

# *Reflections on the Compilation of Tibetan Epigraphy Found in Inner Mongolia*

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**Abstract:** This paper provides an overview of Tibetan inscriptions and stone documents in Inner Mongolia, focusing on Hohhot City and Alxa League as representative examples. The Tibetan Epigraphy in Inner Mongolia has been categorized, based on geographical locations and script types. Noteworthy features has been concluded with the extensive chronological span and diverse forms of these inscriptions and stone documents in Inner Mongolia. The article discusses their value in research, covering social and historical development, astronomical and calendrical studies, religious dissemination research, and linguistic studies. Emphasizing the multidisciplinary significance, it touches upon challenges faced during the compilation process. The examination of Tibetan inscriptions and stone documents in Inner Mongolia contributes to a broader understanding of the region's historical and cultural facets, shedding light on social, astronomical, religious, and linguistic dimensions. The text underscores the importance of preserving and studying these materials despite the encountered difficulties in field investigation.

China possesses a vast quantity of Tibetan Epigraphy with rich content, yet there is a lack of systematic research and compilation. Tibetan Epigraphy, due to their unique forms, has been playing an irreplaceable role and holding significant value in studying the history, culture, religion, science, and technology of the Tibetan people in Inner Mongolia<sup>[1]</sup>.

Many Chinese scholars have conducted research on stone inscriptions in Inner Mongolia and Tibetan Epigraphy. Works such as Wang Dafang's "The Record of Steppe Stone Inscriptions,"<sup>[2]</sup> edited by Shari Na, "Bibliography of Mongolian Studies' Stone Inscriptions," and numerous other studies on Tibetan Epigraphy, like Mr. Wang Yao's "The Record of Tubo Stone Inscriptions" and "Stone Inscriptions in Amdo Tibetan Areas" edited by Wu Jingshan, and so on. However, there are only few specialized compilations of Tibetan Epigraphy in Inner Mongolia. Based on the data accumulated during field research on Tibetan Epigraphy in Inner Mongolia, this article tries to present some reflections and insights gained during the compilation process.

## **1. Distribution of Tibetan Epigraphy in Inner Mongolia**

Due to the close connection between Mongolians and Tibetans and the profound influence of Tibetan Buddhism on Inner Mongolia, there is a significant amount of Tibetan inscription material scattered throughout the region. The long and narrow geographical features of Inner Mongolia have

led to the dispersal of Tibetan Epigraphy. From the western region of Alxa to the eastern region of Hulunbuir, traces of Tibetan Buddhism can be found, and Tibetan inscription materials are the relatively direct evidence of this. This section will introduce the distribution of Tibetan Epigraphy in two areas, Hohhot and Alxa, based on first-hand data collected during the field investigation.

Hohhot, as the capital of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, is located in the central-northwestern part of North China and the central part of Inner Mongolia. During the Qing Dynasty, it was known as Guihua City or Suiyuan City, and it is a region where Tibetan Buddhism was introduced relatively earlier than other places. Numerous prominent monasteries were built in this area, and it is known as the "City of Seven Major Monasteries, Eight Minor Monasteries, and Seventy-Two Small Temples" among the local people. The monasteries in Hohhot are well-organized and strictly managed. The Zasag Da Lama Printing House in Hohhot is located in the Da Zhao temple and oversees religious affairs for 15 Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Guihua City and Tumote Banner. Among these, seven monasteries are under the jurisdiction of the Zasag Da Lama and are known as the Seven Major Monasteries, while eight monasteries under the jurisdiction of the Da Lama are referred to as the Eight Minor Monasteries, and the remaining ten monasteries are affiliated with them.<sup>[3]</sup>

Tibetan Epigraphy in Hohhot are primarily found in locations such as Xilitu Monastery, the Great Monastery, the Five Pagoda Temple, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Museum, Inner Mongolia University, Inner Mongolia Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology, and others. For example, merit-recording inscription (Qing Dynasty of Kangxi Emperor) and iron bell (Qing Dynasty of Daoguang Emperor) are located in Xilitu Monastery, Especially remarkable is that the pedestals of the pagodas in the Five-Pagoda Temple are engraved all around with scriptures written in Manchu, Tibetan and Sanskrit. During the field investigation, we also discovered the long tablets inscribed with 'Phags-pa script. One gold long tablet was found in Inner Mongolia University, and one silver long tablet was found in the Inner Mongolia Institute of Archaeology and Cultural Relics.<sup>[4]</sup>

Alxa League is located in the westernmost part of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, characterized by its inland plateau and prominent desert terrain. Alxa has a unique position in the history of Tibetan Buddhism dissemination in the Inner Mongolia region. According to folklore, the Sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso once came to Alxa to propagate Buddhism and build temples. The South Temple (also named Guangzong Monastery) still houses a dedicated stupa and buildings for the Sixth Dalai Lama. The creation history of some monasteries in Alxa is also related to the Sixth Dalai Lama, although much of this historical information has been passed down through oral tradition. The monastery system in Khoshut Banner, Alxa League are composed of three major monastery systems, eight major monasteries, and subsidiary monasteries associated with three major monasteries.

Monasteries in the Alxa region are widely scattered throughout the league, often located in remote areas with sparse population and inconvenient transportation. Some are even situated deep in the desolate Gobi and Desert.<sup>[5]</sup>

In comparison to other regions, Tibetan Epigraphy in Alxa contain fewer stone carvings but more metallic documents. The variety of carrier forms is also more diverse, including bells, woks, censers, and more. Tibetan Epigraphy in this area are almost found in temples such as Yanfu Monastery, Alxa Museum, Fuyin Monastery, Guangzong Monastery, Dalek Monastery, Chengqing Monastery, and Zhaohua Monastery. The distribution of Tibetan Epigraphy in Alxa is summarized in Table 1:

Table 1: Distribution of Tibetan Epigraphy in Alxa League.

City(banner or county)	location	Tibetan Epigraphy
Alxa League	Yanfu Monastery	Iron bell-(Qing Dynasty of Qianlong Emperor)
		Incense burner-(Qing Dynasty of Qianlong Emperor)
	Alxa Museum	Iron pot belonged to Yanfu Temple -(Qing Dynasty of Qianlong Emperor)
	Fuyin Monastery	Bronze pot -(Qing Dynasty of Jiaqing Emperor)
	Guangzong Monastery	Iron bell-(Qing Dynasty of Daoguang Emperor)
	Dalek Monastery	Iron pot - (Qing Dynasty of Guangxu Emperor)
	Chengqing Monastery	Iron bell-(Qing Dynasty of Daoguang Emperor)
	Zhaohua Monastery	Iron bell – (Republic of China)
	Alxa Right Banner Museum	Iron pot - (Qing Dynasty of Guangxu Emperor)

## 2. Classification of Tibetan Epigraphy

Through the sorting and classification of books and documents, the library makes it convenient for readers to find materials, and the management is more systematic and not easy to make mistakes. As we all know, classification is crucial for the organization and summarization of knowledge. Therefore, significant systems such as the "Chinese Library Classification" have been established to guide the categorization of literature. The classification of Tibetan ancient texts has also been a subject of scholarly attention because a unified classification system is essential for organizing and summarizing knowledge. It is a necessary condition for the collaborative construction and sharing of Tibetan electronic literature resources and a vital topic in many academic forums. Hence, attempting to classify Tibetan Epigraphy is essential to identify their commonalities and differences.

The first dimension of classification is based on geographical regions. Tibetan Epigraphy are mainly scattered in the Xizang Autonomous Region and other Tibetan areas of China, like Qinghai, Gansu, Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, as well as Inner Mongolia, Beijing and other areas. There are abundant inscriptions in Tibetan areas. For example, the *"Tang-Tubo Alliance Monument"* located in front of the Jokhang Temple in Lhasa, the *"Stele with Emperor's Decree Inscription of Qutan Monastery"* in Qinghai, both of which had been engraved with Tibetan and Chinese characters; there is the Tibetan script inscribed on the base of the *"Vajrabhairava Pagoda"* at Wudang Monastery in Baotou, Inner Mongolia; and there is the *"Qingjinguacheng Pagoda Inscription"* located in the West Huang Temple, Beijing city, written by Qianlong himself, inscribed in four different scripts: Manchu, Han, Mongolian, and Tibetan. And in other regions, there is the *"Huguo Guangci Temple Inscription"* in Shenyang, inscribed in four kinds of characters including Manchu, Han, Mongolian, and Tibetan. <sup>[6]</sup>

The second dimension of classification is based on the types of scripts used. Tibetan Epigraphy can generally be categorized into two forms: single-script and multi-script. Single-script inscriptions refer to inscriptions where only one type of script is used on the literary carrier. For example, the words on the stone carvings collected from Alxa area in Baotou Museum are only one kind of ancient Tibetan, and the Yuan Emperor's imperial edicts collected in the Inner Mongolia Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology are only engraved with a kind of Chinese characters which is the Phagspa script. Multi-script inscriptions, on the other hand, feature multiple scripts on the literary

carrier. For instance, the "*Kangxi's Suppression of Jungar Uprising Commemorative Monument*" located at Xilitu Monastery in Hohhot is inscribed in four scripts: Manchu, Han, Mongolian, and Tibetan. The commemorative monument at Longevity Monastery in Wusutu Monastery is inscribed in both Mongolian and Han scripts.

### 3. Characteristics of Tibetan Epigraphy in Inner Mongolia

Tibetan Epigraphy, unlike typical literature, exhibit a diverse range of carriers, and those found in Inner Mongolia display several distinctive characteristics. While compiling Tibetan Epigraphy collected in Inner Mongolia, the following characteristics were observed:

#### 3.1. Broad Time Span

The time span of Tibetan Epigraphy in Inner Mongolia is significant. The earliest inscriptions can be traced back to the Yuan Dynasty, such as the "Imperial Edict Tablet of the Yuan Emperor" written in the Phagspa characters. With the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia, these inscriptions found were primarily carved in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, with some from the Republican era (1911-1949).

#### 3.2. Diverse Forms of Tibetan Epigraphy

Besides common stone carvings, Tibetan Epigraphy in Inner Mongolia also take various forms, including cliff inscriptions, scripture walls, cauldron inscriptions, bell inscriptions, censer inscriptions, plaques, seals, and more.

*Monumental Inscriptions:* These include commemorative monuments such as the "Kangxi's Suppression of Jungar Uprising Commemorative Monument" at Xilitu Monastery in Hohhot, which is inscribed in four scripts: Manchu, Han, Mongolian, and Tibetan. There are also inscriptions documenting the restoration of temples, like the inscription from the Jiaqing period at Longevity Monastery in Wusutu Monastery, and the "Commemorative Monument for the Reconstruction of Baotang Monastery" in Ordos, which are inscribed in multiple scripts.

*Cliff Inscriptions:* Found around the Xilamadong Monastery in the outskirts of Hohhot, these cliff inscriptions contain numerous cliff carvings of Buddha images and Tibetan script.

*Scripture Walls:* The Vajrasana Stupa at Cideng Monastery in Hohhot features scripture inscriptions in Tibetan, Mongolian, and Sanskrit scripts, covering the entire base of the stupa.

*Cauldron Inscriptions:* The Fuyin Monastery in Alxa Left Banner houses a large cauldron from the Jiaqing period, approximately 2 meters in diameter, inscribed with Tibetan script and auspicious motifs with a character height of around 25 cm.

*Bell Inscriptions:* In the monasteries of Ordos, there is a damaged iron bell cast during the Guangxu era, inscribed with Manchu, Han, Mongolian, and Tibetan scripts, along with auspicious motifs.

*Censer Inscriptions:* Yanfu Monastery in Alxa Left Banner has a censer cast during the Qianlong era of the Qing Dynasty, featuring inscriptions in Han, Mongolian, and Tibetan scripts. It was donated by Princess Duoluo Gege and her consort.

*Plaques:* The Hanbaiyu plaque with the inscription "Vajrasana Stupa" in three scripts (Tibetan, Mongolian, and Han) is hung on the Vajrasana Stupa at Cideng Monastery in Hohhot. The plaque's inscriptions are remarkably clear. Additionally, there is the plaque from the Taixie Gate, originally built during the Ming Dynasty in Meidai Monastery, now preserved in the Baotou Museum. This plaque, inscribed in both Tibetan and Han scripts, has a Tibetan line horizontally above the Chinese script, which is vertically inscribed below.

*Seals*: The Inner Mongolia Museum houses Tibetan seals, including a Yuan Dynasty copper seal with the inscription "Treasure of the Sangha and Buddha's Teachings" in the seal script. There is also a bronze seal from the Ming Dynasty with the inscription of "Wish-fulfilling Jewel, Proclaiming Dharma, Omniscient Gandzhu'er Wang" in both Mongolian and Tibetan scripts.

Additionally, other types of inscriptions include engraved waist plaques and imperial edict tablets, among others.

#### 4. The Value of Tibetan Stone Inscriptions

Stone inscriptions written in ethnic characters on stone steles, metal objects, and other carriers serve as records of a culture and the societal conditions of a particular ethnic group. Notably, the rock art in the Helan Mountains vividly depicts scenes of ancestral hunting and the beliefs in certain totems. [7] Tibetan stone inscriptions, on the other hand, have provided relatively accurate historical records of Tibetans for Tibetan history studies. These archives may encompass various fields such as language, customs, religion, and history, making them invaluable primary sources for researchers in these areas.

##### 4.1. Value for the Study of Social and Historical Development

There is an incense burner located in Yanfu Temple in Alxa League. It is inscribed with the words "*Zasakdoro of Mount Helanshan... Princess Dologg presented and offered her respects...*" The casting time of the incense burner was "*August 15, the 33th year of Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty*", and another Tibetan related epigraphy, a bronze bell, also found in the same temple, bears inscriptions mentioning "*Duke of Peshuo... With the princess Dologge Princess sincerely made*" in Mongolian, Chinese and Tibetan languages was also made by casting time "*the 10th day of the fifth month in the 55th year of Emperor Qianlong of the Great Qing Dynasty*." Yanfu Temple, also known as Yameng Temple, has a deep connection with the history of the Alxa League, particularly with the Zasad, the Tibetan religious leaders. The inscriptions from the Qianlong period record the maintenance and contributions made to the temple by Zasad during his time. In the 25th year of Emperor Qianlong, the Qing court granted the temple a "*Yanfu Temple*" plaque with four character styles including Manchu, Han, Mongolian and Tibetan, hence, it is called Yanfu Temple. The development of Yanfu Temple (Yamen Temple) is closely related to the construction of successive Zasad in Alashan. Since the first generation of Zasad came to Alxa in the Kangxi Dynasty, some repairs and donations made by Zasad to Yamen Temple in the Qianlong period had been recorded in the above-mentioned literature. These records are invaluable historical documents for researching the Qing Dynasty's governance in ethnic regions.

##### 4.2. Value for Astronomical and Calendar Studies

In the Cideng Temple which located in Hohhot City, in addition to the inscriptions on the body of the "Diamond Throne Relic Pagoda", there are also three stone carvings of "Six paths of Reincarnation", the "Distribution Map of Mount Sumeru" and "Mongolian Astronomical Chart". According to records, "Mongolian Astronomical Chart" is the only astronomical map in Chinese astronomical historical materials. This astronomical chart is 1.445 meters in diameter, engraved 270 stars, depicted more than 1550 stars' positions, which was embedded in the wall behind the "Diamond Throne Relic Pagoda", and the text instructions next to the stars were written in Mongolian. This unique chart provides valuable insights into the astronomy of ethnic minorities in China. [8]

### 4.3. Value for the Study of Religious Dissemination

Meidaizhao is located at the foot of Daqingshan Mountain in Tumot Right Banner, Baotou City, built in the Emperor Wanli of Ming Dynasty, and the architecture adopts the combination of Han, Tibetan and Mongolian styles, encompasses elements of city walls, palaces, and temples. It was initially owned by Alatan Khan, the head of the Mongolian Tumot Tribe in the middle and late Ming Dynasty. In 1578, Alatan Khan introduced the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism from Qinghai Province. Baotou City Museum has collected Meidaizhao's Taihe Gate stone plaque, which bears inscriptions that read:

*"After the Yuan Dynasty, the King of Shunyi... Vow to worship the Three Jewels... The construction of the Temple of Spiritual Consciousness Taihe Gate less than a month of the city..... The 16 big characters means that the ruler wants the regime to be permanent, the world be peaceful, the people be happy and the society be prosperous. "*

These inscriptions serve as essential historical records for studying the history of Tumot Tribe, expressing the builder's worship to the three treasures of Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, and praying for the good wishes of the Ming Empire and the Jin Kingdom under the light of Buddhism and the luckiness of the people. These Tibetan related archives and materials can directly reflect the spread of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Mongolia at that time.<sup>[9]</sup>

### 4.4. Value for Linguistic Studies

The emergence of language and the creation of scripts represent the birth of a civilization to a certain extent, and the role of scripts is to inherit the civilization or culture it carries. At the beginning of the Yuan Dynasty founded by Kublital, Emperor Master Phagspa created the Phagspa script based on the Tibetan alphabet. Among the Tibetan epigraphy in Inner Mongolia, the seals, tokens and plaques of Phagspa script are distinctive and representative materials. The characteristics of a language are closely related to the inner culture of the ethnic group using it, such as the Yuan Emperor's Imperial decree plate, the cultural relics are genuine collected in the museum of Inner Mongolia University, for the gold long plate. Other museums, such as the Inner Mongolia Museum and the Baotou Museum, have replicas of this plaque. The plaque from the Inner Mongolia Cultural Relics and Archaeology Institute is a silver Phagspa script plaque with gold plating. Both the front and back sides of the plaque bear Phagspa script with the essence that, "With the power of Changshengtian (means eternal life in heaven), the Emperor's decree is sacred and inviolable. Those who do not show respect and obedience will be sentenced to death." The Mongolian people believe in Changshengtian, and the script used in these inscriptions evolved from Tibetan script. This perspective also reveals cultural exchanges between ethnic groups. These inscriptions hold significant value for linguistic research as well as the study of politics during the Yuan Dynasty.

In a word, Tibetan epigraphy is a precious cultural heritage, possessing rich historical and academic value. By researching and organizing these inscriptions, one can gain in-depth insights into the history, culture, and dissemination of religions in Inner Mongolia. They provide invaluable research materials for scholars and promote cross-cultural exchanges and understanding among different ethnic groups.

## 5. Challenges in Collecting and Compiling Tibetan Inscriptions

### 5.1. Damage to Stone Steles and Metal Carriers, Insufficient Preservation Awareness

In Inner Mongolia, many stone steles and metal objects, especially those related to religion, have suffered significant damage and destruction, primarily due to the cultural revolution. As a result,

numerous valuable records were lost, leaving a gap in our understanding of history. Even among the surviving inscriptions, most of them are severely damaged. Interestingly, newly erected steles tend to be better preserved compared to older ones, highlighting the need for enhanced preservation efforts for historical stone inscriptions. During the field investigation, it was observed that many inscribed bells and woks were in a state of disrepair. For instance, the bell tower in Xilitu Monastery had not been well-maintained, and the iron bell displayed severe damage. Additionally, the great bell of Zhungar Temple was placed in the corner of the courtyard wall without any cover. As we all know, the lack of protective measures could lead to gradual erosion of inscriptions due to natural weathering, resulting in the loss of valuable documentary evidence.

## **5.2. Limited Research on Tibetan epigraphy in Inner Mongolia**

Prior to conducting research, it was noted that there is a scarcity of studies on stone inscriptions, inscribed bells, and other similar stone materials in these areas. While some research has focused on the rock carvings and cliff stone statues at places like Lama Dong Monastery, there has been relatively little research on the inscriptions found on the monuments themselves. Consequently, when conducting investigations and research in this area, it was challenging to predict which monasteries or locations would yield significant findings. Research efforts often involved a comprehensive survey, and there were instances where substantial information was obtained from specific temples, while others yielded no valuable results.

## **5.3. Challenges in Compiling Tibetan Stone Inscription Data**

The process of collecting Tibetan related epigraphy data is only the initial step in rescuing and preserving these valuable documents. The subsequent compilation of these materials is a more critical and challenging task. Data obtained through photography or rubbings must be meticulously examined for content, transcribed accurately by trained individuals, and interpreted to facilitate use by future researchers. In Inner Mongolia, many inscriptions are multilingual, sometimes featuring up to four different characters, such as the "Memorial Stele for Kangxi's putting down the rebellion of Zhungar," which had been inscribed in Manchu, Han, Mongolian, and Tibetan scripts. Compiling such inscriptions can be a complex and time-consuming task, and it is difficult to find people who understand the four languages, extremely requiring collaboration between experts proficient in each script, which brings great difficulties to the sorting of the materials. This work is meticulous and must undergo multiple rounds of proofreading to ensure accuracy, finishing which needs professional skills, making it a time- and resource-intensive endeavor.

## **6. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the literature related to Tibetan stone inscriptions has a wide range of time, rich and diverse types, and plays a supporting role in the study of social and historical development, the study of religious dissemination, Astronomical and Calendar studies, and Linguistic Studies of ethnic groups. The collection and compilation of Tibetan related epigraphy in Inner Mongolia are highly meaningful and urgent endeavors. Whether viewed from the perspective of enriching the corpus of documentary materials or considering their intrinsic research value, these efforts are crucial. The preservation of these inscriptions is essential to prevent further deterioration, and their systematic organization allows them to be presented to experts and scholars, ensuring that they can fulfill their intended research and historical roles.

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