

Protecting the kingdom with Tibetan manuscripts: codicological and historical analyses of the royal Drangsong collection from Mustang, Nepal

In 2006, the new Communist government of Nepal declared an end to the monarchy that had founded and ruled the nation for over 200 years, and at the same time abolished the royal status of four other minor kingdoms that had been absorbed into the nation during the Unification. One of these was Mustang, once an autonomous Tibetan kingdom that had supported the Gorkha conquest in the 18th century. Within the nation of Nepal, the kings of Mustang had continued to exercise a degree of autonomy at their capital city Lo Monthang, while Mustang itself became one of 75 districts of Nepal. Since the founding of the kingdom of Mustang in the 14th century, the kings had been supporters of the Sakyapa school of Tibetan Buddhism, and some members of the family had been important hierarchs in the Buddhist church. However, the family itself had originally been followers of the old Bön religion of Tibet: the main god of the royal clan was a Bön divinity, and the chaplains of the palace belonged to a lineage of Bön priests, named Drangsong, for whom the second king had built a house near the palace in the 15th century. Only when the last male heir of the Drangsong line died, without a successor, in around 1960, were the priestly duties assumed by Buddhist lamas. The Bön rituals were discontinued, but the manuscripts that formed the basis of these rituals remained in the shrine room of the Drangsong house. In the 1990s, the Buddhist occupant of the house collected up the manuscripts in a basket and was about to burn them, but was dissuaded from doing so by a distant relative of the Drangsong family. In April 2018, the applicants of the present project were given access to the collection for long enough to make a brief inventory. The collection comprises some 280 different manuscripts with around 2,900 folios. apart from a few works dealing with philosophical and spiritual concerns, most are ritual texts for the propitiation of war gods, the acquisition of prosperity, exorcism, the protection of fields, healing, and various kinds of destructive and preventative magic. A cursory examination of the colophons indicated that the works had been assembled from different parts of Tibet and the Himalaya by successive generations of the Drangsong priestly line.

The value of this collection is twofold: first, because of its diversity, the corpus offers a rich body of material which can be retrieved by material and codicological analyses that will contribute to our understanding of book and paper making traditions in the region, as well as social aspects of Tibetan manuscript production; and secondly, in terms of its content, it offers a unique window onto the nature of royal religion in a Tibetan kingdom. Most of the rituals represented in the Drangsong collection are not performed in monasteries, but some have survived in the repertoires of hereditary lamas in remote locations in the Himalayan region. Videos of examples of what the performances of the Drangsong rituals may have looked like are therefore available for comparative purposes.

DRONG will examine the Drangsong collection through a combination of research methods that address both formal and functional features of the manuscripts. Each manuscript will be considered from three perspectives. First, as an artefact: the end product of cultural, artistic and scribal activities in a particular area; secondly, as the support of a text with cultural meaning that can, in combination with other texts, contribute to our knowledge of little-understood areas of the Bön religion and how it operated in relation to political power; and thirdly – insofar as it is both an intrinsically sacred object and a repository of liturgical narratives and instructions – an essential component of a living, though endangered, tradition of ritual performance.

The Drangsong collection is an information-dense repository of craftsmanship, history, and ideas spanning six centuries. The resultant publications and database will represent a ground-breaking step in an interdisciplinary approach to the Bön tradition, its manuscripts, and the cultural history of the region. The findings will have a significant impact on disciplines such as Tibetology, the history of the book, the anthropology of Tibet and the Himalaya, and the study of ritual in general. The website will permit easy navigation between explanations of rituals, images and information about manuscripts; translations of texts, and videos of ritual performances. These features will make it an accessible teaching resource for schools and universities, as well as for members of the public in search of information about a little-understood area of Tibetan civilisation.