

Parasutraic Narratives and Cultic Repertoire: The Plurality of Afterlife Abode in the Tang *Lotus Sūtra* Cult

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Abstract: Until recently, the role and significance played by parasutraic narratives in the formation and maintenance of scriptural cults have largely been overlooked. These narratives offer valuable insights into the cultic repertoire, the set of defining elements that distinguish one scriptural cult from another. One element that characterises the *Lotus Sūtra* cult is the trope of devotees attaining rebirth in various afterlife abodes, as depicted in the narratives. While the idea of rebirth in Tuṣita, Trāyastriṃśa, and the Western Pure Land could be found in the *Lotus Sūtra*, the association between the scripture and these realms as afterlife abode is almost indiscernible in pre-Tang monastic biographical collections, such as the *Gaoseng zhuan* and *Biqiuni zhuan*. By the early Tang, the association is noticeable, as evidenced in the early Tang biographical collection, *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*. The biographies of the Tiantai patriarchs, known for their esteem of the *Lotus Sūtra*, are the most critical for examining the trope of afterlife abodes. The ambivalence surrounding their afterlife destinations, accentuated by intriguing details about their deaths in their biographies, could have highlighted the various afterlife abodes open to *Lotus Sūtra* practitioners, which the cult adapted to accommodate a growing and diverse community of followers.

Keywords: parasutraic narratives, miracle tales, medieval Chinese Buddhism, Tang China, afterlife, sūtra cult, cultic repertoire

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1. Introduction

In 1975, Gregory Schopen argued that the cult of the book—veneration of Buddhist scriptures—was an integral part of early Indian Mahāyāna, reacting to the cult of relics in mainstream Buddhism with its veneration of stūpas.¹ Schopen's idea of the cult of the book in India, based primarily on a close reading of a group of Mahāyāna passages, has been called into question.² In China, there is no doubt about the cult of the book, which, recent scholarship has shown, flourished in the Tang (618–907).³

Different systems of scriptural veneration, in fact, existed in the Tang, each with a different cultic focus. Most prominent among these scriptural cults are those related to the *Diamond Sūtra* (Skt. *Vajracchedikā*; Ch. *Jin'gang jing* 金剛經), the *Lotus Sūtra* (Skt. *Saddharmapundarikasūtra*; Ch. *Fabua jing* 法華經), and the *Garland Sūtra* (Skt. *Buddhāvataṃsakasūtra*; Ch. *Huayan jing* 華嚴經).⁴ How each of these book cults was individuated—sometimes quite subtly—is related to the cultic repertoire, a set of elements that defines the cult and shapes its followers' attitudes, beliefs, and practices. Because the cultic repertoire is fashioned through the complex intersection between the scripture, its proponents, and the socio-historical milieu, it thus sets one scriptural cult apart from another. The spread of the book cults was intimately related to the extent to which these elements were conveyed to their prospective adherents through either oral or written means. In this context,

¹ Schopen, 'The Phrase "sa pthivīpradeśāś caityabhūto bhavet"'.

² Drewes, 'Revisiting the phrase'.

³ Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*.

⁴ The full Chinese name of this sūtra is *Da fangguang fo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經, which is reconstructed as **Buddhāvataṃsakanāmamahāvaiṣṭyasūtra* in Sanskrit. It is often known—incorrectly—by the abbreviated title, *Avataṃsakasūtra*. According to recent research, it is better referred to as *Buddhāvataṃsakasūtra* [Sūtra of the Garland of Buddhas]. See Hamar, 'Buddhāvataṃsakasūtra', 115. In English, it is known as the *Flower Garland Sūtra* or the *Flower Ornament Sūtra*.

parasutraic narratives play a significant role in communicating the cultic repertoire as they propagate the scripture to a wider audience.

The focus of this paper is the cult of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Specifically, it argues that the trope of afterlife abodes found in narratives that extol the scripture constitutes an essential element within its cultic repertoire. Besides showing how this element has its basis in the *Lotus Sūtra*, it demonstrates how the trope could have also derived from the legacies of its proponents, in particular, the biographical records of the Tiantai 天台 patriarchs, who are known for their veneration of the sūtra. The ambivalence surrounding their afterlives and the speculation it might invite could have encouraged various afterlife aspirations, an idea adapted in the cult to respond to a growing and diverse *Lotus Sūtra* following. In highlighting the intricacies involved in developing the cult repertoire via this trope, this paper aims to facilitate further consideration of the broader issues regarding the formation of elements that define other cults or systems of veneration and their implications for our understanding of medieval Chinese Buddhism.

2. The *Lotus Sūtra* Cult

Although the *Lotus Sūtra* had limited impact in the Indian subcontinent, it quickly occupied a unique place in the history of Chinese Buddhism soon after it was rendered into Chinese in the late third century.⁵ Besides the two prominent monks of the Eastern Jin period, Dao'an 道安 (312–385) and Zhu Fatai 竺法汰 (320–387), who were said to have distinguished themselves in the study of Dharmarakṣa's

⁵ On the *Lotus Sūtra* in Indian Buddhism, see Silk, 'The Place of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Indian Buddhism'. It is thought to have been first translated in 255, but little is known about this translation (Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, ix). The earliest extant translation was completed by the Indo-Scythian monk Dharmarakṣa (Ch. Zhu Fahu 竺法護; ca. 233–310). Revised in 290, it came down to us as *Zhengfabua jing* 正法華經 [Sūtra of the Blossom of the True Dharma], *T* no. 263, vol. 9.

translation of the scripture, the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 [Biographies of Eminent Monks] and the *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 [Biographies of Nuns] listed eleven monastics who were versed in this version of the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁶

Dharmarakṣa's translation was followed by no less than six translations, the most influential of which is the translation made by Kumārajīva (Ch. Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什; 344–409/413) in 406 under imperial auspices.⁷ Rendered as the *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 [The Sūtra of the Lotus Blossom of Wondrous Dharma], this translation is characterised by a smooth and elegant Chinese literary style, which explains its enduring popularity despite the appearance of subsequent translations. Further amplifying the scripture's influence, Kumārajīva's translation facilitated the study of the *Lotus Sūtra* and inspired Buddhist exegetes to compose commentaries on it. The earliest extant commentary of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Fabua jingshu* 法華經疏 [Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra], was composed by Zhu Daosheng 竺道生 (355–434), who had previously studied under Kumārajīva. By the end of the Tang dynasty, it had generated many commentaries by some of the most illustrious monks in Chinese Buddhist history, including Zhiyi 智顛 (539–598), Jizang 吉藏 (549–623), and Kuiji 窺基 (632–682).

2.1. Parasutrac Narratives

While commentarial works of scriptures were composed to transmit scriptural knowledge to contemporary and later generations of monastics and scholars, these were not the only works produced on or about them. Sūtras in medieval China were propagated and promoted not only as standalone texts but also through additional writings that supported their dissemination. Apart from high-flown

⁶ Tsukamoto, *A History of Early Chinese Buddhism*, 221–23.

⁷ According to Tsukamoto (ibid., 221), 'the groundwork for the wide currency of Kumārajīva's translation had been laid by the general availability of Dharmarakṣa's version', which had contributed to the scripture's importance and currency within the Chinese Buddhism community.

exegetical works seeking to illuminate the meanings of the scripture, other kinds of work—what I call ‘parasutraic literature’—in either oral or written forms were also produced around the sūtra, which sought to promote it.⁸ In its literary form and content, parasutraic literature, which may not touch upon the doctrinal contents of the sūtra, could be stories, anecdotes, or legends about it, related historical and biographical accounts, prayers, hymns, exhortations about certain practices, prefaces, and colophons that interpret and promote the observance of that sūtra for its audience. They all form part of the Chinese sūtra cult, supporting and sustaining it. Forming a significant part of indigenous Chinese Buddhist writings, parasutraic writings may be original compositions or compilations of pre-existing oral and written materials. The Tang dynasty saw the compilation of many parasutraic writings, which include collections of substantial length, such as three compilations of *Diamond Sūtra* narratives and two collections each on the tradition and transmission of the *Lotus* and *Garland Sūtras*.⁹

Among the scriptures and writings inspired by the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* 弘贊法華傳 [A Chronicle for Widely Extolling the Lotus Sūtra]¹⁰ and the *Fabua zhuanji* 法華傳記 [A Record of the Transmission of the *Lotus Sūtra*]¹¹ are the most

⁸ The concept of parasutraic literature is first coined in Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 31–33.

⁹ For a recent study on the *Lotus Sūtra* narratives, see Campany, ‘Miracle Tales as Scripture Reception’.

¹⁰ Composed by Huixiang 惠詳 (d.u.), the ten-juan *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* chronicles the transmission of the *Lotus Sūtra* from the Eastern Jin 東晉 (317–420) to the Tang (the latest record is dated 706) with accounts categorised into eight types: images, translation, explication, meditation, self-immolation, and the recitation, reading, and copying of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Collected in *T* as HFZ, *T* no. 2068, vol. 51. For a brief introduction, see Stevenson, ‘Tales of the Lotus Sūtra’.

¹¹ The ten-juan *Fabua zhuanji* was compiled by Sengxiang 僧祥 (d.u.) later than the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* since the latest date recorded in this work is 716 (*T* no. 2068, 51: 8.84b22). The collection is divided into twelve sections, the first six on information related to the transmission of the *Lotus Sūtra* and

important for investigating the cult of the *Lotus Sūtra*. These two collections are sometimes thought of as ‘miracle’ tale collections because they contain many accounts of the marvellous experiences of its adherents, which derived from their devotion to and practice of the sūtra.¹² However, as parasutraic writings, their scope goes beyond miracle tales because they encompass materials related to the tradition and transmission of the *Lotus Sūtra* in China, which are often devoid of marvellous contents. For instance, the *Hongzan Fabua zhuān* documents images produced based on the sūtra (sixteen items in *juan* one), matters on its translation (sixteen items in *juan* two), and exegesis (twelve items in *juan* three). Similarly, the entirety of the first *juan* of the *Fabua zhuānji* is devoted to the documentation of the scriptural tradition from six perspectives, such as the editions of the scripture, the dating of its translations, traditions of practices inspired by the scripture, exegetical variations, and a collection of prefaces related to the scripture. Therefore, these two parasutraic collections could be considered the biographies of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the sense that they contain details about how the scripture was received, conceptualised, and treated, as well as how it holds value, religious or otherwise, for individuals and communities, which are detailed in the narratives they contain.¹³

the remaining sections on the wondrous experiences of its adherents that were derived from explicating, reciting, reading, copying, and hearing the sūtra, and making offering to it. Collected in *T* as *FZ*, *T* no. 2068, no. 51.

¹² Scholars have agreed that ‘miracle’ is a misnomer for Buddhist tales containing marvelous phenomena. See Teiser and Stone, *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, 34. In Chinese sources, there are various labels for collections of these indigenous Buddhist tales, the most common being *ganying ji* 感應記 (record of sympathetic resonance), which indicates that the wonders experienced by the stories’ protagonists are understood as responses (*ying*) stimulated (*gan*) by their Buddhist piety. They are also known as *lingyan ji* 靈驗記 (record of proof of efficacy), which evinces an understanding of the wondrous events recorded as attesting (*yan*) to the efficacy (*ling*) of Buddhism. For an in-depth discussion, see Ho, ‘Sinitic Buddhist Narratives of Wonders’.

¹³ The notion of a scripture, like living thing, as having a biography is not a

As biographies of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* and the *Fabua zhuanji* are rich sources for understanding the cult of the *Lotus Sūtra*, especially their narratives on the experiences of its devotees. The significance of these parasutraic narratives is evidenced by the fact that they survived to be compiled, which implies that they are not simply stories of people but collective products of social and cultic networks sustained by the interest of narrative communities over time.¹⁴ It is easier to see why this is so by considering the relationship between these accounts, the dynamic processes from which they resulted, and how transmitters and compilers could have shaped them. While many more of these parasutraic tales, which started as oral accounts, could have circulated during their times, only those that ended up being compiled in these two collections had gone through the selection process of the editors, having been first collected and committed to writing. Before that happened, only those of particular interest to the narrative communities were circulated repeatedly, gaining widespread and persistent currency. For these reasons, the compiled parasutraic narratives resulted from the social processes by which aspects of the *Lotus Sūtra* cult were conceived, disseminated, and preserved. At each stage of the process, the responsible historical agents—devotees, proponents, transmitters, writers, editors, or compilers—played a part in shaping the sūtra cult. However, the role

new one. For example, ‘biographies’ of important religious texts are published under Princeton University’s Lives of Great Religious Books series. These biographies ‘recount the complex and fascinating histories of important religious texts from around the world... examine the historical origins...trace how their reception, interpretation, and influence have changed...’ See Princeton University Press, ‘Lives of Great Religious Books’. In fact, the series include a biography of the *Lotus Sūtra* by Donald Lopez Jr. that traces its reception history as he ‘followed the *Lotus Sūtra* from India, to China, to Japan, to Europe, and to America’. Lopez, *Lotus Sūtra*, 9.

¹⁴ The importance of the idea of narratives communities is first discernible from the formation of Buddhist narrative collections found in Kominami, ‘Rikuchō Zui-Tō shōstesushi’, which also examines the social relations of people who shared and compiled indigenous tales.

of the compilers in selecting certain tales and not others, adopting a particular version of a tale, editing the selected ones to form a consistent whole, and ordering them in a specific way is significant in determining how their compilations and their representations are to be received and understood. Hence, even though parasutric narratives, when collectively considered, do not provide unmediated history, they can provide access to what a group of people held to be the case about what happened and what the compilers were trying to persuade the readers to believe had happened. These narratives, therefore, could be taken to document the practices and understandings current during their chroniclers' time or at least among the social network from which the compiler gathered them. As artefacts of social memory and collective representation, these tales thus are 'valuable as material for the history of religions—much more valuable, in fact, than if they were the sole invention of a single author'.¹⁵

2.2. Cultic Repertoire

Given the nature of parasutric narratives in the two collections, they could tell us something about the cult of the *Lotus Sūtra* through how the scripture was represented in them, that is, how it was—and supposed to be—conceived, understood, and practised. In other words, their representations could shed light on what shaped and distinguished the scriptural cult.

In his study of *Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記 [A Record of Signs from the Unseen Realm], Robert Campany applied the concept of religious repertoire to this fifth-century Buddhist 'miracle' tale collection to uncover the set of elements—spiritual tools, symbols, practices, and ideas—constitutive of the particular idiom of Chinese Buddhism conveyed by the collection.¹⁶ The notion of religious repertoire is

¹⁵ Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 27. For an in-depth discussion of the narrative communities, see also *ibid.*, 17–30; Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 96–102.

¹⁶ Campany was inspired by Anne Swidler's concept of cultural repertoire, which she applied to her research on the relationship between human action and

also applicable to the sūtra cults of the Tang period as they could be thought of as characterised by different repertoires—collections of core elements fashioned through the complex intersection of multiple forces—that distinguish them from one another. While cultic repertoires may contain unique elements that define and contrast different systems of religious veneration, they could also include elements shared between various scriptural cults. For instance, parasutraic narratives are generally based on the notion of sympathetic resonance (*ganying* 感應), which explains how their experiences—often marvellous in nature—could be called forth through intense piety or devotion.¹⁷ Another example of a shared repertoire element is the trope of protection received by devotees in dire situations, commonly found in parasutraic tales. However, there may be variations in the representation of the same trope depending on the scriptural cult, such as how often it is depicted or how the sūtra is invoked to provide protection.

Elements of the cultic repertoire may or may not be based on the scripture. For example, the indigenous practice of auto-cremation, a unique element of the *Lotus Sūtra* cult, is based on the example of Bodhisattva Medicine King (Yaowang pusa 藥王菩薩) in the twenty-third chapter of the sūtra. About a dozen narratives with this trope are found in the two parasutraic collections.¹⁸ Of greater interest are those elements that are not based on scriptural content. An example of this is the trope of the incorruptible tongue, which features almost exclusively in the *Lotus Sūtra* cult.¹⁹ *Lotus Sūtra* tales with this trope typically

culture, such as in her analyses of how individuals resort to certain cultural resources to assemble and define their repertoires for various purposes. Company, 'Religious Repertoires and Contestation', 106–07.

¹⁷ For a recent discussion of this concept in Buddhist narratives, see Ho, 'Sin-itic Buddhist Narratives'.

¹⁸ James Benn has discussed this at length in his paper, 'When Text Meets Flesh', in which he calls it an apocryphal practice, given that there is no such record of it in the South and Central Asian contexts.

¹⁹ A singular case related to the *Garland Sūtra* is found in the *Huayan jing zhuanji*, T no. 2073, 51: 1.155a10–b9.

recount the wonder of the incorruptible tongue that survived intact after the protagonist's death, an indication of the truth and power embodied in the sūtra, which even sanctifies the organ that recited the *Lotus Sūtra*. Such elements are of greater significance because the reasons for their representation could not be found in the scripture but in the process through which the cult came into being, such as the socio-historical milieu, the concerns the cult was addressing, the historical agents involved, and the intersection of these factors.²⁰

Sūtra cults could also be differentiated in terms of other parameters, such as lay-monastic orientation. Compared to the *Diamond Sūtra* collections, which are dominated by accounts of lay protagonists (almost nine out of ten accounts), the narratives of the *Lotus* and *Garland Sūtras* are much less so.²¹ Narratives with lay protagonists only account for a quarter of the total accounts in the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* and *Fabua zhuanji*, respectively.²² On the other hand, the two *Garland Sūtra* chronicles, the *Huayan jing zhuanji* 華嚴經傳記 [A Record of the Transmission of the *Garland Sūtra*]²³ and the *Huayan jing ganying zhuan* 華嚴經感應傳 [A Chronicle of the Sympathetic Response of the *Garland Sūtra*],²⁴ are even less lay-oriented, with only a tenth and one-fifth of their narratives featuring lay protagonists, respectively.²⁵ With

²⁰ For discussions of *Lotus Sūtra* narratives with this trope, see Suwa, 'Rikuchō kara Zui-Tō jidai' and Ho, 'Truth and Its Reception'.

²¹ Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 62.

²² See Appendix A.

²³ The bulk of this five-juan work was probably completed by the famous patriarch of the Chinese Huayan tradition Fazang 法藏 (643–712) before he passed away in 712 (Zhiru, *The Making of a Savior Bodhisattva*, 333). Like the *Lotus Sūtra* collections, this work chronicles the transmission and practice of the *Garland Sūtra*. Collected in *T* as HJZ, T no. 2073, vol. 51.

²⁴ Based on the original work of Fazang's disciple, the eighth-century monk Huiying 惠英, this one-juan collection was edited and published in 783 by a lay Buddhist named Hu Youzhen 胡幽貞, of whom we know next to nothing. It is collected in *T* as HJGZ, T no. 2074, vol. 51.

²⁵ See Appendix A.

an overwhelming representation of monastics, the *Garland Sūtra* collections are the least lay-oriented of all compilations, which supports the idea that the sūtra was less engaged by the laity on the ground, as indicated by extant Buddhist records, such as those from Dunhuang.²⁶

3. Death and the Afterlife in *Lotus Sūtra* Narratives

In China, Buddhism had responded particularly well to the perennial concerns of death and the afterlife, helping the Chinese deal with them by creating various texts and rituals, which often also exerted far-reaching effects on other parts of Asia. For instance, the modern-day Ghost Festival held in many variant forms in East and Southeast Asia was derived from the Yulanpen 盂蘭盆, a Chinese Buddhist ritual for making offerings to the monastic order (saṃgha) for the salvation of ancestors. Performed as early as the fifth or sixth century, the origin myth and practice of this ritual, informed by pre-existent Indian Buddhist elements, were introduced in and propagated through indigenous Chinese Buddhist scriptures.²⁷ Apart from such afterlife rituals, Buddhist practice and devotion based on scriptural cults, such as those of the *Diamond* and *Lotus Sūtras*, offer alternative means for Chinese Buddhists to secure a good death or favourable rebirth.²⁸

In Buddhism, death is considered a gateway to another birth if the causes and conditions of samsaric existence, such as craving and ignorance, remain at the end of one's life. As the last event, death is thought to determine the condition of the next existence. Therefore,

²⁶ Hamar, 'Huayan Texts in Dunhuang', 89.

²⁷ For a classic study of this festival in English, see Teiser, *The Ghost Festival*.

²⁸ Although there is distinction between achieving a good death and a good rebirth, the difference between them can be difficult to draw, as shown by the example below. As such, I discussed them together since this does not affect the fact that an afterlife abode is often mentioned in *Lotus Sūtra* narratives. For a discussion of this topic with respect to the *Diamond Sūtra*, see Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 162–65.

securing a good death is crucial as it indicates a favourable rebirth. In Chinese Buddhist tales with this theme, a good death or rebirth is often represented as the culmination of one's devotion—often a lifetime of exemplary and steadfast practice. A good rebirth is typically indicated by the state in which the protagonist passes away, often characterised by a combination of the following details: foreknowledge of death; serene state of mind or exceptional composure, usually represented in a meditative posture; and the presence of auspicious signs or beings who come to escort the deceased away.

Unlike the trope of the incorruptible tongue, which is almost unique to the *Lotus Sūtra* narratives, the trope of achieving a good rebirth can be found in parasutraic narratives of different scriptural cults. An example of this can be found in the following *Diamond Sūtra* tale about a lay devotee:

Zhang Xuansu, Magistrate of Huangmei District in Qizhou (modern Huanggang, Hubei), had already accepted and upheld the *Diamond Sūtra* when he was twenty... When he was on the verge of death, he saw fragrant flowers and [beings with] banners and parasols coming down from the sky. Joyfully, he put his palms together. He then took a bath and dressed up. Everyone in his family detected a fragrance that did not dissipate for several days.²⁹

In other narratives, the presence of beings presumably coming to escort the deceased protagonists to their afterlife abodes is not as explicit, being indicated only by the presence of fragrance.³⁰

Despite bearing the same theme, the narratives in the *Lotus Sūtra* collections can differ considerably from those found in the parasutraic compilations of the *Diamond* and *Garland Sūtras*. Any divergences between them may hint at the presence of elements within the cultic repertoire of the *Lotus Sūtra* that individuate it from other book cults. One noticeable difference is the proportion of

²⁹ Translated in Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 376.

³⁰ Stone, 'The Secret Art of Dying', 134. For the association between fragrance and the presence of deity, see also Company, 'The Real Presence', 241–42.

Lotus Sūtra narratives with this theme. In comparison, the two *Lotus Sūtra* collections have the highest proportion—more than a third—of such accounts.³¹ On the other hand, the *Garland Sūtra* collections have a slightly lower proportion, with less than a third of their accounts bearing this theme. In contrast, only less than a tenth of the combined accounts—seven out of one hundred and twelve—in the three *Diamond Sūtra* collections are of this theme.³² While their intense lay orientation highlights the accessibility of a good death and rebirth to the laity through Zhang Xuansu's example above, it may also explain why a much smaller proportion of *Diamond Sūtra* accounts bear this theme.³³ After all, the *Diamond Sūtra* narratives tend to portray the achievement of a good rebirth as a result of a lifetime of exemplary practice, which is often associated with—and better afforded by—the monastic vocation than with the lifestyle of the laity.³⁴

Although they both have similar proportions of narratives with this theme, the *Garland Sūtra* collections differ markedly from those of the *Lotus Sūtra* in not featuring even a single lay protagonist. In the latter case, lay protagonists are featured in at least a quarter of

³¹ See Appendix A.

³² Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 163. The three *Diamond Sūtra* collections are: (1) *Jin'gang bore jing jiyuan ji* 金剛般若經集驗記 [A Record of Collected Proofs of the Efficacy of the *Diamond Sūtra*; X no. 1629, vol. 87] composed in 718 by Meng Xianzhong 孟獻忠, Adjutant of Zizhou (modern Mianyang, Sichuan). (2) *Jin'gang jing jiuyi* 金剛經鳩異 [Collected Marvels of the *Diamond Sūtra*; X no. 1630, vol. 87] compiled in 836 the Tang literatus Duan Chengshi 段成式 (803?–863). (3) *Chisong Jin'gang jing lingyan gongde ji* 持誦金剛經靈驗功德記 [A Record of the Proven Efficacy of the *Diamond Sūtra* and the Merit to be Gained from Upholding and Reciting it; T no. 2743, vol. 85] compiled by Dunhuang layman Zhai Fengda 翟奉達 (fl. early tenth century).

³³ On the intense lay orientation of the *Diamond Sūtra* tale collections, see discussion in Ho, 'Truth and Its Reception', 61–75.

³⁴ This may account for the proportion of tales bearing this theme with monastic protagonists in the parasutraic collections of the *Garland* and *Lotus Sūtras*. See Appendix A.

tales with this theme. More importantly, one other aspect distinguishes the *Lotus Sūtra* collections from those of the two other sūtras: the explicit mention of the afterlife destinations of protagonists. In tales of this theme in the parasutraic collections of the *Garland* and *Diamond Sūtras*, the afterlife abodes of protagonists are rarely mentioned. Only two *Diamond Sūtra* narratives mention the term pure land (*jingtu* 淨土),³⁵ and two others refer to unspecified heavens as afterlife destinations.³⁶ Out of sixty-seven items in the two *Garland Sūtra* collections, only three mention the pure land and five the heavens as afterlife abodes.³⁷ When we examine the *Lotus Sūtra* collections, the afterlife destination of the deceased is mentioned in more than half of said accounts, with many even naming specific heavens as afterlife abodes.³⁸

We may, therefore, conclude that the cult of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as seen through these accounts in its two parasutraic collections, differs from those of the *Diamond* and *Garland Sūtras* in the following aspects: (1) the *Lotus Sūtra* collections feature the highest proportion of tales with the theme of achieving a good afterlife; (2) unlike the total absence of the laity in the *Garland Sūtra* collections, the *Lotus Sūtra* collections feature some laypeople achieving good rebirths; (3) while afterlife abodes are seldom mentioned in narratives of the other two sūtras, the *Lotus Sūtra* narratives more often than not allude to the afterlife destinations of protagonists, including the name of the specific heaven. What could have accounted for such differences between parasutraic collections of these sūtra cults? And what can these

³⁵ Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 163, note 125.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 327 and 421.

³⁷ The three mentions of pure land can be found the accounts on Famin 法敏 (*HJZ*, *T* no. 2073, 51: 3.162a12–27), Dao'ang 道昂 (*ibid.*, 3.162c24–13a19), and Boremijia 般若彌迦 (*ibid.*, 4.166c24–167a17). The five counts of heavens are found in accounts on Linggan 靈幹 (*ibid.*, 2.161b1–c16 [Tuṣita]); Zhiyan 智儼 (*ibid.*, 2.163b18–164a11 [Tuṣita]) item 8 (*HJGZ*, *T* no. 2074, 51: 175a5–14 [unspecified heaven]), item 11 (*ibid.*, 175b29–c12 [unspecified heaven]), item 13 (*ibid.*, 176a1–13 [Trāyastriṃśa]).

³⁸ See Appendix A.

distinctive features, as they relate to the trope of afterlife abode, tell us about the cult of the *Lotus Sūtra*?

3.1. Higher Realms of Afterlife Abodes: Heavens and Pure Lands

The representation of heavens and pure lands as afterlife abodes in parasutraic narratives could find scriptural basis in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself. Already in chapter twelve, ‘Tipodaduo pin’ 提婆達多品 [Devadatta], the Buddha said that those who have heard and believed in the *Lotus Sūtra* would never fall into the unfortunate realms but would be reborn ‘in the presence of the Buddhas’ or ‘among men or gods’.³⁹

A survey of the parasutraic narratives indicates that the two heavens of Tuṣita and Trāyastrīṣā and the Pure Land are the three dominant afterlife abodes in the two *Lotus Sūtra* collections. In the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan*, there are thirteen (out of one hundred and thirty-eight accounts) mentions of them as afterlife abodes in twelve narratives: four counts of Tuṣita, the fourth of six heavens in the sensuous realm, where the future Buddha Maitreya currently resides; one count of the third heaven of Yāma, also known as Suyāma; one count of Trāyastrīṣā, the second heaven of the thirty-three gods at the summit of Mount Sumeru; four counts of unspecified heavens, and three counts of the Western Pure Land.⁴⁰ In the *Fabua zhuanji* narratives, there are fifty-three accounts (out of two hundred accounts) that reference afterlife abodes a total of fifty-seven times: Tuṣita (13+1), Trāyastrīṣā (12), Caturmahārājika, the first heaven of the four heavenly kings (1); unspecified heavens (6), the Western Pure Land (18+2), Abhirati (1), and other abodes (3).⁴¹

The high incidence of the Trāyastrīṣā and Tuṣita in these parasutraic narratives may have its basis in chapter twenty-eight,

³⁹ Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, 197 and 198.

⁴⁰ See Appendix B.

⁴¹ See Appendix C. Additional references to Tuṣita (1) and the Pure Land (2) are made in three narratives, with the first indicating the superiority of the Pure Land and the latter two indicating Trāyastrīṣā’s inferiority.

‘Puxian pusa quanfa pin’ 普賢菩薩勸發品 [The Encouragements of Bodhisattva Universal Worthy] of the *Lotus Sūtra*, where these heavenly realms are mentioned explicitly as afterlife abodes for those who uphold the sūtra:

If he but copies it, that person at the end of his life shall be born in the Trāyastrimśa Heaven. At that time, eighty-four thousand goddesses, making music with a multitude of instruments, shall come to receive him. That man shall straightway don a crown of the seven jewels, and among the women of the harem shall enjoy himself and be gay. How much the more shall this be true of one who receives and keeps it, reads and recites it, and interprets the import of its meaning! To that man at life’s end shall be extended the hands of a thousand Buddhas, causing him not to fear, nor to fall into evil destinies. He shall straightway ascend to the top of the Tuṣita Heaven, to the place of the bodhisattva Maitreya. The bodhisattva Maitreya has thirty-two marks, is surrounded by a great multitude of bodhisattvas, and has a retinue of a hundred thousand myriads of millions of goddesses, born within his retinue. Such are the merits and advantages that he shall have!⁴²

The above passage seems to imply that the Tuṣita, the fourth in a series of six heavens in the sensuous realm (Skt. *kāmadhātu*), is superior to the second—lower—Trāyastrimśa given the higher threshold of devotional acts required to be reborn there. The superiority of Tuṣita can also be seen from the passage’s description of Maitreya’s possession of the features of the Buddhas and the extent of his retinue.

Similarly, parasutraic representations of the Pure Land as an afterlife abode could have its basis in chapter twenty-three, ‘Yaoshi pusa benshi pin’ 藥王菩薩本事品 [The Former Affairs of Bodhisattva Medicine King] of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which speaks of it as a destination for the female practitioner of the sūtra:

⁴² Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, 334–35.

If a woman, hearing this Chapter of the Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King, can accept and keep it, she shall put an end to her female body, and shall never again receive one. If after the extinction of the Thus Come One, within the last five hundred years, there is then a woman who, hearing this scriptural canon, practices it as preached, at the end of this life she shall straightway go to the world-sphere Comfortable (Sukhāvātī), to the dwelling place of the Buddha Amitāyus, where he is surrounded by a multitude of great bodhisattvas, there to be reborn on a jeweled throne among lotus blossoms, never again to be tormented by greed, never again to be tormented by anger or folly, never again to be tormented by pride, envy, or other defilements. But he shall gain the bodhisattva's supernatural penetrations, his acceptance of the principle of unborn dharmas...⁴³

As Trāyastriṃśā and Tuṣita are mentioned together in a separate chapter without comparison, it is unclear whether the pure land of Amitāyus, 'the world of Peace and Delight' (Anle shijie 安樂世界), is superior to Tuṣita. One could, however, consider it to be more superior by arguing that even a female devotee or practitioner could become—as explained later in the scripture—a bodhisattva with 'supernatural penetrations' in Amitāyus' pure land, albeit having to be born in male form before that could happen.

Although the Pure Land seems to predominate over Tuṣita and Trāyastriṃśā as an afterlife abode in the two Tang parasutraic collections, the latter two do have a place within the cult of the *Lotus Sūtra*. The parasutraic collections thus indicate that the cult admits a plurality of afterlife abodes accessible to *Lotus Sūtra* practitioners of various aptitudes, preferences, and practices. If this representation reflected the reality on the ground, it does not accord with the general understanding of the decline of the Maitreya cult in the Tang dynasty.⁴⁴ Except for a brief resurgence brought about by Empress Wu Zetian's 武則天 (r. 690–705) appropriation of Maitreya

⁴³ Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, 300.

⁴⁴ Wang, *Tangdai Mile xinyang*, 215.

symbolism to bolster her reign, the Maitreya cult was thought to have been superseded by belief in Amitābha and his pure land in the Tang.⁴⁵ Since the *Fabua zhuānji* was compiled long afterwards, Maitreya belief might have remained robust well through the eighth century, at least as part of the *Lotus Sūtra* cult, despite the rise of the pure land cult.

4. *Gaoseng zhuān* and *Biqiuni zhuān*: Afterlife Abodes

Whether it is the heavenly realms of Tuṣṭita and Trāyastriṃśa or the Western Pure Land, these afterlife abodes are not considered the final soteriological goals of Buddhist practice. In their respective locus in the *Lotus Sūtra*, they are put forth simply as part of ‘the merits and advantages’ practitioners of the *Lotus Sūtra* enjoy⁴⁶ or the ‘incalculable, limitless merit’ gained by them through devotional acts.⁴⁷ However, this notion is not pronounced in accounts collected in the *Biqiuni zhuān* and *Gaoseng zhuān*, two notable monastic biographical collections completed in the early decades of the sixth century by Baochang 寶唱 (fl. 502–557) and Huijiao 慧皎 (497–554), respectively.⁴⁸

Being first translated in the third century and again in 406 by Kumārajīva in its most influential rendition, the *Lotus Sūtra* was popular before the advent of the *Biqiuni zhuān* and *Gaoseng zhuān*. Thus, it is unsurprising to find the *Lotus Sūtra* featured in almost a quarter of the biographies in both the *Biqiuni zhuān* and the

⁴⁵ For an account Wu Zetian’s use of Maitreya symbolism, see Forte, *Political Propaganda and Ideology*, 153–70.

⁴⁶ Hurvitz, *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma*, 322.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁴⁸ The former compilation collects the biographies of sixty-five nuns, arranged chronologically, who were active from the beginning of the Eastern Jin (317–420 CE) to 516, and the latter contains the biographies of eminent monks from the first century to 519. Baochang’s authorship of the *Biqiuni zhuān* has been disputed. See De Rauw, ‘Baochang’, 215–18.

Gaoseng zhuan.⁴⁹ Referenced in a third of the biographies of noted Buddhist scholiasts in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, the *Lotus Sūtra* is the preeminent scripture for exegesis.⁵⁰ The *Lotus Sūtra*, moreover, is also the unrivalled object of devotion and practice, being listed in eighteen out of twenty-one biographies of eminent monks famed for their intonation of Buddhist scriptures.⁵¹ Yet, despite figuring so prominently in these two biographical collections, the association between the *Lotus Sūtra* and the aspiration to be reborn in the heavens or the Pure Land is very rare.

Among the three biographies in the *Biqiuni zhuan* where Tuṣita (2)⁵² and the Pure Land (1)⁵³ figure as afterlife abodes, only one is related to the *Lotus Sūtra*. The biography of the nun Xuanzao 玄藻 (d. 439/440) tells us that she assiduously recited the *Lotus Sūtra* without remiss and followed a strict vegetarian diet for thirty-seven years, vowing to be reborn in Tuṣita.⁵⁴

Like the *Biqiuni zhuan*, there are few cases where the *Lotus Sūtra* is associated with the aspiration for higher realms of rebirth in the *Gaoseng zhuan*. Of the sixteen monastics who aspired to be reborn in the Pure Land, only three instances mentioned the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁵⁵ However, the association between the sūtra and the aspiration is lacking in the first and the second biographies of the famed Pure Land advocate Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416) of Mount Lu 廬山⁵⁶ and

⁴⁹ There are fifteen such biographies (3, 9, 13, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 53, 56, 57, 62, 62, 65) in the *Biqiuni zhuan*. For the *Gaoseng zhuan*, See Appendix D.

⁵⁰ See Appendix D.

⁵¹ See Appendix D.

⁵² Xuanzao 玄藻, *Biqiuni zhuan*, T no. 2063, 50: 2.938a28–b12; *Guangjing* 光靜, *Biqiuni zhuan*, *ibid.*, 2.939b1–b13; Jingxiu 淨秀, *ibid.*, 4.945a7–c8.

⁵³ Fasheng 法盛, *ibid.*, 2.937c8–22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.938b11.

⁵⁵ The practice of these monastics is based primarily on those related to Buddha Amitābha and the pure land scriptures, attesting to the increasing popularity of the Pure Land cult from the late fourth century, often credited to Huiyuan, one of the three monks whose biography features the *Lotus Sūtra* (see below).

⁵⁶ *GZ*, T no. 2059, 50: 6.357c23–361b13.

the noted exegete Sengrui 僧叡 (355–439).⁵⁷ Huiyuan is well known for leading one hundred and twenty-three monastics and laypeople to contemplate on an image of Buddha Amitābha, aspiring to be reborn in his pure land.⁵⁸ The *Lotus Sūtra* also only figures as one of the scriptures Huiyuan explicated and appears in Sengrui’s biography as the scripture to which he had penned a preface; the *Lotus Sūtra* is thus not related to their aspiration for rebirth in the Pure Land. Only in the third instance, the biography of Huijin 慧進 collected in the section on famous scripture reciters, is there an exclusive relationship between the sūtra and the afterlife abode. According to the biography, Huijin’s recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra* and production of a hundred copies of the scripture is said to culminate in his rebirth in the Pure Land, which was explicitly confirmed by a voice in the air.⁵⁹ Being perhaps the earliest instance in which the *Lotus Sūtra* is directly linked to rebirth in the Pure Land, the significance of this record is evidenced by its inclusion in the contemporaneous tale collection *Mingxiang ji*, as well as later Buddhist compilations, such as Daoxuan’s *Ji Shenzhou sanbao gantong lu* 集神州三寶感通錄 [A Record of Collected Accounts of the Spiritual Resonance of the Three Treasures in China], Daoshi’s 道世 (d. 683) *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林 [A Pearl Grove in the Garden of Dharma], and the two *Lotus Sūtra* collections.⁶⁰

Despite the popularity of the Maitreya cult from the fourth century onwards, only three *Gaoseng zhuan* biographies feature monks who expressed their wish to be reborn in Tuṣita.⁶¹ But none

⁵⁷ *GZ*, T no. 2059, 50: 6.364a14–b22.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.358c22–359a20; 6.364b12–13.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.407c22–408a5.

⁶⁰ Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 258; *Ji Shenzhou sanbao gantong lu*, T no. 2106, 52: 2.427a4–11; *Fayuan zhulin*, T no. 2122, 53: 95.989a28–b6.

⁶¹ One of the biographies is that of the famous Eastern Jin monastic Dao’an 道安 (312–385), who led his disciples to vow before an image of Maitreya, aspiring to be reborn in Tuṣita. Before his passing away, the account relates that a mysterious monk appeared before Dao’an to confirm that he would be reborn in Tuṣita (*GZ*, T no. 2059, 50: 5.353b28–351c3). The other two biographies are

of them are related to the *Lotus Sūtra*. The biography of the Western Jin translator of Western Jin, Bo Yuan 帛遠 (d.u.), the only account to feature Trāyastriṃśa as an afterlife abode, is also unrelated to the *Lotus Sūtra*. In this account, a layman witnessed Bo Yuan reciting the *Shoulengyan sanmei jing* 首楞嚴三昧經 (Skt. **Śūraṅgama-samādhi-sūtra*; Sūtra of Heroic-March Concentration) to King Yama, who, having heard the recitation, announced that the former would be reborn in Trāyastriṃśa.⁶²

5. *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*: Afterlife Abodes

Unlike the weak association between the *Lotus Sūtra* and afterlife abodes in the *Biqiuni zhuan* and *Gaoseng zhuan*, the representation is quite different when we look at the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 [Sequel to the *Biographies of Eminent Monks*], which was compiled by Daoxuan 道宣 (596–667) about one hundred and fifty years later. As its name implies, the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* is a sequel to the *Gaoseng zhuan*. It records biographies of eminent monks between Huijiao's work during the Liang dynasty (502–557) until the middle of the seventh century. While the *Lotus Sūtra* continues to figure prominently in the biographies of exegetes (almost two-fifths) and reciters of scriptures (almost nine-tenths) just as it does in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, there is, however, a surge in its representation in biographies of notable practitioners of meditation in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*. Previously, the *Lotus Sūtra* was mentioned in just three of the twenty-one biographies of renowned meditators in the *Gaoseng zhuan*.⁶³ However, it appears in almost a quarter of *Xu*

those of his disciples, Zhu Sengfu 竺僧輔 (d.u.; *ibid.*, 5.355b5–14) and Tanjie 曇戒 (d.u.; *ibid.*, 5.356b25–c6). In Tanjie's biography, he was asked why he did not aspire for the Pure Land, to which he replied that he had vowed to be reborn in Tuṣṭā with eight of his fellow monastics.

⁶² GZ, T no. 2059, 50: 1.327a13–c11.

⁶³ Faxu 法緒, *ibid.*, 11.396c26–97a2; Fawu 法晤, *ibid.*, 11.399c7–18; Sengshen 僧審, *ibid.*, 11.399c20–400a4.

Gaoseng zhuan biographies (twenty-one out of seventy-five) of the same category.⁶⁴

Compared to the representation of aspirations for rebirth in Tuṣita in Huijiao's biographical collection, there are now twice as many biographies that feature Tuṣita (six).⁶⁵ Since the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* contains at least one and half times the number of biographies in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, this representation does not indicate any significant upward trend for Tuṣita as an afterlife abode. On the other hand, there are only three more—nineteen—references to the Western Pure Land as an afterlife abode in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*. However, it should be noted that although the Chinese term *jingtu* 淨土 (pure land) and *nianfo* 念佛 (recollection of the Buddha) occur forty-nine and thirteen times, respectively, in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, they appear only three times each in the *Gaoseng zhuan*. This may indicate that Pure Land belief and practice gained popularity when the two biographical collections were compiled, before the Western Pure Land became more prominent as an afterlife destination later in the Tang.

5.1. *Lotus Sūtra* and Afterlife Abodes

An aspect that is noticeably different in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* is the increased representation of the *Lotus Sūtra* in biographies that contain references or allusions to Tuṣita and the Pure Land as afterlife abodes. While there are only three instances in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, there are a dozen such biographies in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ See Appendix D.

⁶⁵ See Appendix D.

⁶⁶ Yancong 彥琮 (*XGZ*, *T* no. 2060, 50: 2.436b15–439c15), Huihai 慧海 (*ibid.*, 12. 515c6–516a6), Daojie 道傑 (*ibid.*, 13.529a20–530a11), Zhiyan 智琰 (*ibid.*, 14. 531c2–532b13), Fachong 法充 (*ibid.*, 16.559c3–17), Huisi 慧思 (*ibid.*, 17.562c6–564a17), Zhiyi 智顛 (*ibid.*, 17.564a18–568a14), Zhixi 智晞 (*ibid.*, 19.582a24–583a5), Guanding 灌頂 (*XGZ*, *T* no. 2060, 50: 19.584a25–585b11), Faxiang 法嚮 (*ibid.*, 20.605c13–606b1), Daocheng 道成 (*ibid.*, 21.611a4–25), and Facheng 法誠 (*ibid.*, 28.688c15–689b15).

Among these biographies, there are, of course, those in which the *Lotus Sūtra* was engaged along with other scriptures, such as in the biography of Yancong 彦琮 (557–610), the well-known scholar-monk and translator of the Sui period (581–618).⁶⁷ His biography begins by describing Yancong's prodigious ability to recite various scriptures, including the *Lotus Sūtra*, which he learned to do so at age twelve. Throughout his life, he studied and lectured on many Buddhist texts, including the important Pure Land scripture, *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經 (Skt. *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*; Sūtra Displaying the Land of Bliss).⁶⁸ Like others, Yancong is said to have a foreknowledge of his death. Before he passed away, he paid obeisance to an image of Maitreya.⁶⁹ In Yancong's example, we see someone who had engaged with the *Lotus* and Pure Land sūtras, albeit not exclusively, while seemingly aspiring to be reborn in Tuṣita.

However, the protagonists in most of the biographies are portrayed as demonstrating considerable devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* through various practices. An excellent example of this is found in the biography of Huihai 慧海 (550–606), a well-known exegete from Anle Monastery 安樂寺 in Jiangdu 江都 (modern Yangzhou, Jiangsu). Apart from telling us that he lectured on the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* (Ch. *Niepan jing* 涅槃經) and *Lotus Sūtra* thirty and fifty times, respectively, the account implies that he recited the *Lotus Sūtra* solely.⁷⁰ As a strong aspirant of the Pure Land, Huihai had a foreknowledge of the day of his death. Before passing away, he 'suddenly got up, faced west as usual, and having prayed, he sat in the cross-legged position until dawn before he passed away' (歎然而起, 依常面西, 禮竟加坐, 至曉方逝).⁷¹

In some cases, both *Lotus Sūtra* and Pure Land practices feature prominently. This is illustrated in the account of another notable exegete, Zhiyan 智琰 (564–634) from Mount Wuqiu 武丘山 in

⁶⁷ See Saito, *Shaku Gensō no kenkyū* for a comprehensive exploration of his wide-ranging activities in Luoyang during the Sui period.

⁶⁸ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 2.436b18–24.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 2.437c29–438a2.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 12.516a1–2.

⁷¹ Ibid., 12.515c21–22.

Suzhou 蘇州, who had lectured thirty times each on the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, *Lotus Sūtra*, and *Weimo jing* 維摩經 (Skt. *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa*), as well as one hundred and ten times on the important pure land sūtra, *Guan Wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經 (Skt. **Amitāyurdhyāna-sūtra*; Sūtra on the Visualisation of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life).⁷² At twelve, we are told, Zhiyan could already recite the *Lotus Sūtra* and had since recited it more than three thousand times.⁷³ Apart from lecturing and reciting the scriptures, he also practised various repentance rituals, among which is the Lotus Repentance (*Fabua chan* 法華懺), a ritual based on the *Lotus Sūtra*, as well as the *Guan Puxian pusa xingfa jing* 觀普賢菩薩行法經 [Sūtra on Contemplating the Dharma Practised by Bodhisattva Samantabhadra].⁷⁴ Aspiring to be reborn in the Pure Land, he commissioned an image of Buddha Amitābha and practised the sixteen visualisations of the *Guan Wuliangshou jing*.⁷⁵

Apart from the Pure Land, Tuṣita also figures in some other biographies, an example of which is that of Facheng 法誠 (563–640). Besides taking delight in his practice of the Lotus Samādhi (*Fabua sanmei* 法華三昧), Facheng was also determined to explicate the *Lotus Sūtra* as a long-term undertaking.⁷⁶ His biography also includes a

⁷² GZ, T no. 2059, 50: 14.532b7–8. The name of the *Guan Wuliangshou jing* is often abbreviated as *Guan jing* [Visualisation Sūtra] in the biographical records. It is known for its advocacy of visualisation of Buddha Amitābha and the chanting of the Buddha's name. Together with the *Amitābha-sūtra* and *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*, they constitute the three pure land sūtras.

⁷³ Ibid., 14.531c10–11.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 14.532a17–18. Known in full as *Fabua chanfa* 法華懺法 [Repentance Method of the *Lotus Sūtra*], the instruction for it is found Zhiyi's *Fabua sanmei chanyi* 法華三昧懺儀 [Repentance Ritual of the Lotus Samādhi]. Kai, *A History of Chinese Buddhist Faith and Life*, 45. According to Swanson, the Lotus Samādhi 'consists of ritual repentance and contemplation focused on veneration of The Threefold Lotus Sūtra...it includes two programs: first, the Lotus Repentance ... and second, the Peaceful Practices ...'. Swanson, *Clear Serenity Quiet Insight*, 304. See also Stevenson, 'The Four Kinds of Samādhi'.

⁷⁵ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 14.532a20–21.

⁷⁶ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 28.688c21.

marvellous experience of a copy of the *Lotus Sūtra* that he produced, which survived a heavy rain when it was left out in the open.⁷⁷ Like most monastics in such biographies, Facheng had foreknowledge of his death. Just before passing away, he vowed to be reborn in Tuṣita and saw a youth come to fetch him.⁷⁸ The biography ends with remarks on his recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which numbered five hundred times in one summer. He would always read and recite the *Lotus Sūtra* without permitting his visitors to interrupt him. It is estimated that, over ten years, he had read and recited the sūtra more than ten thousand times.⁷⁹

5.2. Afterlife Abodes of the Tiantai Patriarchs

Perhaps the most significant of this type of biography are those of the Tiantai patriarchs collected in the well-known practitioners of meditation section of the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, which, as mentioned above, saw a marked increase in the representation of the *Lotus Sūtra* when compared to the *Gaoseng zhuan*. This is hardly surprising given the exalted position occupied by the *Lotus Sūtra* in the Tiantai community, which also resulted in their alternative name—Fahua zong 法華宗. The esteem of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the Tiantai community is prefigured in the life of Huisi 慧思 (515–577), the teacher of the de facto founder of Tiantai, Zhiyi 智顛 (539–598). Figuring prominently in the biography, Huisi is said to have recited the *Lotus Sūtra* and other scriptures, totalling a thousand times in a few years.⁸⁰ He had also copied it in gold and practised the Lotus Samādhi.⁸¹ Among the works that he composed is the *Fahua jing anlexing yi* 法華經安樂行義 [The Meaning of the Blissful Practice of the *Lotus Sūtra*], a formative text that positions the *Lotus Sūtra* at the focus of Tiantai doctrine.

Interestingly, Huisi's biography attributes his awakening

⁷⁷ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 28.689a24–26.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 28.689b04–9.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 28.689b12–15.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 17.562c12–13.

experience to his oneiric encounters with Maitreya and Amitābha, which resulted in his fashioning and worshipping of their images. He was also inspired to strengthen his practice after having a vision of attending Maitreya's Dragon Flower Assembly (*longhua hui* 龍華會).⁸² His life story ends with an interesting episode: just as Huisi was passing away, a young monk, thinking that the master had died, started to wail, which annoyed Huisi into reprimanding him for causing a commotion as the many sages who came to escort him away were discussing his rebirth abode. Following that, he passed away, accompanied by auspicious signs.⁸³ It is apparent from the biography that Huisi believed in and worshipped both Amitābha and Maitreya, whose abodes were possible afterlife destinations for him. However, the biography stops short of telling us his afterlife abode, leaving much room for speculation, especially when the sages were discussing it! In this regard, we may note that Huisi seemed to have made a vow, as expressed in a votive text attributed to him, the *Nanyue Si da chansi lishi yuanwen* 南嶽思大禪師立誓願文 [Text of the Vow Made by the Great Chan Master (Hui)si of Nanyue], where he aspires to instruct sentient beings until Maitreya's advent and to be able to meet the Buddha in the future *bhadrakalpa*.⁸⁴ Could the ambiguity of this aspiration have led to the open-endedness of his afterlife in the biography?

The belief in bodhisattvas and Buddhas associated with different afterlife abodes is not unique to Huisi's biography, as it could also be found in Zhiyi's *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* biography, which is essentially based on the *Sui Tiantai Zhibizhe dashi biezhuan* 隋天台智者大師別傳 [A Separate Biography of the Wise One, Great Tiantai Master of

⁸¹ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 17.563b1–2; 563a12.

⁸² XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 17.562c21–24. The notion of the Dragon Flower Assembly is found in scriptures related to Maitreya, which tell of his attainment of Buddhahood in the distant future and his descent to preach the Dharma to an assembly of men and gods under the Dragon Flower tree. Thus, it is an important element of the Maitreya cult. See Hou, 'The Buddhist Pantheon', 1111.

⁸³ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 17.563c22–27.

⁸⁴ *Nanyue Si da chansi lishi yuanwen*, T no. 1933, 46: 786c11–12.

the Sui].⁸⁵ Needless to say, the *Lotus Sūtra* figures prominently in this biography, with Zhiyi encountering the scripture at seven during a visit to a monastery, where the monk taught him chapter twenty-five, ‘Guanshiyin pusa pumen pin’ 觀世音菩薩普門品 [The Universal Gateway of the Bodhisattva Guanshiyin]. After one reading, Zhiyi was able to recite the chapter.⁸⁶ Later, after he was formally ordained, Zhiyi lived in seclusion on Mount Daxian 大賢山 (in Shandong), where he recited and read the *Lotus Sūtra*, *Wuliangyi jing* 無量義經 (Skt. *Amitārtha-sūtra*; Sūtra of Infinite Meanings), and *Guan Puxian pusa xingfa jing* 觀普賢菩薩行法經 [Sūtra of Contemplating on the Dharma Practised by Samantabhadra], among others. In less than twenty days, he thoroughly mastered the three scriptures.⁸⁷ We are told that Huisi also personally taught him the four Blissful Practices (*si anle xing* 四安樂行),⁸⁸ and he himself also practised the Lotus Samādhi in the mountains. The *Lotus Sūtra* also figures in Huisi’s belief that his unification with Zhiyi in the current lifetime was due to the karmic bonds they created in a previous existence when they were both present at the Vulture Peak (Skt. *Gṛdhrakūṭa-parvata*, Ch. Ling shan 靈山) when the sūtra was preached. The biography confirms this by a vision Zhiyi had when he was reciting the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ For detailed discussions of its composition and history, see Shinohara, ‘The Maitreya Image in Shicheng’ and *idem*, ‘Guanding’s Biography of Zhiyi’.

⁸⁶ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 17.564b3–4.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.564b11–13. The grouping of the *Lotus Sūtra* here with *Wuliangyi jing* and *Guan Puxian pusa xingfa guan jing* (commonly known as the *Guan Puxian jing*) prefigures the idea of the threefold *Lotus Sūtra*, with *Wuliangyi jing*—thought to have been preached just before the *Lotus Sūtra*—regarded as a prologue and *Guan Puxian jing*—thought to be the continuation of the last chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* on Samantabhadra—regarded as the epilogue of the threefold *Lotus Sūtra*.

⁸⁸ Based on chapter fourteen, ‘Anle xing pin’ 安樂行 (品) [Blissful Practices] of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the four blissful practices include physical, verbal, and mental practices to realise the vow to attain peace and bliss. Kai, *A History of Chinese Buddhist Faith and Life*, 116.

Of importance are the events during Zhiyi's journey to see Prince Yang Guang 楊廣 (569–618), the future Emperor Yang of Sui 隋煬帝 (r. 604–618), in Jiangdu during which he passed away. According to his biography, Zhiyi became very sick when he reached the Shicheng 石城 in Shan district 剡縣 (modern Shaoxing, Zhejiang). Knowing that his life would end soon, Zhiyi stopped there. At the huge stone image of Maitreya, the future Buddha, Zhiyi rested against the east wall, facing west as he chanted the names of Amitābha, Prajñā, and Avalokiteśvara. Later, he willed his possessions into two portions, one to be offered to the Maitreya image and the other to his community, followed by further instructions. Having taken care of everything, he listened to the intonation of the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*, followed by the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*.⁹⁰ Like Huisi's biography, Zhiyi himself revealed to his disciples that his former teachers and friends had followed Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta to welcome him.⁹¹ Having left behind his final instructions and exhortations to his disciples, Zhiyi sat upright as if meditating and passed away.

One should note that Pure Land and Maitreya beliefs and practices figure conspicuously during the last episode of Zhiyi's biography. However, like in Huisi's case, the biography again seems to stop short of telling us where Zhiyi will be heading after his death. Given the appearance of the two bodhisattvas with whom Amitābha is said to form the Pure Land triad, one might be tempted to speculate whether Zhiyi was bound for the Western Pure Land. However, this is certainly not the case according to the biography of Guanding 灌頂 (561–632), Zhiyi's immediate successor, which is equally essential in our investigation of the trope of afterlife abodes in the *Lotus Sūtra* cult. Given his teacher's exaltation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is no wonder that Guanding's biography tells us that he

⁸⁹ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 17.564b15–21.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 17.567a26–b13.

⁹¹ Ibid., 17.567b19 (吾諸師友從觀音勢至皆來迎我). It is worth noting that the phrase in *Sui Tiantai Zhizhe dashi biezhuan* (ibid., 196b15) does not mention Mahāsthāmaprāpta (吾諸師友侍從觀音皆來迎我).

had gained quite a reputation for his lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra* in his later years. According to his biography, he even won the esteem of the Sanlun 三論 patriarch, Jizang 吉藏 (549–623), who became his disciple.⁹² When we examine the account of Guanding's death in his biography, his afterlife is also shrouded in ambivalence, but with a twist. Knowing that his end was approaching, Guanding announced his impending departure and asked his disciples to burn more incense, saying that according to the *Maitreya Sūtra* (Ch. *Mile jing* 彌勒經), when the Buddha passed away, smoke gathered like clouds. Then he suddenly got up and put his palms together as if showing respect to someone. After intoning the name of Buddha Amitābha three times, he lay down and raised his hand to his chest with a happy expression and then passed away.⁹³ Again, it might be expected that Guanding is destined for the Pure Land based on his intonation of Amitābha's name. However, the biography went on to confirm his afterlife destination by recounting an account of Zhixi 智晞 (557–628), who was also a direct disciple of Zhiyi. Following the description of Guanding's death, the biography digressed with an account about Zhixi, who, just prior to his own demise, informed his disciples that he had a vision that he would be reborn in Tuṣita. In that vision, he also saw his master, Zhiyi, present in Tuṣita. Zhixi added that an empty seat was left in Tuṣita, which would be occupied by Guanding six years later.⁹⁴ When we examine Zhixi's biography, also collected in the same *juan* in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* as that of Guanding, the same account is provided, reinforcing the idea that they would all be united in Tuṣita.⁹⁵ While it appears that the afterlife abode of the Tiantai patriarchs has been accounted for, a lingering sense of ambivalence remains. Considering the

⁹² XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 19.584b13–18. According to Chen Jinhua, this part of Guanding's biography is based on the funerary inscription written by his disciples who attempted to glorify their teacher. For further discussion see Chen, 'Stories from the Life of Chi-Tsang', 82–87.

⁹³ XGZ, T no. 2060, 50: 19.585a2–7.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 19.585a7–11.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 19.582a24–583a5.

significant presence of Amitābha in their biographies, as well as the patriarchs' engagement in associated practices, particularly in the concluding episodes of their lives, why were they not reborn in the Pure Land?

6. The Legacy of *Lotus Sūtra* Exponents in Parasutraic Collections

Although parasutraic accounts of the Tiantai patriarchs can also be found in the two *Lotus Sūtra* collections, they are all shorter and do not contain as many details, differing in various aspects from the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* accounts. Additionally, they are also classified differently.⁹⁶ Being collected in the two parasutraic collections, they often flesh out the *Lotus Sūtra* by omitting details related to other scriptures.⁹⁷ On the other hand, biographies from the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* that do not feature the *Lotus Sūtra* can also be found in the two parasutraic collections, as might be expected, now containing

⁹⁶ As biographical collections, the *Gaoseng zhuan* and its sequel adopted a classification based on the specialisation of the monastics. While the classification schemes of the two *Lotus Sūtra* collections, although differing slightly from each other, seem to be based on the traditional category of the five types of scriptural practices often found in Mahāyāna scriptures, that is to accept and uphold (*shouchi* 受持), read (*du* 讀), intone (*song* 誦), (4) expound (*jieshuo* 解說), and copy (*shuxie* 書寫) the scripture. In the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan*, the accounts on Huisi and Zhiyi are classified under the category of those who engage in mental cultivation, while Guanding's is placed in the category of those who engaged in sūtra explication. In the *Fabua zhuanji*, however, the accounts of Huisi and Guanding are found in the section on sūtra recitation, while Zhiyi's is found in the section on sūtra explication.

⁹⁷ For example, the beginning of Huisi's *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* biography states that he 'recited the *Lotus* and other sūtras totalling more than thirty *juans*' (誦《法華》等經三十餘卷; *T* no. 2060, 50: 17.562c12), while the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* account begins by stating that Huisi was 'resolved to recite the *Lotus Sūtra*' (立志誦《法花經》; *T* no. 2067, 51: 4.21c16).

references to the *Lotus Sūtra*.⁹⁸ We shall examine their representation of afterlife abodes to explore how the legacy of the Tiantai patriarchs might have played a part in establishing the trope as a repertoire element in the *Lotus Sūtra* cult.

At the outset, our exploration is limited by the lack of information on the compilers and the collections. Compiled in the early eighth century, the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* is attributed to a Tang monk named Huixiang 慧詳 from Langu 藍谷 (modern Taiyuan, Shanxi), of whom nothing is known. Besides drawing extensively from the two biographical collections and earlier narrative compilations, it probably contains many contemporary accounts and others passed down orally, judging by the fact that at least half of its accounts could not be located in extant sources. Similarly, we do not know anything about Sengxiang 僧祥, the compiler of the *Fabua zhuanji*. Although it was thought to have been compiled in the Tianbao 天寶 era (742–756), recent scholarship has pushed this date to the end of the eighth century or even later.⁹⁹ As the larger *Fabua zhuanji* overlaps with the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* in about fifty items, its sources may also include those drawn upon by the latter. However, some narratives with the same protagonists seem to be based on other sources because their contents are considerably different. While some of its items list their sources at the end of the accounts, many cannot be identified now because they were lost to us. Like the earlier parasutraic collection, the *Fabua zhuanji* probably contains contemporary oral accounts too.

While it is tempting to speculate on their Tiantai connections, the two collections might not be products of the Tiantai community, as they also feature a host of monastics with other known affiliations; obvious examples include the Sanlun and Faxiang 法相 patriarchs—Jizang and Kuiji 窺基 (632–682). Of course, one may argue that the inclusion of monastics devoted to the *Lotus Sūtra* from other communities lends credence to

⁹⁸ An example of this is Zhixi's biography in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, which does not mention the *Lotus Sūtra* at all.

⁹⁹ Ichioka, 'Hokke denki no senja'.

Tiantai's exaltation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Still, we cannot see any indication that the Tiantai monastics are treated in a special way, which would likely be the case had they been compiled by a Tiantai monk. Moreover, the parasutraic collections' focus is on the *Lotus Sūtra* itself.

6.1. Biographical Collections vs Parasutraic Collections

The influence of the biographical collections on the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* is discernible because their accounts retain the connections between the Tiantai patriarchs and their beliefs in both Maitreya and Amitābha. These parasutraic accounts, however, vary from those in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* in one crucial aspect: no ambivalence is found regarding the afterlife abode of the Tiantai patriarchs. In Huisi's account, the episode in which he reprimanded the wailing monk for disturbing the discussion of the sages who had gathered for him is absent; there is also no mention of the sages' discussion of Huisi's afterlife abode.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Zhiyi's entry in the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* provides no reference to Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta who came to welcome Zhiyi in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* record.¹⁰¹ The absence of these details, which may lead to speculation about where they will go after death, together with the entry on Guanding, which retains Zhixi's vision of Zhiyi in Tuṣita and a prophecy of Guanding's rebirth there, clearly indicates the afterlife location of the Tiantai monastics. This finds support in an entry on another of Zhiyi's disciples, Huibin 慧斌 (d.u.), not found in the biographical collections, which tells of him being reborn in Tuṣita too.¹⁰² It is, therefore, likely that the compiler-editor of the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* had excised certain details and retained others in these related narratives to avoid any dubiety regarding their afterlife abode.

Perhaps due to its temporal remoteness to the monastic biographical collections and the development of the *Lotus Sūtra*

¹⁰⁰ HFZ, T no. 2067, 51: 4.21c12–22b16.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 4.22b17–23a20.

¹⁰² Ibid., 6.33c15.

cult, the *Fabua zhuanji* entries on the Tiantai patriarchs differ considerably. First, the placement of the account on Huisi in the ‘victories of recitation’ (*fengsong shengli* 諷誦勝利) section and those on Zhiyi and Guanding in the section on the sympathetic responses elicited by explicating the sūtra (*jiangjie ganying* 講解感應) deviates from the categorisation of the biographical collections, that is, the type of practitioner they were known for. Second, the titles of these sections clearly anticipate contents related to the wonders experienced by pious acts of recitation and explication, which are rendered in less formal literary Chinese and a straightforward storyline. The entries of Huisi and Guanding are brief and primarily highlight the amazing results of their recitation and lecture of the *Lotus Sūtra*. They do not delve into their life stories or mention anything about their afterlives.

On the contrary, the comparatively longer narrative on Zhiyi in the *Fabua zhuanji* may reflect the exalted status he still enjoyed long after his passing. His account, collected in the first *juan* of that section, is among those of other Buddhist luminaries, such as Daosheng and Jizang, renowned for their commentaries on the *Lotus Sūtra*. Although Zhiyi’s account here is much shorter than those in the biographical collections, it nonetheless outlines his life, including details of his death. Of note is the ending of the account, which contains some details not found elsewhere in the biographical collection: Zhiyi passed away after making a vow before the Maitreya image in the Shicheng monastery, and Guanding dreamed that his master was reborn in the inner court of Tuṣita.¹⁰³ Thus, instead of being revealed by Zhixi’s vision in Guanding’s *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* biography, Zhiyi’s ascent to Tuṣita is confirmed directly by his immediate successor within his entry, neatly prefigured by his vow before Maitreya. It is interesting to note that Zhixi’s account, which is not collected in the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* because the original *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* biography does not feature the *Lotus Sūtra*, is now contained in the *Fabua zhuanji*, as he became known for his recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Besides this, Zhixi’s entry is consistent

¹⁰³ FZ, T no. 2068, 51: 2.57a13–14.

with all the biographical records in retaining the exact details about his vision of Tuṣita at death, where he saw his master and the seat reserved for Guanding. Like the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan*, all the ambiguities regarding the afterlife abode of the Tiantai masters are not found in this parasutraic collection either.

Although we cannot be certain of the influence of Huisi's votive text, which expressed the master's determination to await Maitreya's descent, there is no doubt that—by the time of the two parasutraic collections—Tuṣita would be the afterlife abode of the Tiantai monastics. Even then, the cult of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as rendered by the parasutraic collections, admits a plurality of afterlife abodes, which could meet the needs of *Lotus Sūtra* devotees of various aptitudes and levels of practice. This is likely the result of a combination of factors, which might ironically include the multivalence of beliefs and practices of the Tiantai monastics, the ambiguity surrounding their afterlife abodes found in traditional biographies, and, indeed, the scriptural basis for rebirth in Trāyastriṃśa, Tuṣita, and the Pure Land, which can all be found in the *Lotus Sūtra* itself.

One significant difference between the biographical collections and the parasutraic collections is the absence of Trāyastriṃśa as an afterlife abode in the former, except for a single instance in Bo Yuan's biography in the *Gaoseng zhuan*, where King Yama proclaims Trāyastriṃśa as his afterlife abode.¹⁰⁴ Judging by the way Trāyastriṃśa figures in parasutraic narratives, its absence in the two biographical collections may be explained by the fact that monastics generally aspire to an abode presided over by a bodhisattva or Buddha. This is demonstrated by an entry of a monk named Bacheng 跋澄 (d.u.) in the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan*. According to this account, when Bacheng dreamed of Indra's summon, he told the envoy that going to Trāyastriṃśa did not accord with his vow. The next day, he was oneirically greeted by a few youths at the stairs leading to the Western Pure Land. After he woke up, he made preparations for his death. When his last day came, Bacheng saw a multitude of Buddhas and detected a fragrance in the air before

¹⁰⁴ GZ, T no. 2059.50: 1.327b17–18.

passing away.¹⁰⁵ This narrative may thus explain why Trāyastriṃśa rarely figures in the two biographical collections and, conversely, its representation in the parasutraic collections. In both parasutraic collections, most monastic protagonists are reborn in either Tuṣita or the Pure Land, while Trāyastriṃśa is more often than not the afterlife abode of laypeople and animals.¹⁰⁶

The relative merit of the Pure Land over the heavens not presided over by a bodhisattva or Buddha is illustrated by two other tales collected in the *Fabua zhuanji*, explaining why the Pure Land is less accessible to the laity. In one of them, when Daohui 道慧 (d.u.) of Fucheng Monastery 福成寺 in Yizhou 益州 (modern Chengdu, Sichuan) had recited the *Lotus Sūtra* a hundred times, his parents came to inform him that they had been reborn in Trāyastriṃśa. However, they also told him they would be reborn in the Pure Land if he could complete a thousand recitations.¹⁰⁷ In the other account on Huixian 慧獻 (d.u.) of Waguan Monastery 瓦官寺 in Jincheng 金城 (modern Xianyang, Shaanxi), his father came to inform him that he was reborn in Trāyastriṃśa due to the power of Huixian's recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and if Huixian could recite a thousand times, he would be elevated to the Pure Land.¹⁰⁸ Besides indicating the superiority of the Pure Land through the more significant number of recitations required for rebirth there, these accounts also imply that rebirth in the Pure Land is more accessible to the monastic than the laity due to the former's vocation. Thus, more monastics in the *Fabua zhuanji* attain rebirth in the Pure Land (twelve out of nineteen tales) than the laity (seven out of nineteen tales). Conversely, the heavens are represented as being more accessible to non-monastics with a higher number of laypeople and even animals (nineteen out of thirty-one tales)—gaining rebirth in the heavens found in the *Fabua zhuanji* narratives.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ HFZ, T no. 2067, 51: 6.29a28–b14. Translated in Stevenson, 'Tales of the Lotus Sūtra', 439.

¹⁰⁶ Appendices B and C.

¹⁰⁷ FZ, T no. 2068, 51: 5.67b12–20.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 5.69a8–19.

¹⁰⁹ See Appendix C.

In their *locus classici*, Trāyastriṃśa is accessible through copying the *Lotus Sūtra*, while Tuṣita is accessible through additional acts of accepting, upholding, reading, and reciting the sūtra and understanding its principles. Therefore, the *Lotus Sūtra* provides the scriptural basis for Tuṣita's relative superiority over Trāyastriṃśa, given the higher threshold of religious practice required of devotees to be reborn in the former. On the other hand, there is hardly any scriptural basis for the superiority of the Pure Land over Tuṣita since the requirements for rebirth in both are the same according to the *Lotus Sūtra*. However, there is an odd instance found in the *Fabua zhuanji*, which suggests that the Pure Land is superior to Tuṣita: When an entourage from Tuṣita descends upon Dao'ang 道昂 (565–633) to escort him away during his lecture on the *Lotus Sūtra*, he refused by saying that he was set on rebirth in the Western Pure Land, reasoning that one is still subject to the cycles of birth and death in the heavenly realm. Having said so, another entourage from the Pure Land came to greet him as he breathed his last on the high seat.¹¹⁰

It is important to note that this tale seems to have been adapted from an earlier account of Dao'ang collected in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*, where he is an exponent of the *Garland Sūtra* and the *Shidi jinglun* 十地經論 (Skt. *Daśabhūmividyākhyāna*; Treatise on the Ten Stages).¹¹¹ Whether or not the *Fabua zhuanji* compiler revised the account to include the *Lotus Sūtra* connection, this tale could be taken to reflect the attitude of some regarding the relative merit of the Pure Land over Tuṣita and, perhaps, the changing perception and rise of the Pure Land as an afterlife abode in the cult over time. In the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan*, Tuṣita (four accounts) remained important as an afterlife abode and is slightly more represented than the Pure Land (three accounts).¹¹² But by the time *Fabua zhuanji* was compiled several decades later, the Pure Land was increasingly

¹¹⁰ *FZ*, T no. 2068, 51: 3.59a6–11.

¹¹¹ *XGZ*, T no. 2060, 50: 20.588a26–c14 and *HJZ*, T no. 2073, 51: 3.162c24–163a19.

¹¹² See Appendix B.

portrayed as an afterlife abode.¹¹³ A stark contrast between the two parasutraic collections is the absence of female practitioners in the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* narratives concerning afterlife abode, while they are conspicuous in the *Fabua zhuanji* with the Pure Land being featured most in accounts with female protagonists (six out of nineteen accounts), as compared to those related to Tuṣita (two out of thirteen accounts), and Trāyastriṃśa (two out of eleven accounts) and other heavens (two out of seven). As much as this is based on the *locus classicus* of Pure Land rebirth in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which states that the woman who practised what the sūtra taught could be reborn in male form in the Western Pure Land, this amount of representation in the *Fabua zhuanji* strongly suggests a diachronic increase of the pure land as an afterlife abode in the *Lotus Sūtra* cult between the compilation of the two collections.

Apart from Trāyastriṃśa and Tuṣita, two other heavens are mentioned as afterlife abodes in the parasutraic collections. One *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* narrative tells of a layman named Lu Chun 陸淳 who was given a prophecy of rebirth in Yāmadeva (Yanmo tian 炎摩天) and had a vision of it before passing away.¹¹⁴ Another narrative praises the benefit accrued by bats who heard the recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra* by monks in a monastery, which enabled them to be reborn in Caturmahārājika (Sitianwang tian 四天王天), the heaven of the four heavenly kings.¹¹⁵ Additionally, alternative afterlife abodes that do not belong to the usual categories can also be found in the *Fabua zhuanji*: one of them relates how the disciple of a monk named Fafeng 法豐 (d.u.), who became a hungry ghost for some misdeeds, copied the sūtra to deliver him to an abode called Qingsheng 清勝 (lit. pure victory),¹¹⁶ while the other recounts how a householder who produced a *Lotus Sūtra* written in gold was reborn in the golden-hued world (Jinse shijie 金色世界),¹¹⁷ which, according to the

¹¹³ See Appendix C.

¹¹⁴ *HFZ*, T no. 2067, 51: 7.33b12–17.

¹¹⁵ *FZ*, T no. 2068, 51: 9.91a27–b5.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.81b23.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.96a28.

Garland Sūtra, is the abode of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī.¹¹⁸ Although these might not be conventional afterlife abodes, their representations could be understood as an extension of the notion that devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra* could enable one to ascend to higher afterlife realms.

7. The Formation of an Element of Cultic Repertoire

Early biographies of monastics and tale collections dedicated to Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara suggest Dharmarakṣa's translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* gained initial traction by the end of the fourth century. However, it was not until Kumārajīva's new translation in the early fifth century that the sūtra's popularity soared, prompting the first commentaries. Biographies in the *Gaoseng zhuan* show that the new translation piqued the interest of Buddhist intellectuals from the fifth century onwards. It is featured in a third of the biographies of exegetes, making up over half of all representations in the collection. The sūtra also features prominently in the biographies of scripture reciters, being intoned by most monastics in this section. Moreover, almost a quarter of the nuns featured in the *Biqiuni zhuan* engaged with the *Lotus Sūtra*. Thus, by the early sixth century, the *Lotus Sūtra* had transitioned from a scholarly subject to a religious object taken up in practice.

Although the *Lotus Sūtra* mentions afterlife abodes like Trāyastriṃśa, Tuṣita, and the Pure Land, they rarely appear in the *Biqiuni zhuan* and *Gaoseng zhuan*. There is only one instance of Tuṣita in the former and one of the Pure Land in the latter associated with the *Lotus Sūtra*. Hardly surprising, this aligns with the association of these abodes with primarily Maitreya and Amitābha cults, involving practices like visualisation and the production of images, as suggested by some *Gaoseng zhuan* biographies.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ *Da Fangguangfo buyan jing*, T no. 278, 9: 5.422c2–7.

¹¹⁹ In his study of inscriptions of this period, Hou Xudong found that they accompanied the images fashioned by devotees indicate their aspirations for rebirth in these abodes. Hou, 'The Buddhist Pantheon', 1108.

The Pure Land and Tuṣita, however, are mentioned in a dozen biographies in the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan* that feature the *Lotus Sūtra*, although their relationship is often non-exclusive. Several of these biographies show a perceptible association between *Lotus Sūtra* devotion and aspiration for these afterlife abodes. However, those of the Tiantai monastics who esteemed the *Lotus Sūtra* are most important for our inquiry into the trope of afterlife abode. These detailed biographies, likely informed by internal accounts of the Tiantai community, often present intriguing insights into the circumstances surrounding the masters' deaths and their practices. For example, Huisi's biography includes details of beliefs and practices related to Maitreya and Amitābha, his oneiric vision of Maitreya's Dragon Flower Assembly, and a unique incident where a monk disrupted the sages' discussion about his afterlife abode. But without a clear statement on his afterlife abode, these details invite speculation.

Similarly, Zhiyi's biography also presents a rich narrative leading up to his death, featuring invocations of Amitābha, Prajñā, and Avalokiteśvara, recitation of the *Lotus Sūtra* and *Sukhāvativyūha-sutra*, and the offering he made to Maitreya's image. Against this backdrop of diverse beliefs and practices and possible afterlife abodes, Zhiyi's biography similarly would invite speculation regarding his posthumous fate. Interestingly, his afterlife abode is revealed in the biographies of his immediate disciples, Zhixi and Guanding. Even so, the ambivalence surrounding the afterlife abodes of Tiantai patriarchs is enough to pique the interest of *Lotus Sūtra* practitioners, prompting them to ponder on their practice and preferred afterlife destinations.

Over time, this interest in afterlife abodes likely extended to an increasing body of *Lotus Sūtra* adherents as the scripture gained popularity within and beyond monastic circles. Notably, the sūtra lectures prompted by the distribution of *Lotus Sūtra* copies sponsored by Empress Wu Zetian for her parents' posthumous wellbeing to monasteries across the country could have played a part in this.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Ho, *Diamond Sutra Narratives*, 15–16. Empress Wu is known to have sponsored the copying of 3000 copies each of the *Lotus* and *Diamond Sūtras* for

The lectures could have highlighted the various afterlife abodes open to a broader audience, which became a vital aspect of the *Lotus Sūtra* cult. The representations of different afterlife possibilities in the two parasutric collections thus reflect a concern with posthumous fate, which became a distinctive element setting the cult apart from others. In this regard, the trope of rebirth in various afterlife abodes found in the parasutric collections indicates that the cult had skilfully harnessed an ambiguity in the biographical accounts of the Tiantai monastics to address the concerns and needs of a growing and diverse community of *Lotus Sūtra* adherents.

the posthumous well-being of her parents. The copies resulted from her sponsorship were later distributed to monasteries throughout the country, which would organise lectures on the sūtra.

APPENDIX A Narratives in Parasutraic Collections of the *Lotus Sūtra* and the *Garland Sūtra*

Section	<i>Hongzan Fabua zhuan</i>				<i>Fabua zhuanji</i>			
Explication	12	[6]	{1}		19	[7]	{7}	
Meditation	3	[2]						
Self-Immolation	12	(1)	[1]					
Recitation	80	(17)	[30]	{9}	92	(18)	[32]	{14}
Reading	12	(8)	[3]		16	(9)	[6]	{5}
Copying	19	(13)	[4]	{2}	36	(17)	[15]	{14}
Hearing					22	(10)	[12]	{9}
Making Offerings					17	(4)	[4]	{4}
Total	138	(39)	[46]	{12}	202	(58)	[76]	{53}

Section	<i>Huayan jing zhuanji</i>				<i>Huayan jing ganying zhuan</i>			
Explication	17	[13]	{4}					
Meditation								
Self-Immolation								
Recitation	11	(2)	[1]	{1}				
Reading	8	(1)	[1]					
Copying	6	(1)						
Hearing								
Making Offerings								
Total	42	(4)	[17]	{5}	25	(5)	[3]	{3}

Numbers without any parentheses: Total number of narratives in the section.

Numbers in (): Number of tales with lay protagonist.

Numbers in []: Number of tales with good death/rebirth theme.

Numbers in {}: Number of tales with afterlife abode trope.

APPENDIX B Afterlife Abode Trope in the *Hongzan Fabua zhuan* (HFZ, T no. 2067, vol. 51)

<i>Juan</i> .Page	Section	Protagonist	Afterlife Abode (AA)	Comment
3.18a26–c16	Explication	Guanding 灌頂	Tuṣita	
6.28a15–26	Recitation	Huijin 慧進	Pure Land	Also: FZ
6.29a28–29b14	Recitation	Bacheng 跋澄	Pure Land	> Trāyastriṃśa
6.29b27–29c5	Recitation	Wan Yan 王淹	Pure Land	Laity
6.31a26–31b4	Recitation	Unnamed Monk	Heaven	
7.33b12–17	Recitation	Lu Chun 陸淳	Yāmā	Laity
7.33b18–c5	Recitation	Falang 法朗	Heaven	
7.33c6–19	Recitation	Huibin 慧斌	Tuṣita	
8.37a29–b23	Recitation	Facheng 法誠	Tuṣita	Also: FZ
8.38c4–13	Recitation	Daojin 道璉	Tuṣita	
10.45c9–24	Copying	Chen Fazang 陳法藏	Heaven	Laity
10.46a28–b12	Copying	He Xuanling 何玄玲	Heaven	Laity

APPENDIX C Afterlife Abode Trope in the *Fabua zhuanji* (FZ, T no. 2067, vol. 51)

<i>Juan</i> .Page	Section	Protagonist	Afterlife Abode (AA)	Comment
2.56c14–57a14	Explication	Zhiyi 智顛	Tuṣita	
3.58a12–28	Explication	Kuiji 窺基	Tuṣita	
3.58b14–c9	Explication	Huiming 慧明	Trāyastriṃśā	Macaque's rebirth
3.59a7–11	Explication	Dao'ang 道昂	Pure Land	> Tuṣita
3.59a12–20	Explication	Zhiyuan 志遠	Pure Land	
3.59c19–a17	Explication	Zhitong 智通	Pure Land	Also: HFZ (w/o AA)
3.60a18–c21	Explication	Zhixi 智晞	Tuṣita	
4.62b16–25	Recitation	Sengsheng 僧生	Tuṣita	Also: HFZ (w/o AA)
4.62c29–63a9	Recitation	Huiqing 慧慶	Pure Land	
4.63b9–21	Recitation	Huijin 慧進	Pure Land	Also: HFZ
4.65b14–c18	Recitation	Facheng 法誠	Tuṣita	Also: HFZ
5.67b11–20	Recitation	Daohui 道慧	Trāyastriṃśā	< Pure Land
5.67c4–16	Recitation	Pu'an 普安	Pure Land	
5.68a24–b15	Recitation	Sengyan 僧衍	Pure Land	
5.69a8–19	Recitation	Huixian 慧獻	Pure Land; Abhirati	Pure Land > Trāyastriṃśā
5.70b18–71a15	Recitation	Zhitong 志通	Pure Land	Laity

6.73c14-74a3	Recitation	Fakong 法空	Tuṣita	Female
6.74a4-25	Recitation	Miaolian 妙蓮	Tuṣita	
6.75b4-17	Recitation	Miaofa 妙法	Pure Land	Female
6.76b25-c13	Recitation	Widow Yang 寡女揚氏	Pure Land	Laity, female
6.76c20-77a6	Recitation	North circuit Monk 北道僧	Pure Land	
7.78c5-79a1	Reading	Huiyuan 慧緣	Tuṣita	
7.79b7-23	Reading	Moheyantipo 摩訶衍提婆	Trāyastriṃśa	*Mahāyānadevā?
7.79c6-11	Reading	Woman from Anju district 安居縣女	Pure Land	Laity, female
7.79c12-17	Reading	Girl from Dayuan 大原小女	Pure Land	Laity, female
7.79c18-23	Reading	Miaokong 妙空	Pure Land	Female
7.80c10-b1	Copying	Yao Xing 姚興	Tuṣita	Laity
7.80b3-22	Copying	Monk from Benares 波羅奈僧	Heaven	
7.80c5-20	Copying	Tansui's colleague 曇遂同學	'Pure Abode' 淨處	Other abode
7.81b15-23	Copying	Fafeng 法豐	'Pure Victory' 清勝	Other abode
7.81c13-18	Copying	Widowed concubine 寡妾	Heaven	Laity, female
7.81c19-c25	Copying	Jizhou Adjutant 箕州司馬	Trāyastriṃśa	Laity

7.81c26–82a13	Copying	Chu Xuanzong 楚宣宗	Pure Land	Laity
8.82c23–83a21	Copying	Xuanxu 玄緒	Pure Land	
8.83c26–84b3	Copying	Li Yilong 李遺龍	Tuṣita	Laity
8.85a16–85b17	Copying	Li Qiuling 李丘令	Heaven	Laity
8.85c3–86a12	Copying	Yan Gong 嚴恭	Tuṣita	Also: <i>HZ</i> (w/o AA); laity
8.86c5–87a2	Copying	Xihe Monk 西河僧	Trāyastriṃśa	
8.87b17–c3	Copying	Emperor Gao of Qi 齊高帝	Tuṣita	Laity
8.87c4–11	Copying	Bingzhou laywoman 并州清信女	Pure Land	Laity, female
9.88a17–29	Hearing	Lady Radiance 光明女	Trāyastriṃśa	Laity, female
9.88b1–8	Hearing	King Ajatsatru's partner 阿闍世王伴	Tuṣita	Laity, female
9.89c8–90a1	Hearing	Poisonous snake 毒蛇	Trāyastriṃśa	Animal
9.90a2–b19	Hearing	King Bosinijialuo 波斯匿伽羅王	Trāyastriṃśa	Laity; *Prasenajitkala?
9.90b20–c20	Hearing	Fishwife 海女	Heaven	Laity, female
9.91a2–26	Hearing	Monkey and dog 猴犬	Heaven	Animal
9.91a27–b5	Hearing	Bat 蝙蝠	Caturmahārājika	Animal

9.91b6-16	Hearing	Macaque 獼猴	Trāyastriṃśā	Animal
9.91b7-c25	Hearing	Hungry ghosts 餓鬼	Heaven	Hungry ghost
10.95b23-c8	Making Offerings	Beggar 乞丐	Trāyastriṃśā	Laity, female
10.95c9-21	Making Offerings	Wealthy householder's son 長者子	Trāyastriṃśā	Laity
10.96a9-b2	Making Offerings	Layman 優婆塞	Golden World	Laity; other abode
10.96c3-b11	Making Offerings	Sengda 僧達	Pure Land	

APPENDIX D *Lotus Sūtra* and Afterlife Abodes in the *Gaoseng zhuan* and the *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*

Section	<i>Gaoseng zhuan</i>					<i>Xu Gaoseng zhuan</i>				
Translators	35	(3)				15	(5)			
Exegetes	101	(33)	[10]	{3}	<1>	161	(31)	[7]	{2}	
Thaumaturges	20	(2)								
Meditators	21	(3)	[3]			75	(21)	[5]	{3}	
Vinaya Masters	13	(2)	[1]			24	(6)			
Dharma Protectors						11		[2]		
Sympathetic Resonancer						78	(8)	[3]		
Self-Immolators	11	(1)	[1]			12	(3)	[1]		
Sūtra Reciters	21	(18)	[1]			14	(12)		{1}	
Benefactors	14	(1)				12	(3)	[1]		
Hymnodists										
Propagators										
Miscellaneous						12	(2)			
Total	257	(63)	[16]	{3}	<1>	414	(91)	[19]	{6}	

Numbers without any parentheses: Total no. of monastic in respective categories.
 Numbers in (): No. of biography that features the *Lotus Sūtra*.
 Numbers in []: No. of biography that features the Pure Land as an afterlife abode.
 Numbers in {}: No. of biography that features Tuṣita as an afterlife abode.
 Numbers in <>: No. of biography that features Trāyastriṃśa as an afterlife abode.

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Abbreviations

- GZ* *Gaoseng zhuan*. See Primary Sources.
FZ *Fabua zhuanji*. See Primary Sources.
HFZ *Hongzan Fabua zhuan*. See Primary Sources.
HJGZ *Huayan jing ganying zhuan*. See Primary Sources.
HJZ *Huayan jing zhuanji*. See Primary Sources.
T *Taishō shinsū daizōkyō*. See Secondary Sources, Takakusu and Watanabe, eds.
X (*Wan*) *xu zang jing*. See Secondary Sources.
XGZ *Xu Gaoseng zhuan*. See Primary Sources.

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