Histoire du bouddhisme indien
Close reading and larger patterns in Buddhist history

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This lecture series aimed to consider various ways that the close reading or philological analysis of texts enables us to gain traction on larger questions in the history of Buddhism. The philological methods at play in several of the studies covered by these lectures are strongly—but not exclusively—associated with new techniques for the application of computation to the analysis of Chinese Buddhist texts. A common thread in the historical questions addressed is various ways that Buddhism was transformed as it developed in China, in distinction to what we see in other parts of the classical Buddhist world.

Computer-assisted analysis of problems of ascription in and around the corpus of Dharmarakṣa

The single-most significant and prolific translator of Buddhist texts before Kumārajīva was certainly Dharmarakṣa (fl. 266-308?). However, notwithstanding some superb and illuminating studies by such scholars as Karashima, Boucher, Kawano, and Zacchetti, to date, his corpus has, for various reasons, arguably still been understudied. At the same time, this neglected body of texts holds the promise to cast significant light on important chapters in the formation of Buddhism in China, and also on important chapters in the history of Buddhism in the broader Indic cultural sphere, especially the formation of “the” Mahāyāna. In this talk, I discussed findings from work still in progress at that time (since completed, in a monograph tentatively projected for publication through Hamburg Buddhist Studies in 2025). In that work, I reevaluate the corpus
of Dharmarakṣa, addressing first and foremost questions of ascription—which texts his group really translated, and which not. This work was undertaken with the application of a suite of computational-philological tools custom-developed for the analysis of such questions in the Chinese Buddhist canon, and intended as a pilot and proof of concepts for methods that should be more generally applicable to other corpora. The upshot of that work is twofold. First, on the basis of evidence much richer and more rigorously coordinated than that adduced in prior studies, I argue for the re-ascription of several dozen of canonical works, against the ascriptions bequeathed us by tradition. Second, I call for a number of methodological reforms in the ways that we study questions of ascription on the basis of internal, phraseological ("stylistic") evidence. In the course of my lecture, I also remarked upon the potential of my tools and methods for broader application and generalization.

Revision or modification of early Chinese Buddhist translations under the Western Jin 西晉

As a chance by-product of the computational-philological work I was conducting on Dharmarakṣa, as discussed in other parts of this lecture series, I was led to observe a heavy concentration of translation terminology and phraseology strongly associated with Dharmarakṣa in the earliest extant Chinese translation of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa* 維摩詰經 T474, which is ascribed in the present Taishō canon to Zhi Qian 支謙, who worked a few decades earlier. At the same time, the text also sports rare phrasing characteristic of Zhi Qian, but otherwise never found in Dharmarakṣa. The most economical explanation of this pattern of evidence is that T474 is a Dharmarakṣa revision or reworking of a text originally produced by Zhi Qian. This naturally leads us to ask: Is the text unique in this regard?—or are there others with a similar history? In this talk, I presented the results of a systematic investigation of this problem. On that basis, I argued that up to two dozen earlier texts (or about a third of firm ascriptions from that period) probably underwent some form of revision or modification in the immediate Western Jin context where Dharmarakṣa’s group worked. As part of my lecture, I also reflected on the implications these findings must have for our methods in treating early Chinese translations, and for the models of Buddhist textual, conceptual and social history we build on the basis of that evidence. I also considered the glimpse this pattern of evidence might offer us into otherwise invisible aspects of early Chinese Buddhist textual culture and practice. (The work discussed in this lecture was subsequently incorporated into the above-mentioned monograph, where it forms a central and substantial chapter).
Manufacturing religious needs: Fearmongering, Seduction and the “Cult of the Book” in the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-(mahā)sūtra

Since Schopen’s seminal article of 1975, scholars of Buddhism have increasingly come to accept that the “cult of the book” formed an important part of the nascent movement eventually known as (the) “Mahāyāna”. The precise nature of this cult, however, remains a controversial and understudied matter. In his classic article, Schopen painted a picture of real-world groups congregating around sites where texts are preached or enshrined, and engaging in actual cultic activities that constitute the core of their group identity (this view was subsequently problematized, especially in the scholarship of David Drewes; and also further finessed by Schopen himself). In this lecture, I argued that in the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa-(mahā)sūtra (MPNMS), the “cult of the book” can be better understood as an elaborate, multi-part rhetorical mechanism, designed in significant part to ensure the preservation and transmission of the text itself. This device is especially suited to texts that contain deliberately shocking, contrarian doctrines. I also argued that it was the intention of the composers of MPNMS that transmission occur in significant part in the relatively new medium of writing—but that beyond writing, the overall pattern of relation to the text promoted by the “cult” extends to other modes of preservation, transmission, incorporation, and even to prescriptive programmes of affective relation to the text (thus, perhaps better than “cult of the book”, a broader “cult of the text”). The text, I contended further, also organises cosmological and soteriological threats and blandishments around this central imperative of textual maintenance and reproduction. This pattern suggests that the cult of the text, so defined, may even have played a backstage role in the production of some historically significant “high” Mahāyāna doctrines, such as shortcuts and loopholes allowing exculpation from an otherwise overwhelming burden of “sin” from past lives. This may have interesting implications for the relationship between medium and message in the history of religious ideas. Yet another implication of this structure in the text, I suggested, may be that it prompts us to reconsider the old quasi-Weberian thesis that Chinese civilization had a fundamentally “optimistic” set, such that the arrival of Buddhist texts, including MPNMS, represented a clash of this optimism with a “pessimistic” Buddhism (and Indian Geist). In the MPNMS, on my reading, we discover rather a carefully coordinated “pushmi-pullyu” mechanism, which balances “pessimism” about the presumptive given, initial situation of the text’s audiences against an equally powerful “optimism” about prospects for dramatic improvement in that situation—so long as the text itself is accepted, embraced, and elevated to high and central place in the religious life.
Transculturation theory as a possible way out of the impasse of the “sinification” paradigm

Over a substantial period, the study of Buddhism in China, especially by scholars working in the West (and even more so, in English), played host to a range of speculations about the “sinification” (or “sinicization”) of Buddhism. At the same time, there was rarely any attempt to set the paradigm on a firm theoretical foundation, or to tackle the problem systematically. In recent decades, scholars have predominantly turned away from both the label “sinification”, and the problematic it represented. The sea-change in the vicissitudes of this model might be located around the time of Sharf’s *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism* (2002), or at least, emblematized by Sharf’s approach and its legacy. However, problems raised by the notion of sinification were never solved, and the model was never really fully or cogently critiqued. Rather, the field seems now largely united in observing a tacit taboo of sorts against the very question of how and why Buddhism changed as it grew in China, in relation to forms of Buddhism observed elsewhere. Meanwhile, the large problems originally addressed by theories of “sinification” remain as alive and significant as ever. One of the major critiques of prior discourses of sinification was that such theories often presumed essentialising, static, simplistic, and artificially polarized portraits of cultures—especially “India” and “China”—and equally essentialised images of “Buddhism”, haunted by the bogeyman of authenticity. These critiques, as far as they go, are trenchant and persuasive. However, that does not mean that we should abandon worthwhile questions about ways that Buddhism changed in China (and elsewhere), or why. Rather, we should work to find and apply better conceptual tools. In this talk, I argued that some promising approaches may be found in the theory of “transculturation”—though in the process, current approaches to transculturation may themselves come in for further refinement. I also considered some respects in which this approach might help us revise basic approaches by which we define or characterise Buddhism in general.