

## **What can we learn from philology? Some methodological remarks**

(Ernst Steinkellner: Keynote speech, Beijing 2008 Conference of Tibetan Studies, October 14, 2008; Chinese translation, p.7. To be published eventually, if at all, in the Proceedings of this conference.)

Dear colleagues and friends,

I consider it a great honour to have been asked by the convenors of this meeting to take part in the opening ceremony in my function as Adjunct Professor of CTCRC and am truly grateful for this opportunity.

As some among you know, I am a philologist by profession. This means I study texts or written documents. Since one should not speak, as a rule, about what one does not know, I will only offer you some methodological remarks on philology. But beyond this, I would also like to present you some thoughts, as a human being, about what we can learn from philology, about what this discipline can offer to all of us in addition to its specialized results.

In the last decades, scholarship has broadened the conceptual scope of the term “text” to include anything that carries information (*hsin si*). For my purpose today, however, I would like to use the term in its more limited, traditional sense: information carried by the fixing instrument of writing with the purpose of transmitting this information to other people's minds, or the purpose of making it durable. This kind of information as “text” implies – in my opinion – that the author, at least in most cases, created it with the intention of it being understood by another person. His text is therefore intentional and conscious communication. In comparison to other non-linguistic forms of communication – e.g. gestures and other signs, or actions – a text, as the main carrier of information in a language community, has the advantage of preserving its contents over time, as well as through natural and social vicissitudes. This means that such information may still exist even after the disappearance of its language community, and that it may also be available to other language communities, contemporaneous or future.

The fact that texts are created with the intention to communicate, i.e. their author wishes someone else to understand what he has to say, allows us to identify “text” – because of its durability – as one of the most important means of establishing relationships between individuals, social groups and whole societies. I even dare to say of connecting humankind as such. A text can be considered a nucleus of an organisational kind, in the sense that it is, usually, an instrument building and maintaining social stability, and thus it helps create peace, harmony, and ensuing happiness.

Within this frame of reference, the study of texts, i.e. philology, can thus be considered an effort in exercising and training the capacity of understanding this type of communicated information. All societies depend on understanding information for their existence. And all societies have always depended on specialized people employed for this task: journalists, interpreters, translators, philologists, even spies. The greater the distance of a text in terms of time, place, language, and culture, the greater the effort needed to understand it. This is the main reason I see the work of the philologist as a useful and indispensable task, particularly in our modern societies. For, to ever ongoing efforts towards the mutual understanding of information about social and cultural issues, as well as about the economic and other necessities of life, violence and disastrous antagonism are usually the more than evident alternatives.



An excellent example of the benefits and necessity of this kind of work is the study of one of the most valuable cultural treasures of Asia: the original Sanskrit manuscripts, mostly written on palm-leaves (*ta la'i lo ma*), some on birch bark, some on paper, that are still extant in different collections in the Tibetan Autonomous Region. The concrete items themselves are classified in accordance with Chinese law as "cultural objects" (*wen-wu*). With regard to their “contents” (*nei-rong*), the "texts", because they are written in Sanskrit, are not obviously a subject of Tibetan Studies. But because of their history they nevertheless form a part of the Tibetan culture, and therefore must be considered within this academic framework as well. Their importance, however, reaches far beyond the sphere of tibetological interests. Many of these manuscripts contain Indian texts which were no longer transmitted in India after the decline of Buddhism in its homeland but preserved in the monastic collections of Tibet, and that have been known until today only in their Tibetan or Chinese translations.

It is necessary, therefore, first of all to clearly distinguish between the manuscripts as "cultural objects" and their contents as "texts". As "cultural objects" they must be conserved and protected in their material form. But their contents as "texts" have to be made available to scholarly work and study: they have to be studied and edited and published. For, if information is not channelled into a process of understanding, it is nothing, it is dead and meaningless.

For many years now, many have been trying to make the responsible institutions in Beijing and Lhasa aware of the need – in addition to taking care of these treasures – of also making them available to scholarship in general. This has been also considered repeatedly in this country and steps have already been taken, as for example by the CTRC and Beijing University. But the task is enormous. I am therefore convinced that its sheer volume requires international co-operation. Such a co-operation would not only bring the best available modern standards in scholarly and technological “know-how” to the work, but would also have the lasting effect that in learning by doing, Chinese and Tibetan scholars who internationally co-operate would acquire the necessary methodological skills for themselves.

There is, perhaps, no need to stress the enormous value of these texts in the history of pre-modern ideas, but their value can hardly be exaggerated also with regard to those Asian societies whose populations are still predominantly Buddhist. A decision by the authorities responsible for these cultural documents, both nationally in China and regionally in the T.A.R., to make them available for scholarly work in a well-planned and organised way would most fittingly attest to China's intention of preserving this region's cultural heritage. It would also be a clear sign of China's openness for co-operation, thereby strengthening the ties with international scholarship.



One major objection against the usefulness, even against the very possibility of understanding other peoples' thinking has been raised in recent years in connection with the so-called hermeneutic circle, a circle assumed to exist in all interpretations and explanations of another's ideas and words. This circle means that on the background of our own experiences and conceptions, the entire mental heritage we hold within us when we start to interpret

statements of others, we are only capable of understanding so much of another's statements as we have already known ourselves before. I believe, however, that it is possible to break this circle methodically, and I also think that the claim of its being indissoluble is unproductive, comes to nothing, and in the end, is even dangerous.

Of course, we have to accept that this circle is initially unavoidable. Indeed, when making the first move towards understanding what another person has stated, we need a firm starting-point. But such quite ordinary facts do not force us to accept the maxim that we can only understand what we already know. Such a maxim is simply counterintuitive. Rather, this initial circle can and must be broken in a quite simple and straightforward methodical way: Starting with a preliminary comprehension of the meaning of a word or statement, in the first step of inquiry we place all available documents in a coherent order, one after the other and in relation to one another. This process enriches and improves our initial comprehension, which is continuously improved by each further document. The movement of understanding what we read can be compared to the progress of moving along an inverted conical spiral. We begin at the cone's point as the base upon which it stands. As we broaden our understanding from document to document, we move to ever higher levels of the spiral, each with more content. Each higher level replaces the contents of the lower spiral-circles with new contents that are not totally different, but better because they have been enlarged. We end our movement when no further documents are available, and summarize our comprehension with a hypothetical interpretation. Should more documents become available, later followers can continue this movement. But in any case, our understanding has already moved a long way from our preliminary comprehension. And there is also an important methodological aspect to be noted: this path can be followed and examined at any time by other researchers.

Yet we must deny the validity of the objection against the possibility of understanding other people's minds not only because we know we can break this circle, but even more so on the grounds of social ethics. If we do not assume that linguistic signals originating in others have meaning that is of possible use to us, or at least of interest, we have stopped using our capacity of understanding such signals, a capacity that corresponds to our natural evolutionary state as social beings. It is, in fact, only on the basis of the ability to understand that we are able to act rationally and responsibly, and are able to contribute to the survival of our world. Otherwise, the most important and socially indispensable human gift, language, would be

futile. To deny the ability to understand is, therefore, fundamentally unethical, and in the end would reduce human activities to following only instinctual propensities and desires.

Understanding others, even if in the best possible ways, is however only a necessary condition for the achievement of peace, harmony, and happiness among people and peoples. It alone is not also a sufficient condition. To attain this higher social power, understanding must be accompanied by an attitude of tolerance. Not “false tolerance”, however, but “true tolerance”.

With the expression “false tolerance”, I mean the patient endurance we often display when we believe another’s opinion to be too inadequate or even too stupid to be taken seriously; or when we believe we are unable to stop or change such stupidity, and therefore simply let it be.

“True tolerance”, on the other hand, is our acceptance that another’s opinion has value for him, and our willingness to understand why this is so. Of course, this sort of tolerance is only possible to the extent that the other person or people also pursue the ideal of peace and harmony. And indeed, this is the usual and natural case. For, hardly anyone would intentionally strive for a life full of turmoil and dispute.

On a global scale I dare to say that the attitude of tolerance on the fundament of mutual understanding, supported by common interests of economic success as based on the acknowledgment of the need for mutual benefits, can be a solid instrument for establishing peace and harmony between strangers, individuals and societies alike. The same holds true for the great and powerful societies of the world within their own territory.

Many societies, great and small, have various problems with parts of their population, be they classified as mountain or forest tribes, regional minorities, or even nationalities. To ally them to the common goal of peace and harmony, one has to first correctly understand their thinking and motivation. And this is only possible by knowing their background, the history of their ideas. We have to recognize their specific values, cultural traditions and heritage as valuable for them, even if we don't consider the same as valuable for us. Thus, the protection of their values and heritage is always an easily understood sign of true tolerance and respect.

Much emphasis has recently been placed in the academic world on the so-called leading sciences such as biology or genetics. Important as these life-sciences may be for the survival

of humankind, we tend to underestimate the implicit dangers in the yet unknown results of their progress. "Understanding others", however, is an art not only at the foundation of many fields in the Humanities, but is also an art that certainly will contribute significantly, if correctly applied, to peace and harmony. Like every art, it can, of course, also serve evil. But the common application of reason should protect us from this.

The tools for understanding others, have been developed and refined by philology over centuries as a cultural technique, and through its traditional methods philology is extraordinarily equipped for the task of educating our world in "intercultural competence".

What is needed, therefore, is our efforts to unveil these qualities of philology as a new "leading discipline" comparable to the "leading sciences". I believe that in the old and new great societies of our world, be they Chinese or European, Indian or American, societies who presently bear most of the responsibility for peace, harmony and the happiness of all, the preservation, encouragement, and promotion of efforts to understand texts in the narrower or wider sense is absolutely necessary. These efforts, the very heart of philology, can be a model of orientation in social life that has no alternative. It is my, admittedly personal, conviction that only a hermeneutical dialogue between different world-views, religions, and goals of happiness will successfully contribute to the peaceful formation of the future global community.

## 关于文献学及其方法

(2008年10月14日在北京藏学会议的发言)

同事们，朋友们：

作为中国藏学研究所的兼职教授，我为能够受邀参加这次会议的开幕式而感到特别荣幸。让我对会议的组织者表示衷心的感谢。

在座者都大概知道我是一名文献学专家，从事文本和“文献”的研究是我的专业。通常，知之为知之，不知为不知。所以，我只能就文献研究的方法论谈几点看法。同时，作为人类社会的一员，我也想借此机会，谈谈我们究竟能从“文献学”中学到什么，以及这门学科除了提供给我们具体的研究成果外，还能赋予人们什么样的非专业性知识？

在过去几十年间，学者们对“文本”这一概念的理解有所拓展，开始认识到凡是信息的载体都是“文本”。不过，今天我在这儿想讲的是“文本”这个词的更为传统和更为狭窄的含义：即，“文本”就是一种特定的工具，它的作用在于通过某种特定书写，有目的地将信息传达给他人或者使信息能够很好地留存于世间。这就是说，

至少在多数情况下，“文本”作者创作是为了让人能够理解它，是有目的和有意识的交流。与其他非语言交流做一个对照，

比如通过手势等进行交流，那么以语言交流作为主要信息传播载体的“文本”颇具优势，它对信息的保存有持久性，而且能抗衡自然和社会的变迁。也就是说，即使使用这种语言的群体消失了，信息仍然可以通过“文本”的形式得以保存。这就是说，“文本”有可能在其他语言群体中同时存在，也有可能在今后的一个社会继续存在。

事实上，“文本”的创作目的在于交流。即“文本”的作者希望他人能够明白他想要阐明的意思。由于“文本”具有持久性这一特点，我们可以大胆地说“文本”是建立人与人、社会群体与社会群体、甚至于社会与社会之间关系的最重要的一种工具。也可以进一步说，“文本”是建立人类一体性的一个不可缺少的工具。我们可以认为，“文本”类似于生物组织中的细胞核，它是建立和维护社会稳定的重要因素，它能够帮助我们创建和平，维护和谐，确保人类幸福。

基于这一点，“文本”的研究，即“文献学”，实际上就是一种提高对交流信息的理解能力的方法。所

有社会群体依赖对信息的理解能力而生存。同时社会历来需要一批专家完成这一使命。他们是记者、翻译、文献学家、甚至间谍。

“文本”距我们当今社会越久远，其语言、文化和发生地等与我们的差异越大，我们为了能够理解这个“文本”所需要付出的努力就会越多。这就是文献学家的工作对我们当今社会是一个不可缺少的工作的原因所在。

其实，只有两个选择，或者是努力互相理解所有的社会文化，经济和人们生活方面的问题，或者是通过暴力以及破坏性的敌对活动等来代替互相的了解。

对此最显著的例子，就是对亚洲文化非常有价值的宝藏之研究，即对原始的梵文写本的研究。这些文本大多书写在贝叶上，部分写在白桦树皮上或写在纸上。这些“文本”在西藏自治区境内的不同地方到今天为止还得以保存。按照中国的法律，这些物品被认定为“文物”。就有关其所包含的“内容”来讲，它不一定属于藏学方面的研究，

因为这些文本都是用梵文写出来的。然而，由于其历史发展，这些“文本”事实上成为藏族文化的一部分，因此，必须列入藏学方面的学术研究。不过，

这一研究的重要性远远超越藏学研究的范围。这是因为，佛教在印度衰落之后，很多“文本”在印度没有得到保存，也就是说，这些印度文本的梵文原件已不复存在。而西藏有关人士一直很重视，并且保护这些用藏文记载的“文本”。在发现以上提到的文本之前只能看到他们的藏文和汉文的翻译版本。因此，首先有必要辨别“文物”和“文本”这两个完全不同的概念。“文物”是一种物质，必须对其进行保护；但是，其文字方面的内容应该提供给学者进行学术研究，然后编辑出版。如果这些“文本”上的信息我们不能获取与理解，那么这些信息将死去，而失去其存在的意义。

这些年来，许多人在北京和拉萨的相关机构做了大量的工作，说服有关人士必须在加强文物保护的同时，容许对这些“文本”的学术研究。在这一点上，中国再三将这一问题列入考虑范畴，并且也有一定程度的起步，比如中国藏学研究中心和北京大学所开展的相关工作。然而，这项工作是繁重的。为此，我倡议开展国际合作研究，这种国际合作不仅能够在学术上和技术上提供最新的研究标准与方法，而且也可以给汉、藏学者提供在实践当中学习的好机会，使他们掌握最基本的研究方法和技能。

暂且不论这些“文本”对于古代思想史的巨大价值，对于那些目前仍生活在佛教意识形态下的亚洲社会民众来讲，这些“文本”的价值也是不可估量的。如果中国和西藏自治区的文化遗产权威机构能够做出决定，让学者对这些“文本”进行有计划、有组织的研究，那么这是在证明中国确实对这一地区的文化遗产进行保护。它也能表明中国在合作研究方面的开放政策，从而加强中国与国际学术界的学术纽带。

然而，多年来，有些人对理解他人思想的可能性提出怀疑，其理论根据就是所谓的“循环说”。根据“循环说”，每当我们想理解他人的一种说法，凭借的只能是现有的知识。这是因为，我们总是凭借独自的经验和概念，以及我们固有的文化传统意识去看他人的叙述。我认为，这种“循环”可以通过一定的方法去攻破。如果认为所谓的“循环说”是不可避免的，其结果就会是一无所获，而且，在一定程度上会导致极其危险的结果。

当然，我们不得不承认这一认识论方面的循环当初是不可避免的。事实上，当我们起步努力去理解他人的陈述时，我们确实需要有一个固定的起点。不过这并不强制我们绝对地去接收“知我所知”



这一格言。因为这样的格言是违反直觉的。因而，这样的学说我们是可而且必须去攻克的，采用的方法很简单也非常直接。即首先根据对一个词的初步的理解去整理所有有关文件，把所有可获取的资料有条理地排列起来，一个接一个，个个相关联。这可以帮助我们改进初期的理解，每当我们发现一个新的资料，我们的初步理解会得到进一步的扩展。这个过程要持续到我们找不到更多的有关资料为止。到这个时候，我们才能够提出一个有假定意义的对他人叙述的理解。以后，如果有人能发现新的资料，他就可以继续去理解这个叙述。但无论如何，我们达到的最后理解离我们初步的理解距离总会比较大。在此，应该强调，此种方法可以在任何时候由其他的研究者去应用和查阅。

我们否定“诠释学”的循环说，不仅因为可以在方法上攻破它，而且也因为我们社会伦理学方面的理由。如果我们不去假定他人的语言符号对我们自己有用，或有意义，那么我们再也不具备对语言符号的理解能力了，等于是说，我们将失去作为社会一员所具备的自然进化成果的一个能力。事实上，只有具备了这种理解能力，我们才有可能理性地对他人负责任地去行动，并在此基础上对世界的延续而做出贡献。否则语言这一最重要的赖以生存的人类社会产物将死去。所以，对理解能力的否定根本就是违反伦理的，最终会削减人类的活动能力，变成只能遵从本能与欲望。

然而，理解他人，即使通过最佳方法去理解他人，也只不过是人类实现人与人、人民与人民之间的和平、和蔼以及幸福的一个必要条件，而不是一个**充分**条件。要实现这一种更高的社会权力，“理解”一定要伴随“**容忍**”。不过不是“虚假的容忍”而是一种“真正的容忍”。

“虚假容忍”在此我指的是当我们认为别人的观点不充分或者太愚昧时，我们就对此不加以重视，或者当我们认为我们不能阻止或改变如此一种愚昧的时候，我们就听之任之。

在另一方面，“真正的容忍”

指的是我们能够接受他人观点，认可其价值，而且愿意去思考为什么他人会有这种观点。当然这种容忍的前提是这个人也希望实现和平与和谐。事实上，这种态度是很常见的而且是一种自然而然的态度，因为任何人都不希望自己生存在一个充满混乱和争议的社会环境里。

这种容忍基于相互的理解，它依赖于以彼此承认对方经济利益为前提的经济成绩。

对今天的世界我敢说，容忍已成为建立本人与他人、个人与个人以及社会与社会之间的和平与和谐的有效工具。而容忍也是大国、强国在自己范围之内实现和平与和谐的一个强有力的工具。

许多社会，无论是大还是小，都存在各自的问题。其中有的问题涉及到生活在山区或林区的部落、生活在一定地区的部族或少数民族。如果想把他们团结在和平与和谐的目的之下，每一方都应该正确地理解对方的想法与动机。只有通过对方背景和思想史的充分理解才可能实现这一目标。我们必须承认他们特定的价值观，文化传统以及文化遗产对他们的认同感的重要性。即使我们不完全认同这些价值，但是，对于**他们的**价值和遗产的保护也就是表明我们真正的容忍和尊重。

在学术界，所谓的领军科学如生物学和遗传学，在近期得以强调和重视。因为它们是属于所谓的生命科学，大家都认为他们对人类的生存特别重要。但是，正是由于这个原因，我们趋向于低估这方面的研究进展潜在的我们所不得而知的危险性。理解他人和他物确实是一门艺术，这不仅体现在它是人文科学方面最基本的艺术之一，

同时，如果我们正确地运用它，这种艺术也是我们实现和平与和谐的一个重要前提。当然这种艺术和任何艺术一样，也可以为不良目的服务。不过，如果理性地去应用它会避免我们犯这样的错误。

“文献学”正是理解他人的一门科学。它是人类历来努力发展与改善的一种文化性工具。因此，“文献学”是一门培养跨国本领的、富于传统的、最有效的学科。

我们应该在承认生命科学作为领军科学的同时，努力揭示“文献学”也是全球化世界的一种新型的领军学科。我相信，无论是过去的还是未来新型的大社会，无论是中国，

还是欧洲，印度，还是美国，这些大国的社会对未来的和平，和谐与幸福都负有很大的责任。因此，它们有必要去保护，鼓励和提倡，无论是从广义的角度还是从狭义的角度，对文本开展研究。“文献学”将成为将来社会生活的一种指导性学科。我相信人类是毫无选择的：只有在开展“文献学”性的对话而共同地对不同的世界观，宗教思想和幸福观进行探讨的前提下，我们才有可能对将来实现一种和平的世界做出有益的贡献。