

The Buddhas of the Three Times and the Chinese Origins of the Heart Sutra

Jayarava Attwood

Abstract

The phrase *tryadhvavyavastithāḥ sarvabuddhāḥ* “all the buddhas that appear in the three times” in the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* is a *hapax legomenon* in Buddhist Sanskrit, but it is similar to the common Chinese idiom 三世諸佛 “buddhas of the three times”. In every case where this Chinese phrase is used in a *Prajñāpāramitā* text, other than the *Heart Sutra*, the corresponding extant Sanskrit texts have *atītānāgatapratyutpannā buddhāḥ* “past, future, and present buddhas” instead. Additionally, where one translator has used the phrase 三世諸佛 another frequently prefers 過去未來現在諸佛 “buddhas of the past, future, and present”, suggesting that their source texts also had this form with the three different times spelt out. The phrase *tryadhvavyavastithāḥ sarvabuddhāḥ* is unambiguously a Chinese idiom translated into Sanskrit in ignorance of Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitā* conventions. This proves that the *Heart Sutra* was composed in Chinese.¹

¹ I thank Jeffrey Kotyk for his useful comments on an earlier draft.

Introduction

The Chinese Origins Thesis

Buddhists and academics alike long considered the *Heart Sutra* to be an Indian text, composed in Sanskrit and later translated into Chinese. It was a classic of the Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitā* genre and revered as such by Mahāyāna Buddhists. However, in 1987, Japanese scholar Fukui Fumimasa (writing in Japanese) concluded “that the Heart Sutra is not really a sutra at all”, but a *dhāraṇī* (cited in Nattier 1992: 175-6). Then in 1992 Jan Nattier made a simple but powerful argument that the *Heart Sutra* was composed in Chinese and “back-translated” into Sanskrit. As Nattier says,

“To assume any other direction of transmission would present insuperable difficulties—or would, at the very least, require postulating a quite convoluted series of processes, which (by virtue of this very convolution) seems considerably less likely to have taken place... The *Heart Sūtra* is indeed—in every sense of the word—a Chinese text.” (1992: 198-199)

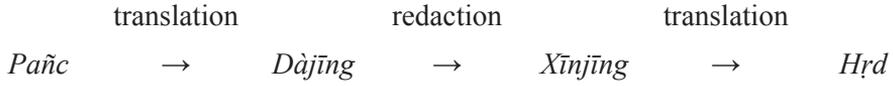
Jan Nattier’s article stands out as one of the most brilliant individual contributions to 20th Century Buddhism Studies. It presents a truly original, even astonishing idea, which is deeply researched, and written about in precise and elegant prose. Anyone reading it must be impressed by the logic of the argument. All of the evidence points to her singular conclusion. However, the reception of Nattier’s article has been mixed so far (it has only been 26 years after all). The “Chinese origins hypothesis” as it is often called, is now widely acknowledged to exist, but there is little engagement with it and still enormous resistance in Japan.²

It will be useful to briefly review Nattier’s method to show why her conclusions shift the burden of proof in the discussion about the origins of the *Heart Sutra*. We have known since the 7th Century that half of the *Heart Sutra* is a quoted passage from *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Pañc*). Nattier compared the quoted section as it appears in four texts:

² I hope to publish a comprehensive survey of responses to Nattier’s thesis in the near future.

1. The 6th Century Gilgit manuscript of *Pañc*³
2. Kumārajīva’s Chinese translation of *Pañc*, T223, completed in 404 CE (*Dàjīng*)⁴
3. Conze’s edition (1948, 1967) of the *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya* (*Hṛd*)
4. The canonical Chinese *Heart Sutra* or *Xīnjīng* (T251)⁵

If the *Heart Sutra* was composed in Sanskrit and then translated into Chinese, we would expect substantial similarities between the extant recensions of *Pañc* and *Hṛd*, and idiomatic Sanskrit throughout. Assuming that the quote was translated into Chinese at different times by different teams, we expect some significant differences in sentence construction and character choice between the *Dàjīng* and *Xīnjīng*. However, our expectations are confounded. The cited passage in *Hṛd* is syntactically (though not semantically) different from the extant *Pañc* texts and it contains a number of unidiomatic phrases. Furthermore, *Xīnjīng* is almost identical to *Dàjīng* (the *Dàmíngzhòujīng* is identical) and is idiomatic throughout. These observations point to a particular sequence of texts and processes:



³ The facsimile edition by Vira and Chandra (1966) has since been superseded by Karashima et al (2016), but without any impact on this discussion.

⁴ Nattier also looked at the associated *Upadeśa* (T1509), translated concurrently with T223 by Kumārajīva’s team. The *Upadeśa* contains an embedded version of *Pañc* with a single minor variant reading, which opens the possibility that it was the source of the quoted passage. However, the text of T251 has the same variation in some older recensions of the Chinese *Tripitaka* and this makes it impossible to determine provenance of the variant reading. This problem is also explored by Huifeng (2008) and Attwood (2017) without resolution.

⁵ The other version of the *Heart Sutra* 《大明咒經》 *Dàmíngzhòujīng* (T250) is not used in Nattier’s main comparisons, but she does look at differences between it and *Xīnjīng* (T251) when considering the question of authorship of these two versions (1992: 184 ff.).

One of Nattier’s key examples perfectly illustrates this general finding. Take the parallel sentences from the four texts:

Pañc: *nānyad rūpaṃ anyā śūnyatā*

Dàjīng: 色不異空

Xīnjīng: 色不異空

Hṛd: *śūnyatāyā na pṛthag rūpaṃ*

All of these statements may be translated into English as, “Form is not different from emptiness”. Where *Pañc* follows the expected Sanskrit idiom for a *Prajñāpāramitā* text (*nā anya X anya Y*), *Hṛd* uses the formulation with *na pṛthag* “not different”. This is not wrong or bad grammar, it’s just that it is not used in *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. It looks like a naïve Sanskrit translation of the Chinese, rather than a genuine Indian composition.

The comparison makes it obvious what has happened, but the Western Intellectual tradition burdens us with tooth-fairy agnosticism – if we can *imagine* another scenario, no matter how unlikely, we are forced to hedge our conclusions. To remove all doubt we would need to show that the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* contains a passage that could *only* be a result of translating from Chinese to Sanskrit. I will show that there is such a passage, involving a reference to the “three times”. It was not included by Jan Nattier in her article, possibly because it is not part of the quoted section. However, not being a quote means that it reflects the language of composition and thus gives us a way to positively identify what that language was.

The Three Times

Ancient Indian Buddhists treated time as being made up of past, future, and present (almost always in this order). The usual Sanskrit words are *atīta*, *anāgata*, and *pratyutpanna*, while the Chinese equivalents are 過去, 未來, and 現在 (guòqù, wèilái, and xiànzài).⁶ The Sanskrit time adjectives are all past participles: *ati-ita* “gone beyond”; *an-ā-gata* “not arrived”; and *prati-utpanna* “just now arisen”. Feng Zhiwei points out that the three Chinese adjectives 過去, 未來, and 現在 are semantic loan words from Sanskrit (2004: 7). They have

⁶ In some early translations, e.g. T224 and T221 we see 當來 for “future”; and 今現在 for “present”.

similar literal meanings and morphology, i.e. 過去 “gone beyond”, 未來 “not yet come”, and 現在 “presently existing”.⁷ The three times, 三世 (*sān shì*), is sometimes also written, 三祭, but not in any of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts.⁸

Buddhist sutras referred to the three times as a set in three ways:

Individually, one after another, i.e. “In emptiness, past appearance is not apprehended ... In emptiness, future past appearance is not apprehended... In emptiness, present past appearance is not apprehended...” (*na śūnyatāyām atītaṃ rūpaṃ upalabhyate ... evaṃ na śūnyatāyām anāgataṃ rūpaṃ upalabhyate ... na śūnyatāyām pratyutpannaṃ rūpaṃ upalabhyate*. Kimura 2010: 1-2, 132-3).

Collectively, using a *dvandva* compound, i.e. “In emptiness, past, future, and present appearance is not apprehended.” (*na śūnyatāyām atītānāgatapratyutpannaṃ rūpaṃ upalabhyate*. Kimura 2010: 1-2, 134).

Collectively, using *tryadhva* i.e. “All the buddhas appearing in the three times.” (*tryadhva-vyavasthitā sarvabuddhāḥ*. Only in the *Heart Sutra*, i.e. Conze 1948).

Chinese translations also had three ways of referring to the three times corresponding to these:

“In emptiness, past appearance is not apprehended ... In emptiness, future past appearance is not apprehended... In emptiness, present past appearance is not apprehended...” (空中過去色不可得... 空中未來色不可得... 空中現在色不可得。T 5.333.a.1-6).

“In emptiness, past, future, and present appearance is not apprehended.” (空中過去未來現在色不可得。T 5.333.a.8-9).

“buddhas of the three times” (三世諸佛 T 8.848.c.17).

⁷ The phrase 現在 may also be (more literally) interpreted as meaning “manifestly existent” or “visibly present”. Jeffrey Kotyk, personal communication.

⁸ See the *Digital Dictionary of Buddhism*, sv 三世.

When Buddhist Sanskrit texts refer to the *buddhas* of the three times, they always use the *dvandva* compound, i.e. *atīta-anāgata-pratyutpannā buddhāḥ* “past, future, and present buddhas” or, rarely, *atīta-anāgata-pratyutpannā sarvabuddhāḥ* “all past, future, and present buddhas”. In Chinese translations we find the equivalent of this in the form of 過去未來現在諸佛 (guòqù wèilái xiànzài zhū fú) “buddhas of past, future, and present”, but we also commonly find the expression used in the *Heart Sutra*, i.e. 三世諸佛 (sān shì zhū fó) “buddhas of the three times”. The exact Sanskrit equivalents of 三世佛 and 三世諸佛 i.e. *tryadhva-buddhāḥ*, *tryadhvā buddhāḥ* and *tryadhva-sarva-buddhāḥ* or *tryadhvāḥ sarva-buddhāḥ* are never found either as a compound or as individual words in *Prajñāpāramitā* texts. *Tryadhvan* is used a handful of times, especially in the compounds *tryadhvasamatā* “the equality of the three times”; *tryadhvanirmukta* “liberated in the three times”, and *tryadhvatraidhātuka* “belonging to the three times and three realms”.

To the best of my knowledge, *tryadhva-vyavasthitā* “appearing in the three times” is a *hapax legomenon*. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Aṣṭa*) does use the word in another context:

“Thus, Subhūti, all phenomena do not arrive or depart, are not constructed or demolished, they are not shaped, do not remain, do not hold, do not appear (*avyavasthitā*); do not arise or cease, and are undifferentiated like space.”⁹

To refer to the buddhas who (at least notionally) lived in the past we can simply use the Sanskrit word for “past” as an adjective, i.e. *atītāḥ buddhāḥ*. We don’t need to specify that a buddha “appears” or “exists” in the past because this is implied by the adjective: a “past buddha” is precisely a buddha who *lived in the past*. To specify that an event occurred in the past we can also use the locative case, e.g. *atīte 'dhvani bodhisattvair* (Kimura 2010: 1-2, 135) “by bodhisattvas in the past”. The addition of *vyavasthita* is unnecessary and unidiomatic.

By contrast, the Chinese phrase 三世諸佛 has been in use in Chinese Buddhist texts since the mid-3rd Century CE. Perhaps the first use is in 《大明度經》 (T225), a translation of *Aṣṭa* attributed to Zhīqiān (ca. 223-229 CE). The phrase is found throughout the Chinese *Prajñāpāramitā* translations, especially

⁹ *evameva subhūte sarvadharmā anāgatā āgatā ākrīṭā avikrīṭā anabhisaṃskrīṭā asthitā asaṃsthitā avyavasthitā anutpannā aniruddhā ākāśakalpatvāda-vikalpāḥ*. (Vaidya 1960a: 148: reading *agatā* for *āgatā*)

in various translations by Kumārajīva and Xuánzàng. Thus, this phrase is idiomatic in Chinese by the time the *Heart Sutra* is composed, which had to have happened after Kumārajīva completed his translation of *Pañc* in 404 CE (since this is the source of the quoted passage).

The importance of the phrase “all the buddhas of the three times” in the *Heart Sutra* is that it is not part of the quoted passage, but was composed as part of the frame for the quotation and thus reflects the language of composition. The phrase *tryadhva-vyavasthitā sarvabuddhāḥ* in the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* looks like a Chinese idiom translated into Sanskrit.

Method

In order to test this proposition, I used the CBETA Reader to survey all of the Chinese *Prajñāpāramitā* translations in the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* edition of the Chinese Tripiṭaka (volumes 5-8) for the target phrases 三世諸佛 “all the Buddhas of the three times” or 三世佛 “buddhas of the three times”. Since we have physical evidence of the *Heart Sutra* dated 661 CE in the form of the Fangshan Stele (Lin 1958), it had to have been composed before this date. The survey is thus limited to texts translated in the 7th Century or earlier. Moreover, Xuánzàng’s *Prajñāpāramitā* translations are collected together under one title, i.e. 《大般若波羅蜜多經》 (T220; Skt. *Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*), which makes up volumes 5-7 of the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, whereas all the other Chinese translations make up volume 8. Xuánzàng’s use of terminology is consistent across all of the texts within T220, so to make the survey more manageable, I took T220 parts ii and iv to be representative of Xuánzàng’s translations of the larger (大) and smaller (小) *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* respectively, thus avoiding considerable repetition. Thus, the survey involved the sutras shown in the table below, in chronological order of translation.

The attribution of early Chinese translations to translators in the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* is sometimes contradicted by modern scholarship. Jan Nattier’s *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations* (2008) provides a helpful summary of such issues. Nattier (2008: 76) follows Erik Zürcher and Paul Harrison in taking T224 to be authentically attributed to Lokakṣema.¹⁰

¹⁰ The reconstructed Sanskrit of the name 支婁迦讖 (Zhī Lóujiāchèn) is disputed, but Lokakṣema is the most widely accepted version. The prefix 支 marks him as ethnically Yuezhi.

Chinese Title	Text	Taishō No.	Translator	Date
《道行般若經》	<i>Aṣṭa</i>	T224	Lokakṣema	179 CE
《大明度經》	<i>Aṣṭa</i>	T225	Zhī Qiān	225 CE
《光讚經》	<i>Pañc</i>	T222	Dharmarakṣa	286 CE
《放光般若經》	<i>Pañc</i>	T221	Mokṣala	291 CE
《摩訶般若鈔經》	<i>Aṣṭa</i>	T226	Zhú Fóniàn	382 CE
《金剛般若波羅蜜經》	<i>Vaj</i>	T235	Kumārajīva	402 CE
《摩訶般若波羅蜜經》	<i>Pañc</i>	T223	"	404 CE
《小品般若經》	<i>Aṣṭa</i>	T227	"	408 CE
《勝天王般若波羅蜜經》	<i>Suv</i>	T231	Upaśunya	565 CE
《大般若波羅蜜多經》	<i>Pañc</i>	T220-ii11 (401-478)	Xuánzàng	663 CE
"	<i>Aṣṭa</i>	T220-iv (538-555)	"	"
"	<i>Suv</i>	T220-xvi (593-600)	"	"

¹¹Roman numerals indicate the part of T220 as enumerated in Conze (1978: 11-12)

However, Nattier also notes that T224 “has not been transmitted without alteration” but shows signs “here and there” of later editing (2008: 80). The provenance of T225 is complex and appears to be the work of two distinct writers. In Nattier’s notation, T225A consists of chapter one plus an interlinear commentary. T225B consists of chapters two through thirty and appears to be a revision of T224. Nattier concludes, “On balance, therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that T225B is the work of Zhī Qiān, while T225A was produced by another hand” (Nattier 2008: 137). In an article focussed on the authorship of T225, Nattier concludes, “T225B is a revision of Lokakṣema’s T224, produced with at least a cursory reference to a different Indian manuscript” (2010: 335), while with respect to T225A in the absence of definite evidence of authorship, “it seems most prudent to regard it simply as an ‘anonymous’ text” (336). The part of the text referred to in the present study is from the Zhī Qiān portion (i.e. T225B). Translators attributed to other texts seem to be uncontested.

Having identified the target phrases in Chinese, I then attempted to find them in the corresponding Sanskrit editions of the sutras. However, this process is far less straightforward than it might seem at face value. Take, for example, the first occurrence of the target phrase in the *Aṣṭa* translation produced by Kumārajīva’s group, i.e. T227. The context is a speech that Maitreya gives at the behest of Subhūti (beginning at 8.548a17). Maitreya is trying to explain how one can practice transference of merit without falling into wrong views. It is easy enough to locate the same speech in Vaidya’s Sanskrit edition (1960a: 72).¹² However, in Vaidya’s text, the speech is approximately three times as long as it is in T227. Whereas the target phrase occurs once in the T227 version of the speech, it occurs several times in *Aṣṭa*. In the translation by Xuánzàng (220-iv), the speech (beginning at 7.791c29), is considerably longer again. The extra material was not simply added to the end of the existing text, but instead was woven through it. The different recensions, although closely related and with the same basic message, are also unique. There is no exact counterpart of the context for the phrase as found in Kumārajīva’s text, but there are still references to the buddhas of the three times in all versions of the speech, enabling some comparison of different texts.

¹² Although Vaidya’s editions are perceived as problematic, they are often the only versions available digitally and thus available for electronic searching. This makes using them for this kind of study unavoidable for now. I note that Seishi Karashima (2012) also uses this edition of *Aṣṭa* for comparative purposes. Where possible, I have compared the digitised versions of Vaidya’s editions with others editions. I found no differences that would affect my argument.

There is, in effect, no single text of *Aṣṭa*. In 2nd Century Gandhāra, *Aṣṭa* was a relatively short, Gāndhārī language text. In the 10th Century Pala Empire, it was a much longer Sanskrit text. The Sanskrit editions of *Aṣṭa* are based on Pala Era manuscripts. The Chinese translations from different centuries reflect the development of the text. That said, in China, after Kumārajīva, especially after his translation of the commentary on *Pañc* (T1509) in 404 CE, the *Prajñāpāramitā* tradition was taught and learned in Chinese. Something similar happened with Tibetan translations. Each community treated their version of the text, in their preferred language, as *the* text.

We need to be very cautious about thinking of any Sanskrit text as “original” or “authentic”. In fact, the original *Prajñāpāramitā* text was almost certainly composed in Gāndhārī (Karashima 2013). The extant Sanskrit manuscripts certainly do not constitute an “original” for Kumārajīva’s translation since they represent a much later recension. The oldest dated Sanskrit witnesses of *Aṣṭa* are from the 10th Century, so Lokakṣema’s 2nd Century translation from a Gāndhārī source-text may well be much closer to the ur-text, and thus more “authentic”, if that term has any meaning in this context. Joseph Walser has recently argued that the Ur-text of the whole *Prajñāpāramitā* literary tradition may have included just the first few paragraphs of Chapter 1 (Walser 2018: 129 ff). Jonathan Silk (2015) has called into question the applicability of the standard methods of philology to Buddhist texts. The idea of an ur-text under these circumstances of constant change and the adoption of different recensions as authentic by different communities is far more fluid than is suggested by how we treat texts. We need to reconsider how we present and understand Buddhist texts both diachronically and synchronically.

Given the wide disparities between versions over time, we must carefully compare each text for each occurrence of the target phrase. Fortunately, the idiom of the Sanskrit texts and Chinese translations was established early and is conserved, meaning that ways of referring to the buddhas of the three times are quite stable across the centuries. Because the idiom is both conserved and different in the different languages, comparisons are still possible.

Results

Aṣṭasāhasrikā

1. In Chapter 7 of T227, on the subject of transference or dedication [of merit] (迴向; pariṇāmana), our target phrase comes at the end of Maitreya’s speech about how to transfer merit without falling into wrong views.

[Maitreya]: “A bodhisatva dedicates dharmas, just as Buddhas in the three times understand dedication, I also dedicate [them] to ultimate, complete awakening, this is called a real dedication.”¹³

In Vaidya’s edition (1960a), Maitreya’s speech appears in Chapter 6, *Anumodanāpariṇāmanā*, i.e. Joyful Transference [of Merit]. It has been reorganised in the process of accumulating a lot more material, eliminating a precise parallel of the phrase in T227. However, he does refer to the buddhas and *bhagavants* of the three times (*atītānāgatapratyutpannānām buddhānām bhagavatām* Vaidya 1960a: 75). Lokakṣema has “past, future, and present buddhas” 過去當來今現在佛 (T224; 8.438c9-10). Zhú Fóniàn retains Lokakṣema’s phrasing (T226; 8.520b15-16).¹⁴ Xuánzàng’s translation (T220-iv) is substantially longer even than Vaidya’s Sanskrit text and appears to have some structural changes. Where Maitreya refers to the Buddhas of the three times, Xuánzàng uses the compound phrase 過去未來現在諸佛 “all past-future-present buddhas” (e.g. 7.794c.06).

It is a curious feature of this story, in all the extant versions, that after Maitreya has given his speech in response to Subhūti’s prompting, that the Buddha praises Subhūti rather than Maitreya.

2. The second occurrence is in Chapter 20 of T227.¹⁵ The context, in this case, is a speech by the Buddha in praise of *kalyāṇamitra* “the beautiful friend” and of the six perfections as beautiful friends. It is precisely from practising the six perfections that the Buddhas of the past, future, and present have attained ultimate perfect awakening.

¹³ 菩薩迴向法，如三世諸佛所知迴向，我亦如是迴向阿耨多羅三藐三菩提，是名正迴向。(8.549a03 ≈ Conze 1973: 130-1)

¹⁴ The passage is in Chapter 4 of T226.

¹⁵ 深心求菩提 **adhyāśaya-prasamsthita* [setting out with intention?] = Chapter 22 *Kalyāṇamitra-parivartaḥ* in Vaidya 1960a.

And the universal knowledge (薩婆若; *sarvajñā*) of the buddhas of the three times (三世諸佛) are all born of the six perfections (六波羅蜜).¹⁶

The received Sanskrit is again considerably more elaborate. It repeats the same phrase three times attributing the awakening of buddhas to the six perfections but uses the individual phrases: *ātīte 'dhvani* “in the past time”; *anāgate 'dhvani* “in the future time”; and *etarhi* “at present”.¹⁷ This appears to be the only time that *etarhi* substitutes for *pratyutpanna* in this context. The sentences each have two clauses: the first refers to the ultimate awakening of the *tathāgata arhat*, and the second refers to the universal gnosis (*sarvajñā*) of the *buddha bhagavant*. Lokakṣema follows the same plan as the received Sanskrit text with three repeated passages using 過去 “past”, 當來 “future” and 今現 “present”.¹⁸ T226 lacks a parallel to this chapter. Xuánzàng also uses the standard phrases for past, future, and present, i.e. 過去, 未來, and 現在 (7.839.c18-25).

3. In T227 Kumārajīva uses the phrase 過去未來現在諸佛 once in the chapter on Hell in a speech about the consequences of having no faith in Prajñāpāramitā (8.551.a26-7). Zhī Qiān (T225) translates with 三世諸佛 (8.488.a29). The parallel in Vaidya uses the phrase twice, both times using the compounded form *atītānāgatapratyutpannā buddhā* (Vaidya 1960a: 90 = Conze 1973: 135).¹⁹

4. There is one example of Xuánzàng using the target phrase 三世諸佛 in Chp 17 (7.828.c05). Vaidya’s text refers separately to the Buddhas of the past, present and future, and in that unusual order.²⁰ Kumārajīva, in this instance, has a hybrid

¹⁶ 又三世諸佛薩婆若，皆從六波羅蜜生。(8.571c04)

¹⁷ *ye 'pi te subhūte atīte 'dhvani tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyakṣambuddhā anuttarāṃ samyakṣambodhim abhisambudhya parinirvṛtāḥ, teṣāṃ api buddhānāṃ bhagavatām ito nirjātaiva sarvajñatā, yaduta ṣaḍbhyaḥ pāramitābhyaḥ / ye 'pi te subhūte bhaviṣyanty anāgate 'dhvani tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyakṣambuddhā anuttarāṃ samyakṣambodhim abhisambhotsyante, teṣāṃ api buddhānāṃ bhagavatām ito nirjātaiva sarvajñatā, yaduta ṣaḍbhyaḥ pāramitābhyaḥ / ye 'pi te subhūte aprameyeṣv asaṃkhyeṣv aparimāṇeṣv acintyeṣu lokadhātuṣu tathāgatā arhantaḥ samyakṣambuddhā etarhya nuttarāṃ samyakṣambodhim abhisambuddhās tiṣṭhanti, dhriyante, yāpayanti, dharmāṃ ca deśayanti, teṣāṃ api buddhānāṃ bhagavatām ito nirjātaiva sarvajñatā, yaduta ṣaḍbhyaḥ pāramitābhyaḥ / (Vaidya 1960a: 197)*

¹⁸ 過去怛薩阿竭、阿羅訶、三耶三佛，皆從六波羅蜜出；甫當來怛薩阿竭、阿羅訶、三耶三佛，皆從六波羅蜜出；今現在十方阿僧祇剎怛薩阿竭、阿羅訶、三耶三佛，亦皆從六波羅蜜出，成薩芸若。(8.462a.2-462a.6)

¹⁹ One occurrence in the genitive plural, one in the nominative plural.

²⁰ *nāyaṃ kevalamatītānāmeva buddhānāṃ bhagavatām saddharmaparigrahaḥ, pratyutpannānāṃ*

“the buddhas of the past and present... and... of future time” (過去現在諸佛... 亦... 未來世 565.c15-16).

5. T225 uses the target phrase 三世諸佛 as well as the variant 三世佛 in Chapter 25 (8. 502.c22-24). This equates to Chapter 28 of Vaidya’s text, which has *atītānāgatapratyutpannā buddhā* and *atītānāgatapratyutpannānām tathāgatānām arhatāṃ* (1960a: 228). In T227 this passage is included in Chp 24, and uses the phrasing, “buddhas of past, future, and present” 過去、未來、現在諸佛 (577c24-5)

6. T226 never uses the phrases 三世佛 or 三世諸佛 though it is missing some of the chapters where these terms would be expected to occur.

Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā

1. The first occurrence of 三世諸佛 in Kumārajīva’s translation of *Pañc* comes in Chapter 36 (T 288b.22-3), in a dialogue between Ānanda and the Buddha about why the Buddha focussed on the perfection of *prajñā* rather than the other perfections. The corresponding dialogue occurs in Chp 30 of *Pañc* (Kimura 2-3:79 = Conze 1975: 241) but has no parallel use of the target phrase. Nor does the phrase occur in the parallel in T221, translated by Mokṣala (cf. T 8.50a.3-10).

2. The phrase 三世諸佛 also occurs in Chp. 41 (T 8.304c10) though it is immediately preceded by 過去未來現在諸佛 (T 8.304c.9), showing that Kumārajīva used both expressions. In T221, there is only one mention of the all the buddhas of the three times, which takes the form 過去當來今現在諸佛 (T 8.63a10), where 今現在 is used for 現在 (今 means “present, today”). This has a parallel in *Pañc*, *atītānāgatapratyutpannānām buddhānām bhagavatāṃ* (Kimura 2-3, 150 = Conze 1975: 288)

3. Finally, in T223, we find the target phrase used twice within three lines in Chp 66 (T 8. 364a.22 and 24). In this passage, the Bhagavan pulls out his tongue and covers his whole face with it, asking Ānanda whether such a tongue could lie. T221 abbreviates the bi-syllabic time adjectives 過去, 當來, and 今現 to just 去來今 (T 8.106a.12 and 14). *Pañc* has *atītānāgatapratyutpannānām buddhānām* on both occasions (Kimura 5:78 = Conze 1975: 489).

apī buddhānām bhagavatāmeṣa eva saddharmaparigrahaḥ, anāgatānām apī buddhānām bhagavatāmeṣa eva saddharmaparigrahaḥ aham apī tatra teṣāmanāgatānām buddhānām bhagavatāṃ saṃkhyāṃ gaṇanām praviṣṭa iti, (Vaidya 1960a: 169. See also Conze 1973: 207)

Vajracchedikā

The target phrase is not used in *Vaj*, but we do find mention of the three times using the adjectives separately. In Kumārajīva’s translation (T235) the wording is:

Subhūti, past mental events cannot be apprehended, future mental events cannot be apprehended, present mental events cannot be apprehended.²¹

Here, “mental events” translates 心 = Skt. *Citta*, while “apprehended” translates 可得 = Skt. *upa√labh*. Vaidya’s (1961) Sanskrit edition is more or less identical to this, as is the Gilgit manuscript edited by Schopen (1989).²²

“Subhūti, a past mental event (*citta*) is not apprehended (*upalabhyate*), a future mental event is not apprehended, a present mental event is not apprehended.”

Suvikrāntavikrāmapariṣcchā

Another relevant, though often overlooked, text is the *Suvikrāntavikrāmapariṣcchā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Suv*) or *The Inquiry of Suvikrāntavikrāmi*. Lancaster and Park (1979), in their *The Korean Buddhist Canon: A Descriptive Catalogue*, designate T231 as a version of *Suv*.²³ The title of T231 is, in fact, 勝天王般若波羅蜜經 = Skt. *Pravaradevarāja-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*. It features dialogues with 勝天王 or Pravaradeva Rāja frequently addressed as 大王, i.e. *mahārāja*. However, in the Sanskrit version (Vaidya 1961: 1-74) there is no king, no one is ever addressed as *mahārāja*, and the text is focussed on the eponymous bodhisatva, *Suvikrāntavikrāmi*. My impression is that they are not the same text. On the other hand, Xuánzàng’s translation, T220-xvi (fascicles 593-600), appears to have been translated from a text very like the extant Sanskrit manuscript both in form and content.

²¹ 須菩提！過去心不可得，現在心不可得，未來心不可得。(8.751b28)

²² *aītaṃ subhūte cittaṃ nopalabhyate | anāgataṃ cittaṃ nopalabhyate | pratyutpannaṃ cittaṃ nopalabhyate* || 18 || (Vaidya 1961: 86 = Schopen 1989: 9a3-4)

²³ Translation by Upaśūnya: 9th month, 6th year of Tiānjiā (天嘉), Chén dynasty (陳) (A.D. 565) in Yángzhōu (揚州). Based on 開元釋教錄, a catalogue of Buddhist texts compiled during the Tang Dynasty Kāiyuán Era (713–741) (Lancaster and Park 1979; substituting Pinyin Romanisation)

This said T231 uses the phrase 三世諸佛 seven times. Vaidya's Sanskrit edition of *Suv* uses the phrase *atītānāgata-pratyutpannā buddhāḥ* a number of times. If T231 is indeed related to *Suv*, then it follows the patterns established above.

Xuánzàng's translation of *Suv*, T220-xvi, uses 三世諸佛 just once (7.1108. b12.) and this corresponds to the Sanskrit text, *atītānāgata-pratyutpannā buddhā bhagavanto* (Vaidya 1961: 71).

Conclusion

All Chinese translators prefer translating the Sanskrit phrase *atīta-anāgata-pratyutpannā buddhāḥ* and its variants using the Chinese equivalent 過去未來現在諸佛. For example, across all his *Prajñāpāramitā* translations, Xuánzàng uses 過去未來現在諸佛 227 times and 三世諸佛 69 times (remembering that his contribution contains a huge amount of repetition between the various versions of the same sūtra expanded to different sizes). Similarly, in Kumārajīva's *Prajñāpāramitā* translations, he uses 過去未來現在諸佛 60 times and 三世諸佛 just eight times.

Where we find 三世諸佛 in a Chinese text, we find *atīta-anāgata-pratyutpannā buddhāḥ* or *atīta-anāgata-pratyutpannāḥ sarvabuddhāḥ* in the extant Sanskrit texts. Additionally, where one Chinese translator uses 三世諸佛, we often find that another will have translated the same passage using 過去未來現在諸佛.

We can say that using “the three times” as opposed to “past, future, and present” to refer to *buddhas* in a *Prajñāpāramitā* text, is common though not preferred in Chinese and that it is unknown in Sanskrit, with the single exception of the *Heart Sutra*. The expression *tryadhvan-vyavastīthāḥ sarvabuddhāḥ* in the *Heart Sutra* is consistent with the Chinese conventions for referring to the buddhas of the three times and inconsistent with the Buddhist Sanskrit conventions. We conclude that it is a Chinese expression translated into Sanskrit and not the other way around. Taken alongside the evidence in Jan Nattier's 1992 article, this shows conclusively that the Sanskrit *Heart Sutra* is a translation from the Chinese *Heart Sutra* and not the other way around. The language of composition was Chinese.

Although the exact reference to the “buddhas of the three times who rely on *Prajñāpāramitā*” is not a quote per se, the sentence would not be out of place in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. Where the redactor of the

Chinese *Xīnjīng* was not actually quoting from the *Dàjīng* they seem to have been consciously employing the language found in it, that is to say, employing Kumārajīva’s Chinese idioms. We also know they used some terms preferred by Xuánzàng, but not his translation of *Pañc* as the basis of their redaction.

This study confirms existing observations by Nattier (1992), Huifeng (2014), and Attwood (2017) that have all showed, in one way or another, that whoever translated the *Heart Sutra* seems to have struggled to express the ideas found in the Chinese text using Sanskrit. Even though they have some facility in Sanskrit, the translator does not seem to have had access to, or familiarity with, *Prajñāpāramitā* literature in Sanskrit. Although Huifeng (2014) does not explicitly say so, one of the mistakes he points out—misreading 以無所得故 as *aprāptivād* rather than *anupalambhayogena*—tells us that the translator was probably not familiar with Kumārajīva’s *Dàjīng* either, since the term is used often and unambiguously in that text. This rules out a number of suspects as the translator. Anyone very familiar with the Sanskrit *Prajñāpāramitā* literature and/or with Kumārajīva’s *Dàjīng*, such as Xuánzàng, can be eliminated from our inquiries.

We can affirm Nattier’s conclusion that the *Heart Sutra* is a Chinese text and add that the Sanskrit translation was not produced by an expert in *Prajñāpāramitā* (Chinese or Sanskrit). As Kyoko Tokuno (1990) and Tanya Storch (2014) have shown, redacted extracts of larger texts known as “digest sutras” (抄經), texts like the *Heart Sutra*, were circulating in their hundreds in early Medieval China. The initial production of a text like the *Heart Sutra* is therefore unremarkable.

The real puzzle is how the *Heart Sutra* ever came to be mistaken for a genuine sutra (正經). It was common knowledge that the sources of digests were Chinese translations. We can only presume that, along with the attribution to Xuánzàng, the forged Sanskrit “original” was part of an attempt to assert the authenticity of the *Heart Sutra* as a sutra, an attempt that clearly succeeded. In a forthcoming article, I will apply observations by Tokuno and Storch to the *Heart Sutra* in the hope of shedding light on its history.

Abbreviations

Aṣṭa	<i>Aṣṭasāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>
Pañc	<i>Pañcaviṃśati-sāhasrikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>
Suv	<i>Suvikrāntavikrāmi-paripṛcchā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>
T	<i>Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō</i>
Vaj	<i>Vajracchedikā-prajñāpāramitā-sūtra</i>

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