

## Article

# Nomads and Vagabond Monks: From the Text to the Reader in 18th Century Inner Asia

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**Abstract:** Buddhist Studies scholarship in general, and its (re)turn to the literary specifically, is overwhelmingly concerned with texts and authors. But what can this research into “Buddhist texts” and “Buddhist authors”, however robust, ever reliably tell us if not accompanied by comparative inquiry into the destabilizing tactics of readers? This article first highlights analytical resources for a comparative history of reading Buddhist literature in Inner Asia by looking to the work of Michel de Certeau and Roger Chartier. I then turn to a case study of collaborative reading that developed across the contiguous monastic and imperial networks binding together Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchu, and Chinese readers at the turn of the 18th century. Focused specifically on letter exchanges between the polyglot scholars Güng Gombojab, Katok Tséwang Norbu, and Situ Pañchen, I underscore how collaborative reading developed to open the literary heritage of trans-Eurasia beyond the technical abilities or material access of any single reader.

**Keywords:** Buddhist literature; history of reading; Tibet and Mongolia; Gombojab; mgon po skyabs; Rgya nag chos 'byung; Tshe dbang nor bu; Si tu Pañchen chos kyi 'byung gnas



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## 1. Introduction

The knowledge and knowledge practices of Buddhist scholasticism in late-imperial Inner Asia was overwhelmingly concerned with text, much like the Buddhist Studies scholarship that has long been devoted to, and influenced by, its study.<sup>1</sup> It is true that this focus on textual cultures has been productively decentered in recent decades in the study of contemporary Tibetan, Mongolian, and Siberian Buddhist communities. Driven especially by the anthropology of Buddhism, the landscape of text that has long preoccupied Buddhist Studies has been diversified by attention to social processes as discipline and performance, the mediation of trans-and local institutions and community, processes of identity formation, and material and aesthetic cultures along with their mediating practices.<sup>2</sup> So, too, among social and intellectual historians of the Qing Empire, who have approached Mongolian and Tibetan scholastic cultures in their broader material and political contexts of self-and community-making.

Still, historical work in Buddhist Studies, especially when it is focused on late imperial scholasticism in Inner Asia, is overwhelmingly what it has been for two centuries: a text-centered endeavor.<sup>3</sup> For example, a few magisterial studies have drawn from the historiography of Europe and looked for the “culture of the book” in Asia’s heartland (Schaeffer 2009; Kara 2005). Taking cues from the historiography of early modern Europe, bibliographical studies of Inner Asia have also entered the fray alongside longstanding subfields focused on canon and canonicity. Interesting work on reuse and intertextuality, as well as apocrypha and erasure, continues to drive forward these conversations.<sup>4</sup> Recently, Inner Asianists have begun to revisit en masse a timeworn Orientalist preoccupation with Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist “literature” (though now offering fresh and consequential acknowledgments that European-derived literary categories seem always to fail to account for Inner Asian patterns, especially in genre expectation).<sup>5</sup> Inquiries into the discursive content of texts, their rhetorical flourish, their poetic qualities, and their genre divisions

continue to fill monographs, volumes, and special issues of journals such as this edition of *Religions*.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, these last two centuries of disciplining Inner Asian *text* as an object of Buddhist Studies inquiry—whether of text inscribed in stone, paper, flesh, or sound—have always been accompanied by the disciplining of Inner Asian *authors*. Mirroring the lineage preoccupations of Inner Asian scholastics, the history of Buddhist Inner Asia has often been organized by the names and biographies of major authors set into lineal relationship with one another. Padmasambhava. Yéshé Tsogyel. Milarepa. Sakya Paṇḍita. Whichever Karmapa or Dalai Lama or Jebtsundamba Qutuγtu. Tsongkhapa. Gendün Chöphel. Zava Damdin. Sera Khandro. In the disciplinary (re)turn to scholarship about Buddhist literature, publications on the scope and historical development of auto/biographical genres like *namtar* (*rnam thar*), the poetics of life writing, and Inner Asian reflections upon the scope and purpose of such writing continue to fill the catalogues of popular and scholarly presses and journals.<sup>7</sup>

As such, in disciplinary knowledge in Inner Asian Buddhist Studies, analytical procedures organized by both Inner Asian scholastic institutions and the Enlightenment-derived “author function”—author not as a unitary wellspring of meaning that precedes a text but rather as discursive formation that enables certain kinds of reading—continue to reign supreme (Barthes 1977, pp. 142–48; Derrida 1987, pp. 259–96; Foucault 1980, pp. 113–38). To constrain the proliferation of meaning and interpretation of text, Buddhist Studies scholars have often, consciously or not, bent the “criticism” of European literary studies to their task, leading from the text always back to the author. Inner Asian scholasticism, for example, is traditionally rendered into an object of contemporary Philosophy or History by engaging text by appeal to authors. In this normative mode of disciplinary analysis, the social context, profile, and putative “intentions” of an author help organize the interpretation of “the meaning” of the texts that he, and very rarely she, once wrote.

But something fundamental is missing. Robust historical inquiry into the textual cultures of Inner Asia will always be partially blinded if focused exclusively upon lineal relations between authors and texts; or, even more regrettably, between authorial intention and meaning. Our current, binary disciplinary focus on Buddhist literature must be triangulated, just as it has been so profitably in neighboring historical fields. Our objects cannot be only on what is made and unmade when the pen is pressed to the page. It must include also what is made and unmade when the inscribed page is later subjected to the fickle and tactical eye of a *reader*; readers, we must remember, for whom text and author, writing and reading, meant ten thousand things, few of which align nicely or at all with the expectations of contemporary literary criticism (or the very idea of “literature” most of all).

In what follows, I first provide a short summary of the productive critical possibilities of a history of reading in late imperial Inner Asia. I then turn to a case study of what I argue was an emergent reading practice that developed in the stitched imperial formations newly connecting Inner, East, and South Asian polities at the turn of the eighteenth century: long-distance, interpersonal, and collaborative reading developed across Tibetan, Devanagari, Mongolian, Manchu, and Chinese linguistic registers, literary traditions, and material practices. I focus upon a specific collaborative reading circle that included cosmopolitan and polylingual scholars like Güng Gombojab, Tsewang Norbu, and Situ Pañchen, and which shaped, in otherwise invisible ways, their remarkable literary outputs (such as the former’s *Rgya nag chos ‘byung*, the famous *History of Buddhism in China*). I show that by means of long-distance correspondence made possible by the centralized bureaucracies of contiguous empires, these lay and monastic literati could call upon co-readers thousands of miles away to read texts on their behalf, across a plethora of languages beyond the linguistic abilities of any one of them, drawn from material texts and archives that were otherwise inaccessible.

## 2. From Text and Author to the Readers of Buddhist Literature

Scholastics in the late-imperial monasteries of Inner Asia and their interpreters in the academy today together imagine Asia's heartland as a topography of text. But it is yet largely unnoticed among the latter that, for a thousand years or more, nomads, vagabonds, and poachers have moved wildly across its inscribed peaks and lettered valleys. These roaming bands of unruly Tibetan and Mongolian and Siberian readers, like all readers, were gleaners of new significance, never beholden to the presumed intentions of authors nor to the presumed fixity of meaning in text. To begin thinking about a comparative field that could set out after their tracks over the landscape of Buddhist literature, we might begin as historians of reading in early-modern Europe have done: with the famous lines of Michel de Certeau about readers and the edifices of significance they make for themselves: "Far from being writers—founders of their own place, heirs of the peasants of earlier ages now working on the soil of language, diggers of wells and builders of houses—readers are travelers; they pass through lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write, despoiling the wealth of Egypt to enjoy it themselves" (de Certeau 1988, p. 174). As in eighteenth century Paris or Venice, so too in Lhasa or Xining: all acts of reading pilfer, silence, omit, repurpose, and glean as the very condition of their practice.

Indeed, writing is cumulative, durable, and fixed. Reading, by contrast, is "always on the order of the ephemeral" (Chartier 1994, p. 50) And yet, there is never one without the other. New texts are made from reading, and new readings are possible only in reference to mosaics of text. And indeed, in Inner Asian biographical genres, the very status and authority of religious virtuosi and more humble authors alike are tied to their reading. As Kurtis Schaeffer has described in his remarkable account of the culture of the book in Tibet, like patrons and printers of books, reading practices were exalted in Inner Asian hagiography. "Learning to read scripture is a basic feature of accounts of childhood in almost any intellectual biography in traditional Tibet," and, indeed, the very act of reading texts like the *Ratnakūṭa Sūtra*, the *Perfection of Wisdom* corpus, or the life story of Milarepa, is often linked to realization and spiritual progress in the vast biographical literature of Inner Asia (Schaeffer 2009, pp. 6–7).

By focusing upon readers, new horizons of historical inquiry present themselves continuously. A turn from text and author to readers is a turn from an imagined fixity of meaning, content, and event to one of open possibility and continual erasure. This, at least, has been acknowledged in Buddhist Studies; though there only as a warning. In his important work on the genesis of Mahāyāna sūtras, a foundational literary corpus for the late-imperial Inner Asian readers examined below, Jonathan Silk notes in passing "theoretically speaking we might even go farther still and say, with modern theorists, that each reading of a work which produces a new interpretation allows, although it does not necessitate, the creation of a new community. Radical re-readings, which amount to re-writings, may indeed create new communities, but access to this level of the tradition(s) is certainly impossible to obtain and so, from a practical point of view, we are surely justified in accepting the generalities of a given text as an integral unit, at least as a starting point" (Silk 2002, p. 370). Beware of inquiry into reading practices, it seems, for therein disciplinary identities lose their way.

But should we not chase after disciplinary uncertainty until our knees shake and our lungs burn? Is this not an obligation of historical inquiry? And why should "the level of the tradition(s)" made up of readers so confound the Buddhist Studies scholar? Are readers not always exponential in number compared to authors, a minority class of persons in turn who are themselves also readers (or hearers, or reciters) of exponentially more text than they ever press to page? Are there not artefacts of reading everywhere? In text and rock and performance and the material stuff of Buddhist Inner Asia up and down? And in turning from literature and authors to reading practices in place and time, do not wild and intoxicating new objects in the cultural history of Inner Asian present themselves?

And we have abundant examples to draw from in neighboring fields, especially from the cultural history of early-modern France, Italy, and Britain. As explored in that scholarship now for several decades, a reader is as much an historical actor as an author. She or he is an agent who “re-employs” and “re-distributes” writing. Any reader interacting with text thus “invents in texts something different from what [an author] ‘intended’” (de Certeau 1988, p. 245; de Certeau 1990, p. 169). The author sets, arranges, polishes, and cements. The reader unmoors, dislocates, and severs. The reader then re-combines in a new ecology of text and interpretation, undoing and re-writing as she goes: improvising the “fragments” of text to create “something un-known” out of “an indefinite plurality of meanings” (de Certeau 1988, 1990). Whatever the content and structure of a text, and whatever may have been the intention and organizing effect of its author, when subjected to a reading “Texts are . . . ‘diverted’ or rerouted as one can divert a river, capital, or traffic” (Ahearne 1995, p. 172). The entombment of past authors in the making of new texts, by rotating on the unpredictable practice of reading, guides the production of primary and secondary sources alike. Jé Tsongkhapa made anew in his scholastic writing by reading Candrakīrti in the fourteenth century, just as a contemporary scholar makes anew in her journal articles by reading Tsongkhapa.

But where to begin as we move from text to author in Inner Asia? We might start with the great historian and theorist Roger Chartier, who insists that Michel de Certeau “provides an obligatory base and a disquieting challenge” for historians of reading.<sup>8</sup> On his teacher de Certeau’s example, Roger Chartier established the practice of reading as an object in cultural history. Reading, as he put it early on with Pierre Bourdieu, is “a distinctive space of appropriation which is never reducible simply to what is read” (Bourdieu and Chartier 1993, pp. 267–94). For Chartier—as for other theorists of reading like Mackenzie and Ricoeur—a history of reading is not reducible to a theory of “reception,” nor of “reader-response,” nor a “rhetorics of reading.”<sup>9</sup> Likewise, a comparative cultural history of reading in Inner Asia would exceed analysis of accepted hermeneutic strategies in scholasticism or the records of monastic textbooks, techniques for memorizing, or the formal performance of interpretation on the debate courtyard.

Instead, at the core of a cultural history of reading practices is the question of appropriation: “What do specific readers ‘make of’ specific texts?” (Ahearne 1995, p. 167). This is what Claude Lévi-Strauss called *bricolage*, the activity of selection and rearrangement, thieving and diversion, silencing and revoicing out (Lévi-Strauss 2021). Of the material and discursive possibilities of text. Reading is circumstantial recombination. It occurs in motion, away from the sites where text is written and where material stuff of books are fabricated, in ecologies of other texts, desires, practices, and social distribution of meaning and interpretation. In what Michel de Certeau called markets of symbolic capital and interpretative authority—in “scriptural economies,” such as we find in 18th century Buddhist scholastic communities in Inner Asia to which I now turn—texts are unmade, parsed, ribboned and braided anew by reading, alone and together across great chasms of space and language. And we, scholars who still dare commit acts of history against Buddhist Asia, are also included. Are we not still more readers combining in a great circulatory chain that exceeds any presumption to primary and secondary sources? The West/Nonwest binary? Or whatever other requirement of objective space and distance that still guards the brittle epistemological status of the humanities?

Such are the possibilities for a history of *reading* Buddhist literature.

### 3. “To the Eyes of the World Who Knows Four Languages...”

I now turn to a long distance, interpersonal, and collaborative reading community that developed among certain polylingual, cosmopolitan Buddhist literati. These particular monks and laymen worked in newly centralized, contiguous imperial and monastic bureaucracies that by the dawn of the eighteenth century connected the Ottoman empire bordering the Mediterranean to the west with the Qing Empire in the east, to Tsarist Russia in the north and the Gorkha kingdom and Mughal empire in the south, and the ascendent Ganden

Potrang and Qoşut Mongol empires in the Tibeto-Mongolian middle.<sup>10</sup> Those involved in these collaborative acts of reading were Inner Asians of various communities and social location, who were interested in reading not only Tibetan and Mongolian text, but also Devanagari, Manchu, Latin, and especially in the present case, Chinese letters and characters. Together, through long distance correspondence, the literary inheritance of trans-Eurasia was made available to each of them. Otherwise limited by technical proficiency—none individually knew the languages they together could read—and material access to books, in the relational reading they developed, books stored thousands of miles away, in unknown scripts, inaccessible archives, and foreign genres were opened to their located reading in Lhasa and Alaşa, Beijing and Kathmandu, Yeke-yin Küriy-e, Mukden, and Dergé.

In the early decades of the eighteenth century, many influential and innovative cultural elites who were spread across these contiguous imperial, state, and monastic bureaucracies entered long-distance and long-running correspondence with one another. Though many were aligned with the Géluk school—newly dominant in Central and Eastern Tibet and Mongolia after the end of Tsang-Mongol War in 1642, the patronage of the Qoşut Mongol Empire, and the promotion of the Qing Empire—this was not always the case. In the displacements that followed the dominance of the Géluk “empire” and in new possibilities for long distance travel, newly mobile and interactive Kagyu, Nyingma, and Jonang monastic scholastics also read together.<sup>11</sup>

Exemplary of a much broader trend towards collaborative reading were letters exchanged by three prominent scholars of the early 18th century: Güng Gombojab, Katok Rikdzin Tséwang Norbu, and Situ Pañchen Chökyi Jungné. Güng Gombojab (Ch. Gongbu chabu 工布查布; Tib. Mi dbang mgon po skyabs, c. 1690–1750) was an Üjümüčün Mongolian nobleman educated in the courtly circles of the Manchu Kangxi 康熙 emperor (1661–1722).<sup>12</sup> During the Yongzheng 雍正 reign period (1722–1735), Gombojab was appointed director of Beijing’s Language Academy (Xifanxue 西番学), otherwise known as the Tangut Language School (Tanggutexue 唐古特学).<sup>13</sup> This was then a gateway institution for translators and administrators aspiring to work in the Qing Empire’s sprawling Inner Asian-focused bureaucracy. Gombojab’s prestigious position put him at the center of some of the most ambitious Buddhist literary projects in late imperial trans-Eurasia, including translating the Tibetan Buddhist canon into Chinese, Mongolian, and Manchu, as well as developing quadrilingual dictionaries and translation manuals to help in the task. As He Mufei puts it, for the first four decades of the Qianlong 乾隆 reign period (1735–1796), Gombojab was charged with opening important Buddhist texts and popular rituals that previously existed exclusively in one of the four languages he commanded (Mongolian, Tibetan, Manchu, Chinese).<sup>14</sup>

Gombojab was thus one of many polyglots in the early 18th century with an imperial mandate to open the previously isolated Buddhist literature of Inner and East Asia to vast new reading publics. The Mongolian composition for which Gombojab became most known was *Flow of the Ganges* (Mong. *Gangga-yin urusqal*; Ch. *Honghezhiliu* 恒河之流), a short genealogical history about the altan uruy (Chinggisd nobility lineage) written at the height of Qing exertion of sovereignty over Mongolian societies (Gombojab and Coyiji 1999). Another of his works, a Tibetan translation of a Chinese classic, revolutionized Buddhist scholastic writing along the Tibeto-Mongolian frontiers down to the twentieth century: a translation (and reframing) of Xuanzang’s seventh century travel narrative, the *Great Tang Record of the Western Regions* (*Da tang xi yu ji* 大唐西遊記) (Mi dbang mgon po skyabs 1998). He also completed several translations of Buddhist text from Mongolian and Tibetan into Chinese, including a Mongol devotional work dedicated to Maitreya and one of the Fifth Dalai Lama’s (Blo bzang ngag dbang rgya mtsho, 1617–1682) offering rituals to the seven Medicine Buddhas.<sup>15</sup>

However, the most impactful of Gombojab’s contributions was not a translation but an original historical work in Tibetan: *The History of Buddhism in China* (Tib. *Rgya nag chos ’byung*) (Mi dbang mgon po skyabs 1998; Zhang 2016; Mala 2006). This widely known work was requested by Gombojab’s guru, the Fifth Širegetü Qutuytu (1713–1751), and

organized in its printed form into three sections. The first was an extensive spatialization of “Great China” (or “Greater China,” Tib. *Ma hā tsi na*) as the exclusive maṇḍala of Mañjuśrī in the prophetic time described in various sūtras and tantras. The second was a survey of the life stories of those Indian and Chinese monks and emperors who brought the Buddhādharma to China (Mi dbang mgon po skyabs, pp. 62–175). The final section was concerned most with providing a Tibetan translation of titles in the Chinese Buddhist canon, a great register of texts hitherto little known among Inner Asian scholastics and accompanied by a comparison with the organization of the Kangyur (Tib. *Bka’ gyur*; Mong. *Ganjur*) (Mi dbang mgon po skyabs 1998, pp. 176–258).

In all, Gombojab’s *History of Buddhism in China* introduced Inner Asian readers to a vast new topography of Chinese historical and geographical sources. In the centuries that followed, Gombojab’s work was a major reference for Buddhist scholastics all along the Tibeto-Mongolian-Russian frontiers of the Qing who tried to make sense of newly circulating forms of intellectual culture and, in time, revolutionary nationalist and socialist movements. In it, “China” is a constellation of events, peoples, and places foretold by the Kālacakra-tantra and other familiar scriptural sources in Inner Asia (like the *Root Tantra of Mañjuśrī*), and a model of world history whose culmination was the forms of community obligations, legal frameworks, and moral authority embodied by the Qing-Géluk formation. While *The History of Buddhism in China* was a masterwork that enabled untold Inner Asian scholars to read Chinese sources for generations to come, this text was itself the product of, and a cause for, new kinds of reading publics in the years leading to its publication.

Leaving aside the contents of this text and the biography of its author, it is to the circle of long distance, collaborative reading in constellation around a draft copy of the *History of Buddhism in China* that we now turn. The foreword of the text tells us that Gombojab sent drafts to two polymath Tibetan scholars of the early 18th century: Katok Tséwang Norbu, who Gombojab apparently first contacted in 1747, and the former’s student, the great Situ Paṇchen in the emerging cosmopolitan center of Dergé, in the eastern Tibetan regions we often gloss as Kham. The former was trained in Nyingma, Kagyu, and Jonang lineages in the context of the persecution and exile of many non-Géluk institutions and incarnation lineages by the combined forces of the Ganden Potrang government of the Dalai Lamas and their Mongol allies. Tséwang Norbu traveled widely in his lifetime, helping to restore the Boudhanath Stūpa in Kathmandu, for example, as well as to mediate conflicts in Ladakh on behalf of the great lay Tibetan leader Polhané Sönam Tobgyé (Pho lha nas bsod nams stobs rgyas, 1689–1747) and to intervene in major succession conflicts for high Kagyu lamas like the Zhamarpa and Karmapa.

Tséwang Norbu’s student, Situ Paṇchen, was much like him and Gombojab, as well as a great many other cosmopolitan, polylingual, and boundary crossing literati networking across South-Inner-East Asian boundaries of the early 18th century.<sup>16</sup> Situ Paṇchen traveled widely from his base in the emerging intellectual and religious center of Dergé, including on several occasions to Nepal and Central Tibet. On several of his travels, Situ Paṇchen collected Sanskrit texts to translate, including works of poetry and grammar. In the early 1730s, he was charged with editing the woodblocks used in the famous Dergé edition of the Kangyur. Situ Paṇchen also trained in crossed lineages of the Nyingma, Kagyu, and Jonang left reeling after the upheavals and persecution of the Ganden Potrang, Qośut, and Dzongar Mongol state building projects. Roaming across languages, concerned with systematizing received literary traditions, and working to expand fields of classical learning such as astrology, poetics, and history, Tséwang Norbu and Situ Paṇchen used the possibilities of centralized and continuous imperial and monastic bureaucracies to support their work in canon formation, mass translation projects, systematic translation, and historical writing. And in all this, Gombojab’s *History of Buddhism in China* was a revelation, as were the possibilities of practicing relational, collaborative reading with a scholar like the distant Mongol principal in Beijing with a horde of Chinese texts at his disposal.

The record of their correspondence is, unfortunately, currently incomplete. Situ Paṇchen’s *Collected Works* contain three letters sent to Gombojab, often displaying the

former's famous command of Sanskrit poetics, and a record of three (now lost) letters Gombojab sent in return from Beijing written in golden ink and accompanied by a Chinese vase.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, Tséwang Norbu's *Collected Works* contains one letter to Gombojab, a fascinating series of requests for help reading Chinese sources ([Tshe dbang nor bu 2006](#), pp. 759–906). Absent, as far as I have been able to tell, are Gombojab's letters, or the draft of *History of Buddhism in China* that motivated their wide-ranging exchanges. Nonetheless, the extant letters of the two Tibetan polymaths reveal a set of possibilities for reading in interpersonal ways specific to their trans-Eurasian and interactive generation: they regular refer, for example, to the new interlocking imperial and monastic networks extending between Central Tibet and Beijing and on to South Asia that facilitated their correspondence (or frustrated it: there are also references to lost letters and misplaced gifts that failed to find their far away recipients because of temporary breaks in infrastructure).

In other words, the draft of *The History of Buddhism In China* provided occasion for these three polylingual literati to engage one another in long-distance collaborative reading suited to each of their individual projects: whether writing the history of Buddhism in China, developing a better understanding of Chan meditation in Tibet, pursuing a comparative exploration of the pathways of the sun and moon and stars, or checking dates and catalogue records in distant lands and unknown languages.<sup>18</sup> (And indeed, a closer look at the hundreds of pages of other surviving correspondence between Situ Pañchen and Tséwang Norbu and figures as varied as the seventh Dalai Lama Kelzang Gyatso and paṇḍits in distant Kathmandu, all offer a great many other examples of interpersonal reading, though unfortunately beyond the scope of this short study).

Tséwang Norbu sent thirteen questions to Gombojab, accompanied by offerings of 135 srang, a white offering scarf, and a red protection cord. In the edition that I follow here, three additional questions “not included in the original letter” were added ([Tshe dbang nor bu 2006](#)). Addressing Gombojab as a “layman bodhisattva paṇḍita” who “possesses supreme eyes that might behold the [Chinese] canon and its commentaries.” Tséwang Norbu positions himself in his questioning as a representative of the great republic of Tibetan readers and authors; those “who have conceitedly claimed to have acquired the vessel of courageous wisdom able to cross the ocean of their own and others’ tenets,” yet who can neither read the vast riches of Chinese Buddhist scripture nor access its material holdings ([Tshe dbang nor bu 2006](#), p. 812).

An early cluster of requests for Gombojab to read on behalf of Tséwang Norbu, and “all the scholars of Tibet” focus upon explicit references in the draft of *The History of Buddhism in China*. For example: could Gombojab provide a reading report in Tibetan translation of Chinese historical records about the kings who ruled in previous world ages, such as during the life of Kāśyapa (Tib. ‘*Od srung*), the buddha who preceded Śākyamuni? ([Tshe dbang nor bu 2006](#), p. 812). Could he also read early Chinese histories on Tséwang Norbu's behalf to provide translated selections that might answer the following: though surely difficult “to match” (‘*grigs*) Chinese with Tibetan texts, how do the former identify “China and Great China” (‘*rgya yul dang rgya yul chen*) and “the kingdom of Mentsé” (‘*Sman rtse'i rgyal kham*)? Furthermore, is it not true that Chinese sources identify “the Land of Li” (‘*Li yul*) as “Ljang,” and that this is one of seven lands belonging to King Sanu? Could Gombojab please enact a distanced reading of Chinese sources and report back “how the Chinese identify these seven regions”? ([Tshe dbang nor bu 2006](#), p. 813) Could Gombojab also read Chinese texts describing the succession of Chan 禪 practitioners (Tib. bsam gtan mkhan rnam)? Could he report how Chinese texts date the Buddha Śākyamuni's parinirvāṇa? ([Tshe dbang nor bu 2006](#), p. 813).

Both Tséwang Norbu and Situ Pañchen were hopeful that Gombojab would read the Chinese literary record for them to illuminate new knowledge about the Tibetan imperial period. Both Tibetans had been to Lhasa and read an inscription on a stone pillar at the Jokhang Temple that confusingly dated the 7th century arrival of the foreign wives of King Songtsen Gampo: the Nepali princess Bhṛkūtī and the Chinese princess Wencheng 文成.<sup>19</sup> One pillar dated their arrival to the “Cang kong” year and the other to the “Keng lung”

year. “[T]he name and element of the years when the earlier and later Kongjo came to Tibet are very important to us,” and so could Gombojab read the appropriate Chinese histories and astrological works in order to identify them? (Tshe dbang nor bu 2006, p. 814). On this point, Situ Pañchen also has questions for Gombojab. In Lhasa, where Situ Pañchen had recently visited when he wrote his second letter to Gombojab, he too noticed the inscription on the pillar at the Jokhang. Could Gombojab read Chinese sources on his behalf to reconcile the dates? (Chos kyi ’byung gnas 2014, p. 411).

Next comes a topic of great concern to both Tséwang Norbu and Situ Pañchen: reconciling competing astrological models—such as those between Phug khyung and his followers among the Kagyu school—about the matter of the apparent changing length of the days and “the reversal of the sun” (Tib. *nyi ldog*, i.e., the summer solstice). Can Gombojab read the Chinese canon in order to find passages that clearly show whether “the reversal leads to earlier days or not?” (Tshe dbang nor bu 2006, p. 814). Finally, can Gombojab read Chinese sources and report on the timing of seasonal darkness in Beijing in order to help Tséwang Norbu better track celestial movement? When “the sun goes to the extreme northern ring, the length of the night is only as long as one cup of tea in the region of Kheng-che” (Tshe dbang nor bu 2006, p. 814).

Returning to geography as mapped in the Kālacakra-tantra, into which Gombojab partly wrote the time and place of Chinese Buddhism, Tséwang Norbu asks Gombojab to read Chinese sources on his behalf to identify whether “the great Shita River” flows to north of China into Russia? Are there records about the people there? Do they in general accept “that Śambhala exists in the north, or not?,” and if they do, can Gombojab send a reading report about any Chinese people who visited? (Tshe dbang nor bu 2006, p. 815) Finally, can Gombojab read on Tséwang Norbu’s behalf in order to find references in Chinese sources to “the six lands of long life” described by Vasubandhu (Tib. Dyig gnyen) in his Indian commentaries, which Tibetan scholars had long assumed but not proved were references to Chinese places? (Tshe dbang nor bu 2006, p. 815).

The next area of interest to Tséwang Norbu concerned the tenets of the Chinese Chan tradition, whose history he was concerned with recovering from the old polemical rejection of its blank-minded meditative practices and sudden enlightenment rhetoric among Tibetan scholastics for much of the last thousand years. He asks Gombojab to read Chinese histories to glean “a concise biographical description of the lama succession of Chinese [Chan] practitioners”? and thus to corroborate the description in Tibetan texts like Nubchen Sanggyé Yéshé’s *Lamp for the Eye in Contemplation* and the *Dogyéchu Lungkhung*.<sup>20</sup> He also ask Gombojab to find and read a catalogue of texts printed at Mt. Wutai 五臺山 and to provide a translated summary in Tibetan, just as he does about any historical accounts in Chinese about Mt. Langchen (Glang chen ri), a pilgrimage place never before described in the Tibetan language (Tshe dbang nor bu 2006, p. 815). Finally, might Gombojab, “the Eyes of the World Who Knows Four Languages,” please identify and read the catalogues of Chinese Dharma histories in order to find the dhāraṇī of Mañjughoṣa and Vajrapāṇi? (Tshe dbang nor bu 2006, p. 816).

#### 4. Conclusions

My point, in all this, is simply to add to this Special Issue a note that, without readers, Buddhist literature is only so much decaying fiber and paling ink. A turn to readers, and to their destabilizing practices specifically, is needed to correctly understand authors, texts, and the very idea of “literature” in late-imperial Inner Asia.

In the newly centralizing and contiguous state and monastic bureaucracies of the early 18th century, many other figures were similarly engaged in collaborative reading, all of them important for developing a history of reading to compliment a history of literature in Buddhist Inner Asia. For example, Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Peljor (Tib. Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal ’byor, 1704–1788) in Amdo and the Sixth Pañchen Lama (Tib. Pañ chen bla ma blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes, 1738–1780) wrote to one another about reading circulating Jesuit and Chinese sources, as well as the “text” of material artefacts and oral

tradition (Ye shes dpal 'byor 1975b, pp. 173–372). Sumpa Khenpo elsewhere wrote about the meaning and purpose of reading Tibetan in the multilingual worlds of Qing Inner Asia:

Om Dzayantu!

To properly understand the subject matter (brjod bya) of the Buddha's words and all the commentaries of the scholar-adepts of India and the Snowy [Land], one must first learn to read the letters that spell the words (ming tshig) that express them (brjod byed). As it says in Tönmi Sambhota's *Sum cu pa*:

The basis of all expressed words (ming tshig)

Are letters in combination.

As this says, the foundation of communicating the meaning of the ten fields of Non-Buddhist and Buddhist knowledge are the nouns and words (ming tshig).

The root of both, moreover, are the letters. As such, in the beginning it is necessary to know them precisely (ji bzhin). (Ye shes dpal 'byor 1975a, p. 1012)

Another eighteenth century example comes from the minor writings of Čaqar Mongolia Lubsangčülüm (Tib. Blo bzang tshul khriṃs, 1740–1810), who wrote about how to combine reading the extensive biography of the Géluk founder Jé Tsongkhapa with specific contemplative practices. Such discipline was necessary, since “a person who reads a life story [of a holy being like Tsongkhapa] should not be like someone listening to a worldly legend. Putting it into practice is preferable!” (King 2019, p. 158). Examples of other places to start a comparative history of reading in just the early 18th century abound: Cangkyā Rolpé Dorjé advice on language ideology and translation in the heart of the Qing Empire, the correspondences of the Seventh Dalai Lama Kelzang Gyatso, the doxographical work of Tuken Chökyi Nyima, or of new forms of standardized reading associated with the spread of Géluk pedagogy across vast networks of Inner Asian monastic colleges (Tib. grwa tshang; Mong. datsan).<sup>21</sup>

To conclude, in this moment of trans-Inner Asian mobility and encounter, mobile scholars like Gombojab, Tséwang Norbu, and Situ Pañchen developed forms of *relational* or *inter-personal reading* that collaboratively engaged the Eurasian literary heritage. Their interpersonal and co-dependent reading practices exceeded the proficiencies, technical knowledge, material conditions, and literary traditions of any single reader. Calling upon another to read on one's behalf, reports on Mongolian sources about the death of Chinggis Khan, for example, were shared in exchange for Chinese versions of the mantra of Mañjuśrī, a few lines of Sanskrit poetry, or a stele inscription in Lhasa. In these ways, new publics were made in Asia's heartland during the 18th century, with dramatic effect on the intellectual, religious, and political life of 19th and early 20th century Mongolia and Tibet, as a republic of not only of letters but of interactional and collaborative readers.

Turning away from the usual, essentially structuralist study of Buddhist literature—which fixes within its expectations of semantic fixity and availability not only the meaning of text but also the status and intentions of that ghostly (and ghastly) historical object: an author—to the concrete habits, spaces, practices, and dispositions of later readers, a historian of reading late-imperial Buddhist literature in Inner Asia must “reconstruct the variations that differentiate the ‘readable space’ (the texts in their material and discursive forms) and those which govern the circumstances of their ‘activation’ (the readings seen as concrete practices and interpretative procedures)” (Chartier 1992, p. 50). Indeed, as Michel de Certeau and Roger Chartier, “a text exists for a reader in the act of appropriation, and yet this act also alters it. The reader reflects ‘upon’ the text, and yet the text operates ‘upon’ (within) the reader” (Ahearne 1995, p. 173).

But what about communities of readers outside of, but still in circles of interaction with, Europe and its colonies, such as those reading in Inner Asia in the age of Qianlong? In both Certeau and Chartier's analysis, as well as related ones by Bourdieu and the text-centered hermeneutical models of Ricoeur, the figure of the reader is always a European. Bounded by social circumstances and limited by the figuration of material and discursive conditions of a text, the reader for these theorists is also always solitary. Her or his tactics and poaching

are always a lonely and isolated operation. By contrast, the many cases of early 18th century collaborative reading in trans-imperial Inner Asia seem to offer something new to a history of reading that has been dominated by studies of early modern Europe, and something new to the study of Buddhist literature that has remained overwhelmingly focused on texts and their authors, but only rarely upon how they have been enlivened (or buried) by being read.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a case study of the webbed interpretative cultures across trans-Eurasia that made and unmade Buddhist Studies within the epistemic sovereignty of “the West” from Qing models of world historical order in Inner Asia, see: (King 2022). For the most comprehensive and widely cited surveys of the intellectual development of Buddhist Studies in the north Atlantic, see: (Cabezón 2021; Masuzawa 2005; de Jong 1998; Lopez 1995; Almond 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> While there is neither reason nor space to provide a comprehensive bibliography here, readers interested in ethnographic studies of contemporary Buddhist scholastic communities connected to those historical networks examined in this paper could begin with the following studies: Makley (2007); Swancutt (2012); Humphrey and Hürelbaatar (2013); Buyandelger (2013); Bernstein (2013); Abrahms-Kavunen (2019); Jonutytė (2019); Quijada (2019).
- <sup>3</sup> And by “texts” I think we could say more specifically texts that were composed, edited, often cut into woodblocks, and published, as opposed to other textual traces like tax records, legal documents, transactional receipts, and so on. A notable exception, in relation to the communities that concern this chapter, is the admirable work of Oidtmann (2016, 2018). There are, of course, many notable exceptions to this enduring disciplinary trend. Some that bear especially on the period and regions examined here include turns to the social history of major scholastic institutional networks and ever-evolving scholastic practices by scholars including Nietupski (2011); Kapstein (2009); Elverskog (2006); Gyatso (2015); Sullivan (2021); Van Vleet (2018); Cabezón and Dorjee (2019); Jansen (2019), and Kaplonski (2014). Other important interventions away from the text-centrism examined in these pages are turns to visual and other material culture in their social and political contexts of production and circulation along the Tibeto-Mongol frontiers of the Qing, including most relevantly in monographs by Berger (2003); Charleux (2006, 2015); Elverskog (2004); (Tuttle and Debreczeny 2016); Townsend (2021), and Tsultemin (2021).
- <sup>4</sup> For fascinating collections, see: (Buswell 1990; Cantwell and Fresch 2017).
- <sup>5</sup> For useful surveys and introductions, see: (Lhundup et al. 1996; Rheingans 2015; International Association for Tibetan Studies and Almogi 2008).
- <sup>6</sup> Some well-cited surveys that compliment this special issue of *Religions* include: (Lhag pa chos 'phel and Min zu chu ban she 2016; Dge 'dun rab gsal 2001; Dung dkar blo bzang 'phrin las n.d.; Rheingans 2015; Lhundup et al. 1996; Lokesh 1963; Venturino 2007; Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008; Vostrikov 1994; Bira et al. 1970; Bawden 2003; Wedemeyer and Davidson 2006; International Association for Tibetan Studies and Almogi 2008).
- <sup>7</sup> For key introductions to the literary history of Inner Asian auto/biography, see: (Schaeffer 2010; Gyatso 1998; Kollmar-Paulenz 2001; Bareja-Starzynska 2009; Quintman 2014; Ary 2015; Jacoby 2016; Gayley 2017).
- <sup>8</sup> For example: (de Certeau 1988; Ahearne 1995; Chartier 1992).
- <sup>9</sup> For example: (Holub 1984; Eagleton 1983; Charles 1977).
- <sup>10</sup> The first half of the 18th century saw a patchwork of imperial and monastic bureaucracies take shape, or begin to dissolve, from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and from Lake Baikal to Arabian and South China seas. These decades encompassed the reign periods of Kangxi, Yǒngzhèng, and Qianlong in the Qing Empire, but also that of Peter the Great in Russia, Lhazang Khan in the Qoşut empire, the Ganden Potrang government of the sixth and seventh Dalai Lamas in Central Tibet, the Gorkha Kingdom in present-day Nepal, and the dissolving Mughal Empire in India. More distantly, though also of consequence for the material and intellectual ecologies of these readers in Asia's heartland, were the Safavid and Ottoman empire, as well as the newly encroaching colonial empires of western Europe.
- <sup>11</sup> (Sullivan 2021). For a wonderful study of long distance correspondence in this period, see: (Kilby 2015).
- <sup>12</sup> The entry on Gombojab in *Qing History* (*Qingshigao* 清史稿) also gives an alternative Chinese name: Gongbu zhabu gong 衮布扎布公. For general overviews of Gombojab's life and career beyond what is possible to cover here, see for example: (Uspensky 2008, n.d.).

- Known in Mongolian as the Neyite jaqirun suryayci sayid-un tusiyal.
- (He 2020). Though Gombojab is always lauded for his mastery of these four languages of Qing sovereignty, I have not found any reference of his translations into or out of Manchu.
- According to He Mufei, the Chinese title of the former is 佛說彌勒勒菩薩發願王偈 (CBETA text no. 1144, p. 600c21). The Tibetan title of the Dalai Lama's original Medicine Buddha text is *Bde gshegs bdun gyi mchod pa'i chog bsgrigs yid bzhin dbang rgyal* (BDRC W26437). In Gombojab's Chinese it became 药师七佛供养仪轨如意王经 (CBETA text no. 927, p. 48b25) (He 2020).
- For a wonderful introduction to the life and times of Situ Pañchen, see: (Smith 1968).
- (Chos kyi 'byung gnas 2014). These letters to Gombojab are filed confusingly in various editions of Situ Pañchen's sprawling *Collected Works* in a section entitled "Letters Sent to the Lord of the World, Glorious Karmapa" (Jig rten dbang phyug dpal karma pa'i drung du phul ba'i zhu yig).
- For more on Tséwang Norbu's work to understand and center Chan meditation in the context of Dzogchen by rehabilitating the much disparaged Hwashang Mohayen from the great Samyé Debate (c. 792–794 CE), see: (van Schaik 2003).
- Tib. Srong btsan sgam po, c. 605–650. Tibetans memorialize Bhṛkūtī as Belmoza Tritsun (Bal mo bza' khri btsun) and Wencheng as Gyamo Za Kongjo (Rgya mo bza' kong jo).
- In the letter, Tséwang Norbu writes "Gnub bsam gtan mig," a contraction of Nubchen's (Gnub chen) *Lamp for the Eye in Contemplation* (*Bsam gtan mig sgron*). See: (Dalton and van Schaik 2003; Lopez 2018; Meinert 2003). Regarding the *Dogyéchu Lungkhung* (*Mdo brgyad cu'i lung khung*), I have been unable to make any sure identification.
- For a magisterial survey of reading in relation to disciplines of memorization and debate in Géluk education, see: (Dreyfus 2008). pp. 149–63. On the play of silence and sound in reading and other pedagogical and contemplative practices in a single monastic setting, see: (Cabezón and Dorjee 2019).

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