

The Translator in Tibetan History: Identity and influence

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Abstract/Résumé

En raison de l'isolement géographique et politique du Tibet durant la majeure partie de sa longue histoire, l'étude de la traduction au Tibet est un très récent -et en grande partie inexploré- terrain de recherche. Pendant des siècles, les traducteurs au Tibet ont été vénérés pour le rôle crucial qu'ils ont joué dans ce qu'on a appelé «le plus grand échange culturel planifié et soutenu aux débuts de l'histoire du monde" (Khyentse 2009: 23)-la traduction de la totalité du canon bouddhiste indien en tibétain . Ce projet monumental, qui a pris des centaines d'années et a impliqué la traduction de plus de 5.000 textes religieux, s'est déroulée en deux périodes historiques distinctes. Dans cet article, la position des traducteurs dans la société tibétaine traditionnelle est d'abord examinée, après quoi est présentée l'histoire de la traduction au Tibet sur les deux périodes, à partir des événements clés, des personnages historiques, et des activités de traduction décrites. Ce travail que Pym nomme « l'archéologie de traduction » (1998: 5) est ensuite lié au présent par un examen des facteurs liés à la réussite des traducteurs tibétains qui influent sur les traducteurs modernes. Comprendre les techniques de traduction et les méthodes du passé peuvent apporter un éclairage nouveau sur les difficultés rencontrées par les personnes impliquées dans le transfert culturel du bouddhisme tibétain en Occident.

Keywords/Mots-Clés

Tibet, translation, translation history, Tibetan Buddhism, Buddhist translation

1. Introduction

In Translation Studies, research on religious translation has long been associated primarily with Christianity. Asian religious traditions such as Buddhism have been greatly underrepresented, and while some research on Buddhist translation has been carried out, one of the least studied forms of this religion, from a translation perspective, is Tibetan Buddhism. One reason for this is Tibet's geographical and political isolation for much of its long history, as a consequence of which the field of Tibetan Studies has only developed in recent decades.

Scholars of Tibetan Studies have contributed tremendously to our knowledge of the history (and present) of Tibet, but very little work has been carried out by translation

scholars regarding its translation history, despite the fact that the Tibetans have one of the most astonishing records of translation activity in the world. Starting in the 7th century and continuing for some 900 years, the Tibetans transmitted, preserved and translated the entire contents of the Indian Buddhist canon, a body of work amounting to more than 5,000 texts and 73 million words. As one Tibetologist notes, the production of the translations that became the Tibetan canon was “one of the greatest cultural exchanges that the world has ever seen” (Khyentse, 2009, p. 23).

Indeed, the Tibetan canon is known as the most complete of all the canons of Buddhism, for the Tibetans translated not only the sutras and philosophical treatises that make up the Tripitaka¹, but also all of the shastras (commentaries) and tantric literature available in India, the latter of which account for more than half of the contents of the Tibetan canon. In the 14th century, the thousands of translations that had been produced thus far were organized into two major collections known as the Kangyur, or teachings of the Buddha, and Tengyur, the commentarial treatises which include both Indian and Tibetan sources. In fact, the use of the term “canon” is misleading in the Tibetan context, because many versions of these collections were produced at different times and in different locations, with new translations constantly being added and revised.

The most recent version of the Tibetan canon was published in 1980 in the United States by Dharma Publishing and is among the most well-regarded by Tibetan studies scholars for its comprehensiveness and authenticity. This edition contains 1,115 texts in the Kangyur (consisting of 65,420 folios or 25 million words) and 3,994 texts in the Tengyur (consisting of 127,000 folios or 48 million words) (Tsepag, 2005, p. 54). In addition, in the volume of indices one can find a list of the 870 translators who worked on these 5,109 texts, with 250 translators listed in the Kangyur and 620 in the Tengyur (Tsepag, 2005, p. 53).²

Translators’ names and identities were carefully recorded throughout Tibet’s centuries of translation activity, beginning as early as the 9th century when the first

¹ The Tripitaka refers to the “three baskets” of teachings: sutras, which were taught by the Buddha or his close disciples; vinaya, the monastic code of conduct; and abhidharma, philosophical and doctrinal works written after the Buddha’s time.

² This figure of 870 translators differs from Tibet’s own religious chronicles, which list a smaller number of 721 total translators, with 551 in the early diffusion and 170 in the later diffusion (Tsepag, 2005, pp. 52-3). However, Dharma Publishing’s edition contains many texts not included in earlier editions of the canon.

catalogue was produced. They were the recipients of royal patronage and largesse that many modern-day translators would surely envy, and were occasionally the subject of religious biographies that extolled their deeds and virtues. In contrast to the often “invisible” position of translators in Western countries, in Tibet the translators were not only highly visible but revered: for the sacrifices involved in their countless hazardous journeys to India; for painstakingly translating vast numbers of texts; and for the invaluable role they played in bringing Buddhism to Tibet, a cultural transfer which transformed the Land of Snows forever.

The aim of this paper is two-fold. Since translation in Tibet is an almost entirely unexplored area of translation history, the first aim of the paper is to focus on what Pym calls “translation archaeology,” which is “concerned with answering all or part of the complex question of ‘who translated what, how, where, when, for whom and with what effect?’” (Pym, 1998, p. 5). It is hoped that using this approach will provide a foundation upon which other researchers can build so that a clear and accurate picture may emerge of Tibet’s translation history. Following a discussion of the translators’ position in Tibetan society, the two historical periods of the transmission of Buddhism to Tibet, known as the “early diffusion” and “later diffusion,” are presented, with key events, historical figures, and translation activities outlined.

The second aim of the paper is based on one of Pym’s principles for studying translation history: to link the past to the present “in order to express, address and try to solve problems affecting our own situation” (1998: x). Thus, one section of the paper is devoted to studying some of the influences that the historical translators have had on their modern-day counterparts. While the task of the Tibetan translators was completed long ago, the work of today’s translators of Tibetan Buddhist literature has barely begun, with only a fraction of the thousands of texts having been rendered into Western languages. Understanding the successes and failures, the techniques and travails, of past translators may help to shed new light on the challenges faced by those involved in the cultural transfer of Tibetan Buddhism to Western soil.

II. Translators in Tibetan society

The translators of Buddhist literature in Tibet are known as *lotsawa*, a word derived from the Sanskrit *locchava*, which means “eye of the world” or “one who opens the eyes of the world” for others. For Tibetans, it is a term of great respect, indicating not only thorough knowledge of the two languages concerned but also profound realization and personal understanding of the deepest meanings of the text. Singh writes that the lotsawas of the past were “not only sagacious and erudite, they were also accomplished saints” and for anyone to reach this level, some twenty years of intensive study and mediation constitute a “bare minimum” (2001, p. 25).

The training of lotsawas involved first becoming thoroughly versed in Sanskrit language, grammar and poetics, followed by in-depth studies of Buddhist philosophy with qualified teachers. Extensive practice were essential prerequisites for anyone wishing to do translation, and in cases of translating tantric texts, oral transmission (Tib. *lung*) and empowerments (Skt. *abhisheka*) were also required. It was unheard of in Tibet for a translator to not be an accomplished practitioner, or to merely work as a translator as a type of paid profession. Translators’ motivations were, in the main, a love of the Dharma (Buddhist teachings) and a wish to make the Buddha’s teachings known and available to others.

Most translations of Buddhist literature from Sanskrit into Tibetan were undertaken in teams of two individuals: an Indian scholar, or *pandita*, and a Tibetan lotsawa. In some instances, another Tibetan also took part to supervise the draft translation, known as a reviser-translator (Tib. *shu-chen-gyi-lotsawa*). The main task of the Indian *pandita* was to explain the meaning of, and answer questions about, the source text to the translator, who translated it into Tibetan. If a reviser-translator was involved, he was responsible for closely examining and correcting the translation (Chimpa, 2001, p. 15). Whether teams consisted of a *pandita* and lotsawa only, or also involved a reviser-translator, depended upon the location where the translation took place and the availability of a reviser.

The norm of close teamwork between two (or more) specialists is often credited as an important factor for the extremely high quality of the translations they produced. The accuracy of the Tibetan translations was noted in the West as early as 1951, when

Walter Eugene Clark made these remarks in his presidential address to the American Oriental Society:

The Tibetan translations are marvelous for their word-for-word fidelity to the original. They are of great help in dealing with badly mutilated texts and in giving a clear impression of the original. With a good knowledge of Tibetan and of Buddhist Sanskrit the Tibetan texts could be rewritten in a Sanskrit that would approximate very closely to the original (Clark, 1951, p. 210).

In the 1980s, Snellgrove went so far as to claim that “every one” of the texts translated by the lotsawas was an “extraordinary linguistic feat” and that “no other translators have ever succeeded in reproducing an original with such painstaking accuracy.” By relying only on the Tibetan translations, he reasoned that “there is no reason why the exact contents of any [Sanskrit] Buddhist text should not become known to us” (qtd. Wedemeyer, 2006, p. 170). Such observations, echoed (and occasionally challenged) by other scholars, have led to efforts to back-translate Tibetan translations into Sanskrit in order to attempt to recreate the originals, most of which have been lost for centuries. Such a project has been underway since the 1990s at the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies at Sarnath, India and “the result is proving so satisfactory that many eminent Sanskrit scholars of India are much impressed by these re-translations” (Tulku, 2001, p. 210).

2.1 Identity and historiography in Tibet

Information about translators in Tibetan history comes from four main sources: colophons of translations; catalogues of translated works; historical records; and religious biographies of translators. Colophons and catalogues normally consist of only the basic details of a translated text, such as the names of the author and translator(s), and the dates of the translations. Historical works, such as *The Blue Annals* (Tib. *Debther ngonpo*), provide facts on many of the more famous translators’ lives, including places visited on pilgrimages, lists of students and teachers they studied with, and other such details. However, less acclaimed individuals only receive brief mentions in *The Blue Annals*, and most of Tibet’s more than 700 known translators are not

mentioned at all.

Religious biographies (Tib. *namthar*), a common form of literature in the Tibetan tradition, are the richest sources of information on the lives and translation activities of the lotsawas, and often contain fascinating details on their travels and religious experiences. Much more common in the later diffusion than in the early period, *namthars*—whether written about lotsawas or others—were normally authored by close disciples, thus only the lotsawas who were widely acclaimed as teachers were the subject of biographies. Rinchen Zangpo, for example, a key figure in the later diffusion, has been the subject of several biographies, one of which has been translated into English (Tucci, 1988).

Due in part to its orally-transmitted nature, early Tibetan history was highly mythologized, full of miraculous events that have become part of the lore of Tibetan Buddhism. In the early diffusion period in particular, we find that the translators are often presented as mythic heroes who were able to perform incredible feats of magic. In particular, the 25 disciples of the great Indian tantric master Padmasambhava—many of whom were translators—were purported to be able to perform myriad miraculous yogic feats. For example, in Vairochana's biography it is said that he had learned 1,600 different languages by the age of 15; Yeshe De could soar in the sky like a bird; and Dorje Dudjom was said to have been able to pass through solid rock. Such abilities were considered signs of accomplishment and are extremely common in Tibetan Buddhist literature. However, biographies of the early translators are rare, with information on them being mainly transmitted through the oral tradition, thus it is difficult to locate accurate details of their lives.

In the later diffusion, when historical records and biographies became more widespread and factual, the lotsawas are seen as more closely resembling “ordinary” human beings, with foibles and motivations as varied as the individuals themselves. As Davidson's study clearly shows, because the translators of the later period specialized in translating tantric texts, which were highly valued as “the most secret and most efficacious of religious methods,” they often enjoyed a preeminent position in society (2005, p. 2). Some, like Marpa Lotsawa, became foundational figures of particular lineages; others became acclaimed tantric masters with many followers; and some even used their position in society for “personal aggrandizement” (*ibid.*). Biographies of

some of the most renowned translators of the later diffusion period are available, a few in translation and others not yet translated³.

III. The “early diffusion”: The era of royal patronage

Documented Tibetan history does not begin until the early 7th century CE, when Tibet became a unified kingdom centered in the Yarlung Valley and the Tibetan written language was first developed. Prior to this time, history was transmitted orally and only later transcribed based on the oral tradition. One of the first mentions of Buddhism in Tibet occurred during this pre-literate period, when according to legend scriptures and other holy objects fell from the heavens and landed in the palace of King Lha Thotori, who reigned in the 4th century CE. However, because no one could read the scriptures, they remained a mystery but were nonetheless revered and venerated (Kaptsein, 2006, p. 42).

According to traditional accounts, King Songtsen Gampo (r. 617-649)—whose kingdom was surrounded by Buddhist states and who realized the need for a written language—dispatched a minister named Thonmi Sambhota to India to acquire a script. Thonmi went to India where he studied Indic languages for seven years, created an alphabet, grammar and written form of the Tibetan language, and brought back many Mahayana Buddhist teachings. As Cabezon and Jackson state, Tibetan was based on “a variant of the Devanagari script in which Sanskrit is presently written, thereby providing Tibetans with a means for recording their oral traditions and translating Indian Buddhist texts” (1996, p. 13). Thonmi translated the texts from the time of Lha Thotori, as well as several sutras and grammars, thus becoming the first translator in Tibet’s recorded history.

This initial act of translation ushered in the period known as the “early diffusion” of Buddhism to Tibet (Tib. *snga dar*) (c. 617-839). During this nearly 200-year period, apart from Songsten Gampo, three kings are singled out for their contributions to the

³ For example, the fascinating biography of Chag Lotsawa Choje Pal (1197-1264), one of the last lotsawas to study at Nalanda Monastery when it was already partially in ruins, was translated into English by George Roerich (1959).

spread of Buddhism: Trisong Detsen (r. 742-797), Tride Songtsen (r. 800-815), and Tri Ralpachen (r. 815-836). Buddhism developed gradually during the reigns of the kings that followed Songsten Gampo but did not see marked progress until King Trisong Detsen came to power in the 8th century. A devout Buddhist, this king was said to have invited 100 learned religious scholars (panditas) and monks from India and trained hundreds of translators. One of those invited by the king was the abbot Shantarakshita, who ordained the first seven monks in Tibet. Several of these monks became great translators, including Vairochana, the most renowned translator of the period. Traditional accounts state that another 300 men were later ordained, the most talented of whom were sent to India to learn Sanskrit and translation (Gyaltzen, 1996, p. 233).

King Trisong Detsen officially adopted Buddhism as the religion of the Tibetan people and ordered the establishment of the first Buddhist monastery, Samye Monastery, which was completed c. 779. There, he installed a team of nine translators⁴ to supervise the translation of the Tripitaka. As Kapstein notes, under royal patronage translation activity at this time “grew to enormous proportions,” continuing into the mid-ninth century. Kapstein remarks:

In both quantitative and qualitative terms the achievement of the Tibetan translators must be ranked among the cultural monuments of the medieval world and the hundreds of texts translated into Tibetan by the imperial translation committees may be counted among the finest achievements of the art of translation in any place or time (2006, p. 72).

Royal patronage thus played a key role in the transmission of Buddhism, with translations on a large scale beginning under King Trisong Detsen and increasing in number after the establishment of Samye Monastery, the site of many of the early translations. It has been observed that initially, translations were “a haphazard and irregular business” but under the reign of the next Buddhist king, Tride Songtsen, “the central political authority soon moved to take control of the process” (Harrison, 1996, p. 73). This king was remarkable for the extraordinarily active role that he played in the

⁴ The nine translators were: Vairochana, Ananda the Kashmiri, Denma Tsemang, Nyag Kumara, Ma Rinchen Chog, Khon Luiwangpo, Kawa Paltseg, Chogro Lui Gyeltzen, and Nanam Yeshe De (Gyaltzen, 1996, p. 247).

sponsorship of translation activities. He is credited with initiating three key events in Tibet's early translation history: the creation of the first Sanskrit-Tibetan lexicon of Buddhist terminology; the introduction of specific guidelines for translators; and the beginning of the process of cataloguing translations.

One of the key acts of King Tride Songtsen was the creation of a central committee of translators, consisting of both Indian and Tibetan scholars, who were "authorized to revise old and new translations in order to attain uniformity in terminology as well as in translating techniques" (Verhagen, 1994, p. 10). Since up to that point, although the translators worked in teams with Indian panditas in order to obtain the clearest possible meaning of these difficult texts, there was no standardized terminology or guidelines on how to translate.

This committee was put in charge of creating two important Sanskrit-Tibetan lexicographical works that are still extant in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, known in Sanskrit as the *Mahavyutpatti* and the *Madhyavyutpatti*. The word *vyutpatti* in both Sanskrit titles means "derivation" or "etymology", thus *Mahavyutpatti* may be translated as "Great [Treatise on] Etymology" and the *Madhyavyutpatti* as "Middle [Treatise on] Etymology" (Verhagen, 1994, p. 15). Although not dated, both of these documents are believed to have been compiled between 812-814 and "perhaps finished" during the reign of Tri Ralpachen. Both documents played a "crucial role in the creation of the rich Indo-Tibetan translation-literature, which uses a great many set patterns and phrases to translate Sanskrit" (Verhagen, 1994, p. 16).

3.1 The Mahavyutpatti and Madhyavyutpatti

The *Mahavyutpatti* is a systematic Sanskrit-Tibetan dictionary giving Tibetan equivalents of Sanskrit words and phrases and contains 9,565 entries organized into 283 semantic categories, ranging from "names of the Buddha" to "names of diseases" (Verhagen, 1994, p. 17). It consists of three volumes: one on the Hinayana, one on the Mahayana, and one of indexes (Vitali, 1990, p. 19).

The committee of Indian panditas and Tibetan lotsawas worked to codify terminology for use by all official translators. Three acclaimed lotsawas of that period were known to have worked on this project: Kawa Paltseg, Chogro Lui Gyeltsen and

Nanam Yeshe De (Vitali, 1990, p. 19). Vitali writes:

Using this new lexical standard, the mistakes and misinterpretations of the older translations were corrected, and omissions were restored. Overtranslated works were reduced, and previously untranslated works were put into Tibetan. ... When the translations were completed, they were proclaimed definitive and no further revisions permitted (Vitali, 1990, p. 19).

The *Madhyavyutpatti* is a commentary on 413 of the entries in the *Mahavyutpatti*, giving the Sanskrit term and its Tibetan equivalent, as well as commentary and explanation on the translations chosen for that term. In the opening paragraphs of the *Madhyavyutpatti*, the Indian scholars and Tibetan lotsawas are named who had translated works into Tibetan and who had created the lexicon of words they had used (Snellgrove, 2004, p. 442). Kapstein considers this text “an unparalleled source for Tibetan thinking about language and translation during the early medieval period that would remain influential a millennium after its composition” (2003, p. 755).

The introduction to the *Madhyavyutpatti* tells of an assembly that was convened by king Tride Songtsen to address military and other matters, after which he commanded that both a lexicon of terms and a catalogue of the Tibetan translations be made, stating that previously, the translators had “coined many new terms of religious language that were unfamiliar in Tibetan, among which some accord with neither doctrinal texts nor the conventions of *vyakarana*” (Sanskrit grammatical science). He ordered that “those that it would be inappropriate to leave uncorrected should be corrected” and explanations given, and those that are in “plain language” and require no explanation should be translated “in a literal manner” (Kapstein, 2003, pp. 755-56).

The king revealed a clear awareness of some of the syntactic difficulties of translating Sanskrit into Tibetan and gave detailed instructions on how to accomplish accurate translations:

In translating the Dharma, without departing from the order of the Sanskrit language, translate it into Tibetan in such a way that there is no deviation in the case of relationships between meaning and word. If ease of understanding is brought about by deviating [from the phrase order of the original], whether in a verse there be four lines

or six, translate by reordering the contents of the verse according to what is easy. In the case of prose, until the meaning can be reached, translate by rearranging both word and meaning according to what is easy (Kapstein, 2003, p. 756).

The king also discusses the specific difficulties involved in creating a lexicon for translators, including “issues of synonymity and homonymity, cases in which Sanskrit loan words should be used in preference to Tibetan equivalents or neologisms, the differences between Sanskrit and Tibetan ways of rendering large numbers, and the correct use of prepositional modifications.” He also explains at length how to translate people’s names and other proper names of such things as countries, plants and flowers (*ibid.*).

The king’s decree states clearly that, apart from such methods as those mentioned in the order, “it is not permitted for any persons, on their own, to correct and form neologisms hereafter” and that if there arises such a need, such terms should be “presented to the royal palace in the presence of the lineage holder and a hearing should be requested” (Kaptsein, 2003, p. 757). Only once a new term had been approved in this way could it be added to the lexicon of terminology.

The final item in the set of rules in this document refers to the translation of tantras, which should be practiced (and therefore translated) only by those given permission and oral transmission by a lineage-holder. Such texts are to be kept secret and only explained or shown to those who are considered suitable vessels for these advanced yogic teachings. The king thus declared that “unless permission for translation is given, tantras and mantra expressions are not permitted to be collected and translated” (Snellgrove, 2004, p. 443).

It can be seen from this ancient document that the king not only organized, supported, and gave royal patronage to translators but also set clear and unimpeachable guidelines for translators to follow. Snellgrove notes that while the royal ordinances such as these “had the most positive beneficial effect in ensuring that from this time onward the highest standards of translation work were maintained,” they did not have any apparent “negative inhibiting effect and ‘unofficial’ translations surely continued to be produced away from the court” (2004, p. 443). The lexicon and guidelines created under royal patronage are no doubt two of the main factors responsible for the precision and

accuracy of the translations produced during this period.

3.2 Cataloguing translated works

The committee appointed by the king continued to make new translations and revise old ones based on the new criteria. In addition, catalogues of all existing translations were made, with the first such catalogue created around the same time as the *Mahavyutpatti* and *Madhyavyutpatti*, with many others to follow later. Of the catalogues made during the early diffusion period, only one has survived: the *Lhan-kar(-ma)*, named after the palace where much of the translation work was done. This catalogue was compiled by Kawa Paltseg and Namkhai Nyingpo, two translators active during that period, and contains titles of 736 texts, all of which were translated from Sanskrit except for eight which were from Chinese (Verhagen, 1994, p. 11).

A unique feature of these catalogues was that, besides listing information about the source text, author's name and translator's name, they also contained data on the numbers of words, verses and folio pages in each text (Tsepag, 2005, p. 54). Thus, the one catalogue that has survived is of inestimable value to scholars studying Tibetan Buddhist history. From the catalogue, we know, for example, that the sutras were translated first (Schoening, 1996, p. 113), that there are 73 million words in both the Kangyur and Tengyur (Tsepag, 2005, p. 54), and that a total of 551 Tibetan translators and Indian scholars contributed to translating texts in the early diffusion period (Tsepag, 2005, p. 52).

After the reign of King Tride Songsten, another devout Buddhist king, Ralpachen, followed and he continued his predecessor's policy of official patronage and support of Buddhist translations. He is known to have invited at least 90 Indian panditas to Tibet to assist in translation work (Das, 2006, p. 67-68), and new catalogues were made during his reign, so that the ongoing work of translating Buddhist texts was periodically updated. Tibetans continued to make pilgrimages to India to learn Sanskrit, study in monasteries, and complete translations.

However, the golden age of centralized patronage of Buddhism came to an end when King Ralpachen was assassinated in 838 and his brother, who was opposed to the Dharma, took the throne. During the short but severe reign of King Langdharma (838-

842), Buddhism was entirely suppressed and the translation of Indian Buddhist literature abruptly ended. For the next 150 years, the transmission of Buddhism to Tibetan soil ceased but was kept alive by a small number of monks in far-flung regions. Towards the end of the 10th century Buddhism began to reappear, first in eastern and western Tibet and later in the central region, and translation activities resumed, often (but not always) between an Indian pandita and a Tibetan lotsawa (Verhagen 46).

IV. The “later diffusion”: The era of tantric translations

After the period of Tibet’s “dark ages”—about which very little is known—were over and Buddhism gradually resurfaced, Tibet entered a new era of cultural efflorescence often referred to as a renaissance. Although the royal dynasty centered in the Yarlung Valley was no more, regional kings and local lords filled the power vacuum left in their absence, and monasteries began to be built on a grand scale. As Davidson writes, from the late 10th to the 12th centuries, “Tibetans longed for all things knowable in the wide world, as if the intellectual famine of the previous era required satiation,” and they “devoured all forms of knowledge” in every discipline in India and Central Asia (2005, p. 155). Translators again began to make the perilous journey to India in search of teachings.

Having already translated most of the Tripitaka, as well as some shastras (commentaries) and tantras in the early period, this era was focused upon learning, practicing, and translating the many tantric systems of Indian Buddhism, which had long fascinated the Tibetans. The translation of this literature brought Tibetans new knowledge that helped them to recreate their society, as Davidson’s (2005) seminal study of this period shows. By the 11th century, he writes, all regions of Tibet “were awash with masters helping translate texts on literature, art, medicine, hippology, polity, prosody, astrology, and a variety of other topics,” but tantrism remained at the center of this process (Davidson, 2005, p. 155).

4.1 The 11th and 12th centuries

Unlike in the early diffusion period, when translators were organized and supported by a central authority, in the later diffusion (Tib. *phyi dar*) they had to rely on the patronage of local kings, princes or other powerful figures. One of the most influential royal personages was King Lha Lama Yeshe O, who in 1025 sent 21 monks to India to find panditas and teachings to bring back to Tibet. Of these, 19 of the monks died of heat, fever, snake bite or other causes. Only Rinchen Zangpo (957-1055), the first great translator of the later diffusion, and his companion Legpai Sherab, survived (Das, 2006, p. 71). Rinchen Zangpo, known in Tibetan as a *lochen*, or “great translator,” studied with 75 Indian panditas and is credited with having translated 174 texts during his lifetime (Tsepak, 1984, p. 36).

The 11th century was a period of intense translation activity, and many of Tibet’s most famous translators were active then, such as Marpa Chökyi Lodro, Ngog Loden Sherab, Ra Lotsawa⁵, Drokmi Lotsawa and Gö Lotsawa Khukpa Lheytsé. Being the bearers of the esoteric tantric teachings back to their homeland, many of this period’s translators were acclaimed as yogic masters of various traditions and lineages. Although the lotsawas’ prestige in Tibetan society was at its height, they often had to vie for funding and support from local kings and princes. Tibetans still admire the translators of this period, considering them to be “divinely inspired and uniquely qualified, depicting their achievement with the iconography of a two-headed cuckoo, a bird said to know perfectly both the source and the target languages” (Davidson, 2005, p. 118).

Like the translators of the early diffusion period, these men⁶ spent considerable time studying in Nepal, Kashmir and other parts of India. And like their predecessors, the physical difficulties of their journeys were hazardous. The majority of the translators who went to India in this period “probably died there, far from home, with one or another of India’s extraordinary diseases” such as malaria, hepatitis, cholera or encephalitis. Other dangers included bandits and robbers, imprisonment, flood, fire and famine, as well as the difficulties of acclimating to India’s climate, entirely different

⁵ In *The Blue Annals* it is stated that “among the Tibetan translations there are no translated texts more satisfactory” than Ra Lotsawa’s (Roerich, 1976, p. 376).

⁶ No female lotsawas in Tibetan history have yet been located.

from Tibet's. All of these factors contributed to the "extraordinary mortality rate of aspiring translators" (Davidson, 2005, p. 124).

If they did not die en route or while there, they began their studies in both Sanskrit language and Buddhism. Their training was carried out either in one of the great monasteries of the day, such as Nalanda or Vikramasila, where they studied together with the monks, or it was with individual teachers with whom they practiced intensively. Some of the translation work was done while they were still with panditas in India, but other work was done in Nepal or back in Tibet.

Davidson writes that "we have no idea of the actual proportion of translations done in Kashmir, India, or Nepal, as opposed to Tibet, but it is clear that the majority of the translations were not finalized south of the Himalayas, for the conditions in India continued to worsen for Buddhist monks as the eleventh century progressed." Once they arrived home, these translators "seldom had the wealthy facilities available to royal dynastic translators" and most of them had access to little more than "the minimal supplies of ink and paper and a manuscript copy of the *Mahavyutpati*" (Davidson, 2005, p. 127).

Other problems these translators had were textual, "and anyone studying late Buddhist manuscript traditions can only stand in amazement at the successes of these Tibetan scholars in the face of the chaos of an Indian manuscript" (Davidson, 2005, p. 127). One such problem was the fact that the script used by Indian scribes had changed from the script that had been learned by the early Tibetan translators. In addition, the "carelessness and ineptitude" of many Indian scribes, whose work was riddled with mistakes of various kinds, caused further difficulties (Davidson, 2005, p. 128).

4.2 The 13th-17th centuries

Scholars often regard the 13th century as the end of the transmission of Indian literary culture to Tibet, but Shastri states that there is no evidence "to prove that any particular period marks the end of literary transmission," and that such activities did continue from the 14th-17th centuries, though they were "not very energetic" (Shastri, 2002, p. 130). By the 13th century, Muslim forces had invaded parts of northern India, destroying monasteries and making travels to that land even more hazardous. Correspondingly,

panditas who were available to work with lotsawas in Tibet became more scarce, with only 30 Indian panditas known to have visited Tibet between the 14th and 17th centuries (Shastri, 2002, p. 141).

Due to the conditions in India, many of the later translators had to study Sanskrit either in Tibet or in Nepal, and some had no choice but to translate alone. Given this situation, it may be unsurprising that their translations are often not considered to be as faithful and accurate as their predecessors'. As Davidson notes, certain translators in the 13th and 14th centuries "relied entirely on a mechanical word-for-word system," due in part to the decline of the Indian monasteries and the dearth of qualified panditas. This procedure, as Davidson wryly observes, "often rendered their texts as little more than gibberish, and we can only pity their cadre of disciples who were forced to try to make sense of the word salad that resulted in such instances" (2005, p. 127).

By the early 14th century, after more than five centuries of translation work, the "intertwining processes of collation, authentication and canonization" of translated texts were underway, with much of the work undertaken by Buton Rinpoche at Shalu monastery (Schaeffer, 2009, p. 12). Buton Rinpoche is well known in Tibetan history for his writings and for his textual scholarship, which included "making new translations, revising or editing translated works, and filling in gaps in faulty texts" (Schaeffer, 2009, p. 16). This collection of texts became known as the Shalu (or Zhalu) edition of the Tibetan canon and was produced in 1335 (Tsepag, 2005, p. 58). After this version, many others were made at different periods and in different locations, with new translations being constantly added and old translations revised.

Little is known about the lotsawas in Tibet after the 14th and 15th centuries, when the glory days of transmission and translation were virtually at an end. One only finds occasional references to them in studies by Tibetologists, such as Schaeffer's illuminating work, *The Culture of the Book in Tibet*. Schaeffer discusses the life of Shalu Lotsawa (1441-1527), whom he considers the greatest translator since the famed translators of the golden era (2009, p. 52). According to Shalu Lotsawa's biography, he "traveled extensively as an itinerant translator" between the ages of 35 and 50 and was said to have remarked that the work of translation was "still a valued profession" in the early 16th century (Schaeffer, 2009, p. 52).⁷

⁷ Shalu Lotsawa's biography mentions a visit he paid to the court of a local ruler where he orally

According to Taranatha's *Religious History of India*, written in 1608, by that time "there were few Tantric texts that had not been translated" but many shastras that had yet to be translated (Shastri, 2002, p. 138). Taranatha (Tib. Kunga Nyingpo, 1575-1634) himself translated some 20 titles with Indian panditas, including texts on Indian grammar and literature (Shastri, 2002, pp. 137-41). The last translator listed in the religious chronicles of Tibet was one Darpa Lotsawa, who was ordered by the Fifth Dalai Lama to translate an Indian grammar text and its commentary, which the lotsawa did in the Potala Palace with the help of two Indian panditas. Altogether, Shastri lists 58 translated works that were the result of collaboration between panditas and lotsawas in Tibet from the 14th-17th centuries.

During the entire span of the later diffusion (c. 958-1717), some 3,000 texts had been translated by a mere 170 scholars and translators⁸ (Tsepag, 2005, p. 53), making the text-to-translator ratio substantially higher than during the early diffusion. By the end of this more than 700-year period, the transfer of all possible knowledge of Indian Buddhism was complete and Tibetans were producing large quantities of works in their own language. The result of centuries of pilgrimages, sacrifice, study, meditation, scholarship and translation became the religious form known today as Tibetan Buddhism.

V. Influence and (dis)continuity: Today's translators

Despite the 150-year gap between the translators of the early and later periods, the influence of the former on the latter was both substantial and enduring. Revered as cultural heroes and religious icons, the early diffusion translators were seen as the

translated a Sanskrit text into Tibetan, "instantaneously while reading it, to the amazement of the ruler and his attendant monks" (Schaeffer, 2009, p. 52), a rare mention of what today we would term "sight interpreting."

⁸ According to Shastri, 157 lotsawa are listed for the later diffusion period in the religious chronicles of Tibet (2002, p. 140). See also footnote 2. At the 2009 Khyentse Foundation conference, it was stated that 44% of the Kangyur and Tengyur had been translated in the early diffusion period. Based on the conference's figure of 5,262 total texts, 2,315 texts were translated during the early diffusion period and 2,947 during the later diffusion period (Khyentse, 2009, p. 33).

standard-bearers of religious translation. This attitude is exemplified in the often-quoted verse written by 11th-century translator Ngog Lotsawa Loden Sherab:

Vairotsana's knowledge is equal to the sky,
Ka and Chok are like the sun and the moon, and
Rinchen Zangpo is like a star at dawn.
Before them I am like a butterfly.⁹ (Palmo, 2004, p. vii)

The influence of the early translators could still be seen as late as the 15th century, when Shalu Lotsawa visited the Translators' Hall at Samye Monastery to venerate the translators of old. This visit inspired him to "translate what had not yet been translated, to modernize the orthography of old translations, [and] to improve bad translations" (Schaeffer, 2009, p. 47). Shalu Lotsawa is said to have declared: "I came to understand translation by following the methods of the translators of old" (Schaeffer, 2009, p. 53).

Due to the early translators' high visibility and status in Tibetan society, such influence is not remarkable. As discussed above, the *Mahavyutpatti* and, to a lesser extent, the *Madhyavyutpatti*, continued to be used by translators in the later diffusion. Teamwork, another key element in the success of the early translators, also continued throughout most of the later period until the conditions in India made this impossible.

What is perhaps of greater interest to the translation scholar is exactly how, if at all, the translators of Tibet's distant past have influenced translation practices today. Such continuity, in Pym's terms, is one of the reasons for studying translation history, since "greater knowledge of the past can give us wider frames for assessing the future" (1998, p. 16). Three main factors related to the success of the Tibetan lotsawas have been identified which impact on the translators, and translations, of today: centralization and patronage; the use of teamwork; and the standardization of terminology.

⁹ Vairotsana is an alternate spelling for Vairochana. Ka and Chok refer to Kawa Paltseg and Chogro Lui Gyeltsen, two of the early translators installed at Samye to translate the Tripitaka. In other versions of this poem, "butterfly" is translated as "firefly," which perhaps better reflects the idea of comparison.

5.1 Centralization and patronage

Tibetan Buddhism was introduced to the West in the 1960s and 1970s, when only a small handful of translations were available in English or other Western languages. Now, it is one of the fastest-growing forms of Buddhism outside of Asia, and the number of translations of Tibetan Buddhist texts has grown exponentially. Translations of Tibetan Buddhism into English have been, by and large, characterized by the individual, ad hoc basis on which they were produced, as well as by a lack of uniformity in both style and language. As scholar and translator Jeffrey Hopkins noted at a recent conference, modern translators of Tibetan Buddhism are often “mavericks” who work alone, “serving as monarchs in our own work, and deciding what and how to translate” (Khyentse, 2009, p. 75).

Due to the absence of centralized support or patronage in the modern world, neither the methods nor the terminology used by today’s translators have been standardized. This is perhaps one reason for the laments of some Tibetan lamas on the quality of translations and translators in the modern age, as they compare them to the lotsawas of their cultural past. As one Tibetan scholar declared: “These days we come across translators who cannot speak a correct sentence in Tibetan translate volumes from Tibetan into English. Had they consulted or sought the assistance of some Tibetan-speaking scholars as the early Tibetan *lo-tsa-wa* had done with their Indian counterparts,” their works would have been of much better quality (Tsering, 2001, p. 208).

Similarly, Tarthang Tulku concluded a chapter on the difficulties of translating Buddhism by stating that “the terminology and understanding of translators at present is not adequate to convey certain meanings of the Dharma” (Tulku, 2005, p. 89). He writes that the model of Vairochana should be followed, “who learned through dedicated study with many masters how to judge the significance of what the texts presented.” Today’s translators, he adds, “follow a different model” in which they each “cultivate their own style and understanding” (Tulku, 2005, p. 87).

Modern translators of Tibetan Buddhism may be grouped into three broad categories: academics, monks and nuns, and lay Buddhist practitioners. Most academics and lay practitioners live in the West, while the monks and nuns who translate are often either

itinerant or live in India, and may be either Westerners or Tibetans. Each group arrives at translation with their own set of skills, motivations, and training, although very few (if any) have trained in translation as a discipline. Academics who translate Buddhist texts are most often scholars in the field of Tibetan studies or Buddhist studies, not in translation, and members of the other two groups either learn how to translate as part of their Tibetan language studies, or learn on their own through practice.

Neither is there homogeneity in regard to whether these individuals are practitioners of Buddhism. Academic scholars, particularly in the earliest days of transmission to the West, have often maintained a belief that scholarship and religious practice cannot coexist, and their translations can be dry, overly annotated and difficult to comprehend. Ordained and laypeople, by contrast, are always devoted practitioners, as the translators of old were, and their translations reflect this in myriad ways.

Thus, with no centralized body to train and qualify translators, assess translations, sponsor translators, and oversee the entire process, a profusion of often widely diverse translation techniques and approaches have resulted. Further, as there is no central catalog of existing translations, there have been instances of multiple translations of the same text while the vast majority of works remain untranslated. The lack of patronage in the form of financial support is an area in which the discontinuity between past and present is keenly felt. Unlike Tibet's lotsawas, today's translators have few resources at their disposal and must often vie for funding from a small pool of private foundations or sponsors.

5.2 Teamwork and translation committees: Two models of collaboration

As discussed above, one of the main factors for the accuracy and high quality of the translations produced in Tibet was the norm of working with an Indian pandita who explained the meaning of the text to the lotsawa. As the number of available panditas in Tibet dwindled during the end of the later diffusion, the quality of the translations witnessed a corresponding decline. In the West, the practice of working in teams has been slow to take root, due in part, perhaps, to the strong sense of individualism prevalent in countries like the US. Another obvious factor is the shortage of qualified Tibetan scholars in Western countries with whom translators can collaborate.

At a conference on Buddhist translation held in 1990, a number of participants discussed the importance of teamwork, which at that time was still rare, with one speaker stating that “a satisfactory translation of a classical Tibetan text into any other language, particularly into English” must be done by team work. The main reason for this necessity, he said, is that a traditional monastic education is necessary in order to understand fully and correctly interpret the meaning of Tibetan texts (Chimpa, 2001, p. 14). Another participant noted that “co-operation does not reduce the status of the translator, nor does it diminish his role,” and that teamwork is especially necessary for translating Buddhist philosophical and tantric texts (Tulku, 2001, p. 212).

The convener of the conference observed that there was (in 1990) an emerging tendency for translators to work in collaboration with Tibetan scholars, which he saw as a positive development (Doboom, 2001, p. 6-7). Such collaborations between Western translators and Tibetan scholars is an area of research that merits further attention. As Tibetan lamas in the West become more fluent in the language of their adopted countries and better able to communicate with local translators, the number of teams based on the traditional pandita-lotsawa model will most likely increase.

Another model influenced by traditional translation practices is that of translation committees, which normally consist of both Western translators and Tibetan scholars. The first such committee was the Nalanda Translation Committee, established in the US in 1975 by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. In the committee’s 1982 translated biography of Marpa Lotsawa, the method they used is described: A core group of English-speaking translators would prepare the first draft, which was then carefully reviewed by a Tibetan lama who was well versed in both English and Tibetan Buddhism. The second working draft would then be presented to Chogyam Trungpa, and together with him they would “repeat the meticulous reading of the entire text” which would invariably spark “a delightful feast of language and meaning.” The text was then reworked repeatedly to revise and polish the English, research continued, and “many portions of the translations” were often scrutinized again by Chogyam Trungpa (Nalanda, 1982, p. ix-x).

After Chogyam Trungpa’s death in 1986, the committee continued its work and has published a large number of books on Tibetan Buddhism, liturgical manuals, practice materials, and works concerning their particular Shambhala lineage. A handful of other

translation committees have been established in the US and elsewhere, often associated with a particular Tibetan Buddhist lineage, center or lama. Examples include the Dharmachakra Translation Committee founded in 2006 (based in Nepal), the Light of Berotsana Translation Group established in 1999 (based in the US), and the Padmakara Translation Group founded in 1987, in Dordogne, France. Research on translation approaches, methods of collaboration, difficulties, training and other issues related to the work of Buddhist translation committees has yet to be carried out.

5.3 Terminology and language standardization

It has been frequently observed that when the early Tibetan translators were deciding upon terminology for the thousands of technical terms used in Indian Buddhist literature, they were working in a cultural environment in which there was no preexisting philosophical tradition with its own linguistic lexicon of terms to draw upon. As Doboom writes, “the remarkable accuracy of the Tibetan translations of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit” may be due partly to the fact that in the 8th and 9th centuries, “Tibet hardly had any well-developed or well-defined intellectual tradition of its own” and the new Buddhist concepts were introduced into “what was virtually an intellectual vacuum” (2001, p. 5).

With no existing lexicon of philosophical terms, the Tibetans either invented new words based upon the lexical components of the Sanskrit equivalent, or they created loan words that were Tibetanized transliterations of Sanskrit, though the latter are less common than the former. In contrast, the West’s encounter with Buddhism has been likened more frequently to that of China, where the existing Taoist and Confucianist traditions exerted great influence on the linguistic choices made by the early translators there.

In the West, the struggle over how to translate Buddhist technical terms into English has been an ongoing one, beginning with the Christian missionaries who first attempted to translate Buddhism in India’s colonial period. Translators such as H. Kern—who disastrously translated the important concept of *nirvana* as “death” in his 1884 translation of the Lotus Sutra—used a great many Christian concepts, values and terminology in their translations (Doboom, 2001, p. 2).

Both Christianity and the conceptual frame of reference provided by Western psychology have had considerable influence over how texts have been translated in the West, although in recent years there has been a gradual move away from such strategies. At an important conference of Tibetan Buddhist translators in 2009, not only how to translate but, more importantly, how to standardize terminology was a frequent item of discussion, and may be seen as one of the greatest challenges facing translators today. Because there is no central body to determine such issues, and because each translator or translation committee often has their own set of terminology, the resultant proliferation of different translations for the same word can cause great confusion to students of Tibetan Buddhism.

Although the *Mahavyutpatti* was, in fact, translated into English in the 19th century by Tibetologist Alexander Csoma de Koros, with the most recent edition produced in 1984, this work has not proved to be a unifying lexicographical work for modern translators, for reasons which have not yet been fully investigated. This early dictionary is still in use today, but its main use is to discover the Sanskrit equivalents for Tibetan terms and to recreate Sanskrit texts whose originals have been lost. There have been other attempts at making a modern *Mahavyutpatti*, such as the *Mahavyutpatti Sanskrit-Tibetan-English Glossary* produced by Tony Duff in CD-ROM format, but how widely used and accepted his glossary becomes is yet to be seen.

The issue of standardizing terminology was also a frequent item of discussion at the 1990 conference on Buddhist translation. Rigzin's paper on this topic discusses the need for a dictionary for translators with agreed-upon terms, and the author chastises translators who make their own choice of translation "for no other reason than to be different from everyone else" (2001, p. 143). Translators of Buddhist texts must exercise caution and restraint in choosing the right word, he urges, as their lack of understanding of the complexities of lexical items can cause many mistakes. Sanskrit terms often have many meanings, he writes, such as the word "mudra" which has 139 different symbolic meanings in one tantric text alone, and even the word "Buddha" has 79 synonyms listed in the *Mahavyutpatti*, all of which are different epithets to apply to the Buddha but with varying meanings (Rigzin, 2001, p. 145-146).

Rigzin suggests that if the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism were to first compile their own lexicons of terminology unique to them, and if these could then be

gradually incorporated into a grand Tibetan-English version of the *Mahavyutpatti*, it could have a beneficial influence. Such a massive project must, however, be coordinated by a central authority that does not yet exist. Other scholars contend that terminology used by Westerners who translate Buddhism will never be codified as it was in Tibet. Cabezon, for example, believes that the “West’s philosophical complexity vitiates against any attempts at standardizing Buddhist terminology” and that, due to the lack of patronage or financial support that would encourage the creation of a standardized terminology, such an endeavor is “practically impossible” (2001, p. 69).

At the 2009 Khyentse Foundation conference, no consensus was reached on how to standardize terminology. It was noted that there was, in fact, no agreement on even the most basic and commonly-used terms in Tibetan Buddhism. However, the creation of a glossary (or glossaries) was one of the goals that the participants agreed to pursue, together with the compilation of a list of existing translations (Khyentse, 2009, p. 68). In addition, it was agreed that translations should be (ideally) produced in teams involving target-language speakers and Tibetan scholars (Khyentse, 2009, p. 47).

The influence of Tibet’s early translators could clearly be seen at this landmark conference, in which speakers repeatedly made reference to the lotsawas of the past and their methods. The conference concluded with pledges from different translation groups and individuals to translate priority texts. It was estimated that another 25 years of work would be required to “translate and make accessible all of the Kangyur and many volumes of the Tengyur” and 100 years “to translate and make universally accessible the Buddhist literary heritage” (Khyentse, 2009, p. ii).

VI. Conclusion: Suggestions for further research

In this paper, I have attempted to lay the groundwork necessary for further research to be carried out into the translation of Tibetan Buddhism, in both an historical and modern context. By way of conclusion, I offer a number of suggestions that scholars may consider taking up, divided into two categories: research into Tibet’s historical translation activity, and research on current practices of Tibetan Buddhist translation.

6.1 Historical research

In *Translators Through History*, Delisle and Woodsworth outline the scope of research in translation history:

Constructing a history of translation means bringing to light the complex network of cultural exchanges between people, cultures and civilizations down through the ages. It means drawing a portrait of these import-export workers and attempting to unravel their deep-rooted reasons for translating one particular work instead of another. It means finding out why their sponsors...asked them to translate a given work. It means taking into account what the translators themselves have written about their work, its difficulties and constraints (1995, p. xv).

Thus, the first task for scholars working on Tibet's translation history is to fill in the many lacunae in existing research, such as why the translators chose the texts that they did, how (and why) their patrons supported them, the social causes of their actions, and many other issues. In addition, all available biographies should be translated and studied in order to better understand these individuals' lives.

Secondly, comparative studies of different translations should be carried out, both between the same Tibetan translations of individual texts and between translations of the same text made by the Tibetans and others, such as the Chinese, who translated hundreds of the same sutras as the Tibetans. Such studies would reveal useful data about the translators' varying cultural and temporal influences, their translation strategies and their working methods.

Thirdly, further studies should be made of precisely how the Tibetan translators used the *Mahavyutpatti* and *Madhyavyutpatti*. How much did they follow, or depart from, the king's guidelines in the latter, and how much did they adhere to, or depart from, the lexicon made by the early translators? Certain scholars have suggested that the Tibetan translations are not as uniformly accurate as is often contended (e.g. Wedemeyer, 2006). A detailed study of this would be a great contribution to our understanding of these ancient documents and translation techniques.

6.2 Contemporary research

As discussed above, much more research is needed on the present situation of how translations of Tibetan Buddhism into English and other languages are made, who is doing them, their training (or lack thereof), and how teamwork and translation committees function. In addition, an area not mentioned thus far in this paper is that of interpreting in a Tibetan Buddhist context. Interpreters for Tibetan lamas have a very unique set of challenges and skills, and studies of this unexplored aspect of interpreting research should be carried out before the older generation of Tibetan lamas, many of whom still rely on interpreters, passes away..

Another potential area of research is the work being carried out in India to back-translate Tibetan texts into Sanskrit. In *Charting the Future of Translation History*, Santoyo writes: “In spite of their cultural significance, no history of translation has taken into consideration the role of translated texts as *survivors* of lost originals” (2006, p. 28). With most of the original Sanskrit texts that were translated into Tibetan lost, how can their reconstruction into Sanskrit provide useful data for translation scholars?

Finally, lexicographical studies should be carried out to determine, firstly, why the *Mahavyutpatti* translated into English in the 19th century by Alexander Csoma de Koros has not been adopted by modern-day translators, as the creation of the many new lexicons indicates. More importantly, this work could be used as the basis of a study into how the terminology of Tibetan Buddhism in Western languages has changed over time, and the important role that translators have played in shaping the language used in disseminating this religion.

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