

Case Study 4.2: Shelves and Manuscripts in Tibet

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Tibetan monasteries were known for being the main repositories of book collections and other antique objects, including *thang ka* (painted textile scrolls), murals and statues, that traditionally filled their interiors. Some of these, when no longer in use, were essentially held in storage, while others continued to be used in religious life and rituals. The largest collections of Tibetan books were found in either the temples and assembly halls of monasteries or designated monastic libraries (*dpe mdzod khang*). Smaller collections were also kept in private homes.

Tibetan books usually existed as loose-leaf volumes; they are wrapped tightly in a cloth between wooden boards, and then neatly placed on the normally red and gold painted wooden shelving structures, where each volume has its own designated pigeonhole in a specific order within the collection. The storage-shelves for books were usually adapted to the general form and size of canonical volumes. They consist of open wooden frames with designated spaces for one or more volumes, and, in most cases, they do not include full planks as shelf bases as is the case of Western storage. The volumes themselves are placed so that they are perpendicular to the wall against which the shelving system stands. The contents of the volume are identified by a cloth label tucked into the wrapping and displayed on the end, sometimes covered by a cloth flap that can be lifted to reveal information about the volume.

Well-constructed bookshelves were a regular part of Tibetan interiors. In some monasteries nowadays, however, the books are stored in cabinets with full shelves and glass doors, more in the Western style. The interiors of the Tibetan monasteries were not properly heated and the buildings were often not sufficiently protected against leakage from melting snows or summer rains. The resulting changes in temperature and humidity were unfavourable for preserving books. Moreover, books in smaller Tibetan monasteries were often stored in spaces that were not specifically dedicated for this purpose and were, thus, less well protected than they might have been otherwise. The interiors were also invariably poorly lit, but, fortunately, low exposure to light is a positive factor for paper conservation.

The fact that books were often placed near the altar, exposing them to butter lamps, is more problematic because the books, thus, received their share of the combustion products of the butter which traditionally fuelled temple lamps. Consequently, the pages of books that were stored in the monastery, and opened for ritual or study, were often covered with a layer of dust and oily soot due to these conditions. The presence of chemically unstable substances in the air brings with it a risk to books and other valued objects kept within the temple.



Fig. 1: Traditional shelving storage of books at private home in Ghami, Mustang, Nepal; photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (2018).



Fig. 2: The books cabinet at Shalu monastery in Tibet; photo: Agnieszka Helman-Ważny (2013).