

A CRITICAL LOOK AT BUDDHIST RELIGIOUS TEXTS TRANSLATION METHODS THROUGH THE VIETNAMESE VERSION OF THERAVADA MAJJHIMA NIKAYA (MIDDLE-LENGTH DISCOURSES)

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Abstract – *Translation of Buddha’s discourses (suttas) is one of the most challenging yet less researched areas in Translation Studies. The question of ‘a faithful translated version’ gains most importance in the translation process. The main focus of this research is to foreground the Buddhist theory of interpretation and translation and to look into the Vietnamese translated version of Majjhima Nikaya (MN) of Theravada Buddhism’s Pali Sutta Collection semantically and etymologically. The study found out that, just like translated works in any other language, the Vietnamese translations of the suttas are still not satisfactory versions for readers- both monks and laypeople, as the translators determined the meanings of Buddhist texts from their own cultural and religious experience, outlook, and interpretative traditions. Han (Chinese) language influence of the Mahayana tradition suttas was also commonly found on both semantic and etymological features of the translations. Therefore, there is a crucial need to envisage and define proper methods of translation that would help translators of Buddhist religious texts to convey the real meaning of Buddha’s teaching to the learners. This is very crucial in the Asian contexts, especially in Vietnam, because Asian conceptions of language, interpretation, translation, literature, aesthetics are very different from that of the West, and even vary by country. Future translators should have a professional attitude towards the translation of such religious texts, should possess both language proficiency and wide knowledge in religious matters. Most important, they should put their heart*

into every of their religious translation works.

Keywords: *religious texts, Theravada Majjhima Nikaya, translation rules, Vietnamese Theravada Sutta translation problems/solutions.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Translation is conceptualized in many different ways. The questions of re-writing, semantic and syntactic differences, cultural identity, gender, ethnicity, education, social equity, to name but a few, these days are all inquired into in the field of translation studies, making it a truly interdisciplinary field of research. Translation of Buddhist scriptures and texts is the most challenging area in translation studies. The goal of translation in the area of Buddhism studies, thus, has always been to arrive at the proper and acceptable interpretation leading to an exact translation. In this research, we attempt to review the theories of Buddhist texts translation, to demonstrate their application values on practical aspects in a specific set of translations from namely Majjhima Nikaya- The Middle Length Discourses of Lord Buddha, from Pali into Vietnamese. The study also intends to analyze the problems that occur in the procedure of translating those Buddhist texts.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TRANSLATION AND PRINCIPLES OF TEXTS TRANSLATION IN AN ASIAN CONTEXT

A. Nida’s definition of translation

Definition of translation represents the perspective and attitude to translation theory, which is the basis and starting point of relative translation studies, so a deep understanding of the definition will deepen the recognition of the theory. Nida and Taber [1, p.12] stated that

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“Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style”.

B. Chinese Yan Fu’s principles of translation

To explore the world of translation in the Asian context, it is necessary to review the translation principles by the Chinese scholar Yan Fu [2, p.89] stated three basic standards to evaluate the quality of a translation work - Faithfulness (Tín), Expressiveness (Đạt), and Elegance (Nhã). “Faithfulness” and “Expressiveness” are compulsory and clear-cut requirements, while “Elegance” is non-compulsory since it is about artistic feeling. “Faithfulness” and “expressiveness” are mutually supportive, while “Elegance” is artistic creation based on the former.

C. Principles of Buddhist texts translation

There are two schools of Buddhist classical scriptures interpretation in Asia, notably in Ancient China, the translation style of Kumarajiva and Xuan Zhuang. Dankova [3, p.60] summarizes translation principles of Kumarajiva as “1) emphasis on polished/refined language, 2) use of additions and omissions (when necessary), and 3) correcting terms.”

The translation style of Xuan Zhuang, as stated by Thich Phuoc Son [4, p.177], as observed from another point-of-view, can be acquired in the method of “Ngũ Chủng Bất Phiên” (Five categories should be left without translation), which includes cases of “1) when the original is secret, such as incantations, 2) a word is ambiguous, 3) there are no equivalents in the vocabulary of the target language”, 4) there are already existing and widely accepted transliterations and 5) there are no stylistic equivalents.”

Xuan Zhang’s translation works, as reported by Thich Nhat Tu [5, p.6], though well known throughout the world were found to be “very difficult for readers to understand the phonetic aspect of the translations, so his translation works are rarely recited in Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese Buddhist traditions during daily rituals”. Meanwhile, as Thich Nhat Tu [5] added, Kumarajiva’s principles of translation is still very

popular and has a great influence on modern religious translators in Asia and Vietnam.

D. Modern principles for Buddhist texts translators

Most Venerable Shuan Hua [6] has suggested some principles for Buddhist text translation and translators which are now widely used in the community of Buddhist texts translators. He states that “A translator must free himself/herself from motives of personal fame and reputation, cultivate a sincere and reverent attitude that is free from arrogance and conceit, refrain from aggrandizing his/her work and denigrating that of others, request Virtuous Elders of the ten directions to certify his/her translations, endeavour to propagate the teachings by printing Sutras, Shastra texts, Vinaya texts, and other Buddhist texts when the translations are certified as being correct.”(p6)

III. TRANSLATION OF PALI TEXTS IN VIETNAM

It is not easy to trace back the history of translating Buddhist texts from Pali into Sino-Vietnamese (chữ Hán), since there is no record preserved to date. As Le Manh That [7, p.4] reports, the Buddhist text written in verse in Sino-Vietnamese under the name Đạt-na thái tử hạnh was related to the Vessantara Jataka 547, and this work can be seen as a starting point of the Pali canon translating in Vietnam. There is no more trace of such translated works from Pali that appeared in the Buddhist literature in Vietnam after that text. Up to the 1930s of the 20th century, when the Vietnamese moved to Cambodia to work, a number of them started to embrace Theravada Buddhism, and Pali texts started to be translated into Vietnamese, mainly belonging to the Abhidhammapitaka (Luận tạng - A Tỳ Đà) by Mahathero Santakicco Tịnh Sự, with the full set of Vietnamese translation of Abhidhammapitaka released in 1990. The Most Venerable Thích Minh Châu - translator of the Vietnamese version of Pali Suttapitaka (Tạng kinh), after completing his PhD study in Sri Lanka and India in the 1950s, has devoted his

time translating the Pali Suttapitaka into Vietnamese, first with the Digha Nikaya (Trường bộ kinh), then Majjhima Nikaya (Trung bộ kinh). The earliest Vietnamese translation of Majjhima Nikaya was published in 1972 by Van Hanh University Press. The official translation work for Pali sutta collections - Digha Nikaya (Trường bộ kinh) was in 1991, Samyutta Nikaya (Tương Ưng bộ kinh) in 1993, Anguttara Nikaya (Tăng Chi bộ kinh) in 1996, and Tiểu bộ kinh (Khuddaka Nikaya) in 1999. Thich Minh Chau's whole set of translation was later published under the name Vietnamese Great Pitaka (Việt Nam Đại tạng kinh) together with other Vietnamese translations from Chinese Tipitaka. As Thich Duc Truong [9, p.3] reports, in 2010, a new edition by the name Đại tạng kinh Việt Nam Nam truyền was purely reserved for Pali Tipitaka. In 2015, the printing work was finished in 13 volumes. Apart from Thich Minh Chau's Suttapitaka translation works, translation for another collection - Vinaya Pitaka (Monastic Code - Luật tạng) was started in 2009 by Bhikkhu Indachanda and finished in 2010 (information gained from personal contact between Bhikkhu Indachanda and the researcher in 2012). The Abhidhammapitaka (Luận tạng - A Tỳ Đàm) collection translated by Mahathero Santakicco Tịnh Sự in 1990 remains to be the most popular and most official works in Vietnamese Theravada monasteries. No new full set of translations for Abhidhammapitaka was found to date.

IV. CURRENT STATUS OF VIETNAMESE THERAVADIN TIPITAKA NIKAYA COLLECTION

Most of the classical Pali suttas translations into Vietnamese, even directly from Pali to Vietnamese, nowadays still carry a heavy Chinese vocabulary influence. Many Buddhists followers, especially those without a minimum level of Sino-Vietnamese, when reading the sutta translations of Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau and Most Venerable Gioi Nghiem can hardly comprehend the profound insights of Buddhism conveyed in those terms. There are certain reasons to explain this Sino influence. Firstly, the Buddhist texts translated into Vietnamese are

mostly carried out during the period of early, or the first half of the 20th century, when the Vietnamese language has not been fully shaped and widespread like today. Secondly, because of the classic translation movement in the early stages, the translators did not have enough means of referencing, matching previous translations, when necessary, as now. When placing the translations decades ago in the present context, the readers of the scriptures will encounter many difficulties in comprehending a classic text which is too heavy in Sino-Vietnamese terms. Such heavily influenced Sino-Vietnamese translations can serve only certain readers, and will not be reaching a large number of readers who do not have proper knowledge of Sino- Vietnamese and/or Chinese language. That is not to mention the Chinese translations of Sanskrit texts, with numerous terms transcribed following Xuan Zhang's rules of translation "Ngũ chủng bất phiên". Such translations have led to the "sacredization" (Thần thánh hóa) of the scriptures, and to the conversion of the classic into the object of prayer. The Buddha, like a divine blessing, was far removed from the nature of his teachings.

V. DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSLATING PALI TERMS INTO VIETNAMESE

The process of translating from one Source Language (SL) into the Target Language (TL) is always painstakingly. In their various research works, Thich Nhat Tu [5] and some other renowned Buddhist scholars, including Le Manh That [7] and Thich Minh Chau [8], attribute the most common obstacles to the translation of Buddhist scriptures into Vietnamese to be knowledge of the translator, textual ambiguity, disparity and inconsistency in the translation works, lack of standardization of terminology, and transliteration.

A. *Knowledge of the translator*

The translator of the Buddhist scriptures should be familiar with the three sources of language, the original written target language (Pali), the reference language (Sanskrit, Chinese), the source language (Vietnamese). Next, the Buddhist scriptural translator must also be proficient

in the thought or philosophy of the content of the original texts (including ancient Indian philosophy and religion) and be able to express them in the target language.

B. Textual ambiguity

This results from differences in syntax and semantic between the two languages, which can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The ambiguity of the original language includes the word's multi-meaning and multi-functionality nature. These two factors lead to misunderstandings of the original text.

C. Disparity and inconsistency in the translation work

This problem is often seen in a series of volumes with different translators. As a result, a term in the original language is translated into many different words, making the reader confused and unaware of the main idea.

D. Lack of standardization of terminology

Creating a new word (coining a new term/word) that is not available in both the SL and the TL is an extremely difficult task. This work should be supported by footnotes so that readers can easily receive them. For example, the term "si" in Vietnamese does not convey fully the meaning of the word "moha" in Buddhist Abhidhamma. Therefore, if not explained, the reader will misunderstand or understand the imposition, due to the influence of Chinese culture, rather than Buddhist culture.

E. Transliteration

In order to avoid defects in the translation of the meaning of a word, the translators choose the transliteration method, rather than translation for a word/phrase. This method generates difficulties in phoneme transliteration. The transliterated Sino-Vietnamese words/phrases for proper names is the most typical of this issue. In this paper, the researcher only mentions the difficulty in syntax and semantics, and transliteration to translate concepts and names as examples.

Difficulties in translating concepts

Various words in Pali often appear in Pali Tipitaka, and were later translated into English and many other different languages, including Vietnamese. The translation for these terms, however, appear much helpful, since as Rao [10] reports, "Translations of words of (this ancient language) Pali must help us to understand the real sense used by the Buddha." (p.5)

To begin with, Buddhist followers always recite the Ten Names of the Buddha; these ten names appear quite frequently in different Buddhist texts. The most frequently recited one is Buddha, which is often translated into English as "The Fully Enlightened One", and in Vietnamese, the term is phonemically translated as "Phật Đà" or "Phật" for short. Both translations, either semantic or phonemic, cannot reflect the full meaning of the word "Buddha". Another name of the Buddha, Tathagata, as the Buddha called himself, is always translated as "Như Lai", which means "One who has gone so", as understood by many monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen. The term 'Tathāgata' was used to explain the Buddha's deep understanding and spiritual and philosophical experiences which he obtained under the tree of Bodhi after the enlightenment. The other common name of the Buddha, Bhagava, which is referred to all suttas in Majjhima Nikaya, Bhagava, has been translated into Vietnamese as Thế Tôn (Người được cả thế gian tôn kính). This translation was rendered from the Chinese word Shi Zun, which means "a person which is respected by the whole world" does not reflect exactly the meaning of its expression term - Buddhālokanātha in Pali, which means The Lord of the World.

Difficulties in translating technical terms into a target language

For philosophical terms, in Majjhima Nikaya series, usually, the word "Dukkha" is translated into Vietnamese just as "Khổ", but "Dukkha" both means both "suffering" and "stress". It also conveys the meaning of "unsatisfactoriness" (Sự không hài lòng) - basically "getting what one does not want" and "not getting what one does want". In the Vietnamese language, such an acceptable but short equivalent for "unsatisfactoriness" is still impossible. Therefore, the

translation cannot involve all the meaningful aspects of the word, as it is meant in Pali. The other common terms in Abhidhamma (Vi Diệu Pháp) about Dukkha (Khổ - Suffering), and Cittasamtāna (Flow of Mind - Dòng Tâm thức) cannot reflect fully the true meaning of the terms in Pali. In many other cases, the Vietnamese terms are just a loose translation of the ideas based on the Chinese terms and the religious practice experience and outlook of the translator (i.e. Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau). The word “metta” that appears in many suttas of the MN Collection is usually and simply translated as “tâm từ” (loving-kindness). This translation does not include the other meaning of the word “sự thân thiện” (friendliness). The best translation appears to be “Tâm từ vô hạn” (the unconditional love). The other words commonly found in the Sutta Collection uddhacca & kukkucca (phóng dật, trạo hối), vitakka & vicara (tâm & tứ), piti (hỉ), saddha (tín), hiri (tàm), ottappa (quý), asava (lậu hoặc) are all Sino-Vietnamese transcriptions from the Chinese translation of Pali words, and the readers thus found big difficulties trying to understand and memorizing these terms when learning Buddhism.

Difficulties in translating/transliterating proper names

Translating names has been one of the most difficult tasks for the translator. Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau [8, p.4] reported that though he has done the translation at his best will; however, the translation of proper names had remained an uncompleted task. Most of the proper names in Pali have been translated into Vietnamese based on their Chinese names equivalents found in Vietnamese translation works of Mahayana suttas, or those names would simply be transliterated. Therefore, those translated names have lost both their original and historical meaning. For example, the name of the Elder Sariputta was translated into Vietnamese as Xá Lợi Phất, which reflects no true meaning. However, the Pali name of Sariputta includes two parts Sari and Putta (which means the son/daughter). When sutta readers with some proper knowledge of Pali look at the name Sariputta, they can understand that Sariputta is the son of a lady named Sari, and

thus can trace back about his religious practice life. Another example for name translation is the name Angulimāla (Majjhima Nikāya No.86). The name has two parts – Anguli, which means finger/toe, and mala, meaning a garland. So, the name Angulimāla reflects a person which has a garland made from human fingers. These details help clarify the context of the sutta and the characters in the sutta. However, in most of the suttas of MN collection, this task was ignored for an unknown reason. Most Venerable Thich Minh Chau (personal contact with the researcher in June 2000) stated that such name translation works would be time-consuming and may draw the readers away from the focus of the sutta.

Another notable matter is the translation of the names of places. Majjhima Nikāya Sutta No.61, Ambalatthika Rahulovada Sutta, has been translated into “Kinh giáo giới La-hầu-la ở rừng Ambala” while the Pali word Ambala means A Mango Forest, and thus can reflect very clearly the place where the discourse was given. From the researcher’s statistics, the 152 suttas in MN Collection include only 22 sutta titles in Vietnamese, the other titles are half-Vietnamese and half-Pali (44 suttas), and the rest are Sino-Vietnamese titles. Kinh Ví dụ tấm vải (The Simile of the Cloth - MN7) is an example of Vietnamese translations of sutta titles. Kinh Vasettha (MN 98), and Đại kinh Mãn nguyệt (MN 109) are examples for the latter two ways of translating sutta titles.

VI. SUGGESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

From the above-stated problems, it is suggested that Buddhist texts translators in Vietnam should have sufficient language knowledge, good translation skill, and more importantly, a proper attitude towards the work of translation since the translation of religious texts, especially texts from Pali into Vietnamese is a work that requires the contribution of many people in many aspects. The proper care and investment devoted to translation works will yield prosperous results. It must be recognized that it is difficult to choose purely English words and terms to replace Buddhist terms in Buddhism that are familiar with Buddhist schools. One significant difficulty is that

newly translated words and terminologies will probably bring in hard-to-hear sounds to the ears of many Vietnamese, due to their habit of reciting scriptures that have been inscribed with the Sino-Vietnamese terms for many years in their lives. However, with such renovation, Vietnamese Buddhists will no longer be enslaved by the Chinese language in expressing Buddhist thought and will most likely be able to present Buddhist thought accurately, coherently in Vietnamese. The “proper-translated” Vietnamese scriptures in a standard way will help Vietnamese people understand the Buddha and Buddhism more, so that the Vietnamese “live” the message of compassion and the wisdom of the Buddha in a more effective way, and finally to uplift the spiritual and moral life of the Vietnamese and Vietnamese in accordance with the noble spirit of the Buddha’s teachings.

Buddhist texts and sutta translation works in the future should, in proper contexts, include both the pure Vietnamese words and the former popular Sino-Vietnamese to express Buddhist ideas. For example, translators can use the phrase “Con đường Thánh đạo tám ngành” (The Eightfold Path) to express the old term “Bát Chánh đạo”, or “Bảy yếu tố đưa đến giác ngộ” to express “Thất Giác chi” (The Seven Factors of Enlightenment). The proposed phrases, once have been used commonly by Vietnamese people, will help successfully replace the Chinese terms. Most importantly, as stated above, the translators should have a professional attitude towards translation of such religious texts, should possess both language proficiency and wide knowledge in religious matters. And inevitably they should put their heart into every of their religious translation works, as Most Venerable Shuan Hua (6) once said, “In translating the Sutras, nothing is more important than accuracy (correctness). The translation cannot be at odds with the original text. When translating someone else’s work, you must translate that person’s words faithfully. You cannot add your own ideas. If the grammar is awkward, you may smooth it out, but there is no need to add your own interpretations.” (p.3)

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