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## The *Varṇārhavarṇa* in the Mongolian Manuscript Kanjur

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*Abstract:* The *Varṇārhavarṇa* is an ample eulogy to the Buddha composed by the eminent Indian poet Mātṛceṭa not later than the 4th c. AD. The work has survived to the present day in a number of Sanskrit fragments as well as Tibetan and Mongolian translations. Generally, the Tibeto-Mongolian canonical tradition places the *Varṇārhavarṇa* in the Tanjurs. Nevertheless, the Phugbrag Kanjur contains the incomplete text of the work (ch. 2–12). Notably, the Mongolian manuscript Kanjur compiled in 1628–1629 encloses chapters four and five of the hymn. Both renditions in the Tibetan and Mongolian Kanjurs have characteristic structural features indicating that they could ascend to one and the same Tibetan version of the *Varṇārhavarṇa*, different from the one in the Tanjurs.

*Key words:* *Varṇārhavarṇa*, Mātṛceṭa, Phugbrag Kanjur, Mongolian manuscript Kanjur, Tanjur

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The *Varṇārhavarṇa* (hereinafter referred to as VAV) belongs to the extensive class of Buddhist poetical eulogies, commonly labelled in Sanskrit literature as *stotra* or *stuti*.<sup>1</sup> It is believed to be the work of Mātṛceṭa, who ranks among the greatest poets of the Buddhist tradition. Despite the existence of some legendary accounts of his life in Chinese and Tibetan literatures,<sup>2</sup> little is known about the real circumstances of his being. According to scholars, he must have been flourished between the 2nd and the 4th cc. The earliest reliable *terminus ante quem* of his life and hence his works is the

<sup>1</sup> On the Indian *stotra* literature in general, see: for example, GONDA 1977: 232–270; ZORIN 2010.

<sup>2</sup> On the sources of Mātṛceṭa's life, see: HARTMANN 1987: 12–22; 2019.

beginning of the 5th c., when he is quoted in a datable translation of the *Mahāprajñā-pāramitā-upadeśa* into Chinese.<sup>3</sup>

The Sanskrit text of the *stotra* has survived to the present day in a number of fragments from Central Asia, where it was remarkably popular,<sup>4</sup> as well as quotations in some other Buddhist texts. By now, about 80 percent of the VAV original have been reconstructed with the use of these sources.<sup>5</sup> Its complete text is available in Tibetan and Mongolian translations. While the Tibetan versions became an integral part of the VAV studies,<sup>6</sup> the Mongolian ones were almost routinely overlooked by academia.

The complete VAV was translated into Tibetan by Sarvajñadeva and dPal brtsegs rakṣita at the beginning of the 9th c.<sup>7</sup> The text is mentioned in the *Hymns* Section (Tib. *bstod pa sna tshogs*) of the *lHan kar ma* catalogue.<sup>8</sup> The fully fledged Tibetan canonical tradition places the text in the Tanjurs (Tib. *sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das la bstod pa bsngags par 'os pa bsngags pa las bstod par mi nus par bstod pa zhes bya ba; bstod tshogs, ka*).<sup>9</sup> J.-U. Hartmann notes that the readings of the Derge Tanjur oppose to those in the Cone, Narthang, and Peking collections,<sup>10</sup> which implies the existence of at least two Tibetan versions of the text. The Tanjurs include an additional hymn entitled *dPe las bstod pa* and marked as the thirteenth chapter of the VAV. It was translated by Padmākara and Rin chen bzan po in the eleventh century. The hymn does not have any counterpart among the Sanskrit fragments of the VAV and seems to be a later appendix to the Mātrceta's work.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>3</sup> HARTMANN 1999: 122; 2019.

<sup>4</sup> S. van Schaik suggests that Buddhist hymns were favoured along the Silk Road because they were used for group recitation within some rituals VAN SCHAİK 2020: 52–54.

<sup>5</sup> HARTMANN 1987: 48; 2002: 305.

<sup>6</sup> The poem was brought to notice by F.W. Thomas, who cited the Tibetan text of the opening verses of the poem, and later on published the first four chapters together with English rendering THOMAS 1903: 346–348; 1905. The following succession of academic works on the subject was crowned with the fundamental research of the then available Sanskrit fragments and the Tibetan translation of the *stotra* by J.-U. HARTMANN 1987. Since then, however, new fragments of the VAV have been published, and hopefully some more to be discovered. See the detailed account of the VAV studies in HARTMANN 1987: 11–12; ZORIN 2010: 12–13, 251–252. See also the VAV Sanskrit text based on HARTMANN 1987 together with some additional materials at <<https://www2.hf.uio.no/polyglotta/index.php?page=volume&vid=1127>> (Accessed 07.07.2025).

<sup>7</sup> HARTMANN 1987: 22.

<sup>8</sup> HERRMANN-PFANDT 2008: No. 455.

<sup>9</sup> On the VAV location in the Tibetan Tanjurs, see RKTs <<http://www.rkts.org/cat.php?id=29&typ=2>> (Accessed 07.07.2025).

<sup>10</sup> HARTMANN 1987: 45

<sup>11</sup> HARTMANN 1987: 22–23, 47.

Apart from the Tanjurs the VAV is included twice in the Phugbrag Kanjur preserved in the Library of Tibetan Works & Archives (LTWA), Dharamshala.<sup>12</sup> This manuscript collection was compiled in the late 17th — early 18th cc., but seems to be a conflation of at least two earlier Kanjurs belonging to different groups.<sup>13</sup> The VAV duplications are located in the *mDo sde* Section, Vols. *la* (401r3–423v4) and *sa*<sup>14</sup> (358b4–377b8) (further on F1 and F2 correspondingly).<sup>15</sup>

Structurally both texts in the Phugbrag Kanjur are quite different from those in the Tanjurs. The Tanjur versions begin with the combination of titles of the whole work and its first chapter — *sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das la bstod pa bsngags par 'os pa bsngags pa las bstod par mi nus par bstod pa zhes bya ba*, sanskritised as *varṇārhavarṇe bhagavato buddhastotre śakyastava nāma*.<sup>16</sup> The Tibetan title is repeated at the end of the first chapter with the addition *le'u dang po'o*, 'first chapter'. The following chapters do not have the initial titles, only the final ones with the addition *le'u* labelled with the number of the chapter.<sup>17</sup>

Both F1 and F2 do not contain the first, as well as the additional thirteenth chapter of the *stotra*. All chapters (2–12) have the initial titles both in Sanskrit, each time introduced by the formula 'in the Indian language' (Tib. *rgya gar skad du*), and Tibetan, in the same way as the first VAV chapter in

<sup>12</sup> First described in HARTMANN 1996: 70–71. We also have evidence, that during the early period of Tibetan canonical history, when the distinction between the Kanjur and Tanjur texts was not so precise, the VAV was included in some other Kanjurs. Thus, for example, the incomplete VAV (ch. 3–11) is mentioned in the *gZungs 'bum* Section of the catalogue of the Early Mustang Kanjur EIMER 1999: No. 430. Similarly, the VAV was included in the *mDo sde* Section, Vol. *ca*, of the Orgyan (Tawang) Kanjur. See the handlist for the Tawang Kanjur in the old rKTs database (O16): <<http://www.rkts.org/rktsneu/handlist/index.php?coll=O>> (Accessed 07.07.2025). Due to the preservation in the Lithang ('Jang sa tham, 1621) edition of some earlier colophons, we know that the editors of the Kanjur produced at Tshal Gung thang monastery in 1351 shifted the VAV, together with some other *stotras*, to the Tanjur: ...*sang-rgyas bcom-ldan 'das la bstod-par bsngags-par 'os-pa bsngags-pa la sogs-pa'i bstod-pa rnams dang/ ...bstan-bcos gyur-ro-cog gi nang du dris-pas...* SAMTEN 1987: 31. See the translation of the fragment in SAMTEN 1987: 22–23, and the alternative translation in HARRISON 1994: 299.

<sup>13</sup> TAUSCHER 2015: 209. On the structural peculiarities of F, see: for example, LAINÉ 2009: 15–17; SAMTEN 1992: i–xxv.

<sup>14</sup> *Ngj* in SAMTEN 1992: 137.

<sup>15</sup> SAMTEN 1992: Nos. 249, 399. See: also rKTs <<http://www.rkts.org/cat.php?id=1117&typ=1>> (Accessed 07.07.2025).

<sup>16</sup> The sanskritised title is given according to HARTMANN 1996: 73.

<sup>17</sup> HARTMANN 1996: 72–73.

the Tanjurs. J.-U. Hartmann notes that the Sanskrit titles “can hardly be derived from a reconstruction based on their Tibetan translation”; they probably go back to a Sanskrit original.<sup>18</sup> The Tibetan titles are repeated in the end of the chapters; at that the chapters are not numbered or marked as *le’us*. Superficially, the Phugbrag duplications reveal a plethora of variant readings and can be regarded as two separate versions in addition to those included in the Tanjurs. Certainly, a final opinion on this issue can only be formed after a complete textual-critical collation of the extant Tibetan versions, which is beyond the scope of the current study.

The Mongolian translation of the *stotra* by Tendzin Chödar (Tib. *bstan ’dzin chos dar*), the *ḡasay blam-a* of the Longfu Temple (Chin. 隆福寺),<sup>19</sup> is included in the 1749 xylographic edition of the Mongolian Tanjur<sup>20</sup> (Mong. *ilaḡu tegüs nögčigsen-e mayḡaysan sayisiyaqu ḡokistu-yi sayisiyaqui-ača maytan ülü čidaqui-da mayḡaysan kemegdekü; mayḡayal-un čiyulyan* (= Tib. *bstod sna tshogs*), *ka*, 112v–135r) (hereinafter MT).<sup>21</sup> As the Mongolian Tanjur mirrors the 1724 Peking blockprint of the Tibetan Tanjur, the Mongolian VAV meticulously follows the same pattern.

Remarkably, the fourth and fifth chapters of the VAV are included in the volume *ba*, *Sūtra* (Mong. *eldeb*) Section, of the copies of the Mongolian manuscript Kanjur compiled in the years 1628–1629, under the patronage of the last all-Mongolian Khan Ligdan (r. 1604–1634). The text is extant in the manuscript Kanjurs preserved in the St. Petersburg State University Library (80v–81r, 81r–81v), the Library of the Academy of Social Sciences of Inner Mongolia (226r–227r, 227r–228v), the Center of Oriental Manuscripts and Xylographs of the Institute for Mongolian, Buddhist and Tibetan Studies of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences (312r–314r, 314r–316r), and the Mongolian National Library (171v–172v, 172v–173v). Regrettably the volume with the text is missing in the *Golden Kanjur* — to all appearances the oldest extant copy of the Mongolian-language canonical collection. No fragments of the VAV have been discovered so far amongst the preserved folios of the Kanjurs from Dzungaria.<sup>22</sup> The text was not

<sup>18</sup> See the list of the Sanskrit chapter titles in HARTMANN 1996: 73–74.

<sup>19</sup> On the Longfu Temple, see: for example, USPENSKII 2011: 74–75.

<sup>20</sup> The phototype edition of the Mongolian Tanjur was published in ALTANORGIL 2007–2014.

<sup>21</sup> CMGD 2002, II: No. 1191; RINTCEN 1964: No. 1190 (29).

<sup>22</sup> On the Golden Kanjur, see: ALEKSEEV & TURANSKAYA 2013. On the Dzungar fragments, see: for example, ALEKSEEV 2019; ALEKSEEV, TURANSKAYA & YAMPOLSKAYA 2016.

included in the xylographic edition of the Mongolian Kanjur, implemented in 1717–1720 in Beijing under the auspices of the Qing dynasty's Emperor Kangxi (1654–1722).

This study was carried out on the basis of the St. Petersburg manuscript (hereinafter PK), the only complete set of the Mongolian manuscript Kanjur known so far.

In PK, the initial parts of both VAV chapters are arranged in the same way as in the separate texts in the Mongolian Kanjur<sup>23</sup>. They start with the *Triratna* worshiping formula followed by the transcriptions of the titles in Sanskrit and Tibetan introduced by the corresponding formulae ('in the Indian language', 'in the Tibetan language') and the title in Mongolian.

Chapter 4 (PK 715): [eldeb, ba, 80v23]<sup>24</sup> *namò bud'd'ha-à-y-a:: : ::* [24] *namò d'harma-à-y-a:: : ::* [25] *nam-aḥ sanggha-à-y-a:: : ::* [26] *enedheg-ün keheber: bran raahè barṇa bhagavati bhud'd'ha sd'od'r-a pala baša bhaša rad'hi-y-a sd'aṇa* [27] *nam-a:: töbed-ün keheber: gsang* [sic, = Tib. *sangs*] *rgyas byòm*<sup>25</sup> *ld'an ád'as pa bsag bar osba bcang balas: mongyol-un keheber:* [28] *ilaḷu tegüs nögciḡsen burqan-i maḡtaḡad sayisiyaḡdaqui yosutu sayisiyaqui-ača kücün kiged ayul ügei maḡtaqui* [29] *kemegdekü*

Cf. F1: [mdo sde, la, 406v8]<sup>F2: [ngi, sa 363v7]</sup><sup>26</sup> //@@@/ /rgya gar skad du/ bar NA<sup>Na</sup> ra ha bar Ne b+ha [8] ga ba to [407r1] bud+d+ha<sup>bud d+ha</sup> stud tre pa ('la pai)<sup>l+bai</sup> sha rad dya sta pa<sup>bo</sup> nA<sup>na</sup> ma/ bod skad du/ sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das la bstod<sup>stod</sup> pa/ bsngags par 'os<sup>ongs</sup> [2] pa bsngags pa las/ stobs dang mi 'jigs pa la [364v1] bstod pa zhes bya<sup>abs.</sup> ba/

The title in the end of chapter four, PK is: [81r18] *ilaḷu tegüs nögciḡsen burqan-tur maḡtaqui* [19] *sayisiyaqui yosutu: sayisiyaqui-ača kücün kiged ayul ügei-tür maḡtaqui neretü tegüsbe:: : ::*

Cf. F1: [mdo sde, la, 408v2]<sup>F2: [ngi, sa 365r5]</sup> //sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das la bstod pa/ bsngags [3] par 'os pa<sup>ba</sup> bsngags pa las/ stobs<sup>stogs</sup> [sic] dang mi 'jigs<sup>jig</sup> pa la bstod pa zhes bya ba rdzogs sho//

Chapter 5 (PK 716): [eldeb, ba, 81r20] *namò bud'd'ha-à-y-a:: : ::* [21] *namò d'harma-à-y-a:: : ::* [22] *nam-aḥ sanggha-à-y-a:: : ::* [23] *enedheg-ün*

<sup>23</sup> In the same way they are represented in the PK catalogue by Z.K. Kas'ianenko (KAS'IANENKO 1993: Nos. 715, 716).

<sup>24</sup> In the transcription of the Mongolian text the following symbols are used for the *Galik* letters and editorial marks: á — ʾ; à — orkiča with a dot; d' — ʿ; è — ʿ; ħ — ∞; ñ — orkiča with a dot; ñ̄ — ʿ; ò — ʿ; p — ʿ; t<sup>h</sup> — ʿ; ý — ʿ; <...> — glosses and interpolations.

<sup>25</sup> Here the *Galig* letter ý generally denoting Tib. y is rendering Tib. c; byòm < Tib. bcom.

<sup>26</sup> Here the superscript text marks the variant readings in the F2 duplication.

*keleber: nar nar habar ni bhagavad'o bud'd'ha sd'od'ri bhabisud' d'hi st' [?] buqas [?] ma: töbed-ün [24] keleber: gsaṅ rgyas býom<sup>27</sup> ld'an ád'as ma sd'od'pa bčang par nos pa bčang balas: mongyol-un keleber: ilaḷu [25] tegüs nögčigsen burqan-i maytaḷad sayisiyaqui yosutu sayisiyaqui-ača: **jarliḷy teyin büged ariluḷsan maytaḷal neretü**. Cf. F1: [mdo sde, la, 408v4] F2: [ngi, sa, 365r6] @@//rgya gar skad du/ bar Nar ha bar Ne b+ha ga ba<sup>abs.</sup> to bud d+ha stod tre pa<sup>ba</sup> ga bi (shud+d+hi)<sup>bi shud</sup> sto<sup>sta</sup> pa<sup>bo</sup> nA ma/ bod skad du/ sangs rgyas bcom ldan 'das la bstod pa/ bsngags [5] par<sup>bar</sup> 'os pa<sup>+las</sup> (bsngags pa las)<sup>abs./</sup> **gsung rnam** [7] par dag pa la bstod<sup>bsto<d></sup> pa<sup>ba</sup> zhes bya ba/*

The title in the end of the fifth chapter reads: [81v17] *ilaḷu tegüs nögčigsen-tür maytaqui* [18] *sayisiyaqui yosutu sayisiyaqui-ača jarliḷy-i teyin büged ariluḷsan neretü tegüsbe:: : :*

Cf. F1: [mdo sde, la, 410r7] F2: [ngi, sa, 366v5] *sangs* [6] *rgyas bcom ldan 'das la bstod pa/ bsngags par 'os pa (bsngags pa)<sup>abs.</sup> las/* [8] **gsung rnam par dag pa la bstod pa zhes bya ba rdzogs sho//**

The collation of the Mongolian and Tibetan texts reveals that, similarly to F1 and F2, PK preserves the Sanskrit titles of the chapters (highlighted in bold in transcription): the *Balavaiśāradyaṣṭava* ‘The Praise to the Powers and the Fearlessness [of the Buddha]’ and the *Vāgviśuddhi* ‘The Speech Purification’. The titles of the chapters are also given in Mongolian translation: *küčün kiged ayul ügei maytaqui* and *jarliḷy teyin büged ariluḷsan maytaḷal*. At the same time, in the transcription of Tibetan titles in PK the names of the chapters are missing, preserving, nevertheless, the ablative marker *-las* ‘from’.

At present it is not quite clear why only two chapters of the VAV were included in the Mongolian manuscript Kanjur. The fourth chapter describes the ten abilities and four confidences as the characteristics of the Tathāgata’s omniscience, while the fifth chapter characterizes the qualities of Buddha’s words.<sup>28</sup> The obvious explanation is that the Tibetan Kanjur taken as a model by the Mongolian editors included these two chapters alone. However, such interpretation only pushes the solution of the problem back a step. We can ask the same questions about the hypothetical Tibetan original. It seems possible that the compilers of both collections interpreted the chapters as separate texts rather than parts of some bigger work.

<sup>27</sup> See fn. 25.

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed description of the chapters’ contents see HARTMANN 1987: 153, 169; 2015: 534–535; SHOMAKHMADOV & HARTMANN 2022: 62; ZORIN 2010: 118.

Outlining the Tibetan translation of the VAV J.-U. Hartmann notes that, although generally literal, it is understandable without consulting the Sanskrit text.<sup>29</sup> In no way this characteristic can be applied to the translation of two chapters in the Mongolian manuscript Kanjur. If the Tibetan text is versified in quatrains of seven-syllable lines, the Mongolian version is prosaic. The translation is essentially literal, at times unclear and contains a plethora of inaccuracies. Notably, in some cases the Tibetan ergative marker *kyis* used with the agent is rendered as the instrumental case *-iyar/-iyer* in combination with the subject designator *ber*. E.g., F1: [407r5] /*khyod kyis mkhyen gyi gzhan gyis min/* ‘...you know but no one else does’ > PK [80v32] *či-ber-iyer medeküi öber-e busu*. The same peculiarity occurs in the Mongolian translation of the *History of the Cycle of Birth and Death* (PK 714) placed in the same volume of the manuscript Kanjur.<sup>30</sup> It is possible that both chapters were translated by one and the same person. As the analysis of some parts of the Mongolian manuscript Kanjur reveals that its translators were working on large clusters of texts,<sup>31</sup> there is a chance that both texts were rendered by Erdeni dai güsi nangsu, the only translator mentioned in the colophons of the volume *ba* in the *Eldeb* Section.<sup>32</sup>

I will give an example of the stanza 14, chapter four in the Phugbrag, PK and MT to illustrate the characteristic features of the translation in the Mongolian manuscript Kanjur.

F1: [407v6] <sup>F2: [364v3]</sup> /*khyod kyis bar du gcod gsungs [7] gang/* /nges par<sup>des</sup> bar de dag bar du gcod/ /*khyod*<sup>abs</sup> kyis lam bstan gang lags pa/ /de cig<sup>cig</sup> kho nar<sup>na</sup> nges par ’byin/

‘Those whom you call obstacles are indeed obstacles, and the way shown by you is the only way out’.

PK: [81r1] ken či ber jaγuradu tasulun nomlaysan mayad tede jaγur-a-du tasuluyči: činu ab [2] ali nomlaysan mör-i tere γaγča imayta mayad γaryabasu::

MT:<sup>33</sup> [118r16] čiber alimad nomlaysan [17] jedkeridügči: tedeger mayad jedkeridügči bui: [18] či ber alimad üjügülügšen mör: imayta γaγča kü [19] tegüber mayad γaryamui:

<sup>29</sup> HARTMANN 1987: 46.

<sup>30</sup> For details, see ALEKSEEV 2025.

<sup>31</sup> For details, see ALEKSEEV 2017: 41–46; 2021: 131.

<sup>32</sup> See KAS’IANENKO 1993: Nos. 704–705, 707, 709–710, 723.

<sup>33</sup> ALTANORGIL 2007–2014, *maytaγal-un čiyulyan, ka*.

The given example shows that text in PK is blurred with the excessive literalism. Here Tib. *bar du gcod* (< Skr. *vibandha*) ‘hindrances, obstacles’ is calqued as *ḡaḡuradu tasulun* and *ḡaḡur-a-du tasuluyči*. In contrast, the Mongolian translation in MT is clearly understandable without the Tibetan original.

At present it is difficult to ascertain which Phugbrag version of the VAV the Mongolian translation of the two chapters is closer to. In some cases, the Mongolian texts correspond with F1, and in the other — with F2. For example, in chapter 4, stanza 23 PK follows the inaccurate reading in F1: [408r7]<sup>F2: [365r2]</sup>: *bag chags thams cad gtan nas blangs<sup>spangs</sup>*. Here the correct translation should be ‘completely abandoned all habitual tendencies’, but F1 gives *blangs* (< *len pa*) ‘to take, to accept’ instead of *spangs* (< *spong ba*) ‘to abandon’, giving the phrase a completely opposite meaning. PK follows the erroneous reading: *qamuy abiyas-un oron-ača abuḡsan*.<sup>34</sup> In another instance, the Mongolian text supports F2. F1: [410r3]<sup>F2: [366v2]</sup> /’*jig rten dag gis mngon<sup>sngon</sup> thos nas/* ‘As soon as those in the worlds [of men and gods] clearly<sup>F2: previously</sup> heard this ...’ > PK: [81v11] *yirtinčü-nuḡud-taki [sic] urid-i sonosču*.<sup>35</sup> The answer to this question is complicated by the ambiguity of the Mongolian text and can be given only after the textual-critical collation of the extant Tibetan versions.

In any case the VAV versions in the Phugbrag Kanjur and the translation of two chapters in Mongolian manuscript Kanjurs have characteristic structural features allowing to suggest that they ascend to the same Tibetan recension of the VAV, different from the versions included in Tanjurs.

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<sup>34</sup> Besides the Mongolian translator probably took *gtan nas* ‘completely, utterly’ for *gdan nas* ‘from the seat/place’ and inaccurately translated it as *oron-ača*.

<sup>35</sup> According to J.-U. Hartmann, the Derge Tanjur gives the same reading as F2 (HARTMANN 1987: 186).

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