



Strategies for modes of management and scholarly treatment of the Sanskrit manuscripts in the TAR¹

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Preamble

The Sanskrit manuscripts extant in the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China constitute an important part of the cultural heritage of humanity. For this reason, the whole world looks to China in hope of successful developments in the care of this precious heritage. In order to discuss related necessities and possibilities within this responsibility a number of young researchers and experienced scholars from the PRC and abroad discussed some basic topics, and the essential proposals are summarized below.

Firstly and properly, the term “Sanskrit manuscripts” (*fan wen shou gao*) refers only to those documents the contents (*nei-rong*) of which are written in various scripts, mostly Indian, but occasionally Tibetan, on different supports, including palm-leaves, paper, and birch-bark, that are part of the cultural heritage of the Tibetan ethnic

¹ The following summary is based on the lecture presented at the panel “Sanskrit Manuscripts in China – State and Prospects” during the 2008 Beijing Seminar on Tibetan Studies convened at the China Tibetology Research Center, Beijing. Additional ideas and criticism were gathered during the many discussions connected to this panel. My sincere gratitude is due to all the colleagues from China and abroad who contributed in different ways to the contents of this paper, which, now, seems to represent nothing less than the common scholarly opinion of leading specialists on this issue.

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minority in China. These constitute a particular type of “Cultural Relics” (*wen-wu*). As such, these relics fall under the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics” in the form amended and accepted by the 30th Congregation of the Standing Committee of the 9th National People’s Congress on October 28, 2002.² This law contains clear rules concerning such relics, and in several paragraphs also directly refers to manuscripts (cf. I.1.(4); IV.36; IV.40; IV.42; IV.46).

Secondly and mistakenly, the term “Sanskrit manuscripts” has often been applied not only to the original “cultural relics” (*wen-wu*), but also indiscriminately to the literature of ancient texts, their contents (*nei-rong*), in other words, to the written information (*xin-xi*) contained in these manuscripts.³

² This Law was amended again on December 29, 2007 (cf. Chinese version: <http://baike.baidu.com/view/45407.htm> and English version: <http://www.nach.gov.cn/tabid/311/Infold/383/Default.aspx>), and supplemented through the “Regulations for the Implementation of the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics” on May 18, 2003 (Chinese version: <http://www.nach.gov.cn/tabid/311/Infold/381/Default.aspx>, and English version: <http://www.nach.gov.cn/tabid/311/Infold/384/Default.aspx>), and “Regulations for the management of the consultation of specialists with regard to the world cultural heritage in China” issued on December 8, 2006, by the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (Chinese version: <http://www.nach.gov.cn/tabid/314/Infold/13730/Default.aspx>).

³ This fundamental terminological misunderstanding resulted initially in an unnecessarily wide application of the mentioned law: the law was also extended to films, photos, and photostatic copies of these manuscripts. It was for this reason that it was also not allowed to move or study any kind of copied or secondary material, not to mention it being exhibited or shown to foreigners.

But surely, a photo of the T’iang-an-men Square or the Potala is not the same as the square or the palace itself. Some years ago, at the CTRC, we analyzed this problem and together were able to recognize this basic misunderstanding and the resulting unnecessary over-extension of the law to the copies of relics. Thereby we also opened the door to the possibility of studying copies of the original manuscripts, and ultimately were able to



With respect to the above quoted Law and the differentiation between original manuscripts and their copies, the following proposals refer to

- A: Sanskrit manuscripts as cultural relics
- B: Copies of these in various forms
- C: Regulation and supervision of access
- D: Costs and sponsorships
- E: Training and cooperation
- F: Further measures within the TAR and other areas of the PRC

A: Sanskrit manuscripts as cultural relics

The following steps are considered necessary with a view to the treatment and preservation of these relics:

1. Identification of official and private collections

2. Assignment of a number to each item in a collection, whether comprising single or multiple texts or fragments. In the case of not yet distinguishable bundles, single items in these can later be given additional sub-numbers.

3. Complete digital photo-documentation of each item.⁴

4. Detailed scholarly description of each item (with single or multiple contents) according to modern standards. Larger collections should be described individually in order to create an “archive” for the respective collection.⁵

initiate an international cooperation that does not violate the law.

⁴ Manuscripts in the larger existing collections (e.g. in the Potala) should be scanned with a scanner having a cold-cathode-tube light source.

⁵ Already during the first steps (1. to 3.), which are presently being undertaken in a research project of the TAR Government, specialists in Sanskrit and the various Indian scripts should be included in the team of researchers working on the project. Specialists are available from Peking University, CTRC, the Austrian Academy of Sciences, Hamburg Universi-

ty, and elsewhere. Their participation would ensure optimal results already from the very beginning.

The detailed scholarly descriptions (4.) should be entrusted to experienced scholars, again preferably in cooperating teams. The same manuscript-description program should be used for all collections. The MASTER (= Manuscript Access through Standards for Electronic Records), which was developed for great European collections of medieval manuscripts in Greek and Latin and adapted to the specific needs of Sanskrit manuscripts at the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna could be provided with the necessary introduction to any institution or team for this purpose.

In addition to the task of describing the manuscripts and their contents, a duly descriptive catalogue will also serve as an important historical source. E.g., many of the available colophons provide often unique information on dates, monastic and other locations, royal and other patronage, scribes, relatives, etc. As such, these **colophons are equal to epigraphic documents** in their value as historical sources. Moreover, subsequent additions, mostly in Tibetan, on cover and end pages as well as in margins, may also carry information regarding the history of the manuscript itself, such as monastic or individual ownership, changes in its location, former inventorial marks, etc.

To be adequate, a modern descriptive catalogue, therefore, has to be **fully searchable** for all such information that is additional to the texts themselves.

The following pilot work can serve as examples:

a. The Research Institute of Sanskrit Manuscripts and Buddhist Literature established at Peking University by Prof. Duan Qing (<http://sfl.pku.edu.cn/sanskrit>) Tibet Museum, Lhasa, in 2009 or later. The greater part of this collection was once kept in the library of the Cultural Palace of Ethnic Minorities in Beijing and photographed before being returned to Lhasa. The photos now form the basis of research at this Institute of Peking University. Over the last years they were already carefully examined by Duan Qing and her PhD students. Thus they have considerable knowledge of the contents of the various items existing at the Tibet Museum and should not have any difficulties to fulfil this task of description within a relatively short time.

b. Similar experience, although not with regard to a specific collection, is available among those who cooperate since 2003 on the photocopies kept at the library of the CTCRC. This cooperation is between the two present



5. Preservation of the manuscripts

While the palm-leaves are usually durable and sturdy, some of the palm-leaf fragments and the paper manuscripts, as well as the birch-bark manuscripts will have to be taken special care of by professional restorers.

The need of restoration should be determined already during first inspection of the items, at the latest during the process of description.

Sanskrit scholars of CTRC and different scholars from the Institut für Kultur-und Geistesgeschichte Asiens (IKGA) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (AAS) (<http://ikga.oeaw.ac.at/>). The items of cooperation selected so far are of two types: small texts of importance that could be examined at the CTRC, or small and larger texts, copies of which were illegally brought outside the PRC in the 1990s and subsequently offered to IKGA from different unknown sources after it became known that IKGA is cooperating with the CTRC on the basis of an official agreement. The scholars of the CTRC and IKGA who cooperate on these materials have experience on items from different collections in the TAR and, therefore, could be relied upon for the work of description in all of these collections.

c. Likewise available are experts at the Centre for Tantric Studies at the University of Hamburg (<http://www.tantric-studies.org/>) working under Prof. Harunaga Isaacson who is also cooperating on specific items with the CTRC under the auspices of an official agreement.

The staff at the University of Hamburg and the staff in Kathmandu, in the context of the Nepalese-German Manuscript Cataloguing Project, have outstanding experience in cataloguing Sanskrit manuscripts of Nepalese and North-Indian origin (as almost all of the manuscripts in the TAR are). See their website (http://www.uni-hamburg.de/ngmcp/about_e.html), as well as the website of the Research Group Manuscript Cultures in Asia and Africa (http://www.manuscript-cultures.uni-hamburg.de/index_e.html).

d. Another group of experts available for this task consists of those scholars who since 1991 were engaged by Taishō University, Tokyo, to edit various items from the collections in the Cultural Palace of Ethnic Minorities, Beijing, and the Potala.

e. Finally, beyond this already existing expertise, more help could be received from the group of international scholars present at the panel on manuscripts during the 2008 Beijing Seminar on Tibetan Studies.

The importance and often technical difficulty of this task requires the best specialists world-wide to be carefully selected.⁶

6. Safekeeping of the manuscripts

Thanks to the general climatic conditions in the TAR, the safekeeping of these materials does not seem to need any special requirements. Of course, moisture and the presence of rodents have to be avoided, and particularly delicate as well as unique manuscripts should be kept in fire-proof cases.

B. Copies of Sanskrit manuscripts in various forms

1. The digitized images of all Mss. should be stored in a specially protected web-space on the Internet.⁷

⁶ This work of restoration can be expensive. As to financing, cf. below D. Prof. Braarvig indicated that there might be possibilities for help in restoration available from Norwegian institutions. For paper-restoration a specialist from Poland is known to be connected with the National Library of China.

Already since the mid 1990s, the Italian Istituto Centrale di Patologia del Libro has been cooperating (through the Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, Rome) with the China National Institute of Cultural Property, Beijing, on the restoration of birch-bark manuscripts. Cf.: <http://www.patologicalibro.beniculturali.it/italiano/icpl/oltreconfine.htm>

⁷ Outside of the PRC, a number of large and important collections of Sanskrit manuscripts are already available online with good quality images. E.g., the collection of the Institute Français de Pondichéry (IFP) in Pondicherry, India (<http://ifpindia.org/cataloguing-and-preservation-of-manuscripts.html>), or the collection of the Tokyo University Library (<http://utlsktms.ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp>).

a. Comparable models are also available within the PRC for such a web-space project:

aa. In 2000, the British Library signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Library of China concerning the International Dunhuang Project. A new Memorandum of Understanding was signed September 2008 for the next five years. This Memorandum regulates the availability of digital images from the National Library’s collection of Tibetan docu-



ments from Dunhuang on the web-space of the International Dunhuang Project. Although in this case the Chinese side participates in an international project, the presentation of materials from the PKU on the Internet is a model for the case of the Sanskrit manuscripts.

ab. The solution recently found for the problem of preservation versus access in the case of the Dunhuang caves (Mogaoku) can also serve as a model for the manuscripts in question. The caves at Dunhuang were opened to tourists in recent years with the result that high levels of carbon dioxide and humidity are already severely undermining all efforts of conservation. The solution under preparation takes full advantage of digital technology. The caves will ultimately be closed to the public, but by 2011 a new visitor centre at the Dunhuang Academy will be opened, where visitors will be given a full digital tour of the caves' interiors. This will provide views of the caves that are much better than an actual visit could ever provide. Only one or two caves will be open to the general public for visits. All others will be closed to all except researchers.

A similar solution should be stipulated for the manuscripts in the TAR: by their storage on the Internet, on one hand, their preservation will be ensured and, on the other hand, regulated access will be possible based on digital technology with all of its advantages.

b. A natural question at this point is: Why does one need to see the original manuscript at least once after the work of editing on the basis of black-and-white copies has been completed? The answer is simple. Three features of the originals are often not clearly reproduced in black-and-white copies: two are intrinsic, namely, ink density and the material structure of the support, be it palm-leaf, paper or birch-bark; the third is extrinsic, namely, dirt or other external additions to the support.

We all know from experience how it is nearly impossible in some cases to distinguish between, e.g., dots of ink and insect droppings, or tiny deletion signs or even insertion marks and uneven structures in the support that cause shadows from certain photo angles. To be practical, in order to settle the last remaining problems like the presence or absence of *anusvāra*-dots, I would say that a final inspection of the original is probably unnecessary if a high resolution colour copy (e.g., 2400 dpi or even more, which can then be reduced to 600 dpi) of the original is available. The advantage in this respect of colour reproductions can easily be verified by examining the beautiful facsimile editions that have been published by Taishō University since 1994.

But that does not mean we are asking for facsimile reproductions of all

2. Photos, microfilms, and photostatic copies such as are presently kept at the CTRC and the PKU should be accessible under the conditions of the regulations of access (cf. below C), as long as no digitized images are available on the Internet. Even after digitized images are available on-line, comparison with black-and-white copies made in earlier years will often be necessary if one considers that damages might possibly have occurred since the earlier images were taken.

C. Regulation and supervision of access⁸

Research on the literature contained in this material depends mainly on two factors: the availability of well-trained researchers with their specific abilities, interests and commitments, and on priorities with regard to the importance of the various objects of study.

In this respect, all future scholarly work needs regulation and supervision. Otherwise overlapping, flawed, or even worthless results will accrue. Regulation will be needed firstly, for the access to the space on the internet, secondly for the distribution of specific re-

the material. First of all, the process of publishing *in facsimile* cannot cope with the sheer quantity of the material. And secondly, even more important, the price of facsimile books produced is so extraordinarily high that hardly any scholar would be able to afford it. With the exception of a number of Buddhist temples in Japan, there are only a few academic institutions that have the budget to buy such publications. Since both the production of facsimiles and the final product are much too expensive, it is quite unreasonable in our times to consider this method suitable, except perhaps in special cases, e.g., for religious or diplomatic purposes, or when the object is an unique manuscript of an extremely important work.

⁸ These are, of course, only some structural ideas for a basic frame. It must be refined in much detail by experts, if the whole project meets approval at all. As scholars, we are mainly concerned with good results, and would therefore only like to add that all regulations should be unambiguous, avoid unnecessary impediments to access and progress, and avoid too many bureaucratic difficulties.



search objects to researchers for editing and publication, and thirdly for the evaluation of the results.

1. All scholarly activities should be regulated and supervised by a **Board**. This Board will consist, on one hand, of leading members from PRC institutions involved in order to establish the Board's activities within an institution of the PRC. On the other hand, it will consist of senior scholars experienced in the relevant issues. At this time, because of the scarcity of experts in the PRC, only an **International Board** seems feasible, i.e., a board consisting of members from both the PRC and abroad. This Board will establish its rules of procedure.

2. **Regulation of work** should be based on work contracts. Yearly progress reports will be compulsory. An item under a work contract will be closed for publication by other researchers for a specific number of years determined in accordance with the amount of work necessary (e.g., from 3 to 10 years). Nevertheless, items being worked on will always remain accessible for other scholars, either for personal research or for comparative purposes. If progress is not reported or delays are not adequately explained, such contracts will be cancelled.

3. **The results** of these contracted works, e.g., in the form of **editions**, will be published as part of the already existing **STTAR (= Sanskrit Texts from the Tibetan Autonomous Region) series of the CTRC Press**, or in other series yet to be established within the PRC.

4. **Supervision of the work** will be the responsibility of those scholar members of the Board who have expertise in the respective object of study or can provide such expertise on their responsibility.

D. Costs and sponsorship

1. **Costs** will accrue from, e.g., restoration, up-keep, infrastructure and additional staff at the holding institutions, protection (fire-proof

cases), establishing and managing the web-space, as well as academic exchange programs (cf. E.3.).⁹

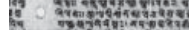
2. Public and private, national and international **sponsorship** is the modern way of providing the financial needs for such an important undertaking.¹⁰ The CTRC would be the best place, perhaps in connection with the International Board, to initiate and organize the financial support of the whole enterprise, as well as to ensure that all public and private manuscript holding institutions are taking part in this project.

⁹ We all know that scholars are habitually poor, particularly in our field. We therefore propose that no fees for access be asked from scholars active in research on these materials. They will be devoting a considerable amount of time and energy in fulfilling the task of propagating these cultural relics through their work, and will be investing either their own or their institution's money to make this possible. We believe that their contribution of work and effort should be considered a return gift for being given access to the objects needed for their work. Without the commitment of such scholars, the propagation of this cultural heritage, which is demanded by the above-mentioned law (cf. IV.40), will come to nothing.

But if access for researchers to these objects is free, what financial benefits would the institutions that hold original manuscripts and take care of them have, e.g., the Office of the Cultural Relics Administration in Lhasa? For, it would also be disastrous to follow the access policies of certain major European libraries, such as the British Library, London, or the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris. Although these great libraries provide easy access to their manuscript collections, the cost of this access has risen so dramatically that it is becoming more and more unaffordable to scholars who, ironically, are often the only public in need of these materials.

In contrast, a positive example for a manuscript collection's access policy is the Tokyo University Library: the images of all their manuscripts are available online with no fees at all (cf. footnote b on B.1.).

¹⁰ Sponsorship or any alternative would certainly bring more income, as well as more constant and regular income, into the budget of institutions holding manuscripts than the small trickle of income that could be expected from individual scholars interested in single items. In addition, this would not only contribute to eliminate access fees but would also cover the related infrastructural expenses.



Alternatively, all costs could be covered by the PRC Government. Accompanied by a well-prepared media campaign and publicity on all international public and scholarly levels, such an investment would be a unique opportunity to demonstrate world-wide the Government's activities in the care and protection of the Tibetan cultural heritage. Such direct support by the PRC Government would also ensure a frictionless cooperation between the various national and regional institutions involved in the future process of the ensuing work on these materials to be channelled, perhaps, through the CTRC.

E. Training and international cooperation

Experts in Sanskrit and manuscripts are rare all over the world. No society anywhere in the world considers it important to invest in the training of Sanskrit scholars, not only in general, but in particular of a sufficient number of Sanskrit scholars who are specialists in the manuscripts in question. Why should we expect this from China?

1. Possible development within China: In the PRC, Sanskrit scholars are presently being educated only at Peking University in the tradition established by Prof. Ji Xian-lin; additional training is available only at the Research Institute of Sanskrit Manuscripts and Buddhist Literature of Peking University. The number of staff, students and post-graduate researchers can eventually be increased. But even if this were to be done, this institute will not provide a sufficient number of scholars in view of the enormous task ahead.¹¹

¹¹ Thus, it must be honestly acknowledged that the handful of Sanskrit scholars available for this work in the next future within the PRC will not be able to fulfil the task alone.

In addition to the linguistic and methodological training needed in the education of capable experts, they will also need a considerable breadth of knowledge and reading, and need to have specialized further in accordance with the various contents of these manuscripts: religious texts of quite different types, including Mahāyānasūtras and commentaries, Tantras and their explanatory literature with the accompanying literature on rituals,

2. Pilot models of international cooperation: A few institutions, from the PRC and abroad, are already cooperating for several years in practicing different approaches for training and cooperation.

a. Peking University: gifted students apply for scholarships and are sent abroad for post-graduate training. Such cooperations exist, e.g., with the University of Munich and other universities in Germany, where students pursue PhD projects often related to specific manuscripts.

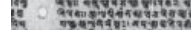
b. In Vienna, at the IKGA, we are following another route, which I call “training while cooperating”: we provide the necessary knowledge about methods of editing and the contents and contexts of particular texts, and collaborate simultaneously in working on each respective text, these then being edited in joint editorship.

c. A similar path is being pursued by the Centre for Tantric Studies at the University of Hamburg.

There are many more places available in Europe, in Japan, and the USA that could be usefully incorporated into this kind of training program.

3. Establishment of an academic exchange program: Students, post-graduate scholars, as well as teachers should be enabled by means of an exchange program to move both ways, from China to abroad, but also from abroad to China with the purpose of creating the staff of experts necessary and sufficient for this task.

etc., lyric texts and texts on poetics, grammar, architecture, astrology, and the different branches of Buddhist soteriology, metaphysics, epistemology and logic. This need of additional expertise is well known. We have all experienced that in order to even correctly read a manuscript – not to speak of critically editing – one has to know what the text is about, regardless of whether one is taking the first transliterating steps or subsequently doing more advanced work. Without a relevant knowledge in the area of a manuscript’s contents, even a correct transliteration is impossible.



F. Further measures within the TAR and other areas of the PRC

In order to ensure permanent and fruitful results from all these initial efforts, as well as to enable the participating scholars within the PRC to gradually pursue all this work with less international assistance, it will be necessary to establish several institutions for education and research:

1. within the TAR:

- a. Establishment of a Sanskrit Studies program at Tibet University, Lhasa¹²
- b. Establishment of an Institute for Research on Sanskrit Manuscripts in Lhasa¹³

2. within other areas of the PRC:

Several measures should be taken to increase the number of Sanskrit scholars with the appropriate expertise, as well as providing jobs for these scholars:

¹² A Sanskrit Studies program at Tibet University could serve to educate ethnic Tibetans in the necessary basic expertise for this work with teaching assistance from, e.g., Peking University and several Western universities (the existing connection between Tibet University and Oslo University being a practical model).

¹³ For the future, a Research Institute established at Lhasa, perhaps as part of the Tibetan Academy of Social Sciences, or as an independent institution cooperating with the TASS and the Cultural Relics Office, would serve the task in several ways, but mainly by continuing with a long-term perspective many of the subsequently arising research tasks, i.e., not only of editing but also of studying the various physical features of the manuscripts, as well as their contents. Such an Institute would also be the perfect centre for international cooperation on these materials, as well as for relevant conferences and workshops.

- a.** Support of the Research Institute at Peking University for post-graduate training and scholarships to go abroad
- b.** Appointment of additional members to the staff of Sanskrit scholars at the CTTC, Beijing
- c.** Establishment of a program of research on Sanskrit manuscripts at the Chinese Academy of Social Science, Beijing
- d.** Establishment of Sanskrit Studies programs at other universities in China

Sanskrit manuscripts in China

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