The *Sūtras* in the Chinese World

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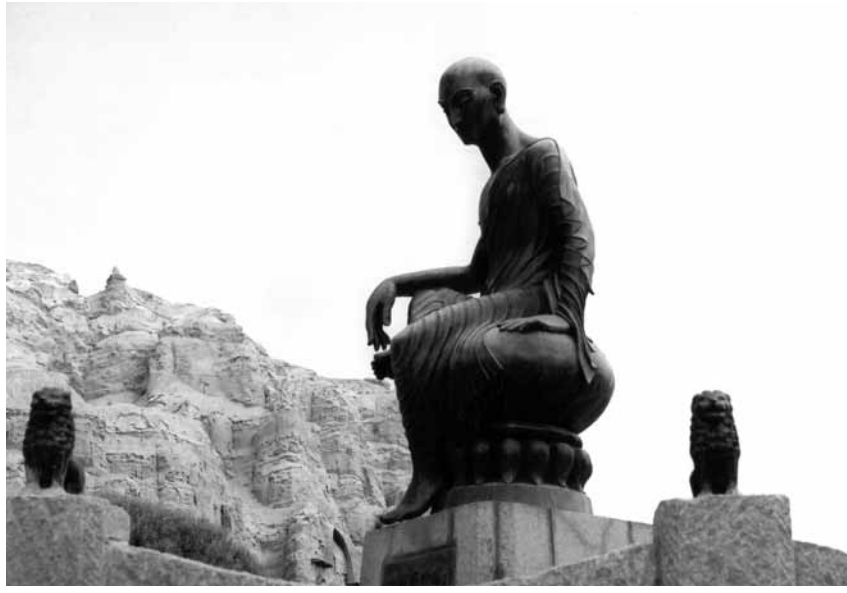
THE assimilation of Buddhism into the Chinese world took place first and foremost through the translation of its Indian texts, in a phenomenon of cultural adaptation that is almost unique in the world. When the first missionaries arrived in China at the beginning of the Christian era, they encountered a civilization that was at least as sophisticated as that of India and endowed with incredibly rich literature.

But the translation enterprise that was about to begin met with a major challenge: that of the Chinese language itself, for its ideogramic dimension and lack of conjugations and declensions went against the grammatical perfection of Sanskrit. In addition, the concepts of Buddhism were very far removed from those of Chinese philosophy. At this point, we should also highlight how the transposition of Indian Buddhist texts into Chinese was the polar opposite of the phenomenon linked to their other major translated language translation—Tibetan, which was created from scratch—essentially between the 8th and 9th centuries—in a context devoid of any literary heritage.

In short, it is no surprise that the Chinese translation project was spread over eight centuries and that certain texts, including the *Lotus Sūtra*,[1] had to be re-translated several times. We cannot go into detail here, especially as French readers enjoy the privilege of having access to the brilliant contribution of Paul Demiéville in *l'Inde classique*, where the great Sinologist describes not only the content of the Chinese canon, but also the history of its translations.[2]

Three Main Translation Periods

It is important to note however that there were three main translation periods. The first is that of the 'archaic translations' (*guyi*), which often grope around to find the right words. For example, the stated aim of Buddhism—*bodhi* (awakening), was rendered by the Chinese term *dao* (way), but one could also opt for the Chinese transcription *puti* to avoid any confusion. The translation of the *Pratyutpanna-samādhi-sūtra*



Statue of young Kumārajīva in front of Kizil Caves

('Sūtra of the samādhi of being in the presence of the Buddhas') by Lokakṣema in 179 C.E. dates from this period, making it one of the first documents of the Great Vehicle. The translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* by Dharmarakṣa in 286 also belongs to this period, a version that lacked some clarity and also had misinterpretations.

The second period is that of the 'ancient translations' (*jiuyi*), which opens with Kumārajīva, to whom we are indebted for some major versions still in use today, such as the *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra* in 402, the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra* and, of course, the *Lotus Sūtra* in 406. He is also the translator of the basic texts of Mādhyamika and introduced them into China, marking the beginning of the development of China's own Buddhist schools. Kumārajīva did not forgo a sometimes astonishing freedom in his translations, but their fluid style is still appreciated, even outside Buddhist circles. One of his major contemporaries (and a rival) was Buddhabhadra, who, notably, translated the great final *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* (417–418) and the *Flower Garland Sūtra* (418–420). From this period also dates the translation of *Āgama* ('Traditions'), the Sanskrit equivalent of the first four of the five *Nikāya* ('Corpus') of the Pāli canon.

The third period, finally, is that of the 'new translations' (*xinyi*), initiated by Xuanzang, a Chinese scholar who returned from a great

expedition to India in 645. He undertook a systematic review of the technical vocabulary, so his translations are especially reputed for their rigour. This is particularly the case with Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa* (Treasury of Scholastic, 651–654), a true encyclopedia of the Small Vehicle for the Far East; and also for the great compilation by Xuanzang of the *Discourse on the Perfection of Consciousness-only* (*Cheng Weishi Lun*, 659–660), the fundamental reference for the Yogācāra idealism of China.

Some of his translations replaced their earlier versions: for example, the famous *Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sūtra*, whose translation by Xuanzang is still recited today, unlike Kumārajīva's version. But we also see the opposite phenomenon: the translation attributed to Xuanzang of the *Sukhāvatī-sūtra* never replaced Kumārajīva's rendition. It is also worth mentioning that in the following century, basic texts of Far East Tantrism were translated: the *Mahāvairocana-sūtra* by Śubhakarasiṃha (724–725), the *Vajraśekhara-sūtra* (753) and the *Adhyardhaśatikā Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (771) by Amoghavajra.

Finally, it should be noted that the Chinese translations were made in an official context, by men of letters in studies, where a handful of the 'translators' we've mentioned (there were dozens more)—were only one link in a network of many officials, including interpreters, text 'polishers' and other scribes and editors. This also explains why indexes were drawn up in a meticulously Chinese way, providing bibliographic details and key historical markers, including (retrospectively) the Indian scriptural sources.

Image of Tripitaka Master Xuanzang. Japan; 14th century. Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo (Image: TNM Image Archives, All rights reserved)

Favour Spirit of Words over Letter

Added to this is the fact that the Chinese Buddhist canon contains some very significant apocryphal texts.[3] This is the case with *The Concentration of*

Heroic Progress Sūtra, of which there are several authentic translations—including Kumārajīva's (408)—but the most widely known version is a creation mainly of the Chinese Minister Fang Rong (705). Another apocryphal text is the famous and remarkable *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, whose attribution to the Indian master Aśvaghoṣa was discredited a long time ago, but which has nevertheless been the subject of two 'translations'. However, their inclusion in the canon is no surprise, since one of the main four criteria of Buddhist interpretative frameworks is to favour the spirit of the words over the letter.

Once the process of translating Indian texts was complete, the Chinese Buddhist canon contained more than 1,600 of these works in the widely published 'Taishō', which appeared in Japan in the early 20th century: *sūtras* nos. 1–847; *tantras* nos. 848–1420; *vinaya* (discipline), nos. 1421–1504; and *śāstras* (treaties) nos. 1505–1692. This edition, however, also includes most of the Chinese commentaries on these Indian texts (nos. 1693-1850), plus a large portion of the original works of China and Japan's original Buddhist scholasticism, as well as historical and bibliographical works, etc.

Traditionally, *sūtras* are the subject of the 'ten practical canonical texts' (*daśadharmacarita*): 1. copying, 2. offering, 3. distribution, 4. hearing, 5. reading, 6. conservation, 7. exegesis, 8. recitation, 9. meditation and 10. putting into practice. It is noticeable that, beyond their liturgical dimension, these practices include the preservation and dissemination of texts, because Buddhism aspires to be universal. Thus from the Tang period onwards, the Buddhists of China did not hesitate to engrave the whole canon on stone tablets, as well as creating woodcut prints.[4]

And the religious dimension of the canon is also illustrated by the creation of revolving bookcases as an act of preservation and also as a tool through which one could acquire merit by turning them, a bit like the famous Tibetan 'prayer wheel.'[5] As for the first complete edition of the Chinese Canon, it was published from 971 to 983 and was followed by eight more between then and the 18th century. Notable among these is the edition produced under the Koryŏ Dynasty in Korea between 1236 and 1251, which also forms the basis of the Japanese edition of *Taishō*: its 81,350 woodblocks are still preserved in the Haeinsa temple (South Korea). Finally, one of the last modern editions is that of the Chinese Buddhist canon *Zhonghua Dazangjing* ('Chinese Buddhist Canon'), published in Beijing in 2004.

Notes

[1] See Robert, Jean-Noël : *Le Sûtra du Lotus* (1997), pp. 14–21.

[2] Demiéville, Paul: « Les sources chinoises »; *L'Inde classique, manuel des études indiennes*, t. 2 (1953), pp. 398–463. Rpr. Demiéville, Paul : *Choix d'études bouddhiques* (1973), pp. 157–222.

[3] Kuo, Liying: « Sur les apocryphes bouddhiques chinois »; *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 87-2 (2000), pp. 677–705.

[4] For an example of the variety and multiplicity of scriptural sources of a sūtra, see Ducor, Jérôme et Loveday, Helen : *Le Sûtra des contemplations du Buddha Vie-infinie* (2011), pp. 78–85.

[5] Loveday, Helen: « La bibliothèque tournante en Chine: quelques remarques sur son rôle et son évolution »; *T'oung Pao*, LXXXVI, 2 (2000), pp. 225–279.

Author Biography

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