

# The Past Lives of Tibetan Letters:

## Tracing the Transformation from Manuscript to Woodblock Print In Several Eighteenth-Century Tibetan Letter Collections

A 2014-2015 Rare Book School - UVa Fellowship Research Project  
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As a doctoral candidate in Tibetan Buddhism, I am reading Tibetan letters — lots of them. My goal is to understand how letter-writing networks fueled religious growth in eighteenth-century Tibet, much like the Republic of Letters in Enlightenment Europe enabled vibrant networks of intellectual exchange. The letters I am reading were produced by Tibetan Buddhist monks, and they have been preserved for us today thanks to the painstaking efforts of monastic scribes and clerks who decided that the compositions of their leading scholars were important. They were important enough, in fact, to be cut onto woodblocks — backwards, and in relief — and printed in collections to be housed in monastery libraries.

These printing projects of the works of renowned masters were (and still are) labor-intensive endeavors. In Tibet, paper is traditionally handmade from the inner bark of the *daphne* or *stella* plants, pulverized and sifted through screens, dried in the strong sun. Ink is crafted from charcoal, hide gum, and yak brain. Wood for the blocks is harvested from forests of birch and engraved by large teams of block cutters; one valley in the Tibetan region where an entire community of block cutters was recruited is called Orthography Valley, and its local birch grove is called Woodblock Grove, all in recollection of a monumental printing of the more than five thousand texts in the Tibetan Buddhist canon during the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the Rare

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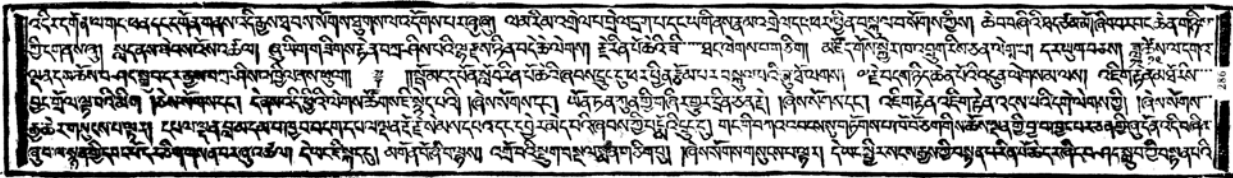
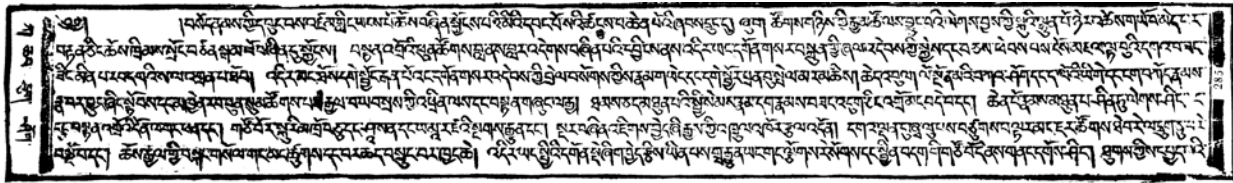
<sup>1</sup> Orthography (*dag yig*) Valley and Woodblock (*par shing*) Grove are located in the Choni (*jo ne*) district in the southern region of present-day Gansu province in China. I was introduced to these toponyms by Professor Yongdrol Tsongkha of Lanzhou University, Gansu.

Book School has granted me a profound sense of appreciation and wonder for the physical labor that has invested the Tibetan texts I now hold in my hands.

The *editorial* labor involved in Tibetan printing projects is just as impressive. Before the paper, ink, and blocks are prepared for printing, manuscript texts are collected, selected, and edited. I knew this, and frankly, I ignored it, grateful that instead of deciphering manuscript letters with their idiosyncratic handwriting, I was able to work with legible and polished print editions. My experience at the Rare Book School, though, compelled me to ask some difficult questions: exactly how much editorial labor separates original manuscript letters from the printed editions of letter collections at my disposal? And does the difference, in fact, make a difference?

To answer these queries, my first task was to reconstruct the original forms of the Tibetan letters I am studying. Because many of Tibet's monastic archives have been lost or destroyed over the centuries, and others are tightly restricted by the Chinese central government, it has proven unfeasible for me to locate original copies of letters stemming from the particular epistolary community I am researching. Instead, I have relied on two alternative sources of information for my reconstruction project: first, Tibetan letter-writing manuals penned by some of the same eighteenth-century monks featured in my dissertation research, and second, the manuscript archives of an unrelated monastery in central Tibet. These two halves of the puzzle — prescriptive instructions about what letters should look like and what content they should include, and examples of letters from the same period, although from a different region — gave me more than enough evidence to reconstruct the past lives of Tibetan letters.

The woodblock printed letters with which I began look like this:



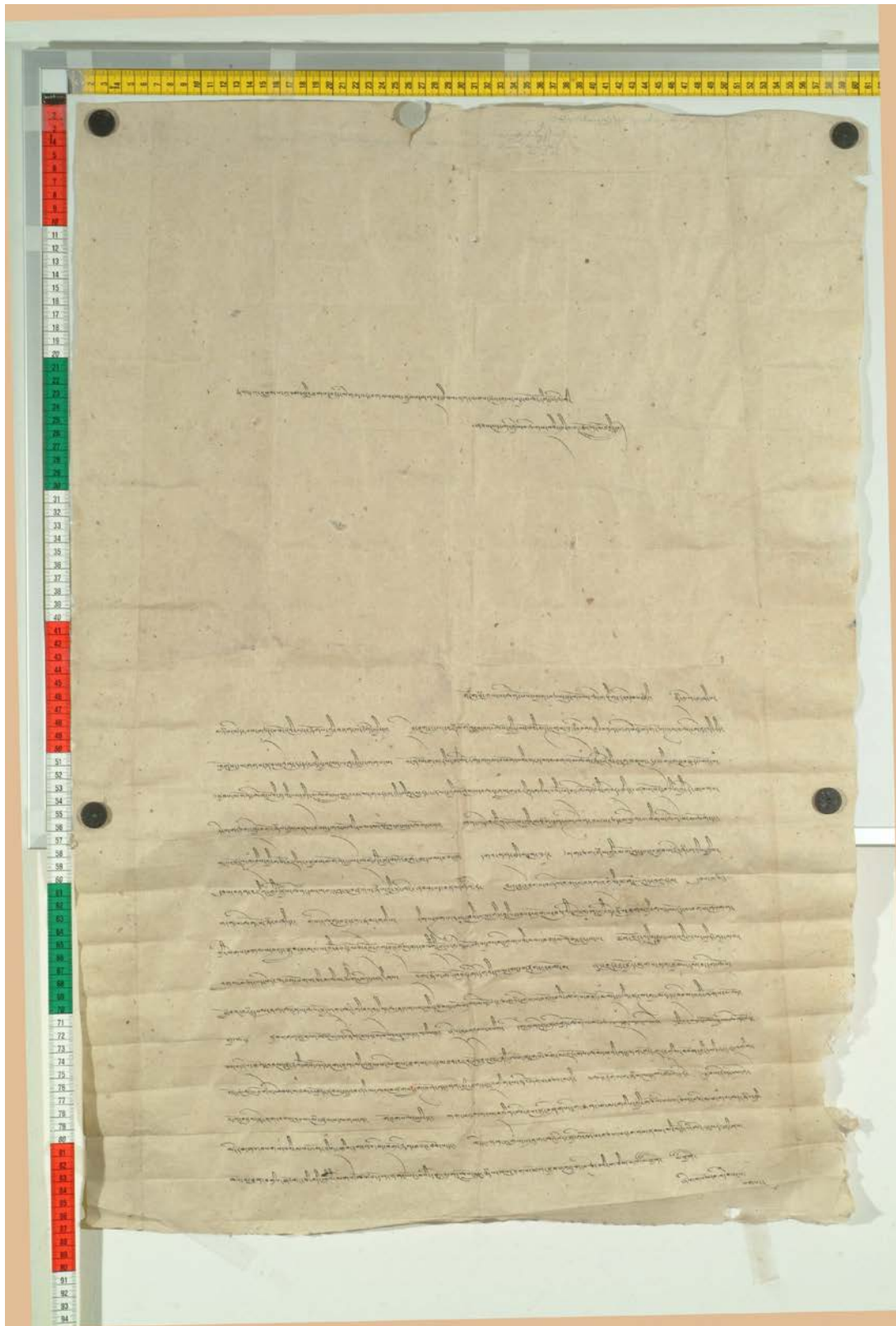
Folio 6, recto and verso, from the *Cycle of Official Letters in Ornate Poetry* by a Tibetan Buddhist monk named Jamyang Zhepa.<sup>2</sup>

You will notice that the paper is wide and rectangular. This shape intentionally mimics the appearance of the palm-leaf manuscripts on which Buddhist teachings from India made their way to Tibet beginning in the seventh or eighth centuries of the Common Era (palm trees do not grow in the Tibetan climate). The exact proportions and overall size of this paper style vary, but on average, imagine a thick stack of these pages sitting across your lap at about twelve or fourteen inches wide. Also, notice that the script on the page is all the same size. The only empty space in the body of the text is an indentation at the upper left of the recto side to mark the beginning of a new letter; on the verso, the letter continues without any indentation. This particular letter ends on the third line of the verso, where a punctuation marker shaped like a miniature trident separates it from the next letter. Bibliographic information on the left sidebar of the recto places this page within the text, and places this text within the *Collected Works* of its author. Pagination in Arabic numerals has been super-imposed on the right by modern editors.

<sup>2</sup> Tibetan title *chab shog snyan dngags kyi skor*. Found in the *Collected Works* of 'jam dbyangs bzhad pa ngag dbang brtson 'grus (fl. 1642-1721).

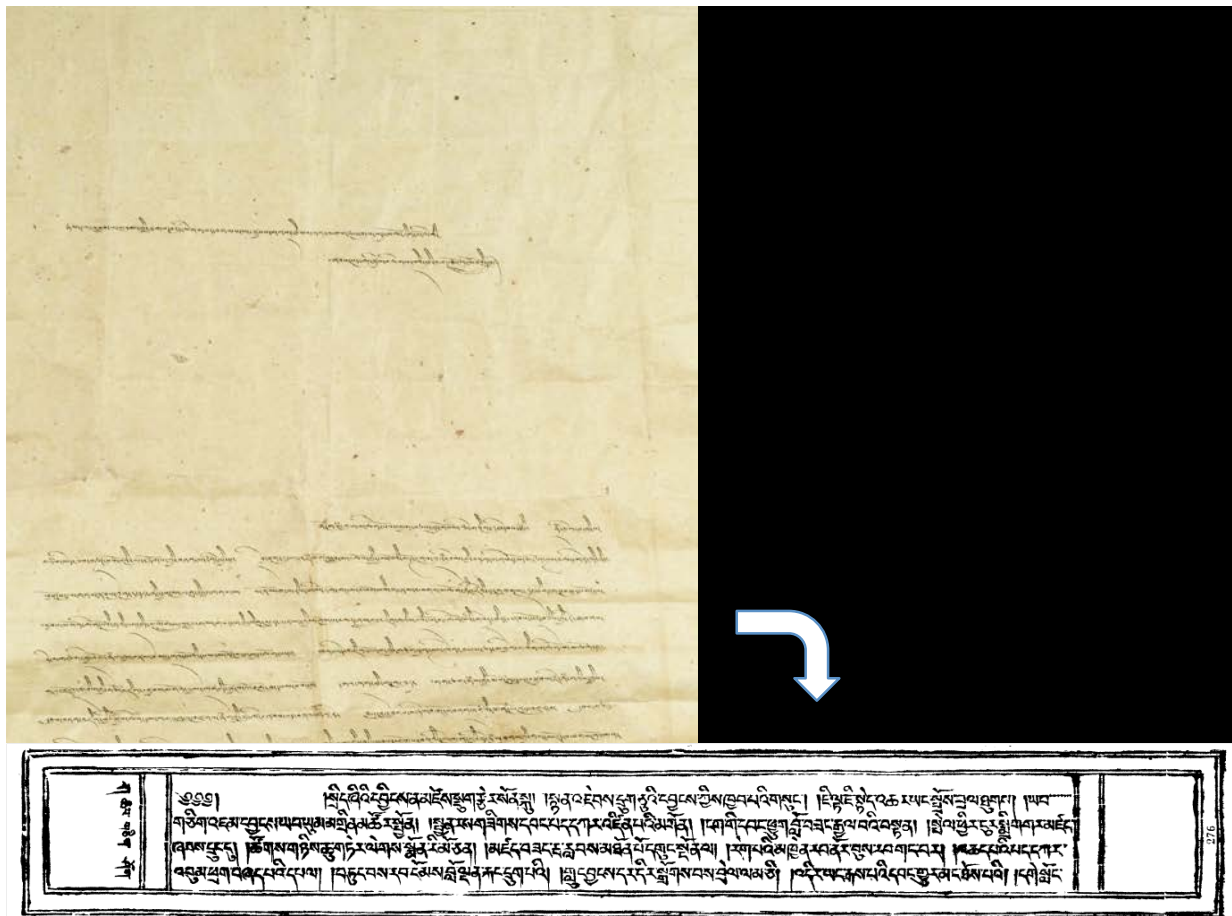
As I read Tibetan letter-writing manuals from the eighteenth century, including one composed by the author of the letter displayed above, I used the lens of my Rare Book School experience to focus on some major differences between the print editions and the descriptions of manuscript letters. First, in terms of content: the letter-writing manuals prescribe a line of address to the recipient, a line of offering identifying the sender, and a conclusion that lists the place and date of dispatch. The main body of the letter falls after the sender is identified and before the conclusion. While the simple details of sender, recipient, place, and date may seem to us obvious necessities for letters in any language and culture, I was astounded to realize that these important markers have usually been removed by the editors of printed letter collections — these lines *simply don't exist* in many of the letters I read in woodblock printed form. Apparently, monastic editors prized the (Buddhist) content of these letters over their historical particularity, and so removed the framing information that is so central to the functioning of letters as letters. This is especially the case when the recipient isn't famous. As a historian, I bemoan the loss of such valuable data about the composition of particular texts and about the invisible recipients whose contributions to history I might value more highly than the editors did.

Second, in terms of form: the letter-writing manuals prescribe that letters be composed on large sheets of paper with more substantial height than the palm-leaf shaped paper. We know this because the manuals indicate the proper way to fold a letter and then seal it and wrap it in a ceremonial scarf; the palm-leaf style paper used for woodblock print editions of *Collected Works* would be cumbersome indeed to fold into eighths vertically! One letter (among many) culled from the administrative archives of Kundeling Monastery confirms that letters were typically composed on large sheets of paper, more vertical than horizontal in dimension, and folded numerous times:



Document ID 616, Kundeling Archives, Bonn University. This document is 60 cm wide by 87 cm tall.

This remarkable difference in paper size and shape, combined with the fact that historical data about recipients, senders, places, and dates has been systematically deleted from edited letters, leads me to the interpretive conclusion that when Tibetan Buddhist letters were printed, they were *un-made* as human historical artifacts just as surely as they were *made* into institutional religious artifacts. Humans write on broad paper; saints write on long, palm-leaf shaped paper. Humans and their words are situated in particular relationships and in times and places; the words of saints are timeless truth, presented in imitation of the eternal Word of the Buddha. A monumental shift in the hermeneutical understanding of these letters is wrought when manuscript letters are edited and printed.



This investigation revealed much about the editorial minds at work behind the *Collected Works* printing projects that were growing in size and number during the eighteenth century. What else, though, could I discover about what the *original letters* were trying to say? Later editors were driven by religious motivations to transform mere human, historical documents into the kind of timeless truth worthy of carrying their tradition into the future. The original letters were also composed by Tibetan Buddhist monks in the context of religious learning and missionary activity: what kind of religious orientation do original manuscript letters manifest, if we look more deeply?

As I paid more attention to formatting instructions in the letter-writing manuals, I discovered several other ways in which the particularity of the relationship between sender and recipient are displayed on the page in original manuscript letters. The manuals divide their instructions into three broad sections; first, how superiors write letters to inferiors; second, how equals write to one another; and third, how inferiors write to superiors. Tibetan Buddhism, like traditional Tibetan social structures more generally, is strongly hierarchical. Relationships hinge first and foremost on an evaluation of relative rank. According to the manuals, the size and style of the handwriting in a letter indicates the sender's perception of his or her rank relative to the recipient's: small, fine handwriting indicates a humilific orientation (inferior writing to a superior), while large letters with sweeping tails at the end of lines indicate an honorific orientation (superior writing to an inferior). Without the benefit of seeing the variation in handwriting size and script style in printed letter collections, we miss important evidence of how the sender relates hierarchically to the recipient.

One final formatting feature proved to be the cornerstone for an entirely new understanding of manuscript letters in Tibetan Buddhist contexts. The letter-writing manuals

prescribe the insertion of a drop-down space, in some texts also called a "hierarchy space," between the names of the sender and recipient. When the superior is writing, his or her name comes first, then the hierarchy space, and then the recipient's name; the opposite configuration occurs in humilific letters. The hierarchy space is measured in finger-widths and corresponds to the relative difference in rank between sender and recipient; the hierarchy space literally embodies the social hierarchy inherent to the epistolary relationship, performing it visually on the page. One letter-writing manual, for example, instructs:

To those whom you know are definitely greater than you,  
Put "submitted before the feet of" [so-and-so].  
Leave a hierarchy space of six finger-widths.  
To those who are a little greater than you,  
Put "submitted before the eyes of" [so-and-so].  
Leave a hierarchy space of two finger-widths.  
To those who are lower than you — to inferiors —  
Put "submitted before the ears of" [so-and-so].  
Make a hierarchy space of four finger-widths.<sup>3</sup>

We see not only a scale of hierarchy in the size of the hierarchy space, but we also see a bodily hierarchy construed as the letter is symbolically presented before the feet, eyes, or ears of recipients of varying status. Offering before the feet connotes a humilific posture; before the eyes, a posture of respect among near equals; and before the ears, a command read aloud (and downward) to a lower-ranked recipient.

Another letter-writing manual offers a narrative interpretation of the hierarchy space:

When exemplifying your timidity and shy respect, as you do when prostrating before [a great person's] actual body, you speak from the lower-most part of their body, and so write "before the feet of" or "before the lotus feet of"; and leave the rest of that line blank. Then, really planting yourself underneath the feet of the superior, [however many] finger-

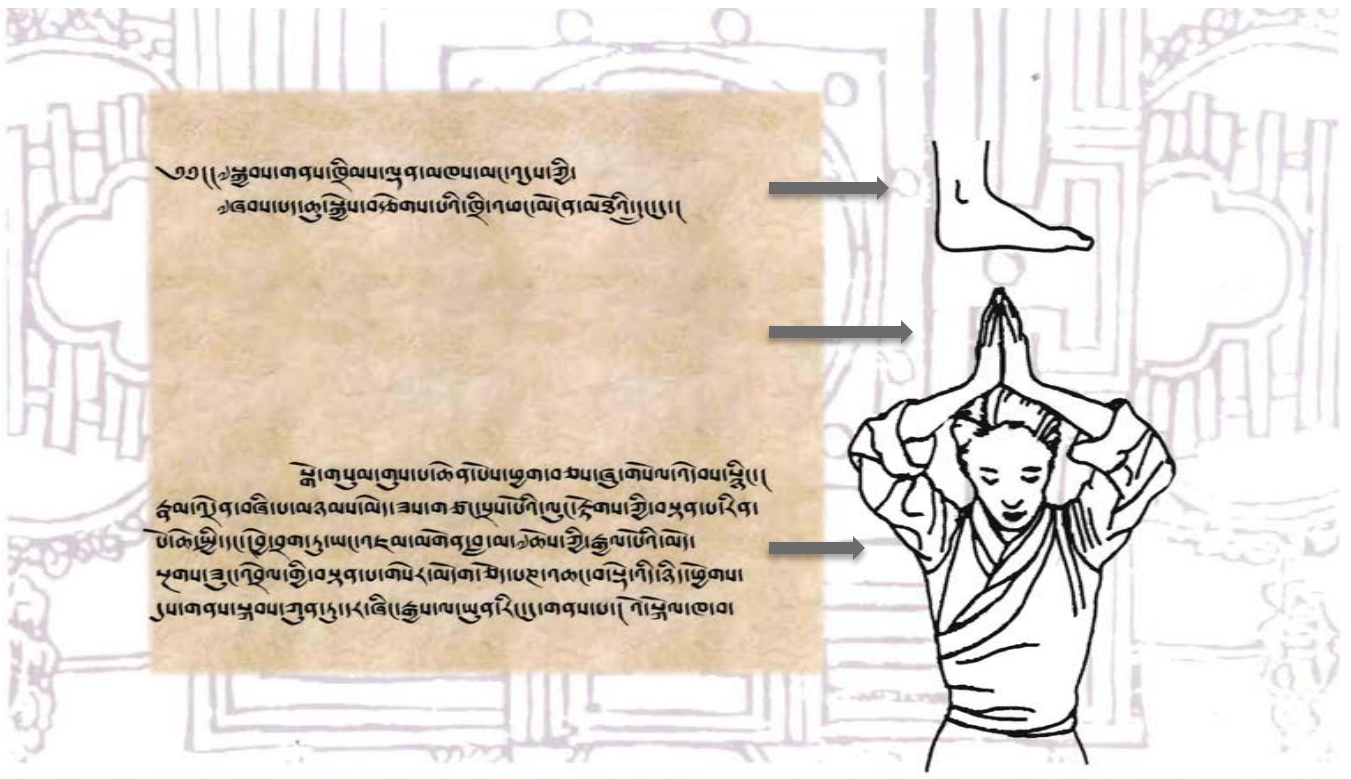
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<sup>3</sup> 'Phags pa blo gros rgyal mtshan. *yig bskur rnam bzhag 'gag sdom (A Condensed Presentation on Correspondence)*. Appended to the *yig bskur rnam bzhag nyung nyu rnam gsal* by dbal mang dkon mchog rgyal mtshan.



widths of space below that, write something like "submitted with great respect," and transition into the inquiry after his health, and the sending of regards [...].<sup>4</sup>

This manual's references to the superior's "actual body" and to "really planting yourself" show that he is not merely invoking a bodily simile here, but is appealing to the real extension of bodily postures — a prostration, in fact — into the form of the letter. He emphasizes that "to whomever you yourself would prostrate, you should write 'petitioned before the feet of.'" <sup>5</sup> The recipient's feet are invoked in the line of address ("offered before the feet of so-and-so"); the sender's hands, outstretched in prostration, are imagined in the hierarchy space measured in finger-widths; and the body of the letter represents the body of the recipient in the sender's presence. The imperative to show respect and submission that informs bodily expressions in Tibetan Buddhist hierarchies applies directly to the very materiality of text on the page.



<sup>4</sup> Mi pham zla ba. *phrin yig gi rnam bzhag dper brjod dang bcas pa padma dkar po'i phreng mdzes (A Presentation on Correspondence, Along with a Formulary: A Lovely Garland of White Lotus)*. Xining: mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrun khang (Qinghai Nationalities Publishing House), 1986. Page 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 13.

Tibetan Buddhist letters — especially letters sent from an inferior to a superior — are prostrations made of words. A combination of textual cues and visual cues recreates the ritual context of a prostration, with the sender offering forth his or her hands in supplication before a religious superior. The fact that such letters are ceremonially wrapped in *katak*, white silk scarves usually presented before religious images or offered to one's spiritual teachers, further reinforces the ritual meaning embedded in the letter as a physical object.

Before I discovered this, I had been reading Tibetan letters — but as the Rare Book School mantra goes, I had never read the *whole* letter. Without interrogating the material and textual "previous lives" of Tibetan letters, and without attention to the stylistic prescriptions in Tibetan letter-writing manuals, we would never know that these letters are in fact ritual objects embodying religious relationships. After all, the line of address, the hierarchy space, and the line of offering where the prostration hinges (both figuratively and literally) are the epistolary formatting components most often deleted in the editorial process for making woodblock print editions of collected works. With some imaginative detective work, I have contributed to what promises to be a radical shift in my field's understanding of Tibetan Buddhist letters. This is a finding that I introduced in preliminary fashion at the American Academy of Religion annual conference in November of this past year, and it is a subject on which I plan to publish a more detailed article. The Rare Book School trained me to ask certain kinds of questions of Tibetan letters that no one in my field had asked before — questions that have made quite a difference indeed.