

Out of the East: Tibetan Scripture Translations from Chinese

Jonathan A. Silk

ABSTRACT The majority of works now found in the Tibetan Kanjur collections are renderings from Sanskrit, but it has long been known that a number of translations from Chinese are also to be found there. Moreover, in addition, Dunhuang manuscripts also reveal other cases of scripture translations made from Chinese into Tibetan, some of these heretofore not recognized as such. This paper introduces some of these materials, outlines their importance, and suggests strategies for their future study.

All translation is commentary.¹This truism surely provides a key to one of the motivations behind the study of Classical translations of Buddhist scriptures, namely, that such works provide interpretations usually much more—or at least significantly differently—informed than our own. In cases in which we no longer have access to the “originals” from which translations were made, their utility is obvious. But even when we have good evidence for the putative sources themselves, translations continue to offer valuable perspectives. Such works have, of course, long been used to, for instance, “correct” Sanskrit texts, the transmission of which is not perfect, this most commonly being the case in Buddhist studies

¹ The present paper is a short introduction to my book-length study of the materials discussed here, which will be published shortly.

when Tibetan translations are deployed to shed light on Indic works.

The Indo-Tibetan axis is not, however, the only relevant or interesting one in this regard. Tibetan translations of another variety also provide valuable insight, namely Tibetan translations from Chinese. As long ago as 1908, Paul Pelliot, among modern scholars, pointed out that a number of texts he had just discovered in Dunhuang were, in fact, translated from Chinese; he later added—and this a century ago—that the same is true for texts found in the already available Kanjurs. Of course, in pre-modern times already the *Lhan dkar ma* and *'Phang thang ma* Imperial catalogues, dating respectively to (more or less) 812 and 830, had set aside special sections to record translations from Chinese—special because the default position was, needless to say, even in this early time already translation from Sanskrit.

Chinese translations of Indic texts, meanwhile, although less mechanically produced than most Tibetan translations, have also long been employed as witnesses (most basically, for the purposes of providing *termini ante quem*), in addition to their obvious function of shedding light on Buddhism in East Asia. When such Chinese translations are proposed as windows onto Indic texts, however, a number of questions arise, some of which are motivated by the obvious fact that, whereas Tibetan translations from Sanskrit give the impression of a sort of literalness which permits one confidently (if not overconfidently) to retrovert an Indic Vorlage, Chinese translations in contrast seem to render the spirit in preference to the letter. Their relation to their source texts aside, the basic question of how to interpret such Chinese texts themselves, including scriptures written in Chinese to begin with (so-called “apocrypha”)—that is to say, in the first place determining how they were understood by their audiences—remains as a challenge. In this regard, in addition to, for instance, the hardly studied Manchu translations—which, however, are quite modern, belonging to the latter part of the 18th century—the store of relatively early translations into Tibetan, most of which appear to date to the eighth or ninth centuries, provides a potentially excellent set of reference points. Except in the field of Chan studies, and therein especially in relation to the so-called Bsam yas debates, which have garnered significant attention over the past decades, these materials rendered from Chinese into Tibetan have been largely overlooked in scholarship. While important contributions such as those of Oetke 1977 and Stein 1983 do exist, an enormous amount remains to be done. One possible result of such studies is that we may discover that what appears to us today as a style of translation more free than literal was in fact understood instead by contemporary readers as quite precise indeed.

Evidence for this claim comes from precisely these medieval Tibetan translations, in which technical terms are regularly recognized in their Chinese guise, and rendered into Tibetan in a manner every bit as precise as what we find in translations from Indic originals. These Tibetan translations of technical terms from Chinese moreover quite frequently

correspond with the parallel renderings in the Tibetan translations of the same text made from Sanskrit. This suggests that, in contrast to the impression we sometimes have that the Chinese translations were vague and impressionistic, they were in reality extremely precise, and understood with precision by their intended audiences. There is a significant promise, then, that such translations will help us better appreciate the value of Chinese translations, not only in their own right and for the study of Chinese Buddhism, but also as meaningful and precise renderings of Indic materials into an idiom which remains for us still insufficiently understood, namely “Buddhist Chinese”. Put another way, the Tibetan renderings of Chinese sūtra translations may provide us significant materials with which to improve our understanding of the idiom of these Chinese Buddhist translations.

In the following I will briefly introduce two examples of such materials. The first is the *Gaṅgottaraparipṛcchā*, for which we have a Tibetan translation found in the Kanjurs, a single Chinese translation, credited to the Tang translator Bodhiruci, and a single complete manuscript containing the Tibetan rendering from Chinese, this being Pelliot tibétain 89. This manuscript also contains a Tibetan translation of the Chinese translation of the *Maitreyaparipṛcchā*. The second case is that of the Smaller *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha*, for which we have a Sanskrit text, a translation (from Sanskrit) in the Kanjurs, two Chinese translations (by Kumārajīva and Xuanzang), and again a single manuscript Tibetan translation from the rendering of Kumārajīva, in which the final two thirds of the text only are preserved.

The first text is preserved in Chinese as *Genghe shangyoupoi-hui* 恒河上優婆夷會. While we can be sure that this text existed at Dunhuang, due to the existence of the Tibetan translation, no Chinese manuscript has yet been discovered. However, the Tibetan translation from Chinese, in its obvious fidelity to the extant Chinese text, serves as a proof that the version available in Dunhuang could not have differed appreciably from that found in the various extant editions. The Dunhuang manuscript of the Tibetan translation made from Chinese is found preserved in Pelliot tibétain 89. This manuscript contains two texts, the *Maitreyaparipṛcchā* and the *Gaṅgottaraparipṛcchā*. Lalou in her catalogue of the Paris collection identified these two texts, the titles of which are given in the manuscript, but apparently did not realize that they differed from the translations found in the Kanjurs. The manuscript is extremely well and regularly written, no doubt by a professional scribe, possibly working in an official function. This contrasts sharply with the case of the so-called Smaller *Sukhāvāṭīvyūha* Sūtra.

This is one of the more frequently studied of Mahāyāna scriptures, due chiefly to its status as one of the central scriptures of “Pure Land” Buddhism. The version to which I wish to draw attention is found in a single, fragmentary manuscript from Dunhuang, kept now in the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris as Pelliot tibétain 758. The manuscript was identified for the first time by *Akamatsu Kōshō* 赤松孝章 in 1984 as a Tibetan rendering of Kumārajīva's translation of the *Amituo jing* 阿彌陀經. The writing is quite legible,

but different from that of the regularly and carefully written Pelliot tibétain 89. Its script should probably be classified between what van Schaik calls the “sutra style” and the “headed official style”. As valuable as it is, this manuscript is far from the only source for the Smaller *Sukhāvativyūha* found from Dunhuang: there seem to be at least 183 Chinese manuscripts of the *Amituo jing*. In addition, we have a remarkable and very valuable source, namely a “transcript” of the Chinese text of Kumārajīva's translation written in Tibetan script. This is valuable because it presents clear evidence for a form of the Chinese text known specifically to Tibetan speakers (or readers) in Dunhuang during what must be the same time period to which our Tibetan translation of Kumārajīva's version also belongs, namely the period of Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang (which more or less lie around 786-848), or slightly thereafter. This also leads us to the question of why, with the availability of Chinese sūtras, it was felt necessary to produce Tibetan translations.

The Chinese translation presented in Chinese language but written in Tibetan script, that is, a phonetic transcription, would have been recited—in Chinese—by those who could not (comfortably) read Chinese script, but were literate in Tibetan (script), that is, members of a group of Tibetan speakers who nevertheless turned for their Buddhist authority (also) to Chinese sources. That such a community of Tibetan speakers interested in the prestigious translation of Kumārajīva would want not only to recite the text, but also perhaps to understand it as well, seems to provide a possible rationale for the production of the Tibetan translation.

Although it is very difficult to precisely date both these Tibetan translations from Chinese, and translations which ended up in the Kanjur collections, it is quite possible that the urge toward completeness is another factor to be noticed here. Tibetan authorities—whoever these might have been—no doubt had a notion about the extent of the Buddha's preaching. They probably felt that it was important to have access to all the Buddha's sermons, all of his sūtras. Becoming aware that there were sūtras for which they did not have Indic sources they could translate, and encountering these scriptures in Chinese, they probably felt that it was important to have access to them in Tibetan language. Therefore, although aware that they were working through an intermediary language, they nevertheless wished to have a version of the text. I should emphasize that this hypothesis of the motivation of these translations is speculative, and I have no evidence to support it.

To illustrate briefly some of the features of these translations, I offer just a couple of sample sentences from each sūtra. I draw these materials from my forthcoming editions, where one will find all the relevant references.

Gaṅgottaraparipṛcchā

§3c:

恒河上言：「若一切法皆如化者，云何問言：‘汝從何來’。」

Gaṅgottarā said: "If all phenomena are like an artificial creation, how can you ask 'Where have you come from?'"

gang ga'I mchog gis gsol pa || gal te chos thams cad sprul pa lta bu lags na || ci'I slad du khyod gang nas 'ongs shes bka' stsal lags ||

Gaṅgottarā asked: "If all phenomena are like an artificial creation, why do you say, 'Where have you come from?'"

§4d:

「復次，世尊，如涅槃性，畢竟不復生善惡趣，及般涅槃。我觀己身，亦復如是。」

"Moreover, Blessed One, as is the case with the quintessence of nirvāṇa, ultimately I will not be reborn in good or evil destinies, nor reach parinirvāṇa. I contemplate my own body as also just like this. "

gzhan yang bcom ldan 'das ci ltar mya ngan las 'das pa'I ngo bo nyid nam yang bde 'gro dang | ngan 'gror skye bar myI 'gyur zhIng | yongs su mya ngan las 'da' bar myI 'gyur ba de bzhIn du bdag gI lus kyang de bzhin du mthong lags so ||

"Moreover, Blessed One, as is the case with the essential nature of nirvāṇa, ultimately I will not be born in a good destiny or a bad destiny, and will not attain parinirvāṇa, in the same way I view my body too as just so."

§14d:

「彼優婆夷及諸大眾聞是法已，皆悉出家，於無餘涅槃，而得滅度。」

"That female lay disciple and the great gatherings having heard this teaching, they all renounced the household life for nirvāṇa without remainder, and obtained nirvāṇa."

dge bsnyen ma de dag dang | 'khor 'dus pa rnam chos thos nas | thams cad khyIm nas khyIm myed par rab du byung bas | lhag ma byed pa'i mya ngan las 'da's pas yongs su mya ngan las 'da's par gyur to ||

"Those female lay disciples and those assemblies having heard the teaching, all of them renounced the house for the homeless life, and attained parinirvāṇa in nirvāṇa without remainder."

Amituo jing

§3:

又舍利弗，彼佛壽命及其人民無量、無邊阿僧祇劫，故名阿彌陀。

Again, Śāriputra, the life spans of that buddha and his people are immeasurable and

infinite asaṁkhyā kalpas. Therefore he is called Amida.

sha rI bu gzhan yang sangs rgyas de'i sku tshe'I tshad dang | sems can gyI tshe'i tshad bskal pa grangs myed pa | tshad myed pa mtha' yas bar thug pas na' || tshe dpag myed ces kyang bya'o ||

Again, Śāriputra, since the extent of the life span of that buddha and the extent of the life span of beings reach immeasurable and infinite uncountable aeons, he is also called Immeasurable Life Span.

§10:

舍利弗，衆生聞者，應當發願願生彼國。所以者何。

Śāriputra, the sentient beings who hear this should raise the wish wishing to be born in that land. Why?

sha rI bu so so'I skye ba dag 'dI skad du bshad pa thos na | sangs rgyas kyI zhing der skye bar smon lam gdab bo || de ji 'I phyir zhe na |

Śāriputra, when ordinary beings hear this preached, they will wish to be born in that buddha-field. Why?

§35:

舍利弗，若有善男子、善女人聞是諸佛所說名及經名者，是諸善男子、善女人皆爲一切諸佛共所護念。皆得不退轉於阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。

Śāriputra, if there are gentle men and gentle women who hear the name stated by the buddhas and the name of this sūtra, these gentle men and gentle women will all together be protected and kept in mind by all buddhas, and they all will attain the stage of non-retrogression in their advancement toward *anuttarasāmyaksambodhi*.

sha rI bu rigs kyI bu 'am rigs kyI bu mo gang zhig sangs rgyas rnams kyI mtshan thos sam | mdo sde 'dI'i mying thos pa tsam gyis | rIgs kyI bu 'am rIgs kyI bu mo de la | sangs rgyas thams cad kyis | dgongs shIng skyob par 'gyur te || bla na myed pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'I byang cub las kyang | phyIr myi ldog par 'gyur ro ||

Śāriputra, a gentle man or gentle woman who hears the Buddhas' names, and/or only hears the name of this sūtra—that gentle man or gentle woman will be contemplated and protected by all buddhas, and will attain irreversibility even from unexcelled perfect awakening.

The main points to which I would like to draw attention are the very strict literalness of the translation in most cases, the rendering of technical terms, and the interpretation of the Chinese syntax. Although there are cases of idioms being rendered in their usual Tibetan manner, rather than strictly following the Chinese, as in §14d *with thams cad khyIm nas khyIm myed par rab du byung bas*, on the whole the translations are very literal indeed.

When in §4d the Chinese has *nièpánxìng* 涅槃性, the Tibetan version interprets this as *mya ngan las 'das pa'I ngo bo nyid*. The Kanjur version of the sūtra here has *mya ngan las 'das pa'i dbyings*, suggesting that the Sanskrit from which it was translated had *nirvāṇadhātu*; the Tibetan translation from Chinese understands *xìng* 性 probably not as *dhātu*, but perhaps as an abstract suffix. Finally, in the *Amituo jing* §35, we notice that a theologically interesting interpretation is evident in the restriction that one need *only* hear the Buddha's name or the name of the sūtra, a restriction not in the Chinese text as we have it. This might suggest that the Chinese original from which the translation was made read slightly differently than the version we now have, as seems to be the case elsewhere.

There are many more materials awaiting examination, at least 40 scriptures being found so far which we believe to have been translated from Chinese into Tibetan. Any conclusion at this time would be premature, but there is great promise in the examination of these important sources.

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◆ Author: Jonathan A. Silk, Professor of Buddhist Studies at the Leiden University
Institute for Area Studies.