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Buddhist Impact on Chinese Language

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Abstract

The Buddhist impact on Chinese language is enormous. This is mainly due to the translation and introduction of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit and other Indic languages. The translation of Buddhist scriptures lasted for more than a thousand years in China and there are about 173 known translators who had translated 1700 more scriptures in about 6000 more Chinese scrolls. As the Indian ways of thinking are different from Chinese, so their ways of expression are also different from Chinese. Therefore, the translators of Buddhist scriptures had to invent and introduce many new words in order to express the highly abstract ideas and concepts in Buddhism apart from finding similar words and concepts in Chinese language. Thus these new words and concepts gradually have been integrated into Chinese language and some of them even become part of their daily conversation. The translation of Buddhist scriptures in Sanskrit and other Indic languages greatly influenced the semantic and syntax of mediaeval Chinese as well as enriched the literary genres and rhetoric techniques. The Sanskrit phonetics brought along with Buddhist translation raised the awareness of Chinese people about phonetics in their own language. This triggered an unprecedented interest in linguistic studies, in particular the description and analysis of the phonetic values of Chinese characters. The result is the compilation of numerous rhyme dictionaries which are of great value for the reconstructions of the different stages of the phonetic systems of Middle Chinese.

1. Introduction

The Buddhist impact on Chinese language is enormous. This is mainly due to the translation and introduction of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit and other Indic languages. The translation of Buddhist scriptures lasted for more than a thousand years in China as it started in the second century CE and ended up by the end of Song dynasty in twelfth century. There are about 173 known translators who had translated 1700 more scriptures in about 6000 more Chinese

scrolls.¹ As the Indian ways of thinking are different from Chinese, so their ways of expression are also different from that of Chinese. Therefore, the translators of Buddhist scriptures had to invent and introduce many new words in order to express the highly abstract ideas and concepts in Buddhism apart from finding similar words and concepts in Chinese language. Thus these new words and concepts gradually have been integrated into Chinese language and some of them even become part of our daily conversation. The translation of Buddhist scriptures in Sanskrit and other Indic languages greatly influenced the semantic and syntax of mediaeval Chinese as well as enriched the literary genres and rhetoric techniques. The Sanskrit phonetics brought along with Buddhist translation raised the awareness of Chinese people about phonetics in their own language. This triggered an unprecedented interest in linguistic studies, in particular the description and analysis of the phonetic values of Chinese characters. The result is the compilation of numerous rhyme dictionaries which are of great value for the reconstructions of the different stages of the phonetic systems of Middle Chinese.

The distinguished Chinese linguist Wang Li 王力 said that the Buddhist terminology contributed to Chinese vocabulary tremendously and some of these terms have already embodied in the blood of Chinese language so much so that people do not even know that they are originally from Buddhist literature.² For instance, *shi-jie* 世界 means the world, but ancient Chinese people used *tian-xia* 天下 to mean the world. The Sanskrit word for *shi-jie* is *loka* which means a land or a state of existence.

The American scholar Victor Mair has summarized the Buddhist impact on Chinese language and literature into eight aspects and three are related to language.³ They are 1. enlargement of the lexicon by at least thirty-five thousand words, including many that are still in common use (e.g., *fang-bian* 方便 [convenient; from Sanskrit, *upāya*, skill-in-means] and *cha-na* 刹那 [instant; from Sanskrit, *kṣaṇa*, instant]); 2. advancement of phonology as a type of linguistic

¹ The number of translators is given in Nanjio (1989): Appendix II. According to Taisho Edition of Tripitaka, there are a total number of 1692 Chinese translations of Indian texts. But there are some more Chinese translations of Buddhist texts found in Dunhuang and other places.

² Wang Li (1990: 678-686).

³ Mair (2001: 56-57).

science; 3. partial legitimization of the vernacular. Victor Mair even tries to analyze the causes of Buddhist impact on Chinese language as he says,

The question of exactly how a foreign religion like Buddhism could have had such an enormous impact on linguistic usage in China is extraordinarily complex. Some of the factors involved are: (1) a conscious desire on the part of Buddhist teachers and missionaries (starting with the Buddha himself) to speak directly to the common people in their own language; (2) the maintenance of relatively egalitarian social values among Buddhists in contrast to a strongly hierarchical Confucian order; (3) an emphasis on hymnody, storytelling, drama, lecture, and other types of oral presentation; and (4) the perpetuation of sophisticated Indian scholarship on linguistics, which highlighted the importance of grammar and phonology as reflected in actual speech, in contrast to Chinese language studies, which focused almost exclusively on the characters as the perfect vehicle for the essentially mute book language.⁴

2. Enlargement of Chinese Lexicon

According to modern scholars' studies, it is estimated that approximately thirty-five thousand new words entered Chinese language through the agency of Buddhism.⁵ The Buddhist influence on and contribution to Chinese lexicon can be summarized, according to Sun Changwu's 孫昌武 study into the following aspects.

First, many existing Chinese words are used in the Buddhist translation of scriptures, but their connotations are new. Such as the words used to express doctrinal teachings: *kong* 空 (*śunya*, empty) is used as empty of self nature, but in Chinese it can mean nothing similar to *wu* 無 which means nothingness; *you* 有 (*asti*, existence) is the opposite of *kong* 空 and it means existence in Buddhist sense, but in ancient Chinese philosophy, it means being. In fact, *you* 有 which means being and *wu* 無 which means non-being are important philosophical terms in ancient Chinese philosophy. *Fa* 法 (*dharma*) is used to denote the

⁴ Mair (2001: 154).

⁵ Mair (2004: 154). This is based on the Buddhist Dictionary 《佛教大辭典》 compiled by Mochizuki Shinkō 望月信亨 (1869-1948).

Buddhist teaching in general, specific thing in particular, but it can mean regulation, law etc. in Chinese; *xing* 性 (*svabhāva*, nature) is used for the nature of things, but in Chinese it can mean character, gender, sex etc. *Yin* 因 (*hetu*, cause) means direct cause, *yuan* 緣 (*pratyaya*, condition) means indirect cause. *Yin* 因 *hetu* is like a seed, *yuan* 緣 *pratyaya* the soil, rain, sunshine. *Zhiran* 自然 (self-existing) and *wuwei* 無爲 (*asaṅkṛta*, un compounded) are two words borrowed from Chinese philosophy to express Buddhist meanings as they are similar to Buddhist usage.

Again, for instance, the twelve phrases used in the Dependent Origination 十二因 緣 to explain the Buddhist idea of the rise of human suffering are also taken from the existing words in Chinese language: *wuming* 無明 (*avidyā*, ignorance), *xing* 行 (*saṅkāra*, action-intentions), *shi* 識 (*viññāna*, consciousness), *mingse* 名色 (*nāmarūpa*, name and form), *liuru* 六入 (*saṅāyatana*, the six-fold sphere of sense contact), *chu* 觸 (*sparśa*, contact), *shou* 受 (*vedanā*, sensation, feeling), *ai* 愛 (*tṛṣṇā*, thirst, desire, craving), *qu* 取 (*upādāna*, grasping, appropriation), *you* 有 (*bhava*, becoming), *sheng* 生 (*jāti*, birth), *laosi* 老死 (*jarāmaraṇa*, old age and death), etc. All these words are found in the classical Chinese, but they are given new meanings to denote a Buddhist meaning in the translations.

Second is the creation of new words by transliteration. There are a large amount of such words introduced into Chinese language with the Buddhist translations. It can be broadly classified into the following two categories, and the first and the largest category is proper name such as *fo* 佛 (Buddha, full transliteration is 佛陀), *pusa* 菩薩 (bodhisattva, 菩提薩埵), *luohan* 羅漢 (*arhat*, 阿羅漢 worthy one), *biqiu* 比丘 (*bhikṣu*, monk), *biqiuni* 比丘尼 (*bhikṣuni*, nun), *sheng* 僧 (*sangha*, community of monks, 僧伽), *shijiamoni* 釋迦牟尼 (*Śakyāmuni*), *ta* 塔 (*stūpa*, 塔婆), *jiasha* 袈裟 (*kaṣāya*, robe), *qianlan* 伽藍 (*ārāma*, a Buddhist building).

The second category of transliteration is more complex and Xuanzang gave five reasons for this category (1) for reason of secrecy such as *darani*, (2) for reason of numerous meanings such as *bóqiéfàn* 薄伽梵 (*bhagavat*, meaning the *blessed one* or *world-honoured one*), (3) for reason of no such terms in Chinese such as *chan* 禪 (*dhyāna*, meditation 禪那), *ye* 業 (*karma*, action), *jie* 劫 (*kalpa*), *niepan* 涅槃 (*nirvāṇa*), *sheli* 舍利 (*śarīra*, relics), *yánfútí* 閻浮提 (*Jambudvīpa*, the great continent

south of Mt. Sumeru) etc., (4) for complying with tradition such as *ānòuduōluó sānmiǎo sānpútí* 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提 (*Anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi*, highest supreme enlightenment), *boluomi* 波羅蜜 (*pāramitā*, perfection), and (5) for the rising of goodness such as *bōrě* 般若 (*prajñā*, wisdom).

The largest category is the third, new terms and concepts which are not found in Chinese. The third is the creation of new words by translating its meaning to express the newly introduced Buddhist concepts. Such words are as *rulai* 如來 (*Tathāgata*, thus come one), *guiyi* 皈依 (*śaraṇa*, to take refuge in), *jingtu* 淨土 (*Sukhāvati*, Pure Land), *jietuo* 解脫 (*mokṣa*, liberation), *lunhui* 輪回 (*saṃsāra*, round of birth and death), *shiji* 實際 (*bhūta*, apex of reality), *zhenshi* 真實 (*bhūta or yathābhūtam*, true form of something), *youqing* 有情 (*sattva*, sentient being), *xindi* 心地 (*mano-bhūmika*, mind ground), *gongde* 功德 (*puññā*, merit), *fangbian* 方便 (*upāya*, skilful means), *wuchang* 無常 (*anitya*, impermanence), *wuwo* 無我 (*anātma*, non-soul), *bukeshiyi* 不可思議 (*acintya*, unthinkable), etc.

The best example of this category is the Sanskrit word *tathatā* which means suchness, or the true nature of phenomena. There is no such a concept in Chinese philosophy and the translators faced huge troubles in finding a suitable word to express the Indian concept. At first Lokakṣema used *benwu* 本無 to translate it, but it was misleading as *benwu* means that originally there is nothing in Daoist philosophy. It was Kumarajiva who created the new word *zhenru* 真如 to translate this highly philosophical concept.

The fourth is the creation of new words by a combination of transliteration and translation of its meaning or a combination of transliteration of a Sanskrit word and a Chinese word, such as *foqu* 佛曲 (Buddhist song, *fo* 佛 is a transliteration while *qu* 曲 is Chinese word), *foxiang* 佛像 (Buddha image) is same; *chanshi* 禪師 (meditation master, *chan* 禪 is a transliteration and *shi* 師 is a Chinese word), *chanfang* 禪房 (meditation hall) is same; *niepanzhong* 涅槃宗 (Nirvāṇa School, *niepan* 涅槃 is a transliteration and *zhong* 宗 is a Chinese word).

Fanbai 梵唄 (Buddhist Music) is a good example for the combination of transliteration and translation of meaning. Here *fan* 梵 is a translation denoting India and *bai* 唄 is a transliteration from *baini* 唄匿 (*bhāṅaka*) means chanting song. Another is *wanzi* 萬字 (Svastika), a symbol, *wan* 萬 is a transliteration and *zi* 字 is a Chinese word.

All these words denote things and concepts, and are not found in Chinese so the translators had to create new words to express them, but the meanings of some Chinese characters were retained while others were changed completely. However there is a close relationship between the meanings of newly created words and the original meaning of each Chinese character. This means that in translation of Buddhist scriptures, the original meanings of Chinese characters are borrowed to create new words usually by combination of two or more Chinese characters, but the meanings of the newly created words are completely different from the original meanings of the characters.

The fifth is the new expressions added to the Chinese language through the influence of Buddhism but these are not direct translations from Sanskrit such as *chūjiā* 出家 (*parivraj*) leaving the family to become a monk; *chushi* 出世, to transcend the world; *tidu* 剃度, ordained by shaving his or her head; *huayuan* 化缘 to beg for food or something else; *kuhai* 苦海, a bitter sea, meaning life is dangerous as the rough sea; *fangzhang* 方丈, literally means one square zhang (3.3 meters), but it designates abbot of a monastery.

The sixth is the increase of Buddhist related idioms and phrases. As Buddhism was gradually accepted by Chinese people, Buddhist ideas, thought and concepts gradually got integrated into Chinese language and as a result, new idioms and phrases were formulated.

For instance, (1) there are idioms from Buddhist stories such as *tiān nǚ sǎn huā* 天女散花 which means to make a mess of everything, *tiān huā luàn zhù* 天花亂墜 means to speak things untenable, *jiè huā xiàn fó* 借花獻佛 means literally to borrow flowers to offer to the Buddha, actually it means to get things from another person to entertain one's own guest, *shuǐ zhōng zhuō yuè* 水中捉月 or *shuǐ*

zhōng lāo yuè 水中撈月 means literally to try to fish the moon out of water, but it obviously means to make futile efforts, etc.

(2) There are idioms from Buddhist doctrinal teachings such as *dà cí dà bēi* 大慈大悲 which means great compassion and loving kindness, *liù gēn qīng jìng* 六根清淨, means literally the purification of six sense organs, true meaning: free from human desires and passions; *bù èr fǎ mén* 不二法門 means the only way, *yī chén bù rǎn* 一塵不染 means immaculate, spotless, *sì dà jiē kōng* 四大皆空 means literally all the four elements of solidity, fluidity, temperature and mobility are impermanent. According to Buddhist teaching the human physical body is made of the four great elements, so the human physical body is also empty of self nature and impermanent, just an instrument.

(3) There are idioms from Buddhist similes such as *mèng zhōng shuō mèng* 夢中說夢 which means literally talking about dreams in a dream, actually meaning talking something nonsense; *tán huā yī xiàn* 曇花一現 means to last for a very brief period of time just as the epiphyllum blooming at night, or short lived; *zhēn fēng xiāng duì* 針鋒相對 means to oppose each other with equal harshness, to attack each other in equally sharp language, to match point by point; *shuǐ yuè jìng huā* 水月鏡花 means illusions like the moon in the water and flower in a mirror; *xīn yuán yì mǎ* 心猿意馬 originally means that the mind is like a monkey or a horse that is very difficult to bring under control, but always prone to outside attractions, and it means that the mind is unsettled and restless.

The seventh is the Buddhist proverbs and Buddhist related common sayings. (a) *jiù rén yī mìng, shèng zào qī jí fú tú* 救人一命，勝造七級浮屠 means that to save a person is better than building a seven storey stupa. It means that saving a life is better than other meritorious deeds. (b) *fàng xià tú dāo, lì dì chéng fó* 放下屠刀，立地成佛, a butcher becomes a Buddha at once if he gives up his knife. It means that an evil person can become a good person if he realizes his bad deeds. (c) *wú shì bù dēng sān bǎo diàn* 無事不登三寶殿, one will not come to the shrine room without having to do something. It means that one will not come to you without a purpose. (d) *lín shí bào fó jiǎo* 臨時抱佛脚, it means that one does a thing without preparation.

3. Increase of Disyllabic and Polysyllabic Words

According to Chinese linguists, there were mostly monosyllabic words and each character is a word to express something in written Chinese in ancient China. But with the translation of Buddhist scriptures, there was an increase of many disyllabic and polysyllabic words which played an important role in the development of Chinese language and vocabulary from monosyllabic to polyphony. During the time of six dynasties from first century CE to the end of sixth century CE, a large number of disyllabic and polysyllabic words appeared and used and these words were mainly created by Buddhists.

Liang Xiaohong 梁曉虹 who has made a study of the Buddhist vocabulary says that there was a huge increase of disyllabic words from Han dynasty to Southern and Northern dynasties and this was mainly brought by Buddhist translations. She gives the following as example: there are only 2300 disyllabic words amongst the 210,000 words of Wang Chong's *Lunheng* 《論衡》 written in Eastern Han dynasty (25-220). But there are 1541 disyllabic words amongst 61,000 words of Liu Yiqing's 劉義慶 (403-443) *Shisui Xingyu* 《世 · 新語》 (New Account of the Tale of the World) of Southern dynasty.⁶ She also gives the following example to show that there are more disyllabic words in Buddhist scriptures than in non-Buddhist texts. 1500 disyllabic words are found in the chapter three "Simile and Parable" of Kumārajīva's translation of the *Lotus Sutra* 《法華經·譬喻品》, which contains 7750 words. There are 250 more disyllabic words amongst 1400 more words of the chapter on "Maitreya's Miracles" of the *Bodhisattova Buddhānussmānti Samādhi Sūtra* 《菩薩念佛三昧經·彌勒神通品》 translated by Gunaśāra in Southern dynasty. However, there are only 60 more disyllabic words amongst also 1400 more words of chapter on Politics of Liu Yiqing's *Shisui Xingyu* 《世 · 新語· 政事篇》.

Apart from these, Buddhist translators also introduced polysyllabic words such as *pú ti xīn* 菩提心 the mind of enlightenment, *gōng dé shuǐ* 功德水 meritorious water, *zhèng sī wéi* 正思維 right thought, *pō luó mì duō* 波羅蜜多 *pāramitā* means perfection, *fēi xiǎng fēi fēi xiǎng* 非想非非想 neither thought nor non-thought.

In ancient Chinese language, there were few polysyllabic words. So the introduction of polysyllabic words made a huge change in Chinese language. All

⁶ Liang Xiaohong (1994: 175).

these show that the Buddhist translators created not only variety of words for Chinese language but also the ways and methods to create new words by careful synthesis and analysis of the characteristics of Buddhist vocabulary. This makes Chinese language a powerful tool to express complex abstract ideas and thoughts, as well as the finest details of things.

Thus, according to Kuiji 窥基 (632-682), a Buddhist monk who lived in the seventh century, the Buddhist translators even introduced the Sanskrit way of explaining words called “liu li han shi” 六離合釋 (sat-samāsāh) which means six ways of explaining a word through first explaining each word individually and then followed by explanation of the meaning when they are combined. Today these Buddhist created words are used in our daily life without their Buddhist traces.

4. The Invention of *Qieyun* 切韻 and the Summary of the Four Tones 四聲

Buddhist scriptures were translated from texts written either in Sanskrit or other Indic languages which are all phonogram languages. However the Chinese is not a phonogram but a logogram language 象形文字. The phonogram refers to the written symbols which carry the phonetic information, whereas the logograms are those meaning-laden written symbols.

Chinese Buddhist translators learnt and some even mastered these phonogram languages in order to help in translation. This in turn promoted the awareness and understanding of phonetic sounds in Chinese language which is an important step in the development of Chinese language. The Song scholar Zheng Jiao 鄭樵 (1104-1162) said, “The Indians excel in sound so they acquire their knowledge mainly from hearing ... while the Chinese excel in characters so they acquire their knowledge from seeing (reading).”⁷

Some scholars are of the opinion that the creation of *qieyun* 切韻, a way to get the phonetic sound of a Chinese character, and the formation of the theory of the four tones 四聲 in Chinese language are closely related to or even directly

⁷ Zheng Jiao 352.

influenced by Buddhist translation of Sanskrit scripture. Others are of the opinion that Chinese people knew these before the introduction of Buddhism.

Chen Yinke 陳寅恪 (1890-1969) is the first Chinese scholar who said that the four tones in Chinese language were created after the Buddhist monks' recitation of sutras.⁸ His arguments are as follows:

(1) The Chinese four tones were created by imitating the three tones of Buddhist recitation of sūtras at the time, which were from the three tones of Vedas in ancient India. (2) The Chinese four tones were created in Yongming's 元明 era (489) because King Xiao Ziliang 蕭子良 (460-494) invited many Buddhist monks who were well acquainted with Buddhist recitation to assemble at his home in order to create new Buddhist music (經唄).⁹ (3) There were many Buddhist monks from Central Asia who lived in Jiankang (Today Nanjing) and were learned in Buddhist recitation.

However, other scholars such as Yu Min 余敏 who wrote papers in 1984 questioned it with a support of Buddhist Vinaya rule that the Buddha prohibited monks from using heretic (Brahmin) way of reciting the Buddhist sutras.¹⁰ However, he agreed that Chinese people became aware and understood the four tones in our language because of the Buddhist study of phonetic sound.

Jao Tsung-I 饒宗頤 wrote a paper in 1987 and he also questions Chen Yinke's ideas, but his questions are mainly concerned with the three tones. Professor Jao argues that (1) there are more than three tones in Vedas and the ways of Veda recitation had long been lost before the sixth century CE when the Buddhist monks in China discussed the ways of Buddhist recitation. (2) The four tones existed in Liu Song (420-479). (3) Same as Yu Min, Buddhist Vinaya rule prohibited monks to use heretic ways of recitation. (4) As Buddhists used hybrid Sanskrit and the Brahmin ways of recitation, this may have been used in the Buddhist recitation of Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit sutras but the link with Veda recitation is not clear. However, Professor Jao argues that the four tones were

⁸ Chen Yinke (2001: 367-381).

⁹ *Nanqi Shu*, Vol. 2, 698. 招致名僧，講語佛法，造經唄新聲。道俗之盛，江左未有也。

¹⁰ Yu Min (1999: 43).

created after the fourteen phonetic sounds introduced in the Buddhist *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*.¹¹

Hirata Shoji 平田昌司 argues against Yao and Yu Min, and says that although Buddhist monks were prohibited to use heretic (Brahmin) way of reciting the Buddhist sutras, this rule was relaxed and Sanskrit, for example, was used by a Buddhist school called Sarvastivada later around the first century BCE, although during the Buddha's time, it was prohibited to use.

Here let me also add more evidence in support of Hirata's argument concerning the Vinaya rules in Buddhism. The Buddha, just before he passed away, said to Ananda, his attendant, "When I am gone, let the monks, if they should so wish, abolish the lesser and minor rules."¹² This idea influenced later Buddhists so much that a special Vinaya was established called "Vinaya According to Locality" which means that the lesser and minor rules can be changed and even abolished according to the location. Yu Min does not know this so his argument is not valid because the rule of not allowing the use of heretic way of chanting was relaxed later and even chanting mantras was also allowed in and after Sixth century when Vajrayāna rose in India.

Aśvaghosa 馬鳴菩薩 (ca. 100 CE), the eminent Indian Buddhist monk scholar, poet and playwright, used both Sanskrit and music to promote Buddhist teachings in the first century.¹³ He is considered the father of Sanskrit drama and he also popularized the style of Sanskrit poetry known as *kavya*. This shows that Buddhists already used music or phonetic sound system to promote the Dharma in the first century CE although there is a rule prohibiting monks to attend musical shows. So Mair asserts that

Nevertheless, exposure to the Sanskrit language and Indian linguistics for several centuries made the Chinese more aware of the phonological features of their own language. The first fruit was the invention of the *fanqie* 反切 method of spelling (namely, taking the initial sound of one character and the

¹¹ Jao Tsung-I (1993: 79-92).

¹² Dighanikāya ii, 154. Chinese translations of *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra* of the *Dirghāgama* (T1, no.1, 26, a28-29), the *Mahīśāsaka-vinaya* (T22, no.1421, 191, b3-4), the *Mahāsaṅghika-vinaya* (T22, no.1425, 492, b5-6), the *Dharmaguptaka-vinaya* (T22, no. 1428, 967, b12-13), and the *Sarvāstivāda-vinaya* (T23, no. 1435, 449, b13-14).

¹³ Khoroché (2004: 35). Warder (2004: 323-4).

final sound of a second character to represent the pronunciation of a third character).¹⁴

Although the creation or formation of the four tones may not be directly linked to Veda, but Sanskrit influence is quite evident and Sanskrit was introduced in China together with Buddhism. The linguistic study of Sanskrit inspired the Chinese to examine the phonetics in their language. At least, Chinese people became aware of the four tones in their language due to the influence of Sanskrit used in Buddhist scriptures.

Today many Chinese scholars support this idea such as Wang Bangwei 王邦維, a specialist in Sanskrit and Buddhist studies at Beijing University who argues with evidence from historical records that the well known Chinese literati Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (385-433) was highly involved with the study of the fourteen phonetic symbols in his life time.¹⁵

Sui Shu 《隋書·經籍志》 the History of Sui Dynasty, records this:

Buddhism reached China since the Latter Han dynasty and there came the foreign letters from Xiyu (western region). It can represent all vocal sounds with fourteen letters. It is concise and compendious and is called the Brahman letters. It differs from our characters which are divided into Eight Styles 八體 (of writing) and Six Orders 六文 (of formation).¹⁶

According to Guanding 灌頂 (561-632), the *Mahāparinivāṇa Sūtra*, translated by Dharmakīema in northwestern part of China, was transmitted to South during the reign of emperor Song Wendi 宋文帝 (424-453 in power) who loved the sutra so much so that he asked Huiguan 慧觀, Huiyan 慧嚴 and Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 to re-edit the scripture.¹⁷ Three of them revised the sutra and divided “the Chapter on Lifespan” into four chapters and “the Chapter on the Nature of Tathagata” into ten chapters in which there is a chapter on Letters (文字品). There are only

¹⁴ Mair (1991: 392).

¹⁵ Wang Bangwei (1998: 631-646).

¹⁶ *Sui Shu* Vol.4: 947.

¹⁷ CBETA, T38, no. 1765, p. 14, b3-10.

thirteen chapters in the original translation and twenty-five chapters in the revised version which proved true when the existing two versions were checked.

According to Fei Zhangfang who was a contemporary of Guangding, the reason for revising the Dharmakṣema's translation is that the original was a literary translation and the language was not polished well enough for dissemination.¹⁸ This means that Huiguan, Huiyan and Xie Lingyun added the chapter on letters. So Xie Lingyun clearly knew the discussion of letters in the Dharmakṣema's translation of the *Mahāparinivāṇa Sūtra* in which there is a mention of the fourteen phonetic symbols.¹⁹

According to Huijiao's 慧皎 (497-554) *Gaoseng Zhuan* 《高僧傳》 (Biography of Eminent Monks):

Xie Lingyun of Chen County loved Buddhist studies, especially the comprehension of sounds different from ordinary ones. He consulted Huiri (355-439) concerning the letters in sutras and the different sounds with their variations in meaning and he wrote the *Shisi Yinxun Xu* 《十四音訓序》 (A Study of the Fourteen Phonetic Symbols). He made it clear by listing Chinese and Sanskrit words so that the written characters have their evidence.²⁰

Huijiao's *Gaoseng Zhuan* also informs us that Huiri travelled to many kingdoms up to South India and learned various phonetic symbols, literary genres and interpretation. It is clear that Xie Lingyun wrote his *Shisi Yinxun Xu* based on the fourteen phonetic symbols in the *Mahāparinivāṇa Sūtra* after consultation with Huiri. According to Wang Bangwei's study mentioned above, the fourteen phonetic symbols in Xie Lingyun's *Shisi Yinxun Xu* refer to the fourteen vowels of Sanskrit language based on Sarvavarman's *Kātantra*, a Sanskrit grammar book.

¹⁸ CBETA, T49, no. 2034, p. 89, c27-p. 90, a6.

¹⁹ 《大般涅槃經》卷8 (13 文字品) : 「善男子, 有十四音名為字義。」 (CBETA, T12, no. 375, p. 653, c24).

²⁰ CBETA, T50, no. 2059, p. 367, b13-17.

As discussed above, it was in such a situation that King Xiao Zilian 蕭子良 invited many Buddhist monks who were well acquainted with Buddhist recitation to assemble in his home in order to create new Buddhist music (經唄).²¹

Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513) and Zhou Yong 周顒 both were Buddhists who were interested in phonetic symbols. Japanese monk Kukai 空海 (774-835) said in his *Bunkyo Hifuron* (Chin: *Wenjing Mifu Lun*) 《文鏡秘府論》, “From the end of [Liu] Song dynasty (420-479) the four tones came into being. Mr Shen wrote an easy to discuss their genealogical table (譜) in which he said that it came from Zhou Yong.”²² According to *Nanshi* 《南史》, a historical book, Zhou Yong wrote the *Shisheng Qieyun* 《四聲切韻》 (A Study of the Four Tones and Qieyun).²³

All these evidences show that Buddhist use of Sanskrit directly influenced the creation of *qieyun* 切韻, a way to get the phonetic sound of a word, and the formation of the four tones. It triggered the Chinese interest in linguistic studies. This also indirectly influenced the study and use of rhyme in Chinese poetry.

It was on the *Mahāparinivāṇa Sūtra* and the *Avataṅsaka Sutra* that the late Tang dynasty Buddhist monk Shouwen 守 𠂔 first created the thirty letters with Chinese characters for the study of phonetic symbols and later it was added to thirty-six.²⁴ Shouwen’s phonetic table was discovered in Dunhuang.

5. Compilation of Rhyme Dictionaries

The Chinese interest in the Sanskrit phonetic symbols gave rise to unprecedented interest in linguistic studies, in particular the description and analysis of the phonetic values of Chinese characters. This resulted in the compilation of numerous rhyme dictionaries. Although these dictionaries were mainly compiled for the purpose of reading and studying Buddhist scriptures but they are also valuable for Chinese linguistic and other historical academic studies.

²¹ *Nanqi Shu* Vol.2: 698.

²² Kukai (1983: 80).

²³ *Nan Shi* Vol.3: 895.

²⁴ *Cihai: Yuyan Wenzhi*, 44.

In fact, there is a tradition of study of the form, the sound and the meaning of Chinese characters in Chinese history. Chinese Buddhists adopted this tradition and borrowed from non-Buddhist works to compile many rhyme dictionaries. As early as the Northern Qi 北齊 (550-577), a Buddhist monk named Daohui 道慧 compiled a book entitled *Yiqiejing Yin* 《一切經音》 (The Sound of All Scriptures) and later Zhisai 智騫 compiled *Zhongjing Yin* 《眾經音》 (The Sound of All Scriptures). But in Tang dynasty there appeared many important works by eminent Buddhist linguists such as Xuanyin 玄應, Huilin 慧琳 and Fayuan 法雲 in Song dynasty.

Xuanyin was a learned person who was even selected by the emperor as one of the ten leading Buddhist monks who formed the Xuanzang's translation committee. Xuanyin compiled the *Yiqiejing Yinyi* 《一切經音義》 (The Sound and the Meaning of All Scriptures) and explained the difficult Chinese characters in four hundred and fifty six Buddhist texts. According to Daoxuan 道宣 (596-667), Xuanyin was not happy about Daohui's work mentioned above so he compiled his own and quoted from more than a hundred and a dozen Chinese works apart from Buddhist literature.²⁵ It is a valuable work for modern scholars as his editing and study were of a high quality.

Second, Huilin compiled a work with the same title *Yiqiejing Yinyi* 《一切經音義》 in a hundred fascicles. Huilin was originally from Kashgar and came to China and studied under Amoghavajra. So he was learned in Indian phonetics and Confucian texts. Huilin in his work explained the difficult words in one thousand and three hundred Buddhist texts. Just as Xuanyin, Huilin also quoted more than a hundred Chinese works and some of them are lost already. Most of the linguists in Qing dynasty made Huilin's work as their main source book.

Then in the Song dynasty, Fayuan 法雲 compiled, around 1151, the well known *Fanyi Mingyi Ji* 《翻譯名義集》 (A Collection of Chinese Transliteration of [Sanskrit] Names and Terms). It contains 2040 entries of transliteration of words

²⁵ CBETA, T55, no. 2149, p. 283, b22-28.

from Sanskrit with careful explanation of the sources and meaning. The author also quoted more than four hundred non-Buddhist works.

Another important work entitled the *Fanyu Qianzi Wen* 《梵語千字文》 (A thousand Characters of Sanskrit Language) was compiled by Yijing 義淨 (635-713) who travelled to India through the South China Sea during the eighth century. This is a bilingual dictionary. All these Buddhist dictionaries promoted the linguistic study of Chinese language and introduced new light.

6. The Use of Vernacular Language

Victoria Mair says,

What Zurcher and Zhu Qinzhi have both shown clearly is that, from the very beginnings of Buddhism in China, the translated texts of this new religion display a higher degree of vernacular content than do non-Buddhist texts. No other texts from the same period can begin to compare with the early Buddhist translations for the large amount of vernacularisms they contain. Indeed, it is extremely rare in non-Buddhist texts of the same age ever to find even a single unambiguously vernacular usage.²⁶

Chinese Buddhists are the first people to use vernacular to translate the Buddhist scriptures in China and this influenced the use of vernacular amongst the Chinese. Mair even thinks that later it became the national language of China.²⁷

Mair lists six reasons why Buddhism used vernacular and some of his reasons are quite forceful.²⁸ I think the main reasons for Buddhism to use vernacular are as follows: The first and the most important reason is the Buddha's language policy. Mair points out that the injunction of the Buddha is to transmit his *dharma* (doctrine) throughout the world in the languages of various regions, rather than in the preclassical language of the Vedas as recorded in the Vinaya (rules of discipline governing the community of monks), because the Buddha wanted all people, mostly the ordinary, to learn and understand his teaching. Mair calls it

²⁶ Mair (1994: 712).

²⁷ Mair (2004: 154).

²⁸ Mair (2001: 30).

the Buddhist egalitarian social values that favor demotic forms of language over elitist, hieratic forms.

It is this sanction of using vernacular language that is reflected in Chinese translation of Buddhist scriptures. According to the preface to the Chinese translation of the *Dharmapada*, when Vighna just came to China in 224, he was invited to translate Buddhist scriptures with his friend Zhu Jiangyan 竺將焰 but the latter had not mastered Chinese yet although he knew Sanskrit well, so the translation was plain and not elegant. But Vighna said, “The Buddha said, ‘Go with the meaning without decoration, take the teaching (Dharma) without ornamentation.’ It is good if the translator makes it easy to understand without losing the meaning.”²⁹ Thus they translated the Buddhist texts in vernacular language. However, this vernacular is, on one hand, coupled with massive borrowing from Indic words and even grammatical usage and syntactic structures and on the other hand, modified by the Chinese Buddhists who helped in the translations so it became a mixture of vernacular and literary style. Scholars call it Buddhist Hybrid Sinitic or Buddhist Hybrid Chinese.

There are a large number of manuscripts in vernacular language preserved in the Dunhuang cave library which were recovered in the early twentieth century. The entire corpus of vernacular narratives in Dunhuang was referred to as *bianwen* 變文 (transformation texts), which includes *jiangjing wen* 講經文 (sūtra lecture texts, elaborate exegesis of specific scriptures), *yazuo wen* 押座文 (seat-settling texts, prologues for the sūtra lecture texts), 因 起 *yinyuan* (circumstances, stories illustrating karmic consequences), and 起 *yuanqi* (causal origins, tales illustrating the effects of karma), etc.

The nature of this collection of literatures shows that they were used for public lectures, preachings, tale illustration of Buddhist teachings and even dramas. As they used vernacular, so they were easy to understand and thus it became the best tool for the spread of the Buddhist teaching.

The second major reason for the use of vernacular language is the Chan school’s philosophy of not dependence upon words and letters, but a special transmission outside the scriptures. Thus the Chan masters transmitted their teaching by word of mouth such as relating enlightening stories called *Gongan* 公案. However,

²⁹ CBETA, T04, no. 210, p. 566, c4-22.

later, the disciples collected the stories and speeches of their masters and compiled into books called *yulu* 語 (Record of Sayings). As the Chan masters used dialects and even colloquial to instruct their disciples, so vernacular language is used in the *Yulun* to record their masters' speeches as they were.

The use of vernacular language in Buddhist literatures was widened in Song dynasty as there are a large number of collections preserved. There are two kinds of such collections: "Denglu" 燈 which means the "Record of Lamp" and "Yulu" 語 which means the "Record of Sayings." The representative work of "Record of Lamp" in Song dynasty is the *Jingde Record of the Transmission of the Lamp* 《景德傳燈》 composed by Daoyuan 道原 during the Jingde 景德 era (1004-1007). The representative of the "Record of Sayings" is the *Blue Cliff Record* 《碧岩》 compiled by Keqing 克勤 (1069-1135) who wrote short introductions to each story and even added notes and comments to some important stories.

Buddhist use of vernacular language in the "Record of Sayings" influenced Confucians in the Song dynasty so much so that they also used vernacular with the same literary style. Jiang Fan 江藩 (1761-1831), a scholar of the Qing dynasty has said, "Chan School had *Yulu* and Song Confucians also had *Yulu*; Chan School used vernacular language (Lit: street language) in their *Yulun* and Song Confucians also used vernacular language in their *Yulu*."³⁰ Again Qian Daxi 錢大昕 (1728-1804) said, "The Buddhist use of *Yulu* started from Tang dynasty while Confucian use of *Yulun* started from Song dynasty."³¹ Just as Mair says, "Thus, with the Buddhist sanctioning of the written vernacular, a sequence of revolutionary developments occurred that radically transformed Chinese literature for all time. Moreover, hand in hand with vernacularization came other Buddhist-inspired developments in Chinese literature." So we find the Record of Sayings of Song Neo-Confucian Chen Yi 程頤 (1033-1107), Zhang Jiuchen 張九成 (1092-1159), and Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200).

However, "the mainstream Confucian literati never accepted anything other than Literary Sinitic as a legitimate medium for writing. To them the vernacular was crude and vulgar, beneath the dignity of a gentleman to contemplate," as pointed

³⁰ Jiang Fan (1983: 190).

³¹ Qian Daxi (1997: 488).

by Mair.³² But ordinary people paid no heed to this opinion and proceeded to use vernacular for dramas, stories, on the foundations that had been laid by the Buddhists of medieval China. It was after the May Fourth Movement in 1919 that literati Chinese started to use vernacular in their writings and hence became the national language. So Mair asserts that “it is safe to say that Buddhism legitimized the writing of the vernacular language in China.”³³

Even the development of the Korean national language and Japanese national language has been influenced by Buddhism as Mair demonstrated in his study “Buddhism and the Rise of the Written Vernacular in East Asia: The Making of National Languages.”

In conclusion, the Buddhist impact on Chinese language forms an enormous range from vocabulary to phonetics, such as the four tones and *Qieyun*, and even the use of vernacular. The Sanskrit phonetic studies triggered the Chinese people’s interest in linguistic studies and eventually led Chinese people to invent tonal prosody as pointed by Mair, and to compile many rhyme dictionaries. Thus it gave rise to the recent style prosody which occupied a special position among Chinese verse forms.

³² Mair (2004: 156).

³³ Mair (2004: 157).

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