A Brief of the Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka

ZHAO LIN
Ph. D. Research Scholar in the Department of Buddhist Studies
Faculty of Arts, University of Delhi, Delhi - 110007

Abstract: the Buddhist scripture is the root of the Buddhist philosophy, and the Tripiṭaka is the sylloge of all scriptures. The Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka has enshrined the most number of scriptures in all Buddhist branches, which collects more than 35 different editions and totally over 23,000 volumes of works. The studies about the constitution of the Mahāyāna Tripiṭaka do not only for the documental research, but also helping us to understand the spread of the Buddhism to East Asia region. The Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka is recorded by East Asian languages, like Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese and other minority languages, but mainly in classic Chinese language. This article will give a brief introduction about the Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka.

Key Words: Tripiṭaka, Mahāyāna Buddhism, East Asian language, “Kai-Bao Zang”, Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō

Instruction:

The Tripiṭaka (Sanskrit) or Tipiṭaka (Pāli) means the “Three Baskets”, it is the formal term for the earliest surviving canon of the Buddhist scriptures, which consists of a threefold collections of the sacred texts, and they are:

1) Sūtta Pitaka, contains the teachings of Lord Buddha and Buddhist doctrines.
2) Vinaya Pitaka, contains the early Buddhist monastic regulations and disciplines of the Buddhist Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni.
3) Abhidhamma Pitaka, contains the commentaries on Lord Buddha’s teachings and the Buddhist philosophical theories.

Generally speaking, the composition of the Tripiṭaka is determined at the first Council of Rājagṛha in the year of the Buddha’s mahaparinibbana, although some academic views deem that there are only two divisions— Āgama (Sūtta Pitaka) and Vinaya—be established at that time. The traditional view considers the Tripiṭaka is unlikely fixed at this time which is corrected by the internal evidence of evolution within the three collections. The third Pitaka particularly shows the greatest variation, owing to it is regarded as the latest of the three. By the end of the 1st century CE, all different versions had been committed in a variety of Indian languages and dialects. Although there are only fragments of the original remains have been found as cultural relics, fortunately there are more extracts have been saved in the Mahāyana Buddhist translations.

1. The Brief of the Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka

The Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka is known as “Da Zang Jing”, which means the “Great Treasury of Sūtras”, as the Mahāyāna Buddhists believe that: the Buddhist canons are the rare treasures in our world, they are the supremacy of law, and they reveal the truth of universe. Hence it says that “there is nothing could benefit living beings better than the Buddhist Dharma, why? Because the real undefiled Dharma is the mother of Lord Buddha, the Buddha originates from the Dharma. So the Buddhas of pass, present and future all offering and sustaining the Dharma. That is the reason for the Pravara-devarāja-pariprcchā Sūtra praises that ‘if a
man offering and sustaining Dharma, it is same as to offering and sustaining Lord Buddha.’ Thus everybody should support the spreading of the Buddhist canons.”³ In the interim, the Buddhist Tripiṭaka in Chinese version is the primary collection of all Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures within the Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese Buddhism.

Considering the content of the Chinese Buddhist Tripiṭaka, it can be divided into two parts which are the “Translation Version” and “Compilation of Local Buddhist Masters”. In the first part, the translation of the original language is very complicated, as there are not only the Sanskrit, Tibetan, Pāli, but also from Central Asia area which includes various minority languages, and they cover all parts of the Mahāyāna, Theravāda and Vajrayāna. The compilation parts of the Tripiṭaka are mainly written by the Chinese Buddhist masters, the contents include commentaries, collections, sections, notes, histories, biographies, and all kinds of monographs, topography, directories so on. Thus, the Chinese Buddhist canon provides indispensable and valuable academic materials for researching of the Mahāyāna Buddhism, philosophy, history, social science, economy and other fields’ important topics. The Buddhism is deemed to introduce into China during the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE~ 2 CE). While the foreign monks of India and Center Asia go to China for preaching the Buddhism, the Chinese monks are also westbound to fetch the Buddhist scriptures. Hence, there are gradually many Buddhist canons are translated, and the compilation of the Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism also be emerged. Through a rapid development during the Southern-Northern Dynasties and Tang periods, the Buddhist canons have widely expanded, and ultimately constitute a huge system of the Tripiṭaka. Therefore, even only in the study of Chinese Tripiṭaka that the one will fully understand the Buddhism.

Between the two millennia history of the Mahāyāna Buddhism in East Asia, the Mahāyāna Tripiṭaka has undergone through several stages as translation, circulation, exegesis, creation and finally compiles into a “thesaurus”. Totally, there are 25 editions of the Chinese Edition, 3 editions in Koreans, and 7 editions in Japanese. The Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka starts from less than five thousand volumes to more than ten thousand volumes after collection.

2. Summary of the Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka in Chinese Version

Academically, the first Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka edition in the history is the “Kai-Bao Zang” in 983 CE by support of Song government. Since then, there are more Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka has been edited in China one by one. A brief of the Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka in Chinese version as below:

1) “Kai-Bao Zang” Edition: This is the first historical Buddhist Tripiṭaka in Chinese version, and it is also the first Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka. “Kai-Bao” is the name of the period of Song dynasty from 968 CE to 976 CE. The edition is kind of a governmental program, and the royal family spends millions of coins to support the edition in twelve years. Finally, it publishes in Hangzhou in 983 CE (it starts in 971 CE). This edition involves the carving of 130,000 hardwood printing blocks, contains 480 slip-cases, 1,076 scriptures, totally 5,048 volumes. After three times of augments, the edition increases to 653 slip-cases, 6,628 volumes. Unfortunately, the “Kai-bao” Edition has lost those only 13 remains.³

2) “Fang-Shan” Stone Edition: “Fang-Shan” is a hill region nearby the capital Beijing nowadays. The edition is organized by the Bhikkhu Jing Wan in the Sui Dynasty. In view of the persecutions of the Buddhism in previous era, so he collects funds to engrave the Buddhist canons on the stone for keeping forever. The Edition is a long-term progress, which stats from 610 CE to 1620 CE. Totally, it contains more than 14,278 engraving stones, includes 1,122
scriptures, and 3,572 volumes.

3) “Qi-Dan” Edition: This is the official edition of the Liao Dynasty. It is edited around 1031 CE to 1054 CE, and it contains 579 slip-cases, 1,373 scriptures, and 6,006 volumes.

4) “Chong-Ning” Edition: It is the first private printing of the Chinese Buddhist Tripiṭaka, and it is also the first one collected by folded format. It is sponsored and published in Dong-chan monastery in Fujian province in 1104 CE, and it contains 579 slip-cases, 1,440 scriptures, 6,108 volumes.

5) “Pi-Lu” Edition: It is other private sponsored edition of the Buddhist Tripiṭaka. It is completed around 1112–1176 CE, and publishes by the Kai-yuan monastery in Fujian province. It contains 595 slip-cases, 1,451 scriptures, 6,132 volumes.

6) “Yuan-Jue” Edition: It is named by the place of publication where the Yuan-jue Monastery in Zhejiang province is. But it is supported by the governmental official Wang Yong-cong’s family. The Edition is completed among 1132 CE, and it contains 578 slip-cases, 1,435 scriptures, 5,480 volumes.

7) “Zi-Fu” Edition: It is also named by the place of publication, where the Zi-fu monastery in An-ji state (now is Hu-zhou city in Zhejiang province) is. The Edition is completed in 1175 CE, and it contains 599 slip-cases, 1,459 scriptures, 5,940 volumes.

8) “Zhao-Cheng” Edition: Its name is given by the place of discovering in the Zhao-cheng County in 1932 CE. The Edition is exactly sponsored by the folks of the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234 CE), and the organizer is a Buddhist laywoman who is named Cui Fa-zhen. It is deemed to complete in 1149–1173 CE, and contents 682 slip-cases, 1,570 scriptures, 6,900 volumes.

9) “Ji-Sha” Edition: Be named by the place of publication Ji-sha city. It is completed around 1225–1232 CE, and it contains 591 slip-cases, 1,532 scriptures, 6,362 volumes.

10) “Pu-Ning” Edition: Be named by the place of publication the Great Pu-ning monastery in Zhejiang province. It is bases on the Edition of “Zi-Fu”, but supplements some new works. The edition is completed during 1277–1290 CE, and contains 588 slip-cases, 1,528 scriptures, 6,320 volumes.

11) “Hong-Fa” Edition: It is a legendary Tripiṭaka edition which bases on the Zhao-Cheng Edition, but only the catalogue is remain and few chapters have been found in Zhi-hua monastery Beijing in 1984 CE. The edition is deemed to contain 1,644 scriptures, 7,182 chapters.

12) Official Edition of the Yuan Government: it is also a legendary Edition which be supported by the vow of the Queen Buddhašri of Yuan Dynasty around 1332–1336 CE. The Edition is considered at least 651 slip-cases, but there are hard to find any part of the works. Until 1979 CE, the Yunnan Provincial Library finds 23 scriptures and 32 volumes of the remains.

13) First Edition of “Nan-Zang”: It is the first governmental Buddhist Tripiṭaka of Ming Dynasty, and the organizer is the official of religious affairs. This edition is completed around 1372–1399 CE, and the remains contain 678 slip-cases, 1,618 scriptures, totally 7,245 volumes. But the full edition had been destroyed by a fire accident after ten years of its completed.

14) “Yong-Le Nan-Zang”: “Yong-le” is the name of a period of the Ming Dynasty (1403–1424 CE). The Edition is the second governmental work of the Ming period, as the publication place is in the southern capital, so it calls the “Southern Edition (Nan-Zang)” for short. The edition is arranged around 1413–1424 CE, and contains 636 slip-cases, 1,610 scriptures, 6,331 volumes.
15) “Yong-Le Bei-Zang”: It is the improvement of the “Southern Edition”. This Edition is completed in 1440 CE, and it publishes in Beijing where the northern capital of the nation is. The Edition contains 636 slip-cases, 1,621 scriptures, and 6,361 volumes. But in 1584 CE, the Edition again supplements 36 scriptures in 41 slip-cases, and totally 410 volumes.

16) “Wu-Lin” Edition: A private printing edition in Ming Dynasty, it probably publishes in 1422 CE. As its full edition has lost, so the number of the volumes is unknown. Until 1982 CE, there are only 17 volumes have been found.

17) “Wan-Li” Edition: Other private printing in the last reign of Ming dynasty. It is arranged around 1589~1657 CE, and contains 678 slip-cases, 1,659 scriptures, 6,234 volumes. This Edition uses to be a conception of the Buddhist Tripiṭaka, until the survivance of the edition is found in 1983 CE, and there are totally 660 slip-cases remains.

18) “Jia-Xing” Edition: The name is given by the publication in Leng-yan monastery in Zhejiang province. The Tripiṭaka is managed during 1589~1676 CE, and it contains 343 slip-cases, 2,090 scriptures, 12,600 volumes. It is the first Buddhist Tripiṭaka which be bound as quadrate book for publication, as it is more convenient for keeping and propagating. This edition collects many of other scriptures which have never been arranged in previous Tripiṭaka, and even includes the details about the date and place of publication, names of sponsors and carvers. It is a precious data to know about the Buddhism and the sociology of Ming dynasty.

19) “Qian-Long” Edition: This is the only official work of the Qing government, and the “Qian-long” is the name of the Emperor. The edition is managed in 1735~1738 CE, and it contains 724 slip-cases, 1,669 scriptures, 7,168 volumes. The edition is the one which be perfectly preserved, as the government distributes its copies to all major monasteries in the country at that time.

20) “Bai-Na” Edition: “Bai-Na” means widely collection. It is a kind of summary of Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka by selection of various Buddhist publications. It starts in 1866 CE, but it doesn’t complete. Owing to there are lots of mistakes, and it doesn’t have a unified format, so few scholars pay any attention to this edition.

21) “Pin-Qie” Edition: Its name is given by the place where the Pin-qie monastery in Shanghai. The edition is managed during 1909~1913 CE, and it contains totally 440 books in 40 slip-cases, 1,916 scriptures and 8,416 chapters. Because main sponsor of this edition is an English Jew who is named Silas Aaron Hardoon, so this edition is also called as Hardoon Edition.

22) “Pu-Hui” Edition: It is an anthology of the Mahāyāna Buddhist Tripiṭaka. It is published by the Pu-hui Buddhist Tripiṭaka Committee of Shanghai in 1943 CE. The edition picks some new, popular and rare Buddhist scriptures for distribution. But it doesn’t complete as the expectation by many reasons, and it contains only 100 volumes. However, due to the committee is so discreetly on proofreading of canons, and it collects many new translations works at that time, thus it is very valuable for the research on the Buddhism.

23) “Dun-Huang” Edition: It is the edition that bases on the Buddhist survival scriptures of Dun-huang grottoes, and publishes by photomechanical printing in 1989 CE. It contains totally 63 volumes in the division of two parts, which the previous 60 volumes regard in Chinese characters, and the last 3 are written in ancient ethnic words.

contains 107 volumes of literatures, includes the photocopies of early versions and many newly unearthed scriptures from Dun-huang grottoes. It is the newer Mahâyâna Tripitaka projects for the country, and it has the advantage on the quantity on the numbers that it contains 220 slip-cases, includes 4,200 scriptures, totally 23,000 volumes.

25) “Bai-Yu” Edition: “Bai-Yu” means the white jade. It is called upon by the abbot Zhi Du of Ci-en monastery in 2012 CE, he wants to imitate the “Fang-Shan Stone Edition” to keep the Buddhist Tripitaka forever, so he collects the funds to sculpture the scriptures on 565,000 boards of white jade. It work is still going on, and it might be completed on the schedule in 2023 CE.

Besides, there are some other regional Tripitaka edition in Chinese version have been published, for example the “Fo-guang” Buddhist Tripitaka in Taiwan in 1977 CE, and “Fo-mei” Buddhist Tripitaka Digital Edition published in Hong Kong in 1999 CE. They are popular in the local region.

3. The Mahâyâna Buddhist Tripitaka in other Easter Asian Languages

Moreover, there are other 12 editions of the Mahâyâna Buddhist Tripitaka in other Easter Asian languages, include the 3 times of compiling of the Goryeo Tripitaka (탈만대장경) in Korean (only the third compiling is existing) which is perfectly kept as the thirty-three national treasure of Korea, and 7 editions in Japanese, like the “Taishô Shinshû Daizôkyô (大正新脩大藏経)”, “Huang-bo Edition” (黄檗大藏経), “Čū- Edition (浄正経)”, “Čū- Supplement Edition (浄伝正経)”, “Tenka Edition (天海経)”, “Koniyaku issaikyô (国訳大藏経)”, “Shin kokuyaku daizôkyô (新国訳大藏経)”. Besides, there are 1 edition of the Manchu Tripitaka (anthology), and the remnant edition of the Tangut Tripitaka.

Among, the most popular edition is the Taishô Shinshû Daizôkyô. It is a definitive edition which bases on the Chinese Edition “Kai-bao Tripitaka” and the Korean edition “Goryeo Tripitaka”. It was edited by Takakusu Junjiro group in 1922 CE. There are totally 100 volumes in the edition. The No.1~85 volumes are the literatures, and the No.56~84 volumes are the Japanese Buddhist literature, which are written in the traditional Chinese; the No.86~97 volumes are the Buddhist related drawings; the No.98~100 volumes are the texts of different indexes of the Buddhist texts in Japan. The first part of 85 volumes literatures are the most popular to be using in the Mahâyâna Buddhism, and it totally contains 5,320 individual scriptures.

Reference:

7. Samuel Beal, “The Buddhist Tripitaka as it is Known in China and Japan: A Catalogue and Compendious Report”, Oxford University, India Office, 1876.
8. “Encyclopedia of China—Religions”, the Editorial Committee of the Encyclopedia,


i As in the “Pāli-vinaya”, “Mahāsāṃghika-vinaya” and “Mahīsāsaka-vinaya” all mention the only two divisions which without the Abhidhamma Pitaka, but in the “Sarvāstivāda-vinaya”, “Dharmagupta-vinaya” and “Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya” all mention the Abhidhamma Pitaka in different types.


