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Western Scholars' Oral Literature on Early Buddhism

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Abstract: ***Scholars generally believe that the beginning of the Buddhist scriptures existed in the form of Oral Literature, that is to say, the Buddhist scriptures were not written in the early days, but the Buddhist chanting by oral transmission. Therefore, the characteristics of oral literature became very important to understanding the history of early Buddhist sutras. The emergence of this kind of literature has a special and intricate background. In order to explore how it is formed, scholars usually speculate on a so-called "model" and use this model to explain its claims and justification arguments. This article is about three scholars in the Buddhist world in the western they put forward a big influence on the formation of oral literature. The first is believes that the classic literature (sutta literature, also known as nikāyas) has the nature of oral epic poetry, that is, it has a "strong improvisatory element" (strong improvisatory element). The second is Richard Gombrich, who opposed the Cousins model and proposed that the Buddhist scriptures are a "deliberate composition". After the Buddhist scriptures were integrated, they were recorded and systematically chanted to students. The third place is Mark Allon. The research theme of his research has shown that many styles play a role in helping to memorize scriptures and functioning in recitation. However, there are also some points worthy of further discussion between these three arguments and the supporting methods they adopt. Therefore, this article also attempts to make preliminary comments in the last section and explains that the thesis of oral literature can hardly be interpreted with a simplified model.***

1. General oral Literature on early Buddhism

Western Buddhist scholars have always a very strong interest in the study of Buddhist history. Most they have put forward many discussions and point of view on the origin problem. For example: Is there a so-called earliest Buddhism? Or what is the doctrine of earliest Buddhism? What is the truth about the life of Buddha in history? What is the language used in Buddhism in the Buddha era? Those are the earliest sutra, how are recorded and spread? This includes many important in the history of Buddhism, such as nikāya or āgama., etc. The obvious truth of vestige, in addition to the records or legends of future generations, sometimes relying on archaeological findings. However, the evidence they provide is often several centuries later than the historical facts that may occur, therefore, the reliability of its information needs further verification. In order to continue to understand the issues raised above, scholars usually focus on the early Buddhist scriptures that are closer to the Buddha era and the center of Buddhist studies ---- nikāya or the āgama. Because the content of the Sutras is probably the key to solving many problems, sutra research has always been the focus of everyone's efforts. However, these existing sutra forms are themselves a central issue, for example, the " āgama Sutra" that we have seen so far is about the product of the 4th _ 5th centuries. The more positive form of Pali nikāya can only be pushed back to the era of Buddhaghosa (around the fifth century), Early evidence is not unrecognized or appears rather vague. The general consensus is that it is necessary to do more and more basic research on these sutra forms of content, in order to further lay a more reliable credit for other special studies such as doctrine and teaching history, and then get inferences close to the historical. In other words, before you study big problems, you must first understand the sutra text itself. One of the most important issues regarding Buddhist sutras and now the written version.

However, in the early period, the Buddhist scriptures were passed on from Oral to Oral, and even the process of their creation and integration is a range of oral narration. And dictated by dictation.In general, scholars believe that the beginning of Buddhist scriptures existed as oral literature, so the characteristics of oral literature became an important part of the historical study of the Early Buddhism scriptures. To understand this feature not only provides an indispensable clue to the problem of setting up the Buddhist scriptures and background of the content scriptures, but also avoids the mistake, and mistakes the events of the descendants as early period. When starting to explore oral literature, the first ask: What is oral literature? What is the process of oral literature? How is the oral literature formed? These issues are very fundamental, but also difficult to say, even controversial this topic. In order to interpret clearly this subject, scholars usually put forward a so-called "argument" on related issues, and they apply this argument to them explain and prove arguments. In the research field of Buddhist oral literature, the author believes that the discussion led by British scholars currently provides more important contributions. This contribution is the model they propose, and these models are often important mechanisms for initiating complex themes. From understanding this process of research, we can learn many Western scholar's achievements and methods; these results often involve many peripheral issues related to the research on this subject. These problems are in retrospect with the many major issues we mentioned at the beginning. The subject has a close and critical causal link. In short, understanding of the oral literature of the Buddhist scriptures is necessary for us in the so-called "early Buddhism".

2. Lance Cousins's Point of View : Improvisatory of integration

Lance Cousins believes that sutta literature, also known as nikāyas, has the nature of oral epic poetry. the following quotes are the so-called oral epic (or narrative poem) refers to the Greek Homeric epics as the representative. A theory is put forward on the nature of oral epics, which later developed into the " model" commonly known in the scholar world. Lance Cousins's point of view is basically to apply this model to the sutra, so the description of this

model can be described in conjunction with the following Lance Cousins arguments. He pointed out that one of the characteristics is the use of "mnemonic formula". In the epic, these are applied in chanting and as a way to maintain and the poetry tradition. The premise of Lance Cousins is that the sutra literature Buddhist can be equated with epic literature because many sutras are also designed as "chanting". He further pointed out that the so-called "chanter", such as a singer for epic plays a very important role in singing. In other words, he has the ability to concatenate a variety of traditional materials (story, doctrine) into a coherent, deep and dynamic composition. This problem Lance Cousins mentions a key point: the singer itself does not have a fixed text, which means that all performances (performance, chanting is also considered a "performance") are a creation. Lance Cousins proposed a main theoretical basis for the formation of oral literature. Its application in the sutra Buddhist has many controversial points, but it is a very exciting argument. At this point, we can reveal its pattern and use the important words that he mentioned in the text as the representative of its model. The description of this model is which emphasizes that oral literature under "improved nature". The main theory is that oral performance is a kind of on-site creation, so its content is changed in every presentation, rather than a full-fledged description.

The evidence for Lance Cousins is that when we compare the different versions of the Pali version of nikāya and other existing āgama, we will easy to find a lot of differences, and these differences represent performances of oral works. He believes that the differences were seen in the four nikāya (or āgama) versions of the various ministry preserved in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan are mostly products the formation of oral literature. Most of these differences are important, such as the location of the sutra occurrence, the name of the person or the order in which the event occurred, and related to the special doctrine held by the early Buddhist schools. In other words, it happened during the oral literature period. His view is that the content of nikāya or āgama was gradually fixed at a later time. It is only possible after the establishment of the Abhidharma and the development of some strict methods to be widely read.

According to Lance Cousin's point of view for the oral compositions. They have no fixed form, but they are integrated into the sutra according to the principles, and they are gradually fixed until they are written. He believes that apply the writing age has begun to have a fixed trend, and it will not necessarily have exactly the same writing content. Finally, Lance Cousins also mentioned that another feature of the oral literature is of formulas are used to illustrate the theme, but he did not discuss it.

Lance Cousins concluded that the sutra of early Buddhist was an impromptu nature and was gradually fixed until later. The oral teaching that inspires true understanding within the convenience of memory considerations is likely to be important factors in the establishment of the nikāya or āgama.

Summarize its views:

- First, he emphasizes the Not fixed and variability of the oral literature "text", because impromptu creation in oral performance is an important way to produce such texts.
- Second, he is convinced that the nikāya or āgama has this nature, and the differences between the versions are the best examples.

3. Richard Gombrich's point of view: Deliberate of composition

Richard Gombrich pointed out that few scholars have noticed that the early Buddhists were able to preserve the vast Buddhist sutra for 3 or 4 centuries. It's unusual this achievement. He also made a summary of the modern research results of oral literature, he pointed out that the scholars believe that oral literature has the nature of repeated. The ancient traditional story is made up of repetitive tracks and certain fixed words. However, he further pointed out that it has an important premise that the above process needs to rely on institution related training, memorization and rehearsal. This instruction is actually a very important foreshadowing of the model that he proposed later.

It was important in his discourse that early Buddhism is different from those of general oral literature because the Buddhist sutra is products of the Buddhists who tried to preserve the teachings of the Buddha. These teachings include many arguments. The content is not simple. The purpose of the Buddhist sutra is to preserve the Buddha's words, so the accuracy of the sentences is extremely important. From this point on, Richard Gombrich began to point out that he disagreed with Lance Cousins' disciples that conveyed the Buddha's teachings in an impromptu manner. He cites Buddhists who have Brahmanism with their contemporaries as a mirror. Brahmanism has a very strict traditional education method. Since Brahmanists can preserve their Vedic literature by oral literature for centuries, Buddhists should be able to do so as well. He pointed out that the Vedic literature has many things in common with the Buddhist sutra, in order to accurately preserve the texts of their respective scriptures, the two use many methods to facilitate the memory and transmission of scriptures, for example, the used numbered repetitive contents, and the use of strict verse styles to create scriptures, etc. Richard Gombrich proposed his model: the Buddha's teachings are a forming the prose or verses of "deliberate composition", which are recorded after integration and systematically to transmit students. The reason is that if don’t do it, the teachings will probably disappear gradually. and to prevent the teachings be faced with the disappearance, correct and incorrect of happens misfortunes. Since the Buddhist sutra is "deliberate composition", the original purpose was to preserve the original appearance of the Buddha's teachings, Once integrated, try not to make changes to facilitate the next generation, so what is to ensure the success and continuity of this project? To illustrate this point, Richard Gombrich reiterates the argument that the importance of the "institution" was previously raised to strengthen its model

argument. He believes that Buddhism has a good Saṅgha, which is the teachings of the Buddha can be hand down from generation to generation Because the inheritance of the scriptures depends on a high-performance organization, The Buddhism Saṅgha is undoubtedly an organization that exerts this efficiency and the first such system.

Richard Gombrich's model is shown in the following description. He believes that each Buddhist monk is likely to learn a variety of different sutra (or teachings) from different teachers, and the so-called "saṅgāyanā" is the function of sorting and chanting these sutras (or teachings), And further design how to preserve and transmit these teachings. Here we can see that Richard Gombrich and Lance Cousins have different views on the formation of the nikāya or āgama according to their respective models.

Richard Gombrich clearly believes that the integration of Buddhist sutra is based on a rigorous, conservative, and non-changing attitude. Once "saṅgāyanā" decides to circulate and recite content. So far, this article has explained Richard Gombrich's ideas and insights. It is not difficult to find that his pattern is basically the opposite of the Cousins model, the latter regards the oral literature as easy to change, while the former holds the oral literature as fixed and not easy to change.

3. Mark Allon's argument

In contrast, the Buddhist literature is indeed another: such as Prose is the main expression of Buddhist sutra; and also to preserve the teachings of the monk, The message conveyed by its content is extremely complicated, Including many descriptions of practice methods, analysis of doctrinal ideas, psychological journeys, etc., All of these require a high degree of precision in the scriptures. In addition, the chanting (or the textual sutra) is a such as the monks and nuns, all training from the temple system. Finally, the presentation of Buddhist sutra can be both personal and collective. The last point is very important because collective chanting requires the use of fixed and common sentences. According to the model, each performer will be innovative at every performance, this method is undoubtedly inappropriate for collective performances and will only confusion.

At this point, we can clearly many differences in the background of the Buddhist sutra and can understand many of the problems that Lance Cousins applied to the model in early Buddhist sutra. However, although Mark Allon commented on the model, there was no plaintext against Lance Cousins, even in approve of the Buddha's teachings, after the Buddha's Nirvana, the disciples presented themselves in an "improvisatory manner". He applied Richard Gombrich's sentence, explain that the early Buddhist sutra was "deliberate compositions which were then committed to memory".

In addition, part of the study turned to a set of strings with similar meanings that often appear in the sutra. These are composed of basic vocabulary plus several words of the same meaning that are proliferated, some are two, three or more adjectives used to modify a noun, or several nouns are treated as the same subject in a sentence, etc. When these strings appear in a phrase, sentence, or paragraph, their arrangement is in line with the so-called Waxing Syllable Principle, that is the words with fewer syllables will be placed before words with more syllables. This study shows that a repeating form with such a high proportion indicates that it is also a design to facilitate memory, Because the more repetitions of the sentence, the easier it is to remember it.

Mark Allon believes in research that whether it is the tradition of composing material during the performance in an improvisatory manner or a tradition of composing fixed texts which were to be transmitted verbatim, The two styles (formulas, strings) shown in the studies can all help to integrate functions, The characteristics of these styles also serve as a function of memory for the latter tradition to help the memory and transmitted of the sutra.

4. Author's Comment

Cousins' arguments have many shortcomings under the comments of Gombrich and Allon, in other parts, there are actually places to be questioned, especially the method of argumentation is not thorough.

The examples cited in the model are limited in content. He cited the differences between the versions as the result of "improvisation" creation, However, most of these differences occur in personal names, place names, etc., or in the arrangement of the story and the increase or decrease in the length of the story, the content of these narratives has no important connection with the doctrine. The content of the story is only part of the content or form of the entire Buddhist sutra, Others include the complicated teaching and practice methods mentioned by Gombrich, Almost all of this content exists in the " memory formulae" that Cousins also mentioned, That is presented in a very fixed in the Buddhist sutra, Therefore, Cousins' sampling is limited and biased and does not represent the characteristics of all Buddhist sutra. In addition, he emphasized that the content of the story can be adjusted according to different situations, this is appropriate when the Master " Exposition or elucidate of the teachings (dharma)" to his disciples. but the integration of sutra should be the formation of fixed texts.

This attitude from the Buddha's policy towards language and the open interpretation of the disciple's "Buddhavacana" show that the text can be applied flexibly (but not necessarily freely "improvisation creation ") So Gombrich's so-called "deliberate composition" is standard, Otherwise, there is some gap with the facts. It is very important because we cannot deny the fact that there are many differences in the sutra, so we must attend to such a problem: How to explain the occurrence of these differences? If these differences have already occurred in the early period, Gombrich's model can't fully explain this phenomenon. Also,

analyze why he agrees with both Gombrich and Cousins.

5. Conclusion

Synthesize and accumulate to create various differences. The changes brought about by this long process are very complicated before all the important joints have not been clarified, it is quite unobjective to make inferences. In particular, what criteria or evidence should be used to judge whether a certain difference occurs late or early? At least it should be explained the difference of cause by one of the above various processes, after thinking, what are the characteristics of oral literature. However, another difficulty the oral literature of materials is early period, the earlier the material more ambiguous it is, but the evidence we have is still very limited.

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