

Preface

Mr. Kosaku Eto, director of the Center in Russia of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, acting at the behest of Dr. Yoichi Kawada, director of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, has asked me to address some remarks to the Tangut edition of the “Lotus Sutra.” I consider this a great honor.

Tangut studies—which examines Tangut literature and documents in Tangut writing, the history and culture of the Tangut people, and the creation of the Tangut state of Xixia (982-1227)—has in the 20th century become an independent branch of oriental studies. If one leaves aside the efforts to identify the writing of the Liangzhou stele and one of the texts on the gates of Juyong guan, the text that served as the impetus for this new field was none other than the “Lotus Sutra,” now published in Tangut translation.

After the armed forces of the eight nations which crushed the boxer rebellion (Yihetuan) entered Peking on August 1, 1900, three employees of the French embassy in China, among them the great future Sinologist Paul Pelliot, strolled along the White Pagoda (stupa) (baita), built during the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271-1368). Among the papers and refuse scattered there, the three friends found six books of texts written in the little-known writing of Xixia. The manuscript was of excellent quality, written in neat, attractive handwriting, in gold, and on black-and-white folios. The book was clearly Buddhist in content, as indicated by its concertina binding, traditional for Buddhist books in China. It seems that the three colleagues at first divided the books equally: two for Paul Pelliot, two for M. Morisse, and two for F. Berteaux. For reasons that remain unclear—perhaps P. Pelliot gave up his share—Morisse and Berteaux ended up with three each.

M. Morisse, a qualified Sinologist, determined on the basis of the Chinese characters added to certain Tangut characters—“Chinese equivalents have been written to the right of certain characters, and undoubtedly by a Chinese”¹—that the text was that of the “Lotus Sutra.” Morisse boldly undertook a comparison of the Chinese and Tangut texts of the sutra, relying on information about the writing of Xixia provided by G. Devéria, A. Wylie, and S. Bushell in the late 19th century. M. Morisse’s work was the first and, in the end, only true decipherment of Tangut writing.

M. Morisse did not support G. Devéria’s earlier assertion that Tangut writing was phonetic; he correctly determined that the writing system was created on the basis of Chinese writing. He established the meanings and approximate readings of a few dozen signs by comparing the Tangut transcriptions of proper names with their Chinese

spellings, identified several grammatical particles, determined that Tangut was a member of the Tibeto-Burman family of languages, and indicated that “Tibetan is a language with similar grammatical phenomena,”² where the verb is in final position, preceded by the object, and attributes can follow the word they describe.³

M. Morisse did not display further interest in this, or any other, Tangut text. In 1912, he sold his three books of the “Lotus Sutra” to the Berlin library. F. Berteaux kept his three books as a rarity and did not study them. When he died, his widow sold all three books to different people. Later, at the initiative of the French scholarly community, all three books were acquired from collectors by the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques Guimet. These books of the “Lotus Sutra” discovered by the French in 1900 may still be held in France and Germany. Those of M. Morisse’s books held in Germany were later studied by German Sinologists (A. Bernhardt and E. von Zach, 1919); those held in France do not seem to have drawn the attention of scholars.

In 1914, the Chinese scholar Luo Fucheng published “A study of the Tangut translations of the ‘Lotus Sutra’”; it is based on the text published by M. Morisse and on photographs of M. Morisse’s books provided by the Japanese Prof. Toru Haneda.⁴

The discovery of the dead city of Khara-Khoto in 1907-1908 by Ts. Badmazhapov and P.K. Kozlov at the mouth of the Edzin-Gol river at the southern edge of the Gobi Desert marked a turning point in the then nascent field of Tangut studies. The Tangut “dictionary” of 1190, “A jewel in a palm which meets the needs of the time,” printed as a xylograph, significantly eased the difficulty of deciphering Tangut writing. There remained the problem of building up lexical material, primarily by reading translated texts, the task of phonetic reconstruction, the interpretation of Chinese and Tibetan transcriptions and dharani texts with the aid of modern phonetics, and a description of Tangut grammar. All of this promised many years of hard work, but the volume of extant material rendered the task eminently accomplishable. The small community of Tangut specialists throughout the world continues to work to this end.

What is important about this edition? First, one can confidently state that Tangut studies began with the text of the “Lotus Sutra.”

The second important aspect of the text of the “Lotus Sutra” that has been readied for publication is that, by all indications, the text of the “Lotus Sutra” was one of the first, if not the very first, to be translated into the Tangut language. With the appearance of Korea and Japan on the stage of Asian history; the adoption, by the time of the establishment of the Tang dynasty (7th-9th century), of Chinese hieroglyphic writing by the Koreans, Japanese, and Vietnamese; and with Buddhism and Confucianism as the basis for state and ethical-moral ideology, East Asian civilization took shape. In much

the same fashion and at the same time, Near Eastern civilization formed around Islam; European civilization began its path on a Christian foundation. But a certain rebellion took place within East-Asian civilization. The Tibetans, who did not accept Chinese Buddhism entirely and were oriented toward Buddhism from India, did not adopt Chinese hieroglyphic writing, although they could have. Nor did the Turkic peoples and the Uighurs. In the 10th century, the Qidan followed their example. The Qidan, Tangut, and Jurchen cultures developed in the main within the cultural framework of East Asia. But while using the model of Chinese hieroglyphic writing, the Qidans, Tanguts and Jurchen, who initially chose “their path” and began with Chinese culture, created their own writing systems.

Tangut writing was developed in 1036, and introduced into official use in Xixia. In 1038, by decree of the Tangut emperor, a working group of translators was created to translate the Chinese Buddhist canon into Tangut. The “Lotus Sutra” was one of their first projects if not the very first. The foreword to the 12th-century manuscript copy of the Sutra, completed during the rule of the emperor Ren-xiao (1139-1193), provides a brief history of the translation: “This sutra appeared in India and was gradually transmitted to the Eastern states. Under the emperor of the [Later] Qin dynasty (386-417) it was translated [into Chinese]. Luoshi (Kumarajiva)... After this, [our] emperor with the title of City-Wind-Horn (Li Yuanhao, reigned 1031-1048), introducing the rituals of the Lhi (which Tangut called themselves) on the basis of the language of his realm, invented writing and translated [this] sutra (into Tangut).” The translation of the sutra immediately benefited the Tangut state; as the foreword explains, “many disputes and wars vanished, the number of good deeds increased precipitously, and it became impossible to compare the efforts made for the people with [those of earlier times].”

One can assume that the sutra was copied and published many times in xylograph form. A manuscript copy from 1157 has been preserved. The text, under the royal editorial guidance of the emperor Ren-xiao, was copied by Ngwi-ndi Ra-shio-we, the order was placed by Je Wgiu. Of great interest is the xylograph edition from the second half of the 11th century carried out under the patronage of the emperor Bing-chang (reigned 1068-1086) and his mother, the widow empress Liang. The text was copied and carved on boards for printing by the monk Wiwo Jie (Gao Hui 高慧) with the title of “he who cares for the sutras.” This is a unique print edition of the 11th century. Xylographs of the 11th century differ noticeably from their counterparts of the 12th century, primarily, it seems, in the lower quality of the printing.

Thanks to the efforts of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and its founder and

president of the Soka Gakkai International, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, the director of the Institute, Dr. Yoichi Kawada, and Mr. Kosaku Eto, the Tangut texts of the “Lotus Sutra” today held at the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies are now being published. One of the remarkable creations of the Buddha Sakyamuni will reappear, and faithful Buddhists will gain access to an ancient example of the sacred text. Tangut scholars and specialists on Buddhism will receive new material for their textological research. And the scholarly world will benefit from yet another work by the outstanding Japanese professor and academician Tatsuo Nishida.

I welcome this edition with all my heart, and am confident that it will serve to strengthen the ties of brotherhood between followers of the teaching of the “Lotus Sutra,” stimulate further cooperation between Japanese and Russian scholars, and all allow us to augment the slim ranks of Tangut specialists, who are in need of reinforcements. I wish this book success as it makes its way in the world!

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