

The History of the *Heart Sutra* as a Palimpsest¹

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In this article, I consult commentarial and bibliographical texts from the early Tang dynasty to better understand the history of the *Heart Sutra*. As in a palimpsest, there appears to be another, earlier history partially preserved beneath the text of the received history. This early layer says that the *Heart Sutra* was composed in China, probably by Xuanzang. He combined a selection of popular extracts from the *Large Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* with a *dhāraṇī* to produce a “condensed sutra.” Even before the death of Xuanzang, this earlier history was being effaced and replaced by elements of the received history. It appears that both the Sanskrit text and the translation attributed to Kumārajīva were knowing forgeries produced to make the new history plausible.

Keywords: *Heart Sutra*, condensed sutras, *chao jing*, Chinese apocrypha, Kuiji, Woncheuk

INTRODUCTION

It was long taken for granted that the *Heart Sutra* is a sutra, that is, an Indian Buddhist discourse, composed in Sanskrit and transmitted to China, where it was translated into Chinese and popularized by Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664 CE). In this article, I will show that this received history has been superimposed over an existing history of the text, creating a kind of conceptual palimpsest. While that older history cannot be entirely recovered, we can see parts of the outline of it.

1. I'd like to thank Donald Lopez and Tanya Storch for generously replying to my emails. Thanks also to Jeffrey Kotyk for translating Japanese *Heart Sutra* scholarship and discussing it with me.

The first sign that there might be an alternative history of the *Heart Sutra* came when MATSUMOTO Tokumyo argued that the *Moheboreboluomidamingzhoujing* 摩訶般若波羅蜜大明呪經 (T. 250) could not be an earlier translation by Kumārajīva.² This theory was cited by Conze and taken up by WATANABE Shōgo, who referred to the *Damingzhoujing* as a “spurious scripture” (*gikyō* 偽經).³ The consensus view⁴ is that the attribution of the *Damingzhoujing* is apocryphal and that the text is probably later than the *Xinjing* (T. 251). With the *Damingzhoujing* discredited as an earlier translation, the earliest dated evidence for the *Heart Sutra* anywhere in the world is the stele from Fangshan, dated 13 March 661 CE.⁵ In 1987, FUKUI Fumimasa suggested that the *Heart Sutra* was not a sutra but a *dhāraṇī* composed for liturgical purposes, a view that was supported by Jan Nattier.⁶ Both Fukui and Watanabe wrote exclusively in Japanese, and as a result their articles have not been widely cited by English-speaking scholars.⁷

Nattier followed up with an elegant but deceptively simple comparative study that has so far been underrated and is often misunderstood. It is common knowledge that about half of the *Heart Sutra*—the so-called “core passage”—was copied from the *Large Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*.

2. MATSUMOTO Tokumyo, *Die Prajñāpāramitā Literatur* (Stuttgart: Rheinischen Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Bonn, 1932), 9.

3. Edward Conze, “Text, Sources, and Bibliography of the *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya*,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 80, no. 1–2 (April 1948): 38; WATANABE Shōgo, “An Introduction to the Theory on the Formation of the *Prajñā-hridaya-sūtra*,” *Journal of Buddhist Studies* 31 (July 1991): 41–86; Jpn. 般若心經成立論序説, 仏教学, 58.

4. Reviewed by Jan Nattier, “The *Heart Sūtra*: A Chinese Apocryphal Text?” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 15, no. 2 (1992): 184–189.

5. Jayarava Attwood, “Xuanzang’s Relationship to the *Heart Sutra* in Light of the Fangshan Stele,” *Journal of Chinese Buddhism* 32 (2019): 11.

6. FUKUI Fumimasa, “Hannya shingyō no kenkyūshi – genkon no mondaiten,” *Bukkyōgaku* 36 (1994): 79–99; see Nattier, “*Heart Sūtra*,” 175–176.

7. I do not read Japanese and thus I am largely reliant on Jan Nattier comments in “*Heart Sūtra*,” 153–223, and her unpublished essay, “Response to FUKUI Fumimasa, ‘Hannya shingyō no kenkyūshi – genkon no mondaiten’” (unpublished essay, 1995), 1–10, for insights into these two writers. Fukui’s later work on the *Heart Sutra* is also discussed by Kazuki Tanahashi, *The Heart Sutra: A Comprehensive Guide to the Classic of Mahayana Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2014).

The copied passage exists in four texts: the Sanskrit *Large Sutra* (*Pañc*), the Chinese *Large Sutra* (*Dajing*), the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* (*Hṛd*), and the Chinese *Heart Sutra* (*Xinjing*). As exemplars of these texts, Nattier chose the Gilgit manuscript of the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* in the facsimile edition by Lokesh Chandra, transcribed by Gregory Schopen;⁸ the *Mohebanruoboluomijing* 摩訶般若波羅蜜經 (T. 223) by Kumārajīva; Conze's revised *Hṛd*;⁹ and the *Banruoboluomiduo xinjing* 般若波羅蜜多心經 attributed to Xuanzang (T. 251).

We can predict that if *Hṛd* was composed in Sanskrit and the core passage is an extract from *Pañc* then they will be identical or nearly so, and the two separate translations into Chinese—*Dajing* and *Xinjing*—will be substantially different. However, we find the opposite. *Hṛd*, although conveying the same message, is very different from *Pañc*, while *Dajing* and *Xinjing* are nearly identical. Moreover, *Hṛd* contains a number of Chinese idioms and some other unidiomatic Sanskrit terms and phrases. These combined observations led Nattier to conclude that by far the most likely scenario is that the passage in *Xinjing* was copied from *Dajing* and was then translated into Sanskrit to create *Hṛd*.

FUKUI Fumimasa's 1994 response in Japanese has never been translated, but from Nattier's unpublished rebuttal¹⁰ (composed in 1995) it seems that Fukui did not follow the logic of Nattier's argument. He appears at times to have struggled with Nattier's English idiom and never really comes to grips with her method. He seemingly objects to Nattier's use of the phrase "core passage" because it conflicts with his own thesis that the (so-called) mantra represents the "core" of the text. Fukui's article and a book-length study in 2000, *Hannya shingyō no sōgōteki kenkyū*,¹¹ set the tone for other Japanese scholiasts who continue to reject Nattier's thesis. Little or no support for Nattier's work was forthcoming in the English-speaking world. Lopez offers a typical,

8. Nattier, "Heart Sūtra," 204n15.

9. Conze's revised *Hṛd*; see Edward Conze, "The *Prajñāpāramitā-Hṛdaya Sūtra*," in *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1967), 147–167.

10. Nattier, "Response to FUKUI Fumimasa." I'm grateful to Prof. Nattier for supplying me with a copy of her draft. The paper is a comprehensive response to Fukui's initial negative comments on the Chinese origins thesis and shows that he broadly misunderstood Nattier's approach.

11. FUKUI Fumimasa, *Hannya shingyō no sōgōteki kenkyū: Rekishi shakai shiryō* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 2000).

noncommittal reference to Nattier's article: "More recently, Jan Nattier has suggested the possibility that [the *Heart Sutra*] is a Chinese apocryphon translated into Sanskrit in the seventh century."¹² There is no attempt to say on what basis the suggestion is made or to evaluate it. Others simply ignore the article, for example Jonathan Silk writing in 2015: "the *Heart Sūtra* revered in Japan is a Chinese translation from Sanskrit."¹³ As we will see below, Dan Lusthaus tries to cast doubt on Nattier's conclusions, but also without engaging in any way with her methods.¹⁴ And thus the Chinese origins thesis remained marginal amongst English speakers. However, in 2014 this began to change.

In "Apocryphal Treatment for Conze's Heart Problems," Huifeng showed that several discrepancies in another part of the text make more sense as mistaken readings of the Chinese translated into Sanskrit.¹⁵ Crucially, Huifeng showed that in his *Dajing* translation (T. 223) Kumārajīva regularly translated the common Sanskrit expression *anupalambhayogena*, "through the yoga of nonapprehension," as *yiwusuodegu* 以無所得故, an expression also found in the *Heart Sutra*.¹⁶ Where *anupalambhayogena* occurs in the *Pañc* version of the core passage, *Xinjing* has the same expression as *Dajing*, while *Hṛd* has *aprāptivāt*, "because of lack of attainment." We can infer from this that the term

12. Donald S. Lopez, *Elaborations on Emptiness: Uses of the Heart Sutra* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), xi.

13. Jonathan A. Silk, "Establishing/Interpreting/Translating: Is It Just That Easy?" *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 36/37 (2015): 217.

14. Dan Lusthaus, "The *Heart Sūtra* in Chinese Yogācāra: Some Comparative Comments on the *Heart Sūtra* Commentaries of Wōnch'ūk and K'uei-chi," *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* 3 (September 2003): 59–103.

15. Huifeng was a Buddhist monk but has since disrobed and now goes by the name Matthew Orsborn. He is still active in Buddhist studies. Huifeng, "Apocryphal Treatment for Conze's Heart Problems: 'Non-attainment,' 'Apprehension,' and 'Mental Hanging' in the *Prajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya*," *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 6 (2014): 72–105.

16. In "Ungarbling Section VI of the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra*" (*Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 18 [2020]: 22), I showed that sometimes Kumārajīva used *yibukedegu* 以不可得故 instead, but this is an exact synonym of *yiwusuodegu* 以無所得故 and thus does not affect Huifeng's conclusion. It does, however, show that the verb is binomial: *suode* 所得 and *kede* 可得 both represent *upa√labh*; while *de* 得 represents *pra√āp*. Buddhist Chinese often has to be read in parallel to Indic source texts.

yiwusuodegu was misread in Chinese, probably influenced by the immediately preceding phrase, *wude* 無得, “no attainment” (Skt. *na prāptiḥ*).

What’s more, as Huifeng argued and I confirmed,¹⁷ *yiwusuodegu* qualifies the previous negations so that the “core section” reads, “In [the state of] emptiness there is no form etc. ... through the yoga of nonapprehension” (*shi gu kongzhong wu se ... yiwusuodegu* 是故空中無色 ... 以無所得故). In other words, the yoga of nonapprehension leads a meditator to a state of “emptiness” in which they perceive no sense experience, or, in Buddhist jargon, a state in which no *dharmas* arises. The negations are a standard list of *dharmas*, and these are absent while one is in that state. This further suggests that *sūnyatā* in the context of *anupalambhayogena* means “absence” and refers specifically to the absence of sense experience in *samādhi*. Huifeng notes that his reading lends itself to more epistemic interpretations in contradistinction to the usual metaphysical speculations that we associate with Prajñāpāramitā literature and the *Heart Sutra* in particular. I have suggested that Sue Hamilton’s approach to the early Buddhist Pāli suttas provides a useful and apposite model for such an epistemic interpretation.¹⁸

Based on a note in Nattier’s article, I confirmed that the “epithets section” was also copied from the *Large Sutra* and that Nattier’s method applied to this section also pointed to composition in Chinese.¹⁹ More importantly, I showed that the phrase *tryadhvavyavasthitāḥ sarvabuddhāḥ* is a calque of a phrase that only Chinese Buddhists used and is unidiomatic Sanskrit.²⁰ Since this part of the text was not copied from elsewhere it reflects the language of composition, and that language is Chinese.

In this article, I will show that an additional argument can be constructed from Nattier’s notes, one which sheds light on the history of the *Heart Sutra*. In note 48, Nattier says that Robert Buswell wrote to her with the suggestion that “the *Heart Sūtra* might be a kind of *chao*

17. Huifeng, “Apocryphal,” 90–91; Attwood, “Ungarbling,” 22.

18. Sue Hamilton, *Early Buddhism: A New Approach* (London: Routledge, 2000); see Attwood, “Ungarbling,” 13–14.

19. Nattier, “*Heart Sūtra*,” 211–213n54a; Jayarava Attwood, “Epithets of the Mantra in the *Heart Sūtra*,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 12 (2017): 42.

20. Jayarava Attwood, “The Buddhas of the Three Times and the Chinese Origins of the *Heart Sutra*,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 15 (2018): 24.

jing ('condensed *sūtra*'), 'a fairly common genre of scriptural writing in early Chinese Buddhism, which excerpted seminal passages from the Mahāyāna *sūtras* to create easily digestible "gists" of these texts.'"²¹ At that time, Buswell had recently edited the volume *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (published in 1990), which included the now seminal, and then *only*, English-language treatise that addressed *chao jing*, that is, "The Evaluation of Indigenous Scriptures in Chinese Buddhist Bibliographical Catalogues" by Kyoko Tokuno.²² Thus Buswell's suggestion was no idle speculation; rather, he recognized that a short text containing excerpts of a larger text, of which it conveyed the gist, was exactly how Tokuno had described *chao jing* based on the notes in various bibliographies and, in particular, on the scholarly apparatus in Sengyou's catalogue (more on this below).

Unfortunately, the suggestion that the *Heart Sutra* was a *chao jing* was not formally published or taken up by either Nattier or Buswell, and it wasn't followed up upon until much later. Ji Yun recapitulated the arguments in Nattier's notes and added a few extra details.²³ He concluded that the *Heart Sutra* was a *chao jing* but also that it was a *dhāraṇī*. This enabled him to conclude that the term "apocryphon" did not apply to the *Heart Sutra*, following the logic that if it is not a *sūtra* then it cannot be an *apocryphal sūtra*. I have also treated the *Heart Sutra* as a *chao jing* based on its copied passages—in the light of studies by Tokuno and Storch—and explored some of the historical implications of the *Heart Sutra* being a *chao jing*.²⁴

In addition, in note 33, Nattier presented unpublished comments by Alan Sponberg on the *Heart Sutra* commentary by Kuiji (T. 1710), supplementing it with her own note on the commentary by Woncheuk. Sponberg wrote his PhD dissertation on the *vijñāptimātratā* Buddhism of Kuiji and had prepared a translation of Kuiji's commentary for a

21. Nattier, "Heart Sūtra," 210n48.

22. Kyoko Tokuno, "The Evaluation of Indigenous Scriptures in Chinese Buddhist Bibliographical Catalogues," in *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha*, ed. Robert E. Buswell (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 31–74.

23. Ji Yun, "Is the *Heart Sūtra* an Apocryphal Text? A Re-examination," trans. Chin Shih-Foong, *Singapore Journal of Buddhist Studies* 4 (2017): 41–45. Ji's article was composed and originally published in Chinese as 纪贇 —《心经》疑伪问题再研究, *Fuyan Buddhist Studies* 7 (2012): 115–182. I am wholly reliant on the English translation.

24. Attwood, "Xuanzang's Relationship," 12–15.

project that never saw publication. In the passage cited by Nattier,²⁵ Sponberg takes Kuiji's comments at face value to suggest that he knew that the *Heart Sutra* was not a sutra but rather a collection of extracts. Neither Kuiji nor Woncheuk uses the term *chao jing*, and thus the conclusion from these quotes is tentative. There may be a connection, however, because Kuiji uses a term that is reminiscent of another jargon term that the early medieval Chinese bibliographers used for *chao jing*.

These two notes from Nattier's article give us the outline of a history of the *Heart Sutra* that has been effaced and over-written, that is, a palimpsest. In this essay, I will first formalize Buswell's suggestion that the *Heart Sutra* is a *chao jing* and then address the question raised by Sponberg: Did Kuiji and/or Woncheuk know that the *Heart Sutra* was a *chao jing*? I will conclude by considering some of the implications of this for the history and historiography of the *Heart Sutra*.

CONDENSED SUTRAS AND THE BIBLIOGRAPHERS

According to Sengyou, writing ca. 515 CE, condensed sutras "were produced by Chinese people who cut the existing translations into pieces and arranged them to their liking."²⁶ Sengyou's term for these locally produced composite texts was *chao jing* 抄經. In this context, *chao* 抄 has been translated several ways, such as "digest," "extract," "excerpt," and "condensed" (in this essay I follow Tokuno in referring to *chao jing* as "condensed sutras").²⁷ Large numbers of such texts began to be produced in China, alongside original Buddhist compositions, almost as soon as Buddhist texts began to be translated into Chinese. Many were passed off as authentic Indian texts. Dealing with these locally produced texts was a particular problem for Chinese bibliographers charged with making catalogues of Buddhist texts in translation.

Tokuno outlines Sengyou's thinking about the genre. Condensed sutras were initially "an abbreviated translation of selected passages from a scripture, which were presumed to convey the text's essential

25. Nattier, "Heart Sūtra," 206–207.

26. Tanya Storch, *The History of Chinese Buddhist Bibliography* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2014), 64.

27. For a fuller consideration of the usage of *chao* 抄 see Alexander Ong Hsu, "Practices of Scriptural Economy: Compiling and Copying a Seventh-Century Chinese Buddhist Anthology" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2018), 203ff.

meaning without any superfluous prolixity.”²⁸ Sengyou’s catalogue lists about 450 such texts circulating independently and making up a substantial portion of all Buddhist texts in China at the time. However, by Sengyou’s time, the process had begun to get out of hand. He records that “people later began to produce their own condensations *directly from the Chinese renderings* by haphazardly extracting passages, arbitrarily dividing coherent sections, and ungrammatically splitting individual sentences.”²⁹ From this point on, bibliographers were at pains to specify that *chao jing* did not count as authentic texts. In the early Tang dynasty, parallel canon-copying projects at Chang’an and Luoyang were initiated when Li Hong, the eldest son of Wu Zhao, became crown prince in 656 CE. The respective project leaders, Daoxuan and Jingtai, were both also responsible for composing bibliographies. They competed on many points but agreed that *chao jing* could not be considered part of the canon despite being both preserved and catalogued.³⁰

As outlined by Tokuno, the attitude amongst bibliographers while initially indulgent became more and more hostile. In the late sixth century, Fajing and his colleagues criticized Sengyou’s tolerance towards *chao jing*.³¹ They introduced the term *bie sheng* 別生 (“separately produced”) as a rubric for condensed sutras. Yancong’s catalogue (T. 2147) in 602 CE picked up on Fajing’s terminology and includes a specific injunction not to copy separately produced texts.³² Jingtai’s catalogue (T. 2148), produced in 666 CE, closely followed the pattern of Yancong’s, including the use of the term *bie sheng*. Daoxuan’s catalogue (T. 2149) appeared in 664 CE and was organized chronologically by dynasty in contrast to the categorical approach of Fajing and Yancong. Daoxuan saw locally produced Buddhist texts as a sign of (or perhaps a manifestation

28. Tokuno, “Evaluation,” 39.

29. *Ibid.*, 39. Emphasis added.

30. *Ibid.*, 39–43. The Chinese canon includes texts considered “canonical” as well as many non-canonical texts that merit preservation as auxiliary texts. Stefano Zacchetti, “The Catalog of All Canonical Scriptures,” in *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China—Sichuan Province, Vol. 3, Wofoyuan Section C*, ed. Claudia Wenzel and Sun Hua (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016; Hangzhou: China Academy of Arts Press, 2016), 65–96.

31. Tokuno, “Evaluation,” 42. Their catalogue was *Da Sui zhong jing mu lu* 大隋眾經目錄 (Catalogue of the Scripture of the Great Sui Dynasty, T. 2146).

32. Tokuno, “Evaluation,” 47.

of) the end of the Dharma (*mofa* 末法)³³ and took a dim view of them. He placed various kinds of excerpts in a category called *zhi liu chen hua* 支流陳化, which Storch renders as “transformations accrued as a result of the use and circulation (of scriptures).”³⁴

One of the reasons that condensed sutras are not as prominent now as they were is that the *Kāiyuán Catalogue*,³⁵ produced in 730 CE, lists only fifty-four of the hundreds that existed, and it relegates them to the end of the list of spurious texts.³⁶ After the purges of Buddhism in 845 CE, the *Kāiyuán Catalogue* was used by Chinese Buddhists to put their canon back together again. The structure and content of it became the basis for the first printed edition of the canon, the *Kaibao zang* 開寶藏 (*Kaibao Edition*).³⁷ With the printing of the canon, those texts known to be locally produced texts were permanently excluded, and it became almost impossible for new texts to be considered canonical.

The Buddhist anxiety over authenticity and legitimacy in a pluralistic world is apparent from the earliest writing to the modern era. And it was clearly at the forefront of the minds of early medieval Chinese bibliographers. There is probably also an element of elitism because the later condensed sutras, produced by taking extracts from Chinese translations, particularly appealed to the common people.

In his doctoral dissertation, Alexander Ong Hsu explores the deeper meaning of the word *chao* 抄, pointing out that Anglophone translations seldom capture the polysemic nature of the word.³⁸ Hsu presents *chao* as a cultural practice that was central to the Chinese Buddhist project to understand and integrate Buddhism into Chinese culture. He argues that viewing the products of this practice (including *chao*

33. On the Chinese narrative of the end of the Dharma see Jan Nattier, *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1991).

34. Storch, *History*, 122.

35. *Da Tang kaiyuan shijiao lu* 大唐開元釋教錄 (Catalogue of Śākyamuṇi's Teachings of the Kaiyuan Era of the Great Tang Era, T. 2154).

36. Tokuno, “Evaluation,” 58.

37. On the history of the *Kaibao Edition* see Jiang Wu, “The Birth of the First Printed Canon: The Kaibao Edition and Its Impact,” in *Spreading the Buddha's Word in East Asia*, ed. Jiang Wu and Lucille Chia (Columbia University Press, 2016), 145–180.

38. Hsu, “Practices of Scriptural Economy,” 203ff.

jing) solely through the eyes of the catalogue-producing elite obscures something more essential:

Chinese Buddhist scholiasts took seriously scriptures' own claims to their being mere extracts as well as unsurpassable epitomes of the totality of Buddhist wisdom; and it was with this understanding of scripture that they sought to classify, relate, and plumb the depths of inherited sūtra traditions, sometimes by creating new extracts and epitomes through their own acts of *chao*.³⁹

While not denying the broader context within which the term *chao jing* exists and not wishing to curtail any subsequent research into the broader context, the phrase singled out below is precisely one used by bibliographers and (possibly) by some of the elite translators who worked with Xuanzang, and so their usage remains at the focus of this essay.

Contrary to everything that has just been said, the first catalogues that the *Heart Sutra* appears in already treat it as a *bone fide* Mahāyāna sutra, although the *Neidian Catalogue*⁴⁰ features multiple entries for the *Heart Sutra*, one of which is for “texts with no translator” where many condensed sutras are listed.⁴¹ Similarly, the earliest physical evidence of the *Heart Sutra*, the Fangshan stele (661 CE), unambiguously treats the *Heart Sutra* as a *translation* (*yi* 譯) by Xuanzang.⁴²

Before concluding, we need to consider a suggestion that condensed sutras might have existed in Gandhāra, which would have a major impact on how we view the practice of making *chao jing*.

Condensed Sutras in Gandhāra?

In his discussion of the inscription of Jingtai's *Catalogue* (T. 2148) at Wofu yuan 臥佛院, the late Stefano Zacchetti notes that the whole of scroll three and a large part of scroll four of the catalogue are devoted to “separately produced” (*bie sheng*) texts, that is to say, “excerpts extracted from larger scriptures and circulating as independent texts (*yu da bu nei chao chu bie xing* 於大部內鈔出別行).”⁴³ He makes an explicit

39. *Ibid.*, 213.

40. *Datang neidian lu* 大唐內典錄 (Catalogue of the Inner Canon of the Great Tang, T. 2149).

41. See Attwood, “Xuanzang's Relationship to the *Heart Sutra*,” 4.

42. *Ibid.*, 8–12.

43. Zacchetti, “Catalog,” 82.

connection to condensed sutras and notes that Jingtai is relatively hostile to them.⁴⁴ In explaining the abridgement of the catalogue inscribed at Wofo yuan, Zacchetti compares this to “similar practices outside India” referring to Richard Salomon’s essay “An Unwieldy Canon.”⁴⁵ In particular, Zacchetti draws attention to apparent abridgements of Buddhist texts reported by Salomon.⁴⁶ If there are indeed abridgements of Buddhists texts in Gandhāra, then we would have to reassess the place and role of condensed sutras in Chinese Buddhism.

I think Zacchetti inadvertently created a misimpression by linking the idea of the “abridgement” of texts to the idea of condensed sutras. He drew attention to the fact that in several cases, only the first scroll of a Gāndhārī text, known to be considerably longer, has been found.⁴⁷ No examples of individual second or subsequent scrolls from these sets have been found. This suggests that there may have been a practice of copying only the first scroll of a longer text. Salomon treats this as an “abridgement,” suggesting that the first scroll symbolically represented the whole. Zacchetti concurs,⁴⁸ and we can see the appeal in relation to the foreshortened version of Jingtai’s *Catalogue* at Wofo yuan. However, I think Zacchetti has already offered a better explanation: that Jingtai only considered texts recorded in the first two scrolls of his catalogue to be *canonical*. If one were laboriously inscribing a list of canonical texts in stone, one might not bother carving two scrolls of non-canonical texts.

Whether it is simply truncating a text and allowing the part to symbolize the whole or condensing the text to create a gist, abridgements are often attempts to address the problem of information overload. A text like the *Large Sutra*, which in the *Taishō* edition of Kumārajīva’s translation is twenty-seven scrolls, presents a formidable challenge to a reader. Even monks who were required to memorize several long sutras as part of their basic education might have found the prospect of the *Large Sutra* daunting, let alone a commoner or a busy palace official

44. *Ibid.*, 92.

45. Zacchetti, “Catalog,” 92.

46. Richard Salomon, “An Unwieldy Canon: Observations on Some Distinctive Features of Canon Formation in Buddhism,” in *Kanonisierung und Kanonbildung in der asiatischen Religionsgeschichte*, ed. Deeg, Freiburger, and Kleine (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2011), 179–183.

47. *Ibid.*, 182–183.

48. Zacchetti, “Catalog,” 93.

(or an emperor). The appeal of a condensed version on one sheet of paper which nonetheless conveys the essence of the teaching is easy to see, especially beyond the monastery walls.

That said, I think Salomon's discussion of abridgement in relation to the Prajñāpāramitā literature relies on an old fallacy.⁴⁹ The idea that the *Diamond Sutra* and the *Heart Sutra* represent abridgements goes back to Conze's attempt to create a chronology for the Prajñāpāramitā.⁵⁰ This chronology is contradicted by scholarship that places the *Diamond Sutra* much earlier than Conze's date of the fourth century and the *Heart Sutra* much later, in seventh century China. In fact, there is no "Buddhist principle of contractibility."⁵¹ On the contrary, the general trend was for Mahāyāna texts to expand over time. It was not until the advent of tantric Buddhism that shorter Prajñāpāramitā texts began to be composed, and these were not abbreviations or condensations of earlier works but new works that reproduced some terminology and stylistic features of older texts but were part of a wholly different trend in Indian Buddhism. By contrast, Chinese Buddhists did create distinctive condensations of long texts.

Salomon also reports that some heavily abbreviated Gāndhārī *avadāna* and *pūrvayoga* manuscripts have been reported,⁵² but these seem to have been crib notes for a performative reading, rather than a genuine attempt to abridge the text to address the problem of information overload as we find in Chinese Buddhism.

It does seem that the *chao jing* or condensed sutra is a distinctively Chinese genre of Buddhist text. The fact that the *Heart Sutra* is a condensed sutra becomes significant for the historiography of the text because it adds to the evidence that the text was composed in China and not in India. We can now return to the main argument that the *Heart Sutra* is a *chao jing* with a few notes about what may have motivated the choice of selections before concluding this section.

49. Salomon, "Unwieldy," 181.

50. Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*, Bibliographica Philologica Buddhica Series Maior I, 2nd ed. (orig. ed. Mouton, 1960; Tokyo: The Reiyukai Library, 1978), 11–12.

51. Salomon, "Unwieldy," 183.

52. *Ibid.*, 183.

Independent Circulation

Although Nattier notes it in her article, it is not widely appreciated that some of the passages that were copied into the *Heart Sutra* may already have been circulating independently. For example, Nattier says that “it seems clear that students of Kumārajīva (in particular Sengzhao) read and commented on the core passage of the *Heart Sūtra* found in Kumārajīva’s version of the *Large Sūtra*.”⁵³ Nattier seems here to refer to the fact that Sengzhao includes the well-known phrase “*Se bu yi kong, kong bu yi se. Se ji shi kong, kong ji shi se*” (色不異空，空不異色。色即是空，空即是色)。⁵⁴ in his *Zhao lun* 肇論 (“Treatises of Zhao,” T. 1858, 45:156c5–6) published in 410 CE. Sengzhao shows no cognizance of the *Heart Sutra* and presumably took the passage from Kumārajīva’s *Large Sutra* (T. 223). This passage is also cited by Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597 CE) in the *Mohezhiquan* 摩訶止觀 (T. 1911)—*Qi you kong neng qian kong. Ji se shi kong. Shou xiang xing shi yi fu ru shi.* 豈有空能遣空。即是空。受想行識亦復如是。(T. 1911, 46:5b19–20)⁵⁵—which is a paraphrase of the same passage.⁵⁶

53. Nattier, “*Heart Sūtra*,” 184.

54. I.e., “Form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form. Just form is emptiness, just emptiness is form.”

55. The text is translated into English by Paul L. Swanson, *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight: T’ien-t’ai Chih-i’s Mo-ho chih-kuan*, vol. 1 (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2018), 160.

56. These early references speak to the problem of the phrasing of the passage raised by Huifeng, “A Survey of Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra Translations in Chinese” (unpublished manuscript, 2008), <http://prajnacara.blogspot.com/2008/10/survey-of-prajnaparamita-sutra.html>, 10–11n34. Based on this phrase, Nattier has raised the possibility that that the core passage was copied from the *Dazhidu lun* 《大智度論》 (T. 1509) since T. 223 has an alternate reading at this point: *fei se yi kong, fei kong yi se* 非色異空，非空異色 for *se bu yi kong, kong bu yi se* 色不異空，空不異色. Huifeng argues that notes in the *Taishō* edition suggest that *fei se yi kong* is the earlier reading and that Kumārajīva’s *Large Sutra* (T. 223) has been altered. This partly follows from the now discredited attribution of *Damingzhoujing* to Kumārajīva. Sengzhao and Zhiyi both cite the text as *se bu yi kong*. Whatever the provenance of the *fei se yi kong* reading, it now seems clear that T. 223 had *se bu yi kong* in the fifth century. We can now say with greater confidence that the *Heart Sutra* passage was copied from the *Large Sutra*, T. 223.

A version of the “epithets passage”⁵⁷ was found inscribed at Mt. Sili, Shandong Province. The text was probably inscribed during the Northern Qi (550–577 CE).⁵⁸ The epithets are also found in *Fo shuo Guanfo sanmei hai jing* 佛說觀佛三昧海經 (T. 643), also likely to be a Chinese-produced text from the first half of the fifth century. My understanding is that the study of Chinese epigraphy is still developing and the corpus of inscriptions is vast. More examples may await discovery.

These few examples suggest that the selection of passages for the *Heart Sutra* may not have been random or due to personal preference. They may have been popular passages that circulated independently in China at the time.

CONDENSED SUTRAS AND THE BIBLIOGRAPHERS: SUMMARY

The bibliographies give us a picture of history in which indigenously produced texts played a prominent role in Chinese Buddhism, albeit one that is colored by elite concerns about the authenticity of Buddhist texts. Such concerns may not have been shared more widely. Early on, *chao jing* or “condensed sutras” were useful summaries of the content of larger texts, but the connections weakened over time and condensed sutras became less coherent and more problematic for bibliographers. The phrase *bie sheng* (“separately produced”) was introduced in the late sixth century as a generic term for condensed sutras, coinciding with a change toward creating extracts in Chinese. The *Heart Sutra*, being largely made up of passages copied from the *Large Sutra*, belongs in this genre. With this background, we can now consider the statements that Sponberg and Nattier noted in the early *Heart Sutra* commentaries.

THE HEART SUTRA AS A COLLECTION OF EXTRACTS IN EARLY CHINESE COMMENTARIES

The two earliest commentaries on the *Heart Sutra* are:

57. *Gu zhi boreboluomiduo, Shi dashen zhou shi daming zhou, shi wu shang zhou, shi wu deng deng zhou* 故知般若波羅蜜多，是大神咒，是大明咒，是無上咒，是無等等咒 (T. 251, 8:848c18–19).

58. Yongbo Wang and Lothar Ledderose, *Buddhist Stone Sutras in China (Vol.1): Shandong Sheng = Shandong Province* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz; Hangzhou: China Academy of Art Press, 2014).

- Kuiji 窺基, *Banreboluomiduo Xinjing you zan* 般若波羅蜜多心經幽贊 (Comprehensive Commentary on the Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sutra, T. 1710)
- Woncheuk 원측/圓測, *Banreboluomiduo Xinjing zan* 般若波羅蜜多心經贊 (Commentary on the Prajñāpāramitā Heart Sutra, T. 1711)

Kuiji 窺基 (632–682)⁵⁹ was progressively Xuanzang’s prodigy, amanuensis, collaborator, and finally his successor as the head of the Faxiang 法相 school of Buddhism. He probably learned some Sanskrit from Xuanzang and was able to consult Sanskrit manuscripts in some cases to clarify translations when the Chinese text was ambiguous.⁶⁰ Little is known for certain of Kuiji’s life before or after his collaboration with Xuanzang. Despite his apparent prominence, Kuiji’s name is mentioned only once in passing in the last chapter the Yancong’s biography of Xuanzang (T. 2053, 50:276b22).

Woncheuk 원측 or Yuance 圓測 (613–696) was from the Korean kingdom of Silla 新羅. Although he is often portrayed alongside Kuiji as a fellow student of Xuanzang, Woncheuk in fact joined Xuanzang’s translation team as a fully-fledged Yogācāra scholar in his own right with a good knowledge of Sanskrit. John Jorgensen has argued plausibly that Woncheuk’s skill and accomplishments were downplayed by Chinese historians partly because he was “foreign” and partly because he fell out with Xuanzang over interpretations of Yogācāra.⁶¹ A disagreement between their senior students led to the story that Kuiji and Woncheuk were rivals, but according to Jorgensen’s revisionist history, the rivalry was between Woncheuk and Xuanzang.

59. See Stanley Weinstein’s “A Biographical Study of Tz’ü-ên,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 15, no. 1/2 (1959): 119–149 for an extensive discussion of the name of this person. Weinstein prefers the name Tz’u-en (Ci’en) and argues that the name Kuiji is a case of mistaken identity: there were two students, one who is virtually unknown called Kui 窺 and our man who was often called Ji 基 (ibid., 132–133). Nevertheless, Kuiji (Wade Giles: K’uei-chi) is the name most commonly used by contemporary scholars.

60. Ibid., 144.

61. John Jorgensen, “Representing Wōnch’ŭk: Meditations on Medieval East Asian Biographies,” in *Religion and Biography in China and Tibet*, ed. Benjamin Penny (New York: Routledge, 2002), 74–131.

Both commentaries survive in the Chinese Tripiṭaka but are undated.⁶² The best we can do is to place them before the end of the seventh century since the authors died in 682 and 696 CE, respectively. Dan Lusthaus speculates that they were composed after the death of Xuanzang but provides no rationale for this.⁶³ We may say that prior to the death of Xuanzang, Kuiji was busy assisting with translation work for at least ten years. When Xuanzang died in 664, Emperor Gaozong (高宗; r. 649–683), or perhaps his Empress Consort Wu Zhao 武曌 acting in his name, reputedly disbanded his translation group and gave any untranslated manuscripts to the Ci'en Monastery in Chang'an (T. 2053, 50:278a). Note that Kuiji is also known as Ci'en Dashi (Great Teacher of Ci'en [Monastery] 慈恩大師). Having inherited the mantle as head of the Faxiang school, it would be understandable if Kuiji shifted his focus from translation to exegesis. He is known to have composed several commentaries along Yogācāra lines.

The Separate Production of the Heart Sutra in Kuiji's Xinjing you zan

In the *Xinjing you zan* (T. 1710), Kuiji imagines a Madhyamaka commentary (although it's not clear if such a thing ever existed) that compares unfavorably with his own Yogācāra commentary. Sponberg draws attention to a passage commenting on the title of the *Xinjing*. An English translation of the *Xinjing you zan* was published by Heng-ching and Lusthaus in 2006 and I follow this below:

心者堅實妙最之稱。大經隨機義文俱廣。受持傳習或生怯退。傳法聖者錄其堅實妙最之旨別出此經。(33:524a25–7)

“Heart” [心] signifies essence [堅實] and most excellent [妙最]. The Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra is voluminous and extensive in meaning, those who receive, uphold, transmit, or study it may easily become discouraged. Therefore, the sages [聖者], for the purposes of propagating the Dharma, captured the supreme essence [堅實妙最] by composing this condensed sūtra [別出此經].⁶⁴

62. The fact that they are undated is suspicious, although the attribution of the commentaries is uncontested.

63. Lusthaus, “The Heart Sūtra in Chinese Yogācāra,” 66.

64. Heng-Ching Shih and Dan Lusthaus, *A Comprehensive Commentary on the Heart Sutra (Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra)* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation & Research, 2006), 63.

The phrase that Heng-ching and Lusthaus translate as “by composing this condensed sutra” is *bie chu ci jing* 別出此經. The use of “condensed sutra” should draw our attention since this suggests that the translators understood *bie chu* 別出 to be synonymous with *bie sheng* 別生, which, as we saw above, was another term for *chao jing* 抄經. Sponberg, by contrast, translated this phrase as “published this [Heart Sutra] separately,” reading *bie chu* “published separately.”⁶⁵

Bibliographers from Fajing 法經 (594 CE) onwards used the term *bie sheng* (“arising separately”)⁶⁶ to refer to *chao jing*.⁶⁷ Jingtai 靜泰 (fl. 660–666) writing in 666 CE (*Zhong jing mulu* 眾經目錄, T. 2148) described *bie sheng* as “excerpts extracted from larger scriptures and circulating as independent texts,”⁶⁸ that is, such excerpts (*chao* 鈔) are produced (*chu* 出) and independently (*bie* 別) circulate (*xing* 行). The implication of this is that Kuiji knew that the *Heart Sutra* was a condensed sutra or *chao jing*.

Storch notes that strictly speaking *bie sheng* 別生 and *bie chu* 別出 are related but different terms. As noted, *bie sheng* refers to a condensed sutra, an excerpt or excerpts of a translation intended to convey the gist of it that circulated independently. By contrast, *bie chu*, when properly used, is “a piece of the original text (whatever it was at the time in the eyes of the bibliographer) that was translated separately from the other parts of the original. Say, only one part of the sutra was available for the oral transmission. And at the time of the transmission, this was not known (it became known later) and the *bie chu* version was thus created.”⁶⁹ Unfortunately, there is no published work that deals with this issue. However, we can see what Storch means using an example from Jingtai’s *Catalogue* (T. 2148). In the category *bie sheng*, “separately produced” (scroll 3), we find this entry:

Daohengjing yi juan: You liu jing chu Dapinjing 道行經一卷：右六經出
大品經。(T. 2148, 55:197a4–5)

65. Nattier, “Heart Sūtra,” 206.

66. *Sheng* 生 is the character used in the *Heart Sutra* to represent Sanskrit *samudaya* (“origin”) and *utpadyate* (“arising”).

67. Tokuno, “Evaluation,” 42. The phrase is found, for example, in catalogues by Fajing (T. 2146), Yancong (T. 2147), and Jingtai (T. 2148).

68. Zacchetti, “Catalog,” 82. *Yu da bu nei chao chu bie xing* 於大部內鈔出別行.

69. Tanya Storch, personal communication, February 25, 2020.

Daohengjing 道行經 is an abbreviation for *Daohengbanruojing* 道行般若經, Lokakṣema's 179 CE translation of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* (T. 224). The Chinese considered the *Smaller Sutra* to be an abbreviated version of the *Larger Sutra*,⁷⁰ hence the annotation *chu da pin jing* 出大品經, "produced from the *Large Sutra*." Jingtai used the exact phrase *bie chu* just three times, all of them in scroll three (within the category *bie sheng*, "separately produced"). Two occur together:

善肩品抄經一卷 右一經別出善譬菩薩經。(T. 55:198b2-3)
寶鬘品抄經一卷 右一經別出寶網經。(T. 55:198b4-5)

Here the *Shanjianpin chaojing* 善肩品抄經⁷¹ and *Baomanpin chaojing* 寶鬘品抄經 are no longer extant condensed sutras. In both cases, Jingtai records the sutra from which he thinks they were excerpted, *Shanpipusajing* 善譬菩薩經 (no longer extant) and *Baowangjing* 寶網經 (T. 433; **Ratnajālīpariprcchā*). If Kuiji were using this term as the bibliographers used it, it would suggest that he believed the *Heart Sutra* extract to have been made in Sanskrit (and as Nattier and subsequent writers have shown, all of the evidence is against this).

In her discussion of Sponberg's translation, Nattier comments that Kuiji contrasted a text "published separately" with one "preached separately" by the Buddha.⁷² Although this is similar to the kind of distinction that contemporary bibliographers such as Jingtai and Daoxuan (T. 2149) were trying to make, the implication of "published separately" (*bie chu*) might be subtly different. The difference is missed by Sponberg, which is hardly surprising given that the study of the bibliographies was almost non-existent when he worked on this material.⁷³ Tokuno is cited by Nattier, but neither that work nor the subsequent book by Storch gets down to this level of distinction.⁷⁴

70. Probably in Lokakṣema's time there was still only one *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*. Once the expanded version appeared, the Chinese tried different titles, but later Kumārajīva settled on "Larger" (*mohe* 摩訶 or *dapin* 大品) and "Smaller" (*xiaopin* 小品). It was only centuries later that the Sanskrit titles *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* ("consisting of eight thousand") and *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* ("consisting of twenty-five thousand") became common.

71. *Shan jian* 善肩 might be Sanskrit **kuśalaskandha*, which is a rare term that is found in the *Ārya Saṃghāta sūtra*.

72. Nattier, "Heart Sūtra," 206–207n33.

73. It is also missed by Ji ("Is the *Heart Sūtra*," 44), who translated 別出此經 as "composed this *Xin jing*."

74. Tokuno, "Evaluation"; Storch, *History*.

Following her comments on Kuiji's commentary, Nattier points out the significant parallel in Woncheuk's commentary on the *Heart Sutra*.⁷⁵ We can now turn our attention to this.

The Separate Production of the Heart Sutra in Woncheuk's Xinjing zan

As before, I will use a recently published translation of the text, this time by Choo B. Hyun. Woncheuk notes:

Since [this text] selects the essential outlines from all the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras*, it has only the main chapter, without introduction and conclusion, just as the *Kuan-yin Ching* (*Avalokiteśvara-sūtra*) is not composed of three sections.⁷⁶

所以無序及流通者於諸般若簡集綱要。故唯正宗無序流通如觀音經不具三分 (T. 33:543b17–19)

The key phrase here is *zhu bore jian ji gang yao* 諸般若簡集綱要, which Nattier paraphrases as “likewise part of a larger text but was extracted and circulated separately.”⁷⁷ More literally it seems to read, “a collection selected from various *Prajñāpāramitā* [sutras] to give an outline of the doctrine”; in other words, a condensed sutra.⁷⁸

The *Guanyin Sutra* (*Guanyin jing* 觀音經) is listed under the heading of *zhiliu chen hua* 支流陳化 in Daoxuan's catalogue (T. 2149, 55:338b20). Storch notes that the category is loosely defined but that, in a nutshell, Daoxuan “collected various pieces that Chinese Buddhists took

75. Nattier, “Heart Sūtra,” 207n33.

76. B. Hyun Choo, “An English Translation of the *Banya paramilda simgyeong chan*: Wonch'uk's Commentary on the Heart Sūtra (*Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*),” *International Journal of Buddhist Thought & Culture* 6 (2006): 138. Brackets original.

77. Nattier, “Heart Sūtra,” 207.

78. Ji (“Is the *Heart Sūtra*,” 44) evinces a passage from a commentary on another text composed by Woncheuk (*Renwang jing shu* 仁王經疏, T. 1708). Here Woncheuk appears to make a distinction between “self-existent sutras” (自有經) and texts like the *Heart Sutra*. According to Ji, there are “other generated sutras” (別生經); though the term 別生 is not used in this context, it does occur elsewhere in the *Renwang jing shu*. Following Tokuno, I have been translating 別生 as “separately produced.” Thus the passage does appear to suggest that the *Heart Sutra* is a condensed sutra. But is it considerably less clear in this case.

out of translations and adapted for various religious uses.”⁷⁹ As Nattier summarizes:

In sum, the statements of both [Kuiji and Woncheuk] indicate that at least some Chinese Buddhists, already in the 7th century CE, considered the *Heart Sūtra* to be not a separate sermon preached by the Buddha, but an extract made by certain “sages who transmitted the Dharma” from the *Large Sūtra* of Kumārajīva.⁸⁰

In light of recent publications on the bibliographies, we can modify this conclusion. Both Kuiji and Woncheuk are aware that the *Heart Sutra* was composed of extracts of a larger text, the *Large Sutra*. However, neither commentator makes it clear whether they knew that text had been extracted *in Chinese*, though this was common practice in their day. We must now consider one other work of modern scholarship on these commentaries that has a direct bearing on the subject of the historiography of the *Heart Sutra*.

Lusthaus’s Use of the Early Commentaries

Dan Lusthaus cites four passages from Woncheuk’s commentary that he says lead us to two main conclusions: (1) that versions of the text once existed that were different from the extant versions, and (2) that these versions were older than the extant versions.⁸¹ Thus Nattier’s preference for a later composition date is seriously challenged. I will take each passage in turn and show why I disagree with Lusthaus’s conclusions in each case.

On Xuanzang’s use of the form Guanzizai 觀自在 for the name of Avalokiteśvara, Woncheuk comments, “This is what the old text(s) named Guanshiyin” (*Ruo yijiu benming guanshiyin* 若依舊本名觀世音, T. 1711, 33:543b21).⁸² Here Lusthaus assumes that *jiu ben* 舊本 (“old texts”) must refer to older versions of the *Heart Sutra*, but this is unjustified. Many texts were already strongly associated with Avalokiteśvara in China at that time. Guanshiyin 觀世音 is one of the ways of rendering

79. Storch, *History*, 141n84. The *Guanyin Sutra* is not listed in catalogues by Jingtai (T. 2148) or Yancong (T. 2147) or any earlier catalogue.

80. Nattier, “*Heart Sūtra*,” 207n33.

81. Lusthaus, “The *Heart Sūtra* in Chinese Yogācāra.”

82. *Ibid.*, 82.

the Sanskrit name, which at the time must have been Avalokitasvara.⁸³ For example, Kumārajīva’s translation of the *Lotus Sutra* uses the forms Guanshiyin 觀世音 and Guanyin 觀音. It was already *old* by the time Woncheuk composed his commentary. It would be far more plausible to think that Woncheuk referred to these “old texts,” especially in light of Watanabe’s argument that the *Damingzhoujing* (T. 250) (the supposedly older version of the *Heart Sutra*) was a *gikyō* 偽經 or “fake text” and thus unlikely to have existed in Woncheuk’s lifetime.⁸⁴

The next passage, also from Woncheuk’s commentary, concerns the latter part of the first sentence of the *Heart Sutra*:

There is another version of the text [*huo you ben*] 或有本 which says: “illuminatingly, he saw the five skandhas, and so on [*deng* 等], are all empty.” Although there are two versions of the text [*you liang ben*] 有兩本, the latter text is correct. An examination of the Sanskrit text [*fan ben* 梵本] shows that it has the word “and so on” [*deng* 等]. Hence the “and so on” stated by the latter (text) should be understood to be the standard.⁸⁵

The standard text (T. 251) has *zhaojian wuyun jie kong* 照見五蘊皆空 without the extra character *deng* 等 after *wuyun* 五蘊. From *deng* 等 (“and so on”) we can infer Sanskrit *ādi*, but Lusthaus concedes that *ādi* doesn’t appear in any known Sanskrit text of the *Heart Sutra*. Nor does any extant Chinese text have *deng* 等 here—including the oldest inscriptions that almost certainly predate Woncheuk’s commentary.⁸⁶ And yet Lusthaus insists that Woncheuk must be referring to a

83. On older Chinese forms of the name Avalokiteśvara and the texts in which they occurred, as well as notes on when the name changed from Avalokitasvara to Avalokiteśvara, see Jan Nattier, “Avalokiteśvara in Early Chinese Buddhist Translations: A Preliminary Survey,” in *Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin) and Modern Society*, ed. W. Magee and Y. H. Huang, Proceedings of the Fifth Chung-Hwa International Conference on Buddhism (Taiwan: Dharma Drum Publishing, 2007), 191–212.

84. Watanabe, “Introduction,” 58.

85. Lusthaus, “The *Heart Sūtra* in Chinese Yogācāra,” 83. Bracketed material is mine.

86. Kūkai’s commentary mentions that in the text attributed to Xuanzang, “after the word *wuyun* (五藏, ‘five skandhas’) the character *deng* (等, ‘and so on’) is added” (Thomas Eijō Dreitlein, “An Annotated Translation of Kūkai’s Secret Key to the *Heart Sutra*,” *Mikkyo Bunka Kenkyusho Kiyō* 24 [2011]: 21). I am

“Sanskrit original.”⁸⁷ On the other hand, we’ve already shown, by reference to their own words, that both Kuiji and Woncheuk knew that the *Heart Sutra* was extracted from the *Large Sutra*. While a Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* text may well have existed by the time Woncheuk was writing, we know that it was a translation from Chinese and not an “original.”

One reading of Woncheuk’s comment was that he believed the *Heart Sutra* to have been an Indian text composed in Sanskrit. In this case, the “Sanskrit original” would be a reference the Sanskrit *Large Sutra* that we have come to know as the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā prajñāpāramitā sūtra*. However, while this sentence resembles the *Large Sutra* in many ways (particularly the opening of chapter 3), it does not come directly from the *Large Sutra*. Woncheuk must have had a Sanskrit *Heart Sutra*, but this is still peculiar since there are many discrepancies between the extant Sanskrit manuscripts and the Chinese text. For example, immediately following the passage just commented on, the Chinese has *du yi qie ku e* 度一切苦厄, which seems to be a final clause of the same sentence since it has the same subject (i.e., Guanzizai) but does not name him or employ a pronoun. This clause has no counterpart in any known Sanskrit text.⁸⁸ And yet Woncheuk does not comment on this much larger discrepancy between the two texts. If Lusthaus is correct, we then have to infer a Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* substantially different from any text that survives today, and this seems to go against the principle of parsimony.

Next, Lusthaus quotes Woncheuk:

Further, for interpreting this sutra we have *two texts* (自有兩本). One text is as above (i.e., Xuanzang’s version, which says: “*vedanā*, *saṃjñā*, *saṃskāras*, and *viññāna*, are also like this”). The other text of the sutra says: “*vedanā*, *saṃjñā*, *saṃskāras*, *viññāna*, and so on, are also like this.” The word “and so on” [*deng* 等] indicates what is [discussed] below in the text of the sutra, i.e., the six skill in means, the

informed by Jeffrey Kotyk that he has encountered the text with *deng* 等 in Japanese Buddhist settings (personal communication).

87. Lusthaus, “The *Heart Sūtra* in Chinese Yogācāra,” 85.

88. The phrase occurs in one other Chinese sutra text: *Dàfāng guǎng shí lún jīng* (大方廣十輪經, **Daśacakra-kṣitigarbha sūtra*, T. 410, 13:708a26–7). The name of the translator is not recorded, but the translation was made during the Northern Liang dynasty, ca. 397–439 CE.

aggregates, āyatanas, dhātus, pratīya-samutpāda, the Four Truths, Bodhi, and Nirvana.⁸⁹

His conclusions regarding this passage are necessarily vague. The passage undoubtedly refers to “two versions” with this minor difference. But it does not tell us anything more. Nor does Kuiji’s commentary shed any light on this since he simply accepts a text with the extra *deng* 等. There is not much else one could say about this.

Finally, Lusthaus cites Woncheuk: “There is another version of the text (或有本) which says: ‘...detached from all conceptually-perverted dream thoughts.’ Although there are two versions of the text (有二本), the latter text is better (勝).”⁹⁰ Lusthaus observes that Woncheuk’s two texts differ and that Woncheuk favors the one that says, “far from all delusions and illusions.”⁹¹ Lusthaus says, “Unfortunately for Nattier’s thesis, the alternate version this time is recognizable. It is Kumārajīva’s version.”⁹² By “Kumārajīva’s version” Lusthaus means *Damingzhoujing*. But as we saw in the introduction, there is a consensus that *Damingzhoujing* is not “Kumārajīva’s version.” The false attribution of *Damingzhoujing* to Kumārajīva notwithstanding, that Lusthaus is wrong about this is obvious if we just lay out the versions side by side and visually compare them (spaced so characters line up):

Xinjing: 遠離 顛倒夢想

Woncheuk: 遠離一切顛倒夢想

Damingzhoujing: 離一切顛倒夢想苦惱

89. 又解此經自有兩本 一本如上。一本經曰受想行識等亦復如是。所言等者準下經文有六善巧。謂蘊處界緣生四諦菩提涅槃。(T. 1711, 33.546.13–15). Lusthaus, “The Heart Sūtra in Chinese Yogācāra,” 84. Bracketed material is original to Lusthaus. Pinyin Romanization added.

90. Ibid., 86. 或有本云遠離一切顛倒夢想雖有二本後本為勝。(T. 1711, 33.548c.12–13). *Diandao* 顛倒 translates Sanskrit *viparyāsa* or “delusion” while *mengxiang* 夢想 translates *māyā* or “illusions.” The more literal translation by Lusthaus is a common approach to this passage, but it obscures the standard Buddhist technical terminology and the fact that both pairs are binomials rather than two separate words. On this passage and its Sanskrit translation see Jayarava Attwood, “A Note on *Niṣṭhānirvāṇa* in the Heart Sūtra,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 14 (2018): 10–17; and Attwood, “Ungarbling.”

91. Yuanli yiqie diandao mengxiang 遠離一切顛倒夢想。

92. Lusthaus, “The Heart Sūtra in Chinese Yogācāra,” 86.

Woncheuk's text has similarities to and differences from *both* other versions. We might be tempted to say that it is a hybrid, except for the likelihood that *Damingzhoujing* was composed after Woncheuk died.

Lusthaus has overstated the case to be made from his albeit interesting evidence. At best we can say that a minor variant of the Chinese text and an apparently anomalous Sanskrit text of the *Heart Sutra* may have existed by the end of the seventh century. There is no sign of them in any other context. Crucially, Lusthaus presents no evidence that such a Sanskrit text would *predate* the Chinese texts and believes that the commentaries of Kuiji and Woncheuk postdate the death of Xuanzang (in early 664) and thus must postdate the earliest dated evidence of the Chinese *Heart Sutra* (March 13, 661 CE).⁹³ If anyone knows of a *securely dated* Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* that predates 661, then I would urgently like to hear from them. This leaves open the question of whether Kuiji knew of a Sanskrit *Heart Sutra*. The fact that he does not mention one suggests (but in no way *proves*) that a Sanskrit translation was not made until after the death of Xuanzang in early 664 CE, and probably after the death of Kuiji himself in 682 CE. This scenario fits with the revised history I proposed elsewhere.⁹⁴

Commentaries Summary

In this section, we have established that both Kuiji and Woncheuk knew that the *Heart Sutra* contained extracts of other Prajñāpāramitā sutras, though it is not entirely clear whether they believed that the extraction was done in China. Although *bie sheng* 別生 is a synonym of *chao jing* 抄經, some translators have further conflated the term *bie chu* 別出 with *bie sheng* 別生 with confusing results. Further clarification of the distinction in the bibliographies would be helpful. In describing the *Heart Sutra*, Woncheuk does appear to describe a *chao jing*, which at the very least is a Chinese genre. We have also seen that arguments by Lusthaus in favor of a Sanskrit “original” for the *Heart Sutra*, based on these commentaries, do not hold up under scrutiny.

93. Attwood, “Xuanzang’s Relationship,” 11.

94. *Ibid.*, 19–25.

DISCUSSION

In 1990, Robert Buswell wrote, “Buddhist apocryphal materials may eventually compel a wholesale revision of our assumptions about the development of the Chinese tradition.”⁹⁵ Similarly, Jonathan Silk has said:

The relation between the Heart Sūtra and other Prajñāpāramitā texts must be re-examined. And ... the Sanskrit text of the Heart Sūtra must be given a new, reliable edition, based on *all* the available evidence.... With such materials to hand it may be possible to reconsider some vexing problems of the history and meaning of this most popular of Buddhist sūtras.⁹⁶

A revised Sanskrit edition of the *Heart Sutra* is underway, but in many ways this is an empty exercise now that we know that the poorly written Sanskrit was produced in China. It might be better to simply translate it again from scratch. Huifeng and I⁹⁷ have gone some way to showing what the text might have meant when it was composed, though this does not change what the text is perceived to mean by different communities at other times, particularly in the present. At least some of the vexing problems of the history of the text are addressed in this essay. We have delved into the ancient literature to try to grasp what contemporaries knew about the text at the time. This effort is preliminary and would benefit from a more detailed study of both the commentaries and the bibliographies of the early Tang by a qualified Sinologist.

Many scholars have reservations about the term “apocryphal” in this context. Tokuno deliberately avoids using it and prefers instead “indigenous scriptures.” Similarly, Ji goes to some lengths to establish that, although the *Heart Sutra* was composed in China, it is not an apocryphon. I share their reluctance, but I’m also aware that by the criteria of seventh century Buddhism, the *Heart Sutra* was not simply “apocryphal” but, more plainly speaking, it was a *fake*: it was not Indian, not composed in Sanskrit, and not even a sutra. However, it will never be

95. Robert E. Buswell, ed., *Chinese Buddhist Apocrypha* (University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 12.

96. Jonathan A. Silk, *The Heart Sūtra in Tibetan: A Critical Edition of the Two Recensions Contained in the Kanjur*, Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien (Vienna: Universität Wien, 1994), 73.

97. Huifeng, “Apocryphal.”

enough just to point out that the *Heart Sutra* is a fake. The extracted passages themselves are genuine enough and can easily be traced to their authentic sources. A quotation cannot be less authentic than its source (although it always benefits from appropriate contextualization). Moreover, millions of Buddhists have found an epitome of their beliefs in this short text, so there must be *something* about it *as they perceive it to be*.

We can make a further important inference regarding the *Damingzhoujing*. If it was created later, then someone must have understood exactly where the copied passages came from and went back to that source—Kumārajīva’s *Large Sutra* (T. 233)—to restore the text to that version. This involved not simply reversing Xuanzang’s modified translations back to those of Kumārajīva, but the addition of an extra line preceding the start of the core passage in the *Xinjing*, as well as the restoration of a line that the author of the *Heart Sutra* excised from the middle of the passage. Only intimate knowledge of the original passage in Kumārajīva’s *Large Sutra* enabled this. In other words, the author of the *Damingzhoujing* had to have known that the *Xinjing* was a Chinese condensed sutra. Furthermore, they seem to have knowingly set out to create a text that would be perceived to be earlier than the *Xinjing*, thus giving the impression of the *Heart Sutra* having a longer history than was the case. Why go to such elaborate lengths to make the *Heart Sutra* seem genuine when there are thousands of authentic texts in China?

The status of locally composed and published Buddhist texts outside of India is still understudied. As we have seen, Chinese bibliographers were largely antipathetic to indigenous scriptures, but at the same time, over centuries, the production of Chinese Buddhist texts continued apace, presumably because they filled a need. Hsu has helped to broaden the context from the narrow concerns of the monastic elite, though only in a general way.⁹⁸ We still need to know more about how condensed sutras were used outside the monastic elite. Some of the local productions survived centuries of scrutiny to be accepted as genuine (that is to say *Indian*) down to the present, only to be exposed by modern scholars. We have to accept that the *Heart Sutra* is one of these.

98. Hsu, “Practices of Scriptural Economy.”

CONCLUSION

In my title and introduction, I invoked the image of the palimpsest: one text written over the top of another. The history of the *Heart Sutra* consists of multiple layers, each layer effacing the previous one. This suggests that Buddhist studies should take a Foucauldian, archaeological approach to the history of this text, excavating layers and examining “artefacts” with one eye on the context in which they were found. Scholars who study commentaries on the *Heart Sutra* have noted the lack of any unifying themes in commentaries. Each commentator tends to see in the *Heart Sutra* a confirmation of their religious profession. The problems go deeper than sectarianism, however, because the palimpsest-like history of the *Heart Sutra* appears to involve the *deliberate* effacing of one history before writing a new one on the same document. As such the history of the *Heart Sutra* cries out for an objective historiographical analysis. We need to better understand the uses to which Buddhists have put histories at different times. We would benefit from insights into why and how they composed and transmitted histories and a better sense of the social and political context in which the history of the *Heart Sutra* was composed. The Japanese establishment’s rejection of the Chinese origins thesis is something that deserves to be studied in its own right.

More often than not, the philology, exegesis, and historiography of the *Heart Sutra* have lacked objectivity. Instead, scholarship has been rooted in religious presuppositions and myth, often uncritically accepting the idea that objectivity is out of place in studying the *Prajñāpāramitā*. The fact that Conze’s *Heart Sutra* text, with uncorrected grammatical errors, still appears in the syllabus of many Buddhist studies programs is indicative. When we expect nonsense, we are not surprised to read nonsense, and we don’t look at why the text doesn’t make sense, be it a word in the wrong case or a sentence break in the wrong place.⁹⁹

A particular problem is the naïve use of Buddhist normative sources as discussed in recent work on the historiography of Xuanzang by Deeg

99. Jayarava Attwood, “Heart Murmurs: Some Problems with Conze’s *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*,” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies* 8 (2015): 28–48; Attwood, “Note on *Niṣṭhānirvāṇa*.”

(in a series of articles) and Kotyk.¹⁰⁰ Buddhist histories are generally unreliable because they have religious motivations and aims. In the case of China, other histories exist that have yet to be fully exploited in Buddhist studies. Buddhist histories seldom mention Wu Zhao, for example, even though she was a Buddhist and the most influential person in the late seventh century.

Academic Buddhist studies has a decidedly emic feel to it. We don't talk enough about the emic and etic viewpoints, how they differ, and why the difference matters. Textbooks on Buddhism all too often simply repeat the myths of Buddhism as though they were history. A more rigorous approach to studying the history of Buddhist ideas is needed, even if that causes tension or conflict with communities of Buddhists. It doesn't serve the academic study of Buddhist history if academics are religious apologists, and I write this as a member of a Buddhist order.

Between the three of us, Nattier, Huifeng, and I have resolved the philological issues and opened the door to new ways of thinking about the *Heart Sutra* and its place in Chinese Buddhism. However, despite being the most popular Mahāyāna text, and despite being routinely taught to university students, serious study of the text is still neglected.

100. See Max Deeg, "Has Xuanzang Really Been in Mathura? Interpretation Sinica or Interpretation Occidentalia—How to Critically Read the Records of the Chinese Pilgrims," in *Essays on East Asian Religion and Culture: Festschrift in Honour of Nishiwaki Tsuneki on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Christian Wittern and Shi Lishan (Kyōto: Editorial Committee, 2007), 35–73; Max Deeg, "Show Me the Land Where the Buddha Dwelled. Xuanzang's Record of the Western Regions (*Xiyu Ji* 西域記): A Misunderstood Text?" *China Report* 48, nos. 1–2 (2012): 89–113; Max Deeg, "The Political Position of Xuanzang: The Didactic Creation of an Indian Dynasty in the *Xiyu ji*," in *The Middle Kingdom and the Dharma Wheel: Aspects of the Relationship between the Buddhist Saṃgha and the State in Chinese History*, ed. Thomas Juelch, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 94–139; Jeffrey Kotyk, "Chinese State and Buddhist Historical Sources on Xuanzang: Historicity and the *Daci'en si sanzang fashi zhuan* 大慈恩寺三藏法師傳," *T'oung Pao* 105 (2019): 513–544.