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English Review of Dissertation

Introduction

The process of writing this dissertation was much more difficult than expected. When I first planned the research framework, I was confident that I had read enough literature, but after I started writing, I encountered one difficulty after another. The definitions of certain key concepts diverged in different scholars' discourses, and they sometimes confused me and forced me to redo my research. Despite the ups and downs of the process, I was relieved when I finished the paper, but these challenges eventually became opportunities for growth. My supervisor was able to point out the logical flaws in my dissertation, and the exchanges with my classmates also brought me inspiration. When I finally read through the whole text, those problems that were once regarded as obstacles have been transformed into imprints of thinking between the lines. This experience has made me realise that academic research requires not only the courage to explore independently, but also the open-mindedness to communicate.

Formulation of topics

A master's level Buddhist course set on the Diamond Sutra and the Infinite Life Sutra, and choosing a topic with them as the main focus, put me in a quandary from the very beginning of the writing dissertation. Although I have been choosing my research direction for a long time, it still makes me hesitate when I really make a decision. As a fundamental classic of the Pure Land Sect, the study of the Infinite Life Sutra focuses on the modern interpretation of the idea of chanting the Buddha's life after death. A search on Knowledge.com showed that there were 47 relevant master's theses in the past five years, of which 32 focused on hospice care or psychology of religion perspectives. While this type of research is in line with current academic hotspots, I prefer to write my thesis in a more academic and dialectical way. What's more, the description of the ‘seven precious pools and eight meritorious waters’ in the Infinite Life Sutra about Elysium makes me yearn for it. However, I feel that

with my ability, it is difficult to write it in a scholarly way, and it is difficult to prove a point. I did not find the contradictions in it.

The study of the Diamond Sutra is much more difficult. First of all, it's already been well studied by others, but the wisdom of ‘What is called form is emptiness , and emptiness is form has always fascinated me. In my preliminary reading, I have focused particularly on the theory of 'Four Perceptual Constructs' (四相) - namely Self-construct (我相), Other-construct (人相), Sentient-being construct (眾生相), and Temporal-being construct (壽者相). This conceptual framework simultaneously embodies: a critical examination of individual cognitive limitations (as manifested in Self-construct). Deconstruction of social relational paradigms (through Other-construct). However, the data from China Knowledge Network (CNN) made me sober: there are already 213 articles with the keyword Diamond Sutra, Four Phases, among which there are 29 articles in core journals, and the most recent one, a paper from the Journal of Religious Studies in 2021, even establishes a comparative model between the Four Phases and phenomenology. Academic saturation has forced me to look for a new way out for the study of the Diamond Sutra.

Secondly, the philosophical teachings of the Diamond Sutra are very deep, and there are so many esoteric theories that it is not easy to explain them in words. However, I am still very interested in the Diamond Sutra. Because I had some understanding of the Buddhist idea of ‘emptiness and non-duality’, I wanted to study it more deeply. But this piece of research is too large for 10,000 words, and the word count is too small. If I am lucky enough to have the opportunity to complete a 50,000-word or even 100,000-word thesis in the future, I will be happy to continue my research. Secondly, the philosophical teachings of the Diamond Sutra are very deep, and there are so many esoteric theories that it is not easy to explain them in words. However, I am still very interested in the Diamond Sutra. Because I had some understanding of the Buddhist idea of ‘emptiness and non-duality’, I wanted to study it more deeply. But this piece of research is too large for 10,000 words, and the word count is too small. If I am lucky enough to have the opportunity to complete a 50,000-word or even 100,000-word thesis in the future, I will be happy to continue my research. So I set my sights on the idea of the non-duality of emptiness and existence in the Diamond Sutra; I wanted to write about all the phases mentioned in the Diamond Sutra because the main theme of the Diamond Sutra is about how to

break the phases, and I wanted to summarise all the phases; but after thinking about it I thought that the topic was still too big, and that I needed to narrow it down. So I began to collect information from various sources, and I felt that this topic was very much studied. I didn't know exactly what I was going to write about anymore, so there was the first talk with my instructor.

In the course of communication, the tutor suggested that we focus on Jiangweinong's Diamond Sutra sermon and write a comparison between Jiangweinong's and other versions of the commentary on emptiness and non-duality. This book is the textbook for our classes and has been known before. Jiang Weinong's Exegesis on the Diamond Sutra (Jingangjing Jiangyi) constitutes a hermeneutic milestone in modern Sino-Buddhist scholarship. There is a paragraph in the book that comments on previous commentaries on the Diamond Sutra, and its vision is refreshing. There are supposed to be points of contradiction in it, which are more worthy of study. In order to verify the feasibility of my tutor's suggestion, I have spent a great deal of time collating and researching other versions of theDiamond Sutra commentary mentioned by Jiang Wenong. The most authoritative ancient commentaries, Maitreya Bodhisattva's Verses on the Diamond Sutra and Bodhisattva Asaṅga's Treatise on the Diamond Sutra, constitute the original exegetical system. However, the extant Chinese translation (by Bodhiruci of the Northern Wei Dynasty) exhibits terminological inconsistencies.

A case in point is the Sanskrit term apratiṣṭhita (non-abiding), rendered as wú zhù (无住, non-abiding) in Bodhiruci's translation, while Vasubandhu's Vajracchedikā-śāstra explicates it as bù qǔ xiàng (不取相, non-grasping at appearances). This terminological variance has engendered hermeneutic divergences in later exegetical traditions. The earliest Chinese commentary was composed by Sengzhao (Kumārajīva's disciple),whose terse yet penetrating annotations . During the Six Dynasties period, both Master Jizang (嘉祥, Sanlun School) and Master Zhiyi (智顗, Tiantai School) produced commentaries. However, Jizang's work, likely compiled by disciples, lacks the doctrinal rigor characteristic of his other treatises. In the Tang Dynasty, all sects had commentaries: the Dharma-phase Sect favoured theoretical analyses. Master Guifeng of the Huayan Sect was too literal and lost the meaning of the sutras. Master Guifeng of the Avatamsaka Sect was too literal and lost the meaning of the sutras. Ancestors of the Sixth Patriarch of the Zen Sect and others

were too brief in their commentaries.In the Song Dynasty, Zen master Changshui explained Guifeng's works in detail but lacked creativity. The Ming and Qing dynasties have many commentaries but few gems. The Tiantai Sect's Master Diamond Breaking the Void has special features. The Huayan Sect's Venerable Master Datian's ‘New Eyes’ has new insights, but most of the others are cluttered and unrefined. Finally, Jiang Weinong humbly stated that although he was not learned enough, he wished to make the public understand the true meaning of the Diamond Sutra, so as to avoid the situation in which people are either afraid of the abstruse, or confused, or superficially understand it.

After conducting extensive reading, I find the research workload particularly challenging due to Jiang Weinong's lack of explicit annotations regarding his critical engagement with alternative textual versions in his Exegesis on the Diamond Sutra. This means I must have a comprehensive understanding of all versions. The sheer volume of content and number of books involved in itself poses a significant challenge. Moreover, the exegetical commentaries on the Diamond Sutra inherently possess a degree of hermeneutic opacity, thereby elevating the textual engagement to a qualitatively heightened tier of interpretative complexity. The dual exigencies of voluminous source material and heightened conceptual rigor have engendered profound methodological uncertainty, leaving me adrift in epistemological indeterminacy regarding both compositional approach and the ultimate configuration of scholarly contribution. After thorough deliberation, I concluded that discontinuing the original research trajectory would be prudent. The finalized focus on 'Deconstructing Linguistic Constructs.

There are several reasons for choosing this direction. 1. Literature base: Jiang Meinong's Lecture Notes, which are required for the course, have mentioned the phase of detachment from speech. I found some literature from Western scholars, such as Wittgenstein's ‘There is nothing beyond the text’, which provides a modern philosophical perspective for analysing ‘the speaker's inability to speak’. At the same time, the length can be controlled: focusing on the ‘Deconstructing Linguistic Signs’ to break through a single point, to avoid being caught in the sea of notes and comparisons, these reasons I jumped at the chance to try. This tumultuous experience of choosing a topic has given me a threefold revelation: academic interest needs methodological support: the resonance of the idea of ‘emptiness and non-duality’ must be transformed into an actionable research design. Literature determines

theoretical depth: my frustration with the study of the notes made me realise the importance of accumulating knowledge. Interdisciplinary perspectives create possibilities: when traditional paths are blocked, methodological innovations can often open up new horizons.

Analysing Definitional Differences Between Denominations

After deciding on a topic, I went into an unprecedented state of efficient writing, consistently writing faster than my classmates. I travelled back and forth between the three translations of the Diamond Sutra (Hatamarishi, Xuanzang, and Yijin) and the ideas of Heraclitus and Wiggenlitstein. I am fascinated by this dialogue of ideas across time and space. Chinese and Western cultures are actually highly similar, and I am looking forward to their more brilliant sparks. However, this state of unrestrained writing also sowed hidden dangers. When I presented my results, my instructor asked me about some Buddhist doctrines and terms, thinking that my definitions were not clear. For example, when I mention concepts like "illuminating the mind to reveal clarity" (mingxin jian ming) and "dispelling confusion to attain enlightenment" (pomi kaiwu), these belong to the teachings of the Tathāgatagarbha school (如来藏学派). The Tathāgatagarbha doctrine asserts that Buddha-nature exists and that all sentient beings can attain Buddhahood. However, initially, I failed to recognize this distinction. In my earlier understanding, I conflated the perspectives of the Madhyamaka school (中观学派) with those of the Tathāgatagarbha tradition. The Madhyamaka school, by contrast, emphasizes that all phenomena are empty (śūnyatā), including sentient beings themselves. Since emptiness negates inherent existence, there can be no such thing as an intrinsic "Buddha-nature" within this framework.

The ideas of Heraclitus align closely with those of the Madhyamaka school (中观学派). Both assert that all things simultaneously exist and do not exist, embodying a dynamic interplay of being and non-being. On the other hand, L. Wittgenstein's philosophy shares similarities with the Tathāgatagarbha school (如来藏学派), particularly Zen Buddhism. The Tathāgatagarbha tradition, especially Zen, holds that Buddha-nature (佛性) cannot be described through language. Both Wittgenstein and this school acknowledge that certain truths—mystical and transcendent—defy verbal expression.

At this point, I suddenly realized the fundamental theoretical divergences within

Buddhism itself. This revelation sparked a deep curiosity in me about the doctrines of various Buddhist schools. If given the opportunity in the future, I am determined to study them more thoroughly. To achieve this, I have slowed my writing pace to focus specifically on researching the core teachings of the Tathāgatagarbha and Madhyamaka schools, clarifying their key disagreements—such as the ontological status of "Buddha-nature" versus "emptiness" (śūnyatā)—and understanding how these differences shape their paths to enlightenment.

This discovery made me make some adjustments to the framework of my writing, even to the extent of rewriting the first paragraph, a revision process that brought me a great deal of shock. Just as the legal systems of different countries cannot be directly applied, comparative studies across sects and cultures must first establish a clear framework for dialogue. Those academic norms, which I once regarded as ‘constricting to the views of the gateway’, are in fact the cornerstone to ensure the effectiveness of the exchange of ideas. It is like a negotiation, we need to sit at a table, have a consensus, on the basis of which we can start to speak our own views and start to debate. If the sects are different, it is as if they are not sitting together at all, and the most basic consensus has not been reached, so the debate is meaningless.

This is when I learnt why my teacher did not allow us to cite Buddhist texts when we wrote our Confucian papers, and that the three schools of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism did not allow us to cite each other. Papers are rigorous and are meant to be valuable. You can't talk for half a day, only to have the other side deny it at all, then the paper written doesn't have any meaning. I feel like my thoughts are a lot smoother all of a sudden, even though they are all things I want to write about, they seem like a jumbled mess that is hard to straighten out. This is something that my instructor wants me to improve on. Looking back on this writing experience from chaos to order, I have three profound experiences: enthusiasm needs rational discipline: the initial writing frenzy is like an unguided flood, which is powerful but may break the dam. Knowledge needs the support of a system: scattered flashes of thought must be embedded in a rigorous logical framework in order to shine.

My tutor felt that the content of my thesis was already rich and I had consulted a lot of information. But it's a bit messy and not clearly tuned enough. In fact, before handing in the first draft, I was quite clueless, I knew to change it as well, but I didn't know how. To be honest, when the first draft was finished, I was slightly relieved, in terms of word count at least completed, coupled with some time constraints, it was a

little difficult to re-quietly write, thinking of waiting for the oral report after listening to the suggestions to make changes.

However, I had some problems in preparing for my oral presentation, and it was a struggle to organise it because of the chaotic thoughts and writing. I couldn't find the focus of the text full of words by myself, this is because when I wrote, I wrote whatever I wanted to write, and it was very smooth, so a lot of thoughts were mixed together. After the oral presentation I spent some more time going through and rearranging them.

During the process of writing my thesis, accessing English-language scholarly materials unexpectedly became a major challenge. Initially, when researching the concept of "non-duality of emptiness and form" (空有不二), I encountered significant setbacks due to inconsistent translations of key terms—phrases like "Non-duality of Emptiness and Form" and "Unity of Śūnyatā and Phenomena" produced fragmented search results. For instance, searching "emptiness + form" yielded numerous architectural studies unrelated to Buddhist philosophy.

Western Buddhist studies predominantly focus on Tibetan traditions, leaving few English-language resources on Han Chinese interpretations of the Diamond Sūtra. I downloaded English seminar videos from Taiwan's Dharma Drum Mountain and connected with academic peers on Zhihu to exchange materials. What ultimately broke the deadlock was my exhaustive review of secondary literature. I downloaded every article tangentially related to the Diamond Sūtra, traced citations within them, and expanded my search iteratively until I located the precise sources needed for my analysis and citations.

Conclusion

In the process of completing this master's thesis, which is centred on the study of the Diamond Sutra, I have experienced academic growth from confusion to clarity. Initial iterations in choosing a topic made me realise the way to balance academic hotspots with personal ambitions - abandoning the popular topic of end-of-life care for the difficult but more theoretically promising interpretation of the classics was both a challenge and a breakthrough. The comparative study of editions suggested by my tutor made me realise that cross-cultural Buddhist studies must be based on solid documentary evidence. The theoretical confusion exposed in my writing prompted me

to systematically sort out the core doctrines of various Buddhist schools. This experience taught me that interdisciplinary research cannot stop at conceptual grafting, but requires a deeper understanding of the internal logic of each system. In the end, by adjusting the framework and clarifying the prerequisites for comparison, the originally scattered ideas gradually formed an effective path for academic dialogue. These lessons will become the cornerstone of my future research - true innovation begins with the deepest respect for academic tradition.