

Translation and Distribution of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the Cultural Field of Classical Chinese

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I am addressing this topic from a particular point of view, which will perhaps be too brutal a reflection of my own tastes. That is to say, from the point of view of the question of language and communication. Let me begin by saying that I am surprised by how many people have gathered here today to hear about the *Lotus Sūtra*. I think most of you have come because of your affinity for the *Lotus Sūtra* in its Japanese tradition. I would like to come back to this phenomenon, which as a Japan specialist, I find of great interest, to try to give some general explanations and an attempt at interpretation.

Translated Version is More Authentic than the Original

I would first like to start with a personal anecdote from several years ago that made a big impression on me. I had met a young Japanese monk in Japan who belonged to one of the schools of modern Buddhism derived from Nichiren. He told me that the purpose of his life was to translate the *Lotus Sūtra* into Hindi. And so I asked him: “Of course, you will use the Sanskrit version?” He looked very surprised and answered: “No, Kumārajīva’s version, the Chinese version.” I told him that Sanskrit is the original language and that Hindi is close to Sanskrit... For him—and I would like to keep this idea as a main theme of this talk—the true meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra* is found in Kumārajīva’s Chinese version.

But if one compares this approach with other religions, for example, with the Christian Bible of Catholic Europe, his reflection was not misguided at all. Throughout the Middle Ages, it was the Latin Bible, the Vulgate of St. Jerome, which was considered—and confirmed again in the 16th century by an Ecclesiastical Council—as the authoritative text. We did not refer to the Bible in Hebrew and Greek, but to the Latin text, which was a second or third-hand version, depending on whether it was the Old or New Testament.

In the same way, you probably know the anecdote of a missionary specialising in the Greek New Testament, who, around the 1920s, went

to Palestine on a cruise. On board, a passenger asked him what he was going to do there. He explained that he was working on the New Testament in Greek. The lady, a little indignant, retorted: “If English was good enough for Saint Paul, why do you want to make it Greek!” For Anglicans, the English version of the Bible was so deeply connected to Biblical truth that it was easy to imagine that all other versions were secondary.

That’s what happened with the *Lotus Sūtra*, and I think there’s a whole chain of causal connections that can somehow explain this, and that also explain why we have gathered here this evening.

Distinctive Popularity of the *Lotus Sūtra* in East Asia

This phenomenon of the *Lotus Sūtra*—at the risk of over-simplifying—is peculiar to what we used to call the Far East, now East Asia, and which I prefer to refer to by a Sino-Japanese term, which seems to me very relevant: *kanbun bunka ken*, the cultural domain of classical Chinese. In other words, the geographical area where classical Chinese was roughly equivalent to Latin in Europe: China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. In the other major area of Buddhism of the Great Vehicle, that of Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism (which, by the way, is now having a renaissance in Mongolia and in the Russian Republics of Mongolian culture), the *Lotus Sūtra* has no particular influence. Here, only the Buddhist Canon as a whole prevails, which constitutes an ‘ocean’ of work as there are 108 volumes in the Tibetan recension, and almost as many in the other Mongolian versions. In this ocean, we might find the *Diamond Sūtra* (skt. *Vajracchedikā*; Jap. *Kongō-kyō*), which has an independent circulation, and in Mongolia, the *Golden Light Sūtra* (skt. *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sutrā*; Jap. *Konkōmyō-kyō*), but this is incomparable to the importance of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the Far East, in Chinese Asia.

There is, of course, a Sanskrit version of the *Lotus Sūtra*, of which many ancient manuscripts have been discovered, and which has remained in a living tradition, in the Nepalese tradition, or more precisely amongst the Newar people of Nepal, a minority in their own country (‘Nepal’ probably comes from ‘Newar’). This ethnic group had preserved this corpus of Sanskrit texts, called the nine scriptures, the *navadharmā* (the nine dharmas), including the *Lotus Sūtra*, but it seems to me that the latter was not considered independently and as being superior to the others. We are now observing a movement to translate these nine dharmas into Newari, the current Newari language. So, for

once, and this must be emphasised, the *Lotus Sūtra* is to be translated into a modern language of the Indian subcontinent from Sanskrit, not from Chinese.

The *Lotus Sūtra*, together with some other sūtras, such as the *Amida Sūtra* and the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, widely read in the Far East, has thus had a very distinctive popularity, linked to several traditions beyond the doctrinal or scholastic.

I wonder if at the origin of this popularity there could be a reason related to language itself. The language used in the translation of the *Lotus* from Kumārajīva's studio is quite extraordinary, and its connections to the translation of Dharmarakṣa are very interesting. In reality, we have two visions of translation, evoking an issue that is currently fashionable in France (I believe, incidentally, that the notion was born here); translators are divided into two groups: the "sourcists" and the "targeters". Sourcists are focused on the source language, the language they have to work on and targeters are concerned about the intelligibility of their translation in the target language. Do we favour faithfulness to the source language, or to the output language? Put this way, the question would be very simple... only Dharmarakṣa, who was a targeter, left an incomprehensible translation, whereas Kumārajīva, who was a sourcist, produced a wonderfully fluid translation. In my opinion, this can be explained by the fact that Dharmarakṣa did not know much Sanskrit, but had, by contrast, a great command of Chinese. Although incomprehensible, his translation is wonderful for all who love Chinese. You will find a blaze of colour there, a flowering of extraordinary terms... I will give you a more precise example.

We have spoken a lot since this morning about the possibility for living beings to become Buddhas. In Sanskrit, these beings are called *sarvasattva*, or 'all life', including animals. The Kumārajīva studio systematically translated this word with a Chinese term already used by Dharmarakṣa,—*zhongsheng* (*shujō* in Japanese), literally meaning 'the crowd', the multitude of the living, of those who have been born, which encompasses animals as well as human beings. Dharmarakṣa uses half a dozen words for this term, all of them indicating human beings. Thus he is clearly a targeter, he has sinicised, adapting the Chinese vision in which there could be no other objects of salvation than human beings themselves. We have spoken of the parable of the poor child. Dharmarakṣa follows it, but only with the knowledge that he has of it. He lets the cat out of the bag by translating the parable; the father says to the son, "You are my son", which reveals things too soon.

But Kumārajīva's studio did not, however, reject Dharmarakṣa's

translation. If you follow the two translations line by line, you see that Kumārajīva corrects Dharmarakṣa's version. If you give two different people a Sanskrit text to translate into Chinese, or another language for that matter, it would be impossible to find the same alignment of syntax, that is, the same order of propositions between the Sanskrit and Chinese. If Kumārajīva had not looked at Dharmarakṣa's work, he would have translated the words in a different order. Instead of just dumping the text fragments phrase by phrase, Kumārajīva corrects and rewrites, and sometimes, when possible, he takes certain words from Dharmarakṣa, moving them from the wrong place to the right one.

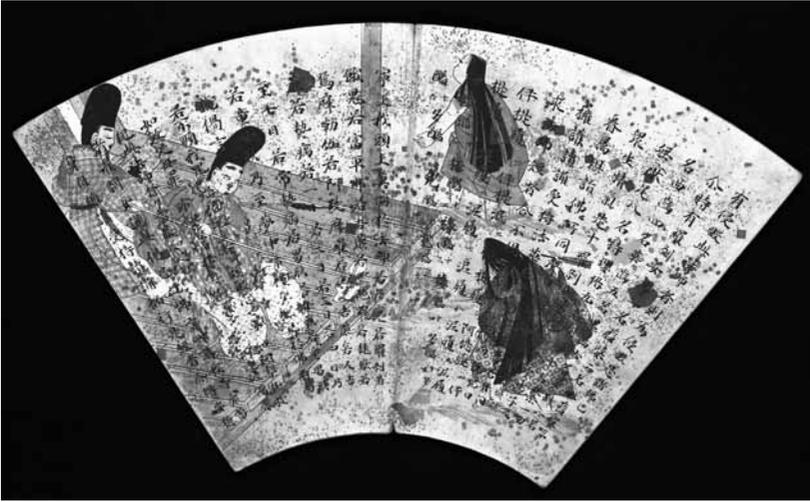
It is fascinating work to study in detail—which I cannot go into further here—and shows that there is a real cooperation between the two translations, spaced a hundred and twenty years apart. Kumārajīva is a targeter, because we understand his Chinese and the sequences much better, and at the same time he is a sourcist because, unlike Dharmarakṣa, who did not use Sanskrit words, Kumārajīva reintroduces Sanskrit words by transliterating them, such as 'supreme perfect enlightenment', *anuttara-samyak-sambhodi*. There is therefore a literary quality, specific to the *Lotus Sūtra*, which is due to the symbiosis between these two translations.

Japanese Poems on the *Lotus Sūtra*

From the 7th century in Japan, during the reign of Shōtoku Taishi, the protector of Buddhism who died in 622, the so-called 'three assemblies' (Jap. *sanne*) developed, in which three great sūtras were read, separated from the Buddhist Canon: the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* (Jap. *Shōman-gyō*), the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (Jap. *Yuima-gyō*), widely read by the laity in China, and the *Lotus Sūtra* (Jap. *Hoke-kyō*). These three assemblies perpetuated themselves over the centuries and it is especially the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* and the *Lotus Sūtra*, which have had the most impact.

I therefore think that the literary quality and the very history of the translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* greatly influenced the reception it enjoyed, first of all from the Chinese and then from the Japanese. Incidentally this is in contrast to the Sanskrit version of the *Lotus Sūtra* as there is no echo of the popularity of the *Lotus* in the Sanskrit literary world.

When this sūtra reached Japan with all the other sūtras, it was not translated. As I mentioned, with Chinese being the 'Latin' of the Far East, Japanese monks did not translate it. It was recited according to the Chinese text, but with Japanese pronunciation. There was no Japanese translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* until a very late date. The first Japanese



Fan-shaped booklet of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Japan; 12th century. Tokyo National Museum, Tokyo (Image: TNM Image Archives, All rights reserved)

Edition of the *Lotus Sūtra* (Kanagaki Hoke-kyō) is that of the 13th century, which was done at the time of Nichiren (1222–1282), but it is limited insofar as all Buddhist terms remain in Chinese.

For a very long time Chinese sūtras and texts in general had been read orally. The Chinese text was read according to Japanese grammar. The question arises as to whether, when reading aloud, one kept the Sino-Japanese vocabulary, or if one ‘Japanised’ everything, as suggested by some of the evidence. It is certain, however, that from the 9th and 10th centuries especially, in the practice of Japanese poetry, (which, as you know, goes far back in history—the first confirmed *waka* date from the 8th century) the tradition developed—mostly through women to begin with—of writing poems in Japanese on the *Lotus Sūtra*.

However, the thirty-one syllable *wakas* have an important literary constraint: one absolutely avoids the use of Chinese vocabulary. These poems on specific passages of the *Lotus Sūtra* therefore obliged the Japanese to translate essential philosophical terms into their language which were subject to interpretation and which, in my opinion, must have been influenced by the oral reading of the sūtras. In this way, translations were subconsciously transmitted into poetry and then into the whole of Japanese literature. As eminent monks practised this poetry, the tendency developed to infuse into it teachings that were not originally in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

For example, we have spoken much today about the universality of

Buddha nature (Jap. *bushshō*). This term does not appear as such in the *Lotus Sūtra*, even though an extremely controversial passage might suggest it. The monk Genshin (942–1017), mentioned earlier, a great thinker of the Pure Land, and one of the rare Japanese scholars of Buddhist logic, left a poem on the parable of the medicinal herbs from the fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Genshin goes further than the *Lotus Sūtra* since he tells us that these very diverse plants on which the same rain falls will also become Buddhas. He associates an idea that is not present in the *Lotus Sūtra*—that of the awakening of plants and vegetation (Jap. *sōmoku jōbutsu*); an idea that took shape in China from the eighth century onwards. In this way, a whole tradition of Japanese poetry cultivated and conveyed by monk-poets said that plants as well as human beings were called to become Buddhas.

Similarly, Jien (1155–1225) left a very interesting poem of introduction to the *Lotus Sūtra*, which shows how the *Lotus Sūtra* blended into Japanese culture, as this poem refers both to Shinto and Buddhist traditions, while reconciling silence and speech.

*Pure waters of the rock
Of the one who now speaks
The leaves of words float
Just as they are in their current.*

Jien uses a very evocative Japanese term to say ‘words’, literally ‘leaves of words’, (Jap. *kotoba* or *koto no ha*). This poem is dedicated to a Shinto sanctuary near Kyoto, Iwashimizu (literally ‘pure waters of the rock’). At the same time there is a Japanese word game: *iwashimizu* can also be read *iwajimizu*: ‘it will not speak / I will not speak’, therefore *iwajimizu*: ‘water that does not speak’. The ‘leaves of words’ are like autumn leaves thrown into the river of this Japanese sanctuary. The Buddha, who had hitherto kept quiet the truth of the *Lotus Sūtra*, began to reveal and propagate it. In this poem, you have at the same time praise of the *Lotus Sūtra*, of the Japanese language (the main meaning of *kotoba* is ‘Japanese words’) and, at the same time, the reference to the Shinto sanctuary, the meeting place for the phenomenal represented by Japan and the supreme truth which is the *Lotus Sūtra*.

I would like to conclude with a revealing example of this ‘return effect’, illustrating how this poetic Japanese interpretation, which developed over the centuries, influenced the Japanese reading of the *Lotus Sūtra* to the point where even Sanskrit scholars of the *Lotus Sūtra*, who read the *Lotus Sūtra* in Sanskrit, almost unconsciously follow this

interpretation.

Chapter II of the *Sūtra* enumerates the so-called ‘ten factors’ (Jap. *jū-nyoze*) following a fundamental principle of this *Sūtra*, ‘the true aspect of all phenomena’ (Jap. *shohō jissō*). In this context, I have translated *shohō* as ‘means’, for it seems to me that an impartial reading of this passage says that the character *hō* is translated as ‘teaching’ or ‘method’, not as ‘things’ or ‘existing phenomena’, a less relevant translation here. It is to do with methods of teaching and this corresponds well to the fact that the Buddha will reveal that there is only a single vehicle. However, the Japanese poet-monks, and even before them the Chinese commentators, interpreted *shohō* as ‘things’, ‘beings’, ‘entities of the phenomenal world’.

Concerning this passage, Jien writes in a poem, which has remained famous:

*That the bay of Naniwa in the country of Tsu
Be as real
Thanks to the way of the helpful door
That we know.*

The ‘bay of Naniwa’ (present-day Osaka), is a word-play in Japanese meaning ‘all things’. This is a self-evident interpretation in Japan. Now, some time ago, a modern Japanese translation of the Sanskrit version appeared in which the term *sarvadharma* is translated as *monogoto*, meaning ‘all things’. The Japanese translator involuntarily reads the term *dharma* as ‘things’, with eyes shaped by a thousand years of Japanese poetry.

The *Lotus Sūtra* is now re-broadcast across the world from its Chinese version, which is itself supported by a long tradition of Japanese understanding and it will be exciting to study how these translations will, in turn, generate new traditions in other languages.

Thank you for your attention.

(Lecture transcribed by Bertrand Rossignol)

Author Biography

Jean-Noël Robert is a specialist in the history of Japanese Buddhism and its Chinese history. His work focuses in particular on Tendai Buddhism and on the philology of Sino-Japanese Buddhist texts. He holds the Chair in Philology of Japanese Civilization at the Collège de France and is a member of the Institut de France: Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres (Academy of Inscriptions and Literature).