

# Chinese Interpretation of Śūnyatā

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1<sup>st</sup> century A.D, Buddhism was introduced to China through the translations of the Sanskrit Buddhist books. Notable mistake happened at the hands of first Chinese translators, it was the use of traditional Chinese terms for the original Buddhist terms.

Chinese scholars explain this situation by the name of “Ge yi fo jiao” (格义佛教) which means that Buddhism concepts in Chinese terms.

When Buddhism arrived to China there were two main cultural and philosophical traditions were in the China. They were Confucianism (道教) and Daoism(儒学).

Chinese Interpretation of śūnyatā can be divided into several phases as follows:

- i. Chinese translation of Sanskrit Prajñāpāramitāsūtras
- ii. Śūnyatā Interpretation of Six and Seven Schools (liu jia qi zong)
- iii. Kumārajīva's translations of Nāgārjuna's texts
- iv. Shen Zhao's Bu Zhen Kong Lun and his interpretation
- v. Qi Zhang's Zhong Guan Lun Shu (Tika)

# Chinese Translation of Sanskrit Prajñāpāramitāsūtras

The first Chinese study of śūnyatā can be found in the Chinese translations of Sanskrit Prajñāpāramitāsūtras (127 A.D). In these translations the word śūnyatā was translated in to Chinese as ‘Ben wu’ (本无).

The first Chinese translator of Mahāyāna Prajñāpāramitāsūtras, Zhi Lou jia Cheng (short name- Zhi Chen, Sanskrit name- Lokakṣema) in his translation of Aṣṭasāhaśrikāprajñāpāramitāsūtra, śūnyatā has been translated as ‘Ben wu’ (本无) (8). Zhi Cheng’s student’s Zhi Qian, too, in his translation of the Mahāparajñāpāramitāsūtra, used this term -“Ben wu” (本无) for the Sanskrit śūnyatā.

The meaning of the term 'Ben wu' can be interpreted in two different ways : 1. Initially or originally non-existence. II. Really non-existence.

The concept of origination of the world is empty(Wu无) , or the world was originated from the nihilism/nothingness was not a new for the Chinese philosophy. This concept can be found clearly in one of the ancient Chinese book - Zhou yi, and Dao Jiao school.

Ancient Chinese understanding the five elements and 'yin yang' are sources of creation of the world but before them Wu(nothing无) was prevailing. Dao Jia school mentioned it as “无为天地之始” which means that the 'hell and heaven' (the world) originated from the nothingness (Wu wei无为).

When Buddhism come to China, the first translators of Prajñāpāramitāsūtras, chose the term ‘Ben wu’ to express the meaning of śūnyatā. Śūnyatā was misunderstood in China because of this term ‘Ben wu’. It is noteworthy to examine the reasons for the misinterpretation of śūnyatā in China.

# Śūnyatā Interpretation of Liu Jia Qi Zong

After śūnyatā was translated in to Chinese as ‘Ben wu’ there were lots of interpretations arisen around it, and many schools grew around this concept. Those schools were named as ‘Liu Jia Qi Zong’( 六家七宗).

Teaching of these schools can be clarified into three main groups, Master Seng Zhao explained these three schools in his book, *Bu Zheng Kong Lun*, ( 不真空论) and it means he too, admits that all the ideas can be discussed within these three main schools, as follows: I. Xin Wu Zong ( 心无者) II. Ji Ze Zong ( 即色者) , III. Ben Wu Zong ( 本无者)

## Xin Wu Zong

The founder of this school is Zhi Min Du. It is considered that he was very familiar with the sutras like Prajñāpāramitā, Wimalakīrtinirdeśa etc.

This school only says that the mind is nothing or void. Therefore, there main idea can be express shortly as follows: “wu xin, se you” (心无色有) “The mind is non-existent(void), but the matter exists”.



## **Ji Se Zong**

Prof. Lai Yong Hai gives a sufficient outline of the school of ‘Zhi Dao Lin’(name of the founder).

Prof. said that the ‘view of empty’ put forward by the School of ‘Zhi Dao Lin’ is that the matter does not independently exist, hence, matters are also empty.

## Ben Wu Zong

This school is divided into two as follows: i. Ben Wu Zong. ii. Ben Wu Yi.

The leader of the 'Ben Wu Yi' was Zhu Fa Sheng. His idea is that "Wu" (无) was before the "you" (有), "You" (有) was arisen from "Wu" (无) (无在有先)wu zai you xian,, (从无生有) cong wu sheng you).

This idea is quite far away from the sense of Buddhist concept of śūnyatā, and it is similar to "Wu(无), and "Dao" (道) concepts

Dao An is considered as the leader of this school of Ben Wu Zong. Teaching of the school of Ben Wu is very much similar to śūnyatā concept in Prajñāpāramitāsūtras.

Seng Zhao's idea on this regarding, we can find the reason clearly that Seng Zhao rejects this 'Ben wu' concept which means 'nihilism' or this school emphasis strongly emptiness in the sense of nihilism, through the concept of 'Ben wu' .

Seng Zhao questions about the sayings of 'Neither existence nor non existence (非无非真无耳)' of Buddhist Sutras that non existence is it really non existence? Does this mean nihilism?.

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Therefore, he wants to point out that the Buddhist concept of śūnyatā does not mean merely nothingness or nihilism.

So, he tries to reveal the real meaning of śūnyatā and was written this *Bu Zheng Kong Lun* which means Unreal Voidness.

## Kumārajīva's Translations of Nāgārjuna's Texts

This real meaning of 'śūnyatā' was known by Chinese after Kumārajīva's translation of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and other books which belonged to Madhyamaka tradition, They are :

I. *Zhong Lun*, II. *Bai Lun*, III. *Shi Er Men Lun*, IV. *Da Zhi Du Lun*. As considering first three of them Madhyamaka tradition was called in China "San Lun", and also as all these four books, it is called "Si Lun". Another name was "Zhong Guang Pai".

According to 'Gao Seng Zhuang' Kumārajīva translated these books after bringing him to China as a prisoner in 401 A.D. He lived in Cao Chang temple in the ancient city of Chang An in China. (Modern Xi'an in Sha'anxi province).

It was the Kumārajīva who introduced the correct meaning of the concept of śūnyatā with his translations specially with the *Zhong Lun* the Chinese translation of *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.

Kumārjīva's used the term 'Xing kong' (性空) which means the empty of self –nature (Svabhāvaśūnyatā) is very specific.

This is the real meaning of śūnyatā put forward by the Ācārya Nāgārjuna. Kumārjīva only introduced it to the China.

# Shen Zhao's Bu Zhen Kong Lun and his interpretation

All dharma are under false name, and unreal. (假号不真). They are comparable to a human figure created by magic (maya). It is not that there is no human figure but that human figure is not a real man. Therefore, the name does not correspond to the substance and the substance does not correspond to the name. If names and substances do not coincide, where are the objects in the universe?.

Seng Zhao questioned thus, and he says that it is merely a wrong name long ever since (故知万物非真, 假号久矣). So it is clear that the real nature of the things cannot be expressed as it is, with the language we use, but it does not mean that there are no-things. He uses the terms 'zi xu' 自虚, 'wu xu, 无虚 respectfully. All these terms mean the selflessness (svabhāvaśūnyatā) of the things.

## Qi Zhang's Zhong Guan Lun Shu (Tīkā)

He developed the San Lun School as a tradition in China(549-623). He said that with normal mind and mind with wisdom experience the one truth. There are no two truths. With the normal mind one experiences the general world while mind with wisdom one experiences the voidness of the world. With this, he harmonized the Sammuti and paramattha Truths.

He further, added that without pointing out any idea regarding the truth repeating others views is not sufficient. So, he criticized Rev. Buddhapalita's view of prāsaṅgika, and favored to Bhāvaviveka's

- Svatantrika view.



# Tibetan Interpretation of Śūnyatā

Around the 8th century A.D., Madhyamaka tradition was introduced to Tibet. Master Kamalāsīla and his immediate disciple Ācārya Sāntarakṣita are also responsible for introducing Buddhism to Tibet. It happened in two stages:

1.(1st phase ) during the period of king Sronbtstan sgam-po translations. It is known as ‘ Era of old translation’. (629- 650 A.D.) Svatāntrika books.

2.(2nd phase ) Glan-Dar-Me king’s period –Era of new translation (836-841. A.D.) Prāsāṅgika books

Perhaps, the greatest Tibetan teacher of Madhyamaka philosophy was Zone-ka-ba(1357-1419) who was basically a follower of the Prāsāṅgika school. He tried to present a smooth blend of both prāsāṅgika and

- svatāntrika views.

## Conclusion

It is clear that Śūnyatā concept of Buddhism has been discussed in the early Buddhism, pāli Buddhism and Mahāyāna Sanskrit Buddhism. When it disappeared in India it came into exist in Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism with the Chinese and Tibetan translations. Evan in modern era this Buddhist philosophic concept was highly discussed by many modern scholars.

# Recommended Readings

- I. Dutt, N., (1978) *Buddhist Sects in India*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarasisidass).
- II. Dhammajothi M, *The Emptiness in Pali Literature*,
- II. Kalupahana, D. J.,(1976) *Buddhist Philosophy A Historical Analysis*,( Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii)
- III. Kalupahana, D. J.,(1933) *A History of Buddhist Philosophy*,( Hawaii: The University Press of Hawaii)
- IV. Murti, T. R. V., (1955) *Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allan and Unwin)
- V. Keneth Inada, *Nāgārjuna (A Translation of his Mūlamadhyamakakārikā with an Introductory Essay)*, trans,(Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication) 1993.

# Thank You

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