THE USE OF METAPHORS FOR HONORIFIC DISTINCTIONS IN THE EPOCH OF THE TIBETAN KINGS

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We have long since known that in the royal epoch, the hierarchy of high functionaries was marked by the granting of “ensigns” (yi ge or yig tshang; Ch. gaoshen 告身) of precious materials. The higher the rank to which one was elevated, the loftier the material. This institution was understood both by the Chinese historians of the Tang period and by the Chinese and Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts.1

Demiéville identified these ensigns with the bifurcated objects (fu 符) which served to authenticate the functionaries in their mission. They were often in the form of fish (gold and crimson; silver and “blue-green”). They were carried in a small bag or sachet. There were also those in the form of a tiger (under the Tang).2

1 P. Demiéville, Le concile de Lhasa, 284–6. The Chinese information dates back to the end of the 8th century (Tongdian). The Chinese manuscript translated by Demiéville concerns the same era (P. chin. 2765 = PT 1070). The Tibetan documentation is furnished by the mss PT 1071 and 1089 (edited and translated by M. Lalou, “Revendications des fonctionnaires de Grand Tibet”). The problem has been discussed by Yamaguchi Zuihō, 乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏, and 乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏乗仏. In these manuscripts, the ensigns are called yi ge. It is likewise in the inscription of Lhasa (764 A.D.) and in that of Zhwa’i lha khang (812). In the Old Tibetan Chronicle, there is a question of a turquoise yi ge given in recompense to a wise and expert minister (115, l. 8). In the Annals, for the year 699 (18, § 50), we read of yig gtsang and gifts given (in recompense) for loyalty (in 759, p. 57, yig gtsang), but in 763 (60) we read of yi ge made from ke ke ru and from turquoise given to great ministers (blon che). In later texts, we generally see yig tshang (e.g. The Chronicle of Ne’u paṇḍita, 71; Sba bzhes, 10 and 53; Dpa’o Gtsug lag phreng ba, chapter ja, 78b; Rlangs po ti bse ru, 17a and Rgya Bod yig tshang, Seattle ms., 122b–123a).

2 R. Des Rotours, “Les insignes en deux parties (fu) sous la dynastie des T’ang.” Curiously, in this exhaustive work the word gaoshen 告身 is never used. According to Morohashi’s dictionary, the gaoshen was an order of mission. It is rightly identified with the fu by the Tangshu (Des Retours, Le traité des examens, 44: “lettres en deux parties” (fu) appelées “titre de nomination,” (gaoshen). A seal was added to this title, gaoshen yin (Tongdian, Des Retours, op. cit., 219).

In the Dunhuang grottoes (and in the manuscripts), we read only of officials (e.g. guanglu daifu) equipped with “a bag of gold and crimson fish” or simply “gold and crimson” (jinci 金紫) and “silver-green” (yin qing 銀青); see Shazhou wenlu, 11b,
This identification is uncertain. Following the Chinese Tang documents, the Tibetan “ensigns” were affixed to the chest or the shoulder (somewhat like the medals of modern soldiers). They were called “decoration, (sartorial) ornament (zhangshi 章飾 or zhangfu 章服).” Demiéville thought that the Tibetan costume undoubtedly derived from Chinese inspiration (285). He cites the Tangshu, according to which a Tibetan ambassador (extremely well informed about Chinese affairs) received as a gift, in 730, a robe, a girdle, and a sachet holding fish ensigns. He refused the latter saying that “this sartorial ensign” (zhangfu) did not exist in Tibet.

We are ignorant of the form of Tibetan “ensigns” mentioned above. However, there are others that had a determined form or that were associated with an image metaphorically exalting a particular virtue.

In the Old Tibetan Chronicles (115, l. 9–10), following the mention of various yi ge given in recompense (see n. 1), we read that “as a sign (symbol) of bravery, one gives a globule(?) of a tiger.” (dpa‘i ba’i mtshan mar/stagi thog bu stsal lo). What a banal image! In China, since antiquity (Zhouli), brave soldiers have been called “tigers” (hupen 虎貳). In Tibet, this image is attested by the Chinese Annals; “Near the tombs of the nobles, one finds a construction plastered in red on which a white tiger is painted. This would be an emblem (jing 旌, a sort of flag of military command) of bravery for those who have distinguished themselves in battle. For their lifetime, they assumed a skin (of tiger).”  

The Chinese Annals further attest, by another example, that the ancient Tibetans (like other peoples) had the custom of designating functions indirectly, by metaphorical, allegorical or symbolic language. In order to raise troops, the functionary carried a golden arrow as a sign of authority. The swift messenger carried the name “flying

24a–b, etc., and the Sino-Tibetan treaty of Lhasa (821–2), South face, l. 20–1 and 26–7; the names of the ensigns have not been translated, but only transcribed into Tibetan: kim ci’, l. 20, and ‘gin tsheng, l. 26.

Translation doubtful. What comes to mind is thog gu or tog, an honorific ornament on the hat or the helmets in the Manchu era, in China and in Tibet. But this is only a comparison. In the Mahāvyupatti, tog serves to translate ketu, the top of a victory banner; cf. n. 8.

Xin Tangshu, 216 B (Pelliot, Histoire ancienne du Tibet, 130). Contrariwise (216 A; op. cit., 81), the tail of a fox was attached to beaten or cowardly soldiers, for their shame. The image of a tiger remains common in the later literature (notably in the epics). S. Ch. Das (dictionary, 1068b) gives the name of the military penal code: “law of the warrior-tigers” (dpa’ bo stag gi zhal lce). See below.