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Sūtra of the Unsullied Worthy Girl as Spoken by the Buddha

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Abstract

The article puts forth a complete, annotated translation of the *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* 佛說無垢賢女經 (*The Sūtra of the Unsullied Worthy Girl as Spoken by the Buddha*), a short Mahāyāna sūtra translated into Chinese in the 3rd or 4th century. The protagonist and namesake of the sūtra is a female bodhisattva (*nü pusa* 女菩薩) who teaches the Mahāyāna doctrine of the emptiness of all phenomena by using her female form to confront the discriminatory attitudes expressed by members of the Buddha's assembly. In so doing, she argues that "in the law of the Great Vehicle there is neither male nor female." The Translator's Introduction situates the text within a larger corpus of Mahāyāna texts that discuss the female body as well as the contentious issue of changing the female body to a male body on the path toward buddhahood.

Keywords:

Mahāyāna Buddhist Sūtras, Medieval China, Gender, Sexual Transformation, Dharmarakṣa

佛說無垢賢女經

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摘要

這篇文章提供了《佛說無垢賢女經》的完整翻譯與注釋。《佛說無垢賢女經》在三或四世紀時被翻譯成中文，是一部簡要的大乘經。本經主角是一位女性的菩薩，她透過運用自己女性的形態來對抗釋迦牟尼佛的弟子所表達的歧視性態度，並同時教導大乘認為一切現象都為空的教義。為了支持她的觀點，她宣稱「於大乘法無男無女」。譯者的介紹是在大乘經典這一更大的範圍中來討論此經，這樣不僅對女性身體進行了討論，還對佛教在成佛之道中「女轉男身」的爭議性課題進行了說明。

關鍵詞：

大乘佛教、中世紀中國、性別、性轉變、竺法護

Introduction

The *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* 佛說無垢賢女經 (*The Sūtra of the Unsullied Worthy Girl as Spoken by the Buddha*) is a short Mahāyāna sūtra that was translated into Chinese during the late 3rd or early 4th century by the eminent monk and translator from the north of China, Dharmarakṣa (Zhu fahu 竺法護) (d. 316 CE).¹ The central message of the text is one of extolling the Mahāyāna by showing that its message of salvation through the path of the bodhisattva is superior to that of the arhat put forth in mainstream Buddhist sūtras. In this way, the text is contextualized within many other Mahāyāna sūtras, most famously, the *Lotus Sūtra*, that advocate for their own value, functionality, and efficacy over the supposed blindness and partiality of the teachings of mainstream Indian Buddhism. Gregory Schopen has characterized this triumphalist self-promotion within Indian Mahāyāna sūtras as the literary output of a small minority of apologists on the defensive.² In China, however, it seems that this message of the superiority of the Mahāyāna was taken at face value: not only did mainstream Buddhism not find wide appeal in China, but, as Schopen also argues, it was in China where the Mahāyāna became dominant.³ In sum, Dharmarakṣa's *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* finds its origin in the early Indian Mahāyāna context of self-promotion and pointed criticism of the mainstream tradition; however, it is preserved for us in Chinese, the language of the region where the Mahāyāna was firmly established.

The *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* puts forth its message of the superiority of the Mahāyāna through an exposé on divergent ways of seeing and knowing wherein, and throughout the text, the broad, penetrating, and boundless (*wuxian* 無限) vision of Śākyamuni Buddha and his disciple, Aniruddha—who is famed for his able perception—is championed over the narrow, restricted, and discriminating vision of Śāriputra and Indra. The question of superior and inferior modes of perception is seen in many places in the text but perhaps none so clearly as in the narrative of the gestation and birth of the Unsullied Worthy Girl. Having journeyed from a far-off buddha land in order to come to

¹ Much more work is needed on Dharmarakṣa and his literary corpus, with particular attention being paid to discussions of sex and gender in his work. For an excellent study of the impact his translations had on the formation of Chinese Buddhism, see: Daniel Boucher, “Dharmarakṣa and the Transmission of Buddhism to China,” *Asia Major* 19, no. 2 (2006).

² Gregory Schopen, “The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism: Through a Chinese Looking-glass” *The Eastern Buddhist* 32, no. 2 (2000): 19–20.

³ Gregory Schopen, “The Mahāyāna and the Middle Period in Indian Buddhism,” 23.

Śākyamuni's buddha land to hear him preach, The Unsullied Worthy Girl upstages all others in the assembly by speaking to Śākyamuni and his disciples directly from her own mother's womb, of which only Śākyamuni and Aniruddha can see inside. To enable his assembly to be able to perceive the child in the womb, Śākyamuni then casts a great light that allows everyone—Aniruddha now included—to see *all* beings inside *all* wombs. Once the assembly's penetrating vision is established, the Unsullied Worthy Girl is miraculously born like a buddha—from the side of her mother, with the earth quaking and shaking. Her birth is accompanied by the successive births of all of the other beings from all of the other wombs. It is therefore clear that the Unsullied Worthy Girl is a highly attained being. By the end of the text she is referred to as “a Female Bodhisattva” (*nü pusa* 女菩薩).

Though the presence of such remarkable beings as the Unsullied Worthy Girl is not entirely unique across Mahāyāna sūtras (her most famous counterpart is likely the Daughter of the Dragon King from the *Lotus Sūtra*), what is unique in the *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* is the fact that she retains her female body throughout the entire text, never taking on a male form as does the Daughter of the Dragon King.⁴ And this fact perplexes Indra and Śāriputra who attempt to clothe her newborn and naked body in order to conceal her “naked and detestable form” (*luoxing kewu* 裸形可惡). In response to this, the Unsullied Worthy Girl lectures them both on the Mahāyāna, telling them that such bodily distinctions do not truly exist. Śākyamuni confirms the veracity of her claim by instructing Indra to give rise to the mind of the bodhisattva, for, in so doing, Śākyamuni says he will see that the naked body of the girl is nothing other than the body of a bodhisattva. In such a way does the *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* find doctrinal context with a number of other Mahāyāna texts, which Nancy Schuster long ago pointed out, “...insist that only the ignorant make distinctions between the religious aspirations of men and women” because, in terms of sex, “this position is the only one which is consistent with the Mahāyāna doctrine of the emptiness of all phenomena.”⁵ Certainly, throughout this text, the Buddha himself agrees with the message of the Unsullied Worthy Girl and supports her

⁴ In the *Sūtra of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經) the Daughter of the Dragon King is a highly-attained being who takes on a human male form in response to criticism on her female, non-human form (T 262, 9: 35b12–c26).

⁵ Nancy Schuster, “Changing the Female Body: Wise Women and the Bodhisattva Career in Some Mahāratnakūṭasūtras,” *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 4, no. 1 (1981): 25.

existence in his assembly by explaining where she has come from and why she has attained such a high and miraculous status in a female body.

Although the *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* uses the body of a young, female protagonist in order to reveal that even physical sex is nonexistent from the perspective of the Mahāyāna, the text is intertextually connected to a cluster of other texts popular in the medieval Chinese Mahāyāna tradition that recommend or simply assume the act of sex transformation for female practitioners.⁶ This textual connection is likely due to the fact that although in the *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* the Unsullied Worthy Girl never changes her sex, the vast and innumerable masses of other women transform their sex and become men. Not yet themselves highly attained beings with the ability to travel through myriad buddha lands teaching and converting other beings, the women in Śākyamuni's assembly are bound by the physical laws of karma in Śākyamuni's land. Indeed, according to mainstream legal traditions, female bodies are considered less karmically developed than male ones, a soteriological scheme that exists also within the Mahāyāna where chauvinisms against the female body and concerns about its pollution abound.⁷ This theme of bodily transformation through positive karmic fruition is repeated in a number of places in the text wherein all manner of beings undergoes a similar, spontaneous process of transformation in a karmically graduated series. With respect to the fates of these beings, the message of the text is that one's physical form is determined by the laws of karma in Śākyamuni's buddha land—whether in mainstream or in Mahāyānic ways of knowing—but that with the power of the Mahāyāna, *even* inferior beings like women can be saved. Highly attained beings in the Mahāyāna are not bound to Śākyamuni's buddha land where gender significations are binary and gender regimes are patriarchal—a stark difference from both the famed

⁶ For a chart of the textual relationships between this text and four others, see: Stephanie Balkwill, “*The Sūtra on Transforming the Female Form: Unpacking an Early Medieval Chinese Buddhist Text*,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 44, no. 2 (2016): 136–138.

⁷ For an extensive analysis of the ways in which the inferiority of the female body has been discussed in Theravadin legal literature, see: Petra Kieffer-Pulz. “Sex-Change in Buddhist Legal Literature with a Focus on the Theravāda Tradition.” *Annual Report of the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology at Soka University for the Academic Year 2017* 21 (2018): 31–33. With respect to the Mahāyāna, a particularly poignant discussion of Mahāyānic notions of female impurity across East Asia can be found in: Lori Meeks, “Women and Buddhism in East Asian History: The Case of the *Blood Bowl Sutra*, Part I: China,” *Religion Compass* 14, no. 4 (2020); “Women and Buddhism in East Asian History: The Case of the *Blood Bowl Sutra*, Part II: Japan.” *Religion Compass* 14, no. 4 (2020).

buddha lands of Sukhāvāti and Abhirati.⁸ As such, the existence of the Unsullied Worthy Girl does not obliterate ideas of karmic graduation and physical transformation seen in Buddhist texts of all traditions, but it does reveal the contingent nature of that system by tying it to Śākyamuni’s buddha land.

The historical reception of this text throughout the social and literary worlds of medieval China is too complicated to be fully explored here; however, a brief summation of the history might be to simply state that just as Śāriputra and Indra are perplexed by the message of the Unsullied Worthy Girl, so too have been the text’s translators and interpreters. Approximately a century after Dharmarakṣa translated this text, Dharmakṣema (Tanwuchen 曇無讖) (385–433 CE), his great northern successor, translated it as well.⁹ Their two translations are not the same: It seems that either the two translators were not working with the same base text or that Dharmakṣema found it necessary to re-envision the text by adding new elements and silencing others.¹⁰ The result of Dharmakṣema’s translation is that the highly-advanced status of the Unsullied Worthy Girl is largely diminished and she is referred to simply as the “Girl in the Womb,” which is what Dharmakṣema entitles his translation: *Fuzhong nütng jing* 佛說腹中女聽經 (*The Sūtra Heard by the Girl in the Womb as Spoken by the Buddha*). Similarly, Dharmakṣema’s text includes a lengthy

⁸ Paul Harrison has helpfully explored the question of sexed bodies in Sukhāvāti, the pure land of Amitābha, where it is often said that women cannot be born as women, but instead as men. Harrison’s argument, which I agree with, is that texts of the tradition suggest a radical gender equality in that rather than being “men” per se, beings in Sukhāvāti can be understood as genderless. Paul Harrison, “Women in the Pure Land: Some Reflections on the Textual Sources” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 26, no. 6 (1998), 566. As for Abhirati, *The Sūtra on the Buddha-land of Akṣobhya* (T 313: *Achu foguo jing* 阿閼佛國經) explains how gender works in that buddha land. For example, Śākyamuni says, “The women in my buddha-land are wicked and shameful with evil tongues, jealous by nature, and manifest depraved actions. In my buddha-land women have all of these conditions. In that other buddha-land [Abhirati], women do not have these conditions.” (T 313, 11: 756b8–b10). For more on this, see: Stephanie Balkwill, “Disappearing and Disappeared Daughters in Medieval Chinese Buddhism: Sūtras on Sexual Transformation and an Intervention into Their Transmission History” *History of Religions* 60, no. 4 (2021): 255–286.

⁹ For a study of Dharmakṣema’s life in Northern China and his importance as a translator, see: Jinhua Chen, “The Indian Buddhist Missionary Dharmakṣema (385–433): A New Dating of His Arrival in Guzang and of His Translations.” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series 90, no. 4/5 (2004): 217–233.

¹⁰ I have pointed out the differences between the texts in the notes below.

section on sexual transformation and Buddhist monastic ordination wherein the women in Śākyamuni's assembly who become men also all become monks after first being ordained as nuns. In the penultimate line of Dharmakṣema's text, the protagonist also changes her sex and becomes a young boy.

In the *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing*, however, the protagonist remains both female and a hero. It is for this reason that the text stands out as unique and important. As one of the earliest texts translated into Chinese that specifically addresses the topic of women and their bodies from the perspective of the Mahāyāna, the *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* teaches that “in the law of the Great Vehicle there is neither male nor female (*yu dasheng fa wu nan wu nü* 於大乘法無男無女).” This is an important message to come out of this earliest stratum of Chinese Buddhist translations. The entire text of the *Foshuo wugou xiannü jing* is translated below, and it is the translator's hope that the message of this text resonates with both scholars and practitioners of Buddhism alike.

Translation

The Sūtra of the Unsullied Worthy Girl as Spoken by the Buddha

佛說無垢賢女經

Translated by the Western Jin (266–316 CE) Tripiṭaka Master,
the Yuezhi¹¹ Dharmarakṣa
西晉月氏三藏竺法護譯

Thus, have I heard: When the Buddha was on Mt. Gṛhrhakūṭa¹² in Rājagṛha with an innumerable assembly of the various bodhisattvas, great disciples, erudite men, erudite women, and a variety of heavenly and human beings, asuras, supernatural beings, and *nāgas*, he spoke this sūtra.

聞如是：一時佛在羅閱祇耆闍崛山中，與諸菩薩、大弟子、學士、學女，諸天人民、阿須倫、鬼神、龍無央數共會，時佛說經。

At the time there was an elder Brahmin in his assembly whose name was Xutan.¹³ He had a wife named Bailouyan who,¹⁴ along with nine-hundred and

¹¹ The term “Yuezhi”月氏 was used in Chinese annals of the period to describe disparate groups of Iranian-language speakers in China. In time, the “Great Yuezhi”大月氏 became identified with the Kushan empire. What we know of Dharmarakṣa is that he was born in Dunhuang to parents of Indian and Scythian ethnicities. I prefer to leave Yuezhi untranslated as, in Dharmarakṣa’s title, I take it more as a semi-mythical ethnic placeholder than as an accurate description of his ethnicity.

¹² Mt. Gṛdhrakūṭa, or Vulture Peak, is where the Buddha is said to have preached the Mahāyāna sūtras.

¹³ Following Pulleyblank’s reconstruction, the Middle Chinese pronunciation of this name would be **Suḍdan* [Edwin G. Pulleyblank, *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation: in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991), s.v.]. Although other possible alternatives for an Indic source come to mind, the one that most immediately suggests itself is Sudāna (‘Good at giving’). The name would have been widely known in the Sanskrit Buddhism of northwestern India: The famous prince Vessantara of the Pāli *jātakas* was called Sudāna in this context.

¹⁴ Determining the Indic source for the mother’s name presents philological challenges. Diego Loukota has provided expertise on this matter, which I attempt

seventy-five billion wives,¹⁵ joined her hands together to listen to the sūtra.

爾時會中，有長者梵志，名曰須檀，有婦名擗樓延，與九百七十五億婦人俱，叉手聽經。

to clarify here and for which I follow Pulleyblank in constructing the medieval pronunciation.

To begin, the Taishō apparatus for her name shows that it has appeared in a number of variants across time, some of which suggest a two-character form, including: 擗樓延 (Korean), 裨樓延 (Yuan and Ming), 捍樓延 (Qing) (T 562, 14: 913b21) and 擗樓延 (Korean), 擗樓 (Song), 裨樓 (Yuan and Ming), 捍樓 (Qing) (T 562, 14: 913b22).

To further complicate matters, in the seventh century lexicon, *Yiqie jing yinyi* 一切經音義 (*The Sounds and Meanings of [all the Words in] Scriptures*) Xuanying 玄應 (f.c. 7th century) agrees with the Qing variant when he writes: **Piǎlāw* 擗樓. The *fanqie* [of the character *pai* 裨] is **piǎ* 臂-彌 *miǎ* [=**piǎ*]. Name of a householder woman from the west. The *Womb Sūtra* (*Taizang jing* 胎藏經) has *hain/hian* 捍 [in the place of 擗], and this is suspect of being a corruption. (T 2128, 54: 530b6–7).

Whether the no longer extant *Womb Sūtra* was the ancestor of the Qing text or an altogether different text is uncertain; however, what seems clear is that for Xuanying the name of the mother consisted of only two syllables.

If we follow Xuanying’s form of the name—**Piǎjlāw* 擗樓—the Indic form that might underlie the name is not immediately transparent. The name of the flowering tree *pīlu* (*Careya Arborea*) is attested as a masculine personal name in Buddhist texts [Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), s.v.], and therefore a feminine version (*Pīlū*, *Pilvī*, *Pailvī*, *Pailavī*) is a possible candidate. Moreover, the personal name *Pilotika* was rendered phonetically as **Piǎljīhāiṅk* 卑盧異學 in **Gautama Saṃghadeva*’s (fl. 4th century) translation of a *Madhyamāgama* of yet unknown sectarian affiliation (T 26, 1: 656a17–28).

However, what we have in the text of the Second Korean Canon (and the *Taishō*) is not Xuanying’s disyllabic form but the tri-syllabic 擗樓延, or **piǎjlāwjian/piǎjlāwciajŋ* in reconstructed pronunciation. That is also the name of the buddha who presides over the land from which the Unsullied Worthy Girl hails. Loukota suspects that the tri-syllabic form in her name is a contamination based on the more readily transparent name of the Buddha *Vairocana*. See note 34 for a philological discussion of this possibility.

¹⁵ Though it is not uncommon to see women included in the vast assembly of the Buddha in Mahāyāna sūtras, both the mention of the “erudite women” and the incalculable amounts of wives in the assembly might signal the reader to the later unfolding of the text, which highlights the roles of both learned women and mothers in its discussion of Mahāyānic salvation.

At the time, Bailouyan was pregnant. There was a girl in her womb whose body was fully formed and who, while in the womb, also joined her hands together to listen to the sūtra.

時裊樓延懷妊，是女在母胎中，形體盡具，亦於胎中叉手聽經。

The worthy Aniruddha,¹⁶ with the power of penetrating vision brought forth by his merit, saw the girl child in the womb with her hands joined together to listen to the sūtra. He thought to himself, “As far as I can see, it appears that in this assembly there are no others who, like myself, are able to perceive this invisible matter.” He then glowed with joy from this lucky happenstance.

賢者阿那律，自以功德徹視之力，見此女子於胞胎中叉手聽經，即自念言：「想在會者目之所覩，未能探察無形之事，如我者也。」則自僥倖光色愉悅。

The Buddha spoke to Aniruddha: “What do you see that has made your heart glow with such peculiar joy?”

佛告阿那律：「汝見何等，心色悅異乃如是也？」

Aniruddha said: “Using my penetrating vision, I see the girl in the womb with her hands joined together to listen to the sūtra. This is why I celebrate with splendid joy!”

阿那律言：「我以徹視，見胎中女叉手聽經，是以熙怡用自慶耳。」

The Buddha said: “How great! How great! It is as you have said. By analogy, [this vision] is like comparing the stars to the light of the sun and the moon.

¹⁶ With the introduction of Aniruddha, we get our first major break with Dharmakṣema’s translation, henceforth referred to as T 563. In T 563, where there is no Aniruddha. The following story of Aniruddha’s ability to see the girl in the womb and the Buddha’s subsequent comments on the vision of the tathāgatas is all missing from T 563. The action in T 563 picks up with the Buddha simply illuminating all of the world so that every person in the assembly can see the girl in the womb. Similarly, T 563 also does not include our text’s further enumeration of everyone in the assembly’s ability to see into all of the wombs of a large variety of creatures once the world is illuminated by the Buddha. In sum, T 563 is the story of one womb and one baby, whereas our text is the story of innumerable wombs and innumerable babies who, as we will see, are all born at the same time, following the birth of the Unsullied Worthy Girl—an action that further suggests her own status as a being very close to buddhahood.

Isn't it pleasing? Among the Voice-Hearers,¹⁷ you are foremost in vision. No other's [vision] is like yours. [And yet it is not comparable] to the quality of observation of the tathāgatas,¹⁸ [who] can see that the flying birds, walking beasts of the ten directions, and all of the insects in the ground are all pregnant and that the children in their wombs are all just like all of you listening to the sūtra.”

佛言：「善哉，善哉！如汝所言。譬如眾星比日月光，寧為等不？汝於聲聞所見第一無逮汝者，如來所觀等見十方飛鳥走獸、地中諸虫皆有懷妊，子於胎中亦悉如汝一等聽經。」

Aniruddha and everyone else in the assembly were suspicious and doubtful. [And so] the Buddha emitted a light that illuminated all places as it shone endlessly. Up and down and in all eight directions the light shone unimpeded, causing all the people and all the things in innumerable lands to see each other as if looking in a mirror.

時阿那律及諸會者咸有疑意。佛放光明徹照無極，八方上下無所罣礙，令無數剎人物所有，譬如照鏡表裏相見。

Aniruddha and the others looked up into the sky and saw that the flying birds had ceased [flapping] their wings and were circling around to listen to the Buddha, that there were un-laid and unhatched eggs in their wombs, and that inside of the eggs [the babies] had also opened up and stretched forth their wings to listen to the sūtra. Looking down, they inspected the walking beasts with four feet who had ceased [eating] grass and stopped [drinking] water, and who were all standing upright to listen to the sūtra. [They] were all pregnant and those in their wombs had crooked two of their feet in front of them to wholeheartedly listen to the sūtra. [They also saw] that the earth-born creatures—snakes and worms—had quieted their bodies and stopped wriggling to listen to the sūtra with pure intention. On the inside, they were pregnant with children who had

¹⁷ Skt. *śrāvaka*. A voice-hearer is a disciple of the Buddha who literally heard his voice. Though a “voice hearer” is regarded as an accomplished disciple, Mahāyāna texts like this one often use the term to signify the religious status of persons who have not yet learned the Mahāyāna. We see this trope at work in the next line wherein the Buddha immediately contrasts the vision of his foremost “voice hearer” against the vision of the tathāgata.

¹⁸ Epithet of the Buddha, meaning either “Thus Come One” or “Thus Gone One.”

not yet been born and who, in the womb, raised their heads and curled up¹⁹ their bodies to wholeheartedly listen to the sūtra.

阿那律等仰視虛空見飛鳥類停翼徘徊聽佛所說，胎中之卵未生未孚，於鳥胎中亦復舒翅布翼聽經；俯視走獸四足之類，輟草止水竦立聽經；胞胎所懷亦於胎中，屈前兩足一心聽經；虫蛇蚯蚓地生之類，靜身不搖精意聽經；中有懷妊子未產生者，亦於胎中舉頭繫身一心聽經。

Then, Aniruddha,²⁰ having received the supernatural power of the Buddha, used the eight kinds of voice to question the girl in the womb:²¹ “For what reason do the children inside the wombs of beasts and insects as well as those inside the eggs of birds press their hands together, stretch their wings, crook their feet, and curl their bodies, to wholeheartedly listen to the sūtra?”

時阿那律承佛威神，以八種音問胎中女：「鳥卵虫獸胎中之子，用何等故，叉手舒翼，屈足繫身，一心聽經？」

Then all the girls inside the wombs answered Aniruddha: “We listen to this sūtra for the sake of all those who are born and who are lost in the five existences where they cannot know the true way. Furthermore, we listen to this sūtra for the sake of the masses who, with desire, anger, and ignorance, are born and die without end. We listen to the sūtra for the sake of persons who are unfilial and who do not support the buddha and the monks.”

時女之等諸在胎者，答阿那律：「我用一切生者之類，迷於五處不識正道，是故聽經；及用一切多婬怒癡生死不絕，是故聽經；用一切人不孝父母，不供奉佛及比丘僧，是故聽經。」

Having heard what they had said, Aniruddha²² then knelt down in front of the Buddha and addressed him: “[I] recognize [that it is through] the

¹⁹ Literally, “bowled body” *panshen* 盤身, which I take to mean that they turned their bodies into bowls by coiling.

²⁰ Again, in T 563, Aniruddha is not in the text. It is the Buddha in this text that is doing the questioning.

²¹ These are eight attributes of voice that the Buddha uses to teach and convert beings. Notably, one of these attributes is a “non-feminine voice” (*bu nǚ yin* 不女音). Charles A. Muller, “*bayin* 八音” (Digital Dictionary of Buddhism, <http://www.buddhism-dict.net/cgi-bin/xpr-ddb.pl?q=八音>), last modified April 25, 2016.

²² Again, this section is missing in T 563, and missing with it is Aniruddha’s vow to save all beings.

supernatural power of the merit of the World Honored One that [I] fully understand this: [I] would rather take up a body that falls into the hells and receives all manner of sufferings for innumerable *kalpas*²³ than choose [the state of the] arhat. Why? All these beings in the wombs whose bodies have yet to be seen have still given rise to the great intention to save all beings; therefore, [if] I now employ my body to undertake death and am frightened, [it will be] because I am fettered by perception and consciousness, and I am like a dead person unable to benefit the living.”²⁴

時阿那律，聞其所說，長跪白佛：「憶知世尊功德威神洞徹如此，我寧以身陷在地獄，受眾苦毒累劫無數，不取羅漢。所以者何？諸在胞胎未見身者，尚發大意念救一切，我今用身以死畏故，為想識所縛，譬如死人無益生者。」

Then, when the girl was born out of the right side [of her mother’s body], the three-thousand world quaked and shook vigorously,²⁵ innumerable heavenly beings stopped in mid-air, and there was a rain of heavenly flowers which made joyous sounds. Following this, there spontaneously appeared a thousand-petal lotus flower as large as a chariot wheel, with a stem like *vaidūrya*.²⁶ The girl took her seat on top of it. At that time,²⁷ the various

²³ In South Asian cosmology, a *kalpa* is an immeasurably large amount of cosmological time that the entire cosmos cycles through in a series of creations and destructions.

²⁴ The interpretation of Aniruddha’s vow is somewhat tricky. As I understand it, Aniruddha here vows to take on the destiny of those in the hells in order to save them. In making his vow, he has been inspired by all of those advanced beings who have taken up female forms inside the wombs of animals and insects in order to save them. In Buddhist soteriology, life in hell is less advantageous than life as an animal or life as a woman. And so, here, Aniruddha makes the ultimate sacrifice; forfeiting his pending receipt of the state of becoming an arhat, he will journey to the hells just like all others who, of unfortunate birth, reside there. This vow of Aniruddha’s must be read as a strong statement in support of Mahāyāna understandings of the bodhisattva path and universal salvation.

²⁵ The birth of the Unsullied Worthy Girl echoes that of the Buddha and thus positions her as a miraculous being akin to him. For more on the natural phenomena that accompany the birth of a Buddha, see: Eugen Ciurtin, “The Buddha’s Earthquakes [I] on Water: Earthquakes and Seaquakes in Buddhist Cosmology and Meditation, with an Appendix on Buddhist Art,” *Studia Asiatica* 10 (2009), 69.

²⁶ A green and precious gem, variously identified as either beryl or lapis lazuli.

²⁷ Notably, this small section which describes how the protagonist’s Buddha-like birth inspires the births of all beings is missing in T 563 even though the rest of

heavenly and human beings, flying birds, walking animals, and snakes and worms—all of them pregnant—all gave birth.²⁸ By analogy, it was like all ministers high and low, without exception, following the king on a sojourn.²⁹ Thereupon, Indra quickly grabbed hold of some celestial clothing and came down from on high so that the clothes could be used by the girl to cover her naked and detestable body, [for her] to take them and put them on. The gods and all of the princesses from the *trāyastriṃśa* heaven³⁰ also all grabbed clothing to give to all the masses of beings.

時女乃生從右脇出，三千國土為大震動，有無數天止在虛空，雨於天華作諸音樂，則有自然千葉蓮華，大如車輪，莖如琉璃，女坐其上。時諸天人飛鳥走獸虫蛇蚯蚓諸懷妊者，亦皆出生，譬如王者征行之時，群官大小莫不隨從；於是天帝，即持天衣，從上來下，以用與女，裸形可惡，取此衣著；忉利天子及諸王女，亦皆持衣與諸眾生。

Then the girl responded: “This is not the shedding of desire for nirvāṇa. We are not those who go along with receiving such things! You, honorable one, will become an arhat. My aspiration is bodhisattvahood. You, honorable one, are not of the same category as me. What we vow is not the same.”

時女報言：「其有未脫欲泥洹，吾等不從有所受也。卿為羅漢，我志菩薩，卿非我類，所願不同。」

the story of her birth is very much the same. It is my opinion that we should understand this as a textual attempt to minimize the spiritual status of the Unsullied Worthy Girl, a minimization which we will again see further on in the text.

- 28 This account of the spontaneous births that accompany the birth of the Unsullied Worthy Girl is reminiscent of the stories of the Buddha’s “co-natals” and might therefore work to further identify her as a being very close to buddhahood. Reiko Ohnuma discusses the co-natals in her book, *Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 102.
- 29 This analogy that compares the Unsullied Worthy Girl to a king is another way of comparing her to a buddha, given that the mythology of kingship, through the ideal of the Wheel-turning King of the Dharma (*cakravartin*), is deeply interconnected with Śākyamuni’s own story.
- 30 In Buddhist cosmology, the gods of the heavens are beings that are still trapped in *samsara* and therefore need the Buddha’s teaching for their ultimate escape from life and death. They are not omniscient and all-powerful gods, rather they are ignorant super-beings at the mercy of their intense emotions and powers. And yet, of the *samsara*-bound heavens, the *trāyastriṃśa* where Indra is sovereign is perhaps the most desirable. The Buddha’s mother was herself reborn there and the Buddha famously ascended there to teach her.

Indra replied: “Because the female body is detestable when naked, I grabbed clothes to cover your form!”³¹

天帝復言：「我以女身裸露可惡，是以持衣用相與耳。」

The girl again responded: “In the law of the Great Vehicle there is neither male nor female.³² I now bear the clothes that nature provided.”

女復報言：「於大乘法無男無女，我今當有自然衣來。」

The Buddha spoke to Indra: “As such, do not undertake to adorn the female body. Give rise to the mind of the bodhisattva and attain good marks on your own accord.³³ What will then appear to you is boundless: nothing other than the adorned body of the bodhisattva.”

佛語天帝：「如是不為裝校女身，發菩薩心自致相好，所現無限乃為裝校菩薩身耳。」

At that time, Śāriputra, deeply bewildered at such a transformation by this girl, faced the Buddha and addressed him: “From what land did this girl come in order to be among us? Who ought to bring clothes [for her]?”

³¹ This exchange between the Unsullied Worthy Girl and Indra is not found in T 563. Indeed, that text does not engage in a similar Mahāyānic discussion of forms and the ultimate point that “In the law of the Great Vehicle there is neither male nor female” (below) is not included.

³² This statement on the non-existence of the categories of male and female within the Buddha’s teaching is common enough in Mahāyāna materials; however, it is worth noting that it often appears in texts where at least one of the protagonists is an advanced female practitioner of the Buddha’s law. Notable other examples of this precise argument occur in such fascinating but understudied texts as: *Foshuo Yuye nü jing* 佛說玉耶女經 (*The Sūtra of the Girl, Yuye*); *Foshuo Xumoti pusa jing* 佛說須摩提菩薩經 (*Sūtra on the Bodhisattva Sumati*); *Foshuo zhuan nüshen jing* 佛說轉女身經 (*Sūtra on Transforming the Female Form*); *Foshuo hailongwang jing* 佛說海龍王經 (*Sūtra on the Dragon King of the Ocean*).

³³ The appearance and the embellishments of the bodhisattva are specifically discussed in two texts of the Chinese canon, translations of the same base text, which also include a female protagonist who discusses Mahāyānic ways of knowing and who changes her sex in a show of her own magic. Those texts are: *Shunquan fangbian jing* 順權方便經 (*The Sūtra on Following Provisional Expedients*) and *Le yingluo zhuangyan fangbian pin jing* 樂瓔珞莊嚴方便品經 (*The Sūtra on the Expedients of the Joyful Diadem and Garlands*). These marks are also considered a physical manifestation of a being’s proximity to buddhahood, as a buddha is born with physical features unique to their supernatural status.

時舍利弗，深怪此女變動乃爾，前白佛言：「此女從何國來到是間乎，誰當送衣？」

The Buddha replied: “This girl came from the southeastern direction, the abode of the Buddha of the Practice of the Bailouyan Dharma.³⁴ This land is

³⁴ In the Taishō apparatus, the name of the buddha from whose land the Unsullied Worthy Girl hails is attested in the following forms: 裨樓延法習 (Korean) 裨樓延法習 (Song), 裨樓延法習 (Yuan, Ming), 捍樓延法習 (Qing).

The initial two syllables show similar variations as those in the name of the girl’s mother, and if we leave aside the semantically transparent segment *faxi* 法習 “practice of the dharma,” we need only to concentrate on the third syllable in order to make sense of the name of the buddha in question. The character 延 has two middle Chinese readings: **jian* and **ciajŋ*. Middle Chinese glosses for 裨/裨/裨/捍樓延 would be then: **piǎ/(piǎ/bɛj/biajk/bɛjk)/(piǎ-biǎ)/(fiuan/fian)lǎw-jian* or **piǎ/(piǎ/bɛj/biajk/bɛjk)/(piǎ-biǎ)/(fiuan/fian)lǎw-ciajŋ*. If we exclude the unlikely *k*-final readings and the eccentric *Womb Sūtra*/Qing variant, this segment readily suggests the Sanskrit word *vairocana*, “resplendent.” If, for convenience, we rely on the Korean reading, **piǎjlǎwciajŋ* matches closely Skt. *vairocana* in spite of the unusual final velar nasal; **piǎlǎwjian* fits well a Middle Indic version of the word, in which intervocalic *c* would have become *y*: Ardhmāgadhī has the personal name *Vairojana*, and the regular Gāndhārī outcome of Skt. *vairocana*, although unattested, would be either *Vairojan(a)* or *Verojan(a)*.

Perhaps on account of its widespread usage as a personal name, and later on as the name of a prominent buddha, the word *vairocana* may have suggested to Chinese translators a phonetic rather than a semantic rendering. This phenomenon is attested in least in one case, in which *vairocana* was rendered phonetically even when used not as a personal or proper name but as an adjective in its primary meaning of “resplendent.” The Sanskrit *Candrasūtra* presents us with the moon god Candra beseeching the Buddha to free him from the attacks of the demon Rahu. The Buddha pronounces a stanza in which he commands Rahu to release Candra, in which the moon is referred to as follows: The one that, in the middle of the dark sky / Makes light [and] is resplendent (*vairocana*) (*yo hy andhakāre nabhasi / prabhākaro vairocano*) (Ernst Waldschmidt, “*Buddha Frees the Disc of the Moon (Candrasūtra)*,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 33 (1970): 181. The 5th Century Chinese translation of this sūtra by *Guṇabhadra (Qiunabatuoluo 求那跋陀羅) (394–468) has: Breaking all darkness, its pure light illuminating the sky, now **bilociana* (=vairocana)’s clean light is clearly visible (破壞諸闇冥，光明照虛空，今毘盧遮那，清淨光明顯) (T 99, 2: 155a16–17).

It seems then likely that in our text the buddha’s name was rendered half-phonetically and half-semantically. If this conjecture is correct, the resulting interpretation of the underlying Indic form of 裨樓延法習 would be “[Having] the Practice [習] of the Resplendent [**piǎjlǎwciajŋ* 捍樓延 = *vairocana*] Dharma [法]”. Good corroborating evidence for this hypothesis stems from the attestation

called the Country of the Jambu River. Having gone through a hundred thousand buddha lands, she came to this land desiring to see the Buddha. Of necessity, there are clothes for coming to this land.” Clothing then spontaneously appeared in the sky along with serene music. In the sky there was a sound that spoke to the girl, saying “It is acceptable to wear these clothes³⁵ [which are] suitable for attaining the Five Supernormal Powers.”³⁶

佛言：「是女從東南方揜樓延法習佛所來，剎名閻浮檀國，去此十萬佛剎，女從本國來欲見佛，自當有衣從本國來。」衣便自然在空中來肅肅有聲，空中有音則語女言：「可著此衣，當得五通。」

of the buddha-name *Vairocanadharmā* ‘Having a Resplendent Dharma’ in the Sanskrit *Karuṇāpuṇḍarīka* (Isshi Yamada, Ed. *Mahākaruṇāpuṇḍarīka Sūtra*, London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1968), 358.

As previously stated, Loukota postulates that if the same two characters 揜樓 were chosen to render both the name of the mother and the initial two syllables of *vairocana*, it is possible that the latter may have contaminated the former and that what we see in the Korean text (揜樓延 for both) could be an analogic normalized form.

³⁵ It is impossible to know what these clothes look like; however, the *The Sūtra on the Buddha Land of Akṣobhya* again offers some probable context. In that text, Śāriputra is again confused about the conditions of women’s lives and Śākyamuni informs him in that in *Akṣobhya*’s buddha land called Abhirati things work as such: “As for the women in the buddha land of Akṣobhya: if they are those who desire to obtain jewels and garlands, then in the treetops will they fetch them and put them on; if they are those who desire to obtain clothing and coverings, they will also fetch them from the treetops and put them on. Śāriputra, the women in that buddha land do not have womanly conditions like the conditions of the women in my buddha land” (T 313, 11: 756b04–b07).

³⁶ The Supernormal Powers are supernatural abilities achieved by advanced practitioners. According to *Baozanglun* 寶藏論 (*The Treasure Store Treatise*), these five powers are: 1) the power of the Way; 2) power of the supernatural; 3) power of dependability; 4) power of retribution; 5) power of the demons (T 1857, 45: 147b1–2).

Subsequently, the girls of this world all attained the Five Supernormal Powers.³⁷ The [Worthy] girl obtained the clothing³⁸ and then came down from the flower to approach the Buddha. When she venerated his feet, heaven and earth at once shook and quaked six times. All of the mothers³⁹ without exception gave rise to the intention of unsurpassable and universal salvation. [Of] flying birds, insects and beasts, there were none who did not transform into humans with their bodies clothed in celestial clothing and adorned with pearls and jewels. The girls kowtowed to the Buddha, placing their heads to his feet, and thrice spoke homage to the *samyak-sambuddha*.⁴⁰ While kneeling, they addressed the Buddha: “We beseech [you], on behalf of all beings in this assembly, to broadly expound the sūtras and the dharma and command us to achieve what we have vowed.” The Buddha complied with their intentions and went on to speak the sūtra.”

又女本國盡得五通，女得衣著，便從華上下至佛所，女一舉足，天地即為六反震動，一切母人，皆發無上平等度意，飛鳥虫獸莫不轉身即化為

³⁷ T 563 records the series of actions of attainments differently. In that text, the Unsullied Worthy Girl attains the Five Supernormal Powers directly after putting on the clothes that appear. Once she has attained these powers, all the other girls in the assembly do so as well. Our text never explicitly states at what point she attains the Supernormal powers; instead, she says that she will attain them and then all the girls in the world will attain them too. As in her birth story, where all the girls are born right after her, we might assume that the girls achieve what she achieves. However, only after that does the Unsullied Worthy Girl put on the clothes. So, it is clear in our text that her clothes are not a requisite for her attainment, but perhaps a concession to the world in which she—a highly advanced being—has arrived.

³⁸ In Dharmakṣema’s translation, he sees it that the girl only achieves the Supernormal Powers after putting on the clothes. This fits with his pattern of minimizing the status of the girl to that of a being subject to the laws of Śākyamuni’s buddha land, which is not what Dharmarakṣa’s text says, as translated above, wherein the girls achieve the Five Supernormal Powers before receiving the clothing. Though Dharmarakṣa’s text makes no mention of the protagonist achieving the Five Supernormal Powers, it is implied that somebody of her stature should have achieved those long ago.

³⁹ T 563 does not include this section regarding the actions of all of the mothers nor does it include the subsequent section on all of the transformations of every manner of birds and beasts. It does put the action of thrice praising the Buddha in the voice of the protagonist and also places the request that the Buddha speak the sūtra in the sole voice of the protagonist; however, instead of beseeching the Buddha to preach, the protagonist instead vows to change her form into a male form.

⁴⁰ Another epithet for the Buddha, meaning “Fully and Perfectly Enlightened.”

人，身衣天衣珠瓔服飾。女以頭面稽首佛足，三言南無三耶三佛，長跪白佛：「願為一切諸來會者，廣說經法令得所願。」佛隨其意即為說經。

At that time, the girls and the nine-hundred and seventy-five billion wives heard the Buddha speak [the sūtra] and jumped for joy. They did not return to their alternate [past] bodies, but straightaway went and stood in front of the Buddha and transformed into men. Each and every one of them cast off their necklaces and jewels, which they scattered on top of the Buddha. The supernatural force of the Buddha commanded that what was scattered spontaneously transform into banners festooned with pearls. Among [the banners], there was a seven-treasured lion seat and, seated on top of it, the Buddha raised his hands in praise of it. As a result, all of them then attained *avaivartika*.⁴¹ The birds, beasts, insects, and snakes that had become humans also cast off their bodily jewels, necklaces, and precious adornments which they used to scatter on the Buddha. Seated among the banners, the Buddha commanded that what had been scattered also become precious banners which were the same as the previous ones. As is standard, these were taken as a *dakṣiṇā*⁴² and all of them [also] attained the seventh abode [of *avaivartika*].

是時此女及九百七十五億母人，聞佛所說，踊躍歡喜。不復貿身，便立佛前化成男子，各各脫瓔珞珠寶用散佛上。佛之威神，令其所散自然變成珠交露帳，中有七寶師子之座，上有坐佛舉手讚之，應時皆得阿惟越致。鳥獸虫蛇得為人者，亦復脫身珠瓔寶飾以用散佛，帳中坐佛，令其所散合成寶帳，亦復如前等無差特，則為達嚩，俱得七住。

The Buddha addressed the Female Bodhisattva, the Unsullied Worthy Girl:⁴³ “When you were in the womb and preached and converted on behalf of

41 The status of “non-returning” in which the attained being will never again return to their un-awakened state.

42 That is, as a religious offering to the Buddha.

43 In T 563, the Buddha uses this opportunity to instruct the protagonist on the reasons why she should change her sex. As a result, all of the women in attendance express their desire to change their sex, but also all ask to be ordained as nuns. Their husbands show up looking for them and ultimately give them permission to ordain. They all become nuns and cast off their jewels, which, as in our text, turn into jeweled banners. They then all magically transform their sex and ask to be ordained as monks, which the Buddha asks Maitreya to undertake. At that point, the protagonist, too, changes her sex, but not before talking with her mother, who confirms that she knew she was pregnant with a bodhisattva and, from that, was

all living beings, the tathāgatas with *sambodhi* in all the five destinies also preached and converted on behalf of all living beings.” The Buddha spoke the sūtra to its end and all beings in the assembly were very happy, kowtowed to the Buddha, and then left.

佛告女菩薩無垢賢女：「汝於胞胎，為眾生作唱導，如來等正覺亦於五道，為一切眾生作唱導。」佛說經已，一切眾會，皆大歡喜，稽首而退。

saved. The Buddha also then confirms that the girl had saved innumerable numbers of parents in her past lives.

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