

Did Chinese Buddhists translate the old formula ‘him I call a Brahmin’? The reconstruction of Buddhism as the path of *nirvāṇa* in Early Chinese translations

Efraín Villamor Herrero
Universidad de Salamanca 

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/estr.90600>

Recibido: 18 de octubre de 2023 / Revisado: 17 de enero de 2024 / Aceptado: 20 de mayo de 2024

ENG Abstract. At first, Chinese translators lacked a unified criterion for interpreting Buddhist scriptures. They employed various phonetic transliterations and gradually adopted etymological approaches as their understanding developed. This study analyzes the Chinese translations of the oldest stratum of Pāli scriptures, focusing on the formula ‘him I call a Brahmin’, attributed in the Canon as the words of the Buddha. This formula has been preserved in Chinese Buddhist scriptures as well. However, Chinese translators did not always translate the formula literally. Their goal was to persuade Chinese readers that they were knowledgeable about the path of *nirvāṇa*.

Keywords: *brāhmaṇa*; *Aṭṭhakavagga*; *Brāhmaṇavagga*; *āgamas*; *nirvāṇa*

ES ¿Interpretaron los traductores budistas chinos la antigua fórmula de ‘aquél es quien yo llamo Brahmán’? La reconstrucción del budismo como camino del *nirvāṇa* en las primeras traducciones chinas

Resumen. Al principio, los traductores chinos carecían de un criterio unificado para interpretar las escrituras budistas. Las transliteraciones fonéticas dieron paso a distintos enfoques etimológicos, según su comprensión aumentaba. Este artículo analiza algunas de las traducciones chinas más antiguas de las escrituras del Canon Pāli, centrándose en la antigua fórmula de: *aquél es quien yo llamo brahmán*, la cual en el Canon es atribuida como la definición implícita en algunas de las más importantes enseñanzas del *buddha* Gautama. Aunque esta antigua fórmula puede encontrarse asimismo en las primeras adaptaciones al chino clásico del Canon, los resultados de este trabajo muestran que esta no fue siempre traducida literalmente por los primeros traductores chinos, dado que el principal objetivo de sus traducciones era presentarse como fieles concedores del camino del *nirvāṇa*.

Palabras clave: *brāhmaṇa*; *Aṭṭhakavagga*; *Brāhmaṇavagga*; *āgamas*; *nirvāṇa*

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. The Chinese transcriptions of the epithets referring to the Buddha. 3. The interpretation of ‘him I call a Brahmin’ in early Chinese translations. 3.1. Its omission from the Chinese version of the *Arth-Chin*. 3.2. The interpretations of ‘him I call a Brahmin’ in early Chinese versions. 4. Convincing that the Buddha attained *nirvāṇa*. 5. Conclusions.

How to cite: Villamor, E. (2024). Did Chinese Buddhists translate the old formula ‘him I call a Brahmin’? The reconstruction of Buddhism as the path of *nirvāṇa* in Early Chinese translations. *Estudios de Traducción*, 14, 65-76. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/estr.90600>

1. Introduction

With the translation of the *Sutta Piṭaka* 經藏 into Chinese (Miyazaki 2019) by the Northern Transmission of Buddhism, the first known adaptations (Ch. *āhán jīng* 阿含經) of the Pāli Canon (P. *āgama*) were produced (Hirakawa 2011: 97). These adaptations, titled *āhán jīng* 阿含經 in Chinese, contain examples of the ethical and ascetic values taught by the Buddha. In the oldest stratum of Pāli scriptures, some of these values appear to be the heritage of the religious ideals attributed to the Buddha’s own words. Transmitted since early times as ‘him I call a Brahmin’, this longstanding formula traveled outside India with Buddhist scriptures, not to refer

to a Brahman priest, but, as can be found translated into Chinese¹, to someone capable of complying with the new ethical standards of Buddhism. Nevertheless, this expression was not always rendered by Chinese translators. Therefore, this paper analyses the early Chinese translations of the *Aṭṭhakavagga* (Av) in the *Suttanipāta* (Sn) (Sn 766-975) and *Brāhmaṇavagga* (Bv) of the *Dhammapada* (Dhp) (Dhp 383-423), focusing on how it was translated in the Arth-Chin² (佛說義足經 (T198.4), *Arthapada*³ *Sūtra*) – the ancient Chinese translation of the Av (Bapat 1951: 1) by Zhī Qiān 支謙 (223-253 CE) – and in the oldest Chinese translations of the Bv. This paper also includes a comparative analysis of the Dhp-Chi^{WQN4} (法句譬喻經) (T210.4) translated by Wéiqínán 維祇難 in 224 CE – a text which was adapted from Pāli with additional material from other Buddhist sources – and the Dhp-ChiFJFN (法句譬喻經) (T211.4) (a selection of verses from the Dhp-Chi^{WQN} by Fājù 法炬 and Fǎlì 法立 which was composed between 290–306 CE from the Dhp, given that some fragments appear to be based on the Arth-Chin as well (Baums 2009: 45).

2. The Chinese transcriptions of the epithets referring to the Buddha

The enterprise of producing consistent Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures with unified translation criteria was more challenging than expected. The production of most translations was scattered and whatever simultaneousness we may find between translations shall be irrelevant to us, as it generally is not the result of a single team of translators working together at the same place. This made the task of unifying the guidelines for Chinese Buddhist interpretation even more complex. The unification of Chinese phonetic transcriptions of Indian languages would have to wait for the formulation of the ‘five rules’ (Ch. *wǔzhǒng bùfān* 五種不翻) by Xuán Zàng 玄奘 (602-664 CE) (Ueki 2012: 69-70). Phonetic transcriptions, mimetic as much as the Chinese readings allowed, were progressively unified. Earlier phonetic transcriptions into Chinese were standardized and popularized by Kumārajīva 鳩摩羅什 (350-409 CE) (Funayama 2020: 27-30), whose works are regarded as the old translations (旧訳). However, subsequent generations of translators mostly adopted Xuán Zàng’s criteria, which is considered the ‘new scale for translating into Chinese’ (新訳) (Ueki 2012: 72-73). Accurately transcribing the most significant Buddhist terms was an imperative need requiring consensus. However, early Chinese translations of the Av and Bv show that, for a time, many terms used to praise the Buddha were not translated, as later translators would expect.

Albeit rare, his family name, Gotama (Sn 848), was sometimes used to describe the ‘teachings of Gotama’ (Gotamasāsana Sn 933) and to refer to his disciples as the ‘followers of Gotama’ (Gotamasāvaka Dhp 296-301). Apart from this peculiarity, the Buddhist narratives in the Av and Bv tend to regard him with solemnity. The Buddha was honored by his followers with many epithets, some of which were common in Jainism (Takeda 2012: 135). Many of these epithets are still recognizable within Buddhist tradition since they obtained great prestige to praise the Buddha. As far as we can notice in the Av, among many epithets, the one that appears the most and seems to be the most common is ‘Blessed one’ (Bhagavant).

*Adiccabandha*⁵ (Sn 915), *bhagavat* (Sn 934) (as Bhagavā commonly in the Av (Sn 815, 837, 839, 841, 849, 914, 916, 934, 954, 963, 975) and in the verses 19-20 of the Dhp, composed later than the Bv), *cakkhumant* (Sn 956), *dhīra* (Sn 775, 778, 838, 877, 890, 913, 964) *muni* (Sn 780, 812, 823, 838, 845, 850, 860, 877, 912, 914, 946, 954) (Namikawa 2006: 195), *mahesi* (Sn 915, Dhp 422), *sambuddha* (Dhp 392), *satthar* (Sn 899, 955), *sugata* (Dhp 419).

The veneration of the Buddha was an important matter for Chinese translators as well. However, the lack of a unifying transcription criteria for terms with no Chinese equivalent led to a vast diversity of transcriptions⁶.

¹ On the challenges arising from phonetic transcriptions in a writing system like sinograms, see Villamor 2023c.

² (Baums 2009: 38). The Arth-Chin text incorporates explanations of the teachings along with comments before introducing the translated versions of the Av. (Baums 2009: 39, Mizuno 1952: 91). This paper contrasts the Av and Arth-Chin versions according to the correspondences detailed in Bodhi 2017: It appears that the Arth-Chin was composed using commentaries from other works in the Canon, including the Udāna, the Pāli Jātaka collection, Dhp, and Sn, resulting in a prose style that is absent in the archaic lyric form of the Av (Ibid. 176).

³ The original title was likely either *Artha(ka)varga* or *Artha(ka)vargīya*, rather than *Arthapada* (Mizuno 1952: 87). McGovern (2018: 274-275) also discusses the potential initial name of this text and its translation into Sanskrit and Chinese. The Av and Arth-Chin versions were compared in this study, based on the correspondences outlined in Bodhi (2017: 1544-1545).

⁴ The Dhp-Chi^{WQN} version of Wéiqínán 維祇難 is believed to be the earliest attempt to translate the Dhp into Chinese, dating back to 224 CE (the third year of the Huángwǔ era (黃武三年)) when Wéiqínán returned from India (Tanaka, 1974: 122). This version is found in the twenty-first chapter of the Dhp WQN, referred to as the ‘Chapter of Secularity’ (世俗品法句經第二十一). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that this additional chapter, which is absent in Pāli, contains the statement that India is the land where all *buddhas* emerged (又諸佛興皆在天竺). It is also worth mentioning that it was transcribed from the language of Ancient India (Ch. Tiān Zhū) into Chinese characters (Ch. hàn 漢) (又諸佛興皆在天竺。天竺言語與漢異音云。其書為天書語為天語 (T210.4.566b29-T210.4.566c01)). As in other classical Chinese translations, this work refers to Indian languages from the Indian referential sources as ‘divine scripts’ 天書 due to their attributed powers in recitation and transcription, rather than as an assertion of their provenance as a script (書) from ancient India (天竺) (Funayama, 2022: 121-122). In Buddhist scriptures translated into Chinese, it is claimed that the Buddha left a written record of his teachings in ancient Indian scripts such as *brāhmī* 梵書 or *khroṣṭhī* 佉留書. These scripts were attributed with superhuman properties. (Ibid. 123).

⁵ This term was one of the several multifaceted titles: ‘Descendant of the Sun God’ *ādiccabandhu*, ‘matchless person’ (*appaṭipuggala*), ‘one who has the eye to see the truth’ (*cakkhumant*), ‘protector of the world’ (*lokanātha*), and ‘master’ (*satthar*); later added by Buddhist authors to distinguish the Buddha from his disciples (Namikawa 2006: 53).

⁶ When encountering untranslatable terms, translators frequently employed the following strategies in Chinese: 1) Transcribing the Indian term according to the most accurate Chinese phonetics. 2) Creating a new character that represented the sound. 3) Selecting a Chinese ideogram with a similar meaning, despite the potential for confusion (Funayama 2020: 212).

Therefore, Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures sometimes conveyed their original meaning, but they often transformed it due to the traditional meaning ascribed to Chinese sinograms. Thus, a fusional 'hybrid' new nuance stemmed from their characterization (Funayama 2022: 13). The abovementioned epithets for the Buddha were transliterated as accurately as possible at the time. The many terms to be used to exalt the magnificence of the Buddha were selected and combined based on the paradigmatic background and, to a certain extent, by the subjectivity of Chinese translators.

The epithet 'kinsman of the sun' (Adiccabandha) was transcribed as 'virtuous divine related to the sun', with the rare transcription of 賢神愈日 (Arth-Chin, T198.4.184b12). Instead of using his most common epithet in the Av and Bv, *bhagavat*⁷, the Arth-Chin stated that the 'teachings reflected in the Arth-Chin, which made all bhikkhus delighted, were taught by the Buddha' (佛說是義足經竟。比丘悉歡喜T198.4.183b15). It does not seem unwise to consider that Zhī Qiān, the Chinese translator of the Arth-Chin, understood these epithets as references to the Buddha, which does not mean that he paraphrased all of them. In fact, the concern not to confuse his audience with too many different epithets may have prompted Zhī Qiān to try unifying some of them. Allusions to the Buddha as 'Sage', interpreting *bhagavā*, appear as the constructed figure of the Buddha and translated with the same sinogram (尊)⁸, which was also used in this Chinese adaptation of the Av to translate *muni* and *sattar*⁹. On the other hand, the Buddha as the possessor of great insight, if not omniscience, was translated as 'who possesses the eyes of wisdom' (*cakkhumant* Sn 956). This, which was later unified as 具眼者, is described in the Arth-Chin as 身眼 (T198.4.186b16). Whereas in the Dhp-Chi^{WQN}, the same concept is translated as 'the eye of the path'¹⁰ (道眼 T210.4.569b27).

Several etymological Chinese translations for *dhīra*, a term meaning 'wise' (勇健, 勇猛, 勇力, 堅固, 心決定) (Ogiwara 1986: 644), have been previously identified. Among them, 'vigorous', in Chinese characters (Ch. *yǒngměng* 勇猛), appears translated in the Arth-Chin to refer to the Buddha as 'hero'¹¹. Chinese transcriptions for *muni* are quite diverse. True that this is also presented as an epithet for many different kinds of 'sages' in the Indian religious context, but it was a common epithet to exalt the alleged holiness of the Buddha. Etymologically, it was later interpreted as: 仙, 仙人, 大仙, 神仙, 默, 寂默, 寂默者, 仁, 尊, 仏, 世尊, 如来 and prior to that with the phonetic transliterations (Ch. *móuni*): 牟尼, 父尼, 茂泥 (Ogiwara 1986: 1050). However, in the Arth-Chin this is repeatedly translated as 'Saint' or 'Sage' 尊¹². As I already discussed, this would be in accordance with the successful attempt to construct a unified vision of the figure of the Buddha. Another interesting example of this would be that a reference to the Buddha as the 'great seer' (*mahesi* Sn 915) was transcribed in the Arth-Chin with the odd transliteration of 大喜足 (T0198_04.0184b12). It is worth noting the relation between this term and early forms of Śaivism – a background intrinsically involved with the development of Buddhism – where this word is used to venerate the God Śiva (Gombrich 2006: 148-151). The attempt to legitimize the superiority of the Buddha over other spiritual leaders, especially over the most iconic deities of Brahmanism, is confirmed by the extensive narratives that described Brahmā¹³ as his patron (Ellis 2021: 247). His followers also attributed countless episodes to him in which, among other Vedic deities, the king of the *devas*, Sakka (Sk. Indra) (Appleton 2016: 25-50), was transformed into one of his most famous pupils¹⁴.

⁷ The Sanskrit term *bhagavān*, with more than six different meanings in the Buddhist context, was phonetically transcribed as: 薄伽梵 (Ibid. 107).

⁸ When one indulges in sexual intercourse, (Metteyya, **the Blessed One** said), even the teaching itself is forgotten and he practices wrongly: this is ignoble in him (Sn 815) (Bodhi 2017: 346)
Methunam anuyuttassa Metteyyā ti **Bhagavā** mussat⁷ evāpi sāsanaṃ, micchā ca paṭipajjati, etaṃ tasmim anāriyaṃ (Sn 815) 'Mental attachment to the physical senses of a woman leads to forgetfulness of the commandments of the **Sage**'
Arth-Chin (Bapat 1951: 86).

⁹ 婬欲著女形 大道解癡根 願受尊所戒 (T198.4.179b11 T198.4.179b12).
According to Bapat (1951: 170), the Chinese translation of Sn 955 is 'The Honored One'. It should be noted that *sattar* was also introduced in Chinese, particularly in the Arth-Chin, with the same 尊 character (T198.4.186b15). This passage praises the Buddha as having great 'divine powers' 威神天 from Tusita heaven, transcribed as 兜術.

¹⁰ The use of the character 道 (Ch. *dào*) for 'path' by Chinese translators is intriguing. This sinogram was widely used with a clear influence from Daoism and to symbolize the 'fruit' of the absolute truth (*bodhi*) (Funayama 2022: 56-58). There are various interpretations of this line, including: 1) the 'eye of the (Buddhist) path', 2) the 'eye of the Dao', and 3) the 'eye of the Truth'. The second interpretation is perhaps the boldest of the three. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that this type of narrative functioned as their identity discourse to propagate the path of *nirvāṇa* rather than the method(s) for achieving it. As discussed below, the narrative served as a means to establish and promote their identity.

¹¹ T198(4)179b22, 183b12, 187a27, 187c7.

¹² Sn 780 (T198.4.177b29), and Sn 812 (T198.4.179a22) demonstrate that the Arth-Chin counterpart of Sn 823 lacks an equivalent translation for *muni* (Bapat 1951: 88). The text advises to 'think and plan of going [from the world] far, far away' (遠計念長行 T0198.4.179b29). In contrast, the adaptation of Sn 838 asks: 'but how can the **sage** accept it?' (Bapat 1951: 100) 尊云何當受是 (T198.4.180b09). More explicit is the example of the Chinese translation of the verse Sn 845. The Pāli terms *nāga* and *muni* were combined with the same character: All over the world, the **saint** (as described by Bapat 1951: 104) wandered seeking to destroy suffering; free from disputes, not joining issues with anyone. Like the pure water-lotus, devoid of mud, and unsullied by particles of filth and mire; the **sage** is quiescent and free from lust. With no additional attachments to worldly pleasures (悉遠世求敗苦 尊言離莫與俱 如水華淨無泥 重塵土不為萎 尊安爾無所貪 於世俗無所著 亦不轉所念 (T198.4.18b25-T198.4.18b28).

¹³ The prominence of Brahmā as a guardian deity in Buddhism was introduced also by Chinese translators. This is evident in the Arth-Chin's numerous references to Fàn Tiān (梵天). Scarcely mentioned in Dhp-Chi^{WQN}, Brahmā is depicted as the very 'essence of Universe' and the 'place where one goes after death' 死昇梵天 (T210. 4.561c8), descriptions which offer insights of the post-mortem beliefs of Vedic Brahmins. For further information on regarding narratives about Brahmā in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu literature, see Appleton (2016: 57-81).

¹⁴ I researched the adaptation of Indra (who is the most worshiped god through Vedic hymns) in Buddhist narratives in my Doctoral Thesis. The Chinese interpretation of one of the most popular *jātaka* tales in Asia (also covered in Japanese medieval literature) implies a misleading use of his figure (commonly adapted in Indian texts as a trickster), as well as a catechetical adaptation of Indra as a follower of the Buddha (Villamor 2023b: 70-105).

History attests to the fact that, among the vast sea of epithets, ‘buddha’ is the most renowned and commonly used title to refer to the Buddha. As I argued elsewhere, special attention must be paid to how his image was shaped in such a way. In the beginning, the term ‘buddha’, a noun commonly used at the time, was neither his preferred appellative nor the term used to describe the goal of Buddhism in early Buddhist scriptures (Villamor 2024a). The term *buddha* (Sn 957, Dhṛ 387, 398, 419, 422) was thus interpreted for the Sn 957 in the Arth-Chin not referring to him as the Buddha in a common way, but adding mysticism to his experience detailing: ‘With no trouble. He is awakened to the good’ (Bapat 1951: 170) (無憂覺我善行) (T198.4.186b18). As I discuss below, we can also find examples of the theologizing of his experience in the Dhṛ-Chi^{WQN} and Dhṛ-Chi^{FJFN}, even where translators later introduced unified terms to refer to the Buddha as Fó 佛 and Shizūn 世尊¹⁵ in the text.

As I briefly revised here, early Buddhists from India introduced many epithets to venerate the Buddha. Many of them have correspondences in the Arth-Chin. Buddhist authors¹⁶ did not hesitate to use appellatives to praise him. The teachings of the Buddha were remembered in many ways. However, in the Av and Bv, the oldest strata of the Canon, there seems to be a certain consensus regarding this ancient allegory. At the very least, whenever it is mentioned in the Av, the verses evoke the apophatic way in which the Buddha used to teach. I think it cannot be completely denied that this formula has a tang of his pragmatics to it. For the Buddha, words meant nothing without actions and thus, for him, words could always be used as a metaphor. This may have resonated as one of his most powerful claims against Vedic ideology. Through this, by borrowing terms such as the ‘oblation water’ (Sk. *udaka*), he denied the philosophical assumptions of Vedic Brahmins (Villamor 2023a). However, it is still uncertain how Chinese translators interpreted his metaphors. As we already reviewed, early Chinese translators of the Av and Bv attempted to unify the image of the Buddha. Therefore, we shall consider whether they were concerned about describing the religious goal of Buddhism by attributing the definition of *brāhmaṇa* to the Buddha himself. As we shall see, controversy around this allegation was widespread and even reached Chinese kingdoms, where the social paradigm was not under the influence of Brahminic thought (beyond the influence from Buddhism, of course). The controversy was long lasting, which would mean that Chinese Buddhist translators were aware of it and the problems related to spreading Buddhism in such terms.

3. The interpretation of ‘him I call a Brahmin’ in early Chinese translations

3.1. Its omission from the Chinese version of the Arth-Chin

The social context of ancient Chinese kingdoms was different from northeastern India, where Buddhism and other ascetic traditions emerged (Bronkhorst 2007). The rivalry between Brahmins and Buddhists spread in India after the Mauryan Period (circa IV BCE) (McGovern 2018: 26, 165). Chinese Buddhists did not have to compete with Brahmins for royal patronage, which does not mean that they were not in competition for patronage with other religions. Their identity discourse is noticeable in their tendency to omit references to ‘brahmin’ as the goal of Buddhism. All of this despite their knowing that the tradition of the Canon inherited that affirmation as *Buddhavaṇana*.

Passages of the Av portray one of the most characteristic aspects of the Buddha’s teachings—his explicit disinterest for metaphysics (Sk. *avyākata* 無記) (Bodhi 2017: 168), which can be particularly noticed in Av lines in the apophatic way that ‘him I call a Brahmin’ (*tam ahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇam*) is formulated (Villamor 2024a: 4). This well-known affirmation has already been noticed in commentaries of the Canon in Gāndhārī language (*tam aho bromi bramaṇo*), in Sanskrit (*yaḥ sa vai brāhmaṇaḥ smṛtaḥ*), and in the Chinese translations of the Ud 1.6 as 是謂梵志 (Baums 2009: 581). Bapat (1951: 12) expressed that Zhī Qiān frequently misunderstood the Indian source when translating the Av into Chinese. It has also been suggested that the Chinese translation of the Arth-Chin does not fully grasp the meaning of ‘brahmin’ (Bapat 1951: 8) in its interpretation of the verse Sn 843¹⁷.

(Sn 843) **Saccan’ ti so brāhmaṇo kiṃ vadeyya**, ‘*musā’ ti vā so vivadetha kena: yasmiṃ samaṃ visamañ cāpi n’ atthi, sa kena vādaṃ paṭisaṃyujeyya.*

‘Why would that brahmin assert, ‘It’s true,’ or with whom would he dispute, ‘It’s false?’ When for him there is no ‘equal’ and ‘unequal,’ with whom would he engage in debate?’ (Sn 843) (Bodhi 2017: 351)

有諦人當何言 已著空誰有諍 邪亦正悉無有 從何言得其短 Arth-Chin
(T198(4)180b21-T198(4)180b22)

¹⁵ The Chinese character 佛 (Ch. *fó*) is commonly used to refer to the Buddha, with its phonetic transcription of the sound ‘but’ from Iranian languages. The character 浮屠 originated from Middle Asian languages, represents the phonetic transcription of the Bactrian terms of ‘*bodo*, *boddo*, *boudo*’ (Ji et al. 2007: 470). Older Chinese translations render it as 浮圖 (Ch. *fútú*) and 浮屠 (Ch. *fútú*), while an additional common phonetic transcription, 仏陀 (Ch. *fótuó*), can also be found (IBJ 2014: 867, Pellard 2014: 690, Miyajima 2006).

¹⁶ Attributing authorship of the various teachings in Buddhism is a complex endeavor. The term *saṅghavaṇana* has been used to refer to Buddhist authors, distinguishing them from the multifaceted entity of the *saṅgha*, which comprises not only authors but also other individuals who have contributed to preserving Buddhism. Textual criticism suggests a complex and heterogeneous process of transmitting Buddhist teachings (Shaw 2015: 454).

¹⁷ An ancient version of this passage in Sanskrit, translated from a vernacular source of the Av, supports the notion that a ‘true Brahmin’ was originally defined as someone who abstains from arguing and remains silent. (*Satyam it[y] e(va va)deta (brāhma) (mṛṣ eti) vā kim prava(detha ke)[na] [...] Arth-Skt^{1.2}*) (Hoernle 1916: 717).

'Here is the Truthful!' -how can one thus proclaim? 'To the void he has clung!' such dispute who can raise? 'Right or wrong' all such [judgment] he has ended. In what words, then, can you his shortcomings declaim? (Bapat 1951: 56)

While defending Zhī Qiān, previous studies have asserted that he omitted the formula from his translations of these verses because it was not necessary to convey the meaning (McGovern 2018: 177). However, his omission does not seem fortuitous, as it was a sensitive topic for Chinese Buddhists as well. We may doubt the coincidence of it when, in his commentaries, Zhī Qiān uninterruptedly uses this term to refer to the Buddha's interlocutors –Vedic Brahmins. Overlooking presumptive innocence, in my view this was more than a mere misreading of the Canon. I believe that this implied a more complex process of concealing an affirmation that could mislead the discourse of Chinese translators, resulting in contradictions. In the Arth-Chin, Zhī Qiān transcribed Vedic brahmins (梵志), who were the Buddha's interlocutors, as well as other allusions to several brahmins (諸梵志) who encountered and dialogued with the Buddha¹⁸. This transliteration 梵¹⁹志 (Ch. *fànzhì*) (lit. 'one, who has [the god] Brahman-like will') is an etymological attempt that dates back to the earliest translations, preceding the rise in popularity²⁰ of the phonetical transliteration 婆羅門 (Ch. *pólúómén*) for *brāhmaṇa*²¹. If the omission was simply a result of a misunderstanding by the Chinese translators, why did they not just transcribe the formula literally 'Vedic brahmins', as they did in other paragraphs? If we regard it as unintentional, it becomes hard to understand why the formula was almost completely omitted in Chinese, when *brāhmaṇa* is clearly established as the ideal figure of Buddhism in the Pāli Canon. As we may see in the following quotations in the Arth-Chin, those lines were not translated into Chinese, except for the counterpart for Sn 795.

Na brāhmaṇo aññato suddhim āha diṭṭhe sute silavate mute vā, puññe ca pāpe ca anūpalitto attañjaho na-y-idha pakubbamāno. (Sn 790)

'A brahmin does not speak of purity by another, by the seen and the heard, by good behavior and observances, by the sensed. Untainted by merit and by evil, he has discarded what was taken up without creating anything here' (Sn 790) (Bodhi 2017: 342)

從異道無得脫 見聞持戒行度 身不污罪亦福 悉已斷不自譽 Arth-Chin
(T198(4)178a6-T198(4)178a7)

'No deliverance doth he gain from heresies diverse. From what is seen, or heard, from rites or rituals and beliefs; Never gets he tainted by merit or demerit; Everything he has relinquished, [even] love of fame' (Bapat 1951: 64).

'For a brahmin who has transcended the boundary, who has known and seen, nothing is tightly grasped. Not excited by lust or attached to dispassion, he does not grasp anything here as supreme' (Sn 795) (Bodhi 2017: 343)

Simātigo brāhmaṇo, tassa n' atthi atvā va divvā va samuggahītaṃ, na rāgarāgī na virāgaratto, tassīdha n' atthi param uggahītaṃ ti (Sn 795)

無所有爲梵志 聞見法便直取 姪不姪著污姪 已無是當著淨 Arth-Chin
(T198(4)178a16-T198(4)178a17)

'Nothing does he possess and thus a Brahman is he made. The Law he has seen and heard and thus properly accepted; No passion of senses has he, and likewise. No attachment for the passions that corrupt; And thus, for him there is nothing that is purest, To which he may [ever] get himself attached.' (Bapat 1951: 66).

tassīdha diṭṭhe va sute mute vā pakappitā n' atthi añū pi saññā: taṃ brāhmaṇaṃ diṭṭhim anādiyānaṃ kenīdha lokasmim vikappayeyya. (Sn 802) || Sn IV, 5.7 ||

'Not even a subtle notion is formulated by him about what is seen, heard, or sensed here. How could anyone here in the world categorize him, **that brahmin who does not cling to any view?**' (Sn 802)

意受行所見聞 所邪念小不想 慧觀法竟見意 從是得捨世空 Arth-Chin
(T198(4)178c10-T198(4)178c11)

'To his practices, thoughtfully accepted, or to what he has seen, or heard, or wrongly conceived, he gives not the slightest thought; The wise man contemplating on Law has all the heresies buried. Because of this attainment of his, he gives up all worldly things he holds 'vain' (Bapat 1951: 72)

(Sn 803) **Na kappayanti na purekkharonti, dhammā pi tesam na paṭicchitāse, na brāhmaṇo silavatena neyyo, pāraṃgato na pacceṭi tādi ti** || Sn IV, 5.8 ||

¹⁸ It cannot be assumed that the Arth-Chin was a direct translation of the fragmented Sanskrit text discovered by Hoernle (1916). The Sanskrit fragments refer to Māgandika (in this Chinese version mentioned as 摩因提) as a *parivāṇaka*, while the Chinese version refers to him as a Brahmin (梵志) (McGovern 2018: 276).

¹⁹ It is unclear if the character 梵 was present in the Chinese language prior to the introduction of Buddhism (Funayama 2022: 117).

²⁰ In subsequent translations, the term 梵志 was substituted with 婆羅門. However, in the initial Chinese translations examined in this study, there is no usage of the later phonetic transliteration of 婆羅門.

²¹ It seems that the phonetic transcription of *pólúómén* (婆羅門) was introduced by Ān Shigāo 安世高 (148-168 CE) and Lokakṣema 支婁迦讖 (178-189 CE) (Karashima 2016: 107-108).

'They do not construct, they have no preferences; even the teachings are not embraced by them. **A brahmin cannot be led by good behavior and observances; the impartial one, gone beyond, does not fall back**' (Sn 803) (Bodhi 2017: 344)

自無有何法行 本行法求義諦 但守戒求爲諦 度無極衆不還 Arth-Chin
(T198(4)178c12-T198(4)178c13)

'Nothing doth he possess; how can the *dharmas* he have? Of the *dharmas* he practised before, he seeks and discusses the meaning; By merely observing conduct, the Truth itself he is seeking. He has completely gone beyond, and to the crowded world, he would not return' (Bapat 1951: 74)

(Sn 907) ***Na brāhmaṇassa paraneyyam atthi dhammesu niccheyya samuggahītaṃ, tasmā vivādāni upātivatto, na hi seṭṭhato passati dhammam aññaṃ.*** || Sn IV, 13.13 ||

'For a brahmin there is no being led by others, no selecting among teachings and grasping tightly. Therefore, he has overcome disputes, since he does not regard another teaching as supreme' (Sn 907) (Bodhi 2017: 361)

言如是彼亦說 一所有從淨墮 便自見怨所作 坐勝慧自大說 Arth-Chin
(T198(4)183a28- T198(4)183a29)

Words like these he doth speak: 'Everyone [else's] views are from purity fallen'. This view, of his then, is dominated by hatred. Because of 'his highest wisdom, he boasts of himself as 'Great'. (Bapat 1951: 138)

(Sn 911) ***Na brāhmaṇo kappam upeti saṃkhaṃ na diṭṭhisārī na pi ñāṇabandhu, ñatvā ca so sammutiyo puthujjā upekhati, uggahaṇanta-m-aññe.***

(Sn 911) 'Having comprehended, **a brahmin does not take up mental constructs**; he is not a pursuer of views nor a kinsman of knowledge. Having known the commonplace opinions, he maintains equanimity while others grasp' (Bodhi 2017: 362)

慧意到無所至 不見堅識所覺 如關閉制所著 但行觀無取異 Arth-Chin
(T198(4)183b7-T198(4)183b8)

'With his wise thoughts, the inaccessible he doth reach; No heresy firm doth he harbour, his consciousness being awake; The closing [of the doors of senses] he knows and from objects of attachments he is far; Circumspect just he is, without grasping the [heresies] that are divers' (Bapat 1951: 140)

(Sn946) ***Saccāavokkammamunithaletiṭṭhatibrāhmaṇo²², sabbamsopaṭinissajjasavesantotivuccati. 'Not deviating from truth, a muni, a brahmin, stands on high ground.*** Having relinquished all, he is indeed called peaceful' (Sn 946) (Bodhi 2017: 367)

乘諦力點已駕 立到彼慧無憂 是胎危疾事護 勤力守可至安 Arth-Chin
(T198(4)189c7-T198(4)189c8)

'On firm truth as their vehicle, do the intelligent take their ride. And presently do they come to wisdom, from tribulations freed. From dangers of rebirth do they guard themselves quick; Diligently are they watchful and Peace do they attain' (Bapat 1951: 206)

3.2. The interpretations of 'him I call a Brahmin' in early Chinese versions

In a context where Buddhists did not have to interact with brahmins, omitting them was an easy enterprise. However, Chinese translations were made from very different primary sources. Thus, the textual evidence surrounding this formula in Chinese translations is, as might be expected, diverse in several respects.

There is a noticeable semantic correspondence between the verses of Dhp 393 and the lines of Sn 136. They recount the way in which the Buddha refused hierarchy by birth and thus the presumed superiority of brahmins, even as inheritors of the Vedas. His teachings focused on ethics; his pragmatic method to purify *karma*. For him, the purity of someone depends on nothing but ethical behavior. The Chinese translations of Dhp 393, where the Buddha's pragmatic restatement of 'holiness' is described, are etymologically interpreted as 'thus [I] named a brahmin' 名為梵志²³ by both the translators of Dhp-Chi^{WQN} and Dhp-Chi^{FJFN}. This would mean that, at the very least, they knew the meaning behind the formula was someone that acts rightly.

²² The commentary of Pj II describes a 'true Brahmin' as someone who 'stands on the high ground of *nibbāna*' (Bodhi, 2017: 1399-1400). It is necessary to consider carefully the description of *thale tiṭṭhati brāhmaṇo*, later used for defining an *arahant* (SN IV 157.9; SN IV 175.3; AN II 5.13 and AN IV 12.31-13.7) (Ibid., 1720), and why Buddhist redefined the Buddha's unfading formula of 'him I call a Brahmin' (Villamor 2024a).

²³ This Chinese transcription 名為梵志, is one of the earliest in introducing the conventional formula. The identical transliteration is present in multiple texts. It also appears in the *Chū Yào Jīng* 出曜經 which was translated by Zhū Fó Niàn 竺佛念 (T212(4)). This independent text has a parallel version to the *Brāhmaṇavaggo* 梵志品 of the Dhp-Chi^{FJFN}. The phrase is frequently mentioned as 是名為梵志 in the Chinese Udānavarga (法集要頌經) (T213(4)) (translated by Devaśāntika 天息災) and as 故名為梵志 in the Chinese adaptation of the Ekottarāgama (EĀ-Chi) 增一阿含經 (T125(2)) (the Chinese adaptation of the Ekottarāgama by Saṃghadeva 僧伽提婆, which was completed in North India around 397-398 CE) (Emoto, 1984: 93, 103). The relationship between the original translation of EĀ-Chi and the Mahāsaṃghika (大衆部) school has been discussed. However, it appears that the actual Indian source used for

na jatāhi na gottena na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo.

yamhi saccañ ca dhammo ca so sukhī so ca brāhmaṇo. (Dhp 393)

Na jaccā vasalo hoti, na jaccā hoti brāhmaṇo.

kammanā vasalo hoti, kammanā hoti brāhmaṇo. (Sn 136)²⁴

非族結髮 名為梵志 誠行法行 清白則賢 Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (T210(4)572c9-10)

非族結髮 名為梵志 誠行法行 清白則賢 Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} (T0211_04.0605a14-15)

Although in the Dhp-Chi^{WQN} and Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} some passages conveyed this sense, when the allegory was explicitly mentioned in the Vedic context, in order to avoid controversy, Chinese translators preferred to omit it. In the Dhp-Chi^{WQN}, the Dhp 392 allegations describing its meaning with a parable of the Vedic ritual of fire are excluded from the translation. It was only emphasized that the Dharma was the Truth, taught by the Buddha himself.

Yamhā dhammaṃ vijāneyya sammāsambuddhadesitaṃ sakkaccam tam namasseyva aggihuttam'va brāhmaṇo. (Dhp 392)

You should venerate your teacher by whom, You learned the true Dhamma, Taught by the Perfectly Awakened One, Like a brahmin venerates the sacrificial fire. (Bodhi 2017: 165).

If the mind awakens **by the Buddha's Dharma**, observing the mind itself, it will naturally return to purity, [like] water becoming clear.

若心曉了 佛所說法 觀心自歸 淨於為水 The Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (T210(4)572c7-8)

There are other lines where the formula was completely omitted from the Chinese translation. Could it be the absence of that part in the Chinese manuscript, just a mere coincidence caused by a corrupted primary source? We cannot precisely know. The Dhp-Chi^{WQN} mainly represents what in the Canon was mentioned as 'him I call a (true) brahmin' with a literal transcription in Chinese (是謂梵志). On the other hand, in the Dhp-Chi^{FJFN}, as in the Arth-Chin, this affirmation was broadly ignored²⁵. Therefore, we can confirm that the Dhp-Chi^{WQN} was probably translated from a direct extract from the Pāli Canon. However, there are some verses in the Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} that transcribed the formula even when the Arth-Chin did not mention it.

Dhp 383 (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (22) 截流而渡 無欲如梵 知行已盡 (23) 是謂梵志) Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} (截流[8] 如渡 無欲如梵, 知行已盡 是謂梵志), **Dhp 384** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 以無二法 清淨渡淵 (24) 諸欲結解 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} 以無二法 清淨渡淵, 諸欲結解 是謂梵志), **Dhp 385** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 適彼無彼 (25) 彼彼已空 捨離貪婬 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 386** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (26) 思惟無垢 所行不漏 上求不起 (27) 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 387** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} [...] (572c1) 非剃為沙門 稱吉為梵志 (2) 謂能捨眾惡 是則為道人) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 388** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 出惡為梵志 入正為沙門[...] (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 391** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 身口與意 淨無過失 (7) 能捨三行 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 395** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 被服弊惡 (12) 躬承法行 閑居思惟 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 396** ((13) 佛不教彼 讚己自稱 如諦不妄 (14) 乃為梵志²⁶) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 397** (絕諸欲 不婬其志 (15) 委棄欲數 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 398** (斷生死河 (16) 能忍起度 自覺出塵 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 399** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 若見侵欺 但念守戒 (19) 端身自調 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 400** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 心棄惡法 (20) 如蛇脫皮 不為欲汚 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 401** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 覺生為苦 從是減意 能下重擔 (22) 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 402** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 辯道不道 (23) 體行上義 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 403** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 棄捐家居 (24) 無家之畏 少求寡欲 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 404** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 棄放活生 無賊害心 無所憐惱 (26) 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 405** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 避爭不爭 犯而不愠 (27) 惡來善待 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 406** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 去怨怒癡 (28) 憍慢諸惡 如蛇脫皮 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} 去[11]怨怒癡 憍慢諸惡, 如蛇脫皮 是謂梵志), **Dhp 407** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 斷絕世事 口無麤言 八道審諦 (573a1) 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} 斷絕世事 口無麤言, 八道審諦 是謂梵志), **Dhp 408** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 所世惡法 修短巨細 (2) 無取無捨 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 409** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 今世行淨 (3) 後世無穢 無習無捨 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 410** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 棄身無猗 不誦異行 行甘露滅 (5) 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 411** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 於罪與福 兩行永

its translation into Chinese was an unknown text (Hirakawa 2011: 97). Along these lines, an esoteric scripture by a Japanese monk (Raiyu 賴瑜) compiled around 13th CE also transliterates the definition of what it means to act rightly, ultimately redefining the term 'Brahmin' (*Dainichikyōshō Shishinshō* 大日經疏指心鈔T2217(59)). This text introduces the Chinese transliteration for explaining the experience of instantly attaining Enlightenment (形即身形). However, in order to be considered a valuable individual worthy of the label 'Brahmin', one must engage in purifying acts (淨行) with intention (為志) to earn the title of Brahmin (梵者淨也謂以淨行為志名為梵志 (T2217(59)639c29-T2217(59)640a1). This essay portrays the Vedic influence of Tantric Buddhism. Brahmins are mentioned in relation to the Vedas 韋陀 (for more information on this Chinese transcription and how the mythology of India was interpreted for the catechetical porpoises of monks in Japanese medieval literature, see Villamor 2023d) as part of the 'external teachings' 外道. This is noted as part of the 'external doctrines' based on the passages narrated by the sage 仙 Jūtán瞿曇 (an ancient phonetic transliteration for Gotama). These phonetic transliterations enable the possible tracing of Chinese primary sources that Japanese monks used for introducing Buddhist stories in Japanese medieval literature (Villamor 2023e). Additionally, it is noteworthy that it is said that the presumed Sanskrit source of this text is accredited as the language of Buddha (瞿曇梵語) (T2217.59.639c28-T2217.59.640a3).

²⁴ I have already discussed these well-known Buddhist teachings and its various transcriptions in classical Chinese (Villamor 2024b: note 31).

²⁵ References to the Dhp-Chi^{WQN} were analyzed from TLB. The quotations from Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} are from SAT.

²⁶ The translation of 乃為梵志 is exclusive to this line in the Dhp-Chi^{WQN}.

除 (6) 無憂無塵 是謂梵志 (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 413** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 心喜無垢 (7) 如月盛滿 謗毀已除 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 414** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (8) 見癡往來 墮墜受苦 欲單渡岸 (9) 不好他語 唯滅不起 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 416** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (10) 已斷恩愛 離家無欲 愛有已盡 (11) 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} 已斷恩愛 離家無欲 愛著已盡 是謂梵志), **Dhp 417** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 離人聚處 不墮天聚 (12) 諸聚不歸 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 418** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 棄樂無樂 (13) 滅無熅熳 健違諸世 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 419** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (14) 所生已訖 死無所趣 覺安無依 (15) 是謂梵志), **Dhp 420** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 已度五道 莫知所墮 (16) 習盡無餘 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 421** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 于前于後 (17) 乃中無有 無操無捨 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} -), **Dhp 422** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (18) 最雄最勇 能自解度 覺意不動 (19) 是謂梵志), **Dhp 423** (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} 自知宿命 本所更來 (20) 得要生盡 觀通道玄 明如能默 (21) 是謂梵志) (Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} 自 [13] 識宿命 本所更來, 生死得盡 觀通道玄, 明如能嘿 是謂梵志).

Given all of this, it would be too naive to maintain that the Chinese translators of these texts did not understand the formula. We may also reach this conclusion from the context and meaning of the translations in the Dhp-Chi^{FJFN}, where the text remains the ethical message of the Buddha—actions are what make someone noble, not their family name or their birth. From the perspective of the Buddha, holiness only depends on intentional acts. Therefore, for him, that formula had to be more than a metaphor on social status, a pragmatic teaching to achieve bliss. This thought is portrayed in the Dhp-Chi^{FJFN}, noted in the prosaic commentaries before the introduction of the verses with a unique transcription: ‘it is not his name what makes a Brahmin’ (非名梵志), which can only be found in this commentary in the entire collection of Chinese Buddhist scriptures.

‘[Then] the Buddha said to the **[Vedic] brahmins**. Please listen carefully and deliberate [on it]. [...] It is not the name, but conduct that makes [a true] brahmin’.

佛告梵志。善聽思之[...] 如汝等行非名梵志。 (T211.4.605a5-a9) Dhp-Chi^{FJFN}

The translators of the Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} did not cover the allegory of ‘brahmin’ as the goal of Buddhism most of the time. It is not necessary to say that for the time of these Chinese translations, Buddhism was presented as the religion started by the Buddha. The transmission of Buddhism from India entailed the historical assumption that Buddhists made; that regarding the teachings of the Buddha as the absolute truth itself, rather than a method to accomplish it. This implied not only the belief on the extraordinariness of what the Buddha experienced, but also that *nirvāṇa* can be explained. This interpretation, deeply rooted in their veneration of the Buddha, derived into the attempt to remember what the Buddha has never explained directly. That, which was metaphorically named as *nirvāṇa*, is of course largely discussed in Chinese translations. However, what is not that obvious is that sometimes Chinese translators went one step further in not translating literally *buddha*, but exploring catechetical explanations to inspire audiences as far as the ideographic resources of sinograms allowed.

4. Convincing that the Buddha attained *nirvāṇa*

That the Buddha attained *nirvāṇa* is a conviction based on faith, since such a thing cannot be verified empirically from outside. This belief, perhaps the most significant for Buddhists, was completely assumed among them, as the narratives assiduously prove. The confirmation of what might imply *nirvāṇa* is not referred to in the oldest verses of the Canon. The allusions to it in the Av (Sn 822, 940, 942) are also not completely cataphatic. These passages explain the correct way that leads to *nirvāṇa*, but not *nirvāṇa* itself. The Av only detailed what we can understand by words, its surroundings. However, after the Buddha was mythicized, the next step was to convince about the mysticism around *nirvāṇa*. For Buddhist followers the Buddha himself was the most representative of the foundation of *nirvāṇa*. The Chinese translations we analyzed in this paper portray the interest of making a convincing apology to the Buddha as the leading figure of *nirvāṇa*, contrarily from the classic discourse held in the Canon of *nirvāṇa* as the mystic experience to deify the Buddha.

In the Arth-Chin, *nirvāṇa* was transliterated by one of its oldest phonetical transcriptions in Chinese: 泥洹 (Ch. *níhuán*)²⁷. The latter term in which the interpretation of *nirvāṇa* was unified was 涅槃. This transliteration

²⁷ Previously, it has been argued that in the Arth-Chin, the Buddha encountered a Brahmin named Sees-Dharma (法觀) (McGovern 2018: 180). In my opinion, this is a rhetorical device employed to promote Buddhism as the teachings of *nirvāṇa*, by precisely illustrating how the Buddha convinced a Vedic Brahmin, by teaching the principle of dependent origination; who was initially unconvinced (是時座中。有梵志名法觀。亦在大眾中因緣所計。見於泥洹脫者有支體。以故生意疑信因緣。佛知法觀梵志所生疑 Arth-Chin (T198.4.182c27-T198.4.182c29)). It is evident that the identical characters are reversed in preceding lines of the Arth-Chin to praise the Dharma. Nonetheless, in the Pāli passages of the Av, the intention was to illuminate the behavior that define an ‘authentic Brahmin’, which are not translated into Chinese.

tassidha diṭṭhe va sute mute vā pakappitā n’ atthi añū pi saññā: taṃ brāhmaṇaṃ diṭṭhim anādiyānaṃ kenidha lokasmiṃ vikappayeyya (Sn 802)

Not even a subtle notion is formulated by him about what is seen, heard, or sensed here. How could anyone here in the world categorize him, **that Brahmin who does not cling to any view?** (Bodhi, 2017: 344)

Or heard, or wrongly conceived, he gives not the slightest thought. **The wise man contemplating on Law** has all the heresies buried. Because of this attainment of his, he gives up all worldly things he holds ‘vain’ Arth-Chin (Bapat 1951: 46)

意受行所見聞 所邪念小不想 慧觀法竟見意 從是得捨世空 (T198.4.178c10-T198.4.178c11).

Moreover, my argument is also supported by the statements in the thirty-fourth chapter of the Dhp^{WQN}, called the ‘Chapter of the Śramaṇa(s)’ 沙門品法句經第三十四 (T210.4.571c28), which does not exist in its counterpart in the Pāli Dhp. There, the same sinograms are used to indicate ‘the contemplation of the Dharma’ 觀法. The surrounding allusions to Chinese paradigms are also noteworthy in these lines, but also how they were used to support faith in *nirvāṇa* (‘Meditating without negligence [...] Without meditation, there is no wisdom. There is no wisdom without meditation. **To follow the path [of *nirvāṇa*]** is the path of [wisdom and meditation. [This is how you achieve *nirvāṇa* [...], [by] **contemplating the Dharma** with a unified heart’ (禪無放逸 [...] 無禪不智 無智不禪 道從禪智得至泥洹 [...] 一心觀法 (T210.4.572a16-T210.4.572a20)).

is not used in the Arth-Chin, nor in the Dhp-Chi^{WQN}. However, in the added final chapters (inexistent in Pāli), the narrative exaltation of *nirvāṇa* in the Dhp-Chi^{WQN}, represented as 泥洹, is plausible²⁸. In the following lines we can notice that the Buddhist teachings, as the Dharma (法)²⁹, were equated to *nirvāṇa*.

'I acknowledged by myself the ***nirvāṇa***, the fruit of immortality, the well-taught **Dharma**.

善說甘露法 自致得泥洹 T210.4.560a15

'Good [actions] led to receive good [consequences]. Evil [actions] led to receive bad [consequences]. [Those] possessing consciousness fall into [rebirth again] in a [new] utero. Evil doers enter into hell(s). [However,] **right-doers ascend to the heaven(s) accomplishing the uncaused: *nirvāṇa***'

爲善則得善 爲惡則得惡 有識墮胞胎 惡者入地獄 行善上昇天 無爲得泥洹
(T210.4.565a21-T210.4.565a23)

'Among the teachings of the Buddha, the highest is *nirvāṇa*' 佛說泥洹最 (T0210_04.0567a25)

'Refrain from committing evil, diligently practice virtuous actions, purify your own mind. Those are [the teachings] of Buddhism. The Buddha, the saintly sage, is free from defilement and desire. Among all the Śakyas, he is the noble one [...]. [He said] I acknowledged by myself **the supreme tranquility, the *nirvāṇa***.

諸惡莫作 諸善奉行 自淨其意 是諸佛教 佛爲尊貴 斷漏無婬 諸釋中雄 [...] 敏於上寂 自致泥洹
(T210.4.567b01-T210.4.567b03)

'***Nirvāṇa* is the superior bliss**. Hunger is a grave illness. Suffering (P. *dukkha*) arises from mental patrons (P. *saṅkhāra*). Knowing this truth deeply, leads to the supreme tranquility: ***nirvāṇa***'

泥洹最快 飢爲大病 行爲最苦 已諦知此 泥洹最樂 (Dhp-Chi^{WQN} T210(4)573a28-a29).

As in many other Chinese translations, these lines denote how *nirvāṇa* was explained in a catechetical way more than epigraphic. Also, in the additional chapters of the Dhp-Chi^{WQN}, there is an obvious tendency in reformulating the ethical message as the way to reach the 'highest prosperity' 是爲最吉祥³⁰. In its colophon it has said that by putting into practice Buddhist ethics, the audience, normally Vedic brahmins, obtained a great joy only by having the change of listening to Buddhism' (梵志聞佛教心中大歡喜, Dhp-Chi^{WQN} T210(4)575b8). This is mostly literally paraphrased in the Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} in his conclusion, reinforced by explaining that the audience of the Buddha, a congregation once again of Vedic brahmins 諸梵志, attained the grade of *arahant* (爲阿羅漢).

These verses were spoken by the Buddha to **a group of brahmins**: All of you, too, can attain ***nirvāṇa*** if you diligently practice by yourselves what I am about to teach you [...]. Upon hearing the five teachings, the hearts of the Brahmins were filled with joy. They respectfully honored the Buddha and said: May we become your disciples? They then cut off their hair and became *samaṇas*. By cultivating purity in their practice, they attained the state of *arahant* [...]

佛說偈已告諸梵志:「汝等所修自謂已達涅槃³¹, [...] 梵志聞經五情內發喜悅, 長跪白佛:「願爲弟子」頭髮自墮即作沙門, 本行清淨因而得道爲阿羅漢 [...] Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} T211(4)605a29- T211(4)605b04.

The thirty fifth chapter of the Dhp-Chi^{FJFN}, called the '*Chapter of Brahmins*' (法句譬喻經梵志品第三十五 T211.4.604c10) (gloss inexistent in the Pāli Canon), portray narratives with the same specific aim: convincing about the superiority of *nirvāṇa* (this supplement chapter is transcribed as 涅槃). Here this was presented as the absolute truth incarnated by the Buddha himself. The Docetism aspect of the Chinese translations highlighted *nirvāṇa* constantly, by reaffirming it as his own acknowledgement. This repetitive pattern that, as already stated above, attempts to take advantage of the renown of the Buddha in order to spread Buddhism among Chinese as the path of *nirvāṇa*.

The aspiration to cease suffering is the fundamental resolve for ***nirvāṇa***. **Those who follow the path of *nirvāṇa***, [will attain] the complete formless tranquility.

欲斷苦原志存泥洹。泥洹道者 寂滅無形 (T211.4.595b18-T211.4.595b17)

Through this, the bhikkhus renounce the world and seek the path of enlightenment. This resolution for the unconditioned, free from craving, leads to prosperity. This is *nirvāṇa*, the most delightful. 是以比丘捨世求道。志存無爲不貪榮利。自致泥洹乃爲最樂

(T211.4.595c10-T211.4.595c12)

²⁸ Aside from the fact that this Chinese version adds an entire chapter called 'Nirvāṇa Chapter' (泥洹品法句經第三十六 T210.4.573a22).

²⁹ For further discussion regarding Chinese interpretations of Dharma as 法 (Ch. *fǎ*) see Funayama 2022: 22-44.

³⁰ **The Buddha said to the (Vedic) Brahmins**, 'Hearing the **auspicious Dharma**, one who puts it into practice will attain merit and be liberated from the three worlds. **This is *nirvāṇa*, acknowledged by myself**. 佛告梵志 [...] 如我所聞吉祥之法。行者得福永離三界。自致泥洹 Dhp-Chi^{FJFN} (T211.4.609a08-T211.4.609a11).

³¹ I think it would not be unduly skeptical to say that this expression is a restatement of the previous formula 'he whom I call a Brahmin,' because it corresponds to the meaning of that affirmation in the Canon, although, as I argue here, they restated *nirvāṇa* 涅槃 instead of *brāhmaṇa*. Moreover, this passage plausibly forces the use of the first-person pronoun (自謂已達), unnecessarily repeated, to convince not only that it was the Buddha who attained it, but also a definition of what it might imply. Such a statement defined by the Buddha himself, despite what his followers might say, would rely on contradiction, since he kept silence on metaphysics, a stance which was not supported in the same way by all of his followers. *Nirvāṇa* presented just as a word to understand how to achieve for real it, became into a reasoning of not much interest among Buddhist believers.

This scripture is indeed the Dharma, the *nirvāṇa*. May the Buddha teach what has not been heard before. Spoke the Buddha to the Vedic Brahmins.

此經爲是涅槃法不。願佛解說開化未聞佛告梵志 (T211.4.605a4-T211.4.605a05)

Some Brahmanical habits like the ritual bath (Dhp 422), among others, probably introduced by brahmins converted to Buddhism (Bronkhorst 2011), might have confused the Chinese audience. Perhaps for that reason, it seems that some of them were not presented by Chinese translators. As intriguingly happened in the case of the translation of Dhp 392, those cultural allegories were not reflected in their Chinese adaptations. The Dhp-Chi^{WQN} restated the formula for defining who was defined as a Brahmin by underling what Chinese translators desired to be regarded as a fact: that the Buddha himself (自) affirmed he attained Enlightenment (覺). Once again, their attempt was to convince in order to spread faith on that belief. The following Chinese interpretations are insightful examples of how they proclaimed the experience of the Buddha as explainable. Their constant attempt was to describe the alleged state of mind they thought the Buddha had, by using the visual information that sinograms permit, rather than just transcribing it phonetically.

The one awakened, having cut off strap and thong, the cord together with the bridle, having lifted the crossbar: That one I proclaim a Brahmin. (Dhp 398) (Fieldmeier 2013: 151)

chetvā naddhiṃ varattañca sandāmaṃ sahanukkamaṃ ukkhittapaliḥaṃ buddhaṃ tam aham brūmi brāhmaṇam (Dhp 398)

[Someone] able to endure and transcend the 'river' of rebirth, **[that is what] I sever through by my acknowledgment [of *nirvāṇa*].** Him [I] call a Brahmin.

斷生死河 能忍起度 自覺出塹³² 是謂梵志 Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (T.210.4.572c15- T.210.4.572c16)

The one who has realized the dissipation and arising of beings, who is unattached, well-gone, **awakened:** That one I proclaim a brahmin. (Dhp 419) (Fieldmeier 2013: 154)

cutiṃ yo'vedi sattānaṃ upapattiṃ ca sabbaso asattaṃ sugataṃ buddhaṃ tam aham brūmi brāhmaṇam. (Dhp 419)

[Someone who] has transcended conditioned existence, does not return to death [again, but] abides in the unsupported **quietness of *nirvāṇa*.** Him [I] call a brahmin.

所生已訖 死無所趣 覺安無依 是謂梵志 Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (T210.4.573a14-T21.4.573a15)

The excellent one who is a bull, a hero, a great sage, a conqueror, free of craving, the one who has taken the (ritual) bath, **who is now awake:** That one I proclaim a brahmin. (Dhp 422) (Ibid.)

usabhaṃ pavaraṃ vīraṃ mahesiṃ vijitāvinaṃ anejaṃ nhātaṃ buddhaṃ tam aham brūmi brāhmaṇam. (Dhp 422)

The supreme hero, the most courageous, capable of attaining the **unmovable *nirvāṇa*;** him [I] call a brahmin.

最雄最勇 能自解度 覺意不動 是謂梵志 Dhp-Chi^{WQN} (T210.4.573a18-T210.4.573a19)

Here we can see that the transliterations and terminology used in Chinese was not simply a phonetical correspondence, but an etymological attempt with catechetical purposes. The translators used conscientiously the visual information and idiomatic nuances that sinograms portray. The sinograms were combined according to what the Chinese translators of these Buddhist scriptures most expected; which seems to be the interest of convincing about the extraordinariness of *nirvāṇa*. In order to address the inconvenience that may happen if the quotation of 'him I call a Brahmin' was regarded as the Buddha's words, they sometimes preferred to avoid it. However, the *modus operandi* for translating into Chinese was not established yet, so many inconsistencies between these translators can be found. Nevertheless, their campaign was to convince Chinese readers, that they know the path of *nirvāṇa*. Leaving aside religious beliefs and their implications, from the perspective of the epistemology of these texts we can say that what made the transcription (and omission) of this formula into Chinese so diverse was not just the lack of a criterion, but the relationship between the beliefs and catechetical intentions of Buddhist translators.

5. Conclusions

Chinese translators were not born into the Brahmin caste, so identifying themselves as Buddhist Brahmins would have been outside of their social context and could have resulted in disadvantageous consequences. This paper analyzes early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, which reveal a lack of lexicographical consistency in the various epithets used to honor the Buddha. However, the ancient Brahmin ideal, attributed as the Buddha's own words in the oldest verses of the Canon, was not always transmitted accurately. The Buddhist texts³³ translated into Chinese show more than just how Buddhism was believed. The Chinese

³² Apart from this line, the characters of 出塹 (Ch. *chū qiàn*) are not present in any of the entire collections of Chinese translations of Buddhists texts (SAT).

³³ A critical reading of a text's success hinges on its ability to prompt the appropriate inquiries (Shaw 2015: 454).

translations of Buddhist texts reveal not only Buddhist beliefs, but also the intricate lexicographical nuances of Chinese characters and their contextual significance. This marked a crucial turning point, allowing Buddhism to flourish across linguistic barriers (Funayama 2020). It also ushered in the transformation of Indian Buddhist scriptures into Chinese Buddhist Scriptures (Funayama 2022).

The early Chinese translations discussed in this paper combine characters from Confucianism and Daoism. This rich lexicographic context of the translations analyzed in this work demonstrate how Chinese translators explained Buddhism through Chinese concepts. One of the most remarkable terms in their interpretations are: *dào* 道 from Daoism, for pointing to the Buddhist path, or moral righteousness *yì* 義, from Confucianism. There are many passages in the Arth-Chin and the Chinese versions of the Dhp with references to these concepts, used for Buddhist catechism³⁴. The way in which the title of the Av was translated into Chinese in the Arth-Chin itself, literally the '*Buddhist scripture (經) of the Right Steps (義足) Taught by the Buddha (佛說)*', is another great and unnoticed example of it. Above all, the varied interpretations resulted from the lack of a criterion for Chinese translation, at the period of the translations examined. As explained in this paper, Chinese translators converted the apophatic explanations contained in the traditional formula of 'him I call a Brahmin' into cataphatic narratives that emphasized Buddhism as the path to *nirvāṇa*. Their religious identity discourses aimed to distinguish their religion as the holder of absolute truth, leading to the development of etymological translations. From the beginning, the process of translating Buddhism into classical Chinese was a comprehensive endeavor that inherently involved both faith and catechesis.

Abbreviations

AN	<i>Aṅguttara Nikāya</i>	
Arth-Chin	佛說義足經 (T198.4)	
Av	<i>Aṭṭhakavagga</i>	
Dhp	<i>Dhammapada</i>	
Dhp ^{WQN}	法句譬喻經 (T210.4)	
Dhp ^{FJFN}	法句譬喻經 (T211.4)	
IBJ	<i>Iwanamibukkyōjiten</i>	『岩波仏教辞典』 Nakamura et al. (2014)
MN	<i>Majjhima Nikāya</i>	
Pj II	<i>Paramatthajotikā II (Suttanipāta-aṭṭhakathā)</i>	
SAT	<i>Daizōkyō Text Database</i>	
Sn	<i>Sutta-nipāta</i>	
SN	<i>Samyutta Nikāya</i>	
TLB	<i>Thesaurus Literaturae Buddhicae</i>	
Ud	<i>Udāna</i>	

Abbreviations of terms in Asiatic languages

P. Pāli
Sk. Sanskrit
Ch. Chinese

References

Primary sources

- Andersen, Dines & Smith, Helmer (1913). *Sutta-Nipāta*. Pali Text Society. Recovered from GRETIL (2020): https://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/2_pali/1_tipit/2_sut/5_khudd/sutnippu.htm.
- Hinüber, Oskar Von & Norman, Kenneth Roy (1995). *Dhammapada*. Pali Text Society. Recovered from GRETIL (2020): https://gretil.sub.uni-goettingen.de/gretil/2_pali/1_tipit/2_sut/5_khudd/dhampdou.htm.
- Braarvig, Jens & Nesøen, Asgeir (2015). (TLB) *Thesaurus Literaturae Buddhicae* in Bibliotheca Polyglotta, Norwegian Institute of Palaeography and Historical Philology, University of Oslo. <https://www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta/index.php?page=library&bid=2>.
- Daizōkyō Text Database (2018). (SAT) 大藏經テキストデータベース研究会. *Department of Indian Philosophy and Buddhist Studies*, Graduate School of Humanities and Sociology University of Tokyo. <https://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp>

³⁴ Sometimes, translators combine the concepts of 道 and 義 to explain the Dharma (法) (Dhp^{WQN} (T210.4.568c19), presenting the teaching 之義 of impermanence 無常 as the cause that made listeners attaining the first state of the path to liberation (Sotāpanna 須陀洹) (T211.4.606b14). Additionally, one of the mentions stretched the Dharma as the law 義 (Ch. *yì*) taught by the Buddha 世尊 (Dhp^{FJFN}) (T211.4.586c11).

Secondary sources

- Appleton, Naomi (2016). *Shared Characters in Jain, Buddhist and Hindu narrative. Gods, kings and other heroes*. Routledge.
- Bapat, Purushottam Vishvanath (1951). *Arthapada Sutra: Spoken by the Buddha: Translated by the Upāsaka Che-Kien under the Wu Dynasty (222– 230 ad)*. Visva-Bharati University.
- Baums, Stefan (2009). *A Gāndhārī Commentary on Early Buddhist Verses: British Library Kharoṣṭhī Fragments 7, 9, 13 and 18*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu (2005). *In the Buddha's words: An anthology of discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu (2017). *The Suttanipāta: an ancient collection of the Buddha's discourses together with its commentaries (the teachings of the Buddha)*. Somerville: Wisdom Publications.
- Bronkhorst, Johannes (2007). *Greater Magadha Studies in the culture of early India*. Leiden: Brill.
- Bronkhorst, Johannes (2011). *Buddhism in the Shadow of Brahmanism*. Leiden: Brill.
- Ellis, Gabriel (2021). *Early Buddhism and its Relation to Brahmanism. A Comparative and Doctrinal Investigation*. Doctoral Thesis: University of Warsaw.
- Emoto, Fumio 榎本文雄 (1984). 「阿含經典の成立」, 『東洋學術研究』23(1), 93-108.
- Feldmeier, Peter (2013). *Dhammapada: The Way of Truth. A Fresh Translation and Commentary on Buddhism's Most Beloved Text*. Buddhist Publication Society.
- Funayama, Tooru 船山徹 (2020). 『仏典はどう漢訳されたのか—スートラが經典になるとく—』, 東京: 岩波書店, 第8刷.
- Funayama, Tooru 船山徹 (2022). 『仏教監護語義解釈—漢字で深める仏教理解』, 京都: 臨河書店.
- Gombrich, Richard (2006). *How Buddhism began: The conditioned genesis of the early teachings*. London: Routledge.
- Gombrich, Richard (2013). *What the Buddha thought*. London: Equinox.
- Hirakawa, Akira 平川彰 (2011). 『インド仏教史(上)』, 東京: 春秋社.
- Hoernle, A. F. Rudolf (1916). The *Sutta Nipāta* in a Sanskrit Version from Eastern Turkestan. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 709–732. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25189480>.
- Ji Xianlin 季羨林 (2007) Karashima, Seishi & Yunqing, Qiu (Trans.) 「[浮屠] と [佛] 再論」, 『創価大学国際仏教学高等研究所年報』, 10, 461-470.
- Karashima, Seishi (2016). Indian folk etymologies and their reflections in Chinese translations— brāhmaṇa, śramaṇa and Vaiśramaṇa. *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University*, 19, 101-123.
- McGovern, Nathan (2018). *The Snake and the Mongoose: The Emergence of Identity in Early Indian Religion*. Oxford University Press.
- Miyazaki, Tensho 宮崎展昌 (2019). 『大蔵經の歴史—成り立ちと伝承—』, 京都: 方丈堂出版.
- Mizuno, Kōgen 水野弘元 (1952). 「*Arthapada Sūtra* (義足經) について」, 『印度學佛教學研究』, 1(1), 87-95. <https://doi.org/10.4259/ibk.1.87>.
- Nakamura, Hajime 中村元 (Ed.) 福永光司、田村芳郎、今野達、末木文美士 (編) (2014). 『岩波仏教辞典』, 東京: 岩波書店.
- Namikawa, Takayoshi 並川孝儀 (2006). 『ゴータマ・ブツダ』, 東京: 大蔵出版.
- Ogiwara, Unrai 荻原雲来 (Ed.) (1986). 『漢訳対照 梵和大辞典』, 東京: 講談社.
- Pellard, Thomas (2014). The Awakened Lord: The Name of the Buddha in East Asia. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 134(4), 689–698. <https://doi.org/10.7817/jameroriesoci.134.4.689>.
- Shaw, Sarah (2015). In what way is there a *Saṅghavacana*: Finding the narrator, author and editor in Pāli Texts. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 36, 423-458.
- Takeda, Ryū 武田龍 (2012). 「Tathāgata の語義解釈の一視点」, 『パーリ学仏教文化学』, 26, 131-146. https://doi.org/10.20769/jpbs.26.0_131.
- Ueki, Masatoshi 植木雅俊 (2012). 『仏教、本当の教え—インド、中国、日本の理解と誤』, 東京: 中央公論新社.
- Villamor, Efraín (2023a). 「パーリ仏典におけるudakaの譬喩—ヴェーダやウパニシャッド思想の「世界」を譬喩で否定した釈尊の教えに遡って—」, 『パーリ学仏教文化学』36, 131-153.
- Villamor, Efraín (2023b). *Transformación del pensamiento budista e influencia de las fábulas jātaka en el Uji Shūi Monogatari*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Salamanca.
- Villamor, Efraín (2023c). Traducción de textos budistas: una aproximación histórica, filosófica y filológica — Antiguos desafíos y nuevos retos que supone su interpretación, tomando como ejemplo referencial el *Prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya-sūtra*. *CLINA Revista Interdisciplinaria De Traducción Interpretación Y Comunicación Intercultural*, 8(2), 107-133. <https://doi.org/10.14201/clina202282107133>.
- Villamor, Efraín (2024a). *Historias de la antigua India en el Konjakumonogatarishū*. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid.
- Villamor, Efraín (2024b *forthcoming*). Did the Buddha teach the path to become a 'buddha'? — Focusing on what implied the oldest definition of brāhmaṇa and how Buddhist authors (re)formulated it.
- Villamor, Efraín (2024c *forthcoming*). The 'true Brahmin truth' taught by the Buddha: His pragmatism and criticism lost in the transmission of his teachings defined as Brāhmaṇasacca.
- Villamor, Efraín (2024d). Mitología india al servicio del catecismo budista Terminología védica y cosmología india en el *Konjakumonogatarishū*. *Revista de Estudios de Asia Oriental*, 1.