

Early Chinese buddhist translators on translation: A brief introduction with textual data

Ancient China was a multi-lingual society and we are quite fortunate to have access to a large literature on translation and on the history of translation in China. In the *Dì jiàn tú shuō* 帝鑒圖說 “Illustrated Primer for the Perusal of the (Ming dynasty) Emperor”, I came upon the following quotation:

三年遠方重譯而至者七十六國，商道復興。

Within three years seventy-six states from distant regions, for which double translation was necessary, joined the Shāng (dynasty) and thus the Way of the Shāng flourished. (ed. AD 1572, p. 17)

Of course this does not prove anything about the Shāng but is rather an evidence on how the Míng dynasty would think of the Shāng dynasty. However we see that concepts of translation were well-known even in early pre-Buddhist literature. Translators were informally referred to as *shé rén* 舌人 “tongue men”. The public function of “translator” or “interpreter” was recognised already in the earliest sources on the idealised Chinese bureaucracy. And it appears that translation was not intended between the (often mutually incomprehensible) Chinese dialects, but for communication with “barbarians” speaking different languages (sanskrit, pali...). By far the largest pre-modern project of translation in world history that has come down to us is the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, as edited in the *Tripitaka*, for which there are a large number of useful handbooks. Buddhist translators from the third century onwards began to reflect on rules for and problems of translation in the introductions to their translation work. Our main source for early developments in this area is Sēng Yòu 僧祐’s *Chū sānzàng jìjí* 出三藏記集 (“A Collection of the Records of Translations of the *Tripitaka*”) dated AD 510.

Some of the ancient Chinese Buddhist literature in these collections was composed in (and not translated into) Chinese, and it was often deliberately written to sound outlandish, as if it were indeed a painfully awkward translation, even when it is not. Writing Buddhist texts in any other way would be treason to the idea that the truth is outlandish, namely from the Indian “Far West”. Much of modern Chinese literature follows a similar principle: in order to be respected it has to sound like an outlandish translation from American. Modern academic Chinese has to sound like painfully americanised Chinese in order to be scientific Chinese.

In China, translation was meant for a monolingual readership because there were not enough people able to read in Sanskrit. In this respect, Chinese translations from Sanskrit differ radically from German, French or English translations from Latin which were addressing an audience a significant part of which was quite literate in Latin but had scarcely access to the original. And it is worth stressing that whereas there were many public libraries in Rome, it was not the case in ancient China where libraries were either private or imperial, with a strictly limited access.

This paper consists of two parts. In Part one I shall lay out some fundamental issues and questions that arise in connection with the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese. In Part two I shall present a concise anthology of some early Chinese reflections on translation problems.

Translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese

As one considers the process of translation from Sanskrit into Chinese, it is important to distinguish carefully between the following:

1. Meaning of the text as to the original Indian author
2. Received meaning in the Indian tradition
3. Translator’s understanding of that tradition
4. Parts of this understanding that the translator tries to translate
5. Message that the translator managed to make explicit
6. Message that was effectively conveyed to the reader if he is:
 - an initiated Buddhist specialist
 - the general Buddhist public
 - the general literate public

As one reads or re-translates the Chinese translations into English, one should not let undecided which one of the above mentioned eight types of meaning he is trying to convey. A translation of “the Chinese text” does not exist: translating the often difficult Sanskrit texts into Chinese required for sure radical decisions on what to translate and what not to translate for the intended Chinese audience. It is not enough to identify the Sanskrit concept lying under the Chinese translation of it. One needs to know how these translations were likely to be understood, and how they might easily have been misunderstood. We need a *Rezeptionsgeschichte* “reception history” of Chinese translations in the Chinese environment.

It is important to remember that the processes involved in producing Chinese translations from Indian originals varied considerably. However, we had typically this kind of pattern: translation of the Sanskrit text into a Central Asian language for which there are semi-bilingual translators, rendering of the translation in “pidgin” Chinese, rendering into basic literary Chinese, and finally polishing of the text towards the “published” version. In such a case, none of the people involved in the translation process ever compared the “original” with the finished Chinese “translation”. For all those translators we can wonder about the sources which they had at their disposal, the dictionaries, glossaries and grammars which they used and, once again, about the part of the original text that they wanted to convey. The uncertainties are numerous about the reader as well: how did the reader appropriate the text? What were the meaning and the efficiency of it in his own culture? And what were the original autochthonous Chinese doctrinal developments inspired by the process of translation and by the Buddhist texts themselves?

On a broader scale, the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese asks the following questions too:

- How did Buddhism materialise itself in its local adaptation to Chinese culture, far from the Buddhist subcultures?
- What was the own Chinese experience of conceptual innovation and conceptual alienation?
- What were Chinese dismissals of Buddhist doctrinal concepts and points of view?
- What were Chinese misapprehensions of the doctrine?
- Which Chinese presuppositions were not compatible with Buddhism?
- What were the deliberate Chinese simplifications?

- What were the innovative conceptual and dogmatic Chinese developments of Buddhist concepts outside of the Buddhist subcultures?
- What did the relevant people in China (predominantly non Chinese!) did write about translation at the time when they were beginning to express Buddhist matters in Chinese?

Some early Chinese reflections on translation problems

Let us now consider a list of some of the main translators in premodern China: Zhī Qiān 支謙 (fl. +224), Dào Ān 道安 (314-385), Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344-413), Huì Yuǎn 慧遠 (334-416), Sēng Rùi 僧睿 (ca. 371-438), Sēng Yòu 僧佑 (445-518), Yán Cóng 彥琮 (557-610), Xuán Zàng 玄奘 (600-664), Dào Xuān 道宣 (596-667), Yì Jìng (635-713), Bù Kōng 705-774), Zàn Níng 贊寧 (919-1001), Xú Guāngqǐ 徐光啟 (1562-1663), Lǐ Zhīzāo 李之藻 (1569-1630), Yáng Tíngjūn 楊廷均 (1557-1625), Wáng Zhǐ 王徵 (1571-1664), Wèi Xiàngqiān 魏象乾 (fl. 1740). Then come translators from Chinese “minority languages” (14th to 19th centuries) and Western Missionaries like Trigault, Matteo Ricci and many others. Matteo Ricci's translation of the *De amicitia* “On Friendship” became a bestseller in classical Chinese during the 17th century¹.

Zhī Qiān 支謙 (fl. +224), of the Yuèzhī 月之 tribe, was renowned for knowing six languages and worked as a tutor for the famous warlord Sūn Quán 孫權 (AD 222-252). In the introduction to *Dharmapada* (ch. 14) he emphasises the difficulties of transmitting things through translations (*chuán shí bù yì* 傳實不易). He focussed on the strategies of literalness (*zhí* 直), concentrating on the wording, the transmission of the substance (*zhì* 質) but was celebrated for his attempts at dignified refined style (*wén* 文) and elegance (*yǎ* 雅). These early oppositions set the tone for later discussion. This introduction is the earliest Chinese problematisation of translation that has come down to us.

We learn from the introduction to the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* that Dào Ān 道安 (314-385) was a learned monk of Chinese origin and that he would speak just one language. He is said to have assembled as many as 500 students around him. Knowing no Sanskrit, he showed an intense interest in problems of exegesis and hermeneutics, and he focussed on the typical failures of translation in current translations.

1. The history of the Western impact on China through translation is summarised with useful statistical surveys in Tsuen-Hsuein Tsien 2008 and the early history down to 1773 is documented in Pfister 1932-1934.

Here are some statements from various translators mentioned in the list above on the difficulties which they faced in the translation process.

或辭句出入, Sometimes the formulations do not correspond.

先後不同, The word order is not the same.

或文義混雜, Sometimes wording and meaning are a shamble
在疑似之間 in a realm of doubt and mere appearances.

(Sēng Yōu AD 510, *Tripitaka* no. 2145, vol. 55, p. 58b)

然般若逕三達之心 The core of the threefold prajñā-knowledge
覆面所演。 has been propounded by people long dead.

聖必因時。 Sages are bound to follow their times

時俗有易。 and the customs of times differ.

而刪雅古 But then to cut out the elegant and the outdated,

以適今時。 to accommodate things to present times

一不易也。 that is the first difficulty.

愚智天隔 The stupid and the wise are by nature separate

聖人叵階。 there is no ladder up to the sages.

乃欲以千歲之上微言 Now wanting to take the 1000 year-old subtle words

傳使合百王之下末俗。 and to transmit and accommodate them to consump-
tion by latter-day creatures, after a history sprad over the reigns of 100 kings

二不易也。 that is the second difficulty.

(Sēng Yōu AD 510, *Tripitaka* no. 2145, vol. 55, p. 438a)

譯胡為秦。 1. When one translates barbarian things into Chinese

有五失本也。 there are five ways of missing out on what is basis.

一者胡語盡倒而使從秦。 To start with, the barbarian speech being turned
completely upside down in order to make it follow Chinese syntax.

一失本也。 This is the first kind of failure to do justice to the original.

二者胡經尚質。 2. The barbarian classics prize substance

秦人好文。 whereas the Chinese ones prize elegance.

傳可眾心 For the transmitted text to please the hearts of the masses

非文不合。 as if without literary polish it would not fit,

斯二失本也。 this is the second kind of failure to do justice to the original text.

三者胡經委悉 3. The barbarian classics are expansive
 至於嘆詠。they go so far in their emotional insistence.
 丁寧反覆。They preach with repetitions
 或三或四。sometimes three- sometimes four-fold
 不嫌其煩。unafraid to bore the reader.
 而今裁斥。Then to omit such texts,
 三失本也。that is the third kind of failure to do justice to the original text.

四者胡有義記 4. The barbarians have doctrinal records (abstract discourse)
 正似亂辭。that are correct enough but seem (to us) chaotic statements.
 尋說向語 When you look for the explanation held up against the main text
 文無以異。one finds no difference between the formulations.
 或千五百刈而不存。Sometimes as many as 1500 words are weeded out and disappear.
 四失本也。This is the fourth failure to do justice to the original text.

五者事已全成。 5. When a matter has been completely dealt with
 將更傍及。and the text flies off on a tangent,
 反騰前辭 playing around with the earlier formulations
 已乃後說 and when having finished that to go on to (re)state the case,
 而悉除此。and then to decide to throw all this out,
 五失本也。that is the fifth failure to do justice to the original text.
 (Dào Xuān AD 650, *Tripitaka* no. 2060, vol. 50p. 438a 2)

Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344-413), of Indian and Central Asian descent, first came to Chang'an in his fifties, and with his apparently superb command of Sanskrit he soon asserted his authority and was appointed *guó shī* 國師 “Preceptor of the State”. He was an immensely successful translator but he didn't write a lot about it. Few systematic remarks on translation remain. His spirit would apparently favour the literally correct (*zhì* 質) versus the polished and elegant (*wén* 文). This is illustrated by the following remarks:

此語與西域義同, This version has the same meaning as that from the Western Regions (India)

但在言過直. But in its formulations it is excessively literal.

... 但改梵為秦, When converting the Sanskrit into Chinese

失其藻蔚， we lost the literary embellishments,
 雖得大意， even when it has the basic thought,
 殊隔文體. It is far from the substance of the text.
 有似嚼飯與人， It is like giving someone chewed rice
 非徒失味， it is not just that it isn't the right taste,
 乃令嘔噦也。 it makes one want to throw it up!
 (Huì Jiāo 慧皎 AD 519, *Tripitaka* no. 2059. vol. 50, p. 332b)

Huì Yuǎn 慧遠 (334-416), with a Confucian and Taoist background, became a monk in his twenties. He never learnt Sanskrit but organised a considerable number of translations. He took the obvious position of the golden mean in the eternally recurrent dispute between *wén* 文 and *zhì* 質 in his introduction to one of his translations:

以文應質 If you deal with substance using elegance (free translation)
 則疑者眾; then there will be many who are in doubt;
 以質應文 if you deal with elegance using substance, (literal translation)
 則樂者寡. then there will be few who feel entertained.
 (Sēng Yòu AD 510, *Tripitaka* no. 2145, vol. 55, p.76b)

Sēng Rùi 僧睿 (ca. 371-438) was of a philosophical bent of mind and was responsible for a large number of thoughtful introductions to his master Kumārajīva's translations which made him famous. He knew no Sanskrit and he is not known to have translated any texts, but he focussed successfully on the difference between the conceptual schemes in India and in China.

而經來茲土, When the (Buddhist) classics came to this land
 乃以秦言譯之, then we translated them into Qin speech (i.e. Chinese),
 典謨乖於殊制, then our classics turned out to be at variance with a different system.
 名實喪於不謹. The terminology and its references got lost in carelessness (of transmission).
 (Sēng Yòu AD 510, *Tripitaka* no. 2145, vol. 55, p. 53a)

詳聽什公傳譯其名, I've listened carefully to Kumārajīva's translation of the terms
 翻覆輾轉, I mulled them over again and again
 意似未盡, but the thoughts seemed not quite completely grasped.

良由未備秦言 It is very much because the Chinese words are not readily available

名實之變故也. and because the terminology and its reference gets turned around/distorted (in the process of translation).

(Sēng Yòu AD 510, *Tripitaka* no. 2145, vol. 55, p. 57c)

Sēng Yòu 僧佑 (445-518), of Chinese origin and unable to read Sanskrit, was the author of the all-important early bibliographic survey (Sēng Yòu AD 510) to which my brief and sketchy account of Chinese thoughts on translation has to make constant reference:

然文過則傷艷, When elegance goes too far, it suffers from over-eagerness to be attractive,

質甚則患野. runs into the trouble of vulgarity,

野艷為弊, vulgarity and over-eagerness are ills,

同失經體. equally they lose the substance of the classics/sutras.

(Sēng Yòu AD 510, *Tripitaka* no. 2145, vol. 55, p. 5a05)

Sēng Yòu provides a slightly more detailed account of the differences between Sanskrit and Chinese that deserves our attention, of which I shall quote only the beginning:

夫神理無聲. The spiritual principle has no sound,

因言辭以寫意. by words and formulations one writes out thoughts,

言辭無跡. but words and formulations leave no trace,

緣文字以圖音. by characters one pictures sound.

故字為言蹄. Thus characters pin down words,

言為理筌. and words trap principles.

音義合符 Sound and meaning go together

不可偏失. ... One must not lose sight of any of the two.

(Sēng Yòu AD 510, *Tripitaka* no. 2145, vol. 55, p.4b)

From Sui times onwards (AD 581-) there was an increasing bureaucratisation of the translation process which was conducted by bureaucratic division of labour in translation teams.

Yán Cóng 彥琮 (557-610), of Chinese origin (his family name was actually Lǐ 李), participated in 27 translation projects, but it is quite unclear how much Sanskrit he actually knew. He made a name for himself

as the first theoretician of translation who wrote a whole treatise on the subject, the *Biàn zhèng lùn* 辯正論 “Treatise on Getting Things Correct”.

1. 意者寧貴樸而近理, When it comes to thought/meaning I prefer simplicity and closeness to principle.

不用巧而背源. There is no need to be crafty and thus go against the source.

2. 人人共解(梵文原文), If everyone understood Sanskrit

省翻譯之勞. one would save the trouble of translate;

代代咸明, and if all generations all had a clear grasp of it

除疑網之失. one would have removed mistakes “of the web of doubts”...

3. 若令梵師獨斷, If the master of Sanskrit alone was to make the decisions, 則微言罕革. then the subtle allusions/expressions would rarely go wrong (in one's interpretations).

(Dào Xuān AD 650, *Tripitaka* no. 2060, vol. 50, p. 439a-c)

八備 Eight Preparations

1. 誠心愛法 Love the dharma with an earnest heart,

志願益人 as your main aspiration desire to better others;

不憚久時 do not fear the use of much time

其備一也。 That is the first preparation.

2. 將踐覺場 If you are about to enter the battleground of enlightenment

先牢戒足 then make solid first your precautions.

不染譏惡 Do not allow yourself to be smitten by sarcasm and hatred.

其備二也。 That is the second preparation.

3. 筌曉三藏 Gain a proper understanding of the Three Baskets of Buddhist knowledge,

義貫兩乘 get to the bottom of the meaning of the Two Vehicles of Buddhist doctrine;

不苦暗滯 do not get bitter when you feel in the dark or get stuck

其備三也。 That is the third preparation.

4. 旁涉墳史 Take a close interest in the historical sources,

工綴典詞 work hard at the dictionaries;

不過魯拙 do not go to excess in your stupidity

其備四也。 That is the fourth preparation.

5. 襟抱平恕 Warmly embrace evenhandedness and fairness,

器重虛融 hold in solid esteem emptiness and pliability;

- 不好專執 do not be fond of dogmatic stubbornness.
 其備五也。 That is the fifth preparation.
- 6.沈於道術 Get deep into the technicalities of the Way,
 澹於名利 be indifferent to fame and profit;
 不欲高銜 and do not show any official ambition
 其備六也。 That is the sixth preparation.
- 7.要識梵言 You must understand the language of the Indians,
 乃閑正譯 with ease you must get the translations right;
 不墜彼學 and you must not fall into heterodoxy.
 其備七也。 That is the seventh preparation.
- 8.薄閱蒼雅 You must read widely in the dictionaries,
 精諳篆隸 you must become a specialist in seal script as well as clerical script,
 不昧此文 and you must not be obfuscated by the text under your nose.
 其備八也。 That is the eighth preparation.

After the establishment of orthodoxy (茲)
 自茲以後, From this time onward,
 迭相祖述, they in turn passed things on from their avatars,
 舊典成法, the old classics made a pattern
 且可憲章. and they could be made into models.
 輾轉同見, In turn they mulled over identical views,
 因循共寫, following tradition they wrote the same
 莫問是非!, and they did not ask about right or wrong!
 誰窮始末? Who got to the bottom of it all?
 (Dào Xuān AD 650, *Tripitaka* no. 2060, vol. 50, p. 438c)

Xuán Zàng 玄奘 (600-664), a scion of a noble Chinese family, was probably the most advanced Chinese scholar of Sanskrit and of Buddhism ever. He spent seventeen years travelling in South Asia and Central Asia and brought with him a vast treasury of Buddhist literature. As a translator, he went for more “free” translations than the other great Sanskritist traveller Yì Jìng 義淨 (635-713), who himself translated no less than 52 Sanskrit works into Chinese. The bureaucratic division of labour in official translation from the time of Xuán Zàng onwards could vary considerably, but it did have some common features (see Wáng Wényán 1984).

There is so much variation described in the bureaucratic practice of

translation that it may be useful to conclude with just one authoritative account as a representative example. In the history of Buddhism *Fó zǔ tǒng jì* 佛祖統紀 by Zhì Pán 志磐, dated to 1258-1269, there is a representative account of the bureaucracy of translation:

第一譯主。正坐面外宣傳梵文。

The first is the *yizhǔ* 義主 (master of translation) who sits in a formal pose facing outwards and reads out the Sanskrit text.

第二證義坐其左。與譯主評量梵文。

The second is the 證義 (philological assistant) who sits to his left and reviews the text with the master.

第三 證文坐其右。聽譯主高讀梵文。以驗差誤。

The third is the 證文 (text appraiser), who sits to his right, listens to the master reading out the Sanskrit and checks for errors.

第四書字梵學僧。審聽梵文書成華字。猶是梵音

The fourth is the 書學梵學僧 (transliterator), who listens carefully to the Sanskrit and who writes it down in Chinese characters. These are still Sanskrit sounds.

(第)五筆受。翻梵音成華言(訖哩那野。再翻爲心。素怛覽。翻爲經)

The fifth is the 筆受 (translator-scribe), who turns the Sanskrit sounds into Chinese.

第六綴文。回綴文字使成句義(如筆受云照見五蘊彼自性空見此。今云照見五蘊皆空。大率梵音多先能後所。如念佛爲佛念打鐘爲鐘打。故須回綴字句以順此土之文)

The sixth is the 綴文 (text editor), who alters the position of the characters so that they make proper meaningful sentences. For instance, [the text drawn up by] scribes would say 照見五蘊彼自性空見此 EXAMINE FIVE SKANDHA THAT SELF NATURE EMPTY SEE THIS but now it says 照見五蘊皆空 EXAMINE FIVE SKANDHA ALL EMPTY. On the whole, the Sanskrit word order is often inverted [in comparison with Chinese] ... so characters and sentences need to be reversed in order to be in accordance with the language usage of this land.

第七參譯。參考兩土文字使無誤。

The seventh is the 參譯 (proof reader), who compare both texts, Chinese and Sanskrit, so that no faults remain.

第八刊定。刊削冗長定取句義(如無無明無明。剩兩字。如上正遍知。上闕一無字)

The eighth is the 刊定 (subeditor), who deletes unnecessarily long expressions and who balances the phrasing.

第九潤文。官於僧衆南向設位。參詳潤色(如心經度一切苦厄一句。元無梵本。又是故空中一句。是故兩字元無梵本)

The ninth is the 潤文 (stylist), who holds office with the monks, occupies the south-facing rooms, and who adds the finishing touches.

The way the transliteration into Chinese works is conveniently illustrated in *Fàn Qiānzìwén* 梵千字文 composed probably by Yì Jìng's 義淨 between 695 and 712 (*Tripitaka* vol. 54, no. 2133B). Foreigners were commonly filling the positions that required knowledge of Sanskrit. However, there were more native Chinese with Sanskrit competence than what is sometimes suggested. Take for example Bǎo Yún 寶雲 (AD 362-449, see Gaosengzhuān 1992, p. 102-103) who had learnt Sanskrit abroad. Not much is known about the number of people in Tang times who studied and could read Sanskrit, apart from the uncontested great masters of Sanskrit Xuan Zàng 玄奘 and Yì Jìng 義淨. The basic information there is on this important point is conveniently summarised in Jì Xiánlín (1983: 135).

For early arguments around all this see the *Lǐ huò lùn* 理惑論 “Essay of Sorting out Confusions” (see the useful edition and translation in Liú Lìfū 劉立夫 and Hú Yǒng 胡勇 2011, pp. 6-72, Pelliot 1919/20, and compare also the highly informative Kohn 2009).

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