

Theorizing Buddhist Scripture Translation as an Act of Giving: a Buddhist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Buddhist scripture translation, the first of the three large-scale translation activities in China, enhanced the propagation of Buddhist doctrine in East Asia and the development of Chinese literature in the first millennium. It was different from other forms of translation activities due to its religious nature. Sometimes it was even considered by Buddhists to be an act of charity, rather than a mere act of translation. It was also closely related to a wide range of Buddhist activities, such as chanting scriptures and holding lectures on the Dharma.

To study scripture translation in the social and historical context, my paper explores the potential offered by the “theory of giving (*dāna*)” in Buddhism. This paper first introduces the basic concepts of the theory, such as “donors”, “recipients”, and “gifts”. It then re-describes scripture translation using these terms. By defining sutra translation as an act of “giving”, it casts translators’ sponsors and teachers as “primary donors”, translators as “primary recipients” as well as “secondary donors”, target readers as “secondary recipients”, and both donors’ support and translated texts as “gifts”. The paper finally suggests ways in which the “theory of giving” can contribute to the studies on scripture translation by discussing Kumārajīva’s translation project in Chang’an in the early 5th century CE.

KEYWORDS: Buddhist scripture translation, History of translation, *dāna* (an act of giving) translation team, Kumārajīva