

AN INTRODUCTION TO EARLY TRANSLATIONS OF BUDDHIST SUTRA INTO CHINESE

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist Sutra Translation was one of the earliest large-scale translation activities in China. It was featured by the large number of translation teams which involved; the numbers of volumes of Buddhist texts that were translated. With their collaborative effort, Sutra translation not only facilitated the dissemination of Buddhist thoughts in China, but also enhanced the development of Chinese literature, art and philosophy.

But the question that the scholars raise nowadays is how early Buddhist missionaries translated Buddhist Sutra into Chinese without having Chinese knowledge in China. Some of the early Buddhist records mentioned significant Buddhist events occurred in China such as detailed records of the very first Buddhist missionaries to China, the places where they resided and their translations of Buddhist Sutras into Chinese.

Based on early Chinese Buddhist records, this research proves that foreign monks had to use three types of methods in order to translate Buddhist Sutra into Chinese. Most early Chinese Sutras were translated by the help of translators. But soon after their visit to China, foreign monks were able to use spoken Chinese, local scholars wrote the texts down in written Chinese according to their explanations. But some foreign monks were fluent in both spoken and written Chinese; they were able to change Chinese history by establishing Buddhism with Chinese Buddhist scripts in China.

Buddhist Sutra Translation was one of the earliest large-scale translation activities in China. It was featured by the large number of translation teams which involved; the numbers of volumes of Buddhist texts that were translated. In its long history, generations of translator monks and laymen devoted themselves to translating Sutras from Sanskrit or Pali and Central Asian languages into Chinese. With their collaborative effort, Sutra translation not only facilitated the dissemination of Buddhist thoughts in China, but also enhanced the development of Chinese literature, art and philosophy. Besides, the translation of Buddhist sutras

had great influence on the development of Chinese phonology and translation theory too.

Fei Changfang, a famous Chinese Buddhist scholar had composed one of his historical works, *Lidai sanbao ji (Historical Records of the Triple Gem)* in 597 AD. In this book he recorded some of the significant Buddhist events occurred in China, such as detailed records of the very first Buddhist missionaries to China, the places where they resided and their translations of Buddhist *Sutras* in Chinese. Some important facts he mentioned regarding the very first Buddhist missionaries and later developments of Buddhism in China are as follows,¹

"Fourteen people including *Jin Jing* - an official of *Yuling* and *Wang Cun* - a scholar of philosophy took off for *Sindhu*. When the delegation reached to *Kushana*, they came across a monk known as *Kashyapa Matanga*. They have copied 42 chapters of Buddhist *Sutras* and have collected figures of the Buddha. They brought with them a white horse carrying Buddhist *Sutras* and figures of the Buddha on its back to the capital, *Luo Yang*. A temple named *Bai ma si* (White house temple) was built to respect the white horse. The old foundation of the white horse temple is located 200 feet away from the south side of the new temple in *Ching men* street of the *Chang an* city. At the archives named *Lan tai shi*, 42 chapters of Buddhist *Sutras* were translated into Chinese. From that the doctrine of *Shakyamuni* has begun to spread. Also there were many monks and educated laymen continuously involved in translation."¹

But *Liang Qichao*, a famous Chinese Buddhist scholar in the early 20th century does not seem to agree with traditional Chinese Buddhist records. He compares different versions of the same story and concludes as follows in his work, *18 articles of Buddhist studies*,

"When we talk about this story, first, it says that the ministers who went to find doctrine came alone but secondly it links to the famous *Sutra* translator, *Matanga*. *Dharmaraksha* involves with it thirdly. Finally it says *Dharmaraksha* has translated several *Sutras* into Chinese. In short, this story has developed gradually and it is not difficult to find that some historical evidences to prove the developments of the story."²

Based on early historical records and Mr. *Lian*'s comments it is clear that *Ven. Kashyapa Matanga* and *Ven. Dharmaraksha* did not translate Buddhist *Sutras* into Chinese themselves. But the reason why they are not mentioned as translators of early Chinese Buddhist *Sutras* is perhaps because all the translations were not done by themselves. We know those Buddhist monks met the Chinese delegation in the state of *Kushana*. Chinese sources have also clearly mentioned that those monks were central Indians. That is why most of modern Chinese scholars such as Mr. *Lian* believe early Indian Buddhist missionaries were not able to translate Buddhist *Sutras* into Chinese unless they could not get the help of the Chinese side.

Previous discussion shows early translations of Buddhist *Sutras* into Chinese were not direct translations. As early records mentioned, we can see how Chinese translators who specialized in both local and Indian languages wrote *Sutra* texts down in classical Chinese when Indian monks described them using the original texts. There is an interesting story that proves this suggestion in *Faxian chuan (Record of Buddhist Kingdoms)*, a famous travelling record written by a Chinese monk, *Faxian*, in the chapter of *Chanting a Sutra by a monk of Sindhu*, he says,

"At that time *Faxian* wished to write the *Sutra* down. But the monk said "This is not a *Sutra*, it is my own preaching."³

Classical Chinese was an unchanged language throughout the centuries. To be fluent in classical Chinese for foreigners is absolutely hard though they have been studying it for more than 10 years. None of the oldest Chinese records gives details about Chinese proficiency of Indian monks known as *Kashyapa Matanga* or *Dharmaraksha* until *Gao seng chuang (Biographies of Master monks)*, written by *Ven. Hui Jiao* (497-554AD) mentioned *Ven. Dharmaraksha* had studied Chinese in his childhood. But this book was written in the 6th century AD. It is clear that the writing style in Chinese translation of 42 chapters of Buddhist *Sutra* is a typical translation done by Chinese people. Furthermore there is evidence in the preface of *Fa jing jing (Ugravati: Grihapati Sutra)* which proves early Chinese translations were done by the help of Chinese translators. It says,

"An Xuan, who has received honorary title and Yan Fotiao in Lin huai were enthusiastically involved in Buddhist work with high spirit since their childhood. They have had a deep understanding of Buddhism and were able to penetrate Buddhism. They were fully involved in translating with the kind intention of relieving the confusion felt by the people of the world towards Buddhism. When Hon. An Xuan explained the meaning of this Sutra, Yan Fotiao wrote it down. They used extremely profound language, hence meaning is highly valued."⁴

Hon. An Xuan was a merchant from the state of Arsaka. He came to the Chinese capital of Luo yang in the period of Han Lin emperor. He was a titled person and well-known Buddhist devotee in China. He was one of the foreigners who spoke Chinese fluently at that time; it is said that he had discussions in Chinese on Buddhism with Chinese monks.

Foreign monks were not able to translate the Buddhist Suttas correctly into Chinese without studying Chinese language properly. Thus there was a need to study Chinese in order to propagate Buddhism in China. Some early Chinese records have clearly mentioned how foreign monks studied Chinese in China. One of the early foreign monks who has studied Chinese in China was An shigao (Vasuttara?), who has come from the state of Arsaka. According to Gao seng chuang (Biographies of Master monks), Ven. An shigao visited China before Hon. An Xuan's visiting there. But they had been translating Buddhist Sutra into Chinese in the same period. Ven. An shigao was the crown prince of the state of Arsaka. He gave the crown to his uncle before becoming a monk, and the book further says that he had studied Tipitaka, and specialized Abhidhamma in order to acquire a thorough knowledge of Buddhism. In 148AD, during the period of emperor Han Xuan Ven. An shigao came to Luo Yang city, the ancient capital of China. From that time onwards he continued to stay in Luo Yang and started to study Chinese. Gao seng chuang has recorded about him in detail as follows:

"In the early period of Han Xuan emperor, this venerable monk had visited China. He had demonstrated extraordinary memory abilities, he was able to memorize all at once. He became fluent in Chinese language in a short period; thereafter he translated so many Suttas from foreign languages into Chinese."⁵

Ven. An shigao lived in China from the 147 AD to the 172 AD for more than 20 years. He had translated 34 Buddhist books into Chinese language. He was the first foreign monk who had translated Buddhist Suttas into Chinese without the help of local people and was also able to give oral translations of Sutra texts. "Oral translation" is a translation technique. That is when someone explains the original Sutra texts in Chinese language to local scholars in order to record them in Chinese characters at once. It is mentioned in Shami shihui zhangju xun (Preface of the ten knowledge chapters of Samanera),

"There was a Bodhisattva who came from the state of Arsaka. His name was Shigao. Old Sutra texts which were explained by him are very famous even now. Those texts show the path for the purification. He had also disseminated the doctrine in the kingdom of Han. Oral and written Records done by him were counted as millions of characters."⁶

According to the above mentioned sources, it is more practical to believe that the tradition of Buddhist Sutra translations done by foreign monks with Chinese knowledge started with Ven. An shigao. Ven. Zhi Loujiachen was also a famous foreign monk in China who did Buddhist Sutra translations in the same period. He was originally born in the state of Kushana, and was the one who introduced Mahayana Buddhism to China. At that time there were several foreign monks who had translated Buddhist Suttas from Sanskrit or other languages into Chinese in China such as Ven. Foshuo (Buddhasruta?), an Indian monk; Zhi Yao, a monk from the state of Kushana; Kang Ju (Vishala?) and Kang mengxiang from West Samarkand etc.

When I examine early Chinese Buddhist records and other sources, I come to the conclusion that foreign monks had made very significant contributions both to translate Sutra into Chinese and propagate Buddhism in China. They had to use three types of methods in order to translate Buddhist Sutra into Chinese. Most early Chinese Suttas were translated with the help of translators, but soon after the arrival to China, foreign monks were able to use spoken Chinese. Local scholars wrote the texts down in written Chinese according to their explanations. But some foreign monks were fluent in both spoken and written Chinese. They were able to change Chinese history by establishing Buddhism with Chinese Buddhist scripts in China.

Endnotes:

- 1 《历代三宝记·卷第四》，CBETA电子佛典系列（CD），中华电子佛典协会，台湾
- 2 梁启超：《佛学研究十八篇》，上海古籍出版社，2001，P. 28
- 3 For further reading: James Legge, Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, p 110 Following is the original Chinese text “法显尔时欲写此经。其人云。此无经本我心口诵耳。”
- 4 《法镜经序》，CBETA电子佛典系列（CD），中华电子佛典协会，台湾
- 5 《法镜经序》，CBETA电子佛典系列（CD），中华电子佛典协会，台湾
- 6 《法镜经序》，CBETA电子佛典系列（CD），中华电子佛典协会，台湾