It is a remarkable paradox that there is no word in Tibetan for "Buddhism", in spite of the fact that the Tibetans—at least up to the Chinese occupation of their country in the 1950's—have preserved a Buddhist culture which to all intents and purposes has remained uninfluenced by the European presence in Asia.

Tibetans do not think of themselves as "Buddhist"—they are either chos-pa, "followers of chos", or bon-po, "followers of bon". The chos-pa, who are divided into a number of separate schools or traditions, of which the Gelugpa, the Kagyu, the Sakyapa and the Nyingmapa represent the major divisions 1), constitute the vast majority of the population. The bon-po were, at least in recent times, a relatively small minority. Exactly how small the minority was, we have no means of saying to-day 2). In all probability it was—particularly in Amdo, in Kham, and in the Himalayan regions—far from negligible. Even in Central Tibet, the very centre of Gelugpa orthodoxy, the bon-pos had monasteries with several hundred monks 3).


2) Information contained in European sources regarding the geographical distribution of the bon-pos in Tibet has been summarized by H. Hoffmann Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion, Wiesbaden 1950, p. 236-243. Information obtained from bon-po refugees in India makes is clear that this summary, though the best that could be made at the time, by no means gives an adequate picture of the actual number of monasteries etc.

3) The most important were g-Yun-druṅ-gliṅ and sMan-ri, both in the province of gCan. They are marked on the map on p. 283 of A Cultural History of Tibet by D. Snellgrove and H. Richardson, London 1968. sMan-ri is described in my article "Remarques sur l'administration d'un monastère bonpo" to appear shortly in Journal Asiatique.
What, then, is the difference between a bon-po and a chos-pa? And what are the relations of both to Indian religion, to Buddhism, to dharma? This is the problem towards the solution of which I hope to contribute in this article. The literary sources at our disposal are of two kinds:

1. Manuscripts, of religious as well as purely secular contents, written in an archaic form of Tibetan and discovered at the turn of the century in one of the chambers, walled up in or about 1035 A.D., in the cave temples at Tun-huang in North-west China.

2. Lamaist literature, philosophical as well as historical, composed by bon-pos as well as chos-pas; that which has been preserved does not seem to have been written before c. 1000 A.D. although it clearly also includes traditions which are considerably older.

Taken as a whole, our sources represent a vast literature which has so far been only partially explored and utilized. Further, new texts are constantly being discovered among the Tibetan refugees in India and Nepal. These refugees—and among them are many hundred adherents of bon—in themselves represent a rich field of research for those wishing to study Tibetan religion; but there is no time to be lost—traditional social and religious patterns are already rapidly disintegrating.

The following is based partly on a study of the relevant Tibetan texts, partly on conversation and study with bon-po monks, in particular the learned abbot, Sangye Tenzin Jongdong who since 1968 has been the abbot of the newly founded bon-po monastery in India.

Followers of chos as well as of bon designate themselves—and each other—as nan-pa, "insiders", in contrast to all foreigners (Indians, Chinese, Europeans) who are phyi-pa, "outsiders". The occasional Christian or Muslim Tibetan is likewise phyi-pa. If there is a word in Tibetan for "Buddhist", it is nañ-pa, which, as we have seen, also includes bon-pos. Even the most cursory examining of bon-po literature makes it abundantly clear that it is a genuine Buddhist literature; bon-po monks, as anyone who has lived with them can attest, are Buddhist, and have the same patterns of faith, study, and monastic life as chos-pa monks. Adherents of chos as well as of bon call the

4) Presumably a Mongolian Buddhist is also reckoned as nañ-pa. Of other Buddhists, the Tibetans have had practically no knowledge.

5) That nañ-pa also includes bon-pos, is confirmed by R. B. Ekvall Religious Observances in Tibet, Chicago 1964, p. 23.

6) Those who have, like the present writer, been in close contact with bon-po