

## Article

# A Humane Kings Convocation Held in the Zhongxing Palace: A New Study of the P. 3808 Sutra Sermon

Changchun Pei <sup>1,\*</sup> and Wei Li <sup>2,\*</sup><sup>1</sup> School of History and Culture, Shandong Normal University, Jinan 250358, China<sup>2</sup> School of Politics and Public Administration, Soochow University, Suzhou 215031, China

\* Correspondence: peichangchun325@foxmail.com (C.P.); kongbai0412@yahoo.co.jp (W.L.)

**Abstract:** P. 3808 records a popular sermons ceremony, which was a Buddhist folk preaching event held in the Zhongxing Palace to celebrate the birthday of Emperor Mingzong of Later Tang. Through the analysis of this text, it is possible to conduct a more comprehensive study of Buddhist popular sermons that formed and gradually developed during the mid-Tang Dynasty. Additionally, this analysis can provide a more systematic understanding of the Humane Kings Convocations (*Renwang hui* 仁王會), which have had a significant impact on East Asia since the late Southern Dynasty.

**Keywords:** the Humane Kings Convocations; the *Sutra Sermon*; popular sermons; Emperor Mingzong of Later Tang

P. 3808, the scriptures preached on the Holy Emperor's Birthday at the Zhongxing Palace in the fourth year of the Changxing era (933 AD) (Changxing sinian (933 nian) Zhongxing dian Yingsheng jie jiangjing wen 長興四年 (933 年) 中興殿應聖節講經文, referred to as the "*Sutra Sermon*"), documents a significant Buddhist popular sermons ceremony that was held in the Zhongxing Palace to commemorate the birthday of Emperor Mingzong of Later Tang 後唐明宗 (867–933, reigned 926–933). This ceremony was particularly noteworthy for two reasons. Firstly, the performance style adopted for the ceremony was the popular sermon (*sujiang* 俗講), which was a type of activity in which Buddhist monks used storytelling and songs to spread the teachings of Buddhism to laypeople, based on the content of Buddhist scriptures. This activity has had a great influence on the development of Chinese literature, folk art, and other areas. Therefore, this document is an important piece of material that can be used to help us understand the popular sermons. Secondly, the Buddhist scripture being preached in this ceremony is the Scripture for Humane Kings (*Renwang jing* 仁王經), which is a highly influential Buddhist scripture in the history of East Asian Buddhism. The Humane Kings Convocations (*Renwang hui* 仁王會) formed based on this sutra are also a powerful Buddhist ritual held across several East Asian countries. Therefore, the *Sutra Sermon* deserves our attention, regardless of whether it is being studied in the tradition of the Buddhist popular sermons or the tradition of the Humane Kings Convocations.

As early as 1934, Xiang Da 向達 (Xiang 1934, pp. 119–32; 2001, pp. 310–21) was the first scholar to reveal the relationship between the *Sutra Sermon* and popular sermons. He also made a record of the *Sutra Sermon*, which was later included in the widely circulated *Dunhuang Bianwen Collections* (*Dunhuang bianwen ji* 敦煌變文集, Wang 1957, pp. 411–25), arousing the attention of more scholars. Shaoliang Zhou (1984, p. 66) and others (Pan 1983, pp. 37–56; Yang 1989, pp. 35–37) revised the transcript, while Yang (1990, pp. 93–101) and others (Fukui 1984, p. 368; Pan 1989, pp. 1–7; Cheng and Xu 2015, pp. 61–6) systematically sorted out various elements involved in the manuscript from historical and literary perspectives, providing a very thorough historical background for our understanding of this sermon. However, previous studies of this sermon have not yet explored the historical scene of the Humane Kings Convocation 仁王會 from the perspective of ritual and performance, either starting from historical evidence or focusing on the style of the *Sutra*



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*Sermon*. This article attempts to examine this sermon from the perspective of ritual and performance.

### 1. The Scripture for Humane Kings in the *Sutra Sermon*

The *Sutra Sermon* can be roughly divided into three parts: the first part explains the preface section of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*, but only discusses the scripture title and first sentence of the scripture: “Thus I have heard. Once the Buddha was residing on Vulture Peak in the city of Rājagrha together with a great assembly of bhikṣus, eighteen-hundred in all” (如是我聞, 一時佛住王舍城鷲峰山中, 與大比丘眾千八百人俱). The second part focuses on praising the virtues of the Emperor, and lists the Emperor’s achievements. The third part, also known as the “closing poems,” praises the sons of Emperor Mingzong, including King Qin 秦王, while also subtly mocking King Qin’s political enemies, such as King Lu 潞王. As for the latter two parts, due to the limitations of the research topic, they will not be discussed for now. The focus will be on the *Scripture for Humane Kings* explained in the *Sutra Sermon*.

#### 1.1. Kumārajīva or Amoghavajra: That’s a Question

According to Buddhist scriptures, the *Scripture for Humane Kings* has been translated into Chinese multiple times throughout history. However, in the current Buddhist canon, only two translations, one by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (T 245) and the other by Amoghavajra 不空 (T 246), have been preserved. The basic framework of these two translations is roughly the same, and many of differences between the two translations are minor. Amoghavajra’s translation also uses many of the same terms as Kumārajīva’s translation. Such similarities aside, Amoghavajra’s translation has many unique aspects, such as the cleaning up of some Taoist vocabulary that existed in Kumārajīva’s translation. Of course, the most unique aspect is that Amoghavajra’s translation includes some Tārā mantras.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, while translating this scripture, Amoghavajra also compiled three ritual commentaries: *The Rite of Reciting the Tārā-Mantra of the Scripture for Humane Kings* (*Renwang huguo bore boluo miduo tuoluoni niansong yigui* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經陀羅尼念誦儀軌, T 994), *The Method of Reciting the Scripture for Humane Kings* (*Renwang huguo niansong fa* 仁王護國念誦法, T 995), and *The Explanation of the Tārā-Mantra in Scripture for Humane Kings* (*Renwang bore tuoluoni shi* 仁王般若陀羅尼釋, T 996). These commentaries cover most of the stages of the Humane Kings ceremony, describing the establishment of the altar, the recitation of mantras, and the meditation and other esoteric rituals, as well as explaining many of the key ritual steps and mantras, See Kazuo (1990, pp. 89–95), Orzech (1998, pp. 169–91). It can be said that Amoghavajra established a whole new system for the Humane Kings Convocations, from the text to the ritual itself. With the support of Emperor Daizong 唐代宗 (726–779; reigned 762–779) and other nobles, and under Amoghavajra’s promotion, the translation of the *Scripture for Humane Kings* by Amoghavajra and the new Humane Kings Convocations established by him quickly became one of the largest, most popular, and most important Buddhist rituals in the entire East Asian region at that time.

However, after Amoghavajra’s death in 774 CE, the esoteric teachings he promoted may have experienced a temporary decline. The circulation of the Amoghavajra’ version of the *Scripture for Humane Kings* was also somewhat affected. We can see in the repertoire of Buddhist miraculous tales that the Amoghavajra’s version was questioned to some extent thirty years after his death.

In the nineteenth year of the reign of Emperor Dezong 德宗 (803 AD), a monk whose identity and abode were unknown stayed overnight at the temple of Lord Taishan 泰山府君. During his stay, the monk recited the “four stanzas on impermanence” from a newly translated version of a Buddhist sutra. While he was sleeping, Lord Taishan appeared in his dream and declared, “I have personally heard the Buddha speak this sutra. Although the version translated by Kumārajīva may be relatively simple in style, it conveys accurately the complete content of Buddhist doctrine. Whenever I hear someone recite this particular version of the sutra, I feel cool and refreshed in both body and mind. Although the

language of the newly translated version is more beautiful, it is inferior in conveying the meaning of Buddhist teachings. This is the version you recited . . . ” The monk awoke from his dream and began reciting both the old and new versions of the sutra.<sup>2</sup>

德宗皇帝貞元十九年 (803 年), 有一沙門, 不知名及住處, 宿太山府君廟堂. 誦新譯經四無常偈. 府君夢示云: 吾昔在佛前, 親聞此經, 什公翻譯詞質, 義味混合. 聞讀誦聲, 身心清涼. 新經又詞甚美, 義味淡薄, 汝持本. . . 沙門夢覺, 兼持舊本矣.

The so-called “newly translated version” refers to the translation by Amoghavajra, while the “old version” refers to the translation by Kumārajīva. This miraculous tale, conveyed through the mouth of Lord Taishan, expresses the author’s attitude towards the two translations of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*. The Kumārajīva’s version may be relatively simple in style, but it is fluent in style, and accurately conveys the complete content of Buddhist doctrine. While the Amoghavajra’s translation may have more elegant language, it does not sufficiently convey the meaning of the sutra. In the author’s view, each translation has its own merits, and both should be kept and recited. In fact, in terms of content, the two translations are almost identical, except for the addition of some tantric content in the two sections of the new translation. However, this anecdote highlights the differences between the two translations and strongly promotes the old version, reflecting a possible competition between the old and new translations at that time. This competition, of course, ultimately stemmed from sectarian interests, which may have been a struggle for the faith community between the believers of Manifest teaching and the believers of Esoteric Buddhism.

However, despite this, the influence of the Amoghavajra’s version remains significant. The new Humane Kings Convocations established by Amoghavajra continues to this day in Japan and Korea. Additionally, our study of the *Sutra Sermon* also serves as evidence for the popularity of the Amoghavajra’s translation. Although the text of the P. 3808 manuscript pertains to the *Scripture for Humane Kings*, in its nearly 5000 characters, it only contains one line from the scripture:

The phrase “如是我聞” emphasizes the credibility of the scripture. . . . The words “一時” highlight the time when the Buddha was giving the teaching. . . . The word “佛” emphasizes that the teacher giving the teaching was the Buddha. . . . The phrase “住王舍城鷲峰山中” emphasizes the location where the Buddha was giving the teaching. . . . The phrase “與大比丘眾千八百人俱” emphasizes which audience members were present and listening to the Buddha’s teaching.

如是我聞, 信成就; . . . . 一時 兩字, 時成就; . . . . 佛 之一字, 教主成就; . . . . 住王舍城鷲峰山中, 處所成就; . . . . 與大比丘眾千八百人俱, 聽眾成就.

The underlined portion is the content of the scripture, and it is from the first sentence of the sutra. This sentence comes from the Amoghavajra’s translation, rather than the Kumārajīva’s translation<sup>3</sup>, which includes the corresponding sentence, “At one time, the Buddha dwelt in the city of Rājagṛha, on Mount Gridhrakūṭa, together with a congregation of eight hundred thousand million bhiksus.” (一時, 佛住王舍城耆闍崛山中, 與大比丘眾八百萬億).<sup>4</sup>

The *Sutra Sermon* was used for the purpose of congratulating the emperor on his birthday, indicating that the user must have been one of the most important monks in the capital at the time.<sup>5</sup> The fact that they chose the Amoghavajra’s version instead of the Kumārajīva’s version in this most solemn occasion shows that even as late as the Later Tang dynasty, the Amoghavajra’s translation was more effective and trustworthy in the core Buddhist circles of the capital.

## 1.2. Contemporary Scholastic Exegesis in Buddhism

Although the popular sermon is a performative activity for lay practitioners, it essentially remains a form of Buddhist scriptural exegesis, thereby retaining the interpretive characteristics of traditional scholastic exegesis to some extent. As previously stated, this

particular sermon only explicated the first sentence of the text of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*, but even this provides insight into the exegetical style of the preacher.

In the *Sutra Sermon*, the exposition of the scripture begins with the title of the Buddhist scripture sung by the Director of Lectures (*dujiang* 都講), who is mainly responsible for reciting the Buddhist scripture. Prior to this, the content mainly praised the virtues of the Buddha. The exposition of the scripture ends with the statement that “It is always necessary to go through countless hardships before obtaining the opportunity to be close to the saints for a long time.” (總因多劫因緣會, 方得長時近聖人) The content after this mainly sings the praises of the emperor and the kings.

If we compare the *Sutra Sermon* with other commentaries on the *Scripture for Humane Kings* written in different periods, we will find that the *Sutra Sermon* still follows the tradition of scholasticism in the way of interpretation, but with new changes. The best two commentaries for comparison are the *Scripture for Humane Kings Commentary* (*Renwang bore jingshu* 仁王般若經疏) written by Jizang 吉藏 (T 1707, hereinafter referred to as “*Jizang’s Commentary*”) and the *Scripture for Humane Kings Commentary* (*Renwang huguo bore boluo miduo jingshu* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經疏) written by Liangbi 良賁 (T 1709, hereinafter referred to as “*Liangbi’s Commentary*”). *Jizang’s Commentary* was written in the early seventh century, *Liangbi’s Commentary* was written shortly after the *Scripture for Humane Kings* was re-translated by Amoghavajra in the mid to late eighth century, and the *Sutra Sermon* was written in the early tenth century. Therefore, these three works represent the characteristics of the interpretation of the *Scripture for Humane Kings* by monks from three different periods. They share similarities in maintaining the traditional scholastic exegesis tradition, while their differences are related to the three commentators’ understanding of the theme of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*.

The main differences among the three commentaries are primarily concentrated in the section of “Explicit Explanation of the Buddhist Scripture’s Objective” (*ming jingzong* 明經宗). For instance, the *Jizang’s Commentary* records:

The objective of this scripture is to expound the concept that the nature of Buddha is neither born nor extinguished. . . . This scripture emphasizes two forms of protection: one is inner (*neihu* 內護), which is used by bodhisattvas to nurture the practices of the ten stages (*shidi* 十地) and to protect the buddha-fruit (*foguo* 佛果); the other is outer (*waihu* 外護), which refers to the protection of the country, to make it stable and peaceful, to extinguish the seven difficulties (*qinan* 七難), prevent disasters, and to make the people feel peaceful.

此經以無生正觀為宗, 離有無二見, 假言中道. . . . 此經以外內二護為用. 內護者, 下文云為諸菩薩說護佛果因緣, 護十地行因緣; 所言外護者, 下文云吾今為汝說護國土因緣, 令國土獲安, 七難不起, 災害不生, 萬民安樂.<sup>6</sup>

The *Scripture for Humane Kings* not only promotes the Madhyamaka doctrine, but also extolls its function of protecting the country. However, by analyzing the order of *Jizang’s commentary*, it becomes clear that he prioritizes the inner protection, namely the essence of Prajna, over the outer protection, namely the protection of the country. In fact, this is a continuation of the tradition of the Humane Kings Convocations since the Southern Dynasty. The corresponding content in the *Liangbi’s Commentary* is:

To provide an explanation of this Buddhist scripture, a comprehensive analysis of the two types of protection is necessary. The fourteen great kings, including both sages and commoners, all held the responsibility of nurturing their people and carried out deeds that can only be accomplished by Bodhisattvas.

今說此經, 廣陳二護. 十四王等, 有聖有凡, 皆育黎元, 植菩薩事.<sup>7</sup>

*Liangbi’s commentary* places greater emphasis on the outer protection before the inner protection, in contrast to Jizang’s approach. This reflects the shift in emphasis in the Humane Kings Convocations under the influence of Esoteric Buddhism, which de-emphasizes the importance of the doctrine of Buddhist scriptures and highlights the pro-

tective function of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*. The corresponding content in the *Sutra Sermon* is as follows:

During that time, the World-honored One expounded a remarkably profound Buddhist doctrine and transmitted it to the wise king. In the distant future, this king would become a Buddha and save sentient beings, and even in the near future, he would bring peace and prosperity to his empire. He would practice the ten virtuous deeds (*shishan* 十善) and pacify the three calamities (*sanzai* 三災), fostering inner peace that would lead to favorable natural conditions. His strict laws would ensure the proper motion of the celestial bodies in the sky. The teachings of truth and worldly wisdom would coexist like fish and water. The king's laws and Buddhist teachings together would serve to educate the people, just like clouds and dragons coexist in harmony.

於〔時〕世尊宣揚妙理，付囑明君。遠即成佛度人，近即安民治國。令行十善，以息三災。心行調而風雨亦調，法令正而星辰自正。真風俗諦同行，而魚水相須；王法佛經共化，而雲龍契合。

It is evident that the *Sutra Sermon* only describes the outer protection and does not address the inner protection, thus completely abandoning the Prajna essence that the scripture originally possessed. This change may have been triggered by the different occasions for preaching, but it reflects the fact that the closer the preacher is to the imperial power, the less importance is attached to the Prajna essence of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*.

The veneration of imperial power is further evidenced through the “Canticles” (*zhuangyanwen* 莊嚴文) found in the *Sutra Sermon*, a text containing prayers for blessings to be bestowed upon the emperor and other nobles attending the celebration. The *Sutra Sermon* opens with an elaborate display of grandiose rhythmical prose and eight couplets that make clear the purpose of the sermon: to celebrate the birthday of Ming Zong. In typical Buddhist preaching ceremonies, the opening ritual is devoted to praising the Buddha's virtue. However, the preacher of the *Sutra Sermon* explicitly declares that the emperor is a bodhisattva or the Cakravartirāja (*zhuanlunwang* 轉輪王), stating, “If he is not an incarnation of a bodhisattva, then he must be the Cakravartirāja in the world.” (若非菩薩之潛形，即是輪王之應位). The preacher even directly compares the emperor to the Buddha, stating, “If he were to reside in the Buddha's country, he would be called ‘Buddha’; if he were to reside in China, he would be called ‘the Supreme One.’” (若居佛國名調御，來往神州號至尊). In fact, not only in the Canticles at the beginning, but also throughout the entirety of the text, praises for the emperor are frequently interspersed, such as in the five-paragraph verse of “Five Kinds of Achievements” (*wuzhong chengjiu* 五種成就), where each paragraph uses eight-line verses to praise the Buddha and an additional eight-line verse to praise Ming Zong. This establishes a parallel between the emperor and the Buddha, where the emperor is elevated to a similar status as the Buddha. Such words represent a direct manifestation of imperial power.

## 2. The Sponsors and the Performance of the Humane Kings Convocation

The *Scripture for Humane Kings*, with its strong protective theme, enjoyed widespread popularity throughout East Asia, and its functions of national protection and rainmaking were revered by people from all social classes. The Humane Kings Convocations, which were based on this scripture, held the power to influence national policies, as well as political, military, and economic affairs during crucial times. The Humane Kings Convocations emerged during the mid to late period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. In terms of its development, during the Southern Dynasty period, the Humane Kings Convocations focused primarily on the philosophical teachings of the Madhyamaka doctrine, even in the process of preaching to the secular believers. However, since the Sui and Tang Dynasties, particularly after Amoghavajra, the Humane Kings Convocations placed greater emphasis on using rituals and interpretations of select portions of the scriptures to highlight the

national protective function of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*. Thus, the protective theme of the *Scripture for Humane Kings* became increasingly significant over time.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile, with the evolution of Buddhist popular sermons culture in the later Tang Dynasty, monks began to incorporate various storytelling techniques when preaching the *Scripture for Humane Kings* to secular believers. Consequently, the rituals of the Humane Kings Convocations became more entertaining and theatrical. Today, we are able to comprehend the content and procedures of this type of popular Convocation through the manuscripts found in the Dunhuang Caves. Specifically, the *Sutra Sermon* offers detailed information about the sponsors, time, space, and performers involved in the Humane Kings Convocations' rituals.

### 2.1. The Sponsors of the Humane Kings Convocation

The *Sutra Sermon* was the text used for the celebration and performance of the birthday of the Later Tang Emperor Mingzong, which means that the sponsor of this ceremony was actually Emperor Mingzong himself. Although, as will be discussed later, other religious ceremonies, including Taoist ones, may have been held during this birthday celebration, we cannot equate the Humane Kings Convocation with other religious ceremonies simply because the Humane Kings Convocation itself was reserved for the exclusive use of the emperor. This exclusivity is fundamentally determined by the *Scripture for Humane Kings*.

Regardless of whether it is Kumārajīva's translation or Amoghavajra's, the *Scripture for Humane Kings* is restricted to "entrusting this scripture to the kings of states and not to *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣunīs*, *upāsakas* and *upāsikās*." (我以是經，付囑國王，不付比丘，比丘尼，優婆塞，優婆夷.)<sup>9</sup> This is because "nothing but the august strength of kings is able to establish it." (無王威力，不能建立.). Only the sovereign has the ability to "receive and keep this *Prajñāpāramitā*, to protect himself, the sons of kings, the empress, and concubines, and all of their retainers, the one hundred officers and the commoners [and if they do they will] all attain peace and happiness, in times of various disasters" (種種災起，諸國王等，為護自身，太子，王子，后妃，眷屬，百官，百姓，一切國土，即當受持此般若波羅蜜多，皆得安樂.). This reflects the idea that has long been circulating in China that "the Buddhist cause cannot be maintained without relying on the emperor." (不依國主，法事難立) If we shift our focus to the Northern and Southern dynasties, we can see that a tradition has formed that the Humane Kings Convocation can only be held when praying for the emperor or for the country. This tradition has never been broken and has even been well maintained in Korea and Japan. For example, Japan's Humane Kings Convocation is only held after the new emperor ascends to the throne (known as the "one generation, one time Humane Kings Convocation" 一代一度仁王會), and is held in the spring and autumn of a year to pray for the country, or is temporarily held to ward off external enemies and prevent or relieve disasters, See Noda (2006, pp. 149–35), Uchida (2017, pp. 50–75).

The *Scripture for Humane Kings* also specifies the scale of the Humane Kings Convocation ceremony:

At that time the World-honored One told King *Prasenajit*, the others, and all of the other kings of great states, "Listen carefully, Listen carefully, and on your behalf I will expound the method for protecting the state. [Now], in all states, when [things are] on the brink of chaos and there are all [sorts of] disasters, difficulties, or bandits come to wreak havoc, you and the others and all kings should receive and hold, read and recite this *Prajñāpāramitā*. Sumptuously adorn a ritual arena and set up one hundred Buddha images, one hundred *bodhisattva* images, and one hundred seats for Buddhist masters, and invite one hundred masters of the Teaching to expound this scripture. Before all of the seats light all kinds of lamps, and burn all kinds of incense, scatter various flowers and make vast and abundant offerings of clothing and utensils, drink and food, broth and medicines, places of shelter and repose, and all of the usual affairs of offering. Twice each day [the Buddhist masters should] lecture on and read this scripture. If the king, the great officers, *bhikṣus*, *bhikṣunīs*, *upāsakas*, and *upāsikās* hear, receives, read,

and recite it and practice it according to the [prescribed] method, the disorders and difficulties will forthwith be eradicated.<sup>10</sup>

爾時，世尊告波斯匿王等諸大國王：“諦聽諦聽，我為汝等說護國法。一切國土，若欲亂時，有諸災，難，賊來破壞，汝等諸王應當受持，讀誦此般若波羅蜜多，嚴飾道場，置百佛像，百菩薩像，百師子座，請百法師，解說此經。於諸座前，然種種燈，燒種種香，散諸雜花。廣大供養，衣服臥具，飲食湯藥，房舍床座，一切供事。每日二時，講讀此經。若王，大臣，比丘，比丘尼，優婆塞，優婆夷，聽受讀誦，如法修行，災難即滅。<sup>11</sup>

According to the *Scripture for Humane Kings*, the Humane Kings Convocation was specified to “set up one hundred Buddha images, one hundred *bodhisattva* images, and one hundred seats for Buddhist masters, and invite one hundred masters of the Teaching to expound this scripture,” etc. Therefore, the Humane Kings Convocation was also referred to as the “Hundred-Seat Humane Kings Convocation”. The scale of the Humane Kings Convocation was far larger than any other Buddhist rituals. Although during the reign of Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty (唐太宗, 599–649, reigned 626–649), a different form of Humane Kings Convocation was developed, namely, a small-scale Humane Kings Convocation held in each monastery that only required the recitation of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*. However, these small-scale rituals could only be held to pray for the emperor and the country, and individuals other than the emperor had no right to hold such rituals.

In the fourth year of the Changxing era, it was decided to hold the Humane Kings Convocation on the “Holy Emperor’s Birthday” (應聖節), which was the birthday of Emperor Mingzong. This decision may have been influenced by the political situation of the Later Tang dynasty at that time, as well as Emperor Mingzong’s personal health condition. The following reasons support this argument:

Firstly, the *Sutra Sermon* lists in detail Emperor Mingzong’s achievements, especially the great accomplishments he made in recent years. For example, “[Because of the emperor’s merits,] the rebellion in Eastern Sichuan (東川) was quelled, and Western Sichuan (西蜀) also returned to the court.” (所以感東川之災息，西蜀心回) This refers to how Meng Zhixiang 孟知祥 (874–934), the military governor of Western Sichuan, defeated Dong Zhang 董璋 (?–932), the military governor of Eastern Sichuan, in 932 and sent envoys to the Later Tang court. Another example is, “Like the regions of Western Zhejiang and Eastern Zhejiang, although they are thousands of miles away from the court, their commissioners are still moved by the emperor’s kindness and accept the stipend bestowed by the emperor. They offer tribute to the court every year and do not allow themselves to be stained with disgrace. The emissaries sent by the court can safely arrive in the regions of Zhejiang to convey the court’s orders, and the envoys sent by the regions of Zhejiang can also smoothly reach the imperial court to present the commissioners’ tribute.” (祇如兩浙，遠隔蒼〔〕，感大國之鴻恩，受明君之爵祿。長時有貢，志節寧虧。天使行而風水無虞，進貢來而舟航保吉) This refers to how Qian Liu 錢鏐 (852–932), the king of Wu and Yue, was relatively obedient to the emperor of the Later Tang dynasty and frequently provided tribute to the court.<sup>12</sup> Of course, the political situation described in the *Sutra Sermon* of a clean government and a stable world was only a superficial phenomenon, as the Later Tang court was overthrown two years later. However, even so, this superficial appearance corresponds to the words in the *Scripture for Humane Kings* that kings can protect their country and make the people all live in peace and happiness.

Secondly, in May of the fourth year of the Changxing, Emperor Mingzong, who was already 67 years old, began to fall ill. The *Zizhi tongjian* records:

On the day of Jia Shen [of May in the fourth year of the Changxing], the emperor suddenly fell ill with a wind disease; on the day of Geng Yin, his body recovered slightly, and he met officials in the Wenming Palace.

[長興四年五月] 甲申，帝暴得風疾；庚寅，小愈，見群臣于文明殿。

The emperor did not receive with the court officials for ten days, causing internal discussions among them. Some officials even fled to the mountains or wilderness,

while others took refuge in military camps. In the autumn, on the day of Geng Chen in July, the emperor's condition improved and he personally went to the Guangshou Palace. It was only then that the emotions of the court officials began to calm down slightly.

帝旬日不見群臣，都人洶懼，或潛竄山野，或寓止軍營。秋，七月，庚辰，帝利疾御廣壽殿，人情始安。<sup>13</sup>

It is evident that Emperor Mingzong fell ill by May, and by July, he was unable to attend court in person, causing emotional distress among the court officials. By August, his condition appeared to have worsened, causing some officials to express concerns regarding the issue of succession. The *Zizhi tongjian* reports that:

He Ze, upon witnessing the Emperor's deteriorating health and the increasing power of Prince Qin Li Congrong 李從榮, sought to regain favor by appealing to Prince Qin's influence. He submitted a memorial to the Emperor, requesting the appointment of Prince Qin as the Crown Prince.

何澤見上寢疾，秦王從榮權勢方盛，冀已復進用，表請立從榮為太子。<sup>14</sup>

Additionally, it was during this period that Emperor Mingzong celebrated his final birthday.

It must have been widely known that Emperor Mingzong's health was progressively deteriorating. Therefore, the Buddhist monks who participated in the birthday celebration incorporated numerous prayers for the Emperor's good health in their ritual performances. For example, "We only hope that the country will remain peaceful forever, and that the Emperor will enjoy long-lasting health," (唯希國土永清平，只願聖人長壽命) and "As monks, we can appeal to the heavens to prolong the Emperor's life. We pray that the Yellow River will remain crystal clear for a long time." (臣僧禱祝資天算，願見黃河百度清) Although these four verses may only be formulaic, they were in line with the actual situation at the time. Not only did they conform to the *Scripture for Humane Kings's* doctrine of "protecting the country and the Emperor," but they also aligned with the purpose of the Emperor's birthday celebration, which was to offer him congratulations and blessings.

In reality, the Humane Kings Convocation did not alleviate Emperor Mingzong's illness. Shortly after the holy festival, Mingzong's condition continued to deteriorate, and he even reached a critical point. "On The day of Wuzi [in November], the Emperor's condition worsened again, and on the day of Jichou, he fell critically ill." ([十一月] 戊子，帝疾復作，己丑，大漸)<sup>15</sup> It was during this critical illness that the mutiny of Prince Qin was triggered. Startled by the upheaval, Mingzong passed away.

## 2.2. The Time and Space of the Humane Kings Convocation

The *Sutra Sermon* begins by mentioning that the Humane Kings Convocation was held on the Double Ninth Festival, which corresponds to the ninth day of the ninth lunar month: "Every year in September, the red palace is shrouded in peaceful smoke; every year on the Double Ninth Festival, the country is immersed in the joy of the festival." ("年年九月，<sup>16</sup> 彤庭別布於祥煙；歲歲重陽，寰海皆榮於嘉節") The ninth day of the ninth lunar month was the birthday of Emperor Mingzong, which was designated as a national holiday at that time.

Hosting the Humane Kings Convocation on the Emperor's birthday was not a tradition that existed from the outset of the Convocation's formation. In historical development, during the Southern Chen dynasty, the Convocation was held twice a year, but there were occasional adjustments due to presence of eminent masters such as master Zhiyi 智顛 (538–597). During the Amoghavajra era, the Convocation was held on significant occasions, and certain temples also held the Convocation on special days.

Since the history of celebrating the Emperor's birthday as a festival may have begun with Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang dynasty 唐玄宗 (685–762, reigned 712–756), the history of preaching at the palace on the Emperor's birthday is not very long. Recorded instances of preaching on the Emperor's birthday also date back to the Xuanzong period

(729 AD, the 17th year of the Kaiyuan era). As for Emperor Mingzong of the Later Tang dynasty, it had already become a customary practice to invite monks to the palace to preach on the day of the Emperor's birthday. The *Cefu Yuanguai* documents six such instances of Mingzong inviting monks to the palace on his birthday. Furthermore, the preaching event in 933 AD reflected in P. 3808 brings that total to seven:

(1) On the 9th day of the 9th lunar month of the first year [of Tiancheng (926 AD)], on the occasion of the emperor's birthday, a Buddhist fasting ceremony was established by the officials in Jingai Monastery 敬愛寺. Monks and Taoists were invited to debate in Zhongxing Palace.

[天成元年(926年)]九月九日應聖節,百寮于敬愛寺設僧齋,召緇黃眾于中興殿論難經義。

(2) On the 9th day of the 9th lunar month of the second year [of Tiancheng (927 AD)], on the occasion of the emperor's birthday, in order to celebrate the emperor, officials set up a Buddhist fasting ceremony and burned incense in Jingai Monastery 敬愛寺, commanding the court musicians to play music. At the same time, monks and Taoists were invited to debate in Zhongxing Palace.

[天成]二年(927年)九月九日應聖節,百官奉為應聖節,于敬愛寺行香設齋,宣教坊伎宴樂之... . . . 召兩街僧道于中興殿講論。

(3) On the 9th day of the 9th lunar month of the third year [of Tiancheng (928 AD)], on the occasion of the emperor's birthday, monks and Taoists from two streets were invited to discuss the sutras in Chongyuan Palace.

[天成]三年(928年)九月九日應聖節,召兩街僧道談經於崇元殿。

(4) On the 9th day of the 9th lunar month of the fourth year [of Tiancheng (929 AD)], on the occasion of the emperor's birthday, officials established a Buddhist fasting ceremony in Jingai Monastery 敬愛寺, and the emperor personally went to Zhongxing Palace to listen to the debate between monks and Taoists.

[天成]四年(929年)九月九日應聖節,百官于敬愛寺齋設, . . . . . 復御中興殿,聽僧道講論。

(5) On the 9th day of the 9th lunar month of the first year of Changxing (930 AD), on the occasion of the emperor's birthday, officials established a Buddhist fasting ceremony in Jingai Monastery 敬愛寺, and the emperor personally went to Guangshou Palace to listen to the preaching of monks and Taoists.

長興元年(930年)九月九日應聖節,百官于敬愛寺齋設,帝御廣壽殿,聽僧道講論。

(6) On the 9th day of the 9th lunar month of the second year [of Changxing (931 AD)], on the occasion of the emperor's birthday, the emperor personally went to Zhongxing Palace to listen to the preaching of monks and Taoists.

[長興]二年(931年)九月九日應聖節,帝御中興殿,觀僧道講論。<sup>17</sup>

(7) On the 9th day of the 9th lunar month, on the occasion of the emperor's birthday, the emperor personally went to Zhongxing Palace to listen to the preaching of the *Scripture for Humane Kings* by the monks.

長興四年(933年)九月九日應聖節,帝御中興殿,觀僧講《仁王經》。

It is not difficult to see that except for the absence of records in the third year of Changxing, during the eight years of Mingzong's reign (926–933), almost every birthday celebration was marked by inviting Buddhist monks to give sermons and setting up a fasting ceremony in Jingai Monastery. Regarding the record of the first event, it is also recorded in *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書, where it is recorded that “on the day of Guihai, the emperor's birthday, the officials established a Buddhist fasting ceremony at Jingai Monastery and invited monks and Taoists to debate in Zhongxing Palace. This arrangement follows a tradition that has been formed previously.” (癸亥, 應聖節, 百寮于敬愛寺設齋, 召緇黃之眾于中興殿講論, 從近例也)<sup>18</sup> The two records are basically consistent, but the latter is more informative, stating that “this arrangement follows a tradition that has been formed previously,” indicating that this is a continuation of the story since the reign of Zhuangzong of Later Tang 唐莊宗 (885–926 AD, reigned from 923–926 AD).

Actually, there is also reflection on Mingzong's practice of inviting monks to preach on his birthday in the *Sutra Sermon*:

The emperor held Buddhism in high regard and was determined to practice Buddhism. He engaged in spiritual cultivation throughout the Three Periods of Time and showed great reverence for the Buddhas' teachings of the Ten Directions. If he did not have such aspirations, how could he possibly invite monks to preach on every birthday?

我皇帝翹心真境, 志信空門。修持三世之果因, 敬重十方之佛法。若不然者, 曷能得每逢降誕, 別啟御筵?

On the day of the Holy Emperor's Birthday, the exact time of the Humane Kings Convocation may have been at night. According to the *Cefu Yuanguai*, most of the preaching activities were arranged after the Buddhist fasting ceremony held at the Jingai Monastery, and the Buddhist fasting ceremony should have ended after noon. The *Sutra Sermon* provides us with more details. Considering that the Mingzong's birthday was on the ninth day of the lunar calendar, which was also during the waxing moon phase, the moon could only be seen in the first half of the night. In the poem praising the newly built imperial garden, the preaching monk sung that "when autumn comes, the lotus flowers in the pond are as beautiful as Shu brocade (*shujin* 蜀錦), and the stars and moon in the sky look like daffodil lamps in the deep night." (秋後蓮荷蜀地錦, 夜深星月水仙燈). These two lines of poetry provide a specific description of the scene at that time. Therefore, we can infer that the Humane Kings Convocation was held in the first half of the night, when the stars and moon were in the sky.

The preaching activity held on the Holy Emperor's Birthday was a birthday celebration. When the Humane Kings Convocation was over, the celebration of the birthday was likely to end as well. Moreover, considering the limited duration of the birthday celebration at night, as well as the arrangement of other activities such as Taoist rituals, there could not have been much time for the monks to preach. This necessitated limitations on the content of the preaching, which had to conform to the purpose of the birthday celebration while also taking into account the performance duration. It is not difficult to understand why the *Sutra Sermon* only explained the title and the first sentence of the opening passage of the *Scripture for Humane Kings*, with the main content being to praise the emperor and to extol the virtues of the King Qin and other kings. The entire text, comprising just over 4700 words, may have taken only a relatively short time for recitation if it was just a form of singing or chanting.

The location of the Holy Emperor's Birthday celebration reflected in the *Sutra Sermon* was the Zhongxing Palace. According to the previous statistics on the seven birthday celebrations held during the reign of Emperor Mingzong, at least five of them (in 926, 927, 929, 931, and 933) were held in Zhongxing Palace, while only the one in 928 was held in Chongyuan Palace and the one in 930 was held in Guangshou Palace. During the Later Tang period, Zhongxing Palace mainly served as a place for the emperor to host guests. The *Sutra Sermon* also described the decoration of the palace at that time, stating that: "Every year in September, the red palace is shrouded in peaceful smoke." It can be inferred that on this day, Zhongxing Palace was filled with smoke and decorated with red ornaments, creating a lively and festive atmosphere. This kind of scene, especially the decoration with red ornaments, is certainly not what is typically seen in a Buddhist ritual. However, since the most important aspect for the Holy Emperor's Birthday was to wish the emperor a long life, all arrangements should reflect the festive atmosphere of the celebration and could not be altered because of the Buddhist preaching.

According to the description in the *Sutra Sermon*, pavilions and towers outside the palace could be seen, as well as the imperial pond in the courtyard. In the palace garden, "there were as many as ten thousand beautiful flowers; their shadows were reflected in the pool, as if embroidered on the surface of the pool." (好花萬種, 布影而錦觀池中). Large areas of chrysanthemums were planted in the palace garden, and in September of the lunar calendar, the chrysanthemums were in full bloom and dazzlingly beautiful. The *Sutra Sermon* mentions "hundreds of thousands of pots of golden chrysanthemums blooming in the courtyard, their petals decorated with drops of dew, emanating a fragrant aroma."

(百千藁之金菊, 惹露芬芳). The imperial pond was also filled with lotus flowers, and the *Sutra Sermon* described that “When the ship is driven it breaks a path through the pool full of lotus leaves; When the music was played, it startled the Mandarin ducks and egrets that stayed nearby.” (撐舡而衝破蓮荷, 奏曲而驚飛鴛鴦). The lotus flowers bloom in June of the lunar calendar, and many flowers remain in bloom until the ninth month after autumn. According to the description in the *Sutra Sermon*, a yellow dragon boat was also moored in the imperial pond, and at that time, “people are watching the yellow dragon boat and making wishes, hoping that the wise emperor could always board the dragon boat.” (人人盡指黃龍舡, 願見明君萬遍升). It can be inferred that Emperor Mingzong often rode this dragon boat to tour the lake and enjoy the scenery when he was in good health.

### 2.3. The Actors of the Humane Kings Convocation

The main actors of the Humane Kings Convocation were the preacher and the Director of Lectures, who was referred to as “dujiang” 都講. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties period, the term “Director of Lectures” was used to describe individuals who challenged and questioned preachers. By engaging in a dialogue with the preachers, they collaborated to provide an interpretation of the scripture. However, during the late Tang and Five Dynasties periods, the role of the Director of Lectures changed. In certain sermon activities, the Director of Lectures was no longer responsible for questioning the preachers. Instead, the Director of Lectures solely recited the scriptures for the preachers to interpret. Zanning 讚寧 (919–1001), a prominent Buddhist scholar and historian of the Northern Song dynasty, commented on this phenomenon, stating that “Present day Directors of Lectures do not ask questions for stimulating discussion. By raising the text of the scripture [for discussion] by reciting it [instead of prompting with questions], they, in effect, imitate [the style of] Directors of Lectures of old.” (今之都講, 不聞擊問, 舉唱經文, 蓋似像古之都講耳).<sup>19</sup> The role of the Director of Lectures in the celebration of the Holy Emperor’s Birthday was identical, with the responsibility to recite the title of Buddhist scriptures.

During this Convocation, the Director of Lectures performed two recitations. In the manuscript preserved in Dunhuang, the recitation was omitted, but two marks were left at the 10th and 30th lines, indicating the presence of the word “jing” (經). The blank space before and after these two instances of “經” indicates that they are distinct from the preceding and following contents and that the original scripture was omitted. Although the recitation text is not preserved here, we can confirm, based on the content of the preacher’s interpretation, that the two omitted scriptures were the title of the scripture “The prologue of the *Transcendent Wisdom Scripture for Humane Kings Who Wish to Protect Their States*” (仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經序品第一者) and the first sentence of the prologue: “Thus I have heard. Once the Buddha was residing on Vulture Peak in the city of Rājagṛha together with a great assembly of bhikṣus, eighteen-hundred in all.” (如是我聞, 一時佛住王舍城鷲峰山中, 與大比丘眾千八百人俱). In normal sermon activities, all scriptures should be recited, but during the Holy Emperor’s Birthday celebration, the recitation was only symbolically performed with a small part of the scripture.

During the performance activities of the Holy Emperor’s Birthday celebration, the function of the Director of Lectures was significantly diminished and transformed into a form of entertainment. On one hand, this reduced the Humane Kings Convocation to a mere façade of preaching, devoid of the scholarly depth and interpretative tradition of Buddhist doctrine refinement, and abandoning the core of the exegesis tradition since the Southern and Northern Dynasties. On the other hand, the primary purpose of this type of preaching was to bestow longevity blessings on the emperor, and in the imperial era of “family and country as one” 家國一體, praying for the emperor was effectively praying for the nation. Therefore, the Convocation continued the “protecting the country tradition” of the Humane Kings Convocation.

In addition, during every Holy Emperor’s Birthday celebration, Buddhist monks and Taoist priests jointly delivered sermons. In other words, the celebration not only featured Buddhist monks preaching, but also Taoist priests. The Taoist preaching was also part of

the celebration of the emperor's birthday. This is in accordance with the description in the *Sutra Sermon*, which states: "When the emperor came to the Golden Hall, he listened to the religious classics preached by the monks and Taoist priests who climbed onto the high platform." (君王聽法登金殿, 釋道談經寶臺上) "Wherever there were people in the palace, incense burners and fresh flowers were to be placed. Wherever there were monks and Taoist priests, fasting and precepts were to be observed. Taoist priests and monks performed their own rituals, but their inner wishes were the same." (有人煙處, 羅烈(列)香花; 有僧道處, 修持齋戒. 醮蔭麻道廣, 虔禱心同) The fact that Buddhist monks and Taoist priests performed together on the same stage may be related to the tradition of Buddhist-Taoist debates (*fo-dao lunheng* 佛道論衡) since the Southern and Northern Dynasties, but the information in the *Sutra Sermon* is insufficient for us to explore further the Buddhist-Taoist activities during the Holy Emperor's Birthday celebration in the fourth year of the Changxing period.

### 3. Conclusions

The development and evolution of the Humane Kings Convocation from the Southern and Northern Dynasties to the Tang and Song Dynasties can be regarded as a microcosm of the development of Chinese Buddhism, reflecting a shift from elite Buddhism to a more secular form. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties and early Sui and Tang Dynasties, the Convocation focused on the preaching of sermons and debating. However, after the reign of Emperor Taizong, and particularly with the growth of Esoteric Buddhism, the Convocation incorporated more elements of Tantra, making it more performative and emphasizing its utilitarian function of protecting the state.

In the middle and late Tang Dynasty, with the emergence and popularity of secular sermons, the Humane Kings Convocation also underwent a transformation, and there appeared the form of the *Sutra Sermon*. On the one hand, the Humane Kings Convocation reflected in this text retained two traditions: one being the tradition of scholasticism in the way of interpretation and the other being the tradition of emphasizing the protective efficacy of the *Scripture for Humane Kings* for the country. On the other hand, the two traditions were greatly simplified, as shown by the changing scale of the Humane Kings Convocation according to different occasions. These changes not only included the selection of sermon contents, but also the adjustment of the size of the staff. In terms of the former, to cater to the needs of sponsors, the Convocation might only select a small portion of scriptures for explanation and use more words to eulogize the lay host, which has strong performative and entertainment elements. In terms of the latter, due to time and space constraints, sermons might be completed with only one or two monks. This type of Humane Kings Convocation, while retaining the old traditions, is more performative and could be regarded as a "dramatized" Convocation.

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## Notes

- 1 Regarding the differences between Amoghavajra's and Kumārajīva's translations, please refer to Charles D. Orzech (1998, p. 69).
- 2 See Sanbao ganying yaolie lu 三寶感應要略錄 (*the Collection of Essential Records on the Manifestations of the Three Jewels*), fascicle 2 (T 2084n846b).
- 3 *Renwang huguo bore boluo miduo jing* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經 (*the Scripture for Humane Kings*), fascicle 1 (T 08n834c).
- 4 *Foshuo renwang bore boluomi jing* 佛說仁王般若波羅蜜經 (*the Scripture for Humane Kings*), fascicle 1 (T 08n825a).
- 5 According to Liu (1988, pp. 43–55), the user may have been the renowned Yunbian 雲辯 during the Later Tang period.
- 6 *Renwang bore jingshu* 仁王般若經疏 (*the Scripture for Humane Kings Commentary*), fascicle 1 (T33n315a).
- 7 *Renwang huguo bore boluo miduo jingshu* (*the Scripture for Humane Kings Commentary*), fascicle 1 (T33n429b).
- 8 For more information on the specific evolution and influence of these two traditions, see Pei (2017).
- 9 The scripture used here is based on the Amoghavajra's translation, but the Kumarajiva' translation has only minor differences. Here I refer to Charles D. Orzech's translation, see Charles D. Orzech (1998, pp. 245–46).
- 10 *Renwang huguo bore boluo miduo jing* 仁王護國般若波羅蜜多經 (*the Scripture for Humane Kings*), fascicle 2 (T 08n840a).
- 11 Regarding the description of Emperor Mingzong's political situation in the *Sutra Sermon*, please refer to Yang (1990, pp. 95–98).
- 12 *Zizhi tongjian*, fascicle 278, p. 9084.
- 13 *Zizhi tongjian*, fascicle 278, p. 9087.
- 14 *Zizhi tongjian*, fascicle 278, p. 9091.
- 15 The three characters “年年九” are incomplete in the plate, but can be inferred according to the meaning of the text. Please refer to Qiu and Luo (2020, pp. 70–72).
- 16 The aforementioned records can be found in *Cefu yuangui*, fascicle 2, pp. 23–24.
- 17 *Jiu wudai shi*, fascicle 37, p. 510.
- 18 Here I refer to Albert Welter's translation, see Welter (2018, p. 242).

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