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Reflections on a Lecture by JSPS Post-Doctoral
Fellow Fumi Yao

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A New Sanskrit Manuscript of the Bhaiṣajyavastu: Reflections on a Lecture by JSPS Post-Doctoral Fellow Fumi Yao

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On the ninth of March, 2017, the Religious Studies Department at McMaster University gathered together to attend a lecture from, and bid farewell to, Post-Doctoral fellow Dr. Fumi Yao. Originally from Japan, Yao has become a familiar face in Southern Ontario's Buddhist Studies community over the last six years. Yao, who researches narratives found in early Indian Buddhist monastic literature available in Chinese, Pāli, Sanskrit, and Tibetan languages, first visited Canada to present at a BDK-Canada conference on Buddhist nuns in India hosted by the University of Toronto and McMaster University in 2011. She has now completed two post-doctoral fellowships supported by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science at McMaster University since 2013 under the supervision of Dr. Shayne Clarke.

The lecture, entitled: "Re-encountering old materials through a new discovery: the emergence of another Sanskrit manuscript of the *Bhaiṣajyavastu*," was the result of years of meticulous research into newly discovered Sanskrit fragments of the *Bhaiṣajyavastu* chapter of the

Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya (the monastic code of the *Mūlasarvāstivāda* school of Indian Buddhism hereafter referred to as the *MSV*).

Although the title *Bhaiṣajyavastu* refers to medicine (*bhaiṣajya* in Sanskrit), “the passages directly related to medicines occupy no more than twenty percent of the entire chapter,” Yao explained. And it was *sūtras*, which belong to a genre of text different from monastic law codes, scattered throughout this large portion of the *MSV* that first piqued Yao’s interest as a Masters student. Yao would go on to complete her PhD dissertation, a translation of this very text, at the University of Tokyo in 2011.

The presentation highlighted the importance of the newly identified manuscript, which Yao began work on after completing her PhD. At one point in her talk, Yao presented a slide containing a historiography of scholars who have drawn comparisons between the pre-modern Chinese and Tibetan translations of the *MSV*, the only sizeable Sanskrit manuscript of the *MSV* (a 7th or 8th century manuscript discovered in the Gilgit region of northern Pakistan in 1931), and stories from the *MSV* preserved in the *Divyāvadāna* (an anthology of stories extant in Sanskrit with no known manuscript dated before the 17th century). Previous studies of the *MSV* prioritized some versions of the text over others and sought to illustrate which readings represent the authentic *MSV*.

With the inclusion of evidence from the newly discovered Sanskrit manuscript of the *Bhaiṣajyavastu*, Yao demonstrated to her audience that once narrative structures, abbreviations of stock phrases, and words and sentences are carefully considered from all available materials, discrepancies in readings of the *MSV* need not be rejected as inauthentic: attributed to the translators of the Tibetan and Chinese versions, or the redactors of the *Divyāvadāna*. Yao explained that at the level of narrative structure, the Chinese version and the Gilgit manuscript often agree against the Tibetan version. With some exceptions, the new manuscript

evidence also supports the readings of the Chinese translation where the Gilgit manuscript is missing. At the level of words and phrases, the new manuscript sometimes differs from the Gilgit manuscript, supporting either the Tibetan translation or the *Divyāvadāna*, and sometimes both.

Convinced that many of the discrepancies found between all extant materials already occurred in the Sanskrit *vinaya* tradition, Yao assured her audience that “each of these extant materials equally has the right to appear in court as a witness,” so to speak. Such a statement reminds scholars to keep an open mind when reviewing primary sources and to consider carefully all possibilities offered by the evidence at one’s disposal.

Yao will return to Japan on March 27th to begin a three-year Assistant Professorship at Waseda University, in Tokyo. Although her presence at McMaster will surely be missed, the Religious Studies Department wishes Yao well and looks forward to her future contributions in the field of Buddhist Studies.