



Study on the relationship between Kumarajiva and Mahayana Buddhism in western regions of China



Authors:

Wuqing Peng^{1,2,3} 
Ninglin Sun¹ 

Affiliations:

¹School of Political Science and Law, Faculty of Philosophy, Xinjiang Normal University, Urumqi, China

²Department of Xinjiang Religious Research Center, Xinjiang Normal University, Urumqi, China

³School of Philosophy, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China

Corresponding author:

Ninglin Sun,
409316307@qq.com

Dates:

Received: 02 June 2024
Accepted: 03 Sept. 2024
Published: 07 Oct. 2024

How to cite this article:

Peng, W. & Sun, N., 2024, 'Study on the relationship between Kumarajiva and Mahayana Buddhism in western regions of China', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 80(3), a9948. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i3.9948>

Copyright:

© 2024. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Kumarajiva is a Chinese Buddhist master who came from the western regions of China. His religious thoughts went through a conversion from Hinayana Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism. Based on the process of Kumarajiva's thought transformation, this article creatively proposes the consistency between Kumarajiva's thought transformation and the localisation process of Buddhism in the western regions of China. The article aims to explore Kumarajiva's special historical status in Chinese Buddhism history, especially the important impact of his Buddhism thoughts on Mahayana Buddhism in the western regions of China, such as Kucha and Gaochang, etc.

Contribution: This study reveals the thought transformation process of Kumarajiva, which is paralleled with the localisation process of Buddhism in the western regions of China. This study can offer references towards scholars in the field of religious history, especially in the field of Buddhist history in the western regions of China.

Keywords: Kumarajiva; Buddhism in the western regions; Mahayana Buddhism; relationship; localisation process.

Introduction

Kumarajiva, a Buddhist master born in Kucha in the western regions (now Xinjiang, China), enjoys very high honour in the history of Chinese Buddhism. His Mahayana thought produced a profound impact on Buddhism in the western China and Chinese Buddhism. Therefore, making him a key figure of study for historians of religion and philosophers. Imposing the study of the relationship between Kumarajiva and Mahayana Buddhism in western China in the theoretical lens of macro civilisation is one of the approaches to investigate the interactions between Indian civilisation and Chinese civilisation, as well as that between western China civilisation and Central Plain's civilisation. There are two main tendencies in conducting this research, one is the conquest of one civilisation by another, as explained by the Dutch scholar Erik Zürcher's 'The Buddhists' Conquest of China (*The Buddhists' Conquest of China in Li Silong 2003*'. The term 'conquest' in the original title has connotations of 'control' and 'enslavement', which are terms commonly used by the West in the context of modern colonisation. However, it seems inappropriate to use such a term that contradicts with the Buddhists' thoughts on harmony in the Buddhist history studies. Furthermore, the word conquest clearly implies a passive acceptance of values, which is also not consistent with the author's research. The second tendency is the peaceful exchange and dialogue between two heterogeneous civilisations. Indian scholar Hari Shankar Prasad (Hari 2020) stated that:

India and China are two great nations with nearly 5000 years of long, great, and ever-lasting civilizations. Their worldviews, based on the nature of the cosmos, have formed harmonious, unified, and prosperous systems of individual, social, political, and religious life within the frameworks of Chinese Taoism and Confucianism and Indian Vedic, Jain, and Buddhism teachings. (pp. 8–9)

In order to build a harmonious religious relationship and with respect towards the fact that multiple religions have coexisted in the western religions of China, this article will uphold the fundamental position of civilised and peaceful exchanges and try to cite diverse detailed historical documents to explore the relationship between Kumarajiva and western Mahayana Buddhism. Firstly, the article will outline the ideological conditions under which Kumarajiva accepted Mahayana Buddhist thought. Secondly, on the basis of detailed historical documents and materials, the article will explore the conversion process of Kumarajiva's faith from

Note: Hangzhou City University Section: Cross-cultural Religious Studies, sub-edited by Chen Yuehua and Ishraq Ali (Hangzhou City University, China).

Hinayana Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism. Thirdly, echoing the title, the article will present some of the author's own views on the influence of Kumarajiva on Mahayana Buddhism in the western regions of China.

The ideological conditions for Kumarajiva's acceptance of Mahayana Buddhist thought

Although Hinayana Buddhist thought, especially the Sarvastivadin thought, was widely spread in Kucha, Jibin (present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kashmir area), and other places during Kumarajiva's time, Mahayana thought was also being spread there, especially in Khotan (present-day Hotan), early Shache (Yarkand) and early Tumshuq (present-day Marabishi Country), which were also a convergence belt for Mahayana Buddhism.

The western regions of China have been a place where multiple tribes and diverse cultures met and integrated since ancient times. Despite the differences in facial appearances and languages, most of the time they have coexisted peacefully and interacted closely with each other. Locating at the southeastern part of the western regions and absorbing the passengers' cultures on the Silk Road's southern route, Khotan exhibited its distinct characteristics in various aspects. Khotan's uniqueness lied in its Saka people's domination and the Saka language with the Khotan accent. The unique tribal, cultural and linguistic characteristics of Khotan led to its creative development of a distinctive and flourishing Khotanese Mahayana Buddhism.

'Li yul chos kyi lo rgyus' (Tibetan) records the spread and development of both Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism in Khotan:

The views held by the two Sanghas' monks are as follows: among the monks who believed in the Mahayana, they adhered to the concepts of non-delusion (rnam par myirtogs pa) and the Samadhi of Shurangama (dpa'bar 'gro ba'i ti nge 'dzin); those who practiced the Hinayana adhered to the Four Noble Truths. Among the two Sanghas and laypeople, the number of those who practiced the Mahayana and those who practiced the Hinayana was described as follows: those who practice the Mahayana are as numerous as the hairs on a horse's body, while those who practice the Hinayana are as few as the hairs on a horse's ear, and the numbers are approximately so (Zhu 2011:116–117).

Though both Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism were transmitted in Khotan, the influence of the two was distinctive. Regarding the number of Mahayana and Hinayana followers in Khotan, an interesting comparison was made: 'those who practise the Mahayana are as numerous as the hairs on a horse's body, while those who practise the Hinayana are as few as the hairs on a horse's

ear', which has clearly illustrated that Mahayana far outnumbered Hinayana and has vividly indicated the predominance of Mahayana Buddhism in Khotan.

Known as the centre of Mahayana in western China, Khotan was an important source of Mahayana Buddhism's spread to other regions of the western regions and even to the Central Plains.

Influenced by Khotan, the power of Mahayana Buddhism was relatively strong in nearby areas such as Shache and Shule at the western end of the southern edge of the Tarim Basin, and at certain times, Mahayana Buddhism even received support from the royal families of Shache and Shule. The Mahayana Buddhism that came from places like Khotan further spread eastward along the northern edge of the Tarim Basin (the southern foothills of the Tianshan Mountains) and gradually expanded its influence. As a result, there was also the spread of Mahayana Buddhist thought in the strongholds of Hinayana Buddhism, like Kucha and Karashahr. Places like Shule, Tumshuk, Shache and others were very similar to Khotan in terms of tribal groups, language, culture and religion in the early days. This is because the culture and religion of the south of the Pamirs, passed over the Karakoram Mountains, the first place it reached was Shule, Tumshuk, Shache and other places at the western end of the northern edge of the Tarim Basin and then spread east to Khotan. This geographical connections resulted in that there were similarities between Khotan and Shule, Shache and other places in many aspects. Therefore, in the early days, Shule, Tumshuk, Shache and other places were involved in the Buddhist cultural circle of Khotan and were strongly influenced by Khotan in terms of their religious doctrines, sects and artistic styles.

And thus, the widespread of Mahayana in Khotan, Shache, Tumshuke and other places in the Tarim Basin had established the ideological condition for Kumarajiva's acceptance of it.

Kumarajiva conversion to Mahayana Buddhism

After studying and debating in places such as Jibin, the young Kumarajiva had become a master of Hinayana Buddhism. At the same time, Kumarajiva had also extensively studied other Buddhist scriptures and thus had gained a comprehensive understanding of Mahayana thought. The most crucial figure that led to his Buddhist philosophy transformation from Hinayana to Mahayana was the Shache Prince Suryasoma.

According to the 'Compilation of Notes on the Translation of the Tripitaka' (Seng Y 519:vol 14):

Kumarajiva consulted the Mahayana from Suryasoma. He sighed and said, 'In the past, I studied Hinayana. And it was just like when a person did not know gold, it would be wonderful to use a stone metaphor'. So he sought

righteousness and recited the two treatises of 'the Middle Sutra' and 'the Hundred Sutra'.

There are similar records in 'The Biography of Kumarajiva':

At that time, there were two brothers, Prince Shache and Prince Canjun, who were appointed as Sramana (沙门) by the State Council. The elder brother was called Suryabatuo, and the younger brother Suryasoma. Soma's skill was unparalleled, specialising in Mahayana. His brother and various scholars all regarded him as a master, and Kumarajiva also respected and followed him, maintaining a close relationship. Soma narrated the Abhidharma Sutra to Kumarajiva. When Kumarajiva heard that the coordination of the whole body and mind was empty and devoid of attributes, he felt puzzled and asked, 'What other meaning does this scripture have and how can it destroy all dharmas?' Soma replied, 'The eye and other dharmas do not truly exist'. As Kumarajiva insisted that there is an eye root, Soma's argument does not have sufficient evidence. The two then repeatedly discussed and argued, and after a long time, Kumarajiva finally understood the reasoning and dedicated himself to the study of Mahayana Buddhist philosophy. He exclaimed, 'In the past, I studied Hinayana Buddhism, like a person who does not recognise gold and mistakes stones for treasures'. So he extensively explored the essence of philosophy and accepted the recitation of classic texts such as the Middle Sutra, the Hundred Sutra and the Twelvelfold Door Sutra.

The records in 'Commentary on Hundred Discussions' (Ji Z 608:42) are more detailed:

The prince (i.e. Suryasoma) wished to convert Kumarajiva, so he came to his room at one time, loudly chanting the Abhidharma Sutra loudly, revealing the emptiness of form and even all the Dharma emptiness. Shi heard it from afar. The next morning he asked, 'What is this sutra and why does it destroy all dharmas?' The prince replied, 'It is a Mahayana sutra'. Shi asked, 'What does this sutra mean?'. The prince replied, 'The emptiness of ultimate righteousness'. Shi said, 'What we see with our eyes is real, so how can you say it's void?'. The prince asked, 'If what we see with our eyes is real, what is its nature?'. Shi replied, 'Its nature is its ability to see'. The prince asked:

If the nature of the eye is its ability to see, then it should be able to see itself. If the eye can see one particle, it should be able to see all particles. If the eye can not see one particle, then none of them can be seen. Just as one blind person cannot see, neither can other blind people.

The prince further asked, 'The colors we see may seem real, but in reality they are composed of numerous tiny particles. Although being in the world, it is still empty'. At this point, Shi had no reply.

The first and second literature records mentioned above show that Kumarajiva, through the guidance of his tutor, Suryasoma, and his own understanding of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, directly depicted Mahayana and

Hinayana in an intuitive way: Mahayana is like gold, while Hinayana is like stone, and the difference is significant and apparent. After that, Kumarajiva discarded Hinayana and sought the essence of Mahayana, reciting canonical texts such as 'Mahayana Sutra', 'Hundred Sutra' and 'Twelve Gates Sutra'.

The third literature records present a detailed introduction of the process that Suryasoma explained Mahayana Buddhism's rationales to Kumarajiva and convinced him of its truth. Suryasoma mainly did this by repeatedly explaining the 'Abhidharma Sutra' to Kumarajiva, allowing him to gradually accept Mahayana Buddhism. The 'Abhidharma Sutra' advocates the ideas of 'following the path of a Bodhisattva who cultivates the roots of virtue in past lives and of firmly adhering to the six paramitas of Mahayana Buddhism' (Dharmaraksa 284:2), especially the theory of 'Emptiness' in the 'Voidness until all Emptiness' viewpoint, requiring believers to discard Hinayana Buddhism and follow Mahayana Buddhism. By comparing 'Being' with 'Emptiness', it is clear that the concept of 'Emptiness' has a deeper meaning, with its philosophy far surpassing that of 'Being'. This laid a solid ideological foundation for Kumarajiva's later promotion of Mahayana principles centred on the 'Mahayana Sutra', 'Hundred Sutra' and 'Twelve Gates Sutra' in Central China, which later on developed to the 'Three Treatises' of Chinese Buddhism (Huo 1997:50).

The historical fact that Prince Suryasoma of Shache promoted Mahayana Buddhism reflects the overall situation of the northern margins of the Tarim Basin from another perspective. The residents in cities like Shule, Qiuci and Yanqi in the northern rim of the Tarim Basin had mainly followed Hinayana Buddhism, especially among the common people. The influence of Hinayana had been omnipresent and unshakable. However, because of the personal preferences of certain figures in the ruling classes, they adopted Mahayana Buddhism and promoted it through their power advantages. Nevertheless, at these figures' death, the influence of Mahayana Buddhism in the northern rim of the Tarim Basin also vanished swiftly.

After returning to Mahayana Buddhism, Kumarajiva had a very firm belief in it. According to 'The Biography of Eminent Monks': (Hui J 519:74)

He then stayed in Kucha and lived in a new temple. Later, in the Forbidden City next to the temple, he first received *the Radiance Sutra* and began to read it. When demons came to cover up the scriptures, he could only see empty ultimatum. Kumarajiva knew what the devil had done but vowed to be steadfast. Then Demons disappeared and characters appeared, and he still learnt to recite them. Upon hearing the sound in the air again, what said that 'You are a wise man, why do you read this?' Kumarajiva replied, 'You are a small demon, it is advisable to go at once. My heart is like the ground, it cannot be turned over'.

This record illustrates that after Kumarajiva turned to Mahayana Buddhism, there was an attempt by the Hinayana community in Kucha to seduce him back to his original Hinayana beliefs. Here, Hinayana was directly referred to as 'demons'. When the Hinayana monks tried to stop Kumarajiva from reading Mahayana scriptures, but his attitude was very firm. He told them to 'leave now' and said, 'My heart is like the ground, it cannot be turned over', which indicated his deep faith in Mahayana Buddhism.

The influence of Kumarajiva on Mahayana Buddhism in western regions of China

Before returning to Kucha, Kumarajiva had already gained fame for his exceptional Buddhist knowledge and debating skills in the western regions in China and other places such as Jibin. When he returned to Kucha with his mother, the King of Kucha personally went to meet them at Wensu in northern Tianshan. Since then, under Kumarajiva's advocacy, Kucha, Yanqi, Shule and Gaochang had all been deeply influenced by Mahayana Buddhism.

Transformation of the exclusively Theravada tradition in Kucha and surrounding regions

Kucha was the Buddhist centre on the northern rim of the Tarim Basin in the western regions. According to *The Book of Jin* records:

'In the custom of Kucha Kingdom, there were three layers' of city walls, including a thousand Buddhist pagodas and temples, and nearly ten thousand monks' all these indicated the prosperity of Kucha Buddhism.

Kucha has long been known for its Hinayana Buddhism, especially for pushing the Abhidharma thought to the extreme. According to records, when Dharmodgata was 20 years old, he could already recite thousands of volumes of sutras, especially in the field of mantras, and was well known throughout all the surroundings. Therefore, people called him the Great Mantra Master. At first, he was highly respected by the king of central India, but later the king became increasingly cold towards Dharmodgata. At that time, most people in Kucha followed Hinayana Buddhism and did not believe in Dharmodgata's lectures. As a result, Dharmodgata was forced to leave there and went to the Mengxun area of Beiliang Juqu in the Hexi Corridor. There, he worked with monks Huisong and Daolang to translate over 600000 words of Buddhist scriptures.

The situation of Buddhists' beliefs in Kucha was as stated by the Tripitaka Master Sikanashi:

In the country of Kucha, they only practiced Hinayana Buddhism and did not believe in the hundred billion manifestations of Shijia, though which had shown various forms and displayed new realms. They did not believe in the Avatamsaka Sutra. (Hui Y 783:176)

Because of Kumarajiva's efforts, Mahayana Buddhism's sects of Fahua, Baojia, Shimen and Fangdeng also spread in Kucha for a considerable period. Even at one point, Mahayana Buddhism became dominant.

According to the 'Record of the Lotus Sutra', vol. 6, 'Seventeen Samantabhadras of the Kingdom of Kucha':

Dāmodātuó, also known as Fāxián, is a native of Kucha. He was endowed with a natural intelligence, proficient in all three copies of Buddhist scriptures, and knew a little about the foreign languages. He considered small things to be the ultimate and held a high opinion of himself. He insulted the Mahayana Buddhism crowd and treated them with contempt. At that time, there was a visiting monk named Sulya who could recite the complete 'Lotus Sutra' without error. When he debated with Dāmodātuó about his recitation of the profound meanings of the sutra, Dāmodātuó realised that his knowledge of Buddhist scriptures was shallow compared to Sulya's. Therefore, he turned to Mahayana Buddhism, began to recite the 'Lotus Sutra' from Sulya every day for five times. He respected and protected Sulya and was also asked to guard Sulya. When he was on his deathbed, he said to his disciples: 'In the past, I only knew and believed in Hinayana teachings as ultimate truth, which was like holding a piece of tile as if it were gold. Now that I have learned and believed in the Mahayana 'Lotus Sutra', and I have obtained genuine gold with it (Takakusu Junjiro 1934:331)'. His followers built a tower on the remains of his body; summer rain fell heavily, but the rain could not wet the tower; bird flocks flew, but not near the tower edge. All who hear or see it come to worship and make offerings as if at a marketplace.

The word 'Sulya' refers to the Mahayana master of Kumarajiva, the high monk Suryasoma of the Shache Kingdom. Dāmodātuó previously referred to the Hinayana as the ultimate and insulted the Mahayana followers, clearly being a faithful believer in the inherent Hinayana Buddhism of Kucha, condemning the Mahayana and striving to uphold it. Later, under the influence of the Sutra of the Dharma by Sulya, he 'returned to the Mahayana' and recited the Sutra of the Dharma 'five times a day as his karma', demonstrating his devout faith in the Mahayana. More importantly, after the death of Dāmodātuó, he became 'meditative', and his followers 'erected a tower on his remains' and deified it – his tower 'rained heavily in summer, and the rain could not wet the tower. Birds flew, but not near the tower', thus creating a grand scene of 'worship and offerings like a market'. From this, it can be seen that there were a large number of followers of Mahayana Buddhism in Kucha at that time, with a considerable scale, indicating that although the power of Hinayana Buddhism, led by the famous master Fotu Shemi, was still relatively strong during the Kumarajiva era, Mahayana Buddhism also flourished, and Mahayana scriptures such as the Dharma Sutra were widely circulated in Kucha.

Until the end of the 6th century AD, the royal family of Kucha still believed in Mahayana. In 585 AD, a South Indian named Dharmagupta came to Kucha and stayed at the Kucha Monastery for 2 years. While learning eastern languages, he also preached to the monks about the 'Treatise on the Precepts of Buddhism' and the 'Treatise on Truth'. As he was well versed in Mahayana at that time, the Kucha king gained a lot of enlightenment after listening to Dharmagupta's lectures. Therefore, every time Dharmagupta preached, the Kucha King would personally attend and accompany him day and night, and he even tried to persuade Dharmagupta to stay in Kucha for long. The devout faith of the royal family of Kucha in Mahayana Buddhism can be clearly seen from this.

Although overall, Mahayana Buddhism was not widely practiced in Kucha, sometimes because of the preference of some of the ruling class for Mahayana, the Mahayana faith was advocated in Kucha or those highly respected monks promoted Buddhism in Kucha and other places, which led to a certain degree of belief in Mahayana Buddhism. The influence of Kumarajiva on Kucha had always existed, mainly manifested in the fusion of the Hinayana and Mahayana ideas in Kucha Buddhism, as reflected in the images of Kucha Grottoes, For example, Kumutula, Senmusem, Mazhabha, Kizil, etc.

The ideas of both the Mahayana and the Hinayana might be integrated into specific Buddhist beliefs, just like many Buddhist monks and masters who were good at both the Mahayana and Hinayana beliefs. Although Kucha was mainly based on Hinayana Buddhism, it also, to some extent, accommodated the beliefs and culture of Mahayana Buddhism at certain historical periods. Taking Maitreya faith as an example, Mahayanas believed that Maitreya would appear in the realm of human beauty in his next life, but the difference was that Mahayanas had a stronger expectation of Maitreya's Pure Land, As Mr. Ji Xianlin said:

With the development of Buddhism, the concept of Maitreya was also constantly evolving. The transition from the Hinayana to the Mahayana was a significant change in the history of Indian Buddhism, and the Maitreya faith also changed at this time... The Hinayana only worshipped Maitreya, while the Mahayana worshipped him fervently, which was an important difference between the two. (Ji 1998:70)

People's faith in the future Buddha Maitreya Bodhisattva actually reflects their inner yearning for a perfect future Maitreya Buddha Pure Land, as well as their expectations for Maitreya's descent to the mortal world and the transformation of sentient beings. As Li Ruizhe pointed out, Maitreya's ideology made a clear commitment to the believers to lead heavens in their rebirth, thus attracting people's faith in Maitreya, 'Tusita is a brilliant and bright ideal world, which undoubtedly has a strong attraction to people who live in this world and suffer greatly' (Li 2006:23).

Impact on Gaochang and other areas

Gaochang, located in the eastern part of the western regions, is connected to the Central Plains through the Hexi Corridor. As early as the Han Dynasty, Han people from the Central Plains came here to settle down in the fields. During the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, wars were still frequent, and it was turbulent in the Central Plains. More Han people came to Turpan Basin to settle down, which embarked on the history of thousands of years of large-scale Han people living in the western regions. Chinese Buddhism took root here and subsequently displayed a comprehensive impact on Uyghur Buddhism.

In the 2nd century AD, a large scale of Buddhist scriptures were translated in the Central Plains region. Some of these classics may have been spread to Gaochang, but they did not produce much influence. In the 3rd century AD, the religious groups in Luoyang and other areas of the Central Plains had close connections with the western regions, and Chinese Buddhism also returned back to Gaochang during this period.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a Japanese exploration team from Otani discovered a copy of the 'Collection of Buddhist Scripture' at the Tuyugou Grottoes Temple. The postscript at the end of the sutra states:

In 292 AD, on January 22, the monthly branch of the Shaman Dharma Protector orally taught Nie Chengyuan to the superior disciple Shaman Zhufa. Today, this scripture is widely circulated, carrying the teachings of Pei Honghua and achieving rapid success. Written on March 18, 298 AD. There were 30 012 chapters with a total of 19596 words (Chen 1983:6; Dagu 1999:112) (owing to the erosion of the paper, the translation may not be exact).

'Yue Shi Sha Men Fa Hu' refers to the famous Dunhuang Buddhist monk who translated scriptures. 'Nie Chengyuan' was Zhu Fa Hu's assistant in translating scriptures, and 'Fa Shou' was Zhu Fa Hu's disciple. From the postscript, it can be seen that Nie Chengyuan and others assisted Zhu Fahu in translating 'Collection of Buddhist Scripture', and Nie Chengyuan transcribed the final manuscript. The fragments seen were copied by Zhu Fahu based on Nie Chengyuan's manuscript. 'Yuankang' is the reign title of Emperor Hui, who advanced westward. In the sixth year of Yuankang, which was 296 AD, the 'Collection of Buddhist Scripture' discovered is the world's earliest written Chinese Buddhist scripture with a clear chronological record. According to records, the 'Collection of Buddhist Scripture' was translated by Zhu Fahu in Dunhuang in the second year of Yuankang (292 AD), and it was only transmitted to Gaochang after 4 years, indicating that there were already very close religious exchanges and interactions between Gaochang and Dunhuang at that time (Rong 1987).

Both before and after the migration of the Uyghurs to the west, Han Buddhism and Chinese Buddhist scriptures were mainly popular in the Gaochang area. According to current archaeological discoveries, the popular Buddhist scriptures in Gaochang were predominantly translated by Kumarajiva. Among the Buddhist manuscripts unearthed in Turpan, Kumarajiva translated the most fragments of the Lotus Sutra in the eighth year of the Hongshi reign of Yao Qin (406 AD), such as the Lotus Sutra, Metaphorical Version 3, Lotus Sutra, Master Version 10, Lotus Sutra and Anle Xing Version 13. These fragments were unearthed from the foundation of the Nanfei Temple in the ancient city of Anle in Turpan. According to the style of the book, it was written in the mid-5th century (approximately no later than the Chengping period of the Northern Liang Dynasty, 443–460 AD) and was one of the earliest transcribed versions of this scripture by Luo Shi shortly after his translation. It is also the earliest known copy of this scripture in China (Wu 1994a:152). In addition, the translations of the Buddha's Sutra of Prajnaparamita, Vimalakirti's Sutra, Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra, Buddha's Sutra of Shurangama Samadhi and Mahayana Sutra by Kumarajiva are also commonly found in places such as Gaochang. It can be seen that as soon as the translation of Kumarajiva was released, it quickly spread to the Turpan region and replaced the previous translation, which is a fact seen from the Turpan written version (Wu 1994b:155).

Conclusion

Kumarajiva's Buddhist philosophy, which evolved from Hinayana Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism, was an important step of Indian Buddhism towards the sinicisation and localisation. The relationship between Kumarajiva and Mahayana Buddhism in the western regions of China is mainly manifested in two aspects. Firstly, under the guidance of his mentor Suryasoma in the western regions of China, Kumarajiva personally promoted Mahayana Buddhism in the area through peaceful means when he converted from Hinayana Buddhism to Mahayana Buddhism. This was a direct influence of Kumarajiva on Mahayana Buddhism in the western regions of China. Secondly, after more than 10 years of translating scriptures in the Central Plains region (Chang'an), Kumarajiva, which represented Chinese Buddhism, returned to places such as Gaochang in the western regions of China again, exerting a second round of profound influence on Mahayana Buddhism in the western regions, which was an indirect influence on Mahayana Buddhism though. He introduced Indian Buddhism in its authentic form for the first time through the translations and interpretations of nearly 400 volumes of Buddhist scriptures, which played an important role in the prosperity of Chinese Buddhism during the Southern and Northern Dynasties and the formation of various Buddhist sects during the Sui and Tang dynasties. These translations are closely related to the development of Chinese culture and have had a

profound impact on several of the most popular Buddhist sects in China, such as the Amitabha Sutra, which is the main classic of the Pure Land sect; the Lotus Sutra, which is the main classic of the Tiantai Sect and the Diamond Sutra, which is the main classic of Zen Buddhism.

In summary, this article attempts to reconstruct the actual conversion process of the representative figure in Chinese religious history, Kumarajiva, and provide reliable historical basis and evidence for the localisation process of Indian Buddhism in the western regions of China. Kumarajiva is a representative figure in the history of heterogeneous civilisations' peaceful exchanges through religious approaches. How can we understand Kumarajiva's religious spirit and provide historical references for the peaceful dissemination, exchange, and dialogue of religions? The author thinks that this is an issue worth further research and discussion.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

The research for this article was conducted collaboratively by W.P. and N.S. While W.P. and N.S. prepared the initial draft of the article, N.S. edited, proofread and refined the article.

Ethical considerations

This article does not contain any studies involving human participants performed by any of the authors.

Funding information

This research is supported by the major bidding project for the 2022 major historical issues research project of the National Social Science Foundation of China's Institute of History 'Research on Religious Governance in Ancient China' (22VLS007).

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

References

- Chen, G.C., 1983, 'The fragmented volume of the collection of Buddhist scriptures unearthed in Turpan and the textual research on the translation of the Sutra by Zhu Fahu, a famous monk in Dunhuang Studies', *The Journal of Dunhuang Studies* 6.
- Dharmaraksā, 284, *Abhidharma Sutra*, vol. 1, pp. 266–317, Zhong Hua Book Company, Beijing.
- Erik, Z., 2003, *The Buddhist conquest of China*, tranl. L. Silong, Jiangsu People's Publishing House, Nanjing.
- Guangrui, D., 1999, *The Atlas of western regions archaeology*, Xueyuan Press, Beijing.
- Hari, S.P., 2020, 'The Confluence of Ancient Indo-Chinese Cultures: The Honorable and Peaceful Buddhist Model', in *International Conference on '70 Years of China-India Relations: Retrospect and Future Scenario'*, Key Research Base of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Ministry of Education of China, Institute of South Asian Studies, Sichuan University, China, November 06, 2020, pp. 8–9.
- Hui, J., 519, *Biography of the Great Monk*, tranl. H. Zhu, pp. 519–557, Shanxi People's Publishing House, Xian.
- Hui, Y., 783, *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, vol. 51, Great Collection, p. 783, Taisho All Classics Publishing Association, Tokyo.
- Huo, X.C., 1997, *The development of Mahayana thought in Kumarajiva and its impact on the Kucha Grottoes*, p. 50, Dunhuang Research, Lanzhou.
- Ji, X.L., 1998, *Translation and interpretation of the Tuhara text 'Meeting with Maitreya'*, Jiangxi Education Press, Nan Chang.
- Ji, Z., 608, *Commentary on hundred discussions*, pp. 581–618, Shanghai Ancient Books Publishing House, Shanghai.
- Li, R.Z., 2006, *The illustrations of Maitreya Kucha and related issues*, p. 23, Dunhuang Research, Lanzhou.
- Rong, X.J., 1987, *The history and culture of Turpan*, Sanqin Publishing House, Xian.
- Seng, Y., 519, *Compilation of notes on the translation of the Tripitaka*, tranl. S. Jinren, vol. 14, pp. 502–519, Zhong Hua Book Company, Beijing.
- Takakusu, J., 1934, *Dazhengjing*, Taisho All Classics Publishing Association, Tokyo.
- Wu, Z., 1994a, 'Essentials of Buddhist Scriptures translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva from Turpan Manuscripts', *Buddhist Studies* 0(0), 152.
- Wu, Z., 1994b, 'Essentials of Buddhist Scriptures translated into Chinese by Kumarajiva from Turpan Manuscripts', *Buddhist Studies* 0(0), 155.
- Zhu, L.S., 2011, *The guardian deities of Khotan recorded in the Dunhuang Tibetan Manuscript Pt.960 – Translation and annotation of 'The History of the Dharma in Khotan' Part Three*, *Dunhuang Research*, pp. 116–117, Lanzhou.