Translating the Dharma: The Role of Buddhist Texts in Shaping Early Chinese Buddhism from Han to Northern Dynasties

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Abstract

The role of the Sanskrit-to-Chinese translations of the Buddhist works was also in the establishment and formation of Chinese Buddhism, particularly in the periods between the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and the Northern Dynasties (386 CE - 581 CE). The translation process was a project that was typified by very intense lexical and semantic challenges, with the translators struggling to find a way out of the abstract and metaphysical language of Buddhist philosophy and come to the realm of the concrete and relational language of the Chinese language. Such trailblazers as An Shigao (安世高) and Zhi Qian (支謙) embraced a number of tricks to diminish the linguistic divide, like the use of phonetic transcription, semantic similarity, and deriving neologisms. Not only by allowing the integration of Buddhist ideas but also by facilitating extremities of syncretism, these innovations in methods made it possible to blend Buddhist ideas with the local Chinese philosophies of Daoism and Confucianism. The kinds of ramifications of such translations went beyond transmissions of doctrines; they included giving rise to specific Chinese Buddhist scholars, influenced elite intellectual discourse, and provided the basis upon which the institutionalization of Buddhism in China would take formal shape. In this way, by examining the translational works that defined early Chinese Buddhism, this paper throws some light on how language, culture, and philosophy interacted with each other and, therefore, highlights the transformative effect of the Buddhist texts on the course of Chinese religious and intellectual history.

Keywords: Buddhist Texts, Translation, Sanskrit-to-Chinese Translation, Semantic Adaptation, Buddhism Syncretism

Evolution of Buddhist Translation and Integration into Early Chinese Society

The cultural and religious interchange that has taken place between India and the fledgling Sino-centric civilizations has been driven by the translation of Buddhist works into the East Asian language. Starting in the second century CE, the movement over the Silk Road helped to standardize the translation of Sanskrit doctrine into the vernacular, though this event would eventually develop into a tight cooperation of itinerant alien monks and the established Chinese learned people. These achievements are culminated in the complete collections of the Taishō *Tripiṭaka*, which are the standard of reference for succeeding generations. The main constraints of this translation contract comprised highly linguistic discrepancies. Classical Chinese was a logography that clashed with the phonetic structure of the Sanskrit language, which has an extensive vowel and consonant repertoire. In order to align these discrepancies, translators made use of a mixture of phonetic transliteration of proper names and technical terminology and semantic adaptation that acquired the doctrinal differences within the boundaries of Chinese lexical types. The introduction of Buddhism into the Chinese milieu occurred in the period of 65-67 C.E. but on the level of a philosophical system and not a real religious organization. The expansion has been greatly facilitated by the traveling of Central Asian merchants and messengers who used the Silk Road. Chinese Buddhism followed a route that led to the earliest extant translations of Buddhist scripture in China, which are credited to An Shigao (Anqing 安清), who, induced to become a monk in 148 CE, already knew Chinese. An Shigao created a body of *Sūtras*, including the most famous Dà *Ān bān* Shǒuyì *Jīng* (大安般守意經), meaning Great Meditation *Sūtra* (Taishō *Tripiṭaka* No. 602), that focuses on the meditative practice and the meticulous oral fidelity. And other important texts of the *Hīnayāna* attributed to him are the *Śuddhi Sūtra* (*Qīng* jìng *Jīng* 清净經), meaning *Sūtra* of Purity; the *Avidyā-nāmā Sūtra* (Wú zhì míng *jīng*), typically translated as Sutta of Non-Intellectual Wisdom; and the *Buddhaśikha* (Fó dǐng *jīng*), commonly translated as *Sūtra* of the Crown of the Buddha.

These scholars were translated in the period of 148-170 CE in the early Han dynasty between the second and third years of Jiàn hé 建和 and Jiàn níng 建寧. Jiàn hé (建和) in this context refers to the era name (147–149 CE) of Emperor Huan of the Later/Eastern Han dynasty, and iàn níng (建寧) refers to the era name (168–172 CE) of Emperor Ling of the Later/Eastern Han dynasty, who succeeded Emperor Huan. The next stage of textual transmission involved other Kushan monks, especially the role of *Lokakṣema* (c. 184-186 CE), who brought other *Mahāyāna* scriptures named *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* in ten volumes, and this text is known as 八千頌般若波羅蜜多經 (*Bā qiān* shòng bō rě bō luó mì duō *jīng*), meaning Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines *Sūtra*. It is generally corresponding to the fourth section of the Great *Prajñā Sūtra* Dà bōrě *jīng* (大般若經). It is a short

title for the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* Dà bōrě bō luó mì *jīng* 大般若經初會序 translated as The Great Perfection of Wisdom *Sūtra*. Thus, the work of *Lokakṣema* on these texts marks a turning point in coming to grips with Chinese intellectual existence. The work of Lokaka, written in Loyang in the late Han period, also made its considerable contribution to the expansion of doctrines and the fusion of cultures of Indochinese Buddhism.

Zhi qian 支謙, a Yuezhi lay Buddhist, was a well-known scholar who lived in Loyang during the late Eastern Han era. His grandfather, *Fādú*, had obtained a title in court in the presence of Emperor Ling (r. 168-189 CE), thus placing the family in the high society of the capital court. Zhi Liang was introduced to the nascent Buddhist community under the tutelage of Zhi Liang, who was a disciple of *Lokakṣema* (Zhi Qiang), and this happened in Luoyang.

The political instability around 190 CE, especially the collapse of Han authority, compelled him to relocate to the Kingdom of Wu, thereby interrupting the continuity of his scholarly work in Luoyang. The start of his translating of the Indian Buddhist texts can be dated earlier to this southward migration, and it may have started in Loyang during 222-252 CE under the influence of the earlier translators such as *Lokakṣema*. The translation activities of Zhi Qian is Luoyang during the late second century are only briefly recorded in the annals of Sengyou's *Chū sānz*àng jì jí 出三藏記集 (ca. 518 CE). He has been credited with over twenty-five works, including *Āgama* translations, versions of Dharmapada, Buddhist biographies, and *Mahāyāna Sūtras*, including the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* and *Sukhāvatī Vyūha Sūtra*. His work (most of it) was finished, however, upon his move towards the south. His initial translations aped quite closely the style of *Lokakṣema* and retained certain continuity with the Indian tradition, whereas in his later works, a gradual process of acculturation to the linguistic and cultural environment was seen with the reabsorption of a Chinese literary convention. The corpus of Zhi Qian (fifty-three texts extant) also contains notable works like the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* (Wéi mó *jīng* 維摩經) and *Śrī* Prasanna *Prabhādhigama Sūtra* (Ruì yìng běnqǐ *jīng* 瑞應本起經); literally, it translates as "*Sūtra* of Auspicious Response and Original Beginning" or "*Sūtra* of the Auspicious Response and Origin of Merit." The modern-day documents witness his intended knowledge of six languages and deep understanding of the Chinese philosophical text and Buddhist literature. His translations, therefore, are a bridge between the Indo-Scythian influences. It was widespread in the Han Dynasty and intellectual currents of the period of the Three Kingdoms, with multi-layered translations that were adaptable to different literary genres. As demonstrated by Sengyou (僧佑) in his catalogue known as Chu *sān* zàng jì jí (出三藏记集), Zhi qian was a highly prolific lay translator whose work continues to have an impact on designs after him, such as Kang Senghui (康僧会) (c. 213–280 CE).

Initial Translation Efforts and Their Roles

A major change in the translation of Buddhist works in China took place in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. These was a transitional period during which individual monks' translation were gradually replaced by formal, state-sponsored translation bureaus. At the beginning the translation of Buddhist texts was carried out by a small group of monastic scholars who worked either alone or in group teams. But the growing presence of Buddhism in China and the growing imperial support of it meant a more formalized method of translation was required. By the fifth century, there was a transition to institutionalized translation activities led by the likes of Dao-an as well as other contemporaries, who included the foreign Buddhist scholars, Chinese clerics, and local scribes in the process. A team of translators also focused on both language accuracy and cultural adaptability so that as well as translating Buddhist texts accurately, they could also be made understandable and acceptable to the Chinese intellectuals and religious institutions.

Fotu Cheng 佛圖澄 (232?–348) and Dao-an played pioneering roles and were known to be among the exceptional and famous Chinese scholars. In 310 CE, Fotu Cheng, a Central Asian monk, reached Luoyang, where his goal was to create a center to propagate Buddhism in China. He had studied Buddhism in his childhood in *Udyāna*, or Uzhang Kingdom (*Wū* zhàng nà guó 烏仗那國), and was famous as a thaumaturgian. *Udyāna* is an ancient area found in the north-western direction of the Indian subcontinent. Nowadays, it is called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which is located in Pakistan. *Udyāna* was a significant cultural and religious hub in the antiquity period and contributed a lot towards the propagation of Buddhism. It is specifically mentioned as the native land of most of the notable Buddhist personalities and thinkers, and it has been linked to the region surrounding Swat Valley, which was well known for its strong Buddhist tradition. The career of Fotu Cheng is mentioned in the Jinshu (晉書). In Jin Shu, he appears at the Thaumaturgy (Yìshù chuán 藝術傳) part, whereas in the Biography of Eminent Monks or The Records of High Monks, known in the Chinese language as *Gāo* Sēng Chuán (高僧傳), there he is found in the section of Supernatural Events (Shén Yì *Piān* 神異篇). Shén Yì *Piān*, literally known as "The Chapter of Divine Wonders" or "The Chapter of Supernatural Wonders," appears to be historical records or fictional works as compared to Journey of the West. This fictional work includes miraculous or supernatural events. These events taught about divine intervention, magical phenomena, and spiritual experiences. Therefore, this part brought out his marvelous works. The number of miracles that Fotu Cheng performed is purported to have shaped the then ruler Shí lè 石勒 (known as the Xiong nu chieftain or military leader, who rose to power in the northern region during the time of chaos and fragmentation after the fall of the Han dynasty in China), who later took him in as an advisor. Besides his impact in politics, Fotu Cheng was believed to be the teacher to the celebrated monk Dao-an and is linked with building eight hundred and ninety-three

temples. He also had a sizeable following, which comprised more than ten thousand disciples. Among his prominent pupils, especially one called the Five Barbarians and Sixteen Kingdoms (Wǔ Hú Shí Liù Guó 五胡十六国), were such outstanding followers as Zhú Fǎ Yǎ 竺法雅, Sēng Lǎng 僧朗, Fǎ Shǒu 法首, Fǎ Zuò 法祚, Fǎ Cháng 法常, Sēng Huì 僧慧, Dào Jìn 道進, Fǎ Tài 法汰, Fǎ Hé 法和, and *Ān* Lìng Shǒu Ní 安令首尼. The name Fotu cheng can be written in other ways: Fútú Chéng 浮圖澄, Fó tú dèng 佛圖磴, and Fó tú chéng 佛圖橙 can also be spelled as *Buddhasiṃha* (Fó tuó sēng hē 佛陀僧訶). This was because of his efforts in the introduction of Buddhism in the northern part of China, which helped in the initial stages of its foundation in East Asia. Dao-an (312-385 CE) was a renowned Chinese monk in the Eastern Jin dynasty. In the past, he had been a student of Fotu Cheng (232?-348 CE). He is one of the most important persons in the institutionalization of Buddhist translations in China. Dao-an, known to be appointed as the director of the first State Translation School in the fifth century, helped in the arrangement of large-scale translation work in the important political and cultural centers like Chang-an and Loyang. Being aware of the situation when no overall knowledge of Sanskrit was possessed by the Chinese scholars, Dao-an demanded strict observance of literal obedience during translations. His methodology was based on the belief that the exact meaning of Buddhist texts was of critical importance, though the language used to translate them may not necessarily fit well with the hidden meaning of the original Sanskrit. What Dao-an did was not confined to the actual translations. He came up with standard procedures of quality assurance of translations. He has implemented other practices, like certifying translation teams that consist of foreign scholars as well as Chinese experts. The task of such teams was to check the correctness of the translations and make sure that integrity had not been lost in various editions of a work. In his commentarial text, Dao An was among the first to recognize the necessity of the break with reliance on the approach of identifying the meanings (géyi 格義) of the Buddhist philosophical terms with pre-existing terms in the system of Buddhism and wished to create his own set of terms. His chief preoccupation was with setting up criteria in regard to quality Chinese translations of Indian texts, and to this end there was the development of one of the first lists of Chinese Buddhist books called the Zōng lǐ zhòng *jīng* mùlù (綜理衆經目錄), which translates as “Comprehensive Catalogue of the *Sūtra*” or "Consolidated Directory of the Scriptures” (the first classical period catalogue of Chinese Buddhist works). It is the first comprehensive catalog of scriptures or the first general catalog of Buddhist texts. This catalogue is also commonly referred to as the *Ān* lù (An's Catalogue) or Dào *ān* lù. The first edition was compiled in 374 CE (and is lost) and is in the Taishō *Tripiṭaka*, vol. 55, no. 2149 under 251a2, known as Dà táng nèi diǎn lù (大唐内典録). This is a meaning of the title “Catalogue of the Inner Scriptures of the T’ang Dynasty” or "The Imperial Buddhist Catalogue of the T’ang Dynasty” is a catalogue of the T’ang scripture compiled by the emperor. This directory of the Buddhist texts was collected in the Tang Dynasty, a period that was instrumental in the progress of the Buddhist religion in China. This was a time of intense concern with the work of translating, preserving, and classifying writings that had come in to India and other regions of Central Asia. A

stream of academics and monks made the systematic recording and systematizing of the teaching of Buddhism, thus establishing the groundwork of later academic research. The Dà táng nèi diǎn lù is one of the earliest systematic guides that were created to discard the growing body of Buddhist writings in China. It served as a valuable source of future Buddhist research as well as translations and exegetical inquiry in the interaction of scholars with the growing textual tradition. The catalogue organized texts under thematic categories as part of a wider project of conserving and standardizing the Buddhist canon as the basis of study, practice, and teaching in China. This made it easier to consult and follow the wise, monks, and the forthcoming generations, thus adding more continuity and spreading of the Buddhist philosophy.

Dao-an is also credited with having founded the Maitreya Mílè 彌勒 traditional cult of worship by his practice of assembling with his students before a statue of Maitreya and asking to be reborn in *Tuṣita* Heaven Dōu lǜ *tiān* 兜率天. Some of his great disciples included Huì yuǎn (慧遠) of Lushan, Lu Shan, and Sengrui (Seng Rui). These collections served as fundamental aids to the systematic structuring and confirmation of Buddhist texts and helped to ensure that every text acquired a proper allusion and was transferred to the future generations of researchers. The approach of Dao-an was the founding of the next generations of translation practices, as it standardized the roles of the translation teams and impacted further translation projects in centuries to come. A euphonious scholar in Buddhism, Dao-an started writing down commentaries on the Dhyana *Sūtras* translated by An-shi gao at an extremely tender age. His commentary on these sutras was successful and gained him early popularity and a large following. Among his main contributions in the scholarly world was his rejection of the traditional method of Buddhist philosophical terms translation by equating them to already existing Daoist terms—a process known as “Geyi” or “matching of meanings." Dao-an was a supporter of the free creation of a Buddhist system of terms, who hoped to establish his own vocabulary, which was more aptly used to render Buddhist concepts without the need to depend on the vocabulary of Daoism. Also, Maitreya was established by Dao-an as a worship cult. He coined the practice of gathering with his adherents in front of a picture of Maitreya and praying to be reborn in *Tuṣita* Heaven, thus creating a key aspect of Maitreya worship in East Asian Buddhism. The contribution of Dao-an to the evolution of Buddhist practice and intellect in China is still symbolized by the cultivation of a distinct Buddhist language and his quest to standardize the translation of scriptures.

Progression of the Northern Dynasties

The development of state-sponsored translation bureaus also took off during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 CE), most prominently in the Northern Wei (386-534 CE) and Northern Zhou (557-581 CE). The Buddhist rulers of these times were aware of how useful translation of

Buddhist scriptures would be in cementing imperial power and bringing about cultural and religious unity. Such figures like Qin Fujian presented these translation activities with government regulation and encouragement to prescribe the quality and uniformity of translated publications. Within the framework of this system, state-funded teams of translators were meant to not just translate the Buddhist texts but also to oversee the standardization of the Buddhist doctrines within the empire.

Guṇabhadra (394–468 CE), Qiú nà bá tuó luó 求那跋陀羅, a notable translator, had significant contributions under the Liú song 劉宋 period in China. He was born in the family of Brahmans in the middle part of India. He received an all-round education as a young boy in the five sciences (五明 Wǔ míng) that are astronomy, calligraphy, mathematics, medicine, and magic. His intellectual interest now caused him to begin with the study of the Samyuktabhidharma-hrdaya-sastra. After being ordained, he began working on Buddhist texts of great importance, starting with old Indian texts, then the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* Dà pǐn bōrě *jīng* 大品般若經 and the *Avataṃskaya-Sūtra* Huá yán *jīng* 華嚴經. *Guṇabhadra* together worked with the local Chinese thinkers such as *Bodhiyāśa* Pú tí yé shě 菩提耶舍 in the Waguan Monastery Wǎ *guān* sì 瓦官寺 in the process of translating the most important books regarding Buddhism. During the Liu Sung dynasty (435-443 CE), both *Guṇabhadra* and *Bodhiyāśa* created the Abhidharma-*śataka-śāstra* Zhōng shí fèn *ā* pí tán lùn (中十份阿毘曇論), a 12-fascicle work. According to Vasumitra Shì yǒu 世友, this translation is considered one of the later works in the canon of *Sarvāstivāda*. Another translation of The Treatise on the Classification of Categories or The Treatise on the Completeness of Categories (Pǐn Lèi Zú Lùn 品類足論) is the Abhidharma *prakaraṇa pāda* Zhòng shì fēn *ā* pí tán lùn (Taishō volume 27, no. 1558-41). Bodhidharma, however, does not give the role of *Guṇabhadra* even lip service in his translation. This work is a significant Abhidharma text in Buddhist philosophy, especially also linked with the *Sarvāstivāda* school, and it deals with the systematic grouping in the Buddhist worldview of phenomena. It is generally associated with the Indian thinker Vasubandhu, but some traditions also say it is by Asanga. The treatise is of importance in explaining how different elements, including consciousness, material components, and actions, are classified in Buddhist teachings. In 435 CE, *Guṇabhadra* traveled to China, and he first sailed to Sri Lanka, followed by Guangzhou. Most of his services were in the translation of *Mahāyāna* and early Indian Buddhist scriptures during his life in the existing quarters of Qí huán sì in Jiankang (建康) and Xin si (辛寺) in Jingzhou (荊州). Whilst staying in these regions, he translated over thirty texts, which included such important works as the *Saṃyuktāgama-sūtra* (Zá *ā* hán *jīng* 雜阿含經), the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* (勝鬘經 Shèng mán *jīng*), and the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* (楞伽經 Léng *jiā jīng*), and others included the *Purvapakṣa-Vyākaraṇa*-Karma-*Sūtra* or Karma-Phala-*Sūtra* (Guòqù xiànzài *yīnguǒ jīng* 過去現在因果經). The literal meaning of the translation is "*Sūtra* on the Causes and Effects of the Past and Present," Anantariya-*Vimokṣa-sūtra Xiāng* xù jiětuō *jīng* 相續解脫經, meaning "*Sūtra* on Successive Liberation" or "*Sūtra* on Continuous Liberation." Karma-*Vipāka-Sūtra* or *Pāpa-Puṇya-Vipāka-Sūtra* (Zuì fú bàoyìng *jīng* 罪福報應經) means "*Sūtra* on the Retribution of Sins and Merits" or "*Sūtra* on

the Results of Good and Bad Karma"; *Dvādaśa-Tuṭṭha-Sūtra* or *Dvādaśa-Ācāra-Sūtra* (Shí'èr tóutuó *jīng* 十二頭陀經) means “*Sūtra* of the Twelve Ascetic Practices"; and the *Dharmadvāda-Sūtra* or Dharmadhvaja-*Sūtra* (Fǎ gǔ *jīng* 法鼓經) means “Dharma Drum *Sūtra*," among many others. This was a considerable influence of the East Asian Buddhist doctrine through the influence of *Guṇabhadra* in the understanding and teaching of the *Mahāyāna* teachings in China. His rigor in academic studies made him so revered, and the royalty in Henan recognized him as a great sage, and he was appointed *Mahāyāna* Master Mó hē yǎn fǎ*shī* (摩訶衍法師). His name was rendered to Chinese as Dè xián (德賢), that is, “Virtuous and Worthy” or “Virtue and Sage," and Gōng dé xián (功德賢), that is, “Meritorious and Worthy” or “Virtue and Merit Sage." This title was a sign of his good character and work. His heritage is therefore also documented in one of the historical classics referred to him as *Gāos*ēng chuán (高僧傳), which means “Biographies of Eminent Monks" or “The Biographies of High Monks."

Another prominent monk named Buddhabhadra (358-429 CE), Fó tuó bá tuó luó (佛陀跋陀羅), originally from Nagarahara in northern India, was an influential translator of Buddhist texts. He reached Chang-an, 406-408 CE, and was respected as a master of meditation Chan (禪) and Vinaya (律). Besides being well versed with his scriptures, he built up a major academic rapport with Kumarajiva (*Jiū* mó luó shén 鳩摩羅什), which led him to his becoming a powerful translator. One major translated work was the *Mahāsaṃghika*-vinaya (摩訶僧祇戒本) (Taishō no. 1425), translated in 416 CE by Buddhabhadra, a Buddhist scholar from the period of Guanxiu, fully containing the corresponding text for eight key canons, accompanied by Faxian such as the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* (Dà *bān* nièpán *jīng*) (大般涅槃經) (Taishō no. 376), the *Tathāgatagarbha* sutra (Rú lái cáng *jīng* 如來藏經 (Taishō no. 666),) (如來藏經) the *Yogācārabhūmi* (Miè mó luó *jiā* yè *jīng*) (滅摩羅迦業經) (Taishō no. 618), and the first version of the Huayan jing (華嚴經), i.e., the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* (dà*fāng* guǎng fú huá yán *jīng*) (大方廣佛華嚴經), comprising 60 fascicles. The translation of the Larger Sukhavati-vyuha (wúliàng shòu *jīng* 無量壽經, Taishō no. 360) c. 421 CE has also been credited to him (along with Baoyun) in 421 CE.

Buddhabhadra was a very famous Indian meditation master known as Chán *shī* 禪師 that was worshiped as one of the eighteen great high priests of the Lú*shān* shí*bā gāo* xián 廬山十八高賢. The eighteen noble and eminent ones of Mount Lu is a name used to designate a group of eighteen eminent Buddhist monks and scholars that were associated with the Buddhist site of Mount Lu in China. This title testifies to their significant work in the T’ang dynasty as well as being a symbol of high moral values and spiritual power and influence in Buddhist Chinese scholarship. His name is also found with different transliterations, with Fótuó bá tuó luó (佛陀跋陀羅), Fú dà pó *jiā* (佛大婆伽), and Fú duò pó *jiā* (佛墮婆伽), and in some cases translated as Jué gǎo (覺暠) or zhú yì (竹譯). Also, it seems that Buddhabhadra lived concurrently with Emperor Xiaowen (Xiao Wen, 467-499 CE) of the Northern

Wei Dynasty. This is the man who is closely referred to as the original abbot of the Shaolin Monastery in Mount Sung.

The Issue of Methodology in Translation

The lack of equal lexical items turned out to be one of the fundamental problems of translating Buddhist text into Chinese. The Sanskrit words like "*śūnyatā*" or "dharma" had no explicit equivalent in Chinese, and they led translators to come up with a new vocabulary domain or a modification of the vocabulary of philosophy. In particular, the Buddhist metaphysics merged with local intellectual traditions in the translation of *śūnyatā* as Kōng 空 to produce interpretation systems that were acceptable to local intellectuals. The syntactic drift between the Indo-European groups (such as Sanskrit) and the Sino-Tibetan ones (such as Classical Chinese) was a major impediment. The inflected morphology of Sanskrit and participial formations demanded that a translator seek a functional equivalent that is made in a language with frequent use of word order and particles. Such structural inequalities necessitated new innovative approaches such as paraphrasing and elaboration to maintain the coherence of the doctrines. The process of Buddhist Dharma text translation from the Indic languages into Chinese (the Han Dynasty 206 BCE-220 CE and the Northern Dynasties 386-581 CE) was characterized by a great number of lexical and semantic gaps. The latter problems were due to the fact that Chinese is based on a concrete, relational system, whereas the abstract philosophical nature of Sanskrit (like *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and anatman (non-self)) was foreign. Translators used a number of strategies in dealing with these challenges, such as phonetic transcription (*fān yīn*), semantic matching (gē yì), and neologisms. In many cases, these neologisms were a borrowing of Daoist or Confucian traditions that provided interpretive changes. Such practices were carefully recorded in earlier catalogues and dictionaries and allowed Buddhism to become integrated into Chinese culture in the face of the ambiguities. These two are the lexical and semantic challenges of translating Buddhist dharma texts of Indic languages into the Chinese language.

Lexical Challenges

A translator such as An Shi Kao has written the Sanskrit term “dharma” as fǎ 法, meaning "law" or "ritual" in the early period of the Han dynasty. He had borrowed the Confucian terms related to law and ritual to translate into Buddhist teachings. Likewise, *nirvāṇa* was translated as Nièpán涅槃 with phonetic loans, although it was, again, not that semantically heavy as the Sanskrit word was. These attempts in the Northern Dynasties, and especially under Dao-an, again revealed the features of the dialectical incompleteness of the extant vocabulary. And Dao-an indexed more than 400 texts in which pairs of terms were listed with one term being wéi fǎ (為法), which means "conditioned," and another wú fǎ (無法), which means "unconditioned," signifying the necessity of new compound terms not found within the classical lexicon. The development of words like "fán nuò" (煩惱), which refer to

affliction, according to such dictionaries as the Soothill-Hodous dictionary, was innovated using Sino-characters to fill gaps in lexicons and cover concepts like delusions.

In the case of semantic adaptations, Chinese grammar discouraged the use of abstract words in Sanskrit in favor of relational words, where notions like "*śūnyatā*" (emptiness) became matched with Daoist notions of "wu" (non-being). The method breathed Egyptian metaphysical systems with the Buddhist concept of nothingness, as was done by Zhi Qian circa 220 CE. The notion of karma (Zuò, 作, means “action”) now became more of a moral causality, an idea that was echoing the Confucian deed to filial piety. Similarly, the concept of *anātman* (non-self) was rendered as Wú wǒ (無我), a translation that helped align the doctrine with existing Chinese notions of self-cultivation. Early *Āgama* translations often faced the difficulty of lacking precise lexical equivalents in Chinese, a challenge later addressed through explanatory glosses that clarified doctrinal meanings.

The conceptual and lexical gaps of early translations gave rise to a wave of syncretism that resulted in the introduction of so-called Dark Learning (xuanxue) that involved the Buddhist non-self doctrine being blended with the Daoist wu-wei (non-action) doctrine. This syncretic paradigm had a significant impact on Han elites and late authorities, even the rulers of Northern Wei, thus creating a background for the appearance of Chan and Tian-tai doctrine schools. Many of these ambiguities were greatly mitigated by the standardization initiative led by *Kumārajīva* (circa 401 CE), and the initial attempts to harmonize these gaps did help justify the institutionalization of the Dharma in China.

Conclusion

The Sanskrit Buddhist texts translated into Chinese were known to be a landmark actor in the development history of early Chinese Buddhism, especially in the Han to the Northern Dynasties. It was an effort marked by a complex linguistic and cultural adjustment, an effort that went beyond a simple lexical adaptation; this was an elaborate process of negotiation between the emergent Buddhist beliefs and the existing Chinese ways of thinking. These early translators (especially An Shigao, Zhihuan, and *Kumārajīva*) faced significant challenges in their translation of the abstract philosophical principles of Buddhism into a linguistic and cultural context severely disturbed by the difference between its initial Indic context and the Chinese context. The use of a repertoire of strategies such as phonetic transliteration, reconfiguring of semantics, and synthesis of Daoist and Confucian ideas made Buddhist teachings understandable to the Chinese and the process of reconstituting the same teachings to suit local intellectual culture at the same time. The implications of these translations went beyond teaching of doctrines; they eased the development of various schools of Chinese Buddhism, influenced the elite-level discourse, and helped to make Buddhism in China a relevant religious and philosophical institution. Further, this syncretic mechanism of integrating Buddhism with Chinese homegrown notions prepared the way to the development of distinctively Chinese Buddhist traditions,

including the Chan and Tian-tai, which are still able to have an effect on modern thinking on Buddhism. The translation of Buddhist literature into early Chinese situations was not an easy linguistic transfer but a transition process that was an inevitable part in the religious, cultural, and intellectual interactions between India and China. Their work and their contributions to making Buddhism in China more accessible continue to be the key to understanding the process of Chinese Buddhism's evolution and its introduction as part of Chinese culture.

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