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Opinions on the Turks' Turkic Translation Activities in the Period of Taspar Qagan

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There is a variety of opinions about the first translation activities within the Turkic Empire. It is widely believed that some Buddhist sutras were translated into the Turkic language in the period of Taspar Qagan (572-581). This theory is based on certain arguments: Some Turks practiced Buddhism, Buddhist monks translated sutras in the center of the Turkic Empire, Taspar brought sutras from China and had them translated, and the monarch of Northern Qi had a sutra translated and sent to Taspar. However, in my opinion, these arguments lack credibility. This article, which is based on primary Chinese sources, will question the likelihood of such translation activities having occurred.

Some Chinese records for these claims exist: *Da Tang Nei Dian Lu* (大唐內典錄) and *Xu Gao Seng Chuan* (續高僧傳) by the Buddhist monk Jinagupta and the records of Hui Lin in *Sui Shu* (隋書) and *Wen Xian Tong Kao* (文獻通考). These are known as "primary sources." Secondary sources, namely contemporary history and language studies, such as those in books and articles, must be based on primary sources. It can be seen that claims relating to the first Turkic translation activities at the time of Taspar are mainly derived from secondary sources, and that the arguments in these secondary sources vary. Sometimes researchers make suppositions on the existence of information that is not referred to in primary sources. However, this is not normal practice. If a researcher relies on unknowns for the evidence of information existing, it can cause false information, ideas and anachronisms

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to be created.

It is important that primary sources, such as the Chinese sources mentioned above, be translated correctly in language and history studies. If only a word is mistranslated, very different results may occur. Mistranslating or misinterpreting a primary source allows conclusions to be reached that are not supported by dissemination of information from primary sources. This can mislead experts and result in information that is not correct being considered as being true.

As well as helping to prevent such misinterpretations occurring, another aim of this paper is to question the interpretations of the first Turkic translations in contemporary studies on history and language. The origin of such assessments will be explored and the validity of that information will be examined.

Keywords: Taspar Qagan, Jinagupta, Hui Lin, Translation Activities, Buddhism, Mistranslation, Misinterpretation

Introduction

It has been said in the field of Turkic history and Turkic language studies that some Buddhist sutras were translated into the Turkic language in the period of Taspar Qagan (572-581) of the Turk Qaganate. Such an idea is derived from four points: Taspar's safeguarding of certain Buddhist monks in his palace, his presence at Buddhist worship, his request to bring some sutras from Northern Qi (550-577), and the Northern Qi's will to translate a sutra from Chinese to Turkic.

First of all, certain opinions in regard to the translation activities in the Turkic palace, and the Northern Qi's translation and the delivering of a sutra for the Turk Qagan need to be explained. Firstly, the origin and validity of such information needs to be considered. There are also some other issues which need to be addressed: The activities of an Indian Buddhist monk named Jinagupta who lived in the Turkic palace under the protection of Taspar Qagan, Qagan's relations with the Chinese monk Hui Lin who was captured and brought by the Turks to the palace, Qagan's request that some sutras be brought from China, and China's desire to have a sutra translated into the Turkic language for Qagan. Let us now examine these issues one by one:

Jinagupta

Jinagupta (*Sanzang (Tripiṭaka) Dharma Master Dunajueduo* 三藏法師闍那崛多) was born in *Gandhara* in northern India. He left the country with his master and companions to spread

dharma, and they reached China after three years. The monk lived there for 20 years, learned Chinese and engaged in activities relating to Buddhism and translation. When the Northern Zhou state banned Buddhism and Taoism in 574, Jinagupta and his comrades were prosecuted, but were allowed to leave China. Jinagupta subsequently progressed northward to return home from China. In fact, monks in such a desperate situation were either invited or coerced by Taspar to stay in the Turkic palace, where they continued their activities for over ten years, finally returning to the Chinese capital in 584 or 585.[1]

Information about Jinagupta was recorded in only two Buddhist sources located in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*: *Da Tang Nei Dian Lu* (大唐内典錄) and *Xu Gao Seng Chuan* (續高僧傳). It can be understood from the records that Jinagupta didn't know Turkic, and so didn't engage in Turkic translation. In other words, there is no information suggesting that he did. Moreover, it is accepted by some scholars[2] that the Sanskrit letters of the Bugut inscription that existed in 582 were written by Jinagupta.

First of all, if Jinagupta knew the Turkic language, Taspar Qagan would have had a Turkic text on Bugut. Secondly, although we know that the monk lived for 20 years in China, learned Chinese, "which is the language of where they live" (as recorded in his biography) and engaged in Buddhism and translation activities, we don't have any knowledge about the monk's foreign language abilities, other than Chinese. Although some researchers suggest that Jinagupta "knew the languages of foreign countries and was familiar with the scripts of distant lands" and thus imply that Jinagupta knew Turkic,[3] others emphasize that he was involved in Chinese translation.[4]

In his role as a master, Jinagupta was in charge of Buddha practices in the Turkic palace. It is understood from his two biographies: *Xu Gao Seng Chuan* and *Da Tang Nei Dian Lu* that monks and disciples came with 260 new sutras and were requested to translate their titles and amend old catalogs. These monks and disciples, named Bao Xian, Dao Sui and Seng Tan, who took refuge with the Turks after China's banning of Buddhism, were Chinese or people that had become integrated into Chinese culture. Their language was Chinese. They were in the East between 575-581 and collected 260 new sutras. Of course, as their sutras were in Sanskrit, the translation activities of the "refugee" monks in the Turkic palace were Sanskrit-Chinese. Furthermore, if Chinese sources mention "translation," it would mean that one of the languages is Chinese, unless a separate statement is included.

Some researchers, including Kljaštornyj and Livšic[5] and S. Barutçu Özönder, believe

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[1] *Da Tang Nei Dian Lu* 大唐内典錄 (*Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, Tokyo, 1922-1933, V. LV, text 2149, 276/b17-c18); *Xu Gao Seng Chuan* 續高僧傳 (*Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, V. L, text 2060, 433/b07-434a/19).

[2] Gerard Clauson, "The Foreign Elements in Early Turkish," in *Researches in Altaic Languages*, ed. L. Ligeti (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1971), 48; S. G. Kljaštornyj and V. A. Livšic, "The Sogdian Inscription of Bugut Revised," *Acta Orientalia Hungarica* XXVI, 1 (1972): 78-79.

[3] Denis Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire," in *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*, ed. D. Sinor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 314.

[4] Peter Zieme, *Religion und Gesellschaft in Uigurischen Königreich von Qočo* (Opladen: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1992), 11; H. J. Klimkeit, "Türk Orta Asyasında Budizm," *Selçuk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 26 (2010): 96.

[5] Kljaštornyj and Livšic, "The Sogdian Inscription," 78.

that Jinagupta and his comrades were heavily involved in concentrated translation activities at that time, and that they translated certain sutras into Turkic, including even those written for Taspar Qagan.[6] Two expressions used by Özönder, namely "Turkic translation" and "translation was done for Taspar Qagan," are taken directly from Kljaštornyj and Livšic. However, while she refers to Liu Mau-Tsai,[7] Liu's pages are about the partial translations of *Da Tang Nei Dian Lu* and *Xu Gao Seng Chuan*, and there is no mention of Turkic translation in his work. Özönder also refers to Buddhism activities among Turks, and to Gabain, Zieme and Sinor. However, Zieme doesn't believe in a Turkic translation,[8] and states "We don't know whether Buddhist sutras were translated into Turkic by Jinagupta and his comrades. Because there is no concrete evidence, we may assume that monks translated Hindi texts to Chinese in the steppe empire."

Klimkeit also supports the idea that the monks provided Chinese translations.[9] Ahmet Bican Ercilasun repeats Özönder's opinions in his *History of Turkish Language*,[10] and Denis Sinor cautiously says:[11] "Together they engaged in the study, cataloguing, and translation into Chinese (and perhaps also into Turkish) of the 260 Sanskrit works they had brought from India." It is important to note that as Sinor is aware of the mention of Turkic translation being absent from the primary sources, he only makes the suggestion in a parenthetical form.

There is another problem related to the time Jinagupta spent in the Turkic palace. Some researchers say or imply that he was a Buddhist missionary who was dispatched to convert Turks to Buddhism. Some researchers[12] even insist on Jinagupta being a missionary, suggesting that Jinagupta had a special mission to convert Turks to Buddhism. It is also believed that Jinagupta lived among the Turks between 574-584, and aimed to teach Buddhism to the Turks.[13] However, as there is no such mention of that being the case in the relevant pages of Gabain's[14] and Kljaštornyj and Livšic's works, it would seem that this theory is only based on their own opinions. Moreover, although there is indirect mention of missionary activities,[15] no reference to such can be found in the primary sources on the missionary of Jinagupta, and some would be required to prove his missionary status. Jinagupta was compelled to remain in the Turkic palace by the insistence of Taspar during his return from China where Buddhism

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[6] S. Barutçu Özönder, "Eski Türklerde Dil ve Edebiyat," in *Türkler,* ed. H. C. Güzel, K. Çiçek, and S. Koca (Ankara: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2002), 484.

[7] Liu Mau-Tsai, *Die Chinesischen Nachrichten zur Geschichte der Ost-Türken (T'u-Küe)*, I (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1958), 36-39.

[8] Zieme, *Religion und Gesellschaft*, 12.

[9] Klimkeit, "Türk Orta Asyasında," 96.

[10] A. Bican Ercilasun, *Başlangıcından Yirminci Yüzyıla Türk Dili Tarihi* (Ankara: Akçağ, 2004), 129.

[11] Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution," 314.

[12] Osman Turan, *Türk Cihân Hâkimiyeti Mefkûresi Tarihi* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 2013), 82; Mehmet Aydın, "TürklerinDînî Tarihi Üzerinde Bir Değerlendirme," *Selçuk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4 (1997): 4.

[13] Ahmet Taşağıl, *Gök-Türkler I* (Ankara: Turk Tarih Kurumu Basmevi, 1995), 28.

[14] A. von Gabain, "Buddhistische Türkenmission," in *Asiatica: Festschrift Friedrich Weller,* eds. J. Schubert and U. Schneider (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowithz, 1954), 161-173.

[15] Özönder, "Eski Türklerde," 498, note. 16.

was forbidden, and even *Xu Gao Seng Chuan* records that Jinagupta was kept down by Turks.[16] There is therefore no point in making any claims about him being a Buddhist missionary. After China had calmed down, and Jinagupta had the opportunity, he returned to the Chinese capital.

If Taspar kept monks as a political move, possibly for their value as translators, religious translations were completely infeasible for this purpose because, according to Chinese sources about the Turkic Empire, there were no widespread Buddhist practices in the Turkic palace. Moreover, there is no direct correlation between the occurrence of Buddhism and Turkic translation. If translation had been conducted, there would at least be a Turkic aspect to the Bugut Inscription. Furthermore, Jinagupta stayed for four more years in the palace after the death of Taspar in 581. As the monk continued to live in the palace during the reign of two qagans who had no interest in Buddhism, it is most likely that he was kept there for political purposes.

Hui Lin

Sui Shu (隋書) states that a Buddhist monk named Hui Lin (惠琳), who was living in Northern Qi, was captured by the Turks and brought to the Taspar's palace. Taspar was impressed by Hui Lin's speeches and built a monastery and a pagoda. He stopped eating meat and began to spend time at his new pagoda. Taspar subsequently dispatched an envoy with gifts to request sutras, such Vimalakirti Rirdesa, Nirvana, Avatamsaka and Sarvastivada Vinaya, from Northern Qi.[17] This information is also recorded in *Wen Xian Tong Kao* (文獻通考).[18]

It is known that Northern Zhou (557-581) built a Buddhist monastery in Chang'an between 557-560 for Turks who lived in Chang'an to express friendship between the Eastern Turkic Empire and Muhan Qagan.[19] Moreover, the Wang Bao Inscription in this monastery describes the bravery and honesty of Turks.[20] It is therefore possible to say that there were some Buddhist influences at the beginning of the Taspar period, and that Taspar might have encountered Buddhism before Jinagupta and Hui Lin. Although some researchers[21] believe that Buddhism had limited influence on Turks, other researchers[22] claim that Buddhism had a greater impact. In my opinion, Taspar was only an admirer of Buddhism and it is important to note that there is no record of Taspar's conversion to Buddhism. Nevertheless, recorded

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[16] *Xu Gao Seng Chuan*, 433/c26.

[17] *Sui Shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1997), 1865.

[18] *Wen Xian Tong Kao* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2006), 2687c.

[19] X. Tremblay, "The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia: Buddhism among Iranians, Tocharians and Turks before the 13th Century," in *The Spread of Buddhism*, eds. A. Heirman and S. P. Bumbacher (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 107.

[20] Liu, *Die Chinesischen Nachrichten*, 38-39.

[21] Gabain, "Buddhistische," 165; J. Peter Laut, *Der Frühe türkische Buddhismus und seine Literarischen Denkmäler* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1986), 2.

[22] Louis Bazin, "Turcs et Sogdiens," in *Mélanges Linguistiques Offerts à Emile Benveniste,* ed. Émile Benveniste (Louvain: Peeters, 1975), 42; İbrahim Kafesoğlu, *Türk Millî Kültürü* (İstanbul: Ötüken, 2003), 103.

activities such as Taspar stopping eating meat, his walking around his pagoda,[23] his collecting of monks and his Buddhist activities in his palace[24] indicate his Buddhist sympathies.

Some writers say that Taspar had sutras translated due to the influence of Hui Lin. This opinion, which first appeared in Kljaštornyj and Livšic's article, probably derived from the request to Taspar's envoy for sutras. However, there is no record of the actual delivering of sutras to Taspar, and it would seem that only guesses can be made in regard to their translation.

Although there are indications of Taspar's interest in Buddhism, it is necessary to know the original source of Taspar's Buddhist practices. How did monks record these practices? According to Chinese sources, Taspar became a Buddhist thanks to Hui Lin. He even regretted not being born in China.

First of all, it was known that Hui Lin was a prisoner among the Turks, and then he returned to China. Records are only concerned with Taspar's activities; other events that took place in the palace are not recorded. However, if someone in the palace was worshipping Buddha, it would seem that this would certainly have been recorded. It can therefore be assumed that only Taspar engaged in Buddhist practices, and the way that the events are recorded makes the reader consider the possibility that Taspar worshipped secretly. It would also seem that information relating to Taspar's worshipping of Buddha and his admiration of the Chinese must be derived from the prisoner Hui Lin's private reports. After Hui Lin returned to China, he probably wanted to clear himself and increase his status as a Turk expert. On the other hand, it is possible that Taspar had used Hui Lin against China, such as was the case with Jinagupta. In fact, it is impossible to know exactly what happened unless new documents appear.

Turkic Translation Decree of Northern Qi's Ruler

From a record in *Ce Fu Yuan Gui* (冊府元龜):

> "At the end of the reign of Wuping (570-575), the Northern Qi ruler, Hou Zhu, ordered Liu Shiqing (entitled Shizhong), who was the greatest expert of non-Chinese languages at that time, to translate Nie (Mahāparinirvāṇa) Sutra into the Turkic language to present to the Turk Qagan. He commanded Li Delin (entitled Zhongshu Shilang) to write the preface."[25]

The record is very clear. There is only a decree to translate a sutra into the Turkic language

[23] According to Şinasi Tekin, Hui Lin was sent by Northern Qi to the Turks in the period of Taspar. The monk insisted on the qagan building a monastery but the qagan didn't accept it. Şinasi Tekin, *Uygurca Metinler II. Maytrsimit* (Ankara: Erzurum Atatürk Üniversitesi, 1976), 22. Tekin referred to Otto Franke's book; however, there is no such information in the book. Otto Franke, *Geschichte des Chinesischen Reiches*, II (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1930), 245.

[24] Sinor, "The Establishment and Dissolution," 314.

[25] *Ce Fu Yuan Gui* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1989), 4020b.

and to write a preface for it. We don't know whether the translation was done or not, and there is no record of a translated book being delivered to the qagan. On the other hand, many researchers accept that a translation was completed and delivered to the qagan, and some suggest that Taspar had the sutra translated. However, such opinions are not based on primary sources, and they have led to many inaccurate views being taken.

Laut says that Taspar was in communication with Buddhism, and that this is a historical reality. Laut goes on to claim that Taspar built a monastery, and that Buddhist texts were translated and delivered by his request.[26] However, Laut's opinions about Turkic translation aren't supported by the primary sources. He refers to Gabain. Peter Golden claims that:[27] "During his reign, Liu Shih-ch'ing, who knew "the languages of the Barbarians of the four compass points" was asked to translate the Nirvâna-Sùtra into Turkic by the Northern Ch'i Emperor. This was sent to the Türk Qagan." In this, Golden refers to pages 34, 36-37, and 43 of Liu Mau-Tsai's work. However, Liu's pages are about the biography of Liu Shiqing in *Bei Qi Shu*, the biography of Jinagupta in *Da Tang Nei Dian Lu* and *Xu Gao Seng Chuan* and the relations between Taspar and Hui Lin in *Sui Shu* (page 1865), and there is no evidence of Golden's claims in these records.

Similarly, Edouard Chavannes writes that Li Delin was ordered to write a preface; but not that the book was to be delivered to the Qagan, and does not provide any information relating to the completion of the translation, or the delivering of it to the Qagan.[28] Another statement that can easily be debunked is Ahmet B. Ercilasun's suggestion in his *History of Turkish Language* that *Nirvāṇa Sūtra* is the first Turkic translation in history,[29] a statement which is not supported by any Chinese source. Peter Zieme, for example, says there is only an order to translate the sutra into the Turkic language.[30]

The biography of Liu Shiqing in *Bei Qi Shu* states that:[31] "(Liu) Shiqing was ordered to translate Nie (Mahāparinirvāṇa) Sutra into Turkic as a gift to Tujue (Turk) Kaqan. Li Delin (titled Zhongshu Shilang) was ordered to write preface of it."[32]

In short, it cannot be claimed, according to primary sources, that a sutra was translated into Turkic, delivered to the Qagan, presented by an envoy or that a translation was made.

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[26] Laut, *Der Frühe Türkische Buddhismus,* 2: "Erst Muhan Kagans jüngerer Bruder und Nachfolger, Tapar Kagan, steht in einem historisch gesicherteren Verhältnis zum Buddhismus. Es wird berichtet, daß er einen Tempel errichten ließ und auf seine Bitte hin in China buddhistische Schriften in das Türkische übersetzt und ihm geschickt wurden."

[27] Peter Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1992), 151.

[28] "Heuo tchou l'invita à traduire en langue T'ou-kiue (turque) le Nie-p'an king (Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra) afin d'envoyer (cette traduction) au kagan des T'ou-kiue; un décret impérial ordonna au tchong-chou che-lang Li Tö-lin de composer une préface por cet ouvrage." Edouard Chavannes, "Jinagupta (528-605 aprés J.C.)," *T'oung Pao*, II/6 (1905): 345.

[29] Ercilasun, *Başlangıcından Yirminci Yüzyıla*, 85.

[30] Zieme, *Religion und Gesellschaft*, 11.

[31] *Bei Qi Shu* (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1997), 267.

[32] Liu Mau-Tsai translated this record correctly. "Kaiser Hou-tschu befalh (Liu) Schi-ts'ing, das Nirvâṇa-Sûtra in die Sprache der T'u-küe zu übersetzen, um es dann dem khagan der T'u-küe zu schenken. Er beauftragte den Tschung-schu-schi-lang, Li Te-lin, ein Vorwort dazu zu schreiben." Liu, *Die Chinesischen Nachrichten*, 34.

Conclusion

In terms of the translation activities that were said to have been performed during the reign of Taspar Qagan, the following conclusions can be reached.

Information about the residence of Jinagupta at the Turkic palace can be found only in *Da Tang Nei Dian Lu* and *Xu Gao Seng Zhuan*, and there is no mention of Turkic translation activities in these two sources. It therefore appears to be more likely that the monk was engaging in Sanskrit-Chinese cataloging and translating.

Other points that need to be made in regard to the validity of these claims are there are only Chinese sources on this topic, some of which haven't been translated or interpreted correctly in language and history studies.

There is no evidence that Jinagupta knew the Turkic language, although as he completed Hindi-Chinese translations, he would have known Chinese and Hindi, like other monks of the period.

Although Taspar Qagan clearly was interested in Buddhism, it cannot be decisively claimed that he actually believed in Buddhism and that those in the Turkic palace were Buddhists. Therefore, there is no evidence for the need to make a Turkic religious translation.

Jinagupta and his comrades were most likely held in the Turkic palace by the Turks for political purposes. There is no conclusive evidence that they were missionaries, and it seems more likely that they were political refugees in exile.

While Hui Lin may well have had a religious influence on Taspar, that does not mean that Taspar and others in the Turkic palace were Buddhists. There needs to be a clear record in primary sources for this conclusion to be reached. It is also not known if Taspar's books came from China, and in fact we do not have any information about their Turkic translation.

While it seems to be certain that the Northern Qi ruler ordered the translation of a sutra to give to the Turks as a gift, it is not known whether this translation was actually made and whether it was ever delivered to the Turkic qagan. It would seem that if the translation had been made and delivered to the qagan, there would be a clear record of this having occurred.

It can therefore be concluded that these views about the first Turkic translation basically derived from secondary, not from primary sources, or to put it another way, researchers have presumed the existence of some information which wasn't recorded in primary sources, and such presumptions have led to false information and ideas. In my opinion, there were no Turkic translation activities at the time of Taspar Qagan.

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