

# Printing Tibetan *Epistolaria*: A Bibliographical Analysis of Epistolary Transformations from Manuscript to Xylograph

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*Abstract:* In Tibetan tradition, letter writing is a sophisticated art in which the material aspects of a letter—paper format, script style and size, text spacing and layout—are integral to the letter's semantic content. What meaning is lost and gained in the transformation from manuscript original to printed edition? What scribal and editorial decisions are at play in this textual transformation? My aims in this article are twofold: to introduce scholars of global epistolary literatures to the Tibetan epistolary tradition, and to examine the ways in which editing and printing *epistolaria* can thoroughly transform letters' materiality and meaning. This study not only contributes a bibliographical analysis of printed Tibetan *epistolaria*, but also offers a model for investigating how woodblock printing or other printing technologies can change the way epistolary texts both look and function.

## *Introduction*

In Tibetan cultural areas, the practice of collecting and printing an exemplary person's writings has been a prevalent mode of textual production for the past several centuries and remains so today.<sup>1</sup> Tibetan collected works publications function simultaneously to memorialize the deaths of prominent figures, to display their scholastic and creative achievements, and to enhance the prestige of their institutions and patrons.<sup>2</sup> The printing of collected works has also served to preserve rare texts, to create new reading communities, and to circulate model texts for training in literary composition.<sup>3</sup> Among the genres of literature commonly anthologized and printed in Tibetan collected works are epistolary genres: official letters, personal letters, letters of advice, letters replying to questions about scholastic topics, petitions, decrees, and many others. Most of the letters that have been gathered for printing in collected works publications are those prized either for the richness of their literary style, the significance of their content, or the renown of their recipients; they are typically formal epistles rather than intimate messages to family members or everyday administrative communications.

A formal Tibetan epistle is an elegant literary product that draws on expertise in composition, poetic synonyms, and intricate conventions of etiquette, but it is also a well-crafted physical object: a carefully measured leaf of paper inscribed in calligraphy, folded many times, sealed with wax, wrapped in a white offering scarf, accompanied by gifts, delivered into the hands of a courier, and transported by foot, horseback, or yak. When printed for circulation beyond its original recipient (or recipients, for texts such as political edicts or public circulars), a letter becomes a different artifact entirely. Not only is a letter's material and graphic constitution changed from its original manuscript form to a printed text with a new shape, script, and format, but in the process of printing, a letter's readership and social value are thoroughly reinvented. Until the use of the telegraph, typewriter, and computer in Tibetan communities, virtually all letters were written by hand; this means that every woodblock-printed letter is an artful transformation of a manuscript original.<sup>4</sup>

What might change in our reading of a printed letter or letter collection if we not only read the text, but also read the material history of the text's transformation from manuscript to print?

In the Tibetan cultural context, xylography (printing from engraved woodblocks) has long been the dominant mode of printing technology and continues to be employed widely today, particularly in religious contexts. Xylographic productions of large compendia, such as collected works, are resource- and labor-intensive endeavors that require teams of paper makers, wood workers, engravers, metal workers (to make and maintain the engraving tools), and tailors (to sew the cloth book covers).<sup>5</sup> The editorial labor involved in printing collected works is equally intensive. Editors locate and obtain original texts, cross-check copies for accuracy or best witnesses, oversee scribal production of copies for the engravers, cross-check each woodblock against the scribe's copy, and finally proofread and collate each printed chapter or textual unit.<sup>6</sup> In Tibetan contexts, editing a manuscript for xylographic print production involves a thorough transformation of the text's material and graphic constitution as the author's or scribe's original handwriting, often in a cursive or headless script, is traded for another scribe's rewriting in a uniform headed script and then an engraver's emulation in wood—backward and in relief—of the scribe's paper copy. Sometimes, this editorial transformation from manuscript to print carries with it significant changes in a text's symbolic meaning and social use.

My aims in this article are twofold: to introduce scholars of global epistolary literatures to the Tibetan epistolary tradition, and to examine the ways in which editing and printing *epistolaria* can thoroughly transform letters' materiality and meaning. This study not only contributes a bibliographical analysis of printed Tibetan *epistolaria*, but also offers a model for investigating how woodblock printing or other printing technologies can change the way epistolary texts both look and function. By attending to printed letters as physical objects, we can better understand the social contours of editing, publishing, and circulating *epistolaria* for wider reading communities.

### *A Brief Note on Historical Context*

Tibetan epistolary style, like all arts, is internally diverse and changes shape over time. In order to frame the generalizations that I will make here about formal Tibetan epistolary style in manuscript and xylographic forms, I first offer a short note on the historical development of Tibetan letters and an explanation of why I have chosen the epistolary style that was standardized in the early modern period as a useful representative of Tibetan epistolary tradition for this study.

Tibetan-language written correspondence has circulated since the seventh century CE, when the Tibetan script was invented to serve the administrative needs of the rapidly expanding Tibetan empire. First taking shape as imperial edicts engraved on stone pillars and as material requisitions for military outposts inscribed on wood slips, letters in the Old Tibetan language began to appear on paper in the early eighth century when the empire moved its record keeping from wood slips to paper.<sup>7</sup> A wide variety of Tibetan letters on wood and paper populates the Dunhuang collections: memorials to superiors, letters of passage for pilgrimage and trade, letters of introduction to Buddhist lamas, administrative messages, and practice letters composed as scribal training exercises.<sup>8</sup> Dunhuang documents testify that by the time of the Tibetan empire's fall in the ninth century, letters were deeply embedded in everyday religious, political, and commercial activity along the Silk Road. Tibetan letters from Dunhuang are characterized by a fair degree of consistency in epistolary style within distinctive categories that Takeuchi has classified as formal official, informal official, and personal letters.<sup>9</sup> Much remains to be learned about the multicultural

influences that informed the epistolary conventions appearing in these early Tibetan materials, as well as about Old Tibetan epistolography in areas beyond the reach of Dunhuang.

The features of formal Tibetan epistolary style that I introduce in this article began taking shape as early as the time of the Yuan-Mongol administration of Tibet in the thirteenth century, due in no small part to the influence of Pakpa Lodrö Gyeltsen (Tibetan Lama and Imperial Preceptor under Qubilai Khan), who adapted Indian epistolary conventions to craft a new script and lexicon for official imperial communications in the Tibetan language. To Pakpa's pen is also attributed a short epistolary treatise, a formulary in verse that lists the major recipients of official address along with the appropriate phrasing conventions, spacing, and sealing practices that accompany each.<sup>10</sup> Though a watershed moment in the history of Tibetan letters, Pakpa's formulary is short and concise; the basic framework for epistolary style that it outlines is more robustly developed in above a dozen epistolary manuals that were authored from the seventeenth through early twentieth centuries.

These early modern manuals, which span diverse sectarian affiliations and geographical regions of the Tibetan Plateau, take the recognizable forms of both theoretical treatises and formularies (although the titles of these manuals do not always signify these categories). The theoretical treatises are most useful for our purposes here because they describe the material dimensions of Tibetan letters properly composed according to rules of etiquette and custom. They instruct the letter writer not only about word choice and address, but also about paper quality, size, and shape; script size and style; the placement of specific lines of text as well as deliberate empty space on the page; the impression of stamps; the folding of letters; and the application of seals. Each of these factors is attuned to the social register of the letter and to the relationship between the writer and recipient. Tibetan epistolary treatises allow us to understand the meaning behind the forms and features of manuscript letters in a wide variety of epistolary types. More than merely illuminating a historical period of Tibetan letter writing, some of these manuals continue to serve as training textbooks in epistolary composition for Tibetan students today. The enduring authority of these manuals' instructions in Tibetan literary education, as well as their highly detailed treatment of epistolary composition, make them ideal representatives of Tibetan epistolary style for the purposes of this bibliographical study.

In addition to epistolary manuals, I rely upon archival evidence of both manuscript and xylograph letters. Xylograph editions of letters are accessible in abundance thanks to the extensive preservation efforts of Tibetan language archives and publishing houses in China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan as well as digital libraries such as the Buddhist Digital Resource Center and the Tibetan and Himalayan Library.<sup>11</sup> For examples of manuscript letters, I have relied on the Tibetan Historical Documents and Letters collection of Digitized Tibetan Archive Materials at Bonn University as well as on a facsimile publication of historical documents from the Archives of the Tibetan Autonomous Region in Lhasa.<sup>12</sup>

### *Form and Features of Manuscript Tibetan Letters*

Because the Tibetan language contains honorific, humilific, and neutral registers, all direct address in Tibetan is implicitly attuned to social rank. As does Tibetan speech, Tibetan letter writing (as a form of direct address) requires a determination of the writer's own status in relation to one's recipient. Therefore, Tibetan letter-writing manuals typically divide their pedagogical instructions into three broad sections: how superiors write letters to inferiors, how relative equals write to one

another, and how inferiors write to superiors. These three sections are usually further subdivided to list various recipients in order of rank and office, ordered from high to low. Hierarchy is not an ancillary concern in this literature but is a structuring principle that infuses every aspect of epistolary instruction.

Despite some interesting variety in their range of intended audiences and concerns (for example, some manuals give instructions for writing to merchants, astrologers, or girlfriends), the Tibetan epistolary manuals I have studied express a general consensus about the components of a formal letter to a relative peer or superior. Edicts or missives issued from political leaders to subordinates have their own distinctive conventions, so here I have chosen to focus on letters of courtesy offered to relative peers or superiors. The following outline is drawn from a twentieth-century article by Tseten Zhapdrung, who synthesized the contents of several of the early modern manuals in a way that represents well the broad contours of Tibetan epistolary culture.<sup>13</sup> Here I introduce the customary components of a formal letter of courtesy, and below I detail how some of these components are graphically expressed on the page in manuscript and xylograph forms.

### Components of a Formal Letter of Courtesy

1. Praise of the recipient: This line of praise, which serves as the line of address, identifies the recipient through wordplay or poetic reference to the recipient's office. Naming the recipient plainly is considered too familiar for formal correspondence.
2. Offering of respect, with a bow:<sup>\*</sup> This line identifies the sender offering the letter and conveys the sender's posture of deference (Note: this line only includes the language of bowing if the recipient is clearly ranked higher than the sender.)
3. Inquiry after health:<sup>†</sup> Whenever the recipient's body is mentioned, an honorific mark should be used to indicate respect.<sup>‡</sup>
4. One's own circumstances:<sup>§</sup> In this section, the writer relates the narrative background leading to the main point of the letter.
5. Relevant point [of writing]:<sup>\*\*</sup> This component communicates the writer's main question, request, or message. Sometimes this section is as short as one sentence.
6. Well wishes for the future:<sup>††</sup> The writer concludes the body of the letter with words of blessing and goodwill.
7. Concluding section:<sup>‡‡</sup> This section includes the register of accompanying gifts, where applicable, as well as the place and date of dispatch.

These seven components, although parsed somewhat differently, recall a similar general sequence to that found in classical Latin *ars dictaminis*: the *salutatio* addresses the recipient; the *captatio benevolentiae* employs words of praise, humility, or regards to secure the recipient's goodwill; the *narratio* communicates the writer's circumstances or the background to the *petitio*; the *petitio* expresses the letter's main point or request; and the *conclusio* closes the letter.<sup>14</sup> The heart of the

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\* 'dud pa dang bcas pa'i zhe sa

† kham bde 'dri ba

‡ The *che mgo* mark (ལ) placed before a word acts as an additional honorific.

§ rang gi gnas tshul

\*\* skabs bab dngos don

†† slad char dge ba'i smon 'dun

‡‡ mjug sdud kyi rim pa

matter, however, is the manner in which these formal components of Tibetan letters are graphically presented on the page.

### **Script Size and Style**

According to the epistolary manuals, the size and style of the handwriting in a letter indicate the sender's rank relative to the recipient's: small, fine, and compact handwriting indicates the humble attitude of an inferior writing to a superior, while large letters with sweeping tails express the authoritative attitude of a superior writing to an inferior.<sup>15</sup> In Figure 1, which is a letter addressed to a Buddhist monastic assembly, note the fine handwriting and how its scale appears diminutive on the large page of sixty-one centimeters wide by eighty-seven centimeters tall:

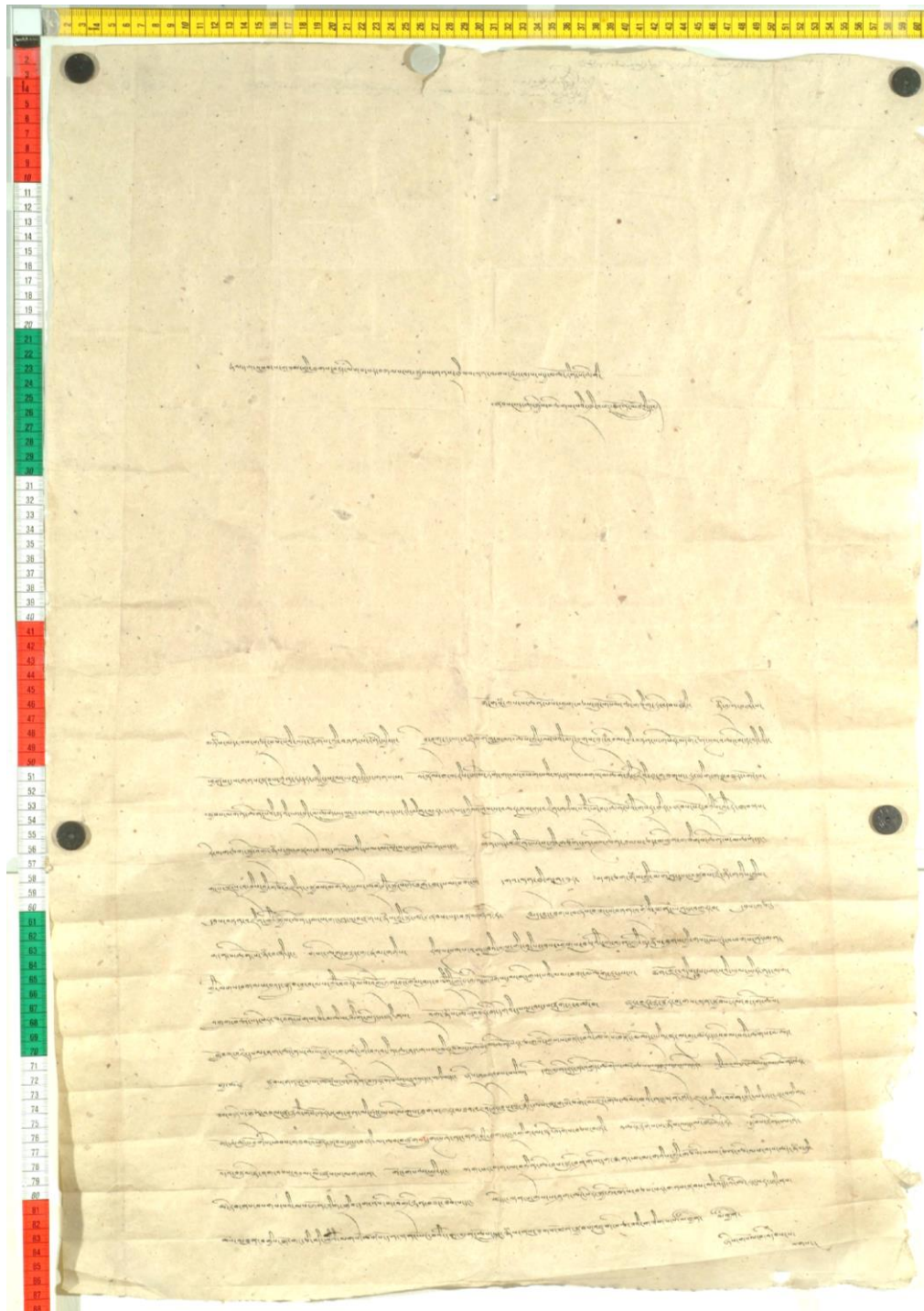


Figure 1: Letter of Courtesy to a Superior<sup>16</sup>

Small handwriting indicates a small or humble voice. In contrast, many political edicts—which are also considered correspondence and are treated in the Tibetan letter-writing manuals—employ the *drutsa* (*'bru tsa*) script in larger scale (see the upper half of Figure 2, which is a bilingual edict issued by the Fifth Dalai Lama) to indicate a large or commanding voice. The Tibetan *drutsa* script



is defined in one dictionary as “a script that produces an affect of firmness.”<sup>17</sup> Edicts are commands issued from superiors to inferiors, and so they employ a bold, ostentatious script with long tails on the graphs to indicate power and authority.



Figure 2: Political Edict Issued to Lower-Ranking Recipients<sup>18</sup>

### Upper Margin, Line of Address, Hierarchy Space, and Line of Offering

In a letter of courtesy, a large upper margin is left blank to demonstrate respect for the office of the recipient. As one manual instructs, to show that “the upper place is made the other’s and the lower place one’s own, however great the recipient is, so great should the upper [margin] be; and the lower [margin], small.”<sup>19</sup> Then the name of the recipient is written, along with words of praise: in Figure 1, a large upper margin of approximately twenty-one centimeters is followed by a highly ornate line of address, which reads, “Before the exalted tiered seat, the water-born lotus feet of the precious oceanic assembly of the wise, upholder of the discipline, object of refuge, fullness of the stream of transmission of the utterly pure three teachings.” The Buddhist monastic assembly commands great symbolic respect; even for less exalted recipients, however, lengthy metaphors of praise may ornament the line of address. The words of praise in the line of address provide two important opportunities for the writer: first, the writer can express the desired degree of respect by refraining from naming the recipient directly and by choosing the extent of hyperbole to employ; and second, the writer can imagine the recipient in any capacity by means of metaphor: as a mountain, a sun, an ocean, a king, a goddess, a guide, and so forth. The writer defines the recipient’s role in their shared universe.

After the line of address, the manuals prescribe the insertion of an empty space, called a *bep* (‘*bebs*’) or “dropdown” space, which reflects the hierarchical distance that separates the recipient and the sender. Hanna Schneider has translated *bep* very usefully as “distance of respect.”<sup>20</sup> The hierarchy space is measured in units of “fingers” (*sor*) and corresponds to the relative difference in rank between sender and recipient. This space literally maps the social hierarchy inherent in the epistolary relationship, performing it visually on the page. The exact number of *sor* prescribed for different relationships varies somewhat among the letter-writing manuals. For example, Pakpa’s thirteenth-century formulary instructs writers to place six *sor* after the name of someone who is “definitely greater than you,” two *sor* after the name of someone who is “a little greater than you,” and four *sor* after your own name for someone who is “lower than you.”<sup>21</sup> Jamyang Zhepa’s manual, written in the seventeenth century, prescribes eight *sor* for writing to a high superior such as a lama, lord, or parent.<sup>22</sup> Overall, the manuals and archival examples agree that a hierarchy space functions to indicate respect for rank.

The line of offering to a superior is a respectful line indicating a bow. The line of offering effectively places the letter writer below the recipient, as if the writer is prostrating before the physical person, and it leads directly into the body of the letter. As one epistolary manual describes it,

When exemplifying your timidity and shy respect, as you do when prostrating before [a great person’s] actual body, you speak from the lower-most part of his body, and so write “before the feet of ” or “before the lotus feet of ”; and leave the rest of that line blank.<sup>23</sup> Then, actually planting yourself beneath the feet of the superior [however many] fingers of space below, write something like “submitted with great respect,” and transition into the inquiry after health and the sending of regards.<sup>24</sup>

In Figure 1, the line of address is followed by a dropdown space of approximately twenty centimeters and then the indented line of offering, which reads, “A petitionary prayer single-pointedly planted, with great respect in body, speech, and mind, with a prostration.”

Here we can see how the placement of text on the page of a manuscript letter visually displays the hierarchical relationship between sender and recipient: the size and style of the handwriting, the size of the upper margin, the size of the hierarchy space or distance of respect, and the line of offering a bow all serve graphically to re-create the bodily experience of bowing before



one's superior.<sup>25</sup> In Tibetan tradition, hierarchy has been physically expressed in several ways, not only through bowing, but also through the height and placement of one's seat in an assembly and through stringent norms of physical contact that prohibit the lower parts of one's body (legs and feet) from touching, or even aiming toward, revered persons or objects. Instead, the upper part of one's body (head) should be used to touch the lower part (feet) of a high-ranking person. The cultural importance of the physical act of a bow is rendered even weightier when coupled with its religious associations, where bowing is rendered as an offering of one's body, speech, and mind before a spiritual teacher, as evoked in the line of offering in Figure 1. Tibetan manuscript epistles perform highly visual "sociologies of presence" that are integral to Tibetan culture and religion as they graphically map the social relationship between writer and recipient as an encounter of bodies on the page.<sup>26</sup>

### Seal Impressions

Outer seals impressed in wax or clay serve to ensure security: to guarantee the recipient that the epistolary text has not been opened or seen by anyone else en route. Inner seals stamped with ink are signs of authority and guarantees of a letter's authenticity. Especially for higher-ranking letter writers who hold more than one seal of office, the seal impression on a letter indicates the particular office or mode of authority—whether institutional or personal—that the sender invokes in the letter. With higher authority comes a heightened concern with assuring the letter's security and authenticity. Examples of forged letters and counterfeit seals in Tibetan history are helpful reminders that guaranteeing a letter's authenticity can in some cases mean the difference between life and death, or war and peace. For example, a forged letter attributed to the King of Beri served as the fifth Dalai Lama's justification for waging war against Beri in 1639.<sup>27</sup>

In an edict issued by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in January 1902, the Dalai Lama's seal of office is impressed upon the document twice and, thanks to artful illumination, the seal impressions are depicted as seated upon lotus thrones carried by a part-human, part-*garuḍa* figure in one case, and by a snow lion in the other.<sup>28</sup> The practice of illuminating seal impressions suggests the power of personhood that seals convey: the seal, seated upon a throne, stands in for the person of the Dalai Lama. Sealed letters have often been touched upon the head as a sign of respect in the same way that one might show respect when greeting a superior face to face by bowing, or by touching one's head to the floor or to a superior's feet.

My description of the form and features of Tibetan manuscript letters reveals a rich attention to detail and to the craft of a letter as a physical object. The gestures of social deference and authority that are embedded in seals, script size and style, lines of address and offering, and the upper margin and hierarchy space all replicate aspects of the relationship between the sender and recipient. This revelation alone is significant and should change our way of reading manuscript Tibetan letters—not merely for their content but also for the social postures they assume and the scale at which they do so. When we compare original manuscript letters to letters that have been edited and printed, it becomes even more obvious how much knowledge we miss when reading printed epistles without attention to their compositional history as manuscripts.

### Form and Features of Woodblock Printed Letters

While an original letter is handwritten on a large piece of vertically rectangular paper, with enough height to accommodate an upper margin, hierarchy space, and the epistolary text with its carefully chosen script size and style, the edited versions of letters we read in collected works are

printed on short, wide pages (*pothi*) whose shape imitates Buddhist palm-leaf texts from India (Figure 3).

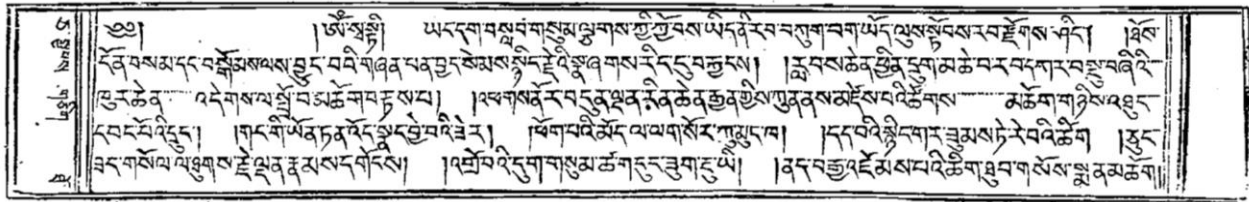


Figure 3: *Pothi*-style Xylograph Edition of a Letter Requesting Refuge (*skyabs tho*)<sup>29</sup>

The *pothi*-style paper used for Tibetan xylographic printing invokes the authority and status of Buddhist scriptures, creating a visual transformation of an epistle from historical document to sacred text. Buddhism's direct role in the adoption of xylography in Tibet has meant that even for works concerning the common arts and sciences, or nonreligious topics, each xylograph text inhabits the shape of a Buddhist scripture and retains symbolic associations with sacred literature: in particular, the format of these texts appeals to the merit of printing, the moral edification of reading, and the auspicious power of books to bless or protect.

For many centuries, xylographic printing in Tibet has almost exclusively employed *pothi*-style paper (with exceptions, such as the printing of cloth prayer flags, which are square shaped). I should clarify here that *pothi*-style paper is not only used in printing; this shape of paper has also been used in Tibetan manuscript production for many centuries. Xylographic printing was not widely adopted in Tibet until the fifteenth century, “becoming an important technology for the multiplication of texts and images, alongside manuscript production, and remaining so until the 20th century.”<sup>30</sup> Both before the spread of xylography and alongside its growth, manuscript production of *pothi*-style volumes in Tibet continued to be plentiful. The major distinction that I seek to draw in this paper is between an *original* manuscript letter that is composed for its first audience, with its capacious size and intricate stylistic details, and an *edited* letter that has been transformed and compressed, both textually and materially.<sup>31</sup> While an original letter could well be copied by hand onto *pothi*-style paper, editorial transformation is most marked in printed letter collections, not only because of the formatting constraints that *pothi*-style volumes impose, but also because of the elision of detailed aspects of handwriting (script style, size, and spacing) that occurs when the text is carved onto woodblocks in a simplified and uniform script.

In print editions of epistles, the upper margin and hierarchy space are omitted in favor of a continuous flow of text in a consistent number of lines per folio. Paper is expensive, and so empty space is employed primarily in political edicts or in decorative contexts, such as on a title page or when printing iconographic portraits. In Figure 3, note that the only empty space in the body of the text is an indentation at the upper left of the recto side to mark the beginning of the letter, which is otherwise indistinguishable from the other texts in a variety of genres in this large collected works publication; on the verso, the text of the same letter continues without any indentation. Furthermore, the small size and stylistic flourishes of headless cursive handwriting, each of which reveals an aspect of the social status of the sender relative to the recipient, are replaced in print editions by uniform headed graphs that are blind to gestures of hierarchy. In particular, in print editions the tails of letters (whose length indicates the status of the sender) must be short enough that the lines of text can be stacked economically close to one another, without any letter interrupting the line beneath it; long, fine lines are also harder to engrave and are more fragile, making them relatively impractical for xylography. These editorial changes mean that grand imperial

edicts in *drutsa* script (Figure 2) and humble petitions in headless cursive (Figure 1) look virtually identical on the printed page (Figure 3). If the script of a xylographed epistle reveals any social identity, it is the identity of the printing house, where regional or sectarian stylistic preferences shape an institution's particular printing style.<sup>32</sup>

When reading an epistle in print, the dramatic gestures of deference to rank that we see in manuscript letters are rendered invisible. The hierarchical placement of the sender's and recipient's bodies is recalled only in word choice, not in graphic presentation. With this shift, the reader of a printed epistle is no longer an active embodied presence in a dialogical text as is the case in original manuscript letters. Instead, the printed text is a monologue, blind to the status of its anonymous and unranked reader. Paradoxically, this erasure of the reader's body from the constitution of the letter makes room in the text for new readers. In print, any ordinary reader can approach a letter written to the highest ruler in the land and can create an active relationship with the text, whether engaging the letter for historical knowledge, for pleasure, or for a model of epistolary composition to copy.

Finally, the seals that document a letter's life as a material object in a particular institution or ruling family are also absent in edited letters, as are the performative functions of seals to command action or adherence to the contents of the letter. The omission of seals in xylographed letters conveys that in the editorial and printing processes, one type of textual authority is exchanged for another. An original manuscript epistle bearing a seal invokes the authority of the writer's institutional office, while a printed epistle that is part of a laborious and expensive printing project invokes the authority of the institution or patron sponsoring the printing. In the transformation from manuscript to print, the original social meaning of a letter is subsumed by an institutional mission with its own social and symbolic agendas. The printed epistle becomes a different artifact both physically and socially as it comes to represent institutional power rather than individual relationships.

The differences between original manuscript epistles and edited xylograph epistles include paper size and shape, script size and style, the graphic arrangement of text and empty space on the page, and the presence or absence of seals. A distinction in the hermeneutical understanding of a Tibetan epistle is necessary when a scholar considers an epistolary document's history as either an original manuscript or an edited, printed artifact. With careful attention to the transformations that editing entails, whether in Tibetan xylography or in other cultures of printing, we can train our eyes to recover a truer-to-form reading of *epistolaria*—and of the readers that inhabit manuscript and print epistolary worlds, respectively.

### *The Stewards of Tibetan Epistolaria*

The letters from Tibet's past that persist into the present have been handled by generations of stewards: monks, clerks, scholars, and others who have served as scribes, archivists, cataloguers, and editors, sometimes occupying several of these capacities at once. I offer here some reflections on the roles these largely invisible agents have played in transmitting Tibetan epistolary legacies, and in particular, how the social meanings that letters convey are sculpted by the hands that not only compose, but also inscribe, archive, catalogue, and edit them.

### Scribes

In Tibet, scribes have often transcribed letters from dictation, especially in administrative contexts; at the end of a letter, the occasional line, “this was written by my own hand,” is a reminder that a letter is not necessarily an autograph. An official’s handbook composed by the regent Sangyé Gyatso indicates that in the fifth Dalai Lama’s government (seventeenth to the twentieth century) scribes not only transcribed letters but also helped compose them by abbreviating or expanding the information that superiors dictated to them, as appropriate.<sup>33</sup> If a letter, at the time of its composition, met a certain threshold of institutional importance, the scribe would produce a duplicate of the letter. Otherwise, because letters were written to be dispatched, the correspondence of a particular individual or office would be scattered throughout all the archives of the recipients and would be virtually impossible to reassemble. Thus, the shaping of the Tibetan epistolary archive begins at the very moment of a letter’s composition, when an author or scribe creates the written text of a letter, editing the oral dictation if applicable, and chooses whether to duplicate the letter for preservation.

### Archivists

Most of the Tibetan letters that are extant today have been selected to survive. Archivists usually preserved letters because they met one of several criteria: they were connected to important people; they contained valued content, such as religious doctrine or legal material; or they exemplified literary artistry. Most Tibetan letter collections to which international scholars currently have access are not complete *epistolaria* (collections of all the letters a given figure ever wrote) but rather curated anthologies that were designed to showcase institutional knowledge, to document history, or to teach literary skills to writers in training. We rarely see personal notes, such as letters from monastics to their parents, included in collected works editions, even though Tibetan letter-writing manuals almost universally address the practice of familial correspondence and give instructions for its proper execution.

### Cataloguers

Those who create catalogues of epistolary collections, whether for preservation purposes or for publication and distribution, hold in their hands the power to shape epistolary concepts and discourse. Some Tibetan letters that are more artistically inclined are headed with a decorative title and an epistolary genre marker, in accordance with the titling conventions for other treatises and texts, but most Tibetan letters are not titled as letters. Instead, they are simply addressed to the recipient, and the cataloguer has the privilege of transmitting assumptions about what type of letter a certain text is (or whether it is a letter at all), granting it a title for the catalogue, and as a result, influencing the growth and decline of various epistolary genre categorizations. For example, in the early modern period the designation *chab shog*, commonly translated as “political letter,” was increasingly used in intramonastic correspondence that is not obviously political in nature, such as letters of religious advice from teachers to students. The way that letters are identified (or not identified) and grouped in catalogues influences their future lives in the hands of new readers. As Carol Poster has articulated in her research on ancient *epistolaria* in the Greco-Roman world, “the problem of what can be said to be (or not to be) in the archives is as much an interpretive as a bibliographic one. In particular, because what we find is conditioned by the methods and definitions we bring to our inquiries, things not recognized can be assumed to be not present.”<sup>34</sup> This call to be aware of our interpretive blind spots and the organizing structures that they reinforce is as relevant to the many archivists that have curated Tibetan materials through the centuries as it is

for contemporary scholars; each interpreter of an archive introduces another layer of conceptual presences and absences arising from our assumptions about genre.

### Editors

The role an editor plays in transforming a text (and particularly in transforming an original manuscript text for print production) is vitally significant in shaping the life and legacy of an epistolary document, as the larger part of this article seeks to demonstrate. However, it is helpful to remember that much editorial work on Tibetan letters is already determined before the process of editing for print production begins. Given the prehistory of epistolary transcription, copying, archiving, and cataloguing manuscript originals, the print editor inherits a set of values and attributions that have already been imposed on the letter. The editor then wields an additional responsibility to reflect the interests of the institution or patron sponsoring the printing project, such as omitting texts that may appear irrelevant to, or at odds with, the interests of the institution. For example, the scholar Tukwan Lozang Chökyi Nyima composed a treatise on the “Great Perfection,” a contemplative system that was developed in lineages that competed with the author’s own. This text, though of great scholarly and religious interest, was censored from the Lhasa Zhol edition of his collected works but thankfully was preserved elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>

### *Concluding Thoughts and Future Directions*

This brief study illuminates several key interpretive changes that textual editing and printing can make in the context of Tibetan epistolary literature and its afterlives. For scholars of Tibetan literature, who tend to rely heavily on xylograph editions of texts, I hope to make the case that a text’s material form can be deeply integral to its meaning, and that scholars should be alert to whether and how the meaning of a manuscript original changes when a text is edited and printed. I also hope to appeal to the immense value of Tibetan archival documents, epistolary or otherwise. The bibliographical approach I model here can be applied to the wide variety of Tibetan literary genres, which might yield a variety of distinctive insights into the relationship between manuscript and print, or between original and edited texts.

This study also offers bibliographic questions that can serve the study of epistolary literatures in historical periods and linguistic contexts beyond early modern Tibet: how does material form contribute to the meaning of a letter? How are absent persons rendered present through the materiality of ink and paper? Do editors and archivists preserve the embodied presences and hierarchies inflected in epistolary texts, and if so, how? What might these efforts reveal about diverse cultural orientations toward the value and meaning of epistolary texts—as texts and as physical artifacts? With the tools of analytical bibliography, the new directions that these questions open are fully accessible to the global epistolary studies community.

### NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The Buddhist Digital Resource Center, for example, currently lists 198 volumes tagged with the term *gsung 'bum*, which is typically translated as “collected works.” Accessed at [www.tbrc.org](http://www.tbrc.org) on July 7, 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of one collected works printing project, see Kurtis Schaeffer, “Printing the Words of the Master,” *Acta Orientalia* 60 (1999): 159–77.
- <sup>3</sup> Dungkar Lobzang Trinlé and Tsering Dhundup Gonkatsang, “Tibetan Woodblock Printing: An Ancient Art and Craft,” *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 36.1 (2016): 163–77. See 164.
- <sup>4</sup> Schaeffer, “Printing the Words of the Master,” 159.
- <sup>5</sup> Dungkar, “Tibetan Woodblock Printing,” 165–66. After a large initial investment of resources and labor, woodblocks could be stored and used for many reprintings.
- <sup>6</sup> Dungkar, “Tibetan Woodblock Printing,” 165–66.
- <sup>7</sup> Brandon Dotson, *The Old Tibetan Annals: An Annotated Translation of Tibet's First History* (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2009), 124.
- <sup>8</sup> Sam van Schaik and Imre Galambos, *Studies in Manuscript Cultures: Manuscripts and Travelers, The Sino-Tibetan Documents of a Tenth-Century Buddhist Pilgrim* (Munich: de Gruyter, 2011).
- <sup>9</sup> Tsuguhito Takeuchi, “A Group of Old Tibetan Letters Written Under Kuei-I-Chun: A Preliminary Study for the Classification of Old Tibetan Letters,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 44 (1990): 175–90.
- <sup>10</sup> Pakpa Lodrö Gyeltsen (‘phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan), *A Condensed Presentation on Correspondence* (yig bskur rnam bzhas ‘gag sdom), appended to the *Presentation on Correspondence: A Little Illumination* (yig bskur rnam bzhas nyung nyu rnam gsal) in Vol. 4 of the *Collected Works* of Welmang Könchok Gyeltsen (dbal mang dkon mchog rgyal mtshan), (Amchog Monastery Printery, undated xylograph, folios 11b.3–12a.7.).
- <sup>11</sup> *Buddhist Digital Resource Center*, accessed at [www.tbrc.org](http://www.tbrc.org) on July 6, 2020; *Tibetan and Himalayan Library*, accessed at [www.thlib.org](http://www.thlib.org) on July 6, 2020.
- <sup>12</sup> *Tibetan Historical Documents and Letters*. The Digitized Tibetan Archive Materials at Bonn University, Germany. Accessed at <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm> on July 16, 2018 (the collection is currently migrating to a new digital site); Archives of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, *A Collection of Historical Archives of Tibet* (Beijing: Cultural Relics Publishing House, 1995).
- <sup>13</sup> Tseten Zhapdrung (tshe tan zhabs drung ‘jigs med rig pa’i blo gros), *How Letters Spread: The Sun that Causes the Lotus of Supreme Minds to Smile* (‘phrin yig spel tshul lhag bsam pad mo ‘dzum pa’i nyin byed) in Vol. 4 of the *Collected Works* (Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House, 2007), 459–79.
- <sup>14</sup> Martin Camargo, *Ars Dictaminis, Ars Dictandi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 22.
- <sup>15</sup> Jamyang Zhepa (‘jam dbyangs bzhas pa’i rdo rje ngag dbang brtson ‘grus), *A Presentation on Correspondence: A Lovely Garland of Sinduvara Flowers, Ear Ornaments that Illuminate the Mind* (‘phrin yig gi rnam par bzhas pa blo gsal rna rgyan sin+du w+A ra’i ‘phreng mdzes), in Vol. 1 of the author’s *Collected Works* (Mundgod India: Gomang College, 1997 [undated xylograph]), pp. 363–430. See folio 14a.3.
- <sup>16</sup> *Tibetan Historical Documents and Letters*, Bonn University, Germany (61 cm x 87 cm, on paper), Document ID 0616a\_AA\_1\_1\_67\_11. Accessed at <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm> on November 10, 2019. This document is a manuscript letter of courtesy submitted in the name of *dge chos blo bzang ‘jam dpal* and his monk household to the monastic assembly.
- <sup>17</sup> Yisun Zhang, *Great Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary* (Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House, 1985), entry 2000.
- <sup>18</sup> *Tibetan Historical Documents and Letters*, Bonn University, Germany (62 cm x 123 cm, on silk), Document ID 1579. Accessed at <http://www.dtab.uni-bonn.de/tibdoc/index1.htm> on November 10, 2019. This document is a bilingual edict of the Fifth Dalai Lama from the seventeenth century. The upper half of the document contains the Tibetan script.
- <sup>19</sup> Jü Mipam Gyatso (‘ju mi pham ‘jam dbyangs rnam rgyal rgya mtsho), *Presentation on Correspondence Expressed in Brief: A Jeweled Garland of Flowers* (yig bskur gyi rnam bzhas mdo tsam brjod pa me tog nor bu’i phreng ba), in Vol. 2 of the author’s *Collected Works* (Chengdu: Snowland Culture Rare Book Preservation Society, 2007), 677–90. See folio 1a.3.
- <sup>20</sup> Hanna Schneider, “Tibetan Epistolary Style,” in *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*, ed. Martin Brauen (Chicago: Serindia, 2005), 258–61.
- <sup>21</sup> Pakpa Lodrö Gyeltsen, *Condensed Presentation*, folio 11a.
- <sup>22</sup> Jamyang Zhepa, *Presentation on Correspondence*, folio 14a.3ff.
- <sup>23</sup> The text in Figure 1 follows this prescription. Although my translation places the phrase “before the exalted tiered seat, the water-born lotus feet of” at the beginning of the line of address, in the Tibetan syntax, this phrase comes at the end of the line of address.



<sup>24</sup> Bipa Mipam Dawa (bis pa mi pham zla ba). *A Presentation on Correspondence, Along with a Formulary: A Beautiful Garland of White Lotus* (*phrin yig gi rnam bzhag dper brjod dang bcas pa pad+ma dkar po'i phreng mdzes*) (Xining: Qinghai Nationalities Publishing House, 1986), 14.

<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed study of the bow rendered graphically in Tibetan epistles, see Christina Kilby, “Bowing with Words: Paper, Ink, and Bodies in Tibetan Buddhist Epistles,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87.1 (2019): 260–81.

<sup>26</sup> Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), 114.

<sup>27</sup> See Alexander Gardner, “The Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso,” *Treasury of Lives*. Accessed at [https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Fifth-Dalai-Lama/TBRC\\_P37](https://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Fifth-Dalai-Lama/TBRC_P37) on November 9, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Document 958. See Peter Schwieger, *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of China: A Political History of the Tibetan Institution of Reincarnation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 206–7.

<sup>29</sup> Tubten Chökyi Nyima (thub bstan chos kyi nyi ma), in Vol. 6 of the author’s *Collected Works* (Tashi Lhunpo printery, undated xylograph), 398.

<sup>30</sup> Hildegard Diemberger, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, and Peter Kornicki, *Tibetan Printing: Comparison, Continuities, and Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Thanks to my anonymous reviewer for highlighting this nuance.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Nourse, “A Question of Style: Regional, Sectarian, and Printing House Styles in Tibetan Language Woodblock Printing” (Conference paper presented at the Symposium on the Tibetan Book, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA, November 7, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> Sangyé Gyatso (sangs rgyas rgya mtsho), *The Crystal Clear Mirror: A Straight Line That Clearly Reveals What to Accept and Reject* (*blang dor gsal bar ston pa'i drang thig dwangs shel me long*) (Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India: Lhasa New Zhol Printery, 1979), folio 19a.6.

<sup>34</sup> Carol Poster, “The Case of the Purloined Letter-Manuals: Archival Issues in Ancient Epistolary Theory,” *Rhetoric Review* 27.1 (2008): 2.

<sup>35</sup> Tukwan Lozang Chökyi Nyima (thu'u bkwan blo bzang chos kyi rni ma), *Refutation: A Cleansing Ketaka Gem* (Sikkim, India: Rumtek Monastery, 1972).