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The Nandimitrāvadāna: a living text from the Buddhist tradition

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In his introduction to the **Bhadramāyākaravyākaraṇa**, a text which, just like the **Nandimitrāvadāna**, is extant in Khotanese, Tibetan and Chinese, Constantin Régamey proposed the following method as part of his approach to a Buddhist text whose Indian original is no longer preserved:

The reconstruction into Sanskrit is a rather useless amusement, and is seldom successful not only with European, but also with Indian Sanskritists. On the contrary a manner of translating which by analogy with the ‘critical edition’ may be called a ‘critical translation’, would come nearest to the original ... Just as in the ‘critical apparatus’ all the *variae lectiones*, even the obvious mistakes, are noted, so all the *variae versiones*, even sheer absurdities, should be noted (under the text) in a critical translation of this kind. In that manner, not only all the data helping to reconstruct the original become synthesized (even those which though they seem absurd at first sight, may, after a thorough investigation, prove to be correct), but also this assemblage of different versions may constitute a useful contribution to the study of the technique of Buddhist translators.¹

The idea of “critical translation” proceeds out of the presumption of an Indian original as the forebear of all the extant versions, and takes for granted that, wherever the translations of the versions differ from one another, one of the different meanings must be that of the original, while others are deemed ‘variants’ derived from the original in a linear manner. If the present study is anything to go by, it has hopefully demonstrated that what Régamey proposed 80 years ago is doomed to failure in the case of a living text similar to the **Nandimitrāvadāna**. As is pointed out above, things that we title as the **Nandimitrāvadāna** probably result from a process of communal composition and/or compilation on the basis of some pre-existing textual modules and a fill-in-the-blanks narrative template, which may have been transmitted orally and could be expanded according to a certain model.² Régamey’s theory postulates a creative author on the one hand, and various translators on the other – the former is credited with the production of the single originating text; as regards the latter, however, we can only speak of their translation technique. This bipartite schema (i.e., author/translator) does not do justice to a living text, whose textual history knows no clear-cut distinction between the authorial and the translatorial activities.

The absence of a borderline demarcating the boundaries of authorship makes possible an essentially open tradition, which is receptive to recasting and imitation of (parts of) the text. This seems to have been the case in Khotan, where, as is shown above, a forebear of the Khotanese **Nandimitrāvadāna** was recast and incorporated into the 22nd Canto of the **Book of Zambasta**

1. Régamey 1938: 10f.

2. See above pp. 24f.

composed before the late 5th century.³ Some 300 years later, an imitation of the frame narrative found its way into the **Prophecy [of the Arhat] of the Li Country**, a presumably Khotanese text which was rendered into Tibetan and, in turn, into Chinese.⁴ Both examples attest to the increased potentiality of the living text in serving as an incentive to literary innovations by members of the faith community who were eager to swim with the tide. It is thus not unlikely that the openness of the **Nandimitravadāna**, coupled with its religious affordances,⁵ has given rise to the prevalence of the related ideas and practices in different strands of Buddhism.

Readers may have noticed that so far I have left an issue unaddressed in this thesis, to wit, the text's school affiliation. I have done so intentionally since I consider it basically a wrong question. I am well aware of the vast amount of scholarship devoted to this topic, starting with Lévi and Chavannes, who, on the basis of the section enumerating the canonical literature of Śrāvakayāna (i.e., [F2.2]), hypothesized that the text probably hailed from Dharmaguptaka circles.⁶ This was in turn taken for granted by Przyluski and Frauwallner in their discussions on the geographical diffusion of this Mainstream school.⁷ The Dharmaguptaka hypothesis presupposes an essentially non-Mahāyāna origin of the text, which has undergone a process of Mahāyānization later on. A similar viewpoint is represented by Nattier, who goes so far as to suggest that the list of Mahāyāna scriptures (i.e., [F2.1]) was a late addition.⁸ This scenario implies two agents contributing to the formation of the text as it stands, *viz.*, a primary author who was non-Mahāyāna, if not necessarily Dharmaguptaka, in background, and a secondary redactor who was a Mahāyāna follower. Its textual history can thus be divided into a non-Mahāyāna phase and a post-Mahāyānization one. Thinking along similar lines, some other scholars seem to have been baffled by the fact that the Arhats rather than the Bodhisattvas serve as protectors of the teachings.⁹

3. See above pp. 53–65.

4. See above pp. 51f.

5. See above pp. 27–31.

6. See Lévi/Chavannes 1916: 32, 39–40.

7. See Przyluski 1926: 328f. and Frauwallner 1956: 20 and 22. Both of them prioritized the Khotanese version which sets the frame narrative in Surāṣṭra, where they saw the presence of the Dharmaguptaka school.

8. See Nattier 1988: 45f., n. 54. A radical extension of Nattier's theory is asserted by Shin 2002: 51–57, whose claim seems to me very speculative.

9. See de Visser 1922–1923: 66–68 and Shih 2002: 48–49. The hypothesis of Lévi and Chavannes was misunderstood by de Visser as an assertion of the text having been authored by a Mahāyānist who wanted to “attach the Arhats to his doctrine and to connect the two schools by one kind of cult” (p. 67). Shih Jen-lang, in his turn, regards de Visser's old arguments in support of a “Hīnayānistic origin” of the **Nandimitravadāna** as a rebuttal of Lévi's and Chavannes' theory, turning a blind eye to the remarks that de Visser made immediately thereafter on the same page: “After having written this I read the learned and interesting arguments, given by the Professors Lévi and Chavannes in favour

No serious attempt has, to my knowledge, been made to come to grips with these points of view, quite a few of which should have raised an eyebrow, but two points seem to me most problematic and are thus discussed here. First, the exaltation of the Arhats is held by some scholars to be incompatible with the list of Mahāyāna scriptures, which is explained away either as a secondary addition or as trace of syncretism. This is a pre-conception influenced by the widespread East Asian idea of identifying the ‘way of the Arhat’ (luóhàn dào 羅漢道) with Śrāvakayāna.¹⁰ But in the case of Indian Buddhism, as is pointed out by Ruegg, “it cannot correctly be held that, in all circumstances, the ideal of Arhatship is antithetically opposed to (and even contradictory with) that of Bodhisattvahood or Buddhahood.”¹¹ Thus, if there is any fundamental difference between Mahāyāna and Śrāvakayāna, it is not reflected in the recognition of the Arhat ideal; and I do not see any reason that the cult of the Arhats promoted in this text cannot go hand in hand with that of Mahāyāna scriptures. Second, the main proof of the Dharmaguptaka hypothesis is the content and structure of the three Baskets (*tripiṭaka*) of Śrāvakayāna, which, as is described in the Chinese and the Tibetan versions, dovetail with a record in the **Dharmaguptaka-Vinaya**.¹² This detail can at best be interpreted as indicative of a strong likelihood that the target audience addressed by the tradents of the two versions was under as strong an influence of the Dharmaguptaka canon as that exerted by Mahāyāna scriptures. However, this does not point to a Dharmaguptaka origin of the **Nandimitrāvādāna**, insofar as there is no evidence that this section, as it stands, goes back to the earliest stage of the text’s history. We must be alert to the risk of overgeneralization by assuming every commonality of the later versions to be a bequest of a unitary Indian original. My reservations about the Dharmaguptaka hypothesis are not based on unreasonable doubt, since the Khotanese recasting in the **Book of Zambasta**, as is demonstrated above, testifies, at this point, to some features peculiar to the canonical literature of the Sarvāstivāda-Vaibhāṣika school.¹³ These peculiarities by no means suggest an alternative hypothesis of Sarvāstivāda origin, but, at the very least, make us wary of the fact that a significantly different version of this section was known in Khotan no later than the late 5th century.

of the *Mahāyānist* origin of the this cult. I must confess that I regretted to see the balance turn to that side ... Yet Lévi’s and Chavannes’ arguments are so convincing, that we must acknowledge the correctness of their theory.” (p. 66) Thus, Shih seems to have misunderstood de Visser’s misunderstanding.

10. This convention seems to have started with Lokakṣema who used *luóhàn(dào)* as a functional equivalent of *śrāvaka(yāna)*; see Harrison 1987: 81f. For this term used as the counterpart of *hīnayāna* or *śrāvakayāna* in his translation of the *Kāśyapaparivarta* (i.e., T350), see Vetter 2001: 63. No such term seems to be ever attested in Skt.

11. See Ruegg 2004: 8.

12. Lévi’s and Chavannes’ argument was based on the Chin. version alone, but this case of the Tibetan version is not substantially different; see above, pp. 192f., fn. 103 and 104.

13. See above pp. 58–60.

To be sure, school affiliation does help us understand some types of texts, for instance, Vinaya texts, which are, as a rule, transmitted and used within the confines of a certain monastic environment dominated by a specific school; and, maybe to a lesser extent, doctrinal texts, which contain religious viewpoints attributable to a specific school or, in generic terms, to Mahāyāna or Śrāvākayāna. But with regard to texts which are neither Vinaya-related nor doctrinally oriented, it is pointless to distinguish between Mahāyāna and Śrāvākayāna, much less to associate their origin with a specific school of Mainstream Buddhism. A case in point is the work known in Tocharian as **Maitreyasamitināṭaka** and in Uighur as **Maitrisimit**, which, as Jens-Uwe Hartmann plausibly argues, has no school affiliation at all, or, more cautiously put, for which such a phenomenon as school affiliation is not yet proven to have ever functioned as a distinguishing feature.¹⁴ As further examples for this type of texts, Hartmann refers to the so-called **Yogalehrbuch** and the **Maitreyavyākaraṇa**, which seem to evade every attempt of categorization either by school affiliation or through a rigid dichotomy between Mahāyāna and Śrāvākayāna.¹⁵ These texts, characterized by their openness, represent, according to Hartmann, a type of ‘living Buddhism’, in which not only does school affiliation play no rôle, but also the line between Mahāyāna and Śrāvākayāna starts to become blurred.¹⁶

Hartmann’s theses also apply to the **Nandimitrāvadāna**, which is partially overlapping with the legend of Maitreya and coalesced in the **Book of Zambasta** with a unique version of the legend, which, according to Kumamoto Hiroshi, “occupies a place that bridges the Sanskrit texts and the hugely expanded Tocharian-Uighur versions,”¹⁷ i.e., the **Maitreyasamitināṭaka** and the **Maitrisimit**. We may better understand the non-sectarian character of these texts by viewing them as living texts which have come into being at the hands of multiple tradents rather than a single author. It is thus highly unlikely to presume that all the tradents were affiliated with the same school in terms of their monastic background, or that they targeted at a homogeneous audience associated with the same school. If we do not consider it fruitful to work with either of the two presumptions, the issue of school affiliation need not be addressed in the study of living texts.

14. See Hartmann 2013: 37–50. The main thesis of his article is formulated as follows: “Das Werk besitzt keine Schulzugehörigkeit, oder, etwas vorsichtiger formuliert, beim derzeitigen Kenntnisstand lässt sich nicht nachweisen, dass so ein Phänomen wie Schulzugehörigkeit für ein Werk wie **Maitreyasamitināṭaka** und **Maitrisimit** als angestrebtes Unterscheidungsmerkmal überhaupt eine Rolle spielt.” (p. 40).

15. See Hartmann 2013: 46–48.

16. See Hartmann *ibid.* 45: “Ich will daher noch eine weitere These wagen. Sie lautet, dass bei einem Werk wie der **Maitrisimit** aus verschiedenen Quellen geschöpft wird und dass es einen Buddhismus repräsentiert, bei dem nicht nur Schulzugehörigkeiten keine Rolle (mehr) spielen, sondern bei dem auch die Grenze zwischen Hinayāna ... und Mahāyāna zu verschwimmen beginnt.”

17. See Kumamoto 2009: 9.

I offer as my final remark a tentative answer to a question which might be of interest for both textual critics and literary theorists: In what sense can we speak of a ‘work’, when it comes to such a living text as the **Nandimitrāvadāna**? As opposed to a ‘document’ which is a concrete object containing a record of human activity, a ‘work’, according to the textbook definition, is a creation produced by an author which conveys his (or her) intention to an audience and may never have existed in any concrete form.¹⁸ According to this definition, the text of a work differs from that of a document, insofar as the former is the presentation of the original product of the author and, unlike the latter, not found in any actual manuscript or book. Thus, some scholars argue that the aim of textual criticism is to establish the text of a work by examining the varying texts of its documents.¹⁹

In the case of the **Nandimitrāvadāna**, we have access only to some documentary texts which are not amenable to stemmatic analysis and cannot be regarded as verbal instantiations of a work created by a single author, as the above chapters demonstrate. It is thus unknown whether such an author ever existed in history, and if so, his (or her) silhouette cannot be clearly distinguished from that of every scribe or translator involved in the history of this text. What is at issue here is probably a type of literary culture, in which the author’s intention gave way to the interpretive experiments undertaken by people engaged in a variety of interactions with the text. In this case, it is pointless to speak of a ‘work’ in the *authorial* sense, namely, as the original product of an individual, inasmuch as the presumption of an author does not get us anywhere. Therefore, one possibility to answer the question is to argue that, in the present case, there is no work, but only documents, the texts of which have taken shape in various cultural contexts.

Be that as it may, it seems to me also possible to treat the **Nandimitrāvadāna** as a ‘work’ in the *tradental* sense; that is to say, we may be justified in viewing the overall tradition as a collective product of various tradents, distinguished from its every single freeze-frame, i.e., its every single documentary text, which temporarily stills the constant flow of the tradition and thus represents a simulacrum of the work. In doing so, we can come to terms with the dynamics of the living text and better understand its historicity, which finds expression precisely in the work’s entanglement in the heterogeneity of the documents and the diversity of human experiences associated with them. From this perspective, we may conceive the **Nandimitrāvadāna** as something of a work, a work which remains unfinished and is constantly enriched by the experiences of people it engages with – in other words, a ‘work in progress’.

18. For the first definition of ‘work’ and ‘document’ as a pair of contrastive terms, see Tanselle 1989: 11–38 and 1990: 1–33. For the adaptation of these concepts to the text-critical study of Rabbinic literature, see Milikowsky 1999: 138, n. 4; and of Buddhist literature, see Silk 2015: 206, 209–210. For a monographic study of the concept of ‘work’ in its various aspects, see Smiraglia 2001.

19. See, for instance, Tanselle 1989: 34–38 and Milikowsky 1999: 138.