The Making of an "Outstanding" Translation: Obstacles and Solutions

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Abstract

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| If we were to assess the overall state of the translation of works in the East Asian canons, we should probably acknowledge the fact that we are still at a relatively rudimentary state of development. This is not only because only 10-15% of the texts have been translated, but because the overall quality of the translations themselves can be seen to be somewhat deficient: the art and technique of translation itself can still be seen as quite immature. The problems related to the present weaknesses in translation are various in type, but they can be readily seen as affecting even the most learned of our academic colleagues, who may have a good understanding of the text they are treating, but can still render rather poor translations. I have been become aware of such problems based both on my own, fairly extensive translation experience, as well as my experience as an editor for major translation projects. In this presentation I will examine four general types of problems that are often seen, and propose some remedies for them. |

Good afternoon. You may have noticed that in the handout I included a full list of my translation projects, and so that this is not taken in the wrong way, I would like to you know that the reason I did this was that I wanted to make it clear to everyone the degree to which translation has been the very center of my scholarly career, and thus my comments today are not simply the light observations of a "native speaker" who has done, or looked at a few translations here and there.

There seems to be in the present decade, a renewed and heightened interest in the topic of canonical translations. While most of the Pāli canon has been rendered into European languages at least once, the Tibetan and Chinese canons, although lagging behind, are recently receiving strong impetus and new energy. Of course, the Numata BDK translation project [slide] has been in progress for a few decades now. Recently, the Korean Jogye Jong 曹溪宗 completed 12 volumes of English translations from the Collected Works of Korean Buddhism 韓國佛教全書. [slide]

 Nonetheless, if we have to assess the overall state of the translation of works in the East Asian canons, we should probably acknowledge the fact that we are still at a relatively rudimentary state of development. This is not only because only 10-15% of the texts have been translated, but because the quality of the translations themselves can often be seen to be lacking in some important ways—the art and technique of translation itself is still somewhat immature. The problems related to these present difficulties in translation are various, but they can be readily seen as affecting even the most learned of our academic colleagues, who may have a good understanding of a text, but can still be rather poor as translators.

 I say this based on my fairly extensive experience as a translator, as well as working as an editor of the translations being done by colleagues. In the recent Jogye Jong series, I edited 3 volumes in full and others partially. And now, as Publications Chair of the BDK project, I am responsible for the overseeing of the translations of many excellent scholars, many who are perhaps more learned than I, but who fall victim to a few bad practices. I would like to take a look at some of these shortly.

 One basic problem lies in the fact that in the field of Buddhist Studies the art of translation has never been taken as the primary focus of training or scholarship. Linguistic training is of course important, but graduate school courses generally do not take on the role of judging the best rendering of a text into modern vernacular languages. And scholarly translations usually take place as a detailed philological study of a particular text, without an emphasis on the readability of the translation itself.

 Scholarly translations occur in two main ways: (1) as an academic monograph that constitutes the detailed study of a text, perhaps including the job of producing a critical edition; or (2) that of a contracted translation that is part of a sponsored series. In East Asian Buddhism, the BDK Numata series is probably the best-known and has the longest history. However, significant translation projects have recently occurred, and are still underway in Korea.

Approaches of Major Projects

 As compared to the sophisticated organizational structure of the translation teams of Kumārajīva, Xuanzang, and others, the approach used in most present-day projects for translating into English is the basic one-scholar-per text model.[[1]](#footnote-2) Taking the BDK as one example, the BDK tries to find a scholar who is a specialist in the area of a particular text, and asks him or her to finish it alone. After the translation is completed, it is submitted to an internal reader (who is usually not a specialist on the text) for assessment of basic accuracy of rendering the Chinese. If the reader judges it to be a fundamentally sound translation, it is sent to the publication office, where it is read for style and accuracy by editors who are scholars of Buddhism (but again, not specialists on the text), and it is then copy edited.

This is by no means an ideal system. Aside from the desirability of having any text translated by a team, it is usually the case that neither the first reader nor the subsequent editors specialize in the area of the text, and thus the value of their corrections is somewhat limited. There are, of course, exceptional cases, where the text is handled at some point by a true expert. But the existence of such limitations should not be blamed on the publication project. There is a limited budget per text, which puts constraints on how many people may work on it. And despite such shortcomings, the BDK project has published translations of some 76 canonical texts.

 The most fundamental problem is securing the services of a truly qualified scholar who has enough specialist expertise on the text. Most of the best scholars are employed at good universities where they have many responsibilities. If they are senior scholars, they have more responsibilities, and if they are junior scholars, they can't get credit for promotion and tenure by doing translations. So the BDK is lucky when it can gain the services of a good scholar in his prime who is right for a text. Otherwise, they often have to wait for scholars to retire, or hire translators who work outside of academia.

 The Jogye Jong project and the Academy of Korean Studies project have had an advantage, since they are both benefiting from HK ("Humanities Korea") funding, which is considerable. For the Collected Works of Korean Buddhism, the Jogye Jong was able to pay translators approximately 4 times the rate per page as the BDK does. Thus, they were able to quickly secure the cooperation of the best experts in the field. The translations were finished quickly and with a relatively high quality. But the Collected Works project had another very good aspect. Each text was translated simultaneously into English and modern Korean. When the translations were completed, a team of graduate students compared them and identified all of the points of difference. Subsequently, the translators from both sides got together in a weeklong workshop, where they worked through the differences. Of course, both the English and Korean translations were much improved by this. The Korean Classics project does not feature this team aspect, but the pay for the work is once again very high—US $36,000 per book—so they are able to gain the services of the top specialists.

The Work of Translation Itself

Despite the history of translation of the Buddhist canons into English being already over 150 years, the skills of translation are still far from mature, even among scholars of high reputation. I have come to notice this in the course of my editing work. There are some fairly common mistakes that can be corrected, and I would like to touch on a few of them here. [slide]

1. **Lack of attention to the improvement in the vocabulary of important technical terms, based on the most recent scholarship.** Despite the fact that many important terms have been analyzed and clarified by good scholars, older, ingrained renderings persist. One example is that of the rendering of *āsrava* 有漏. Here is an example from a recent BDK translator, otherwise a good scholar: [slide]

皆是阿羅漢**諸漏**已盡無復煩惱。

They were all arhats who had extinguished **all the outflows** and were never to [suffer from] the afflictions (*kleśa*).

Academic articles clarifying the proper interpretation of this term, including its relationship to "affliction" 煩惱, have been around for a couple of decades, but "outflow" (used, apparently, with little or no understanding of its technical connotations) continues to be the overwhelming choice. The proper accepted rendering by scholars is "contamination" or "taint."

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2. **The tendency to be influenced by the modern meaning of Chinese words**. This problem also affects , both Asian and Western scholars, who can be trapped by the assumption that they already know the meaning of a word based on its modern meaning. The most ready-to-mind example is that of the *kanji* 假 (Ch. *jia*, J. *ke*), which is universally rendered by translators as "provisional." People take the meaning intended in Buddhist texts to be close to the modern sense of かりに. But in the rendering of Indian texts, esp. those related to Madhyamaka and Yogâcāra, it is a translation of *prajñapti*, which refers to the fact that things exist "by designation" or "nominally," and so it is more accurate in most cases to render it that way. Furthermore, "provisional" implies that there is an agent, of some sort, who would "providing" the existence of something. In Buddhism, who could "provide" such existence? The point is that the "existence" of a conglomeration of factors is being "designated" or named.

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3. **Wrongly breaking compound words into two.** This phenomenon is also widespread, and seen quite commonly among first-rate scholars, both Eastern and Western. For very common words that we are familiar with, such as 智慧 or 煩惱, no one would think to break them into two, the same way that modern readers know that 宗教 means "religion" and not "ancestral teaching." When the classical translators such as Kumārajīva and Xuanzang created compound words, they were almost always intending to represent a single concept, not two. It happens especially with terms whose meanings have not yet been adequately explored in scholarship. **[slide]** For example, most translators render 麤重 as "coarse and heavy." But numerous Abhidharma and Yogâcāra sources clearly explain that this term, as a rendering of the Sanskrit *dauṣṭhulya*, means something like "incapacitating" or "debilitating." One might say that dictionaries don't teach this meaning, but it has been defined as such in the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism (DDB) since 1997.

Some might argue that the need to render as a single word in English is true for terms that are known to be translations from Sanskrit, and that terms of indigenous Chinese origin are a different case. I would also tend to disagree with this. I think that compound words, even the earliest ones, are intended to represent a single meaning, whether that meaning is reinforced by two similar concepts, or intended to be something "in between" the two concepts.

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Here is a line from a well-known Chinese Buddhist work, translated by a highly-regarded Chinese scholar:

儒道二教說。人畜等類。皆是**虛無**大道生成養育。

The two teachings of Confucianism and Daoism say that the species, such as men or animals, etc., are all produced, completed, nourished and brought up by the great Dao, which is **Empty and Nothing**.

The term 虛無, originating in Daoism, but also used in Chinese translations of Sanskrit works, would be better rendered by a single term, such as "void," "vacuous," "empty," etc., rather than trying to render both words separately.

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Here is another example, not so obvious, as the word in question is not as well known:

彼先邪見相傳說此功德。殺馬功德。殺人功德。**射方**功德。

“The heterodox views of the past have been transmitted in order to preach these merits: the merit of killing horses, the merit of killing humans, the merit of the **direction of shooting**.

Actually the consultation with a dictionary might have reminded this translator that 方 is commonly used to render the meaning of "method." But the Hirakawa index further defines 射方 directly as archery. Again, this translator is a good scholar, but translates based on the fact that he thinks he knows the words, and is not sure if it will be worth the trouble to look them up (again), and so just leaves it at that.

The tendency of rendering compound words into separate English terms is often seen in the works of good scholars who try to translate the text faithfully and literally. Many scholarly translations are victims of this kind of rigidity, resulting in translations that bore the reader.

One point that all of the above problems have in common is that they are connected with words or characters that the translator thinks he already knows, and thus there is no need to go to the trouble of trying to look them up in a dictionary which may or may not contain them. Thus, some of these problems should be mitigated in the present age by the intelligent use of digital tools.

Overcoming these Problems through the Usage of Digital Resources

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That is, the digital canons, such as SAT, CBETA, the Dongguk online texts, along with the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism (DDB) (including its authorities index; *http://www.buddhism-dict.net/ddb*) and applications that work with it. Using these tools, translators can readily identify terminology—can know if a term is a technical term or not—and either find its meaning directly in the DDB, or get a quick and handy reference to an authoritative source. But in using digital reference tools, one can confirm quickly if the word is defined either in the DDB or elsewhere. For example, we will find 愛想 in the DDB itself, but find that 愛他 is contained in Nakamura's *Bukkyōgo dai jiten*, p. 16d. Even just plugging in such terms for search is far faster than leafing through paper dictionaries.

 The efficacy of digital tools far exceeds the above, however, if one is working with a Taishō text and uses the SAT Database, which works interoperably with the DDB. {Open T 1585} Thus, not only are meanings provided, but compound words are identified, and the text is parsed.

 Translators need not be restricted in the usage of the DDB (and CJKV-E) dictionaries on the SAT Taishō alone. Several years ago an independent Windows developer named Jean Soulat kindly created a free DDB/CJKV-E lookup applet called DDB-Access (*http://download.smarthanzi.net/ddbaccess/*) that allows the user to paste in any kind of kanji-related text and have it parsed in a variety of ways. And since it works with the CJKV-E dictionary as well, translators of Confucian, Daoist, and other forms of non-Buddhist literature can also take advantage of it. For example, we could take the first part of the *Cheng weishi lun* that we saw above,

稽首唯識性。滿分淸淨者。我今釋彼說。利樂諸有情。今造此論爲於二空有迷謬者生正解故。生解爲斷二重障故。由我法執二障具生。若證二空彼障隨斷。斷障爲得二勝果故。由斷續生煩惱障故證眞解脫。由斷礙解所知障故得大菩提。又爲開示謬執我法迷唯識者。令達二空。於唯識理如實知故。

Or, on the other hand, with a Confucian text such as the *Mencius*:

孟子見梁惠王。王曰、叟、不遠千里而來、亦將有以利吾國乎。孟子對曰、王何必曰利。亦有仁義而已矣。 王曰、何以利吾國。大夫曰、何以利吾家。士庶人曰、何以利吾身。上下交征利、而國危矣。萬乘之國弒其君者、必千乘之家、千乘之國、弒其君者、必百乘之家。萬取千焉、千取百焉、不爲不多矣、苟爲後義而先利、不奪不饜。 未有仁而遺其親者也、未有義而後其君者也。 王亦曰仁義而已矣、何必曰利。

If a translator uses these kinds of tools, he or she can readily check the words of the text while working, and determine if a word has a special meaning that needs to be considered. At present, I have no data on exactly how many people are using these tools. But I have anecdotal information from our colleagues overseas who report that they are being used in most graduate schools in North America. If this is the case, I think that the pace of the appearance of "outstanding translations" can improve noticeably.

My advisor in graduate school, Sung Bae Park, used to tell me all the time: "A good translation can't come out until the tenth try." Well, I don't know if it has to be ten, but when one is translating a text for which three or four previous translations exist, one has much more flexibility in terms of composing prose that is accurate, readable, and expressive. And it is in this sense that the BDK translations are serving a vitally important role, even if many of them are not perfect: They are providing a useful first draft for subsequent scholars to build on. Over time, outstanding translations will gradually emerge.

Charles Muller's Translation Projects

(I provide this list simply to make it clear that "translation" is not simply a minor interest of mine. It has been the central focus of my academic career. Therefore, with much hesitation, I would like to list below my works and responsibilities related to translation.)

Monograph-length Translations

(1) *The Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment: Korean Buddhism's Guide to Meditation, with the Commentary by Kihwa*. (Translation of 圓覺經解説誼 T 842) Albany: SUNY Press, 1999.

(2) *Living Yogācāra: An Introduction to Consciousness-only Buddhism*. (trans. of 多川俊英、『はじめて唯識』) Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2009.

(3) *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005.

Edited Translation Volumes

(4) *The Collected Works of Korean Buddhism: Volume I:* 元堯 *Wonhyo: Selected Works*. Seoul: Compilation Committee of Korean Buddhist Thought, Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012.

(5) *The Collected Works of Korean Buddhism: Volume VI:* 諸敎學 *Doctrinal Treatises: Selected Works*. Seoul: Compilation Committee of Korean Buddhist Thought, Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012.

(6) *The Collected Works of Korean Buddhism: Volume XI:* 梵網經古迹記 *Exposition of the Sutra of Brahmā's Net*. Seoul: Compilation Committee of Korean Buddhist Thought, Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012.

(7) *Wŏnhyo's Philosophy of Mind*. Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2011.

Translations Contained in Volumes

(8) "Doctrinal Essentials of the *Lotus Sutra"* (*Beophwa jong-yo* 法華宗要). *Wonhyo: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 1, 83–139. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(9) "Doctrinal Essentials of the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life"* (*Muryangsugyeong jong-yo* 無量壽經宗要). *Wonhyo: Selected Works*. Seoul: vol. 1, pp. 140–212. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(10) "Outline of the Tiantai Fourfold Teachings (*Cheontae Sagyo Ui* 天台四教儀)*.*" *Doctrinal Treatises: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 6, 297–396. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(11) "Selections from the *Commentary on the Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra"* (*Haesimmilgyeong so* 解深密經疏, by Woncheuk 圓測). *Doctrinal Treatises: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 6, 21–124. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(12) "Selections from the *Study Notes on the Cheng weishi lun"* (*Seong yusingnon hakgi* 成唯識論學記, by Daehyeon 大賢). *Doctrinal Treatises: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 6, 125–200. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(13) "Preface to the Commentary on the Jin Translation of the *Flower Ornament Sūtra"* (*Hwaeomgyeong so seo* 晉譯花嚴經疏序). *Wonhyo: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 1, 57–61. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(14) "Preface to the Commentary on the *Saṃdhinirmocana-sūtra"* (*Hae simmil gyeong so seo* 解深密經疏序). *Wonhyo: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 1, 67–70. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(15) "Preface to the Exposition of the *Sūtra on the Adamantine Absorption"* (Geumgang sammae gyeong non 金剛三昧經論). *Wonhyo: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 1, 71–73. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(16) "Preface to the Doctrinal Essentials of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra (*Yeolban jong-yo seo* 涅槃宗要序)*."* *Wonhyo: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 1, 73–81. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(17) "Prolegomenon to the Commentary on the Amitâbha Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha (*Bulseol Amitagyeong so* 佛說阿彌陀經疏)*."* *Wonhyo: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 1, 215–219. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(18) "Prolegomenon to the Doctrinal Essentials of the Sūtra on Maitreya’s Ascension (*Mireuk sangsaeng gyeong jong-yo* 彌勒上生經宗要*)."* *Wonhyo: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 1, 219–225. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(19) "Awaken Your Mind and Practice (*Balsim suhaeng jang* 發心修行章)*."* *Wonhyo: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 1, 261–269. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(20) "The Exposition of the Correct (*Hyeonjeong non*顯正論*)"* by Gihwa 己和. *Doctrinal Treatises: Selected Works* Seoul: vol. 6, 425–515. Jogye Order of Korean Buddhism, 2012. *Collected Works of Korean Buddhism*.

(21) "The Great Confucian-Buddhist Debate." (translation of 顯正論 and 佛氏雜編) Robert E Buswell, Jr., ed. *Religions of Korea in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 177–204. 2007.

(22) "A Korean Contribution to the Zen Canon: The *Oga Hae Seorui* 五家解説誼 *(Commentaries of Five Masters on the Diamond Sūtra)."* includes translation of Ch. 7 of 五家解説誼) in *Zen Classics: Formative Texts in the History of Zen Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. 43–64.

Web-Published Translations

(23) *Analects of Confucius*論語 (http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/analects.html)

(24) *Great Learning* 大學 (http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/greatlearning.html)

(25) *Doctrine of the Mean* 中庸 (http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/docofmean.html)

(26) *Mencius* 孟子 (http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/mencius.html)(partial)

(27) *Daode jing* 道德經 (http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/daodejing.html)

(28) *Zhuangzi* 莊子(http://www.acmuller.net/con-dao/zhuangzi.html) (Chapter One)

(29) *Diamond Sūtra* 金剛經 (http://www.acmuller.net/bud-canon/diamond\_sutra.html)

(30) *Ten Approaches to the Harmonization of Doctrinal Disputes* (*Simmun hwajaeng non*) 十門和爭論. By Wonhyo (http://www.acmuller.net/kor-bud/simmun\_hwajaeng\_non.html)

(31) The Culmination of the East Asian Confucian-Buddhist Debate in Korea: Jeong Dojeon's *Array of Critiques Against Buddhism* (*Bulssi japbyeon* 佛氏雜論) vs. Gihwa's *Exposition of the Correct* (*Hyeonjeong non* 顯正論) (http://www.acmuller.net/jeong-gihwa)

(32) The Genjōkōan 見成公案 and One Bright Pearl 一顆明珠 from Dōgen's 道元 *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏 (http://www.acmuller.net/dogen/genjokoan.html)

(33) Zongmi 宗密 on the Two Hindrances 二障 (http://www.acmuller.net/twohindrances/zongmi.html)

Translation-related Editorial Positions:

Publications Chairman of 仏教伝道協会

Editorial Board Member of the Collected Works of Korean Buddhism 韓國佛教全書

Editorial Board Member of the Korean Classics Series (Academy of Korean Studies)

1. And in the case of team translations, it is usually done with a large text, where the translators are assigned specific portions of the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)