

Lost in translation? The *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith (Dasheng qixin lun)* and its modern readings¹

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Abstract

The *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith*, an indigenous Chinese composition written in the guise of an Indian Buddhist treatise, is one of the most influential texts in the history of East Asian Buddhism. Its outline of the doctrines of buddha nature (*foxing*), buddha bodies (*foshen*), and one mind (*yixin*), among others, served from the medieval period onwards as one of the main foundations of East Asian Buddhist thought and practice. The *Treatise* is putatively attributed to the Indian writer Aśvaghōṣa, and its current Chinese version was traditionally conceived of as a translation from an original Sanskrit text. In the course of the twentieth century, however, many important scholars of Buddhism have called into question the textual history of the *Treatise*. Even if the specific circumstances of its creation are still largely unknown, the view that the *Treatise* is an original Chinese composition (not necessarily written by a native Chinese) is now prevalent among scholars. Meanwhile, and for more than one hundred years, the text has also become a source of knowledge of Buddhism in the West thanks to a number of English translations. After examining the early textual history of the two existing versions of the text, this article will offer some examples of its modern appropriation by a novel group of readers and interpreters, an appropriation that took place during the first decades of the twentieth century amidst efforts to re-envision Chinese and East Asian Buddhist history and the place of Buddhism in modern society.

Introduction

The *Dasheng qi xin lun* or *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* is a highly influential text in the history of East Asian Buddhism.² Even if it is a

1 I would like to thank Stefan Sperl, Stefano Zacchetti and an anonymous reviewer for providing detailed commentary and helpful suggestions for revisions on a previous version of this paper.

2 With regard to the use here of the term “East Asian Buddhism”, it should be noted that the Buddhist source texts used in China, Korea, Japan and even Vietnam are identical and that together they form the tradition that gave rise to what is commonly referred to now in Chinese as *dazangjing* or the canon of Buddhist scriptures written in literary Chinese.

lun – the term generally used in Chinese to translate the Sanskrit *śāstra* – meaning a work of exegesis or a doctrinal treatise, it has none the less been regarded as a text containing teachings on the same level as scriptures (*sūtras*, what is heard) that conveyed the word of the Buddha.³ The *Treatise*’s key concern is the discussion of ultimate reality, referred to as “suchness” or “thusness” (*zhenru*). The text examines this concept in relationship to what it refers to as the “two aspects” (*er zhong men*) of the “one mind” (*yixin*), which are mutually inclusive and embrace all things (*she yiqie fa*). This is an important discussion in that it suggests that the absolute does not belong to an order of being completely distinct from the phenomenal order. One of the metaphors used in the text to illustrate the relationship between principle (*li*) and phenomena (*shi*), between the pure mind and the world, and so on, is the famous metaphor of the wind and the waves.

All the characteristics of the mind and of consciousness (*xin shi zhi xiang*) are produced by ignorance. The characteristics of ignorance (*wuming zhi xiang*) are not separate from the nature of awakening (*jue xing*) and thus are not something that can either be destroyed or not destroyed. It is like the water of the big sea, which is turned into waves by the wind. The characteristics of the water and of the waves are inseparable, and yet the nature of movement does not pertain to water. When the wind ceases, the characteristics of movement also cease, but the nature of wetness remains undestroyed.⁴

Another key doctrinal formulation expounded in the text is that of the “buddha bodies” (*foshen*), which entails the analysis of buddhahood in terms of the doctrine of multiple coexisting buddha bodies that possess different characteristics and can thus respond to the prayers of the suffering living beings. Finally, the treatise elaborates upon earlier Indian Buddhist notions of *tathāgatagarba* (literally, “womb” or “embryo” of the *Tathāgata*, the latter being an epithet for Buddha) instilling them with a distinctive cosmological dimension whilst initiating a new discourse on the intrinsic possibility for all beings to reach enlightenment, which had enormous consequences for the development of East Asian Buddhist soteriology.⁵ Arguably, however, the popularity of the text was not only connected with its doctrinal content, but also with what could be described

3 The title of many East Asian *sūtras* begins with the words *fo shuo* or “the Buddha says”. The widespread use of this formula highlights the importance placed on direct oral transmission to authenticate Buddhist writings. On issues of translation and Buddhist language see, for example, Nattier (1990). For some interesting comments on the use and reception of sacred texts within Buddhist traditions see Levering (1989: 13–14; 58–101).

4 See *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* (hereafter abbreviated as T.), No. 1666, p. 576c, 9–13.

5 See T. 1666, p. 576a–c. For a discussion of the doctrinal contents of the text see for example Williams (1989: 109–10). On *tathāgatagarba* thought see for example Ruegg (1969) and Grosnick (1995). On the “buddha-body” (*buddhakāya*) doctrine in China see Sharf (2002: 100–14).

as its “spiritual capital”.⁶ In fact, East Asian Buddhists read it and worshipped it as the original work of Āśvaghōṣa, the first-century Indian Buddhist patriarch author of a very important work on Buddha’s teaching career.⁷ Its translation from Sanskrit was attributed to Paramārtha (Zhendi, 500–569), an equally important figure in medieval Chinese Buddhist circles.⁸ Yet, no original Sanskrit manuscript has ever been found, nor is there any reference to the *Treatise* in Buddhist texts composed in India.

In modern times, not least because of the emergence of the modern study of Buddhism in Asia and in the West, and the Orientalist quest for ascertaining the Indian pedigree of all things Buddhist, the genealogy of the treatise has been the focus of intense scrutiny.⁹ Ultimately, the idea that the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* is an indigenous Chinese composition gathered consensus, especially in scholarly circles, but this agreement is still far from universal. Theories surrounding the text’s creation remain largely speculative, spurring on the debate on its possible ancestry.¹⁰ Recently, the truthfulness of all teachings connected with the *tathāgatagarba* tradition has been questioned in both Chinese and Japanese Buddhist circles,¹¹ yet it seems unlikely that the *Treatise* will ever be expunged from the East Asian Buddhist canon. In this paper, I first outline the history and reception of the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* since its first appearance in medieval Chinese Buddhist monastic circles, and then examine its manifold metamorphoses in modern times.

6 For a discussion of the meaning and the making of “spiritual” capital see Verter (2003). See also Bourdieu.

7 There is no consensus on the exact dates of Āśvaghōṣa’s life, but the majority of scholars indicate a period from the first to the second century CE. A recent study by Alf Hiltebeitel, after surveying the existing literature on this issue, favours the first century as the more likely dating (2006: 233–5). While I was preparing this paper I was not aware of the forthcoming dissertation by Stuart Young, “Conceiving the Indian Buddhist patriarchs in China” (Princeton University). Young addresses the issue of the attribution of the *Treatise* to Āśvaghōṣa in chapter 4.

8 William H. Grosnick suggested that Paramārtha may be the real author of the text, see Grosnick (1989). For a critique of Grosnick’s and others’ methodological assumptions in the study of medieval Buddhist texts see Sharf (2002: 104, n. 85; 4–21).

9 For a study of the founding figures of Buddhist studies in the West see Lopez (1995). See also the comments in Nattier (1997) and in Silk (1994). For Japan see Jaffe (2004) and Snodgrass (2003). For some preliminary comments on the beginning of Buddhist studies in the modern Chinese context see Goldfuss (2001). See also here below.

10 Some of the major contributions to the question of the authorship of the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* are the studies by Demiéville (1929), Liebenthal (1958), Lai (1980) and Grosnick (1989). Grosnick (1989) has suggested that Paramārtha may be the real author of the text. For a critique of Grosnick’s methodological assumptions see Sharf (2002: 104, n. 85).

11 See for example the study on doctrinal transformation in twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism in Hurley (2004). See also here below.

Composition and reception

One of the most distinctive features in the history of East Asian Buddhism is that the collection of Buddhist texts preserved in literary Chinese, what is commonly referred to as the Chinese Buddhist canon, was printed from a very early stage. The earliest printing from woodblocks – no fewer than 130,000 blocks were used – of a collection of Buddhist texts in Chinese that comprised translations from Indian languages as well as indigenous ones, was carried out by imperial order between 971 and 983. Perhaps the most influential of the early printed editions of the Chinese Buddhist canon is that of the “Tripitaka Koreana”, the Korean edition of the canon. The woodblocks for this edition were carved in the middle of the thirteenth century and consist of 1,521 separate texts in more than 6,500 scrolls. Regardless of the fact that it was transmitted in print, the “canon” of East Asian Buddhism was, and in theory still is, an “open” canon, as opposed to the relatively “closed”, and comparatively very short, canonical collections found in Islam or Christianity. Currently the most widely used modern edition of the collection of Buddhist scriptures in Chinese script, also thanks to its being the foundation of the digital format edition (CBETA), is the *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, originally edited and compiled in Japan (1924–34) on the basis of the thirteenth-century xylographic edition produced in Korea.¹²

The *Taishō* edition of the East Asian Buddhist canon contains two versions of the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith*, numbers 1666 and 1667. T. 1666 is the shorter version in one fascicle (*juan*), while T. 1667, which is entitled *New Translation of the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith (Xinyi dasheng qixin lun)*, is in two fascicles.¹³ The preface appended to T. 1666 attributes it to the Indian patriarch Aśvagoṣa, known in Chinese by the rather unusual name of Maming or “horse neigh” because, says his Chinese hagiography, even “the horses could understand his words”.¹⁴ Maming is indeed a legendary figure to whom medieval and later Buddhists granted an important place in the genealogy of transmission from India to China of the *fofa* (Sanskrit: *buddhadharma*, the Buddhist teachings), and who thereby populates a rich body of images and stories in Chinese exegetical materials and in ritual texts. As with the well-known

12 For Buddhism and the rise of printing in medieval China see Barrett (2001). For alternative strategies of canon formation in medieval East Asia see Deal (1999). For the *Taishō* edition of the canon see Vita (2003).

13 Currently the most widely used, the CBETA digitized canon is largely based on the *Taishō* edition, see <http://cbeta.org>. For a preliminary assessment of the use of digitized source materials in the study of East Asian Buddhism see Schlütter (2005).

14 The Chinese Buddhist canon contains countless references to the magical and numinous powers of Aśvagoṣa, not least in the hagiographical account *Maming pusa zhuan* (Biography of the bodhisattva Aśvagoṣa, T. no. 2046). For a translation of this text see “Biography of the Bodhisattva Aśvagoṣa”, by S. H. Young, available at the URL <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT7JR-AN/103180.htm> (accessed March 2008). For an example of nineteenth-century Western scholarly interest in Aśvagoṣa as a historical figure see Lévi (1928) and here below. On religious biographies and hagiographies in India and China see Kieschnick (1997); Granoff and Shinohara (1988).

Nāgārjuna, the purported founder of the Madhyamika Indian school of Buddhist thought, the poet and philosopher Aśvaghōṣa was worshipped in China as a salvific figure and as a bodhisattva, a Buddha to be, from the early medieval period. Thus, the attribution of the text to Aśvaghōṣa/Maming may initially have been understood in terms of spiritual inspiration, as it were, rather than actual authorship in the modern sense. Indeed, the medieval collection of *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (*Gaoseng zhuan*) claims that specific commentaries produced by prominent Chinese monks were dictated by Aśvaghōṣa, who had manifested himself in the guise of a horse.¹⁵

Of course, the preface to T. 1666 is almost certainly spurious. It is inaccurate with reference to Paramārtha and contains several other anachronisms.¹⁶ Moreover, it is important to point out that the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* was initially listed in a catalogue of canonical texts in 594 as a text of “dubious” (*yi*) origin, a fact that modern Buddhist interpreters, of course, found very problematic (more on this below). Eventually, however, the highly authoritative catalogue *Kaiyuan shijiao mulu* (T. 2154), composed by Zhisheng (active c. 730), declared T. 1666 a legitimate translation of an Indian original, thus guaranteeing its entrance in the body of accepted canonical texts. The catalogue also gives notice of the “new translation” (*xinyi*), now preserved in the *Taishō* edition of the Buddhist canon as T. 1667.¹⁷

After the initial uncertainty among medieval Buddhist scholars regarding the status of the *Treatise* as a genuine translation was overcome, the text went on to become one of the most emblematic cases of the enculturation of Buddhism in East Asia.¹⁸ After its canonization, the widespread fortune of the *Treatise* is witnessed, above all, by the wealth of commentarial literature composed by eminent scholar-monks in the pre-modern period. According to a Japanese survey from the 1920s there are about 173 surviving commentaries on the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith*.¹⁹ As I will show below, many further studies, commentaries and translations have been added to this list over the past eighty or so years.

Perhaps the most influential medieval commentary is that of the patriarch of the Huayan school, Fazang (643–712), who not only accepts the text as the work of Aśvaghōṣa, but also assigns it a key role in his own doctrinal classification scheme (*panjiao*) of the Buddhist teachings, together with a number of sūtras.²⁰ For the purpose of monastic study and practice,

15 See Liebenthal (1958: 157, n. 2).

16 See Demiéville (1929: 11–5).

17 For a study of Chinese Buddhist medieval catalogues and their role in canon formation see Tokuno (1990).

18 See for example the comments in Sharf (2002: 107–10) on the passages in which the text combines the Buddhist doctrine of the three bodies of the Buddha with earlier Chinese philosophical terminology of “essence” (*ti*) and “function” (*yong*).

19 See Hakeda (1967: 5).

20 Fazang’s commentary, the *Dasheng qixin lun jiyi*, is a fairly expansive text that covers some forty pages of the modern edition of the canon and can be found at T. 1846. For the early commentaries to the *Treatise*, including Fazang’s, see Demiéville (1929). For a recent study on Fazang see Chen (2007). For the context in which the monk lived see Weinstein (1987: 46–7 and *passim*).

such doctrinal classifications were perhaps more important than the sum of the texts contained in the canon.²¹ The transmission beyond China is well attested. For example, the early eighth century saw the emergence of a text closely related to the *Treatise*, namely the *Explanation of the Treatise on Mahāyāna* (*Shi Moheyan lun*, T. 1668). Again, the *Explanation* is attributed to the Indian patriarch, Nāgārjuna, but the text is clearly of East Asian provenance and was widely read throughout China and Japan, especially in esoteric contexts.²²

A new “translation” of the *Treatise* (*Xinyi dasheng qixin lun*) is attributed to the Khotanese monk Śikṣānanda (active in China between 695 and 710). Once again, this attribution is made in the anonymous preface appended to the text (T. 1667, pp. 583bc–584a). It is worth noting that the two versions contain some significant terminological differences, particularly with regard to the concept of “thought” (*nian*) and “non-thought” (*wu nian*), and its relation to the mind (*xin*) and enlightenment (*jue*). The preface to T. 1667 deliberately attributes the differences to the existence of two Sanskrit versions, or to translators’ choices. But in fact the production of this new version is probably an attempt to explain away some of the more controversial passages of T. 1666, those close to Daoist, and generally pre-Buddhist, understandings of *xin*, the “mind”.

According to the preface, the new translator obtained the much sought-after Sanskrit original in a very intriguing way, among the texts stored in the pagoda of the Monastery of “Great Compassion and Grace” at the Western Capital Chang’an. This is the monastery where the great translator monk and pilgrim traveller to India Xuanzang (602–664) lived and worked and to which he added the pagoda to store the scriptures and relics he had brought back from his travels. This story is interesting because it connects the composition of the later version of the text to the diffusion, thanks to Xuanzang’s translations, of the thought of the Yogācāra school in China, and the criticisms of some of the teachings of the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* which resulted. Thus, as Whalen Lai has suggested, the appearance on the scene of the “second translation”, with its conscious quasi-commentarial approach to the earlier redaction and its attempt to bring it in line with the new orthodoxy, which was then being introduced from India, is no mere coincidence. As not all of the reliable historical sources concerning the work of the translator monk Śikṣānanda mention this work, it is likely that the second version was a deliberate rewriting of the existing version carried out at a later stage in China or Korea.²³

For a variety of reasons, including perhaps the fact that it almost reads like a commentary on the earlier version, T. 1667 did not enjoy much critical fortune and there exist only three commentaries on it, all by the

21 On the use of the treatise within medieval *panjiao* systems see for example Gregory (1983).

22 For the formation of indigenous Buddhist schools in China and Korea and the role of the *Treatise* see Buswell (1989). For Shingon associations with the *Shi Moheyan lun* see Rambelli (1994).

23 See Lai (1980: 35); and also pp. 45–8 for a discussion of the Sinitic nature of the concept of “no-thought”.

same author. Thus, it is intriguing that D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966), the highly influential modern writer and popularizer of Buddhism to the West, chose to translate this text rather than the more established version of the East Asian exegetical tradition, thus opening a new chapter in the fascinating history of the readings and interpretations of T. 1666 and T. 1667 (see below).

What happened to the *Treatise* after the medieval period? A cursory examination of a few library collections of pre-modern texts indicates that the *Treatise* was one of a finite number of canonical texts that were individually reprinted, a common act of devotion among Chinese Buddhists and a sure indication of popularity among the faithful. Thanks to the nineteenth-century British missionary Robert Morrison (1782–1834), one can gauge the importance of the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* in the world of late imperial southern China, particularly between the second half of the seventeenth century through to the first quarter of the nineteenth century.²⁴ Morrison lived in one of China's most important centres of commercial publishing, the southern city of Canton (modern Guangzhou) and in Macao between 1807 and 1823. Over a period of about sixteen years, he amassed some 10,000 Chinese-style thread bound volumes, an important library by any standard. In Morrison's times, commercial publishing houses in Canton were responsible for the carving of printing blocks for religious texts on behalf of Buddhist monasteries. The blocks were stored in monastic libraries, whence practitioners could print off copies for charitable distribution. Of the 120 Buddhist texts in the Morrison Collection, eighty-four were printed between 1658 and 1823 from blocks held at the Haichuang Monastery in Canton. Buddhist books are very well represented with 120 records as compared, for example, to only 23 Confucian works. This appears to be a veritable cross-section of the most commonly used texts, including the most ubiquitous *sūtras* (*jing*), namely the *Diamond Sūtra* (*Jingang bore boluomi jing*), the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofa lianhua jing*), the *Sūtra of Bodhisattva Dizang* (*Dizang pusa benyuan jing*), and an interesting selection of their commentaries, as well as the ritual manuals, liturgical texts and collections of charms and spells that served as the backbone of religious practice.²⁵ The collection also contains an

24 See the published catalogue of the Morrison Collection in West (1998), especially pp. 169–204. The collection of pre-modern printed texts at the Shanghai Library contains several copies of the *Treatise* printed at different times and on behalf of different donors, as well as copies of some of the later commentaries. The Collection of Chinese Books at the Vatican Library in Rome contains at least one copy of the text, printed at the Changsha Scriptural Press (*Changsha kejingchu*) in 1877.

25 For ritual practices associated with Buddhist texts of various kinds see also Strickmann (1996), Stevenson (2001) and *passim* Lopez (1998). Recently, Barend ter Haar (2001) examined the importance and variety, albeit in an earlier period, of Buddhist-inspired religious activities and lifestyles in the context of China's local religious cultures. The practices he describes range from the performance of death rituals to the recitation of Buddhist texts, and from the liberation of animals (fish or fowl) during the Setting Free Life Gatherings (*fangshen hui*) to keeping a vegetarian lifestyle. The sponsorship of printed collections of Buddhist texts under the leadership of local monasteries was also regarded as highly meritorious. For other uses of the *Diamond Sūtra* in Chinese culture besides reading, copying, memorizing or reciting it see *passim* Chern Shu-ling (2000).

example of the later commentarial tradition of the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith*, authored by the illustrious monk Deqing (1546–1623), one of the key figures of late imperial Buddhism, and composed in 1620, a few years before the death of the master. The book in the Morrison Collection was printed and distributed in Canton in 1751. It is worth noting that this is one of the very few texts of its kind, namely the commentary of a *lun* or doctrinal treatise, rather than the commentary of a *sūtra*, or the sub-commentary of a *sūtra*, that are preserved in the Morrison Collection.²⁶

Modern readings in China

As I suggested above, the significance of the *Treatise* in pre-modern times was perhaps not only due to its hermeneutical value for the exegetical constructions of medieval and post-medieval East Asian Buddhist thinkers, but also to the fact that its association with the Buddhist patriarch Āśvaghōṣa granted it a special status in the eye of the practitioner, and maybe even all kinds of powers akin to those of some key *sūtras*. Similarly, modern interpreters justified their re-reading of the text on the basis of philosophical and doctrinal arguments, and yet the accumulated weight of the symbolic capital of the *Treatise* is never completely absent from their pronouncements. In the course of the twentieth century, the text has captured the imagination of many modern Buddhist interpreters, but also of Christian missionaries, and of members of East Asia's modernizing elites. Thus, several key thinkers of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century China have used it.

Conventionally described as the “father of modern Chinese Buddhism”, Yang Wenhui (courtesy name Renshan, 1837–1911), was one of the most influential laymen of his generation, and the founder in Nanjing of a very active private Buddhist press, which survives to this day.²⁷ Prior to devoting all of his energies and economic resources to Buddhism and to the collection and carving of woodblocks for printing texts, Yang worked as a government official and visited Europe twice, from 1878 to 1881 and from 1886 to 1889. In Oxford, he met the Japanese buddhologist Nanjō Bun'yū (1849–1927), with whom he formed a life-long friendship based on similar bibliographical interests and the communal search for “lost texts”. Nanjō belonged to a new generation of Japanese scholar-monks trained in Sanskrit and Western philological and textual approaches to the study of Asian religion, and was a collaborator of the highly influential Orientalist F. M. Müller (1823–1900).²⁸ One of the topics discussed in the letters

26 The collection contains, for example, an interesting combined edition of two translations of a commentary on the *Diamond Sutra* (*Jingang bore boluomijing lun*) putatively attributed to the Indian master Vasubandhu and printed in Canton in 1800.

27 For a classic study on the so-called Buddhist revival beginning in late imperial China see Welch (1968), particularly pp. 2–10 for Yang Wenhui. For a more recent study of Yang Wenhui's activities see Goldfuss (2001).

28 For a study of nineteenth-century Japanese clerical travels see Jaffe (2004). On Müller's attitudes towards Indian and Chinese Buddhism and see Girardot (2002).

exchanged between Yang and Nanjō is the importance of the *Treatise* for their tradition. Yang was very much convinced of its Indian origin and, together, the two looked in vain for the lost Sanskrit original, which would have confirmed that the text was a legitimate source of Buddhist doctrinal authority.²⁹

According to some sources, Yang's conversion to Buddhism was indeed sparked by reading the *Treatise*.³⁰ Undoubtedly, he refers to it often, and manifests interest in both its doctrinal content and in its final exhortation to practise Buddhism. In a short note entitled *The True Fruit of the Treatise on Awakening the Faith* (*Qixin lun zhenguo*), for example, Yang uses the text to discuss the complex theory of the "three bodies" (*sanshen*) of the Buddha. In other writings he encourages students to use the text to approach various aspects of Buddhist thought and practice.³¹ Yang's influence is probably one of the key reasons for the widespread knowledge of and interest in the *Treatise* in modern China. During the first decades of the twentieth century, several other Chinese commentators in fact appropriated it and reshaped its content to suit a variety of agendas. Indeed, according to the contemporary observer of things Buddhist Lewis Hodous, "Not only monks, but laymen trained in Japan are delivering lectures on Buddhist sūtras. The favourites are the *Awakening of Faith* and the *Saddharma-pundarika Sūtra*".³²

In the first issue of *Haichaoyin* (The Sound of the Tide), the most popular and influential of a novel type of Buddhist periodical publication that emerged in the 1920s, the monk Taixu (1889–1947) uses the well-known metaphor of the water and wind quoted at the beginning of this article to explain the "mind of modern people" (*xiandai ren xin*). He reminds his readers that the relationship between ignorance (*wuming*) and enlightenment (*jue*) is similar to that between open waters and the waves stirred by the wind. Water moves because of the wind but movement is not inherent to its true, fundamental, nature. Thus, while the "mind" (*xin*) of sentient beings is inherently pure, it is stirred by "wind of ignorance" (*wuming feng*). Yet, because the mind is not by its own nature movable, once the wind of ignorance ceases so does the production of delusional thoughts. In his untiring attempts at finding new ways to communicate traditional Buddhist ideas to his contemporaries, Taixu understands the usefulness of the *Treatise's* concept of *xin*, and the potential of its

29 On the exchanges between Yang Wenhui and Nanjō Bun'yū see Goldfuss (2001, especially 68–78). Yang's letters to the Japanese buddhologist are published in volume 10 of his Collected Writings, see Yang Wenhui (1918). For a study of the intellectual context surrounding Nanjō Bun'yū and other Asian scholars at Oxford see Girardot (2002).

30 One source for this statement is the autobiography written by Yang Wenhui's granddaughter Yang Buwei Chao (1970: 82), but see also here below.

31 See Yang Wenhui (1918), especially vol. 9, ch. 6 and 7. The final part of the *Treatise* is interesting in that it refers specifically to the practice of the "faith" (*xin*) mentioned in the title. Some scholars consider this section the creation of a different author from the one who wrote the main body of the text. See for example Liebenthal (1958: 196–7).

32 See Goldfuss (2001: 203) and Hodous (1924: 67).

soteriological appeal to “modern people” (*xiandai ren*).³³ *Haichaoyin* and the other Buddhist journals of the 1920s and 1930s return again and again to such Buddhist *xin*, and to the *Treatise*.³⁴

Interestingly, so far as I am aware, with few exceptions (one of which I shall examine here below), modern Chinese Buddhists remained faithful to tradition and maintained that the treatise was the word of the Bodhisattva Aśvaghōṣa.³⁵

Some cultural activists outside of Buddhist monastic circles also sought to construct Buddhism as a possible solution to the dilemmas of Chinese modernity. The influential writer Liang Qichao (1873–1929), for example, best known for his commitment to a “new” society, and his skilful use of the possibilities offered by the emergence of the modern periodical press, also features among the modern commentators on the *Treatise*. Liang, one of a number of late nineteenth-century intellectuals advocating reform in China, took an active part in the Hundred Days Reform of 1898, after the failure of which he was forced to flee China and take refuge in Japan, where he continued his political and journalistic activities. Incidentally, immediately prior to his exile, between 1895 and 1896, Liang worked as the secretary of Timothy Richard, the British missionary who translated the *Treatise* into English (more on this below).³⁶ According to Chan Sin-wai, Liang Qichao, although not strictly speaking a practitioner, was nevertheless interested in the study of Buddhism, and introduced in his daily schedule a period devoted to reading Buddhist texts.³⁷ His interest was of a peculiar kind though, and had perhaps more to do with the perceived

33 The passage is quoted in Yinshun (1995: 59–60). For *Haichaoyin* and other Buddhist periodicals see Tarocco (2007: 75–81). Between 1911 and the early 1940s, some 150 Buddhist periodicals were circulated in China. Beginning with the *Buddhist Studies Miscellany* distributed in Shanghai, Beijing and Tianjin on the eve of the 1911 revolution, a list of Buddhist periodicals would have to include *The Buddhist Monthly*; the *New Buddhist Youth*, the *Buddhist Studies Monthly*, the *Buddha Mind*, the *Buddhist Critic*, the *Buddhist Research*, the *Modern Sangha* and the *New Buddhism*. The titles of some of the periodicals are themselves illustrations of the attention Buddhists had to wider cultural trends emerging in Chinese intellectual circles. For a recent study of the multifarious activities of the monk Taixu and his approaches to modernity see Pittman (2001).

34 In an ironic twist of events, Yinshun (b. 1906), one of Taixu’s main disciples and a very active and influential contemporary scholar-monk, has a very different position regarding the importance of *tathāgatagarbha* thought and its place in the future of the Chinese Buddhist community. Through the use of classical Buddhist hermeneutics, Yinshun repudiates the commonly held East Asian Buddhist view, long established also thanks to the *Treatise*, that the teaching of *tathāgatagarbha* represents the ultimate teaching of Buddhism. This, he believes, resides instead with the teaching of emptiness. Unlike Japanese proponents of the so-called “Critical Buddhism” movement, however, Yinshun does not completely reject *tathāgatagarbha* thought and highlights instead its soteriological value for the practitioner. On Yinshun’s critique of *tathāgatagarbha* see Hurley (2004).

35 For a recent example of Chinese commentarial scholarship see Gao Zhenrong (1992).

36 For a classic study of Liang Qichao see Alitto (1982). For Liang Qichao’s journalism see, more recently, Vittinghoff (2002).

37 See Chan Sin-wai (1985: 41 and *passim*).

problems of then contemporary China than with Buddhist doctrine. In fact, Liang argued that since religion was at the root of Western civilization and an important element of its success, China should also resort to the “ancient teachings” of Buddhism and Confucianism. In an essay entitled “On the relationship between Buddhism and social order” (*Lun Fojiao yu qunzhi zhi guanxi*), Liang laments the fact that China, unlike Europe or America, does not have a national religion. He then goes on to say, “Will progress in governing China be attained using faith? ... [I believe that] the root of faith is religion ... some say that education can take the place of religion, but I dare not accept this statement. And even if it may be so this would apply only to countries where education is universal ... This time has not yet arrived for China”. According to Liang, there are various reasons for why Buddhism would be the ideal choice as the Chinese national religion. Buddhism is “a rational belief” (*zhexin*) and not a superstition (*mixin*) and it trusts in one’s strength and not in the strength of others. On account of the bodhisattva vows, Buddhists believe in universal goodness and not in individual goodness. It also teaches equality because all living things possess the nature of buddhas, a reference to the doctrine of Buddha nature (*fo xing*) expounded in the *Treatise*.³⁸

The edition of Liang Qichao’s *Textual Criticism on the Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* I consulted was published in 1935 (it was first printed in 1922) by the Commercial Press. This publishing house was perhaps the most important mainstream Shanghai-based commercial publisher of Republican China, well known for its new-style textbooks and periodical publications: Liang’s work was not meant to be read by a small Buddhist readership, but was aimed at a more general intellectual elite.³⁹ The principal point Liang appears to be making in his study, partly based on the wealth of scholarship on the *Treatise* that had appeared in Japan since the late nineteenth century, is that the text was composed in China by a Chinese person. Thus a strong nationalistic sentiment, then widespread among members of Chinese modernizing elites, is perhaps Liang’s main motivation for deciding to rewrite this particular segment of Chinese Buddhist history.⁴⁰

T. Richard’s and D. T. Suzuki’s *Awakening*

A few English versions of the *Treatise* were published during the course of the first decade of the twentieth century, a period in which translations of Chinese religious texts, let alone of Buddhist texts, were still few and far between. The first translation, published in 1900, was carried out by the Japanese scholar and popularizer of Buddhism D. T. Suzuki, and the

38 See Liang Qichao (1910: 33–6; 1990: 49–56).

39 For the Commercial Press and Shanghai publishers see especially Reed (2004: 203–25). For Buddhist publishers see Tarocco (2007: 41–65).

40 See Liang Qichao (1935: 82–6). Note that Liang makes abundant use of the terms then current among reformist nationalists including “nation” (*guo*) and “citizens of the nation” (*guo min*), etc. For religion and the nation in Republican China (1911–49), see in particular Duara (1995); Nedostup and Liang Hong-ming (2001).

second, completed earlier but eventually published in 1907, was carried out by Briton Timothy Richard (1845–1919).

A Baptist missionary, Richard arrived in China in 1870 and lived there for almost 45 years. One of his key proselytizing strategies was to open a dialogue with Chinese political and cultural elites and to seek to influence them.⁴¹ In 1892, he presented the work *Historical Evidences of the Benefits of Christianity* to the Chinese authorities, and we know that his views on modern education were certainly known to, among others, the Qing reformer Li Hongzhang (1823–1901). Richard's purpose was to provide books and pamphlets that would show “the bearing of educational and religious development in industries and trade and in every department of national progress”.⁴² The views he put forward to the Chinese can be glimpsed in the following excerpt, where he makes an explicit connection between religion, modernity and national prosperity:

The result of this advance in the Christian religion has been to give liberty to men to progress on all lines, and they have progressed in the last 300 years more than they have progressed in the 3000 years previously. This we say to all the followers of the non-Christian religions; we bid them not to take alarm because we bring them new religious ideas which may supplant those they now hold; for we say that it will not rob them of a single good which they have without supplying them with something better ... Those who oppose change in religion are to-day in danger of retarding progress, as Roman Catholicism and Islam do in all countries under their sway. They bring on inevitable national death ... Hence the prosperity of all Protestant countries ... In religion, we must not be behind, but before every kingdom of this world. If we do not embrace all branches of knowledge, ours is not worthy to be the one religion of the future of the whole world.⁴³

In an improbable rehearsal of earlier approaches to Chinese religious life devised by seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries to China, Richard also put forward the theory that the so-called Buddhism of the “Great Vehicle” (*Mahāyāna*) was not Buddhism at all, but rather a form of Christianity. In fact, he writes, when the apostle Thomas went to India he met the Indian Buddhist master Aśvagoṣa and preached to him. Eventually, Aśvagoṣa wrote the *Treatise on the Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* that caused Buddhism to be transformed from the more primitive “Small Vehicle” into the more advanced Mahāyāna form. Apparently, Richard was so impressed by the “Christian nature of the teaching of the book”, he decided to translate it. The fruit of his labours was initially published by the Christian

41 The main sources on Richard are his own memoir published in 1916 and the biography written by the missionary and professor of Chinese at Oxford W. E. Soothill. On the ecumenical attitudes of some Protestant missionaries see Lian (1997).

42 See Richard (1916: 222).

43 Soothill (1924: 210).

Literature Society in 1907 as *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna Doctrine: The New Buddhism*, and still enjoys an incredibly wide distribution, especially now various digitized versions have appeared on the World Wide Web. The claims initially made in that text are even more clearly articulated in a subsequent collection of translations from Chinese scriptures that also includes the translation of the *Treatise, The New Testament of Higher Buddhism*. Richard writes that:

The Mahāyāna faith is not Buddhism but an Asiatic form of the same gospel of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ, in Buddhistic nomenclature, differing from the old Buddhism just as the New Testament differs from the Old ... It commands a world-wide interest, for in it we find an adaptation of Christianity to ancient thought in Asia, and the deepest bond of union between the different races of the east and the west, namely the bond of a common religion.⁴⁴

According to the missionary, the “Awakening of Faith” – as he and others called the text, perhaps because of the resonance of the word faith in Christian contexts – is among the great “Books of the World”, together with the Quran, the Bible, and the Vedas. “The book is Brahmanistic and Buddhistic, Indian and Western in some aspect of philosophical thought”, and yet it also presented itself as very practical.⁴⁵ After having described the emergence of “New Buddhism” some 500 years after the death of the Buddha, and after having made Jesus a contemporary of Aśvaghōṣa, Richard astutely describes its presumed state of decline he apparently witnesses. “The reader who is acquainted with the low state of Buddhism in China to-day may naturally ask, since the New Buddhism was so full of such high teachings on some of the greatest problems of life and since it was so flourishing for many centuries, why is its glory departed?” The answers are that “later writers” attempted to “combine the primitive with the advanced”, and that Buddhists, being “ignorant” of their own religion, were simply incapable of doing anything right.⁴⁶

In a strange twist of destiny, the eminent layman Yang Wenhui, one of the people who did most to encourage the study and understanding of Buddhism and of the *Treatise* in modern China, was called to collaborate with Richard, and ultimately and unwittingly helped the missionary to produce a Christian-influenced translation of his favourite Buddhist text. He was clearly unaware of Richard’s transformation of the *Treatise* into a sort of *preparatio evangelica*, and extremely frustrated when (too late) he finally discovered it.⁴⁷ This is how Richard relates their first encounter, and legitimizes his choice to translate the *Treatise*:

44 See Richard (1910: 43–6).

45 See Richard (1910: p. vi).

46 See Richard (1910, pp. vi, xv and *passim*). Criticism of Buddhism was common among missionaries of this period. See *passim* Welch (1968) and Pittman (2001).

47 See Yang Wenhui’s letter to Nanjō Bun’yū in which he relates some of the facts (Yang Wenhui 1918, vol. 10, ch. 7, letter 13).

In 1884 I visited Nanking ... Whilst there, I sought for some books which I could not procure in the North of China. I learnt that a Buddhist Book Society had been started in Nanjing, Soochow, and Hangzhou, three of the leading cities in Central China, in order to replace those destroyed by the Taiping rebellion. Of these three societies, the most important was that at Nanking, and the prime mover over the whole three societies lived there. His name was Yang Wên Hui. I called on him and found the most intelligent Buddhist I had ever met. He had been several years in Europe as treasurer to the Chinese embassy when the Marquis Tseng represented China in England and France. Mr Yang had had interviews with Max Müller and Julien and Bunyû Nanjo of Tokyo, who had studied under Max Müller. Thus, besides being well acquainted with the best authorities in Europe and Japan, Mr Yang was not a Buddhist priest, but a Confucianist with the B.A. (*siutsai*) degree and was only a lay Buddhist. I said to him, "How is it that you, with a Confucian degree, should have ever become a Buddhist?" His answer was striking: "I am surprised that you, a missionary should ask me that question, for you must know that Confucianism shirks some of the most important questions. It only deals with human affairs now, not with the superhuman." But do you mean that Buddhism answers those questions? He said: "Yes". "Where?" I asked again. He answered: "In a book called the *Awakening of Faith*. That book converted me from Confucianism to Buddhism".⁴⁸

Of course, this dialogue may not have taken place in the exact terms with which Richard reports it. And perhaps the missionary was not completely convinced that later Buddhism was an offshoot of Christianity, or that the apostle Thomas had preached to Āśvaghōṣa in India; most missionaries were probably not. Yet Richard's archetypically Orientalist appropriation of Buddhism to serve his missionary agenda was not an isolated case. And he was certainly not alone in offering an essentialist reading of the *Treatise*, adapting its description of the absolute to suit his proselytizing agenda. In fact, the transnational exchanges that characterized the religious life of East Asia, Europe and America since the late nineteenth century, have left a clear mark on another modern interpretation of the *Treatise*.⁴⁹

Outside of China, the *Treatise* became part of what has been described as the "occidental strategies" of Japanese Buddhists, whereby they discovered the role Western studies of Buddhism could play in legitimizing their tradition in the eyes of their local critics.⁵⁰ In particular, to those Japanese Buddhist clerics and lay people interested in what James Ketelaar calls "the construction of Eastern Buddhism", the *Treatise* represented a great resource: it was one of the texts that could be used to manufacture a

48 Richard (1907: pp. ix-x).

49 For some recent studies of these exchanges see for example Tweed (2005) and Jaffe (2004).

50 On Japanese Occidentalism see Ketelaar (1991) and Snodgrass (2003).

Buddhism beyond sectarian boundaries, a united, trans-historical, essential Buddhism. Thus some Japanese thinkers looked on the text as a clear articulation of Buddhism itself.⁵¹

A not yet famous D. T. Suzuki translated the *Treatise* in 1900. Puzzlingly, and offering little by way of explanation for this choice or even acknowledging the wider diffusion of the other version, Suzuki decided to use the second version for his English version.⁵² One reason for this may be that the later version, in its commentarial attitude towards the earlier formulation, offered greater scope for smoothing down the “Chineseness” of the text. To the best of my knowledge, this is still the only English translation based on T. 1667.

This work is Suzuki’s first major effort to present Buddhism to Western audiences, North Americans in particular, an endeavour that was going to last for more than sixty years. In 1897, he went to the United States to study with the eclectic thinker Paul Carus (1852–1919), and learn the “various skills required to disseminate knowledge of Buddhism to the West”.⁵³ A speaker at the World’s Parliament of Religion of 1893 and editor of the journals *The Open Court* and *The Monist*, Carus was the author of the popular volume *The Gospel of the Buddha* and of many other writings on all things Buddhist, including a baffling collection of *Buddhist Hymns* containing pseudo-Buddhist lyrics set to music by Chopin and Beethoven.⁵⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the brief *Publisher’s Preface* to Suzuki’s translation, is a typical example of Carus’s discourse on Buddhism. First it tells the reader that Aśvaghōṣa “is the philosopher of Buddhism” and that his “treatise on *The Awakening of Faith* is recognized by all Northern schools and sects as orthodox and used even to-day in Chinese translations as a text-book for the instruction of Buddhist priests”. Unfortunately, the original Sanskrit has not yet been found, thereby limiting “our knowledge of Aśvaghōṣa’s [*sic*] philosophy” to “its Chinese translation”.⁵⁵ Eventually, Carus reassures the reader of the importance and accuracy of the English translation, not least because it confirms his own interpretation of Buddhism. The idea of “Suchness” contained in the *Treatise*, in particular, confirms what he had written in his own *Gospel of Buddha*. Further, “Suchness” is also connected with many other aspects of European philosophy and literature, apparently, it is “Plato’s realm of ideas and Goethe’s ‘Mothers’ of the second part of *Faust*”.⁵⁶

In his own *Introduction*, Suzuki defends Buddhism saying that “The *Awakening of Faith* is dedicated to the Western public by a Buddhist from Japan, with a view to dispelling the denunciations so ungraciously heaped upon” *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.⁵⁷ It is worth remembering, incidentally, that

51 See Ketelaar (1990: 186–7).

52 See Suzuki (1900: 41).

53 See Snodgrass (2003: 260).

54 For Carus’s thought and its influence on Suzuki see Sharf (1995). See also Snodgrass (2003) and Tarocco (2007: 111–2).

55 The first quotation is from Suzuki (1900: iii); the second from Suzuki (1900: iv).

56 See Suzuki (1900: iv, v).

57 See Suzuki (1900: xii).

in 1895, within months of its American publication, Suzuki translated *The Gospel of the Buddha* into Japanese. According to Judith Snodgrass, this was not because Japanese Buddhists thought much of Carus's eclectic mixing of Buddhist texts, but rather because the book was proof of "Western approval of Buddhism as the most appropriate religion for the modern, scientific world".⁵⁸ Indeed, Suzuki worked hard both to restore Western views of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and to help convince people at home that Buddhism was useful to the modern Japanese nation. In his elegant, if at times misleading, translation of T. 1667, the Japanese scholar utilizes a sophisticated philosophical idiom, and appropriates many of the philological and historicist weapons of the Western buddhologist's arsenal. Interestingly, one of his main concerns is to prove Aśvaghōṣa's historical existence, and his work is thus emphatically concerned with discourses of chronology, history, and rationality, which were certainly not central to the language or practices of pre-modern readers of the *Treatise*.

Conclusions

For the past one hundred or so years, a medieval Buddhist text has been adapted to serve very different projects, ranging from those of Buddhist modernizers, to those of Asian nationalists, to those of Christian missionaries. All have produced conflicting interpretations of the original Buddhist text. Ironically, some of these radically different translations and representations now coexist in the vast uncritical repository of human textual production that is the World Wide Web.⁵⁹ In 2006, Columbia University Press published a new edition of what is now regarded as the standard English translation of the *Treatise*, that by Y. Hakeda, originally published in 1967, which is based on a reading partly influenced by sectarian Japanese developments. Intriguingly, the publicity material describes the *Treatise* as "attractive", "profound", and even "mysterious".⁶⁰

Nationalist and Orientalist readings of the *Treatise* may be a thing of the past but the search for its authors and its origins continues. Indeed, the 1980s witnessed a resurgence of the debate on the authenticity of the text. Several articles by prominent scholars were published throughout the decade in the *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, perhaps the most influential journal in the field of Buddhist Studies.⁶¹ One reason for this may be that the East Asian Buddhist canon contains a very large number of so-called "apocryphal texts", which claim to be translations of Indian originals but are East Asian compositions. Some of these texts have recently been rediscovered in Japan and previously were

58 See Snodgrass (1998: 341 and 320).

59 See for example <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/aof/index.htm> and <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/taf/index.htm> (accessed November 2007).

60 See <http://cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-13156-8/the-awakening-of-faith> (accessed November 2007). See also Hakeda (1967) and Tarocco (1996).

61 For Japanese debates of the 1920s, 30s and 40s see Liebenthal (1958: 155 and *passim*). See also *passim* Demiéville (1929). For more recent studies see Lai (1980) and Grosnick (1989).

found in the extraordinary medieval Buddhist library found in 1900 in Central Asian Dunhuang. Before the modern period only a small minority of Chinese, Japanese and Korean Buddhists were conversant with Sanskrit or other Indic languages. But this fact has not in any way hampered the development of East Asian Buddhism. In light of recent research, moreover, it is clear that there is nothing intrinsically Indian, let alone Sanskrit, about Mahāyāna Buddhism. The growing body of scholarship on East Asian Buddhist apocrypha demonstrates that many East Asian Buddhist traditions are based on these texts rather than on translations of Indian materials. If medieval catalogues initially categorized some of these texts as Chinese compositions rather than as translations, thus making their entry into the canon difficult, some were eventually accepted as canonical, thereby changing for ever the course of Buddhist history. This, alas, may well be one of the most enduring legacies of the *Treatise*.⁶² Its status in medieval times may have facilitated the production of other apocrypha and their inclusion in the canon. In modern times, on the other hand, its contested origins have contributed to its appropriation by very different interpreters, each with very different agendas.

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62 On Sanskrit studies in pre-modern China and Japan, or lack thereof, see the study, albeit somewhat dated, by van Gulik (1953).

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