

Why is the Mādhyamika translated as “Zhōng guān (中觀)”?

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0. Introduction

We do not often know the source of a term that we are already familiar with. The more familiar the term is to us, the less concerned we are about it. The term Mādhyamika seems to be one such term. The Mādhyamika, which is one of the major schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India (the term often refers to the people belonging to that school), has been considered to be based on the thought of Nāgārjuna (ca. A.D. 150–250), though some modern scholars have proved that Bhāviveka (ca. A.D. 490–570) was the first person to use the term “Mādhyamika” (which means “the middle”) in his texts and define himself as the Mādhyamika.¹⁾ He uses at first the term in one of his major texts, *Prajñāpradīpa* (PPr), which is a famous commentary on the *Madhyamaka-kārikā* (MK) written by Nāgārjuna. According to many modern scholars, its name—Mādhyamika—originates from the name of the MK, which is probably true. As Buddhism was transmitted to other areas, namely, Tibet, China, Japan, and many other Asian countries, its name was also translated into the local languages. For instance, in Tibet, Mādhyamika was translated as “dBU ma pa,” which means “middle school” or “the people belonging to the middle school,” and it was translated literally from the original Sanskrit. In China, it was translated as “Zhōng guān (中觀),” and in Japanese, as “Chūgan (中觀).” “Zhōng guān” and “Chūgan” mean “Watching (guān) the middle (zhōng).” Why was the term Mādhyamika (the middle) translated as “Zhōng guān” and not as “Zhōng” in Chinese? Who was the first to translate it in this way? This paper aims to answer these questions.

1. Why did Yijing (義淨) translate the term Mādhyamika as “Zhōng guān” and not as “Zhōng”?

To date, modern scholars think that the person to first use the term “Zhōng guān” as the

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name of the school was Yijing (義淨, A.D. 635–713). He was a very famous Chinese monk who traveled between China and India by sea (from A.D. 671 to 695). In his report, *Nán hǎi jì guī nèi fǎ zhuàn* (南海寄歸內法傳), which tells us about the cultures, religions, and so on that he observed in his travels, he referred to the name Mādhyamika.

[1] There are two kinds of schools in Mahāyāna Buddhism. One is the Mādhyamika (中觀) and the other is the Yogācāra (瑜伽). According to the Mādhyamika, things exist as conventional [truth] and are emptiness as [ultimate] truth. They are vacant like illusion²⁾

I have found that he also uses the term “Zhōng guān” as the name of the school in another work, *Dà táng xī yù qiú fǎ gāo sēng zhuàn* (大唐西域求法高僧傳).

[2] After the monk went to the Nālanda temple, he listened to the teaching of Yogācāra and learned the teaching of Mādhyamika there.³⁾

Undoubtedly, Yijing used the term “Zhōng guān” as the name of this school of Buddhism, though we must later question whether he was the first person to use the term or not. However, even if he was the first, there remains the big question of why he did not translate the term Mādhyamika as “Zhōng,” which is the original meaning of the term, but as “Zhōng guān,” by adding the word “guān”—even though he probably knew the original Sanskrit meaning of Mādhyamika. Unfortunately, I have not been able to find any paper that clearly answered this question. Some researchers imply that Mādhyamika originally included the meaning of “guān” and so it would have been natural for him to use the Chinese translation “Zhōng guān” for the Mādhyamika.⁴⁾

However, is this entirely true? We can find the term “Zhōng guān” in some Chinese Buddhist texts written by Chinese monks who were born and active before Yijing. Thus, I think that at least this term was not invented by Yijing. According to my research, there were two persons who used this term at the earliest time in their own Buddhist texts. One is Zhiyi (智顓, A.D. 538–597), who is said to be virtually the founder of Tiantai (天台宗)—one of the major Chinese Buddhist sects. The other is Jizang (吉藏, A.D. 549–623), who is said to be the founder of Sānlùn school (三論宗), whose doctrine is based on three Indian Buddhist texts—MK (中論), *Shí èr mén lùn* (十二門論), and *Bǎi lùn* (百論)—which are all Mādhyamika texts. Of the two persons, Zhiyi uses this term only a few times in his famous book, *Mó hē zhǐ guān* (摩訶止觀), in order to explain his famous idea of Yī xīn sān guān (一心三觀). However, his usage seems to be limited to him or his sect, and it does not seem to be directly connected with the Mādhyamika school in original Indian

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Buddhism. Therefore, we should focus on the other person, Jizang, who is probably the most important person to deal with here, because he is the founder of the Chinese Buddhist sect based on the Mādhyamika texts, as mentioned above. In addition, he repeatedly uses the term “Zhōng guān” in most of his texts. The most interesting of all his texts is the commentary on MK (*Zhōng lùn*), of Nāgārjuna, which he titled *Zhōng guān lùn shū* (中觀論疏). He changed the original title, *Zhōng lùn*, which had been translated into Chinese by Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什), into *Zhōng guān lùn* (中觀論) by inserting one word—“guān”—between “zhōng” and “lùn (論).” In his introduction to this commentary, he says the following.

[3] “[About the name of this text,] there are two types of *lùn*, broad and short. The short name is *Zhōng lùn*. The broad name is *Zhōng guān lùn* by adding the word “guān” [to the short name].⁵⁾

According to this commentary, we can understand that *Zhōng guān lùn* is used as another name for *Zhōng lùn*. In another text, *Sān lùn xuán yì* (三論玄義), he explains why he can give *Zhōng lùn* another name, *Zhōng guān lùn*, as follows.

[4] Why are three words, “zhōng,” “guān,” “lùn,” used as the text name? The answer is as follows: We can watch (guān) [the nature of things] through the middle way (zhōng), and then we explain the theory (lùn) through watching (guān). Therefore, we need these three words together.⁶⁾

He uses this expression “Zhōng guān” in other texts too. On the basis of my examinations, any usage of this expression always involves MK, or is used as another name for it, including any explanations about it. There does not seem to be any usage of it as the name of the school.

Thus this term, “Zhōng guān,” was at first used as a part of the popular name of the fundamental text, *Zhōng lùn*, of the Mādhyamika school in India by Jizang. However, if this term was used only in Sānlùn school, it was highly possible that Yijing could not have known it as well. Nonetheless, we can find examples where not only Chinese Buddhists but also some East Asian Buddhists, who were active in about the seventh century, knew this term. I will pick up two examples from them. One is Kuiji (窺基, A.D. 632–682), who was a disciple of Xuanzang (玄奘, A.D. 602–664). He uses this term in his text, *Chéng wéi shì lùn zhǎng zhōng shū yào* (成唯識論掌中樞要), as follows:

[5] As mentioned in the Tathāgata chapter in *Zhōng guān lùn*,⁷⁾

Xuanzang is the most famous and most important Chinese Buddhist monk, who also traveled to India before Yijing and whom Yijing is said to have respected. The fact that one

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of his disciples uses the term is very impressive. The other is Wonhyo (元曉, A.D. 617–686), who was a Korean monk. He uses this term in his text, *Dà chéng qǐ xìn lùn bié jì* (大乘起信論別記), as follows:

[6] . . . like *Zhōng guān lùn* and *Shí èr mén lùn*, etc.⁸⁾

Although Wonhyo had never been to China during his life, he also uses the name *Zhōng guān lùn* for *Zhōng lùn*. This example obviously shows that, at least by about the late seventh century, this name had been known in Korea as well.

We can find similar examples in other Chinese Buddhism texts. Given these examples, we can say that *Zhōng guān lùn* was widely used as another name for *Zhōng lùn* in China or in East Asian Buddhism in the seventh century. Therefore, there should be no doubt that Yijing already knew the other name for MK before he began his travel to India. If so, we can easily imagine that Yijing thought of the term “Zhōng guān” as the name of the school, when he heard about Mādhyamika, assuming that it was the school based on the thought of Nāgārjuna, who had written MK (*Zhōng lùn*).

There are also indirect reasons for this question. As shown in [1], Yijing explained the thought of the Mādhyamika school like so: “According to the Mādhyamika, things exist as conventional [truth] and are emptiness as [ultimate] truth (俗有真空).” This explanation of the thought of the Mādhyamika is very popular, and similar expressions are often found in most of the Mādhyamika texts. Jizang also uses very similar terms in his texts, such as:

[7] Emptiness is the truth. Existence is the conventional.⁹⁾

This explanation of [7] does not literally correspond with that of Yijing. However, both meanings are completely the same. Another example is more similar and thus more important:

[8] [All things] exist in the conventional truth, are emptiness in the ultimate truth. Wise men are not surprised at it, because they hope that all things exist as convention and are emptiness as truth.¹⁰⁾

This [8] is cited from *Dà chéng guǎng bǎi lùn shì lùn* (大乘廣百論釋論), which was written by Dharmapāla (護法) and was then translated into Chinese by Xuanzang. It is a translation of half of the *Catuḥśataka* written by Āryadeva, who is the author of *Bǎi lùn*, one of the three fundamental texts for Sānlùn school, founded by Jizang.

As we can find from these very impressive examples, the term “Zhōng guān,” used as the name of the school, was not an original expression created by Yijing. Instead, he adopted it as the translation of Mādhyamika in Sanskrit from *Zhōng guān lùn*, another name of

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Zhōng lùn, which had already been used in China.

2. Why did Jizang add the word “guān” to “zhōng”?

Then, why did Jizang add the word “guān” to “zhōng,” which is the original meaning of Mādhyamika? I do not have a plausible answer to this question, but I can offer a hypothesis. When Jizang explains why he can give *Zhōng lùn* the name of *Zhōng guān lùn*, he often also explains the chapter title. For instance, the first chapter of MK was originally called “pratītyasamutpāda parīkṣā” in Sanskrit and is translated as “Guān yīn yuán pǐn (觀因緣品)” in Chinese. Parīkṣā is obviously translated as “guān.” Nevertheless, he claims that we should add the term “guān” to “Yīn yuán pǐn (因緣品)” in *Zhōng guān lùn shū*, as if this term “guān” did not exist in the original text. The passage reads:

[9] Now some people ask why MK is called *Zhōng guān lùn* and why this first chapter is titled “Guān yīn yuán pǐn.” There are four different answers. One answer is as follows: the name *Zhōng guān lùn* is the popular name of *Zhōng lùn*. The “Guān yīn yuán [pǐn]” is another name for the first chapter.¹¹⁾

Here, both *Zhōng guān lùn* and *Guān yīn yuán pǐn* are simultaneously and similarly interpreted by Jizang. More precisely, he says that both the title and chapter names originally lacked the word “guān,” and therefore, he claims that we should add the word “guān” to both. Certainly, the text title does not have “guān,” but the chapter name did originally have the word “guān,” in both the original Sanskrit text and the Chinese translation. Nevertheless, why did he explain it like this? We may be allowed to hypothesize that the idea of adding the word “guān” to the original title came from the chapter title, which originally included the word “guān,” or that he wanted to show the title in the same form as the chapter name with the word “guān.” Therefore, I think that he intentionally avoided using the word in the chapter title, and then added it to both the text title and chapter name again.

3. Is Yijing the first person to use the term “Zhōng guān” as the name of the school?

As mentioned above, Yijing did use the term “Zhōng guān” as the name of the school. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that he was the first person to do so. Could there not be the possibility another person used the term in the same way before him? We have another interesting source to refer to in order to answer this question. As I said in the

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introduction to this paper, the school name Mādhyamika was first used in the PPr (*Bān ruò dēng lùn*, 般若灯論) by Bhāviveka in India. This text was translated into Chinese by an Indian Buddhist named Prabhākaramitra (波羅頗密多羅, A.D. 565–633). He is said to have been from middle India and to have studied Yogācāra theory under Śīlabhadra at the Nālanda temple, which was expanding and becoming more famous as a Buddhist center. It was also said that he stayed at Western Turkic Khaganate (西突厥) in A.D. 626; hence, we can infer that he had lived in India until about A.D. 620. He arrived in Cháng ān (長安), the capital of China, about A.D. 627. He is said to be the person who inspired Xuanzang to travel to Nālanda.¹²⁾ It is natural for us to think that he was familiar with the situation of Indian Buddhism in around A.D. 600, including the movements of the Mādhyamika and Yogācāra schools. Therefore, it seems very useful to check the style of his translation of the term Mādhyamika as found in the PPr. If he translates it as “Zhōng guān,” we can say that this term had been known well before the time when this text was translated into Chinese, namely, between A.D. 630–632. In addition, we may get a clue about the situation with the school name Mādhyamika, since this was not long after this term was put into use by Bhāviveka.

In the PPr, the term “dBu ma pa (Mādhyamika)” was used a total of 15 times, and 12¹³⁾ of them can be found in a part of chapter 25 of MK, where the thought of Yogācāra is criticized. Unfortunately, this part does not exist in the Chinese translation, *Bān ruò dēng lùn*. I do not know the reason for this; perhaps Prabhākaramitra belonged to the Yogācāra school and hated to translate this part and describe the criticism against Yogācāra from Bhāviveka, who belonged to the Mādhyamika school, or perhaps the original Sanskrit text that was brought into China lacked this part. At any rate, there are only three examples that we can use in order to try to answer my question. One is found in chapter 16, where the term “dBu ma pa” is translated as “Zhōng lùn.” Certainly, this is the name of the text, not of the school.¹⁴⁾ The others are found in chapter 18, where one is translated as an opponent,¹⁵⁾ and the other is translated as “middle way (中道).”¹⁶⁾ In any example, the term “Zhōng guān” is not used, not even as the name of the school. Therefore, we can assume that it had not been known and used in A.D. 632. Moreover, if an exciting hypothesis can be allowed, It is a little doubtful whether “Mādhyamika” was well known as the name of the school in India, because apparently even an Indian Buddhist, Prabhākaramitra, did not think of the term “dBu ma pa (Mādhyamika)” as the name of the school. Aside from these examples,

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we cannot find any use of the term, “Zhōng guān,” in the *Dà táng xī yù jì* (大唐西域記), written by Xuanzang, though it is obvious that he knew about the existence of the discussion between Mādhyamika and Yogācāra in India.

4. Conclusion

1. Yijing is probably the first person who used the term “Zhōng guān” as the name of the school of Mādhyamika. This is perhaps because neither Prabhākaramitra nor Xuanzang, who were active in the seventh century before Yijing, used it.
2. The expression “Zhōng guān” was created not by Yijing, but by Jizang, who used it as another title of MK; hence, it is quite possible that Yijing adopted it only as the name of the school.
3. A probable reason for Jizang to add “guān” to “zhōng” is that he tried to use the word “guān” in both the text and chapter titles.

1) See, Ejima Yasunori [1991] “Chūganha no tenkai,” in *Indo chūsei shisō kenkyū*, Shunjū-sha, pp. 113–129, Saito Akira [1998] “〈Shoki〉 Chūganha to Buddhapālita,” *Bukkyōgaku* 24, pp. (29)–(51). Saito Akira [2006] “Is Nāgārjuna a Mādhyamika?” in *Hokekyō to Daijōkyōten no kenkyū*, Sankibō Busshorin, pp.153–164. 2) 所云大乘無過二種。一則中觀。二乃瑜伽。中觀則俗有真空體虛如幻。瑜伽則外無內有事皆唯識 (T.54 no.2125, 205c13–15). 3) 禪師後向那爛陀。聽瑜伽習中觀 (T.51 no.2066, 9b27). 4) See, Miyamoto Shōson, Kajiyoshi Mitsuyuki, Yasumoto Tōru [1939] *Kokuyaku Issaikyō, ronsobu* 6, Daitō shuppan, p.5. 5) 但論有廣略二本。略但云中論。廣則加以觀也 (T.42 no.1824, 2a3–4). 6) 問何故具題三字耶。答因中發觀。由觀宣論。要備三法義乃圓足也 (T.45 no.1852, 13c1–2). 7) 中觀論破如來品云。 (T.43 no.1831, 636b24). 8) 如中觀論十二門論等 (T.44 no.1845, 226b5). 9) 以空為真。有為俗 (T.38 no.1780, 896b9). 10) 世俗故有。勝義故空。諸有智人不應驚異。為顯諸法俗有真空 (T.30, no.1571, 229c7–8). 11) 問何因緣故標中觀論。復題觀因緣品。答略明四義。一者中觀論是一部之通名。觀因緣謂一章之別稱 (T.42 no.1824, 5b23–25). 12) See, Kuwayama Shoshin [1983] “Indo eno michi: Genjō to Prabhākaramitra,” *Tōhōgaku* 55, pp.145–210. 13) 1. (D. 242b2; P.304a1–2). 2. (D.242b4; P.304a5). 3. (D. 244b5; P. 306b7). 4. (D.244b5; P.306b7). 5. (D.244b6; P.307a1). 6. (D.244b7; P.307a3). 7. (D.245a1; P.307a4). 8. (D.245a1–2; P.307a4–5). 9. (D.247a1; P.309b6). 10. (D.247a5; P.310a4). 11. (D.247B5; P.310b6). 14) The translation example of dBu ma pa: PPr, chapter 16. (Tib) gal te med na ni chad pa ñid kyi skyon du ‘gyur ro // yod pa dañ med pa ñid du brjod par bya ba ñid ma yin na ni **dBu ma pa smra ba dañ mthun par smra ba yin no** // (D.166a5; P.206b1). (Chin) 若言無餘涅槃彼剎那時不可說人有體無體者。此則與我中論義同 (T.30 no.1566, 97a). 15) One translation example of dBu ma pa: PPr chapter 18. (Tib) ci ste yañ la la ’di sñam du **dBu ma pas bdag gi tshig gi don ñid du khas**

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ma blañs pa'i phyir de'i khyad par bstan pa mi rigs te / dper na mo gśam gyi bu'i sño bsañs dañ / dkar śam ñid la sogs pa bzin no sñam du sems na / de ni bzañ po ma yin te / (D.180b2-3; P.244b4-5).
 (Chin) 復次有外人作如是意。謂論者言。彼既不令我是一物。復還簡別言我。是物是體是無常是不遍。是疑智等。作是說者其義不然。亦如有人自生分別。譬如石女實自無兒。何得示他青黃色耶。是則虛妄。論者言。汝語非也 (T.30 no.1566, 104c28-105a3). 16) The other translation example of dBu ma pa: PPr chapter 18. (Tib) rañ gi sde pa dañ / gźan gyi sde ba kha cig na re / **dBu ma smra pa** ni dños po thams cad la skur ba 'debs pa'i phyir med pa pa bdag dañ khyad par ni med do źes zer ba de dag la kha cig gis / dños po sel ba ñid du mtshuñs su zin kyañ / so so'i skye bo dañ / dgra bcom pa so sor ma brtags pa dañ / so sor brtags pa'i btañ sñoms pa dag bzin nam / dmus loñ dañ¹⁶ mig can gyi phyogs mi bde'o sñam du ñes par śes¹⁶ pa dag mtshuñs su zin kyañ khyad par yod pa bzin du med pa dañ / **dBu ma pa** dag la yañ khyad par yod do źes lan 'debs par byed pas ni / pha rol pos dños po'i de kho na ñid rtogs pa la khyad par med do źes bstan pa la khyad par yod par ma brjod pas lan ma yin no // (D.188b1-3; P.244a4-8). (Chin) 自部及外人等謂我言。彼中道說無一切句義與路伽耶說無則無差別。應如是答我言。一切句義無者亦有差別。汝不解故出是言耳。有人言。如以智慧知而捨。不以智慧知而捨。豈無差別。若言說無同者。是則凡夫與羅漢不異。生盲與有目不異。平地與丘陵不異。若如是說。中道路伽則無差別。作此說者。不解差別。是為無智 (T.30 no.1566, 107c2-8).

abbreviation

D.: sDe dge ed., P.: Peking ed., T.: Taishō shinshū daizōkyō,

〈Key words〉 中觀, 中論, 中觀論, 中觀論疏, Jizang 吉藏, Yijing 義淨

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