READING THE ONE HUNDRED PARABLES SŪTRA:
THE DIALOGUE PREFACE AND THE GĀTHĀ POSTFACE

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If all the world is a stage, then the ancient Indian Buddhists would say that what is being played out in this theatrium mundi is one great tragedy. To the compilers of the One Hundred Parables Sūtra, as well as the Sūtra of the Talented and the Stupid, what is played out is very much a tragicomedy: As with Shakespeare, the tragic and the comical are often inextricably intertwined. To them, this world is not a fool’s paradise. But it certainly is a Ship of Fools. Chán texts, as well as Chán practice, are thoroughly Indian-inspired. They combine flamboyantly vulgar Chinese colloquialisms with lexical, as well as syntactic, loans from non-Chinese languages, not necessarily Sanskrit and Pali. It is in China, Korea and Japan that the Buddha tends to smile, not in India.

The text known as the One Hundred Parables Sūtra,¹ the Chinese version of which dates to 16 October 492, an example of the Piyū jīng 警喻經 (avadāna sūtras),² is an important precursor to this Chán literary tradition. It is a text which uses humorous tales as a vehicle to nirvāṇa. The One Hundred Parables Sūtra is a jestbook and, like the Xiányū jīng 賢愚經 (Sūtra of the Talented and the Stupid, XYJ), it is all about entering nirvāṇa with a smile, like the smiling Chinese Buddha who is so exasperatingly absent in Indian iconography. These parables are very much like those medieval exempla or bispel used to support Christian messages.³

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¹ A complete and profusely annotated, as well as rhetorically analyzed, bilingual edition by the present writer of the One Hundred Parables Sūtra will be found in Thesaurus Linguae Sericae (TLS) under the text label BAIYU (see http://tls.uni-hd.de/).
² Five further examples of avadāna sūtras, presenting 12, 32, 61, 39 and 44 parables respectively, will be found in T. 4, nos. 204–208:499–542.
³ For the exemplum, see Bremont / LeGoff / Schmitt 1982 and particularly the eminently useful Tubach 1969. Moser-Rath 1984 remains the unsurpassed masterpiece on traditional European joculography. For a partial bilingual edition of the Sūtra of the Talented and the Stupid and a complete translation of the earliest extant Chinese jestbook, see the complete translation of Xiāolín 笑林 (The Forest of
I have found that the *One Hundred Parables Sūtra* (BYJ) richly rewards close reading not only from a buddhological point of view, and not only from the point of view of comparative narratology, but also in the context of Chinese literary and linguistic history.

About the provenance of the text generally known today as the BYJ we do know a surprising amount. The author of the original was an Indian monk named Saṅgasena, about whom little is known, and the translator/compiler of the work as we have it today was a monk from childhood, whose family is said to be from central India (Zhōng Tiānzhú 中天竺), Guṇavṛddhi 求那毗, who chose for himself the Chinese name Déjin 德進 (according to the GSZ, it was Ānjin 安進) when he settled under the Southern Qi 南齊 (480–502). Guṇavṛddhi came to Jiànhè 建鄕 (present-day Nánjing) in 479, and is said to have finished the compilation of the book on 16 October 492, translating it into a language which was then known as Čí yǔ 齊語, ‘the language of (the Southern, or Xiāo 蕭) Qi (Dynasty).’ Guṇavṛddhi’s biography in the GSZ tells us that he was an expert in dàoshù 道術 ‘the arts of the Way.’ He is said to have died in Jiànhè in 502 (according to L. N. Menshikov possibly in 503). As we shall see, the introductory dialogue between the Buddha and the brahmans show fairly clear evidence that Guṇavṛddhi was familiar both with the book Lǎozǐ 老子, and with the Zhuāngzī 莊子. I would venture to suggest that this introduction may be the work of Guṇavṛddhi rather than his master Saṅgasena. However, I hasten to add that I have no proof.

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Laughter) in my *Thesaurus Linguae Sericae*. Detailed comparison between Chinese and ancient Greek joculography (the famous Philogelós ‘Laughter-Lover’) contemporary with the *One Hundred Parables Sūtra* is made possible by my lengthy unpublished manuscript *The Varieties of Chinese Laughing Experience: Towards a Conceptual History of Linguistic and Literary Impudence, Insolence, and Frivolity* (1993) which includes an extensive bibliography on Chinese joculography through the ages. The motif-registers in the *One Hundred Parables Sūtra* can be explored in relation to non-religious Chinese popular narratives in Nai-tung Ting 1976, and in much greater detail in Dīng Nàitòng 丁乃通 1986. However, one needs to keep in mind the Buddhist impact on that ‘non-religious’ folklore.

4 See Chā sànzàng jījì 出三藏記集 by Sēng Yòu 僧祐 (445–518) and Gāosēng zhúàn 高僧傳 (GSZ) by Huìjiāo 慧皎 (467–554), and for details, see Gurevich/Menshikov 1986:7–49.

5 For over 40 ways of referring to the Chinese language, see my 2008 lecture *On the Very Notion of the Chinese Language*. 

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