

Transmission and Translation: why and how we study Tangut Buddhist texts

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Tangut (The Great State of White and High) state existed from 1038 to 1227. Despite its relatively short history, the Tangut created an important Buddhist heritage, which still continues to emerge. After more than a hundred years since initial discoveries, and despite continuous inflow of newly discovered texts, Tangut Buddhist heritage remains in the margins of modern Buddhist studies. This situation is regrettable, since the amount of discovered texts is second only to the Dunhuang findings. From the perspective of textual repertoire and variety of subject matter of the identified texts, Tangut Buddhist heritage far exceeds received Uighur Buddhist heritage, and deserves to be incorporated into the mainstream research of Buddhist history in East Asia, rather than to remain within the domain of Tangut studies.

As is well known, Tangut Buddhist heritage consisted of three major constituents: Sinitic texts (i.e. texts of Sinitic origin in Tangut and texts in Chinese), Tibetan texts (i.e. texts of Tibetan or Indo-Tibetan origin in Tangut, Chinese and Tibetan), and local compositions (some identified as “Sino-Tibetan”, in Tangut and in Chinese). Elements of this textual heritage, especially texts of Tibetan subject matter, ritual compositions (e.g. the Huayan repentance rituals), continued to remain in circulation after the demise of the Tangut State in 1227, and survived either as parts of the Chinese Buddhist Canon, or had been included into various textual collections such as *Dasheng Yaodao Miji* 大乘要道密集, composed during the Yuan and Ming periods. As some recent studies confirm, initial Mongol familiarity with Tibetan Buddhism during the early years of the Yuan was facilitated through the mediation of the Tangut monks, who occupied important positions in the Yuan Buddhist administration.

Such a lasting impact together with a complex historical background means that Tangut Buddhist texts deserve a more specific and in-depth study than is currently the case in modern scholarship worldwide. This is important, especially because many surviving texts are unique: despite their affiliation with various dimensions of Sinitic or Tibetan Buddhism, these compositions survive only in Tangut versions, and can thus provide unique information unavailable from anywhere else. At the same time, texts of Tibetan and Sinitic origins (e.g. the so-called *Chan Preface* 禪序 by Guifeng Zongmi 圭峰宗密 780-841, or the *Satyadvayāvātāra* by Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna 982-1054) generated native commentarial tradition in Tangut, which should be studied both for its own sake, and from the perspective of the history of Chan Buddhism or Bka' gdams history.

The above means that the study of Tangut texts can be carried out from two perspectives: pure Tangutology (narrow approach), and from the perspective of Buddhist history of East Asia (broad approach). Narrow approach is generally unproductive, since it does not enhance our understanding of historical reality behind the texts in question. Broad approach proceeds from an understanding that Tangut Buddhist history was not an isolated process, but an integral part of a greater historical development, therefore the importance of the Tangut Buddhist heritage can be properly understood only when the Tangut texts are located within a comprehensive background of Sinitic and Tibetan Buddhist history. Historical treatment is especially important, because no comprehensive narrative on the history of Buddhism in Xixia, either in Tangut, or in Tibetan or Chinese has survived. This effectively means that the texts which originally were not intended as historical sources should be treated as the representatives of historical processes. That is, Tangut Buddhist history is generally dependent on textual studies, which can sometimes reveal historical tendencies which are otherwise not recorded.

Technically, as is the case with all textual studies, the research implies reading, dating, analyzing contents and drawing historical conclusions from the texts, i.e. is a philological study in the actual sense. Below I will present several examples of how this is done, and what possible conclusions can be obtained thereby. Initial stage is arrangement of Tangut texts into the so called “textual clusters” according to their subject matter. This procedure is rather automatic, allowing us to deal with the texts more systematically. The criteria for the specification of the clusters are not completely arbitrary, since we have certain indications from Tangut official documents. The problem with the “textual clusters” is that while these had originally been equated with the activities of the “schools” of Buddhism in Xixia, our current understanding does not support this point of view. That is, although texts belonging to the same cluster share common subject matter but do not necessarily share common origin. When translation techniques, transcriptions and vocabulary are compared, one can readily observe that texts of similar subject matter might have penetrated into Xixia through various pathways, and are thus genetically unrelated. This observation holds true mainly for the texts of Sinitic origin, whereas Tibetan texts demonstrate better consistency.

Reading: current developments in the study of the Tangut language together with available reference materials allow reliable reading on the texts. Reading new texts, especially of the ones unavailable in Chinese or Tibetan is based on our preceding corresponsive readings of parallel texts. For this step familiarity with both Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism is mandatory, since the Buddhist vocabulary includes elements from both lineages. Diachronically, the Buddhist vocabulary emerged on the basis of Sinitic translations of Sanskrit words and native Sinitic compositions, whereas Tibetan terminology only emerges when a Sinitic word is unavailable (e.g. in esoteric compositions, or in the *pramāṇa* literature). Original suggestion that Tangut translations experienced influences from the source languages does not hold: syntactic patterns are similar in all types of texts, and attest to the same language.

Dating of the texts. The most readily available sources for dating the texts include the colophons, prefaces, and other external materials. However this source is not readily available. A phonological criterion suggested by Nishida Tatsuo is based on the assumption that Tangut translation/ transcription techniques underwent an evolution from reproducing the Chinese equivalents of Indic terms in Tangut to the accurate representations of actual Sanskrit sounds. This evolution is reproduced graphically, especially in the Chinese Buddhist transcriptions developed in Xixia, or in specific transcription symbols in Tangut. This allows building of the relative chronology. Considering that possible date of emergence of the new techniques can be placed sometime around 1150-s, one can distribute the texts chronologically to either before or after this date. Same phonological approach allows delineating the lineages of textual transmissions: varying transcriptions and other translation devices are indicative of independent translation lineages, and thus point towards the variety of the sources of Tangut Buddhism. The limitation of this approach is that it generally holds only for the translations from Chinese, some of which had been edited in the “new techniques”. Naturally, the translations from Tibetan are all “new”.

Analytic stage includes both study of the contents together with textual variations, or alternative translations of the same text. Combined with the analysis of translation principles, this allows a more comprehensive insight into the nature of the texts.

Examples:

1. Alternative translations of the *Platform Sutra of Sixth Patriarch*. Currently we have two translations of the scripture, which can be partially juxtaposed. One version is dependent on the Dunhuang Fahai version; whereas the other one is more closely related to the Huixin version from the Northern Song (the date for this version is debated). The two versions proceed from

- different source texts, and employ alternative translation techniques, which in turn indicates on the textual variety in Sinitic Buddhism in the Northern China during 11-13th centuries.
2. Alternative translations of the *Preface to the Sources of Chan* (禪源諸詮集都序) and of the *Yuanjue jing lueshu chao* 圓覺經略疏鈔, demonstrate that the Tangut versions are based on the Chinese versions which are currently unavailable. This again is indicative of textual variety in the Northern China during 11-13th centuries. Considering well-documented connection between the Liao and the Tanguts (or rather their common heritage of Buddhism in Hebei and Yanjing areas), we might view these hypothetical originals as representative of the Liao Buddhism.
 3. “Hongzhou texts” of Chan Buddhism. Here a Tangut composition (translation of an unknown Chinese original text) with the general purport of reconciling the Chan lineages of Heze Shenhui 荷澤神會 and Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一. The attempt is generally based on the adoption of “ultimate cohesion” 圓融, derived from the *Great Commentary to the Avataṃsaka sūtra* by Qingliang Chengguan 清涼澄觀. The texts are generally dependent on Zongmi’s views, intending to demonstrate that there are no obstacles between the two versions of Chan. Importantly, the Tangut text does not refer to the concept of “awareness” (知), which is traditionally to be one of the core aspects of Zongmi’s criticism towards Hongzhou school.
 4. Alternative translations of the *Mañjuśrīnāmasaṃgīti*: currently we have two Tangut versions and two Chinese versions of the text, which probably was the first text to have been translated into Tangut from Tibetan around late 1140-ss. None of the existing translations can be directly related to any of existing Tibetan versions, either mainstream or Dunhuang. The two translations again employ different techniques and had been produced independently from each other, and proceeded from independent source texts, which still remain to be identified. Alternative translations are also identified to the fundamental Bka gdams composition *Satyadvayāvātāra* by Atiśa Dīpaṃkaraśrījñāna and other texts.
 5. Tangut translation of the *Bodhisattvacaryāvātāra* is a central text in a textual cluster, which otherwise includes variant translations of the *Bodhicittotpādasamādānavidhi* by Jītari, and a commentary, which remains unidentified (in all probability not the *Bodhicaryāvātārapañjikā* by Prajñākaramati). Our study reveals that although the Tangut translation is based on the revised Tibetan version by Sumatikīrti and rNgog Blo ldan shes rab, some verses deviate from the Tibetan translation, and are directly based on the Sanskrit original. This last consideration is open to historical corroboration: we have indications that one of the translators, Sumatikīrti might have travelled to the Tangut kingdom in the very end of the 11th century. rNgog Blo ldan shes rab is well represented among the Khara-Khoto texts, both in Tangut and Tibetan. Even if this reconstruction remains hypothetical, we have sufficient information of Jayānanda sojourn into the Tangut realm, and his successful career there. Combined with other sources, this allows suggesting some Indic presence in Xixia during 12th centuries.
 6. Analysis of the texts of the Mahāmudrā reveals existence of two textual traditions, i.e. two lineages of transmission, one associated with the lineage the circle of Gampopa, whereas the other was considerably more Sinicized, represented by the lineage of the Tangut State Preceptor Dehui 德慧 (died after 1185). Out of these, the former was recorded in the *Dasheng Yaodao Miji*, whereas the lineage of Dehui, though considerably more popular during the Xixia period, discontinued afterwards.

Historical analysis requires corroboration with all knowledge we have about the history of Sinitic

and Tibetan Buddhism during 11-13th centuries. This further leads to an understanding that the history of both Sinitic and Tibetan Buddhism in the Northern China and Mdo smad should be reconsidered in the light of the Tangut texts. As a part of historical analysis we observe a situation which we identify as the “shift in status”: i.e. texts which can be considered “marginal” in the parent traditions became the core compositions in the Tangut Buddhist agenda.

Examples:

1. Tangut Huayan (or Huayan Chan, 華嚴, 華嚴禪) teachings are based on the texts alternative to the currently available variants. For the source texts the Kitan Liao origin is currently suggested, but this observation needs further elaboration.
2. The study of a Huayan fragment discovered at Shanzui gou 山嘴溝 revealed that this composition has textual connection with the composition known 華嚴經懸談會玄記 by Cangshan Purui 蒼山普瑞, i.e. with Buddhism in Dali 大理 area during the Yuan.
3. Tangut exegetical tradition of the *Hevajra tantra* is based on the lineage of Ram Klu gong, i.e. the tradition which became marginal in the mainstream Bka' brgyud, and was substituted by the lineage of rNgog Chos rdor and his son rNgog Zhe sdang rdo rje. Tibetan texts of this particular lineage have not survived whereas Tangut translation indicates that at least by the mid-12th century Ram lineage still existed in the Amdo and Khams.
4. Tangut Buddhist heritage reflects a combination between Mahāmudrā (various lineages under the Bka' brgyud umbrella) and Bka' gdams learning, however, the Tangut situation represents the period before the study of the *Satyadvayāvātāra* was substituted by the study of the *Bodhipathapradīpa*.
5. Indic presence in Xixia is attested, and we have grounds to suggest that in the Tangut translators had an opportunity to consult actual Indic texts. However, the leader of Indian Buddhists in Xixia was Jayānanda, whereas the majority of the Mādhyamika and pramāṇa texts identified now belongs to the lineage of Phya pa Chos kyi seng ge, i.e. the tradition believed to have been alternative to the one represented by Jayānanda.
6. The so called “Sino-Tibetan Buddhism” proceeded from adopting general Huayan taxonomy, into which elements of Tibetan Buddhism had been incorporated.

We proceed from an understanding that the translated and composed texts represent certain historical reality. That is, the image of the Buddhist history of Northern China and Central Asia could be reconsidered in view of the discoveries made during the study of Tangut texts. That is, the Tangut witness a substantial textual variety in both Sinitic and Tibetan clusters; they record the marginal traditions originally unknown, but at the same time reveal further questions which need to be answered.