



Embodiment and embryology in Tibetan literature

Frances Garrett

This paper is a study of the role of embryology in structuring Tibetan presentations of human embodiment. I will demonstrate that embryology was a productive means of expressing and debating controversial notions of embodiment that were themselves central to some of the most fundamental concerns in Buddhist doctrine. The problem of generation engages conceptual and metaphysical questions that are integral to way an intellectual culture articulates constructions of human identity. This paper will outline several ways that embryology is used in Tibetan literature to define taxonomies of embodiment that are in turn posited as physiological grounds for theories of human identity. Such taxonomies classify individuals by a host of criteria, including gender, moral status, material quality or content and spiritual achievement, and their prominence in Buddhist literature demonstrates the importance of embryology in Tibetan intellectual culture.

Literary representations of human embryology from a selection of pre-16th-century Tibetan medical and religious texts, and analysis of their role in Tibetan presentations of embodiment, are taken in this paper as the basis for addressing the relationship between medical, religious and other forms of discourse during that period. The analysis of embryology in Tibetan literature emphasizes the ready exchange of scholarly discourse across literary genres, demonstrating the complex intertwining of religious and philosophical scholasticism with scientific and medical theoretical structures. Although it is sometimes said that medical theories are fully integrated with religious doctrines in Tibet, the two are still, to a certain extent, disciplines and genres of literature with known boundaries in Tibetan literature. While Tibetan historiography typically marks medicine as a “secular science,” by the fifteenth century certain topics within medical literature, most notably embryology, anatomy, and physiology, had been completely absorbed into Buddhist conceptual frameworks. Analysis of seminal medical texts and their commentarial literature demonstrates that within medical literature a developing methodological divide distinguishes these topics from others such as pharmacology or nosology.

By analyzing accounts of human physiology and their relationship to theories of generation, I question whether the relationship between medical and other forms of discourse was characterized by convergence or rivalry, and whether links between medicine and religion were expressed as a matter of shared contents or of common analytical language. Francis Zimmermann's insightful research on Indian medical texts uncovers a subordination of empirical fact to the blueprints of classical thought. In these medical texts traditional knowledge is expressed in stereotyped formulas. These formulaic paradigms portray a vision of the world and its inhabitants that pervades a wide variety of literary genres, and Zimmermann's research demonstrates that such concepts, vocabularies and stereotyped formulas are common to both the medical and legal works of ancient Hindu India. While Zimmermann's work suggests a valid approach to the study of Tibetan medical texts and their relationship to other forms of Tibetan literature, a reduction of medical epistemology to formulaic repetition is, in the Tibetan case, largely inapplicable. Producing such impressive polymaths as Longchenpa (*klong chen rab 'byams dri med 'od zer*, 1308–1363) and Tsong Khapa (*tsong kha pa*, 1357–1419), the centuries in question are arguably the most creative period of Tibetan intellectual history, and scholarly innovation is evident in Tibetan medical literature as well. Analysis of the wide-ranging and influential uses of embryology in Tibetan literature shows Tibetan medical scholasticism to have been a productive enterprise that integrated both gnostic and epistemic modes of knowing to express contemporary views on ethics, aesthetics, philosophy and politics.