Dorjé Tarchin, the Mélong, and the Tibet Mirror Press: Negotiating Discourse on the Religious and the Secular

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Abstract
Much scholarly attention has been given to the importance of the Mélong, the first Tibetan newspaper, in the discursive formation of Tibetan nationalism; yet in claiming the Mélong as ‘secular’ and ‘modern,’ previous scholarship has also evaded the press’s Christian and colonial roots. This paper investigates the secularization of the Mélong and the Tibet Mirror Press as an historical project, and as a corollary demonstrates the emergence of a vernacular project of secularism that aligned pan-Tibetan national identity with religious pluralism against the threat of communism. As a Tibetan Christian intellectual, the Mélong’s founder Dorjé Tarchin (1890-1976) creatively responded to divergent and competing processes associated with British colonialism and missionary activity in India which led to the birth of the newspaper in 1925. Based outside of the purview of the xenophobic Lhasa government, Tarchin’s base in the Christian Scottish Mission provided an alternative institution for cultural production outside of Buddhist ones. This contributed to the secularization of Tibetan print culture by moving production away from the Buddhist-monastic elite, introducing a new genre into Tibetan discourse, opening up a public sphere for Tibetans, and supporting vernacular language publications. Despite or because of the press initially being situated in the Scottish Mission Church, the Mélong promoted literacy, religious pluralism, and fostered Tibetan national identity. Over the course of its near forty-year history, the press would undergo processes of institutional secularization with its separation from the Scottish Mission Church in 1946. Parallel to these processes, secularism emerges as a discursive terrain whereby the boundaries of religion, nation, and language are negotiated. I chart Tarchin’s role in negotiating and creating this conceptual terrain, gesturing to how the distinct boundaries between Christianity and Buddhism evident in his early career become more porous against the ‘distinct other’ of communism—the enemy of faith.

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