

Research Note

A Buddhist Colophon from the 4th Century: Its Reading and Meaning

The colophon under discussion is found at the end of a paper roll Buddhist manuscript that is now in the possession of the Anhui Museum in Hefei, China. A facsimile of the manuscript was published for the first time in 1959, but unfortunately the photograph was of poor quality.¹ In the years that followed, this circumstance led to readings that were less than satisfying. Even the much praised corpus of colophons in Chinese manuscripts had to accept this important text with lacunae.²

Meanwhile the situation has changed greatly for the better. In recent years, the Chinese authorities in charge of cultural affairs have launched a prestigious project of compiling a National Catalogue of Rara (*Guojia zhengui guji minglu* 國家珍貴古籍名錄; the phrase ‘valuable traditional books’ is used in the broadest sense of the word, and includes manuscripts independently of the physical distinction of their media, inscriptional rubbings as well as wood-block printed books).

This manuscript has been chosen to be part of the second catalogue, published in 2009, and bears the No. 02452.³

The colophon is written apparently by the same hand that copied the main text. Hence it belongs to the earliest scribal colophons that have survived. The Buddhist monk Baoxian, who has written the colophon, shows a perfect command of the clerical style prevalent in Northern China that is typical of manuscripts from the 4th to 5th centuries AD.

In the course of the Rara Catalogue’s compilation, two scholars of the National Library of China in Beijing took the opportunity to undertake a new reading of the colophon.⁴ Thanks to today’s better conditions, they were able to achieve a coherent reading that is a substantial improvement on the previous ones. Only minor shortcomings have remained. In addition, a particularity in the manuscript deserves attention: There seems to be at least four characters at the bottom of the second line in colophon. Judging from the photograph,



Fig. 1: Baoxian’s manuscript of a Buddhānāma text (dated 399 AD)

¹ Shi 1959, 33.

² Ikeda 1990, 78 with bibliographical information. Cf. also Wang 1997, 75.

³ *Guji minglu* II 2010, Vol. 2, 82–83.

⁴ Lin, and Liu 2009.

they are smaller than the foregoing characters and have been erased with a yellow pigment. But a reading of them is difficult. The colophon reads as follows:

神璽三年太歲在亥正月廿日，道人寶賢於高昌寫此千佛名。願使眾生禮敬奉侍，所生之處，歷奉千佛。

On the 20th day of the 1st month of the 3rd year of the Shenxi era (i.e. 13th March, 399 AD), while Jupiter was occupying the hai station, the Buddhist monk Baoxian copied these Thousand Buddhas' Names in Gaochang. May thereby all living beings be caused to venerate and observe [them] and wherever reborn, encounter the Thousand Buddhas!

The title of this fragmentary manuscript should first be discussed. The Rara Catalogue provides a bibliographic description, saying that the manuscript roll consists of two fragments of the same height (24.5 cm). The longer fragment measures 121.8 cm with 72 written lines, whilst the shorter one is 55 cm with 32 lines. There is no mention concerning the relation between the two pieces. In addition, nothing is said about the beginning and final parts of the roll, and hence the key information about the original title is missing.⁵ The Catalogue lists the manuscript with the title *Xianjie jiubai Foming pin dijiu* 賢劫九百佛名品第九 'Section of Names of the Nine Hundred Buddhas to Appear in the Good Aeon, chapter 9'. On the facsimile we are shown only the end of the roll, but here no title is encountered. This is contrary to the usual practice in traditional Chinese books of writing titles at both ends of a chapter or similar closed units.

We are told that the present title given in the Catalogue is taken from 'the beginning part of the roll'.⁶ On the official home page of the Anhui Museum, we see an image carrying this short section title. Unfortunately the image is cut off from the context so it is not possible to determine its position.

It is, however, disquieting that this heading contradicts Baoxian's own statement concerning the title. In the colophon, he called his manuscript 'Names of the Thousand Buddhas'. Relying on his authority, one can imagine the title 'Names of the Nine Hundred Buddhas' being a mark that separates a section of 100 names, probably from the 801st to the 900th. In fact this type of division can be found in another Buddhanāma sutra (T. 447b), which uses the phrases *jiubai Fo jing* 九百佛竟 'The End of Nine Hundred Buddhas' and *yiqian Fo jing* 一千佛竟 'The End of One Thousand Buddhas'. Even in the section title of the Nine Hundred Names,



Fig. 2: Detail of the Baoxian manuscript

the key word *xianjie* refers to the Thousand Buddhas, since in Buddhist lore, a *xianjie* (*bhadra-kalpa*) has one thousand worthies. In view of these internal and external factors, the proper title of the Baoxian manuscript should be 'Names of the Thousand Buddhas'.⁷ However, a definitive solution of this problem can be only possible after a complete publication of the whole manuscript.

Disregarding a few scribal variants and misspellings, Baoxian's list of the Buddhas' names is very close to that found in the closing part of section 20 of the 6th chapter of the *Xianjie jing* 賢劫經千佛名號品, in the translation by Zhu Fahu 竺法護 (Dharmarakṣa, 230?–316 AD) (T. 425, 14, 49c24–50a20). T. 425 enumerates 70 Buddhas and 1052 Bodhisattvas. The two texts are largely identical in structure. Textual variants are largely of a graphic nature; some variants point to the superiority of the Baoxian manuscript, as for example the expression T. *Qiyinqiang* 其音強 'a Bodhisattva whose voice is strong' vs. ms. *-xiang-* ~香~, 'a Bodhisattva whose fragrance is intense'. The preceding name is *Zhihuihua* 智慧華, 'the Bodhisattva Blossom of Wisdom', which fits better to the manuscript variant of the olfactory sense. *Shenyouli* 甚有力 in the manuscript reveals the corresponding name *Qiyouli* 其~ in T. to be a graphic corruption. Four names of the T. version are missing in the manuscript. With regard to linguistic features, the manuscript appears archaic, with names consisting of either two or three characters. In contrast, T. seems to be a later rearrangement in clear-cut trisyllabic verses.

⁵ As for the description norm, the editors of the Catalogue treat manuscripts as books. In so doing, not all necessary data can be included.

⁶ Lin, and Liu 2009 use the same title, saying 'This [title] has been decided on grounds of the title appearing at the outer part (*juanduan* 卷端)'.
⁷ *Bei Liang Shenxi sannian Baoxian xie Qianfo minghao* 北涼神璽三年寶賢寫千佛名號.

Worship of the Thousand Buddhas was widespread in Central Asia.⁸ ‘Hearing, preserving, and having faith’ in the Buddhas’ names was much encouraged. Copying them was believed to be one way of worshiping the Buddha, and indeed, the earliest witnesses of the worship of the Thousand Buddhas are in the form of words and images. Lists of the Buddha’s names are not only a frequent component in Buddhist scriptures, there are even texts exclusively devoted to enumerating the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, together with, in the rule, an introductory and a summarizing sermon (e.g. T. 440, T. 441).⁹ The Baoxian manuscript appears to represent a third type: it is a pure list of Buddhas’ names. As mentioned above, our manuscript is striking in its lacking an end title. Comparing it with T. 425, we find that T.’s concluding paragraph is not included in manuscript.

Another difference consists in the point that in the manuscript the words *Fo ming*, ‘name of the Buddha (is)’ appear ahead of every Buddha and Bodhisattva, whereas in T. the sections of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are introduced in each case by an overall heading of the style ‘They are as follows’. If the manuscript indeed contained one thousand Buddhas’ names, Baoxian must have repeated this word one thousand times. In other words, the Baoxian manuscript seems to be a special sort of list of Buddhas’ names. One might ask why Baoxian chose such a labour-intensive way. Was it intended to be an excerpt from a lengthy *Buddhanāma* for liturgical purposes?

The colophon is one of the oldest Chinese Buddhist witnesses to bear the complete date and place of its production,

and thus is an ‘ideal’ Buddhist colophon. In that time, Gaochang (present-day Turfan) was ruled by the Northern Liang (397–439 AD), whose capital was in Guzang (present-day Wuwei). However, owing to the lack of accurate information about its chain of owners, scholars are of different opinions as to its provenance. On the one side, it is believed that the manuscript was found in Turfan (cf. Wang 1997). On the other side, Dunhuang is favoured (Rara Catalogue; Lin, and Liu 2009). Relying on hearsay about its alleged Dunhuang provenance, the paper historian Pan Jixing has placed the Baoxian roll into the Dunhuang group, instead of the Xinjiang group, and considers it a representative sample of paper used in Dunhuang.¹⁰ But the fact is, since it came to the Museum via several hands probably at a rather later date, any claim for the provenance of this manuscript can only be *cum grano salis*. It is generally known this uncertainty also applies to many minor Dunhuang collections of unclear origins, in contrast to those gained through archaeological work and transmitted via secured ways. In this sense, the manuscript of Baoxian is more fortunate as he unambiguously wrote down the place where he produced this manuscript: Gaochang. Indeed it is one of the earliest testimonies of the local Buddhist communities in Chinese Central Asia. Whether the manuscript was later taken to another place or not is not relevant with regard to the fundamental fact of its origin.

Ding Wang | Hamburg

REFERENCES

- Bechert, Heinz et al. (2010), *Der Buddhismus I: Der indische Buddhismus und seine Verzweigungen* (Stuttgart).
- Guji minglu II (2010), *Di'er pi guojia zhengui guji minglu tulu* 第二批國家珍貴古籍名錄圖錄, 10 Vols. (Beijing).
- Ikeda On 池田溫 (1990), *Chūgoku kodai shahon shikigo shūroku* 中國古代寫本識語集錄 (Tokyo).
- Kuo Li-ying (1994), *Confession et contrition dans le bouddhisme chinois du v^e au x^e siècles* (Paris).
- Lin Shitian 林世田, and Liu Bo 劉波 (2009), ‘Guojia zhengui guji tezhhan: Kuayue qiannian de duihua’ ‘國家珍貴古籍特展: 跨越千年的對話’, *Zhonghua dushu bao* 中華讀書報, June 24th.
- Pan Jixing 潘吉星 (1979), *Zhongguo zaozhi jishu shigao* 中國造紙技術史稿 (Beijing).
- Schopen, Gregory (2005), *Figments and fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India: More collected papers* (Honolulu).
- Shi Gufeng 石谷風 (1959), ‘Tan Songdai yiqian de zaozhishu’ ‘談宋代以前的造紙術’, *Wenwu* 文物 1: 33–35.
- Wang Su 王素 (1997), *Tulufan chutu Gaochang wenxian biannian* 吐魯番出土高昌文獻編年 (Taipei).

Picture Credits: Fig. 1, Fig. 2: © Courtesy of The Anhui Museum

⁸ Bechert et al. 2010, 257.

⁹ Kuo 1994, 119–147; Schopen 2005, 198–200.

¹⁰ Pan 1979, 174, 176.