

Some Reflexions on the Meanings of *Kokoro* as Exemplified in Japanese Buddhist Poetry

— An Instance of Hieroglossic Interaction —

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EVERY STUDENT of the Japanese language notices early enough that the semantic field of any given word in Japanese most of the time does not overlap with its immediate counterpart in Western languages. But it would be an error, to my mind at least, to think that the languages and cultures of Eurasia, however distant from each other they might be through time and space, are insulated entities only rarely interacting. I will try and show here that the Japanese concept of *kokoro*, for all its unique richness and originality, is actually the result of a long history of cross-cultural relations and an almost ideal example of what I called *hieroglossia*, or hierarchized religious contacts and influences between languages.

Here is not the place to discuss shades of meaning between, for instance, Latin *cor*, English *heart* or French *cœur*, to which we could add, for good measure, Greek κέαρ and καρδία, Russian *serdce* and Gaelic *croí* (old Irish *críde*); it will be enough to say that all these words, belonging to different language families inside the indo-european phylum, stem from a common indo-european root, often reconstituted as **kērd*, which developed into all those discrete words just mentioned, that still manage somehow to keep an *air de famille* recognized as such by everybody. I think it is safe to assume that this common root had a double meaning: the heart as a physical organ on one side, and as a mental one on the other. It is still the case in most of modern European languages.

At the other end of the Indo-european area, the same root has given the Sanskrit forms *hrd* and *hrdaya*, that closely parallel the Greek κέαρ and καρδία. Everyone, even innocent of any philological bend, can perceive the closeness of *hrd* to the English *heart*. The spread of Buddhism through South-East Asia carried the Sanskrit word, or its Pali cognate, to the Siamese and Cambodian languages almost without change.

On the other hand, the very same word, travelling northwards to Central Asia and eastwards to China, underwent a rich and strange metamorphosis. It is common knowledge that the translation of the Buddhist Scriptures and doctrinal treatises, mainly from Sanskrit into Chinese, was not a straightforward process; it lasted for centuries and, contrarily to what happened in Tibet, where a consistent list of set equivalents for the use of translators was early enough promulgated under royal authority, it was left to the proclivities of the different workshops and individuals to choose within an almost endlessly accumulating store of vocabulary. For

the sake of brevity, I will only here distinguish two main methods of conveying basic Indian Buddhist concepts into Chinese: the first, and least frequent, is the phonetic transcription through Chinese characters the meaning of which is more or less discarded to render only the sound of the Indic word, supposedly untranslatable; for example *nehan* < *nirvāṇa*, *datsuma* < *dharma*, *setsuna* < *kṣana*, etc. You will notice that, for these words, there are very good Chinese terms as well (resp. *jakumetsu* [and many others], *hō*, *nen*); indeed, the great majority of the common Chinese vocabulary of Buddhist texts pertains to this last category: purely Chinese words adapted more or less to convey ideas and notions yet unknown in China. The lack of a systematic set of translations explains that one Chinese word can be used to translate several Indic ones or, on the contrary, that several Chinese words actually render one Indic term.

To go back to our Sanskrit *hrdaya*, it is consistently translated in Chinese and very rarely transcribed phonetically. Most of the time, the translators have used one and the same word, i.e. the character *xīn/shin* 心, a very ancient Chinese pictogram which is basically the stylized drawing of a heart, for rendering the Indic word. As is evident from the primitive form of the character, the pristine meaning is fundamentally the heart as a physical organ; hence, if we follow most of the good dictionaries, the meanings of “seat of the mental and spiritual functions” on the one hand, and of “central and essential part”, “kernel, core” (cf. Jpn. *kakushin*) on the other, both in their concrete and figurative meanings. As a matter of fact, *hrdaya* matches almost exactly one part of those meanings, i.e. the heart as an organ, and the innermost part, the core. This nuance is still very much alive in Japan through the title of the best-known Buddhist Scripture here, the *Heart Sutra* or *Hannya-shin-gyō*. The mental and psychological aspect of *shin* is not so conspicuous in Sanskrit *hrdaya*, although the sentimental one (“love”) is well attested in compounds like *suhrd* “friend” (“well-loved one”), sometimes translated in Chinese as *shin. yū* 心友 (*shin* written as *kokoro*).

But while the Chinese translators used *shin* to translate *hrdaya*, the very same word was also put to good use for transposing a whole different set of Indic Buddhist terms, the technical meaning of which was clearly distinguished from *hrdaya* and had nothing to do from the start with the physical organ. It would be tedious and disproportionally long to explain them all here, let me just name the three main ones: *citta*, *manas*, *vijñāna*; everybody can see they belong to separate roots. Two of them have obvious cognates in the European languages (Latin *gnoscere*, Greek *gnosis*, English *to know*, for example, for *vi-jñāna*; L. *mens*, G. *menos*, E. *mind* for *manas*), and I may venture here to suppose a possible relation between *citta* and the Slavic root *cit-* (“to read, to count, compute, reflect”). All these words not only pertain to the psychological functions, but more precisely to the cognitive and reflective functions, and as such relate as well to rational thought.

We can thus see that through the agency of Chinese translators, the one character *shin*, a word already very rich in its own right, came further to load itself with a whole array of Buddhist and Indian psychological conceptions.

It is of some importance at this stage to quote a very interesting notice, as interesting as it is brief, from one of the most famous and influential Buddhist treatise written by a Chinese author, the *Mohezhi-guan/Maka-shikan* (English: *The Great Calming and Contemplation*) one

of the three major works of the Tiantai School. In the first chapter of his *summa*, Zhiyi, the 6th century Chinese monk, explains the meaning of the term *bodaishin* (skr. *bodhicitta*) and distinguish two main meanings of *shin*, as we have just said: one as the translation of *hrdaya*, the other as the translation of *citta*, only the second one being pertinent in the compound term *bodaishin*. While *citta* is defined as “the cognitive mind” 慮知之心 (T. XLVI p. 4a21), *hrdaya* is explained as meaning either the “essential part of any compound” 積聚精要 or the “core of plants” 草木等心, *core* here renders the same character *shin*. Nothing is said of the other meanings of *hrdaya*; the basic sense is pithily conveyed, but we can find it rather strange that Zhiyi chose to restrict his example to plants, although the text rather means “the core of things such as plants”. But a quick reading undoubtedly leaves the impression that plants are essentially meant here.

Zhiyi goes on saying that this meaning of *shin* as *hrdaya* is irrelevant 非 to the definition of the thought of enlightenment and must be left out 簡. So that one could think that we should leave the things at that, but you will see that they do not end here.

After India and China, let us see now what happens to the heart in Japan. The Chinese character we have just seen as already fraught with Indian and Buddhist conceptions was given at a very early time the reading *kokoro*. Although it seems that this very ancient Japanese word meant at the beginning the heart as an organ, and thus may have been, like *kimo* (“liver”), one of the very few genuinely Japanese terms indicating an anatomical reality,¹ the fact is that the physical entity quickly gave way to the different mental functions ascribed to the heart. But, and this is a very original characteristic of what we might call the double articulation of the Japanese writing, which blends Chinese characters with Japanese words more or less arbitrarily ascribed to those characters, although the physical meaning of *kokoro* as such has been almost completely obliterated, the Chinese character *shin*, to which this reading was ascribed, remains as a constant reminder of that meaning, to the extent that most modern Japanese would say that somehow *kokoro* means *shinzō* (the heart as an organ, a medical term), although both words can never be interchanged. Such is the power of the Chinese characters.

But, then, there is another, and reverse, aspect in the interaction of the two languages. As I said before, the arbitrary ascription of genuine Japanese words as readings of Chinese characters allows for two different written words to be read as one in Japanese, thus fusing together in this language discrete terms of the other one. An important instance is the Chinese character *yi/i* 意, which has three relevant senses here: one more general is “mental function”, the working of the spirit and of the intellect; this basic meaning caused to choose this character as a more precise translation of the Buddhist Sanskrit term *manas*, which was more loosely rendered as *shin*. It will be enough to say here, in order to have some idea of its importance, that it is what we might call “the sixth sense”, the mental faculty that perceives the phenomena (*dharma*) in the same way that the ear perceives the sounds and the eye perceives shapes and colours. In this more technical sense, the Chinese texts tend to use exclusively *i* and not *shin*. The third meaning of *i* is precisely this one: “meaning”, as in the Sino-japanese compound *imi* 意味. It can indicate the meaning of a word as well as the sense or true meaning of a poem and the answer to a riddle. As far as I know, this third meaning is conspicuously wanting in the Chinese character *shin* when used alone.²

I would now like to show with a few examples how Japanese learned monks and poets were able to make the most of all those different layers of meaning when they used them in a particular genre of Japanese classical poetry (*waka* 和歌) that is called *shakkyō-ka* or *shakkyō no uta*, “poetry on Buddhist topic”. I will chose my examples from a little collection of such Buddhist poems written by one of the most distinguished authors in this genre, Jien (Jichindaikashō; 1155–1225) whose fame as a scholar is perhaps greater than as a poet. This collection, as is obvious from its title *A Hundred Poems on the Essential Texts of the Lotus Sutra*,³ consists in a series of poems in Japanese (actually 144 and not a hundred) made on one hundred quotations from the *Lotus Sutra* in the Chinese version by Kumārajīva. The fascination exerced by these poems on the reader, on some readers at least, certainly originates in the way the Japanese poet enroots the ethereal teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* in the reality both of the Japanese language and of the Japanese landscape. We can endlessly wonder at the subtily of the dialogue taking place between the two languages, the Chinese and the Japanese, the latter developing all the possibilities of the former by means of the rhetorical intricacies of classical Japanese poetry. I will add to these examples a few poems from a different series composed by Jien on one particular teaching appearing in the second chapter of the Sutra, the “Ten Suchnesses” 十如是.⁴

35. *ada no hana / kokoro wo shimete / nagamureba / hotoke no yado ni / tomo no miyatsuko*

This transient flower,
if we bring all our heart
in contemplating it,
is our fellow-servant
in Buddha’s abode

Here, *kokoro* means mindfulness, poetical sincerity, and the power of concentration. This can be inferred from the pun or *double entendre* on *nagamu*, meaning both “to contemplate” and “compose poetry”; if the poetical mind is put to good use, then the transient flower, the favorite object of poets, can become the *minori no hana* “the flower of reality”, which is the *Lotus Sutra*.⁵ The scriptural context (the parable of the “prodigal son” in chapter IV of the Sutra) shows that here the flower is expected to attain enlightenment as well as a human being; if we remember that the verb *shimu* means “to permeate” as well, it is clear that *kokoro* is not only in the eye of the beholder, so to say, but in the flower too.

43. *kyō no sora ni / amaneku sosogu / ame no iro ha / minabito-goto ni / kokoro ni zo somu*

In today’s sky
the charm of rain
pouring on the universe
imbues the heart
of each and everyone

If we compare this poem to the scriptural passage it is meant to develop, we find that Jien performs here a sensorial transfer of a sort, since the *Lotus Sutra* tells of the taste of the rain, not of its “colour” (here translated by me as “charm”); but the change from taste to colour allows him to play on the concatenation of *iro*, *kokoro* and *somu* (“colour”, “heart”, “dye, imbue, permeate”) rather frequent in poetry and alluding to the charm of the loved one permeating the heart of the lover, but which is used for describing the melancholy or the emotion at the contemplation of

flowers blossoming; so that both love and the spectacle of nature are described here. The *Lotus Sutra* in this chapter describes only the beneficent effects of the same rain pouring on different kind of plants as a parable for the salutary action of Buddha's teachings on the sentient beings. Here as in the preceding poem, it is precisely the word *kokoro* that acts as conjunction between the two dimensions, the human and the vegetational one.

89. *yoshino-yama / oku no kokoro ni / suminureba / chiru hana mo naku / saku eda mo nashi*

When the hermit's heart
in the depths of Yoshino
has been purified,
flowers do not scatter
nor do twigs blossom anymore

In this description of the result of Buddhist practice in the mountains of Yoshino, a traditional recess for hermits and poets, the word *kokoro* means clearly the discerning and meditating mind and the new state of awareness that is brought by enlightenment. This poetical amplification of the scriptural words: "There is no more birth nor death" can be taken as an allusion to the practice of *pratyekabuddha* too, but we will not dwell on this here. Let us rather compare the use of *kokoro* here, in this rather restricted sense, to the following poem.

I. a. *yoshino-yama / kumo ka hana ka to / nagamekemu / yosome ha onaji / kokoro narikeri*

In the Yoshino Mountains
we may have looked and wondered
if it was clouds or flowers,
but beyond diversity
is the same heart

This poem is composed on the first suchness, the suchness of mark or aspect 如是相, and the purport of this piece is clearly to establish the identity of the phenomenal world with the mind which perceives it. Here the hills of Yoshino are not only the sojourn of hermits, but, on account on a poetical topos, the exemplification of erroneous perception: the cherry blossoms are taken from afar for the snow lingering on the heights; but there is no need for doubt or interrogation, since all phenomenal diversity is reintegrated in the mind. Here again, *kokoro* is the place of conjunction of outer nature and inner self.

The same idea is expressed in the following.

102. *satori-yuku / kokoro no mizu ni / somenureba / ika-naru iro mo / tagau mono ka ha*

Since they have been tinged
by the waters of the heart
awakening
will you find a colour
divergent from the others?

The scriptural passage referred to here has the word "real aspect" and we find much the same idea of the perfect integration of all phenomena in the absolute aspect of reality, which is held to be one of the most fundamental teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*. "Colour" means therefore

“phenomena, things as apparent to the eye.” But in the state of being awakened, the mind permeates every hue of the outer world.

The expression “water of the heart” is rather intriguing; coupled with the verb “to awaken”, it renders a certain image of the supreme state of conscience that we will find again in the following poem, all the more interesting as the decisive term *kokoro* is conspicuously absent.

II. *natsu no ike ni / moto yori tane no / areba koso / nigori-nishimanu / hana mo sakurame*

In the summer pond
since from the beginning
is hiding its germ,
immaculate
will the flower blossom

The flower to blossom in the pond is of course the lotus flower, and therefore the *Lotus Sutra*, but this is only one level, and the easiest one, of meaning. It will be too long to repeat it here, but I think I have show elsewhere⁶ that the second and third verse are a Japanese paraphrase of a Chinese Buddhist term for the *ālaya-vijñāna* or “store-consciousness,” while the fourth verse is a nice rendering of another technical term referring to an aspect of this consciousness (*amala-vijñāna*). The pond is a rather well-known metaphor for the heart, so that although the very word *kokoro* does not appear it, the whole poem is a description of the heart as the store of Buddha-nature. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that this poem is given under the caption “suchness of nature” 如是性.

The vegetational image is carried further in this last poem:

II.a. *ki mo kusa mo / ne-tsuki eda-ha mo / kizasu yori / hito no kokoro no / tane mo sa koso ha*

Since trees and grass
take root, leaves and branches
grow buds,
the same goes for the germ
in the human heart

Under the same caption of “suchness of nature”, we find here a very explicit parallel between vegetational life, all the more striking that we have seen how carefully Zhiyi distinguished the mind as subject of enlightenment from the meaning “heart of plants”. We cannot but think that Jien here wanted to reunite what was divided by the Master of the Tendai school.

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In conclusion, I think I have been able to show how the richness of *kokoro* as an all-encompassing psychological category has been displayed in a very thorough and original way in Japanese Buddhist poetry. And I hope too that the reasons for this have been made clear: it is not a random coincidence, but precisely because the learned monks who have composed such poetry were very consciously tapping on all the semantic and doctrinal resources of the vocabulary they were using.

More particularly, as a monk-poet steeped in all the doctrinal subtleties of Tendai and thinking along the religious logic of Tendai dogmatics, which loathes to leave a blatant contradiction hanging and aspires to the final cointegration or fusion of opposites, Jien could not be satisfied until he blended together the two dimensions of *shin* distinguished by Zhiyi at the beginning of its treatise on contemplation; if *citta* and *hrdaya* (this last term, as you remember, being explained as meaning “the heart of plants”) had been kept separated in *shin*, Jien, making full use of the traditional poetical lore, fuses them in *kokoro*.

We have here an excellent instance of a complete “hieroglossic” relationship, involving three languages, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, the world-views and psychological conceptions each of them conveyed, the third in the series being the richer for gathering at the end of the way all the meanings of the first two.

Everybody knows the famous zen saying “transmit from mind to mind” 以心傳心; if we remember that *hrdaya* springs eventually from the same Indo-European root as *heart*, it would perhaps be appropriate to read this sentence in Japanese as *kokoro o motte hāto ni tsutau* 心を以てハートに伝う and translate it into English as “transmit from heart to *kokoro*.”

NOTES

1. Cf. the poetical expression 肝向ふ心 “the heart facing the liver”.
2. It would be interesting to speak here, but for want of time, of some Japanese readings that could be viewed as the same rendering of two different technical terms; an especially interesting example is *kokorone*, that can be derived both from *shinkon* 心根 (from Sanskrit *mūlacitta*) and *ikon* 意根 (from *manendriya*). As a quite ordinary word in spoken Japanese, it both means one’s innermost feelings and one’s nature or character.
3. 法華要文百首, also known as the 詠法華經百首.
4. I have of course no time to explain more precisely this term here.
5. See my “From Jien to Son’en,” IRSJS, International Symposium 18, p. 157.
6. Cf. my 「和歌に依る法華經の解釈」, p. 8, in Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on Japanese Literature, Tokyo, 14th-15th, Nov. 2002, National Institute of Japanese Literature.