A TIBETAN ANTIQUARIAN IN THE XVIII CENTURY

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It is a common place that Tibetan historians after the re-establishment of Buddhism in Central Tibet in the 5th century gave little space to events before that time which did not have an obvious religious significance. Nevertheless, several of them can be seen to have had some acquaintance with the early inscriptions, which existed in front of their eyes, and with records in monastery archives. For example, Gsal-ba-’tsa-sa, the author of the careful and invaluable "Blue Annals", quotes the 4th and 6th lines of the inscription on the east face of the Lhasa Treaty pillar of 815 (vol. IIa, f. 108a). He also states (vol. IIa, f. 40b) that he has seen a letter on blue silk recording the grant of property to Myung ’Jing-nye-dzin bzang-po, but he makes no mention of two inscriptions on stone pillars at Zhwa’i Iha-khang which still survive as witness of that fact.

The Lhasa Treaty Inscription was also known to the author of the rGyal-rabs gsal-ba’i rae-long who picks out words and phrases as though from a hasty and inaccurate recollection of its contents (f. 92a) and recommends his readers to study the inscription if they want fuller information.

The comparatively recent discovery in the Chos-kyung of dpal-bo gtsug-la’g phrags-ba (1089) of an exception to this sketchy approach to ancient documents was, therefore, a welcome event. A manuscript copy of this work was lent to me at Lhasa in 1947 and it appears that Professor Tucci saw a printed copy on his visit to Tibet about the same time. After widespread enquiry I succeeded in locating the blocks at the Iha-long monastery in Lho-brag and it was possible to arrange for a number of copies to be printed, some of which were sent to scholars in Europe. At that time the book was known to few Tibetans at Lhasa, probably because it had been mentioned unfavourably by the 5th Dalai Lama who may have been inspired in part by the fact that the Karmapa school, to which dpal-bo gtsug-la’g belonged, had seen its principal opponent when, with the support of Cushi-khan, he had invaded Tibet and defeated the Gtsang king in 1642. In fact, where he criticizes dpal-bo gtsug-la’g, it is the Dalai Lama who appears to be mistaken; but his disapproval was enough to remove the work from the libraries of the Lhasa intelligentsia.

In that history is found, for the first time, the careful quotation of a complete 17th century inscription—that at bsam-gye. The author mentions the inscribed pillars at Zhwa’i Iha-khang (f. 108b). There is also a passing reference to the Lhasa Treaty pillar and short quotations from its east face (f. 152). In addition to this evidence of familiarity
with ancient inscriptions there is the unique contribution of what appears to be a verbatim quotation from the archives of some monastery, probably 5bsam-pa, of two edicts of Khri Stong-lden-brtan and one of Khri Idem-stong-brtan. These remarkable documents are authenticated by the survival on a stone pillar near Lhasa of an inscription recording an edict which is clearly the counterpart of the Edict of Khri Idem-stong-brtan. The inscription has been published by me in JRAS 1949 and has been examined more fully by Professor Tucci in his edition of it in Tombs of the Tibetan Kings, Rome, 1950.

Much of the other material in this history has the appearance of being drawn from ancient sources but it cannot be so clearly linked to its originals as can be the passage mentioned above.

From the foregoing examples it can be seen that Tibetan scholars had acquaintance, in differing degrees, with ancient documents although the fact that detailed reference rarely found their way into the surviving histories suggests that such documents were not regarded as of prime importance. It was, therefore, an unexpected thrill to be presented not long ago through the kindness of Atheta Denapa of Birmiak, with a photograph of a collection of copies of early inscriptions which had recently come into his possession. These were stated to be the personal papers of the Khotog Lama, Rig-'dzin the-bdag nor-bu who lived in the XVIIIth century and they show that at the time of the Age of Reason in Europe and the scholarly researches of Sir William Jones in India, there was a Lama in Tibet who had taken pains to collect and to annotate the text of many important inscriptions of the VIIIth and IXth centuries.

One of these inscriptions was hitherto unknown because the lettering on the pillar which contained it had become illegible through time. It dates from the reign of Khri Stong-lden-brtan and has now been edited by me in JRAS 1964. The other inscriptions are: that at the tomb of Khri Idem-stong-brtan at Phyang-gyuk, which has been published by Professor Tucci in Tombs of the Tibetan Kings; the inscription from rKong-po published by me in JRAS 1953; the so-called skar-cung inscription published by me in JRAS 1949 and by Professor Tucci in Tombs of the Tibetan Kings; and two of the four inscriptions on the Lhasa Treaty Pillar which are known from the editions of Professor Li Fang-kuo, Bissho Sato and myself.

Missing are what is probably the oldest of such documents—that from the Zhod rdo-rings at Lhasa (c.764) which does not appear to be mentioned by any historian although the conquest of the Chinese capital which is described there is known to them. Perhaps the tradition that this pillar was erected by a lay minister who was hostile to Buddhism led to it being ignored. Other inscriptions missing from the collection
are those at Zhiwu Tshe-khang and at mVhur-pu, both of which relate to Buddhist foundations.

What is in the collection is, nevertheless, of great importance especially when it is seen that some of the materials which the Lama acquired in the XVth century may have been either originals or, more likely copies made as much as 130 years before his lifetime. This appears from a note at the end of his copy of the Thaana Treaty inscriptions to the effect that the copy was made in a water-tiger year 193 years after the water-buffalo year in which the pillars were set up. That it is known to have been 813. It may be necessary to allow for a confusion in Tibetan chronology which has affected much of their dating from that period by the apparent omission of a cycle of sixty years, but, even so, the date of the copies is put firmly in the XVth century. Further, a note, perhaps made by the Lama himself, on the copy of the rKong-po inscription indicates that when the text was checked on the spot with the original, about six and a half lines of the inscription were buried under sand. His copy was, therefore, taken some time before it came into his possession.

I am gradually making new editions of the inscriptions in the light of the Lama's texts. Although comparison with photographs etc., shows the state of the inscriptions as they were some 10 years ago, discloses many inaccuracies in the Lama's copies, these are largely orthographic and his contribution provides much new information of real value. It is not my intention to discuss this aspect here; but I should like to attempt a short sketch of Lama's life in the hope that others with better source at their disposal may be inclined to enlarge upon it. In a recent article "Nouveaux Documents Tibetains sur le Mi Nyag Si Hia" in Mélanges de Sotologie de l'Avenir, published by the Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1966, Professor H. A. Stein mentions two biographies of Rig'dzin tsha-thang nor-bu which he saw at Gangtok. I have not had access to those works and have drawn only on the rin-chen gnyen-ma'i red on verbal and written information from the present Ka-thog-linn dPal-sku and the Sak-yus-pa Lama, dbar-gshing Pnyi, etc.,

Tsha-thang nor-bu was born in 1648 in the Shag-nang region of Eastern Tibet and was soon recognized as the reincarnation of one tsa-wa-dbang Pema nor-bu who carried on the spiritual line of gNor-lugs Nam-mik-ba's rgya-ma-pa at the time of Khrim Dong-lhe-brtan. The boy was ordained by the rGyaltsen Rimpoche of Ka-thog the famous rNyin-ma-pa monastery some 40 miles S.E. of dBo-dge, founded in 1093 by Lama Dam-pa De-bges Concert which takes its name from a hill, on the slopes of which the monastery lies, bearing near its summit marks resembling the letter Fa. Tsha-thang nor-bu studied with the leading rNyin-ma-pa teachers and also with those of the Karmapa with whom Ka-thog had
a close connection. One of his contemporaries and friends was Kamapa Sül-tu Cho-kyi Byung-gnas, a famous XVIIIth century scholar; and later, Tse-ba Drung nor-bu became the tutor of the XIIIth Kamapa Zawa-nag reincarnation, bDud-'dzin sde-rje.

From Kham he went to Central Tibet where he received instruction in the Jo-nang-pa doctrines. Among the skills he developed was that of gshar-rtses, discoverer of religious texts and objects believed to have been concealed in the remote past. He travelled widely and his activities included the founding or repairing of monasteries in Western Tibet and in Sikkim, and the repair of mchod-rten stupa in Nepal. He was greatly revered by Pho-ba-nams stobs-rgyas, the ruler of Tibet; and in 1761/62 when trouble arose between the princes of upper and lower Ladakh and there was danger of interference by the Dzungar marauders of Kashgar, Pho-ba and the Vithal Dalai Lama commissioned him to restore peace. That incident was referred to recently by the Chinese Government in their frontier disputes with India as evidence that Ladakh was at that time under the authority of Lhasa. In spite of complimentary remarks in Tibetan sources, it seems that his efforts did not bear lasting fruit. From Ladakh he went to Nepal and not long after, in about 1763 he died at skye-dgong where there is a mchod-rten containing his relics.

The Lama is brought vividly to life by a passage in the biography of the 'Brug-pa Lama Yon-tan mitha-yas which shows his active personal interest in verifying his antiquarian material. Yon-tan mitha-yas describes how when he was at Lhasa about 1744 he met Karthog Rig 'dzin chen-po Tse-ba Drung nor-bu sitting by the zder-rinj outside the gTsung-lag-khang and reading the inscription on it. A copy of that inscription is, as mentioned above, included in the collection now in Arting Barnina's possession and it may well be that the notes and corrections on it were being made at that very time by the Lama himself.