

Buddhism Exchanges in Trans-Himalaya Region: Development and Recommendations

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Abstract—This paper attempts to explain the historical development of exchange of Buddhism between China and the Trans-Himalayan countries, as well as its positive effects on the bilateral relations between them, and give some useful recommendations. It argued that Buddhism has become a powerful cultural tie that binds the nations in the region and promotes friendship between the Himalayan states. It also suggested that China should make further efforts to excavate Buddhist relics and sort out Buddhist spiritual resources on the silk road, promote the communication between Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada continuously on the basis of seeking common ground while reserving differences, encourage and support educational cooperation between China and Buddhist universities and colleges in trans-Himalaya countries through expanding the friendly exchanges between youth students and scholars, and provide necessary assistance such as funding and technology, to support the Buddhism exchange programs.

Keywords—*Buddhism; Himalayan; China; Communication; Cooperation*

I. INTRODUCTION

Due to the geographical proximity, long historical connection, and close cultural ties between the countries in the trans-Himalaya region such as China, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, since the ancient times, there is a mutual exchange of Buddhist thoughts and philosophy in the region. Through the academic exchanges between the monks, the governmental programs, as well as people to people contacts, Buddhism has become a powerful cultural tie that binds the nations in the region and promotes friendship between the Himalayan states.

Given the robust Buddhism connections in the Himalaya region, this paper attempts to explain the historical development of exchange of Buddhism between China and the Himalayan countries, as well as its positive effects on the bilateral relations between them, and give some useful recommendations. The main body is divided into three parts, in which the first section briefly introduces the research objective and the structure. The following part focuses on the development of Buddhism exchanges in the trans-Himalaya region. Finally, it draws a short conclusion and gives suggestions on pushing forward the Buddhism connections.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHISM EXCHANGES IN TRANS-HIMALAYA REGION

A. Han Dynasty (202BD-220AD)

The initial stage of Buddhist communication between China and the countries of the trans-Himalaya region was started during the Han Dynasty. It is widely believed that Buddhism was introduced into China during the reign of Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty. The eminent monk Zhu Shemoteng and the Zhu Falan arrived in Luoyang, translated Buddhist scriptures and carried forward Buddha dharma. Since then, the number of monks who came to China gradually increased. She Moteng translated a volume of the Sutra of Forty-two Chapters. This is the earliest Buddhist sutra in China.

Liu Ying was the half-brother of Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty. He admired the teaching about Emperor Huang and Lao-zi. Meanwhile, he sacrificed himself to the Buddha and fasted for three months. The Buddha was worshiped as an exotic deity. It can be seen that the spread of Buddhism was inseparable from the idea of immortals and Huang-lao philosophy.

During this period, some people began to translate Buddhist scriptures. Among them, An Shigao and Lokaksema were more popular than others. An Shigao was the prince of Parthia, which was located in the northeast of Iranian plateau. He came to China during the period of Emperor Heng of the Han Dynasty. He translated Anapanasati Sutra and the Sutra on the Aggregates, Realms, and Fields. The later mainly expounds the basic concepts of Buddhism, such as the four noble truths, five aggregates, twelve links of dependent origination and the thirty-seven factors of enlightenment, so as to break the attachment to self and achieve liberation. He systematically translated the scriptures of Hinayana Buddhism for the first time. Anapanasati Sutra introduces the method of counting breath, which is the most basic Buddhist meditation methods. By counting breath people can become calm, which is similar to the Chinese Taoist practice of inspiration and expiration.

Lokaksema came to Luoyang during the reign of Emperor Ling of the Han dynasty (156-189AD). "He is traditionally said to have been a Kushan, though the Chinese term Yuezhi covered a broad area of what is now Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. [1]" What he translated were mainly Prajna study and Chan study of Mahayana Buddhism. He translated the Wisdom Scripture of Practicing Enlightenment and Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra or Sūtra on the Samādhi for Encountering Face-to-Face the Buddhas of the Present. According to the Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sūtra, as long as people repeat the name of Amitabha wholeheartedly over and over again, they can be reborn in the western paradise on their deathbed.

B. Three Kingdoms, Jin Dynasty and the Northern and Southern Dynasties(220-589AD)

During this period, there were a lot of wars and regime changes. It was the golden age of Buddhist exchanges between China and the trans-Himalaya region. During this period, the orthodox Confucianism collapsed and Lao-Zhuang metaphysics prevailed, which promoted the development of Buddhism in China. There were mainly two routes for foreign monks from trans-Himalaya region to enter China: one was the northern Silk Road, and the other was the southern Maritime Silk Road. The silk road not only facilitated trade between the east and the west but also promoted religious and cultural exchanges. Besides, it allowed Buddhist monks in China to seek dharma mainly through these two roads.

At the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, a large scale peasant uprising broke out in China. The uprising caused a heavy blow to the dark Eastern Han Dynasty. Thus the Three Kingdoms (namely, Wei, Shu Han, and Wu) began. Zhu Shixing (203~282AD) was the first Han monk in Chinese history and the first monk to seek dharma in the western regions of China. He always taught the Wisdom Scripture of Practicing Enlightenment in Luoyang. He thought this sutra had many cuts and it was difficult to understand the meaning. So he was willing to go to the western regions to find the original version. In the year 206, he crossed the desert to Yutian and got the Sanskrit version. In the Western Jin Dynasty, it was translated into Chinese, namely Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā Sūtra.

By the time of the Western Jin dynasty, Buddhism had been already introduced to China for more than 200 years and had developed on a certain sense of order in China. In this period, prajna classics were more popular. In 266, Sima Yan forced the emperor of Wei State to abdicate and established the Western Jin Dynasty. During this period, foreign monks from Trans-Himalaya Region came to China through the Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road. And two Buddhist centers-Chang'an and Luoyang were formed.

After the death of Emperor Wu, the Western Jin dynasty collapsed, and China fell into turbulence and secession. Northern China was locked in tangled warfare among sixteen states. In the south, Sima Rui, a member of the Royal Family, rebuilt the Jin dynasty in 317, it was known as the Eastern Jin

Dynasty in history. During that time, Buddhism had developed rapidly because of the belief and support of the supreme rulers of Eastern Jin Dynasty. It was also the period, when some notable monks such as Kumārajīva from trans-Himalaya region were traveling to China. These events also lead prajna study to become more popular during this period. While Chinese monks' enthusiasm for going west to seek dharma was also very high, among which Faxian and Zhimeng were representative. In 404 BC?, Zhimeng and another 15 of his contemporary were leading Buddhist monks in that period. They traveled enormous distance, surmounted many obstacles, and finally reached the hometown of Sakyamuni-Kapilavastu. They received the Sanskrit version of Six Fascicle Nirvana Sutra and Mahasangha-vinaya. Fayong, a Chinese monk, arrived in central India in 420 and returned by sea. He believed in Avalokiteshvara and translated the Assurance of future enlightenment of Avalokiteshvara Sutra.

C. Sui and Tang dynasties(581-907AD)

During the Sui and Tang dynasties, with the establishment of a unified state, Buddhism entered its heyday in China. During this period, the Buddhist communication between China and the trans-Himalaya region was manifested as the introduction of Esoteric Buddhism and the establishment of local sects. Founded in Sui dynasty, there were Tien-Tai Buddhism, Three Treatise School and Teaching of the Three Levels. In Tang dynasty, there were Hua-yen Buddhism, Yogo-care Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, Esoteric Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism.

Xuanzang (600-664) was an eminent monk in the Tang dynasty. He realized the lack of Buddhist sutra, so they began a pilgrimage to India to seek scriptures and to translate Buddhist Sutras. During the reign of Emperor Taizong, he took risks alone and traveled enormous distance over the desert regions. At last, he arrived in India and studied Buddhism there for seventeen years. He wrote the Great Tang Records on the Western Regions, which became an important document for the study of the history of ancient India and central Asia. "During the journey, he visited many sacred Buddhist sites which are now Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh. [2]" It also embarked a new chapter of friendly exchanges between China and India.

In 645, he returned to China with over six hundred Mahayana and Hinayana texts, seven statues of the Buddha and more than a hundred sarira relics. Taizong made several attempts to persuade Xuanzang to resume secular life, but he refused. He devoted his energy to translating Buddhist texts until his death in 664. "He is recognized with the translation of some 1,330 fascicles of scriptures into Chinese. His strongest personal interest in Buddhism was in the field of Yogācāra, or Consciousness-only. [3]" Xuanzang's translation represents the highest achievement in the history of Chinese sutra translation. As a representative work of Xuanzang's thought, the Discourse on the Theory of Consciousness-only is also the foundational treatise of Yogacara Buddhism. "Although the school itself did not thrive for a long time, its theories regarding perception, consciousness, Karma, rebirth, etc.

found their way into the doctrines of other more successful schools.” Confused by the Vinaya, another local monk, Yijing, set out from Guangzhou to India to seek scripture in 671 in the Tang dynasty. Unlike Xuanzang, Yijing arrived in India by sea. After his tours in the Deer Park, the Jetavana and other Buddhist sites, he went to Nalanda temple and studied Buddhism for ten years there. He traveled to more than 30 countries and returned to Luoyang with about 400 Sanskrit sutras and 300 sarira relics. When he returned to Luoyang, he was welcomed by Empress Wu Zetian and was conferred the title of “Tripitaka Master” [4]. The Buddhist scriptures he translated were mostly about Vianya. Yijing, Kumārajīva, Zhendi and Xuanzang, were the four great translators of sutras in China.

During the reign of Empress Wu Zetian in the Tang dynasty, Buddhism reached its peak. Wu Zetian once sent envoys to visit Yutian to ask for the 80 volumes of Flower Ornament Sutra in Sanskrit. Then the translator Sikshananda translated the sutra in Luoyang. Bodhiruci (southern Indian monk) came to Luoyang during the reign of Wu Zetian and completed the translation and compilation of the Sutra of the Heap of Jewels.

During the reign of Emperor Xuanzong, he himself annotated the diamond sutra and promulgated it together with Tao Te Ching and the Classic of Filial Piety. Besides, India’s Buddhist monks Śubhakarasiṃha, Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra-came to China one after another, and Xuanzong extended courtesy to them, which laid the foundation for the establishment and development of Esoteric Buddhism in China and had an impact on both Tibetan Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism. In the late Tang dynasty, Esoteric Buddhism declined and during the Song dynasty, it had a new renaissance. However, it lacked conditions for the development in the Han region. It was later introduced into Tibet and combined with the Bon. At this point, the long process of the introduction of foreign Buddhism into China gradually stopped. After centuries of translation, conversion and the creation of sects, China became one of the prominent centers for Buddhism in the world. Buddhism was introduced into Tibet during the Srongtsen Gampo period. During his reign, Tibet has successively united with Nepal and Tang dynasty through marriage. Princesses from both countries came into Tibet with Buddhist statues and classics and introduced Buddhism into Tibet.

D. Ming Dynasty(1368-1644AD)

Zhenghe’s traveling to the west were great sea voyages in the early Ming dynasty. His ships reached the western Pacific and Indian oceans. They reached as far as East Africa and the Red Sea. Zhenghe believed in Buddhism. He had received the Precepts of a Bodhisattva and was a disciple of Buddhism. In 1409, when Zhenghe went to the western seas for the second time, he gave gold and silver offerings to the National Buddhist Temple of Sri Lanka and set up a stone monument to remember the event, praising the merits of the Buddha and stating his wish to pray for the blessing of the Buddha [5].

It is worth noting that the Yunnan province of China borders on Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar and Thailand. As a result, Hinayana Buddhism is also spreading in some regions. In the 13th century, there were some Buddhist groups, towers, and temples in the Xishuangbanna area. Especially with the establishment of the Dai language, the sutra of Hinayana Buddhism officially entered the spread period [6].

E. The Republic of China (1912-1949AD)

During the period of the Republic of China, due to the international situation, Buddhist exchanges between China and the trans-Himalaya region was increasing day by day. In 1937, when the Chinese People’s War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression broke out entirely, Master Taixu organized an international Buddhist mission to Myanmar, India, Sri Lanka and other places to publicize China’s national policy of resisting Japanese aggression and saving the country and strive for support from these countries for China’s Anti-Japanese proposition.

Through his travels in these trans-Himalaya countries, he believed that although in Ceylon, Myanmar, and Thailand, Hinayana Buddhism was popular, people there actually practiced the Bodhisattva Path. Because monks there were able to civilize people and convert people to Buddhism and receive the five precepts-no killing, no stealing, no sexual misconduct/adultery, no lying, and no intoxicant. The concept of Buddhism was deeply rooted in people’s heart. In addition, they were able to do a wide range of social charity undertakings and engage in cultural and educational undertakings to benefit the country and society.

He believed that there were many reasons for the decline of Buddhism in China, and the biggest of which was the empty talk of Mahayana, the lack of emphasis on practice, and the separation of behavior from doctrines. He believed that Chinese Buddhism should practice the Bodhisattva Path.

F. Contemporary Era (1949-2018AD)

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Buddhist exchanges between China and the trans-Himalaya region have become more and more frequent, showing all round exchanges-from the official level to the personal level, and playing an irreplaceable role in promoting regional cooperation and stability.

From 1955 to 2012, the Buddhist Association of China successfully held four memorial services for Buddhist tooth relics in Myanmar, which has become a symbol of the traditional friendship between China and Myanmar. Jade from Myanmar is a precious material for carving jade Buddha statues. Many temples in China have jade Buddha statues donated by Myanmar.

In 2016, the first Summit Forum of Theravada Buddhism was held in Xishuangbanna. Monks and scholars from 12 countries including Sri Lanka, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal and the United States attended the meeting

and had an extensive discussion, which was an important starting point for China's Theravada Buddhism.

On May 10, 2017, senior monk Yinshun led a delegation to send the elder Benghuan's Sarira to Sri Lanka for permanent worship, which not only promoted cultural exchanges between China and south Asian countries. Before this, the elder's Sarira has gone to Thailand, Cambodia, Nepal, Australia for permanent worship. Over the years, Hongfa temple has maintained cooperation with Sri Lanka Buddhist circles in fields such as Buddhist education, Buddhist cultural exchanges and civic charity.

On May 16, 2018, director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs Wang Zuoan met with Sri Lanka minister of Buddhism Ministry Pereira, during which Wang proposed that the Chinese Buddhist community should strengthen exchanges and cooperation with Sri Lanka's Buddhist community so as to enhance mutual learning and friendship between the two countries and promote understanding and friendship between the citizens of both countries.

III. CONCLUSION

By analyzing various academic materials and internet resources, the paper explains that the Buddhism exchanges between China and the Himalaya countries have taken more than a thousand years. During which the countries have constructed a deep and robust Buddhism connection, thereby promoting trade cooperation, political exchanges, cultural ties, and peace and prosperity in the trans-Himalaya region. The old Silk Road, which connects China, South East, South Asia, Central Asia, Middle East, and Europe is the strong evidence of such interactions.

When Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013, he proposed the silk road economic belt and the 21st-century maritime silk road, known as "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). The new Silk Road is not only a road of trade and investment but also a road of cultural and religious exchanges. In other words, people to people exchanges in the trans-Himalaya region is the key element of the BRI, through which the cultural ties would be further deepened, and the economic relations, as well as political trust, would also be promoted. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that the Buddhism exchanges between China and the Himalaya countries would get a stronger momentum under BRI.

Given this, I attempt to give several useful suggestions in order to facilitate the Buddhism exchanges in trans-Himalaya region. First of all, both countries could make further efforts to excavate Buddhist relics and sort out Buddhist spiritual

resources on the Silk Road, and deeply explore the history and representatives of Buddhist exchanges between China and countries in the trans-Himalaya region.

Second, promoting the communication between Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada continuously on the basis of seeking common ground while reserving differences. It should be noted that there is a complete Vinaya inheritance and meditative concentration system in the countries such as Sri Lanka and Thailand, which could be used by the Himalaya countries to expand cooperation. Countries in trans-Himalaya region should also discard the factional views and absorb the essence of all Buddhist traditions with an open mind.

Third, to encourage and support educational cooperation between China and Buddhist universities and colleges in trans-Himalaya countries through expanding the friendly exchanges between youth students and scholars. Strengthening education exchanges and cooperation between Buddhist colleges of China, South Asia and Southeast Asia nations, so as to improve the international exchange level of Chinese Buddhist monks. Cultivating high-level talents and monks in order to make deep academic communication in the trans-Himalaya region.

Finally, China could provide necessary assistance such as funding and technology, to support the Buddhism exchange programs, mainly through establishing Buddhism exchange institutions at universities or other government agencies, and regularly holding Buddhist summit and conference in trans-Himalaya countries.

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