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Literati and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*  
大般涅槃經 in the Táng dynasty  
～Wéi Shěn's 韋諗 *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* 注大般涅槃經～

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1. Preface

This paper is based on my oral presentation given at the "New Horizons in Buddhist Studies" symposium held at the International College for Postgraduate Buddhist Studies on November 16, 2019. Before delving into the discussion of Wéi Shěn's 韋諗 *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* 注大般涅槃經 from the perspective of the activity of literati, let me provide a brief introduction to Wéi Shěn's *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng*.

The *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* authored by Wéi Shěn serves as a commentary on the northern text of *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*. Wéi Shěn, a prefectural governor during the Táng dynasty, is a figure about whom little is known. The *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* seems to have had limited, if any, circulation in China. However, Japanese sources, such as the *Tōiki dentō mokuroku* 東域傳燈目錄 compiled by a Japanese monk of the Heian Period called Eichō 永超 (1014- 1096)<sup>1</sup> and the *Nara-chō genzai issaikyō mokuroku* 奈良朝現在一切經疏目錄 by Ishida Mosaku 石田茂作<sup>2</sup>, provide records of this commentary.

According to the *Tōiki dentō mokuroku*, the commentary originally comprised thirty scrolls 卷, but only nine scrolls— II, IV, VIII, X, XII, XIII, XIV, XIX, and XXII—have survived to this day. Most of these scrolls are designated as important cultural properties in Japan, making direct access

<sup>1</sup> *Taishō* 55, no.2183 p.1151c and 1154b. Also refer to Aoki [2022] A, pp.42-43.

<sup>2</sup> Ishida Mosaku 石田茂作[1966], p.113. Also see Aoki [2022] A, pp.40-42.

challenging.

Based on my current investigation, I propose that the *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* may have been brought to Japan by Japanese monks Dōji 道慈 (?-744) or Genbō 玄昉 (?-746) and copied by Japanese official scribes during the Nara Period, to be more precise, between 713 and 753. However, the mystery remains as to why this commentary, authored by an obscure provincial governor, found its way to Japan.

Despite Wéi Shěn's lay background, he displayed a profound understanding of Buddhism. According to catalogs of sutras, his notable works include the *Zhù Wéimó jīng* 註維摩經 Commentary on *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, the *Jīngāng bōrě zhù* 金剛般若註 Commentary on *Vajracchedikāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra*, and possibly the *Zhù Fǎhuá jīng* 注法華經 or a commentary on *Saddharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra*<sup>3</sup>. However, except for the *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng*, none of these texts have been found so far to this day.

Following you will find detailed codicological information regarding the nine extant scrolls.

- ① Scroll II, One Scroll, Vertical 26.0 cm, Total Length 1656.6 cm, Nara Period, Seirai-ji, Mie Pref. (三重・西來寺)
- ② Scroll IV, One Scroll, Vertical 26.0 cm, Total Length 662.1 cm, Nara Period, Shitenno-ji, Osaka Pref. (大阪・四天王寺)
- ③ Scroll VIII, One Scroll, Vertical 26.4 cm, Total Length 1286.1 cm, Nara Period, Saikyō-ji, Shiga Pref. (滋賀・西教寺)
- ④ Scroll X, One Scroll, Vertical 25.8 cm, Total Length 1250.0 cm, Nara Period, Shōshu-raigyō-ji, Shiga Pref. (滋賀・聖衆來迎寺)
- ⑤ Scroll XII, One Scroll, Vertical 26.3 cm, Total Length 1465.6 cm, Nara Period, Sairai-ji, Mie Pref. (三重・西來寺)
- ⑥ Scroll XIII, One Scroll, Vertical 26.2 cm, Total Length 1081.8 cm, Nara

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<sup>3</sup> Aoki [2022]A, pp.53-60.

- Period, Personal storage, Nara Pref. (奈良・個人藏)
- ⑦ Scroll XIV, One Scroll, Vertical 26.3 cm, Total Length 1152.2 cm, Nara Period, Bishamon-dō, Kyoto Pref. (京都・毘沙門堂)
- ⑧ Scroll XIX, One Scroll, Vertical 26.3 cm, Total Length 1163.8 cm<sup>4</sup>, Nara Period, Saihou-ji, Kanagawa Pref. (神奈川・西方寺)
- ⑨ Scroll XXII, One Scroll, Vertical 26.0 cm, Total Length 1313.1 cm, Late Nara or early Heihan Period, Gogatsudō Art Gallery, Tokyo (東京・五月堂美術店)

(For the latest information regarding the *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng*, please refer to my monograph published in 2022 as well as my research map on the web<sup>5</sup>.)

## 2. Introduction

As aptly summed up by the phrase 道由人弘<sup>6</sup> “the Path spreads through people” (phrase found in the *Dà fāngbiàn fó bào'ēn jīng* 大方便佛報恩經 or *the Sutra on the Buddha's Great Skillful Means of Repaying Kindness*), the transmission of the Buddhist teachings depends on human activity. In Buddhism, there are three kinds of people engaged in religious activities: monastics, Buddhist householders<sup>7</sup> *jūshì* 居士, and commoners.

Looking back at the early transmission of Buddhism in China, the major believers at the time were the nobility, bureaucrats and their families. They had close ties to the Imperial court *cháo tíng* 朝廷 of the ruling dynasty, which provided them with opportunities to encounter newly imported ideas as well as visitors from abroad. Moreover, they were highly educated and

<sup>4</sup> The measurement data of Scroll XIX is based on the article of Mitsumori Tatsuo 三森達夫[1948] pp.11-18.

<sup>5</sup> <https://researchmap.jp/sweetdharma?lang=en>

<sup>6</sup> *Dà Fāngbiàn Fó Bào'ēn Jīng* 大方便佛報恩經 卷 6 : 「道由人弘」 (*Taishō* 03, no. 156, p. 157b16)

<sup>7</sup> There are other expressions used for ‘居士 *jūshì*’ such as lay believers, or lay Buddhists.

therefore often open to as well as capable of understanding the new cultural forms they were exposed to. Most importantly, they were wealthy, enabling them to acquire texts and spend time on studying them. Prince Yīng of Chǔ (Chǔ Wáng Liú Yīng 楚王劉英) of the Eastern Hàn dynasty Dōnghàn 東漢, for instance, was one of the earliest Buddhist householder-worshippers. According to the *Hòu Hàn shū* 後漢書, he worshipped the statue of a Buddha as early as 65 CE<sup>8</sup>.

The definition of the word ‘householder’ *jūshì* 居士 has gone through several changes over the course of its history<sup>9</sup>. In the early stage, the word referred to those who retire from social activities but undertake studies at home for their own pleasure. Later, under the influence of Buddhism, the definition shifted to lay people who practice Buddhist studies or activities with or without a worldly occupation. In the Buddhist definition, householders are those who believe in the three treasures *sān bǎo* 三寶 (*Buddha, dharma, saṃgha* 佛法僧), undertake the five precepts *wǔ jiè* 五戒, and accumulate good deeds while eliminating evil deeds.

On the other hand, the term “literatus” *shìdàfū* 士大夫 refers to those who had passed the imperial examination *kējǔ* 科舉 and became bureaucrats. In most cases, they were landlords as well as scholars at the same time.

Due to their extensive knowledge and educational background, literati sometimes worked in sutra translation bureaus *yìchǎng* 譯場 being officially in charge with proofreading or editing the wording. When such literati also became Buddhist householders, they not only supported Buddhism politically and economically, but also played important roles in assimilating as well as interpreting and commentating on complex Buddhist teachings for the commoners.

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<sup>8</sup> *Hòu Hàn shū* 後漢書 42 : 列傳第 32 *Chǔ Wáng Yīng Zhuàn* 楚王英傳(The Biography of the Prince Yīng of Chǔ) *Hòu Hàn shū* 後漢書(The Twenty-four Histories 二十四史 3)

<sup>9</sup> Pān Guímíng 潘桂明[2000] Chapter 1 of vol.1.

Commentaries on Buddhist sutras written by literati are, however, hardly found today. One of the reasons for this is probably the fact that the officials were not considered to be professional exegetes or to have the same standing as the monastics. Therefore, their commentaries were not often included in sutra repositories or official publications. Another reason has to do with the fact that their studies of the Buddhist canon were primarily pursued as a personal interest, which made it difficult to associate them with a precise school or lineage. This is why their commentaries are hardly referred to in traditional sources and extant commentaries written by literati are quite rare.

The present paper focuses on a manuscript written by Wéi Shěn, a literatus during the Táng dynasty.

### 3. Literati and Buddhism in under the Táng dynasty

*Jūshì zhuàn* 居士傳<sup>10</sup> (*Biographies of Householdors*) by Péng Shàoshēng 彭紹昇(1740-1796) of the Qīng 清 dynasty, collects stories of 312 householders from the Eastern Hàn to the Qīng dynasties, some of which relate the lives of literati.

Today when we think of famous Buddhist householders of the Táng dynasty, such names as Lǐ Tōngxuán 李通玄(635-730) may spring up to mind. However, strictly speaking, he was not a bureaucrat and will therefore not be included in this category. Lǐ Tōngxuán was actually a member of the royal family. Furthermore, he played a major role himself as a master of the Huáyán 華嚴 school.

If we are to look for typical examples of Táng literati who were also Buddhist householders, several figures such as Wáng Wéi 王維(701-761), Yán Zhēnqīng 顏真卿(709-785), Bái Jūyì 白居易(772-846) and Péi Xiū 裴休(791-864) would naturally come to mind.

Wáng Wéi was not only a famous poet representing the apogee of the Táng

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<sup>10</sup> Péng Shàoshēng 彭紹昇 annotated by Zhāng Péifēng 張培鋒[2013], p.2.

culture, but also an elite bureaucrat. Moreover, he was also an accomplished painter, calligrapher and musician. We know that his Chinese courtesy name *zì* 字 of Mójíe 摩詰 is derived from “Wéimójíe” 維摩詰 or “Vimalakīrti”, the celebrated lay Buddhist follower who is the protagonist of the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra* 維摩詰經.

Yán Zhēnqīng became renowned for his calligraphical virtuosity which assured him a place amongst the “four great calligraphers” of the Táng dynasty. He was also a loyal retainer of the Táng dynasty who had played a key role in the suppression of the Ānshǐ zhī luàn 安史之亂 (Anshi rebellion). At the same time, he is also known to have been a devout believer in the Buddha dharma who kept the five precepts.

Likewise, Bái Jūyì ranks as one of the most famous poets of the Táng age while Péi Xiū is remembered not only as a Buddhist writer but also as a skillful calligrapher. Péi Xiū actually bears the closest resemblance to Wéi Shěn in spite of the one-hundred-year gap between them. While he did not write any commentaries like Wéi Shěn did, Péi Xiū authored prefaces for some of Zōngmì’s 宗密 (780-841) works like the *Zhù Huáyán fǎjiè guān mén* 注華嚴法界觀門 (*Commentary on the Huáyán’s Gate of Contemplation on the Reality-Realm*) and the *Dàfāngguāng yuánjué xiūduōluó liǎoyì jīng lüèshū* 大方廣圓覺修多羅了義經略疏 (*Brief Commentary on the Perfect Enlightenment Sūtra*).

These literati also share some features which do not apply to Wéi Shěn. They often had close connections to Chàn/Zen masters and their poetry often reflects spiritual experiences associated to this tradition. Many of them, because of their proficiency in calligraphy and poetry, also wrote epitaphs at the request of Buddhist temples or the imperial court.

On the other hand, there is nothing in Wéi Shěn’s commentary to indicate any connection to the Chàn/Zen tradition. Furthermore, I have not found any historical records to support his involvement in writing epitaphs. What singles him out amongst the Táng literati is his authorship of a commentary



on a Buddhist scripture.

As far as I know, throughout the entire Táng history, there is only one similar example, to wit, the case of Fēng Wúdài 封無待 (for a detailed discussion, see Ochiai Toshinori 落合俊典 2011)<sup>11</sup>. Fēng Wúdài is said to have lived from the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE to the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE, therefore slightly earlier than Wéi Shěn. In the Preface of his commentary on the *Heart Sutra*, Fēng Wúdài refers to his position in the central government bureaucracy, adding that as he has some spare time, he has decided to write this exegetical work. The commentary itself reveals a rich knowledge and deep understanding of the Buddhist doctrines. (The same can be said of Wéi Shěn, too). Moreover, Fēng Wúdài's commentary provides no clues regarding his affiliation to a specific Buddhist school or temple. Neither can we find any reference to his master. (Again, such features are common to Wéi Shěn's case.)

We can thus identify two types of literati active during the Táng dynasty. The first were talented poets and calligraphers, who engaged with Chàn/Zen masters and composed poetry reflecting their spiritual experiences. The second were literati who apparently did not become affiliated to the Chàn/Zen tradition or any other specific schools, yet had sufficient knowledge to write commentaries on Buddhist scriptures.

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Next, I will briefly outline the traditional exegetical history of the *Nièpán jīng* 涅槃經 in China, focusing on the background of Wéi Shěn's commentary.

#### 4. Brief review of the research history of *Nièpán jīng* in the Táng dynasty

##### (1) Before the Táng dynasty

The study of the “Mahāyāna” *Nièpán jīng* began shortly after the translation

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<sup>11</sup> Ochiai Toshinori 落合俊典[2011], pp. 1 - 52

in six scrolls done by Fǎxiǎn 法顯 (337-422) and Buddhahadra 佛陀跋陀羅 (359-429) in 418 CE (i.e., the so-called *Fǎxiǎn* version). In particular, this version was studied by Dàoshēng 道生 (355-434), Huìyán 慧嚴 (363-443) and Huìguān 慧觀 (unknown dates). Famously, Dàoshēng rejected the theory that the *icchantikas* cannot attain Buddhahood (a doctrine found in the Fǎxiǎn translation). Instead, he claimed, all sentient beings have Buddha-nature 一切衆生悉有佛性, 一闡提成佛論. This marked the beginning of a famous controversy in the history of Chinese Buddhism. This dispute could not be settled before the translation of the forty-scroll version of the text, also known as the “Northern version”. We owe this translation to Dharmakṣema 曇無讖 (385-433) in 421 CE. The forty-scroll version of the “Mahāyāna” *Nièpán jīng* clearly vindicated the interpretation advocated by Dàoshēng, who was later invited to give lectures on this scripture. Dàoshēng also wrote a commentary named *Nièpán jīng yì shū* 涅槃經義疏 (later named the *Guānzhōng Shū* 關中疏, which is included in *Nièpán jīng jí jiě* 涅槃經集解).

Héxī Dàolǎng 河西道朗 (316–420), who translated the Northern version alongside Dharmakṣema, authored a commentary entitled the *Nièpán jīng yì shū* 涅槃經義疏, which unfortunately has been lost.

Later in 436 CE, a thirty-six-scroll version, known as the Southern version, was edited by Huìyán, Huìguān and Xiè Língyùn 謝靈運 (385-433). This version is based on Fǎxiǎn’s translation. In the southern part of China, the so-called Jiāngnán 江南 region, research on *Nièpán jīng* was based on this Southern version.

The Liáng 梁 dynasty was the golden era for research on the *Nièpán jīng*. Many commentaries were written, and the Nirvāṇa school 涅槃宗 was established. The tradition counts three key masters, i.e., Guāngzhái-sì Fǎyún 光宅寺法雲 (467-529), Kāishàn-sì Zhìzàng 開善寺智藏 (458-522) and Zhuāngyán-sì Sēngmín 莊嚴寺僧旻 (467-527).

Emperor Wǔ of Liáng 梁武帝 (464-549) is known to have ordered

Bǎoliàng 寶亮 (444-509) to edit the *Nièpán jīng jíjiě* 涅槃經集解 and to write himself a preface to it. The *Nièpán jīng jíjiě* has 71 scrolls and assembles passages from more than 10 commentaries. It represents the culmination of the *Nièpán jīng* commentarial literature, being considered an outstanding exegetical achievement.

During the Suí 隋 dynasty (581- 618), Jīngyǐng-sì Hùiyuǎn 淨影寺慧遠 (523-592) wrote the *Dàbān nièpán jīng yìjì* 大般涅槃經義記. Except for Wéi Shěn's commentary, this is the only exegetical work based on the Northern version. Jízàng 吉藏(549-623) also wrote a commentarial treatise dedicated to the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*, named the *Nièpán jīng yóuyì* 涅槃經遊意. So did Guàndǐng 灌頂 (561-632), one of Zhìyǐ's 智顛 main disciple (538-97), who authored two commentaries on the same text, to wit, the *Dàbān nièpán jīng xuányì* 大般涅槃經玄義, in two scrolls, and the *Dàbān nièpán jīng shū* 大般涅槃經疏, in 33 scrolls.

The Nirvāṇa school reached its peak during the Liáng dynasty. From the end of the Liáng to the beginning of the Chén 陳 dynasties, we witness the rise of other Buddhist schools such as Sānlùn 三論宗, Shèlùn 攝論宗, and Tiāntāi 天台宗. The emergence of these schools made it difficult for the Nirvāṇa school to retain its appeal. This historical process was further complicated by the fact that quite a few scholar-monks associated with the Nirvāṇa tradition were not exclusively focused on the *Nièpán jīng* only but also studied other sutras or even belonged to other schools. Furthermore, as Buddhism was twice persecuted under Emperor Zhou Wu, many Northern Chinese Buddhists fled into southern China. One of the by-products of this exodus was the fact the Southern Nirvāṇa tradition became absorbed into the Sānlùn and/or Tiāntāi schools and slowly died out. In a parallel process, the Northern Nirvāṇa tradition, which had once prospered alongside the Shèlùn school, ceased to exist by the beginning of the Táng dynasty due to the newly established Fǎxiàng school 法相宗.

(2) Research history in the Táng

So, by the beginning of the Táng age, the Nirvāṇa school, as an organized tradition chiefly based on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra*, had ceased to function. This, however, does not mean that the *Nièpán jīng* was no longer the object of exegetical interest and study. Some Buddhist scholars continued to study the *Nièpán jīng* out of personal interest while pursuing their doctrinal curriculum according to the school to which they belonged.

Indeed, commentaries on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-mahāsūtra* continued to be composed during the Táng. Most of them come from the Tiāntāi school. Only three of them, namely, Dàoxiān's 道暹 *Nièpán jīng sījì* 涅槃經私記 (9 scrolls) and *Nièpán xuányì wénjù* 涅槃玄義文句 (1 scroll) and Xíngmǎn's 行滿 *Nièpán jīng sījì* 涅槃經私記 (12 scrolls), are extant. Other Tiāntāi scholar-monks of this age who are also known to have studied the *Nièpán jīng* include Xuánlǎng 玄朗 (673-754), Dàyi 大義 (691-779), Zhànrán 湛然 (711-782), Yuánhào 元浩 (?-817), Dàoxiān 道暹 (740-810) and Xíngmǎn 行滿.

During the Táng epoch, we also see some Huáyán 華嚴 scholar-monks like Ūisang 義湘 (625-702) and Wonhyo 元曉 (617-686), both originally from Silla, as well as Chéngguān 澄觀 (738-838) and Zōngmì 宗密 (780-841) who showed interest in the scripture.

The exegetical literature dedicated to the *Nièpán jīng* came to an end with Zhìyuán's 智圓 *Nièpán jīng xuányì fāyuán jīyào* 涅槃經玄義發源機要 and *Nièpán jīngshū sāndé zhǐguī* 涅槃經疏三德指歸, both composed in the Song 宋 dynasty.

## 5. Wéi Shěn's *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng*

### (1) Importance

*Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* is important for two reasons. First, with the exception of Huiyuǎn's *Dàbān nièpán jīng yìjì*, it is the only extant commentary based on the Northern version. Before *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* became known, Huiyuǎn's commentary was actually considered to be the

only exegetical material dedicated to this version. Second, alongside Fēng Wúdài's work (discussed in the previous section), the *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* is the only extant example of a commentary written by a literatus.

## (2) Author

Little is known about the author Wéi Shěn, other than his title of governor of the Dǎojiāng Prefecture 導江縣令, which is stated at the beginning of the scroll titled *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng*. According to the *Yuánhé jùnxiàn túzhì* 元和郡縣圖志<sup>12</sup> (*Yuánhé Maps and descriptions of the Counties and Prefectures*) and *Xīn Tángshū* 新唐書 (地理志)<sup>13</sup> (*New History of the Táng Dynasty: The Annals of Geography*), the name “Dǎojiāng” appears used in two periods, i.e., 619-626 and 713-741. In addition, the *Shōsōin Monjo* 正倉院文書 or *Shōsō-in Treasure Repository*, records that another commentary by Wéi Shěn on the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśasūtra*, which is now lost, had been borrowed in the year 753<sup>14</sup>. Based on the above, I therefore date Wéi Shěn to the early 8<sup>th</sup> century and the composition of the *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* sometime between 713 and 741. The text must have been brought to Japan in the Nara period, no later than 753. (For further details on the question of the formation of the *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng*, refer to my previous article).<sup>15</sup>

## (3) Special features linked to the content of the *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng*.

- ① The commentary is based on the Northern version.
- ② Several words are, however, adopted from the Southern version. There are approximately ten such examples in scroll II.

<sup>12</sup> *Yuánhé Jùnxiàn Túzhì* 元和郡縣圖志 (*Yuánhé Maps and descriptions of the Counties and Prefectures*), *Zhōngguó Gǔdài Dìlǐ Zǒngzhì Cóngkān* (中國古代地理總志叢刊), p.773.

<sup>13</sup> *Xīn Tángshū* 新唐書 42 (地理志) (*New History of the Táng Dynasty: The Annals of Geography*), p.1080.

<sup>14</sup> *Shōsōin monjo* 正倉院文書, *Dai nihon komonjo* 大日本古文書 (*The Japanese Ancient Document Archives*) Chronicles III 編年之三, Tenpyō 20th to Tenpyō Shōhō 5th 天平二十年—天平勝寶五年. pp.642-643

<sup>15</sup> Aoki Chialin 青木佳伶 [2018] pp.1-22

- ③ Terms adopted from texts other than the Northern or Southern versions. I have identified around 25 examples of this kind just in scroll II. It will require further research before drawing any conclusions on the significance of this choice.
- ④ Rigorous attention to definitions  
My study of the text reveals that Wéi Shěn paid serious attention to the meanings of words and their usage. There is a distinct possibility that he referred to the *Yīqièjīng yīnyì* 一切經音義<sup>16</sup> (*Glossaries of Buddhist Sutras*). Wéi Shěn's meticulous attention to lexical details might reflect his educational background as a literatus.
- ⑤ Changes in the citations  
The *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* also contains what appear to be citations from other major commentaries. It is, however, difficult to identify the latter, and I continue to seek for their precise provenance. The reason for this is that Wéi Shěn often changed the wording and style of the citations, and never clarified from which works he cited.
- ⑥ Avoiding the repetition of the same words
- ⑦ No traces of scholastic affiliation

The *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* offers no clues as to which school Wéi Shěn belonged to, who was his master, and what temple he was related to. This is similar to the case of Fēng Wúdài. As noted earlier, it seems that Wéi Shěn and Fēng Wúdài represent a rather unique subcategory of literati different from Wáng Wéi and the other Táng householders famous for their poetry or calligraphy.

As Ui Hakuju 宇井伯壽 states, Chinese Buddhism loves to categorize<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> *Yīqiè Jīng Yīnyì* 一切經音義卷 25, *Dàbān Nièpán Jīng Yīnyì* 大般涅槃經音義 (*Taishō* 54, no.2128, pp. 463a11- 480c24)

<sup>17</sup> Ui Hakuju 宇井伯壽[1951] p.220

Chinese Buddhists first accepted new teachings, then they categorized them. When something new comes, they try to make it fit into a category.

The same happened when the *Nièpán jīng* was transmitted. Its teachings were classified according to the criteria of doctrinal assessment 教判. Such strict categorizations might be relevant to scholars, whether traditional or modern, but they also pave the way to sectarian understanding and hinder the accessibility of some of the teachings to the general public. Those who preferred a freer style of interpretation, such as the literati who were not affiliated to any particular school, might have felt less constrained by the strict emphasis on categorizations and classifications.

Wéi Shěn and Fēng Wúdài were probably two such free-minded exegetes. We continue to see the same pattern today. For example, I am conducting research on the *Nièpán jīng*, but this does not mean that I belong to a certain school or tradition.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper introduces Wéi Shěn's *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* and discusses its main features. Compared to the commentaries authored by famous monks and judged according to their scholastic standards, Wéi Shěn's *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* might appear a mediocre work. However, its value lies, in part, in revealing the existence of a different type of literatus other than the Chàn/Zen poets. These unknown literati such as Wéi Shěn and Fēng Wúdài were writing in freer styles, without any emphasis on categorization or displaying any school affiliation. That is why Wéi Shěn was able to adopt terminology from other texts without any hesitation. Making such alterations to the holy Buddhist Canon would have been practically impossible for a monastic.

I have been trying to understand why Wéi Shěn's commentary was brought to Japan, and it may be precisely the lack of categorization which offers a clue: Wéi Shěn's commentary was probably welcomed by those readers who

were not concerned about scholastic affiliations. This might be seen as a new trend in the commentarial tradition brought back by the Japanese monks who had studied in China. The *Zhù Dàbān nièpán jīng* is practically an unknown text. It is certainly not a famous text, but personally I consider it as an important work. It reveals how an unknown literatus, apparently independent of the established commentarial schools of his day, may nonetheless bring a contribution to the history of Buddhism in East Asia.

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