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Jadamba

Eight Mongolian Translations
of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra

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Preface

Jadamba—this is the name under which the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* is widely known in Mongolia. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, or the *sūtra* of Eight Thousand (Mong. *naiman mingyatu sudur*) is one of those Buddhist texts, on a par with the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā*, *Suvarṇaprabhāsa*, *Pañcarakṣā* and others, that enjoy a special status in Mongolian culture. Apart from its role in liturgy, it is associated with popular ritual and revered as a powerful symbol. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* is spread in Mongolia in numerous copies, the bulk of which, as one would find while browsing through library collections, shelves of antique shops and private households, contain the Tibetan translation of the text. Hence the established name *Jadamba*, which is a phonetic rendering of the Tibetan *brgyad stong pa*—“Eight Thousand.”

The prevalence of the Tibetan version of the *sūtra* is a common phenomenon in Mongolia where Tibetan has long been the principal language of Buddhist texts and ritual. However, it does not depreciate the significance of the Mongolian translations. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* was translated into Mongolian multiple times. At present eight Mongolian translations are described and one Oirat translation is published, and it is possible that there were others that have not come to be known today.

The present publication introduces eight Mongolian translations of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*. I started researching this subject in 2010 within the context of my Ph. D. project at Bern University, Switzerland. At that point the Mongolian translations of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* had never become the object of scholars’ attention. A three year research resulted in identifying eight different translations all of which date back to the period from the early 17th to the early 18th century. The Oirat translation could not be accessed at that time and was not included in the study. A fragmentary comparative analysis of the eight translations was carried out in order to show how a sacred canonical text was handled by the Mongolian translators of the period.¹ The rich textual material provided for the fruitfulness of the study, the results of which allow to make observations on the translators’ methods of work and give grounds for speculations on their understanding of the process and aims of translation. The analysis of the religious and philosophical content of the *sūtra* is not pursued in this work.

The results of the study are presented in this book as three blocks: the extra-textual data on the eight translations (based on the colophons), the comparative analysis of the texts’ structure, vocabulary and style followed by conclusions and observations in a broader context, and the textual material in the form of comparative tables, which shows the overall structure of the translations, the text of one chapter and a selection of vocabulary. The last block can be used by the reader not only as an illustration to the analytical part of the study,

¹ The study was conducted as part of the interdisciplinary project “Text und Normativität” that focused in particular on redefining the concept of canon and canonicity. The project was based at the universities of Luzern and Bern and sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

but also as a convenient source of comparative textual material that can serve as reference for students of the language of Mongolian translated Buddhist literature.

One major drawback of my work is the limited range of comparative material in other languages. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* was translated into Mongolian from Tibetan, and the Tibetan text of the *sūtra* is addressed consistently. However, a comprehensive study of all the Tibetan versions has not been carried out, and this is probably the reason why some of the questions that present themselves in the course of the analysis remain unanswered. The same can be said of the Chinese translations that are not addressed here at all. This book is but the first step in the study of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* in Mongolia, and I hope that it will become the basis for future research that will fill these lacunae.

Altogether, the aim of the book is to introduce the translations of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* as part of the literary process in 17th century Mongolia.

Natalia Yampolskaya
St. Petersburg, 2018