# The Origin and Practice System of *Ganhwa Seon*

# Hyewon Kang

Ever since national master Do-ui brought the method of Seon practice from China in the Silla Danasty, the Nine Schools of Korean Seon arose and fell, finally integrating into the Jogye Order.

The lineage of Korean Seon initiated by national master Bojo and Taego in the Goryeo Dyanasty originated from the Southern Chan of China. It is generally considered that the Korean Seon method succeeded Da-hui who belonged to the Yang-qi branch of the Lin-ji school. Da-hui Chan penetrated intellectuals after the Yuan and Ming Dynasty in China and became the driving force of the Chan movement. Likewise, Taego Seon was the engine of integration for all the Buddhist sects into Seon-centered Korean Buddhism. Taego introduced the Lin-ji school to later stagnant Goryeo Buddhism through the cultivation of One Mind. Thus, Ganhwa Seon played a key role in transmitting the lamp of the patriarchs and became a significant energy of the Jogye Order's tradition.

The practice of Ganhwa Seon as an initial enlightenment, which has faith in 'the original purity of mind' is a kind of short-cut practice that returns to the original sources of innate enlightenment. Ganhwa Seon regards 'a big faith' and 'a big doubt' as it's essence and is a vital mainspring of

Hyewon Kang is a Professor of Buddhist Studies at Dongguk University, Korea.

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Korean Seon.

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### I. Introduction

According to the constitution of the Jogye Order, the Korean Buddhist Jogye Order originated from the *Gajisan* school, established under the influence of the national master of Do-ui in the Silla (57 B.C.E.-936 C.E.) Dynasty and was reorganized later by Master Bojo (1158-1210). Finally, later it was officially named the Jogye Order, integrating all other Buddhist denominations by Master Taego (1301-1382).

The basic idea of the Jogye Order is based on the fundamental philosophy of *Seon* Buddhism of 'enlightening both self and other', seeking 'a direct pointing to one's mind' and 'seeing one's own nature and directly accomplishing buddhahood.' Especially, 'seeing one's own nature and directly accomplishing buddhahood' means to realize one's original nature with no delusion and no doubt. This original nature cannot be seen through an objective perspective solely, but through one where the subjective and the objective are united as a whole. Thus, we ultimately accomplish buddhahood. In terms of its name and idea, the Jogye Order belongs to the *Seon* School and it is a denomination which aims to see one's own nature and accomplish buddhahood on the basis of *Seon* practice.

Ever since national master Do-ui brought the method of *Chan* practice from China, the nine schools of Korean *Seon* arose and fell, finally integrating into the Jogye Order. Especially, as is commonly known, national master Taego and Bojo's *Seon* method in the Goryeo (918-1392) Dynasty was *Ganhwa Seon*. In the Joseon (1392-1910) Dynasty, the books titled "*Seon-ga Gwigam*" and "*Seon-gyo-seok*" emphasized

<sup>1</sup> Seon is a Korean pronunciation of Chan. Its corresponding Sanskrit and Japanese terms are dhyāna and Zen, respectively. In this article, Seon and Chan were used compatibly.

'discarding the scholarly aspect of teachings and entering the meditative aspect' which indicates the succession of the *Ganhwa Seon* tradition. After the middle period of the Joseon Dynasty, *Shu-zhang* and *Chan-yao* were used as teaching aids in inner palaces. Today, they are still used as *Seon* guidelines for every monastic practice center. This fact suggests that the practice of *Ganhwa Seon* has been considered as a main *Seon* practice in the Jogye Order.

The formation of *Ganhwa Seon* is traced back to the Tang (618-907) and the Song (960-1279) Dynasties in China. Among five *Chan* schools in the Tang period, the *Fa-yan*, *Ui-ang* and *Cao-dong* schools deteriorated. In the Northern Song period, only the *Lin-ji* school flourished and branched into two sects, i.e. the *Huang-long* and *Yang-qi* schools. In the Southern Song period, only the *Yang-qi* school remained.

The trend of 'daily living meditation' in the Tang period transformed into 'stabilizing meditation' in the Song period which was strongly emphasized in the Southern school, resulting in the formation of *Ganhwa Seon*. This Chinese *Chan* lineage became the backbone of the *Ganhwa Seon* in the Goryeo Dynasty and succeeded to the present practice method of the Jogye Order.

This study examines the origin and system of *Gong-an* practice as the Jogye Order's basic tenet. Even though there are many writings concerning the theory and practice of *Ganhwa Seon*, I examine the *Gong-an* and the structure of the practice as a means of enlightenment in *Ganhwa Seon*.

## II. The definition and formation of the Gong-an

According to the preface of the Bi-yan-lu3, "The teaching of

<sup>2</sup> Seon-ga Gwigam: Translated into Collection of paragons of the Seon School. Written by Hyu-jeong (1520-1604) during Joseon Dynasty. A collection of teachings and aphorisms from classical Seon and pre-Seon literature offering instruction on Seon practice, along with commentary by the author. An important practice manual in Korean Seon Buddhism (HBJ. Vol.7:634c-646a). The Seon-gyo-seok was written by the same author and its meaning maybe translated into Comparison between scholar and Seon tradition (HBJ. Vol.7:654b-657a).

<sup>3</sup> Blue Cliff Record: A collection of one hundred Gong-an, originally compiled by Xue-dou (980-1052) and later commented on by Yuan-wu (1063-1135). Considered as an outstanding representative of Chan literary quality, this text became a central object of study for later

Masters, which used the term *Gong-an* for the first time in the Tang Dynasty, became very popular in the latter half of the Song Dynasty." The *Jing-de-chuan-deng-lu*<sup>4</sup> explains 1,700 *Gong-ans* and was considered to

be a popular and common classical textbook among the ruling class of the Song Dynasty.

Gong-ans in those days showed very official and authoritative trends because Buddhism and government were intertwined. As the trend of bureaucratic Buddhism became stronger, *Chan* dialogues also showed the traits of intellectualization. I would like to look into the fundamental differences between the formative period of *Gong-an Seon* in the Tang Dynasty and the established period of *Gong-an Seon* in the Song Dynasty.

First of all, the definition of *Gong-an Seon* is well-explained in the *Shan-fang-ye-hua*<sup>5</sup> by Chun-feng (1263-1323) as follows:

"Gong-an is the torch of wisdom that eliminates afflictions. Also, it is the sharp knife that cuts off the bondage of defilement. On the other hand, it is a poignant axe that crushes the root of all mental disturbances and also it is a mirror that differentiates the saint and the ordinary. Gong-an clearly shows the original mind of Masters along with the Buddha's. Therefore, there is no better guideline which shows the wisdom of the Buddha, eliminating all affective disorders" (SGC. Vol.2:45-49).

He clarifies the definition and essence of *Gong-an* in a simple and clear way. Literally, *Gong-an* means 'the draft of a public document' that shows authority and authenticity. According to him, *Gong-an* is a personal relationship between a student and a Buddhist patriarch and also a good opportunity for the student to realize enlightenment with the help of his Master. *Gong-an* conveys separate transmission outside of the teaching, or in other words, transmission from mind to mind (i.e.

Ganhwa practitioners (T.48. No.2003).

<sup>4</sup> Record of the Transmission of the Lamp Published in the Jingde Era: Edited by Dao-yuan. Often abbreviated as Chuan-deng-lu (T.51. No.2076).

<sup>5</sup> Tale of Mountain Monastery.

from master to disciple), without relying on verbal or literary communication, that directly points to one's mind. Furthermore, a *Gong-an* can be a torch of wisdom that eliminates false intellectualization and discrimination, and also an expedient method which eliminates conditions of bondage due to affliction.

As mentioned above, the original character of the *Gong-an* was intended as individual rules and principles for masters to induce students in *Chan* practice. However, in the later period of the Song Dynasty, *Gong-ans* were considered as fixed, collective, general and common principles that could be used among many practitioners. Two typical ones are Zhao-zhou's<sup>6</sup> *Gong-ans*. Whenever students asked Zhao-zhou, "What's the reason the patriarch came from the west?", then he always repeated these two typical *Gong-ans*, "Help yourself to a cup of tea" or "A cypress tree in the garden." (SGC. Vol.18:34,36,155).

These kinds of Gong-ans, as a medium of Chan practice, prevailed after the Song Dynasty. In Chan training monasteries, there was a strong tendency of emphasizing the 'experience of enlightenment' after the Song period. The 'experience of enlightenment' was strongly stressed in the Northern School of Chan, but such a trend was disregarded after Shen-hui (684-758) and finally the 'experience of enlightenment' was completely and explicitly ignored after Ma-zu (709-788). However, later, 'Chan experience' was once again emphasized in the Southern Song period. This trend shows that the minds of the Chan masters were directed inwardly away from formality, intellectualization and convention.

Gong-an Seon (Ganhwa Seon) appeared in the Southern Song period owing to the combination of the emphasized 'Chan experience' and the criticism of conventional, perfunctory Gong-an by many Chan masters like Da-hui (1089-1163) and Hong-zhi (1091-1157). Gong-an Seon began with Yuan-wu (1063-1135) and Wu-zu (1024-1104). Da-hui succeeded and organized Gong-an Seon as a clear methodology of Chan practice.

<sup>6</sup> Zhao-zhou (778-897): one of the most well-known Chinese *Chan* masters of the Tang Dynasty, whose teachings are frequently cited in *Gong-an* collections. The most often-cited of his attributed teachings is the *Gong-an* of the dog and the Buddha-nature or '*Mu*' *Gong-an*, as well as the teaching "the great way is not difficult."

Through his unique methodology of 'a big doubt', practitioners raised solidification of doubt at the bottom of their mind. This increased focus on the 'doubt-mass' generated by the *Gong-an*, ultimately leading to enlightenment.

# III. The formation and practice of Ganhava Seon

During the Southern Song period, with the completion of the Five mountains and Ten monasteries system which was supported by the government, the daily life of a *Chan* monastery was formalized and *Chan* dialogue was intellectualized under governmental influences (Seizan, 1970:176). However, a new *Gong-an Seon* movement led by Wu-zu restored the vigorous and lively *Chan* style of the Tang Dynasty, shattering the formalized and stagnant *Gong-an Seon* of the Song period.

Originally, the genuine *Gong-an Seon* practice was an individual question and answer formula between master and student intended to induce enlightenment in the student; but later it became formalized text guidelines among many practitioners, resulting in the deterioration of the authentic *Gong-an Seong* through intellectualizing the *Gong-an* themselves.

As hundreds of formalized and intellectualized *Gong-ans* sprouted with 'florid and flowery words', many practicing monks fell into an easy-going deliberation and calculation. Thus, Da-hui suggested the substantial nature of *Gong-an Seon* and provided a new direction for the *Chan* method.

The formation of Da-hui's *Ganhwa Seon* can be traced back to *Dalma Seon*. The gist of *Dalma Seon* is 'wall-meditation'7 with a deep faith in the true nature.<sup>8</sup> *Dalma Seon* is a deep faith in the *tathāgata-garbha*9 of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, and it starts with faith in

<sup>7</sup> The wall-gazer, applied to Bodhidharma, who is said to have gazed at a wall for nine years. Also a name for the meditation of the *Chan* school.

<sup>8</sup> The fundamental nature of each individual, i.e. the Buddha-nature.

<sup>9</sup> As an embryo that should become a Buddha, or as that 'womb' where the Buddha-to-be is carried. In either case, it does not refer simply to 'mind,' rather it is an expression that refers to sentient beings as the full embodiment of the Buddha's capability for existence. At the same

original and innate enlightenment.10

If *Ganhwa Seon* is considered as a *Seon* with 'big doubt', it can be said to be 'the *Seon* of initial enlightenment'<sup>11</sup> - starting with 'big doubt'. Sudden enlightenment is a goal of *Ganhwa Seon*. Da-hui, who laid the foundation of *Ganhwa Seon*, strongly denied the character of 'waiting enlightenment' in *Ganhwa Seon* which was criticized by the school of *Mukjo Seon*.

In *Ganhwa Seon*, observing a key phrase is the main gate of sitting meditation. Observing a *Gong-an* with a big question leads the practitioner to the stage where he coincides with his true nature. <sup>12</sup> As far as the wall-meditation of Bodhidharma having it's root in deep faith is concerned, wall-meditation itself is the unhindered self which leads us to the state of enlightenment.

In the Dou-xue<sup>13</sup>, Zong-mi (780-841) says:

time, compositionally, it is in the condition of being temporarily defiled by non-inherent forces, thus it cannot be called 'Buddha.' Therefore the term refers to the capability for becoming a tathāgata that is present in the minds of worldlings. The cause of tathāgatahood existing within sentient beings. Thought to be the origin of the manifestation of all aspects of existence.

<sup>10</sup> Ben-jiao: The possession by sentient beings of enlightenment as their basic nature, which means that enlightenment is not something to be obtained externally, as a distant goal, or as part of a gradual, purifying process, but exists in full reality here in the present moment, and therefore sentient beings need only to awaken to it. This is a concept expressed commonly in scriptural works of East Asian provenance, such as the Dai-sheng-qi-xin-lun (Mahayanasraddhotpada-sastra; Awakening of Mahayana Faith, T.32. No.1666-1667) and the Yuan-jiao-jing (Satra of Perfect Enlightenment, T.17. No.842). It is due to this East Asian origin that there are no direct Indic terms indicated as sources for the concept, which in turn offers support to the argument for the East Asian provenance of such texts. It is in the Dai-sheng-qi-xin-lun in particular where the background of the doctrine is developed in detail, where it is explained in contrast to 'Shi-jiao', as transcending the dualistic opposition of 'Jiao' vs. 'Bu-jiao', See, T.32.576b14.

<sup>11</sup> Shi-jiao: The first phenomenal actualization of enlightenment in this lifetime, as contrasted to Ben-jiao which is the basic Buddha-nature of sentient beings. The concepts of initial enlightenment and original enlightenment are elucidated at length in the Dai-sheng-qi-xin-lun (T.32.576b14). The initial functioning of mind or intelligence as a process of 'becoming,' arising from Ben-jiao which is Mind or Intelligence, self-contained, unsullied, and considered as universal, the source of all enlightenment. The 'initial intelligence' or enlightenment arises from the inner influence of the Mind and from external teaching. In the 'original intelligence' are the four values adopted and made transcendent by the Mahaparinirvana-sutra (T.12. No.374,375). These are perpetuity, joy, personality, and purity.

<sup>12</sup> The fundamental nature of each individual, i.e. Buddha-nature. The true nature of the mind, which, is *Ben-jiao* in the *Dai-sheng-qi-xin-lun* (HBJ. Vol.1:733b).

<sup>13</sup> Preface to the Collection of Chan Sources: Its full title is Chan-yuan-zhu-quan-ji-dou-xue (T.48.

"If we have suddenly enlightened on the pure mind of the own-nature, originally there is no defilement and also we are inherently equipped with untainted wisdom free from all illusion. This mind is ultimately equivalent to the wisdom of the Buddha. This practice is the *Seon* of the supreme vehicle and also called *Yeorae Seon*" (T.48.399b16-19).

As Zong-mi said above, it can be said that *Dalma Seon* itself is 'sudden enlightenment *Chan.*' *Dalma Seon* is principally based on the unhindered state of non-duality between body and mind and we can see the starting point of *Dalma Seon* right here. In *Dalma Seon*, wall-meditation is 'a practice of faith' which is directed towards the inward self. On the other hand, *Ganhwa Seon* also induces practitioners to realize immediately the innately pure-mind i.e. *tathāgata-garbha*, but by intuition through the exchange of questions and answers.

This kind of mind-penetrating *Seon* is practiced through 'a big doubt' as master and student face each other. Only when these doubts collide with each other and are crushed at the same time will there be enlightenment, recognition and transmission of *Dharma*. Here, a *Gong-an* is an object of doubt which is directed by the master. Wu-zu layed the foundation of *Gong-an Seon* as *Ganhwa Seon* and Da-hui put a finishing touch on its completion.

There is enough reason to believe that Da-hui advocated the *Ganhwa Seon*. He criticized Silent illumination *Seon* as a gradual and dualistic sitting practice void of original enlightenment. He assured practitioners that *Ganhwa Seon* would bring sudden, non-dual and original enlightenment through a *Gong-an*. In other words, *Ganhwa Seon* starts with a specially emphasized big mass of doubt.

# IV. The practice system of Ganhava Seon

Whereas *Ganhwa Seon* is a meditation on the key phrase of a *Gong-an* also for the purpose of coinciding with one's true nature, *Mukjo* 

No.2015).

Seon is a sitting meditation without thinking. Even though Da-hui criticized *Mukjo Seon* as a heterodox *Seon*, Silent illumination *Chan* of the *Cao-dong* school and *Ganhwa Seon* of the *Lin-ji* school are essentially the same. Ultimately *Ganhwa Seon's* true character is to concentrate all of one's consciousness on a *Gong-an* so as to cut off all calculation and discrimination.

Wu-men (1183-1260) explains the *Gong-an* practice of the dog and Buddha-nature. It has been called, the '*Mu' Gong-an* and runs as follows:

"Meditate on 'original non-being (Mu)' wholeheartedly with a big doubt at the bottom of your mind! Concentrate on it all day long. Don't consider non-being neither as 'nothingness' nor as 'existence or non-existence.'  $\cdots$  If you continue to concentrate with your body and soul and crush your ignorance, you will get it spontaneously" (T.48.293a3-6).

If you concentrate with all consciousness on 'the mass of doubt' generated by the *Gong-an*, then you will eventually reach your original face (i.e. true nature). In this respect, both *Seon* practices have essentially no difference at all in that they seek the same original mind by eliminating deliberation and discrimination. The only difference is that they use the *Ganhwa* method [meditating on a the key phrase of a *Gong-an*] or not.

According to the *Chan-guan-ce-jin*<sup>14</sup> written by Yun-shu (1535-1615), it provides guidelines that trigger the practitioners to look back on their faith. In the *Dharma talk between Wan-shan and Meng-shan*, Wan-shan (1191-1274)'s advises: "Concentrate on '*Mu*' but don't read *sūtra* or analects", "Practice like 'a cat that catches a mouse quickly or a hen that carefully embraces her egg hatching", "Don't change your *Hwadu* before you arrive at complete enlightenment", "Question yourself about why Zhao-zhou denied buddhahood even though all sentient beings have buddhahood?" (T48.1005a8-a13; Wonyung, 1993:114-122).

Meng-shan also emphasized the importance of 'big doubt' in his

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<sup>14</sup> Way to Advance Chan Practice (X.63. No.1257).

Dharma talk of Meng-shan as follows: "You have to question the Gong-an you received from your Master. If you have a big doubt, you will have a big enlightenment. Put together thousands of questions and crush the Gong-an you received from your Master. Accordingly, crushing 'a big doubt (Hwadu)' is a key point and lifeline of Ganhwa Seon."

According to Chan-jing-yu<sup>15</sup> written by Po-shan (1535-1615), he explains in detail about the importance of 'big doubt' and the path of practice. Wu-men's idea is all the same as follows: "Only one 'mass of doubt' is in your body and soul. If you can't crush the mass of doubt, don't rest in your mind. If you concentrate on 'Mu', you have to have a big doubt on 'Mu'. If you have 'the cypress tree in the garden' as a Gong-an, you should have a feeling of doubt on it day and night. Thus, a genuine feeling of mass arises and the world will be filled with only of doubt." Finally, in this moment, you can realize mass enlightenment where the inside and outside [the subjective and objective] are united as a whole, crushing the whole mass of doubt. The practice system of Da-hui's Ganhwa Seon consists of great faith, great doubt and great enthusiasm. The current practice system of the Jogye Order in Korea exclusively reflects Da-hui's kind of Ganhwa Seon.

### V. Conclusion

The lineage of Korean *Seon* initiated by master Bojo and Taego originated from the Southern *Chan* of China. It is generally considered that the Korean *Seon* method succeeded Da-hui who belonged to the Yang-qi branch of the *Lin-ji* school. Da-hui *Seon* penetrated intellectuals after the Yuan (1279-1368) and Ming (1368-1644) Dynasties in China, and became the driving force of the *Chan* movement. Likewise, *Taego Seon* was the engine of integration for all the Buddhist sects into *Seon*-centered Buddhism. Taego introduced the *Lin-ji* school to the later stagnant Goryeo Buddhism through the cultivation of One Mind. Thus,

<sup>15</sup> Admonition to Chan Practice (X.63. No.1257).

<sup>16</sup> The mind as the most fundamental basis. The true thusness of all existence. 'One' means that the ordinary is one with the absolute. 'Mind' means 'certainty.' Also, the one consciousness that is the basis for all sentient beings. The absolute reality that is the basis for all phenomena

Ganhava Seon played a key role in transmitting the lamp of the patriarchs and became a significant energy of the Jogye Order's tradition.

The practice of *Ganhwa Seon* as an initial enlightenment, which has faith in 'the original purity of mind' is a kind of short-cut practice that returns to the original sources of innate enlightenment of *Seon*. As Da-hui said "A true practitioner is compared to a bell in the bell-tower. The stronger we strike a bell, the louder and more far away it sounds spreads", *Ganhwa Seon* regards 'a big faith' and 'a big doubt' as it's essence and is a vital mainspring of Korean *Seon*.

# Glossary of Chinese Terms

(K=Korean, C=Chinese, J=Japanese, S=Sanskrit, P=Pali)

Bi-yan-lu (C) 碧巖錄

Bojo (K) 普照.

Bu-jiao (C) 不覺

Cao-dong (C) 曹洞

Chan-guan-ce-jin (C) 禪關策進

Chan-jing-yu (C) 禪警語

Chan-yao (C) 禪要

Chan-yuan-zhu-quan-ji-dou-xue (C) 禪源諸詮集都序

Chuan-deng-lu (C) 傳燈錄

Chun-feng (C) 中蜂

Da-hui (C) 大慧

Dai-sheng-qi-xin-lun (C) 大乘起信論

Dalma Seon (K) 達磨禪, 達摩禪

Dao-yuan (C) 道原

Dharmadhātu (S) 法界

Dharmakāya (S) 法身

Do-ui (K) 道義

Dou-xue (C) 都序

in the universe. This concept is central to the *Dai-sheng-qi-xin-lun* where the one mind is identified with the *dharmakāya* and *dharmadhātu* (T32.576a5).

Fa-yan (C) 法眼

Gajisan (K) 迦智山

Ganhwa (K) 看話

Ganhwa Seon (K) 看話禪

Gong-an (K, C) 公案

Gong-an Seon (K) 公案禪

Goryeo (K) 高麗

Hong-zhi (C) 宏智

Huang-long (C) 黃龍

Hwadu (K) 話頭

Hyu-jeong (C) 休静

Jing-de-chuan-deng-lu (C) 景德傳燈錄

Jogye (K) 曹溪

Joseon (K) 朝鮮

Lin-ji (C) 臨濟

Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra (S) 大般涅槃經

Ma-zu (C) 馬祖

Meng-shan (C) 蒙山

Ming (C) 明

Mu (K), Wu(C) 無

Mukjo Seon (K) 黙照禪

Po-shan (C) 博山

Seon (K), Chan (C), Zen (J), Dhyāna (S) 禪

Seon-ga Gwigam (K) 禪家龜鑑

Seon-gyo-seok (K) 禪教釋

Shan-fang-ye-fua (C) 山房夜話

Shen-hui (C) 神會

Shi-jiao (C) 始覺

Shu-zhang (C) 書狀

Silla (K) 新羅

Song (C) 宋

Taego (K) 太古

Taego Seon (K) 太古禪

Tang (C) 唐

Tathāgata (S) 如來藏

Ui-ang (C) 潙仰

Wan-shan (C) 皖山

Wu-men (C) 無門

Wu-zu (C) 五祖

Xue-dou (C) 雪竇

Yang-qi (C) 楊岐

Yeorae Seon (K) 如來禪

Yuan (C) 元

Yuan-jiao-jing (C) 圓覺經

Yuan-wu (C) 園悟

Yun-shu (C) 雲棲

Zhao-zhou (C) 趙州

Zong-mi (C) 宗密

# **Abbreviations**

HBJ Hanguk Bulgyo Jeonseo (韓國佛教全書; Complete Works of Korean Buddhism). Seoul: Dongguk Univ. Press.

SGC Seollim Gogyeong Chongseo (禪林古鏡叢書; Collection of Paragons of Seon Masters). Seoul: Jang-gyeong-gak.

Taishyō-shinsy-daizōkyō (大正新修大藏經; Japanese Edition of

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X Xu-zang (卍續藏, Japanese Edition of Chinese Tripi%aka).

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