The Himalayan Paper

History, Identification and Trade

A workshop hosted by
The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg

Monday-Tuesday, 14-15 November 2016

Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures
Warburgstrasse 26
20354 Hamburg
**Programme**

**Monday**

9:30 am  
Welcome

9:40–10:20  
Anna-Grethe Rischel: The importance of a reference material for the identification of Himalayan papers

10:20–11:00  
Claude Laroque: Khartasia, Multidisciplinary and International Research program on Asian paper

11:00–11:20  
Coffee break

11:20–12:00  
Hildegard Diemberger: Exploring Zurtsho: what paper analysis can tell us about an important site in Tibetan book technology

12:00–12:40  
Alessandro Boesi: Kings, Families, and Paper-plants: Report on a Recent Fieldwork in Kham (Sichuan, China)

12:40–14:00  
Lunch

14:00–14:40  
James Canary: Mthing shog: ways of working and efforts to preserve a vanishing tradition

14:40–15:20  
Bruce Huett: The Revival of Traditional Tibetan Paper Making: Historical, Socio-cultural and Economic Aspects

15:20–15:40  
Coffee break

15:40–16:20  
Charles Ramble: Production, taxation and export of paper in Nepal, 19th to mid-20th centuries, with particular attention to the Kali Gandaki region

16:20–17:00  
Camillo Formigatti: Paper Production between Nepālamandala and Mang yul Gung thang: an Unacknowledged Revolution?

17:00–17:40  
Agnieszka Helman-Ważny: Tibetan papermaking traditions in Nepal: A transfer of technological knowledge in Central Asian history

**Tuesday**

10:00–13:00  
Round table discussion
Introduction

The Himalayan Paper
History, Identification and Trade

A two-day workshop dedicated to Himalayan paper and papermaking will be hosted this November by the CSMC at the University of Hamburg. The high altitude of the Tibetan Plateau together with its dependent valleys and climate extremes make the local vegetation distinctive from all other areas of Asia. The specificity of Himalayan papermaking lies in the properties of these native plants, the living conditions of peoples dwelling on the world's highest plateau, and aspects of their culture that together create a distinctive craft. In this workshop, we will look at properties of both the papermaking plants and paper made of them, distribution of local plants, methods of paper fiber identification and analysis, and papermaking technology will be the subject of our discussion in the context of book-making practices, paper trade, availability of raw materials and technological modes of production.

In the past paper was used as a support for manuscripts, printed books, paintings and other art and daily-use objects. The preserved artefacts themselves, and particularly the materials they consist of, can tell us more about the meaning and the use of the written word in past societies. Further, since books and other objects made of paper were in constant circulation, part of the complex networks of their producers and users raise questions concerning trade routes, trading posts and possible location of papermaking workshops.

The best chance of differentiating among papers in books and artworks is by the systematic study of the plants used for their production, along with other features useful for typology. The study of paper in books uncovers the story of the manuscript that critically supplements its content, revealing the untold details of its making. By paying careful
attention to paper on a microscopic scale the methods of its production are revealed as well as which plants were used for its creation.

On a larger perspective, the history of paper has become recently popularized, even sentimentalized, given our current dependence upon instant communication via electronic devices. And it is a fascinating story—how the simple invention of two thousand years ago in China wrapped itself around our world. However, the roads of early dissemination of papermaking technology have never been finally delineated. It is obvious that the basic “know-how” of paper technology moved from China to both the East (Korea and Japan) and West (to Arab world and then Europe), and soon after technology spread to India via the Himalayas. There are still various concepts of this dissemination, however, that are not fully supported by scholarly evidence. Thus, from a historical perspective this workshop will also consider tracing the history of paper in various Himalayan countries, the innovation and transmission of papermaking in the Himalayas, and integrating an understanding of technologies with the historical development and transmission of social and cultural practices and possibilities of mapping the papermaking workshops and areas known for paper production. Thus among others subject we will discuss history, trade, modes of production, transfer of papermaking technologies and how tradition interacts with natural resources, climate conditions and how the spread of paper is connected to trade in the region.

In this workshop will ponder the following questions (among many others):

How should we define Himalayan paper? Is it a consistent category or rather many types which share some features? Can fibre analysis indicate where and how paper was produced? What are the differences in papermaking technology in neighbouring Himalayan countries now and in the past? Is there a useful framework to judge the quality of paper based on paper as a material itself? By examining a paper artefact, can we detect specific traces of regional practices left by those who owned or used the archival documents and books? Do these human traces inform us about the role and the presence of written sources in particular cultural and historical contexts?
Abstracts

**Kings, Families, and Paper-plants: Report on a Recent Fieldwork in Kham (Sichuan, China)**

**Alessandro Boesi**
(Independent scholar)

This paper aims at presenting the results of a preliminary research fieldwork on Tibetan paper-plants, which the author conducted in May-June 2016 in Dege, Lithang, and Bathang Counties in Kham (Sichuan, China). This investigation has shown that people from these areas, and notably specific families, have specialized in paper-plant collection and paper manufacture. Before the Chinese arrival in the 1950s these activities were carried out on behalf of local Kings and monasteries and paper had to be handed over to them as tax payment. According to local environmental conditions and local traditions, different paper-plants, all belonging to species of the Thymeleaceae family, were used in each region.

**Mthing shog: ways of working and efforts to preserve a vanishing tradition**

**James Canary**
(The Lilly Library, Indiana University Bloomington)

Although many examples survive of the beautiful manuscripts written on black burnished paper in precious mineral inks the variants have not been dealt with in a systematic way. The vocabulary describing these manuscripts is incomplete.

Several formulations and descriptions of the process exist in the texts but it is difficult to find artisans today still following the traditional methods. I have not found anyone still using traditional Tibetan papers as the basis for the surface treatment. Modern Chinese papers are being used. The traditional indigo dye for the blue coloration has in some instances been replaced by modern blue paints. Some artisans use colored papers blue or black as a base. This presentation will look at several manuscript types and comment on the methods and materials of production. Information gathered in Lhasa and in Rebgong will be compared.

**Exploring Zurtsho: what paper analysis can tell us about an important site in Tibetan book technology**

**Hildegard Diemberger**
(Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge)

On the basis of the study of paper samples from Zurtsho and nearby sites, this presentation highlights the significance of this area in Tibetan book production. This will also offer
opportunities for methodological reflections on how data from paper analysis can be considered in relation to other types of codicological information.

**Paper Production between Nepālamandala and Mang yul Gung thang: an Unacknowledged Revolution?**

**Camillo Formigatti**  
(Bodleian Libraries Oriental Section Department, University of Oxford)

Starting from the 14th century, a general increase in the production of manuscripts in Nepal can be noticed. The progressive diffusion of paper as a writing material culminates in the 17th century, when paper replaced almost completely palm-leaf as writing material. In the second half of the 14th century, an unstable political situation of the neighbouring Tibetan kingdom of Mang yul Gung thang was paralleled by an intense cultural activity. Both king bKra’ shis lde (ruled 1352–63 CE) as well as king Khri rgyal bsod nams lde (ca. 1371–1404 CE) commissioned the production of a set of bKa’ ’gyur and bStan ’gyur, and the latter contributed also to the re-establishment of the royal lineage and of Sa skya patronage over Gung thang, taking political control also of the Glo bo (Mustang) and Dol po areas. He was also responsible for the foundation of the Gung thang chos sde (ca. 1390) and the Shel dkar chos sde (the latter included a printery, par khang). Moreover, Chos skyong rgyal mo, Khri rgyal bsod nams lde’s wife, commissioned the production of a set of bKa’ ’gyur and bStan ’gyur in memory of her husband. In order to complete these three big editorial projects many people were involved: translators (who most probably came from the Nepal Valley), artists for the miniatures as well as craftsmen for the writing materials (like paper and inks). The Tamang population of the Mustang area controlled by the Mang yul’s kings had an important tradition of papermaking. Is it too far fetched to presuppose a link between the impulse to papermaking triggered in this area by the editorial projects of Mang yul’s king and the technological shift from palm leaf to paper witnessed in Nepal starting from the 14th century?

**Tibetan papermaking traditions in Nepal: A transfer of technological knowledge in Central Asian history**

**Agnieszka Helman-Ważny**  
(Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, University of Hamburg)

This study presents a wider view of the history of the Tibetan papermaking technology adopted in Nepal, together with the innovation and transmission of papermaking knowledge in the Himalayas. It aims to integrate an understanding of technologies with the historical development and transmission of social and cultural practices, and the possibilities of mapping the papermaking workshops and areas known for paper production in Nepal.
The high altitude of the Himalayas together with their climatic extremes make the local vegetation distinctive from all other areas of Asia. The specificity of Tibetan papermaking lies in the properties of these native plants, the living conditions of peoples dwelling on the world’s highest plateau, and aspects of their culture that together create a distinctive craft. The connections between Tibet and other Himalayan regions through corridors such as the Mustang-Kali Gandaki valley and the Kyirong–Rasuwa valley have facilitated the development of distinctive paper- and bookmaking craftsmanship in the region.

This talk attempts the preliminary reconstruction of the history of paper in Nepal from two main sources of information that mutually support each other in the face of the complete lack of written sources on this subject. These were the historical works of art on paper accordingly dated—by looking at fragments of the actual manuscripts or documents, identifying the paper and fibre components, and reconstructing the history of papermaking from the findings—and from the living tradition of papermaking still existing in Nepal, supported by information collected from interviews.

The Revival of Traditional Tibetan Paper Making: Historical, Socio-cultural and Economic Aspects

BRUCE HUETT

(Associate Member: Mongolia and Inner Asia Studies Unit, University of Cambridge)

Tibetan paper has a long history of production using a variety of plants which grow along the Himalaya. The paper quality differs depending on the materials used. The production of paper probably played an important economic and social role in areas where paper was produced, often associated with local monasteries. It is likely that it was also an important trade commodity.

Tibetan paper production seems to have declined during the middle part of the 20th century but has more recently been revived as part of the “intangible cultural heritage” initiative from the central government.

This paper will give a brief overview of the role that paper has played in Tibetan society in the past but will mainly focus on the revival in the later part of the 20th century. The content is based on interviews with a range of small producers in various areas of Tibet, with some comparisons to paper making activities in Nepal and Bhutan and North West China. The analysis will explore the reasons for the revival, the people and communities involved, the commercial and other economic factors and how the revival fits into Chinese government minority culture policies.
Khartasia, Multidisciplinary and International Research program on Asian paper

CLAUDE LAROQUE
(Senior Lecturer, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University)

Asian collections in heritage institutions outside Asia (museums, libraries, research centers) have rarely been studied from a technological angle; this is particularly crucial for paper artworks and documents. The nature of the paper is often misidentified and if paleographic studies were for a long times conducted on manuscripts out of excavations, the searches are restricted to visual observation of documents.

A research started in 2010 which purpose is the compilation of information that will enable the characterization of Asian papers. The goal of this research program is to approach the subject from various aspects allowing the understanding of the importance of this material in the history of societies and the better identification of the collections (origin of production, dating). It is built on a collaboration between research institutions, French and foreign, western and eastern, to promote the pooling of complementary skills to identify papers from Asia. The research team includes paper engineers, historians, philologists, chemists, conservators and occasionally papermakers. The partners work in France, Germany, Denmark and for Asia, China, Korea and Japan.

The device includes four main steps:

- Gathering of documentation on current manufacturing practices in China, Korea, Japan.
- Setting up of a multilingual database on the constituents of papers, available online.
- Development of a descriptive method of documents and artworks on paper.
- Development of laboratory analysis protocols for the characterization of the basic elements of papers.

The first stage of work is centred on China, Japan, and Korea, each of which has long produced paper. It will focus in a second time on the countries of Southeast Asia and the Himalayas, as final goal to cover the widest possible field of paper-producing countries in Asia.

Production, taxation and export of paper in Nepal, 19th to mid-20th centuries, with particular attention to the Kali Gandaki region

CHARLES RAMBLE
(École pratique des hautes études, University of Paris; CRCAO)

In the period spanning the 19th to mid-20th centuries much of the paper that was used in the arid Annapurna region of Nepal was produced in the middle hills of Myagdi and Baglung districts, and subsequently transported northwards along the Kali Gandaki corridor. Although the main commodities of this north-south trade were salt from Tibet in exchange for grain from the south, there were a great many other items of lesser importance.
For much of the period under consideration trade was not free, but under the control of contractors who held a monopoly on the exchange of goods on the basis of government contracts. The smooth flow of trade required the cooperation of numerous groups: not only the government and the contractors, but also the different communities who lived along the route and who could, whenever disaffected, impose a blockade or random tariffs on traders passing through their territory. Paper was one of the dutiable commodities that travelled along this route, but documents concerning the volume of paper transported along the Kali Gandaki and the revenues involved are sparse. In hopeful anticipation that future research will yield further information about paper as a commercial item in this region, the present contribution will address two components of the background to the topic: first, it will provide an overview of the local difficulties facing trade along the Kali Gandaki in the 19th to mid-20th centuries; and secondly, it will present some vignettes about paper as a dutiable item in Nepal as a whole during the same period.

The importance of a reference material for the identification of Himalayan papers

Anna-Grethe Rischel
(National Museum of Denmark)

Comparison with a reference material of known origin and technology has served as a useful method for identification of anonymous Asian paper materials. Study tours to papermaking workshops in Nepal, Thailand, Japan and China have resulted in a collection of a reference material of new handmade paper of known technology and provenance. Comparison with a reference material of Lockta paper from the Nepalese workshop in Goulche might be of help for identification of the Himalayan paper materials of unknown origin.

A systematic macroscopic observation of anonymous paper requires the examination of the surface structure and traces of the tools, followed by microscopic observation of the morphology, condition, eventual mixture of fibres and identification of the fibre material. The papermaker’s choice of fibre material illustrates what is available in his region and the identification of the fibre material of Asian paper is therefore of importance for information about the possible provenance of the paper.