

Report for Columbia University Libraries Research Awards, 2012-2013

Repositioning “Religion” and “Superstition” in Tibetan Intellectual History

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In July 2012, I spent two weeks at the C.V. Starr East Asian Library researching the unique Tharchin Collection in order to investigate how Tibetan intellectuals understood the categories of “religion,” “secularism,” and “superstition” in the early 20th century. Many copies of the Tibetan-language newspaper *The Tibet Mirror* are readily accessible on-line, so I didn’t spend much time looking at these papers as I can access them here in Denver. Instead, I looked through and read most of the voluminous letters, documents, photos, and drafts of the autobiographical materials in addition to other publications by Dorje Tharchin—the founder and editor of *The Tibet Mirror*. This proved to be an invaluable resource for investigating my research question as Dorje Tharchin was a Reverend for the Scottish Mission, and foremost an intellectual who was invested in modernizing Tibetan culture, especially the role of religion in society.

The two weeks of research proved sufficient for going through the Tharchin Materials. The library staff were immensely helpful, especially Luran Hartley and Kenneth Harlin. I am very grateful for their assistance in accessing materials. I also met with Dr. Paul Hackett while in NY, who was also very helpful in understanding the process of collection.

In many ways, the abundance of this material is opening up a new area of research, not only for me but for other scholars. By doing this research, I became aware of the fact that the Tharchin Collection at the C.V. Starr East Asian Library holds only a portion of the worldwide collection of materials attributed to the publications of Dorje Tharchin’s Tibet Mirror Press. I spent December of 2012 in Dharamsala as the program director for the University of Denver’s study abroad service learning project and during that time I continued to pursue this research part-time. I was astounded to find that many of the missing issues of the *Tibet Mirror* newspaper are held in the collection at LTWA, and in desperate need of preservation. Moreover The Tibet Mirror Press, the printing house responsible for the newspaper, published many small pamphlets on Tibetan culture,

Buddhist prayers and Tibetan language books that I was previously unaware of. These were scattered through the collection at LTWA and not well-organized.

Later this week April 5-6, 2013, I will present my preliminary findings both from my time spent at Columbia University on the Library Research Grant and while at LTWA in Dharamsala at a workshop titled, “Lamas, Spies, Gentleman Scholars, and Trans-Himalayan Traders: The Meeting of Religion, Colonialism, Politics and Economics in Twentieth Century Kalimpong” at the University of Toronto. By analyzing the production of Tibet Mirror Press publications, I argue that on one hand, Dorje Tharchin created a space for modern sense of “religion” for a Tibetophone audience. Yet, he was also somewhat conservative because he rejected atheism altogether. His reasons for this were political and due to the fact that Chinese Communist ideology placed Tibetan society as “lower” on the evolutionary teleology of religions, which will disappear in a classless society.

Another interesting issue that I will not be talking about in Toronto is the fact that discourse on “superstition” seems to be almost non-existent in Tibet Mirror publications. This is another avenue of research, but I suspect that this discourse in Tibet arose with Chinese Communist writings on religion on Tibet, perhaps as late as the 1960s.

In summary, the Columbia University Libraries Research Award proved invaluable for starting this line of research, especially from here in Denver. It would have been truly impossible to do this without the support of the Libraries Research Award. Thank you for making this possible.