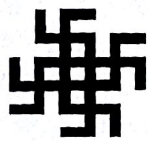


# KUMĀRAJĪVA PHILOSOPHER AND SEER

*Edited By*  
SHASHIBALA



Indira Gandhi National Centre For The Arts  
New Delhi

**KUMĀRAJĪVA  
PHILOSOPHER AND SEER**

**ISBN: 978-93-80935-61-4**

**Sale Price: Rs. 1500/-**

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First Published in 2015 by:

**Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts**  
Central Vista Mess, Janpath, New Delhi- 110 001 (India)

**Distributor:**

D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd.

*Regd. Office: Vedaśrī, F-395, Sudarshan Park*  
(Metro Station: Ramesh Nagar)

New Delhi-110 015-11

*Phones: (011) 2545 3975, 2546 6019; Fax: 2546 5926*

*e-mail: indology@dkprintworld.com*

*Web: www.dkprintworld.com*

Designed and Printed in India by  
Nutech Print Services, New Delhi

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## Kumārajīva's translation of Vimalakīrtinirdeśa and its contribution to Chinese literature

Fan Jingjing

In medieval China, literature underwent a considerable change, largely because of the translations of Buddhist scriptures. Now, many scholars agree that the most important translator in this period was Kumārajīva, whose translations were widely read and commented not only by his contemporaries but also by later generations. Among the numerous Buddhist scriptures translated by him, one of the most popular is *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. It has exerted a great influence on Chinese literature since the Six Dynasties.

According to Buddhist bibliographies, there had been several different translations of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* before Kumārajīva, of which only one is extant till today. That is Zhiqian's 支謙 translation. After Kumārajīva, Xuanzang 玄奘, a monk who has made a great contribution to the cultural exchange between ancient India and ancient China, translated this sūtra again. Therefore, we have three different Chinese translations of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* at our disposal. Besides, the Sanskrit manuscript of this sūtra has also been found at the Potala Palace. Although this manuscript is said to have been written after the 7th century and is not the same source text from which Zhiqian, Kumārajīva and Xuanzang made the Chinese translation, it is still of great value to help improve our research. At least, it can be used as a parallel text while analyzing the different Chinese translations.

However, the intriguing question is that although there are three Chinese translations of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, the most widely read and quoted is Kumārajīva's translation. In this paper, I will first make a close reading of the Sanskrit manuscript and the three Chinese translations to figure

out Kumārajīva's unique translation strategies, so as to answer why his translation is the most popular. One of the possible answers is the eclectic nature of Kumārajīva's translation; in other words, Kumārajīva consulted both previous translations and Chinese monks who were members of his workshop while translating. The other is that Kumārajīva was not only a technician on translation but also a Buddhist philosopher and preacher, which helped to make his translation more accessible and acceptable to the literati in China. This will be explained in the paper in detail. Then I will continue to explore how Kumārajīva's translation affected the Chinese literati's writings. As far as I am concerned, there are at least two aspects to this question. On the one hand, the imagery in Chinese literature is largely enriched by borrowing materials from Kumārajīva's translation. On the other hand, the style of Kumārajīva's translation has also been imitated by Chinese writers.

### The Eclectic Nature of Kumārajīva's Translation

In the process of translation, Kumārajīva not only made use of the previous translations, but also discussed difficult problems with Chinese monks who worked as his assistants. In this way, his translations gained a high quality which contributed to their popularity among both higher intellectuals and lower common people.

When Kumārajīva retranslated *Mahāprajñāpāramitā* whose previous translations were said to be flawed, the Later-Qin king Yao Xing 姚興 who sponsored the translation activity read the previous translations while listening to Kumārajīva's new interpretation. He made a comparison between the new and the old versions and then demanded of Kumārajīva to explain and justify his new translation.<sup>1</sup> Thus Kumārajīva's translation had a nature of synthesis. In other words, it kept the virtues of previous translations while avoiding their defects. In *Annotations to Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, Sengzhao 僧肇 recorded Kumārajīva's commentaries on previous translations and his explanations of the revision, which takes up half the space of the book. These commentaries and explanations show that Kumārajīva was very careful about the choice of words.

For example, let us take one of Kumārajīva's revisions of previous translations. A case which can illustrate his translating techniques is his retranslation of the Sanskrit original "triratnava śānupacchet bhi". Before him, Zhiqian translated this as "[t]hey ensured the prosperity of the Three Treasures, making certain that these never expired" 興隆三寶，能使不絕. However, Kumārajīva was not satisfied with this translation. He revised Zhiqian's words

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<sup>1</sup> Huijiao 1992: 52.

as "[t]hey ensured the continuance and prosperity of the Three Treasures, making certain that these never expired" 紹隆三寶，能使不絕。 After Kumārajīva, Xuanzang's translation is "[t]hey ensured the continuance of the seeds of the Three Treasures, making certain that these never expired" 紹三寶種，能使不絕。<sup>2</sup> From these three different versions, we can see that Kumārajīva paid special attention to the Sanskrit word "vaṃśa" while Zhiqian did not translate it into Chinese. However, Zhiqian added a new meaning to his translation which was not present in the original; and that is "the prosperity of the Three Treasures". Then Xuanzang just left out this information while Kumārajīva preserved it in his translation.<sup>3</sup> According to the analysis above, we can safely conclude that Kumārajīva's translation was rather flexible. On the one hand, he corrected the mistakes of previous translations and thus made his own translation more accurate. On the other hand, he took in some elements which were not in the original, but created by previous translators, in order to make his new translation more acceptable to readers who had already got used to the expressions of the older versions.

At the same time, while referring to previous translations, Kumārajīva also listened to the advice of his Chinese assistants while translating. His translation workshop was the largest among the three sponsored by government. (The other two were led by Bodhiruci in Northern Wei and Xuanzang in Tang dynasty respectively.) To some extent, Kumārajīva's translations were the products of cooperation among many people. In Sengzhao's preface to *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*, there is a brief description of the process of the translation of this sūtra:

"[Yao Xing] ordered the General Duke Changshan and the General Duke Ancheng with 1,200 monks who had a good command of Buddhist doctrines to help Kumārajīva retranslate this sūtra in the big temple of C'hang-an. ... Kumārajīva held the original Sanskrit manuscript and interpreted the text. The monks and laymen who were present at this occasion listened to Kumārajīva's

<sup>2</sup> Study Group on Buddhist Sanskrit Literature, The Institute For Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism, Taisho University, ed. *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: Transliterated Sanskrit Text Collated with Tibetan and Chinese Translations*. 2004. p.4-5. And I have consulted Burton Watson's *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* for the English translation.

<sup>3</sup> During the seminar, some scholars reminded me that Kumārajīva's change of the Chinese character "興" to "紹" might had another reason, a particular taboo. That is to say, because "興" is the name of the king, Kumārajīva should avoid it in translation. I really appreciate their kindness and would like to extend my gratitude to them here. However, after the seminar, I have checked *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and found that Kumārajīva actually used "興" once in his translation. So it can be safely concluded that Kumārajīva's choice between the two words is because of his understanding of the original meaning, not the taboo of avoiding mentioning a king's name.

interpretation attentively; and they discussed the translation eagerly in order to make sure that the Buddha's teaching be transmitted correctly and clearly."<sup>4</sup> From this description, we can see clearly that there were a number of people who contributed to Kumārajīva's translation, which promoted its circulation more widely.

### **Kumārajīva as a Faithful Translator or a Creative Preacher?**

While translating the Attic orators, Cicero had a famous saying "I did not translate them as an interpreter, but as an orator"<sup>5</sup>. By this confession, Cicero justified his adaptation of the original text. Therefore, we may ask a similar question: how did Kumārajīva regard his own translating job? Was he satisfied to be just a faithful translator or did he have any higher ambition? In Huijiao's *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, there is a paragraph which can help us better understand this question:

"Kumārajīva has always been a disciple of Mahāyāna Buddhism; and he aims at preaching the doctrines to people. He keeps sighing: 'If I had the opportunity to write Mahāyāna *Abhidharma*, I would do better than Kātyāyana. Now that I am here in China, nobody can understand me. My talent is wasted; and what can I do about this!'"<sup>6</sup>

Through this narrative, we can infer that he was very disappointed to be just a translator and not a śāstra master, although his role as a remarkable translator had won him much fame. So there was a conflict between the reality of being a passive translator and the ideal of being a creative philosopher and preacher. However, he actually did try his best to reconcile the two. In his translations, he went farther than only strictly obeying the original. He had some creative thoughts about Buddhist philosophy and he then inserted these into his translation. As a preacher who was eager to make Mahāyāna Buddhism popular among Chinese people, he adapted some doctrines while translating, in order to make them more acceptable in the background of Chinese culture.

Moreover, Kumārajīva also took the unique historical circumstances into consideration when he undertook his translations. At that time, China was torn apart by wars. As a result, people were experiencing a hard life and struggling for survival. In this situation, a saviour or a bodhisattva who had mercy for the common people was badly needed, which was a good opportunity to disseminate Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. Kumārajīva made best use of this advantage and preached about the possibility of the commoners being saved from their miserable everyday life and being enlightened. Besides, in his translation, he showed much concern for secular life, as Nakamura Hajime

<sup>4</sup> Sengyou 1995: 310.

<sup>5</sup> Munday 2008: 19.

<sup>6</sup> Huijiao 1992: 53.



has pointed out in his paper titled "Thoughts based on the reality of life: one characteristic of Kumārajīva's translation".<sup>7</sup> The following argument has benefited a lot from Nakamura's insightful discovery.

In chapter four "The Bodhisattvas", there is a Sanskrit sentence which is "tat kasmād dheto sarvasatvānubodho hi bodhir"<sup>8</sup>. Kumārajīva's translation is "Why? Because all living beings in truth bear the marks of bodhi."<sup>9</sup> 所以者何?一切眾生即菩提相 While Zhiqian translates it as "Why? Because all living beings should follow the way of the Enlightenment" 所以者何?一切眾生當從覺道故; and Xuanzang translates it as "Why? Because bodhi is what all living beings are equal to follow to be enlightened" 所以者何?夫菩提者,一切有情,等所隨覺. Thurman translates this sentence from the Tibetan version as "Why? Enlightenment consists of the realizations of all living beings".<sup>10</sup> Compared to the others, Kumārajīva's translation speaks highly of the common people and strongly approves their potential for becoming an enlightened Buddha themselves. Moreover, this statement would greatly encourage the disciples to pursue the Buddhist truth, since it guaranteed a bright future for them.

Another convincing example of Kumārajīva's emphasis on common life is his translation of "sarvakleśaprasāmanamaṇḍa eṣa"<sup>11</sup> as "[e]arthly desires are the place of practice"<sup>12</sup> 諸煩惱是道場. It is obvious that he omitted the Sanskrit keyword "prasāmana" in his translation, which means to extinguish, to pacify. Zhiqian's translation is "[t]o pacify all kinds of worries is that (the place of practice)" 眾勞之靜是. And Xuanzang's translation has also included the word "prasāmana", which is "[t]o extinguish earthly desires is bodhi" 息諸煩惱是妙菩提. According to Thurman, the Tibetan translation is "[i]t is the seat of eradication of all passions"<sup>13</sup>. Among the four different translations, only Kumārajīva's contradicts the Sanskrit original. However, what is ironic is that Kumārajīva's unfaithful translation was appealing to Zen masters and become a famous saying in the Zen school, and which prevailed among the Chinese literati even in later generations.

Since Kumārajīva adapted Indian Buddhist doctrines according to the needs of Chinese people, it is no wonder that his works are widely read. In this sense, he was successful both as a translator and a preacher.

<sup>7</sup> Hajime 1994: 6-10.

<sup>8</sup> *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: Transliterated Sanskrit Text Collated with Tibetan and Chinese Translations.* p.140

<sup>9</sup> Watson 1999: 53.

<sup>10</sup> Thurman 1991: 34.

<sup>11</sup> *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa: Transliterated Sanskrit Text Collated with Tibetan and Chinese Translations.* p.150

<sup>12</sup> Watson 1999: 56.

<sup>13</sup> Thurman 1991: 36.

Up until now, I have attempted to answer the question why Kumārajīva's translation of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* won such popularity in ancient China, though it is not the most faithful to the Sanskrit original. I have found two factors which are attributable to this phenomenon. One is Kumārajīva's open mind to accept both previous translation traditions and Chinese monks' opinions. The other is that he pays special attention to the cultural and historical background of China during his time while translating; and that he is not hesitant to express his own ideas in translation, even at the expense of distorting the original, since he does not only regard himself as a translator but also as a preacher. However, there are also other possibilities which need further exploration in the future.

### The Imagery Borrowed from Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in Chinese Literature

That *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has exerted a great and long-lasting influence on Chinese literature has been recognized by most scholars in this field and the significance of this influence cannot be overestimated. The well-known Chinese writer and scholar Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881-1936) claims that "since Jin dynasty on, the upper-class literati (in Six Dynasties) have always taken three books with them, *Analects*, *Lao tze* and *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*."<sup>14</sup> Although we do not exactly know whether it refers to Kumārajīva's translation, since Zhiqian's version was also in circulation at that time, what we can ascertain is that Kumārajīva's translation had been much more popular than both Zhiqian's and Xuanzang's from the Tang dynasty onwards. When Li Shan 李善 (ca. 630-689) annotated the *Anthology of Literature* 文選, he made many references to Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. That is also the case with Prince Li Xian 李賢 (ca. 652-684) when he annotated the *Book of the Later Han* 後漢書. In the works of the great poets Wang Wei 王維 (ca. 701-761) and Bai Juyi 白居易 (ca. 772-846), there are large numbers of quotations from this sūtra as well. On the contrary, Zhiqian's and Xuanzang's translations have almost disappeared into oblivion. After the Tang dynasty, with the development of the Zen school, Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* has been mentioned more frequently since it is one of the major source texts of the Zen sect.

Because of their great fondness for this sūtra, the Chinese literati liked to allude to it in writing. One of the characteristics of Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* is the abundance of beautiful imagery pregnant with meaning, which has largely enriched Chinese literature. The most famous ten similes in this sūtra are as follows:

"This body is like a cluster of foam, nothing you can grasp or handle. This

<sup>14</sup> Lu Xun. *The Complete Works of Lu Xun*. Vol. 5

body is like a bubble that cannot continue for long. This body is like a flame born of longing and desire. This body is like the plantain that has no firmness in its trunk. This body is like a dream, compounded of false and empty visions. This body is like a shadow, appearing through karma causes. This body is like an echo, tied to causes and conditions. This body is like a drifting cloud, changing and vanishing in an instant. This body is like lightning, barely lasting from moment to moment."<sup>15</sup>

The prominent poet Xie Lingyun 謝靈運 (ca. 385-433) wrote a group of poems titled "Praise unto the ten similes in *Vimalakārti sūtra*" 維摩經十譬贊 based on this paragraph, only eight of which are extant today.<sup>16</sup> Since then, these ten similes have been widely employed in Chinese literature. In particular, the image of the plantain enjoys a high frequency of appearances.

In addition, "the silence of *Vimalakīrti*" is another metaphor which attracted much attention from the literati in ancient China. There are still a number of cases of this kind, but I cannot list them all due to the constraints of space of this paper.

### Impact of Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* on the Style of Writing in the Chinese Literature

Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* was warmly welcomed by the Chinese literati because of its daring imagination and hyperbolic descriptions which were foreign to indigenous Chinese literary tradition. By assimilating these writing techniques, the writers could produce more lively and enjoyable works. The six Pienwen 變文 texts adapted from *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* found in Dunhuang can best support this point. In one of the manuscripts, there is a long paragraph depicting the beauty of the twelve thousand heavenly maidens who are sent by the devil King Papiyas 波旬 to disturb the practice of the bodhisattva Upholder of the Age 持世菩薩. The author employs many similes to illustrate the maidens' attractiveness. For example, he compares them to fresh flowers and magnificent jewellery. He describes their clothes and faces in detail; and he makes an exaggeration of their gorgeousness. The whole paragraph has more than three hundred Chinese characters only to tell us that the maidens are exceptionally good looking, which is a rare case in indigenous Chinese literature.<sup>17</sup> However, this overly elaborate and highly exaggerated narrative helps the readers form a vivid picture in their mind and enjoy their reading more.

<sup>15</sup> Watson 1999: 34-35

<sup>16</sup> From the image "炎" in the second poem, we can know that what he reads is Kumārajīva's translation, since Zhiqian uses the phrase "野馬" instead.

<sup>17</sup> Wang 1957: 620.

More importantly, Chinese literati imitated the structure and advocated the style of *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in writing. As early as in the Song dynasty, Li Tu 李塗 (ca. 1147) had already pointed out that it could teach people how to compose a good essay.<sup>18</sup> The literary critics in the Ming and Qing dynasties continued to appreciate the high writing skills of this sūtra. Both Wang Shizhen 王世貞 (ca. 1526-1590) and Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (ca. 1582-1664) admitted that they learned a lot from *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* on how to write a poem.<sup>19</sup> In the 19th century, the erudite scholar and writer Gong Zizhen 龔自珍 (1792-1841) expressed his enthusiasm for *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* in one of his famous poems "Song of the fallen flowers in western countryside" 西郊落花歌: "I have finished reading the tripiṭaka, but my most favorite is *Vimalakīrti* since it has beautiful and light words." Interestingly, this poem is also full of grand sceneries and daring imagination which can be seen as parallels of the sūtra itself.

In short, there is a long tradition of Chinese literati appreciating the literary value of Kumārajīva's *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa* and then setting it as an example to follow in writing. This sūtra has become a treasure which they resorted to now and then in their writing career.

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<sup>18</sup> Sun 1996: 390-391.

<sup>19</sup> Sun 1996: 391-392.