



The Dissemination and Development of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment and Its Commentaries in East Asia

Jianing Han ^[710127]

School of Philosophy, Northwest University, Xuefu Avenue, Guodu Street, Chang'an District, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, China

Email: 18698150199@163.com

Abstract. As a significant Mahayana Buddhist scripture formed in China in the early 8th century, the dissemination and reception of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment profoundly reflect the diverse pathways of Buddhist cultural exchange and localisation in East Asia. Employing primarily textual analysis, comparative research and historical investigation, this paper systematically traces the dissemination trajectories and regional variations of this Buddhist scripture and its commentaries across multiple regions of East Asia. This dissemination process not only illustrates the multiple dimensions of textual reception within Buddhism but also reveals the cultural agency and adaptive innovations demonstrated by various regions in East Asia during the assimilation of Chinese Buddhism.

Keywords: Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment, East Asian Buddhism, regional dissemination.

1 Introduction

The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment focuses on the nature of perfect enlightenment and the practice methods of perfect integration. This Buddhist scripture exerted a wide-ranging influence during the Tang and Song dynasties; it was not only a key text eagerly interpreted by major Buddhist schools such as the Huayan, Tiantai and Chan, but also profoundly influenced the philosophical speculation of Song and Ming Neo-Confucianism. Like most Buddhist scriptures, the commentaries on this Buddhist scripture serve not only to elucidate and expand upon its content but also act as a medium for its dissemination; consequently, when discussing the transmission of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment itself, one cannot overlook the role played by these commentaries in its dissemination.

Research into the transmission and reception of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment has long been a significant topic in the history of Buddhism and the history of ideas; its transmission routes and interpretative evolution profoundly reflect the process of interaction among Han Chinese Buddhist schools and the transformation of Buddhist thought. Early scholarly research on it focused primarily on the authentication of its

textual authenticity. The Japanese scholar Ysuki, Ryohei (汤次了荣) was the first to systematically catalogue the history of its commentaries, thereby establishing a foundational research framework. Mochizuki, Shinko (望月信亨) and Yanagida, Seizan (柳田圣山), however, proposed that it was a Chinese work from the early 8th century, though they differed on the exact date of its composition: the former argued for 713–730AC, whilst the latter maintained it was written before 712AC. Subsequently, the focus of academic research shifted to the role played by this Buddhist text in the interaction between Buddhist schools. American scholar Peter N. Gregory analyzed the motivation behind Zongmi's promotion of it from the perspective of the internal development of Chan Buddhism, arguing that his intention was to reconstruct the significance of spiritual practice this Buddhist scripture. In recent years, research has placed greater emphasis on exploring the dissemination of it from the perspectives of cultural exchange and ritual practice. Xiaohuan Lü's study of the exchange between Jingyuan and Yitian reveals how the trans-maritime transmission of the Huayan, amidst Sino-Korean Buddhist interactions, contributed to the revival of the Huayan in the Song dynasty. Sheng Kai and Jianmin Hu, meanwhile, have analysed Zongmi's Works related to this Buddhist scripture in terms of its incorporation of Tiantai ritual practices and its nature as a guide to practice, emphasising its intention to transform doctrinal teachings into operational practices.

2 The Transmission Pathways of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment and Its Commentaries in East Asia

2.1 The Origins of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment's Dissemination: China in the Early 8th Century

The question of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment's provenance and authorship has been the subject of controversy since its first appearance, constituting a famous academic conundrum in the history of Chinese Buddhism. The prevailing view holds that this Buddhist scripture was translated by the monk Buddha-dharama (佛陀多罗) from the Kingdom of Gandhara (罽宾) in Northern India during the Tang dynasty. In the Kaiyuan Record of Buddhist Scriptures (开元释教录), the Tang scholar Zhisheng (智昇) recorded that the monk Buddha-dharama from Gandhara in Northern India translated this sutra at the White Horse Temple in Luoyang, though he did not specify the date of translation^[1]. Zongmi, the Fifth Patriarch of the Huayan School, in his Great Commentary on this Buddhist scripture, cited relevant commentaries by Masters Daoqian (道詮) and Jianzhi (坚志) to propose two different dates for the translation of this Buddhist scripture: the 8th day of the fourth month in the second year of the Changshou era (693) and the 15th day of the seventh month in the 21st year of the Zhenguan era (647). Overall, ancient Chinese scholars have not yet reached a consensus regarding the exact date of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment's translation, but there is widespread agreement that it was translated at the White Horse Temple in Luoyang by the monk Buddha-dharama from the Kingdom of Gandhara. Since modern times, and particularly in the 20th century, some scholars have argued that this Buddhist scripture is

not a text transmitted from India, but rather the work of a Chinese author. For instance, Lü Cheng (吕澂) maintained that it is a product of medieval China; Japanese scholars Mochizuki, Shinko and Yanagida, Seizan, on the other hand, maintain that this Buddhist scripture was composed in China in the early 8th century, though they differ on the exact date: the former proposes 713–730, whilst the latter suggests a date prior to 712.

Although no reliable conclusions can be drawn regarding the specific author and date of translation of this Buddhist scripture, the beginning of its dissemination can be fairly accurately pinpointed to early 8th-century China. The Catalogue of the Great Zhou's Compiled Canon (大周刊定众经目录) (compiled in the first year of Empress Wu Zetian's WansuiTongtian era, 695) does not include this Buddhist scripture, whereas the Kaiyuan Record of Buddhist Scriptures, completed in the 18th year of Emperor Xuanzong's Kaiyuan reign (730), included this Buddhist scripture for the first time. Consequently, regardless of the circumstances surrounding its circulation and translation in the 7th century, the point at which this Buddhist scripture began to exert significant influence within Chinese Buddhism should be dated to the early 8th century. The further expansion of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment's influence is reflected in the development of its commentaries and exegeses, a process in which Guifeng Zongmi, the Fifth Patriarch of the Huayan School, played a pivotal role. Zongmi's significant contributions to the commentary on this Buddhist scripture lay, on the one hand, in establishing an interpretative system for the sutra based on his series of related works, thereby gradually making this Buddhist scripture an indispensable scripture for the Huayan School and indeed for Chinese Buddhism as a whole; on the other hand, his commentary spread alongside the sutra itself throughout East Asia, becoming a vital medium for its dissemination.

2.2 The Dissemination of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment and Its Commentaries in China

The dissemination of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment and its commentaries within China exhibits regional characteristics; geographically, it can be divided into two main regions: the Northwest and the Southwest.

The dissemination of this Buddhist scripture in the north-western region was primarily characterised by cross-ethnic translation and cultural interaction. The extant fragments of this Buddhist text found in the Dunhuang manuscripts are primarily B3024 and S4644, both of which are Tang dynasty manuscripts. The dissemination of this Buddhist scripture in the north-western region during the Liao, Song, Western Xia, Jin and Yuan periods was primarily manifested in Western Xia and Uyghur translations of this Buddhist scripture and related works. The British Museum's collection of Western Xia texts from Black Water City contains a Western Xia printed edition of this Buddhist scripture and fragments of its chapter headings^[2]. Although the extant fragments are too fragmentary to identify the specific version, it can be confirmed that the Western Xia undertook systematic translation and dissemination of this Buddhist scripture. Furthermore, the layout of the Western Xia translation of this Buddhist scripture, which

places the section headings side-by-side with the main text, bears a striking resemblance to that of the Song dynasty edition, indicating a clear degree of exchange between them. In the Western Xia region, not only was the Western Xia version of this Buddhist scripture in circulation, but there were also Chinese-language commentaries and explanatory works related to this sutra. Beyond the Western Xia region, this Buddhist scripture also exerted a certain influence on the Uighurs; fragments of Uighur translations of this Buddhist scripture have been unearthed at Dunhuang and are preserved in China, Japan and Sweden; fragments of Uighur manuscripts of this Buddhist text unearthed at Turfan are preserved in Germany. According to research by scholars specialising in Uighur texts, there are at least two manuscript versions of the commentary on this Buddhist scripture with differing texts. The manuscripts held by the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm and the Chinese Academy of Cultural Heritage are identical, whilst those held by Ryukoku University in Japan and the Dunhuang Academy are also identical; furthermore, the Uighur text in these manuscripts was translated from Chinese^[3]. Domestic scholars believe that the Uighur commentary on this Buddhist scripture can be definitively linked to the works of Zongmi, though the specific source text remains unconfirmed^[4]. Tieshan Zhang speculates that the Uighur annotated version of this Buddhist scripture was translated during the Tang and Song dynasties, whilst the surviving fragment was likely copied during the Yuan dynasty^[5].

The transmission of this Buddhist scripture in the south-western region was particularly significant during the Tang and Song dynasties. According to the *Biographies of Eminent Monks of the Song Dynasty* (宋高僧传), the south-western region had by then become a major centre for the preaching and exposition of this sutra^[6]. The dissemination of this Buddhist scripture in the south-western region was not only reflected in the study and recitation of the text, but was also deeply integrated into local artistic practice, manifesting primarily in two traditions: stone carvings and temple murals. Outstanding examples include the Huayan Cave in Anyue, Sichuan, founded at the turn of the Song dynasties, and the Baoding Round Wisdom Cave in Dazu, carved during the Southern Song dynasty. The tradition of temple murals related to this Buddhist scripture reached its zenith during the Ming Dynasty; for instance, murals depicting the Twelve Bodhisattvas of Perfect Enlightenment, based on the content of this Buddhist scripture, are still preserved today in the Central Hall of Longju Temple in Guanghan, the Vimalakirti Hall of Guanyin Temple in Xinjin, and the Great Hero Hall of Baoen Temple in Pingwu.

2.3 The Spread of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment in Korea and Japan

Although it is difficult to determine the exact date on which this Buddhist scripture was introduced to the Korean Peninsula, existing historical records suggest that this occurred no later than the Silla period. During this period, Korean Buddhism was actively absorbing Chinese Buddhist scriptures, and the sutra was introduced as part of this process. The Silla monk Hwe-gu (惠居) (899–944) explicitly mentions the teaching of this Buddhist scripture in his writings, providing early evidence of the sutra's circulation in Korea. With the advent of the Goryeo Dynasty, the vigorous development of Buddhist

doctrinal studies and increasingly close exchanges with China led to the study and propagation of this Buddhist scripture in Korea becoming more systematic and in-depth. Another important Buddhist text from the Goryeo period—Newly Compiled General Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures—includes a large number of Buddhist works by Chinese monks. It explicitly records that commentaries on this Buddhist scripture written by Chinese monks such as Jianzhi, Jingyuan, Dage, Desu, Fayan, Shancong, Zhongxi and Daolin were introduced to Korea. The transmission of these commentaries to the East greatly enriched the understanding and interpretation of this Buddhist scripture within Korean Buddhism. It is worth noting that the majority of these commentaries were authored by monks of the Song dynasty, reflecting the penetration and shaping of Goryeo Buddhism by Song Buddhist thought, particularly the trend of integration between the Hua Yen and Chan schools. By the reign of King Sejo of Joseon, the court organised the publication of a Korean translation of this Buddhist text—known as the New Translation of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment—to meet the needs of propagating the Dharma. In the thirteenth year of King Sejo's reign (1467), the Joseon royal court completed the construction of Wonhyo Temple and a thirteen-storey stone pagoda within the temple grounds, specifically enshrining the New Translation of this Buddhist text within the pagoda. This act not only elevated a specific scripture to a lofty status representing the entirety of Buddhist doctrine, but also fully demonstrated the central position of this Buddhist scripture within the state Buddhist system of Joseon. Furthermore, the vast collection of extant literature related to this Buddhist scripture on the Korean Peninsula serves as concrete evidence of its far-reaching influence. According to statistics, there are as many as 141 works, commentaries and printed editions relating to this Buddhist scripture from successive dynasties in Korea, of which 89 have clear publication records, forming a vast interpretative system^[7].

The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment had already been transmitted to Japan during the Tang dynasty. From the perspective of religious practice and temple construction, devotion to this Buddhist scripture more directly facilitated the establishment of the Japanese Enkaku-ji temple system, whose temple names, organisational structures and religious practices all trace their origins to the tradition of Enkaku faith in south-eastern China. For instance, the Southern Song Dynasty's Enkaku-ji in Lin'an, founded in the third year of the Jingding era (1262), was originally established by the monk Ruzhao of Lingyin Temple, who built a hermitage at Liuxi. It was named after this Buddhist scripture, which was regularly recited there, and later developed into a Zen monastery of considerable scale. This model of religious practice was transmitted eastwards to Japan, directly influencing the establishment of the Enkaku-ji temples in Hakata and Kamakura. The number of Japanese texts related to this Buddhist scripture is slightly smaller than that of Korea. According to Ysuki, Ryohei statistics, there are 13 widely circulated Japanese commentaries on this Buddhist scripture, the majority of which were compiled during the Tokugawa period (1603-1868)^[8]; consequently, the Tokugawa period should be regarded as the golden age of this Buddhist scripture in Japan.

3 Conclusion: The Cultural Adaptability of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment in its Dissemination across East Asia

As a major Mahayana Buddhist scripture, the dissemination and reception of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment across East Asia exhibit marked regional variations. These differences not only reflect distinct interpretative preferences for Buddhist scriptures across different cultural regions but also illustrate the diverse pathways of Buddhist localisation. From the Western Xia and Uighur regions to the Song, and further to Korea and Japan, the methods of transmission, traditions of commentary, and forms of religious practice each have their own distinct emphases. Overall, the dissemination of this Buddhist scripture in East Asia can be divided into two major patterns: in regions such as the Western Xia and the Uighur territories, the emphasis was on ritual practice and the practical adaptation of the text, with religious practice and communal asceticism becoming the primary forms through which the sutra survived; whereas in the Song, Korea and Japan, greater emphasis was placed on doctrinal exegesis and sectarian construction, with the interpretations of the sutra by individual scholars or sectarian groups becoming the main driving force behind its dissemination.

The dissemination of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment across East Asia represents not merely the history of a single Buddhist text, but a process of cultural adaptation that profoundly illustrates the localisation, regionalisation and functional transformation of Buddhism. A review of the dissemination pathways of this Buddhist scripture reveals that it was not a linear diffusion following a single direction or model, but rather took the form of a cultural network characterised by multiple parallel strands and mutual influence. Within China, its dissemination exhibited distinct regional variations: the north-western regions emphasised ritual practice and the practical application of the text; the south-western regions integrated artistic expression with local beliefs; whilst the south-eastern regions became key areas for doctrinal exegesis and the revival of sects. These differences stem from the historical foundations of Buddhism's development in each region, and are also closely linked to political structures, ethnic relations, and channels of cultural exchange. As multi-ethnic regimes, the Western Xia and the Uighurs undertook systematic translation of Buddhist scriptures and integration of rituals at an earlier stage, reflecting the frontier Buddhism's emphasis on practice and integration. Meanwhile, the south-eastern region during the Song dynasty, owing to its economic prosperity, the development of printing technology, and its port advantages, became the core area for the revival of Buddhist doctrinal studies and its outward influence. Zongmi's commentary on this Buddhist scripture exerted a profound influence as a theoretical framework across all regions where it was disseminated; the text itself underwent a functional transformation during this process. In the north-western regions, Zongmi's texts were abridged and excerpted, becoming practical guides for religious rituals; in Korea, his works were regarded as the authoritative source of orthodox Huayan doctrine, entering the national canon and monastic education; in Japan, Zongmi's commentary evolved from being fully accepted to being critiqued and transcended, becoming the starting point for stimulating indigenous interpretations. These

variations are the finest illustration of the regional reconfiguration of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment. Since it began to exert a widespread influence in China in the early 8th century, this scripture gradually transcended geographical, linguistic and sectarian boundaries, penetrating diverse cultural regions such as Western Xia, the Uighurs, Korea and Japan, and developing distinctive modes of reception and interpretative traditions in each of these regions. This process of dissemination not only highlights the high degree of flexibility possessed by Buddhism as a cross-cultural religious system, but also provides a crucial perspective for understanding the unity and diversity of East Asian Buddhism.

References

1. Tang, Zhi Sheng, Record of Buddhism in the Kaiyuan Era, Vol. 9, The Taishō Revised Tripiṭaka (大正新修大藏经), Vol. 55, p. 565
2. Or.12380-2294RV(K.K.II.0282.ddd);Or.12380-2764RV(K.K.II.0277.ff)and Or.12380-2762 (K.K.II.0254.n)
3. Peter,Zieme:Some Notes On Old Uigur Translations Of Buddhist Commentaries, Annual Report of the Institute of Advanced Buddhist Studies, Soka University, 2012, 147-160
4. Aydar Mirkamali, Ge Zhang.A Study of Two Fragments of Uighur Commentaries on the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment in the Collection of the National Library of China. Studies in Religious Studies, 2022, (01): 183-189.
5. Tieshan Zhang , Peter Ziemer. A Study of Fragments of a Uighur Commentary on the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment in the Collection of the Dunhuang Academy. Dunhuang Studies, 2015, (02): 97-101.
6. Song, Zanning, Biographies of Eminent Monks of the Song Dynasty, Vol. 2, Chapter 1, The Taishō Revised Tripiṭaka, Vol. 50, p. 717
7. Korea, Kim Mi-kyung.A Study on the Characteristics of the Bibliography of the Edition System of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment,Studies in Bibliography, Vol. 46, 2010, p. 331
8. Japan:Ysuki, Ryohei.A Study of the Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment, Modern Buddhist Studies, Vol. 91,267–268(2005)

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

