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TIBETOLOGICAL REMARKS ON THE MONGOLIAN VERSIONS OF THE "THAR-PA ČHEN-PO"

by

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It will take a long time to collect the sources of the history of the Tibetan language. The Tibetan orthography, like every written system, is a frozen mirror of the spoken vernacular. We know, naturally, that at its very beginning it deviated from what was spoken and it is also clear that the classical orthography, also after the "Great Revision", has undergone slight changes under the influence of the spoken idioms. Nevertheless the Tibetan script conceals as much from the history of the Tibetan language as it helps in reconstructing it. Therefore we have to look for other sources, such as the comparative study of the dialects, the Tibetan loanwords in the neighbouring languages and foreign loanwords in Tibetan and last but not least we have to investigate the foreign transcriptions of Tibetan and the Tibetan transcriptions of foreign words.

Beside the Chinese transcriptions the most important writing system which was in long and close contact with Tibetan was Uigur. The Turkish-speaking Uigurs came into contact with the Tibetans as early as the 9th century. They developed a writing system originating from the Aramaic version of the Semitic alphabet and they transmitted this system to the Mongolians, who used and some of whom use it still in a slightly modified form. The Mongolians came into contact with the Tibetans in the 13th century and from then on they had increasing relations with the people and culture of the Land of Snow. A mass of Tibetan literary monuments was translated into Mongolian and in these translations Tibetan words or even sentences were sometimes preserved and only transcribed with Uigur letters. It became a current usage e.g. to transcribe the Tibetan title of the work translated. Most of these works begin in the following manner: "The title in Sanscrit is... the title in Tibetan is... the title in Mongolian is...".

These transcriptions are far from fixing exactly the pronunciation of their own times. There were several delimitations which we have to take into

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consideration. The first of them was the Uigur writing system itself. This system has a series of ambiguous letters, such as q/y, k/g, t/d, a/e and even n, č/ž in certain positions. Some of the Tibetan sounds have no equivalents in the original Uigur script as c, ch, z, ž, j, 'a, h, n, w, 'o; instead of the threefold oppositions k : kh : g p : ph : b, t : th : d č : čh : ţ the Uigur script has only b, t, d and č : ţ, but the letters Ĺ, d and č, ţ are used orthographically and not phonetically etc. So we have to make do with substitutions and the interpretation of some letters remains arbitrary.

The second delimiting factor is the structure of the Mongolian language. Sounds and clusters unusual to Mongolian are substituted or extended sometimes to such an extent that the Tibetan original can be reconstructed only with great difficulty.

Tradition also exerts a strong delimitive factor. The Uigurs early developed a tradition in transcribing Tibetan and this tradition continued life among the Mongols and has resulted in solutions which do not reflect the real state of the spoken language. Sometimes a Tibetan reading style is concealed behind the transcriptions; and we must also take into account the fact that the Tibetan texts were copied many times where the different usages of the copyists, not to mention simple scribal errors, blurred the original rendering of the spoken forms.

I have pointed out the difficulties in interpreting the Uigur transcriptions to show that a thorough philological method has to be applied, but bearing this in mind we can draw some not unimportant conclusions both as concerns the history of the Tibetan language and the history of Tibeto-Mongolian relations.

In the following lines I would like to offer an examination of the Uigur-Mongolian transcription of Tibetan words in the well-known canonical work, the Thar-pa Chen-po. It is a little piece of work in which the Tibetan transcriptions in Uigur-Mongolian are collected.

The Thar-pa Chen-po belongs to the Buddhist works translated into Tibetan from Chinese. The earliest fragment of this work was found in the famous cave of Tun-huang. It was already very popular in Old Tibetan times as can be seen from an extract also found in Tun-huang. Two different versions of the work are mentioned in the catalogue of the library of the Tibetan Royal Palace in Ldan-kar in 812. It was included in serveral

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2 For the purpose of transliterating Sanscrit and Tibetan texts special letters were used by the Mongolians called gülü. They were Uigur letters slightly deformed on the pattern of their Tibetan counterparts. The usage of gülü was very restricted and was not widespread till the 18th century.

3 No. 207 in De La Vallée-Poussin’s Catalogue of the Tibetan Manuscripts from Tun-huang in the India Office Library, Oxford 1962, with the title: Thar-pa Chen-po: 'Quad-chang-kya-le'v.

5 Cf. M. Lalou, Les textes bouddhiques au temps du roi Khri-srong lde-bran : J.A 1933, pp. 313-553. The dragon year of this catalogue was fixed as 812 A.D by Frauwallner (WZK'NO 1961, p. 146); and Tucci (Minor Buddhist Texts II, p. 46). The title of No 149 is: Thar-pa Chen-po