


# The 1983 Copy of Köten's 1244 Letter to Sa skya Paṇḍita

Sun Penghao  
(Harvard University)

Chen Qingying  
(China Tibetology Research Center)

he year 1244 is traditionally believed to be the year that the Mongol prince Köten<sup>1</sup> extended an invitation to Sa skya Paṇḍita, starting a relationship which, after some twists and turns, finally evolved into the so-called Mongol-Sa skya hegemony in Tibet. Two of the early Tibetan sources related to this invitation have been subjected to philological scrutiny: Dieter Schuh suggested that at least part of Köten's invitation letter preserved in A mes zhabs's (1599–1657) 1629 history is the result of forgery;<sup>2</sup> David Jackson later cast doubt on the alleged origin of another important epistle copied by A mes zhabs, the so-called “Sa skya Paṇḍita's letter to the Tibetans,”<sup>3</sup> which is traditionally believed to have come from the meeting of Köten and Sapaṅ. These two scholars have drawn attention to some critical issues concerning the textual transmissions of these two early documents of great political significance. In this article, we will reevaluate some of the problems they identified through the reading of a hitherto underappreciated document found in 1983 at the Sa skya monastery (hereafter referred to as “the '83 copy”). In 1989, Huang Bufan 黃布凡 and Chen Qingying 陳慶英, though unaware of their two western colleagues' works, published a study of the '83 copy, explaining its anomalies and arguing for its authenticity. However, due to the poor circulation of the edited volume that contained the article, their study has so far received little notice even in China. The '83 copy that they studied is a unique version of Köten's letter – it contains not only a unique Tibetan version of the text but also a set of Tibetan transcriptions of Chinese annotations. As we will see, the phonology of the Chinese matches the Early Mandarin of the thirteenth to fourteenth centuries. The '83 copy thus constitutes an earlier layer of the textual transmission of

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<sup>1</sup> For the Mongol spelling of Köten (Kuoduan 闊端, Kuodan 廓丹, or Kuteng 庫騰 in Chinese, Go dan or Go tan in Tibetan), see Atwood 2015, 21.

<sup>2</sup> Schuh 1977, 26–69.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson 1986.

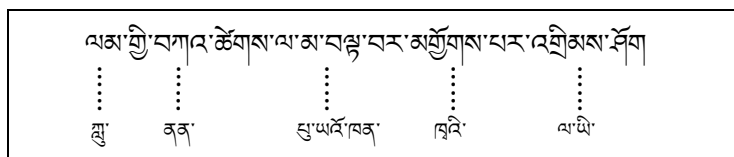
the letter in question.

Recently, we introduced the studies by Schuh and Jackson to our peers in the Chinese academic world in the hope that their important contributions would receive due attention (Sun & Chen 2020). Conversely, the present essay aims to fully present the '83 copy of Köten's letter to scholars in the west. After a revised reconstruction of the Chinese gloss, we will also introduce recently discovered fragments of a Tangut woodblock-print that was produced through the patronage of Köten in 1244, to better contextualize his letter and discuss the multilingual and multiethnic officials in his court. Notably, Köten is addressed in the Tangut print set as "the crown prince," which echoes some historical records about Köten's endeavor to pursue the throne of the Mongol *qa'an*. We believe that it is appropriate to dedicate this essay to our friend Dan Martin, who has greatly enriched our understanding of Tibetan epistolary culture.

1. The '83 Copy of Köten's Letter

One of the authors, Chen Qingying, had the rare opportunity to view the document in the summer of 1983 when he visited the Sa skya monastery. It is a 30cm wide by 10cm tall piece of thick white paper with writing on both sides, preserved in a room on the second floor of a building located across from the grand assembly hall. The room in which the letter was found was referred to as an "archive-cum-library" (*cangshu shi* 藏書室) by local monks and housed other manuscripts alleged to be epistles of Sa skya Paṇḍita. Largely owing to certain restrictions, but also because the camera (a Seagull [海鷗] 135mm) brought by Nga phod 'Jigs med (阿沛·晉美) was out of film, Chen Qingying and his companions (Nga phod 'Jigs med, Luo Zhao 羅焯, and Ding Mingyi 丁明夷) were unable to take any pictures but had to copy selected documents by hand, one of which was the '83 copy.

This copy contains not only a unique Tibetan version of Köten's letter but also Tibetan transcriptions of Chinese annotations. For example,



These notes obviously denote the Chinese *lu* 路 (*klu*), *nan* 難 (*nan*), *buyaokan* 不要看 (*pu ya'o khan*), *kuai* 快 (*khwa'i*), and *lai* 來 (*la yi*). Taken together, they do not follow Chinese syntax, but when the word order is slightly adjusted, they carry the same meaning as the Tibetan counterparts they gloss: "Disregarding the hardship of the road, quickly come here!"

Huang Bufan, a linguist of Sino-Tibetan phonology, recognized the importance of the phonology and, together with Chen Qingying, reconstructed most of the Chinese expressions. Below is a reproduction of the '83 copy with revised reconstructions based on Huang & Chen 1989. Original transcriptions appear in brackets and are followed by our reconstructed characters. To clarify the structure, we present the text within the frame of an imperial edict and wherever possible use the same terms that have been used to study medieval European documents.<sup>4</sup>

[Invocatio] tshe ring gnam (tshang ming then \*長命天) gyi she mong (shri ta \*勢大?) dang (hwa \*和) bsod nams chen po'i (ta hu \*大福) dpal (hu ko'i \*富貴) la brten (thā \*托?)

[Intitulatio] rgyal po (ham ti \*皇帝) nged kyi lung (shing tri \*聖旨)/

[Publicatio] sa skya (pa'i thu \*白土) paṇḍita (ho'e 佛爺?) kun dga' (phu hyi \*普喜) rgyal mtshan (throm \*幢) dpal (hu ko'i \*富貴) bzang po (zhan \*賢) la go bar byed pa'i gnam (ngo 'ji ta'u \*告知道)/

[Narratio and Dispositio] nged pha ma (hu mu \*父母) dang / gnam sa'i (then ti \*天地) drin lan (ngan tyan \*恩典) 'jal ba'i ched du (trung \*重)/ lam (klu \*路) gyi blang dor (ho'i tshu'i \*會取?) ma nor bar (pu thra \*不差) ston (chu khan \*出看?) shes pa'i (ho'i \*會) bla ma (sri hu \*師傅) cig (yi ko \*一個) dgos pa (ya'o \*要) brtag pa byas (cin tro \*斟酌) dus (sri'u \*時候) khyed (ni \*你) du 'dug pas (hri ha'o \*是好?)/ lam (klu \*路) gyi dka' tshogs (nan \*難) la ma blta bar (pu ya'o khan \*不要看) mgyogs par (khwa'i \*快) 'grims shog (la yi \*來)/

[Sanctio] yang na so rgas zer na (ni g.yu'i la'o la'o \*你曰老了) sngon (tshan \*前) ston pa thub pa'i dbang pos (shi kya ho yu hwam \*釋迦佛玉皇?) sems can (i tshi drung srin pi shin \*一切眾生百姓) gyi

<sup>4</sup> Schuh 1977, Chapter 4 (158–177).

don du lus grangs med sbyin par btang ba (mo shru she sri \*沒數  
 施捨) ci tsam (sya pi \*相比?)/ khyed (ni \*你) kyi chos (hwa \*法)  
 go ba'i dam bca' (ta'i zho \*大學?) (mam \*盟?) dang e 'gel (ngo  
 shin hyi \*?)/ ngas (ngo ling \*我令[/領]?) mtha'i khirms ra che ba  
 (ta'i hwa tu \*大法度)<sup>5</sup> blangs dmag chen po'i (ta'i ping \*大兵)  
 'bab 'dur byas na (shrang tsa'i ta'u can \*傷在刀劍) sems can  
 mang po la (yi tsi drung sring \*一切眾生) mi gnod pa e yin (drus  
 pu hya \*誅不下?)/ nga (ngo \*我) dang sems can mang po'i (yi tsi  
 drung sreng \*一切眾生) don (sri \*事) du mgyogs par 'grims shog  
 (sen la'i \*迅來?)/ nyi ma nub phyogs (si ci'u bzhi tha'u \*西州日  
 頭?) kyi bande rnams (sing tu \*僧徒?) khyed shes su 'jug pa yin  
 (ni phu wa'i tsun \*你普為尊?) /

[List of gifts<sup>6</sup>] gngang sbyin (shrang si \*賞賜) dngul (yin tsa \*銀子) bre  
 lnga / gos (ton ji \*緞織?) ta hūm (dmar chen \*大紅)<sup>7</sup> gi chos gos  
 (rgya sra \*袈裟) mu tig gi tshom<sup>8</sup> can (hwam cin tru \*黃珍珠?) la  
 mu tig (cin tru \*珍珠) stong phrag drug (lu tshan \*六千) dang  
 nyis brgya (ri pa'i \*二百)/ gos lu hang (ljang ser \*綠黃) gi ring  
 'gag (chan ka la \*?)<sup>9</sup>/ lham (sho tsa \*靴子) 'bob (can ba \*氈襪?)  
 dang bcas pa kha ti kha tshang yug gnyis (kyin chon ri \*錦全二  
 )<sup>10</sup>/ thon ti (shan sren \*?)<sup>11</sup> kha tshang yug gnyis (ri phi \*二疋)/  
 gos chen sna lnga (u sre'i \*五色)<sup>12</sup> yug (yi ko \*一個) nyi shu  
 rnams (ri phi \*二疋)<sup>13</sup> yod (ya'u \*有)/

[Proclamation and Personnel] 'di'i don la (ci sri \*這事) (gim gam \*今

<sup>5</sup> = *yeke jasaq?*

<sup>6</sup> The list of gifts (die Aufzählung der Geschenke) is intentionally not discussed by Schuh 1977. The list of gifts and the personnel appointed to the task are also uncommon elements in later protective or tax-exemptive edicts.

<sup>7</sup> The Tibetan transcription of Chinese, *ta hūm* (< *dahong* 大紅), is used in the Tibetan letter, and the Tibetan *dmar chen* is used as its annotation. *Lu hang* (< *lūhuang* 綠黃) and *ljang ser*, which appear several lines below, are the same.

<sup>8</sup> Read *tshon?*

<sup>9</sup> Not identified.

<sup>10</sup> Although the three syllables were written together, they respectively correspond to Tibetan terms *kha thi*, *kha tshang*, and *yug gnyis*. Here, *gin* may represent the Chinese *jin* 錦. *Quan* 全 refers to *kha tshang*, which may be the same as *kha gang*, a measurement for textiles, like Chinese *yifang* 一方.

<sup>11</sup> We wonder whether *thon thi* is related to the Mongolian *taji*, which means *shanduan* 閃緞, a kind of shiny satin.

<sup>12</sup> This may refer to *wuse duan* 五色緞, "five-colored satin."

<sup>13</sup> The number in the gloss ("two") does not match the Tibetan ("twenty").

喊)<sup>14</sup> dor shrī mgon (hu ko'i hu \*富貴怙)<sup>15</sup> dang (hwa \*和)/ jī ba  
 kha (mi sdi \*)<sup>16</sup> mngags pa yin (khyu la'o \*去了)/  
 [Eschatocol] 'brug lo (lung nyan \*龍年) zla ba brgyad pa'i (pa yo \*八  
 月) tshes grangs la (ki bzhi \*吉日) song ba (khyen khyud \*遣去)  
 dge/ shu bham (ha'o \*好)/

As Professor Huang Bufan has demonstrated, the Chinese phonology represented by these transcriptions matches the Early Mandarin represented by the *Zhongyuan yinyun* 中原音韻.<sup>17</sup> We can also see randomness in the choice of different Tibetan transcriptions for the same Chinese characters, such as *srin*, *sring*, and *sreng* for *sheng* 生, which seems to suggest that this was an *ad hoc* or personal note rather than a systematically edited annotation. Interestingly, in the case of words that are already in the form of their foreign transcriptions (perhaps already loanwords/Erbwörter at the time), the annotator uses Tibetan to gloss them: *dmār chen* for *ta hūm* (< *dahong* 大紅) and *ljang ser* for *lu hang* (< *lūhuang* 綠黃). This practice indicates that the annotator may have been a bilingual speaker of Chinese and Tibetan, instead of a monolingual Tibetan speaker who simply wrote down the sounds. The '83 copy not only offers us a new look at the date of the letter, it also provides philologists with new materials to work with. For example, some terms for textiles, such as *thon ti* and *kha ti*, may not have come from Chinese, at least according to this annotator.<sup>18</sup>

But what was their usage? Although the later edicts of the Yuan dynasty had a dimension of public performance, we do not know in this particular case whether the letter was read out loud before an audience that included the primary recipient. If that was the case, the annotations may have accompanied the original document to facilitate its reading by the drafter, messengers, or negotiators, who may have included monolingual speakers from Köten's court. We will discuss this point in the next section.

<sup>14</sup> This most likely corresponds to the Tibetan *mngags* that comes later in the sentence.

<sup>15</sup> We thank Xie Guangdian 謝光典 for his suggestion on this reconstruction.

<sup>16</sup> It is unclear whether this form represents the Sanskrit *jīvaka*, which is also the name of a famous physician. The *Blue Annals* record a Mongol general called Mi li byi, who went to Tibet with the general Dor ta. We cannot help but wonder if that name has anything to do with this Mi sdi.

<sup>17</sup> Huang & Chen 1989.

<sup>18</sup> See Karsten 2018 for more possibilities regarding their origins.

## 2. Sources of Skepticism

The multiple variations between the '83 copy and other versions allow us to review the skepticism expressed by scholars. Schuh, reading versions of the letter such as that of A mes zhabs, finds it odd that Köten's court would have made use of so much Buddhist discourse in the letter.<sup>19</sup> The '83 copy gives us a variant reading that partly supports this doubt. When talking about the *raison d'être* of Sa paṅ's future trip, the letter says,

The '83 copy	A mes zhabs's version <sup>20</sup>
<i>nga dang sems can mang po'i don du ...</i>	<i>sangs rgyas kyi bstan pa dang sems can mang po la ...</i>
"For the sake of me and many sentient beings ..."	"For the Buddha's Teaching and many sentient beings ..."

The tone in the '83 copy thus sounds more like what we would expect from a Chinggisid ruler at this time, emphasizing the Mongol lord himself rather than the Buddha's Teachings.

The '83 copy is, however, not totally free of Buddhist discourse. Are we then to take all the Buddhist elements as the work of later editors? As Schuh has remarked, even by the end of the Yuan dynasty, the official ideology of the empire only traced the royal patronage of Buddhism to the reigns of Ögedei and Möngke.<sup>21</sup> Christopher Atwood has also noted that "the Mongol image of 'Tibet' in the 1240s and 1250s was not based on the religiously-dominated society of Central Tibet, but rather on the pastoralists and farmers of Kökenuur."<sup>22</sup> However, we cannot for this reason simply dismiss any understanding of Tibet as a Buddhist society on the part of Köten. Since the appearance of studies by Sperling, Dunnell, and most recently Atwood, we can no longer talk about the early Mongol-Tibet interface without taking into account the Xia and Jin experience with Tibetans.<sup>23</sup> The evidence we will present below also supports our belief that Köten and his courtiers are likely to have used Buddhist discourse in their negotiations with central Tibetans.

Recently, two woodblock-printed fragments of the Tangut version of Zhenzhi's 眞智 *Foshuo dabaisangai zongchi tuoluoni jing* 佛說大白傘蓋總持陀羅尼經 (Taishō Tripiṭaka no. 977, i.e., the *Uṣṇīṣasitātapatrā*

<sup>19</sup> Schuh 1977, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Schuh 1977, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Schuh 1977, 58–69.

<sup>22</sup> Atwood 2015, 40.

<sup>23</sup> See Atwood 2015 for a full bibliography.

*Dhāraṇī*) were identified by Shi Jinbo.<sup>24</sup> These fragments fortunately include a portion of the printing colophon, which was composed by a certain “national preceptor” (國師) named \*Buddhavajra (噶藏拔藏) and which clearly states that it was through the patronage of Köten that this trilingual (Tangut, Tibetan, and Chinese) block-print of the *Uṣṇīśasitāpatrā Dhāraṇī* was produced in 1244. The cult of *Uṣṇīśasitāpatrā* was doubtless inherited from the former Tangut kingdom.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, printing editions in these three languages are also a tradition of the Tangut royal house, the earliest extant specimen of which is dated to 1149 – almost a century before Köten’s patronage.<sup>26</sup> That is to say, in the same year when the invitation letter was sent to Sa skya, Köten was a patron of Buddhism just as the former Tangut kings before him had been, and he may also have employed members of the local Buddhist community in his administration.<sup>27</sup> Shen Weirong, in his reading of the Buddhist texts of the Kharakhoto collection, observes that the Buddhist community in the area had an excellent translingual aptitude, being able to create new texts based on both the Chinese and Tibetan traditions.<sup>28</sup> These data allow us to imagine the use of Chinese and Tangut as working languages in Köten’s administration.

The Tangut fragments have also betrayed the self-proclaimed political status of Köten. There, Köten is addressed as 東宮皇太子, literally “east-stairs crown-prince.” This must be the Tangut equivalent of Köten’s title, *donggong huangtaizi* 東宮皇太子, “crown-prince of the eastern-palace,” found in the 1243 Chinese edictal inscriptions at the Caotang monastery in Huxian (鄆縣草堂寺閣端令旨碑).<sup>29</sup> Another section of the colophon addresses Köten as 藏剌藏藏, “Crown Prince /ko ta/,” with the last two syllables being transcriptions of Köten. Therefore, both Tangut and Chinese contemporary sources address him as the “crown prince,” meaning he was expected by certain people to be the heir apparent to the

<sup>24</sup> Shi 2015; and Shi 2016. Although the Tibetan prints have not been found, Zhenzhi’s version corresponds to the *’Phags pa de bzhin gshegs pa’i gtsug tor nas byung ba’i gdugs dkar po can gzhan gyis mi thub pa zhes bya ba’i gzung*s (D593).

<sup>25</sup> Shi 2015; and Shi 2016. The cult was already popular among the Sino-Tibetan communities of Dunhuang during the eighth to tenth centuries. For Dunhuang’s *Uṣṇīśasitāpatrā* cult and its social role, see Yu 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Hamanaka & Sizova 2020.

<sup>27</sup> This new evidence also prompts us to slightly revise the beginning of the Mongol patronage of Buddhism to the 1240s; see van der Kuijp 2004 for later Mongol support of Tibetan Buddhist text printing.

<sup>28</sup> Shen 2020.

<sup>29</sup> For the inscriptions, see Cai 2017, 21.

throne,<sup>30</sup> which was at that time empty, while the political power rested in the hands of the regent-dowager Töregene (regent 1242–1246, d. 1246), Köten's mother.

This period, however important for the development of the Mongol-Tibetan relationship, was a time when Mongol politics was, in Jagchid Sechen's words, "extremely chaotic."<sup>31</sup> The Imperial Preceptor 'Phags pa (1235–1280) in the 1270s already considered Köten's older brother Güyük (1206–1248) to be the third *qa'an* of the Mongol empire.<sup>32</sup> This is arguably the orthodox view at Qubilai's court at that time; however, this may have not been the case for other historiographical traditions. As Liu Yingsheng has observed, the Chinese *Yuan shi* 元史 does not include Güyük in the *benji* 本紀 ("biography of emperors") section, and the two Persian sources by Juwaynī and Rashīd al-Dīn both refer to Güyük as a mere *qan*, while they call other Mongol emperors *qa'an*.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Juwaynī reports that Köten once proposed himself as the rightful successor to the throne.<sup>34</sup> Rashīd al-Dīn also mentions that Köten was chosen as the heir apparent by Chinggis Qan.<sup>35</sup> In other words, Persian sources indicate that Köten may have competed with his brother Güyük for the emperorship. We are also reminded that, although the demanding of hostages was a standard Mongol practice, it was exceptional, as Atwood has noted, on the part of Köten to have felt confident enough to keep Sa paṅ and his nephews in his own entourage and not forward them to the emperor.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the act of sending an imperial edict to Tibet in 1244 and subsequently keeping the resulting hostages for himself might have stemmed from his ambition to claim the throne.

This may explain why Köten, in his invitation letter to Sa paṅ, calls himself *rgyal po* (usually "emperor" in the edictal context) and the

<sup>30</sup> Although it is generally believed that the *huangtaizi*-system was first established by Qubilai in 1260 and the use of imperial titles by the Mongols cannot be interpreted simply through their Chinese origins (see Hung Chin-fu 2010, 754), the phrase *donggong huangtaizi* in both Chinese and Tangut seems to point to a possible earlier example of such institution among the Mongols.

<sup>31</sup> Jagchid Sechen 1978, 34. For a survey of the discordant sources on Güyük and Köten, see *ibid.*, 34–42. It remains to be examined what early sources were responsible for the confusingly diverse treatment of the two figures in later Tibetan and Mongol sources.

<sup>32</sup> For 'Phags pa's writings on the Mongol royal family, see Ishihama 2001, 35–40.

<sup>33</sup> See Liu 2016. For a survey of sources on Köten, see Pochekaev 2018. For *qa'an* as a title reserved for the emperor, in contrast to *qan* which refers to the subordinate khan, see de Rachewiltz 1983.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Boyle 1997, 251; and Pochekaev 2018, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Liu 2016, 47 suggests that the Chinggis Qan here was a mistaken reference to Ögedei Qan.

<sup>36</sup> Atwood 2015, 42.



letter itself a *lung* (“edict,” Mon. *jarliq*) in Intitulatio.<sup>37</sup> This use of *lung* constitutes one reason for Schuh’s doubt about the authenticity of the letter’s formality, because if Köten was just a prince he would only have been able to issue a *gtam* (Mon. *iige*) and not a *lung*, which was reserved for the *qa’an*.

A letter sent to Sa paṅ from the hierarch of the dominant ‘Bri gung school, Sphyan snga Grags pa ‘byung gnas (1175–1255/1256) further corroborates the idea that Köten may indeed have used “*lung*” in his letter. In it, he asks Sa paṅ to come to him in person, warning that “the golden-paiza-envoys said, ‘if you [Sa paṅ] do not come personally, no matter what you say, since we do not have the king’s edict (*rgyal po’i lung*), we dare not to invite you, and we have indeed not yet invited you.’”<sup>38</sup> The term “king’s edict” here may have represented the same understanding of Köten’s status as the invitation letter.

It is thus possible that Köten was intentionally posing as the Mongol *qa’an* in his communications with Tibet in 1244. That said, it should be noted that the letter is probably the earliest extant Tibetan witness of Mongol chancellery practices, and it is therefore possible that it contains certain “anomalies” (judged by later standardized practice) due to irregular translations and other factors.<sup>39</sup> We have to leave problems such as the simultaneous use of both *lung* and *gtam* to the future.

### 3. Mentions and Citations

With the ‘83 copy we can also address some of the textual issues raised by Jackson concerning Sa paṅ’s *Letter to the Tibetans*. Sa paṅ’s letter has come under suspicion because 1) the earliest mentions and citations of it do not appear until the sixteenth century; and 2) the style, “colloquial in tone and not at all elegant,” is unlike that of Sa paṅ’s other writings.<sup>40</sup>

We believe the two issues are connected and both depend on the nature we attribute to Sa paṅ’s letter. If the letter represents the result of Sa paṅ’s negotiation with Köten, its colloquial style and late

<sup>37</sup> The Tibetan term *rgyal po* seems to have not been exclusively used for *qa’an*, but both the formulaic Intitulatio and the following *lung* indicate that *rgyal po* here means “emperor.”

<sup>38</sup> Sphyan snga 2000, vol. 1, 59: *de la gser yig pa rnams kyis / rin po che lo tsāba mar la mi ‘byon na zhal kyin gang btang yang nged la rgyal po’i lung med pas sphyan ‘dren mi phod cing mi ‘dren par bya bar gda’ /*. For the close connection of Sphyan snga and his successors with the Mongols, see Czaja 2013, 89–99; and Samten & Martin 2015, 298.

<sup>39</sup> For example, the issue of title confusions that arose due to status changes, which is briefly dealt with in Qiu 2011, 106–7.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson 1986, 20.

inclusion in his oeuvre would not be strange. The interrogative particle *e* in Sa paṅ's letter, which may strike a Tibetan reader as too colloquial,<sup>41</sup> is actually reflecting the Mongolian *ilü'ü*, a common particle in edicts with which a rhetorical question "Aren't you afraid?" is made.<sup>42</sup> We thus prefer the alternative hypothesis made by Jackson, which is that Sa paṅ's letter "was the product of close consultations with the Mongols."<sup>43</sup> The "collected works" (*gsung 'bum*) of a scholar would not include such a quasi-political settlement.

As for its late appearance, not only in catalogues but also in citations, we can think of two factors that may have contributed. First, during the time of Möngke (r. 1251–1259) and the succession war that followed his death, the two letters' significance for Tibetan politics became limited. Even after 'Phags pa became the imperial preceptor and Sa skya the most powerful order in Tibet, Köten's heritage would have been downplayed because he was not of Tolui's blood line. As far as we know, 'Phags pa only mentioned Sa paṅ and Köten's meeting once in his collected works, that is, in his 1275 praise for prince Manggala's (d. 1278) patronage of Buddhist text production.<sup>44</sup> It is possibly because prince Manggala, the third son of Qubilai, was deemed by 'Phags pa to be the successor of Köten in terms of their domains and roles in the empire.<sup>45</sup> Second, there seems to have been a general trend toward giving increasing weight to official documents in Tibetan historiography. For example, none of the fourteen official documents of the Yuan government included in the *Gnyags ston pa'i gdung rabs*, a work of the eighteenth century,<sup>46</sup> were found in the earlier and otherwise more detailed biography of Mus chen Rgyal mtshan dpal bzang po (1287–1347),<sup>47</sup> although in many places the early biography was copied almost verbatim into the *Gnyags ston pa'i gdung rabs*. This seems to suggest that these official documents took on new historical significance some four centuries after their issuance.

The two letters' inclusion in later historical writings has also to do with the renewed Tibeto-Mongol connection that had developed since the late sixteenth century, especially in the case of A mes zhabs, who witnessed a new influx of Mongols, as well as the rise of the Manchus in Inner Asia, and corresponded with them through

<sup>41</sup> Jackson 1986, 20.

<sup>42</sup> For *ilü'ü* in the *Secret History of the Mongols* and edicts, see Junast 2002.

<sup>43</sup> Jackson 1986, 20.

<sup>44</sup> See Ishihama 2001, 36.

<sup>45</sup> For Manggala's life, see Shurany 2017.

<sup>46</sup> See Everding 2006 for this work and the documents it preserves.

<sup>47</sup> Nam mkha' 2015. We thank Trawang (Sichuan University) for this reference.

letters.<sup>48</sup> Letters and government documents began to become more prominent for religious leaders in Tibetan politics in the following period, as also shown by the emergence of the large numbers of letter-writing manuals that are listed in Schneider 2003 and Martin 2016.

Moreover, new mentions and citations of the letter continue to be found. For example, Rin spungs Ngag dbang 'jigs med grags pa, (1532–1597),<sup>49</sup> in his poetical presentation of the life of Sa paṅ, obviously used Köten's letter and copied the list of gifts almost unchanged.<sup>50</sup> He thus offers us a version closer to the '83 copy in many places than that of A mes zhabs, as is clear from the following examples:<sup>51</sup>

The '83 Copy	Rin spungs (1579)	A mes zhabs (1629)
<i>gos ta hūm gi chos gos</i> ...	<i>gos ta'i hung gi snam</i> <i>sbyar ...</i>	<i>gos chen gyi chos gos ...</i>
<i>... dor shrī mgon dang /</i> <i>jī ba kha mngags pa yin /</i>	<i>... rdo shrī mgon dang /</i> <i>dzi ba kha mngags pa yin</i> <i>/</i>	<i>... dor sri mgon dang /</i> <i>dpon jo dar ma gnyis</i> <i>gtang ba yin/</i>
<i>... tshes grangs la song</i> <i>ba dge /</i>	<i>... tshes grangs la song ba</i> <i>dge /</i>	<i>... gnam gang la bris</i>

Rin spungs Ngag dbang 'jigs med grags pa himself was far from a rigorous historian,<sup>52</sup> and we are not sure why he placed this prose passage between flowery verses in a practically unaltered form. But it should be noted that this citation of the letter predated A mes zhabs by half a century. We hope that in the future more of such records will be found.

#### 4. Conclusion

Having read the '83 copy, an early version of Köten's letter to Sa skya paṅdita, we agree with Schuh that later versions of the letter, such as that of A mes zhabs's, were adulterated.<sup>53</sup> However, we wish to

<sup>48</sup> Oyunbilig & Shi 2014 studies the Mongol version of the correspondence between A mes zhabs and the Qing court that is found in the Qing archives.

<sup>49</sup> For the most recent study on his life (including his elusive dates), see Zhang 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Rin spungs 1985, 187–89.

<sup>51</sup> See Sun & Chen 2020 for a complete comparative chart that shows how Köten's letter is rendered by Rin spungs Ngag dbang 'jigs med grags pa.

<sup>52</sup> Rin spungs Ngag dbang 'jigs med grags pa's free adaptation of other works can sometimes be outrageous. For instance, he has transplanted the content of the fifteenth-century *Man lung pa'i lam yig* (TBRC W1KG13947, 1a–2a; and Newman 2020, 1–4) onto Sa paṅ's trip to meet Köten in Liangzhou (Rin spungs 1985, 199–201), therefore his version of the trip is furnished with vivid details.

<sup>53</sup> Schuh 1977, 40.

emphasize that the extent to which it was edited is debatable. Köten may have intentionally presented himself as the Mongol emperor to Tibet, and he may very well have used Buddhist discourse in his edict. The Chinese gloss in the 83' copy and Köten's connection with the printing of Buddhist texts point to the possible involvement of the multilingual personnel who had once worked for the former Tangut kingdom in the drafting of the invitation letter.

Crucial to improvement of our understanding of the letter is to better understand the people behind it: who produced it, what languages they spoke, and what their religious practices and political conventions were. The '83 copy and the Tangut fragments discussed above problematize some of the historiographical records concerning Köten and warrant a revisiting of these questions.

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