The Catalogue of Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin

In 1954 Per Kvarnere published the first ever translation of a catalogue of Bonpo canonical texts, the one composed by Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin (b.1813).

The Catalogue of Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin was compiled at the hermitage of mKhar-che (Tsang-po, Tibet) and was published in India in 1965 (Antipodean Studies, vol. 27 pt. 2, pp. 331). However, the catalogue by Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin in its treatment of the subject reveals a somewhat critical attitude regarding the admissibility of texts into the canon and the order in which the texts ought to be arranged. It is therefore a theoretical work rather than simply an inventory that contains a list of real texts existing in a particular place.

It is considered among the Bon as the official standard for grouping together canonical texts. He has rejected the inclusion of a certain number of texts that were included in the catalogue in the Kun-grol grags-pa, whose catalogue will be discussed anon.

Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin’s approach to the subject echoes the treatment of the sNgoy-ma-pa texts published by Bu-ston Rin-chen (1949–1954) when he compiled the catalogue of the Buddhist Kanjur. Bu-ston allowed only five sNgoy-ma-pa tantras to remain in the Bud- dhist Kanjur. The central argument of Bu-ston for rejecting most of the sNgoy-ma-pa tantras concerns the question of authenticity. In his view, most of the sNgoy-ma-pa tantric works never had any Sanskrit originals. They are therefore apocryphal and not fit for inclusion in the Kanjur. The very term Kanjur (see introduction) conveys the idea of translation being involved.

Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin’s criticism of Kun-grol grags-pa’s catalogue, on the other hand, rests on a different argument. In it, Nyi-ma bstan-'dzin stands for a purist idea of translation being involved.

The Catalogue of Kun-grol grags-pa

Kun-grol grags-pa (b.1790) was born in the region of Dza in Khams (South- eastern Tibet) and in his later life he flourished as the prince of the kings of rGyal-rong, especially those of Khros-khyabs and Chhu-chen princelings (also Southeastern Tibet).

Kun-dga nor-bu, the king of Khros-khyabs, had a manuscript set of the canons under the new tradition. It was placed in palace in Drung-zur rnam-rag rgyal-djing. Urged by the king, Kun-grol grags-pa in 1701 compiled a catalogue of the manuscripts set in the palace of the king of rGyal-rong in Chhu-chen, known as Li-er mampam-ral-bza’i rdzong. The cata- logue is entitled sNgoy mthong-grol gsar ma bstan pa’i sde tshan (1701). It was under Kun-grol grags-pa’s guidance that the kings of Khros-khyabs and Chhu-chen had simultaneously undertaken to carve the woodblocks of the Bonpo canons in the eighteenth cen- tury. Aided by a number of assistants he edited the texts and supervised the whole enterprise of preparing the woodblocks. In 1766 he wrote an account entitled Par gyi dkar chag rdo rje sde tshan. He knew that the woodblocks for a certain part of the canon were made. He has died that same year. Whether the carving of woodblocks for all the texts that he has listed in his catalogue was completed before 1766 remains uncer- tain, because bSod-nams dbang-dus, the king of Rab-brtan of the Chhu-chen principality, was at war against the Manchus for a number of years prior to 1766. He finally lost the war in that year, but kun-dga’ nor-bo, the king of Khros-khyabs, had continued the carv- ing of his own woodblocks in spite of the decree issued by the Manchu Emperor Qianlong forbidding the prac- tice of the Bon religion in rGyal-rong.

Kun-grol grags-pa has taken the most detailed inventory of the canon that had ever been made. Not content to give just the titles of texts, he also provides all the chapter headings of all the works that he has listed. This catalogue was published in Beijing in 1993 under the title of g.Yung drung gyi kun-grol grags-pa’s catalogue. The woodblocks of the canon were completely destroyed dur- ing the Cultural Revolution.

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By Samten C. Karmay

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The Catalogue of g.Yung-drung tshul-khims dbang-brags

g.Yung-drung tshul-khims dbang-brags was a disciple of sNgag-rton Zla’ ba rgyal-mtshan (b.1796) and was a native of the Khyang-po province in Khams. He was one of the founders of the monastery known as Khyang-po sTeng-chen. His catalogue is entitled Par gyi bka’i’i bka’ dang bka’i’i rnam thyang-dro. He is credited with being the words of gShen-rab Mi-bo and was the 23rd Abbot. His autobi- ography is entitled sGRigs tshul bstan pa’i me ro spar ba’i rlung and was published in India in 1965 (Antipodean Studies, vol. 27 pt. 2, pp. 331).

Dr Samten Karmay is former Research Director at the CNRS, Paris. He has published extensively on the Dzogchen philoso- phy in Tibet and the development and spread of Dzogchen teachings. He has received a number of awards for his work, including the Prix de l’Institut Francais for his work on the Buddhist gelug-pa tradition in Tibet.

Notes


2. As is easily clear from a section of the title of the work: sde tshan mthong-grol.

