

Report of the Guest Lecture of the BuddhistRoad project

08 February 2023 Reinier Langelaar (Vienna)

AVALOKITEŚVARA IN DUNHUANG AND TIBET: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A BODHISATTVA'S MYTHOLOGY

invited lecture at the BuddhistRoad project, CERES, Ruhr University Bochum

The BuddhistRoad team invited Reinier Langelaar, a post-doctoral researcher at the Institute for the Intellectual and Cultural History of Asia (IKGA) at the Austrian Academy of Sciences. He has previously worked on Tibetan clans and kinship, and his current research focuses on the development of Tibetan Buddhist national mythology in the second millennium CE.

In Langelaar's lecture, he shed light on the links and disconnects between the role of Avalokiteśvara in pivotal early second-millennium Tibetan works (the *Bka' chems Ka khol ma* [The Pillar Testament] and the *Ma ṅi bka' 'bum* [Collected Works on the Maṅi (Mantra)]) and Tibetan materials retrieved from Dunhuang. Chief amongst these disconnects is the fact that in the Dunhuang materials, Avalokiteśvara plays a comparatively modest role, and his most famous *mantra*, *Oṃ ma ṅi padme hūṃ*, is absent altogether. The absence of this *mantra*, so central to the subsequent Tibetan tradition, had long been noted, but has also defied explanation. What can account for its bursting onto the scene in the literature from the Tibetan plateau? Is it correct, as has been suggested, that the Tibetan complex surrounding Avalokiteśvara—consisting among other things of his mythology as patron deity, king and ancestor of the Tibetans, and the outside role of his six-syllable *mantra*—largely spread in a popular and oral environment, and therefore left little to no trace in earlier written materials? Or is the absence of the *mantra* from Dunhuang a reflection of this outpost's isolation from developments inside Tibet?

After providing samples of the Dunhuang documents in which Avalokiteśvara appears, Reinier Langelaar then introduced the *Pillar Testament* and *Collected Works on the Maṅi (Mantra)*. By diving into their respective textual histories, Langelaar argued that when scholarship uses these supposedly early second-millennium works from the Tibetan plateau, they in fact tend rely on relatively late witnesses. This temporal gap goes a long way towards explaining the split between the Dunhuang materials and the supposedly early second-millennium works from Tibet.



Pivotal, for one, the earliest redaction of the *Pillar Testament* does not contain a single instance of the *mantra Om ma ñi padme hūṃ*. Furthermore, Avalokiteśvara, though intimately involved with the origins of the Tibetan people, is not yet himself presented as the forefather of the Tibetans. In later redactions all of this changes. The six-syllable *mantra* is inserted at the outset of later reworkings and their newly added chapters, and the Tibetan ancestor comes to be identified with Avalokiteśvara himself. It seems, then, that the immense popularity of *Om ma ñi padme hūṃ* and other well-known aspects of Avalokiteśvara's Tibetan mythology, are relatively late. Some elements certainly appear to post-date the *Pillar Testament*, whose earliest extant redaction is no earlier than the 12th century and may be later still.

By combining a variety of block prints and manuscripts of the *Collected Works on the Mañi (Mantra)*, Langelaar demonstrated that we do not properly understand the murky past of this miscellaneous collection, either. He illustrated that the collection, rather than being a rather well circumscribed canon, formed a quite flexible basket for works attributed to (and associated with) the 7th-c. emperor Tri Songtsen (ca. 605–649, Tib. Khri Srong btsan, remembered as Songtsen Gampo, Tib. Srong btsan sgam po): its exact compilation and textual history are beset with questions and inconsistencies. The influence of the collection's block prints, moreover, appears to have erased much of the diverse manuscript evidence that is still available for the *Pillar Testament*. In order to come to an updated estimation of the date of the compilation as we know it, an origin story of the Tibetans was compared to other attested versions of the story. This creates a firm impression that a key part of the collection is much later than often assumed.

By way of conclusion, the growing role of the *mantra Om ma ñi padme hūṃ* in the first centuries of the second millennium was once more illustrated. In the Dunhuang documents (and Tibetan *bKa' 'gyur* [Kangyur] collections, too), we find a work titled *Spyan ras gzigs kyi mtshan brgya rtsa brgyad pa* [The 108 Names of Avalokiteśvara] (Skt. *Avalokiteśvaranāmāṣṭaśataka*), a passage in which describes a range of benefits that accrue when a person praises Avalokiteśvara "by his 108 names." In the *Collected Works on the Mañi (Mantra)* the same passage is adduced. Being written, as Langelaar argued, some centuries after the Dunhuang texts, the work's passage tellingly replaces the 108 names with the newly ascendant *mantra, Om ma ñi padme hūṃ*.

The ensuing discussion and Q&A focused on the re-use of archaic materials in later Tibetan literature, the appearance of the *mantra* in early Chinese materials, and the potential for art history to buttress the points that Langelaar made based on textual sources.

