

## What Are the Early Chinese Buddhist Translations Good For—If Anything?

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Interest in the early Chinese Buddhist translations has risen dramatically in recent decades. Buddhologists have been drawn to these texts as representatives of Mahāyāna *sūtras* at a time thought to be rather close, by Indian standards, to that of their composition. These early translations predate our oldest Sanskrit manuscripts and earliest Tibetan translations by four or five centuries—often many more—and may well reveal an earlier redaction of the Indian textual tradition, our only window into the hazy origins of the Mahāyāna. But the early Chinese translations are so fraught with problems that their value for Indian textual history has been seriously questioned. From the Chinese side, it is obvious that these texts are not fundamentally creations of the Chinese religious milieu and thus cannot report directly upon it. On the surface, it would appear that these documents are frozen between two very different worlds, satisfying to specialists of neither. Any approach to examining these translations will require that we contend with the means by which the Indic texts—their exact language remains to be determined—were made accessible to interested Chinese. It is my contention that this can only be accomplished by considering in detail the records of the translation process itself as well as by an analysis of the resulting translation idiom. In the end, we must learn how to straddle both worlds in every act of reading, highlighting in turns the Indic and Chinese frames of reference simultaneously encoded in these translations.