

Apocryphal Buddhist Sūtra in Chinese Buddhism

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Buddhism originated from India and the transmission of Buddhism to China is of a long arduous journey through land, circumnavigating the Sub-Indian Continent, travelling North West and entering China via the Silk Road¹. Since the *Han* dynasty (circa 100BCE), various sources have quoted the existence of the Buddha^{2, 3}. However, no scriptures for Buddhism have flourished and propagated at that time period. Although Buddhism may have existed, but only privy to a few aristocrats, and has been practiced alongside local beliefs such as Daoism. However, as time passes, trickling quantity of Buddhism have entered China, and slowly Buddhism flourished after the *Han* Dynasty. This coincided with the Northern *Wei* dynasty (386-534), when Buddhism was adopted as a state religion⁴. During that time, Buddhism is considered a foreign religion, and amidst various *sūtras* that have been brought into mainland China⁵, some *sūtras* have been authored and passed on as authentic Buddhism *sūtra*. Others are text and tales, which resonate with the local culture that is understandable and accepted, until it is commonly accepted as Buddhist text.

The Buddhist academics have borrowed⁶ the term “Apocrypha” to denote these *sūtras*, which were created or thought to be authored outside the original Indian Buddhist transmission.

To understand what is apocrypha, an academic approach is taken for its definition. In the book *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (Buswell), the editor has explained apocryphal text using the following:

¹ Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road*. (Montreal: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Ch. 3, p. 39-41. Explanation on the transmission with emphasis on Dharmaguptaka and Mahayana.

² Ibid, p. 49. “The first clear mention of Buddhism in a Chinese source is a reference in the *Hou Han shu* (Late Han History) to a Buddhist community at the court of the governor of Chu province that included some Chinese lay followers.”

³ Lewis Hodous, *Buddhism and Buddhist in China*. (United States: Shelba Blake Publishing, 2015), Ch. II, p. 9, “There is a tradition that as early as 142 B.C. Chang Ch'ien, an ambassador of the Chinese emperor, Wu Ti, visited the countries of central Asia, where he first learned about the new religion which was making such headway and reported concerning it to his master. A few years later the generals of Wu Ti captured a gold image of the Buddha which the emperor set up in his palace and worshiped, but he took no further steps. According to Chinese historian, Buddhism was officially recognized in China about 67 A.D. “

⁴ Jonathan Tucker, *The Silk Road - China and the Karakorum Highway*. (London: IB Tauris, 2015), Ch. 2, p. 53.

⁵ Ibid, p. 55.

⁶ Robert E Buswell Jr, *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 3.

“indigenous Buddhist text composed outside the Indian cultural sphere, but on the model of Indian or Serindian scripture. Such texts were sometimes written in association with a revelatory experience, but often were intentionally forged using false ascriptions as a literary device both to enhance their authority as well as to strengthen their chance of being accepted as canonical”

The editor also offered that such a view would put all *Mahāyāna*, *Śrāvakayāna* and *Vajrayāna* scriptures as apocrypha⁷. However, the editor further qualified that the Buddhist Scripture of verifiable origins (*Buddhavacana*), Inspired speech (*pratibha*) and *Abhidhamma* can be considered as Buddhist text, excluded as apocryphal text⁸.

This in the Chinese Buddhism context, would include culturally inspired sutras, and writings which includes the syncretism of concept with local religions such as Daoism, will be classified as apocrypha, within the group of spurious *sūtras*.

All non-indic text, including those composed outside the original texts in *Prakrit / Pāli* is Apocryphal in nature. Chinese *sūtras* old translations (旧译) and new translations (新译) which have origins from *Sanskrit* into Chinese, would almost certain be simplistically classified as Apocryphal text⁹. For the purpose of analyzation within a Chinese context, apocryphal texts will be further divided into;

- Spurious *sūtras* (wéijīng) 伪经
- *Sūtras* of doubtful authenticity (yíjīng) 疑经

However, the origins of Chinese *sutras* from the context of ancient translation (古译) from *Prakrit* is considered to be an exception to this classification. A survey of *Sarvāstivāda*

⁷ Robert E Buswell Jr, *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 5, Although Buswell have not specifically classified Vajrayāna text as apocrypha, a deduction has been made to include it, as it has a much later historical origins taking development from Mahāyāna tradition.

⁸ Ibid, p. 6.

⁹ Edward B.Cowell, ed, *The Buddha-Carita, or Life of Buddha by Āśvaghoṣa*. (New Delhi, 1977, re-release 2005 online version), p.4 within this source, Cowell have clearly mentioned the Sanskrit origins of the Buddhacarita and the translation of the Buddhacarita into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in the fifth century. Although the translation from Sanskrit into Chinese was done, the Sutra have been accepted as a non-apocryphal nature, as it is an exception within the class of Sutras with verifiable origins. Cowell further discusses the convergence and discrepancy of the Tibetan, Chinese and original Sanskrit text (whereby spurious components are identified). The similarity in translations increases after Book I [Bhagavatprasūtiḥ] after para 25.

developments by Willemen, concludes that ancient translations are based on *Gāndhārī* oral and texts¹⁰, however there are no translation of *Prakrit / Pāli* into Chinese¹¹.

The definition presented in recent journal (Makita), defines books of doubtful authenticity as scriptures/text using the style of Buddhist scripture and passing off as a translated text, but without any actual source of translation, which cast doubt on its origin and authenticity¹². As for spurious *sūtras*, Makita further defines it as baseless folk and customs put together as a spurious *sūtra*¹³. It is also worth mentioning that during the early transmission, during the identification of spurious *sūtras* by Dao An (314-385 CE), transmission of sutras and teaching would require elaborate ritual and no changes were allowed even to the extent of adding or deleting a single word¹⁴.

A *Tang* Dynasty (618-907CE) Buddhist monk and academician, Zhi Sheng (ch. 智昇) who compiled one of the first index of apocrypha in 开元释教录, defines the spurious *sūtras* as;

“Spurious *sūtras* in the Chinese context are the creation of persons with evil views, producing these fake text to pass of as real text. 2000 years after the passing of the great teacher (Śākyamuni Buddha), various demonic religion will flourish and the true teaching will wane, there will be those that are stubborn and foolish, blinded with misguided views, create fake *sūtras*, traditions, which seems authentic and will continue without stop¹⁵.”

¹⁰ Charles Willemen, "Kumārajīva's "Explanatory Discourse about Abhidharmic Literature.". Journal of the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies 国际佛教学大学院大学研究纪要 XII (2008). p. 37. In the paper, the ancient translation was before the common use of Sanskrit, within the first century BC. “By the period where Indian original language changed to mainly Sanskrit, old translations brought a change in Chinese terminology from the time of Kumārajīva till Xuanzang.”

¹¹ *ibid*, p 67, The arguments are presented with the initial hypothesis presented by Mizuno Kogen, 1954. Further rationalization was presented by Nagai Makoto, 1933. Willemen has clarified points made by A Hirakawa and Mizuno Kogen, and further concluded that no Prakrit text were translated to Chinese.

¹² Makita Tairyō, 疑經研究-中國佛教中之真經與疑經, Hua-Kang Buddhist Journal, No4, (1980). p. 287. “經則是雖取佛陀金口說法的形式，但全無翻譯的事實，由表面看似乎是翻譯的，不過其事實頗為可疑的經典”

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 288. “有來自道教的符讖方術之類的，亦有根據民眾俗信的荒唐無稽的偽經”

¹⁴ Makita Tairyō, 疑經研究-中國佛教中之真經與疑經, Hua-Kang Buddhist Journal, No4, (1980). p. 289. “在外國自師父傳經，乃要求恭敬地跪下來接受口授，授予後學，亦一字一句不可加減，這樣不疏忽的嚴肅態度。”

¹⁵ 開元錄卷, CBETA T2154”偽經者邪見所造以亂真經者也。自大師(釋迦)韜影向二千年，魔教競興，正法衰損，自有頑愚之輩，惡見迷心，偽造諸經，誑惑流俗，邪言亂正，可不哀哉”

By looking at the approach and definition, Buswell's version generally would be the "safe route" classifying authenticated *sūtras*, and leave less room for interpretation, and inclusion of potential inspired text. This will also exclude text which may be in line with Buddhism but are written much later as commentaries and interpretive text. Other scholars recommend understanding the value of non-Indic origin *sūtras* and its value for Sinology¹⁶, syncretism with Daoism was not acceptable, as Daoism is considered a demonic religion¹⁷.

It is summarized that Makito takes a more neutral and academic standpoint. Zhi Sheng however does not consider the distinguishing factor of Indic origins, but rather the intent and the objective of the apocryphal text, which is to create mischief and confusion. As such, the classification of Zhi Sheng could lead to text which maybe created without evil intent admissible as part of the acceptable Buddhism *sūtras*.

Other scholars have attempted to classify the various reasons why apocryphal *sūtras* exists. The oldest source quoted (Buswell) was by Mochizuki Shinko (望月信亨 1869-1948) where there were 5 reasons¹⁸;

- Scriptures incorporating elements adopted from Daoism and popular religion
- Text teaching national protection (护国), which outlines the *Mahāyāna* precepts and/or *Bodhisattva-mārga*
- Text associated with Buddhist esotericism (specially on *Tathāgatagarbha* thought)
- Syncretistic (blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions)
- Sastra attributed to eminent Indian exegetes like Nagarjuna

Buswell also quoted that Makita Tairyō proposed a different scheme¹⁹;

¹⁶ Michel Strickmann, "Consecration Sutra: A Buddhist Book of Spells", within the compilation of essay in Robert E Buswell Jr, *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p 77.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 99. The justification and the use of the term "demonic religion of last age" is strictly used as a quote without biased.

¹⁸ Robert E Buswell Jr, *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), p. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid.

- Text supporting the views of ruling elites
- Writings criticizing policies of that ruling class
- Works attempting to synthesize or rank differing elements in Chinese tradition thoughts and religions
- Works advocating distinctive ideologies, such as *Tathāgatagarbha*
- Works that include in their title the name of a presumed living individual

Another relevant source is by Mizuno Kogen which proposes²⁰;

- Text relate Buddhism to traditional Chinese folk beliefs
- Text that reconcile Buddhism with the indigenous Taoist religion
- Revelatory scriptures through religion inspirations (including Tibetan *terma*)
- Text that attempted to adapt Buddhist doctrines to the indigenous needs of Chinese Buddhists.

In summary, any text not of Indic origin using Buswell’s definition would be considered an apocryphal *sūtra*. Although students of Buddhism may be able to clearly identify spurious *sūtras* quite easily, the propagation of such *sūtras* is still considered very common and accepted by society which are not exposed to formal Buddhist training and education. These are typically common in China and a large part of South East Asia with entrenched Chinese cultural influence on Buddhism, typically in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. To illustrate the concept of a spurious *sūtras*, a commonly available text *Yu-Li Bao Chao* is used as an example.

The *Yu-Li Bao Chao* (*YLBC*) was compiled in the *Ching* Dynasty period circa 1700, and compiled as a “folk tale” narrative during the *Ching* dynasty as a “journey” of a Buddhist through the *naraka* realm²¹, and is presented as a “record” of the conditions in *Naraka* and within its text include “core teachings” to be followed by its reader.

²⁰ Kogen Mizuno, "On the Pseudo-Fa-kiu-king." 印度學佛教學研究 9.1 (1961): 402-395, p. 402. Mizuno have used the term false/sham scripture, instead of the term spurious used within this ISR. Mizuno further proposes three criteria to “test the genuineness of Buddhist scriptures” as the fundamental principle of Buddhism.

²¹ This would use the same story structure as the popular novel, Journey to West, in Chinese literature.

Within the *YLBC* are major divergence to core Buddhist teaching, but have been entrenched within the Chinese culture, and until today is a major hindrance in propagating the true teaching of the Buddha. This includes;

- Simplified but deviated karmic system. Within *YLBC*, it is told that *Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva* (implying Buddha's teaching) introduced a "point" system with positive and negative merits are given and can be offset by doing good. This is simplified as,

Good merits give good results; bad merits give bad results. Do good to offset any bad one has done, and one ends up with a "net" good results. This is a major deviation from *Maha Kammavibhanga Sutta*²² which records the Buddha's explanation to *Ānanda*²³

- Action is judged by a "deity" which determines punishments within Naraka based on a court system. The *YLBC* promotes the 10 levels of *naraka*, each dominated by a "realm King", and each metes out punishment based on individual sins and "point scoring system. The Theravāda tradition teaches a single *naraka*²⁴. The *Dharmaguptaka* tradition describes 8 major Naraka and 16 minor Naraka²⁵. The *Abhidharmakośa*²⁶ also provides a description dividing the *naraka* into 8 hot and 8 cold *narakas*. All of these tradition teaches that these are fueled by karmic deeds.

²² M iii 270 Maha Kammavibhanga Sutta.

²³ Ibid. Note that the use of kamma instead of karma which is consistent with the source document use of the noun. "So, Ānanda, there is kamma that is incapable (of good result) and appears incapable (of good result); there is kamma that is incapable (of good result) and appears capable (of good result); there is kamma that is capable (of good result) and appears capable (of good result); there is kamma that is capable (of good result) and appears incapable (of good result)."

²⁴ M iii 178, Devaduta Sutta.

²⁵ Dīrgha Āgama, Cháng Āhán Qīng (佛說長阿含經卷第十九) 佛告比丘：「此四天下有八千天下圍遶其外。復有大海水周匝圍遶八千天下。復有大金剛山遶大海水。金剛山外復有第二大金剛山。二山中間窈窈冥冥。日月神天有大威力。不能以光照及於彼。彼有八大地獄。其一地獄有十六小地獄。第一大地獄名想。第二名黑繩。第三名堆壓。第四名叫喚。第五名大叫喚。第六名燒炙。第七名大燒炙。第八名無間。其想地獄有十六小獄。小獄縱廣五百由旬。第一小獄名曰黑沙。二名沸屎。三名五百丁。四名飢。五名渴。六名一銅釜。七名多銅釜。八名石磨。九名膿血。十名量火。十一名灰河。十二名鐵丸。十三名斫斧。十四名豺狼。十五名劍樹。十六名寒水。

²⁶ 阿毘達磨俱舍論卷第十一. 分別世品第三之四, CBETA T0029, [0058c23]. n.d.

熱捺落迦已說有八。復有餘八寒落迦。其八者何。一頹部陀。二尼刺部陀。三頹嘶吒。四臞臞婆。五虎虎婆。六喞鉢羅。七鉢特摩。八摩訶鉢特摩。

With the *YLBC* as an example, this spurious *sūtra* poses a major danger to the propagation of true Buddhist concepts, as they;

- i. Attempt to structure the writings to a format consistent with Buddhist *sūtra*, where the opening, word and sentence structure, translation authenticity.
- ii. Use proper Buddhist concept (*karma*, *naraka*) and syncretism to form a new concept
- iii. Passing the *sūtra* as an authentic Buddhist text
- iv. Attempt to create a new “cult” using Buddhism as a base for the presentation of its agenda. It has the components of trying to create a cult following, where there are principle characters, structure, reward-punishment system and using Buddhism to endorse its principles.

The *YLBC* have been authored and republished more than 300 years ago. The propagation of this *sūtra* has led to the common belief of good actions will lead to a definite good results (wrong view) is something sought by the masses as a “salvation” to their current state, hoping to achieve better financial, social or physical wellbeing. This is very serious misguidance, as it is not what the Buddha taught on the fundamental concept of *karma*!

Many have argued that if a text promotes good merit practices, it can be tolerated and should not be subjected to strict judgement (such as terming it as apocrypha and disregarding it). However, in order for the correct teaching of the Buddha to develop and benefit sentient beings, such apocryphal text must be identified and dispelled in a methodological manner. Buddhist of this age, are from a much educated background (where literacy rate has increased significantly in the last 100 years) and access to source documents over media, books and the internet are easier and more accessible. The number of research groups dedicated to apocryphal study is also growing, and with educational institution such as the International Buddhist College, the dispelling of text including the *YLBC* can be initiated to prevent further deviation from the true teaching of the Buddha. With the rapid development and the numerous aspiring Buddhist academicians/researchers, an authoritative council should be formed to identify, dispel and

clarify the various apocryphal text circulating to cultivate the right view and spread Buddhism in its correct form.

A potential development in the field of Apocrypha identification should be a classification system, to allow detailed grouping based on function, type and purpose of apocryphal text, which allow academician to further provide a ranking on the severity of an apocryphal text and whether appropriate remedial action such as public information should be acted on. This ultimately will minimize occultism based on Buddhism and reduce any misconception on the Buddhist community as a whole.

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