Re-examination of the Tangut Fragment Or. 12380/3495 from the Collection of the British Library

Among all discovered Tangut written monuments there are known to be 31 fragments (including five very small pieces that are broken off from larger fragments) of Tangut texts where Tangut characters are supplemented by their phonological transcription in Tibetan writing. The Tibetan transcription provides straightforward information on the pronunciation of Tangut characters, and hence plays a key role in the phonological reconstruction of Tangut.

The fragments in question are now preserved in two collections, 19 fragments and five small pieces of them are in the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences at St. Petersburg, and five fragments are in the British Library at London. As we have already reported in 2009, two fragments which were originally in the Russian collection have been lost, and only photographs of them belonging to Nikolai Aleksandrovich Nevsky (1892–1937) are preserved among his archive materials kept in the Archive of Orientalists of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts (copies of these photographs are preserved in the British Library as well).

The aim of this paper is to provide a re-examination and new description of one of these fragments, preserved at the British Library with pressmark Or. 12380/3495. This fragment has been studied in detail by several Tangut scholars (Arakawa 2008, Tai 2008, West 2011), but some of the questions concerning it, like meaning of the Tibetan writing at the top left edge, remain unsolved and have become the focus of our research.

Description of the fragment Or. 12380/3495. Size: 9.8 × 15.3 cm. 5 lines. Yellowed undyed thick cotton paper. Starts with: “竀紴瞭镀…”, ends with: “…谍氢出螏”. This fragment is the left leaf of a page from a book which is possibly bound in bufferfly-format. The page is framed in hand-drawn double lines 1.2 to 1.6 cm away from the edge. Tangut characters in the fragment are handwritten in black ink. The Tibetan syllables are handwritten to the right
of the corresponding Tangut character in black ink, although in a lighter tone, suggesting that the Tibetan transcription was not written at the same time as the Tangut characters. Line 1 has 13 Tangut characters in which the four characters below the 7th character are written in smaller size in two columns (apparently in order to find room for placing the whole phrase on the same line). From line 2 to line 5 there are nine Tangut characters each, but the first three characters in line 5 are damaged (see our reconstruction of them below).

Lines 2–4 are written with an indentation approximately equal to one character’s height, which could mean that line 1 and possibly line 5 (the text is damaged here, but it looks like it has no indentation, as is the case with line 1) could be the beginning of a paragraph.

The Tibetan transcription only occurs from line 2 to line 4. On the top of line 1 there is a drawing of a cintāmani “wish-fulfilling jewel” or “wish-granting gem” (Tangut 拓讲; Chinese rúyì zhū如意珠 or rúyì bǎozhū如意寶珠; Tibetan yid bzhin nor bu) encompassed with a crowning aureole of flame 𪜬, which corresponds to the Tangut text on line 4: 錵銜狡犧 alcuni 景 “just like the precious jewel, [his] deportment [is] bright [and] burning.”

On the top left corner there is some doubtful and damaged Tibetan writing (see picture below) which was previously read by scholars as “…se ’dzwar ’jo nye” (Tai 2008), “s[t?]e / ’dzwang / ’jo / te” (Arakawa 2008), “?se ’dzwar ’jo ste” and “?se ’dzwang ’jo ste” (West 2011).

The meaning of it was completely unknown. S. Arakawa (2008) correctly pointed out that it can’t be writing in Tibetan language, and proposed that it is the Tibetan transcription of a Tangut or Chinese proper noun. After careful re-examination we provide a new reading for it, and explanation of its meaning: “□ l[d]e ’dzwar ’jo nye” which is the Tibetan transcription of the first five Tangut characters in line 5: 錫銜狡犧 alcuni, represented the Tangut name of Tathāgata Indraketudhvajaraṇa (see explanation below).

The verso side of the fragment is almost blank, with only old inventory number “KK.II 0280.s” written in black ink at the bottom left corner1. This

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1 This old inventory number belongs to Sir Aurel Stein’s third Central Asian Expedition (1913–1916), excavated from Khara-Khoto at the end of May 1914. The letters “K.K.” indicate Khara-Khoto and “II” indicates the spot where this object was found. In this case it is the ruined shrine, i.e. remains of the “famous” or “celebrated” suburgan
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fragment cannot join with other Tangut fragments with Tibetan transcription. The current preservation status of this fragment is unclear. The image of this fragment was published in “Documents from Khara-Khoto in the British Library” (Vol. IV, p. 198), quoted before in Tai (2008), and is now available on the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) website. The content of this fragment is collated in Tai (2008) as Cánpiàn 18, in Arakawa (2008), and in West (2011).

Reconstruction of the damaged characters at line 5.

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Reconstruction of the first two damaged characters at line 5 as 竟織 (Chinese rúlái 如來) “Tathāgata” is proposed by S. Arakawa (2008) (now it can be indirectly confirmed by the Tibetan transcription of the second character). Reconstruction of the third damaged character at line 5 as 索 (Chinese dì 帝) “ruler; king; emperor” is proposed by us in accordance with available Tibetan transcriptions, the visible part of the damaged Tangut character, and the sense of the text itself. The Tangut name of Buddha (Tathāgata) Indraketudhvajarāja mentioned in this part of the text appears in the fragment of the Tangut translation of the “Upāli’s Questions Regarding Determination of the Vinaya sūtra” (Fóshuō Juédìng píní jīng 佛說決定毗尼經) preserved as pressmark 6721 in Wuwei Museum: 韃備蟺磠索洱腲緽 (in reverse Chinese translation from Tangut: 南無焰紅帝幢王佛) “Homage to Indraketudhvajarāja Buddha” (see: Yu Guangjian and Xu Yuping 2011). The appearance of the character 索 before 索亅 here confirms our reconstruction.

(Russian “знаменитый” субурган) excavated by the Mongolia and Sichuan Expedition (1907–1909) of Pyotr Kuzmich Kozlov during the end of May and beginning of June, 1909.
The source of the Tangut text has not yet been identified. S. Arakawa (2008) thinks that it could be part of an ode (sòng 頌) or prayer (yuànwén 願文) translated into Tangut from a Tibetan Buddhist scripture. However, based on philological and linguistic evidence we think that it was probably translated from Chinese (but from a text pertinent to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition).

We should note that above-mentioned fragment of a sūtra from Wuwei Museum also contains the name of the Buddha Suparikīrtitanāmagheyaśrī: 卍备界疥藉緳萚緽 (in reverse Chinese translation from Tangut: 南無善名稱功德佛) “Homage to Suparikīrtitanāmagheyaśrī Buddha” which appears on the first line of the described fragment as well: 卍备界疥藉緳萚緽 “the Tathāgata, the Arhat, the Samyaksamābuddha Suparikīrtitanāmagheyaśrī Buddha” (this line would correspond to the following pattern in a hypothetical Chinese scripture if it was a source for the Tangut translation: 如來、應供、正等覺善名稱功德佛). The appearance of both names in the described fragment, as well as its order, which is similar to the order of names in the list of thirty five Buddhas, shows that the text is possibly connected with the their cult, which could be used as clue to the further identification (not only the source for the translation, if it was translated, but also a full text or its parts as well).

Key words: Tangut script, Tangut language, Tangut characters, Tibetan transcription, Tangut fragment, phonological reconstruction.
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