The elusive connection: Manuscripts and rituals of the Bon and Naxi traditions

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A workshop hosted by

The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg

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Manuscripts have been essential in supporting the efforts of Bon monks, nuns and hereditary priests to preserve their unique culture and rituals, as well as the attempts of scholars elsewhere to understand not only the Bon religion but also the early cultural and intellectual history of Central Asia. Manuscripts account for the entire range of Bonpo literary production, from all the major canonical works such as the Bonpo Kanjur, or the so-called New Collection of Bonpo Katen, to the collected writing of famous masters, and the plethora of ritual texts that have been unexpectedly coming to light in many parts of the region during the first decade of the twenty-first century. These manuscripts are of great importance for gaining new insights into largely unknown cultural developments on the Tibetan Plateau and its connections to other traditions present in the region.

There is also a growing body of evidence to suggest that a connection between the rituals of the Naxi dongba priests and those of the Bon religion of Tibet is more than merely speculative. However, despite a growing number of scholars exploring Bon and Naxi manuscript traditions, there is still only little evidence for a possible common ground which both traditions may share. While some examples of Bon manuscripts recently revealed may date from as early as the ninth century, most of the extinct Naxi dongba pictographic ritual texts were produced within the last two centuries. However, most of physical manuscripts of both traditions have not been dated, and so far have attracted only little attention as material objects. While irrefutable instances of Bon-Naxi connections may be rare, the case for a link is reinforced via the ritual texts of a class of priests in Gansu and Sichuan known as le’u. This very large corpus of material – which continues to grow as new discoveries are made – contains texts that seem to provide a bridge between the archaic rituals of Central Tibetan Bon and those of the Naxi. Furthermore, certain aspects of Naxi ritual themselves may elucidate mysteries surrounding Tibetan ritual. Similarities may also be seen in mythical narratives and figures, iconography, or even habits of using the same materials and technologies. Naxi paper has been thought to be unique, with influence from, among other things, the papermaking traditions of the Tibetan community. But many questions remain when we consider this region with its complex history of interaction between various ethnic groups.

The previous workshops were intended to be an open-ended discussion on the existing Bon manuscript collections which, besides being a record of history and religion in its textual sphere, are also material objects being a part of sustainable cultural world heritage. Along the same lines, we would like to continue an interdisciplinary discussion that will make it possible to see Bon manuscripts in the wider perspective of manuscript studies. However, on this occasion we would like to place the emphasis on the Bon-Naxi connections found in both traditions and revealed by multidisciplinary studies. The participants are specialists of different academic disciplines, and will present their research on a variety of topics including different collections of Bon and Naxi manuscripts, the concepts and history of both traditions, and the science and technology of book studies.