Translation Issues in the Rapid Transmission of Esoteric Buddhism from India to China to Japan

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Introduction

This paper foregrounds the usually taken-for-granted but vital historical role of language study and translation in the international spread of religions and cultures. In this case, three consecutive patriarchs of Esoteric Buddhism were Amoghavajra of India, Huiguo of China, and Kūkai of Japan. In terms of content, this paper will focus on Kūkai, the first Japanese to master Sanskrit, along with Chinese calligraphy, literature, and spoken conversation, which all had a positive impact on relations between Japan and China in the early 9th Century (Shiba, 1978/2003, pp. 103-112). Moreover, a research gap will be addressed by highlighting issues behind the scenes of history such as foreign language study, bilingual or multilingual mastery or limitations, translation problems, and some disparate voices reaching us today through a Sanskrit-Chinese-Japanese-English chain of communication.

A Case that illustrates the Historical Role of Translation

In the background of an international movement such as the spread of Buddhism across Asia, where translation succeeded, the focus could be on the inspiring religious and philosophical content. A translated work would ideally speak with one voice, that of the original source, and the translator would be invisible. Yet in reality, as shown in this paper, the difficulties involved in translation from ancient times to the present become conspicuous upon close analysis.

First there were the difficulties of translating Indic languages into Chinese from the 2nd Century (Saitō, 2017, p. 17) as Buddhism spread along the Silk Road (Chowdhury, 2018, pp. 11-12). No translator of sūtras was sufficiently bilingual to render excellent translations into Chinese until Kumārajīva (350–409). Xuanzang (or Hsüan-tsang, 602-664), who traveled widely and studied in India, also “provided the prototypes for translations of terminology and texts” (Saitō, 2017, p. 18). Nevertheless, in the academic study of translation, a critical review showed that many liberties were taken in translation, such that “Buddhism in China had been completely localized to acquire a new identity: Chinese Buddhism” (Tang, 2017).
"Three Indian Tantric masters (UBC, 2022) during the reign of Emperor Xuanzong" (685-762) started a lineage that internationalized Indian Esoteric Buddhism. Dharmagupta of Nālandā urged Śubhakarasiṃha (637-735) to go to China, where he translated Sanskrit works into Chinese, including the sūtra Mahāvairocana Abhisambodhi Tantra (UBC, 2022).

Śubhakarasiṃha, a regional king, like the Buddha and Kūkai later in Japan, renounced his aristocratic privileges for the ascetic religious life of a monk. But his work turned out to change the course of East Asian history. That was because in Kūkai’s youth, "[u]nder Prajñā, the monk of Nālanda in Central India, and under Munis’ri, the Master of the Tripitaka, he studied Sanskrit, and was by them presented with many books of the Scriptures in Sanskrit" (Lloyd, 1911, p. 273). It was the Mahāvairocana Sūtra translated by Śubhakarasiṃha that was the “doctrine” referred to in the following passage about events fateful for Kūkai:

Inside the tower [pagoda] of the Temple of Kumadera in Yamato there was revealed to him the doctrine which is above all others. But as there was none whom he could question thereon, he received permission from the Emperor to go to China for study. (Lloyd, p. 243)

Next in the lineage of Esoteric Buddhism after Śubhakarasiṃha were Vajrabodhi (670-741) and Amoghavajra (705-775), who passed the torch to the Chinese patriarch Huiguo, who in turn bypassed more than a thousand Chinese disciples to pass the torch to Kūkai, because of his abilities that quickly became renowned in the Chinese capital. Chang’an was the peak of world civilization in classical times, and Kūkai’s Esoteric Buddhism still continues today.

**Japan’s Great Saint Kūkai**

China and Japan in the 8th Century both welcomed international influences, and invited Buddhist priests from India and East Asia into their Imperial courts and aristocracy. Both Chinese and Japanese emperors were patrons of Buddhism and of the fine arts at the time (Shiba, 1978/2003, pp. 25-189). That, plus language learning and the work of translators, was how three consecutive patriarchs of Esoteric Buddhism could represent India, China, and Japan.

A young man later known as Kūkai, from an aristocratic family on the outer island of Shikoku, across the Seto Inland Sea from the capital area of Japan, came of age just when the Nara Period turned to the Heian Period and the capital moved to what is now Kyōto. Kūkai was educated to enter the university in the Yamato capital (Nara) in order to become a government official, but instead he followed in the footsteps of the Buddha and became a wandering ascetic in search of enlightenment (Takemoto & McCarty, 1993, pp. 190-191).

Kūkai did also study the Confucian curriculum for a time at the university in the Nara Period capital, but turned to Buddhism and Sanskrit studies. Then, also as mentioned above, Kūkai managed to join a hazardous expedition to the T’ang Dynasty capital of Ch’ang-an (now
Xi’an), where he was welcomed by the Imperial court for his linguistic and literary talents. He returned to the new Heian Period capital, having been invited and initiated into Esoteric Buddhism by the patriarch Huiguo, bringing back many scriptures, commentaries, ritual instruments, and practical texts with which to inform Japan. Having trilingual proficiency, Kūkai could confirm both Sanskrit and Chinese versions of scriptures in establishing his own system of doctrine and practice for Japan called Shingon (True Word, i.e., mantra). Particularly with patronage from his pupil and friend Emperor Saga (Takemoto & McCarty, 1993, pp. 192-193), Kūkai could draw much from the golden age of China and then contribute greatly to the golden age of Japan.

**Monastic Education and Ancient Universities**

The last flowering of Buddhism in India, the Esotericism of Mantrayāna, Tantrayāna, and Vajrayāna could rapidly spread across northern Asia and to Japan because literacy and foreign languages were taught mostly in monasteries. Generations of monks translated sūtra scriptures, ritual manuals, and commentaries interpreting Buddhist doctrines from Sanskrit and other Indic languages into Chinese and other Asian languages.

The oldest universities in the world are usually presented as ones in continuous operation, beginning with the University of Bologna (since 1088) and others in Europe, whereas one could point to much earlier universities, including Plato’s Akademy in Athens (from 338 BC), but also Asian institutions, notably Nālandā (5th-13th Centuries). Emulating China in the 8th Century, Japan had the university where Kūkai studied. Literacy was only in Chinese at that time, although the indigenous oral language persisted and was rendered into more suitable writing systems in the Heian Period from the 9th Century.

Since universities in Europe developed from monasteries, those in Asia that were similarly the stewards of literacy should also be recognized as universities. Although universities today should have universality (McCarty, 2012), past institutions must be judged by their contemporary standards, resources, and attainable knowledge. Universities could thus be defined as institutions for the highest and broadest education available in their time and place, based on literacy as well as oral communication between teachers and students.

**Cultural Teaching and Learning Styles in the Classical Era**

Around 1,200 years ago in Asia, monks and other students learned by apprenticeship, memorizing and copying texts, and they were not in a position to question the veracity of sources or the authority of their teachers. Only a few religious leaders such as Zhiyi (Chih-i) or Kūkai could publish critical classifications of doctrines. Kūkai ranked religions within his purview into his own Shingon Esoteric Buddhism above all, then exoteric Buddhism (i.e., other sects), Taoism (Daoism), and Confucianism. When circumstances of the new Heian Period Imperial court placed Kūkai in a rivalry with Saichō, the founder of Tendai (T’ien-t’ai) Buddhism in Japan, Kūkai finally repudiated Saichō’s dependence on Kūkai’s library from
China in terms of a traditional form of pedagogy: Kūkai argued that Esoteric Buddhism could not be acquired by reading scriptures but had to be directly transmitted from master to disciple (Shiba, 1978/2003, pp. 240-246).

**Continuing Difficulties in Translation: A Case of Disparate Voices**

The difficulties of translation continue to this day, since it is rare or practically impossible for individuals to be completely bilingual or multilingual. There are still no dictionaries that provide the cultural context, full range of usage, and nuances of terms, which are important between non-cognate languages such as Japanese and English. Moreover, as introduced above, a successful translation speaks with one voice such that the translator is invisible.

A book most relevant to this paper, *Kūkai the Universal* (Shiba, 1978/2003), involved Sanskrit-Chinese-Japanese-English translation among its challenges. The masterpiece of the renowned historical novelist Ryōtarō Shiba was translated by Akiko Takemoto, with insufficient editing, which illustrates some difficulties of translation along with the benefits of such a valiant effort by a non-native user of English.

Both the author and the translator add complications to the content about Kūkai’s career. With incomplete information from the 8th-9th centuries, Shiba tends to speculate, often unconvincingly to this reader. Furthermore, as Japanese and some Western novelists do, he periodically leaves the ancient scene and discusses his current thoughts and experiences such as investigating for the book. He channels more voices by sometimes affecting a T’ang Dynasty style of insincere flattery, which has influenced the indirectness in Japanese culture, then shifts to blunt realism. In the above-mentioned instance of rivalry, Saichō was clearly taking advantage of Kūkai’s generosity, but Shiba kept praising the pure sincerity of Saichō until finally implying misconduct with a disciple and accusing him of ulterior motives.

While the author thus speaks in several voices, the translator has a distinct English writing style evident to this reader who has edited her writing in other books. She again relied upon the encouragement of James Kirkup, who had gained some literary fame and notoriety in Great Britain. The English errors are mostly inconspicuous, but she uses “principle” where it should be “doctrine,” an important term that recurs in the book. Names of sūtras are sometimes better known in Sanskrit or English, depending on the reader, but she renders Chinese and most other scriptures in Romanized Japanese. By not turning to an editor with subject matter expertise, and not ironing out the disparate voices from the 9th Century to the present, the translation of a Japanese best-seller has remained in relative obscurity despite some well-researched historical content not found elsewhere.

**Conclusion**

The scope of this paper has been confined mostly to the little-discussed dimension of language education and translation in the international spread of Buddhism. No paper could do justice to the vast literature on Buddhism in Asian languages, or to the complexity
of each regional historical context and their intercultural interactions.

This paper focused on translation issues during and about a golden age of religion, literature, and internationalism in Asia. Language study and translation in monasteries and universities played an essential role in cultural transmission. The rapid spread of Esoteric Buddhism from India to China to Japan in three generations illustrated the power of effective language education and accurate translation.

References


About the author

Steve McCarty was born in Boston. After specializing in Asian religions and Japan at the University of Hawaii, he moved to Japan and was promoted to full Professor in 1993. Since 2004 he also introduces Japan to developing country officials for the government foreign aid agency. For further research on Japan, Asia, Buddhism, syncretism of Asian religions, and East-West comparative culture, see https://japanned.hcommons.org/japanology