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Reinterpreting *The Wén-Zhì Debate* in the Education of Translation History with special reference to Sutra Translator Xuan Zang in Tang Dynasty

HUA Manyuan

Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, China

HUA Xianfa*

Central China Normal University, Wuhan 430079, China

Article history	The present-day widespread adoption of the interpretation of the Wén 文(refined or elegant style)-Zhì 质 (unhewn or plain style) Debate in Chinese sutra translation has meant that such an interpretation is only one of methods of or approaches to sutra translation both in sutra translation studies and in the education of Chinese translation history. This paper argues that it is necessary for researchers in general and teachers in particular to have a clear understanding of the traditional Chinese poetics behind and the implication of this debate. The analysis identifies a number of issues of the Wén-Zhì Debate such as its origin, source and implication from a historical perspective and clarifies the strong influence of functional poetics upon sutra translation as well as sutra translators. With special reference to Xuan Zang as a good example who well actualized the concept of “To be a good sutra translator means to be a good man” in sutra translation in Tang Dynasty, the paper concludes with suggestions for reinterpreting the Wén-Zhì Debate both in sutra translation studies and in the education of Chinese translation history by taking into account the influence of the Chinese traditional poetics as well as the ethical aspect of the translator.
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1. Introduction

In the traditional Chinese poetics, *Wén* [wén 文] means the form (writing style) which is **ornamental**, **refined** or **elegant** whereas *Zhì*[zhì 质] refers to the **really good**[zhēnshí 真实] and **trustworthy**(xìn 信) content conveyed by the form or style. Only when these two elements are duly blended, can we say what is written is a good piece of writing because it is up to the standard of the traditional poetics. After this poetics extended its influence to sutra translation, both *Wén* and *Zhì* came to be employed as approaches to translation. *Wén* [wén 文] refers to a sutra translation done in a manner **ornamental** or **refined**, whose near synonyms are **embellished**(shì 饰), **beautiful** (měi 美) and **elegant**(yǎ 雅). And *Zhì*[zhì 质]

* Correspondency: huaxf3000@163.com

refers to a sutra translation done in a way **unhewn**[zhì 质] or **plain**[pǔshí 朴实], whose near synonyms are **straightforward**(zhí 直), **trustworthy**(xìn 信) and **unvarnished** (pǔ 朴) (Hua & Hua, 2014:138-142). Over the past decades, studies on and the teaching of the traditional Chinese translation thought in the one-thousand-year sutra translation in China has been mainly focused on the interpretation of the debate on *Wén* and *Zhì* as different approaches to or methods of sutra translation and little attention has been paid to what is behind this debate or the implication of such a debate (Ma, 1998:24; Chen,1992:14-17; Wang & Wang,2009:8-9) . And there has also been an interpretation of the debate on *Wén* and *Zhì* as equal to liberal translation and literal translation within the framework of the contemporary discourse on translation(Liang, 2010:154-158). This kind of studies, it is argued in this paper, is incomplete as it lacks theoretical depth—the significant and interesting insight into what is behind this dispute; namely, the influence of the then dominant literary poetics. As translation, no matter what kind it is, is a social activity regulated and governed by its poetics which cannot be irrelevant to the then dominant literary poetics, a good analysis of its leading mode of translation thought, therefore, cannot be done without taking into account such poetics. Sutra translation practice is no exception. And it is also argued in the paper that the then dominant traditional Chinese poetics influencing the Chinese sutra translation is not simply a theory of literary criticism, but also a theory about ethics; namely, about a good writer who should prove to be a good man through his writing. This influence upon sutra translation generates a translation poetics which not only deals with an approach to sutra translation that duly blends *Wén* and *Zhì* but also implies that a qualified sutra translator is one who should prove to be a good man through his sutra translation. Given this factor, this paper, taking Xuan Zang(600-664 CE, an eminent sutra translator in Tang Dynasty in Chinese history) as an example, will firstly discuss the start of the dispute over *Wén* and *Zhì*, secondly address the issue of the origin, implication and evolution of the doctrine of *Wén* and *Zhì* and its influence upon sutra translation practice, and finally comment on how Xuan Zang actualized in his sutra translation practice the concept of Harmony Between *Wén* and *Zhì*, namely doing sutra translation in a manner that duly blends *Wén* and *Zhì* and at the same time "To Be a Good Translator Means to Be a Good Man". It is hoped that such a claim can help correct the inexact interpretation of the *Wén-Zhì* Debate not only in the sutra translation research but also in the education of the history of Chinese sutra translation.

2. The start of the debate on *Wén* and *Zhì* in sutra translation

The debate on *Wén* and *Zhì* occurred in the process of translating the Dharmapāda when the translation team formed by the Indian monk Vighna, the Presiding Translator, Zhu Jiangyan the Interpreter and Zhi Qian (fl.233-253 CE) the Recorder was working at its Chinese translation. Vighna and Zhu Jiangyan preferred a sutra translation done in a *Zhì* manner which was not refined but unhewn as they were very cautious about departing from the source language because of their minimal command of Chinese. To Zhi Qian whose command of Chinese was good, sutra translation should be done in a *Wén* manner which, elegant and refined, was conformable to the norms of the then Chinese poetics. Each of the both sides failed to convince the other in accepting its view on the approach to sutra translation. Details about this dispute were clearly recorded in *Preface to the Translation of the Dharmapāda* written by Zhi Qian 支谦 (Ren, 2010:176; Lv ,2013:22; Chen,2000:15):

...Then in the third year of the Huangwu reign [224 CE] the Indian monk Vighna 维祇难[fl.222-228 CE] came to settle in Wuchang. Under him I studied a version of this sutra consisting of five hundred



gathas, and I requested his co-worker Zhu Jiangyan 竺将炎 [fl.222-228 CE], also from the Indian subcontinent, to translate it. This learned monk was well versed in the Tiānzhū language[Sanskrit], but did not know the Chinese language very well. When he translated, he adopted sometimes transliteration and sometimes paraphrase. And the result was of a metaphorical kind that was **unhewn** [zhì 质] and too **straightforward**[zhí 直]. At first I found it lacking in **elegance** [yǎ 雅], but Vighna said, “The Buddha himself said that one should follow the sense in all its plainness, dispense with **embellishment** [shì 饰], and transmit the truth without being too **strict** [yán 严] with the means and method. If a sutra translation is easy to understand and no meaning is lost, then it is a good translation.” The people present all agreed to this and said, “Laozi cautioned that ‘**beautiful** [měi 美] words are not **trustworthy** [xìn 信] and **trustworthy** [xìn 信] words are not beautiful[měi 美], and Kongzi (Confucius) made a similar remark, ‘Writing cannot fully express what is conveyed by speech; speech cannot fully express ideas’. This shows how fathomless and limitless the thoughts of the saintly sages are. Today when we translate the sutras, we should **directly convey** the meaning [jìngdá 径达].” That is why I now write down only the words spoken by the Presiding Translator and I follow the original theme of the sutra without **refining** [wén 文] it with **embellishment**[shì 饰]. Anything the translator does not understand will be left blank and not transmitted. There are many omissions in this text, and there are places that have been left untranslated... (Seng, 2013:272-274; Cheung, 22010:58-59)①

As recorded in this preface, Zhi Qian was opposed to translating sutras in an **unhewn** (zhì 质) and **straightforward** (zhí 直) manner which Zhu Jiangyan and Vighna favored instead of translating in an elegant and refined way. This is what people called the debate on or dispute over the issue of *Wén* and *Zhì*—two different approaches to translating sutras. Lasting a long time, such a dispute found reflections in many famous sutra translators’ work as Kumarajiva(c.350-c.410), an Indian Buddhist monk, who preferred translating sutras in a readable and elegant manner in his sutra rendition practice, and Dao An, a native Buddhist monk, adhered to the manner of *Zhì* 质(unhewn), namely, translating in an **plain**[pǔshí 朴实] and **straightforward** (zhí 直) way. This dispute came to an end at last in the Sui and Tang Dynasties as more and more Buddhist monks came to realize that either *Wén* or *Zhì* had its own merits as well as demerits and the two cannot be separated from each other in sutra translation. And only when the two are duly and harmoniously blended in sutra translation can their strengths be brought into full play and can high quality sutra translations be produced. To some people, translating sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese in two different ways or in a way that harmoniously blends the two shows different attitudes held by sutra translators toward translating sutras, but in the eye of the authors of this paper, there is something more important behind this dispute that needs clarification, namely a doctrine of harmony between *Wén* and *Zhì* which originated from Confucius’ Theory.

3. The origin, implication and evolution of the *Wén* and *Zhì* Theory

The doctrine of harmony between *Wén* and *Zhì* can be traced back to Confucius’ *The Analects*. In Book Six of this Chinese bible, Confucius said,

When natural substance[Zhì 质] prevails over ornamentation[Wén 文], you get the boorishness of the rustic. When ornamentation prevails over natural substance, you get the pedantry of the scribe. Only when ornament and substance are duly blended do you get the true gentleman. (Confucius, 1998:73)

Here, *Zhì* 质 (substance) originally means “texture”, extended as denoting the “content”, while *Wén* 文(ornamentation) signifies “grain” or “vein”, extended as referring to “form”. If a man has both *Zhì* and *Wén* duly and harmoniously blended in himself, he can be a real gentleman of the highest integrity, an ideal noble man in the eye of Confucius. To him, a society will be an orderly and ideal one when people in it behave like this model. Obviously, Confucius utilized and discussed *Wén* and *Zhì* from an ethical perspective, aiming to express his moral and ethical principles in establishing an ideal society . This *Wén-Zhì* theory of Confucius was adopted first by later generations as the standard of personality evaluation,

then by politicians and statesmen as the principle of assessment of a society (which was made up of *Yīn*[equal to *Zhì*] and *Yáng*[equal to *Wén*] and finally by scholars and literary critics as the principle for criticizing literary writings. According to such ancient Chinese scholars as Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒(1975:230), Sima Qian 司马迁(1982:1442), Yang Xiong 杨雄(1998:97), Wang Chong 王充(2010:280) and Liu Xie 刘勰(1958:537), the *Wén-Zhì* Theory proposed by Confucius thereafter began to penetrate and prevail the later Chinese society in general and the Chinese literary forum in particular in the following hundreds of years. Scholars and literary writers all showed strong interest in the employment of the *Wén-Zhì* Theory in literary criticism. To them, *Wén* referred to the beautiful form and elegant style of the literary writing whereas *Zhì* stands for the good content of the writing. If both the form and the content are harmoniously mixed with each other, then the literary writing will be of an ideal kind. Hence, the *Wén-Zhì* Theory became a literary theory, a kind of functional poetics blended with expressive poetics. In the case of the former, literature should perform the function of social education and cognition in agreement of the dominant social ethics and morality, enhancing the social pecking order, and in the case of the latter, literature should be esthetic-oriented, synchronically and diachronically interactive with the then society in terms of writing style and the social system. Given these factors, the *Wén-Zhì* Theory should be understood not only as a theory of literary criticism but also as an ethical principle for demonstrating a good man through his work. In other words, the *Wén-Zhì* Theory requests a writer not only produce great literature but also show his good personality or highest integrity.

When China entered the periods of the Three Kingdoms(220—280 CE), then the Western Jin Dynasty(265—316 CE) and the Southern and Northern Dynasties(317—420 CE), the *Wén-Zhì* Theory became a dominant sort of poetics, exerting great impact on the then Chinese literature of all kinds, not to mention sutra translation which is of course a type of literary writing. After China was unified under the name of the Sui and then the Tang Dynasties, the *Wén-Zhì* Theory became a nationally-accepted kind of poetics, serving as a yardstick for all sorts of literary writing and criticism. During the long process of social change (ranging from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty), there were many books published and articles presented, centering around the topic of how a harmonious combination of *Wén* and *Zhì* could do good to the production of fine literature which could perform good social functions in education. And there have also been literary books and readers which were compiled in the light of this dominant poetics whose extension began to cover issues of sutra translation. Behind the debate on the two approaches(*Wén* and *Zhì*) in sutra translation, the influence of the *Wén-Zhì* Theory cannot be underestimated.

As influenced by the *Wén-Zhì* poetics, the Buddhist monks engaged in sutra translation gradually began to notice the strengths and weaknesses of the two approaches (*Wén* and *Zhì*) and how the two could be duly blended in sutra translation so as to produce more satisfactory Chinese versions of sutras. Most monk translators agreed that the most important thing for a sutra translator to do is how to make the Chinese version faithful to the source text in content. To achieve this goal, the sutra translators should appropriately choose their translation method. Some sutra translators like Seng Rui 僧睿(Seng,2013:308;298), Hui Yuan 慧远(Seng,2013:380) and Seng You 僧祐(Seng,2013:14-15) came to realize that each of the approaches had its weaknesses and strengths in translation practice under certain circumstances and only in a way of blending the two could faithful and satisfactory sutra translations be produced. To support such an argument, some eminent sutra translators like



Dao an 道安(313/314-385 CE), Yan Cong 彦琮(557-610 CE) and Xuan Zang 玄奘(600-664 CE) shifted their attention to such specific issues as how cultural obstacles could be overcome and what prerequisites there should be for a good sutra translator so as to help make the *Wén-Zhì* Theory perfect and applicable in sutra rendition practice. After the *Preface to the Translation of the Dharmapāde*, Dao An, a revered and highly influential monk in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420 CE), specified some instances of the impossibility of preserving all of the source text in the target language and Yan Cong, another eminent monk translator in the Sui Dynasty, proposed eight prerequisites for sutra translators. In an essay (*Preface to A Collation of [the Translation of] Extracts from the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*[Perfection of Great Wisdom Sutra]), Dao An drew sutra translators' attention to the five instances of losing the source and the three difficulties that the sutra translator would encounter in translating sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese:

In translating Hu-language into Chinese, there are five instances of losing the **source**[shībēn 失本]. The first is when the Hu-language word order is reversed to conform to that of Chinese. The second is when Hu-language sutras, **unhewn**[zhì 质] in style, are converted into **refined**[wén 文] Chinese—as only **refined**[wén 文] texts can please the Chinese, who like **refined** [wén 文] writing. The third is when the Hu-language sutras, elaborate and detailed, are tailored and the repetitive chants, considered **wordy**[fān 烦] are shortened or excised in the Chinese translation. The fourth is when the Chinese translation completely erases the repetitions and the gathas [ranging from five hundred to a thousand words], which recapitulate in verse the meaning of a prose section. The fifth is when the narrative, having completed a theme, makes a digression and then goes back to it, but the digression is removed in the Chinese translation.

Let us look at the *prajñāpāramitā* [Preface of Wisdom] sutras. The Buddha's wisdom is expounded in the sutras, and its true revelation always goes along with the times. As times and fashions change, the antiquated **elegant** [yǎ 雅] features have to be removed and adjusted to the present time. This is the first difficulty. The enlightened and the unenlightened are separated by an immense gap, and yet [the translator] must seek to make the subtle and profound words from a millennium ago understandable to the common people. This is the second difficulty. When Ānanda 阿难[d.463 BCE] put the sutras together for the first time shortly after the death of Buddha, Mahākāśyapa 大迦叶[dates unknown] asked the five hundred arhats to check the texts rigorously; but now, after a millennium, present-day notions are adopted unthinkingly when the texts are edited. How cautious the arhats were, and how reckless we ordinary mortals are! Could it be that those who know little about the sublime law are braver? This the third difficulty. ... (Seng, 2010:290; Cheung, 2010:80)

What Dao An says here is not simply a warning (of the need to guard against reckless excision and less than respectful treatment of the source^②) but also the first piece of writing in Chinese to address the problems of translation. It clearly mapped out and thematized (with unprecedented lucidity) what was involved in translating (Qian Mu, 1980). It became a kind of nodal point around which many ideas revolved, or upon which they were predicated. In other words, the five instances of losing the source and the three difficulties are a warning to the sutra translators who hope to achieve faithfulness in sutra translation no matter in what way they did their rendition.

To produce good sutra translations that were faithful to the source text and conformable to the then Chinese poetics of writing, far-sighted and sensitive sutra translators like Yan Cong begin to think about the qualifications that a sutra translator needs as the *Wén-Zhì* Theory is in fact centered around the man who does the work. Yan Cong's focus, different from that of Dao An, is shifted to the right way of sutra translation, namely, the right way of following the Buddha, the right way of studying Buddhism, the right way of preparing oneself to be a Buddhist sutra translator and the right way of translating. Of all these conditions, he emphasized most the right way of preparing oneself to be a Buddhist sutra translator—the pre-requisites for sutra translators:

Taking everything into consideration, there are Eight Prerequisites for Translators. First, a translator must love the truth sincerely and be devoted to spreading the Buddhist faith and wisdom to others. Second, to prepare himself for enlightenment, he should hold fast to the rules of abstinence and not arouse scorn or laughter in others. Third, he must be well read in the Buddhist canon and must understand both Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, and he should not be deterred by the difficulties he encounters. Fourth, he must also study the Chinese classics and Chinese history and make himself well versed in letters so that his translations will not be clumsy and awkward. Fifth, he must be compassionate, open-minded and keen to learn, and must not be biased or stubborn. Sixth, he must devote himself to practicing the truth; he must think lightly of fame and riches and harbor no desire to show off. Seventh, he must also acquaint himself with the lexicons in ancient Chinese writings and with the development of the Chinese script so that he will not misuse words in his translations. Only when he has prepared himself in all these eight aspects will he be regarded as a worthy translator; only then will he be able to gain merit in the karmic trio of thought, word and deed and project his influence. (Dao,2014:56-57 ; Cheung,2010: 142)

It is clear from this passage that the eight pre-requisites proposed by Yan Cong for the sutra translator include high linguistic competence, high moral and spiritual accomplishments. These additional conditions should be taken into account when the *Wén-Zhì* Theory is intended to be successfully actualized in sutra translation practice. When the whole China was unified under the name of Tang Dynasty, the *Wén-Zhì* Theory became a dominant poetics guiding literary writing. In accordance with this theory, sutra translation was done by taking into consideration two things—one is the harmonious blending of *Wén* and *Zhì* approaches and the other the actualization of the concept of “Being a good sutra translator means being a good man of highest integrity”. Of the four famous sutra translators (Kumārajīva 鸠摩罗什, Paramārtha 真谛, Xuan Zang 玄奘 and Bu Kong 不空) in Chinese history of sutra translation, there were two (Xuan Zang and Bu Kong) in the Tang Dynasty. And among them, Xuan Zang is the best example who is worth mentioning with regard to the actualization of that concept in sutra translation.

4. Xuan Zang as an Example for actualizing the concept of harmony between Wén and Zhì in sutra translation

According to both Dao Xuan(2014:95-131) and Hui Li and Yan Cong(2003), Xuan Zang(600-664 EC) is an eminent monk and a prolific sutra translator in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), who is known as “the Tripitaka-master” (*Sanzang Fashi*) or simply “the Tang Monk” in folklore. His original name was Chen Yi 陈祚 and he came from a family in what is now Yanshi County, Henan Province. He became a monk at the age of thirteen and took his final vows at the age of twenty-one. When young, he made an exhaustive study of the different schools of Buddhist doctrine, and found that sutras and treatises showed discrepancies in what they said about the underlying principles of Buddhism and the processes and methods for pursuing Buddhist enlightenment. In order to resolve the differences, and dispel his doubts, he decided to take the risk of a long and arduous journey to India where Buddhism originated. For 17 years, he learned Sanskrit in India and studied the most important Buddhist sutras under the guidance of renowned monks. Through his hard work, he became expert in the doctrines and philosophies of both Hinayana and Mahayana Schools of Buddhism. Returning to Chang’an, the capital of the Tang Dynasty, he stayed in the Hongfu Monastery, translating the sutras and treatises he had collected from India. During his remaining 20 years of life devoted to sutra rendition, he had translations totalling over 1300 volumes which are of high quality. In addition, he designed the working system of sutra translation in organization and work procedures, verifying the interpretations and doctrinal issues, polishing the translations, standardizing terminology and checking the Sanskrit meanings. Studying, summarizing and commenting on Xuan Zang both as a eminent monk scholar and as a prolific sutra translator, are such contemporary critics and scholars as



Liang Qichao(2011:166), Ji Xianlin(Xuan Zang and Bian Ji: 1985: 1040-1047), Yang Tingfu(1980:17) and P. Pradhan^④. they offer views on him from different perspectives. These views, as far as the features of Xuan Zang's sutra translation are concerned, are of four kinds: (1) Attaching great importance to team work in sutra translation and the proper plan of the whole rendition work; (2) Taking a very serious attitude towards his sutra translation by carefully choosing source texts and comparing and proofreading different Chinese versions of the source texts; (3) Doing his sutra translation in a way that duly blended *Wén* and *Zhì* so as to ensure fidelity and readability of the target text; (4) Paying enough attention to re-translation after he scrupulously checked those poor versions for accuracy. But based on all kinds of historical records (Hui Li & Yan Cong, 2003; Xuan Zang and Bian Ji, 1985) and our evaluation of his Chinese versions, our argument is that Xuan Zang's example as a sutra translator in terms of duly blending *Wén* and *Zhì* finds reflection mainly in two aspects: one is his attitude toward Buddhism and the other his attitude toward his translating work. In the case of the former, he showed an unwavering fidelity to Buddhism which is manifest in his trek to India on a pilgrimage in search of sacred texts and his exact interpretation of every piece of Buddhist scriptures as well as his expressive representation of the source text in Chinese as supported by the five guidelines he set down for not-translating a term [and using a transliteration instead] (Luo,2009:93; Cheung, 2010:157-158), and in the case of the latter, he, indifferent to fame and profit, worked so hard and attached great importance to every detail of his sutra translation which wins him a good reputation in the world of sutra translation as well as in Buddhism studies.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is worth considering the possible future directions for teaching the *Wén-Zhì* Debate in the Chinese history of sutra translation. The main requirement is the new consideration of an expanded range of aspects of teaching which involves a historical perspective on this debate. To put it briefly, we should help our students understand that both *Wén* and *Zhì* originated from Confucius as an ethic blending both, developed into a theory adopted to evaluate a society, evolved into a literary poetics and finally found their way into sutra translation as a kind of translation poetics. A reinterpretation of this translation poetics should not only go deeper into the then dominant poetics behind this debate but also make clear the implication of this translation poetics which emphasizes the demonstration of the noble character of the sutra translator through his sutra translation. A good example is Xuan Zang, an eminent sutra translator in Tang Dynasty, who put it into practice perfectly. More importantly, this re-interpretation of the *Wén-Zhì* Debate can not be done within the framework of the contemporary discourse on translation!

Acknowledgement

- (1) The English translation is selected from Martha P. Y. Cheung's book *An Anthology of Chinese Discourse on Translation*, but improved a little bit by the authors.
- (2) See Martha P.Y. Cheung's *An Anthology of Discourse on Translation*, Vol. 1, p.81.

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