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Introduction

Until the 1960s, knowledge about Bon outside Tibet was based substantially on the translated writings of Tibetan Buddhist authors, who often misunderstood or misrepresented their subject.¹ This situation changed thanks mainly to a collaboration between David Snellgrove of the University of London, and Tenzin Namdak, a Bonpo² scholar-monk who had escaped to India via Nepal in 1960. The result of this collaboration was the landmark volume *The Nine Ways of Bon*,³ which consists of annotated translations of excerpts from a fourteenth-century Bonpo doctrinal work. For the first time, the Bonpos were represented to the outside world by their own scriptural tradition.

In fact Bon, as Per Kvaerne has pointed out, refers to three different things: first, the religion that prevailed in Tibet before the introduction of Buddhism in the seventh century (and about which very little is known); secondly, a wide range of cults across Tibet and the Himalayan middle hills that often feature spirit mediums; and finally, the systematised religion that developed in tandem with Tibetan Buddhism and includes a monastic tradition.⁴ This latter form, referred to as Yungdrung ('Eternal') Bon by its adherents, is the result of a rich convergence of religious traditions from diverse provenances, notably India, Central Asia, China and Tibet itself. The scriptural corpus of Bon is organised according to several traditional models, the best known of which is the 'nine-vehicle' framework, commonly referred to as the Nine Ways of Bon. Much of the substantial scriptural heritage of Bon is strongly influenced by Buddhism, to the degree that certain commentators regard it as just another Tibetan Buddhist school. However, a significant part of this corpus clearly relates to a religious system that has nothing to do with Buddhism. Whereas the 'higher' vehicles exhibit a clear kinship with the Indian Buddhist Tantric systems, the 'lower' ways are a compilation of rituals and narratives that appear to have indigenous roots.

The Bon literary corpus comprises several thousand volumes on a vast array of topics, often representing conflicting world views. For followers of Yungdrung Bon, the coherence of these disparate doctrines is derived from the belief that

¹ See, for example, Hoffmann 1950. An overview of Western-language studies of Bon up to end of the twentieth century is given in Kvaerne 2000.

² The term 'Bonpo' is the adjectival form of Bon, and also denotes a follower of the religion.

³ Snellgrove 1967.

⁴ Kvaerne 1995.

they are all teachings of the figure they consider to be the founder of their religion, Tönpa Shenrab (Ston pa Gshen rab). Most of the scholarly attention to Bon has been directed to the soteriological aspects of the religion, which are the most closely aligned to Buddhist thought. The most distinctive aspects of Bon, however, are to be found in the category of rituals known as *gto* (pronounced *tô*) and associated myths, an area of the religion that is barely represented in the monastic repertoire. Works of this genre are well known from the Dunhuang corpus – the earliest collection of Tibetan literature (seventh to eleventh centuries) that was discovered in a cave in Gansu, on the Silk Road, in the nineteenth century. Studies of these *gto* texts were pioneered by a number of scholars, among the most important of whom were Marcelle Lalou and Rolf Stein.⁵ Another collection from much the same period was recently discovered in Southern Tibet.⁶ This collection has featured in a publication by John Bellezza⁷ and in ongoing research by Daniel Berounský.⁸

Rolf Stein was the first to point out that close parallels are to be found between the Bonpo mythic narratives from Dunhuang and more recent works, such as the *Klu 'bum* ('Myriad Serpent-spirits') that is part of the *Bon Canon*.⁹ The range of this category of 'indigenous' ritual literature has recently been expanded considerably thanks to the recent discovery of extensive collections of Bon manuscripts in Gansu and Sichuan, China.¹⁰ The similarities that these texts bear to many aspects of the Dunhuang texts and canonical *gto* literature suggest that there was a wide distribution of these rituals and the beliefs with which they were associated, and that this system was fragmented and partially absorbed – and transformed – by the development of Buddhism and Yungdrung Bon. Recent research by Toni Huber has revealed the presence of a closely-related body of myths and complex of rituals preserved in manuscript form in the Eastern Himalaya.¹¹ His recently published *Source of Life*¹² shows the locally designated 'Bon' rituals in Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh in relation to the local manuscript cultures of the region. He notes a degree of coherence between Bon, Naxi and Qiang ritual cultures, and proposes a series of hypotheses about possible ethnolinguistic con-

5 Lalou 1958; Stein 1971.

6 Pa tshab and Glang ru 2007.

7 Bellezza 2013.

8 See especially Berounsky's contribution to the present volume.

9 *Klu 'bum* WBV.

10 For an English-language version of an overview of this material, see Ngondzin Ngawang Gyatso 2016.

11 Huber 2013.

12 Huber 2020.

nections in the past along the eastern Himalayas. Though little can be proven conclusively, there is a growing body of evidence to support these hypotheses.

The possibility of a connection between the rituals of the Naxi Dongba priests and those of the Bon religion of Tibet increasingly appears to be more than merely speculative. While it has long been accepted that the Naxi term Dongba is derived from the Tibetan Tönpa (*ston pa*), ‘teacher,’ and the name of the legendary founder of the Naxi religion, Dongba Shiluo, from that of Tönpa Shenrab (Ston pa Gshen rab), the quasi-mythical founder of Bon, evidence of more substantial links between these two traditions has proved to be elusive. In his landmark article ‘Du récit au rituel’¹³ Rolf Stein pointed to the similarity in structure between Naxi funeral ritual texts and the *Klu ’bum*, an important Bonpo work that may date from as early as the ninth century. Among the more compelling indications of a link between the Naxi Dongba and Tibetan Bon is a recent article, published in Chinese, by a Naxi scholar named He Jiquan.¹⁴ His study of a Naxi manuscript kept at the Harvard Yenching Library reveals that certain sequences of images are to be understood not for the concepts they represent but for their phonological value: the articulation of the Naxi terms for the objects depicted reproduces a series of well-known Tibetan mantras (magical formulae) of the Bon religion.

Furthermore, certain aspects of Naxi ritual themselves may elucidate mysteries surrounding Tibetan ritual. An example is to be seen in the case of an enigmatic reference relating to Tibetan royal burial practices in the seventh century. A fourteenth-century work informs us that provincial kings would send *lto nag* (pronounced *tonak*) to Central Tibet, and that these *lto nag* would lurk in the imperial tombs and attack passers-by. *Lto nag*, literally ‘black food’, is a Buddhist misspelling of the homophonous Bonpo term *gto nag*, ‘black rituals’. The Bonpo repertoire of *gto* rituals includes an exorcism called *Gto nag mgo gsum*, the ‘Three-Headed Man of the Black Rituals’, performed in culturally Tibetan areas of the Himalayan borderlands, in which an effigy with three animal heads is cast out of the community. Thanks to Joseph Rock’s research in Yunnan in the 1930s we know that, in a ritual of a similar name among the Naxi, the effigy they used was a substitute for a human: in short, it is in the ritual repertoire of the Naxi, in far-off Yunnan, that we find the link between a Central Tibetan imperial-period ‘scapegoat’ (more accurately, ‘ransom’) practice and a modern Bonpo exorcism.

Even taking into account the enormous scientific progress of the last few decades of Bon studies, as well as a significant increase of general interests in

¹³ Stein 1971.

¹⁴ For a discussion of this article, see Poupard 2020, 115–119.

Bon religion itself in recent years, the research on Bonpo literature (broadly defined) is still in its pioneering phase.¹⁵ The idea of focusing on Bon manuscripts has slowly been born from a collaboration over many years on Tibetan manuscripts and archival documents (unrelated to Bon) between Charles Ramble and Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, which has illustrated the benefit of a dual approach combining form and content. It has materialised thanks to the generous support of the Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures at the University of Hamburg, which made possible the organisation of the series of workshops devoted to Bon and Naxi manuscripts in the years 2016–2020.

The first two workshops, entitled ‘Bonpo Manuscript Culture: Towards a Definition of an Emerging Field (parts 1 and 2)’, organised in 2016 and 2017, were dedicated to existing Bon manuscript collections (some of the most important of which have been discovered only recently), and oriented to the Bon tradition itself, their possible interconnections with Naxi culture, as well as surveys of collections from all around the world. In 2018, the third workshop, entitled ‘Bon Manuscripts in Context’, initiated a discussion on how we might adopt a cross-disciplinary approach, develop our methodology and identify all possible tools that might allow us in the future to formulate a definition of ‘Bon manuscript culture.’ We first of all aimed to perceive manuscripts as complex entities that are both material objects and an essential component of ritual performance, which carry a scriptural content. This led to the fourth workshop, held in 2019, entitled ‘Manuscripts, Rituals, and Magic in the Bon Religion’, where we explored connections between manuscripts, their function, their form in the context of the Bon religion and ritual performance, and more generally the material forms encapsulating this entire range of features. The workshop ‘The Elusive Connection: Manuscripts and Rituals of the Bon and Naxi Traditions’, postponed until 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, focused specifically on the connection between Bon and Naxi manuscripts.

The aim of these early meetings was to create and to reinforce a network of scholars who are known for their work on Bon, and to discuss the subject of Bon manuscripts. The topics included the different collections of Bon and Naxi manuscripts, the concepts and history of both traditions, the science and technology of

¹⁵ In ‘Bon Bibliography’, compiled and published on 27 May 2020 (<https://sites.google.com/view/bonbiblio/home>; accessed on 10 September 2022), Dan Martin says that it might seem ironic to speak of Bon as a ‘little-known’ religion when we have a listing of around two thousand writings on the subject. However, it should be explained here that the large number of these bibliographic entries stand for works of repetitive polemic targeted at a few misunderstood topics. The greater part of Bon practice, history and literature is still unknown to the world.

book studies and its possible application to Bon and Naxi manuscripts, the relationship between text and illustrations, writing materials used in both traditions, and the historical and archaeological context of the manuscripts' places of origin. The present volume is composed of selected articles contributed by the participants at these workshops, specialists in different academic disciplines including philology, anthropology, art history, archaeology and codicology.

Manuscripts have been essential in supporting the efforts of Bon monks, nuns and hereditary priests to preserve their unique culture and rituals, and have also helped 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 scriptural production, from all the major canonical works such as the Bonpo Kanjur, or the so-called *The New Collection of Bonpo Katen Texts*, to the collected writing of famous masters, and the plethora of ritual texts that unexpectedly came to light in many parts of the region during the first two decades 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 their connections to other traditions present in the region.

Whereas xylographic printing has a long tradition in Tibet, its use was largely confined to Buddhist institutions. A few block-printing projects – including full sets of the Bonpo Canon – notwithstanding, Bon has always manifested a preference for handwritten books. These are distinguishable from Buddhist manuscripts in a number of respects, and indeed there is compelling evidence to suggest that Bon has developed a distinctive manuscript tradition that transcends regional and historical peculiarities. This is seen most conspicuously in the use of certain abbreviations, scripts and symbols that occur very rarely or not at all in Tibetan Buddhist texts.

Migration of codicological practices from Central Tibet to Amdo, and then from Amdo to the Naxi of Yunnan, would most likely have happened first in late eighth century and then several centuries later. Thus the Bonpo ritual manuscripts from Dunhuang studied by Sam van Schaik may shed some light on the distinct features which then could be adopted in other areas, as well as ritual practices.

The contributions by Sam van Schaik and Marc des Jardins present interesting examples of ritual compendiums. Although the books of spells under discussion are dated to different periods of time and were created in different regions, they share some textual and material features. The value of the Dunhuang manuscripts for our research comes from both their age (no later than the early eleventh century), and the fact that this manuscript cache was formed by a local community.

‘A Tibetan Book of Spells’ by Sam van Schaik discusses a Dunhuang manual of magic spells and invocations (IOL Tib J 401 at the British Library) in the form of a Tibetan booklet containing offering methods for divination, rainmaking and curing various medical ailments. Van Schaik points to a form that, while unusual for Tibetan manuscripts, is also used for medical compendia, and emphasises the similarities between the rituals outlined in this book of spells and those observed by anthropologists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Careful analyses of text, form, materials and historical context enable us to derive a great deal of information about the author of the work. He also suggests that we look for further similarities in this type of literature, stating that a particular ritual from this Dunhuang book of spells may find a later echo in the work of a Buddhist ritual practitioner, or a Bonpo, or in practices that cannot be easily assimilated to either tradition.

‘Magical recipes from the *Grimoire* of a Tibetan Bonpo priest’, by Marc des Jardins discusses the universality of the *grimoire* formula among religious specialists, as well as the uniqueness of this Bon manuscript content, since this genre is rarely presented in Western literature. Des Jardins discusses the content, function and the historical context of this Bonpo compendium of magical recipes, and the similarities it exhibits to Buddhist texts of the same genre. He emphasises how difficult it is to obtain or even copy such material from private collections, in spite of the current rise in interest in the scholarly world on esoterism and its place in religious institutions, ordained monastics and the priesthood in general.

A belief in magic is ubiquitous in Tibetan culture, and is deeply rooted in Bon tradition. The magical power of words and symbols is as widely diffused as the power of spirits, ghosts and mythical creatures. Belief in the power of words and rites as a fundamental and irreducible force is an important component of Bon belief. This insight has important implications for classic and contemporary debates over the nature of ‘magic,’ and its presence in rituals and the daily life of people. The material culture of the Bon tradition likewise seems to provide copious, tangible evidence of the vitality of belief in magic. In his contribution to this volume, ‘Notes on a Bonpo manual for the production of manuscript amulets’, Charles Ramble explores connections between hand-drawn amulets, their function, their form and application in the context of the Bon religion and ritual performance, and in general the material forms of these protective talismans. Most of the existing published work on Tibetan amulets deals with block-printed devices, and although sets of instructions for their manufacture do exist, illustrated manuals for creating hand-drawn amulets seem to be much more unusual. The short texts that make up the compilation discussed here have been assembled from a range of different manuscripts, and Ramble offers the tentative hypothesis that the collection may represent an intermediate phase in a project –

that was apparently never completed – to copy the contents of these disparate materials into a single work devoted to the topic of amulet production. The author further notes that the lamas of the Samling temple complex appear to have a preference for using hand-drawn images in rituals where other Bonpo and Buddhist communities would normally opt for the more convenient solution afforded by blockprints. This may reflect the historical general preference among Bonpos for manuscripts over printed texts.

The undeniable connection between manuscripts and rituals in the Bon tradition, as well as the Bon cult of the book, is discussed in Dan Martin's contribution 'Earth and wind, water and fire: book binding and preservation in pre-Mongol Bon ritual manuals for consecrations.' One of the primary aims of the ritual of consecration is to preserve the sacred object, not just as a physical object, but as a focus of continuing devotion. Martin reminds us that for at least the last thousand years, Bon had a cult of the book that was very similar to that found in the other traditions. In his opinion, however, what may distinguish Bon from Tibetan book culture in general are the explicit conservation aims, as well as a somewhat different set of book accessories. Martin suggests that when books achieve iconic status and are duly enshrined, every element that goes into their making is elevated along with them. With their exceptional emphasis on letters, papermaking and protective coverings, the Bon consecration manuals make these micro-level consecrations explicit as an integral part of the consecration process. Knowing these ways of thinking is of primary importance if we are to achieve any worthwhile understanding of the physical book and its material aspects in their cultural context.

The long-standing interest in Buddhism and the preservation of cultural heritage, combined with the more recent focus on the conservation of manuscript collections within Tibet and the Himalayas, has triggered a wave of interest in the codicological, historical and anthropological study of Tibetan book culture.¹⁶ However, Bon manuscripts have not yet been clearly identified as a distinct corpus, or formed the object of codicological and material studies. The following chapters, therefore, are among the first in a series of case studies on both the collections and individual artefacts of Bon tradition, studied from the perspective of art history, codicology and preservation.

In 'Preliminary remarks on the Drangsong collection of Bon manuscripts in Mustang, Nepal', Agnieszka Helman-Ważny and Charles Ramble present their preliminary findings on a unique collection of manuscripts found in Lo Monthang, Upper Mustang, Nepal, with a discussion of the historical background of

16 Helman-Ważny et al. 2021; Luczanits and Tythacott (eds) forthcoming.

the significance of these books as both sacred and material objects. In terms of its content, this collection, belonging to the Bon religion of Tibet, offers a window onto the nature of royal and what we may call ‘community’ religion in a Tibetan kingdom. The collection has been assembled from different parts of Tibet and the Himalaya over six centuries, and therefore offers a rich body of material that has been retrieved by material and codicological analyses. The results contribute to our understanding of book and papermaking traditions in the region, as well as social aspects of Tibetan manuscript production. These manuscripts were used in rituals for the protection and prosperity of the kingdom of Mustang, its subjects and members of the royal lineage. Knowledge of the materials and ritual practices involved in the creation of physical objects sheds light on the interaction between religion, patronage and political authority in Tibetan society.

At the cultural level, there is a significant gap between Western codes and practices in heritage conservation and the reality of what can be implemented in particular regions of Asia due to the diverse economic situation, extreme climatic conditions, and prevailing cultural attitudes. The materiality of written artefacts is usually secondary for local people in culturally Tibetan regions of Asia, and is often neglected when it comes to the preservation of their cultural heritage. In practice, conservation is understood as the replacement of an old object with a new one. In effect, then, the number of original objects is constantly dwindling. With the replacement of original books when they start showing signs of damage, and the restoration of wall paintings when the old painting layer is replaced with a new one, a great deal of historical and scholarly information is lost forever when seen from a European perspective. These cultural differences in the approach to preservation of written artefacts have become a topic of heated discussion in recent years, when more new discoveries of manuscripts and other works of art were revealed from the caves of the Himalayan region.

The material side of books, whether they are Bon, Buddhist or Dongba, is often overlooked in historical studies. Amy Heller’s article, which reports on the history of the discoveries of Bonpo manuscripts in the libraries of the Samling and Phijor (Byicer) monasteries in Dolpo, is an illustration of the importance of taking this material aspect into account: by combining translations of the dedications of two *mthing shog* manuscripts with art-historical and codicological research, she retrieves important information about provenance. Her investigation opens the possibility of identifying a distinctive style of graphic representation in the illustrations and illuminations that accompany certain texts. Questions about iconography, style and techniques of painting provide an entry point to a wider area of investigation, since at this stage we cannot be sure whether these features are connected exclusively to Bon manuscripts or to regional Tibetan traditions of graphic illustration.

While contracted forms of words – in which two or more syllables are collapsed into a single syllabic space – are used in both traditions, Bonpo texts employ many contractions and abbreviations that are not found in Buddhist works. The same is true of numerous graphic symbols and scribal codes. This distinctiveness is not confined to formal features of the texts, but extends to a variety of grammatical forms.¹⁷ Why these should be confined to Bonpo texts is not yet known. One hypothesis – yet to be tested – is that certain regional forms that were originally used in both Buddhist and Bon works of the corresponding locality were lost in the former but preserved and dispersed in Bon literature owing to the prestige attributed to their provenance.

This topic is discussed in Henk Blezer's article, 'Toward a definition of local orthographies of Bon manuscripts', which presents preliminary observations about whether scribal and linguistic features of Bon texts can help to establish their provenance. For this investigation the author uses the digitised texts available in his research archive, which includes reproductions of a large number of Bon manuscripts from Menri Monastery, in Dolanji, India and the library of Samling Monastery in Dolpo, Nepal (and currently on loan to Dolanji). Blezer points to the possibility of a system or at least certain regularities in the apparent idiosyncrasies in orthography and abbreviations (*bsdus tshig* or *bskungs yig*), and suggests that these can be organised into groups of features to be then recorded in a systematic way. He comes to the conclusion that many of the particularities seem to relate to local conventions, and in the longer term may contribute to our understanding of the transmission history and regional (or temporal) provenance of Bon manuscripts. Such peculiarities are a feature of hand-written, not printed, texts: many Bonpo scriptures have been digitised for publication in the form of Western-style books or in Tibetan *pothi* (longbook) format. During the process, these traits are generally regarded as errors and are accordingly purged from the publications through 'silent' editing. The distinctive aspects of any manuscript – as an artefact that is a product of specific technologies and skills, as a platform for content, and as an essential component of ritual performance – should therefore be closely integrated into research on Bon and Naxi manuscripts.

The growing body of research on Bon and Naxi manuscript traditions has produced little evidence of a possible common ground that the two traditions may share. However, while irrefutable instances of Bon-Naxi connections may be rare, the possibility that such a link may exist has been reinforced by the discovery of ritual texts of a class of priests in Gansu and Sichuan known as *Leu* (Tib. *le'u*). This very large corpus of material – which continues to grow as new discov-

17 Tri Yungdrung 2015, esp. 196–217.

eries are made – contains texts that seem to provide a bridge between the archaic rituals of Central Tibetan Bon and those of the Naxi.¹⁸ Similarities may also be seen in mythic narratives and figures, iconography, or even practices of using the same materials and technologies.

In ‘An old Tibetan myth on retribution for killing the Nyen (*Gnyan stong*): Manuscripts scattered between Naxi, Tanguts, Eastern and Western Tibet’, Daniel Berounský touches on a fascinating, but very puzzling, topic of a certain non-Buddhist mytho-poetic tradition related to eastern Tibet. Such a tradition – or more correctly complex of traditions – is bound up with an interesting corpus of myths known as the Nyen Collection (*Gnyan ’bum*). He introduces eleven versions of the myths dealing with retribution (*stong*) for killing the Nyen (*gnyan*) by the original people of the Dong (Ldong) clan as they appear in four versions of the Nyen Collection (*Gnyan ’bum*), in one version of the Tö Collection (*Gtod ’bum*), in a version dealing with aquatic spirits, Lu (*klu*), found in Gathang Bumpa Stupa in South-Central Tibet, and in five Naxi manuscripts, one of them paraphrased in English by Joseph Rock. The number of surviving versions reveals that this myth was once well known in Central and East Tibet, and provides a link between Naxi myths, East Tibetan non-Buddhist traditions and also West Tibet, where two versions of the Nyen Collection have been found. The Tangut names of the Bon Kanjur version reveal also that the myth was probably once related to the Tangut people.

As noted above, the class of spirits known as the *klu*, along with the three other main types of divinities, namely the *gnyan*, *sa bdag*, and *gtod*, are all believed to dwell in the Tibetan natural environment, notably in water, trees, the earth and rocks. These categories of divinities all feature in Tibetan religious writing, and especially in Bon literature, where there are a number of texts related to each of them. The *Klu ’bum* may be the only Bonpo work recognised as such by Buddhists that the latter use in their monasteries. Versions of the text were the subject of early studies by Anton Schiefner and Berthold Laufer in the nineteenth century,¹⁹ but apart from a comparative study by Rolf Stein of some of the myths contained in this intriguing work,²⁰ very little research has been conducted on it. For the Bonpos, the most important version is the trilogy generally known as *Klu ’bum dkar nag khra gsum* – the White, Black and Variegated *Klu ’bum* – that is contained in the Bka’ section of the Bon canon, corresponding to the Buddhists’ Bka’ ’gyur. However, a work entitled *Klu ’bum* is also found in the supplementary

¹⁸ Ngondzin Ngawang Gyatso 2016; Ramble 2014.

¹⁹ Laufer 1898; Schiefner 1881.

²⁰ Stein 1971.

section of the canon (the Bka' rten), as one of the 'Four Collections' (*'Bum bzhi*), one of which, the Nyen Collection (*Gnyan 'bum*), features in Daniel Berounský's contribution. The Leu manuscripts from East Tibet, mentioned above, include a version of the Four Collections from the Phenchu (*'Phan chu*) area, and in her contribution to the present volume Bazhen Zeren undertakes a comparison of this manuscript version with that contained in the canon. The results of her enquiry suggest that the canonical text is based on an earlier recension that may have resembled the Phenchu version, but that underwent editing in order to bring it more clearly into line with the conventions and principles of Yungdrung Bon.

A copy of the *Klu 'bum* text from the Four Collections was made available to Bazhen Zeren thanks to the generosity of Ngondzin Ngawang Gyatso, the foremost pioneer of research on the Leu literature. In chapter 9, 'The *Lung yig* textual corpus: an overview of Leu manuscript collections from Phenchu, Amdo', Ngawang Gyatso presents the contents of the main private holdings of Leu texts from an area of East Tibet where he has conducted extensive research. While the rituals contained in these scriptures correspond broadly to those found in the 'lower' vehicles according to the mainstream 'nine-vehicle' classification of Bon literature, they also contain traces of religious practices that have been rejected by the monastic Bon establishment. In the area under consideration, the sanitisation of the Leu literature is recent enough – the process began in the early nineteenth century and has continued since then – that we know how the selective process was carried out and even the names of those who were responsible for it. As the author points out, the performative traditions of the Leu priests are now very much in decline, and while this itself may be a cause of regret among traditionalists and anyone who appreciates the sheer variety of Tibetan religious and literary traditions, the fate of the Leu manuscripts does offer a salutary example of how such local diversity might have been progressively reduced in the interest of conformist homogeneity at other periods of Tibetan history.

The study of the ritual texts of the Dongba priests of the Naxi, in Yunnan, is most closely associated with the Austro-American explorer and botanist Joseph Rock (1884–1962). Rock first went to Yunnan in 1922, and his subsequent book publications on the subject of Naxi religion and a number of high-profile articles in the *The National Geographic Magazine* assured his reputation in the West as the foremost specialist of Naxi religions, culture and literature. Rock's prominence in the field eclipsed most of the pioneering work that was carried out before him, a result that he himself actively sought by taking every opportunity to diminish the achievements of his predecessors. Michael Friedrich's contribution, 'Lost in Translation? A Brief History of the study of Dongba manuscripts from its beginnings to 1945', sets out to trace the little-known history of the acquisition of Dongba manuscripts for mainly Western collections, and of attempts to

translate their contents, from the first publication of a copy of such a manuscript in the nineteenth century up to the end of the Second World War. Throughout this period, debates concerning the nature of Dongba writing, its origins and its antiquity in relation to the syllabic Geba script also used by the Naxi, are seen to run in parallel with personal rivalries, the blatant commodification of Dongba manuscripts – resulting in their proliferation for the international market – and a neglect of early Chinese-language scholarship that is only now beginning to receive the attention it deserves.

One of the obstacles to meaningful comparisons between Tibetan Bon and Naxi belief systems is the paucity of translations of works from the latter corpus. The problem of ‘translation’ from texts consisting of mnemonic pictograms is a more general consideration that must feature in any discussion of Naxi materials, and one that is raised by Dan Petersen’s contribution, ‘A “key” to the Dongba script? A re-appraisal of a set of four Dongba manuscripts, held by the John Rylands Library’. On the basis of a set of four Dongba manuscripts and two unpublished translations held at the John Rylands Library, in Manchester, the article examines both the textual and material aspects of these manuscripts. We are fortunate that one of the four texts features a sublinear Chinese translation. As is well known, it has been possible in the past to reconstruct original Tibetan forms for the names of certain divinities and classes of beings in the Naxi corpus, but having to rely on the Chinese representation of these names makes the task especially challenging. The difficulties presented by the Chinese medium notwithstanding, the story that emerges is strikingly evocative of the world that we know from the earliest mythic narratives of the Tibetan Bonpos, with a cosmogonic account that documents the absence of natural phenomena and their subsequent presence, followed by the vicissitudes of a society where the interactions of different classes of praeternatural beings and animals may be the idiom for the conflicts and resolutions between neighbouring clans and tribes.

Besides being a record of history and religion, in its textual sphere, whether Bon or Naxi, these manuscripts are also material objects that form part of cultural world heritage, and it is this aspect of them that is considered in the chapter ‘Technical examination of paper in Naxi manuscripts from the Weltmuseum in Vienna in the context of the papermaking tradition in Yunnan Province, China’ by Agnieszka Helman-Ważny and Mengling Cai. 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. Helman-Ważny and Cai present the results of analyses of paper and fibre in sixteen Naxi manuscripts from the Weltmuseum in Vienna in the context of paper production in Yunnan Province, China, a region inhabited primarily by Naxi commu-

nities. Examination of paper samples with both digital and optical microscopes have revealed the papermaking techniques and raw materials used. Identification of the raw materials and the way they correspond to the distribution of local plants and cultural habits provided clues about the possible regional origins of the paper.

Detailed comparative research on Bon and Naxi manuscripts, entailing a consideration of trade routes, collections, materials and technologies as well as the study of reading practices and ritual usage of texts, will help to shed further light on the manuscript cultures of the two traditions. We hope that this volume will offer new insights into the topic and help to consolidate this emerging field of study.

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