

ROBIN, FRANÇOISE, translator, with the collaboration of KLU RGYAL TSHE RING. *Les Contes facétieux du cadavre*. Paris: Langues & Mondes–L’Asiathèque, 2005. 332 pages. Tibetan and Sanskrit glossary. Paper, €18.00; ISBN 2-915255-33-4. (In Tibetan and French)

This book presents the non-transliterated Tibetan text of the twenty-four stories of the *Mi ro rtse sgrung* and its French translation. It is one of many volumes of a collection of bilingual editions that are probably quite useful for French-reading language students on a somewhat advanced level. As this seems to be the main purpose of the volume, the

translator has kept his introduction short and his explanatory footnotes very basic. This makes the book quite easy and enjoyable reading from the first page to the last. There are a few minor mistakes in the introduction, but the translation seems to be quite competently carried out. The Tibetan text given here has a rather obscure history as it is probably a modern Tibetan (re)translation with some additions of an earlier Chinese translation of a Tibetan print. During this process the Tibetan acquired many features pointing to the east, to the province of Amdo. The reader could perhaps have been offered a more detailed discussion of the significance of this translation-retranslation process for this version of the collection.

Although the stories translated here clearly are very Tibetan in most ways, they emanate from India more than a thousand years ago, but have also spread to and gained a great popularity in Central and East Asia. During the wanderings of the stories, their literary style and content have naturally been transformed and locally adapted. Given that written and oral versions exist, the stories obviously offer a rich field for literary and folkloristic research. Much work remains to be done, though, before a reasonably clear picture can emerge of the complicated processes of adoption and adaptation. The structure of the collection, with a frame story uniting a varying number of stories that may be initially unrelated, must have facilitated the continuous incorporation of new material. The frame story tells of how the Buddhist master Nagarjuna saves the life of a sinner and then gives him a possibility to atone for his misdeeds. Nagarjuna needs a certain cadaver from a certain place in order to attain a *siddhi* that will give everybody long life and great wealth. The saved man is thus sent to fetch the corpse and told that he must not utter a single word during his mission. He finds the corpse easily enough and carries it back to Nagarjuna. The corpse, however, turns out to be a very talented storyteller and every time it finishes a story, the poor man cannot help but make a comment or ask a question, at which point the corpse flies back to where they started. Finally, though, he succeeds in bringing the corpse all the way back to Nagarjuna's cave and the master turns a few curls of its hair into silver and gold.

The *ro langs*, the evil "walking corpse," and the fear of being mistaken for one is mentioned in one of the stories. The concept of the *ro langs* is, however, quite different from the type of story-telling corpse we are dealing with here. The *ro langs* belongs to the Indo-Tibetan Tantric traditions and to the Tibetan folk religion, while the other quite clearly belongs to the literature of fiction.

The stories are full of miracles, wonders, and transformations of various kinds, and it is evident that this is their main point, not Buddhist didactics. Of course the Buddhist features are there: the philosopher Nagarjuna as an alchemist, magician, and guru who has to be obeyed, the karma doctrine, esoteric teachings as *'pho ba*, "mind transference," but also criticisms of soothsayers and "oracles," *lha pas*, and people deceiving others with "talking" bodhisattva statues, and so on. But as we do not know the cultural milieu in which these versions of the stories were formed, some uncertainty remains as to how the peculiar mixture of esoteric and exoteric features should be interpreted. Evidently the practices of *'pho ba* and alchemy were well known on the popular level among nomads in Eastern Tibet. It would be interesting to investigate the occurrence of such esoteric teachings in the written and oral versions of these tales in order to understand the interaction between different cultural layers. More than thirty years ago I collected an oral version of the stories from a Tibetan spirit medium, who related them to me to our mutual pleasure (I believe). There certainly must be many other oral versions circulating in Tibet and among exile Tibetans. When these have been collected and studied we will be better equipped for the study of these entertaining tales from the viewpoints of context and content. Finally, I would like to remind the reader who wants to enter the study of this fascinating material of the volumes

of text and translation published by Alexander Macdonald in 1967 and 1972 (*Matériaux pour l'étude de la littérature populaire tibétaine* I and II, Paris), and of Walter Ruben's older analysis of the Indian *Vetalapañcavisati* published in 1944 (*Ozean der Märchenströme I: Die 25 Erzählungen des Dämons (Vetapañcavimsati) mit einem Anhang über die 12 Erzählungen des Dede Korkut*, FF Communications No. 133, Helsinki). Hopefully, *Les Contes facétieux du cadavre* will arouse such interest.

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