

**THE HERMENEUTICAL
FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS
OF THE
*SA DHINIRMOCA NA S TRA***

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ABSTRACT

In the study of the humanities, the role of hermeneutic is a crucial one. This is especially so in the Buddhist Studies, where textual exegesis plays an important part in the effective understanding of doctrines, and resolution of doctrinal tension or contradiction. The current study examines and demonstrates how Buddhist hermeneutics function in the case of the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*. As a seminal Yog c ra text, the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* not only contains doctrines central to this tradition, but also lays out its mode of interpretation with various hermeneutical features and functions. This includes the very title of the text, and the section on the “Three Turning of the Dharma Wheel” found in the Chapter of “Absence of Own Nature” (*ni svabh vat / asvabh vat*). These make up the main focus of this paper.

After a close examination of the historical development of the text, various versions of its title present key pointers to the text’s hermeneutical functions. While ancient Chinese and Tibetan translators as well as modern scholars may vary in their versions of the title, common to all is the hidden or esoteric (*sa dhi*^o) meaning that the title of the *S tra* itself draw out and unfold (*nirmocana*). This plays on an implicit level of the text stating its own purpose and importance. The implicit meaning of the title is further demonstrated and elaborated when the *S tra* categorizes itself as the only explicit (*nit rtha*) teaching, while the earlier doctrines of the *Abhidharma* and the *Prajñ p ramit* systems are said to be implicit (*ney rtha*) teachings. The *S tra* establishes itself as a source of authority by proclaiming itself as the Third Turning of the Dharma Wheel. It attempts to reinterpret the proclaimed doctrine from an earlier Second Turning of the Dharma Wheel that “all *dharma*s are without own nature” as possessing implicit meaning which requires interpretation.

Fundamental to the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*’s hermeneutical features is its function of overcoming contradictions or tensions presented by previously established doctrines, a common role of religious hermeneutics everywhere. As seen in the “Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel”, the First and Second Turnings are recognized by modern researchers as doctrines of “existence” (*astitva*) and “emptiness” (*nyat*). These two seemingly antithetical positions are overcome by the re-explication of the teachings of “all *dharma*s are without own nature” from the Second Turning, which is said to be a reinterpretation of the *Prajñ p ramit*. Together with the hermeneutical features that function explicitly and implicitly within the text, the scripture is able to position itself as the foremost authoritative Yog c ra text that became a part of the newly developed mainstream of this Mah y na tradition.

Key Words: *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*, hermeneutics, Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel, implicit meaning, explicit meaning

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The discipline of hermeneutics originates from ancient Greek Philosophy. Its systems of theory in understanding and interpretation of linguistic and non-linguistic expression emergences in the Biblical Studies and later on in the study of other ancient and classic cultures.¹ The role of hermeneutics in Buddhist Studies is an important one. With a vast canonical literature and posthumous composition of scriptures attributing to the Buddha continued for over a millennium after his *parinirvā*,² there hence arouse the need for systems of exegesis in order to make sense out of the complexity found in Buddhist texts. In fact, such systems of understanding and interpretation have long existed within the Buddhist traditions, with new texts claiming the authority of the words of the Buddha in order to validate certain doctrinal positions or to provide new systems to resolve problems and crisis faced at a particular time.³

One such example demonstrating Buddhist hermeneutics can be seen in the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*. As a seminal scripture of the Yog c ra tradition, the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* not only contains many Buddhist hermeneutical features but also functions on a whole as a hermeneutical tool for interpreting previously established doctrines. The present paper aims to discuss some of these Buddhist hermeneutical features and functions found within the text and their significance in establishing doctrinal position for the Yog c ra tradition. The first part will consist of a brief historical overview of the text, followed by the main study of hermeneutic features and functions of the text.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* is an early Yog c ra text of great importance in the historical development of the tradition. It contains the first traces of Yog c ra ideas and its chapter four and eight contain a ‘crystallization’ of a particular early phase in the development of the Yog c ra.⁴ The Chinese tradition often regards this scripture to be one of the major ‘Six *S tras*’ that the Consciousness Only School bases on. It too,

¹ Ramberg, Bjørn and Gjesdal, Kristin, “Hermeneutics”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.).

² Donald S. Lopez, Jr. *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, p. 2.

³ In Chappell’s “Hermeneutical Phases in Chinese Buddhism”, *Buddhist Hermeneutics*, p175. He employs the ‘three phases of millenarian religions’ by Kenelm Buridge as a hermeneutical device to analysis aspects of Chinese Buddhism: canonical Buddhism, Pureland and Ch’an traditions. The first stage in the rising of a new religion or new system involves a new interpretation and practice to resolve crisis faced at the time.

⁴ Richard King, “Early Yog c ra and its relationship with the Madhyamaka School.” Pp. 660.

has an important status in Tibetan Buddhism, with many important works written base on the doctrine found in the text.

Like many Mah y na scriptures, the authorship and the exact date of composition are unknown. It is thought that the S tra was written between the first and third century C.E. since it was quoted in the works of Asa ga and Vasubandhu. Also, it must have existed in much of its present form prior to Asa ga, since he quoted most of the S tra in the *Vini caya-sa graha* of the *Yog c rabh mi*. Some of these scriptures that have either cited or quoted the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* include: *Mah y na-sa graha*, *Abhidharma-samuccaya* and *Madhyanta-vibhaga*.⁵ Besides its influences in the early development of these Yog c ra texts, the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* was also translated into Chinese and Tibetan. As there is no Sanskrit version of the text extant today, the Chinese and Tibetan translations become the only sources for studying of the text.

At present, we know of certain in total, there are four Chinese versions, translated between 445 and 647 A.D. Two of these are full translations in relation to the versions we see today. It is worth noting that according to Lamotte, the text existent today is not a unitary work, but a compilation of fragments with different origins across time.⁶ Whether or not the other two versions were partially translated or the translators simply had smaller texts to begin with is not known. However, scholars such as Lin and Powers both view Lamotte's proposition as a plausible hypothesis that requires further supporting evidences.⁷ For the Tibetan translations, which were translated nearly four centuries after the Chinese ones, there is one version available excluding the fragments of the Dunhuang manuscript.

The influential status of the text can be seen from the composition of four commentaries and other related works in the Tibetan tradition. For the Chinese commentaries, there is only one extant, with the other five commentaries lost. The extant Chinese commentary is composed by Wonch'uk, which is also translated into Tibetan. The Tibetan has a translation of Asa ga's commentary on the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* (*rya-Sa dhinirmocana-bh ya*). Tsong Khapa argues that this text is incorrectly attributed to Asa ga, since the majority of the text has already been quoted in *Vini cayasa graha*, hence it seems unnecessary to compose another commentary. Though in Powers' study, he concludes that there is no strong evidence to support Tsong Khapa's argument.⁸ However, Tsong Khapa's argument seems plausible since there is no mention of this important commentary attributing to Asa ga in Chinese. Figure 1 below presents a clear overview detailing the textual sources of *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*, with their historical developments and relationship among one another.⁹

⁵ John Powers, "The concept of the ultimate in the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*." Pp. 14.

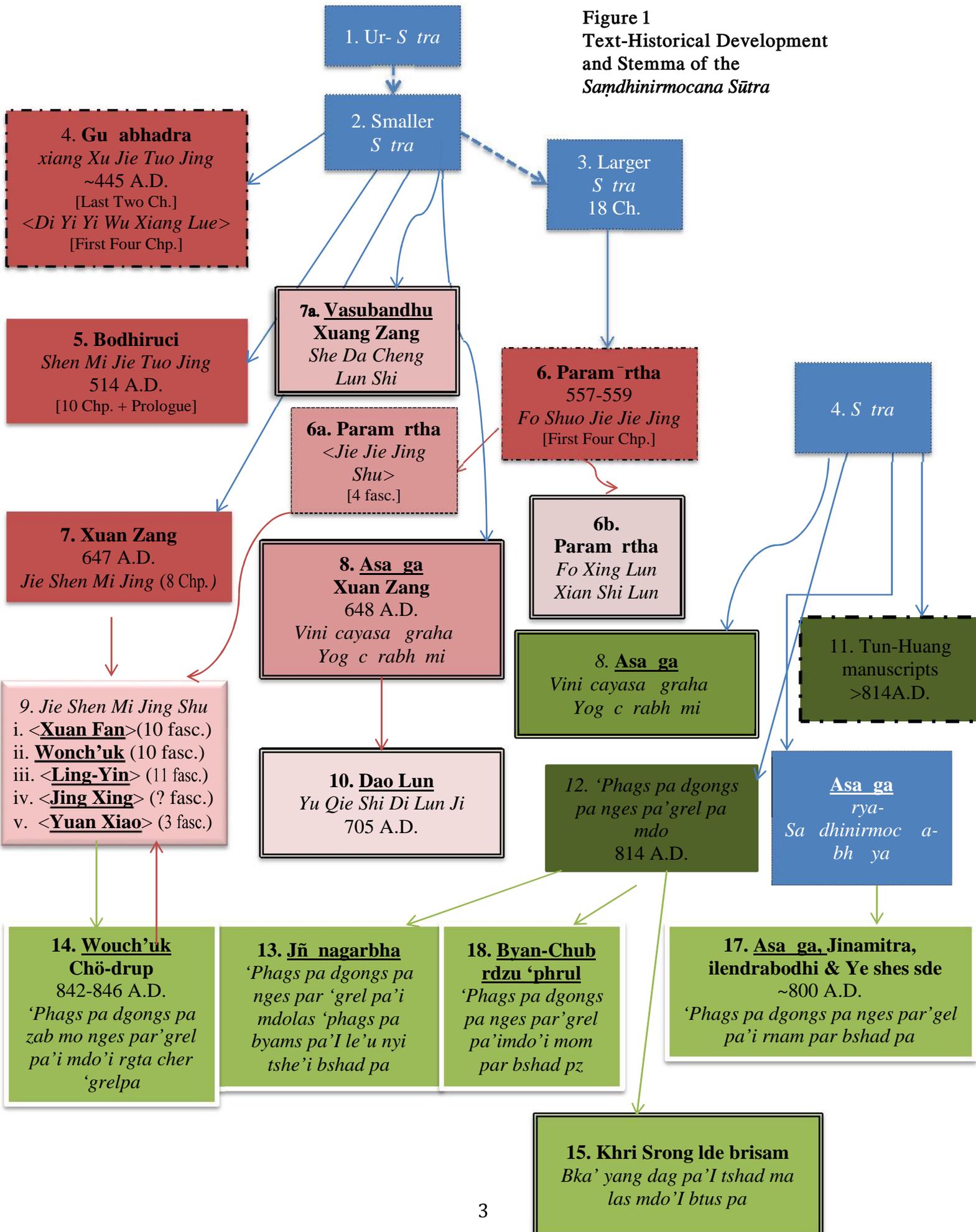
⁶ Lamotte, *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* cited in John Powers, "The concept of the ultimate in the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*." Pp. 17.

⁷ Lin, Chen-Kuo. "The *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*: A liberation hermeneutic."

⁸ John Powers, "The concept of the ultimate in the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*." pp. 66.

⁹ All the information is compiled from Lin, Chen-Kuo. "The *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*: A liberation hermeneutic." & John Powers, "The concept of the ultimate in the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*."

Figure 1
Text-Historical Development
and Stemma of the
Samdhinirmocana Sūtra



Key	Notes
	Sanskrit texts
	Chinese texts
	Tibetan texts
	Partially translated text
	Quoted, cited, discussed the text
	Hypothetical transmission
	Direct Translation or commentary
	Quoted in
<u>Names</u>	Author (underlined)
Names	Translator
< >	Text no longer extant
~	Approximate date
1.	The hypothetical theory of the existence of an Ur-Sutra that developed over time. As currently there is no extant Sanskrit version available, all of the Sanskrit texts in the blue boxes are drawn hypothetically to show historical development and transmissions in each traditions.
2.	The hypothesis of the existence of a smaller Sanskrit original text that Bodhiruci and Xuan Zang translated from. Wonch'uk stated in his commentary: This scripture as one set is of two versions. One is the larger This scripture as one set is of two versions. One is the larger version, which contains one hundred thousand verses, the other one is the smaller version which contains one thousand and five hundred verses. Nevertheless, there was only one Sanskrit original for the brief version, which was translated into four Chinese texts by different translators. ¹⁰
	See also 6 & 6b below
3.	The larger text Param rtha translated from. See 6 & 6b below.
4.	Translated at Dong An Monastery in <i>Ruen Zhou Jiang Ning</i> (present day <i>Zhen Jiang</i>), <i>Xiang Xu Jie Tuo Jing</i> 《相續解脫經》 is the oldest Chinese translation available, edited as two separate s tras in Taish : <i>Xiang Xu Jie Tuo Di Bo Luo Mi Liao Yi Jing</i> 《相繼地波羅 密了義經》 and <i>Xiang Xu Jie Tuo Ru Lai Suo Zuo Sui Shun Chu Liao Yi Jing</i> 《相續解脫如來所作隨順處了義經》. The lost <i>Di Yi Yi Wu Xiang Lue</i> 《第一義無相略》 was preserved in Ji Zang's <i>Fa Hua Xuan Lun</i> 《法華玄論》.
5.	<i>Shen Mi Jie Tuo Jing</i> 《深密 解脫經》, translated at Shaolin Monastery in <i>Song Shan</i> . Its chapter division is the same as in the Tibetan version.
6.	<i>Fo Shuo Jie Jie Jing</i> 《佛說解節經》, recorded in Wonch'uk's commentary, the other possible date of translation is 561 A.D. The content of this text indicates that the original text might be different from the one used by other translators. Firstly, the prologue is totally different to Bodhiruci's and Xuan zang's version. Secondly, there is a quote from <i>Li Dai San Bao Ji</i> indicating the existence of a

¹⁰ *Jie Shen Mi Jing Shu* 《解深密經疏》, 2.1.a.

larger sutra, “Originally, the scripture had eighteen chapters ... Param rtha selected it (the first four chapters) as the scriptural support”.
6a. <i>Jie Jie Jing Shi</i> 《解節經疏》, listed in <i>Li Dai San Bao Ji</i> . 《歷代法寶記》. Only fragments are preserved in Wonch’uk commentary.
6b. Verses of the <i>Sa dhinirmocana S tra</i> quoted in <i>Fo Xing Lun</i> 《佛性論》 and <i>Xian Shi Lun</i> 《顯識論》 are not found in the other extant versions. It indicates a separate original text to the one used by Bodhiruci and Xuan Zang.
7. <i>Jie Shen Mi Jing</i> 《解深密經》, translated in <i>Xi jing Hong Fu Monastery</i> , the whole of the text, except the prologue is found in in the <i>Vini caya-sa graha</i> of <i>Yog c rabh mi</i> 《瑜伽師地論卷第七十六攝決擇分》.
7a. <i>She Da Cheng Lun Shi</i> 《攝大乘論釋》 <i>Mah y na-sa graha-bh ya</i> . Chapter three of the <i>Sa dhinirmocana</i> , <i>Xin Yi Shi Xiang Pin</i> (心意識相品) is quoted in chapter 1.1 <i>Suo Zhi Yi Fen</i> (所知依分) of this text.
8. <i>She Jie Ze Fen</i> of <i>Yu Qie Shi Di Lun</i> 《瑜伽師地論卷第七十六攝決擇分》, extant in both Chinese and Tibetan translation. The entire Chinese <i>Sa dhinirmocana Sutra</i> except the prologue is quoted here. The Tibetan version is also quoted entirely except for the introduction and conclusion. It contains brief commentaries before each chapter.
9. Of these five commentaries recorded in the <i>Dong Yu Chuan Deng Mu Lu</i> 《東域傳燈目錄》, only Wonch’uk’s commentary is extant presently. Although the its chapter ten is missing, it is later translated into Chinese from the Tibetan version by Sh ju Inaba in 1949.
10. This work by the Korean monk, Dao Lun, of the lineage of Kui Ji, also contains the entire <i>Sa dhinirmocana Sutra</i> .
11. Records from Dunhuang manuscript containing fragments of the <i>Sa dhinirmocana S tra</i> indicating that it was already translated into Tibetan before 814 A.D.
12. The translator of the extant Tibetan <i>Sa dhinirmocana S tra</i> is not recorded.
13. “Commentary on Chapter of the Superior Maitreya from the Superior Sutra Explaining the Thought” (<i>rya-Sa dhinirmocana- rya-Maitreya-kevala-parivarta-bh ya</i>). Along with Candrak rti, Jñ nagarbha is classed as Sv tantrika-M dhyanika.
14. <i>rya-gambh ra-Sa dhinirmoca a-s tra- k</i> . Referred frequently by Tsong Khapa.
15. “Summary of the S tra [Explaining the Thought] by Way of Valid Cognition of Correct Words”, a treatise that discusses the reasoning processes outlined in the tenth chapter of the s tra.
16. “The Essence of the Good Explanations” is a treatise on Buddhist hermeneutics, using the <i>Sa dhinirmocana s tra</i> as the main bases. Other sub-commentaries from Dge lugs pa school.
17. “The Explanation of the Superior Sutra Explaining the Thought “ <i>rya-Sa dhinirmocana-bh ya</i> . It consists of 200 verses according to the <i>Lban dkar</i> catalogue.
18. “Explanation of the Superior Sutra Explicating the Thought” <i>rya-Sa dhinirmocana-s trasya-vy khy na</i> . This is the second largest Tibetan commentary that explains the entire sutra with particular focus on the tenth chapter.

Having established the position of *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* in the framework of its historical development, one could see its influence and relationships with other Yog c ra scriptures. Modern scholars such as Lamotte consider the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* as a representative of an important stage in the development of Mah y na doctrines. It serves as a transition between the Perfection of Wisdom Sutras and the Yog c ra school of Asa ga and Vasubandhu.¹¹ Conze classifies the seventh stage in the development of the *Prajñ p ramit* literature to be marked by the Yog c ra production of systemizing commentaries.¹² The Yog c ra text accomplished the above-mentioned task by implementing hermeneutical features and functions in the text. The following section will discuss some of these features and functions.

HERMENEUTIC FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS OF THE S TRA

The Title Of The S tra

Even though there is no extant Sanskrit version, the Sanskrit title, *Sa dhi-nirmocana* is the accepted one and is widely used today. The title of the text serves as an important hermeneutical elements of the text. The term ‘*sa dhi*’ means, “containing a conjunction, transition form one to another, junction, connection, union with, a joint”. The term ‘*nirmocana*’ is made up of the prefix ‘*nir*’, “-out”, followed by ‘*mocana*’ from the verbal root *muc*, meaning, “to loosen, free from, liberate”.¹³ In the Buddhist context, the meaning of *Sa dhinirmocana* is defined as, “Setting forth, unfolding of real truth, fundamental explanation”. The Tibetan translation includes ‘*dgo s pa*’ “esoteric meaning” and ‘*es par grel pa*’ “real explanation”.¹⁴ In the Chinese versions, the various translations include, “Connection continuity and liberation (*Xiang Xu Jie Tuo*)”, “Untying of the knot (*Jie Jie*)”, “The deep mystery releasing (*Shen Mi Jie Tuo*)” and “Releasing the deep mystery (*Jie Shen Mi*)”.

Modern Western interpretations of the title includes: “Explaining the thought” by John Powers, “Explication of underlying meaning” by John Keenan and Cleary’s “Unlocking the Mysteries”.¹⁵ All of the above versions of the title suggest the *S tra* is attempting to unfold some deep, underlying, profound teachings. Lin argues that the title suggests more than its hermeneutical function of disclosing the profound meaning, but also serves to liberate sentient being from the knot-like complexity of *sa s ra*.¹⁶

For Takasaki, the function of the title for the *S tra* is summarized as the following formula: “X as the esoteric meaning possess the connotation of A1, A2, A3... (*samdh ya*) which is expressed as B”. The *Sa dhi* X is seen during the explication of

¹¹ Lamotte cited in John Powers, “The concept of the ultimate in the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*”. pp. 14.

¹² Edward Conze. *Thirty years of Buddhist studies*. pp. 144. Even though the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* is not a commentary, it is often describe as written in a systematic commentarial style. Conze saw the Yog c ra’s interpretation on *Prajñ p ramit* as ‘violent to the existing text’ i.e. *Prajñ p ramit S tra*, and ‘superimpose some scheme alien to it’.

¹³ Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*. pp. 556.

¹⁴ Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Dictionary*. pp. 558.

¹⁵ See bibliography.

¹⁶ Lin, Chen-Kuo. “The *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*: A liberation hermeneutic.” pp. 99.

B, which contains the underlying meaning of A1, A2 and A3 Therefore, X is esoteric, which is *abhipr ya*.¹⁷ The formula can be exemplified in Chapter five “Absence of Own Nature” (Xuan Zang’s version) as follows:

‘World-honored One. With what esoteric meaning when you say: “all *dharma*s are without own nature, without arising, without ceasing, originally quiescent, (their) own nature is *nirv a*?’ I now ask the Tath gata the meaning of this, may the Tath gata kindly explain all the esoteric meaning when speaking of ‘All *dharma*s are without own nature, without arising, without ceasing, originally quiescent, (their) own nature is *nirv a*...’

‘Param rthasamudgata, you should understand that, based on the three kinds of “Absence of own nature” I speak of the esoteric meaning of all *dharma*s are without own nature, that is called ‘Absence of own nature of form, absence of own nature of arising, absence of own nature of the Ultimate.’¹⁸

According to Takasaki, in this passage, ‘B’ is the statement taught by the Tath gata that “all *dharma*s are without own nature”, however this statement possesses the esoteric meaning of X, which is revealed in the “absence of own nature of form, arising and Ultimate” (A1, A2, A3), which is the “absence of three own natures”. X is expressed in B, B has the *sa dhi* of A1, A2, A3, which are the explanations of X. The hermeneutical strategy of interpreting B with A1, A2, and A3 in order to reveal the esoteric meaning X is the main theme of the text. The title suggests the need to draw out the esoteric meaning of “all *dharma*s are without own nature”. It also presents the connotation that the doctrine of “all *dharma*s are without own nature (B)” cannot be understood and interpreted as it is; the real meaning is actually X which can only be explained with A1, A2, A3.

The Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel

One of the most crucial passages steering the hermeneutical function of the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* is the “Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel”. This section is found in Chapter Five of Xuan Zang’s version, Chapter Eight of Bodhiruci’s and the Tibetan versions. The concise passage contains a number of hermeneutical elements, including: Three turnings of the Dharma Wheel, proclaimed doctrines, Vehicles and implicit (*ney rtha*) versus explicit (*net rtha*) teachings. Figure 2 shows the various elements from the passage of the Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel.

¹⁷ Takasaki, Jikido, & others. *Wei Shi Si Xiang* “唯識思想.” Pp. 21.

¹⁸ “世尊，依何密意，作如是說。一切諸法皆無自性，無生，無滅，本來寂靜，自性涅槃。我今請問如來斯義，惟願如來哀愍解釋，說一切法皆無自性，無生，無滅，本來寂靜，自性涅槃，所有密意。… 勝義生！當知，我依三種無自性性，密意說言，一切諸法皆無自性，所謂相無自性性，生無自性性，勝義無自性性。” CBETA, T16, no. 0676, p.0693c29.

Figure 2 Content of the Three Turning of the Dharma Wheel¹⁹

Turning of the Dharma Wheel	First	Second	Third
Type of Turning	True Dharma	True Dharma, Esoteric way (<i>Yinmi Xiang</i>)	True Dharma, Exoteric (<i>Xianliao Xiang</i>)
Proclaimed Doctrines	Four Noble Truths	All <i>dharmas</i> are without own nature, without arising, without ceasing, originally quiescent, (their) own nature is <i>nirv a</i>	All <i>dharmas</i> are without own nature, without arising, without ceasing, originally quiescent, (their) own nature is <i>nirv a</i>
Vehicles	<i>r vaka</i>	<i>Mah y na</i>	All vehicles
Implicit vs. Explicit	Implicit	Implicit	Explicit
Descriptions of teachings	Marvelous, wonderful	Marvelous, wonderful	Even more marvelous and wonderful
	Surpassable	Surpassable	Unsurpassable
	Subject to criticism	Subject to criticism	Not subject to criticism

The fact that it was Bodhisattva Param rthasamudgata, whose very name means “Attained the Ultimate Meaning”, who narrates this passage of the Three Turnings of the Dharma Wheel implies that text’s implicit indication of preaching the Ultimate teaching. It is worth noting that the content of the proclaimed doctrine for both the second and third turnings are identical, which is the ‘B’ as seen earlier. The *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* as the Third Turning is the explicit teaching. It is not ‘B’ namely “all *dharmas* are without own nature, without arising, without ceasing,

¹⁹ “爾時勝義生菩薩復白佛言。世尊。初於一時在婆羅痾斯仙人墮處施鹿林中。惟為發趣聲聞乘者。以四諦相轉正法輪。雖是甚奇甚為希有。一切世間諸天人等先無有能如法轉者。而於彼時所轉法輪。有上有容是未了義。是諸諍論安足處所。世尊。在昔第二時中惟為發趣修大乘者。依一切法皆無自性無生無滅。本來寂靜自性涅槃。以隱密相轉正法輪。雖更甚奇甚為希有。而於彼時所轉法輪。亦是有上有所容受。猶未了義。是諸諍論安足處所。世尊。於今第三時中普為發趣一切乘者。依一切法皆無自性無生無滅。本來寂靜自性涅槃無自性性。以顯了相轉正法輪。第一甚奇最為希有。于今世尊所轉法輪。無上無容是真了義。非諸諍論安足處所。世尊。若善男子或善女人於此如來依一切法皆無自性無生無滅。本來寂靜自性涅槃。所說甚深了義言教。聞已信解書寫護持供養流布受誦修習如理思惟。以其修相發起加行生幾所福。說是語已。” CBETA, T16, no. 0676, p.0697a23.

originally quiescent, (their) own nature is *nirvāṇa*” as the explicit teaching, but rather ‘X’ as the esoteric meaning is the explicit teaching, that can only be explained by the Three Absences of Own Nature (A1, A2, A3) as established earlier in the chapter. Therefore, even though this passage did not explicitly state the actual doctrine propagated by the *S tra*, it functions as an important hermeneutical feature in establishing the authoritative position of the text.

Implicit Meaning vs. Explicit Meaning

The feature of implicit and explicit meaning as schema of textual exegeses derives early in the Buddhist tradition. They are part of the four sets of hermeneutics that the early Buddhists define and formulate in the “*S tra* of the Four Refuges or Four Reliances” (*Catur-pratis rana s tra*).²⁰ These sets of Buddhist hermeneutics serve as guidelines for interpreting texts and teachings. It states the reliance on the Dharma, meaning, wisdom and explicit meaning over the reliance on teacher, letters, consciousness and implicit meaning respectively.²¹ They appear in a number of texts such as the *Abhidharmakośa*, the *M dhyamika s tras* and *śāstras* as well as *Yog c ra* texts.²² The *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* employs one of the “Four Reliances”, stating that the teachings of the Buddha from the first two Turnings of the Dharma Wheels as implicit teachings, therefore these teachings cannot be taken as they are and require further explanations. Only the teachings from the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* can be taken explicitly as they are, without further explanation. While the teachings of the first two Turnings are said to be “surpassable”, of “interpretable meaning” and “subject to criticism”, the teaching of the Third Turning is considered to be “unsurpassable”, of “definitive meaning” and “not subject to criticism”. It implies that the interpreter should find the Third Turning of the Dharma Wheel more compelling and convincing than the other two Turnings of the Dharma Wheel.²³

The proclaimed doctrines from the First, Second and Third Turnings are commonly accepted to be: *Abhidharma*, *Prajñāp ramit ś tra* and *Yog c ra* tradition respectively. Lamotte summarizes these as the following:

The hermeneutical function of the *Sa dhinirmocana* takes on doctrine from the *Prajñāp ramit ś tra* and *nyāta* of Mahāyāna thought established by Nāgārjuna, and reinterprets them to establish *Yog c ra* position in the Mahāyāna. As seen in *Madhyanta-vibhaga*, the *Yog c ra*’s establishment of the middle way bases on *astivada* and *nyavāda*.²⁴

It is said that the early *Yog c ra* was confronted with what seems to be a doctrinal contradiction of the First and Second Turnings. In the First Turning of the Dharma Wheel, the *Abhidharma* texts bases itself on analyzing the own nature of all *dharmas* and to meditate on how these *dharmas* arise and cease. In contrast, the Second Turning

²⁰ Lamotte, E. “The Assessment of Textual Interpretation in Buddhism” pp. 12.

²¹ “四依止：依法不依人，依義不依語，依智不依識，依了義不依不了義。”

²² Lamotte, E. “The Assessment of Textual Interpretation in Buddhism” pp. 12

²³ John Powers, *Hermeneutics and Tradition in the Sa dhinirmocana S tra*. pp. 108.

²⁴ Takasaki, Jikido, & others. “唯識思想.” pp. 26

of the Dharma Wheel, the *Prajñ p ramit* literature declares that all *dharmas* are without own nature, neither arise nor cease. Since both the *Abhidharma* and the *Prajñ p ramit* are attributed to the Buddha, their successor, Yog c ra tradition saw the need to develop a new Buddhist discourse that too attributed to the Buddha through hermeneutical features such as those found here.²⁵

The Third Turning of the Dharma Wheel stands on the notion that its doctrine is for people of all Vehicles. For some, the *Prajñ p ramit* system and the system established by N g rjuna have been too hasty in preaching the Mah y na doctrine, therefore negating and excluding the *r vaka* Vehicle. The *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* claims to include the *r vaka* Vehicle by stating that its proclaimed teachings are for all Vehicles or anyone who is in accordance with the explicit doctrine.²⁶

The hermeneutical features of the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* function as a source of authority for the text. Throughout the scripture, there are a number of places that contain both implicit and explicit claims about its definitiveness. In the introduction chapter, it presents itself as a text for advanced practitioners, and the place where the *S tra* was taught is described as being a vast celestial palace that reflects the supreme state of realization of the Buddha. The interlocutors (except for Subh ti) are all Bodhisattvas who have attained high level of understanding.²⁷ Besides Bodhisattva Param rthasamudgata, other interlocutors include: Bodhisattva Gambh r rthasa dhi-nirmocana, Bodhisattva Vidhivatparip cchaka, Bodhisattva Dharmodgata, Bodhisattva Suvi uddhamati, Bodhisattva Vi lamati and so on. There may be hermeneutical significance with the names of these Bodhisattvas and their roles within the text that worth further studies.

The authority of the Buddha and his teaching abilities are also important elements of the *S tra*'s implicit arguments for its authority. When the first two Turnings of the Dharma Wheel are described, the audiences were told that these teachings were taught for particular congregations, and behind this statement is the Mah y na Buddhist doctrine of "skillful means" which bases on the notion that the Buddha teaches each individual or group what will be most beneficial. In addition, the Mah y na tradition in general views the Buddha as omniscient and so he is able to know precisely the nature of the predispositions of each individual and group and adapt his teachings accordingly.

The implicit claims of the *S tra*'s multifaceted arguments for its own definitiveness, which is based on the personal authority of the Buddha, the persuasiveness of its analogies, as well as the scripture's own claims of definitiveness requires the assumptions that this is a teaching given by the supreme authority for Buddhists and that these teachings can effectively reconcile the conceptual difficulties that arose from his earlier teachings and will advance the spiritual progress of those who embrace the

²⁵ Lin, Chen-Kuo. "The *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*: A liberation hermeneutic." Pp.72.

²⁶ Takasaki, Jikido, & others. *Wei Shi Si Xiang* "唯識思想." pp. 26.

²⁷ "Subh ti is presumably a member of this august assembly because of being recognized in Pali literature as the most advanced of Buddha's Hearer disciples in understanding of emptiness." John Powers, *Hermeneutics and Tradition in the Sa dhinirmocana S tra*. pp. 108.

world view outlined in the sutra.²⁸

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* established its authority for reinterpreting the earlier doctrines with hermeneutical features such as its title, the Three Turning of the Dharma Wheel, dictograph the previously established doctrine to be implicit and itself as the definitive one. Together with the hermeneutical features that function explicitly and implicitly within the text, the scripture is able to position itself as a *Yog c ra* text that became a part of the newly developed mainstream. As the title suggests, the text implies the need to draw out the implicit meaning of previously established teachings, namely the “the absence of three natures”. While the explicit teaching of the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra*, should be interpreted as it is. Even though the *S tra* categorized itself as explicit, its proclaimed doctrine is built on an implicit fashion, the need to draw out the esoteric meaning.

While modern scholars seem to be in agreement that the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* as the Third Turning of the Dharma Wheel is reinterpreting the Second Turning, the *Prajñ p ramit* , which builds on the assumption that the doctrine of “all *dharma*s are without own nature” equates to the doctrine of the *Prajñ p ramit* . No doubt, this is what the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* was reinterpreting and the *Prajñ p ramit S tra* regards itself as the Second Turning of the Dharma Wheel, it does not justify the argument of the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* is reinterpreting the whole of the *Prajñ – p ramit* literature. If the vast textual sources from the *Prajñ p ramit* literature develop through centuries and its doctrines and thoughts progress across time, to claim that its doctrine as one single teaching of “all *dharma*s are without own nature” seems to be simplifying the complex matters involved.

Nevertheless, the function of the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* within the *Yog c ra* context in reinterpreting some aspect of the *Prajñ p ramit* system is obvious. Another area worth exploring is to determine what “X” is. Perhaps it is the “Ultimate” that all Buddhist systems attempt to define. Together with other hermeneutical features and functions form the *Sa dhinirmocana S tra* such as the name of various Bodhisattvas, the hermeneutical features and functions within the broader *Yog c ra* tradition for example, the Maitreya as the founder in the East Asian tradition, are all potential topics worth further studies.

²⁸ Powers, John. *Hermeneutics and Tradition in the Sa dhinirmocana-s tra*.

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