

An exploration of the time when the *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas of China—a case study of *Batama Gaga Ponglo*, *Langga Xihe*, and *Usabaro*

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Abstract. When the *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas of China is an interesting yet elusive question. Most Chinese scholars argue that the *Ramayana* was introduced along with Buddhism, a view that acknowledges Buddhism's significant role in promoting literary exchanges between China and India. However, this perspective, which ties the two closely together, limits further research into the exact timing of the *Ramayana*'s introduction and overlooks the fact that exchanges between China and India began as early as the Neolithic Age, as well as literature's pioneering role in these interactions. The Dai epics influenced by the *Ramayana* were orally transmitted for a long time before being compiled into texts, which were later rewritten by Buddhism to propagate religious doctrines. To clarify the facts, this paper conducts an in-depth analysis of three representative Dai epics to examine the extent of their rewriting, demonstrating that the *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas prior to the arrival of Buddhism. Finally, using the timing of Buddhism's introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas as a reference, the paper concludes that the *Ramayana* was introduced no later than the 1st century BCE.

Keywords: *Ramayana*, silk-cotton exchanges, introduction of Buddhism, *Batama Gaga Ponglo*, *Langga Xihe*

1. Introduction

When the *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas of China is a complex and unresolved issue. Both the *Ramayana* and the Dai's *Langga Xihe* share a common characteristic: they were orally transmitted for a long time before being compiled into written texts. For modern researchers, there is no substantive evidence available, and only through meticulous study and analysis of existing texts can reasonably approximate inferences be made. Buddhism, originating in India, also spread to regions surrounding India, particularly Southeast Asia and East Asia, exerting a profound influence on these areas. To disseminate religious doctrines more efficiently, rewriting local literary works with Buddhist ideas was a practical measure. Given their wide audience, epics were undoubtedly key targets for Buddhist rewriting. Epics revised by Buddhism are replete with Buddhist elements, leading many scholars to link the dissemination of epics with that of Buddhism and argue that the *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas of China along with Buddhism. By sorting through the early exchange history between China and India and conducting a close reading of three Dai epics—*Batama Gaga Ponglo*, *Langga Xihe*, and *Usabaro*—this paper not only clarifies the relationship between the introduction of the *Ramayana* and Buddhism but also lays a solid foundation for accurately inferring the timing of the *Ramayana*'s arrival in the Dai-inhabited areas.

2. Three early channels of exchange between China and India: the Silk Road, the Cowrie Shell Road, and the Painted Pottery Road

There are documented records in both countries regarding the origin of textile trade between China and India. When Zhang Qian was on his mission to the Western Regions, he saw Shu cloth and Qiong bamboo canes: "While I was in Dayuezhi, I saw Qiong bamboo canes and Shu cloth. I asked, 'Where did you get these?' The people of Dayuezhi replied: 'Our merchants bought them in Shendu. Shendu is several thousand li southeast of Dayuezhi. Its customs are similar to those of Dayuezhi, but it is low-lying, humid, hot, and muggy. The people fight on elephants. The country borders a great river [1]." Based on Zhang Qian's estimation, Dayuezhi was 12,000 li away from Han China, located southwest of Han. Since Shendu was another several thousand li southeast of Dayuezhi and had products from Shu, it must have been not far from Shu. This is the earliest record in Chinese

classics of Chinese silk appearing in India. Zhang Qian embarked on his first mission to the Western Regions in 138 BCE and returned to Han China in 126 BCE after 12 years. It is evident that Chinese silk was transported to India by merchants via the Southern Silk Road as early as the 2nd century BCE.

An earlier Indian classic records the spread of Chinese silk to India: the *Arthashastra* by Kautilya, which states: "Wild silk fabrics and silk cloth produced in 'Cina' (China) can be explained hereby [2]." Kautilya lived approximately between 400 BCE and 300 BCE. This constitutes the most important Indian documentary evidence that Chinese silk had been introduced to India as early as the 5th-4th centuries BCE. Indian scholar D.P. Singhal argues that textile exchanges between China and India were bidirectional: "Chinese silk (Chinamsuka) and later porcelain were highly valued in India, while Indian textiles were marketed in southwest China [3]." Archaeological findings indicate that "the earliest human group to cultivate cotton were farmers in the Indus Valley. In 1929, archaeologists discovered fragments of cotton textiles in Mohenjo-daro, present-day Pakistan, dating roughly between 3250 BCE and 2750 BCE. In the nearby Mehrgarh region, archaeologists found cotton seeds dating back to before 5000 BCE. Historical records further confirm that the cotton industry existed in the Indian subcontinent in ancient times [4]." Clearly, China and India engaged in a long-standing bidirectional exchange of material culture through silk and cotton textiles in ancient times.

Cotton textiles not only met people's needs for warmth and adornment but also played an irreplaceable sacred role in religious rituals. These rituals revering cotton thread are reflected in literary texts such as the Indian epic *Ramayana* and the Dai epics *Langga Xihe* and *Usabaro*. Most ethnic minorities in southwest China believe in animism, holding that all things in the world possess souls. For example, the human body is believed to have 32 souls and 92 spirits; if these souls and spirits remain in their respective positions and guard various parts of the body, the person will be healthy. If a soul leaves the body, the person may fall ill or die. Therefore, when a Dai person is ill or injured, they believe it is because their soul has departed, and a soul-calling ritual is performed.

Textual records of textile exchanges between China and India date back to the 5th century BCE. Chinese silk was cherished by Indians for its beauty, while Indian cotton textiles were transported to southwest China to serve as precious ritual items. Of course, human history is not only recorded in texts but also reflected in the artifacts used by people, which carry rich cultural information from their time.

Professor Duan Yu argues that during the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600 BCE – c. 1046 BCE), southwest China already had exchange relations with "ancient cultures in South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia [5]." He suggests that the Shang Dynasty golden artifacts unearthed from the Sanxingdui site in Guanghan and the Jinsha site in Chengdu may have absorbed similar cultural elements from West Asian and Near Eastern civilizations through ancient India and Central Asia, via routes such as the ancient Southwest Yi Road and the Shu-Shendu Road, passing through Yunnan, Myanmar, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other regions. These artifacts were then transformed and innovated by the ancient Shu people in accordance with their own cultural traditions, reflecting the exchange relations between China and ancient cultures in South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia during the Shang Dynasty.

The Cowrie Shell Road was another important channel for early exchanges between China and India. As early as the late 2nd millennium BCE, cowrie shells entered Yunnan. Archaeological discoveries show that cowrie shells were present in Yunnan from the Shang Dynasty to the Eastern Zhou Dynasty and the Western Han Dynasty [6]. Most of these cowrie shells originated from the Maldives [6], then were transported to Bangladesh and Assam, and further to Siam via the Burmese coast, before moving north from Siam to Chiang Mai (and Yunnan) [6]. Yang Bin argues that "cowrie shells used in northern China during the Shang Dynasty originated from the Maldives in the Indian Ocean and reached the Yellow River Basin via the Steppe Road [6]." Peng Ke also contends that "judging from their origin, cowrie shells used in ancient China did not come from the southeast coast but only from the Indian Ocean coast [7]." Cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean "were transported from the Indian Ocean to Turkmenistan, then via the Eurasian Steppe and the Mongolian Steppe to eastern Qinghai or the Great Wall region in China, which was likely an early import route for cowrie shells in ancient China [7]." Cowrie shells from the Maldives were introduced to Yunnan as early as 2000 BCE via Bangladesh and Assam, and also reached the Yellow River Basin during the Shang Dynasty via the Steppe Silk Road.

In fact, cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean were introduced to certain regions in central Gansu and eastern Qinghai in China's hinterland as early as 2500 BCE. A painted pottery vessel with cowrie shell patterns, now preserved in the Gansu Provincial Museum, was unearthed in Lanzhou, Gansu, and dates back approximately 4,500 years, serving as reliable evidence. Cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean have also been found in tombs at Liuwan in Ledu, Qinghai; Shang Sunjiazhai in Datong, Qinghai; and Karuo in Qamdo, Tibet. Fifteen cowrie shells and six stone cowrie shell imitations were discovered in four Majiayao Culture Machang-type tombs at Liuwan in Ledu, Qinghai, dating from approximately 2350 BCE to 2050 BCE. Cowrie shells were also found at Shang Sunjiazhai in Datong, Qinghai: "The cowrie shells, clam shells, bone beads, etc., unearthed from this tomb are common in Majiayao Culture tombs [8]." This tomb belongs to the Majiayao Culture period. Ten shell ornaments were found in the Karuo tombs in Qamdo, Tibet, with the Karuo Culture dating from approximately 5000 BCE to 4000 BCE.

If cowrie shells were introduced to Yunnan as early as 2000 BCE, could the cowrie shells unearthed in the Yellow River Basin have spread to Gansu, Qinghai, and other regions via Yunnan and Chengdu? After all, reaching the Yellow River Basin via the Southern Silk Road was more economically feasible and reasonable than via the Steppe Silk Road in terms of distance and

transportation costs. Regardless, it is certain that China and India began exchanges via the Southern Silk Road as early as 2500 BCE.

In addition to cowrie shell trade, China and India also exchanged painted pottery craftsmanship. Painted pottery unearthed at sites of the Indus Valley Civilization, such as Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, share certain similarities or commonalities in patterns with prehistoric painted pottery unearthed in Gansu, China. Therefore, scholars infer that there may have been mutual learning or imitation between them [9]. Contemporary Chinese scholars continue to explore issues related to early Sino-Indian exchanges. On April 7, 2021, Qinghai Daily published an article titled "Gazing at Hehuang Culture from the Indus Valley—Excavation Notes from the Bahadarabad Site in Pakistan," reporting on archaeological excavations conducted by Chinese scholars at the Bahadarabad Mound Site in Pakistan. The report states that ancient Chinese Yangshao Culture and Harappan Culture share significant similarities, particularly in certain decorative patterns. Furthermore, there were interactive relations between Harappan Culture, the Majiayao Culture in the Gansu-Qinghai region, and the Karuo Culture in Tibet. For example, the "brushed patterns" (irregular sweeping marks on the surface of vessels, believed to be caused by scraping with fine tree bundles or brooms after the vessels were formed) found on pottery unearthed at Karuo have also been discovered in Kot Diji Culture units at Bahadarabad. In particular, the Burzahom Culture, dating back to over 2000 BCE and discovered in the Kashmir region, shares numerous similarities with the Karuo Culture in Qamdo. Therefore, many scholars believe that the Harappan Culture of the Indus Valley, the Yangshao Culture, and the Majiayao Culture of the Yellow River Basin in China exchanged with each other through the Burzahom Culture in the Kashmir region as a bridge.

As the closest birthplaces of ancient civilizations, exchanges between China and India were inevitable. As early as the Neolithic Age, the two countries began interacting, and evidence of these exchanges—pottery and cowrie shells—can still be seen today, well-preserved in relics and tombs. Evidence of mutual exchanges during the Shang and Zhou dynasties includes the twenty-eight lunar mansions in astronomy and the earliest records of India in Chinese documents. Exchanges between China and India took place via the Maritime Silk Road, the Shu-Shendu Road, and the Desert Silk Road. Scholars argue that trade was the focus of Sino-Indian exchanges, with cultural exchanges relying on trade interactions, and Yunnan serving as a nodal point for these exchanges. Cowrie shell and silk trade were transported to India or China via Yunnan. Of course, there is no inevitable connection between the comprehensive Neolithic exchanges between the two countries and the timing of the *Ramayana's* introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas. However, these early exchanges at least provide a temporal possibility for the early introduction of the *Ramayana* to China, expanding the scope for scholars studying this issue. Without this possibility, the view that the *Ramayana* was introduced to China at an early date would not hold.

3. The relationship between the introduction of the *Ramayana* to China and the introduction of Buddhism to China

Studying the timing of the *Ramayana's* introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas inevitably involves the question of when Buddhism was introduced there. The timing and routes of the *Ramayana's* introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas roughly coincide with those of Buddhism. However, this does not necessarily mean that the *Ramayana* was introduced along with Buddhism, even though this view has seemingly become a consensus among experts researching the *Ramayana's* introduction to China. We first analyze the origin of the view that the *Ramayana* was introduced along with Buddhism.

This view may stem from the widespread dissemination of stories similar to "The Tale of King Ten-Virtues" (Shi She Wang Yuan). The combination of "The Tale of King Ten-Virtues" in Volume 1 of the Miscellaneous Treasures Sutra (Za Bao Zang Jing) and the story of the king in "The Previous Lives of the Buddha" (Guo Wang Ben Sheng) in Volume 5 of the Six Perfections Sutra (Liu Du Ji Jing) roughly constitutes a summary of the *Ramayana*. Buddhist Jataka tales absorbed a large number of Brahmanical stories to propagate Buddhist doctrines. The widely influential *Ramayana* was inevitably reworked by Buddhism to promote its teachings, and through Buddhism's powerful and enduring dissemination, the *Ramayana* was accepted by all social strata in China. The audience may not have known that these stories originated from the Indian epic *Ramayana*, but the *Ramayana* was inadvertently made known, accepted, and cherished by more people on a broader scale. Stories of the *Ramayana* from Buddhist scriptures spread widely, leading to the view that the *Ramayana* was introduced along with Buddhism. Within the context of the Jataka Tales, this view is undoubtedly correct.

The widely popular "Ailuan" stories in the Dai-inhabited areas are derived from the Jataka Sutras or Jataka Tales, which themselves "narrate various stories of the Buddha Sakyamuni's past lives—whether as humans, gods, or animals—before attaining enlightenment, based on the Buddhist concept of reincarnation [10]." According to Lu Yilu's research, many Dai long narrative poems, such as Zhang Xiang (The Oath), Qian Ban Lian Hua (The Thousand-Petaled Lotus), Su Wen, Zhao Bola, and Songpamin and Gaxina, "mention encountering dragons to obtain treasures or depict maritime trade stories, which are similar to the plot of the Buddhist scripture 'Seeking Pearls in the Sea.' The seven fairies in Qian Ban Lian Hua who spit a lotus flower from their mouths with each word are also analogous to the seven lotus flowers on the tusk of the six-tusked white elephant in Buddhist scriptures or the 'lotus flowers springing up wherever she steps' in the Buddhist scripture 'Princess Lotus.' Buddhist scriptures not only influenced Dai narrative poems in terms of content and plot but also in titles: Songpamin and Gaxina is

derived from the Songpamin Jataka, Zhao Shutun (Prince Shutun) is adapted from the Shutun Jataka, Qian Ban Lian Hua is based on the Thousand-Petaled Lotus Sutra, and Xiang Fa Gu Niang (The Fragrant-Haired Girl) is adapted from the Fragrant-Haired Girl Sutra, among others [11]." Due to the immense influence of the Ailuan stories, people assumed that all Dai narrative poems were influenced by Buddhism, and thus inferred that the *Ramayana* was also introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas along with Buddhism, subsequently influencing the development of Dai epics such as *Langga Xihe*.

This view may also arise from the abundance of Buddhist elements in *Langga Xihe* and other Dai epics influenced by the *Ramayana*. However, the presence of Buddhist elements in literary works such as *Langga Xihe* does not necessarily mean that the *Ramayana* was introduced along with Buddhism, as Buddhism also adapted widely circulating local literary works to propagate its doctrines. The idea of linking the timing and routes of the *Ramayana*'s introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas exclusively with those of Buddhism is overly absolute. While the two are related, the connection is not inevitable.

Scholars hold diverse views on when Theravada Buddhism was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas of China. Indian scholar P.C. Bagchi argues that Emperor Ashoka sent envoys to many countries to achieve religious conquest. These countries included not only those bordering the Mauryan Empire but also distant kingdoms such as Syria, Egypt, and Macedonia. Ceylon's conversion to Buddhism is attributed to Ashoka, who dispatched princes and princesses from his own family to Ceylon for this sacred mission. Such missions were also sent to Nepal, and most likely crossed the Indian Ocean to what the Indians called the "Land of Gold"—the Malay Peninsula and its neighboring islands [12]. A Chinese coin discovered in Mysore, dated to 138 BCE, indicates that maritime links existed between China and India as early as the 2nd century BCE [12]. As we know from earlier discussions, land links between China and India—i.e., the opening of the Southern Silk Road—date back to the 5th century BCE, and maritime links to the 2nd century BCE. Therefore, Buddhism's introduction to China was certainly not delayed, especially in Yunnan, which had extensive exchanges and connections with India via the Shu-Shendu Road from an early period, making the natural introduction of Buddhism to Yunnan plausible.

Some scholars argue that Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Myanmar and Thailand as early as the 3rd century BCE, influenced by Emperor Ashoka's vigorous promotion of Buddhism. Another view suggests that Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Myanmar and Thailand around the 3rd century CE, triggered by the exile of a large number of monks due to intense conflicts within domestic monastic communities, which also served as an opportunity for the spread of Buddhism. Scholar Wang Shilu argues that both views lack sufficient evidence to be valid. He contends that India had established close ties with Southeast Asia between the 3rd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, and thus Buddhism was introduced to Myanmar and Thailand during this period [13]. When inferring the timing of Buddhism's introduction to Myanmar, Wang Shilu based his reasoning on the timing of India-Myanmar exchanges—given the close interactions, the introduction of Buddhism was a natural consequence. If Buddhism was introduced to Myanmar between the 3rd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, its introduction to the neighboring Dai-inhabited areas of China would not have been much later.

Zhang Gongjin also explored the timing of Buddhism's introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas, concluding that the most credible period is between the 6th and 8th centuries CE [14]. He arrived at this conclusion using oral survey materials and legends, which hold certain documentary value for a people who created a written script relatively late. Just as Indian Vedic texts and epics were orally transmitted for thousands of years and remain among the oldest and most reliable historical documents of ancient India, oral traditions and legends can provide valuable insights. However, Zhang Gongjin's view that Buddhism was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas between the 6th and 8th centuries CE is not entirely accurate.

Li Donghong argues that "synthesizing Buddhist texts, new archaeological discoveries, and relevant research results, the view that Buddhism was introduced to Yunnan during the Han and Jin dynasties and flourished during the Tang and Song dynasties—i.e., Yunnan Buddhism 'originated in the Han and Jin dynasties, thrived in the early Tang Dynasty, and reached its peak during the Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms'—is supported by both documentary and archaeological evidence and should be considered relatively credible [15]." This timeline is roughly consistent with the introduction of Buddhism to Central Plains China. Mr. Jiang Weiqiao argues that "the Chinese first learned about Buddhism as early as the early Han Dynasty; however, historically significant records indicate that it was officially introduced to China during the reign of Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty (58-75 CE) [16]." Jiang Weiqiao believes that the Chinese became aware of Buddhism around the time Zhang Qian returned from the Western Regions, while Buddhism was officially introduced to the Central Plains during the reign of Emperor Ming of the Eastern Han Dynasty, i.e., in 67 CE. In the 12th year of Emperor Ming's Yongping reign (69 CE), with the submission of the Ailao Kingdom, the Han Dynasty finally opened the Yunnan-Myanmar section of the Shu-Shendu Road. The Records of Huayang: Records of the South (Huayang Guo Zhi: Nan Zhong Zhi) mentions that there were Shendu people in the Yongchang Commandery. Clearly, Yunnan had a geographical advantage for exchanges with India. While people from the Central Plains traveled to India via the Hexi Corridor, Central Asia, and across plateaus, residents of the Yongchang Commandery found it relatively easier to interact with Shendu, as the Yongchang Commandery bordered Shendu and some Shendu people resided within it. Therefore, Theravada Buddhism was introduced to Yunnan earlier than to the Central Plains. Thus, the claim that Buddhism was introduced to Yunnan during the Han and Jin dynasties is inaccurate.

The History of Dai Literature (Dai Zu Wen Xue Shi), co-authored by Wang Song and other scholars, argues that although Buddhist monks began propagating Buddhism in the Dai-inhabited areas as early as the 1st-2nd centuries CE, their numbers were small, and they failed to establish a firm foothold, let alone achieve popularization. By around the 7th century CE, Buddhist

influence gradually expanded, becoming a universal belief among the Dai people [17]. Wang Song suggests that Buddhism was first introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas as early as the 1st century BCE, but this missionary effort did not take root. Later, Buddhism continued to spread and competed with traditional Dai religions for followers. Eventually, Buddhism established a firm presence in the Dai-inhabited areas, with temples built. Wang Haitao argues that Yunnan was the first stop for Buddhism's introduction to China, and Chinese Buddhism originated in India and began in Yunnan [18]. According to Dai documents, Buddhism was introduced to the Dai people much earlier than this.

In summary, Buddhism, which emerged in the 5th century BCE, had spread to neighboring countries and regions by around the 3rd century BCE due to Emperor Ashoka's vigorous promotion—consistent with the views of many scholars. Most domestic scholars acknowledge that Buddhism was introduced to China between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE. Some scholars even argue that Buddhism was introduced to Myanmar as early as the 3rd century BCE, and according to Dai documents, Buddhism's introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas was even earlier. Synthesizing Dai documents, other historical records, and scholars' research findings, it is more likely that Buddhism was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas of China in the 1st century BCE. Discussing the timing of Buddhism's introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas of China lays the groundwork for further exploring when the *Ramayana* was introduced there.

4. Epics rewritten by Buddhism—*Batama Gaga Ponglo*, *Langga Xihe*, and *Usabaro*

To clearly understand whether the *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas along with Buddhism, examining whether Dai epics were influenced by and rewritten by Buddhism, and investigating Dai epic texts influenced by Indian epics and myths, is a viable approach. Below, we take three Dai epics—*Batama Gaga Ponglo*, *Langga Xihe*, and *Usabaro*—as case studies to explore whether the *Ramayana* was rewritten by Buddhism after its introduction to the Dai-inhabited areas and the extent of such rewriting. In the Dai-inhabited areas, offering "donation texts" (tan bu) is considered the most meritorious form of offering and almsgiving: Buddhists present handwritten long narrative poems or folk stories to the Buddha to obtain maximum blessings. Therefore, the likelihood of epics being rewritten by Buddhism is high. We first examine the Dai creation epic *Batama Gaga Ponglo*.

4.1. *Batama Gaga Ponglo*: Brahmanism and traditional Dai religion in the text

The Dai creation epic *Batama Gaga Ponglo* begins with a depiction of chaos:

In ancient times, the universe was a vast expanse, with no distinction between east, west, south, and north, and no boundaries. There were no heaven and earth, no all things, no sun, moon, or stars, no ghosts or gods. Only smoke rolled, only airwaves surged, only strong winds raged, only great waters churned. The roaring strong winds blew unceasingly for ten billion years, stirring the smoke and airwaves, lifting the waves high into the sky.... The airwaves gestated for 100,000 years, giving birth to the first god of the universe. He looked like a giant, with a head, a body, hands, feet, a mouth, a face, eyes, and a nose. This primal great god, born from airwaves, was named Yingba (Brave Wind) for his blessings. His mother was the airwaves, and his father was the strong winds—they were the divine ancestors of ancient times [19].

Rigveda: On Creation:

1. Then there was neither non-being (Asat) nor being (Sat). There was no airspace, nor the sky beyond it. What covered it? Where? Under whose shelter? It was water—the unfathomable abyss of water?

2. There was neither death nor immortality; no sign of day and night. Only something breathed, in its own way, yet not through breath. Beyond it, there was nothing else [20].

Rigveda: Hymn to Brahma:

1. Then there was nothing—neither being nor non-being, no highest realm, no air, no sky.

2. No death, no birth. No day, no night.

3. In the beginning, all was chaos: water congealed, everything indistinct. The spirit dwelled within this chaos; due to its holiness, this immense body shattered [20].

The descriptions of the initial universe in the Dai creation epic *Batama Gaga Ponglo*, the Rigveda's "On Creation," and "Hymn to Brahma" are essentially consistent: nothing existed, and all was chaos, yet primal water had already come into being. In the Dai creation epic, smoke, airwaves, and strong winds emerged from water, while the Rigveda only mentions congealed water—water holds a more prominent position in Dai creation mythology. From this water, a great being was born: the creator god Brahma in the Rigveda. The Dai creator god Yingba was born from airwaves and strong winds, which themselves arose from the movement of water, thus also originating from primal water. "The core of Vedic mythology consists of various creation myths. The creation of the universe is said to have begun with water; the universe was born from water, and water is the fundamental origin of the universe [20]." In terms of primal water and the birth of the creator god, there is a clear genetic relationship between the creation stories in the two works.

The material Yingba used to create the world was the dirt from his body—dead tissue that had once been part of him. Thus, like the Vedic god Prajapati, who created the world with his body, Yingba sacrificed a part of himself to bring forth the new world.

Rigveda: Hymn to Purusha (the Primordial Man):

11. When they divided Purusha, how many parts did they make? What was his mouth called? What his arms, legs, and feet?
12. His mouth became the Brahmin, his arms the Kshatriya, his legs the Vaishya, and his feet the Shudra.
13. The moon was born from his heart; the sun from his eyes; Indra and Agni from his mouth; Vayu from his breath.
14. Air was born from his navel; the sky from his head; the earth from his feet; the directions from his ears; thus, the worlds were formed [20].

Purusha was dismembered, and his body parts became the material for creating the world, leading to the formation of the new universe. The first thing Yingba created from his body dirt was a flying chariot. In Vedic mythology, Indra also had a divine chariot pulled by celestial horses, crafted by his brother Tvastar, the god of craftsmen.

The process of Yingba's creation of the universe is also highly similar to that in Indian mythology. At this time, the universe was filled with rolling smoke and surging airwaves. Yingba searched for materials to create the world in his flying chariot but found nothing. He then thought of the dirt on his body, immediately rubbed it off, mixed it with seawater, and created the earth, "Luoongbu." The unsupported "Luoongbu" floated and fluctuated on the water. Yingba then used dirt to create a cosmic pillar, "Haosha Neluo," which pierced through "Luoongbu" to stabilize it. However, the cosmic pillar could not penetrate the infinitely deep seabed, and both the earth and the pillar continued to float and fluctuate on the water. Yingba devised another way to stabilize the earth: he rubbed four pillars from dirt to prop up "Luoongbu" and fix it on the water. The four pillars transformed into elephants, which supported "Luoongbu" with their legs. Yingba placed the cosmic pillar on the elephants' backs, and the divine pillar held up the sky, separating heaven and earth. In Indian mythology, elephants are also the guardians of the eight directions of the earth, standing on the back of a giant tortoise. When the elephants shake their tails or sneeze, the earth trembles.

Yingba then created three types of animals to guard the four great continents: lions guarded the western continent "Wuluan Ke" and the southern continent "Alama Goran," oxen guarded the eastern continent "Zongbu Dibia," and elephants guarded the northern continent "Buba Weidiha." The great epic *Mahabharata* constructs a Brahmanical universe, initially sustained by the five elements: earth, water, wind, fire, and space. In the early stages of the universe in *Batama Gaga Ponglo*, there are three elements: wind, fire, and water. The world in the *Mahabharata* is centered around Mount Meru, with the four great continents—Bhadrashva, Ketumala, Jambudvipa, and the sacred Uttarakuru—located near Mount Meru. Both *Batama Gaga Ponglo* and the *Mahabharata* divide the world into four great continents, indicating a certain connection between them.

Yingba further divided heaven into sixteen layers. Seeing the empty sky, he began to create gods. He first created one god, who flew to the highest layer of the sixteen heavens, "Agni Tata Pongzhu," without waiting for Yingba to breathe divine energy into him, and never returned. Yingba then created a court official named "Pongmaja" to serve him. By this time, Yingba was already old and frail. He fell asleep for 100,000 years, and upon waking, decided to create the great god "Mahapong" from the dirt on his head to rule the sixteen heavens. He voluntarily handed over the highest power symbolized by the highest layer of the sixteen heavens, "Agni Tata Pongzhu," to Mahapong, and moved to the second layer of heaven, "Dawadingsha." This is essentially consistent with the decline of Indra's status and the rise of Brahma's status in Indian mythology over time, confirming that *Batama Gaga Ponglo* was influenced by Vedic mythology.

Through the above analysis, it is evident that the Dai creation epic *Batama Gaga Ponglo* was influenced by Indian Vedic texts, particularly the *Rigveda*, *Brahmanas*, and the great epic *Mahabharata*. In addition to Indian elements, *Batama Gaga Ponglo* also retains a wealth of traditional Dai deities and cultural elements, which are specifically reflected in chapters such as "Busangaxi and Yasangaxi Creating Humans," "The Great Flood," "Brother and Sister Continuing the Human Race," "The Origin of Grain Seeds," and "Sangmudi." These indigenous creation and human-origin myths are seamlessly integrated with foreign myths, forming a unique Dai creation epic that is widely sung by Dai bards (zanha).

4.2. *Langga Xihe* and *Usabaro*: rewritten by Buddhism

"For more than 500-1,000 years after the commencement of trade between India and Southeast Asia around the beginning of the Common Era, Indian merchants, Brahmin and Hindu priests, and Buddhist monks who continuously entered Southeast Asia propagated the *Ramayana* stories primarily through oral narration or ballad-singing [21]." Oral transmission lacks fixed texts; each transmission is a process of creation. Through countless recitations, only the general framework of the story may be preserved, while other elements undergo changes. The *Ramayana* introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas became *Langga Xihe* and *The Twelve-Headed Demon King* (Shi Er Tou Mo Wang), to Malaysia as *Hikayat Seri Rama*, and to Thailand and Laos as *Rama and Lakshmana*, *Rama Jataka*, and *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, among others. Except for the general story framework, these texts are vastly different from their Indian original, and we can only infer their distant origin and long history through character names and plot elements.

Compared to the linear structure of the *Ramayana*, *Langga Xihe* innovates in structure by breaking the linear narrative and placing the story of the ten-headed king at the beginning, making him the central figure of the entire narrative. This change in

structure and form shifts the focus of the epic, with the female protagonist Nancila also occupying a larger portion of the text—contrasting sharply with the relatively small role of Sita, the female protagonist in the *Ramayana*. This narrative style and structural arrangement in *Langga Xihe* balance the importance of the three characters: the ten-headed king, Langma (Rama), and Nancila, avoiding the "dominance of Rama alone" in the *Ramayana*.

There is a clear genetic relationship between the *Ramayana* and *Langga Xihe*, but the latter is not a mere imitation of the former; instead, it incorporates more innovations based on borrowing and absorption. Yingba, the Dai creator god derived from Indra in Vedic mythology, becomes the ruler of the first to sixth layers of the sixteen heavens. Mahapong remains the supreme god and the father of the ten-headed king Pongmaja. Nancila inherits the ability of the rishis in the *Ramayana* to issue powerful curses. When the ten-headed king Pongmaja molests her in the forest, she curses: "You thunder-stricken king, so lecherous and unjust, bringing disaster to your country—your ten heads will wither like flowers [23]." When spring arrives and Nancila is reborn in the Nariben flower tree, the ten-headed king flies to see her. Recognizing that Nancila has indeed been reborn, he remembers her curse and feels extreme anxiety: "She cursed retribution upon me, to ruin my life through retribution. I must not let her curse come true—I must end her life quickly [22]." This plot is distinctly Brahmanical, reflecting *Langga Xihe's* inheritance of the religious culture of the *Ramayana*.

The governance of the kingdom of Meng Langga in *Langga Xihe* also includes an official named Panama responsible for religious affairs and rituals. Although the ascetic monk Palasi is regarded as a Buddhist monk, his actions are closer to those of the ascetic rishis in the *Ramayana*: he can divine the future and teaches Langma spells to heal the dying by blowing breath and sprinkling water—practices that deviate significantly from Buddhist monastic rules. Therefore, he is merely called a Buddhist monk in name; in essence, he is an ascetic rishi from the *Ramayana* or a practitioner of traditional Dai witchcraft.

The Dai epic king *Usabaro* also contains numerous similar characters and plots: "*Usabaro* is permeated by the Theravada Buddhist concept of karma and retribution throughout, using it as the standard for judging right and wrong, constructing the plot, shaping characters, and leading the story to deepen layer by layer [23]." This indicates that the Buddhist concept of karma and retribution not only serves as the criterion for evaluating the words and actions of the epic's characters but also as the guiding principle for the author in constructing the plot and shaping character images. From the first chapter of *Usabaro*, the fundamental conflict is set between the Buddha and the ten-headed demon king. On the eve of the Buddha's enlightenment, he encounters the ten-headed demon king, who attempts to seize the Buddha's throne and launches an attack to make him abandon his ideals. After failing to seduce the Buddha with beauty, the demon king resorts to force. However, his sharp arrows transform into flowers, incense candles, and popcorn upon reaching the Buddha. Witnessing this, the demon king willingly submits to the Buddha. The narrator of the first part of the first chapter of *Usabaro* is not a zanha but the Buddha himself, who recounts his own story with the ten-headed demon king. However, midway through the first chapter, the epic's narrator suddenly appears, replacing the Buddha, and declares: "Now I will change the topic, singing of the earliest times, singing of stories related hereto, detailing the Buddha's past lives. There was a virtuous and respected monarch, named Pongmadian, who resided in Meng Jiashi. He ruled over an alliance of 101 Mengs, and was the suzerain of 101 Mengs." Subsequently, the narrator even refers to himself as "brother": "Brother will narrate this story in full." Those familiar with the narrative characteristics of Dai epics know that the actual story begins here; the first half of the first chapter is clearly inserted later, serving as evidence of Buddhist rewriting.

Usabaro also retains a wealth of Brahmanical elements, with Brahmins playing an indispensable role in state affairs. In addition to generals and soldiers defending the country, four ministers proficient in astronomy, calendar, and astrology manage state affairs. There are also eight priests: "They play a pivotal role in handling state affairs, undertaking national rituals and divination. These eight priests are the king's advisors, proficient in various astronomical calendars and astrology, always ready to offer counsel to Pongmadian, and capable of predicting the evolution of events and omens of good and bad fortune." The priests not only bear the responsibility of managing state affairs but also provide advice and guidance for the royal family's life, such as interpreting dreams for the queen, naming newborn princes and princesses, and selecting auspicious dates for their weddings when they reach adulthood.

In the Dai creation epic *Batama Gaga Ponglo*, we can see not only Indian Vedic mythology, Brahmanical deities, and Brahmanical cosmology but also elements of traditional Dai religion and ancestor worship. Overall, Buddhism attempted to rewrite this epic by forcibly inserting Buddhist discourse at the end. It is also possible that a Buddhist devotee added this content to express reverence for the Buddha when copying the text as an offering (tan fo). Let us examine the inserted content: "From then on, 'Shabang Ru Pabuta Zhao' replaced all other gods, becoming the ruler of heaven and earth. The supreme 'Gautama' solemnly proclaimed to humanity: 'The Batama Gaga era has ended; the era of the Buddha's great blessings has begun.'" These two declarations announcing the arrival of the Buddhist era are clearly inconsistent with the overall style of the text when inserted into *Batama Gaga Ponglo*.

Compared to Buddhism's influence on *Batama Gaga Ponglo* and *Langga Xihe*, *Usabaro* was more strongly influenced by Buddhism. Nevertheless, the entire *Usabaro* still focuses on the irreplaceability of Brahmins and Brahmanism in the state governance system. Although the Buddhist concept of karma and reincarnation runs through the epic, Buddhism does not hold a position in the state governance system, nor does it exert a significant impact on this system. It also does not alter the pantheon, with Paya Yin remaining the king of the gods. The epic lists important figures in the state governance system, with no place for Buddhism: "The king's palace is located in the innermost layer; 60,000 Paya (gods) reside in the second layer; wealthy merchants

and noblemen in the third layer; all ministers and officials in the fourth layer; Brahmin priests in the fifth layer; executive officials in the sixth layer; and soldiers of the army in the seventh layer." In short, Buddhism did not alter the core story and plot of *Usabaro*; its rewriting remained superficial.

5. Conclusion

When the Indian epic *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas of China is a question without a definitive answer. Textual records from both countries confirm that textile trade between China and India began as early as 500 BCE. During the Shang Dynasty, gold and bronze craftsmanship from West Asia was introduced to the Shu region of China via India and Central Asia. Around 2000 BCE, cowrie shells from the Maldives reached Yunnan via India. Before 2500 BCE, cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean arrived in eastern Qinghai and central Gansu via India, Central Asia, and the northern steppe. People in these regions not only wore them as ornaments but also painted their images on pottery as symbols. Around the same time, Majiayao painted pottery from the Gansu-Qinghai region of China also influenced Harappan painted pottery. While the fact that exchanges between China and India began in the Neolithic Age cannot serve as direct evidence for the early introduction of the *Ramayana* to China, it provides a temporal possibility for answering this question.

Chinese scholars link the introduction of the *Ramayana* to the Dai-inhabited areas with the arrival of Buddhism, a view that may stem from the fact that the *Ramayana* was first introduced to Han China through Buddhist scriptures. In the Dai-inhabited areas, the Ailuan stories, being accessible and widely appealing, spread extensively and exerted a profound influence. Derived from the Jataka Sutras, they serve as another basis for the view that Indian literature was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas via Buddhist scriptures. Furthermore, texts such as the Dai creation epic *Batama Gaga Ponglo*, as well as *Langga Xihe* and *Usabaro*, all contain more or less Buddhist elements, leading people to naturally associate them with Buddhism. Most scholars believe that Buddhism was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas between the 3rd and 7th centuries CE; however, a more credible view is that Buddhism arrived as early as the 1st century BCE.

Through a textual analysis of the Dai epics *Batama Gaga Ponglo*, *Langga Xihe*, and *Usabaro*, it is found that Buddhism's influence on them was limited. Particularly in *Batama Gaga Ponglo* and *Langga Xihe*, although Buddhism left traces, it did not alter the core of their stories or affect the progression of the plot, and the protagonists retained the characteristics of Indian literary figures. Brahmins and Brahmanism remained central in both state governance and religious affairs, and they were also the focus of the epics' narrative and expression. After the *Ramayana* and other Indian literary works were introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas, they absorbed elements of traditional Dai religion, ancestor legends, and folk literature during long-term dissemination, forming new epic texts. Later, with the introduction of Buddhism, these established epic texts were rewritten to propagate religious doctrines more widely. However, the analysis shows that Buddhism's rewriting was unsuccessful. Clearly, the *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas earlier than Buddhism. If Buddhism was introduced before the 1st century BCE, then the *Ramayana* was introduced to the Dai-inhabited areas no later than the 1st century BCE.

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