

MAGDALENA SZPINDLER

(Warsaw)

Sarasvatī – A Charming Goddess Guiding Towards Enlightenment**Abstract**

There is, among several others, one xylograph preserved in the library of the Oriental Department of Warsaw University containing a poem on Sarasvatī by Tsong kha pa written both in Tibetan and Mongolian. When translating it, the author of the present paper, pondered upon the idea of a woman (as a goddess and vice versa) and the beauty (of a woman) in Tibetan (and Mongolian) Buddhist literature. And that is how these few thoughts were put into the following words.

Athena, the famous Greek goddess, was born from god Zeus' head broken in half by Hephaestus. She was a goddess of wisdom associated also with great power. Artists showed her as a beautiful, but surely not as a feeble, woman. Another famous goddess of wisdom and learning (as well as literature and music), Sarasvatī, was born from the mouth of the four-faced god Brahma (Caturmukha). Most commonly she appeared as a young white-skinned woman having as her attributes a lute (*vīna*) or a goose (*hamsa*)¹ and, contrary to the Greek goddess, she was gentle in her character². In the course of time she appealed to believers all across Asia: from India, through South-East Asian

¹ According to Pal it is a *kalahamsa* – a melodious goose, a meter, a symbol of wisdom and deliverance at the same time, Pal 1988: 142, 143.

² There are, of course, various forms and attributes of Sarasvatī, that we are not going to discuss here in depth. Instead of a goose, for example, a peacock could accompany the goddess. An image somehow corresponding to a “warrior-like” Athena one finds in Japan. There, Sarasvatī known under the name of Benzaiten holds either a lute or a weapon. Following the Indian tradition the Tibetans distinguish the peaceful and wrathful aspects: a Tantric form, the so-called Red Sarasvatī (*dByangs can dmar*) etc. (see Wayman 1977). However, the emphasis in this article is put on the best known peaceful aspect of the goddess and her role in artistic and literary life of Tibet.

countries, up to Mongolia in the north³. Jain, Hindu and Buddhist worshippers venerated and praised her through the expressive powers of art and literature.

First, the rigid and simple representations of a woman (as a goddess personifying fertility and abundance) date back to 3000 B.C. and rank among the oldest depictions in Indian art⁴. However, Sarasvatī herself was in Vedic times a river goddess⁵ and only gradually, with the passing of time, assumed the form of a woman. As such we find her silhouette carved in a sandstone by a Mathura artist in the 2nd century. The squatting goddess is holding a *pustaka* (manuscript written on a palm leaf, represented here probably for the first time in Indian art)⁶. Some thousand years later, in the 12th century, another Jain artist from Gujarat surrounded her sculpted image with musicians and a goose and presented her with prayer beads (*māla*) and a book⁷. This might be – as Guy suggests – a depiction of a goddess holding a book or a personification of the book itself, like in the case of Prajñāpāramitā later on⁸. Pal, on the other hand, suggests that since the most important Mahāyāna text, i.e. *Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom*) is personified as a goddess, *prajñā* (wisdom) is feminine and all goddesses are treated as its embodiment⁹. While *prajñā* is feminine, the method (means) *upāya* is masculine, visualized and represented in the form of various gods. The union of wisdom and means results in the thought of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*)¹⁰.

And Sarasvatī was not left alone, either. In Purāṇas she shared her lot with Brahma. At the beginning of *Kāvyaḍarśa* (*Mirror of Literature*), one of the earliest Indian treatises on poetics (*alaṃkāraśāstra*), its author Daṇḍin (7th century) when turning to Sarasvatī for benediction, described the goddess as the one born from the lotus garden of Caturmukha's countenance¹¹. This introductory verse attracted the attention of Tibetan commentators of the treatise – translated into Tibetan and better known in Tibet under the title *Snyan*

³ She found her way, among other regions, to nowadays' Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. Although introduced to Cambodia already before the 7th c. and to China between the 5th and 8th c. (early representations found in Dunhuang) she is largely forgotten at present. Together with *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* (*Sutra of the Golden Light*) she must have made quite an impression in Japan around the 7–9th c., where she became a popular deity. See Ludvik 2001, Pou 1986, Pal 1986: 113, 1988: 142.

⁴ Pal 1986: 27.

⁵ There existed a river called Sarasvatī, but has dried.

⁶ Guy 2007: 36, 41.

⁷ Pal 1988: 142, 143.

⁸ It is worth taking under consideration a long tradition of book veneration in India (and Tibet, too) demonstrated in the 11th century relief from Bodhgaya as well as during annual religious festivals devoted to Sarasvatī, when a book was presented as an offering in front of the goddess's image, Guy 2007: 120–121.

⁹ Pal 1986: 28. It is interesting to note herewith Snellgrove's words related to Tantra teachings: "In Hinduism the feminine Śakti inherits the age-old Indian tradition of a productive mother of all creatures...", Snellgrove 1987: 132. See also the concepts of the "Mother of all Buddhas", *op. cit.*

¹⁰ This is a fairly complex issue, as well as Tantric practices which require a sexual relationship. Here, it was meant just to touch upon it to show relevance to the subject under discussion. For more details see Snellgrove 1987.

¹¹ In Khmer literature, as a goddess of eloquence, arts and science, she is more than once said to reside in the mouth or in the lotus of the mouth of a king etc., Pou 1986: 324.

ngag me long. The Fifth Dalai Lama Ngag dbang Blo bzang rGya mtsho (1617–1682), for example, on the one hand explained (accordingly to the Indian sources) her origin related to Brahma and to one of the Vedas, namely *Sāmaveda*, on the other hand he set her in the Buddhist tradition relating her to Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara¹².

Snyan ngag me long, the only treatise on poetics of Indian origin constituting one of the five minor sciences, i.e. poetics (*snyan ngag*), became thoroughly studied only by a chosen limited circle of Tibetan men of letters and did not gain wide appreciation¹³. After all, *Mirror of Literature* was introducing to Tibet the imaginary world of *kāvya* pervaded with sensuality which revealed itself through richly ornamented depictions of women, nature etc. Learned monks wrote commentaries on it, illustrations (*dper brjod*) and independent compositions based on Daṇḍin's recommendations. Buddhist scholars dealing with *kāvya* and its theory needed to legitimize it in the eyes of Buddhist practitioners. This legitimization could have been obtained from a goddess – an Indian goddess as much venerated by the Hindus as by the Buddhists or Jains and a goddess of science, learning, eloquence, poetry and music. Her presence in canonical writings, like *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-sūtra* (*Sutra of the Golden Light*)¹⁴, must have been crucial, too. Its chapters are “devoted to certain divinities, female as well as male, who have offered to protect those who practice Buddhist teachings and especially those who are devoted to it (...)”¹⁵. The eighth chapter dedicated to Sarasvatī includes the following words:

“O Venerable Transcendent Victor, I, the great goddess Sarasvatī, will also bestow eloquence in order to adorn the speech of the bhikṣu who expounds the Dharma. I will also grant him *dharani*. I will always invest in him the power of authoritative speech. I will give the great illumination of knowledge to the bhikṣu who expounds the Dharma. If he loses or forgets a word or a letter from the King of the Glorious Sutras, the Sublime Golden Light, I will supply this bhikṣu who expounds the Dharma with all the definite sounds, letters, and words. I will grant him *dharani* to prevent it from being lost, so that the King of the Glorious Sutras, the Sublime Golden Light, may last long, without disappearing from Jambudvīpa for the sake of sentient beings who plant merit-roots before hundreds of thousands of buddhas, the Transcendent Lords, so that these numerous sentient beings may develop inconceivably sharp wisdom upon hearing the King of the Glorious Sutras, the Sublime Golden Light; so that they may receive an inconceivable wealth of wisdom, have excellent energy in their present life; have an increase in life force; so

¹² Fifth DL 1966: 8–10. See also, e.g. Bod mkhas pa 2004: 24–29 and Khams sprul 1969: 30–44, Szpindler .

¹³ The reference is made only to monk's circles; it is not meant to encompass the cultural and literary life of the lay part of society.

¹⁴ T. 'Phags pa gser 'od dam pa mdo sde'i dbang po'i rgyal po.

¹⁵ Snellgrove 1987: 149.

that they may come to hold inconceivable masses of merit, seek various creative methods, be learned in all treatises, and they receive excellent expertise in various arts and crafts. (...)

(...) Listen to me, O you hordes of bhutas:
 I will sing the praise of virtues of the sublime goddess with a supremely immaculate face,
 The chief of goddesses, the finest among sublime women
 In the worlds of gods, gandharvas, and lords of asuras.
 She is adorned with limbs embellished with numerous virtues;
 Called Sarasvati, her eyes are broad, and she blazes with merit.
 She is fully endowed with the virtues of pristine wisdom.
 As she looks like an array of precious jewels,
 I praise the virtue of her supreme eloquence.
 She gives the supreme boon of the sublime,
 And perfect mantras and virtues.
 Immaculately pristine, she is like a blazing lotus.
 Her eyes are holy and incomparable.
 Source of virtues, she sheds light to see virtue.
 She is adorned with inconceivable qualities.
 Her light is bright like the moon.
 She is a mine of exalted wisdom and cool mindfulness;
 She is the finest lioness, and vehicle for men.
 She is adorned with eight arms,
 And appears like the fully waxed moon.
 She has a beautiful voice and captivating melody.
 She is possessed of profound wisdom.
 An excellent being, she helps accomplish the highest goals.
 Honored by the lords of gods and asuras,
 She is celebrated among the abodes of gods and asuras;
 And she is continually worshipped in the abodes of bhutas. Svaha! (...)”¹⁶

In the passages quoted there are verses of praise portraying the goddess as a beautiful woman, but without focusing on her feminine qualities. She is shown as perfect as much as her nature is. Paraphrasing *Socrates*’ words one could wonder in this very instance upon perceiving the same reason to call the goddess beautiful and good; and having such her qualities as long as they are useful for the aim – the ultimate one¹⁷. Portrayals like these are not any longer human portrayals but visualisations of a deity. Following the

¹⁶ Losang Dawa 2006: 39, 42.

¹⁷ Eco 2005: 48.

Indian convention Tibetan artists painted and sculpted figures of gods that showed the idealised beauty of the human body.

As was mentioned above, *Snyan ngag me long* along with Sarasvatī known to the Tibetans as dByangs can ma (the one possessing a melody) found their way to the Tibetan Buddhist world. The text was included in the canon (more precisely in *bsTan 'gyur*) and there were numerous hymns of praise (*bstod pa*) written that extolled the goddess' qualities. At the same time she became a theme exploited by visual arts. Zhu chen Tshul khri ms rin chen (1697–1774), famous for his learning in linguistic arts and mastery in painting was a great devotee of Sarasvatī¹⁸. Another renowned painter – 'Phreng kha ba (16–17th century), “skilled in elegant poetical and prose composition”, is described in written sources as he was “beginning to paint a *thang ka* of the goddess Sarasvatī”. He was checking “her technical description as given in a meditation text, but at that moment the goddess herself appeared before him and called out, ‘O artist, here I am! Look!’”¹⁹.

Artists as well as poets were obliged to follow the canon, however the style, the mood and the character of a work of art lay beyond any canon and this is what we may observe in the literary output of Tibetan lamas, for example in a poem by Tsong kha pa (1357–1419) called *Melodious Realization of the Melodious Goddess*²⁰:

“...body is white, with one face and two hands. With a smiling expression, she looks happily at the instrument she plays. The hairs of her head are plaited and bound with a garland of white flowers; and, hanging down, a garland of golden bells rings freely and effortlessly.

... She wears upper and lower garments of katsalindika silk, ornamented with various jewels and silks, draped about her so as to set off her beauty, like a white lotus. She is a young girl, sixteen years old. Her breasts, enjoyable to touch, are full. She sways to the left, in a provocative way...”

While reading this and other similar passages and keeping in mind by whom they were written, one comes to a comparison, abruptly changing the perspective, with the European world from hundreds of centuries earlier. “Medieval philosophers, theologians and mystics did not have many reasons to interest in woman's beauty, considering that all of them were the people of Church and medieval moral philosophy leaned towards mistrust in relation to pleasures of the body”²¹. At the same time they were compelled

¹⁸ Jackson 1996: 304.

¹⁹ Jackson 1996: 182.

²⁰ This extract comes from *Asian Music* (Vol. 10, No. 2, Tibet Issue (1979), p. 1–2), where the Tibetan title was not given but I assume it might be: *dByangs can ma'i sgrub thabs*, www.tbrc.org.

²¹ Eco 2005: 154, 156.

to take a stance on the theme presented for example in *The Book of Song of Solomon*, part of a Christian canon. In order not to be groundless I let myself quote a fragment:

How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter!
 the joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning
 workman.
 Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor:
 thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies.
 Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins.
 Thy neck is as a tower of ivory; thine eyes like the fishpools in
 Heshbon,
 by the gate of Bathrabbim: thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon
 which looketh toward Damascus.
 Thine head upon thee is like Carmel, and the hair of thine head like
 purple;
 the king is held in the galleries.
 How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!
 This thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of
 grapes.
 I said, I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs
 thereof:
 now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of
 thy nose like apples;
 And the roof of thy mouth like the best wine for my beloved, that goeth
 down sweetly,
 causing the lips of those that are asleep to speak.
 I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.
 Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field; let us lodge in the
 villages.
 Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish,
 whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there
 will I give thee my loves.
 The mandrakes give a smell, and at our gates are all manner of pleasant
 fruits, new and old,
 which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved²².

What might have been interpreted allegorically by Christian monks might as well be read literally as a praise of female charms, like in another text by 'Jam dbyang Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820–1892), the great teacher primarily of the

²² *The Book of Song of Solomon* (10th B.C.), chapter 7, King James Bible.

bKa' rgyud tradition and after that of the nonsectarian movement²³, where he describes the Melodious Goddess:

“...the goddess Sarasvatī, with a body white in colour, one face, two hands. Seated in a relaxed manner, with a face like the rising moon, eyebrows like drawn lines, two beautiful eyes like utpalas, casting side long glances like shooting stars, a clear complexion, pink cheeks and attractive. The throat is graceful and gently bending; white breasts, round, firm, upright and full. The left hand holds a jewel-studded vina of the gandharvas, the right a pick strumming the vina enthusiastically with the fingertips. With a very slender waist and flexible hips, a body well proportioned, fair, smooth, young, ample flesh and well rounded. Seated with the two legs, white, smooth, relaxed and desirable, in a slightly crouching manner; attractive braids, long and full, half-loose covering the upper back, half tied up in a topknot blazing with a wishing jewel. At the hairline – wearing a beautiful gold chain strung with flowers, blue, red and the like, wearing earrings of gold flowers and utpalas. Next to the ears are flowing silk ribbons; also adorned with many ornaments, jewel earrings, necklaces, bracelets, anklets, belt, long-necklace and the like. Wearing an attractive upper garment of white cotton and a lower garment like a rainbow; fantastically beloved, radiantly desirous – sixteen years of age”²⁴.

Could it be that through the artistic and visionary power the character of Sarasvatī's images, as well as of other goddesses' images, combined the elements of ideal beauty (“showing the best qualities of a man”), spiritual beauty (“showing the soul through the eyes”) and useful, functional beauty?²⁵ Allowing myself just to touch upon the issue of beauty in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition once again and as a conclusion I let the poet speak for himself: *A Praise to Goddess Sarasvatī* by Tsong kha pa²⁶:

²³ For details see Smith 2001.

²⁴ Jeff Watt 9-2000, www.himalayanart.org. As for the age and beauty one finds similarity in descriptions in *Hevajra Tantra* (T. Kye rdo rje'i rgyud), where a beautiful girl of sixteen years of age is prepared for consecration. In Tantric Buddhism “Hevajra Tantra might be regarded as the locus classicus for references to Wisdom and Means as the fundamental pair of coefficients, whose union produce the state of Great Bliss which is essentially innate to the whole of existence.” Snellgrove 1987: 244, 261, 284–285; see also Wayman 1977: 247–248.

²⁵ Eco 2005: 48.

²⁶ This is the author's translation from Tibetan with references to Mongolian translation. The original bilingual text printed on three cards is preserved in the library of the Section of Inner Asian Peoples of the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Warsaw under the reference number 774. According to Ragchaagiin Byamba's words it is an 18–19th century Buryat xylograph. The first page is a title page with the title written in Tibetan and beneath it in Mongolian. There is also the University's stamp on it, a label and a pen-written note with the reference number. One page of each card (*recto*) contains a margin on the left with enumeration in Tibetan and Mongolian. There are two lines of Tibetan text – beneath each of them there is a text of Mongolian translation

[1r1] Om, Let there be auspiciousness! (May happiness prevail!)

Enchantress (mind stealer) resembling embellishment (beautifier) of the sky [filled with]

Water holders (clouds) endowed with a net of strings of lightening,
Allurer among damsels of *gandharva* (the one feeding on scent),
Approach me goddess caring (loving) since ancient times!

Eyes of an agitated bee on a lotus face,
White-rayed on the top of pitch black sapphire hair²⁷,
Melodious one (Sarasvatī) gracefully posing in a charming dance
Now bestow pure mastery (or ‘mastery over speech’) upon me!

Deer’s eyes endowed with a sentiment of theatrical dance
Enchantress insatiable in looking with [her own] eyes
My speech thanks to you caring (loving) like a mother
Make [me] equal to [you], the very goddess of powerful speech.

More beautiful than the glory of an expanding autumn moon
Overwhelmed with brilliance even the sound of a melodic voice of Lord
Brahma,
Deep voice hard to measure like depths of an ocean,
I desire the body, voice and mind of the Melodious Goddess.

A Praise to Goddess Sarasvatī by T s o n g k h a p a: Tibetan (marked with bold-faced letters) and Mongolian text in transliteration:

Dbyangs can lha mo'i bsod pa bzugs so //
Sarasvatī ökin tngri-yin maytayal orusibai

[1v1] ***om bde legs su gyur cig //***
om sayin amuyulang boltuyai ::

chu 'dzin dkar po glog 'phreng dra pa can //
mkha' yi mdzes byed 'dra ba'i yid [2] 'phrog ma //
dri za'i na chung dbus na 'jo sgeg mkhan //
ring nas brtse ba'i lha mo da tshur byon //

written down. The general condition of the xylograph is good, only in certain places the ink is blurred. Another version of the same poem in Tibetan was published and translated into English by Kilty (2001: 20, 21).

²⁷ T. *mthon mthing* means ‘a sapphire, dark blue’. In relation to hair – as one could imagine – it means ‘shiny pitch black hair so dark (and shiny), that it looks almost blue’. Mongolian translation put stress on the fact of glittering: M. *gegegen gilbeljegen qarabtar* – ‘shining bright[ly] blackish’.

*tunumal*²⁸ *čayan usun-i bariyči čakilyan-u erike-yin tour-tu :*
*tunumal oytaryui-yin üjesgüleng bolyayči metü sedkil-i [2] buliyči*²⁹ *eke :*
*tunumal sayıqan gandari*³⁰ *-yin keüked*³¹ *-ün dumda toylun qangyuljayči*³² *:*
*tunumal ayiladqui-bar*³³ *erten-eče enerijü aysan ökin tngri edüge inaysi*
*jalalan soyurasa*³⁴ *::*

padma'i bzhin la [2r1] g.yo ldan bung ba'i mig //
*'thong mthing*³⁵ *ral pa'i rtse na 'od dkar can //*
rol sgeg gar gyis 'gying ba'i [2] dbyangs can ma //
*da dung bdag la dag*³⁶ *gi dbang phyung stsol //*

*masi*³⁷ *čeberk[e]n*³⁸ *lingqu-a-yin [2r1] čirai-dur ködelküi tegüsüksen jögei-yin*
nidü-tü :
masigegegen gilbeljegen qarabtar üsün-ü üjegür-tür čayan genel-tü :
*masi sayıqan ...ljaqu*³⁹ *čenggel-ün büjig-iyer yangjulaşsan [2] egsig-tü eke :*
*masi eneriküi-ber*⁴⁰ *edüge basa nadur kelen-ü erke-yi örüsü-e ::*

rol rtsed gar gyi nyams ldan ri dwags mig //
[2v1] mig gis blta bas mi ngoms yid 'phrog ma o //
mao ltar brtse ba khyod kyis bdag gi ngago //
ngago dbang lha mo nyid dang [2] mtshungs par mdzod //

nayadun čenggeküi büjig-ün bayital tegüsüksen görügesün-ü nidü-tü :
[2v1] nidüber üjegen-iyer qanyisi-ügei sedkil-i buliyči eke :
eke metü enerigči ta ber minu kelen-i:
kelen-ü erketü ökin tngri-lüge ben [2] adali bolyan soyary-a :

²⁸ M. *tunumal*, 'clear', 'transparent', 'lucid', appears at the beginning of each line in the strophe.

²⁹ Illegible, however most probably it should be *buliyayči*.

³⁰ From S. *gandharva* meaning 'the smell eater'. Compare with the literally translated T. *dri za*.

³¹ Usually means 'children', however it is a plural form of the word *keüken* meaning 'a child' and 'a girl' at the same time.

³² M. *toylun qangyuljayči* corresponds to T. '*jo sgeg*. *Toylun* means 'playing', playfully'. As for the second word I was unable to decipher it. Perhaps it is a misspelled form of the verb *yangyala-* ('be dressy, dandy') or *qangya-* ('satisfy', 'fulfill')?

³³ 'Clearly speaking'.

³⁴ Most probably it should be *soyury-a*, an imperative form of a verb (without ending) added to construct a very polite request: 'be so good as to...'. Tibetan polite expression *tshur byon* 'come here' was rendered with the polite, descriptive Mongolian expression *inaysi jalalan soyury-a* 'be so good as to make an entry here'.

³⁵ It should be *mthon mthing*.

³⁶ It should be *ngag*, 'speech', at least compared to Mongolian translation.

³⁷ 'Very' – appears at the beginning of each line in the strophe.

³⁸ 'Clean' (diminutive form of a word *čeber*).

³⁹ Illegible.

⁴⁰ M. *masi eneriküi-ber* – 'by means of caring (loving)'.

ston zla rgyas pa'i dpal las lhag par mdzes //
tshangs dbang dbyangs snyan gdangs kyang zil gyis gnon //
 [3r1] *zab dbyangs rgya mtsho'i 'dzings*⁴¹ *ltar dpag dka' ba //*
dbyangs can lha mo'i sku gsung thugs la 'dod //

tungyalay namur-un saran delgeregsen-ü čoy-ača ülemji üjesgüleng-tü :
tungyalay esrü-a-yin egsig-ün irayu ayalyu-yi ču süür-iyer daruyči :
 [3r1] *tungyalay giin ayuu dalai-yin töb metü üligiüke berke :*
tungyalay egsig-tü ökin tngri-yin bey-e jarliy sedkil-iyer sigütemüi ::

[2] *ces sgra dbyangs lha mo snyan drangs nas bstod cing gsol ba btab*
pa yul byang phyogs kyi snyan dngags mkhan blo bzang grags pa'i
dpal gyis spyad ba'o //

[3r2] *gesen dayun egesig-tü ökin tngri-yi jalayad maytaju jalbariqui*
*egün-i umara jüg-ün orun-u irayu ayalyuči sumati kirti šri ber ...yul*⁴²
ber :: : ::

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⁴¹ Should be 'jings.

⁴² Illegible.

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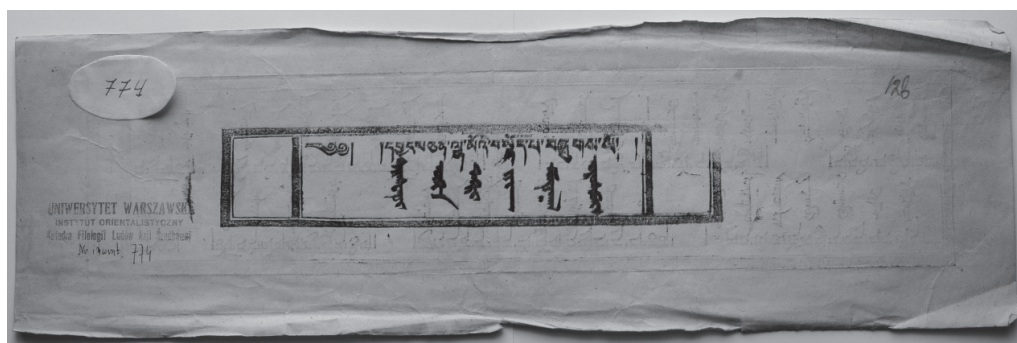


Photo 1. The title page of the text *Dbyangs can lha mo'i bsod pa bzhugs so //*
Sarasvati ökin tngri-yin maytayal orusibai

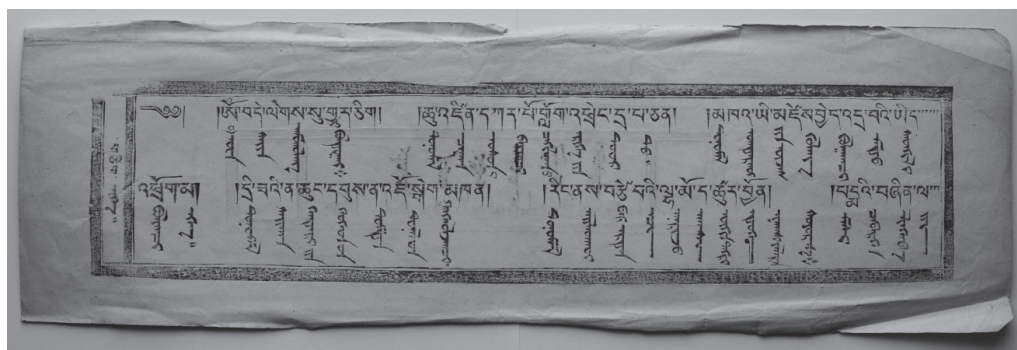


Photo 2. 1 verso

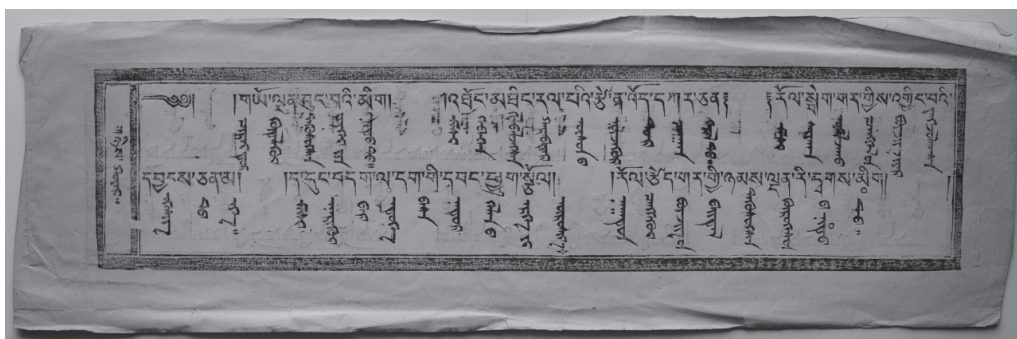


Photo 3. 2 recto

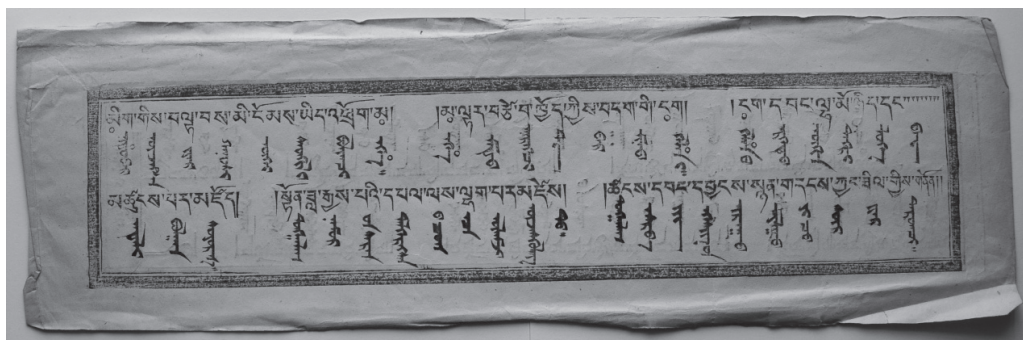


Photo 4. 2 verso

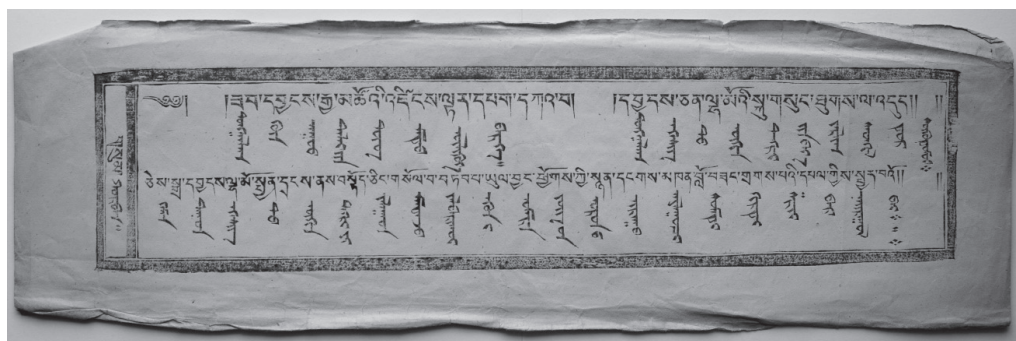


Photo 5. 3 recto