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Traditional Paths, Innovative Approaches  
and Digital Challenges in the Study  
of Tibetan Manuscripts and Xylographs

Edited by Michela Clemente



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## PREFACE

The leading orientalist Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1984) is considered as the father of the Italian Tibetology for his great merit of making available the treasures of Tibetan culture and promoting Tibetan studies in Italy. Supported by his profound knowledge of humanities and oriental studies, he did not confine himself to study the primary sources—Tibetan and Sanskrit texts in particular—but he also travelled in India, Tibet and Nepal and used his personal experience and knowledge of these territories to better understand their cultures.<sup>1</sup>

This brief preface to the volume conceived and edited by Michela Clemente aims to recall Tucci's relationship with Tibetan books through some short notes taken from his works, his travelogues in particular.

The observations about Tibetan literature written by Tucci make us understand how the path to wisdom is also linked to the physical path of his scientific expeditions. During these latter, Giuseppe Tucci tangibly met the texts, which became the object of his study once he returned to his homeland. In an article written in 1940 he talks about his seventh trip to Tibet with these words:

The profundity grows not where there is the urgent push of action but from idleness.<sup>2</sup> In the empty hours the intelligence reaches a crystal-like pureness on which appears the reflection not of the appearance of things but of their essence. It is from idleness that the Tibetan literature was born. And this literature is one of the most subtle, deep and pondered of the East. I mean the spiritual and religious literature because there is nothing else on the roof of the world (Tucci 1940a: 3).

Tucci partially rectified this last assertion when he wrote about the so-called secular literature, namely epic texts, convivial chants, stories of the oral tradition and love poetry.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For a biography of Giuseppe Tucci, see Crisanti 2020.

<sup>2</sup> I think that we should interpret Tucci's thoughts by considering his education in classical studies as the starting point of our analysis (see Crisanti 2011-2012: 15-19). For instance, we should see Seneca's positive acceptance of the word *otium* which embodies several meanings such as isolation, solitude, literary and philosophical studies and contemplative life. These meanings perfectly fit the monastic atmosphere of ancient Tibet (see Seneca 1983: 66, 145-151).

<sup>3</sup> See Tucci 1970: 540-541.

## VIII

Tibetan literature is rich and vast. In order to briefly describe it, we should distinguish between canonical literature, namely literature deriving from the translation of the Buddhist canonical texts (*bKa' 'gyur* and *bsTan 'gyur*), and the whole literary production by Tibetan authors, whose compositions were nonetheless inspired by the Canon of the sacred texts. Regarding the categorisation of the fields of study, Tibetans were inspired by Buddhist and Indian traditions: this proficiency in the many branches of knowledge helped the Enlightened one to save the human world.

It is well known that during his scientific expeditions Tucci gathered a great amount of Tibetan texts in order to be able to study Tibetan literature.<sup>4</sup> He writes: “I collected hundreds of manuscripts during my expeditions, rescuing them from an irretrievable loss, and I’m going to devote myself to their interpretation, at least of the most significant and vital information they retain...” (Tucci 1935a: 918).<sup>5</sup> Tucci refers how he managed to win the trust of cautious monks by fraternising with them, leading them to open the doors of their libraries:

[...] gradually I change the subject of the discussion heading to complex problems of theology and mystic, about which my interlocutors have nothing more but imprecise notions. The diffidence fades away: the gates of the temple open up. [...] I pitch the tent close to the monastery for one or two days until they show me the treasures of the archives and let me take a copy or a photograph of these documents I’m most interested in, or even buy, and take with me what I like the most. In this way I finally took possession of hundreds of manuscripts... (Tucci 1933: 98-99).<sup>6</sup>

We read again:

[...] Then, going closer to books, I took them with my utmost respect, I brought them at my forehead so that the contact with their sacred pages would cleanse me. Hence, sitting down cross-legged with a book on my knees, I flipped through it in accordance with set rules, reading aloud and with rhythmic inflection, as monks do. [...] if by chance a manuscript of great interest fell in my hands, it wasn’t always easy to start the delicate negotiations that would have brought me to purchase any relics... (Tucci 1935b: 268).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> On Giuseppe Tucci’s expeditions, see Nalesini 2008. On Tibetan texts gathered by Tucci, see in particular De Rossi Filibeck 1994; De Rossi Filibeck 2003, and my *Addenda* in this volume.

<sup>5</sup> “Sono centinaia i manoscritti che io ho raccolto nelle mie spedizioni e salvato da una irreparabile rovina; e alla loro interpretazione, in ciò almeno che essi contengono, di più significativo e vitale, mi vado ora dedicando...”

<sup>6</sup> “[...] poco alla volta faccio cadere il discorso su questioni complesse di teologia o di mistica di cui i miei interlocutori hanno al massimo poche e imprecise nozioni e l’attenzione e l’interesse crescono... la diffidenza svanisce: le porte del tempio si aprono. [...] e pianto le tende vicino al monastero per uno o due giorni fino a che non mi si mostrino i tesori degli archivi e non mi si permetta di prendere copia o di fotografia dei documenti che più mi interessano o addirittura di comprare e portar via ciò che più mi sta a cuore. In tal maniera centinaia di manoscritti preziosi sono venuti in mio possesso...”

<sup>7</sup> “[...] Poi avvicinatosi ai libri, li prendevo con il massimo rispetto, me li portavo all’altezza della fronte per modo che il contatto con le pagine sacre mi purificasse. Accoccolatosi quindi per terra e depositato il volume sulle ginocchia incrociate, lo sfogliavo secondo le regole prescritte, leg-

In his book entitled *A Lhasa e oltre*, Tucci describes in particular his commitment to find as many books as possible. Lhasa inhabitants, even the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, helped him reaching this goal by donating him their books: “By this time they know the purpose of my journey, and they generously meet my wishes. His Holiness the Dalai Lama lead the way” (Tucci 1952: 130-132).<sup>8</sup>

In his works Tucci occasionally mentions some codicological aspects of Tibetan manuscripts and xylographies, although he does not dedicate himself to this subject.<sup>9</sup> He notices that Tibetans produced many illuminated manuscripts, imitating Indian and Nepalese cultures, and that miniatures may be found not only in the first and last pages—like in most xylographies—but also in the inner folios. Images depicted in Tibetan books may be examined with the same methods used for paintings. Local painters, indeed, often drew their inspiration from illustrations found in manuscripts and xylographies. Sometimes they even traced out representations of deities and masters from xylographies: these paintings can be found throughout Tibet in temples and monasteries.<sup>10</sup> Tucci refers: “Sometimes these manuscripts are illuminated: miniatures are much more perfect when these are older: lacquer varnish, with which they were covered, increases their vividness and beauty, and also the background on which they were drawn, nearly always made by gold foils” (Tucci 1940b: 85).<sup>11</sup>

Concerning xylographies and the technique used to produce them, Tucci refers:

Leaving on the right the monastery of Chumi (Chumig) you arrive at Nartan (Narthang) where the biggest printing house of Central Tibet is found. There Tanghiur in 225 volumes and Canghiur in 100 volumes are printed, the biggest collections of Buddhist scriptures, which contain the translation of the most important Buddhist works translated from the original Sanskrit into Tibetan. In the gigantic classrooms of the monastery, one of the most ancient of the area, woodblocks—on which thousands of pages of sacred scriptures are carved—are stored on suitable shelves. These blocks are the matrices. Books are not ready at the first request: these should be ordered. It is advisable to

gendo ad alta voce e con modulazione ritmica, come fanno i monaci. [...] se per caso mi capitava fra mano un manoscritto di grande interesse, non era sempre facile iniziare con i lama i delicati conciliaboli che dovevano portare all’acquisto dei cimeli...”.

<sup>8</sup> “Sanno ormai quale sia stato lo scopo del mio viaggio e vengono generosamente incontro ai miei desideri. Sua Santità il Dalai Lama dà per primo l’esempio”.

<sup>9</sup> For a complete bibliography of Giuseppe Tucci’s works, see Nalesini 2018.

<sup>10</sup> “I manoscritti miniati sono molto comuni nel Tibet, anche in questo i Tibetani hanno copiato gli Indiani e i Nepalesi che molto apprezzavano i manoscritti illuminati. Come nelle prime e nelle ultime pagine delle xilografie si trovano immagini di divinità e di maestri, così abbondano manoscritti nei quali non solo la prima e l’ultima pagina, ma anche le interne sono decorate da miniature. E il discorso che di esse si può fare è il medesimo delle pitture”. [...] I pittori locali non solo si ispiravano a quelle xilografie, cui accresceva prestigio l’essere uscite da celebri monasteri, ma spesso le ricalcavano addirittura. In qual cosa vediamo nelle più diverse parti del Tibet riprodotte senza variazioni di sorta, non soltanto il medesimo soggetto, ma il medesimo disegno” (Tucci 1959: 179).

<sup>11</sup> “A volte questi manoscritti sono miniati: le miniature sono tanto più perfette quanto più antiche: accresce freschezza e grazia la lacca di cui venivano ricoperte e lo sfondo, quasi sempre di lamina d’oro su cui erano disegnate”.

bring along good quality paper, which can be quite easily found at the bazaar of Scigazè. Several specialised lamas are assigned to the printing house, working under a parpon with whom you should negotiate for prices and make any requests (Tucci 1935b: 83).<sup>12</sup>

And also:

It's a basic technique: thick ink is smeared on the block with a brush, then the sheet is put on the moistened surface, pressing it with a small roller. The clearness depends on paper quality and thickness of the ink, which sometimes expands, sometimes it clots, often straining one's eyes and making very difficult reading a book. Tibetan books are usually printed on 20-30 centimetres long paper sheets; each sheet is written on recto and verso in six or seven lines. [...] Two are the biggest printing houses in Lhasa: the former in the Depung monastery and the latter in the Sciocang (zol k'an), beneath the Potala. Nevertheless, the best and valuable books are printed in Eastern Tibet, where copper-blocks are used instead of woodblocks (Tucci 1935b: 83).<sup>13</sup>

In a further work Tucci (1959: 187) mentions different kinds of paper used for Tibetan books, namely *gla yi*, *gan shog bu*, *hor* and *mon* paper, anticipating studies which have been developed only recently.<sup>14</sup> He also hints at books made by lapis lazuli, luxury editions usually produced as gifts for monasteries and sponsored by local rulers, another subject of research which still awaits further investigation.<sup>15</sup> Materials (*rdzas*) used for producing scriptures are included in the six ornaments of the holy books, as we read in another essay that Tucci dedicates to Tibetan wood covers (Tucci 1947: 63, 65).

<sup>12</sup> “Lasciando sulla destra il monastero di Ciumi (Chumig) si arriva a Nartan (Narthang) ove si trova la più grande stamperia del Tibet centrale. Vi si stampa il Tanghiur in 225 volumi e il Canghiur in 100 volumi, le più grandi raccolte di scritture buddhistiche, che contengono la traduzione delle opere più importanti del Buddismo volte dall'originale sanscrito in tibetano. Nelle gigantesche aule del monastero, uno dei più antichi della contrada, sono conservate in apposite scaffalature le tavole di legno sulle quali sono incise le migliaia di pagine delle scritture sacre. Queste tavolette fanno da matrice. I libri non sono pronti alla prima richiesta: si ordinano ed è consigliabile portare con sé della carta buona che si può trovare con discreta facilità nel bazar di Scigazè. Un gran numero di lama specializzati è addetto alla stamperia alle dipendenze di un parpon col quale bisogna contrattare i prezzi e al quale fare l'ordinazione”.

<sup>13</sup> “Il sistema è elementare: si spalma con una spazzola l'inchiostro denso sulla matrice e poi sulla superficie così inumidita si adagia il foglio, schiacciandolo contro con un piccolo compressore: la nitidezza dipende dalla qualità della carta e dalla densità dell'inchiostro che ora si spande ora si coagula, si da rendere spesso la lettura di un libro cosa molta faticosa e stanchevole per gli occhi. In genere il libro tibetano è stampato su fogli di carta lunga dai venti ai trenta centimetri; ogni foglio è scritto sul dritto e sul rovescio in sei o sette righe... A Lhasa due sono le maggiori stamperie: una nel monastero di Depung e l'altra a Sciocang (zol k'an) sotto il Potala. I migliori libri tuttavia e più pregiati si stampano nel Tibet orientale, dove invece di matrici di legno adoperano anche matrici di rame”.

<sup>14</sup> The first significant study on paper made in the Himalayan areas is that of Jasper Trier (1972). For more recent publication on this subject, see in particular Boesi 2016; Boesi & Helman-Ważny, this volume; Diemberger, Elliott & Clemente 2014: chapt. 5; Helman-Ważny 2014: chapt. 6; Helman-Ważny 2016a; Helman-Ważny 2016b.

<sup>15</sup> On deluxe editions of Tibetan books, see in particular Wangchuk 2016.

Since features of ancient manuscripts were later adopted as model for xylographies, I would like to conclude this short report on Tucci's notes with some of his remarks on the mTho gling bKa' 'gyur. Several years ago, a dozen or so packages were found lying in a room at Palazzo Brancaccio in Rome, which was the venue of IsMEO at the time. The packages included a set of voluminous Tibetan manuscripts, some of which in good condition, others presenting ragged edges and signs of mould. After a thorough examination of every manuscript, I realised that I was holding canonical texts or a fragmentary edition of the Buddhist Canon, and I wondered where Tucci could have found them. Then, in one of the sheets I noticed a note by Tucci, saying "bKa' 'gyur of Tholing".<sup>16</sup> In one of this writings, he confirms this: "I also possess many volumes of a manuscript bKa' 'gyur found in the ruins of upper Toling" (Tucci 1971: 474). And again: "Among the others there are the magnificent exemplars of the Tholing Kanjur, copied between the 11<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> century, sometimes protected by superb engraved covers with the Five Supreme Buddhas meditating their eternal meditation" (Tucci 1934b: 118-121).<sup>17</sup> Tucci describes how these manuscripts passed into his hands as follows:

After six days we reach Toling, the big monastery of Rincenzampo and of the kings of Guge: one hundred chapels are scattered here and there on the left side of the Sutlej in a yellowish scenery. Everything seems so unreal. The exploration is fruitful: centuries-old manuscripts, all covered with sharp writing which seem to be copied by the scribe only yesterday, many of them illuminated and decorated [...] I buy as much as I can, while long talks with the abbot of the monastery, a learned saint of Lassa, open new and unexpected doors to my understanding of the Tibetan mystical and dogmatic literature (Tucci 1934a: 83-84).<sup>18</sup>

This short preface, written to pay homage to Giuseppe Tucci, reminds us that information provided by him on Tibetan manuscripts and xylographies is scattered in various essays and books related to different subjects, demonstrating that the study of the Tibetan book culture in his multifarious aspects (materials, layout, provenance and dating, content, conservation, etc.) is strictly connected with other

<sup>16</sup> See De Rossi Filibeck 1996.

<sup>17</sup> "Fra gli altri i magnifici esemplari del Kanjur di Tholing copiati dall'XI al XIV secolo protetti a volte da superbe tavole scolpite in cui i cinque budda supremi meditano la loro eterna meditazione."

<sup>18</sup> "Dopo sei giorni siamo a Toling il grande monastero di Rincenzampo e dei re di Guge: cento cappelle disseminate qua e là sulla riva sinistra della Sutlej in un paesaggio gialliccio, tutto sembra irreale. L'esplorazione è feconda di risultati: manoscritti secolari tutti ricoperti di scrittura nitida, sembrano usciti ieri dalla cella dell'amanuense moltissimi alluminati e arabescati [...] Compro quello che posso comprare mentre lunghi colloqui col priore del monastero, un santo e dotto uomo di Lassa, mi aprono nuove e ed insperate porte alla comprensione della mistica e della dogmatica tibetana." Some of the mTho gling manuscripts preserved in the Tucci Tibetan Collection have been examined over the years from different perspectives: paper composition, codicological features and illuminations. Hypothesis of their chronological context have been advanced, setting them approximately in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries (see Heller 2016; Heller 2019; Heller & Eng 2017).

disciplines such as philology, philosophy, history, art history and archaeology. This is how Michela Clemente's volume has been conceived, that is to say, to underline the importance of the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to the study of Tibetan manuscripts and xylographies.

ELENA DE ROSSI FILIBECK

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MICHELA CLEMENTE