

Protecting Tibetan Buddhist Texts: The Material and Spiritual Considerations of *Pothi* Format Wrappings

Rachel Bissonnette, Graduate Book Conservation Intern
The Harvard Library Weissman Preservation Center

Introduction

Pothi was the most common book format for Tibetan Buddhist texts by the tenth century and is a book structure unique to the Tibetan and Mongolian book arts (Fig. 1). In the *pothi* format, the book is comprised of a long, narrow loose-leaf textblock made of paper (Fig. 2). The proportions are derived from the format of earlier palm leaf manuscripts. The textblock is stacked between stiff boards that are wrapped in cloth and secured with a strap or buckle. The cloth wrapping may be wrapped around the textblock only or wrapped around the entire book including the boards. For users, *pothi* evokes a different idea of the book and is interacted with in a different manner than a codex. **The wrappings play a crucial role in the user experience.** This poster explores the specific role that the wrappings play in the preservation of *pothi* format books.



Figure 1. *Pothi* format books wrapped in colorful textiles at the Library of Gandantegchinlen Monastery in Mongolia. Image courtesy of Dr. Vesna Wallace.

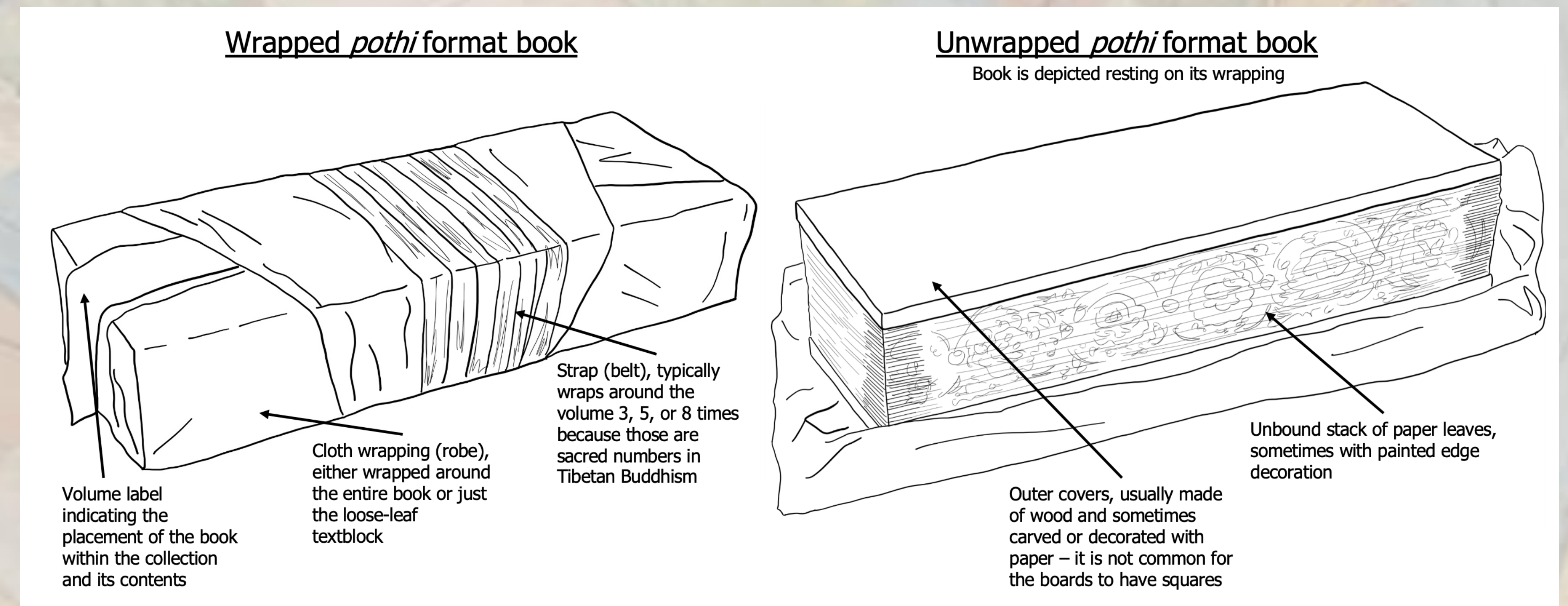


Figure 2. Diagrams showing the features of a wrapped and unwrapped *pothi* format book.

What is the role of wrappings?

The wrappings are not ancillary to the book but are an integral part of the structure.



Figure 3. Image showing the *pothi* format books with yellow-orange wrappings housed on-site at Harvard-Yenching Library.

To protect the physical object

Because the textblock is not bound like a codex and held together with adhesive or sewing, the wrappings are necessary to maintain the cohesion of the textblock. A tightly wrapped volume is held together by its wrapping thus maintaining order and alignment of the textblock. One of the greatest vulnerabilities of *pothi* format books is that the textblock is shuffled or misaligned. The wrapper reduces risk that the loose leaves will become uncollated and mitigates damage to protruding edges. Like the clothes that protect our bodies, the wrappings also act as a barrier from moisture, light, pests, and the accumulation of soiling and debris (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Image showing accumulation of debris and light damage observed on the wrappings of books that are stored exposed on the shelves in the stacks. The wrappers protected the textblocks from accruing this damage.

To protect the spiritual object

In the Buddhist tradition, the written word is a physical embodiment of the Buddha, thus books are treated with reverence akin to icons and relics. Books are referred to like honorific persons, the wrappings are called robes (*na bza'*) and the straps belts (*sku rags*), personifying the texts and highlighting their agency. The wrappings literally clothe the books and protect the sacred texts (Fig. 3). There is an often-cited passage regarding caring for Tibetan Buddhist books from the life of Chökyi Drönma, a 15th century Tibetan princess and Buddhist leader. She came across a collection of ancestral holy books and upon seeing the commentaries were covered with dust she set about cleaning them. In addition to refurbishing the books, she provided them with new cloth (robes) and strings (belts) to be wrapped in. It has been suggested that this established the custom of celebrating these books by caring for them and presenting offerings. One of the necessary offerings is clothing to ensure the spiritual needs of the objects are met.



Figure 5. Author unwrapping the robes of the Mongolian Red Kangyur for a tour group. Photo courtesy of Debora Mayer.



Scan to watch a video of unwrapping Harvard-Yenching Institute's Mongolian Red Kangyur

The impetus for research into the role of *pothi* wrappings was Harvard-Yenching Institute's luxury Mongolian Red Kangyur (Fig. 5). This *pothi* format book has an unprecedented five robes. Unwrapping the volume frequently evokes reverence and awe. 3D scans of the Mongolian Red Kangyur can also be accessed at this link: <https://skfb.ly/orpuC>

Conclusion and Considerations

Handling guidelines and caring for wrappings:

During a survey of the *pothi* format books at Harvard-Yenching Library, several Buddhist studies specialists were consulted to establish the special handling needs of these books:

We learned ***pothi* format books must never be placed on the floor, they should not be sat upon or touched with anyone's feet, and they must be kept in their robes when not being examined.** The last tenet is key because it emphasizes that it is necessary to make efforts to preserve the textile wrappings and document how the books are wrapped. A robe should not be separated from a book, but if it is necessary to remove a robe for treatment, the book should be given a temporary wrapping. The straps are integral as well because they are made to wrap around the volumes a specific number of times corresponding to sacred numbers. The unwrapping of the belts and robes forces the user to put themselves in a state of mindfulness when accessing the text and are a unique facet of the *pothi* format book structure. A conservator may not readily see the need for a robe or belt or feel that a damaged robe could be removed and replaced with a box, but these textiles confer spiritual protection to the sacred texts and are essential to the preservation of these objects.

References:

- Diemberger, Hildegard. 2012. "Holy Books as Ritual Objects and Vessels of Teachings in the Era of the 'Further Spread of the Doctrine (*Bstan pa yang dar*).'" In *Revisiting Rituals in a Changing Tibetan Context*, 9-41. Leiden: Brill.
- Elliott, Mark, Hildegard Diemberger, and Michela Clemente. *Buddha's Word: The Life of Books in Tibet and Beyond*. Cambridge: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2014.
- Helman-Ważny Agnieszka. 2014. *The Archaeology of Tibetan Books*. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library, 36. Leiden: Brill.

Acknowledgements:

Katherine Beaty (Book Conservator for Special Collections at the Harvard Library Weissman Preservation Center), **Jim Canary** (Head Conservator at the Indiana University Lilly Library), **Dr. Janet Gyatso** (Hershey Professor of Buddhist Studies at Harvard University), **Dr. Jinah Kim** (George P. Bickford Professor of Indian and South Asian Art at Harvard University), **Kelli Piotrowski** (Special Collections Conservator at the Harvard Library Weissman Preservation Center), **Library Staff at Harvard-Yenching Library**



Contact the author:
Rachel Bissonnette (she/her)
Winterthur/University of Delaware Program in Art
Conservation LACE Fellow
rachelroseconservation.com
rbis@udel.edu