

## A PHILOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE SINO-TIBETAN BUDDHIST CULTURAL IDENTITY<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The exchange between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism has traditionally been a major element of Sino-Tibetan cultural exchange, and cultural identity needs to be based on a correct understanding of the text. The “philological” type of text studying is the key to correct cognition and understanding of relevant text. Therefore, using the research method of “philology” as a guide and based on text research is definitely the most effective way to strengthen the mutual understanding and recognition of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist cultures.

**Key words:** Sino-Tibetan Buddhism, Cultural Identity, Philology

### I

The concept of “identity”, first proposed by the psychologist Freud, was introduced into the field of humanities and social sciences, and gradually became a common vocabulary in social and cultural studies. The “cultural identity” as one of

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them belongs to spiritual belonging and resonance, and is the deepest kind of identity.

“Adhere to the direction of Chinese-Characterization of our religion” is the main policy of our country’s religious work at present. This argument not only has extremely high practical value but also has rich academic value and theoretical connotation. In theory, the most fundamental aspect of adhering to the Chinese orientation of our religions is to promote Chinese cultural identity. In practice, the most effective way is to guide Chinese religions into Chinese culture<sup>2</sup>.

Buddhism is an integral part of traditional Chinese culture. Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism are the two pillars of Chinese Buddhism. Therefore, the relationship between Sino and Tibetan Buddhism must be one of the inevitable topics in the study of Chinese Buddhism. Since its introduction to Tibet in the 7th century AD, Buddhism has been continuously integrated with the native Tibetan culture. After centuries of development, it has been deeply rooted in Tibet. For over a thousand years, Tibetan Buddhism has been the most pious belief of the Tibetan people. It has exerted a profound impact on the overall value orientation, ideology, thinking mode, and even the shaping of the character of the Tibetan people, thus eventually cultivated a Tibetan culture with Tibetan Buddhism at its core. Therefore, when we talk about Tibetan culture, Tibetan Buddhism is naturally the main factor we need to consider first.

Buddhism is the foundation of Tibetan culture, and it is also a solid bridge for Sino-Tibetan cultural exchanges. The exchange, integration, and understanding between Sino-Tibetan cultures are undoubtedly an effective way for us to guide the Tibetan culture to integrate into Chinese culture, with Tibetan Buddhism as the core. The Central Institute of Socialism also held the “Sino-Tibetan Buddhism Exchange and Integration and Chinese Culture” academic conference in May 2017 to discuss the historical experience of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist integration, its feasibility, and its relationship with Chinese culture<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, at a time when we are committed to shaping Chinese national identity and Chinese cultural identity, the reason why communication and exchange between different ethnic groups and cultures is so important is that strengthening Chinese cultural identity requires not

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<sup>2</sup> Zhang Zhigang. “Adhering to the Chinese orientation of our religion and forging a firm Chinese cultural identity,” *China Religion*, Vol. 1, 2019, pp. 32-33.

<sup>3</sup> See *Buddhist Studies*, No. 1, 2017, p. 37.

only the identification of different ethnic and religious groups with Chinese culture, but also the acceptance of different religious and ethnic cultures by Chinese culture. What needs to be emphasized here is that the “integration” mentioned here is not “assimilation”, but “seeking common ground while reserving differences”, “communication and mutual appreciation” and “identification and acceptance”. Based on such thinking, this paper attempts to explore the path of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist cultural exchange and identity, and to consider the significance of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist cultural exchange and identity in forging the Chinese cultural identity of the Tibetan people.

As early as the early 20th century, with the rise of the Buddhist Revival Movement, Chinese academia turned a new page in Buddhist studies. Correspondingly, there has also been an upsurge of research in fields such as “Tibetan Buddhist Studies”, “Comparative Studies of Sino-Tibetan Buddhism”, and “Comparison of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Scriptures”, such as Chen Yinke, Lu Cheng, and Fa Zun who have made major contributions to the study of Sino-Tibetan Buddhism. In the new century, many scholars in China have paid full attention to the comparative study of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist cultures and accordingly established some institutions. For example, the Institute of History and Language of the Western Regions of the School of Chinese Classics of the Renmin University of China established the Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Studies Center and published a series of books “Sino-Tibetan Buddhist Studies Series”; Zhejiang University established the Zhejiang University Center for Buddhist Art; Minzu University of China recruits students majoring in comparative studies of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism; Sichuan Library and Sichuan Ancient Books Protection Center organized the “Sino-Tibetan Classical Document Mutual Translation Agency”. All these have laid a good foundation for the domestic comparative research of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist culture in the new era.

## II

In today’s increasingly close interaction between different nationalities and groups, there is certainly more than one way to promote cultural communication and exchange between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism culture. However, in terms of the characteristics of Buddhist culture, many of its fundamental discussions, essential teachings, and inheritance pedigree are mostly based on “Text”, so text

research is the foundation and the focus. The study of texts is often referred to by scholars as “philology”, “historical linguistics”, etc.

The key to philology lies in how to deal with the text, and a clear and accurate perception of the text is the prerequisite for us to understand the other, while the understanding of the “other” is precisely the basis for the enhancement and strengthening of intercultural integration and identity. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) said: “A statement is meaningful only in stream of life.”<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein may only use this sentence to explain his language and philosophy of life, although I don’t know enough Western philosophy to make a “philological” examination of this quote, I think of it whenever I am confronted with two or more different cultures. It is a constant reminder that all linguistic or textual expressions fit the local context or form of life at the time and that we should be aware of this before we evaluate a culture or text.

As mentioned above, recognizing and understanding the “other” is the prerequisite for enhancing cultural identity among different groups, and the “philological” style text processing is the key to the proper recognition and understanding of the “other”.

### III

The exchange between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhism has traditionally been a major element of Sino-Tibetan cultural exchange. Even after Confucianism was introduced into Tibet, Confucius, as a representative of Confucianism, followed the local customs and became the incarnation of Mañjuśrī in Tibetan Buddhist literature and the founder of countless literature on arithmetic and disaster relief rituals<sup>5</sup>. *Journey to the West*, one of the four traditional Chinese classics, has also been

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<sup>4</sup> Norman Malcolm et al.: *Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, Translated by Li Bulou and He Shaojia, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1984, p. 83. Regarding the quote mentioned by Wittgenstein in his famous book *Philosophical Investigation*, the scholar Zhou Lian once said in his book: “When we first encounter those beliefs that violate common sense and reason, the first attitude we adopt should not be rejecting or criticizing, but trying to understand it. Wittgenstein said: ‘A statement is only meaningful in a stream of life.’ In other words, when a statement is out of the flow of life (or after the life style), outsiders will easily regard it as ‘irrational’ or ‘meaningless’. When encountering a heterogeneous culture, we must first resist this impulse.” (Zhou Lian: *Opening Up: 100 Lessons in Western Philosophy by Zhou Lian*, Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2019, p. 345.)

<sup>5</sup> Wei Dong, Yixi Qunpei: “The Image of Confucius in Tibetan Traditional Culture”, *Tibetan Studies*, No. 1, 2009, pp. 33-41. See also: Zeng Deming and Lin Chunyu: “The Image of

translated into *The Story of the Tang Monk and Lama* in the Tibetan version<sup>6</sup>. These are the objective results of ethnic integration and cultural exchanges. After the Chinese culture entered Tibet, it was inevitable that it was more or less marked by the trace of Tibetan Buddhist culture.

Given the deep-rooted influence of Tibetan Buddhism culture in the Tibetan region, it is still an excellent choice to use Buddhism as the entry point and breakthrough for the integration of Sino-Tibetan culture. In the face of the differences between Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist doctrines and rules, practice systems and rituals, the most effective way to strengthen mutual cultural understanding and identity is to return to the text, using the “philological” research method as a guide.

It is well known that Buddhism was first transmitted to Tibet in two ways, one from India and the other from Han. The Zen Buddhism of Chinese Buddhism has been introduced to Tibet since the Tubo period. It spread rapidly in Tibet at that time and gained many devout and faithful people. Many early Zen classics were also translated into Tibetan, and early Chinese Buddhism is often referred to as “Mahāyāna Teaching”, “Monk Teaching”, “Dzogschen School” and so on.

In the long historical process of Sino-Tibetan cultural exchange and integration, this event, which could have been a typical representative of Sino-Tibetan Buddhist cultural communication and dialogue, has been shaped through such Tibetan historical books as dBa' bzhed(or sBa bzhed, rBa bzhed) and mKhas pa'i dga' ston, Bu ston chos 'byung and other Tibetan history books, were then portrayed as a devastating failure of Chinese Buddhism that even contained serious violent conflicts. The “Monk” incident is known as “Tubo Sengzheng” or “Sangye Sengzheng” in history. This tradition of religious-historical narratives about the “Tubo Sengzheng” has been passed on and evolved, especially through the reassessment of highly discursive religious authorities such as Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan, (1182-1251), Tsong kha pa (1357-1419), and others, the Mahāyāna teachings and the Chinese Buddhism they represent eventually became heresies that were criticized by the Tibetan and the mainstream religious discourse for failing to realize the ultimate emptiness, for blocking all meaningful actions, for

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Confucius in Tibetan Culture”, *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Civilization Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (No. 8 overall), December 2007, pp. 169-207.

<sup>6</sup> *Journal to the West* (*Thang sing bla ma'i rnam thar*), the Ethnic Publishing House, 1981.