

**The Elements of the *Hu* 胡 Languages in  
Chinese Transcription in *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*  
*Prajñāpāramitā***

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Abstract

Scholars have presented different theories about how Buddhism spread to China and which routes were followed since its birth. In order to reinforce the linguistic evidence that Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages played a role of medium in the sutra translation, this paper focuses on the Chinese transcribed words in the translation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, translated by Lokakṣema. The comparison and correspondence between the Chinese transcribed words and the sounds in Tocharian, Gāndhārī and Middle Indic highly suggest that the Chinese version of the sutra was not translated directly from Sanskrit to Chinese; the linguistic evidence proves the existence of Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages in the process of translating the Buddhist sutra into Chinese. The tradition of oral transmission in Buddhism offered a precious opportunity for Central Asian monks to dictate and recite the

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Buddhist sutras in their local languages; the Chinese transcribed words in the sutra translation are concrete and valid proof that certain Central Asian languages, such as Tocharian, Sogdian, Bactrian, and other non-Sanskrit languages, such as Gāndhārī and Middle Indic, were mediums and may actually be the source languages for Buddhist sutra translation into Chinese.

Keywords: *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, sutra translation, Central Asian languages, Lokakṣema, Chinese transcription

# 支婁迦讖所譯《道行般若經》

## 音譯之胡語軌跡

魏 伶 珈

摘 要

佛教經由哪一條路徑傳播至中國，學者分別提出不同理論，卻也莫衷一是。爲了提出更強而有力的語言學證據，來證明在佛經翻譯中中亞語言與非梵語所扮演的關鍵性角色，本文藉由支婁迦讖（支讖）所譯的《道行般若經》中的音譯字深入探討。將吐火羅語、犍陀羅語、中期印度語這些字詞的發音與中文音譯比較，發現佛經翻譯中這些音譯詞，並非直接從梵語音譯得來；相反的，中亞語言與非梵語等語言卻留下了其語音的痕跡。佛經傳播中一直以來的口語相傳的傳統，使得中亞佛僧可能就以自己本地語言／母語，來口述並複誦解釋佛經。更進一步來說，佛經翻譯中的中文音譯詞，更是堅實地證明了中亞語言，如吐火羅語、粟特語、大夏語，以及一些非梵語，如犍陀羅語、中期印度語爲佛經翻譯過程中的重要媒介，更甚或是有可能就是佛經原文所使用的語言。

關鍵詞：《道行般若經》、佛經翻譯、中亞語言、支婁迦讖、中文音譯



## The Elements of the *Hu* 胡 Languages in Chinese Transcription in *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* *Prajñāpāramitā*

Wei Ling-chia

Scholars have presented different theories about how Buddhism spread to China and which routes were followed since its birth. Although the role of Central Asian monks as the bridge of transmission into China was documented in the *Gaoseng Zhuan* (《高僧傳》) (*Accounts of Eminent Monks*), the source languages they used for the Buddhist sutra translation into Chinese remain a topic for debate. One school of scholars, which include Jan Nattier, argue that there is no archaeological evidence of preserved Buddhist texts in Central Asian languages that could be assigned to a date earlier than the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Another school of scholars, which include Ji Xianlin 季羨林, Daniel Boucher, and Seishi Karashima, however, managed to compare the sounds of the transcribed words in Wei-and-Jin period Chinese translation; they identified traces of the *Hu* 胡 languages, including Tocharian, Sogdian, and Gāndhārī, as the source languages of sutra translation. In order to reinforce the linguistic evidence that Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages played the role of medium in the sutra translation, this paper focuses on the

Chinese transcribed words in the translation of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (《道行般若經》), translated by Lokakṣema 支婁迦讖 (or 支讖). The comparison and correspondence between the Chinese transcribed words and the sounds in Tocharian, Gāndhārī and Middle Indic highly suggest that the Chinese sutra translation is not a direct translation from Sanskrit to Chinese; the linguistic evidence proves the existence of certain Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages in the process of translating the Buddhist sutra into Chinese.

## The Tradition of Oral Transmission

“Thus have I heard at one time” is a typical opening phrase of sutras, and it also manifests in the Buddhist tradition of oral transmission. After the death of Buddha, his teachings were passed down in oral form. Though it was claimed that Gautama Buddha (also known as *Śākyamuni*) spoke Magadhi, a dialect spoken in the Eastern zone of the Indian subcontinent, the dissemination of his teachings during his lifetime was not limited to any single language; rather Buddhism was spread in several vernacular languages. According to Lin Liguang 林藜光, “Magadhi may be one of the languages that was employed. In places where Buddhism was popular, such as Vaisali, Kausambi, Mathura, and Ujjayini, it was spread in the respective local language.”<sup>1</sup>

Not until the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries did the dissemination of Buddhism begin to undergo a process of Sanskritization.<sup>2</sup> By that time, Buddhism

<sup>1</sup> This is my own translation from the French source: Lin Liguang, *L'aide-memoire de la vraie loi (Saddharma-smrtyupasthana-sutra)*. (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1949), 227-228.

<sup>2</sup> With the increasing use of literary Sanskrit by educated Hindu poets and philosophers, we find the Buddhists beginning to follow their lead and

had already passed through Central Asian and was flourishing in China proper. Scholars have since debated endlessly as to what languages were used by the Central Asian monks who helped spread Buddhism.

Further exploration of this topic only raises more questions. What kind of languages were the source languages used by the Central Asian monks? Are there extant sutra texts written in Central Asian languages? Based on the teachings of the Buddha, who stressed that his teachings should be spread in local languages, it is not likely that Central Asian Buddhist monks would ignore this tradition of oral transmission. More concrete evidence is required, however, to prove the central status of Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages in the process of sutra translation. Even though Jan Nattier rebutted the theory that Central Asian monks exclusively used the Indian languages as sources for the Chinese translation of sutras prior to the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> no archaeological evidence exists which supports the use of Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages in sutra translation. In addition, transmission of texts during that period was based primarily on word-for-word memorization and oral transmission, so Jan Nattier's argument has no solid evidence to prove that the Central Asian monks did not transmit orally the teachings of the Buddha in their Central Asian languages or non-Sanskrit languages.

Moreover, increasing numbers of scholars have begun to concentrate on the comparison of sounds of the Chinese transcribed words with

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(particularly during and after the Gupta period, c. 320-467 CE) producing religious literature in more or less polished forms of Sanskrit. See: Jan Nattier, "Church Language and Vernacular Language in Central Asian Buddhism,"

*Numen* 37 (Dec. 1990): 202.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 212.

Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit<sup>4</sup> and other Indo-European languages, such as Tocharian, Gāndhārī, Middle Indic and others. For example, Norman<sup>5</sup> and Pulleybank<sup>6</sup> both support the concept that in the early stages the Buddhist sutras were written in Gāndhārī. Ji Xianlin used the fragments of Tocharian A in the *Maitreyasamiti-Nāṭaka* to prove that traces of Central Asian languages, such as Tocharian, had some parallels in the Buddhist sutras, which could be dated back to the Wei and Jin Period and even the Eastern Han Dynasty. According to Coblin,<sup>7</sup> though he believed that the original language employed in the Buddhist sutras may have been Sanskrit, he recognized that there were elements of Middle Indic remaining in the Chinese transcription. Since there is no archaeological evidence of Buddhist texts written in Central Asian languages earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup> century, it would be extremely valuable if linguistic evidence could

<sup>4</sup> The term Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit was coined by Franklin Edgerton in the introduction of his book, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, published in 1953. The language was used in the early Mahāyāna Buddhist texts and the texts for other schools of Buddhism in the first few centuries C.E. It was not Classical Sanskrit, nor Middle Indic, but it preserves some features of vernacular Indic languages. See: Nattier, 202, 215.

<sup>5</sup> K. R. Norman, “Gandhārī,” in *Ji Xianlin Jiaoshu Ba Shi Hua Dan Ji Nian Lunwen Ji* (《季羨林教授八十華誕紀念論文集》) (*The Collection of Papers Dedicated to the Celebration of the 80th Birthday of Professor Ji Xianlin*) (Nanchang, China: Jiangxi People’s Publishing House 江西人民出版社, 1991), 133-143.

<sup>6</sup> E.G. Pulleybank, “Stages in the Transcription of Indian Words in Chinese from Han to Tang,” In *Sprachen des Buddhismus in Zentralasien*, eds., Klaus Rohrborn und Wolfgang Veenker. (Wiesbaden: in Kommission bei O. Harrassowitz, 1983), 73-102.

<sup>7</sup> W. S. Coblin, “BTD Revisited-A Reconsideration of the Han Buddhist Transcriptional Dialect (Part 1: The Initials),” *Di Er Jie Zhongguo Jing Nei Yuyan Ji Yuyan Xue Guoji Yan Tao Hui Lunwen Ji* (《第二屆中國境內語言暨語言學國際研討會論文集》) (*Paper Collection of the Second International Conference of Languages and Linguistics in China*) (Taipei: Institute of History and Philology, Academia Sinica, 1991), 160-179.



be brought to bear on comparing the sounds of the transcribed words in the Chinese translation and the sounds in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. This would also verify their close correspondence with the sounds in Tocharian, Gāndhārī and Middle Indic.

As for verifying the correspondence of the sounds in the Buddhist texts, the Buddhist sutras translated in the Eastern Han Dynasty offer tremendously rich resources for research on transcription. Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, a famous scholar on the history of Buddhism in China, stated that,

As for the translation and the source text in the Six Dynasties, in order to decide which were from the *Hu* languages and which were from Sanskrit, we should compare the transcription in different versions of translation and then its source could be decided. (至于六朝譯本原文，果何者為胡，何者為梵，則應俟比較各書之譯音，或可決定也。)<sup>8</sup>

Previous scholars have focused more on the comparison of the transcription (印漢對照 or 梵漢對照) in the sutras translated in the Wei and Jin period, such as the *Dirghagama-sutra* (《長阿含經》) studied by Brough and the *Saddharmapundarika-sūtra* (《正法華經》) studied by Seishi Karashima. These sutras ranged from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

There is a paucity of research, however, on the transcription in the sutras translated in the Eastern Han Dynasty, which dated back to the period between the first and the third century. Even Ji Xianlin only located the sounds of Tocharian in some parts of the sutras translated in the

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<sup>8</sup> Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, *Han Wei Liang Jin Nan Bei Chao Fojiao Shi* (《漢魏兩晉南北朝佛教史》) (*The History of Buddhism in Han, Wei and Jin and the Northern and Southern Dynasties*) (Taipei, Taiwan: The Commercial Press, Ltd. 臺灣商務印書館, 1938 年). It is my own translation from the Chinese.

Eastern Han Dynasty. There has been no systematic comparison between the sounds of Chinese transcribed words with sounds from the *Hu* 胡 languages, that is, Indo-Iranian languages and Central Asian languages, especially for the Buddhist sutras translated in the Eastern Han Dynasty. Buddhism was purported to have spread to China and burgeoned during the Eastern Han Dynasty. Therefore, Buddhist sutras translated in the Eastern Han Dynasty are a good indicator of how the Buddhist texts first arrived and were transcribed in China, especially since some special terms were not yet semantically translated.

In addition, because Sanskrit and Eastern Han Chinese belong to two different language families and are quite different in terms of sounds and scripts, in the beginning stage of transmission, Buddhist monks followed primarily the principle of transcription to translate special terms in sutras and dhāraṇīs.<sup>9</sup> Especially when the Buddhist texts were first translated into the Chinese language, there were words and concepts that did not previously exist in Chinese culture; to translate these unfamiliar terms, the Buddhist monks tended to copy the sounds. Therefore, transcription of Chinese Buddhist sutra translation in the Eastern Han preserves the original core of the texts, which allows some insight into the languages used by the Central Asian monks while they translated orally. That is why, instead of focusing solely on the fragments from different sutras, this paper compares the sounds of Buddhism Hybrid Sanskrit in the source texts with the sounds of transcribed words in the Chinese translations. Sounds from Indo-Iranian languages, such as Gāndhārī and Middle Indic, and non-Iranian languages, such as Tocharian, will also be examined for the same words.

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<sup>9</sup> The exact transcription is especially important for dhāraṇīs because dhāraṇīs are considered to protect the one who chants them from malign influences and calamities.

## Methodology

In order to take good advantage of the resources imbedded in the transcription of Chinese Buddhist sutras, this paper focuses on the transcriptions in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* and reconstructs the Chinese transcribed words in the Eastern Han Dynasty. First, certain frequently used and transcribed words or terms are chosen for comparison while semantically translated words, which do not necessarily preserve the sounds of the source, are left out of this study. Second, the sounds of these transcribed words are reconstructed according to the sound system posited by W.S. Coblin. Next, the pronunciation of these transcribed words in the Eastern Han Dynasty will be compared with the sounds from Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. Those which do not match the pronunciation of Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit will be identified; the sound changes and correspondence with Tocharian, Gāndhārī, and Middle Indic also will be specified respectively.

In addition, though the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* was first translated by Lokakṣema, it was later translated by Buddhist monks in different periods with different titles, such as *Da Ming Du Wu Ji Jing* (《大明度無極經》), translated by Zhiqian 支謙 in the Three Kingdoms Period, *Guang Zan Bore Poluomi Jing* (《光贊般若波羅蜜經》), translated by Dharmarakṣa 竺法護 in the Western Jin Period, and *Mo He Bore Poluomi Duo Chao Jing* (《摩訶般若波羅蜜多鈔經》), translated by Buddhasmṛti 竺佛念 in the Former Qin 前秦. The famous Buddhist monk and translator of Later Qin 後秦 Kumārajīva also translated this sutra with a different title, *Mohe Bore Poluomi Jing* (《摩訶般若波羅蜜經》). Though this paper concentrates on the transcription and translation of Lokakṣema and tries to locate the traces of Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit

languages in the transcription, the transcriptions of later versions may also be considered if they are valuable to examining the evolution of sound change. The comparison of transcribed words in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* translated by Lokakṣema is especially important because, with the comparison of sounds from different languages of approximately the same period, the traces of Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages will be thus revealed in the Buddhist sutra translation.

### Lokakṣema and *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*

Lokakṣema, Zhiluojiachen, or Zhichen was originally from Yue-zhi 月氏. His conduct was simple and considerate and he was open-minded and agile. He was committed to persevering in the Dharma and the precepts and was famous for enhancing himself in such a way. He chanted many sutras and was dedicated to spreading the Dharma. During the reign years of Guanghe 光和 and Zhongping 中平 of Emperor Ling of Eastern Han, he traveled in Luoyang, where he translated and interpreted Sanskrit.

(支婁迦讖，亦直云支讖，本月支人。操行純深，性度開敏。稟持法戒，以精勤著稱。諷誦群經，志存宣法。漢靈帝時游於雒陽，以光和、中平之間傳譯梵文。)<sup>10</sup>

Lokakṣema was a Buddhist monk from the Yuezhi or Rouzhi 月氏，<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Hui Jiao 慧皎, *Gaoseng Zhuan*, (《高僧傳》) (*Accounts of Eminent Monks*),. In *Gaoseng Zhuan He Ji* (《高僧傳合集》) (*The Compilation of Legends of Eminent Monks*) (Shanghai, China: Shanghai Guji Publishing House 上海古籍出版社, 1991), 5. It is my own translation from the Chinese.

<sup>11</sup> Erik Zürcher claimed that Lokakṣema was an Indoscythian. In Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: the Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China*. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2007), 35.

a tribe whose territory originally covered the Eastern part of the Tarim Basin. In the 1st century C.E., one of the Yuezhi tribes established the Kushan Empire, and later it united all five Yuezhi tribes. In the *Xiyu Zhuan* (《西域傳》) (*The Accounts of Western Regions*) and *Han Shu* (《漢書》) (*the Book of Han*), Ban Gu 班固 stated that,

Da Yuezhi was originally situated between Dunhuang and Qilien. Not until Modu Chanyu defeated Yuezhi and (his successor) Laoshang Chanyu killed (the chieftain) of Yuezhi and drank wine with his head, did Yuezhi flee. Yuezhi passed Da Yuan and attacked Bactria in the West. (Bactria) succumbed to Yuezhi.

(大月氏) 本居敦煌、祈連間。至冒頓單于供破月氏，而老上單于殺月氏，以其頭爲飲器。月氏乃遠去，過大宛，西擊大夏而臣之。<sup>12</sup>

In addition, in the *San Guo Zhi* (《三國志》) (*Records of the Three Kingdoms*) annotated by Pei Songzhi 裴松之 (372-451), “Kasmira (or Kashmir), Bactria, Gaofu and Tianzhu (a name for India at that time), were all under the control of Da Yuezhi.” (罽賓國、大夏國、高附國、天竺國，皆並屬大月氏。) By the 3rd century C.E., the territory of Yuezhi included Bactria and northern South Asia (the Northwestern part of India), and was under the influence of Central Asian languages. Because Tocharian may have been the spoken language for this group of people, and because their territory covered Gandhāra and Northern India, it is imperative to find out whether the elements of these languages existed in the transcription and the translation of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, translated by Lokakṣema in 179 C.E. In addition, Lokakṣema was renowned as the first generation

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<sup>12</sup> Ban Gu 班固. *Xiyu Zhuan* (《西域傳》) (*The Accounts of Western Regions*), *Han Shu* (《漢書》) (*the Book of Han*). This is my own translation from the Chinese.

of Buddhist translators of the Mahāyāna sutras and, compared to other Buddhist monks and translators, he intentionally chose transcription as the main strategy to translate the special terms from Buddhist sutras. According to Erik Zürcher, however, while “the translation of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* were based on manuscripts brought From India by Zhu Shufo 竺朔佛,”<sup>13</sup> this paper locates traces of the Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages in the Chinese transcribed words. In his role as interpreter, Lokakṣema, would recite and explain the meaning of the sutras, while his three Chinese assistants, Mengfu 孟福, Zhang Lian 張蓮, and Zibi 子碧,<sup>14</sup> would help him to transcribe the words in Chinese. The transcription reveals how these Chinese assistants perceived the sounds from Lokakṣema’s pronunciation, which was influenced by these Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages. The next part of this paper will discuss the evidence from Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages to show that as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. in the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Buddhist sutras were not directly translated from Sanskrit to Chinese.

## Transcription from Tocharian

According to the fragments excavated in Kucha, Xinjiang, Tocharian is an ancient and extinct language, which is believed to have been spoken by steppe people living in the Tarim Basin during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century or even earlier. Tocharian was written down in the Brahmin scripts, a northern Indian syllabary, and was classified into Tocharian A, also called the language of Yanqi 焉耆 or Qarashahr, and Tocharian B, the language

<sup>13</sup> Zürcher, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Hui Jiao, 5.

of Kucha. In the analysis of the scripts, devoted linguists such as Ji Xianlin not only tried to find out the meaning of individual words and the pronunciation in Tocharian but also noticed the parallels with the Buddhist sutras translated in Chinese. While Ji Xianlin compared the words in the parallel versions of sutras, such as the *Dīrgha Āgama* (《長阿含經》) and *Dharmapada* (《法句經》), which were dated back to the Wei and Jin period or later, this paper examines the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* of the Eastern Han Dynasty.

First, in Tocharian, the voiced /dh/ sound in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit was weakened into the voiceless /t/ sound, which also manifests in the pronunciation in Eastern Han Chinese. The most obvious example is the Sanskrit word, *Buddha* 佛陀, which appears in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* 1,320 times. It shows that, starting from the Eastern Han Dynasty, in this sutra, *Buddha* had been transcribed into 佛 and that it is not a shortened form for 佛陀. This sound change from the voiced /dh/ to the voiceless /t/ may not be a direct result of translation from Sanskrit to Eastern Han Chinese but might be a sound change resulting from the mediation of Central Asian languages. Not only did Ji Xianlin<sup>15</sup> propose that Tocharian B's *pudñäkte* and Tocharian A's *ptāñkät* transformed the sounds into 佛 (Eastern Han: bjət, *Qieyun* (《切韻》): bjuət), but other Central Asian languages also manifested this change.<sup>16</sup> For example, in Middle Persian it was pronounced /bwt/; in the documents of Manichaeism written in the Parthian language, *Buddha* was pronounced /bwt/ or /but/; in the

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<sup>15</sup> Ji Xianlin 季羨林, “Zai Tan Futu Yu Fo (〈再談浮屠與佛〉) (Re-discussion on Futu and Fo),” in *Fojiao Hanyu Yanjiu* (《佛教漢語研究》) (*Research on the Buddhist Terms in Chinese*), eds. Zhu Qingzhi 朱慶之 (Beijing, China: The Commercial Press 北京: 商務印書館, 2009年), 483.

<sup>16</sup> G. Djelani Davary, “*Batrisch.*” *ein Wörterbuch auf Grund der Inschriften, Handschriften, Münzen und Siegelsteine* (Heidelberg, Germany: J. Groos, 1982).

documents of Manichaeism written in the Sogdian language, *Buddha* was pronounced /bwty/ or /pwtyy/; in the documents of Buddhism written in the Sogdian language, *Buddha* was pronounced /pwt/. According to H.W. Bailey, in the Sogdian language, the voiced consonants b, d, and g were transformed into fricatives, such as β, δ and γ, which were written as p, t, and k.<sup>17</sup> One easily notices this sound change in Eastern Han Chinese and that it derived more possibly from Central Asian languages. In Taiwanese, which preserves some elements of Old Chinese, the pronunciation of 佛, /put/, is also very similar to the Central Asian pronunciations.

Another example comes from the stronger sound correspondence between *Mile* 彌勒 (Maitreya) in Eastern Han Chinese and that in Tocharian. *Mile* 彌勒 (Maitreya) appears in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* 17 times. In Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, -ya is pronounced as /ja/, which is a palatal sound, but in Eastern Han Chinese, the end sound of the word 彌勒, mjiei[ mjiei:] lək, was weakened into a velar sound, /k/. If the sound in Eastern Han Chinese is compared with the sounds in Tocharian and Bactrian, the word *Mile* 彌勒 (Maitreya) demonstrates a sound change from Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, to Bactrian, then to Tocharian, and finally to Chinese. According to Seishi Karashima,<sup>18</sup> *Mile* 彌勒 (Maitreya) was pronounced Mētraga in Bactrian; while according to Franz Bernhard,<sup>19</sup> *Mile* 彌勒 (Maitreya) was pronounced Metraḡa in Gāndhārī. The palatal sound -ya was transformed

<sup>17</sup> Harold Walter Bailey, *Opera Minora: Articles on Iranian Studies*, ed., M. Nawabi (Shiraz: Forozangah Publishers, 1981), 104.

<sup>18</sup> Seishi Karashima, *A Glossary of Lokakṣema's Translation of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* (Tokyo, Japan: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddology, Soka University, 2010), 367.

<sup>19</sup> Franz Bernanrd, "Gāndhārī and the Buddhist Mission in Central Asia,," in *Añjali: Papers on Indology and Buddhism: A Felicitation Volume Presented to Oliver Hector de Alwis Wijesekera on His Sixtieth Birthday* (Peradeniya: The Felicitation Volume Editorial Committee, University of Ceylon, 1970), 55-62.



into the voiced velar sound /g/ in Bactrian and Gāndhārī. Then in Tocharian, the voiced velar sound /g/ was weakened into the voiceless sound /k/, like the tendency mentioned in the previous paragraph. In Tocharian A, the pronunciation for *Mile* 彌勒 (Maitreya) is Metrak, while in Tocharian B, it is Maitrāk.<sup>20</sup> The tendency of voiced consonants to weaken into voiceless consonants in Central Asian pronunciation once again manifests in this word.

When compared with the transcription in later translations, the influence of Central Asian languages can be detected. In Buddhist sutra translations for the same sutra completed in the Tang Dynasty Xuan Zang 玄奘 translated and transcribed the term as *Mei Da Li Ye* 梅怛利耶. This transcription was closer to the pronunciation in Sanskrit because Xuan Zang traveled to India and sought the original versions of the sutras in Sanskrit. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, however, the translation and the transcription of *Mile* 彌勒 (Maitreya) had already been influenced by Central Asian languages, and the sound change was preserved in the transcribed words. Therefore, the sound, -ya, was not transcribed as *Ye* 耶 but 勒 /lək/, which was influenced by Central Asian languages.

## Transcription from Gāndhārī

Gāndhārī is a Northwestern Middle Indic language used in Gāndhāra. According to Bailey, Middle Indic encompassed “. . .the Asokan kharosthi edicts from Shahbazgarhi and Mansehra, the various donative inscriptions

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<sup>20</sup> Ji Xianlin 季羨林, *Dunhuang Tuluofan Tuholuo Yu Yanjiu Dao Lun* (《敦煌吐魯番吐火羅語研究導論》) (*The Introduction to the Research on the Tocharian in Dunhuang and Turfan*) (Taipei, Taiwan: Xinwenfeng Publishing House 臺北：新文豐出版公司, 1993年), 224.

from northwest India, the *Dharmapada* found near Khotan (the Dutreuil de Rhins manuscript), the documents from the ancient Shanshan kingdom found at Niya and Loulan.”<sup>21</sup>

Gāndhārī was identified, however, from several fragments of sutras, such as *Dharmapada*, *Anavatapta gāthā*, *Khargaviṣāṇa sutra*, *Sangiti sutra* and a collection of excavated sutras of *Anguttara*; they were all written in Kharosthi scripts.<sup>22</sup> With the archaeological evidence, Brough assumed that an early Buddhist translation could have been done from Gāndhārī,<sup>23</sup> and Bernard agreed and proposed the so-called “Gāndhārī hypothesis,”

Phonetic transcriptions in early Chinese translations of Buddhist texts make it clear that Gāndhārī was the medium in which Buddhism was first propagated in Central Asia, the medium through which Indian culture was transmitted from the northwest across Central Asia to China.<sup>24</sup>

Though the sutras in the Sarvāstivādin and Dharmagupta schools in Hīnayāna Buddhism were examined and the source language was analyzed as possibly Gāndhārī,<sup>25</sup> a closer systematic examination of the

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel Boucher, “Gāndhārī and the Early Chinese Buddhist Translations Reconsidered: The Case of the Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra”, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118.4 (1998): 472.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Salomon, “Recent Discoveries of Early Buddhist Manuscripts: And Their Implications for the History of Buddhist Texts and Canons”. in *Between the Empires, Society in India 300 BCE to 400 CE.*, ed., Patrick Olivelle (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 349-382.

<sup>23</sup> John Brough, *The Gāndhārī Dharmapada* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 50-54.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard, 57.

<sup>25</sup> Shoji Hirata 平田昌司, “Lue Lun Tang Yi Qian De Fojing Dui Yin (〈略論唐以前的佛經對音〉) (Rough Discussion on the Comparison of Transcriptions in

early Mahāyāna sutras, such as the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, should also be conducted. This would establish whether traces of Gāndhārī sounds, in addition to the elements of Tocharian, also exist in the Chinese transcription of Mahāyāna sutras. Sound changes from Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit to Gāndhārī are found in the transcription, as I explain below.

First, according to Seishi Karashima's case study on the *Dirghagama-sutra*, one obvious feature in Gāndhārī phonology is the sound change from the /th/ sound in Sanskrit to the /s/ sound in Gāndhārī.<sup>26</sup> The transcription in *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* is also a testament to this special feature. For example, Tathāgata 怛薩阿竭 (如來, the name in the scriptures that the *Buddha* uses when referring to himself) in Sanskrit was transformed into *tasa-agada* in Gāndhārī. In the sound reconstruction of Eastern Han Chinese, the sound /th/ was also an /s/ sound: tat sat 'a gjiat. The aspirated dental sound /th/ was then transcribed and recorded in the Chinese transcription as the voiceless dental sound, /s/.

Secondly, according to Daniel Boucher's case study of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra* (《妙法蓮華經》), the sound change from /p/ in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit to /v/ in Gāndhārī exhibits features of Gāndhārī's phonology.<sup>27</sup> Confusion between labials /p/ and /v/ also appears in the transcription in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. One example of this is *Av ṛ bāh Atapāh* 阿比耶陀天 in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit; however,

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the Buddhist Sutras before the Tang Dynasty”, in *Fojiao Hanyu Yanjiu* (《佛教漢語研究》) (*Research on the Buddhist Terms in Chinese*), eds. Zhu Qingzhi 朱慶之, (Beijing, China: The Commercial Press 北京商務印書館, 2009), 212.

<sup>26</sup> Seishi Karashima, “Han Yi Fodian De Yuyan Yanjiu (《漢譯佛典的語言研究》) (The Research on the Languages in the Translated Buddhist Sutras into Chinese)”, in *Fojiao Hanyu Yanjiu* (《佛教漢語研究》) (*Research on the Buddhist Terms in Chinese*), ed., Zhu Qingzhi (Beijing, China: The Commercial Press 北京商務印書館, 2009), 50-51.

<sup>27</sup> Boucher, 481.

in Gāndhārī, it is *Avi'ā Adavā*, and the end sound /pā/ becomes /vā/. Later, it was shortened to *Aviyāda(va)*. Therefore, in Eastern Han Chinese, the end sound /va/ was deleted and transcribed as 'a *bjjə*[bjjəi-] *zja*[zja] *da*. The transcribed word, *bi* 比, for /vi/ in Gāndhārī, also corresponds with the principle of Old Chinese, being void of dento-labial onsets in classical Sinitics (古無輕唇).<sup>28</sup> According to Wang Li 王力, “Not until the era of *Qieyun* did the heavy labial sound separate from the light labial sound.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the transcription also shows this special linguistic feature in Eastern Han Chinese.

Thirdly, in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, Gāndhārī's phonology similarly shows a feature which was transformed from the aspirated labial /bh/ sound in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit to the unaspirated labial sound, /b/, and then to the elliptical form in Gāndhārī. For example, first *Apramā ṇ ābha* 阿波摩那 in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit changed to *Ap(r)amā ṇ āba*, and then the /b/ sound was omitted and changed into *Ap(r)ama ṇ a'* *a* in Gāndhārī. In the pronunciation of Eastern Han Chinese, the sound for this term is reconstructed as 'a *pa ma na*, and it exactly reflects the sound change in Gāndhārī and also omits the end sound /bh/ or /b/. On the other hand, in the transcription for the modern translation, this word is transcribed as *Ābō mó shǒu hē tiān* 阿波摩首訶天, which is closer to the pronunciation in Sanskrit. Therefore, the transcription in *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* in the Eastern Han Dynasty followed more closely linguistic features of Gāndhārī than those of Sanskrit.

From the above linguistic evidence in the translation of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*

<sup>28</sup> Zhou Jixu 周及徐, *Hanyu Yinouyu Cihui Bi Jiao* (《漢語印歐語詞彙比較》) (*The Comparison of the Terms in Sinitics and Indo-European Languages*) (Chengdu, China: Sichuan Nationalities Publishing House, 成都: 四川民族出版社, 2002), 105.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

*Prajñāpāramitā*, Gāndhārī must play a very important role as a medium, aside from the influence of Tocharian, in the Buddhist sutra translation performed during the Eastern Han Dynasty.

## Transcription from Middle Indic

In addition to the influence of Tocharian and Gāndhārī, the elements of Middle Indic (except Gāndhārī) are also found in early Buddhist sutra translation undertaken during the Eastern Han Dynasty. According to Seishi Karashima's case study of the *Dirghagama-sutra*, one obvious linguistic feature that was very common in Middle Indic but rare in Gāndhārī is the tendency for the two unaspirated sounds /t/ and /d/ to shorten to retroflex and lateral approximant /ɻ/ and then to the dental sound /l/.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, this tendency occurs in the Chinese transcription of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. For example, *garu d a* 迦樓羅 (a name of a ghost) in Sanskrit transformed into *garuḷ a* in Middle Indic. Then the sound was transcribed as the dental sound /l/ as *kja[kra] lou la* in Eastern Han Chinese. Additionally, in Coblin's *A Handbook of Eastern Han Sound Glosses*, he indicates one instance of this tendency, which also appears in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. *Kumuda* 拘文羅華 (the night blossoming white water-lily) in Sanskrit was changed into *Kumula* in Middle Indic and was transcribed as *kou[kjou] mjən la* in Eastern Han Chinese. The sound change from /t/ or /d/ to /ɻ/ to /l/ shows that there was a more direct influence from Middle Indic imposed upon the Chinese transcription of Buddhist sutras, and that the translation was not a direct translation from Sanskrit.

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<sup>30</sup> Karashima, 51.

Furthermore, the sound change from Sanskrit to Middle Indic in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* also corresponds with the tradition of reducing the number of syllables in the Chinese transcribed words in Buddhist sutras. In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, for example, *Śubbakṛtsna* 首訶迦天 in Sanskrit was shortened to *Śubaka* in Middle Indic. In the sound reconstruction of Eastern Han Chinese, 首訶迦天 was reconstructed as *śju: ha kja*[kra], and the end sound /ṛtsn/ was altogether omitted. Starting from the Eastern Han Dynasty, there was a tradition that Sanskrit words were always shortened into two- or three-syllable words when they were transcribed into Chinese. With the evidence of the already shortened transcribed words from Sanskrit to Middle Indic, the Chinese transcribed words might have been transcribed from Middle Indic or might have followed the tradition of shortened transcription from Middle Indic.

## Conclusion

The tradition of oral transmission in Buddhism offered a precious opportunity for Central Asian monks to dictate and recite the Buddhist sutras in their local languages; thus, the linguistic evidence was documented as Chinese transcribed words in the Buddhist sutra translation. Despite the lack of archaeological evidence dating back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E., as early as the Eastern Han Dynasty, the Chinese transcribed words in the sutra translation are concrete and valid proof that Central Asian languages, such as Tocharian, Sogdian, Bactrian, and other non-Sanskrit languages, such as Gāndhārī and Middle Indic, were mediums and might be source languages for Buddhist sutra translation into Chinese. In other words, the sutras might not be the result of direct translation from Sanskrit to Chinese. As Richard Saloman has observed, “The history of Buddhist

canons... had the natural tendency of local variations.”<sup>31</sup> It is only natural that Central Asian monks conveyed, translated, and interpreted the Buddhist sutras in their own local languages, and that the Chinese assistant transcribed the words with the sounds they perceived. In addition, because Central Asia was a multi-lingual steppe region where many kingdoms and empires coexisted, Central Asian monks like Lokakṣema were possibly multi-lingual and therefore may have exhibited certain linguistic features from their local languages when they translated and interpreted Buddhist sutras.

During the process of propagation, Sanskrit words may have been transcribed into different Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages before being translated into Chinese. It is reasonable to assume that transcription may be an early tradition of Buddhist sutra translation in the Central Asian region before Buddhism spread to China. These Central Asian languages may have been closely related linguistically, so much so that transcription was employed as an important strategy. However, when no similar word or concept existed in the target language, such as Chinese, the transcription caused more confusion. Later this convinced more Chinese monks to seek out the original texts in Sanskrit, such as with Xuanzang in the Tang Dynasty. Subsequently, more semantic translation was performed. For this reason the early Buddhist sutras realized in the Eastern Han Dynasty were precious for that fact that they preserved so much linguistic evidence for the examination of the transcription from Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages during this period.

This paper is only a preliminary analysis of the transcription of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*; in the future, a more thorough

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<sup>31</sup> Saloman, 375.

examination will offer a more comprehensive view of the presence of Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages as a translation medium. In addition, in order to trace the footprints of the Central Asian languages and non-Sanskrit languages more exactly, the transcription of Dhāraṇīs may be looked at as sources for further comparison and research in the near future. Some scholars doubt the real value of comparing transcriptions and question whether these are not as convincing as archaeological evidence. Based on the sound system established by previous scholars, however, this paper suggests that though Central Asian languages were extinct and the influence of some non-Sanskrit languages declined, their role as medium in Buddhist sutra translation must never be forgotten or buried in a sea of words.



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