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Brief Note about the *Heart Sūtra* and its Composition

Charles Willemen *

It is no exaggeration to say that the *Heart Sūtra* is the most popular Buddhist text.¹ This “*Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom*” offers the heart, the essence of the literature about the perfection of wisdom, *prajñāpāramitā*. This literature expounds the emptiness, the relativity of all factors, *dharmas*. All is relative, does not exist on its own. This literature belongs to the Mahāsāṅghikas.

Generally speaking, there are two families of Buddhist schools after ca. 340 BCE. At that moment, shortly after the Vaiśālī synod of ca. 380 BCE (Ch'en, 1964 : 12 note 2), the leaders of the *saṅgha* wanted to bring a bit more discipline, adding a few minor rules to the *Vinaya*, but the majority did not agree. In India only a disagreement about the *Vinaya* can cause a schism. Doctrinal disagreements may, of course, also lead to a *Vinaya* dispute. Ca. 340 BCE the members of the majority, the *mahāsaṅgha*, separated from the *saṅgha*. They were the Mahāsāṅghikas. The leaders of the *saṅgha*, the *sthaviras*, and the traditional Sthaviravāda Schools (Sarvāstivāda, Theravāda, ...) would never unite with the Mahāsāṅghikas again. A different understanding of wisdom, *prajñā*, doctrinally illustrates the split. Traditionally wisdom means *dharmapracaya*, distinguishing the different factors, *dharmas*. This is explained in the scholastic texts, in the *Abhidharma* of traditional schools (Willemen, 2006 : 234). Mahāsāṅghikas, on the other hand, do not see separately existing factors. Factors are relative, empty. Zhu Daosheng 竺道生 (ca. 360

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¹ In China and especially in Japan all Buddhists know the text. See e. g. Tanahashi Kazuaki; Donald Lopez; a.o.

– 434 CE), most likely a Chinese Mahīśāsaka monk who was working with Kumārajīva in Chang’an 长安, ca. 406 CE, put together a Chinese magic text to protect health.² He attributed the text to Kumārajīva. We know the text as *Taishō* 大正 ed. 250 : *Moheboreboluomi* 摩诃般若波罗蜜 (*Mahāprajñāpāramī*, *Great Perfection of Wisdom*) *Da Ming* 大明 (*Mahāvidyā*, *Great Esoteric Knowledge*) *Zhou* 咒 (*Mantra*). In Kumārajīva’s days the term *pāramī* was used, not *pāramitā*. It is also possible to understand *Da Mingzhou* as *Mahāvidyā*. Zhu Daosheng composed this magic text against illness and danger in general. Xuanzang 玄奘 received it before he went to India. Shortly after his return in China, in 649 CE, he offered his revised version of the text, calling the result *sūtra* : *Boreboluomiduo* 般若波罗蜜多 (*Prajñāpāramitā*, *Perfection of Wisdom*) *Xin* 心 (*Hṛdaya*, *Heart*) *Jing* 经 (*Sūtra*), *Taishō* ed. 251. The text is sometimes referred to as *Duo Xin Jing*. *Duo* is the final – *tā* of *Pāramitā*. Xuanzang uses *pāramitā*. Xuanzang may have translated the Chinese text to Sanskrit. His knowledge of Sanskrit was very good. He had become quite fluent while studying in India, in Nālandā, etc. He is said to have translated the *Dacheng Qi Xin Lun* 大乘起信论, *Mahāyānaśraddhotpādaśāstra*, to Sanskrit. In 647 CE the king of Kāmarūpa (Assam), Bhāskaravarman, asked for a Sanskrit version of the *Daode Jing* 道德经, *The Way And Its Power*, the famous Daoist classic. It was completed in 661 CE, but the text is lost now. Xuanzang was convinced that a Sanskrit version was needed to be authentic. He even wrote a longer version of the *Heart Sūtra* in Sanskrit, a real *sūtra*. All Chinese versions after Xuanzang, *Taishō* ed. 252, 253, 254, 255, and 257, are all translations of this longer version. T 252 of 741 CE, is called *Pubian Zhizang Boreboluomiduo Xin Jing* 普遍智藏般若波罗蜜多心经, *The Heart of Prajñāpāramitā*, *Universal Storehouse of Wisdom*, the work of Fayue 法月. T 253 *Boreboluomiduo Xin Jing* 般若波罗蜜多心经 is the work of Bore (Prajñā) and Liyan 利言 in 790 CE. T 254 *Boreboluomiduo Xin Jing* 般若波罗蜜多心经 is the work of Prajñācakra, Zhihuilun 智慧轮, in 861 CE. T 255 of 856 CE has the same title. Facheng 法成

² Daosheng translated the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* T 1421, in 422 – 423 CE. See Walter Liebenthal in *Monumenta Nipponica* 11, 3 (1955) b : 64 – 96. See also Jan Nattier in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15 (1992) : 153 – 223.

translated it from Tibetan. T 257 *Sheng Fomu Boreboluomiduo Jing* 圣佛母般若波罗蜜多经 is the work of Shihu 施护, Dānapāla, in 1005 CE. *Sheng Fomu* means *Noble Buddha Mother*. There also is T 256 *Tang Fan Fandui Ziyin Boreboluomiduo Xin Jing* 唐梵翻对字音般若波罗蜜多心经. This text uses Chinese (*Tang* 唐) characters to render the Sanskrit (*Fan* 梵) sounds. The text actually is not a translation. Fukui Fumimasa 福井文雅 has recently proposed Amoghavajra (705 – 774 CE) as the author (Nattier, 1992 : 192). As the Chinese text was used as a magic text from the beginning, it is no surprise that a real esoteric version came into existence after Xuanzang.

The text is transmitted in many languages, including Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan. J. Nattier has explained that the core of the two oldest versions, T 250 and 251, is based on the *Da Zhidu Lun* 大智度论, *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa* (*Explanatory Discourse about the Great Perfection of Wisdom*), and on the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*, *the perfection of Wisdom in 25000 lines*, known as *Da Pin* 大品, *Large Version* T 223. Zhu Daosheng assisted Kumārajīva with the translation of these texts. He attributed T 250 to Kumārajīva. He himself had adopted the surname Zhu from his early master Zhu Fatai 竺法汰, who had adopted the Zhu from his own master Fotu Deng 佛图澄 from Kuqa (232 – 348 CE?). Zhu Daosheng was Han Chinese, called Wei 魏, but he never used that name (Ch'en, 1964 : 113). Fotu Deng was a specialist of magic formulas, of *mantras* and *dhāraṇīs*.

The oldest Chinese text we now have is inscribed on a stele dated 661 CE. It is part of the Fangshan 房山 stone *sūtras*.

Both the brief and the longer texts of Xuanzang consist of three parts.

1. Introductory part with Avalokiteśvara.
2. Core text, based on the *Da Zhidu Lun*.
3. *Mantra*, spell.

Parts one and three are quite unexpected in this kind of literature. The bodhisattva of emptiness – wisdom is Mañjuśrī, not Avalokiteśvara. Avalokiteśvara is quite present in the *Lotus Sūtra*, T 262, of 406 CE, an *Ekayāna*, One or Unique Vehicle text. The text originally was a Bactrian Sarvāstivāda text, taken over by

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Gandhāran Mahāsāṅghikas.³ Zhu Daosheng was quite involved in the Chinese translation of Kumārajīva 's work in 406 CE. In 432 CE he even wrote a commentary on this text, called *Fa Hua Jing Shu* 法华经疏, *Commentary on the Lotus Sūtra*. When Mahāsāṅghikas, who referred to their own kind of Buddhism as *Mahāyāna*, Great Vehicle, used or adapted a text of the traditional *saṅgha*, usually a Sarvāstivāda text, the result was called *Ekayāna*. When Sarvāstivādins used a Mahāsāṅghika idea or text, they called the result *Mahāyāna* too. If a school had an *Abhidharma* spoken by the Buddha in heaven, their Buddhism was considered *Hīnayāna*, Lesser Vehicle, by their opponents. This is the case for Theravāda, and also for the *Vaibhāṣika* Sarvāstivāda “orthodoxy” established in Kāśmīra at the end of the second century CE. All other Buddhist groups had a practical *Abhidharma*, teaching how to practice, how to advance to the stage of the highest arhat.⁴ So, the first part of the *Heart Sūtra* shows the influence of the *Lotus Sūtra*, a text in which Daosheng was quite involved. One should also remember that the compassion of Avalokiteśvara was quite welcome in a magic text to keep illness away.

As for the *mantra* at the end, Daosheng lived when T 1332 appeared : *Qi Fo Ba Pusa Suoshuo Da Tuoluoni Shenzhou Jing* 七佛八菩萨所说大陀罗尼神咒经, *Great Scriptural Text of Dhāraṇīs and Mantras Spoken by Seven Buddhas and Eight Bodhisattvas*, four volumes long. T 1332 is a collection of magic formulas, dated between 317 and 420 CE. Magic formulas were quite common early in the fifth century, in the days of Daosheng. Furthermore, Avalokiteśvara and the use of the *mantras* are linked.

How can we better understand the term *Heart* in the title of Xuanzang's text?

Daosheng spent much time on Mount Lu 庐山 with Huiyuan 慧远. He was there, for instance, in 397 CE. Huiyuan and Saṅghadeva translated T 1550 *Abhidharmahrdayaśāstra*, *Treatise* :

³ India's northwestern cultural area is known as *Jibin* 罽宾, the Gandhāran cultural area. It has a Western part, Bactria, Northern Afghanistan, mainly Sarvāstivāda. Its eastern part is Gandhāra proper, Pakistan, mainly Mahāsāṅghika.

⁴ E.g. the *Abhidharmahrdaya* of *Dharmaśreṣṭhin*, see Willemsen, 2006. This traditional *Abhidharma* explains how to reach the highest stage of an arhat.

The Heart of Abhidharma, in 391 CE on Mount Lu. This text, the work of Dharmasreṣṭhin, Fasheng 法胜, only exists in Chinese now : *Apitan Xin Lun* 阿毗曇心论 (9) (See Willemen, 2006). This text teaches how to attain the stage of an arhat. Xuanzang must have known about this *Abhidharma* and about Daosheng. Did that result in the title of the Chinese *Heart Sūtra*? There is a likelihood that it did. The term heart, meaning essence, is not frequent in titles.

As for the school affiliation, *nikāya*, of Zhu Daosheng, it most likely was Mahīśāsaka. He assisted Buddhajīva in 422 – 423 CE with the translation of the Mahīśāsaka *Vinaya* in five parts, T 1421. In those days Mahīśāsakas seem to have been seen as a group of heterogeneous, of traditional Sarvāstivādins. One may think of Asaṅga, a Mahīśāsaka monk and relative of Vasubandhu. Such people were familiar with Avalokiteśvara, with *Abhidharma*, and also with *mantra*.

By way of conclusion one can say that Zhu Daosheng put together the Chinese *Heart Sūtra* ca. 406 CE in Chang 'an, attributing it to Kumārajīva, with whom he was working. The text was used as a magic text against sickness and danger. Xuanzang received it before his travels to India. He updated the version and he even may have translated the text to Sanskrit. At the same time he offered a longer Sanskrit version, looking like a real *sūtra*. Chinese versions after Xuanzang were all translations of the longer Sanskrit text.

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