

“WHY DON’T WE TRANSLATE SPELLS
IN THE SCRIPTURES?”:
MIEVEAL CHINESE EXEGESIS ON THE MEANING
AND FUNCTION OF *DHĀRAṆĪ* LANGUAGE¹

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Near the end of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* is a short “Chapter on *Dhāraṇī*” (*dhāraṇīparivarta*) (see Kern and Nanjō 1908–1912: 395–403). In this chapter the *bodhisattva* Bhaiṣajyarāja discusses the benefits of memorizing and propagating the scripture. Then, to ward Buddhist preachers (*dharmabhāṇaka*) from danger, he recites the following *dhāraṇī*:

*anye manye mane mamane citte carite same samitā viśānte mukte muk-
tatame same aviśame samasame jaye kṣaye akṣaye akṣiṇe śānte samite
dhāraṇi ālokabhāṣe pratyavekṣaṇi nidhiru adhyantaraniviṣṭe abhyantara-
pāriśuddhi mutkule mutkule araḍe paraḍe sukāṅkṣi asamasame buddha-
vilokite dharmaparīkṣite saṃghanirghoṣaṇi nirghoṇi bhayābhayaviśodhani
mantra mantrākṣayate rute rutakauśalye akṣaye akṣayavanatāye vakkule
valodra amanyanatāye svāhā!* (Kern and Nanjō 1908–1912: 396–397)

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This spell, and others like it throughout Mahāyāna Buddhist literature, would come to pose real problems for translators and exegetes. For an audience fluent in some variety of middle Indic, the words of the *dhāraṇī* linger on the knife's edge of intelligibility. Some are clearly identifiable Indic words, perhaps in the feminine vocative or in the masculine or neuter locative case. Some of the language sounds manifestly nonsensical, reminiscent of glossolalia. Nothing binds the words together syntactically. This tension between sense and nonsense is standard for Buddhist incantatory writing. Even while glimmering with an alluring familiarity, Buddhist *dhāraṇī* language seems fundamentally aporetic.

When the words of the *dhāraṇī* are written onto birch bark or palm leaf, fixed in human memories and perhaps recited communally, we can only imagine the wonder such language might inspire. And we may – if we are speculative – imagine the open-endedness of this wondrous language. The spell overflows with concrete nouns and dynamic verbs, without ever committing fully to semantic or syntactic cohesion. What does such language do? How does it act in the world of the speaker or reader? The *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* itself offers guarantees of efficacy, but does not explain the precise mechanism of the *dhāraṇī*. Such explanations would be left to future generations of Buddhist writers.

Translating this chapter of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* will be, of necessity, an act of courage. The translator must, from the first moment, decide what the language of the *dhāraṇī* is, how it functions, and how these syllables should be rendered in the target language. Eugène Burnouf, in his pioneering translation of 1852, made a deliberate choice to leave the *dhāraṇī* untranslated. He even went so far as to render the syllables of the *dhāraṇī* in Devanāgarī script rather than Roman transliteration; this was the only place in the entire work where Devanāgarī was printed.² Perhaps this choice was a measure of his distaste for the material. In the notes to the *dhāraṇī* chapter, Burnouf dutifully transcribed manuscript

² Burnouf 1852: 238–241. Note that this was not his default choice when rendering Sanskrit words; Burnouf reproduced entire Sanskrit sentences in Roman transliteration elsewhere in the work. See, for example, his note on the four *vaiśāradyas*, 402–405. Burnouf used Devanāgarī in this volume *only* when reproducing *dhāraṇī* language.

variants of the *dhāraṇī* for future generations of scholars, but not before declaring:

...ce passage ait trait à une des superstitions les plus misérables du Buddhismisme du Nord, c'est-à-dire à cette croyance, que certaines paroles ou formules nommées *Dhāraṇīs* ont une efficacité surnaturelle... (Burnouf 1852: 418)

At the moment of the first translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* into a Western language, Burnouf chose to leave the text of the *dhāraṇī* untranslated, to set the text off typographically, and to register his objections to “one of the most miserable superstitions of Northern Buddhism.”

Three decades later, Hendrik Kern translated the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* for Max Müller's Sacred Books of the East series. Kern transliterated the *dhāraṇī* into Roman letters, accompanied by a footnote explaining his interpretation of the spell's language:

All these words are, or ought to be, feminine words in the vocative. I take them to be epithets of the Great Mother, Nature or Earth, differently called Aditi, *Pragñā*, *Mâyâ*, *Bhavânî*, *Durgâ*. *Anyâ* may be identified with the Vedic *anyâ*, inexhaustible, and synonymous with *aditi*. Most of the other terms may be explained as synonymous with *pragñâ* (e.g. *pratyavekshanî*), with nature (*kshaye akshaye*), with the earth (*dhāraṇî*). (Kern 1884: 371)

Even when the syllables are left undisturbed, the translator gave some account of the mechanism of the spell – an account altogether missing from the scripture itself. Kern saw a series of nouns that could plausibly be interpreted as feminine vocatives, and argued that the words invoked a series of feminine deities, each one herself a manifestation of a single great goddess. Whether we agree with Kern or not, we must admire the attempt of the translator to confront his materials and wrestle with their function. This was, at least, a step beyond the disgust of Burnouf.

Leon Hurvitz's 1976 translation of the *dhāraṇī* chapter begins with a brief note:

Translation of the *dhāraṇīs* has not been attempted because the meanings are frequently obscure, and the results would be pure guesswork. Most of the words are Indic, some pure Sanskrit and some just mumbo-jumbo, and most are or have been made to look like feminine singular vocatives. (Hurvitz 1976: 320)

Here we can see again how the language of the *dhāraṇī* perpetually confounds attempts at translation. Hurvitz could identify some words and meanings but refused to translate them, as the results of such an effort would be “obscure.” And given that the spell contains “mumbo-jumbo,” Hurvitz doubted the usefulness of any attempt to translate. The dilemma faced by Hurvitz, by Kern, by Burnouf, and by the many others who have worked with the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* is not new; it was the same dilemma faced by the earliest Chinese translators of the text.

The two earliest translations of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* contain radically different approaches to the spells of the *dhāraṇī* chapter. Dharmarakṣa, who translated the scripture into Chinese in 286 CE,³ translated the *dhāraṇī* word for word. In Dharmarakṣa’s translation the first spell looks like this:

又尋咒曰：「奇異所思意念無意永久所行奉修寂然澹泊志默解脫濟渡平等無邪安和普平滅盡無盡莫勝玄默澹然總持觀察光耀有所依倚恃怙於內究竟清淨無有坑坎亦無高下無有迴旋所周旋處其目清淨等無所等覺已越度而察於法合衆無音所說解明而懷止足盡除節限宣暢音響曉了衆聲而了文字無有窮盡永無力勢無所思念」 (T. 263, 9:130a13–20)

The correspondences here are not too difficult to see. *anye manye mane mamane citte carite* corresponds rather nicely with 奇異 所思 意念 無意 永久 所行奉修.⁴ The words are all rendered in two- or four-character phrases, leading to a sing-songy and somewhat free-associative Chinese: “Extraordinary, thought, thinking, without intention, for a long time practiced, reverently cultivating...” The Chinese reader would see not a garbled mess of incomprehensible words, but an evocative and enigmatic sequence of utterances about the mind (無意), about practice (奉修), about quiescence (寂然), about liberation (解脫), about contemplation

³ For a concise timeline of Dharmarakṣa’s translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, see Zürcher 2007: 69–70; Boucher 1998: 485–486. For more on Dharmarakṣa’s translation process and the language of his Indic texts, see Karashima 1992 and Boucher 1998.

⁴ Note that 無意, “without intention,” suggests **amana-* rather than *mamane*, and 永久, “long time,” recommends **cira-* rather than *cite*. The correspondence between the extant Sanskrit and the Chinese remains astounding, especially considering the fact that Dharmarakṣa was surely working from a middle Indic (probably Gāndhārī) version of the text.

(觀察), about radiance (光耀), about purity (清淨), and so on. The spell is thus syntactically chaotic but semantically rich.

Kumārajīva's translation, completed around 406 (see T. 2154, 55:512b23), transcribes the words of the spell phonetically:

安爾(一) 曼爾(二) 摩禰(三) 摩摩禰(四) 旨隸(五) 遮梨第(六)
 賒咩(羊鳴音)(七) 賒履(网雉反)多瑋(八) 羶(輪千反)帝(九) 目帝(十)
 目多履(十一) 娑履(十二) 阿瑋娑履(十三) 桑履(十四) 娑履(十五)
 叉裔(十六) 阿叉裔(十七) 阿耆膩(十八) 羶帝(十九) 賒履(二十)
 陀羅尼(二十一) 阿盧伽婆娑(蘇奈反)簸蔗毘叉膩(二十二)
 禰毘剃(二十三) 阿便哆(都餓反)邏禰履剃(二十四) 阿寔哆波隸輸地
 (途賣反)(二十五) 溫究隸(二十六) 牟究隸(二十七) 阿羅隸(二十八)
 波羅隸(二十九) 首迦差(初几反)(三十) 阿三磨三履(三十一) 佛
 馱毘吉利袞帝(三十二) 達磨波利差(猜離反)帝(三十三) 僧伽涅瞿沙
 禰(三十四) 婆舍婆舍輸地(三十五) 曼哆邏(三十六) 曼哆邏叉夜多
 (三十七) 郵樓哆(三十八) 郵樓哆憍舍略(來加反)(三十九) 惡叉邏
 (四十) 惡叉冶多冶(四十一) 阿婆盧(四十二) 阿摩若(荏蔗反)那多
 夜(四十三) (T. 262, 9:58b19–c3)

The Chinese is incomprehensible semantically, but pronouncing the characters one may roughly approximate the Indic sounds. This becomes especially apparent when we rely on historical phonology to imagine how these characters would have sounded in early medieval China. If we use reconstructed Middle Chinese pronunciations,⁵ the first few words of the *dhāraṇī* look like this:

?ān-ń́je^a mjwɛn^c-ń́je^b muâ-nej^b muâ-muâ-nej^b tsi^b-liei^c tśja-lji^c-diei^c...⁶

We have no way of definitively knowing why the translation committees led by Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva made their choices.⁷ The *Saddharma-puṇḍarīka* itself remains silent about the precise mechanisms of Buddhist *dhāraṇī* language, and the earliest Chinese translators left no traces

⁵ I draw these reconstructions from Schüssler 2007.

⁶ Note that this transcription too supports a MS reading **cire* rather than *citte*.

⁷ Whenever we speak of choices made by Dharmarakṣa or Kumārajīva, we necessarily include the large staff of scholars and scribes that actually produced the translation. Whenever this article speaks of “Dharmarakṣa” or “Kumārajīva” as an individual, the reader should keep in mind that these must be understood as a composite: the foreign master as figurehead *plus* the laborers within the translation workshop. For a concise description of Chinese Buddhist translation as a collective process, see Nattier 2008: 19–20.

of their reasons for their own renderings of the spells. But the choice to translate or transcribe requires explanation. It is a choice that cuts to the very core of what a *dhāraṇī* is, and how the language of a *dhāraṇī* functions.

The earliest commentaries on the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* were composed in Chinese. The exegetes were thus forced to confront and grapple with the choices made by the teams of Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva. As we read these commentaries, we begin to see the outlines of implicit and explicit theories of *dhāraṇī* language taking shape in early medieval China.

The commentary of Dào shēng 道生

The oldest surviving commentary on the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* is the *Miàofǎ liánhuā jīng shū* 妙法蓮花經疏 attributed to Dào shēng 道生 (ca. 355–434), renowned for his exegetical prowess and his influential views on the nature of and potential for awakening.⁸ Dào shēng's commentary does not go into great detail about the nature of *dhāraṇī* language, but we do learn a few important facts. First, we learn that spells are feared by foreign peoples, and that the effects of incantatory rituals are powerful:

外國之人，信畏禁呪。禁呪之法，能排凶招吉，無所不制。

Foreign people believe in and fear arcane spells. The rites of arcane spells can banish bad luck and summon good luck; there is nothing they do not control. (Z. 577, 27:178a8–9)

More importantly, we learn that spells sound strange because they are in a foreign language: the language of demons:

又吉凶之來，關於鬼神。因用其語，訓令莫害。畏累懼害者，無不修經。

Again, the arrival of good or bad luck depends upon demons and spirits. Therefore, by using their language, one commands them to do no harm.

⁸ See Dào shēng's biography at T. 2059, 50:366b23–367a28, partially translated and summarized in Liebenthal 1955. For a comprehensive overview of Dào shēng's *Miàofǎ liánhuā jīng shū*, see Ōchō 1952. For an English translation and analysis of Dào shēng's work, see Kim 1990.

There is nobody who fears bondage and is terrified of injury who does not cultivate this scripture. (Z. 577, 27:17a11–12)

Dàoshēng reiterated this point more strongly, noting that the language of demons cannot be translated:

若護持呪，謂陀羅尼也。呪是鬼神之語，不可傳譯也。

A spell which guards and maintains is called a “*dhāraṇī*.” The spell is the language of demons and spirits. It is untranslatable. (Z. 577, 27:17a16–17)⁹

While Dàoshēng was often connected with Kumārajīva in hagiography, we do not know the precise lineage of Dàoshēng’s thoughts on the *Lotus*.¹⁰ But here we can at least say that Dàoshēng gives a justification of Kumārajīva’s team’s approach to *dhāraṇī* language. The spells must be transcribed rather than translated, to preserve their pronunciation. The demons apparently do not understand Chinese, so translation is useless. Spells are broadly powerful, but this power is linked to a conception of the spell as *demonic language*. With this understanding, we can connect *dhāraṇī* language to earlier Buddhist deployments of protective speech, in the genres Peter Skilling calls “the *rakṣā* literature.” Throughout the *rakṣā* literature we find a model of efficacy that engages with the social world of demons and spirits directly, commanding the *nāga* or *yakṣa* generals to discipline their armies to prevent harm to the reciter.¹¹

⁹ Note that in the first clause of the sentence Dàoshēng is merely giving an Indic etymological definition of *dhāraṇī*, deriving it from the verbal root *√dhr*, “to maintain, uphold, grasp.” For more reflections on the *dhāraṇī* as “grasp,” see Copp 2008. See also Copp 2014: 25–28.

¹⁰ Dàoshēng claimed that his commentary was composed in 432, and was a synthesis of notes taken while listening to lectures. See Z. 577, 27:1b11–13. Liebenthal tentatively guesses (1955: 312) that the lectures Dàoshēng heard may have been given by Zhú Fātài 竺法汰 (320–387). Kanno asserts that the notes were from the lectures of Kumārajīva in Cháng’ān 長安. See Kanno 2001: 108.

¹¹ For an overview of the *rakṣā* literature, see Skilling 1992. For an exploration of the ways in which a particular *vidyā* would come to address and command an ever-widening variety of demonic and natural forces, see Overbey 2016.

The commentary of Zhìyǐ 智顓

The *Miàofǎ liánhuā jīng wénjù* 妙法蓮華經文句, attributed to Zhìyǐ 智顓 (538–598) and edited by his disciple Guàndǐng 灌頂 (561–632), contains an invaluable analysis of the *dhāraṇīparivarta*. Zhìyǐ recognized many functions of *dhāraṇī*; some quell sickness, others preserve the *dharmā*, some eliminate sin, and others have some combination of these functions. More importantly, Zhìyǐ told the reader precisely *how* the *dhāraṇī* might work. Below we shall examine Zhìyǐ’s commentary in detail:

此翻「總持」。總持，惡不起，善不失(其一)。又翻「能遮」、「能持」。能持善，能遮惡(其二，其三)。此能遮邊惡，能持中善(其四)。It [the word *dhāraṇī*] is translated as “completely maintain.” To completely maintain means that evil does not arise, and good is not lost. (This is the first [definition].) Or, it is translated as “obstructing” or “maintaining.” It maintains the good, and it obstructs evil. (These are the second and third.)¹² It obstructs the evil of the extremes, and it maintains the good of the Middle. (This is the fourth.) (T. 1718, 34:146c1–3)

Here we see Zhìyǐ working with the Sanskrit verbal root \sqrt{dhr} , which can mean “maintain, uphold, grasp” as well as “hold back, suppress, restrain.” The oppositional pair of “good” (*shàn* 善) and “evil” (*è* 惡) are the primary objects of retaining and restraining, although the fourth definition, in typical Tiāntái 天台 style, frames the duality itself as the “evil” and the Middle (*zhōng* 中) as the “good.”¹³

In the next passage we see how Zhìyǐ interprets *dhāraṇī* within the context of particular texts to which they belong:

衆經開遮不同。或專用治病，如那達居士。或專護法，如此文。或專用滅罪，如方等。或通用治病滅罪護經，如請觀音。或大明呪、無上明呪、無等等明呪，則非治病、非滅罪、非護經。若通方者，亦應兼。若論別者，幸須依經勿乖教(云云)。

¹² These two translations of *dhāraṇī* are taken from the *Dàzhìdù lùn* 大智度論: 「陀羅尼」，秦言能持，或言能遮。“In the language of Qín, ‘*dhāraṇī*’ means ‘maintaining,’ or it means ‘obstructing.’” (T. 1509, 25:95c10–11). These are both plays on the verbal root \sqrt{dhr} .

¹³ Here, perhaps, we can see a specifically Tiāntái interpretation of the “maintaining” function of *dhāraṇī*.

All the scriptures differ in opening up or obstructing. Some focus on quelling sickness, like the *Householder Nāda* [Scripture].¹⁴ Others focus on the protection of the *dharma*, like this text. Others focus on the elimination of sin, like the *Vaipulya* [Scriptures]. Others comprehensively quell sickness, eliminate sin, and protect scriptures, like the *Guānyīn Scripture*. Alternatively, the Great Vidyā Spell, the Unsurpassed Vidyā Spell, the Unequaled Vidyā Spell¹⁵ neither quells sickness, nor does it eliminate sins, nor does it protect the scriptures. Those who master techniques should add them [to their repertoire]. Those who dispute and discriminate would be fortunate to rely on the scriptures and not contradict the teachings (etc.)¹⁶ (T. 1718, 34:146c3–8)

In the following paragraphs Zhìyǐ begins a detailed theoretical exploration of the precise mechanisms of *dhāraṇī* language. Each explanation is offered by an unspecified subset of unnamed “masters” (*zhūshī* 諸師).

諸師，或說：「呪者，是鬼神王名。稱其王名，部落敬主不敢為非。故能降伏一切鬼魅。」(其一)

(1) Some masters say: “Spells are the names of the kings of demons and spirits. When one invokes the names of the kings, their subordinate factions who venerate their leader would not dare disobey. Therefore one can subdue all demons and Māras.” (T. 1718, 34:146c8–10)

Here we find an interpretation quite close to Dào shēng’s. The *dhāraṇī* cannot be translated because each syllable invokes the name of a demon king; to subdue the demonic horde one must presumably pronounce their king’s name accurately.¹⁷

¹⁴ This is an obscure reference, and my interpretation here is quite speculative. First, the name *Nāda* 那達 is mysterious; I could find no evidence anywhere else in the Chinese Buddhist canon for a householder with the name *Nāda*. Second, I assume this is a scripture, although I have no real evidence about which scripture Zhìyǐ might mean here. In the earliest extant catalog, Sēngyòu’s 僧祐 *Chū sānzàng jījī* 出三藏記集, we do find an anonymous scripture in one scroll named the *Buddha Householder Scripture* (*Fó jūshì jīng* 佛居士經). See T. 2145, 55:34a3.

¹⁵ This, of course, refers to the spell *gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā* at the end of the *Heart Scripture*, translated by Kumārajīva and discussed in the *Dàzhìdù lùn* 大智度論. See T. 250, 8:847c24–26; T. 1509, 25:468b17–22.

¹⁶ This last sentence appears to be a quotation, but I have not yet located its source.

¹⁷ This should remind us again of the *rakṣā* literature, which contains numerous examples of extending the coercive power of *maitrī* to powerful beings. What is important here is that these beings must often be *named* and *located* in ritual utterances. On this see Schmithausen 1997; Overbey 2016.

或云：「呪者，如軍中之密號。唱號相應，無所訶問。若不相應，即執治罪。若不順呪者，頭破七分。若順呪者，則無過失。」(其二)

(2) Others say: “Spells are like the secret orders in an army. When soldiers comply with a shouted order, they are not interrogated. But if they do not comply, they are punished. If they [the demons] do not obey the spell, their heads will break into seven pieces. If they do obey the spell, then there will be no fault.” (T. 1718, 34:146c10–13)

Again we have an explanation that the *dhāraṇī* language is powerfully communicative.¹⁸ The members of an army communicate using an encoded language, and one cannot translate the *dhāraṇī* without ruining its intended effect. However, if pronounced correctly, the syllables communicate to the demon armies, who promptly obey for fear of punishment.¹⁹ Next, Zhiyi turns to an explanatory anecdote:

或云：「呪者，密默治惡，惡自休息。譬如微賤從此國逃彼國。訛稱王子。彼國以公主妻之。多瞋難事。有一明人從其國來，主往說之。其人語主：『若當瞋時，說偈。偈云：「無親遊他國，欺誑一切人。麤食是常事。何勞復作瞋？」』說是偈時，默然瞋歇，後不復瞋。』是主及一切人，但聞斯偈，皆不知意。呪亦如是。密默遮惡，餘無識者。」(其三)

(3) Others say: “Spells mysteriously regulate evil, and evil naturally is pacified. It is like the lower-class man who fled from one state to another. He falsely called himself a prince, and the other state gave a princess to him in marriage. He would often get angry at difficult things. There was a wise man who came from [the lower-class man’s] former country, and the lord went to speak with him. That [wise] man said to the lord, ‘When he [the conman] becomes angry, you should recite a verse. The verse goes like this: “Without [royal] parents, you traveled to another state, and deceived all the people. Coarse food is a common problem. Why do you bother to get angry again?” When you recite this verse, then mysteriously his anger will subside, and never again will he become angry.’ The lord then went before all the people, and though they heard his verses, none of them knew the meaning. A spell is also like this. Mysteriously it obstructs evil, but there is nobody else who understands it.” (T. 1718, 34:146c13–20)

¹⁸ We might more precisely say that these examples frame the utterance of the *dhāraṇī* as an illocutionary act, a speech act whose performance secures an “uptake,” and generates social consequences. See Austin 1962: 115–116.

¹⁹ Buddhist spells often contain the implicit or explicit threat that any demons who do not obey will see their heads broken into seven pieces. For more on this fascinating cliché, see Witzel 1987.

This is an elaborate story that describes the phenomenology of the “mystery” of *dhāraṇī*. The lord gives his daughter away to a foreigner, who seems prone to fits of rage. Following the counsel of a wise man from the foreigner’s country, the lord utters publicly a verse in the foreigner’s own tongue. Even though the lord himself does not understand the foreign language, and none of his people do, the anger-prone foreigner gets the message that he will be exposed unless he disciplines himself. From our perspective as readers, we can thus see the ways in which the foreign language is straightforwardly communicative. But from the perspective of the lord who recites the verse, and from the perspective of nearly all his audience, the verse’s effect on the angry foreigner is mysterious and incomprehensible. In this analogy we can see the injunction to Buddhist practitioners: you (the lord) should trust that the *dhāraṇī* transmitted by Buddhas in the scriptures (the wise man) will have its proper effect on the target of your utterance (the foreigner). Translation in this ritual scenario would, of course, ruin the intended effect. The “mystery” of *dhāraṇī* language is simply a matter of the provincial perspective of Chinese Buddhist practitioners in the vast Buddhist cosmos. Zhìyǐ’s tale here seems to emphasize the need for the Chinese Buddhists to trust in the efficacy of *dhāraṇī* language, even when its meaning is not legible. Finally, Zhìyǐ closes with a fourth possibility:

或云：「呪者，是諸佛『密語』。如『王索先陀婆』。一切群下無有能識。唯有『智臣』乃能知之。呪亦如是。祇是一法遍有諸力。病愈，罪除，善生，道合。」(其四)

(4) Others say: “Spells are the ‘occult language’ of the Buddhas. It is like a ‘king who requests *saindhava*.’ None of his inferior ministers will be able to understand him. Only a ‘wise minister’ will be able to understand him. Spells are also like this. Just this single thing (*dharma*) completely contains all functions. Sickness is quelled, sin is eliminated, goodness arises, and the Way is joined.”²⁰ (T. 1718, 34:146c20–24)

²⁰ This explanation includes direct quotation of the Chinese translations of the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. “Good sir, the occult language of the Tathāgata is very profound and difficult to understand. It is like a great king who tells his ministers to bring the *saindhava*. The single word *saindhava* refers to four things: (1) Salt, (2) a cup, (3) water, and (4) a horse. These four things all share the same name. A wise minister well understands this word. If the king, when he is bathing, requests *saindhava*, then he brings him water. If the king, when he is eating, requests *saindhava*, then he brings him salt. If the king, after eating, wants to

In this explanation we see a different take on the semantics of *dhāraṇī*. Here it is not the case that *dhāraṇī* simply represents straightforwardly foreign speech. Instead, each word of the *dhāraṇī* is potentially dense with meaning, like the Sanskrit word *saindhava* (“the Indus thing” – potentially salt, a cup, water, or a horse). A translation of such dense language might limit the effectiveness of the utterance. *Dhāraṇī* language offers the potential of general utility – not unlike the sonic screwdriver of Doctor Who, a device with profound power across a nearly infinite range of contexts. Zhìyǐ sums up thusly:

為此義故，皆存本音。譯人不翻意在此也。

We may conclude that everything lies in the sounds of the text. This is why the translator does not translate the meaning. (T. 1718, 34:146c24–25)

Zhìyǐ ends the discussion with an affirmation of Kumārajīva’s approach, and a rejection of Dharmarakṣa’s. The commentary does not decide for the reader which of the four explanations is the “correct” one; it leaves all four to us as possible mechanisms elucidated by various masters. But in all these explanations *dhāraṇī* function because they *communicate meaning* in an effective way. As the names of demon kings, as secret military codes, as the unknowing repetition of words in a foreign language, or as semantically dense language, the words of the *dhāraṇī* would lose something crucial in translation.

The commentary of Jízàng 吉藏

The commentary of Jízàng 吉藏 (549–623), entitled *Fāhuā yìshū* 法華義疏, places the *dhāraṇī* within a context that draws a sharp line between *bodhisattva* and *śrāvaka*, between esoteric and exoteric. Immediately after highlighting spells as an instance of an “esoteric” *dharma*, Jízàng gives the following explanations of how spells work:

drink, and requests *saindhava*, then he brings him a cup. If the king, when he is traveling, requests *saindhava*, then he brings him a horse. In this way a wise minister well understands the four aspects of the ambiguous words of the great king.” See T. 374, 12:421a29ff., T. 375, 12:662b17ff.

有人言呪所論不出三義。一說：極果勝德。或因中萬行，故聞者發心。二說：三寶名字。或諸佛菩薩之別名。或大力鬼神之名。招呼此名，使魔耶聞者驚退。三說：諸法深理無相，使聞者悟道得無生忍。

Some people say that spells may be explained in no more than three senses.

1. They are the ultimate fruit, the superlative virtue. Because of his myriad deeds in the course of training, the *śrāvaka* inspires a mind of awakening.
2. They are the names of the Three Gems. Or they are the different names of the buddhas and *bodhisattvas*. Or they are the names of very powerful demons and spirits. Calling out these names causes the Māras who hear them to become terrified.
3. The deep structure of all *dharmas* is without characteristics, causing *śrāvakas* to awaken to the Way and to attain *anutpattikaṣānti*. (T. 1721, 34:629c4–8)

In the first explanation, a *dhāraṇī* is the result of intense Buddhist practice culminating in the entrance to the *bodhisattva* path. In the second explanation, we find considerable overlap with both Dàoshēng and Zhìyǐ, framing *dhāraṇī* language as the evocation of powerful names. The third explanation, however, goes in a new direction. Here we find *dhāraṇī* as a kind of experiment in emptiness, a way of demonstrating clearly the impossibility of permanence and identity in any phenomena whatsoever.²¹

Jízàng goes on to answer a conveniently explicit question: why don't we translate spells in the scriptures?

問：諸經中，何故不翻呪耶？

Question: Why don't we translate spells in the scriptures?

答：呪語多含。此間無物以擬之。若欲翻之，於義不盡，又失其勢用。如此間禁呪之法，要須依呪語，法而誦之，則有神驗。不得作正語而說。

Answer: The language of spells is exceedingly capacious. There is nothing here [in China] with which to compare it. Even if you wanted to translate it, you would not exhaust its meanings, and it would lose its potency. It is just like our own [Chinese] rites of arcane spells, in which you must rely

²¹ This sort of spell, categorized in the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*'s fourfold scheme as a *bodhisattvaṣāntilābhāya dhāraṇī*, has been explored in great detail by Janet Gyatso. The key here is that the spell does not communicate; it demonstrates to the practitioner the indisputable fact that language has no essential relationship with phenomena. Once the practitioner is convinced of the emptiness of phonemes, she is able to realize the emptiness of all phenomena. See Gyatso 1992. For the *Bodhisattvabhūmi*'s fourfold classification of *dhāraṇī*, see Ogiwara 1930: 272–274; T. 1579, 30:542c16–543b7; T. 1581, 30:934a3–b9; T. 1582, 30:996b23–c24.

on the language of the spells, and follow their model to recite, and then there occurs a divine verification. You must not turn them into ordinary language and utter them. (T. 1721, 34:629c8–12)

Here we see Jízàng wrestling with the task of comparison: how do Indian spells fit into Chinese conceptual categories? The way that Buddhist *dhāraṇī* work in this account is similar to the ways that Chinese “rites of arcane spells” work – one must comport with a precise ritual model to be effective. His answer here tracks most closely with Zhìyǐ’s account of the “occult language” of the Buddhas in the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*. On this reading *dhāraṇī* language is too semantically rich to translate. To translate a word of the spell would do violence to the density of the language.

Jízàng has another occasion to describe how spells function when his interlocutor asks him how spells eliminate evil:

問：呪云何能除患？

Question: How can the spell eliminate calamity?

答：一切法中，各有增上。如水力增上能滅火，火得增上復能消水。今神呪力能除諸惡亦爾。

Answer: Every thing (*dharma*) has its increase. Just as the power of water, when increased, can extinguish fire, when fire is increased it can make water vanish. Now, the power of a divine spell that can eliminate evils is also like this.

惡有二。一：有情，惡鬼等。二：無情，謂惡風雨等。如是內難、外難，悉名為惡。

There are two kinds of evil. (1) Sentient, such as evil demons, etc. (2) Non-sentient, such as evil winds, rains, etc. These internal difficulties and external difficulties are all called “evil.” (T. 1721, 34:629c24–28)

Here we find Jízàng moving away from the power of language as semantically rich, and towards a much more visceral and elemental view of efficacy. The passage makes clear that water and fire stand in opposition; one defeats the other when there is an “increase” (*zēngshàng* 增上). When increased, water *extinguishes* (*miè* 滅); fire *causes to vanish* (*xiāo* 消) water. With this framing, what does it mean to say that divine spells *eliminate* (*chú* 除) evil? Jízàng seems to be claiming here that language itself may be “increased” – this density or amplification of language gives us an additional reason why such language would be untranslatable. But the most intriguing inference we might make from Jízàng’s argument is that spell language’s elimination of evil is comparable to the elemental

opposition of fire and water. If *dhāraṇī* is language that has been “increased,” it is intriguing to consider that language itself is here framed as a force that can eliminate natural forces and malevolent beings.

Common threads

How do we analyze these three commentaries? A wide range of views is presented in the works above, but most of them can be organized around two problems. The first problem is whether or not a *dhāraṇī* recitation is an act of communication. Do the words of the spell communicate, and if so, with whom? The second problem is how and why *dhāraṇī* can be conceptualized as a kind of elemental efficacious force.

Dàoshēng’s commentary invests good and bad luck with demonic agency. Since demons control the onset of fortune or calamity, a spell may influence demons by speaking in the language of the demonic horde.

All the explanations by Zhìyǐ contribute to the notion that a spell is essentially communicative. If a spell is a demonic name, it communicates with demons. If a spell is a secret military code, it communicates a secret message to demons. If a spell is in a language I do not understand, it still communicates to speakers of that language. Even if the spell is in the “occult language of Buddhas,” it still communicates.

The analogy given here is telling: when a king says “bring me a *saindhava!*” he is requesting either salt, a chalice, water, or a horse, all possible meanings of the polyvalent word *saindhava*. His servants must understand from the context of the utterance what object the king is requesting. If spells work in this way, then the utterer of the spell assumes the position of the king, and unnamed demons are enjoined to fulfill the request. The recitation of *dhāraṇī* inserts the speaker into a clear hierarchy, into a world where the armies of demon kings are at one’s command.

Zhìyǐ’s third explanation, that the spell “mysteriously regulates evil,” seems to address the specific anxieties of Chinese Buddhist practitioners. His tale of the angry foreign conman reassures the reader that they cannot be expected to know the semantic content of the spell. But the reader is asked to trust in the wisdom of the “wise man” who originally uttered the spell, to have confidence that the words will have an effect on their

intended targets. The “mystery” is not, in this reading, a special density or occult power of spell language. The mystery is due entirely to our own understandable ignorance as speakers of human languages rather than demonic languages. If *dhāraṇī* are in the language of demons, we must pronounce that language as best we can without understanding precisely what we are saying, and we must trust in the accuracy of the spell’s transmission in Buddhist texts. The success of our repetition of this language becomes apparent only when we observe the subsequent behavior of the demonic agents targeted by the spell, when we see that sickness has been cured or rain has fallen.

Jízàng’s examples also contain evidence for a semantic orientation. Jízàng lists explanations, reminiscent of Dàoshēng and Zhìyǐ, that spells are simply names of powerful figures that terrorize the demonic horde. Jízàng’s lengthier comment gives a different twist on the semantic interpretation. For Jízàng, a spell is special because of its plenitude of meaning. It is precisely because spell language is so full of meaning that we cannot translate it, for to translate is to strip away the polyvalent fecundity of ritual speech. Only preservation of the original language of spells can allow the spell to communicate fully, and to fulfill the intention of the practitioner.

It is most instructive that at the end of his commentary on the *dhāraṇīparivarta*, Jízàng attempts to line up the transcriptions of Kumārajīva with the translations of Dharmarakṣa. He does this with some hesitation, because Dharmarakṣa only “kinda-sorta” (*fāngfú* 髣髴) translates the terms, but Jízàng nevertheless finds this task necessary for some practitioners:

呪不可翻，如前說。但讀誦之人，聞之茫然不解，遂都不留心。今依《正法華經》髣髴翻之，多是明實相祕密法。

Spells are untranslatable, as we discussed above. But when people read and recite them, when they hear them they are entirely at a loss, and then nothing will remain in their minds. Now if these people rely on [Dharmarakṣa’s] *Scripture of the True Dharma Flower*, he does kinda-sorta translate them, and for the most part they elucidate the esoteric *dharmas* of the Mark of the Real. (T. 1721, 34:630a11–13)

We can, in other words, extract some useful information from the words of the spell through translation, and this may help us fix the words of the

dhāraṇī in our minds more fully if we find ourselves incapable of focusing on language that we cannot understand. Jízàng seems to acknowledge the problem created by *dhāraṇī* language. Its authenticity and power derive from its aporetic qualities, but it is precisely these qualities that make it more difficult for *dhāraṇī* to take root in the minds of Chinese Buddhists.

Jízàng's explanation of the "increase" of spells has an elemental quality: spells work because they are in some sense an "increase" of linguistic efficacy as such, and they can therefore quell evil just as an increase in water can extinguish a fire. This efficacious power of spell language is at first difficult to understand, for the vast majority of cases described above locate the spell's power in the semantic specificity or semantic richness of its language.²²

But we can understand the spell as efficacious force when we read Jízàng's discussion of the two kinds of evil. If evil is both sentient and non-sentient, then we must come to grips with how language can control non-sentient evil, such as powerful winds and rains. In Dàoshēng we see evil described as *exclusively demonic*. In Jízàng's view, evil has both demonic causes and material causes. Jízàng's view of spells as "increased" language might be understood as a necessary move to account for this more complex view of evil. Language is not merely communicative in this account; language is efficacy as such, and divine spells are language so effective it can directly manipulate winds and rains.

We may speculate that it is precisely the overlap of these two qualities that makes spells so effective. Spells not only foster communication with barbarous and incomprehensible demons; they enable the utterer to wield power that transcends the everyday uses of language. The movement we see from spells as simple demonic language to spells as *unusually semantically rich* language, from simple communication to *super-communication*, is a testament to the complementary nature of these qualities.

²² Paul Copp's lovely study on post-Táng *dhāraṇī*, especially his chapter on the *Uṣṇīṣaviṇṇayadhāraṇī*, brilliantly explores the material force of spells in Chinese religious culture. See Copp 2014: 141–196.

Concluding remarks

There is one final lesson to take from all this. Everyone agreed that Kumārajīva's approach was correct, that Indic spells cannot be translated into Chinese without losing something important. But it is clear that the *reasons* for this approach were unstable. Dàoshēng's explanation is simple and concise, but apparently it was insufficient to explain all cases. Demonic communication is preserved as an explanation through Zhìyǐ's and Jízàng's works, but by the sixth century many alternative hypotheses were being discussed.

So even if we hypothesize that Dàoshēng, as our earliest commentary on *dhāraṇī* language, preserves the simplest and earliest justification of the choice to transcribe, we must acknowledge that the popularity of Kumārajīva's translation and its untranslated spells generated new problems and new discussions about the nature and function of spell language. The exegetes offer many alternative explanations, which leads the reader to believe that the theoretical underpinnings of *dhāraṇī* language were far from settled. We may guess here that Kumārajīva's translation of the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* could have guided interpretation, and we may interpret the commentaries as a series of attempts to rationalize this choice. Chinese readers in the early medieval period were not yet certain how spells worked, but they knew that spells *must* work, and that spells could not be translated.

These fumbling attempts of the fifth and sixth centuries would eventually influence the ideas of Buddhists into the Táng 唐 and beyond. In a fascinating study on the eighth-century Buddhist monk Fǎchóng 法崇, Paul Copp highlights some valuable examples of later *dhāraṇī* exegesis in China. Some claim that the meaningful language of the *dhāraṇī* is substantially connected to the simultaneous emptiness and fullness of all phenomena, as when the syllable *a* is identified as the Dharma Body of the Buddha.²³ Others claim that the meanings of *dhāraṇī* language are accessible *only* to Buddhas – a step far beyond the notion that they are *demonic* language (Copp 2012: 148–149). Fǎchóng himself crafted an

²³ Copp 2012: 146–147. This claim about the syllables of *dhāraṇī* hearkens back to *Bodhisattvabhūmi* discourse taken up by Jízàng, and is ultimately traceable to the Arapacana tradition found in the *Lalitavistara* and the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature. On this stream of *dhāraṇī* interpretation, see Gyatso 1992.

extraordinary and beautiful translation of the *Uṣṇīṣavijayadhāraṇī*, with the same justification Jízàng gives for Dharmarakṣa's translation: "Though I translate the phrases here in order that beings may give rise to understanding, in chanting them the Brahmanical language cannot be altered" (Copp 2012: 155). Fǎchóng, like Jízàng, recognized that the Chinese Buddhist audience would have been eager to understand more fully what they were chanting in their rituals, and why their utterances were meaningful and effective. In what Copp describes as a "synæsthetic narrative," Fǎchóng's interpretation of the *dhāraṇī* would also extend Jízàng's argument about the raw efficacy of language in *dhāraṇī* practice, with the *Uṣṇīṣavijaya* taking on even more starkly material forms: as water, as light, as wind, as the nectar of immortality, and so on, all lending the language itself a consecrating power (Copp 2012: 160–167). In all these cases we can see how Buddhists in medieval China elaborated on a basic framework set down by Dàoshēng, Zhìyǐ, and Jízàng. And in all these cases we can also see how Buddhists continued to theorize *dhāraṇī* language with a variety of strategies. The tradition adds explanations over time, without ever settling upon a single, authoritative model for the efficacy of *dhāraṇī* language.

The choices made by Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva were not insignificant choices. These translators faced profound problems: not just how to render Indic language into Chinese, but also how to render Indic ritual language for a Chinese audience. The choices faced by Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva were the same choices faced by Burnouf, by Kern, by Hurvitz, and by Watson. It is a choice that will haunt nearly every translator of Mahāyāna texts, as so many of them contain *dhāraṇīs*.

The modern translator is placed, it seems, in a difficult position. On the one hand, we might agree with Ronald Davidson's important argument about the historical pragmatics of *dhāraṇī*, which demonstrates that the use of ordinary linguistic tools can give us clues about the usage and performance of *dhāraṇī*. On Davidson's reading, the emic Buddhist claims about *dhāraṇī* language need not structure or limit our understanding of *dhāraṇī*. Scholars should pay attention instead to the linguistic context: the assertions, ritual instructions, commands, and so on that surround *dhāraṇīs* in Buddhist scriptures and ritual manuals. Davidson argues that we can more fully understand *dhāraṇī* when we understand the claims and injunctions that accompany them, which shape their

pragmatic deployment in ritual action (see Davidson 2014: 52). On the other hand, we are still left with the question of how to translate the *dhāraṇī* themselves: what context should we provide to our readers, and how do we deal with this intentionally aporetic language?

Rather than closing off the worlds of possibility opened up by such wondrous language, perhaps we can take comfort in the Chinese Buddhist tradition's refusal to decide.²⁴ From these early moments of indecision, perhaps we can learn to respect *dhāraṇī* language for all its potential. For exegetes in early medieval China, *dhāraṇī* is efficacious language, language that confounds and yet communicates, a language dense with semantic possibility, a language with raw elemental power, a language that plunges its speaker into intimate communion with demons. Translators of Buddhist scriptures today would do well to acknowledge this richness and variability in our own work. When we translate Buddhist texts, making them available for future generations of students and practitioners, our choices matter. And not unlike the choices made in the workshops of Kumārajīva and Dharmarakṣa, our decisions may one day inspire exegetical labor in Buddhist communities who take up our scholarly work.

Abbreviations

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²⁴ I am sympathetic to Ronald Davidson's argument, drawing from a vast array of Sanskrit and Tibetan scriptures, that *dhāraṇī* may be best understood as "encoding" in the broadest possible sense. See Davidson 2009: 138–142. The fact that Chinese commentaries from Zhìyǐ forward leave the reader open to multiple exegetical possibilities seems to confirm Davidson's account of the intentional slipperiness and recursivity of *dhāraṇī*.

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ABSTRACT

The work of the translator involves difficult choices. But this difficulty is compounded when dealing with special kinds of language, such as Buddhist *dhāraṇī*. When faced with the choice to translate or transcribe Indic spells into Chinese, the translation workshops led by Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva made decisions that in turn produced exegetical dilemmas. In this article I survey early medieval Chinese commentaries on the *dhāraṇī* chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*. These commentaries reveal that there was no clear or stable theory for understanding the efficacy of *dhāraṇī*. Instead, Chinese exegetes put forward a range of possible underlying mechanisms for *dhāraṇī* language.