

Article

A Study on the *Nianfo* 念佛 Practice in the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna*

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Abstract

The *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* 大乘起信論 has generated over 300 commentaries, yet research on its practice section, particularly *nianfo* practice 念佛修行, remains remarkably limited. This study examines interpretive differences in the *nianfo* practice section across major commentaries: Wŏnhyo's *Kisillon so* 起信論疏, Fazang's 法藏 *Dasheng qixinlun yiji* 大乘起信論義記, the *Shi moheyan lun* 釋摩訶衍論, Tankuang's 曇曠 *Dasheng qixin lun guangshi* 大乘起信論廣釋, and Zixuan's 子璿 *Qixin lun shu bixueji* 起信論疏筆削記. Two key discrepancies emerge: the scope of scriptural citations and interpretations of “those who achieve rebirth.” Analysis reveals that while Fazang was influenced by Wŏnhyo, he developed independent interpretations. Later commentaries demonstrate selective reception rather than uncritical acceptance of predecessors. Post-*Bixueji* commentaries divide into two groups: the *Qixinlun jieyao* 起信論捷要, *Dasheng qixinlun shulue* 大乘起信論疏略, *Qixinlun zhijie* 起信論直解, and *Qixinlun shuji huiyue* 起信論疏記會閱 form one group, while the *Qixinlun zuanzhu* 起信論纂註 and *Qixinlun xushu* 起信論續疏 constitute another. This investigation illuminates doctrinal relationships among commentaries and confirms that later commentators built upon earlier works while contributing original insights.

Keywords: *nianfo* practice 念佛修行; *Dasheng qixinlun* 大乘起信論 (*Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna*); pure land; *Lengqie jing* 楞伽經 (*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*); commentaries on the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna*; rebirth; doctrinal relationships

1. Introduction

The *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (*Dasheng qixinlun* 大乘起信論, hereafter *AFM*) stands as one of the most influential texts in East Asian Buddhism. This treatise has been the subject of extensive scholarly investigation across vast geographical regions from approximately the sixth century when it is believed to have been composed to the present day.¹ This sustained scholarly engagement has resulted in the composition of more than 300 commentaries on the *AFM*, including what is considered the earliest extant commentary, the *Dasheng qixinlun shu* 大乘起信論疏 housed in the Kyōu Shooku 杏雨書屋 collection.²

This trend has continued into the modern and contemporary periods, leading to numerous commentaries and research papers. However, an analysis of existing scholarship reveals that research has predominantly focused on the Positing the Meaning Section (*liyif fen* 立義分) and the Explanatory Section (*jieshi fen* 解釋分) of *AFM*. Yet, as the title “Awakening of Faith in Mahayana” 大乘起信論 itself indicates, the Practice and the Attitude of Faith Section (*xiuxing xinxin fen* 修行信心分), which deals with practices for generating faith, constitutes another crucial dimension of the text. Nevertheless, research on the *AFM* that explicitly features “practice” in its title or dedicates a specific chapter or section to



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the topic accounts for a mere 2% of the total body of scholarship.³ Furthermore, within this small subset, there is a striking paucity of studies that provide an in-depth, independent investigation of all the *nianfo* practice as presented in the Practice and the Attitude of Faith Section. Virtually no studies have conducted in-depth, independent examinations of *nianfo* practice (*nianfo xiuxing* 念佛修行). Furthermore, *nianfo* practice occupies only a small portion of the text—approximately 7.5% of the Practice and the Attitude of Faith Section and merely 1.4% of the entire treatise.⁴ This limited textual coverage requires broader understanding through diverse interpretations by various commentators, no comparative studies examining different commentaries on the *AFM* have been undertaken.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze the interpretations of *nianfo* practice in the *AFM* by examining five commentaries: Wǒnhyo's 元曉 (617–86) *Commentary on the AFM* (*Kisillon so* 起信論疏) [hereafter *Wǒnhyoso*], Fazang's 法藏 (643–712) *Doctrinal Record on the AFM* (*Dasheng qixinlun yiji* 大乘起信論義記) [hereafter *Fazangshu*]⁵, the *Commentary on the Treatise on Mahāyāna* (*Shi moheyan lun* 釋摩訶衍論) [hereafter *Shilun*]⁶, Tankuang's 曇曠 (700–88) *Extensive Explanation of the AFM* (*Dasheng qixinlun guangshi* 大乘起信論廣釋) [hereafter *Guangshi*]⁷, and Zixuan's 子璿 (965–1038) *Record of Editorial Revisions to the Commentary on the AFM* (*Qixinlun shu bixueji* 起信論疏筆削記) [hereafter *Bixueji*].

The reasons for limiting the scope of this study are as follows. First, as mentioned above, there are more than 300 commentaries on the *AFM*, making it difficult to examine all of them. Second, regarding commentaries prior to *Fazangshu*, the Kyōu Shooku Collection manuscript of the *Commentary on the AFM* and Tanyan's 曇延 (516–88) *Doctrinal Commentary on the AFM* (*Dasheng qixinlun yishu* 大乘起信論義疏), written in the sixth century, do not contain extant sections corresponding to the scope of this study (T32no1666: 583a12–21). Furthermore, Huiyuan's 慧遠 (523–92) *Doctrinal Commentary on the AFM* (*Dasheng qixinlun yihsu* 大乘起信論義疏) [hereafter *Huiyuanshu*] only presents the textual organization for the relevant section without detailed explanation. Additionally, Wǒnhyo's other commentary on the *AFM*, the *Separate Records on the AFM* (*Kisinon pyōgi* 起信論別記), is excluded because the corresponding section does not survive. Third, among commentaries after the *Fazangshu*, Zongmi's 宗密 (780–841) *Commentary on the AFM* (*Qixinlun shu* 起信論疏) contains the relevant section, but comparison with the *Fazangshu* reveals that it merely divides the text of the *AFM* according to the outline classification established by Fazang and adds sentences from the *Fazangshu* without presenting Zongmi's own distinctive arguments. Moreover, Tankuang composed the *Brief Commentary on the AFM* (*Dasheng qixinlun yueshu* 大乘起信論略述) as an abridgement of the *Guangshi*, but comparison show that it does not reveal distinctive characteristics of its own, and thus it is excluded. Fourth, most commentaries from the eleventh century onward develop their interpretations based on understandings from the *Fazangshu* and the *Bixueji*, so they will be mentioned separately only, when necessary, rather than addressing each commentary's interpretation in its entirety.

There are two noteworthy findings from the examination of *AFM* commentaries. First, the commentaries differ in how they define the scope of the “*sūtra*” cited in the *AFM* as scriptural authority of *nianfo* practice. This discrepancy stems from the original author's failure to explicitly identify the cited passages. Second, there are significant variations in the interpretations that follow these citations. Not only do the commentaries differ in their understanding of “those who are reborn in the Pure Land,” but textual variations are also evident in the citations from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*Lengqie jing* 楞伽經) found in most *AFM* commentaries following the *Wǒnhyoso*.

Accordingly, this study first focuses on these conflicting interpretations regarding the scope of the cited *sūtra*. By drawing on the textual organization (*kewen* 科文) of the commentaries, the internal context of the *AFM*, and the identification of the original *sūtra* sources,

I aim to clearly delineate the boundaries of the citations within the text. Subsequently, I will conduct a comparative analysis of the commentators' interpretations and the specific versions of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* passages they employ. Through this, I intend to highlight the similarities and differences in the commentator's perspectives and, by extension, clarify their ideological relationships.

By examining these commentaries, this study offers a deeper understanding of the concise sections of the *AFM* and provides an opportunity to identify the historical and philosophical lineages among the texts. Furthermore, it will serve as a foundation for future research investigating the mutual influences between the *AFM*'s interpretation of *nianfo* practice and later literature in the Pure Land and Chan traditions.

2. The “Sūtra” 修多羅 Cited in the *AFM*

2.1. Textual Organization 科文 in the Commentaries and Scriptural Boundaries

Each commentary on the *AFM* approaches the text from a different perspective, and several differences are evident even in the section on *nianfo* practice.

[*AFM*] As the *sūtra* says: “If a person whole-heartedly contemplates Amitābha Buddha of the Western Pure Land, dedicating the good roots that has cultivated and vowing to seek rebirth in that world, one immediately achieves rebirth and, always seeing the Buddha, one will never retrogress. If one contemplates that Buddha's Dharma-body of Suchness, constantly practices it diligently, one will finally achieve rebirth and abide among being who are determined to attain enlightenment.

如修多羅說 若人專念 西方極樂世界阿彌陀佛 所修善根 迴向願求生彼世界 即得往生 常見佛故 終無有退。若觀彼佛真如法身 常勤修習 畢竟得生 住正定故。(T32no1666, 583a17–21)

One such difference concerns the scope of the “*sūtra*” (*xiuduoluo* 修多羅) cited in the *AFM*. The Huiyuan's 慧遠 (523–92) *Doctrinal Commentary on the AFM* (*Dasheng qixinlun yishu* 大乘起信論義疏) [hereafter *Huiyuanshu*] divides the content of *AFM* into sectional divisions but simply labels the relevant passage as “citing *sūtra* as proof” (*yin jing zheng cheng* 引經證成) without further subdivision.⁸ However, later commentaries- the *Wōnhyoso* and the *Fazangshu*-distinguish between the “*sūtra*” and its interpretation, though it is noteworthy that they define the scope of the “*sūtra*” differently from each other.

This difference stems from their contrasting interpretations of the passage “Always seeing the Buddha, one will never retrogress” (*chang jian fogu zhong wu you tui* 常見佛故終無有退). The *Wōnhyoso* treats this as “separately presenting the *sūtra* teaching” [*bie chu xiuduoluo shuo* 別出修多羅說], while the *Fazangshu* classifies it as “interpreting the *sūtra* passages” [*shi jingwen* 釋經文].” To determine the boundaries of the “*sūtra*,” this study will first examine the textual organization the textual organization of the commentaries on the *AFM*.”

An analysis of Table 1 reveals that the *Wōnhyoso* divides sections ① and ② as “separately presenting the *sūtra* teaching” and section ③ and following as “interpreting the intention expounded in the *sūtra*” [*shi jing suo shuo yiqu* 釋經所說意趣]. However, the *Fazangshu* classifies section ① as “citing *sūtra*” [*yin jing* 引經] and section ② and following as “interpreting the *sūtra* passages”.

Table 1. Textual Organization of Commentaries on the AFM.

	Huiyuanshu 慧遠疏	Wōnhyoso 元曉疏	Fazangshu 法藏疏		Shilun 釋論	Guangshi 廣釋	Bixueji 筆削記	
復次眾生 Furthermore, when sentient beings					顯示趣 向假入門 the section of mani- festing the direction for the beginner			
初學是法 [they] first study this Dharma	明其佛力 攝護令生 explaining the Buddha’s power selects and guards [sentient beings] to enable their rebirth	明初學者畏退墮 explaining the beginner’s fear of retrogression	明可退之人 explaining those capable of retrogression	標行劣 noting the inferiority of one’s conduct	歸依所學 教法門 the section of taking refuge in the taught dharma	舉可退之人 presenting the classes of practitioners subject to retrogression	勸生等 the passage [beginning with] ‘encourage- ment to rebirth,’ etc.	防退 preventing retrogression
欲求正信其心怯弱 and seek to attain right faith, their minds may be frail and weak					厭惡處所 退信門 the section of revul- sion for the realm where faith re- gresses			
以住於此娑婆世界自畏 不能常值諸佛親承供養 懼謂信心難可成就 Because they dwell in this world that must be endured, they fear they cannot always meet the Buddhas or personally serve and make offerings to them, and dreading that their faith will be difficult to achieve				舉處釋成 presenting the state and elucidating its completion				

Table 1. Cont.

	Huiyuanshu 慧遠疏	Wōnhyoso 元曉疏	Fazangshu 法藏疏		Shilun 釋論	Guangshi 廣釋		Bixueji 筆削記
意欲退者 They may feel inclined to retreat								
當知如來 One should know the Tathagata								
有勝方便攝護信心 [The Tathagata] has superior skillful means to select and guard their faith					標聖善巧 Indicating the sacred skillful means	如來方便殊勝門 the section of the Tathagata's superior skillful means		後報 等 the passage of consequence in subsequent lives, etc. 聖意 the sacred intent
謂以專意念佛因緣 Namely, through the causes and conditions of whole-hearted nianfo practice,								
隨願得生他方佛土 one achieves rebirth in Buddha-lands of other quarters according to one's vows		示不退轉之方便 showing the skillful means for non-retrogression	明佛有勝方便 explaining the Buddha's superior skillful means	明防退之法 explaining the methods to prevent retrogression	通舉聖意 comprehensively presenting the sacred intent	承力得勝妙處門 the section of relying on [Buddha's] power to attain the sublime realm	防退之法 methods for preventing retrogression	正其法 establishing the Dharma
常見於佛永離惡道 always seeing the Buddha and eternally departing from evil destinies.					釋顯巧相 interpreting the manifestation of skillful aspects	得善處定不退門 the section of attaining the noble realm and settling in non-retrogression		顯專念所得之益 manifesting the benefits gained from whole-hearted concentration
								勝方便 superior skillful means

Table 1. Cont.

Huiyuanshu 慧遠疏	Wōnhyoso 元曉疏	Fazangshu 法藏疏	Shilun 釋論	Guangshi 廣釋	Bixueji 筆削記
① 如修多羅說若人專念西方極樂世界阿彌陀佛所修善根迴向願求生彼世界即得往生 As the <i>sūtra</i> says: “If a person whole-heartedly contemplates Amitābha Buddha of the Western Pure Land, dedicating the good roots that has cultivated and vowing to seek rebirth in that world, one immediately achieves rebirth, ② 常見佛故終無有退 and always seeing the Buddha, one will never retrogress. ③ 若觀彼佛真如法身 If one contemplates that Buddha’s Dharma-body of Suchness, 常勤修習畢竟得生 constantly practices it diligently, one will finally achieve rebirth 住正定故 and abide among being who are determined to attain enlightenment.	引經證成 citing <i>sūtra</i> as proof	別出脩多羅說 separately presenting the <i>sūtra</i> teaching 別引經證 citing <i>sūtra</i> for detailed evidence 釋經所說意趣 inter-pretng the intention ex-pounded in the <i>sūtra</i>	引經 citing <i>sūtra</i> 引經證自所說門 the section that cites <i>sūtra</i> to prove what one has explained 釋經文 inter-pretng the <i>sūtra</i> passages	別引經證 citing <i>sūtra</i> for detailed evidence 顯得往生 manifesting the achievement of rebirth 顯住正念 manifesting abiding in right mindfulness	往生等 the passage [opening with] rebirth, etc. 引經 citing <i>sūtra</i> 觀解等 the passage [opening with] contemplate and unravel, etc.

(①, ②, ③ are arbitrarily assigned by the author for explanatory convenience.)

Ui Hakuju 宇井伯寿 followed the *Fazangshu*'s divisions when translating the *AFM* into modern Japanese, treating only section ① as scriptural text.⁹ However, he noted that section ② could also be viewed as scripture, leaving the boundary problem unresolved. A review of various modern commentaries reveals that this problem remains unsolved. Scholars such as Ui Hakuju and Takasaki Jikidō 高崎直道¹⁰, Yoshizu Yoshihide 吉津宜英¹¹, Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信亨¹², and Ikeda Rosan 池田魯參¹³ accept the view of the *Fazangshu*. Others, including Ōtake Susumu¹⁴, Ven. T'anheō 吞虛¹⁵, Ven. Kaksōng 覺性¹⁶, and Koga Hidehiko 古賀英彦¹⁷ follow the perspective of the *Wōnhyoso*. Let us then examine how earlier commentators understood this issue.

Looking at Table 1, the *Shilun* was influenced by both the *Wōnhyoso* and the *Fazangshu*,¹⁸ but it demonstrates a distinctive approach to understanding the *nianfo* practice section. This is because it divides the *nianfo* practice section of the *AFM* into seven parts, structuring them in parallel. It classifies section ① and following as “the section that cites *sūtra* to prove what one has explained” [*Yin jing zheng zi suo shuo men* 引經證自所說門]. However, unlike other commentaries that provide detailed explanations of this section, the *Shilun* omits its explanation, stating that there is no need to interpret section ① and following redundantly.¹⁹

Next, examining the *Guangshi*, this text is also linked to the *Wōnhyoso* and the *Fazangshu*.²⁰ However, looking at the textual organization related to *sūtra* citation, it divides section ① and ② as “manifesting the achievement of rebirth” [*xian de wangsheng* 顯得往生] and section ③ and following as “manifesting abiding in right mindfulness” [*xian zhu zheng-nan* 顯住正念]. This is identical to the position of the *Wōnhyoso*. Yet the *Guangshi* follows the *Fazangshu* in most of its sectional classifications and titles, such as calling the passage from “one should know that the *Tathāgata*” (*dangzhi rulai* 當知如來) and following “methods for preventing retrogression” (*fang tui fangfa* 防退方法)²¹ and the passage from “as the *sūtra*” (*ru xiuduoluo* 如修多羅) and following “methods for preventing retrogression” [*fang tui zhi fa* 防退之法]. It is noteworthy that while clearly demonstrating the influence of the *Fazangshu*, the *Guangshi* offers a different interpretation regarding the boundaries of the cited *sūtra*. However, even though the *Guangshi* defines the scope of the cited *sūtra* identically to the *Wōnhyoso*, it differs from Wōnhyo's approach of dividing sections based on scripture in that Tankuang categorizes them according to content as “rebirth” and “right mindfulness.”

Finally, the *Bixueji* distinguishes content by words such as “the passage [beginning with] ‘encouragement to rebirth,’ etc.” (*quan sheng deng zhe* 勸生等者) without separate textual organization, and explains the material not in the order of the *AFM* but in a mixed sequence.²² Zixuan clarifies at the beginning of this text that the *Bixueji* is a commentary on the *Fazangshu*. This character of the *Bixueji* is also evident in the *nianfo* practice section through its method of presenting keywords used in the *Fazangshu*, such as “those [corresponding to] the ‘three stages’ in the [*Fazang*]shu” (*shu sanwei zhe* 疏三位者), “those [passages] recorded in the Buddha's teachings, etc.” (*foji deng* 佛記等), and “those [corresponding to] the latter three stages” (*hou sanwei zhe* 後三位者). However, by distinguishing section ① and ② as “the passage [opening with] rebirth, etc.” (*wangsheng deng* 往生等) and section ③ and following as “the passage [opening with] contemplate and unravel, etc.” (*guanjie deng* 觀解等), it can be confirmed that regarding the scope of the cited *sūtra*, the *Bixueji* is closer to the *Wōnhyoso* than to the *Fazangshu*.

Examining commentaries after the *Bixueji*, the Ming dynasty commentator Zhenjie's 真界 *Compiled Commentaries on the AFM* (*Qixinlun zuanzhu* 起信論纂註) [hereafter *Zuanzhu*] distinguishes between “如脩多羅” (*ru xiuduoluo*) and “若觀” (*ruoguan*). The Ming commentaries on *AFM*—Zhengyuan's 正遠 *Essential Points of the AFM* (*Qixinlun jieyao* 起信論捷要) [hereafter *Jieyao*], Deqing's 德清 (1546–1623) *Abbreviated Commentary on the AFM* (*Dasheng*

qixinlun shulue 大乘起信論疏略 [hereafter *Shulue*] and *Direct Explanation of the AFM* (*Qixinlun zhijie* 起信論直解) [hereafter *Zhijie*], and Tongrun's 通潤 (1565–1624) (*Qixinlun xushu* 起信論續疏) [hereafter *Xushu*]—are identical to the *Wōnhyoso*. The Qing dynasty work *Collected Reading of Commentary Records on the AFM* (*Qixinlun shuji huiyue* 起信論疏記會閱) [hereafter *Huiyue*] by Xufa 續法 (1641–1728) presents the content of the *Fazangshu*, but with differences from the original description in the *Fazangshu*.²³

2.2. The Purpose and Identity of the Cited “Sūtra”

Another basis for clarifying the boundaries of the “sūtra” cited in the *AFM* can be found in the purpose of citing the *sūtra* and the identity of the cited *sūtra*. First, examining the purpose of presenting the “sūtra,” the *AFM* cites *sūtra* to demonstrate the efficacy of *nianfo* practice for those who are inclined to regress, showing that they can be reborn in other Buddha-lands of other quarters through *nianfo* practice. When the *AFM*'s expositions are compared with the content of the *sūtra* cited in the *AFM*, the correspondence is as follows:

[The exposition of the *AFM*]

Namely, through the causes and conditions of whole-hearted *nianfo* practice, ② one achieves rebirth in Buddha-lands of other quarters according to one's vows, always seeing the Buddha and eternally departing from evil destinies.

謂以專意 念佛因緣/隨願得生 他方佛土/常見於佛 永離惡道。 (T32no.1666: 583a15-17)

[The *sūtra* cited in the *AFM*]

[A] As the *sūtra* says: “① If a person whole-heartedly contemplates Amitābha Buddha of the Western Pure Land, dedicating the good roots that has cultivated and vowing to seek rebirth in that world, one immediately achieves rebirth and, ② always seeing the Buddha, one will never retrogress.”

[B] As the *sūtra* says: “① If a person whole-heartedly contemplates Amitābha Buddha of the Western Pure Land, dedicating the good roots that has cultivated and vowing to seek rebirth in that world, one immediately achieves rebirth.” ② Always seeing the Buddha, one will never retrogress.

① 如修多羅說 若人專念 西方極樂世界 阿彌陀佛/所修善根 迴向願求生彼世界 即得往生/ ②常見佛故 終無有退。 (T32no.1666: 583a17-19)

The distinction between [A] and [B] centers on whether “Always seeing the Buddha, one will never regress” constitutes part of the *sūtra* passage or not. When considering the purpose of providing scriptural evidence, the *AFM* describes how, through the karmic connection of *nianfo* practice, one is reborn in a buddha-land and “always seeing the Buddha and eternally departing from evil destinies.” Following this exposition, the *sūtra* is cited and the corresponding passage state “Always seeing the Buddha, one will never retrogress.” Therefore, “Always seeing the Buddha, one will never regress” should be considered part of the *sūtra* passage.

Second, examining the identity of the cited *sūtra*, the *AFM* merely states “as the *sūtra* says” without specifying which *sūtra* it is. The *Wōnhyoso*, the *Fazangshu*, the *Shilun*, and the *Guangshi* provide no particular description regarding the source of the “sūtra.” However, the *Bixueji* stated that “The ‘sūtra’ and others in the [AFM] refer to the *Amitābha Sūtra* (*Ami-tuo jing* 阿彌陀經), the *Sūtra of Immeasurable life* (*Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經), the *Sūtra of Auspicious Aspect* (*Xixiang Jing* 瑞相經), and the *Sūtra on the Meditation on Infinite Life* (*Guan wuliangshou jing* 觀無量壽經), among others.”²⁴ The *Xushu*, when explaining this section, quotes the *Sūtra on the Meditation on Infinite Life*.²⁵

Modern research on the *AFM* also proposes various *sūtra*s,²⁶ and among these, there is a view that identifies this *sūtra* as the *Sūtra of Immeasurable life*. In particular, Ōtake Susumu 大竹晋 compared passages from the two texts as shown below and demonstrated the similarity between the *sūtra* passage cited in the *AFM* and the *Sūtra of Immeasurable life*.²⁷ Following Ōtake Susumu's view that the *sūtra* cited in the *AFM* is the *Sūtra of Immeasurable life*.²⁸

[*AFM*] 如修多羅說、若人專念 西方極樂世界 阿彌陀佛、① 所修善根、迴向願求生彼世界、② 即得往生、常見佛故、③ 終無有退。

As the *sūtra* says: "If a person whole-heartedly contemplates Amitābha Buddha of the Western Pure Land, dedicating the good roots that has cultivated and vowing to seek rebirth in that world, one immediately achieves rebirth and, always seeing the Buddha, one will never retrogress.

[*Sūtra of Immeasurable life*] 諸有眾生聞其名號信心歡喜，① 乃至一念，至心迴向願生彼國，② 即得往生③ 住不退轉。(T12no.360:272b11–13)

All sentient beings who, having heard the Name, rejoice with a faithful heart even for a single moment of thought, and sincerely transfer their merit with a desire to be born in that land, shall immediately achieve rebirth and dwell in the stage of non-retrogression.

As we have seen thus far, regarding the different perspectives of Wōnhyo and Fazang, it is impossible to clearly define the extent of the cited *sūtra* passage because the *AFM* does not specify this. However, first, when organizing the textual organization of commentaries on the *AFM*, we find that the *Guangshi*, the *Bixueji*, the *Zuanzhu*, the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, the *Zhijie*, and the *Xushu*—all influenced by the *Fazangshu*—take a different position from the *Fazangshu* and identify sections ① and ② as passages from the "*sūtra*." Second, based on the purpose of providing scriptural evidence and the high probability that the cited *sūtra* is the *Wuliangshou jing*, "Always seeing the Buddha, one will never regress" should be included in the *sūtra* passage. In light of these considerations, the findings suggest that the majority of *AFM* commentaries adhere to the scope of the "*sūtra*" delineated in Wōnhyo's interpretation (① and ②).

3. The Relationship Among Commentaries Based on Interpretations of the "*Sūtra*"

3.1. Commentary Interpretations of "若觀法身畢竟得生" (*Ruoguan Fashen Bijing Desheng*)

Another section where differences are found in commentary interpretations is the passage from "若觀" (*ruoguan*) onward, which interprets the teaching of the "*sūtra*." After citing the "*sūtra*," the *AFM* states: "If one contemplates that Buddha's Dharma-body of Suchness, constantly practices it diligently, one will finally achieve rebirth and abide among being who are determined to attain enlightenment." (*ruoguan bifo zhenr-ufashen changqin xiuxi bijing desheng zhu zhengding gu* 若觀彼佛真如法身 常勤修習畢竟得生，住正定故，『大乘起信論』 T32no.1666: 583a20–21).

The Wōnhyoso abbreviates this *AFM* passage "若觀彼佛真如法身 常勤修習畢竟得生" as "若觀法身畢竟得生" and creates a textual organization titled "interpreting the intention expounded in the *sūtra*". Notably, among all sections explaining *nianfo* practice in the *AFM*, Wōnhyo provides detailed exposition only for his particular section.

The *Fazangshu* also presents the *AFM* passage using the abbreviated form "若觀法身畢竟得生" as provided in the Wōnhyoso. Regarding *nianfo* practice in the *AFM*, Fazang briefly explains "復次以下" (*fuci yixia*) by referring to "those who are liable to retrogress" (*ketuizhi ren* 可退之人). However, he provides detailed explanation when he includes "若觀法身畢竟得生" within the textual organization of "interpreting the *sūtra* passages."

Comparing these two texts reveals that both the *Wōnhyoso* and *Fazangshu* focus on the section that interprets the cited *sūtra* within the *nianfo* practice portion of the *AFM*. Both commentaries' use of the abbreviated form “若觀法身畢竟得生” demonstrates the *Fazangshu*'s dependence on the *Wōnhyoso*. However, when examining the content of their interpretations in detail, the two commentaries diverge in their interpretation of “若觀法身畢竟得生” become apparent.

[*Wōnhyoso*] “If one contemplates that the Dharma-body one will finally achieve rebirth” (*ruo guan fashen bijing de sheng* 若觀法身畢竟得生) means to clarify that bodhisattvas of the ten stages of propensity (*shijie* 十解) and above, by attaining a partial vision of the Dharma-body of Suchness, one certainly achieves ultimate rebirth. ... Moreover, because bodhisattvas of the first ground (*chudi* 初地) and above attain and see the Dharma-body of Suchness of that Buddha, it says ‘finally achieving rebirth.’” ... Among these, the meaning of the *AFM* is to clarify certain rebirth by citing people of the superior grade (*shangbei* 上輩), not to say that those who have not yet seen the Dharma-body cannot attain rebirth.

若觀法身畢竟得生者。欲明十解以上菩薩。得少分見真如法身。是故能得畢竟往生。... 又復初地已上菩薩。證見彼佛真如法身。以之故言畢竟得生。... 此中論意約上輩人明畢竟生。非謂未見法身不得往生也。(『起信論疏』 T44no. 1844: 225c9–16)

[*Fazangshu*] Regarding the statement “contemplating the Dharma-body and finally achieving rebirth” and so forth, those who achieve rebirth roughly consist of three stages (*sanwei* 三位). First, like when the lotus has not yet bloomed, faith and practice are not yet complete, so [one is] not yet called “non-retrogression.” However, because one dwells where there are no conditions for retrogression, [it is] called “non-retrogression.” Second, after the [ten] stages of faith (*shixin* 十信) are fulfilled, the lotus blooms and [one] sees the Buddha, enters the ten abodes (*shizhu* 十住), attaining a partial vision of the Dharma-body, and abiding in the stage of those determined to attain enlightenment (*zhengdingwei* 正定位). Third, when the stages of the three kinds of worthies (*sanxianwei* 三賢位) are fulfilled and [one] enters the first ground and beyond, [one] realizes the all-pervading Dharma-body and is born in the limitless Buddha-land. ... Among this [passage], “finally” and so forth refers to these latter two stages.

言若觀法身畢竟得生等者。但往生之人約有三位。一如蓮華未開時信行未滿。未名不退。但以處無退緣故稱不退。二信位滿足已去。華開見佛。入十住位。得少分見法身。住正定位也。三者三賢位滿。入初地已去。證遍滿法身。生無邊佛土。... 此中畢竟等。是後二位也。(『大乘起信論義記』 T44no.1846: 286c15–23)

The above description from the *Wōnhyoso* reveals one reason why *Wōnhyo* abbreviated the *AFM* passage “若觀彼佛真如法身 常勤修習畢竟得生” (*ruoguan bifo zhenrufashen changqin xiuxi bijing desheng*) to “若觀法身畢竟得生” (*ruoguan fashen bijing desheng*). The *Wōnhyoso*'s exposition identifies only two categories—those at the ten stages of propensity, namely the ten abodes and above, and those at the first stage and above—emphasizing that they “finally” achieve rebirth because they no longer retrogress. In other words, *Wōnhyo* focuses on “finally achieve rebirth” (*bijing desheng* 畢竟得生), and it can be inferred that this focus led him to omit “constantly practices it diligently” (*changqin xiuxi* 常勤修習).

Although the *Wōnhyoso* states that only superior grade—those at the ten abodes and above and those at the first ground and above—“finally” achieve rebirth, this does not contradict the *AFM*'s assertion that beings of indeterminate class (*budingju* 不正聚) can also achieve rebirth through *nianfo* practice. This is because the *Wōnhyoso* subsequently explains the *AFM*'s “abide among beings who are determined to attain enlightenment” (zhu

zhengding 住正定), stating: “Third, all nine grades of rebirth are called determined enlightenment because they attain non-retrogression through relying on the power of superior conditions.” (*sanzhe jiupin wangsheng jie ming zhengding yi shengyuanli de butui gu* 三者九品往生皆名正定。依勝緣力得不退故。『起信論疏』 T44no.1844: 225c19–20). This clarifies that beings of indeterminate class also avoid regression and can achieve rebirth while abiding in determined enlightenment. This explanation in the *Wōnhyoso* appears to be intended to distinguish between those who “finally” achieve rebirth and those who achieve rebirth through superior karmic connections.

While the *Fazangshu* uses the same phrase “若觀法身畢竟得生” (*ruoguan fashen bijing desheng*) as the *Wōnhyoso*, it focuses on “achieve rebirth” (*desheng* 得生) rather than “finally” (*bijing* 畢竟). The *Fazangshu* establishes three stages by adding “faith and practice are not yet complete” to the *Wōnhyoso*’s two categories of practitioners. This addition appears to account for beings of indeterminate class, who are the intended audience for *nianfo* practice in the *AFM*. Unlike the *Wōnhyoso*, the *Fazangshu* does not provide a separate explanation of “abide as beings who are determined to attain enlightenment” (*zhu zhengding* 住正定), possibly because it had already included beings of indeterminate class among “those who achieve rebirth” when explaining “若觀法身畢竟得生.” While the *Fazangshu* thus demonstrates differentiation from the *Wōnhyoso*, its concluding statement that “‘finally’ and so forth refers to these latter two stages” clarifies that the second stage of “after the [ten] stages of faith are fulfilled” and the third stage of “when the stages of the three kinds of worthies are fulfilled and [one] enters the first ground and beyond” correspond to “finally.” This reveals that ultimately, the *Fazangshu* maintains the same position as *Wōnhyo*’s understanding.

Another distinctive feature of the *Fazangshu* is its comparison of those who achieve rebirth to the blooming of lotus flowers. However, the *Bixueji* connects this lotus metaphor to the significance of lotus flowers in Pure Land thought. Consequently, the *Bixueji* interprets his section of the *Fazangshu* as referring to those who have already achieved rebirth and explains “there are no conditions for retrogression” (*wutui yuan* 無退緣) with the Pure Land as given premise.²⁹ The *Fazangshu*, however, describes the third category of practitioners being reborn in Buddha-lands only after entering the first ground. This suggests that the lotus metaphor was intended simply to illustrate the question of rebirth through the blooming of lotus flowers.

The *Bixueji* explains the scriptural citation and commentary sections of the *AFM* using terms such as “rebirth” (*wangsheng* 往生), “contemplate and unravel” (*guanjie* 觀解), and “encouragement to rebirth” (*quansheng* 勸生). The *Bixueji* provides detailed explanations of *Fazangshu*’s three stages (*sanwei* 三位) of rebirth and correlates them with the nine grades (*jiupin* 九品) of rebirth.

[*Bixueji*] The “three stages” cited in the [*Fazang*]*shu* now are spoken of based only on the first six grades among the nine grades [excluding the lower three grades]. The first position refers to those people of the middle three grades. The second position refers to those people of the upper-lower grade. The third position refers to the people of the upper-middle and upper-upper grades. Because this distinguishes the meaning of non-retrogression, it is divided in this way. ... “these latter two stages” are precisely the people who have completed the ten stages of faith and those of the three kinds of worthies. This is because they contemplate the Dharma-body of Suchness and practice diligently. If they vow to be reborn in that land, they are precisely the people of the upper three types of position among the nine grades.

今疏約三位者。但就九品中前六品說。初位即彼中三品人也。第二位即彼上下品人。第三位即彼上中上上品人也。以是料揀不退義故。故此判也。... 後二位者。

即十信滿足及三賢位人。以觀真如法身勤修習故。願生彼國。即是九品中上三品人也。(『大乘起信論疏筆削記』 T44no.1848: 407b8-c6)

The *Bixueji* mentions the nine grades of rebirth from the *Sūtra on the Meditation on Infinite Life* while commenting on *Fazangshu*'s "those who achieve rebirth roughly consist of three stages." According to the *Bixueji*, those who achieve rebirth in the *Fazangshu* correspond to the middle three grades and upper three grades among the nine grades, based on the criterion of "non-retrogression." Furthermore, the *Bixueji* quotes the *Amitābha Sūtra* to demonstrate that all nine grades are free from retrogression, which corresponds to what the *Wōnhyoso* stated about the nine grades of rebirth when explaining "abide as beings who are determined to attain enlightenment." The *Bixueji* then defines the "latter two stages" that "finally" achieve rebirth, as mentioned in the *Fazangshu*, as those who have fulfilled the ten faith stages and those at the stages of the three kinds of worthies (*sanxian wei* 三賢位). Synthesizing these two descriptions, the *Bixueji* interprets that those who gave fulfilled the ten faith stages and those at the three worthy stages "finally" achieve rebirth as the upper three grades. The interpretations of *Wōnhyo*, *Fazang*, and *Zixuan* concerning the *AFM* passage "若觀彼佛真如法身，常勤修習畢竟得生" as analyzed up to this point, are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Interpretations of "Those Who Achieve Rebirth."

Person 人	<i>Wōnhyoso</i> 元曉疏	<i>Fazangshu</i> 法藏疏	<i>Bixueji</i> 筆削記		
Rebirth 往生	Finally 畢竟	Bodhisattvas of the First Ground and above 初地已上菩薩	3. Completion of the Stages of the Three Kinds of Worthies are fulfilled and enters the first ground and beyond 三賢位滿-入初地已去	People of the Upper-Middle and Upper-Upper grades 上中上上品人	Non-retrogression 無退
		Bodhisattvas of the Ten Stages of Propensity and above 十解以上菩薩	2. Completion of the Ten Stages of Faith are fulfilled and enters the Ten Abodes 信位滿足已去-入十住位	People of the Upper-Lower grade 上下品人	
			1. Incomplete Faith and Practice 信行未滿	People of the Middle three grades 中三品人	
				People of the Lower three grades 下三品人	

As evidenced by Table 2, the categorization of "those who achieve rebirth" became increasingly granular, and the scope of explanation broadened significantly through the progression from the *Wōnhyoso* to the *Bixueji*.

Among commentaries on the *AFM* after the *Bixueji*, those that mention the *Fazangshu*'s "three stages" include the *Jieyao* (X45no.763, 400a19–24), the *Shulue* (X45no.765, 482b12–17), the *Zhijie* (X45no.766, 515a3–7), and the *Huiyue* (X45no.768, 726c; 728c). In contrast, the *Zuanzhu* and the *Xushu* do not mention this content. Thus, the *Fazangshu*'s "three stages" serves as evidence for understanding the influence among commentaries on the *AFM*.

3.2. The La

Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra Quoted in the Commentaries and Its Interpretation

In the process of commenting on *nianfo* practice in the *AFM*, the *Wōnhyoso* is the first among extant *AFM* commentaries to quote the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. This passage, which is no mentioned in the *AFM* itself, contains the content that *Nāgārjuna* will be reborn in the Pure Land because he has attained the ground of joy. Later commentaries on the *AFM* after the *Wōnhyoso*—the *Fazangshu*, the *Guangshi*, the *Bixueji*, and the *Xushu*—also mention this content from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. The Passages from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* and the

Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra passages quoted in the commentaries on the AFM are organized in Table 3 below.³⁰

Table 3. Comparison of *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* Passages.

Title	Sentence
<i>Ru lengqie jing</i> 入楞伽經	In a great country to the south, there is a Great Virtuous Bhikṣu named Bodhisattva <i>Nāgārjuna</i> . He shall shatter the views of existence and non-existence, and preach my Dharma to the people—the supreme Dharma of the Great Vehicle. Attaining the ground of joy, he will be reborn in the Paradise. 於南大國中有大德比丘 名龍樹菩薩 能破有無見 為人說我法 大乘無上法 證得歡喜地 往生安樂國 (T16no.671:569a24–27)
<i>Dasheng ru lengqie jing</i> 大乘入楞伽經	Within the country of south India, there is a Bhikṣu of great renown and virtue, whose name is <i>Nāgārjuna</i> . He shall the doctrines of existence and non-existence, and manifest my supreme Great Vehicle Dharma within the world. Attaining the first ground of joy, he will be reborn in the Paradise. 南天竺國中 大名德比丘 厥號為龍樹 能破有無宗 世間中顯我 無上大乘法 得初歡喜地 往生安樂國 (T16no.672:627c19–22)
<i>Wōnhyoso</i> 元曉疏	This is because the <i>Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra</i> praises Bodhisattva <i>Nāgārjuna</i> , stating that he attains the ground of joy, thereby being reborn in the Paradise. 如楞伽經歎龍樹菩薩云 證得歡喜地 往生安樂國故 (T44no.1844:225c14–15)
<i>Fazangshu</i> 法藏疏	As recorded in the Buddha’s teachings regarding Bodhisattva <i>Nāgārjuna</i> and others, [they] reside in the first ground and attain birth in the Pure Land. 如佛記龍樹菩薩等。住初地生淨土等也。 (T44no.1846:286c21–22)
<i>Guangshi</i> 廣釋	Based on this meaning, the <i>sūtra</i> states that Bodhisattva <i>Nāgārjuna</i> attains the first ground of joy, thereby being reborn in the Paradise. 經依此義說。龍樹菩薩證初歡喜地往生安樂國。 (T85no.2814:1172c26–27)
<i>Bixueji</i> 筆削記	Regarding the phrase ‘recorded in the Buddha’s teachings’ and so forth: the <i>Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra</i> states that the Bhikṣu <i>Nāgārjuna</i> resides in the first ground of joy, shatters the views of existence and non-existence, and is reborn in the Land of Paradise. 佛記等者。楞伽經說。龍樹比丘住初歡喜地。能破有無見。往生安樂國。 (T44no.1848:407b28–29)
<i>Xushu</i> 續疏	As the <i>Ru lengqie jing</i> says, <i>Mahāmāti</i> , you should know that after the parinirvāṇa of the Sugata, within the country of south India, there is a Bhikṣu of great renown and virtue, whose name is <i>Nāgārjuna</i> . He shall the doctrines of existence and non-existence, and manifest my supreme Great Vehicle Dharma within the world. Attaining the first ground of joy, he will be reborn in the Paradise. 如入楞伽經云 大慧汝當知 善逝滅度後 南天竺國中 大名德比丘 厥號為龍樹 能破有無宗 世間中顯我 無上大乘法 得初歡喜地 往生安樂國 (X45no.764:441b6–9)

The above Table 3 allows for analysis from two perspectives. First is the formal aspect, namely textual similarity. In the sentence describing *Nāgārjuna*, the *Ru lengqie jing* 入楞伽經 and the *Dasheng ru lengqie jing* 大乘入楞伽經 differ in expression between “證得” (*zhengde*) and “得初” (*dechu*). Based on this, since the passage quoted in the *Wōnhyoso* uses “證得” (*dechu*), it can be concluded that *Wōnhyoso* quoted from the *Ru lengqie jing*.

The *Fazangshu*, while referencing the *Wōnhyoso* in many parts as previous scholarship has been shown, demonstrates differentiation from the *Wōnhyoso* in this section. Instead of naming the *sūtra*, the *Fazangshu* uses the expression “as recorded in the Buddha’s teachings” (*rufoji* 如佛記), and replaces *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*’s “歡喜地” (*huanxi di*) and “安樂國” (*anleguo*) with “初地” (*chudi*) and “淨土” (*jingtu*). Through this method, it presents only the content of this *sūtra* rather than citing the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* in a formal quotation format.

The *Bixueji* provides a detailed explanation of this section using “recorded in the Buddha’s teachings” (*foji* 佛記), the keyword employed by the *Fazangshu*. However, the *Bixueji* explicitly identifies the *sūtra* name as the “*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*,” which the *Fazangshu* had omitted, following the same approach as the *Wōnhyoso*. It also restores words such as

“歡喜” (*huanxi*) and “安樂國” (*anleguo*) that had been altered in the *Fazangshu*. Additionally, it includes the phrase “能破有無見” (*nengpo youwujian*) from the *Ru lengqie jing*, which was not mentioned in either the *Wōnhyoso* or the *Fazangshu*. Through this, it is possible to suggest that Zixuan directly consulted the *Ru lengqie jing* and revised the text accordingly. However, the *Bixueji* omits certain portions of the *Ru lengqie jing* text, and this form bears a high degree of similarity to Zongmi’s *Great Commentary on the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment* (*Yuanjuejing dashu* 圓覺經大疏).³¹ Based on this fact, it appears more likely that Zixuan consulted other texts that quote the *Ru lengqie jing*, such as the *Great Commentary on the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, rather than directly consulting the *Ru lengqie jing* while modifying the quoted passages to differ from the original.

The *Guangshi* simply refers to “經” (*jing*) without specifying the *sūtra* name like the *Fazangshu*, but the quoted passage shows high similarity to the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* text. However, the use of “證初” (*zhengchu*) raises several questions. Did Tanguang consult the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* directly? If so, did he use the *Ru lengqie jing* or the *Dasheng ru lengqie jing*? Or did he simply add characters while referencing the *Wōnhyoso*? these questions remain unclear. Based on textual similarity, it is closer to the *Wōnhyoso* than to the *Fazangshu*. However, since there would be no particular need to change “*Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*” to simply “*sūtra*” while referencing the *Wōnhyoso*, the likelihood of influence from the *Wōnhyoso* appears unlikely as well.

Examining commentaries after the *Bixueji*, the *Zuanzhu*, the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, and the *Zhijie* do not quote the above *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* passage. In the case of the *Xushu*, it identifies the source as “as the *Ru lengqie jing* says” (*ru ru lengqie jing yun* 如入楞伽經云), but the quoted passage is identical to the *Dasheng ru lengqie jing*.

The second aspect is the content-related, concerning the sections where each commentary cites the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. The *Wōnhyoso*, in “interpreting the intention expounded in the *sūtra*”, explains the second category among those who necessarily achieve rebirth—the first ground (*chudi* 初地) and above—and presents Bodhisattva *Nāgārjuna* from the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* as evidence for this. The *Fazangshu*, in “interpreting the *sūtra* passages”, describes the third of three stages of rebirth—the first ground and above—while mentioning Bodhisattva *Nāgārjuna*.³²

Unlike the *Wōnhyoso* and *Fazangshu*, the *Guangshi* quotes the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* not in the section that explicates the cited *sūtra*, but in the cited *sūtra* section itself—“manifesting the achievement of rebirth”. The *Guangshi* presents two types of power for achieving rebirth: self-power (*zili* 自力) and other-power (*tali* 他力), and us *Nāgārjuna* as described in the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* as an example of “self-power.” The interpretation utilizing self-power and other-power in this section is a distinctive interpretation unique to the *Guangshi*.

The *Xushu* quotes the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* in its commentary on the AFM passage “one will finally achieve rebirth and abide among beings who are determined to attain enlightenment” (*bijing desheng zhu zhengding gu* 畢竟得生住正定故) to emphasize the importance of *nianfo* practice. It then quotes the *Ten Doubts about the Pure Land* (*Jingtu shi yi lun* 淨土十疑論), the *Madhyamaka-śāstra* (*Zhonglun* 中論), the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra* (*Weimojing* 維摩經), and the *Questions about the Pure Land* (*Jingtu huo wen* 淨土或問) to discuss the relationship between emptiness (*kong* 空) and the Pure Land.

The tendency of quoting the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* in commentaries on the AFM examined thus far provides another clue for understanding the influence among the commentaries. While the *Fazangshu* demonstrates differentiation from the *Wōnhyoso* in both the expression of *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* passages and their positioning, both commentaries share an identical goal. They both seek to clarify rebirth at the “first ground,” namely the ground of joy, through the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*. The *Bixueji*, while commenting on the *Fazangshu*, attempts to restore the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* quotations to their original form, and in this process appears

to have been influenced by other texts rather than the *Wǒnhyoso*. The *Guangshi* differs from both the *Wǒnhyoso* and *Fazangshu* in the section where it explains by quoting the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* and in the form of its quotation. However, since the intention to demonstrate rebirth at the first ground and above through quoting the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* is identical, it reveals the originality unique to the *Guangshi* while being influenced by both texts or one of them. Meanwhile, while these four commentaries are primarily close in form to the *Ru lengqie jing*, the *Xushu*, written during the Ming dynasty, quotes the *Dasheng ru lengqie jing*, revealing a formal difference. Moreover, the purpose of quoting the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* in the *Xushu* differs from them, aiming to clarify the importance of *nianfo* practice. Furthermore, it can be confirmed that in the subsequent content, it develops into a discussion of the relationship between emptiness and the Pure Land by quoting other *sūtra*s and treatise together.

4. Conclusions

This study focused primarily on *nianfo* practice, which appears as the final method among the various practices presented in the Practice and the Attitude of Faith Section of the *AFM*. The investigation centered on the *AFM* itself along with its major commentaries: the *Wǒnhyoso*, the *Fazangshu*, the *Shilun*, the *Guangshi*, and the *Bixueji*. When necessary, additional interpretations from the *Huiyuanshu*, the *Zuanzhu*, the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, the *Zhijie*, the *Xushu*, and the *Huiyue* were also examined. Through this comprehensive analysis, the study explored interpretive differences found in the *nianfo* practice section of the *AFM* and illuminated the doctrinal relationships among the commentaries.

The problematic issues can be classified into two categories. The first concerns the scope of the *sūtra* cited in the *AFM*. The *Wǒnhyoso* and *Fazangshu* differ in their perspectives on “Always seeing the Buddha, one will never retrogress.” *Wǒnhyo* views this passage as part of the “cited *sūtra*,” while *Fazang* interprets it as belonging to the section that “interprets the cited *sūtra*.” To examine the differences between these two texts, three distinct approaches were employed. First, an analysis was conducted on the commentaries after the *Fazangshu*, namely the *Guangshi*, the *Bixueji*, the *Zuanzhu*, the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, the *Zhijie*, and the *Xuxhu*. Second, analysis of the correspondence between the *AFM*’s exposition and the *sūtra* content, considering the purpose of providing scriptural evidence, supports this interpretation. Third, I inferred the identity of the cited *sūtra* based on its strong similarities to the *Wu lianshou jing*. Taken together, these analyses confirm that the passage “Always seeing the Buddha, one will never regress” is primarily recognized as the specific scriptural text being cited.

The second issue involves examining how the commentaries understand the section that interprets the *sūtra* cited in the *AFM*. This analysis was conducted from two perspectives. First, the *Wǒnhyoso* abbreviates the passage from “若觀” (*ruoguan*) onward to “若觀法身畢竟得生” (*ruoguan fashen bijing desheng*) and the *Fazangshu* adopts *Wǒnhyo*’s formulation. While this demonstrates the influence of the *Wǒnhyoso* on the *Fazangshu*, the two commentaries diverge in their specific interpretations. Both texts explain “those who those who finally achieve rebirth,” but the *Wǒnhyoso* focuses on “finally” while the *Fazangshu* emphasizes “practitioners.” The *Wǒnhyoso* defines those who “finally” achieve rebirth as two categories: those at the ten stages of propensity and above, and those at the first ground and above. The *Fazangshu* adds a third category—those below the ten stages of faith—to *Wǒnhyoso*’s two categories, presenting a total of three types of practitioners. However, it clarifies that only the latter two stages correspond to “finally,” ultimately revealing the same position as the *Wǒnhyoso*.

The *Bixueji* applies the nine grades system to the three stages established by the *Fazangshu*, assigning the middle three grades, upper-lower grade, upper-middle grade, and upper-upper grade respectively. This demonstrates an expansion in the interpretive

scope regarding those who achieve rebirth. Among commentaries after the *Bixueji*, the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, the *Zhijie*, and the *Huiyue* mention the *Fazangshu*'s three stages, while the *Zuanzhu* and the *Xushu* make no reference to them. Although this tendency is limited to commentaries on the *nianfo* practice section of the *AFM*, it provides evidence of *Fazangshu*'s influence on commentaries on the *AFM*. Accordingly, later commentaries can be classified into two groups: the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, the *Zhijie*, and the *Huiyue* on one side, and the *Zuanzhu* and the *Xushu* on the other.

The following analyzes the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* quotations that appear in the process of commenting on the *AFM*. The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* first appears in the *Wōnhyoso*, and this passage continues to be quoted in subsequent commentaries on the *AFM*. Comparing the form and context in which commentaries cite this *sūtra* reveals the relationships among the commentaries. From a formal perspective, the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* passages in the *Wōnhyoso*, the *Fazangshu*, the *Guangshi*, the *Bixueji*, and the *Xushu* each differ. While the *Bixueji* comments on the *Fazangshu*, it attempts to restore the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* quotations to their original form, and in this process appears to have been influenced by other texts rather than the *Wōnhyoso*. Meanwhile, the *Wōnhyoso*, the *Fazangshu*, the *Guangshi*, and the *Bixueji* show forms closer to the *Ru lengqie jing*, while the *Xushu* quotes the *Dasheng ru lengqie jing*. From a content perspective, the *Wōnhyoso*, the *Fazangshu*, the *Guangshi*, and the *Bixueji* all share the common purpose of using the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* to demonstrate rebirth at the first stage, the ground of joy. In contrast, the *Xushu* quotes the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* emphasize the importance of *nianfo* practice.

This analysis of the two primary differences in the interpretation of *nianfo* practice within the *AFM* has clarified the relationship between the *Wōnhyoso* and the *Fazangshu*, as well as their respective influences on subsequent commentaries. Specifically, the differences in explanatory methods and content classifications—such as the divergent descriptions of “those who finally achieve rebirth” in the *Wōnhyoso* and *Fazangshu*, the expansion of the three levels of rebirth into nine grades in the *Bixueji*, and the fact that the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, the *Zhijie*, and *Huiyue* adopted these three levels while the *Zuanzhu* and the *Xushu* did not—demonstrate that subsequent commentators did not uncritically accept the views of their predecessors. Rather, the discrepancies observed in the citations of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* featured in the *Wōnhyoso* demonstrate that while these commentators built upon the perspectives of their predecessors, they also incorporated their own original interpretations.

Furthermore, this study confirmed that among commentaries after the *Bixueji*, the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, the *Zhijie*, and *Huiyue* were influenced by both the *Fazangshu* and the *Bixueji*, specifically in the *nianfo* practice section. However, the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, and the *Zhijie*, along with the *Bixueji*, define the scope of the *sūtra* cited in the *AFM* differently from the *Fazangshu*. This suggests that these three texts show stronger influence from the *Bixueji*, and the apparent influence of the *Fazangshu* may have been transmitted indirectly through the *Bixueji* rather than directly. Meanwhile, the *Zuanzhu* and the *Xushu* do not reflect *Fazangshu*'s views on either the scope of the *sūtra* cited in the *AFM* or the “three stages.” Based on this analysis, commentaries after the *Bixueji* can be classified into two main groups: Group1 consists of the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, the *Zhijie*, and the *Huiyue*; these can be further subdivided into a subgroup containing the *Jieyao*, the *Shulue*, and the *Zhijie*, and a separate branch for the *Huiyue*. Group 2 comprises the *Zuanzhu* and the *Xushu*; notably, even within this group, these two texts are distinguished as belonging to separate and independent lineages when further subdivided.

On a related note, passages from the *AFM*, including the *nianfo* practice section, are also quoted in Pure Land texts. These quotations appear once in the *Paradise Anthology* (*Anleji* 安樂集) of Daochuo 道綽 (562–645), four times in the *Explaining the Pure Land—a*

Treatise on Accumulated Doubts (*Shi jingtu qunyilun* 釋淨土群疑論) of Huaigan 懷感 (d.u.), ten times in the *Treatise on the Pure Land* (*Jingtulun* 淨土論) of Jiakai 迦才 (d.u.), and three times in the *Doctrinal Essentials of the Sūtra of Immeasurable Life* (*Muryangsukeyōng chong'yo* 無量壽經宗要) of Wŏnhyo. Examining how the AFM is quoted in Pure Land literature represents an important task for understanding the position and influence of the AFM within Pure Land thought. Therefore, questions regarding how Pure Land texts understand the *nianfo* practice examined in this study and what influence this had on later developments remain as topics for future research.

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Abbreviations

大乘起信論	AFM = <i>Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna</i>
起信論疏筆削記	Bixueji = <i>Qixinlun shu bixueji</i>
大乘起信論義記	Fazangshu = <i>Dasheng qixinlun yiji</i>
大乘起信論廣釋	Guangshi = <i>Dasheng qixinlun guangshi</i>
起信論疏記會閱	Huiyue = <i>Qixinlun shuji huiyue</i>
起信論捷要	Jieyao = <i>Qixinlun jieyao</i>
釋摩訶衍論	Shilun = <i>Shi moheyan lun</i>
大乘起信論疏略	Shulue = <i>Dasheng qixinlun shulue</i>
大正新修大藏經	T = <i>Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō</i>
起信論疏	Wŏnhyoso = <i>Kisillon so</i>
卍續藏經	X = <i>Manji Zokuzōkyō</i>
起信論續疏	Xushu = <i>Qixinlun xushu</i>
起信論直解	Zhijie = <i>Qixinlun zhijie</i>
起信論纂註	Zuanzhu = <i>Qixinlun zuanzhu</i>

Notes

- ¹ This Study adopts Ōtake’s theory, which dates the AFM to the sixth century. See Ōtake (2017, pp. 485–91).
- ² For information on the AFM Commentaries, see Mochizuki (1938, pp. 47–68); Ono (1937, pp. 285–97); Kashiwagi (1995, pp. 24–26). For information regarding the Kyō Shooku Collection, see Kongō Daigaku (2017).
- ³ A search conducted across the Riss (Korea), Crnki (China), CiNii (Japan), and DLBS (Taiwan) reveals that more than 850 academic papers published since 1900 include the AFM in their titles. Among these, however, studies that either feature “practice” in the title or dedicate a specific chapter or section to the topic number only about twenty, accounting for a mere 2% of the total body of scholarship.
- ⁴ It is based on the volume of the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經, where Paramartha’s translation of the AFM comprises 701 lines, the Practice and the Attitude of Faith Section comprises 132 lines, and the section describing *nianfo* practice comprises 10 lines.
- ⁵ A comprehensive survey of the literature citing Fazang’s commentary on the AFM reveals that it is consistently identified as the “*Qixin lun shu*” 起信論疏, rather than its formal title “*Dasheng qixinlun yiji*” 大乘起信論義記. Accordingly, this study adopts the abbreviation “*Fazangshu*” to reflect this prevalent nomenclature. See Kim (2021a).

- The period of composition is estimated to fall between the late seventh and late eighth centuries. While the work is attributed to *Nāgarjuna*, the Japanese text *Treasury of Siddham* (*Shittan zō* 悉曇藏) contains the earliest record identifying the Silla monk Woulchung 月忠 as its actual author. See Kim (2021b, pp. 17–35).
- Its formation is estimated to have occurred in the mid-to-late 750s, and it is believed that the writing was finished before 763. See S. Lee (2025, p. 25).
- Although the *Huiyunshu* is excluded from the discussion in this study because it only presents the textual organization for the section on *nianfo* practice without detailed commentary, certain aspects of the *Huiyuanshu*'s textual organization need to be considered in relation to the *Fazangshu*. Therefore, it will be included in Table 1, which organizes the textual organization.
- See Ui and Jikidō (1994, p. 286). According to Ui, although this section normally ends at “即得往生,” reading it up to “常見佛故終無有退” is also a viable interpretation.
- See Ui and Takasaki, *Daijō Kishinron*, pp. 285–86.
- See Yoshizu (2014), *Daijō Kishinron Shinyaku*, pp. 195–96.
- See Mochizuki, *Kōjutsu Daijō Kishinron*, pp. 74–75.
- See Ikeda (1998), *Gendaigoyaku Daijō Kishinron*, pp. 151–52.
- See Ōtake (2004, p. 62). Ōtake notes that the “修多羅” passage extends as far as the phrase “終無有退”.
- See T. Ven (1990, pp. 174–75).
- K. Ven (2000, pp. 534–36).
- See Koga (2002).
- On the influence of the *Wōnhyoso* and the *Fazangshu* on the *Shilun*, see Kim (2021a).
- Shi moheyan lun* (T32no.1668: 666c15–16), “所引經文說相明故，不須重釋。”
- On the relation between the *Wōnhyoso* and the *Fazangshu* on the *Guangshi*, see S. Lee (2025).
- The *Fazangshu* uses “明防退方法” (*ming fang tui fangfa*) while the *Guangshi* uses “防退便” (*fang tui fangbian*); although the characters “法” (*fa*) and “便” (*bian*) differ, their content is the same. See *Dasheng qixin lun guangshi* (T85no.2814: 1172b15), “第三防退方便。”
- ① 復次眾生初學是法欲求正信。其心怯弱。以住於此娑婆世界。自畏不能常值諸佛。親承供養懼謂信心難可成就意欲退者。② 當知如來②④ 有勝方便。攝護其心。②謂以專意念佛因緣。隨願得生他方佛土。常見諸佛永離惡道。⑤ 如修多羅說。若人專念西方極樂世界阿彌陀佛。所修善根迴向願生彼世界者即得往生。常見佛故終無有退。③ 若觀彼佛真如法身。① 常勤修習 ①③ 畢竟得生住正定故。[The numbers are arbitrarily assigned by the author, and in the *Bixueji* they are presented in numerical order.]
- The *Fazangshu* state as “引經證中二。先引經。後常見佛下釋經文。” (T44no.1846: 286c10–11), whereas the *Fazangshu* quoted in the *Huiyue* reads as “疏。若人下。引經。常見下。釋文。若觀下。引。住正句。釋。” (X45no.768: 726c14).
- Qixin lun shu bixueji* (T44no.1848; 406c26–27), “論修多羅等者。即阿彌陀無量壽瑞相。及觀經等。”
- Qixinlun xushu* (X45no.764: 441a24–b3).
- Regarding the “修多羅,” Ven. Kaksōng identifies the *Amitābha-sūtra* (*Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經), the *Sun-Store sūtra* (*Rizang jing* 日藏經), the *Sūtra of Immeasurable life*, the *Candragarbha sūtra* (*Yuezang jing* 月藏經), *Śūramgama-sūtra* (*Lengyan jing* 楞嚴經), whereas scholars such as Lee, Eun, Oda, Ōtake, and Takemura that it refers to the three principal texts of the Pure Land tradition (*Jingtu sanbu jing* 淨土三部經: The *Sūtra of Immeasurable Life* 無量壽經, the *Sūtra of the Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* 觀無量壽經, and the *Amitābha-sūtra*, 阿彌陀經). See K. Ven (2000, p. 535); Ōtake (2004, p. 62); K. Lee (2004, p. 329); Eun (2017, pp. 487–488); Oda (1897, p. 597); Takemura (1985, pp. 505–6).
- Ōtake (2004, p. 62).
- Ōtake (2004, p. 62). The numbers such as ① follow Ōtake, and the underlining has been added by the author.
- Qixin lun shu bixueji* (T44no.1848; 407a24–25), “Regarding the ‘three stages’ mentioned in the Commentary, the discernment of those attaining rebirth refers precisely to those who have already been born in that land. (疏三位者。料揀往生之人。正是說於已生彼者。)” (T44no.1848; 407b11–16), “The condition for non-retrogression refers to the fact that the lifespan in the [Pure] Land is long and eternal. Furthermore, there are no women, no three evil realms, no cold or threat, no hunger or thirst, no distinction between enemies and relatives, and no old age or sickness. Whatever one desires follows the heart. One is always in the company of Sravakas 聖聞 and Great Bodhisattvas 大菩薩, and constantly sees the Buddha and hears the Dharma. The water, the birds, the trees, and the forests all proclaim the teachings of Suffering, Emptiness, Impermanence, and Non-self, leading one to be mindful of the Buddha and the Dharma. Consequently, wholesome karma 善業 naturally increases, and afflictions are effortlessly eliminated. Thus, one reaches Bodhi without ever falling back into retrogression. (無退緣者。以彼壽命長遠。又無女人無三塗。無寒暑無饑渴。無冤親無老病。所欲隨心。常與聲聞大菩薩等而為伴侶。常見佛聞法。水鳥樹林皆演苦空無常無我。念佛念法。由是善業則自然增長。塵勞則任運消除。直至菩提更無退轉故。)”
- This content does not appear in the *Lengqie abaduoluo bao jing* 楞伽阿跋多羅寶經 (T16no.670).
- Yuanjuejing dashu* (X9no.243: 328c21–22), “《入楞伽》中佛說龍樹，住初歡喜地，能破有無見，往生安樂國。”
- As this portion of the *Bixueji* serves as an annotation of the *Fazangshu*'s interpretation, it will not be subject to a separate analysis in this study.

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