CHAPTER 8

Tibetan Buddhist Books in a Digital Age

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This paper examines a particular aspect of the Buddhist revival that has taken place throughout the Tibetan areas of China since Deng Xiaoping introduced radical policy changes in 1978. By looking at ethnographic cases from diverse Tibetan regions it explores the role of sacred texts in this process. It suggests that a deeply engrained attitude towards books as Buddhist relics informs not only the current recovery of sacred texts that have survived the Cultural Revolution but also the production of digital objects derived from them. These play an important part in local, transregional and international networks devoted to the preservation and revival of the Tibetan cultural heritage, in a process that often transcends the boundary between the religious and the secular.

After providing a brief outline of the political and cultural background of the current revival, this paper will focus on the recent re-discovery of important texts and archives and discuss the distinction between books as ‘cultural objects’ (Ch. wenwu 文物) to be preserved and their content (Ch. neirong 内容) to be studied as well as on the use of books as ritual objects and as the basis for the revival of ritual practices. It discusses how new technologies are used to meet religious and secular needs for the reproduction and distribution of sacred texts. By reshaping access to books, these technologies have had a significant impact on religious practices and on the reconstitution of Tibetan cultural heritage and have had wide-ranging social, cultural and political implications.

1 The Buddhist Revival in Contemporary Tibet: The Political Dimension

Deng Xiaoping’s policy change at the Third Party Plenum in 1978 introduced a radical transformation of Chinese society after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution. This led, among other things, to the re-enshrinement of the promise of ‘freedom of religious belief’ in the Chinese constitution (it had originally been mentioned in the Chinese constitution in 1954 but had later been discarded). This change of policy particularly affected those groups defined in
China as ‘minority nationalities.’ Among these were Tibetans, who had been fully absorbed into China in 1951, and this triggered an enthusiastic revival of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibetan areas of China. This included the reconstruction of monasteries, the restoration of shrines, the re-establishment of rituals and festivals, and the recovery of those sacred items that had survived the Cultural Revolution. Traditional forms of Buddhist patronage re-emerged within the framework of the new market economy with Chinese characteristics. The Chinese authorities supported or condoned this religious revival at least in the 1980s, but also saw it as a social phenomenon that had to be studied and controlled by dedicated institutions.\(^1\) The decision to allow the revival has been linked to the revival of the United Front policy, a policy which had characterised the government’s approach in the 1950s towards nationalities that were not ethnic Chinese.\(^2\)

Mao was deeply aware of the challenge that both religion and ethnicity represented to his political vision and in the case of a deeply Buddhist society like the Tibetan he saw these were deeply interlinked. At certain times he had expressed a pragmatic approach towards religion: “It is the peasants who put up the idols and, when the time comes, they will throw the idols out with their own hands… It is wrong for anybody else to do it for them.”\(^3\) His ultimate aim was clearly the full secularization of society, but he had a policy of encouraging strategic, short-term alliances with religious leaders. It was this policy that was known as the United Front: “Communists may form an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal united front with certain idealists and even with religious followers, but we can never approve of their idealism or religious doctrines.”\(^4\)

The United Front policy of strategic alliance with the local leadership became a particularly important political tool in the Chinese government’s dealings with the Tibetan areas. Hardly any Tibetans had in fact embraced a communist view of the world when Mao embarked on the revolutionary project that led to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China and to the so-called ‘peaceful liberation’ of the Tibetan areas. The best-known

\(^1\) These include academies, universities, Buddhist associations and research centres such as the China Tibetology Centre (an organization directly under the United Front).

\(^2\) This policy, rooted in a system of strategic alliances deployed by the Communist party in its early days when facing different antagonists at the same time was adapted to address the needs of the Chinese government in dealing with non-Chinese nationalities in the 1950s. It is mainly reflected in the tasks of the United Front, an organ of the communist party dealing specifically with non-Communist components of Chinese society. See Dreyer (1972), pp. 416–50.

\(^3\) Mao Zedong (1961–65), vol. 1, p. 46.

\(^4\) Ibid., vol. 3, p. 155.