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Beyond Words: Object-Based Approaches to Tibetan Book Culture

656

Submitted by: Dr. Markus Viehbeck (University of Vienna, AT), ID: 1051

Chair(s): Markus Viehbeck markus.viehbeck@univie.ac.at, Agnieszka Helman-Ważny hagniwaz@gmail.com

Discussant(s): Matthew Kapstein mkapstei@uchicago.edu, Hildegard Diemberger hgmd2@cam.ac.uk

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Abstract

Material aspects of cultural production have received increasing attention in a broader trend in the humanities sometimes referred to as a "material turn." In the field of manuscript studies, this has allowed researchers to look beyond the prevalence of the textual contents of manuscripts and books to view them as material objects in their own right that can be examined from multiple perspectives. This shift in focus has opened up new opportunities to think about the relationship between (material) media, (textual) contents, and the (social) context of the production and use of particular manuscripts, and the way these aspects are investigated.

While it may not always be explicitly formulated along these lines, the turn towards materiality is also felt in the study of Tibetan manuscripts and printed books, with several new publications that foreground the material object in the study of various aspects of the production, form, conventions, function, and usage of Tibetan written artefacts. Tibetan manuscript studies, however, are still considered an emerging discipline, without established methodologies. With this panel, we would like to provide a forum to discuss recent advances in the study of Tibetan book culture and to instigate a broader reflection on the possibilities and limitations that an "object-based approach" towards Tibetan manuscripts and printed books entails.

Presentations of the Symposium

Foliation and Marginalia in Pothi Manuscripts: Tibetan-Mongolian Parallels

Kirill Alekseev ✉ (St. Petersburg State University), Natalia Yampolskaya ✉ (Institute of Oriental Manuscripts)

In the group of seventeenth-century Mongolian manuscript Kanjurs that ascend to the Golden Kanjur of Ligdan Khan (1629), there are several kinds of foliation and marginalia that are not characteristic of the Mongolian tradition in general, but have counterparts in archaic Tibetan manuscripts.

In this group of Mongolian Kanjurs, the hundreds in foliation are designated by crosses, not written in words as it is usually done. This creates a combination of crosses and words, for example, the folio number 346 is written as "+++ döcin jiryuyan". The same method of foliation occurs in several early Tibetan Kanjurs.

Another kind of mark located in the left margin is a combination of two Tibetan letters, one written atop the other. Such marks are found in early Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang and Tabo, and scholars suggest that these letter combinations are related to numbering folios and volumes. Only one example of this kind of mark has been located in a Mongolian manuscript: it was found on the only surviving folio of a Kanjur catalogue. Here, a combination of Tibetan letters k+zha (ཚ) is written above the folio number. The function of this signature has not been established yet, as other folios from the volume are lost.

In some volumes, names of scribes are written in the margins to designate that a certain person wrote down that part of text. Most often these names are written in the right margin of a page, in a rectangular or ornamental frame drawn next to the text-frame, but in some cases, they are frameless or located in other parts of the folio. Similar autographs of scribes are found in Tibetan manuscript Kanjurs.

These types of marginalia were used only when copying large volumes or multi-volume manuscripts, such as the Kanjur. In the Tibetan manuscript tradition, they generally occur in archaic canonical collections, such as Tabo, Gondhla and others, but are absent from the so-called "mainstream" Kanjurs of the Tshal pa and Them spangs ma groups. The Mongols first encountered the practice of copying multi-volume manuscripts in the process of translating the Kanjur in early seventeenth century, and, as is suggested by the surviving manuscripts from that period, fully adopted the Tibetan system of marginal signs, possibly, in order to reproduce both the content and the appearance of the Tibetan prototype. These marginalia are found only in a small group of Mongolian Kanjurs closest to the Kanjur of Ligdan Khan, and did not come to be widely used. The parallels show that the creators of the first Mongolian Kanjur manuscripts had archaic Tibetan prototypes at their disposal, but as the text transmission went on this early tradition was driven out by the example of "mainstream" Tibetan Kanjurs.

Tibetan Ritual Texts in Mongolia: Form, Content and Usage – on the Basis of the Collection of Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw

Agata Bareja-Starzyńska ✉ (University of Warsaw)

Among Tibetan texts which circulate in Tibet and Mongolia there are personal collections of short Buddhist texts which are meant for the ritual use of monks, mainly on request of the individuals. All sorts of problems, such as everyday obstacles, diseases and financial difficulties made people come to the ritual specialists for aid. The ritual texts are usually handwritten on small size paper in order to make them portable. Often the whole collection was wrapped in cotton or silk cover to be placed in the pocket of the owner.

In the present paper I will analyze several such parcels, kept in the Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, focusing on their form, content and usage. Short prayers, sāghanās and dhāraṇīs which were most probably used by Buddhist monks in their daily practice in Mongolia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries document the everyday problems of the Buddhists of that time and the possible solutions to those problems found in Buddhist practices. The texts were described briefly by Agnieszka Helman-Ważny in her monograph on Tibetan monastic books (Sztuka tybetańskich ksiąg klasztornych [The Art of Tibetan Monastic Books], Warszawa 2009: TRIO) and catalogued by Thupten Kunga Chashab. Recently they were scanned and made available via the museum website (www.manuskrypty.muzeumazji.pl).

Wraps, Straps and Repairs: Examination of the Use of Textiles in Manuscript Preservation

James Canary ✉ (Indiana University)

From the simplest cloth wrapping to elaborate brocade covered wooden boards textiles have played a role in protecting and preserving manuscripts. A range of styles and the materials and methods of construction will be presented and observations made on the efficacy of their

protection. Often repairs have been made to the texts and their wrappings and these too show signs of usage and can provide a glimpse into the care and handling of the manuscripts in their historic context. How are manuscripts kept today and what is being done to preserve all of the elements present. What colors the choices being made?

Case-studies from Bon Texts included in the Tucci Tibetan Collection

Michela Clemente ✉ (*Sapienza University of Rome*)

This paper has the aim of presenting case studies related to bon texts included in the Tucci Tibetan Collection of the former IsIAO Library, currently preserved at the National Library of Rome (Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Roma) in a dedicated room called "Biblioteca IsIAO" – Sala delle collezioni africane e orientali. A codicological study of the bon collection has been undertaken by me in March 2020 thanks to a 3-year project funded by the Italian Institute of Oriental Studies of "Sapienza".

This paper will attempt to provide a preliminary analysis of some elements found in manuscripts and prints included in the bon corpus of the Tucci Tibetan Collection. It will especially focus on symbolic ornaments exhibited in title pages and writing frames, some of which might be peculiar of the bon tradition. In particular, some volumes (493, 500, 559) will be presented as case-studies and working hypothesis on their production and use will be discussed.

Questions stemming from the study of Tibetan Ritual manuscripts

Amy Heller ✉ (*University of Bern*)

This presentation will focus on the interface between display of ritual offerings, the illustrations of ritual offerings and textual descriptions of ritual offerings. For example: ritual offerings displayed on altars, such as curds or butter lamps, the painted or drawn illustrations of such offerings in manuscripts, and their textual descriptions in manuscripts may be analyzed to suggest criteria which indicate a specific religious school, a regional provenance and/or historical tradition, or, on the contrary, the pages may illustrate traditional offerings which may not be distinctly attributed regional, historical or distinct religious provenances. In the case of tsakali, in general, the appearance is that the cardboard or paper support may have the textual description on one side with an illustration on the other, while archaic illustrated ritual sheets such as the Mokotoff manuscript may have phrases written below or surrounding the illustration which may be studied in terms of codicology to clarify the ritual context or the social implications of the ritual officiant. In some cases, the text may be at variance with the illustration, or present lacunae. Also, the fragmentary nature of certain texts complicates analysis despite very clear illustrations suggesting their use. The actual paper card of tsakali may also be integrated in the performance of certain rituals, leading to use of drawing on wood. We propose to study a series of ritual drawings and tsakali to examine the extent to which ritual offerings correspond or not to their illustrations, their textual descriptions of ingredients or the instructions for the performance rituals.

Do local tradition, foreign influence, fortuity or a combination of all of these lie behind the production of Tibetan canonical manuscripts in Mustang and Dolpo, Nepal?

Agnieszka Helman-Ważny ✉ (*Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Hamburg*)

Manuscripts containing canonical Buddhist or Bon texts usually appear as large sets of loose-leaf volumes of large dimension, usually wrapped in cloth, and then sandwiched between two wooden boards that are often quite lavishly decorated. These complex and majestic books were then tightly bound with a cloth or leather strap. They typically comprise sets of more than a hundred volumes, each containing about 300 leaves, sometimes taking many people and many years to produce by hand. The extensive scale of this hand-made production is reflected in the physical appearance of these volumes, revealing both subtle and drastic differences in their form, style and the materials used. We are thus dealing with the collections of unique hand-crafted objects and these books are never identical. The sets of volumes were produced intentionally as one edition sharing the same features making their physical appearance somehow standardized. Despite of this intentional standardisation, identifying these volume clearly as particular editions in the library or museum collections tends to be difficult without clear guidelines, established methodologies and specialised terminology.

In the course of their work scribes, bookbinders, papermakers and other manuscript makers expressed both their individuality and group affiliation in manifold ways that reflect the particularities of both the changing material object and its historical and social contexts. Using the case studies from the various canonical manuscript collections recently documented in Mustang and Dolpo, Nepal, this talk will discuss the resources, skills, technologies, standards and social values of the manuscript-making process by 1) studying a selected group of canonical Tibetan manuscripts specifically with a view to materials, technologies and social context; 2) identifying and interviewing experts in the tradition; 3) using both collected data from material and codicological analyses and data from interviews regarding manuscripts for a better understanding of the technological changes throughout the history of manuscript production and to understand the innovations, differences between local knowledge and foreign implementation, as well as tradition versus the fortuitous inventiveness of local craftsmen.

Networks, lineages and community frameworks in the revival of traditional Himalayan paper making

Bruce Huett ✉ (*Cambridge University*)

Traditional paper making skills in the Himalayas were often passed down from generation to generation through family based lineages serving, and supported by, their local communities; as is often the case with craft related skills. This idea of transmission of special knowledge has some similarities to the transmission of Buddhist teachings from master to pupil.

As the secrets of manufacture were retained within the family or lineage framework each supplier could claim a uniqueness for their paper products related to the techniques that only they knew and that were exclusively handed down through the lineage set up. It is common for these paper manufacturers to refer to special secret ingredients they add at certain stages and special ways of processing the pulp to produce paper superior to their competitors.

When industrial paper largely replaced home made paper in the Himalayas in the 1960s the community support was lost and the skills and knowledge base declined.

However knowledge was still retained in some locations and when the revival took place in the early 21st century the initiators tracked down the remaining lineage holders and other experts and used them to train new craftsmen and women. This then set up new networks and new lineages. Local communities also provided support again. This was often linked to the realisation that these skills were an important national heritage (encapsulated in the UN intangible cultural heritage concept) and could enhance the status of their locality and provide economic benefits.

Another characteristic of the revival is the important role that women play in paper making and this will be explored in the context of changing social contexts and the nature of the family.

The paper is based on interviews I carried out with a range of small producers in various areas of Tibet and Nepal and information supplied by contacts in Bhutan on the revival there. This is supplemented by information from newspaper articles, official reports and academic studies on the revival.

Hell Lives: Material and Social Worlds of a Mongolian Buddhist Manuscript

Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz ✉ (University of Bern)

The Collection of Tibetan and Mongolian manuscripts and xylographs of the late Richard Ernst

(Switzerland) includes an incomplete Mongolian manuscript titled "Various great hells" (eldeb jüil-ün yeke tam-nuyud orsibai). It consists of thirteen unnumbered folios on which individual Buddhist hells are depicted in colour illustrations. The accompanying text is written all around the illustrations.

Based on the description of the material appearance of the manuscript, I will focus my analysis on the encounter between the visual and verbal representations, or, to put it differently, on the "image/text" (W.J.T. Mitchell), and ask about the social use and context of its circulation and viewings.

The Fifth Dalai Lama's The Wish-Fulfilling King (Yid bzhin dbang rgyal) and Suggestions for Precise Terminology in the Description of Xylographic Books

Benjamin Nourse ✉ (University of Denver)

This paper offers suggestions for precise terminology in the description of xylographic editions of Tibetan texts. I take as my starting point an unpublished talk that E. Gene Smith gave in 2002 on 'The Importance of Precise Terminology' in Tibetan bibliography. Taking up his concern over the jumble of terminology used to discuss editions, redactions, reprints, and recuttings, I suggest a selective borrowing of terms from Western bibliography (edition, impression, and state) adapted to be used in describing Tibetan xylographs. In exploring the usage of these terms, I take as a case study the numerous xylographic versions of the Fifth Dalai Lama's The Wish-Fulfilling King (Yid bzhin dbang rgyal) that were produced in central Tibet, China, and Mongolia. These editions exhibit both subtle and drastic variations in the actual text as well as in the format and style. There are even sometimes variations among copies of the same edition. Analyzing these elements and describing them with clear terminology can shed light on how these editions were made and the relationships between them. At the end of this analysis, I argue that the use of precise terms and concepts in the study of Tibetan books not only eliminates lingering confusions in Tibetan bibliography but also helps us understand much more richly the historical transmission and use of Tibetan books.

Presenting more than the words of the master: Illuminated Manuscript of Lochen Gyurme Dechen's select works

Elena Pakhutova ✉ (Rubin Museum of Art)

This paper will discuss a manuscript lavishly decorated and hand-written in gold on black painted paper in the Rubin Museum's collection that contains several texts of the Collected Works of Lochen Gyurme Dechen (lo chen 'gyur med bde chen, 1540-1615).

The format of the manuscript, its preserved exquisitely carved and decorated wooden covers, its rather distinct size, elaborate construction and adornments of the pages that contain twelve miniature paintings dispersed throughout the text belay its patron's, painter's, and calligrapher's skills and consideration of the book as an object beyond its text.

Unlike the larger or wider sized manuscripts written in gold ink on black ground, such as the Prajnaparamita sutra, which were usually created to generate merit often on behalf of and with a dedication for a deceased person, this manuscript appears to have been created for appreciation and study at leisure. It displays signs of high or aristocratic patronage and presents a question of when it was created and whether it was written down during Lochen Gyurme's life or not long after his passing. Using art historical and material analysis, and referencing textual and historical literature, the paper will attempt to more firmly situate the manuscript in its cultural space and time.

About the Tibetan folio sent to France by the Russian Emperor Peter the Great

Alla A. Sizova ✉ (Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences)

When the first Tibetan manuscripts, found in abandoned Oirat monasteries in Siberia, were delivered to St. Petersburg, there was no one who could read or translate them. One of the Tibetan folios was published in *Acta eruditorum* in 1722 and subsequently, according to the order of Peter the Great, directed to the Abbé Jean-Paul Bignon, a member of the French Academy of Sciences and royal librarian, for the purpose of identifying the language and translating the text. This task was undertaken by the scholars Étienne and Michel Fourmont who had at their disposal only a concise Latin-Tibetan dictionary compiled by Domenico da Fano. The result of their work turned out to be nonsense, though the fact of this translation itself is inscribed forever in the annals of Tibetology. A century later the Tibetan folio was correctly identified as a fragment of the Mahāvairocana Tantra by a Hungarian scholar S. Kőrösi Csoma.

My report seeks to present the new findings on the history of the famous Tibetan folio in the light of archival documents kept both in Russia and France, among which the copy of the folio made by Theophilus Siegfried Bayer is of particular interest. Besides, the report aims to describe the conclusions drawn from the textual comparison between the fragment of the folio and the texts found in available editions of the Tibetan canon. Finally, it summarizes the results of reviewing the translation made by the brothers Fourmont by means of examining the lexicographical material given in the Latin-Tibetan dictionary of da Fano.

Storytelling Materialised: Book-reading of a story of Maudgalyāyana descending to hells in search of his mother

Magda Szpindler ✉ (University of Warsaw)

A story can be very elusive, emanating into many bodily and un-bodily forms. It does a lot and a lot can be done to it or with it. It attracts attention, entertains, educates, heals. It can be written, recited, imagined, evoked, visualised and so much more. It can be told and it tells things, and such a practice, that is a practice of storytelling is bodily and is an act involving an agent. Each time a story is "told" it is materialised. In fact, these endless acts of materialisation define it as subject to constant change. Moreover, it is materialised in various spatio-temporal and intercultural settings by agents and these agents (understood as individuals and/or communities), on their part, are subject to various social, religious, cultural and political agendas.

A story of Maudgalyāyana descending to hells in search of his mother is an example of such a story, which took various shapes and the aim of the paper would be to look closely at these materialised instances, at very concrete books, trying to answer what do they tell us about the readers, how were they handled and how were they read and for what purpose.

The first Mongolian manuscripts in France: curiosities from the Oirat monastery library

Anna Turanskaya ✉ (Institute of Oriental manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences)

The history of the first Tibetan and Mongolian texts brought to Russia and afterwards Europe is tightly connected and seems to be more or less clear in general details. The first manuscript fragments in these languages are known to have been discovered in Oirat monasteries Sem Palat and Ablait at the beginning of the 18th century. The mysterious texts found "near the Caspian Sea" written in an unknown, later identified as Tibetan language, were first mentioned in Europe in 1721, by Weber in his *Das veränderte Russland* and in the Paris newspaper *Gazette*. The discovery of Mongolian texts, on the other hand, went somehow unnoticed by the European academic society.

Meanwhile, the total number of manuscript fragments in the Mongolian language, discovered in the abandoned Ablait monastery library in

1721, was astonishing. Gerhard F. Müller, the participant of the rather ambitious Second Kamchatka Expedition (1733-1743) aimed at exploration of remote Siberian territories, mentioned more than 1500 leaves (in both Tibetan and Mongolian), that later were brought to the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences (Müller 1747: 441).

These Mongolian folios from Ablakit are preserved nowadays in various Russian and European depositories. The bulk of them, 1265 folios, are stored in the Institute of Oriental manuscripts, RAS. The others were discovered in the Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel (1 f.), Kassel University Library (1 f.), Francke Foundations, Halle (4 ff.), Berlin State Library (19 ff.), Linköping City Library (2 ff.), British Library (7 ff.), Glasgow University Library (6 ff.), and National Library of France (6 ff.).

In my paper I will focus on codicology of the fragments preserved in the National Library of France (6 folios of 4 different manuscripts), and textual collation with Mongolian and Tibetan Kanjur editions.

From "Archaic" to "Later Standard"? Reconsidering Stylistic Typologies of Western Tibetan Canonical Manuscripts

Markus Viehbeck  (*University of Vienna*)

A common problem in the study of larger holdings of Tibetan manuscripts is their conglomerate nature, in the sense that various parts, volumes, or even individual manuscript folios produced in different historical contexts were brought together in a single collection. While some of these entanglements can be resolved by an analysis of the textual contents, a determination of the different historical layers of manuscripts depends also, and in many cases more importantly, on the consideration of stylistic aspects. Building upon earlier foundational work (Scherrer-Schaub 1999, Scherrer-Schaub and Bonani 2002), significant research on stylistic features of early Tibetan manuscripts has been produced more recently, drawing mostly on Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang (e.g., Dotson and Helman-Ważny 2016) and adding, among other benefits, insights into the development of early Tibetan palaeography (Schaik 2013 and 2014).

In my presentation, I will make use of these recent methodological advances to reconsider a marked stylistic shift among Tibetan manuscripts in a later period, to be located tentatively between the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries. Focussing on an investigation of canonical manuscripts from the remote Himalayan regions of Dolpo and Mustang, I will first of all aim at a decisive description of the codicological, orthographic, and in particular palaeographic aspects this shift involves, and, secondly, attempt to locate this development more precisely in chronological terms. This second aspect will be aided by the consideration of the historical information that some of the manuscript volumes provide in their introductory dedications. Lastly, these observations should also allow us to formulate a hypothesis about why this shift in manuscript culture occurred.

The first Tibetan Manuscripts brought to Saint Petersburg from the Oirat monasteries in Siberia: codicology and palaeography

Alexander Zorin  (*The Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, the Russian Academy of Sciences*)

The first Tibetan manuscripts acquired by the Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences in the 1720s and 1730s were mostly brought from the two Oirat monasteries known as Sem Palat and Ablakit. Built in the Irtysh area (currently in the territory of Eastern Kazakhstan) in the 17th century, they were abandoned by its residents by the early 18th century. In 1717 and 1721, respectively, they were found by Russian soldiers and, thus, their libraries of books in Tibetan, Mongolian and Oirat were destined to gradual disappearance. The fragments of manuscripts kept now in various academic institutions of Russia and Europe are but a little part of what used to be preserved in these libraries that seem to have been formed under direction of Zaya Pandita, the legendary Oirat Buddhist master, translator and propagator of Buddhist faith. A number of deluxe editions of sacred Buddhist texts, including a set of Tibetan Bka' 'gyur, was found there, their few remnants being extant. In my presentation I will focus on codicological and palaeographic aspects of the study of these manuscripts. A special attention is to be paid to a unique complete book, presumably, from Sem Palat that used to belong to G. S. Bayer, the first Orientalist at the Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, and is preserved now at the Hunterian Library of the University of Glasgow.

Submitted File(s)

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