CHAPTER 6

A Survey of Tibetan Paper

History of Paper in Central Asia and Tibet

The historical origins of Tibetan papermaking are difficult to determine. Our knowledge about the invention and transmission of papermaking in Central Asia and Tibet in the first millennium is very selective and fragmentary. Vorobieva-Desiatovskaia dates the beginnings of papermaking in Tibet back to the eighth century,\(^1\) while the Tang Annals mention an even earlier date, 648, in the report of the Tibetan emperor Songtsen Gampo’s request of paper, ink, and other writing utensils from the Chinese emperor. Yet, until the middle of the eighth century, most Tibetan official documents were written on wood. The entry for the years 744–745 in the Old Tibetan Annals records the transfer of official records from wooden ‘tallies’ (khram) to paper.\(^2\) Thus, it appears that by the time writing appeared in Tibet, the technology of papermaking was already known in the Far East and Central Asia.

The invention of paper is traced back to China. The year 105 CE is often cited as the date for the inception of paper technology. According to historical records, the technique of making paper was reported to the Eastern Han Emperor Ho-di by Marquis Cai, an official of the Imperial Court. However, archaeological records contradict this claim, suggesting rather that paper had already been known in China in the second century BCE. Soon after its invention, paper was widely used in China and spread to the rest of the world via the Silk Road. In the east, the art of papermaking reached Korea, where paper production began in the fourth century CE. According to traditional accounts, sixty years after Buddhism was introduced in Japan, a Korean monk named Don-cho brought papermaking to Japan, sharing his knowledge at the Imperial Palace in ca. 610 CE. Archaeological records suggest that along the Silk Road, paper was introduced to the Xinjiang area soon after its invention.

Crucial for the later dissemination of papermaking to Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Burma and Thailand was the migration of Chinese communities that prepared paper for their own needs. The development of papermaking in these countries was spurred by Buddhist monks who copied vast religious literature. The westward spread of papermaking through Chinese Turkestan along the Silk Road

---

has been widely investigated, but its migration to the south towards Himalayas including Tibet and Nepal to India remains unrecognized. Although paper had already been widely known by then, most of the Chinese documents discovered in Nia in Kroraine (dating from the third and fourth centuries) are written on wooden tablets and bamboo sticks and silk, which continued to be used alongside paper for a long time. Manuscripts written on paper found at sites in Kaochang, Loulan, Kusha, Kotan, Dunhuang, and Turfan date as early as the third century. The technology eventually reached Tibet most probably around 650 CE and from there spread to India. Thousands of manuscripts written in Tibetan language from before the tenth century have been discovered at Dunhuang in the Gansu province. Most estimates date these manuscripts to the time of Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang that occurred in c. 781–848 CE, but recent research by Géza Uray, Takeuchi, as well as Dalton, Davis, and van Schaik has dated the large portion of these manuscripts to the tenth century.3

According to written sources, after 751 CE, paper production spread westward to Arabia via Samarkand. There is a story about Chinese papermakers who were captured by the Arabian army as prisoners of war in the battle of Talas and later settled in Samarkand. The Arabs learned the craft from Chinese prisoners and built the first paper industry in Baghdad in 793 CE Yet this account oversimplifies the matter—in fact, papermaking may have been practiced in Samarkand decades before that battle. Around that time, papermaking spread west of the Pamir, but probably not because of one singular event but rather through a gradual transmission by many routes. The craft continued to spread gradually from Islamic Asia to Europe and, from there, around the world.

By the seventh century, papermaking was already a highly refined art and it may be asserted beyond doubt that paper had always been a material of great value. For example, in Tibet, paper had never been used for mundane purposes such as writing personal notes. Because of its costliness, it was important to find ways to save it. One of the methods of saving paper and ink was using small wooden planks or tablets (varying in size, but usually about 35 × 15 cm) with a hollowed out black-inked writing surface instead of paper as described in chapter 3.

We do not know if these few early dates singled out from written records are truly the turning points of paper history. There exist no written records of papermaking in Central Asia in any of the languages of the region. Yet what we have available are books and documents from that time. This chapter surveys the types of information these sources provide. By expanding the scope of inquiry from the study of their textual content of these documents to an exploration of their material characteristics, we move beyond legends to a