

The Influence of Liangzhou House Arrest on Kumarajiva's Decision to Translate Sutras and His Contribution to the Translation of Buddhist Sutras

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Abstract: Kumarajiva was a renowned Buddhist monk, translator, and scholar who lived from about 344 to 413 CE. He played a very important role in the development of the transmission of Mahayana Buddhism in China. Born in the kingdom of Kucha, on the Silk Road, he was early exposed to a variety of philosophical traditions, which gave him a profound understanding of Buddhist texts. Captured in a military campaign by Chinese forces, he was brought to Luoyang, where he became the central figure in the translation movement. Kumarajiva's mastery of both Sanskrit and Chinese enabled him to translate such important scriptures as the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra* into the vernacular, hence making them accessible to the masses. His translations are marked by clarity and faithfulness to the original texts that became very influential for further generations of Buddhists and scholars. Moreover, Kumarajiva established a monastic order based on stringent study and practice; as such, he fostered intellectual engagement with the ideas of Buddhism. His legacy survives through his writings and translations, which have remained basic texts of East Asian Buddhism, reflecting an enduring synthesis of cultural and religious ideas.

Keywords: Kumarajiva, Translation, Sinicization, Silk road, Culture.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Kumarajiva(AD344~413.5.28,commonly known as Jiva) was one of the well-known monks of India in the Later Qin period (before Sui dynasty), who was engaged in the translation of Buddhist sutras in Chang 'an. He was not only a famous translator of Buddhist sutras, but also Buddhist ideologist. Of course, in the number of classics translated, Xuanzang of the Tang Dynasty has an absolute advantage. But considering the contents of the translations and the influence on the later generations, Jiva is in the history of the translations.

Occupy a high position on. Most of the Buddhist sutras translated by Xuanzang of the Tang Dynasty have been preserved in the Buddhist collection, while the important Buddhist sutras recited and read by monks and lay people are still read with doves the book of Morosh's translation.

1.2. Research value

Regarded as “the most legendary monk in history of China”, Kumarashi's life was magnificent and full of legend. As the offspring of a prominent royal family, he could have enjoyed a life of wealth and prosperity, but he not only retreated into an empty household, successively studying Theravada Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism, but also spent his efforts on translating the Chinese sutras, which were in decline. His state of mind deserves everyone's respect, and the author is curious about the reason for his change of mind, so he looks at his 17 years of house arrest in Liangzhou. As the last stop before entering Han Dynasty, Kumarashi's 17 years of house arrest must have brought him a lot of influence, and then had a certain impact on his concept of life.

2. Discussing

Long before Xuan Zang, Rashe(nickname of Kumarajiva widely used in Chinese history literature) had translated *Prajna sutras* of both Great and Small, which enabled Chinese Buddhist circle to systematically absorb Prajna. Yes, it played a role in promoting the prosperity of Chinese Buddhism as well as the formation of Buddhism in the Sui and Tang dynasties. He was more systematic for the first time in the history of China.

It systematically introduced the ideological system of Indian Buddhism, which would influence the whole Chinese ideological circle in the future and also profoundly permeate into traditional Chinese culture, into every area of East Asian culture.

2.1. Kumarajiva's activities during the Lu Guang period

In 385 Yao Chang killed Fu Jian and annihilated the Former Qin dynasty. Lu Guang then took over his own leadership in Liangzhou, and declared himself head of the house of Liang. So Luo Shi was imprisoned in Liangzhou. Subsequently, over a period of seventeen years in Liangzhou, existing historical texts are very scanty and there is no record at all of any Buddhist related activities being undertaken by Luo Shi. For instance, this can be seen in "Categorized Records of the Three Sutras", where it is said: "He stayed many years in Liang, but because Lu Guang and his son did not proliferate the Dao, he had to put his scriptures and teachings away and never found any opportunity to proliferate out" [1]. The Dunhuang manuscript 381 states, "For several years, he was isolated by Lu Guang due to difficulties". Then, he "does not keep extensive records of details." From this, one can see that during this time, either the propagation of Buddhism or the study of Buddhist doctrines did not have much development from Luo Shi.

After Lu Guang acquired Luo Shi, he did not respect him. The biography of Luo Shi recounts:

"After Guang gained access to Shi, he did not measure his wisdom; and, after seeing that he was still young, he treated him like an ordinary person and forced him to marry the daughter of the King of Kucha. Shi declined this offer, however, giving a very pained reply [2]. Said Guang, "The deeds of a Daoist should not surpass those of his father. How can he refuse so strongly?" He continued by offering him some fine wine and locking him up in a secret room. With difficulty and due to continuous pressure, Shi was finally placed in a compromising position. Some have even made him ride a cow or a fierce horse, trying to throw him off."

Meanwhile, according to the records, Luo Shi's operation during the reign of Lu Guang was somehow like a fortune-teller or soothsayer. For example:

"So, when Guang returned half-way through the journey and went into camp with his troops at the foot of the mountain, the soldiers were finally at rest. Shi said, 'Do not encamp here. It is for sure asking for disaster. It is better to move up the troops to the ridge. Guang ignored. That night heavy rain fell. A flood came up to several yards deep. There were thousands of deaths. Then came the days when Guang began to treat him with respect.'"[3]

Shi warned Guang, "This is a place of catastrophe and death. No need is fit to be stopped here. I, for my part, think that you should return home as quickly as possible where you will, without doubt, find a pleasant place to rest along the road." Guang followed the advice [4].

In the first month of the first year of Tai'an (386 AD), there were strong winds in Gu Zang. Shi said, "This ominous wind is showing treachery, and with rebellion, yet it will end without effort." No sooner, Liang Qian and Peng Huang then joined in plotting treason and made a rebellion, thereafter completely destroyed.

But in 2nd year of Guanglong Fei — 397 AD — Lin Song of Zhangye and the HuJu Qu Nan Cheng, rose in revolt and followed the governor of Jiankang, Duan Ye, as their head. Guang sent his illegitimate son, then governor of Qinzhong, Ti Yuan Gong Zuan, at the head of an army 50,000 strong to meet them. And then it was that people said at the time that Ye and the rest were in the very thick of it, and victory with Zuan seemed as though it must be within grasp, but Guang consulted Shi, who replied, "In this present campaign, observing the tendency, I see no benefit." Not long after Zuan was defeated at Heli, and, before long, Guo Xin rose in revolt, and Zuan hurriedly leading his army to retreat, was defeated by Xin, and barely escaped with his life.[3]

Just like that, after Lu Guang's demise, his illegitimate son Lu Zuan followed in his footsteps, though Luo Shi did not improve in either status or living conditions. According to the records delineating his biography:

"Turning to Zuan, the Daoist Gu Mo Luo Qi Po said: 'A hidden dragon emerges repeatedly; When pigs and dogs see demons, There will be schemes among the lower classes, To plan against you. "So must you cultivate virtue and governance in order to respond to the heavenly warnings?" Zuan accepted this. Qi Po refers to Luo Shi."[5]

Zuan played games with Shi, and Zuan jokingly said, "Cut off the head of the barbarian slave." Shi replied, "One should not cut off the head of the barbarian slave; the barbarian slave will cut off someone's head." This statement held significance, but Zuan never understood it. Guang's brother Bao had a son named Chao. His nickname was Hu Nu. Chao killed Zuan and finally beheaded him. He placed his brother Long as the ruler afterward. People verified the words of Shi then [2].

From this, one can see that of all knowledge Luo Shi may have accumulated in his earlier years, such as divination, supernatural abilities, and military strategies, and though feasible during the reign of Lu Guang, occasions were found for them to fit in. Still, this cannot help reflect a great sorrow to Luo Shi as a Buddhist figure.

Basically, Lu Guang and other Later Liang rulers were more inclined towards Confucian scholars rather than Buddhist monks; this was due to political necessities. Being an exogenous culture, Buddhism has some contradictions with traditional Chinese culture in many aspects. However, Luo Shi did not give up and continued with the forbearance inherent in the Buddhist tradition of enduring humiliation with great patience. Meanwhile, he was thinking and observing changes in the world around him. From a certain perspective, this also reflects Luo Shi's practical attitude of diligent effort in Buddhism when faced with a hard, unadaptable situation.

In the late Former Qin period, Luo Shi entered China and then stayed in Liangzhou for many years. Existing historical records show that there was little development in his Buddhist practice, but the long-term exposure to Chinese culture, with the aid of intelligence and an extraordinary power of comprehension, provided a solid foundation for his future work of translating scriptures.

2.2. The contributions of Kumārajīva to the sinicization of Buddhism and East Asian culture

Kumārajīva's translation and preaching in Chang'an represented a watershed moment in the history of Chinese Buddhism and culture. He was the first to translate and introduce Indian Buddhist teachings into China in a truly meaningful way, which not only played a decisive role in the emergence and development of various Buddhist sects in later generations but also established a

cultural foundation where Buddhism coexisted alongside traditional Chinese Confucianism and Daoism, thereby forming a distinctly Chinese cultural identity.

The Buddhist scriptures translated by Kumārajīva had a significant impact on the development of Chinese Buddhism, with many texts becoming essential scriptures for the establishment of various Buddhist sects in China and East Asia. During the Tang dynasty, there were eight notable Buddhist sects, six of which were founded based on Kumārajīva's translations. For instance, his translations of the "Large Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra" and the "Small Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra" became essential texts in the study of Prajñā; the "Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa" and the "Diamond Sūtra" were highly regarded in the study of Prajñā and later by Zen monks; the "Treatise on Establishing Reality" was foundational for the Establishment of Reality School; the "Amitābha Sūtra" and "Maitreya's Buddhahood Sūtra" were key texts for the Pure Land School; the "Middle Treatise," "Hundred Treatises," and "Twelve Gates Treatise" served as fundamental texts for the Three Treatises School; the "Lotus Sūtra" was central to the Tiantai School; and the "Ten Stages of the Bodhisattva" was also an important text for the Huayan School. His translations of Zen sutras and precepts also had a profound influence, with works like the "Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa" and "Great Wisdom Treatise" becoming must-reads for later scholars of Buddhism. At the peak of translation activities in places like the Xiaoyao Garden and large monasteries in Chang'an, over 3,000 monks assisted in the translation efforts. Furthermore, Kumārajīva's disciples, known as the "Ten Philosophers and Eight Talents," along with noble figures such as Yao Xing and Yao Song, actively participated in the translation, editing, and debate of Buddhist texts, making Kumārajīva's translations a product of collective wisdom.

2.3. The literary and cultural impact of Kumārajīva

In terms of literature, the scriptures he translated are full of lovely literary rhythms. This deep influence on the development of Chinese literature came from the Indian literature with its stories, along with techniques for expressiveness, that are the basis of these scriptures. At the artistic level, these scriptures, like "Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa," were lively, compact sources of mural creations in cave temples. For instance, the murals in the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang on the "Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa" were painted following the translations by Kumārajīva. Innumerable cave murals on the "Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa" and the "Western Pure Land Sūtra" have their origins from his works.

As time went on, the translated texts spread to Korea and Japan. Intellectuals there respected his translations as the closest to the truth among all the ancient translators [6]. Praises were penned in his honor by Japanese scholars; their belief in Maitreya was found widespread in early Korea and Japan, closely related to the translation of the "Lotus Sūtra" by Kumārajīva, showing his leading influence on the formation of Buddhism in East Asia.

In that sense, Kumārajīva's translation of Buddhist scriptures and cultivation of disciples are monumental deeds in the cultural exchange between China and India, among ethnic minorities, and with Han culture in China from the perspective of Chinese Buddhist historical development in thought and culture. In Chinese history, this was the first grand collision and integration of foreign and indigenous cultures and has profound cultural and historical significance. Mr. Fang Litian has summarized the influence of Kumārajīva upon Chinese Buddhism and Chinese thought into the following two aspects:

Promotion of Chinese Buddhist Thought: The quality of the Buddhist texts and the systemization of doctrines brought about by the translations of Kumārajīva rejuvenated Chinese Buddhism. It has helped, especially, in the universalization of the Mahāyāna concept of emptiness. He is credited with transplanting and propagating the basic principles of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Promotion of the Southern Dynasties and Sui-Tang Schools: The enormous amount of translations and new translations of various kinds of Buddhist scriptures done by Kumārajīva provided the

fundamental Buddhist basis and ideological conditions for the formation of Chinese Buddhist sects [7].

3. Conclusion

Thus, it went on to prove that Kumārajīva's achievements were of a profound and lasting influence on the development of Chinese thought. His impact on the history of Chinese Buddhism, if not bounded by any sectarian boundary and the historical timeline since the Eastern Jin period, in itself makes him exceptionally outstanding in the annals of Chinese Buddhist history.

It was his behavior as a lay follower of the Bodhisattva path that Kumārajīva put into practice; he lived by the "no distinction between monastic and lay life" of the "Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa." This eased the psychological conflict of the choice between monastic life and family life that plagued Confucian filial piety so deeply impressed in contemporary scholars' and people's minds, which again may add to the reasons for his deep respect.

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