

Conceptual Autonomy and Semantic Re-Engineering: Kumārajīva's Liberation of Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit from Neo-Daoist Lexicon

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Introduction

During the early phase of the transmission of Buddhism to China, spanning from the Han Dynasty to the Eastern Jin period (circa 2nd to 4th century CE), Indian Mahāyāna texts faced a profound hermeneutical crisis. To make foreign Indian abstract categories intelligible to the literate Chinese gentry, early translators resorted to the method of *Geyi* (格義 - Concept-Matching). This methodology borrowed heavily from the prevailing vocabulary of Neo-Daoism (*Xuanxue* - 玄學), substituting indigenous Chinese metaphysical terms for intricate Sanskrit Buddhist concepts. While this pragmatic approach initially facilitated a rapid syncretic dissemination of the new doctrine, it inadvertently induced a severe systemic crisis. Key philosophical categories of Buddhist hybrid syntax became completely subsumed under Daoist ontology. The distinct radical epistemology of the Madhyamaka school was systemically misconstrued as a mere derivative or foreign branch of *Lao-Zhuang* philosophy. This conceptual entanglement persisted until the arrival of the Kuchean master translator Kumārajīva in the capital of Chang'an in 401 CE. Operating under imperial patronage, Kumārajīva recognized that the philosophical sovereignty of Buddhism was fundamentally compromised by the linguistic parameters of *Geyi*. This research paper addresses the critical historical and philological problem of how Kumārajīva managed to dismantle this syncretic assimilation. It posits that his translation methodology was not merely a mechanical substitution of vocabulary, but a systematic process of Semantic Re-engineering. By evaluating his seminal translations of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*Chung lun*) and the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*, this study explores the precise mechanism through which Kumārajīva extracted Buddhist terminology from its Neo-Daoist captivity, thereby granting Chinese Mahāyāna its long-overdue Conceptual Autonomy.

The fundamental crisis of *Geyi* lay in its failure to recognize that language carries structural and ontological presuppositions. When translators utilized pre-existing Chinese concepts to convey Indian ideas, they were not doing neutral mappings. Instead, they forced a radically distinct framework into

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an incompatible container. For instance, the early translators were primarily interacting with the Chinese literate elite who were deeply immersed in *Xuanxue* ("Dark Learning" or Neo-Daoism). To explain the profound, unconditioned, and non-dual nature of ultimate reality as described in Mahāyāna scriptures, these translators picked words that carried heavy cosmological associations from the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. This was a profound philosophical compromise. The radical, deconstructive critique of fixed essences that characterized early Indian Madhyamaka thought was completely obscured. Instead of understanding *Śūnyatā* as a radical epistemic tool designed to expose the relational and dependent nature of all phenomena, Chinese intellectuals read it as a validation of their own indigenous cosmogony. They interpreted the teaching as an assertion that the material world of form emerges from a primal, undifferentiated, and silent void. Thus, the foreign religion was initially accepted not for its revolutionary philosophical departures, but precisely because it appeared to confirm what the local gentry already believed. This historical situation created an urgent philological challenge: how to communicate the subtle, technical nuances of Indian Buddhist philosophy without allowing its unique core to be absorbed by domestic intellectual traditions.

Objectives

The primary aims and research questions that this study intends to answer are structured to systematically investigate the early translation methodologies. The first major objective of this study is to identify and categorize the precise points of philosophical distortion that occurred when early Chinese translators mapped Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit terms onto Neo-Daoist ontological frameworks through the *Geyi* method. By mapping these specific linguistic slippages, the project demonstrates how translation can inadvertently alter core philosophical positions. Furthermore, it dissects the specific translation strategies employed by Kumārajīva, specifically his transition from *Geyi* to *Yiyi* (意譯 - Meaning-adhering translation) and evaluates how these strategies preserved the core philosophical integrity of Indian texts. This involves examining the administrative and collaborative structures of Kumārajīva's state-sponsored translation bureaus in Chang'an, which represented a shift toward institutional precision. Finally, it demonstrates, via textual case studies of key philosophical concepts (*Śūnyatā*, *Tathatā*, and *Prajñā*), how Kumārajīva executed semantic re-engineering by selecting, altering, or completely inventing Chinese characters to avoid Daoist misinterpretations, thereby establishing a new, autonomous technical vocabulary for East Asian Buddhism.

Methodology

This study utilizes a strictly qualitative, text-critical, and comparative philological research design. The primary data corpus consists of selected parallel textual units from two fundamental streams: the Sanskrit primary editions of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* and fragments of the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*, alongside the corresponding classical Chinese translations executed by Kumārajīva as preserved in the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (*Taishō Tripiṭaka*). The comparative analysis proceeds through a three-tiered framework. First, the core philosophical definition of the Sanskrit Buddhist term is established. This step requires careful attention to the technical syntax of Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, noting how grammatical inflections carry specific meanings. Second, the early pre-Kumārajīva translation equivalents drawn from Neo-Daoist lexicons are analyzed to uncover their ontological limitations and historical misinterpretations. Third, Kumārajīva's finalized Chinese characters are subjected to an ideographic and contextual analysis to demonstrate how they successfully neutralized Neo-Daoist syncretism and restored conceptual autonomy.

Results

The analytical data reveals that Kumārajīva's departure from *Geyi* successfully decoupled Buddhist texts from Daoist cosmology across three distinct linguistic and conceptual axes. Instead of treating translation as a passive linguistic mapping, Kumārajīva instituted an active philological boundary that fundamentally altered the reception of Indian texts in China.

In the case of *Śūnyatā* (Emptiness), pre-Kumārajīva translators relied on the Neo-Daoist term *Benwu* (本無), which literally signifies "Original Non-being." This mechanical match caused the Chinese literati to treat Emptiness as a primal, physical state of "Nothingness" out of which the manifest universe emerged. Kumārajīva corrected this by introducing *Kōng* (空). The ideographic components of *Kōng* denote dynamic space or a receptive vacuum, successfully shifting the interpretation from a cosmic origin story to an epistemological state of relational co-dependency, or *Pratītyasamutpāda*.

The Sanskrit concept of *Tathatā* (Thusness or Reality as it is) had been systematically obscured by its rendering as *Dao* (道) - the ultimate, generative Cosmic Way of Daoism. This assimilation confused a static, unconditioned description of experiential reality with an active, metaphysical force that rules over nature. Kumārajīva engineered the standard equivalent *Zhēnrú* (真如), translating literally to "True Thusness." This linguistic intervention effectively rescued the term from its generative overtones and established it firmly as a descriptive indicator of the true state of phenomena.

When confronting the term *Prajñā* (Transcendent Insight), Kumārajīva encountered a situation where no equivalent Chinese ideograph could escape the secular, psychological connotations of *Zhīhuì* (智慧 - mundane intelligence or wisdom). Recognizing that any domestic character would compromise the unique, non-conceptual nature of this insight, he deployed a strategy of absolute phonetic insulation. By bypassing ideographic translation altogether and opting for the transliteration *Bōrě* (般若), he established a strict conceptual boundary that forced Chinese scholars to internalize a non-indigenous meaning, altogether avoiding Daoist conceptual syncretism.

Discussion and Conclusion

The empirical findings of this textual study demonstrate that translation is never a neutral linguistic swap; it is an act of philosophical architecture. Kumārajīva's methodology illustrates how the structural and semantic precision of Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit was preserved within an entirely different ideographic writing system. By choosing to bypass the comfortable, established paths of Neo-Daoist *Geyi*, he prevented Mahāyāna Buddhism from evaporating into a mere subset of Chinese mysticism. His work established that translation between highly developed philosophical cultures requires the creation of a specialized, targeted lexicon rather than reliance on casual, pre-existing cultural synonyms.

This semantic re-engineering had profound implications for the evolution of East Asian philosophy. It allowed for the authentic development of the Three-Treatise school (*Sanlun*) and laid the conceptual foundation for the eventual rise of native Chinese Buddhist traditions such as Tiantai, Huayan, and Chan (Zen), which required a clear grasp of *Śūnyatā* as relational dependency rather than primal nothingness. Without Kumārajīva's rigorous philological boundary-setting, the unique non-dual epistemology of Madhyamaka would have remained invisible, trapped inside the conceptual language of indigenous Chinese cosmology. His text-critical practices demonstrate that intercultural translation must balance accessibility with an unyielding preservation of the source text's radical differences.

In conclusion, Kumārajīva's translation enterprise represents one of the earliest and most successful historical examples of safeguarding the conceptual autonomy of an imported philosophical system against aggressive domestic syncretism. His legacy proves that maintaining strict linguistic boundaries and carrying out deliberate semantic re-engineering are vital tools for ensuring the precise intercultural transfer of complex ideas across human civilizations. His methodology remains a vital model for contemporary computational linguistics, comparative philosophy, and translation theory, showing how structural integrity can be maintained across radically disparate symbolic systems.

Keywords- Kumārajīva, Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit, Geyi, Semantic Re-engineering, Conceptual Autonomy

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