

The English Translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Classics: History and Method

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Abstract:

Chinese Mahayana Buddhism is an important part of traditional Chinese culture. In the process of continuous integration of local ideas, it has been established not only as a belief system represented by eight main sects, but also as a huge knowledge system based on Sutras, Disciplines and Sastras. The history of the translation and introduction of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classic scripts into English began in the mid-nineteenth century. At present, hundreds of classics have been translated. A comparative study of important Buddhist classics translated by translators from different eras, regions, and cultural backgrounds shows that the social attributes of the translators' identity is the main factor affecting their choices of translation strategies. Some translators rely too much on "Domestication," which is an important cause of "cultural variation." Comparing the history of the translation of Chinese Buddhist scripture with that of the English context, it can be said that a more faithful and accurate translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics depends on the establishment of the Buddhist conceptual system in English.

Keywords: Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics, English translation, history, translation strategy, conceptual system

The beginning of Buddhism in China can be traced back to the period of Emperor Ming (57-75 AD) of the Eastern Han Dynasty. Prior to this, Buddhism may have been spreading along the Silk Road in the Western Regions for a longer period of time without being documented. It is commonly agreed that China's large-scale translation of foreign cultures began with the translation of Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures. The translation of Buddhist scriptures can be regarded as the

first collision between Chinese and other cultures. In the process, Buddhism from India started its localization in Chinese soil and later produced a huge and lasting influence on Chinese history and social life.

“Chinese Buddhism” comprises three aspects in meaning, “its classics are written in Chinese; the time of its formation is in the Han Dynasty; the people of its belief are mainly those living in the circle of Chinese culture” (Li Shangquan 2). During the Tang Dynasty, the editor of *The Buddhism Catalog of Kaiyuan* (《開元釋教錄》) grouped the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Classics into five divisions: Prajñā (般若), Ratnakūṭa (寶積), Mahāsaṃnipāta (大集), Avataṃsaka (華嚴) and Nirvāṇa (涅槃). The eight major sects of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism emphasize different scriptures, but basically all come from the five divisions above. More specifically, the Tiantai sect adheres to *The Lotus Sutra*, *the Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra*, *The Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sutra* and *The Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sastra* (《法華經》《大般涅槃經》《大品般若經》《大智度論》). The Huayan sect adheres to *The Avataṃsaka Sutra* (《華嚴經》). The Sanlun sect: *The Mādhyamaka Sastra*, *The Śata Sastra*, *The Dvādaśamukh Sastra* and *The Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sastra* (《中論》《百論》《十二門論》《大智度論》). The Weishi sect: *The Yogācārya-bhūmi Sastra*, *The Avataṃsaka Sutra*, *The Laṅkāvatāra Sutra* and *The Vidya-matrāṣiddhi Sastra* (《瑜伽師地論》《華嚴經》《楞伽經》《成唯識論》). The Discipline sect: *The Sarvāstivāda Vinaya*, *The Four-division Vinaya*, *The Mahāsāṃghika Vinaya* and *The Five-division Vinaya* (《十誦律》《四分律》《摩訶僧祇律》《五分律》). The Chan sect: *The Laṅkāvatāra Sutra*, *The Diamond Sutra*, *The Vimalakīrti Sutra* and *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (《楞伽經》《金剛經》《維摩詰經》《六祖壇經》). The Pure-land sect: *The Sukhāvātīvyūha Sutra*, *The Vision of Sukhāvātī Sutra*, *The Sukhāvātīvyūha Sutra* (the minor) (《無量壽經》《觀無量壽經》《阿彌陀經》). The Esoteric sect: *The Vairocana Sutra*, *The Diamond Crown Sutra* and *The Susiddhi Sutra* (《大日經》《金剛頂經》《蘇悉地經》). The above-mentioned scriptures and some of the other most widely circulated and influential scriptures, such as *The Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda Sastra*, *The Śūraṅgama Sutra*, *The Heart of Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutra* (shortly, *The Heart Sutra*) (《大乘起信論》《楞嚴經》《般若波羅蜜多心經》) constitute the core of the Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics.

Since the nineteenth century, with the rise of comparative religious studies, the Western world began to realize the importance of Buddhism as one of the sources of Chinese philosophy, and began to translate and introduce Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics. After more than a century, and even though a large number of classics have been translated into English and gradually exerted a greater influence, academic studies still lack a historical survey of the translation of Chinese

Buddhist classics. “The scholars of the Western world have paid great attention to the dissemination history of Buddhism since the 1960s, and there are many famous works...but there is still a lack of systematic studies of Buddhist scriptures in Western languages. Scholars have done less research on translations, and they are basically focusing on the ideas of Buddhism” (Zhu Feng 82). At the same time, discussions on the influence of translators’ subjectivity regarding their translations is still lacking, as well as their translation strategies and specific methods. Addressing this problem, this article examines the English translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics by translators from different countries and regions as the research object, and summarizes the translation history of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist literature since the second half of the nineteenth century. The article selects representative and important translators and their translations as examples to analyze the impact of their subjectivity on translation, and aims to engage in discussion on the establishment of the Buddhist conceptual system in English.

I. A Historical Overview of the English Translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Classics

According to the list of the Buddhist canon in various Western languages based on the catalog of *Taishō Canon* started by Marcus Bingenheimer with the aid of scholars all over the world, to date as of October 8, 2020, 903 scriptures have been translated into English¹. If the author of this article lists all the English translations of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics on Bingenheimer’s website, then the reader will see an overly lengthy list. Therefore, the author attempts to have the history of translation as a clue, and make a general analysis of the English translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist scriptures since the second half of the 19th century.

The large-scale English translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist scriptures began with a group of British Protestant missionaries who came to China in the second half of the nineteenth century. The earliest translation practice can be traced back to *The Ekaśloka Sastra* (《壹輸盧伽論》) translated in 1857 by Joseph Edkins, a member of London Missionary Society. Later, Edkins also translated the first volume of *The Śūraṅgama Sutra* and published it in the year 1880 (Li Xinde 52). The most productive translator of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist scriptures among the British missionaries was Samuel Beal, who successively translated *The Sutra of Forty-two Sections* (《四十二章經》) (1862), *The Diamond Sutra* (1865), *The Heart*

1 Marcus Bingenheimer. *Bibliography of Translations from the Chinese Buddhist Canon into Western Languages* [EB/OL]. [2020-10-08]. <https://mbingenheimer.net/tools/bibls/transbibl.html>.

Sutra (1865), *The Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sutra* (1866) and other classics into English and published them in *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (Zhao Changjiang 243). Other scriptures translated by Beal include *The Romantic Legend of Śākya Buddha* (《佛本行集經》) (1875), *The Dharmapāda Sutra* (《法句經》) (1878) and *The Buddhacarita-kāvya Sutra* (《佛所行贊經》) (1883), etc. (Li Xinde 54-55). In addition, Beal's *A Catena of Buddhist Scriptures from the Chinese* (1871) also includes some abridged translations of Chinese Buddhist scriptures, among them *The Heart Sutra*, *The Mahā-Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutra*, *The Four-division Vinaya*, *The Sutra of Forty-two Sections*, *The Śūraṅgama Sutra*, *The Sitātapatroṣṇīṣa-dhāraṇī with Annotations* (《首楞嚴咒注釋本》), *The Candī-dhāraṇī* (《準提咒》), *The Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sutra*, *The Diamond Sutra* and *The Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra* (《大般涅槃經》) etc. (Ban Bai 276). After Beal, in 1894, another missionary Timothy Richard worked together with Chinese scholar Yang Wenhui to translate *The Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda Sastra* (with the title *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna Doctrine*) into English (formally published in 1907). In addition, Timothy Richard also translated part of *The Lotus Sutra*, part of *The Bhaiṣajyaguru Sutra* (《藥師如來本願經》) and *The Heart Sutra*. Other British missionaries who have translated Mahayana Buddhist classics include: William Gemmell, who translated *The Diamond Sutra* (1912), and William Soothill, who translated *The Lotus Sutra* (1930) (Ban Bai 277-278).

Many Japanese scholars also translated Chinese Buddhist scriptures into English during the period from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. The most famous among them was D. T. Suzuki. In 1900, *The Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda Sastra* translated by D. T. Suzuki was published by the Open Court Publishing Company owned by Suzuki's patron Paul Carus, and *The Laṅkāvatāra Sutra* translated by Suzuki was published in London in 1932. In 1935, the Oriental Buddhist Society published *The Manual of Zen Buddhism* edited by D.T. Suzuki, which included Suzuki's translation of *The Heart Sutra*, *The Pumen Chapter of the Lotus Sutra*, *The Diamond Sutra* (partial), *The Laṅkāvatāra Sutra* (partial) and *The Śūraṅgama Sutra* (partial). The Chinese Buddhist scriptures translated into English during the period by other Japanese scholars include *The Vision of Sukhāvāṭī Sutra* (1894) translated by Takakusu Junjiro and *The Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa Sutra* (1898) translated by Ōhara Masatoshi (Ban Bai 278).

American intellectuals' attention to Buddhism can be traced back to at least the first half of the nineteenth century. As early as 1844, Henry D. Thoreau published his translation of part of *The Lotus Sutra* in *Dial* magazine, his translation was not based on the Chinese text, but rather on a French text by Eugene Burnouf in 1843

translated from a Sanskrit version. The translation of Chinese texts of Mahayana Buddhist classics in America roughly began in the late 1920s and early 1930s. An important scholar who focused on Chinese Buddhist scriptures in this period was Dwight Goddard. *A Buddhist Bible* edited by him was published in Vermont in 1932, including the three important classics of the Chan sect: *The Diamond Sutra*, *The Laṅkāvatāra Sutra* and *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*². Soon after Goddard, the philosopher, Clarence Herbert Hamilton translated *Wei Shih Er Shih Lun or The Treatise in Twenty Stanzas on Representation-only by Vasubandhu* (《唯識二十論》) (1938), which constitutes some of the slight attention given from American academia regarding the classics of Weishi Sect.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, the representative scholars who translated Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics from Chinese into English in the United States were Philip B. Yampolsky and Burton Watson. Yampolsky's main focus is on the classics of Chan sect, among which important translations are *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (1967), *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writing* (1971), *Selected Writing of Nichiren* (1990), *Letters of Nichiren* (1996) and many more. Watson is a famous sinologist in the United States. His translation and introduction of Chinese history, culture and philosophy are very extensive. Watson's translations of Buddhism scripts include *The Vimalakīrti Sutra* (1999), *The Lotus Sutra* (1993), *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi* (1993) etc. Recent famous American scholars who endeavor in the English translation of Mahayana Buddhist classics from Chinese texts are Bill Porter (also known as Red Pine) and Thomas Cleary. The translations of the former include: *The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom* (2001), *The Heart Sutra: The Womb of Buddhas* (2005), *The Platform Sutra: The Zen Teaching of Hui-neng* (2006) and *The Lankavatara Sutra: Translation and Commentary* (2013). The latter's translations include *The Sutra of Hui-neng, Grand Master of Zen: With Hui-neng's Commentary on The Diamond Sutra* (1998), *The Blue Cliff Record* (2005), *The Flower Ornament Scripture: A Translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra* (2014).

Compared with the above-mentioned translation practice of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist scriptures in Britain, Japan and the United States, the translation by Chinese nationals began relatively late. One of the representative translators of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist documents during the period of the Republic of China is Wong Mou-lam, a Hong Kong Buddhist layman who moved to Shanghai. His most important translation is *The Platform Sutra of Hui-neng* (1930). Before his

2 What needs to be pointed out is that Goddard did not translated the three classics himself, but edited, reorganized and interpreted others' translation.

death in 1933, Wong Mou-lam also translated *The Diamond Sutra*, *Vijñaptimātratā Siddhi Sastra* (《成唯識論》) (Chapter 1), *The Buddhābhāsita Dasabhadra Karmamarga Sutra* (《佛說十善業道經》), *The Smaller Sukhāvātī-vyūha Sutra* and some other Mahayana classics. Another important translator is Charles Luk, a Cantonese Buddhist layman who settled in Hong Kong in his later years. His translations include: *The Altar Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Supreme Zen Sutra of the Hui Neng* (1962), *The Vimalakīrti-Nirdeśa Sutra* (1972), *The Śūraṅgama Sutra* (1966), etc.

After 1949, the English translation of Buddhist scriptures in mainland China stagnated for a long time due to various reasons. It is not until the last 20 years that scholars have gradually begun to translate Chinese Buddhist scriptures into English, but in terms of quantity, it is obviously relatively small. For example, in the influential project of the Library of Chinese Classics in English Edition, only two Buddhist classics are included: *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Lo-Yang* (《洛陽伽藍記》) and *The Sutra of Hui-neng*. Compared to Chinese mainland, the English translation of Buddhist scriptures in Taiwan is more active. As early as 1970, Shen Jiazhen, a Buddhist layman, established an institute for the translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist scriptures in Hsinchu. Recently *The Mahāratnakūṭa Sutra* (《大寶積經》) and other scriptures have been translated into English and published in the United States by the organization. Similar Buddhist scripture translation agencies include the Neo-Carefree Garden Buddhist Canon Translation Institute established in Taipei in 2011 by Ven. Cheng Kuan, and the institute has retranslated *The Sutra of Forty-two Sections*, *The Diamond Sutra*, *The Dharmic Treasure Altar-Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch (The Platform Sutra)* and other classics. In addition, other Chinese Buddhist institutions across the globe have also begun to translate the Mahayana Buddhist classics into English. For example, in 1973, Venerable Master Hsüan Hua established the Buddhist Text Translation Society in San Francisco, USA, and translated *The Śūraṅgama Sutra*, *The Diamond Sutra*, *The Sixth Patriarch's Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*, *The Sutra of Forty-two Sections* and other Mahayana classics; Venerable Master Hsing Yun established the Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center in Los Angeles and translated *The Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sastra* (with the title: *The Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise*), *The Amitabha Sutra*, *The Lotus Sutra's Universal Gate Chapter*, *The Diamond Sutra*, *The Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Pūrvapraṇidhāna Sūtra* (with the title: *The Original Vows of Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* 《地藏菩薩本願經》) and other Mahayana classics.

Besides the above-mentioned translations, according to the “Historical Materials

on the Translation and Introduction of Chinese Culture to Foreign Countries (1929-1949)” edited by Zhao Ying, some other translations include: *Vimśatikāvijñaptimātratā-siddhi Sastra* (《大乘唯識論》) (1931) translated by Indian scholar Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya, *The Heart Sutra* (1934) translated by Chinese sinologist Li Shaochang, *The Brahma Net Sutra* translated by James R. Ware (1936), *Yung-chia’s Song of Experiencing the Tao* (1941) and *The Treatises of Seng-chao* (1948) translated by Austrian scholar Walter Liebenthal, *The Diamond Sutra* (1947) translated by A. F. Price, and *The Zen Teaching of Huangbo on the Transmission of Mind* (1947) and *The Zen Teachings of Hui Hai on Sudden Illumination* (1948) translated by John Blofeld etc. The author notes that there are some Mahayana Buddhist classics (such as the many Buddhist scriptures translated by Rulu) that have been self-published on the internet, but that there is still a lack of access to the detailed information on the translator and his (or her) translation works.

II. The English Translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist Classics under the Perspective of Socio-Translation Studies

Since the 1990s, under the influence of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu, a sociological surge has appeared in the field of translation studies. Many Western scholars have begun to explore a new model from a sociological perspective, emphasizing the relationship between the production, dissemination and reception of translation and various other social constraints (Wolf 125-138). Among the various social constraints mentioned above, the translator’s background is a key issue. Specifically, the influence of translators’ social attributes on his or her translation are mainly reflected in the fact that “the political, economic, legal, religious, ethical and other factors will affect the selection of source language texts, the setting of reader groups, and the formation of translation strategies” (Wang Hongtao 251-252). A survey of the history of the English translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics since the late nineteenth century summarizes that the characteristics of the translation during various periods differ significantly and these differences reflect the different strategies adopted by translators (represented by different methods and techniques in a specific way). The choice of the translation strategy is often closely related to translators’ social attributes. In the next part of this article, the author takes Timothy Richard’s translation of *The Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda Sastra* (with the title *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna Doctrine*) and Yampolsky’s translation of *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* as examples to discuss the impact of social constraints on translators in their translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics.

1. Timothy Richard: a missionary who interprets Buddhism from a Christian ideology

In the second half of the nineteenth century, under the influence of comparative religious studies initiated by Max Muller, many British Protestant missionaries who came to China discovered that many ideas in the Buddhist faith in China are similar to that of Christianity, and thus found the possibility of preaching in China with the help of Buddhism. As Li Xinde pointed out, “Joseph Edkins, William Alexander, Timothy Richard and other missionaries advocate using ready-made Chinese Buddhist terms to explain Christian doctrine. Although it is to make it easier for the Chinese to understand Christian thought, the ultimate goal is to make Chinese convert to Christianity” (Li Xinde 119). The Protestant missionaries used concepts of Chinese Buddhism in the spread of Christian dogma in China; inversely, they used the Christian conceptual system when introducing Chinese Buddhism to the Western world. This is most evident in the translation of Buddhist scriptures by Timothy Richard.

Timothy Richard (1845-1919), an Anglican Baptist missionary, lived in China for nearly half a century. He had extensive contacts with well-known figures from all walks of life in China during the late Qing Dynasty and exerted a great influence on the Reform Movement of 1898. Richard’s interest in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism originated from his experience reading Buddhist scriptures translated by Samuel Beal, in which he claimed to find shocking similarities with Christian spirituality. In 1907, Timothy Richard’s English translation of *The Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda Sastra* was officially published. This translation adopts an obvious “domestication” strategy, and in large-scale employs Christian concepts to explain Chinese Mahayana Buddhist concepts as interpreted by the translator. For example: Richard translated “Tathagata (如来)” as the “incarnate God,” “Bodhisattva (菩薩)” as “Pusa Saints,” “Dharma body (法體)” as “the divine spirit (Holy Spirit),” “one practice of samadhi (一行三昧)” as “the divine peace,” etc. It is obvious that the concepts in translation used by Timothy Richard deviates from the original meaning of the Buddhist terms, which explains why the publication of his translation aroused strong dissatisfaction from his original Chinese collaborator, Yang Wenhui³ (Yang Wenhui 491).

In fact, there were doubts about Timothy Richard’s translation even within the

3 Chinese: 楊文會(1837-1911), a famous Buddhist layman and scholar in late Qing Dynasty.

Western missionary community. In June 1911, *The Chinese Recorder*, founded by the American Christian Church, published an editorial entitled “Wanted: More Evidence” in the name of Editorial:

Into certain of the writings of the Mahayana school Dr. Richard reads the tenets of the Christian Gospel to so great an extent that he feels justified in the use of Christian terminology when translating these writing into English. Here he parts company with almost all other Buddhist scholars, Christian and non-Christian alike. All those who are interested in this branch of religious enquiry, and especially missionaries to the Far East, anxiously await the presentation of the argument which is to justify the use of Christian Theistic terms in the translation of Buddhist literature. That argument has not yet appeared. So far as we are at present acquainted with the position, or are able to follow it, we can not find upon grounds either of philology, history or theology sufficient warrant for so momentous a departure (Editorial 313)

Although there are criticisms and doubts, it is evidential that Timothy Richard used Christian terms to translate Buddhist classics deliberately. As early as 1884, Timothy Richard had already completed the English translation of *The Mahāyāna-śraddhotpāda Sastra*, but it was not until Japanese scholar D. T. Suzuki published another translation in 1900 that Richard published his own translation in 1907 as a response to Suzuki’s translation. For more than a century, in the Buddhist community and in the field of academic research, it is generally agreed that D. T. Suzuki’s translation is more accurate and has the better academic value. But accuracy and academic enquiry were not the objects that Timothy Richard attached the most importance to. As Professor Lai Pan-chiu pointed out:

He made it clear that his translation and introductions were not merely academic exercises, but were aimed at explicating the meaning of these Buddhist texts for Westerners, especially from a Christian perspective...In fact Richard did not claim any technical superiority for his translation. What he claimed is that his translation should be more faithful to the Buddhist tradition and could harmonize most fully with Christian philosophy and religion (Lai Pan-chiu 28)

In short, the reason why Timothy Richard translated Buddhist scriptures with

the strategy of domestication is to express his Christian ideology (Li Xinde 57). Although Timothy Richard himself claimed that his motivation is to promote the dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity, so as to build a forthcoming “world peace kingdom” (Lai Pan-chiu 24), he resorted to too many Christian concepts as a medium in the process of translation. This is indeed inseparable from his religious stance: “When Richard translated these basic concepts of Buddhism in English, his starting point was Christianity, and his goal was to convey to Western readers that ‘Chinese Buddhism are actually talking about Christianity.’ Therefore, the difference is erased, what is presented is the similarity. This kind of assimilation is at the cost of dislocation, and the consequence is that the concepts in Buddhism are not reproduced, but added a new interpretation for the spread of Christianity” (Yang Jing 118).

2. Yampolsky: the translation of Buddhist scriptures as academic research

The translation that avoided the influence of Christian religious concepts and the more scholarly translation of Buddhist scriptures can be traced back least to William Soothill who came after Timothy Richard. In terms of translation strategy, compared with Timothy Richard, William Soothill’s approach was to be as faithful as possible to the original text, and literally translate the Buddhist terms with specific meanings through Latin transliteration of Sanskrit, thus giving the translation a more academic flavor. Jiang Weijin and Li Xinde analyzed the English translation of William Soothill *The Lotus Sutra* and stated,

William Soothill was already a professional sinologist in the process of translating this scripture, not just a missionary...Soothill is not completely constrained by the Christian culture like Timothy Richard who focused on the Christianity in translation and distorted the original meaning of Buddhist scripture, but treated the translation of the scriptures in an objective manner. In the process of translation, Soothill abandoned the inherent Christian prejudice and translated it more objectively, accurately, and concisely. He tried to express the connotation of this classic clearly, so that Western scholars can better study Chinese Buddhist culture and serve for the religious and cultural exchanges between China and the West (Jiang & Li 77)

After the 1950s, more in-depth studies of Buddhism in universities and

academic institutions gradually emerged with the wider propagation of Buddhism in European countries and America. Against this background, many English translations of Buddhist classics that are characterized by rigorous academic research employing translation strategies more prone to “foreignization” appeared. Yampolsky is an outstanding representative of such a translator. Philip Yampolsky (1920-1996) is an excellent American researcher of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism who is especially known for his translation of Chan Buddhist classics. From 1954 to 1962, Yampolsky went to Japan to study Buddhism as Fulbright Scholar. Later on, Yampolsky returned to Columbia University to continue his study. In 1965, Yampolsky went to work in the East Asian Library and earned his doctoral degree. Since 1968, he’d been the director of the library and engaged in research work until his retirement in 1990.

The most important work of Yampolsky’s translations of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics is *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-Huang Manuscript with Translation, Introduction, and Notes*. As the title indicates, this work by Yampolsky is not only an English translation of the Tun-Huang manuscript of *The Platform Sutra*, but also includes the translator’s in-depth research on this Chan classic in the introduction and various annotations added to the translation. American scholar Appiah proposed the “Thick Translation” theory in 2000, and argued “that, namely, of a translation that aims to be of use in literary teaching; and here it seems to me that such ‘academic’ translation, translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context, is eminently worth doing. I have called this ‘thick translation’” (Appiah 427). According to Appiah’s definition, Yampolsky’s translation is undoubtedly a model of “thick translation.” In this work of more than 200 pages, the introduction written by Yampolsky comprises 121 pages, far exceeding the translation of only 62 pages. Readers can fully comprehend the extensive background knowledge of *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* by reading this introduction. At the same time, Yampolsky added a total of 291 notes to his translation, which clearly shows the depth of the translator’s research. In many annotations, Yampolsky carefully corrected the mistakes or clarified the ambiguities in the Tun-Huang manuscript through his philological studies and discriminates between different versions of the Sutra. In addition, Yampolsky pays special attention to citing other scholars to support his methodology. The scholars he cites include Hu Shih, D. T. Suzuki, Ui Hakuju, Iriya Yoshitaka, etc. Among them, there are almost 20 citations to Hu Shih’s research alone. Finally, Yampolsky pays special attention to comparing his own translation with other translations,

and presents the differences to the reader. For example, he mentions at least 10 significant differences between his translation and that of Wing-tsit Chan in his notes. And the many places where he is not sure how to translate, or where he has the concerns about the accuracy of the translation, Yampolsky indicates that with “tentative” or “translation tentative,” which undoubtedly reflects the honest and rigorous academic attitude of the translator.

In term of translation strategy, Yampolsky mainly adopts the “foreignization” approach, using the Latin transliteration of strict phonetic transcriptions for most Buddhist terms and retaining the semantic and stylistic features of the original text to the greatest extent. At the same time, this translation provides readers with rich information to understand the original text and incorporate it with the translator’s own academic views. Yampolsky’s translation of *The Platform Sutra* is so important to Buddhism research in America that Bernard Faure pointed out: “It was only with the translation of *The Platform Sutra* by Philip Yampolsky in 1967, and his research about the legend on the origin and inheritance of Chan Patriarchs, the research about Chan sect obtained its academic qualification” (Faure 241). In short, it can be said that Yampolsky raised the standard of the English translations of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist scriptures to a new level and his translation became a model of academic translation.

Comparing the translation of Timothy Richard with that of Yampolsky, it can be proved that in terms of translation strategies, the former adopts a method that centers on the target culture and the translator’s pre-understanding, while the latter is basically centered on the in-depth study of the original text. The two translators adopted different strategies, which are directly related to the social attributes of their identities. More exactly, they are strongly influenced by the socio-historically defined habituses. As Daniel Semeoni said, “The habitus of a translator is the elaborate result of a personalized social and cultural history...For future research in mental processes underlying translation performance to be compatible with this socio-cognitive framework, new protocols may have to be designed following prior observations in habitus-governed and governing practices” (Semeoni 32). Wang Dongfeng also pointed out with regard to Evan-Zohar’s poly-system theory that “the decisive factor of translation strategy is ultimately the translator himself. Because whether to adapt to the target culture or the source culture is largely determined by the subjective decision of the translator. If the poly-system hypothesis takes into account the role of the translator’s subjective choice when facing the two cultures in the translation process, it will be more convincing. After all, the choice of translation strategy is a subjective process” (Wang Dongfeng 4-5). As a

Protestant missionary and social activist, Timothy Richard's aim was to highlight the similarities and the historical links between Buddhism and Christianity, while Yampolsky, as a scholar, paid more attention to reestablishing the true history imbued by the classics through rigorous academic research.

III. “Geyi (格義)”: “cultural variation” in the translation of Chinese Buddhist classics

By surveying the English translations of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics for more than a century, it may be ascertained that the strategy of “domestication” is more likely to be adopted by Western translators who adhere to Christian culture and belief. Whether it was Timothy Richard as discussed above or translators such as A. F. Price and Cleary in the following decades, many people consciously or unconsciously matched Chinese Buddhist concepts with those of Christianity. The application of domestication strategies to the translation in this way has produced a lot of “cultural variations”, and many Chinese scholars call this phenomenon “Geyi”.

The concept of “Geyi” first appeared in the teaching and translation practice of Buddhist scholars in China in the period of the Dynasties of Eastern Han (25-220), Wei (220-265), to the Western Jin (265-316) and the Eastern Jin (317-420). In the very early stages of Buddhism's spread to China, many of the terms and concepts in Sanskrit scriptures have not yet achieved definite translation, so Buddhist monk-translators such as Zhi Qian (支謙) tended to translate Buddhist concepts with corresponding concepts taken from the works of Chinese thinkers, especially those of Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu and Confucius. This practice was called “Geyi,” or “matching the meaning” (sometimes also rendered as “matching the concept”) (Cheung 97-98). For example, the monk-translators once used the Taoist concepts “wuxing”⁴ to explain the “four tanmātra,”⁵ “shouyi”⁶ to explain “dhyana,”⁷ and used the Confucian “wuchang”⁸ to explain the “pañca-sīla.”⁹ But in fact, such kind of “Geyi” did not occur for a long time in the history of Chinese Buddhist scripture translation, and there were not many representative monk-translators translating in this fashion. Only a few people such as Zhi Qian and Zhu Faya (竺法雅) who valued “free translation” adopted this method. As the Dutch scholar Erik

4 Chinese: 五行, namely, metal, wood, water, fire and earth

5 The four tanmātra or elements, earth, water, fire, air (or wind). Chinese: 四大

6 Chinese: 守一, means meditation with concentration in mind.

7 Chinese: 禪定

8 Chinese: 五常, five ethic norms: benevolence, righteousness, courtesy, wisdom and honesty.

9 Chinese: 五戒, five precepts.

Zürcher pointed out, “the importance of Daoist terminology has generally been overestimated: terms of undoubtedly Daoist provenance actually constitute a very small percentage of the Chinese archaic Buddhist vocabulary” (Zürcher 34).

Different from the limited scope and relatively short duration of “Geyi” in the history of Buddhist scriptures translation in China, Western scholars and translators have extensively interpreted and translated the Mahayana Buddhist classics in the style of “Geyi,” and it has continued from the 19th century to the present day. Prior attention to the “Geyi” of western academia in the research of Chinese Buddhism comes from Lin Zhenguo, a Taiwanese scholar. In 1987, the American scholar Tuck proposed in his doctoral dissertation “Isogesis: Western Reading of Nāgārjuna and the Philosophy of Scholarship” that “It is the ‘productive’ or creative aspect of interpretation that I refer to as isogetical. There are no interpretations that are not the result of some creative effort on the part of the interpreter, and it is difficult to imagine what would be gained from an interpretation that did not exhibit the isogetical interference of the commentator” (Tuck 24). Tuck argued that the interpretation of Mādhyamika philosophy by Western scholars is highly subjective. Lin Zhenguo accurately found that the term “isogesis” Tuck used is conceptually a counterpart to what Chinese scholars call “Geyi,” and keenly perceives that “this kind of ‘Geyi’ is actually a universal cross-cultural hermeneutic phenomenon occurred as early as during the spread of Buddhism, and the various ‘Geyi’ in the West provide us with the most close examples of hermeneutic phenomenon” (Lin Zhenguo 282-283). Gong Jun, a scholar of mainland China also mentioned “Geyi” in his analysis of the methodology of European and American Chan studies. For example, he believes that Dale S. Wright puts contemporary ideas, history and cultural structure into the interpretation of the Chan writing of Huangbo, and conducts a “continuous” dialogue between readers and historical Chan texts. Gong Jun argues that Wright’s approach constitutes a typical “Geyi” (Gong Jun 242).

Although “isogesis” in Western academic studies of Buddhism has a different cultural background and etymological origin compared with “Geyi” in the history of Chinese Buddhism, the two words share a common thread by explaining or considering unfamiliar concepts with familiar or known ones. Returning to the topic of the English translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, through the above analysis of Timothy Richard’s translation, it can be found that Richard’s method can be regarded as a western parallel of “Geyi.” Compared with that of the history of Chinese Buddhist scripture translation, “Geyi” in the translation or philosophical interpretation of Chinese Buddhist scriptures in the Western world is more commonly seen and can potentially last much longer. The possible answer

to this may be related to the cultural environment in which Buddhism grew. After Buddhism was introduced to China, it at once conflicted with the local culture and was rejected by Confucianism and Taoism during a certain historical period, but it soon showed a strong adaptability and capacity for self-adjustment. This is not only because Chinese Mahayana Buddhism adheres to the ideas as “the use of appropriate means (方便),” “not in bondage to anything (無著),” “not abiding (無住),” but also because of the outstanding efforts made by the monk-translators of many dynasties who made a great effort to adapt Buddhism to the Chinese native culture. Different from China, although the philosophy of Mahayana Buddhism is relatively peaceful and does not conflict much with Christian tradition, it is not easy for Buddhism to take root in the cultural background of the West. First of all, because they belong to the eastern and western civilization systems respectively, the heterogeneity between Buddhism and Christianity is quite substantial, and followers of Christianity tend to somehow have a conservative attitude towards Buddhism. The formal dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity in the modern age has only a history short of roughly more than 100 years since the World Conference of Religions in Chicago in 1893. In general, although Western academic circles have made considerable progress in the study of Buddhism, the influence of Buddhism in Europe and the United States is still relatively limited. Secondly, the cultural hegemony and western centralism discussed by scholars such as Gramsci and Said, as a potential way of thinking, still have an influence in the Western world, which also provides the soil for a long-term existence for “Geyi”.

IV. The Future: the Establishment of the Buddhist Conceptual System in the English Language

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, the English translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics began by British missionaries has a history of more than a century, and a number of Buddhist scriptures have been translated into English. At the same time, the influence of Buddhism in Europe and America is also growing. In the United States, according to statistics on Wikipedia, the number of Buddhist believers currently accounts for about 0.9% of the total population of 300 million, only less than Christians, Jews and atheists. The dissemination of English translations of various classics is an important foundation for the growing influence of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. At the same time, the increasing interest in Buddhism in Europe and the United States has promoted the translation of Buddhist scriptures. According to statistics by Marcus Bingenheimer, since the 1960s, the translation of Chinese Buddhist documents by translators from

various countries has entered a stage of rapid growth. For more than one hundred years, although the quantity and quality of translation of the English translations of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics have greatly improved, there are still a lot of translations that adopt the strategy of “domestication” with the style of “Geyi.” In addition to the social attributes of the translator’s identity as discussed above, another issue may be more worthy of attention, which is the establishment of the Buddhist conceptual system in the English language.

As we all know, since the late Han Dynasty Buddhism has gone through a long process of evolution since it first took root in China. Although Buddhism from India is very different conceptually from Confucianism and Taoism in China, after centuries of development, Buddhism has successfully adapted its conceptual system into the framework of traditional Chinese culture. For example, whether with the method of transliteration in the translation of Buddha, Bodhisattva, Arhat, Amitabha, Samadhi, Dhyana, or with the method of paraphrasing in the translation of Mahayana, Karma, Klesa, Upasaka, a large number of Buddhist concepts were translated from Sanskrit in a relatively short period of time (and the method of translation in concepts were strictly inherited by later translators), and finally incorporated into the Chinese vocabulary system. In this process, Buddhism has continuously integrated into native culture and has become an important part of Chinese philosophy. As the famous scholar Chen Yinke once pointed out in his discussion with Wu Mi, “Buddhism introduced in the late Han Dynasty flourished in the Tang Dynasty. The civilization of Tang Dynasty was highly developed, and Buddhism widely spread in the Western Regions and is worth studying in the history of world civilization. Buddhism has high achievements in Metaphysics, which can make up for the lack of Chinese philosophy, so it has been welcomed by Chinese intellectuals¹⁰.” In the process mentioned above, “Geyi” gradually disappeared from the history of Chinese Buddhism after completing its mission.

Unlike “Geyi,” “isogesis” comes from the hermeneutic tradition of the West. This tradition evolved from Schleiermacher to Dilthey, and then to Hirsch, Heidegger, Gadamer and others. It has developed into one of the main paradigms of western philosophy research that has been used in Western Buddhist studies and will continue to play an important role. At the same time, “isogesis” (or “Geyi”) in the translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics will also continue. The main reason is that the translation of Buddhist scriptures in the Western world is far from complete. On the one hand, quite a lot of Chinese Buddhist scriptures still don’t

10 See diary of Wu Mi, Dec. 14th 1919.

have authoritative texts in major Western languages such as English; on the other hand, the Western world has not yet encountered a master of translation with similar status as that of Kumarajiva or Xuanzang in the history of Buddhist scripture translation in China. Therefore, it may be said that the Buddhist conceptual system in the English language is far from firmly established. This is an important reason why the translation of Buddhist scriptures has been unable to avoid the influence of “Geyi.”

In addition, the establishment of the Buddhist conceptual system in English is also related to the relationship between power and culture: “The so-called ‘power of discourse’ refers to discourses constructed and selected by various social powers, or influential ‘statements’ for maintaining the interests and superiority of certain people” (Zhang Shuguang 174). Scholars such as Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu have engaged in profound discussions on the topic of power and discourse. In their opinion, power functions through discourse, and discourse of conceptual systems is the basis of culture. The establishment of a new conceptual system is similar to the establishment of a new set of discourse powers. Compared with Buddhist culture, the Christian cultural system in the West undoubtedly occupies a stronger position, and that is why the establishment of the Buddhist conceptual system is undoubtedly not an easy task. As Martha P.Y. Cheung said, “Translation is not a simple (or complex) change of the codes of languages, but the actual scene of cultural communication. Cultural communication is not often the exchange of two idealized cultures that keeping away the prejudice and understanding each other. Two (or more) cultures in different historical atmosphere, political situations, cognitive models, power relations and discourse networks will definitely experience collision, confrontation, resistance, control, and wrestling in the process of contact” (Cheung 19). Chinese and English belong to very different cultural systems, the translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics into English will inevitably involve the transformation of cultural factors, and thus “cultural variation” arises. This explains why many translators of Western cultural backgrounds tend to have adopted the “domestication” strategy with the method of “Geyi,” which can also be regarded as a special “cultural filtering.” According to Cao Shunqing’s Variation Theory, “Cultural filtering refers to selection, transformation, transplantation, and penetration of exchanged information in literary communication” (184). Regarding the possible situations when local culture encounters foreign cultures during cultural exchanges, Li Dan put forward two scenarios: “In the first situation, the recipient culture may adopt a conservative attitude and use its own cultural traditions and habits as a defense against foreign cultures. In the second, the recipient culture

will distinguish, select and transforms the foreign culture based on its own, and absorbing what is beneficial to itself” (Li Dan 125). If Li Dan’s argument is true, the translation of Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures into Chinese obviously belongs to the second situation, while to some extent, the English translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist scriptures is still at the stage described in the first one.

By reviewing the history of the English translation of Chinese Mahayana Buddhist classics and by summarizing of the translations in different periods, the following conclusions can be made: Firstly, the “cultural variation” (Geyi) in the translation of Buddhist classics is due to some translators’ adoption of a “defensive” translation strategy that is closely related with their social attributes in identity; secondly, the Buddhist conceptual system in English is not accomplished, and it will take a long time for its development in the Western world to reach final maturity. The world today is in an age of constant conflict and epidemic. In such an era, Mahayana Buddhism may gain wider recognition with its basic idea of “saving all living beings” and its more remarkable spirit of tolerance. In the long run, as Buddhist culture spreads more widely in the Western world and with the acceptance of ordinary people to the Buddhist conceptual system, the translations of “cultural variation” may gradually decrease. This is evident to a certain extent by the history of Chinese Buddhism and the current trend of development of Buddhism in the Western world.

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