

Wissenschaftliches Teilprojekt C01

Esoteric Transmissions: The “Vanaratna Codex” (Royal Asiatic Society, London, MS Hodgson 35)

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Description of the project

This sub-project is devoted to the study of Royal Asiatic Society, London, Hodgson 35, a palm-leaf multiple-text manuscript written in Sanskrit, which has been shown to be an autograph of the celebrated 15th century East Indian scholar Vanaratna, who lived long in Nepal and made three trips to Tibet. The manuscript bears signs of a complicated life. Its first part contains texts that Vanaratna obviously copied, perhaps from manuscripts he was able to see in Tibet. This part was concluded with a colophon including a formula calqued on older Indian donation formulas, showing that the manuscript was originally supposed to be completed here. It continues, however, with no change in foliation, handwriting, or layout. The second part contains mainly material translated by Vanaratna from oral, esoteric (tantric) teachings which he received in Tibet, and some verses of his own composition. The project will combine philological, codicological, and material methods in the study of the manuscript, its texts (with particular emphasis on their relationship to older or otherwise related extant sources), paratexts, and layout.

Objectives

The aim of this sub-project is to elucidate in detail the production history of the manuscript, since this will offer a unique window into the working methods of a learned Buddhist scholar, into cross-cultural and interlingual transmission of esoteric material, and into the adaptation of orally received knowledge in written form. Furthermore, the subsequent history of the manuscript will also be taken into account. In this context, particular stress will be laid on the study of a number of secondary changes in the text, which seem to consist mainly in the deletion/alteration of references to Tibet and to Vanaratna’s birthplace. In most cases, it can be detected that the changes were made by a Nepalese hand. This project will try to find arguments for or against our provisional hypothesis that they reflect anti-Tibetan sentiment in Nepal and an attempt to claim the maximal amount of the prestige of association with Vanaratna for Nepal.

Cooperation with other subprojects

This sub-project brings together several central concerns of the SFB: paratexts (project area A), the organization of knowledge in multiple-text manuscripts (project area C), and the role of manuscripts in scholarship and learning (working group L). Hodgson 35 has the additional feature of being, as regards its second part, an autograph of a celebrated scholar. Cooperation with Z01 and Z02 will be important for the study of the paratexts and the history of the manuscript.



Tibetan portrait of Mahāpaṇḍita Vanaratna;
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Royal Asiatic Society, London, MS Hodgson 35, folio 45v; © Royal Asiatic Society.