

Article

The Establishment of Buddhist Creation Myth Text—Investigation Based on Narrative Context and Clues

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Abstract: The creation myths recorded in the Buddhist canon (Skt. *Tripiṭaka*; Pal. *Tipiṭaka*) reveal to us the various genesis scenarios adopted by early Buddhists concerning the formation of the world and the emergence of human beings in this world. The contents of these stories can be divided into three basic narrative elements: (1) the calamities and the formation of the world; (2) the devolution of sentient beings and the establishment of a worldly ruling order; and (3) the origin of the caste system and the royal pedigree of the Śākya clan. There are differences in the various accounts and in the details of the narratives as they appear in the *Āgamas*. Through a comparison of the narrative structure and content of various texts, this article will extrapolate on the narrative context that informed these myths. This article will argue, among other things, that when these myths were composed, they were directed at followers (Pal. *bhikkhus*) from Brahminical backgrounds. Segments of the genesis story were, moreover, incorporated into the *Vinaya* texts as narrative aids to help communicate certain lessons. The purpose of this article is to explore the topic of cosmology in texts such as the *Shiji jing* 世紀經 in the *Dīrgha-āgama* and the “Qiri pin” 七日品 in the *Ekottara-āgama*, both of which were later additions to these larger *Āgamas*. The *Poluopo tang jing* 婆羅婆堂經 in the *Madhyama-āgama* and the *Aggañña-sutta* in the *Dīgha-nikāya* both contain similar formulaic sentences and descriptions which show that they may come from the same source. The *Poluopo tang jing* might, however, be an older text. Finally, the different contents found in texts such as the *Xiaoyuan jing* 小緣經 that contains details on the five castes indicate that it may have come from a different source.

Keywords: creation myth; degeneration of sentient beings; narrative context; narrative clues; *Vinaya*



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1. Introduction

Many Chinese and overseas scholars have studied and developed on the topic of Buddhist creation myths.¹ Ulrich Schneider was one of the first scholars to conduct textual analysis relating to the origin of the world and the birth of human beings as depicted in the Pāli *Aggañña-sutta* (hereafter AS). Interestingly, in his study of the AS, Schneider claimed that the description of the world's origin was irrelevant to what the Buddha was really trying to express in his first sermons (see note 1). Taking Schneider's ideas as a launching pad, his student Konrad Meisig compared the AS with its three Chinese parallels, proposing that the AS was a “patchwork Sutra” made up of different recensions, and that the form and structure of the earliest recension would certainly not have been what appeared in the AS as we have it today (see Schneider 1954, 1957). In his article “The Buddha's Book of Genesis?”, Richard Gombrich disagreed with Schneider's claim that these myths had no pedagogical purpose, describing the intent behind these creation myths purportedly delivered by the Buddha as “satirical” and “parodistic”.² Informed by the writings of Kenneth R. Norman, Gombrich compared the similarity between the vocabulary and language used in the AS with the language in the *Vedas* as well as the *Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, stating that the Buddha was using Brahminic terminology to oppose the caste system (*varṇa*) in Brahminic society. While Gombrich does not discuss the original sources of the myth, he does categorically disagree with Meisig's statement that these narratives as they appear in the AS

constituted a “patchwork” of the sources available at that time. In 1993, Steven Collins interpreted the AS from three mutually inclusive perspectives—world history, the society of ancient India, and the history of early Buddhism—to provide a thoroughgoing study of the AS and an extensive translation of it as well. One of the most innovative ideas in Collins’s study is how he relates details of the narrative in the AS to stories found in the *Vinayas*. Moreover, by investigating the terms and prefixes used in the AS such as *agga*, *seṭṭha*, and *Brahmā*, Collins proposed that a complete source for the narrative may have existed and that the story as it appeared in the AS was not a random “patchwork” gathered from various sources (see Gombrich 1992). Scholars such as Rupert Gethin broke away from the works of Gombrich which claimed that the creation myths in the AS had a “satirical” undertone. Gethin instead considers that the myth in the AS presents Buddhist ideas of universal formation (*vivaṭṭakappa*) and corruption (*saṃvivaṭṭakappa*), which are helpful categories for understanding the primacy of practice described in the *Nikāyas* and in the *Abhidharma*. In addition, Gethin considers that the interpretation of the AS is relevant when exploring core ideas in Buddhist doctrine as well as Mahāyāna Buddhist ideology—for example, *thathāgatagarbha* thought and the Mahāyāna idealist conceptions of ontology (see Collins 1993). This discourse in modern scholarship also indicates that our opinions vis-à-vis the AS are based on its descriptions of Buddhist cosmology (see Gethin 1997). While the study of the AS in Western academia has gone a long way toward explaining the Sanskrit and Pāli sources, the study of the Chinese translations of relevant cosmological texts is still lacking.

In China, studies related to the creation myth in the AS mainly focus on the sources of the text. Chen Ming 陳明 has undertaken detailed research on this topic. This research is published in the chapter titled “*Yindu fojiao chuangshi shenhuan yuanliu—yi fanhan fojing yu xiyou ben wei zhongxin*” 印度佛教創世神話的源流——以梵漢佛經與西域寫本為中心 (The Origin of Indian Buddhist Creation Myth: A Focus on Sanskrit and Chinese Buddhist Sutras and Western Texts) in Chen’s book *Yindu fojiao Shenhua: shuxie yu liuchuang* 印度佛教神話: 書寫與流傳 (Indian Buddhist Myths: Writing and Transmission). Although the Buddhist creation myth reveals elements related to other research in comparative mythology—narrative tropes such as the “disaster trope”, “flood trope”, and “scapegoat trope”—the tropes and their overarching narratives have not been considered by many scholars in the field of comparative mythology. This might be because the Buddhist genesis story is simply not very well known. Among all those stories recorded in the Buddhist canon, the myths in the AS have received less attention from scholars in China, especially in comparison to the attention that has been directed at the stories of the Buddha’s past lives (*jātakas*). Moreover, compared to the artistic representations of the Genesis story in Christianity, there is almost no Buddhist artwork dedicated to the creation myth of the AS.

This creation myth exists in Sanskrit and Pāli in the various canons, particularly in the *Āgamas* and the *Vinayas*, where this myth was transmitted, inscribed, and translated by members of the early Buddhist schools. The early Buddhist schools would have shared these mythological narratives, and, therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the creation myth in the AS would have been shared and formed during a relatively early period. Not only does the content of this story speak to the understandings of cosmology and social status that were true at the time of the Buddha and his disciples, but the variations on the myth in its varied renditions also reveal to a modern readership the different characteristics of the schools themselves. This article’s methodology is based on Richard Gombrich’s research, which combines the myth’s “narrative context”—which runs through the development of the plot—with aspects in the narratives themselves to investigate the relationship between them. This article compares elements in Brahminical cosmogeny and Buddhist creation myths to further develop on their textual and ideological relationship. Furthermore, elements of storytelling as well as the text awareness of the compilers in these Buddhist schools can also be observed through comparison between these texts.

In this study, the creation myth story in the AS is divided into three basic narrative units: (1) the calamities and the emergence of sentient beings in the world; (2) the trans-

formation of sentient beings from “godhood” to personhood and the establishment of a secular regime; and (3) the origin of the caste system and the lineage of the Śākya clan. The concluding section returns to Buddhist doctrine and religious life as unique features of this creation myth, looking specifically at how the genesis story speaks to the worldly benefits of monasticism. Although the story as it might have existed during the Buddha’s and his disciples’ time is certainly not discernible, there is a subsequent relationship of establishment between the *Āgamas* and the *Vinayas*; the similarities in the narrative as it appears in the works of the various sects, especially between the Sthaviravāda and Mahāsāṃghika schools, give us insights into the forms of early Buddhist literature. The following sections will discuss the three narrative aspects of this creation narrative to conjecture as to whether each aspect was necessarily part of a hypothetical Ur-text while simultaneously studying the variations between these narratives as they appear in the different *Āgamas*.

2. First Genesis Narrative Element: The Calamities and the Formation of the World

2.1. Similarities in Cosmological Content across Texts Do Not Necessarily Indicate That They Came from a Common Source

The creation myth as it appears in the AS states at the outset that before the start of an eon, the world must go through a cycle of degradation and reformation (Skt. *kalpa*; Ch. 劫). The *Daloutan jing* 大樓炭經 (Sutra on the Great Conflagration) describes the cycle of the *kalpas* as follows:

“When a *kalpa* reaches the point of calamity, there emerge the causes for the four seasons. The first cause arises when the earth is in ruin and fire appears; the second cause arises when the fire is exhausted and water appears; the third cause arises when the water is exhausted and wind appears. Then the sky and the earth are formed. After their formation, they then begin to degrade again like an endless loop, thus it is called a *kalpa*.”³

劫名為災壞時，有四時因緣。一者久在地盡便火起，二者久火盡便水起，三者久水盡便風起稍生，後天地成，從成覆敗，如環無端，故名為劫。

First of all, this particular understanding of the *kalpa*, as it is defined in Buddhist doctrine, constitutes the cycle emerging from the recurrence of the three calamities—fire, water, and wind—and is itself a closed temporal loop. This closed loop constitutes the formation of the world through intermittent instances of arising, establishing, decaying, and then emptiness. This definition of *kalpa* informs the Buddhist understanding of how the world was formed after the three calamities, in which the three calamities are the key elements of this cycle. In terms of the creation of space itself, the genesis story mentions various heavens: the Heaven of Radiant Sound (Skt. *Ābhassaradeva*; Ch. *Guangyin tian* 光音天), the Heaven of Universal Purity (Skt. *Subhakiṇṇa*; Ch. *Bianjing tian* 遍淨天), and the Heaven of Complete Fruition (Skt. *Vehapphala*; Ch. *Guoshi tian* 果實天).⁴ The story also creates a sense of space by describing how beings ascend and descend between these spheres through contemplative practice—or, rather, by means of the powers of flight that this practice gives them. The above elements constitute the narrative core of the Buddhist genesis story. The genesis narrative takes into account both time and space. From the perspective of time, the world undergoes successive fires and floods throughout the eon. The narrative records that the beings who dwell in the sphere of *Ābhassaradeva* can fly by means of their supernatural powers, although the calamities introduce these pure beings to a new reality: mortality. After they reach the end of their respective lifespans, this genesis cycle of the world (*kalpa*) also comes to an end, and that is when sentient beings in a newly formed worldly realm are formed. From the perspective of space, beings from the *Ābhassaradeva* who have descended are, after the calamities have passed, not able to return to their heavenly realm because they have become corrupted in the worldly realm, eventually losing their ability to ascend to the heavens. The sun and the moon appear in the mundane world, followed by the genesis of day and night, as well as the emergence of

sentient beings. In this way, the narratives related to the three calamities and the creation of the world are closely connected to Buddhist formulations of cosmology and the *kalpas*.

With regard to the literary content, the various recensions of the AS such as the *Shiji jing* 世紀經 (Sutra on the Genealogy of the World) in the *Dirgha-āgama*, the *Daloutan jing*, and the *Qishi yinben jing* 起世因本經 (Sutra on the Original Conditions of the World's Creation), as well as the *Qishi jing* 起世經 (Sutra on the Origins of the World), are all parallel texts containing detailed descriptions of the Buddhist conception of cosmic creation. Additionally, the “Qiri pin” 七日品 (Chapter on the Seven Days) in the *Ekottara-āgama* also provides many insights with regard to cosmology. The other scriptures in the canon, however, do not provide a thorough account of the calamities that led to the formation of the world. It would seem, therefore, that as the Buddha preached his sermons, he assumed that listeners were already familiar with the themes related to the following: “the *kalpa* of the world is over and the ascension of all sentient beings to the Ābhassaradeva 世界劫盡, 眾生光音天”—as it is told in the creation myth.

To determine whether this myth in the AS was used for explaining concepts related to cosmology, we must determine whether these details related to Buddhist cosmology were central to the myth itself, in other words, did this narrative of calamity play a vital role in the story as it was purportedly delivered by the Buddha in his sermons. Looking through the sources, it would seem the story related to the calamities was not central to all the accounts of Buddhist cosmogony. For example, the *Tāmaparāṇīya* of AS, the *Xiaoyuan jing* 小緣經 (Sutra on Petty Origins) in the *Dirgha-āgama*, as well as the *Poluopo tang jing* 婆羅婆堂經 (Sutra on Discourse to Bhāradvāja at the Hall) in the *Madhyama-āgama*, did not describe the calamities and the ensuing formation of the world in great detail. They emphasized, instead, the relationship between the various stages of Buddhist practice, the process of rebirth, and the formation of the world.⁵ This study therefore assumes that the account related to the calamities was not an essential narrative element in this creation myth and that, therefore, the purpose of this myth was not to elucidate an early Buddhist theory of cosmology. The reasons for this are as follows:

First, with respect to the relevant content related to cosmology in these scriptures, this calamity narrative seems to be independent from the rest of the account. It would, indeed, seem to be a later interpolation. As we may note in the account as it appears in both the “Shibenyan pin” 世本緣品 (Chapter on the Original Conditions of the World) in the *Dirgha-āgama* and in the “Qiri pin” in the *Ekottara-āgama*, the sequencing of the narrative relating the formation of the world is different in these two texts. In the “Shi benyan pin”, the story is as follows:

1. After the fire, while the world is about to form, beings die in Ābhassaradeva and they transmigrate to another heaven called the empty palace of Brahmā (Pal. **suññābrah-mavimāna*; Ch. *Kongfanchu* 空梵處) where the god Brahmā was born;
2. Sentient beings are then born in Ābhassaradeva. At that time, the world is beset by floods, and there is no sun, moon, or stars in the sky. Day and night do not yet exist;
3. Then, the world transforms and the beings die in the Ābhassaradeva realm, after which they descend to the mundane realm where they are all incarnated as newly formed sentient beings;
4. All these sentient beings taste the earth essence (*Diwei* 地味) and lose their supernatural powers as a result. Then there is a huge storm and various palaces emerge out of this storm;
5. The text describes the king of the sun (Skt. *Sūryadeva*; Ch. *Ritianzi* 日天子) and his sun palace as well as the king of the moon (Skt. *Candradeva*; *Yuetianzi* 月天子) and his moon palace.

After this section in the text, the account returns to part 4 again with a connecting sentence: “After a long time, there was a huge storm [that even] blew the sand on the seabed at a depth of 84,000 *yojana* (*youxun* 由旬), and it made [the sand] float around the two shores [of the sea] (Rupert Gethin 1997).” This connecting sentence is a typical formula used in the *Dirgha-āgama*, though the juxtaposition of parts 4 and 5 is not properly arranged.

In this case, reading the narrative elements in part 5 and their awkward juxtaposition with elements in part 4 indicates that part 5 might be a later addition to the text.

In the “Qiri pin” in the *Ekottara-āgama*, the narrative sequence of this story is as follows:

1. The *bhikkhus* discuss how the Buddha will begin expounding on the transformation characterized by the decay and destruction of the worldly realm (the creation myth);
2. The Buddha describes Mount Meru (Xumi shan 須彌山), and the battle between the *asuras* and the 33 *devas* (Skt. *Trāyastriṃśa-deva*; Ch. *sanshisian tian* 三十三天) at the foot of Mount Meru. This part also describes the kings of the sun and the moon, and their respective palaces;
3. The Buddha proclaims that the worldly realm transformed during a seven-day period after the cataclysmic destruction of the realm by fire, water, and wind;
4. All sentient beings reborn in the world taste the earth essence that was newly produced in the worldly realm as a result of this cataclysmic event.

Although the “Qiri pin” depicts the destruction of the worldly realm during a seven-day period—a similar account to the one in the “Sanzai pin” 三災品 (Three Calamities Chapter) of the *Shiji jing* in the *Dīrgha-āgama*—the “Qiri pin” is in reality a short version of the narratives found in the *Dīrgha-āgama*, from the “Sanzai pin”, the “Zhandou pin” 戰鬥品 (Militant Chapter), to the “Shibenyuan pin”. The primary variance in the content of these *Dīrgha-āgama* texts when compared to the “Qiri pin” is in the sequencing of the narrative. The myth as it appears in the *Shiji jing* begins with an account of the decay of the world in seven days, followed by the battles between the *devas* and the *asuras*, the description of the three *kalpas* in the world, and finally the fall from a pure form of existence (where beings in the *Ābhassaradeva* feed on light and joy) to a newly formed mundane realm where *prīmaeva* sentient beings lose their purity and first experience desire by eating the fragrant essence produced by the earth. As in the “Qiri pin”, there is also a description in the *Shiji jing* of the kings of the sun and the moon and their palaces.

Looking at this myth in terms of its narrative coherence, the calamities described in the “Sanzai pin” (Chapter 9 in the *Shiji jing*) should be followed by details regarding the formation of the world as it is described in the “Shibenyuan pin” (Chapter 12). However, the two intermittent chapters in the *Shiji jing*, the “Zhandou pin” (Chapter 10) and the “Sanzhongjie pin” 三劫品 (three middle-length *Kalpas* in Chapter 11), break away from the narrative’s flow, including various elements extraneous to the creation myth. Certain narrative elements in chapters 10 and 11—indeed, the entire story recounted in the “Sanzhongjie pin”—do not appear in the more streamlined “Qiri pin” narrative.

In another instance, the “Da sanzai huozai pin” 大三災火災品 (Calamity of Fire among the Great Three Calamities Chapter) in the *Lishi a’pitan lun* 立世阿毘曇論 (Abhidharma Treatise on the Establishment of the World, Skt. **Lokasthānābhīdharma-śāstra*) includes details regarding the cataclysmic disasters and the formation of the world, while leaving out the battles between the *devas* and the *asuras*. The overall creation narrative as it is recorded in the *Lishi a’pitan lun* is more polished than the various recensions of the same story as they appear in the *Āgamas*, suggesting that the myth was still developing when the first scriptures were being written. Considering that this creation story did not have a set narrative structure when these scriptures were first written out, it is safe to conjecture that the scribes and editors of the *Āgama* passages related to the origins of the world were committing the related sources to text without, at the outset, intending to provide a complete and final theory of Buddhist cosmology. Instead, the mythological content would have been loosely gathered together in the different chapters (*pin* 品) of texts such as the *Shiji jing* according to thematic associations between the accounts related to the transmigration of pure beings as well as the creation of the world by means of destruction and regeneration—the three calamities. These chapters in the *Dīrgha-āgama* were distinct texts, making each chapter independent one from the other, though they were loosely associated and placed together by the various *Āgama* authors according to the themes that they had in common—a thematic that we could today call religious cosmogony.

The discussion above leads us to the following question: why was the Buddha preaching on creation in the first place? Indeed, what is the origin story of the genesis story? One of the narratives related to the origin of this sermon claimed that the Buddha began his lesson after two Brahmin disciples reported that they had been lambasted by other Brahmins who were critical of monastic practice. Most sources mention this encounter with the two Brahmins as the reason why the Buddha began to preach on the origins of the world. Only in the “Shibenyuan pin” are the circumstances surrounding the Buddha’s sermon not mentioned. The “Qiri pin” states, “The Bhagavat spoke: ‘Would you like to hear about the transformation of this world by means of destruction?’ The monks replied: ‘The time is now. We just hope that Bhagavat could preach at the right moment so that the minds of all sentient beings could be liberated.’”⁶ Indeed, the *Xiaoyuan jing*, the *Poluopatang jing*, and the *AS*—all parallel texts—were the records of the sermon that resulted from the Buddha’s encounter with his two Brahmin disciples. In these texts, the two Brahmins said that other non-Buddhist Brahmins considered their own practices to be noble and that Buddhist monastic practice was reprehensible. Gombrich sees in this interaction a strong commentary on the caste system, noting that the language as well the narrative in the *AS* refute Brahmin ideas of caste in India. He argues that the polemical facet of this sermon was a core motivation for recounting the myth.

According to the Buddha’s two disciples, the anti-Buddhist Brahmins—rhetorical “straw men” in the Buddhist argument against the inherent superiority of the Brahmin caste—claimed, “We Brahmins are the most superior, while others are despicable. We Brahmins are pure, while the rest are tainted. We Brahmins come from Brahmadeva, we are born from the mouth of Brahma, we obtain liberation which is pure and tranquil in the present dharma 現法 (Skt. *dr̥ṣṭadharmā*), and then [we become] purified and peaceful.”⁷ Considering the strong polemical rhetoric in the *AS*, Gombrich was certainly right in claiming that the discourse on caste was undergirding this creation myth. At that time, people of various castes were members of the Buddhist *saṅgha*, and Brahmin caste members would have occupied a special place in the community. Indeed, the prevalence of Brahmin followers in the scriptures indicate, at the very least, that Buddhist teachings at the time had great influence and reach—so much so that even India’s social and religious elite were joining.⁸ In his sermon, the Buddha was not only preaching to the two Brahmins, but also to all the *bhikkhus* in the community who would at that time have encountered similar issues with their fellow non-Buddhist caste members. It would therefore seem that addressing Brahmin followers—not describing the origin of the world—was the primary goal of the sermon in the *AS* and other related texts.

That being said, the “Qiri pin” could be read today as a combination of two different sermons: a sermon on the “origins of the worldly realm” and the “origins of the human race”. Looking at the context and contents of this sermon, however, there is no doubt that these are modern classifications, and that these two themes were not evoked on purpose in the text. Furthermore, the Buddha was not necessarily providing an account on the formation of the world. Although the “Qiri pin” evokes the three calamities that brought about the emergence of the worldly realm, the sermon itself does not dwell on these calamities and their effects, but instead lingers on the ideal pure land that was produced through meditative contemplation—the realm of Ābhassaradeva. The “Zhushi pin” 住世品 (Chapter on Abiding in the World) in the *Qishi yinben jing* 起世因本經 records the following:

Bhikkhus! What is it that we call “fire”? During the fire, all sentient beings who have done good deeds, who have spoken according to the Dharma, who have attained the right views, who have no inversion, who have wisdom and merit, who practice the ten wholesome ways, have obtained the second *jhana* of undiscriminating perception, and do not need to cultivate merit for they will obtain it naturally. At that time, sentient beings will by means of their supernormal powers dwell in the *śūnyatā*, or in the realm of the sages, *devas*, or dwell in the way of the highest principle. When one dwells in such places, one obtains the second *jhana* of undiscriminating perception. With this gnosis, all cultivations

are complete so that when the physical body decays, one is reborn in the realm of Ābhassaradeva.⁹

雲何火災？諸比丘！火災之時，諸眾生輩，有於善行，所說如法，正見成就，無有顛倒，具足而行，十善業道，得無覺觀二禪，不用功修，自然而得。爾時，彼等諸眾生輩，以神通力住於虛空、住諸仙道、住諸天道、住梵行道，如是住已，受第二禪無覺觀樂，如是證知，成就具足，身壞即生光音天處。

The story continues, recounting that when these pure beings faced calamity, they initially continued to perform noble deeds, to cultivate merit and virtue, and that they were still endowed with spiritual powers. However, issues began to arise when, after descending from Ābhassaradeva, sentient beings began partaking of the earth's essence. As a result of this, sentient beings began to desire things, they lost their spiritual powers, and these beings of pure light began to take on distinct genders, male and female. The contrast drawn up in the creation myth between beings in their original state and then in their "fallen" state served to demonstrate the extent of the corruption of these pure beings through the account of the genesis of desire and greed. It was also a reminder for *bhikkhus* of the importance of Buddhist cultivation practices, a callback to the Buddha's instruction to the two Brahmins regarding the good and the bad deeds practiced by all members of the four castes that served as an introduction in the sermon to this discussion on the "fall from grace", so to speak, of sentient beings.

These texts that provide a detailed description of cosmology do not provide descriptions of how beings went back and forth between Ābhassaradeva and Subhakiṇṇa during the eon of calamity. Meanwhile, "Shibenyuan pin" and "Qiri pin", providing a detailed explanation of cosmology, focus on Mount Meru, the palaces of the sun and the moon, and so on. Interestingly, the three calamities are usually mentioned in passing, and none of these texts focus on this most critical aspect of the process of the worldly realm's making and emergence. There is one exception, the *Lishi a'pitan lun*, where the narrative segment prior to the story of the fall of sentient beings did direct special attention to the three calamities, the cultivation of the second *jhāna* (*erchan* 二禪) by sentient beings, as well as the depiction of the palaces of the *devas*. Regarding the issue as to why texts such as the "Shibenyuan pin" and the "Qiri pin" provided so many details regarding the creation of the world, while other texts only briefly mentioned it, Steven Collins claimed that the problem was both historical and contextual. When the AS was first compiled in Sri Lanka, the socio-historical context was completely different from how it had been in India when the AS first existed in the oral tradition. Indeed, in Sri Lanka, Brahminical religion was no longer competing with Buddhism. Buddhist intellectuals at that time could therefore direct their rhetoric elsewhere, and so Buddhism as an ideological system became more concerned with cosmogony rather than polemics.¹⁰

Finally, the title of the AS also provides us some insights on the textual history of this text. Richard Gombrich interprets the term "*aggañña*" to mean "primitive" or "prymaeval", and he dismisses the possibility that it could mean "knowing"—we could therefore translate the title of the AS as the *Sutra on the Prymaeval*.¹¹ But what do we mean here by prymaeval? Does it refer to the origins of the world or of something else? Among the translated titles of the AS as they appear in Chinese, only two texts in the *Dīrgha-āgama*, the *Xiaoyuan jing* and the "Shibenyuan pin" (in the larger *Shiji jing*), seem to originate from the same base AS manuscript. Between the compounds "*xiaoyuan* 小緣" and "*benyuan* 本緣" in their respective titles, it would seem that the term *benyuan* is the closest in meaning to Gombrich's interpretation of the word "*aggañña*" as "primitive" or "prymaeval". Studying the content of the first half of the *Shiji jing*, Meisig suggested that the stories related to the calamities and to the creation of the world in the first sections of the *Shiji jing* were independent of the latter sections and that the former texts would have simply been put together during the compilation process with the other texts that make up the second half of the larger *Sutra*. That is to say, the *Shiji jing* was a patchwork of various independent texts. According to Meisig, the plots of the calamities and the origination of the world

are patched together with the rest of the text, in which case the text should not be named as *Aggañña sutta*. This article supports Meisig's argument for the following reasons: (1) The title of "Qiri pin" in *Ekottara-āgama* is of little reference in this instance. The story of how the world was destroyed in seven days—as it is told in the "Qiri pin"—was only a small part in this narrative and it did not constitute an important segment of the creation story. In other Sutras of the same chapter, the "seven days" (*qiri*) seems to be centered on practice, and it begins with a *bhikkhu* who claims to practice and meditate on death for seven days (Gombrich 1992, p. 170). Indeed, it would seem that the only real connection in the "Qiri pin" between the contemplation on the "seven days" (*qiri*) and the seven days of dissolution and creation is the number seven itself.

(2) The *Poluopo tang jing* in the *Madhyama-āgama* is quite helpful in this discussion. Bhāradvāja (*Poluopo 婆羅婆*), whose name appears in the title, is one of the protagonists in this story. Based on the two names mentioned in the *Sutra*, Bhāradvāja and Vāsetṭha (*Posizha 婆私吒*), it is clear that they belonged to Brahmin families. Indeed, many Sutras take on the names of those notable individuals who received the sermons, meaning that the *Poluopo tang jing* was the sermon preached before both Bhāradvāja and Vāsetṭha.¹² In another similar instance in the *Majjhima-nikāya*, the text is once more related to Vāsetṭha, and the text takes his name: *Vāsetṭha-sutta*. Therefore, the compilers of the *Madhyama-āgama* may have named the *Poluopo tang jing* after Bhāradvāja to distinguish it from other Sutras where Vāsetṭha is named in the title. In the *Foshuo baiyi jinchuang er'poluomen yuanqi jing* 佛說白衣金幢二婆羅門緣起經 (Sutra on Creation Spoken by the Buddha to the Brahmins Baiyi and Jinchuang) translated from Sanskrit by Dānapāla, also known as Shihu 施護 (?–1017 CE), the terms *baiyi* (白衣) and *jinchuang* (金幢) in the title also evoke the names of two Brahmins.

The word "*yuanqi*" (緣起) in the title does not seem to refer to the creation of the world, but instead to the origin of the caste system. Except for the term "*benyuan*" in the "Shibenyan pin", the terms for "creation" or "primitive"—such as the terms "*aggañña*" in the AS and "*xiaoyuan*" in the *Xiaoyuan jing*—that appear in the various versions of the AS refer to the origins of caste, not to the origins of the world. In the *Āgamas* that recount the creation story, there are also many instances where *Sutras* take on the names of the monks or lay Buddhists. This detail in the titles attests to the fact that the creation myth as it appears in the *Āgamas* may have been intended as origin stories related to the caste system—not the worldly realm. To sum up, looking at content, structure, possible motivations, and scripture titles, the first narrative element of the AS described in this article, namely the calamities and the creation of the world that ensued, did not seem to be the narrative or pedagogical crux of the original text.

2.2. Narrative Order in the Āgamas According to the Relationship between "Brahmā" and "Tathāgata"

If the details regarding the calamities and the origin of the world in the *Shiji jing* and the "Qiri pin" are stories independent of the other narrative elements in the AS, is it still possible to pinpoint a discernible sequence in which the various narrative elements of the creation myth were composed among the relevant Sutras in the *Āgamas* and the AS? This study will explore this question by discussing the variations between the relevant parallel texts, starting with the narrative describing the initial emergence of the world, especially in relation to the creator god Brahṁā.

The *Xiaoyuan jing* describes the relationship between Brahṁā and the Tathāgata as follows: "The title 'great Brahṁā' is [another epithet] of the Tathāgata [the Buddha]. The Tathāgata is the eye of the world; the wisdom of the world; the law of the world; Brahṁā in the world; the wheel of the Dharma in the world; the sweet dew in the world; and the Dharma-lord in the world."¹³ There is a passage in a parallel segment in the "Shibenyan pin" that is not found in the *Xiaoyuan jing* which records the following: "The Brahmadeva thinks to himself: 'I am Brahṁā, Mahābrahman, I am uncreated and am self-caused. I am unconditioned and am the ultimate independent entity in this boundless universe. I am

adept on the path of truth, I am wealth and abundance, I can create all things, and I am the parent of all creatures That Brahmā has the appearance of a young boy and is therefore named *tongzi* (童子).¹⁴ This passage was clearly inserted into the original text. Indeed, if this passage were taken out, this section in the “Shibenyuan pin” would parallel—in terms of the narrative—the equivalent section in the *Xiaoyuan jing* in every respect. It is worth noting that in the “Shibenyuan pin”, the Buddha does not refute this statement from Brahmā, and there is no equivocation of the Tathāgata with Brahmā. In the *Xiaoyuan jing*, although there is no mention of Brahmā’s part in creating the world, the text does indicate that there is a relationship between Brahmā and the Tathāgata. The *Poluopo tang jing* in the *Madhyama-āgama* also equates Brahmā with the Tathāgata when it states: “Brahmā is the Tathāgata, the Tathāgata is the cold (i.e., free from passion) without hindrance or heat (torment), and those who do not depart from thusness (*ru* 如; *Skt. tathatā*) are the Tathāgata.”¹⁵ Additionally, Gombrich states more generally about the AS, “It appears superficially that the Buddha was trying to equate himself with Brahma, the god of creation, but within a few sentences he clearly showed that the real equation made here is not about people, but about dharma.”¹⁶ This emphasis on the teachings in such circumstances appears in another repeated formulaic sentence relating to the Brahmin Vāseṭṭha: “Vāseṭṭha, in the present and future lives of sentient beings, it is the Dharma that has primacy.”¹⁷

The content related to the Buddha and the creator god, however, is not included in the “Qiri pin” in the *Ekottara-āgama*. Interestingly, in another text from the Mahāsāṃghika, the *Fenbie gongde lun* 分別功德論 (Treatise Distinguishing Meritorious Actions, *Skt. *Punya-vibhaṅga*), the authors re-envision Brahma’s creation of the world in the Tathāgata’s discourse on the “four unfathomables”. The original sequence of the “four unfathomables” begins with a discussion of the “inconceivability of all sentient beings”, followed by the “inconceivability of the world”, the “inconceivability of the dragons”, and the “inconceivability of the Buddha”. However, the *Fenbie gongde lun* puts the “inconceivability of the world” first in the list. The treatise recounts that the world was indeed created by Brahmā, but it also redefines the conditions by which the creator god was produced. Although Brahmā is of the Brahmin caste, the *Fenbie gongde lun* recounts that he was actually born from the navel of Udayana (Youtuoyan 優陀延) who was the son of a Kṣatriya ruler, King Sancuo 散嗟. The text does, moreover, briefly discuss the first of the unfathomables, the “inconceivability of all sentient beings”, when clarifying that Brahmā was born from a Kṣatriya host. Bearing this in mind, it is interesting that the creation myth as it appears in the *Fenbie gongde lun* turns the genesis story of the Brahmin caste—the birth of Brahmā himself—on its head, claiming that the representative of the Brahmin caste was, in fact, born from a member of the Kṣatriya caste, fundamentally contradicting the caste hierarchy laid out by Brahminism. In terms of its narrative, the *Fenbie gongde lun* also inherits important narrative elements from the Brahminical tradition, such as Brahmā’s incubation in the lotus flower and his immaculate birth from the navel of a person or god—sometimes Viṣṇu’s and sometimes the navel of other figures, depending on the text.

The reason for debating whether “genesis” is the primary purpose of the Buddha’s statement from the relationship between Brahmā and Tathāgata is that, against the backdrop of “Brahmin’s genesis” and “Brahmin supremacism” at the time, did the Buddha wish to subvert these statements and reorganize the Buddhist theory of genesis and caste? According to the comparison, we can conclude the following: first, except for *Fenbie gongde lun*, there is no saying in *Āgamas* that Brahmins were born from Kṣatriyas; second, in addition to *Ekottara-āgama*, the corresponding problems between Brahmā and Tathāgata are mentioned in all the Sūtras in *Āgamas*. Third, only AS emphasizes that “Dharma is the best” since Tathāgata is Brahmā, and there are stereotyped lines that clearly highlight the theme after arranging. As a result, the Buddha’s objective at this time is simply to broaden the concept to “Tathāgata equals Brahmā” (there is no direct description of Tathāgata’s creation of the universe), but it has not been expanded to doctrine, nor has it openly attacked “Brahmin supremacism”.

3. Second Genesis Narrative Element: Narratives of Devolution in Buddhist Genesis and the Development of the Monastic Precepts

This section will explore the narrative model of devolution in Buddhist cosmology. This narrative element presents how sentient beings gradually fell from grace because of greed and gluttony. Most texts claim there were five phases to this devolution from the purest state where beings fed on joy to a tarnished state where worldly beings fed on grain. The *Poluopo tang jing* provides the following five devolution phases: feeding on joy (*xi* 喜)→feeding on earth essence→feeding on earth fat (*difei* 地肥)→feeding on the creeper (*poluo* 婆羅)→feeding on naturally ripe rice (*ziran jingmi* 自然粳米). It is important to note that the parallel passages in the *Ekottara-āgama* and in the *Fenbie gongde lun* give a simplified account of the devolution of these beings who became more worldly with every new food source they ingested. This devolution narrative can be broken down into the following three narrative elements exploring the origins of different dichotomies.

3.1. The Dichotomy of Consuming More or Less Food

In all accounts that trace the devolution of beings through the consumption of food, there appears an opposition between eating too little and eating too much. In these accounts, those that ate less felt contempt toward those that ate more, bringing about pride and a false sense of superiority. In time, according to the story, the superior forms of food were replaced by progressively inferior forms of food (e.g., joy is replaced with earth essence, earth essence with earth fat, etc.), which in turn came to deepen the depravity of these once pure beings. The food of joy and meditative bliss (*chanyue* 禪悅) was considered the ultimate form of sustenance. The *Ekottara-āgama* states, “[He who] feeds off the joy of *samādhi*, sustaining himself on meditative bliss, is called Vāsetṭha 婆私吒. He who always feeds on joy is called Bhāradvāja 須夜奢.”¹⁸ *Miaofa Lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經 (The White Lotus of the Good Dharma, Skt. *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*) states, “All the sentient beings will be born here spontaneously, without any sexual desires. They will attain great transcendent powers, emit rays of light from their bodies, and fly freely through the air. These beings will be determined, persevering, and wise. They will all be of golden hue and adorned with the thirty-two marks. The sentient beings in that land will always eat two meals: one is the joy in the Dharma, and the other is the meditative bliss.”¹⁹ The word *pītibhakkhā* in the AS is a compound of *pīti* and *bhakkhā*: *pīti* means “joy”, “delight”, so that the difference between joy in the Dharma (*faxi* 法喜) and joy in meditative bliss cannot be discerned from this compound. The *Xiaoyuan jing* describes their sustenance by using the term “*nian*” 念 (contemplation), which does seem to indicate that they sustained themselves with the bliss of meditative experience.

3.2. The Male and Female Dichotomy

Most accounts state that the differentiation of beings into two genders, male and female, happened after beings began consuming rice. This was the last dietary phase of the devolution and, indeed, the differentiation of genders, according to the scriptures, would be the basis for many of the problems to come.²⁰ The gendered differentiation between beings was a pivotal breaking point in the devolution from divinized beings to humans. The *Xiaoyuan jing* states, “[Beings] enjoyed things that were not in line with the dharma, they became more desirous [of one another] and thus the womb appeared. The world thus became the product of the womb.”²¹ This also corresponds to the previous point that the Brahmin caste was born through the birth canal that was inherently distinct from the spontaneous birth of all beings. This section reiterates the Buddha’s assertion that the goal is to destroy the Brahmins’ self-esteem and give the monks a motivation to practice.

3.3. The Narratives around the Emergence of Self-Interest and the Creation of Residences

The new phenomenon of self-interest in the world emerged in contradistinction to the wholesome subsistence and open-air living that most beings adopted after the world began to take form. Some individuals started gathering rice for themselves and built homes

to separate themselves from others. The *Poluopo tang jing* does not directly mention the origins of the house as a domicile, though it does state that “out of the first causes and conditions of this world, the dharma of the householder emerged.”²² The creation of residences is described in these genesis stories as a natural development stemming from the differentiation among beings into two distinct sexes. These houses served as the place occupied by those “greedy individuals that stored up rice” 貪人蓄稻, which is recorded in all the scriptures that relate the genesis story and the devolution of beings through the consumption of grain. The story goes that, initially, the beings lived on subsistence farming, going out to pick the creepers or the millet only when they were hungry. Then one being thought to start storing food so as to avoid going out every other day to gather food. Others saw this and more and more beings started competing for rice. As they continued to compete for limited resources, they quickly learned how to produce and store rice. At this point in the story, the competition became so fierce that all sentient beings had to learn to toil and cultivate fields. A similar story is recorded in the *Guowang wuren jing* 國王五人經 (The King and the Five Men Sutra) preserved in Tocharian, which explored the theme of “diligence opposing indolence”. This text criticized the behavior of the hoarders, calling it a lazy practice that harmed the collectivity.²³ However, the *Guowang wuren jing* does not really constitute a genesis story because it gives this example without providing any more information on the creation of the cosmos. Although the story of these “hoarders” appears in both the *Āgamas* and *Vinayas*, it is possible that this story predates the creation myth itself. It is likely that this story was a prevalent folktale that would have been appropriated by Buddhists. Additionally, the *Zhongxu Mohedi jing* 眾許摩訶帝經 (*Mahāsammata-rāja*), a late Chinese translation with parallels in the first nine fascicles of the *Genben shuo yiqieyou bu binaiye poseng shi* 根本說一切有部毘奈耶破僧事 (Skt. *Samghabhedavastu*), was also quite consistent with the other genesis stories related to devolution, although it changed the theme of hoarding grain into a, perhaps more malicious, theme of taking the grain of others 借取稻種. This discrepancy is not a translation error and the *Zhongxu Mohedi jing* was perhaps based on a different base text from the *Āgamas*. Considering that this narrative was adopted and reimagined in the *Zhongxu Mohedi jing*, it casts some light on the process of transmission and editing of the myth that was going on at the time.

In summary, the story of cosmic devolution as a result of gluttony and greed is found throughout the scriptures. This article argues that the consistency of this particular narrative supports Gombrich’s claim that these stories served as a form of satire. Indeed, this story also serves as a cautionary tale, as we will see in the discussion of the development of the *Vinayas* below. To begin, unlike the creation myths of the Brahminical religion, Christianity, and many other world religions, the Buddhist creation myth does not include a creator god or any other figure. While the Brahminical religion holds that Brahṃā is the great creator of the world, the Buddhist myth holds that the genesis of our world was a random process caused by restless beings looking for the choicest foods. In addition, Brahminism explains the transformation of the world in terms of “*kalpas*”, wherein one *kalpa* is equivalent to one thousand celestial periods, or one thousand *māhayugas* 大時. The Brahminical religion established four *yuga* cycles: the *kṛtayuga* 圓滿時代, the *tretayuga* 三分時代, the *dvāparayuga* 二分時代, and the *Kaliyuga* 爭鬥時代 (See Ji 1998). In the *Vedas*, the lifespans, practices, and capacities of beings were determined in terms of the lives of deities and in terms of eons. On the other hand, in Buddhist process of devolution, the effect of the calamities, and the gradual fall of beings were caused by the beings themselves, in this case because of avarice and greed. Although both are “degenerative” narratives, Brahminism emphasized that this degeneration was a passive and objective process brought about by the inherent quality of the *kalpa*, while Buddhism described an active degeneration that began with the restlessness of beings. This confirms Gombrich’s claim that the Buddhist account of cosmogeny fundamentally criticizes the Brahminical system by adopting and subverting its elements.

3.4. Devolution and the Monastic Precepts

There are also elements in these stories that were linked with the monastic precepts, a topic explored by Steven Collins in his annotated translation of the AS (See [Chen 2016](#), pp. 55–80). In line with Collins's work, this article proposes that the precepts would indeed have provided the framework for the Buddhist genesis story. As mentioned above, before the account of devolution in the *Poluopo tang jing*, the Buddha speaks to two Brahmins who were shunned by other Brahmins for becoming Buddhist disciples. Reacting to the Brahmin claim that their caste was inherently superior, the Buddha stated that there was no difference between the peoples of the various castes insofar as the members of every caste may either commit good acts or commit bad acts such as murder, theft, sexual misconduct, lying, and other such malignant behavior. This same story appears in the *Xiaoyuan jing* and in the AS. It is interesting to note that the Buddha critiques the Brahmin caste for the first time in language that adheres to the logic and order of the monastic precepts, after which he challenges the idea that Brahmins should see themselves as being pure from birth.

There are many rules surrounding etiquette that relate to eating with one's fingers and one's hands in the *Vinayas*.²⁴ The question regarding whether one ought to eat with their fingers was purportedly brought up by Yaśa 耶舍 at the Second Buddhist Council as one of the "ten unlawful points" 十事非法. The *Shisong lü* 十诵律 (*Daśa-bhāṇavāra-vinaya*) states, "When finished eating, one may stand up from one's seat and there is no need for a ceremony to finish the leftover food; simply scrape it (*chaoshi* 抄食) with two fingers and eat it. This is said to be the pure form of conduct."²⁵ This indicates that the *bhikkhus* at the council in *Vaiśālī* believed that eating leftovers with two fingers was the pure way of conduct (*jingfa* 淨法), the so-called *dvaṅgula-kappa* 二指淨. In fact, the questions related to *dvaṅgula-kappa* were considered among the 10 important matters for the monastic community, of which *dvaṅgula-kappa* was the second possible offence mentioned in all the *Vinayas*. Only the explanation given in the Pāli *Vinaya* is different.²⁶ Interestingly, the *Ekottara-āgama* uses the characters "tasting with one's fingers" 便以指嘗 rather than *chao* 抄. The *Xiaoyuan jing* uses the sentence "eating with hands by *pravāraṇa*" 以手抄自恣食之. However, we cannot say with any certainty whether the character "*chao*" was used for its specific meaning in Chinese or was the product of its translation. It was perhaps a case of wordplay in the *Sthaviravāda Vinaya* that was then translated to Chinese.

These rules regarding etiquette were associated with the myths regarding the differentiation of the two sexes, the hoarding of rice, the theft of other people's rice, the cultivation of grain, and the emergence of sanctions among primeval beings, which were all explained in terms of the five monastic precepts (*wujie* 五戒). Indeed, the *Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya* and the *Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinayas* changed the details of the creation myth and presented it in the narrative form of a *jataka* tale. The *jataka* tale is an indigenous literary genre in India that described the past deeds of the Buddha and his disciples. These were didactic tales that borrowed various narratives to highlight the protagonist's commendable or illegal behavior in his previous lives. The Chinese translation of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinayas* was undertaken relatively late, so it is clear that the story of devolution was still preserved in the text when Yijing 義淨 (635–713 CE) went to India. This devolution story only appears in the Chinese and Pāli versions of the *Vinayas*, while this record is completely absent from the *Sthaviravāda Vinayas*. The oldest translation, Zhu Fonian's 竺佛念 translation of the *Vinaya* (*Binaiyē* 鼻奈耶), includes the narrative related to the hoarding of rice in the section on the precept against eating after midday (*guozhong shi jie* 過中食戒). The variety of these precepts and the use of this story shows us that this creation myth would have influenced the precepts sometime after the second Buddhist Council when there was a schism and the early Buddhist schools were formed. Moreover, in *Samghabhedavastu*, there is also a royal genealogy and other such details that made the account more complete than *jataka*.

The *Poluopo tang jing* contains a passage that well represents the relation between the creation myth and the precepts. It states, "there was strife because people guarded their fields. There was blame and exhaustion [of resources], mutual offenses, and fist fighting."²⁷ The *Ekottara-āgama* has a similar passage: "The monastics know that theft

[from the fields] begets murder, and murder begets weapons.”²⁸ The AS reads: “From then on, theft appeared, retribution appeared, false speech appeared, and punishment appeared.”²⁹ From these passages we can note the association between the creation myth and monastic law. On the one hand, this article has argued that the narrative element of devolution revealed a shift in rhetoric by the compilers of these scriptures away from Brahminical views on creation—such as equating Brahṃā with the Tathāgata—which represents early Buddhist ideas on creation. The scriptures, on the other hand, attributed the emergence of human beings to the actions of frivolous sentient beings, implying that the Buddha, or the compilers of scriptures, put Brahmins on an even playing field with members of the other castes and effectively made it easier for Brahmins to conceive of becoming *bhikkhus*—if Brahmins are not inherently pure, then they need to practice like everyone else. The account of gluttony leading to the devolution of pure beings was also a cautionary tale, warning the *bhikkhus* to beware of the hazards associated with desire and greed.³⁰ The narrative of devolution was indeed informed by the five Buddhist precepts, beginning with the changes in food and drink, leading to the formation of both sexes, then to theft for profit, which leads to delusion and murdering, and finally punishment. This is essentially an account of how devolution led to the genesis of the codes of discipline and, therefore, not only was this creation myth a parody of Brahminical ideology, but also it was a text that purposefully emphasized monastic discipline.

4. Third Genesis Narrative Element: The Caste System and the Origins of the Śākya Clan

The guiding question in this last section is whether the genesis story in the Buddha’s sermon was meant to address the origins of the Śākya clan, his forebears, after the establishment of the ruling order in the world, or whether it was meant to determine the origins of the caste system, or a combination of both. Aside from the *Shiji jing*, which addresses the origins of the Śākya clan, all the other parallel texts in the *Āgamas* refer only to the caste system. Both the Chinese translation and the Sanskrit version of the *Samghabhedavastu* in the *Mūlasarvāstivādin Vinaya* included a segment on the origins of the Śākya clan, but the other *Vinayas* do not include these details. This section will argue that the initial purpose of the genesis story was only meant to illustrate the origins of the caste system, while details regarding the origins of the Śākya clan were added at a later date.

Interestingly, that which comprises the four castes as recorded in the *Sutras* vary greatly. (1) The *Xiaoyuan jing*, for instance, lists a fifth caste, the *Śrāmaṇa* caste, describing them as follows: “Weary of the world, they shave their heads, wear the sacerdotal robes and cultivate the way.” The text declares that if they practice the ultimate path, they will prove themselves in present dharma: birth and death are over, they will obtain liberation in this world, extinguishing cessation and arising to end all suffering as they obtain the sagely status of the *arhats*. The *Śrāmaṇa* caste was, for obvious reasons, presented as the foremost of the five castes. (2) The *Poluopo tang jing* retains the four kinds of castes, but replaces the fourth, the *Śūdra* caste, with the *Śrāmaṇa* caste. However, the *Poluopo tang jing* also distinguishes the *Śrāmaṇa* caste from the other three, marking its special status by “speaking extensively of the [other] three castes”. (3) Unlike in Brahminism, which determines caste in terms of one’s hereditary essence (*puruṣa*), Buddhism defined caste according to the social divisions of labor. Interestingly, the definition and the occupations of the *Vaiśya* class varied greatly. In the *Poluopo tang jing*, it is written that the *Vaiśya* were engaged in “field work”; in the *Shiji jing*, the *Vaiśya* did “seed work”; in the *Xiaoyuan jing*, the *Vaiśya* were “good at craft and skill”; in the AS, they “acted according to their sexual passions and engaged in commonplace work”. The descriptions of the *Śūdra* caste also varied. Compared with many of the other *Sutras* which defined the *Śūdra* as those who engaged in craftsmanship, the AS described them as those who profited from the “business of hunting and killing”, a more derogatory description compared with the other definitions of the *Śūdra* caste. The genesis story continues and notes that the members of all the castes can accrue good karma, bad karma, or neither good nor bad karma. Considering that all

castes had the potential to accrue good merit, it would seem that the negative views regarding the *Śūdra* caste in the AS would have to be a later addition to the text. (4) Of all the hymns (*gāthās*) related to the genesis story, the most distinctive one is found in the AS. In other texts, the god Brahmā recites the following: “The *Kṣatriya*’s are the most noble of the two-legged [creatures], they are the caste of great clans, they pursue knowledge and cultivate illumination, they are praised by both deities and humans.”³¹ In the various scriptures, the Buddha usually repeats this *gāthā*. Only in the AS is this hymn prefaced by a statement by the Buddha: “Vāseṭṭha, in the present and future lives of sentient beings, it is the Dharma that has primacy.” Once again, the core idea that “Dharma has primacy”, which is prevalent in the AS narrative, is emphasized.

In summary, even the descriptions of the four castes that we are familiar with still differ among the various *Āgamas*, which shows that, at the time of the formation of the *Āgamas*, the sectarian schools had differing views with regard to lineage, caste, and other such doctrinal details. The *Poluopo tang jing*, which mentions only three traditional castes excluding the *Śūdra*, might seem groundbreaking in its outlook, yet this arrangement probably reflected a certain reality about the Buddhist community at that time. After all, many Brahmins that ordained as *bhikkhus* would have found it difficult to accept that both *Brahmin* and *Śūdra* could have good *dharma*s and bad *dharma*s. Indeed, the fourth caste was changed to *Śrāmaṇa* for the sake of the Brahmin disciples who would have been more comfortable with this fourth category. The Chinese translations of the *Āgamas* and the *Vinayas* are sectarian texts, though they still are in many cases the best representations of early Buddhism that we have today, reflecting the attitude of the Buddha toward the four castes, especially the Brahmin caste, during the early Buddhist period.³² In the “Shibenyuan pin”, the scholars of the *Vedas*, the *Ajjhāyaka* 無禪婆羅門, are described as “passing through villages to practice bad and toxic *dharma*. Because they have these marks, they are called poisonous. For this reason, there are Brahmins in the world”.³³ Indeed, compared to many of the other *Sutras*, passages like this in the “Shibenyuan pin” and in the *Daloutan jing* as well, read like a straightforward satire of Brahmin ideas of caste purity and superiority.

Additionally, the *Poluopo tang jing* and the AS both have formulaic sentences in their respective sections on the origin of caste. Their contents roughly correspond to each other as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of *Poluopo tang jing* and AS stereotyped sentences.

婆羅婆堂經	AS
婆私吒！	Vāseṭṭha
是謂初因初緣世中剎利種舊第一智，	evam etassa khattiyamaṇḍalassaporāṇena aggaññena akkharena abhinibbatti ahoṣi.
×	Tesaṃ ñeva sattānaṃ anaññesaṃ sadisānaṃ ñeva no asadisānaṃ
如法非不如法，	dhammeneva no adhammena.
如法人尊	Dhammo hi Vāseṭṭha seṭṭho. ³⁴

Among these parallel excerpts, we note how the sentence “sadisānaṃ ñeva no asadisānaṃ” 平等非不平等 (equality is not inequality) is added to the AS, though the rest is consistent. This formulaic sentence is repeated four times throughout *Poluopo tang jing*, and six times in the AS. The *Xiaoyuan jing* does not include these verses. We may therefore note, based on the recurrence of this particular formula, that the *Poluo po tang jing* is clearly related to the same base text as the Pāli AS.

Lastly, although the origin of the Śākya clan was not the original source of the myth, the *Samghabhedavastu* stated that the creation myth was created by descendants of the Śākya who wanted to clarify the origin of their clan. The sermon was therefore recited by the Buddha’s disciple Moggallāna, and there was no mention in the *Samghabhedavastu* of the

origin of the caste system. Additionally, the origins of the Śākya clan are only mentioned in the “Shibenyuan pin”, and the narrative does not really correspond to the one presented in the *Samghabhedavastu*. It is worth noting that in several texts that explicitly question the origins of the Śākya clan, they are all narrated by Moggallāna, which is evidence of the fact that the Śākya clan origins were a later addition to the genesis story. Indeed, it would be hard to believe that a subject as important as the creation of the cosmos as well as the origins of sentient beings would have first been preached by a disciple.

5. Conclusions

The social anthropologist Edmund Leach (1969) wrote, “The composition of a mythological system always takes place according to its religious context, and this basic structural pattern provides a sense of authenticity to the myth. Just as poetry conveys some meaning, myth also expresses some sense.”³⁵ The Buddhist creation myth conveys the Buddhist views on the Brahminical caste system through the description of the genesis of the cosmos, wherein the world devolved from a utopian state of equality among all beings to the tarnished state of the world after beings learned of desire, self-interest, and greed. Indeed, the story as a whole serves as a warning, or a cautionary tale with strong satirical undertones. First of all, we noted above that the sections of the *Āgamas* and the *Vinayas* where this sermon was recorded in detail, such the “Shibenyuan pin” in the *Shiji jing* and the “Qiri pin” in the *Ekottara-āgama*, were probably taken from a common source text wherein the genesis story began with the seven days of cosmic dissolution, followed by the war between the *devas* and the *asuras*, and then the descent of beings from Ābhassaradeva to the worldly realm. However, the relevant passages in the *Ekottara-āgama* were obviously arranged by the compilers, and the *Shiji jing* was also divided into distinct chapters—perhaps four independent texts—so there is a clear link between the text of the *Shiji jing* and the final narrative relating the descent of beings to the worldly realm. Moreover, we noted that although the theme of cosmology appeared several times in the *Āgamas*, the myth was probably not produced with the purpose of preaching on cosmology or even the formation of the world. Second, when looking at the titles given to the *Xiaoyuan jing*, the *Poluopo tang jing*, and the *AS*, the names of these Sutras suggest that the *Xiaoyuan jing* and the *AS* were not referring to the origin of the universe, but instead to the origin of the caste system. Although these three texts resemble one another, this article argued that because the *AS* and the *Poluopo tang jing* repeat the same formulaic verses, they possibly represent a similar development phase of the genesis story and probably took from the same textual sources. Compared with both the *Poluopo tang jing* and the *Xiaoyuan jing*, however, the *AS* is remarkably well-organized in terms of both the number of formulaic sentences and its narrative content. The *Poluopo tang jing*, on the other hand, provides details regarding the caste system that are more consistent with the reality of the time, indicating that the source text for the *AS* and the other scriptures may have originated later than source text for the *Poluopo tang jing*. In contrast, the *Xiaoyuan jing* differs from both the *Poluopo tang jing* and the *AS* in terms of the dietary changes of *pramaeval* beings, the comparisons between the present and the past, and the caste system, which may indicate that it came from a different lineage of transmission. Finally, the myth as a whole was informed by the disciplinarian purposes of the *Vinayas*, and thus the genesis story also carried many teachings that had parallels with the Buddhist precepts. Taking into consideration the motivations undergirding the genesis story, it is not only, as Gombrich put it, a parody of Brahmin ideals using Brahminical language, but it is also a warning to those *bhikkhus* who joined the cloister and yet continued to foster ideas of Brahmin purity and superiority.

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Notes

- ¹ Early European and American scholarship mainly referred to T. W. Rhys Davids's translation, which translated the *Sutra* name as "Genesis". Therefore, early European and American scholars studied it as a text that systematically introduced the early Buddhist cosmology. This article continues to use expressions such as "creation myth" or "genesis story", but this is because the motifs of "the formation of the world", "the origin of human beings", and "the establishment of order" recounted in the myth are recurring motifs associated with creation myths in the study of mythology. Steven Collins called this story the "parable of origins" (Collins 1993, p. 302).
- ² Concerning Meisig's statement, see Meisig (1988). There are three book reviews about this book: von Hinüber (1993); Vogel (1990); and Norman (1989). Meisig's research on the AS is still the only monograph among European and American scholars to discuss the issue of the source texts. It makes a comparison between the *Xiaoyuan jing* 小緣經 in the *Dirgha-āgama*, the *Poluopo tang jing* 婆羅婆堂經 in the *Madhyama-āgama*, the *Foshuo baiyi jinchuang er'poluomen yuanqi jing* 佛說白衣金幢二婆羅門緣起經, and the AS that has four versions. He classified the *Āgama* texts into one textual family category, and the *Foshuo baiyi jinchuang er'poluomen yuanqi jing* belongs to the same textual family as the AS. Meisig presumes that the oldest version is the *Xiaoyuan jing* 小緣經, and that the *Poluopo tang jing* 婆羅婆堂經 was influenced by the AS. Meisig believes that the development from prototype to AS is influenced by the Gāndhārī Prakrit. Norman and others think that the conclusion drawn by Meisig is open to question.
- ³ "Buddhist cosmology" mentioned by Gethin (1997) is a theory that explains the generation of the world by Buddhism. Suwanda Sugunasiri continued this discussion on cosmology, see Sugunasiri (2013). Sugunasiri retranslated parts of the AS, and pointed out some translation problems in Walshe's (1987) as well as Collins's (1993) works. At the same time, Sugunasiri compared the Buddhist cosmology contained in the AS with the research on the origin of the universe and biological evolution in modern Western science.
- ⁴ *Daloutan jing* 大樓炭經, T01, no. 23, p. 309c19-22.
- ⁵ According to the *Dirgha-āgama*, when the fire started, all beings practiced the second *jhāna*, ascending to the Ābhassaradeva; when the flood started, all beings practiced the third *jhāna*, ascending to the Subhakiṇṇa; when the storm broke out, all beings practiced the fourth *jhāna*, ascending to the Vehapphala.
- ⁶ *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經, T01, no. 1, p. 138b3-5.
- ⁷ *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經, T02, no. 125, p. 735c9-12.
- ⁸ *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經, T01, no. 1, p. 36c15-18.
- ⁹ For example, the *Ambaṭṭh-asutta* in the *Dirgha-āgama*, describes how a disciple named Pokkharasāti, who was born to a noble family, purposefully stood while addressing the Buddha, thinking, "Brahmin talking about *dharma* will sit together, stand together and lie down together. But now, the figures of Buddhist monks are ruined and lonely. They are humble and inferior, learning the dark *dharma*. When I discuss *dharma* with this generation, I don't need to sit." (T01, no. 1, p. 82b23-25).
- ¹⁰ *Qishi yinben jing* 起世因本經, T01, no. 25, p. 409c22-28.
- ¹¹ For more on this subject, see Collins (1993, p. 325).
- ¹² *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經, T02, no. 125, p. 741c28-29.
- ¹³ For more examples, see the *Tevijjasutta* in the *Dīgha-nikāya* and the *Vāseṭṭha-sutta* in the *Majjhima-nikāya*.
- ¹⁴ *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經, T01, no. 1, p. 37b3-6.
- ¹⁵ *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經, T01, no. 1, p. 145a10-19.
- ¹⁶ *Zhong ahan jing* 中阿含經, T01, no. 26, p. 674a25-27.
- ¹⁷ For more, see Richard Gombrich (1992, p. 165). The Pāli reads: Tathāgatassa h'etaṃ Vāseṭṭha adhivacanam—"Dhamma-kāyo iti pi Brahma-kāyo iti pi, Dhamma-bhūto iti pi Brahma-bhūto iti pīti." (D III 84, ⁹).
- ¹⁸ Pāli reads: Dhammo hi Vāseṭṭha seṭṭho jane tasmim diṭṭhe c'; eva dhamme abhisamparāyaṇ ca. (D III 93, ⁸⁻⁹).
- ¹⁹ *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經, T02, no. 125, p. 558c7-10.
- ²⁰ *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮花經, T09, no. 262, p. 27c26-29.
- ²¹ The only exceptions are the *Ekottara-āgama* and the *Fenbie gongde lun*. After the first taste of earth fat, there emerge a group of men and women who eat more and become women.
- ²² *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經, T01, no. 1, p. 38a8-10.
- ²³ *Zhong ahan jing* 中阿含經, T01, no. 26, p. 675b12.
- ²⁴ See Collins (1993, pp. 326–31). Hiltebeitel (2009, p. 83) writes that with each stage of depravity, individual behaviour always leads to general transformation, which is the embodiment of individualism and voluntarism in the *Vinayas*.

- 25 Eating earth essence with the fingers violates the 78th law against licking hands of the *saṃbahulāḥ-saṅkṣa-dharma* in the *Shisong lü*, and grabbing food with one's hands violates the 68th law against grasping food of the *saṃbahulāḥ-saṅkṣa-dharma* in the *Shisong lü*.
- 26 *Shisong lü* 十誦律, T23, no. 1435, p. 451b28-29.
- 27 The meaning of “two fingers kappa” 二指淨 in the Pāli text is “two fingers west of the sun”.
- 28 *Zhong ahan jing* 中阿含經, T01, no. 26, p. 676a10-12.
- 29 *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經, T02, no. 125, p. 737c14-15.
- 30 Pāli reads: Tadagge kho pana Vāseṭṭha adinnādānaṃ paññāyati, garahā paññāyati, musāvādo paññāyati, daṇḍādānaṃ paññāyati. (D III 92, ⁹).
- 31 The narrative related to the origin of residences is strongly associated with the “precept against stealing”. The monk named Dhanikāin stole the royal wood because he needed to build a house, which the Buddha admonished. Hildebrandt thinks that the “home problem” is a crucial narrative clue. It includes householders, houses, and leaving home. What the Buddha wants to overturn in the AS is the view that connects the Brahmin caste's “supreme goodness” with the ideal of the householder. See Hildebrandt (2009, p. 79).
- 32 *Zhong ahan jing* 中阿含經, T01, no. 26, p. 676c24-25.
- 33 Professor Gombrich and Collins agree that this passage describes real historical circumstances. In particular, it distinguishes between a Brahmin who is good at meditation (*jhāyaka*) and a Brahmin who is not good at meditation but suitable for writing books and articles (*ajjhāyaka*). See Gombrich (1992, p. 174).
- 34 *Chang ahan jing* 長阿含經, T01, no. 1, p. 149b11-13.
- 35 *Dīgha Nikāya* III 93, ^{6–7}.

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