

Kumārajīva: A Great Contributor to the Creation of Chinese Buddhism and the Chinese Culture

It is well known that the cultural development in ancient China from the Eastern Han (25-220 AD) to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) was directly and deeply influenced by Indian culture and civilization. The influence was largely achieved through the dissemination of Indian Buddhism. Without this magnificent religious media, it is hard to imagine that a foreign culture with considerably different characters could have made such great influence on the already highly developed and extremely secularized Chinese culture. For this reason, scholars nowadays in China generally tend to consider the influence of Indian culture as resulting from the influence of Indian Buddhism. In this regard, Prof. Ji Xianlin once said, “Without studying the impacts of Buddhism on Chinese culture, it is impossible to write an authentic history of Chinese culture, a history of Chinese philosophy, or even a history of China”. The term “Buddhism” mentioned here does not only refer to the religion *per se*, but to the whole complex of ancient Indian culture that had been brought by Buddhism into China.

One may wonder: how did Buddhism, the carrier of Indian culture, find its way into China? The languages used for transmission of Indian Buddhism and Indian culture are basically from the Indo-European language family, while the Chinese language as the essential vehicle of Chinese culture belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. The huge typological gap between Indian and Chinese languages reflects the great underlying difference between Indian and Chinese cultures. Anyone who has some knowledge about this difference is astonished by the fruitful achievements of the communication of these two cultures made in ancient times. A substantial part of the achievements, fairly speaking, owes to the enterprise of translating Buddhist texts into Chinese, which lasted between the early first millennium AD and the early second millennium AD. This enterprise represents perhaps one of the most spectacular examples of intercultural exchange in human history: during nearly ten centuries from the Eastern Han to the Northern Song Dynasty, hundreds of Buddhist masters coming from India or Central Asia to China, along with their Chinese assistants, translated thousands of Indian Buddhist scriptures into Chinese and thereby made known to Chinese people not only Buddhist teachings, but also an extensively rich set of Indian cultural information, which finally even had effects on their daily life. In this sense, it is reasonable to say that without the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese, there could have neither been the widespread dissemination of Buddhism in China, nor the establishment of Chinese Buddhism, not to mention the profound influence of Indian culture on the Chinese popular culture. Among those honourable Buddhist masters, the most outstanding one is Kumārajīva whom we commemorate today.

The present paper consists of three parts: 1) The significance of Chinese Buddhist translations in the history of Chinese Buddhism and the history of Chinese culture; 2) Kumārajīva and his translation activities; 3) The characteristics of Kumārajīva's translations and their influence on the Chinese culture.

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