



Youxuan Wang, *Buddhism and Deconstruction: Towards a Comparative Semiotics*

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THE AUTHOR of this lively and erudite book took up Buddhist studies only in 1995, but by working on a judicious selection of texts—the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra translations of Kumārajīva, Paramārtha, and Xuānzàng on the one hand and the earlier works of Derrida on the other—he has produced a stimulating and in some aspects ground-breaking study. The central concept in his dense argument is the notion of the ultimate sameness (*samatā*) of all dharmas, as apprehended in the enlightened vision of a Buddha. This is a lofty topic of the *Perfection of Wisdom* sutras and the Madhyamaka commentary thereon, the *Dāzhīdù Lùn*, translated by Kumārajīva. Wang aims to highlight a semiotic significance in Madhyamaka non-dualism, and to connect it with “Derrida’s idea of the Same as the true nature of the sign” (6) and “the post-structuralist notion of the Same as the middle ground between identity and difference” (16). Those unused to thinking of Derrida as a Buddha will greet this proposal with skepticism, and not be impressed by correlations of Baudrillard with Sautrāntika and of Lyotard with Sarvāstivāda, nor by a claim that a Mahāyāna classification of sentient beings into the ordinary, the noble, and the enlightened is “echoed by Derrida’s classification of the three kinds of perspectives: the vulgar in metaphysics, the philosophical in the early criticisms of metaphysics, and the deconstructive in post-structuralism” (14). In fact, however, Derrida takes a

back seat for most of the book, serving at most to discreetly guide Wang's analytical gaze as he courses with enviable native aplomb through the texts of the *Taishō* canon. When Derrida re-emerges in the last chapter the initial skepticism is confirmed. But by then we have been treated to a refreshing and enlightening tour of the Sarvāstivādin Abhidharma and some fundamental Mahāyāna texts, so that even if the semiotic McGuffin was a vain pursuit, the abundance of local insights, original observations, and readings of texts unknown in the West made the trip well worth while.

Chapter 1, a preparatory discussion of Sarvāstivādin theory, clarifies the dynamic relations between the seventy-five factors, and concludes by signaling neglected semiotic aspects in a way that throws some new light on ancient debates. (1) Insofar as it undermines the ideas of "I" and "mine," the Abhidharma works with a semiotic contrast of the nominal (self) and the actual (non-self). (2) The "signlessness" ascribed to the perfected mind also prompts reflection on the status of signs. In fact it excludes only signs focused on the merely nominal, and retains signs that are "the characteristics of an actually existent being in itself" (48). (3) Factors 70–72 (letters, words, sentences) are linguistic notions, classified as purely mental events. Sautrāntikas protested against this classification. "By putting the linguistic sign under the category of mental events the Sarvāstivādins are refusing to see it as a sensible object under the category of matter" (50), whereas the Sautrāntikas argued that "a word is essentially a sensible mark" that "becomes a vehicle of meaning by virtue of social conventions" (51), thus remotely anticipating Derrida's polemic against idealizing phonocentrism and logocentrism. However, "both sects have an understanding of the arbitrary nature of signs," and it is the Sautrāntikas who have an unDerridian atomism wherein "a syllable cannot be associated with another syllable because sense-perception cannot cope with more than one object at once." The two groups "did not know that they were employing different concepts of meaning while they argued about the relation between word and world" (55). The semiotic remarks here seemed somewhat heterogeneous, and the livelier and more instructive part of the discussion lay elsewhere.

In Chapter 2 Wang clarifies the dynamic logic underlying the list of eighteen notions of emptiness in the *Dāzhīdù Lùn* (and a related Yogācāra account in Paramārtha), much as he did for the seventy-five factors. The first six emptinesses, corresponding to substance (*tǐ*), capture the movement from Hīnayāna teaching on the emptiness of the self to Mahāyāna insight into the emptiness of dharmas and the emptiness of emptiness itself. The next eight, corresponding to function (*yòng*), give a "semiotic deconstruction of the Hīnayāna onto-epistemology" (79) and begin "an active engagement with the question of the sign" (80), by undoing binary oppositions. In connection with the emptiness of *nirvāna* and of ultimate truth (*paramārtha-śūnyatā*)—sixth on the list, thus before the "active engagement" with the notion of the sign—Wang says that Mahāyāna "focuses on the semiotic question of the truth of all signs. Conceptual categories such as ether, spatial direction, and so on, are now understood as useful only on the level of conventional meaning, but empty if seen from the perspective of ultimate meaning. However, the dichotomy of the ultimate and the conventional is itself a conventional construct,

and it is not to be understood as a fixed hierarchical binary opposition” (77–78). This is a standard account, but Wang wants to milk it for semiotic aspects that chime with poststructuralist views. The idea of undecidability, as developed by Derrida in *La dissémination* (1972), inspires a vision of Madhyamaka thought as focusing on an ambiguous oscillation between ultimate and conventional and a troubling of frontiers in conventional discourse generally. Madhyamaka talk of the “true mark” (true character, true sign) of things might seem to counter such undecidability, but Wang believes that this term is in fact a name for the ultimately undecidable. “The ‘true sign’ (*bhūtalakṣaṇa*) dissolves the boundary between signified (*lakṣya*) and signifier (*lakṣaṇa*). It is an inherent trembling that problematises the limits between self and the other, and it cannot be determined in terms of identity or difference” (92). This is no doubt meant to suggest a Derridian move beyond the closure of a Hegelian identity that integrates difference toward an open-ended undecidability.

The seventy-five factors divided into conditioned and unconditioned, where the unconditioned represented the “true character” of the unconditioned, being characterized by the absence of the Four Marks (arising, enduring, perishing, altering). The *Dāzhiđū Lùn*, in teaching the emptiness of both conditioned and unconditioned, contests “the notion that there exists a level of reality which is absolutely free of marks and absolutely indifferent to the law of causality. The absence of the Four Marks is still a mark of a sort. It is the mark of the lack of conditioning. Moreover, the conditioned and the unconditioned are interdependent” (83; see T1509.289b; LAMOTTE, 2082). One might read this as showing up the conventionality of dualistic opposites in virtue of their mutual implication, in order to transcend them to ultimacy, a realm beyond dualisms, even beyond the dualism of ultimate and conventional. The “true character of all dharmas”—their dharmahood (*dharmatā*)—takes us to a realm where there is no duality between signifier and signified, the realm of the Same. But Wang seems to hint at a correlation of this realm with a Derridian deconstruction of the signifier-signified opposition, so that the texture of Derrida’s *différance* and *archi-writing* would be a rough modern equivalent of it.

The reader will be likely to object that there is a substantive core to Buddhism that is missed by this focus on the semiotic. If the Same “rejects both permanence and impermanence” (89) it is because such categories have no application to ultimate empty reality, not because of a dislike of simplistic semiotic oppositions. Identity (*eka*) and difference (*anya*) are similarly rejected in the eightfold negation at the beginning of Nāgārjuna’s Middle Treatise. But the transcendence of the opposition is semiotic only in the sense that the language of the opposition is found to be non-applicable at the ultimate level. Neither category fits ultimate empty reality: if things are empty of real existence it is meaningless to speak of the identity or difference between them (see T1509.97b; LAMOTTE, 326).

This does not contradict the law of identity or the excluded middle. “Conventional logic takes it as an axiom that an object can be either predicated of a property or not predicated of this property and that it cannot stand in a middle region” (91). (Probably the words “object” and “property” should be interverted in this sentence.) But a not so

unconventional logic might say that to attribute or to deny a certain property to a certain object could sometimes be neither true nor false but simply meaningless. For example, both “God is red” and “God is not red” are meaningless, or again, “the letter A is speedy” and “the letter A is not speedy.” Wang again sees a need to bring in semiotics. In taking the eightfold negation as referring to “the characteristics of all factors” the *Dāzhīdù Lùn* sees it as “not concerned with the way thoughts and conceptions are to be formulated so that they make sense, but with the way the meaning of a factor is to be, or rather not to be, determined” (91). For “meaning” here I would say “ultimate meaning.” When Wang says that the negations focus on “a level of the sign that escapes the logical determination of the characteristics of factors” (91), I would substitute “reality” for “the sign,” though it means a loss of semiotic interest. In general, I suspect that the translation of *lakṣaṇa* as “sign” brings in misleading semiotic associations.

Wang sees the Madhyamaka rejection of the categories of self-caused and caused-by-another as meaning that change is no longer a movement from one determinate moment to another, permitting a stable relationship of sign and signified (smoke and fire), but rather “an inherent trembling within the structure of any provisionally designated factor” (92). He mentions in the next breath that Mahāyāna negates firm boundaries between being and non-being, on the basis of ‘an inherent rupture as the true characteristic of all factors: “perishing is happening at the very moment of arising, and arising is happening at the very moment of perishing” (T1509.287c12) (92). This quotation concerns impermanence, which according to the *Dāzhīdù Lùn* is only the first gate of entry into the wisdom of emptiness. Such formulations are not specific to Mahāyāna and do not attain the Same that lies beyond both permanence and impermanence. Though the step from impermanence to emptiness is a short one, we should keep separate (1) the mutual implication of being and non-being discovered by meditation on impermanence; (2) the dialectical interplay between conventional existence and ultimate emptiness. The latter presupposes the former but is distinctive to Madhyamaka. Neither of them has much to do with a trembling of the sign. Each is a version of the Buddhist middle way between the extremes of substantialism and nihilism, which is enacted not by a cult of the undecidable but in a deft pragmatic back-and-forth guided by an integrated dialectical vision.

Chapter 3 turns to a little known part of the *Dāzhīdù Lùn* (T1509.436-9, not translated in Lamotte), which discusses the sequence of “three ways of looking at the un-arisen,” namely:

1. “seeing a factor as un-arisen”; The treatise identifies the un-arisen with the thirteenth notion of emptiness, “emptiness of distinctive characteristics.” Wang hits the semiotic note again by recalling that the ‘true sign’ deconstructed the binary opposition of “proper essence” and “distinctive characteristics.”
2. not seeing a factor as either arisen or as non-arisen (“indifferent to binary oppositions”). “The Mahāyāna deconstructionist insists that the arisen mark, like the un-arisen, is also immaterial, formless and attributeless... A non-dualistic

semiotic model places both the arisen and the un-arisen under the sign of signlessness” (128).

3. “seeing the truth about the un-arisen and non-dual as comprehensible and communicable” (104–105). This implies the two truths doctrine, not as a pair of opposites, but as a circular relationship. He invokes “Derrida’s conception of the relation between speech and silence as a magical circle” to translate “the Madhyamaka notion of *samatā* as the name for the true relation between the conventional and the ultimate” (122). Signlessness and signs, silence and speech, have a non-dual relationship: “Speech is a necessary condition of possibility for the experience and communication of the supreme bliss of silence” (128).

The “semiotic” aspects of these discussions seem rather thin and adventitious. I am not sure if they converge into a unified picture. The endeavor to give a deconstructionist spin to them is rather strained. The circularity of conventional and ultimate, speech and silence in Madhyamaka is nothing like the Mallarmean slippages that fascinate Derrida.

The final discussion of Derrida’s conception of the Same confirms my misgivings about the semiotic reading of *samatā*. Wang speaks of *différance* as “an order that escapes the structure of the sign” and asks “how can we make this order intelligible if not by means of a sign” (206). This is confusing. Derrida is revealing how signifiers really function, that is, that they are not pinned down by signifieds but relate to other signifiers in a constantly shifting relationship. This deferral of the signified undermines the institution of the sign as a stable signifier-signified relationship and introduces a new order of signification. When Derrida says that “we cannot do without the concept of the sign” (quoted, 209), he does not mean that the sign is needed to make *différance* intelligible, but only that metaphysical concepts, such as that of the sign, are unavoidable as one tries to overcome them. Wang compares this idea with the Madhyamaka insight that the ultimate can be spoken of only in conventional terms. But it would be wrong to say that for Derrida the sign has conventional validity as pointing to an ultimate, ineffable *dharmatā* of *différance* that would be unintelligible without it, or that metaphysical discourse is related to a beyond of metaphysics as speech to silence. Again somewhat confusing is the remark that “the system of differences cannot have fallen from the sky. It is the effect of a cause that permits the play of differences” (209). To image Derrida’s *différance* as a cause with Saussure’s differences as its effect is to reify the former, or to make it a Kantian condition of possibility (as Wang inclines to do on page 215). The similarities between Derrida and Madhyamaka sketched on pages 215–19 are tenuous. The least convincing moment is the single sentence in which the topic of the Same is explicitly addressed: “What is evident is that his account of the Same as the truth of the sign is resonant with the Buddhist conception of the *samatā* as the true sign of all factors” (218).

All in all, this is an expert and often brilliant work, which is somewhat hobbled by its problematic comparativist thesis.

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