

## Experimental Core Samples of Chinese Translations of Two Buddhist Sūtras Analysed in the Light of Recent Sanskrit Manuscript Discoveries

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The spoofy pseudo-scientific title of this paper notwithstanding, scholars whose research focuses on Chinese translations of Buddhist texts know that their work is more art than science. There are simply too many imponderables in any given case for certainty and precision to be achieved, or for hard-and-fast rules to be applied, in all respects. That said, rigour and exactitude are still required, even to arrive at results which recognize the existence of many grey areas and generate more questions than answers. One of the things that unites scholars in this field is the belief that such results are still meaningful and useful, or, to put it negatively, that Chinese Buddhist translations are not a hopelessly compromised source of evidence for the study of Buddhist doctrine, practice, literature and history.

This paper explores some of the general problems which researchers in this area encounter by taking "core samples" of the Chinese translations of two well-known and important Mahāyāna sūtras, the Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā and the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa. The same passages in all existing Chinese versions are subjected to detailed analysis in the light of the existing Sanskrit manuscript tradition of these texts, which in both cases has been significantly enlarged in recent years by exciting new finds. This analysis throws light on the fluid nature of the Sanskrit tradition on the one hand and the Chinese on the other, and on their interplay. One of the conclusions it arrives at entails a reaffirmation of the importance of the oldest Chinese translations, in this particular case those of Kumārajīva (early 5th century) and Zhi Qian (early 3rd century).