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Chinese Buddhist Historiography and Orality

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CHINESE BUDDHIST HISTORIOGRAPHY AND ORALITY

TANYA STORCH

Probably the most common motif seen throughout all early biographies of Chinese Buddhists is the search for Buddhist texts.¹ In fact, this motif is so common that nobody bothers to inquire what compelled the Chinese to look so vigorously for authoritative written texts while receiving their doctrine from the West? Two major conclusions may be drawn by closely considering this phenomenon -- 1. The process of transmission was overwhelmingly oral; 2. The Chinese were strongly disappointed with it.

If so, the next question arises -- why would they be disappointed? Possibly because they already had an idea of how true doctrine should be transmitted, and oral it was not. If we look at the earliest extant catalogue of Chinese classics, *Hanshu "Yiwenzhi"*,² we see an orientation towards the written text as the best means for insuring the accuracy and fidelity of the highest wisdom in the process of its formulation.

¹This statement is made on the basis of the biographies collected in *Chu Sanzang ji ji* (Compilation of Notices on the Translation of the Tripiṭaka) compiled by Shi Sengyu in 515, and *Gaoseng zhuan* (Lives of Eminent Monks) compiled by Shi Huijiao in 518.

²*Hanshu "Yiwen zhi"* (Monograph on Arts and Literature in the Book of the Han) was compiled by Ban Gu in 58-82. It was based on two previous catalogues, that of Liu Xiang (80-8) and Liu Xin (26-6), namely *Bie lu* (Subject Catalogue), and *Qi lue* (Seven Categories).

On the one hand we are still able to see clear evidence of many classics having been transmitted orally, but on the other hand we can observe the idealization of their written versions already having been made, especially because Confucius himself appropriated the written text for the expression of his teaching.³

The above statement gains evidence from another angle -- the documents of the polemics between pro-Buddhists and anti-Buddhists collected in *Hongming ji* .⁴

In many early treatises we see the pro-Buddhists being interrogated by anti-Buddhists about the physical existence of their teacher. The argument of the latter goes like this -- since there is no record of Buddha in the classics, one cannot be sure he ever existed as a real person. And if he never existed as a real person, believing in his teaching makes no sense.

³Upon attentive examination of the first division of Ban Gu's catalogue which is called "*Liu yi*" (Six Arts) and where all Chinese classic books are comprised, it becomes clear that, in Ban Gu's interpretation, they are all deprived of their anonymous and pre-written stage of existence. Instead, their authorized history is reckoned from the time when Confucius edited them as written texts. Thus, we read in the very first lines of Ban Gu's introduction to the catalogue, "Confucius died and the true words stopped. His seventy disciples passed away and the great righteousness was perverted. This is why *Chunqiu* exists now in five [different redactions], *Shijing* in five [different versions], and *Yijing* in the interpretation of the numerous authors." (*Hanshu*, the beginning of *juan* 30).

⁴*Hongming ji* (Collection [of Notes on] Propagating [the Doctrine and] Illuminating [the Teaching]) was compiled in 515 by Shi Sengyu.

One would wait in vain for the pro-Buddhists to speak of revelation. The only reasonable argument the pro-Buddhists could offer was as follows -- we cannot prove that Buddha really did exist, but we have the texts that remained after him.⁵ The latter statement according to the model of ideal transmission as expressed in the *Hanshu* "*Yiwen zhi*" means that Buddha was a real sage and his doctrine is true because we have the written texts that were left after him. And if so, the more written texts the Chinese Buddhists could obtain, the more true their doctrine would appear to non-believers.

If the above argumentation is correct, one should expect a totally negative approach towards orality on the part of the Chinese Buddhist activists. But the latter turns out to be only half true, so now I shall proceed to discuss material showing in a more practical way the Chinese Buddhists' estimation of the oral aspect of Buddhist doctrine.

First of all, Chinese Buddhists could not hide the fact that the revelation of the Buddhist path was done orally. Although in some catalogues of Buddhist literature one may find awkward phrases showing that their authors viewed Buddha as preaching with the help of a canon that was already written, earlier writers such as Sengyou make it absolutely clear that

⁵*Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* (Hereafter *Taishō*), vols. 1-100. Tokyo, 1960-1977. vol.52. p. 79b.

the truth was revealed to the world orally. Buddha talked when he first preached about The Four Noble Truths; Buddha's last instruction to his saṅgha before he entered nirvāṇa was given orally; even the compiling of the *Tripitaka* by Mahākāśyapa, Ānanda, and Upāli is "honestly" described by Sengyou as a completely oral process.⁶ The first four characters of every sūtra in Chinese, *ru shi wo wen* ("thus have I heard"), connect us immediately with this respectful attitude towards orality within the Indian tradition recaptured by the Chinese.

Yet a different approach may be seen evolving in the process of translation of the Buddhist canon into the Chinese language. It is a well-known fact that the oral aspect played an enormous role in this process, but no one has thus far paid attention to what Chinese Buddhists themselves thought about the oral element being so heavily involved.

An initial look at *Chu Sanzang ji ji* gives us the optimistic impression that one can always distinguish between purely oral transmission and oral translation from the physically existing original, for Sengyou is very accurate in pointing out whether it was *kou tong* (transmitted orally), or a *zhai hu ben* (derived from Sanskrit/Central Asian original) process. But

⁶*Taishō*, 55. 1a, 3c, 4a.

this optimistic hope disappears as soon as one takes a closer look at what Sengyou actually means by these expressions.

For example, in the second *juan* one finds two translations made by Saṅghabhūti -- *Abhidharma-vibhāṣā-śāstra*, and *Vasumitra-śāstra*. About the first it is said that Saṅghabhūti based the translated text on *kou tong* , and about the other one it is said that it was based on *zhai hu ben*. It is reasonable to assume that we are dealing with purely oral transmission in the first case and with oral translation done from a physically existing original in the second, but this is not true. As becomes clear from another section of *Chu Sanzang ji ji* , the physical text was missing in both cases. What really happened is as follows. For the *Abhidharma-vibhāṣā-śāstra*, Saṅghabhūti orally presented the content, Dharmanandi wrote it down in *hu wen* (Sanskrit/Central Asian script),⁷ Buddharakṣa translated it into spoken Chinese, and Zhi Mindu wrote it in characters. With regard to the *Vasumitra-śāstra*, Saṅghabhūti orally presented its content together with two other monks, Dharmanandi and Saṅghadeva, Fonian made the oral translation into Chinese, and Huigao wrote it down.⁸

⁷A little detail showing perfectly the commitment of Chinese Buddhists to the written aspect of their doctrine, for this step was not necessary for the transmission of the text.

⁸*Taishō*, 55. 99a-b.

This is just one example of many demonstrating that Sengyou's use of expressions such as *zhai hu ben* does not necessarily mean that any physical text from the West was involved. But what seems to be even more important is that it was not Sengyou's intention to distinguish between these two types of translation. The reason is that he approached all cases of oral transmission of Buddhist doctrine by Western monks as completely accurate representations of the texts' written originals, which he strongly believed existed in each case in the West.

Sengyou and all later bibliographers alike were deeply impressed by the Western monks' magnificent memory and always praised it with fine compliments. "When he was young, he was able to recite by memory Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna scriptures up to 200, 000 words," it was said about Buddhayaśas. "There were many texts which [Saṅghadeva] could recite by memory. ... He used to recite by memory the *Tridharmika-śāstra*, enjoying it day and night." "What took other monks a month to memorize, Buddharakṣa memorized in just one day."⁹ And so on.

In the biography of Buddhayaśas we see a whole episode devoted to the issue of the monk's memory. Buddhayaśas was

⁹*Ibid.*, 102a, 99c, 103b-c respectively.

famous among Chinese Buddhists for knowing by heart the *Dharmagupta-vinaya*, and they wanted him to make a translation of it. But emperor Yao Xing (Early or False Qin, 351-394) did not want to permit it because he did not believe that Buddhayaśas could remember by heart such a long text. The Buddhists insisted, and it was decided to examine Buddhayaśas' memory. He was given population registration lists and pharmacological recipes, in 40 pages each. He learned all in three days and recited then by memory without a single mistake. After that Yao Xing permitted him to translate the *Dharmagupta-vinaya*.¹⁰

Oral transmission, as has already been said, was viewed by Chinese Buddhists only as an exactly correct representation of the corresponding written version of the text. Whenever they faced a purely oral revelation, they strongly denied it. To give an example, one may read a story about the Buddhist nun, Sengfa, in the fifth *juan* of *Chu Sanzang ji ji*. According to this report, Sengfa experienced Buddhist revelations and started speaking on behalf of Buddha. Although later on her words were written down in the form of a regular Buddhist sutra, Sengyou claims they were doubtful.¹¹ Right after this story, in the same *juan* there appears a record about another Chinese

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 102c.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 40b.

woman who suddenly began speaking Sanskrit. Her revelations were also written down at first in Sanskrit and then in Chinese, but Sengyou says, "To accept or to throw away, I am in doubt in both cases. That's why I categorized it within the list of doubtful scriptures."¹²

Two other vast areas where one may start looking for the impact of Indian oral tradition on the Chinese via Buddhism are the usage of *dhāraṇī*, and the transcription of names.

The information about the earliest encounter with the art of *dhāraṇī* is found in the biography of Śrimitra. This so-called translator had actually not translated anything, apart from one *dhāraṇī*, which was not really translated but transcribed. Both Sengyou and Huijiao emphasize that it was a special point of Śrimitra's dignity not to learn Chinese at all, and it was a part of his magical skill to understand Chinese without translation. Most of Śrimitra's Buddhist activity was comprised of reciting *dhāraṇī* in Sanskrit. Apparently he was the first person who taught the Chinese how to use them. It is said in *juan 13* of the *Chu Sanzang ji ji*, "Śrimitra well mastered the skill of *dhāraṇī*. Whatever [concept] he entertained happened.

¹²*Ibid.*, 40b. In both cases, Sengyou does not criticize the content of the texts pronounced by these women, which permits understanding that they did not contain any heretical ideas. So, what was really wrong with them in the eyes of the Chinese bibliographer is the way they came into being, that is through oral revelation.

Prior to him there was no *dhāraṇī* law east of the Yangzi. Śrimitra spread the *Kongque wang* (*Mayūra-rāja*), and other magic *dhāraṇīs*."¹³

This is how Sengyou depicts Śrimitra reciting in Sanskrit. "He sat opposite them and pronounced a spell in Sanskrit three times. The sounds of Sanskrit reached to the clouds. Then he recited *dhāraṇī* in several thousand words. His voice was high, and his intonations were joyful. His face did not change."¹⁴

The fact that Śrimitra is the only monk of that kind listed in *Chu Sanzang ji ji* (Dharmakṣema used *dhāraṇīs*, but he made translations, too) speaks for itself -- this was not in the major stream of Chinese Buddhists' perception of Buddhism. In fact, in both *Chu Sanzang ji ji* and *Gaoseng zhuan*, we see only foreigners using *dhāraṇī*: if the Chinese use them, which happens very rarely, it always occurs in the West and not in China proper. In the entire *Chu Sanzang ji ji* there has been found only three cases of using *dhāraṇī* for creating magic. One is in the biography of Dharmakṣema, the second is in the biography of Buddhahadra, and the third is in the biography of Fayong. In all cases such magic happened outside of China.

If magic created by pronouncing *dhāraṇī* is very rare, indeed, magic created by a Buddhist scripture is not rare at

¹³*Taishō*, 55. 99a

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 99a.

all. In the biography of Faxian there is a story about a family in which the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* was worshipped for several generations. When a big fire struck the capital, the family's house burned down, but the scripture remained intact. Even the color of the paper did not change. It is also reported that the population of the capital passed around the story of this miracle.¹⁵

In the biography of Zhu Shixing we read the following episode. When the Chinese monks were ready to leave Khotan with the Mahāyāna version of the *Aṣṭāsāhasrikā-prajñā-pāramitā-sūtra* which they had found there, the Khotanese Hinayanists went to the king and told him that the Chinese were going to take to China false Buddhist scriptures. The king stopped the Chinese monks, but Zhu Shixing demanded a fire test be applied to the scripture. When he set the scripture on fire, he proclaimed, "If Mahāyāna should spread to China this sūtra will not burn!" And of course, the paper remained intact.¹⁶

Still another illustrative story about magic created by a Buddhist manuscript is found in the biography of Dharmakṣema. Dharmakṣema had the original of the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*. He was afraid of thieves and used to hide the scripture

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 112a.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 97a-b.

under his pillow every night. But every morning he found the scripture on the ground. One day he heard a voice saying, "Buddha revealed the truth for everybody. Why do you hide it?" Dharmakṣema stopped hiding the scripture and the same night the thieves came, but they could not move the manuscript because all of a sudden it became very heavy. They realized that Dharmakṣema was not an ordinary man and became his disciples.¹⁷

The most significant story about magic created by a Buddhist manuscript is found in the preface to *Da Tang neidian lu* (Catalogue of the Sacred Canon of the Great Tang).¹⁸ It reports that as soon as the *Sishier zhang jing* (Sūtra in Forty-two Sections) was delivered to the Eastern Han emperor Ming's court, the Taoists came out with accusations against the new religion. In order to decide which doctrine was really true, a similar test of the scriptures of both doctrines was applied in the presence of the emperor. The Taoist scriptures burned and the Buddhist ones remained intact. The leader of the Taoist party died not being able to endure such a disgrace.¹⁹ Magic events associated with manuscripts are not only much more numerous than those made by *dhāraṇīs*. Almost always they

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 103a.

¹⁸This catalogue was compiled in 664 by Shi Daoxuan.

¹⁹*Taishō*, 55. 220b.

take place in China itself, even in its capital, and happen more often to Chinese than to foreigners.²⁰

Daoan is one of the most important figures in early Chinese Buddhist history. There are several valid studies written about him, but it seems that one side of his personality, which is of key importance for understanding many of his acts and expressions, remained unemphasized. Daoan's greatest idea was to make Buddhist doctrine and the Buddhist community in China follow exactly their Indian models. The reorganization of the saṅgha, changes in the monks' names, a new approach towards the translation of texts and transcription of the terms and proper names are just some examples of this idea being put into practice. There are also some significant statements of Daoan pertaining to the oral element in genuine Indian Buddhist tradition.

In *juan* five of *Chu Sanzang ji ji*, one division of Daoan's catalogue is included where the doubtful texts are listed. There is also a preface to it written by Daoan. In this preface, strong support of the oral manner of receiving and transmitting the doctrine is expressed because this was the genuine way of

²⁰It should be noted that the cult of the book in Mahayana is also responsible for this affectation about Buddhist manuscripts seen among the Chinese Buddhists. Concerning this cult see G. Schopen, "The Phrase 'ṣa pṛthivipradeśe caityabhūto bhavet' in the *Vajracchedikā*: Notes on the Cult of the Book in Mahāyāna," *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 17 (1975): 147-81.

preserving the doctrine among Indian monks. It is said, "When the monks of the outside countries learn the Law, they all kneel down and orally receive it. They receive it together with the teacher. They repeat it ten to twenty times. Only after they receive it in this way do they begin to study it."²¹

In the "Preface to *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-śāstra*" Daoan talks about five losses the Chinese inflict on the genuine Buddhist doctrine while trying to render it in Chinese. One of these losses is said to have been incurred by the Chinese while rearranging the text, which originally was designed to be performed orally to musical accompaniment, and which therefore had multiple repetitions in it.²²

It seems that Daoan was about to restore to some extent this oral element in Chinese Buddhist practice simply because it would bring Chinese Buddhism closer to its Indian model and not because something had changed in his evaluation of the spoken word itself. What can be said for sure is that, after Daoan, those translators who had been eliminating the *gāthās*, or textual repetitions needed for the text's oral performance, began to be heavily condemned by Buddhist bibliographers.

Daoan also was the first Chinese Buddhist who raised the issue about the correct transcription of Sanskrit Buddhist terms

²¹*Taishō*, 55. 38b.

²²*Ibid.*, 52b.

and proper names in Chinese translations. In the second *juan* of *Chu Sanzang ji ji* there is a list of old and new translations of Buddhist terms and names. New ones were suggested by Daoan and they often show more phonetic accuracy than the old ones. In different parts of Sengyou's catalogue and biographical survey of Daoan's life, the former points out that Daoan was very concerned about *hu yin* (Sanskrit/Central Asian sounds) being accurately rendered by means of the Chinese language because, according to Daoan, wrong transcriptions deprived a Buddhist text of its power. Sengyou himself followed in the steps of his teacher and wrote the first treatise in the history of Chinese Buddhism about the phonetics and semantics of Sanskrit/Central Asian languages written in Brahmi.²³

This may be about all the evidence that one can find in Chinese Buddhist historiography with regard to the oral aspects of the Indian Buddhist tradition. There are a few more cases to be added when the bibliographers refer to Chinese Buddhists listening to storytelling somewhere in India or Central Asia. But a reference of that kind has just one purpose -- to prove

²³This treatise was translated and analysed by A. Link in "The Earliest Chinese Account of the Compilation of the *Tripitaka*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* , 81 (1961): 87-103, 281-99.

that the particular sūtra in Chinese the cataloguer is speaking of has originated in the West and not in China.

Thus, we may conclude that Chinese Buddhist historiography retained stories about oral revelation of the Buddhist truth by Buddha, as well as about the oral process of compiling the *Tripitaka* in India. As the above-quoted passage from Daoan's preface to the list of doubtful sutras confirms, Chinese Buddhists were well aware of the fact that in the Western countries the *Tripitaka* was mostly preserved and transmitted orally. Yet, when it came to the territory of the Chinese, they made all possible efforts to present their sacred doctrine as existing exclusively in its written form – a phenomenon which may only be explained by the influence of the Chinese traditional idea of the canon, as expressed in the *Hanshu "Yiwen zhi"* and other catalogues of Chinese classic books. It is worthy of noting that an analogous transformation also occurred in Christian and Moslem cultural areas, where oral transmission played an extremely important role during the period of dissemination of these religions, but was later rejected in favor of written scripture.

Recent studies on the idea of the canon in different cultures reveal that the normative or controlling role of the canon has always been among its major functions under all cultural

circumstances.²⁴ If this is true about any kind of canon, then, it has to be even more so, when applied to those canons whose written aspect is so heavily emphasized. Orality provides more freedom, while scripture provides more control for both political and religious institutions, along with its positive sides such as a greater stability of the text and its physical durability.

²⁴The first issue of vol. 10 (1983) of *Critical Inquiry* was completely devoted to the problems of the canon in different cultures. About the normative role of the canon, see in particular Charles Altiery, "Idea and Ideal of a Literary Canon", *Critical Inquiry* , 10 (1983): 37-61.

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