Terms and the redefinition and re-interpretation of traditional Buddhist concepts played a crucial role in establishing a Chán-specific identity and doctrinal framework, in addition to marking a distinction to other schools’ teachings, practices, and doctrines.¹ The specific use of terms is closely connected to other important developments in Chán, for example, the appearance of specific literary genres and rhetorical devices. This paper intends to analyze some aspects of the use of terms and the redefinition of concepts during different stages of the development of Chán, specifically by comparing the early period (ca. 650–800), the late Táng and Five Dynasties periods, and the period of the early Sòng when Chán classics such as the Línjì lù were edited. Important sources for this study are the writings of the early Chán School preserved in the various collections of the Dùnhuáng manuscripts.²

Terms in Dùnhuáng Texts

Many of the early Chán texts are originally only preserved in manuscript form since they did not become part of the ‘orthodox’ Chán canon and were subsequently not transmitted after the so-called

¹ I use the word ‘school’ here not as referring to an institutional entity, but rather referring to groups who shared a common doctrinal or ideological framework within communities of Buddhists. The term ‘schools’ referring to monastic institutions cannot be properly applied before Sòng times.

² These handwritten manuscripts were discovered in ca. 1900 and closely studied from the 1960s onwards, specifically by Japanese scholars, such as Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山, Ui Hakujū 宇井伯壽, etc., and in the 1980s and 1990s also by American scholars. The study of these manuscripts led to a complete re-evaluation of the early period of Chán which was previously only known through the retrospective and sectarian historiography of the Chán schools of the Sòng period. There are basically two types of texts among the Chán Dùnhuáng findings: (a) texts written in the form of treatises, and (b) historiographic texts of various early Chán factions. In the limited framework of this study, mainly early Chán texts in treatise form will be considered.
‘Southern’ branch of Chán gained dominance from the mid-8th century onwards. Since they were not edited and revised as most texts of the ‘classical’ Chán were, they give us a unique opportunity to study the multifaceted thoughts of early Chán monks. The interpretation of terms and concepts played an important role already in these early texts.

Before dealing more specifically with some of these texts it is important to shortly discuss the issue of Buddhist terms in Táng Buddhism. During my research visit at Kyoto University in spring 2008, I had the opportunity to browse through the facsimiles of the various Dínhuáng collections. It was striking how many manuscripts and manuscript fragments actually deal with the meaning of Buddhist terms and concepts, in addition to the many manuscripts containing parts of dictionaries and word lists on the meanings and pronunciation of Chinese characters and words.

During the Táng Dynasty an enormous number of Buddhist terms were circulating in countless sūtra texts, in addition to translated commentaries and commentaries/treatises produced by Chinese Buddhists. The 6th and 7th centuries—when Buddhism was already well-established in both the north and south of China—witnessed the emergence of a variety of Buddhist schools of thought, often differing not in terms of actual Buddhist practices and rituals, but rather concerning the interpretation of (often contradictory) concepts and doctrines found in the numerous translations of Indian sūtras and śāstras. 3 The creative attempts to overcome contradictions and create

---

3 In order to succeed with the project of synthesizing the incoherent or even contradictory concepts, thoughts, and sets of doctrines appearing in the Buddhist key scriptures, certain devices were crucial: The application of ‘two truths’ models (i.e., contradictory concepts could be assigned to certain slots pertaining to different spheres of function, for example, the ‘mundane’ vs. the ‘absolute’ level). The important concept of upāya (Ch. fāngbiàn 方便), ‘expedient means,’ could be applied in a similar way: Certain concepts, doctrines, practices could be assigned a valid function restricted to specific circumstances and instances—stripping them of a general validity. Another important device is the organization of concepts and terms in hierarchical taxonomies (a good example is the organization of consciousnesses [shí 識] and mental functions in the 6th and 7th centuries, some models reaching up to nine consciousnesses). These devices are, of course, often combined in order to achieve consistent doctrinal models (e.g., in the nine consciousnesses-model, the first eight are assigned a provisional status, whereas only the ninth pure consciousness is considered as ‘real’). Last, but not least, the Madhyamika theories on insubstantiality can be used to invalidate the meaning of any concept/doctrinal statement. Already in traditional Mahāyāna this led to endless chains of synonyms (often consisting of