

“THIRTY YEARS OF WORKIN’ AND THEY PUT YOU ON THE AWARD LIST”

Thoughts on the 2019 Toshihide Numata Book Award for Buddhism

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*I was asked to prepare a brief report on *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight: T’ien-tai Chih-i’s Mo-ho chih-kuan*, receiving the 2019 Toshihide Numata Book Award for Buddhism, and the award ceremony and presentations sponsored by the University of California, Berkeley. Here are some thoughts and reflections on the award ceremony and its themes.*

TRANSLATING CLASSICAL religious texts is usually a lonely struggle, often a frustrating challenge, now and then an opportunity for communication with other scholars (both living and dead), and occasionally a cause for joyful discovery. Thus it was particularly delightful to receive the 2019 Toshihide Numata Book Award and the public recognition that it entails, and I am grateful for it. I must thank many people who brought this about: Robert Sharf and other University of California, Berkeley faculty members for managing this award; Sanjyot Mehendale, Vice Chair, Center for Buddhist Studies, for taking care of details of the award ceremony and my visit; the anonymous members of the award committee for their consideration; George Tanabe, President of BDK America; and Jacqueline Stone and John Kieschnick for their presentations at the award ceremony.

More than forty years have passed since I first encountered the *Mohezhiguan*, and then thirty years of deliberately working on the complete translation and annotation of this text. This does not mean that it took thirty years of steady work; after all, I was also busy with editing the *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, teaching, running research projects and other Nanzan Institute activities, and an intense ten years of heavy administrative duties, not to mention raising a family. But there are advantages to spreading the work out over a long period: this gives time for extended and repeated pondering over terms and concepts, reading and absorbing other studies (both modern and classical) on the subject, and feedback and advice from fellow scholars. Over time the translation percolates and matures, as curry gains depth and flavor by repeated reheat-

ing. Yet unlike curry, which must be consumed before it spoils, translation work is never complete, as there are always new nuances to consider and passages to polish. Eventually the time comes to make the work public, which requires the “final copy” for publication and gives the false impression of definiteness. Every time I look at the published copy, however, I see other possibilities and lost opportunities. Words, as Zhiyi was wont to say, are inadequate, slippery, and can be misleading.

Happily, I am given the opportunity to continue fiddling with the translation. The BDK (Buddhaya Dendo Kyokai) has suggested including my translation in their series of the Taishō Buddhist canon, the “BDK English Tripitaka,” which offers non-annotated translations of important texts from the Buddhist tradition. In the past I was wary of having the *Mohezhiqian* included in this series, as I felt that the text required extensive annotation and supplementary materials in order to be properly understood. Now that such material is available in my *Clear Serenity, Quiet Insight* book, however, it makes sense to provide a more accessible, reader-friendly version.

George Tanabe (President of BDK America) and Paul Swanson (recipient of the 2019 Toshihide Numata Book Award for Buddhism) during the award ceremony sponsored by the University of California, Berkeley.



This new challenge was the main focus of my presentation at the award ceremony in December 2019 at the University of California, Berkeley. Rather than just looking back on past work, I took the opportunity to look forward to the challenge of revising the translation. I spoke of the importance of context, how there is never only one completely accurate translation and that therefore there can be more than one “correct” translation, and also the need to keep in mind the audience, and how this all affects the translation. I then ruminated on what specifically must be done for such a revision. It will not be enough to just strip out the notes and the occasional Chinese characters imbedded in the text and leave the translation as is. I brought up and examined a number of specific examples that showed how a translation that depended on explanation in a note must be revised to make sense without reference to annotation, perhaps by including words or phrases that are not explicit or present in the original Chinese. There is also the need for background information that the English readers may lack, curt phrases that carry weighty nuances not apparent to readers unfamiliar with Chinese or Buddhist traditions. Again, one should avoid technical terms and the use of Sanskrit as much as possible. To cut to the chase, in many cases one would have to come up with a “different” translation for the same text. As this became clear, it also opened up the exciting possibility that such revisions can provide two alternative translations and thus expand the understanding of the original text.

The award ceremony consisted of more than just my presentation, of course. I would like to briefly mention the other two presentations, which resulted in a healthy panel discussion among us three as well as feisty questions from the audience. First, Jacqueline Stone of Princeton University provided a thoughtful explanation of the “Contemplating Objects as Inconceivable” section of the *Mohezhi-guan*, showing how it was such an important and influential passage, especially for the Japanese Tendai and Nichiren traditions. Next, John Kieschnick of Stanford University compared the demonology in the *Mohezhi-guan* with that of Evagrius of Pontus, a fourth-century Christian monastic. Coincidentally, I had just ordered and read the translation by David Brakke (whom I, even more coincidentally, also knew personally as a neighbor and fellow faculty member from my sabbaticals at Indiana University) of *Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons*, by Evagrius of Pontus (Cistercian Publications, 2009), and Kieschnick deftly showed the similarities and differences between the role of “demonic forces” in these two traditions.

Also quite coincidentally, Kieschnick closed his talk with an appropriate quote from *Moby Dick*, the classic novel I had recently begun to peruse (after many years of floundering on my “must read some day” bucket list). I had reached nearly to the section where Melville dramatically expresses the challenge and limitations of a writer of great tomes, which also applies to a translator:

“...the great Cathedral of Cologne was left, with the crane still standing upon the top of the uncompleted tower. For small erections may be finished by their first architects; grand ones, true ones, ever leave the copestone to posterity. God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but draught—nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience.”

I am now working on the non-annotated revision of *Mohezhiquan* for BDK. I have enough cash and patience, my prayer now is for the time and strength to continue the work.