

Study on Translation and Study of Chinese Buddhist Works in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society in the 19th Century

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Abstract: In the 19th century, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* published a wealth of articles on Chinese Buddhism, serving as a recorder and witness to the study of Chinese Buddhism in the UK. Historical research on this journal has found that the journal leveraged the efforts of Westerners residing in China to conduct surveys of Buddhist works in China, obtaining important bibliographies of Chinese Buddhist works. Secondly, the journal placed great emphasis on the translation of Chinese Buddhist works, gathering and nurturing a group of British scholars in the translation of Chinese Buddhist works, and the most representative among them was the missionary Samuel Beal, the journal became the first publication site for many important English translations of Chinese Buddhist works. More importantly, the journal also valued the comparative study of Chinese Buddhist works and Sanskrit Buddhist works, promoting the study of Chinese Buddhist works from a comparative perspective. It can be said that the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* holds an important position in the history of Chinese Buddhist studies in the UK during the 19th century.
Keywords: Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 19th Century, Chinese Buddhist works, Samuel Beal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism originated in India and is an important part of traditional Indian culture. Before the 19th century, Europeans had little knowledge of Buddhism, and even the famous Orientalist William Jones mistakenly believed that Buddhism was a foreign religion to India. In 1807, the Orientalist Henry Thomas Colebrooke was the first to suggest that Buddhism originated in India itself (Colebrooke, 1807). Buddhist studies in the modern academic sense emerged in Europe in the early 19th century, and Britain, driven by the development of Indology, gradually became the centre of Buddhist studies in Europe. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (JRAS) was a scholarly journal of Oriental studies founded and published by the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland in the early 19th century. Throughout the 19th century, the study of Chinese Buddhism was one of the main themes of this publication, and articles on the subject were published annually with continuity and stability. The authors of these

articles include W. H. Sykes, H. H. Wilson, S. Beal, T. Watters, J. Takakusu, L. A. Waddell, and others, all of whom were the leading figures in European Buddhist studies in the 19th century (Beal, 1862; Sykes, 1841, 1847; Takakusu, 1896; Wilson, 1854). The missionary Samuel Beal is the author with the most contributions. In the 19th century, the study of Buddhism in Europe was within the academic tradition called 'Buddhist philology'. In this cultural context, Chinese Buddhist literature, especially 'Chinese Buddhist works', have gradually attracted the attention of European Buddhist scholars. Many Sanskrit Buddhist works are already incomplete, and most of the ideological and historical information about early Buddhism is preserved in the Chinese Buddhist works, which not only provide the comparative objects for the study of Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist works, but also the valuable corroborating materials for the study of the history and teachings of Indian Buddhism. This paper attempts to reproduce the historical facts of the dissemination of Chinese Buddhist works by the JRAS, and to analyse the characteristics and scientific value of these facts.

1.1. Survey of Buddhist Literature in China and Compilation of Bibliography

Sykes and Wilson were important members of the Royal Asiatic Society in the nineteenth century, and used the Royal Asiatic Society as a scholarly forum to draw the attention of the academic community to the Sanskrit Buddhist works in China and to initiate related investigations. In 1844, Sykes commissioned Sir John Davis, who was to become Governor of Hong Kong, to undertake a survey in China of the Pali Buddhist canon brought back from India by Chinese Buddhist priests such as Fa-Hsien(法顯). On his arrival in China, John Davis commissioned the missionary Charles Gutzlaff (1803-1851) to carry out the survey. Wilson asked Sir John Bowring (1792-1872), the new Governor of Hong Kong, who was about to arrive in China, to find the Buddhist works that Hiouen Tsang (玄奘) had brought back from India. When Bowring arrived in China, he commissioned Walter Henry Medhurst (1822-1885), an officer of *the Chinese branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, to carry out a survey. Two surveys of the Chinese Buddhist works published in the journal were 'On a Catalogue of Chinese Buddhistical Works' in 1848 and 'Notes of a Correspondence with Sir John Bowring on Buddhist Literature in China, with Notices of Chinese Buddhist Works translated from the Sanskrit By Rev. E. Edkins' in 1856. Sykes and Wilson investigated Buddhist literature in China with the aim of finding Pali and Sanskrit Buddhist works from

India, in keeping with the prevailing ideology in European Buddhist studies at the time, which valued Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist texts. The clues to their research came from the Indian travelogues of Chinese Buddhist priests, especially the *Foe Koue Ki* (佛國記) and *Si Yu Ki* (西域記), which had just been translated into Europe at that time. They believed that the Chinese Buddhist priest had kept an authentic record of their activities in India, and had brought back a large number of Sanskrit Buddhist works, as Sykes said: ‘many Chinese Buddhist priests at different periods had travelled to India, and resided there for many years, for the express purpose of copying the religious books in use amongst the Buddhists of India, on arriving in China the priests would multiply copies of these books; that copies would be handed down to present times, and that they would be met with at this day in the libraries of China, in the Lath character and in the Pali language’(Sykes, 1847). In fact, neither Sykes nor Wilson was able to obtain any Sanskrit or Pali Buddhist works in China as a result of their researches. Sykes said: ‘In this expectation I have been partly disappointed; very many works, indeed, have been met with in the Pali language, but the whole of them are written in Chinese characters. Mr. Gutzlaff, the celebrated Chinese scholar, says, he has not met with a single instance of a book written in either the ancient or modern Pali character’ (Sykes, 1847). They have, however, obtained valuable bibliographies of the Chinese Buddhist works. A bibliography submitted by Gutzlaff is appended to Sykes's report, entitled List of the Principal Buddhistical Works from the Pali, in Chinese Character. This bibliography is divided into five sections. Part I is the ‘Works in Pali, with the Expression of the Sound in Chinese Characters’, containing 27 works. Part II is the ‘Works Almost Entirely in Pali’, including 6 works. Part III is the ‘Books if not entirely, still the Greater part in Chinese’, including 99 works. Part IV is the ‘Religious Works’, including 14 works. The works included in this section are different from Chinese Buddhist works, which are Buddhist literature compiled by Chinese Buddhist priests and literati, for example, *Keae Hwō peen*(解惑篇) and *Luh Taou Tsīh* (六道集), written by a Buddhist priest named Hong Zan (弘讚) in the Qing Dynasty. Part V is the ‘Ethics’, including 10 works. The works included in this section are Chinese ethics and moral cultivation teaching books, not related to Buddhism, and many of them involve Chinese Taoist beliefs, for example, *king Sin Luh* (敬信錄), *Sing Ming Kwei Che* (性命圭旨), *Pau Shen peen* and so on (寶善編) (Sykes, 1847). In a word, this bibliography showed Europeans the wealth of Chinese translations of Buddhist works. Wilson’s survey included three Buddhist Bibliographies by missionary Edkins. The first is the

'Buddhist Works Translated from Sanskrit', which contains 16 works. The second one is the 'Works Translated from Sanskrit by Hwen Tsang and Others', including 6 works. The third one is the 'Works by Native Chinese Buddhists', containing 30 works. At the end of Wilson's survey, there is a catalogue called "A Further Collection of Chinese Buddhist Works from Sir John Bowring", including 6 works, such as Khai yuen chi kiao lu (開元釋教錄) and so on (Wilson, 1854). These two surveys and bibliographies of Buddhist literature in China which published in the *JRAS*, provide reliable historical information for the study of ancient Indian texts, history, and Buddhist beliefs. As early as the early 19th century, Remusat, in his translation of *Foe Koue Ki* (佛國記), pointed out the important value of Chinese Buddhist works, and this point directly quoted by Sykes in his study of *Foe Koue Ki* (佛國記): 'In one word, if it were desired to recover the entire doctrine of Buddha, in its primitive purity, there still would remain these translations from the highest antiquity, transmitted to us by the Chinese, made directly from the holy books of the most authentic character, where the words, before being interpreted, are reproduced by analogous consonances always to be recognized, and where the grammatical forms are preserved' (Sykes, 1841). In his survey, Sykes specifically analysed the scholarly value of these catalogues of Chinese Buddhist works, based on the scholarly sensibility in his survey. The first practical use to which the catalogue would seem to be applicable is, by its publication, to afford the scholars of Europe an opportunity of ascertaining whether copies of any of the works exist in the great libraries. The next use to be made of the catalogue is to apply the titles of the books to assist speculations and deductions in the history, religious dogmas, ritual, and ethics of Buddhism (Sykes, 1847). In short, given the scarcity of Chinese Buddhist canonical collections in Europe at that time, the two surveys in the *JRAS* provided valuable clues and information for Orientalists to study the Chinese Buddhist works, objectively promoted the collection and collation of Chinese Buddhist literatures for British Sinology, enabled the Chinese Buddhist works to participate in the world Buddhist studies, and gave the Chinese Buddhist works a modern academic significance and value.

2. SAMUEL BEAL'S ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF CHINESE BUDDHIST WORKS

With the growing interest of the British Orientalists in Chinese Buddhist works, Chinese Buddhist works were translated into English one after

another from the second half of the 19th century, mostly by Protestant missionaries to China, with the most diligent translators being Joseph Edikins (1823-1905), Samuel Beal (1825-1889), Timothy Richard (1845-1919) and William Edward Soothill (1861-1935) and so on (Li et al., 2024). In the 19th century the JRAS published six English translations of the Chinese Buddhist works, all translated by Samuel Beal. Beal was Chaplain to the British fleet in China and then was appointed Professor of Sinology at the University of London in 1877. Able to read Chinese, Sanskrit and Pali, he devoted himself to the study of Buddhism, writing many articles on Chinese Buddhist studies, and was a pioneer in the study of Chinese Buddhism, along with the French sinologists Rémusat and Julien, and his Buddhist studies opened up a new field of study in sinology (Light, 2016). The Chinese Buddhist works translated by Beal in the JRAS are all important and widely circulated in China, including *The Sutra of the Forty-two Sections* (四十二章經) (1862), *Vajra-chhediká*, the 'Kin Kong King', or *Diamond Sûtra* (金剛經) (1864), *The Páramitá-hridaya Sûtra*, or in Chinese, 'Mo-ho-pô-ye-po-lo-mih-to-sin-king' (摩訶般若波羅蜜多心經) (1864), *Amitâbha Sûtra* (阿彌陀經) (1866), *The Original Work of the Precepts in Four Divisions* (四分律比丘戒本) (1896), *The Legend of Dīpaṅkara Buddha* (燃燈佛傳) (1873). The vast majority of European scholars have studied the precepts and Buddha stories in Pali and Sanskrit. As a pioneer in the translation of Chinese Buddhist works, Beal has, to some extent, brought Chinese Buddha stories and precepts to the attention of the scholarly community, providing scholars with different types of Buddha stories and precepts to cross-reference. More importantly, the JRAS is at the forefront of English translations of Chinese Buddhist works, publishing English translations that are appearing in the UK for the first time (Rudakowska, 2014; Ye, 2024). From the Chinese translation of the Buddhist texts in the Journal, it is clear that Beale's translation of the Chinese Buddhist works is mainly a direct translation, faithful to the content of the original text, and that the translation corresponds to the original text in word and phrase, striving to maintain consistency with the original text in word meaning, so that readers can grasp the original meaning of the text. From Beal's English translation of Chinese Buddhist works in the JRAS, it is clear that Beal's translation is mainly a direct translation, faithful to the content of the original text, and that the translation corresponds to the original text in word and phrase, striving to maintain consistency with the original text in word meaning, so that readers can grasp the original meaning of the text. The Chinese Buddhist works

contain a number of Buddhist terms that were difficult for European sinologists to translate. For Buddhist terms such as names of people and places, Beal generally uses two approaches. One way is to use a direct translation from Sanskrit, for example, he translates 'The Devata of the Sutra' as 'Avalokiteswara'. The other is a direct translation of the Chinese name using the Latin notation, for example, Anagami, Sakradagami and Sotapanna are the four different realms attained through the practice of Lohan, Beal translated them directly as 'A-na-hom, Sz'-to-hom and Sü-to-hun', which was the Latin notation (Beal, 1862). Much of the reason for Bier's Sanskrit translation of Buddhist terminology lies in the Sanskrit and Pali research traditions of Buddhist studies in Europe at the time. In Beal's translation of the Chinese Buddhist works, he did not translate Buddhist hymns in rhyme, but in prose, in order to better present the ideological content of the Buddhist texts. Moreover, in order to highlight important ideas, Beal also adopted the method of omitting translations. For example, in his translation of *The Legend of Dipaṅkara Buddha* (佛本行集經), he omits the omission of Shakyamuni's mother's travels and the birth of Shakyamuni, because these contents have nothing to do with the content of Dipaṅkara Buddha's attainment of Buddhahood. Beal was a pioneer in the translation and study of Chinese Buddhism in England, attempting to present the ideological content of the Chinese Buddhist works as rigorously as possible through direct translation and to provide an objective interpretation of Buddhist doctrine. As a British missionary in the nineteenth century, Beal had difficulty in freeing himself from Eurocentric ideas and Christian supremacy when he undertook English translations of Chinese Buddhist works. Beal's direct translations of Chinese Buddhist works were thus motivated not only by a scholarly pursuit of Buddhist doctrine, but also by a missionary desire to highlight the differences between Buddhist and Christian cultures, to give the reader a strong sense of the strangeness of Buddhism as the 'other', and to serve the missionary cause to which he was dedicated. As one scholar has pointed out that, Beal hoped to distinguish between the self and the other, reminding missionaries at all times to know themselves and others in order to facilitate the spread of Christianity in China (Chen & Chang, 2004). Indeed, Beal had expressed in his writings the missionary appeal behind his deliberate use of direct translation. In his book *Texts from the Buddhist Canon Commonly Known as Dhammapada with Accompanying Narratives* in 1878, he suggested that only by carefully studying Buddhism and understanding the meaning of Buddhist terminology could missionaries provide China and Japan with an

understandable translation of the Bible that would clearly present Christian teachings to them (Beal, 1878). It is important to note that Beal also initiated a scholarly study of the Chinese Buddhist works by means of an introduction preceding the translation, which explores the scholarly value of the translation. In his translations, Beal would refer to the editions and their original sources of these sutras and also to the authenticity of the Chinese Buddhist works. When he translated *The Sutra of the Forty-two Sections* (四十二章經) in 1862, he raised the question of whether the Sutra was the earliest Chinese Buddhist sutra, and pointed out that *The Sutra of the Forty-two Sections* (四十二章經) was not a forgery. Discussion of the authenticity of this Sutra in the modern academic sense in China did not begin until the early 20th century. Beal also broadened the horizons of study about Chinese Buddhist works. For example, after translating the *The Legend of Dipaṅkara Buddha* (燃燈佛傳), Beal remarked: "These legends, when all are translated, will explain many obscure references in Buddhist literature, and also throw some light on the rise of Romance literature in Europe" (Beal, 1873), and he established a relationship between Buddhism and literature that can be seen as an early practice of comparative literature.

2.1. A Study of Chinese Buddhist Works in a Comparative Perspective

Until the second half of the nineteenth century, the importance and value of Chinese Buddhist works in Buddhist studies had not been brought to the attention of the scholarly community. In his book *Buddhism in china*, Beal noted that although the history and philosophy of Buddhism were being studied as early as 30 or 40 years ago, missionaries and scholars generally made little use of the Chinese Buddhist works (Beal, 1884). However, the translation of the Chinese Buddhist works into English added a new perspective to the burgeoning field of comparative religious studies, and brought the value and significance of the Chinese Buddhist works to the attention of mainstream Buddhist studies. The JRAS published not only English translations of Chinese Buddhist works, but also scholarly articles on the study of Chinese Buddhist works, such as Comparative Arrangement of two Translations of the Buddhist Ritual for the Priesthood, known as the Prātimoksha, or Pātimokhan (1862), Chinese Translations of the Milinda Paṇho (1896), Pāli Elements in Chinese Buddhism: a Translation of Buddhaghosa's Samanta-pāsādikā, a Commentary on the Vinaya, found in the Chinese Tripiṭak (1896) and so on. Although the number of scholarly articles on the Chinese Buddhist works in the JRAS was limited, it gave a picture of the research on Chinese

Buddhist works in Britain at that time. The fact that Chinese Buddhist works have always come down to us in both Pali and Chinese provides the necessary conditions for scholars to apply a comparative approach to the study of the Buddhist texts. The JRAS focused on the study of the Chinese Buddhist works, of which the Pali version had existed, influenced to a large extent by the British tradition of Pali Buddhist studies. The British tradition of Buddhist studies focuses on southern Pali Buddhism and considers the Pali canon to be the most reliable historical document of early Indian Buddhism, the most reflective of Buddhist thought at the time of the Buddha, while Buddhist works in mixed Sanskrit and other common languages are copied from these Pali works, considering the Pali works as the only canonical text. To this day, the study of Buddhism in Britain is still dominated by the study of southern Theravada Buddhism. The JRAS tended to look to the Buddhist Ritual as an object of study that could provide an insight into the spiritual world of Buddhists and how Buddhism influenced the minds of its followers. In the article *Comparative Arrangement of two Translations of the Buddhist Ritual for the Priesthood*, known as the *Prátimoksha*, or *Pátimokhan*, the author Beal argued that in the Buddhist world, it was incredible that the *Prátimoksha* could be observed by more than 100 million Buddhists in China and so in Ceylon, Burma and Siam (Beal & Gogerly, 1862), and led to a reflection on the vitality of Buddhism in different cultures. Beal said: 'how it is that a system so cold and formal as Buddhism has been able to secure a reception more extended than any other religion that has yet appeared among men; and how it is that a system which holds as one of its principal tenets the impermanency of all things, has retained its primitive character unchanged by distance of time or variety of race' (Beal & Gogerly, 1862). At the same time, the JRAS compared the Chinese and Pali Buddhist Ritual with the aim of using the Chinese Buddhist works as an important source for studying the history of the Pali Buddhist texts. For example, in the article *Pāli Elements in Chinese Buddhism: a Translation of Buddhaghosa's Samantapāsādikā, a Commentary on the Vinaya, found in the Chinese Tripiṭaka*, J. Takakusu aimed to examine the remains of the Pali Buddhist texts in the Chinese Buddhist works, saying at the beginning of the article that 'whether we possess among the numerous Buddhist books preserved in China any text translated from a Pali original, is a question which has not as yet been quite settled. The object of my present note is to decide this point, and to introduce to the Society a text of Pali origin in Chinese' (Takakusu, 1896). By way of comparison, Beal also confirmed the conclusion of European

Orientalists that 'Buddhism is the same in almost all regions of the East' (Beal & Gogerly, 1862). As can be seen from the above, the study of the Chinese Buddhist works in the JRAS was not aimed at the Chinese Buddhist works themselves, but it objectively tapped into the scholarly significance and value of the Chinese Buddhist works. Moreover, the most important way in which they did this was by comparing the Pali texts of the Buddhist works with Chinese, which was an expression of the use of comparative linguistics in the study of Buddhist literature, which contributed to the development of Buddhist literature in Europe.

3. CONCLUSION

The nineteenth century coincided with the beginning and development of Buddhist studies in Europe, which were dominated by the Sanskrit and Pali Buddhist texts, with an emphasis on Indian Buddhist studies. This was also the case in Britain. Buddhist studies in Britain had generally regarded Pali Buddhism as a form of pure Buddhism, focusing on the history and thought of Indian Buddhism based on the original Sanskrit and Pali texts. British scholars valued Chinese Buddhist works more for the study of Indian Buddhism. In this scholarly context, the JRAS was at the forefront of the translation and study of Chinese Buddhist works by British scholars in the nineteenth century. The JRAS objectively promoted the dissemination of Chinese Buddhist works in Europe, by collecting, translating and studying Chinese Buddhist works using modern Western academic approaches such as historical bibliography, comparative linguistics and comparative religion, incorporating Chinese Buddhism into the study of Western Buddhism, bringing Chinese Buddhist works into a global perspective, and giving Chinese Buddhist works an active role in world culture.

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Contribution

The main contributions of the study are twofold. The first point is to provide new historical material for Buddhist studies in Britain in the 19th century, from the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. The second point is

to discuss the contribution of the missionary Samuel Beal to Chinese Buddhist works, and to demonstrate the religious and scholarly value of Chinese Buddhist works. This research provides data that can be used by scholars in the fields of comparative religious studies and theology.

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