Kumarajiva and the paradigm of the bodhisattva-translator: A Lotus-Sutra based approach

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Summary

Translation is one of the fundamental resources and conditions for religious propagation. As it relates so closely to the spread of Buddhist teachings, we may see translation as a specific manifestation of the Bodhisattva Way. Thus, we intend to propose the idea of the bodhisattva-translator as a self-chosen way of life, a subjectivity and a *habitus*\(^2\) which are constructed in the context of Buddhist practice, whose roots may be traced down to the Lotus Sutra’s Bodhisattvas of the Earth. Kumārajīva (344-413), the eminent Dharma Master who translated Buddhism to Chinese and thus enabled the worldwide dissemination of Buddhist teachings, may offer a bright, unparalleled example of the bodhisattva-translator and help us outline new approaches to contemporary Buddhist translation.

Introduction

Among the vast landscape of Indian heritage, Buddhism has been a foremost source of enlightenment and hope to countless peoples and cultures. “Everywhere [Buddhism] spread, it has served as a civilizing influence. Truly it is the light of Asia”, says Buddhist scholar Kenneth Ch’en (1968, vii). And the monumental expansion of Indian


\(^2\) As in Bourdieu’s sociology.
Buddhism to Central and South Asia, later to East Asia, and even later to the whole world, was only possible due to the labours, the power and the human footprint of translation. Two and a half millennia after its inception, Buddhism it is now experiencing what could be described as a new renaissance in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, not just as the carrier of an ancient, past Eastern wisdom, but also as the source of a vibrant creativity oriented to the present and future. \footnote{I give detailed description of this Western scholarly and academic involvement with the Lotus Sutra tradition in a recent article, “La traducción religiosa y su impronta filosófica en el nivel de la praxis: El budismo en América latina”, approved for coming publication in Mutatis Mutandis, Latin American Translation Journal, University of Antioquia, Colombia.}

Among an incredibly large corpus of Buddhist scriptures and texts known as the “eighty-four thousand teachings”, the Lotus Sutra —preached by Shakyamuni Buddha in the last eight years of his life— has uniquely captured the attention of Western scholars and artists in the past decades for its bold humanistic principles, while flourishing at the level of people as a dynamic religious practice of universal scope. The Lotus Sutra tradition (in which translation played a major role) has ancient origins, but it is surprisingly alive and prolific today. What lessons and paradigms can we learn from this tradition that may renew, enlarge and enrich contemporary Translation Studies?

**Translation: At the root of culture**

Translation is the wondrous fabric of which true culture is made. If diversity is life (Ikeda and Tehranian 2003, 173), and human life is diverse by nature, then translation is the human spiritual effort of reaching out, building bridges out of differences, and
transcending all sorts of barriers in order to share textual wisdom and resources with other people in other cultures.

In this regard, translation may express as few other intellectual activities the gist of human compassion, generosity and empathy in an intercultural environment. Many eloquent voices in Translation Studies have said that the condition for the occurrence of a translation is the human desire to translate (Berman 1984). While this desire, as any other, can stem from all sorts of life-conditions (desire to acquire power, desire for self-validation, desire to increase knowledge, etc.), Buddhist translation offers a vantage point to observe this endeavour as an expression of a noble, altruistic desire to benefit others and help them attain emancipation from suffering, a desire which is specifically satisfied through a taxing spiritual, philosophical and linguistic practice in the field of textual transcreation.

**From the translator’s task to the translator’s mission**

We would like to propose here the concept of the bodhisattva-translator as a field of subjectivity, as the *habitus* (Bourdieu 1998) of those who choose to devote themselves to translating Buddhist teachings for the sake of people, not just as a mere transference of words, not just as a linguistic procedure, but as a tremendously committed *askesis* (Foucault 1997; McGushin 2007).

We see here a transition from “the translator’s task” to “the translator’s mission”, which includes the hermeneutic motion (Benjamin 1923) but also expands it with a new philosophical turn.

Where in the Buddhist tradition can we find support for the proposition of the bodhisattva-translator? On the one hand, we would like to bring into the scene the extraordinary figure of the “Bodhisattvas of the Earth”, who are among the boldest and
most stunning characters appearing in the Lotus Sutra from Chapter 15th ("Emerging from the Earth") to Chapter 22th ("Entrustment"). On the other hand, we will base ourselves in the life and work of Kumārajīva, the towering translator-monk who transcreated the Lotus Sutra in Chinese and opened up the road to worldwide Buddhist practice and transmission, setting lasting and excellent standards for intercultural translation, both within and beyond Buddhist realm.

The Bodhisattvas of the Earth

The “Bodhisattvas of the Earth” are magnificently described in the Lotus Sutra in an opulent, cosmic narrative. Which values do they represent in our modern world, and how can they be associated with the translator’s habitus?

When Shakyamuni Buddha asks his disciples, all eminent and well-learned in his doctrines, who will preach the Lotus Sutra in the dark, violent and chaotic future ages, and who will endure huge difficulties and hostility in order to do so, all of them emphatically claim their will to do so, hoping to inherit the propagation of the Law in the age of confusion after his mentor’s death (Watson 1993, 212 and ff.). However, Shakyamuni declines to entrust them this mission and, instead, summons the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, an impressive multitude of bodhisattvas who “emerge from the ground as «human lotus flowers»” (Ikeda et al. 2003). These imposing figures are described in the Lotus Sutra as follows: “Firm in the power of will and concentration, with constant diligence seeking wisdom, they expound various wonderful doctrines and their minds are without fear” (Watson 1993, 220); 4 “As the light of the sun and moon / can banish all obscurity and gloom, / so this person [the leader of the Bodhisattvas of

the Earth] as he passes through the world / can wipe out the darkness of living beings” (Watson 1993, 276); “like the lotus flower in the water” (Watson 1993, 222).

Although much can be said about the Bodhisattvas of the Earth in hermeneutic terms, and this of course goes beyond the scope of this short article, the previous quotations clearly show attributes of an outstanding character, such as courage, power of will, intellectual focus, compassion, philosophical mastery, communicational competences, diligence, avid disposition towards knowledge and wisdom, ability to illuminate and enlighten others’ lives, and a lotus-like quality: just as the lotus blooms beautifully and emits fragrance in a dirty, muddy pond, the Bodhisattvas of the Earth live and manifest their Buddha nature actively engaged in the contradictory, “muddied” reality of human society, not isolated inside an ivory tower.

The great scholar, religious reformer and Buddhist teacher Nichiren (1222-1282), who established the Hokke [Lotus] school of Buddhism in Japan based on Kumārajīva’s translation of the Lotus Sutra, has said about the Bodhisattvas of the Earth that “their fundamental mission is to propagate Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, [the devotion to the Buddhist Law revealed in the Lotus Sutra], the one great reason for the Buddha’s appearance in this world” (Hori 1952, 833). This means that the Bodhisattvas of the Earth, which “emerge from the ground” of human reality instead of “descending from the sky” of utopias or divinities, devote all their extraordinary human attributes to the mission of communicating and sharing the essential Law inherent in the Lotus Sutra, or Myoho-renge-kyo.

**Translators as Bodhisattvas of the Earth**

It is easy to apply this description to the translator’s *habitus*, and conceive of committed translators whose identity is established in terms of their mission; involved
with the empowerment of people; who translate not mere concepts, but living words transcreated to revive and encourage human beings in their quest for emancipation. They endure all sorts of difficulties and overcome every obstacle to accomplish their task; they hone their faith in order to embody the texts in their lives; they rack their brains and summon their creative wisdom to translate the true entity of phenomena, even aware of its unfathomable, inexpressible nature. While they work for the enlightenment of others, they procure their own enlightenment, showing that cause and effect, process and result, are inseparable terms.

Of course, not all Bodhisattvas of the Earth are translators; furthermore, we can think of the Bodhisattvas of the Earth not as external or fictional characters, but as a dimension of our own lives, in the same way that the whole Lotus Sutra may be seen as the depiction of Shakyamuni’s own drama of enlightenment from an eternal and universal point of view (Ikeda et al. 2003). Thus being a Bodhisattva of the Earth is not a status determined by external factors, but the expression of a self-attained subjectivity which is the result of commitment and courageous choice.

A threefold view of Kumārajīva’s life

Kumārajīva, half Indian and half Kuchan, is universally acclaimed by his contributions to the dissemination of Nāgārjuna’s Mādhyamika school and, more importantly, by his exceptional and beautiful translations of the sutras. His Chinese version of the Lotus Sutra (Myoho-renge-kyo or The Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Law, tr. 406), second to none and considered to be his masterpiece, has been the basis of all the Lotus Sutra tradition in China and Japan, and by extension, now in the whole world. (Incidentally, by virtue of a strange coincidence he was a contemporary with the great Christian scholar St. Jerome (347-420), who translated the Greek Bible into Latin in
Europe at exactly the same time as Kumārajīva was spreading Indian Buddhism in China).

Kumārajīva lifted Buddhist translation to the stature of a major art and created unparalleled versions in terms of philosophical accuracy, communicational impact and literary exquisiteness. His fruitful endeavours have created uninterrupted effects until our age in fields as culture, philosophy, art, literature, peace activism and translation pedagogy. By fortunate and timely coincidence, next year (2013) we will commemorate the 1600th anniversary of his death.

In our research work about Kumārajīva, we propose a threefold view of his life and his achievements: as a Dharma Master (a master of the Buddhist Law); as an outstanding translator; and as a translators’ trainer and teacher, head of the renowned State Translation Bureau at Chang-an. We know would like to add a new approach, relating his habitus with the above mentioned concept of the bodhisattva-translator.

**The essence of Kumārajīva’s greatness**

The son of a mixed marriage, born in a Tocharian-speaking oasis-kingdom along the Silk Road, Kumārajīva was the epitome of the intercultural and genuinely global mind. In terms of his contributions to Translation Studies, we could summarize the essence of his uniqueness in the following ten aspects: (1) His versions were faithful and accurate, both in textual treatment and in the transmission of Buddhist philosophical purpose and contents; (2) his texts radiate stylistic beauty, musicality and literary vitality; (3) his methodology of work enabled him to translate at full speed, with a feverish rhythm, even to our present standards; (4) Kumārajīva embraced translation not as a “task”, but as his personal “mission”; translation was his place in the world and the stage on which he constructed his subjectivity; (5) his approach to translation is the product of his
demanding spiritual quest as a Buddhist disciple and practitioner; (6) his translation work was implemented by means of an innovative pedagogic project which led him to foster thousands of successors; (7) he translated for his own time and target culture, but at the same time he managed to capture the timeless and universal nature of the sutras; this is why his versions have been embraced and loved by all sorts of people across countries and ages; (8) his strategies reveal a strict hermeneutic investigation and a firm ethics of responsibility towards translation; (9) his essential understanding of Buddhism allowed him to assess the sutras beyond their pure religious value, acknowledging their importance as authentic sources of humanistic civilization; (10) his translations promoted the flourishing of peace, culture and human development in all those societies where they were spread and practiced. This analysis, which summarizes our findings and personal reading on Kumārajīva, is of course sustained and preceded by much more authoritative sources, such as the works by Ocho, Yamada, Lu, Ikeda, Chandra and others.

As a token of his achievements, historical written records show that Kumārajīva translated 384 volumes or fascicles of sutras and treatises in the short term of twelve years, and with the limited technologies available in the early Middle Age (Sharma 2011). In the same short lapse, he instructed even up to 3,000 specialized linguists at the impressive State Translation Bureau at Chang’an, sponsored by Emperor Yao-Hsing (Ikeda 1993).

**From a deep source, a far-reaching stream**

The standards and vision of translation set by Kumārajīva can also be seen as a perennial model and a powerful reference for Buddhist translators of all ages. In the 1,600 years since his epochal achievements, thousands of linguists, scholars and sincere
believers have earnestly devoted themselves to the difficult task of translating the essence of the sutras—essence which is beyond language—to all sorts of human languages.

This tradition of capturing the essence of the sutras by means of a “embodied hermeneutics”, and transcreating the Law in magnificent, powerful words, was so bravely, earnestly established by Kumārajīva and his disciples that it became the root of a steady Lotus Sutra culture in Asia for centuries; then flourished in the deep, hope-filled humanism of Nichiren Buddhism in Japan, and now flows all over the world sustained by an impressive corpus of translated Buddhist literature, scriptural works and contemporary essays. This texture is supporting new and vibrant Buddhist lay movements based on the Lotus Sutra—of which the Soka Gakkai International is the foremost example—, which are active even in places with no historic links to Buddhism such as Africa or Latin America. In terms of the cause and effect principle revealed in the Lotus Sutra itself, we suggest a logical continuity between the original compassionate desire of Shakyamuni Buddha; the powerful, essentially faithful translations made by Kumārajīva (both taken as a seed or cause); and finally the worldwide, far-reaching stream of Lotus Sutra propagation attained in later centuries (seen as the effect or fruit). This is a matter for further investigation in terms of Buddhist epistemology.

**Engaged translations as the result of an engaged life**

Kumārajīva unleashed the full power of speech and words by challenging himself in the Way of the bodhisattva-translator, by persevering and clinging to his mission even in the face of the worst impediments. He held a true, valiant dialogue with the Dharma, not merely as a “monk”, but as a self-reliant, courageous and determined “disciple”, as
can be seen in many episodes of his biographies (Nobel 2011; Sharma 2011). If, as Gadamer has said, “reading is already translation, and translation is translation for the second time” (Biguenet and Schulte 1992), then Kumārajīva’s versions are the retranslation of his own faithful and subjective involvement with the sutras; what we find implicit in his translations is the absolute and driven “desire to translate” that led him to develop unprecedented cognitive faculties and to reveal his own Buddha wisdom in the midst of a complex, changing reality. His “desire”, the desire of a Buddha, was the engine which propelled a wondrous, epic life as a translator. As his unburned tongue may illustrate, he translated not with his brains, not with his intellect, not by means of mere competences, but engaging his whole body, his faculties and his embodied spiritual capital, which encompassed both Buddhist and linguistic domains.

Kumārajīva has invaluable lessons to offer about the identity and subjectivity of the translator as an agent of cultural and social change, and as an architect of civilization. His sense of mission, ethics and agency teach us fundamental lessons about the tenets of cultural translation, extremely relevant to our contemporary world where translation permeates all aspects of politics, economy, science, education and arts. And also a lesson about situated, self-chosen, driven effort as a Bodhisattva of the Earth in a personal field of mission, for the sake of sharing the Buddhist Law with people.

**Conclusion**

If, as the Lotus Sutra shows, dialogue is an antidote to darkness, ignorance and violence, then translation, by virtue of its dialogical nature, may well be seen as the epitome of victory over the structural violence of isolation.

By pursuing a systematic study of Kumārajīva’s life from the standpoint of Translation Studies, based on the tremendous impact of his *Myoho-renge-kyo* on global
culture and philosophy, we propose the paradigm of the bodhisattva-translator as a valid model, both for contemporary Buddhist translation and for intercultural and ideological translation in general. At the same time, we reconfirm the value of translators as key players in the dialogical construction of social change and peace culture, while suggesting the importance of awareness, embodied cultural capital and sense of mission as often ignored pillars in the development of superior translation skills.

References


