

## **A Noble Noose of Methods, The Lotus Garland Synopsis: A Mahāyoga Tantra and its commentary**

by Cathy Cantwell & Robert Mayer. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften, 449. Band. Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens Nr. 73. Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2012, 375 pp., with a CD-ROM attachment, ISBN 978-3-7001-7273-4, 105.28 €.

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There has been an increasing awareness that the period stretching from roughly the middle of the ninth century to the turn of the first millennium was, in major areas where Buddhism was active on the Asian mainland (I am thinking here of East India, Tibet, and China), a time of political uncertainty, in the sense that there seems to have been a complete breakdown of centralised control. Historical evidence (such as inscriptions) is indeed scarce. However, it is very clear that this political instability not only did not cause a stagnation in religious matters: on the contrary, and perhaps for precisely this reason, the said period witnessed an incredible burgeoning of new revelations (mostly of the esoteric or tantric kind) and vigorous exegetical discussion.

The texts edited in the work under review date roughly to this period, or perhaps somewhat earlier. The ‘Noble Noose of Methods’ (henceforth TZ, after the Tibetan title, *Thabs zhags*) is a scripture still revered in the Tibetan cultural sphere, first and foremost among ‘followers of the old [translations]’ (Rnying ma pa). The authors, foremost scholars in the field of early Rnying ma pa studies (and beyond), present here not only a critical edition of the TZ (pp. 103-228), but also an edition of an early commentary (henceforth TZComm) that survived in the famous Dunhuang cache of manuscripts (pp. 229-348).<sup>1</sup> The two editions are prefaced by an in-depth philological (but also methodological) study (pp. 1-102), and followed by an Appendix concerning the pantheon of the cult taught in the text (pp. 349-362), a short bibliography, and an index. There is also a

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1 The TZComm is not presented as a critical edition (in spite of the fact that other reviewers refer to it thus), but as a diplomatic transcript with missing passages lifted over from other witnesses. The boundaries are carefully pointed out.

CD-ROM attachment containing the images of the Dunhuang Manuscript, IOL Tib J 321, from the Stein Collection at the British Library.

The core of the work is a critical edition of TZ itself, which is a veritable philological tour de force. The authors went to great lengths to obtain every single accessible witness, including very rare and hitherto only very rarely used prints and manuscripts such as the Bathang, Hemis, and Tawang canons. The complexity of the work undertaken should at least be suggested by the fact that in the end there are 21 witnesses used for the edition, which results in a rather complex and at first sight daunting apparatus. This remains true even after the first chapter, which is the only one recording every single reading. The authors were not willing to compromise for the sake of simplicity, and rightly so: after some initial efforts, the careful reader is amply rewarded.

In the Introduction quite a lot is made of the stemmatic method and its application to the TZ, but, again, rightly so. Recent times have witnessed the appearance of several studies concerning the not inconsiderable theoretical and practical problems of the stemmatic method. This has led some to dismiss it almost completely; on the other hand, even eminent scholars seem not to have given up on the rather orthodox principle that an edition cannot be called critical unless it succeeds in establishing a stemma, i.e. a (hypothetical) 'tree' of textual transmission. The present reviewer thinks that one cannot be dogmatic in this approach and tends to advocate that while a critical edition is entirely possible without necessarily succeeding in establishing the precise history of transmission, the stemmatic method should nevertheless be used in cases where enough material and material of a suitable nature is accessible. In other words, one must be pragmatic and adopt, or indeed develop, a method that is best suited to what is dictated by the nature and quantity of the material under scrutiny. This may not always be successful, but herein lies one of the most beautiful aspects of scholarship: everybody is more than welcome to improve on previous work.

The present case is fortunately one in which the stemmatic method can be used, and with profit. For—and this is only one of the reasons, but one that we must insist on, since it is a veritable philological treat—the TZ was transmitted in some cases in a rather awkward way: it seems that the root-text was for some and at some point lost, whereupon editors were constrained to extract it from its commentary, which was available

to them. This, needless to say, resulted in a garbled transmission. The authors are, I think, successful in untangling this formidable problem, and manage to establish a plausible archetype of the root-text with an assured hand. However, at the same time they are not reluctant to point out what had remained conjectures or mere hypotheses. This, what one might call ‘editorial honesty’, is something that normally should be expected, but, sadly, it is not so often observed in actual practice.

One would wish to go through the work and discuss it page by page, especially the Introduction, which is rich and thought-provoking. However, due to constraints of space I must limit myself to only a handful of disjointed observations.

TZComm, as the authors state (p. 2), ‘displays some sign of probable authorship in Tibet, or at least, contains some material most probably composed in Tibetan. Its Chapter Six glosses the Tibetan term for *maṇḍala*, *dkyil 'khor*, according to its two halves, giving first an explanation of centre (*dkyil*), followed by an elaboration on circle (*'khor*). The note added (n. 2) states: ‘It is unlikely that the Sanskrit word, *maṇḍala*, could have been similarly separated into two parts with exactly these implications’. The note further down cites Mi pham: ‘*maṇḍal ni snying po'am l'*’ etc. First of all, we should point out the transmissional error (or Mi pham’s own) *maṇḍal* for correct *maṇḍa*, cf. e.g. *bodhimaṇḍa = byang chub snying po*. In fact there are such explanations in Indian semantic analysis, where *maṇḍala* is explained as *maṇḍa+la*. Typically, *maṇḍa* is taken to mean *sāra*, ‘essence’, which can be glossed further according to the context, and *la* is taken to stand for the rare verbal root *lā*, ‘to give’, or, more often, ‘to take’ (cf. Pradīpodyotana p. 41, 42, 45, 94, and elsewhere).

The authors place great emphasis on the fact that there is an effort throughout the commentary to interiorise ‘external’ elements such as ritual procedures, a tendency usually associated with later Rnying ma pa authors. This effort is already present in the Indian context by this time. Moreover, the example cited here (p. 5), namely that empowerment (i.e. initiation) can be obtained both through ritual articles and through awareness, but here (in the TZ) it is through the expressive power of awareness (*rigs* [this spelling is often employed for *rig*] *pa'i rtsal*), has a striking parallel in the kindred tradition of tantric Śaivism. Abhinavagupta describes the highest kind of officiant as one who has been initiated by ‘the goddesses of one’s awareness’ (Tantrāloka 4.43ab).

Perhaps the least explored area in the book is the issue of parallels and works cited by the commentary (primarily pp. 84-86). The authors are of course aware of this and promise more work on the subject. Exploring textual pools cited by commentators (especially such early ones) is a matter of utmost urgency if we wish to establish a relative chronology of texts. It might be pointed out, for example, that the citation attributed in TZComm to the *Dpal mchog dang po* (that is, the *Paramāḍya*<sup>2</sup>) cannot be traced in the version transmitted in the Gsar ma canons. The same is true for the 'Gu hya (or *Gu hya ti la ka* in the non-Dunhuang transmission): the text does not match anything in the most obvious candidate, the *Guhyendutilaka*. On the other hand, one is struck by the close resemblance between the stanza beginning with *lam gyi nang na* (p. 108) and the famous verse on the superiority of Vajrayāna from \*Tripiṭakamalla's \**Nayatrāyapradīpa*, which was already current in ninth-century Indic exegesis: *ekārthatve 'py asaṃmohāt bahūpāyād aduṣkarāt | tīkṣṇendriyādhikārāc ca mantrasāstraṃ viśiṣyate ||*.<sup>3</sup>

No masterpiece is ever free of errors, and the following list contains very minor points. In the Acknowledgments (p. vii), the Japanese name order is observed for Tanaka Kimiaki but not for Tsuguhito Takeuchi. The old, Mongolian-style pronunciation is retained for the Kanjur and the Tenjur throughout, although the authors are otherwise very careful to distance themselves from old habits that die hard, such as using \**anut-taratantra* for *yoganiruttaratantra*. In the Indian context 'charnel ground' or 'cremation ground' is more appropriate than 'cemetery' (p. 3, 9). The expression *de rigueur* should be spelt thus rather than *de rigure* (p. 22). It is debatable whether 'synopsis' is the best choice to render *don bsdus pa*: perhaps 'digest' is more appropriate, whereas we should reserve 'synopsis' for *sa bcad*. In discussing the codicological feature of highlighting in the Dunhuang Manuscript, the authors state (p. 36): 'It is clear that highlighting of the chapter titles would seem redundant since it is obvious that they are root text'. Doubtless, the authors are aware of contrary examples,

2 What exactly the *Paramāḍya* is is a rather complex question. I have examined the *Adhyardhaśatikā* and the so-called \**Paramāḍyamantrakalpakaḥṇḍa* as transmitted in the Derge canon. An examination of the Chinese translations best-known under their Japanese moniker as the *Rishukyō* cycle might prove revealing.

3 Loosely translated, this would read: 'Although the goal is the same [as in the case of non-tantric Buddhism], the teaching of mantras [i.e. esoteric Buddhism] is superior because it does not fail, because of its manifold means, because of lack of asceticism, and because it is meant for those of the highest ability'.

such as the *Herukābhīdhāna*, where chapter titles appear later, therefore this sentence could have been phrased more carefully. Goddesses with animal heads are referred to (p. 39) as ‘zoomorphic’, whereas in truth they are ‘zoocephalic’. What the authors interpret as ‘patience’ (p. 68 for *bzod pa* on p. 235) is perhaps better rendered as ‘tolerance’.