The Sutra of Golden Light depicts Sarasvatī under three aspects, corresponding to the three consecutive parts of the Sarasvatī chapter, which were produced in chronologically sequential order. The first of these appears in the earliest extant redaction of the sutra represented by Dharmakṣema’s Chinese translation of 417, where the goddess, under the name Great Eloquence Deity (Da Biantian 大辯天), functions as the preserver of the flawless speech and memory of the expounder of the sutra. Accordingly, she fills the exponent with eloquence based on knowledge and memory. This is the only one of the three parts that is directly in line with Sarasvatī’s Vedic background, where the river goddess was identified with Speech, and through speech, which expresses knowledge, became goddess of knowledge. Hence, it is from her function as presiding deity of eloquence in this part that her Chinese Buddhist name derives, clearly pointing to her Vedic role.

To this first and earliest part of the Sarasvatī chapter were added two more, not found in Dharmakṣema’s version, but included in the extant Sanskrit, in Yāśogupta/Jñānagupta’s translation in Baogui’s edition of 597, and in Yijing’s translation of 703: Sarasvatī teaches a ritual herbal bath and is then praised by the Brahman Kaunḍinya as an eight-armed goddess. I have examined the bath here in terms of ancient Indian medicine and as a kind of consecration ritual. The bath reflects the magico-religious healing of the Atharva Veda and may well represent a Buddhist esoteric abhiṣeka, derived from the royal consecration ceremony where it plays the central part, addressed to the ruling class, to whom the sutra promises protection of the state. Sarasvatī’s long ago well established identity and connections with water and healing in the Vedas rendered the goddess of eloquence and knowledge an appropriate teacher for this bathing ritual.

Kaunḍinya’s praises of Sarasvatī consist of three sections held in common by the extant Sanskrit and the Chinese translations of Yāśogupta/Jñānagupta and Yijing: a three-stanza praise, in response to which the goddess teaches a spell, followed by an eight-stanza praise. Yijing’s translation includes three additional sections: a corresponding spell rite taught by Sarasvatī, a hymn from the Harivamsa recited by Kaunḍinya in praise
of our goddess, and the Brahman’s instruction of the words to be recited by those who wish to invoke Sarasvatī. Kaundinya’s praises, however, reveal also the presence of other goddesses: Pārvatī in the three-stanza praise, Vindhyavāsīnī/Mahiśāsuramardini in the eight-stanza praise, and Vindhyavāsīnī, to whom the Harivamśa hymn is dedicated. These three goddesses are brought together in the sixth- to seventh-century Skanda Purāṇa, wherein Kauśikī, born of the dark sheath shed by Pārvatī, takes up residence in the Vindhya mountains (Vindhyavāsīnī) and, as an eight-armed weapon-bearing battle goddess identified also with Mahiśāsuramardini, slays demons. Kaundinya’s praises correspond to an early stage in the composition, or even a slightly pre-composition stage, of the Skanda Purāṇa, wherein Vindhyavāsīnī is already connected with Pārvatī’s tapas and has acquired a warrior character and countenance, which in the sutra she lends to Sarasvatī. These goddesses appear in the Sutra of Golden Light under the influence of the developing Warrior Goddess cult and are fittingly made use of by the goddess of eloquence, who functions as a defender of the Dharma. In Chapter Twelve, representations corresponding to the sutra’s eight-armed weapon-bearing description will be discussed.

A mystery that remains unresolved is why the extant Sanskrit Sutra of Golden Light does not include the Harivamśa hymn. Was it simply a matter of circumstances that this version of the Sanskrit happened not to have been preserved? Or did someone intentionally edit out material that he recognized to be extraneous to the Sarasvatī chapter? There are, as we have seen, two other sections, found both in Yijing and in the ninth-century Tibetan translation from the Sanskrit (Tib. II), and likewise not preserved in the extant Sanskrit: the spell rite and, at the end of the chapter, the words of praise to be recited by people who wish to invoke Sarasvatī’s compassion and protection. These two sections, however, do not contain material that might point to other goddesses, and hence that might warrant editing. In the spell rite, the individual seeks to have a vision of Biancaitian and, for that purpose, draws an image (form unspecified) of her. In his invocation, the devotee calls on the Eloquence Talent Goddess as eloquence itself, requesting the quality she embodies and other benefits. While it is evident why an editor might wish to cut out the Harivamśa hymn, it is not clear why he should want to remove the two other sections. Furthermore, if it would have been desirable to edit out the Harivamśa hymn, would it not also have been appropriate to take out the passages held in common by the extant Sanskrit, Yaśo-