Tibetan information technology in perspective: traditional belles-lettres and new media

Christopher E. Walker

Seen broadly, the history of information technology (I.T.) in Tibet spans the earliest forms of Tibetan scripts to the current online collections of texts and multimedia. Given this expansive duration of communication tools, specific Tibetan practices and cultural understandings surrounding I.T. have grown in unison. Although most current social theory theorizes the impact of new media on traditional communities, we might fruitfully ask how Tibetan reading and writing practices can impact newer Tibetan language media, such as on-line databases and chat forums. The challenge now for developers of Tibetan electronic media is to pursue a methodology incorporating not only literary content, but traditional practices that Tibetans will both recognize and esteem. To this end, this paper provides an ethnography of older, lay education in Lhasa related to collective and individual reading, memorization, and calligraphy. Based on interviews with elder and distinguished lay scholars in Lhasa, this presentation aims to describe a public of belles-lettres which functioned, most notably, within the leisure classes. How might vaunted traditions and notions surrounding Tibetan publication and discourse find renewed existence and recognition in the digital age? Is an assimilation of such Tibetan practices desirable, let alone feasible, within current Internet databases and hypermedia libraries? An anthropology of Tibetan information technology should attempt to provide some grounded data from which a discussion of such issues can proceed.