

Ethical Treatment of Animals
in Early Chinese Buddhism:
Beliefs and Practices

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P U B L I S H I N G

apart from the rephrasing he made based on the passage quoted above, at least three other passages of this sūtra were quoted by him.⁵³

A similar emphasis on rescuing animals that are in danger can also be found in the *Liudu jijing* (六度集經 'collected sūtras on the six perfections'),⁵⁴ a text is to be utilised below since it contains some crucial evidence for the origin of the custom.

2.2. Stories Concerning the Releasing of Turtles

The translation previously mentioned as containing a typical example of releasing animals in the Chinese custom is the *Liudu jijing*. Actually a mixed collection of Jātaka and Avadāna stories, it was translated in 247 by Kang Senghui (康僧會 d. 280). This text has been neglected as far as the custom of releasing animals is concerned, but it was the most important text in the formation of the custom in Chinese Buddhism, for it contains a detailed story of setting an animal free.

The story is relatively long, and what follows is only a brief account. One day, a great householder (大理家 i.e. the Buddha in one of his previous lives) of a certain country, who was a devoted Buddhist philanthropist, was walking in the market and saw a soft-shelled turtle on sale. He asked the seller for its price. The latter, knowing that he was rich and kind towards all kinds of sentient beings, told him that it was worth one million (coins), and hinted that if the philanthropist did not buy it, he would eat it. The philanthropist immediately agreed to buy the turtle and took it home. He washed it and cured its wounds, then released it into a river.⁵⁵ The rest of the story tells how the turtle repaid the householder by warning him in advance about the coming of a flood, and how on their way to escape, they rescued two other animals and a man. It also tells how, eventually, the man viciously repaid the philanthropist. Parts of this story will also be offered in chapter three of this thesis.⁵⁶

⁵³ These quotations have been investigated in my article, 'Notes on the *Chengju guangming dingyi jing*', pp. 31-33.

⁵⁴ T.3. p. 37a.

⁵⁵ LDJJ, T. 3, pp. 15a-16a.

⁵⁶ There are at least two other stories in the *Jinglü yixiang* similar to the story about the great householder who bought the soft-shelled turtle and released it (JLYX, T. 53, p. 228b-c, quoted from a lost translation called *Anan xianbian jing* 阿難現變經, T. 53, pp. 142b-143a, and *Mo guowang jing* 摩國王經). This story is said to have become part of Chinese folklore found in different provinces. See Liu Shouhua, 'Ren yu dongwu', p. 32.

The didactic theme of this story is intended to show that Devadatta—who, like the turtle, was another character in the story—was ungrateful and maleficent to the Buddha from previous life times. The rescue and release of the soft-shelled turtle is the only part of the story that aims to convey the message of releasing animals. Nonetheless, it did have a salient effect on Chinese society. In fact, it did not take long for this story to start to be accepted by the Chinese as a typical example of turtle releasing stories that are found in the so-called ‘strange writings’ and other texts. At least two common Chinese stories of releasing turtles appeared not long after the text’s translation.

Of the two stories, one is found in the Gan Bao’s (干寶 fl. 317-320) *Soushen ji* (搜神記 ‘records of searching for spirits’), the other in a fifth century commentary on the *Shishuo xinyu* (世說新語 ‘new account of tales of the world’). Since both stories are similar in structure, to quote one of them will illustrate sufficiently the point that is being made.⁵⁷

Kong Yu (268-342), styled Jingkang, was from Shanyin of Kuaiji. In the reign of Emperor Yuan (276-322), he was appointed a marquis for his merit in cracking down on Hua Yi’s (fl. 311) rebellious force. When he was young, he once passed by the Pavilion of Yubu and saw a turtle caged and on sale by the roadside. He bought it and set it free in the Stream of Yubu. Having swum to the mid-stream, the turtle turned [its head] left backward [to Kong Yu] several times. Later, he was appointed for his merit as the Marquis of Yubu. When a seal was being made, its button that was shaped as a turtle turned left. This happened three times. The seal-smith told him of this, only then did Kong realize that it was the repayment of the turtle [to get him appointed]. He then collected it and wore it. He was repeatedly promoted, reaching the rank of Vice Director of State

⁵⁷ SSJ 20: 239. Also in the *Shishuo xinyu* 2A: 185. Cf. the translation of SSJ by Kenneth DeWoskin & J. I. Crump, Jr, *In Searcher of the Supernatural: the Written Record* (Stanford & California: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 239. Kong Yu’s biography is included in the JS 77-78: 2051-67. For the event that he released a turtle, see pp. 2051-52. There are two versions of *Soushen ji*, the more genuine one is in twenty *juan*, which is used in this study. For a detailed discussion about the author and the texts of the *Soushen ji*, see, Derk Bodde ‘Some Chinese Tales of the Supernatural: Kan Bao and his Sou-shên chi’ (HJAS 6:3-4, 1942), pp. 338-357, and his ‘Again Some Tales of Supernatural: Further Remarks on Kan Bao and His Sou-shen chi’ (JAOS, 62:4, 1942), pp. 305-08. For the eight-fascicled version, see Wang Weihui, ‘Cong cihuishhi kan bajuaben *Soushen ji* de yuyan shidai’, at <http://202.119.41.10/oldversion/wangweihuilunwen-cch.htm> visited on July 20, 2002.

Affairs Department. [A title of] General under the Imperial Guard was posthumously conferred on him.

孔愉，字敬康，會稽山陰人。元帝時以討華軼功封侯。愉少時，嘗行經⁵⁸餘不亭。見籠龜于路者，愉買之，放於餘不溪中。龜中流，左顧者數週。及後以功封餘不亭侯。鑄印而龜鈕左顧，三鑄如初。印工以聞，愉乃悟其為龜之報，遂取佩焉。累遷尚書左僕射，贈車騎將軍。

A similar story, which will be quoted in the next chapter, is also recorded in the *Jinshu*. Stories like this suggest that *fangsheng* activity has been practised by the Chinese since the latter part of Western Jin at the latest in Southern China where the *Liudu jijing* was translated.⁵⁹

It may be worth mentioning that no sources mention that monastics engaged in animal releasing activities during this time. Considering the fact that the Chinese were officially not allowed to be ordained into the Buddhist Saṃgha till the year 335 in northern China, although private ordination started by the end of the Han times, one could reason that the number of Chinese monastics was relatively small.⁶⁰ Even in the Eastern Jin, an anti-Buddhist Chinese wrote that people of the Western Jin were not so interested in Buddhism, all the *sramaṇas* ('monks') were *hu* (胡) people (those from western regions outside of China).⁶¹

Given the fact that the most inspiring text for releasing animals was translated in the early 3rd century, the practice of releasing turtles existed since Western Jin times, and that the popularity of the *Chengju guangming dingyi jing* together with Xi Chao's work in the Eastern Jin period rose, it

⁵⁸ In Wang's edition it is 經行, here a new suggestion is followed. See Wang Huabao, 'Soushen ji jiaokan zhaji' (*Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 2, 2000), p. 55.

⁵⁹ It may be interesting to note that this sort of stories has been heard all the time in China, and that even nowadays, the Chinese are still releasing turtles.

⁶⁰ GSZ, T. 50, p. 385c; JS 46: 1305. It has become common knowledge that the first Chinese Buddhist monk was Yan Fotiao (嚴佛調) of the last part of the second century (T. 50, p. 324c). Yu Jiayi suggests that even ignoring the information about the Yan Fotiao being the first Chinese monk in GSZ it is highly likely that there were Chinese who became Buddhist monks near the end of the Han dynasty. See *Yu Jiayi lunxue zazhu* (2 vols., Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1963), vol. 1, pp. 125-27. later than Yan Fotiao was a Chinese monk named Zhu Shixing (朱士行 fl.260-82), see CSZJJ, T. 55, pp. 42a, 47c; GSZ, T. 50, p. 346b.

⁶¹ HMJ, T. 52, p. 81b; GHMJ, T. 52, p. 126b. Liu Shufen, 'Cong minzushi de jiaodu kan taiwu miefo', *ZYLYYJ* 72: 1, 2001, p. 24;

is not difficult to imagine that the inclusion of the term *fangsheng* in the *Liezi* version of the dove-releasing custom was the result of Buddhist influence.⁶² Many Chinese scholars regard the *Liezi* as a forgery made under Buddhist influence, mainly because the dove releasing custom seems similar to the animal releasing tradition of Buddhism.⁶³ Bodde does not accept this view. Instead, he suggests that the dove releasing custom is an indigenous Chinese one since the Buddhist custom of releasing animals did not occur till the fifth century CE.⁶⁴ He seems to have reached an accurate conclusion but one based on an apparently false suggestion. After all, even when the custom was in its heyday, only a few persons' animal-releasing activities were recorded.

3. The Animal Releasing Custom in 5th and 6th Century China

3.1. More Texts Advocating Releasing Animals and More Practitioners

The fifth and sixth centuries saw an increase in the number of Buddhist translations and the development of the custom of releasing animals under the encouragement of officials and emperors. First, during the fifth century, the Vinaya texts of several major Buddhist schools were successively translated into Chinese. These texts confirm that the Buddha did not forget to tell his clerical disciples that observing disciplinary rules meant no hindrance whatsoever to the practice of releasing tied or troubled animals. The Buddha said that a monk is free of any fault for rescuing or liberating a trapped or endangered animal, as long as he does it with a heart of kindness or of sympathy. However, he would be charged with a small offence if he released an animal, particularly a domestic one or the one that has an owner, under any of these circumstances: mischief, with the intention of stealing, releasing an animal of one sex for the other sex, or if he was regretful after releasing.⁶⁵

Then, there appeared another important translation called the *Jin guangming jing* (金光明經 'sūtra of golden light'), translated by

⁶² *Liezi jishi* (shuofu) 8: 269.

⁶³ See the views dealt with in Bodde, 'Lieh-Tzū', p. 25.

⁶⁴ Bodde, 'Lieh-tzū', p. 26.

⁶⁵ WFL, T. 22, p. 183a; SSL T. 22, p. 381a, 430c; *Sapoduobu pini modeleiqie*, T. 23, p. 587c; *Shanjianlü piposha*, T. 24, p. 740a; SFL, T. 22, p. 974a.