I GENERAL INTRODUCTION

During the last thirty years there has been a revolution in the understanding and appreciation of the Buddhist tantras in the West. Whereas they had been regarded in the past with suspicion and disdain by those who saw them as the hybrid products of a degenerate form of late Indian Buddhism, they are now the focus of great interest among both the growing band of Western Buddhists following the Tibetan tradition and the smaller number of Western academics specializing in Buddhist and related studies, as will be evident from even a cursory glance at bibliographies of works on Buddhism now in print. However, this new interest in the Buddhist tantras still has many limitations and unfortunately a detailed description of the development of tantric thought and practices is far from being complete. This situation will not be remedied until much more textual work has been done by the few scholars who have access to the original materials surviving in the various Asian languages. Moreover, almost without exception, present-day scholars in the West have relied solely on Tibetan materials and such Indic texts as have survived the ravages of time for their studies on the tantras. While much valuable work has thus been produced by these scholars, they do present a somewhat one-sided view of Tantric Buddhism as they have tended to concentrate on the more spectacular Anuttara-yoga tantras. For apart from these, there is also a wealth of other tantric literature preserved in Tibetan sources, dealing with the Kriyā, Caryā and Yoga tantras, that awaits detailed exploration and translation. Additionally, the neglect of the vast amount of literature related to Tantric Buddhism available in Chinese translation is quite regrettable, although this is understandable in view of the quite daunting range of linguistic skills which is needed to make full use of these texts. It would not be surprising to find that most Western scholars working on Buddhist tantras from the Indo-Tibetan side are largely unaware of the enormous volume of translated tantric texts preserved in Chinese. We can better understand the sheer bulk of available material if we relate it to the present work. The Chinese text of the *Mahā-vairocana Tantra* covers just forty four pages in the standard Taishō Edition and my translation of this covers about 200 pages. However there are another 3,554 pages of texts related to Tantric Buddhism in Chinese, which at the above rate would amount to over 16,150 pages in English. And that is before we start on the native Chinese and Japanese commentarial works, manuals and so forth! A comprehensive study of this material is vital for an understanding of the origins of Tantric Buddhism, for while the Tibetan tradition is strong on later tantric works and less so on earlier ones, the situation with the Chinese materials is the reverse – they have preserved many of the earlier Indian texts which were never translated into Tibetan. This is not only true of 'tantric' style texts, but also can be said of all Buddhist works in general. It must be remembered that the bulk of Chinese translations had been completed before the Tibetans had really begun their work on the canon. Chinese translation activities began in the middle of the 2nd century CE and continued until at least the first half of the 11th century, a period of over nine hundred years! Moreover, in stark contrast to the paucity of relevant materials providing reliable dates in Indology, documents from the Chinese tradition often record various historical data with great accuracy. It is noteworthy that the dates when Buddhist texts were translated into Chinese during this nine hundred year period are known

in the majority of cases, thereby providing us with a loose framework for the chronology of the development of Buddhist texts. It should therefore not surprise us if the insights we can derive from Chinese sources cast a different light on the development of Tantric Buddhism.

For example, it is normal to classify the tantras into four categories – Kriyā, Caryā, Yoga and Anuttara-yoga – following the normal Tibetan practice and this system of classification is now treated by modern Western scholars as though it were in some way definitive. But it is clear from a study of earlier tantric materials, especially of those preserved in the Chinese tradition, that this system of classification, useful though it was to very late Indian exegetes and their Tibetan successors, was gradually developed to make sense of the mass of tantric materials that they were faced with. Nevertheless, it may be said that this system of classification also represents, in a general manner, the historical sequence in which the tantras were developed. In other words, the majority of the texts that came to be classified as Kriyā tantras derive from the earliest proto-tantric phase, leading on through Caryā tantras to the Yoga and later the Anuttara-yoga tantras. This will be seen most clearly later when we briefly examine the contents of tantric-style texts surviving in Chinese, together with their dates of translation.

But before proceeding any further, it might be useful to attempt a definition for the reader of exactly what kind of texts we may legitimately call tantras, for the situation is not as straightforward as some might wish to believe. I remember asking someone who has specialized in the Indian tantric tradition how can one identify tantric texts as being such and was given the rather ingenuous answer that this is easy because tantras have the word 'tantra' in their titles. But this is clearly not the case, because a number of texts that one would formally classify as tantras are in fact called *sūtras*, such as the *Maha-vairocana-abhisambodhi*[1] itself, the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṃgraha* and several of the early rNying-ma tantras, such as the *dGongs-'dus* (T 829), the *rNgam-glog* (T 830), the *Kun-'dus* (T 831) and so forth. In fact, the word 'tantra' itself does not even appear anywhere in some of these texts, including the present text itself.

Definitions of the term do appear in some later tantric texts, such as the famous lines in the Continuation Tantra of the *Guhya-samāja*, which state '*"Tantra" is continuity and that continuity is threefold: the ground, the intrinsic nature and the indestructible. The intrinsic nature is the immanent cause, the indestructible is the result and the ground is the means. The meaning of "tantra" is summarized by these three*[2]'. However, important as these definitions are, they tend to be somewhat doctrinal or soteriological in nature, so we should try to isolate the key constituent elements which go to make up what one might call Tantric Buddhism in its widest sense, to get a better grasp of what we are dealing with. There are a number of such elements, some of which were derived from earlier trends within Buddhism itself and others which were adopted and adapted from non-Buddhist sources. Obviously it is beyond the scope of this book to present a full-scale study and documentation of all these elements, desirable though that may be, but instead I shall confine myself to a summary of those features which characterize the spirit of Buddhist tantric thought[3]:

1 Tantric Buddhism offers an alternative path to Enlightenment in addition to the standard Mahāyāna one.

2 Its teachings are aimed at lay practitioners in particular, rather than monks and nuns.
3 As a consequence of this, it recognizes mundane aims and attainments, and often deals with practices which are more magical in character than spiritual.
4 It teaches special types of meditation (*sādhana*) as the path to realization, aimed at transforming the individual into an embodiment of the divine in this lifetime or after a short span of time.
5 Such kinds of meditation make extensive use of various kinds of mandalas, *mudrās*, mantras and *dhāraṇīs* as concrete expressions of the nature of reality.
6 The formation of images of the various deities during meditation by means of creative imagination plays a key role in the process of realization. These images may be viewed as being present externally or internally.
7 There is an exuberant proliferation in the number and types of Buddhas and other deities.
8 Great stress is laid upon the importance of the guru and the necessity of receiving the instructions and appropriate initiations for the *sādhanas* from him.
9 Speculations on the nature and power of speech are prominent, especially with regards the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet.
10 Various customs and rituals, often of non-Buddhist origins, such as the *homa* rituals, are incorporated and adapted to Buddhist ends.
11 A spiritual physiology is taught as part of the process of transformation.
12 It stresses the importance of the feminine and utilizes various forms of sexual yoga.

Though by no means exhaustive, this list incorporates the main elements and preoccupations of the tantras. During the proto-tantric and early tantric phase only a few of these elements may occur together in any given text, but as we enter the middle and late phases, we find that an increasing number of them, in one form or another, are incorporated into the texts. This process of synthesis and development extended over several centuries, from the earliest proto-tantric texts down to the elaborate *Kālacakra Tantra*, which was possibly the last tantra to be developed in India. While it would be foolhardy to make any definitive statements about the early development of the tantras at the present stage of our knowledge, it might be of interest to briefly examine this process, particularly from the evidence available to us from Chinese sources.

First, the general trend may be seen if we examine a simple listing of the main translations (Table 1) containing any of the above elements down to the early Tang period. Other texts could be added to this list with some justification, such as the Pure Land cycle of texts. What immediately strikes one is the sudden increase of these texts from the Sui to Tang Dynasty, an indication of the increasing popularity of 'tantric' practice in India. Those translated after Xuan-zang during the Tang and early Song periods run into hundreds and so are far too numerous to list. Looking at their contents, we can see a gradual progression from external 'mundane' rituals and objectives to the internal and the 'spiritual', from the unsystematic to the systematic. Hence, as their titles indicate, the majority of the earlier texts are connected with *dhāraṇīs* and they deal with various kinds of prayers or requests for

Table 1: Chinese Translations of Sutras with 'Tantric' Elements

Wu	**Zhi-qian** (220-230 CE):
	Ananta-mukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1011)
	Mātaṅga-sūtra (= *Śārdula-karṇāvadāna*) (T1300)
	Dhāraṇī of Supreme Illuminator (T1351)
	Puṣpakūṭa-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1356)
E. Chin (317-420)	**Dharmarakṣa:**
	Dhāraṇī for Relieving Toothache (T1327)
	Ārṣa-praśamanī-sūtra (T1325)
	Māyā-kāra-bhadra-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1378)
	**Daṇḍala-māyā Dhāraṇī* (T1391)
	Maṇi-ratna-sūtra (T1393)
	Nanda:
	Sūtra of Avalokiteśvara's Dhāraṇī for Overcoming Poisoning (T1043)
	Śrī-mitra:
	Abhiṣeka-sūtra (T1331)
	Kumarajīva:
	Mahā-māyurī-vidyā-rājñī (T988)
	Buddhabhadra:
	Avataṃsaka-sūtra-hṛdaya-dhāraṇī (T1021)
	Unknown:
	Puṣpakūṭa-dhāraṇī (T1357) (T1358)
W. Chin	**Dharmapāla** (385-400):
	Mātaṅga-sūtra (T1301)
	Sheng-jian:
	Sūtra on the Dhāraṇī Against Perversities (T1342)
N. Liang (397-439)	**Fa-zhong:**
	Mahā-vaipulya-dhāraṇī (T1339)
Liu Sung (420-478)	**Guṇabhadra:**
	Ananta-mukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1013)
	***Punyaśīla & Xuan-chang:**
	Ananta-mukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1014)
	Kālayaśa:
	Amitābha-dhyāna-sūtra (T365)
	Bhaisajya-rāja-bhaisajya-samudgati-sūtra (T1161)
Qi (479-502)	**Wan-tian-yi:**
	Infinite Dhāraṇī of Entry into all Dharmas (T1343)
Liang (505-556)	**Saṅghapala:**
	Mahā-māyurī-sūtra (T984)
	Ananta-mukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1016)
N. Wei (534-550)	**Buddhaśānta:**
	Ananta-mukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1015)
	Vajra-maṇḍa-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1344)
	Tan-yao:
	Dhāraṇī for Great Benefit (T1335)
	Bodhiruci:
	Sarva-bala-rakṣa-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1028)
N. Chou (557-581)	**Jñānayaśa:**
	Mahā-megha-sūtra (T992) (T993)
	Yaśogupta:
	Avalokiteśvaraika-daśa-mukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1070)

Table 1 (continued)

Sui (581-618)	**Narendrayaśa:**
	Mahā-megha-sūtra (T991)
	Jānagupta:
	Ananta-mukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1017)
	Amoghapaśa-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1093)
	Tathāgata-mahā-kauśalyopāya-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1334)
	Dharmolka-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1340)
	Mahā-bala-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1341)
	Vajra-maṇḍa-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1345)
	Dhāraṇī of the Twelve Buddhas (T1348)
	Dhāraṇī of Supreme Illuminator (T1353) (T1354)
T'ang	**Xuan-zang** (post 645):
	Sarva-buddha-hṛdaya-dhāraṇī (T918)
	Five Dhāraṇīs (T1034)
	Avalokiteśvaraika-daśa-mukha-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1071)
	Amoghapaśa-hṛdaya-sūtra (T1094)
	Vasudhārā-dhāraṇī-sutra (T1162)
	Ṣaṇ-mukha-dhāraṇī (T1360) (T1361)
	Subāhu-mudrā-dhāraṇī-sūtra (T1363)
	Sūtra of Most Secret Dhāraṇī of Eight Names (T1365)
	Dhāraṇī that Saves from Adversities (T1395)

liberation from sufferings, adversities or disasters. Such texts probably have their roots in the early *paritta* type of sutras. But we are unable to detect any fusion in a systematic manner of Buddhist thought with these prayers and practices. So though a few of these texts, such as the *Sutra on the Dhāraṇī Against Perversities* (T 1342) and the *Infinite Dhāraṇī of Entry into all Dharmas* (T 1343) refer to emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and others such as the *Ṣaṇ-mukha-dhāraṇī* (T 1360 & T 1361) mention 'awareness-only' (*vijñapti-mātra*), the general feeling one gets from looking at these texts is that they were for the benefit of unsophisticated ordinary people beyond the confines of the great monasteries such as Nālandā. Hence the aims of the practices are often quite modest and do not entail a radical course of self-development using the complex types of meditation (*bhāvanā*) and the mandalas or *mudrās* that are so characteristic of fully developed tantras. On the other hand, as one might expect to find in a popular devotional form of Buddhism, we can note the existence of various kinds of worship and offering (*pūja*) to the Buddhas which later form a part of tantric practice. It is noteworthy that some texts describe types of worship that employ visualization of various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, especially those associated with the Pure Land group of texts. For example, the *Amitāyur-dhyāna-sūtra* (T 365), translated into Chinese by Kālayaśa around 430 CE, gives vivid descriptions of Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara and Mahā-sthāma-prāpta and also of the mandala-like Pure Land of Amitābha itself. It can easily be seen how similar such meditative visualizations are to those prescribed in tantric texts both for worship and for *sādhana*. The visualizations of the Pure Land parallel to a remarkable extent those of mandalas, as for example, that in Chapter 16 herein of the *Mahā-vairocana Tantra*.

Other texts in the above list are important as they give some indication of the introduction and use of rituals. For example, the well-known *Mātaṅga Sutra* (T551, T552, T1300, T1301), first translated by Zhi-qian in 230 CE and re-translated several

times down to the late 5th century CE, speaks of a magical ritual used for subjugation. The earliest versions tell of a low-caste (*caṇḍalī*) woman who was infatuated with Ānanda. Her mother tries to entice him in the following manner. She magically creates flowers in eight jars of water and then taking these up, she casts them back into the jars while reciting spells. Later versions of the text contain a prototype of the Buddhist *homa* ritual. The sorceress mother smears the floor of her house with cow-dung and spreads white rushes (*kuśa*?) upon it. She then lights a large fire there and casts a hundred and eight flowers into it while reciting the necessary spell with each flower. These texts also contain six *dhāraṇīs* and the instructions for performing the associated ceremonies.

We see other ritual elements in the *Mahā-māyūri-vidyā-rāja Sūtra*. The several versions of this text in Chinese bear witness to its continuing popularity. In an appendix to it, translated by Śrī-mitra (T 1331) around 340 CE, there are instructions for the delimitation of the ritual area (*sīma-bandha*), which is then to be decorated with five swords, five banners, five mirrors, twenty-one arrows and twenty-one lamps. This site is to be anointed with perfumes and mustard seeds are to be burnt to expel obstructing demons.

Further developments may be seen in the *Dhāraṇī for Great Benefit* (T1335) translated by Tan-yao in 462 CE. In addition to the burning of mustard seeds and such like, this text also prescribes the recitation of mantras before the images of various deities to bring about their appearance in order to fulfil the wishes of the practitioner. Again, it describes the making of a ritual area, but now with Buddha images arranged in circle to receive offerings.

Mandalas, which figure so much in tantras, can be formally divided into two main categories according to Buddhaguhya – the intrinsically existent mandala and the representational mandalas. The first of these is the 'real' mandala formed by the Buddha and the emanations of his qualities as Bodhisattvas and so forth. The second type is the graphic or plastic representation of the first. These two types seem to derive from different, though not entirely unrelated sources. As mentioned above, one might see the origin of the intrinsically existent mandala in the descriptions of the various pure lands, so striking is the similarity. On the other hand, the origins of the representational mandala may well lie in the arrangement of Buddha and Bodhisattva images upon altars for worship. As images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas became acceptable to people in India, we often find representations of the Buddha flanked by Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇi. With the proliferation of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, one can understand how these would have come to resemble the basic pattern of a mandala when arranged geometrically. Hence the arrangement of such images in a circle, described in the *Dhāraṇī for Great Benefit*, can be seen as a rudimentary mandala. This same text also teaches various attainments (*siddhi*) to stop storms, to make rain, to become invisible and so forth.

I have only been able to select a few of the most noteworthy texts for mention here, but all of these works bear witness to the steady increase of tantric elements in Buddhism, leading on to the flowering of sophisticated tantric texts in the seventh and eighth centuries.

In addition to the evolutionary process indicated by the chronological sequence of these texts preserved in Chinese, there are other indications we may note that speak of the spread and acceptance of tantric practices. For example, Śāntideva (fl.

700–750 CE) compiled the *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, a valuable selection of quotations from various Mahāyāna texts, dealing with the practices a Bodhisattva was expected to engage in. There are several interesting features to be found in this work relevant to the development of Tantric Buddhism in India. One is Śāntideva's acceptance and use as a textual authority (*āmnāya*) of the *Trisamaya-rāja*, one of the sources of the *Mahā-vairocana Tantra*. The other is the evidence for the growing importance of internal visualization, similar to that in tantric practices. These are the relevant passages:

1 '*You should recite this* vidyā *mentioned in the* ***Tri-samaya-rāja*** *for the mandala* samaya*:* Namaḥ sarva-buddha-bodhisattvānām. Oṃ viraji viraji mahā-cakra-viraji. Sata sata sārata sārata trapi trapi vidhamani. Sabhajani saṃbhajani, taramati, siddha agre tvaṃ svāhā. *With that you may enter all mandalas. Or else you should recite Essence of the Tathāgata eight thousand times and then enter into both mundane and supra-mundane mandalas ...*'
2 '*Focusing upon the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, you should also recite [the mantras] following the Rite of Good Conduct, with a mind that longs to benefit all beings. This prescribed rite* (vidhi) *should be observed at the conclusion of this ceremony. What is prescribed in the* ***Tri-samaya-rāja*** *is authoritative* (āmnāya), *so there is no fault [in doing this].*'
3 '*According to the* ***Tri-samaya-rāja****, the prescribed ritual is to close your eyes and recite the Hundred Lettered [Mantra] eight thousand times, with your mind focused upon the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. As soon as you have shut your eyes, you will behold the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and be freed from sins. Or else circumambulating a stūpa, you should recite it eight thousand times and also place books of the holy Dharma in front of the image in the shrine.*'
4 '*The Bodhisattva who is endowed with eight qualities will constantly meet Buddhas. What are those eight? He urges people to visualize the body-form of the Buddha, he worships* (upasthāna) *the Tathāgatas, he expounds the eternal form of the Tathāgata ....*' (From the *Bṛhat-sāgara-nāga-rāja-paripṛcchā*).
5 '*Nobly born sons or daughters should visualize the Buddha depicted in paintings or described in books.*' (From the *Śraddha-bālādhānāvatāra-mudrā*).

From this we can see that the kind of 'tantric' practice generally accepted around that time already included use of mandalas, the recitation of *dhāraṇīs*, ritual worship (*pūja*) and visualization.

Xuan-zang, the great Chinese traveller, was also in India until 645 CE. He has left us a detailed account of his travels in the *Da-tang-xi-yu-ji*, yet he makes no mention of anything which would clearly indicate the wide-spread existence of tantric practices or texts, apart from the use of *dhāraṇīs*. It has been argued that this could be due to his lack of interest in such matters, yet as he was a keen observer of the state of Buddhism as he found it throughout India at that time, it would not be unreasonable to expect him to have mentioned such practices in passing had he actually witnessed them. It is likely that any specifically tantric texts and practices that were already in existence at that time had not yet gained general acceptance in the main centres of Buddhism he visited, such as Nālandā.

However this situation seems to have changed thirty years later when Yi-jing arrived in India in 673 CE. We find a number of references in his 'Record of Eminent Monks

who Sought the Dharma in the West' (*Xī-yu-qiu-fa-gao-seng-zhuan*) to tantric practices, where there is the very suggestive remark that people '*seek the secret books from the* nāga *palaces in the oceans and search for mantras from stone-chambers in the mountains*'. Even more noteworthy is what he has to say in the section dealing with Dao-lin, who also had spent many years in India. It seems that Dao-lin was very interested in tantric practices. He resided for a number of years at Nālandā and then set out first to Lāṭa in Western India where he '*stood before the divine altar and received the* vidyās *once again*'. Regarding the *vidyās*, Yi-jing says,

> *'It is said that the* Vidyādhara *Collection comprises a hundred thousand verses in Sanskrit, which in Chinese would amount to over three hundred rolls. But if one inspects these texts nowadays, it will be seen that many have been lost and few are complete. After the death of the Great Sage, Nāgārjuna in particular studied the main parts of this Collection. Then one of his disciples called Nanda, who was both intelligent and learned, turned his attention to this text. He spent twelve years in the west of India, applying himself solely to the study of the* dhāraṇīs. *At length he achieved success. Whenever it was time for him to eat, his meals descended from the sky. Furthermore, one day while he was reciting the* vidyās, *he wanted to get a wish-fulfilling jar, which he obtained after a short while. He was overjoyed to find that there was a book within this jar, but as he did not bind the jar with a* vidyā, *it suddenly vanished. Then, fearing that the* vidyās *might be scattered and lost, the Dharma Master Nanda gathered them together into a single collection of about twelve thousand verses, forming a single corpus. In each verse he matched up the text of the* vidyās *with* mudrās. *Although the words and the letters are similar [to those in normal use], in fact their meanings and usages are different. Truly, there is no way of comprehending them without an oral transmission. Later, the Master Dignāga saw that the merit of this work surpassed the intelligence of ordinary people and its thought pushed reason to its limits. He put his hand upon the book and said sighing, "If this sage had applied his mind to logic, what honour would have remained for me?". One can see by this the wise know their own value though fools are blind to the worth of others. This* Vidyā *Collection of Prayers is not yet available in China, hence Dao-lin applied his mind to these subtleties, for it is said in this Collection that 'one will only succeed in walking in the sky, riding* nāgas, *commanding the hundred spirits or being a benefactor of beings, by means of these* vidyās'. *When I, Yi-jing, was staying at Nālandā, I went several times to the altar place, but as I was not successful in either my application to the essence of this teaching or in gaining merit, in the end I gave up my hopes. I have touched on the main points of these new teachings here, in order to make them known.'*

The Chinese word *tán* (壇), which I have translated in the above passages as 'altar' is ambivalent, as it was also used to translate the word '*maṇḍala*'. In view of the quotations given above from Śāntideva's *Śikṣā-samuccaya*, there is a strong likelihood that Yi-jing is referring to the use of mandalas at Nālandā while he was there. It should also be remembered that Śubhakara-siṃha, who translated the *Mahā-vairocana Tantra* into Chinese, and his teacher Dharmagupta would have been at Nālandā exactly at the same time as Yi-jing was, which gives rise to the intriguing possibility that they may have actually met!

Yi-jing mentions at length another monk, the Dhyāna Master Wu-xing, who was in India around the same time as himself. He had been there since 667 and died as he began his journey back to China in 674. Upon his death, the large number of texts he had collected, together with his travelogue-report were forwarded to China. In the part of this report which survives, Wu-xing states that '*recently the Mantra Method has come to be venerated throughout the land*'[4]. More will be spoken of Wu-xing's importance later.

It is this period onwards to the end of the eighth century which saw the most rapid development in tantric thought and practice. Though strictly outside the scope of this book, some observations regarding the probable sequence of events may not be out of place, especially as our commentator Buddhaguhya was active in the middle years of this period. Although there are scholars who seem to speak with great confidence about the dating and chronological relationship of the texts and people who figure in this process, my following suggestions are of a tentative and hypothetical nature. I make no apology for this, as it merely reflects the uncertainty surrounding the whole subject. One only has to take into consideration the enormous amount of available historical and documental evidence, much of which is ambiguous or contradictory, to understand the daunting task awaiting anyone attempting even an outline history of Tantric Buddhism. For example, one may present a reasonably plausible account of the relationship of the eighty four tantric *siddhas*, as has been done by several scholars, only to find that this does not fit in with evidence derived from other sources. Also, as I have stressed elsewhere, one ignores the information preserved in Chinese works at one's peril. The *only* reliable and datable eye-witness accounts that we have for the whole of the period in question are those provided for us by the Chinese monks who travelled in India – nothing comparable is available from Indian or Tibetan sources.

For reasons that I give below in the next section, I believe it is likely that the *Mahā-vairocana Tantra* (hereafter MVT) was composed or 'revealed' some time during the first half of the seventh century, perhaps around 640 CE or a little earlier. If we examine its contents in comparison with other tantric works, it clearly belongs to the earliest phase of true tantras, and must precede all Yoga and Anuttara-yoga tantras on both doctrinal and iconographical grounds. Although we can identify several other works that would have been composed immediately following the MVT, the next major work in the development of tantric Buddhism must be the *Sarva-tathāgata-tattva-saṃgraha* (STTS). This work is of seminal importance, as it heralds a number of innovations such as the adoption of a five Buddha family pattern in contrast to the three Buddha family pattern which is predominant in the MVT. We are fortunate in possessing the Sanskrit text of this work, its Tibetan translation, as well as several Chinese versions. The earliest evidence we have for the existence of this tantra again comes from Chinese sources. The Indian *ācārya* Vajrabodhi introduced elements derived from it (which he had obtained around 700) into China with his *Recitation Sūtra Extracted from the Vajra-śekhara Yoga* (T 866), which gives in a summarized form the basic meditational practices now found in the first section of the STTS. It is thought by Japanese scholars that this summary is based on material pre-dating the more elaborate version of the STTS (T 865) translated by Amoghavajra in 753. A certain amount of circumstantial evidence points to south India as the area of its origin. For example, according to its Chinese commentary, a certain *bhadanta*

(Nāgārjuna?) took the *Tattva-saṃgraha* from the Iron Stupa in south India. It is also stated in Vajrabodhi's biography that he received teachings on the *Tattva-saṃgraha* in southern India when he was thirty one (700 CE) from Nāgabodhi (Nāgabodhi is said to have been the disciple of Nāgārjuna, according to Sino-Japanese traditions). This is the first datable reference to it, so we may therefore assume that it had come into existence by the last quarter of the seventh century, though this was unlikely to have been in the full form we now have. Furthermore, Śākyamitra, one of the later eighth century Indian commentators on the STTS, relates in the introductory salutation verses where and by whom he was instructed and initiated into the STTS in his commentary on it. From the places named, we can see that the southern area of India was the home of the majority of his teachers. Especially important seems to have been the coastal region in the present-day Bombay – Goa area, known then as Koṅkana and Sahya. Moreover, his commentary on the STTS is entitled 'The Adornment of Kośala' (*Kośala-alaṃkāra*). There were two Kośalas in India: the old Kośala centred on Śrāvastī, and another one further to the south, straddling a wide area across India from east to west. Śākyamitra's Kośala is likely to have been the latter. We know from Xuan-zang's travelogue that this Kośala was the country in which the famous stūpa of Nāgārjuna-koṇḍa was located, which is significant in view of the tradition that it was Nagarjuna who removed the STTS from the Iron Stūpa. Finally, Amoghavajra, who translated the first section of the STTS, obtained his copy during his trip to southern India between 743-746.

The next text of major importance is the *Guhya-samāja Tantra*. Again, the first datable reference to this text is to be found in Chinese sources. When he returned from his trip to India, Amoghavajra wrote a summary of the eighteen parts of the *Vajra-śekhara* (understood by the Sino-Japanese tradition as another name for the STTS), the *Shi-ba-hui-zhi-gui* (T 869). This work gives titles and brief descriptions of the contents of eighteen tantras, though it is unfortunately not possible to identify all of those which he describes with extant tantras[5]. However, he clearly does include a description of a prototype *Guhya-samāja Tantra* (GST) as the fifteenth item, but the information he gives shows that the version which we have now in Tibetan and Sanskrit was still to be finalized when he returned to India in 743–746 CE. In fact, a detailed examination of the text of the GST, in conjunction with the oldest commentaries, indicates that the GST, like many other Buddhist texts, underwent several stages of development before the final form was reached. We can see from a comparison of the contents of its eighteenth chapter, the Continuation Tantra (*uttara-tantra*) with the preceding portion of the GST, that the GST originally comprised just the first twelve chapters of the version we now have, because all the fifty two questions and answers contained in the Continuation Tantra relate to topics mentioned only in those first twelve chapters of the GST. This is further borne out by an examination of the Explanatory Tantra, the *Sandhi-vyākaraṇa*, which also deals only with matters arising from the first twelve chapters. This, therefore, is likely to have been the form of the GST around the time when Amoghavajra was in India – a short version of twelve chapters, with perhaps the Continuation Tantra (the now eighteenth chapter) already having been composed but still existing as an independent work. Following this, we may posit a further development into a version with seventeen chapters, for the earliest commentaries by teachers such as Vajrahāsa do not deal with chapter eighteen, the Continuation Tantra. In view of the general chronology of

people connected with him, Vajrahāsa's commentary seems to have been written c.750. It is noteworthy that Vajrahāsa is also named by the rNying-ma Tantric Collection (*rNying-ma'i rGyud-'bum*) as a translator of the first seventeen chapters of GST with rMa Rin-chen mChog, which were later re-translated by Śraddhākaravarma and Rin-chen bZang-po. Finally, the eighteenth chapter would have been appended to the Root Tantra shortly after this time. The rNying-ma Tantric Collection states, probably spuriously, that this was translated by Buddhaguhya and 'Brog-mi dPal Ye-shes.

Yet the GST did not spring into being out of a vacuum. As we have seen, it must have taken several decades to evolve from the prototype described by Amoghavajra to the full length version we now have. But we can additionally identify several stepping-stones in the process of evolution of tantras from the *Tattva-saṃgraha Tantra* to the *Guhya-samāja Tantra*, especially the *Guhya-garbha* and the *Māyā-jāla Tantra*. Although the exact relationship between these two texts is uncertain, it seems from iconographical considerations for example, that the sequence of development was *Tattva-saṃgraha* → *Guhya-garbha* → *Māyā-jāla* → *Guhya-samāja*.

Apart from these tantras, several other important works also belong to this early period, such as the *Buddha-sama-yoga Tantra* and the *Śrī-paramādya Tantra*. The former is of interest because Amoghavajra mentions it as the ninth item in his *Shi-ba-hui-zhi-gui*, which is an indication of its age, while parts of the latter are especially venerated in the Japanese Shingon tradition. However, I must now conclude this brief survey of the evolution of tantric literature as we are in danger of losing sight of the main theme of this introduction, the *Mahā-vairocana-abhisaṃbodhi Tantra*.