

Word, Image and Song in Transdisciplinary Dialogue

BRILL PROCEEDINGS OF THE TENTH SEMINAR OF THE IATS, 2003



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PREFACE

The papers in this volume all result from fieldwork associated with the research program conducted by the Interdisciplinary Research Unit (Forschungsschwerpunkt = FSP) *The Cultural History of the Western Himalayas from the 10th to 14th Centuries*, sponsored by the Austrian Science Fund. The Research Unit has been directed by Deborah Klimburg-Salter and consists of five subprojects: Coordination, Art History, Inscriptions, Codicology, and Architecture, directed by Deborah Klimburg-Salter (the first two), Ernst Steinkellner, Helmut Tauscher, and Holger Neuwirth respectively. The papers in this volume are related to the research activities of the first four subprojects as well as to the Austrian Science Fund financed project *Documentation of Oral Traditions in Spiti and Upper Kinnaur*, directed by Dietrich Schüller, and closely associated with the Research Unit since its inception. The history of the Interdisciplinary Research Unit and its expanding transdisciplinary modalities are found in the contributions of Steinkellner and Klimburg-Salter to this volume.¹

While the research goals were established within the framework of transdisciplinary research, each scholar approaches scientific problems according to the methodologies associated with their respective disciplines: philology, philosophy, history, art history, linguistics, and cultural anthropology. In order to facilitate the dissemination of research results databases will eventually be linked to a digital 'map'. This is one of the long-term goals of the Research Unit and a first report on this undertaking was delivered during the panel by Elisabeth Posch. Her presentation could not be included in this volume because the research product was not suitable for the printed media.

Articles by Steinkellner, Klimburg-Salter, Widorn, and Jahoda explicate the structure, methods, and advantages of transdisciplinary research, reflecting the interactive dialogue with scholars who attended the almost day-long session at Oxford. These articles serve as an in-

¹ See also n. 1, p. 1, in D. Klimburg-Salter, "Ribba, the Story of an early Buddhist temple in Kinnaur". In D. Klimburg-Salter and E. Allinger (eds) *Buddhist Art and Tibetan Patronage, Ninth to Fourteenth Centuries*. PIATS 2000: Proceedings of the Ninth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Leiden 2000, vol. 7. Leiden 2002: Brill.

roduction to the examination of specific problems in different aspects of the culture and history of the Indian Himalayas and Central Tibet.

Lasic and Tauscher discuss problems of textual genesis and transmission on the basis of manuscripts discovered in Tabo (Spiti) and Gondhla (Lahaul) respectively—a canonical *pramāna* text and a non-canonical *sūtra* anthology. Pasang Wangdu, Tropper and Ponweiser each examine a Buddhist monument from a different perspective: the manuscript ‘library’ at Keru (TAR), the historical inscription at Wanla (Ladakh), and the narrative painting at Tabo. Papa-Kalantari defines the artistic representations of royal figures in the monasteries of the period and the extended region, and Hein analyses the evidence provided by the oral traditions from Spiti and upper Kinnaur.

A basic hypothesis of the panel entitled “Transdisciplinary Research” was that the initial phases of field research and documentation of multidisciplinary research teams are easily understood within the usual parameters of ‘basic’ or ‘theoretical’ research (Grundlagenforschung). In the next analytical phases transdisciplinary methods enable more flexible interpretive models. Transdisciplinary research results provide the additional advantage of being easily configured as ‘applied’ research and as such adapted to a variety of programmes responding to the needs of the communities where the research is conducted, as in the case of Nako Monastery (Kinnaur) discussed by Klimburg-Salter.

Renate Ponweiser’s contribution was originally presented in the panel “History, Literature, Archaeology and Art of Western Tibet and the Western Himalaya” organised by Amy Heller. Horst Lasic delivered his paper in the panel “Philosophy” chaired by Pieter Verhagen. As their research results derive from fieldwork conducted with the FSP and the resources of the WHAV (see Widorn’s article in this volume), they decided to publish their contributions here.

The various spellings of many Tibetan names of places and persons that can be found in both Western and Tibetan sources have not been unified by the editors and the individual articles reflect the preferences of each author. Where appropriate, the anglicised form is followed by a transliteration of the Tibetan version or vice versa.

In order to provide the best possible reproduction of the plates, the colour images are represented in a CD accompanying the volume. They can also be accessed on <http://www.univie.ac.at/fsp-programm>.

Vienna, May 2006

D. Klimburg-Salter, K. Tropper, Ch. Jahoda

INTRODUCTION: TRANS-DISCIPLINARY RESEARCH IN THE WESTERN HIMALAYAS

ERNST STEINKELLNER (VIENNA)

The papers presented in this panel on 'trans-disciplinary research' are meant to demonstrate the advantages of this kind of approach as inherent in the efforts of a group of scholars at Vienna University who focus in their research on the cultural past of Western Tibet. The members of this group have begun their research at different times and for different reasons, but have recently become connected formally in a common Interdisciplinary Research Unit (Forschungsschwerpunkt) 'The Cultural History of the Western Himalaya' which is supported financially by the Austrian Science Fund.

What does 'trans-disciplinary' mean for us? It refers to the ideal of looking beyond the rims of one's own discipline, 'discipline' being understood as any kind of research on a certain subject by using a methodology—with appropriate variations—that has been developed within this research and that is sanctified by success and tradition.

Now, if one and the same subject, or different subjects belonging to one and the same cultural context, can be studied by different disciplines, the different methodologies of these disciplines are brought into play. An illustrated manuscript, for example, may be studied by a philologist concerned with the text and the ideas it contains, by an art-historian concerned with the illustrations, a palaeographer with the writing styles and forms, a chemist with the nature of the material, a physical engineer with its age, and so on.

Each of us has been educated within a certain discipline. We have learned to apply its specific methods in order to be trusted with regard to our results. But whenever we make an effort to understand a larger context, quite naturally we become trans-disciplinarians. Of course, within our own discipline we have a primary methodological model which we can adapt to our changing subjects, but we cannot be so parochial as to consider this method to be the only one able to produce reliable results and to not introduce notions and results into our work that we would not have been able to come up with using

only our primary method. This, in my eyes, is a 'trans-disciplinary' attitude which can always be chosen by anybody, but is more easily developed in larger groups of researchers interested in the same subject from different angles. This is what is happening in Vienna.

It is also evident, however, that this sort of trans-disciplinary attitude does not constitute a methodology of its own; no meta-method, so to speak, has been developed beyond the methods of the participating disciplines. Still, its results are more than the mere sum of the individual results. This is due to the dialectical movement which starts as soon as one looks at and makes use of somebody else's questions, or their progress and results.

Why then is it important, if there is nothing unusual about trans-disciplinary studies, to stress this point? A number of answers are possible. Yet, without trying to be blunt, my first answer is that a main reason is socio-political.

Many of the social institutions that finance research today no longer trust the traditional disciplines to be able to develop new 'useful' approaches from within their own theoretical set-up. Although in fact, e.g., no philology would be worth its name if it didn't include a consideration of the context of its texts, present-day societies continue to ask for new programmes, mostly under the influence of theories from Social Anthropology, with the aim of transforming traditional disciplines into more up-to-date Cultural Studies. True philology in general, of course, has no need of such pressures. Particularly within Tibetan Philology and Tibetan Social Anthropology it has always been clear, and has to a large extent been accommodated, that texts, written or oral, have functions, on the one hand, and that many social phenomena in Tibet have texts, on the other. Nevertheless, it seems necessary nowadays, as a measure of research-propelling wisdom, to inform the institutions providing financial backing that we are not incarcerating our searching minds into methodological prisons, but are open for trans- or multi-disciplinary approaches.

If this first answer had given the impression of being tinged by slightly cynical despair, that was not my intention. I would rather defend the necessity of our societies' steering the research they are paying for. What I object to is that when this is done only in generalising or simplistic ways, or by changing merely the labels, or, in particular, by devaluing the specific methods developed within the disciplines for their specific objects.

My second answer is based on the practical results of such a trans-disciplinary approach in research. This is, in fact, not only the more important reason, but it is also a good and worthy one.

The research that has been conducted in Tabo, Spiti (Himachal Pradesh) by cooperating international groups of historians, art-historians, architects, socio-anthropologists, and philologists has not only motivated the locals, the monks of the thriving monastery and the villagers, to strengthen their already quite strong consciousness and feeling of responsibility for the cultural treasure in their midst, but has also made the Indian government and the world more aware of the uniqueness of this cultural complex. The effects of the considerable research work invested in the Tabo complex have also clearly been felt at the economic level by the villagers. In these individual research efforts, Tabo is valued as a case in which the roughly thousand-year-old contexts can still be traced and identified from what remains today, can be related to information attained through different approaches, and finally interpreted as a living whole, in which all the individual facts, data, and documents receive their meaning from a real or at least hypothetical understanding of their actual social functions. This enterprise in Tabo is still going on, of course, with matters of monument preservation in the hands of the Indian government (Archaeological Survey of India).

This is not the case in Nako, Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh). Nako is not among the monuments protected and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India. However, its four twelfth-century temples are the focus of the 'Nako Research and Preservation Project', a sub-unit of the Interdisciplinary Research Unit mentioned above. Two of these temples still contain wall paintings and sculptures from their original building period. But earthquakes, roof and water damage seriously threaten the fragile remains. The villagers' attempts to repair the damage proved futile. Thus the art historians who studied these temples have joined forces with Indian architects and conservation specialists in London, New Delhi, and Vienna. On the basis of the site documentation, tests and analyses, as well as the study of the chronology of the decoration, methods and a plan of preservation can now be implemented in the Nako conservation-cum-restoration programme.

Without trans-disciplinary communication this work of saving the temples of Nako would not have come about. But what is 'trans-dis-

disciplinary' in the real sense of the word, going beyond all the academic disciplines involved so far, is the fact that the specialists who are involved are continuously engaged with the local community and the Buddhist community organisations. They aim at not only incorporating the still-available local expertise and other local capacities into the work process, but also at finding simple and mutual solutions for problems as they arise. In this way the population of Nako can easily realise their own intentions and hopes for the spiritual centre with the best modern methods offered them by these foreigners. The enterprise began as art-historical research, extended to other disciplines, and now assumes the character of 'translational' research in its worthy final move to bring the results to an overall beneficial practical fruition.