

# Translated Sūtra, Transcultural Dharma: Three Father-Son Parables of the *Lotus Sūtra* in English and French from Kumārajīva Chinese Version

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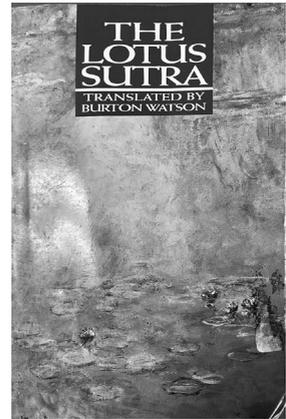
A traditionalist view holds that canonized religious texts, in vertu of their sacredness, cannot be translated without suffering certain distortions. This stance adopted by those who may be qualified as “linguistic orthodoxists” results in stabilized classics, as exemplified by Quran, and in a global religious community, despite its heterogeneity, solidified by a shared language. A relatively pragmatic linguistic position largely accepted by churches is that, for the mission of evangelization, translation is necessary without being evil, given that blessed are those who translate the word of God and so are holy scriptures. Several translations of the Bible into vernacular languages prove their timeless literary values, not merely religious ones, as is the case of Niccolò Malermi’s Italian Bible (1490), that in English of King James (1611) and that in French of Louis Segond (1880). The Lotus Sūtra in ancient literary Chinese, though itself a translation from an Indo-European language, not absolutely from Sanskrit, as we shall see, claims its place in ancient Chinese literature for its eloquent prose, elegant verses and, most of all, “some of the most beautiful parables in world literature,” according to Hu Shih (1891–1917), the author of the *History of Literature in Vernacular Chinese*.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Hu Shih, *History of Literature in Vernacular Chinese* 白話文學史 (Shanghai: Crescent Moon Bookstore, 1928), vol. 1, 174.

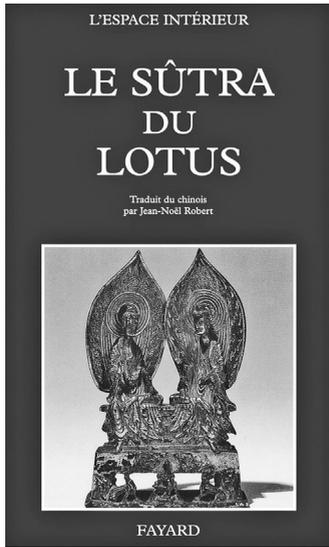
Parables are pedagogical tools widely adopted since the dawn of Buddhism, as Buddha says, “Ever since I attained Buddhahood I have through various causes and various similes widely expounded my teachings and have used countless expedient means to guide living beings.”<sup>2</sup> “Similes” may be an inexact translation of “譬喻,” which denotes a wider range of comparative rhetorical devices. Strictly speaking, any figure of speech, even languages themselves, are considered as “expedient means,” without which Buddhist wisdom risks becoming a privilege of talented few instead of the path toward the Truth universally accessible. Comparative rhetoric, as well as languages in general, constitute the key to a successful outreach program aiming at most of us, whose intellect is, although not as outstanding as that of privileged few capable of conceptualizing the dharma without language, still sufficient to “contemplate parables with humility,” as the monk Jizang (549–623) puts it.<sup>3</sup> When Buddha says that “those who possess intellect understand the dharma through parables,” he means by those with intellect, as the monk further explains, people who are “dull-witted compared to those who need not languages to access the dharma but, meanwhile, intelligent in comparison with those who leave while Buddha talks.”<sup>4</sup>

With deep esteem toward the merciful benevolence of Buddha, as demonstrated in “expedient means” conceived specifically for average people like us, who he treats as his sons, the present work explores how three father-son parables in the *Lotus Sūtra* are translated into English and French from Kumārajīva Chinese version (406) canonized for ages. Chosen translations of our present study are Burton Watson’s



English translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, by Burton Watson, 1994 edition.

2. *The Lotus Sūtra*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 24; 「吾從成佛已來，種種因緣，種種譬喻，廣演言教無數方便，引導眾生令離諸著。」 in *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, CBETA, T09, no. 262, 5c1–3.
3. *Commentary on the Meaning of the Lotus Sūtra* (*Fahua yishu* 法華義疏), CBETA, T34, no. 1721, 520a20.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 520a19–22.



French translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, by Jean-Noël Robert, 1997 edition

English translation in 1993 and that of Jean-Noël Robert in French in 1997, both for their wide academic acceptance and for their choice to translate from Kumārajīva version in ancient Chinese instead of from Sanskrit, as are the cases of Eugène Burnouf’s French translation (1852) or Jan Hendrik Kern’s English translation (1884), the very first translations in these two languages. Versions thereafter, however, are mostly translated from ancient Chinese, which is not an insignificant editorial choice. In defence of his preference of Kumārajīva Chinese version to those in Sanskrit, Watson argues with vehemence that the language in which the *Sūtra* was originally written may well not be Sanskrit, that no existent version in Sanskrit is as ancient as Kumārajīva Chinese version, and, above all, that it is the latter, in lieu of any Sanskrit version, that has been canonized in

Eastern Asia for centuries both for its religious teachings and its literary values.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of our study is not as much to examine how strictly these translations stick to the Chinese text, given the linguistic incommensurability between the source language and two target languages, as to analyze how translators employ certain techniques for “expedient” purposes and how semantical divergences between the classical Chinese version and these two translations can offer us a modern and transcultural reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the hope of approaching the dharma.

## 1. The House in Flames

We encounter, in the very first parable of the *Lotus Sūtra*, a man advanced in age, who is the only person in the house alarmed by a fire that flares up out of nowhere. His children, too absorbed in their games to leave the house, are either

5. *The Lotus Sūtra*, trans. Watson, xxiv.

ignorant of the danger or, even worse, not aware of the flames. There is only a door, but children are numerous, which makes it infeasible to evacuate all of them by carrying a child once at a time. No more effective are threats, which will be taken as jokes. Normal means exhausted, the father has no choice but to resort to expedient one. Outside, there are exquisite playthings, such as goat-carts, deer-carts and ox-carts, improvises the father. The irresistible appeal of carts draws his kids out of the door, one shoving another, toys left on the floor. Reassured, the man finds no reason not to keep his promise. Once these children are out of the burning house, the father provides them with uniform carriages pulled by white oxen, spacious, delicately adorned, and comfortably cushioned.

Adorable small-size goat-carts and deer-carts serve to lure younger children, for whom white oxen may be too intimidating to imagine, out of the house on fire and to whom white oxen will be given, for they deserve a carriage of no less quality than those of their older siblings. In the following passage translated by Watson, the father explains his uniformized distribution of oxen-driven carriages, which he judges to be expressive of his fatherly love:

These little boys are all my sons and I love them without partiality. I have countless numbers of large carriages adorned with seven kinds of gems. I should be fair-minded and give one to each of my sons. I should not show any discrimination.<sup>6</sup>

今此幼童，皆是吾子，愛無偏黨。我有如是七寶大車，其數無量，應當等心各各與之，不宜差別。<sup>7</sup>

The father describes his uniformized distribution of carriages as an act “without partiality,” which demonstrates his “fair-mindedness” that excludes “discriminations.” Robert’s French translation proves to be closer to the Chinese version in that “愛無偏黨” is translated as “*sans préférence ni partialité*” (with neither preference nor partiality), which recognizes a slight difference between “偏” and “黨,” rather than reducing the former to the latter. Another difference

6. *The Lotus Sūtra*, trans. Watson, 58.

7. *Miaofa lianhua jing*, T09, no. 262, 12c25–28.

that renders Robert more loyal to the original is his translation of “等心各各與之” into “*donner à chacun d’un cœur égal*” (give each of them with an equal heart), which retains the Chinese concept that one reasons with heart.<sup>8</sup> Robert and Watson agree however with each other upon the translations of “黨” into “partiality/partialité” and of “差別” into “discrimination.”

These two words, along with the adjective “fair-minded,” as “等心” is translated by Watson, are, in the eyes of modern readers, inextricable of juridical or political lexicons. The word “partiality” is omnipresent in legal documents, as is the case of the *European Convention on Human Rights* (1950), which states that “everyone is entitled to a fair and public hearing [...] by an independent and impartial tribunal” and that judgments may be exempted from public announcement “where the interests of juveniles or the protection of the private life of the parties so require.”<sup>9</sup> A party, in a juridical context, denotes “one (as a person, group, or entity) constituting alone or with others one of the sides of a proceeding, transaction, or agreement,” as defined by Merriam-Webster, according to which “impartiality” can be understood as a mental state not “inclined to favor one party more than the other.”<sup>10</sup>

“Without partiality” seems to be a judicious translation of “無偏黨,” for both of them contain a strong juridical-political denotation. When Kumārajīva adopts the expression “愛無偏黨,” he taps into the Confucian notion of exemplary governance from *The Book of Documents* (《尚書》), in which we find a similar expression, “無偏無黨，王道蕩蕩。”<sup>11</sup> The phrase, translated by Swedish sinologue Bernhard Karlgren into “have nothing one-sided, nothing partial, the

8. *Le Sūtra du Lotus*, trans. Jean-Noël Robert (Paris: Fayard, 1997), 104.

9. European Court of Human Rights, “Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms,” in *European Convention of Human Rights* (Strasbourg: 2021), 9.

10. “Party”; “Partial,” Merriam-Webster, <https://reurl.cc/Gjbj3G>, <https://reurl.cc/Vz5zAy>, accessed April 24, 2024.

11. Kong Anguo (Han) [Biography] and Kong Yingda (Tang) [Commentary], “Hongfan 洪範,” in *The Book of Documents (Shangshu 尚書)*, in *Annotations and Commentaries to the Thirteen Classics from the Wuying Hall Edition (Wuyingdian ben shisan jing zhushu 武英殿本十三經注疏)*, fasc. 11, 15.

king's way is smooth and easy," would probably have been what Kumārajīva has in his mind when he translates the *sūtra* to majorly Confucian readers.<sup>12</sup> While a Confucian exemplary emperor governs impartially for practical purposes, the father, the representation of Buddha, remains impartial for the sake of love. Although there is nothing inexact with either Watson's or Robert's translation of “愛無偏黨,” in both of which the subject is the father who loves his kids without partiality, it is noteworthy that, syntactically speaking, the subject may well be “love.” In this sense, the phrase can be translated into “love takes no sides,” which illustrates the Buddhist stance of love. If we delve into the reason why Kumārajīva draws inspiration from *The Book of Documents*, the absolute reference for Confucian governors, the answer may be that, by establishing an analogy between Buddha and exemplary Chinese rulers, Confucians can better understand the status of Buddha as the king of the dharma. Compared to “無偏無黨,” “愛無偏黨” conveys a much richer message, for it explains that love doesn't take sides if it stems from the dharma while earthly passion is hardly unbiased.

## 2. The Onlyborn

In the second parable, we meet a father with great affluence and influence, who searches his only son for more than half a century. The latter, having run away from home at a young age, has led a life of indigence ever since. He begs for a living, and, by chance, he comes to the unrecognizable house of his father whose sumptuousness daunts him. At the sight of his father surrounded by servants and well-respected guests, the son speculates that his unapproachable father, who becomes no less than a noble, may well not deign to offer him a job. Dismayed, the son leaves the grandiose residence of his father for an impoverished village where he deems fit. On the side of the father, who, from the height of his throne, recognizes immediately his son even after five decades, is delighted by his homecoming and determined to bestow upon the regained son all his property. He dispatches servants to bring his son back, only to find him in a despairing state, for torturing punishments await him, at least as the son imagines.

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12. *The Book of Documents*, trans. Bernhard Karlgren (Stockholm: Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, 1950), 32.



Illustrated Comic: The Parable of the Poor Son (*Lotus Sūtra*)

The father allows the son to leave, not willing to impose pressure on him, who, as observes the father, is “of humble outlook and ambition,” and for this reason, the father infers that “his own rich and eminent position would be difficult for the son to accept.”<sup>13</sup> The father then conceives of “expedient means,” or, in the words of Alan Cloe, of various “seductive ploys” to lure his son back home, where his self-esteem will be gradually fostered through a progressively strengthened relationship, which develops from that of an employer and a hired, passing by that of a man without blood-related heritor and a fostered son not ready to accept the fact that he is a biological one, to that of a moribund man and his reformed son, with his legal status rehabilitated and, more importantly, his self-efficiency rebuilt.<sup>14</sup>

The father’s initial judgement of his son is that his problematic self-image is a major flaw to which his excessive fright of his father can be imputed. The exact

13. *The Lotus Sūtra*, trans. Watson, 83.

14. Alan Cole, *Text as Father: Paternal Seductions in Early Mahāyāna Buddhist Literature* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 153.

word adopted by Kumārajīva is “志意下劣,” which is translated by Watson into “humble outlook and ambition” and by Robert into “la vile inclination d’esprit” (a vile inclination of spirit). Entrusted with more and more significant tasks, the son still considers himself a “客作賤人,” “a person of humble station who was in the employ of another,” as translated by Watson, or, in Robert’s words, “*un vil ouvrier de passage*” (a vile temporary worker). Even after being formally adopted, he is still attached to a “下劣” heart. Watson employs “mean and lowly” to translate this very central qualifier, whereas Robert sticks to the idea of “*vilenie*” (villainy), the nominalized form of the adjective “*vil*” (vile) already used twice – the first time to describe the son’s spiritual inclination and the second his status as a temporary worker. Both qualified as “vile,” the two cases differ from one another in that the former is psychological and the latter socioeconomic. While a person with an “insignificant” social status, from a secular perspective and surely not from that of the admirable Bodhisattva Never Disparaging, may possess a noble spirit, one whose spirit is tainted by the “villainy,” or an inclination to impose limits on oneself, may well be therefore predisposed to underachievement.

Out of a Buddhist context, a literal translation of “下劣” could be “of lowliness and inferiority,” which, though linguistically valid, appears to be misleading, for it may erroneously be associated with moral corruption or lack of competence, especially for non-Chinese readers. By describing the son as someone of “humble outlook and ambition,” Watson guides his reader, with pedagogical patience, toward a better understanding of the Buddhist notion of “下劣,” which is not so much a problem of capacity, less that of morality, but that of one’s attitude toward himself. The Buddhist usage of “下劣” is well-accepted by later Chinese literati who tend to use the word in a Buddhist manner, as is exemplified by Yan Yu (1191–1241), a literary critic of the Southern Song dynasty, who exhorts novice poets to apply the highest esthetic standard to themselves, regardless of their lack of experience, for, otherwise, they may fall prey to the “villain (下劣) poetic devil”:

From the very first day of poetic writing, one should be ambitious.  
[...] Whoever sets limits for himself, invites the villain poetic devil to  
indwell him, which is a result of the lack of ambition.

入門須正，立志須高。〔…〕若自退屈，即有下劣詩魔入其肺腑之間；由立志之不高也。<sup>15</sup>

Poetic “villainy” (下劣), according to Yan Yu, stems from insufficient ambition, which is in agreement with Watson’s translation of “志意下劣” into “humble outlook and ambition,” which better serves non-Chinese readers, for it does not imply moral decadence, as Robert’s consistent wording, “vil” (vile) and “vilenie” (villainy), may mislead us to think of.

Another discrepancy between the two translations resides in their understanding of how profoundly the son is affected by self-imposed limitations. While Watson regards the son’s self-underestimation as a matter of “outlook,” Robert considers it a problematic spiritual “inclination” or “disposition” (*inclination/disposition d’esprit*). From a humanistic Buddhist perspective, outlook, or “a point of view,” according to Merriam Webster, can be radically changed at every instant.<sup>16</sup> Master Sheng Yen puts it well, “If your thought is pure at this moment, the Pure Land appears in that single thought. Conversely, if, in the next instant, you can’t prevent your mind, your words, your thoughts from wrongness, a hell appears in front of you within that single instant.”<sup>17</sup> Contrarily, “inclination” and “disposition” signify a “tendency” according to which one thinks or behaves, which, in contrast to “outlook,” may not be easily changed in the short term.<sup>18</sup>

The choice of wordings between constantly changeable “outlook” and relatively fixed “inclination/disposition” reveals translators’ different, without being mutually exclusive, stances on Buddhist spiritual growth. By employing

15. Yan Yu 嚴羽, *Canglang shihua* 滄浪詩話, in *The Imperial Compilation of the Complete Library in the Four Branches of Literature* (*Qinding siku quanshu* 欽定四庫全書), 5.

16. “Outlook,” Merriam-Webster, <https://reurl.cc/5vGdyq>, accessed April 26, 2024.

17. Sheng Yen 釋聖嚴, *Amitābha Buddha and the Pure Land Teachings* (*Emituōfo yu Jingtū fāmen* 阿彌陀佛與淨土法門) (New Taipei: Dharma Drum Publishing, 2013), 94.

18. “Inclination”; “Disposition,” Merriam-Webster, <https://reurl.cc/nNEvd6>, <https://reurl.cc/kO7yYL>, accessed April 26, 2024.

“inclination/disposition,” Robert describes the spiritual journey of the son in a gradualist term, which suits well the specific case of the son, who takes decades to fully understand how deeply his father loves him. Watson’s translation, evocative of a subitist perspective of spiritual growth, is no less valid than that of Robert. One may question that the son’s decades-long journey is everything but subitist, which may render Watson’s interpretation self-contradictory. The doubt can be dispelled, if we consider that, by implying a possibility of a quickened process of self-reconciliation, Watson successfully translates the auctorial intention of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which has been written surely not to encourage readers to follow in the footsteps of the son, whose self-underestimation postpones the re-establishment of the father-son relationship until his father is not far from death, but to convince readers that the whole process may have been shortened, even directly skipped, if only one would have trust in Buddha’s fatherly love at the very beginning.

### 3. Empoisoned Children

Quarrels between gradualists and subitists, seemingly opposing but essentially compatible, lead us to the last father-son parable in the *Lotus Sūtra*, in which Buddhist equalitarian ethics unfold itself beautifully. The story begins with a physician who returns to his country after a trip, only to find his children, having accidentally drunk poisons, squirming on the ground with intolerable pain. Children supplicate him to prescribe some medicine, to which no father would refuse. He prepares medicine with the greatest care, seeing that it is effective as well as pleasing in every aspect, from vision and olfaction to gustation. These esthetical concerns are necessary “expedient means,” without which, as all parents know, no medicine, no matter how effective it is, would be of any use, for children are likely to refuse it.

Much to the physician’s surprise, the poorest children, whose minds are profoundly empoisoned, aren’t persuaded that these delicately prepared candy-like medicines are appealing enough. Their situation cannot but degenerate, which obligates the father to resort to another expedient measure. After reiterating the benefits of the medicine, he goes on a trip and sends a messenger back to announce

his death. Abandoned, these miserable children sink into the grief in which they regain good judgement and suddenly realize how esthetically appealing the medicine is. At the very moment in which they swallow the medicine, their pain disappears all at once and their mind functions normally. Rejoiced by the good news, the father returns home.

Children with empoisoned mental state are described repeatedly as “失心者” (literary “those who lose their heart”), a notion which can be traced back to Mencius. In chapter 10 of *Mencius*, the eponymous philosopher accuses careerists of “losing the nature of their heart” (失其本心) and, in the proceeding chapter, he reveals that the way toward Great Learning is nothing other than “seeking for the lost heart” (求其放心).<sup>19</sup>“放” is synonymous with “失,” both qualifying a heart which goes astray. By adopting the word “失心,” Kumārajīva facilitates the comprehension of his readers mostly of Confucian background, for whom Mencius’ teaching of regaining the lost heart is of greatest familiarity. An irreducible difference between *Mencius* and the *Lotus Sūtra* lies in the fact that Mencius urges us to rely on ourselves to seek back our lost hearts, whereas the *Sūtra* announces the great news that we are never left alone by Buddha, who would not hesitate to resort to dharmic expediency so that everyone, even the latest bloomers among us, is of equal potential to achieve Buddhahood.

In the *Lotus Sūtra*, “失心者” is translated by Watson interchangeably into those who are “out of their minds” or those who “lose their senses” and by Robert constantly into “those who lose their spirit” (“*qui ont perdu l’esprit*”).<sup>20</sup> A question arises naturally: why isn’t “失心” translated faithfully into “lose heart”? In fact, among numerous translations of *Mencius*, opinions diverge. In James Legge’s English translation, “失心” is translated into “losing the proper nature of one’s mind.” In this case, “心” is not treated as an equivalent to the mind but “the

19. Zhao Qi 趙岐 [Annotation] and Sun Shi 孫奭 [Commentary], “Gaozi I” 告子上, in *The Annotation and Commentary Mencius (Mengzi zhushu 孟子注疏)*, in *Annotations and Commentaries to the Thirteen Classics from the Wuying Hall Edition (Wuyingdian ben shisan jing zhushu 武英殿本十三經注疏)*, juan 11, pt. 2, 6–7.

20. *The Lotus Sūtra*, trans. Watson, 228; *Le Sūtra du Lotus*, trans. Jean-Noël Robert (Paris: Éditions Fayard, 1997), 284–85.

proper nature” of it.<sup>21</sup> Séraphin Couvreur’s French translation drifts further away, with “失心” translated into “étouffer ses bons sentiments naturels” (repress one’s good natural sentiments). Far from literal at first sight, Couvreur’s translation is in reality well-constructed upon Mencius’ theory of benevolent human nature and his lamentation of its’ denaturation.<sup>22</sup> The English translation of Din Cheuk Lau, the only one of Chinese origin among the three translators, sticks the closest to literal meanings by translating “失心” into “losing one’s original heart” and “放心” into “strayed heart.”<sup>23</sup>

The fact that a translator with Chinese upbringing clings to the literal translation of “失心” explains well how deeply the motif of the “lost heart” leaves its mark on Chinese intellectual and literary history. From this perspective, Kumārajīva’s adoption of the keyword of Mencius’ philosophy may well be understood as a well-devised “expedient means” aiming at the Confucian audience. The concerns of translators who avoid the word “heart” are no less valid than those of those who insist on literal translation, for non-Chinese speakers may be easily guided astray with both secular and Catholic denotations of “lose heart.” The dictionary definition of “lose heart,” according to Merriam-Webster, is “to begin to feel that one cannot do something that one has been trying to do” or “to become discouraged.”<sup>24</sup> In a Catholic setting, the expression “lose heart” is deeply embedded in modern theology, especially hamartiology, the study of sins, after theoretical elaborations of Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) on this topic. In the Catholic Bible, the term “lose heart” appears five times, all of which take the form of negative injunction, either “ought not” (Luke 18:1) or “do not lose heart” (2 Corinthians 4:1, 2 Corinthians 4:16, Galatians 6:9 and Ephesians 3:16).<sup>25</sup> During John Paul II’s papacy (1978–2005), the loss of heart is treated as

21. *The Works of Mencius*, trans. James Legge (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), vol. 2, 414.

22. *Œuvres de Meng Tzeu*, trans. Séraphin Couvreur (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956), vol. 4, 190.

23. *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau (Auckland: Penguin Books, 1976), 166.

24. “Lose heart,” Merriam-Webster, <https://reurl.cc/4r48bj>, accessed April 27, 2024.

25. *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 74, 164, 174, 176.

one of the greatest spiritual crises within the Church. The Polish pope facilitates the formation of a modern understanding of the essence of original sin, which resides not as much in forbidden fruit as in the very fact of the loss of heart, as is clearly stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), the official book on Catholic doctrines: “Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart [···]. This is what man’s first sin consisted of. All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness.”<sup>26</sup>

In this sense, when Pope John Paul II urges the youth “Do not lose heart!,” he means, in a less metaphorical language, “Do not lose trust in God’s goodness,” which, according to Catholic teachings since his papacy until our days, constitutes the essence of the very first sin and all those that follow.<sup>27</sup> The remedy against the loss of heart or that of trust is the “divine mercy,” a gift of God initially advanced by canonized Polish Catholic sister Faustyna Kowalska (1905–1938) and theorized by Pope John Paul II, which, in the former Pope, Pope Francis’ words, is concretized as a “tenderness” that “never disappoints but is always capable of restoring our joy” so that we can “lift up our heads and to start again,” no matter how unredeemable we think of ourselves as sinners.<sup>28</sup>

*Misericordia*, or the Latin for “mercy,” is composed of “pity” (*misereo*) and of “heart” (*cor*), which provides a translator a solid etymological basis to translate “失心” into “lose heart,” if his objective is to establish an analogy between divine mercy and Buddhist compassion (慈悲) for “expedient” purposes. As “divine mercy” helps a believer with the weakest faith to seek back his lost heart, so does Buddha, with his infinite compassion, conceive of as many “expedient means” as needed. The challenge of this analogical translation would be that certain readers may be misguided to understand the *Sūtra* through a Catholic filter, which may well serve as a convenient starting point for a non-Chinese reader but ought to be ultimately surpassed if a deeper understanding of the dharma is to be attained.

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26. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 100.

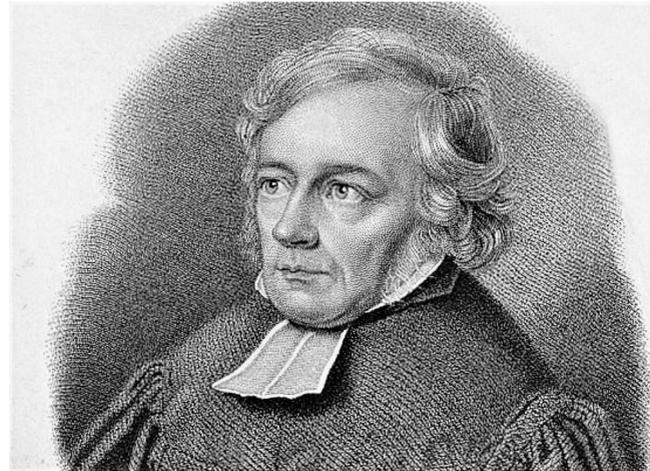
27. Pope John Paul II, *For the XI World Youth Day* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), 5.

28. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 2013), 3.

## Conclusion

When Buddha says that there are “84000 dharma gates,” he reduces innumerable paths to the dharma to a large but conceivable number to facilitate the understanding of his audiences, few of which, bestowed with considerable intelligence and determination, require less support to attain enlightenment, whereas most of us approached the dharma little by little via “expedient means” founded upon Buddhist compassion.<sup>29</sup> If the dharma is “ineffable” (不可說), as Buddha repeats more than 800 times in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, it is firstly because no language is capable of exhausting it, and that, even certain Buddhist scholars specify that, by “ineffable,” Buddha refers to a number as gigantic as  $10^7 \times 2119$ , it doesn’t exclude the possibility that the number is of symbolic value, as is the case of “84000 dharma gates.”<sup>30</sup> Languages, numbers, as well as literary devices all serve as “expedient means,” with which we approach the dharma while experiencing the deep compassion Buddha holds for us who may not be able to grasp dharmic wisdom otherwise.

Translations, whose purpose is to propagate the dharma in non-Buddhist cultural spheres, may well be considered a pedagogical expedience. Even if the *Lotus Sūtra* per se abounds with expedient means, where elegant verses and smooth prose meet intriguing plots, without proper translations capable of conserving these features, few



Friedrich Schleiermacher

29. *Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra* (*Da baoji jing* 大寶積經), CBETA, T11, no. 310, 163a1.

30. Qiu Gaoxing 邱高興, “Numerical Concepts and Their Interpretations in the ‘Asaṃkhyeya Chapter’ of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*,” in *Proceedings of the 2015 International Conference on the Avatamsaka School (2015 Huayan zhuanzong guoji xueshu yantaohui lunwenji 2015 華嚴專宗國際學術研討會論文集)* (Taipei: Huayan Zhuanzong Xueyuan, 2018), 198.

non-Chinese readers can fully appreciate the dharmic beauty of the *Lotus Sūtra*, just as the efficient medicine in the last parable would be of no use if it is not appealing enough for the children to take it. One may pose the classic question in traductology: which one may better serve targeted readers, a translation faithful to the source text but linguistically challenging to targeted readers or one that caters to the esthetics of the targeted language despite the risk of deviating from the source text? To this delicate question, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1934), an 18th-century German translator, Biblical scholar, and philosopher of language responds that, by maintaining particularities of the source language, a translator has the best chance to push targeted readers out of the comfort zone of their mother tongue and thereby bring them closer to the essence of the original text.<sup>31</sup> When Robert translates “下劣” constantly into the adjective “vil”(vile) or the substantive “vilenie”(villainy), he adopts a Schleiermacherian position, according to which a reader tends to better understand the complexity of a text when the eccentricity of a translation reminds him constantly of the irreducible alterity.

This does not, however, reduce the legitimacy of Watson’s tendency to put his anglophone readers at ease by employing the most familiar words, an example of which is his translation of “等心” into “fair-minded,” in contrast to Robert who translates in a literal manner into “*d’un cœur égal*” (of an equal heart). By attending to the comfort of his readers, instead of, as Schleiermacher proposes, maintaining a certain degree of unfamiliarity, Watson provides a relatively smooth reading experience to readers in search of easily consumable classics, who may be discouraged by Schleiermacherian translators. The latter undeniably possess their readership, who, characterized by adventurousness, intellectual curiosity and even studiousness, is neither superior nor inferior to those seeking a comfortable and delightful reading experience, for no path to the dharma is superior to another, as *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* clearly states, “While gates to the dharma are numerous for expedient purposes, their end remains the same.”<sup>32</sup>

31. Friedrich Schleiermacher, “On Different Methods of Translating,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, trans. Susan Bernofsky, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2021), 43–63.

32. “The nature of returning to the origin is without duality, but skillful means have many gateways” 歸元性無二，方便有多門，*Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (*Lengyan jing* 楞嚴經), CBETA, T19, no. 945, 130a24.

Ideally, translations of sacred texts are expected to be heterogeneous in languages, in registers, in styles, for each translation, aiming at a specific audience, has the potential to serve as a gate to the dharma. In this sense, the more diverse are translations, the more pathways to *sūtras* are offered. Watson answers well his self-posed question regarding the *raison d'être* of his translation, given the amount of existent translations of the *Lotus Sūtra*: “The great works of world literature deserve to be translated again and again so that they will continue to be in language that is appealing to contemporary readers.”<sup>33</sup> Esthetics and comforts remain the central concerns of Watson, which is of undeniable importance, considering that, more often than not, readers “lose heart” long before the essence of a classic begins to surface.

This holds, as sad as the fact is, for younger Sinophone readers. Although grown up in a Chinese-speaking society, their general literacy of classical Chinese is constantly weakened while their competencies in foreign languages are fortified due to systemic changes in education. Under these circumstances, a remedial reading strategy capable of closing the gap between a modern Chinese-speaking reader and *sūtras* in classical Chinese is to accompany a given classic with various translations, be it retranslated recently or decades ago, in European languages or modern Chinese.<sup>34</sup> While not the most rigorous approach to obtain an in-depth comprehension of *sūtras*, it serves well nonetheless as an “expedient means,” with which one can still connect to Sinophone dharmic wisdom in a modern society where classical Chinese, unfortunately, becomes a scholastic expertise. Admittedly, reading in classical languages is an irreplaceable experience; this does not necessarily imply, however, that modern readers with weakened classical language skills are “of humble outlook.” Well-versed in classical languages or not, we ought not to impose self-contempt on ourselves as the onlyborn in the second

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33. *The Lotus Sūtra*, trans. Watson, xxiii.

34. Lai Yonghai 賴永海 [chief ed.] and Wang Bin 王彬 [annot. and trans.], *The Lotus Sūtra (Fahua jing 法華經)* (Taipei: Linking Publishing, 2023). A recommendable translation in modern Chinese of great pedagogical expedience. It can be adopted as a reading material for learners who study Chinese as a foreign language at C1-C2 level according to Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

parable, given that our general linguistic capacities are in fact broadened, with *sūtra* translators with diverse cultural backgrounds at our service and multiple translations of excellent quality at our disposition.

The present case study of Buddhist traductology cannot be concluded without a humble acknowledgement that, from a Buddhist perspective, every academic writing is an expedient means in the service of the dharma, which caters to the needs of a certain group of readers with intellectual ardour. By no means is research an end per se, as Master Hsing Yun clearly explains, “Far from mere theory, the dharma is not an object of scholarly studies but a guide toward self-cultivation and enlightenment.”<sup>35</sup> In alignment with the *Lotus Sūtra*’s teaching that “expedient means” stem from Buddhist compassion, traductological studies are of great potential to optimize dharmic expedience residing in translated *sūtras*, Buddhist literature, as well as transcultural and interconfessional exchanges. While classical Chinese is translatable, with tolerable loss of style and content, the dharma itself is hardly translatable and need not be, for it transcends language which it indwells and proves itself to be transcultural.



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35. Xingyun 釋星雲, *The Buddha-Dharma: Pure and Simple (Fofa zhenyi 佛法真義)* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2019), vol. 2, 33.



Illustration of the Parable of the Burning House in the *Lotus Sūtra*