



## AN SHIH-KAO

---

**AN SHIH-KAO**, or An Ch'ing (the latter is said to be his personal name, the former his courtesy name), the earliest known translator of Buddhist texts into Chinese. There is little reliable information about him, though he is mentioned in some early colophons and prefaces. The earliest extant biography, embellished with hagiographical anecdotes, is found in the *Ch'u san tsang chi chi lu*, a work on the history of the translation of the Tripitaka, by Sengyu (A.D. 435-518). An Shih-kao is said to have arrived in China during the reign of Huan-ti (of the Later Han dynasty, A.D. 147-67) or, more precisely, in the year 148, and to have carried on his translation work at Lo-yang, the Later Han capital, where there was already a flourishing Buddhist community. As his Chinese surname implies, he reputedly came from Parthia, known to Han China as An-hsi, i.e., Aršak. According to an early tradition he was a former crown prince who had renounced the throne in order to follow a religious life. One reference implies that he came to China as a refugee. It has been plausibly suggested that he belonged to one of the dynastic houses of Parthia rather than to the royal family at Ctesiphon. Other early missionaries came from the Kushan empire, which was expanding at the expense of Parthia at this period, and it seems that the texts translated by this early Lo-yang school, including An Shih-kao, were originally written in the Gāndhārī Prakrit which was in use in the Kushan empire, so he may have come from a region that had fallen under Kushan suzerainty. In later times the surname An was associated specifically with Bukhara.

The earliest list of An Shih-kao's translations contains thirty titles, with four



more possibly attributable to him; later, unreliable bibliographies add many more. Of the thirty, nineteen survive, but only four can be proved to be by him on the basis of contemporary or near-contemporary evidence. All nineteen works belong to the earlier, Hīnayāna, school of Buddhism, with no trace of Mahāyāna influence, and concern meditation techniques (*dhyāna*) or various numerical categories. They are not of high quality as translations but are of great interest for what they show of the state of Buddhism at the time. They are also of considerable linguistic interest, since the Chinese into which they were translated seems to be closer to the vernacular of the day than to the literary language used in secular texts of the same period.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

T'ang Yung-t'ung, *Han Wei Liang Chin Nan-pei Ch'ao fo-chiao shih*, 2 vols., Shanghai, 1938.

E. Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China*, 2 vols., Leiden, 1959.