

ON THE TRANSLATION OF BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES AND TRANSLATION CASE STUDIES¹

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Abstract

The first climax of translation activities in China has been in a vigorous manner accompanied by the spread of Buddhism since the late Western Han dynasty. The translation of Buddhist scriptures has been playing a significant role in the process of Buddhism localization and Sinicization, which has had profound impacts on all aspects of Chinese culture. This paper reviews and discusses the achievements made in translation of Buddhist scriptures in China, and also analyzes some specific translation cases in terms of ideology, content and language, for the purpose of exploring the significance of translation of Buddhist scriptures in the dissemination of Buddhist culture.

Key words: Buddhist scriptures; Buddhist culture; translation

Introduction

As one of the oldest religions in the world, Buddhism originated from ancient India. It was founded by Sakyamuni Buddha in India in the 5th century BC, and was introduced to China through central Asia. It exerted enormous influences on Chinese ideology and formed the cultural characteristics with Confucian ambition,

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Taoist immortality and Buddhist state of mind. There is a widespread agreement that Chinese traditional culture seems like a big river, whose upper reaches are the mix of the two tributaries of Confucianism and Taoism, and whose middle reach is a tributary of Buddhism emerging with the original water of the big river and rushing into the distance.² In the process of spreading Buddhism in China, with its own cultural advantages and characteristics, it has a strong adaptation into Chinese culture, simultaneously enriching Chinese culture. In return, Buddhism is also deeply influenced by Confucianism and Taoism, gradually localized and nationalized, and finally as a whole becomes an essential part of Chinese culture.

1. The Historical Track of Buddhist Scriptures Integration into Chinese Culture

Undoubtedly, translation of Buddhist scriptures has been playing a significant role in spreading Buddhism throughout China, which has lasted for more than a thousand years. Translation of Buddhist scriptures has had far-reaching impacts on the translation model, philosophical thinking, language, and literature, and has injected vitality into Chinese culture. In general, the translation practice of Buddhist scriptures in China began from the end of the Eastern Han dynasty in which An Shigao (a Persian) 安世高³ served as the pioneer, further developed in the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern dynasties, reached its peak in the Tang dynasty, declined in the Northern Song dynasty, and came to an end in the Yuan dynasty.⁴ The western monks served as the main force of Buddhist scriptures translation and the Chinese monks who travelled to the west to seek the Buddhist scriptures also joined the group. The historical process of Buddhist scriptures translation can be roughly divided into four distinct stages: the emerging period (from the end of the Eastern Han dynasty to the Western Jin dynasty), the developmental period (from the Eastern Jin dynasty to the Sui dynasty), the golden period (the Tang dynasty), and the ending period (the Northern Song dynasty). A large number of Buddhist scriptures were translated into Chinese, and a host of outstanding translators, such as Zhiqian 支谦, Kang Senghui 康僧会, Zhu Fahu 竺法护, Daoan 道安, Kumarajiva 鸠摩罗什, Faxian 法显, and Zhendi 真谛, have made considerable

² Bai Jingyu 白靖宇(2010): *Wenhua Yu Fanyi* 《文化与翻译》 (*Culture and Translation*), Beijing: China Social Sciences Publishing House, 2010.

³ An Shigao was born as a prince in Parthian Empire who was said to be the first western monk to travel to China to spread and translate Buddhism scriptures into Chinese. His version tended to be literal translation and hard to understand for common readers.

⁴ Xie Tianzhen 谢天振(2009): *Zhongxi Fanyi Jianshi* 《中西翻译简史》 (*A Brief History of Translation in China and the West*), Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2009.

contributions to the Chinese translation industry and put forward various translation strategies.

1.1 The Emerging Period

During this period both foreign monks and Chinese monks of Hu 胡人 descent served as the main force of Buddhist scriptures translation, but translation, to some extent, was still a folk act. Virtually, the translation process, at that point, was entirely based on oral instruction model. Foreign monks recited the scriptures which one translated into Chinese (i.e., "Chuanyan" 传言 or "Duyu" 度语) and which the other or several others recorded into Chinese. During the stage there was no standard in the oral instruction and devoid of writing instructions as well as linguistic knowledge, though the translator was fluent in both Chinese and Sanskrit. Monks were devout to Buddhist scriptures for fear of violating them so that literal translation was generally adopted in translation. In the second year of Jianhe 建和 (148), Emperor Huan of the Eastern Han dynasty, the translator An Shigao opened the prologue of Buddhism scriptures translation, who totally translated more than 30 Buddhist scriptures, such as *Anapanasati Sutta* 《安般守意经》 and *The Scriptures of Human Desire for Life* 《人本欲生经》. The main content of An Shigao's translation of the Sutra is to teach the basic teachings and practice method of Theravada Buddhism. Following An Shigao, Zhi Qian translated the scriptures who was good at Chinese and could basically convey the original meaning of the text. Coincidentally, Zhi Qian is the disciple of Zhi Liang 支亮, who is also the disciple of Zhi Lou 支娄 (the outstanding translators in the contemporary age, known as "Three Zhi" 三支). Virtually, Zhi Qian's translation practice has changed "Hu Voice" to "Han Voice", specifically, to replace the transliteration with free translation. It is also the characteristic of his translation of scriptures to try to adapt to the Han people, and the annotation of the translation was also firstly initiated by Zhi Qian.⁵ There were also two other influential Buddhist scriptures translators of Zhi Qian's era, namely Kang Senghui and Zhu Fahu. As for Kang Senghui, he had a good command of the Buddhist scriptures and was considered as the master in the six classics, the prophecies and theology. Based on traditional Chinese Confucian classics and the theory of Heaven-Human Induction, Kang Senghui interpreted the Buddhist doctrine, and treated "the maxim of Confucianism" and the "specific Buddhist doctrine" equally, who regarded the "remote distance" of Buddhism as a supplement to the Rites of the Zhou 周礼 and famous doctrines,

⁵ Yu Xie(2001):"Zhongguo Fanyi Shishang Wailai Yizhe De Zuoyong Yu Gongxian" 中国翻译史上外来译者的作用与贡献(The Contribution of oversea translators in the translation history of China), Shanghai Science and Technology Translation, 2001(04):57-60.

and wished that the governor taught the world and cultivated people with filial piety, charity, benevolence and virtue.⁶ This is essentially an important attempt at the integration of Buddhist ideas. During his lifetime, Kang Senghui translated 7 books and 20 volumes in total, such as the *Liu Du Ji Jing* 《六度集经》. Compared with other translators in his age, Kang Senghui was deeply sinicized, quite cultured in Chinese, and his translation was elegant, in which famous words and allusion of Lao-Zhuang 老庄思想 were widely used. Zhu Fahu was an overseas Chinese who lived in Dunhuang 敦煌 who travelled with his master to all countries of the western regions in the contemporary society, and devoted to translation all his life with no tiredness. He translated 175 Buddhist classics in total and made great contributions to the spread of Buddhism.

1.2 The Developmental Period

During the Fu Qin era 苻秦时代(Pre-Qin dynasty), translation of Buddhist scriptures was changed from individual-centered action to official-funded one and translation venues were set up under the advocate of Shi Dao'an, one of the prestigious translators in the Fu Qin era. Since then, translation of Buddhist scriptures became a well-organized activity. Shi Dao'an's contributions to Buddhism can be mainly listed as the following aspects: First, the two systems of Zen and Prajna which have been popular since the Han dynasty were thoroughly studied and combed for the later studies. Secondly, the rules of Buddhism were finally established in the contemporary society. Thirdly, the character "Shi" was strongly advocated and widely applied as a monk's surname. Finally, a body of classics and catalogs were compiled and created for the convenience of the future research.⁷ During this period, Shi Dao'an also invited some foreign scholars to visit China, and one of them is Kumarajiva, the most distinguished translator in India. Through a systematic review of previous translators' Buddhist scriptures, Kumarajiva pointed out the weakness of transliteration in the past and advocated the translator's signature after translation. For Kumarajiva, inflexible and rigid style should be abandoned and free translation should be encouraged. He produced a body of works such as the *Lotus Sutra* 《华法经》, the *Avatamsaka Sutra* 《华严经》, the *Vajra Sutra* 《金刚经》 and *Dvadashamukha Shastra* 《十二门论》. People who have read his translation of the *Lotus Sutra* fully agreed that his version had the "natural language interest of the western regions" and his works was full of

⁶ Liang Qichao 梁启超(2006):*Liangqi Chao Lun Fojing* 《梁启超论佛教》 (*Liang Qichao on Buddhism*), Beijing: Jiuzhou Press, 2006.

⁷ Zhang Rujuan, Kong Ben(2019): "Dao'an De Fanyi Guan" 道安的翻译观(Dao'an and his Translation Theory), Northern Literature, 2019(15):263-264.

wits and interest, which laid the foundation for Chinese literature.⁸ During the Southern and Northern dynasties, with the recruitment of emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, an Indian Buddhist scholar named Zhendi came to China. He translated 49 scriptures, among which the translation of *Mahayanasajgraha* 《摄大乘论》 has exerted enormous impacts on Chinese Buddhist thoughts. At this stage, the majority of translators were proficient in both Chinese and Sanskrit language, and the quality of their translations was constantly improved. Metaphysics was combined with Confucian classics, and Buddhism was accordingly further sinicized.

1.3 The Golden Period

The Tang dynasty was the golden age of Buddhism in China, and the translation of Buddhist scriptures reached its peak. The main force to translate scriptures has changed from foreign monks to native monks, who were proficient in Sanskrit and Chinese, and had a deep understanding of Buddhist doctrine and could translate scriptures with better planning. Xuanzang 玄奘, a well-known translator in this age, set out for India in the second year of Zhenguan 贞观 during the Tang dynasty to search for scriptures. After 17 years, he returned to China and brought back 657 Buddhist scriptures in total. He presided over a translation venue with a more holistic organizational system than ever before, and translated 75 Buddhist scriptures, totaling 1,335 volumes within 19 years. He not only translated Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Chinese, but also translated some of Taoism' works into Sanskrit, becoming the first figure to translate Chinese works into foreign languages. Xuanzang could skillfully use various translation techniques to achieve a high degree of unity between form and content, whose works was of high quality.⁹ There are also many other eminent translators of Buddhist scriptures in the Tang dynasty, including Yun Bopo 云波颇, Huijin 慧净, Bodhi Liuzhi 菩提流志, Yijing 义净, Shan Wuwei 善无畏, Ichigyō 一行, Vajrabodhi 金刚智, Bukong 不空, Lingxian, 灵仙 etc. Most of the translators in this period were native monks, who were familiar with Sanskrit and Chinese and had a deep understanding of Buddhism. So translation of Buddhist scriptures was more favorable to be accepted by the Han people and conducive to the localization of Buddhism.

⁸ Zhang Yunjiang(2021):“Jiumo Luoshi:Fojing Fanyi He Fojiao Zhongguo Huade Kaituo Zhe”鸠摩罗什：佛经翻译和佛教中国化的开拓者（Kumārajīva :Translation of Buddhism Scriptures and the for-runner of Sinicization of Buddhism),Beijing :China National News, 2021-03-16(008).

⁹ Luo Changbin(2014):“Xuanzang Dashi Fojing Fanyi De Jiazhi Yu Qishi”玄奘大师佛经翻译的价值与启示 (*The Value and Enlightenment of Translation of Buddhism Scriptures by Master Xuanzang*), Journal of the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies,2014,25(03)