

Working Title:

Canonicity in translation: the Mongolian versions of the “Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 lines” sutra.

Summary:

The study is aimed at examining the peculiarities of translations of the Buddhist canonical scriptures from Tibetan into the Mongolian language. The research will primarily deal with the following problems: the ways of preserving and rendering the inner criteria of canonicity of the texts, the relations between the canonical texts and Mongolian cultural and linguistic context, and the supposed functioning of the orality of the texts (ritual, recitation, memorization). The object of the research is the text of the “Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 lines” sutra, the different Mongolian versions and one Tibetan version of which will be compared and analysed basing on the method of textual criticism.

State of Research:

Contemporary researchers characterize Buddhist canonical literature primarily as diverse and non-uniform. The term “canon” is generally considered inaccurate when applied to the collections of Buddhist sacred scriptures that differ in form and content depending on various factors, such as culture, language, school of thought, etc. The absence of a single, strictly fixed and universal canon naturally brings up the question of authority of Buddhist scriptures. This issue is quite comprehensively described on Indian (Sanskrit, Pali) material. The primary indicator of authenticity and sacred status of a scripture is the opening phrase “Thus have I heard” that marks it as Buddha-speech (sansk. buddhavacana) and roots back to the oral nature of early Buddhist texts. Being ascribed to the Buddha, and therefore sacred, Buddhist canonical texts, unlike the Hindu Vedas or the Muslim Quran, were at the same time not restricted to one sacred language. On the contrary, the translation of the teaching into local dialects and foreign languages is believed to be encouraged by the Buddha himself. If summarised, the doctrinal basis for such relative flexibility of form lies in the notion of meaning as being superior to form, or “letter”.

Mongolian culture, being one of those that translated and preserved the Buddhist scripture, presents a peculiar, if not unique, case of perception and handling of the canonical collections. The first translations of Buddhist texts into Mongolian language date back to the XIV century, yet a comprehensive translation from Tibetan and edition of the entire Kanjur collection was not carried out until 1607. However, apart from references in other sources, we don’t possess any direct evidence of the existence of this translation. The earliest Mongolian edition of Kanjur known to us is the Liydan qayan Kanjur of 1629. After this manuscript edition there was at least one more – the printed Beijing Kanjur of 1718-20. Several other incomplete and still undescribed copies are known to be extant, not to mention the multiple independent editions of certain popular and highly venerated canonical texts.

The practice of translation from Tibetan into Mongolian allows to mark out two schools, or more precisely two systems, of translation: verbatim (word-for-word) and semantic. As is evident from the Mongolian literary heritage, the former system was dominant, while the latter is only found in the works of a few prominent scholars. Word-for-word translations possess a number of specific features, such as retaining Tibetan word order (which in most cases is unnatural for the Mongolian language), leaving some Tibetan words untranslated, etc. In other words, the language of these translations could only be intelligible to a skilled (ideally – bilingual) reader, and not to a common person literate in classic Mongolian.

Problems still unsolved:

One of the topical issues in contemporary Mongolian studies, relevant for both the Kanjur transmission research and the study of translation schemes, is the question of the actual use of

the Mongolian translations of the Kanjur. This question arises from the fact that the use of Mongolian translations in praxis was literally stopped soon after the enthronement of the Qing dynasty (apparently due to political reasons), and Tibetan unarguably became the cardinal language of Mongolian Buddhist ritual and literature. At the same time almost nothing is known about the practical use of Mongolian translations before the switch to Tibetan. Three main issues can be pointed out for this area of study:

- The connection between translation schemes and the nature of canonical texts. How could the translator try to render the inner criteria of canonicity in the translation? Was the meaning here always more important than the form? (Apart from the opening phrase “Thus have I heard”, other markers of authenticity were introduced in Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist literature, such as adducing the name of the text in Sanskrit (in case of Mongolian translations – in Sanskrit and Tibetan), or distinctive stylistic peculiarities).
- The relation between the text and its cultural and linguistic context. For what reasons and for what purposes were the canonical texts translated? How did the translator treat the sacred text? What was the perception of the text by the supposed reader? (We know that the attitude to translation of canonical literature varied greatly throughout the history of Buddhism in Central Asia).
- Orality is one of the prime and basic characteristics of Buddhist literature. Were the Kanjur texts recited in Mongolian for ritual purposes? Were they ever supposed to be memorised in Mongolian?

Primary sources:

The Mongolian translation of the “Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 lines” (Sanskrit. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, hereinafter referred to as “Perfection of Wisdom 8,000”) was chosen as the material for this research project.

The sutra is part of the enormous corpus of the “Perfection of Wisdom” (Sanskrit. *Prajñāpāramitā*) literature which includes various versions of the sutra of different length (100,000, 25,000, 18,000, 10,000 lines, etc.), its verse summaries and commentaries. The “Perfection of Wisdom 8,000”, however, is considered to be the core text, as well as the earliest one. The sutra, originally composed in Sanskrit, consists of 32 chapters, the oldest of which were admittedly created as early as 100 B.C.E., while the complete text took its shape by 100 C.E. Being one of the earliest sutras of the Mahayana Buddhism, the “Perfection of Wisdom 8,000” argues with the Hinayana tradition and discusses some of the principal concepts of the Mahayana philosophy.

The texts on the “Perfection of Wisdom” constitute a whole section in the Tibetan and Mongolian Kanjur collections. According to the colophon of the manuscript edition, as well as the colophon of one of the later printed editions of the sutra, the “Perfection of Wisdom 8,000” was translated into Mongolian from Tibetan by Samdan Sengge – one of the eminent members of the redaction board that worked on the first edition of the Kanjur (1629), who is mentioned as the translator of 39 canonical texts.

This research will be based primarily on the text of the printed Beijing edition of 1720 (re-edited in New Delhi in 1977). The text will be compared with one of the Tibetan versions (Lhasa edition, re-edited in Dharamsala in 1987), as well as with other Mongolian editions available. The study will be fairly facilitated by the possibility to address the Sanskrit text of the sutra and its English translation edited by E. Conze.

Despite the fact that the “Perfection of Wisdom 8,000” sutra is one of the most significant and highly venerated texts of the Mahayana tradition, its Mongolian translations haven’t been studied yet.

Working Hypotheses:

The research will not touch upon the sphere of philosophical meaning of the sutra. The questions to be answered deal with the ways of translating its form and content. A comparative study of different Mongolian translations of the sutra (and their correspondence to the Tibetan text) will presumably show, how the above mentioned translation schemes work. Moreover, the comparative analysis of different Mongolian translations can make a contribution to the study of inter-relations of the extant versions of Mongolian Kanjur. We can make a conjecture that the manuscript preserved in the Royal Library in Copenhagen is a translation different from the printed edition of 1720, which would give a rich potential for comparison. There is yet very little data on the other existing editions (the manuscripts preserved in Ulan-Ude and St-Petersburg, the printed Beijing editions of 1707 and 1727). A comparative study of the colophons of these texts alone would provide valuable information: such facts as ascribing translations to certain famous authors and explaining the reasons and purposes of translation are important markers of the understanding and manifestation of the canonicity of the Kanjur texts.

Methods of research:

The main research method to be used in this study is comparative textual criticism. The research will, to a large degree, be based on the methodological system of textology, which allows to approach the text of a manuscript as subject to the history of its creation, copying, editing and translation.

In terms of literary criticism the text in question will be approached as part of the ritualised type of literature. Ritualised, or canonical, art is based on following certain established patterns, or canons, which means that both the author and the reader a priori know what to expect from the text. Using this theoretical background as a foothold is highly important to come closer to understanding the perception of the text by its translator and its contemporary reader.