Tibetological Collections & Archives Series **[part 2]**

The Bonpo Katen Cataloguing Project

Research > Central Asia

A whole set of manuscripts of the Bonpo canon, the Kanjur part, was long hidden away in the vicinity of the dBal-khyung Monastery in Nyag-rong when the Tibetan areas in Qinghai, Gansu and Sichuan were harshly subjugated by the Chinese during 1957–58. After relaxation of the strict control by the Chinese at the beginning of the 1980s, it was deemed safe to bring out what was hidden.

By Samten G. Karmay

There was some cause for anxiety as this manuscript set of the canon was the only surviving copy in the whole of Tibet after the Cultural Revolution. It was therefore a matter of great urgency to make new copies by reproducing the manuscripts lest anything irrevocable should happen to the unique copy. But due to the great number of volumes, it represented a prohibitively costly enterprise to have them published. Mr sKal-bzang phun-tshogs with the staunch support of his friend Lama Ayung finally overcame all the obstacles. They encountered both financial problems and non-cooperation on the part of the people who claimed to have been the owners of the manuscripts. Ultimately, the publishers had the backing of the Sichuan government as well as several Tibetan officials, who were mostly rNy-ing-ma-pas working in Chengdu and the whole printed edition was published in Chengdu from 1985 to 1988. The new print was decried by the 'owners of the manuscripts' and other Bonpo as of poor production quality. However, the main concern of the publishers was in fact to quickly bring out new copies of the manuscripts so that there would be no unrecoverable loss should anything happen to the unique original manuscripts.

Dori Heiliigers-Seelen.

Organizing the Tibetan canon at the library of the Kern Institute for shelving in accordance with the Osaka/Triten Norbutse catalogue.

It is this edition of the Kanjur, the first part of the canon, of which Per Kværne obtained a copy for the University of Oslo. In 1996, he there began organizing a group of scholars in order to make an analytic catalogue, which is now being prepared for publication.

However, the Katen, the second part of the canon, does not seem to have survived in any one set of manuscripts or printed editions either in Tibet or anywhere else. Although a great number of the texts that theoretically belong to the Katen part of the canon were published in India by Tibetan refugees with the encouragement given by Gene Smith during the 1960s and 1970s, no systematic collection of the whole of it has so far ever been made. Sog-sde bsTan-pa'i nyi-ma, the publisher of the present collection, therefore felt the urgent need of assembling together the Katen texts that were still available, even though scattered over various locations.

In assembling the texts Sog-sde bsTan-pa'i nyi-ma seems to have made no attempt to select texts as the Abbot Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin would have suggested if he were alive (see the accompanying article by the same author on p 17). Given the predicament of the cultural and religious situation in Tibet, it is understandable that Sog-sde bsTan-pa'i nyi-ma has collected texts almost indiscriminately and wherever he could lay his hands on them for his new edition of the Katen texts. It made no difference whether a text belonged to the old or new Bon tradition. The present collection of his edition that made its way to the Tritan Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu in 2000 has 300 volumes, not counting the texts that belong to the Kanjur part of the canon and a number of gsung 'bum that have, in fact, come along with the collection.

Another characteristic of Sog-sde bsTan-pa'i nyi-ma is the lack of any systematic approach to his action. The texts in this collection are not arranged in any kind of order nor are the volumes numbered coherently in a particular way. It lacks a general title in spite of the claim that it is the 'Bonpo Tenjur'. There is no indication of the place where it is published, nor a date of publication. In other words, it is a totally disorganized mass of texts. We have therefore preferred to use the term Katen (bka' rten) which is the traditional term for this part of the canon rather than describing it as the 'Bonpo Tenjur'. However, it must be pointed out that the collection does indeed contain a considerable number of rare and extremely important works that had thus far never been published before. Moreover, however poor the quality of the reproduction may be due to the process of reproducing the old manuscripts by means of photostat, the value of the publication is all the same great and there is no doubt that scholars will highly appreciate having such texts in their 'original form'. In this sense the publisher is to be warmly congratulated for this vast undertaking and his strenuous efforts in bringing out this composite collection.

Preparing the Catalogue

Our colleague professor Yasuhiko Nagano has a genius for organizing our work. He came to Tritan Norbutse Monastery with four portable computers already installed with a Tibetan programme as a gift for the monastery. It was in March 2000 that we began to prepare the work on the catalogue with four monks led by Tenpa Yundrung. The monks learned how to use the computers within a week. However, to deal with such a mass of texts that has no obvious regular numbering was rather daunting. It took us a whole week simply to sort them out and put them in a kind of order. We did not rearrange the texts in any order since this would upset the already partially numbered parts of the collection and would also lead to confusion when other libraries obtain the same set of texts and try to use our catalogue. We therefore decided to follow the numeration of the volumes although, as mentioned earlier, this numeration is not always consistent. One of the problems the users of this catalogue may face is that the publisher has not set any limit to a conclusive edition so that there is no one 'set of the Bonpo Tenjur' with a definitive number of volumes. In the present case the collection contains 300 volumes.

Tenpa Yungdrung and his colleagues completed the compilation of the catalogue within ten months, as instructed. To underline the open-ended nature of our enterprise I may add that in March 2001, while we were reading the proofs of the catalogue in the Tritan Norbutse Monastery, news reached us that the publisher had added more volumes to the collection, as he kept finding more unpublished manuscripts ...! <

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More info >

This brief project description is part of the introduction to the volume, *A Catalogue of the New Collection of Bonpo Katen Texts*, published by the National Museum of Ethnology, Oska in 2001, Senri Ethnological Reports 24, Bon Studies 4.