

MIND OR HEART? ON TRANSLATING THE CHARACTER *XIN* [1] IN CHINESE BUDDHIST MAHĀYĀNA TEXTS INTO WESTERN LANGUAGES

Jana BENICKÁ

Department of the Languages and Cultures of the Countries of East Asia,
Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia

The aim of this article is to shortly examine some implications of the term *xin* ^{mind; heart, etc.} in Chinese Buddhist texts (against the background of the main philosophical implications of Mahāyāna teachings as such), to show a primary danger of interpreting (or translating) this term (and other terms like *essence*, *principle*, *One mind*, etc.) as entities “inherently existing”, or as independent *substances*.

The question whether to translate the Chinese character *xin* ^{mind, heart, consciousness, intentions, thoughts} into English as “*mind*” or as “*heart*” has been raised by some Buddhologists, in my opinion, mainly (or perhaps only) due to attempts by some translators to interpret the term (*a process* indeed, expressed by this character) with the implications of some kind of *substance*, thus situating (or confining in this case) the *process* in spatial extension limits. Of course, the implications of the term *substance* itself can be examined from many different aspects, varying from one philosopher to another:

Substance – as necessarily implying the assumption of itself being situated or extended in space – a linear space.

In the *Ethics*, Spinoza defines *substance* as what is in itself, and is conceived through itself (while “attribute” is comprehended as that which intellect perceives of a *substance* as constituting its essence).

Substance – can be comprehended as an “ontologically *prior* nature or characteristics”, the term “ontological” here conveying meanings like “basic” or “first in (a linear) time”.

Or, as defined by Aristotle in his *Categories*, *substance* is that which is neither *predictable* (“*sayable*”) of anything nor present in anything as an aspect or property in it.¹

¹ One of the examples given by Aristotle illustrating his definitions is *a horse*. We can predicate *being a horse* of something but not *a horse*.

Of course, these criteria are only a few among many implications or confinements according to which we can derive at least general observations on the term *substance* relevant for the topic of this article. However, also by exploring the *substance*-like implications of the term *xin*, I intend to question the philosophical relevancy of the problem raised, the problem of whether the meanings of the Chinese character *xin* (especially in Mahāyāna texts, for the most part those of Chan [2] Buddhism) mainly imply the *contents* of the term “heart” or, “on the contrary” of the term “mind”; or not. Regarding the term *substance* itself, my analysis will mainly focus on the problem of “spatial extension” (in a linear space) of the *content* of *xin*, yet, of course, not confining the scope of my elaborations on the topic only in this respect.

Most of the schools of Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism postulate the terms, which we can be tempted to interpret as kinds of *substance* – namely, for example, *ti* [3] (*essence*), *xing* [4] (*nature*), *foxing* [5] (*Buddha nature*), *Yixin* [6] (*One mind*), or *xin* (*mind*, *heart*), and, I think, that the discussions whether to translate our character *xin* as “mind” or as “heart” could have been primarily exacerbated when the problem of the interpretation of the just mentioned terms was faced by the translators or scholars. *Xin* is a very frequent word in Chinese Buddhist texts and its meaning connotations can vary from English “mind”, “heart”, “consciousness”, “intentions”, “thoughts” to the notions of “the Absolute (mind)”. So, first of all I want to briefly introduce the main tenets of the Mahāyāna teachings, which can give us a more or less solid basis for our further examinations of the term, or, let us say, justification for our further steps.

Chinese Mahāyāna philosophy as such is basically rooted in Nāgārjuna’s elaborations on its key term – *emptiness* (Skt. *śūnyatā*, Chn. *kong* [7]). Nāgārjuna was a famous Indian Buddhist thinker from the fourth century, author of the *Memorial Verses on the Middle Teaching* (*Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*),² where one of the most crucial points of the Buddhist teaching is also analysed – the notion of *conditioned arising* (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*)³ – it is well known that Buddha’s teaching (Dharma) was generally distinguished from among all temporary teachings by the doctrine of *conditioned arising*. This doctrine, roughly, says that any “real” arising, i.e. arising which would be understood as the arising of a real *thing* (conceived with the implications of *svabhāva*⁴), not of a mere *phenomenon*, is not tenable. The conception of *pratītyasamutpāda* dismisses arising of a “real” thing,⁵ that is, a thing existing independently on the “*citta*”.⁶

² Nāgārjuna in *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (chapter 1) states: “The self-nature of existents is not evident in the conditions, etc. In the absence of self-nature, other-nature too is not evident.” (English translation according to Kalupahana, 1986: 107).

³ In Chinese mostly translated as *yuangqi* [9].

⁴ Generally speaking, the term *svabhāva* in the Mahāyāna thinking designates “self-nature”, and can be labelled as an opposite to the term *lakṣaṇa* (Chn. *xiang* [8]) – “phenomenal mark”.

⁵ In accordance with current translations of the Sanskrit term *svabhāva*, here we can use the expression “inherently existing”.

Two terms are central in the analysis of *conditioned arising*: *cause* (Skt. *hetu*)⁷ and *condition* (Skt. *pratyaya*)⁸. Nāgārjuna shows the principal contradiction in any attempt to postulate the existence of any “ontological” *cause*, saying that only different kinds of *conditions* can be appealed to when explaining our experience (of *reality*). Whereas *causes* are, according to Nāgārjuna, unobservable, he speaks about the *conditions* as about inherent part of our experience. And, in his philosophical elaborations, the scene of human experience was specified through four *conditions*, which should be primarily comprehended as “forms of our empirical experience”:

1. *efficient condition* (*hetu-pratyaya*)
2. *percept-object condition* (*ālambana-pratyaya*)
3. *immediate condition* (*samanantara-pratyaya*)
4. *dominant condition* (*adhipati-pratyaya*)

Hetu-pratyaya is usually translated as “*efficient condition*”, “*primary condition*”, “*producing cause*”, etc. To some extent we can say that this *condition* corresponds to the Aristotelian *causa efficient*. Garfield (1995: 109) explains it as: “*Efficient conditions* are those salient events that explain the occurrence of subsequent events: Striking a match is the *efficient condition* for its lighting....” The sentence “there is a flame because of my striking a match” can be the answer referring to *efficient condition*. Generally speaking, a noticeable difference of *hetu-pratyaya* from other *conditions* consists in its exclusively contextual explanatory function, thus, the mentioned reply is in the given context the most natural answer to the question on the *cause*. Nothing more. It is not necessary to conclude from such a form of answer on “causal power”, or “the agent” or *causa sui* etc., although it seems to be a natural consequent step of human reasoning. *Efficient condition* is just a mere direct answer to a given question.

Ālambana-pratyaya, also translated as “*objectively supporting condition*”, expresses our act of differentiating between a mental event (perception, thought) and its “object”. This *condition* refers to subject-object distinction as a genuine part of our experience. David Kalupahana (1986: 111) points out that: “Buddhism recognized external objects as *conditions* for the arising of ideas of experience (in contrast to the ideas of imagination)”. Then he claims that the “facts” like, for example, “depending upon eye and visible form a visual consciousness arises”, serve as *conditions* for the ideas of perceptual experience.

⁶ *Citta* – one of Sanskrit terms which are usually translated or reinterpreted in Chinese Buddhist texts as *xin*; its most frequent English translations are “*mind*” or “*Mind*” (when the letter is capitalized, the term being explained as representing meanings “Ultimate Reality” or “Pure Consciousness”, especially in the teachings of the schools of “Buddhist Idealism” – see below). However, generally speaking, the term designates the totality of mental processes, a process of “thinking itself”.

⁷ In Chinese (usually) *yin* [10].

⁸ In Chinese (usually) *yuan* [11].

By *Samanantara-pratyaya* – “*immediate condition*”, “*contiguity condition*” – Buddhist philosophy reflects the “causal” character of experience, yet the notion of *immediate* should be comprehended here within the scope of its “explanatory function”. By this *condition* a lapidary “fact” is expressed that in realm of human experience every event is immediately preceded by another one, and that there is no *hiatus* in the flow of events. Unlike the *hetu-pratyaya*, the *samanantara-pratyaya* – as its very name implies – is temporary contiguous to the effect and has to precede it immediately. In other words, in the world of our ordinary experience the sentence “because you have made me angry” will always be the clearest and the most understandable answer to the question “why did you cuff me on the ear” rather than, for example, “because the distance of atoms and molecules of my hand and your face finally reached the point in which these change a spray of photons carrying the power efficiency” – although this is a “true” answer as well. Inasmuch as we assume a continuity in a flow of events, *immediate condition* is not necessarily observable in all cases, and we are almost always able to replace one given *immediate condition* with another.

Adhipati-pratyaya is a Buddhist counterpart to Aristotelian *causa finalis* (of course, we should always keep in mind a specific character of *conditions* as “mere” forms of experience). Unlike the previous three *conditions*, which can be judged as being related to the question “Why?”, this one answers the question “What for?”. Whereas the first three *conditions* are connected with the “causal” character of our experience, this one points to a “purposive” aspect of our phenomenal experience. Garfield (1995: 109), for example, states: “My hopes for understanding of Mādhyamika might be the *dominant condition* for my reading Nāgārjuna’s text.”

Thus, we can conclude that Nāgārjuna’s theory of *emptiness* does not presuppose the existence of any independent *substance* operating *beyond* phenomena, and, we can say that his notion of *emptiness* is postulated without any metaphysical commitment; “to cause” belongs exclusively to a phenomenal aspect of the world. Needless to say, the process of mental activities of a human being cannot be “spatially confined” to some linear spatial extension.⁹

⁹ Th. Stcherbatsky (2000: 85), regarding space in Buddhist philosophy, claims: “In the first period of its philosophy Buddhism admitted the reality of Space as one of the elements of the universe. It was an empty space imagined as an unchanging, eternal, all-embracing element. But when later Buddhists were confronted by Idealism in their own home [Vijñānavādins and Yogācārins], they saw that the reality of external objects does not admit of a strict proof, and the reality of a substantial space was then denied. Substantial time was likewise denied, but subtle time, i.e., the moment, the point-instant of efficiency, was not only asserted, it was made, as we shall presently see, the fulcrum on which the whole edifice of reality was made to rest. The notions of substantial time and space were not attacked on the score that they were a priori institutions whose empirical origin it was impossible to conceive, but they were destroyed dialectically on the score that the notions of duration and extension as they are used in common life covertly contain contradictions and therefore cannot be accepted as objectively real.”

On the other hand, terms like – *ti* [3] ([“true”] *essence*), *li* [12] ([“true”] *principle*), *Yixin* [6] (*One* [“absolute”¹⁰] *mind*) or *foxing* [5] (*Buddha nature*) are widely proclaimed in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, thus, at the first glance, the terms evoking the notions of existence of some kind of *essence* operating *beyond* phenomena are proclaimed.¹¹ Of course, the tenets of any kind of absolutely independent *essence* sharply contradict the just mentioned teachings of Nāgārjuna. So, in this point we are obliged to clarify this “contradiction”. First of all, in the philosophy of *emptiness*, as we can see in the different philosophical systems of different schools of Chinese Mahāyāna, I think, two distinctive implications applicable to all of the just mentioned terms can be detected:

1. Their nature is *empty*.
2. The *emptiness* can be interpreted in a “positive” way.

A “positive” formulation of *emptiness* seems to be widely valid in Mahāyāna Buddhism as such. For example, in one of scholarly works on the philosophy of the Tiantai [14] school of Chinese Buddhism, by Lang Eun Ra (1989: 53), we can read that the term *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*) of Nāgārjuna’s thought can be paraphrased as “absolute inter-exclusiveness of ego, self-nature or *substance* in all *dharmas* [phenomena]”. This would mean that *emptiness* does not mean that all phenomena do not exist, but that they are in the state of excluding (being devoid of any) self-existent identity or fixed *essence* of any sort. Therefore, we can assert that a self-nature is excluded from every particular thing, absolutely and totally. “Exclusiveness” should not be the opposite of “inclusiveness”, but rather the ground of “inclusiveness” – “exclusiveness” of something means “inclusiveness” of some other things. Thus, we can argue that the “exclusiveness” of self-nature in every phenomenon [phenomenon’s “inherent existence”] means the “inclusiveness” of all others with no self-nature [“inherent existence”] involved.

Again, it is of most importance here to remember that *phenomena* (Skt. *dharmāḥ* – plural of *dharma*, Chn. *fa* [16]) are not independent entities “staying on their own” but, according to the Buddhist usage of the word, the *dharmas* (*phenomena*) are meaningful precisely under specific *conditions* and without our own experience of the world and our thinking about them, they do not exist, or better, closely following Buddhist general intention, they “have not meaning”. The same holds good for Mādhyamika’s *emptiness* (*śūnyatā*), Huayan’s *universal principle* (*li* [12]), or *Consciousness Only* schools’¹² concept of *mind*

¹⁰ “One (*yī*) in Chinese also means total and complete.” (Kristofer Shipper, 1994: 132) – this is one of also Taoist (Buddhist as well) meanings of the prefix “one”.

¹¹ For example, in the teachings of Chinese Huayan [13] school, the *principle* is directly labelled as “immutable”, but this “immutability” of the *principle* is introduced within the frame of the theory of the inseparability of the *principle* and phenomena. *Principle* and phenomena cannot be separated from each other, since they come into existence together and cease together. For detail See Hamar (1998).

(*citta*¹³, *ālayavijñāna*¹⁴, etc.). All these concepts we can take as “fundamental explanatory concepts” through which each of these schools explains the “proper” (i.e. conditioned / non-substantial?) nature of the world. However, all these concepts are still in danger of being understood as propagating “inherently existing” entities. For example, the teachings of the *Consciousness Only* school (sometimes labeled as a Buddhist “Idealism”, with its basic “truth” that the world, as we experience it, is nothing but a “cognitive construction” (Skt. *vijñapti*) explicitly postulates the real existence of a “human mind” (here the Sanskrit term *citta* or in Chinese the character *xin* are mostly used). But, it is generally accepted by the scholars that the notion of a “human mind” and its transformations (mental activities) here should be comprehended just as a permanent self-reflexive process of deautomatization of the *mind*, the process of *mind* which is being mistakenly grasped (by deluded sentient beings) as an independent *substance* – it cannot be comprehended in the intentions of postulating some kind of aseit (aseity – self-origination) *substance*.

Before we continue our analysis of the “philosophical background”, or “philosophical contents” of the original Buddhism notions toward how they were reinterpreted on the Chinese soil, also by the use of the *xin* character, I would like to do a short excursion into some (not strictly “philosophical”) implications of this character given in some Chinese classical texts.

First of all, the Chinese character *xin*, though originally being a pictogram of a physical human heart (therefore primarily formally indicating a “site” of mental activities and human feelings, according to the traditional Chinese, let us say, concepts), the character *itself* (not only in Buddhism, of course) expresses a *process* and as such cannot be limited, confined, or extended in space, thus, the discussions whether to translate it as a “mind” or as a “heart” seem to be not very relevant from the “ontological” or “epistemological” points of view. Therefore, just for the sake of illustration (without ambitions to derive any “philosophical” consequences), here I will give two (playful) examples, found in the texts of ancient China, which deal with “mental activities” or “mental abilities” – and situating /not situating/ them into physical organs – the human heart or human brain.

¹² Chn. *Weishi zong* [17]; also translated as the *Mere Ideation* school. In Indian Buddhism originated, labelled as *Consciousness Only* schools can be primarily seen as having two aspects: the “more philosophical” aspect (*Vijñānavāda*) and the “more practical” aspect – *Yogācāra*. In China, its most representative branch was the [*Phenomenal*] *marks of dharmas* school (*Faxiang* [18]).

¹³ For the Sanskrit term, see note 6.

¹⁴ The central concept of *Yogācāra* school of Buddhist philosophy – *vāsanā* (Chn. *xunxi* [19]) – generally designates a process of impressions of the external manifestations and one’s deeds constantly “perfuming” or influencing the “eighth consciousness”, the “storehouse consciousness” (Skt. *ālayavijñāna*, Chn. *zangshi* [20]). During the process of “perfuming” the karmic seeds become planted in the “storehouse consciousness”, waiting for the appropriate *condition* to be activated. It depends exclusively on the karma accumulated whether one becomes wise or dull, being so, everybody has the opportunity for the religious cultivation, to eventually become a buddha. For detail see Fung (1953: 312-338).

In the *Tang wen* [21] chapter of a popular work *Liezi* [22], we can find a story about a famous doctor Bianque [23], who physically changed the hearts of two men (Gong Hu [24] and Qi Ying [25]), in order to improve their mental abilities. Since one of them (Gong Hu) was observed by the doctor to have a strong *zhi* [26] (“character”) but a lack of *qi* [27] (“energy”, “vital force”), while the other one had a heart of weak *zhi*, but was equipped with a strong *qi*, energy or vital force for doing (fast, strict, and dull indeed, in his case) decisions.

However, regarding the problem of the “site” of mental activities in the Chinese world, or in various texts written in traditional China, the situation seems to be much more tricky than we can suppose. In the just mentioned example, the physical heart was directly indicated as a seat of the human’s character, yet, for example, in another famous Taoist text by Ge Hong [28] (283-343) titled *Prescriptions Within Arm’s Reach for Use in Emergencies* (*Zhou hou beiji fang* [29]), we can find a following kind of “magical medicine” solution for the treatment of “a loss of souls outside the body”:

Place the victim on the ground, and with a sharp sword draw a circle in the earth around his head ... Then with a point of a sword make an inch-deep incision in the victim’s nose. Quickly hold him fast so that he does not move. He will then speak in the voice of possessing spirit and implore mercy.¹⁵

As I already stated above, these examples I introduced just to show the primary trickiness of any efforts to fix implications in the explanations of any, more or less “philosophical”, notions, in this case the notion of “mental activity” and its “seat within the human body”.

Now, let us come back to the discussed character *xin*. The character *xin*, expressing a *process*, can cover a wide range of connotations: from the meaning of the pure Buddha *mind* (or *heart* – of the sentient beings or even non-sentient things as well, as proposed by some mainly Chan Buddhism masters – see below) to the meanings like deluded thoughts or evil thoughts of ordinary human beings. It can indicate “false or deluded assumptions” (*wang xin* [31]) – deliberate or as direct results of retribution according to the Law of Dharma; it can stand for “subordinate mental states of the human *mind*” (mainly in the teachings of *Consciousness Only* schools); it can also designate “purified thoughts or *mind*” – attained in the process of Buddhist cultivation; or it can also even hold the meaning of *the Absolute* (with the connotations of the *absolute order* or *absolute principle*) – as supported for example in the text *Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith* (*Dasheng qi xin lun* [32]), one of the crucial philosophical texts for Chinese Mahāyāna, for the Tiantai, Huayan or Chan schools.

In this text, a kind of “immutable” (but, of course, not independently or “inherently existing”) *absolute order* or *absolute principle* (named *Suchness*, Skt. *Tathatā*,

¹⁵ Harvard-Yenching Index to Taoist Canon, *Daozang zi mu yinde* [30] (Combined Indices to the Authors and Titles of Books in Two Collections of Taoist Literature). Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, no 25. Peking, 1935; 1295, 1: 9-11. English translation according to Michel Strickmann (2002: 239).

Chn. *Zhenru* [33]) is postulated – here “absolute” is understood as “the only one” or “absolutely valid”, not as an opposite to the relative. When it “engages” the realms of beings, it is expressed in terms of our *xin*, that is, *Yixin* [6] (*One mind*), *zhongsheng xin* [34] (the *mind* of sentient being), etc. – thus conveying the meaning of a universally or absolutely valid regulative *principle* in its phenomenal aspect. Thus, *xin* represent *the Absolute* (*Suchness, absolute order*) as it is expressed in the temporal order, and therefore it necessarily contains within itself two aspects – the “absolute” aspect (*xin zhenru men* [35]) and the phenomenal aspect (*xin shengmie men* [36]). But, accordingly, the *absolute order* does not exist apart from the relative order; rather they differ epistemologically but not ontologically. Yoshito Hakeda in his commented translation of the treatise (1993: 32) points out they are ontologically identical since they are actually two aspects of one and the same *reality*.

In Chan Buddhism the situation is similar, the character being translated as “*mind*” or as “*heart*”, without, in my opinion, relevant “philosophical” (epistemological or even ontological) differences detectable between these two English terms in their use when translating Chan Buddhist texts. For example, we all know a famous work, usually in English briefly referred to as the *Heart sūtra* (*Mahāprajñā āpāramitāhṛdaya-sūtra*, in Chinese referred as the *Xin jing* [37]; or, on the other hand, a term “deluded *mind*” (*wang xin* [31]) of ordinary human beings is a very frequent expression in various Chan texts. In both cases our character has implications of the term *xin* as we have introduced it in the above text – thus being “ontologically” and “axiologically” *empty*. So, it is not a matter of importance, in my opinion, to explore whether in the first case the title of the *sūtra* can be replaced by *Mind sūtra*, or whether ordinary sentient beings have “deluded *hearts*” or “deluded *minds*”. I think that both options can be accepted without relevant shifts in the philosophical concepts of the terms mentioned.

However, there have been tendencies within the schools of Chan to postulate some kind of *substance*-like notions, elaborating the notions of an “eternal soul” or “eternal *mind*”. Of course, these concepts had to face the voices of strict opponents within the Buddhist world. For example, some masters of Chinese Chan were not unlike to have accepted the teachings of the so called Śrenika heresy, a current of heretical thought that appeared during the Buddha’s lifetime in India, emphasizing a concept of “permanent self”, emphasizing the immutability of the *mind* and, on the other hand, the perishableness of the body. Such tendencies in Chan were, of course, criticized by other masters, mainly, I think, by those known as propagators of the theory that even non-sentient things *have (are)* the Buddha nature and being so, being capable of preaching the Dharma – thus attributing the Buddha *mind (heart?)* even to walls, stones or grasses. The most representative figures of the teachings in China were master Nanyang Huizhong [38] (?-775), and a founder of the Caodong [39] branch (Jap. Sōtō) of Chinese Chan Buddhism – Dongshan Liangjie [40] (807-869).¹⁶ Well, to dispute here whether the term *fo*

¹⁶ For detail see Benická (2002).

xin [15] should be interpreted as a Buddha *mind* or as a Buddha *heart* seems to be of no serious philosophical interest, though here we can formally exclude the option *heart*, since non-sentient things do not have this physical organ (or a brain either). Anyway, things are able to preach the Dharma, thus some kind of “mental abilities” are attributed to them.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the article is very simple – in Chinese Buddhist texts I did not find any proofs of the correctness of translating our character as *mind* or, on the contrary, as *heart*. We can only say, *xin* represents a process of “mental” activities, here “mental” conveying the meaning of our mental activities being a co-constituent of our “outer” world.

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[1] 心 [2] 禪 [3] 體 [4] 性 [5] 佛性 [6] 一心 [7] 空 [8] 相 [9] 緣起
[10] 因 [11] 緣 [12] 理 [13] 華嚴 [14] 天台 [15] 佛心 [16] 法
[17] 唯識宗 [18] 法相 [19] 熏習 [20] 藏識 [21] 湯問 [22] 列子
[23] 扁鵲 [24] 公扈 [25] 齊嬰 [26] 志 [27] 氣 [28] 葛洪
[29] 肘後備急方 [30] 道藏子目引得 [31] 妄心 [32] 大乘起心論
[33] 真如 [34] 眾生心 [35] 心真如門 [36] 心生滅門 [37] 心經
[38] 南陽慧忠 [39] 曹洞 [40] 洞山良價