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URL: http://doi.org/10.15021/00002416
The Problem of Researching Kalmyk Buddhist Literature from the 20th and Early 21st Centuries

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The article deals with the problem of researching Buddhist literature, one of the important components of the Kalmyk written-literary tradition in the 20th and early 21st centuries. The article presents Buddhist literary sources kept in Kalmykia’s collections, most of which are monographs written by well-known Kalmyk Buddhist monks. The author also discusses the tradition of translating Buddhist literature from Tibetan into the Oirat, Kalmyk, and Russian languages begun by the outstanding 17th-century philosopher Zaya-pandita Nam-mkha’rgya-mtsho (1599–1662).

Key words: Kalmyks, Buddhism, literature, canonical works, Oirat philosopher Zaya-pandita

1. Introduction

Kalmyks, like other Central Asian peoples, lie within Tibetan Buddhism’s sphere of distribution and influence, which reaches them from the south and the southeast. The Buddhist canonical literature, unique in its scale and scope, was well known to Buddhist Buryats, Kalmyks, and Tuvinians. Following the example of that literature, Buddhist clerics from a variety of Mongolian peoples have also developed an extensive literature in Mongolian languages. Unfortunately, a great part of the Oirat and Kalmyk written heritage has been lost to history, but what remains available to Kalmyk believers at the beginning of 21st century illustrates in detail the influence of Buddhism on Kalmyk culture.

Contemporary Kalmykia has seen a revival in its spiritual culture, in which Buddhism by right occupies an important place. According to tradition, Buddhism can exist only where

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1. Introduction

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Contemporary Kalmykia has seen a revival in its spiritual culture, in which Buddhism by right occupies an important place. According to tradition, Buddhism can exist only where
three of its components exist—the Buddha, the Doctrine (dharma), and a community of followers (sangha). The Doctrine is comprised symbolically of records of the Buddha’s sermons, which exist in both handwritten and printed (book) form. The special status of sacred Buddhist texts, first conferred in Tibet, has also been affirmed by the Kalmyks.

Although Russia still takes the lead in Buddhist studies, Buddhist literature in its later stages is also very important, as both a literary and a cultural phenomenon, to Buddhists among the Kalmyks and other Mongolian peoples. The study of Mongolian Buddhist literature has not received sufficient attention in the fields of Kalmyk, Buryat, and Tuvinian literature and in studies of the Buddhist literary tradition as a whole.

This article provides a short preliminary review of the structure and maintenance of samples of Buddhist literature, both in translation and in the original, created by Kalmyks throughout the 20th century. We will speak first of compositions that mention various aspects of Buddhist doctrine, including its religious-philosophical system, epistemology, vision of the world, ethics, aesthetics, and canonized narrative subjects.

2. The influence of Buddhism on the spiritual lives of Mongolian peoples

The influence of Buddhism on the development of Mongolian culture and literature has been addressed by the prominent Russian Mongolist B. Ja. Vladimirtsov in his article “Mongolian Literature” (Vladimirtsov 1920). All subsequent works of Russian Mongolists appearing throughout the 20th century and at beginning of this century confirm the importance of this subject. We should recognize that, for many decades, Russia’s Mongolists were strongly influenced by the ideology dominating their country, which tore religion away from the general base of spiritual culture. This ideology compelled scientists to resort to self-censorship in their choice of research subjects, following Marxist theory by shunning all material concerning religion and religious philosophy. That is why, in histories of Mongolian and Oirat literatures written in the last quarter of the 20th century, the term “Buddhist literature” is conspicuously absent—even in discussions of medieval times.

There are now few works to which, on the basis of the analysis of all available genres of the religious and religious-philosophical literature, the history of the formation of Oirat Buddhist literature could be presented; the same is true of their ethnic descendants the Kalmyks and of the separate genres of Buddhist literature in their separate traditions. This creates a problem; the study of literature usually deals with questions of genre, putting a text in perspective against a larger written tradition, but such is not the case in studies of Buddhist literature. When speaking about Buddhist literature, we should whenever possible adopt a macroscopic view that encompasses each genre, each strand, the numerous authors of original compositions, and the author-translators and their biographies, destinies, and individual translational practices. Inevitably, questions arise regarding the necessity of researching the latest compilations, alterations, interpretations, versions, and lists—especially in the face of many difficulties. For example, the Kalmyks and all people familiar with atheistic policies who were deported to Siberia consider the Buddhist tradition an insignificant part of their written heritage.

This theme has not yet received sufficient attention from historians of Kalmyk literature from the 20th and 21st centuries. Unfortunately, what has been written on the Kalmyks and
other peoples of Russia in the 20th century has been nothing but socialist realism. Historians of Kalmyk literature select secular literary works for study by default, assuming that Buddhist religious literature consists exclusively of ancient canonical compositions and cannot generate new texts or new documentary and literary forms. In research on the Buddhist literary canon and especially in scientific editions of work on manuscripts or xylographs, the most authoritative text tends to be what is released; even reviews of lists and editions are dominated by the most representative manuscripts.

3. Oirat and Kalmyk traditions of translating Buddhist literature

For Kalmyks, as for their compatriots from Western Mongolia and Northwest China, the name of the great Oirat philosopher Zaya-pandita Nam-mkha’rgya-mtsho (1599–1662) remains sacred. Buddhist preachers understood that compressed, intelligible literature is necessary if practicing believers are to understand the basic postulates, ceremonial practices, ceremonies, and other aspects of dogma. They therefore considered the affective power of the Buddhist ethos, emphasizing compositions capable of inspiring awe and respect in the minds of potential believers. The selection of texts translated by Zaya-pandita (more than 178 works), his closest disciples (35 works), and his followers (who wrote well-known canonical and non-canonical compositions) is interesting. It is possible to classify the texts by genre and purpose into educational, liturgical, and popular literature.

The tradition of translating Buddhist literature begun by Zaya-pandita continued into the 20th century, through the end of the 1960s and possibly even further. The beginning of the 20th century was marked by an explosion in the educational and translation activities of Kalmyk Buddhist clerics. It should be noted that, by the end of the 19th century, a variety of translations and original compositions in Russian and Oirat (Kalmyk) languages had been created. An initiator of this work was the baksha (lama) of the Don Kalmyks Men’ko Bormanzhinov (1855–1919).

The edition of Buddhist literature in the Todo Script and using lithographic techniques was adjusted typographically at the turn of the 20th century in St. Petersburg. One of the editors was the well-known Mongolist A. M. Pozdneev (1851–1920) (Shastina 2003: 7–18). The compilation includes famous canonical Buddhist texts (Bormanzhinov 1997: 25).

The adherence of Kalmyk monks to the Buddhist literary book tradition shows that they translated religious compositions and scientific texts from the Tibetan language not only into the Oirat and Kalmyk languages but also into Russian. The last translation of a medical composition from the category lhanthabs (tib. lhan-thabs) was carried out by the Kalmyk monk bakshi of the Erketenevsky village in the army of Don Danbo (Dambo) Ulyanov (1844–1913) (Perevod iz tibetskikh medicinskikh sochineniy 1902). The preface to this edition makes clear what “extremely difficult” work it was to translate from the Tibetan language into Russian. Not daring to add or change anything, the translator rendered all allegorical and symbolical representations just as they had appeared in the original (Perevod iz tibetskikh medicinskikh sochineniy 1902: 3–4).

It is important to note (and until recently it was not widely known) that religious texts were composed not only in the Tibetan and Oirat languages (quite traditional for the Mongolian
world) but in Russian as well. Noteworthy in this connection is the Predictions of the Buddha for the House of Romanovs and a Short Sketch of my Travel to Tibet in 1904–1905, composed by D. Ulyanov (Ul'janov 1913). The diary of his travel to Tibet contains data on the Don Kalmyks, explanations concerning Buddhist clergy, and the basic precepts of the doctrine of the Buddha, all supported by data from compositions whose primary elements consist of predictions (Ul'janov 1913). The author’s detailed commentary on the position of the true Buddhist and the reflections of simple believers is a valuable aspect of this work. One reason for the creation of such texts may be the Russification of some of the Kalmyks, particularly in the area of the Don troop; on the other hand, the gelungs (“dge-slong” in Tibetan) probably aspired to extend Buddhist influence beyond the limits of the Kalmyk ethnic environment or change the tolerant Buddhist beliefs of their neighbors the Kalmyks.

In addition to practical works such as the medical texts mentioned above, substantive Buddhist doctrinal texts were also popularized, explained, and translated from Tibetan. An Oirat translation of the Tibetan Management of the Knowledge of Lamaist Dogmas by Dordzhe Setenov (Navangzodba or Navangzodba), who died in 1915, was published for this purpose. The senior baksha of the khuruls (Buddhist temples) of the Bolshe-Derbetovsky were ulus of the Stavropol Kalmyks (Rukovodstvo k poznaniyu lamayskogo veroucheniya 1914). In an edition of the Tibetan sKyabs’ gro sens bskyed bzhugs (Awakening of Thought on Refuge Acceptance) and its Oirat equivalent, we have a double work: (1) Ibēl yabuulxu sedkil öüskekü (Awakening of Thought on Refuge Acceptance) and (2) Γurban törölkiteni möriyin kötölbüri (The Guidance (in) the Way of Three Categories (of living beings)). This masterpiece makes a statement on the basic element of Buddhist practice—acceptance of refuge in the Three Jewels (i.e., the Buddha, the doctrine, and the sangha)—and provides guidance for those following the way of the Buddha’s doctrine.

The interesting literary and educational activity of the Kalmyk clerics, continuing the traditions of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, is connected with Kalmyk emigration. Kalmyk clerics in Europe have not only continued to be engaged in translation but also created original spiritual compositions in the Oirat language. One such work is that of Zadba (Zod’ba) Burul’dinov (1888–1964), who continues the tradition of Buddhist hierarchs from the Don Kalmyks (Adistide cixal orxu kemeküü maqtal 1957). According to the author, the manuscript of this treatise was finished “on the 30th of the monkey month of the cow year, the earth of 16th rabjun [“rab-byung” in Tibetan],” a 64-year cycle according to the Tibetan-Mongolian calendar; this corresponds to 1949 in European chronology. A short retelling of this composition, according to Professor A. Bormanzhinov, occurs in the sketch of Kol’donga (Kul’dinov) Sodnom (Sud’ba donskikh kalmykov 1984). Moreover, a manuscript of Z. Burul’dinov, the umzad (“dbu-mdzad” in Tibetan: a canonarkhus, or leader at divine services) at khurul Arsha lamin kit (Alekseeva 1997: 30–31), includes the composition Burxan birman xoyor (The Buddha and the Brahman) and explains the main provisions of Buddhist doctrine (suffering, the three poisons, the ten sins, the ten virtues, etc.).

Representatives of the Kalmyk intelligentsia who appeared in America, anxious to spread their national culture among the young generation, compiled cultural-educational texts in which the frameworks of Buddhist ceremonial writings and prayers were translated. Baksha Sandzhi-Ragba Men’kov (1897–1968) translated from Tibetan and wrote in the “magtal”
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(praise) poetic form about the favor of the Three Jewels and the deities of the Buddhist pantheon (Vajrapani, Manjushri, Avalokiteshvara, etc.) (Adistide cixal orxu kemeküü maqtal 1957). His small work was published in 1957 in Philadelphia, its Oirat text accompanied by a Latin transliteration to make the Buddhist prayers easy to understand.

4. Translation and education by the Kalmyk lama Tugm’ud-gavdzhi

Among Oirat translations of Buddhist texts is the work of the well-known cleric Tugm’ud-gavdzhi (1887–1980) of Kalmykia (this was his state name; he is also known as Togmd-Ochir Mandzhaev), who translated the canonical Sutra of the Wise and the Fool (in Sanskrit Damamūkonāmasūtra, muô. ’Dzangs blun zhes-by-a-ba theg-pa chen-po ’i mdo) from Tibetan into the Oirat language (1968) (Muzraeva 2008b: 90–113).

The destiny of Tugm’ud-gavdzhi, a native of the Jandyko-Mochazhny ulus (now the Astrakhan region), was to receive an initial spiritual education in his homeland, in Arshinsky khurul, and then train in Mongolia and Buryatia—following in the footsteps of many members of the Kalmyk clergy. This group has twice been subjected to repression—first in 1935, when they were sent to Northern Kazakhstan, and then from 1943 to 1956, during the deportation of the Kalmyks to, Khakassia. The Scientific Archive of the Kalmyk Institute for Humanitarian Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences thus holds a trove of Tibetan and Mongolian texts with both Oirat manuscripts and xylographs (Muzraeva 2008a: 26–54).

A sutra translated by Tugm’ud-gavdzhi is well known in the Mongolian world by the short name “Ulíger-un dalai” (in Mongolian “Ülíger-ün dalai-yin neretü” or “The Sutra under the name ‘Sea of Parables’”). In extant descriptions of canonical Oirat texts, this sutra is often called “Medëtei medë ügyiγi ilyaqči kemëkü sudur” (“the Sutra explaining wise and fool”). It is in fact a collection of jatakas and avadanas narrating the last births of Buddha Shakyamuni. Although modern researchers characterize it as a popular Buddhist composition, it has in fact been included in a canonical work (the arch of bKa’-’gyur), which fact undoubtedly affected the author’s relationship to the translation. The translation of Tugm’ud-gavdzhi written in the Todo Script, when compared to the Tibetan original, appears to be a literal translation (rather than a semantic translation more remote from the substance of the Tibetan original) completely meeting the translation requirements for sacred canonical texts that were codified in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The sutra was continually an object of study and translation, testifying to its great popularity among the people of Central Asia. It was translated from the Tibetan by such well-known and highly educated Mongolian lamas as Širegetü güüsi čorji (at the beginning of the 17th century), Tshul-khrim Blo-gros, and Toyin gushi (Ulgeriyin Dalai 1996: 1–3). In the 17th century, Zaya-pandita Nam-mkha’rgya-mtsho translated it into the Oirat language (Muzraeva 2008: 317–323). The translation by Tugm’ud-gavdzhi is the latest version of the text and certainly the latest Oirat translation of a Buddhist masterpiece accomplished by Kalmyks in the 20th century. The work also symbolizes the importance of preserving tradition and contributes significantly to the literary heritage of the Kalmyk people.

It would be especially desirable to examine Buddhist ceremonial literature up to the beginning of the 21st century—not only texts in the traditional Todo Script but also those
employing various versions of the secular Kalmyk alphabet, Cyrillic, which was used during the linguistic reformation of the modern Kalmyk language. For example, we could examine the collection of Buddhist compositions in Cyrillic in Baga-Chonosovsky khurul’s collection. These include such well-known texts as “Prediction for the future” (or “Clearing icon lamp”), “The Sutra pacifying the earth and water,” “Manuals of Jetsundampa Khutukhtu,” and “The Sutra eliminating consequences of (acts) of a body, speech, and thought.” The transposition of these and similar texts in Cyrillic was not generally reflected in their sacral status: they are still read and believed to bring prosperity to families who keep them and to whom they are transferred for recitation or ceremonial actions.

Such compositions in the Oirat, Kalmyk, and Russian languages testify to the richness and originality of the Buddhist tradition in the Kalmyk literature of the 20th century. They continue the creative tradition of translation that was begun in the 17th century by Zaya-pandita Nam-mkha’ rgya-mtsho and continues to thrive more than three centuries later.

This literature not only survived but also grew in the 20th century as Kalmyks, including those in the Kalmyk diaspora across Europe and the United States, continued to create new works of art. Among these works were not only new translations of classical texts by Kalmyk Buddhist clerics but also wholly original compositions.

Understanding the revival of Kalmyk spiritual culture is impossible without studying Buddhism and Buddhist culture, without analyzing of the ethnic specificity of Buddhism’s reception by Oirats and Kalmyks, without considering national literary and cultural traditions, and—most of all—without examining in detail the links between Buddhist tradition and 20th-century Kalmyk Buddhist literature. Similarly, it is impossible to comprehend Buddhist studies in all their manifestations without discussing their development—from the history of Buddhist philosophy to archeographic descriptions of the manuscripts of Buddhist compositions that have entered the 21st century with us.

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