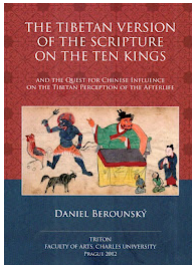


## REVIEW: *SCRIPTURE ON THE TEN KINGS*

Reviewed by Paul K. Nietupski (John Carroll University)



Daniel Berounský (with Luboš Bělka, "Comparative Description of the Paintings"). 2012. *The Tibetan Version of the Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Quest for Chinese Influence on the Tibetan Perception of the Afterlife*. Prague: Triton Publishing House. 319pp, bibliographies, appendices, color plates, index. ISBN 9788073875848 (paper 19.80€).

This book is a study of the various influences on the complex Tibetan visions of the afterlife. It is based on new text-critical research and includes an introduction and translation of a rare Tibetan manuscript entitled *Scripture on the Ten Kings*, housed in the National Gallery, Prague. The book includes extensive references to secondary scholarship, as well as collaborative work by competent scholars and an appended study of the text illustrations by Luboš Bělka.

From the outset, the book raises a range of interpretive questions of central importance to at least Tibetan and Asian studies. The author describes the plan of the book and its parameters in the Introduction, noting that the manuscript under study does not include tantric perspectives (12), and is instead more oriented to popular understanding and use. This is an important and controversial methodological position, consistent with the formalized one circulated in scholastic and monastic circles that emphasizes secrecy and limited access to fully developed tantric studies.<sup>1</sup> This position can, however, be contrasted with, for example, the uses of texts noted by Cuevas (2003), and further emphasized by Prude (2005:1-3), who suggests more popular use of tantric texts. This view is discussed in detail by others, including Thurman (2006), in his obviously tantric-influenced introduction and translation of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Noted briefly by Dreyfus (2003:118-120).

*Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Berounský explains that the tantric traditions have been avoided in the text under study, which instead:

concentrates only on seemingly marginal influences on the perception of the afterlife which, however, might have had a strong popular impact, and thus would have been hard to discern in the texts rendered in tantric garb (12).

Berounský's position about the Tibetan audiences and uses of his featured text presents an important voice in this still unresolved debate about who read, who engaged in relevant religious observances, or even knew about these and other, explicitly tantric texts.

As the title of the work suggests, the objective of the book is a "[q]uest for Chinese Influence on the Tibetan Perception of the Afterlife." However, the study is a more comprehensive and inclusive examination of the subject. The first chapter is a summary of Hindu, Buddhist, and other Indian religions' views of afterlife experiences, notably, descriptions of hells. With close reference to key secondary studies, the author presents the ideas of hells from the *Upaniṣads*, the *Laws of Manu*, and other Indian sources. Berounský pays attention to the developed ideas of hells in Indian Buddhist thought, and includes material from early Buddhist and later Mahāyāna sources. The chapter ends with the author's translation of a vivid passage on Buddhist hells by the ca. thirteenth to fourteenth century scholar, Chim Jampelyang, from his important commentary on the *Abhidharmakośa*. This is significant because, though a late text, it raises the issue of a much older Indian source for both Chinese and Tibetan visions of hells. This chapter, moreover, deals with the motives for what follows in the next chapter, the excursions to various hells, whether out of a Confucian sense of filial piety, or because of a Mahāyāna sense of compassion for the suffering of beings in hell, an underlying problem noted by Kapstein (2007:345-377). Also, as above, this chapter prompts the reader to question what social factors were at work in the reception of these texts and ideas, a recurring issue throughout the book, summarized in another work noted by Berounský, Cuevas' *Travels in the Netherworld: Buddhist*

*Popular Narratives of Death and the Afterlife in Tibet* (2008:6-11). The issues and depth of scholarship in this volume serve as a good platform for the next chapter, a summary of stories about visits to hells.

In Chapter Two, "Visits to Hells: Tibetan *Delog* Narrations and Chinese *Zhiguai* Stories," Berounský presents a bibliographical study of the relevant Tibetan and Chinese traditions on this subject. The study is strengthened by reference to relevant Russian scholarship. He opens the chapter with methodological considerations about the authorship of the texts, whether they are of the highest level of scholarship or otherwise, and citing Cuevas (2008), goes on to note that the categories of scholastic and popular literature are not rigid, and that there was borrowing across genres. He carries on beyond these considerations, noting that there was "an integration of the scholarly teachings into real life" (45). This point is well presented and explains the complexity of the literature under discussion, with influence from the Abhidharma literature, tantra, popular stories and, as we will see, from Tibetan, especially in the case of *delog* stories, and from Chinese traditions. Still, while the influences are manifold, there are recognizable differences, for example, in the precise descriptions of the death process in the Tibetan materials (45-46), and the more legalistic images of the afterlife found in Chinese sources, also mentioned by Kapstein.

Berounský describes Tibetan *delog* stories in detail, and summaries the available studies, their possible Chinese and/ or other origins, and the influences on this literature. Drawing on the work of Pommaret (46 n26), he lists the currently known *delog* literature, including the English translation in Delog Dawa Drolma (1995). The author goes on to describe possible Iranian<sup>2</sup> antecedents and compares the *delog* genre with the much older Chinese "Accounts of the Strange" (*zhiguai*) stories, through the work of Company (1990, 1995) and other scholars, again including Russian scholars. In this segment the author notes the possibilities and problems of intercultural literary borrowing across many centuries. He discusses

---

<sup>2</sup> The term Berounský uses is 'Iranian', by which I assume he means 'Persian'.

the distinctive Chinese and Buddhist influences in the texts and closes this section with a translation of a section of one of the most popular *delog* stories, *Delog Lingza Choekyi*, edited and translated from Tibetan with reference to all available editions.

As in the previous chapter, the presentation of ideas and translation are useful for understanding this literature, and are thought-provoking in application to broader issues. Berounský's analysis is solid and comprehensive. He raises key interpretive questions, of whether the audience was exclusively a scholarly élite or the population at large, of possible sources of the stories in Tibetan or Chinese cultures, and of the transference of ideas and translation across cultures, including Iranian, Tibetan, and Chinese. Though not discussed in detail, Berounský questions and provides data on the processes of composition, production, copy, and circulation of written texts, and the extent to which texts available today reflect actual practice in real communities.

Chapter Three builds on an already detailed study with yet another full-length investigation of sources of texts on the afterlife, here including the well-known story of "Maudgalyāyana's Travels in Hells." Berounský opens the chapter with the emphatic statement that "the Tibetan *delog* narrations share an almost identical basic storyline with their much earlier Chinese precursors" (78). Having said this, however, he notes that beyond the obvious similarities there are significant differences in the Tibetan and Chinese traditions, typical of Chinese "transformation texts" (*bianwen*). He notes that the Tibetan version of "Maudgalyāyana's Travels in Hells" is a likely translation of one Chinese "transformation text," which itself has even earlier, perhaps Tibetan antecedents or, as one might expect, a type of Tibetan "transformation text." The opening pages of this chapter include a detailed description of a complex literary history that extends across languages, cultures, and religions. The reader, moreover, arrives at this chapter knowing of the possibilities of Indian, Iranian, Tibetan, and Chinese borrowings of text and story materials, and the considerations of the audiences, production, and circulation of written texts and oral traditions, including Chinese ghost festivals and Tibetan festivals, noted by other scholars. In the

opening section he discusses the history and secondary scholarship of the so-called *Yulanpen Sūtra* and its associated calendrical celebrations, noting that there were likely many more such texts and stories, both oral and written. Berounský includes reference to secondary studies by Kapstein, Teiser, and others, and uses these to build his description of a literary and religious genre.

Chapter Four, "Ten Kings of the Afterlife" brings the reader to the main text of the book. By this point, the reader well understands that Berounský's work is a description of a literary genre defined in part by a body of religious beliefs in the afterlife. The boundaries of death, like the boundaries of the cultural and literary contexts Berounský presents, are permeable. With his broad-based descriptive chapters as a foundation, he turns to a primary source text that is perhaps more remarkable for what it represents than the text itself. He opens the chapter with a description of the extensive Chinese texts, developed traditions, and sources of the "Ten Kings," including detailed comments on Teiser's (1994:132-140.) work. This section is very useful for its analysis of Chinese and other sources, and their relevance to the Tibetan text.

Chapter Four continues with a careful analytical description of the text holdings in the National Gallery of Prague and the known history of their acquisition, with a focus on the *Scripture on the Ten Kings*. The author makes helpful suggestions about the possible origins, motives, and use of these texts, with careful reference to Dunhuang texts and Teiser's works. He continues with a detailed and thorough description of the Prague *Scripture on the Ten Kings*, followed by summary remarks on the possible uses of the text in its original contexts. The next section is a careful translation of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings*, based on and at times critically reconstructed by the author's solid command of Tibetan language and literature. This valuable translation is followed by a facsimile of the entire Prague manuscript, which includes the illustrations in black and white. Berounský's "Concluding Remarks" (263) are a concise and lucid summary of the four chapters and the translation.

This already thought-provoking and encyclopedic book continues with a "Comparative Description of the Paintings" written

by Luboš Bělka. The Appendices include color plates of the illustrations in the Prague manuscript of the *Scripture of the Ten Kings*, already displayed in the facsimile of the text. Bělka's detailed descriptions of the paintings include close reference and comparison to Dunhuang paintings, and with careful consideration of the works of Masako Watanabe and Teiser (1994).<sup>3</sup> Bělka's detailed analytical descriptions and "Preliminary Conclusions" (297) are an excellent ending to an already detailed project.

In sum, this book is a remarkable study, ostensibly of a rare Tibetan manuscript, but also of so much more, including careful analysis of the text's possible source cultures, texts, and religious traditions. The Tibetan text under study is considered in light of Indian, Iranian, Mongolian, Tibetan, and not least, Chinese sources. The chapters are well organized, and include references to relevant primary texts and secondary studies. Berounský includes translations of primary texts, a key strength of the project. His command of Tibetan language is evident throughout. The book is thought-provoking for the obvious eschatological subject matter, and how this is dealt with in Tibetan, Chinese, Indian, and related contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Berounský's project is data rich, and provides foundations for further investigation. He raises issues of text production and circulation in Tibetan and the related cultures under study. For example, readers might consider who the author of the text was, whether a monk, an educated layperson, or a commissioned copyist. The text is not well written, and the paintings not high art; it was not a product of a highly educated writer or a skilled master painter. It does not appear in canonical collections, and yet it, or at least the ideas expressed in the text, as shown by the related texts under discussion, appears to have been widely circulated. Why was it written? For use in funeral rituals? To gain Buddhist merit for deceased persons? Or, was the text written to address concerns of communities with little access to or understanding of high level monastic traditions? In this case, was this text used exclusively by non-monastic persons and communities, and does this text represent

---

<sup>3</sup> See also Teiser (1999:169-197).

<sup>4</sup> For detailed contextual studies see Cuevas and Stone (2007).

a very wide-ranging, non-monastic religious practice? Furthermore, given the title of the book, what is the relationship between Tibetan and Chinese communities with similar concerns? Is the Chinese text a prototype for the Tibetan, or do both traditions rely on Indian Buddhist and other materials? And what of art traditions? Luboš Bělka takes care to show how the ideas discussed in the written book are expressed in a visual medium. Berounský raises these and other compelling issues in this thoughtfully written and carefully researched book. Its broad range of data makes it useful for scholars and students interested in the subjects introduced. It is not burdened with excessive theological speculation, and it is for the most part well written. This compelling volume makes the material accessible to a wide range of readers.

The shortcoming of the volume is the frequency of lexical and spelling errors in the English text and less frequently in Sanskrit words, and occasional lack of clarity of expression. The book deserved a careful proofreading and editing and could also have included Chinese characters for technical terms and primary sources. These issues aside, the book is a valuable contribution to scholarship in Asian studies, religious studies, Asian art history, and all related fields.

#### REFERENCES

- Campany, Robert Ford. 1990. Return from Death Narratives in Early Medieval China. *Journal of Chinese Religions* 18:91-125.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1995. To Hell and Back: Death, Near-death and Other Worldly Journeys in Early Medieval China in John J Collins and Michael Fishbane (eds) *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Cuevas, Bryan J. 2003. *The Hidden History of The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Oxford: Oxford University
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2008. *Travels in the Netherworld: Buddhist Popular Narratives of Death and the Afterlife in Tibet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Delog Dawa Drolma (Richard Barron with Chagdud Tulku, translators). 1995. *Delog: Journey to Realms Beyond Death*. Junction City, CA: Padma Publishing.
- Dreyfus, George B. 2003. *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: The Education of a Tibetan Buddhist Monk*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kapstein, Matthew T. 2007. Mulian in the Land of Snows and King Gesar in Hell: A Chinese Tale of Parental Death in its Tibetan Transformations in Bryan J Cuevas and Jacqueline I Stone (eds) *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*: Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Padmasambhava (compiler) and Robert Thurman (translator). 2006. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Prude, Alyson. 2005. Review of The Hidden History of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* by Bryan J. Cuevas. *Journal of the International Association of Tibetan Studies* 1:1-3 (<http://www.thlib.org?tid=T1224>, accessed February 9, 2013).
- Teiser, Stephen F. 1994. *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999. Picturing Purgatory: Illustrated Versions of The Scripture on the Ten Kings in *Images de Dunhuang: Dessins et Peintures sur Papier des Fonds Pelliot et Stein* Jean-Pierre Drege (ed). Paris: École français d'Extreme-Orient.
- \_\_\_\_\_ and Jacqueline Stone. 2007. *The Buddhist Dead: Practices, Discourses, Representations*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Watanabe, Masako. 1984. *An Iconographic Study of the Ten Kings Paintings*. MA Thesis. Vancouver: The University of British Columbia.



NON-ENGLISH TERMS

*bianwen* 变文

Chim Jampelyang མཚེམས་འཇམ་དཔལ་དབྱངས་, མཚེམས་འཇམ་པའི་དབྱངས་,  
(མཚེམས་འཇམ་པའི་སྐྱུངས་, sic.)

*delog* འདས་ལོག

Delog Dawa Drolma འདས་ལོག་ལྷ་བ་རྫོལ་མ།

Delog Lingza Choekyi འདས་ལོག་གླིང་བཟའ་ཚོས་སྐྱོད

*zhiguai* 志怪