Buddhist Scripture Translation in the New Millennium

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Abstract

Buddhist scripture translation (hereinafter BST) has a long history. It can be traced back to the first millennium CE, when a number of scriptures were translated from Sanskrit and Central Asian languages into classical Chinese. Despite its decline in the second millennium, BST has revived in recent years. For instance, manuscripts newly discovered in India as well as the existing Chinese tripitaka (collections of Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures) have been rendered into modern languages. To explore this changing face of BST in the new millennium, this paper discusses features of modern BST from the following perspectives: the variety of translation projects launched, the function of new translations, the diversity of translators, and the translation methods adopted. Moreover, since rapid advancements in information technology have contributed to the revitalization of BST, my paper also examines the use of computer tools in scripture translation.

Introduction

Buddhist Scripture Translation (BST), which began in the second century CE, is one of the earliest large-scale translation activities in China. It involved the translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Central Asian Languages into classical Chinese by translator monks. It not only facilitated the dissemination of Buddhist teachings in East Asia, but stimulated the development of Chinese literature, art and philosophy.

Despite its great impact in the first millennium, BST declined in the eleventh century CE. Stefano Zacchetti (2005, p.2) pointed out that scripture translation in China ended in the Northern Song (11th century). Eva Hung and David Pollard (2001) also stated that there was “a rapid decline in Buddhist translation activities towards the 1050s” (p. 367).

But scripture translation is not dead. In fact, it has revived since the 19th century, and it has transformed itself into a global enterprise. Now, manuscripts newly discovered in India and the existing Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures are rendered into modern languages. Translators from around the world dedicate themselves to scripture translation. Moreover, electronic scriptures and computer tools play a significant role in the process of translation.
What then is BST in the new millennium? Why do scripture translators make new translations? How do they translate? These questions about modern BST have not yet been examined much, although attention has been paid to scripture translation in ancient China. In this regard, this paper explores the changing face of BST. It discusses different types of scripture translation activities, motivations for translation, and translation strategies adopted by translators. It also examines the use of computer tools in translation. It is hoped that this paper may lead to a more complete understanding of scripture translation. Such an understanding may be of importance in explaining how this seemingly old form of translation activity survives in the new era by constantly adapting itself to the changing world.

A General Picture of BST (2nd century CE – 19th century CE)

Our focus here is scripture translation in the new millennium, yet it would be useful to first construct a general picture of BST, including what BST is, what ancient BST was, why BST declined, and how BST has revived.

BST, as its name suggests, involves the translation of Buddhist texts from one language into another. Basically, these texts can be divided into three categories: sūtra, vinaya, and śāstra. Sūtra, the basic teachings of the Buddha, refers to the Dharma spoken by the Buddha. Vinaya is a collection of monastic rules which should be followed by Buddhist monks. Śāstra stands for commentaries written by monks and scholars on sūtras and on Buddhist doctrine. The three kinds of scriptures are called tripiṭaka, which literally means the “Three Baskets” of the Buddhist canon.

Buddhist Scripture Translation first thrived in ancient China. This ancient form of BST can be divided into three phases: “Eastern Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms Period (c. 148-265); Jin Dynasty and the Northern and Southern Dynasties (c. 265-589); and Sui Dynasty, Tang Dynasty and Northern Song Dynasty (c. 589-1100)” (Hung & Pollard, 2001, p. 366). Generally speaking, the three phases were characterized by the following: First, scriptures were normally translated by translation teams rather than by individual translators. These teams were large in scale and consisted of a translator-in-chief and translation assistants. Well-known scripture translators like Kumārajīva (344-413) and Xuanzang (602-664) were leaders of such translation teams. Second, most translation activities were supported by the government. To monitor the progress of translation, royal family members and government officials sometimes served as team
members as well. Third, the function of translated scriptures was more than disseminating the Buddha’s teachings. It was believed that the translations carried the same spiritual (and even supernatural) power as their source texts did. As a result, the Chinese translations were recited and chanted in Buddhist rituals by monks and lay disciples for peace, comfort, and spiritual progress.

The translation of Buddhist scriptures in China, however, declined in the 11th century because of “the decline of Buddhism in India as well as a change in government policy (Hung & Pollard, 2001, p. 367)” . Consequently, between the 12th century and the late 18th century, there were few scripture translation projects.

But BST prospers again. Its revival was marked by the beginning of scripture translation activities in the West in the 19th century. In England, for example, different Buddhist texts were translated into English (Almond, 1988, cited by Lie, 2000, p. 190). One of the most important translations was the Sacred Books of the Buddhists Series edited by F. Max Müller and first published in 1895 (Lie, 2000, p. 191).

Scripture Translation in the New Millennium

The revival continued in the 20th century. With the growing interest in the Buddha’s teachings among scholars and laypeople, BST not only grew steadily in the West, but also regained its momentum in China. It has become even more active since the late 1990s, thanks to the rapid digitalization of traditional paper-based tipitaka and the worldwide distribution of electronic scriptures on the Internet. Now, at the dawn of the third millennium, scripture translation continues to flourish. It is characterised by the following:

Translation Projects

Scripture translation in the new era is characterized by the variety of translation projects launched. These projects can be categorized into four types: The first type refers to the translation of Sanskrit and Pāli scriptures into modern languages. Buddhist texts in Sanskrit and Pāli are rendered into modern languages, including Western languages and modern Chinese. For example, Wisdom Publications, a non-profit publisher, have published English translations of Pāli scriptures since 1995. In addition, since 2004, the Chi Lin Nunnery in Hong Kong has supported a translation group for the translation of scriptures from Pāli into Chinese (Anuruddha, 2005, p. 1). Individual scholars in the field of Buddhist Studies, such as Tony K. Lin and Xiyong Tan, have also
devoted themselves to translating Sanskrit texts into modern Chinese.

The second type is the re-translation of Chinese and Tibetan translated scriptures. In this case, classical Chinese and Tibetan translations of Buddhist scriptures are translated into modern languages. Large-scale projects of this kind include the ongoing construction of an English *tripitaka* initiated by the Numata Centre for Buddhist Translation and Research in Berkeley, California (Numata, 2008a) and the translation of the Chinese *tripitaka* into Vietnamese by members of the Tuệ Quang Wisdom Light Foundation in the States since 2002 (Tuệ Quang, 2006, p. 3). The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology of Soka University in Japan has also published a wide range of translations of Buddhist texts written by prominent Chinese monks in the first millennium.

The third type is the transliteration of scriptures. This involves the transliteration and annotation of newly-discovered manuscripts written in ancient characters such as Siddha script. For example, in 2004, scholars from Taisho University in Japan published the transliterated text of *Vimalakirtinirdesa*, a Sanskrit scripture discovered at the Potala Palace in 1999.\(^5\) Again in 2004, Noriyuki Kudo (2004) from Soka University transliterated and annotated all the original Sanskrit manuscripts of the *Karmavibhaga* which had been found in Nepal (p. vii).

The fourth kind is the restoration of Buddhist texts in Sanskrit. This is necessary because a number of Sanskrit source scriptures are now incomplete or lost. Therefore, Chinese and Tibetan translations of scriptures are now translated back into Sanskrit. According to Min Bahadur Shakya (2008, section VIII), scholars from institutes such as the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, Delhi University, and K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute have contributed to the reconstruction of Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures from Tibetan texts.

**Purposes of Translation**

New translation projects are launched for different reasons. Some of the projects are for the general public. They aim to propagate the Dharma by making Buddhist texts available to a wider audience. The translations, therefore, target not only experienced readers, but also ones who are unacquainted with the Buddhist teachings. Bhikkhu Bodhi’s *In the Buddha’s Words*, a collection of selected discourses from the Pāli *tripitaka*, is an example. He stated that his book was for both “newcomers to Early Buddhist literature” and readers who were
“already acquainted with sutras” (2005, p. x). Meanwhile, the book was to “convey the sheer breadth and range of the Buddha’s wisdom” (2005, p. xi).

Some projects are for academic purposes. The translated scriptures help investigate and illustrate Buddhist ideas and their development. For instance, when tracing the origin of the Middle-way practice or explaining the idea of the five aggregates, researchers may quote Buddhist scriptures to support their views; translation is, therefore, necessary for readers who do not understand the source languages. The translations may also provide a basis for in-depth textual analysis. For instance, Noriyuki Kudo (2004, p. vii) transliterated the Karmavibhaga to “provide the fundamental materials for the study on” that Buddhist text. Stefano Zacchetti (2005) translated one of the earliest Chinese translations of the Larger Prajñāpāramitā into English so that he was able to study that Chinese version of the scripture “in as much detail as possible” (pp. 4-7).

New translations function differently according to the motivation for translation, but it should be pointed out that they are seldom intended to replace their original texts, whether the source scriptures are Sanskrit originals or old translations produced by ancient translators, and whether the translations are for general readers or for experienced readers. Instead of being chanted in religious rituals, the modern translations are considered to be a bridge between readers and the classical texts. In other words, while Pāli and Sanskrit scriptures as well as classical Chinese translations are still the foundation for Buddhist practices and festivals⁶, the new translations help their readers study the source texts and traditional translations. This is obvious in the case of translating scriptures into modern Chinese. The translators often provide both the source text and the target text at the same time; this enables readers to refer back to the original as they read the translation.

Translators

Because of the diversity of translation projects, scripture translators are now from different backgrounds and are no longer limited to monks. Instead, monks, scholars and lay disciples from all over the world contribute to scripture translation. They receive support from Buddhist organizations (e.g. The Chi Lin Nunnery in Hong Kong) and institutes (e.g. Soka University and the Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research); the government, however, is seldom the major supporter, despite its important role in promoting ancient
scripture translation activities.

There is another difference between ancient translators and modern translators. Unlike ancient translation teams, modern scripture translators usually work individually. For example, translations published by Wisdom Publications and the Namata Centre are often done by individual translators. Most modern Chinese versions of scriptures are also completed and annotated by individual monks and researchers. Sometimes there are translation teams, like the team supported by the Chi Lin Nunnery, but the translators still work independently. Rather than collaboratively working on the same piece of source text, they divide the source text into parts, and each translator is responsible for his or her part.

Translation Strategies

There are a few translation strategies which are commonly adopted by modern scripture translators. They usually refer to multiple versions of a source text as well as Buddhist scriptures relating to it. On the one hand, by comparing different versions of a text, translators make corrections to the current source text, which may be prone to mistakes such as missing characters. On the other hand, translators interpret the source text by consulting its translations in other languages or commentaries on it.

Translators also make extensive use of notes and explanatory paragraphs. In ancient China, translators-in-chief explained their translations by delivering public lectures and writing commentaries. Now, translators do so by providing notes and supplementary texts such as prefaces and introductory passages instead. The explanatory texts usually justify translation decisions, provide background information concerning the teachings involved in the scripture, and explain how Buddhists interpret the scripture and technical terms differently. Some translators, particularly those who translate for general readers, even share their views on Buddhist doctrine by adding introductory passages to their translations.

Furthermore, scripture translators tend to follow the form of the source text as closely as possible. In some cases, they even add a number of marks to indicate changes made to the translation – translators in ancient China seldom did so. An example from Zacchetti’s *In Praise of the Light* is shown in Figure 1. The translator added brackets to his new translation in English to try to preserve the Chinese structure of the source text:
While scripture translators attempt to stay close to the syntax of the source text, they may abridge the text by omitting repeated sentences and paragraphs. It is common that Buddhist scriptures repeat themselves – this may be due to the “oral transmission” of scriptures in the past (Bodhi, 2005, p. 14). Translators, therefore, often select the most important part of the source text and only translate the non-repetitive parts. For example, Bhikkhu Bodhi (2005) used ellipsis points in his In the Buddha’s Words to replace some of the repeated expressions in the source texts and to “avoid excessive repetitiveness in the translation” (p. 14).

Transliteration is also very common. Translators who translate scriptures into Western languages usually borrow Buddhist terms directly from Sanskrit or Pāli, rather than translating them semantically. This is also illustrated in Figure 1, where a number of Sanskrit transliterations are present. The use of transliterated terms in modern Chinese translations is slightly different, however. Instead of transliterating terms from Sanskrit into modern Chinese, the translators often follow traditional Chinese transliterations suggested by ancient translators such as Kumārajīva and Xuanzang. Classical transliterations such as bore (prajñā) and pusa (Bodhisattva) are prevalent in new Chinese translations.

Use of electronic resources

The use of computer tools is a prominent feature of scripture translation in the new millennium. First of all, databases of digitalized
scripts are used. Examples include (1) the Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon, (2) the Pāli Canon Online Database, and (3) the Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA) Tripitaka. These databases have become popular sources of Buddhist texts and reference works. For example, Noriyuki Kudo (2004), when transliterating the Karmavibhaga, “utilized a number of the digitalized databases” (p. xii). The Trụ Quang Wisdom Light Foundation also took the CBETA Tripitaka as the source text (Trụ Quang, 2006, p. 3).

Along with the e-tripitaka, digitalized general and specialized dictionaries are available for translators. Important general dictionaries include Cologne Digital Sanskrit Dictionaries completed by the Institute of Indology and Tamil Studies of Cologne University (IITS) and Dictionnaire Français de l'Héritage Sanskrit (The Sanskrit Heritage Dictionary) by Gérard Huet. Both of them are available online. Examples of specialized dictionaries are Ding Fubao’s Foxue Dacidian (A Dictionary of Buddhism), Fo Guang Shan’s Foguang Dacidian (Fo Guang Buddhist Dictionary), and Charles Muller’s Digital Dictionary of Buddhism. They can be accessed through CBReader, a text viewer developed by CBETA for its electronic tripitaka.

Another important translation tool is machine translation systems. A famous example is the Chinese-Vietnamese translation project launched by the Trụ Quang Wisdom Light Foundation. To reduce translation time, the organization has developed a machine translation system which is based on Chinese-Vietnamese dictionaries. According to its translation plan, the system first provides a draft Vietnamese translation of Chinese scriptures, and Dharma masters and experts post-edit the machine output. The machine translation has been completed. It was reported that the system translated a total of 2372 sutras in 28 hours (Trụ Quang, 2006, p. 4).

Technology also plays a role in publishing new translations. For example, the Numata Centre provides some of its translations online in PDF format (Numata, 2008b). The digitalized scriptures can then reach a large audience instantly, which serves the primary purpose of translation – propagating the Dharma. The electronic texts would also be more useful to researchers, for they can process the files directly without optical character recognition.

**Looking Ahead: An Integrated System for Scripture Translation**

Features of BST in the new era have been discussed. The question now arises as to what do we need to do to further stimulate scripture
translation activities in the future? One of the things we can do is to improve the existing computer tools. In view of the wide range of electronic tools available, we need to develop a translation system which combines them. In this way, translators can access different tools without switching from one application to another, and they can translate more efficiently. To illustrate this idea, I have proposed a prototype system. The user interface of the system is shown in Figure 2 below:

![Figure 2](image_url)

The User Interface of an Integrated System for Scripture Translation

The system performs the following functions: First, it offers word-for-word translation of scriptures. Second, it provides an intersemiotic translation of scriptures. Based on the idea of multimedia translation proposed by Chan (2006, p. 9), the system translates Buddhist terms from text into images, sounds, animations, and videos. Third, it enables its users to access digitalized scriptures, electronic Buddhist dictionaries, and aligned bilingual Buddhist texts. For details of the prototype system, please refer to my video presentation on the post-conference website.12

Concluding Remarks

Buddhist scripture translation is essential to the propagation of the Dharma. It has a long history, and is now adapting itself to changing times. In the new millennium, scripture translation projects are launched for various reasons. Some aim to preach the doctrine, while some help researchers discover more about the religion and reconstruct the lost scriptures.

Scripture translators, who are no longer only monks, apply various
translation techniques and make use of a wide spectrum of electronic tools, from digitalized scriptures to machine translation systems, to translate more effectively and efficiently. Their new translations fulfill various functions. They become a companion to original Sanskrit and Pāli scriptures and older translations, and they close the gap between the reader and the classical texts.

The present discussion of scripture translation in the new millennium may not only prompt us to put BST in a broader context that is beyond ancient China, but also help us plan for its future. Since computer tools are increasingly important to both scripture translators and researchers, it is necessary to develop a specialized system which provides one-stop access to different tools. This integration would be crucial to the advancement of scripture translation and, in turn, to the dissemination of the Dharma, in the new age.

Notes

1 See Donald W. Mitchell (2008, Chapter 3) for details of the “Three Baskets”.
2 For example, Kumārajīva led around 2,000 participants (Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association [CBETA], 2008, Vol. 7, T9, no. 262, p. 62c), and Xuanzang worked with some 20 monks (CBETA, 2008, T30, no. 1579, p.881c).
3 For instance, Xuanzang was supported by the Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty.
4 See Wisdom Publications (2006) for a list of translations published by the publisher.
5 Please refer to Vimalakīrtinirdeśa (2006) for details.
6 For example, Kumārajīva’s translations of the Amitabha Sūtra and the Diamond Sūtra as well as Xuanzang’s translation of the Heart Sūtra are still chanted in morning or evening recitations in Chinese monasteries.
7 The Digital Sanskrit Buddhist Canon is a project launched by the University of the West and Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods (NIEM). It involves the digitization of around 300 Sanskrit texts (University of the West, n.d.). The Pāli Canon Online Database, which contains 35 million characters, is a digitalized tripitaka based on the Buddha Jayanti Tripitaka Series (Friedlander, 2008). The CBETA canon is a digitalized version of the Taisho Tripitaka, one of the most famous collections of Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures. The CBETA Tripitaka consists of 70 million Chinese characters (Tuệ Quang, 2006, p. 3).
8 The institute provides a revised and digitalized version of Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary as well as scanned images of a few bilingual Sanskrit dictionaries (IITS, 2008).
9 This is a Sanskrit-French dictionary which has been updated regularly since 1994 (Huet, 2009, para. 2).
10 See IITS (2008) and Huet (2009, para. 2).
11 The first two dictionaries are in Chinese, and the third one is a

The URL for the website is:
http://www.hum.port.ac.uk/slas/pastconferenceproceedings/translationconference08/presentations_video.html

Bibliography


