



Alternative translations of Sanskrit sources in the writings of rJe Tsong-kha-pa: a survey and analysis of the criteria for preference

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With the work of assembling the Tibetan translations of Indian Buddhist literature into the great collections of bKa'-'gyur (containing *sūtra*-s and *tantra*-s) and bsTan-'gyur (*śāstra*-s), Bu-ston Rin-chen-grub (1290–1364) initiated a process which ultimately led to the standardization and univocality of canonical reference works in the latter half of the second millennium. Those translations selected for inclusion in the canonical collections assumed thereby a privileged status and soon eclipsed those other translations which had not been so selected. This process was accelerated considerably by the later adoption of the practice of block printing, which allowed the mass reproduction – and thus wider and easier availability – of the standard collections. As a result, almost none of the excluded translations have come down to us today.

However, during the lifetime of rJe Tsong-kha-pa bLo-bzang Grags-pa (1357–1419) – a half-century after the time of Bu-ston, yet over two centuries before the widespread adoption of block-printing – a variety of translations were still available and tantalizing traces of these “alternative” texts are to be found in his surviving works. Often, these citations are among the only surviving evidence of these texts. In his writings on the Guhyasamāja Tantra, for example, Tsong-kha-pa makes frequent reference to such alternative translations, often expressing a preference in his exegesis for one or the other over the “standard” translations of Śraddhākaravarman and Lo-chen Rin-chen bZang-po. In his interlinear commentary (*mchan 'grel*) on Candrakīrti's *Pradīpoddyotana*, his work on the Pañcakrama system of Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva (*rim lnga gsal sgron*), and his smaller commentaries on the explanatory Tantras (*vyākhyā-tantra*, *bshad rgyud*) of the Guhyasamāja, he often cites a preference for one Tibetan version over another, legitimating his own interpretation in light of the variant readings.

In this paper, I undertake to independently evaluate some of these alternative passages against the “standard” translations, in light of the surviving Sanskrit texts of these

works. Attention will especially be paid to the criteria which may have been in play in the preference of one translation over another. Are they, in fact, preferable considered from a philological perspective? To what extent were his choices based on the authority of the Sanskritic tradition and to what extent on that of indigenous Tibetan exegesis? As Tsongkha-pa does not himself explicitly outline his reasoning – he does not, as it were, “show his work” – it is only from context that we can attempt to determine his thought processes. This paper represents an essay in that direction.