Close to a century has already passed since the discovery of the bian-wen 变文, but there are still very few annotated translations. This is no doubt due to the fact that the Dun-huang1 manuscripts were for a long time kept in London, Paris, Beijing, Leningrad, and so forth with relatively few opportunities for public access.

Since the end of World War II, however, international scholarly exchanges have grown. The Dun-huang manuscripts were microfilmed and became available to researchers. The bian-wen were a part of this effort, and copies of the original manuscripts are now available to scholars around the world.

Nevertheless, the number of reports on the bian-wen are few. There are two reasons for this situation. The first is that the bian-wen manuscripts are very complex. There are many variant texts, errata, missing or superfluous characters, corruptions, missing pages, and so forth, so that in these conditions it would be impossible to decipher. An extremely long period of time was required to edit and produce a readable text.

The second reason is that the vocabulary and style of the bian-wen are extremely difficult. Research on the history of the colloquial language is one of the least developed fields in the area of Chinese language studies. Unlike the classic literature, there have been few extant docu-
ments, and also Chinese language studies have tended to show a preference for the classic literature. Therefore systematic research has not developed in this area, and there was not even an adequate reference source book. This area has received some attention recently, and one after another new studies have been published, though without reaching an adequate level. Since the bian-wen uses a great deal of the colloquial vocabulary and grammar of medieval Chinese, annotated translations went through a considerable process of trial and error.

The study of the bian-wen, and especially its annotated translation, took a great leap forward with the publication in 1957 of the Dun-huang bian-wen ji by Wang Chong-min. This collection contains seventy-eight examples of folk literature discovered at Dun-huang. Though this work contained many mistakes and problems, it made it possible for the first time to systematically study the bian-wen, and to linguistically reexamine them. After the publication of the Dun-huang bian-wen ji, many translations of the bian-wen appeared in books and journals, and many studies of their vocabulary and grammar were also published (See Kanaoka 1978: 15). The works by Iriya (1975) and Waley (1960) are translations based on the Dun-huang bian-wen ji.

Although this work played an important role in the process of understanding the bian-wen, it contains a great amount of mistakes, and it soon became clear that it cannot be used in this form for long. Fortunately, as I mentioned above, microfilm copies of the Dun-huang manuscripts are now available to scholars around the world. Therefore, even if one uses the Dun-huang bian-wen ji, one should constantly refer to the microfilm originals and correct the misprints. This is the present state of bian-wen studies. As a result of this state, Ban Zhong gui of Taipei has published a revised edition of the Dun-huang bian-wen ji as Dun-huang bian-wen xinshu. The book under review here is a partial annotated translation of the same text.

2

Four chapters make up the core of Mair's book:
I. Śāriputra.
   Transformation on the Subduing of Demons, One Scroll.
II. Maudgalyāyana.
   Transformation Text on Mahāmaudgalyāyana Rescuing His Mother from the Underworld. With Pictures. One Scroll, with Preface.
III. Wu Tzu-hsü
   (The Story of Wu Tzu-hsü).
IV. Chang I-Ch’ao
   (Transformation Text on Chang I-Ch’ao)
As we can see from this, the present work is centered on the annotated translation of four Dun-huang bian-wen texts. The first is the Jiang mo bian-wen 降魔變文, the second is the Da mu jienlian ming jien jiu mu bian-wen 大目連連冥間救母變文, the third is the Wu zi xii bian-wen 伍子胥變文, and the fourth is the Zhong Yi-ch'ao bian-wen 張議潮變文.

This review will have to concentrate on the annotated translations, but first it is necessary to consider the author's basic approach to the bian-wen as expressed in his Introduction. Also, it is not possible to adequately review all of the four translations, so I will take up one of the texts for detailed investigation.

In his Introduction, Mair explains his own understanding of the definition of the terms bian 變 and bian-wen 變文. The author classifies former interpretations of the term bian into three groups, and criticizes these interpretations. These interpretations understand bian-wen as 1) "alternating text," 2) "popularization text," and 3) bian as "strange" (qi 奇) or "uncommon" (yi 異). The presentation and critique of these interpretations is not always complete. Some Japanese, including myself, have already covered these points in studies published before Mair's work, so I will not repeat their content here (See Kanaoka 1971).

Mair claims that the above three interpretations are inadequate, and proceeds to describe his own interpretation. The text is important enough to quote in full.

The pien of pien-wen is etymologically related to a Buddhist technical term meaning 'transformation'. 'Transformation' here implies the coming or bringing into being (i.e. into illusory reality, Skt. māyā) of a scene or deity. The creative agent who causes the transformational manifestation may be a Buddha, a Bodhisattva, or a saint such as Maudgalyāyana or Śāriputra. Highly skilled storytellers and actors—with the help of visual aids, gestures, and music—were also thought to be able to replicate transformational acts of creation. The ultimate religious purpose of such transformations was the release of all sentient beings from the vicious cycle of death and rebirth (samsāra). By hearing and viewing these transformations and reflecting upon them, the individual could become enlightened. Therefore, it is permissible to refer to pien-wen in English as 'transformation text' and the related visual art form, pien-hsiang 變相, as 'transformation tableau'.

The philosophical basis for the concept of 'transformation' can readily be traced to its Indian sources. One of the most important ideas relating to this concept is expressed by a Sanskrit term in-
indicating a changed state, *nirmāṇa* (Pāli *nimmāṇa*), which also can mean ‘a magical creation’. The Sanskrit term *nirmāṇa-rati* (*lo pien-hua* 樂變化) thus means ‘enjoying magical creations’ and one expression for a transformationally manifested image is *nirmāṇa-nirbhāsa* (inadequately rendered in the Chinese version of the *Gaudāvyuha* as ‘reflected/shadowy image’, *ying-hsiang* 影像).

Though originally alien to China, the Buddhistic notion of transformation proved fascinating to the Chinese people. In later popular culture, enormous delight was taken in the constantly shifting series of transformational guises adopted by the likes of Monkey in the novel, *Journey to the West*, by Wu Ch'eng-en 吳承恩 (fl. c. 1500–c. 1582). It is no accident that the performance of magic came to be known as *pien mo-shu* 變魔術 or *pien hsi-fa* 變戯法. Contemporary descriptions of the entertainers who told these T'ang and Five Dynasties transformation tales indicate that audiences were impressed by the manifestations evoked during their performances. Through singing, dancing, gestures, painted scrolls, shadow projections, and picturesque language, the performers recreated magically the characters and events in their stories. (3)

The major point made by Mair is the understanding of *bian* as "transformation," referring to the Sanskrit term *māyā* as its source. The term "transformation" assumes that "the creative agent who causes the transformational manifestation may be a Buddha, a Bodhisattva, or a saint such as Maudgalyāyana or Śāriputra." It refers to the actions of the storytellers or actors who use visual aids, gestures, or music to "transpose" people from this present existence into a "strange" world. This understanding of the term *bian* in *bian-wen* forms an important basis for Mair's handling of the *bian-wen* texts. The novels and dramas of a later age are considered basically of the same genre as the *bian-wen*, which magically lured people through acting or music to experience another world.

This is certainly, as Mair points out, a different interpretation of *bian-wen* than as "alternating text," "popularized text," or as synonymous to *qi*. The explanation in the introduction is very short and thus his point is not adequately demonstrated, but it certainly is a new interpretation.

Mair is not really the first to seek the original meaning of *bian* in Buddhist thought. Japanese scholars in particular have pointed this out for quite some time. Buddhist commentators of the Edo period (1615–1867) have left many writings on the meaning of *bian* from their respective point of views. Most of these deal with *bian* as paintings, and not
with bian-wen literature. However, as Mair has stated, bian is used in
the same way whether the context is painting or literature, so the opinions
of these commentators are worth noting.

“Bian” means chuan bian (轉變, to transform). The true teachings
are transformed into paintings. This is called bian-xiang 變相 (to
transform the appearance).

Daijun, 1772.

What is the meaning of the word “bian”? The answer is that bian
is dō 動, to “move.” Paintings do not move. However, they show
the various moving forms in paradise or hell. Therefore these
paintings are called “bian-xiang 變相.

Unpei, 1691, p. 208.

What is the meaning of the character “bian”? There are two
meanings. One, as Unpei has pointed out, is to move. Since they
show the various moving forms in paradise or hell, these paintings
are called “bian-hsiang.” As Ryojō says in the second part of the
Kokukyōshū 谷響集, it means to transform the form of certain things
and thus make them into a picture. Also, as Ninchō says in the
Taimahensō byakkī 当麻変相自記, this refers to transforming the
essence (of things) into the form of a painting. The Kömyōdaishi
betsuden sanchū 光明大師別傳纂註 says that both of these meanings
are proper interpretations.

Kugedansō Vol. 4, p. 208

When we compare the above interpretations of bian by past Japa­
nese commentators with that proposed by Mair, we find a number of
similarities and dissimilarities. Some common points are the attempt
to discover the meaning of bian in Buddhist thought, and the idea, as
apparent in the interpretation of dō, of showing the transformations of
a certain figure as it moves through several forms, by the medium of
pictures and music.

A point where Mair differs from these interpretations, however, is
that he does not take transformation to refer to the illustration in paint-
ings of movement by figures in hell or paradise. Rather, he says that
“the ultimate religious purpose of such transformation was the release
of all sentient beings from the vicious cycle of death and rebirth (samsāra)”
(page 3). Through the help of pictures and music, people can appreciate
the transformation of the present world into that of the Buddha and the
Bodhisattvas. And the author thinks that to release people in this man-
ner is the original meaning of this word.

I agree with Mair's opinion that the "bian" of bian-wen and bian-xiang does not mean "alternative," "popularized," "strange," or "uncommon." I am also in favor of his attempt to seek the philosophical basis for this term in Buddhist thought. In fact, I myself have made this point repeatedly (See Kanaoka 1971: 206–207). However, it is doubtful whether one can go so far as to claim for certain that this term is based on the Sanskrit term māyā as Mair attempts in the passage quoted above. One reason is that there are no original Sanskrit texts available to determine the term which is the basis for bian. Another reason is that titles such as yinyuan 因縁, yuanqi 縁起, and so forth are found in texts of the same kind as bian-wen (See Kanaoka 1974). As for Mair's comments on bian-wen and painting, this is an area which has already been covered by many Japanese scholars and with which I have no disagreement.

It is undeniable that one of the basic functions of bian-wen was the attempt to captivate the audience through the medium of painting, songs, or plays. However, whether this interpretation has anything to do with the above-mentioned Sanskrit etymology requires more detailed proof. The fact that Jiang jing-wen 講經文 and bian-wen are of a fundamentally different character is a point which I have also made earlier. However, more historical evidence is needed to show whether or not Jiang jing-wen and bian-wen arose from a completely independent source, and whether they should be understood as developments or variations of Buddhist sermons.

An article introducing Mair's work by Barbara Ruch of Pennsylvania University refers to Mair's soon to be published work on T'ang Period Pien-wen. *A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Fiction and Drama in China.* She says that in this work Mair claims that the origin of bian-wen is to be found in India and Central Asia, and that bian-wen was not started by monks but by popular entertainers (Ruch 1982: 161–162). The attempt to trace the origins of etoki 絵解き (explanation or stories using pictures) to India or Central Asia has also been made by Japanese scholars such as Akiyama Terukazu (1963) and Umezu Jirō (1955), but if Mair will introduce entirely new documentation on this subject, as hinted in Ruch's introduction, this is surely an important development. Also, if it is possible to textually prove the existence in Chinese popular arts of an early ancestor for the bian-wen, this will be a major contribution to the study of bian-wen and important material for further debates. I for one look forward eagerly to the early publication of Mair's work.
There is a great variety of problems touched upon in Mair's introduction which cannot be discussed in detail here, so I would like to proceed and discuss his annotated translation which makes for the core of this book.

As I have mentioned above, Mair has translated four texts from the Man- wen. Of these four, the works on Sāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, and Wu Tzu-tsū have been translated previously. These were translated into Japanese by Iriya in his Bukkyō bungaku shū, and it appears that Mair has referred closely to these translations. A. Waley has also translated the texts of Wu Tzu-tsū and Maudgalyāyana ("Mulien Rescues His Mother") into English in his Ballads and Stories from Dun-huang. Waley's is not a close literal translation, however, but a rather free one which skips many sections. Therefore it can be said that Mair's is the first English translation which is literal and appears independently in book form.

The characteristics of Mair's translation are as follows:

1. Quite detailed and accurate comparison between variant Dun-huang texts. The story on Sāriputra, for example, involved comparing the four texts numbered S. 5511, S. 4938v., P. 4524v., and P. 4615. The story on Maudgalyāyana involved reference to S. 2614, P. 2319, P. 3485, P. 3107, P. 4988v., P. 3704, Beijing 876, Beijing 4085, Beijing 3789, and the Li Te-hua 李德化 text. The story of Wu Tzu-tsū involved S. 328, P. 2794v., and S. 6331, and the story of Chang I-Ch'ao involved P. 2962. Each of these are carefully analyzed.

On this point Mair's work is in contrast to that of Waley's which, for example, referred only to a single text, the Dun-huang bian-wen ji, rather than comparing the variant Stein, Pelliot, and Beijing manuscripts. Waley's translation was very literary and enjoyable, but since the mistakes included in the Dun-huang bian-wen ji are translated without correction, there are places where the meaning is not clear and the translation mistaken. In contrast Mair's translation is extremely reliable. Recently many collections of literary texts discovered at Dun-huang have been published in China, but these contain an appalling number of mistakes when compared to the Dun-huang manuscripts. For example, the book Dun-huang qū jiao lu published by Ren er-bei already thirty years ago is a valuable source of poetic literature discovered at Dun-huang (1955), but this work contains many misprints, wrong characters, and arbitrary changes to the text, and cannot be used as a source for academic purposes.

In this way, many of the studies on Dun-huang manuscripts published recently are problematic, and the fact that Mair relies directly on
the original manuscripts is a point to be highly commended. Of course Mair refers and makes use of the *Dun-huang bian-wen ji* and other here­fore published collections, but since he relies basically on the original manuscripts, he avoids making majors mistakes. This underscores the fact that future annotated translations of the Dun-huang texts should be based on the original manuscripts.

(2) Another major feature of Mair's work is his addition of detailed notes and comments. Each page contains the reference to the original manuscript location, making it easy to refer back to the original text. There are 131 pages of notes in small print for 140 pages of translated text, which illustrates the detail to which the text is annotated. The notes carefully explain variant readings and various possible interpretations of doubtful sections. Mair is especially careful to point out Sanskrit equivalents to Chinese terms, and often adds folkloristic discussions of Indian and Chinese customs and traditions. Examples of the first would be his identification of the word for "hell" with the Sanskrit "Naraka" (p. 223, note 5), and of that for "ten virtues" with *Daśakusala*, i.e. "avoidance of ten evils" (p. 223, note 6), and so forth. An example of the later would be his extended discussion in the notes to the name Maudgalyāyana of how the term for "turnip" (*lā pūk* 雷卜) came to be used as Mulian's infant name (p. 224, n. 17).

Mair has used the work of many scholars to present a fascinating argument. He provides not only a detailed annotated translation of the Chinese but also adds comments which are of deep interest to ethnological and philological studies. This kind of commentary reflects Mair's wide expertise not only in the world of Chinese literature but also in Indian languages and literature. At the same time it reveals that Mair's understanding of the problems with regard to the *Dun-huang bian-wen* avoids a one-sided analysis of *bian-wen* only in terms of Chinese literature by attempting to grasp them as a religious and cultural phenomenon involving India, Central Asia, and Asia as a whole.

It is clear that Mair's translation has many superior points when compared to former publications of the kind. However, there are a few points which do not sufficiently convince, and some explanations which are incomplete. I would like to raise some of these points in the hope of gaining further explanation from Mair and also to identify some points which need to be discussed further by scholars in the field. For the sake of convenience I will limit my comments to the second text on Maudgalyāyana (*Mulian bian-wen*), for which the translations by Iriya and Waley provide convenient comparative material.

First of all, the translation is so very strictly literal that one gets the impression at times that it is too literal and contains many unnecessary
notes. For example, line 133 and 134 of Maudgalyāyana are translated as follows:

The mist in the centre of the ponds was greenish,
The sky was clear, the distant road was red.

潭中烟霞碧，
天浄遠路紅

This is a very direct and sufficiently correct translation. However, the note to this translation is somewhat problematic. The explanation of “greenish” as “pea soup fog(!)” is difficult to accept. The fact that Mair himself inserts an exclamation mark shows that he must have felt somewhat uncomfortable with this translation. The explanation of “red” as “a paraphrase emphasizing the popular Buddhist connotations of 紅(塵) might be ‘The pure sky was far from the red dust of the mundane world.’ Cf. 遠塵離垢 ‘distant from the dust and defilement of the mundane world’,” seems to be an overly philosophical interpretation of the original text. This context is not using “green” in the sense of “fog dense as pea soup” or “red” as “the red dust of the mundane world.” The “greenish mist” 煙霞碧 and “the distant road was red” 遠路紅 of the original text are parts of a symmetrical form of expression for which the contrasting colors of red and green were utilized. It is therefore sufficient to understand these phrases as a typical example of Chinese poetical style.

It is certainly true that the story of Maudgalyāyana is a Buddhist tale, but there is no compelling need to search for implications from Buddhist texts in each word. Especially in the case of such symmetrical poetic style as the lines just mentioned, if “greenish” referred to “pea soup”, it is unnatural for the contrasting “red” to have some Buddhist philosophical connotation. In the same text, line 141,

Red towers were faintly reflected on the golden hall,
A profusion of green lattices opened on white jade wall...

紅樓半映黄金殿
碧牖渾淪白玉城

contains a similar poetic expression and should therefore be understood in the same way as a form of Chinese poetical style.

Mair’s translation is very strict and his notes detailed. However, especially in the verse section we find many pieces which simply follow Chinese poetic conventions. To look for Buddhist philosophical connotations in all of them seems to be forcing these texts too much.

I also wonder if Mair does not at times add more to the text than what is really there. For example, lines 6–7 of Maudgalyāyana are
Because this is the day when the company of monks end their summer retreat, the deity who confers blessing and the eight classes of supernatural beings all come to convey blessing.

The term "confers" in the text above is explained as follows:

**Confers:** All of the published texts give 會福之神, "deities who assemble/gather blessing," but this is suspicious because it is unheard of elsewhere that I know of. I believe we should understand 會 (增) 福之 (財)神, i.e. Kuvera or Kubera (Vaiśravana), the god of wealth, "confer blessing" (punya-udaya) being a stock epithet of this deity.

In other words, Mair questions the name of a deity called 會福神 and takes the character 會 to be a mistake for the character 曾, and since 曾 is pronounced the same way as 增, he surmises that the correct reading is 增福, "to increase blessings." He also takes 增福之 (財)神 to have to be supplemented with 財 and to refer to Vaiśravana. It is true that the deity 會福神 does not appear in any Chinese Buddhist text, or in any Taoist text either. Iriya also placed a question mark after the name of this deity in his Japanese translation to express his doubts concerning this deity. However, Mair's explanation is somewhat forced. His argument requires changing the character 會 to 曾, and then again to 增, and adding the character 財 before it carries. It is true that the Dun-huang manuscripts contain many mistaken and unreadable characters, and are often in need of editing, but this sort of double and triple transformation in order to build an argument is a bit too much to be accepted unconditionally. It is true that the name of this deity does not exist, but then there is the problem of what to do with the particle 之. The fact that there is this particle between the name 會福 and the term for deity shows clearly that 會福 is not to be understood as a proper noun. The phrase is connected with the term "deity" by that particle. If this is the case, the phrase can be understood as a combination of 會 as a verb with 福 as a noun, meaning "deities who gather blessing." Also, there are no texts dating back to the T'ang and Five Dynasties periods in which the deity Vaiśravana appears during the Ullambana ceremony. More documentation is required showing the connection of Vaiśravana to the Ullambana ceremony in order to identify these "deities who gather blessing" with Vaiśravana. I am not aware of any texts which show...
this connection, and would be very interested in such if Mair could point them out.

On the other hand, there are some points where notes are missing when the context requires them. For example, line 192 (p. 91) of Maudgalyāyana is translated as

I was orphanned and, furthermore, have no future before me.

Iriya translated this passage into Japanese as “I was orphaned and had nothing to rely on,” without any annotation. Mair has a note explaining “orphaned,” but has no note on *tu dang* 途當. There is a clear difference between Iriya’s translation of “nothing to rely on” and Mair’s “have no future before me.” There is no example in contemporary literature which uses *tu dang* as a compound, but there are examples of the use of *dang tu*. It is synonymous with the term *dang lu 当路* in the Gong sun zhou 公孫週 chapter of the Meng Zi, 孟子 meaning “to hold power.” However, the manuscript clearly reads *tu dang*, and it is difficult to believe that these characters were written in the wrong order. In any case, the context would not make any sense with the reverse reading of *dang tu* anyway. This leaves us with the only possible option of taking the term as being made up of the words *tu* and *dang*. This would make it a literary and not a colloquial expression. According to literary grammar *dang* would modify *tu* meaning “a suitable way” or “an appropriate path.” The translation of this passage would then be, “I was orphaned and there was no proper way for me to live.” Thus Mair’s translation is quite accurate, but it would have needed a note to explain the fine difference with Iriya’s translation. Neither Mair nor Iriya depart significantly from the original text in their translations. Passages such as these which contain some difference in the translation would gain from a short note explaining the literary expressions to the reader.

Another passage which would have been improved by a note is the translation of line 168 of Maudgalyāyana as

But I wasn’t aware that he had left home to become a monk

This is in response to the statement by Maudgalyāyana’s father that

I, your disciple, had a son in Jumbūdvipa.

Mair notes concerning the phrase *bu sheng* 不省: “Aware: LSY
(Conversation with Lien Shen Yang 楊職陞) regards 省 as 會, a past indicator (cf. Chang Hsiang 張相 514 and Iriya 入矢 Review, 180.” This means that Mair did not accept Yang’s interpretation of this term as 會. Jiang Li hong has a very detailed note concerning this term in his Dun-huang bian-wen zi-yi tong-shi (1981:295-296) identifying this phrase with 未曾. This would agree with Yang’s opinion. If so, then this phrase should read “I had a single child in Jumbudvipa, but until now I had no child who became a monk.” In this case sheng would not mean “aware.” Mair does not explain why he does not follow Jiang’s interpretation, but a note on this point would have clarified the situation. Iriya’s translation is the same as that of Mair, but has no note. Since it is the opposite of Jiang’s interpretation, a note to that effect would have been helpful. I imagine that bu sheng was taken as a compound to fit the 2–2–3 characters pattern of the two phrases, but even so this would not preclude interpreting bu sheng 不省 as “until now” 未曾. In any case this phrase is related to Chinese colloquialisms of the T’ang dynasty and would require annotation.

I have thus attempted to give a simple introduction and critique of Mair’s significant study Tun-huang Popular Narratives. It is impossible under the given limitations to introduce all the aspects of this vast study. Especially the detailed annotated translations of the four texts would have needed a thorough treatment and so I feel that I have been unfair to Mair in only taking up a portion of his work. I have raised some criticisms, but I hope that I have not misunderstood Mair’s intentions. I must add that compared to the numerous translations of the bian-wen which have appeared in various journals, and the volumes published by Iriya and Waley, Mair’s work with its detailed and rich annotations puts it a class above these previous works. It can be called the first truly significant annotated translation of the bian-wen. The bian-wen are extremely difficult, with numerous manuscripts containing variant readings, misprints, and mistakes. Even Mair’s work leaves many passages unclear. However, research into the Dun-huang bian-wen is progressing. From the perspective of past studies, Mair’s work is of great value which will contribute to the eventual complete understanding of the bian-wen. This work is also sure to renew the debate as to the correct method for analyzing and understanding the bian-wen texts. Mair’s study is sure to have far-reaching influence.

NOTE

1. Mair uses Wade-Giles romanization. However, we will use pin-yin except for texts taken from Mair’s book.
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