# OBITUARY

## STEFANO ZACCHETTI
## 1968–2020

ANTONELLO PALUMBO[1]

When news of the sudden death of Stefano Zacchetti, Professor of Buddhist Studies at the University of Oxford, started spreading among friends, students and colleagues on the evening of 29 April 2020, there was perhaps no less room for disbelief than for utter shock. The sheer absurdity of an untimely end was taking from us, aged only 52, a magnificent scholar who had already given so much to Buddhist Studies, and who would have given so much more still. The vagaries of publishing schedules have made it so that this imperfect remembrance of him should be written when well over a year has passed since that tragic evening, and emotional tributes bearing witness to the enormous esteem and affection he enjoyed across and beyond the field have already appeared in other venues.[2] But as grief peters out in the callous distance of time for those who were privileged with his friendship and his teaching, stating the value of

[1] This obituary is also published in *Buddhist Studies Review* 38.2 (2021). The editors would like to thank the BSR editors and Equinox Publishers for making this joint publication possible.

[2] See the profile of Zacchetti's life and scholarship by Ester Bianchi for the AISC (Associazione Italiana Studi Cinesi) at https://aisc-org.it/stefano-zacchetti-1968-2020-contributo-agli-studi-buddhisti/ (in Italian, accessed October 19, 2021), which also includes links to tributes and testimonies from several scholars and friends; and the intimate, moving portrait by Francesca Tarocco for the European Association of Chinese Studies at http://chinesestudies.eu/?p=4087. Both were published in May 2020, and are also available at https://glorisunglobalnetwork.org/in-memoriam-stefano-zacchetti/ (accessed October 19, 2021). See also the extensive discussion of Zacchetti's work in Buddhist Studies by Ji Yun 紀贇, "Zuo Guanming (Stefano Zacchetti, 1968–2020) de Hanyu Fojiao wenxianxue gongxian jianshu" 左冠明的漢語佛教文獻學貢獻簡述, *Hualin guoji Foxue xuekan* 華林國際佛學學刊 3.2 (2020): 226–290 (in Chinese), at https://glorisunglobalnetwork.org/chin-hijbs/e-journal/3-2/226-290/?lang=zh-hant (accessed October 19, 2021).

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Photograph Jonathan Silk, near Spert, Italy, summer 2017.

his scholarly life and legacy seems as important for them – for us – as for everyone else who can now only read his work.

Stefano Zacchetti was born in Milan on 16 January 1968. His secondary schooling at the *liceo classico*, which in earlier days had been a default option for those aiming at most types of higher education in Italy, was for him an opportunity to build solid bases in ancient Greek, Latin and philosophy, and with them the philological mindset and love for the humanities that would stay with him all his life. His distinctive scholarly voice had already emerged with powerful maturity by the end of his university years at Ca' Foscari in Venice. He had studied there Chinese and Sanskrit, under Maurizio Scarpari and Giuliano Boccali respectively; before and after his graduation he also spent decisive periods of research in China (Sichuan University, Chengdu, 1990–1992) and at the Sinologisch Instituut in Leiden (1994–1995), where he worked with Tilmann Vetter and Erik Zürcher. His *tesi di laurea* – a substantial final dissertation in the old Italian single-degree system – was on the Chinese versions of the *Diamond Sūtra* (1994).[3] As an offshoot came his first scholarly article in *T'oung Pao* (1996a), an early testimony to his remarkable combination of linguistic virtuosity and skill in historical and textual analysis: by identifying an abnormally literal, Sanskritising rendition of the sutra in the Chinese canon as what was in fact an unedited draft, Zacchetti could bring his readers right inside the translator's workshop, and open views on the translated text as process rather than product. His Ph.D. dissertation (*La più antica versione cinese della Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, 1999), on a topic he had chosen after a conversation with Zürcher, earned him a reputation as an emerging authority on *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, but also established his research interests firmly in the earliest stage of Buddhist translations in China.

After a brief experience as an assistant professor of Sinology at the University of Padua, Italy, in 2000–2001, a major turn in Zacchetti's academic trajectory came with his appointment as Associate Professor of Sino-Indian Buddhist Philology at the International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhology, Soka University, Tokyo. This Japanese hub of cutting-edge scholarship in Buddhist Studies was to prove the perfect

[3] Full references are given in the bibliography in appendix.

environment for his research. There he started enduring conversations – and in several cases lifelong friendships – with such scholars as Karashima Seishi, his host, and then Jan Nattier, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Oskar von Hinüber, John McRae, and many others. There he also produced his first research monograph – *In Praise of the Light*: *A Critical Synoptic Edition with an Annotated Translation of Chapters 1–3 of Dharmarakṣa's Guang zan jing* 光讚經, *Being the Earliest Chinese Translation of the Larger Prajñāpāramitā* (2005a). This was a considerably revised version of his doctoral thesis, with so many new insights and directions of enquiry. Zacchetti could now confidently trace the development of the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, and show that the *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā* was but a relatively late offshoot of a family of "Larger *Prajñāpāramitā*" texts. His historical reconstruction of *Dharmarakṣa's late third-century translation (T.222) was an investigative masterpiece. No less significantly, he brought the apparatus of his Chinese text to unprecedented levels of sophistication, as he wrote, in the unassuming guise of a mere subsection, an entire history of all the printed editions of the Chinese Buddhist canon, with their lineages, variants, and mutual relationships (2005a: 92–117). This tour de force is now widely regarded as one of the very best introductions to the topic, and yet it was simply conceived as an extended footnote of sorts.

The Japanese years also yielded an impressive series of studies in another of Zacchetti's areas of specialisation: An Shigao's 安世高 (fl. 148–170) translations of Buddhist texts, the earliest known in China (2002a, 2002b, 2002d, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2005c). This was an interest that went back to conversations with Paul Harrison, Vetter and Zürcher during his visits to Leiden, and had already resulted in an article in Italian (1997), but was now rekindled with Zacchetti's involvement in a research group led by Ochiai Toshinori (International College of Postgraduate Buddhist Studies) on the newly found manuscripts at the Kongō-ji 金剛寺 temple near Ōsaka. As long-lost texts by An Shigao – the original *Anban shouyi jing* 安般守意經, two versions of the *Shi'er men jing* 十二門經 – reemerged from the penumbra of a Japanese monastic library, he happened to be the right scholar in the right place and time.

In 2005 Zacchetti returned to Italy to become a lecturer in Chinese at his alma mater, Ca' Foscari in Venice. His main brief there – teaching Mandarin Chinese – was a rather narrow jacket for his scholarship, but

he endeavoured to organise lectures and seminars in Classical and Buddhist Chinese as well as Buddhist literature and thought, whilst keeping and expanding his research interests. These years saw in fact a new spate of fundamental studies on An Shigao's work (2007, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c), beside a number of publications in Italian on aspects of Buddhist history and philosophy (2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2010d, 2010e, 2012). An Shigao's translations were also at the centre of a very successful course on early Chinese Buddhist commentaries that Zacchetti gave as a Numata Visiting Professor in Buddhist Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, during the Fall semester of 2011.

The academic fruits of this scholarly labour were finally reaped in 2012, when Zacchetti was appointed as the Yehan Numata Professor of Buddhist Studies and Fellow of Balliol College at the University of Oxford. That he should progress to such a position from a simple lectureship in Chinese attests, probably better than anything else, to the recognition his research had achieved. The Oxford years were both rewarding and challenging, with much more of Zacchetti's energies now going into teaching, tutoring, supervising, administration, or such demanding Oxonian rituals as the yearly rounds of admission interviews. They were years of frequent conferences and teaching abroad – numerous summer programmes in China, but also repeated guest lectures in Italy. He continued his work on the history of the Buddhist canon in China (2016a, 2016b); he also published important summaries of research in two of his key areas of expertise, *Prajñāpāramitā* literature (2013a, and especially 2015a) and An Shigao (2019). Most of all, however, he worked on a major monograph on *The Da zhidu lun* 大智度論 (**Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*) *and the History of the Larger Prajñāpāramitā* (2021), in many ways the product of two decades of reflection and research on Buddhist exegesis and the *Perfection of Wisdom* literature, which he had virtually brought to completion.

Of Stefano Zacchetti's personal qualities others have already written, and better than it could be done here. He was as clever as he was unpretentious, a rare blend of artless erudition and bonhomie. He was viscerally modest. He was also very funny and generous. And of course, he was an extremely talented scholar and teacher, with a contagious passion for his objects of research. But the broader significance of his work deserves no less of our attention than the lingering trail of his warm humanity. It may be easy at

first to see Zacchetti's scholarship in Buddhist Studies as highly specialist, focused as it appears to have been on a number of well-carved niches that yet give no obvious sign of interconnection: An Shigao and the language of early Chinese Buddhist translations, the "Larger *Prajñāpāramitā*" literature in Sanskrit and Chinese, early Chinese Buddhist exegesis, the history of the manuscript and printed canon in China. In each of these areas he has no doubt left many lasting contributions that it would be difficult to enumerate, though at least passing reference, apart from those mentioned above, should be made to his skilful unravelling of An Shigao's obscure renditions of Buddhist texts into "a largely invented artificial idiom" (2007: 396); or his groundbreaking identification of a work from this translator, the *Yin chi ru jing* 陰持入經 (T.603), as a close counterpart to chapter 6 of the *Peṭakopadesa*, a Pali treatise on hermeneutic methodology; or his painstaking lexicographical enquiries, scattered across countless erudite footnotes – for he was sceptical of ready-made equations of Indic and Chinese as found in dictionaries of Buddhist terms, and always attempted instead to anchor his interpretations to specific textual counterparts. And, to be sure, he was perfectly capable of addressing and attracting wider readerships, although he did this chiefly in Italian, for example with essays in Buddhist philosophy, or with his deft translations of Fazang's 法藏 "Treatise on the Golden Lion" (*Jin shizi zhang* 金師子章) (2000) and of fourteen *jātaka* tales from Kang Senghui's *Liudu ji jing* 六度集經 (T.152) (2013a).

At a closer look, however, Zacchetti's research over the years reveals a long-term vision and a coherent thread running across its many outcomes that closely bear on its overall significance. Its main themes and directions were already largely established by the time he achieved his doctorate: a conference paper read in 1999 at the meeting of the International Association of Buddhist Studies, for example, was on "The *Da zhidu lun* T 1509 as a Source for the Textual History of the Larger *Prajñāpāramitā*," the very topic of his posthumous monograph (2021), which has just been published thanks to the editorial care of Michael Radich and Jonathan Silk. In this last, formidable work, Zacchetti undertakes a close analysis of the *Da zhidu lun*, a massive commentary, of probably Northwest Indian origins, of a "Larger *Prajñāpāramitā*" that has been immensely authoritative in East Asia since its translation by Kumārajīva at the beginning of the fifth century, but perhaps even more in Western Buddhist studies

in the wake of Étienne Lamotte's no less monumental translation of its first part (*Le Traité de la grande vertu de sagesse*, 5 vols., 1944–1970). Zacchetti's impressively documented finding here is that in a significant number of cases, the *glosses* in the *Da zhidu lun* prefigure *readings* in later recensions of the "Larger *Prajñāpāramitā*," and that therefore the exegesis anticipates directions of expansion in the text itself, until the latter does appear to crystallise downstream of the transmission process. But we only have to glance at Zacchetti's other work to see that the porous boundary between text and commentary had been a constant focus for him, and that aside from his research on the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, he had notably explored it in several of his essays on An Shigao's translations (2002a, 2003, 2004c, 2007, 2010a, 2010b), just as his studies on the history of the canon had looked at the other end of the process. Far from viewing Buddhist translation as the mechanical, if imperfect, rendition of fixed canonical texts and idioms from Indic into Chinese (what on occasion he referred to as the "*Mahāvyutpatti* model"), Zacchetti had thus seen early on the extent to which this practice could rather reproduce on Chinese soil the very making of the Buddha's word as a constitutively open text, and therefore shed light on fundamental processes of scriptural formation in Buddhism. It took an immense scholarship of breathtaking skill, vision and patience to build this view over the years as cogently as he did, and even greater modesty to present and almost hide such incredible results as simply and unassumingly, as he also did. Acknowledging as much should give us no little measure of comfort while we still mourn this cruel loss, for Stefano Zacchetti's work will stay with us for a very long time to come.

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[4] In compiling this bibliography I have relied in part on the list of Prof. Zacchetti's publications posted by Zhao You 趙悠 at https://aisc-org.it/stefano-zacchetti-publications-list/ (accessed October 19, 2021), with additions and corrections. Details of forthcoming publications were kindly provided by Michael Radich and Jonathan Silk.

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