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Ritual Funeral Text Tang 665
from the Tangut Collection of IOM, RAS

Abstract: This paper represents a brief study and a translation of a ritual funeral text dated to the 11th–13th cc. Despite its brevity, the manuscript is a consistent and complete fragment describing the ritual and proving the doubtless similarity between the Tangut and Tibetan religious traditions. The very age of the text attests to the fact that this tradition has survived down to the present day in unaltered form.

Key words: Khara-Khoto, funeral ritual, bardo teaching, Tangut Buddhism

The Description and Identification of the Manuscript

This manuscript Tang 665 was selected for study when a catalog of the Tangut collection kept at the IOM, RAS was being compiled in 2005–12\(^1\) under the supervision of Evgenii Kychanov (1932–2013). As a rule, the process involved special descriptions of those books whose bindings differed from those traditional or regular for canonical texts (potli, scrolls, and accordion book) and which looked more like small copybooks. This manuscript is a book with its pages sewn in that way; its two folios, each with text on both sides, measure 17.5 by 12.3 cm. The cursive handwriting is fairly legible (cf. Pl. 1–4). Concerning dating, we can easily determine that it belongs to the 11th–13th cc., that is to say, it is the same age as the bulk of the items collected by Piotr Kozlov (1863–1935). The visible features of the text reveal its structure to be an alternation of poetic and prosaic parts. The latter contain 15 characters per line; a poetic line consists of two parts (each of 7 characters) separated by a caesura. This brief handwritten fragment represents part of the burial procedure, but it also is logically consistent which provides reliable grounds for making it the object of a separate study.

\(^1\) Until recent times this manuscript was registered under inv. No. 4084. This unattributed fragment was entered in the inventory by E.I. Kychanov along with other items in the 1950s.
The self-sufficiency of the text, legible handwriting and good condition of the manuscript simplified its reading and comprehension. The basis for this short study was found in the translation of the title written over the top right-hand margin of page 3: *je ngiw[tśia vje śiei* Ritual [sequence] of cutting in the temple. Firstly, this clearly indicated the nature of the ritual described; and it did indeed soon become clear that the text dealt with funerals. Secondly, the positioning of the inscription on the margin before the text body indicated that the title concerned either the previous or, more likely, the following chapter or text, a component of some larger whole text cycle.

**Text’s Characteristics**

Now it is the time to address the text. An indication that the book was used for practical purposes is the line containing the formula *someone’s name* intended to be replaced with the actual name of the dead or dying person for whom the ritual was performed:

źion si liwu lin mjë swi mjë “Someone’s name’s life is expiring. The body will be changed, changed”. (p. 2)

The following lines reveal that a lama read the text over the body of a disciple, i.e. a monk or some person following the path of the Buddhist teaching:

liwu lin ndjje ngi mọ tšia šji “The body has changed, the disciple will ascend to the heaven!” (p. 3)

That personal and at the same time social characterization of the deceased determined both the form and the content of the ritual. The text states the points of doctrine relevant for the ritual, along with the established rules. The latter were traditionally supported by diverse metaphors and comparisons making it easier to perceive the sense correctly and in-depth. At the same time, these metaphors provide the text with a degree of artistic value. Its basic idea is the following: as soon as one feels that death is imminent, one should immediately and decisively give up one’s attachment to the temporary and fragile body:

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2 This is rarely the case with books from Khara-Khoto, most of which have reached us as fragments of various sizes.
3 The phonetic transcription in M.V. Sofronov’s reconstruction is used in this article.
4 It might also be a convolution.
“Do not feel affection for [your] body and do not love it! A human body is short-lived, you are about to borrow another”. (p. 1)

Such are the initial lines of the fragment; this appeal was repeated more than once when the ritual was performed. The body belonged to and symbolized the fleeting and illusory world that was also to be rejected. Instead, the spirit of the dying (or already dead) person is exhorted to consider the Buddhist faith, to apply every effort in order to purify the nje 辣 (Chin. xin 心, “mind”, “consciousness”) of all affectations, to acquire the new nature of disembodied being, to ascend, and later, fate permitting, to achieve a better rebirth.

Religious and Ethno Cultural Parallels in Ritual Context

Now, we should take a closer look at certain peculiarities of the ritual found in the text.⁵ They are of interest as they make the procedure comparable with later descriptions of the burial traditions of the Tibetans, Buryats, and Mongols. The manuscript contains the following lines:

Listen about the expiry of life and the changes the body will undergo! This is a great umbrella giving [you] shelter. This is a banner measuring [your] body". (p. 2)

These lines can be considered the origins of the ritual that was described much later as follows: “A Tibetan was dying… His name accompanied by invocations was written on an umbrella-shaped shield covered with a khadak. Food was left in front of it; it was revered”.⁶ “The deceased’s best clothes were placed in front of the body, with a representation of the person's soul affixed to them… (stamped… on a sheet of paper)”.⁷ At this point, one

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⁵ In Russian sinological tradition this key concept of Buddhist philosophy is usually translated as “mind”, “consciousness”, but these words do not provide an adequate understanding of the meaning. Evgenii Torchinov, for instance, used a better equivalent, “heart-mind” (TORCHINOV 2008). We, however, will use the traditional translation, “mind”, occasionally employing more elaborate versions, i.e. “heart-mind”, “heart” and “mind”.

⁶ KYCHANOV, SAVITSKY 1975, 159–160.

⁷ GERASIMOVA 1981, 117.
may recall the Tibetan tradition of making flags with representations of the wind-horse indicating the birth date and the wish to ascend like that wind-horse.\(^8\) Rolf Alfred Stein also compared the *tente du corps* ("tent (umbrella) of a body") with the traditional Tibetan wind-horse flags.\(^9\) One can assume that the invocations and the pictures of the soul symbolically represented the merits attained by the deceased during earthly life. It also corresponds to the Tantric concept of *body-consciousness* according to which the *body* denotes only the living shell, a means to spend one's life, but never an object for study by a pathologist.\(^10\) It should be added that Richard Gombrich emphasized the similarity and even identity between the notions *merits* and *good karma* acquired during one's lifetime and passed on at rebirth.\(^11\)

Describing the transformations of Central Asian shamanic rituals under the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, Kseniia Gerasimova mentioned as essential the fact that the lama performing the ritual was identified with as the god of the corresponding ritual: "The lama acted in the name of Buddha's specific Tantric form. The power of the invocations was secured by the force of Buddha's holiness and the teaching of the Buddhist religion".\(^12\) In the Tangut ritual text, too, the officiating lama, in accordance with the tradition, glorified Buddha: \(\text{"Words cannot express Tathagata's power and wisdom."}^{(p. 3)}\)

Then, the lamaist ritual demanded purification of the dead body which was to be cleansed of evil spirits: \(\text{"In the temple, the dead body will be cut, [then the body] will be carried away. [So] the entire illusory nature of [this] world [will be] perceived. The oldest nephew is to carry the head and be more joyful than anybody."}^{(p. 3)}\)

As indicated by the title of this chapter, it concerned the ritual of dismembering conducted in a certain order. One can assume that the initial beheading might possibly be of importance for the posthumous fate of the dead. A lot of peoples developed a special attitude towards the skeleton, the bones. For example, the Buryats had a prohibition on breaking animals' bones during hunting, especially their skulls.\(^14\) The Tibetans believed that the

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\(^8\) Kychanov, Savitsky 1975, 234.
\(^10\) Guenter 1986, 148.
\(^11\) Gombrich 1996, 56.
\(^12\) Gerasimova 1981, 122.
\(^13\) See the commentary on the text translation.
\(^14\) Galdanova 1987, 49.
bones held preserved the soul, and, when performing purification of dead bodies, “…they tended to break the bones of the dead”. These beliefs were linked to the idea that the shelter best home of the soul and the life force in a dead body was the skull. The supposed particular sacral nature of the head is confirmed by funeral (and other) rituals observed by several peoples in Central Asia. For the Tibetans, the soul was linked to a substance of life, the wind, wind-horse dwelling in the shin. If the deceased was someone who had achieved holiness, the soul could find its way to heaven on its own; ordinary secular persons required special rituals performed by a lama and invocations allowing the soul to exit via the top of the dead head. The Mongols associated the head with the notion of sulde (one of its meanings being “the life force”). Galina Galdanova remarks that according to the “Secret History”, Gurbesu, Nayman Dayan-Khan’s mother, ordered that the head of Van-Khan be brought and gave it for sacrifice because Van-Khan belonged to an ancient clan. The legend about ongon Burte says that while the Buryats were moving from Mongolia one of them took along his father's head… as his most cherished treasure. And in the same study there is evidence recorded by Tsyben Zhamtsarano (1880–1942): “…give your gray head to your descendants”. All these actions involving the dismembering of bodies, probably rooted in ancient shamanistic ritual sacrifices, were sanctified by the Buddhist ritual with its primary meaning of magical unification turning into nothingness. That initial and final emptiness, the illusory nature of the body is emphasized in the Tangut ritual text as well; there, the body is represented as “the center of emptiness” and likened to “a mass of clouds”, “a reflection of the Moon in the ocean”.

As soon as the evil spirits were chased out, the lama addressed the deceased's spirit urging it to abandon the perceived world and everything in it, to reject all components of samsaric existence: feelings, attractions, urges, and to strive towards the Three Jewels of the Buddhist faith. The Tangut text confirms that the tradition was old indeed: thi niyo žjon si lwuy lin mie ži phju so ldjʒ ndo mjuṯ tjei ldew This is the reason why the one whose life is expiring, whose body is being changed, should seek the protection of the Three Highest Jewels”. (p. 2)

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15 Gerasimova 1981, 119
16 Kychanov, Savitsky 1975, 234.
17 Galdanova 1987, 49–50.
18 Galdanova 1987, 50
Text Transliteration and Translation

Ms. Tang 665, p. 1. Pl. 1

(01) liwụ `m tsi ti ndzu kye tseụ ndziwo liwụ mi `ju ndzin nje wa sju
(02) `wè lo mi `ju rai ndzje mi lje jë pho `je sju tshjo rju ndziwo
(03) liwụ `m ndzu kye ideu njau
(04) zjon si liwụ lin ndju ti ndzu / ndziwo liwụ nga ngu ndi tson sju
(05) rai ndzje mi ndu xja rja ndzja / rju kha tsi `m tha vi sju
(06) ndzjon sju nga ngu lhjei to sju / lhjei rα lje ngon jë kha šja
(07) tha lhjei jë kha to ldg ngju / lje ngon jë kha lhjei mi ndju

Ms. Tang 665, p. 2. Pl. 2

(08) rju kha tsi `m tha vi sju / zjon si liwụ lin nwọ tsin ideu
(09) zjon si liwụ lin mjè swi nje so kai rα ndai tsi ŋi tha vi sju mi
(10) ngwi lwo ŋj kwọ tsi min nwọ tsin ideu thi niuo zjon si liwụ lin
(11) mjè ŋi phiù so ldgnd mo bhju tjei ideu
(12) zjon si liwụ lin vi sọ tsin na / thi tha `ja ta mbju ngięi tjei
(13) thi loso ta na liwụ ndza / thi ndţiwo ta mjè `o tjei
(14) thi nje wo ta njen džje tjei / thi rjù `u ta ngiwi ideu ngwu

Ms. Tang 665, p. 3. Pl. 3

(15) je ngiwọ tšja vie šjei
(16) zjon si liwụ lin vi sì tsìn na / mjùo ldìe pjù me tshje tjei mìn
(17) nga `m mbì `e mbie ndzìwor thà / phiù tseù lìh pu `in zjòn sì
(18) lda `u tseù rjù na sjwo ŋon / je ngiwo phe tò si `u ndzìei
(19) rju kàì mbì `je ngiwo phe vje / njèi pu `u ŋon ndjù su rai
(20) liwụ lin ndzie ngi mà tshja ŋjò / nde lđi njè ngwu thà lhà we
(21) jë mìn njè ngwu ndà sùjò / lài lìu nje ta vjèi ka nà

Ms. Tang 665, p. 4. Pl. 4

(22) khu ndzìei nje ta tin in na / mi ngüßu njè ngwu sùl déu ngwu
(23) liwụ lin ndzie ngi xja `in tsìn / zjon si liwụ lin vi sì tsìn na
(24) mjè je nja ti žon jë / thà `u `in ndzìe ngo ki žë
(25) rai `ja kí liwụ ndà lìs / lhè žë thà mjè mbì ndzìo déu
(26) lhi pu vjèi `u na tsìwù žë / rju kha ndzù a žì khwa ka
(27) nde lđi njè ngwu `in `a tshjo / thà khwá `u ngwù `in nda na
(28) thà žì mjè ngwu `in nda na / thà kè `je ngwu `in nda na
(01) Do not feel affection for [your] body and do not love it! A human body is short-lived, you are about to borrow another. 

(02) Noble birth and wealth are temporary, like the material world, and passing like bubbles on water. Therefore, 

(03) It should not be attached to [thy] body. 

(04) Life ends, the body will undergo changes, do not be attached [to it]. A human body is like the center of emptiness, an accumulation of clouds. 

(05) It does not exist for long, it perishes soon. Such is the law of [this] world. 

(06) Like the center of emptiness, like the rising Moon with its reflection in the ocean water. 

(07) Though the Moon is reflected in the water, [it is] not there, the Moon is not in the ocean. 

(08) This is like the law for [this] world. Life ends, the body will undergo changes; it should be recognized. 

(09) The life of someone’s name is expiring; the body will undergo changes, be changed in the Three worlds, everything obeys this law. 

(10) A human body is not a solid fruit, it does not have a [solid] basis; it should be recognized. 

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20 As the entire text is an exhortation, a monologue addressed to the listener, punctuation marks used for indicating direct speech have been omitted. 

21 The ritual could be performed over a person dying or already dead; the text has no temporal indications, and so the translation will not go into particulars concerning the alternatives to be expressed by grammatical tense: “life is ending or has ended, the body is undergoing or has undergone changes”. 

22 Lit. “You shalt not love”. 

23 Meaning “shunyata” (Sansk. śūnyata), “nothingness”. The word denotes a key concept in Buddhist philosophy. 

24 Here, the grammatical construction allows for other translations. The dictionary compiled by E.I. Kychanov (below, DEK) translates character No. 4179, 唐, present in similar texts, as “the Buddhist Dharma” — according to the tradition. The metaphor can doubtlessly indicate the unavoidable and universal nature of the dharma laws. However, a literal and possibly simplified meaning of “law” is also possible. 

25 The text employs the character 印 “shadow” (DEK No. 2454), but the context suggests “reflection”. 

26 The text unequivocally emphasizes the process of dying instead of its end, death. Likewise the body (more strictly, “body-mind”) transforms (and not just decomposes!) thus acquiring the properties required for reincarnation. 

27 According to Buddhist cosmology, the life in the three spheres is conditioned by the individual karma. 

28 The grammatical construction allows also another translation: “Like all dharmas of the Three Worlds /which/ get changed...”
(11) This is the reason why one whose life is drawing to its end and whose body is undergoing changes, should seek protection from the Three Highest Jewels.  

(12) Listen about the extinguishing of life and about the changes which the body will undergo! This is the great umbrella which can give [you] shelter.  

(13) This is the banner measuring [your] life.  

(14) This is where consciousness resides, like a pearl [in a shell]. [At the same time] this vessel of evil is [nothing but] the outer cover.  

(15) Ritual [sequence] of cutting in the temple  

(16) Listen about the extinguishing of life and about the changes which the body will undergo! No words can express the might and wisdom of Tathāgata  

(17) My might is great, my name is glorious, [I am] the greatest descendant [from the clan] of Tathāgata [himself],  

(18) [I] hold a skillfully sharpened ax in [my] hands. In the temple, the dead body will be dissected, [then the body] will be taken away.  

(19) [So,] all illusory nature of [this] world [will be] revealed.  

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29. The Three Highest Jewels in Buddhism are Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.  

30. The passage possibly implies the merits attained during one's earthly life.  

31. Sansk. tathāgata, “thus gone”, is one of Buddha's epithets.  

32. There is a problem with reading the 8th character in the second line. It looks like  ˙w  (DEK No. 4509) “old, ancient” or  phi  (DEK No. 4573) “high, upper”. In the event of the first interpretation, this phrase is of particular interest and raises a few questions. The one performing the ritual, the oldest descendant of the deceased, claims to belong to Tathāgata's kin. Most probably, however, the second variant is correct, so it is a metaphor reflecting the identification of the performer with the Tathāgata himself.  

33. Correct understanding of this line is hindered by the poorly written top of the left-hand side of one character which could be read as  暾, “illusion, magic” (DEK No. 4913) or  么, “indivisible” (DEK No. 4914). The same ideogram (minus the two top horizontal strokes) means “empty” (Nevsky 1960, 1,494). However, as a rule, the notion of emptiness was rendered in Tangut texts (including this one) by  空 (DEK No. 2735). As the right-hand character in ideographs No. 4913, No. 4914 in Kychanov’s dictionary and the ideograph denoting “emptiness” in Nevsky’s dictionary was a determinative grapheme with the meaning of “demon” (Kychanov 2008, 397), it cannot be ruled out that the line implied revealing or perceiving the demons' world, which in turn might be directly linked with the idea of purifying the body during the ritual.  

34. Lit. “[will be] disclosed”.  

35. The text repeatedly mentions a descendant of the deceased as a participant in and performer of the funeral ritual (cf. p. 3, lines 2–4, p. 4, line 5). The implication that custom demanded that certain relatives participate in the funeral ritual requires additional research.
(20) The body has undergone changes, and the disciple will ascend to heaven! With heart-mind full of joy, [he] will be reborn in Buddha's land.

(21) Go with [your] mind cleansed of perplexity! Purify [your] mind of passion and greed!

(22) Do not hurry [your] mind when it is being perfected. [You] should leave with [your] mind purified of all perplexity!

(23) The body undergoes changes, the disciple must recognize it now! Listen about the exhausting of life and about the changes which the body will undergo!

(24) The dark earthly habitat cannot withstand testing. When [you] dwell in it, there come sicknesses-obstacles.

(25) Lots of days passing, the body will undergo changes. That habitat must be left behind now.

(26) [When] the descendant, an ax in his hand, touches the head, he will release [you] from everything [in this] world, whatever [you] loved and [whatever you] submitted to.

(27) Ascend [to heaven] with joyous heart-mind! Having played [your part] in this great play, go ahead!

(28) Having sacrificed a lot, go ahead! Having obeyed the Great Law, go ahead!

The Wholeness of Ritual Tradition in Historical Prospective

Finally, we should pay attention to the semantic similarity between this ritual text and the Tibetan treatise “Bardo Thodol”, also known as the

involving other sources. The “oldest nephew” and the “oldest descendant” mentioned here imply the importance of paternal filiation common for the family ties existing in Tangut society at that time (Kychanov 1997, 72–78). The text actually mentions two descendants: the oldest member of the clan who dissects the body, and the “oldest nephew” who is to hold the head, but these two might well be the same person. Besides, it remains unclear whether the “descendant” and the lama performing the ritual and identifying himself as Tathagata are two people or one.

36 The text reads “with joyous mind”; cf. commentary to fn. 4.
37 Lit. “with your mind [from which] all obstacles have been removed”.
38 I.e. obstacles on the path to liberation.
39 Cf. fn. 39.
40 Evidently, cutting the head off in accordance with the ritual.
41 Lit. “with joyous mind”; cf. Preface, fn. 5.
42 I am very grateful to Kirill Solonin for the assistance he rendered during the translation.
43 Its title has been transcribed in more than one way.
“Tibetan Book of the Dead”, that has been extremely popular (if that word is appropriate for such compositions) in Europe since 1927, when it was translated into English and commented on by Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). That work, presumably written in the 9th c., has been ascribed to Padmasambhava. It used to be one of the “clandestine texts” or “concealed books” hidden when Buddhists were persecuted at that moment in history. In the course of time that text, or rather, an entire set of texts have undergone inevitable changes; it was not written down until the 14th c., in the version subsequently edited in English translation by Walter Evans-Wentz (1878–1965). Admittedly, the teaching concerning the existence in the intermediary state between death and rebirth (Sansk. *antarābhava*, Tib. *bardo*) was thoroughly covered in the Buddhist canon and philosophical treatises. That teaching was especially well-known and widely applied in practice in Tibet. The process must have involved writing ritual texts of various length and structure, in which the basic ideas were presented in a form easy to understand and use in practice, so the “Bardo Thodol” might well be just another text of that type. Returning to the Tangut ritual funeral text, we can safely assume that it also was one following the teaching of *bardo* and intended for use in everyday practice. It was genetically and ideologically related to the doctrine and the “Bardo Thodol” text, reflecting the same key values. Therefore, the Tangut text was supposed to confirm the veracity of the Teaching and to attest of the fact that, while transferred, the Teaching had not been interrupted.

**References**

Gerasimova K.M. 1980: “O nekotorykh aspektakh assimiliatsii dobuddiiskikh kul’tv po tibetskim obriadnikam” [On certain aspects of the assimilation of pre-Buddhist beliefs...

44 This conventional title was initially used when the treatise was translated into English. There exist other translations actually disclosing the meaning of the word.
45 That apocryphal text has primarily been quoted and referred to in esoteric literature, while until recently academic Russian tibetology remained more skeptical about it. For example, Andrei Vostrikov (1902–1937) was critical about both its history and presumed authorship (Vostrikov 2007, 46).


