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Peer Review of

Daniel Berounský, *The Tibetan Version of the Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Quest for Chinese Influence on the Tibetan Perception of the Afterlife* (Prague: Triton, 2012)

I was asked to give a peer review of the monograph *The Tibetan Version of the Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Quest for Chinese Influence on the Tibetan Perception of the Afterlife*, written by Daniel Berounský (in the following: DB), as part of the requirements for his habilitation at Comenius University of Bratislava, Faculty of Arts. In the following I will give an evaluation of his monograph without, however, commenting on the comparative description of the paintings composed by my colleague Luboš Bělka.

The Tibetan Version of the Scripture on the Ten Kings offers a thorough analysis of one aspect of the Tibetan concepts of death and the afterlife, the views of the netherworld, especially the hells. Its main focus lies on the descriptive analysis and careful translation of a text that has hitherto not been known to exist in the Tibetan cultural regions and which has by pure chance caught the attention of the author. The text of 43 folios forms part of a convoluted manuscript that is currently preserved in the National Gallery at Prague. It is, at least up to now, the only Tibetan version of a Chinese text by the same title that has already been the subject of a detailed study (see S. F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*, Honolulu, 1994). In his study, DB presents much more than just a thorough analysis and philologically sound translation of the *Scripture on the Ten Kings*. In the first three chapters he offers the reader a comprehensive introduction to the Tibetan literature on death and the afterlife, thereby disentangling the manifold influences of Indian (both Hindu and Buddhist), Chinese and even Mongolian concepts on this literature and the ideas transported in it. At the heart of his exploration into the Tibetan concepts of the afterlife is his quest to search « for Chinese influence on the Tibetan perception of the afterlife. »

The study is divided into four chapters, which follow the same, twofold order: After a thorough examination of the topic a selected text taken from the material discussed is presented in translation. In my opinion this arrangement is a kind of symbolic token for one of the author's main concerns, namely to address the divide between the discourse of the monastic elites and that of the common people. I will come back to this important issue later.

After a very short introduction in which DB states the aims of his study, the first chapter presents a thorough overview of Indian ideas about hells. By drawing on the extensive secondary literature available, the author follows the development of hell notions from the Upaniṣads and the Mana-

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vadharmaśāstra to early Buddhist scriptures and later Mahāyāna developments. The chapter concludes with the translation of a passage from a well-known Tibetan commentary on the *Abhidharmaśāstra*, composed in the 13th/14th century by mChims 'jam pa'i dbyangs which provides us with a glimpse into the spatial images of hells.

The second chapter concentrates on the well-known character of the *'das log* that was the subject of extensive research by the French scholar F. Pommaret. DB duly draws on her research and, when he deems it necessary, critically evaluates her findings. In his presentation of the current state of research about the *'das log* he tests the idea of a proximity of the *'das log* to the Chinese genre of *zhiguai* stories. He tries to prove his point by working out the „almost identical narrative trajectory » (p. 55) of both literary genres. DB is, however, well aware that structural similarities are not proof of a historical connection and influence, and, fortunately, does not fall into the trap of a-historical phenomenology. The *'das log* character gives the author ample opportunity to elaborate on the complex relationship between normative prescripts and social reality. For DB the *'das log* stories demonstrate the adaptive power of the standardized and normative hell descriptions to the social reality of Tibetan ordinary life. The chapter concludes with a translation of the hagiography of the *'das log* Gling sa chos skyid, from a hitherto not translated modern edition.

In the third chapter the author deals extensively with the most famous of all Buddhist hell journeys, Maudgalyāyana's travels to the different hells in search of his mother. The travels of Maudgalyāyana have already been well researched by different authors. This chapter provides a well-written and up-to-date overview of the available studies in regard to the Maudgalyāyana stories. DB demonstrates an excellent knowledge of the relevant primary and secondary sources. The chapter contains a translation of the *'Phags pa yongs su skyob pa'i gnod ces bya ba'i mdo* and the story of Maudgalyāyana's mother by bSod nams lha'i dbang po. The first mentioned translation starts in a curious way : « Thus I heard once upon the time » (p. 116). Usually, « once upon a time » belongs to the following sentence and the opening lines run thus : « Thus I have heard. Once upon the time the Bhagavān dwelt ... ». As I do not have access to the Tibetan text, I cannot judge whether the Tibetan text deviates from the usual formula or whether this is a slight mistake in translation. DB concludes this chapter with a very useful list of the available Tibetan manuscripts of the rescue story.

Finally, in the fourth chapter the author presents a thorough description, comparative analysis (with the Chinese text available in Teiser's translation) and translation of the Prague manuscript of the *Scripture on the Ten Kings*. The first sub-chapter deals with the development of the Chinese texts, providing the ground for the comparison with the Tibetan text. In the next sub-chapter he introduces the reader to the Prague collection of texts which contain the *Scripture on the Ten Kings*. This sub-chapter provides interesting information about the history of Asian art history in Eastern Europe which nowadays is not well-known anymore. DB continues with a very detailed description of the Prague manuscript and its possible relation to a Chinese original. He also discusses the possible provenance of the manuscript and considers the possibility « that the production of this particular copy of the text took place in Mongolia » (p. 156). The text contains numerous spelling mistakes. For this and other reasons DB draws the conclusion that the scribe of this text did not come from « the higher strata of society ». I am not sure what that entails: does DB doubt the scribe being a monk ? Or could he be a monk, but one who was not particularly educated?

DB dedicates one sub-chapter to speculations about the possible relation of the text to the Tibetan cultural field. As the Prague manuscript probably is no older than the 18th or 19th century, and as there are no known older Tibetan versions of the story, the « Sitz im Leben » of the text is open to speculation. DB sees one possible relation of the text and Tibetan social practices in the view that the deceased meets his final destiny in *samsāra* after three years, as expressed in the text. As this view is only one of numerous views about death and the afterlife in the Tibetan cultural sphere, the ideas expressed in this sub-chapter give food for thought, but remain unproven (a fact of which the author is well aware).

The remainder of the fourth chapter consists of a careful translation of the manuscript, including comments on the various spelling mistakes (or curiosities) and suggestions of reading them. I spot-

checked the translation and cannot but admire DB's thorough command of the Tibetan language. In some places, not surprisingly (when do translators not differ in their interpretations?), I do not quite agree with his translation, for example when he translates « let this teaching be pronounced from the face of the [Buddha] himself [...] let it spread wide » (fol. 12b), I suggest « Let this teaching that was pronounced/proclaimed from himself, be spread widely », or « Endowed with Comfort », I would rather translate conventionally « endowed with bliss/ happiness ». Some passages are obscure in the translation, for example on p. 182 : « producing virtue is very similar to particles of dust, and evil reminds the peak of a mountain. » Comparing the translation to the Tibetan original I would prefer to translate « Those who act virtuously are similar to particles of dust, and the evil-doers are like/resemble the peak of a mountain. » These minor points, however, do not lessen the amazing achievement of this translation.

The remaining part of the chapter contains the facsimile of the Prague manuscript, including the illustrations. In his « concluding remarks » the author summarises his findings and once again stresses his belief that this text originated « outside the communities of educated monks ». He offers reasonable arguments for his belief, but I hesitate to follow him here. My hesitation is based on two considerations. First, a comparison with the Mongolian situation: the Mongolian hell descriptions mostly did originate in a monastic environment, as we know for example from the (admittedly rare) remarks in the texts about authors and scribes. Illustrated texts were mostly produced for lay people, but the production itself lay in the hands of the monks who used the pictures as didactic means to impress Buddhist prescriptive norms on the lay community. Secondly, the many spelling mistakes: they certainly show poor knowledge of Tibetan classical orthography, but this does not necessarily hint at a lay-background, but was also a common factor in a monastic scriptorium. The question who copied books and for what reasons is explored by Kurtis R. Schaffer in his seminal *The Culture of the Book in Tibet* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), the only monograph I missed in DB's voluminous bibliography.

This brings me to a final remark: Throughout his study DB addresses the issue of „the integration of the scholarly teachings into real life“ (p. 45), without, however, going into more detail concerning this issue. In my opinion, he stresses too much the rift between the intellectual elites and the common people (see for example his remark on p. 12, where he presupposes a gulf between the Tibetan tantric tradition and the popular perceptions of the afterlife), whereas I would rather stress the entanglements and mutual influences of both strata of society.

To sum up: DB has written a well informed and thought provoking study about Tibetan perceptions of the afterlife. He addresses many important issues like the complex cultural influences that are present in Tibetan literary production and the interplay between popular and elite culture, issues that wait to be more thoroughly explored. There are very few shortcomings in this study : one is certainly the English, which should have been carefully edited before publishing the book. I also found quite a few mistakes in the Sanskrit transliterations. Apart from these very few minor shortcomings, this study is a very valuable contribution to Tibetan Studies, but also to Religious Studies in general. Therefore I strongly recommend Dr. Daniel Berounský to be given the title „docent“.

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