

Xuanzang's Theory "Transliteration for Five Occasions" In Religious and Cultural Loanwords Translation

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Abstract

Monk Xuanzang, a great translator in the Tang Dynasty in China, once put forward the famous Buddhist sutra translation theory of "transliteration for five occasions", that is, transliteration for mystery, for polysemy, for non-existence, for following the past and for respect. This article explains the connotation and limits of this theory, and comprehensively reveals its guiding role in the translation of religious and cultural loanwords as well as the important role in promoting the development of Chinese translation theory.

Keywords— Xuanzang, transliteration for five occasions, religious and cultural loanwords, application, amendment.

I. INTRODUCTION

Monk Xuanzang was a famous translator of Buddhist scriptures in the Tang Dynasty. He is one of the four great translators of Buddhist scriptures. His translation of the sutras is called a new translation by Buddhist historians, which means that he opened up a new style in the history of sutra translation. He put forward the famous theory of sutra translation—"transliteration for five occasions", which was followed by many translators. This is why a large number of words, such as "bodhi", "samadhi", "lohan", "bodhisattva", "rakshasa", "shayana", "yoga" etc, have appeared and widely circulated in Chinese vocabulary. Xuanzang's theory has positive significance for the translation of those Sanskrit languages that cannot properly retain their forms in Chinese, and to preserve the meaning of the source language to the maximum extent. Today, this theory still has an important guiding role in the practice of religious and cultural loanwords translation.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

With regard to Xuanzang's "transliteration for five occasions" theory, Xu Liping's (2008:36) "Analysis of

Xuanzan's "Transliteration for Five Occasions"" takes Xuanzang's translation as an example to reinterpret his theory and analyze its historical background, verify how Xuanzang followed or violated the "transliteration for five occasions" theory in his translation, and explore the enlightenment significance of the theory in the context of globalization. He Zizhang's(2018: 151) "The Practical Significance of Xuanzang's "Transliteration for Five Occasions", which introduces the role of the principle founded by Xuanzang in today's English-Chinese translation. Wang Qing's (2012: 65) "On the Role of Transliteration from Xuanzang's "Transliteration for Five Occasions" believes that untranslatability is inevitable in the process of translation due to language and cultural differences. The transliteration method under the guidance of this theory is a good way to eliminate untranslatability.

In terms of the application of the "transliteration for five occasions" theory, Ren Rongzheng(2012: 90), based on interpreting and analyzing this theory, discusses the principles of transliteration in Chinese-English translation of Chinese medicine. Zang Hongbao and Wei Hongjun(2013: 34) make an analysis of the "Xinjiang

Production and Construction Corps” and its related terminology based on the Xuanzang’s theory, and several possible ways of translating the term under this theory are discussed. A field study of Xuanzang’s translation and its enlightenment to the English translation of agricultural classics by Sun Hailin(2016: 178), which is believed that contemporary people can follow the example of ancient Buddhist Scripture translators, communicating with each other, and jointly complete the translation of agricultural classics. The innovation and modern significance of Xuanzang’s terminology translation by Shi Xiaomei and Lu Xiaohong(2013: 19) believe that the translation of Buddhist scriptures in the Tang Dynasty has reached maturity, but Xuanzang boldly put forward new principles and methods of terminology translation, which is still of guiding significance not only for that time but also for the modern translation.

III. CONNOTATION AND APPLICATION OF “TRANSLITERATION FOR FIVE OCCASIONS” IN RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL LOANWORDS TRANSLATION

The earliest record of Xuanzang’s “transliteration for five occasions” is in the *Preface to the Translation of the Name* compiled by Zhou Dunyi, which was written in the 27th year of the Song Dynasty (1157) and is still preserved in the *Great Tibetan Scriptures* today. Xuanzang explained transliteration in five occasions: transliteration for mystery, for polysemy, for non-existence, for following the past and for respect. (*Great Tibetan Scriptures*, vol. 54: 1057) Xuanzang’s so-called non-translation is the use of transliteration. This fully reflects the essence of the translation, dialectically and dynamically clarifying the characteristics of translation activities, so that the translation work can play a significant role in respecting the subjectivity of foreign cultures and maintaining the elegant and dignified style of Buddhist texts.

3.1 Transliteration for Mystery

“陀罗尼(Toroni)” is the transliteration of the Sanskrit Dhāraṇī. Dhāraṇī in Buddhism refers to the mantra, and in Chinese means “secret language” or “simple speech symbols”, which is the secret language of Buddha, Bodhisattva, and the heavens. Buddhism advocates the recitation of Dhāraṇī regularly, believing that it has some

mysterious power to help the devout chanters to get rid of disasters, destroy evil spells, eliminate evil spirits, and gain peace in life. *The Dhammapada* says that “Dhāraṇī” can hold good dharma and shield evil thoughts, so it should always be held in the mind.

“Transliteration for mystery”, such as transliteration of “Dhāraṇī” does not mean that the statements of “Dhāraṇī” are not literal or obscure; on the contrary, the statements of “Dhāraṇī” are very simple and easy to understand. For example, the first line of the *Mahabharata* is “Namo. Do-lo-lo-ye. Namo. The first line of the *Great Compassion Mantra* is “Jie Shri, Jie Shri, Polo Jie Shri, Polo Sang Jie Shri, Bodhisattva Sahaabha”, which can be translated as “Go! Go! Go to the other shore! Let us all go to the other shore! May the Dharma of righteousness be fulfilled.” This translation seems to be correct from the literal meaning of the Sanskrit, but this sentence of “Dhāraṇī” has always been considered to reflect the true essence of the doctrine of Prajñā Sūtra, and such a translation is meaningless. Another example, “Amida Buddha” is the transliteration of Sanskrit “Am itabha Buddha”, which refers to the largest Buddha in the Western bliss world, and can be translated as “longevity Buddha”. However, the Buddha’s name is still “Amida Buddha” rather than “longevity Buddha” when Buddhist believers express their prayers or thanks. Xuanzang did not translate this kind of dharani, such as “Om Mani Padme Hum”. But these six words are meaningful, which can be translated into “Oh! Buddhism symbolizes the jewel in the lotus flower!” Transliteration means the original meaning of the Buddha can be kept. For many Buddhist believers who do not know the meaning of the translation will not think about the literal meaning of the text, and will focus on the process of correspondence with the Buddha when chanting. In this way, the mystery, dignity and elegance of the Buddhist language are maintained. Over time, this kind of Dhāraṇī has been passed down from generation to generation. The mysterious power it represents, with a strong psychological deterrent effect, has long penetrated into people’s ideas, and has produced a wide range of religious influence. Today, there are still examples of such “secrets” in religions around the world. For example, in the shaman sect that has lasted for thousands of years, the mage with the highest generation is extremely noble. He can get the

true biography of the image of the previous generation and dictate the scriptures of Shaman's exorcism and exorcism. Only the Dhārani (scripture) read out in the ancient Manchu can exorcise ghosts and evil. This custom has been verified in many sects in the world, such as Indian Buddhism and Islam. It is generally believed in religious circles that only when the mantra is recited in the national language can it be effective.

Therefore, when we deal with things and words with strong mystery in ethnic, religious and local languages, it is best to take into account their special cultural origin, historical inheritance, psychological role and other factors, and appropriately adopt the transliteration strategy proposed by Xuanzang, that is, using transliteration to maintain their original mystery.

3.2 Transliteration for Polysemy

"Transliteration for polysemy" means that when a word or a special term in a Buddhist Scripture has multiple meanings, transliteration is directly adopted in order to prevent the loss of meaning. For example, "Bhagavad" is transliterated from the Sanskrit Bhagavat, which contains six meanings: freedom, prosperity, integrity, name, auspiciousness and dignity. The lack of any of these six meanings can't fully express the connotation of "Bhagavad". The Buddhist Scripture says that "the six meanings are complete, so it is named Bhagavad". Therefore, it can only be transliterated, for one cannot choose a certain interpretation and give up the other meanings.

In today's translation practice, this method can also be used to deal with some words with more meanings. For example, "Yin and Yang" has been translated as female and male, negative and positive, and even woman and man. These translation methods are literal, and have been eliminated. The symbols of Yang and Yin in the book of *Zhou Yi* are very broad in scope. They can respectively symbolize "all opposite objects in nature or human society, such as heaven and earth, men and women, day and night, heat and cool, up and down, victory and defeat, monarchs and officials, husband and wife, and even the concepts of Yang electricity and Yin electricity, positive number and negative number in modern science" (Huang Shouqi and Zhang Shanwen, 1989:38). The transliteration of Yin and Yang covers all meanings, which is the unique semantic

coverage of transliterated words (Yue Feng, 2018:54). This transliteration form is widely accepted and has been included in *Webster's Third International Dictionary*.

In the translation of Chinese ancient books, it is common to translate the "道(Dao)" in Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* into "way", which is actually a serious mistranslation. Because "道" here is not the "road". In Chinese traditional culture, "道" has four meanings, namely process, origin, law and regulation. Only one meaning can be found by free translation, and the other meanings cannot be reflected. It should be transliterated as "Tao". Now this translation method has been widely accepted. The translation of the abstract concept of Chinese Qi also follows the principle of "Transliteration for polysemy". Because "Qi" has a variety of meanings, such as breath when breathing, pulse in traditional Chinese medicine, mental state, self-cultivation, etc, which can refer to both tangible and intangible "Qi". If it is translated as vital energy, it will make people feel that the concept is unclear and the semantic meaning is unclear. It is better to transliterate it as "Qi". With the increasingly exchanges between China and foreign countries, many foreigners have a special preference for things with Chinese characteristics, of which Kung Fu is the representative. "Kung Fu" was once translated as "martial art", which has caused misunderstandings for many foreigners. This translation only reflects the meaning of fighting, but does not translate the key meanings of time-consuming, labor-consuming and energy keeping. Therefore, the transliteration of "Gongfu" or "Kungfu" can better reflect its original meaning.

3.3 Transliteration for Non-existence

"Transliteration for non-existence" means that the thing in the source language does not exist in the target language. In this case, transliteration is adopted. Translation is the conversion of one language into another language, which requires semantic equivalence. However, due to the great differences in race, region, history, religion, culture and customs, there will be situations where there will be no equivalent words when introducing something unique to a nation to another party, so transliteration method has to be used to create new words in the target language.

This translation method is common in the process of foreign words pouring into the China in recent thousands of years. For example, jambu-vrksa is only produced in

India, so it should retain the original sound. “Bing Lang(Betel nut)” is a transliteration of Indonesian “Pinang”. “Pu Tao(Grape)” is a transliteration of Dawan “badaga” in *Shiji Dawan Biography*, and “Mo Li(Jasmine)” is a transliteration of Sanskrit “Mallika”. In ancient times, “You Tan Bo Hua(Epiphyllum)”, transliterated from the Sanskrit “Udumbara”. Later, due to the influence of Chinese disyllabic, the syllable of “You Tan Bo Hua” was compressed to “Tan Hua”. “Xi Gua (Watermelon)”, a common fruit today, was introduced into the China from Nuzhen, an ancient nationality in China in the Song Dynasty, and the name of watermelon is transliterated from its language “xeko”.

3.4 Transliteration for Following the Past

“Transliteration for following the past” refers to the original transliteration of words that have existed and widely spread before. For example, “阿耨多罗三藐三菩提(a ru duo luo san mao san pi ti)” is the transliteration of Sanskrit word “anuttarā samyak-sambodhim abhisambuddh”, which means supreme positive consciousness, being able to obtain omniscient wisdom. Since the Eastern Han Dynasty, transliteration has been used by translators in all dynasties, so Xuanzang also retained transliteration.

A typical example is “莫斯科 (Mo Si Ke)”, which is translated according to the pronunciation of English “Moscow”. According to the Russian pronunciation, it should be pronounced as “Mo Si Ke Wa”, but since the Chinese are used to the pronunciation of “Mo Si Ke”, they still follow the ancient times. Similar cases also include the translation of names, such as “孔夫子(Kong Fu Zi)” translated into “Confucius” and “孟夫子 (Meng Fu Zi)” translated into “Mencius”. The place name “澳门 (Ao Men)” is translated into “Macau”, “香港 (Xiang Gang)” is translated into “Hong Kong”, which are all derived from Cantonese dialects since the Qing Dynasty. Although these translated names are not translated according to the standard Chinese Pinyin, they have long been familiar and widely accepted at home and abroad because of their long-term use, so they will not be changed.

3.5 Transliteration for Respect

“Transliteration for respect” refers to the idea that some words can be respected by transliteration. For example, “Prajna” in Sanskrit means wisdom, but if we translate “Prajna” into “wisdom”, it will seem superficial. Nan

Huaijin (2005:27) once said, “Great wisdom is called Prajna. The so-called Prajna is not ordinary wisdom. It refers to the wisdom that can understand the “Tao”, realize the “Tao”, disregard one’s own life and become a saint. This is not ordinary wisdom, but the fundamental wisdom of “Tao”. This is not obtained by thought, but by the wisdom of the whole body and mind. This wisdom is “Prajna”. Therefore, the word “wisdom” cannot represent the whole meaning of “Prajna”. For example, the word “Bodhisattva” means being conscious and affectionate. It has also been translated into “great scholar” or “enlightened scholar”, which refers to a person with “Tao” (Nan Huaijin, 2001:52), but it has not been passed down in the end, because the free translation can’t compare with the mystery and sanctity of transliteration. The reason why Xuanzang put forward the idea of “transliteration for respect” is because when Buddhism was first introduced into China, it had not yet received the attention of the rulers and had not achieved a high status. At that time, most translators interpreted Buddhist terms based on the teachings of Taoism and Confucianism. This strategy was called “Geyi”, that is, using the concepts and terms in Chinese traditional culture and thought (such as *Lao Tzu*, *Zhuang Zi* and the *Analects of Confucius*) to match the concepts and terms in Buddhism. This is what we call domestication today. So much so that when Chen Shou, a historian of the Western Jin Dynasty, wrote the annals of the *Three Kingdoms*, he saw the words in Laozi’s *Tao Te Ching* in the Buddhist scriptures, and mistakenly thought that it was “Laozi’s going out of the customs in the west, crossing Tianzhu in the western regions, and teaching people to be a floating butcher”. Under this strategy, in the early stage of Buddhist scripture translation, “p̄r̄mit” was translated as “Tao”, “tathat” was translated as “nothing”, “prajn” was translated as “holy”, “sūnyat” was translated into “emptiness”, “Santi” was translated into “stillness” and “up̄ya” was translated as “nature” (Zhu Zhiyu, 2003:63). Xuanzang clearly opposed this translation, arguing that the word “Prajna” seems solemn and the free translation of “wisdom” would be superficial. If “Sakyamuni” is translated as “wise people”, its status seems to be inferior to that of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius in China. (Chen Fukang, 2000: 121)

In today’s translation of cultural loanwords, “transliteration

for respect” still plays an important guiding role. For example, “推拿” is now transliterated as “Tuina”, which was previously translated as “massage”. It is not only easy to confuse the concept, but also devalues this therapy and reduces its lofty position in traditional Chinese medicine. Many people believe that “风水 (Feng Shui)” belongs to Geomagnetic Field and human relations. Although “Feng Shui” involves many disciplines, such as geophysics, hydrogeology, astrology, meteorology, environmental landscape, architecture, ecology and human life informatics, it is not only an art of choosing good fortune and avoiding bad luck, but also has become a traditional cultural phenomenon and a widely spread folk custom. Rashly interpreting “Feng Shui” as a specific natural discipline will not reflect the historical and cultural connotations it carries, and it also violates the principle of “transliteration for respect”. The Sanskrit for “袈裟 (Jia Sha)” is Kasāka. In Buddhism, the word “kasāka” is used to refer to the gowns that are wrapped around the body of a monk. The cassock is the most important clothing of monks, which can accumulate “Ten benefits and virtues”, which has been respected by the Buddhist since ancient times. If it is translated as gown won by monk, it is equivalent to ordinary clothes, which lowers its status, so it is transliterated as “Jia Sha”.

IV. THE AMENDMENT OF “TRANSLITERATION FOR FIVE OCCASIONS”

It has been more than a thousand years since master Xuanzang put forward the theory of “transliteration for five occasions”, during which great changes have taken place in the translation strategy of transliteration. In terms of transliteration methods, they are more diverse, from the traditional simple transliteration, such as “coffee” and “sofa”, to the coexistence of multiple transliteration strategies, including homophonic transliteration (Li Zhenzhong, 2001:50). In the past 1000 years, among the 794 transliterated words from Sanskrit, only 50 words, such as “Brahma”, “Buddha”, “Bodhisattva”, “arhat”, “Nanwu”, “Amitabha”, “Maitreya”, are still used, accounting for only 1/16 of the original words.

Words from other Sanskrit sources are either basically converted to free translation, or only retained in the Buddhist monk and nun community, which are largely

ineffective for the whole society and language system (Shi Youwei, 2003: 187). Most of the transliterated words borrowed from English in the late Qing Dynasty and the May Fourth Movement were eliminated and replaced by free translation words in line with the characteristics of Chinese word formation. Some transliterated words have changed from three syllables and multi syllables to today’s two syllables or single syllables over a long period of time. Some transliterated words have not been eliminated or reduced, but have become common words in Chinese, such as “humor”, “logic”, “Utopia”, “chocolate”, “guitar”, “brandy”, “jacket”, etc. In terms of word length, transliterated words that still have vitality basically belong to words with relatively short syllables, such as monosyllabic, disyllabic or trisyllabic. This is in line with the characteristics of word formation in modern Chinese and the cognitive psychology of Chinese community. Generally speaking, in ancient Chinese, monosyllabic words are dominant, while in modern Chinese, disyllabic words account for the majority and trisyllabic words are less. There are fewer words with more than four syllables, because the more syllables there are, the looser the internal structure is, and the easier it is to be separated, the separated components can be used as independent words. From the view of word selection, the words that can be retained basically follow the principle of “following the master’s name”, that is, they are not only close to the pronunciation of the original text, but also can more scientifically reflect the original phonetic, and conform to the meaning.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, if Xuanzang’s theory of “transliteration for five occasions” wants to be better used and developed today, it should follow the following two conditions: first, the words that are more than three or four syllables, with loose structure and easy to be separated, it is not recommended to use transliteration; second, the words can’t reflect the characteristics and nature of the things itself, easy to produce ambiguity, it is not recommended to use transliteration.

During the period of cultural exchange between China and the west, we reviewed “transliteration for five occasions” proposed by Xuanzang in the translation of Buddhist

scriptures. Understanding the conditions of application of this translation theory today can better guide the translation practice of religious and cultural loanwords, and enable us to dialectically treat the local translation theory that has been popular in China for thousands of years. This is of great benefit for us to engage in translation work, which can promote the continuous improvement and development of Chinese translation theory represented by Xuanzang.

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