

# Philosophy of Translation

## An Interdisciplinary Approach

# Filosofia della traduzione

## Un approccio interdisciplinare

T E O R I A

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fondata da Vittorio Sainati  
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# T

## Context, Logosyllabary, and Multiple Choices. Reflections on 30+ Years of Translating Chinese Buddhist Texts

Paul L. Swanson

After publishing my translation and study of the Chinese Buddhist text *Mohezhi-guan* of Zhiyi (538-597)<sup>1</sup> and having worked in this area for over 30 years, I continue to reflect on the process of translation. In this essay I will take up some issues that I have ruminated over, which apply not just specifically to the translation of classical Chinese Buddhist texts but also to the art of translation in general. First I will revisit points I have emphasized in the past, with special attention to the importance of context; second I will question and try to figure out what it means to “read” Chinese and translate into English (with reference particularly to the paradox of not being able to “read” Chinese orally); finally I will examine a few phrases from the *Mohezhi-guan* and unpack the process from a simple analysis of the individual Chinese characters and phrases, to examining the context and developing a readable English rendering, and discuss the possibility and challenges of preparing two different English translations of the same text.

### I. *Basic Guidelines for Translation*

I have already discussed my theories of translation in some detail in other places<sup>2</sup>, so here I will only repeat the main points and add a few com-

<sup>1</sup> See *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight: T'ien-t'ai Chih-i's Mo-ho chih-kuan*, University of Hawai'i Press, Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture, Honolulu 2018 (hereafter *Clear Serenity*).

<sup>2</sup> See my *Translator's Introduction*, in *Clear Serenity*, vol. 1, pp. 43-64, and essays on *Dry Dust, Hazy Images, and Missing Pieces: Reflections on Translating Religious Texts*, in «Bulletin of the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture», 23 (1999), pp. 29-43 (updated and reprinted

ments concerning the importance of context, using the example of a single Chinese character mostly to illustrate what I wish to say in the following sections. In short,

- There is no one-to-one correspondence between words of different languages.
- There is never only one correct translation.
- The importance of context.
- The nuances of particular words or terms, specific concepts or ideas, and the intended audience.

The point that there is never a perfect correspondence between words of different languages – each word and phrase having a different history and covering a different range of meanings – also implies that there can be more than one “correct” translation of a word or phrase. Much depends on the context, and even then the translation can be affected by factors such as the intended audience. To illustrate these points I have created an illustration (see Chart 1), admittedly rather crude but visually presenting these basic points of translation, and which could be modified to compare any two languages. I chose the Chinese character 通, a character with a quite broad meaning that can be rendered into English as “passing through”, “penetrate”, “transmit”, “open”, “go smoothly”, or “common/shared”, and used in a wide variety of compounds<sup>3</sup>. In my chart I use a large circle (surrounding the character 通) to indicate the scope of the meaning of this term. I then add circles to indicate the meaning of words that I use in different contexts to translate this character. In the Tiantai Buddhist context of works by Zhiyi, the character is often used to indicate “penetrating” to an understanding or awakening, as in the compound 通門, “passing through” or “entering” a gate. This refers to the “four gates” (四門 or 四教, “four teachings”; the Tiantai classification of all Buddhist teachings) through which one may pass to attain awakening; as Zhiyi says, «It is like a city that has four gates; they are not different in the sense that they all offer a passageway 通 to [meet and] assemble

in P.L. Swanson, *In Search of Clarity: Essays on Translation and Tiantai Buddhism*, Chisokudo, Nagoya 2018, pp. 213-232); and *What’s Going On Here? Chih-i’s Use (and Abuse) of Scripture*, in «Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies», 20/1 (1997), pp. 1-30 (updated and reprinted as *Say What!?! Zhiyi’s Use (and Abuse) of Scripture*, in P.L. Swanson, *In Search of Clarity: Essays on Translation and Tiantai Buddhism*, cit., pp. 109-144).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the variety of meanings given in P.W. Kroll, *A Student’s Dictionary of Classical and Medieval Chinese*, revised edition, Brill, Leiden 2017, p. 436.



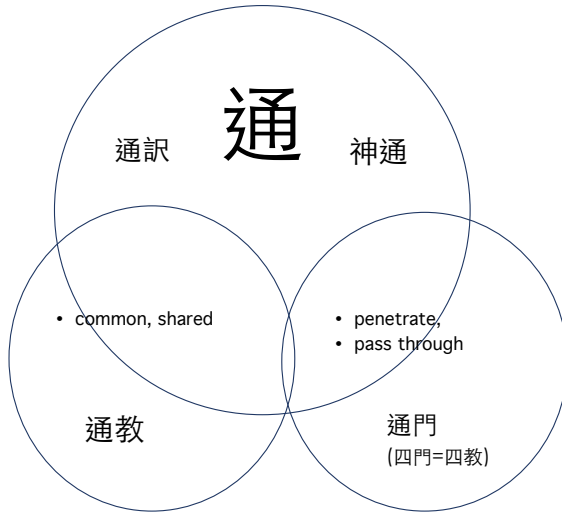


Chart 1

[in the city]»<sup>4</sup>. Significantly, this character is also used in the Tiantai doctrinal classification system. The “Common” or “Shared” Teaching 通教 is the second of these four types of teachings, namely, the teaching of emptiness that is common to or shared by all types of (technically, both Hinayana and Mahayana) Buddhist teachings. Clearly this character cannot be translated in the same way in both contexts, and “passing through” and “shared” (though different in English with a small overlap) both participate in the wider meaning of the character, as indicated by the two circles at the bottom of the chart. Again, there are other compounds that use this character but do not fit with the two English translations already given. For example, 神通 refers to “supernormal powers” (such as the ability to perceive your past lives; a translation of the Sanskrit *abhijñā*), and (because of the Chinese) is sometimes rendered “penetrating supernormal powers”. In another context, in modern Japanese 通訳 is the term for translating or oral interpreting. Such uses of this character must be rendered differently into English depending on the context. Sadly, what is lost in translation is the sense or feeling of this character and the commonality of compounds in which it is used.

I will refer back to these points as I discuss concrete examples of translating Chinese in Part III.

<sup>4</sup> See the *Mohezhi guan*, T 46.74a12; *Clear Serenity*, vol. 2, p. 1005.

## II. *What Does it Mean to “Read” Chinese?*

Often when I meet a person for the first time and they ask what I “do” and I answer that I study and translate Chinese Buddhist texts, the next comment is almost invariably, «Oh, so you read Chinese?» It seems obvious to me that if I am studying and translating Chinese texts, I do indeed “read” Chinese. But there is an important sense in which I do not read Chinese – I cannot speak Chinese (in any of its many dialects) and thus if a Chinese text is presented to me to read out loud, I cannot do it. This may sound odd to people who are only familiar with alphabetic languages, for which failure to know the pronunciation of the written texts means that one cannot read or understand it. So, what does it mean to “read” Chinese without speaking Chinese, without knowing the sounds? Some may think that since Chinese consists of “pictographs”, the visual meaning allows one to read Chinese, like a cartoon or graphic novel. But most Chinese characters are not pictographs; the majority stand for various grammatical, emotional, abstract, phonetic, semantic or other meanings, with a few that are “pictures” of concrete things (such as 木 tree, or 川 river). I must admit that it is still a mystery to me as to what exactly goes on in my mind upon perceiving a Chinese text and grasping or figuring out its meaning or rendering it into English. What is the process whereby the Chinese characters are rendered “intelligible”? This is a very complex subject, but I would like to refer to three books that I have read recently and have illuminated to some extent the process of language and translation, particularly with regard to Chinese.

1. *Sympathy for the Traitor: A Translation Manifesto*, by Mark Polizzotti (The MIT Press, 2018).
2. *Proust and the Squid: The Story of Science and the Reading Brain*, by Maryanne Wolf (Icon Books, 2008).
3. *Breaking the Maya Code*, by Michael D. Coe (Thames & Hudson, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition [Kindle version], 2012).

### *Sympathy for the Traitor*

This short book is a feisty defense of the importance of translation, with the title playing on the Italian phrase «*traduttore, traditore*» (translator, traitor). The author’s discussion of the translator’s struggle to be “faithful” to the original text (often couched elsewhere in over-simplified arguments between creating a “literal” or “free” translation) is *de rigueur* for anyone who has at-

tempted the challenge of translation. But here I will only quote one passage that makes an important point about how language “works”:

Arguably, it is this constantly shifting balance between objective fact (the text to be translated) and subjective interpretation (a given translator’s version of it) that accounts for the persistence and vehemence of the conviction that translation is inherently impossible. It rests on a conception of human language that considers speech merely a conveyor of information, or, as David Bellos puts it, a «desire to believe (despite all evidence to the contrary) that words are at bottom the names of things». As Bellos notes, this conception goes all the way back to the Book of *Genesis*, in which Adam sets about naming «every living creature» – which begs the question of how Adam would have named a particular shade of blue (or indigo, or azure) hovering over the Paris skyline at dusk, or the feeling of melancholy (wistfulness, gloom) that might visit you at the hour [...]. Language is not all about designation. Its real meanings often hover in the spaces between utterances, in the movement generated by particular arrangements of words, associations, and hidden references. (p. 7, emphasis added)

This point that language is not merely the «names of things» is important to remember in reading Chinese and in overcoming the impression that it consists of pictographs. Again, since language is «not all about designation», this brings into relief the importance of context, «the movement generated by particular arrangements of words, associations, and hidden references».

### *Proust and the Squid*

This is a classic study of the “history” of reading (that is, how the ability to read developed and evolved over the centuries) and how the human brain compresses this process and now learns to read in the first six years of one’s life. It uses the term “logosyllabary” (use of a letter, symbol, or sign to represent a single morpheme or an entire word) to replace the overly simplistic “pictographs” to describe languages such as ancient Sumerian and Chinese:

To get a glimpse of the ancient Sumerian reading brain, we can extrapolate from a living, flourishing, similarly constructed writing system (i.e., logosyllabary). One language today has a similar history of shifts from pictographic symbols to logographic symbols, uses phonetic and semantic markers to help disambiguate its symbols, and has ample brain images: Chinese [...]. Thus a Chinese reading brain offers a contemporary, fairly reasonable approximation of the brains of the first Sumerian readers. A vastly expanded circuit replaces the little circuit system of the token reader. This new adaptation by the brain requires far more surface area in visual and visual association regions, and in both hemispheres. Unlike oth-

er writing systems (such as alphabets), Sumerian and Chinese show considerable involvement of the right hemisphere areas, known to contribute to the many spatial analysis requirements in logographic symbols and also to more global types of processing. The numerous, often visually demanding logographic characters require much of both visual areas, as well as an important occipital-temporal region called area 37, which is involved in object recognition and which Deheane hypothesizes is the major seat of “neuronal recycling” in literacy [...]. These motoric memory areas are far more activated in reading Chinese than in reading other languages, because that is how Chinese symbols are learned by young readers – by writing over and over. (pp. 35-37, emphasis added)

This passage introduces the intriguing idea that different parts of the brain are used in reading Chinese (and other such logosyllabic languages) compared to reading alphabetic languages (or syllabograms; symbols that represent a syllable or sound). Thus, although Chinese is not totally pictographic, there is still a strong visual element in absorbing the meaning of the text that is processed in a different part of the brain. The final point about Chinese being learned “by writing over and over” is still true for many (for Chinese, Korean, and Japanese youngsters, for example), though not necessarily for people who study and learn the Chinese characters as an adult, and it would make an interesting study to see how this different learning experience affects the memory areas of people in their reading of Chinese texts.

### *Breaking the Maya Code*

This book presents the story about how the ancient Maya language was finally deciphered by modern scholars after being delayed by more than a century due to the mistaken assumption that the language was basically pictographic or hieroglyphic, a «mentalist, ideographic mindset that had served in a far earlier epoch to bog down would-be decipherers of the Egyptian monuments» (location 4732 in Kindle edition). As it turns out, Maya (like Chinese) was logophonetic:

In the first place, we have already seen that there is no such thing as a purely pictographic writing system, nor has there ever been, even though pictures of real objects, and parts of them, are used in some scripts. Point two, there is no such thing as an ideographic script, either. And finally, all known writing systems are partly or wholly phonetic, and express the sounds of a particular language [...]. What kinds of writing systems have been devised, and how do they work? Setting aside semasiography [“writing with signs”, a non-phonetic based technique to communicate information without the necessary intercession of

forms of speech]<sup>5</sup> which we have seen cannot by itself constitute a workable script, we are left with systems which really do express the utterances of a spoken language, be it Chinese or Greek. These writing systems may be categorized as logophonetic, syllabic, and alphabetic [...]. Modern alphabetic scripts, for instance, lean heavily towards the phonetic, but the earliest form of the most ancient script in the world, the Sumerian of southern Iraq, is strongly logographic. To be even more precise, Sumerian is logophonetic, as are Chinese and Egyptian. This term indicates that its semantic element is expressed by logograms, a written sign which stands for a single morpheme, or (rarely) a complete word. If written sentences consisted only of logograms, which they never do, this would be pure semasiography, but the would-be reader would never get the message right. Accordingly, some five thousand years ago a Sumerian scribe hit upon a way to take out the ambiguity inherent in semasiography; he decided to supplement, or help out, the logograms by means of signs of a purely phonetic nature. (location 410-455 in Kindle edition, emphasis added)

And so it is with Chinese. But if a large portion of Chinese characters are not pictographs but instead represent syllables or sounds, how can one “read” Chinese without knowing how it sounds, without actually being able to “speak” Chinese (in at least one of its many dialects)? It is still a mystery to me, despite actually doing it over and over again<sup>6</sup>. In the next section I will take up some specific phrases in Chinese that I translated from the *Mohezhi-guan* to illustrate the process by which such phrases are deciphered, and also to show how more than one “correct” translation can be made from the same text.

### III. *Creating Two Different Translations of the Same Text.*

After publishing my heavily annotated translation of the *Mohezhi-guan*, I was approached by the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (with their massive project to

<sup>5</sup> A modern form of a currently developing semasiography is Emoji, which so far is a quickly growing body of pictographs. Although it appears that some attempts are being made to construct sentences using only Emoji, these cannot go beyond crude approximations of a fully communicative language. One interesting development is the use of some Emoji (for example, the eggplant) to refer to something not directly intended by the original fruit pictograph. It will be interesting to see if Emoji to represent grammatical functions, or syllabic Emoji, are created to allow for the construction of full sentences, and if so which sounds/language they will represent. If they appear, Emoji will have taken the first steps to becoming a logophonetic language.

<sup>6</sup> I have recently discovered that there is a Japanese word 看読 (*kandoku*) that is used to describe reading classical texts without knowing the pronunciation, so I am assured that this is not a phenomenon unique to myself.

translate and publish straight, non-annotated translations of a large number of Chinese and Japanese Buddhist texts<sup>7</sup>), about the possibility of published a “text-only” (non-annotated) version of the *Mohezhiquan* for their BDK series. I previously had hesitated about agreeing to such a project, since the text was so complicated that it needed heavy annotation to make sense to the English reader. Once the annotated and technical translation was published, however, it began to make sense to me to produce a more reader-friendly, straight translation. However, what approach would be necessary to produce such a version? It certainly would not be enough just to strip out the notes and reproduce the naked text. If the notes are gone, to be fully “faithful” to the text the translation itself would have to be revised in order to convey the “original” content. In short, one would have to prepare a “different” translation of the text that would match the context and intended audience. Thus the challenge of creating two different (yet correct, as far as possible) translations of the same text. As I pondered this possibility, it seemed that a number of revisions would be necessary.

1. First, and most importantly, all of the notes and explanatory items (such as Chinese characters inserted in the English text) must be stripped out. How, then, does this affect the translation? In many cases it would require a translation with more extrapolation or paraphrase, perhaps including specific wording that is implied but not explicit in the original Chinese. Would it be necessary to keep those words or phrases in square brackets, or would this just make the translation ugly? Some may say that this would result in a “paraphrase” and not a “translation”, but if so, so be it.
2. Avoid technical terms as much as possible. In the original translation (in *Clear Serenity*) many technical terms retained, for example, the original Sanskrit, especially for Chinese terms that were transliterations rather than full translations. Here is a brief list of such terms, with the Chinese, followed by the technical translation used in *Clear Serenity*, followed by a possible English translation of the term for use in the BDK version.
  - 菩提 → *bodhi*-wisdom → awakening
  - 陰 → *skandha* → aggregate
  - 悉檀 → *siddhānta* → method of instruction
  - 剎那 → *kṣaṇa* → moment
  - 方等 → *vaipulya* → broad

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, <https://www.bdkamerica.org/translation-mahayana-buddhist-canon>

3. Translate text names into English instead of maintaining original (or supposed) Sanskrit or Chinese titles: for example, instead of *Mahāvaiṣṭya-dhāraṇī-sūtra*, use *The Great and Broad Dhāraṇī Sūtra*.

To illustrate this process, below are some illustrations of phrases from the *Mohezhiḡuan*; first I will give the original Chinese, then give a crude “word-by-word” literal reading of the individual Chinese characters, then give the translation from *Clear Serenity* (which requires sometimes extensive annotation), and finally a possible expanded translation that does not require annotation.

1. 方等云種種問橋智者所呵 (T 46.137a14-15)

This phrase appears towards the end of the *Mohezhiḡuan*, within the context of criticizing “scholastic” monks who focus only on their studies at the cost of maintaining their meditative practices, whose other extreme is “meditation masters” who focus only on their meditative practices at the expense of learning and studying. These two “extremes” are often contrasted and criticized by Zhiyi.

- Broad says various questions bridge wise one scolds/rejects; this direct translation of each Chinese character fails to convey any of the nuances of the full phrase. The first thing to realize is that 方等 – though the phrase indeed means “wide” or “broad” – if simply translated with its literal meaning of “broad” may be misinterpreted as a sexist remark. Indeed in this context it is an abbreviation of the title of a text that contains a story which is summarized by this phrase. The context is a story about a group of travelers who come to a ravine over which there is a bridge. Instead of crossing the bridge and continuing on their journey, they stop and begin to argue and discuss various questions concerning the bridge: how many people had crossed it, what kind of wood was it made of, how many elephants had been used to build it – thousands of such questions – until a wise person approached and scolded them, saying they should just cross the bridge.
- [The Great] Vaiṣṭya [Dhāraṇī Sūtra] says, «A wise person rejects various [impractical] questions about a bridge». (*Clear Serenity*, p. 1575, with notes). This straightforward translation (using square brackets for content that is not explicitly in the Chinese) reflects the awareness that it is a summary of a longer story. It is possible to make a curt translation because notes can be added to identify the source of the quote and to explain the full story behind the phrase.

- The Great and Broad Dhāraṇī Sūtra tells about those who argue over various [impractical] questions about a bridge [instead of crossing it] and are scolded by a wise person. This extended translation, assuming that it cannot be explained in detail in notes, incorporates details that are implied by the context and can thus convey the meaning of the text. Whether or not to include “impractical” and “instead of crossing it” in square brackets or not is a judgement call. Without those phrases that are not explicit in the Chinese, it is not clear why the people are being scolded by a “wise person”.

## 2. 止觀明靜 [前代未聞] (T 46.1a7)

These are the famous first four opening characters of the *Mohezhiquan*, extremely dense in significance. It could be said that these four characters capture the full content and teaching of the *Mohezhiquan* itself, and can be fully unpacked and understood only after reading the whole text. It is impossible to translate into English while retaining the poetic balance and concise gist of the phrase in Chinese.

- stop, look, clear, quiet: a mere direct translation of the four characters results in nonsense. The first crucial point is that 止觀 (stop, look) is the Chinese translation of *śamatha-vipaśyanā*, the broad Indian/Buddhist term for meditative practices (lit. “calming and contemplation”). So, an expanded translation gives us:
- Calming/cessation (*śamatha*) leads to quietude and contemplative insight (*vipaśyanā*) leads to clarity, or [The practice of] cessation-and-contemplation (*śamatha-vipaśyanā*) is bright clarity and quietude. There are further nuances that are included in the compact Chinese phrase, namely, should the couplets “cessation-and-contemplation” and “luminous quiescence” be understood as compounds, or should the elements be considered separately? In Chinese both are possible, and are implied without further explication. The title of my book, *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight*, is an attempt to merge these two possibilities. Again, the Chinese 止觀 can refer to either or to both the process and the result of meditative practices (e.g., by “stopping” passions and distracting thoughts one can attain a state of cessation; through focused “contemplation” one can attain insight). Without the advantage of discussing these nuances in notes or commentary, the translator must make a decision:



- Donner and Stevenson opt for «Calming and contemplation as luminosity and tranquility»<sup>8</sup>. “Calming” is a more accurate translation of *śamatha*, but there are reasons (including Zhiyi’s extended explanation of the term later in the text) to use a word that communicates the implications of the Chinese 止 (“stop”). Thus I have translated:
- «The luminous quiescence of cessation-and-contemplation» (*Clear Serenity*, p. 74). I am not happy with this translation; it has none of the poetic conciseness of the original Chinese and, to be honest, is clunky English. In *Clear Serenity* the phrase is explained and unpacked in long footnotes, as well as in a more extended endnote, and Zhiyi himself devotes a whole chapter (*Clear Serenity*, vol. 1, pp. 424-48) to explain the term 止觀. But for an unannotated translation, an extended explanatory version (sacrificing completely the conciseness of the original) may be necessary:
- To put an end [to passionate afflictions, wrong views, and distracting thoughts] is to attain quietude, and focused contemplation results in clear insight.

### 3. 一觀心是不可思議境 (T 46.52b18-19)

This is one of the most important phrases in the *Mohezhi-guan*, coming at the beginning of perhaps the most well-known and influential passage in the text, on «Contemplating Objects as Inconceivable». Again, it can be interpreted in a variety of ways, but the translator must decide on one of many possibilities.

- First, contemplate mind this not-possible-to-conceive object. Again, merely listing a direct translation of each Chinese character does not provide an intelligible rendering. Read in context, one can see that it refers to the first of ten “modes of contemplation” that have already been listed in the text. Thus we have:
- The first [mode of] “contemplating thoughts” 觀心 is [to contemplate] objects as inconceivable (*Clear Serenity*, p. 795). A more traditional reading would be «the first [mode of contemplation] is to contemplate thoughts (or, “the mind”) as inconceivable object[s]», or, «First, contemplating the mind (or thoughts) as an inconceivable object». Gram-

<sup>8</sup> See N. Donner, D.B. Stevenson, *The Great Calming and Contemplation: A Study and Annotated Translation of the First Chapter of Chih-i’s Mo-ho chih-kuan*, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu 1993, p. 99).

matically, one can take the two characters 觀心 as a compound, or one can take “contemplating” 觀 to modify the whole phrase. Again, is it the mind itself or “thoughts” that is/are the inconceivable object(s), or is it that one contemplates all phenomenal objects (including the mind or thoughts) as inconceivable – that is, as beyond conceptual understanding, and incapable of being “apprehended” or “obtained”? Does Zhiyi mean that the mind contemplates only itself, or its own thoughts, as “objects”? These questions were of great import for the later development of Tiantai/Tendai thought in China and Japan<sup>9</sup>, and it is impossible to come up with a single English translation that would reflect this broad ambiguity.

- Leon Hurvitz, in his pioneering biography and study of Zhiyi<sup>10</sup>, translated this as «The contemplation of the ‘realm of the inconceivable»». However, this translation is closer to the phrase in the earlier list of the ten modes of contemplation (觀不可思議境) than the phrase under consideration here.
- For an unannotated translation, here is a possible compromise: «The first mode of contemplation is to contemplate that all objects of our experience are inconceivable».

### 3. 如醉婆羅門剃頭戲女披袈裟 (T 46.20a23)

This phrase refers to two stories from the *Dazhidulun* to explain the importance of having some sort of connection with the Buddhist path, and that even people with various faults can benefit from an unintended relationship with the Dharma: a Brahman who unintentionally took the vows to become a monk while in a drunken stupor, and a “female entertainer” who wore a nun’s habit just to play a part as an actress.

- like drunk *poluomen* shaves head playful woman spreads robe; this direct translation could be misunderstood to refer to a single example (a playful women spreading her robe for a drunk Brahman?) rather than two different examples. The translation must make it clear that these are two different examples:

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jacqueline Stone’s discussion of “mind-contemplation” in her *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism*, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu 1999, especially Chapter 4 on *Hermeneutics, Doctrine, and “Mind-Contemplation”* (pp. 153-189).

<sup>10</sup> See L. Hurvitz, *Chih-i (538-597): An Introduction to the Life and Ideas of a Chinese Monk*, vol. XI, *Mélanges Chinois et Bouddhiques*, Peeters Publishers, Leuven 1980, p. 330.

- [The primacy of the Way] is illustrated by [the stories in the *Dazhidulun* about] the drunken Brahman who took the tonsure, and the female entertainer who donned monastic robes. (*Clear Serenity*, pp. 407-408, with notes). This expanded translation clarifies the content of the two examples, and further details are provided in the notes. Donner and Stevenson (p. 334) render this similarly as «[This supreme importance of the dharma] may be illustrated by the case of the drunken brahmin who took the tonsure or the actress who donned monastic robes». This could be rendered without square brackets as:
  - This is illustrated by the drunken Brahman who took the tonsure, and the female entertainer who donned monastic robes. In this case (unlike the previous examples), the translation could be left plain and without explanation. If read within its context, it is clear that it refers back to an earlier explanation in the text that «although good [moral conduct] is conducive to [realizing] the principle [of reality], the Way derives [primarily] from [the cultivation of] cessation-and-contemplation [as a home-departed one]» thus emphasizing the importance of contact with the monastic life. The intent of the passage is clear without having to indicate that the stories appear in the *Dazhidulun* (and they probably appear in other sources as well) or explaining further details about the stories. Thus there are passages that need not be modified even in the absence of explanatory notes.

### *In Closing*

In this essay I have reflected on some personal guidelines for translation (especially the importance of context), speculated on what it means to “read” Chinese, and examined the process of developing more than one “correct” translation for the same Chinese text. I look forward to further developments as I rethink and redo my heavily annotated translation of the *Mohezhi-guan* into an unannotated straight translation.

## Abstract

*This essay presents some ruminations on the challenge of translating Chinese Buddhist texts, based on more than thirty years of working on such a task, and looking forward to developments for future translations. First I will recall some personal guidelines for translation (especially the importance of context). Second, I will then reflect on a few passages and arguments from three books I have read recently on translation and language (in particular the characteristics of the Chinese language) and what it means to “read” Chinese. Third and finally, I will examine a few terse phrases from the Chinese text (the Mohezhi-guan) I published recently in a heavily annotated translation to illustrate how a translation proceeds, and to show that more than one correct translation is possible, depending on the annotation (or lack thereof) and the intended audience.*

Keywords: Translation; Chinese; Context; Reading; Logophonic; Annotation.

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A critical reflection about the relevance of translation and its many variations seems to be a priority in contemporary philosophic research. This issue of «Teoria» features the talks held at *Homo translator. Traditions in translation*, a meeting organised at the Nanzan University, Nagoya, Japan, and other selected papers, which broaden the horizon of the survey to the spheres of literature, technology, psychoanalysis and politics.

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