

Report of the Guest Lecture of the BuddhistRoad project

19 April 2023 Joanna Bialek (Berlin)

WHY DID BOOKS COME DOWN FROM THE SKY? OR IS THERE A GRAIN OF TRUTH IN AN OLD BUDDHIST LITERARY TOPOS?

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

The team of the BuddhistRoad project invited Dr. Joanna Bialek, independent researcher based in Berlin, to give an online BuddhistRoad Guest Lecture on the sources of the Tibetan Buddhist story commonly referred to as *Books coming down from the sky*. Dr. Bialek discussed various versions of the story retrieved from Tibetan post-imperial historiographical works. The main objective of the lecture was to explore the potential sources from which Tibetan authors might have drawn in their attempts to resolve the question of Buddhism's beginning in Tibet.

The lecture started with a brief overview of motifs that were isolated from twenty-one examined versions of the story *Books coming down from the sky*. Apart from over two dozen minor motifs that are less significant to the plot, the story was shown to include eight major motifs that recur most frequently across different versions and substantially inform the narrative.

Following this brief introduction to the variations in the story, the lecture continued with a presentation of the Chinese Daoist concept of Celestial Writings that can be traced back in time to the earliest philosophical thinking on the origin of Chinese characters. Their sources were identified in trigrams, later hexagrams, that were considered natural revelations from Heaven. By the 4th century the concept of Celestial Writings has achieved its mature form in which it denoted a spontaneously occurring written text with a secret message that was a revelation from Heaven, frequently in form of a prophecy. Such a celestial writing was considered a Heaven-given mandate with an authority-creating function.

Proceeding to the main part of the lecture, Dr. Bialek presented a detailed comparison between selected motifs from the story *Books coming from the sky* and the Chinese concept of Celestial Writings. To this aim, Dr. Bialek concentrated on the motifs of celestial origin, container for received objects, and prophecy, demonstrating the existence of many tangent points between the Tibetan and the Chinese traditions.



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In the final part, Dr. Bialek explored the potential sources of single motifs in the story *Books coming from the sky*. Although many problems remain unsolved, there are convincing arguments that the story resulted from combining two, originally independent narrative traditions: one projecting back the introduction of Buddhism to the reign of King Lha Todoré Nyatsen (Tib. lHa mTho do re sNya brtsan) and the other seeking to legitimate Tibetan ruling house by creating Tibetan celestial writings, exemplified with the Old Tibetan text IOL Tib J 370/6 and inspired by the Chinese concept. The first pillar of the narrative originated in Central Tibet, most probably in circles directly related to the royal court, whereas the second pillar took its roots in the multicultural and multilingual environment of Central Asian oases, foremost Dunhuang.



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