

# *The Current State of Research on Ancient Tibetan Texts from the Perspective of Academic Dissertations*

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**Abstract:** Using bibliometrics methods, this paper examines the publication trends of academic theses related to "ancient texts," "ancient texts of ethnic minorities," and specifically "Tibetan ancient texts." The findings reveal that the more narrowly focused the research scope—for instance, on Tibetan ancient books—the fewer the number of published theses. Drawing on data from CNKI, the study identifies two key phases in postgraduate training related to Tibetan ancient text research: an initial accumulation phase and a subsequent development phase. It also analyzes the institutions awarding degrees in this field, along with their research orientations. Furthermore, by reviewing the evolution of policies concerning ancient books, the paper underscores the consistent importance placed by the Communist Party and the state on the preservation of ancient documents since the founding of the People's Republic of China. In the current era, new opportunities have emerged for advancing the study and preservation of ancient texts.

Research on Tibetan ancient texts primarily centers on two areas: the study of their content and the preservation of the texts themselves. The content of Tibetan ancient texts is vast and diverse, covering a wide range of topics that are difficult to generalize. Preservation efforts can be categorized into two main types: original protection and regenerative protection. Original protection refers to the physical conservation and restoration of ancient texts, while regenerative protection includes digital initiatives aimed at documenting and preserving Tibetan ancient texts through modern technologies.

Master's and doctoral dissertations represent significant academic achievements by postgraduate students and serve as important indicators of research activity within a given field. These dissertations not only reflect the current status and development of a discipline but also signal the potential for future research contributions. Analyzing dissertations on Tibetan ancient texts provides valuable insight into current research hotspots and evolving trends, contributing to the broader advancement of Tibetan ancient text studies in China.

Bibliometric analysis, which combines mathematical and statistical methods, is an effective tool for identifying research trends and frontier topics within academic disciplines. Despite its widespread use, bibliometric research specifically focused on Tibetan ancient texts remains limited in China, with most existing studies analyzing journal articles. For instance, Lama Tsering and Dojin Tsering have examined the publication history of Tibetan ancient texts over the past decade<sup>[1]</sup>, while Si Yitong has investigated research hotspots using bibliometric analysis of journal literature<sup>[2]</sup>. However, there has been little in-depth analysis of the development of Tibetan ancient text research based on postgraduate degree dissertations.

This paper addresses this gap by utilizing the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database to collect and analyze degree dissertations related to Tibetan ancient texts. It examines trends in annual publication volume, disciplinary distribution, academic level, degree-awarding institutions, and research focus areas. Additionally, the paper reviews and synthesizes the evolution of China's policies on Tibetan ancient texts in recent years, providing a comprehensive overview of the field's development and highlighting emerging opportunities in the current academic and policy landscape.

## 1. Data Sources and Methodology

The data for this study was obtained from the CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) degree dissertation database. The initial search was conducted using the keyword query “theme = 'Tibetan ancient texts'”, with no time restrictions applied. As of January 9, 2024, a total of 46 records were retrieved. Following manual data cleaning, one master's thesis unrelated to Tibetan ancient text research was excluded, resulting in a final dataset of 45 valid dissertations, comprising 9 doctoral dissertations and 36 master's theses.

Given the relatively small sample size, the scope of the search was subsequently broadened using the same method with the keywords “theme = 'ethnic minority ancient texts'” and “theme = 'ancient texts'.” These expanded searches yielded 91 and 18,060 relevant records, respectively. The data highlights that master's and doctoral students play a key role in ancient text research, forming an essential and expanding segment of the academic research community. However, when focusing specifically on ethnic minority ancient texts—and Tibetan ancient texts in particular—it becomes evident that the field remains under-researched, with significant gaps and untapped academic potential.

## 2. Results and Analysis

### 2.1. Research Timeline and Development Phases

As illustrated in Figure 1, the earliest degree dissertation related to Tibetan ancient text research was published in 2010. A second dissertation followed in 2012, after which there was a four-year gap with no retrievable publications. From 2017 to 2019, the number of dissertations increased modestly, with three papers published annually. This was followed by a clear upward trend in subsequent years. When the annual trends of master's and doctoral dissertations are examined

separately (see Figures 2 and 3), and compared to the total, it becomes evident that fluctuations in the number of master's theses primarily account for changes in the overall volume of dissertations.

The first doctoral dissertation in this field—*A Study on Mipham Jamyang Namgyal Gyatso and His Buddhist Thought System* by Zheng Hongying of Lanzhou University—was published in 2017, seven years after the first master's thesis. This delayed emergence of doctoral-level research further highlights the gradual development of the field<sup>[3]</sup>.

Based on the annual publication data, the progression of postgraduate training and research in Tibetan ancient texts can be divided into two main phases: the Initial Accumulation Phase and the Development Phase. Although the first master's thesis appeared in 2010 and the first doctoral dissertation in 2017, it is important to consider the extended research and writing cycles required for degree dissertations. Typically, a master's thesis takes around three years from proposal to completion, while a doctoral dissertation may require four or more years. By accounting for these timelines, the initial phase can be traced back to 2007.

#### 1) Initial Accumulation Phase (2007–2013)

This phase marks the early groundwork of academic research on Tibetan ancient texts. The first degree dissertation was a master's thesis titled *Research on Interoperability Technology of Tibetan Ancient Texts in Grid Environment* by Zhang Xianzheng, completed at Northwest Minzu University in 2010. In 2012, another master's thesis—*A Study on the Tubo Biography of the Tang Dynasty Cited in the Tibetan Ancient Book "Red History"* by Xidaojia, also from Northwest Minzu University—was published. Only two relevant dissertations were produced during this period, indicating limited scholarly engagement and a nascent research field.

#### 2) Development Phase (2013–Present)

Although no related dissertations were published between 2013 and 2016, the field began to develop significantly starting in 2017. The publication of the first doctoral dissertation by Zheng Hongying signaled a turning point. Since then, the number of degree dissertations has steadily increased, reflecting growing academic interest and institutional support. The annual dissertation counts are as follows:

2020: 7 dissertations

2021: 9 dissertations

2022: 7 dissertations

2023: 11 dissertations

This sustained growth suggests a maturing academic discipline, with doctoral research emerging as a major driver of development in Tibetan ancient text studies. The increase in publications highlights the expanding participation of graduate students and institutions in the field, marking a transition from foundational exploration to broader and more diverse scholarly inquiry.

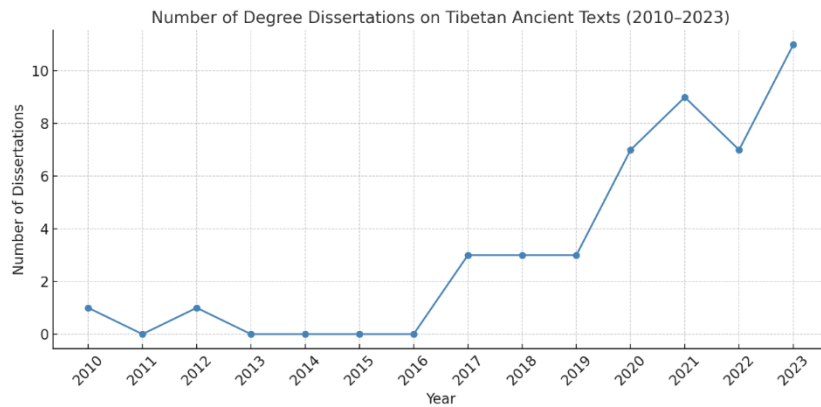


Figure 1 Trends of Academic Dissertations on Tibetan Ancient texts in China

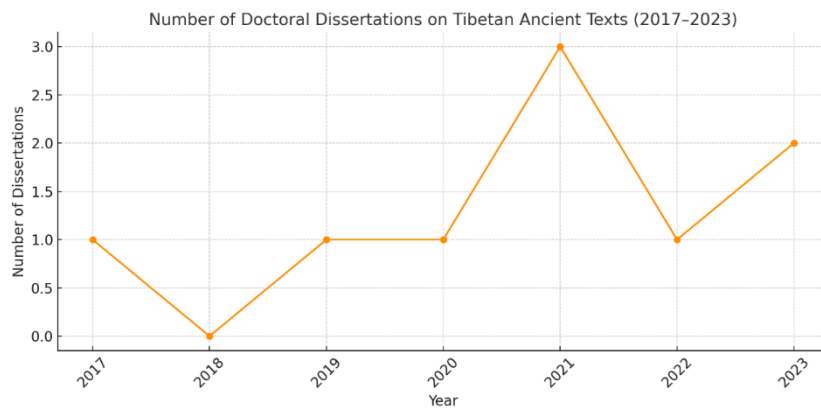


Figure 2 Trends of Doctoral Dissertations on Tibetan Ancient texts in China



Figure 3 Trends of Master's Dissertations on Tibetan Ancient texts in China

## 2.2. Analysis of Degree-Granting Institutions and Their Training Directions

There are a total of 11 academic institutions that train students and award degrees in the field of Tibetan ancient texts research. The number of degrees awarded by each institution is shown in the table 1 below. Northwestern Minzu University, Xizang University, and Southwest Minzu University stand out, awarding 14, 13, and 8 relevant degrees respectively. From the perspective of the type of

institution, Minzu (ethnic) universities, comprehensive universities, and normal (teacher training) universities pay more attention to this topic, with Minzu universities being the majority. Regarding geographic distribution, most of these institutions are located in the western region of China. Apart from Fuyang Normal University in the eastern region and Minzu University of China in the North China region, the rest are distributed across southwestern and northwestern China.

Analyzing the top three institutions in terms of the number of degrees awarded reveals that each university has distinct focuses and training approaches in this field.

Northwestern Minzu University has awarded 14 related theses, the highest number among these institutions. All 14 are master's theses; there are no doctoral dissertations. The research directions can be roughly divided into three areas:

- 1) Research on the content of Tibetan ancient texts, such as “Study on the Tibetan Historical Text ‘Naiba Jiaofa Shi’” and “Research on the Tibetan Ancient Text ‘Red History’ Quoting Tang Records on Tubo”<sup>[4] [5]</sup>.

- 2) Research on the collation of Tibetan ancient texts, such as “Research on the Collation of Tibetan Ancient Texts”<sup>[6]</sup>.

- 3) Research on the digitization of Tibetan ancient texts, such as “Interoperability Technology for Tibetan Ancient Texts in Grid Environments”, “Layout Analysis and Recognition System for Tibetan Document in U-chen Script”, and “Unsupervised Deep Learning Method for Enhancing Tibetan Ancient Document Images”<sup>[7] [8] [9]</sup>.

Among these, the third type of research is most abundant. Northwestern Minzu University started early in Tibetan natural language processing technology and has developed relatively rich research results in this area<sup>[10]</sup>.

Xizang University has awarded 13 related theses, including 4 doctoral dissertations and 9 master's theses. The doctoral research can be broadly divided into two categories:

Digitization of Tibetan ancient texts, such as OCR recognition, etc.

Research on the ancient texts themselves, such as musical ancient texts, the Potala Palace's Printing House, Tibetan portrait art, and so on.

The master's theses have research directions basically consistent with the doctoral ones, but differ in quantity and focus. Among the 9 master's theses, 5 focus on digitization of Tibetan ancient texts, including character recognition, text recognition, and deep learning. The remaining focus on historical and religious research based on Tibetan ancient texts. Only one doctoral dissertation focuses on digitization, while the others focus on content research.

Southwest Minzu University has awarded 8 related theses, including 3 doctoral dissertations and 5 master's theses. The doctoral research focuses on content studies, specifically religious and folk culture research. The master's theses cover a more diverse range of topics, which can be divided into three areas: content research, disciplinary intelligence information research, and preservation and collection technology research.

It is worth noting that Fuyang Normal University had one master's thesis related to Tibetan ancient texts in both 2021 and 2022, namely Ren Fangzhen's “Research on Layout Segmentation Methods of Tibetan Ancient Texts” (2021)<sup>[11]</sup> and Shi Rumeng's “Tibetan Ancient Document Line

Segmentation Based on A and Connected Regions”\* (2022)<sup>[12]</sup>. Judging by their titles, both studies concern layout segmentation technologies for Tibetan ancient texts, which is a prerequisite and fundamental research for digitization of Tibetan ancient texts.

Table 1 Ranking of Degree-Granting Institutions for Tibetan Ancient Text Research Theses in China (2010–2023)

Rank	Institution	Number of Theses
1	Northwest Minzu University	14
2	Xizang University	13
3	Southwest Minzu University	8
4	Qinghai Normal University	2
5	Fuyang Normal University	2
6	Lanzhou University	2
7	Minzu University of China	1
8	Shaanxi Normal University	1
9	Qinghai Minzu University	1
10	Kunming University of Science and Technology	1
11	Strategic Support Force Information Engineering University	1

### 3. Development History of Ancient texts Policies

Since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Party and the state have attached great importance to the protection of ancient books and documents. To rescue and protect China’s precious ancient texts, we need to inherit and promote outstanding traditional culture, and advance the construction of socialist advanced culture and a harmonious society, in 1984, the General Office of the State Council forwarded the “Request from the National Ethnic Affairs Commission on the Rescue and Organization of Minority Ethnic Ancient Books.” This officially launched work on the protection, rescue, collection, collation, translation, publication, and research of minority ethnic ancient texts. In 1985, the first National Conference on Minority Ethnic Ancient Books was held in Beijing. In 1996, the second National Conference on Minority Ethnic Ancient Books was held in Beijing, where the compilation of the “*General Catalogue and Abstract of Ancient Books of China’s Minority Ethnic Groups*” was decided. In 2006, the “*General Catalogue and Abstract of Ancient Books of China’s Minority Ethnic Groups*” was officially included in the “*National Eleventh Five-Year Cultural Development Plan Outline*.” This project comprehensively summarized achievements in minority ethnic ancient book work over nearly 30 years, marking a new stage of development in the collation of minority ethnic ancient texts. According to the *Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics* and the *Notice of the State Council on Strengthening Cultural Heritage Protection*, and the *National Eleventh Five-Year Cultural Development Plan Outline*, the *Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Further Strengthening the Protection of Ancient Books* (2007) were issued. Since implementation, the *National Catalogue of Precious Ancient Books* was established, and a large number of precious

minority ethnic ancient books have been restored.

In the new era, the Party Central Committee has made a series of major decisions and deployments to inherit and promote China's excellent traditional culture from the strategic height of realizing the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The ancient books cause has ushered in new development opportunities. The 2016 *Thirteenth Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development of the People's Republic of China* proposed: "Implement the Chinese Ancient Books Protection Plan. Basically complete the census of ancient books, and promote the protection of their original and regenerative characteristics." Since 2018, the formally implemented *Public Library Law of the People's Republic of China* states in Chapter 3, Article 28: "Public libraries shall be equipped with fire prevention, theft prevention, and other facilities, and shall take special protective measures for ancient books and other precious and fragile documentary information in accordance with relevant national regulations and standards to ensure safety." Chapter 4, Article 41 states: "Public libraries established by the government shall strengthen the protection of ancient books in the library, and based on their own conditions, promote the collation, publication, and research utilization of ancient books through digitization, photocopying, or microfilming technologies." In April 2022, the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the State Council issued the *Opinions on Promoting Ancient Books Work in the New Era*, emphasizing that doing a good job in ancient books work, and protecting, inheriting, and developing the country's precious cultural heritage is of great significance for continuing the Chinese cultural lineage, promoting national spirit, enhancing the country's cultural soft power, and building a socialist cultural power<sup>[13]</sup>. In June 2023, General Secretary Xi gave an important speech at the symposium on cultural inheritance and development, emphasizing five prominent characteristics of Chinese civilization: continuity, innovation, unity, inclusiveness, and peace. He also stressed that Chinese-style modernization is a modernization that continues the ancient civilization, not one that eliminates it. This provides ideological guidance for us to carry out Chinese cultural construction through ancient book collation and research in a way that upholds integrity and promotes innovation. In October 2023, the National Ancient Books Collation and Publishing Planning Leadership Group issued the *2021–2035 National Ancient Books Work Plan*, laying out the key directions, main tasks, and major projects for ancient book work nationwide.

#### 4. Conclusions and Observations

From the perspective of academic theses on Tibetan ancient texts, several phenomena can be observed:

Firstly, the publication of theses related to Tibetan ancient texts is influenced by national policies. Theses typically have a relatively long cycle, generally about 3 to 4 years—that is, the research direction is usually determined 3 to 4 years before the publication year. For example, the first thesis published in 2010 likely had its research direction set around 2007. In 2007, the state issued clear policies on ancient book protection, specifically the *Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Further Strengthening the Protection of Ancient Books*, which inspired a group of researchers working on ancient texts and led to specialized research in theses. Since the new era,



with the Party Central Committee placing great importance on cultural heritage and cultural confidence, there has been a noticeable recent increase in related theses, indicating a future growth in talent in this field.

Secondly, emphasis is placed on building a high-level research talent team in the field of Tibetan ancient texts. Graduate academic theses have high academic value, reflecting authors' new independent insights into their topics, as well as broad and deep mastery of foundational knowledge, independent research ability, and active contribution to advancing the academic level of their discipline. In particular, doctoral theses represent potential future research directions and may creatively open new areas in Tibetan ancient text research, proposing new perspectives for the discipline.

Thirdly, digital research on Tibetan ancient texts receives attention. The integration of ancient documents—especially minority ethnic documents—with computer technologies, using current popular and advanced natural language processing and deep learning techniques, plays a crucial role in further advancing the digital protection of Tibetan ancient texts.

Last but not least. Preservation of Tibetan Ancient texts as a Means to Safeguard National Cultural Security. Research and protection of Tibetan ancient texts contribute to maintaining linguistic security, which is a critical component of cultural security. Strengthening the scientific protection, development, and utilization of cultural resources in Xizang and Tibetan-related regions therefore serves as a means to safeguard national cultural security. Additionally, this also serves as a strong clarification against the misconception within the international community that China is engaged in the "Tibetan cultural genocide."

From the perspective of research on academic theses related to ancient Tibetan texts, it is evident that China places great importance on the protection and promotion of Tibetan cultural heritage. These efforts also reflect the Chinese government's commitment to cultural diversity and historical continuity, helping to refute misinformation and strengthen the integrity of the national cultural identity.

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