

Kirill Bogdanov

**Ritual Funeral Text Tang 665
from the Tangut Collection of IOM, RAS**

Abstract: This paper represents a brief study and a translation of a ritual funeral text dated to the 11th–13th cc. Despite its brevity, the manuscript is a consistent and complete fragment describing the ritual and proving the doubtless similarity between the Tangut and Tibetan religious traditions. The very age of the text attests to the fact that this tradition has survived down to the present day in unaltered form.

Key words: Khara-Khoto, funeral ritual, bardo teaching, Tangut Buddhism

**The Description and Identification
of the Manuscript**

This manuscript Tang 665 was selected for study when a catalog of the Tangut collection kept at the IOM, RAS was being compiled in 2005–12¹ under the supervision of Evgenii Kychanov (1932–2013). As a rule, the process involved special descriptions of those books whose bindings differed from those traditional or regular for canonical texts (pothi, scrolls, and accordion book) and which looked more like small copybooks. This manuscript is a book with its pages sewn in that way; its two folios, each with text on both sides, measure 17.5 by 12.3 cm. The cursive handwriting is fairly legible (cf. Pl. 1–4). Concerning dating, we can easily determine that it belongs to the 11th–13th cc., that is to say, it is the same age as the bulk of the items collected by Piotr Kozlov (1863–1935). The visible features of the text reveal its structure to be an alternation of poetic and prosaic parts. The latter contain 15 characters per line; a poetic line consists of two parts (each of 7 characters) separated by a caesura. This brief handwritten fragment represents part of the burial procedure, but it also is logically consistent which provides reliable grounds for making it the object of a separate study.

© Kirill Mikhailovich Bogdanov, Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, Russian Academy of Sciences

¹ Until recent times this manuscript was registered under inv. No. 4084. This unattributed fragment was entered in the inventory by E.I. Kychanov along with other items in the 1950s.

The self-sufficiency of the text, legible handwriting and good condition of the manuscript simplified its reading and comprehension.² The basis for this short study was found in the translation of the title written over the top right-hand margin of page 3: *je ngiwə tšja vje šjei*³ 爾爾魏魏爾 *Ritual [sequence] of cutting in the temple*. Firstly, this clearly indicated the nature of the ritual described; and it did indeed soon become clear that the text dealt with funerals. Secondly, the positioning of the inscription on the margin before the text body indicated that the title concerned either the previous or, more likely, the following chapter or text, a component of some larger whole text cycle.⁴

Text's Characteristics

Now it is the time to address the text. An indication that the book was used for practical purposes is the line containing the formula *someone's name* intended to be replaced with the actual name of the dead or dying person for whom the ritual was performed:

žion si liwų lin mje swi nje 駁解身穢修補爾 “Someone's name's life is expiring. The body will be changed, changed”. (p. 2)

The following lines reveal that a lama read the text over the body of a *disciple*, i.e. a monk or some person following the path of the Buddhist teaching:

liwų lin ndzje ngi mə tšhja šje 身穢駁駁膝爾爾 “The body has changed, the disciple will ascend to the heaven!” (p. 3)

That personal and at the same time social characterization of the deceased determined both the form and the content of the ritual. The text states the points of doctrine relevant for the ritual, along with the established rules. The latter were traditionally supported by diverse metaphors and comparisons making it easier to perceive the sense correctly and in-depth. At the same time, these metaphors provide the text with a degree of artistic value. Its basic idea is the following: as soon as one feels that death is imminent, one should immediately and decisively give up one's attachment to the temporary and fragile body:

² This is rarely the case with books from Khara-Khoto, most of which have reached us as fragments of various sizes.

³ The phonetic transcription in M.V. Sofronov's reconstruction is used in this article.

⁴ It might also be a convolution.

bones held preserved the soul, and, when performing purification of dead bodies, "...they tended to break the bones of the dead".¹⁵ These beliefs were linked to the idea that the shelter best home of the soul and the life force in a dead body was the skull. The supposed particular sacral nature of the head is confirmed by funeral (and other) rituals observed by several peoples in Central Asia. For the Tibetans, the soul was linked to a substance of life, the *wind*, *wind-horse* dwelling in the *shin*. If the deceased was someone who had achieved holiness, the soul could find its way to heaven on its own; ordinary secular persons required special rituals performed by a lama and invocations allowing the soul to exit via the top of the dead head.¹⁶ The Mongols associated the head with the notion of *sulde* (one of its meanings being "the life force"). Galina Galdanova remarks that according to the "Secret History", Gurbesu, Nayman Dayan-Khan's mother, ordered that the head of Van-Khan be brought and gave it for sacrifice because Van-Khan belonged to an ancient clan. The legend about ongon Burte says that while the Buryats were moving from Mongolia one of them took along his father's head... as his most cherished treasure.¹⁷ And in the same study there is evidence recorded by Tsyben Zhamtsarano (1880–1942): "...give your gray head to your descendants".¹⁸ All these actions involving the dismembering of bodies, probably rooted in ancient shamanistic ritual sacrifices, were sanctified by the Buddhist ritual with its primary meaning of magical unification turning into *nothingness*.¹⁹ That initial and final emptiness, the illusory nature of the body is emphasized in the Tangut ritual text as well; there, the body is represented as "the center of emptiness" and likened to "a mass of clouds", "a reflection of the Moon in the ocean".

As soon as the evil spirits were chased out, the lama addressed the deceased's spirit urging it to abandon the perceived world and everything in it, to reject all components of samsaric existence: feelings, attractions, urges, and to strive towards the Three Jewels of the Buddhist faith. The Tangut text confirms that the tradition was old indeed: *thi niyo zjon si liwu lin mje zi phju so ldjə ndo mbju tjei ldeu* 禿髮散髻鬚髮修羅龍散髮魂魂禿禿禿禿 "This is the reason why the one whose life is expiring, whose body is being changed, should seek the protection of the Three Highest Jewels". (p. 2)

¹⁵ GERASIMOVA 1981, 119

¹⁶ KYCHANOV, SAVITSKY 1975, 234.

¹⁷ GALDANOVA 1987, 49–50.

¹⁸ GALDANOVA 1987, 50

¹⁹ GERASIMOVA 1980, 67.

Text Transliteration and Translation
Ms. Tang 665, p. 1. Pl. 1

- (01) *liwụ `m tsi ti ndzu kụo tseu ndziwo liwụ mi `ju ndzin nje wạ sju*
 (02) *`wê lo mi `ju rại ndzie mi liệ zje phạ `je sju tshjio rjụ ndziwo*
 (03) *liwụ `m ndzu kụo ldeu njau*
 (04) *zjion si liwụ lin ndju ti ndzu / ndziwo liwụ nga ngu ndi tsôn sju*
 (05) *rại ndzie mi ndu xịa rịạ ndziạ / rjụ kha tsi `m tha vjạ sju*
 (06) *ndzjion sju nga ngu lhjẹi to sju / lhjẹi rạ liệ ngôn zje kha sịa*
 (07) *tha lhjẹi zje kha to ldjạ njau / liệ ngôn zje kha lhjẹi mi ndju*

Ms. Tang 665, p. 2. Pl. 2

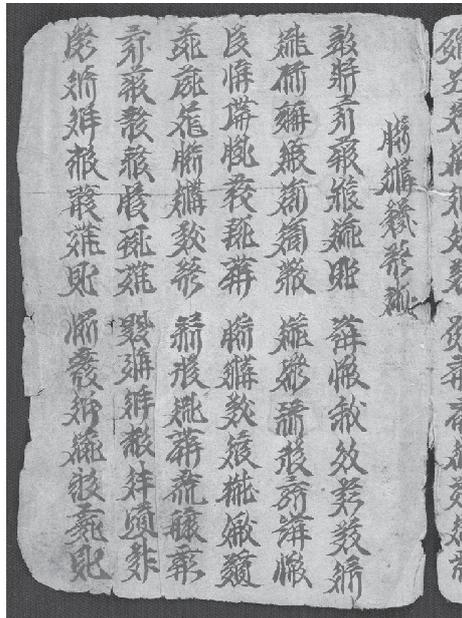
- (08) *rjụ kha tsi `m tha vjạ sju / zjion si liwụ lin nwạ tsin ldeu*
 (09) *zjion si liwụ lin mjẹ swi nje sọ kại rạ ndai tsi zi tha vjạ sju mi*
 (10) *ngwi lwo zjạ kwạ tsi min nwạ tsin ldeu thi niuọ zjion si liwụ lin*
 (11) *mjẹ zi phjụ so ldjạ ndo mbjụ tjei ldeu*
 (12) *zjion si liwụ lin vjạ tsin na / thi tha `ia ta mbjụ ngjẹi tjei*
 (13) *thi lẹ wo ta na liwụ ndzạ / thi ndzjụ wo ta mjẹ `o tjei*
 (14) *thi nje wo ta njien dzje tjei / thi rụo `u ta ngwi ldeu ngwu*

Ms. Tang 665, p. 3. Pl. 3

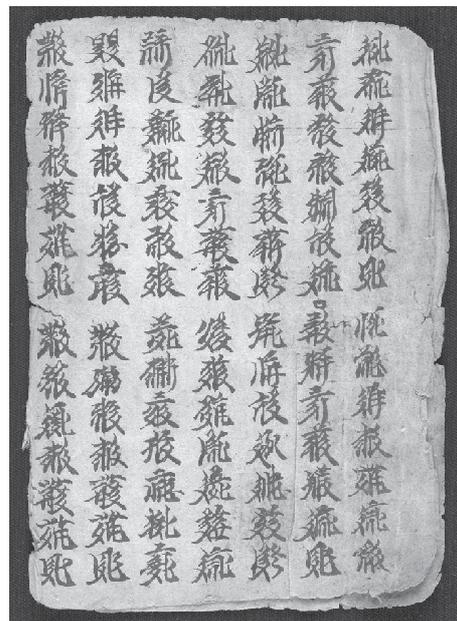
- (15) *je ngiwạ tsjạ vjẹ sjei*
 (16) *zjion si liwụ lin vjạ tsin na / mjụo ldjẹ pjụ me tshjẹ tjei min*
 (17) *nga `m mbi `ê mbie ndziwon tha / phjụ tseu lhi pụ `in zjion si*
 (18) *ldạ `u tseu rjẹ na sjuwo zôn / je ngiwạ phe to si `u ndzêi*
 (19) *rjụ kại mbe `je ngiwạ phe vjẹ / njẹi pụ `u zôn ndju su rại*
 (20) *liwụ lin ndzie ngi mạ tshjạ sịạ / nde ldjị nje ngwu tha lhjạ we*
 (21) *zjẹ min nje ngwu nda sịạ na / lại liụ nje ta vjẹi ka na*

Ms. Tang 665, p. 4. Pl. 4

- (22) *khu ndzjẹi nje ta tin in na / mi ngeu nje ngwu sịạ ldeu ngwu*
 (23) *liwụ lin ndzie ngi xịa `in tsin / zjion si liwụ lin vjạ tsin na*
 (24) *mụ mjẹ `je njạ ti zôn zjẹ / tha `u `in ndzjẹ ngo ki zjẹ*
 (25) *rại `ia ki liwụ nda lin / thjẹ zjẹ thi mjẹ mbạ ndzjio ldeu*
 (26) *lhi pụ vjẹi `u na tsjwụ zjẹ / rjụ kha ndzu a zi khwa ka*
 (27) *nde ldjị nje ngwu `in `a tshjio / tha khwai `u ngwu `in nda na*
 (28) *tha zi mjẹ ngwu `in nda na / tha kê `je ngwu `in nda na*
-



Pl. 3 — manuscript Tang 665, page 3



Pl. 4 — manuscript Tang 665, page 4

- (01) Do not feel affection for [your] body and do not love it! A human body is short-lived, you are about to borrow another.²⁰
- (02) Noble birth and wealth are temporary, like the material world, and passing like bubbles on water. Therefore,
- (03) It should not be attached to [thy] body.
- (04) Life ends, the body will undergo changes,²¹ do not be attached [to it].²² A human body is like the center of emptiness,²³ an accumulation of clouds.
- (05) It does not exist for long, it perishes soon. Such is the law of [this] world.²⁴
- (06) Like the center of emptiness, like the rising Moon with its reflection²⁵ in the ocean water.
- (07) Though the Moon is reflected in the water, [it is] not there, the Moon is not in the ocean.
- (08) This is like the law for [this] world. Life ends, the body will undergo changes; it should be recognized.²⁶
- (09) The life of *someone's name* is expiring; the body will undergo changes, be changed in the Three worlds,²⁷ everything obeys this law.²⁸
- (10) A human body is not a solid fruit, it does not have a [solid] basis; it should be recognized.

²⁰ As the entire text is an exhortation, a monologue addressed to the listener, punctuation marks used for indicating direct speech have been omitted.

²¹ The ritual could be performed over a person dying or already dead; the text has no temporal indications, and so the translation will not go into particulars concerning the alternatives to be expressed by grammatical tense: “life is ending or has ended, the body is undergoing or has undergone changes”.

²² Lit. “You shalt not love”.

²³ Meaning “shunyata” (Sansk. *śūnyata*), “nothingness”. The word denotes a key concept in Buddhist philosophy.

²⁴ Here, the grammatical construction allows for other translations. The dictionary compiled by E.I. Kychanov (below, DEK) translates character No. 4179, 礙, present in similar texts, as “the Buddhist Dharma” — according to the tradition. The metaphor can doubtlessly indicate the unavoidable and universal nature of the dharma laws. However, a literal and possibly simplified meaning of “law” is also possible.

²⁵ The text employs the character 影 “shadow” (DEK No. 2454), but the context suggests “reflection”.

²⁶ The text unequivocally emphasizes the process of dying instead of its end, death. Likewise the body (more strictly, “body-mind”) transforms (and not just decomposes!) thus acquiring the properties required for reincarnation.

²⁷ According to Buddhist cosmology, the life in the three spheres is conditioned by the individual karma.

²⁸ The grammatical construction allows also another translation: “Like all dharmas of the Three Worlds /which/ get changed...”

- (11) This is the reason why one whose life is drawing to its end and whose body is undergoing changes, should seek protection from the Three Highest Jewels.²⁹
- (12) Listen about the extinguishing of life and about the changes which the body will undergo! This is the great umbrella which can give [you] shelter.
- (13) This is the banner measuring [your] life.³⁰ This is the explanation of the place where the [earthly] glory dwells.
- (14) This is where consciousness resides, like a pearl [in a shell].
[At the same time] this vessel of evil is [nothing but] the outer cover.
- (15) Ritual [sequence] of cutting in the temple
- (16) Listen about the extinguishing of life and about the changes which the body will undergo! No words can express the might and wisdom of Tathāgata!³¹
- (17) My might is great, my name is glorious, [I am] the greatest descendant [from the clan] of Tathāgata [himself],³²
- (18) [I] hold a skillfully sharpened ax in [my] hands. In the temple, the dead body will be dissected, [then the body] will be taken away.
- (19) [So,] all illusory nature³³ of [this] world [will be] revealed.³⁴ The oldest nephew is holding the head, more joyful than anybody around.³⁵

²⁹ The Three Highest Jewels in Buddhism are Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

³⁰ The passage possibly implies the merits attained during one's earthly life.

³¹ Sansk. *tathāgata*, “thus gone”, is one of Buddha's epithets.

³² There is a problem with reading the 8th character in the second line. It looks like 𐰃𐰚 (DEK No. 4509) “old, ancient” or *phju* 𐰃𐰚 (DEK No. 4573) “high, upper”. In the event of the first interpretation, this phrase is of particular interest and raises a few questions. The one performing the ritual, the oldest descendant of the deceased, claims to belong to Tathāgata's kin. Most probably, however, the second variant is correct, so it is a metaphor reflecting the identification of the performer with the Tathāgata himself.

³³ Correct understanding of this line is hindered by the poorly written top of the left-hand side of one character which could be read as 𐰃𐰚, “illusion, magic” (DEK No. 4913) or 𐰃𐰚, “indivisible” (DEK No. 4914). The same ideogram (minus the two top horizontal strokes) means “empty” (NEVSKY 1960, 1,494). However, as a rule, the notion of emptiness was rendered in Tangut texts (including this one) by 𐰃𐰚 (DEK No. 2735). As the right-hand character in ideographs No. 4913, No. 4914 in Kychanov's dictionary and the ideograph denoting “emptiness” in Nevsky's dictionary was a determinative grapheme with the meaning of “demon” (KYCHANOV 2008, 397), it cannot be ruled out that the line implied revealing or perceiving the demons' world, which in turn might be directly linked with the idea of purifying the body during the ritual.

³⁴ Lit. “[will be] disclosed”.

³⁵ The text repeatedly mentions a descendant of the deceased as a participant in and performer of the funeral ritual (cf. p. 3, lines 2–4, p. 4, line 5). The implication that custom demanded that certain relatives participate in the funeral ritual requires additional research

- (20) The body has undergone changes, and the disciple will ascend to heaven! With heart-mind³⁶ full of joy, [he] will be reborn in Buddha's land.
- (21) Go with [your] mind cleansed of perplexity!³⁷ Purify [your] mind of passion and greed!
- (22) Do not hurry [your] mind when it is being perfected. [You] should leave with [your] mind purified of all perplexity!
- (23) The body undergoes changes, the disciple must recognize it now! Listen about the exhausting of life and about the changes which the body will undergo!
- (24) The dark earthly habitat cannot withstand testing. When [you] dwell in it, there come sicknesses-obstacles.³⁸
- (25) Lots of days passing, the body will undergo changes. That habitat must be left behind now.
- (26) [When] the descendant,³⁹ an ax in his hand, touches the head,⁴⁰ he will release [you] from everything [in this] world, whatever [you] loved and [whatever you] submitted to.
- (27) Ascend [to heaven] with joyous heart-mind!⁴¹ Having played [your part] in this great play, go ahead!
- (28) Having sacrificed a lot, go ahead! Having obeyed the Great Law, go ahead!⁴²

The Wholeness of Ritual Tradition in Historical Prospective

Finally, we should pay attention to the semantic similarity between this ritual text and the Tibetan treatise “Bardo Thodol”,⁴³ also known as the

involving other sources. The “oldest nephew” and the “oldest descendant” mentioned here imply the importance of paternal filiation common for the family ties existing in Tangut society at that time (KYCHANOV 1997, 72–78). The text actually mentions two descendants: the oldest member of the clan who dissects the body, and the “oldest nephew” who is to hold the head, but these two might well be the same person. Besides, it remains unclear whether the “descendant” and the lama performing the ritual and identifying himself as Tathagata are two people or one.

³⁶ The text reads “with joyous mind”; cf. commentary to fn. 4.

³⁷ Lit. “with your mind [from which] all obstacles have been removed”.

³⁸ I.e. obstacles on the path to liberation.

³⁹ Cf. fn. 39.

⁴⁰ Evidently, cutting the head off in accordance with the ritual.

⁴¹ Lit. “with joyous mind”; cf. Preface, fn. 5.

⁴² I am very grateful to Kirill Solonin for the assistance he rendered during the translation.

⁴³ Its title has been transcribed in more than one way.

“Tibetan Book of the Dead”,⁴⁴ that has been extremely popular (if that word is appropriate for such compositions) in Europe since 1927, when it was translated into English and commented on by Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961). That work, presumably written in the 9th c., has been ascribed to Padmasambhava. It used to be one of the “clandestine texts” or “concealed books” hidden when Buddhists were persecuted at that moment in history.⁴⁵ In the course of time that text, or rather, an entire set of texts have undergone inevitable changes; it was not written down until the 14th c., in the version subsequently edited in English translation by Walter Evans-Wentz (1878–1965). Admittedly, the teaching concerning the existence in the intermediary state between death and rebirth (Sansk. *antarābhava*, Tib. *bardo*) was thoroughly covered in the Buddhist canon and philosophical treatises. That teaching was especially well-known and widely applied in practice in Tibet. The process must have involved writing ritual texts of various length and structure, in which the basic ideas were presented in a form easy to understand and use in practice, so the “Bardo Thodol” might well be just another text of that type. Returning to the Tangut ritual funeral text, we can safely assume that it also was one following the teaching of *bardo* and intended for use in everyday practice. It was genetically and ideologically related to the doctrine and the “Bardo Thodol” text, reflecting the same key values. Therefore, the Tangut text was supposed to confirm the veracity of the Teaching and to attest of the fact that, while transferred, the Teaching had not been interrupted.

References

- EVANS-WENTZ, Walter 1951: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* [2nd ed.]. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Filosofiiia Buddizma. Entsiklopediia* 2011: [Buddhist philosophy. An encyclopedia]. Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura.
- GALDANOVA G.R. 1987: *Dolamaistskie verovaniia Buriat* [Pre-lamaistic beliefs of the Buryats]. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- GERASIMOVA K.M. 1980: “O nekotorykh aspektakh assimiliatsii dobuddiiskikh kul'tov po tibetskim obriadnikam” [On certain aspects of the assimilation of pre-Buddhist beliefs

⁴⁴ This conventional title was initially used when the treatise was translated into English. There exist other translations actually disclosing the meaning of the word.

⁴⁵ That apocryphal text has primarily been quoted and referred to in esoteric literature, while until recently academic Russian tibetology remained more skeptical about it. For example, Andrei Vostrikov (1902–1937) was critical about both its history and presumed authorship (VOSTRIKOV 2007, 46).

- traced in Tibetan ritual texts]. *Buddizm i srednevekovaia kul'tura narodov Tsentral'noi Azii*. [Buddhism and the medieval culture of the Central Asian peoples]. Novosibirsk: Nauka, 54–83.
- GERASIMOVA K.M. 1981: “Tibetoiazychnye obriadniki lamaizirovannogo kul'ta shamanskikh predkov” [Ritual texts in Tibetan dealing with the lamaized cult of Shamanic ancestors]. *Buddizm i traditsionnye verovaniia narodov Tsentral'noi Azii* [Buddhism and the traditional beliefs of the Central Asian peoples]. Novosibirsk: Nauka, 110–131.
- GOMBRICH R.F. 1996: *How Buddhism Began. The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- GRANE, Marcel 2008: *Kitaiskaia tsivilizatsiia* [Chinese Civilization]. Moscow: Algorithm.
- GRANET, Marcel 1994: *La civilization chinoise*. Paris: Albin Michel.
- GUENTHER H.V. 1986: *The Life and Teaching of Nāropa*. Boston: Shambala Publications.
- KYCHANOV E.I. 1997: *More znachenii, ustanovlennykh sviatymi*. Faximile ksilografiia [A Sea of meanings established by the saints. Facsimile edition, translation from Tangut, foreword, commentary and appendixes by E.I. Kychanov]. St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie (Pamiatniki kul'tury Vostoka IV).
- KYCHANOV E.I. 2006: *Slovar tangutskogo (Xixia) iazyka* [Tangut-Russian-English-Chinese Dictionary]. Kyoto: Kyoto University.
- KYCHANOV E.I. 2008: *Istoriia tangutskogo gosudarstva* [History of the Tangut State]. St. Petersburg: Fakul'tet filologii i iskusstv Sankt-Peterburgskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta.
- KYCHANOV E.I., SAVITSKY L.S. 1975: *Liudi i bogi strany snegov* [The People and Gods of the Land of Snows]. Moscow: Nauka.
- NEVSKY N.A. 1960: Tangutskaia filologiya. Issledovaniia i slovar'. [Tangut philology. Study and dictionary], vols. 1, 2. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vostochnoi literatury.
- SOFRONOV M.V. 1968: *Grammatika tangutskogo iazyka* [The Grammar of the Tangut Language], vols. 1, 2. Moscow: Nauka.
- SOLONIN K.Yu. 2007: *Obretnie ucheniia. Traditsiia Khuayan'-Chan' v Buddisme tangutskogo gosudarstva Sisia* [Acquiring the teaching. The Chuayan'-Chan' tradition in Buddhism of the Tangut state Xixia]. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo universiteta.
- STEIN R.A. 1970: “Un document ancien relatif aux rites funéraires des bon-po tibétains”. *Journal Asiatique* 258, fasc. 1–2, 155–186.
- Tibetskaia kniga mertvykh* 1994: [The Tibetan Book of the Dead]. Transl. from English. St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Chernyshova.
- TORCHINOV E.A. 2008: *Kratkaia istoriia Buddisma* [A brief history of Buddhism]. St. Petersburg: Amphora.
- TSYBIKOV G.Ts. 1991: *Izbrannye trudy* [Selected works], vols. 1, 2. Novosibirsk: Nauka.
- VOSTRIKOV A.I. 2007: *Tibetskaia istoricheskaia literatura* [Tibetan historical literature], 2nd ed. St. Petersburg: Peterburgskoe Vostokovedenie.
-