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Buddhist kepan and literary theory of the early Tang Dynasty

Abstract The term kepan 科判 means to divide a text into chapters and paragraphs. By explicating the context of Buddhist kepan and its influence on the explanation of Confucian classics, this paper tries to demonstrate how wide and profound this influence was on literary criticism in three aspects: literary criticism, fluency and coherence of writing, and relationships between the authors of literary theories and Buddhism in the early Tang Dynasty.

Keywords Buddhist sutras, kepan, the early Tang Dynasty, literary theories

1 The purpose of the study

Liang Qichao 梁启超 first relates kepan 科判 with Chinese literature in general. He said in his Translated Literature and Buddhist Classics:1

There is one thing worthy of our attention, the emergence of the new genre of structural analysis. Anyone who has had some experience in the study of Buddhist classics knows the fact that Buddhist scholars after the Tang and the Song Dynasties attached great importance to the study of kepan. Those well-known and extensive sutras have usually been divided and re-divided into chapters, sections and paragraphs by scores of different scholars. Monk Dao’an 道安 of the Eastern Jin Dynasty was the first one to talk about kepan in saying

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1 Fanyi wenxue yu fodian 翻译文学与佛典.
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that all sutras should be divided into three parts, namely, the xu part (序分, order), the zhengzong part (正宗分, proper talk), and the liutong part (流通分, application). After him, people became increasingly meticulous in doing the work. The scholars may think that since Buddhist sutras were originally scientifically structured so they must be studied scientifically, and the more they are studied this way, the more precise the method becomes. The method later casts much influence on other academic fields. As everyone knows, the work of explanatory notes (on Confucian writings) in the Sui and the Tang Dynasties is of special significance in the study of Confucian classics. It happens that the work appears almost simultaneously with the study of Buddhist Classics. Although I dare not draw a conclusion that the new style of writing is the result of literary translation, it is positive that they are mutually related and that marks an obvious advancement in the evolution of writing techniques.²

However, Liang just talks about the possible relationship between the writing style of explanatory notes on Confucian classics and the study of explanatory notes on Buddhist classics; ³ he does not go into detail as to how kepan has influenced literature in general.

This paper tries to explore a special part of the relationship between Buddhism and the literary theory of the Tang Dynasty. It is common to us now that in order to compose an article or a longer poem, an author needs to separate his work into several paragraphs or gradations. But the practice really originates from the early years of the Tang Dynasty, thanks to the inspiration of the Buddhist kepan. It is the first, and I hope not the last, attempt in dealing with this problem.

2 An introduction to kepan

Kepan, also named as kefen 科分, kewen 科文, keduan 科段, kezhang 科章, and kejie 科节, etc., refers to a method by which Buddhist monks interpret sutras or

³ Mr. Liang’s statement is quite obscure when he talked about the relation between Kepan and Chinese literature. In chapter 12 “Lun yishu zhi wenti 论义疏之文体 (on the writing style of commentary notes)” of Lun ru shi liangjia byzhi jiangjing yu yishu 论儒释两家之讲经与义疏 (A Study on the Lecturing and Interpreting of the Confucian and Buddhist Classics), Mu Runsun’s 周润孙 commented, “Mr. Liang found that both explanations on Confucian classics and explanations on Buddhist classics have Kefen in common. This similarity caused him to draw a conclusion that the writing style of Confucian explanatory notes had been influenced by Buddhism. But his reasoning is unclear and his meaning is ambiguous. He did not illustrate clearly how Buddhist sutras were divided, nor did he state what the writing style of Confucian explanatory notes was like. He just used the words “came into being simultaneously” to deduce that there must be mutual influences between the new style of writing and the translated literature. From my point of view, what Mr. Liang wanted to say is inadequately expressed.” Zhushizhai conggaoo, 1987.3, p.295.