The Post-Nirvāṇa Meeting of the Buddha with Māyā
Examination of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra and its Quotations in the Shijiapu—Part II

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INTRODUCTION

In our previous inquiry into the episodes of the Buddha’s legend, selected by Sengyou in his Shi jiāpu (“Generation of the Śākya”), we observed that the Śākya Prince’s family connections played an important role. The often neglected figure of his natural mother, Māyā, deserved special attention. In the Indian tradition, after the Buddha’s conception and birth, the most memorable event related to Māyā is the visit that her son paid her in the Trāyastrimśa Heaven. Nevertheless, the Indian narratives have been succinct on the meeting itself, whose purpose is presented as a teaching session during the rainy season or a sermon addressed to the gods of the Trāyastrimśa Heaven, consisting according to a Pāli tradition of the Abhidharma.

The element that sculptors and painters who represented the scene and story-tellers who recounted it have emphasized is the devāvatāra, which occurs after the visit to heaven. This is the solemn return of the Buddha on earth, a descent during which he is surrounded by the gods Brahmā and Śakra, and welcomed by a king and disciples (among them, a nun, who shows irrepressible impatience). The legend of the Buddha’s visit to Māyā and of his

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glorious return to earth also circulated in China and Japan, and it seems that the text which recorded it, known in Chinese as the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*, exerted notable influence since the sixth century.  

It is in this text, preserved only in Chinese, that we find the only detailed account of the Buddha’s visit to his mother, but we may consider this account to be a developed echo of an earlier Indian tradition. This “Sūtra of Māyā,” also referred to as the *Sūtra of the Ascension of the Buddha to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven in order to Preach the Dharma to his Mother*, does not end with the tale of this visit. It continues with a quite original account of the Parinirvāṇa, including a coming down of Māyā from her heaven in order to pay a homage of lamentation to her son’s coffin. The coffin then opens up and the Buddha emerges to pronounce a few sentences of filial gratitude.

The episode of the post-nirvāṇa meeting is completely unknown in the Indian tradition, but it has enjoyed a broad audience in the Chinese and Japanese contexts. Encyclopedists of the Liang period, namely Sengyou and Baochang, first reproduced the textually relevant parts of the tale as it figures in the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*. Thereafter, we find mentions of the miracle, always retold with the terms of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*, in Xuanzang’s 大慈 pilgrimage record (T. 2087) and Zhiban’s 志磐 Fozou Dongji 佛祖統紀 (T. 2035). An account of Māyā’s visit is also found, shortened, and with interesting textual variants, in the *Fomujing* 佛母經 “Sūtra of the Mother of the Buddha,” a popular Chinese sūtra under different forms which will be referred to hereunder. Furthermore the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* account notably influenced the Japanese *Konjaku Monogatari shū* 今昔物語集.

As we will see, the miracle of the Buddha’s “resurrection” has scarcely

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been carved and painted in China and Japan. It figures in the printed illustrated Chinese Lives of the Buddha, popular since the Ming period in China. (As for the copies that I have seen, it does not however figure in Sakyamuni’s late Japanese popular biography entitled Shaka no honji 釈迦の本地, whose study is now in progress).

In Japan, the image of the Buddha greeting his mother from his coffin is comparatively rare, but in many representations of the Buddha laying on his Nirvāṇa bed, and thus not yet encoffined, we can glimpse in the upper part, Māyā coming to the scene; she is preceded by a bhikṣu and accompanied either by one servant or an escort of goddesses. An example of the representation of Māyā with a bhikṣu and a single servant can be found in the Shaka no honji, a copy of which is kept in the Tōyō Bunko.

Going back to the anthologies of the Liang era, one observes that in the Shijiapu compilation, the XXVIIth chapter devoted to the Parinirvāṇa displays a broad variety of quotations from texts of different origins: A. Mahayanic Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra (T. 375); B. An account of the Parinirvāṇa in the Dirgha Āgama (T. 1); C. The archaic Nirvāṇasūtra, referred to as Da Panniyanjing in two juans (T. 6); D. The Womb Sūtra (T. 384); E. The Mahāmāyā Sūtra (T. 383). Such a collage inspired a derogation to Sengyou whose comment generally closes each chapter of his anthology. He felt obliged to insert an exceptional commentary in the middle of the quotations (T. 2040, j. 4, p. 70c16-17). Along with the lengthy chapter IV, on the conception, birth and youth of the Buddha, the comparatively substantial chapter XXVII is the most elaborate from Sengyou’s compilation.

In the Jinglūyixiang, Māyā’s last meeting with her son is made to stand out on account of its location, i.e. the 6th and last subsection of the first section of the Buddha chapter (佛部). This account is based on the Mahāmāyā Sūtra and is visibly inspired by the Shijiapu. Compared to the Sengyou’s version (Shijiapu, T. 2040, j. 4, p. 73b26-74b26), Baochang’s tale (Jinglūyixiang, T. 2121, j. 4, p.19a21-b13) is abridged although it reproduces the main elements
of the plot, aside from the final scenes concerning the dialogue between Māyā and Ānanda on the future of the Dharma. Since it is short, it gives a special emphasis to the respect shown to three sacred objects used by the Buddha which became “without owner,” namely the Buddha’s dress, bowl and stick. This version also underscores the Buddha’s advice against unfiliality and the entrusting of the tale to Ānanda under the title: “Sūtra of mother and child meeting (相見) when the Buddha was facing (臨) nirvāṇa.”

The *Jinglùyixiang*’s passage is short but takes its importance from being included in the main section on the Buddha. Of the six subsections of this section, three are related to the extinction of the Buddha. The emphasis the Buddha puts on filial piety (孝) is correlative to the emphasis on gratitude (報恩) that was evident in the first part of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* as shown in our precedent article.

In contrast, the episode of the Buddha’s visit to his mother in the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven appears in a remote section of the *Jinglùyixiang* (the 3rd subsection of the 4th section ‘on the Śākya relatives’ of the Buddha chapter: T. 2121, j. 7, p. 33a8–26). The quotation, while shortened, is again very close to the *Shijiapu*’s, although it is listed as coming from two sources, A. the *Sūtra of the Ascension of the Buddha to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven in order to Preach the Dharma to his Mother*, which is another title for our *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* (T. 383), and B. the Chinese version of the *Samantapāśadikā* (T. 1462), where, in the text presently available, I did not find anything similar to the circumstances of the devāvatāra.

Finally, concerning the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* (T. 383), which inspired the two above-mentioned anthologies for the intense and very original account of the meeting of the Buddha with his mother, we have to acknowledge that the tale on which the present article is focused constitutes only a small fraction of the Sūtra’s second juan. In the first part, object of the previous article, we read a truly “feminine” text, since two thirds of the first scroll were devoted to Māyā’s various discourses. In the second scroll, the Māyā’s presence is
limited, first, to her trouble when she is still in the Trāyastrīṃśa Heaven, followed by her meeting with the Buddha who emerges from his coffin (1012a16-1013b13), and, second, to her return to her heaven after exchanging a few words with Ānanda (1013b14-21 and 1014a3-15). The bulk of the second part of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra was composed to correspond to the definition of the genre called “Sūtras on Nirvāṇa” or alternativey “Sūtras on the Destruction of the Law” (法滅經).

In anticipation of the complete translation of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra that I am preparing, I will shortly describe here what precedes and follows our account of the post-nirvāṇa meeting. We have seen that the first scroll ended with the return of the Buddha from the Trāyastrīṃśa Heaven to the Jetavana of Śrāvastī, where he was welcomed by King Prasenajit. The second juan starts with the Buddha’s departure from the company of Prasenajit (1010a27). The Buddha takes a bath in the Nairāṇjanā river where his body is still resplendent like a bright mirror (1010a29-b6). On the riverside, the Buddha discusses Devadatta’s misconduct with Ānanda (1010b8-c16). Then follows a classical account of gradual decay, rather similar to that of the Mahāparībhāṇa Suttanta. It includes: the drama of loosing āyus (捨寿) in Vaiśālī (1010c177-1011a21), the Buddha confining himself to his bed in Kuśinagara (1011a22-28), his last prescriptions, particularly concerning his cremation (1011a28-b23), Subhadra’s conversion (1011b23-c11), the Buddha’s gradual extinction (1011c12-29) followed by funeral stanzas pronounced by the gods Indra and Brahmā, general disarray and, finally, the preparation of the funeral rites (1011c29-1012a16).

In the latter part of the second juan, after the end of her meeting with her son, Māyā’s apparitions are only occasional. She discloses her fears to Ānanda about the transmission of the Dharma. It is the origin of Ānanda’s famous prophecy (remembering what he learned from the Buddha) about the gradual disappearance of the Law in fifteen centuries, each century being identified with an emblematic figure of the Saṃgha. Māyā’s despair is then expressed in
a few stanzas. After having entrusted the Dharma to Ānanda and Mahākāśyapa, she declares herself unable to endure the sight of the Tathāgata’s cremation. She thus departs to her heaven. The original *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* ends there with the customary obtention of varying degrees of holiness by the assembly congregated around the sāla trees. A supplementary “Part II: the parting of the relics among eight countries” (1014a21–1015a7) is an addenda without mention of Māyā and without interest for the present study.

A last remark should be made about the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*. It was said in the previous article that it is not a philosophical sūtra. Its exceptional narratives must have attracted the encyclopedists of the Liang period composing anthologies of narrative pieces. Subsequently, the post-nirvāṇa plot was adopted in late popular sūtras with ritual purposes. From a growing number of fragments and from medieval Chinese editions, it is possible to obtain a better access to various versions of the *Sūtra of the Mother of the Buddha* (*Fomujing* 佛母經).

Recent studies by Kawasaki Michiko⁴ and by Nishiwaki Tsuneki clarify the existence of various copies of the *Fomujing*. A fragment of thirty-two lines

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⁴ The Buddha himself utters a short prophecy of decline in ten stages, each of one century, at the end of the *Sūtra on the Parinirvāṇa of Mahāprajñāpāti* (T. 145, p. 870b28–c13). The translation of this sūtra by Huijian 惠簡 (act. 457) is slightly anterior to the *Mahāmaya Sūtra*’s translation. This sūtra, without its prophecy, has been the source of Chapter XVII on the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha’s stepmother in the *Genealogy* (T. 2040, j. 2, pp. 55–56).


from Dunhuang is published under that title in the 85th volume of the Taishō
Canon (T. 2919). I had access to one copy (Pelliot 2055)6 presenting a more
elaborate aspect of the tale. The Fomujing was presented there as the “Māyā
chapter” of an unexisting Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra. A comparison between the
Mahāmāyā Sūtra and this last text has been published in a Festschrift for the
late Michel Soymié, a Dunhuang scholar.7 A comparison of different versions
of the Fomujing (from manuscripts kept in Russia, Berlin, Munich, as well as
Chinese Medieval printed books) has been attempted by Nishiwaki Tsuneki.8 I
will not address this problem here, but rather confine myself to the study of
the Mahāmāyā Sūtra as it appears in the Shijiapu, as well as the exploration
of its tale of the post-nirvāṇa meeting, eventual quotations in China and Japan,
and the artistic representations inspired by it.

The text of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra is often verbose. In order to help the
reader, I have chosen to integrally translate the abridged quotations made by
Sengyou, supplementing them with translations from the original text for
passages, especially the versified passages, which were systematically omitted
by the compiler. On the other hand, I have excluded the final passage of
Ānanda’s prophecy which is unrelated to the story of the Buddha and his

6 See its reproduction by Izumi Takeo 泉武夫, in Kyoto National Museum 京都国立
博物館編 Kokuhō: Shaka konkan shitsuugen zu 国宝 釈迦金棺出現図 (Shaka rising from

7 “L’apparition du Buddha à sa mère après son nirvāṇa dans le Sutra de Mahamayā
(T. 383) et dans le Sūtra de la Mère du Buddha (T. 2919)” in De Dunhuang au Japon,
Etudes chinoises et bouddhiques offertes à Michel Soymié (éd. J.P. Drège), EPHE, Sciences
Historiques et Philologiques, et Collège de France, Institut des Hautes Études Chinoises.

8 Nishiwaki Tsuneki 西脇常記, “Zum Fomujing 佛母經 (Sūtra der Mutter des
Wittern and Shi Lishan 石立善 eds. 東アジアの宗教と文化—西脇常記教授退休記念
論集 Essays on East Asian Religion and Culture. Kyoto: Editorial committee for the
mother’s meeting.

I. Analysis and translation of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra quotation in the Parinirvāṇa chapter of the Shijiapu

Despite shortening its text, the comparatively long quotation from the Moyejing in the Shijiapu (T. 2040, j. 4, p.73b26-74b26) closely follows the content of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra (T. 383, j. 2, p. 1012a16-1014a15) although shortening its text. The main episodes may be summarised as

1) Māyā’s premonitions of the Buddha’s extinction (T. 2040, j. 4, p. 73b26-c8); 2) Anuruddha’s announcement of Parinirvāṇa (Ibid., p.73c8-12); 3) Māyā’s descent to the coffin of the Buddha and her homage to the three relics (Ibid., p.73c12-22); 4) the re-appearance of the Buddha rising from his coffin (Ibid., p.73c22-26); 5) Ānanda’s question and the answer made by the Buddha returning into his coffin (Ibid., p. 73c27-74a6); 6) Ānanda’s prophecy on the future of the Law and Māyā’s return to her heaven (Ibid., p. 74a6-b26). The translation of the Shijiapu passages will be preceded by a few explanatory words.

1. Māyā’s premonitions of the Buddha’s extinction

In literature about the life of the Buddha, there is a rich tradition concerning the dreams, mostly experienced by the female actors in the legend. There are the dreams of the Buddha’wife or those of his stepmother at the time of his “great departure,” but Māyā’s dreams remain most numerous even when distinguished from other physiological phenomena affecting her, such as her desires as a pregnant woman (dohada) and the presages of a god’s

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disability (in the present passage). Moreover Māyā is apt at connecting her present dreams to other past dreams. Her dreams are altogether prescient and reminiscent.

We have already seen her oniric reminiscence of her son’s conception, when the Buddha appeared in the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven.\textsuperscript{11} This reminiscence is found here again with emphasis on the golden body of the devaputra (not called “bodhisattva” in this passage) riding an elephant.\textsuperscript{12}

The first series of presages may be assimilated to the well known cliche of the five god’s symptoms of decline.\textsuperscript{13} Thereafter follows the version of Māyā’s five bad dreams, which is rather edulcorated in the Shiṣiapu. Let us take as an example the description of the fifth dream in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra: “There were five lions coming down from the sky. They bit Mahāmāyā’s breast and entered in her right flank. Her body and mind were suffering as if pierced by a sharp sword.” (T. 383, j. 2, p. 1012a26-27).

*Shiṣiapu*, p. 73b26-c8.

On the parinirvāṇa of the Buddha, to Lady Māyā being in heaven, five debilitating symptoms did appear: 1) flowers decaying on her head, 2) sweat running out from under her armpits, 3) extinction of the light coming from her sinciput, 4) blinking of her eyes, 5) feeling of unease when seated on her throne.

Moreover, on that night, she experienced five highly unpleasant dreams: 1) Mount Sumeru’s collapse with drying out of the four oceans,


\textsuperscript{13} Those symptoms affected also the Bodhisattva when he left the Tuṣita heaven in order to be incarnated into Māyā’s womb, cf. *Shiṣiapu*, T. 2040, j.1, p.13c19-23 (second version of Chapter IV, inspired by T. 189 (因果經)).
2) stirring rakṣasa contending for human eyes, 3) gods loosing their precious crown and having their bodies deprived of brightness, 4) banners of jewels upside down loosing their talisman (manicintana), 5) suffering of her’s body bitten by lion’s teeth like sharp knives.

After having experienced these dreams, she awakened and was afraid: “This is not auspicious. When, in the past, I was in the King Suddhodana’s palace, being asleep, I was upset when I had a dream of a wonder. I saw a devaputra with a body of golden yellow colour, driving a white king-elephant, coming from among the devapurtras. They were making nice music. It was a vision of the essence of the sun which entered my right flank though my heart and body were serene. Then in my breast, I was pregnant with Prince Siddhārtha, light illuminating the world.

The five dreams of present were extremely frightening. Definitely, it is an omen of my son’s nirvāṇa.”

2. Anuruddha’s announcement of Parinirvāṇa

The description of Māyā’s meeting with Anuruddha is more developed in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra. Instead of the stereotyped expression with which Sengyou expresses Māyā’s pain: “The world’s eye is destroyed,” we find in this sūtra more dramatic sequence of events. There is an exchange of gāthās between the bhikṣu and the unhappy mother. After expressing in prose her regret that she had to leave her just born baby to her sister Mahāprajāpati, Māyā makes a short summary of her son’s career (which started when he was nineteen), ending with a versified allegory which will be quoted here:

Stanzas of Māyā in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, p. 1012b29–c7.
“Through the innumerables kalpas of the past, always we were mother and son.
You have reached the perfect awakening and thus for ever cut off the bonds.
Therefore it is now to you to enter parinirvāna.
Like a high tree where many birds take refuge,
At morning, every one goes his own way but comes back in the evening.
With you, mother and son could stay together on the transmigration tree.
As you obtained the fruit of awakening, its trunk and source became cut off,
And as it is your time to assume extinction, there will be no more time for me to meet you again."

Shijiapu, p. 73c8-12.

It is at that time that Anuruddha, having celebrated the encoffinisation of the Tathāgata, climbed to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven in order to inform Māyā by word (gāthā). Māya listened, and in despair, stamped the ground. Taking time to recover, she rips out hair from her head, and says, crying sadly: “Last night, I dreamed of this. I know that there is something strange: the extinction of the Buddha’s fruition. Soon there will be his cremation. What a pain! The world’s eye is destroyed!”

3. The descent of Māyā to the coffin of the Buddha and her homage to the three relics

Sengyou closely follows the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, merely shortening and sobering it here and there. He does avoid quoting the gāthās entirely. Nevertheless, like the stanzas Māyā pronounced when she learned of her son’s departure, the gāthās she uttered in front of his coffin also employ avian similes and imagery. The question that she asks to the extinguished Buddha elicits an answer that he formulates when rising up from his coffin:

Stanzas of Māyā in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, p. 1012c18-29.
“Today, between the twin trees, deva, dragons and the eight categories of beings (of the surnatural escort of a Buddha)
Make sounds of cries and lament. They don’t know what they say. 
It is as the sounds and shrieks of the parrots who are not able to explain 
their words.
They fill the space like birds opening their wings and making rings, 
And are not able to fly out of the woods of the Tathāgata’s nirvāṇa.
During distant kalpas, I accumulated a love of gratitude (恩愛) like a 
cātaka bird.
Now the wind of impermanence is blowing and disperses everywhere
The beings afflicted with pain and hoping for the Dharma’s sweet dew 
(amyta).
I am like the Randī bird who is thirsty, waiting the celestial rain.
Why do you leave us here and hasten to reach nirvāṇa?
Hidden in your heavy coffin, did you not know that I would come?”

In the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, these stanzas are followed by Māyā’s gesture of 
veneration addressed to the three emblematic relics-of-use, i.e. the dress, the 
bowl, and the stick of the Buddha, which will become pilgrimage objects 
during the first centuries of the Buddhist expansion. We have here a case of 
divergence between the Mahāmāyā Sūtra and the Shijiapu.

According to the Sūtra, Māyā uses her right hand to grip the stick and her 
left hand to strike her face before throwing herself on the ground. The 
Shijiapu omits the hitting of the face which, as is throwing oneself on the 
ground, is a common gesture of sorrow in India. About the grasping of the 
stick, it seems, as we will see, that there is a representation of it in the famous 
Heian period painting “Śākyamuni Rising from the Golden Coffin” 釈迦金棺出現圖.

Shijiapu, p. 73c12-22.

Immediately, with her escort, she leaves her heaven to go down.
Taking the direction of the space between the twin trees (śāla), she sees 
from afar the Buddha’s coffin and laments, unable to master herself: With
water poured on her face, she recovers [temporarily]. Facing the coffin, she performs a prostration and weeps sadly, saying: "Since a past of innumerable kalpas, there was for long a mother/son [relation] which shockingly, had to be abandoned. Today's morning it becomes without return. Such pain to be lamented! It is for the living beings, the destruction of happiness."

Then divine flowers of many sorts were spread over on the coffin.

Lady Māyā considered the samghāti dress, bowl and stick of the Tathāgata. With the right hand she touched them, then, flexing her body, she threw herself to the ground like the collapse of a high mountain. Completely moved by tears of sadness, she said: "My son was attached to the salvation through happiness of men and gods. Now these things are empty and no longer have an owner. Such sorrow to be lamented!"

The general sadness of the four groups [branches of the Sangha] made the tears fall like rain. With the power of Śakra-the-emperor [the God Indra] they were transformed in a running river.

4. The re-appearance of the Buddha rising from his coffin

Sengyou delivers a rather dry account of the second meeting between mother and son, which is one of the central scenes from the Mahāmāyā Sūtra. Besides the polite greetings quoted in the Shijiaşu, we may read gāthās in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra coming this time, from the mouth of the Buddha himself, and praising Māyā as a woman and mother. The sūtra adds thereafter that for Māyā these stanzas were a slight consolation and that her face recovered the soft taint of a lotus flower. Here are the gāthās spoken by the Buddha:


"Among the fields of merit, the Buddha's field is supreme.
Among all women, supreme is the Jade woman who is a treasure [of the king cakravartin].

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Now I, born from my mother, surpass the unsurpassable.
I am able to produce in the triple world the treasures which are the
Buddha-Dharma-Saṅgha
Therefore I rise from the coffin, with joined hands, happy to praise.
I produce a gratitude (恩) which is due to indebtedness (報), and I show
my diverse feelings of filial piety (孝).
Even if Buddhas are submitted to extinction, the treasures which are the
Dharma and Saṅgha subsist for ever.
I wish that my mother ends her sorrow in order to declare and
contemplate the supreme way.”

Shijiapu, p. 73c22–26.

Then the Baghavat with his supernatural strength succeeded in
making the lid of the coffin open by itself. He emerged from his coffin with
joined hands like a king-lion leaving his cave. Quickly unfolding his
majesty (sthāma), he projected a thousand rays of light from the hair-
follicles of his body, each ray bearing a thousand metamorphosis-
Buddhas. Each of them greeted Māyā with joined hands. With a Brahmic
soft voice, he addressed his mother in these words: “You came down
quickly in this Jambudīpa. I beg you not to cry as all these events are
conform to the Dharma.”

5. Ānanda’s question and answer made by the Buddha returning into
his coffin

Ānanda plays an important role in the last part of the tale. He interferes
with the Buddha and with Māyā. We may already understand why Ānanda
contributes to the eschatological aspect of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra by pronouncing
the prophecy about the future of the Dharma. Ānanda asks how to explain the
miraculous return of the Buddha. The Buddha’s answer emphasizes filial piety
while providing a third title for the sūtra. Keeping the deposit (parindana) of
a sūtra with its title is a mission regularly entrusted to Ānanda. This title centered on the mother/son meeting (母子相見) is often quoted in the Buddhist literature but is not to be found in Catalogues. Here again the last gāthās of the Buddha reentering his coffin have to be quoted from the Mahāmāyā Sūtra. Māyā is mentioned but the discourse seems to be a paraphrase of its last sentence: the stanza on impermanence.

“The part of myself which was born is already extinct, but the Brahmanic conduct has been established to perdure.
All the things which have been made have already been discarded along the way, there is nothing to take which will exist hereafter.
I ask to my mother to find solace, and not suffer from affliction.
All acts are transitory! Pay attention to the Law of production and destruction.
To be born or to perish are only destruction. The destruction which is quietude is the supreme happiness.”

Shijiapu, p. 73c27-74a6.
Then, Ānanda having seen the Buddha rising up and having listened to his words, held back his weeping and, showing resilience, said to the Buddha: “The living beings of the next world will certainly ask me: ‘What did the Buddha teach when he was close to death?’ How to answer?”

The Buddha said to Ānanda: “You will answer to them that after the Baghavat entered nirvāṇa, Lady Māyā came down. Because in the future there could be living beings without filial piety, the Tathāgata appeared from the golden coffin, he joined his hands and spoke the usual polite greetings, moreover he pronounced stanzas. It is why this sūtra is called “Sūtra of the meeting of the mother and the son when the nirvāṇa came near.”
After having uttered these lines, he had a few words of parting for his mother. Then the coffin closed again.

The trichiliocosm was shocked. The beings of the eight categories were sadly crying and repenting their weaknesses. The noise hurt heaven and earth.

6. Ānanda’s prophecy on the future of the Law and Māyā’s return to her heaven

We may abridge our quotation of the final part of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* tale in the *Shijia pu*. It essentially consists of the prophecy of the future of the Law which has nothing to do with the legend of Māyā. This prophecy from the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra* (p. 1013b21-1014c3) is reproduced almost integrally in the *Shijia pu* (p. 74a11-b19). Allegedly taught by the Buddha to Ānanda, it was an important element for the popularity of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*. The last fifteen hundred years of the Dharma are divided in periods of one hundred years where one emblematic figure is predominant. Starting with Mahākāśyapa and Ānanda, the patriarchs of the first century are well known. Among the generally unknown patriarchs of the following periods, the presence of Āśvaghoṣa and Nāgārjuna confirms, according to Jan Nattier, the Mahayanic character of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*. It attracts this scholar’s attention because the description (without naming the participants) of the Dharma’s final collapse in Kauśāmbī (p. 1013c18-1014a3) is exceptional in a Mahayanic text.14

Māyā’s first question to Ānanda seems to be related with the past. It is dealing with the teaching and prescriptions uttered by Siddhārtha before his extinction. Her second question concerns the future. It seems to have been purposely designed to introduce the prophecy of decline. Ānanda’s answer,

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which will not be translated here, starts with the first council and ends with
the Kauśāmbī catastrophe. Sengyou omits the last gāthās of the Mahāmāyā
Sūtra. They are spoken by Māyā after being informed about these dark
predictions. They address the eulogy of her son, intertwined with the theme of
impermanence.

Stanzas of Māyā in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, p.1014a5-11.
“Everything takes refuge in destruction. Nothing is lasting or stable.
At the end of a kalpa, Sumeru and the oceans are dissolved and dried
The world’s beauty and strength devolves into decay and putrefaction.
My son who, in the past, committed every action related to pain and its
origin
Obtained for that reason the right awakening and taught the Sūtrapiṭaka
to the masses.
Why in that future, will all be drowned and dissolved?
Alas, the law of transmigration has to be feared and avoided.”

Shiṣīapu, p. 74a6-11.
Lady Māyā asked Ānanda: “Which were the teaching and
prescriptions left by my son Siddhārtha when he was close to
extinction?” Ānanda said: “The Baghavat, in the middle of the night,
taxt taught shortly a last sermon for the bhikṣus. Moreover there is the
predication of the telve aṅgas, which was entrusted to the Venerable
Mahākāśyapa. Soon thereafter, he ordered me to help with the
dispensation.”

Then Mahāmāyā listening these words, asked Ānanda again: “In the
past, when you did go to attended to the Buddha, you listened the
Bhagavat’s speeches. When will the disappearance of the correct Dharma
of the Tathāgata take place?”
Shijiapu, p. 74a11-b21.

Ānanda’s detailed answer whose translation is omitted here dissents on the future end of the Dharma (当来法滅之事) gradually declining during fifteen centuries.

Shijiapu, p. 74b22-26.

Mahāmāyā listening to these words, repented and said to Ānanda: “The prescriptions left by the Buddha have already been entrusted to you, Reverend, and to Mahākāśyapa, as deposits of the correct Dharma. It befits to protect, keep, read and recite them with sincerity. I myself cannot endure seeing the moment of the Tathāgata’s cremation.” Paying homage to the Buddha’s coffin, she made around it a septuple circumambulation from the right (pradaksīna). Crying and moaning, she ascended to her heaven.

II. Notes on the diffusion of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra’s tale of the second meeting in China and Japan

The Buddha’s visit to his mother in heaven was not unknown in India. Māya’s return visit and the re-appearance of the Buddha emerging from his coffin however, is only known in the Far East, and no earlier than the end of the fifth century, date of the translation of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra.

The only evidence of anything remotely related to this event seems to come from Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664). His pilgrimage record, the Xiyūji 西域記 (T. 2087, j. 6, p. 904a29-b10) mentions that in Kuśinagarī, close to the location where the Buddha’s body was cremated, there was a stūpa commemorating the place where Māya had been mourning her son. The short explanation of the event highlights, as in the tale from the Jinglūyixiang, the three relics and the Buddha’s advice against impiety - without mention of the future (後世). The Xiyūji text seems to be borrowed verbatim from the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, or from its derived anthologies. There are nonetheless a few
innovations. Among them is the Chinese way of calling Māyā “loving mother” (慈母) and the indication that the Buddha, greeting his mother with clasped hands, his mother was seated on the coffin. The seated position of the Buddha is common in Chinese pictorial representations of the scene, but is not mentioned in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra. It does not appear in the Chinese Shanxi sculpture of 698 where the risen upper half of the Buddha’s body is visible from inside the open coffin. The seated variation is unknown in Japan.

In later times, Zhiban’s 志磐 (act. 1258-1269) Fo zou Dongji 佛祖統紀, A General History of Buddhism, starts with a detailed rendering of Śākyamuni’s biography (釋本紀). A short mention (T. 2035, k. 4, p. 167a18-22) is made of his re-appearance. The source is said to be the Mōye furen jing 摩耶夫人經. Inherited from the Liang anthologies, the name “Mahāmāyā” (摩訶摩耶) which appears in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra is converted to “Lady Māyā.” The detail of the Buddha’s clasped hands figures without mention of his seated position. His exhortation against impiety appears here, as in the original text, with the mention of the future (後世).

In Japan, the Konjaku Monogatari shū 今昔物語集 version of the tale, entitled “Words Addressed to Maya Bunin by the Buddha Entering nirvāṇa.”¹⁵ seems to be inspired by the Mahāmāyā Sūtra. All episodes, even the delivering of a title for the sūtra, appear in the Japanese tale in a simplified form, however some of them are slightly modified. The term “golden coffin,” which is always used for the Buddha’s casket figures only once in Japanese. Ānanda replaces Anuruddha as the messenger of the Buddha’s passing. A new interpretation is given to the veneration of the three relics. The text seems to indicate that Māyā (called Lady as in the Liang Anthologies) took in her right hand the samghāṭi dress and the stick (the bowl is not mentioned) and threw them on the ground, thereby producing a noise of large mountain’s collapse.

The Chinese anthologies, as we have seen, incompletely reproduced the text of the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*, but Māyā’s action of throwing herself on the ground seemed clearly established. The term of “impiety” (不孝) does not figure in Japanese, although it is made clear that the purpose of the Buddha was to teach future generations about revering one’s mother. Strangely enough, the title bestowed within the narrative reads 佛臨母子相見經 instead of 佛臨涅槃母子相見經.

There are still many documents which could be investigated. After the critical *Shijiapu* anthology, there have been, up until the modern times, several later anthologies and many “Lives of the Buddha” that made use of quotations from this story, some of them coming directly from the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*. As observed above, the study of these medieval Chinese anthological (and educative) works as well as the study of the different versions of the *Sūtra of the Mother of the Buddha*’s 佛母經 different versions, derived from the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*, are new fields opening up to scholars.

III. Artistic representations of the Buddha’s post-nirvāṇa meeting with Māyā

The early representations of the last meeting of the extinguished Buddha with Māyā are very rare, yet they have received well-deserved attention (much more than the *Mahāmāyā Sūtra*) for their historical worth (in China) and artistic value (in Japan).

The Chinese images are a sculpture dated to 692 (天授 3) from Ishi 稔氏縣 in Shanxi (pl. 1) and a painting dated to 698 (聖曆 1) from Dunhuang (pl. 2). The datating of the Japanese painting (pl.3) is not precisely settled: attributed to a Kyōto atelier active in the late eleventh century, it is a masterwork that now belongs to the Kyōto National Museum.

The two Chinese images belong to the short-lived Zhou 周 (690-705) dynasty founded by Empress Wu Ze-tian, a period of intense Buddhist expansion into all spheres of society. One of the halmarks of Empress Wu’s
pro-Buddhist policies was the commission of a commentary to the Great Cloud Sūtra (Mahāmegha Sūtra 大雲經).\textsuperscript{16} It is possible to infer that the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, with its focus on a Queen, mother of the Buddha, and its accent, in its last scene, on filial piety may have been felt as congenial with the scopes of Empress Wu.\textsuperscript{17} By comparison with the few Buddhist texts on filial piety (generally wrongly attributed to the earliest Chinese translators), there is no other text in the Buddhist tradition with such a strong assertion of the Buddha’s gratitude toward his mother.

The Shanxi sculpture\textsuperscript{18} is part of a stone pillar divided in eight niches, each of them adorned with a scene of the Parinirvāṇa of the Buddha (涅槃變相). The sculptures that concern us are only those of the 5th and 6th niche where we may suppose Mahāmāyā Sūtra influence. In the 5th niche Māyā pays homage to the coffin and in the 6th niche the Buddha is opening the lid of his coffin, thus revealing the upper part of his body. Facing the lower part of the coffin, Māyā and a female assistant seem to be kneeling with their hands joined together. Bhikṣus surround both sides of the coffin.

The Dunhuang painting (from Mogao 莫高 Grotto no. 332—southern wall) belongs to a series of ten scenes of the Buddha’s Parinirvāṇa. On the right, it represents the Buddha seated on the closed lid of his coffin, facing a kneeling Māyā who is at the center of the painting. A numerous group of disciples, bodhisattvas, and divine attendants surrounds the scene of the

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\textsuperscript{17} See Yasuda Ilaruki 安田治樹, 「唐代則天朝の涅槃変相について」成城大学大学院美学美術史論集, 2 parts 1981, 1982; Hirano Kyōko 平野京子, 「中国北朝期の涅槃図についての一考察」(... ) 仏教美術, 205 (1992), pp. 91-122.

gathering. The position of the Buddha seated on his coffin would come to be adopted in the late engravings of this scene which have been popular since the Ming period in the printed illustrated books about the life of the Buddha (Pl. 4). In these engravings, the Buddha is seated, according to the established convention, on a lotus growing from the lid of the coffin.

Another Dunhuang painting from Mogao Grotto no. 148—western wall, presents similar characteristics.

The late Heian period Kyōto painting centers on the majestic silhouette of the Buddha's upper body as it emerges from the open coffin with joined hands, in a gesture of greeting addressed to his mother. The dimensions of his body are easily twice those of the assistants, with the exception of Māyā, who makes a rather massive appearance in the right part of the painting. The golden body of the Buddha is surrounded by a large equally golden halo inhabited by miniature Buddha figures. On the left, we may observe the twin sāla trees and two objects belonging to the Buddha, his garments (where we distinguish a typical Japanese kesa and a whitish piece of cloth which could be a reference to a shroud, katabira 齋子) and his ornamented bowl packed in a diaphane piece of silk. These two objects seem to have been laid out on the edge of the coffin. The last relic, the staff, seems to be held in Māyā's right hand. In the middle, before the coffin, there is an altar with offerings. Numerous people contemplate the scene. Identification tags, written in a coarse writing, have been inserted, probably at a later date, on almost each of the attending mourners, who are generally consistent with the iconographical traditions of the Parinirvāṇa representations. However, the central figures in the lower part of the painting, close to Māyā and to the table of offerings, play a particularly important role. We see on the center-right Ānanda and Subhadra, the last convert, and on the center-left Cunda, bringing some dish to the Buddha. He is accompanied by a member of his house, tagged as 純陀家人.

Between Cunda and Ānanda, there is an enigmatic well-dressed figure standing upright and adorned with headgear. The tag bears the mention "a
standing human being” (立像人物). It has been suggested that it could be a bodhisattva. Maitreya does not intervene in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra and Mañjuśrī appears only in the tale about the Buddha’s first meeting of the with Māyā in the Trāyastrimśā heaven. I would like to point out that it is strange that there is no place in this painting for the bhikṣu Anuruddha. He plays an important part in the Parinirvāṇa events and, in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, he is the messenger of the news of nirvāṇa; although in the Sūtra of the Mother of the Buddha, he is replaced in that role by Upāli, and by Ānanda in the Konjaku Monogatari. In typical Japanese Parinirvāṇa paintings (涅槃図), where Māyā is represented on her way to the place where the extinguished Buddha is laying, Anuruddha is always represented as flying leader for Māyā and her attendants. The absence of Mahākāśyapa is easier to explain: in the medieval tradition of the Fomujing, Mahākāśyapa arrives rather late, but before the cremation, just in time to see the feet of the Buddha emerging from the coffin. This mythological episode is chronologically situated after the Buddha’s post-nirvāṇa meeting with Māyā.

The Mahāmāyā Sūtra does not mention Cunda, who in the early Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta plays the unfortunate role of host (full of goodwill) for the fateful meal which caused the Buddha’s sickness and was to be his last. He was completely rehabilitated in the Mahayanic Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra where he becomes a rather important figure. His presence in the Kyoto

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19 See Kyoto National Museum 京都国立博物館編 c/o Izumi Takeo 泉武夫, 「国宝釈迦金棺出現図」(Shaka Rising from the Golden Coffin), Kyoto, 1992. See also Kyoto National Museum: The Ueno Memorial Foundation for the Study of Buddhist Art, Report No XXIII 仏教美術研究 上野記念財団 No 23 (1993), including Yasuda Haruki 安田浩樹「中国仏伝美術と金棺出現図」The Painting of the Sakyamuni Rising from the Golden Coffin in the Buddha’s Biography Art, pp. 1-5; Izumi Takeo 「釈迦金棺出現図の構成と図像」The Composition and images of the Sakyamuni Rising from the Golden Coffin, pp.11-15; Other iconographical research: 高賀浩 Asaka Hiroshi 「釈迦金棺出現図をめぐって」 東北大学美術史学 13 (1991)

20 See Shiijiapu quoting T.1 and T.6, T. 2040, j.4, p. 70b16-c15.
painting may be influenced by an effort to insert the Mahāmāyā Sūtra tradition in the large tradition of the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra. The presence of many personages (some of them betraying a tantric iconographic influence) shows that this work belongs to the “cosmic” current of the Parinirvāṇa paintings.

As said before, this large composition is unique. Later, in the Kamakura period, a few miniature representations of the extinguished Buddha’s meeting with Māyā were produced in the context of a special set of Japanese Parinirvāṇa paintings called Nehan Hassō 涅槃八相, “eight scenes related to the Parinirvāṇa.”22 These paintings, known mostly in Western Japan, take their name from the paintings called Shaka Hassō 釈迦八相 “eight scenes from the life [mostly from the youth] of Śākyamuni.”

CONCLUSION

We may suppose that the Mahāmāyā Sūtra’s fame mainly derives from the artistic field. The fact that Māyā’s descent from the heaven is frequently visible in the upper part of many Japanese Parinirvāṇa representations constitutes one element of proof. Subsequently to Māyā’s visit to the coffin, the spectacular “resurrection” of the Buddha which has been reviewed in this paper reinforces the exceptional character of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra’s story.

On this “resurrection,” much has been said. We must remind ourselves that the extinguished Buddha’s body was never considered a dead body. The story mentioned above of the Buddha’s feet emerging from the coffin in order

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to be venerated by Mahākāśyapa who missed the last moments of the Buddha belongs to an old tradition. The relics of the Buddha, which elicited much scholarly interest in the recent years, are assimilated to his living body in Pāli and mainstream Buddhist sources. Besides the greeting to Māyā recorded in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, there are other apocryphal sermons, such as for example, that to Subhūti, attributed to the Buddha lying in his coffin. In the Japanese context, we must take into account the "return to Śākyamuni" that was diffused at the end of the Heian period. It has also been suggested that the Kyoto painting reflects a "sensitivity" to womanhood and motherhood which seems to be characteristic of that period.

Another topic of several contemporary studies, the ideology of the decline of the Law (未法思想), is often connected with relic worship, and is moreover a constitutive element of the Mahāmāyā Sūtra. For obvious reasons, in the Mahāmāyā Sūtra, the prophecy about the vicissitudes of the Dharma is uttered by Ānanda, faithful spokesman of the Buddha. We have seen that the precious last words of the Buddha, who was anxious about a lack of filial piety in the future, were immediately followed by the announcement of an eschatological catastrophe.

These features reveal an obviously "popular" dimension, but they are not in contradiction to the doctrine of the eternity of the Dharmakāya (法身常住), as taught by the Mahayanic Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra. Therefore there is no

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23 See Shiṣṣapa quoting T.6, T. 2040, j. 4, p. 73a15.
25 Such is the case of T. 2877 Rulai zai jinguan zhulei qingjing zhuangyan jingfu jing 如来在金棺囑累清淨莊嚴敬福經, which his a short fragment of eight lines consisting of a dialogue between the Buddha, seated on his coffin, and Subhūti. The title refers to the parīndāna (zhulei 嘱累) which is the discourse for the entrusting of a sūtra by the Buddha to one of his listeners.
26 As expressed in Chapter XXVII of the Shiṣṣapa, quoting the Mahayanic
need to use the modern expression “Sermon of the resurrected” 再生說法 for what the Buddha taught from his coffin. We already know that a venerable Mahayanic tradition attributes sermons to the Buddha while he was in intermediate existence, as in the Antarabhāva Sūtra, and at an embryonic stage, as in the Womb Sūtra.

Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra, T.2040, j.4, p. 72a3.

27 See T. 385 Zhōng yīn jīng 中陰經 translated by Zhu Fonian.

Pl. 1. Stone Pillar with Nirvana scenes (dated 692), Ighi, Shanxi.

Supra (Niche 5) Maya’s lamentation in front of the closed Buddha’s coffin. 
Infra (Niche 6) Opening of the coffin and apparition of the Buddha to his mother.
Pl. 2. The Buddha seating on his coffin greets Māyā. Dunhuang Wall painting with Nirvāṇa scene (Mogao grotto no. 332, dated 698).
Pl. 3. "Śākyamuni rising from his golden coffin" and joining his hands to greet Māyā. Central part of a Heian period painting (late 11th century), Kyoto National Museum.
Le Buddha se relève pour saluer sa mère.

Pl. 4. The Buddha seating on his coffin greets Māyā.

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