

EAP296: Digitisation of the manuscripts and xylographs held by the Tibetan Yungdrung Bon Library of the Menri Monastery in Dolanji, India

Professor Edward Proctor, Missouri State University
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Survey report and catalogue of manuscripts and initiation cards

Further Information

You can contact the EAP team at endangeredarchives@bl.uk

EAP296
PILOT PROJECT
SURVEY REPORT

Digitisation of Manuscripts & Initiation Cards
held by Menri Monastery in Dolanji, India

Edward Proctor

The method followed in conducting the survey was to (1) search thoroughly for all the Bön manuscripts (MSS) that are held by the Tibetan Yungdrung Bon Library and other units of the Yungdrung Bon Monastic Center [*sic*] in Dolanji, India; (2) examine them carefully; (3) record systematically in Excel spreadsheets the major characteristics of each manuscript (MS) -- specifically its title, location, subject, format, condition, page size, number of pages, language(s) and script(s), provenance/ownership, and any noteworthy features -- and the monk primarily responsible for its analysis and tabulation; and (4) photograph over a hundred exemplars with my personal digital camera to give a rough idea of their appearance. A hard copy of the spreadsheets and a disc containing the photographs are enclosed with this Report.

I was assisted in this task by four senior monks, two of whom have occupied managerial positions in the Library for several years, Yungdrung Konchok (currently the 'In-charge', the functional equivalent of a Library Director) and Tsewang Namgyal (Tsenam), and two who are highly educated in the classical Tibetan tradition (both holding the degree of *Geshe*, corresponding to a Western doctorate), Geshe Sonam (A Sonam) and Geshe Tenzin Yangton. In addition to working closely with these monks on a daily basis, I had several lengthy conversations regarding the MSS with the Abbot of the Monastery, His Holiness 33rd Menri Trizin, Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, and also consulted numerous other highly-educated monks with specialisations in various fields of traditional Tibetan learning.

Upon arriving at the Monastery, I immediately sought to discern an order in the arrangement of MSS, but soon discovered that there is none. This is not surprising, considering the circumstances of the Monastery's establishment: it was created in 1967 as a successor-in-exile in India to the original Menri Monastery in Tibet which

had been founded in 1405, and the texts were brought to India in a very haphazard manner by refugees hastily fleeing Tibet during and after the Cultural Revolution. Not only were numerous texts or portions of texts lost, but the traditional order of those that survived was not maintained when they reached their new home nor was a new system developed. Consequently, there is no order to my Survey at this point other than the order (or, rather, disorder) in which the MSS were found. All that could be done was to record where the MSS are currently located. The criterion used to sort through and select items was purely physical: each and every handwritten Bön text was included in the listing.

Surprisingly, only a few MSS are housed in the Library, a purpose-built four-storey structure opened in 2007. A handful are located in a small museum situated in the same building. But by far the majority are scattered throughout the Monastery complex in dozens of locations, including multi-purpose workspaces and storage areas; the office, private chapel, studies and residences (both present and previous) of the Abbot; and the living quarters of monks who have borrowed them. Those MSS that were described to me as ‘most precious’ are kept in a locked metal cabinet standing in a small, dusty storage room in the south-eastern corner of the main temple, the *Pal Shen Ten Menri Ling*.

We found a total of 129 MSS containing 62,854 pages of text. The vast majority are in the traditional Tibetan format for books known as *pecha*, which consists of a stack of loose leaves of thick handmade paper arranged sequentially, wrapped in cloth, placed between wooden boards, and then tightly secured with a belt. The *pecha* vary enormously in size and length, the largest measuring 71 x 21 cm and the smallest 23 x 12 cm, with some texts exceeding over a thousand pages in length.

In addition, we located a few texts written on long single sheets of very thin paper, similar to a scroll, but folded flat, the lengthiest of which extends to over four feet.

The physical condition of the MSS varies considerably, from immaculate, intact volumes to tattered shards of individual pages. Those which I have described as 'fair' are generally somewhat worn from heavy use and age, whilst 'poor' MSS have suffered significant damage from water, insects, rodents, extreme age, very heavy use, or have been badly stained by spills from butter lamps or butter tea. Fortunately, in many cases it is largely the margins that have been most severely damaged, and the text remains legible. In others, however, considerable portions of the leaves are missing or substantial amounts of text have been rendered illegible.

It is impossible to determine quickly the age of most MSS, and such data could not be reliably tabulated in the short time available for the Pilot Project. This task is complicated by the fact that the dates given in a text or its colophon may not refer to when a particular MS was physically produced, but rather to the date of composition of the original text. The consensus among the monks is that most of the MSS at Menri were created between the 17th and 20th centuries, but that many date from earlier times. Since calligraphy is a living tradition amongst the Bönpo [followers of the Bön religion], there are also a few MSS from the present century.

The majority of the *pecha* are not in the form of single books written by single authors, but are rather like anthologies, consisting of a combination of books, sometimes on a single theme but sometimes covering a broad variety of topics, frequently written by a number of different authors from different historical periods. This is often physically evident from the number of different leaf sizes which are wrapped together as a single volume. The English-language term consistently used by

the monks for these component books is ‘chapters’, regardless of their length or whether they were written contemporaneously or several centuries apart.

We also found 18 sets of handmade colourfully-illustrated Initiation Cards (ICS), or *tsākli*, totalling 479 individual cards. Consisting of portraits of deities, lineages of both human and divine teachers, pictures of ritual implements, representations of offerings, abstract symbols, and single-syllable ‘seed’, or *bīj*, mantras, *tsākli* are employed for instructional and ritual purposes. Most contain significant amounts of text on the verso.

Almost all of the MSS -- and all of the ICS -- are in the Tibetan language, written in the *dbu-med* script. But several MSS are written in *dbu-can*, *'bru-tsha*, *'khyug-yig*, *ljib* or a mixture of several scripts. Some texts, particularly title pages, are written at least partially in *Zhang Zhung*, a language whose historicity is questioned by many Western scholars but which the Bönpo firmly believe significantly predates written Tibetan (and from which all Bön scriptures are said to have been translated into Tibetan). *Zhang Zhung* utilises its own distinctive family of scripts, the *smar-yig*, which are also believed by the Bönpo to be of much greater antiquity than any of the other Tibetan scripts.

A wide range of subject matter is covered by these MSS, including metaphysics, dialectics, logic, history, grammar, poetry, rules of monastic discipline, astronomy/astrology, medicine, divination, mantras, guidance in recognising the stages of inner progress, as well as numerous biographies of prominent teachers (most hagiographical in nature, but some with a degree of historical accuracy), musical scores, and practical instruction manuals for the creation and consecration of paintings, sculptures, mandalas, ritual offerings, reliquaries, amulets, and talismans.

The vast majority of MSS, however, are ritual texts, providing cycles of prayers devoted to various deities in their many manifestations, detailed descriptions of procedures conducive to a spiritual experience (*sāadhanā*), visualisations of self dismemberment (*chöd*) of the body and ego, as well as assorted religious ceremonies, particularly those focusing on the intermediate state (*bardo*) between death and rebirth and the transference of consciousness (*phowa*). The Bönpo take great pride in the fact that they have more -- and more elaborate -- rituals than do any of the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. These texts contain detailed instructions for a panoply of rituals ranging from simple blessings that can be executed by a single monk in a few minutes to extremely elaborate multi-media ceremonies involving hundreds of participants and taking several weeks to perform.

The Abbot informed me that many of these ritual MSS have specific *thangkā* (scroll paintings) associated with them, most often those texts involving visualisations of deities (for which purpose a picture that can be contemplated is a useful support). He was at great pains to point out that most *thangkā* in Western museums and private collections are incomplete or inaccurate since they were produced for sale to the general public (i.e., uninformed Tibetan laymen or foreign collectors). Such *thangkā* do not include the tremendous number of minute technical details necessary for the correct performance of rituals as stipulated in the MSS.

The rituals described in these texts involve not only the sense of sight (contemplating *thangkā* and sculptures), but also that of hearing (chanting and music), touch (manipulating ritual implements and symbolic *mudrā* hand gestures), smell (burning incense and fumigating with juniper branches), and taste (eating consecrated *prasād* food offerings and drinking holy water) -- all performed by monks who are

simultaneously absorbed in extraordinarily complex internal visualisations.

Much of this contextual and supporting material should -- and could -- be preserved digitally. Such preservation is particularly important since many Bön MSS are not read in isolation but are chanted as part -- albeit the most important part -- of ritual performances. Digital recordings of chanting and music are needed, as well as still photographs of relevant paintings and statues, and both still and video images of *mudrā* and other performance aspects of these rituals in order to fully capture and preserve the cultural context in which these MSS are embedded.

The final component essential to comprehensive understanding is to record and preserve the -- to date -- unbroken tradition of oral commentaries which explicate these texts, some of which (particularly the more esoteric and, until recently, restricted ones) are little more than *aide-mémoires*, and incomprehensible even to other Tibetans without detailed explanations and elaborations by qualified specialists.

Storage conditions are poor. The MSS are exposed to extremes of temperature, ranging from 7° to 41° C last year, with high humidity during the monsoon. The buildings in which they are housed have no climate control except for ceiling fans whose operation is frequently disrupted by power failures (the frequency of which can be seen by the number of photographs on the enclosed disc which had to be taken in natural light). Security against theft and protection against fire are negligible. There are padlocks on external doors and iron grating on the windows, but these are held in place by screws that could easily be removed. Neither the Library nor any other unit in the Monastic Center has guards or night watchmen. There is no alarm system, either for burglary or for fire, and there is neither a police station nor a fire station in Dolanji.

Another of the many reasons these MSS urgently need to be digitised is that the Bönpo themselves do not value them as physical objects. That is to say, Bön culture does not hold in high regard the antiquarian status of MSS *qua* MSS -- as physical objects of value in themselves -- but reveres them only for the content of the texts which they embody. The Abbot made this point when he said to me, ‘You [Westerners] are interested in old books; we [Bönpo] are interested in old teachings’.

This attitude was most vividly brought home to me when I was told how in the 1970s an American collector had -- with permission -- taken away (and *kept*) many old MSS in exchange for giving the Monastery three low-grade photo-offset copies of them which he arranged to have printed in Delhi. The monks and the Abbot appear to have no sense of having suffered any loss in this (to my mind very inappropriate) transaction, since they now have three copies of texts of which they previously had possessed only one (the original MS). Their only complaint was that these modern copies are in the form of a Western codex (bound, and with four pages of the original MS reproduced on each page), rather than in the traditional loose-leaf format of a *pecha* which allows for individual leaves or whole sections of a volume to be selected or rearranged according to the particular demands of whichever ritual they wish to perform. From a preservation standpoint, these photo-offset copies will not stand the test of time as they were printed on the highly acidic, poor quality paper widely used in Indian publishing at that time, and already show visible and olfactory signs of deterioration.

I suspect that this attitude of valuing the contents of texts over the physical MSS themselves (except insofar as they are respected as vehicles for transmitting those contents) may account for why the MSS that are described as ‘most precious’

are kept in a hot, dusty metal cabinet in the main temple, with no protection from humidity, insects, mold, or other causes of damage. This is not entirely due to lack of familiarity with modern archival storage techniques, but stems in large part, I believe, from a notion similar to one widely held in India that some things (particularly religious objects, places, and individuals) are inherently pure by their very nature, even though they may be physically dirty. Thus, I think that the Bönpo feel that they are respecting the *contents* of those precious MSS by keeping them within the sacred precincts of the main temple. The fact that that location is actually physically harmful to the MSS did not enter into their thinking; it was more important to show respect for the teachings by housing them in an appropriately holy place, such as a temple, even though it was physically dirty, hot, and humid, than to keep them in a physically clean, but secular, location such as the new Library building.

I think that this attitude might also account for why so many of the MSS are kept by the Abbot -- even those which are not his personal possessions. Since he is held in such high regard ('reverence' would not be too strong a word), the Bönpo seem to feel that anything that has been in his presence -- from short pieces of knotted red string upon which he has breathed, thereby transmuting them into 'protection cords', up to the buildings he occupies in the Monastery compound, which are circumambulated by the devout -- all partake of his sacred essence, and are, in effect, blessed by association.

Ownership and copyright are clear. Many of the MSS belong to the Abbot himself, and those that are not his personal possessions fall under his control as he has final authority over all that exists and takes place within every unit of the Yungdrung Bon Monastic Center -- as well as over all aspects of the Bön religion globally. He

was highly supportive of my work, authorising a letter giving full consent for digitisation (which was attached to my application for a Pilot Project grant), assigning four senior monks to assist me when I had requested only two, providing us with a large workspace in the Library, frequently dropping by to check on our progress and to see if we required anything, and opening his private quarters to our search. He also indicated on several occasions that he would be happy to be involved in a Major Project, and that, following the completion of the digitisation of Menri's MSS, he would like for me to conduct similar work with collections of Bön MSS in Nepal and Bhutan (for which he would provide the necessary contacts and introductions).

Despite being the autochthonous religion of Tibet, Bön has, in the Abbot's view, been unfairly overshadowed by the Western popular and scholarly interest in Tibetan Buddhism. He is clearly eager to have Menri Monastery's MSS digitised, for he believes that making them available to the global scholarly community would lead to an increased understanding and appreciation of Bön, and would contribute significantly to the preservation of the religion that he heads and its millennia-long tradition of scholarship, which otherwise may vanish within a generation.

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