

RNYING MA AND GSAR MA: FIRST APPEARANCES OF THE TERMS  
DURING THE EARLY *PHYI DAR* (LATER SPREAD OF THE DOCTRINE)

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**I**n this article, I will investigate the distinction between the *rnying ma* (the Old Tradition) and the *gsar ma* (the New Tradition) in Tibetan Buddhism. Several other terms are closely related to this pair, of course. Tibetan history writers ubiquitously use the terms of the early spread of the teachings—*bstan pa snga dar*, and the later spread of the teachings—*bstan pa phyi dar*. They likewise divide Tibetan translation efforts into two periods: the old tradition of the early translations and the new tradition of the late translations (*snga 'gyur rnying ma* and *phyi 'gyur gsar ma* or simply *snga 'gyur* and *phyi 'gyur*). I would like to make an attempt to clarify the meaning and the relationship of these various terms. I will also investigate the terms' early appearances in the literature, particularly in polemical works, such as those texts gathered under the heading of *sngags log sun 'byin* (refuting the erroneous mantras).<sup>1</sup> The early and later *chos 'byung* also provide useful references about the distinction between these terms.<sup>2</sup>

### History writing – continuity and change

As the threefold divisions of *bstan pa snga dar* / *bstan pa phyi dar*, *snga 'gyur rnying ma* / *phyi 'gyur gsar ma*, and *rnying ma* / *gsar ma* are terms directly related to the historical development of Buddhism in Tibet, it would be appropriate to begin with some general remarks about history writing and possible methods for interpreting historical events. The above-mentioned terms are in focus here, in so far as they constitute historical events.

One common conception of history is that it is a narrative, to be divided into meaningful events that participate in a broader historical continuity. Historical narratives show us how a specific group of

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<sup>1</sup> Under this designation can be included early polemical writings written by Lha bla ma ye shes 'od (947-1024), Pho brang zhi ba 'od, and 'Gos khug pa lhas btsas; the *Sngags log sun 'byin* attributed to Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal (1197-1264), the *Chos log sun 'byin* attributed to Bu ston rin chen grub (1290-1364), and so on. The subject matter of all these writings is refuting erroneous mantras (tantras).

<sup>2</sup> The *Dharma* histories of Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (1124/36 – 1192/1204), Mkhas pa lde'u, Lde'u jo sras, Bu ston rin chen grub (1290-1364), 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal (1392-1481), and Dpa' bo gtsug la phreng ba (1504-1566) are all productive sources for these distinctions, for example.

people or culture has tried to understand its own history by choosing to highlight certain kinds of events. Narrative histories are also always written in chapters.<sup>3</sup> Tibetan historians, for example, have usually approached history by trying to describe coherent continuities and break-ups, surrounded by transition periods. When writing about the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet, for example, Tibetan historians appeal to the chapters of the *bstan pa snga dar* and *bstan pa phyi dar*.<sup>4</sup> The twofold distinction of *bstan pa snga dar* and *bstan pa phyi dar* is probably the only periodization that has found general acceptance amongst Tibetan authors. Yet this significant periodization also colors how the spread of the teachings are articulated, namely by the distinction between *snga 'gyur rnying ma* and *phyi 'gyur gsar ma*.

All historical periodizations are founded upon theoretical interpretations of continuity and change. Debates around periodization tend to flare up around where one chooses to locate the break-up points between periods, the interruptions between continuities. This is certainly the case in Tibetan history, where the breaking point between various interpretations of the early and the late has incited significant polemics.

While addressing the use and the meaning of the *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* monikers, it would be pertinent to make use of Michel Foucault's reflections of the genealogical approach to history. According to Foucault, the structural approach to history, wherein one tries to establish longer continuities and linear successions, does not reveal a genuine history. Because history is never a coherent flow of events, such presentations become arbitrary. It is inevitable that such normative history speaks the language of its writer, while the possibility arises that the real history remains masked behind the letters on the paper.<sup>5</sup> Where normative history tends to see unity and linear development, as with the twofold division of early and later spread of the teachings in Tibet, for example, Foucault would rather see "series full of gaps, intertwined with one another, interplays of differences, distances, substitutions, transformations."<sup>6</sup>

Foucault also emphasizes that the genealogical approach to history is not a search for "origins." Likewise, with reference to the "origins" of the dichotomies of *bstan pa snga dar/bstan pa phyi dar*, *snga 'gyur rnying ma/phyi 'gyur gsar ma*, and *rnying ma/gsar ma*, it must be understood that discovering the historical beginnings of

<sup>3</sup> A detailed account of such a phenomenon is given in Cuevas 2006: 44-55.

<sup>4</sup> Sometimes an intermediary period, *bar dar*, is added. Bcom ldan rigs pa'i ral gri (1227-1305) has used it to denote the early part of the *phyi dar* associated with Rin chen bzang po (Cuevas 2006: 47). According to Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer, Dge ye tshul khri ms seng ge also used this term in his *Chos 'byung thos pa'i rgya mtsho dad pa'i ngang mo'i rnam par rtse ba* published in 1474. Yet he only uses *bar dar* in relation to the Kālacakra transmission (Cantwell and Mayer 2008: 290).

<sup>5</sup> Foucault 1984: 94.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault 2007 (reprint): 40.

these terms will not provide us with a proficient understanding of their meaning and practical use. In actuality, the historical beginning of these events cannot be found. As is most often the case, the materials that are available to modern historians are secondary sources. In case of these specific Tibetan terms, there is a considerable time gap between the events and the primary sources composed by Tibetan historians.

Furthermore, in accordance with Foucault's insights, I suggest that locating the initial use of the distinction between the terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* is not of utmost importance. One reason for this is that these terms do not have a stable, univocal definition, as the following analysis will show. A second reason is that the use of these terms depends on a variety of contributing factors. Much more attention should be paid to all kinds of subjective details: in whose interests are these terms used, in what kind of environment do they appear, and what precise purpose do they serve for their users at the moment of their usage in a given environment?

A genealogical approach to history seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that appear to the modern historian. In the case of the use of terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma*, it would not be appropriate to consider them as entities with fixed meanings. Rather, we should attempt to observe the shifts in their meaning over time, as used by distinct groups with various motivations. We should notice its discontinuities, which from the surface seem to be fitting into a general narrative of history.

#### **Definitions of the *rnying ma*, *gsar ma* and related terms; their appearances in textual sources**

Speaking about earlier (*rnying ma*) and later traditions (*gsar ma*) with respect to the very beginning of the later spread of the teachings is clearly mistaken, as both the *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* identities had not yet been established at this time. This time period brought with it the arrival of new teachings lineages into Tibet. In the course of adapting to the Tibetan environment, some lineages died out while others merged together. Gradually, those groups of lineages that successfully merged together became the basis for the later *chos lugs*, "teaching traditions."<sup>7</sup>

The beginning of the *phyi dar* was the moment when the founders of the major Tibetan traditions made dangerous journeys to India to bring the teachings to Tibet. It became a common practice to define the authority of the teachings in terms of unbroken lineage going

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<sup>7</sup> In Tibetan, the expression "*chos lugs*" is used to indicate a teaching tradition or a teaching system of the Buddha. In order to avoid unnecessary extra meanings to this notion, I have avoided the common translations of "sect," "order," and "school" and instead chosen "teaching tradition" or "*Dharma* tradition" as equivalents to this term.

back to the Buddha himself.<sup>8</sup> The idea of a lineage (*rgyud*), after all, is directly related to the transmission of teachings from teacher to disciple in an unbroken flow. This notion of lineage was therefore of major importance during early *phyi dar*.

The term *chos lugs*, in contrast, can be understood as groups of lineages, which all share a focus on one particular teacher or teachings. *Chos lugs* and *rgyud* (lineage) may therefore share such features as distinctive bodies of ritual and literature and a clearly identified founder.<sup>9</sup> However, *chos lugs* have extra features related to their function within society. They have centers with permanent buildings and a shared administrative hierarchy.

In traditional accounts,<sup>10</sup> the arrival of Buddhism into Tibet is usually traced back to the king Lha tho tho ri, the 27<sup>th</sup> king of Tibet.<sup>11</sup> Legend tells that scriptures (including the *Karaṇḍavyūhasūtra*) and ritual objects fell from the sky onto the roof of his royal palace Yum bu bla sgang. There are competing accounts, of course.<sup>12</sup> Still, because there are no reliable historical sources depicting that period, Tibetan historians have generally accepted the legendary account of the arrival of the Buddha's teachings into the Land of Snows. To the point, there are no polemics about the initial arrival of the teachings to Tibet.

This is not the case with respect to the beginning of the later spread of the teachings, about which we find multiple accounts with diverse variations. The later spread of the teachings is usually said to have begun with the return of ten men to central Tibet (the number of men varies from four to thirteen) after their ordination in Tsong kha in northeast Tibet.<sup>13</sup> Most of the sources report them to be direct disciples of Dge ba rab gsal. Such reports are not very credible, however, because they require these persons to have had exceedingly long lives. More probably, there were several generations of monks between Dge ba gsal and the group of men who spread the *Vinaya* from the northeast to central Tibet.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lopez 1998: 24.

<sup>9</sup> In the case of a lineage, teachings are often traced back to the Buddha or perhaps Padmasambhava in *nirmāṇakāya* form, or some other teachers in *sambhogakāya* form. In the context of *chos lugs*, major importance is laid on the founder of the tradition in Tibet, who is usually the founder of a permanent religious center.

<sup>10</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal 1996 (reprint): 38; Bu ston Rin chen grub 1988: 181; Thu'u bkwan Chos kyi nyi ma 2007: 35; Bla ma dam pa Bsod nams Rgyal mtshan (1312-1375) 1994: 137, and so on.

<sup>11</sup> Bla ma dam pa Bsod nams Rgyal mtshan 1994: 137. Sometimes it is said that he was the 26th or the 28th king.

<sup>12</sup> According to Nel pa Paṇḍita, for example, those scriptures were brought to Tibet by the scholar Buddhiraṅkṣita and the translator Thilise. See Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 509.

<sup>13</sup> Davidson 2005. In chapter three, Davidson gives a concise overview of the beginning of the *phyi dar* in central Tibet.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*: 92.

According to later Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the breaking point between the early and the later spread of the teachings is more or less equivalent to the breaking point between the early and the late translation traditions, commonly referred to as *snga 'gyur rnying ma* (the old tradition of early translations) or *gsang sngags snga 'gyur rnying ma* (the old tradition of early translations of secret mantras),<sup>15</sup> and *phyi 'gyur gsar ma* (the new tradition of later translations). The early translation period started with the translation activities of Rma rin chen mchog, Ska ba dpal brtsegs and Cog ro klu'i rgyal mtshan during the second half of the eighth century under the patronage of Khri srong lde bstan (742 – c. 800).<sup>16</sup> There are no polemical debates about these claims.

In the traditional accounts like *chos 'byung*, the exact year of the break-up point between *bstan pa snga dar* and *bstan pa phyi dar* is sometimes given. For example, in *The Blue Annals*, author 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal (1392-1481) quotes Bu ston Rin chen grub as reporting that the later spread of the teachings started in the year of the water female bird (*chu mo bya*) (973 CE). 'Gos lo tsā ba also adds that 'Brom ston rgyal ba 'byung gnas (1005-1064) considered the year 978, the earth male tiger year (*sa pho stag*), to be the beginning of the later spread of the teachings.<sup>17</sup> According to the *Dharma History of Lde'u jo sras*, it was rather year of earth female bird (*sa mo bya*), probably 949, when the *Dharma* rose from ashes.<sup>18</sup>

According to some accounts, the date of Rin chen bzang po (958-1055)'s return from India is considered to be the beginning point of the *bstan pa phyi dar*.<sup>19</sup> Rin chen bzang po's was born in 958 and, according to his *rnam thar*, he was ordained at the age of thirteen, in 971.<sup>20</sup> It is said that he went to India around the age of seventeen, which would be approximately 975, and stayed there for more than ten years (usually, thirteen years is mentioned). Therefore, Bu ston, 'Brom ston, and Lde'u jo sras' dates for the beginning of the *phyi dar* (973, 978, and 948 respectively) would all be too early to be indexed to Rin chen bzang po's return from India (nor would they be linked to his departure for India).

Most often, the beginning of the later spread of the teachings is explained with reference to other events, not the translation acti-

<sup>15</sup> *Mantrayāna* (*gsang sngags kyi theg pa*), *mantranaya* (*gsang sngags kyi tshul*) and *vajrayāna* (*rdo rje theg pa*) are the common terms used to designate that which modern scholars call "Tantra" or "Tantrism," names which themselves come from *tantra* in Sanskrit (*rgyud* in Tibetan). See David Ruegg 1981: 212. Monier-Williams gives the following definitions of a *mantra*: "instrument of thought," "sacred speech or text," "prayer or song of praise." See Monier-Williams 1994 (reprint): 785-786.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1988: 482.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.* 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal 1996 (reprint): 1086; *Bu ston chos 'byung*, *Gsung 'bum vol. XXIV* (Ya) folio 136a.

<sup>18</sup> Lde'u jo sras 1987: 158.

<sup>19</sup> Buswell 2003: 36.

<sup>20</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba gzhon nu dpal 1996 (reprint): 68.

vities. As it is commonly said that the *bstan pa phyi dar* began simultaneously in western and central Tibet, dates for its inception are probably related to the revival of the *Vinaya* in central Tibet by Klu mes and his companions. Mkhas pa lde'u (mid-to-late thirteenth century) places this event in the year of 988.<sup>21</sup>

In the later historiographical literature, there is an absence of polemics or even fundamentally diverging opinions about the beginnings of the *bstan pa phyi dar*. The distinction between the early and later spread of the teachings only becomes polemical when it indicates distinct translation periods – *snga 'gyur rnying ma* and *phyi 'gyur gsar ma*. Locating the breaking point between these distinct translation periods did, in fact, incite polemical debates by Tibetan scholars, debates that are discussed in the last section of this article.

The terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* are not actually chronological categories. Their precursors emerged in the early polemical material, where they are used in direct opposition to one another. As in many early polemical texts, debates were related to authenticity problems of scriptures (at that time, doctrinal debates were still rare).<sup>22</sup> The division of the old and the new traditions began to emerge amidst these authenticity debates. Most often, *gsar ma* polemicists condemned certain *rnying ma* translations and practices, but it was not always so. Polemics also arose the other way round, or between the proponents of the emerging *gsar ma* traditions themselves.

How were the precursors of *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* used in the early polemics? In the “ordinance” (*bka' shog*) of Lha bla ma ye shes 'od (947-1024), probably written around the year 985, we do not find any words which would refer to an earlier or a later period. In some occasions, the author does use the word *sngon* (early, before), but this use has a different meaning here, solely referring to the *Dharma* kings era.<sup>23</sup> Ye shes 'od is stating that the early kings were actually the emanations of bodhisattvas who inspired many people to follow the Buddhist path.

In the *Sngags log sun 'byin* of 'Gos khug pa lhas btsas (born around 1015) there are also no clear references to two translation periods or to multiple *Dharma* traditions. The author only mentions earlier translations connected with *Dharma* king Khri srong lde btsan. While speaking about what we now call the later spread, he criticizes the Zur family lineage. To designate this later time, he uses the expression “*phyis la brtan nas*” (literally: “relying upon later”).<sup>24</sup> In the *bka' shog* or “ordinance” written by Pho brang zhi ba 'od around 1092, we find for the first time clear references to the earlier and later periods. In the introductory lines of his *bka' shog*, he uses

<sup>21</sup> Mkhas pa lde'u 1987: 394.

<sup>22</sup> See also Davidson 2002: 203-24.

<sup>23</sup> Karmay (1988a: 14): [...] *mna' sngon bod yul dbus su chos byung ba* / [...] *sngon gyi rgyal po byang chub sems dpa' yin*

<sup>24</sup> 'Gos khug pa lhas btsas (1979: 21): /...*phyis la brtan nas*.../ (“relying upon later time”).

the *snga-phyi* dichotomy (“early-late”), proclaiming that Tibetans forged texts during two periods, early and late.<sup>25</sup> He then enumerates the “false” texts from each of these two periods. He uses the terms *snga* and *phyi* elsewhere, as well. He refers to texts translated at early times (*sngar gyi dus*), and then while speaking about later texts, such as tantras, commentaries and *sādhana*s composed in Tibet, he uses the expression “*phyi gsar*” or “later new.”<sup>26</sup> The word “*gsar*” appears now for the first time, as opposed to simply “*phyi*” (later). This is the first step in the process of the term *gsar ma* being used to designate a distinct group of new teaching traditions.

As the (late appearing) terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* are polemical categories by nature, we should expect them to appear in early polemical literature. One of the earlier appearances of the terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* is found in the *Sngags log sun 'byin*, probably wrongly attributed to Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal (1197-1264).<sup>27</sup> The exact date of composition of this text is not clear. It was most likely written during the second half of the thirteenth century if not later, and almost certainly not during the lifetime of Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal. The author, while referring to the old tradition, uses the expression “*gsang sngags rnying ma*,” (the old tradition of secret mantra). The term is used in the context of pointing out corrupted texts and practices.<sup>28</sup> When the author describes the later spread of the teachings and points out the spurious texts and teachings written during this later spread, he uses the term *gsar ma*.<sup>29</sup>

While Chag lo tsā ba may not have written the *Sngags log sun 'byin*, he is known to have also used the terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma*. In a letter to Sa skya Paṇḍita, known as Chag lo's *Zhu ba*, he uses the phrase “*gsang sngags gsar rnying*” (new and old secret mantra) while asking Sa skya Paṇḍita to enumerate the tantras that were composed in Tibet. Sa skya Paṇḍita, in a diplomatic response, uses the terms “*sngags rnying ma*” and “*gsar ma*” in turn.<sup>30</sup> According to Jared

<sup>25</sup> Karmay 1998b: 31-40.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*: 39. /...*phyis gsar du byung ba'i rgyud dang/ 'grel ba dang/ man ngag dang/ sgrub thabs la...*/

<sup>27</sup> For a more detailed account, see Raudsepp 2009.

<sup>28</sup> The same use occurs in the *Chos log sun 'byin*, probably written in the beginning of the fourteenth century and wrongly attributed to Bu ston rin chen grub.

<sup>29</sup> Chag lo tsā ba Chos rje dpal (1979: folio 6): *rgya gar na med par gsang sngags rnying mar ming btags pa rnams sol* ; and the occurrence of the term “*gsar ma*” (folio 14): /...*yang gsar ma la chos log dar ba ni...*/

<sup>30</sup> *Sa paṇ Gsung 'bum*, 533-534: *gsang sngags gsar rnying gnyis la bod kyis ni/ sbyar ba'i rgyud sde mang ste gang dag lags/*. The answer of Sa skya paṇḍita (545-46): *dri ba bcu gcig pa gsang sngags gsar rnying la bod kyis sbyar ba'i rgyud sde gang lags gsungs pa'ang/ sngags rnying ma la lha mo skye rgyud dang/ bum ril thod mkhar la sogs pa shin tu mang bar gda'/ gsar ma la bod kyis sbyar ba'i rgyud dus 'byung dang/ phyag na rdo rje mkha' 'gro dang/ ra li nyi shu rtsa bzhi la sogs pa shin tu mang po brjod kyis mi lang ba cig gda' ste/ thams cad gsal kha ston na phog thug bag tsam yong bar gda' bas khyed nyid kyis dpyod mdzod.*

Douglas Rhoton, this letter to Sa paṅ was written somewhere between 1236 and 1241.<sup>31</sup>

In summary, we see that the clear dichotomy of *snga/phyi*, early and later, appears for the first time at the end of the eleventh century. In one occasion, “*gsar*” is added to the term “*phyi*.” However, the terms “*snga*” and “*phyi*,” when used, merely indicate distinct *spreads* of Buddhism into Tibet. We cannot yet speak about distinct *Dharma* traditions at this point. A clearly new use appears in Chag lo tsā ba’s *Zhu ba*. His use of these terms, I would argue, attests to the fact that a distinct textual corpus of *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* had been set by this time. As the occurrence of these terms in the *Zhu ba* is limited to enumerating text names only, it should be emphasized that doctrinal differences are not being discussed here.

Apart from polemical texts, *chos ’byung* (literally “*Dharma origins*”) are essential sources for this research. It should be remembered that several early *chos ’byung* have been lost. Some believe that the first *chos ’byung* was written by Rong zom pa (1012-1088), but only its fragments have survived. Khu ston btson ’grus (eleventh century) is also known for having written a *chos ’byung*. But again, only fragments in the form of quotations in the later *chos ’byung* have survived.<sup>32</sup>

Nyang ral nyi ma ’od zer’s *chos ’byung* entitled *Chos ’byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi’i bcud* (*The Essence of the Flower, the Elixir of Honey*) is one of the earliest *chos ’byung* still available to us. Nyang ral’s life dates differ according to variances in his birth year’s element: sometimes it is given as the wood dragon year (1124), sometimes as the fire dragon year (1136). His death year likewise varies (1192 or 1204).<sup>33</sup> We do not know the exact composition date of his *chos ’byung*, but it was probably composed towards the end of his life.

In Nyang ral’s *Chos ’byung*, we can find one of the earliest mentions of the distinction between *rnying ma* and *gsar ma*. Although the work primarily focuses on the *Dharma* kings era, he also gives detailed accounts of certain events during the *phyi dar*. At the end of his *chos ’byung*, there is a paragraph where the terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* are used:

Relying upon the kindness of Lha bla ma, in the set of teachings translated in this way, as there are slight differences between the translations, starting from the great being Rin chen bzang po and all the later translations, and the early translations from Rma Rin chen mchog, Ska ba dpal brtsegs and Cog ro klu’i rgyal mtshan onwards, Tibetans named them

<sup>31</sup> Rhoton 2002: 206.

<sup>32</sup> For example, in Dpa’ bo gtsug la phreng ba’s *Chos ’byung mkhas pa’i dga’ ston* (2003), reprint.

<sup>33</sup> See Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, 2<sup>nd</sup> part: 70, notes 989 and 995.



[the later translations] *gsar ma*, and in the same way, all the old translations are famous under the name of *rnying ma*.<sup>34</sup>

The author is evidently using these terms to refer to distinct translation periods rather than distinct spreads of the teachings. Again, a chronological distinction is in use. However, he does not give further details about how he perceives these slight differences in translation to appear.

The last section of the *Chos 'byung* raises some questions regarding the consistency and authorship of the work. One possibility is that the very final part of the *Chos 'byung* could be a later addition to the core text. According to David Germano, the final section may have been written by Nyang ral's son 'Gro mgon Nam mkha' dpal ba, or some other direct disciple of his.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this final chapter of the work, where the terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* actually appear, seems to be an annex, filling the details of all of the accomplishment lineages (*sgrub brgyud*) as they continued after the composition of the original text. The *Chos 'byung* itself seems to end earlier with the traditional concluding formulas of praises, where the author honors Indian scholars and *mahāsiddhas* like Grub pa thob pa rnal 'byor gyi dbang phyug, Paṇḍita 'Bum phrag gsum pa and Atsa ra mar po can who came to Tibet for the benefit of beings.<sup>36</sup> Of course, in the conclusion that follows the annex, it is said that the entire text was written by Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer himself. However, the list of accomplishment lineages nonetheless seems to be a later addition to the main text. Regardless, as the exact composition date of the text (or its parts) is not known, definitive conclusions about the exact time of the appearance of the terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* cannot be established.

Another famous *Dharma* history with uncertain dates is Mkhas pa lde'u's *Chos 'byung*. Mkhas pa lde'u probably wrote his work around the middle of the thirteenth century. In his *Chos 'byung* there is an interesting passage that elucidates how the differences between *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* should be understood:

It is said that all the translations of Vajrāsana are *gsar ma* and all the translations of Oḍḍiyāna are *rnying ma*. These [texts], which have been transmitted by the *ḍākini*, are *gsar ma* and these, which have been transmitted by *vidyādhara*, are *rnying ma*. If there is no *gter ma*, then it is *gsar ma*, and if there are *gter ma*, then it is *rnying ma*. All this is not certain. If one would ask why this is like that, this is explained in Scriptures. If we

<sup>34</sup> Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer (1988: 482): / ... De ltar bsgyur ba'i chos sde la/ lha bla ma'i sku (drin) la brten nas/ bdag nyid chen po rin chen bzang po nas bzung ste/ de rjes bsgyur ba thams cad dang 'gyur snga ma ka cog yan chad kyis bsgyur ba rnams dang/ cung mi 'dra ba 'dug pa rnams la bltos nas bod kyis mi rnams kyis gsar ma zhes grags te ming du chags so/ de ltar snga 'gyur rnams la rnying ma zhes grags te / ...

<sup>35</sup> Germano 1994: 237.

<sup>36</sup> Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer 1988: 482.

would point out the four immeasurables<sup>37</sup> and seven pure actions<sup>38</sup> and Vajradhara of cause being transformed into Vajradhara of fruit [result], then this is *gsar ma*. If we would directly outline the threefold contemplations,<sup>39</sup> then, generally speaking, the Vajradhara of fruit being brought to perfection [directly], then this is *rnying ma*. In reality, there is no such distinction in India. This is a distinction made by Tibetans. It does not have a scriptural authority.<sup>40</sup>

In this passage, various distinctions are pointed out, including doctrinal ones. First, the different places of origin of *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* are indicated. The *Rnying ma pa* connect the origin of their teachings to Guru Padmasambhava and the land of Oḍḍiyāna, while the *Gsar ma pa* claim that their teachings come from Rdo rje gdan (Vajrāsana) and are directly related to the Buddha. The next distinction is about *gter ma* (treasure revelations). Mkhas pa lde'u states that if a *Dharma* tradition has *gter ma* then it is *rnying ma* and if there is no *gter ma*, then it is *gsar ma*. While this is, of course, a simplification, the *Rnying ma* tradition has always made a distinct place for *gter ma* (and by extension, for continuous revelation).

Mkhas pa lde'u also describes differences with respect to achieving the fruit of practice. With reference to the *Gsar ma* tradition, it is emphasized that through the practices of the four immeasurables and seven pure actions one will achieve the Vajradhara of fruit (fruit of the Buddha nature). That is to say, through the practice of the four immeasurables and seven pure actions, the full fruition of

<sup>37</sup> Love (*byams pa*), compassion (*snying rje*), joy (*dga' ba*), and equanimity (*btang snyoms*).

<sup>38</sup> The seven pure actions are: confession (*bshags pa*), joy (*yi rang*), development of absolute bodhicitta (*don dam sems bskyed pa*), refuge (*skyabs 'gro*), development of aspiration bodhicitta (*smon sems bskyed pa*), development of application bodhicitta (*'jug sems bskyed pa*), and dedication of merit (*bsngo ba*). These aspects are also described by Bu ston in his *Chos 'byung* during his explanation of the superiority of *Mahāyāna* to *Hinayāna*.

<sup>39</sup> The threefold contemplations are: empty suchness, all-pervading compassion, and clear seed syllables. These are the three contemplations of *bskyed rim* practice of *Mahāyoga* and *tantra* in general. In further detail, the contemplations are: the contemplation of the essential nature where one meditates on the intrinsic emptiness of all phenomena, the contemplation of total manifestation where one meditates on equanimous compassion for all sentient beings, and the contemplation on the cause where one concentrates on the seed syllable of the *yi dam* deity (*de bzhin nyid kyi ting nge 'dzin, kun tu snang ba'i ting nge 'dzin, rgyu'i ting nge 'dzin*).

<sup>40</sup> Mkhas pa lde'u (1987: 142-143): *rdo rje gdan nas 'gyur ba gsar ma yin la/ u rgyan nas 'gyur ba rnying ma yin zer/ mkha' 'gro nas rgyud pa gsar ma la/ rig 'dzin nas rgyud pa rnying mal/ gter ma med pa gsar mal/ gter ma yod pa rnying ma yin zer te/ de rnams ma nges gsungs/ o na gang yin zhe na/ gzhung las gsal te/ tshad med pa bzhi dang bdun nam dag bkod nas/ rgyu'u rdo rje 'chang las 'bras bu'i rdo rje 'chang du bsgyur ba'i gzhung 'dug na de gsar ma yin la/ ting nge 'dzin gsum sngon du bkod nas 'bras bu'i rdo rje 'chang de phal cher yongs su grub pa'i gzhung de ni rnying ma zer te/ don la rgya gar na gsar rnying gi dbye ba med de/ bod kyis phye ba yin te/ de la lung mi gda' /*

Buddhahood can be attained. The aspect of transformation is emphasized here. In contrast, Mkhas pa lde'u asserts that the three concentrations (*ting nge 'dzin gsum*), practices related to *Mahāyoga-tantra*, are the specific practices of the *Rnying ma* tradition that lead to full Buddhahood. Unlike with *gsar ma* practices, no transformation is necessary. Through these examples, we see that the teachings have, by this time, been systematized into two distinct traditions, with some doctrinal distinctions already evident.

### **Polemics about the distinctions between *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* and related terms**

The eighteenth century scholar Thu'u bkwan chos kyi nyi ma (1737-1802) has made some essential clarifications about the meaning and relationship of these terms. He dedicated an entire chapter in his *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long* entitled "*Spyir gsar rnying gi dbye tshams ngos bzung ba*" or "The General Distinction Between Rnying ma and Gsar ma," to the distinction between *rnying ma* and *gsar ma*.<sup>41</sup> In the beginning of the chapter, he presents the common view that there is no distinction between *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* on the *sūtra* level. The *gsar ma* classification was set when the teachings of the secret mantras began to spread. Thu'u bkwan, probably basing his statements on a variety of sources, concludes that according to common understanding, all of the tantras that were translated before the coming of the paṇḍita Smṛtijñānakīrti were *gsang sngags rnying ma* (the secret old mantras), and all the tantras that were translated after lo tsā ba Rin chen bzang po (958-1055) were conventionally called *gsang sngags gsar ma* (the secret new mantra). It is stated in the *Blue Annals* that Smṛtijñānakīrti "had inaugurated the translation of the "new" tantras."<sup>42</sup> It is also added in the *Blue Annals* that all the tantric texts translated into Tibetan after the persecution of king Glang dar ma are called "gsar ma."<sup>43</sup>

The exact dates of Smṛtijñānakīrti are not known. In Bu ston's *Chos 'byung* and in other sources<sup>44</sup> it is mentioned that he arrived in Tibet at the time of Lha bla ma ye shes 'od, the 11<sup>th</sup> century ruler of Pu rangs, and is believed to have taken rebirth shortly after his demise as Rong zom Chos kyi bzang po (1012-1088).<sup>45</sup> This account conflicts with a statement by 'Jam dbyangs Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po (1820-1892), who asserts that Smṛtijñānakīrti was Rin chen bzang

<sup>41</sup> Thu'u bkwan chos kyi nyi ma 2008: 40. See also *Gu bkra'i Chos 'byung* 1990: 977-980 and 991-993.

<sup>42</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal 1996 (reprint): 204.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*: 204.

<sup>44</sup> For example, Bu ston rin chen grub (1988: 202); Dpa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba (2003: 511).

<sup>45</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal 1996 (reprint): 160.

po's (958-1055) junior.<sup>46</sup> It is not clear which sources were available to Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po, but it seems that there is more evidence to suggest that Smṛtijñānakīrti's activities slightly preceded those of Rin chen bzang po than the other way around. Regardless, as we will see later, a chronological approach to who came earlier does not solve the whole issue.

Thu'u bkwan Chos kyi nyi ma, after pointing out the precise temporal distinction between *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* translations, immediately shows its shortcomings. He gives the example of the root tantra of Mañjuśrī which, despite having been translated during the time of Khri srong lde btsan and therefore which logically should be accepted among the old translations, is still classified as a *gsar ma* translation. To explain this contradiction, he states that the propagators of this tantra were those who were actually deciding which tantras belong to *gsar ma* and which do not. This statement demonstrates that Tibetan scholars were themselves well aware of the arbitrariness of the attempt to set an exact demarcation line between the early and later translation periods.

Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po also made similar statements. In his *Mtshan tho*,<sup>47</sup> he points out that there existed many texts that were translated before Rin chen bzang po but were still classified among *gsar ma* translations and later integrated into the canon. He gives the examples of the *De nyid 'dus pa* (*Gathering Thatness*), the *Rnam snang mngon byang* (*Tantra of the Awakening of Mahāvairocana, a Caryāyoga tantra*), and the *Bsam gtan phyi ma* (*Concentration Continuation Tantra, one of the four main Action tantras*).<sup>48</sup>

As we can see, using chronological logic in order to distinguish between *snga 'gyur* and *phyi 'gyur* does not work, and an attempt to fix the time limit between these two periods does not lead us out of confusion. Historically, there is simply no such precise demarcation line. Thu'u bkwan chos kyi nyi ma himself points out that Rin chen bzang po was not the only one who was translating texts in the beginning of *phyi dar*. There were many translators besides him, like 'Brog mi (992/993-1043/1072), 'Gos khug pa lhas btsas (born around 1015),<sup>49</sup> the lord Mar pa (1012-1077) and so on. The new translation period actually started with all of these new translators and their respective lineages.<sup>50</sup> And while Rin chen bzang po may have appeared slightly earlier than the other aforementioned translators, it is well known that he did not translate the texts all by himself. He had many disciples, such as Gur shing brtson 'grus rgyal mtshan and others, who worked together with him and later continued his

<sup>46</sup> *Op. cit.* Ramon Prats 1995: 789.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*: 789-790.

<sup>48</sup> *Sarvatathāgatātattvasaṃgraha, Mahāvairocanaḥśambodhi and Dhyaṇottarapatalakrama*, respectively.

<sup>49</sup> He was contemporary to Zur chen Shākya 'byung gnas (1002-1062), Zur chung Shes rab grags pa (1014-1074) and Rong zom chos kyi bzang po (1012-1088), all of which he met personally.

<sup>50</sup> Thu'u bkwan chos kyi nyi ma 2008: 41.

translation lineage.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the chronological demarcation line is simply not as sharp as it appears to be in textual accounts. In all likelihood, there were different groups of translators working in different parts of Tibet, with Rin chen bzang po and his disciples in the west of Tibet, and Smṛtijñānakīrti in Khams at Dan long thang either at the same time as Rin chen bzang po or earlier. And while the early translators that Thu'u bkwan mentions are known to have translated texts which are included to the *gsar ma* tradition, there are also other examples. The well-known *Rnying ma* scholar Rong zom chos kyi bzang po (1012-1088) was also active at the beginning of the *phyi dar*, translating many of the “new” tantras as well. Yet he is still considered to be the last in a line of translators of the *snga dar* period.<sup>52</sup>

The well-known *Rnying ma* scholar Sog bzlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan (1552-1624)<sup>53</sup> has made similar statements to those that we looked at by later scholars Thu'u bkwan and Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po. Sog bzlog pa also emphasizes the fact that many translators who were either contemporaries of Rin chen bzang po or even came after him translated texts which were later included among *rnying ma* translations. Conversely, some of the tantras belonging to the *kriyā*, *caryā* and *yoga* classes that were translated during the time of Khri srong lde btsan have been included amongst *gsar ma* translations.

As we can see from these above-mentioned examples, the distinction of the early and later translations cannot be made on a chronological basis. It is rather a distinction related to the category of texts. Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po concludes that the *rnying ma* label should be applied to the teachings which were translated secretly by Vairocana and other of his contemporaries according to the instructions of Indian teachers (such as Padmasambhava, and so on). The *gsar ma* label should be applied to the tantras of *rnal 'byor bla na med pa* (the unsurpassed yogatantras) that were translated from Rin chen bzang po onwards.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the distinction between *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* should be understood as applying only to the higher tantras' translations.

As we can conclude from these examples, it is quite easy to refute the statement that all the translations that were later classified under *gsar ma* were translated from Rin chen bzang po onwards. The more essential issue, however, should be to establish clearly the actual meaning of the later translations. As Thu'u bkwan said, there is no

<sup>51</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal 1996 (reprint): 68-69. Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer mentions his four main disciples: Gzhon nu bzang po shes rab spu (rang) pa, Bkra pa gzhon she, Kyi nor nya na and Gung shog brtson 'grus rgyal mtshan: 1988: 464.

<sup>52</sup> Almogi 2000: 67.

<sup>53</sup> Sog bzlog pa blo gros rgyal mtshan 1975: 27-28.

<sup>54</sup> Mkhyen brtse'i dbang po mentions the three tomes of the *Eighteen Tantrapitaka* (*tantra sde bco brgyad*): *Gsang 'dus* (*Guhyasamāja*), *Zla gsang thig le* (*Candraguhya-tilaka*) and *Sangs rgyas mnyam sbyor* (*Buddhasamāyoga*). *Op. cit.* Ramon Prats 1995: 789 -790.

doctrinal distinctions between the early and the late translations on the sūtra level. Even if the later tradition gathers under the name of *gsar ma* texts from all four categories of tantra, its distinction only becomes significant in the higher category of *rnal 'byor bla na med pa* tantras. A simple statement that all the *gsar ma* translations start from Rin chen bzang po is slightly misleading.<sup>55</sup>

Although we do observe an effort to discriminate distinct spreads of the teachings and distinct translation periods in the polemics and historiographical literature, for Buddhist lineage holders and followers these distinctions have never been of major concern. For them, the arrival of Buddhist teachings into Tibet and its development can only be understood in terms of an unbroken lineage, *rgyud*.

The term *rgyud* (lineage), which literally refers to a continuity, should render the search for breaking points meaningless. *Rgyud*, by its nature, refers to something which is continuous, uninterrupted. There has always been an endeavor to establish the continuity of the teachings in an uninterrupted way, be it in the sense of family line or a succession of a teacher and a disciple. An attempt to find a breaking point between the earlier and the later spread of the teachings is entirely against this spirit. With respect to an uninterrupted lineage, it would be impractical to talk about earlier and later spreads of the teachings. We should rather conclude that there was a continuous stream of lineages coming into Tibet, lineages that were dying out and those that grew together, lineages in perpetual motion.

Nonetheless, while reading *chos 'byung*, *rnam thar*, and so on, it seems that these two opposite aims appear side by side. In the same way that it is essential to these authors to emphasize the continuity of the lineage, it is also important to them to distinguish between the earlier and later spreading of the teaching, and between early and late translations. As we have established, when speaking about distinct translation traditions, the chronological terms “early” and “later” cannot be accurately applied. Rather, “new” translations are related to the higher tantra texts of the new lineages that were introduced in Tibet from the end of tenth century onwards, while “old” translations are related to the higher tantras of the *Rnying ma* tradition. The first *gsar ma* translations, namely the translations of *rnal 'byor bla na med pa* tantras, do seem to be traditionally related to the figure of Rin chen bzang po.

According to these short reflections, the attempt to set the chronological breaking point between the early and later translation periods is historically arbitrary. Tibetan scholars themselves admit these contradictions. It also becomes evident from analysis that the

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<sup>55</sup> It is stated in that way in most of the historiographical sources, as well as in contemporary sources and dictionaries. For example, *Bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo* 1996 (reprint), gives the explanation that *gsar ma* should be understood as translations from Rin chen bzang po onwards. See also Ben Deitle, “Biography of Rin chen bzang po.” <https://collab.itc.virginia.edu/> 31.03.2010.

terms *bstan pa snga dar* and *bstan pa phyi dar* point to a wider meaning than simply distinct translation periods. With these terms, *all* of the activities of spreading the teachings are emphasized. These terms pick out the activities of translating texts, but also other activities of spreading the teachings: building new temples and monasteries, renovating old ones, giving teachings, and so on. As already explained above, when the spreading of the teachings is mentioned in the historiographical literature, distinct events are articulated. The *bstan pa snga dar* is said to have been started from the time of the king Lha tho tho ri, while the *snga 'gyur* is only said to have started with the first translations under the patronage of Khri srong lde bstan in the second half of the eighth century, hundreds of years later. The beginning of the *bstan pa phyi dar* is related to the return of ten men to central Tibet and the revival of *Vinaya*, while the beginning of the *phyi 'gyur* is related to the figure of Rin chen bzang po, (though this is only a hypothetical distinction). Furthermore, the idea of an *uninterrupted* lineage has to be kept in mind when describing the spread of Buddhist teachings in Tibet, as there has always been an attempt to ensure the continuity of the lineages.

Still, the temptation to divide history into distinct periods has strongly influenced the way that the Tibetan Buddhist tradition understands its own historical development. Therefore, two commonly accepted, yet contradictory understandings of the spread of the teachings to Tibet appear. On the one side, we see the claim of a continuous, uninterrupted lineage, and on the other side, we witness the claim of interruption via a chronological division into two distinct periods of the spread of the teachings and two distinct translation periods.

It would also be pertinent to examine how the distinctions of “early” and “late” have been perceived according to the proponents of *rnying ma* and *gsar ma*. We find a competitive spirit prevailing in Tibetan comparisons of the early and later translations. From the *Rnying ma* tradition’s side, we can find examples of *rnying ma* translations being described as being higher than *gsar ma* translations. For example, Dudjom Rinpoche in his *History of the Rnying ma School* quotes Rong zom pa chos kyi bzang po’s *Dkon cog 'grel* (*The Commentary of Guhyagarbha*) as pointing out the different ways in which the ancient translations of the secret mantras are superior to the later translations.<sup>56</sup> He declares that there are six different reasons for this superiority. In the first place, he emphasizes the greatness of the benefactors, the three ancestral kings who were actually the sublime Lords of the Three Families in kingly guise. Second, he describes the location of the early translations: they were made in such places as Bsam yas and other holy places of the past.

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<sup>56</sup> Dudjom Rinpoche 1991: 889.

Third, he points out the distinction of the translators of the past: exceptional translators such as Vairocana, Ska ba dpal brtsegs, Cog ro klu'i rgyal mtshan, Zhang Sna nam ye shes sde, Rma Rin chen mchog, and Gnyags Dznyāna kumāra. They were not like *gsar ma* translators, who spent their summers in Mang yul and traveled to Nepal and India for only a short time in the winter (meaning that in older times, translators stayed in India to study for long periods). Fourth, he speaks about the distinction of the scholars who supervised the ancient translations, claiming that in older times, teachings were introduced by great buddhas and bodhisattvas, such as Śāntarakṣita, Buddhaguhya, Padmakāra, Vimālamitra, and so on, who understood directly the meaning of the texts. They did not make lexical word-by-word translation, as was done by *gsar ma* translators, but rather directly translated the meaning of the text. The scholars of early times also had purer motivations, he claims. They were not just wandering around in the search of gold.

Fifth, in the past, translations were requested with offerings of gold weighed out in deerskin pouches, or by the measure. That is to say, in the past, one had to pay a much higher price for the teachings than during the time of the *gsar ma* translations. The sixth distinction is the most prominent one and concerns the doctrine itself. It is said that the translations of the past were completed at the time when the doctrine of the Buddha had reached its zenith in India. There were also many teachings that did not exist in India but were taken directly from pure Buddha realms.<sup>57</sup>

This extract attributed to Rong zom pa seems to be a reply to the first wave of criticisms that arose from the new, nascent Buddhist traditions, such criticisms as those of Lha bla ma ye shes 'od and 'Gos khug pa lhas btsas. In later sources, opposite statements are known. 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal states in the *Blue Annals* that the later translations were considered greater than the early one from the beginning because of the activities of great translator Rin chen bzang po.<sup>58</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba's statement clearly reflects the *gsar ma* side's understanding.

One problem with the statements of Rong zom pa is that they do not actually appear in *Dkon cog 'grel*, as we now have it. The extract in question has not been found in other works of Rong zom pa, either. It is true that an important part of the textual heritage of Rong zom pa has been lost. It is also known that a follower of Rong zom pa named Rog ban shes rab 'od (1166-1233) enlarged the opinions of Rong zom pa and himself wrote some polemical commentaries. Whatever the historical origin is of these statements, *Rnying ma* scholars and teachers appreciate highly these six superiorities. They often form an introductory part of oral teachings given

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*: 890-891.

<sup>58</sup> 'Gos lo tsā ba Gzhon nu dpal 1996 (reprint): 68.



within the *Rnying ma* tradition.<sup>59</sup> However, it is asserted that these points are not brought up out of a desire to vilify the *gsar ma* traditions, but rather to remind the audience of the preciousness of the teachings. Their use is not polemical.

Even though the continuity of the lineage seems to be the basis of the teachings, Tibetan Buddhist historians have always been fond of divisions and classifications. Even in the *Rnying ma* tradition itself, the translations are divided into two categories – old translations and new translations. Nevertheless, sometimes there is a lack of consensus regarding to which category a translation belongs. Taking the *sems sde* texts of *rdzogs pa chen po* for example, we see that amongst these texts there are five translations of Vairocana (*snga 'gyur lnga*) that are considered old, and thirteen translations of Vimalamitra (*phyi 'gyur bcu gsum*) that are considered to be later translations.<sup>60</sup> However, often opinions diverge about this distinction and a consensus has not been reached.

Even though the main arguments in this article are related to textual accounts, the political situation during the early *phyi dar* should also be taken into account. The lack of a strong central power in the beginning of the *phyi dar* influenced the arrival of the numerous teachings lineages into Tibet. There was a justified danger that some of these teachings would be misinterpreted or not properly understood. As a result, to avoid the corruption of the teachings, the political and religious figures of the early *phyi dar* constantly questioned the authenticity of the lineages and their texts. In addition, in order to survive, separate lineages started to mix, and were later associated with either *rnying ma* or *gsar ma*. In the early polemical literature, these identities became more solid in opposition to one other. The teachings traditions of *gsar ma* and *rnying ma* slowly began to be associated with distinctive bodies of ritual and literature, clearly identified founders, centers with permanent buildings and shared administrative hierarchies.

According to Paul Harrison, those involved in political efforts for power also engaged in the struggle for religious esteem.<sup>61</sup> From the beginning of the *phyi dar*, political rulers influenced religious matters with their activities, promoting and condemning certain texts and practices.<sup>62</sup> Fearing the decline of the teachings that was happening in the surrounding countries, a critical attitude was taken towards certain Tibetan compositions whose authors opposed the nascent monastic institutions and purported the capacity for direct visionary contact with religious authority.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Per a personal communication with Stag lung rtse sprul Rinpoche in August 2010 in Darnkow, Poland.

<sup>60</sup> Karmay 1998b: 34.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Mayer 1996: 17-18.

<sup>62</sup> For example, Lha bla ma ye shes 'od and Pho brang zhi ba 'od, and later the authorities of the emerging Sa skya tradition.

<sup>63</sup> By the thirteenth century, Buddhism in India had practically disappeared; the conquest of Tangut Buddhist Empire by the Mongols in 1227 was seen as a

### Conclusions

The gradual development of the meanings associated with *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* was a long process extending over several centuries. As there is no absolute certainty about the dating of most of the relevant polemical and historical writings, and an important amount of textual material about early *phyi dar* has been lost, definitive conclusions cannot be drawn on a textual basis. This investigation has shown the most polemical moment to be the debate surrounding the breaking point between the longer continuities of the early and the late. The beginning of the *phyi dar* is introduced in the various *chos 'byung* as the moment when the *Dharma* raised from the ashes in central Tibet, with the events of the arrival of Klu mes with his companions in central Tibet and the revival of *Vinaya* emphasized. In contrast, the beginning of the *phyi 'gyur gsar ma* is mainly related to the translation activity of Rin chen bzang po. However, it becomes evident that the distinction between the early and late translations cannot be understood on the basis of chronological distinctions, but rather on the basis of doctrinal distinctions.

These doctrinal distinctions connect the use of the *snga 'gyur* and *phyi 'gyur* to the later appearing terms of *rnying ma* and *gsar ma*. In fact, these two sets of terms can even be used synonymously. The dichotomy of *rnying ma/gsar ma*, when used in opposition, usually refers to early and late translations.<sup>64</sup> The long process of formation of the terms *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* started from the *snga/phyi* dichotomy, dating back to the end of the tenth century. In the *Dharma* history of Nyang ral nyi ma 'od zer, probably from the end of the twelfth century, *snga 'gyur rnying ma/phyi 'gyur gsar ma* is used. In the middle of the thirteenth century, in Chag lo's *Zhu ba* and Mkhas pa lde'u's *Chos 'byung*, the terms appear as designating distinct teaching traditions (*chos lugs*). In Chag lo's *Zhu ba*, the new term "*gsang sngags gsar rnying*" indicates tantras belonging respectively to *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* traditions. Mkhas pa lde'u uses the distinction to point out some doctrinal differences concerning the attainment of the fruition of full enlightenment. In both cases of *snga 'gyur/phyi 'gyur* and *gsar ma/rnying ma*, the distinction is thus based on doctrinal differences.

Furthermore, in both cases the distinction is significant in relation to the higher tantras, belonging on the one hand to *Mahāyoga*, *Anuyoga* and *Atiyoga* (the inner tantras, or *nang rgyud*) of the *rnying ma* tradition, and on the other to the *rnal 'byor bla na med pa* tantras (the unsurpassed yogatantras) of the *gsar ma* traditions. As confirmed by Thu'u bkwan Chos kyi nyi ma, there are no contradictions

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threat to Buddhist teachings and surely influenced, for example, those statements of Sa skya Paṇḍita or Chag lo tsā ba that lamented the decline of the teachings. The setting of the early polemics is not the subject of this article. For more details, see Martin 1996.

<sup>64</sup> Personal communication with Tenzin Samphel in April 2005, Paris.

or misunderstandings between these two traditions on the sūtra level or with respect to the outer tantras (*phyi rgyud*). The division of *rnying ma* and *gsar ma* is important on a polemical level. However, these terms should not be treated as exclusive to one other. Many Buddhist masters have been and still are the holders of both *gsar ma* and *rnying ma* lineages.<sup>65</sup> For accomplished masters, the Buddha's teachings are not limited by the narrow distinctions of *rnying ma* and *gsar ma*.

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<sup>65</sup> For example, in the Sa skya tradition some Rnying ma rituals related to Rdo rje gzhon nu and Yang dag Heruka are practiced until the present day (Ronald Davidson 2005: 272). It is known from the *Sa skya gdung rab chen mo*, that in the beginning, the older brother of 'Khon Dkon mchog rgyal po (b. 1034) named Shes rabs tshul khriims was the follower of *gsang sngags snga 'gyur rnying ma* ('Jam mgon a myes zhabs ngag dbang kun dga' bsod nams 1986).

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