

Introduction

The study of Tibet and its variety of religious forms has attracted a widening body of interest in the last forty years. The political events of the 1950s, which spurred a mass exodus of learned Tibetan scholars from their native lands, have brought to the attention of the scholarly public a vast wealth of heretofore unknown written materials as well as access to the “living knowledge” of these materials carried by the native scholars into their diaspora. Certainly, no one familiar with the field of Tibetology can say that it will be the same as it was before the Chinese occupation of Tibet. Nonetheless, the field remains in its infancy. The reasons for this sad state of affairs are manifold, not the least of which is the lack of funds and facilities for its exploration.

In intellectual terms, two desiderata intrude into every aspect of the field: First, there is a lack of the most basic studies on virtually every aspect of Tibetan life. The literature, religion, cultural systems, mythology, politics, history, geography, material life, medicine, economics, weather, and so forth all remain, to a greater or lesser degree, *terra incognita*. Second, with the increased interaction between academically trained Western scholars and ethnic Tibetans, questions of methodology arise in earnest. While the historical-critical methodology remains the great mainstay of Tibetan studies, it is not clear that access to all types of material are best served by the exclusive emphasis on this approach. Moreover, the difficulties of the participant-observer, highlighted in anthropological endeavors, obtain in most areas of Tibetology.

Both the advantages and limitations of working with Tibetans on their own materials needs to be recognized. No scholar who has collaborated with a learned *dGe-bshes* or *mKhan-po* will gainsay their ability to communicate issues important to an understanding of the Tibetan cultural milieu. Yet, in the international context—increasingly the setting for academic endeavor—traditionally educated

ethnic Tibetan scholars are, for the most part, ill-prepared to contribute, except as "native informants."

There is hope, however, that the younger generation of Tibetans, who are the heirs to a rich (and endangered) cultural heritage, will be attracted to seek training in Western academic methodologies, thereby better enabling themselves to understand and respond to current issues in religious research.

On the other side of the problem, traditional Tibetan perspectives seem to the Western-trained scholar to be anchored in a wealth of imagery and mythology which mix logic and superstition in a web of analogical thinking which, while enticing, is yet difficult of access to the uninitiated. Two examples will serve to underscore this point. Tibetans sometimes describe what might be called the "psycho-physical geography" of their country as an inverted human skullcap. In this description, the irregular edges of the skull represent the mountains surrounding the periphery of Tibet; the three plates of the skull represent the three major geographic divisions of their land. In many ways, this description displays the values embedded in Tibetan religious and cultural life: isolation, an engagement with striking images, a disregard for what lies beyond its borders, and so forth. It also shows that a neat separation of domains into human/animate and non-human/inanimate simply does not apply to Tibetan life. The human skull, a ubiquitous religious object in Tibet, signifies both the human domain of mortality and transformation, as well as the geographical environment within which beings live and die. Another example illustrates the co-mingling of 'lower' and 'higher' tendencies embedded in the cultural identity of Tibetan peoples. We refer to the myth of Tibetan origins: the people inhabiting the land of snow came from the union of a monkey (the incarnation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion Avalokiteśvara) and an ogress (the incarnation of the Savioress Tāra). Tibetans are fond of saying that, when they are gentle, they take after the monkey in them, while any violence derives from the ogress.

Although the above examples admittedly belong to the area of popular religion, there is little hard evidence to support the dissection of popular and intellectual religious activities in the Tibetan context. Thus Western students of religious studies who bifurcate the tradition into 'high' versus 'folk' religion will have difficulties when confronted with the Tibetan reality of the complex web of relations which extend from the most intellectual life of the monastery to the pastoral world of the nomad tent. Indeed, those living in the monastic environment and undergoing rigorous scholastic training retain a

world-view remarkably similar to that of the unlettered pilgrim from Amdo, or the yak-herder from Tsang. Many come from the same milieu and maintain close connections with their family—interactions which are woven with ideas of prestige, merit, economics and politics.

The remote yet tantalizing imagery of Tibetan culture has sometimes tempted writers on the subject into such hyperbole as declaring it the last bastion of primitive spirituality in the twentieth century—a 'lost horizon' against which modern man's yearnings for a pristine "Shangra-la" might be yet realized. It is the task of modern researchers, however, to document and explore the multiple changes which this culture is undergoing. Certainly, few informed scholars would suggest that Tibetan life was 'essentially' the same in the first decades of this century as it was during the royal dynastic period. Indeed, the continuity of certain aspects merely serves to highlight the changes in religion, language, and culture. Yet cultural creativity or innovation in Tibet, especially in the area of religion, was rarely considered a virtue. Indeed there is a cultural bias against introducing what we might call 'new' ideas—all cultural activity must be couched as attempts to understand and interpret established norms. Grand historical figures must be found to be the incarnations of previous exemplars or celestial beings. New doctrines, ideas, methods of contemplation, and so on, all must be related to prior forms; the invocation of scriptural testimony and theoretical precedence must accompany each original contribution.

In practice, new scriptures or doctrines are introduced by one of two standard means: either by reasoning combined with scriptural justification or through the mechanism of visionary revelation. In a real sense, these two means reflect a difference of vocation or career within Tibetan religious life—the monk scholar and the visionary yogi. With respect to the first means, debate and the invocation of textual quotation is most often pursued in the monastic milieu. Monks will often study for decades before obtaining the highest certificates of their learning. They will then, as the learned do in other cultures, seek employment at a school or monastery wherein they could transmit their understanding. In the course of their study, some of the learned might build seemingly radical intellectual systems, but their work is assimilated conservatively as a new way of addressing standard problems. Rarely does Tibetan history record a tolerance for genuine innovation—polemical attacks by conservatives, sealing and limiting access to such renegade work, and outright political intimidation are all well attested.

Alternatively, culture-bearers may introduce new material through visions of charismatic figures, often presenting cultural artifacts (both material and textual) as having their origin in the teaching of an ancient or celestial predecessor. In Tibet, this method has become one of the most fruitful means of redefining the Buddhist and Bonpo doctrines for the needs of the contemporary period. Tibetan meditative and ritual systems depend often on this method of introduction, which is not limited to the monastic sphere but enjoys a much wider audience. Many of the most popular rites and rituals derive their origin from visionary experience and often focus on divinities which were the objects of the revelation. Sometimes the claim is made that the revelatory material is the most effective—and hence most powerful—means for obtaining a desired end, because the special (new) text or ritual was ‘intended’ specifically for the time and place in which it was revealed, providing the intimate connection of a spiritual source with the Tibetans living at that time.

The above remarks are made to show that the sources utilized by Tibetologists must be treated in a manner peculiar to extremely traditional religious systems which, at the same time, also have characteristics common to all literature. In an intellectual community relying so heavily on common consent, Tibetan texts may not simply be treated as the manifestation of the author’s intention, however important a role the author may have played in its formulation. Wider forces exert at least as potent an influence on the formulation found in Tibetan texts: intellectual fads, community needs, the economic viability of the tradition, the political position of the author or his family, and so forth.

Thus, to recapitulate, while following approaches which reflect their personal concerns, religious writers of Tibet most frequently will choose their topics and express their idioms in a manner which also acknowledges the cultural pre-occupations of their peers—be it the family of their literary sponsors or their monastic brethren. New contributions will somehow appear as if they had been said before, thus ensuring that cultural cohesion is maintained.

Those researching the history and doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism have tended to specialize in the study of either the philosophical or the visionary approach. Indeed Tibetan sources seem to encourage such specialization, since the orientation of particular authors or informants is often in one of the two areas at the expense of the other. Certainly, the problems of availability and individual interest have much to do with the process of selection. Perhaps just as important, however, are the serendipitous forces which so clearly

play a part in both the lives of eminent Tibetan literateurs as well as itinerant Tibetologists. The association with certain teachers, the personality factors in their relations, the subsequent presence or absence of community support for written results—these intangibles of scholarship appear to be universal.

Recognizing that the interests and concerns of those exploring Tibetan materials vary greatly, the editors feel that, in some measure, the present volume addresses the need for making available to students of religious studies material which demonstrates the wide range of Tibetan religious sensibility. We trust the reader of this volume will find that the desire for basic studies on Tibetan material, tempered by considerations of methodology, are in some measure fulfilled by the contributions to this volume. The authors have demonstrated a command of the original materials and have employed a variety of methodological means in the treatment of their sources. Their endeavors have brought us new data on many of the most vital issues of Tibetology.

Part One of this book, devoted to philosophical explorations in Tibetan Buddhism, includes three studies which reflect the variety of approaches that can be encompassed within the rubric of the term 'philosophical'. In the context of Tibetan Buddhism, the term 'philosophical' never indicates the merely theoretical or speculative. Such inquiry is undertaken so as to clarify one's 'view' (*lta-ba*) of reality, lack of clarity or ignorance (*ma-rig-pa*) being considered the root cause of suffering for all sentient beings. Thus, philosophical inquiry at its best always demonstrates a strong soteriological motivation.

All the major schools of Tibetan Buddhism have produced their own literature on key philosophical topics, as well as polemical works which critique the 'false views' of others' schools. At present, however, there is a paucity of studies which show the diversity of approaches and the controversies which fueled these concerns. In particular, there is a *de facto* prejudice amongst many contemporary Tibetologists which seems to represent the politically dominant dGe-lugs-pa school, often in the person of the fourteenth century master Tsong-kha-pa, as having settled definitively all the major points in epistemology and ontology. The contributions in this volume should serve to balance out this myopic tendency. The contributors draw on materials from the rNying-ma or Sa-skya traditions—traditions which, since the time of Tsong-kha-pa, have engaged in lively philosophical counterpoint with the prematurely 'settled' views expounded by dGe-lugs-pa scholarship of the last five hundred years. It

is hoped that studies such as these will spur further research into the rich and lively areas of Tibetan ontology and epistemology, drawing parallels and contrasts to Western European formulations and approaches.

Guenther's study on the view of Absolute Perfection (*rDzogs-chen*) probes deeply and questions radically what one means by 'thinking', identifying as exemplary process thinkers those early rNying-ma-pas who established and clarified the 'view' known as rDzogs-chen. The term "rDzogs-chen" itself, became a kind of pejorative epithet mentioned in the same breath along with "Chinese" (*rgya-nag*) and bound up with the eighth century politico-religious controversies surrounding the so-called debates of bSam-yas. As will become apparent from Guenther's study, philosophical exploration in the rDzogs-chen mode indeed appears to be radically rooted in experience and grounded in what the twentieth century European philosopher Martin Heidegger called a fundamental ontology. It would seem that the Tibetan tradition, no less than the European, had great difficulty in 'thinking' the difference between things, whether material or mental—what Heidegger called the ontic mode—and Being-itself, the ontological mode.

Lipman's study draws on rNying-ma material to question the very nature of the Buddhist philosophical enterprise known as 'logic', or, more properly, 'epistemology' (*pramāṇa*, *tshad-ma*). As yet there are scant studies in this area, for the terminological difficulties and highly nuanced contextual settings within which Buddhist epistemological treatises were composed place great strains on the investigator. Again, with few exceptions, most studies rely on dGe-lugs-pa formulations. This present study is an exception, and the issues raised cause one to re-think what is meant by 'logic'.

The last study in Part One, by Lang, demonstrates how philosophical thinking, in the Tibetan Buddhist context, was an 'applied' thinking, a thinking which inquires into what is most essentially human. Heidegger identified "being towards death" (*Sein-zum-Tode*) as a fundamental existential dimension of all human beings. This insight was, of course, fundamental in the teachings of the Buddha Śākyamuni some five hundred years before the birth of Christ. Lang explores how the topic of death is philosophically explored in the work of Āryadeva and his Tibetan followers.

Part Two of this book is devoted to revelation and the visionary 'products' which manifest themselves via revelation. The material is presented here according to the historical periods treated. Visionary,

as opposed to philosophical, materials seem to have had a more erratic diffusion, primarily because of the position ritual plays in the lives of Tibetans. Whereas philosophical materials focus on certain well-defined—if not unanimously accepted—areas of discussion, the same cannot be said of visionary revelations. Politics, literature, hagiography, grain cultivation, drama, lapidary science, geography, ritual, genealogy, mystic revelation, mythology, divination, ranching—all these topics and more are grist for the visionary mill, which by the very nature of its polyvalent creativity fuses into a seemingly coherent 'corpus' ideas not normally associated.

Tanaka and Robertson's article on Chinese religious material in Tibetan is the only study covering the Royal Dynastic Period (7th–10th century). The authors have shown that Chinese religious sensibilities, in the form of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, were an option that Tibetans were formally grappling with during the early formation of their national religious consciousness. While the Ch'an traditions were not destined to last in Tibet as separate lineages of instruction, they continued to provide some impact on the intellectual and religious life of the country, primarily as a false view to be avoided.

Kapstein's study on the great popular religious scripture of Tibet, the *Maṇi bKa'-bum*, follows naturally, for with the final collapse of the royal house in Tibet, the ensuing relative isolation became an extremely fruitful matrix for the generation of indigenous Buddhism. Tibetans had taken from both India and China much of value, but the synthesis, represented in part by the *Maṇi bKa'-bum*, demonstrated that Tibetan teachers were developing a national approach and perspective to their Buddhist understanding. Of the many early visionary responses to Tibet's need for a distinct cultural identity, the *Maṇi bKa'-bum* was certainly the most successful with its blend of religion, mythology of the great kings, and the popular cult of Avalokiteśvara.

Gyatso's study on Thang-stong rgyal-po demonstrates the importance of the individual visionary to the success of the subsequent system. Personalities have often played an important part in the dissemination of such systems in Tibet, and Tibetans quite early demonstrated a fondness for eccentrics of the variety of Thang-stong rgyal-po. Such individuals, of whom the most well-known was the yogi Milarepa, played an important part in the integration of Buddhism into the lives of the uneducated populace. Often the culture heroes were both poet and prankster, and their antics and visions provide much of the material for sustaining religious faith amongst the cultivators and herders of Tibet. If the monk in his monastery was

seen as the mainstay of religion, the totally free sage—like Thang-stong rgyal-po—was widely considered the absolute exemplar, for whom the constraints of monasticism were unnecessary.

Yet it cannot be said that Tibetans excluded the classical Indic systems of visionary contemplation from their religion. Much of the religious thrust of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries represented a rebound from the extraordinary amount of indigenous material coming from non-monastic milieux. The high classical systems were carried on by reformist orders, the Sa-skya being especially concerned with orthodoxy.

Davidson's article on the structure and redefinition of the Sa-skya's meditative system under the monastic tradition at Ngor illustrates the variety of reform that was occurring in the bKa'-brgyud-pa and dGa'-ldan-pa as well. If Thang-stong rgyal-po's whimsical freedom represented the ideal, then the daily ritual life of the ordinary monk, and the annual rituals of initiation given by the great lamas in their monastic seats—as exemplified by the *Lam-bras tshogs-bshad* system of Hevajra—represented the more prosaic reality.

The concluding study on Tibetan visionary revelations is Goodman's work on the life of the great eighteenth century savant 'Jigs-med gling-pa. Here is an example of a gifted Tibetan who was highly educated in the monastic curriculum, and then devoted himself to the cultivation of the interior life of contemplation and revelation. Based on autobiographical materials and working closely with native Tibetan scholars, Goodman has reconstructed an account of the early monastic education of this influential Central Tibetan. Paraphrasing 'Jigs-med gling-pa's own account of his subsequent meditative retreats and attendant visionary experiences, Goodman demonstrates that, like Saint Teresa, Tibetan visionaries are also subject to great emotional upheavals. Through this study we are able to glimpse the creative origins of perhaps the most widely diffused and practiced visionary cycle of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the *kLong-chen snying-thig*. The practice of this visionary corpus spread from Central Tibet eastward into Khams, amongst the nomadic Golog, into Mongolian dominated areas of Tibet, and into China itself. At present, its diffusion has extended into Taiwan, Europe, and even North America.

In conclusion to this introduction we feel it prudent to offer a word of cautious encouragement. With the recent reopening of Tibet by the Chinese, a wealth of materials will become available for study.

The editors hope that this present volume will serve as a catalyst for both the present and future generation of Tibetan religious studies scholars. With respect to Tibetan Studies, we are living in a time not unlike that during which Renaissance scholars “re-discovered” Greek culture. The conclusions and assessments we make are based on the meagre and fragmentary *realia* of a largely destroyed cultural heritage. As new material becomes available, it will undoubtedly influence the conclusions and assessments embodied in this volume. Unlike the Renaissance scholar, however, we have consulted and collaborated with the upholders and heirs of Tibetan culture and can continue to do so. To that end, these studies are equally meant to encourage the younger generation of native Tibetan scholars.