

# A Study of the Earliest Translations of *Foxing* 佛性 in Chinese Buddhism:

The *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* 大方等如來藏經 and the *Da boniepan jing*  
大般涅槃經

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## 1. Dharmakṣema and Buddhabhadra

The early translators who translated and emphasized *foxing* 佛性 (Buddha-nature) were Buddhabhadra 佛陀跋陀羅 (358–429) and Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (385?–433). Both of them worked on their texts in China in the first half of the fifth century. In 421, it was recorded that Dharmakṣema held a Sanskrit text in hand and spoke Chinese to Daolang 道朗 (?–?) when he translated the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* [the Great Nirvāṇa Sūtra]. Dharmakṣema moved to Guzang 姑臧 and translated these texts after 417.<sup>1)</sup>

Concerning the Sanskrit text of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*, Takasaki Jikidō mentioned the partial fragments of this text.<sup>2)</sup> Almost simultaneously, Matsuda Kazunobu collected and translated all existing fragments,<sup>3)</sup> and Habata Hiromi used the previous research by Takasaki and Matsuda and provided a new Tibetan translation text.<sup>4)</sup>

According to Ōchō Enichi, conceiving that the same person or group translated at the same time all forty volumes of the *Da boniepan jing* is difficult. Instead, they may have been edited by different people over several stages.<sup>5)</sup> Feng Chengjun stated that Dharmakṣema used the Sanskrit text collected by Zhimeng 智猛 (?–452) who did not engage in translating.<sup>6)</sup> In contrast, Chen Jinhua asserted that Zhimeng not only brought the Sanskrit text of the *Da boniepan jing* to China but also participated in the translation.<sup>7)</sup>

According to the *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀 [Entire Records of the Buddhas and the Ancestors], both Dharmakṣema and Buddhabhadra were engaged in their translation works in China during almost the same era.

義熙四年，遠法師以江東經卷未備，禪法無聞，律藏殘缺。乃令弟子支法領等往天竺，尋訪獲梵本。於闐遇佛陀跋陀羅，乃要與東還。八年，曇無讖至姑臧，涼王沮渠蒙遜留之譯《大般涅槃經》四十卷。九年，迦維衛國沙門佛陀跋陀羅（此雲覺賢）至廬山入社，遠

法師請譯禪數諸經。<sup>8)</sup>

Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416)’s disciples met Buddhahadbra in about 408. In 412, Dharmakṣema launched the translation of the *Da boniepan jing* in the Northern Liang. In 413, Buddhahadbra had met Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (344–413) in China and moved to Lushan mountain to continue his translation works. Evidently, the periods of Dharmakṣema and Buddhahadbra acted in China overlapped. For this reason, it is inevitable to discuss not only Dharmakṣema’s translations but also those by Buddhahadbra if we intend to clarify the translation cases of *foxing* at the beginning of the fifth century.<sup>9)</sup> The term *foxing* as found in the *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* 大方等如來藏經 [Tathāgatagarbha Sutra] translated by Buddhahadbra, therefore, is also the object of my discussion.

## 2. *Foxing* 佛性 in the *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* 大方等如來藏經

Two recensions of the *Tathāgatagarbha-sutra* are extant in Chinese: the *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* (T vol. 16, no. 666), translated by Buddhahadbra, and the *Da fangguang rulaizang jing* 大方廣如來藏經 (T vol. 16, no. 667), translated by Amoghavajra (or Bukong) 不空 (705–774). While the original Sanskrit sutra is not extant for comparison, the bKa’ ’gyur canon contains a Tibetan recension, translated by Śākyaprabha and Ye-śes-sde (photographic print Tibetan Buddhist Canon 36, 240.1–245.5).

As mentioned above, the *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* translated by Buddhahadbra is a very early classical Chinese Buddhist canon text where the term *foxing* is clearly used to denote Buddha-nature, embryo or womb. At the beginning of this chapter, the following paragraph must be discussed prior to others.

如是善男子！我以佛眼觀一切眾生，貪欲恚癡諸煩惱中... 佛見眾生如來藏已，欲令開敷為說經法，除滅煩惱顯現佛性。善男子！諸佛法爾，若佛出世若不出世，一切眾生如來之藏常住不變。<sup>10)</sup>

It is notable that in the Tibetan translation, there is a sentence stating “*de bzhin gśeṅs pa rnams ni yang dag pa ñid du gnas so* (the Tathāgatas stay in the reality),” rather than the *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* stating “*xianxian foxing* 顯現佛性 (clarify Buddha-nature).”<sup>11)</sup> In other words, in the Tibetan translation, it is impossible to identify the term corresponding to *foxing* 佛性 in this paragraph.

The following passage is also typical of the difference between these two translations.

隨應而說法，令辦一切事，佛性煩惱覆，速除令清淨。<sup>12)</sup>

The term *foxing* 佛性 appears in Buddhābhaddra's translation again. If we check the Tibetan translation, this original term is likely to be “*prakṛti* (intrinsic nature).”<sup>13)</sup> There does not to be a term corresponding to at least the Chinese character *fo* 佛.

The classical Chinese term *foxing* can only be found in the *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing*, which was translated by Buddhābhaddra. It is difficult to accurately confirm the relevant term for *foxing* in both Amoghavajra's classical Chinese and the Tibetan translation. As mentioned above, there are various terms related to the Chinese term *rulaizang* in the Tibetan translation and in the original Sanskrit fragments, rather than a fixed term.

### 3. *Foxing* 佛性 in the *Da boniepan jing* 大般涅槃經

Takasaki Jikidō noted that the original term of the *foxing* in the *Da boniepan jing*, translated by Dharmakṣema, refers to the nature of *tathāgata* (Chin. *rulai* 如來).<sup>14)</sup> Both Shimoda Masahiro and Michael Radich stated that in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*, a strong connection exists between *buddhadhātu* (Buddha-nature) and *tathāgatagarbha* (the embryo of Buddha), related to *stūpa* (Buddha Tower).<sup>15)</sup> Saliently, the term *buddhadhātu* (Chin. *foxing*), regarded as the most significant term in the *Da boniepan jing*, cannot be found in the extant Sanskrit text of this scripture.<sup>16)</sup>

In the Sanskrit text, there is one section, as stated below.

icchanti[kāḥ ka]lyāṇakṛtaṃ na paśyata(!): paśya(ṃ)ti tu pāpaṃ nidiṣṭuṃ(!) garhituṃ(!) [ca] ..  
.. [yadā] sa[rvba]sa[rv]tvā anuttarāṃ saṃmyaksaṃbodhim abhi○saṃbhotsyate saṃsāra .. [tā] tadā  
tathāgatasya kṛtaṃ na vinakṣya(ti / ta)dā [par]inirvāṇāyaṃtaparinirvāṇe[na anit]yo bu[ddh]o  
bhaviṣya[ti] [d]īpa ivendhana .. ā [dag]hir iva... / <sup>17)</sup>

不見者謂不見佛性。善者即是阿耨多羅三藐三菩提....又復不見誰之所作，所謂不見如來所作。佛為眾說有佛性，一闍提輩流轉生死，不能知見。<sup>18)</sup>

The Sanskrit text states that *icchantikas* do not see good deeds (*kalyāṇakṛta*). Indeed, it becomes “*bu jian zhe wei bu jian foxing* 不見者謂不見佛性” in the classical Chinese translation. Specifically, in the Sanskrit text, “*dhātu*” does not appear in this passage. On the contrary, Dharmakṣema and his collaborators translated “*kalyāṇakṛta*” as “*foxing*,” which should be the Chinese translation term of “*buddhadhātu*” or “*dhātu*.”

Notably, as the above section, the difference between the Sanskrit text and Chinese translation is located in the ninth fascicle of the *Da boniepan jing*. According to previous research, after the finishing of the translation of the first twelve fascicles of the *Da boniepan jing*, Dharmakṣema stayed in Guzang 姑臧 and learned the Chinese language for three years.<sup>19)</sup> In other words, the section discussed above where the difference in *foxing* between Sanskrit and Chinese appears was translated by Dharmakṣema when he was not proficient in the Chinese language.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article was not to be exhaustive, but to provide some additional reflections on the term *foxing* represented in the *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* and the *Da boniepan jing*, two contemporary classical Chinese renderings, suggesting possible further research. It is hoped that this study can make a small contribution to reconsider the origin and background of the Chinese term *foxing* within the historical context of Chinese Buddhism.

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## Notes

1) Concerning the subsequence of the texts translated by Dharmakṣema, see Chen, “The Indian Buddhist Missionary Dharmakṣema (385–433): A New Dating of his Arrival in Guzang and of his Translations,” 2004. Chen argues that Dharmakṣema in fact did no translation until 421.

2) Takasaki, “Daijō no daihatsunehangyō bonbon danken nitsuite: bongādo rebin kyōju no kingyō niyosete,” 1987.

3) Matsuda, *Indoshō toshokan shozō chūōajia shutsudo daijōnehangyō bonbon dankenshū*, 1988.

4) Habata, “The *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* Manuscripts in the Stein and Hoernle Collections (1),” 2009.

5) Ōchō, *Nehangyō: Nyoraijōju to shitsubushō*, 1981.

6) Feng, “Tanwuchen yu suoyi daboniepan jing qianfen,” 1976.

7) Chen 2004.

8) *Fozu tongji* 佛祖統紀, 54 *juan*, Zhipan 志磐 (?–1258–?), 36, T. 2035, 49.342b15–343a3.

9) Faxian 法顯 (337–422) returned to China from India and launched his translation work after 410. It overlapped with the date of the translation of the *Da boniepan jing*. Faxian even cooperated with Buddhahadra and finished the translation of the *Nihuan jing* in 416. I will, therefore, ignore the *Nihuan jing* in this article, but discuss this issue in a forthcoming article as the further work.

10) *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* 大方等如來藏經, 1 *juan*, translated by Buddhahadra 佛陀跋陀羅 (359–429), 1, T. 666, 16.457b28–c8.

11) Zimmermann, *A Buddha Within: The Tathāgatarbhasūtra: The Earliest Exposition of the Buddha-nature Teaching in India*, 2002.

12) *Da fangdeng rulaizang jing* 1, T. 666, 16.458b6–10.

13) Zimmermann 2002, 119.

- 14) Takasaki, *Nyoraizō shisō no keisei*, 1974, 183.
- 15) Shimoda, *Nehangyō no kenkyū: Daijōkyōten no kenkyūhōhō shiron*, 1997; Radich, *The Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra and the Emergence of Tathāgatarbha Doctrine*, 2015. According to Radich, both Chinese translations of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* frequently feature terms like *foxing*. This term may not obviously look like translations or equivalents for *tathāgatarbha*. See Radich 2015, 23.
- 16) According to Habata, the Sanskrit original of *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* has come down to us only in fragments, while the underlying Sanskrit term of the Chinese term *foxing* and its intended meaning poses difficulties. See Habata, “*Buddhadhātu, tathāgatadhātu and tathāgatarbha in the Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*,” 2015.
- 17) Matsuda 1988, 45–46.
- 18) *Da boniepan jing* 大般涅槃經, 40 juan, translated by Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (385–433), 9, T. 374, 12.418b28–c26.
- 19) Chen 2004, 215–263.

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