The Publication and Distribution Context of the First Chinese Translations of the *Lotus Sūtra*

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The *Sūtra* Stirred the Passion of the Chinese

IT is an honour to be invited to talk about the *Lotus Sūtra* because this jewel of literature is not only one of the most important texts of Far Eastern Buddhism, but also its diversity of content and its complexity make it one of the most interesting. It is well known that from the moment it was published, this sūtra stirred the passion of Chinese believers, and that, century after century, it was widely read, copied, commented on and engraved in part or in full on cliff-faces. More than 4,000 copies of this sūtra were counted among the manuscripts found in the Dunhuang oasis. It also inspired painters and poets.

The esteem in which this text is held by believers is certainly due to the beauty and depth of its content—such as the parable of the burning house, of the pearl, of the medicinal herbs—but also due to the unprecedented nature of certain passages that go against Hīnayāna thoughts—the Buddha's cousin is seen promising to become enlightened, despite his attempts to murder him—or it could also be due to the presence of the chapter describing the protection that Bodhisattva Guanyin can bring to those who invoke his name, but these are perhaps not the only factors.

The text has the distinction, in fact, of promoting itself and encouraging its own cult, as do many other Mahāyāna sūtras. It encourages believers to receive, uphold, read, recite and copy it. It promises protection for those that preserve and propagate it and that they will acquire benefits and rewards.

This perhaps explains why the *Lotus Sūtra* was the favourite text of Buddhist monks and nuns who chose to dedicate their lives to the recitation of the scriptures. One of these monks, who lived in the second half of the 5th century, spent thirty years in seclusion in a temple near present-day Nanjing, reciting the sūtra in full each day. In the 4th century, there was a nun who recited it three thousand times during her life.

It is even said that the first monk who specialised in the practice of intensively reciting the scriptures used to recite the *Lotus Sūtra*, and that

one night he was secretly invited to go and recite it to a local spirit, the god of the soil. The monk did so for three months and to thank him, the god of the soil generously rewarded him with pieces of silk, a white horse, and some sheep. I will address the question of translations and translators through this story about the monk reciting the first version of the *Lotus Sūtra* of the true law to the god of the soil.

Translation Activity of Dharmarakṣa

From the biography of the first translator, Dharmarakṣa (Zhu Fahu 竺法護), we learn that he was born during the first half of the 3rd century in a family of Indo-Scythian origin, who had settled for generations in Dunhuang oasis (in today's Gansu province), a stop-off point on the Silk Road. So he was a native Chinese speaker. Entering the novitiate at eight years old, one year after the minimum age for doing so, he undertook a study trip to Central Asia, as was customary for Buddhist novices in this area at the time, studying with a teacher in one centre and then with another master at another location. His biographer says that he returned from this trip a polyglot, mastering all the languages that were spoken there, and their writings.

As Jean-Noël Robert points out, the biographer mentions thirty-six different languages, but in reality the number was lower. The Chinese of that era considered that there were thirty-six different kingdoms in Central Asia, and the biographer attributed a different language to each one. All have since disappeared, and are only very partially known through the discovery of manuscripts or inscriptions on Buddhist archaeological artefacts in China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. The languages were Kuchean, Gāndhārī, Sogdian, and Khotanese.

Back in China, Dharmarakṣa first reached Dunhuang, then Chang'an (now Xi'an), and Luoyang, where from the year 267, he set to work, translating almost continuously for nearly forty years, his final work dating from 308. We note, however, a break of eleven years in his translation work, during which we don't know what he did; some researchers point to a sentence in his biography saying he had gone to the mountains, others say he was improving his Chinese.

The number of his translations is considerable since he is credited with more than 150 texts, from a volume of more than 300 scrolls—both Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna—that he had brought back with him or had been brought to him for translation. Many of the texts he translated were hitherto unseen and their content enriched the knowledge of the life and previous lives of the Buddha, of his practice and his teachings and of his

liturgical practices. In addition to the *Lotus Sūtra*, it is to him that we owe the first translation of a sūtra prescribing the practice of confession, another dealing with Buddhist cosmology, another still on the future Buddha Maitreya, another on the layman Vimalakīrti, that is to say texts around which Chinese Buddhist thought and practice would take shape in the following centuries.

Some prefaces and colophons in his translations shed light on how he worked, including the fact that he surrounded himself with a team of associates. Indeed, although the translations were attributed solely to Dharmarakṣa, it was customary for several translators to take part, each one being assigned a specific task.

Dharmarakṣa's role was to read, orally translate and explain the Indian texts to his colleagues, who listened to him and asked questions, as the need arose. One or more scribes were responsible for taking notes of his explanations, then drafting the Chinese translation. Finally, a group of proofreaders reviewed the first draft before finalising a version which would then be copied and circulated. Sometimes this final version was resubmitted for corrections, as was the case with the *Lotus Sūtra*.

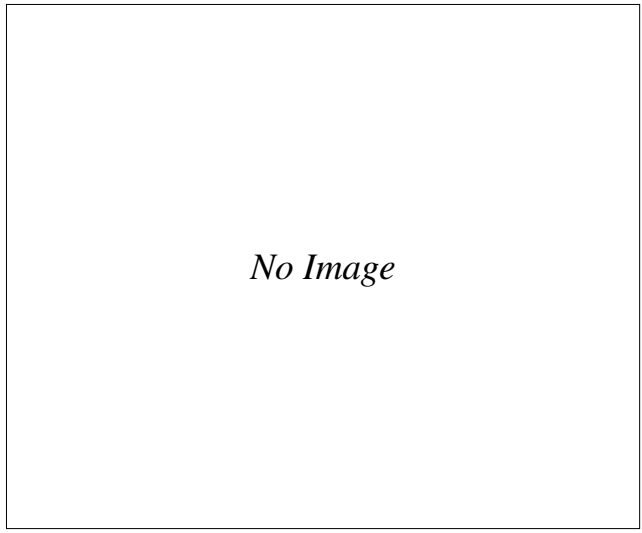
We therefore know the names of seventeen of the team members, mostly of foreign origin (Indian, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Parthian, Sogdian, and Kuchean), which reflects the cosmopolitan nature of the cities where he did his translations: Dunhuang was an average-sized oasis on The Silk Road; Xi'an was an ancient capital, Luoyang was the capital of that time. His main colleague and scribe was a layman.

The colophon of the *Lotus Sūtra* mentions the names of ten people who participated in the translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*: three official scribes, five other people who seem to have helped the scribes and two proofreaders. Only one of the proofreaders was a monk; all the other participants were lay people.

The colophon also states that it took him three weeks to complete his oral translation project (from 15 September to 6 October, 286), which is a very short time, given the length of the text, and that the first proof was then subjected to review, which ended a year and a half later (25 March, 288). Another colophon informs us that Dharmarakṣa corrected the text again two years later, on a day when he was preaching it to an audience of lay people gathered for a fast and sermon.

Translation Activity of Kumārajīva

Despite all the care that Dharmarakṣa brought to the publication of the *Lotus Sūtra* of the True Law, his version was eclipsed as soon as the



Chinese manuscript of the *Avalokiteśvara-sūtra* (Chapter 25, the *Lotus Sūtra*), copied by Monk Yidao in 559 CE, only 153 years after Kumārajīva's translation. Turfan Museum, Turfan (Replica)

history-making version by Kumārajīva (Jiumoluoshi 鳩摩羅什) appeared—the *Sūtra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law*. Occasional mentions are found of Dharmarakṣa's version being used, as in the story of the monk who preached to the god of the soil, or the nun who recited the sūtra three thousand times during her lifetime, but there is no comparison with the frequency of references to Kumārajīva's translation.

Kumārajīva, who is considered the foremost of the four great translators of Buddhism into Chinese, was born around the middle of the 4th century in Kucha, an oasis in the current autonomous region of Xinjiang, but which at that time was a kingdom independent of China, where they spoke an Indo-European language known as Tocharian.

Unlike his predecessor Dharmarakṣa, Kumārajīva was not a native Chinese speaker. His father was of Indian descent, and his mother was a younger sister of the King. He entered the novitiate at the age of seven, and two years later set off with his mother to study alongside reputable masters of the time in great Buddhist centers in Kashmir, possibly in Gandhāra, and in Kashgar.

He returned to Kucha after five or six years and continued his apprenticeship, but in 384, the small kingdom was besieged by its Chinese neighbour and fell under its rule. The invaders departed again a year later, after pillaging the royal palace. Historical sources say that it took

twenty thousand camels to transport these spoils of war, which consisted of animals, musical instruments, objects of worship, embroideries and statues.

They also captured members of the kingdom's artistic and cultural elite, including Kumārajīva. He never saw his native land again. A legend grew up around the conquest of Kucha. Some Buddhist sources, including the biography of Kumārajīva, say that in fact the ultimate intention of the Chinese ruler was to bring Kumārajīva to the capital Chang'an. But historical sources, which on this point are more reliable, say that it was to extend his territorial hold that the sovereign had decided to attack this rich kingdom, with its clear strategic importance at the gateway of Central Asia.

However, the meeting between Kumārajīva and the Chinese king never took place, because while his troops were on the way back, he was murdered and his kingdom overthrown. Kumārajīva remained confined for sixteen years in Liangzhou (in present Gansu province), where the conquering general of Kucha had settled. It is not clear what he did during those sixteen years, other than learning Chinese. The general who had captured him had no interest in Buddhism, only interacting with him to call on his talents as an advisor and occasionally as soothsayer. His disciples said evasively that he had kept his light under a bushel. So he arrived in Chang'an sixteen years later, during the winter of 401–402, after the Liangzhou region was in turn conquered by another Chinese ruler.

In Chang'an, Kumārajīva found not only a new ruling family who encouraged and sponsored Buddhist activities—there were several temples and other translators; some members of the ruling family actively took part in the translations—but above all there were also monks who, fifteen or twenty years earlier, had already worked on translation activities. This environment allowed him to embark immediately on a large translation enterprise, for the next ten years, until his death.

He set to work a week after arriving, translating a sūtra that contained several meditation techniques, a type of text that was lacking in China. Kumārajīva therefore published around thirty works, mostly Mahāyāna texts, from nearly 300 scrolls—around the same number as Dharmarakṣa, but comparison must be done with careful consideration because the length of scrolls and number of sheets could vary. This mostly consisted of new works, though others were already known. Unlike the works of Dharmarakṣa, very few have been lost. In the 5th century alone, when sixty of Dharmarakṣa's works disappeared, only two of Kumārajīva's were missing.

In addition to the *Lotus Sūtra*, the most famous of his works and those that have most influenced the course of Buddhism not only in China but throughout East Asia are the sūtras of the family of the perfection of wisdom, particularly the *Diamond Sūtra*, the *Sūtra of Buddha Amitābha*, the *Sūtra of Vimalakīrti's Teaching* and treaties of the Mādhyamika philosophical school. Less known but no less important are his presentation of different methods of meditation, as well as two sūtras dealing with the coming of the future Buddha, Maitreya.

Moreover, Kumārajīva helped translate two essential works of Buddhist monasticism, which had never been translated into Chinese. One was the list of rules for monastic discipline, recited twice a month by devotees, combined with confession and repentance in case of contravention. The second was the code of Buddhist discipline, which as well as explaining what discipline is, how followers should observe it, how they should live and practise their liturgy and how communities are structured, also explains the circumstances that led the Buddha to define such rules.

Shortly before Kumārajīva arrived in Chang'an, a group of fifteen Chinese monks had gone on pilgrimage to India in order to seek these writings; only three of them came back alive, but unfortunately for them, they arrived a decade after Kumārajīva had translated the discipline texts, and the samples that these pilgrims had risked their lives to obtain and translate never had the same impact as those of Kumārajīva.

Throughout his work, which consists mainly of Mahāyāna texts, Kumārajīva sought to revive interest in writings from this branch of Buddhism, which had lost its appeal at that time. Indeed, fifteen years before his arrival, a wave of missionary monks, mainly from Kashmir, had come to Chang'an and translated a whole series of writings of classical Hīnayāna Buddhist writings. One of them even described the Mahāyāna texts as demonic. Kumārajīva therefore breathed new life into Mahāyāna.

However, while history has mostly recorded Kumārajīva's role as a translator, other aspects of his life and personality also influenced the future of Buddhism in China. Kumārajīva laboured skillfully to bring Buddhist clergy closer to the secular authorities while also defending their independence. He was the first monk to share a real passion for Buddhist scriptures with the sovereign, in fact we can imagine there was a sincere friendship between the two men.

At the same time, he was also the first monk to write to the sovereign requesting that he leave with the clergy two monks whom he had wanted by his side to work on worldly affairs. The circumstances of his death

are uncertain. We only know that he fell ill and died soon afterwards; Professor Tsukamoto surmises that he may have succumbed to a brain haemorrhage. Biographers have reported that amongst his cremated ashes, relics were recovered, including his tongue which had miraculously remained intact. This was one of the first times a relic had been recovered from a monk on Chinese soil.

The astute readers of his biography will in all likelihood have recognised a prophecy from the *Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom* (*Dazhi dulun*), which Kumārajīva had himself translated, saying that reciting this and other texts from the perfection of wisdom family, made the tongue indestructible and protected it from the flames of cremation. As it is not Kumārajīva whom we are honouring today, I will not dwell further on his overall contribution to Chinese Buddhism, but will return to his activities as a translator, with a special focus on the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Kumārajīva's situation was quite different to that of Dharmarakṣa in the sense that when he arrived and began working at Chang'an, he could certainly express himself in Chinese but his knowledge was still imperfect. In addition, he was inexperienced in the art of translation, did not know what his associates expected and tended to simplify texts rather than faithfully translating them. In any case, his writing skills were insufficient. So his role was limited to reading the texts and explaining them as he went along to monks who would record his explanations and draw up the text, in accordance with the traditional translation method.

The prefaces and colophons of his works mention the names of four or five scribes, all of them monks, two of whom appear to have been more important than others. The fact that this number was significantly lower than the number of Dharmarakṣa's scribes is explained by the fact that he did his translations in the same city, Chang'an, and in just ten years, whereas Dharmarakṣa's work spanned forty years across different places.

It is certain however that some of his activity took place in public in the form of commentated translation and reading sessions to an audience of sometimes several hundred people of all ages and status, from young novices to monk-scholars through to members of the ruling family. This was the case with the *Lotus Sūtra*, which he translated to a crowd of eight hundred people during the summer of 406, three and a half years after his arrival in Chang'an. His fluency in Chinese had improved considerably, to the point that his eloquence drew admiration from the crowd. He translated while correcting, modifying, and revising Dharmarakṣa's version.

Miracles Resulting from Devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra*

As I said in the introduction, the success of the *Lotus Sūtra* is due to its beauty, depth, and the recommendation that it be recited aloud. But this may not be the whole story. Soon after its translation, we see the appearance of stories published by Chinese believers which recounted cases of miracles produced as a result of devotion to the *Lotus Sūtra*.

These stories, from a genre which the Chinese call 'strange tales' (*zhiguai xiaoshuo*), show for example how a particular person was cured of a serious illness by reciting the sūtra and how another was saved from danger thanks to the intervention of Bodhisattva Guanyin. This included all sorts of dangers such as drowning, shipwreck or the death-penalty, and the person is saved through having a vision, and meeting a particular bodhisattva from the sūtra, then being reborn among the gods, all of this thanks to reading, reciting, copying, and venerating the sūtra.

The stories of monks' biographies also relate tales of this kind, where we see monks who recite the sūtra subduing wild animals, ghosts, and spirits, and where, on the nights when they recite the sūtra, their neighbours witness the arrival of gods who have come to listen.

These types of stories appeared soon after the circulation of the sūtra, and for century after century were enriched with new examples, which were transmitted orally as well as in writing. We therefore have some collections of 'strange tales' and stories of miracles, either strictly relating to the sūtra and its protagonists, including Guanyin, or in which the sūtra and its protagonists are mentioned, among other examples. They show how a particular monk or a secular believer in distress prayed to Guanyin and was saved; or they show how a certain act that had contributed to circulation of the sūtra resulted in a cure from disease.

I would like to end with one such story, reported in a collection of biographies of monks. During the 5th century, a forty-year-old man from present-day Nanjing became a monk. He was a vegetarian, dressed plainly, and applied himself to reciting the *Lotus Sūtra* with all his heart, to the point of exhaustion. But being of fragile constitution, he often fell sick. Realising that his condition was the result of bad karma, he took a vow to copy out the sūtra one hundred times, to expiate his past sins. But once finished, he only had a remission. He then understood that he had to recite the entire sūtra in full and, as a result, was immediately cured.

Author Biography

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