THE LOTUS SUTRA AND GARLAND SUTRA
ACCORDING TO THE T'IEI-T'AI AND
HUA-YEN SCHOOLS IN CHINESE BUDDHISM*

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Foreword

It is well-known that the T'ien-t'ai 天台 and Hua-yen 華嚴 schools base their teachings on the Lotus Sutra (Sanskrit: Saddharmapundarika-sūtra, Chinese: Fa-hua ching 法華經) and the Garland Sūtra (Sanskrit: Avatamsaka-sūtra or Gandavyūha-sūtra, Chinese: Hua-yen ching 華嚴經) respectively. It is not the intention of the present essay to try to go into all aspects of the expositions given of the two works by the two traditions, a vast undertaking which would be beyond the compass of a book, not to say that of an article. Rather, we shall limit ourselves to the more humble task of examining how Chih-i 智顗 (538-597) and Fa-tsang 法藏 (643-712), their respective founders, assess each other's central scriptures. As we shall presently see, the two masters are remarkably close in their general views regarding the basic purport and nature of the Lotus and the Garland. Thus, their disagreement on their relative value cannot be entirely a matter of diverse reading, but is largely the outcome of the different evaluative criteria they bring to their assessment of the two texts, which in turn reflect the distinctive doctrinal orientations of the schools of thought they represent. And it is these distinctive doctrinal orientations which we aim to bring out with our comparative study.

1. The Character of the Lotus Sutra and Garland Sutra and
   Early Chinese Views of Their Relation

To put our discussion in the proper perspective, it is necessary to say a few words on the general character of the Lotus Sutra and Garland Sutra and to outline briefly the early Chinese opinions of their relation with each other.

* I would like to thank the Hsu Long-sing Research Fund administered by the University of Hong Kong for the grant which made this study possible.
1.1 The Central Themes of the Lotus Sūtra and Its Introduction into China

The Lotus was first introduced into China in the mid-third century, but won wide attention only after Kumārajiva, the famous initiator of Madhyamika thought in Chinese Buddhism, gave his translation of the text in 406. In the century and a half that followed, the work became increasingly popular, especially in the South, where it was widely studied and written about, first by Kumārajiva’s followers such as Seng-juī 僧叡 (352–436), Chu Tao-sheng 竺道生 (355–434) and Hui-kuan 慧觀, and later by experts of the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra and Satyasiddhi-sāstra, such as Seng-ching 僧鏡, Seng-yin 僧印 (435–499), Chih-tsang 智藏 (458–522), Fa-yün 法雲 (467–529) and Pao-ch’iüang 寶幢 (504–584). While these early students of the Lotus had very dissimilar ideas regarding the text’s structure, substance, etc., they generally agreed that the Sūtra was propounded by Śākyamuni in the last years of his life, and has among its main

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4 This contention is supported by the text proper of the Lotus: “Monks! When the Tathāgata sees that his time of nirvāṇa has arrived and his followers are pure [at heart], firm in faith and understanding, thorough in comprehension of the truth of emptiness, and profound in practice of meditation, he then assembles