

The Etymology and Origin of the Ullambana

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Abstract

Buddhism was disseminated from India to China during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 C.E.) and incorporated local Chinese local cultures. It emerged gradually as a specific cultural phenomenon with Chinese features. According to Li Li'an, such a phenomenon could be considered a miniature of all the foreign cultures' destiny in China, too (Li 2006, Huang 2021). The Ullambana Festival of Buddhism experienced a long process of change within Buddhism itself. The Ullambana Service of Chinese Buddhism is a glittering example of this historically peerless amalgamation of two of the world's most remarkable ancient civilizations. Thus, this paper attempts to investigate the etymology and origin of the Ullambana Festival during the process of its transmission in China to explore the localization of Buddhism in China further.

Keywords: *Ullambana festival, Etymology, Origin, Localization*

Introduction

Ullambana Festival (Buddha's joyful day), known as Sangha Day, is the last day (15th of July, Chinese lunar calendar) of the SaCgha community's three-month Vārsika (summer retreat or rainy season). Literary evidence proves that the Ullambana Festival has a close relationship with three Buddhist canons: Fo-shuo Yu-lan-pen Jing (The Buddha Bhāsita Ullambana Sūtra in English), Bao-enfeng-pen Jing (The Sūtra on Offering Bowls to Repay Kindness in English)" and "Jing-du Yu-lan-pen Jing (The Pure Land of Ullambana Sūtra in English)". It is an activity with great merits that allows the SaCgha community to perform ritual practices without obstructions, rescuing the spirits of the deceased ancestors, parents and relatives from suffering. The distinctive features of Buddhism in China result from a process of absorption and assimilation between Buddhism and China's hitherto existing cultural peculiarities. The Ullambana Service of Chinese Buddhism is a glittering example of this historically peerless amalgamation of two of the world's most remarkable ancient civilizations. It is observed that from time to time, scholars have busied themselves with the study of the

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Ullambana Festival or 盂兰盆节/*Yu-lan-pen Jie* (in Chinese) since the *Ullambana Sūtra* was introduced from India into China.

Most scholars like Fan Jun, Xie Wanruo, Makita Tairyō and Akamatsu Kosyō (Chisong Xiaozhang in Chinese) advocate that it is Chinese culture that has been instrumental to the origin of the *Ullambana* Festival, for there is no precedent of observing *Ullambana* in Indian Buddhism. Makita Tairyō holds that *Ullambana Sūtra* is an apocryphal text (known as “*Wei-jing*” or “*Yi-jing*” in Chinese) and was created by local ancient Chinese (Makita Tairyō, 1976: 84). The clinching factor, these scholars argue, is the concept of filial piety prevalent in the Chinese thought (Fan 2006, Xie 2004, Akamatsu 2000). However, there has been limited research until now that has systematically studied the root of the *Ullambana* Festival. Hence, this paper attempts to investigate the etymology and origin of the *Ullambana* Festival, including the different names of the *Ullambana* Festival and the similarities and differences between the *Ullambana* Festival and the Zhong-yuan Festival of Chinese Taoism.

The Etymology of the term *Ullambana*

On the issue of the etymology of *Ullambana*, there has been a lot of research by scholars from different countries such as China, Japan, the United Kingdom, the United States, Denmark, France and Germany (Ashikaga 1951, Kenneth 1973, Duyvendak 1926, Ernest 1904). The different views can be broadly grouped into three categories, which are enumerated as follows. “The first type of view postulates that *Yu-lan-pen* (*Ullambana* in Chinese) is derived from the Indo-European languages. According to these theories, the Chinese word is assumed to be a phonetic derivation of the Sanskrit word *Avalambana*, the Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit equivalent of which is *Ullambana*, meaning ‘hanging down or depending on’; the *Pāli* word is *Ullambana*, meaning ‘salvation, rescue, full of mercy’; and the Iranian word is *Urvan*, meaning ‘soul’. It has been carried to China in Sogdian form *rw’n* or ‘*rw’n*.’”(Teiser, 1988: 21)

Hui-lin (737-820 C.E.) thinks that the name “*Yu-lan-pen*” is incorrect and that the correct name vis-à-vis the festival ought to be denoted by the term “*wu-lan-po-nu*”, meaning “hanging upside-down”. There is a custom in the Western country (India), he said, that if someone’s male line came to an end, then when he (or she) died, nobody would sacrifice for him (or her). He (she) would then be fated to go down in hell, hanging upside-down, because he (or she) would be accounted as a criminal. Thus, the Buddha ordered that the kinsfolk of the dead should make offerings to the *Triratna* with the goods of the living so that the dead may be rescued from an existence of suffering on the day of *PravāraGā*. Therefore, the former explanation that “*Yu-lan-pen*” is aware of saving food is wrong (T 54: 535b).

In *Yu-lan-pen-jingshuxiao-heng-chao* (Sub-commentary of the *UllambanaSūtra*) from the Song dynasty (960-1279 C.E.), Yu-rong (not in detail) deems that “*Yu-lan-pen*” is a combination of two Sanskrit words; “*Yu-lan*” is short for “*wu-lan-po-nu*”, meaning “filial piety, offering, kindness, hanging down”, while “*pen*” is a truncation of the old pronunciation “*Bhājana*”, and the new pronunciation “*Men-zuo-nang*” or “*men-zuo-luo*”, meaning “saving ware”. The literal meaning of the word “*Yu-lan-pen*”, thus, is “saving ware for hanging upside-

down” (T 10: 519 b-c). The explanation of Hui-lin (737-820 C.E.) and Yu-rong (not in detail) were the first in this respect.

The second view follows the standard Chinese understanding that while “*pen*” in Chinese means “bowl”, “*Yu-lan*” is a transliteration of a foreign term for “upside down”. On this basis, “*Yu-lan-pen*” refers to the bowl, into which offerings are placed to save the forefathers from the destiny of hanging upside down in the underworld or to the manner in which offerings are sometimes made by inverting the bowl of offerings intended for wandering spirits. In the ancient Chinese explanations, Tang Hui-jing (578-?C.E.) and Zong-mi (780 -841 C.E.) acknowledged this viewpoint (Teiser, 1988: 22)

In *Yu-lan-pen-jingzan-shu* (*Commentary Praising the Ullambana Sūtra*), Hui-jing wrote: “There is a lot of delicious food in the *pen* (bowl), which is offered to the Buddha and the monks to save the pitiable fate of those hanging upside-down in the subterranean prisons of hell. Hereupon, it is titled ‘*pen*’.” (T 85: 540 a) Zong-mi had a similar description in his work (T 39: 507 a). “*Yu-lan*” is a Western term¹, (meaning that it came from India; since India lies to the West of China, most Chinese called India the Western Country) the meaning of which, in Chinese, is hanging upside-down; “*pen*” is a Chinese word that means a ware to be used for saving. Thus, according to Chinese convention, “*Yu-lan-pen*” should be called “*jiu-dao-xuan-qi*”² (which indicates a ware used on the *Ullambana* Festival to save hungry ghosts). They both consider “*pen*” as a kind of ware like “a bowl”.

The third idea states that the meaning of “*Yu-lan-pen*” draws from spoken Chinese. Some scholars have suggested that the sound “*Yu-lan-pen*” represents is a variation of the commonly accepted orthography, namely “*Yu-lan-pen*”, which means “tray-shaped bamboo basket”. Others suggest that the shortened sound “*Yu-lan*” represents either “*Yu-lan*”, meaning “fish basket”, or “*Yu-lan*”, referring to a cup of nectar and a basket of seedcakes. The shortened sound “*Lan-pen*” has also been interpreted as “magnolia bowl” (Teiser, 1988: 23).

Among these three explanations, the third one is so biased that no more than a few people have accepted it; the second one has had a broad mass base and even enjoys acceptance from some scholars in the contemporary era. The author, however, prefers the first explanation.

The Sanskrit word “*Ullambana*” has very ancient origins, as similar words are found in the great Indian epic “*Mahābhārata*”. For example, a story described “*The Mahābhārata*” suggests that the original meaning of “hanging...down” and “suspended” is denoted in this quotation precisely by the Sanskrit words “*Lambamānān*”, “*Valambante*” and “*Lambāmahe*” (Sukthankar, 1993: 113). All these three Sanskrit words share the root “*lamba*” with the word “*Ullambana*”. The “*Mahābhārata*” appeared between the 4th century B.C. and 4th century C.E. and is considered ancient literature. This shows that the Sanskrit word “*Ullambana*” has some deep historicity.

Buddhism employed this word in the *Ullambana Sūtra* to elaborate upon the meaning of salvation. Later, when the *Sūtra* was introduced into China, the concepts of “*Ullambana* Service” and the “*Ullambana* Festival” were developed in accordance with the features of the canon. Like so, the word “*Ullambana*” has come to be well known in China.” *Ullambana*

Service” is an annual celebration in Han-Chinese monasteries held on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the traditional Chinese calendar, which is referred to “*Yu-lan-pen-hui*” or “*Lan-pen-hui*”. After it appeared, more and more people, comprising both the upper classes and common society, started taking part in the activities. The purely religious celebrations were also interspersed with a variety of recreational and commercial activities, leading to the “*Ullambana Festival*” in its popular avatar.

The Chinese version of the word “*Ullambana*” had quite a few different abbreviations and synonyms; we will frequently see these names in quotations in this paper. The different names of “*Ullambana Service*” are “*Yu-lan-pen fa-hui*”, “*Yu-lan-pen sheng-hui*”, “*Lan-pen sheng-hui*”, “*Lan-pen-hui*”, “*Yu-lan-hui*” and “*Pen-hui*” etc. There is no doubt that the “*Ullambana Festival*” has also had a lot of names in folk China culture, such as “*Gui-jie (Ghost Festival)*”, “*Lan-pen-jie (Ullambana Festival)*”, “*Yu-lan-jie (Ullambana Festival)*”, “*Zhong-yuan (Middle Primordial in English)*”, “*Zhong-yuan-jie (Middle Primordial Festival in English)*” and “*Zhong-yuan-ri (Middle Primordial Day in English)*”, in which the best-known name was “*Zhong-yuan-jie*”, the usage of which might have been more popular than that of all other names combined.

The *Ullambana Festival* and the *Zhong-yuan Festival*

It is not just the Buddhist monasteries that utilized religion to sponsor a festival of ancestral offerings on the first full moon of autumn. Taoists also held a celebration on this day called “*Zhong-yuan-jie*”, namely the *Zhong-yuan Festival*.

The *Zhong-yuan Festival* is closely associated with the belief of the *San-yuan* (The *Three Primordial* in English) thoughts that indicate “*tian*” (the “heaven” in English), “*di*” (the “earth” in English) and “*shui*” (the “water” in English). *The Three Primordial* has a long and varied history in Taoism. Taoism states that Heaven, Earth and Water are the three basic elements which take the shape of all things, as recorded in the Taoist literature of “*Yun-ji-qi-qian (The Classified Collection of Taoist Scriptures in English)*”: “After “*Hun-dun*” (the “universe” in English) separated, there were three *Qi* (the “gas” in English) of the heaven, the earth and the water, in which formed human beings and bred everything” (Zhang, 2003: 1224)³ Afterward, the Three Primordial were personified as God who won the forces to govern the world—*San-guan (The Three Officers in the World in English)*, i.e., Official of Heaven, Official of Earth and Official of Water. They oversaw the human world and granted blessings for good deeds or rendered punishment for evil acts. The belief in the “Trinity of the Three Officials for Ruling and Offering” started gaining currency in the second century when Wu-dou-mi Taoism (Five pecks of rice Taoism) appeared. Thereafter, it has never been suspended. At that time, the celebration was on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month (Maspero 1981: 34, T 6: 879).

For instance, a Taoist scripture *Tai-shang-dong-xuan ling-bao-san-yuan pin-jie-gong-de qing-zhongjing (The Scripture of the Exalted One of the Sacred Jewel of Penetrating Mystery on the Prohibitions and Judgment of Merit of the Three Primordials in English)*

states, “Placed three palaces, three mansions and thirty-six bureaus administered by the Upper Primordial, Official of Heaven; set three palaces, three mansions and forty-two bureaus administered by the Middle Primordial, Official of Earth; and located three palaces, three mansions and forty-two bureaus administered by the Lower Primordial, Official of Water. Altogether, there were nine palaces, nine official residences and one hundred and twenty bureaus from the Three Primordial. The Three Primordial complement each other to judge people’s merits and misdeeds, whether they should get life or death, blessings or sins, then order the public office runners to investigate execution in due time without any error. The meritorious works of learning immortal and the criminal offence of doing evil would be recorded in detail and in charge by the officer branching.” (T6: 879)

Since the thought of the “Three Officers” arose, it was merged with the “Three Primordial” by degrees. In Northern and Southern dynasties (420-589 C.E., *Nan-bei Chao* in Chinese), Taoism established the date of the fifteenth days in each lunar January, July and October as the birthdays of Officers of Heaven, Earth and Water, respectively. It is said that the “Three Officers” would descend to the earth on their respective birthdays to judge people’s actions. Therefore, Taoist rituals of confession and promotion of good conduct are practised on this day, and thus formed the “*San-yuan* Festival”, including *Shang-yuan*, *Zhong-yuan* and *Xia-yuan* Festival.

In the “*Tai-shang dong-xuan ling-bao ye-yin-yuan jing (The Cause Scripture on Supreme Mysterious Practices)*”, it says, “The day on the fifteenth of the first month, The Lord of *Shang-yuan* palace, The First Official, The *Qi* (*Nine Prana*), The Heaven Official who brings fortune, the *Zi-wei* Great (*the Emperor of Purple Forbidden Enclosure* in English) descends to the earth to judge people’s action; the day on the fifteenth of seventh month, the Lord of *Zhong-yuan* Palace, the Second Official, the Earth Officer of Remitting Crime, the *Qing-xu* Great (the Emperor of Pure Emptiness) drops off the world to determine conduct of human beings; the day on the fifteenth of tenth month, the Lord of *Xia-yuan* Palace, the Third Officer, the Water Officer of releasing doom, The *Fu-sang* Great (the Emperor of East) arrives for the land of humankind to inspect behavior of humanity.” (T 6: 100 a-c)

Setting offerings as sacrifices for ancestry was a historical custom in China. In the “*Li-ji* (Book of Rites)”, there is a record relating the *Qiu-chang* (*Autumn Taste* in English)⁴, one of the four routine royal sacrifices for the four seasons. These folk customs came into being before the beginning of the Han dynasty (202 B.C. – 220 C.E.) and subsequently were absorbed by Taoism, taking the shape of the *Zhong-yuan* Festival. According to the record of “*Zhai-jie-lu* (*Records of Fasting* in English)”, some actions of fasting and praying on *Zhong-yuan* day on the fifteenth of the seventh month took place at the time of Taoism’s origin in the second century (T 6: 1008).

Early Taoism also had the custom of *Fan-xian* (*Worthy of Entertainment* in English), in which delicious food was offered to people of virtue in order to keep all evils away and eliminate one’s own crimes. As the following segment of the “*History of Three Kingdoms*” below records:

“(Zhang-lu’s disciples) were to be the wizard, praying for people’s illness. The method of prayer was to write down the name of the patient (on papers or clothes) to acknowledge a fault. After three times, the first paper or cloth with the sick person’s name is hidden in the mountains so that it may reach the heavens; another paper or cloth with the sick person’s name is buried in the earth, and the last paper or cloth with the sick person’s name is sunk in water known as “*San-guan shou-shu* (hand-writing of Three Officer)”. The invalid family must pay with rice worth Wu-dou (five pecks) as his repayment, which was called “Wu-dou-mi-shi (Master of Five pecks Rice)”...when (Zhang-)lu⁵ stayed in Han-zhong, the payment increased as the believers grew in number. (He) let relievers build free houses and kept rice and meat inside for feeding the travelers; and taught followers to cloister; (taught) that people should clean up the roads for a hundred steps to eliminate the faults of small mistakes; (he) also (ordered disciples to) suspend from killing within spring and summer on the basis of the Yue-ling (Affairs in Twelve Months), to refrain from drinking as well. The adherents could not violate (his teaching) even if they moved to other places.” (Luo, 1971: 2641)

The records of “entertaining the worthy” are also found in the literature of subsequent dynasties, such as *Lao-jun-yin song-jiejing* (*Oral Commandment of the Aged Worthy of the Heaven in Dream* in English) by Kou Qian-zhi (365-448 C.E.) in the Northern Wei dynasty (386-535 C.E.), and *Yao-xiuke-yijie-lü-chao* (*Selection of Commandment of Taoist Rituals* in English) edited by Zhu Fa-man (not in detail) in the Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.). In the first work, some rituals are drawn up, such as gathering for those worthy of regaling, confessing, the dispelling of sickness, praying, getting illness and so on (Qing, 1994: 143).

In the second work, the related description goes as follows:

“(If there happens to be) sickness or misfortune in a family, (they should) personally organize a feast in public, called “entertaining the worthy”. (In the feast, the host family should) invite holy and virtuous Taoist masters, including upper, middle and lower with ten, twenty-four, thirty, fifty or a hundred people; they cannot be less than ten people to invite; otherwise, they will not get the blessing. The Taoist priests are holy people who perhaps do not eat food or only eat little so that the food offered to them need not be much. It must just show the follower’s reverence for Taoists because people respect and adore them (the Taoists).” (T6: 978 b)

When Buddhist monasteries began holding the *Ullambana* Festival, Taoist monks started to follow them too. Along with the Taoist rituals that appeared in *Zhong-yuan*, the Taoists also developed a set of legends that justified and explained the celebrations. As seen in such sixth-century texts as *Tai-shang dong-xuan ling-bao san-yuan yü-jingxuan-du da-xian-jing* (*The Scripture on the Ultimate Nobility of Accessible Mystery of Unmeasurable Treasure of Great Offerings to the Three Primordial of Jade Capital Mountain in the Dark Metropolis*), the Taoist legends drew extensively on the Buddhist mythology of the ghost festival. While on the one hand, the sacrificing customs have been preserved, on the other, “entertaining the worthy” came into being to make offerings to Taoist monks. With the association of the

autumn harvest celebrations, the sacrifices for forefathers and the Buddhist ritual of the *Ullambana* Festival, the Taoist “*Zhong-yuan* Festival” finally emerged.

At any rate, by the time of the Tang dynasty, there was already a coexistence of two festivals of Buddhism and Taoism on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, as described by two famous poets, Ling Hu-chu (765 -837 C.E.) and Lu-gong (770-845 C.E.), regarding the Taoist *Zhong-yuan* Festival in their poetries in the Tang dynasty:

“Presented to Honored Master Zhang in *Zhong-yuan*:

(You) accidentally visit the human world to participate *Zhong-yuan*;

Without offering (on the festival),

You would be forever leisurely in the wonderland.

(I) burning incense lonely in the immortals’ monastery;

And (I) know that the master (at present) is taking rite in the Jade Capital Mountain from afar.

Appreciating Taoist Service in *Zhong-yuan*:

Seasons changes the start of autumn, the Three Primordials flow on middle;

Clouds pad the sky-blue paces, a memorial sent to the jade Emperor’s Palace;

Altar dotted dew from the locust flowers, fragrance of cypress seeds fills in the air;

Taoist robe looming through the mist, jade hub cutting through space;

I long to be an anchorite for long time, often pity the poor bugs of polygonum;

If I can present satchel (with official seal to else person), I am going to ramble in the free world since then.” (CTEXT 12: 3751)

As the two festivals paralleled in China, ordinary people could neither distinguish nor lucidly discern the differences between the two forms of celebrations due to the absence of apparent differences in their forms and characteristics. Buddhist and Taoist elements were freely mixed during the occasion, as they did with the terms “*Zhong-yuan*” and “*Yu-lan-pen*”, which were both used as generic appellations for the fifteenth day of the seventh month. More importantly, for most people, making offerings at a Taoist temple was not seen as contradictory to making offerings at Buddhist monasteries; both were deemed efficacious in bringing aid to the ancestors. Therefore, most people called the Buddhist ceremony “*Zhong-yuan*” instead of “*Yu-lan-pen*”. Gradually, “*Zhong-yuan*” also became one of the nicknames of the *Ullambana* Festival.

Conclusion

In brief, the Sanskrit word from which “*Yu-lan-pen*” is derived is “*Ullambana*”; thus, the Festival has its ancient roots in India. It basically denotes the pitiable fate of those hanging

upside-down in the subterranean prisons of hell; later, this Sanskrit word was absorbed into The *Ullambana Sūtra* by Buddhism. The *Ullambana* Festival is one of the most significant annual Buddhist celebrations in China and is held on the fifteenth of the seventh month of the lunar calendar to assuage the spirits of the dead, who were the believers' former enemies, friends, kinfolks and ancestors, and to make offerings to the *Triratana* at the same time.

The *Ullambana* Festival was founded directly at the beginning of the sixth century on the foundations of the *Ullambana Sūtra*, The *Sūtra on Offering Bowls to Repay Kindness* etc. The *Pure Land of Ullambana Sūtra* was not included in the official canon because it was deemed an apocryphal version. Emergence and dissemination of these three *Ullambana Sūtras* were the most important criterion for forming the *Ullambana* Festival in China so far as classical texts are concerned. After the *Sūtras* spread and the festival began to be celebrated, the *Ullambana* was quite a vogue in Chinese society. The *Zhong-yuan*, a similar festival, was also celebrated on the same day in the lunar July by Taoists under Buddhism's influence. Subsequently, the "*Zhong-yuan*" became an alias for the "*Ullambana* Festival" for ordinary Chinese people. The name and the idea of *Ullambana* were sourced from India, but the style of celebration developed in China. This fact is at the core of the question of the meaning and origins of the *Ullambana* Festival.

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End note

- ¹ “A Western term” means that it came from India since India lies to the West of China; most Chinese called India the Western Country.
- ² It indicates a ware used on the *Ullambana* Festival to save hungry ghosts.
- ³ See Zhang Jun-fang (?-C.E.1001-?), “*Zhu-jia-qi-fa* (The Practices of Qi of different Schools in Taoism)”, is collected in “*Yun-ji-qi-qian* (The Classified Collection of Taoist Scriptures)”, vol. 56, Beijing: Chung Hwa Book Company, 2003ŷp. 1224.
- ⁴ As a record in the chapter “*Wang-Zhi*” (Roles of Emperor) of “*Li-ji*” (Book of Rites): “Sacrificial roles of Emperor and Princes are as follows: Yue in spring, Di in summer, Chang in autumn and Zheng in winter.” It is collected in “*Li-jizheng-yi* (Correct Explanation of Book of Rites)”, Beijing: Peking University publisher, 1999, p. 385.
- ⁵ In original text, Zhang-lu’s name is only written “lu”, which is not completed. For easy to absorbquotings, the author adds full term in parentheses (the same hereinafter).