

Preserving Tibetan Heritage

Putting the Leiden Collection on Microfilm

Report >
Central Asia

In May 2002 a project was launched for the preservation of the Tibetan block prints and manuscripts that are kept at the Kern Institute Library of Leiden University. During this project the documents will be transferred to microfilm and registered in the national automated catalogue. The bibliographical data of this catalogue are accessible through the Internet and on the basis of these data it is possible to order copies on microfiche or in print. In continuation of the articles in the *IIAS Newsletter* (issues 19 and 23) on the significance of this Tibetan collection for scholarly research and on the life and work of its collector, Johan van Manen, the present contribution focuses on its preservation.

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Courtesy of Kern Institute Library

By Dory Heilijgers

In 1997, a national programme for the preservation of library material named 'Metamorfoze' was launched in the Netherlands. The programme is an initiative of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Cultural Affairs and Science and is coordinated by the National Preservation Office of the Netherlands that operates under the direct supervision of the Dutch Royal Library in The Hague. Through the Metamorfoze programme the Ministry grants subsidies to libraries for the preservation of collections of paper documents from the

period 1840–1950. The preservation work is realized mainly through microfilming and a reliable storage of the original (acid free sleeves or boxes) in combination with registration. For the time being, microfilming as preservation method is preferred to digitizing. Digitizing offers advantages especially in making saved data accessible and easily available, but the disadvantage is that there are a lot of uncertainties as to long-term storage of digital media. A microfilm made within the Metamorfoze framework will last at least 200 years, and meets the quality requirements necessary for optimum digitizing in the future.

At first, the Metamorfoze programme was aimed at the preservation of the Netherlands' national paper heritage only. Of old, however, scholarly work in the Netherlands has been to a considerable degree internationally oriented. As a consequence, many Dutch research libraries with a preservation function house important collections of foreign origin. Therefore, in the Metamorfoze framework additional funds were made available for the preservation of such non-Dutch collections, and twenty-three collections of international value were selected to participate in the preservation programme. One of these is the Leiden collection of Tibetan block prints and manuscripts that meets all the criteria set forth by the Royal Library in order to be admitted to the programme. Metamorfoze accepted the project proposal submitted by the Kern Institute Library and granted a subsidy of 70 per cent of the total costs of microfilming and registration by the end of 2001. The Jan Gonda Foundation, the National Museum of Ethnology (Leiden), and the Faculty of Arts of Leiden University will cover the remaining 30 per cent.

The collection numbers some 1756 volumes: 998 Tibetan block prints, 557 Tibetan manuscripts, 182 Lepcha and 19 Bon manuscripts. As is usual in the Tibetan literary tradition many volumes consist of the collected works (*gsud-bum*) of important writers such as, for instance, the leading scholars of the dGe-lugs-pa sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

These volumes then contain more than one text, which means that the total number of texts actually exceeds 1,756.

The majority of block prints and manuscripts have loose leaves (printed/written on both sides); some 25 per cent has been folded like a 'Western book' whether bound or not. The volumes vary in the number of leaves (from 1 to over 600) and in size. The paper of part of the block prints and manuscripts is brittle, or is affected by the black ink, mildew, or insects. Another part of the block prints suffered from water damage when some boxes fell into the water at the harbour of Calcutta. Their leaves are stuck together and are unfortunately beyond repair, whereas an unknown number of block prints were completely ruined by this accident and were therefore thrown away.

On arrival in the Netherlands in 1935 and 1948, the block prints and manuscripts were labelled with an inventory number at the National Museum for Ethnology. In 1950, the then conservator of the museum, P.H. Pott, announced a detailed study of this collection (in his *Introduction to the Tibetan Collection of the National Museum of Ethnology* (1951), p. 7). In 1953-55, René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz compiled a first *Catalogue of the Collections of Tibetan Block Prints and Manuscripts in the National Museum of Ethnology* (*Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde*) that includes the Bon manuscripts. He made a second catalogue of the Lepcha manuscripts. Both catalogues consist of an alphabetical title list in romanized transcription and arranged according to the Tibetan alphabet. They mention the title (in the case of a collected work followed directly by any 'subtitles'), the margin title and the number of folios. These catalogues are not officially published and can only be consulted on the spot.

From 1961 to 1965, two Tibetan monks, Chongla N. Losang and Rechung J. Phunghang, examined the collection anew under a programme sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation. They compiled a second catalogue, which is handwritten in the Tibetan script and also alphabetically arranged

according to title. Whereas Nebesky considered different texts in a collected work as subchapters of the first mentioned text and catalogued these under one heading, Chongla and Rechung considered them to be individual texts and alphabetized them each under their own title. In addition to the titles this catalogue mentions other data as well such as a description of the contents and, if available, the author/scribe and the printing office.

The Metamorfoze preservation project has started in May 2002 with the preparatory work of checking and, if required, restoring the order of the loose leaves. Each leaf has to be numbered so that the correct sequence will be maintained during the process of microfilming. Our colleague Tharphen Lingsang is carrying out this painstaking but extremely important work. In the next phase, the texts will be transferred to microfilm by Strata Preservation, a joint enterprise of the OCLC (Online Computer Library Center, USA) and the Dutch Royal Library. They made some test films that are of excellent quality and, on occasion, even more readable than the original. The camera films (35mm, 600 shots per film) will be stored in the Royal Library; the Kern Institute Library receives duplicates that can be used for any further copies, either films or fiches.

In the Metamorfoze scheme, registration refers to the making of a bibliographical description in the Dutch national automated cataloguing system (GGC). Essential entries are the title, the margin title (and, if applicable, the title of the collected work it belongs to), a local code (= inventory number), elementary systematic codes to indicate the contents, and the number of leaves. Other desirable entries that are either put away in the colophon or are not mentioned at all and therefore must be derived from other sources are the author/scribe/compiler, (an estimate of) the date of composition and the date of the making of the present copy, and the name of the printing office. Kalsang Norbu Gurung has been appointed for this cataloguing work. We intend to make in the future an annotated systematic catalogue by generating the bibliographical computer data and adding to them a detailed specification of the subject matter of each text and (part of) the colophon as well.

The catalogue (WebOPAC) is searchable on title, author, subject, etc. and is accessible online all over the world through the Internet. Upon request any text can be supplied on microfiche or in print. For searching and ordering I refer the reader to the instructions in the side frame. By the time this article is published the first entries will be available.

Puntsok Lungtak, a monk from Central Tibet, was one of the most enthusiastic collectors in the service of Johan van Manen. In his autobiography written in the 1920s he informs us that according to some of his countrymen 'it is a great sin to sell our Tibetan religious books to Englishmen...[who] will sit on the book and step by foot [on it]'. He ignored this accusation because he was of the opinion that exactly the spread of these texts guaranteed a thorough knowledge of the Tibetan Buddhist traditions. The possibilities of modern preservation and computer techniques were far beyond his imagination, but he would certainly have been very happy with the present care for 'his' books and their accessibility on an international scale. ◀

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Tibetological Collections & Archives Series

Dory Heilijgers' article on the 'The Leiden Collection of Tibetan Documents' is the ninth contribution to the Tibetological Collections & Archives Series, which is devoted to important projects on cataloguing, 'computerization' (inputting and scanning), editing, and translation of important Tibetan language text-collections and archives. In this series various colleagues briefly present their initiatives to a larger public, or update the scholarly world on the progress of their already well-established projects. Some are high-profile projects, of which at least Tibetologists will generally be aware, yet some may also be less well known. Nevertheless, I trust that it will be useful to be informed on all these initiatives and I also hope that the projects presented will profit from the exposure and the response that this coverage will engender. If you are interested in any of the projects described, feel free to contact the author of the article. In case you would like to introduce your own (planned) work in the field, please contact the editors of the *IIAS Newsletter* or the author of this introduction. We should very much like to encourage our contributors to keep us informed on the progress of their projects by regular updates. - Henk Blezer

Information >

Searching in the WebOPAC:

- go to <http://lbs.leidenuniv.nl> (English version available)
- select General Catalogue Leiden University
- select your search keys in the menus and type your search term.
Any document available in the Kern Institute Library has a shelf-mark (= plaatsingscode) beginning with I.KERN

An interesting option is the possibility to search for a survey of the Tibetan documents in the Kern Institute Library (of course, after registration): Select in the menus: 'new search; and then 'classification dept.libraries' (last option), and give as a search term 'i.kern 2470/H' or 'i.kern Br.79/H' to obtain a survey of the block prints; 'i.kern 2740/M' or 'i.kern Br.79/M' for the manuscripts; 'i.kern 2740/L' or 'i.kern 2740/B' for the Lepcha and Bon manuscripts, respectively.

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