

On the features of Buddhist Chinese

Zhu Qingzhi, Peking University

This paper will focus on the features of Buddhist Chinese, which I used to call Buddhist Hybrid Chinese, a kind of written Chinese used originally in the Chinese translations of Indian Buddhist sutras.

In the past, most scholars who were fond of using the Buddhist sutras as the main data for studying Middle Chinese considered the language of the Buddhist sutras to be most likely spoken Chinese on one hand, and on the other, they were not aware that this language is not pure Chinese.

The difference between Buddhist Chinese and the Chinese in non-Buddhist documents is obvious. Being a unique variation of ancient Chinese, Buddhist Chinese can be characterized by two “blendings”, which I will discuss here: one is the mix of Chinese and originally Indian linguistic elements, the other, the combination of written Chinese (*wenyanwen* 文言文) or classical Chinese with spoken Chinese.

1. Blending of Chinese and foreign elements. A main feature of Buddhist Chinese, which finds its expression first in the style of the recurring and alternating use of prose and poetry, with prose written in a continuous form and poetry beginning in the new lines, had never before occurred in Chinese for narrative or expository purposes. In terms of vocabulary, the most obvious characteristic, if not the most important, is the large number of transliterated words, which include not only Buddhist terminology or concepts specific to Indian culture, but also concepts common to the Chinese and Indian cultures. In addition, the fact that most translations are carried out in a word by word manner results in syntax that is not Chinese.

2. Blending of *wenyan* and oral elements. It has been proven by many researchers that Buddhist Chinese contains traces of intense oralization. In the Middle Ages, the opposition between written and spoken language was clear cut and *wenyan* dominated the written language; the translation of Buddhist sutras, however, adopted a form of half *wenyan* and half colloquial terms as its language. As a result, a new written Chinese (*baihuawen* 白话文) was created during the Tang Dynasty. We will discuss this characteristic of Buddhist Chinese, including what it is, why and how it came about, and its significance in creating the new written Chinese.

Finally, its potential value for the study of language contacts will be mentioned in this paper.