

# A Study on the Causes and Significance of Long Titles in Chinese-Translated Buddhist Sutras - Centered on Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures\*

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## Abstract

Long titles are an important phenomenon formed during the process of titling Buddhist classics that cannot be ignored. According to the Kaiyuan Shijiao Lu, from the Han Dynasty to the 18th year of the Kaiyuan era in the Tang Dynasty, the number of long sutra titles showed a year-by-year increasing trend, and their proportion among the total sutra titles of the same period also gradually increased. The causes for long sutra titles can be summarized into three aspects: first, Namer tended to use longer titles to convey richer information about the sutra; second, Buddhist sutra Namer hoped to disseminate Buddhism and its sutras more widely through long titles; third, transliterated words in the titles led to an increase in character count. After the emergence of long sutra titles and their becoming a trend, as a unique cultural phenomenon, they held significant meaning for the Buddhist classics themselves, for the titles of Apocryphal Literature, and for the naming of Taoist classics.

**Keywords:** *Word; Another Word; Lower Case Except Names.*

**Subject Classification Codes:** *Buddhist Sutra Titles, Long Sutra Titles, Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures, Titling Patterns.*

## INTRODUCTION

Observing Zhi Sheng's Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures, the titles of Chinese-translated Buddhist sutras exhibit a significant characteristic of "long titles." Microscopically, in the phenomenon of multiple titles for the same sutra due to different translations, the titles formulated by later translators are generally longer than those of earlier translations; macroscopically, the character count of Buddhist sutra titles overall shows an increasing trend with the development of time. In fact, the causes of long sutra titles are complex, and their unique titling patterns, in turn, profoundly influenced the naming practices in native Chinese literature. Therefore, the study of long sutra titles in Buddhist texts is both a deepening and refinement of Buddhist sutra studies and an enrichment of the study of titles in ancient Chinese books. However, current academic focus on Buddhist sutra titles is concentrated on individual sutras, explaining their meanings. Thus, this paper, building on previous research, intends to provide an overview of the long title phenomenon, explore its causes, and discuss its underlying significance and value.

### I. Overview of the Long Title Phenomenon

The naming of Buddhist sutras is a purposeful, subjective creative activity undertaken by namers for needs such as retrieval, dissemination, and citation. However, the naming of Chinese-translated Buddhist sutras combines the dual attributes of translation and formulation. Chinese-translated sutra titles are formulated by translators based on their personal knowledge,

integrating Chinese culture and the naming principles of Buddhist classics, making them a recreation filled with distinct personal will and rich subjectivity. Long sutra titles emerged precisely under this titling background, influenced by factors such as the original Sanskrit title and the translator's formulation, becoming a unique category of titles among ancient Chinese book titles. However, before investigating their causes and significance, it is necessary to have a general understanding of the long title phenomenon.

First, it is essential to define the scope referred to by the concept of “long sutra title.” “Long” as a qualifier for “sutra title” delineates the title based on character count. According to the records in *The Catalogue Of The Imperial Collection of Four*, titles with four characters account for about 40% of the total, and titles with four characters or fewer account for about 71% of the total. Generally, the principle of conciseness guides the naming of ancient books, with the most prominent feature being expressing the richest connotation with the fewest characters. Therefore, titles with four characters or fewer were the preferred choice for namers. Conversely, titles with more than four characters were less chosen as they did not conform to the principle of conciseness. If this standard is applied for division, ancient book titles can be categorized into two types based on character count: short titles with four characters or fewer, and long titles with more than four characters. Accordingly, the definition of “long sutra title” follows the same criterion, defining titles with more than four characters as “long sutra titles.”

Secondly, it is necessary to elaborate in detail the reasons for choosing “Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures”. Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures was born during the Tang Dynasty, a period of peak development in Buddhism, representing the highest achievement in Buddhist theory and cataloging before the 18th year of the Kaiyuan era. Thereafter, although Buddhist scriptures continued to be introduced, translated, and disseminated, subsequent Buddhist catalogs compiled in the world could not surpass the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures in academic value and influence. Therefore, this paper selects the sutra titles of Buddhist sutras translated by successive dynasties' translators recorded in the first nine volumes of the *Catalog Encompassing All Sutras* (总括群经录) in the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures as material for statistics a total of 2249 sutra titles selected, and conducts EXCEL data analysis to explore the proportion of sutra titles with different character counts. The results are shown in Table 1 compiled by the author:

**Table 1: Statistics on Sutra Title Length, Quantity, and Proportion<sup>1</sup>**

| Sutra Title Length<br>(Character Count) | Quantity | Percentage<br>(%) | Sutra Title Length<br>(Character Count) | Quantity | Percentage<br>(%) |
|---|----------|-------------------|---|----------|-------------------|
| 2                                       | 18       | 0.800             | 14                                      | 12       | 0.533             |
| 3                                       | 318      | 14.133            | 15                                      | 6        | 0.267             |
| 4                                       | 406      | 18.044            | 16                                      | 2        | 0.089             |
| 5                                       | 595      | 26.444            | 17                                      | 2        | 0.089             |
| 6                                       | 292      | 12.978            | 18                                      | 1        | 0.044             |
| 7                                       | 228      | 10.133            | 19                                      | 1        | 0.044             |
| 8                                       | 166      | 7.378             | 20                                      | 1        | 0.044             |
| 9                                       | 86       | 3.822             | 22                                      | 1        | 0.044             |
| 10                                      | 37       | 1.644             | 23                                      | 1        | 0.044             |
| 11                                      | 38       | 1.689             |   |          |                   |
| 12                                      | 22       | 0.978             |   |          |                   |
| 13                                      | 17       | 0.756             |   |          |                   |

According to the above table, the shortest sutra titles in the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures are two characters long, while the longest can reach 23 characters. Due to

the requirements of Buddhist sutras to express content such as “person” “dharma” “metaphor” and to distinguish between “sutra” “vinaya” and “shastra,” they do not, like Chinese ancient books, have single-character titles like Shi (《诗》), Shu (《书》), Li (《礼》). Among them, five-character titles account for the largest proportion, approximately 26.444%, followed by four-character titles at about 18.044%. Three-character and six-character titles are nearly equal, at about 14.133% and 12.978% respectively. Titles ranging from seven to eleven characters are also numerous, collectively accounting for about 28% of the total. Although titles with twelve characters or more are not large in number, accounting for only about 2.921% in the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures, it is evident that the distribution of title character counts spans a wide range. Accordingly, based on character count, long sutra titles can be classified into two categories: general long sutra titles with 5 to 11 characters, and ultra-long sutra titles with 12 characters or more. These two categories together account for approximately 67.02% of all sutra titles.

Simultaneously, while compiling Table 1, the author discovered that when classified by dynasty, the character counts of sutra titles recorded in the first nine volumes of the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures show regular changes. Therefore, the author statistically analyzed the 2249 sutra titles from the first nine volumes of the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures by dynasty, with the results shown in Table 2 compiled by the author:

**Table 2: Sutra Title Length, Quantity, and Proportion by Dynasty<sup>2</sup>**

| Dynasty  | Number of 2-4 Char. Titles | Percentage | Number of 5-11 Char. Titles | Percentage | Number of 12+ Char. Titles | Percentage |
|--|----------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|------------|----------------------------|------------|
| 1) Han Wei period  | 87                         | 28.524     | 214                         | 70.164     | 5                          | 1.640      |
| 2) Three Kingdoms (Sun Quan) to W. Jin Jianxing 4th Yr.                                      | 208                        | 40.078     | 308                         | 59.345     | 3                          | 0.58       |
| 3) E. Jin Yuandi to Fu Deng Taichu 9th Yr.   | 64                         | 34.973     | 117                         | 63.934     | 2                          | 1.09       |
| 4) Sixteen Kingdoms (Yao Chang Baique 1st Yr.) to Juqu Mujian Chenghe 7th Yr.                | 94                         | 39.830     | 138                         | 58.474     | 4                          | 1.70       |
| 5) S.Dynasties Liu Yu Song Wudi Yongchu 1st Yr. to Song Shundi Shengyang 3rd Yr.             | 171                        | 36.774     | 289                         | 62.151     | 5                          | 1.08       |
| 6) S.Dynasties Qi Xiao Daocheng Gao Di Jianyuan 1st Yr. to N. Qi Gao Heng Chengguang 1st Yr. | 50                         | 33.557     | 91                          | 61.074     | 8                          | 5.37       |
| 7) N. Dynasties Zhou Yuwen Jue Min Di 1st Yr. to Sui Yang You Gongdi                         | 36                         | 30.508     | 77                          | 65.254     | 4                          | 3.39       |
| 8) Tang Li Hu Gaozu to Li Longji Kaiyuan 18th Yr.  | 33                         | 12.088     | 204                         | 74.725     | 36                         | 13.33      |

From the statistics in the above table, it can be seen that the number of 2-to-4-character sutra titles in the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures overall shows a fluctuating downward trend, while the number of titles with 5 or more characters overall shows a fluctuating upward trend. In other words, from the Han Dynasty to the 18th year of the Kaiyuan

era in the Tang Dynasty, the number of long sutra titles gradually increased, their proportion consistently higher than that of 4-character-and-below titles in the same period. With the development of the sutra translation enterprise and the dissemination of Buddhism reaching its peak, the number of titles with 12 or more characters showed explosive growth during the period of "Tang Li Hu Gaozu to Li Longji Kaiyuan 18th Yr." Certainly, long title phenomena are also extremely common in sutra titles after the 18th year of Kaiyuan not recorded in the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures. Additionally, besides sutras, vinaya, and shastras, commentaries by eminent monks and Buddhist academic books also have long titles, such as “新译华严经七处九会颂释章”“南宗顿教最上大乘摩诃般若波罗蜜经六祖惠能大师于韶州大梵寺施法坛经”。

## II. Causes of Long Titles in Buddhist Sutras

As an art form, the sutra title is the facade of the Buddhist sutra and part of its spiritual demeanor. Careful Buddhist scripture translators generally attach great importance to the carrying capacity of the scripture title for the content, the promotional effect, and the comparison with the Sanskrit original. They also combine the imaginative and romantic literary characteristics of Buddhist scriptures to create long scripture titles with extremely high artistic value.

### (I) Titler's Perspective: The Content-Bearing Mechanism of Sutra Titles

Overly long titles do increase the difficulty of memory, thereby negatively affecting the dissemination of the sutra. However, longer titles also have the capacity to carry richer information. Therefore, titles with high information content, whether book titles or sutra titles, can be favored by specific audiences of Buddhist sutras. Despite certain contradictions in the dissemination process, some titlers still tend to use longer titles to convey more abundant information about the sutra.

During the process of circulation, meticulously collated and translated versions form the basis for reading. After fully understanding the content, readers further refine the title, eliminating information redundancy, forming habits of referring to classics through abbreviations or collective names. This leads to not all versions of differently translated sutras receiving “fair” circulation, and the full title is not frequently mentioned in daily life. For example, The Heart of Prajna Paramita Sutra (Mahāprajñāpāramitā Hṛdaya Sūtra), as a widely circulated Buddhist classic, is mostly called Xin Jing (《心经》) or Duo Xin Jing (《多心经》) in popular dissemination. For instance, Spring and Autumn Annals of the Ten Kingdoms, Volume 18: “Lady Qiao was also a palace maid of the Later Lord. Skilled in calligraphy, she lived in the palace, often left home to serve the Buddha.

The Later Lord personally wrote the Xin Jing in golden characters and bestowed it upon her.” Wenfang Sipu · Yayi · Zhipu records: “All the palace ladies wrote the Duo Xin Jing on golden floral paper to recommend blessings for her in the underworld.” From the reader's perspective, shorter titles are indeed easier to remember. Conversely, abbreviations are only stepping stones to understanding Buddhist sutras. Ordinary readers entering the world of Buddhist sutras through easy-to-read and memorable abbreviations may potentially become believers, thus developing expectations for sutra information and gradually entering a stage of deeper understanding. In this case, the namers' mentality of striving to display key information in the title begins to play a role.

The ancients said, “Writing a book must begin with naming it.” The book title, as a necessary item for writing and establishing theories, is the most intuitive reflection of the book's content and plays a role that cannot be ignored in research on ancient book catalogs, content, tracing origins, and collation. The same applies to sutra titles. From the namers' perspective, displaying classical information as fully as possible is of great significance for the future dissemination, research, and tracing of the classic. Taking “金光明经” (Suvarṇaprabhāsa Sūtra) as an example, this sutra has many variant versions: Dharmakṣema's translation “金光明经” 4 volumes, Paramārtha's translation “金光明帝王经” in 7 volumes, Yaśogupta's translation “金光明更广大辩才陀罗尼经” in 5 volumes, and the two chapters “银主陀罗尼” and “嘱累”. Catalog of Buddhist Scriptures in the Great Tang records after “金光明经嘱累品银主品”: “Translated by Dharmakṣema in the Liang era, 4 volumes; translated by Paramārtha in the Liang era, 6 volumes; translated by Jnanagupta in the Zhou era, 5 volumes; none included these two chapters. Now they exist, hence they are published again.” Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures also records after “金光明经银主陀罗尼品嘱累品”: “Dharmakṣema's 4 volumes, Paramārtha's 7 volumes, Jnanagupta of the Zhou era's 5 volumes, none had these two chapters. Checking the Sanskrit original, they exist, hence they are published again.” The title “金光明经银主陀罗尼品嘱累品” not only reflects the content differences between the variant translations but also intuitively reflects the collation and supplementation work carried out by Buddhist catalogs in the process of including the “金光明经”.

Simultaneously, due to limitations in ancient dissemination, writing habits, printing technology, and the social environment, not only were many ancient books and related information lost, causing difficulties for later citation and research. For example, “Zhou and Qin ancient books do not list the author. Vulgar editions that have attributions are all falsely added by later people.” Another example is works like “刘子” and “登山记”, where the original title information was not passed down to later ages due to natural disasters, human calamities, etc. However, short titles cannot provide excessive clues for later scholars to investigate and discern. At this point, the advantages of long titles become apparent: any surviving title records key content. For instance, Rostrum Scriptures refers to “六祖大师法宝坛经”. The version of the Tan Jing considered by Master Yinshun as the “Nan Zong's purpose Version” is also the version circulated in Caoxi after Huineng's parinirvana. “This Rostrum Scriptures was compiled by Senior Monk Fahai, upon Fahai's parinirvana entrusted to fellow student Daoji; upon Daoji's parinirvana entrusted to disciple Wuzhen. Wuzhen is at Faxing Temple in Caoxi, Lingnan, and currently transmits this Dharma.” The Shenhui faction, based on Fahai's “Nan Zong's purpose Version” as the base text, after modifications and additions, produced the Dunhuang version of the Rostrum Scriptures, whose full title is “南宗顿教最上大乘摩诃般若波罗密经六祖惠能大师于韶州大梵寺施法坛经”. This full title involves information such as the school, author, location, and is very detailed, almost approaching the content of a colophon. In summary, long sutra titles with complete information allow later readers a greater possibility of accurately understanding the translation and creation background of the Buddhist sutra or Buddhist work, thereby significantly increasing the probability of the sutra's transmission.

Therefore, such long sutra titles not only facilitate sutra readers in directly grasping the author's relevant creative information during reading but also endeavor to ensure the accuracy of information during preservation and circulation for posterity.



## (II) Advertising Effect: Dissemination Strategy for Buddhist Sutra Texts

The sutra title is located at the beginning of the scroll and is usually the part that first attracts the sutra reader's attention. Therefore, Buddhist sutra titlers try every means to work on the title, using the sutra title for “advertising” propaganda, disseminating Buddhism and its sutras. Long sutra titles became an excellent choice conventionally formed by titlers to fulfill the disseminative function of the title.

First, the superimposed key information in long sutra titles can shorten the psychological distance with the sutra reader, similar to the advertising effect achieved by long book titles. A very important use of a book title is for citation or recording in book exchange activities. Overly complicated and lengthy titles are not conducive to serving this function of the title. Therefore, conciseness became a common pursuit for namers of ancient Chinese books. However, in other uses, long book titles can play an important role. For example, Opera name like “新刻出像音注花栏裴度香山还带记” and “新刻出像音注目莲救母”; Novel titles like “李卓吾评忠义水浒传全传” and “增评补像全图金玉缘” etc., which are commercial works. Their dissemination relies on attracting a wide audience to watch and read. Therefore, compared to concise titles, long book titles that comprehensively reflect key information possess the function of stimulating readers' interest in reading and are more favored by them. In view of this, titlers and booksellers—anyone with decision-making power over the title conception—often invested considerable effort into the conception and design of the title, hoping to attract the attention of potential readers.

The dissemination of Buddhist sutras shares similarities with that of commercial works. On the one hand, believers are deeply immersed in the simplicity of sentiment desiring to obtain practical help from Buddhist faith, regarding revering and making offerings to the Buddha as “methods for obtaining blessings.” Sutra titlers, complying with the secular utilitarian characteristics of faith demands, integrated important blessing-bestowing functions into the titles, such as in “佛说虚空藏菩萨能满诸愿最胜心陀罗尼求闻持法经” and “请观世音菩萨消伏毒害陀罗尼咒经” fully reflecting functions of the sutra content such as averting disasters, praying for blessings, curing illnesses, and ensuring safety. On the other hand, for people with specific reading goals, “keywords” make it easier for them to obtain groups of works that suit their taste. For example, after Zhi Qian's translation “了本生死经”, there is a lost translation Dao Gan Jing (稻秆经), and Amoghavajra's Tang translation “慈氏菩萨所说大乘缘生稻秆喻经”. “了本生死经” was beloved by believers from the time of its initial translation, so later generations continuously had translators re-translate it, making it more perfect. The content of this sutra was already familiar to believers, and the “Dao Gan” metaphor within it became a keyword for believers when reading. Therefore, Amoghavajra's translation also retained the key content word “Dao Gan”.

The same classic often underwent continuous re-translation, refinement, and supplementation over multiple generations, eventually forming what are called “variant translations” today. Later generations, after re-supplementing and perfecting the old drafts of predecessors, often devised new names. However, as the old titles had long become customary and had a broad popular base, title formulators, mainly considering dissemination efficiency and other aspects, were often unwilling to completely abandon them but continued to use the “keywords,” resulting in the phenomenon of new sutra titles containing the old sutra title while incorporating new content.

This approach both made it convenient for sutra readers to track down their desired classics and refreshed the title, turning it into a long sutra title bearing the translator's ideas and concepts. Although the advertising effect of Buddhist sutra titles is not commercial in nature, if they are to develop, they also need an audience and readers, with the ultimate goal of promoting and expanding the scope of Buddhist sutra dissemination. Therefore, long sutra titles can contain more reading keywords and information anticipated by readers, helping to shorten the distance from the reading psychology of sutra readers, making the dissemination of Buddhist sutras more convenient.

Secondly, long sutra titles possess a sense of novelty that attracts attention and relatively strong visual impact. For example, Zhi Qian's translation “佛说持句神咒经” and the variant translation by Jñānagupta of the Sui Dynasty, “东方最胜灯王如来助护持世间神咒经”. Zhi Qian's translation was widely disseminated and deeply popular for a long time, and sutra readers were more familiar with the title “佛说持句神咒经”. Under the influence of the titling psychology that respects tradition and innovation when formulating titles, Jñānagupta, while undertaking the work of translating the title, not only inherited the merits and key parts of Zhi Qian's title but also added the main figure and function based on Zhi Qian's work, forming a long title to distinguish it from the previous work. Sutra readers would experience a sense of freshness when encountering Jñānagupta's translation. Simultaneously, long sutra titles themselves have a high character count and large volume. In any context, larger entities occupy more visual focus and can better attract the reader's attention. Long sutra titles in Buddhism can even reach twelve characters or more, forming ultra-long titles. Such titles, placed at the beginning of the scroll, naturally create impact.

Xu Nianci in the late Qing, in 《余之小说观·小说之题名》, pointed out that the ways of naming novels are diverse, “always aiming at moving people's attention as the purpose.” Attracting the attention of sutra readers is the motivation and purpose of sutra title formulators, and this is centrally embodied in long sutra titles. Long sutra titles can achieve both novelty and enhanced visual impact, thereby significantly improving the dissemination effect of Buddhist sutras, precisely serving as a cultural dissemination strategy for Buddhism.

### (III) Transliterated Vocabulary: Transmission of Cross-Cultural Semantics

Sutra translation activity involves translating Buddhist sutras from a foreign language into Chinese while conforming to Chinese language habits. According to Xuanzang's translation theory, when encountering situations of “Five Categories of Untranslatable Terms” (“五不翻”), transliterated vocabulary should be used.

However, due to the nature of Sanskrit, the transliterated Chinese often has a higher character count, and there may be semantic incomprehensibility, forming specialized terms. Therefore, transliterated words in the title cannot be arbitrarily deleted, hence becoming one of the causes for the long sutra title phenomenon.

Transliteration, a strategy of recording the phonetic form of a foreign word, borrowing the term, translating by not translating, is the most direct and simplest method to quickly integrate foreign words into the Chinese vocabulary.

Sanskrit belongs to the phonetic language family, where the smallest unit combining sound and meaning has no corresponding relationship with syllables in terms of phonetic form. The phonetic form of a morpheme can be one syllable, more than one syllable, or less than one syllable. However, the situation in Chinese is vastly different.

In Chinese, morphemes take syllables as the basic formal unit, and the vast majority of the smallest sound-meaning combinations present as one syllable in phonetic form. Chinese transliteration is based on the correspondence between syllables and Chinese characters. Although all syllables can ultimately be analyzed into phonemes, phonemes themselves have no corresponding Chinese character writing form and must be represented using characters that represent syllables. Therefore, to correspond to Sanskrit syllables, transliteration employs a large number of characters, resulting in a character count exceeding that generally used in Chinese.

Normally, transliterated words in sutra titles include two aspects: First, names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Title formulators added transliterated names like Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, Amṛtakuṇḍalin Bodhisattva, Mahāvairocana Buddha, Aśuṣṭa Bodhisattva, etc., forming long sutra titles such as “金刚顶经曼殊室利菩萨五字心陀罗尼品”, “阿闍贯王女阿术达菩萨经”, “甘露军荼利念诵仪轨”, “无迦略曳菩萨造广大摩尼秘密善住经”, “大阿罗汉难提蜜多罗所说法住记”, etc. Transliterated names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have a high character count and are the most widely used vocabulary in sutra titles, becoming the main component constituting long sutra titles.

Second, specialized vocabulary, such as “尼陀那” (nidāna) and “目得迦” (māṭṛkā) in “根本说一切有部尼陀那目得迦摄颂”; “般若波罗蜜” (Prajñāpāramitā) in “能断金刚般若波罗蜜多经”; “优波提舍” (Upadeśa) in “摩诃衍优波提舍经”, etc. Such Buddhist-specific vocabulary originally appeared in Sanskrit. Since accurate corresponding words cannot be found in Chinese, and the essence of Buddhism cannot be conveyed through meaning translation, translators directly used the transliterated vocabulary in the titles, inadvertently causing the long sutra title phenomenon.

In summary, transliterated words in Buddhist sutras, to ensure similarity with the original foreign word's pronunciation, require finding corresponding Chinese characters for each syllable within the Chinese phonetic system.

This practice leads to transliterated words often requiring a relatively large number of characters to convey the meaning of one Sanskrit word, thereby increasing the character count of the sutra title and forming long sutra titles.

### III. The Significance of Long Sutra Titles

The long titles of Buddhist sutras are by no means accidental accumulations of text formed in history; they are highly representative linguistic and cultural landscapes in the process of Buddhism's Sinicization.

Behind them lies profound significance and value, like an exquisite mirror that reflects both the complex process of Buddhist classics taking root in Chinese soil and the outstanding wisdom of Chinese civilization in accepting foreign cultures. Moreover, they have precipitated into an inexhaustible academic treasure trove for later generations in the long river of history.

#### (I) Significance for the Buddhist Classics Themselves

“Understanding the gist before reading the text” is the basic principle for formulating sutra titles. From the perspective of Buddhist sutra translation, the “sutra” corresponding to the title should include three categories: first, the original Sanskrit Buddhist classics; second, sutras initially introduced and translated into Chinese; third, sutras re-translated by different translators.



These three categories can also be regarded as the three stages in the process of sutra dissemination and circulation. As clarified above, the original Sanskrit titles already possessed factors for long titles. Translators, based on the translation principles of “faithfulness, expressiveness, and elegance” (“信、达、雅”), would recreate them on the basis of respecting the original title, forming long titles in the true sense. And long titles that display classical information as fully as possible hold significant meaning for the Buddhist classics themselves.

When translating and formulating titles, translators would carefully select elements relying on their personal talent and wisdom, hoping to highly condense profound Buddhist principles within the confines of the title.

Long sutra titles, due to their outstanding ability to accurately convey the core content and main theme of the sutra, were highly favored by translators, enabling sutra readers to glimpse the hall of the classic just by observing its name.

Simultaneously, Buddhist sutras and their titles are interdependent. Only by circulating together with the sutra can the title continuously become familiar to readers and have the potential for interpretation; only then can the title be endowed with new meanings or even be re-translated, processed, and recreated to form new titles.

Historically, sutras that were repeatedly translated were all classics beloved by readers. Conversely, if a sutra perished during circulation, its title would also fall into oblivion. The basic elements of person, dharma, and metaphor appearing in long sutra titles, as well as information such as version and fascicle/volume, clearly distinguish the subject matter, main purpose/function, and scale of the sutra, greatly facilitating believers in quickly locating and selecting the required texts, enhancing the precision and efficiency of the dissemination of Buddhist teachings.

While pursuing clarity of expression, long sutra titles also shoulder the mission of maintaining the cultural appearance and religious authority of Buddhist classics. Long sutra titles primarily manifest as having a relatively high number of characters, accompanied by aesthetic attributes of extreme splendor, ornate complexity, and a sacred feeling of the inconceivable, sublime, and mysterious.

The sutra title, as the symbol of a sutra, represents the aesthetic tendency of the sutra, or rather, it is homogeneous with the literary nature of the sutra's content. The literary characteristics of long sutra titles, together with the sutra's content, shape the unique artistic features of Buddhist classics.

Simultaneously, by enhancing the sutra reader's sense of defamiliarization, long sutra titles emphasize a sense of mystery and distance, which are important sources for inspiring awe and strengthening religious piety.

Professor Li Xiaorong once proposed that religious documents possess dual attributes of religion and literature. As one of the objects of literary research on religious documents, long sutra titles also possess religiosity and literariness, holding crucial significance in promoting the circulation of the sutras themselves, deepening their aesthetic attributes and literary features, and maintaining their sense of mystery.

It can be said that long sutra titles, to a certain extent, shape the mystery and beauty of Buddhist sutras, enabling them to be accepted and transmitted as literary and cultural carriers during dissemination.

## (II) Significance for the Titles of Apocryphal Literature

Apocryphal Literature are divided into doubtful sutras and forged sutras, referring to those Buddhist scriptures fabricated by Chinese disciples under the pretext of “The Buddha said.” Apocryphal Literature were inevitably modeled on Buddhist classics at their creation. Therefore, the titles of Apocryphal Literature, born relying on “Buddhist scriptures”, inevitably bear traces of Buddhist sutra titles.

The popularity of long Chinese-translated sutra titles provided a model for apocryphal sutra titles to draw upon in their naming methods, gradually becoming a culturally significant phenomenon in the process of Buddhism's Sinicization.

Creators of Apocryphal Literature strove to polish them to achieve seamless existence among the created “Buddhist scriptures.” Sengyou, in *Chu Sanzang Jiji*, proposed that the creation methods of Apocryphal Literature can be divided into two types: “relying on the true to construct the false” (凭真以构伪) and “adorning the false to confuse it with the real.” (饰虚以乱实) “Relying on the true to construct the false” refers to drawing upon the content or form of true sutras and then reforming them to create Apocryphal Literature, emphasizing the recreation of the “true.” “Adorning the false to confuse it with the real” refers to using fabricated false content or forms to infinitely approach the true sutras, achieving a state of mixing the false with the true, emphasizing the whitewashing of the “false.” It can be said that the existence of long Chinese-translated sutra titles provided a reference for naming apocryphal sutra titles, causing them to exhibit the form of long titles, for example, “银蹄金角犍子经” and “佛说犍子经”; “妙法莲华经度量天地品” and “妙法莲华经观世音菩萨普门品经”; “妙法莲华天地变易经” with “妙法莲华经” etc. Such long titles of Apocryphal Literature, through the modification of Buddhist sutra titles, can be divided into two categories: one retains the content expressed by the original title but recreates the title by adding or subtracting characters to deepen the content and emphasis; the other replaces the key points involved in the original title with new key points to express new content.

In fact, not only has Buddhism itself always held a negative attitude towards Apocryphal Literature, but the official authorities have also often explicitly prohibited them. *Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures*, separate catalog, seventh section on “Records of Falsities Confusing the Truth” (伪妄乱真录), records that Liang Miaoguang created Apocryphal Literature, falsely claimed to be a sage, and also “嚟供烟塞,” so he was reported, “狄牒: ‘妙光巧诈, 事应斩刑.’” However, the authors of Apocryphal Literature keenly perceived the authority and functionality carried by long sutra titles and, by imitating their formal structure, achieved the effect of “mixing the false with the true” or at least “resembling the orthodox in form.” Hence, long Chinese-translated sutra titles also provided cover for the dissemination of Apocryphal Literature.

First, when the vast majority of Buddhist sutras possess complex and unique long titles, a newly appeared classic with a similar long name would not appear particularly conspicuous. Second, for eminent monks, when faced with the need to organize and distinguish a vast number of Buddhist sutras, a title conforming to the standard naming convention might likely be categorized as a “sutra of lost translation” during preliminary screening, rather than directly judged as apocryphal.

Therefore, the “camouflage” of apocryphal sutra titles imitating the naming patterns of long sutra titles, while increasing the difficulty for later scholars to distinguish authenticity,

undeniably allowed many Apocryphal Literature to circulate for a long time in history, even integrating into popular belief practices, with lasting influence.

### (III) Significance for the Naming of Taoist Classics

The phenomenon of long titles in Chinese-translated Buddhist sutras, as a unique naming form in ancient Chinese texts, not only reflects the stylistic features of Buddhist classics themselves but also profoundly influenced the naming of Taoist classics. Taoism, as a native Chinese religion, absorbed certain factors conducive to its own dissemination during its ebb and flow with Buddhism, among which the long titles of Taoist classics were influenced by Chinese-translated Buddhist sutra titles. The earliest Taoist classics, such as Zhuangzi and Laozi, actually followed the naming principles of ancient Chinese book titles. Although pre-Qin ancient books often did not bear authors' names, later compilers assigned them relatively concise titles. This is because “a very important function of the book title is for citation or recording in the communication process; overly cumbersome and lengthy titles are not conducive to serving this function.”

Buddhist sutra titles, however, did the opposite, avoiding neither complexity nor repetition, striving to summarize the content, clarify the purpose, and emphasize the function within the title, such as “佛说大乘庄严宝王经”, “度诸佛境界智光严经”, “大乘金刚髻珠菩萨修行分经” etc., using character count to enhance information-carrying capacity and dissemination ability. Influenced by long Buddhist sutra titles, the titles of Taoist classics began to show a trend of increasing character count, gradually developing into long titles, such as “上清大洞真经”, “太上修真体元妙道经”, “灵宝无量度人上经大法” etc. This stems from Taoism sharing similar demands with Buddhism, such as using titles to assert authority and expand the scope of dissemination, hence the similar naming patterns for Taoist and Buddhist classic titles.

## CONCLUSION

Long sutra titles are a unique titling method developed by Buddhists in response to needs such as retrieval, dissemination, and citation, combined with the original characteristics of Buddhist sutra titles. Titlers focused their attention on three aspects: the reader, themselves, and the original title, and in making trade-offs, tried to satisfy the reading expectations of all three parties. Long sutra titles have existed since the early stages of sutra translation activity and gradually became a titling trend. It can be said that the emergence of long sutra titles was not accidental but an inevitable result of the development of Buddhism. From a macroscopic perspective, this titling pattern behind long sutra titles contains profound significance and value. The existence of long sutra titles endows Buddhist sutra titles with both literariness and religiosity. They not only construct a unique artistic beauty with ornate and complex phrases but also transmit Buddhist principles through stronger content-carrying capacity, making the title a cultural symbol possessing both literary value and religious implication.

This titling method, while promoting the dissemination of Buddhist sutras, also shaped the unique expression of Buddhist classics within the Chinese cultural context. On one hand, long titles in Chinese-translated Buddhist sutras provided a reference paradigm for the naming of apocryphal sutras, prompting them to formally align with orthodox Buddhist sutras, thereby obtaining broader dissemination space and cultural recognition to a certain extent. On the other hand, Taoist classics absorbed the characteristics of long Buddhist sutra titles, promoting innovation in the naming methods of native Chinese religious texts, reflecting the depth and

breadth of cultural interaction during the process of Buddhism's Sinicization. Within the contemporary academic perspective, the long sutra title phenomenon, as a typical case of religious document naming, not only provides an important entry point for the study of Buddhist classics but also offers a case for understanding the inclusive and innovative cultural characteristics of Chinese civilization. Its academic value and cultural significance will continue to be discovered and interpreted by future generations.

### Footnote

- \* 国家社会科学基金重大项目“敦煌佛教文学艺术思想综合研究 (多卷本) (19ZDA254)的阶段成果。

### References

- 1) To ensure an accurate understanding of the aforementioned table, the scope of the selected data is explained as follows:

First, Volume 10 of the General Catalog in the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures contains records of Buddhist catalogs. As this table selects only Buddhist sutra titles for analysis, only the first nine volumes of the General Catalog are used.

Second, the first nine volumes of the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures are arranged chronologically by dynasty, recording the sutra titles attributed to each translator. However, this includes sutras omitted for various reasons, such as the eighty-five volumes from the “尊者薄拘罗经” to “金色女经”. According to the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures: "These are all separately derived from various sutras, or were not produced by An Shigao and others, and are not suitable to be counted fully among the translations. Now, for the purpose of factual record, they are completely deleted." Therefore, this table selects only the formally recorded sutra titles from the first nine volumes and excludes those the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures "completely deleted."

Third, this table excludes the six Buddhist catalogs interspersed within Volumes 8 and 9 of the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures.

Fourth, because translators, following tradition, often continued using sutra titles from previous generations during the process of sutra transmission and translation, this table retains identical sutra titles formulated by different translators that resulted from this adherence to tradition.

Fifth, as Volume 9 of the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures states that “the twenty-six assemblies of ‘大宝积经’ are considered twenty-six separate works”, this table counts “大宝积经” as only one classic, rather than twenty-six separate works.

- 2) To ensure accurate understanding of the aforementioned table, the scope of the selected data is likewise explained here: This table follows the same selection criteria as the previous one, choosing the sutra titles recorded in the first nine volumes of the "General Catalog." It does not include alternative names or multiple titles, using only the formal sutra title names as recorded in the Kaiyuan Catalogue of Buddhist Scriptures as the standard.