依經以立教). Here, we establish categories (名) in relation to this principle, i.e., we cite text on the basis of this principle. [The category established] by establishing the teaching on the basis of scripture is the overarching category/name of the whole piece [i.e., the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*]. [The categories established] by citing [text] on the basis of the principle are the separate categories in single fascicles [of the overarching text]. Before establishing the 'Three Levels,' beings are reckoned as singular. After having established the Three Levels, faculty and nature are distinguished. [This] is the case in the whole buddha-dharma and even in each and every [individual] teaching.

Once this taxonomy is revealed (i.e., once the 'principle' [義] is 'expounded' [詮]), Xinxing can use the taxonomy itself to justify excerpting scriptural text (henceforth, "we cite text on the basis of this principle" 依義而引文). As we saw in our examination of Xinxing's thought, Xinxing felt that scriptural passages should be extracted and combined according to intratextual clues that connect them to the beings of the Three Levels. These clues included the Buddha's descriptions of the times in which a particular practice would be efficacious, or to the composition of the Buddha's audience at the moment he preaches a scripture. The *Secret Records* clearly understands the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* as constructed, in part, by reference to such clues. For example, certain scriptures are applicable to both laypeople and the ordained because they present themselves as preached in the presence of both kinds of people, or because they declare that their teachings are effective for both kinds. The commentary writes:

> 自道俗者依三部經。一依法華經，不輕菩薩起一乘教法白四眾故。二依十輪經，佛起三乘教法，俗人為首，道俗並說，通為剎利沙門說故。三依像法決疑經，具說道俗名字，經云未來世中一切道俗故。[410]
> Whether lay or religious, one relies on three scriptures. One: one relies on the *Lotus Sutra*, because [when] Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging establishes the teaching of the One Vehicle, he addresses the Four Assemblies [i.e., an audience of both monks and laypeople]. Two: one relies on the *Scripture of the Ten Wheels*, because [when] the Buddha establishes the Teaching of the Three Vehicles, laypeople are at the head [of the assembly], he discusses both monks and laypeople, and it is preached for both *kśatriya* and *śrāmaṇa*. Three: one relies on the *Scripture on Resolving Doubts in the Semblance Dharma*, because it mentions both terms, 'lay' and 'religious.' The scripture says, "All the lay and religious in the ages yet to come."

[409] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 83.
[410] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 79.

The *Secret Records* is similarly attuned to Xinxing's sensitivity to the time and place that teachings are given:

> 處別有二。
> 第一階處，即一乘世界，亦名淨土蓮華藏世界，常唯純有諸佛菩薩无聲聞緣覺處是。
> 第二第三階處同，即三乘世界亦名五濁諸惡世界、娑婆世界、盲闇世間三界火宅、一切眾生起於斷常即是空見有見眾生、亦名三乘眾生十惡世界是。[411]
>
> There are two distinctions of place.
>
> The place of the first level is the world-system of the One Vehicle, also known as the Pure Land, a *padmagarbha* world-system, a place where there are only, exclusively, and purely buddhas, bodhisattvas, *śrāvakas*, and *pratyekabuddhas*.
>
> The place of the second and third levels is the same; it is the world-system of the Three Vehicles, also known as the evil world system of the Five Impurities, the Sahā World-System, the Burning House of the Three Realms in the world of darkness, the world system of the Ten Evils of the beings who all give rise to nihilism and eternalism, i.e., the beings who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence, which is to say the beings of the Three Vehicles.

> 於惡處中時別有三。
> 佛在世佛自住持佛法，位判是第一階時。
> 佛滅度後一千五百年已前，由有聖人及利根正見成就凡夫住持佛法，位判當第二階時。
> 從佛滅度一千五百年已後，利根凡夫戒定惠別解別行皆悉邪盡，當第三階時。
>
> In evil places, there are three distinctions of time.
>
> When the Buddha is present in the world and the Buddha himself maintains the buddha-dharma, it is classified as the time of the First Level.
>
> The fifteen-hundred year period after the Buddha's passing into liberation is classified as the time of the second level, because the sages and the worldlings of keen faculties, provisioned with correct conceptions, maintain the buddha-dharma.
>
> After the fifteen-hundred year period following the Buddha's passing into liberation, for the worldlings of keen faculties, the precepts, calming, wisdom, the understanding of the particular, and the practice of the particular all go wrong, completely. This corresponds to the time of the third level.

Thus, the *Secret Records* clearly describes many facets of Xinxing's project. It explains that Xinxing's *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* is, at base, a compilation of scriptural extracts; that these extracts are compiled according to intratextual clues that allow them to fit into the Three Levels taxonomy; and it suggests that the taxonomy itself emerges from scripture. At

[411] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 75.

points, it seems to also articulate Xinxing's conviction that scripture is an almost numinous means of connecting with the Buddha, a sort of portal through which we come to know the Buddha's knowing us. The commentary emphasizes this facet of scripture when it discusses the rationale for the practice of 'acknowledging evil.' The *Secret Records* insists that we acknowledge evil because the Buddha already knew us when he preached his sermons, and *he tells us we are evil through scripture*. It writes:

> 三有三句明認惡所由。一由畏罪徹到、二由信用佛語、三由解法檢驗。
> 畏罪徹到者，謂畏未來最大多重惡果。
> 信用佛語者，謂即能仰學先聖知己。……
> 解法檢驗者，謂現見末法第三階人旃陀羅等不畏後世定墮地獄與經符同。驗經中說，今時怕罪決得出世，故須認惡。亦驗知有第一階根機。[412]
>
> Three: there are three items explaining the reasons for 'recognizing evil.' One, out of thoroughly fearing evil. Two, out of having faith in and putting to use the words of the Buddha. Three, out of understanding the teaching and matching the evidence.
>
> 'Thoroughly fearing evil' means fearing future evil karmic results that are greatest, most numerous, and gravest.
>
> 'Having faith in and putting to use the words of the Buddha' means revering and studying the former sages' knowledge of you (先聖知己)…
>
> 'Understanding the teaching and matching the evidence' means one sees, now, in the Declining Dharma, that the *caṇḍālas*, the people of the third level, do not fear that in a future age they will certainly fall into hell, and that [this fact] tallies with scripture (與經符同). Check what it says in scripture—in the present time, if one fears sin, one will certainly attain transcendence. Thus, one must recognize evil. One would also know the faculties for the first level by [similar] evidence.

In the previous chapter, we examined passages in Xinxing's writings in which he emphasizes that the Buddha foresaw our situation and uses scripture to bridge the gap of centuries and teach us expediently in the here and now; if only we read scriptural text with the proper technique, we can access the Buddha's *upāya*. The *Secret Records* attests that at least some of Xinxing's epigones shared his near-ecstatic sense that scripture allows for a real communion with the Buddha—it allows you to know the Buddha knowing you. The commentary clearly holds out the possibility that the *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* is a self-unfolding of scripture's implicit form, much as Xinxing himself seemed to understand these texts.

Although the *Secret Records* gestures toward Xinxing's understanding that his texts are conduits for the agency of the Buddha himself, the commentary clearly struggles to explain the highly ambiguous relationship between Xinxing's writings and basal scripture. Does Xinxing add nothing, or add everything? The commentary constantly vacillates between these two possibilities. Consider the *Secret Records*' attempt to defend Xinxing's practice of excerpting scripture. That defense begins with an explanation of how the Buddha's time and our own time are different, and how these differences justify Xinxing's process of compiling and rearranging scriptural excerpts. The defense immediately shifts, however, to claiming that the act of

[412] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 95.

excerption is justified by the *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament*; in fact, the commentary suggests that these scriptures *completely* explain the Three Levels taxonomy, a remark that seems to conflict with the commentator's initial suggestion that Xinxing's writings are necessary to expand the Buddha's 'abbreviated' explanation of third level teachings into a 'detailed' explanation. The *Secret Records'* defense also ignores the obvious issue that neither the *Nirvana Sutra* nor the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament* ever uses the term 'Three Levels.' (While it is not unreasonable to read the metaphors in the *Nirvana Sutra* as descriptions of a three part taxonomy, the crucial authorizing metaphor in the *Scripture of the Flower Ornament* does not even taxonomize three kinds of beings; instead, it identifies five.). By what principle do we justify reading these two scriptures as articulations of the Three Levels taxonomy? The *Secret Records* gives no explicit solution to this question.

At times, the commentary seems to suggest that Xinxing, not the Buddha or Buddhist scripture, is the primary agent of liberation and scriptural interpretation. Famously, Xinxing claims in the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* that everything in the work is scriptural text, except for nine characters that he has added himself: the first level, the second level, and the third level (唯除第一階、第二階、第三階九字是人語已外，餘者悉是經文).[413] Xinxing calls these characters 'human words' (人語). The *Secret Records* makes careful note of these nine words, and suggests that they explain all of scripture:

> 又九字是人語者，謂立法字也。以此九字釋一切經故，唯九字是人語也。[414]
> Furthermore, "nine words are human words" refers to the words that establish the teaching. Because these nine words explain all the scriptures, only nine words are human words.

Given that these words "establish the teaching" (立法), it seems disingenuous to insist that Xinxing's texts are simply conduits for the words of the Buddha. And indeed, the *Secret Records* refers directly to Xinxing's numinous powers of interpretation several times. At one point, while explaining how to reconcile two quotations in the root text, the *Secret Records* states that Xinxing 'mystically combines' them ("The Dhyāna master mystically combines these two passages in the scriptural text, citing them separately." 禪師玄會經文兩處，別引。)[415] The text also explains that Xinxing has dispensed with the superficial ordering of the scriptures in order to make them suitable for degraded beings. It writes:

> 佛對根授法為根成者，依根起行故就位說。禪師遺法立因唯為下人破病學行、捨邪歸正。以立根故就病說。[416]
> When the Buddha bestowed the teachings in relation to faculties, it was for those accomplished in their faculties. Because he relied on their faculties to give rise to practice, he preached with regard to rank [i.e., their social identity or superficial label—*śrāvakas*, *caṇḍālas*, kings—rather than their place in the Three Levels]. The cause (因) for which the Dhyāna Master sets up his dispensation (遺法) is strictly the study and practice that destroy sickness for people of lower [faculties],

[413] Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma,* Yabuki 1927, appendix, 12.
[414] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 88.
[415] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 103.
[416] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 104.

> the renunciation of the incorrect and the return to what is correct. In order to establish the faculties [i.e., promulgate the Three Levels taxonomy], he preaches in relation to sickness.

Here, the *Secret Records* juxtaposes Xinxing with the Buddha himself; Xinxing more than holds his own in the comparison. Ultimately, the commentary admits that Xinxing is an advanced bodhisattva of highly unusual status, and it is by virtue of this status that he is able to "establish the teaching" (起教). It writes:

> 能起教人者，即信行是，謂當一乘菩薩六住已去。通凡及聖俱是。由能發願受善惡兩種身故，能入六道隨類應生。由不假人法即自開解故，能為他起教故。[417]
>
> The person capable of establishing the teaching—it is Xinxing, a One Vehicle Bodhisattva, beyond the Six Abodes. He is both worldling and sage. Because he made a vow to take on two kinds of bodies—[both] evil and good—he was able to enter the Six Paths and be born responsively in accord with the kind [of beings now prevalent]. Because he did not rely on [other] people or on the teachings, but was understood [the teachings/scriptures] on his own, he was able to establish this teaching [i.e., the teaching of the Three Levels] for others.

The *Secret Records*' identification of Xinxing as an advanced bodhisattva raises questions about its ambivalent defense of Xinxing's citational practices. Why not defend these practices on the simple basis that Xinxing was, functionally, a buddha? (Below, we shall see that some of Xinxing's followers took this approach, making no attempt to explain, justify, or even understand Xinxing's tortured fidelity to received scripture.) The situation is all the stranger when we consider that the *Secret Records*' identification of Xinxing as a bodhisattva amounts to a direct contradiction of Xinxing's own text. In the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*, Xinxing also says that the person who "establishes the teaching" (起教) is a "One Vehicle Bodhisattva, beyond the Six Abodes" (一乘菩薩六住已去). However, Xinxing identifies this bodhisattva as Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging in the *Lotus Sutra*; so far as we know, Xinxing never claims this status for himself.[418] As we have seen, the *Secret Records'* presentation of the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels* is, in most respects, a scrupulous representation of Xinxing's own understanding of this text and the broader project it advances. In this one regard, however, the commentary departs from the master. We may conjecture that the commentary introduces this innovation for external reasons—perhaps belief in Xinxing's exalted status was widespread, or perhaps the commentator hoped that Xinxing's status would help defend his otherwise heavily criticized approach to scripture.

We may make two more remarks on the *Secret Records* before moving on. First, the commentary quotes from a wide variety of scriptures. In general, however, these scriptures are also quoted in the root text; at least in this commentary, therefore, Xinxing's followers seem to confine themselves to his restricted corpus of scriptural passages. Second, although the *Secret Records* demonstrates an understanding of the way in which Xinxing conceives of scripture as dangerous because of the possibility of maligning, the commentary itself evinces a less anxious

[417] Yabuki 1927, appendix, 79.
[418] For a translation of this section of the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma*, see Appendix B.

approach to scripture. We find none of the rigid separations between 'scriptural text' and 'human words' that we find in Xinxing's own writings. The commentary seems much more concerned with clarifying the meaning of Xinxing's text and defending his project than it does in adopting his regimen of interpretive hygiene. If we consider these two observations in combination—that the commentary adheres to Xinxing's reduced scriptural corpus but also dispenses with his rigid treatment of scriptural text—we might surmise that the author of the *Secret Records* accepts Xinxing's scriptural project *and* feels satisfied that Xinxing's project has succeeded in removing the danger of scripture. It may be that, for the author of the *Secret Records*, Xinxing's texts have replaced the received scriptural corpus, and thus no longer pose a threat to the practitioner.[419]

4) 'Account of an Unnamed Dhyāna Master' (Abbr.: the 'Account of the Dhyāna Master')

'Account of the Dhyāna Master' is an unusual text partially attested in a Dunhuang manuscript (Pelliot 2550). As the beginning and end of the text are missing, there is no extant title, colophon, authorial attribution, or date. Based on orthography, the text likely dates no later than the mid-eighth century, and is probably considerably earlier—perhaps mid-seventh century.[420] In somewhat disorganized fashion, this fairly long text (around 12,00 characters) gives an account of the life and teachings of an unnamed Dhyāna Master; it intersperses this account with reports of his sayings and direct speech.[421] Although the text mentions various place names, it is unclear where, exactly, the Dhyāna Master is from and where his sphere of activity lies; it is unambiguous, however, that the Dhyāna Master lives and teaches in the provinces, outside of the capital (at several points, figures are described as coming from the capital to talk with the Master, and he occasionally disparages metropolitan monks). In the course of the account, the unnamed Dhyāna Master interacts with various people, including five figures from the capital who "studied the buddha-dharma of the Three Levels in the five assemblies;"[422] the Master is also compared to Xinxing, and some features of his practice are clearly coded as Three Levels practices (including begging for food, repairing old temples, and engaging in the practice of universal reverence). In part for these reasons, the first major study of this work gave it the provisional title of "Life and Works of a Certain Three Levels Dhyāna Master" (三階某禪師行狀始末).[423] Since the identification and publication of this text in the 1930s, many scholars have treated its subject as an authoritative example of Three Levels practice,[424] and as by far the longest discursive account of the life and work of a figure associated the Three Levels, the 'Account of the Dhyāna Master' has exerted an outsize influence on our image of the 'Three Levels Movement' in general.

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[419] We find some evidence in the *Secret Records* that the author considers Xinxing's writings to be identical in status to scripture. Throughout the text, the commentator refers to both types of texts as 'bestowed' or 'bequeathed' (稟). We thus find reference to the "teachings of the bequeathed scriptures" (稟經教, see Yabuki 1927, appendix, 90) as well as references to the "teachings of the bequeathed passages of the Three Levels" (稟三階文教, see Yabuki 1927, appendix, 74).

[420] Cf., Ōtani 1938, 250. Also see Ōtani 1938, 283–302, for transcription of the text.

[421] Yang 2017 suggests that this text should be seen as an early example of the 'recorded sayings' (語錄) genre. See Poceski 2004 for some remarks on the development of this genre and its relationship to Chan lineages.

[422] 五眾學三階仏法。See Ōtani 1938, 290.

[423] Ōtani 1938.

[424] Cf., especially, Lewis 1990.

It would be wise, however, to treat this text with caution. It is clear that the text positions the Dhyāna Master as a master of Three Levels practices. The five metropolitan students of the Three Levels come to the Master and ask him, in good Three Levels fashion, about "the correct and incorrect teachings" (邪正法). They are left in awe by his response.[425] Another interlocutor asks him why some of his practices depart from those of Xinxing, suggesting that it is expected that the Master's practice and Xinxing's practice be the same.[426] At one point, the Master repairs an abandoned temple—an obvious implementation of Xinxing's recommendation that repairing old temples and stupas are secure practices for degraded beings.[427] However, the Master also engages in a wide variety of practices unattested in other texts by Xinxing or his followers. In some cases, it seems plausible that these practices were shared with other devotees of Xinxing, or were natural outgrowths of Xinxing's teachings. For example, the Master encourages his followers not to speak, lest they fall into hell; although no other text suggests that Xinxing's followers take vows of silence, it is an obvious implication of Xinxing's intense anxiety about maligning the Dharma.[428] Other practices of the Master, however, are quite unusual. The Master wears a goat skin instead of a monk's robe,[429] and focuses on teaching laywomen to the exclusion of others.[430] He tells his disciples that, after his death, his body should be cremated and the ashes should then be divided into two parts. One part should be scattered, while the other half should be moistened into a paste and formed into balls, which should then be distributed to his followers.[431] Thus, many features of the Master's practice are unusual (even by the standards of the Three Levels); moreover, the Master seems to have no real affiliation with any other Three Levels monk or institution, and sometimes seems to be hostile toward Three Levels monks in the capital.[432] It seems reasonable, therefore, to be skeptical about the idea that the Dhyāna Master actually represents the broader community of Xinxing's followers. It is possible, in fact, that the Dhyāna Master was a religious entrepreneur who adopted some affectations of Xinxing and Xinxing's followers in order to bolster his own status. Given that, throughout the account, the Master is presented as a concealed buddha (sometimes even hinting at this possibility himself), this gambit appears to achieved some success.[433]

Even if the unnamed Dhyāna Master had no formal affiliation with or education in Xinxing's teachings, the account of his life offers important insights into Xinxing's later reception. First, the fact that the metropolitan students of the Three Levels ask the Dhyāna Master about "incorrect and correct teachings" (邪正法) suggests that, even after Xinxing's death, and even among far-flung provincials, Xinxing's followers were known for an interest in avoiding erroneous teachings. The fact that the Dhyāna Master has his students commit to silence in order to avoid hell likewise attests to the long afterlife of Xinxing's fear of maligning, as well as a ramifying anxiety about speech in general. Finally, the 'Account of the Dhyāna Master,' like all of the texts we have looked at so far, attests to Xinxing's exalted personal status. Although the account never refers to Xinxing as a bodhisattva, it does imply that the Dhyāna Master is a concealed buddha. Interludes where the Dhyāna Master is compared to Xinxing make

[425] Ōtani 1938, 290.
[426] Ōtani 1938, 292.
[427] Ōtani 1938, 284.
[428] Ōtani 1938, 299.
[429] Ōtani 1938, 290.
[430] Ōtani 1938, 300.
[431] Ōtani 1938, 293.
[432] See Ōtani 1938, 295, where he criticizes the followers of a certain Daoshu 道樹 as precept-breakers.
[433] See especially Ōtani 1938, 285–286.

clear that it would be advantageous for the former to be seen as similar to the latter. Xinxing, it seems, was a monumental figure and a potent source of religious authority.

5) 窮詐辯惑論 *Treatise on Investigating Falsehoods and Resolving Delusions* (Abbr.: the *Treatise*)

The *Treatise* is a polemical text partially preserved at Dunhuang.[434] The surviving portion of the text—the "latter fascicle" (*juan xia* 卷下)—consists of twenty-eight sets of questions and answers in which an anti-Three Levels interlocutor addresses a pro-Three Levels respondent (below, I will refer to these positions as the 'attacker' and the 'defender'). The author and date are unknown, but its frequent references to Xuanzang's 玄奘 (602–664) translations and suggest that it was composed no earlier than 659. The *Treatise* touches on a wide variety of issues in and around Xinxing's teachings, including the problem of maligning, the nature of the monastic hierarchy, and the possibility of discrimination among beings of the latter age. For our purposes, however, the most interesting feature of the *Treatise* is its robust defense of Xinxing against charges that he contradicts scripture (*wei jing* 違經) and its corollary treatment of the relationship between scriptural authority and Xinxing's personal authority. Much like the *Secret Records*, the *Treatise* acknowledges ambiguity in the relationship between Xinxing's writings and scripture. Like all of the other texts we have examined, including the *Secret Records*, the *Treatise* grants Xinxing an exalted status. The *Treatise*, however, goes much farther than other texts in the weight it places on this status. For the *Treatise*, it is Xinxing—more than scripture or the historical Buddha—who guarantees the efficacy of his teachings. As part of its defense of Xinxing's authority, the *Treatise* occasionally evinces a radical skepticism, suggesting that received scripture may not be comprehensible at all. Instead, faith in Xinxing alone secures our access to liberation.

The *Treatise* makes repeated reference to the fact that Xinxing compiles scriptural passages by reference to a taxonomy of practitioners. In the eleventh section of the text, for example, the Three Levels defender parries the attacker's accusation that Xinxing contradicts scripture by interpreting two separate scriptural passages as related. The attacker states:

> 辯曰。「教令習誦，勸化佛法」既是明文，共「以三乘法教人，」竟有何異，便為加誑乎。此乃類会經文，辯明正義，何加減乎。[435]
> Resolution: "[I] teach [them] to do repeated recitation and exhort [them] in the buddha-dharma" is clear text, and [Xinxing] unites [this clear text with,] "Teach people by means of the teaching of the three vehicles." Ultimately, how are they different, and how then is it [a case] of adding deception? This is just [a case of] bringing scriptural passages together by type [in order to] clarify their proper meaning. What did he add or remove?

Likewise, the *Treatise* repeatedly suggests that Xinxing's teachings are 'based in scripture' (依經); the attacker constructs their attacks as if departure from scripture is a vulnerability, and the

[434] Gernet lists the manuscript as "Pelliot chinois 2115" (Jacques Gernet, *Catalogue des manuscrits chinois de Touen-houang, Vol. I (Nos. 2001 – 2500)*, Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris, [1970]: 76-77). See also Nishimoto 1998, 237, for discussion, and 660–673 for transcription.
[435] Section Eleven. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

defender often attempts to show that such departures are illusory. Thus, the defender insists that "Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] relied on scripture to clarify the teaching. His sentiments were completely impartial."[436]

The *Treatise* also maintains the conceit that scripture is a portal to the Buddha, whose foreknowledge allows him to intervene, even now, through the agency of scripture. Thus the defender urges us to revere the Buddha's intent. He states:

> 仰推佛意。良亦有由，所以棄機任質，杜漸防萌患利口之傾覆，惡蓋夫之辯給矣。余如上下廣釋。[437]
> Esteem and revere the Buddha's intention, [for it] truly has a reason [behind it]. What [he intends] is [for us to] discard artifice and take up straightforwardness, and to nip in the bud [both] the disorder [caused by those] afflicted with a keen tongue, and the glibness of tongue [arising from] vile obfuscators. The rest is as explained in detail above and below.

The historical Buddha's liberatory power is, it seems, still active:

> 大聖釋尊懸鑒億劫，處分之日不解慮乎，聖尊智惠不及凡乎。[438]
> The great sage, Venerable Śākyamuni, perceived a million *kalpas* [into the future]. Hasn't he given thought to [each person's] day of treatment? Doesn't the wisdom of Venerable Śākyamuni extend to worldlings?

Later, the *Treatise* continues:

> 是故如來大悲大智，最後了說，決定明斷，廣開六喻，大分三義對文岳跱，邪正俱然，欲令衆生離苦安樂，豈有旨哉，豈有旨哉。[439]
> Thus, the Thus-Come-One, [in his] great compassion and wisdom, ultimately expounded [things] clearly, rendered a clear judgment, and introduced the six metaphors[440] in detail, grandly distilling the three meanings [of the three levels], which [tower like] a mountain peak above the text. [He explained] the state of both the perverse and the proper, with the intent that sentient beings transcend suffering and [be] calm and joyous. What an intent, what an intent!

The *Treatise*, then, attempts to present the Three Levels taxonomy as present in scripture, the result of the Buddha's compassionate foresight. Much like the *Secret Records*, however, the authority of the ancient teachings of the Buddha coexists uneasily with the role of Xinxing in making this implicit teaching explicit. Initially, the *Treatise* emphasizes Xinxing's ability to penetrate the Tathāgata's 'recondite words' (密語) and advance the teaching through his 'collected records.' It writes:

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[436] 禪師依經辯法，情在至公。Section Fifteen, see transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[437] Section Nine. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[438] Section Three. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[439] Section Eighteen. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[440] I.e., the six metaphors in the *Nirvana Sutra* passage in question, which the Three Levels considers the scriptural source for the three levels of sentient beings.

空有，善惡，邪正，大小，教内教外，一乘四乘，三階九階，一切人行一切教理，根法，義文，解行病等，一一法中相似同異，一見一聞一觀一察，皆悉了知，分毫不惑故，實是利根。
[Yet:] emptiness and existence, good and evil, incorrect and correct, great and small, within the teaching and without the teaching, the one vehicle and the four vehicles, the three levels and the nine levels, all human practices and all the teachings, the faculties and the dharmas, the meanings and texts, understanding [tailored to the sickness] and practices [tailored to] the sickness—[though] in every dharma there appear to be distinctions, with just a look, a listen, a glance, an examination, he understood it all without a mote of confusion. Thus, he was really a person of keen faculties.

多修福事，供養三宝，不專讀誦，不講經律故如似鈍根。妙通般若，深入一乘，廣撰集錄，大興至教故實是利根。
He often cultivated meritorious activities and made offerings to the three jewels; he did not single-mindedly recite [the scriptures]; and he did not lecture on the scriptures and codes. Thus, he seemed to have dull faculties. [But,] sublimely penetrating *prajñā* and deeply immersed in the one vehicle, he put together expansive compendia and raised up the ultimate teaching grandly. Thus, he was really a person of keen faculties.

但有明文，必依斷義，不敢加減如似鈍根。義有文無，則取真實義，不着文字，以義攝文，不依於語，能解如來密語及能說故實是利根。[441]
When there was clear text, he of course relied on [its] definite meaning and dared not add or subtract [from it]. Thus, he seemed to have dull faculties. [But] when there was a meaning [there] that the text lacked, he took up [that] real, true meaning, didn't cling to the characters of the text, and understood the text by means of [that] meaning. Without relying on the [surface meaning of the] words, he was able to understand the recondite words of the Thus-Come-One, and he was able to preach [those words].[442] Thus, he was really a person of keen faculties.

In the following passage, for example, the *Treatise* barely conceals the tension between Xinxing's 'reliance on scripture' and his own precocious interpretive abilities:

禪師生知法義，不依章疏，符披諸經，即自開解，自称正利。豈愧時莫。徒以像運東西。時宜謙隱，卑以自牧。不称奇異。或須止謗利生，幾微自顯耳，仍依經教亦不師心。[443]
From birth, Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] understood the meaning of the teachings. Without relying on commentaries, he perused the scriptures, understood them on his own, and proclaimed himself a person of proper views and keen faculties. Wasn't it a shameful time period! He went far and wide [literally, from east to west] bearing [various] disguises. When appropriate, he humbly concealed

[441] Section Four. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[442] A reference to the *Nirvana Sutra*. See T.374.402b1-9.
[443] Section Fourteen. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

> [himself]; humbling himself with [great] self-restraint, he did not proclaim his extraordinary distinctions. Sometimes it was necessary to put a stop to maligning and benefit sentient beings [by] revealing himself just a tiny amount, [but he] still relied on the teachings of the scriptures and did not make his [own] mind his master.

This passage suggests that part of the reason for Xinxing's ambiguous relationship to scriptural authority is that Xinxing himself had a secret identity, which he by turns concealed and revealed. This identity was that of a powerful bodhisattva, the bodhisattva of the four reliances.[444] This identity means that Xinxing functionally possessed the interpretive authority of the Buddha himself. The *Treatise* repeatedly emphasizes this status. For example, immediately after the its excursus on the Buddha's mighty intent (see above), the *Treatise* shifts to emphasizing Xinxing's textual prowess. It writes:

> 四依佛眼一見披雲，故以此經為能斷，余一切經為所斷，於是類会群經，擬義成旨。故《經》云，「是人則解如來密語及能說故。」又云，「唯諸菩薩能於是經取真實義不着文字，」其此之謂乎。故曰，「鄙俗不可以語大道者滞於名也。曲士不可与辯宗極者拘於形也。」然則適事以権，猶反經而合變，況復探微跡閟，豈随文而取義哉。[445]
>
> The buddha-eye of [the bodhisattva of] the four reliances [i.e., Xinxing,] parts the clouds with a single glance. Thus, he took this scripture, [the *Nirvana Sutra*,] to be that which is capable of analyzing, and [he took] all the other scriptures as those which are analyzed. Thereupon, he brought together groups of scripture by category, assessing their meanings to perfect [their] intent. Thus, the [*Nirvana*] *Sutra* says, "This person will understand the recondite words of the Thus-Come-One and even be able to expound them."[446] It also says, "Only bodhisattvas will be able to grasp the true meaning in this scripture without clinging to the words of the text."[447] [Xinxing] is who this refers to. So it is said, "That the rube cannot talk about the great way is [a matter of] being stuck in 'names.' That a rustic scholar cannot discuss the ultimate tenet is [a matter of] being constrained by appearance."[448] Thus, one accords with phenomena by means of expedients. Similarly, one [might] contradict the scriptures yet accord with transformations. How much more so does one probe the subtle to arrive at the hidden? Does one [really] grasp the meaning by following the text?

[444] The term 'four reliances' 四依 derives from a passage in the *Nirvana Sutra* that describes a methodology for reliably interpreting Buddhist scripture after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Chinese Buddhists occasionally used this term to refer to a master Buddhist teacher who postdates the Buddha but nevertheless is capable of organizing and preserving Buddhist teaching. Most commonly, the teacher in question is one of the later Indian patriarchs—Nagarjuna or Asanga. (See Young 2015.) It is rare for this term to be applied to a Chinese figure in the medieval period.

[445] Section Eighteen. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

[446] Quote from a passage at T.374.12.401c6-c13. For a translation of the entire passage, see Blum 2013, 194.

[447] Quote from a passage at T.374.12.421.c9-c16. For a translation of the entire passage, see Blum 2013, 299.

[448] This entire couplet appears almost verbatim in other polemical texts preserved in the *Hongming ji* (T2102.52.35c1-3) and the *Guanghongming ji* (T2103.52.139b12-13).

Although the *Treatise* pays lip service to the authority of the Buddha, the real agency behind Xinxing's texts clearly rests with Xinxing himself. In this passage, Xinxing is the true promulgator of the teaching. He uses the *Nirvana Sutra* as his interpretive tool. But the *Treatise* suggests that Xinxing's real authority derives from his own status as a 'bodhisattva of the four reliances,' not from scripture. In fact, for such a being, it is permissible to go against scripture if convenient (反經而合變).

Xinxing's exalted status is a major focus for the *Treatise*. A lengthy question-and-answer section is devoted to proving and explaining that Xinxing was a bodhisattva; the defender suggests that learning about Xinxing's status is crucial to coming to a "proper understanding" (正解). The *Treatise* states:

> 問曰。但驗人当四依，自然於法不惑。禪師若是四依，請示可信之状。僕亦望欲求道，何敢故謗正真哉。
> Question: [If you] simply prove that [Xinxing's] human [capacities] corresponded to [those of the bodhisattva of] the four reliances, [then,] naturally, I will not doubt his teachings. If Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] was [a bodhisattva of] the four reliances, please put forth some credible evidence. I too yearn to pursue the path. Why, then, would I dare to defame [something that is] true and proper?[449]
>
> 答曰。善哉，快發斯問。欲求正解，当如是問。諦聽善思，略為分辯。夫但是傳法藏人，佛於經中皆記行状。
> Answer: Excellent, [that you would so] quickly raise such a question! If you wish to pursue a proper understanding you *should* ask such a question. Listen closely and consider carefully, and I will briefly explain. Now, [as for] the "people who transmit the dharma-treasury," the Buddha makes note, in the scriptures, of the comportment of all [of them].
>
> 今禪師縱生知以釋經起教，任道性以立法開模，乃百行皆異衆人，万德咸符聖記，独異于衆，一人驗矣，遍符聖記，万行真矣。
> Recently, Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] gave vent to his inborn knowledge to explicate the scriptures and give rise to his teaching, [and by] following his path-nature he established the [true] dharma and revealed [its] patterns. Thus, his hundred-odd deeds all differ from [those of] the great mass of people, and his myriad qualities all tally with the sagely records. [He] alone differs from the masses—proof [that he is] the "single person." [Since they] tally entirely with the sagely records, his myriad deeds [must be] true.

[449] This is not the only extant Three Levels text that claims Xinxing is a bodhisattva bringing a special dispensation. A passage from the *Sanjie fofa miji* 三階佛法密記, a seventh century Three Levels commentary, also claims that Xinxing is a bodhisattva of the four reliances (see Nishimoto 1998, 120-121). Huaigan, the Pure Land exegete and prominent critic of the Three Levels, criticizes these claims on at least two occasions (see the discussions in Nishimoto 1998, 120, 139).

驗行足以決是非，驗人可以斷多少，多少不疑則是非信矣。故能識一乘四乘之性習，辯三階三際之根機，以此大明討論至教，記猶指掌，寧当違教理哉。[450]

To decide whether [Xinxing was this bodhisattva], look to see if his deeds were sufficient. To decide on his rarity, one could look to see if his personal [capacities were rare or common]. If there is no doubt as to the rarity [of his personal capacities], then the determination is credible.[451] He was able to recognize the nature and habits of people of the one vehicle and the four vehicles,[452] and he discerned the faculties of the three periods and the three levels. [He] used this great wisdom to discuss the ultimate teaching and record [it] as [easily as] pointing at [his own] palm, [and yet you] would [preposterously claim that this] equates to contradicting the teaching!

The *Treatise* repeatedly defends Xinxing from accusations of interpretive excess on the grounds that, as a bodhisattva of the four reliances, it was his duty to modulate scripture in accord with the audience's needs, much as the Buddha might do. The *Treatise* frankly admits that Xinxing sometimes "added his own intent" into scripture:

法師引經三部並無明了正文，豈若楞伽名義劈析。但禪師意者，欲明内外顛倒，迷惑重多，唯由学別，使增習障深遠。是故随其重病加意。遠限深防，欲使普藥頓行，庶得先勞後逸，因遂泛為此說，不欲争論盡否。既非衆生急要，又非[453]已地所行。[454]

The Dharma Master[455] cites the threefold scriptural [collections] without clarifying the correct text. How could [this] compare with the analysis of names and meanings in the *Laṅkāvatāra* [*Sutra*]? Dhyāna Master [Xinxing's] intent was to clarify the interior and exterior distortions, [but at that time] confusions were grave and numerous, and [if people] merely studied the particular, [their] afflictions would increase, [their] practices would be obstructed, and the profound would grow remote. Therefore, [Xinxing] added his intent [to his explications of scripture], in accord with the severity of this illness. [Because people] were cut off from the distant and obstructed from the profound, [he] wanted to [encourage them in] the sudden practice that is the universal medicine, hoping to get [them] to labor first and indulge in leisure later. Therefore, he made broad statements [like the one above]. It was not that he did not want to vie in debate, [just that

[450] Section Five. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

[451] That is, Xinxing's great deeds are numerous, and in his accomplishments he is singular or "rare." Consequently, he matches the "description" that the author has extracted from the *Nirvana Sutra*, "This records that the [the number of such] people will be rare, and it records that [their] deeds will be many" (斯則記人惟少，記行惟多).

[452] This is perhaps a reference to Jizang's analysis of the *Lotus Sutra*, in which he finds five vehicles. See T.1720.34.417c23-418b23.

[453] The manuscript, as well as the transcription in Nishimoto 1998, have another "又非" here, yielding, "既非衆生急要，又非又非已地所行。"

[454] Section Nineteen. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

[455] The identity of this Dharma Master is not clear, but it may by Xuanzang. The *Treatise* repeatedly attacks 'Faxiang' 法相 and refers to texts translated by Xuanzang disapprovingly.

this] was not the urgent need of sentient beings [at that time], nor was it the practice [fitting for] his stage [of the bodhisattva path].

The *Treatise*, at points, seems to suggest that, if Xinxing's ideas are not actually present in scripture, then *scripture* is in error—these ideas *should* be there, even if they are not. It writes:

> 辯曰。病同二小，浅近所容解異一乘，微妙不攝。若以文無不攝之言，便執是攝教，無容之語，應是必容。[456]
> Resolution: The sickness [of the bodhisattva of the three vehicles] is the same as [that of] the two lesser vehicles. The understanding contained in what is shallow and simple differs from [that of] the one vehicle, and the sublime [meaning] is not included [therein]. If we grant that the text has nothing it does not include, then we will insist [that the teaching of the three levels] is included. [If ours is] language that is not contained [therein], it *should* have perforce been included.

At the same time as the *Treatise* asserts Xinxing's supremacy over scripture, it suggests that scriptural teachings not included in Xinxing's framework, or mentioned in his texts, should not be read or respected. In one section, the attacker accuses Xinxing of destroying the Dharma by forbidding his followers from reading the 'particular' *tripiṭaka* (as opposed to, presumably, Xinxing's own 'universal' collection of teachings). The attacker says:

> 惑曰。三階引經作四種道理證下階人不合学別。若准《仁王經》，由彼此学徒互相非毀令法速滅，如食師子虫者。禪師不聽学別三藏，滅佛法故，亦是師子虫者乃至不得引呵責文者。[457]
> Delusion: The Three Levels quote scripture to produce the four kinds of reasons[458] proving that people of the lowest level are unsuited to the study of the particular. According to the *Scripture for Humane Kings*, [when] the dharma quickly disappears because this and that disciple deny and malign each other, it's like worms feeding [in the body] of a lion.[459] Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] does not permit the study of the *tripiṭaka* as a particular [teaching], and [thereby] destroys the buddha-dharma. Therefore, he, too, is a worm [in the body of] the lion, and did not even allow the citation of passages critical [of his teachings].

Shockingly, the defender makes no denial that Xinxing's followers do not read the 'particular *tripiṭaka*.' He merely attempts to explain that refraining from the study of the particular constitutes no harm to the Buddha's Dharma. At another point, the defender flatly refuses to consider evidence from a text that Xinxing does not cite.

[456] Section Eighteen. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[457] Section Twenty. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[458] On the four kinds of reasoning, see T.676.16.709b11-18.
[459] T.245.8.833c5-6.

但諸經論滅不滅文，《三階集錄》咸舉会釋，不能廣引。令此論中略述兩義，一則善均從衆，十部良多，二則捨論依經。《善見》非據，何引非証，将自慰乎。[460]

Although the *Collected Records of the Three Levels* considers, reconciles, and explains all the passages in the various scriptures and treatises [on when the dharma] disappears or does not disappear, [we] cannot cite [the *Collected Records*] in detail [here]. Allow us [instead], in the present treatise, to outline two principles [that govern such considerations]: First, the good is measured from the many, and ten [scriptures] is quite a lot.[461] Second, discard the treatises and rely on the scriptures. We don't base [our teachings] on the *Samantapāsādikā.* [So] why have you cited what we don't [consider] a proof [text]? Is it a self-consolation?

The *Treatise* thus presents a very Xinxing-centric view of scriptural interpretation and scriptural authority, going so far as to disregard scriptural evidence that falls outside Xinxing's own circumscribed corpus. In the course of defending Xinxing and his work, however, the *Treatise* mounts an increasingly radical attack on the possibility of correct exegesis, and even the possibility of scriptural comprehension. This attack begins when the *Treatise* suggests that criticism of Xinxing is the result of a double standard—even if Xinxing does interpret scripture by his own lights, how is that any different than the activities of other exegetes? The *Treatise* writes:

窮曰。向若初地都無斷正使文可責定違經論，且就迷理說盡。已符經論明文，假使俱生不除亦未有違深義，何則。經論自相鉾楯，禪師詎有乖違。……

Investigation: If a passage [saying,] "in the initial stage, not all the afflictions proper are severed" can be rebuked as definitely contradicting the scriptures and treatises, then [allow me] to completely explain as regards "being confused about principle." Having compared the clear text of scriptures and commentaries, even if inborn afflictions were not eliminated [in the initial stage], [the passage above] would still not contradict the profound meaning. Why? Scriptures and commentaries contradict themselves. So how could Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] have contradicted [them]? …

若然者，經說七使，論分九十增加文義，應名矯惑，損誤道俗，便不少乎。禪師以文会義，猶嫌矯惑。向若道生法師預說闡提佛性，道深大德懸續《婆沙論》文於意，如何應大怒乎。

If it does [qualify as deceptive], [then when] a scripture speaks of seven declivities, and a treatise divides [them] into ninety and adds to the meaning of the passage, it should [also] be considered "sly and deceptive." [If that were so,] the harm and deception [posed to both] monk and laymen [by such deception] would be no small thing, eh? Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] joined text to its meaning, [yet you] still reprove [him] for being sly and deceptive. Given that Dharma

[460] Section Twenty-Two. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[461] In the present debate, there are ten scriptures cited by Xinxing in support of his position.

Master Daosheng foretold the buddha-nature of the *icchantika*,[462] and Venerable Daoshen appended a passage of the *[Abhidharma-vi]bhāṣā Śāstra* to agree with his intent,[463] why are you enraged [at Xinxing alone]?

捨彼責此，何不平乎。比來障誰不許說乎。法師何愁不得說乎。嗟乎，善星反信尼乾謂佛妬於羅漢，央伽耶怒真聖以為違戾已師，邪倒之力遂至於此不亦哀哉。[464]
Forgiving one and rebuking the other—why [so] unfair? Up to now, who has been obstructed and prevented from preaching? Dharma Master, why are [you] worried about not being permitted to preach? Alas, [Bhikṣu] Shanxing turned his faith to Nirgrantha and claimed that the Buddha begrudged [Nirgrantha's] arhatship, [while] Yangqieye was angered at the true sage, thinking that he went against his own teacher.[465] [When] the strength of perverse confusion gets to this [point], isn't it a pity?

The *Treatise* expands its attack to include Indian patriarchs who post-date the Buddha like Asvabhāva and Vasubandhu.

惑曰。三階雖錄佛經，但以凡夫愚惑，不測聖心，自意錄經，豈能無錯乎。
Delusion: Although the Three Levels collected the scriptures of the Buddha, still, because of their worldling delusions, they didn't fathom the mind of the sage. [Instead] they collected the scriptures by their own lights. How could they have avoided errors?

窮曰。只如無性《攝論》護法《唯識》天親《因明》親光《佛地》並是凡夫愚惑自意釋經，豈能無錯，何因信学。又此等並是凡夫釋經造論，禪師《集錄》何謝此徒。奚独不測聖心，豈必不能無錯乎。
Investigation: [Your argument holds] only if [you admit that] Asvabhāva's [*Commentary on the*] Mahāyānasaṃgraha,[466] Dharmapāla's *Consciousness-Only*,[467] Vasubandhu's *Yinming*,[468] and Qinguang's *Fodi [lun]*[469] are also

[462] This refers to the famous episode in which Daosheng 道生 (355-434) insisted that the *icchantika* has buddha-nature, in defiance of the then-prevailing interpretation of the Northern recension of the *Nirvana Sutra* (T.374). Expelled from the sangha, he was vindicated when the *Nirvana Sutra* was retranslated (producing the Southern recension, T.375) and found to contain passages clearly supporting his position. See Walter Liebenthal, "A Biography of Chu Tao-Sheng," in *Monumenta Nipponica*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Oct., 1955): 284-316.
[463] The identity of Daoshen 道深 is unclear, and this episode with the *Vibhāsā* is obscure. Xuanzang produced a translation of the *Vibhāsā* (T.1545), and Xuanzang is reported to have studied the *Chengshi lun* 成實論 with a Dharma Master Daoshen (see T.2154.55.557c17). Or, "Daoshen" may be a mistake for "Daotai 道泰," a fifth-century monk who, working with Buddhavarman (*Futuobamo* 浮陀跋摩), also produced a translation of the *Vibhāsā* (T.1546).
[464] Section Nineteen. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.
[465] For Shanxing, see Section Four of the *Treatise*. I have been unable to identify Yangqieye or the incident referred to here.
[466] T.1598, translated by Xuanzang.
[467] Probably a reference to the *Cheng weishi lun* 成唯識論 (T.1585, translated by Xuanzang).
[468] I have yet to determine the identity of this text.
[469] T.1530, translated by Xuanzang.

[instances where those with] worldling delusions interpreted scripture by their own lights. Could *they* have avoided errors? Why should we believe in or study them? Those [people] were all worldlings who interpreted scripture to produce treatises. Why should Dhyāna Master [Xinxing's] *Compendium* yield before [the works of] those disciples? Did he *alone* fail to fathom the mind of the sage? Certainly, [then,] he could not have avoided errors!

又設使諸造論師皆為聖者，法師所承疏主並是凡愚，應亦不測聖心。豈能無錯，何因稟誦，将依信乎。又經皆聖說，論皆聖作，不敢仰儔。然禪師以凡愚造《三階集錄》解釋經律，法師亦以凡愚造章疏問答解釋經論。
Moreover, even if the masters who produced the treatises [in question] were all sages, the lords of the commentaries to whom [you,] Dharma Master, are heir, were certainly worldlings, and couldn't have fathomed the mind of the sage. Could they have been errorless? Why seek to recite [their works] and place one's faith in them? Moreover, [because] the scriptures were all preached by the sage, and the treatises were all produced by the sages, we dare not rely [on them]. Thus, Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] produced the *Compendium of the Three Levels* to explain the scriptures and codes for worldly fools [like us]. [You,] Dharma Master, have also produced commentaries and question-and-answer to explain the scriptures and treatises for worldly fools [like us].[470]

焉知法師章疏測聖心而無錯，禪師《集錄》則有錯而不測聖心乎。設有是事，何以知乎。為以聖智明知，為以凡心闇謗。若以聖智則禪師不敢怨。儻其闇謗，法師能無愧乎。若雖闇謗而終不愧，法師豈是無慚愧乎。
Have [your] commentaries, Dharma Master, fathomed the mind of the sage and so avoided errors, while the *Compendium* of Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] contains errors, not having fathomed the mind of the sage? If this were so, how would we know? Do we think [these works represent] the luminous knowledge of sagely wisdom, or the darkling maligning of the worldly mind? If we think that they [represent] sagely wisdom, then Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] would not have dared to resent it. Suppose it were darkling maligning—could [you,] Dharma Master, not be ashamed? If, however, it were darkling maligning, he would never have been ashamed [of it]. Are [you,] Dharma Master, without shame?

若其能造章疏集錄之人猶当有錯不測聖心者，法師傍他章疏覓解，翻能無錯測聖心乎。設能爾者，有何殊狀乎。若言有，即次前文解信不具，是測聖心定不錯乎。如其錯者一之已甚，何假棄乎。況乎此論句句盡錯，語語皆謗乎。又若自無錯，容有明智，能知彼錯。自未免錯乃是闇愚，何足知人錯乎。[471]
If even people who are capable of producing commentaries and compendia are people who make errors and have not plumbed the mind of the sage, is it possible, Dharma Master, [for you] to go to [some] other commentary in search of understanding, [and find it,] in contrast, without errors, [something that has]

[470] Note that Xinxing explains the scriptures and codes, while the Dharma Master explains scriptures and *treatises*.
[471] Section Twenty-Seven. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

plumbed the mind of the sage? Even if that's possible, what special proof [of that status could you provide]? If you claim there is [such proof], given that in the immediately previous passage you were not possessed of understanding or faith, [how can you have faith] that this [commentary in question] has plumbed the mind of the sage and definitely not erred? [In a situation] like this, even a single error is profound. How could you [avoid eventually admitting its fallibility] and discarding it? How much more [obvious is the situation] when every sentence of [your] treatise reaches the heights of error, and each and every word is maligning? Moreover, if you were yourself without error, and possessed of luminous wisdom, you could know the errors of others. Given that you've yet to avoid error, and are thus a darkling fool, how could you be competent to know people's errors?

The *Treatise* ends on a note of hermeneutic despair, suggesting that human interpretation of scripture simply cannot be trusted.

設就今時造章疏者，不出一切諸惡之外，何独禪師違教乎。設就今時造章疏者，不出一切諸惡之外，何独准經並是千歲之前。
If we accept that those of the present age who produce commentaries are no different from all [these] evil [worldlings], why is it Dhyāna Master [Xinxing] *alone* who contradicts the teachings? If we accept that those of the present age who produce commentaries are not apart from all [these] evil ones, why, solely, is basing oneself on the scriptures [a practice restricted to] one thousand years ago?[472]

或聖或凡，有善有惡，莫不抄文造論，推義解經。或略大部以偏行，或抄小卷而別用，離合品目，迴改後先，代代穿鑿，人之制造，傳記千般，章疏万卷，是非混雜，邪正糺紛，迷謬聖凡，顛倒上下，以病為藥，宜有更空。
Whether sage or worldling, [one] with goodness or [one] with evil, there is none who does not extract passages to produce treatises, understanding the scripture by pushing their [own] meaning. Whether abridging a large division [of the canon] in order to practice a portion, or extracting a small fascicle to use it separately, [people] separate and bring together chapters and sections, reversing what comes later and what comes first. Generation after generation [produces] forced interpretations. As for the creations of humans, their biographies are manifold, and their commentaries number a myriad fascicles. Judgments are disordered, incorrect and correct in a jumble. [The situation] confuses sage and worldling, disorders superior and inferior, and takes the sickness for the treatment. It's probably even more vacuous [than this].

別上為邪定所修，則抄前着後。闡提行微妙之義，則抄後着前。利根用師僧講誦之法，則前後着中。愚鈍作坐禪少欲之人，則中着前後。水加八分，乳

[472] Of note for our discussion of Xinxing's thought, the author seems to be admitting that the Three Levels base themselves primarily on scripture (*jing* 經) rather than treatises (*lun* 論).

味都無。藥病總乖，深要何在。違及佛性，是魔伴侶，處分不從，非佛弟子。執名相之別文，則非義言義。謗義体之普真，則義言非義。[473]

Separating out the superior is something practiced by [those with] incorrect judgment, and equates to "extracting the beginning and placing it later." The *icchantika* practicing the most sublime teaching is [a case of] "extracting the ending and placing it in front." [One of] keen faculties employing the dharma expounded by a master monk is [a case of] "placing the beginning and the ending in the middle." The foolish and dull acting like people who reduce their desires in seated meditation is [a case of] "placing the middle at the beginning or end." Water has been added [so it's] eight parts [in ten], and the taste of milk is entirely absent.[474] When medicine and sickness are completely incompatible, how [could] the profound essence remain? [Those] opposed to buddha-nature are the associates of devils. [Since] they do not following the [Buddha's prescribed] treatment, they are not disciples of the Buddha. [When one] clings to the particular text, which is name and appearance, then one says that what is not the meaning is the meaning. [When one] maligns the universal truth, which is the essence of meaning, then one says that what is the meaning is not the meaning.

In this lengthy attack on the possibility of scriptural interpretation, the *Treatise* consistently laments that Xinxing is attacked for misinterpretation while his peers are left undisturbed, despite writing treatises full of errors. The overall effect of the *Treatise*'s attack, however, is not to beg a fair hearing for Xinxing; instead, it is to undermine any scriptural exegete who is not possessed of transmundane exegetical powers—that is, everyone but Xinxing. And as the *Treatise* insists again and again, the appropriate way of engaging with Xinxing himself is not to try to understand him, but to have blind faith. Faith, too, is the *Treatise*'s solution to its exegetical dilemma—faith replaces meaning in reading. It states:

以義攝文經論共說，文閑義備通賢共許。明信之人不足亦信，闇謗之夫足亦不信。[475]

The scriptures and treatises all speak of understanding the text through the meaning, and accomplished worthies all permit equipping oneself with the meaning via the text. The person of luminous faith has faith even when [evidence] is lacking, [while] the fellow of darkling maligning does not have faith even [when evidence] is sufficient.

Finally, the *Treatise* suggests that mere reverence for the *tathāgata* is a sufficient replacement for understanding of Buddhist scripture:

[473] Section Twenty-Eight. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

[474] A reference to a parable in the *Nirvana Sutra* (T.374.12.421c16-25; for translation, see footnote 33) in which a milkmaid dilutes her milk with water so she has more to sell. As the milk works its way through various middlemen, each does the same, so by the time it is sold in the marketplace it is mostly water. The milk represents the *Nirvana Sutra* itself, which will be mangled, diluted, and destroyed over time by evil *bhikṣus*. The parable ends on an upbeat note, however, with the Buddha saying that even though the milk flavor is *almost* gone, what little is present is still better than any other flavor. By omitting this concluding statement, the author of the *Treatise* seems to emphasize the pessimistic aspects of the parable.

[475] Section Nine. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

> 又見仰推如來，非我境界，離自毀傷。設遇此文，仰推不解，当有何咎。[476]
> Also, note that [by] relying on and esteeming the Thus-Come One, [even though he is] not [of our] realm [of understanding], we transcend [the possibility] of maligning or injuring [the dharma].[477] Suppose we meet with the aforementioned passage [on the purity of he who harms parents, country, and kingdom].[478] [Though] not understanding it, [as long as we] rely on and esteem it, what fault could there be?

Thus, the *Treatise* shares many elements with other post-Xinxing texts. It reveres Xinxing, acknowledges the centrality of scripture and scriptural citation for his thought, and gestures toward the idea that scripture preserves the Buddha's startling foreknowledge of future readers, allowing him to influence us through scripture. The *Treatise* also acknowledges the profound ambiguity surrounding the relationship between Xinxing's project and the authority of scripture. More than other texts, however, the *Treatise* privileges Xinxing's own authority over that of scripture. In the course of defending that authority, the *Treatise* mounts increasingly radical deconstructive attacks on the very possibility of interpretation and knowledge. It ultimately endorses a position of mere faith—scriptural understanding is not necessary, only faith in Xinxing and the Buddha.

6) Three texts on contemplating (*guan* 觀) buddha-nature (Abbr: *guan* 觀 texts)

[476] Section Two. See transcription in Nishimoto 1998, 660–673.

[477] For "[by] relying on and esteeming the Thus-Come One, [even though he is] not [of our] realm [of understanding], we transcend [the possibility] of maligning or injuring [the dharma]," see the *Śrīmālādevī Sutra*:

> 爾時勝鬘白佛言。更有餘大利益。我當承佛威神復説斯義。佛言。更説。勝鬘白佛言。三種善男子善女人。於甚深義離自毀傷。生大功德入大乘道。何等爲三。謂若善男子善女人。自成就甚深法智。若善男子善女人。成就隨順法智。若善男子善女人。於諸深法不自了知。仰惟世尊。非我境界。唯佛所知。是名善男子善女人仰惟如來。除此諸善男子善女人已。
>
> (T.353.12.222c18-c26)
>
> Then Queen Śrīmālā said to the Buddha, "There are still remaining great benefits which I will explain, with the Buddha's permission." The Buddha said, "Again, please explain." Queen Śrīmālā said to the Buddha, "The three kinds of good sons and daughters who, within the most profound meaning [of the Dharma], *have separated themselves from injury [to the Dharma]*, produce great merits, entering the path of the Mahāyāna. What are the three [kinds of good sons and daughters]? They are those good sons and daughters who 1) develop their own wisdom of the most profound Dharma, 2) develop the subsequent wisdom of the Dharma [that is based upon the illumination of faith], and 3) revere the Lord though they do not completely understand the most profound Dharma. "*What is known only by the buddhas is not our realm*. These [abovementioned] are called the good sons and daughters who revere the Tathāgata. Only these are the good sons and daughters..."
>
> (Trans. Paul 2009, 47-48. Italics mine.)

[478] The attacker had presented this passage as one that is difficult to understand, and suggested that the necessity of interpreting such passages in the course of monastic life should preclude Xinxing's acolytes from positions of prominence in the sangha.

The three *guan* 觀 texts are all partially attested in Dunhuang manuscripts; like many such recovered texts, they have no extant titles, colophons, authorial attributions, or date ascriptions. The texts are:

A) 三階觀法略釋 *Brief Explanation of the Three Levels Teachings on Seeing* (Abbr.: *Brief Explanation*)[479]
B) 第三階佛法廣釋 *Detailed Explanation of the Buddha-Dharma of the Third Level* (Abbr.: Detailed Explanation)[480]
C) 佛性觀 *Seeing Buddha Nature*[481]

The texts all refer to Xinxing, Xinxing's writings, and employ some of Xinxing's distinctive terminology (e.g., the technical distinction between universal 普 and particular 別, and the list of twelve inversions 十二顛倒). The texts thus clearly post-date Xinxing. Beyond that *terminus post quem*, however, their date of composition is obscure. (Nishimoto estimates merely that they date to the seventh century or later.)[482] Because the texts explicitly cite Xinxing as an authority, it is reasonable to classify them as 'Three Levels texts.' Moreover, the texts share the theme of 'contemplating' (*guan* 觀) buddha-nature, and have parallels in their structure and phrasing. It is possible, therefore, that these texts emerged from a shared milieu or were produced by the same group of Xinxing's followers. This group may have been somewhat distinct from the groups that produced the other texts we have surveyed. The *guan* 觀 texts have many features that set them apart from other texts by Xinxing's followers; these features include a marked interest in meditative phenomenology (including *abhidharma*-inflected physio-psychological analysis) and a willingness to cite a wide array of treatises in addition to sutraic scripture. Among post-Xinxing texts, the *guan* 觀 texts are unique in their tone and structure. They lack the rigid structure of commentaries like the *Secret Records* and the *Inexhaustible Explanation*, as well as the fervent tone of the 'Account of the Dhyāna Master' and the *Treatise*. Instead, in measured, discursive prose, these texts attempt to explain one of Xinxing's central injunctions: to universally revere (*pujing* 普敬) other beings as if they were buddhas. The exegetical function of the *guan* 觀 texts is obvious—Xinxing consistently enjoins his followers to recognize others as buddhas, but his extant texts offer almost no comments about how this practice should be implemented or what this practice entails for the psychology of the practitioner. The *guan* 觀 texts step in where Xinxing's own texts are silent.

The *guan* 觀 texts are rich articulations of a unique Three Levels contemplative practice; their comments on the theory and praxis of contemplation deserve further study. Here, however,

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[479] This text was first identified as possibly a Three Levels text by Wang Zhongmin in 1962 and by Gernet in 1970; Gernet suggested that it might be part of the *Secret Records*, although Nishimoto shows decisively that this is not the case (Nishimoto 1998, 216). The text is transcribed at Nishimoto 1998, 623–646.
[480] Parts of this text were first identified by Yabuki, who transcribed and published them under the name 'Four Buddhas of the Universal Dharma' 普法四佛 (Nishimoto 1998, 205). Hubbard translates Yabuki's fragment of this text in Hubbard 2001, 247–256. This text has exerted enormous influence on scholarly representations of the Three Levels, although, much like the 'Account of the Dhyāna Master,' it is unclear how well this text represents Xinxing's own thought, and to what degree its positions were shared among Xinxing's followers. Nishimoto has pieced together several manuscript attestations of this text to produce a much more complete version. His transcription can be found at Nishimoto 1998, 609–621.
[481] This text was first firmly identified by Nishimoto; his transcription can be found at Nishimoto 1998, 650–658.
[482] Nishimoto 1998, 227.

we are mainly interested in the *guan* 觀 texts for the evidence they can provide about how Xinxing's scriptural project intersected with later Three Levels discourse on contemplation. It is clear that all three texts are deeply grounded in Xinxing's thought and teaching; we find many restatements of Xinxing's convictions about scriptural authority, error, demonic interference, and the danger of maligning. All three texts abound in citations of sutraic scriptures.[483] The *Brief Explanation* stresses that the reason for seeing beings as buddhas is that this 'universal' teaching allows one to remedy degraded beings' inability to recognize (*shi* 識) the difference between right and wrong, and between correct preachers of the dharma and incorrect preachers of the dharma.[484] The *Detailed Explanation* emphasizes that different scriptures use different names for buddha-nature, but Xinxing's taxonomy allows us to see these usages as outgrowths expressions of a unitary, underlying concept.[485] Embracing the 'universal' contemplation of beings' buddha-nature thus protects one from demonic interference, for demons cannot disorder the universal.[486] Two of the *guan* 觀 texts, the *Brief Explanation* and *Seeing Buddha Nature*, also cite Xinxing's 'collected records' as if they were authoritative scriptures.[487] The *guan* 觀 texts, therefore, are clearly heirs to many of Xinxing's textual and hermeneutic preoccupations, and see his texts in much the same way as Xinxing himself saw them—as authoritative redactions of authoritative scripture.

These texts do depart from Xinxing's conception of scriptural authority in several ways, however. First, the texts all cite treatises as well as sutraic scripture as authorities. The *Detailed Explanation* cites the *Dazhi du lun* 大智度論,[488] the *Brief Explanation* cites several treatises and commentaries,[489] and *Seeing Buddha Nature* cites a Mādhyamika treatise[490] and the *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith*.[491] These specific texts—as well as treatises and commentaries in general—are never cited in Xinxing's extant texts or in other later Three Levels texts. *Seeing Buddha Nature* also spends almost ninety lines identifying scriptural passages on buddha-nature and declaring that they are incorrect. (E.g.: "One sometimes sees passages of scripture that say that buddha-nature is ultimate emptiness. This is to understand [buddha-nature] as emptiness—and this framework is incorrect." 或見經文道佛性者名第一義空，即作空解者，是義不然。)[492]

The most interesting extension of Xinxing's project is visible in *Seeing Buddha Nature*. There, the author strains to articulate the act of seeing another as the buddha in the terminology of meditative visualization. One must produce a 'proper' visualization. Failure to do so will 'obstruct the path,' which will inevitably lead to *maligning*. The text states:

> 又作佛性觀須知境普別上下內外淺深邪正。若不解者途費功夫。……

[483] Our fragment of the *Brief Explanation* opens with a series of scriptural citations (Nishimoto 1998, 609–610); *Seeing Buddha Nature* ends with such a series (Nishimoto 1998, 657).
[484] Nishimoto 1998, 618.
[485] Nishimoto 1998, 619.
[486] Nishimoto 1998, 618.
[487] Nishimoto 1998, 644, 657.
[488] Nishimoto 1998, 614.
[489] Nishimoto 1998, 645.
[490] Nishimoto 1998, 650.
[491] Nishimoto 1998, 655.
[492] Nishimoto 1998, 652.

又若於境上見不淨，即解二乘縛。濃血身相迷凡夫為煩惱障，四大名相迷二乘是為智障。會須心境調停，莫為人天二乘三障迷縛。然可出離，仍須見佛性境界。

Moreover, when you contemplate the buddha-nature, one must understand whether the object [of the contemplation] is universal or particular, higher or lower, inner or outer, shallow or profound, correct or incorrect. If one does not understand [this], then one exerts one's effort in vain….[493] Moreover, if one sees the object as impure, then one loosens the fetter of the Two Vehicles. When the blood and the body-characteristic is lost in worldling-ness, this is an afflictive obstruction; when the Four Elements and the *nāma*-characteristic are lost in the Two Vehicles, this is the wisdom-obstruction. [In this case] one needs the mental object to be tamed and settled; do not be confused or fettered by the Three Obstructions of men-and-gods and the Two Vehicles. Even if one can get away [from these obstructions], one must still see the object that is the buddha-nature.[494]

故知，於境上作佛性解，即為清淨智。又若不作佛性觀，即十二種顛倒常起不滅。何以故。由其心顛倒常錯不謬故。以心顛倒故，所出言不稱法性，所以常行誹謗語，乃至能成七種大損，趣向兩遍[495]十方一切阿鼻地獄。若作佛性觀，即十二顛倒常滅不起……生正覺牙。[496]

Know, therefore, that if one sees the object as the buddha-nature, this is a pure cognition. If one does not produce the contemplation of the buddha-nature, then the twelve inversions will permanently arise and not pass away. Why? Because the mind is inverted and permanently in error (錯謬).[497] Because the mind is inverted, the words one speaks will not proclaim the dharma-nature, and so one will permanently engage in malignant speech, and even accomplish the seven kinds of great harms; one will go toward the *avīci* hells of the ten directions. If one performs the contemplation of the buddha-nature, then the twelve inversions will be permanently extinguished and never arise, and one will give rise to the sprouts of correct awakening.

Thus, *Seeing the Buddha-Nature* lays out a precise theoretical account of how Xinxing's practice of universal reverence allows degraded beings to avoid error, escape maligning, and thereby achieve awakening. That account, however, demands that the practitioner engage in contemplation in precisely the correct way. In order to *really* see the buddha-nature, the practitioner must *know* the object (須知境), including whether it is, among other distinctions, correct or incorrect (普別上下內外淺深邪正). These are precisely the distinctions that Xinxing insists the degraded being *cannot* make; for Xinxing, seeing the buddha-nature in other beings is a way of *avoiding* making such distinctions. But *Seeing the Buddha-Nature* insists that, in order to see correctly, the practitioner must be capable of making such distinctions. Perhaps

[493] Reading 徒 for 途. See Nishimoto 1998, 655fn23.
[494] Nishimoto 1998, 655.
[495] The meaning of the phrase 兩遍 is uncertain, and I omit it from the translation of this line.
[496] Nishimoto 1998, 656.
[497] Omitting the 不; cf. Nishimoto 1998, 654fn30.

inadvertently, *Seeing the Buddha-Nature* takes Xinxing's solution to the skeptical dilemma of scriptural interpretation and introduces the seeds of a parallel skeptical dilemma of meditative interpretation. Although we do not possess the complete text, nor do we possess any evidence for the reception of *Seeing the Buddha-Nature*, one wonders if the text's reintroduction of the necessity of discernment would have led, eventually, to deconstructive attacks on the very possibility of meditative attainment.[498]

Conclusion

In the foregoing chapter, we have surveyed six sources or sets of sources for the later reception of Xinxing's project. Those sources were likely produced by separate, possibly hostile factions of Xinxing's followers. Unsurprisingly, in many points, these sources are highly divergent. However, a few common themes emerge. All of these sources revere Xinxing's writings, treating them as if they are as or more authoritative than received Buddhist scripture. With the exception of the Jinchuanwan cave site and the three *guan* 觀 texts, all of our sources explicitly grant Xinxing an exalted spiritual status and use that status to explain why his texts are important and why his practices are effective. As we saw in the previous chapter, Xinxing's work received vicious criticism from some of his peers, who accused him of mutilating Buddhist scripture in order to realize his own, personal vision. We might conjecture that Xinxing's followers felt themselves quite vulnerable to these attacks. Rather than defend Xinxing's writings on their merits, most of them bolster their credibility by deferring to Xinxing's unique spiritual status. In at least one case (that of the *Treatise*), the deification of Xinxing coincides with a radical attack on the very idea that scripture is comprehensible. One of the *guan* 觀 texts (*Seeing the Buddha-Nature*) seems to try to escape from the dilemma of scriptural interpretation by shifting focus to meditative visions; it is already clear in that text, however, that this shift in emphasis merely defers—rather than resolves—the interpretive dilemmas that preoccupied Xinxing.

The evolving reception of Xinxing's work by his later followers thus attests to a slowly ramifying hermeneutic crisis. Xinxing identified an interpretive problem internal to Buddhist scripture itself—scripture sometimes suggests that beings of the latter age are entirely lacking in the ability to correctly discriminate categories; such discrimination is essential to understand scripture; given that, how can we be certain that we are interpreting scripture correctly? How can we be certain that we interpret *ourselves* correctly? Xinxing proposed a unique solution to this problem—he attempted to identify scriptural passages that, effectively interpreted themselves; he then combined these passages, resulting in a complex compilation that purported to maintain the efficacy of the Buddha's teaching for degraded beings lacking in discernment. Xinxing's followers evince a profound anxiety about the authority undergirding this project. Are Xinxing's texts the outgrowths of the Buddha, or his own creations? Are they appendages of scripture? Are they scripture itself? Do they *supersede* scripture? They attempt to solve this problem in various ways. In all cases, however, they remain firmly enmeshed in Xinxing's skeptical dilemma. The enormous creative energy brought to bear on escaping this dilemma may help us to account for the controversy and influence that shadow Xinxing and his followers throughout the Sui and Tang dynasties.

[498] See Greene 2021 for an explanation of a very similar dynamic in earlier meditation texts.

Chapter Five: Conclusion and the Statusy of Scriptural Authority in the Sixth and Seventh Centuries

Most strands of the Buddhist tradition weight very heavily the authority of written Buddhist texts, particularly texts attributable to a buddha like Śākyamuni. Such texts clearly include sutraic material (generally labeled by Chinese Buddhists with the preexisting Chinese term *jing* 經) and vinaya material (generally labeled *lü* 律). Many Buddhists also place great emphasis on texts with more uncertain connections to the figure of the Buddha, including commentaries and abhidharma treatises (often conflated in Buddhist Chinese as *lun* 論), to say nothing of compilations of rituals, records of prophecies, and tantric texts. We should emphasize, however, that the authority of such texts varies from place to place and changes with time. The identity of the authoritative text or set of texts fluctuates; the relative ranking of different types of authoritative text also changes. In some times and places, abhidharma subordinates all else; in other circumstances, tantric texts call the tune. Charting the modifications in the identity of authoritative scriptures and the nature of those scriptures' authority should be one of the major tasks for a historian of any Buddhist tradition.

In pre-modern China, the contents and nature of the Buddhist scriptural corpus underwent several major shifts. One such shift took place during the sixth and early seventh centuries, roughly coinciding with Xinxing's lifetime. This shift represents the culmination of a crisis of scriptural authority that had been building since the early fifth century. To speak very generally, the fifth century witnessed the introduction of vast numbers of Buddhist texts (particularly sutraic texts) into China in the form of translations of unprecedented grace, facility, and comprehensibility—Kumārajīva alone translated more than seventy texts into Chinese in the early fifth century, many for the first time.[499] This generation of translators favored Mahāyāna sutras, and major Chinese Buddhist thinkers from this period evince an uncritical acceptance of the efficacy and coherence of sutraic texts in general.[500] Already by the late fifth century, however, Chinese Buddhists demonstrate increasing unease with the coherence of sutraic literature. We might view Chinese Buddhists' fervent reliance on the *Chengshi lun* 成實論 and the *Dazhi du lun* 大智度論—both of which function for fifth- and early sixth-century Buddhists as preeminent commentaries on the Mahāyāna tradition—as evidence of growing dissatisfaction with plain readings of sutraic literature. I would conjecture that intense interest in meditation manuals and strategies of visionary repentance in fifth century China also reflects concerns about sutra literature.[501]

By the middle of the sixth century, Chinese Buddhists began to engage quite critically with received sutraic literature. Great scholiasts like Zhiyi, Jizang, and Jingying Huiyuan adopted innovative commentarial techniques (often lumped together, then and now, under the heading of *panjiao* 判教, 'grading the teachings') to provide a framework for reconciling contradictions in sutra literature. While *panjiao* exegesis is often seen as a sign of scripture's preeminence in sixth-century China, its widespread adoption also implicitly suggests that the greatest theorists of Chinese Buddhism no longer felt that the received canon was straightforwardly coherent—a specific commentarial apparatus is necessary to make the canon comprehensible and internally non-contradictory. Meanwhile, thinkers like Huisi and Daochuo

[499] See Buswell 2004, 'Kumārajīva.'
[500] See especially Zurcher 1972, 195–198, 208, 229.
[501] See Greene 2013 and Greene 2021.

raised doubts about whether all the teachings contained in scripture remained efficacious, suggesting that spatial and temporal distance from the Buddha may have impaired the Dharma's efficacy. For these latter figures, self-confident engagement with Buddhist sutras coincided with a full-blown skepticism about the relevance and comprehensibility of their content. Thus, in sixth-century China, scripture in general (rather than specific translations of specific scriptures) seems to have become embroiled in a burgeoning crisis of authority.[502]

Xinxing's writings are often compared to those of other sixth-century thinkers. Both modern historians and pre-modern Chinese Buddhist commentators have occasionally classified Xinxing's writings as *panjiao* texts, although this classification is imprecise and misleading.[503] Much more often, Xinxing's writings have been classified as instantiations of "Final Dharma Thought" (*mappō shisō* 末法思想). This classification, too, is imprecise and misleading.[504]

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[502] See Chappell 1980 for an overview.

[503] There are instances of Chinese-, Japanese-, and English-language scholarship that classify Xinxing's work as a system of 'grading the teachings.' Examples include Hubbard 2001, 18, *passim*, and Lin 1980, 355. In at least one case, a Tang-era scholiast interpreted Xinxing's thought as a form of *panjiao* 判教. (See Fazang's remarks on Xinxing in his *Huayan yisheng jiaoyi fenqi zhang* 華嚴一乘教義分齊章, T.1866.45.481a10, *passim*.) As many scholars have pointed out, however, we should be wary about labelling Xinxing's system in this way. Xinxing himself never uses the term; his system also clearly lacks certain interpretive criteria shared by practitioners of *panjiao* systems, including the idea that the primary unit of analysis is the complete scripture (Xinxing's preferred level of analysis is the passage or sentence) and the idea that the Buddha's teachings should be stratified, in part, according to abstract philosophical principles (in general, Xinxing does not sort passages by their perceived philosophical content; rather, he sorts them according to evidence of their intended audience provided intratextually by the Buddha or *nidāna* frame story).

[504] Many of Xinxing's assumptions about scripture are entangled with his anxiety about sixth-century China's physical and temporal distance from the historical Buddha. Xinxing shares this anxiety with many of his contemporaries. This anxiety—which really reflects a perceived crisis of Buddhist scriptural authority in sixth-century China—has come to be closely associated with theories of 'the Final Dharma,' or '*mofa* 末法.' In Japanese Buddhism, a specific formal theory of Dharmic decline—the 'tripartite model'—became immensely influential, and modern Japanese scholarship continues to interpret many aspects of Sui and Tang Chinese Buddhism as reflections or instantiations of "Final Dharma Thought" (*mappō shisō* 末法思想). The tripartite model posits three stages in the devolution of the Dharma: a period of the 'Correct Dharma' (*zhengfa* 正法), a period of 'Semblance Dharma' (*xiangfa* 像法), and a period of 'Final Dharma' (*mofa* 末法). Even among adherents of this tripartite model, there is immense variation in the lengths of time each period is held to span, the years in which each period is held to begin and end, and the perceived consequences for Buddhist orthodoxy and orthopraxis that each period entails. (For a careful study of the philological history of the tripartite theory and its relationship to other theories of dharmic decline, see Nattier 1991.)

Because of the sophistication and influence of Japanese Buddhology, Buddhologists working in many languages (including English, Chinese, and Japanese) have interpreted Xinxing and his movement as proponents of a kind of "Final Dharma Thought." Moreover, because Xinxing's typology of the 'Three Levels' (*sanjie* 三階) of Buddhist practitioners partially indexes these groups of practitioners to particular spans of time following the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, early scholars of the Three Levels movement conjectured that Xinxing subscribed to the tripartite model of Dharmic decline that achieved preeminence in Japan. We now know that this conjecture is incorrect—Xinxing was not an adherent of the 'tripartite model.' Nor did Xinxing feel that the Buddha's dharma had disappeared or would disappear, as some 'Final Dharma' thinkers insisted. Instead, Xinxing located 'decline' or 'failure' entirely in the spiritual faculties of Buddhist practitioners—it was not the Buddha's dharma that was failing, but instead the character and aptitude of the dharma's readers and users. (For a careful reconsideration of the correspondence between Xinxing's 'Three Levels' and the tripartite model, see Hubbard 2001, 76–78. Hubbard's discussion of the 'Rhetoric of Decline' is an insightful and needed corrective to overly schematic understandings of 'Final Dharma Thought' in China [see Hubbard 2001, 36–98].)

We should be careful, therefore, about using the lens of the "Final Dharma" (*mofa* 末法) to interpret the Three Levels. Xinxing almost never uses the term *mofa* 末法, and his theory of the problems encountered by

Xinxing and his followers do not use the terms *panjiao* 判教 or *mofa* 末法 to describe their project or their doctrines—for the very good reason that, despite certain commonalities, they diverge from these other projects in essential ways—and assimilating Xinxing's project to these received scholarly categories will obscure more than it reveals. It is more useful to think of Xinxing's project as a peer, rather than an instance, of these other important strands of Buddhist tradition. Xinxing, the *panjiao* exegetes, and the theorists of *mofa* are united by a shared problem—a crisis of scriptural authority. They are divided by radically different proposals for resolving that crisis.

In some ways, Xinxing represents a radical union of the *panjiao* exegetes and the *mofa* eschatologists: he combines the scholiasts' implicit anxiety about the coherence of scripture with Huisi's conviction that received teachings are no longer straightforwardly efficacious. In his writings, Xinxing articulates this combination of anxieties by raising skeptical attacks on the idea that an ordinary person can discern (*bie* 別) between the work of 'demons' (*mo* 魔) and 'buddhas' (*fo* 佛). Throughout Buddhist scripture, we find points where the Buddha predicts that, in a future age, beings will not be able to distinguish between the True Dharma of the Buddha and false dharmas devised by demons to lead them astray. Xinxing's project begins in an attempt to take these predictions seriously—what if we radically doubted our ability to understand scripture? How, really, can we tell the difference between the True Dharma and the demonic dharma? How can we tell the difference between a dharma-preacher who speaks the truth, and an impure dharma-preacher who will lead us astray? In his *Meditations*, Descartes famously imagined that an evil demon was distorting his senses. To defend against this skeptical conceit, he attempted to devise a method that would allow him to sort uncertain sense impressions from certain ones. Similarly, Xinxing uses his conceit of a 'demonic dharma' as a launching pad for a project of rescuing Buddhist scripture from uncertainty and doubt. To defeat the specter of skepticism raised by the 'demonic dharma,' Xinxing imagines that the Buddha himself can reach out through scripture and explain how scripture is to be interpreted, sorted, and ordered. Xinxing's later texts are products of his attempt to allow scripture's true form to reveal itself. The result was an idiosyncratic but highly systematic set of writings. Far from being a religious populist, overt iconoclast, or anti-scripturalist, Xinxing must be considered one of the preeminent textualists and system-builders in Northern China during the sixth century.

As we have seen, however, Xinxing's reformulation of the scriptural corpus was not well received. It is clear that, to outsiders, Xinxing's treatment of scripture was one of the most objectionable features of his movement. Xinxing's followers also seem to have become uneasy with Xinxing's justification for his writings. Rather than accept that Xinxing's taxonomy was implicit within scripture, placed there by the Buddha himself, many of Xinxing's later followers simply proclaimed Xinxing an advanced bodhisattva. Such a status rendered Xinxing's recompilations authoritative in their own right. In some cases, Xinxing's followers seem to have despaired of the possibility of understanding scripture at all. Later Three Levels works like the *Treatise* state directly that received scripture is not understandable; the *Treatise* implies that scripture possesses no authority at all. Instead, authority resides only with Xinxing.

The trajectory of scriptural thought in Xinxing's writings and the writings of Xinxing's followers thus moves from an interpretive skepticism (Xinxing's demon and the danger of maligning the dharma) to a proposed solution that makes scripture fundamental but tightly

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contemporaneous Buddhist practitioners has many quirks and idiosyncrasies that distinguish it from other instantiations of so-called "Final Dharma Thought."

controlled (Xinxing's reformulation of the scriptural corpus) to attempts to defend that solution on its merits (e.g., the presentation of the *Secret Records*) to the admission that that solution is not defensible on its own terms and the consequent adoption of a sort of scriptural nihilism (the *Treatise*). This motion from scriptural fundamentalism to scriptural nihilism over the course of the sixth and seventh centuries raises several future research questions. Xinxing and his followers identified and grappled with a skeptical challenge to the authority of scripture; to what extant was this skeptical challenge recognized and contended with *outside* of Xinxing's movement? Is it possible that early proponents of Chan ideology were, in part, responding to the same skeptical problem identified by Xinxing? Is it possible that Xuanzang's attempt to renew the Buddhist scriptural transmission by traveling to India was, likewise, a response to the same problem?[505] Finally, to what extent did Xinxing's proposed codification of the Buddhist scriptural corpus invite the ire of the imperial authorities? Could it be that imperial authorities came to see Xinxing's reformulation of Buddhist canon as a usurpation of their own authority to curate and transmit Buddhist literature in China?[506] Indeed, is it possible that certain innovations in Buddhist bibliography emerge, in part, as a response to the ambiguous quality of Xinxing's writings? Pursuing these questions should allow us to understand even more firmly the place of Xinxing and his followers in the history of Sui-Tang Buddhism.

[505] Xuanzang's biography in the *Xu gaoseng zhuan* includes the revealing comment that, upon his arrival at Bodhgaya, Xuanzang saw what he had previously only read in scripture: "What he had previously learned from scripture was now clear before his own eyes" 昔聞經說，今宛目前。 (T.2060.50.451a8). On journeys to India as attempts to overcome deficits in scripture, see Chen 2013. Polemical attacks on Xuanzang and his writings in some Three Levels texts (particularly the *Treatise*) suggest that later followers of Xinxing in fact saw Xuanzang's renewed scriptural transmission as a direct threat to their own project.

[506] Lewis 1990 raises this possibility, although he does not explain why Xinxing and the Three Levels aggravated the imperial authorities while other groups (e.g., early Pure Land thinkers) did not.

Appendix A: Dialogue on the Harms and Benefits of the Universal (*pu* 普) Teaching and the Particular (*bie* 別) Teaching From *Practice Matched to Faculties*[507]

[Q1] 問，普別兩教俱是佛說，若欲行學，畏有捐者，何經廣說。
Question: the two teachings, universal and particular, are both the words of the Buddha. If you were going to practice and study them, but feared injury, what scriptures discuss it in detail?

[A1] 答，多經說。若欲具足知者，今具出之。有六部經說行學別法。損益者有/148/二義，一者學解，二者學行。
Answer: many scriptures discuss it, and if you want to know all about it, then I will lay it all out for you now. There are six scriptures that discuss the study and practice of the Particular Teaching. With regard to 'harm' and 'benefit,' there are two issues. One: study of the understanding. Two: study of the practice.

[A1.1] 第一解者，有二種，一損、二益。
First, understanding, of which there are two kinds. One: harm. Two: benefit.

[A1.1.1] 第一明損者，有三。
First: harm, of which there are three.[508]

[A1.1.1.2] 如涅槃經說，讀得十二部經、誦得十二部經亦不免謗佛、作一闡提業、現身墮阿鼻地獄。
As the *Nirvana Sutra* explains. In reading the twelve kinds of scripture, and reciting the twelve kinds of scripture, one also inevitably maligns the Buddha, engages in the karmic acts of the *icchantika*, and falls into the *avīci* hells in the present lifetime.

[A1.1.1.2] 二者如大集經說，大乘小乘各各誦得八萬四千法聚，由嫌他學十二頭陁比丘即滅尒許時誦經善根盡，墮阿鼻地獄具受諸苦，出地獄已受羅剎身，現身值佛亦不得授記，即於佛前發大誓言，寧受地獄苦，不生人道，我從无始已來生自在家、聰慧、利根、自高、輕他、遏善、揚惡，以斯業障逕歷諸趣具受苦惱。
Two: as the *Great Collection Scripture* explains. Though one memorizes eighty-four thousand groupings of the teachings of both the Greater and the Lesser Vehicle, because of resenting other *bhikṣus* who study the twelve *dhūtas*, one destroys utterly the good roots of such times when one recited the scriptures, and one falls into the *avīci* hells and suffers all torments. Emerging from the hells, one takes rebirth as a *rākṣasa*, and though one meets the buddha in that lifetime, one does not receive a prediction [of buddha-hood]. Then, one makes a great vow in the presence of the Buddha, "I would rather experience the torments of hell than be born on the Path of the Human. From beginningless time, I have been born in a free household, intelligent and with keen faculties. I have exalted myself and disparaged others, suppressing their good and highlighting

[507] These two sets of question-and-answer appear in a longer set of question-and-answer sections at the end of *Practice Matched to Faculties*. The section is transcribed at Yabuki 1927, appendix, 147–149. I mark page transitions in the transcription here with the page number in forward slashes (e.g., /148/).
[508] There appear to be only two subsections, rather than the promised three. 三 may be a scribal error for 二 .

their evil. Because of these karmic obstructions, I will pass through the [evil] destinies, suffering all torments."

[A1.1.2] 第二明益者，亦有二種。
Second: benefit, of which there are two kinds.

[A1.1.2.1] 一者，如勝鬘經說。若人於恒沙劫修菩提行，不如有人執持經卷，何况有能具足受持、廣為人說，其福甚多不可思議。
One: as the *Scripture of Śrīmālādevī* explains, even if people cultivate the practices of *bodhi* for *kalpas* [as numerous as] the sands of the Ganges, they would not be as good as people who maintain the scriptures. How much the more for one with the capability of completely upholding [the scriptures] and extensively preaching them for people? Their blessings would be extremely numerous, inconceivable.

[A.1.1.2.2] 二者，如涅槃經說。一聞大乘經永不生四惡趣。
Two: as the *Nirvana Sutra* explains. Once one hears the scriptures of the Greater Vehicle, one is not reborn in the Four Evil Destinies.

[A1.2] 第二段學行者，有二種。一者行，二者度生。
Second section: studying practices, of which there are two kinds. One: practice. Two: liberating beings.

[A1.2.1] 第一行者，有二種。
First, practice, of which there are two kinds.

[A1.2.1.1] 一者，值佛。於佛前无量无邊劫行六波羅蜜，捨頭目髓骨，不免謗佛，墮阿鼻地鼻獄，如摩訶衍經說。
One: meeting with the Buddha. Practicing the six *pāramitās* for immeasurable, unlimited *kalpas* in the presence of the Buddha, abandoning one's head, eyes, and bones, one inevitably maligns the Buddha and falls into the *avīci* hells, as the *Mahayana Scripture* explains.

[A1.2.1.2] 二者，坐得四禪，斷欲界煩惱亦不免謗佛、墮阿鼻地獄，如涅槃經說。
Two: sitting and attaining the four *dhyānas*, cutting off the afflictions of the Desire Realm, one still inevitably falls into the *avīci* hells, as the *Nirvana Sutra* explains.

[A1.2.1.3] 三者[509]，大精進、大懺悔、大持戒、大不自是非他、不自高輕他。有尒許解行，佛猶不攝，是无慚愧，如十輪經說。
Three: great vigor, great repentance, great discipline, greatly not affirming oneself and denying others, not exalting oneself and disparaging others—those who have such understandings and practices, but are still not brought in by the Buddha, are the shameless monks. As the *Scripture of the Ten Wheels* explains.

[A1.2.2] 第二度生者，有二種。

[509] The beginning of this section suggests that there should be only two subsections, rather than three.

Second: liberating beings, of which there are two kinds.

[A1.2.2.1] 一者，度得九十六種異學外道，廻心向涅槃，非佛弟子，无慚愧僧攝。
One: one who liberates the [followers of] the External Paths and the Ninety-Six Kinds of Alternate Studies, turning their mind towards nirvana, but who denies the disciples of the Buddha—[such a person] is included among the shameless monks.

[A1.2.2.2] 二者，門徒弟子檀越度得六百四萬億，謗佛弟子學真法比丘，與弟子及與檀越同墮十方一/149/切阿鼻地獄，出即隨出，入即隨入，如佛藏經說。
Two: one liberates followers, disciples, and *dānapatis* to the number of six hundred four myriad million, but maligns the disciples of the Buddha, the *bhikṣus* who study the true dharma. One will, along with disciples and *dānapatis*, fall together into the *avīci* hells of the Ten Directions. When [the teacher] emerges, [the disciples and *dānapatis*] will emerge as well, and when [the teacher] enters [the hells], [the disciples and *dānapatis*] will enter as well. As the *Scripture of the Buddha-Treasury* explains.

所學別解行損已廣說竟。
The detailed explanation of the harms of the particular understandings and practices studied has ended.

[A1.c[510]] 行學普法淳益无損者，有三種。
Practicing and studying the universal dharma is purely beneficial and devoid of harm. There are three issues.

[A1.c.1] 一者，自身見破戒惡，他身見如來藏佛性善，得受信心檀越、飲食、衣服、臥具種各十萬不足為多，如涅槃經說。
One: one sees oneself as possessed of the evil of destroying the precepts, while one sees others as possessed of the goodness that is the Treasury of the Thus-Come One, of the Buddha-Nature, and [thinks it] insufficient for them to obtain a myriad each of faithful *dānapatis*, of comestibles, of garments, and of bedding. As the *Nirvana Sutra* explains.

[A1.c.2] 二者，行不輕行。增上慢四眾，莫問善惡、邪正、俱敬作當來佛，從是以後世世值佛乃至成佛。淳有說益，不說有損，乃至打罵者。損少、益多，後得入菩提道。
Two: engaging in the practice of non-disparagement. As for the overly-prideful four assemblies, regardless of whether they are good or evil, incorrect or correct, one venerates them as the Buddha-To-Come, as from this moment on, meeting the Buddha in life after life, and finally becoming accomplishing buddha-hood. It says only that there is benefit [in this], and it does not say that there is harm. Even for those that strike and scold, the harm is small and the benefit is great, and later they will enter into the Path of Bodhi.

[A1.c.3] 三者，如維摩經說明八法，淳說有益，不說有損。我見學此普法，淳益、无損，淳善、无惡，故知生盲凡夫不識邪正唯合行普淳益无損法，不合行別，損益俱者。

[510] This section is a ‘concluding section’ to the list that I’ve labelled ‘A1;’ consequently, I label this section and its branches as ‘A1.c.’ I follow a similar convention throughout this section.

Three: when the *Vimalakīrti Sutra* explains the Eight Teachings, it says that they are purely beneficial, and does not say there they are harmful. I see that, in studying these universal dharmas, it is purely beneficial and not harmful, purely good and not evil. Thus, we know that worldlings who are born blind and do not distinguish between the correct and incorrect are fit only to practice the universally, purely beneficial and non-harmful teachings, and they are not fit to practice the particular, which is possessed of both benefit and harm.

[Q2] 問曰，同是佛法，何因普法學之淳益无損，別法學之即損益俱有，何義。
Question: both, alike, are the buddha-dharma. Why is it that when one studies the universal dharma, it is purely beneficial and not harmful, but when one studies the particular dharma, there is both benefit and harm? What is the meaning of this?

[A2] 答，因根別故，有二義。一普法无病。二別法就根。
Answer: it is because of distinctions in faculties. There are two issues. One: the universal dharma is without sickness. Two: the particular dharma is addressed to [different] faculties.

[A2.1] 普法无病者，如來藏佛性等體是普法，一切凡聖、一切邪正同是一體，更无別法，唯是如來藏。一切凡夫，莫問根機上下，學之淳益无損，不畏邪錯。
'The universal dharma is without sickness.' The Buddha Nature, which is the Treasury of the Thus-Come One, is in essence the universal dharma. Sages and worldlings, the incorrect and the correct, are all alike of a single essence, without any further particular dharma; it is only the Treasury of the Thus-Come One. Worldlings, regardless of whether their faculties are superior or inferior, may study it with pure benefit and no harm, and without fear of mistakes.

[A2.2] 別法就根者，有二義。
'The particular dharma is addressed to [different] faculties.' There are two issues.

[A2.2.1] 一者，對根明淳益无損。但使一切經教內嘆學別法利益者，唯是第一第二兩階、一乘三乘人是別根當位。學法由稱根故淳益、无損。
One: explaining pure benefit and lack of harm in terms of faculties. When, in the teachings in the scriptures, it praises the benefits of studying the particular dharma, it is only the people in the two levels, the first and second, and in the One Vehicle and the Three Vehicles who are in the appropriate rank for the particular. The study of this dharma is purely beneficial and without harm because it matches those faculties.

[A2.2.2] 二者，不當根學別法，淳損、无益。何以故。由不當根下人行上人所行法故。但使一切經教內明學別法損者，皆是學法不當根。
Two: the study of the particular teaching when it does not match the faculties is purely harmful and without benefit. Why? Because, not matched to faculties, the inferior person practices the dharma that is to be practiced by the superior person. When, in the teachings in the scriptures, it explains the harms of studying the particular dharma, they are all [cases] of studying a dharma that does not match one's faculties.

[A2.c] 此兩段義喻說，顛倒眾生若別[511]有損者，喻如盲人射墮，由不見故，射物不着即射殺人，淳損、无益。顛倒眾生若學普法，淳益、无損者，喻如盲人射地，放放皆着，不射殺人，淳益、无損。

Analogical explanation of the principle behind these two sections: the beings of the inversions are harmed when they [study] the particular. It is like a blind person shooting an arrow. Because they do not see, the arrow does not hit its target, and they shoot and kill someone—purely harmful, and not beneficial. If the beings of the inversions study the universal dharma, it is purely beneficial and without harm. It is like a blind person shooting an arrow at the ground. Every shot hits, and they do not shoot and kill anyone—purely beneficial, and not harmful.

[511] In parallel with the following sentence, I read a 學 here.

Appendix B: Discussion of the 'Person Capable of Establishing the Teaching' (能起教人) in the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*[512]

又[513]不輕菩薩等能起教人起教，有多義。
"The establishment of the teaching (起教) by a person capable of establishing the teaching (能起教人) like the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging (不輕菩薩)"—there are many meanings [related to this category].

一者不輕菩薩於佛滅度後起教，
亦名一切聖人隱不現時起教，
亦名佛滅度五百年後起教，
亦名正法滅後/34/起教，
亦名一切十二種最大邪見顛倒眾生有大勢力時、競興滅佛法時起教。
One: the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging establishes the teaching after the Buddha has passed into liberation;
Also articulated as, he establishes the teaching when the sages are hidden and not apparent;
Also articulated as, he establishes the teaching after the five-hundred year period [following] the Buddha's passing into liberation;
Also articulated as, he establishes the teaching after the True Dharma has passed away;
Also articulated as, he establishes the teaching when the twelve kinds of beings possessed of the inversions and possessed of the greatest misconceptions hold great sway, when the rise of conflict has destroyed the buddha-dharma.

准依法華經不輕菩薩品，佛滅度後正法滅後，增上慢比丘有大勢力時，
On the basis of [what it says in] the 'Chapter on the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging' in the *Lotus Sutra*: 'After the Buddha has passed into liberation, after the True Dharma has passed away, when the overly-proud *bhikṣus* hold great sway.'[514]

准依大般涅槃經四依品，佛滅度後聖人隱不現時，邪正品，佛滅度後七百年，邪魔作佛作出家人，
On the basis of [what it says in] the 'Chapter on the Four Reliances' in the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa*: 'After the Buddha has passed into liberation, when the sages are hidden and not apparent'[515] [and on the basis of] the 'Chapter on the Correct and Incorrect' [in the same

[512] The section is transcribed at Yabuki 1927, appendix, 33–38. I mark page transitions in the transcription here with the page number in forward slashes (e.g., /34/).
[513] In the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Three Levels*, *you* 又 often serves simply to mark the introduction of a new category or topic for definition, as is the case here.
[514] Paraphrase of:《妙法蓮華經》卷 6〈常不輕菩薩品 20〉：「最初威音王如來既已滅度，正法滅後，於像法中，增上慢比丘有大勢力。」(CBETA, T09, no. 262, p. 50, c14-16)
[515] Paraphrase of:《大般涅槃經》卷 6〈如來性品 4〉：「善男子！如我先說，正法滅已，毀正戒時，增長破戒。非法盛時。一切聖人隱不現時」(CBETA, T12, no. 374, p. 399, c22-24)

scripture]: ‘Seven hundred years after the Buddha has passed into liberation, perverse demons will appear as buddhas, they will appear as renunciants.’[516]

准依迦葉經第一卷，佛滅度五百年後惡賊狗菩薩，
On the basis of [what it says in] the whole fascicle of the *Scripture of Mahākāśyapa*, ‘Five hundred years after the Buddha’s passing into liberation, the bodhisattvas who are robbers, who are dogs…’[517]

准依摩訶摩耶經第二卷，佛滅度五百年後九十六種道競興，滅佛法，
On the basis of [what it says in] the two fascicles of the *Scripture of Mahāmāyā*, ‘After the five-hundred year [period following] the Buddha’s passing into liberation, the ninety-six kinds of non-Buddhists spring up in contention, destroying the buddha-dharma.’[518]

准依大方廣十輪經第二第四第五第六卷，五濁惡世界，遠離於佛，一切人民皆悉起於斷常、旃[519]陀羅、无慚愧僧、以驢惟狗驢菩薩，
On the basis of [what it says in] the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth fascicles of the *Great Expansive Scripture of the Ten Wheels*, ‘In the baleful world-system of the Five Impurities, far from the Buddha, [among] the people there arise [those who subscribe to] nihilism and eternalism, *caṇḍālas*, shameless monks, and *lüwei-goulü* bodhisattvas.’

准依大薩遮尼揵子經第三卷，於末世正法不行，三種顛倒眾生競興等說，驗之所以得知。
On the basis of what it says in the third fascicle of the *Scripture of Mahāsatya Nirgrantha*, ‘In the age of decline, when the True Dharma does not circulate, when the beings of the three kinds of inversions spring up in contention.’ These [statements] provide evidence, and so we come to know [this category].

二者不輕菩薩唯禮拜增上慢四眾，作學菩薩行想、當來佛想。
Two: the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging simply made obeisance to the overly-prideful Four Assemblies, thinking of them as students of the bodhisattva practices, thinking of them as Buddhas-To-Come.

驗之，即是常唯純徧學觀他一切如來藏佛性、當來佛、佛想佛、普真普正八種佛法，如似金剛與一切虛空大地等，常唯純徧學觀自身一切十二種顛倒，如似金剛與一切虛空大地等。准依法華經不輕菩薩品，准依第三卷第三大段第三段第三子段近初八種佛法，及十三子句內第七子句所引經等說，
The evidence for this is that he always, only, purely, and exclusively studied the contemplation, in others, of the Treasury of the Thus-Come-One, the Buddha-Nature, the Buddha-To-Come, the Buddha-As-Thought, and the eight kinds of buddha-dharma that are universally true and

[516] Paraphrase of: 《大般涅槃經》卷 7〈邪正品 9〉：「我般涅槃七百歲後，是魔波旬漸當壞亂我之正法。譬如獵師身服法衣。魔王波旬亦復如是，作比丘像、比丘尼像、優婆塞像、優婆夷像，亦復化作須陀洹身，乃至化作阿羅漢身及佛色身」(CBETA, T12, no. 375, p. 643, b25-c1)
[517] Can’t find this quotation in T.2027.
[518] 《摩訶摩耶經》卷 2：「六百歲已，九十六種諸外道等邪見競興，破滅佛法。」(CBETA, T12, no. 383, p. 1013, c5-7)
[519] Reading 旃 for 旛

universally correct, as if they were adamant, equal to the sky and the earth. He always, only, purely, and exclusively studied the contemplation, in himself, of the twelve inversions, as if they were adamant, equal to the sky and the earth. On the basis what it says in the 'Chapter on the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging' in the *Lotus Sutra*, and on the basis of [what it says in] the initial eight kinds of buddha-dharma near the beginning of the third subsection of the third section of the third main section in the third fascicle, and [on the basis of what it says in] the scriptures cited in the seventh item in the thirteen items.[520]

亦名常唯純徧學觀一切八種普真普正佛法，
亦名一切八種根本佛法，
亦名一切八種義佛法，
亦名一切八種體佛法，
亦名一切八種條然相別佛法。
此五句准經義推說，
Also articulated as, he always, only, purely, and exclusively studied the contemplation of the eight kinds of buddha-dharma that are universally true and universally correct,
Also articulated as, the eight kinds of fundamental buddha-dharma,
Also articulated as, the eight kinds of principal buddha-dharma,
Also articulated as, the eight kinds of essential buddha-dharma,
Also articulated as, the eight kinds of delimited and mutually distinguished buddha-dharma.
These five items are derived on the basis of the meaning of scripture.

亦名一切八種正因佛性佛法，准依大般涅槃經第廿八卷說，亦名准經義推說。/35/
Also articulated as, the eight kinds of buddha-dharma related to that buddha-nature which is the right cause. [This is] based on what it says in the twenty-eighth fascicle of the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa*, which is to say, derived on the basis of the meaning of scripture.

三者不輕菩薩更不行餘行一行，亦不讀誦經典一偈一句一字，驗之，
亦名常不學一切別真別正佛法，
亦名一切枝條佛法，
亦名一切名佛法，
亦名一切相佛法，
亦名一切同而異佛法，
此五句准經義推說，

[520] References to the 'thirteen items,' and particularly to the 'seventh item in the thirteen items,' occur several times in the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Third Level*. Because we cannot reconstruct the complete structure of the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Third Level*, the exact identity of these thirteen items is somewhat unclear. However, based on internal references in the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Third Level*, as well as the outline of the *Buddha-Dharma of the Third Level* in the *Secret Notes*, it appears that the section in question is preserved toward the end of the extant third fascicle of the Dunhuang *Buddha-Dharma of the Third Level*. The section on the 'eight kinds of buddha-dharma' begins on page 273 with the phrase 又一切八種佛法, while the 'seventh item' begins on page 281 and reads as follows:

七者一切空見有見眾生(已下)文當，求佛、求世間果報、乃至求涅槃。
Seven: The beings who misconceive emptiness and misconceive existence (attested by text), 'Seek buddhahood, seek worldly karmic reward, and even seek nirvana.'

Three: the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging did not practice a single other practice, nor did he recite a verse, a sentence, or a word of the scriptures. (There is evidence for this.)
Also articulated as, he never studied the buddha-dharma that is true in the particular and correct in the particular.
Also articulated as, [he never studied] the subdivided buddha-dharma.
Also articulated as, [he never studied] the nominal buddha-dharma.
Also articulated as, [he never studied] the semblance buddha-dharma.
Also articulated as, [he never studied] the buddha-dharma that is uniform yet distinct.
These five items are derived on the basis of the meaning of scripture.

亦名一切緣因佛性佛法，准依大般涅槃經第廿八卷說，亦名准經義推說，唯除不輕行成就、得六根清淨、更增壽命已去不在其限，
Also articulated as, [he never studied] the buddha-dharma that is the buddha-nature that is the conditional cause. Based on what it says in the twenty-eighth fascicle of the *Great Scripture of the Parinirvāṇa*, which is to say, derived from the meaning of the scriptures. The only exception [to his non-study of these forms of buddha-dharma] being after he had accomplished the practice of non-disparagement, obtained the purification of the six faculties, and extended his lifespan.

何以故，已下所引經俱就最大惡世界，佛滅度後，正法滅後，一切十二種最大邪見顛倒眾生有大勢力時，競興滅佛法時，所說經等說。
What of it? The scriptures below are all scriptures spoken in the most evil world, after the Buddha's passing into liberation, after the destruction of the True Dharma, when the twelve kinds of inverted beings of the greatest misconceptions hold great sway, when conflict has destroyed the buddha-dharma.

/36/……/38/[521]

四者不輕菩薩，由於最大惡世界、惡時、惡眾生內起教故，又由常唯純徧學當一切十二種最大邪見顛倒眾生出世間根機正對治藥、及出世間有緣根機行故，文當、義當，現身即得聞法受持、現身即得六根清淨、現身即得更增壽命已後、即得常值諸佛、從一佛國至一佛國、乃至成佛。准依上能起教人三子句/39/所引經等多部文義具足廣說。
Four: the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging, because he established the teaching [of non-disparagement] in the most baleful world-system, in a baleful time period, and among baleful beings, and moreover because he always, only, purely, and exclusively studied the practice for those with faculties for the transmundane, which is to say, the correctly targeted transmundane antidote matched to the faculties of the twelve kinds of beings possessed of the inversions and the most perverse misconceptions—[because of all that] (attested by text and attested by meaning): in that very lifetime he was able to hear the dharma and maintain it, in that very lifetime he was attained the purification of the six sense faculties, in that very lifetime he attained an increase of his lifespan, and after [all that] he was able to always meet with the buddhas, from one buddha-realm to the next buddha-realm, until he accomplished buddhahood. This is based on what it discusses in detail in the text and meaning of the many scriptures cited in the foregoing three sections on the 'person capable of establishing the teaching.'

[521] There follows here a lengthy discussion of the ways in which each scripture should be interpreted as, in fact, discussing the practice of non-disparagement. I omit this here.

Appendix C: On the Usage of the Term 'Canon' in Literary Studies

How literature and its practitioners should be graded, ranked, and assessed is a perennial question for critics, writers, and educators. Such debates alternate regularly between moments of dormancy and states of frenetic controversy,[522] but they appear to be regular features of culture. The instantiation of this debate in the Anglophone sphere of arts and letters has been mired in sustained, interlocking controversies regarding interpretation and literary curricula since the early 1960s.[523] Today, literary scholars and even the broader public understand these controversies as comprising the issue of 'the cultural/literary canon'—the set of works culled from the overwhelming mass of our cultural products that should be taught to students in the university curriculum, either to assimilate them to a cultural and aesthetic norm,[524] or to 'give voice to' the diverse constituents of our population.[525] Discussion of this topic is invariably contentious, and today the literature as a whole is often referred to as the 'canon debate' or the 'canon wars.'[526] (The 'canon wars' are often placed in relation to a broader 'culture war' in

[522] The succession of these debates provides a useful structure for the history of any given culture, and many useful studies of particular cultural spheres have taken this structure as their skeleton. See, e.g., Hubbell 1972 for one such history of American arts and letters, or Bol 1992 for a representative history of Tang/Song China.

[523] These controversies have two intertwined origins. The first was a rebellion against the once-dominant New Criticism developed by poetry critics like T.S. Eliot, William Empson and Cleanth Brooks (see Eliot 1944, Empson 1930, and Brooks 1947). The New Critics promoted a formalist methodology for interpreting literature (mainly poetry) that focused on the text as a self-contained unit. They also sketched a theory of 'the classic'—that is, what made a text worth interpreting in the first place (see Eliot 1944). Both of these elements of their program came under fire starting in the 1960s. (See, e..g., Jauss' Gadamerian alternative to the New Criticism, 'reception criticism' [Jauss 1970]. See Eagleton 1983 for a 'Marxist' approach.) The second was the cultural and pedagogical impact of the Civil Rights Movement, multiculturalism and feminism, which prompted some university professors to promote the teaching of works from outside 'the great tradition'—works by and about women, the working class, and racial minorities, especially African Americans. (See Lauter 1991 for an account of some of these early debates, as well as examples of the kind of scholarship they produced. See Gates 1992 for mature attempts to reckon with African American literature's place in the canon, and Mukherjee 2013 for an interrogation of the concept of a 'post-colonial' canon.)

[524] This is the understanding of the function of 'canon' undergirding Bloom's *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (Bloom 1994).

[525] This understanding is brought out in Gates' work: "[T]he teaching of literature *is* the teaching of values; not inherently, no, but contingently, yes; it is—it has become—the teaching of an aesthetic and political order, in which no women or people of color were ever able to discover the reflection or representation of their images, or hear the resonances of their cultural voices" (Gates 1992, 35). John Guillory has provided a useful summary of this view and its political and sociological implications in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Guillory 1993, 6–9).

[526] See, e.g., Witt 2000, Gorak 2001.

American public life.[527]) Reflection on these debates is sometimes called 'canon studies.'[528] Curiously, 'literary canon' and related locutions were almost never used in this way before the mid-70s, and only very rarely until 1978/79. The usage exploded in the 80s, becoming the dominant way of referring to these debates and displacing earlier, distinct senses of the term 'canon.'[529] In this essay, I will briefly outline how and when this usage of 'canon' was introduced to literary studies.

Before the 70s, 'canon' had two dominant senses for scholars of literature. The first was a way of describing the definitive collection of authentic works by a given writer. This usage yields, for example, the 'Shakespeare canon' or 'the canon of Chaucer.'[530] The second was a synonym for the 'standard' or 'criterion' employed by a literary critic. This canon was the 'canon of criticism,' by which the critic performed his customary office: pronouncing on the value, worth, or rank of a given text, author, or literary genre. It is in this sense that Eliot writes in 1919, "[The poet] will be aware also that he must inevitably be judged by the standards of the past...not judged to be as good as, or worse or better than, the dead; and certainly not judged by the *canons* [i.e., standards of judgment] of dead critics. [Emphasis mine.]"[531,532] While both of

[527] Documents that link curricular debates ('the canon war') to a wider 'culture war' include Bennett 1984 and Bloom 1987. These neo-conservative works articulate the stakes of the debate in terms of 'the humanities,' 'the liberal arts,' and 'democratic citizenship.' A New Left formulation of the canon's place in the culture war can be found in a 1984 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* quoted in Kermode 1989: "The dominant concern of literary studies during the rest of the nineteen-eighties will be literary theory. Especially important will be the use of theory informed by the work of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida to gain insights into the cultures of blacks and women. In fact the convergence of feminist and Afro-American theoretical formulations offers the most challenging nexus for scholarship in the coming years. Specifically the most exciting and insightful accounts of expressive culture in general and creative writing in particular will derive from efforts that employ feminist and Afro-American approaches to the study of texts by Afro-American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Sonia Sanchez, Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison...Such theoretical accounts of the cultural products of race and gender will help to undermine the half-truths that white males have established as constituting American culture as a whole. One aspect of that development will be the continued reshaping of the literary canon as forgotten, neglected or suppressed texts are re-discovered. Literary theory is also full of disruptive and deeply political potential, which Afro-American and feminist critics will labor to release in coming years." (Kermode 1989, 113–114. Kermode does not give the title or author of this piece, which he calls a 'manifesto,' and I have been unable to locate it.)

[528] For this phrase, see Hui 2021 and Kümmerling-Meibauer 2017.

[529] A Google n-gram for 'literary canon' shows a small uptick in the early 1960s and a massive increase in usage beginning in the late 1970s. 'Feminist canon' and 'Western canon' show the same pattern. Such n-grams should be used with caution since they cannot distinguish between different usages, and 'literary canon' was indeed used in widely differing senses throughout the 20th century; however, the trend is suggestive.

[530] See, e.g., J.M. Robertson's *The Shakespeare Canon* (1922), or Walter Skeat's *The Chaucer Canon, With a Discussion of the Works Associated With the Name of Geoffrey Chaucer* (1900). These works attempt to define the 'canons' of Shakespeare and Chaucer, respectively, by the standard of authorship—i.e., they propose collections of texts that include all extant works actually written by Shakespeare or Chaucer, while excluding works falsely attributed to them. This usage of 'canon' is very common in English literary scholarship until at least the mid-1970s. See, e.g., "Companion Poems in the Ralegh Canon" (May 1973), "The Poe Canon" (1912), and "Flannery O'Connor: The Canon Completed, the Commentary Continuing" (Friedman 1973).

[531] Eliot 1982, 38.

[532] Note that the critic's role, as conceived by critics from Arnold to Eliot, was not to 'interpret,' it was to *judge*—to judge merit, judge worth, judge value, absolutely or relatively. This distinction is occasionally elided in accounts of past criticism by post-modern literary theorists (e.g., Eagleton 1983), who present themselves as theorizing 'interpretation' rather than (ghastly thought!) rendering judgments. We should guard against the assumption that when modernist critics used the phrase, 'canon of criticism,' they meant, 'tool of interpretation,' even though contemporary readers will be inclined to understand them that way. It may be that, by the light of the dark sun of post-modernism, we can see that that is what they really are. But it not clear that that is how pre-post-modern critics understood their canons of criticism.

these senses share some semantic overlap with the sense of 'literary canon'—all three involve the concept of a norm or standard—neither is equivalent to it. When contemporary scholars refer to the literary or cultural canon, they are referring to a set of works that regulate 'the culture.' The articulation or reformation of this set is the special duty of the university educator and professional critic. This concept of 'canon' is distinct in several ways from the two usages mentioned above. First, it presupposes a conception of 'culture' as one of, if not the, primary arenas of politics—an arena, moreover, that is uniquely malleable and susceptible to manipulation by a cultural elite. Second, in defining 'canon' as a 'set of works that regulate culture,' it shifts the semantic accent from the idea of a norm or ideal to the idea of a 'set.' The 'set' of works that constitute the canon in turn constitutes a norm that regulates culture, and it is highly ambiguous whether this set is *selected* according to a preexisting norm or whether it artificially *creates* this norm for those who consume it.[533] Both of these aspects of the contemporary concept of canon are absent from prior usages.

An adequate intellectual genealogy of this concept would trace its winding roots to the Frankfurt School of Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Adorno, to Gramsci and Pareto, to the Fabian Society, and to American education reformers like Dewey and Horace Mann. Such an account would require many hundreds of pages, and since it is not directly relevant to the broader dissertation, I will not attempt it here. Rather, I will focus on a very narrow philological question: when in the history of Anglophone literary studies did the word 'canon' become primarily identified with the concept of a 'set of works that regulate culture'?

We should admit at the outset that it requires no great leap of the imagination to see the parallels between a university syllabus or curriculum and a 'canon,' in the sense of the 'canon of the New Testament' or the 'canon of Shakespeare.'[534] These parallels no doubt account for the rapidity with which curricular debates came to be reframed as 'canon debates' in the early 80s. We can find scattered, rare usages of the current sense of 'canon' in English as early as the 1930s.[535] Nevertheless, the broad acceptance of this usage of 'canon' postdates by nearly a decade the onset of Anglophone debates about criticism and curricula.

An early, relevant, but ambiguous usage of 'canon' in our sense comes in 1971, in a report on a syllabus for a course called "The Educated Woman in Literature." The author, Elaine Showalter, writes, "Let us imagine a woman student entering college to major in English

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[533] For a thorough explication of this conception of 'literary canon,' see Guillory 1993.

[534] The analogy between literary classics and scriptural canon appears in Western languages as early as the 1760s, in the work of the Dutch-German philologist David Ruhnken (see Guillory 1993, 344fn9).

[535] The early-twentieth century critic Carl Van Doren occasionally uses 'canon' in this sense. Van Doren, best known today for rehabilitating Herman Melville and *Moby-Dick*, wrote a short book review in *The Nation* in 1932 in which he describes recent changes in literary assessments of nineteenth-century American writers as revisions of 'the canon' (Van Doren 1932). In his 1936 autobiography he also describes his aspirations as a young critic as a desire to "revise the canon" (Van Doren 1936, 195) and to "establish a new canon for American literature" (ibid., 197). It is clear that Van Doren uses 'canon' here in roughly our sense, although this locution is rare in Van Doren's own writings and seems to have been very unusual at that time. It may have struck Van Doren's contemporaries more as an affectation than as a clear conceptual innovation. Northrop Frye also hints at the parallel between scriptural canon and literary curricula in 1957, in *Anatomy of Criticism.* He writes that the Victorian critic Matthew Arnold should be seen as "trying to create a new scriptural canon out of poetry" (Frye 1957, 22), and goes on to denigrate Arnold for envisioning "an expensive library alleged to constitute the scriptural canon of democratic values" (ibid., 22). (These remarks appear in Frye's 'Polemical Introduction,' which was a reworked version of a 1949 paper [Frye 1949]. The remarks do not appear in that original version. It should also be noted that Arnold himself does not describe his project in this way, and does not overtly compare a curriculum of poetry to scriptural canon [Arnold 1869].) However, all the rest of Frye's usages of 'canon' in *Anatomy of Criticism* are in the sense of a 'canon of criticism,' and he appears not to have developed the parallel into our concept of a 'literary canon.'

literature. In her freshman year she would probably study literature and composition, and the texts in her course would be selected for their timeliness, or their relevance, or their power to involve the reader, rather than for their absolute standing in the literary canon."[536] This is the only use of the word 'canon' in Showalter's article, and its meaning is open to debate. The modern reader will naturally parse the last part of this passage as meaning, "...rather than for their place in the canonical set of literature." But Showalter may in fact be using 'canon' to mean 'canon of criticism,' and the phrase should be parsed, "rather than for their assessed value in *light of* the received canon of criticism."

A less ambiguous example comes in 1972, in Jay B. Hubbell's *Who Are the Major American Writers? A Study of the Changing Literary Canon*. There, Hubbell uses the term 'canon' in ways that are extremely close to our sense of a 'set of literary works to be studied.' He writes, for example, of a 'New England canon' constituted by writers like Emerson, Hawthorne, and Longfellow,[537] refers to the act of esteeming particular writers as 'canonization,'[538] and concludes by saying, "My surmises about the future state of the American literary canon are likely enough to be proved wrong...but beyond question the twenty-first century will make changes in the ranking of both our major and minor writers."[539] Notably, Hubbell's book begins with a quotation from Van Doren's 1932 article on the American canon; Van Doren's article remains a lodestar for Hubbell throughout his book. This fixation is somewhat odd, since Van Doren's article is only a page long and is primarily a rather pedestrian review of a book of literary criticism by Ludwig Lewisohn. To indulge in speculation: we might surmise that the article is important for Hubbell primarily as a source and authority for the locution 'literary canon,' which does not appear to have been common at that time.

Finally, in 1973, we find evidence of the spread of our usage of 'canon' in literary studies, as well as frank admissions of its novelty and praise for its utility. This evidence appears in accounts of the meeting (or meetings) of the Modern Language Association in Chicago in 1973. In a paper presented at an MLA meeting the next year, Kimasa Sindel reports on the discussions held in and around an MLA meeting in Chicago in 1973,[540] remarking explicitly on an idiosyncratic usage of the term 'canon' encountered there:

> "The title of this paper [viz., "The Canon of American Literature: Cramming It All In"] resulted directly from a number of discussions which took place at the 1973 MMLA Convention whose subject of concern was 'Lost Literature.' In those discussions, the word 'canon' was used as an economical description of the literature which is the subject of the offerings of an English or Modern Language Department—and last year the focus of the debates was the question of what one <u>does</u> with the literature once 'lost,' now 'found' and/or given 'new

[536] Showalter 1971, 855.
[537] E.g., "It was not until the 1860's that the New England canon was generally accepted in New York…Ticknor and Fields and their successors, the Houghton Mifflin Company, had a large part in the creation and the perpetuation of the New England literary canon" (Hubbell 1972, 21).
[538] "[B]rash young critics…are all too ready to throw overboard the established poets and novelists and to canonize the new who must still undergo the test of time" (Hubbell 1972, viii). "[Henry James and Mark Twain]…like Emily Dickinson, had to wait for the twentieth century to canonize them, along with Poe, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman" (Hubbell 1972, 76).
[539] Hubbell 1972, 332–333.
[540] See Midwest Modern Language Association 1973. Just as Sindel says, the program for this meeting lists its theme as "Lost Literature: Discovery and Rediscovery."

> relevance' ...Having had, for years, a fairly established set of material to pick and choose from for any given semester's syllabus—*the material called, with tongue-in-cheek, the 'canon'* [emphasis mine]—the professor of American literature and especially the teacher of the undergraduate survey course has recently had to come to grips with a sudden expansion of his potential teaching material. His attendance at last year's convention, for instance, brought him face to face with the necessity of 'Enlarging the Context (to include Minority literature),' and of finding 'A New Place For H.D.,' and of 'Teaching American Indian Literature,' and of examining 'A Feminist Approach to Women Poets'—to mention just a few of the concerns of that meeting. The most striking demonstration of the need for a reassessment of the 'canon,' however, occurs with the teacher's confrontation with the realm of black literature."[541]

By the end of the paper, Sindel has dropped the scare quotes around 'canon,' using it freely and naturally in the exact sense of our 'literary/cultural canon':

> "Perhaps because of their [viz., white students unfamiliar with black literature] naivete, they are freed from the question of whether they are unable to understand black literature because they are white; for the most part, they find the literature accessible and pertinent in a way that the traditional canon of literature can not be because it is suffocated with an academic sacrosanctity."[542]

In *Canons and Contexts*, Paul Lauter claims, "I believe the first session at an MLA convention on the question of the canon was the one I organized in 1973 at Chicago."[543] It is unclear if Lauter in fact organized a panel on 'the canon' *per se*, or even if the convention he refers to is the same one attended by Sindel.[544] Regardless, our concept of a 'literary canon' seems to have emerged into general academic consciousness in the very early 70s, and received its first decisive propagation in 1973—possibly at the very meeting of the Midwestern Modern Language Association that Sindel describes.

As Sindel's tentative introduction of the concept of a 'literary canon' makes clear, this usage was not well known to literary scholars in 1973. It was receiving sustained attention and articulation by the end of that decade,[545] but would not become dominant until the early 1980s. A seminal 1984 anthology on the 'canon debate' in literary studies bears witness to this transition. Robert von Hallberg's *Canons* brings together a series of papers on canon and literary criticism, most originally published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1983 and 1984. Hallberg's introduction to the collection situates it in relation to a booming debate on 'canon formation.' He writes, "In the last

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[541] Sindel 1974, 2.
[542] Sindel 1974, 7.
[543] Lauter 1991, 7.
[544] Lauter's name does *not* appear in the published program of the Nov. 1973 meeting of the MMLA attended by Sindel (see Midwest Modern Language Association 1973). It does appear in the program of the December 1973 Annual Meeting of the MLA, also held in Chicago. There, Lauter is listed as a panelist for the session, "Pressures on Academic Freedom: Economic, Political, and Managerial" (Modern Language Association 1973, 1261). Of the sessions held at these two conferences, only one mentions 'canon': a 'Radical Caucus' titled, "Workshop on Developing a Canon of Proletarian Literature" (Modern Language Association 1973, 1255). No participants are listed; in any case, the sense of 'canon' in the title of this workshop is ambiguous.
[545] See Fowler 1979, which distinguishes six kinds of 'canon.'

few years any number of papers and panels on canon-formation have been listed in programs for the Modern Language Association and various conferences on interpretation…these essays reflect some of the range of current thinking about canon-formation in different areas of interpretation."[546] The 'canon' of Hallberg's 'canon-formation' clearly reflects the sense of 'canon' that is common today, and that struck Sindel as a novelty in 1973. Almost all of the papers in *Canons* engage this concept explicitly, although many still feel the need to signal their awareness that this usage is awkward and unusual. John Guillory's paper, for example, introduces the concept as follows: "I propose in this essay to shift the attention of such [critiques of the ideological content of texts] away from the individual text or author and toward that organization of texts known as a 'canon.' The particular canon to be examined here emerged in T.S. Eliot's earlier criticism, was presented as a canon by Cleanth Brooks in *The Well Wrought Urn,* and has since been institutionalized to a greater or lesser extent in the curricula of university English departments."[547] Guillory's employment of scare quotes around 'canon' suggests that he did not expect universal familiarity with this usage in 1983/84, even among readers of *Critical Inquiry*.

The papers in *Canons* display several patterns in the treatment of the 'canon' concept that persist in literary studies to this day. First, the concept of a literary canon is retrojected onto historical figures who would not have employed it themselves. The Eliot/Brooks canon described by Guillory above is one such example—neither Eliot nor Brooks used the term 'canon' to describe their preferred texts, and may not have even understood the usage were they to encounter it. Second, the problem of 'canon formation' subsumes a host of previous issues in literary studies, displacing their former modes of articulation. The relationship between local/parochial literatures and 'world literature,'[548] feminist critiques of a patriarchal Great Tradition,[549] the university teacher's role in shaping curricula,[550] the history of literary criticism,[551] and the 'critical' question of what makes a work good or bad[552] are all recast in terms of 'the canon.' Finally, at least one paper gestures toward the parallel between Judeo-Christian scriptural canon and the literary canon, raising questions about the relationship between religion and literary culture.[553]

We can take Hallberg's *Canons* as a sign of the increasing dominance of the canon-concept as a lens through which literary scholars and critics viewed their field of study and their own scholarly activities. Although the concept would be endlessly refined, contested, and propagated over the ensuing decade-and-a-half,[554] the contours of its political and philosophical potential were already recognized and recognizable by 1984. Since several of the contributors to

[546] Hallberg 1984, 1.
[547] Guillory 1984, 337.
[548] Krupat 1984: "Native American Literature and the Canon."
[549] Froula 1984: "When Eve Reads Milton: Undoing the Canonical Economy."
[550] Ohmann 1984: "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960–1975."
[551] Golding 1984: "A History of American Poetry Anthologies." Chandler 1984: "The Pope Controversy: Romantic Poetics and the English Canon."
[552] Smith 1984: "Contingencies of Value." Altieri 1984: "An Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon."
[553] Bruns 1984: "Canon and Power in the Hebrew Scriptures." Note that Bruns draws heavily from Brevard Childs in his treatment of Hebrew Scripture. The most significant scholarship linking the concepts of literary canon and scriptural canon comes from the pens of Frank Kermode and Robert Alter. See, e.g., Alter and Kermode 1987, and Alter 2000.
[554] For some reflection on these developments, see Readings 1989 and especially Harris 1991.

Canons would go on to become *éminences grises* of 'canon studies,'[555] it is not unreasonable to view this 1984 collection as itself a canonical text of the canon conversation in literary studies.

For the purposes of the present study, the foregoing philological account of the term 'literary canon' has three main implications. First, we can rest assured that the 'canon conversation' in literary studies has much different origins than that native to religious studies and the philological fields. Second, the parallels between these two conversations were recognized by literary scholars almost immediately (e.g., Bruns 1984), allowing one to influence the other by the early '80s. Third, reflection on the canon conversation in literary studies yields an interesting observation—almost immediately upon conceiving of literature and culture as possessing a closed 'canon,' literary scholars began trying 'articulate' it, that is, they began identifying canons within canons (promoting some parts over others), or proposing competing canons (a 'feminist canon,' a 'post-colonial canon'). The observation of this pattern in one particular canonical culture—literary studies—provides a useful data point for constructing an account of how canons function in general.

[555] Both Altieri and Guillory went on to write seminal works on canon-formation (Altieri 1990, Guillory 1993). Gerald Bruns and Barbara Herrnstein Smith would later write important books on closely related topics—the former on comparative hermeneutics (Bruns 1992), and the latter on a critical theory of valuation (Smith 1991).

Appendix D: What is Authority?

Over the past sixty years, historians of religions have grown increasingly mistrustful of many of the conceptual categories that they have applied through force of habit to the analysis of religion. First, concepts like 'scripture' and 'religious experience' were found to be inappropriate when applied to religious traditions outside of Protestant Christianity. Next, what were thought to be fundamental anthropological categories, like 'sacred' and 'profane,' were discovered to be more problematic than they first appeared when presented by luminaries like Durkheim. Finally, the category of religion itself fell into disrepute, revealed as yet another artifact of Christian ethnocentrism. For decades, historians of religion have found themselves in the position of craftsmen who, in applying themselves to a broader field of work then they had hitherto undertaken, find their accustomed tools unfit for the task. Sorting through these tools one by one, they reluctantly admit that they each must be discarded. At this point, the conceptual toolbox of the historian of religion has been vetted again and again. No tool has been left untested. All have been either set aside or revamped.

Or so it would seem. In fact, at least one of the traditional tools remains in the toolbox, uninspected. This tool has performed analytic labor for historians of religion since the inception of the trade, and even today it does consistent, if unshowy, work for members of our profession—its contributions unremarked upon, and its character uninterrogated. This tool is 'authority.' It is time we take a closer look at what we hold in our hand when we use this concept, and assess what, if anything, it is capable of achieving.

Authority in the History of Religions

It is very easy to supply examples of work in the history of religions that employs the concept of authority. Taking examples close to our subject matter, consider the following remarks on the Three Levels movement. Jamie Hubbard, explaining the apparent fragmentation of the movement after the death of Xinxing, comments that "religions face a turning point after the passing of the founder, when the sectarianism implicit in the founding of a new movement manifests itself internally but the follower may no longer turn to the founder's *authority* for ultimate understanding [emphasis mine]."[556] Alan Cole, attempting to situate the Three Levels in his broader account of the development of Sui-Tang Buddhism, states, "the best reason for including Xinxing in an account of China's efforts to produce a Chinese buddha is Xinxing's radical reconstruction of Chinese Buddhism around his own *authority* [emphasis mine]."[557] Neither Cole nor Hubbard wastes a breath on defining 'authority;' they use the term as an ordinary English word, like 'blue' or 'economy.' Of course, this should not surprise us—both of these usages of authority are casual; they are ancillary to the main arguments of each author. But 'authority' is not always so peripheral a concept for historians of religion. It is occasionally (often in fact) a load-bearing concept—a concept *in terms of which* other phenomena are explained, and without which the fundamental argument could not be articulated. Let's consider an early essay by Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Logical Status of Religious Belief." MacIntyre, attempting to define religious beliefs and explain their justification, writes, "Every religion therefore is defined by reference to what it accepts as an authoritative criterion in religious

[556] Hubbard 2001, 41.
[557] Cole 2009, 32–33.

matters. The acceptance or rejection of a religion is thus the acceptance or rejection of such an authority."[558] He continues, "We justify a particular religious belief by showing its place in the total religious conception; we justify a religious belief as a whole by referring to authority."[559] It would be fair to say that, for MacIntyre in this essay, the essence of religion and religious belief is reliance on a particular authority. But MacIntrye never defines this term.[560] Like Hubbard or Cole, he uses 'authority' as if its meaning were perfectly clear.

It might be objected that MacIntyre's essay is very early (1957), published before religious studies embarked on its long process of reassessment and deconstruction, and his blasé use of the concept of 'authority' should not be taken as any indication of how 'authority' is used by historians of religion in general. In fact, however, MacIntyre's usage is entirely characteristic of that usage down to the present day.[561] This is especially relevant for the present study, which centers on concepts of scripture and canon. Academic discussions of scripture and canon are particularly apt to define their subjects in terms of 'authority'—'scripture,' for example, is often defined as an authoritative book or text, while 'canon' is defined as a set of *authoritative* scriptures. In Sheppard's seminal article on 'canon,' he defines his 'canon 1' as "a standard of excellence or *authority* [emphasis mine]."[562] The New Testament historian Bruce Metzger describes the conception of the New Testament in Early Christianity as vacillating between "a collection of authoritative books" and "an authoritative collection of books."[563] Moshe Halbertal's study of the canons of the Hebrew Bible is framed explicitly as an examination of the conflicting ways in which the authority of those canons has been conceived and constructed. ("Since canonical texts have many functions, various arguments are advanced concerning their *authority*. A text can be *authoritative* because it claims origin from a unique source such as God, the king, or an expert in the field…These claims to *authority* can be challenged on several grounds. [Emphasis mine.]"[564]) Examples of studies in which 'authority' serves to define or explain scripture and canon could be multiplied many times over.[565] But despite the ubiquity of 'authority' in many studies of religion—and, indeed, its centrality for many such studies, especially those related to canon—almost no historian of religions has made a serious attempt to

[558] MacIntyre 1957, 189.
[559] MacIntyre 1957, 192.
[560] Even a young MacIntyre, however, is astute enough to sense that there is something funny about the concept. See his remarks on the 'two senses' of authority, MacIntyre 1957, 190–191.
[561] Out of many relevant examples, consider a recent study of Islamic communities on Java. This study, otherwise highly intriguing, is framed as an analysis of the process by which 'articulatory labor' constructs, maintains, and modifies 'authority' in these communities. The author translates his observations of Javan Muslims into an account of *authority* in those communities; in the absence of this load-bearing concept, the argument would not hold together—it would not be legible to the reader as an argument at all. Despite this fact, authority is never defined, and apart from a brief reference to a famous essay by Hannah Arendt, the idea that authority is a difficult or problematic concept never appears. This study was published in 2021, but its treatment of authority is of a piece with MacIntyre's treatment in 1957. (See Alatas 2021, especially his introduction, "Cultivating Islam," pp. 1–33.)
[562] Sheppard, "Canon," 63.
[563] Metzger 1987, 282.
[564] Halbertal 1997, 5.
[565] See, e.g., Patton 1994, Kraemer 1991, Brown 2007 and Biderman 1995. The definition of scripture and canon as, essentially, *authoritative* texts dates back to the very beginning of comparative religious studies. See, for example, F. Max Müller's explanation of his criteria for including texts in his Sacred Books of the East series: "So we agreed to treat as Sacred Books all those which had been formally recognized by religious communities as constituting the highest authority in matters of religion, which had received a kind of canonical sanction, and might therefore be appealed to for deciding any disputed points of faith, morality, or ceremonial." (Quoted in Molendijk 2016, 92).

define 'authority.'[566] When 'authority' figures in the history of religions, it is almost always the *explicans*, never the *explicandum*. One can find many studies that answer questions like, "What caused the Protestant Reformation?" with statements like, "A shift in the conception of scriptural authority led to the reformation." It is almost impossible, however, to find work in this field that poses, let alone answers, the question, "What is authority?" It would seem that for historians of religion, 'authority' functions much like 'dark matter' does for astrophysicists—the mysterious value that balances the equation, but which itself eludes observation and definition. Our passive attitude toward this concept is all the more puzzling given that the field has vigorously interrogated and deconstructed so many other fundamental concepts.

'Authority' in Ordinary Language—a Straightforward Concept?

If the concept of authority were simple, straightforward, and merely given, then this evasion would not pose a serious problem. Perhaps authority really is a perfectly ordinary, everyday concept, like 'blue' or 'economy.' Let's consider the entry under 'authority' in the Oxford English Dictionary, and see if this lays our doubts to rest. The entry in the second edition of the OED reads:

'*Authority*'
I. Power to enforce obedience.
- 1.a. Power or right to enforce obedience; moral or legal supremacy; the right to command, or give an ultimate decision.
- 1.b. *in authority*; in a position of power; in possession of power over others.
- 2.a. Derived or delegated power; conferred right or title; authorization.
- 2.b. with *inf.* Conferred right *to do* something.
- 3. Those in authority; the body or persons exercising power or command.

II. Power to influence action, opinion, belief.
- 4. Power to influence the conduct and actions of others; personal or practical influence.
- 5. Power over, or title to influence, the opinions of others; authoritative opinion; weight of judgment or opinion, intellectual influence.
- 6. Power to inspire belief, title to be believed; authoritative statement; weight of testimony. Sometimes weakened to: Authorship, testimony.
- 7. The quotation or book acknowledged, or alleged, to settle a question of opinion or give conclusive testimony.
- 8.a. The person whose opinion or testimony is accepted; the author of an accepted statement.
- 8.b. One whose opinion *on* or *upon* a subject is entitled to be accepted; an expert in any question.
- 9. *Comb.*, as *authority-maker*.[567]

[566] Halbertal, almost alone of these commentators, offers a definition of religious authority, and even then it is very brief. For Halbertal, authority resides in "the locus of religious experience and divine presence and the object of ongoing reflection" (Halbertal 1997, 2). Even the entry on 'Authority' in Eliade's *Encyclopedia of Religion* fails to define or explain the term, instead surveying the varied loci of 'authority' across the history of the world's religious traditions (Waida, "Authority").
[567] Simpson 1989, "Authority." I have silently emended the entry to remove the many included *exempla*.

At first glance, these definitions are straightforward. Authority is a type of power. This power seems closely related to the realms of society and politics. It is related to both force ("enforce obedience") and persuasion ("influence action, opinion, belief"). Authority can cause changes both in people's actions and in their beliefs. Running through all of these definitions is the sense that authority *decides*, often on behalf of other people.

After reading these definitions, we have very little cause for complaint against the historians mentioned above. Halbertal, Metzger, Hubbard, Alatas—their usage of 'authority' is well within the guardrails established by the OED, and if we were not fluent English speakers, we could consult these definitions and come to a pretty good sense of what they mean. When Halbertal says, "A text can be *authoritative* because it claims origin from a unique source such as God, the king, or an expert in the field…," we understand that the text in question has a power to influence or compel people, and that it may be consulted to *decide* controversial questions. Similarly, when scholars discuss the construction, destruction, or modification of authority, we understand that such a power might wax or wane, or even move from one person or text to another. Moreover, authority, so-defined, is a concept we use and apply constantly in everyday life. In our work life, we obey the commands of an authority figure—our boss *decides* what we will do, and when. The boss (our authority at work) compels us to act a certain way. In moments of doubt, we consult an authority, like a doctor, who influences our beliefs and opinions, and ultimately our actions. "Will I pursue chemotherapy or surgery to treat my cancer"? Our oncologist—our medical authority—plays a pivotal role in such a decision. When an 'authority' on baseball makes predictions about who will win the World Series, we revise our expectations accordingly. Authority is part of our everyday life and language. Authority is straightforward. Isn't it?

Unfortunately, the concept remains simple only so long as it remains unexamined. Let us focus on a curious ambivalence in the OED's definitions of authority. The OED initially defines authority as a "power to enforce obedience" and a "power to influence action, opinion, belief." But is authority *really* a power? Many of the OED's sub-definitions walk back that claim. For example, authority is the "power *or right* to enforce obedience." It is a "derived or delegated power; *conferred right or title*." It is a "power over, *or title to influence*, the opinions of others."[568] Power itself is a nebulous concept,[569] but one of its few clear implications is the ability to regularly bring about an effect. (The OED itself defines power as the "ability to do or effect something or anything, or to act upon a person or thing.") A title or right is something much different, and clearly much less certain in bringing about an effect. History shows that James I had the power and right to rule England, Scotland and Wales. Cromwell clearly had the power, but whether he had the right is less certain. James II had the right, but by the end of his life he most definitely lacked the power. The divergent fates of these men should suffice to show that power and right are quite distinct; a right is not a type of power, but something else. To say that authority is a type of power, but sometimes also a right, and sometimes *only* a right, is very curious. It would appear that, for the OED, authority is quite changeable—it fluctuates between being a right, being a power, and being both.

Authority's ambiguous character is further evidenced by the strange variety of things with which it is identified. In the OED definitions, people or groups of people can be authorities. But so can books, quotations, and commands. Is a policeman like the Bible? Is a general like his command? Common sense suggests that these two usages of authority—person as authority and

[568] All emphases mine.
[569] On the issues with 'power,' see, e.g., Lukes 2005 and Lukes 1986.

thing/piece of language as authority—should be rigorously disambiguated. We can see how a person can *decide*—we naturally think of people as agents. It is less intuitive for a book to be an agent that decides. Can a book hold power or right over us in the same way a policeman can? Although common sense urges us to distinguish these two usages, common language (and the OED) suggests that they are closely connected. The phrases "I submitted to the authority of the policeman" and "I submitted to the authority of the Bible" are identical in grammar and syntax. Could it really be that their underlying logic is identical as well?

The question of whether authority is a right or a power, and the question of whether an authority is a person or a thing, are only the first of many puzzles we could unearth by surveying usages of 'authority' in ordinary English. For example, if authority is sometimes not a power *per se*, how does it bring force or influence to bear? (Is anyone ever actually affected by authority that is mere right, as opposed to right combined with power?) If authority can be transferred or delegated (as the OED indicates it can), what exactly is shifting location at the moment of delegation? A metaphysical substance? A phenomenological quality? A position in a language game? Or perhaps a mere conventional designation? We might call these questions 'definitional problems.' These definitional problems are tricky enough. But merely raising these questions tends inevitably to call forth a host of other, even thornier issues that we might label the *ethical* problems of authority. For example, which, if any, authorities should we obey? Among the many authorities that claim our attention and obedience, how should we adjudicate? Who has established the authorities we find around us, and should we seek to change them? Is it possible for authority to disappear from human experience, and if so, is that a good thing or a bad thing?[570]

At this point, I hope the reader is satisfied that the concept of authority is *not* simple or straightforward, although it may seem so at first. When historians use this concept unthinkingly, they are using a tool they may not completely understand. When they use it to construct essential parts of their argument without making any attempt to explain what authority *is*, they are entrusting the integrity of their analytic structure to a mysterious and capricious device. They may be, in effect, connecting steel girders with super glue, instead of using a rivet gun and a welding outfit. That may mean that their arguments—these towering academic structures—are fatally unstable. Perhaps they will collapse when the least amount of pressure is placed on the bonding agent. Or, it may be that these craftsmen have actually succeeded in constructing stable skyscrapers with super glue. Perhaps the arguments that Halbertal and Alatas have constructed are sturdy and sound. In which case, the structures they've built are almost beside the point—their really interesting accomplishment is demonstrating that this glue, which they have been using unthinkingly, possesses bizarre and powerful properties. If they have so succeeded, then that tool warrants serious investigation. If the glue is a sham—if 'authority' is a conceptual chimera—then we should test it, and show these dangerous structures for what they are. But if 'authority' (whatever it is) is actually a sound tool for putting together a historical argument, then we should urgently examine this hitherto unnoticed miracle substance. Either way, 'authority' warrants further investigation.

How Can We Clarify the Concept of Authority? Should We Even Try?

[570] There is an extensive literature on the 'ethical' facet of the authority problem. See Appendix E.

I have some proposals for studying and clarifying this mysterious tool, authority. Before implementing them, however, we should address an obvious objection. The objection fits most naturally in the mouth of a logical positivist or one of their descendants, an analytic philosopher. This philosopher might object as follows:

> You've demonstrated that 'authority,' as used in ordinary language, is a conceptual muddle. It seems to correspond to several distinct referents, and its overhasty employment naturally produces all sorts of paradoxes. Now you propose to investigate this 'concept' more deeply, either to show that it really is a sham, or to salvage it in some way. At best, this is a waste of time, and at worst, it will merely compound the problem. Simply discard the old term and propose a new one—or better yet, propose several terms, so as to disambiguate what are, in truth, several unrelated concepts. When definitions are unclear, stipulate new ones. Let X equal whatever is most convenient, its previous values be damned. Trying to update and rationalize past usages is an unwarranted and dangerous concession to the semantic detritus of the past.

This is a cogent objection that will generate considerable sympathy in Anglophone academia, or at the very least in Anglophone departments of philosophy. To defend against it, we need to clearly articulate our methodology and explain why it pays any heed to the semantic tradition surrounding 'authority.'

We find a useful introduction to such a methodology in the early work of the historian of religions Jeffrey Stout. Stout points to a passage of the *Philosophical Investigations* in which Wittgenstein compares language to an ancient city, "a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."[571] Stout takes this metaphor seriously; it tells us something important about how we use language—even philosophical language. It suggests that we must take stock of past usage in order to say something new. Stout aims to intervene in contemporary discussions in epistemology and ethics, but to do so, he finds it necessary survey Wittgenstein's 'ancient city,' and "to undertake an archaeological dig in the part of town that, thanks to erosion and reconstruction, opened the way to all those straight regular streets and uniform houses [of contemporary philosophy]. I shall open a site in the vicinity of terms like *knowledge* and *authority*, *certainty* and *probability*, *mystery* and *paradox*, *God* and *good*. These terms are like old houses with additions from various periods. The paths that now connect them differ from the paths that once did. The story in which this difference comes to light sheds light also on the genesis of modern thought and on the intellectual predicament in which we find ourselves." Stout hopes that this conceptual archaeology will "expose a substructure of dialectical pitfalls and blind alleys, and thus…promote the freedom that comes from knowing the necessities of our situation."[572] For Stout, we cannot say something new unless we become conscious of the way we are constrained by, and biased by, the past. Stout calls this commitment 'historicism;' as he points out, 'historicism' has a bad name in much of Anglophone philosophy, but in fact it conditions much of the most interesting work done in

[571] Wittgenstein 2009, Section 18. Quoted in Stout 1981, 1.
[572] Stout 1981, 2.

philosophy in the 20th century, from Kuhn to Rorty, and from Heidegger to Gadamer.[573] Historicism works, despite its naysayers.

Quite simply, when I insist that we try to salvage and renovate the concept of authority (rather than simply stipulating new, disambiguated concepts), I am endorsing a modified historicism, similar to Stout's 'conceptual archaeology.' This is the method Gadamer employs in *Truth and Method*, although I will apply it on a much smaller scale. We recognize, first, that any question we pose about authority is conditioned or prejudiced by what has been said about and with 'authority' in the past. That is, we inevitably approach the subject with a historically-affected consciousness. To stipulate new terms and new definitions—proposed above as an alternative methodology by our imaginary analytic philosopher—is merely to offer covert answers to such questions. The stipulative approach, too, will be impinged upon by prejudices born of authority's conceptual history—all the more so, since the presentism of that approach will preclude us from acknowledging our prejudices. Words, far from being arbitrary signs, correlate to conceptual objects that, although historically conditioned, still have an inertia all their own.[574] The only leverage that can possibly overcome that inertia is gained by digging down, into the past, under those objects. The best way to move beyond the past is to go under and through it.

To accomplish this 'digging down,' we must survey how the concept in question was used in the past. We should reconstruct the etymology of the English 'authority;' this will give us a sense of how the term's usage in ordinary language has changed over time. We should also pay close attention to how scions of the Western intellectual tradition have used or defined 'authority.' Such thinkers often use ordinary concepts in unaccustomed ways, or use a term in a way that penetrates to the essence of the term's usage in their period of activity. As we may come to a special appreciation of the potential of 'blue' by viewing Picasso's 'blue period' paintings, find a renewed understanding of the philosophical inflections of the term by reading Stevens' "Blue Guitar," and achieve a fresh insight into the emotional resonance of 'blue' through the old classic, "This Side of the Blue," so too may we find new insight into the analytic potential of 'authority' by consulting classic thinkers of the Western tradition.

We will proceed, then, in the following way. First, we will examine the etymology of 'authority.' Next, we will examine its function in the writings of several important Western thinkers. No canonical writer of the modern West, so far as I am aware, attempts to define authority. But several use it as a fundamental concept, most importantly Hobbes, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein. We will take stock of their usage of the concept, including their insights and oversights. Finally, exploiting the benefit of hindsight, we will attempt to renovate this concept to make it both more coherent and more useful for historical analysis.

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[573] See Stout 1981, "Explicating Historicism," 256–272.

[574] When this position is so baldly stated, it may strike many of my philologist and conceptual historian colleagues as hopelessly abstract and overly philosophical. "We deal with words, etymologies, and contextualization, not philosophy!" But philology and conceptual history are freighted with metaphysical presuppositions, and much philological practice seems to take for granted a metaphysical position very much like the one stated here. Skinner and the Cambridge School clearly accept this position, which they inherited from R.G. Collingwood. See Skinner 1969, especially his references to Collingwood's autobiography, 38, 50–51. See Collingwood 2013, "History of Philosophy," 53–76. Collingwood and his epigones are notably anti-perennialist, but they refuse to endorse relativism *simpliciter*. The path they chart between these two poles amounts to an acceptance of conceptual objects, so long as those objects are admitted to gradually change over time. Some Buddhologists also admit this position. See Radich 2007, "Methodology and Method," 31–51.

What Was Authority?

We find a seminal articulation of authority's origins and problems in Hannah Arendt's 1961 essay, "What Is Authority?"[575] This is a complex paper, as Arendt grapples simultaneously with several issues related to authority. She begins by asking, 'what is authority?' That is, she raises the definitional question. But she immediately turns toward a different facet of the authority problem, one we ourselves have yet to touch on: Arendt claims that the modern West is experiencing a 'crisis of authority,' famously remarking, "authority has vanished from the modern world."[576] For Arendt, this crisis explains why the definitional problem needs to be raised at all, writing, "[s]ince we can no longer fall back upon authentic and undisputable experiences common to all, the very term [authority] has become clouded by controversy and confusion."[577] We will return later to the idea that authority has 'vanished.' It is an important claim (one that predates Arendt),[578] but ultimately, I think, an exaggerated one. For now, let us focus on Arendt's response to this crisis—she discards her eponymous question, "what is authority?," in favor of a historical one: "what *was* authority?" Arendt delves into the history of the concept of 'authority' with the aim of substantiating the idea that authority is historically conditioned (i.e., it originates at a definite point in time, changes over the course of its history, and eventually disappears). She also aims to understand how authority's 'disappearance' affects the socio-political prospects of the modern West. Arendt's history of 'authority' provides a useful etymology of the term and, by honing in on how the term was used in its original context, illuminates some of the puzzles and problems that seem to perennially attend 'authority.'

Arendt traces 'authority' and its cognates in Western languages to Latin *auctoritas*.[579] As Arendt points out, the term is perplexing and paradoxical from the very beginning. The word derives from *augere*, 'to augment, increase, or nourish.'[580] This is a very curious root—what does 'authority' have to do with 'augmentation'? The OED's entry on authority contains no suggestion of a semantic overlap between 'authority' and 'increase,' and most speakers of English would be hard pressed to explain the logic of the derivation. Arendt explains that the connection has its background in the Roman obsession with 'foundation.' She quotes Cicero: "In no other realm does human excellence approach so closely the path of the gods as it does in the

[575] Arendt, "What Is Authority?" Note that Arendt first published a version of this essay in *Nomos* in 1958. I refer exclusively to the version published in 1961 in a volume of collected essays, *Between Past and Future*.
[576] Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 91.
[577] Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 91.
[578] See Appendix E for a review of literature on the West's "crisis of authority." As I point out there, warnings of such a crisis have appeared regularly in Anglophone scholarship since the early 1900s.
[579] Arendt claims, audaciously, that "[n]either the Greek language nor the varied political experiences of Greek history shows any knowledge of authority and the kind of rule it implies. This is expressed most clearly in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, who, in quite different ways but from the same political experiences, tried to introduce something akin to authority into the public life of the Greek polis." (Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 104.) This claim deserves careful scrutiny; so far as I know, there are no serious philological studies either supporting or refuting the existence of a concept like 'authority' in ancient Greek thought. As I am not equipped to undertake such a study, I will leave this claim by the wayside. Arendt is certainly correct, however, that *auctoritas* as word and concept is indigenous to Roman thought. Unlike many other abstract philosophical terms in Latin, it is not a translation or transliteration of an underlying Greek term.
[580] Via *augere*, authority is also closely related to *author* (Latin *auctor*) as well as *auction*—a sale in which the price *increases* over time. For the etymology of auction, see Cassady 1967. (I am indebted to Shengwu Li of the Harvard Department of Economics for both the connection and the reference.)

founding of new and in the preservation of already founded communities."[581] Arendt claims that the religious culture of the Romans, in contrast to that of the Greeks, centered on renewing and preserving acts of foundation, writing, "In contrast to Greece, where piety depended upon the immediate revealed presence of the gods, here religion literally meant *religare*: to be tied back, obligated, to the enormous, almost superhuman and hence always legendary effort to lay the foundations, to build the cornerstone, to found for eternity."[582] Authority, as a Roman political and religious concept, emerges in relationship to this cult of foundation. As Arendt states, "what authority or those in authority constantly augment is the foundation."[583] This, then, is why *auctoritas* derives from *augere*: authority *augments* a foundation, and exercises influence by virtue of that fact.

The link between authority and foundation also implies a temporal dimension. For the Romans, *auctoritas* always has its roots in the past. The relationship between foundation and present-day authority is mediated by tradition. Political authority derived "by descent and by transmission (tradition) from those who had laid the foundations for all things to come, the ancestors, whom the Romans therefore called the *maiores* [the greater ones]. The authority of the living was always derivative, depending upon the…authority of the founders."[584] Roman authority's ties to past foundation accounts for the habitual contrast in Republican Roman political writing between the *auctoritas* of the Senate (the elders) and the *potestas* (power) of the *populus* (people). Power is oriented toward the *present*—it is a currently existent capacity to cause a change *now*. Authority, in contrast, is oriented toward the past; moreover, unlike power, its relationship to the present is ambiguous and its ability to effect change is enigmatic. As Arendt writes, "Because the 'authority,' the augmentation which the Senate must add to political decisions, is not power, it seems to us curiously elusive and intangible, bearing in this respect a striking resemblance to Montesquieu's judiciary branch of government, whose power he called 'somehow nil' and which nevertheless constitutes the highest authority in constitutional governments."[585] The German Latinist Mommsen captures the ambivalent character of *auctoritas* in a famous definition: the counsel of *auctoritas* is "more than advice and less than a command, an advice which one may not safely ignore."[586] For the Romans, it seems, *auctoritas* is essential yet somehow insubstantial, even spooky. Like the ghost in *Hamlet*, it reaches out from the past to set plots in motion and govern the fate of kingdoms. It has no concrete power, but it cannot be ignored, and its influence, ultimately, swallows everything. *Auctoritas* is a spectral ruler.

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[581] Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 121.

[582] Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 121. Arendt astutely observes that the Roman fixation on foundation accounts, in part, for the development of the Roman polity along much different lines than the model provided by the Greek city-states: "At the heart of Roman politics, from the beginning of the republic until virtually the end of the imperial era, stands the conviction of the sacredness of foundation, in the sense that once something has been founded it remains binding for all future generations. To be engaged in politics meant first and foremost to preserve the founding of the city of Rome. This is why the Romans were unable to repeat the founding of their first polis in the settlement of colonies but were capable of adding to the original foundation until the whole of Italy and, eventually, the whole of the Western world were united and administered by Rome, as though the whole world were nothing but Roman hinterland…The foundation of a new body politic—to the Greeks an almost commonplace experience—became to the Romans the central, decisive, unrepeatable beginning of their whole history, a unique event." Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 120.

[583] Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 121.

[584] Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 121–122.

[585] Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 122.

[586] Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 122.

Arendt's description of the origins of authority in Roman *auctoritas* comprise a very small portion of "What Is Authority?"[587] Arendt's main aim is to define the fundamental qualitative difference between the modern and premodern West. Her thesis, in brief, states that the society and politics of Western premodernity were defined and stabilized by an interlocking triad of concepts invented by the Romans and inherited by the medieval Roman Catholic Church. This triad consists of authority, tradition, and religion; each pole of the triad reinforces the others, and if any pole loses legitimacy, the other two will fail in turn. Arendt suggests that a constitutive feature of modernity is the failure or casting aside of this triad. This is what she means when she says that "authority has vanished from the modern world"—in truth, the entire 'Roman triad' has vanished. We moderns live in the wake of the passing of authority, tradition, and religion, a situation that entails special challenges and unique opportunities.

Although Arendt's broader thesis is intriguing, we must set it aside for now (we will make a few comments on it later).[588] Our main project is defining authority, not understanding its purported disappearance. Is 'authority' a sound tool for historical analysis and, if not, can it be made so? Arendt's discussion of Roman *auctoritas* advances this project in several ways. First, Arendt's analysis strengthens our conviction that the concept of authority should be handled with caution. We have already shown that the modern English term conceals conceptual lacunae and logical pitfalls. Arendt shows that these problems are not merely artifacts of a faulty adoption of an old idea—paradoxes and puzzles attend even authority's earliest etymological ancestor, *auctoritas*. Moreover, Arendt makes a strong case that authority, at least as articulated in Western political philosophy, is a historically contingent category, not a natural fact. That is, authority, unlike, say, Planck's constant, was invented at a definite historical moment within the confines of a particular culture for expedient political reasons. This analysis presents a severe challenge to those who would analyze non-Roman (and particularly non-Western) cultures in terms of authority. Arendt implicitly suggests that 'authority' may not exist in many times and places. It does not, according to Arendt, exist in the modern West, nor did it exist before the rise of the Roman polity. If that is true, why should we assume that authority exists in early Islam or medieval China?

Second, Arendt's description of *auctoritas* raises some questions for the ordinary language understanding of authority represented in the OED. The OED defines authority as a power (and sometimes as a right/title). According to Arendt, none of those qualities are present

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[587] Arendt's essay is 51 pages long in the standard edition. Her discussion of Roman *auctoritas* is nine pages long (Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 120–128).

[588] There is currently a surge of interest in Arendt's thought in Anglophone academia. However, many of Arendt's modern partisans seem not to appreciate that Arendt's thinking is profoundly conservative. Her argument in "What Is Authority?" is, implicitly at least, highly unsympathetic to Western secular liberalism. In Arendt's view, the Roman triad first came under attack by that proto-liberal technocrat, Machiavelli; tradition and religion were completely discredited during the Age of Revolution, and the concept of authority has now (by the time of Arendt's writing in the mid-twentieth century) lost all suasive power as well. She strongly implies that this is a bad thing. Western moderns (Arendt claims) are now in a position analogous to that of the Classical Greeks—ensconced in a socio-political order with no understanding of or sympathy for the 'Roman triad,' and which recognizes (despite its pretensions to sophistication) no political principle besides mere power. Arendt's conclusion suggests that modernity, for all its obsessions with progress, actually entails a *regression* to the political situation of the Greek city-states—capricious, susceptible to tyranny, prone to senseless and endless revolution, and incapable of achieving socio-political stability. In this light, it is no surprise that Arendt spends the first two sections of her essay drawing hard lines between the concept of an authoritarian regime and a totalitarian one. Arendt is well known for attacking totalitarianism. But, as the overall thrust of "What Is Authority?" makes clear, she appears to be quite sympathetic to authoritarianism.

in Roman *auctoritas*. The Romans certainly did not understand *auctoritas* as a type of right; apparently, they also explicitly distinguish *auctoritas* from *potestas*/power. How did the modern concept come to subsume these qualities? Were those qualities assimilated legitimately or, as it were, by accident and through conceptual imprecision?

Finally, Arendt emphasizes two interrelated facets of *auctoritas* that we are unaccustomed to find in the modern concept of 'authority'—namely, its sense of 'augmenting' or adding to something, and its intrinsic connection to the past. The Romans develop their idea of *auctoritas* in relation to their special esteem for *foundation*. Those who possess *auctoritas* have it by virtue of their ability to *augment* the crucial episodes of the past, like the foundation of Rome. Thus, a literal translation of *auctoritas* that captures this distinctly Roman sensibility would be *augmentor-ness*—the quality of being one who builds up an inheritance. In contrast, the OED's definitions of authority make no mention at all of the past or of 'building up.' We shall have to think carefully about how, and whether, these aspects of the ancient *auctoritas* should be squared the modern descendent, authority.

Some Notable Usages of Authority in Western Thought

Arendt's "What Is Authority?" provides a useful exploration of the etymological origins of 'authority.' Unfortunately, understanding those origins seems to bring us no closer to understanding 'authority' itself; if anything, the fact of authority's birth in *auctoritas* makes the concept more puzzling, not less. In the end, Arendt does not clearly answer her essay's eponymous question.

In this section, I will try to lay the groundwork for clearly defining authority by looking at its treatment in the work of major thinkers of the modern Western tradition. As I mentioned above, no canonical modern Western writer, so far as I am aware, seriously attempts to define authority. (Given the disputatious nature of philosophers, this aversion itself cries out for explanation.)[589] Regardless, several thinkers have used 'authority' as a fundamental concept. We will examine the three most important of these figures: Hobbes, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein. I admit that this approach is somewhat odd. None of the three is in conversation with the others, at least on the topic of authority. Nor do I claim that any of these writers provides a completely satisfactory model for how to think about and with 'authority.' None delve into the etymology of 'authority,' as Arendt does, and certainly none attempts (let alone succeeds) in offering a final, clear conceptualization of the term. Each, however, offers clues about what we are really talking about when we use this term, and Wittgenstein, in particular, points the way toward a philosophically useful concept of 'authority.' We will begin with the earliest thinker, Hobbes.

Hobbes

[589] Stout would point out that modern philosophy was born in a *flight* from authority; the governing impulse of Cartesian philosophy was the desire to construct a system of knowledge in which authority (reliance on texts approved by tradition *because* they were approved by tradition) played no role (see Stout 1981, "Philosophy After Authority," 25–94). Given that origin, it is no surprise that modern Western thinkers tend to avoid the issue of authority. For twentieth century philosophers, we could adduce the motive pointed out by the Thomist philosopher Yves Simon: in the wake of World War II, "[t]he issue of authority has such a bad reputation that a philosopher cannot discuss it without exposing himself to suspicion and malice." (Simon 1980, 13.)

The OED suggests that authority is a power or right—usually a power/right to enforce obedience or influence belief. Arendt suggests that, for the Romans, *auctoritas* is a sort of influence wielded by those who nourish the past—those who augment the foundation. Hobbes' usage of the word is closer to the first meaning than the second, though still obviously distinct from either. For Hobbes, authority is fundamentally about *responsibility for an action*. In the sixteenth chapter of *Leviathan*, he writes:

> Of persons artificial [i.e., someone who represents someone else by their words or actions], some have their words and actions *owned* by those whom they represent. And then the person is the *actor*, and he that owneth his words and actions is the AUTHOR, in which case the actor acteth by authority. For that which in speaking of goods and possessions is called an *owner* (and in Latin *dominus*, in Greek *kurios*), speaking of actions is called author. And as the right of possession is called dominion, so the right of doing any action is called AUTHORITY. So that by authority is always understood a right of doing any act; and *done by authority*, done by commission or licence from him whose right it is.[590]

Authority, in Hobbes' locution, is "the right of doing any action." Hobbes ties the concept closely to the idea of representation. A person may represent someone or something else (Hobbes calls such a person a 'person artificial'). When the representative does something on behalf of a person whom they represent, he is an 'actor.' The person represented is an 'author.' The author 'owns' the action done on his behalf by the actor. The quality that the actor bears, and that connects ownership of the actor's action to the author, is 'authority.'

This passage may seem recondite, but it is essential to Hobbes' general argument. Hobbes' main purpose in *Leviathan* is to demonstrate that it is legitimate for a single monarch to exercise absolute power over his commonwealth; Hobbes justifies this absolute sovereignty with the conceit of a primordial social contract by which individuals in a state of nature transfer their rights to a single individual and so transform themselves into a community. Such a transference is both necessary and right because it is the only way for individuals to achieve safety from the ravages of nature and of each other. As he writes later in Chapter Sixteen, community requires oneness, and that oneness is achieved through representation by a single representative: "A multitude of men are made *one* person, when they are by one man, or one person, represented…For it is the *unity* of the representer, not the *unity* of the represented, that maketh the person *one*."[591] Authority is the linchpin of this process of amalgamation through representation. Individuals become one community when they transfer authority to a sole, shared representative. They thus find themselves obliged to *own* the actions of that representative—to acknowledge themselves as *authors* of the actions of the sovereign. As Hobbes puts it, "The only way to erect such a common power as may by able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners…is to confer all their power and strength upon one man…and every one to own and acknowledge himself to be *author* [emphasis mine] of whatsoever he that so beareth their person shall act…"[592] In other words, the subjects of the king are, in fact, the *authors* of his actions. They have committed themselves, through inheritance of a primordial transference of authority,

[590] Hobbes 1994, 101.
[591] Hobbes 1994, 103.
[592] Hobbes 1994, 109.

to *own* his actions. Consequently, they have no grounds to contest those actions, for those actions (in a curious way) are their own. Disobedience is not only illegitimate but schizophrenic.[593]

We need not detain ourselves with Hobbes' political theory. For our purposes, what is important is how he conceives of authority. There are some gray areas in Hobbes usage of this term. For example, although Hobbes calls 'authority' a 'right,' it is in fact more than that, for its influence flows in two directions. In one direction, it gives an actor some sort of standing to perform an action. In the other direction, it obliges the author to *own* the actions performed by the actor. Famously, the ontological status of Hobbes' authority is also unclear. It seems like authority is a legal or ethical concept, but it is uncertain which. An author owns the actions of the actor. Does this mean he is legally responsible for them (i.e., if my representative signs a contract, I am legally obligated to fulfill it)? Or ethically responsible (i.e., I *should* fulfill my representative's contract)? Seen in the context of Hobbes' larger argument, 'authority' seems to be more than merely legal or ethical and instead to attain an almost cosmological significance. The commonwealth is founded on a primordial transfer of authority. This transfer appears to bind the subjects of a commonwealth for eternity. Moreover, the 'authority' transferred in Hobbes' social contract has a strange, recursive character. The subjects of the commonwealth become the authors of their own subjection; if the sovereign executes them, we must say that they are the authors of their own death. From some angles, Hobbes' 'authority' is more like original sin than an ethico-legal principle—a primordial constituent of human being that, through its foundational role in social life, has a hand in all of human experience. Authority in *Leviathan*, like authority in the OED and *auctoritas* for the Romans, has a certain uncanny quality.

Despite these ambiguities, there are several features of Hobbes' authority that are perfectly transparent. First, one of authority's essential qualities, for Hobbes, is its transmissibility. At other points in *Leviathan*, he makes clear that it can be transferred many times, creating a sort of 'chain' of authority, stretching from an author to a distant action via the mediation of many actors. This is why a sovereign does not need to undertake every public action personally—his authorized officers bear the primordial authority of the social contract no less than the sovereign himself does. Similarly, sovereign authority is inherited through a bloodline, creating a chain of authority that stretches from the current to the original monarch.

Second, 'authority' for Hobbes does not appear to be a historically contingent category, but rather a permanent feature of human experience. There is no indication that humans in the state of nature needed to 'invent' the idea of transferring authority—it is simply one of their native capabilities. Hobbes would have seen no problem analyzing an alien culture in terms of the social contract and the transfer of authority. He would hold that his account is valid anywhere there is social organization, as applicable to Ming China as to the kingdom of England. (Indeed, some of his intellectual descendants would see in China a perfect example of Hobbes' Leviathan.)

These two emphases distinguish Hobbes' 'authority' from both the ordinary language understanding and from Roman *auctoritas*. In Arendt's account, authority and *auctoritas* are conceptual inventions with a specific point of origin. They can be modified or lost entirely. For Arendt, neither the Greeks nor Western moderns have 'authority'—an impossibility for Hobbes. Similarly, the fact that authority can be transferred is a very minor element in both Arendt's account and the OED's definitions. For Hobbes, transmissibility is one of authority's principal points of interest.

[593] I use the term 'schizophrenic' deliberately. See footnote 649, below, on recursive authority relationships and Bateson's thesis that schizophrenia is triggered by 'double binds.'

Hobbes' employment of 'authority' in *Leviathan* reveals shades of potential meaning that we did not notice before. We will take stock of the particularities of Hobbes' usage later, and consider whether and how they should be reconciled with the concept of authority in general. Before that, we must examine a few more *exempla* of authority's usage in Western thought. Next, let us turn to Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard

In contrast to the work of Hobbes, 'authority' is not often recognized as a central component of Kierkegaard's thought. Nevertheless, the term crops up regularly in his oeuvre, often in moments where Kierkegaard (or his persona) wishes to distinguish his writings from Christian teachings. In such moments, Kierkegaard will state somewhat cryptically that he does not teach "with authority." (As we shall see, these statements really mean that he does not teach with a specific kind of authority, *divine* authority.) Apart from these oblique references, Kierkegaard discusses the concept of authority in detail in the second addendum to *The Book on Adler*, "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle."[594] The addendum is brief but essential for understanding Kierkegaard's main point in the body of this book; it offers several insights into what 'authority' can and should mean.

In *The Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard[595] explores the case of Adolph Adler, a controversial pastor in the Church of Denmark. Adler had published a series of teachings in 1843 that he claimed, initially, to have received as divine revelations. After being interrogated by church authorities and dismissed from his clerical post, Adler rescinded his claim that these teachings were revelations, and claimed instead that they were products of his own genius. Kierkegaard is very troubled both by Adler's claim to have received a revelation and by the confused way in which Adler redescribed the writings as his own invention. Kierkegaard attempts to flesh out the qualitative difference between revelation and the products of individual insight. He concludes by noting that Adler and many intellectuals of his generation were deeply influenced by Hegelian philosophy, and analyzes the ways in which Hegelianism confuses the categories of revelation and insight. Ultimately, Kierkegaard suggests that what revelations and their promulgators possess, and works of genius and their inventors lack, is divine authority. This is the qualitative difference between an apostle and a genius: "The genius is what he is by himself, that is, by what he is in himself; an apostle is what he is by his divine authority."[596]

In his addendum, Kierkegaard expands on this distinction by contrasting an apostle like Paul with literary and philosophical masters. He writes, "Paul is an apostle. And as an apostle he again has no affinity, none whatever, with either Plato or Shakespeare or stylists or tapestry makers; they all…are without any comparison to Paul. A genius and an apostle are qualitatively

[594] Note that Kierkegaard uses both the Danish cognate *autoritet* and a Danish synonym, *myndighed*. See Turchin, "Authority."

[595] Kierkegaard, as was his wont, published *The Book on Adler* under a pseudonym, in this case "Petrus Minor" (Peter the Lesser). He attached his own name to the work as the 'editor.' Parsing the differences between Kierkegaard's pseudonymous personas and his own beliefs is a longstanding, complex pursuit in Kierkegaard studies. Since I am not particularly interested in Kierkegaard's 'real beliefs' about authority, but rather in using his analysis as a case study for how the concept of authority can be employed and developed, I will simplify things by discussing *The Book on Adler* as if Kierkegaard wrote it under his own name. If a scholar of Kierkegaard reads this section and feels annoyed, they are welcome, from this point forward, to silently emend all mentions of 'Kierkegaard' to 'Petrus Minor.'

[596] Kierkegaard 1998, 175.

different…"[597] He draws out the difference by pointing out that it is natural to praise a genius for their profundity, for the beauty of their style, or for the uniqueness of their aesthetic qualities. In some ways, the essence of a genius lies in the fact that they are worthy of such praise. In contrast, there is something vaguely blasphemous about praising Paul for his aesthetics. Kierkegaard writes, "one not infrequently hears pastors who in all scholarly naïveté *bona fide* prostitute Christianity. They speak in lofty tones about the Apostle Paul's brilliance, profundity, about his beautiful metaphors etc.—sheer esthetics. If Paul is to be regarded as a genius, then it looks bad for him…"[598] Similarly, "To ask whether Christ [who, like Paul, teaches with divine authority] is profound is blasphemy and is an attempt…to destroy him in a subtle way…"[599] It is not that Paul or Christ have poor 'style' and so 'look bad' when assessed by the standards of genius; rather, such assessment constitutes a category error.[600] They are not geniuses—they are apostles, bearers of revelation. The essence of apostlehood is possession of divine authority, and this possession is entirely unrelated to the formal features or substantial content of their presentation of revelation. The same categorical distinction obtains between a piece of poetry and a bearer of worldly authority, e.g., a royal order: "[I]s there not a difference…between a royal command and the words of a poet or a thinker? And what is the difference but this, that the royal command has authority and therefore forbids all esthetic and critical impertinence with regard to form and content?"[601] Similarly, human bearers of authority bear that authority regardless of their character: "whether a police officer, for example, is a scoundrel or an upright man, as soon as he is on duty, he has authority."[602] And, "To honor one's father [i.e., the worldly authority in the household,] because he is exceptionally intelligent is impiety."[603] One is reminded here of the story of Jonah, the reluctant prophet. God charges Jonah with 'preaching against Ninevah.' Jonah hates this mission, and attempts to shirk it. In the end, very much against his original intentions, he finds himself compelled to deliver the message. Jonah's authority as a prophet bears no relation to his character or his personal disposition—his reluctance to deliver the message is irrelevant to the authority of the message itself.

Fundamentally, for Kierkegaard, authority is something external to its bearer, something that accompanies the bearer but does not blend with it. This means that authority cannot be inferred from the form or content of a teaching, or from the personal qualities of an authoritative person. Authority also cannot be *acquired* merely by assimilating a doctrine or emulating a person—a Christian does not obtain Christ's divine authority by acting like Christ and, in defiance of the common English idiom, a student *does not become the master* by mastering the teaching. Kierkegaard writes,

> What, then, is authority? Is authority the profundity of the doctrine, its excellence, its brilliance? Not at all. If, for example, authority would only signify, to the

[597] Kierkegaard 1998, 174.
[598] Kierkegaard 1998, 174.
[599] Kierkegaard 1998, 183.
[600] As Kierkegaard puts it, "Paul must not commend himself and his doctrine with the aid of the beautiful metaphors; on the contrary, he would surely say to the individual, 'Whether the image is beautiful or it is threadbare and obsolete makes no difference; you must consider that what I say has been entrusted to me by a revelation; so it is God himself or the Lord Jesus Christ who is speaking, and you must not become involved presumptuously in criticizing the form.'" Kierkegaard 1998, 177.
[601] Kierkegaard 1998, 177 – 178.
[602] Kierkegaard 1998, 180.
[603] Kierkegaard 1998, 182.

> second power or doubled, that the doctrine is profound—then there simply is no authority, because, if a learner completely and perfectly appropriated this doctrine by way of understanding, then of course there would be no difference anymore between the teacher and the learner. Authority, however, is something that remains unchanged, something that one cannot acquire by having perfectly understood the doctrine. *Authority is a specific quality that enters from somewhere else and qualitatively asserts itself precisely when the content of the statement or the act is made a matter of indifference esthetically.*[604]

Or, more pithily:

> If the authority is not the other (*to heteron*), if in any way it should indicate merely an intensification within the identity, then there simply is no authority.[605]

Consequently, authority adds nothing besides itself to its bearer. When a person receives divine authority via an apostolic calling, they receive nothing else. "By this call [the new apostle] does not become more intelligent, he does not acquire more imagination, greater discernment, etc.—not at all; he remains himself but by the paradoxical fact [of the calling] is sent by God on a specific mission."[606] The same is true of a worldly authority—the policeman's authority does not make him a better person, nor does the royal command's authority make its prose beautiful.

For Kierkegaard, a puzzling consequence of authority's fundamental externality is that its otherness does not diminish with time. It remains both forever new and forever alien—or, in Kierkegaard's terminology, 'paradoxical.'[607] This provides another contrast between the apostle and the genius. The deeds of a genius may initially appear 'new' to a culture. Works of genius are often misunderstood. But the 'otherness' or 'paradoxicality' of the genius fades with time. "A genius may be paradoxical in his first communication, but the more he comes to himself the more the paradoxical vanishes. Perhaps a genius can be a century ahead of his time and therefore stand as a paradox, but ultimately the human race will assimilate the one-time paradoxical in such a way that it is no longer paradoxical."[608] What a genius invents becomes, over time, ordinary. The message of the apostle, however, is always marked by the otherness of divine authority. Consequently, "The new that [the apostle] can have to proclaim is the essentially paradoxical. However long it is proclaimed in the world, it remains essentially just as new, just as paradoxical. No immanence can assimilate it."[609]

Kierkegaard suggests one final, essential quality of authority, namely, it is always directed toward a purpose or *telos*. Such a purpose is specific and definite. In the case of the divine authority of the apostle, this *telos* is the promulgation of revelation. This explains why apostles are active figures who preach their revelation, rather than passive figures who merely reflect on it. "The doctrine communicated to him is not a task given to him to cogitate about; it is not given to him for his own sake. On the contrary, he is on a mission and has to proclaim the

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[604] Kierkegaard 1998, 179.
[605] Kierkegaard 1998, 179.
[606] Kierkegaard 1998, 176.
[607] See Turchin, "Paradox." Paradox is a fundamental term of art for Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard does not use paradox to refer strictly to a 'logical paradox.' Rather, a paradox is something uncannily puzzling—something alien to ordinary experience and logic. For Kierkegaard, the paradigmatic example of paradox is faith.
[608] Kierkegaard 1998, 175 – 176.
[609] Kierkegaard 1998, 176

doctrine and to use authority."[610] Again, the *telos* of authority is distinct from the qualities of its bearer and distinct from what the bearer might teach or convey. In this respect, the divine authority of apostles is analogous to the authority of a mailman or emissary: "Just as little as a person sent into the city with a letter has anything to do with the contents of the letter but only with delivering it, and just as little as the envoy sent to a foreign court has any responsibility for the contents of the message but only for conveying it properly, so an apostle primarily has only to be faithful to his duty, which is to carry out his mission."[611] Again, one thinks of the reluctant prophet Jonah. Jonah receives the authority to preach against Ninevah; this authority, in fact, carries a *charge* or obligation to preach. But both the authority and the obligation are limited—Jonah carries no authority to preach against a different city. He is not even under an obligation to understand the message he delivers. And once Jonah announces God's judgment on the Assyrians, the charge is fulfilled and he sheds the role of a prophet. Thus, a particular authority carries a definite *telos* that delimits its scope, places obligations on its bearer, and may imply conditions that trigger the authority's dissolution.

In the course of dissecting the case of Adolph Adler, the Hegelian pseudo-apostle, Kierkegaard fleshes out a very distinct concept of authority. For Kierkegaard, authority is a quality that can be born by a person or a teaching/utterance. One of the fundamental features of this quality is its externality or otherness from its bearer. This externality means that authority cannot be inferred from the other qualities of its bearer, nor can it be acquired by emulating or assimilating those other qualities—nothing about Paul, apart from divine authority itself, marks him as authoritative; we cannot acquire Paul's authority by imitating his style of Greek, or by mastering the content of his teachings. This externality means that authority has an uncanny timelessness—two millennia after Paul promulgated the revelation, his locutions have become completely assimilated and his metaphors are tired tropes, but (per Kierkegaard) his writings are just as authoritative now as they were in the first century of the common era. (Kierkegaard would call this uncanny timelessness a 'paradoxical transcendence.') Finally, a particular instance of authority has a specific *telos* that limits its scope. Paul was not given 'unlimited authority,' whatever that would be, but rather a very specific charge: to promulgate the Christian revelation. To tease out some of the implications of authority's intrinsic orientation toward an aim, we might say that, for Kierkegaard, authority places an obligation—a claim—on its bearer, and through the bearer it also places obligations on those who fall within its scope or field. Divine authority lays a claim on Paul, demanding that he preach, and through Paul it lays a claim on his listeners, demanding that they have faith in Christ.

Kierkegaard's concept of authority is much more robustly developed than those we have surveyed so far. Although Kierkegaard articulates the concept as a whole in a very idiosyncratic manner, many of his individual observations resonate strongly with those of previously mentioned thinkers. Kierkegaard shies away from identifying authority with power,[612] but his concept clearly aligns closely with the idea of 'title' or 'right' so ambivalently highlighted by the OED. Like the concept of *auctoritas* reconstructed by Arendt, Kierkegaard's authority has a curious relationship with time. Arendt's *auctoritas* flows from the past into the present. Kierkegaard's authority, likewise, is capable of stretching undiminished from the past to the

[610] Kierkegaard 1998, 186.
[611] Kierkegaard 1998, 186 – 187.
[612] He does mention, once, that as a rule the mark of worldly (as opposed to divine) authority will be power: "In the transitory relations of authority between persons *qua* human beings, authority will as a rule be physically recognizable by power. An apostle has no other evidence than his own statement, and at most his willingness to suffer everything joyfully for the sake of that statement." Kierkegaard 1998, 186.

present. Like Hobbes, Kierkegaard sees authority as creating a complex structure of claims—it lays claims on its bearer, as well as on those who fall within the scope defined by its *telos*. (Unlike Hobbes, Kierkegaard never considers the claims that authority lays on its author, presumably because it would be impolitic to imply that Paul has a claim on God.) And although Kierkegaard does not emphasize authority's transmissibility, as Hobbes does, he clearly implies it.[613] Lastly, in every discussion of authority so far, we have been forced to acknowledge that there is something paradoxical, puzzling, or uncanny about the concept. Kierkegaard is in complete agreement about this uncanniness, stressing it constantly in *The Book on Adler*; indeed, one senses that authority's tendency toward paradox accounts for much of its attraction to Kierkegaard. In this regard, Kierkegaard's authority is of a piece with that of Arendt, Hobbes, and the OED.

As a final farewell to Kierkegaard, let us remark on one troubling or puzzling feature of his account. Throughout his addendum to *The Book on Adler*, Kierkegaard explains authority by way of contrast with 'genius'—the status of Paul as an apostle, for example, is completely unlike the status of Shakespeare or Plato as geniuses. Kierkegaard's trenchant remarks on authority's absolute externality to beauty of form and profundity of content go a long way toward making this distinction believable. It is plausible (though rarely acknowledged) that there is something vaguely impious about praising Paul for his 'style' or his 'deep insight,' as Kierkegaard suggests. But in our enthusiasm for this insight, let us not lose sight of what Kierkegaard implies by contrasting the authoritative Paul with the genius Plato: he denies that Plato has authority.[614] From the point of view of ordinary language, this is a strange distinction to draw. Common sense suggests that Plato's writings possess a great deal of authority in many cultures. They certainly had, and continue to have, power to influence belief, and they have definitely sometimes occupied the position of a "quotation or book acknowledged, or alleged, to settle a question of opinion or give conclusive testimony." It will often make sense in ordinary English to say, "Plato possesses authority." And, if we take Arendt's account of *auctoritas* seriously, Plato literally possessed *auctoritas* in the eyes of the Roman, who looked back to classical Greek philosophy as a philosophical foundation analogous to the political foundation of Rome. One could make a similar case for Shakespeare as an authority in the realm of English literature—he certainly possesses a 'power to influence' drama. Moreover, his writings appear everywhere in English dictionaries as 'conclusive testimony' for the meaning of the many words and phrases he coined. Shakespeare, too, seems like a type of authority. In this light, one begins to wonder if Kierkegaard's dichotomy between 'authority' and 'genius' really holds up. Perhaps qualities of genius are not strictly necessary for authority, but could it be that genius (profundity, or beauty of style) sometimes actually confers authority, as it evidently did for Plato and Shakespeare? Could it be that genius, far from being a conceptual antonym of authority, is actually one of its subtypes? We will return to this wrinkle in Kierkegaard's account later.

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[613] Divine authority is transferred to Paul (presumably from God). The policeman's authority is presumably transferred to him by officers of the state. A royal command might very well transmit authority to the receiver.

[614] Kierkegaard says as much in discussing Christ's promise of eternal life: "A Christian pastor, if he is to speak properly, must quite simply say, 'We have Christ's word that there is an eternal life, and with that the matter is decided. Here it is a matter…of its being Christ who, not in the capacity of profundity but with his divine authority, has said it.' …On the other hand, let us take someone who wants to rack his brains profoundly on the question of immortality—will he not be justified in denying that the direct statement [of Christ] is a profound answer to the question? What Plato says about immortality is actually profound, attained by profound cogitating; but then poor Plato does not have any authority." Kierkegaard 1998, 184.

We have now examined the concept of authority in four contexts: in ordinary language (as represented by the OED), in Arendt's essay "What Is Authority?," in Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and in Kierkegaard's *The Book on Adler*. As we view these four accounts together, we begin to hone in on areas of commonality and overlap. Just as a series of photographs of many people's faces may be projected simultaneously, each individual face superimposed on the others so that a strange, generic human face appears, so too, can we see the outlines of a generic concept of authority emerging. That generic authority involves a structure of claims; it is transmissible; it is like a title or right; it forms chains with other authorities; it has a curious relationship to time; it can be borne by either a person or an utterance; it is distinct from its bearer; it is not *merely* power, if it is a power at all. The image is still very blurry. It contains contradictions and lacunae. But we have a better sense of what the word and its cognates seem inclined to express—the face behind the faces, the word behind the words. Very soon, we will try to give an account of authority that sharpens and clarifies this blurry generic image into something crisp, concrete, and useable. First, we must consult one more image.

Wittgenstein/Winch

Wittgenstein, like Kierkegaard, is not often spoken of in the same breath as 'authority.' Kierkegaard, at least, peppers his writings with the term. The word almost never appears in Wittgenstein's work—it is, in fact, entirely absent from his early treatise, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* ('Early Wittgenstein'), as well as from what is usually considered his mature work, the *Philosophical Investigations* ('Late Wittgenstein'). It appears three times in *On Certainty*, a posthumously published collection of notes written in the final two years of his life ('Last Wittgenstein').[615] *On Certainty* is often characterized as an exploration of epistemology; it was born in Wittgenstein's attempt to grapple with his colleague G.E. Moore's claim to know, with certainty, a small set of 'common sense' propositions, like "Here is one hand, and here is another," "The earth existed for a long time before my birth," and "I have never been far from the earth's surface." Wittgenstein deals throughout with the relationship between certainty, error, propositional knowledge, and language.

Unlike our previous *exempla*, Wittgenstein's three references to authority in *On Certainty* are more or less in line with authority's usage in ordinary language. At first glance, the concept does not seem important to Wittgenstein's lines of inquiry in *On Certainty*. However, his references to authority, apparently made in passing, implicitly suggest a radical reframing of how 'authority' is ordinarily thought to relate to 'reason.' This reframing was later explored at greater length by one of Wittgenstein's students, Peter Winch. The Wittgenstein/Winch picture of authority's entanglement with reason will prove crucial in our final account of authority. Below are the three series of notes in which Wittgenstein refers to authority.

First series:

> 155. "In certain circumstances a man cannot make a *mistake*. ('Can' Is here used logically, and the proposition does not mean that a man cannot say anything false in those circumstances.) If Moore were to pronounce the opposite of those

[615] *On Certainty* was written in German and translated into English after Wittgenstein's death. When I say he uses the word 'authority,' I mean that he uses the German cognate, *Autorität*.

propositions which he declares certain [i.e., 'Here is one hand, and here is another,' et al.], we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented."
156. "In order to make a mistake, a man must already judge in conformity with mankind."
157. "Suppose a man could not remember whether he had always had five fingers or two hands? Should we understand him? Could we be sure of understanding him?"
158. "Can I be making a mistake, for example, in thinking that the words of which this sentence is composed are English [original: German] words whose meaning I know?"
159. "As children we learn facts; e.g., that every human being has a brain, and we take them on trust. I believe that there is an island, Australia, of such-and-such a shape, and so on and so on; I believe that I had great-grandparents, that the people who gave themselves out as my parents really were my parents, etc. This belief may never have been expressed; even the thought that it was so, never thought."
160. "The child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes *after* belief."
161. "I learned an enormous amount and accepted it on human ***authority***, and then I found some things confirmed or disconfirmed by experience [emphasis mine]."
162. "In general I take as true what is found in text-books, of geography for example. Why? I say: All these facts have been confirmed a hundred times over. But how do I know that? What is my evidence for it? I have a world-picture. Is it true or false? Above all it is the substratum of all my enquiring and asserting. The propositions describing it are not all equally subject to testing."
163. "Does anyone ever test whether this table remains in existence when no one is paying attention to it?
"We check the story of Napoleon, but not whether all the reports about him are based on sense-deception, forgery and the like. For whenever we test anything, we are already presupposing something that is not tested. Now am I to say that the experiment which perhaps I make in order to test the truth of a proposition presupposes the truth of the proposition that the apparatus I believe I see is really there (and the like)?"
164. "Doesn't testing come to an end?"
165. "One child might say to another: 'I know that the earth is already hundreds of years old' and that would mean: I have learnt it."
166. "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing."[616]

This series begins with Wittgenstein pointing toward the special qualities of the statements Moore claims to know 'with certainty' or 'for sure.' It is clear that if these statements possess 'certainty,' it is not the same kind of certainty possessed by, say, a logical proof of the Pythagorean theorem. To flesh out this distinction, Wittgenstein suggests that these statements are not just run-of-the-mill beliefs or opinions, like the best piano sonata or the date of Julius Caesar's death. If Moore suddenly disavowed these statements, it would be futile to say he was making a 'mistake,' for "we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented." Wittgenstein hints that some

[616] Wittgenstein 1972, 23–24.

statements in a language game have a more foundational quality than others, and infelicities with regard to foundational statements are not mere mistakes.

Wittgenstein connects this foundational quality with a temporal dimension: as a child is inducted into our language games, some beliefs come earlier than others. Early beliefs are based on trust—authority. We learn about the existence and shape of Australia from adults or books. If a belief like "there is an island called Australia that looks vaguely like a kidney bean" is ever tested, it will be *after* having already been accepted. "Doubt comes *after* belief"—skepticism comes *after* authority. Some beliefs we describe and exchange in certain language games are 'groundless,' i.e., not based in a final reason, but ultimately in childhood acceptance of authority. There is nothing particularly radical about this insight—all serious thinkers accept that, barring omniscience, we must use and even accept some propositions on hearsay. But Wittgenstein hints at something more radical at the end of this series: perhaps the game of 'believing' in general is rooted in authority ("The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing"). Perhaps Moore's 'certain' statements are certain because they implicate the foundations of the game itself. Wittgenstein says as much in the second series.

Second series:

> 486. "'Do you know or do you only believe that your name is L.W.?' Is that a meaningful question?
> "Do you know or do you only believe that what you are writing down now are German words? Do you only believe that 'believe' has *this* meaning? *What* meaning?"
> 487. "What is the proof that I *know* something? Most certainly not my saying I know it."
> 488. "And so, when writers enumerate all the things they *know*, that proves nothing whatever.
> "So the possibility of knowledge about physical objects cannot be proved by the protestations of those who believe that they have such knowledge."
> 489. "For what reply does one make to someone who says 'I believe that it merely strikes you as if you knew it'?"
> 490. "When I ask 'Do I know or do I only believe that I am called [L.W.]?' it is no use to look within myself.
> "But I could say: not only do I never have the slightest doubt that I am called that, but there is no judgment I could be certain of if I started doubting that."
> 491. "'Do I know or do I only believe that I am called L.W.?'
> "—Of course, if the question were 'Am I certain or do I only surmise…?', then my answer could be relied on."
> 492. "'Do I know or do I only believe [that I am called L.W.]?' might also be expressed like this: What if it *seemed* to turn out that what until now has seemed immune to doubt was a false assumption? Would I react as I do when a belief has proved to be false? or would it seem to knock from under my feet the ground on which I stand in making any judgments at all?—But of course I do not intend this as a *prophecy*.

> "Would I simply say 'I should never have thought it!'—or would I (have to) refuse to revise my judgment—because such a 'revision' would amount to annihilation of all yardsticks?"
> 493. "So is this it: I must recognize certain ***authorities*** in order to make judgments at all? [Emphasis mine.]"
> 494. "'I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgment.'
> "But what sort of proposition is that? (It is reminiscent of what Frege said about the law of identity.) It is certainly no empirical proposition. It does not belong to psychology. It has rather the character of a rule."
> 495: "One might simply say 'O, rubbish!' to someone who wanted to make objections to the propositions that are beyond doubt. That is, not reply to him but admonish him."
> 496: "This is a similar case to that of shewing that it has no meaning to say that a game has always been played wrong."[617]
> ……
> 509: "I really want to say that a language-game is only possible if one trusts something (I did not say 'can trust something')."[618]
> ……
> 512. "Isn't the question this: 'What if you had to change your opinion even on these most fundamental things?' And to that the answer seems to me to be: 'You don't *have* to change it. That is just what their being 'fundamental' is.'"
> ……
> 515. "If my name is *not* L.W., how can I rely on what is meant by 'true' and 'false'?"[619]

In the first series, Wittgenstein suggested that beliefs that are early or foundational are intimately connected to authority. In this second series, he explores what happens when one questions or abandons those beliefs. Is it certain, for Wittgenstein, that his name is Ludwig Wittgenstein? Is the certainty of his being named Wittgenstein open to debate? Well, yes: he can conceive of the possibility that the doubt may someday enter his mind. But this doubt would not be like pedestrian, everyday doubts ("Will John really arrive by 2 PM?"), or even like abstract philosophical doubts ("Is the *Principia Mathematica* logically sound?"). Serious, unusual consequences would follow in its wake—so serious, in fact, that Wittgenstein might respond to this doubt not with honest investigation but with mere dismissal. His striking initial articulation of this insight is that "such a 'revision' would amount to annihilation of all yardsticks." Or, more prosaically, "I cannot doubt this proposition without giving up all judgment." The proposition, "My name is Ludwig Wittgenstein" is so foundational for Wittgenstein that it would entail doubting the meaning of 'true' and 'false.' Crucially, this proposition has the character of those things one learns early in childhood, like the existence of Australia and the ancientness of the earth. It is based, not on reason, but *authority*. Wittgenstein is forced to entertain the possibility that one "must recognize certain authorities in order to make judgments at all."

[617] Wittgenstein 1972, 65.
[618] Wittgenstein 1972, 66.
[619] Wittgenstein 1972, 64–67.

The making of judgments—the game of grounding beliefs in reasons—is itself based on authority, not reason.

Third series

> 559: "You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable).
> "It is there—like our life."
> 560. "And the concept of knowing is coupled with that of the language-game."
> 561. "'I know' and 'You can rely on it'. But one cannot always substitute the latter for the former."[620]
> ……
> 570. "'I know this is my name; among us any grown-ups knows what his name is.'"
> 571. "'My name is…—you can rely on that. If it turns out to be wrong you need never believe me in the future.'"[621]
> ……
> 577. "'My knowledge of my name is absolutely definite.'
> "I would refuse to entertain any argument that tried to show the opposite!
> "And what does 'I *would* refuse' mean? Is it the expression of an intention?"
> 578. "But mightn't a higher ***authority*** assure me that I don't know the truth? So that I had to say 'Teach me!'? But then my eyes would have to be opened."
> 579. "It is part of the language-game with people's names that everyone knows his name with the greatest certainty."[622]

The lesson Wittgenstein derives from his analysis of the 'personal name' language game applies to the language game in general. It is not grounded in reason. It is "something unpredictable…It is there—like our life." Statements that implicate its 'being there' (like, in the end, Moore's 'certain' statements) cannot be doubted without doubting the entire game. We might imagine that such statements could be revised in a way that kept the game intact, but such a revision would have to come from "a higher authority," and it would have the character, not of an argument, but of a revelation ("But then my eyes would have to be opened"). Wittgenstein can imagine the abstract possibility, but not the concrete content, of a world in which he is not certain that his name is Ludwig Wittgenstein.[623] Moreover, because 'knowledge' is a correlate of the language game, knowledge itself is always based on authority. We know because we are *authorized* to know. Or, as Wittgenstein puts it, "It is always by favour of Nature that one knows something."[624]

As Wittgenstein's student Peter Winch points out, Wittgenstein's treatment of authority reverses the hierarchy between authority and reason as it is usually conceived in modern Western philosophy. Descartes strove to build a philosophical system that dispensed with authority and

[620] Wittgenstein 1972, 73.
[621] Wittgenstein 1972, 75.
[622] Wittgenstein 1972, 76.
[623] Kierkegaard might point out that we can infer nothing about the contents of a royal command from the mere fact that it bears royal authority.
[624] Wittgenstein 1972, 66.

relied on certainty, achieved by reason alone. After all, behind authority and untested sense perception there might lurk a demon, a Deceiver.[625] Many post-Cartesian thinkers have pointed to flaws in this approach, but Wittgenstein does so in a novel way. He suggests that, behind reason, stands authority.[626] In a conceptual rhyme with Gadamer (who describes the Enlightenment as founded on 'a prejudice against prejudice'),[627] Wittgenstein indicates that there can be no final 'flight from authority' after all. "What Wittgenstein shows is that, so far from its being the case that all recognition of authority derives from the exercise of practical reason on the part of the recognizer, the notion of practical reason itself requires at many points a recognition of the authority of others that is *primitive*."[628] Winch goes so far as to say that we should think about reason not as opposed to authority, but as a *type* of authority. Rather than asking about the reason of authority, we can ask, "What is the authority of reason?"[629]

When Wittgenstein and Winch use the word authority, it is more or less in line with the ordinary language understanding of authority. It is a "power to inspire belief; title to be believed" or a "quotation or book acknowledged…to settle a question of opinion." Their usage does not highlight the ambivalent nature of authority or raise questions about its ontological status. Basically, their interest in 'authority' is restricted to the world of asking for reasons and assessing beliefs. But if the scope of their usage is restricted in this way, it is expanded in another. They expand the category 'authority' beyond the confines it has inhabited since Descartes (and, Winch would suggest, since Aristotle). No longer is authority a conceptual peer or subordinate of reason; instead, it is a higher order category that *subsumes* reason—reason is a type of authority. In light of the other thinkers we have surveyed, this is a unique formulation. Hobbes and Arendt certainly see authority and reason as peers; Kierkegaard might be

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[625] See Stout 1981, Chapter 1.

[626] We can assume that the 'evidence of the senses,' the other source of knowledge targeted by Descartes, would also be treated as a type of authority by Wittgenstein. Other post-analytic philosophers have described the evidence of the senses as, basically, 'authorities,' rather than as immediately given forms of knowledge or experience. See Sellars 1997.

[627] See Gadamer 2004, 278–285. For Gadamer, the preeminent examples of 'prejudice' targeted by the Enlightenment are 'authority' and 'tradition.'

[628] See Winch 1990, 236. The subordination of authority to reason is of course a cornerstone of Cartesian philosophy, but Winch observes that it is also a defining assumption for Descartes' philosophical cousin, Hobbes. Hobbes shows that people transfer authority *for good reason*, and the absolute state, therefore, is rational. But "*On Certainty* on the other hand turns the tables on Hobbes by showing that the conception of *reason* requires as its background precisely a community in which there is such trust and agreement." Winch 1990, 233.

[629] Winch explored the idea of reason as a type of authority in unpublished lectures. In notes from one such lecture, "The Authority of Reason," he writes, "Discussion of my question 'How is political authority possible?' should have brought out that it is akin to the question: 'How is political authority compatible with reason?'. The assumption has been that the acknowledgement of such authority must somehow be *based on reason*. And some of the difficulties we have encountered have suggested that this may not be the right question to ask. I want now to turn the question round: instead of asking for the reason of authority, let's ask: *What is the authority of reason?*" In an intriguing aside, Winch examines Socrates' explanation of his method in the *Gorgias*. Winch suggests that Socrates, far from conceiving of his *elenchus* as entirely divorced from authority, in fact sees authority as crucial to its persuasive appeal. "In *Gorgias* the *authority* carried by Socrates's arguments is the *authority of Socrates, the man*. And this is emphasized in the dramatic structure of the dialogue. Or rather, it is *the authority carried by the spectacle of a certain type of life, which Socrates both exemplifies and describes*. This is connected with the fact which (I think) I drew attention to before: that Socrates's appeal to all three of his interlocutors is, at the most crucial point, an appeal to their sense of *shame*. It is as though he says to them: 'Disagree with me if you can, *or dare*!'" See Winch 1993, 2–4. (I thank Prof. Olli Lagerspetz of Åbo Akademi University for providing me with Winch's unpublished lecture notes. The lectures are summarized and expanded upon in Lagerspetz 2012.)

sympathetic to Wittgenstein's overarching claim, but he never puts it this way explicitly. This expansion of the concept of authority allows us to make something quite new out of it.

Putting It All Together: Authority's Transmissibility and Its Role in Argument

We have been trying to pin down the concept of 'authority.' We now have three 'field reports' describing sightings of this concept 'in the wild'—those of Hobbes, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein. We have an archaeological report describing fossils that appear to belong to the ancestor of the beast—Arendt's account of *auctoritas*. We have, in addition, 'folktale evidence'—the ordinary language definitions exemplified in the OED. Let us take stock of these reports and see if we can define the concept's range and natural habitat. Perhaps we can capture this creature and put it to use.

Our reports observe 'authority' ranging across a wide range of conceptual terrain: it consorts with 'force' and 'influence' (OED), 'adds to' or 'augments' something (Arendt), plays a role in politics (Arendt and Hobbes), distinguishes a bearer of revelation from a bearer of genius (Kierkegaard), and seems to undergird 'language games,' perhaps even the language game normally known as 'reasoning' (Wittgenstein/Winch). Our reports contain some starkly conflicting testimony. Authority is a type of 'power' according to the OED, but Arendt and the Romans rigorously distinguish it from power. For Hobbes, reason seems to precede authority, but precisely the opposite holds for Wittgenstein. For Kierkegaard, Plato is an example of the anti-authority, 'genius.' But for the OED, for Arendt's Romans, and for Wittgenstein (via Winch), Plato clearly seems to qualify as a type of authority. From these angles, our image is getting muddier, not clearer.

But there are two features of authority that feature in every single report: authority can be transferred, and it plays a crucial role in argumentation. Let us hone in on these commonalities. As we shall see, they are closely related to each other.

Several of the OED's subdefinitions mention authority's transmissibility ("derived or delegated power; conferred right or title…conferred right *to do* something"). Arendt says that *auctoritas flows* from the past, and that the Senate *adds auctoritas* to political decisions. For Hobbes, transmissibility is a primary feature of authority (it is transferred from the people to their representative, the sovereign, and from the sovereign to his officers). For Kierkegaard, authority is transmitted from God to the apostles, and from the state to the policeman. For Wittgenstein/Winch, authority permeates chains of beliefs. It seems safe to say that authority is transferable. But what is being transferred? At first glance, this is difficult to answer. Is it a metaphysical substance? A socially-recognized status? A physical piece of paper? And who or what receives and transmits authority? People? Social positions? Pieces of discourse?

The other common feature of authority is that it plays a role in argument or disputation. This is obvious in the OED, which says that authority can be "the quotation or book acknowledged, or alleged, to settle a question of opinion or give conclusive testimony." Similarly, it can be "the person whose opinion or testimony is accepted," or "one whose opinion *on* or *upon* a subject is entitled to be accepted; an expert in any question." In other words, authorities *settle* debates and end arguments. Wittgenstein's conception of authority has a similar sense—'authority' rests underneath a language game, backing up statements that implicate the game's very foundations. Why do we accept that Wittgenstein is certain that his name his

Wittgenstein? Because of authority alone. Seriously questioning Wittgenstein's statement that his name is Wittgenstein doesn't yield additional reasoning, but rather collapses the game.

This functional feature of authority—that it plays a role in argument—is not immediately apparent in the other accounts, but a moment's reflection brings it to the surface. Arendt approves of Mommsen's definition of *auctoritas* as "more than advice and less than a command." This definition clearly places *auctoritas* in the context of argumentation, and we can easily imagine that a Roman general might explain or justify his actions by reference to the *auctoritas* of the Senate ("I invaded Gaul because the Senate, with its *auctoritas*, suggested I do so.") Similarly, Kierkegaard gives divine authority as *the* reason Paul should be obeyed: "I am not to listen to Paul because he is brilliant or matchlessly brilliant, but I am to submit to Paul because he has divine authority."[630] Finally, this function of authority simmers just below the surface of Hobbes' account, where "the right of doing any action is called AUTHORITY," and authority creates a tie of ownership between authors and their actors' actions. Here, authority acts a *reason* that an author must take responsibility for the actions of their actor. Why should you, a subject, obey the laws of your sovereign? Because of his authority—because you *own* his actions.

At the most general level, we might sum up these treatments of authority's function in argument by saying that authority can function as a justification. Indeed, perhaps this is an essential feature of 'an authority': it can be given as a final reason in argument. Curiously, authority can fulfill this function regardless of its type of bearer, and regardless of what it is being used to justify. We can justify (i.e., give a reason meant to be final) an action (going to war) or a belief (the father is the head of the household) by reference to an authoritative person (a king), an authoritative piece of discourse (the Bible), or an authoritative image or ideal (an image of the state of nature). Admittedly, some philosophers, such as Descartes, have tried to claim that authorities *should* not have this standing in argument—they are not 'good' reasons. But despite the immense influence of Descartes and his epigones, they have not succeeded in permanently altering the 'grammar' of ordinary argument; four hundred years after Descartes tried to forbid authority, a line of reasoning that ends in authority still 'scans' as a line of reasoning, although we can always quibble about whether the particular line of reasoning is a good one. (If we take Wittgenstein/Winch seriously, this is because *all lines of reasoning*, pursued to an end, end in authority.)

The fact that authority always may function as a final reason in argument can help us understand its 'transmissibility' better, specifically what is being transmitted. Picture the following social situation: there are three people in a restaurant—the owner, a cook, and a janitor. No one is confused about their roles. The owner says to the cook, "Tell the janitor not to clean the kitchen today." The cook goes to the janitor and says, "Don't clean the kitchen today." If the janitor asks why, the cook can respond, "Because the owner said so." This is a perfectly cogent response. All three acknowledge that the owner has authority over the restaurant and the employees' activities there. The owner's will alone can function as a final reason in arguments/inquiries concerning those activities.

Now, imagine that the owner is about to leave for three weeks. The owner says to the two employees, "The cook is in charge while I'm gone," and departs. The next day, the cook says to the janitor, "Don't clean the bathrooms, today." If the janitor asks why, the cook can respond, "Because I say so." Again, this is a cogent response. The owner has delegated authority to the cook, and now the cook's will alone can function as a final reason. What did the owner transmit

[630] Kierkegaard 1998, 177.

to the cook in delegating authority? Certainly nothing physical or metaphysical. It is also overly hasty to say that he has transmitted 'power' over the restaurant—perhaps the janitor respects the owner, and despises the cook. Per the owner's order, he doesn't clean the kitchen, but he secretly ignores the cook's order and cleans the bathrooms anyway. In this case, power to clean or prevent the cleaning of rooms has not accompanied authority in its transit from the owner to the cook. But something *has* accompanied authority, namely the ability to function as a final reason in a relevant argument. (This is, in fact, a kind of power, although a very, very narrow one; it is only tenuously related to the power of, say, armies and violence.) We might say that, through a mere speech act, the owner has transmitted a position in a language game, the game of "Who has authority over the restaurant?" If the janitor wishes to continue playing that game, then he is constrained to accept the cook's will as a final reason (note that this does not mean he is constrained to actually obey). If he doesn't—if he asks for further reasons, or openly defies the cook—he has changed the language game entirely. The cook and the janitor would then engage in a new game, the nature of which would become apparent over time. (It might be a game of "What would the owner say?," or a game of "What is best for the restaurant?," or even a game of "Are you, cook, capable of forcing me to revert to playing the previous game?") Regardless, within the confines of the initial game ("Who or what gives final reasons in relation to the restaurant?"), the janitor can make no move that will change the cook's position—no machination of his can dislodge the cook's authority in that game.

This account meshes perfectly with all our previous reports of authority. The Roman Senate, Hobbes' sovereign, Kierkegaard's apostle, and Wittgenstein's yardstick all occupy this position in their corresponding language games. Moreover, our 'fable of the restaurant' subtly reproduces the uncanny, ambivalent aspect of authority that appears so consistently in our field reports. We have said that the janitor is 'constrained' to accept the cook's word as final reason. This is a curious kind of constraint, because it is conditional. It is a real limitation—a real force or power—if the janitor wishes to remain within the initial game. But it has no power at all if he is willing to step outside of that game. We might call this conditional constraint a 'claim'—the cook's authority lays a claim on the janitor (accept my word as a final reason), and the janitor, enclaimed by that authority within the context of the game, must accept the claim if he wishes to continue playing.[631] Of course, the terms 'game' and 'play' trivialize what is in fact a serious situation, for the claims of authority can be deadly things. The outputs of language games often have profound impacts on the non-linguistic world. (If the janitor flouts the cook's authority, he may be fired, either by the cook or by the owner; if this were a ship, the janitor might walk the plank). But 'game' and 'play' also highlight the apparent triviality with which authority transits from one locus to another, and the ease with which one game is abandoned and another begins. Merely by questioning the cook's will, the janitor throws them both into a different, larger game. And when the owner returns, he may capriciously switch the locus of authority from the cook to the janitor with a mere sentence ("The janitor is in charge now"). Seemingly trivial speech acts literally 'change the game.' We can see now why authority often appears paradoxical: depending on our perspective, it is both omnipotent and impotent, trivial and serious, as immoveable as granite and as changeable as a feather in the wind.

[631] N.B., the 'claim' in question is distinct from the content of the cook's command. The cook's authority does not constrain the janitor to refrain from cleaning the bathrooms; rather, it constrains him to treat the cook's statement as a final reason in argument.

If we accept this account, then 'authority' becomes clearer and its puzzles start to dissolve. Let us see if we can identify a few more of its essential features and thereby refine its analytic capacities.

The Claims of Authority

First, let's focus on the nature of the 'claims' (the conditional constraints) related to authority. In our imaginary restaurant, it is clear that authority places a claim on the janitor—he must accept the will of the bearer of authority as a final reason in relevant argument. It is worth emphasizing that the authority-bearer's ability to make claims is clearly limited, not unlimited. First, the authority of the cook or owner over the janitor relates to the restaurant and nothing else. Suppose the cook were to tell the janitor, "Buy a bicycle." If the janitor asked, "Why?," it would not be cogent for the cook to respond, "Because I say so." Whether the janitor owns a bicycle is not, *prima facie*, related to the restaurant or to the janitor's role there, and the janitor is under no constraint to accept the cook's will on this question as a final reason. The janitor could respond, "That's not a good reason, do you have another?," and this would not count as a 'game-breaking move' in the game of "Who has authority in the restaurant?" In fact, it is not a move in that game at all, but in a different one (perhaps the game of "Which method of transport is best?," or the more malign game of "Who has authority over the janitor's personal life?").[632]

Similarly, suppose the cook leaves the restaurant, enters the pharmacy next door, and tells the pharmacy's janitor not to clean the bathrooms. Whatever conversation ensues between the cook and the pharmacy's janitor, it is clear that the cook's will does not have the claim on the pharmacy's janitor that it does on the restaurant's janitor. In both of these situations, the cook has gone 'outside of his authority.' Just as Kierkegaard emphasized, what is subordinate to an authority always seems to have a specific 'scope.' Borrowing from law, we might refer to this scope as an authority's 'jurisdiction.' An authority's jurisdiction limits both who it can make claims *on* (let us call this person 'the subject,' e.g., the restaurant's janitor, but not the pharmacy's), and what it can make claims *about* ('the subject matter,' e.g., cleaning the bathrooms, but not buying a bicycle). An authority's jurisdiction is often clear to most participants in a language game, but not always. And an authority's jurisdiction is often *not* clear to people outside of the relevant language game—a customer at the restaurant will not necessarily understand that the cook has authority over the janitor. We will return to this issue of unclear jurisdiction later.

The claim that exists between the janitor (the subject) and the cook (the bearer of authority) is fairly obvious. The claim is a constraint within the language game over which the 'authority' holds a position. But in the game of the restaurant, authority also entails claims on the cook and on the owner. These claims also relate to roles in the language game. Authority's claim on the owner is straightforward, because it is identical in form to authority's claim over the

[632] There are ways that the cook could subsume the issue of the janitor's transportation choices under his authority over the restaurant. But this process of subsumption would require *work* on the cook's part—he would have to clearly demonstrate that authority over the janitor in the restaurant entails authority over the janitor's transportation choices. And such processes of subsumption are always tenuous and conditional, not ironclad and foreordained. If the cook attempted to demonstrate that authority over the restaurant entails authority over employee transportation, the janitor might counterargue and successfully get the cook to admit that there is no such entailment. Or, the cook's attempt might frighten and disturb the janitor so much that he simply stops playing the game ("I didn't sign up for this!") and quits the restaurant. We will return to this issue later when we discuss 'structures of authority' and their interactions.

janitor. Let us imagine that the owner returns to the restaurant and asks the janitor, "Why didn't you clean the bathrooms?" The janitor can respond, "Because the cook said not to." Again, this is cogent as a final reason. The owner is constrained to accept it if he wishes to remain in the relevant game. If he says, "That's not a good reason, is there another?," he is pushing the janitor into a different sort of game. When Hobbes says that 'authors' must own the actions of their 'actors,' he is identifying a precisely analogous claim. Although he would not phrase it this way, we might say that in the language game of the absolute state, the statement "Because the sovereign or his officers told me to" is always and constitutively a *good final reason* in argument, even when offered to the original author of the action. Hobbes calls the source of authority the 'author.' I would prefer to call this source 'the origin.' An authority lays a claim on its subject or subjects (in our case, the janitor). An authority lays a parallel claim on its origin or origins (in our case, the owner). Ordinary English has expressions that correspond to these claims: the subject answers *to* an authority, and the origin answers *for* an authority.

So much for the claim on the subject and the claim on the origin. What of authority's claim on its *bearer*, the cook? This claim is less obvious. There are many things that bearers of authority will habitually do that are not, in fact, essentially required of them. They may make decisions. They may judge, permit, or forbid. Or they may not. They may act as a final reason themselves, or delegate that position to someone else. Perhaps, during their time in authority, they receive no queries and do absolutely nothing at all. But there is one thing they must do if they are to continue bearing authority: they *must* participate cogently in relevant arguments when asked. If they cannot do this, they fall out of the relevant language game—it either reroutes around them or it dissolves.

Again, let's picture our restaurant. While the owner is away, the janitor notices the windows are dirty and asks the cook, "Should I clean the windows?" If the cook responds, "Yes," "No," "Because it's a slow day today, you should clean them," "Decide for yourself," etc., then the game continues. But what if the cook fails to respond at all? (Rather than acknowledging the janitor and his question, he simply twiddles his thumbs and then walks out of the restaurant.) What if the cook gives an unintelligible response? (He tells the cook, "Wirb dip nolo crandall.") What if the cook makes his response as an argument that fails to cohere? ("The windows are dirty. Paris is clean. Therefore, you should not clean the windows.") Or finally, what if he makes an argument based on observations that seem manifestly nonsensical to the janitor? ("There are no windows. There is nothing to clean.") As outside observers, we sense immediately that the relationship between the cook and authority is broken or in jeopardy. These responses are serious problems that interrupt the normal flow of the language game. Imagine that the janitor proceeds to clean the windows despite the cook's nonsensical responses. The owner returns, and asks him why he did so. The janitor cannot truthfully say, "Because the cook told me to." Nor can he relay the cook's response and expect it to be accepted as a cogent final reason. If he says, "Because the cook said, 'Wirb dip nolo crandall,'" the owner would be perfectly within his rights to ask for further reasons. As it turns out, when the cook gave his non-cogent response to the janitor, he lost his ability to function as a final reason in the relevant language game. There are ordinary language expressions that correspond to these situations. In the first case, where the cook gives no response at all, we might say that the cook has vacated, abdicated or abandoned his authority. In the other three cases, where the cook's answer is unintelligible to the janitor, we would say that the cook is incapable of exercising authority. In all these cases, we might say that his authority has 'failed,' or that he has failed in his authority. This, then, is the claim of authority on its bearer—the bearer must *exercise* authority when asked by acting intelligibly as a

final reason in relevant argument. If a bearer fails to do that, for an reason, they are ejected from the relevant language and at least provisionally lose their authority.[633]

We have identified three types of claims or conditional constraints that seem intrinsically attached to 'an authority.' An authority makes a claim on the subjects in its jurisdiction, requiring that they accept the authority as a final reason in arguments relevant to the authority's subject matter if they wish to remain in the game. An authority makes a parallel claim on its origins. It makes a slightly different claim on its bearer, requiring that the bearer participate cogently in relevant arguments when asked. An authority does not, in and of itself, possess the power to compel anyone to submit to these claims. Uncannily, however, it does seem to possess the power to eject a subject, bearer, or origin from the game if they do not submit.

When Authority Fails

It is worth pausing here to consider the possibilities open to the other players in the game when the cook fails in his authority. When the cook fails to respond cogently to the janitor, the janitor has several options. The most obvious is to stop playing the game himself—drop his mop, turn on his heels, and bolt out the door. However, he does have options that allow him to continue playing the game of "Who gives final reasons in the restaurant?" The janitor can *seize* authority for himself, *push* authority somewhere else, or *repair* the authority of the cook.

Seizing authority might look like this: the cook leaves the restaurant without responding to the janitor's question about the windows; the janitor shrugs his shoulders and decides to clean the windows himself. When the owner returns and asks, "Why did you clean the windows?," the janitor can respond, "The cook left, so I took charge and decided for myself." If the owner wishes the game with the janitor to continue, than he is constrained to accept this response as a final reason—i.e., he will accept that the janitor possessed the relevant authority in the wake of the cook's failure. The owner might also refuse to recognize the janitor's seizure of authority. He might berate him, saying, "I left the cook in charge, not you! You had no authority to decide about that!" In this case, none of the players is able to agree about who bore authority in the restaurant. The game collapses.[634]

Obviously, seizing authority is risky for the janitor. It gives the initiative in this authority game to the owner, whose response may be difficult to predict and could be unpleasant. The janitor might instead try to *push* authority onto someone or something else. He might turn to a customer and ask, "Should I clean the windows?" (In this case, the *customer* is in a position to seize authority.) More likely, he will try to push authority back on its proximate origin, the owner. When the cook leaves, the janitor calls the owner and says, "Should I clean the windows? The cook wouldn't give me an answer and left." The owner may then seize authority and direct the janitor one way or another. The owner might also reconfirm the cook's authority, although that may lead to a complete breakdown in the game, since he cannot compel the cook to accept it. It is also possible that the owner does not pick up the phone. In that case, the janitor could ask

[633] This type of 'auto-ejection' is a common feature of language games as Wittgenstein conceives them. He identifies a similar process when he discusses Moore's 'certain statements.' According to Wittgenstein, claiming to be uncertain about statements like "Here is one hand and here is another" will result in ejection from the relevant game (the game of giving reasons *simpliciter*). "If Moore [disavowed such statements], we should not just not share his opinion: we should regard him as demented." Wittgenstein 1972, 23.

[634] The janitor and owner are thrown into a different game, perhaps a game of "When a bearer fails in authority in the restaurant, where does the authority go?" In practice, most authority games have implicit and explicit rules that dictate how authority moves when its bearer fails.

himself, “Who is in charge of the owner?” Perhaps he knows that the owner always defers to his mother. He calls the mother, who gives him an intelligible response. In all these cases, the authority game continues, at least for a while.

Finally, the janitor may try to repair the authority of the cook. Imagine that, when the janitor asks the cook about the windows, the cook responds, “Wirb dip nolo crandall.” The janitor is initially taken aback—the cook has given an unintelligible answer and appears to have failed in his authority. But rather than reroute around the cook (trying to assume authority himself or push authority back onto the owner) or stop playing the game (fleeing from the restaurant and the demented cook), the janitor decides to try to *repair* the cook’s authority. The janitor asks the cook again and again, giving him a chance to reassert authority. (This in itself represents an attempt at repair.) The cook, however, persists in giving this inscrutable answer. The janitor accepts that the cook’s committed answer is, on its face, unintelligible. He wonders, however, if he can take this unintelligible answer and turn it into an intelligible one. Having a hunch that the cook is speaking a different language, he consults a relevant translation dictionary and finds that, indeed, the cook appears to be saying “Yes, clean the windows” in Gavagache, his boyhood language. Overjoyed, the janitor proceeds to clean the windows. Now when the owner returns, the janitor can *in good faith* say, “I cleaned the windows because the cook told me to.”

We have charted four different options available to the janitor when he perceives that the cook has failed in his authority—he can stop playing the relevant authority game, he can seize authority himself, he can push authority onto someone else, or he can try to repair the authority of the failing cook. For a moment, the janitor is the crucial player in this authority game; he will make a decision, and that decision will have enormous implications for how the game will go. We might call this moment of decision a *crisis* of authority. Like the *crisis* of an illness for ancient Greek medicine, a crisis of authority is a ‘turning point.’ One can point to such *crises* and say, “This was the moment in which the system’s fate—failure or recovery—became apparent.” For our purposes, crises of authority are very interesting, because it is during such crises that structures of authority reveal themselves.

Structures of Authority

The foregoing discussion attempts to give an account of authority that reconciles many aspects of our ‘field reports,’ yielding a more accurate depiction of the concept that often goes by the name ‘authority.’ I will now attempt to sketch an additional feature of ‘authority’ that has not been mentioned explicitly by any of our reports but that will, I hope, prove very useful in analyzing historical and religious phenomena. This feature is the way in which the claims of an authority and that authority’s operation within a language game imply relationships between language games and language-game participants. Around any given authority, a system of these implied or possible relationships form a ‘structure’ of authority.

These systems or structures are formed of two kinds of relationships. Sometimes, authority makes a claim on something, a node, that itself lays claims. This node may lay claims on another node, and so on. This web of nodes, linked by claims, can continue for a very long time, perhaps *ad infinitum*. For ease of reference, let us call the relationships between nodes in this web *vector relationships*. An authority may also imply relationships of a second kind. Imagine that ambiguities or disputes arise in a language game that contains an authority, stalling the game. It may be that those ambiguities can only be resolved, and the language game restarted, by the output of a different authority-containing language game. In order to render the

desired output, that game may itself depend on the output of another, distinct authority game. Like the web of vectoral nodes, this chain of games may be very extensive. Let us call the relationships between games in such a chain *ordinal relationships*. An authority may imply a structure that contains both kinds of relationships—a node in a web of vector relationships may be part of a game that is a function in a chain of ordinal relationships, and a chain of ordinally related games may constitute a node in a web of vector relationships. Thus, the structure of interlocking vector and ordinal relationships that radiates out from an authority may be very complex. Let us call such a structure a 'structure of authority.' It may make it easier to understand what a structure of authority *is*, and how it is *mapped*, by returning to our imaginary restaurant. Even in this simple social context, we can discover a complex structure of authority. Indeed, the structure partially discovers itself whenever there is crisis of authority.

Consider the following moment of crisis in the restaurant: the janitor asks the cook about the windows, the cook gives an incomprehensible answer, and the janitor calls the owner. In our terminology, we might say that the bearer of authority fails, and the subject of that authority pushes it onto the proximate origin. The origin, bearer, and subject are connected in a web of vector relationships (owner➔cook➔janitor). Depending on how the authority game goes, authority can move along this web. A node can drop out, but the game and the web remain (owner➔janitor). Indeed, a mark of vector relationships is that it is possible (though not necessary) for authority to move up and down this web of nodes and *remain the same instance of authority*. Vector relationships are revealed when crises of authority result in authority moving around such a web.

Ordinal relationships, in contrast, are revealed when an authority's location or existence in such a web is ambiguous or disputed. Recall the situation in which the cook gives the janitor the dreaded response, "Wirb dip nolo crandall." The janitor consults the dictionary, concludes that the cook has told him in Gavagache to clean the windows, and proceeds to do so. In this case, there is a vector relationship between the janitor and the cook, but an external resource is required for authority to be exercised in that relationship. In order to reinterpret the cook's response and thereby repair his authority, the janitor needs to consult the dictionary. This action, in fact, constitutes a move in an entirely different game, the game of "What does 'Wirb dip nolo crandall' mean?" The output of that second game ("The cook *really* said 'Clean the windows'") is essential for the resolution of the initial game ("How are actions justified in the restaurant?"). The second game contains its *own authority* (that borne by the dictionary) distinct from the authority in the first game (that borne, problematically, by the cook). We can see this clearly if we imagine the janitor's subsequent conversation with the owner. If the owner asks the janitor why he cleaned the windows, the *authoritative* response within the frame of the first game would be, "Because the cook told me to." In contrast, the owner would not be constrained to accept the response, "Because the dictionary told me to." The dictionary told the janitor what the cook said. It did not tell the janitor to clean the windows. And the owner would be well within the rules of the first game to point this out. In contrast, imagine if the owner asked the janitor, "Why do you think 'Wirb dip nolo crandall' means 'Yes, clean the windows' in Gavagache?" The owner is now playing the second game, and in relation to that game's subject matter, he will have to treat the dictionary as a possible authority. Now, if the janitor says, "Because the dictionary told me to," the owner will be constrained to accept that answer if he doesn't want to deny the authority of the dictionary. Thus, there are two authorities and two authority games here, related by an ordinal relationship. We might say that the cook's role in the 'restaurant game' is now a function of the 'dictionary game.' We could represent that relationship as Cook(Dictionary). Authority

does not 'move along' that relationship, as it does in the case of vector relationships. Instead, *resolution* or *judgment* moves along that relationship—the first game, stalled by ambiguity about the location or existence of authority, imports a judgment from the second. That judgment resolves the ambiguity, and allows the initial language game to proceed. Ordinal relationships are revealed when crises of authority result in one authority game 'calling' another for a judgment or resolution.

We have used our restaurant to provide examples of both vector and ordinal relationships. Each example is meant to illustrate very simple instances of such relationships—our vector web consists of three nodes (one subject, one bearer, and one origin), while our ordinal chain consists of two functions (two language games). But one can easily imagine that both vector webs and ordinal chains could become very long. Perhaps the restaurant is not owned by a single individual but by a large corporation. In that case, a vector authority relationship might stretch from the janitor to the cook to an assistant manager to the head manager and so on, to the CEO and beyond (CEO➔…➔janitor). Similarly, suppose janitor not only cannot understand the cook's response, but also cannot understand the meaning of the dictionary. To interpret the dictionary, he writes to its editor. Unfortunately, the editor's reply uses technical jargon from linguistics that he also does not understand. To interpret the jargon, he consults a linguistics textbook. And so on. The continuity of the first game ("Who has authority in the restaurant?") now depends on the outcome of a game that is many degrees superordinate. The cook's role is now a function of a function of a function: Cook(Dictionary[Jargon{Textbook}]). A partial map of the resulting structure of authority might look like this:

CEO➔…➔Assistant Manager➔Cook(Dictionary[Jargon{Textbook}])➔Janitor

A slightly more realistic example of a structure of authority 'in action,' producing outputs in many language games and importing judgments from many others, might look as follows. Imagine a multinational restaurant corporation. The corporation is based in the United States, but the CEO has recently become obsessed with the example of a rival corporation that expanded into the Republic of Gavagai. He wants to expand there, too. The CEO puts a committee of three subordinates in charge of realizing this vision by opening a test restaurant in Gavagai. This is a vector authority relationship. The three subordinates go to Gavagai and hire a construction company to construct the restaurant. This is, again, a vector relationship. The CEO's committee of subordinates speak English while the construction crew operates in Gavagache. An interpreter translates the committee's orders to the construction crew. There is an ordinal relationship intervening between the crew and the committee, connecting the committee's authority to a different language game (the English-Gavagache translation game). The committee consults an expert on Gavagai's building codes to determine how the crew should be ordered to build the restaurant. Again, an ordinal relationship intervenes between the committee and the crew, connecting the committee to the game of "What's legal to build in Gavagai?". The test restaurant is constructed and becomes a great success. The committee immediately opens three more restaurants. The CEO considers them to have overstepped their initial charge, and tries to replace them with a different group of managers. They respond that all their communications with the CEO indicated that they were to open more restaurants pending the success of the first. The committee threatens to sue, and the Board of Directors (related to the CEO by a vector relationship) hires a law firm to clarify what, according to American law, the CEO authorized the committee to do. This is an ordinal relationship intervening between the Board and the law,

connecting the Board to the game of "What does the law say?". And in one of these restaurants, a janitor asks his manager if he should wash the windows. This is a vector relationship. The janitor uses a translation app to understand his manager, who speaks poor Gavagache and usually responds in English. There is an ordinal relationship here.

When seen from overhead, the janitor is connected to the CEO by a vast and very complex structure of authority, a structure of networked vector relationships and nesting ordinal ones. The structure connects many different language games and many different game participants. The structure produces a vast number of outputs of various kinds, ranging from plans to realize a 'vision of expansion,' to orders for construction in Gavagai, to decisions concerning the cleaning of individual windows. These nominal outputs will often have physical correlates, including the erection of real buildings and the production of edible burgers and fries. Like a pulsing network of neurons, the structure of authority of the multinational corporation gathers information, resolves ambiguities, and outputs commands.

When seen from the outside, a structure like this has several salient properties. First, small changes or substitutions in one part of the system can cause huge changes in downstream outputs, or even cause the downstream structure to collapse. If the CEO puts one person in charge of the initial project instead of a committee, the whole process may move much faster. Or, it may be spoiled by that one person's poor judgment. If the initial committee hires Expert Y instead of Expert X, they may end up with a very different understanding of Gavagai's building codes, and the restaurant they order the construction firm to build will look very different. The effects of such substitutions are greater the higher up in the structure they are made. Changing the manager of one restaurant will not affect outputs in most of the structure. Changing the law firm investigating the CEO's correspondence with the committee may result in enormous shifts in personnel, policy, and results throughout the structure.

A second curious feature of such a structure is that it is very easy to map in part, and very difficult to map as a whole. It is often possible to produce a 'local map' of the structure of authority around any given node. You could walk into the restaurant in Gavagai and ask the manager (the bearer of authority in that restaurant), "Who are your employees?" If the manager tells you, you now know some of the subjects to which he is connected by vector relationship. Ask, "Who is your boss?," and you will discover the origin to which the manager's authority is vectrally related. Ask, "What app do you use to communicate with the janitor?," and you will discover one of the authorities to which the manager's authority game is ordinally related. Producing a complete map of the multinational's structure of authority, however, is very difficult, perhaps impossible. Downstream players will often have no understanding of upstream nodes. The manager may not know much about the higher levels of management, or be unwilling to talk to you about them. He will certainly be ignorant of most of the ordinal authorities that relate to authority games in those higher reaches—authorities in games like 'international law,' 'best financial practices,' and 'doctrines of business strategy.' Moreover, many bearers of authority near the top of the structure may have intentionally ambiguous authority relationships. An easy example is the Board of Directors of the corporation. What is the origin of their authority? Is it the shareholders, to whom they owe a legal fiduciary duty? Is it their abstract sense of morality? Is it the board itself? If there are disputes about the origins of their authority, or their competence in exercising their authority, what ordinal authority will adjudicate the disputes? The law? Their fellow board members? The shareholders? A deity? Structures of authority usually have branches that are murky or opaque, especially as you consider nodes higher and higher in the structure. More bafflingly, they sometimes turn back on themselves,

forming recursive structures. Consider the CEO who declares that he makes every decision 'for the good of his employees.' By saying this, doesn't he place his employees, who are, vectrally, subjects of his authority, in the position of ordinal adjudicators of his authority? Isn't this what Hobbes' sovereign individuals do when they transfer authority over themselves to a sovereign 'for their own good'?

A third and final salient aspect of structures of authority is their multi-modality. We began fleshing out our account of authority and its structures with a simple story of a restaurant. The restaurant contains a structure of authority focused on three nodes: a janitor, a cook, and the restaurant owner. All three are human beings. But as we expanded our account, we introduced a non-human node into the structure—a dictionary. We ended by considering a very complex structure, a multinational corporation. That structure contains many human nodes but also many non-human nodes, like laws, written communications, dictionary apps, and another corporate entity, a law firm. The structure even includes a non-linguistic 'image' or 'ideal,' namely the 'example' of the rival corporation that originally inspires the CEO. Is it fair to flatten human and non-human things into a single category, that of 'nodes in a structure of authority?' I can only say that the model seems to work despite this multi-modality, with one caveat: a structure of authority must include at least one competent *agent* of language use (a category usually, though not always, restricted to human beings). It cannot be composed entirely of non-human nodes. But as long as there is one human player, an authority game can be played, and a structure of authority can be discovered.[635]

When Structures of Authority Meet: Well-Defined Interactions

As we have developed our concept of authority, we have slowly expanded our scope. We began with individual authorities, then explained how individual authorities relate to vectoral nodes in a language game and to other language games as ordinal nodes, thereby forming structures of authority. In a sense, we moved from an atomic scale to a molecular scale. To conclude our account, we will consider the chemical scale—the level at which structures of authority relate to each other.

When we considered the multinational corporation's attempt to expand into the Philippines, we mentioned that the Board of Directors hires a law firm to adjudicate some matters in the dispute between the CEO and his subordinates. Our account focuses primarily on the multinational corporation as a structure of authority, and the law firm appears in this account in a subsidiary role, seemingly as *part* of that structure of authority. Presumably, the Board of Directors will have authority over the firm's lawyers with regard to many jurisdictions—how they investigate the dispute, who they reveal their findings to, and even the physical location of the firm's employees during their investigation. But the law firm is, in many ways, a structure of authority all its own. The firm has governing partners who *also* have certain authorities over the lawyers dealing with the issue. In certain circumstances, those lawyers may have authority over employees of the multinational (e.g., they might order the CEO to turn over certain documents).

[635] Picture our simple restaurant. Let us remove both the owner and the cook from the picture. A man enters the empty restaurant one day and finds a sign, reading, "Janitor needed. Start cleaning immediately. Consult manual for instructions. Will return at 3 PM." The man grabs the mop and starts cleaning. He wonders, "Should I clean the windows?" He consults the manual, but under 'window cleaning,' it contains the strange phrase, "Wirb dip nolo crandall." Despite there being only one human player, the game is afoot. Our lonely janitor can play the game of "Who has authority in the restaurant" all by himself. Even if the owner never returns, the janitor can continue the game, though it may degenerate over time into a one-man staging of *Waiting for Godot*.

Moreover, the firm deals with many legal matters and cases, not just the dispute at the restaurant multinational. The Board of Directors at the multinational has no authority over those other matters at all. And when the dispute at the multinational is resolved, the two structures will naturally separate—the multinational goes one way, and the law firm the other. What is going on here?

What we are describing is a situation in which two structures of authority meet and interrelate. We might call this particular kind of situation 'cooperation'—with regard to a very specific jurisdiction (the CEO's dispute), two structures of authority (the law firm and the multinational) cooperate (literally 'operate together') to render an output in the relevant game. With regard to the Board's adjudication of the dispute between the CEO and his subordinates, the law firm will act as an ordinal authority. The firm will play its own authority game to render a judgment on those matters, then output judgments into the authority game being played among the Board of Directors, the CEO, and the CEO's subordinates. In some ways, the law firm is playing a superordinate game—its outputs will determine the outcome of the game being played in the multinational. But in other ways, that game is subordinate—the Board, after all, hired the law firm and instructs its lawyers about how to proceed. The Board 'set the rules' of that game, and will dissolve it at will. 'Cooperation' between structures of authority tend to have this ambiguous character. Such ambiguities often do *not* stall the language game, however, because parties in both structures have incentives to ignore them. In this case, if the matter gets resolved, the law firm gets paid and the multinational gets a legally defensible resolution of an internal ambiguity. Many, though not all, ordinal relationships between language games can be seen as instances of 'cooperation' between structures of authority.

There are other ways that structures of authority can interrelate. Suppose that the Board of Directors is impressed by the law firm's work. The Board puts the firm on retainer and makes a rule: all disputes between the CEO and any of his direct subordinates will now be examined and adjudicated entirely by that law firm. Whenever there are ambiguities in that particularly jurisdiction, they will be referred to the firm for resolution. As before, the Board has some authority over the firm and its employees, while the firm has some authority over elements of the multinational. Again as before, with regard to the relevant jurisdiction, the law firm is an ordinal authority. Now, however, that ordinal relationship is a regular one—barring some intervention by a higher authority (the Board), the CEO can expect that ambiguities will be clarified by *this* particular ordinal authority and no other. We might call this kind of relationship 'appropriation.' For a specific jurisdiction, the multinational has 'appropriated' the firm as a part of its structure of authority.

Suppose, instead, that the Board of Directors is so pleased with the law firm's performance that they make its partners an unusual offer: for a certain sum of money, they will dissolve the law firm and come work in multinational's legal department with all of their former employees.[636] Now, the law firm's entire structure of authority is 'plugged in' to the structure of the multinational, and all of the firm's jurisdictions become subordinate jurisdictions of the multinational. In this case, the firm becomes not just an ordinal node in the multinational's structure but a vectoral one as well. In all respects, the employees of the law firm become employees of the multinational. We might call such a relationship 'subsumption'—one structure of authority is subsumed by another; where once there were two, now there is one.

[636] To make the thought experiment easier, you might imagine that the multinational 'acquires' the law firm. Technically, that is not possible under U.S. law—corporations cannot 'own' law firms, they can only retain their services, or hire individual lawyers—and so I have refrained from using the language of 'acquisition.'

Finally, suppose that the partners of the law firm and the Board of the multinational somehow have a falling out. Perhaps the results are not satisfactory to the multinational, and the partners feel the firm was abused and undercompensated by the Board. Rather than merely go their separate ways and ignore each other, each node makes a rule for its respective structure—never do business with the other structure again. The firm will refuse to cooperate with, be appropriated by, or be subsumed by the multinational, and vice versa. Their nodes will never again interact in a relevant language game—the two structures will never share or exchange jurisdictions. We will call this sort of negative relationship 'exclusion'—one structure excludes the other. In this case, the stance is mutual, and a relationship of mutual exclusion obtains between the multinational and the law firm.

In all four of these examples, the way that the two structures of authority will interact, *qua* structure of authority, is easily understandable for all relevant players in both structures. In our example of 'cooperation,' the Board of Directors of the multinational and the partners at the law firm will largely understand how their subordinate jurisdictions overlap or diverge. The Board of Directors will not suddenly begin dictating the firm's approach to other cases (or at least, it will not do so in the context of the relevant authority game). Nor will the partners at the law firm begin issuing commands to the multinational's advertising department, or start rendering judgments on the dictionaries used to translate emails from English to Gavagache. The same holds for the example of 'appropriation' and 'exclusion.' In the example of 'subsumption,' the former partners of the law firm, newly installed at the multinational, will no longer expect to autonomously direct what legal work their subordinates undertake. Instead, they will be expected to defer to the relevant nodes within the structure of the multinational, as will all of their former subordinates. The former firm's employees will now be constrained to act, in all relevant language games, as employees of the multinational. We might call these types of relationships between structures of authority 'well-defined interactions.' All the relevant nodes know how the relationship works, who they answer to or for, and which nodes exercise authority over which jurisdictions.

So far, our account of authority and its structures has focused on corporations and legal partnerships. This is intentional. A modern corporation tends to have an exquisitely explicit internal structure of authority. Moreover, the players in the authority games relevant to corporations have access to a long-standing, stable, well-articulated repertoire of ways of relating the structure of authority of one corporation to that of another.[637] They are further blessed with the knowledge that *their counterparts in the other structure also use and understand this repertoire*. Thus, the Board of the multinational can write to the partners of the law firm and say, "We want to hire you to look into X dispute." Each relevant node understands that this means the two structures will 'cooperate' with regard to X jurisdiction, and they understand that the other nodes also understand this. They understand the expectations that all parties will have when the two structures cooperate to play the relevant language game (e.g., the Board of the multinational can occasionally exercise authority over the law firm's employees), they understand the expected outputs of the game (the law firm gets paid, and the multinational gets a judgment), and they understand the consequences for 'collapsing' that game by backing out or failing in their relevant authority (one party will sue the other for breach of contract). The same holds for appropriation, subsumption, and exclusion. The CEO of corporation A writes to the CEO of corporation B and says, "We want to acquire your company"—everyone understands that this means A will subsume B, and they all understand the broad outline of how the two structures of authority will

[637] On the concept of 'repertoires' that players of reasoning games may pick up and 'use,' see Swidler 2001.

change. If the CEO of corporation A announces to his employees that they will not do business with corporation B, the relationship of exclusion is similarly clear.

Modern corporations interact in well-defined ways. But not all structures of authority are corporations. As it turns out, corporations are exceptional for the explicitness of their structures and the high degree of definition of their possible interrelations. Other structures of authority are, in general, less explicitly defined—they have many more murky branches, and even their high level nodes are accustomed to operate with a sketchy and very incomplete map of the structure as a whole. Such structures often do not have well-developed repertoires for interacting with other structures of authority, even structures that are, at first glance, very similar. Prime among these other structures of authority are political states and what are normally called 'religions.' We turn to these structures now.

When Structures of Authority Meet: Poorly-Defined Interactions

It should not require great leaps of imagination to understand how an organization like the Catholic Church is analogous to a corporation, and to see how the Catholic Church correlates with a structure of authority all its own, just as our imaginary multinational does. In the most general authority game in Catholicism's structure of authority, the highest human node is the pope. The pope is connected, via vector relationships, to the cardinals, the bishops, the priests, and finally to individual parishioners. At least according to Catholics, the pope is also connected, via vector relationships, to previous popes stretching back to the Apostle Peter and finally to Jesus and the other aspects of the Holy Trinity. This web of vector relationships is interdicted at many points by ordinal relationships to authorities in other games. Such ordinal authorities include the Bible, specific doctrines promulgated by the Church (magisterial traditions and dogmas, e.g., the Immaculate Conception of Mary), foundational rites (e.g., the sacraments of baptism or the Eucharist), and various creeds (e.g., the Nicene Creed). This is not to mention the Church's many organs, colleges, and committees, which have their own vector and ordinal relationships with the other nodes in Catholicism's vast structure of authority.

Among the phenomena we call 'religions,' the Catholic Church has a comparatively well-defined structure of authority.[638] Nevertheless, its structure is in many ways less defined than that of a modern corporation. The Catholic hierarchy, for example, implicitly claims jurisdiction over the spiritual lives of all human beings. (By contrast, imagine if the McDonald's corporation claimed jurisdiction over 'cuisine.') Catholic exorcists claim to exercise certain types of authority over unseen beings like demons. And how exactly does the Catholic hierarchy relate to problematic Catholic groups like the Society of Saint Pius X? (Again, by way of contrast, imagine if a McDonald's franchise continued selling McDonald's branded Big Macs after having its franchise revoked by the parent company—such situations, while possible, do not last very long.) What of the fact that some ultra-traditionalist Catholics hold that the current pope, Francis I, is *not* in fact a 'legitimate' pope? (Do McDonald's franchisees or customers ever claim that the current CEO of McDonald's is not the real CEO?) Many Catholics, including some who act as highly placed nodes in its structure of authority, will be unable or unwilling to answer these questions and specify what the Church's structure of authority is for them. Again, this presents a

[638] In this regard, it is surely no coincidence that the modern corporation and the Catholic Church developed in close relationship with one another, and both developed in the shadow of Germanic feudalism and Roman law.

stark contrast to a corporation, where almost any node, especially a highly placed one, can be induced or enabled to explain the corporation's structure of authority.[639]

When it comes to Catholicism's relationship to other structures of authority, the situation is often both very fluid and very poorly defined. Consider the relationship between Catholicism and that structure of authority often called 'Chinese traditional religion.'[640] The fraught and uncertain relationship between these two structures is illustrated by the so-called 'Chinese Rites' controversy in the early modern Catholic Church. In the course of spreading Catholicism to Ming China, Catholic missionaries gradually became aware that many Chinese habitually engaged in certain rites honoring their ancestors. For the Church's structure of authority, this introduced ambiguities related to Chinese converts. Certain teachings of the church (i.e., certain ordinal authorities in its structure) forbid Christians (i.e., those subject to its jurisdiction over spiritual matters) from practicing non-Catholic religious rites. Are Chinese traditional rites the rites of a non-Catholic religion? For the first Catholic missionaries to China and the first Chinese converts to Catholicism, there was no answer to this question, because the question had never been asked. In a sense, the relationship between the jurisdictions of the Catholic structure of authority and this feature of life in China was 'unmapped.'

Over time, this relationship became better defined. First, controversy over the rites specified the parameters of the issue: Jesuit missionaries argued that the rites were merely secular customs (and thus permissible to Christians) while the rivals of the Jesuits, the Dominicans, argued that they were real religious rites (and thus prohibited to Christians). Hence, by the mid-17th century, the issue of the Chinese traditional rites moved from being a blank spot on Catholicism's conceptual map to being a specific jurisdictional ambiguity for Catholicism's structure of authority. Are Chinese rites secular customs or religious rites? The problem of the rites was now articulated, by and for Catholics, in the emic terms of their authority structure, and the ambiguity could be referred to a predefined ordinal authority within that structure. In 1645, one of those authorities (the Church organ with jurisdiction over missionary work) duly rendered a judgment: Chinese rites are religious rites. Consequently, Christians, including Chinese converts, were prohibited from engaging in them. The Catholic Church had come to better define its relationship with Chinese traditional religion: at least with regard to this jurisdiction, Catholicism's structure of authority *excludes* the structure known as Chinese traditional religion.

Of course, such relationships may change over time. We can imagine that such a relationship may gradually become better defined (perhaps certain Chinese rites would be recognized by the Catholic Church as distinct from the others, and as subject to different jurisdictions). We might also imagine that the articulation of the jurisdictional issues remains the same, but the actual resolution of the issue changes. Such vacillations in fact took place in Catholicism's relationship to traditional Chinese religion. In 1656, a relevant ordinal authority ruled that the rites were secular, removing the prohibition. In 1704, the pope overruled that

[639] These ambiguous and murky aspects of the Church's structure of authority relate, no doubt, to the fact that, by almost any metric, it is larger and more important than any corporation. They relate, too, to the fact that many of the most important jurisdictions claimed by that structure—e.g., the spiritual salvation of all humans—are universal in character as well as very abstract.

[640] 'Chinese traditional religion' is, of course, itself a very poorly defined structure of authority, even for its own nodes. It is clearly *not* as distinct from the Chinese state and Chinese culture as Catholicism is from Western nation-states and Western culture. Luckily, in the context of this discussion, the mapping of that structure of authority is not our problem. We are only concerned with how Catholic missionaries attempted to map and relate to that structure over the course of their mission to Ming and Qing China.

decision, again banning the rites. In 1939, a pope reversed his predecessor's ruling, again authorizing the practice.[641] [642]

We have used the example of the Catholic Church to explore the issue of well- and poorly-defined branches of a structure of authority. By giving an account of the Catholic Church's slow recognition, gradual mapping, and vacillating definition of traditional Chinese religion, particularly 'traditional Chinese rites,' we have come to some understanding of how one structure of authority may render its relationship with another better defined. Let us now consider how such relationships may become more poorly defined. In this case, we will consider the relationship between a corporation and a state. Let us return, again, to our multinational restaurant corporation, and its expansion into Gavagai. Although we did not stress the point in our initial account, this process entails an interaction between the multinational and another large structure of authority—the Republic of Gavagai. How do these two structures relate to each other? Generally, the relationship between a modern commercial corporation and a political state is quite well-defined. Almost always, corporations acknowledge the legal and political authority of the states in which they operate (as is well known, and as the following account will stress, whether they obey that authority *in practice* is quite another matter). In our initial account, for example, the multinational's committee in Gavagai consults the city's building codes before ordering the designing and construction of their first restaurant—that is, the multinational incorporates the laws and regulations of Gavagai as an ordinal authority when it decides how to build its restaurants. In the course of its operation in Gavagai, it will have occasion to treat many other Gavagache laws and commands in a similar way (e.g., it will acknowledge the state's tax rules, import laws, and hygiene regulations). In our terminology, for certain authority games, the multinational 'appropriates' certain nodes from the structure of authority of the Gavagache state—nodes in the state's structure render judgments or commands that nodes in the multinational's structure are constrained to accept as final reasons. In contrast, the Gavagache state in principle never appropriates nodes from the multinational—the officers of the Republic of Gavagai will never, within the frame of their own authority games, be constrained to accept the judgments from the multinational as final. In that regard, the relationship between the two structures is well defined, like the relationship between the multinational and the law firm. (Unlike that relationship, however, this relationship is also highly asymmetrical.)

Imagine, however, that the multinational's footprint in Gavagai gradually grows. Its restaurants become extraordinarily popular there. At the same time, the multinational swells to enormous size, both in Gavagai and outside of it. Its market capitalization, already large, now becomes humungous, and begins to rival Gavagai's gross domestic product. The multinational buys up large swathes of agricultural land in the country, and begins monopolizing and subsidizing food import and export. It becomes widely acknowledged that the multinational, improbably, has become one of the major forces in the economy, society and politics of the Republic of Gavagai.

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[641] See Mungello 2013.

[642] Of course, relationships between structures of authority go both ways. Our account of the 'Chinese Rites Controversy' is told entirely from Catholic perspective. Similar debates occurred on the Chinese side—the structure of authority of the Ming and Qing Chinese states gradually came to perceive, then map, then define their relationship with Catholicism and other forms of Christianity. That process of growing awareness eventually led to jurisdictional rulings and finally to definitive statements of the Chinese state's relationship to Catholicism—exclusion. Catholic missionaries were expelled from Qing China in the early 1700s, and would not reenter China until the late 1800s. See Minamiki 1985.

At this point, the once well-defined relationship between the multinational and the Gavagache state has become quite opaque. The company openly flouts building codes; when its officers are asked to justify this, they often refer not to vagaries of Gavagache law but to the CEO's vision of hyper-efficiency—in such cases, the multinational is no longer appropriating nodes from the state as authorities for decisions, but referring to its own internal ordinal authorities. The state's National Economic and Development Authority sometimes justifies policies not on the basis of national interest but on the basis of the objectives of the multinational—the *state* is now intermittently appropriating nodes from the multinational. Finally, portions of the multinational's vast property holdings become entirely estranged from the practical power of the state, and their jurisdictional status is openly disputed. The state claims that these territories remain under its jurisdiction, but the multinational claims that certain laws have transferred to it many forms of authority over its landholdings. How do these two structures interrelate now? As the multinational grows, its relationship with the state has been thrown into flux and, in places, the two structure's jurisdictional claims are in open conflict.[643]

The sordid tale of the multinational restaurant corporation and the Republic of Gavagai helps us imagine how the relationship between two structures of authority may start out well defined and become poorly defined over time.[644] It is important to emphasize that such a movement (from high definition to low definition) implies no value judgment—it is not that we, as outside observers, are 'rooting' for the relationship to become better defined. In fact, such a movement does not even entail a value judgment on the part of the participating structures of authority, or on the part of players in those structures. We can imagine that Jesuit missionaries in Ming China dreaded the prospect of defining the jurisdictional status of Chinese family rites, since they foresaw the possibility that the issue might be decided in a profoundly inconvenient way (as, in fact, it eventually was). Similarly, from the perspective of certain nodes in the multinational, the increasing murkiness of their relationship with the Republic of Gavagai must come as a welcome change (no more need for tortured, sophistic explanations of the latest building code infraction). Conversely, certain factions in the Catholic hierarchy must have

[643] It is, of course, ludicrous to imagine a restaurant chain competing with a state. But corporations have competed with, been appropriated by, and even directly subsumed states before—think of the United Fruit Company in Latin America or the British East India Company on the Indian subcontinent.

[644] We might add that such degradations are sometimes the result not of political circumstances but of shifts in the intellectual or cultural resources available to a particular structure of authority. Recall the example of the Catholic Church and the Chinese rites—over time, the Church's relationship to the rites became more defined because its nodes engaged in argument and ultimately subjected foreign conceptual matter (the rites) to emic jurisdictional categories (secular customs vs. religious rites). It is possible for a structure of authority to lose its ability to draw certain distinctions, and thus to de-define its relationship with other structures or subject matter. We might imagine that, over the course of many centuries, the Catholic Church might lose its capacity or its desire to distinguish between secular rites and religious rites. Perhaps, over time, its jurisdiction grows, such that all social activities recognizable as 'rites' *or* 'customs' fall under its jurisdiction—perhaps this religion becomes so powerful that it effects the abolition of the secular. In that world, why would the Church continue distinguishing between customs and rites? Its nodes might lose the ability to see this distinction at all. Conversely, what if the intellectual resources of the Church's nodes change, such that they can no longer understand the meanings of 'secular' and 'religious'? What if the language of the church changes to some unknown, unforeseen dialect in which the distinction is difficult to draw? There are many examples of a structure of authority losing a formerly mundane distinction-drawing ability in this way. Consider, for example, the evolution of Roman law in the Eastern Roman Empire. The initial law codes of the Roman Empire were written in Latin. By the time of Justinian, Roman (i.e., Byzantine) jurists spoke Greek and knew little Latin. In many cases, they could not understand distinctions between Latin terms of art in the original law codes, and the structure of authority of which they were nodes lost the ability to draw those distinctions. See Vasiliev 1952, "Justinian Digest."

welcomed the settling of the 'Chinese rites question,' since it allowed them to, in their view, do right by God and prevent Chinese converts from falling into grave sin. Similarly, the CEO of our multinational might lament the increasing uncertainty of his relationship with the Gavagache state—uncertainty, after all, is bad for business. Although many commentators invest questions of authority with profound moral significance, structures of authority are not in and of themselves morality plays in which good guys win and bad guys lose, and dim implicitness gives way to shining explicitness. If commentators wish to make them *stages* for such plays, that is their business. In and of themselves, structures of authority are media of social interactions. Those interactions may be good, bad, or morally neutral, and depending on the explicitness of the structure and its relations, such interactions may be confusing and unpredictable or routine and orderly. For our purposes, the moral valence of a particular structure of authority is completely irrelevant. We are not interested in whether an authority and the structure it implies are good or bad, clear or unclear. We are interested in *how* such structures of authority emerge, become know, and eventually interact with other such structures. And we are interested in how such knowledge allows us to understand human phenomena—especially religious phenomena—in a new way.

The Uses of Argument

In the foregoing discussions, I have taken some pains to give an account of what a structure of authority is *in general*. I have taken further pains to emphasize that *particular* structures of authority, like the Catholic Church, are very hard to know—they cannot be known 'all at once,' but must be mapped, branch by branch and layer by layer. Their borders with other structures of authority are particularly inscrutable; these may not even be understood by the structures' participants themselves. And the branches and borders seem to change constantly. Given these fluctuations and ambiguities, perhaps it is foolhardy to talk about 'mapping' these structures at all. After all, they seem much more flighty than a mountain or river.

Flighty—what a curious connection. How does one map objects in flight? How does one map a flock of birds, or a swarm of bees? How do we chart the drifting clouds? Of course, one cannot produce a permanent map of such things. (Although, come to think of it, there is no such thing as a permanent map—even mountains and rivers drift and flow. The borders of nations certainly shift.) But we do produce provisional graphs or images of their locations. A radar, regularly pulsing, will record shadows of objects in flight. The 'ping' of a radar system can extend for hundreds of miles, then bounce back, revealing the presence of an object at a particular place at a particular time. If, with patience and dexterity, you collate all the pings that return, over and over again, you can map the flight of a flock of birds.

In principle, then, it's not impossible to track something that flows and shifts, even across vast distances. I suspect that we can do something similar with structures of authority. Our 'ping' will not be a sound wave, but instead the echoes of 'argument' or 'reasoning.' It is important to remember that, at the most basic level, authority has to do with argumentation—with reason-giving language games. 'An authority' is a position in a language game that can be given as a final reason in argument. If you wish to 'see' an authority over a jurisdiction in a particular moment, you can force it to reveal itself by observing how a subject in that jurisdiction reasons about that jurisdiction. If you can observe a player-subject giving a final reason in relevant argument, you are observing an authority in action.

Let me demonstrate this principle by returning, one final time, to our thought experiment about the restaurant corporation. We left that corporation in a state of ill-defined conflict with a host state. In such a murky situation, how can one tell where the corporation's jurisdictions begin and the rival state's begins? We can make this situation much simpler by making it much more complex. We must give up the idea of producing one final, permanent map of the corporation's structure of authority. Instead, we must resign ourselves to the necessity of making many maps, for many times, places, and people. The corporation's 'structure of authority' does not exist *simpliciter*, in and for itself. Instead, it exists *for* a certain subject, *at* a certain time, *over* a certain jurisdiction. Luckily, this narrowly delimited structure of authority *can be known*.

Consider the issue of a restaurant recently constructed in the capital of Gavagai. The structure is clearly not in conformity with Gavagache building codes. We can walk into this building and ask the restaurant manager, "Which officer of the multinational oversaw the construction of this building?" Supposing the manager tells us, we can go to that officer and ask, "Why did you authorize the construction of the restaurant in this way, rather than in conformity with Gavagache law?" This question is the 'ping' of our radar. If the officer answers—if our ping returns—we will learn quite a lot about the multinational's structure of authority. Suppose he replies, "Actually, it is in conformity with Gavagache law. My manager told me to build a restaurant. I consulted our legal experts, and they assured me that this restaurant's design can be interpreted as completely legal according to X, Y, and Z principles of jurisprudence." At that moment, for that subject (the officer) and for that jurisdiction ("How shall the restaurant be constructed?"), Gavagache law (as interpreted by certain legal authorities) functions as an ordinal authority whose judgment delimits how the subject (the officer) interprets the commands of the relevant vectoral node (his manager) with regard to how restaurants are constructed (the jurisdiction). At that moment, for that officer, the multinational's structure of authority is one that appropriates Gavagache law as an ordinal node governing construction—that is structure in and around the authority game the officer is playing.

Suppose, instead, that the officer replies, "I approved this design because my manager told me to build a restaurant, and it conforms to my understanding of the CEO's call for cheaper and faster restaurant construction." In effect, the officer is saying, "I did this because my manager told me to, and I interpreted that command in light of the CEO's pronouncements." At that moment, for that subject and for that jurisdiction, Gavagache law is irrelevant. The relevant authorities are, instead, his manager's will as adjudicated by the budgetary concerns of the CEO. For that officer at that moment, the multinational's structure of authority is one that ignores Gavagache law as a relevant ordinal node. Instead, the structure looks to the CEO and his pronouncements for adjudications about restaurant construction.

The slice of 'map' produced by our 'ping' is quite small. Depending on the mood of the officer and the political climate in Gavagai, if we asked the same question the following day we might get an answer, and hence a slice of map, that looked very different. Nevertheless, the slice is real—that is really what the structure looks like for that officer at that moment. The officer's 'true' or 'permanent' answer is irrelevant. The officer's physical actions—whether he would die to defend an authority, or how much he would pay to subvert it—are irrelevant too. When we map structures of authority, we are not plotting any of those things. We are only interested in the constraints of the authority game at a particular moment for a particular subject in a particular jurisdiction.

Moreover, based on this one 'slice,' we can infer a fair amount about the structure of authority for other players in that moment. If we assume that the officer wishes to remain in good

standing in the relevant authority game in the corporation, we can infer that his superiors are very likely to give a similar answer. We can make a weaker inference that at this moment many officers of the Gavagache state are likely to weigh the authority of the corporation and the authority of their own state in a way similar to that of the corporate officer—since we know that the officer regularly plays authority games with Gavagache officials, he is likely to choose to play an authority game that he can also play with those officials.

Thus, a single 'ping' and its tiny slice of 'map' allow us to make some weak inferences about other local features of authority structures. But the more people we sample—the more pings we emit—the more of the map we see and the more strongly we can make inferences about the areas that remain blank. With enough simultaneous pings, we could create a very extensive map of the two structures of authority and their interrelations. With enough maps compiled at different times, we could chart the slow dance of these swarm-like structures over time. We could watch their jurisdictions ebb and flow, and we could see how a node from one swarm is suddenly appropriated by the other, instantaneously exerting a tidal influence. We might see the two structures hold rigidly apart, like magnets excluding each other with their magnetic fields. Or we might see one structure suddenly dive into the other, subsuming itself into the rival swarm. I do not claim that this methodology allows us to predict how structures of authority will develop and interrelate. I only insist that we can, with fastidious attention to the evidence of reasoning, chart their development.[645]

The pings of a physical radar system can track structures hundreds of miles away. The pings of our radar, of course, can do the same. We do not have to be in close physical proximity to a subject to observe their reasoning; we can sample that reasoning by email, video, or telephone. We don't even have to emit the ping ourself—we can observe two subjects engaged in debate or discussion, 'pinging' each other. But unlike a radar, our probes have a truly miraculous quality—they can reveal the shadows of authority not only across spans of hundreds of miles but across the chasm of thousands of years. In the form of texts and manuscripts, we have access to the reasoning of people long dead—distant echoes of the authority structures of yesteryear.

Let's consider an example of reasoning from a context that is both culturally and temporally estranged from us. In the early fifth century, a Chinese Buddhist monk, Lushan Huiyuan, wrote a short treatise addressed to his ruler, Huan Xuan, the founder of the short-lived Chu dynasty. In this treatise, Huiyuan laid out his reasoning in support of the controversial position that Buddhist monks in China should not be expected to make obeisance to the ruler and his officials. Huiyuan makes several arguments. We will just consider one: the argument that the Buddhist monastic order is parallel, not subordinate, to the social order of the Confucian sage-kings. Huiyuan musters a complex line of reasoning to support this position. He suggests that, with respect to social life, sage-kings and buddhas represent two, coeval aspects of the same principle of social coherence. The sage-kings 'begin in diversity and end in unity'—they come from diverse backgrounds but become a single, solitary pivot around which the social world moves. The buddhas, in contrast, 'begin in unity but end in diversity'—they begin from the simple, undifferentiated principle of nirvana and spread throughout the world, taking different expedient forms and teaching different expedient doctrines in conformity with the sentient beings

[645] My understanding of reasoning as something that reveals structures of authority is very similar to certain philosophical pragmatists' characterizations of the social functions of argument. For Stephen Toulmin, argument specifies and reveals implicit 'warrants' in reasoning. (See Toulmin 2003, "The Layout of Arguments.") See also Brandom 1994, which explains how reasons offered in argument gradually build a system of commitment and constraint around reasoners.

they encounter. Buddhas may, in fact, disguise themselves as sage-kings. The two may be one and the same. Huiyuan suggests that the coevality of these two agents of coherence implies the coevality of their representatives. Q.E.D., the Buddha's monks should not be expected to bow to the sage-king or his representatives.

In Huiyuan's reasoning, we can detect echoes bouncing off of several authorities. The easiest to perceive is the following: Buddhist scripture. In the course of explaining the parallelism between sage-kings and buddhas, Huiyuan feels the need to justify his description of buddhas as beings that 'begin in unity and end in diversity.' (One can almost hear a silent interlocutor asking, "Why do you describe buddhas this way?") Huiyuan says that we know buddhas have this particular character because Buddhist scripture describes them that way. He writes, "How shall I explain this? The Scriptures say, 'The Buddha has naturally superhuman faculties. He converts the beings by means of expedients, and universally accords with wherever he goes. At times he becomes a [worthy] or a sage-emperor turning the wheel of government, at times he becomes a minister of state, a national preceptor or a gentleman of the Way. Such as these manifest themselves in their several transformations, and among kings and gentleman none knows who they are.' This is what is meant by [beginning in unity and ending in diversity]."[646] For Huiyuan, Buddhist scripture is an authority over questions of what buddhas are like, and he cites scripture as a final reason in relevant argument.

We might find this a trite observation. Of course Buddhist scripture is an authority on buddhas! But we actually discover something here. At this moment in history, when Huiyuan engages in reasoning with a node of the Confucian state, and he feels pushed to provide justifications for his characterization of buddhas, Huiyuan cites Buddhist scripture as a final reason. He could have cited any number of other authorities—he might have cited a Confucian classic instead, or cited the testimony of a learned Indian Buddhist missionary in China. At this moment (the early fifth century), for this subject (Huiyuan), in this jurisdiction ("What is the nature of buddhas?"), the structure of authority pertaining to buddhas incorporates Buddhist scripture as a node. Moreover, Huiyuan cites Buddhist scripture as an authority in the course of reasoning with Huan Xuan, a man who might or might not recognize Buddhist scripture as an authority about anything. Not all players of the 'Confucian sage-king' authority game would accept Huiyuan's introduction of this node. Many such players rejected the authority of the Buddhist scriptures over any jurisdiction, including matters pertaining to the traits of the Buddha. (They might counter that these scriptures were forgeries, inventions of Laozi, or sheer nonsense.) The fact that Huiyuan cites Buddhist scripture in this context allows us to infer quite strongly that his interlocutor was also likely to accept that authority, at least over this limited jurisdiction.

The example of Lushan Huiyuan's attempt to justify certain positions to his ruler, Huan Xuan, should give us some evidence that the echoes of authority structures can be detected across time as well as across space. Moreover, it should show that the interactions of different authority structures can also be dimly perceived across time. The 'obeisance' controversy lay at the heart of broader debates in fifth century China about the relationship between Buddhism and the Confucian polity. The collision between these two structures of authority was very similar to the collision between Catholicism and the Ming/Qing regimes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Like that later interaction, the relationship between Buddhism and the Confucian polity changed over time. Over the coming centuries, its degree of definition fluctuated. Jurisdictional questions, posed from both structures, were decided one way, then another. Huiyuan's treatise should be seen as an early attempt to define one narrow aspect of that

[646] Hurvitz 1957, 105.

relationship. In general, Huiyuan attempts to define that relationship as one of cooperation or appropriation—neither structure should subsume the other. In relation to the narrow jurisdiction of whether monks should bow to rulers, he adopts an exclusionary stance—in this jurisdiction, monks are not subject to the authority-structure of the Confucian polity.

Given the example of Huiyuan, it may be tempting to assume that, when nodes of different authority structures debate or engage in a cooperative display of reasoning, the goal is to effect some sort of rapprochement between the two structures. When philosophers or scientists argue with each other, it is often assumed that the goal is to persuade the other side—to make them agree with one's positions (Wittgenstein/Winch might say, "to accept one's authorities"), and 'join' one's structure of authority. But in the broader context of the social function of debate, this sort of shared project is an exception, not the rule. While it is true that debate tends to *clarify* the relationship between structures, it is certainly incorrect that the effect, or even the goal, is always rapprochement. In fact, such cooperative displays of reason are more usefully seen as two structures of authority engaged in 'pinging' each other, producing a map of their rival. Players of authority games in each structure may have many, diverse motivations for mapping the other structure. Their goal is often not to make it possible for one structure to subsume the other, but rather to ensure that their boundaries are clear, that their jurisdictions exclude one another, and that such a subsumption *never* becomes possible. Instead of a debate between scientists, imagine a meeting of officials from rival states in which they discuss their shared border. The officials debate, reason, and argue. They come to understand the other state's jurisdictional claims over territory, as well as the authorities by which it justifies those claims. Perhaps, at the end of the meeting, their discussions have yielded perfect clarity about the relationship between the two authority structures. How often, at the end of such a meeting, do the two states *merge into one*? Almost never. Instead, clarity entails a mutually understood border—perfect exclusion. Arguments with the character of a scientific conference coming to consensus are rare. Arguments that are intended to map boundaries and sharpen differences are common.[647]

As external observers of structures of authority, interested only in mapping them and tracking their development, we are lucky. We do not have to be particularly concerned about the motivations that individual players of authority games have for engaging in reasoning. Whether they debate to persuade, to define, to defeat or to defend, when a player offers a final reason, we catch a glimpse of an authority in action. The echoes of authority in a debate reveal structures of authority, regardless of the internal motivations of the debaters.

Conclusion

This appendix began with a puzzle. Historians of religions insistently use 'authority' as a term of explanation and analysis. But what is authority? Humanists, especially historians of religion, have over the pasty sixty years scoured their conceptual toolbox, deconstructing many of the customary tools of their trade. They have tested many concepts, like 'religion,' 'the secular,' 'sacred,' 'experience,' 'history,' 'author,' and 'reader,' and found them wanting. Like a will o'wisp, these concepts melt away upon close inspection, often revealed as ethnocentric or historically contingent categories, rather than the basic universal categories they were once taken

[647] Examples are ready to hand: spouses in a divorce court, rival political candidates at an election debate, debates between Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucians at the Tang imperial court. In practice, discussions among scientists and philosophers also often have the effect of defining boundaries instead of erasing them.

for. But scholars rarely subject 'authority' to the same process of critique. When historians of religions use this term as a tool of analysis, what type of tool do they hold in their hand?

Over the course of this chapter, we have attempted to answer that question. We looked first at the use of authority in ordinary language, and found that this seemingly simple concept concealed troubling ambiguities. We next examined some 'field reports'—cases in which major thinkers in the Western tradition analyzed or relied on the concept of authority. In the work of Arendt, Hobbes, Kierkegaard, and Wittgenstein, we found widely divergent presentations of the concept of 'authority.' We also found a few commonalities—authority was often presented as something transmitted, and it seemed to often attend the activity of argument and justification. Using these commonalities as our starting point, we proposed a more rigorous account of what authority is and how it can be detected.

Drawing heavily on certain clues in the work of Wittgenstein and his student Peter Winch, we specified that 'authority' is a position in a kind of language game, one in which arguments are made and reasons are given. The function of the *authority* position in such a game is to serve as a final reason or justification. We proposed that authority, as it operates in these language games, lays *claims* or conditional constraints on certain nodes of the game: it makes claims on *subjects* in its *jurisdiction*, it makes claims on its *bearer*, and it makes claims on its *origin*. Authority's claims on the subject and the origin constrain these players (if the nodes are players) to accept the authority as a final reason in relevant argument. Authority's claim on its bearer constrains this node to cogently provide a final reason in relevant argument when asked. When the bearer cannot or will not exercise authority, then we say that authority *fails*, and the other players are faced with a *crisis* of authority. These claims give authority a very precise, subtle form of power: when players do not submit to an authority's claims, they are ejected from the authority's language game.

The claims of an authority imply a structure around it—a *structure of authority*. This structure consists of two kinds of relationships. The first is a *vector relationship*, which connects players in a single authority game. The players in that game can *seize* or *push* the game's authority along this web of vector relationships. The second kind of relationship is an *ordinal relationship*. Ordinal relationships connect an initial authority game with a second game. When ambiguities arise in the initial game about the location or existence of authority in that game, players in the first game may 'call' the second game to adjudicate the ambiguity and *repair* the authority. They import clarity or resolution into the initial game via the ordinal relationship.

Many large-scale social phenomena are correlated with their own relatively distinct structures of authority. Our account focused on modern corporations, states, and religions, although it could be extended to other phenomena like nuclear families, monastic orders, extended clans, language communities, universities, mafias, scientific disciplines, political movements, philosophical systems, and artistic movements. Structures of authority are never completely fixed or explicit, even to the players in their constituent language games. Such structures are often completely opaque to people outside of them. These structures inevitably change over time as a result of discrete choices made by individual players.

Distinct structures of authority often interact with each other, in which case their relationship can range from *poorly defined* to *well defined*. Well defined relationships include *cooperation*, *appropriation*, *subsumption*, and *exclusion*. Poorly defined relationships are more ambiguous, and may change rapidly and unpredictably from one moment to the next. Relationships between structures may change over time. In principle, structures that correlate to what we think of as distinct kinds of social phenomena may interact with each other in any

imaginable way, regardless of their categorization in ordinary language (i.e., 'religions' interact with 'states,' 'states' with 'corporations,' 'clans' with 'artistic movements,' and so on, in any combination). There is no predefined way one structure of authority must interact with another—like the structures themselves, the relationship is built or 'discovered' provisionally over time by the discrete choices of individual players in each.

Finally, based on this account of authority and authority structures, we proposed a methodology for mapping structures of authority and charting their development and interactions. This method demands that we probe the reasoning of a subject in an authority game. Because an authority is a position in an authority game that can be given as a final reason in relevant argument, we observe as a subject in such a game engages in reasoning. When they give a final reason or justification, we discern an instance of authority, and can produce a local map of the relevant structure of authority. Such maps are very contingent. They are never maps of the structure *as it is, in and for itself, always*. Rather, they are maps of a particular structure *at* a particular moment, *for* a particular subject, *over* a particular jurisdiction. Although the map is contingent and limited, it allows us to make some inferences about the larger structure. When we sample the reasoning of many subjects in many jurisdictions, our map grows and we can make surer inferences. When we sample many subjects over many points of time, we can compile a fairly stable image of a structure of authority and its development and interactions over time. We suggested that this methodology is useful for historians, particularly conceptual historians and historians of religion, because historical sources give us access to the reasoning of past players of authority games. In fact, our access to the reasoning of past players is qualitatively the same as our access to the reasoning of living people. It differs only quantitatively—in number, not in kind. If one accepts that this methodology can map a structure of authority for a living, breathing person, one must accept that we can also map a structure of authority for someone long dead.

If the reader accepts this account of authority and the corresponding methodology for mapping its structures, then we are in a position to resolve many of authority's apparent puzzles and paradoxes. We can also give a very satisfactory account of how 'authority' can and should function for historians of religion.

First, let's tie up some loose ends from our 'field reports' on authority. The first 'problem' that appeared in our survey of authority was its ambiguous relationship to 'power.' Is authority really a power? Or is it merely a title or right? What kind of power could it have, if it is "more than advice and less than a command, an advice which one may not safely ignore"? Our account allows us to completely resolve this question. Authority is a very specific, very contingent kind of power—the power to serve as a final reason in a relevant language game. Within the frame of an authority game, this power is real. Players are constrained to accept an authority as a final reason if they wish to continue playing the relevant game. If they do not submit, they drop out of the game. But the authority within a game has *no* power to constrain a player to remain within the game—it cannot compel them to continue playing. For this reason, the power of an authority sometimes seems absolute. At other times, it seems totally nil. But that ambivalent character is not, in the end, paradoxical—it all depends on whether the player in question wishes to remain in the game or not.

The other major outstanding issue is Arendt's claim (echoed by many other commentators) that authority is a historically conditioned conceptual object that can come into human experience and pass out of it. If one accepts our account, then this is impossible. Authority in general is a permanent fixture of human experience—if people play authority games (and we have good reason, per Wittgenstein/Winch, to believe that *all* language games are

somehow authority games), then 'authority' exists. However, Arendt's claim can be modified so that it coheres with our account. In our telling, authority in general does not pass away. Individual instances of authority, however, do disappear. If no one is playing a particular authority game, it ends, and for all intents and purposes that game's authority vanishes. Moreover, particular *structures* of authority are obviously historically conditioned. They can be created, modified, or destroyed. In her essay, Arendt identifies a 'triad' of interrelating concepts that she says defined the Roman world and the pre-modern West: tradition, religion, and authority. In her telling, these three concepts supported each other and once defined the socio-political world of the West. In the wake of the Age of Revolution, these concepts vanished, one by one—first religion, then tradition, and now, finally authority. I think that Arendt is wrong to say that authority has 'vanished.' She would, however, be correct to say that the modern West's structure of authority is much different than that of the premodern West. Premodern society had a structure of authority in which, for many constituent language games, the *origin* of authority lay in the past (represented by tradition) or in a religious ideal or standard. In contrast, the modern world often places the origin of its authority *in the future* or in scientific ideals and goals—when we argue about how things are or should be, we now often *primarily* justify our arguments in relation to imagined futures or scientific truths. Justification by reference to tradition or religion is usually not permitted. This structure of authority is, historically speaking, very unusual. If this is what Arendt means when she says that 'authority has vanished from the modern world,' then she is completely correct.[648]

The fact that our account of 'authority' gives us resources for resolving some of the concept's perpetual paradoxes should give us confidence that we are on the right track.[649]

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[648] We can make a similar objection to Kierkegaard's claim that Paul has authority, but Plato has only genius. In fact, in many structures of authority, Plato and his writings *do* bear authority. Kierkegaard, however, writes from a Protestant Christian perspective, and in most iterations of that structure, Plato is not an origin of authority in the main authority game. Only God, Jesus, and the apostles are.

[649] An outstanding 'puzzle' related to authority is the curious way in which Hobbes uses the concept. As we noted in our initial discussion of Hobbes, Hobbes' presentation has two bizarre features. First, Hobbes' 'authority' at some points attains a sort of cosmological status, more akin to original sin than to a legal or ethical category. Second, Hobbes' account of the state of nature has his sovereign individuals transfer authority *over themselves* to their sovereign representative. The result is that the subjects of the absolute state are constrained to consider themselves the *authors* of their sovereign's commands. Thus, when the state executes one of its subjects, Hobbes would say that, in a certain respect, the subject was the author of his own execution. I do not have space to fully explore these issues. With regard to authority's strange cosmological status, it will suffice to say that Hobbes' account of the state of nature and the emergence of the state are effectively political myths—they are elements in a political theology. Authority attains cosmological significance for Hobbes because the myths in which it plays a constitutive role are fundamentally religious and cosmological in character. If we are not committed to such myths, we will be under no obligation to recognize any cosmological dimension to authority. In reference to the puzzle of the self-authoring execution, let us merely say that Hobbes sketches a theoretical structure of authority that contains recursive elements—the highest nodes in his structure subordinate themselves to their own vectoral subordinates. In truth, Hobbes is not entirely off-base in introducing recursive elements into his imagined structure of authority. Many real structures of authority actually contain recursive links. Such structures have unpredictable and uncanny outputs, and occasionally produce situations analogous to Hobbes' self-authoring executions. This aspect of authority structures deserves further investigation. I would connect the occasional paradoxes that result from recursive authority relationships to Bateson's thesis that schizophrenia is triggered by logical 'double binds.' One could interpret Bateson's 'double binds' as cases in which ordinal authorities issue judgments that interfere or disrupt their own status as authorities. If Bateson is correct that schizophrenia is related to double binds (and it is not at all clear that he is), one might say that the schizophrenic resolves such paradoxes not by calling an additional ordinal authority for resolution but by fracturing their own subjective unity. For the canonical presentations of Bateson's theory of

Reinforced by that confidence, let us now return to our initial question: when historians of religion use the concept 'authority,' what is that analytic tool capable of? When we began our investigation, we might have expected that 'authority' would prove to be as contingent and unstable as concepts like 'secular' or 'history.' We might have proceeded by trying to 'deconstruct' authority, revealing it as a category incapable of doing real analytic work. Instead, our account has developed in a different direction. Our account has revealed (or reconstructed) authority as an indissoluble category of human experience. In the course of presenting our account, we have drawn on examples from many different cultures and many different times. In applying our methodology of mapping authority structures, we have similarly adopted test cases from distant times and places. Surprisingly, when construed in a certain way, the concept of 'authority' appears to have trans-temporal and cross-cultural validity.[650] Thus, when historians of religion un-self-consciously cast their analyses of religious phenomena in terms of authority, it is possible to see their arguments as unwittingly grounded in something real. A historian may talk about the shifting 'authority' of scripture or the 'construction of authority' in a particular religious community. By the lights of our formulation of authority, they are not incorrect to frame their analysis in this way. Moreover, if they explicitly endorsed our account and its attendant methodology, they could make their arguments more incisive, less theoretically vague, and more powerful as explanations.

One immediate benefit of adopting our account of authority is that it allows us to speak more precisely about 'canon.' In the previous chapter, I outlined the ways in which the concept of 'canon' tends to trip up historians of religion. Much like 'authority,' 'canon' often appears in historical analyses of religions, but its meaning seems difficult to pin down. We can clarify what canons are and how they operate by defining 'canon' in terms of our concept of 'authority.' At least on its face, such a definition should be acceptable to many participants in the 'canon conversation' that we outlined earlier; after all, such participants already frequently and naturally define a 'canon' as 'something authoritative'. Let us specify this definition by stipulating 'canon' as a non-empty set[651] of writings or images that bear authority in an authority game. By restricting 'canon' to a set of writings or images, we deliberately exclude *agents* of language use (i.e., human beings). Canons are nodes in authority games, but they are not active players. Like all bearers of authority, canons are constrained to function as final reasons in relevant argument when called. For Lushan Huiyuan, 'Buddhist scripture' is a 'canon.' At least in Huiyuan's correspondence with Huan Xuan, that canon fulfills its obligations—it does, in fact, function as a final reason in relevant argument. But canons do not always succeed in exercising authority.

Let us imagine that players in an authority game involving a canon find that the canon has *failed* in its authority. They call on the canon as a final reason, but it is unable to fulfill that obligation. Perhaps its answer to the relevant question is incomprehensible to the players.

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schizophrenia and double binds, see Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," and Bateson, "Toward a Theory of Schizophrenia."

[650] One might say that historians of religion should see 'authority' as more like 'economy' than 'religion.' Many historians would take issue with the claim that the ancient Greeks had a 'religion'—they would argue that religion is a historically contingent category, and ancient Greeks did not possess our concept of 'religion.' Describing ancient Greek society in terms of 'religion' is an illegitimate anachronism. In contrast, many historians of religion will frankly admit that the ancient Greeks had an 'economy,' despite the fact that they did not possess this concept. I propose that 'authority' is like 'economy'—a society does not need to have self-consciousness of 'authority' to possess authority structures.

[651] Here, I use 'set' in a technical sense borrowed from set theory. Sets may contain many, one, or no members. The members of sets may themselves be sets. Our definition of canon stipulates only that the set not be empty, and that it contains no agents of language use (i.e., human players).

Perhaps the players themselves cannot agree on the meaning of its answer—it is disputed or ambiguous. The players now find themselves in a *crisis* of authority, precipitated by the failure of a canon's authority. As it turns out, this is a very common situation in authority games that involve canons. In this situation, we find recurring patterns in how the players respond and how the structure of authority develops as a result of their choices. They may try to route around the failing canon by *pushing* authority back on an origin. Teachers of literature are very familiar with this move. Suppose a teacher asks their students, "What is Harry Potter's favorite food?" Perhaps the students refer to the Harry Potter series of books to construct their answer. But let's suppose that they experience a crisis of authority—on this point, they find the books unclear. They may eventually say, "Let's just ask the author, J.K. Rowling." In such instances, the students are trying to *push* authority up the web of vector relationships from the canon (the books) to an origin (the author). A creative student might try instead to *seize* authority—they write their own story, in which Harry Potter explains very straightforwardly that his favorite food is steak tartare. In either case, a crisis of canonical authority results in shifts in the locus of authority in the relevant language game.

Rather than *pushing* or *seizing* authority, players may instead try to *repair* the authority of the canon. As we saw in our initial discussion of the janitor and the mysterious phrase, "Wirb dip nolo crandall," attempts at *repair* will involve players taking a disputed or unintelligible response and transforming it into an agreed upon or intelligible one. Such attempts will involve calling on an ordinal authority to adjudicate ambiguities and import clarity. In attempts to repair canonical authority, another clear pattern emerges. The players might call on an ordinal authority that consists of a rule or methodology of interpretation, or they might call on a player in another language game. Historians of religion are very familiar with ordinal authorities that take the form of rules or methods of interpretation—they are often called 'hermeneutics' or 'exegetical practices;' I prefer to call them *criteria*. Literary scholars and legal scholars, on the other hand, are very familiar with ordinal authorities that take the form of other players—such players are called 'critics' or 'judges;' I prefer the former term, *critics*. Thus, when players of an authority game experience a *crisis* of canonical authority, they may try to repair the authority of the *canon* by applying a *criterion* or consulting a *critic*. Or, they may try to route around the failing canon by *pushing* authority onto an origin, like the author of the canon or the historical context in which the canon emerged. Or, they may *seize* authority for themselves, making a decision on their own.

If these attempts are successful, we often see another pattern emerge: the original canon may expand or contract. Writings that preserve the adjudications that resolved the crisis may be incorporated into the original canonical set. A text that explains how to interpret a law code becomes amalgamated with the law code, for example. Conversely, judgments imported from an ordinal authority may effectively *shrink* the canon. An exegetical rule may direct the players to focus on a subset of the canonical writings to the exclusion of others. In time, the ignored writings may be lost or expunged. Thus, crises of canonical authority often have lasting effects on an authority game and on a structure of authority as a whole. From the perspective of the players confronted with a crisis, the long term effects of potential moves may not be apparent. They may call on a criterion or a critic that ends up permanently resolving ambiguities in the canon and thereby rendering the canon, and the game as a whole, more stable. Or, their chosen criterion may destabilize the canon, further paralyzing the authority game and convulsing the whole structure of authority. It is no wonder that adherents of a religion often take canons very seriously. When a move in an authority game modifies a canon, the results can very explosive.

This appendix has strayed far afield from the topic of this dissertation—the world of medieval China, Buddhism, and the Three Levels movement. We have delved into questions of methodology and made critical inquiries into the meaning of 'canon' and 'authority.' In the course of that inquiry, I have tried to develop a precise language for describing the operation of authority and the structures it implies. That language may grant some insight into the nature and import of Xinxing's writings. Through the lens of authority, we can see why Xinxing and his movement were controversial and charismatic figures: Xinxing's mature writings posed questions about the structure of authority for Chinese Buddhists that had hitherto been unasked. Xinxing attempted to specify the locus of scripture's authority, offering the unprecedented suggestion that authority resided in the reported words of the Buddha alone. Specifically, Xinxing suggests that the speech of the Buddha, as recorded in scripture, serves as an ordinal authority for the interpretation of scripture itself. This scriptural fundamentalism created a tightly recursive interpretive loop—one that was no doubt attractive in its seeming simplicity and baffling for the paradoxes it inevitably produced. As I suggested above, modifications of a structure of authority that involve written canons tend to be controversial. I would suggest that these proposed modifications, far more than the content of Xinxing's beliefs or the peculiarities of his preferred rites and practices, account for the controversy and political intrigue that surrounded the Three Levels movement in medieval China. When Xinxing began to call on new criteria and new critics, they rendered judgments with far reaching implications for the authority structure of Chinese Buddhism—consequences that Xinxing and his followers may not have foreseen or desired.

Appendix E: Three Facets of the Authority Problem—Major Themes in Literature on 'Authority'

Arendt's "What Is Authority?" is useful in highlighting three distinct facets of the authority problem. We might term these three facets the definitional issue, the moral issue, and the diagnostic issue. The definitional issue is simple: what is authority? Arendt explores this question philologically, by tracing the history of the authority concept back to ancient Rome. The moral issue asks, should we submit to authority, and if so, to which kind? Arendt addresses this issue obliquely and incompletely, but persistently, hinting that some forms of authority are natural and right.[652] The diagnostic issue involves the state of authority in the modern West. Arendt raises this issue by claiming that the West is experiencing a crisis in which "authority has vanished." She provides a brief account of the origins of this crisis, as well as some remarks on its consequences.[653]

Arendt did not discover these issues, though her essay constitutes a now-canonical presentation of them, and it is all the more seminal for treating the three issues as closely interrelated. Each issue has inspired its own more or less distinct corpus of literature. The most voluminous and longstanding body of work deals with the 'moral issue'—should we submit to authority? Is authority ever justifiable? If so, what kind?[654] Few of these works pause to ask what authority is; moreover, some are written from an anarchist or anti-traditional perspective, and thus do not register the disappearance of authority as a crisis, but rather as something to be hoped for. The next largest set of work deals with the diagnostic issue. Works in this category proclaim a 'crisis of authority' in the modern West. They usually analyze how this crisis emerged and sometimes sketch how it might be resolved.[655] Again, this genre rarely raises the problem of authority's definition. The definitional issue has inspired the smallest body of work, most of which treats the problem of defining authority as subordinate to the moral issue.[656] Of this group,

[652] See especially her comments on child-rearing and education. Arendt, "What Is Authority?," 92.

[653] "Authority as we once knew it, which grew out of the Roman experience of foundation and was understood in the light of Greek political philosophy, has nowhere been re-established, either through revolutions or through the even less promising means of restoration, and least of all through the conservative moods and trends which occasionally sweep public opinion. For to live in a political realm with neither authority nor the concomitant awareness that the source of authority transcends power and those who are in power, means to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living-together." Arendt, "What Is Authority," 141.

[654] For an attempt to theorize and justify the authority of law, see Raz 1990 and Raz 2009. For a study that treats receptiveness toward the claims of authority as pathological, see Adorno, et al, 2019. For a psychological study that is less hostile to the claims of authority, see Sennett 1980. For an attempt to construct an epistemology that takes the claims of authority seriously, see Zagzebski 2012. For a contemporary statement of the anarchist case against the rationality of authority, see Wolff 1988. For a canonical presentation of the anarchist view, see Proudhon 1923, especially the Fourth Study, "The Principle of Authority."

[655] Works of this nature have appeared in the Anglophone world infrequently but persistently for the last hundred years. See Demos 1926, Dewey 1936, Benne 1943, Arendt 1968, Nisbet 1975, Stout 1981, Mayer 1989, Heineman 1994, Luxon 2013 and Gurri 2018.

[656] See Simon 1940, Simon 1980, Benne 1943, Winch, "Authority," Winch 1990, and Winch 2002. I omit from this list Max Weber's famous threefold typology of *Herrschaft* (the locus classicus for this typology is Weber 1978). Weber identifies three types of *Herrschaft*: charismatic, traditional, and rational-legal. When Weber uses *Herrschaft* it is often translated into English as 'authority,' but it is not clear that Weber's concept and the English word are coterminous. On the difference between *Herrschaft* and the German cognate to 'authority,' *Autorität*, see the relevant entries in Brunner 1972–1997.

Arendt's essay is by far the best known.[657] Arendt, however, is more interested in the moral and diagnostic issues, and she ultimately fails to provide a clear, comprehensive definition of authority. Many of the other works that treat the definitional issue suffer from the same defect—more concerned with the other issues related to authority, they rarely make the concept much clearer.

Thus, much of the existing literature on authority treats the three issues—definitional, moral, and diagnostic—as interrelated. But this literature has made comparatively little headway on the definitional issue—on what authority actually is. I propose, therefore, to take these three strands apart, and to treat the definitional issue in more or less isolation. I hope that this will allow us to develop a useable concept of authority.

[657] There is, in addition, considerable work in political science related to classifying authoritarian regimes and measuring the degree to which they are authoritarian. This work is not relevant here. For an overview, see Wendt 2018.

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