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The Emergence of a Myth : In search of the origins of the life story of Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Bon

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CHAPTER THREE

BUDDHIST LEGENDARY SOURCES

As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, the accounts of Shenrab Miwo in the *mDo 'dus* are largely derived from accounts of the life of the Buddha. There are numerous accounts of the Buddha, and many of them were also translated into Tibetan. I will introduce here three legends of the Buddha's life that were available in Tibet earlier than the *mDo 'dus* and are possible sources of the accounts of Shenrab Miwo, as they appear in the *mDo 'dus*. One of the earliest available legends is the *Phags pa rgya cher rol pa zhes bya ba theg pa chen po'i mdo* (hereafter *rGya cher rol pa*), which is the Tibetan translation of the *Āryalalitavistaranāmahāyānasūtram* (henceforth *Lalitavistara*). The other two Buddhist texts are: *sKyes pa'i rabs kyi rgyud*, the Tibetan translation of the *Jātakamālā*, written by Āryaśūra, and the sūtra *mDzangs blun zhes bya ba'i mdo* (henceforth *mDzangs blun*).

Firstly, the *Lalitavistara* is a sūtra belonging to Mahāyāna Buddhism, as may be inferred from its title. Winternitz (1933, pp. 248–56) concluded that the *Lalitavistara* is a recasting of an old Hīnayāna text belonging to the Sarvāstivāda School, but enlarged and embellished in the spirit of Mahāyāna. According to Banerjee (1957, p. 247) and P. L. Vaidya (1958, p. ix), this sūtra belongs to Mahāyāna Vaipulya sūtras⁶⁷. Both scholars assume that parts of the *Lalitavistara* are based on some old accounts of the life of the Buddha. Vaidya (1958, p. ix) argues that parts of the *Lalitavistara* are based on old stories from 'orthodox' schools of Buddhism and stories from the *Avidūrenidāna* in the *Nidānakathā* of Buddhaghoṣa, which seems likely to me. Nakamura (1980, reprint 1989, p. 131) suggests that the *Lalitavistara* may be a compilation of fragmented biographies of the Buddha, and that the influence of Mahāyāna is evident in the literary style of this text. In any case, the Sanskrit original was already regarded as a Mahāyāna

⁶⁷ For the list of texts belonging to these sūtras, see Vaidya 1958, p. ix.

sūtra when it reached Tibet, and that is duly reflected in its Tibetan version, the *rGya cher rol pa*, and its classification as a Mahāyāna text, by Tibetans.

The date of the *Lalitavistara* is a debated issue. It is approximated on the basis of Chinese translations of legendary accounts of the Buddha that correspond to the *Lalitavistara*. Several Chinese translations of Buddha legends are known.⁶⁸ Vaidya (1958, pp. xi–xii) reports that the *Lalitavistara* was translated into Chinese in the 1st century AD, although he does not specify the exact year. He apparently determined this date on the basis of two Chinese translations of legendary accounts of the Buddha, Nanjio 159 (Taisho 187) and 160 (Taisho 186),⁶⁹ and particularly on the basis of the latter one, which according to Nanjio’s Catalogue is dated in 68 AD.⁷⁰ Thus in Vaidya’s view, its original obviously must be dated before that.

Mather (1987, p. 31) prefers to date the present Sanskrit version of the *Lalitavistara* from the 3rd century AD, although he provides no clear evidence for this date. However, since he refers to Vaidya (1958), he seems to follow an alternative date of Nanjio 160 (Taisho 186), i.e. 308 AD, supplied in Vaidya (1958, p. xi). Mather (1987, p. 32) explicitly writes that Nanjio 160 (Taisho 186) was translated in 308 AD. According to the Database of Chinese Buddhist texts, Nanjio 160 was translated by Dharmarakṣa (233–310 AD), sometime during the Western Jin Dynasty (西晉, 265–316 AD).

⁶⁸ Mather (1987, p. 31–32) lists five Chinese translations (Taisho 184, 185, 186, 188 and 189).

⁶⁹ These two Chinese translations are catalogued in the Database of Chinese Buddhist texts, digitized by the Documentation and Information Center for Chinese Studies (DICCS), Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University, and they are also numbered as Taisho 187 and 186 in volume 3 of the Chinese Tripitaka. Nakamura (1980, see note 17 in reprint 1989, p. 131) provides titles of two Chinese texts next to the *Lalitavistara*, *Fân-kwân-tâ-kwân-yen-ching* and *P’u-yao-ching*, and writes that these two texts correspond to the *Lalitavistara*. I am grateful to Ms. Ching Hsuan Mei for helping me to identify these two texts catalogued under Nanjio 159 (Taisho 187) and Nanjio 160 (Taisho 186) in the Database of Chinese Buddhist texts.

⁷⁰ This date assumed in Nanjio’s Catalogue has been rejected by Winternitz (1933, p. 253, note. 3), as he argues that there is no proof for this text being translated in 68 AD. In fact, the earliest Chinese translation of Buddhist texts seemed to have begun only from the mid-2nd century AD (Nattier 2008, p. 3, pp. 35ff.).

Nakamura (1980, reprint 1989, p. 131) argues that the Nanjio 159 (Taisho 187) was actually translated by Divākara in 683 AD. He identified Divākara's Nanjio 159 as a translation of the Sanskrit version of the *Lalitavistara*, as Nanjio 159 contains twenty-seven chapters and they correspond to the twenty-seven chapters of the *Lalitavistara*.⁷¹ If Nanjio 159 (Taisho 187) has to be dated to the 7th century AD, it is possible that, when the other Chinese translations of Buddha legends were prepared, there was not yet a Sanskrit version of the *Lalitavistara* that closely corresponds to the Sanskrit text that we have now. This shows that the legend of the Buddha that we know today as the *Lalitavistara* already existed at least when Divākara prepared his translation of Nanjio 159, in 683 AD.

When the present version of the *Lalitavistara* reached Tibet, it was translated into Tibetan through the collaboration of four Indian and Tibetan translators: namely Jinamitra, Dānaśīla, Munivarman and Yeshe De.⁷² It belongs to a group of Buddhist texts translated during the early translation period that ended around 836 AD. The Tibetan version, *rGya cher rol pa*, has twenty-seven chapters in total. It presents an account of the life of Buddha Śākyamuni, starting from his descent to earth from heaven until his teaching of the first sermon.⁷³ Unlike the *mDo 'dus*, the legend of the Buddha does not end with the final day of the Buddha, known as *parinirvāṇa*.

The first translation in a European language of the *rGya cher rol pa* is the French translation by Philippe Edouard Foucaux, published about one and half

⁷¹ I have also compared the titles of the twenty-seven chapters of the *Lalitavistara* with the twenty-seven chapters of Nanjio 159, and found that they are almost identical. This suggests that Nanjio 159 probably is an actual Chinese translation of the *Lalitavistara*. I am indebted to Ms. Ching Hsuan Mei for helping me to compare the contents of these two texts.

⁷² Martin 2006, p. 158. Yeshe De is also known as Yeshe Nyingpo De, Zhang Yeshe De and Nanam Yeshe De. Some of his other co-translators are Śilendrabodhi, Surendrabodhi, Prajñāvarman and Buddhaprabhā, Viśuddhasirinha, Vidyākarasirinha, Jñānagarbha and Paltseg (a.k.a. Kawa Paltseg), who were also active in translation of Indian Buddhist texts (see Martin 2006, pp. 164, 172, 175, 178, 261, 278, etc.).

⁷³ For a short summary of all twenty-seven chapters, see Banerjee 1957, pp. 247-257 and even shorter in Vaidya 1958, pp. xii-xiii.

centuries ago. This French translation of the Sanskrit and Tibetan originals has been further translated into English by Gwendolyn Bays more than two decades ago. Gwendolyn Bays translation seems to be the first and only English translation of the *rGya cher rol pa*. As noted in the publisher's preface, this English translation has been made by comparing it word for word against the Tibetan version, and by occasionally consulting the Sanskrit original too. Due to its accuracy and its very close rendering of the original Tibetan version of the *rGya cher rol pa*, I decided to use this English translation in my comparison of the life of the Buddha and Shenrab. However, whenever necessary I shall implement a few minor changes when presenting the relevant passages. Therefore, I am fully responsible for any errors regarding the use of her translation.

Secondly, the *sKyes pa'i rabs kyi rgyud* was translated by Vidyākarasimha and Mañjuśrīvarman (Tib. *'jam dpal go cha*), who lived around the 9th century AD.⁷⁴ Nakamura (1980, reprint 1989, p. 136) and Winternitz 1933, pp. 273–76) have discussed the *Jātakamālā* at some length, and I refer the reader to their works. I will briefly present a few important points here. Winternitz reports that the *Jātakamālā* of Āryaśūra closely resembles the *Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā* in its style. Interestingly, he also reports that the first story of this *Jātakamālā* is not found in the Pāli collection of Jātaka stories. The Tibetan translation can be found in volume Hu (pp. 2–269) of the Derge Tanjur, made from the wood-block prints of the Tibetan Buddhist canon prepared at Derge Printing Press in Tibet, in the 18th century AD.⁷⁵ This text contains thirty-four short stories about the many lives of the Buddha before his birth as Śākyamuni.

Thirdly, the sūtra *mDzangs blun* contains a collection of legendary accounts of the Buddha. The complete text can be found in volume A (cf. overall volume no.

⁷⁴ This is the earlier translation. According to Martin (2006, p. 486), the *Jātakamālā* was translated again by Lodoe Gyaltsen (1294-1376 AD) and Lodoe Palzang (1299-1353/4 AD) at the order of their teacher Panglo Lodoe Tenpa (1276-1342 AD).

⁷⁵ A brief history of this printing press and its current situation is written in the introduction of *sDe dge par shing dkar chag*.

74, pp. 257–595) in the sūtra section (Tib. *mdo sde*) in the Derge Kanjur. It is said to be translated into Tibetan from a Chinese version by 'gos Chodrub (ca. 830–860 AD).⁷⁶ According to Nakamura, the Sanskrit original is lost, but he supplies the possible Sanskrit title as *Damamūkanidānasūtra*.⁷⁷ However, it is not entirely clear if there ever was any original Sanskrit text and that is probably the reason why no Sanskrit title appears in this Tibetan translation.

The *rGya cher rol pa* was one of the first sources of the Buddha's life that was translated into Tibetan and is considered to be a Mahāyāna text. Its Sanskrit original, the *Lalitavistara* sūtra, was already regarded as a Mahāyāna text when it reached Tibet, although, earlier, it may have been enlarged and embellished from the Sarvāstivāda literature. This also influenced the classification of the *rGya cher rol pa* as a Mahāyāna text among the Tibetans. The date when the *Lalitavistara* was written is uncertain, and scholars have approximated its date variously, on the basis of the Chinese texts corresponding to this sūtra. However, on the basis of Divākara's Chinese translation of legendary accounts of the Buddha, we may conclude that the present version of the *Lalitavistara* was known from at least before 683 AD.

The Sanskrit original was translated into Tibetan during the early translation period of Buddhist canon, which ended around 836 AD. Around the same time, the other two legendary accounts of the Buddha, *sKyes pa'i rabs kyi rgyud* (*Jātakamālā*) and the sūtra *mDzangs blun*, were also translated into Tibetan. The latter is from the Chinese version, as the Sanskrit original has been lost. Since these three Buddhist legendary sources were translated into Tibetan before the 10th century AD, they evidently are earlier than the *mDo 'dus*. Therefore, in principle, it is possible that the early Bonpos had access to these translations and utilized them to compose the life accounts of Shenrab Miwo.

⁷⁶ Cf. Martin 2006, p. 201 and 672.

⁷⁷ Cf. Nakamura (1980, reprint 1989, p. 141) and also see Strong 2004, p. 57.

