



Analysis of the Diffusion Process of Buddhist Vocabulary from *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*

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Abstract

The diffusion process of Buddhist vocabulary can be divided into three stages of primary diffusion, standardization and classification, and profound integration. Biographies of monks are the links in the integration of the Buddhist terms with the midland Chinese language. The Buddhist vocabulary in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* has accurately reflected the basic pattern of diffusion of Buddhist vocabulary during the Southern and Northern Dynasties.

Key words: Buddhist vocabulary; Diffusion of vocabulary; *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*

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The integration of the Buddhist vocabulary with the midland Chinese language is an important linguistic phenomenon in the history of development of the middle-ancient Chinese vocabulary (from Eastern Han Dynasty to Sui Dynasty), which is worth special attention. For the past over 20 years, there have been great achievements in the study about middle-ancient Buddhist vocabulary. According to the statistics by Shuai Zhisong, Tan Dailong, etc. in *Directory of Researches on Language in Buddhist Literature (1980-2006)*, there have been more than five

hundred researches published in mainland China only. Among them, many scholars have also noticed the integration of the Buddhist vocabulary with the midland Chinese. Dong Zhiqiao (2000) was among the early ones to describe the diffusion paths of the Buddhist vocabulary, “This is a kind of gradual diffusion from the near to far. The midland literature which had direct contact with Buddhism was the first to be influenced, such as travel journals of monks, biographies of monks, records of monasteries, works of monks and other literature related to Buddhism”. In order to accurately describe this process, the author has done a special research on the integration of the Buddhist vocabulary with the midland Chinese with *A Record of Buddhist Temples in Luoyang* by Yang Xuanzhi as the basic linguistic data, and has come to some preliminary conclusions. Because of the limitations about some subjective and objective factors, many questions have not been studied profoundly. In recent years, through reading the *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*, the author gained a clearer understanding of the diffusion process of the Buddhist vocabulary, which is presented below for peer review.

Memoirs of Eminent Monks was written by Hui Jiao (497-554), a monk in Liang Dynasty of the Southern Dynasties. It was approximate to or a bit earlier than *A Record of Buddhist Temples in Luoyang*. The whole book has 14 volumes and has recorded the life stories of over 200 famous monks from the Yongping era in Eastern Han Dynasty to the Tianjian era in Liang Dynasty, which are categorized by “Sutra Translation”, “Hermeneutics”, “Miracles”, “Zen Cultivation”, “Moral Cultivation”, “Reincarnation”, “Chanting Sutra”, “Offerings”, and “Guidance”. It has become a paradigm of biographies of monks in ancient China. The book was finished in the later period of the process of integration of the Buddhist vocabulary with the midland Chinese, i.e. the completing stage of the process.

1. MEMOIRS OF EMINENT MONKS AND THE DIFFUSION PROCESS OF BUDDHIST VOCABULARY

The diffusion process of Buddhist vocabulary was almost the process of integration of Buddhism into the Chinese society.

At the early stage of introduction of Buddhism to China, the basic teachings of Buddhism were the first introduced. For the purpose that the Chinese disciples may easily understand and accept the thoughts of Buddhism, the missionaries revised the contents of Buddhism while keeping the essential parts unchanged so that it became more suitable for the habits of thinking of Chinese people. When the influence of Buddhism became greater, more and more Chinese people were participating in compiling various kinds of Buddhist works, and the integration of Buddhism into China became more profound. And finally it has become a thoroughly sinicized religious belief. At the early stage of diffusion of Buddhist vocabulary, only some terms expressing the basic concepts and their relevant terms came into the Chinese language. Later on, many people in the middle and higher social classes with the intellectuals as the hard core gradually became Buddhist disciples. The intelligentsia has always regarded classical Chinese as the orthodox written language and despised the slangs which were close to colloquial language. In the Buddhist literature they have translated and compiled, the generally secularized Buddhist vocabulary has become more exquisite. Such Buddhist literature include not only the sutra translations by Kang Mengxiang, Kang Senghui, Zhi Qian, etc., but also the biographies of monks and records of monasteries written by Chinese people such as *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* and *A Record of Buddhist Temples in Luoyang*. With the wide spread of Buddhism, the more exquisite contents gradually diffused into the orthodox written literature. The entry of large amount of such contents into the orthodox written literature has, on the one hand, naturally elevated the status of Buddhist terms, and on the other hand, promoted the integration of Buddhist vocabulary into the Chinese language. The final result is that the Buddhist vocabulary has become an organic part of the Chinese vocabulary system. According to the different degrees of integration, the diffusion process of Buddhist vocabulary can be divided into three stages of primary diffusion, standardization and classification, and profound integration, which have comparatively clear dividing lines and also some overlapping.

1.1 Primary Diffusion Stage

From Emperor Huan of Eastern Han Dynasty to the end of Han Dynasty is the drafting period of Chinese translations of sutras. The Buddhist vocabulary is in the original state of free development. The general characteristic is the deep influence of the original sutras.

The early Buddhist vocabulary mainly came into the Chinese language through transliteration. Due to overemphasis on the correspondence to the syllables of the original sutras, most translations of Buddhist vocabulary were polysyllabic. The reasons are: First, the early translators of sutras tried stubbornly to introduce the original Buddhism into China and they did not consider much about localization subjectively; Second, among the translators of that time, those who taught sutras orally were not proficient in Chinese, and those who did written translations were not proficient in the language of the sutras; their abilities of translating the syllables were different to the same Buddhist term was translated into different combinations of Chinese characters by different translators of sutras. Many chapters in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* have described the process of sutra translation in Southern and Northern Dynasties. For example, "Biography of Samghabhuti" records: in 381 AD, Kashmiri monk Samghabhuti came to China. Fu Jian's subordinate Zhao Zheng invited him to translate the sutras. Samghabhuti chanted the sutras orally; Dharmarandi recorded them in Sanskrit; Futuluocha translated them on the spot; Chinese monk Min Zhi rewrote them into Chinese. We may see the great obstacles in language during the early stage of sutra translation. Third, Chinese and Sanskrit belong to two different language systems. For example, the phonetic system of Chinese after Eastern Han Dynasty no longer had consonant clusters; however, Sanskrit has many consonant clusters, which had to be treated properly during translation. Due to the differences in abilities of understanding the syllables, the translators would choose different ways of treatment, resulting in totally different translations. This is another important reason for the too many syllables in transliterated words. The external form of the multi-syllable terms is very much different from the Chinese words, which has objectively reduced the efficiency of spreading of Buddhism. In this stage, the integration degree of Buddhist vocabulary with Chinese was low.

1.2 Standardization and Classification Stage

From Wei Dynasty to Western Jin Dynasty is the development period of Chinese translations of sutras. The influence of Buddhism on China became greater and greater, and the sutra translations also made great progress. The time had come for Buddhist vocabulary to diffuse into the Chinese orthodox literature.

The external factor for the large-scale diffusion of Buddhist vocabulary is the greater influence of Buddhism. Starting from the middle period of the 3rd Century, many Chinese disciples followed the road of pilgrimage. *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* records the events of Dharmaraksha's journey to the West during the period of Emperor Xiaowu of Jin Dynasty, and Shi Faxian's journey in 399 AD, Shi Zhimeng's journey in 404, Tanwujie's journey in 420 to India for Buddhist scriptures, which can

give us a glimpse of the greater influence of Buddhism. The internal factor is the standardization of Buddhist vocabulary. When Buddhism was first introduced to China, the disciples were mainly the middle and lower class people. It was inevitable to choose the secular language style for the convenience and understanding of the translators, the teachers and the followers. The large amounts of contents including the mother tongue of translators, Sanskrit in original sutras, mistakenly used Chinese and slangs are all against the orthodox written Chinese. Another problem is that there are too many transliterated words and multi-syllable words. Later on, with the expansion of disciples and elevation of cultural level of translators, the sutra language and the Buddhist vocabulary were standardized and transformed according to the orthodox written language. The famous translators including Zhi Qian and Kang Senghui in the Three Kingdoms Period had all made such efforts. The standardization mainly has three aspects.

1.2.1 Shorten the Syllables of Transliterated Words

Mainly to shorten the multi-syllable terms into monosyllable or double syllable, such as ringsel, sangharama, etc. For the long term used words recognized by the public, choose the most often used form.

1.2.2 Standardize Buddhist Terms and Avoid Multiple Forms for One Word

There are many transliterated words in the early sutra translations, which have weaker expressive functions and affected people's understanding of the sutras. Later translators tried to use free translation, which has become the starting point of integration of Buddhist vocabulary into Chinese. In the meanwhile, many translators were revising the terms translated by previous translators, resulting in multiple translations for one word. There are many words with multiple translations in the transliterated sutras such as *Transliterations of All Sutras* by Xuan Ying. Most Buddhist vocabulary that has passed down had been standardized. Standardization means determining a fixed form for Buddhist words with multiple translations which is acceptable to all. The most common means is to use a Chinese word which has similar meaning with the Buddhist one. Sometimes, the component of the Chinese character which expresses the meaning of the character might be changed in the Buddhist word according to the habit of Chinese language.

1.2.3 Shorten More Buddhist Words to Double Syllable Words

2+2 or 2+2+2 syllable combination was very popular in the four characters a line poem and rhythmical prose of Han and Wei Dynasties. Due to its influence, the format of four characters a line dominated the sentence pattern of sutra translations in Wei and Jin Dynasties. This has largely promoted the shortening of Buddhist words into double syllable words. The concept which was originally expressed by a monosyllable word has to

be added with another syllable in order to form the four-character line. The most convenient means is to look for another monosyllable word with similar, relevant or opposite meaning to make a compound word; or to use a monosyllable word which usually matches with the word and might not change the original meaning of the word to make a compound word with modifying, complementary or subject-object relation; or to add a monosyllable word the meaning of which is weaker or repetitive to make a double syllable word. The new double syllable language unit has been repeatedly used and gradually solidified into a word in Chinese language.

After the standardization of Buddhist vocabulary, its distance to the orthodox written language has been gradually shortened, which was a large step for the integration of Buddhist vocabulary into Chinese. The time has come for Buddhist vocabulary to diffuse comprehensively into the orthodox Chinese literature.

1.3 Profound Integration Stage

From Eastern Jin Dynasty to Sui Dynasty is the mature period of sutra translation. Buddhism has truly become a local religion. There were a large number of sutra translation works and hermeneutic works of sutras by Chinese disciples. Some secular works have also included the Buddhist elements. The Buddhist vocabulary had finished the long-term process of large-scale diffusion, profound integration with the Chinese literature and becoming an organic part of the Chinese vocabulary system.

The diffusion of Buddhist vocabulary into the Chinese literature is a wave-like and step-by-step process: First, it is from near to far. The literature which has closer relationship with Buddhism was the first to be influenced by the Buddhist vocabulary. The greatness of influence was generally determined by how close was the relationship with Buddhism is; Second, it is a mutual process, not unidirectional. When the Buddhist vocabulary was diffusing into the Chinese literature, it has also accepted the transformation that the Chinese literature has brought about; Third, it is a gradual process, not mutational. The Buddhist terms concerning the basic teachings were the first to come. Later on came the general Buddhist vocabulary. The works about Buddhism such as *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*, which had close relationship with Buddhism, were the most influenced. Although some other works, such as *Words of the Day* by Liu Yiqing and *Yan's Family Admonitions* by Yan Zhitui, could not generally be classified as Buddhist works, part of their contexts had close relationship with Buddhism, which include large amounts of Buddhist vocabulary. The former was written earlier than the journals and biographies of monks which have direct relationship with Buddhism, indicating that the diffusion of Buddhist vocabulary started very early. The latter was written in Southern and Northern Dynasties, indicating that the diffusion of Buddhist vocabulary had constantly been deepening.

Memoirs of Eminent Monks was written in Southern and Northern Dynasties when sutra translation was mature. The Buddhist vocabulary in the book has shown all the characteristics of the profound integration with the Chinese vocabulary system:

1) Multi-syllable Buddhist terms, especially the totally transliterated multi-syllable words, have almost disappeared. Instead are the shortened monosyllable or double syllable forms of the original multi-syllable terms. For example, in the early sutra translations, the word “Sramana” had been translated into multi-syllable forms such as Sang Men, Sha Men Na, Shi Luo Mo Na, She Luo Mo Na, etc. according to the pronunciation in Sanskrit. Later on, all the Chinese translations of sutra were simplified and shortened into double syllable words. The multi-syllable forms were no longer used in the sutra translations and Buddhist works in the period when *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* were written.

2) There were few words with multiple forms. The multiple forms of Buddhist words caused by different translations of transliteration and free translation and the varied forms of words caused by different translations of individual translators are not seen in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*. Most of the Buddhist words are still in use today.

3) Double syllable words are frequently seen the word formation methods including combining syllables with similar meaning, combining syllables with the opposite meaning and derivations had decisive effect in shortening the words into double syllable, resulting in a large amount of new Buddhist words. Besides the Buddhist words with the fixed forms, there are also many double syllable language units which are neither words nor phrases in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*. Many of these double syllable combinations have comparatively stable meaning with a certain extent of Buddhist connotation. Their structural forms are similar to words. The two monosyllable morphemes were both very common before the middle-ancient times; however, such combinations have never appeared. The literature after *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* has maintained such usage.

For example, in *Sutra Translations -- Kumarajiva*: “Later on, Shimule wished to become a Buddhist nun. Her husband did not agree. She then gave birth to another boy named Pusysdeva. When she had sight-seeing out of town, she saw the scattered bones of the dead in the cemetery. The pain of life deeply moved her, so she vowed to become a nun. Otherwise, she would not eat or drink. On the sixth night, she was nearly dying. The husband was scared and agreed”.

The combination of “Ding” and “Shi” was not found to be used in archaic Chinese according to the search results in the language databases of “Chinese Books Searching System”, “Imperial Collection of Four Searching System” and “China Basic Classics Database”. The usage is often seen after the Southern and Northern Dynasties, especially in modern Chinese. Although such language units were

frequently used in middle-ancient literature, they are actually quite different from the common “words”. They can be regarded as “pre-words” coined by Liu Shuxin (2000, p.35). For the large amount of pre-words in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* and middle-ancient literature, we believe that:

Pre-words are a common phenomenon in middle-ancient Chinese language system, which has accurately reflected the transitional state between words and phrases of the process of formation of most Chinese words. Although some of the words are used in later literature, they have not become true “words”, which means the nature of “pre-words” is free word groups.

The pre-words in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* are using the same word-formation method of absorbing oral elements in early and middle period of sutra translation. Of course, it is also possible to use written language elements in word formation. At first, it was originated from personal language innovation. Then through more usage, it has become a more and more fixed form. Due to the existence of large amounts of pre-words, the language of Buddhist classics has generally reached a balance between “the exquisite” and “the secular”. Therefore, it was easier for the Buddhist vocabulary to integrate with the contemporary Chinese vocabulary system.

Some of the pre-words have Buddhist connotations, which are different from the meaning of common Buddhist terms. The major difference is the degree of words: the meaning of Buddhist words is very obvious while the connotation of pre-words is hidden. The reason is that: in the stage when large amount of pre-words were produced, the process of the integration of Buddhist vocabulary into Chinese was basically finished. During this process, the meaning of many Buddhist words are weakened or secularized, which is a general rule of transforming a professional term into a general term. Some pre-words directly came from common words, which have been imbued with some Buddhist connotations. Such imbue is not an innate meaning of the original sutras. It is actually one of the local results after the integration of Buddhism into China.

2. THE LAW OF DIFFUSION OF BUDDHIST VOCABULARY IN MEMOIRS OF EMINENT MONKS

From the introduction of Buddhism to China in the late years of the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the integration of Buddhist vocabulary into Chinese lasted for several hundreds of years. The diffusion process of Buddhist vocabulary was even longer than the integration process. *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* was written in the Southern and Northern Dynasties, which was the completing stage of the integration of Buddhist vocabulary into Chinese as well as the primary

stage of large-scale diffusion of Buddhist vocabulary into the Chinese vocabulary system. The comprehensive and in-depth study of the Buddhist vocabulary of *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* can give us a clearer understanding of the evolution and diffusion process of Buddhist vocabulary in the Southern and Northern Dynasties.

From the static perspective, in the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the integration of Buddhist vocabulary into Chinese was almost finished. Therefore, the Buddhist vocabulary in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* has the above significant characteristics of disappearance of multi-syllable words and one word with multiple forms, the majority of double syllable words, and the exquisite trend of large amount of words. These characteristics are the direct outcome of the integration of Buddhist vocabulary into Chinese.

From the dynamic perspective, the Buddhist vocabulary in the Southern and Northern Dynasties was in the process of large-scale diffusion into the orthodox Chinese classics and profound integration with the Chinese vocabulary. In this stage, the Buddhist vocabulary was still undergoing many changes. *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* mainly presents the changes of connotations of free translation words.

Most original sutras are written in Sanskrit, which has much difference with Chinese. The translations between two languages are mainly realized through the methods of transliteration, free translation and half transliteration and half free translation. It is not difficult to see from the sutra translations passed down that the percentage of transliterated words in Buddhist vocabulary was obviously decreasing; for the free translation words and half transliteration and half free translation words, the opposite. This means that the later the time, the larger the percentage of free translation words, until they became dominating. The research of Zhu Qingzhi (2001) has also proved this point, "Large amount of new words and new meanings from the original sutras mainly came into Chinese through free translation, which might have taken up four fifths of the loan words from Buddhism into Chinese". The main methods of free translation of loan words include: direct translation, imbueing of new connotations and language innovation. Direct translation means choosing the word-formation materials in Chinese which have the same or similar meaning to translate the Buddhist words; if no fixed word can be found which is similar to the Buddhist word, the word can be translated using methods of giving Buddhist connotation to existing Chinese words (i.e. imbuing new connotations) or creating new words by recombining the word-formation materials in Chinese (i.e. language innovation). According to preliminary statistics, in the Buddhist vocabulary of *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*, the percentage of free translation words is actually above four fifths, among which the free translation words newly created in the Southern and Northern Dynasties can be largely ignored. Therefore, the important function of this stage in the

diffusion process of Buddhist vocabulary is not presented in the creation of new free translation words, but the changes of connotations of Buddhist vocabulary.

The law of change of the connotations of Buddhist words presented by *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* mainly includes:

1) Expansion of meaning. The denotations of Buddhist words created in the previous sutra translations experienced some changes in the Southern and Northern Dynasties due to the integration process into Chinese. Among these changes, the expansion of meaning was more common than the shrinkage of meaning. The reason is that with the influence of Buddhism becoming greater and the increase in the number of disciples, the previous Chinese translations of sutras containing the basic teachings of Buddhism were not able to fully solve many new problems of the sinicized Buddhism. Therefore, there were more and more Buddhist works aiming at solving actual problems, which were inevitably concerned about some new concepts other than the basic teachings of Buddhism. At the same time, in order that the Chinese disciples may understand and accept the concepts which should not change the original teachings of Buddhism, the most convenient method is to logically extend the meaning of the current Buddhist words so that they may refer to more principles or actual objects.

2) Creation of new meaning. It means to create new meaning for existing Buddhist words through the methods of extension or metaphor. Because of the inertia of language, the new and the old meanings usually coexist in the contemporary language for a pretty long time, which actually means the expansion of the range of reference of words.

Take the usage of the word "provision" in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* as an example:

Before the introduction of Buddhism to China, the word "provision" already existed in the Chinese literature, the common meaning of which was supply and support, usually the lower to the upper, with the objects limited to human, god, ancestors, etc. and the emphasis of measures on the material level. In most sutra translations, the usage of "provision" was very clear: only the lower to the higher, with the objects limited to Buddha, monk, or Buddhist symbols such as sutra, Buddha Dharma, etc. In Southern and Northern Dynasties, new Buddhist concepts constantly appeared. Correspondingly, the usage of "provision" has also changed. The obvious thing is: there were more measures of "provision". There are altogether 30 examples in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*. Pure material measures such as the four provisions mentioned in sutra translations including clothes, food and drink, bedding and medicine were still the most common ways of provision. There were 15 examples of such usage. During the process of spreading of Buddhism in China, other common measures of provision include incense and flowers, dancers and music, virga lids and establishing temples and towers. The objects are usually the Buddha

statues and sutras. There were 11 examples of such usage in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*. In Southern and Northern Dynasties, “burning the body” was also a method of provision. There were 4 examples of such usage in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks*. Although most of these changes belong to the changes of “parole”, which cannot be classified as changes of the word meaning, without the repeated changes in “parole”, the word meaning would not have obvious changes.

No matter the creation of new meaning or the expansion of the word meaning, the Buddhist connotation of words is usually secularized. Secularization means the professional meaning of a term is weakened to some extent and has been changed to a word with some professional idiosyncrasy. This is also a common rule for the evolution of terms in other trades into common words. The professional words can only be understood and accepted by ordinary people when the professional connotation is weakened. From the usage of the Buddhist vocabulary in *Memoirs of Eminent Monks* in later literature, Buddhist words with new metaphorical meaning, extended meaning or enlarged meaning have been created, which have been

frequently used in contemporary and later literature. Besides a few special terms containing the basic teachings of Buddhism, most of the Buddhist words which maintained the original meaning have been confined to the contemporary literature. With the lapsing of time, they are easy to lose the vitality and deteriorate into word fossils in Buddhist literature.

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