SA-SKYA PANDITA’S LETTER TO THE TIBETANS:
A LATE AND DUBIOUS ADDITION TO HIS
COLLECTED WORKS

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In the Derge printed edition of Sa-skya Pandita’s collected works there exists a short letter that purports to have been written by Sa-skya Pandita (Sa-pa) (1182–1251) in about 1247, after he reached the Mongol camp in Liang-chou and had an interview with the Mongol prince Köden. It bears the title Bu slob rnam la spring ba and, if authentic, is one of the earliest sources on Tibetan-Mongolian political and religious relations. Till now it has been accepted as authentic and used as a basic source by scholars. It was translated in full and studied by G. Tucci in his monumental Tibetan Painted Scrolls,1 and was summarized by T. W. D. Shakabpa in his Tibet: A Political History.2 It has also been described or mentioned by several others.3 There are, however, some important reasons to doubt its authenticity, one being that it is absent from some of the early lists of Sa-pa’s collected works and only enters Tibetan historiography from about the first half of the 16th century.

The earliest evidence for the existence of this letter is its mention in the record of teachings received (gsan yig) of Ngörchen Dkon-mchog-lhun-grub (1497-1557). In that work, which is entitled Chos kyi rje dpal ldan bla ma rnam las dam pa’i chos thos pa’i chos thos pa’i tshul gsal bar bshad pa’i yi ge thub bstan rgyas pa’i nyin byed, the letter is cited by the title Bu slob rnam la springs pa. It is the sixty-third work in that list.4 The letter is also listed in the gsan yig of the Gong-dkar bla-ma Phrin-las-rnam-rgyal (fl. c. 1700), a work entitled Thob yig bum pa bzang po. There the letter is cited by the different title Chos rje Sa skyas Paṇḍitas bod ‘bangs spyi la gðams pa, and the text is said to
have been four folios long in the manuscript upon which this gsan yig list was based. In the latter list it was the fifty-second work, the last work in volume dza.\(^5\)

As for the actual text of the letter, the first place it is known to have turned up is in the Sa skya gdung rab chen mo of A-mes-zhabs Ngag-dbang-kun-dga’-bod-nams (1597–1659), a work that he completed in 1629.\(^6\) It is found added to the long biography of Sa-pan, which A-mes-zhabs took almost verbatim from the commentary by Glo-bo mkhan-chen Bsdod-nams-lhun-grub (1456-1532) on Sa-pan’s Mkhas pa rnams ’jug pa’i sgo.\(^7\) The inclusion of this letter, however, was one of the few instances where A-mes-zhabs departed from Glo-bo mkhan-chen’s account and added some new material from elsewhere, two other important additions being the letter of summons from Köden to Sa-skya Pandita and the list of Sa-pan’s writings.\(^8\)

The second place the letter turned up in was the edition of Sa-pan’s collected works by Zhu-chên Tshul-khrims-rin-chen (1700-1769), Sa-pan’s works forming the fourth main part of the 1736 Derge edition of the Sa skya bk’a’ bum.\(^9\) The letter therefore is listed in the index compiled by Zhu-chên (ascribed to the Ngor mkhan-po Bkra-shis-lhun-grub, 1672–1739),\(^10\) as well as in the almost identical list of Sa-pan’s works recorded in Zhu- chen’s record of teachings received (gsan yig).\(^11\) In both index and gsan yig, the title is marked with the numerals 9 and 24, thus apparently showing that he found the same work listed in the gsan yigs of Dkon-mchog-lhun-grub (1497–1557) and Sangs-rgyas-phun-tshogs (1649–1705), who were respectively the 9th (i.e. 10th ) and 24th (i.e. 25th) abbots of Ngor. As mentioned above, the work indeed is listed in the record of teachings received of Dkon-mchog-lhun-grub. However, Zhu-chên noted in both the index and gsan yig that the letter is not actually listed in Sangs-rgyas-phun-tshogs’s gsan yig, the Gsan yig dbang gi rgyal po.\(^12\) Instead, according to Zhu-chên, one finds there the title Bod yul la snga’gs pa. This is the title of a work which appears in the Derge edition before the letter (being no. 69 in the Tōyō Bunko reprint edition) and which, according to its colophon, was written when Sa-pan was in his nineteenth year (1200).\(^13\) Zhu-chên decided that this title (which appeared twice in the gsan yig he was using?) must refer to the letter, since “there was no other [similar work?] besides this.” He also notes that the letter itself had the title Bod ’bangs spyi la gdam pa in the manuscript available to him.\(^14\) One hopes that the actual gsan yig of Sangs-rgyas-phun-tshogs will become available so
that one can verify the presence or absence of the letter or of any similarly entitled work in its list. But until it does, it is open to doubt whether it lists this work, since Zhu-chen qualifies his citation from the gsan yig of Sangs-rgyas-phun-tshogs in the above way.

The third and last known appearance of Sa-pan’s letter is its quotation in the recent Hor chos ‘byung by Blo-bzang-rta-mgrin (1867–1937), as mentioned by D. Schuh.15

Besides its mention in the gsan yigs of Dkon-mchog-lhun-grub and Gong-dkar ‘Phrin-las-rnam-rgyal, and the Sa skya bka’ bum index and gsan yig of Zhu-chen Tshul-khrims-rin-chen, this letter is not cited in any other list of Sa-pan’s works available to me. It is absent from that in the gsan yig of Ngor-chen Kung-du-bzang-po (1382–1456)16 and also from that of the fifth Dalai Lama Ngag-dbang-blo-bzang-rgya-mtsho (1617–1682).17 It is likewise missing from the lists of Sa-pan’s works found within the biography of Sa-pan in the Mkhás jug rnam bshad composed in 1527 by Glo-bo mkhan-chen Bsdod-nams-lhun-grub,18 in the long biography of Sa-pan by Rin-spung-pa Ngag-dbang-jigs-med-grags-pa (composed in 1579),19 and in the Sa skya gdung rabs chen mo of A-mes-zhab Ngags-dbang-kun-dga’-bsod-nams.20 As mentioned above, however, A-mes-zhab did present the letter itself in extenso in that genealogical history.

The absence of the letter from those lists is sufficient to show that it was probably a later addition to Sa-pan’s oeuvre. It surfaced as early as the early-16th century, the time when Dkon-mchog-lhun-grub received the lung for Sa-pan’s works. It is curious that Rin-spungs-pa did not list it, for he had access to many works, and he also was quite free in including a number of probably apocryphal letters and treatises among the works he listed. The letter was also not included by Glo-bo mkhan-chen in the biography of Sa-pan placed at the beginning of his commentary on the Mkhás jug which he completed in 1527. In this biography Glo-bo mkhan-chen did quote several of Sa-pan’s other letters, as well as some four letters ascribed to Sa-pan’s student Bi-ji Rin-chen-grags which he says were recovered from Khams in the time of Rgyal-tshab Kun-dga’-dbang-phyug (1424–1478; abbot of Ngor 1465–1478).21

All of this may not decisively disprove the letter’s authenticity, but it does cast doubt on it. There are, moreover, some other dubious features of the letter. Stylistically it is quite unlike anything else I have read in Sa-pan’s works. In general,
the letter is colloquial in tone and not at all elegant. I do not recall, for instance, seeing the e interrogative particle ever used by Sa-pan elsewhere. The letter, if authentic, was admittedly written in very unusual circumstances and its contents are somewhat unique among Sa-pan’s writings. When I first read the letter some years ago, even without doubting its authenticity I noted its strange style and wondered whether Sa-pan had not received some official “help” in writing it, such as from a bilingual scribe at the court. It was ostensibly meant to be an official statement and, if authentic, it presumably was the product of close consultations with the Mongols. Another possibility that occurred to me was that it had survived in some Mongolian or Chinese collection of edicts and correspondence, and later had been translated back into Tibetan, thus giving it a strange flavor. Indeed, the work it reminded me of most was the putative letter of summons sent by the Mongol prince Köden to Sa-pan, a letter which likewise first surfaced as a complete work within the same section of A-mes-zhab’s Sa skya gdung rabs chen mo.

One should not overlook the strong probability that these two letters are closely connected. The letter of summons attributed to Köden has already been investigated by D. Schuh, who has shown it to be not only corruptly transmitted but also, on formal grounds, probably a forgery. Therefore there is all the more reason to doubt the authenticity of the related letter ascribed to Sa-pan. In this connection one should also take note of the fact that Köden’s letter was known to Pan-chen Bṣoṅ-ṇams-grags-pa (1478–1554), who quoted part of its beginning in his New Red Annals (composed in 1538). As seen above, this is also about the period in which the letter ascribed to Sa-pan is first known to have been cited in a gsan yīg.

In any case, it is not yet possible to determine the authenticity of these materials in a decisive way. Moreover, if the letter is a forgery, one should be able to attribute a motive for it. I must leave that, as well as the detailed examination of its contents and style, to scholars who are specialized in the study of Tibetan political history and Tibeto-Mongolian relations. I do think, however, that all scholars who use this letter should henceforth do so with caution, since it is probably a later accretion to Sa-pan’s collected works, and its ultimate origins are still by no means clear.
NOTES

4. Dkon-mchog-lhun-grub, *Chos kyi rje dpal ldan bla ma dam pa rnam las dam pa’i chos thos pa’i tshul gsal bar bshad pa’i yi ge thub bstan rgyas pa’i nyin byed* (dbu-med MS, 159 ff), p. 120b. For the full list see Appendix N of D. Jackson, *Sa-skya Pandita on Indian and Tibetan Traditions of Pramāṇa and Philosophical Debate: The Entrance Gate for the Wise*, Section III, forthcoming in Wiener Studien zur Tibetologie und Buddhismuskunde, vol. 17.
5. Gong-dkar ’Phrin-las-rnam-rgyal, *Thob yig bum pa bzang po* (dbu-med MS, 244 ff), fascicle 4a, p. 4b. For the complete list of Sa-pa’ns works from this source, see Appendix M of the study cited in the previous note.
pa'i bka' 'bum, Toyō Bunko reprint (Tokyo: 1968), vol. 5, pp. 401.3.2–402.4.3.

10. [Zhu-chen Tshul-khrims-rin-chen], Dpal Sa skya'i rje btsun gong ma lnga'i gsung rab rin po che'i par gyi sgo 'phar 'byed pa'i dkar chag 'phrug gyi lde mig, Sa skya pa'i bka' 'bum (Tokyo: Tōyō Bunko, 1969), vol. 7, p. 329.4.2 (ba 449b.2).


12. Ibid., and [Zhu-chen Tshul-khrims-rin-chen], Dpal sa skya'i rje btsun gong ma lnga'i gsung rab rin po che'i par gyi sgo 'phar 'byed pa'i dkar chag 'phrug gyi lde mig, p. 329.4.2 (449b.2): gsan yig dbang gi rgyal por bod yul la bsgangs pa zhes byung ba 'di min pa gzhon mi 'dug pas yig skyon yin nam snyam/ bod 'bangs spyi la gdam pa zhes dpe dangs la 'dug/.

13. Sa-skya Pandita, Bod yul la bsgangs pa, Sa-skya pa'i bka' 'bum, vol. 5 (Tokyo: Tōyō Bunko, 1968), pp. 395.3.2–396.1.2 (=na 202a.2–203a.2). The colophon reads: bdag nyid chen po grags pa rgyal mthar gyi zhabz kyi rdul la reg pas blo gros gtsang ba'i 'khyon jo sras kun dga' rgyal mthar gyis lo bcu dgu lon pa'i tshel dpal sa skya'i dten gnas yon tan rin po che'i 'byunog gnas su nye bar sbyar ba'/.


18. Glo-bo mkhan-chen Bsdod-nams-lhun-grub, Mkhas pa rnams 'jug pa'i sgo'i nnam par bshad pa, pp. 40.1–43.3 (=20b.1–22a.3).


21. Glo-bo mkhan-chen Bsdod-nams-lhun-grub, Mkhhas pa rnams 'jug pa'i sgo'i rnam par bshad pa, pp. 30a.3-32a.4; 32a.4-33b.4; 33b.4-34a.4; and 39a.3-42a.6. These are the minor works listed in the index to the Tôyô Bunko reprint, vol. 5, nos. 97, 99, and 32.

22. Sa-skya Paṇḍita, Bu slob rnams la spring ba, pp. 401.3.5 (na 114b.5): de ngas mi shes pa e yin, and khyed kyi lha chos [line 6] kyi bskyangs na shâkya mu ne'i bstan pa yang phyi'i rgya mtsho'i mtha' tshun chad khyab par mi 'gro ba e yin gsungs so/. And on p. 401.4.2 (115a.2): nga brang por e gtong gnam shes gsungs/. All three of the above sentences are from supposed direct quotes of Kôden's words. Cf. Kôden's letter of invitation, D. Schuh, Erlass und Sendschreiben, pp. 32f, line 13: khyod kyi chos go ba'i dam bca' dang e 'gal/ and lines 16-17: (sems can) mang po la gnod pa byas na (khyod) mi skrag pa e yin/.


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