

Yi (exegesis) 義, Lun (treatise) 論 and Shu (commentaries) 疏:

On the Types of Buddhist Scripture-Interpreted Literature in the Medieval China

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In the period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China, the translation, interpretation, and annotation of Buddhist scriptures were very active, and a large amount of Buddhist Scripture-interpreted literature appeared. These documents were usually entitled with Xuanyi 玄義, Xuanlun 玄論, Yizhang 義章, Yiji 義記, Yishu 義疏, Wenju 文句 and so on. In this paper, all of them could be summarized as three basic genres: Yi, Lun and Shu.

As a traditional genre since the Han Dynasty, Yi was endowed with the characteristic of classification and argumentation due to the translation of Indian Buddhist scriptures. Lun, a traditional Chinese style since the Warring States Period, was used to translate various Indian genres of Buddhist scriptures represented the argumentation tradition since the late Eastern Jin Dynasty. And then Yishu became the most popular kind of Buddhist literature by Chinese monks, that is more similar with Yi mentioned above, rather than Shu, another traditional genre of Chinese literature.

Furthermore, Yi and Shu stood for two approaches of Buddhist Hermeneutics in the Northern and Southern Dynasties: philosophical exegesis and philological exegesis. The two approaches of Buddhist Hermeneutics corresponded to the two situations of Buddhist sermon activities at that time, one is the kind of direct teaching in person, the other is the studies of general Buddhist ideas which provided the whole background of Buddhism.¹⁾

1. Yi and the basic forms of Buddhist scripture-interpreted literature

Direct teaching includes two parts: “eliminating the title” 開題 and “explaining the text” 消文. The “eliminating title” is an introduction to the teaching of a Buddhist scripture, while “explaining the text” is a special commentary to comb or analyze the original text in Buddhist scripture. The explanation of Buddhist scriptures has its specific ideological background, and it is necessary to write a general introduction of Buddhist philosophy. It

could be called “Buddhist philosophical exegesis,” which stood for an indirect or implicit sermon activity. Those documents on general introduction of Buddhism could be classified as the first type of interpretation literature (abbr. Type I), because it acted as the ideological background of the sermon activities. And then the literature of “eliminating the title” could be classified as the second type (abbr. Type II), the literature of “explaining the text” as the third type (abbr. Type III). In comparison to the Type I, the last two types of interpretation literature belonged to the direct teaching or explanation of Buddhist scriptures.

Type I. This kind of interpretation literature is a comprehensive explanation of Buddhist terms, or a general introduction of Buddhism as a whole. The titles of these documents are often titled with Yi or Yiji. Yi, meaning or principle literally, is a Chinese traditional style of literature, which became popular since the Western Han Dynasty, and was related to the exegetical tradition of Confucian classics. For example, in Dong Zhongshu’s 董仲舒 *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露, many essays were named after Yi. He tried to illuminate Confucius’s subtle meaning in writing the great book *Chunqiu*, “Spring and Autumn Annals.”²⁾ At least in the Eastern Jin Dynasty, there were several Buddhist essays or theories in the name of Yi. The most famous examples were Benwu Yi 本無義, theory of originally nothingness, Xinwe Yi 心無義, On the nothingness of mind, etc.³⁾

In the extant documents of interpreting scriptures during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, most of them were entitled the word Yi, and often regarded by modern scholars as Yishu, philosophical or annotational commentaries. According to their contents, the genre Yi of Buddhist literature is very complicated: it may explain the general Buddhist doctrine or discuss the profound meaning of a Buddhist scripture. The interpretation of Buddhist philosophy or Sūtra is also called Yizhang, which refers to the compilation of a series of Yi. The most famous example is *Dasheng yizhang* 大乘義章 (Compendium of the Purport of Mahāyāna, abbr. *DSYZ*) by Jingying Huiyuan 淨影慧遠 (523–592), which systematically explains the important concepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism. When interpreting a Buddhist scripture, Usually, the idea of the whole scripture was explained first, and then the content would be explained in detail. This mixed form of scripture-interpreted literature is called Yishu and will be discussed later.

There are other scripture-interpreted documents similar with *DSYZ*, such as *Dasheng xuanlun* 大乘玄論 by Jizang 吉藏 (549–623). Yizhang and Xuanlun are in the same

literary style. Huiyuan claimed that the style of *DSYZ* was the same as the genre Lun (treatise) translated from Indian Buddhist scriptures, and he said, “After the death of the Buddha, the sage creates his own interpretation of Buddhist scriptures, and it could be called treatise. If it is made by ordinary people, and then just named Yizhang.”⁴⁾ In fact, the titles, Yi, Yizhang, Yiji and Lun could be mixed at that time. For example, Paramārtha 真諦 (499–569) wrote *Jiushi yi* 九識義, the meaning of nine consciousness, which was recorded as *Jiushi yizhang* 九識義章 in Zhikai’s 智愷 “Preface to *Treatise on the Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*,” and as *Jiushi yiji* 九識義記 in *Lidai sanbao ji* 歷代三寶紀 compiled in 597, and as *Jiushi lun* 九識論 in *Zhangshu of huayan school* 華嚴宗章疏 compiled by Japanese in the early 10th century.⁵⁾

Type II and Type III belong to the literature of the annotation and interpretation of Buddhist scriptures. In the Chinese medieval period, both types often took Yishu as the title, and there were many other substitutions, such as Xuanyi, Yiji, Wenju, Youyi 遊意, Zongyao 宗要, Yizhang and Xuanlun, which mostly inherited the argumentation tradition of Indian Buddhism. Some of them are the general explanatory introduction of a particular Buddhist Scripture or belong to the section of “eliminating the title” when delivering sermon, and this kind of interpreting scriptures belongs to Shijing Lun 釋經論, scripture-interpreted treatise full of philosophical reasoning; some of them focus on the text explanation in the way of the traditional Chinese annotation.

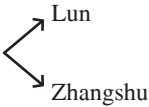
However, the boundary between type II and type III is not clear and needs to be carefully distinguished. The second is represented by Zhiyi’s 智顗 (538–598) *Fahua xuanyi* 法華玄義, Jizang’s *Fahua xuanlun* 法華玄論, *Sanlun xuanyi* 三論玄義, Huiyuan’s *Shidi jinglun yiji* 十地經論義記, and so on. The amount of Type III literature has the largest number, and this kind of literature refers to a direct teaching of Scripture interpretation, and even includes the annotation of scriptures. It is unnecessary for theoretical discussion, and this kind of literature focuses on the interpretation of the words or sentences in the text. It is the indirect successor of Indian Buddhist argumentation tradition in China. These highly sinified and widely popular Buddhist commentaries in the Northern and Southern Dynasties had several titles, such as Yishu, Wenju, Yiji and Yizhang, and were later classified as Chinese traditional commentaries or Zhangshu 章疏 (paragraph commentary) especially in Tang dynasty. The characteristic of Type III was gradually ignored in the Chinese history of Buddhism, and as a result, many of those documents had

been lost.

In the view of philosophy, we could figure out the differences between the two kinds of literature, which existed between philosophy and philology. If the documents could integrate the debating and discussing tradition of Indian Buddhism into the daily preaching practice, they belonged to the Type II of interpretation literature, corresponding to Śāstra in Indian Buddhism. If the documents just did explain the words and sentences in the way of philology, they would be classified into the Chinese traditional annotation or commentary. Both genres mentioned here were called Yishu, which was formed because of the interaction between Confucianism and Buddhism in the field of interpreting classics.

According to the above classification, the types of Buddhist Scripture-interpreted literature at that time could be listed as follows:

(1) Yi, Yiji, Yizhang (exegesis), Xuanlun → Lun (treatise)

(2) Yishu, Yiji, Yizhang (commentaries), Xuanyi, Xuanlun 

2. Lun as a new Chinese literature genre with the Indian tradition of Buddhist argumentation

According to the summary in the above table, it is obvious that Yi is the key to these scripture-interpreted literature, and almost all of them are searching for the Yi (meaning or principle) of Buddhist canons. Jieyi 解義 (disclosing meaning) appeared as a special term in the Buddhist literature at that time. The interpretation process of Yi is marked by the traditional Chinese style of Shu 疏 (commentaries) or Ji 紀 (records), and these exegesis documents mainly inherit the tradition of argumentation in Indian Buddhism.

During the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Lun which literally means treatise or the process of argumentation in Chinese, was figured out to translate several Indian genres of Buddhist canons, such as Śāstra, Upadeśa, Abhidharma, Vibhāṣā and Bhāṣya. However, most Chinese monks still called their own treatises Yi or Yishu, a name of genre with

Chinese traditional style.

In India, the arguing or reasoning tradition was derived from the following sources: Upadeśa, Abhidharma, Māṭṛka, and Śāstra. These Indian genres are suitable for different occasions, but they have similar ways of argument. For example, Abhidharma is a kind of method to explain the Buddhist teaching, and the most basic method is to discuss and to argue each other, using the way of question and answer to analyze key terms and to choose the best choice. Indeed, some of these methods are in the way of logical argument, such as Hetuvidyā.

Kumārajīva (343–413) translated Śāstra into Chinese word Lun in Changan 長安, but did not lead other masters to use Lun in the title translation of abhidharma. Perhaps translators strictly distinguished the differences of genres among Abhidharma in Hinayana and Śāstra written by Mahāyāna patriarchs such as Nāgārjuna. Abhidharma was mainly a form of argumentation to explain various important dharma terms, and Śāstra perhaps tried to establish new viewpoints through argumentation. Seng Rui 僧叡 who was the disciple of Kumārajīva said, “Lun means to seek for the origin of certain thought and to collect all principles which could support that thought.”⁶⁾

In the late Northern Wei Dynasty, Indian monks such as Bodhiruci 菩提流支 translated several Buddhist canons named in title of Upadeśa 優婆提舍 in Yecheng 鄴城, most of them belonged to Yogācāra Buddhism. This style of Buddhist scriptures is also called “argumentative Sūtra” 論議經, which means that the Buddha “analyzed and discussed in detail”⁷⁾ when preaching the Sūtra. The records that Buddhist disciples discussed with each other, could also be called Upadeśa. And then the genre Upadeśa was regarded as Lun (treatise) by Chinese monks at that time. Just after Bodhiruci translated the *Upadeśa of Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra*, Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542) said in his note, “There is no correct translation of the Sanskrit word Upadeśa. If try, it could be called Lun.”⁸⁾

In the *Catalogue of All Sūtras* 眾經目錄 compiled by Fajing 法經 in 594, Abhidharma and Vibhāṣā, which had not been called Lun before, were also named Lun and included in the “catalogue of Hīnayāna Abhidharma,” and “catalogue of Abhidharma” became the general name of both Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna scriptures.⁹⁾ So far, Lun had become a new style combined Chinese and Indian literature traditions in Sui Dynasty, namely by the end of the Northern and Southern Dynasties.

3. From Yishu to Zhangshu

There were not many scripture-interpreted literature named Lun, and most of them were entitled with Yi, such as Yizhang, Yishu, Xuanyi, Yiji, etc. Scholars often refer to these styles as Yishu, and some believe that Yishu originated from the Confucian tradition of interpreting classics.¹⁰⁾ This paper holds that the importance of the new style of Yishu lies in absorbing the argumentation tradition of Indian Buddhism.¹¹⁾

Shu (commentary) is a traditional way of annotation in Chinese ancient literature, but its literal meaning is “dredging” or “combing” and “recording in an orderly manner.” Zhanran 湛然 (711–782), a famous Tiantai monk in Tang Dynasty, said in *Notes on Fahua wenju* 法華文句記, “Shu means to link up directly, and to note down.”¹²⁾ As a genre of Chinese literature, Shu could be used to explain and to arrange the former commentaries to form a new annotation or sub-commentary, but it also could explain the text of Buddhist canons directly in the title of Yishu, or similar name such as Yiji.

In Chinese ancient literature, there is a strict distinction between Zhu 注 (commentary or note) and Shu (commentary or sub-commentary), and there is an exegetical rule, “Sub-commentary does not deny former commentaries.” But Yishu didn’t abide by such a rule. It is more about directly interpreting scriptures and overthrowing old interpretation. In Indian ancient literature, there is a similar style whose Sanskrit equivalent is bhāṣya. The term refers to the interpretation of classical annotations, sometimes translated as “sub-commentary.” In modern Chinese it could be translated as Fuzhu 複注, while in the medieval period, Chinese monks often translated it as Shilun 釋論, which means the interpreting treatise. The most famous example is *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* 阿毗達磨俱舍釋論 translated by Paramārtha. Shilun or bhāṣya in this title could be translated as Shu or Lun-Shu 論疏, but because the commentary was written by Vasubandhu, the genre was translated as Shilun.

The rise of Yishu has a long history, and it appeared in the Buddhist literature in the late Eastern Jin Dynasty. For example, Sengrui, the famous disciple of Kumārajīva, wrote a preface to the *Yishu of Vimalakīrtinivdeśa Sūtra* 毗摩羅詰提經義疏.¹³⁾ Yishu was very popular in the next 200 years, but it was gradually replaced by Zhangshu. There is no case of Zhangshu in the *Biography of Eminent Monks* 高僧傳, and the word appeared many times in the *Biography of Eminent Monks in Tang* 續高僧傳. Yizhang was abbreviated as

Zhang and Yishu was abbreviated as Shu. The two words were gradually connected, and the new word Zhangshu became common in Buddhist literature since Tang Dynasty. Sometimes the two characters Zhang and Shu would be confused.

In the time of famous monk Zhanran, the term Zhangshu had been in circulation. He said, “the ancient Zhangshu could be titled with Shu or Zhang separately.”¹⁴⁾ The writings of Jingying Huiyuan and Tiantai Zhiyi were collectively known as Zhangshu in Tang Dynasty.¹⁵⁾ In 914, Japanese monks compiled the five catalogues of Buddhist schools 五宗錄, namely, the *Zhangshu of huayan school* 華嚴宗, of *tiantai school* 天台宗, of *sanlun school* 三論宗, of *faxiang school* 法相宗, and of *lu school* 律宗.¹⁶⁾ All the catalogues of five Buddhist schools were titled with the name of Zhangshu, it means the usage of Zhangshu was widely used in East Asia since the Tang Dynasty.

4. Conclusion

From the perspective of Buddhist hermeneutics, Yi and Lun are in the same style, with a small number of volumes and profound meanings, and there are lots of volumes of Yishu, which had a wide influence in the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Since Tang dynasty, Yi and Yishu were confused and called together as Zhangshu, and these two styles gradually disappeared into the Chinese traditional philological commentaries. As a result, in the history of Chinese Buddhism, Yi and Lun gradually faded out after the Tang Dynasty, while the style of Zhangshu kept alive. This phenomenon means that the focus of Chinese Buddhism had shifted from Indian Buddhist scriptures to Chinese works of Buddhist schools, such as Tiantai, Huayan, Chan Buddhism and others.

Notes

- 1) See Li 2021, 113.
- 2) See Zhong 2005, Contents.
- 3) See Tang 1983, 164–195.
- 4) See Huiyuan, *Philosophical Commentary of the Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, vol. 1, T44, 175c.
- 5) *Jiushi Yi* appeared in *Notes of Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra*, T42, 318a; *Jiushi yizhang*, see T32, 575a; *Jiushi yiji*, see T49, 99a; *Jiushi lun*, see T55, 1133a.
- 6) 究其源盡其理. See Sengrui, “Preface of the Treatise of Twelve Aspects,” in *Collections of Records of Translating Tripitaka*, T55, 77c.
- 7) 分別廣說. See *Mahāparinirvāna-sūtra*, vol. 15, T12, 452a.
- 8) Tanluan, *The Commentary of the Blissful Rebirth Gāthā in Upadeśa of Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra*, vol. 1, T40, 826b.

- 9) See Fajing, *Zongjing mulu*, vol. 5, T55, 141–142.
- 10) See Chen 2001, 321.
- 11) See Mou Runsun 1987, 240.
- 12) 疏者, 通意之辭, 亦記也。See Zhanran, *Fahua wenju ji*, T34, 151a.
- 13) See Sengyou, *Collections of Records of Translating Tripiṭaka*, T55, 58c.
- 14) See Zhanran, *Fahua wenju ji*, T34, 151a.
- 15) See Daoxuan, *Biography of Eminent Monks in Tang*, T50, 491c.
- 16) See Sueki 2000, 424.

Abbreviations and Primary Sources

- Biography of Eminent Monks in Tang* 續高僧傳, Daoxuan 道宣, T50.
Collections of Records of Translating Tripiṭaka 出三藏記集, Sengyou 僧祐, T55.
Commentary of the Blissful Rebirth Gāthā in Upadeśa of Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra 無量壽經優婆提舍願生偈注, Tanlun 曇鸞, T40.
DSYZ Dasheng yizhang 大乘義章, Huiyuan 慧遠, T44.
Fahua wenju ji 法華文句記, Zhanran 湛然, T34.
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Zongjing mulu 眾經目錄, Fajing 法經, T55.

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Key words Yi (exegesis), Shu (commentaries), Lun (treatise), Types of Buddhist scripture-interpreted literature, Buddhist Hermeneutics

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