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# Reconsidering the Sino-Tibetan Treaty Inscription

Kazushi IWAO

Kobe City University of Foreign Studies

## 1. Introduction

The Sino-Tibetan Treaty Inscription (Tang Fan huimeng bei 唐蕃会盟碑, hereafter referred to as the ST inscription) is probably the most famous and important among the old Tibetan inscriptions.<sup>1</sup> Inscribed in Tibetan and Chinese, it was erected in 823 to commemorate the bilateral treaty concluded between Tibet and Tang China. It stands today in front of the Jokhang temple in Lhasa.<sup>2</sup>

Since Bushell's translation of the Chinese inscription published in 1880 (Bushell 1880), many studies have been conducted on it from various perspectives including philology, history, and politics.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, the uniqueness of the treaty and the inscription in the historical context of relations between China and Tibet has not yet been fully studied.

This paper reinvestigates the history of this inscription mainly using Chinese historical materials to highlight some unique characteristics of the ST inscription in comparison with earlier Sino-Tibetan treaties. I will begin by briefly introducing the inscription, before moving on to explain the historical background. I will conclude by comparing this Sino-Tibetan treaty to earlier ones.

## 2. The Sino-Tibetan Inscription and treaties

The ST inscription was, according to the Tibetan text inscribed on the western side, installed in 823, and is still located in front of the gate of the Jokhang temple in the city of Lhasa.

The inscription bears four texts on four faces: the western face carries the text of the treaty in Tibetan with a Chinese version; the eastern face carries a Tibetan view of Sino-Tibetan history from the beginning of the seventh century to the time of the treaty; the northern face is a list of Tibetan officials who attended the signing ceremony; and the southern face is a list of the Chinese officials who attended the ceremony. Both the northern and southern faces are written in Tibetan

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<sup>1</sup> For the text and annotated translation of the inscription, see for example Sato 1958-59: 874-931, Wang 1982: 1-60, Richardson 1985: 106-43 and Li and Coblin 1987: 34-137. For other previous studies, see Iwao *et al.* 2009: 32.

<sup>2</sup> According to Hazod 2009: 184, it is likely that the inscription was originally erected in a different place called Sbra stod tshal.

<sup>3</sup> See Iwao *et al.* 2009: 32.

with Chinese.

Of the four faces, the most important text is on the western face because it bears the main text of the inscription, namely the text of the treaty. It is noteworthy that the text is written in Chinese and Tibetan, and that both versions' contents are identical.

It is neither the only treaty concluded between the Tibetan Empire and Tang China nor the only inscription that was erected. Although relations between the Tibetan Empire and Tang China were mostly hostile for more than 300 years, there were numerous attempts at arbitration. At least seven Sino-Tibetan treaties are recorded in Chinese sources, namely in 706, 730-3, 762, 767, 783, 784, and 821-2.<sup>4</sup> Inscriptions were built for three treaties: the 730-3 treaty, the 783 treaty, and the 821-3 treaty.

In 730-3, when the mountain Chiling 赤嶺 in Qinghai 青海 province was established as the boundary between Tibet and Tang China, a stone inscription was installed to demarcate the boundary at the foot of the mountain Chiling near the Qinghai lake.<sup>5</sup> Although the inscription is currently missing, the text of the Chinese inscription is conserved in *Cefu Yuangui* 979 (A: 11b-12a, p.11503, B: 7a-b, 3908).<sup>6</sup>

In 783, when a further treaty was concluded, inscriptions were installed along the borderline.<sup>7</sup> These inscriptions have not, however, yet been discovered.

Inscriptions were again erected in 823 when a further treaty was concluded. According to the western face of the ST inscription, two identical inscriptions were erected in the capitals of both of the empires.<sup>8</sup> One was located in Lhasa in the Tibetan Empire—the ST inscription treaty—while the other was erected in Chang'an 長安 (present-day Xi'an), but this is currently missing.<sup>9</sup>

These inscriptions were all installed as part of the treaty-making process. However, it is worth noting that there is a distinctive difference between the ST inscription and the other two. The most striking difference is the location of the inscriptions. While the ST inscription and the

<sup>4</sup> See Suganuma 2010: 2.

<sup>5</sup> *Jing Tangshu* 196b: 5231. Sato 1958-59: 465-466.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Stein 1988: 137.

<sup>7</sup> *Tang Huiyao* 97: 1734. It states that in the ninth month of the third year of Jianzhong 建中 (782), the Chinese and Tibetan envoys decided the Chinese boundaries and also decided that these were to be recorded in the stone inscriptions. In addition, the inscription in Qingshui 清水, where the boundary was established in the treaty of 780-3, is mentioned in "the official letter dispatched to a general of Tibet" (賜吐蕃將書) in *Lu Zhi Ji* 6: 305. See Suganuma 2012: 10-11.

<sup>8</sup> ST inscription: East II. 64-71.

<sup>9</sup> The inscription was likely to be erected in/near the place where the ceremony was to be held. According to the eastern face of the treaty, the treaty ceremony in Chang'an was held in a temple named Sheng sang si (ST inscription, east I. 57). But *Tang Huiyao* 97: 1738 records suggest that it was in a temple named Wanghui si 王會寺. See also Li and Coblin 1987: 113-14.

Chang'an inscription were built in the capitals, namely Lhasa and Chang'an,<sup>10</sup> the two other inscriptions were located along the boundaries.

This suggests that the purpose of the ST inscription was different. The intention of inscriptions installed along the boundaries in 730-3 and 780-3 were apparently to demarcate the boundaries. The ST inscription was not, however, as it was erected far away from the boundaries, and the text of the ST inscription is only a summary which denotes just one place as being part of the boundary.<sup>11</sup> Thus, it may be concluded that the demarcation of the boundaries was not the purpose of the ST inscription.

Several questions therefore emerge. Why were two of the treaty inscriptions erected on the border while the ST inscription was erected in the capitals? What was the purpose then of the ST inscription? To resolve these questions, we have to reconsider the characteristics of the treaty of 821-2 by comparing it to the treaties of 730-3 and 780-3.

### 3. The treaty of 730-3

Just before the treaty of 730-3, the two countries had been in a state of fierce war. The youthful Tang Emperor Xuanzong 玄宗, who enthroned in 712, quickly and widely dispatched the army to Qinghai and Pamir to detain the Tibetan army coming down to Central Asia. It is apparent that the Tibetan army deploying over these areas were pushed back by the Tang army then. It became decisive in 729 when the Tang army recaptured Shibao cheng 石堡城<sup>12</sup>, a strategic point to enter in the Qinghai plateau. Tibet then underwent a policy change and entered into peace talks with Tang.<sup>13</sup>

According to Chinese sources, the two countries set the boundary at the Qiling mountain, where they installed stone inscriptions in 733 to indicate the boundary. It is noteworthy that the text of the inscription preserved in *Cefu Yuanqui* (vol. 979, A: 11b-12a, 11503, B: 7a-b, 3908) was written from the viewpoint of Tang China in a prose style with 四六駢儷体, or a pattern of four-

<sup>10</sup> Tibetan historical texts that were written after the 12th century suggest that after two inscriptions were built, the third inscription was built at a place called Gong gu rme ru, which was probably along the boundary of the two states. But it is quite doubtful whether it exists, for this is not mentioned in the ST inscription: if it exists, it must be mentioned in this official inscription, similar to another inscription in Chang'an. See Uebach 1991.

<sup>11</sup> ST inscription: West Face, ll.42-45 of Tibetan and col. 4 of Chinese. It states that the Tibetan boundary was Qingshui xian 清水泉, while Chinese was Suirong zha 綏戎柵. The buffer zone between two places was Jiangjun gu 將軍谷, where each envoy could change horses. See also Li and Coblin 1987: 90-91.

<sup>12</sup> Sato (1958-59: 459-61) pointed out that the fort must be identified as mkhar lcags rtse, "the fort of the iron peak," which appears in the entry of 741 in *Old Tibetan Annals*. But Beckwith (1987: 129) differently identified Shibao cheng with Jid par appearing in the entry of 745 in *Old Tibetan Annals II*. For *Old Tibetan Annals*, see Bacot *et al.* 1940-46, and Dotson 2009.

<sup>13</sup> The contact between the two countries started through unofficial channel: The negotiation was through Jincheng gongzhu 金城公主. See Sato 1958-59: 462-3.

and six-character rhythms. Therefore, apparently it was prepared by the Chinese side.

However, there is no record of a Tibetan text or Tibetan version corresponding to the Chinese text in the 730-3 treaty. Given that it was a bilateral treaty, it is likely that both two sides prepared the text in each language. In fact, we could find a faint trace of the Tibetan text in the 780-3 treaty.

#### 4. The treaty of 780-3

The treaty of 780-3 marked a point at which the Tibetan Empire gained military dominance over Tang China.<sup>14</sup> Tang China, once the stronger of the two empires, had been significantly weakened as a result of the An Lushan 安祿山 rebellion, which exploded in 755. Before this, Tang China dominated Central Asia through its strong military power and the Tibetan military was held back by the Tang force, but the Chinese army was withdrawn from the area after the rebellion. At the same time, the Tibetan military advanced into Central China and the Gansu area. Tibetans seized a major part of the once-Chinese-dominated areas such as Gansu. Tibet now ruled almost all of the Hexi corridor and the Longyu area, and the territory of Tang China was reduced. The border between the two states was around Longshan 隴山 (north-west of Shanxi 陝西 province), which is only approximately 230 km west of Chang'an.

It was in the context of overwhelming Tibetan superiority that the treaty was negotiated. When the Chinese envoys arrived in Tibet, the Tibetan Emperor ordered them to stop and immediately produce the official Chinese dispatch. Having investigated the dispatch, he sent envoys a message in which he claimed not to treat Tibet as Chinese subject, negotiated the boundary, and presented the following proposal:

For the sworn ceremony, we propose to follow that of the 2nd year of Qinglung (708), when the imperial dispatch said “When the Tang envoy arrives there, the son-in-law shall first conclude the sworn ceremony with him, and when the Tibetan envoy arrives here, we, father-in-law, will ourselves take part in the ceremony with him.”<sup>15</sup>

In the following part, *Jiu Tangshu* (196b: 5246) states that the Chinese Emperor conceded all these demands. It is noteworthy that the Tibetan Emperor demanded that the treaty ceremony should first be held in Tibet, and then in China among these demands. The motivation behind the

<sup>14</sup> For the Sino-Tibetan relation and Central Asia after the An Lushan rebellion, see Sato 1958-59: 497-708, Moriyasu 1984: 50-58 and Beckwith 1987: chapter 6 (143-72).

<sup>15</sup> *Jiu Tangshu* 196b: 5246. The translation is based on Bushell 1880: 52 with minor modifications. See also Pelliot 1961: 41-42.

Tibetan Emperor bringing up this old dispatch was apparently to demonstrate their diplomatic superiority: as the Chinese first came to Tibet for the ceremony, it is the Chinese who “proposed” the treaty to the Tibetans.

The second point I would note is the text of the treaty. The treaty ceremony was held in the first month of 783 in Qingshui, a boundary between the two states. Several Chinese sources, including *Jiu Tangshu* (196b: 5247-48) and *Tang Da Zhaoling Ji* (129: 698-99) preserve the text of the 783 treaty.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese side apparently prepared the text as it was written in a prose style with a pattern of four- and six-character rhythms.

The Tibetans also prepared their own text. According to *Jiu Tangshu* (196b: 5248), Tibetan envoy Jiezan 結贊 (= rgyal mtshan) also had the text of the treaty. This is probably the Tibetan version of the text, which would have been written on the basis of Tibetan tradition. Thus, the text of the treaty was prepared simultaneously in two states on the basis of distinct traditions. As a result, minor differences may occur, but the most important facet of the treaty had to be identical, that is, the demarcation of the boundaries. The Chinese version states the boundaries in considerable detail, with many toponyms. This is the only part of the treaty where the pattern of four- and six-character rhythms is not respected.

In short, in 783 the Tibetans had tried to establish a superior position against Tang China. After the negotiation of the boundaries, the treaty text was prepared by both sides.

However, 30 years later, the Tibetans had shifted their diplomatic policy significantly.

## 5. Treaty of 821-2

Even after the conclusion of the 783 treaty, the Tibetan army did not stop its advance into China. However, Tang China adopted a long-term strategy of enclosing the Tibetans from 788, and the Tibetan Empire gradually lost its military superiority. According to Sato (1958-59: 668-88), Tang China tried to ally itself with states such as Uighur, Nanzhao, and the Islamic Empire to surround Tibet, and Tang China made successful alliances with Uighur and Nanzhao. Sato concluded that it was the main reason why the Tibetans shifted their strategy and began to seek reconciliation from the 810s.

Besides the Tibetan commander Zhang Khri sum rje's attempt to attack the Chinese military in Ordos in 818,<sup>17</sup> the Tibetans pursued a coherent strategy of reconciliation, and

<sup>16</sup> See Bushell 1880: 54-56 and Pelliot 1961: 43-45. Li (1956: 7) paid attention of this text because it cites the numerous toponyms of the boundaries of two states, and surmise that these boundaries were almost the same as those of the treaty of 821-3.

<sup>17</sup> Sato 1958-59: 689-91.

finally between 821 and 823, Tibet successfully concluded peace treaties with Tang, the Uighurs, and, according to a Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot tibétain 16 + IOL Tib J 751, even with Nanzhao.<sup>18</sup> The conclusion of the treaty was a great success as it prevented large-scale war until the collapse of the Uighur and Tibetan empires in 840 and 842, respectively. The particularly noteworthy point here is that the treaty was led by the Tibetans. In other words, it was Tibetans who finally brought peace to Central Asia.

Thus, the treaty of 821-2 is the most important treaty in Tibetan history. Furthermore, a comparison of the treaty of 821-2 with earlier treaties reveals that contemporary Tibetans also regarded the treaty of 821-2 as more important than the others. *Jiu Tangshu* mentions an interesting episode in the negotiation of the 821 treaty:

Brtsan po (emperor) and the state ministers Dpal-chen-po and Zhang Khri-sum-rje had sent the treaty beforehand, the important summary of which is “The two countries Tibet and China shall keep the borders which each one now rules ....” All now shall be followed; there shall be neither addition nor change.<sup>19</sup>

This means that the Tibetans sent the treaty to the court of Tang, and the Tang Emperor accepted it without any modifications. It is highly possible that the treaty the Tibetans sent was written in Chinese because the summary which is partly cited in *Jiu Tangshu* is almost identical to the Chinese text of the western face of the ST inscription.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, if one compares the Tibetan version of the treaty on the western face with the Chinese version, one notices that the language of the Chinese version is stiff and awkward, while the Tibetan is more natural and fluent. It is apparently because, as Japanese Sinologist Naito Torajiro states, the Chinese version of the treaty was a poorly writing text as classical Chinese, because it was a literal translation of the Tibetan version (Naito 1928: 307). Thus it seems the Tibetans first prepared the treaty in Tibetan, then translated it into Chinese and sent it to the Tang court.<sup>21</sup>

The differences in the negotiations leading up to the two treaties reveal that the Tibetan attitude had changed. In 783, the Tibetans demanded Tang to move first, and Tang at least prepared the text of the treaty in Chinese. But in 821, it was Tibetans who made the first move

<sup>18</sup> See Yamaguchi 1981: 28, 34 and Szerb 1983.

<sup>19</sup> *Jiu Tangshu* 196b: 5264. See also Bushell 1880: 84 and Pelliot 1961: 74.

<sup>20</sup> However, there are minor variants between the citation in *Jiu Tangshu* and the Chinese text of the ST inscription.

<sup>21</sup> There is no wonder that the Tibetan Empire was able to translate into Chinese because in the middle of the eighth century, Tibetans seized a major part of the once-Chinese dominated area including Gansu area until the collapse of the empire in the middle of the ninth century. It is certain that many Chinese were integrated into the expanding Tibetan Empire then. Chinese sources and manuscripts unearthed from Central Asia reveal that Chinese military officers and soldiers worked for the Tibetan Empire.

with them even preparing the Chinese version. In other words, in the 821–2 treaty, it was the Tibetans who took the initiative in concluding the treaty.

This should of course be seen in the context of the historical background mentioned before. Tang China's strategy of surrounding Tibet was almost successful, but the Tibetans shifted their strategy, and by their initiative pushed to conclude a peace treaty with Tang China and the Uighurs.

Given this context, we might surmise why the pair of inscriptions were erected in the capitals and not along the border. These inscriptions were apparently monuments to commemorate the diplomatic success of the Tibetan Empire, rather than acting to demarcate boundaries.

The memory of this great success and the importance of the inscription seem to have been passed from generation to generation in Tibet. Even after the collapse of the empire, while many Tibetan inscriptions of the imperial period were gradually forgotten and abandoned in Tibet, this inscription continued to be recognized as the “Sino-Tibetan Peace Treaty.” Despite a general lack of interest in old Tibetan inscriptions in Tibetan historiography, Tibetan authors have continued to cite this inscription.<sup>22</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

The conclusions of this paper could be summarized as follows:

1. While the inscriptions of the 730-3 treaty and the 780-3 treaty were boundary demarcations, the ST inscription was a monument to commemorate the treaty led by the Tibetans.
2. While in the treaties of 730-3 and 780-3 both Tang China and Tibet prepared each text of the treaty, it was the Tibetan side who prepared both Tibetan and Chinese texts in 821-2 treaty.
3. Tibetan attitude to the treaty had changed dramatically by the 821-2 treaty.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, in *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* the inscription was cited as “inscription of Lhasa” (p. 228).



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