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# Kumarajiva

## “Great Man” and Cultural Event

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### Introduction

Kumarajiva (Kumārājīva, fl. early fifth century CE) was a Central Asian Buddhist scholar-monk, generally considered one of the key actors in the millennium-long process of translation of Indic Buddhist texts into Chinese. This process represents perhaps the greatest, at least in terms of the sheer volume of texts translated, example of intercultural translation in world history, and it not only enabled the emergence of East Asian forms of Buddhism, but profoundly impacted the Sinitic cultural sphere (China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam) in all its aspects: literary, artistic, social, and political. Kumarajiva’s precise dates are still under debate. Those given most commonly are 350–409 (Tsukamoto 1954, 568–577) and 344–413 (Robinson 1967, 244–247); for more recent discussions of this problem, see Hureau (2003, 189–199). The translations associated with his name – executed both from Prakrits, i.e. vernacular forms of Sanskrit, and from early forms of Buddhist Sanskrit, into a form of classical Chinese – have enjoyed enormous success in the Sinitic tradition. This success is so great that even when, in the subsequent centuries, other scholars produced new and supposedly improved translations of the same texts, it has been the “Kumarajiva versions” that have remained in use in the devotional, exegetical, and literary life of East Asia up to the present day. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as the Sinitic Buddhist traditions have contributed to the emergence of a distinctly global modernist Buddhism, the Kumarajiva corpus of early fifth-century translations has been an implicit major presence.

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The details of Kumarajiva's life are not easily recovered from the early hagiographic sources. The earliest of these sources are the short prefaces that accompanied the translations themselves. Somewhat later, in the sixth century, there came the longer full-fledged biographies of Kumarajiva in the collections *Records from the Translation of the Canon* (*Chu sanzang jiji*) from c. 515 and the *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan*) from c. 530. While these sources, especially the later biographies, offer numerous dramatic details that complicate the picture of our protagonist (Lu 2004), in its general outline, the picture that emerges from them is unambiguous: Kumarajiva was a religious hero, a lone bright light that cut through the darkness of the earliest period of the introduction of Buddha's word (Skt. *Buddhavacana*) in China.

At the beginning of this period (roughly the second century CE), we read in our sources, the Chinese had only very fragmentary access to genuine Buddhist scriptures. Moreover, whatever texts they did have they misread through the distorting lens of native Chinese philosophical concepts. Thus, access to the salvific power of the Buddha's teachings was impeded. But then a sage was born in the "western region" (from the Chinese perspective, the land of authentic Buddhism). His youth was steeped in miraculous events, which all but assured his future role. In his compassion, the young Kumarajiva resolved to spread the teaching to the religious hinterlands of China. He journeyed east, arriving in the capital Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an) in early 402 CE, where he gave himself fully to the task of translation. Aided by a prodigious mastery of the Chinese language, as well as by his translatorial genius, within a mere 10 years he authored accurate and aesthetically refined translations of many Buddhist scriptures, a dispensation that immediately flooded China with the Buddha's true revelation. As proof that all his words were true to the originals, upon his cremation, when the fire of the funeral pyre died out, Kumarajiva's tongue emerged intact, untouched by the flames.

## Historical Background

This idealized hagiographical image has impacted not just the traditional religious reception of Kumarajiva, but also, in recent times, his popular and scholarly presentations. This image can itself be the object of scholarly interest as an example of hagiographic writing (e.g. Kieschnick 1997). However, if we want to reach the historical figure behind the ideal, we must first consider the broader context.

This context was one of intercultural exchange. Kumarajiva's birthplace, Kucha, was a thriving oasis town on the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert. It lay on the famed Silk Roads, the network of well-trodden trade routes connecting the Indian and Chinese cultural spheres and facilitating the spread of ideas, practices, and literatures – including those of Buddhism.

The Kuchean ruling elite had adopted Buddhism already in the mid-fourth century CE. Sources connect Kumarajiva to the royal clan, claiming him as the son of an Indian Brahmin and a Kuchean princess, herself a Buddhist lay devotee who had him ordained as a novice when he was seven. This enabled him to receive a thorough Buddhist education in Kucha, and to travel for further study: first to Kashmir, a stronghold of traditional Buddhist learning, and then to Kashgar, where he encountered a Mahāyāna community, and studied

texts of the Madhyamaka school. Still a young man, his reputation as a master of the Dharma spread swiftly.

To the east of Kucha, in the historically Chinese heartland, the powerful state of Later Qin (not to be confused with the Qin dynasty of the “First Emperor” which unified China in 221 BCE) was expanding its reach, and sponsoring Buddhism. Its ruler, the sinified proto-Tibetan Fu Jian (337–385), summoned to his capital at Chang’an (modern-day Xi’an) a motley assemblage of Buddhist scholars from Central Asia and India, directed them to translate scripture, and nominated a Chinese staff, led by the literatus Dao’an (312–385), to edit the output. This was of course not the first Buddhist translation team in China, but Fu Jian’s academy in the capital stands out as the first to receive direct royal patronage.

Fu Jian’s conquests continued, and in 383 he set his sights on Kucha. His general Lü Guang (337–400) broke the city’s defenses, killed the king, and took many spoils of war – among them Kumarajiva, whom Fu Jian looked to add to his translation team. Fu Jian’s power seemed to be at its peak.

But that peak turned out to be precarious. Still in 383, a disastrous campaign in the south (the battle at River Fei) dealt the regime a fatal blow. As the Qin armies crumbled, so did the authority of Fu Jian, and eventually a military man in his former employ, Yao Chang (331–394), sent in thugs to have Fu Jian strangled to death.

Kingless, the general Lü Guang proclaimed an independent polity between Kucha and Chang’an, and kept Kumarajiva at his court. Lü had little but disdain for Kumarajiva’s Buddhism, and used him apparently as a kind of court adviser, and perhaps as a supernatural protector of the city. This lasted for some 17 years.

Meanwhile, Fu Jian’s nemesis Yao Chang (r. 384–394), now the self-proclaimed “emperor” of the Later Qin, set out on a project of expansion. Eventually, in 401, his nephew, the able king Yao Xing (r. 394–416), took Lü Guang’s territories, and with them Kumarajiva. Once again the Kuchean master was on the move, but this time the captor (or, according to the Buddhist version, the liberator), was an ardent Buddhist. Yao Xing brought Kumarajiva to Chang’an, and immediately put him to work in a new translation bureau, commissioning him to translate scriptures for the salvation of the masses and glorification of the state.

This new academy was in some respects a continuation of the effort sponsored by Fu Jian some two decades earlier – both were large officially sponsored academies in the capital of a state with imperial aspirations – but this new one was far grander still in scale and ambition. The Yaos summoned the best scholar-monks from the realm to join in as scribes and assistants – some of them veterans trained under Dao’an, in Fu Jian’s academy, a generation prior. Kumarajiva and the team were housed first in repurposed royal precincts on the outskirts of the city, and then in a newly constructed compound in Chang’an proper. A member of the royal clan would then order the translation of a specific text. Once translation work began, it was a grand public event, open to a large assembly of monks and laypersons, from 500 to 3000 strong. Translation sessions may have been scheduled to coincide with the fortnightly *poṣadha* ceremonies (Hureau 2006), a solemn ritual during which the monks would gather for communal recitation of the rules of monastic life. During the sessions, Kumarajiva would lecture to the assembly on the contents of the text (Cao 1990, 96–103; Lo 2002). These lectures could take the form of

question-and-answer exchanges between him and prominent members of the gathering, or even the royal sponsor himself, who would often be present, at least in the initial phases, seated alongside the foreign master and “holding the manuscript” in a symbolically potent gesture. These lectures and debates would in some cases be written down by those in attendance, and, edited as “commentaries” (*shu*), distributed throughout the regime and beyond. This enterprise continued for some 10 years.

A number of factors contributed to its success. Under Yao rule the first decade of the fifth century was a time of stability in an otherwise notoriously chaotic period. Moreover, the Yaos were not mere *pro forma* devotees. Rather, personally involved in the translation activities, they showed strong interest in even some of the more abstruse problems of doctrine (as evidenced by the letters Yao Xing exchanged with Kumarajiva, which partially survive). Finally, the Chang’an area was a repository of Buddhist scholastic talent going back to Dao’an and, as the capital at the hub of an extensive communications network, the city had access to the entire range of Buddhist texts in Chinese produced by that time.

While it was very successful as long as it lasted, the Chang’an work of translation ceased just as swiftly as it had begun. Sometime around 410, Kumarajiva fell ill (perhaps suffering an apoplectic stroke), and died shortly after. Translation activity came to a halt, and many of the leading figures left to offer their talents elsewhere. Yao Xing died in 416, and his regime collapsed. The academy was no more.

### Texts Translated

Although the translation project was short-lived, its products remain substantial. According to our earliest sources, during this period the academy translated some 30 scriptures in a total of roughly 300 scrolls, though recent critical scholarship has revised that number somewhat downwards (Kimura 1986). By comparison, prior to Kumarajiva the famous translator Zhi Qian (fl. c. 225) has to his name some 48 fascicles worth of translation (36 texts). And although Kumarajiva’s great predecessor in Chang’an, Dharmarakṣa (233–310), is credited with as many as 154 texts in 309 fascicles – slightly more than Kumarajiva – this was spread over a career some four times longer. For its time then, the output of the academy was unprecedented.

The texts translated in the academy can be tentatively divided into three main categories. The first is that of roughly a dozen Mahayana (Mahāyāna) sutras not previously translated into Chinese. Among them, one of the most influential is the text known as the *Amitābhasūtra* or the “shorter Sukhāvativyūha” (Cn. *Amituo jing*). It centers on exuberant depictions of a Buddhist “pure land,” the marvelous world Sukhāvātī (Blissful), presided over by the Buddha Amitabha (Amitābha). Rebirth there, guaranteed to anyone who faithfully recollects Amitabha’s name, ensures that one will attain buddhahood within just one lifetime. This scripture would later, from the sixth century on, be considered one of the three texts central to “Pure Land” religiosity in China and in Japan.

The second is that of *śāstras*, or philosophical treatises (Cn. *lun*), mainly, for the first time in China, those of Mahayana (chiefly Madhyamaka) orientation. This category includes translations of two works attributed to the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna (Nāgārjuna) (c. 150–250), i.e. the *Treatise on the Middle* (Cn. *Zhonglun*; Skt. *Madhyamakakārikā*) and,

somewhat more controversially attributed, the *Twelve Gates Treatise* (Cn. *Shi'er men lun*; Skt. \**Dvadaśamukha*<sup>1</sup>); as well as of one work traditionally attributed to his disciple Āryadeva, the *Treatise in One Hundred (Verses)* (Cn. *Bailun*; Skt. \**Śataśāstra*). Later polemicists built on Kumarajiva's connection to these three texts in their efforts to construct him, retrospectively, as the founder of a "Three Treatise" (Cn. *Sanlun*; Jp. *Sanron*; K. *Sam non*) lineage of exegesis. A final text belonging to this category is the *Treatise on Establishing the Real* (Cn. *Chengshi lun*; Skt. \**Tattvasiddhi*). Its anomalous combination of Madhyamaka elements with more traditional Abhidharma categories attracted much exegetical activity in East Asia up until the sixth century.

Here we may also include the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom* (Cn. *Da zhidu lun*; Skt. \**Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*), in 100 scrolls, a vast heterogeneous encyclopedia that has become one of the key sources for the modern study of Buddhism in general (most particularly thanks to its accessibility in the partial translation of Lamotte 1944–1980), and that remains a definitive reference work for scholastic debates within the Chinese tradition up to this day. Its traditional attribution to Nagarjuna is generally distrusted. Some scholars have argued that it may be not simply a translation, but a hybrid composition in which Kumarajiva's own voice and those of his Chinese collaborators, as echoes of the debates and the lectures from the academy, perform a key role (e.g. Chou 2004).

In between these two categories we may place Kumarajiva's manuals for the cultivation of *dhyāna* (meditation). These manuals were translations, not of any single text but of *dhyāna*-related passages extracted from various Indic canonical and extracanonical Buddhist writings. Whether these compilations were assembled by Kumarajiva himself, or whether they reflect instead the expectations of the Chinese audiences, continues to be discussed. These manuals would form the basis of the mainstream Chinese Buddhist meditation theory until their critique by early Chan masters in the eighth century (Greene 2012, esp. 77ff.). Kumarajiva also contributed to the long process of translation of a code of rules of monastic discipline (Cn. *Shisong li*; Skt. *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya*), although he has never been considered either in Chinese typologies or by modern scholars as a specialist in this genre.

The third category is that of *retranslations*, i.e. new renditions of some six scriptures already translated into Chinese prior to Kumarajiva's time and enjoying considerable popularity. Included here are such texts as the *Teaching of Vimalakirti*, which, on account of its wit and dramatic structure, as well as of its perceived embrace of the ideal of a householder saint, became an instant favorite among the cultured medieval Chinese gentry from the time of its first translation. Also of immense significance are the *Perfection of Wisdom* (Cn. *Banruo jing*; Skt. *Prajñāpāramitā*) sutras, whose central concept of emptiness has remained a staple of all forms of Chinese Buddhist philosophical literature until today. Last but not least is the *Lotus Sutra*, whose allegories of the prodigal son, of the phantom city, and of the burning house left a permanent mark on literature and the arts, and whose doctrine of universal Buddhahood fundamentally influenced the development of Sinitic Buddhist doctrinal systems, and of institutions: Tiantai (Jp. Tendai), Nichiren, and modern Japanese "new religions" such as Soka Gakkai. Kumarajiva's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* has been translated repeatedly in the past century or so, excerpted and summarized, and in this respect may legitimately lay claim to be one of the most influential Buddhist texts in modern times.

Scriptures in this category of retranslations had first been translated into Chinese in the third and fourth centuries under such translators as Zhi Qian and Dharmarakṣa. The “Kumarajīva” retranslations displaced the older versions, and in subsequent periods were used to the practical exclusion of all others.

While not itself a retranslation, a particularly important member of the Kumarajīva corpus of *Perfection of Wisdom* translations is the short scripture popularly known as the *Diamond Sutra* (Cn. *Jingang banruo jing*; Skt. *Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā*). A hard-hitting critique of conventional ways of knowing, the *Diamond* inspired some 80 commentaries in China alone. Many of them evinced particular interest in the text’s signature formula – “A is not A, therefore it is A” – which in various forms occurs in the text some 30 times, and which was often read as hinting at some paradoxical transcendent truth. The text also presented itself as a potent magical object, promising supernatural protection to those who “accept and uphold it,” a feature that inspired an entire genre of miracle stories with the text itself as the main protagonist (Ho 2013). The world’s oldest surviving printed book is a copy of the Kumarajīva *Diamond Sutra*, dated to 868, held in the British Museum.

### Kumarajīva the Translator?

In addition to the vast number of commentaries and subcommentaries written to these texts over the centuries, as well as to the more indirect forms of influence they exerted in the Sinitic cultural sphere, one particular aspect of their legacy merits special attention.

This is the fact that, while in later centuries some scholars would retranslate the Kumarajīva translations in an effort to improve them (just as the Kumarajīva academy had reworked some texts that had been in circulation before him), these supposedly better renditions never took hold.

The case of Xuanzang (600/602–664) is instructive. The second great translator in the Chinese Buddhist tradition, Xuanzang is perhaps most famous for having traveled to India in search of authentic texts, on the basis of which he intended to rectify what he considered a misguided Chinese understanding of Buddhism. (This fame, however, is owed not primarily to the historical Xuanzang but to the fictionalization of his story in the wildly popular sixteenth-century novel *Journey to the West* [Cn. *Xi you ji*]). Part of Xuanzang’s enormous translatorial output consists of retranslations of key “Kumarajīva” texts. In his theoretical writings on translation, presenting his own works as superior, Xuanzang directly attacked the Kumarajīva versions – which he respectfully though critically dubbed “old” (*gu*) – for taking too much license with the originals. However, although Xuanzang was a figure of immense authority, enjoying personal support from the emperor of the great Tang Empire, and although modern scholars value his translations for their fidelity to their Indian sources, the Xuanzang versions never became even remotely as successful as those of his predecessor.

Confronted with this fact, one may be tempted to invoke the traditional idealized image of Kumarajīva sketched out at the outset of this chapter: Kumarajīva’s *longue durée* success was surely a result of his missionary zeal, his mastery of Chinese, and his prodigious talent in translation.



This approach, however, would be misguided. The missionary impulse that the pious historians ascribe to Kumarajiva is simply not evidenced by a critical reading of the sources, nor by a consideration of the relevant context. Instead, Kumarajiva's gradual drift eastwards – first from Kucha to the court of Lü Guang (383–401), and then on to Chang'an as the *purohita* of the Yao regime (402–death) – seems clearly to have been a function of political, social, and military factors quite independent of Kumarajiva's own intentions: he did not go, he was taken. And, while as remarked previously, the traditional accounts of his life are not transparent windows onto historical reality, it may be that we should give at least some credit to such episodes as that in which he confesses that he feels among the Chinese like a “bird with clipped wings,” or that in which he compares translating into Chinese to feeding pre-masticated food to others: not only is the original taste lost, the recipient will end up sick. Given the historical circumstances, all this may be somewhat more than mere literary fiction (on the “psychological distance” Kumarajiva may have felt toward his adopted home, see also Lu 2004, 31–32).

A second problem is that of Kumarajiva's linguistic capacity. What exactly was the extent of his knowledge of Chinese?

As has been mentioned above, an essential element of his traditional image is that, in contrast to foreign translators in China before him, Kumarajiva actually mastered Chinese, which allowed him to translate without dependence on Chinese collaborators, and which ensured a refined literary quality to the final products. Indeed, in his biographies we read that his skill was so advanced that he could effortlessly compose Chinese poetry in full conformity to the standard rules of Chinese poetic prosody! Such assertions have led scholars to speculate that Kumarajiva must have learned the language during his 17 years at the court of Lü Guang.

But we must take such claims critically. In principle, in the early period most foreign translators in China could not even speak Chinese (in whatever form may have been relevant for their location, keeping in mind that even in contemporary times there is no such thing as a single Chinese spoken language, in contrast to the largely unified written form). We must also distinguish the knowledge of those few who did have some competence in spoken Chinese (even if only passive) from knowledge of the complex Chinese writing system. It is yet another step, and a very large one indeed, to the ability to compose texts in adherence to the cultural and literary norms which always defined literacy in traditional China: no foreign monk that we know of ever possessed this ability (see Funayama 2013, 87–120; cf. Zürcher [1999] 2013, 561–562). Seeming exceptions to this rule prior to Kumarajiva's time were translators like Zhi Qian (fl. c. 225) or Zhu Shulan (mid-third century), who had sufficient facility with the written language to be able to translate independently. Both, however, while ethnically foreign, were born and raised in culturally Chinese territory, and so were fully bicultural. As such, they were not “foreign monks” in the terms sketched above. In principle then, when we encounter claims of Kumarajiva's prowess in Chinese, we must be skeptical.

This skepticism is justified by our earliest relevant evidence, the prefaces written by Kumarajiva's Chinese collaborators, which show that Kumarajiva's facility with Chinese was limited, especially in his early years in Chang'an. The “scribe” Sengrui, for instance, in his preface to the translation of the sutra *Viśeṣacintibrahmapariṣṭhā* (402), opines that Kumarajiva mistranslated the title of this scripture, for the simple reason that “surely

he had not mastered the Qin [Chinese] language.” Some two years later Sengrui reiterates the same sentiment in his preface to the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*, claiming that “the Dharma Master [Kumarajiva] had only a general grasp of the Qin language.” Others in the academy – e.g. Sengzhao in his preface to the *Treatise in One Hundred Verses* – expressed similar views.

Moreover, while Kumarajiva’s ability to speak and understand spoken Chinese no doubt improved during his decade-long stay in Chang’an, there is no reliable evidence that he ever wrote independently in Chinese (although compare Hureau 2006, 94–96, and Funayama 2013, 96, for a different position). The original writings attributed to him – his letters to the prominent monk Huiyuan (334–416), to the king Yao Xing, and to the statesman and lay follower Wang Mi (360–407), “his” explanations included in the commentary to the *Teaching of Vimalakirti*, as well as his lost *Treatise on the Mark of the Real* (Cn. *Shixiang lun*) – were in all likelihood produced with the help of his Chinese collaborators (Zürcher 2007, 409n85), or, in the case of a handful of poems, attributed to him in later times (Lu 2004, 32–35).

If then the “Kumarajiva translations” are renowned for, and successful thanks to, their polished literary quality, this feature can only be credited, ultimately, to his Chinese collaborators. In order to understand the role of these collaborators, and its implications for the translations, we must consider the division of labor in the academy.

## The Academy

In the Chang’an academy – as in others like it that would come later – translation was carried out by committee. The division of labor for any particular translation task could be quite complex, but we can reduce the range of diverse positions to three. The first was that of the “chief of translation” (*yizhu*). This function was usually assigned to a high-ranking foreign monk. The *yizhu*’s main task was to recite the base text (*ben*) in its original language, either from a manuscript or from memory, an act the Chinese sources refer to as “bringing out” or “producing” (*chu*) the text. In addition, the *yizhu*’s role was also ceremonial, in that his recitation of the text was often a ritually charged event that gave the translation a seal of authenticity, and because the foreign master was seen as endowed with the charisma of the Buddhist homeland.

The second key position was that of the “translator” proper (*yi*; but also “transmitter of the words” [*chuanyan*], “verbal transmitter” [*kouchuan*], etc.). The *yi*’s job was to put the foreign text, orally “produced” by the *yizhu*, into rudimentary Chinese – also usually in speech, not yet in writing, and often in a crude, word-for-word fashion. This function would be assigned either to a foreigner with a basic grasp of spoken Chinese, or to a Chinese with some facility with the spoken Indic (which, as above, need not have been Sanskrit as such) language. In the process, the *yi* would ask questions of the *yizhu* regarding the contents, or otherwise mediate questions from the audience. The resulting discussions were not just *post facto* exegeses of a finished product, but were crucial to the formation of the translation itself.

By all accounts, Kumarajiva combined in one person the functions of *yizhu* and *yi*. His main position at the academy was that of the *yizhu*, but he also carried out the oral



translation into basic Chinese: contemporaneous sources say he “held the Indic text in his hands, and proclaimed [the meaning] in Qin [i.e. Chinese] speech.”

The third main function was that of the “scribe” (Cn. *bishou*) or “stylist” (Cn. *chouwen*; lit. “embellisher of the writing”). The scribe’s (or better, the scribes’) role was first to record the oral translation – to “hold the brush” – and then, second, to revise and edit it in consultation with other members of the team, and with the notes taken during the proceedings, until a conceptually and stylistically satisfactory product was obtained. Despite the humble-sounding term “scribe,” it was precisely the scribe(s) that gave the text the actual written, stylistic, and literary form in which it would be published, circulated, and transmitted.

In sum, then, within the institutional context of the translation academy, Kumarajiva’s role was considerably more limited than the traditional narrative suggests (see Zürcher [1999] 2013, 560–562; Nattier 2008, 19–20). He did “bring out” the text and offer an initial oral translation, but already at this early stage his own output was mediated by the assembly, whose questions and discussions impacted the text’s expression and reception. Further, once the resulting interpretation of the source text was first written down by the scribes in Chinese, the process of turning the text from a rough draft into a refined literary artifact could well have continued without Kumarajiva’s involvement, and, as above, it is highly likely that he would not have been in any position to make suggestions at this stage in the process. This final product was then twice removed from “the original”: first by its oral translation and its mediation through public discussion, and second by the written transformation of the resulting translation by the scribes and polishers.

One may be inclined to think that all these factors – Kumarajiva’s relatively restricted role in the translation process, his limited capacity in Chinese, and his apparent lack of an organizing missionary impulse (since he was apparently an unwilling captive) – would have weakened the Kumarajiva translation effort, and compromised the chances of it making a lasting impact.

However, just the opposite may in fact be true. Perhaps it was just the openness of the process – its multi-stage character, the variety of its participants, and above all its mediation through oral performance and discussion – that rendered its products culturally flexible and thus resilient over time. The fact that Kumarajiva was not *the* one, singular translator, that indeed the work of translation was not dominated by any single individual, meant that many individuals contributed to it – and those individuals brought with them a wide range of perspectives, backgrounds, experiences, and linguistic and literary competencies, all of which contributed to a diffused but nonetheless effective kind of authorship.

Xuanzang, by contrast, worked in a very different type of translation academy (see Funayama 2006, 40). This different type was a much more circumscribed affair. Its membership was small, restricted to only a handful of specialists. The division of labor was accordingly limited, and there was no lecturing or debate accompanying the translation work. All this, along with the fact that Xuanzang himself knew Sanskrit well, thanks to his long study in India at the famous Nālandā monastic university, meant that the transmission between source and target text was much more direct, and thus much more subject to the control of one individual.

## Features of Translations

Considering the dynamics of the Chang'an translation academy may help us account for some of the unique features of the texts produced there.

One such feature is abridgment or condensation. In general, the medieval Chinese favored concision, and found the exuberant, flowing style of Indic sutras crass. Accordingly, the Chang'an team tended to remove elements perceived as too exotic or too prolix. A famous case is that of the *Great Treatise on the Perfection of Wisdom*. According to traditional accounts, most likely to some extent hyperbolic, the original would have run to 1000 scrolls in translation, but the team cut that down to a "mere" 100 scrolls. Condensation was also applied on the level of vocabulary and style, and resulted in elegantly economical renditions (for one much-discussed example, see Zacchetti 2015, 187n65).

The opposite of abridgment is the addition of interpretive glosses designed to ease reading in line with Chinese philosophical sensibilities. Since in adding these glosses the translators did not mark them as such, the glosses blended with the translation proper, making the translation less "exact" but nonetheless conceptually compelling in the Chinese context. The *Diamond Sutra's* "signature formula" may even be a case of just such insertion (Harrison 2010), and thus in a sense of mistranslation – albeit one that would prove exegetically very potent indeed!

All translations contain errors, but not everything which looks to us like an error is necessarily unintentional. In translating a specific Indic term, translators might opt for a Chinese term that, while not accurate as a translation as such, was clearly the result of conscious interpretive agenda. A particularly interesting case is the term *shi xiang*, which was used to render the Sanskrit *bbūta-samjñā*. While the Sanskrit means simply "correct perception," the Chinese means "mark (or characteristic) of the real," resulting in a robustly ontological term, which later commentaries engaged as referring to an ultimate principle of reality or of the mind (Zacchetti 2015).

All these features – condensation, glossing, terminological modification – help us understand Kumarajiva not as the "great man" singularly in charge of a translation project, but rather as indexical of a cultural event, the strength of which was precisely in its diffusion, its lack of a central steering authority. Instead of speaking of "Kumarajiva's translations" and their "free style" (as a factor that contributed to their popularity), it is perhaps more accurate to speak of an institutional setting – that of the translation academy – that necessarily led to the formation of texts that did not follow "the original" text in any strict way, but which were nonetheless, or just for this reason, particularly well-adjusted to the literary, cultural, and linguistic sensibilities of the host culture.

## Canonization

Although we have argued that it is not a helpful heuristic, the "great man" approach did dominate the later bibliographical tradition. Faced with the need to systematize the ever growing body of texts, bibliographers from Sengyou onwards settled for the strategy of attaching to each translation (many of which in the early period were anonymous) the name of just a single translator (usually that of a *yizhu*), a strategy that also responded to

the religious demand for sages from the Buddha's homeland, and to the Chinese need for patriarchal "masters" as originators of tradition.

Once Kumarajiva became identified as "the" singular translator of the texts from the academy, the number of works attributed to him skyrocketed: from the initial 30 or so, by the late sixth century it more than trebled to a total of 98. Not just the quantity, but also the quality, of "his" translations is inflated. Sengyou presents them as "new," as marking a stylistic and lexical break with the past, despite the fact that any comparative reading swiftly reveals that the "new" translations from the Chang'an team were in some cases little more than careful adaptations of extant materials (Ch'en 1960, 180; Harrison 2008).

In asserting the "newness" of the Kumarajiva corpus, Sengyou was relying on the earlier prefaces which, as is the convention of the genre, praise their target texts as in all respects supreme. These prefaces may have been instrumental to the later reception of the Kumarajiva corpus. In contrast to the translations themselves, which while perhaps in their own way elegant are clearly "foreign" in that they preserved elements of the exotically oral character of the Indic originals (Nattier 2008, 22–23), the prefaces were written in refined literary Chinese (*wenyan*), teeming with deft allusions to the Chinese literary classics, the very hallmark of educated composition in China. In the text-centered Chinese culture, this fact would have made them, at least to educated elite readers, more appealing than the translations. In addition, the prefaces contain accessible summaries of the "central meaning" of the often long and convoluted target scripture, and these summaries in turn would have influenced the ways in which the text would have been read. Moreover, the very brevity of the prefaces would have made them easy to reproduce, copy, and circulate in an economy of manuscripts.

Last but not least, the prefaces operated with what has been called the "canon narrative" (Zacchetti 2016), a trope whereby the preface writer narratively positions the target text in a meaningful relation to other texts from the academy, and then ideally to all available Buddhist literature, creating in effect a higher-order totality, complete, closed, and timeless – a canon. Indeed, the very genre of the preface was borrowed by the Chinese Buddhists from the native Chinese Ruist (Confucian) literary tradition, where it is associated historically with the grand canon-building project of the Han empire (Zacchetti 2016, 92n63), a project to preserve the totality of authoritative "sagely writings," which are always at risk of vanishing from the world. That the Chinese Buddhists chose to appropriate this genre, and at the time that they did, and that the Daoists for instance did not, is perhaps an indication that they wanted to see themselves, and wanted to be seen, as partaking in this same tradition of sagely writing. The Kumarajiva texts, in as much as they were inscribed in the prefaces into such an ideal canon, took on an entirely new dimension of meaning.

In sum then, both the actual composition of "Kumarajiva's" translations, and their later reception as mediated by the canonizing rhetoric of the prefaces, were shaped decisively by the members of the academy, mainly the scribes – those who "held the brush." Holding the brush meant, then, wielding considerable influence. When the hagiographies tell us that, upon Kumarajiva's cremation, his tongue emerged intact – able, we assume, to continue to do its work of conveying in Chinese the Buddha's true teaching – this is in a sense quite true: this Indic tongue indeed continued to live on through the Chinese writing brush, and continues to speak to us today.

SEE ALSO: Introduction to World Literature Third Millennium BCE to 600 CE; Echoes of the Classics in the Voice of Confucius; Shifting Paradigms in Orality, Literacy, and Literature; Wisdom and Mysticism; “Home” and “Abroad” in Medieval Travel and Trade Narratives; The Popular Chinese Novel; Literary Translation in the Modern World

## NOTE

- 1 The asterisks here and throughout indicate that the romanized titles given are a hypothetical reconstruction: no Sanskrit witnesses of these texts are available, nor are there references to such texts in the extant Sanskrit literature, so we can only rely on the title of the Chinese translation to reconstruct (imagine) what the Sanskrit “original” title may have been.

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