

# TRANSCRIPTION AND THE HEART SUTRA

YOONCHEOL PARK

English Education Department Kyungnam University South Korea  
E-mail: lingular@yahoo.co.kr

**Abstract-** The purpose of this paper focuses on examining transcription of *the Heart Sūtra*. Buddhist scriptures prefer to the transcription due to the Five Losses and Three Difficulties. *The Heart Sūtra* includes traces of transcription by Chinese, Sanskrit, and Korean pronunciations. These transcriptions keep long history and show intention to preserve the original without distortion of meanings by translation. So, this paper suggests that transcription can be a translation method without loss of meanings.

**Keywords-** Buddhist Sutra, the *Heart Sūtra*, Translation, Translation Methods, Transcription

## I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism in South Korea was introduced from China in A.D. 372. It has much influenced Korean culture and history too. And most of the Korean people got to know natures of Buddhism through its scriptures and monks' sermon. Buddhist scriptures are originally written in Sanskrit but has recently been translated Chinese character into Korean. And Korean has its own pronunciation different from Chinese to the same Chinese character. In other words, Korean and Chinese are differently pronounced. This phenomenon is so far continued and shows that Korea and China have different culture.

In the early times, messages of Buddhist scriptures in South Korea are conveyed not by meaning-based translation but by transcription. Even some of them are written with the pronunciations close to Sanskrit. Therefore, we can find that unfamiliar pronunciations exist at a part of transcription.

As reflecting this reality, Buddhist scriptures include several forms of transcription: some represents pronunciations similar with Chinese, and others, those of Sanskrit. So, the purpose of this paper focuses on examining transcription of a Buddhist scripture *the Heart Sūtra*. For observing it, we will firstly look at characteristics of Buddhist scripture translation in the next section.

## II. CHARACTERISTICS OF BUDDHIST SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION

### 2.1. Five Losses and Three Difficulties

Buddhist scriptures have constraints of translation such as the Five Losses and Three Difficulties. These constraints show intention to maintain the original and offer a clue for observing translation of early Buddhist scriptures. In Buddhist scripture translation, the Five Losses are as follows:

- (a) There is a problem of word order change since Sanskrit and Chinese character are in reversing word order in sentence structure, as far as the grammar is concerned.

- (b) Sanskrit prefers to be simple and straight forward, while Chinese character prefers to be complex, polished in writing. So, there is a concern to lose nature of the original itself by translation.
- (c) Sanskrit tends to be repetitive, but, in case of translation, it is likely to be lost due to translator's discretion.
- (d) Sanskrit contains complicated explanations. So, they are likely to be loss by translation.
- (e) Sanskrit tends to repeat previous passages every time a paragraph changes in subsequent passages, but Chinese character translations remove them. (Lee 2004; Park 1988)

The Five Losses mentioned above refers to the translation constraint which prevents loss of meanings in the original. They represent the contents to preserve meanings of the original. This similar phenomenon can be found at the Three Difficulties. They are as follows:

- (a) Do not change the graceful and highly inflected ancient Sanskrit into plain comprehensive Chinese character.
- (b) Do not change the Sanskrit expressions into contemporary readers' remarks since it is difficult for ordinary people to reach at saint's stage.
- (c) Do not adopt some of sutra sentences arbitrarily since the first Saṃgīti published by Ānanda is written by 500 arahants.

(Kim 1998)

As mentioned above, the Three Difficulties offer that the original meanings of Buddhist scriptures should not be distorted by any translation. These constraints like the Five Losses and Three Difficulties may be fundamental force to maintain the original for more than 2000 years. Then, we will look at how they affect the translation of *the Heart Sūtra* in the next section.

### 2.2. Transcription and the Heart Sūtra

One of the Buddhist scriptures, the *Heart Sūtra* is a popular in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Its Sanskrit title, *Prajñāpāramitāhṛdaya*, can be translated as 'The Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom' (Wikipedia

2018). And this sutra has still been propagated through transcription. The transcription is useful in preserving the meanings of the original. And the transcription conveys messages based on the sounds so that it pays attention to the mark of the sounds.

In conveying messages by the transcription, Catford (1965) insists that graphological unit of source language is substituted into that of target language. He said that the transcription is made by the procedures as followings:

- (a) Letters of the source language are replaced by sounds of the source language.
- (b) The sounds of the source language are translated into sounds of target language.
- (c) The sounds of the target language are replaced by letters of the target language.

As we can see at the procedures above, the transcription refers to relaying letters into letters based on sounds. Therefore, translation by the transcription is slightly different from person to person. Then, we will examine the transcription of *the Heart Sūtra* in the next section.

### III. DATA ANALYSIS

*The Heart Sūtra* is the most widely known to Korean people and handed down by recitation. Hence, it has traces of several transcriptions. Then, let's look at them in the next examples.

- (1) SL: 阿耨多羅三藐三菩提

TL: 아늑다라삼막삼보리

(/anotdarasamyaksambodri/) (法要集 2001)

The example above shows that Chinese character in source language (SL) is transcribed into Korean in target language (TL). These Korean spellings have an origin in Sanskrit. The reason is that they pronounced close to the Sanskrit like /anuttarā-samyak-sambodhi/. The next example shows the transcription which borrows Chinese pronunciations.

- (2) SL: 菩提娑婆訶

TL: 모지사바하 (moji savaha) (法要集 2001)

In the example above, the Chinese character '菩提' in SL is conveyed as '모지 (/moji/)' in TL. In fact, it is pronounced in Chinese /puti/. Its pronunciation is similar with Sanskrit /bodhi/. However, the /moji/ in TL is influenced by Chinese because Chinese and Korean are similarly pronounced to the '菩提.' Likewise, a few of phrases in *the Heart Sūtra* borrow Chinese pronunciations. The next example shows domestication in transcription.

- (3) SL: 揭諦揭諦波羅揭諦

TL: 아제아제바라아제 (/aje aje

baraaje/)(法要集2001)

The example above represents the domestication of pronunciations which are familiar to readers in TL. The phrases in SL are pronounced as/gate gate paragate/ in Sanskrit, and these pronunciations are different from those of the TL. It means that /aje aje baraaje/ in TL is far from pronunciation of SL and shows pure Korean pronunciations. In other words, this transcription similarly follows rhymes of SL, but this type of translation eventually represents domestication of the transcription. Then, we will summarize results of these analyses in the next section.

### IV. ANALYSIS RESULTS

*The Heart Sūtra* includes a variety of meanings relevant to realization. These meanings do not have connection with specific words. Namely, *the Heart Sūtra* reveals meaning of the realization in the sentences. So, it may be handed down by transcription. In this paper, we observed the transcriptions by Sanskrit, Chinese, and Korean pronunciations. The reason why the three languages are included in *the Heart Sūtra* is caused by long history and convenience of pronunciation. The transcription may be necessary in conveying messages without distorting the original. However, we think it important to convey the transcription coherently in one language. Now, we will draw conclusion about these analyses in the next section.

### CONCLUSIONS

The translation of Buddhist scriptures has restrictive and controlled conditions like the Five Losses and Three Difficulties. Thus, Buddhist scriptures prefer to transcription and literal translation as holy religious book. In this respect, Buddhist scriptures have their own characteristics in conveying messages from one language into another. Most of all, *the Heart Sūtra* shows the translation to convey messages through transcription. This method preserves meanings of the original. So, this paper suggests that the transcription can be a translation method without loss of meanings.

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