

# THE TIBETAN VERSION OF THE SCRIPTURE ON THE TEN KINGS

AND THE QUEST FOR CHINESE INFLUENCE  
ON THE TIBETAN PERCEPTION OF THE AFTERLIFE



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## Introduction

The book presently offered to the reader has its origin in events that date back to a time some seven years ago. At this time, the two of us – Luboš Bělka and Daniel Berounský – were discussing a possible research project aimed at the Tibetan and Mongolian collection in the Náprstek Museum in Prague. The initial impulse for the project was our shameful realization that we knew surprisingly little concrete facts about the Tibetan and Mongolian artworks kept in Prague. We took the research project as an opportunity to see what the Náprstek Museum has hidden in its collections, and thus to absolve ourselves of our shame.

We were lucky with the persons, both previous and present, who serve as the curators of the collections. At that time, in the Náprstek Museum we worked with Zlata Černá and Zornica Kirková, both of whom were very kind and supportive in response to our inquiries about the pieces held in the museum, and showed great personal warmth as well. Such an experience was also repeated with Helena Heroldová, who became the curator later.

One particular item in the holdings of the Náprstek Museum inspired us directly, and could be taken as the primary impulse towards this book. This artifact was the thick (but incomplete) xylographic text from Mongolia containing frequent depictions of Buddhist hells, written partly in Mongolian and partly in Tibetan. Of course, we soon became aware that it was not a completely new discovery for scholarship, and that better and complete pieces of the same text; referred to as *Picture-Book of Hell* (PBH); are kept in a number of collections in Europe and Asia. The work was compiled by the Mongolian monk Bandida Čebel Vangčugdorji (Tib. Paṇḍita Tshe spel dbang phyug rdo rje, born 1836) from various sources, but primarily from the Tibetan rendering of *Saddharmasmṛtyupasthāna*. It lacks a title and so the following note on the content of the text from its introduction could be taken as a kind of title: *A Teaching which with the help of pictures demonstrates*

*why beings are born to live in the hell or the world of wandering spirits, and, by filling humans with fear, guides them to the right path* (see Sárközi 2003; Bethlenfalvy, Sárközi 1975; Bethlenfalvy, Sárközi 2010; Kollmar-Paulenz, forthcoming). Though being of the Mongolian origin and created in the specific time of obsession with hells in Mongolia (cf. Kollmar-Paulenz, forthcoming), this text is based on the tradition which came to Mongolia from India through Tibet. A selection of several xylographic depictions of a variety of hells from this compilation will accompany the reader of this book. This manuscript inspired us to collect primary and secondary literature on Tibetan and Mongolian hells and even resulted in the completion of several rough versions of translation from Tibetan texts concerning hells, stored somewhere in the computer for the time being.

After three years of involvement with the project, we decided to repeat the work of exploration, this time with a focus on the Tibetan and Mongolian collections kept in the National Gallery in Prague. As we had the fortune to receive the grant for the project, the kind approach of the curators Zdeňka Klimtová and Lenka Gyaltsso again made it a pleasant event. It was in the National Gallery that we found the text that forms the direct reason for presenting this book to the reader.

The text is the Tibetan rendering of *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* (Ch. *Shi wang jing*), a religious work well known in China and Japan and influential up to the present time. Probably due to absence of any title on the first folio of the text, it remained unidentified on the inventory cards of the National Gallery. Putting information together, it emerged that the manuscript is a unique copy of a previously unknown Tibetan rendering of *The Scripture on the Ten Kings*. No Tibetan copy of it has ever been reported as far as we know.

This finding was the definite starting point of the present book. The previously compiled materials and information could again be put to use, the translation of the largely corrupt Tibetan text from the National Gallery was undertaken, etc. Only during the process starting from this point did the book take its present shape. As a result, the text has been written by Daniel Berounský, with Luboš Bělka as the author of an appendix elu-



cidating the depictions contained in the manuscript. Its cost was liters of coffee and also wine, desperate moments, but also those welcome flashes of insight and the delightful feeling of information becoming known. Part of it will remain hidden and part of it is offered here.

Before the outline of the result will be offered here, some particular notes on the background of the work should be revealed. In contrast to the example of the Tibetan text, information from the Chinese, Mongolian and Indian primary sources was acquired from the secondary literature. In many cases, the use of valuable results of research published only in Russian in the respective fields, often not very well known to Anglophone scholarship, has brought new insight into the topics discussed. Nonetheless, the Chinese, Mongolian and Indian sources are taken here as more of a general background used for exploration of the Tibetan texts.

The book is divided into four chapters. The last of the chapters deals with *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* and the three preceding ones are intended to draw the reader into the wider context of perception of Buddhist hells in Tibet. The primary focus is on the literature existing in a number of its variable editions, and since the text itself often presents rather dry and brief information, it is hoped that this defect could be balanced by the translations from Tibetan of several chosen examples of the texts discussed. Although the translation is always a new text, still something from the melody of the originals could emerge into the rendering in a very distant language.

Another point should be highlighted here, this being the awareness of the incompleteness of the information given in the book concerning beliefs related to the afterlife in Tibet. There is a strong tantric tradition applied throughout the most of the recorded history of Tibet concerning the funeral rituals, and this aspect has been almost completely avoided in the present volume, retaining only a few references to such a tradition. This is done with a good reason: the book concentrates only on seemingly marginal influences on the perception of the afterlife which, however, might have had a strong popular impact, and thus would have been hard to discern in the texts rendered in tantric garb.

The book starts with an outline of the Indian ideas about the hells. To deal with such a topic covering thousands of years in a few pages is always a hazardous project. Here, its aim is to point to the richness of the ideas connected with hells in India and their long history. Buddhist ideas of the infernal realms are not unique in the Indian subcontinent, but could be seen more as a particular Indian version of the vision of hells among a number of others. In the Indian Buddhist texts, the perception of hells is often a very practical one and is viewed as an important stimulation for the individual setting out along the path of Buddhist practice. Yet, at the same time, the information on the hells is scattered among individual literary works of different genres and there also appear inconsistencies among the descriptions. Even in India, before any spread to other countries, such inconsistencies were realized and there exist Indian attempts to organize the particular bits of information on hells in a scholarly manner. This effort appears within the genre of *abhidharma*. Information on the hells is collected from a variety of sources under the unifying point of view focused on the cosmological arrangement of the universe. Its scholarly nature could be seen in the occasional resurfacing of diverse information in them, but these are reflected in the *abhidharma* texts and attempts to hide them are rare.

This part is concluded with the translation of a vivid example of such an *abhidharma* text from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Tibet. It is hoped that the reader will appreciate the scholarly methods emerging from within the text, which for the contemporary European might appear rather bizarre, but might well serve as a reminder that the situation of the modern scholars might not be generally that far removed. The Tibetan text uses a critical eye and precise citations in order to discuss the variety of tortures in hells and the layout of the hells. Moreover, the Tibetan author frequently cites his sources and not surprisingly, these sources are exclusively of Indian origin.

The next part of the book is devoted to the genre describing the stories of 'returners from hells' in Tibet (*'das log, shi log*), the literature which speaks about the hells from a different viewpoint and comes closer to domain of folk religion in Tibet. Fortunately, there exist good studies of this genre by several Tibetologists and thus the introduction



of the topic need not continue beyond the provision of very general information on the genre and references to the most valuable studies. The main focus of this part is instead the generally neglected relation of such Tibetan stories to their much earlier Chinese counterparts. It is beyond any doubt that the bare structure of both the Chinese and Tibetan narrations is almost identical. With the translation of one such stories, that of Lingza Choekyi, probably the most frequently discussed example of the *delog* genre in the Western literature and already partially translated by several scholars, this section comes to an end.

Choosing this example for the translation reflects the extraordinary position of the text under primary consideration. There are good reasons to consider it to be an early model for similar later narrations, and its spread in Tibet could be also documented through its offering the largest number of copies known to date in comparison with others. Additional information on its exclusivity could be drawn from the less-known but highly extensive research published in Russian concerning the Mongolian versions of the story of Lingza Choekyi. It would seem that this tale is the only *delog* story ever translated from Tibetan into Mongolian, but the translation was nonetheless undertaken several times by different Mongolian translators.

With this section devoted to *delog* stories, the question emerges as to the Chinese influence on the Tibetan perception of hells. What follows in the next part is a discussion of one particular narration, this being Maudgalyāyana's rescue of his mother from the hells. It is probably a Chinese apocryphal text, one well-known example of the genre of prosimetric texts known as *bianwen* in China. Some of the research on the presence of the narrative in Tibet was made available in recent years in the valuable article by Matthew T. Kapstein (Kapstein 2007a). In this section, further evidence of the narrative's presence in Tibet is added in the form of the provision of more instances of traces of this text uncovered in Tibet. Such evidence primarily consists in the sole hypothetical occurrence of some version of it among the titles included in the Tibetan catalogue of the texts translated in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, then in its presence in the catalogue from 13<sup>th</sup> century under a different title, the

occurrence of the narration in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century volume of various narratives, the text included in Phugdrag Kanjur (*Phug brag bka' 'gyur*) from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (again under different title) and an alleged 11<sup>th</sup>-century Bonpo paraphrase of the story. The apparent variability of the titles of these texts in their Tibetan versions is discussed and leads to the hypotheses that the main problem of the text in Tibet was that it could not be classified as a *sūtra* (i.e. discourse of Buddha). Some of the Tibetan texts evidently try to adorn the narrative with further glory through designing it a *sūtra* text, while others attempt false ascriptions of its translation to various famous Indian and Tibetan translators of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Also, with the help of available research on the Mongolian translations of the text from Tibetan originals (some of them no longer extant), one arrives at a picture of relatively wide knowledge about this particular story in Tibet. This state of affairs contrasts with the relatively restricted number of copies known to be extant at the present time and the exclusion of the text from the written canon of the elite society of monks. Frequent mention of a literary text among the literary sources in Tibet does not mean its enjoying widespread knowledge, and vice versa.

Only with such conclusions does the main topic of the book come into discussion: the find in the National Gallery in Prague, which is the Tibetan rendering of another Chinese apocryphal text, the previously mentioned *Scripture on the Ten Kings*. A great deal of uncertainty persists concerning the knowledge of this text in Tibet and Mongolia, since this manuscript seems to be the first instance of such a version ever to be discussed. Thus the circumstances of its appearance in Prague are dealt with, as well as the possible promising directions of further research on the topic. The provenience of the text remains uncertain. Bearing the cases of *delog* and Maudgalyāyana in mind, there is a possibility that *The Scripture on the Ten Kings* was known in Tibet, but being condemned by the elite of educated monks, it remained alive within the lower strata of Tibetan or Mongolian society. Such characteristics as frequent spelling mistakes in the manuscript or errors in the parts concerning the doctrine clearly suggest the likeliness of such an origin for the text.



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