

# Buddhist Scripture Translation in Chinese Translation History

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**Abstract:** Buddhism has a profound influence on Chinese culture, and the inheritance of Buddhism cannot be separated from the translation and dissemination of Buddhist scriptures. The translation of Buddhist scriptures from China to India has lasted for a thousand years, which can be roughly divided into four stages. The development of Buddhist scripture translation has not only promoted the development of translation theories in our country, but also exerted a significant influence on language, thought, and art. This article will introduce the characteristics and changes of the four stages of Buddhist scripture translation, and summarize the various influences of Buddhist scripture translation on Chinese culture.

## 1. Introduction

If you compare it with a river, the long river of Chinese culture has experienced the time that the water is full or there is little water, but it has never been exhausted. The reason is that there is something new injecting into it. In this process, there are two important turning points: one is that water from India, and the other is from the West, both of which rely on translation <sup>[1]</sup>. Here “from India” refers to the Chinese translation of Indian Buddhist scriptures. This article will introduce the characteristics of Buddhist scripture translation in different periods, including representatives, translation theories, translation strategies, etc., and finally concluded influences.

## 2. Overview of Buddhist Scripture Translation in Ancient China

Since the foundation of Buddhism in ancient India from the 5th century BC to 6th century BC, Buddhism gradually began to be spread over the adjacent countries. In fact, as early as 139 BC to 120 BC, in the time when Zhang Qian paid an official visit to the countries of the Western Regions, Buddhism was possible to get into the mainland of China <sup>[2]</sup>. But it was not until the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty that Buddhism had the opportunity to be widely accepted by Chinese ruling class and common people, Buddhist sutra translation in China started from the late Eastern Han Dynasty, flourished in Tang Dynasty and declined in Song Dynasty. Buddhist scripture translation represented the first climax of Chinese translation history.

## 3. Development of Buddhist Scripture Translation in Ancient China

### 3.1 Origination of Buddhist Scripture Translation in Ancient China

Buddhism was founded from 6th century to 5th century BC in ancient India. According to official records, Buddhism was introduced into China as early as 65 AD<sup>[3]</sup>. As is well known, religion is just like spiritual opium that helps ruling class consolidates their powers and captivating the common people. No sooner than was Buddhism spread into China, it started to be rooted in the circle of ruling class. Gradually, it got the high position in the whole country. Therefore, it is necessary for Buddhists to bring in more Buddhist scriptures in order to better preach its religious creeds.

## **3.2 The four stages of Buddhist Scripture Translation**

### **3.2.1 Eastern Han Dynasty to the Western Jin Dynasty**

In this stage, the Buddhist scripture translation belonged to the pioneering period. It lasted from 148 AD to 316 AD <sup>[4]</sup>. In Late Eastern Han Dynasty, one of the earliest known translators were Zhiqian. There were also many other translators who contributed to the Buddhism scriptures translation.

The features of Buddhist scriptures translation in this stage could be summarized as follows: first, the major translators of Buddhist scripture translation were foreign monks and Chinese monks with Hu nationality aided by some Chinese intellectual believers. Second, translation was often conducted by means of dictating, that is, one translated what a foreign monk recited into Chinese by oral translation, and then another recorded the translations and did some necessary polishing and corrections. Third, as for the translation method, the translators translated in literal translation, due to lack of experience and linguistic knowledge.

### **3.2.2 Eastern Jin to Sui Dynasty**

This stage commenced in 317 AD and ended in 617 AD, in this period, the famous Buddhist scripture translators must incorporate two significant Buddhist monks as Shi Daoan and Kumarajiva.

The characteristics of Buddhism scriptures translation in this stage have three points. First, the organization of translating workshops on Buddhism scriptures translation selected outstanding Buddhist monks and scholars; thus, the private translation was firstly turned into the official translation. Second, the source text helped translators consult different sources in order to make the renderings more precise and accurate. Third, there were many developments and innovations when it came to the translation theories and methods.

### **3.2.3 Tang Dynasty**

In this stage, Buddhism reached its heyday of development in China. By realizing the power of the common people, the ruling class of Tang Dynasty took some measures so as to consolidate their ruling status by enhancing the control of ideological thought. In Tang Dynasty, Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism were all used by rulers so as to strengthen the control of social ideology. For instance, Emperor Taizong even offered to provide great support when Xuanzang insisted in translating Buddhist scriptures <sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, the translating activities in this stage reached its highest peak.

The primary features of Buddhism scriptures translation in Tang Dynasty can be generalized as two points. First, the major power of Buddhism scriptures translation relies on Chinese Buddhist monks who are proficient in both Chinese and Sanskrit and have a deep command of Buddhist doctrines. Second, the system of translation bureau in Jin and Sui period has been developed toward a higher level until Tang Dynasty.

### **3.2.4 Northern Song Dynasty**

Although there was a special agency for the translation of Buddhist scriptures in the Song Dynasty, it could not be compared with the Tang Dynasty <sup>[6]</sup>. At this time, the decline of Buddhism in India also led to the decline of Buddhist scripture translation in our country. Although the translation of Buddhist scriptures has gradually decreased, the printing and dissemination speed of Buddhist scriptures has been improved due to the application of block printing. Although, the number of translated Buddhist scriptures is almost close to those of Tang Dynasty, the quality is not the same as that of Tang Dynasty. In particular, the translations related with Buddhist creeds are difficult to comprehend.

## **4. The Translation Thoughts of Some Famous Translators**

In this section, I will briefly introduce the translation thoughts of the representative translators in

each period mentioned in the previous article.

In chronological order, the first translator is Zhi Qian, who proposed thought that sometimes names and meanings are different, and it is not easy to pass the truth. With this regard, he proposed the theory “follow the original purpose without any decoration”, which can be regarded as the original literal translation theory [7].

Then there is Dao'an's theory of “case-based study” that means translation should be centered on the original. He also put forward the “Five Lost Basics”, telling about the language form of the original text.

Early literal translations, such as the translations of Zhi Qian, were too constrained to the structure of the original text. The translations were often repeated and inverted, which did not conform to Chinese grammatical habits and had more transliterations. Later Daoan's literal translations required the translation to conform to Chinese habits. He proposed “Five Lost original” is opposed to modifying the translation to reduce the complexity.

The third one is Kumarajiva who advocates paraphrase. He thought, “After reading the group scriptures, many translations have their errors, which were result from the first version, which cannot be corresponded to the Sanskrit [7]”. Thus, he used concise language to convey the content of the scripture and appropriate simplify the translation to conform to the habits of the Chinese, making it concise and smooth compared with the old one.

Xuanzang's translation of the scriptures is opposed to blindly passing on the original text without quality, and also against excessive deletion of the original text and free interpretation of the meaning. He created a new way of Buddhism scriptures that “harmonious use of literal and free translation while seeks truth and satisfies common sense [7]”. What he pursued is “not to damage the original meaning, but also easy for readers to understand”. What he pursued was not the Sanskritized Chinese but to form a “precise and solemn” translation style [7].

After analysis, it can be seen that some translators in the previous periods admired literal translation and some preferred free translation. Since the Xuanzang period, translators have started literal translation and a new style of translation combined with free translation.

## **5. Impacts of Buddhist Scripture Translation on Translation**

### **5.1 Impacts of Buddhist Scripture Translation on Translation Theory**

In the process of glorious translation of Buddhist scriptures, we have gradually formed our own theory of Buddhist scriptures translation through constant summarization. For example, Zhiqian wrote the first theoretical text on translation. In his article he mentioned the names and meanings are different. And then Daoan's “case-based study” and his famous “Five loses”, Qian Zhongshu considered it to be the first chapter of our country's translation [7]. Liang Qichao once had such a brief generalization that firstly, the translation was not systematic and the style of translation was not established; secondly, the gateway to Buddhism was established; finally, the translation of Buddhist scriptures gradually became independent. Until the heyday of Buddhism, the development of Buddhist scriptures also reached its peak.

### **5.2 Impacts of Buddhist Scripture Translation on Translation Skills**

The main translation methods were either literal translation or free translation. Early literal translations, such as An Shigao and Zhi Qian, were too constrained to the structure of the original text. The translations were often repeated, inverted, and transliteration, which did not conform to Chinese grammatical habits. Later Daoan's literal translations required the translation to conform to Chinese habits. He proposed “Five Lost” to opposed to modifying the translation to reduce the complexity. On the other hand, early free translations, such as Xuanzang integrated Confucianism and Buddhism to borrow Chinese classics to paraphrase Buddhist scriptures. Later, new style of Buddhism scripture came out, from unpretentious literal translation to simple literal translation, the two translation techniques of literal and free translation have been developed through continuous practice and summing up experience of translators.

### **5.3 Impacts of Buddhist Scripture Translation on Translation Activities**

In the early days, the translation of Buddhist scriptures was mainly carried out by mostly foreign monks or monks of ethnic Hu descent, supplemented by Han monks. They translated firstly by foreign monks, interpreters translated into Chinese, and others were recorded into Chinese characters. In short, the entire translation process was composed of the translator, rumors, written acceptance, and justification. In the second stage, the translation shifted from private activities to official organizations. For example, during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Qin Fujian hired famous Chinese and foreign monks, who was officially in charge of translating Buddhist scriptures, and some official departments were set up to preside over the work of the Buddhist scripture translation field<sup>[8]</sup>. Later, Yao Qin and Yao Xing sent envoys to welcome Kumarajiva and created a whole set of translation field system, cooperating with more than 800 monks. When in Sui Dynasty, the Emperor Yang who asked famous monks to translate the scriptures and built the temples, setting up the Chang'an Daxingshan Temple. At this time, the translation process is relatively procedural and standardized, with order system and detailed labors' division<sup>[9]</sup>.

## **6. Impacts of Buddhist Scripture Translation on Chinese Culture**

### **6.1 Impacts of Buddhist Scripture Translation on Chinese Language**

The spreading of Buddhism in China has spanned for more than two thousand years as a religion, which had ever almost believed by all Chinese people. As a result, it played a great role in enriching Chinese language and vocabularies. In fact, many words we used today are associated with Buddhism like "convenience", "barrier", "bad habit" and many other expressions<sup>[10]</sup>.

### **6.2 Impacts of Buddhist Scripture Translation on Chinese Literature**

Buddhist influence on Chinese culture is far and wide. It affected almost all the aspects of Chinese life, be it philosophy, religion, art, literature or science. But without Buddhist sutra translation, all these would not happen. In fact, it was the Buddhist sutra translation that genuine Chinese fiction could develop a lot in the Tang Dynasty during which Buddhism flourished. In China, earlier literary works had been mere fables and naive tales. The Tang tales of marvels that were derived from Buddhist visions developed intriguing plots and vivid characterizations. It is no exaggeration to say that without knowledge of Buddhism, it is difficult to read Chinese literary works<sup>[11]</sup>.

## **7. Conclusion**

From the end of the Han Dynasty to the Song Dynasty, while the translation of Buddhist scriptures developed vigorously, and translation theory also developed step by step from multiple levels. In terms of internal research, there are discussions on translation style and statements on translation techniques and methods. From the perspective of external research, there are the establishment and perfection of the translation field system, the complete development of various translation departments, the construction of the translation institute, the training of translators, although there are still many shortcomings, but the overall framework Has been basically formed.

In addition to the translation itself, the translation of Buddhist scriptures has also made outstanding contributions to cultural exchanges. During this period, people continue to accept and absorb Indian civilization, which has a positive impact on the development model of translation, philosophy, language, literature, art, and other fields. In view of this characteristic, it can be concluded that the function of translation in serving human beings to spread knowledge and ideas is a promotion. Translators should make every effort to contribute to the development of national culture while doing their own job of translation.

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