

# Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines

## Reflections on Social Status in the Tibetan World

Part I: Social status as reflected in Tibetan literature  
Part II: Animals and social status in the Tibetan world

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Proceedings of two conferences of the Franco-German project  
"Social Status in the Tibetan World"

Edited by  
Lucia Galli and Peter Schwieger



numéro quarante-neuf — Mai 2019

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## Introduction

Lucia Galli and Peter Schwieger

For the first time she looked him in the face. For the first time Flush looked at the lady lying on the sofa. Each was surprised. [...] There was likeness between them. As they gazed at each other each felt: Here am I—and then each felt: But how different! [...] Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been—all that; and he—But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one human being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was a woman; he was a dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other.

Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography*

 choice of opening a collected volume on the theme of social status in Tibet—albeit confined to the literary milieu on one hand and human-animal interactions on the other—with an extract from Virginia Woolf's experiment in genre may appear bizarre, if not outright preposterous. What connection is to be drawn between the fictional life story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's canine companion and the way Tibetans perceived and conveyed social stratifications both in their textual productions—be they historiographical, biographical or fictional narratives—and in their relationships with, and representations of, the animal world? The answer can only be deceptively simple. Woolf's purported biography of a dog combines most of the features upon which the present volume is built, namely narrative (more precisely a fictional text disguised as a non-fictional one), animals, and hinted reflections on the status ascribed to each being, human and nonhuman alike, within the author's society.<sup>1</sup> Any narrative persona is in fact nothing else but a reflection, to a greater or lesser extent, of the human predicament. In the light of this, all narrations, whether about ancestors, remarkable individuals or animals, are to be understood as the result

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf's novel has recently received renewed scholarly attention. Although opinions on the literary quality of the work diverge, a return to the centrality of the dog has lately shed light on its implications in the human perception of man-animal relationships and exposed the artificiality entailed in the enforced application of taxonomic hierarchies thereupon. For some recent studies of *Flush: A Biography*, see, among others, Smith (2002) and Macadré (2018).

of a deep-seated desire to give meaning to oneself and one's place in the world, and that is a truism for every society. It is therefore in the way that the ever-evolving concept of status emerges in the different texts examined by our contributors that the *fil rouge* binding the present volume must be sought.

For the sake of convenience, the articles have been divided into two parts. The first section contains papers presented at the workshop "Social Status in the Tibetan World: Social Status as Reflected in Tibetan Fictional Narrative Literature, Biographies and Memoirs", held in Bonn on 30–31 May 2017, whereas the second section accommodates the outcome of "Animals and Social Status", held in Paris 15–16 June 2018. Both events were conducted within the framework of the ANR/DFG research project "TibStat", with which most of the authors are closely associated.

Although there is no lack of scholarship on the social structure of pre-modern Tibetan society,<sup>2</sup> any in-depth analysis of such a multifaceted reality is still in its infancy. Studies purporting to reduce the intricacies of Tibetan history to a simplistic dichotomous tension between centre and peripheries, or land-owners and serfs, have been gradually discarded in favour of a more nuanced scholarly approach, whereby archival documents, material culture, and contemporary literature are used as legitimate source of socio-historical information.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies on social status within pre-modern Tibetan societies have mainly focused on the material and symbolic value of goods-exchange and gift-giving, attesting to the importance of these practices as indicators of prestige and honour.<sup>4</sup> The present volume aims to elaborate further on the topic by taking into consideration how social stratifications seeped into indigenous textual productions and shaped human's interactions with, and conceptions of, animals.

The first section opens with Lewis Doney's analysis of the progressive devaluation of the imperial figure, a "degradation" that the author ascribes to a narrativisation of the remembered past, wherein the royal history is gradually replaced by a religious version of it. By addressing historiographical and biographical sources on

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<sup>2</sup> The sheer amount of scholarship on the topic prevents a complete list. To track the evolution of the discourse on Tibetan social structure within Western academia, see, among others, Goldstein (1968, 1971, 1986, 1988), Miller (1987, 1988), Schuh (1988), Samuel (1993), Bischoff (2013, 2017), Travers (2013).

<sup>3</sup> Particularly relevant in this regard are the volumes published within the research project "Social History of Tibetan Societies, 17th–20th Centuries" (SHTS). See Ramble, Schwieger and Travers (eds, 2013), Bischoff and Mullard (eds, 2017), Bischoff and Travers (2018).

<sup>4</sup> See Bischoff and Travers (eds, 2018).

Khri Srong lde brtsan (r. 756–c.800) and Khri gTsong lde brtsan (r. 815–841), Doney illuminates the gradual shifting of values that occurred within the Tibetan society between the imperial period (c. 600–850) and the “second diffusion” (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism. The emperor, depicted first as *primus inter pares*, assumes in the post-imperial period the character of a bodhisattva, upstaged in the 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>-century narratives by the religious masters, either South Asian or indigenous. Doney structures his article upon a refined theoretical discussion of types of fiction, mythology, and historiography, thus uncovering “the narrative mechanisms which enabled a shift from status based upon kinship, military endeavour, and fealty to the emperor as the highest member of Tibet to religious status drawing on Indic social structures.” It is this shift towards Buddhist values and norms, the author argues, that made possible, if not inevitable, the progressive decline of the social (and symbolic) status of the emperor from an “instantiation of indigenous divine kingship” to a mere “mundane ruler”.

Specular and opposite reflection of the instances of status degradation presented by Doney is Lobsang Yongdan’s investigation of the “invention” of Bla ma dkar po (1835–1895) as “lama general”. Expounding on the political finesse and military genius of an apparently “ordinary” monk, the author dwells on those happenstances that led to Bla ma dkar po’s elevation to “one of the most important *ho thog thu* in the Qing empire.” Further elaborating on the concept of *sprul sku*, Yongdan contends that the social status of a reincarnate, far from being the sole outcome of past religious achievements and cultural norms, could also be achieved through war, violence, and destruction. To support his argument, the author produces large extracts from Bla ma dkar po’s biography, thus confirming the value of contemporary textual sources to deepen scholars’ understanding of the indigenous view of social norms and stratifications.

A similar socio-historical approach is proposed by Franz Xaver Erhard in his reading of *rDo ring paṇḍita’i rnam thar*, one of the earliest examples of Tibetan secular (auto)biography. Erhard ascribes the difficult genre attribution to the deceptively clear intent animating the author of the work. Although purportedly centred on the figure of rDo ring Paṇḍita mGon po dngos grub rab brtan (1721–1793), the real protagonist is in fact the biographer himself, his son bSod nams bstan ’dzin dpal ’byor tshe ring (b. 1760). Taking his cue from Umberto Eco’s semiotics, Erhard discards any superficial reading of the work to focus on the *intentio operis*, thus arguing that, in departing from the narrative programme expected from a traditional *rnam thar*, bSod nams bstan ’dzin dpal ’byor tshe ring

creates “the new literary genre of secular autobiography”, the intent of which is to repeatedly “assess, defend, and ascertain the social status of the rDo ring family.”

The first section ends with two articles reflecting on the value of Tibetan literary fiction as a source of social history. In her contribution, Lucia Galli suggests the adoption of New Historicism as a methodological tool for the analysis of Tibetan literary productions, thus moving the scholars’ attention “from the centre—that is, the text—to the borders where the text connects with the material world.” To do so, Galli asserts, will make for “a process of reconstruction of the past that, going beyond the literary text, recreates the complex socio-historical and intertextual networks in which the work and its author are embedded.” Structuring her article upon Lhag pa don grub’s *Drel pa’i mi tshe*, Galli corroborates the information contained in the novel with contemporary non-literary sources, such as personal records, legal documents, and Tibetan-medium journals, casting some light on the social and economic conditions of porters, muleteers, and low-medium traders between the 1940s-early 1950s.

The dramatic events that followed the 1959 uprising and the flight of the Dalai Lama to India—left tellingly unspoken in *Drel pa’i mi tshe*—find their voice in Trashi Palden’s *Phal pa’i khyim tshang gi skyid sdug*, the novel at the core of Charles Ramble’s article. The author unravels the intricacies of the plot by comparing it to Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, a beloved classic of English literature. Such an exercise is not a mere pandering to the Western reader’s tastes; on the contrary, by choosing the English novelist as a referent, Ramble reinforces his reading of *Phal pa* as a source of social historical information. In providing “[some] of the most subtle accounts of social hierarchy, social order and social struggle of her time”,<sup>5</sup> Austen’s writings have assumed in the eyes of many a scholar of undisputable sociological value. Although lacking the stylistic elegance of Austen’s masterpiece, *Phal pa* has the merit of presenting “village life through the eyes of farmers and herders, without the prism of a social or political project”, and it is in this detached observation and recording that, Ramble argues, the socio-historical importance of Trashi Palden’s work lies. While the analogy with *Pride and Prejudice* may be a helpful way of grasping the dynamics among the protagonists in *Phal pa*, Ramble suggests that a more significant comparison may be drawn with the work of Thomas Hardy, whose novels are widely regarded as important sources for the social history of 19<sup>th</sup>-century rural England.

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<sup>5</sup> Wilkes (2009: 2).



Peter Schwieger's contribution eases the passage between sections: by leading the reader into the marvellous world of folktales, he seamlessly merges textual production and animal world, the two *fulcra* of the present volume. Schwieger opens his article by questioning the same definition of animals in Tibetan society and observing how the latter appears based on dualisms, the most important of which regards human beings at one end and animals at the other. Yet, such a categorical boundary, the author remarks, is not an ontological one, due to the Buddhist belief in rebirth; despite being subject to the same process of salvation as human beings, animals' inability to receive and understand the *dharma* makes them virtually insignificant in the eyes of Buddhist scholars. If the animal world fails to gain recognition in Buddhist scholarship, it fares better within narrative literature and oral folklore. It is to the latter that Schwieger devotes most of his paper: examining those stories that have an animal as a protagonist, the author concludes that the line between human and animal is fluid and porous, a testimony to a time where the civilisation and wilderness were two faces of the same coin.

Moving away from narrative, the following two contributions delve deeper into the topic of status and hierarchical stratifications of the animal world by discussing the social value of horses. The first article, by Petra Maurer, examines the various classes men assigned to animals in general, and equines in particular. In investigating the existence of "social" categories applied to horses, the author expands her study geographically, culturally, and chronologically, encompassing in her discourse on Tibetan hippology a wide array of sources, dating from the 8th to the 17th centuries, thus tracing the development of a taxonomic system in which Indo-Greek concepts blended with Central Asiatic models. Through her careful reading of the indigenous hippiatric texts, Maurer notes in fact the coexistence of *varṇa*-like social classes and elemental categories, whereby a specific element is assigned to each Tibetan horse type. Among the latter, a place of pre-eminence is accorded to the *gyi ling*, a renowned eastern Tibetan breed at the core of the joint contribution by Hildegard and Yancen Diemberger. Combining textual analysis and ethnographic materials, the authors enrich our knowledge of *gyi ling* horses, at once a breed and a symbol, illuminating the fundamental role that horses and horse knowledge had, and still have, among nomadic communities across the plateau, as they acted as indicators of prestige as well as an important component in the enactment of the cult of the territory.

The spiritual and symbolic function of animals in the Tibetan religious and socio-cultural fabric is further explored by Alexander

Smith. In his article, the author presents a 14th-century narrative that plays a central role in the origin mythology of *ju thig*, a form of rope divination unique to the g.Yung drung Bon tradition. Smith's translation of the text—*de facto* an allegory of the primordial domestication of sheep—supports his reading of the episode as an expression of “the hierarchical social taxonomies that structure the performance of a number of cleromantic practices encountered in Bon cultural milieus.” In the tale, the economic and propitiatory value of the sheep is conveyed by the composite nature of the primordial sheep itself, which is crafted from the essence of thirteen different substances, thus “tak[ing] on a chimeric quality, with the various parts of its body composed using a type of thaumaturgic bricolage.

The volume ends with Olaf Czaja's preliminary remarks on the use of human and animal *materia medica* in Tibetan medicine. In the effort to discern to which animal substances Tibetans ascribed therapeutical and pharmacological properties, the author examines five clinically-oriented treatises from the 11th to the 15th centuries and two drug lists from the 19th and 20th centuries, providing for each of the works a list of the types of *materia medica* and the frequency of their occurrence within the texts. In his concluding observations, Czaja notes how, in Tibetan pharmacopeia, “medicinal resources from domestic and wild animals, together with human *materia medica*, formed a unified whole”, thus suggesting that they are considered equally important in treating diseases and preserving good health.

In an ideal closure of the circle, our journey through the ways in which social status is expressed in Tibetan literature and human-animal interactions ends where it started, namely Woolf's *Flush*. When creating her version of Elizabeth Barrett's canine companion, the English novelist did not simply recount the woman's life through the eyes of her dog. Rather she embarked on a quest, retracing the private correspondence between the cocker spaniel's owner and her beau, Robert Browning, and using this material to afford her work the breath of life.<sup>6</sup> The same could be said for the textual productions examined by our contributors in the first section of this volume: regardless of their being historiographical accounts, biographical writings or folktales, each work conveys, to a greater or lesser degree, the idiosyncrasies of the society that created it. As the articles contained in the second section demonstrate, the human need to apply taxonomic classifications extends to the animal world as well, thus translating into horizontal and vertical hierarchies mirroring

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<sup>6</sup> Smith (2002: 352).

those in force in the socio-cultural fabric that produced them.

Contrary to Woolf's detached and unsentimental third-voice narrator, it is the editors' hope that the present volume may contribute to bridge that "widest gulf", leading the reader one step closer to understand the fascinating complexities of pre-modern Tibetan societies.

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# The Degraded Emperor: Theoretical Reflections on the Upstaging of a Bodhisattva King

Lewis Doney

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## *Introduction*

Tibet's imperial period (c. 600–850) holds a central position in many traditional Tibetan histories, especially the depiction of how the emperors of that time established Buddhism in “the land of snows” by inviting Dharma practitioners from surrounding states. These narratives less often emphasise the mundane aspects of the empire, the conquests and international diplomacy that made Tibet at this time a dominating force in Central Asia. Even the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, despite receiving a thorough monastic education in religious history, did not learn about Tibetan imperial achievements when young. Then, in 1954, he visited Xi'an, which was once the ancient western Chinese capital of Chang'an:

The mayor of Xi'an and the deputy minister of Gansu province suggested that we go outside the city. Outside there are walls from the Tang Dynasty more than one thousand years old. We were on the walls, which are quite high and thick, and the sun was about to set. Sitting there, the mayor told me that the Tibetan army reached up to these walls and the emperor of China, living then in Xi'an, had to run away. I thought that in an airplane I could have flown from there to Lhasa in a one-hour flight. And I thought 'Oh the Tibetan army, in order to create such a panic in the capital of the Tang...at least tens of thousands of soldiers must have been there, must have come to China on foot.'<sup>1</sup>

Chinese historians had passed on records of the Tibetan military campaign for the intervening twelve hundred years. Tibetan histories, in contrast, omitted this victory and all other conquests from their accounts of Khri Srong lde brtsan's reign. Generally speaking, Tibetan Buddhist tradition favoured religious history over royal history.

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<sup>1</sup> HH Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso, quoted in Laird (2006: 43).

Peter Schwieger has shown how Buddhism gradually became the dominant source of ethical values in Tibetan historiography by the 14th century.<sup>2</sup> He states that Tibetan histories, which narrativise the remembered past, play a mythic role inasmuch as they confer constructed meaning on Tibetan culture, determine cultural self-interpretation to some extent and provide a source of normative claims concerning sociocultural interrelationships that hold true in the histories' "present."<sup>3</sup> This article complements his analysis of the shift from a royal to a religious centre of society,<sup>4</sup> by bringing theoretical insights from the field of narratology to bear on Tibetan historiography's depiction of the emperors and their introduction of Buddhism to the Tibetan plateau.

According to Matthew T. Kapstein, land during the dGa' ldan Pho brang period of Tibetan history (mid-17th to mid-20th century) "was the property of the ruler, and in those regions under the sway of Lhasa, this meant the Dalai Lama."<sup>5</sup> Land could also be held by a noble or a monastery, in other words one of the three major classes of landlords (*mnga' bdag chen po gsum*), and revenue gained from those of lower status who worked the land (or made some other more specialised contribution to the economy) would in part be expended for the representatives of the religious establishment, which means monks, nuns and various types of lama (*bla ma*).<sup>6</sup> As Kapstein notes, this system was not timeless or immutable, though it was sometimes assumed to be. Moreover, the "ecclesiastical hierarchy was clearly the dominant class," which "amounted to a broad disenfranchisement of the lay aristocracy."<sup>7</sup>

The gradual establishment of ecclesiastical power over the land of the Tibetan plateau erased the memory of the complex power dynamics of the imperial period's Yar lung (/klung) Dynasty, who directly or indirectly ruled over an even greater territory than that which most scholars describe as "cultural Tibet" today. From this position of ultimate power and land ownership (at least from a rhetorical perspective), the image of the emperor as standing at the zenith of imperial Tibetan society largely disappeared from view. Although narratives of these rulers continue to idealise them, tending to emphasise their religious rather than martial characteristics, emperors such as Khri Srong lde brtsan (r. 756–c.800) and Khri gTsug lde brtsan AKA Ral pa can (r. 815–841) are increasingly described as

<sup>2</sup> See Schwieger (2000; 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Schwieger (2000: 947; 2013: 65–66).

<sup>4</sup> Schwieger (2000: 947–949 and 962–964; 2013: 66–67 and 72–74).

<sup>5</sup> Kapstein (2006a: 176).

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*: 176–178.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*: 180. The same is affirmed by Travers (2013: 142, n. 2).

taking an inferior position to religious masters at their courts.

This article will address the (earlier) historiographical and (later) biographical sources on the first of these two emperors, Khri Srong lde brtsan, in order to offer some insights into the *changing* values of Tibetan society from the imperial period into the time of the “second dissemination” (*phyi dar*) of Buddhism. It begins with the self-representation of the Yar lung Dynasty during the Tibetan imperial period (c.600–850), in which the Tibetan emperor is both the *primus inter pares* and also pinnacle of society. It then moves on to the early post-imperial idealisation of the emperors as Buddhist rulers or bodhisattvas, before describing how from around the 11th or 12th century the rulers began to be upstaged in narratives on imperial-period Buddhism by religious masters: South Asians such as Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava but also Tibetans including dBa’ gSal snang.

Such examples of early Tibetan Buddhist literature often contain narratives of (almost exclusively male) characters being either abandoned in the wilderness as children or being exiled from a kingdom (or renouncing it) in youth or early adulthood. By identifying some similarities between these abandonment/ exile/ renunciation *topoi* (literary motifs) in these texts, I shall show how these markers signify the power of the victim over the perpetrator of these acts. Investigating the Central Eurasian theme of exile and return to power in state formation mythology, as well as Indic narratives of renouncing the throne in favour of the spiritual life, will help to clarify the processes involved in the introduction of both of these important *topoi* into early Tibetan biographies. Understanding the divergences between the Central Eurasian and Indic heritage of these Tibetan tales will allow for a preliminary discussion of the changing relation between religious and royal figures in early Tibetan biographical narratives. Grounding these changes in theoretical discussions of types of fiction, mythology and historiography will uncover some of the narrative mechanisms which enabled a shift from status based upon kinship, military endeavour and fealty to the emperor as the highest member of Tibet to religious status drawing on Indic social structures. Such a shift opened up the possibility that a subject of the emperor (at least rhetorically) could outshine an instantiation of indigenous divine kingship. A Buddhist cleric could be superior to royalty.

### *The emperor*

The geographical extent of what constituted “Tibet” (Bod) varied considerably as the Tibetan empire expanded and contracted at its

various borders between the 7th and 9th centuries, and then collapsed to leave a power vacuum and even more uncertain borders. The empire of the Yar lung Dynasty, the hereditary rulership originating in and based around the Yar lung valley on the Central Tibetan plateau, expanded from this power base in all directions (except much to the direct south, due in part to the Himalayas). The land that Arabic sources of this period refer to as Tubbat was situated west of China, north of India, south of the Uyghur Turks and east of the eastern marches of the Khurasan.<sup>8</sup>

The expansion of the Tibetan empire meant gradually taking control of other kingdoms, city states and regions (by alliance or force) and ruling them as an empire with an emperor (*btsan po*) at its head. The term *btsan po* is difficult to translate but may be akin to the term “emperor” used of the previous rulers of China or Japan.<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is an indigenous term for the sole ruler of the Tibetan state. From the 7th century onwards, though, the Yar lung rulers were also “emperors” in the more literal sense of the term, “ones who rule over an empire,” and Tang China referred to them as either *btsan po* or words meaning “emperor” from this period onwards.<sup>10</sup> Tibetan, Chinese and Arabic histories all claim that the Yar lung rulers conquered the “kings of the four directions and forced them to pay tribute.”<sup>11</sup>

Fealty to the emperor paid by regions incorporated into the empire appears in some cases at least to have been mutually beneficial. For example, in the middle of the 7th century the Tibetan empire expanded northeast and conquered the Turkic kingdom of 'A zha (Ch. Tuyuhun), who were based to the west of Qinghai Lake and the south-eastern Tarim Basin.<sup>12</sup> Yet the 'A zha were seemingly not simply swallowed up in the process. After 663, the 'A zha became a vassal state (*rgyal phran*) of Tibet, as evidenced by their performance of a yearly *sku bla* rite of fealty to the emperor,<sup>13</sup> and this status allowed the 'A zha some autonomy within the Tibetan empire.<sup>14</sup> This area was famed for its horses, and the Yar lung Dynasty's military was strengthened by means of an expanded cavalry in return.<sup>15</sup> Thus, recognition of the superior status of Tibetan emperor in some regions allowed both that vassal state some autonomy and also the empire to

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<sup>8</sup> Beckwith (1987: 163, n. 127).

<sup>9</sup> See Doney (2013).

<sup>10</sup> Beckwith (1987: 20).

<sup>11</sup> Beckwith (1980: 30).

<sup>12</sup> See Beckwith (1987: 17–19).

<sup>13</sup> Hill (2015).

<sup>14</sup> Dotson (2009: 40–41).

<sup>15</sup> Tong (2013: 19).



continue to grow.

On a local level, the emperors maintained a somewhat nomadic base of operations, travelling around Central Tibet. However, they tended to gravitate towards the ancestral home of their dynasty in the Yar lung valley. It was from this base that, at the close of the 6th century, the Yar lung or sPu rgyal dynasty, took over what they called “rTsang Bod,” probably southern Central Tibet.<sup>16</sup> Each generation enthroned a male to act as head of the Yar lung Dynasty and a *primus inter pares* ruler of an empire consisting of a number of conquered kingdoms. Loyal ministers, drawn from both the families who had first supported the Yar lung house and also principalities newly encompassed by the empire, did service to these rulers and their sons. These ministers and their families benefited thereby with land taken from the disloyal or rival rulers. The words that Kapstein uses to describe land ownership in later centuries appears to be as true during the imperial period: “Though aristocratic estates were usually hereditary, the nobles held their estates as grants, not as personal property, and the government could and did resume them when circumstances were perceived to warrant this.”<sup>17</sup> Such concerns are expressed, for example, in the so-called Zhol Inscription.<sup>18</sup> The centrality of the emperor to even geographic and temporal reckoning in Tibet is reflected in imperial literature, for example the dating formula of the *Old Tibetan Annals* is based upon these travels around the lands of loyal Tibetan subjects. As Brandon Dotson comments: “In this way, time itself was centralised by the figure of the Tibetan emperor.”<sup>19</sup>

As Weber has noted of the Indian social system, “the caste structure transforms the horizontal and unconnected coexistences of ethnically segregated groups into a vertical social system of super- and subordinate.”<sup>20</sup> Something similar took place in imperial society, both between ethnic groups like the Central Tibetans and ‘A zha and between the Yar lung family, now a dynasty, and the other clans in Central Tibet. The emperor thus sat at both the centre and zenith of imperial Tibetan society, at least according to the imperial self-representation of court documents (which is almost our only source of written information for this period). From the official perspective of the court, the Yar lung Dynasty held a position of ultimate power and land ownership across the Tibetan plateau.

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<sup>16</sup> Beckwith (1987: 8).

<sup>17</sup> Kapstein (2006a: 180).

<sup>18</sup> Doney (2013: 65–69).

<sup>19</sup> Dotson (2009: 11).

<sup>20</sup> Weber ([1948] 1991: 189).

In practice however, the *primus inter pares* form of rulership seems to have been deeply unstable,<sup>21</sup> needing to be constantly reinforced as the emperor moved his mobile court of administrators, judiciary, priests and guards in semi-nomadic fashion around the lands of his loyal aristocracy.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the entire duration of the imperial period, like its beginnings, was marked by internal power struggles, marital alliances and territorial disputes among and within the Yar lung Dynasty and other local polities and major families of Central Tibet.<sup>23</sup> The emperors did not always hold meaningful power (which sometimes resided with their queens), and the mGar group maintained a brief ministerial “shogunate” in the late 7th century.<sup>24</sup> Yet when the system was most stable, and acquiescence to it ensured by the spoils of continued expansion of the empire, the Tibetan aristocracy with the emperors at their head benefitted from periods of great wealth and cosmopolitanism.

The Tibetan empire reached its greatest extent during the reign of Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan. In the northwest, it threatened the territory of the fourth and fifth Abbasid caliphs, Al-Mansur (714–775) and Harun al-Rashid (763/766–809), on the banks of the Oxus; in the east, as mentioned above, the Tibetan army even briefly sacked the Chinese capital Chang’an in 763.<sup>25</sup> This emperor also presided over the growing institutionalisation of Buddhism in Tibet, as a state religion. This patronage was epitomised by his construction of bSam yas Monastery, which shows signs of influence from the older Buddhist cultures surrounding the empire at this time—most notably South Asia and China.

The ascendancy of the empire allowed Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan to confer high status, patronage and support on the *samgha* of monks. In the famous bSam yas Inscription that still stands outside the monastery of bSam yas in Central Tibet, he proclaims that such patronage “shall never be abandoned or destroyed,” as well as provide the wealth that makes the “provision of the necessary accoutrements” possible.<sup>26</sup> The recipient is not a specific person or clan as in some other imperial inscriptions, but rather monastic followers of Buddhism. The bSam yas Inscription draws on certain rhetorical devices used in earlier secular proclamations, for instance the Zhol Inscription, in order to evoke both imperial expansion and

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<sup>21</sup> Ramble (2006: 129–133).

<sup>22</sup> Dotson (2009: 43–46); Hazod (2009).

<sup>23</sup> Hazod (2012: 49–55).

<sup>24</sup> See Dotson (2009: 18–19).

<sup>25</sup> See Beckwith (1987: 143–157).

<sup>26</sup> See Richardson (1985: 26–29); Li and Coblin (1987: 186–192); Doney (2013: 69–72).

stability. It uses these *topoi* to lend authority to Buddhism. Reciprocally, the ministers who swore to protect this newly established state religion also thereby pledged their continued loyalty to the Yar lung Dynasty, and the imperially-sponsored construction of large temple structures centralised the generally itinerant power base of the empire around the two “capitals,” Ra sa (later to be named Lhasa) and Brag dmar (further southeast where bSam yas stands). The circular *maṇḍala* symbolism inherent in the design of bSam yas Monastery reflects the ideal empire, with the emperor identified with the powerful cosmic buddha (Vairocana) at its centre—as at other imperially sponsored Buddhist sites in East Asia more generally during this period.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, the metonymic identification of Vairocana Buddha with Khri Srong lde btsan will play a special part in his later upstaging in narratives discussed below.

The emperor invited Buddhist masters to court during his reign, including the Indic monk Śāntarakṣita, who became his spiritual preceptor and head of bSam yas Monastery.<sup>28</sup> Such invitees may also have included the shadowy tantric master Padmasambhava, who will become a central figure in the latter half of this article. Michael Walter suggests that Khri Srong lde brtsan invited Padmasambhava from Oḍḍiyāna in today’s Swat Valley, at that time a part of the Tibetan Empire.<sup>29</sup> However, although Padmasambhava’s birth-place was considered to be Oḍḍiyāna/ Uḍḍiyāna (O rgyan/ U rgyan) from a relatively early period, even in these sources there is confusion about whether Oḍḍiyāna corresponds to the Swat Valley or was perhaps in or to the south of India instead,<sup>30</sup> and even whether the Swat Valley was part of the Tibetan Empire at all.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, other scholars have questioned the historicity of his traditionally-attributed presence at the Tibetan court.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Walter’s observation is interesting because it most likely reflects the true status of religious figures at the court of Khri Srong lde brtsan:

Assuming the historicity of this event, the political reality of the situation was that [...] Padmasambhava appeared before him as one of his subjects. If his fame was as great as later tradition maintains, he was likely commanded to appear, or physically brought to court, at

<sup>27</sup> See Doney (2013: 71) on Ra sa and Brag dmar. On the identification of Vairocana with the Tibetan emperor, see Kapstein (2000: 60–65; 2006a: 71–72; 2009: 53).

<sup>28</sup> See footnote 89.

<sup>29</sup> Walter (2009: 13 and 50–51, n. 26).

<sup>30</sup> See Doney (2014: 5 and 29, n. 24); see also Aciri (2016: 9, n. 25).

<sup>31</sup> See Zeisler (2010) for further discussion.

<sup>32</sup> See Kapstein (2000); Cantwell and Mayer (2016).

the Btsan-po's order.<sup>33</sup>

We can thus add religious masters to the list of groups who are amenable to Weber's analysis given above. The "vertical social system of super- and subordinative elements" probably also included indigenous priests and augurs, as well as foreign abbots and lay tantric adepts (and their converts at the Tibetan court), who tended to lack land but offered services to society, the state, or the emperor himself.<sup>34</sup> It is fair to assume that such groups engaged in different discourses of superiority or inferiority that tended to stand in tension historically rather than be a synchronic fact accepted by all groups,<sup>35</sup> but that they all equally (if not all successfully) vied for the favour of the emperor at the top of society. We shall see below that the relationship between the religious and the royal figures in this social system are depicted very differently in later narratives.

As mentioned above, the status of the emperor as *primus inter pares* led to increased instability at the court. The new ways of stratifying society and the ruler-minister bond, caused by either Buddhism<sup>36</sup> or economic bankruptcy following the end of the expansionist period,<sup>37</sup> or both, led to the collapse of this important binding force and the eventual implosion of the sPu rgyal Dynasty of Yar lung. Many on either side of this debate maintain that Buddhism in Central Tibet was exclusively a religion centred around the emperor at his court and not shared by all, whereas others dispute this view.<sup>38</sup> All serious scholars are now in agreement that there is certainly no evidence that Buddhism in Central Tibet or any outlying parts of the empire suffered from the mythical anti-Buddhist purge by Khri 'U'i dum brtan (also known as Glang Dar ma; r. 841–842) that once held a firm place in the historical imagination of Tibetan Buddhist tradition and Tibetan Studies. The evidence instead suggests that the emperors stayed at least publicly Buddhist to the end.<sup>39</sup> It seems that the idea of the court's power to spread Buddhism throughout the empire, whether it was rhetorical or real, was disseminated as much for the positive way in which it reflected the Yar lung Dynasty as for Buddhism itself. This supported the dynasty's self-presentation of its position of ultimate power and land ownership across the Tibetan plateau, discussed above.

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<sup>33</sup> Walter (2009: 50–51, n. 26).

<sup>34</sup> Weber ([1948] 1991: 182).

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.*: 193.

<sup>36</sup> Hazod (2012: 48); Ramble (2006: 133).

<sup>37</sup> Beckwith (2011: 233).

<sup>38</sup> van Schaik (2016a: 62).

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*: 63.

When 'U'i Dum brtan was violently killed in 842, his assassination meant the beginning of the end of the Tibetan empire. Hazod suggests that this incident happened at the site of the 821/822 Treaty Inscription, "in the same side valley of the Skyid chu [in Central Tibet] where the kingdom had been founded 250 years earlier."<sup>40</sup> He retells the classic story (evidenced from the 12th century onwards) of the assassination of the "sinful king" (*sdig pa'i rgyal po*) Glang Dar ma by the virtuous monk lHa lung dPal gyi rdo rje and notes some evidence of the historicity of the latter man (if not the narrative).<sup>41</sup> The status of the religious figure rather than the ruler as the hero of this narrative is expressive of the same processes that this article addresses.

Towards the very end of the imperial period, Yar lung dynastic power became split between two rival factions and then disintegrated into what later histories call the "time of fragmentation" (*sil bu'i dus*).<sup>42</sup> Although Tibet's glory days of empire were behind it, their wake continued to be felt and some later kingdoms and Buddhist traditions continued to chart their lineage back to the golden age of the Yar lung Dynasty and its bodhisattva kings.<sup>43</sup>

#### *Narrativising the right to rule*

The legitimacy of the Yar lung dynasty was presented in numerous different ways in early Tibetan historiography. The authentically Old Tibetan "texts" available to us use certain words and phrases specifically for each emperor and no-one else. The inscriptions describe the emperors as possessing characteristics of divine power and wisdom corresponding to their pre-eminent status,<sup>44</sup> and some documents relate how the first rulers came down from heaven to rule over their "black-headed" subjects.<sup>45</sup> Such *topoi* continued to be used later Buddhist narratives too, as recounted by Samten Karmay.<sup>46</sup> The early, equivocal description of three alternatives in the perhaps 10<sup>th</sup>-century document Pelliot tibétain 1038, preserved in Mogao Cave 17 near Dunhuang on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan empire,<sup>47</sup> seems to make way for other, longer and similarly tripartite

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<sup>40</sup> Hazod (2014: 77).

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*: 45–48.

<sup>42</sup> See Kapstein (2006a: 81–85).

<sup>43</sup> Doney (2015: 44–47).

<sup>44</sup> Doney (2013: 72–78).

<sup>45</sup> Hill (2016).

<sup>46</sup> See Karmay (1998).

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*: 285–286. On Dunhuang and the treasure-trove of ancient documents found nearby, see van Schaik (2011: 28–29).

categorisations of narratives surrounding the origin of the first Tibetan king,<sup>48</sup> for example as found in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Rgya bod kyi chos 'byung* by mKhas pa lDe'u.<sup>49</sup> The first is the "Ultra Secret" Tradition:

According to the ultra secret tradition, the king descends from the *the'u brang* spirit. In the country of sPu-bo, there are nine brothers in the clan Mo-btsun, the youngest being Ma-snya u-be-ra. His tongue is so big that it could cover his face and the space [*sic*] between his fingers are joined together (i.e. a webbed hand). He has a hard character and is magically powerful which is the cause of his exile. Bonpos and Buddhists(!) proficient in rituals perform the rite of *The'u brang skyas 'degs* ("Sending away the *the'u brang* spirit with departing gifts") and he is finally banished from sPu-bo. He comes across people who are looking for someone who could be made their king. They ask him: "Where do you come from?" "I come from sPu-bo," he replies. "You have a strange tongue and hands! Do you possess any magical power?" [...] "I am banished because of being magically too powerful." "Let us make you our king," they said. Carrying him on their necks, they proclaimed him as their king called gNya'-khri btsan-po, the "Nape-enthroned king."<sup>50</sup>

Here, the youngest of the brothers is physically different and distasteful to his countrymen. He is banished as a result, but these distasteful traits endear him to the Tibetans who are searching for a ruler. The magical power that puts Ma snya u be ra beyond the pale of one society is the same that leads to his enthronement and renaming as gNya' khri btsan po. A similar narrative *topos* will be seen when we turn to the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Zangs gling ma* account of Padmasambhava, where his renaming makes it clear that his dangerous personality and power are exactly what raise him above the status of mundane or secular figures, even kings.

The second tradition on gNya' khri btsan po is from the "Secret Tradition." It describes his father (Bar gyi bdun tshigs) as a Phyva god, who "is exiled to the dMu heaven, because he dislikes his father and the three elder brothers above him and dislikes his mother and the three younger brothers below him."<sup>51</sup> His father gives him a number of presents in order to persuade him to leave for dMu, where he sires a son, gNya' khri btsan po (so called for being born out of the

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*: 294–307.

<sup>49</sup> Martin (1997: 43–44, no. 54).

<sup>50</sup> Karmay 1998: 294–295 (parentheses Karmay's, square brackets mine). On the traditional etymology of *gnya' khri*, see Dotson (2015: 20–21). For an alternative one based on *nya*, "fish," see Ramble (2013: 81–83).

<sup>51</sup> Karmay (1998: 298).

nape of his mother's neck). The Tibetans then send an emissary to invite him to be their ruler.<sup>52</sup> It therefore appears that a movement in a story such as leaving a heaven is either motivated by exile, by a wish to leave, or by invitation.

The third origin narrative is from the "Renowned Buddhist" version, which relates that gNya' khri btsan po descended from the Buddha's Śākya clan.<sup>53</sup> Two brothers in this line are feuding in India, and the son of one of the brothers kills 98 of the 99 sons of the other. The surviving child, Ru pa skyes, "is banished, put into a box, and thrown into the river Ganges." The boy is found by a herdsman and protected by King Bimbisāra, since he recognises the child as an emanation of a bodhisattva, Mahākaruṇa Avalokiteśvara. When his uncle's family arrives, Ru pa skyes then becomes scared and escapes. He flees to Tibet, whose inhabitants mistake Ru pa skyes for a god descended from heaven and enthrone him on their napes (*gnya'*).

These stories float in time somewhat within early Tibetan historiography, so the date of their "original" creation remains unclear. Importantly though, they all seem to draw on wider Central Eurasian narrative traditions of exile and return to power in state formation mythology, as well as Indic narratives of renouncing the throne in favour of the spiritual life. The heroes here are almost always male (though the example of Vimalaprabhā in footnote 69 below provides a rare exception), and their strange births and difficult childhoods give them a special status in society that strengthens their claims to re-join and rule the societies they left or found new societies of which they are the (sometimes spiritual) exemplars. Christopher I. Beckwith schematises the general features of this "state formation" mythology, which he also calls "state foundation" mythology or the "First Story," into the following list of elements (here numbered 1–12):<sup>54</sup>

1. A maiden is impregnated by a heavenly spirit or god
2. A rightful king is deposed unjustly
3. The maiden gives birth to a marvellous baby boy
4. The unjust king orders the baby to be exposed to the elements
5. Wild beasts nurture the baby and so he survives
6. The baby is discovered in the wilderness and saved
7. This boy grows up to be a skilled horseman and archer
8. He is brought to court but put in a subservient position
9. He is in danger of being put to death but escapes

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*: 298–299.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*: 303–305.

<sup>54</sup> Beckwith (2009: 12).

10. The boy becomes a man and acquires a following of oath-sworn warriors
11. He overthrows the tyrant and re-establishes justice in the kingdom
12. He founds a new city or dynasty

As Beckwith notes in the same place, these elements may appear in a different order, and they resemble the parts of a folktale in some respects. He also gives a short précis of the state formation myths of a number of Central Eurasian cultures.<sup>55</sup> The above “Renowned Buddhist” narrative on gNya’ khri btsan po shares certain similarities with these myths, including the (today potentially shocking) topic of attempted infanticide, which is not a theme that is necessarily avoided in traditional Tibetan Buddhist literature. In fact, this *topos* is found in narratives told far away from Tibet, such as the famous stories of Romulus and Remus, baby Moses in the bulrushes and the sea-exile of Orgy, whose son and later husband Telephos is raised in the wild according to the frieze in the Pergamon Altar.

Especially prominent in the first Tibetan ruler’s life-story are elements 1, 2, 4, 6, 8 and 9. Yet, we should not assume that the Tibetans only borrowed these narratives from wider Central Eurasian myths, at some time after the fall of empire. The narratives probably have their more proximate source in Indic narratives or the Tibetans’ own imperial legends. For instance, Brandon Dotson, who himself noted Beckwith’s “state formation” schema applicability to Old Tibetan mythology, connects the *topos* of being cast adrift on the waters not only with the important myth of another early Tibetan ruler, Gri gum btsan po/ Dri gum btsan po in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, but also with the Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>56</sup> It should be noted that this method of exile is also found in the Khotanese version of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>57</sup> Other imperial narratives display *topoi* such as the hero’s mastery over wild animals indicating the power that he has acquired in his wilderness period preceding regaining the throne.<sup>58</sup> For example, in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* Emperor Khri ’Dus srong (r. 686–704) displays these traits as a child and goes on in later life to

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*: 1–11.

<sup>56</sup> Dotson (2011: 90, n. 25); see also de Jong (1989: A 65–73 and A 73–83); Kapstein (2003: 760). Dotson (2011: 95 and n. 43) indicates that Beckwith’s “First Story” schema could guide future readings of the narrative of another character in the Gri gum btsan po myth, Ngar la skyes, connecting it to wider Central Eurasian narrative going back to Proto-Indo-European mythology as Beckwith (2009: 12) suggests.

<sup>57</sup> Bailey (1940: 564).

<sup>58</sup> As discussed in Heesterman (1985: 118–127).



regain power of Central Tibet from the powerful mGar clan.<sup>59</sup>

Importantly, gNya' khri btsan po in the myths above does not return to overthrow his uncle or any unjust ruler and become king, but rather is enthroned as the ruler of another land. These narratives thus contain a more nomadic element, also present in other Central Eurasian versions of state formation. In the same way, the myth of the Scythians founding their city describes them discovering a new home in exile rather than winning (back) territory through conquering their enemy.<sup>60</sup>

Similar *topoi* of founding a new home occur in a Buddhist context on the Silk Road, for example describing how the Central Asian kingdom of Khotan was founded, as translated into Tibetan and preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist canon. Khotan was first conquered by the Tibetans around 670,<sup>61</sup> and monks from Khotan, perhaps even indigenous Khotanese, appear to have settled in Central Tibet by the 8th century at least.<sup>62</sup> Khotanese Buddhism no doubt exerted some influence on the form of Dharma adopted at the Tibetan court.<sup>63</sup> This encounter with an already established cosmopolitan Silk Road centre may have also formed part of their inspiration to create a Buddhist society of trade, wealth and luxury in Central Tibet.

The Khotanese state formation myth is found in a number of early sources in both Tibetan and Chinese,<sup>64</sup> and here I rely on the Tibetan *Annals of Khotan*.<sup>65</sup> This work states that the chief consort of the Indian Buddhist emperor, Aśoka (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), became pregnant through beholding the divine king of the north, Vaiśravaṇa (element 1, above). Aśoka summons diviners, who tell him that the child displays miraculous bodily marks and will become king before his father's death (3). Becoming jealous, Aśoka orders that the child be cast away, quarrelling with his consort until she agrees out of fear that he will kill her baby (4). The child does not die but is rather suckled by a breast arising from the earth (5), for which he gains the name Earth-Breast (*sa nu*, Kustana) which resembles the Indic name for Khotan (Gostana).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> See Dotson (2013: 78–79).

<sup>60</sup> Myth retold in Beckwith (2009: 4).

<sup>61</sup> Beckwith (1987: 30–34); Denwood (2008: 7); Dotson (2009: 18).

<sup>62</sup> van Schaik (2016b: 54).

<sup>63</sup> Tong (2013: 21–22).

<sup>64</sup> Skjaervo (1987: 783–784).

<sup>65</sup> Thomas (1935: 97–102). The *Annals of Khotan* forms the second part of the *Prophecy of Khotan* (*Li yul lung bstan pa*), which is included in the *Bka' 'gyur* (P.5699). See van Schaik (2016b: 62–63) for more details.

<sup>66</sup> Skjaervo (1987: 784) explains the relationship between Kustana and the name of Khotan; see also Thomas (1935: 99, n. 7). This motif of the (re)naming of an exiled

Vaiśravaṇa takes the boy from the Indian wilderness to China, to act as the prayed-for thousandth son of the bodhisattva-king (6).<sup>67</sup> His stepbrothers ridicule him as no true son of the king (8), so he fights with his father, assembles a force of ten thousand and heads west.

Back in India, a minister of Aśoka named Yaśa(ḥ) falls out of favour with the king and leaves with seven thousand followers. Eventually heading east, they meet two men from Earth-Breast's company, who are led to the same spot by a group of calving cows.<sup>68</sup> Yaśa sends a message proposing that they unite as king and counsellor. Earth-Breast does not agree and so the two sides wage war over the territory. Finally, Vaiśravaṇa and the goddess Śrī Devī appear and forbid them to fighting. Henceforth the two groups live together, with Earth-Breast becoming prince of the new city and Yaśa his minister (12).

Clearly, not all of the elements of wider Central Eurasian state formation mythology are explicit here. The narrative omits any mention of Earth-Breast's skill as a horseman and archer (7), or fear for his life and escape (9). Perhaps the most important omissions are numbers 2 and 11, which are contradicted by the plot of the piece. There is no unjust king apart from Aśoka, who appears to play the roles of both the pious Dharmarāja and the jealous killer of "his" child. Earth-Breast, rather than return to conquer him, fights and finally attains a superior position to the minister Yaśa (who we could

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figure before his return to power reappears in Tibetan narratives such as the *Zangs gling ma*, described in the latter half of this article.

<sup>67</sup> The *topoi* of abandonment, a thousand sons, and nurturing with breast-milk are found in a different configuration in an Indian narrative related by the Chinese travellers Faxian (337–c.422) and Xuanzang (c.602–664; see Deeg [2004: 122–124]). In this version, a king's consort/wife gives birth to a lump of meat or lotus flower, which she throws away but that then transforms into a thousand sons brought up by someone else. Eventually they recognise their mother when she feeds all of them with a thousand streams of milk from her breasts. This narrative does not directly correspond to the Khotanese version of state formation, but perhaps draws on the *Mahābhārata*'s description of Gandhārī's one hundred sons, the Kauravas, and one daughter, Duḥśalā. Much more could be said about the exile of the *Pāṇḍavas* and Draupadī in the *Mahābhārata*, but hopefully this is sufficient to show the wider resonance of these images in (Buddhist) Asia during the first millennium.

<sup>68</sup> This *topos* in state formation mythology is also found in the story of Cadmus discovering and founding Thebes, as well as in some Tibetan narratives. For example, in a text translated in Erhrhard (2004: 237–238), a cow refuses to give milk but instead offers it to a sandalwood tree in a nearby forest—alerting locals to the appearance of statues of the four Mahākaruṇa brothers (*thugs rje chen po mched bzhi*). Animals leading people from the wilderness or towards places of state or religious value may count as a variant on element 5 of the above list.

perhaps identify as Aśoka's substitute). Lastly, an important dichotomy in the emplotment of the *Annals of Khotan* narrative, not present in the above schema of state formation mythology, is also worth highlighting here: forced exile *vs* self-exile. Earth-Breast is forced into the wilderness as a child, but then leaves China willingly as a young man. Also, Yaśa is exiled as an adult (in a senior position) rather than as a child, because his smell displeases the king! The physically unpleasant or deformed appearance of the exiled protagonist is a *topos* that appears in such tales as that of gNya' khri btsan po, above.

Tibet plays no part in this narrative,<sup>69</sup> though it is to be wondered whether any part of the story was redacted to suit local sensibilities when it was translated into Tibetan or included in the *Bka' 'gyur*.<sup>70</sup> Whatever the ultimate relationship is between the above descriptions of the first ruler of Tibet and the original imperial mythology or influence from Khotanese (Buddhist) historiography, it is clear that post-imperial and later narratives included elements of an exile from an original divine or royal homeland that form part of the legitimisation of the right to rule Tibet.<sup>71</sup> I shall move on now to show

<sup>69</sup> Another Khotanese narrative containing similar *topoi* of exile and return is also found in the Tibetan canon. This is the *Enquiry of Vimalaprabhā* (P.835: *Dri ma med pa'i 'od kyis zhus pa*), most recently studied in van Schaik (2016b: 48–52). Here the protagonists are different, so that this time Tibet and not Aśoka is responsible for the exile. Vimalaprabhā incarnates as the daughter of King Vijayakīrti of Khotan, \*Praniyata (*rab nges*), one of the few females to play the role of the exiled protagonist. When the Tibetans and Supīya (*sum pa*) attack, the king is killed, and his daughter forced to flee. She travels with her husband to Suvarṇagotra, a land of gold where she faces many hardships in her attempt to raise the money to pay off the Tibetans. In this tale, Tibet is one of the aggressors causing the protagonist to flee from her homeland. Eva Dargyay (1988: 109–111) also compares the *Enquiry of Vimalaprabhā* to Tibetan narratives describing the empire, though she focuses mainly on the fact that Vimalaprabhā is a bodhisattva seeking to instill Buddhist values in the country into which she incarnates.

<sup>70</sup> Xuanzang mentions some of the elements of this tale, including Earth-Breast, at a later point in the narrative after the city is founded (see Beal [1884: 309–311]).

<sup>71</sup> Similar *topoi* could be identified throughout later Tibetan Buddhist and Bon biography and history, or folktale traditions such as that of King Ge sar. This royal hero is not only divinely born, from an egg rather than the womb, but in some versions his “human” parents are also semi-divine (a god and a *nāga* serpent; Miller [2000: 72]; FitzHerbert [2007: 113–131]). Dean Miller comments on Ge sar in his monograph on the subject of epic heroes, saying that his “supernatural adventures easily escape the familiar boundaries of our usual Eurocentric or Indo-Eurocentric focus” (Miller 2000: 266). His point is valid, and also applies to the lack of strong correspondence between the Tibetan narratives covered in this article and Beckwith's model of Central Eurasian state formation mythology. The “rightful king” (i.e. the hero's human father) is never deposed unjustly (element 2) in our narratives; nor does the hero acquire a following of

how such *topoi* are deployed in other historiographical sources to lend weight to the right of religious masters to claim superior status over the Tibetan rulers.

*Buddhist Tibetans leaving the court*

The beginnings of the shift towards Buddhist values and norms can be identified even in imperial sources. For instance, time and space are described in some of the Old Tibetan inscriptions according to Buddhist ideas rather than being grounded in the body of the emperor (as in the *Old Tibetan Annals* described above).<sup>72</sup> In early post-imperial sources, Emperor Khri Srong lde brtsan is depicted only positively, even becoming increasingly idealised for his work on behalf of Buddhism. However, he is *himself* recast according to Buddhist values, rather than being represented purely in imperial terms. His martial acts, valorised in the inscriptions for instance, are underplayed or ignored in these documents,<sup>73</sup> corresponding to Peter Schwieger's analysis of the growing emphasis on Buddhist ethics rather than imperial values.<sup>74</sup> Generally, Khri Srong lde brtsan is still the main focus of the documents that describe him, though sometimes this focus is shared with other Tibetan rulers, again remembered primarily as Buddhist emperors. Gradually though, religious masters begin to take centre stage and then to upstage the emperor (who is increasingly called a king, *rgyal po*, perhaps under the influence of Indic literature on Buddhist kingship). Here I wish to

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oath-sworn "warriors" or even a band of disciples on his way back to his realm (10). Such variation in the Tibetan narratives from wider examples of the story may be explained by Buddhism's influence. Miller sees this influence in certain Tibetan variants to the heroic narrative, such as the emphasis on the non-human and so undefiled conception and birth of the hero. Miller (2000: 72) remarks on the Ge sar epic:

Generative anomaly is extraordinarily dominant in this Tibetan narrative, and in a Buddhist context it has to be so. The idea of the unavoidable contamination involved in the normative plan of heroic generation, through the power of a divinity, is secondary to the accepted Buddhist belief that the processes of profane life are all profoundly contaminating in themselves, and incarnation in this case a tremendous and unlooked-for sacrifice for any divinity. Thus Gezar is an *exemplum* who does not easily fit into the world of the Western, human hero [...] in the Greek myths such tales occur in the overmyths describing the conception and birth of the gods.

There is undoubtedly more at play in the representation of Ge sar's birth narrative than an acquiescence to "Buddhist belief." Nonetheless, a further disentangling of the *topoi* in such narratives (following FitzHerbert [2007]) would perhaps shed light on its relationship with wider Buddhist narrative traditions in surrounding states.

<sup>72</sup> See Doney (2015: 37–39).

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*: 39–46.

<sup>74</sup> Schwieger (2000; 2013).

highlight one of the mechanisms by which the superior spiritual status and later social status of the religious master was expressed in historical and biographical narratives (and partially thereby effected in society): renunciation of, or exile from, the centre of royal power.

Is to be in exile a negative state? In the law it is, since it is used as a punishment. For the person who undergoes it, this state is also a hardship and so is felt as negative. We may recall *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 3, scene 3), in which the hero, on learning of his punishment by exile, cries: "Ha, banishment! Be merciful, say 'death'; for exile hath more terror in his look, much more than death." During the Tibetan imperial period, banishment is a lesser punishment than execution and comprises various sorts. For example, possible punishments in *The Law of Theft* (Dunhuang documents IOL Tib J 753 and Pelliot tibétain 1075) include execution and three types of banishment:

They are divided into three degrees of increasing severity: one is banished to a nearby area, to a distant area, or to a remote area (*shul nye bar spyug; lan 'bring por spyug; shul ring por spyug*). There is also a distinction or qualification in that one can be banished together with one's family, or alone, that is "as a bachelor" (*pho reng du spyug*).<sup>75</sup>

Why, then, does it play a re-occurring role in religious biographies? It is not necessarily because these exiles actually occurred in the lives of the protagonists of such biographies. This is not to say that they necessarily did not, but to argue that the historicity of the exile is not so important as its effect on the audience. The exile event in a character's life-story may be designed to inspire those facing banishment or other straightened circumstances themselves, but this is not the whole of the reason either. The biographical narratives of the post-imperial period contain exiles that to our eyes today may appear to paint the banished protagonists in less than flattering lights. I wish instead to argue that these narrated events indicate narrative *topoi* incorporated or adapted into Tibetan biographical writing from older narrative traditions (also) found outside Tibet in surrounding lands. The reason for this incorporation appears to be that the act of being banished, forced to flee, exposed to death in the wilderness or set adrift on a river has some positive connotations that attach to the victims of these acts of exile. In later works, such banishment is explained, suggesting that exile's meaning has been lost (its purpose perhaps having been served) and it is now felt necessary to apologise for the narratives. But in the 8th to 12th centuries that concern us in this article, the exiled protagonist *topos*

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<sup>75</sup> Dotson (2015: 478).

still seems to be very potent (even if its meaning is not always understood).

*Post-imperial documents*

Much of Buddhist biographical literature mimics the life-story of the Buddha. Although the Buddha is born miraculously from an immaculate conception, he is not abandoned or exiled as a child. His exit from the court, against the wishes of his father, is classed as renunciation rather than banishment.<sup>76</sup> Of the narratives discussed above, it most closely resembles Earth-Breast's renunciation of the Chinese court in the Khotanese myth—Khotan's Buddhist culture may be in part responsible for this *topos* appearing there. In the case of the Buddha and the narratives and ceremonies influenced by his life-story, this renunciation leads to a wilderness period wherein the protagonist harnesses the power of nature to gain the skills, knowledge or wisdom necessary to rejuvenate both himself and society. J.C. Heesterman describes the importance of such a *topos* in South Asian *royal* narratives and ritual, wherein survival in the wilderness is considered a proof of one's right to rule.<sup>77</sup> In the Buddha narrative, the main character does not usually return to conquer an unjust king, but rather overcomes the ultimate enemy, Māra or *samsāra*. However, the Buddha *does* have to prove his spiritual status to his father—the latter does not understand that his son was already enlightened but rather feels superior in status due to his being the elder, until the Buddha displays his new status by performing the famous “twin miracles” (as he performed at Śrāvastī).<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> See e.g. the *Buddhacarita* of Aśvaghōṣa; Johnston ([1936] 1992: 59–61).

<sup>77</sup> Heesterman (1985: 29–44).

<sup>78</sup> See Johnston (1937: 85–90).

In contrast, Chapter 5 of the Khotanese *Book of Zambasta* recounts that the Buddha returned home after gaining enlightenment in order to teach his father and was immediately welcomed and identified as a spiritual superior (Emmerick 1968: 97–117; Martini 2014). The latter thinks: ‘You have done well, most beloved son, who have utterly given up sovereignty. You have obtained the kingdom of the Law.’ He then kisses his son's feet in happy acknowledgement of his superiority (*ibid.*: 102–105). This narrative is perhaps more expressive of how visiting masters were treated in new cities (see van Schaik [2011: 57–58] on Atiśa's invitations to reside and teach at the courts of Kathmandu and Gu ge; Scherrer-Schaub [2014: 151, n. 84] on Amoghavajra's warm royal welcome in Sri Lanka according to his biographical tradition). It also accords with the pious ceremonies performed to transport images from the main monasteries on cars into Khotan, which, as witnessed by Faxian, included a moment when “[o]utside the city gate each car was met by the king, who having put off his crown came barefooted to offer homage with flowers and incense” (Stein [1907: 169]). This in itself expresses a

In Tibet, the narrative of renunciation as a prelude to (and sign of) increased spiritual status also appears to draw inspiration from younger Indic Buddhist texts than the above *Buddhacarita* life-story of the Buddha, though works likewise mining the same “enlightenment journey” vein—for instance the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*.<sup>79</sup> The 10<sup>th</sup>-century Dunhuang document Pelliot tibétain 149 contains a brief précis of some variant version of the *Gaṇḍavyūha-sūtra*, in which the protagonist Sudhana leaves his life as a merchant’s son in search of the famous *Ārya-bhadracaryā-praṇidhāna* prayer.<sup>80</sup> The scene then shifts focus to dBa’ dPal byams (*sic*), the “commitment-holder” (*thugs dam ba’*) or state preceptor of the pious Buddhist emperor, Khri Srong lde brtsan. dPal byams recites the same *Ārya-bhadracaryā-praṇidhāna* as Sudhana did, but then contemplates that in order to properly recite the prayer he should leave his post as abbot of bSam yas Monastery and find a secluded place to practise.<sup>81</sup>

Both of the tales contained in Pelliot tibétain 149 depict willing renunciations of home and privileged status, in favour of peregrination in the first tale and seclusion in the second. Both protagonists thereby achieve their Buddhist goals: Sudhana reaches the first bodhisattva-stage (*bhūmi*), “utter joy,” and dBa’ dPal byams departs for the paradisaical land of Sukhāvati. This important theme of self-exile into a life of wandering or wilderness will be discussed again in reference to the *Dbā’ bzhed* and *Zangs gling ma*, below. The merchant father of Sudhana is not named, nor is the Tibetan emperor the main focus of the narrative. The latter is instead a rather passive, though pious, secondary character.

The emperor’s relegation to a secondary character here resonates with the state formation narrative above, except with a religious rather than royal figure in the main role. For example, the Khotanese version depicts the great Buddhist king Aśoka as a secondary character and the Chinese bodhisattva-king is not mentioned by name. However, in that tale, Earth-Breast was the (adopted) son of two royal figures and his divine parent was also a “king,” Vaiśravaṇa. In contrast, neither Sudhana nor dBa’ dPal byams in Pelliot tibétain 149 are in any way kings or princes, so the text

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classic model of Buddhist kingship, “illustrated in the *Suvarṇabhāsottamasūtra*, of a king ‘who goes and meets his invitee, the *dharmabhāṇaka*’” (Scherrer-Schaub [2014: 50]). Scherrer-Schaub argues that the historical actions of Khri Srong lde brtsan also reflected this ideal, but as I argue below the literal obeisance of the emperor before religious masters may be no more than a literary *topos*.

<sup>79</sup> Steinkellner (1995); Imaeda (2007).

<sup>80</sup> van Schaik and Doney (2007).

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*: 205–206.

specifically glorifies non-royal figures as renunciates in the mould of Śākyamuni. Although the emperor is not cast as inferior to his state preceptor, the shift in focus towards religious protagonists constitutes the first step in this direction. This is also a feature of the life-story of another dBa' clan member, known to tradition as dBa' gSal snang or Ye shes dbang po, in the important early Tibetan history named with reference to him as the *Dbā' bzhed*.

### *The Dbā' bzhed*

The *Dbā' bzhed* represents a collage of narratives that probably took on its recognisable shape around the 11th century.<sup>82</sup> It would be misleading to view the contents of the manuscript as a homogeneous story indicative of the intention of an "author." Some Tibetans over the centuries may have read this text as a single work (just as it is translated as a single piece into English), but it was surely created through a process of compilation and annotation over a number of centuries. The text therefore contains numerous strata of narrative, wherein the *topos* of a character leaving the royal centre takes a number of different forms. One is exile, being forced to leave one's own home or land. Another is banishment back to one's own homeland. A third is renunciation for spiritual retreat. The Tibetan emperors have final responsibility for exiling or banishing religious figures from the Tibetan court and are never exiled themselves. Therefore, the court is always the centre from which only non-royals, whether Tibetan, Indic or Chinese, are banished. However, the emperors do not play the role of protagonist in every vignette from which the *Dbā' bzhed* is compiled and, in the case of Minister dBa' gSas snang (*sic*), renouncing the royal court appears to lend him spiritual status above Emperor Khri Srong lde btsan (*sic*).

The *Dbā' bzhed* (1b–4a) begins by recounting the acts that early Buddhist emperors of Tibet performed on behalf of the religion. Chief among these is Khri Srong btsan (sgam po; d. 649), who establishes Buddhist laws in Tibet and shows himself to be an emanation of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.<sup>83</sup> Khri Srong btsan goes into retreat in his palace for four years before codifying these laws (2a), perhaps in order to learn reading and writing.<sup>84</sup> When he returns to the public view, he announces the laws to his subjects (2b). He thereby allays their fears that he had abandoned them and earns himself the title

<sup>82</sup> The manuscript containing this work is reproduced and translated in Wangdu and Diemberger (2000).

<sup>83</sup> See Uray (1972); Dotson (2007); Pirie (2018).

<sup>84</sup> See Wangdu and Diemberger (2000: 27–28, n. 28).



“wise” (*bsgam po*; 2b2). Some of these narrative elements, such as retreat (this time self-enclosure) and the renaming of the returned hero, bear some resemblance to the journey of the son of Dri gum btsan po, Sha khyi, through the land of Pyi in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.<sup>85</sup> Banishment is one of the punishments sanctioned by the emperor in these new law codes, as witnessed by two Khotanese monks who arrive in Tibet at this time (3a–3b). They have heard that Khri Srong btsan is the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, but these punishments cause them to doubt this—until he shows them incontrovertible signs (3b–4a). Banishment is considered a punishment and has wholly negative connotations to the Khotanese monks, who consider it antithetical to the compassionate characteristics of Avalokiteśvara.

The main focus of the *Dbā' bzhed*, though, is the establishment of Buddhism during the life-time of Khri Srong lde btsan. He is depicted as a bodhisattva, like his ancestor (e.g. 9b), but faces difficulties early in his reign when Buddhism is vilified at court. At this time, a Chinese Buddhist monk (*hwa shang*) is dismissed from court and sent back to China (4b) and practising the Dharma is made punishable by banishment alone/ to the hinterland (*pho reng*).<sup>86</sup> The statue of Śākyamuni Buddha, one of Tibet's chief palladia, is turned out of the temple (4a),<sup>87</sup> which it resists by growing too heavy to transport.<sup>88</sup> The removal and “exile” of this palladium, as well as its survival in the wilderness, seem to be considered part of another form of banishment. Eventually, the non-Buddhists responsible are killed (4b) and the palladium returns in triumph to protect Tibet again (6b–7a). Note that the punishment for the anti-Buddhists in the *Dbā' bzhed* is death, not exile (4a). Here it is possible to see some of the many ways that exile is included in this multi-layered narrative, not all of which can be covered here.

The description of dBa' gSas snang, the central protagonist of much of the *Dbā' bzhed*, is itself rich in the use of these *topoi*. Despite

<sup>85</sup> See Dotson (2011: 88–89).

<sup>86</sup> *Dbā' bzhed* 4b5: *brgya la chos byed pa cig yod na pho reng du gtan spyug go*. Wangdu and Diemberger (2000: 37) mistranslate this sentence, justifying their amendment of *brgya la chos byed pa cig yod na* (“suppose there is one who practises the Dharma”) to *rgya'i chos la byed pa cig yod na* (“If someone practises the doctrine of China”) with reference to later versions of the same narrative (*ibid.*: 37, n. 72). They translate *pho reng du gtan spyug go* (“he will be permanently exiled alone”) as “he will be condemned to an unmarried life.” See the discussion on banishment during the imperial period above, following Dotson (2015: 278).

<sup>87</sup> Sørensen (1994: 347, n. 1094; 591–96, n. 1094); Warner (2011).

<sup>88</sup> For a humorous modern version of the same narrative, see Beyer ([1973] 1988: 240).

being under threat of banishment by the non-Buddhists, he first goes in search of the Dharma to the south of Tibet and to India—where he performs offerings at the Mahābodhi Temple and Nalandā Monastery (5b)—even though he describes the experience of being away from court as “similar to exile” (6a). The danger from the non-Buddhists then necessitates that he retreats into hiding in his village (6b). Here, the threat of exile is unjustly applied to practitioners of the Dharma, so our hero perseveres despite this possible punishment.

In time, dBa' gSas snang is able to return to the court where the emperor instructs him to invite to Central Tibet the Indian abbot (*mkhan po*), Śāntaraḥṣita (7a), and eventually the tantric master Padmasambhava (11a). The accounts of their sojourns in Tibet also contain the *topos* of the necessary abandonment of the Tibetan court (see below), but this need not concern us here. After their narratives are recounted, the focus returns to dBa' gSas snang. He is re-named, like many heroes before him, specifically with the ordained name of Ye shes dbang po (17a), and this coincides with his becoming possessed of the faculty of clairvoyance and being lauded by Khri Srong lde btsan as spiritually superior to himself and equal only to the Buddha (17b). He is elevated to the position of the ruler's spiritual preceptor, but finally enters retreat (18b). Ye shes dbang po is thus a renunciate, similar to dBa' dPal byams in Pelliot tibétain 149 above, and perhaps importantly he passes on his high-status role at court to this same person in the process.<sup>89</sup> There he shows his mastery over nature by tying up a tiger to deter visitors. This minister-turned-cleric thus displays a similar power in the wilderness that was reserved for a Tibetan emperor, Khri 'Dus srong, in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (above). The emperor is at this time faced with the famous bSam yas Debate between the gradualists and simultaneists (18b–24b). He summons Ye shes dbang po back to offer advice, the latter criticises Khri Srong lde btsan for shortening not only his own life but also that of the emperor by cutting short the former's secluded meditations (19a). Yet he also explains to him the gradualist view that eventually succeeds in the Debate (19b).

<sup>89</sup> van Schaik and Doney (2007: 191–192) showed the importance of the succession of religious heads (called “spiritual friends,” *dge ba'i bshes gnyen*) of bSam yas and Ra sa 'Phrul snang temples to the Pelliot tibétain 149 narrative. The Dunhuang document listing the succession (IOL Tib J 689/2) describes the post passing from Śāntaraḥṣita to Ye shes dbang po and then dBa' dPal dbyangs (this spelling being the more common one of dBa' dPal byams given in Pelliot tibétain 149). The events in the *Dbā' bzhed* 18b thus comprise a narrated version of a true succession. Perhaps this *topos* of retreat into seclusion was applied to a number of the figures in the early abbatial succession, unless eventual abdication was an actual stipulation or practically a part of the role.

Note that, when they are defeated, the Chinese simultaneists are not banished from Tibet (nor are the Tibetan non-Buddhists ever sent into exile). No characters leave the Tibetan court during the reign of Khri Srong lde btsan without it reflecting positively on them as Buddhist religious figures, including the Buddha statue. dBa' gSas snang, AKA Ye shes dbang po, even stands in a position to criticise the emperor who is at the centre of this court and thus the Tibetan world. In heroic narratives, being renamed usually marks the moment of recognition, *anagnorisis* (ἀναγνώρισις), where the characters around him recognise not only the identity of the hero but also of what he stands for, for example realising and acknowledging his right to rule. This seems to be the case with Khri Srong btsan being renamed “sgam po” in the *Dbā' bzhed*, as discussed above, as well as in Karmay's gNya' khri btsan po myths recounted in the section of this article titled “Narrativising the Right to Rule.” *Anagnorisis* will also prove an important term later on in this contribution. Here, the renaming of dBa' gSas snang apparently signals the transformation of his status from an inferior to superior position with regard to Khri Srong lde btsan (at least from a religious perspective). This minister-cleric first leaves the court in order to travel to India, which he describes as similar to exile, then (*after* his renaming) renounces the court in order to go into retreat, which then allows him to be able to criticise Khri Srong lde btsan when the latter calls on him for help. The *Dbā' bzhed* relies on the Yar lung Dynasty's self-representation in painting the emperor as at the zenith of Tibetan society and responsible for the overall establishment of Buddhism throughout “Tibet,” but this multi-valent work is also one of the earliest to show that he is capable of being wrong and so rightly criticised by a subject, due to the latter's religious status.

#### *Indic Buddhist masters in Tibet*

In the *Dbā' bzhed*, Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava are non-Tibetans, but are also asked to leave the Tibetan court and are in a position to show their spiritual superiority to Emperor Khri Srong lde btsan. Abbot Śāntarakṣita, described as a son of the king of Sahor (Za hor; 6a; 7a; 25a), acts as the first state preceptor and spiritual superior to Khri Srong lde btsan—as he probably did in reality.<sup>90</sup> He faces hostility from the non-Buddhist factions in Tibet, causing Khri Srong lde btsan to offer him gifts and ask him to return to Nepal for a short while (8b). The *Dbā' bzhed* makes it clear that no stigma is attached to the Indian master on this account: later in the narrative he is still

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<sup>90</sup> See Doney (2017: 313–314).

quoted as a source of authority and prophecy concerning Tibet (19b). Like dBa' gSas snang, his abandonment of the court is depicted as due to the evil intent of the Tibetan "black" (non-Buddhist) religionists there. This reflects badly on them, not on the Buddhists who are banished or forced to flee. To the contrary, Śāntarakṣita shows his high status (and superhuman powers) in the narrative by revealing his knowledge of past lives spent performing Buddhist acts with dBa' gSas snang and Khri Srong lde btsan, which determined their present lives together (6a and 8a).<sup>91</sup>

The invitation of Padmasambhava to Tibet to tame the autochthonous deities, *nāga* serpents and evil spirits causes even more antagonism among the non-Buddhists at court. Attempting to wash the emperor's hair with what they refer to as "mad Mon-water" and trying to make the barren Tibetan land fertile raise their ire, so they report to Khri Srong lde btsan who then becomes suspicious himself (13a).<sup>92</sup> The emperor asks Padmasambhava to

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*: 315–317.

<sup>92</sup> An annotation to the text makes their speech calumnious, with them asserting that Padmasambhava would use his magical power to take control of Tibet. It is possible that this is a gloss on the main text, reducing the emperor's portion of blame for Padmasambhava's dismissal. Yet, Padmasambhava in his speech to Khri Srong lde btsan also mentions the accusation of seizing political power. Perhaps an implicit connection between his power over the fertility of the land, the ceremony of washing hair, and control over Tibet lies in the link that they all share with kingship. Heesterman (1957: 212–215) describes the importance of the hair-cutting festival (*keśapanīyah*), after a wild period of growing nails and hair and without washing, in the Vedic ritual of the *rājasūya*. He notes the festival's likely origin in the fully-fledged royal consecration ritual (*rājābhiṣeka*; *ibid.*: 219) and the wide-spread importance of hair shown by taboos, rites and legends (such as that of Samson) surrounding it: "The ethnological facts concerning hair can be summarised by the statement that the hair is considered the seat of the soul substance [...] The Vedic ritual also shows the hair's close association with the vital forces and fertility, as can be seen in the hair-cutting mantras quoted above" (*ibid.*: 215). Regarding fertility, he states later: "The hair-cutting symbolises the yearly process by which the earth is shorn of its vegetation in order to produce new vegetation." The Indic Padmasambhava (as he exists in the *Dbā' bzhed*) is separated from the Vedas by religious identity and centuries of intervening maturation of Indic rituals, yet still retains this connection in the consecratory nature of his hair-washing ritual and the *mantras* that he utters while performing it (see Davidson [2002: 113–168] on the continuation of royal imagery into tantric Buddhist ritual more generally). The power of the hair-washing rite that he attempts to perform for Khri Srong lde btsan may have held extra resonance in readers' minds when combined with the mythology of the *dmu* cord that are said to have connected the early Tibetan kings to heaven (van Schaik [2011: 3]). The power that Padmasambhava gains for himself (or rather the narrator bestows on him) thereby, as almost a king-maker but also a foreigner, makes it understandable that someone added to the narrative the ministers' fears for the safety of the kingdom. This ritual, like that of the hair-washing, is followed by his

return to India, not for the master's own safety (as he did with Śāntarakṣita) but because he has fulfilled his purpose. Both masters agree to leave, but Padmasambhava disparages the emperor over his dismissal from Tibet. Khri Srong lde btsan offers both masters gifts while asking them to leave, which is reminiscent of those used to banish the first Tibetan king from sPu bo or persuade his father to leave dMu, according to the two variant traditions described above. However, Padmasambhava only takes a handful in order to please the emperor, while he magically turns a sleeve-full of sand into gold dust to signify wealth's lack of attraction for him (13b). Finally, while leaving Tibet, Padmasambhava shows *his* spiritual status and supernatural powers by correctly prophesying that his dismissal (while the deities, *nāgas* and evil spirits of Tibet remain to be tamed twice more) will cause the decline of the Dharma in a great fight (14a). This future schism, it transpires, is the famous bSam yas Debate itself (19b). Banishing the Indian master thus reflects badly, not on him, but on the banisher (as with the non-Buddhists' punishments of Dharma practitioners)—despite the fact that this banisher is Emperor Khri Srong lde btsan, who throughout the *Dbā' bzhed* shows himself to be a pious Buddhist ruler.

Travel seems to signify or at least correspond to high status in the narrative(s)— whether it be Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava who travel to Tibet or dBa' gSas snang who journeys to India. Yet so does banishment or being asked to leave the court, which is more counter-intuitive. However, the use of *topoi* of both exile and renunciation found in the wider and earlier set of narratives discussed above appear to have established a connection between a period of distance from the ruler's power centre and a hero's time in the wilderness before a return to claim his right to rule. In the *Dbā' bzhed*, the Buddhist masters whose narratives contain such *topoi* become the Buddhist emperor's state preceptors and/ or spiritual goads, and it seems right that they do so. The renunciation of the court by the state preceptor dBa' dPal byams/ dbyangs is not recounted in the *Dbā' bzhed* but confers similar status on him in Pelliot tibétain 149. The *Dbā' bzhed* differs from this text in showing the first signs of the religious masters' superiority to the emperor.

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efforts to bring fertility back to Tibet, which hints at the symbolic importance of this attempted rejuvenation of Khri Srong lde btsan's royal/imperial power (as well as to increase his life-span).

*The Zangs gling ma*

Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer's (1124–1192) *Zangs gling ma* biography, the earliest extant full-length life-story of Padmasambhava (Doney 2014), contains many narratives on the early contributors to the spread of the Dharma in Tibet.<sup>93</sup> Most of the religious figures are deferential to the Tibetan “king” (*rgyal po*) Khri Srong lde btsan. In contrast, both Padmasambhava and an Indian abbot named Vimalamitra on different occasions set fire to the king's robes, causing him to prostrate to them. Whereas one could understand such outrageous behaviour from Padmasambhava, whose biography this is, it is more of a puzzle in the case of Vimalamitra. Looking into their life-stories in the *Zangs gling ma* uncovers structural similarities in their earlier lives before coming to Tibet, that in narrative terms may act as a precedent that affords them the status to treat the Tibetan king with disdain. Both masters are identified as emanations of a form of Avalokiteśvara, bodhisattva of compassion and patron deity of Tibet. At a very young age both Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra spend time in the wilderness but are then brought up as part of a royal family. Eventually, they both renounce their roles as princes in order to follow the Dharma. Then, when they arrive in Tibet, they disparage the status of the Tibetan ruler before relegating him to the subordinate but important position of a disciple.

As should be evident from the literature discussed already, there exist a number of different sorts of Tibetan historiography, even in the early period. The processes and philosophies that lie behind such creations are still unclear, but one rough distinction in narrative style can be made between more standard histories (such as the *Dbā' bzhed*) and the less familiar “treasure text” (*gter* or *gter ma*) genre that proved especially popular in Tibet. The former is written from a third-person perspective of the “present” narrating past events, and pious alterations are even present in the text itself—in the form of interlinear notes, glosses and corrections to the main text—not to mention the later tradition of its expansion.<sup>94</sup> This tradition purports to be authored by one of the agents of the events themselves (usually Padmasambhava), and so written shortly after the events they

<sup>93</sup> I quote here from the *Zangs gling ma* exemplar ZLh (Doney [2014: 101–223]), since it is one of the most complete and error-free exemplars of the earliest attested recension of the *Zangs gling ma*. The version of the *Zangs gling ma* contained in the *Rin chen gter mdzod* and translated in Kunsang (1999) appears to represent a later recension, including a number of interpolated episodes. For more details, see Doney (2014: 23–42). The basic narrative of the *Zangs gling ma* can still be followed in the Kunsang translation.

<sup>94</sup> See Wangdu and Diemberger (2000: 1–14).

describe, then buried like treasure to be discovered by a reincarnation of a disciple of the “author.” Nyang ral was one of the first and most famous “treasure discoverers” (*gter ston*), who retrieved not only ritual works, prayers, holy relics and objects bestowed on him in his previous incarnation as Khri Srong lde btsan, the royal disciple of Padmasambhava, but also the master’s biography itself.<sup>95</sup> He thus did not claim to have written the *Zangs gling ma*, but to have been present at the events described in it. The colophon of the *Zangs gling ma* itself states that it was written by the Tibetan tantric consort of Padmasambhava, Ye shes mtsho rgyal, and buried in the early 9th century to be discovered by Nyang ral in the 12th century. Furthermore, the text includes prophecies of Padmasambhava that make the identification of his intended recipient for this biography clear. This new form of revelation enabled Nyang ral to place himself in the history of Tibet at a pivotal moment in the introduction of Buddhism there. Furthermore, Padmasambhava lends his seal of authority to Nyang ral’s credentials as a Buddhist master and legitimises his 12<sup>th</sup>-century ritual corpus by practising it in India and transmitting it to Tibet in the 8th century. The processes that this new form of revelation involved and the power it entailed in 12<sup>th</sup>-century southern Tibetan society has yet to be fully unpacked, but its benefits should have been evident to Nyang ral.

#### *Padmasambhava*

The *Zangs gling ma* biography describes Padmasambhava very differently from the *Dbu’ bzhed*. The latter only introduces him within the context of his arrival in Tibet and from the perspective of his superior in Tibetan society, Khri Srong lde btsan. The *Zangs gling ma* in contrast begins with King Indrabhūti, who finds Padmasambhava seated on a lotus on an island in the middle of the ocean (ZLh 5a3–4). He is a child-incarnation of Amitābha (Padmasambhava is identified as such in ZLh 1b1 *et passim*), therefore neither born of a mother impregnated by a deity nor abandoned to die either by her or his father—since he has no parents.<sup>96</sup> Yet the state formation *topoi* of non-human origins (element 1) and of the marvellous child (3) are still evident, with perhaps an even stronger sense of being unsullied by

<sup>95</sup> See Doney (2014: 10–19).

<sup>96</sup> When questioned about his provenance at the time, Padmasambhava states that his father is “self-cognisant wisdom” (*rang rig pa’i ye shes*) and his mother Samantabhadri (*kun tu bzang mo*), the feminine aspect of the Primordial Buddha (ZLh 5b1–2). Though this latter parental attribution is probably not meant literally, narratologically it suggests that, *if anything*, his parentage is divine rather than human.

the natural processes of sex and birth. The king realises this child is an emanation (Skt. *nirmāṇakāya*; Tib. *sprul sku*), names him Padma Vajra and adopts him as heir to his throne in Uḍḍiyāṇa (ZLh 6a3).

Themes of exile and the wilderness arise slightly later, when the young prince arranges his own banishment from the kingdom because he considers that ruling will not benefit sentient beings (ZLh 7a5–8a3). Specifically, he kills a minister's son in an "accident," and the ministers ask the king to execute capital punishment in compliance with the law of the realm. However, Indrabhūti says he does not know if his adopted son is a non-human or an emanation (*sprul sku*), and for this reason commutes his sentence to banishment (*spyug*). Padmasambhava goes on to practise higher tantric yoga in charnel grounds all over India. He is thus simultaneously a Buddha's incarnation and a king's son; but he lives the life of a *siddha* (accomplished religious adept) in the wilds outside of urban society. Padmasambhava has exiled himself from courtly social mores and has become a master of both spiritual and wrathful powers, rejecting and thus transcending social status. We may recall Weber's notion of the stratified society discussed above and note how he describes the new status group as showing off their status in apparel, accoutrements etc., taking up certain activities, or refraining from other activities or payment for services such as purifying of sin.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, the narrative choice to have Padmasambhava (self-)exiled as punishment for killing a minister's son (rather than simply renouncing the court) also serves to underscore his dangerous characteristics. In this role, similar to the Hocartian dynamic of kingship in which rituals that act to segregate the king from society magically rejuvenate the kingdom he controls,<sup>98</sup> Padmasambhava becomes similar to a "magician-king," separate from society but possessing the power to control and unify it. Furthermore, he also undergoes trials on the journey towards enlightenment and submits himself to disciplining by other powerful religious masters. As he attains each new stage on this path, he is renamed—some of these forming the basis of his famous "eight names" (*mtshan brgyad*).<sup>99</sup> Though he is exiled from courtly society, these stages and the corresponding names that are bestowed upon him also mark a raise in his status within the specific society of the Indic religious adepts. Padmasambhava's status as a *siddha* thus gives him power over three

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<sup>97</sup> Weber ([1948] 1991: 190–191).

<sup>98</sup> Scubla (2005: 50).

<sup>99</sup> Doney (2014: 95, col. i). My thanks go to Brandon Dotson for suggesting the connections between Padmasambhava's various names and the wider mythic importance of renaming.



characters who are born kings, i.e. his father Indrabhūti in Uḍḍiyāṇa, the king of Sahor named gTsong lag 'dzin, and Khri Srong lde btsan in Tibet.

First, Padmasambhava performs tantric practices in an isolated cave with his Indic spiritual consort, Princess Mandāravā of Sahor. They then travel to her homeland to convert its inhabitants to Buddhism, but the people accuse Padmasambhava of defiling the royal caste by carrying off the king's daughter and then attempt to immolate the pair on a sandalwood pyre (ZLh 13a2–14b5).

When others were burned, the smoke would cease after seven days, but [now] after nine days the smoke did not stop. Then the fire blazed outward, even burning the entire royal palace. The oil had pooled into a lake, in which grew lotus flowers. Upon one lotus stalk, the pair were seen sitting cool and fresh in tantric union, so the king and his ministers were amazed and praised [Padmasambhava].<sup>100</sup>

In an act of *anagnorisis*, the members of the Sahor court thus realise his true tantric nature and rename Padmasambhava “Padma Vajra,” “Pad ma saṃ bha ba” and “Padma 'byung gnas” (seemingly in recognition of his superior status but also containing the word “lotus,” *padma*, which evokes the natural world and wilderness more than the urban environment of a court); he then causes the whole country of Sahor to embrace the Dharma and establishes everyone on the bodhisattva-stage of “non-return” (ZLh 14a4–14b4).

In a classic repetition of the mythic event (or “function”) familiar to readers of Vladimir Propp among others,<sup>101</sup> Padmasambhava then returns to his own home in Uḍḍiyāṇa with Mandāravā, where both survive immolation at the hands of King Indrabhūti. This tantric feat astounds his royal father:

The king placed the foot of Master Padma above his head and requested him to become the supreme object of veneration at the court, but the master replied:

“To take birth in the three realms of *saṃsāra* is a dungeon of misery.

Even birth as a Dharma-protecting king is a place of bustle and distraction.

<sup>100</sup> Translation based on Kunsang (1999: 46). ZLh 14a4–14b1 reads: *gzhan bsregs pa zhag bdun nas du ba 'chad pa yin pa la / zhag dgu ru du ba ma chad nas / me thams cad phyir la 'bar nas / rgyal po'i pho brang thams cad kyang tshig / til mar rgya mtshor khyil nas / nang thams cad padmar chags ste / padma'i gdong po (=sdong po) cig gi kha na / yab yum gnyis sku grang grang ser ser ltar 'dug pas / rgyal po la sogs pa ya mtshan skyes nas bstod pa /*

<sup>101</sup> Propp ([1928] 1968: 74–75).

If you do not know that your mind is the unborn Dharma Body  
 (*dharmakāya*),  
 Rebirth in *samsāra* does not end and you circle unceasingly.  
 Great king, look into your empty and cognisant nature!  
 Then you shall soon attain the perfect enlightenment.”  
 In the same moment that he spoke, the king realised his mind to be  
 the Dharma Body.<sup>102</sup>

Padmasambhava's miraculous powers, gained as a *siddha* during his self-orchestrated exile in the wild charnel grounds of India, enable him to convert the courts of both Sahor and Uḍḍiyāna. As Dean Miller remarks of the returning hero in the Indo-European epics, “it is from ‘out there’ that he comes back to whatever center, and its controlling authority, sent him forth, or to other centers of enclosed rigid, restricting, old, and impacted power.”<sup>103</sup> Indrabhūti then sings a song of praise to Padmasambhava, prostrating to him and renaming him Lotus King in the process.<sup>104</sup> Remember that renaming the hero is often an important part of his ascension to power at the end of a narrative, coupled with *anagnorisis*.<sup>105</sup> Padmasambhava is renamed a number of times in the early part of the *Zangs gling ma*, but perhaps the royal element of his name here is important. Padmasambhava is thereby marked out as not only royal, but also standing in a superior position to his adoptee father, the king of Uḍḍiyāna who exiled him for killing a minister's son and then tried to kill him on his return home.

Both of these episodes appear to borrow Indic Buddhist vignettes and apply them to Padmasambhava, thereby partaking in a wider genre of “comedic” narrative to useful effect. As John Strong first

<sup>102</sup> Translation based on Kunsang (1999: 47–48). ZLh 16a1–5 reads: *rgyal pos zhabs spyi bor blangs nas mchod gnas su zhus pas / slob dpon gyis gsung pa / kham gsum 'khor bar skyes pa sdug bsngal gtson dong yin / chos skyong rgyal por skyes kyang 'dus 'dzin g.yengs pa'i gnas / rang sems skye me[d] chos skur ma shes na / 'khor ba'i skye nas mi chod rgyud mar 'khor / rgyal po chen po'i sems nyid stong gsal ltos / phyi[n] mar rdzogs pa'i sangs rgyas thob par 'gyur zhes gsungs pas / rgyal po nyid dus de sems chos bskur (=skur) mthong*

<sup>103</sup> Miller (2000: 134).

<sup>104</sup> ZLh 16a5–16b1. Cantwell and Mayer (2012: 93) identify a similar verse of praise in the Dunhuang text of the *'Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa Padma 'phreng gi don bsdus pa*, IOL Tib J 321 folio 84a. It appears, therefore, that an older eulogy to Padmasambhava is incorporated in the *Zangs gling ma* in order to show the superiority of the Indian master to his adoptee father. In an annotation to these lines in IOL Tib J 321, attributes the lines of homage to Master Śāntigarbha (on whom, see Cantwell and Mayer [2012: 95])

<sup>105</sup> Padmasambhava is at the same time renamed “Lotus with a Garland of Skulls” (*padma thod 'phreng*, ZLh 16b2), perhaps a reference to his time in the wilderness (see footnote 118 below on the double renaming of dGa' rab rdo rje).

noted, either the *Zangs gling ma* or the *Padma-vita* tradition preceding it probably inherited these repetitions of the same narrative *topos* from the *Aśokāvadāna*.<sup>106</sup> There, Emperor Aśoka becomes a disciple of Samudra, a fatherless child and Buddhist mendicant wandering throughout the land, after failing to execute him.<sup>107</sup> In the *Zangs gling ma*, Padmasambhava converts his consort's land and his own adoptive father to the Dharma in similar circumstances.

Like the Buddha in his *Buddhacarita* life-story (above), who must use his magical abilities in order to show his high spiritual status to his unbelieving father, Padmasambhava and his consort are both times met with paternal resistance and our hero has to prove his spiritual attainments by the display (and the people's recognition) of his miraculous powers. Such tales of overcoming recall the literary analyst Northrop Frye's description of the "comic" or "comedic" narrative genres (as distinct from say the "tragic").<sup>108</sup> Frye states:

In the first place, the movement of comedy is usually a movement from one kind of society to another. At the beginning of the play the obstructing characters are in charge of the play's society, and the audience recognises that they are usurpers. At the end of the play the device in the plot that brings hero and heroine together causes a new society to crystallise around the hero, and the moment when this crystallisation occurs is the point of resolution in the act, the comic discovery, *anagnorisis* or *cognito*.<sup>109</sup>

Frye goes on to note that in general, "tragedy" refers to narratives in

<sup>106</sup> Strong (1983: 74).

<sup>107</sup> Translated in Strong (1983: 214–219). Aśoka in this narrative is neither abandoned nor exiled as a child, though he is born with bad skin, "rough and unpleasant to the touch, and he was not at all liked by his father" (*ibid.*: 206). It is tempting to see this as a parallel of the Khotanese narrative's description of Yaśa, who is later in a subordinate position to Earth-Breast. However, we have also seen in the Tibetan myths retold by Karmay that a strange appearance can mark one off as special and a later ruler. The *Aśokāvadāna* is a complex narrative that I cannot do justice to here; though it contains many interesting *topoi* of kingship also found in the life-stories of Khri Srong lde btsan, which I hope to address in the future.

<sup>108</sup> I say "comedic" as distinct from "tragic" rather than as opposed to it. Although the tragic and the comic do tend to stand at two ends of a spectrum, it should be clear that there are many more types of narrative than these two. As Frye ([1957] 1971: 13) himself points out:

The very word "genre" sticks out in an English sentence as the unpronounceable and alien thing it is. [...] Thanks to the Greeks, we can distinguish tragedy from comedy in drama, and so we still tend to assume that each is the half of drama that is not the other half. When we come to deal with such forms as the masque, opera, movie, ballet, puppet-play, mystery-play, morality, commedia dell'arte, and Zauberspiel, we find ourselves in the position of the Renaissance doctors who refused to treat syphilis because Galen said nothing about it.

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*: 163.

which the hero becomes isolated from his society, and “comedy” to ones in which she is incorporated into it.<sup>110</sup> From this perspective, we can see this part of Padmasambhava’s biography as one in which his search for tantric accomplishments (*vidyādhāras*) outside of his home and society leads him back to return home with a changed status. He has changed from a boy into a man and returns together with Mandāravā his consort (as a quasi-romantic heroine) and overcomes obstructions to their (tantric) union. Moreover, he has gained accomplishments by trials in the wilderness of India (each step marked by a new renaming, see above) and reached the heights of enlightenment.<sup>111</sup> These accomplishments give him the power to overcome his society (religiously), renew it and redirect it towards tantric Buddhism. In this way, Padmasambhava takes on the role of a state founder but his new state and status is religious in nature.

The doubling of the upstaging of the royal father should alert us to a coming third similar event, following the Proppian notion of the trebling of functions or groups of functions.<sup>112</sup> And sure enough, Padmasambhava’s conversion of the land of Sahor (including its king gTsub lag ’dzin) and King Indrabhūti in Uḍḍiyāna prefigures his display of superiority to Khri Srong lde btsan in Tibet. In this narrative, Khri Srong lde btsan is the personification of Tibet, drawing on earlier imperial representations, but Tibet no longer an empire but instead a kingdom. King Khri Srong lde btsan is also an emanation of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Mañjuśrī, but he incarnates through his parents’ sexual union and is born naturally—albeit with signs that mark him out as a marvellous child. He is not abandoned or exiled but ascends to power at the death of his father (ZLh 19b3–21b3). Thus, he is not set up as the hero of this narrative, but rather his conversion to tantric Buddhism is meant to symbolise the conversion of Tibet. However, neither is he portrayed as the classic villain. For example, he has not had any dealings with Padmasambhava before they meet in Central Tibet, and so is not responsible for any unjust actions towards him, unlike Padmasambhava’s exile at the order of Indrabhūti.

Śāntarakṣita (who plays an important but “supporting” role in this

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*: 35.

<sup>111</sup> Among his five modes of comedy, Frye’s mythic form (rather than the romantic, high mimetic, low mimetic, or ironic) appears most suitable to this narrative. He describes it as “Apollonian, the story of how a hero is accepted by a society of gods. In Classical literature the theme of acceptance forms part of the stories of Hercules, Mercury, and other deities who had a probation to go through, and in Christian literature it is the theme of salvation” (*ibid.*: 43).

<sup>112</sup> Propp ([1928] 1968: 74–75).

biography) recommends that Khri Srong lde btsan invite Padmasambhava, at this time practising further accomplishments in another isolated cave on the modern India-Nepal border (ZLh 24a4–24b2). The ruler orders his messengers to guide him to Tibet (including dBa' gSal snang, ZLh 24b4, who plays no other role in the *Zangs gling ma*). When he meets Khri Srong lde btsan, Padmasambhava again shows his disdain for a king's worldly status.<sup>113</sup> Whereas in the *Dbā' bzhed* he prostrates to the emperor, in the *Zangs gling ma* Padmasambhava humbles Khri Srong lde btsan in a humorous way. He bows to his robes of office and sets them on fire and the king then prostrates contritely to his spiritual superior (ZLh 30b1–2). This work gives no hint that the ruler of Tibet may have a right to social superiority, since religious values are paramount in this portrayal. Moreover, from this Buddhist perspective the king is found wanting due to his perceived social status *itself*. Although he is an emanation of Mañjuśrī, in this incarnation Khri Srong lde btsan is deluded by his position as ruler of Tibet. Padmasambhava, as fully enlightened, realises this and upstages him by setting light to the symbol of his royalty—using the magical abilities by which he proved his higher status to the other two kings, including his own father. Later on, Padmasambhava also displays another supernatural gift when he prophesies that Khri Srong lde btsan will meet obstacles in a future life, due to his failings as a Buddhist in expelling several Tibetan Buddhist masters (ZLh 83a3–5).<sup>114</sup> This again has the effect of shaming the king, who from his first meeting with Padmasambhava onwards has his status relegated from Tibetan king to tantric disciple. This apparently less than flattering portrayal can be seen as a positive move within the soteriology of Tibetan Buddhism but has important consequences for the emperor's representation in later histories. It breaks with the trajectory of the growing aggrandizement of Khri Srong lde btsan evident from the imperial inscriptions and early post-imperial documents discussed above. In this way, it goes a step further than the *Dbā' bzhed*, since both portray a more fallible ruler but the *Zangs gling ma* is far more explicit in depicting this weakness.

The master-disciple relationship between Padmasambhava and Khri Srong lde btsan is long and fruitful in the *Zangs gling ma*. Padmasambhava's arrival in Tibet is followed by a long round of

<sup>113</sup> On this interchange see Doney (2015: 318).

<sup>114</sup> This has to do with the banishment of Pa sgor Vairocana and gNub Nam mkha'i snying po, whose exile I hope to address in the future. However, their depictions in the *Zangs gling ma* do not share the same structural similarities as the stories of Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra, and do not result in these masters showing anything but deference to Khri Srong lde btsan. I have therefore omitted them from my current analysis.

textual translations and journeys by translators to transmit the Dharma from its homeland in the Indian subcontinent. Then Khri Srong lde btsan dies, but the *Zangs gling ma* does not narrate his death directly. Instead it places the first mention of the king's death in the mouth of Padmasambhava as he leaves Tibet (ZLh 89b5–91b1). Perhaps narrating the death of a major character would not suit the more positive tenor of the narrative of the successful establishment of the Dharma in Tibet. The tradition of life-stories devoted to another emperor, Khri Srong brtsan (sgam po; d. 649), transform *that* Buddhist ruler's death into a re-absorption into the statue of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, whose incarnation he is. This innovation was perhaps not widely known when the Padmasambhava narrative was being formulated before Nyang ral, or for whatever reason it was not chosen for application to Khri Srong lde btsan as an emanation of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī. Another possibility is that it might simply detract from the more important narrative of Padmasambhava's leaving Tibet (which follows shortly afterwards). Whatever the case, Padmasambhava outlives Khri Srong lde btsan in the *Zangs gling ma*. This goes against the usual lineage tradition, where the disciple lives to become a master to a future generation of pupils. Such proximate transmission is unnecessary, since the king will be reborn over 17 future lifetimes and spread the Dharma then. From another, literary, perspective, Khri Srong lde btsan could be said to predecease Padmasambhava in order that the "son" outlive his "father" and become the head of his domain.<sup>115</sup>

### *Vimalamitra*

The above narrative makes it clear that Padmasambhava is superior to Khri Srong lde btsan, which makes sense because this is Padmasambhava's biography. However, the subsequent sojourn in Tibet of the Indian abbot, Vimalamitra, demonstrates the superiority

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<sup>115</sup> Robert Paul (1982) analyses the narrative traditions that the Sherpa people of the Himalayas maintain surrounding Padmasambhava. He notes that Padmasambhava "is called upon to perform the most 'symbolic' work" in Sherpa religion (*ibid.*: 151), which he conceives around Hocartian and (with *caveats*) Levi-Straussian models of social symbolism. He says that "political and sacred authority (which I take to mean aspects of the same thing, the 'center' of society) are always accompanied by Oedipal symbolism, which is itself concerned directly with the problem of the succession of generations" (*ibid.*: 7, parentheses Paul's). This updated Freudian analysis of myth is only one partial perspective on the rich symbolism of the Padmasambhava biographical tradition and may not be a perspective that scholars find particularly enlightening any more. However, Paul's early attempt to conceptualise the symbolism in this important *vita* may still offer some insights.

of another foreign Buddhist master over the king. It does this by displaying his power over the Buddha Vairocana statue in bSam yas Monastery, which like the king's robe appears to metonymically represent Khri Srong lde btsan.

Vimalamitra's early life, as recounted in the *Zangs gling ma*, is far simpler and conforms more faithfully to the state formation mythology discussed at the beginning of this article. Chapter 16 begins:

Then, the lord, King [Khri Srong lde btsan] thought: "Now, to make the excellent Dharma [shine] like the rising sun, I need to invite from India Master Vimalamitra, who is [the most] skilled among 500 *paṇḍitas*." He set his heart on this. That Master Vimala was also an emanation of Mahākaraṇa (Avalokiteśvara): an extremely handsome white man appeared in a dream to the daughter of Aśo[ka], Princess D[h]armabodhi, who was extremely beautiful like the daughter of a god. He poured ambrosia from a completely full vase so that it went down through the top of her head and she dreamed that she was filled with bodily bliss. There she gave birth uncomfortably/unhealthily to a boy. Ashamed at the boy, since she did not have a husband, [Dharmabodhi] cast him out into the dust/ in the midst of the desert. When he awoke, eyes wide open, she received him again and nurtured him. As the days and months went by, he turned out to be one who grew up faster than others. By the age of five he was trained in the five sciences and so especially skilled in the Dharma, and he was named Vi[ma]lamitra (Friend of the Immaculate [Dharma?]).<sup>116</sup>

As is evident, this potted life-story of Vimalamitra contains variants of a number of the elements of state formation mythology discussed above, beginning with divine impregnation (1).<sup>117</sup> Also present is the

<sup>116</sup> Translation based on Kunsang (1999: 105). ZLh 60b4–61b1 reads: *de nas mnga' bdag rgyal po'i thugs la / da ni dam pa'i chos nyi ma shar ba 'dra ba cig byed pa la / rgya gar yul nas pandi ta lnga brgya'i nang nas mkhas pa / slob dpon bi ma la mi tra spyan drangs dgos snyam nas / thugs kyi dgong[s] so / slob dpon bi ma la de yang thugs rje chen po'i sprul pa yin ste / rgyal po a sho bya ba'i sras mo lha lcam dar ma bo dhi bya ba / shin tu mdzes pa lha'i bu mo 'dra ba cig yod pa la / gnyid log pa'i rmi lam na / mi dkar po shin tu mdzes pa cig byung nas / bdud rtsi bum pa gang bzhas nas blug pas / tshang pa'i bu ga nas mar song pas / lus gi [bde] bas gang ba cig rmis nas / der lus ma bde nas / bu cig btsas so / khyo med pas bu ngo tsha nas / bye ma'i seb du bor pas / mig bkra hri ge 'dug nas / yang blangs nas bsos pas / zhag log zla log gzhan pas skied che ba cig byung nas / lo lnga lon nas rig pa'i gnas lnga la sbyangs pas / lhag par chos la la (sic) mkhas par gyur te / bi [ma] la mi tra zhes bya 'o /*

<sup>117</sup> Such elements are omitted from another popular and perhaps early Tibetan narration of Vimalamitra's life-story, which is contained in the *Rdzogs pa chen po snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo* (translated in Valby [1983: 28–60]; on this text see Martin [1997: 28 no. 12]). There, for instance, Vimalamitra is born naturally of

child's exposure (4), though this time by the mother since there is no father (and in fact this is given as the reason for abandoning him).<sup>118</sup> In an interesting reversal, the survival of Vimalamitra in the desert/ among the dust (5) leads to him being received again and nurtured by his mother (6), rather than by animals. He grows up to be unusually skilled (7), though importantly here not in archery and horsemanship but in the sciences and especially Buddhism, which is the reason that Khri Srong lde btsan invites him to Tibet. Since he is, at this time, the abbot of Vikramaśīla Monastery rather than a king or prince, we can perhaps identify one movement in the narrative as implied rather than stated: Vimalamitra's rejection of his royal title in favour of ordination (and renaming with a moniker suited to his

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two non-royal parents, "the householder bDe-ldan-'khor lo and his wife bDag-nyid-gsal-ma" (*ibid.*: 28). However earlier in the same history, a birth narrative similar to Vimalamitra's in the *Zangs gling ma* is told for the Indian Buddhist master, dGa' rab rdo rje (\*Prahevajra; *ibid.*: 10–17 and see also the translation in Reynolds [1996: 179–189]). He is also born to a Princess Kudharma, who was impregnated by a white man with a vase initiation (element 1). He is born miraculously from her side (3); but Kudharma (out of shame) hides the child in an ash pit (4), where he survives for three days (5). Kudharma retrieves him, declaring him to be an emanation (6), and he grows up prodigiously wise in the Dharma (7). At seven years of age he arrives at court, successfully debates with 500 *paṇḍitas* and declares himself to his grandfather, King Uparāja, as his spiritual superior. The king delightedly renames him "Master Vajra of Supreme Delight" (*slob dpon dga' rab rdo rje*). This renaming seems to confirm his superiority to the king (as with dBa' gSas snang in the *Dbā' bzhed* and Padmasambhava in the *Zangs gling ma*, above). His mother then names him "Great Master Ash-coloured Zombie" (*slob dpon chen po ro langts thal mdog*) because of his miraculous survival of being exposed in the ash pit (this renaming being more redolent of the name Earth-Breast). dGa' rab rdo rje escapes being killed by a heretical king (9), instead converting him to the Dharma through his miraculous display of escape (11?). The history then moves on to other feats achieved by this Indian master, but this narrative of his early life contains many of the elements of Vimalamitra's life-story in the *Zangs gling ma*. dGa' rab rdo rje's relationships to his grandfather and another heretic king also share elements with the duplication of the conversion *topos* in Padmasambhava's story. It is perhaps possible to see, in the life-story of this Indian master, the basis for parts of the narratives concerning both Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra in the *Zangs gling ma*.

<sup>118</sup> The absence of a father is, in itself, quite a widespread element of the heroic birth story, and fits within the more general theme of abandonment. Miller (2000: 73) sees either as possible outcomes of the double parentage of the hero, divine and human:

[A] god may be Father but he will never be Papa, or indeed any sort of paterfamilias. The latter role may be taken up by a mortal, or not; the incredible apparition of the hero is naturally most dramatic when no human father is apparent, so that the secular world may see the hero as illegitimate.

The result, as he later quotes Alwyn and Brinley Rees (1961: 232) as saying, is the same: "the advent of the hero is invariably an embarrassment to someone or other, and an attempt is made to get rid of him" (Miller 2000: 90)—though this sometimes takes the form of attempted infanticide.



being a “friend of the stainless” Buddhism [*vimalamitra*]). His passive abandonment is followed by active renunciation, which constitutes the same series of moves that the Khotanese narrative of Earth-Breast made. Is it too much of a stretch to suggest that Padmasambhava likewise follows the same pattern: that he was found miraculously alive in the wilderness (on his lotus flower) and then renounced his royal home (this time an adoptee home like Earth-Breast’s at the Chinese court) in favour of another life, when he orchestrated his own exile from Uḍḍiyāna?

It may be argued that too much can be read into the potted life-story of a character in a work like the *Zangs gling ma*. Perhaps the life-story of Vimalamitra was unknown and so the compiler of the work (Nyang ral, or the compiler of a source he used to recount Vimalamitra’s story) “filled in the blanks” without intending (consciously) to legitimise his spiritual status thereby. Yet, even if this is the case, it is still important *what* narrative was used as filler, since whatever seemed an appropriate childhood to provide for Vimalamitra sheds light on the milieu in which the narratives were compiled and received. The wider mythic connotations contained in Vimalamitra’s potted biography set the reader up to perceive him as a heroic type of character with an elevated status. This is borne out in his manifest superiority to the Tibetan ruler later in the narrative. The ways that this “back-story” effects this, by drawing on pre-existing heroic mythology, uncovers something of the society in which it was told. In this context, it is interesting that his grandfather is Emperor Aśoka, who has already appeared in a number of the narratives recounted above. Wherever the tale was sourced from, it was incorporated here and thereby invested the hero Vimalamitra with a power that the tellers themselves perhaps did not fully comprehend.

Once in Tibet, Vimalamitra acts in a similar way to Padmasambhava in not bowing to the king, but uniquely also refuses to prostrate before the statues of Buddhist deities at bSam yas Monastery (ZLh 63a3–5). Padmasambhava has already shown his power over the statues of the king’s monastery, including Vairocana of the Bodhi temple, when he causes them to float out into the sky at the consecration of bSam yas (ZLh 35b3–5).<sup>119</sup> Yet this is a more straightforwardly positive form of metonymy, suggesting a

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<sup>119</sup> Another possible metonymic symbol of Khri Srong lde btsan is the stele (*rdo rings*) on which he inscribed the famous bSam yas Inscription. Padmasambhava also magically manipulates this by making the four bronze dogs on top of it (or perhaps them, thus suggesting the existence of four stelae) come alive, jump and bark in the four directions (ZLh 35b3–36a1).

consecration of the king himself as a Buddhist ruler.<sup>120</sup> In contrast, when Vimalamitra finally bows to Buddha Vairocana, the statue cracks in half from head to foot (ZLh 63b4–5). The king thinks the Indian master must be a heretic (*rgyal po'i thugs la mu stegs pa yin par 'dug snyam*; ZLh 63b5–64a1), but then Vimalamitra criticises the king for his lack of faith, prostrates again and the image returns to a state more beautiful than before and lights shine upon the central temple of bSam yas (ZLh 64a1–4). A similar narrative *topos* is found in the life-story of Virūpa, one of the 84 *Mahāsiddhas*, a popular version of whose biographies was perhaps translated into Tibetan in the early 12th century,<sup>121</sup> hence before the *Zangs gling ma* was compiled.<sup>122</sup> It appears that a number of narrative elements among these biographies were adapted, attributed to new masters, and included in the *Zangs gling ma*, but this particular vignette may also be a stable element of Vimalamitra's *vita*.<sup>123</sup> It may reflect a wish to imbue Vimalamitra with the status of a wild Indic *siddha* (like Padmasambhava), despite his more established position as abbot of Vikramaśīla Monastery. Finally, he bows to the king (against the latter's now contrite wishes), causing Khri Srong lde btsan's robes to

<sup>120</sup> An interesting parallel tradition from Myanmar displays similar *topoi* (as well as motifs from the Aśoka-Samudra narrative that also influenced Tibet) in its description of the conversion of the Bago/Pegu (Mon) Kingdom to Buddhism at some time after the 5th century:

A king of Pago, Tissa by name, had abandoned the worship of the Buddha and instead practised Brahmanical worship. He persecuted the Buddhists and destroyed Buddha images or cast them into ditches. A pious Buddhist girl, the daughter of a merchant, restored the images, then washed and worshipped them. The king could not tolerate such defiance, of course, and had the girl dragged before him. He tried to have her executed in several ways, but she seemed impossible to kill. Elephants would not trample her, while the fire of her pyre would not burn her. Eventually the king, intrigued by these events, asked the girl to perform a miracle. He stated that, if she was able to make a Buddha image produce seven new images and then make all eight statues fly into heaven, she would be set free. The girl spoke an act of truth, and the eight Buddha statues flew up into the sky. The king was then converted to Buddhism and elevated the girl to the position of chief queen (Bischoff 1995: 39–40).

<sup>121</sup> Kapstein (2006b: 52).

<sup>122</sup> However, the vignette concerning Virūpa and the statue is markedly different from that of Vimalamitra (at least according to the version translated in Robinson [1979: 29–30]). Virūpa at first refuses to bow to a *non-Buddhist* statue, that of Mahādeva, and then destroys it by chanting homage to the Buddha, Dharma and Saṃgha at it. He then restores the deity but with an image of Mahākaruṇa Avalokiteśvara on top of it, instructing the frightened king that the former will only remain whole as long as the latter is not removed. This display causes another yogi, rather than the king, to convert to Buddhism and become his disciple.

<sup>123</sup> The *Rdzogs pa chen po snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo* also includes this event in the story of Vimalamitra in Tibet (translated in Valby [1983: 56]), though in this case Khri Srong lde btsan only hears about it through his translators.

catch fire once again; the king prostrates before Vimalamitra and places him with great ceremony on a high throne (ZLh 64a5–64b4).<sup>124</sup>

This is, of course, similar to Padmasambhava's meeting with Khri Srong lde btsan, but unlike that of any other master in the *Zangs gling ma*. In narrative terms, they also share similar early lives in Indic regions, both of which are marked by claiming divine and royal parentage, abandonment/exile by the human parent and then return to that world from the wilderness. Perhaps, having also both been the sons of kings, Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra look at the king of another country as an equal. Alternatively, their new spiritual status, acquired outside the realm of mundane kingship, gives them the authority to disparage the status of the Tibetan ruler. Yet it is interesting that these two back-stories are attached to these two Indic emanations.

In telling such stories about the Buddhist masters who brought the Dharma to Tibet, the *Zangs gling ma* draws on a deep, even mythic, narrative tradition of depicting "victimised heroes,"<sup>125</sup> overcoming their early abandonment/exile by an unjust usurper to regain their rightful place at the head of the realm. However, the logic of this narrative, which once invested a royal-born hero with a power and destiny that allowed him to become king again, in this Buddhist context leads to casting the religious masters in the narrative as superior to royal figures, which is unprecedented in early Tibetan historiography and its depiction of its imperium. In this Buddhist context, the *topos* of the abandoned/exiled hero has also become mixed with that of renunciation, perhaps ultimately in emulation of the Buddha. This serves to add higher status to the Buddhist master, at once victimised by and renouncing the world, in contrast to the king who symbolises society and mundane power.

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<sup>124</sup> This is not included in the *Rdzogs pa chen po snying thig gi lo rgyus chen mo*. Instead, Khri Srong lde btsan is so impressed when he hears about the destruction and rejuvenation of the Vairocana statue that, when they meet the next day, he bows to Vimalamitra immediately (see Valby [1983: 56]). The scene is somewhat oddly represented in the *Zangs gling ma*, which has the king say that he is not worthy of being prostrated to before Vimalamitra then bows regardless. It is tempting to see the inclusion of this vignette here as related to the inclusion of his "heroic" birth narrative earlier in the *Zangs gling ma*, namely as marking Vimalamitra out as special (and similar to Padmasambhava).

<sup>125</sup> Propp ([1928] 1968: 36). Propp's proposed 31 functions of the folktale do not correspond so neatly to the abandonment/exile narratives discussed here, though some of the elements of state formation mythology are found among the Proppian functions, and the schema could be incorporated into a wider discussion of Tibetan literary *topoi* at a later date.

*The degraded emperor*

In this narrative, does Khri Srong lde btsan play the role of the unjust king who is rightly overthrown? Since Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra are religious masters (though with somewhat different royal pasts), rather than archetypal just kings overcoming an unjust monarch, the logic of the narrative dictates a religious figure proving his superiority to a royal figure. Khri Srong lde btsan is undoubtedly a representative of the Tibetan society that Padmasambhava is entering and wishing to convert to Buddhism. However, he does not seem to fit closely the stereotype of Miller's "controlling authority" or act purely as a representative of "centers of enclosed rigid, restricting, old, and impacted power," which the returning hero overthrows in order to rejuvenate society.<sup>126</sup> Nor is he immediately obvious as one of Frye's "obstructing characters," whom the audience would recognise as "usurpers." Frye perceptively notes that all characters tend to be redeemed in the comic narrative.<sup>127</sup> Yet Khri Srong lde btsan appears to play a more pivotal and positive role in the *Zangs gling ma* than Frye's representation suggests, which indicates a problem of mixed messages in the narrative.

In order to find a solution, perhaps we should pay more attention to the objects involved and their metonymic relation to the king.<sup>128</sup> It seems that the *Zangs gling ma* holds the power of the king to reside metonymically in a) his royal robe, the regalia of his preeminent social status, and b) the palladium Vairocana statue, symbolising Buddhist monarch reigning over the *maṅḍala* of Tibet. The miraculous control shown over each of these by religious masters—Padmasambhava when he sets fire to the king's robe and Vimalamitra when he destroys the statue—equate to their control over Khri Srong lde btsan. These Buddhist masters not only temporarily wrest control of Khri Srong lde btsan's power from him, but also then return it to the Tibetan ruler. His continued royal

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<sup>126</sup> Miller (2000: 134).

<sup>127</sup> Frye's statement on the resolution of the newly transformed, comic "society" runs as follows:

The tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking [i.e. obstructing] characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated. Comedy often includes a scapegoat ritual of expulsion which gets rid of some irreconcilable character, but exposure and disgrace make for pathos, or even tragedy. ([1957] 1971: 166; square brackets are mine)

<sup>128</sup> In this, I am following Stanley Tambiah, who criticises Max Weber for his emphasis on the charismatic leader and "blindness to the 'objectification of charisma in talismans, charms, regalia, palladia and so forth'" (Tambiah [1984: 335], quoted in Gentry [2017: 21]).

control over Tibet is shown by the fact that, after being upstaged by Padmasambhava, he brings the four horns of Tibet under his control and instigates a Buddhist law throughout the country (albeit one that privileges religious practitioners; ZLh 55b4–60b4). His continued identification with Buddhism is suggested by the fact that the Buddha Vairocana is a Buddhist deity and is not only destroyed but also magically reconstructed. The narrative thus takes place within the Buddhist cosmos, where these two acts of controlling the king could be argued to bring about the purification rather than annihilation of the king's charisma. From this perspective, Khri Srong lde btsan is not the antagonist, but is himself in some way a protagonist who undergoes degradation (at the hand of Buddhist masters acting as helpers) as part of his own heroic journey and the conversion or purifying of Tibet as a Buddhist land. In this sense, Vimalamitra's destruction and reconstitution of the Vairocana Buddha statue and Padmasambhava's control of the same statue at the completion ceremony for bSam yas Monastery are not opposed at all, but rather similar "consecration" rituals. Frye himself has noted the use of ritual humiliation in Central Eurasian royal ceremonies:

Even when those kings were strong and successful, they would have to go through certain ritual ceremonies in which they assumed the opposite role. We are told that in Babylon at the time of the New Year festival, a king, such as Nebuchadnezzar, would go through a ceremony of ritual humiliation, have his face slapped by the priest and that sort of thing, and then his title would be renewed for another year. Nebuchadnezzar was a strong and successful monarch; but if this ceremony were omitted, it might provoke the jealousy of his tutelary deity.<sup>129</sup>

In the *Zangs gling ma*, the jealousy of the deity Vairocana is less important than the king-turned-disciple keeping his tantric vows to his Buddhist masters, who act as the primary points of reference. Yet the ruler is a secondary type of hero rather than merely their antagonist. The degradation of Khri Srong lde btsan (in a similar way to Nebuchadnezzar) and his relegation in mundane status from the supreme ruler into a tantric disciple, transforms Tibet into a Buddhist country and rejuvenates the kingdom and Khri Srong lde btsan himself.

Nonetheless, his depiction as an inferior ruler of Tibet upstaged by religious masters stands in contrast to the early descriptions of the

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<sup>129</sup> Frye ([1982] 2013). Frye goes on to talk of King David's necessary humiliation at his greatest moment, the time when he was brought that great palladium, the Ark of the Covenant.

Tibetan emperors. The documents surviving from the 8th to 10th centuries depict Khri Srong lde btsan as the pinnacle of imperial and then also religious greatness.<sup>130</sup> In the *Dbā' bzhed*, he is held responsible for the decline of the Dharma. Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita are therein banished from Tibet in their adulthood, meaning that the dynamic is different from the renunciation of an Indic royal home by Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra in the *Zangs gling ma*. Yet both plots reflect positively on the religious protagonists to the detriment of the royal characters. In the *Dbā' bzhed*, Padmasambhava and Śāntarakṣita are asked to leave Tibet before they have completed their respective tasks in establishing Buddhism there. However, this dismissal does not reflect badly on them. Instead, their treatment highlights the ambivalence of Tibetans towards Buddhism, which the *Dbā' bzhed* claims will cause the decline of the Dharma.<sup>131</sup> In the *Zangs gling ma*, Khri Srong lde btsan is shown up and his royal status specifically made comic by the burning his robes of office. Neither Padmasambhava nor Vimalamitra become kings of Tibet, but these Buddhist masters have instead displaced the king as the central protagonists or heroes, worthy of being given a birth story that retains the formal elements of older mythic hero narratives from Central Eurasia and elsewhere. This act of upstaging, degradation or humiliation of Khri Srong lde btsan aligns him with a new Buddhist trajectory, allowing him to construct bSam yas Monastery, pass Buddhist laws, invite other masters, find his tutelary deity (one of the tantric *bKa' brgyad* deities), take initiation in it and eventually be reborn and enlightened (and find the tantric *bKa' brgyad* corpus again) as Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer.<sup>132</sup> Thus, the humiliation is real, the superior position of Padmasambhava is real and the later lesser importance of Khri Srong lde btsan is real. Yet *at the time*, in the *Zangs gling ma*, Khri Srong lde btsan is not the antagonist or unjust king, but takes on some of that role as necessary for his conversion. Despite the internal logic of this narrative turn, in the wider history of representing kings in Tibetan biographical literature, Emperor Khri

<sup>130</sup> See van Schaik and Doney (2007) on these early documents and their varied but wholly positive images of Khri Srong lde btsan.

<sup>131</sup> The influence of the End of the Dharma narrative in Tibetan historiography, especially following the *Dbā' bzhed*, may also have played a part in making Khri Srong lde btsan into a more fallible figure. I hope to expand on this theme in a future publication.

<sup>132</sup> See Doney (2014) for more on these aspects of the *Zangs gling ma*. One of the longer recensions of the *Zangs gling ma* also includes the "hair-washing" scene, discussed above as it appears in the *Dbā' bzhed*, in chapter 18 (and thus after the invitations of Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra; see Doney [2014: 26 and 31, n. 28]). This appears natural, given the consecratory nature of other parts of the uninterpolated *Zangs gling ma* described here.

Srong lde brtsan of the Yar lung Dynasty has been relegated in status below Padmasambhava (and Vimalamitra) ever since.

### *Conclusion*

In the Central Eurasian and Indic narratives covered at the start of this article, the abandoned/exiled protagonist is born into the royal family and ends up enthroned once more at the finale.<sup>133</sup> During the Tibetan imperial period, all the religious figures appear to act like loyal priests to Khri Srong lde btsan and the other emperors. This role is continued narratively in later histories on imperial-period Buddhism. The religious characters remove the emperor's impurity by ritually dying in his place—being exiled or eating his food when he is ill—so that the king can cleanse the country but does not have to die himself. However, the growing popularity of Buddhism among Tibetans seems to have necessitated a literary overthrow of the old order and symbolic destruction of the emperor and the pre-Buddhist impurity he carried with him. As representatives of the incoming religion, Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava thus perform two conflicting roles in the *Dba' bzhed*: both supporting and criticising the ruler of Tibet. They both obediently leave at the command of the emperor, but like dBa' gSas snag they also upstage and upbraid Khri Srong lde btsan in subtle ways. In the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Zangs gling ma*, Śāntarakṣita continues in this role but Padmasambhava and Vimalamitra are more explicitly narrated as bringing "comedic" transformation to Tibetan society. Both are semi-royal emanations who give up their kingdoms, in order to become a wandering *siddha* and abbot of Vikramaśīla monastery respectively, and eventually act as spiritual goads to King Khri Srong lde btsan. The above process marks the rise in status of the Buddhist master in Tibetan literature, a process that Peter Schwieger has already well described in society at large.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>133</sup> This is, of course, not to claim that all older hero narratives necessarily concern kings. In fact, the application of some of the heroic *topoi* covered in this article to religious figures such as Moses and Jesus (in Rank [1932] 1959: 15–18 and 50–56 respectively) may be a fruitful source of comparison with a process that I argue for in this paragraph (this is also suggested in Dotson [2011: 95–96, n. 43]). Specifically, these two great founders of Abrahamic religions suffer abandonment and exile respectively, under the same threat of death by mass-infanticide, but eventually prove themselves to be superior to their royal antagonists, the Pharaohs and Herod.

<sup>134</sup> See Schwieger (2000; 2013).

As indicated above, the Indic religious rhetoric of superior religious groups, which Weber sees as belied by reality,<sup>135</sup> became something else in Tibet. Tibetans perhaps took on the Indic rhetoric of Brahmanical and *siddha* superiority that may not have been real and put it into practice, thereby supplanting the imperial hierarchy that placed the emperor at the top with a new social structure that gave religious figures pre-eminence. If so, they were no doubt helped by the fact that the fall of the empire had led to a power vacuum in central Tibet. This transformation was expressed, or even brought about, by narratives of separate, special, otherworldly religious figures who disregard social mores, criticise society and as a result show their superiority to kings (and thereby their usefulness to the rejuvenation of the power of kings too). These religious figures and their lineages/ institutions attained high status in Tibet; gradually they also gained property that, although rhetorically disparaged, acted as proof of their status and the stability of the system that privileged them—think of Weber's remark: "Property as such is not always recognised as a status qualification, but in the long run it is, and with extraordinary regularity."<sup>136</sup> However, this process was not to be a leading factor in the changes that large-scale monasticism wrought in Tibetan society. In the introduction to this article, I quoted Kapstein's remarks on the dominance of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the consequential disenfranchisement of the lay aristocracy. He goes on:

At the same time the subjection of the nobles to church rule was mitigated to the extent that the sons of aristocratic families became ranking hierarchs or monk-officials, and thus shared in church power. [...] Within the broader ruling class, therefore, there was a marked degree of concurrence among its lay and monastic facets. The church, however, was generally chary of lay interference and so more or less systematically limited the opportunities of noble households to exercise any appreciable degree of control over it.<sup>137</sup>

This limiting of lay power was probably a process beginning during the lifetime of Nyang ral Nyi ma 'od zer, the creator of the *Zangs gling ma*, entailing the overreach of monastic power which he evidently considered a threat to his position.<sup>138</sup> That being said, Schwieger rightly points out that Tibetan culture was not in general plagued by social upheaval or a wider threat to the Buddhist

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<sup>135</sup> Weber ([1948] 1991: 193).

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*: 187.

<sup>137</sup> Kapstein (2006a: 181).

<sup>138</sup> See Doney (2014: 8–15).



worldview—what Weber calls “[the] technological repercussion and economic transformation [that] threatens stratification by status and pushes the class situation into the foreground.”<sup>139</sup> Therefore, although different religious groups held power, the status of religious figures in general did not change much, once established, until the 20th century.

Perhaps this overthrow of the previous value and status of the emperor had been forgotten already in the 16th century. A prominent religious historian of that century, dPa’ bo gTsug lag phreng ba (1504–1566), argues against the *Dbā’ bzhed* that no Indian religious figure would bow to a Tibetan king—a symbol of merely mundane power.<sup>140</sup> To borrow the terminology of Max Weber, the pre-eminent status of the Tibetan emperor, which was conveyed in the Old Tibetan manuscripts and imperial inscriptions, is no longer “distinctly recognisable,” whereas the superior status of religious figures is taken as “an absolutely given fact to be accepted” within his society.<sup>141</sup> This reversal of earlier historical representations of Khri Srong lde btsan and Padmasambhava also influenced interaction between living religious figures and those in mundane authority in Tibet,<sup>142</sup> and so was not merely confined to the pages of Tibetan literature. These are just some of the effects on Tibetan notions of social status brought about by the growing power of Buddhism and Buddhist masters, whose narratives drew so successfully on older state formation mythology and the *topoi* of exile and abandonment to valorise their protagonists.

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<sup>139</sup> Weber ([1948] 1991: 194)

<sup>140</sup> See Wangdu and Diemberger (2000: 54, n. 152).

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# The Invention of a Tibetan Lama General: a Biographical Account of Bla ma dkar po (1835–1895)

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## Introduction

**I**n the past, reincarnated lamas, or *sprul sku*, were at the top of the social hierarchy in Tibet. This is demonstrated by the succession of Dalai Lamas who were the head of the Tibetan government. Moreover, *sprul sku* played important roles in every aspect of Tibetan life, as almost all villages and monasteries had their own reincarnated lamas. Thus, for a long time it was assumed that the social status of *sprul sku* emerged only through monastic training, religious practice, and various reincarnation systems. While it is true that most *sprul sku* lineages developed from this standard tradition, there are many exceptions, as the establishment of incarnation lines may also have resulted from attributions to prominent actors in the political or social sphere including figures of war. In using the Tibetan biographical account of Bla ma dkar po,<sup>2</sup> known as *Rje btsun byams pa mthu stobs kun dga' rgyal mtshan gyi rnam thar* (“The biography of the venerable and almighty Byams pa mthu stobs Bla ma dkar po”), I will show how an ordinary young monk became one of the most important *ho thog thu* in the Qing empire. By historical coincidence, he found himself in the midst of Islamic rebellions in

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<sup>1</sup> This is an on-going project and is supported by an ANR-DFG funded research project, “Social history of Tibetan societies”.

<sup>2</sup> Although Bla ma dkar po is well-known in Amdo and studied by some Chinese specialists on Xinjiang, as far as I know, there are virtually no works about him in Western languages. This is first attempt to engage the important yet ignored history of this lama, who played a crucial role in the later Qing dynasty, Xinjiang, Tibet, and China. In exploring Bla ma dkar po’s biography, I have discovered a great number of historical materials that are not only available in Tibetan and Chinese, but also in Manchu, Russian, Mongolian, and Nepalese. This is only an explorative draft of his biography—a detailed account of his life will be come out in the near future. At the moment, his Tibetan biography constitutes the main source; Qing documents as well as the Russian, Manchu or Nepalese materials are yet to be fully explored. The presence of any mistakes or inaccuracies will be rectified in due course.

Xinjiang and turning his military skills into an advantage, he soon rose to the rank of local general, a status reinforced by his recognition as *ho thog thu* by the Qing imperial court. In discussing how he maneuvered politics at the Qing court and settled disputes in Lhasa, I will argue that the social status of a *sprul sku* was not determined by past religious achievements and cultural norms. Rather, it could be invented through war, violence, and destruction.

*Background of the sprul sku system*

Bla ma dkar po has been known by many names in different languages. In Qing official documents, he was referred by the Chinese name Gun ga za la shen 棍噶扎拉参 in Chinese. Even in Tibetan his name presented a variety of spellings: Kun dga' rgyal mtshan or Byams pa mthu stobs Kun dga' rgyal mtshan following his re-ordination in Lhasa in 1883, Bla ma dkar po, Cha kan ho thog thu or Cha han ho thog thu, Tsha gwan ke kân. In Amdo and Mongolia, he was widely known as Bla ma dkar po ("The White Lama"), hence the decision to use such an appellative in the present article.

Although the Qing official documents refer frequently to the life and events of Bla ma dkar po in Xinjiang and elsewhere, my contribution mainly draws from his Tibetan biography. The original manuscript, found at Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil in the early 1990s, counts two Chinese editions (in 1990 and 1994), each totalling 737 pages. According to the colophon, during Bla ma dkar po's stay in Amdo in the 1890s, the author of the biography sKal bzang legs bshad asked him permission to write his life-story. Bla ma dkar po not only agreed but also assisted him by giving thirty or forty pages he had drafted himself. In 1903, eight years after Bla ma dkar po's death, sKal bzang legs bshad began writing Bla ma dkar po's *rnam thar*, relying on what the master himself had told him as well as on interviews with those who had known him. The biography was concluded in 1905, yet it offers no information on its compiler apart from his name and year of completion of the work.

According to the biography, Bla ma dkar po was a *sprul sku*, a Tibetan word that, although specifically referring to the reincarnated body, may also indicate a religious institution unique to Tibetan Buddhism: the *sprul sku* system had not only a religious connotation but also a political and social one.<sup>3</sup> The concept is deeply rooted in Buddhist ideas of sainthood, *samsāra* (mundane existence), and rebirth. Tibetan Buddhists believe that all sentient beings must go

<sup>3</sup> On the history of *sprul sku* and their formations and roles in Tibetan society, see Schwieger (2015: 1–50) and Gamble (2018).

through cyclic existence until each reaches final enlightenment. According to this view of cyclic existence, all sentient beings are born and die again and again in accordance with their karma, regardless of their personal choices. However, there is a class of enlightened beings—the bodhisattvas—who have control over the cycle of birth and death. Known also as *sprul sku* (“Emanation Body”) in Tibetan, these individuals may assume many different forms, including that of a human, in order to serve all sentient beings. The Dalai Lamas, for example, are believed to be reincarnations of Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion descended into the human world for the benefit of the living beings. Thus, for Tibetan Buddhists, the idea of reincarnation is the “reliving” of the previous life<sup>4</sup>—in a sense, death is not the end of life but can be considered as a transitional phrase from one form of existence to another.

Views about reincarnation and ideas of rebirth have been intertwined with Tibetan religious culture for a long time. As a consequence, the *sprul sku* system was institutionalized and has been the most important factor in the social hierarchy. The system emerged in the early 13th century after the disciples of Karmapa Dus gsum mkhyen pa recognised, in accordance with his prediction, Karma Pakshi as the reincarnation of their master. Since then, the practice has been accepted by all traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. After an important lama or religious saint passes away, his disciples usually identify a new child, often a boy, as the *sprul sku* of the deceased. The boy then inherits the status, wealth, and prestige of the person of whom he is thought to be the reincarnation. When the searching party found the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, for example, he not only inherited his predecessor’s title, but also his power, wealth, and the government itself. *sprul sku* are generally regarded as emanations of Bodhisattva endowed with special abilities and ideals, and as such are encouraged to live and act according to such patterns.<sup>5</sup> Since the ideas about what a *sprul sku* is are based on the bodhisattva model, for a long time it was commonly assumed that reincarnations were the outcome of monastic training and religious practices alone, and that they were deeply embedded with the Buddhist concepts of compassion and enlightened beings. In other words, only the death of an important scholar or accomplished practitioner required the search for a reincarnation.

However, this is not the whole story since, throughout the history of Tibet, the reincarnation system has complex religious and political connotations. While it is true that most *sprul sku* emerged from

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<sup>4</sup> Gupta (2002).

<sup>5</sup> Schwieger (2015: 12–13).

religious training and practices, there were some who rose from unusual and abnormal circumstances. One of the most unusual reincarnation practices is the transferring of consciousness from one body to another, known in Tibetan as *pho ba grong 'jug* or as *ma 'das sprul sku*, "Emanation before passing away". This system, part of the Six Naropa Yogas, had existed for a long time in Tibet. Among the *ma 'das sprul sku*, the most famous one was the third reincarnation of sTong 'khor ho thog thu.<sup>6</sup> In 1639, after rGyal ba rgya mtsho died at the age of fifty-two due to smallpox, a twenty-year-old Chinese man was identified as his reincarnation, thus becoming the Fourth sTong 'khor Don yon rgya mtsho (1619–1683).<sup>7</sup>

Reincarnation lineages could also emerge due to non-religious circumstances, such as political events, wars, and conquests of other lands. Bla ma dkar po is one of such *sprul sku*. Through his military efforts—in other words, through his participation in the suppression of the Islamic rebellions, he established himself as an important leader of Xinjiang, being later recognised as a *sprul sku*. Just by glimpsing at his life, it is clear that Bla ma dkar po's biographical trajectory is different from that of other Tibetan *sprul sku*—not only was he not recognized as a reincarnation in his youth but was also an ordinary individual with no prior status and position in either secular life or religious system. However, his situation changed drastically during the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877), the ethnic and religious war fought in 19<sup>th</sup>-century western China, when he emerged as one of the most important political and military leaders in Xinjiang and distinguished himself as a great defender of Tibetan Buddhism and the Qing. For his military contributions, he was recognized as a *sprul sku*, and received the title of *ho thog thu* from both the Qing court and the Tibetan Buddhist authorities in Amdo and Lhasa. At his death, his reincarnation was sought and the lineage of Bla ma dkar po started, an event that suggests the existence of many types of *sprul sku* and indicates how the system, far from being fixed, relied on different methods and practices.

In general, the history of the Bla ma dkar po's lineage is not just about Tibetan Buddhist militarism and how the militancy created a reincarnation system but it is also closely related to Buddhist ideas of war, Tibetans' relationship with the Mongols, Muslim rebellions in western China, and Bla ma dkar po's role in the Qing's re-conquest of

<sup>6</sup> The first sTong 'khor *ho thog thu* was Zla ba rgyal mtshan. Born into a Bon family in Khams, he became an important dGe lugs pa bla ma in the region. The second Yon tan rgya mtsho was the student of the Third Dalai Lama bSod nams rgya mtsho; he was the emissary of the Dalai Lama in Mongolia where he promoted Tibetan Buddhism among the locals.

<sup>7</sup> See the biographies of sTong 'khor ho thog thu ([n.a.]: 193–220).

Xinjiang and their relationship with Russia, as well as other political matters, such as the ways the Dalai Lama's government in Lhasa dealt with the Qing and Nepal. All these details and issues will need to be addressed in due course. In this paper, however, I will limit myself to a brief study of the biography of Bla ma dkar po, focusing on his military and political career. In doing so, I will argue that the social status of a *sprul sku* was not determined only by past religious achievements and cultural norms but could also be invented through war, violence, and destruction.

*A normal child with a drifting life*

Bla ma dkar po was born in the tenth month of the Wood Sheep Year (1836),<sup>8</sup> in a place called Chos dpal zhing khams sde ba. It was part of a cluster of villages which is today locally known as Chas pa'i srib or Chab bu gshis in Co ne (also known as Choni), a historical border town<sup>9</sup> in the northeast of Tibet, in today's Gansu province. Co ne is a semi-nomadic area, that meaning that the population includes both farmers and nomads. Historically, Co ne was not only known for its principality, printing house, and copper works, but also for its association with great scholars and important persons in Tibetan history. Several of the regents in Lhasa, for example, were born in this area. Due to its border town nature, many locals spoke several languages, including Chinese.

Bla ma dkar po was born into a Bon family. His father's name was Tshe dbang nor bu and his mother was known as Rnam 'joms 'tsho. He also had two brothers—the eldest one, dKon mchog bstan 'dzin later came to Xinjiang and worked with him until 1886, whereas the younger sibling, dKon mchog tshe ring, married a local woman and did not leave the house. In his youth, Bla ma dkar po was sent by his parents to the local monastery of dGa' ldan bshad sgrub gling to become a Buddhist monk. Here, he became familiar with Buddhist scriptures and prayer rituals, and learned basic reading and writing under the tutelage of the scholar Ngag dbang bstan 'dzin. Despite the small dimension of the monastery limited his training, preventing him from learning how to debate or studying philosophical tenets, he appears to have been a curious young child. From a monk named A

<sup>8</sup> In his biography, the date appeared to be written in the Chinese lunar calendar year. In this paper, I use the occurring date as written by the biographer. I converted the lunar years into the Gregorian calendar years, excluding the months and the days since many dates given in the biography still need to be crosschecked with other sources.

<sup>9</sup> On Bla ma dkar po's birth, childhood, and visit to Xinjiang, see Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 249–268).

khu rig 'dzin, who was based in the local hermitage of A khor brag dkar ri khrod, he studied Tibetan orthography and mastered the subject. Around the same time, he also started to study Tibetan poetry. Judging from a letter that he sent from Xinjiang during the war, he was good writing at poetry and letters.

He left his home monastery for the first time in 1847, when he accompanied an elderly monk named Ngag dbang bstan pa to Hoboksar 和布克赛尔 in today's Hoboksar Mongol Autonomous County in Xinjiang. The place, located at a distance of about two 280 kilometres from his hometown, was the centre of Dzungaria, and was mainly inhabited by Tibetan Buddhist Oirat Mongols.

In the 18th century, Qianlong defeated the Dzungars and established Ili as the centre of the Qing's power in Dzungaria by dispatching there a great number of Manchu and Mongol soldiers. Those men, hailing from other areas such as Helongjiang, Shengjing, Jehol, and Changjiakou, became residents of the Ili Region.<sup>10</sup> The general of Ili was in charge of the overall command of the local Qing troops in the region. Since many of the Mongols and Manchus were Tibetan Buddhists, they also built monasteries and maintained a strong religious relationship with Tibet. Although Bla ma dkar po's biography does not state it clearly, it appears that the reason why he went there was to collect donations for the monastery. It was common for monastic agents or even individual monks to undertake such a journey to distance places to collect alms. Bla ma dkar po's stay in Hoboksar was limited as he soon returned to his monastery in Amdo.

In 1852, he made his way to the mountain region of Altai in Xinjiang, where Russia, China, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan intersect. Among Tibetan Buddhist Mongols, he performed ritual prayers and practiced medicine, becoming a *grong chog pa*, a "village ritualist", one of the ordinary monks who did rites for village farmers and nomads. However, because of his healing power and ritual practices, his reputation grew among the local people. At some point, he also became acquainted with the Qing officials who lived in Tarbaghatay in Mongolia, today's Tacheng 塔城. Gradually, he became known among the locals as Tsha gan dge rgan ("The White Teacher"), the Mongolian rendition of the Tibetan Bla ma dkar po.

In 1843, when he was twenty-eight years old, he visited Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, one of the largest monasteries in Amdo, where he resided for several months. During that time, he studied poetry with the well-known scholar Thub bstan rgya mtsho. In Bla brang, he met

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<sup>10</sup> Kim (2004: 52).



many important lamas including the prominent dGe lugs scholar Shes rab rgya mtsho, (1803–1875). However, almost all of those encounters appear to have occurred as part of public functions and meetings rather than during private gatherings. For example, when he wanted to see the head of Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, the young Fourth 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa sKal bzang thub bstan dang phyug (1856–1916), he could not arrange a private audience, and like the rest of monks, had to content himself with seeing him from afar at the public audience.

Around 1854, he returned to Co ne, where he took many Buddhist initiations as well as the vows of a *dge slong* (fully ordained monk) in front of Tshe smon gling Ngag dbang 'jam dpal tshul khriims rgya mtsho (1792–1864), the previous regent of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa. It is not clear whether Bla ma dkar po was involved with the invitation and arrangements of Tshe smon gling *ho thog thu's* visits to Xinjiang. However, around that time, Bla ma dkar po was also present in the region. Unfortunately, Tshe smon gling *ho thog thu* passed away in Torghut in Xining around 1862.<sup>11</sup>

In 1863, Bla ma dkar po moved back to Tarbaghatay. Initially, he wanted to stay at a monastery known as Zhi ne ang gi but his sojourn was prevented by the local monastic authorities. Left with no other choice, he set camp outside of the monastery and practiced his medicine there. At that time, a skin-rash epidemic struck the region, and no one was able to contain the disease. Using his medical skills, he treated many people and put a halt to the plague. Perhaps, it was due to his medical practice that the Qing officials who lived in Tarbaghatay heard about him and invited him to visit them at the fortress.

In spite of all this activity, until the Dungan Revolt in 1863, Bla ma dkar po was still an ordinary, drifting monk. Unlike *sprul sku* in Tibet, he was not recognized as a reincarnated lama, nor did he have personal tutors or a private residence. He was just one of many ritualist monks or healers who travelled to distant places to seek some economic benefit and collect some donations.

### *The Dungan Revolt*

Bla ma dkar po's ordinary life dramatically changed when the Dungan Revolt (1862–1877)<sup>12</sup> broke out in Xinjiang. He was caught in events that went beyond his control. The Dungan Revolt was mainly

<sup>11</sup> Brag dgon pa bstan pa rab rgyas (1982: 658).

<sup>12</sup> For more information of this war and on Xinjiang in general, see Kim (2004) and Chu (1958).

an ethnic and religious war fought by the Qing army against Islamic adherents in the west of China. The original cause of the Dungan Revolt appears to have been related to a minor issue. It was not started as a planned uprising or as an attack on Qing officials. In 1862, in Shangxi province, a fight broke out between a Han merchant and a Hui Muslim over the price of some bamboo poles. Soon Qing officials became involved in this dispute, and that led to the massacre of Huis who lived in a nearby village. As a consequence, a Hui mob attacked the Hans, and eventually this evolved into a total rebellion against the Qing. The imperial army suppressed the rebellion, and many of the defeated Huis fled to Gansu and Qinghai. After hearing the news of Hui rebellions in Shanxi and the resulting surge of refugees, the Salar—originally Oghuz Turks—and other Hui groups in Qinghai began to rebel. These uprisings first started among the Salar in Ya rdzi or Xunhua 循化 in Chinese and then spread quickly across Qinghai—particularly to the northern parts near the Tsong chu also known as the Huangshui River 湟水河. Eventually, the Hui in sTong skor, a fortress city, joined the upheavals. In 1866, they raided and looted Tibetan monasteries such as gSer khog and dGon lung, all institutions located in the northern parts of Tsong chu.

Religious establishments and villages on the south side of Tsong chu were not spared in the frequent raids. On the eight day of the fifth month of Water Pig Year (1863), sKu 'bum Monastery was sieged by Muslims forces and the Fourth A kyā Ye she skal bzang mkhas grub rgya mtsho (1817–1869), at the time forty-six, had to take charge of both the military and religious affairs of the monastery. As the Hui army was approaching sKu 'bum Monastery, the Fourth A kyā organized a military unit from the villages of sKu 'bum, sTong skor, and Khri ka to defend against the Muslim army.<sup>13</sup>

When news of the Hui rebellions in Shangxi and Gansu reached the Muslims in Xinjiang, revolts mushroomed in the whole area. Seeing this as an opportunity, Yaqub Beg (1820–1877), a Tajik adventurer, took up arms against Qing control in the Tarim Basin. On the seventeenth day of the third month of the Water Pig Year (1863), the Muslims in Ili region also started to rebel against the Qing. Two hundred Tungans living in a town called Sandaohezi attacked a Qing garrison at Tarchi. On the eighth month, they also attacked the fortress at Qur Qaraus.<sup>14</sup> Suddenly, the war was everywhere, and the people were suffering. The Buddhists were under attack and the Qing were losing control over a territory they had controlled since

<sup>13</sup> Gser tog Blo bzang tshul khirms rgya mtsho (1982: 114).

<sup>14</sup> Kim (2004: 53).

the 18th century.<sup>15</sup>

*Bla ma dkar po at war*<sup>16</sup>

In this midst of the wars, the Qing's authority in Xinjiang collapsed.<sup>17</sup> At that critical time, Bla ma dkar po took up arms and led a larger Mongolian voluntary army to reaffirm the imperial control and defend Tibetan Buddhism in the region. Largely due to his efforts, the Qing were able to keep their vast western territories. Modern Chinese scholars have recognized him as a great defender of motherland.<sup>18</sup> His biography reads:

On the first day of the eleventh month of the Wood Bull Year (1865), suddenly the Hui army arrived. Among the three Ambans (in Tarbaghatay), they killed the oldest one. Due to the war, the people were suffering greatly, especially the Mongols, Manchus, Xibe, Solons and Chinese, who were under the authority of the imperial Qing [...] the war was everywhere. Thousands of towns and villages were destroyed and lots of people were killed, temples and halls as well as monasteries were burned, and all holy objects were taken away. Thang ka were used for horse saddles, books were used for shoe soles. The *tsha tsha* and statues' heads were cut off and stomachs were plucked out. All food and possessions were taken away. Hui, Hotans, Kazaks, Salar, Russians, and English, who were not Buddhist, cut off the people's access to communication and travel. One third of the total population was really suffering like it was hell on the earth.<sup>19</sup>

It was under these difficult circumstances that Bla ma dkar po decided to take up arms against the Muslim army. Since he was a monk, it was not an easy decision. In his biography, the author goes to great length to justify his military actions and to explain how such a behaviour was not only allowed in Buddhist doctrine under extraordinary circumstance but also how it was necessary for the sake of his own people and Buddhism itself. However, before taking arms against the Hui, Bla ma dkar po had a personal issue to solve. He was an ordained monk, and therefore he could not kill—such a realisation must have tormented him quite a bit. After deep reflection

<sup>15</sup> On the background of this revolts in Xinjiang, see Chu (1958: 248–271), Kim (2004: 37–72), Millward (2007: 117–118).

<sup>16</sup> For Bla ma dkar po's wars and political activities in Xinjiang, see Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 277–334).

<sup>17</sup> Chu (1958: 250).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Zhao Tong Hua calls Bla ma dkar po 卫疆英雄, "the heroic defender of Xinjiang".

<sup>19</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 277).

on the *dge slong* vows and on the suffering of the people who experienced the attacks against Buddhism, he came to a decision. To benefit most people, he claimed that Buddhism allowed monks to take up arms against the enemies of the Dharma. In 1865, he went to a monastery known as *Zhi ne ang gi* and gave up his *dge slong* vows.

His first military engagement was not on a big scale. According to his biography, as the wars were raging everywhere, the people were scared and had gathered at a place called *Kā tsar u tsur*. Among these refugees, he organized a group of people who was willing to fight, taught them "the tactics of maneuvering and fighting," and "issued strict military orders and expected everybody to follow them." On the nineteenth day of the third month of the Wood Bull Year (1865), after hearing that the Hui army was approaching the camp, he took thirty soldiers with him—the small army squad "killed a thousand enemies."<sup>20</sup>

Following the ambush, his reputation as a military leader grew among the people and many were those who followed him. One of his most celebrated battles was the liberation of Tarbaghatay fortress. After the rebellions started, Hui and Kazakhs came to Tarbaghatay. At the time, the Qing army and its officials still inside the fortress were put under siege by the Muslim attackers. On the second month of the Fire Tiger Year (1866), *Bla ma dkar po*'s force defeated the Hui and Kazakhs who had surrounded the Tarbaghatay, thus delivering much needed food to the people of the fortress. It was in the aftermath of this battle that the name of *Bla ma dkar po* appeared in Qing imperial records for the first time.

In the sixth month of the fourth year of Tongzhi (1865), the reincarnation *Bla ma dkar po* led an army to defend Tarbaghatay fortress. He achieved a victory never obtained before. His military service was excellent. The rewards that must be given him and detailed information on the people who helped such military victory will be written and sent quickly. Then imperial decree and rewards will be issued quickly.<sup>21</sup>

Soon, the imperial court issued a decree and gave him the title of *A chu ho thug thu*. That was very unusual in the Qing court, as a title as important as *ho thog thu* was generally bestowed only to important religious figures in Mongolia and Tibet and not to military and secular individuals. Acknowledging a Tibetan ex-monk and local military leader as *ho thog thu* was therefore against all norms and practices of the imperial court. Such an action might have been the

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*: 284.

<sup>21</sup> *Materials on Xinjiang*: 198.

result of some confusion within the Qing court. In any case, the conferral of the title of *ho thog thu* appears as the first indication of his later identification as a *sprul sku*. While the Qing officials were discussing Bla ma dkar po's heroic deeds and rewards, he was leading his army to war. In the course of a battle fought in a place called Bu rān tā ban, he allegedly defeated thousands of Hui soldiers—a likely event since most of these men were civilians—and 10,000 sheep, 5,000 horses, 100 camels were taken as military bounty.<sup>22</sup>

By the second month in the Fire Tiger Year (1866), his force had protected Tarbaghatay for two years and had provided food to the army and people. However, the military campaign did not end well. With local Muslim support, the Dungan had taken most of the towns and villages around Tarbaghatay and the Chinese, Mongols, and Manchu were now surrounded on all fronts. It was at such a critical time that Bla ma dkar po suggested that these people move to the extensive pastures of the Altai region. However, when in the fourth month of that year, they reached the grasslands, the local Qing officials did not welcome them. The general of Uliastai and the Amban in Hovd, today's Mongolia, sent a letter to Beijing to mediate the situation. After hearing and reading the official reports from Tarbaghatay, the emperor issued a decree and rewarded Bla ma dkar po by giving him title and seal of *ho thog thu* Kun dga' rgyal mtshan. According to Bla ma dkar po's biography, this was the second time he was granted the title of *ho thog thu* by the imperial court. The emperor also gave provisions and silver currency to his soldiers. Furthermore, he was given permission to write directly to the emperor without having to rely on the imperial mail system, an extremely rare honour.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the military campaigns continued. At a place called Tho mar bo kā, he led his army against the Muslims, conquering several thousands of Hui families and taking their possessions. In the winter, in order to face a famine, he ordered that fish be caught from the river, an unusual practice that saved people from starvation. In 1867, Liu Yunlin 李云麟 (1834–1897), the Military Governor of Uliasutai in today's Mongolia, gave Bla ma dkar po's forces provisions and commanded them to protect Bayandai Town (also known as Ba Cheng 巴城). Bla ma dkar po returned to Xinjiang in 1866 and was later appointed as the counsellor of Tarbaghatay fortress, thus becoming the general in charge of Ili.

According to his biography, in 1868, a fight broke out among the

<sup>22</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 291–292).

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*: 293–294.

Chinese soldiers who were stationed in the region, following the arrival of a Qing official from Beijing, on a mission to see Bla ma dkar po. On the way, some of these local soldiers sent to escort the envoy, robbed him of his silver. As a reaction, in May, thousands of Chinese soldiers came to Bla ma dkar po's monastery and surrounded it. The local militia managed to ward off the enemies twice, yet a part of the Chinese soldiers defected the army and began to pillage and plunder the areas nearby. In the following year (1869), Bla ma dkar po ordered his armed forces to contain those defectors. He said, "These runaway Chinese soldiers are extremely harmful. If we do not eliminate them, there will not be any peace in the country." Apparently though, Bla ma dkar po needed not to be concerned himself. A few months later, a disagreement emerged among the Chinese defectors, and their leaders were arrested and handled over to the Tibetan general, who consigned them to the Qing officials stationed at Hovd in Mongolia.<sup>24</sup>

His final battle was the liberation of U sā su tha fortress from the Hui army in 1871. His help was directly requested by the Qing court but, by the time his army arrived, the fortress had already been looted and his forces could only clean the area. Whilst Bla ma dkar po was camped in Bu ral tho hā, the imperial court sent Li Yunlin with gifts and money to ask the Tibetan general to settle down and build a town. Under the Fourth 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa's guidance, Bla ma dkar po built the monastery known as Chīn ho zī (Chenghua Si 承化寺), the largest in the region.

As his reputation grew, around 1871, thirty thousand Kazakh families came to the Altai region to ask for his protection. Although he allowed them to stay, the local Russians were not pleased with his decision and demanded the return of these Kazakhs to Russia. When Bla ma dkar po arrested four Russians and put them to prison,<sup>25</sup> his relationship with the Russian delegates deteriorated, so much so that he became known as the most anti-Russian officials in the Qing empire.

From 1871 to 1881, the Russians occupied the Ili region of Xinjiang in what was known as the "Ili Crisis". Such an event became an important issue for both the Qing and Russia; indeed, it formed the basis for the diplomatic negotiations between Russia and the Qing dynasty. After Russia occupied Ili, the overall situation more or less stabilized. The Dungan force was not able to make any headway, and Bla ma dkar po never managed to eradicate the Muslim force completely. By then, Russia was the established force in the region.

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*: 301–302.

<sup>25</sup> On Bla ma dkar po's relationship with Kazakhs, see Noda (2006).

At that time, the Qing officials, particularly Li Yunlin, were concerned about Bla ma dkar po's next moves. In particular, they worried about Bla ma dkar po's hatred of the Russians. This is because they had actively sought Russian participation in the negotiations over Ili. Although Li Yunlin disliked Bla ma dkar po, during the war, he came to rely on the general's forces for protection since there were no Qing armies in the area. He had to listen to whatever Bla ma dkar po demanded and asked him to do. Yet, from the 1870s onwards, their relationship gradually but inexorably worsened.<sup>26</sup>

Bla ma dkar po also became involved in helping the Qing's reconquest of Xinjiang. By 1876, as the military situation improved in China, following the crushing of Hui rebellions in Qinghai and Gansu, the Qing court decided to reconquer Xinjiang. At that time, although some parts of the Dzungarian Basin were under the control of Qing loyalists, such as Bla ma dkar po, the South Tianshan was still controlled by Yaqub Beg. The Qing court appointed the renowned General Zuo Zongtang (1812–1885) as the military leader in charge of retaking all of Xinjiang. However, Zuo's army faced a lot of logistical problems, especially due to the distance between the mainland and Xinjiang that prevented the military from getting supplies delivered on time. Consequently, General Zuo Zongtang's general asked Bla ma dkar po's help, that arrived in the form of sheep and horses bought with the taxes collected from the Kazakhs. As Zuo Zongtang's army was slowly taking Xinjiang, Bla ma dkar po planned his next move—a trip to Lhasa.

#### *Bla ma dkar po's journeys to Lhasa and to Beijing*

Bla ma dkar po refers to his journey from Lhasa to Beijing as a pilgrimage.<sup>27</sup> In the seventh year of Guangxu, on the fifteenth day of the twelfth month of the Iron Snake Year (1881), Bla ma dkar po left Xinjiang for Lhasa. Setting off from his monastery in the Altai region, he and his entourage arrived in Ürümqi, where they celebrated the Spring Festival. They moved on to Lanzhou, where they met the local Governor General. After passing through Xi'an, in the third month, they arrived in Chengdu and met the Governor General of Sichuan

<sup>26</sup> The dispute between Li Yunlin and Bla ma dkar po, see Zhao Tong Hua (2014: 88–90).

<sup>27</sup> For Bla ma dkar po's travels to Lhasa and Beijing, see Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 334–502).

Ding Bao Zhen 丁宝楨 (1820–1886).<sup>28</sup> The governor believed that there was going to be a war between Russia and China and advised him against travelling to Lhasa. In spite of the warning, Bla ma dkar po persisted on his journey towards Central Tibet, and headed to Dar tse mdo, a historical tea-trade town between China and Tibet. Here, he purchased a large amount of tea bricks to be offered in religious rituals in Lhasa. His party moved on, arriving in Li thang) and then in 'Ba' thang in the eleventh month of the Horse Water Year (1882).

On their way to the monastic town of Brag g.yab, the entourage encountered two Russians, who, in approaching Bla ma dkar po, refused to dismount from their horses in sign of respect. Bla ma dkar po's attendants, judging their behaviour to be an act of aggression, arrested and beat up the two Russians. Bla ma dkar po intervened and told the Tibetan and Chinese officials who were travelling with him, "There should not be any Russians in Sichuan." After reasoning with the Russians, he let them pass. Slowly, Bla ma dkar po and his entourage arrived at the historic town of Chab mdo. 'Phags pa lha, the head of Chab mdo Byams pa gling, the largest dGe lugs pa monastery, came to greet him. Bla ma dkar po stayed at his monastery for several days.

Before Bla ma dkar po's departure from Chengdu, the Sichuan governor informed the Qing Ambans in Lhasa of his arrival in the city. The news created some uncertainties among the Tibetan officials, as they were uncertain about which protocols and manners should be used to receive him. The government officials consulted gNas chung, the official deity, who told them to receive him with respect. In accordance with the oracle, a first greeting party, formed by officials, was sent to Chab mdo to welcome Bla ma dkar po. Another reception was then organised outside of Lhasa by the bKa' shag, and, at that time, all the government officials, including the regent and the representatives of the Three Seats, came to greet the Tibetan general.

Bla ma dkar po entered the city on the second day of the second month of the Water Sheep Year (1883) and he immediately headed to the Jo khang, the holiest place in Tibet. In front of the Jo bo, he wept and said loudly, "For days and nights, I have been thinking about this but now I see it [with my own eyes]."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> He was born in Guizhou and considered one of the most honest, courageous, and progressive officials at the Qing court. In 1864, he became the Shandong governor. In Shandong, he established college known as Shandong Xunfu 山东巡抚 and set up a foreign affairs office. In 1876, he became the governor of Sichuan.

<sup>29</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 348).



The eighth day of the third month was the day that was set for his audience with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama (1876–1933), and he demanded a specific protocol to be followed during the event. In particular, he said, “The emperor entrusted me with his imperial greeting for the Dalai Lama, to be given during my audience. Therefore, the Tibetan king cannot not be seated on his chair. He must stand up until I leave.”<sup>30</sup> In this instance, it is clear that he was acting as the emissary of the Qing emperor and that his status has to be understood as equal to that of the regent of Tibet. The Tibetan “king” Bla ma dkar po is referring to was no other than the regent of Dalai Lama’s, the Tenth rTa tshag rje drung Ngag dbang dpal ldan chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1850–1886), a pragmatic individual known for containing the smallpox epidemic in Lhasa. In the morning, dressed in a Qing official dress, Bla ma dkar po went to see the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, and, according to the latter’s biography, Bla ma dkar po kowtowed nine times in the Chinese style and also prostrated in the Tibetan style, showing no arrogance.<sup>31</sup>

During his stay in Lhasa, Bla ma dkar po generously donated to monasteries and religious lamas and scholars. He spent all the money that he had brought from Xinjiang, to the point that he even had to sell his official dress to support himself. His economic difficulties were partially solved when a group of Mongols, hailing from Xinjiang, handed him some cash. At that, he remarked, “I have become rich again.”<sup>32</sup> In Sera monastery, he met the young Tsha rdor *sprul sku*, the soon-to-be dGa’ ldan khri pa and regent of Tibet. Previously, Bla ma dkar po had helped him to rehabilitate his position in front of the Qing when he was in Xinjiang.

Even in the course of his religious visit to Lhasa, politics were not far from his sight. As soon as he arrived in the city, he was in fact caught in the midst of a crisis between Nepalese and Tibetans, and his mediation proved fundamental in solving the matter. Apparently, the conflict started over a minor trade issue. In the thirty-first day of the second month of that year, during sMon lam chen mo (the Monlam Prayer Festival), two Tibetan women attempted to buy some coral beads from a Nepalese shop owner. As the two women looked at the corals, one of them dropped some coral beads on the ground, and they could not find them. Angered, the shop owner not only verbally abused them but also demanded the price of the dropped coral to be paid. Among the crowd who witnessed the incident were numerous monks who had come to town to celebrate the New Year.

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<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*: 359–360.

<sup>31</sup> Thub bstan byams pa tshul khri ms bstan ‘dzin ([n.d.]: v1, 181).

<sup>32</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 366).

Siding with the Tibetan women, they began to throw rocks at the shop owner and his Nepalese friends. The situation soon got out of control as the mob destroyed most of the Nepalese shops in Lhasa.<sup>33</sup>

Several days later, while peace seemed to have been restored, Nepalese traders in Lhasa gathered secretly and wrote a joint letter to the authority in Nepal to ask for a military intervention. On the twentieth day of the seventh month of that year, the Tibetan government received news that the Nepalese king was preparing to go to war. The bKa' shag requested Bla ma dkar po to intervene the situation.<sup>34</sup> The general agreed to settle the issue, that he believed to be of economic nature. He therefore suggested the Tibetan party to reimburse the Nepalese shop owners in Lhasa, stressing the importance of framing the payment as a "gift" and not as a "compensation". According to his instructions, the money was not taken from the government's treasury but from "from the Tibetans themselves, including the monastic establishments."<sup>35</sup> Bla ma dkar po also asked the Qing Amban to contribute. Since the monasteries had difficulty paying what was requested, he personally donated the money he originally wanted to use for tea offerings.<sup>36</sup> Despite his direct intervention, the money was still short. To make up the difference, he borrowed 80,000 silver pieces from the governor general of Sichuan and used them to pay off the Nepalese. The settling of Tibetan-Nepalese issue pleased the emperor, who honoured Bla ma dkar po by issuing an imperial decree title known as Yi Shi Du Xin Chan Shi 伊师笃信禅师.<sup>37</sup>

In 1884, his activities in Lhasa mostly focused on pilgrimages and donations to various monasteries and monks. He also sponsored the building of a temple in Pha bong kha monastery and the replacement of the Jo bo's head ornament. In that occasion, many people donated their personal jewelry and precious stones, include a huge diamond from the Nepalese government. In April, the crown was completed and consecrated by all the important lamas in Lhasa.

In 1885, Bla ma dkar po made preparations to leave Lhasa. He sent a group of people to Xinjiang through the northern route via mNga' ris while a small advance party was sent to China through the

<sup>33</sup> For the general background of Nepal-Tibet, see Uprety (1980). On this incident, see Rose (1971: 123–127).

<sup>34</sup> His actives in Lhasa could be corroborated by his letters to the bKa' shag and by the Amban letter to Sichuan. Fortunately, we still have some of these letters at the Tibet Archive in Lhasa.

<sup>35</sup> Cha han tho thug thu nas phyag bris khag bzhi gngang 'byor gyi ngo bshus, at the Tibet Archive in Lhasa.

<sup>36</sup> See Uprety (1980).

<sup>37</sup> See *First Historical Archives of China*: 502—1379.

southern route. Bla ma dkar po moved to Sichuan, and, at his arrival at Chengdu, he immediately went to see the Governor General Ding Bao Zhen 丁宝楨 (1821–1886), who expressed his radical political projects. “[Lhasa] is far away from here. How about [we] move the two Jo bo—the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama—and all the monasteries, such as Se ra, ‘Bras spungs and dGa’ ldan to the Khams-area of Tibet?” Referring to Russians in Xinjiang and British in Tibet, the governor continued, “dBus-gTsang is near India, so sooner or later, the Europeans will come to Lhasa. Bodhgaya is in India, but it should belong to China. I will give a hundred of thousand soldiers.”<sup>38</sup> For a few days Bla ma dkar po did not reply to the governor, then, he made the request to have a private audience with the emperor. As it is recorded in his biography, “Although he had served the emperor for thirty years, he had never seen the emperor himself. If the governor permitted, he would like to go to Beijing to see the emperor.” Without much choice, the Zongdu agreed.

After sending some of his attendants to Ili, in 1886 he visited Mount Emei, travelling then to Hunan, Huibei, and Nanjing, eventually reaching Shanghai. During his stay there, he wanted to visit Mount Putuo, a Buddhist holy island southeast of Shanghai, but the heavy waves prevented him from doing so. He moved therefore to Tianjin where he met the famous Chinese official Li Hongzhang (1823–1901).

He reached Beijing in the mid of the fourth month, an experience that proved to be a deep disappointment for him, as he found a city infested with corruption and incompetent officials. The Qing dynasty as he knew it was dying. On the fifteenth day of the fourth month of the Fire Dog Year (1886), officials from the Lifan Yuan met him and inquired about the reasons for his travels. Their questions came as a surprise to Bla ma dkar po, as he had informed Beijing of his movements before leaving Chengdu. The officials, pretending not to have been aware of his trip, said that an audience with the emperor could now be arranged only by payment. He responded, “I was invited by the imperial court. I did not choose to come. I have no money to pay to see the emperor.”<sup>39</sup>

On the sixth day of the sixth month of the same year, the emperor queried the officials of the Lifan Yuan about Bla ma dkar po’s visit. Suddenly nervous, the officials agreed to arrange an audience for free. On the ninth day of the sixth month of the Fire Dog Year (1886), at the age of fifty-two, Bla ma dkar po met with the Guangxu

<sup>38</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 457–458).

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*: 463.

Emperor (1871–1908), although the audience appears to have been more ceremonial than substantial in its nature. The biography does not much say about the meeting itself. It seems that while in Beijing, Bla ma dkar po petitioned several issues to court and met the officials from Lifan Yuan and the Ministry of Rites officials several times.<sup>40</sup> He asked them to solve several issues including his new status in Xinjiang and whether he was allowed go back to Xinjiang or not. The decision did not come easily. While waiting for the imperial decision, he undertook a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai 五台山 (Five-Peak Mountain) in Shanxi and spent the first days of 1887 on the holy mountain. Almost one year later, he got imperial permission to return to Ili. In the second month of the Earth Rat Year (1888), he went back to Beijing.

Meanwhile the Governor General of Sichuan Liu Bingzhang 刘秉璋 (1826–1905) informed Beijing that the British were engaging in war in Darjeeling and suggested that, “Only Tsha gan *ho thog thu* could solve this problem.” The court was uncertain whether or not to appoint Bla ma dkar po as the Qing’s representative to deal with British aggression in Darjeeling. While waiting for the decision, Bla ma dkar po decided to visit the Tianjin Military Academy 天津武備學堂. There, he met the famous general, politician and diplomat Li Hongzhang (1823–1901). Li received him enthusiastically and showed him his military and modern weaponry, including a recently purchased hot air balloon, in action. He was summoned back when the court decided against appointing him as Qing’s general in Lhasa, on the account of his being more useful in Tarbaghatay in Xinjiang.

In third month of the Iron Tiger Year (1890), Bla ma dkar po decided to go back to Co ne for a short visit. After passing through Lanzhou, on June 1, he arrived at his birth place, for the first time since he left the village thirty years prior.

#### *Final years as a Buddhist sprul sku*

Bla ma dkar po’s final years<sup>41</sup> were filled with disappointments and disillusionments about the Qing dynasty and politics. Besides commenting on certain political issues, he mainly focused his attention on the construction of bKra shis chos ’khor gling in Co ne.

<sup>40</sup> Although these issues and petitions appear to have been important, the biography does not say what he petitioned for nor does it elaborate on what the issues concerned. In due course, all of these questions need to be examined vis-à-vis Qing official court documents.

<sup>41</sup> For Bla ma dkar po’s travels to Lhasa and Beijing, see Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 503–654).

The idea of establishing a new monastery in his hometown came while he was in Lhasa, and already at that time, he began to send some money to initiate it. In Beijing, he petitioned the imperial court for economic support and when he arrived at the monastic site on the seventh day of the sixth month of that year, he informed the Governor General of Lanzhou that the construction of the monastery had started and that it would host 400 monks.

Since he was considered a Qing court official, many asked his advice and intervention in local issues and disputes. For example, on the way to Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, he was requested to settle a dispute between the monasteries of Bla brang and gTsos. At Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, Bla ma dkar po saw the completion of the rooftop of the gSer khang (the Golden Temple), made from the Russian copper that he had bought and had shipped to Bla brang while he was in Xinjiang.

On the fifteenth day of the ninth month, he set off towards Xinjiang. Passing through Lanzhou, he reached Urumqi later that month. His sudden arrival caused confusion among the local Qing officials since they did not know what kind of arrangements and accommodation were appropriate for him. They asked Beijing for advice and the court ordered Bla ma dkar po to be lodged at the monastery of An chig Gan, until his return to Amdo.

During his stay in Xinjiang, he acted more like a *sprul sku* than as a general and a politician. His activities and travels centered mainly on religious rituals and purposes. At the end of 1892, for example, Bla ma dkar po was summoned by the general of Ili for a purification ritual, since the man believed that his fortress was infested by ghosts.<sup>42</sup>

Bla ma dkar po's stay in Xinjiang was brief, and already on the tenth day of the sixth month of the Wood Horse Year (1894), he set off for Amdo, "with countless camel loads, thirty carriages and horses."<sup>43</sup> Before leaving Xinjiang for the last time, he sent one of his attendants to Lhasa to get the name and title for his home monastery. He arrived at his monastery in Co ne in August.

When he was in Xinjiang, he continued to send silver coins to Co ne to build the monastery and its four Grwa tshang or colleges. Each college had prayer halls and residences for monks. All rituals and curricula were modelled on Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, and teachers and instructors were invited from that monastery.

Although removed from the imperial court, he continued to pay close attention to Qing politics. Streams of information came to him

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*: 550.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*: 568.

from all over the Qing empire, as he was at the centre of a communication network. It was through one of these messages that he learned of the outbreak in Korea of the first Sino-Japanese War on July 25, 1894. In a few days, the Japanese army crushed the Qing imperial army. Although a Japanese victory was expected, the speed of it wrong footed the predictions of many observers. The defeat seriously affected the Qing army, both on the military and psychological level. The news deeply upset Bla ma dkar po, who felt hopeless and despondent. It was with such a heavy heart that he decided to leave for Lhasa.

In his biography, he appeared to be desperately waiting for the spring of the Wood Sheep Year (1895), when the warm weather allowed for the long journey to Lhasa. He spent the New Year at his monastery, meeting frequently with the Khri chen *sprul sku* from Bla brang. Once Bla ma dkar po confessed him, "All my life, there are a few enjoyments but much misery and sufferings."<sup>44</sup> Eventually, the time came to go to Lhasa and preparations were made. Since there were no motor vehicles, the people had to ride horses, whereas bags were loaded on mules and *mdzo*.<sup>45</sup> Lacking saddles for the *mdzo*, he sent one of his attendants to Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil to borrow some. Suddenly, his dreams and plans of a Lhasa journey were shattered. On third day of the third month of Wood Sheep Year (1895), he became seriously ill. In the fifth month of that year his health improved, yet it was still uncertain whether he would be able to face the journey to Lhasa. The following month, he decided against it, resorting to send his treasurer instead, telling him, "I cannot go to Lhasa. I would like to leave my remains at this place."<sup>46</sup>

During the last part of his life, he met many important lamas, including the author of his biography. He expressed many political statements and dire predictions on the collapse of the Qing dynasty. Once, he told Khri chen *sprul sku*, "This dynasty is not going to last too long. I am worrying about it."<sup>47</sup> When he was asked what would happen to the Qing, and what to do if the emperor could not defend himself, he replied, "They should run. He should run to Sichuan." Or, "The crisis could be solved if the imperial court would give to the enemy what they wanted." And, "After signing an agreement, the emperor could return to Beijing [... because] Chengdu is the old capital, it is the centre of the dynasty. Even if the emperor loses some

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<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*: 620.

<sup>45</sup> Hybrid between yak and domestic cattle.

<sup>46</sup> Skal bzang legs bshad (1994: 631).

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*: 634.

peripheral territories, at least he still could be emperor."<sup>48</sup>

It was at that time that sKal bzang legs bshad asked Bla ma dkar po some materials for his biography. Bla ma dkar po warned sKal bzang legs bshad to write honestly and truthfully, without exaggerations or flattery. He said that all the actions he performed, whether in China or Tibet had been recorded in documents and files and agreed on writing thirty or forty pages about his life. Sadly, that same afternoon, Bla ma dkar po's health took a turn for the worse. On twenty-eighth day of tenth month of the Wood Sheep Year (1895), after summoning his managers brTson 'grus and sByin pa, he told them, "Now my old monk's life is over."<sup>49</sup> Yet, many were the issues left unfinished, and when asked whether he wanted a reincarnation to be found, he answered, "If everything is accomplished, I have no reason to come back."<sup>50</sup> Tellingly he passed out amid sentence, a strong indication for the establishment of a *sprul sku* lineage. Bla ma dkar po was no longer able to talk and he died at his monastery in Co ne on the thirtieth day of the tenth month of the Wood Sheep Year (1895) when the sun had just appeared on the top of the mountains surrounding his monastery.

#### *The invention of a Tibetan sprul sku*

The invention of Bla ma dkar po as a *sprul sku* was largely due to his militancy and wealthy patronage of Buddhist lamas and monastery. As we have seen, he was born as an ordinary young boy in Amdo and was not identified or recognized as a *sprul sku* in his youth nor was he an accomplished religious scholar. However, due to his rise as important military leader in Xinjiang, the imperial court granted him the title of *ho thog thu*, usually bestowed only to high ranking *sprul sku* from Tibet and Mongolia. It is possible that this event, against all political forms and rituals, was a strategic move played by the Qing to contain Bla ma dkar po's military power within the religious sphere without acknowledging it at a secular level. The bestowal of the title of *ho thog thu* was a honour, but spiritual rather than political. Nevertheless, as he proved to be a strong military leader, able to

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*: 634–636. Following Bla ma dkar po's predictions of the oncoming collapse of the Qing dynasty, the author of his biography, sKal bzang legs bshad, ascribes the reason for it to the loss of the principles of governing policy. Using Qianlong's words, he writes, "If the Qing dynasty had not cut off its matrimonial relationship with the Mongols, had not given the Wang position to Chinese, and had respected Tibetan Buddhism, then the dynasty would last long and be safe." The disregard for these three principles is considered by the author of the biography as the major reason for the demise of the Qing dynasty.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*: 646.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*: 647.

defend Buddhism and attract wealthy patronage from many monasteries in Xinjiang and Tibet, the idea that he might indeed be a *sprul sku*, a reincarnate lama, began to take form.

During his military years, as his reputation grew, and he became richer, Tibetan rulers and dignitaries from all over the plateau began to send him greeting parties and ask him for donations. As a Buddhist devotee, he was happy to oblige to their requests. From bKra shis lhun po monastery in the central Tibet, the eighth Panchen Lama bsTan pa'i dbang phyug (1855–1882) dispatched his treasurer rGya mtsho with a decree sealed with the golden rDo rje with the intent of congratulating him on his recent victories. Around 1872, from Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, the fourth 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa sent his treasurer Blo bzang to request a donation for the rooftop for the golden temple. Bla ma dkar po agreed to sponsor the construction of both a golden roof and one thousand Maitreya Buddha statues. In 1873, Bla ma dkar po's treasurer was sent to Bla brang bkra shis 'khyil, and during the prayer meetings, the 'Jam dbyangs bzhad pa told him that Bla ma dkar po himself was the reincarnation of the *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705), the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama.<sup>51</sup>

The lineage of Bla ma dkar po began with one of the most important and recognised reincarnations of previous Buddhist lamas and kings. His biography, written in the form of *rnam thar*, or hagiography, strengthened and legitimised these claims, by presenting Bla ma dkar po as the reincarnation of successful saints, lamas, kings, and rulers of the past and asserting his coming to this world as a servant of the Dharma and all sentient beings. Although he was liberated or enlightened many years ago, he decided to be reborn again and again in different forms to serve and guide others. From pages 9 to 249, the work lists short biographies of twenty-eight saints, kings, or rulers, all said to have been one of the previous reincarnations of Bla ma dkar po. Among them are Kublai Khan and the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, as well as other lamas and scholars.

After his death, he was honoured by many spiritual figures and his reincarnations were sought and enthroned. The news of his passing was reported to Beijing and funeral rituals usually reserved for high lamas were performed in Amdo and Lhasa. Even the Thirteenth Dalai Lama issued a decree bestowing him the honorary title of Sha cin sdel gig che. Many important lamas, including the Dalai Lama and the Panchen Lama, predicted that his reincarnation would be born in Amdo and search parties were sent in earnest from

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*: 322.



his monastery in Co ne. The second Bla ma dkar po, sKal bzang tshul khrim bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan, was born in 1896, and enthroned in 1901. Sadly, the boy did not live too long, as he passed away in Xining in 1911.

The third reincarnation of Bla ma dkar po, sKal bzang 'phrin las lhun 'grub chos kyi rgyal mtshan (1911–1954), was found shortly after, and he lived an active life in his monastery and region. The fourth Bla ma dkar po, Blo bzang bshad sgrub pa'i bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1954–1978), was born in a tumultuous time. He saw his monastery destroyed in 1958 and died before seeing it rebuilt in the 1980s. The current reincarnation was born in 1981 and was identified by the Dalai Lama as the Fifth Bla ma dkar po in 1994; he lives in his monastery in Amdo.

The rise of Bla ma dkar po, an important reincarnation lineage in the late 19th century, shows a different side of Tibetan Buddhists. Before the war, he was an ordinary young monk. By historical coincidence, he found himself in the midst of Islamic rebellions in Xinjiang, an area linguistically, ethnically and geographical different from Amdo. He became a great warrior who took arms against Hui Muslims. In recognition of his heroic defense of the Qing's interest in Xinjiang and the patronage of Tibetan Buddhism in Lhasa and Amdo, the imperial court in Beijing installed him as *ho thog thu*. Many Tibetan lamas—including the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama—recognized him as a spiritual leader and reincarnation of *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, the regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama. After his death, his reincarnation was sought, and his lineage has continued as one of the most important in Amdo.

#### *Further questions and issues*

What has been said so far raises questions on the role that both violence and the reincarnation system play in Tibetan Buddhism. In times of upheaval, in contrast to many people's beliefs, violence was not only allowed but was also encouraged by Tibetan Buddhism. When Bla ma dkar po decided to take arms against Hui rebellions in Xinjiang, there was a common acceptance among the Tibetan Buddhists in Amdo that the war was justified, since Muslims were attacking not only civilian militants but also woman and children, as well as monasteries and temples in the northern parts of Amdo. Due to this background, many were the lamas and monks who participated in the conflict. They considered their participation to be for the greater good of all sentient beings and Buddhism. Judging from the Bla ma dkar po's case, we could argue that the social status of a *sprul sku* was not achieved through past religious achievements

and cultural norms. Rather, a *sprul sku* could be accomplished through war, violence, and destruction.

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## Aspects of Social Status in the *Biography of Doring Paṅḍita*

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**L**ife writing occupies a central place in Tibetan literature. While scholarship often speaks of hagiography and thus emphasises the religious aspects of the genre, which was mainly reserved for the narration of accomplished life stories of spiritual masters, Tibetan life writing, nevertheless, comprises a much greater variety of interesting and often secular genres such as journals, diaries, or biographical fragments found in legal documents or in *gsan yig* (texts recording the transmission of a teaching). Admittedly, there are only few samples of outright secular biographical writings that have come down to us. The *Dga' bzhi ba'i mi rabs kyi byung ba brjod pa zol med gtam gyi rol mo*, better known as the *Biography of Doring Paṅḍita* (*Rdo ring paṅḍita'i rnam thar*)<sup>1</sup> is perhaps one of the earliest examples of such secular biography or, to be more precise, secular autobiography.<sup>2</sup> The text was finalised shortly after 1806 by bSod nams bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor tshe ring (b.

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<sup>1</sup> The family is known by two names, hence the two varieties in the titles of the two contemporary editions. dGa' bzhi, the earlier and perhaps more official name, derives from the family's main estate dGa' bzhi a few kilometres down the Myang valley north of rGyal rtse in gTsang region, while the appellation rDo ring derives from the family mansion in Lhasa directly opposite the stele (i.e. *rdo ring*) in front of the Jokhang (see Petech [1973: 50]). The text was not put to print but circulated in manuscript copies. Reportedly, four or five different manuscripts are locked away in archives, libraries, and private collections in China and India (see Li Ruohong [2002: 8–10] for more information on the publication history).

<sup>2</sup> Hartley (2011) discusses the *Rlangs kyi po ti bse ru* as a possibly much earlier example of secular biography. Nevertheless, she rejects the idea since the text goes beyond the scope of a mere biography (Hartley 2011: 45). The other well-known examples of Tibetan secular life writing are mDo mkhar Tshe ring dbang rgyal's (1697–1763) autobiography (Tshe ring dbang rgyal 1981) as well as his biography of Pho lha nas (Mdo mkhar 1981) both published in the first half of the 18th century. Recently, another secular autobiography of the same period—composed by Zur khang Sri god tshe brtan (b. 1766)—appeared, however, I have not had access to it.

1760), the son<sup>3</sup> of rDo ring Paṇḍita mGon po dngos grub rab brtan (1721–1793). It is an extremely detailed account of not only Tibet's ruling elite, but also its culture and society in the 18th century. As such the text records numerous public and private events—weddings, funerals, picnics, official visits, audiences as well as pilgrimages—and lends itself as a veritable source on the social life of the aristocratic class in Tibet and in particular of the rDo ring family.

Despite the promise to be “a music of candid speech” (*zol med gtam gyi rol mo*) announced in its title, for the modern reader—perhaps even more so than the contemporary reader—the question remains whether the text is as trustworthy a source as it initially appears. As already a superficial reading of the text will show, it is less of a family history but more of a description of its author's life and times. In order to better understand not only the text but also the circumstances of its production it is important to pay attention—as far as possible—to the *intentio operis*. Umberto Eco defined the *intentio operis* as a “semiotic strategy” and any conjecture about it, he suggests, can only be proved by checking “upon the text as a coherent whole.” Eco emphasises that any interpretation of a part of the text must be confirmed by other parts of the text, thus “internal textual coherence controls the otherwise uncontrollable drives of the reader.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, the *intentio operis* is the red thread that binds together the narration as a whole.

For certain, the *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita* departs considerably from the established hagiographical form so prevalent in the Tibetan biographical tradition. It was convincingly demonstrated that one of the main functions of Tibetan hagiographical writing was to present an exemplary spiritual life story that ultimately leads to full realisation and liberation (*rnam par thar pa*) and inspires the reader to pursue a similar path.<sup>5</sup> The *Biography* on the contrary records the secular life of an aristocrat and lay official. The author styles his text as a family history with its focus on his grandfather mGon po dngos grub rab brtan, who was widely known as rDo ring Paṇḍita. Nevertheless, most of the text deals with the ill-fate and destiny of

<sup>3</sup> This, at least, should be considered as the biological relationship. bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's “legal” father Pa sangs tshe ring (1730–1788), despite his marriage to Rin chen skyid 'dzoms (b. 1739) in 1753, led a life in celibacy due to the ill-treatment he received from Dalai Bātur 'Gyur med rnam rgyal (r. 1747–1750). In order to keep up the family line, rDo ring Paṇḍita then had a son with Rin chen skyid 'dzoms, which makes bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor the biological son of rDo ring Paṇḍita. See Rdo ring (1987: 69–70); see also Li Ruohong (2002: 9); Martin (1997: No 357).

<sup>4</sup> Eco (1992: 64–65).

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Vostrikov (1994: 188); Roesler (2010: 2–3).

the author himself, and the text thus must be read as an autobiographical account or memoir of its author, rDo ring Bsod rnam bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor tshe ring. As such, the *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita* seems to follow a different narrative programme and exhibits an obsession with social status and public recognition. In the following pages I shall argue that bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor utilised—or perhaps even invented—the new literary genre of secular autobiography in order to repeatedly assess, defend, and ascertain the social status of the rDo ring family.

*Property, prestige and power*

The *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita* describes the rise to political power of the dGa' bzhi or rDo ring family within only two generations as well as its relative demise within the next generation. The specific literary form of memoir presents the chronology of events in a highly subjective but meaningful narration.<sup>6</sup> From a very personal perspective, the family's involvement in the social, religious, and political events of its time are presented. This personal perspective on family history also reveals interesting insights into the interplay of property, prestige, and power.

In Max Weber's analysis, three sources determine political power: 1) economy which is characterized by property, 2) estate and social group which are characterized by social status or prestige and finally 3) political influence characterized by political parties or interest groups. These three determinants may also be translated into the three terms: class, social status (*Stand*), and party. While these factors usually mutually determine each other, Weber offers another interesting observation when he claims that political power does not necessarily arise from economic power, but both may actually have their source in social status:

“Economically conditioned” power is not, of course, identical with “power” as such. On the contrary, the emergence of economic power may be the consequence of power existing on other grounds. Man does not strive for power only in order to enrich himself economically. Power, including economic power, may be valued for its own sake. Very frequently the striving for power is also conditioned by the social honor it entails. Not all power, however,

<sup>6</sup> From a narratological perspective, there is a considerable difference between autobiography—which answers the question “How did I become what I am?”—and memoir, which presents the life of its author in his social role, usually neglecting the individual's history in favour of the political, social, etc. history of her times; for a detailed discussion of the differences, see Neumann (2013).

entails social honor: The typical American Boss, as well as the typical big speculator, deliberately relinquishes social honor. Quite generally, “mere economic” power, and especially “naked” money power, is by no means a recognized basis of social honor. Nor is power the only basis of social honor. Indeed, social honor, or prestige, may even be the basis of economic power, and very frequently has been.<sup>7</sup>

Keeping Weber’s considerations in mind, it might be worthwhile to see what factors were crucial for a Tibetan noble family in order to enhance its social, political, and economic standing. From Luciano Petech, we know that the rDo ring family did not play a significant role in Tibetan history prior to the 18th century and the first larger involvement in international politics came with Khang chen nas bSod nam rgyal po (d. 1727), who acted as governor (*mgar dpon*) in mNga’ ris, and whose brother Tshe brtan bkra shis (d. 1727) became known as the first dGa’ bzhi ba.<sup>8</sup> During the turbulent first half of the 18th century, the rDo ring family rose from relative insignificance to become one of the most powerful families in Tibet. Petech describes the family as one of the five *sde dpon* families, who, together with the *yab gzhis* families, made up the highest stratum of the Tibetan nobility and political elite with direct access to political power.<sup>9</sup>

In the *Biography*, the status of the rDo ring family is not yet fixed; rather, the work describes the dynamics and processes shaping their rise to power. While Petech informs us that the status of the *sde dpon* families is second only to that of the *yab gzhis* families, he however does not explain how this status was achieved. For the first half of the 20th century, Tsering Yangdzom similarly explains the status of a family as directly related to the family’s access to government positions, the highest of which being that of *bka’ blon*.<sup>10</sup> Even though

<sup>7</sup> Weber (1978: 926).

<sup>8</sup> See Petech (1973: 51). bsTan ’dzin dpal ’byor summarises his great-grand uncle’s early career: “My forefather’s uncle, Khang chen nas, who was also known as Daiçing Bātur, served the government as grain and tax collector at estate and district levels since the time of the Great Sixth, the precious Tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho, and later, during the time of the Tibetan king Lha bzang khang, he held the position of leading governor (*sgar dpon*) of sTod mNga’ ris skor gsum.” *bdag gi mes po mi rje bka’ drin can de’i a khu khang chen pa’am / rda’i ching sba dur du grags pa de ni gong sa drug pa chen po rin chen tshangs dbyangs rgya mtsho’i dus nas gzhung gi rdzong gzhis bkar yong sogs las tshan rim pa’i zhabs ’degs sgrub cing / de rjes bod kyi rgyal po lha bzang khang gi dus stod mnga’ ris skor gsum gyi ’go byed sgar dpon las thog mdzad [...]* (Rdo ring 1987: 25). See also the translation of the extended passage in Sperling (2012: 205).

<sup>9</sup> Petech (1973: 50).

<sup>10</sup> See Tshe ring g.yang ’dzom (2006: 45). The term *bka’ blon* in general denotes a minister. Since Sde srid Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho’s (1653–1705) reform of the government, the term denotes one of the members of the Council of Ministers



some families trace their history back to imperial times, the aristocracy in the 18th and later centuries seems to have only formed during Pho lha nas's rule (1728–1747) in the first half of the 18th century.<sup>11</sup> The rise of the rDo ring family is closely connected to these developments and to Pho lha nas and his rule. The *Biography*, hence, describes also the establishment of a noble family. It meticulously recounts the accumulation of social, cultural, and economic capital by the successive heads of the family.

The narrative of the *Biography* can be split into three parts according to content, detail, and narrative mode:

Part I recounts the first generation of the family, which laid the foundation to the family's wealth, prestige, and political power. It is the shortest and least detailed part with only 88 pages<sup>12</sup> spanning over a period of 60 years, from roughly 1700 up to 1760, when bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor, the author of the *Biography*, was born. This part is told in a rather impersonal manner and seems to summarize general knowledge or information found in family archives. The main emphasis of part I is on the stepping stones to political power and elevated social status.

Part II is with 460 pages much longer and describes the youth and upbringing of bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor, but also the public and private activities of his father rDo ring Paṇḍita mGon po dngos grub rab brtan (1721–1793), the patriarch of the second generation. It covers the twenty-three years from 1760 to 1783. The narration is more personal and fuller of detail regarding the private life of the family and personal experience of the author. However, it largely presents events from the limited point of view of a young child. It culminates with bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor succeeding his father rDo ring Paṇḍita as *bka' blon* and as such recounts the consolidation of the family's political power and social status.

Finally, part III—with 584 pages, the longest and also most detailed part covering the next twenty-three years from 1783 to 1806—deals with the political involvements of our author, i.e.

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called *bka' blon shag lhan rgyas* or *bka' shag* in short. However, it must be noted that the power and position indicated by the title *bka' blon* varied over time; see Dung dkar (2002: 176).

<sup>11</sup> Petech (1973: 15).

<sup>12</sup> I am using the first modern edition Rdo ring Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor (b. 1760) 1987. *Rdo ring paṇḍi ta'i rnam thar* [The Biography of Doring Paṇḍita]. 2 vols. Khren tu'u: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, comprising a total of 1301 pages. While the text only slightly differs from the other modern edition compiled in Lhasa (Rdo ring 1988), the pagination and total length vary considerably between the two editions as well as from all newer reprints. Hence the page count here is meant to provide only rough orientation.

especially the Gorkha wars (1788–1792), bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's time as hostage in Kathmandu, as well as his time in Peking, where he was sent for trial, and finally his efforts to install his son as *bka' shag* minister and hence re-establish the family's prestige after his return to Lhasa. This lengthiest part may be regarded as the core of the autobiographical project and details the gradual demise of the family's social prestige and political power.

*The rise of the rDo ring family*

In the first 88 pages, which only make up for roughly 7% of the whole text, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor summarizes the events that in the first half of the 18th century made the rDo ring pas one of the most powerful families in Tibet. The author adheres to the well-known pattern of approaching the main theme of the text with an initial praise of the land, starting with a general description of Tibet and then zooming in on gTsang, the Myang valley, and then the dGa' bzhi village in particular.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, he does not deem it necessary to give a detailed narrative account of the deeds of his forefathers. On the contrary, he apparently regards this part of his family history as common knowledge and refers the reader to mDo mkhar ba's *Mi dbang rtogs brjod*,<sup>14</sup> what appears to be the authoritative and widely read history of the time. It is however safe to assume that bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor references Pho lha nas's biography not only for the sake of brevity but also in order to support his own account with the powerful voice of an external and independent witness. Compared to later passages of the *Biography*, the focus here is obviously not on the narrative flow of a family history, but more on

<sup>13</sup> Here he gives an explanation of the village's name dGa' bzhi, pointing out that its name is different in meaning from the well-known name of the Lhasa Jokhang, which is also "known as dGa' bzhi 'phrul snang gi gtsug lag khang." The name of the dGa' bzhi village derives from its beautiful setting within rivers, woods and fields: "In the east there is plentiful water for the delight of the Klu. In the south there are plenty of fruits for the delight of the birds. To the west are plenty of grains for the delight of men. In the north there are a plenty of meadows for the pleasure of cattle." *shar du chu sna 'dzoms pas klu dga' / lho ru shing sna 'dzoms pas bya rnams dga' / nub tu 'bru sna 'dzoms pas mi rnams dga' / byang du rtswa sna 'dzoms pas phyugs rnams dga' /* (Rdo ring 1987: 16).

<sup>14</sup> mDo mkhar ba Tshe ring dbang rgyal was a close colleague and fellow *bka' blon* of rDo ring Paṇḍita, but perhaps more importantly, he was also bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's father-in-law and as such well acquainted with the rDo ring family and their history. He is the author of *Dpal mi'i dbang po'i rtogs pa brjod pa 'jig rten kun tu dga' ba'i gtam*, as the title of the biography of Pho lha nas reads in full. It was finalised in 1733 and a xylographic edition executed on initiative of *bka' blon* Thon pa Sri gcod tshe brtan shortly after mDo mkhar Tshe ring dbang rgyal's death in 1763 (van der Kuijp 1985: 322).

the decisive moments as they were handed down from generation to generation and perhaps as they were recorded in family archives.

This first part, despite the typical prelude in form of a praise of the land and introduction to the geography of Tibet and the Myang valley in gTsang, focusses on the promotions crucial for the social and political status of the family. Two consecutive phases can be identified: 1) the phase of achievement of status and power and 2) the phase of inheritance of status and power.

*Achievement of status and power*

The rDo ring family's initial rise to power was dependent on the achievements of the most prominent family members. bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor starts his narrative with his most distant relative who played a symbolic role in the power shift from Mongol to Manchu dominance in Tibet at the beginning of the 18th century.

As is generally well known, after the fall of Lha bzang khan (1658–1717) in 1717, Khang chen nas as district governor of Mnga' ris annihilated a Dzungar army who were passing north through mNga' ris on their way to Dzungaria, carrying with them the treasures including the precious Avalokiteśvara statue they had looted from the Potala. Khang chen nas invited the Dzungars into a tent for a dinner party. After the Dzungar leaders had arrived, he made the tent collapse. Most Dzungar leaders and soldiers died and the few servants who survived ran away. The *Biography* recounts these events in utmost brevity and highlights the results:

In the end the higher ranks [of the Dzungar troops] were basically annihilated and because Daičing Bātur [i.e. Khang chen nas] returned to its owner the property of the government, particularly the statue of the Precious Noble One [i.e. Avalokiteśvara] and the gems and jewellery that had been carried away by the Dzungars, the emperor bestowed upon him the title of *beise* and appointed him to the position of chief minister [...]<sup>15</sup>

The author of the *Biography* clearly exhibits a strong interest in documenting the rewards received for services rendered. Khang chen nas was granted the title of *beise*,<sup>16</sup> and, moreover, he was appointed

<sup>15</sup> *gtso drag phal cher dmigs med du btang mthar/ slar yang 'phags pa rin po che'i sku dang rin chen rgyan chas gtsos gzhung gi sku chas jun sgar pas 'khyer ba rnam nor bdag po'i lag tu rtsis phul bar brten/ gong ma mchod yon nas/ rda'i ching spa dur la pas se'i cho lo dang bka' blon gyi gtso bo'i las 'khur du bsko gzhag bstsal [...]* (Rdo ring 1987: 27).

<sup>16</sup> Prince of the fourth rank, one of the many titles given to the nobility of conquered territory in Qing dynasty. See for instance Elverskog (2006: 69–70).

chief minister (*dbu bzhugs dka' blon*) of Pho lha nas's cabinet in 1721. In 1727, however, he was murdered by his fellow ministers, an event that triggered the Civil War (1727–1728).<sup>17</sup>

Thus, Khang chen nas appears in this narrative as the founder of the rDo ring family since he laid the foundation of their power, prestige, and wealth. What is important to note, and what bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor never fails to emphasise, is that Khang chen nas acquired a very high social status in reward for the loyalty and military service provided.

Khang chen nas's brother, Tshe brtan bkra shis (d. 1727)—the first known dGa' bzhi ba—sided with Pho lha nas in the civil war between dBus (Central Tibet) and gTsang (Western Tibet) to avenge his brother's death.

Because [Pho lha nas] ordered governor dGa' bzhi to join him in order to avenge Dāiçing Bātur, he was made leader of the mNga' ris army and led it in the cover of night into battle against dBus troops in rGyal rtse. Just as [the saying of] Sa [skya] Paṇ[dita] goes: "When many are of the same opinion, even the weak can achieve great things. Through the united force of many ants, a lion cub was slain", my honourable [grand]father Tshe brtan bkra shis was lost to the enemy because he was outnumbered by the enemy.<sup>18</sup>

Before being able to succeed his elder brother or receive any awards or promotions, Tshe brtan bkra shis fell in a minor battle against Central Tibetan troops in rGya mkhar. This detail is told by Petech,<sup>19</sup> but not included in the *Biography*. bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor apparently regarded these details as well-known common knowledge and unnecessary to repeat in his narration and instead simply refers the reader to *Mi dbang rtogs brjod*.<sup>20</sup>

So far the proponents of the rDo ring family have all met an early and violent fate. Their premature deaths made it impossible for them

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed account of Khang chen nas's assassination by his fellow ministers Nga phod pa, Bya ra ba, and Lum pa nas and the resulting civil war, see e.g. Petech (1972: 112–140).

<sup>18</sup> *rda'i ching sba dur gyi dgra sha len par sgar dpon dga' bzhi ba rang ngos yong byed dgos bka' phebs par brten / skor gsum dpung tshogs kyi 'go byed du byon te rgyal rtser dbus dpung la mtshan 'gebs kyi 'thab 'dzing skabs / rje sa paṇ gyis / mang po gcig tu blo mthun na / nyam chung rnam kyis don chen 'grub / srog chags grog ma'i tshogs 'dus nas / sengge'i phru gu bsad ces grags / zhes gsungs pa ltar / yab rje tshe brtan bkra shis de skabs dpung mang nyung thug pa'i dgra thog tu shor ba* (Rdo ring 1987: 26–27) The translation of Sa skya Paṇdita's saying is Sallie and John Davenport's in Sa skya Paṇdita (2000: 142, No 203).

<sup>19</sup> Petech (1972: 53).

<sup>20</sup> *mi dbang rtogs brjod du gsal 'khod ltar* (Rdo ring 1987: 27).

to enjoy the privileges their loyal services had earned them. At least, the *Biography* does not spend too much time on their life and ambitions, focussing more on the recognition they had earned their family. Tshe brtan bkra shis only posthumously was awarded the title of 1<sup>st</sup> class *taiji* as well as the title *gung*.<sup>21</sup>

After Tshe brtan bkra shis's early death in 1727, Pho lha nas had to care for the family and recommended the promotion of Tshe brtan bkra shis's son rNam rgyal tshe brtan (d. 1739) which was promptly accepted by Emperor Yongzheng 雍正 (r. 1723–1735), who took this as an opportunity to posthumously reward the services Khang chen nas and his brother Tshe brtan bkra shis had offered. bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor reports:

Considering the deeds of the father, who had been lost to the enemy's hand, Pho lha nas nominated the elder son rNam rgyal tshe brtan for first class *taiji* or a rank equal to a *terigiin jerge taiji* and a first class coral hat button<sup>22</sup> with peacock feathers to the emperor, the great lord Yongzheng, who replied with the award in a *gser yig* [edict]: "Earlier, your father dGa' bzhi ba has rendered diligent service, therefore I award you the title of *terigiin jerge taiji*!" [In addition, the emperor] in the same context awarded him a hat knob with a peacock feather, which made him the first Tibetan to receive a hat button.<sup>23</sup>

Yet, Pho lha nas expressed his satisfaction and gratitude to the rDo ring family's service by granting them not only three of his estates but also his daughter.

<sup>21</sup> Tib. *gung* is the phonetic rendering of Chin. *gong* 公, usually translated as "duke" (Hucker 1985: no. 3388). Since the term frequently appears as part of Tibetan names and titles, I keep the Tibetan variant *gung*.

<sup>22</sup> This practice is also described in Das (1970: 174): "The Kalon dress in yellow tunics, and wear Mongol hats with a coral button on top." Interestingly, Rockhill adds a foot note that "the coral belongs to the 1<sup>st</sup> class", whereas "the Kalon have only 3<sup>rd</sup> class, or blue, buttons." Similar information is provided in Petech (1973: 9). The contradictory information suggests that the usage and understanding of perhaps both titles and symbols of rank differed geographically as well as over time.

<sup>23</sup> *yab dgra lag tu shor ba'i byas rjes la dgongs te gcen rnam rgyal tshe brtan la rim pa dang po'i tha'i j'iam / ther gun jir ge tha'i ji dang don gcig gi cho lo dang / rim pa dang po'i tog byu ru 'jam sang dang / rma bya'i sgro mdongs bcas mi dbang chen po nas gong ma bdag po chen po g.yung chen dus zhus bstsal gyi bka'i phyir phebs la snga sor khyod kyi pha dga' bzhi bas brtson pa chen pos gshed mo phul par brten bdag rkyen du khyod ther gun jir ge tha'i jir bton pa yin zhes gzengs bstod kyi gser yig dang 'brel bar tog sgro mdongs bcas bstsal bas bod mir sgro tog thob pa'i snga shos su lags [...]* (Rdo ring 1987: 28).

For the same reason the Great Ruler [i.e. Pho lha nas] presented the estates of mKhar kha, Sa lha, and Bya chos in rGal rtse [to the rDo ring family] with the words: “Even though for now this is only a little more than nothing in appreciation for the deeds of your father, I will remember later on and not let it be delayed.” According to his promise, soon afterwards he gave his noble daughter Zhabs drung bDe ldan sgrol ma as a bride to both my benevolent lord [i.e. rDo ring Pañḍita] and his elder brother rNam rgyal tshe brtan.<sup>24</sup>

Certainly, these had been turbulent and difficult times of war and conflict. While the nomination of the respective members of the rDo ring family was perhaps due to compassion and the personal relationship Pho lha nas had with the family, the posthumous award of titles was clearly connected to the recognition of the achievements. It is therefore safe to suggest that it was the intention of bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor to highlight that in the early phase, the family's prestige and power were a direct result of their service and achievements. This pattern, however, was to change over the next generation.

#### *Inheritance of status and political power*

A few years later in 1729, rNam rgyal tshe brtan succeeded his younger brother as *bka' blon* in Pho lha nas's cabinet (*bka' shag*) and received the title of *gung* from the imperial court.<sup>25</sup>

The promotion is mentioned in a very compact form in the *Biography* quoting from the Emperor Yongzheng's edict:

dGa' bzhi terigiin jerge taiji rNam rgyal tshe brtan, your uncle Khang chen nas from the beginning until his deeds were completed rendered his services honestly. Therefore, We want to reward him. Because he has no son [and] you, rNam rgyal tshe brtan, are not only his elder brother's son, but, as Pho lha nas now reported, have often served [the government well], We, in particular consideration of Khang chen nas's service, make this award and bestow upon you [the title]

<sup>24</sup> [...] *de dang stabs mtshungs mi dbang chen pos rgyal rtse khul / mkhar kha / sa lha / bya chos bcas ngo gzhis sa snon du brtse bskyangs thog bka' phebs su khyod tsho'i pha byas can de'i drin lan da lan stong min tsam las ma byung rung / slar sems bzhag mi 'gyangs par yong tshul bka' bzhes don dang mthun par / de nas 'gyangs min gcen rnam rgyal tshe brtan dang / mi rje bka' drin can de nyid kyi btsun mor mi dbang chen po rang gi rigs kyi sras mo zhabs drung bde ldan sgrol ma ster bar mdzad [...]* (*ibid.*: 28–29).

<sup>25</sup> According to Li Ruohong, who analysed Chinese sources, the Lifanyuan issued the title of *fuguogong* i.e. bulwark duke of sixth rank (out of twelve ranks), see Li Ruohong (2002: 63–64). The *Biography* only mentions the title as *gung* without further specification.

*fuguo gong*<sup>26</sup> [...] <sup>27</sup>

Then the following remark is added, explaining that the title had been not only confirmed but made hereditary a few months later:

Not long thereafter on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the last winter month in the 9th year [1730] of the reign of Yongzheng, the great emperor sent another edict similar in structure to the earlier one, which said in summary: “I again honour and award you the highest possible title of *thu pu la chi gung*<sup>28</sup> and [this title] shall remain [with your family] from generation to generation without interruption!”<sup>29</sup>

rNam rgyal tshe brtan was to remain in this position for ten years, without much information provided in the *Biography*, which quickly jumps to the next important appointment for the rDo ring family. After rNam rgyal tshe brtan had died, the new emperor Qianlong 乾隆 (r. 1735–1796) confirmed the hereditary title of *gung* and installed the young rDo ring Paṇḍita as successor of his elder brother. The *Biography* reports:

“The *thu pu la chi gung* rNam rgyal tshe brtan has died from an illness, [and We] appoint once more his immaculate younger brother Paṇḍita to the position of *thu pu la chi gung*. Thence [the title] shall remain for his descendants and following generations;” decreed on the 25th day of the last spring month in the 5th year [1739] of the regency of the Divine Protector [Qianlong].<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> “*mi dmangs la phan pa’i gung*” seems to be a translation of *fuguo gong* (“duke who assists the state”) rendered “Bulwark Duke” in Hucker (1985: no. 2075).

<sup>27</sup> *dga’ bzhi ba ther gun jir ge tha’i ji rnam rgyal tshe brtan / khyod kyi a khu khang chen pas dang po nas kho rang gi bya ba ma rdzogs bar sems drang po’i sgo nas gshed mo phul ba yin pas nged rnams gsol ras gnang dgos la kho par bu med gshis rnam rgyal tshe brtan khyod khang chen nas kyi jo jo’i bu yin par ma zad / da sgos pho lha nas kyis khyod nas yang yang gshed mo phul tshul zhuis byung ba dang / lhag par nged rnams khang chen pa’i gshed mo phul bar dgongs te bdag rkyen gnang rgyur / khyod mi dmangs la phan pa’i gung la bton pa yin* (Rdo ring 1987: 29–30).

<sup>28</sup> The Lhasa edition reads “*thu sa chi gung*” (Rdo ring 1988: 23) and “*thu sa la chi gung*” (*ibid.*: 25), which seems to be a phonetic rendering of the Mong. *tusalayčī güng*, which is the Chin. *fuguo gong*. In Tibetan cursive *dbu med* the letters “pa” and “sa” are often indistinguishable.

<sup>29</sup> *zhing de nas mi ring bar slar yang gong ma chen po’i bka’ yig phebs pa’i don rdo byings sngon ma nang ltar thog mjug bsdoms su khyod la slar yang phul tu phyin pa’i sde’i thu pa la chi gung gi gsol ras dang gzengs bstod pa yin / mi brgyud nas mi brgyud kyi bar rgyun chad med par rim bzhin ’jags gnas byed rgyur g.yung chen khir bzhugs dgun lo dgu pa’i dgun zla tha ma’i tshes gsum la zhes pa’i gser yig bstsal* (Rdo ring 1987: 30).

<sup>30</sup> [...] *nad rkyen gyis ’das pa’i thu pa la chi gung rnam rgyal tshe brtan kho pa’i nges dag gi nu bo paṇḍi ta la slar yang thu pa la chi gung gi cho lo sprad nas bu brgyud nas*

Probably due to his young age, it was not rNam rgyal tshe brtan's son Pa sangs tshe ring (1730–1788)<sup>31</sup> but his younger brother mGon po dngos grub rab brtan (1721–1792), who had been studying in sMin grol gling monastery and had received the scholarly title of Paṇḍita, who eventually inherited the titles (*taiji* and *gung*) and later, in 1750, the position of *bka' blon*. This is the rDo ring Paṇḍita who gave the text its title. He would remain *dka' blon* until 1783.

This first part of the *Biography* of course records other events underlining the loyalty and esteem of the family, such as the promotions of the unfortunate Pa sangs tshe ring to 3<sup>rd</sup> class *taiji* in 1751<sup>32</sup> or rDo ring Paṇḍita's role in the interregnum from 1747 to 1750,<sup>33</sup> yet the emphasis is on rDo ring Paṇḍita's inheritance of titles and positions and the fact that these were made hereditary by the Emperor for future generations of the family.

*Knowing and Acknowledging.  
Consolidation of Status and Accumulation of Social Capital*

bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's youth falls into the most active period of rDo ring Paṇḍita as *bka' blon*. A closer look at the descriptions of the early years of bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor reveal that the narrative focus is not on rDo ring Paṇḍita and his political activities but rather on his social and religious activities and the recognition he received. The *Biography* presents the period from 1760 to roughly 1783 as a period where the family's wealth, political power, and social status were consolidated.

In a number of marriage alliances the family was able to confirm its networks with other powerful families of Tibetan nobility such as the Pho lha family, as mentioned above, but also the Rag shag (mDo mkhar) family or the family of both the 8th Dalai Lama and the 10th

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*brgyud kyi bar 'jags gnas byed chug lha skyong khrir bzhugs dgung lo lnga pa'i dpyid zla tha ma'i tshes nyer drug la zhes pa (ibid.: 32).*

<sup>31</sup> Most likely, Petech was right, identifying Pa sang tshe ring as the biological son of rNam rgyal tshe brtan (Petech 1973: 53), given that in 1730, when Pa sangs tshe ring was born, mGon po dngos grub rab brtan was only nine years old. Pa sangs tshe ring again was only eight years old when his father passed away and thus was unable to inherit rNam rgyal tshe brtan's position. Pa sangs tshe ring had a slow career and was promoted headman (*'go pa*) of Sa dga' only in 1763 (Rdo ring 1987: 114) and later in the same year general (*mda' dpon*) of dBus (*ibid.*: 121). At the dawn of the Tibeto-Gorkha conflict (ca. 1787), Pa sang tshe ring asked for retirement as he did not feel able to lead troops into an armed conflict and feared he would seem like "an old dog clinging to his bone" (*khyi rgan rus srung*) (*ibid.*: 422).

<sup>32</sup> Rdo ring (1987: 33).

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*: 43–52.



Zhwa dmar pa.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, these familiar bonds, alongside increasing their political influence, enabled the family to further accumulate wealth. These processes are reflected in the *Biography* in the form of social and religious recognition. As examples are numerous, I will in the following concentrate on three interrelated instances where the family's social status is acknowledged in exchange for an impressive boast of wealth in form of religious sponsorship.

The text is presented in flowing narrative prose, following a strictly chronological order not unlike the entries of a diary. Most chapters, identifiable by the inserted verse summaries, start with repetitive descriptions of the New Year's celebrations (*lha ldan simon lam*) and activities. Although not limited to religious activities, these gatherings were at the same time the most important social events during which, for instance, the appointments of new government officials took place.<sup>35</sup> However, the festivals provided for a multitude of opportunities to make splendid and expensive donations to monastic institutions as well as to nuns and monks. The portrayal of the family as an important donor for the religious community is then frequently supplemented by indicators of recognition such as the regular participation of rDo ring Paṇḍita as the head of the ceremony in the assembly. For example, during the first visit of the Panchen Lama in dGa' bzhi, in occasion of a banquet hosted in the assembly hall, various offerings were presented to the Panchen Lama, but—it is pointed out—“the Maṇḍala-prayer was performed by the benevolent *gung* Paṇḍita himself.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps even a greater sign of recognition is the fact that rDo ring Paṇḍita repeatedly succeeded in inviting the 6th Panchen Lama to dGa' bzhi as will be detailed below.

Already in 1746 rDo ring Paṇḍita, who had just inherited position and titles from his elder brother, built a temple dedicated to the long life of the emperor and the well-being of Tibet next to the family's estate in dGa' bzhi. Named 'Chi med bde ldan, the complex housed

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<sup>34</sup> Due to constraint of space, the familial alliances of the rDo ring family, which would absolutely deserve more attention, cannot be explored in any detail here. It must suffice to mention that the family over time had spun a thick web of interfamily relations first with Pho lha nas family by the marriage of rDo ring Paṇḍita with Pho lha nas's daughter (*ibid.*: 29), then with the Rag shag family by the marriage of Pa sangs tshe ring (*ibid.*: 69) as well as the illegitimate relations of rDo ring Paṇḍita with two daughters of the Rag shag family (*ibid.*: 70–71). Later, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor married the younger sister of the 8th Dalai Lama, who was also a cousin of both the 6th Panchen Lama and the 10th Zhwa dmar pa (Li Ruohong 2002: 110; Petech 1973: 58; Rdo ring 1987: 215–216, 253).

<sup>35</sup> Petech (1973: 14).

<sup>36</sup> *maṇḍal gsol 'debs kyang bka' drin can gung paṇḍi ta rang nas mdzad cing* (*ibid.*: 103).

nine life size gilt copper statues of Buddha Amitāyus.<sup>37</sup> In 1756 an expensive copy of the *Lha ldan jo bo rin po che*, the main statue of the juvenile Buddha in the Lhasa gTsug lag khang, was commissioned and the temple equipped with a luxury edition of the Kanjur as well as with a set of eight bDe gshegs mchod rten.<sup>38</sup> rDo ring Paṇḍita, who had received in-depth religious training at sMin grol gling, likely had a religious inclination and his massive investments into the family estate's temple—alongside the generous donations made during pilgrimages and audiences—were clearly framed within the concept of merit accumulation. Nevertheless, they were splendid enough to impress not only common people but also trigger important social recognition.

The Paṇḍita's efforts were quickly met with recognition by the 6th Panchen Lama Blo bzang dpal ldan ye shes, who visited the dGa' bzhi estate three times. During the first of his three visits to dGa' bzhi in 1762,<sup>39</sup> the 6th Panchen was clearly impressed by the 'Chi med bde ldan lha khang<sup>40</sup> and praised rDo ring Paṇḍita's devotion:

Paṇḍita, in this age of decay you are unrivalled in both talent and merit whatever one considers, be it your willingness to virtuously sacrifice, your own wealth for the purification of your obscurations, or your service to the Dalai Lama and the Emperor!<sup>41</sup>

But the Panchen Lama went even further and suggested that rDo ring Paṇḍita should pursue his religious activities and establish a Great Prayer Festival in the second month (*hor zla gnyis pa*) at the dGa' bzhi gtsug lag khang, not least because of the beauty of the temple.<sup>42</sup> This suggestion was taken up and in 1765 during the 6th Panchen's second visit to dGa' bzhi,<sup>43</sup> rDo ring Paṇḍita sought advice as to how preparations should be made in order to establish a "*cho 'phrul smon lam*" in dGa' bzhi, in particular how many monks and from which

<sup>37</sup> Rdo ring (1987: 33–34).

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*: 72–73.

<sup>39</sup> The year is not given in the *Biography*, but it is mentioned that rDo ring Paṇḍita and his fellow *bka' blon* went for vacation to dGa' bzhi right after the enthronisation of the 8th Dalai Lama in Lhasa (*ibid.*: 100). The enthronisation ceremony was led by the 6th Panchen Lama in 1762 (Maher 2005: 117–118).

<sup>40</sup> Rdo ring (1987: 100–104).

<sup>41</sup> *paṇḍi ta khyod nas gong ma mchod yon gyi zhabs 'degs zhu lugs dang / rang rang gi tshogs gsog sgrub sbyong gi ched rnam dkar mchod sbyin gyi gtong phod byed lugs sogs gang la bsam rung snyigs pa'i dus 'dir bsod nams dang / shes yong gnyis ka 'gran zla med pa zhig yin 'dug [...]* (*ibid.*: 104).

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*: 106.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*: 137–139.

monasteries should be invited, what should be read in assembly (*tshogs dus zhal 'don*), and what should be practiced.<sup>44</sup> In the following months the dGa' bzhi temple was further fitted-out with statues and scriptures in order to have the first sMon lam in 1766.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to the marriage alliances, which stabilised and enhanced the social status of the family, the accumulation of religious merit (*bsod nams* or *dge ba'ilas*) seems to convert well into social prestige. Due to their public or communal nature, religious activities such as the sMon lam also function as accumulation of social capital, as bonds are built with monasteries, religious figures, and other donors. Moreover, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's detailed accounts of the family's devotion and accumulated merit—meticulously documented in the form of lengthy lists—functions in the context of the *Biography* as further legitimation of the family's wealth and power. bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor consequently subsumes these religious activities under the main purposes (*dgos don gyi gtso bo*) for writing the *Biography*:

[I wrote the *Biography* to show] how I have built in the regions of dBus and gTsang many Buddhist stupas, firstly for the long life of the Emperor and the Dalai Lama and for the wellbeing of the Dharma and the Sangha in Tibet, but also for the donor's [i.e. bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor] own merit accumulation and purification of obscurations. Moreover, [I wanted to show] how I offered prayers for the long life to the saintly persons of refuge of the impartial central doctrine of the supreme protector and the profound teachings I received from them [...].<sup>46</sup>

bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor continues the enumeration of meritorious activities, such as the sponsoring of the Great Prayer festival, renovations, and various donations he wanted to record in his *Biography*. The presentation of the rDo ring family as generous and important donors of the Buddhist institutions and perhaps also as fundamental actors for the artistic and economic development in the region is more than mere display of economic power. Rather, it

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*: 142.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*: 144–148.

<sup>46</sup> *gtso bor gong ma mchod yon gyi zhabs brtan dang / bod ljongs kyi bstan 'gro'i bde thabs / zhar byung du rgyu sbyor ba rang nyid kyi tshogs gsog sgrib sbyong gi phyir dbus gtsang khul du rgyal ba'i sku gsung thugs rten mang ba gsar bzhengs byas pa rnams dang / gzhan yang skyabs mgon rgyal ba yab sras kyis dbus grub mtha' ris su ma chad pa'i skyabs yul gyi skyes bu dam pa rnams la zhabs brtan legs 'bul zhus rigs dang / de dag las mdo sngags kyi zab chos thob tshul / lha ldan smon lam chen mos dbus se 'bras dga' gsum sogs nye skor dang / phyogs mtha'i gzhis dgon bcas kyi 'phags tshogs 'dus sde rin po che khag la mang 'gyed kyi bsnyen bkur zhus rigs dang / gnas rten rnams la nyams gso mchod 'bul gang byas rnams gling gzhi'i thog mar bkod (*ibid.*: 1297–1298).*

brings into play accumulated merit as religious capital, which the author uses to legitimate the family's status.

*The demise of the rDo ring family*

bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor who acted as *dka' blon* from 1783 to 1792 was the last 18<sup>th</sup>-century patriarch of the rDo ring family. Most of the text, 1,213 out of 1,301 pages or roughly 93%, is devoted to the life of its author bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor. He was born in 1760 and educated by his biological father the rDo ring Paṅḍita. The Paṅḍita wanted to step down from his positions due to bad health and promoted his son's name in 1783. From about 1789, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor acted as chief minister (*bka' blon gtso bo*):

While I was among my fellow *bka' blon* the youngest and least knowledgeable, I took over the responsibility as chief minister from my benevolent lord *gung* Paṅḍita just like the proverb goes: "chased by a dog, reaching the first position."<sup>47</sup>

The most important milestones of his political career were the Gorkha wars (1788–1792) and his time as hostage in Kathmandu (1791–1792), as well as his journey to the imperial court in Peking where he had an audience with Emperor Qianlong (1793). Ultimately, he was demoted, and his titles and positions removed.

bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's career differed inasmuch from the careers of his predecessors, who had successfully accomplished civil and military campaigns, as he failed to accomplish his major campaign against the invading Gorkhas. This failure and the resulting wish to clarify and defend his role in the conflict may well have been the primary sources of motivation to write his memoirs.

In 1789 bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor negotiated a peace agreement in sKyid grong, mediated by the 10th Zhwa dmar pa, who had been residing in Nepal since 1784.<sup>48</sup> These negotiations initially earned bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor some recognition, and the inheritance of the family's titles was reconfirmed in 1789 in a *gser yig* edict, recounted in the words of bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor:

<sup>47</sup> *bka' blon sbrel zla rnams las na tshod dang shes yon gnyis ka nas dman bzhin du khyis ded nas gral 'gor slebs pa'i dpe dang mtshungs par mi rje bka' drin can gung paṅḍi ta'i las shul du bka'i gung blon gyi gtso bo'i las 'khur skyong khul byas / (ibid.: 552–553).*

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed discussion and a full version of the agreement, see Komatsubara (2017). Li maintains the 10th Zhwa dmar pa resided in Nepal since 1784 (Li Ruohong 2002: 142). Dhungel however holds that the 10th Zhwa dmar pa had escaped house arrest and went into exile in Nepal only in 1788 (Dhungel 1999: 191; see also Rose 1971: 35).

In continuation, the Paṇḍita's position of *gung* shall be again conferred to his son bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor. The title and position of *daryan gung* earlier bestowed upon the Paṇḍita as well as the coral hat button with peacock feathers were exceptionally awarded during the Paṇḍita's life time. Dated the 20th day of the 6th month in the 54th year of the reign of the Divine Protector [Qianlong]. The successive precious 'ja' sa gser yig edicts, which had earlier on granted the inheritance of the *gung* title to each generation and which [the rDo ring family] is continually holding, were newly awarded below.<sup>49</sup>

In the following years, the Tibetans failed to fulfil the agreement and did not pay the reparations in due course. After another incursion of Gorkha troops, new negotiations were scheduled in 1791. However, due to distrust and suspicion, the parties never actually met for negotiations, instead the Tibetan delegation was attacked and overwhelmed by Gorkha troops. bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor was taken to Kathmandu as hostage, where he remained until Qing troops under general Fuk'anggan (1753–1796) besieged the city in mid-1792.<sup>50</sup>

#### *Outcomes of the Gorkha War*

Apparently, the imperial court did not trust bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor and was deeply suspicious that he may have conspired with his relative the 10th Zhwa dmar pa.<sup>51</sup> While the 10th Zhwa dmar pa allegedly committed suicide in Nepal,<sup>52</sup> bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor was accused of treason and thus called to Peking for trial.

<sup>49</sup> *paṇḍi ta'i gung gi cho lo slar yang kho pa'i bu bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor la mu mthud kyis gnang ba yin zhing / paṇḍi tar sngon du gsol ras gnang ba'i dar han gung gi cho lo dang / tog sgro mdongs bcas paṇḍi ta rang gi mi tshé'i ring dmigs bsal gyi gsol ras gnang ba yin / lha skyong dgung lo nga bzhi pa'i zla ba drug pa'i tshes nyi shu la zhes de sngon nas mi rabs rim par gung gi cho lo brgyud 'jags su btsal ba'i 'ja' sa gser yig rin po che rim can mu mthud du yod* (Rdo ring 1987: 655). For a slightly different version translated from Chinese, see also Li Ruohong (2002: 150).

<sup>50</sup> For a description of the events that lead to the second Gorkha war, see e.g. Rose (1971: 47–67).

<sup>51</sup> An often-cited reason for the hostilities is the conflict over the inheritance of the 6th Panchen Lama between his two half-brothers, the 10th Zhwa dmar pa and the Drung pa *qutuytu* Blo bzang byin pa, who was the treasurer of bKra shis lhun po. As a result of this conflict, the 10th Zhwa dmar pa went to Nepal into exile, where he reportedly instigated the Gorkhas to invade Tibet and loot bKra shis lhun po (Li Ruohong 2002: 142–43; Rose 1971: 36; Schwieger 2015: 175–176). For a slightly different view, see. Dhungel (1999: 190–193).

<sup>52</sup> There is also a belief that he died of jaundice in Nepal, see the discussion in Dhungel (1999: 193). bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor seems to believe in his suicide (Rdo ring 1987: 854). See also the summaries in Li Ruohong (2002: 142); Rose (1971: 61); Schwieger (2015: 176).

In a review of Chinese contemporary sources, Li Ruohong showed that the Emperor's court harboured considerable suspicion. Firstly, both Amban Helin (和琳) and Emperor Qianlong were convinced that the peace agreement of 1789 as well as the abduction of bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor were "a trick set up by Zhwa dmar and Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor" in a conspiracy with the Gorkhas to get their hands on the reparations.<sup>53</sup> At the same time, the Qing court seemed convinced that the enormous wealth of the rDo ring family was appropriated from government sources. This suspicion was further supported by Fuk'anggan's investigations, which brought to light public discontent with the partiality of bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's handling of affairs.<sup>54</sup> As Li suggests, "Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, as the head of the household, was undoubtedly under a thick cloud of suspicion".<sup>55</sup> Due to its overwhelming wealth and its far-flung relations (8th Dalai Lama, 10th Zhwa dmar pa, Mdo mkhar ba etc.), the family may have easily posed a challenge to the Dalai Lama's and the Qing Emperor's authority in Tibet and bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's testimony during his interrogation at the court in Peking was partly understood as an attempt to excuse his illegal financial appropriations.<sup>56</sup>

It is highly unlikely that bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor was unaware of Qianlong's suspicion and his crumbling reputation. He presents himself as if he had been cut off from any news in Tibet and had learned about the court's suspicion and Fuk'anggan's investigations regarding the 1789 agreement only during the interrogations that followed his rescue.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, he claims, he was only now able to find out about his family's conditions, even though Fuk'anggan still tried to block him from any information. Only after his release, he thus learned about rDo ring Paṇḍita's and Pa sang tshe ring's deaths, as well as about his family suffering "hardships from tax, war, and many things combined."<sup>58</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Qinding Kuo'erke jilüe*, vol 28: 27–28, cited and translated in Li Ruohong (2002: 252–253).

<sup>54</sup> Li Ruohong (2002: 254–255).

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*: 256.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*: 257. Although Li tries over the following pages of her dissertation to support this claim, she is unable to present clear evidence. Nevertheless, her suggestion that large parts of the *Biography* read as direct responses to the allegations made against bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor and his family seems convincing.

<sup>57</sup> Rdo ring (1987: 894–895).

<sup>58</sup> *khral dmaṅ sne 'doms kyi dka' tshogs che bar* (Rdo ring 1987: 887). bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor complains that, after his rescue, people tried to avoid him (*g.yas g.yon du byol gang thub byed pa*). The only person willing to speak to him was the son of a Chinese butcher (*rgya mi bshas pa*) from Lhasa, who then reluctantly told him

Still in Nepal, Fuk'anggan, based on his earlier investigations, decided that "besides being weak in the 1788 Gorkha-Tibetan controversy, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor did not commit any greater mistakes"<sup>59</sup> but was nevertheless "guilty of having given up his own body into the hands of the enemy"<sup>60</sup> instead of sacrificing his life. Therefore, he was brought to Peking for further investigation.

Despite the initial hardships, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor seemed to have considerably enjoyed his travels through China. According to his account, he and g.Yu thog were generally well-received in Peking. However, immediately after their arrival, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor was interrogated during a hearing in front of high-ranking Qing officials in a formal and perhaps even hostile atmosphere.<sup>61</sup>

Be it as it may, the *Biography* does not dwell upon the officials' attitude and rather records the court's lenient decision, which confirms Fuk'anggan's earlier assessment. g.Yu thog and bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor were acquitted of treason and only found guilty of having caused "a heavenly army to be despatched and having [thus] inflicted trouble on the teachings and all sentient beings of China, Tibet, and Nepal."<sup>62</sup> But since they were not aware of this, the court was lenient and only demoted "both from the rank of *bka' blon* and at

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about the rDo ring family but had bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor swear not to disclose this conversation to anyone else.

<sup>59</sup> *sa sprel lo'i bod gor lab gzhi'i skor la shugs ma thub kyi bya ba las bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor rang la de tsam gyi le khag che ba gang yang mi 'dug* (*ibid.*: 895).

<sup>60</sup> [...] *rang lus dgra lag tu rtsis sprad pa 'di la nang gi lugs srol du nyes pa thob yod 'dug* [...] (*ibid.*: 896).

<sup>61</sup> The silence of the officials during the proceedings leaves bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor certainly impressed, while he describes them as interested in Tibetan dress, "because the court officials had not yet seen Tibetan lay dress" (*bod mi skya bo'i cha lugs krung thang rnams nas ma gzigs stabs*). When asked about, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor explains the Tibetan custom of wearing two different earrings (*rna rgyan mi mtshungs par*): "Wearing a turquoise is an old Tibetan custom, and wearing a pearl is a custom dating back to the times when the kings of Tibet where from the royal line of the Gushri Khan the King of Kokonor." (*g.yu 'dogs pa de bod rnying khungs kyi srol dang / mu tig 'dogs pa 'di mtsho sngon gyi rgyal po goo shir khang gi rgyal brgyud nas bod kyi rgyal po byed dus srol lam dar ba yin 'dug*). He then also records a jokingly (*nyams 'char sku rtsed kyi tshul du*) yet flouting comment of a Manchu official: "Well then, as the Tibetan people are now subjects of the Great Emperor and because you are already wearing the customary earrings of old sovereigns on your left and right ear, you cannot find another place [for wearing earrings], thus, you will perhaps have to wear a ring on the tip of your nose that accords to Chinese customs!" (*des na da cha bod mi rnams gong ma chen po'i mnga' 'og lha 'bangs yin rung / rna ba g.yas g.yon gnyis la rgyal thog rnying pa'i srol lam gyi rgyan re btags grub gshis 'dogs khungs ma rnyed kyang / sna khug gi rtser rgya nag gi lugs srol dang mthun pa'i rgyan zhig 'dogs dgos rgyu yin 'dra*) (*ibid.*: 929–930).

<sup>62</sup> *nang gi lha dماغ ched rdzong byed dgos pa sogs rgya bod bal yul gyi bstan 'gro sems can thams cad la brdabs bsigs yong rkyen* (*ibid.*: 930).

the same time, taking back the hereditary title of *gung* awarded to bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor as well as the hat button and [peacock] feathers earlier awarded."<sup>63</sup>

Shortly thereafter bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor attended a ceremonial procession and when the Emperor in his palanquin passed by him, Qianlong addressed bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor in a consoling tone and repeated that the court did not consider him guilty.

*The dharmarājā, the heavenly-appointed Mañjuśrī Emperor, thinking in terms of compassion, privately conferred upon me his golden counsel: "With regard to the root causes of the Tibet-Gorkha conflict, as a result of the reasons that have emerged, little by little, from the officials resident in Tibet as to the manner in which your tasks throughout remained variously incomplete, you were specially summoned here for an inquest. For your part, due to your youth and powerlessness, you fell into the hands of the enemy. You have committed no greater offence than the offence of simple inattentiveness. [...]"*<sup>64</sup>

At no time does bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's account give the impression that he felt treated as a culprit or as a prisoner. On the contrary, he is surprised and happily notes that the Emperor even provides the Tibetan culprits with a financial allowance for their time in Peking and accommodation in the Yellow Temple (Sha ra pu / su mi)<sup>65</sup> where they were to stay together with a delegation sent by the 7th Panchen Lama.<sup>66</sup>

When the rDo ring family heard of bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's imminent trial, they probably feared he would never be able to return to Lhasa. In his report to Peking, Fuk'anggan recounts his conversation with bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's eldest son Mi 'gyur bsod nam dpal 'byor who was at the time only nine-years-old. These negotiations of the rDo ring family with the Qing officials are not mentioned in the *Biography* but must have taken place shortly after

<sup>63</sup> *gnyis ka'i bka' blon gyi go sa nas gnas phab pa yin cing / de mtshungs bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor la brgyud 'jags gung gi cho lo btsal ba dang / tog sgro mdongs sngon btsal dang / [...]* snga 'phros phyir len byed rgyu yin (*ibid.*: 931).

<sup>64</sup> *gnam bskos 'jam dbyangs gong ma chos kyi rgyal pos thugs brtse bas dgongs te kho bo sger la gser gyi bka' slob btsal don du khyod nas bod gor 'khrug gzhi'i skor la snga phyir las don 'thus sgo ma tshang ba sna tshogs byas tshul gyi bod sdod blon po rnam nas rgyu mtshan rim par byung bar brten / 'di phyogs ched du bkug nas rtsa ba zhib tu dpyad par / khyod rang gi ngos nas lo na dang stobs shugs chung ba'i babs kyis gzugs po dgra lag tu shor ba sogs 'on ma sang ba'i nyes pa tsam las gzhan byas nyes che ba gang yang mi 'dug / (*ibid.*: 935). Translated in Sperling (1998: 331-332).*

<sup>65</sup> For the identification of "Sha ri pu mi" as Huangsi 黃寺 or Yellow Temple which is usually referred to as Lha khang gser po, see Sperling (1998: 332n3).

<sup>66</sup> Rdo ring (1987: 936-937).



bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's departure to Peking. As an outcome of these negotiations, the report mentions that the rDo ring family "was extremely grateful that the Great Emperor did not give [bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor] the death penalty. Instead he was escorted to the court only for interrogation."<sup>67</sup> As it was usual practice, the family offered five estates to the emperor, to save his life. According to the *Biography*, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor learned about his family's efforts to save him only when he was informed by Qienlong in Peking.<sup>68</sup>

In the *Biography* this donation is presented as an attempt to express the gratitude of the family for saving their head from the enemy's hands. It is mentioned only after bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's trial and after the insignificance of his misdemeanour is repeated for three times. However, Li demonstrates in a few quotes from memorials authored by Amban Helin as well as by Fuk'anggan, that this "donation" should rather be understood as a self-imposed punishment or "confiscation of the rDo ring estates", which had been negotiated prior to bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's arrival in Peking. Moreover, she points out that such "donations" were common practice when punishing imperial officials.<sup>69</sup>

In the end bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's life was saved. Nevertheless, he was demoted and the hereditary title of *gung* lost. This demotion also meant that the family lost not only the power of but also the income from a government minister's position,<sup>70</sup> in addition to the loss of income from the five estates. Moreover, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor was also barred from any public offices for a limited period.<sup>71</sup> In sum, this must have been a severe blow to the patriarch whose family had been, for most of the century, second only to the ruler.

<sup>67</sup> Li Ruohong (2002: 243), quoting and translating from *Qinding Kuo'erke jili*, vol. 46: 26–28. For a discussion of the related Chinese sources, see *ibid.*: 241–246. bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor himself expressed his worries immediately after he started on his journey to Peking: "Now because we have to go to China, I am terrified this will cost my life!" *da cha nged rnams rgya nag du 'gro dgos stabs srog la babs pa'i 'jigs pa byung* (Rdo ring 1987: 901).

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*: 951–952.

<sup>69</sup> Li Ruohong (2002: 241–242).

<sup>70</sup> According to Li, ministers received yearly salaries since 1727 and the yearly salary for a minister of the rank of *fuguogong* was 200 taels of silver and 13 bolts of silk (*ibid.*: 246n13).

<sup>71</sup> While bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor only mentions his demotion, the *Qing Gaozong Shilu*, vol. 1417: 12–17 is more detailed: "After returning to Tibet, he is no longer allowed to serve as a minister. If he acts infallibly, it may be applicable that in a number of years he might once again be recruited as a low ranking official." (quoted and translated in *ibid.*: 239).

*Corruption and public resentment*

When his disbarring from public office was over, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor was made administrator of Zhol village below the Potala. It was during this time that the next blow to the rDo ring family seems to have brewed.

The enormous wealth and power of the family did not remain unquestioned. Already during the investigations of the 1789 Gorkha-Tibetan agreement carried out by Fuk'anggan, questions concerning the source of the family's wealth had arisen. Accordingly, Amban Helin reported in one memorial:

If the rDo ring family property was not appropriated from the government treasury, where else did the family get it? Furthermore, ordinary Tibetans have complained about the wealth of this family and the family's possible embezzlement from government coffers.<sup>72</sup>

This was further pinpointed by Fuk'anggan, who stressed that "Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor and his father displayed partiality in daily official business. Among average Tibetans there are lots of complaints about this."<sup>73</sup> This irritation and discomfort with the wealth, power, and influence enjoyed by the rDo ring family eventually erupted into open yet anonymous corruption allegations in the form of posters hung in public places in Lhasa in 1803. Since the Tibetan government did not take any action, the same people drafted a letter (*zhu tho*) listing all complaints intended for Emperor Qianlong and secretly sent it out of Tibet.<sup>74</sup> bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor does not provide the full content of the letter, but one part of it read: "Ministers and officials take advantage of their power to appropriate property. Moreover, they sent ambush burglars to extort property."<sup>75</sup> The court reacted by ordering Amban Cebake 策拔克 (the Tse'u am pa of the *Biography*) to investigate the allegations.<sup>76</sup> As if putting a fox in charge of the henhouse, Cebake turned to bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor for assistance with this assignment. The case was quickly solved, and two people arrested.<sup>77</sup>

However, the letter explicitly mentioned that the rDo ring family still owned large tracts of government land (*sa rigs*). To counter these

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*: 254–255, quoting and translating from *Qinding Kuo'erke jilüe*, vol. 28: 28–29.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*: 263, quoting and translating from *Qinding Kuo'erke jilüe*, vol. 28: 28–29.

<sup>74</sup> Rdo ring (1987: 1226–1228).

<sup>75</sup> Li Ruohong (2002: 264), quoting and translating from *Qingdai zangshi jiyao*, edited by Zeng Guoqing, Lhasa [1983] 1999: 364.

<sup>76</sup> Rdo ring (1987: 1228).

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*: 1232–1233.

accusations bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor reminds the reader about the certified land rights and various documents of legitimation of the family's possessions.

Regarding the government lands [...] for my earlier rescue from the hands of the enemy for the military expenses I offered out of faith bKra shis pho lha and altogether five estates from [the family's] possessions in dBus [and] gTsang as a gift [to the Emperor].<sup>78</sup> The ownership of the other [estates] remains [with the family] hereditarily as before and else taking those by force, quarrels, and disturbances is not acceptable, neither from Chinese nor from Tibetan side. As by the order from the Great Heavenly Emperor this was clearly recorded in the office of the consecutive resident Ambans of Tibet, the history of which I have detailed above. Apart from that, there is not even a fraction of a *rkang phul*<sup>79</sup> of land that has been appropriated by way of extortion, dispute or request.<sup>80</sup>

This was not enough to squelch resentment against the rDo ring family and in 1805 once again posters were put up in Lhasa. Although this time bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor and Amban Cebake were personally accused of corruption,<sup>81</sup> the event is not admitted in the *Biography*, perhaps to secure the appointment of his son Mi 'gyur bsod rnam dpal 'byor (b. 1793) as *bka' blon* in 1805.<sup>82</sup> This incident developed into a big scandal and put a temporary halt to the appointment of Mi 'gyur bsod rnam dpal 'byor. Emperor Jiaqing 嘉慶 (r. 1796–1820) sent an investigator. Amban Cebake and bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor were eventually found innocent and Mi 'gyur bsod rnam dpal 'byor was appointed *bka' blon* in 1806.

From bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's point of view, as presented in the *Biography*, these were altogether groundless allegations and false

<sup>78</sup> The term *sba yer* implies a gift sent to the emperor, see Schwieger (2018: 37).

<sup>79</sup> *rkang phul* is some kind of land measure, where, according to Dung dkar (2002: 1505), one *phul* is 1/6 of a *bre*, and 21 *bre* make up a *khal*; according to Gurung (2017: 218n19) 40 *khal* again make up one *rkang*.

<sup>80</sup> *sa rigs de dag ni [...] de sngon kho bo rang dgra lag nas thar ba'i sba yer la dmag phogs thog bkra shis pho lhas mtshon dbus gtsang gi 'dzin khongs steng nas gzhis khag lnga dad 'bul zhus shing / de 'phros 'dzin dbang bdag thob rnam 'di ga'i mi mus brgyud bcas la sngar rgyun 'jags gnas las / 'phrog rtsod bsun gtser sogs rgya bod su thad nas mi 'thus pa gnam bskos gong ma chen po'i bka' 'brel bod bzhugs an pa rim can gyi yig tshang ltang rtser gsal 'khod yod pa'i lo rgyus rnam gong du zhib rgyas 'khod gsal ltar las gzhan ma de lhag 'phrog rtsod slong gsun gyi sgo nas 'dzin bdag byas pa'i sa cha ni rkang phul gyi cha shas tsam yang med (Rdo ring 1987: 1240–1241). This refers directly to the arrangement he secured 1793 in Peking with the Qianlong court, see *ibid.*: 953.*

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*: 1268.

<sup>82</sup> This view is discussed widely based on Chinese and Tibetan sources, see e.g. Petech (1973: 59–60); Li Ruohong (2002: 273–277).

accusations. He calls these assertions “evil actions and thoughts that did not even occur to one in a dream, serious gossip, which loads guilt on innocent [people]”<sup>83</sup> and an “evil talk that is putting a black hat on a white person.”<sup>84</sup> In the context of the present essay, it is impossible to decide whether or not bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor was a corrupt official. In fact, Li has demonstrated that despite investigations no evidence for corruption could be produced.<sup>85</sup> Nevertheless, the scandal clearly shows that the rDo ring family's power and status had diminished considerably at the turn of the century.

To summarize, regarding bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's achievements there is only little to report. His nine years as *bka' blon* resulted in the family's loss of five estates as well as the loss of social prestige in form of honorary titles and government positions. His attempt to restore the family's social standing by making Mi 'gyur bsod rnam dpal 'byor a cabinet minister resulted in great loss of social status as indicated by the public protest expressed in the posters. Even though Mi 'gyur bsod rnam dpal 'byor served as *bka' blon* until 1835/36, the family name of rDo ring or dGa' bzhi gradually ceased to appear in Tibetan and Chinese sources, a factor indicative of the gradual demise of the family.<sup>86</sup>

*Conclusion: literary practice as self-assertion of social status*

bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor, it seems, was obsessed with issues of status. His account consequently reads less like a self-confession or a self-critical introspection into the politician's soul, but rather like a demonstration of the author's and his family's rights and the broad social acceptance they enjoyed. The humbleness as is reflected in many formulations appears as mere stylistic convention.

Unfortunately, we do not know much about the textual genesis. We also do not know about the intended readership of the memoir, which was only circulated in a few manuscript copies,<sup>87</sup> and bsTan

<sup>83</sup> *rmi lam du yang mi dren pa'i bsam sbyar gnyis nag ya la bsnyon 'dzugs kyi gtam tshabs che* (Rdo ring 1987: 1268).

<sup>84</sup> *mi dkar zhwa nag gi gtan ngan* (*ibid.*: 1269); also the softer variant *mi dkar zhwa nag byung ba* (*ibid.*: 1270).

<sup>85</sup> Li points out that most research accepts the view of bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor being a corrupt official as firstly put forward by Petech (1973: 60). However, she then goes on citing evidence from Chinese sources that prove the opposite, see Li Ruohong (2002: 276–280).

<sup>86</sup> Petech (1973: 59–62); Li Ruohong (2002: 281).

<sup>87</sup> To date (2018) it is still unclear how many manuscripts exist of the memoir. At least two different manuscripts were utilized when editing the modern edition published in Lhasa 1988. Presumably, the earlier Chengdu edition (Rdo ring

'dzin dpal 'byor gives us all but a few clues. In the first and in the last pages he summarizes his intentions to compose his memoirs. Even though some of the intentions mentioned are certainly to some extent due to social and literary conventions, he nevertheless offers a few interesting points:

Firstly, he emphasises that he wanted to show the “self-sacrificing service for the benefit of both the Emperor and the Dalai Lama by [his] forefathers in former times,”<sup>88</sup> an intention that Lauran Hartley equally identifies as central to the autobiography of the slightly older mDo mkhar ba Zhabs drung Tshe ring dbang rgyal (1697–1763).<sup>89</sup> This serves to provide his legitimation claim with a historical component reaching back several generations.

Secondly, bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor intends to substantiate his description of the rDo ring family as loyal civil servants and politicians by the repeated enumeration and description of “how in consideration of these deeds the respective Emperors and Dalai Lamas awarded titles, fiefs, and property, as well as of the accompanying significant and binding official Chinese and Tibetan edicts.”<sup>90</sup> Such documents and titles, as has been recently demonstrated, were not fixed and stable but on the contrary were constantly challenged and negotiated and hence continually needed to be reconfirmed.<sup>91</sup> In this context, the confiscation of the family estates as a form of punishment or reparation for the Gorkha war had the advantage of resulting also in a written confirmation of the land and property rights for the remaining estates.

Lastly, considering the final episode in bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor's account, namely the so-called bribery scandal, the family's reputation and social status needed to be defended. The sponsorship of prayers, stupas etc. for the benefit of the dharma and Tibet, at last, are again due to social and literary conventions but also add a balancing religious (*chos*) devotion in the form of merit accumulation to the worldly (*'jig rten*) affairs. Religious merit, which—in the Tibetan

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1987) was based on a different manuscript, see Martin (1997: No 357); Li Ruohong (2002: 9–10). Since Shakabpa quoted extensively in his *Bod kyi srid don lo rgyus* (Zhwa sgab pa 1976) from the *Biography*, it is widely assumed yet another manuscript could have survived in his library. Unfortunately, so far none of these manuscripts have become accessible.

<sup>88</sup> *rang cag gi pha mes bzang po rnams kyi dus gong ma mchod yon rnam gnyis kyi don du lus srog kyang blos gtong nus pa'i zhabs 'degs zal thon sgrub lugs dang* (Rdo ring 1987: 1297).

<sup>89</sup> See Hartley (2011: 69).

<sup>90</sup> [...] *gong ma mchod yon nas rin nas kyang byas rjes la dgongs go sa dang / sa rigs bdag thob sogs ji ltar bstsal tshul / de dag la rgya bod bla dpon gyi bka' gtan btsan dmigs che ba yod lugs* [...] (Rdo ring 1987: 1297).

<sup>91</sup> Okawa (2017).

context—can be easily accumulated by way of money, goes far beyond personal spiritual development to represent a universal capital readily convertible in both social status and political power.

Nevertheless, the *intentio operis*, as far as can be said after this brief and superficial survey, is not—or not so much—to establish the life of a model civil servant or lay aristocrat. Nor about the protagonist's achievements, as bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor in a final comment summarises his personal career in a tone of regret and melancholy:

Wandering about in the far lands of China and Nepal like chaff driven by the wind, I have not left behind anything, neither religious nor worldly, but wiped out with my feet the fine traces [left by my] ancestors' hands.<sup>92</sup>

Yet, he successfully presented a lengthy narrative legitimating his positions and actions as well as the rDo ring family's wealth. The *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita* can thus be read as a well calculated self-assertion of social status.

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<sup>92</sup> [...] *kho bos chos dang 'jig rten gnyis kar byas rjes drud shul gang yang med par pha mes kyi lag ris bzang po rnam rang gi rkang pas bsrub phyir du bal yul dang / rgya nag sogs kyi sa mthar sbur ma rlung gis bdas pa bzhin du 'khyams tshul rnam bris pal [...]* (Rdo ring 1987: 1298).

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# All the Life We Cannot See: New-Historicist Approach to a Modern Tibetan Novel

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**I**n the early 1980s, Western literary studies were rapidly and pervasively transformed by a re-orientation towards history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, social context, and material base. This new trend, evolving within post-structuralist theory and characterised by an “emphasis on the literary as both a form of and a forum for cultural practice, on literary analysis as a vehicle rather than an end in itself”,<sup>1</sup> eventually came to be known as “New Historicism”, a term first coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1982 to describe the body of works compiled by North American Renaissance scholars since the late 1970s. Albeit controversial,<sup>2</sup> the label caught on, and, among heated debates and discussions, it eventually asserted itself as “the dominant *modus operandi* of literary criticism”,<sup>3</sup> to the point where the mere idea that only thirty years ago “there [was] no clear consensus that the task of literary criticism [was] to teach an analysis of the historical production of writing”<sup>4</sup> now appears unconceivable. Almost two decades into the 21st century, the original theoretical framework of New Historicism, based on Althusser and Foucault’s anti-humanism, has lost part of its fascination; the increasing pressures of cognitive science<sup>5</sup> indicate the need to move beyond outdated theories and practice to bring again to the fore the idiosyncrasies of the

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<sup>1</sup> Mullaney (1996: 19).

<sup>2</sup> The term was judged by Greenblatt’s critics as misleading in its suggestion of a unified theoretical movement and deemed uncomfortably close to the 19th century positive historicism (Mullaney 1996: 19).

<sup>3</sup> Parvini (2012: 2).

<sup>4</sup> Simpson (1988: 723).

<sup>5</sup> The anti-humanist stance of the early New Historicists appears to be at odds with some of the most recent arguments of cognitive scientists, who have rather compellingly showed that human beings, although conditioned by cultural surroundings, are also the product of biological and genetical inheritance, see Pinker (2002).

individual.<sup>6</sup> Whereas certain aspects of New Historicism call for improvement and can no longer be considered orthodoxy, the adoption of an approach based on the premise that a literary text should be understood as a communal product rather than an autonomous and isolated expression of an author's intention provides scholars with a powerful critical method. The so-called "historical background" is suddenly put to the fore and transformed into a task of investigation, through a process that broadens the textual base beyond literary texts, consequently including archival sources and other forms of cultural representation. The attention of the new historicist has moved from the centre—that is, the text—to the borders where the text connects with the material world. As Kaes aptly points out, "the new-historicist project overlaps the concerns of a social history of literature [...] Social history displaces the literary text from the centre and focuses instead on the historical conditions and functions of literary production and reception."<sup>7</sup> In the new-historicist view, literary texts represent the arena in which social tensions are expressed *and* repressed, a make-believe, fictional world in which subversive movements and thoughts, as well as common fears and hopes, can be safely displayed and resolved. The scholar is no longer a remote bystander in the "historical reconstructive process"—on the contrary, s/he influences the recreation of the historical background, by actively selecting the sources under scrutiny. By reinserting a text in its historical context, the scholar relates it to a wide array of cultural representations (e.g. religious, legal, and political documents, autobiographies, memoirs, letters, diaries) and symbolic representations (e.g. festivals, rituals, material objects). Although originally restricted to the English Renaissance and Shakespearean studies, the new-historicist approach has proved to be flexible enough to be successfully applicable to other fields as well. I would argue that in the case of Tibetan Studies, the adoption of a method that calls for the analysis of literary and non-literary texts, as well as other forms of cultural expressions, has been already advocated by Charles Ramble and Peter Schwieger in recent times.

The remarkable results obtained by the ANR/DFG project on the social history of Tibetan societies strongly supports claims to a broadening of the textual base, thus encouraging a critical practice that synthesises theoretical, historical, literary, and anthropological methods of analysis. To veer away from the main central text, circling back to it after having reached an element in its periphery to which it might be connected, means to add new information about a remote

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<sup>6</sup> Parvini (2012: 176–78).

<sup>7</sup> Kaes (1989: 214).

partner in what is, to paraphrase Frank Kermode, a lost "negotiation".<sup>8</sup> It is a process of reconstruction of the past that, going beyond the literary text, recreates the complex socio-historical and intertextual networks in which the work and its author are embedded.

In the present contribution, the literary work from which "try[ing] to track what can only be glimpsed [...] at the margins of the text"<sup>9</sup> is *Drel pa'i mi tshe* ("Life of a Muleteer") by Lhag pa don grub. Set in the decade preceding the Chinese invasion, this historical novel narrates the passage to adulthood of Zla ba phun tshogs, a young *mi ser* from gTsang; the growing pains of Zla phun mirror those of pre-modern Tibetan society, struggling to adjust to the challenges posed by modernity. *Drel pa'i mi tshe* captures the spirit of the time—a period marked mostly by elation and anticipation of a better future. Tellingly, the novel ends when the tides of history are about to sweep away the same socio-economic and cultural structures it depicts; the roars of the Peaceful Liberation no more than a weak echo, barely reaching the remote estate of Gangs ro, a location that marks both the beginning and the end of Zla phun's story. *Drel pa'i mi tshe* promises a closure that is only partially fulfilled; the plot ends when the Chinese occupation has just started, and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution are yet to come. By sparing the fictional world of Gangs ro from the suffering that befell Tibetans from the late 1950s onwards, Lhag pa don grub bursts the illusive bubble of historical mimesis. It is this tension between creative writing, that is fiction, and historicity, that is facts—at the core of historical and realistic novels—that supports the application of a new-historicist approach.

In the following paragraphs, selected passages from *Drel pa'i mi tshe* will be compared to information found in contemporary non-literary sources, such as personal records, legal documents, and Tibetan-medium journals, in an attempt to increase our understanding of the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the middle and lower classes in 1940s–early 1950s Tibet. A main source of comparison will be provided by a factual, first-person account written by Kha stag 'Dzam yag, a Khams pa trader who recollected in the form of diary entries thirteen years of his life—from 1944 to 1956. The text comes to us as a published Western-style book, edited by Tibet House in Delhi and printed by Indraprastha Press in 1997. The foreword informs us that the text, originally on scroll-papers, was part of the author's family archives and that it was 'Dzam yag's nephews who first acknowledged the potential benefit that such a

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<sup>8</sup> Kermode (1988: 32).

<sup>9</sup> Greenblatt (1988: 7).

personal narrative could bring to the Tibetan community at large.<sup>10</sup>

The events described in the text span a thirteen-year period (1944–1956),<sup>11</sup> mainly spent by the author journeying, trading, and pilgrimaging between the central provinces of dBus-gTsang and the trade hubs and holy sites of India and Nepal. Although categorised by the editors as *nyin deb*<sup>12</sup>—a Tibetan term that is often used as equivalent to the English umbrella-term “diary”—the text is clearly a recollection of events; suffice to say that, while presenting features ascribable to a personal journal, due to the process of recollection and narrativisation, ‘Dzam yag’s account is, in my understanding, closer to an autobiography than a diary. Whereas the literary categorisation of the *nyin deb* may be open to discussion, what is of undisputable value is the information the text offers regarding the social status of traders in mid-20th century Tibet. Kha stag ‘Dzam yag is in fact a representative of what Travers quite aptly defines the “intermediate social groups”, in which “professional groups and social stratum were intertwined”.<sup>13</sup> In the *nyin deb*, the author gives accounts, albeit in a rather off-handed fashion, of his interactions and business relationships with important figures of the time—chieftains, nobles, chief-merchants, and government officials. ‘Dzam yag’s upbringing is itself a reflection of the intermediate position eastern Tibetan traders had come to assume by the early 20th century.

Born and raised in one of territorial divisions of the Nang chen kingdom, Khams, he belonged to a local *be cang* family, nominally under the rule of the king who held court at Nang chen sgar, but *de facto* answering to the local *be hu*, the lord of Rab shis.<sup>14</sup> Although he

<sup>10</sup> By the 1990s, the diaspora was extremely active in editing and publishing personal narratives for preservation purposes, and it is easy to understand that a factual account based on diary entries taken during a crucial period of modern Tibetan history could not fail to attract the attention of indigenous and foreign scholars alike; see Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani (2008).

<sup>11</sup> The last part of the *nyin deb* contains an additional summary of the years between 1956 to 1960, presumably compiled after 1959, when the author fled from Tibet to West Bengal, where he died in 1961.

<sup>12</sup> The text was published under the bilingual title *Phyi lo 1944 nas 1956 bar bod dang bal po rgya gar bcas la gnas bskor bskyod pa'i nyin deb*. *A Pilgrim's Diary: Tibet, Nepal and India 1944–1956*.

<sup>13</sup> Travers (2013: 143).

<sup>14</sup> According to the system of bestowal of hereditary imperial titles and official positions, often referred to as the *tusi* system, the king of Nang chen was recognised as *chan hu* (Ch. *qiān hù*), a commander of one thousand households, under which there were eighteen major and fifteen minor divisions, each headed by a lord, whose titles were converted to *be hu* (Ch. *bǎi hù*, commanders of one hundred households) and *be cang* (Ch. *bǎi zhàng*, commanders of fifty households) respectively. Lesser ranks were indicated by other positions, e.g.

never addresses himself as such, the events described in the *nyin deb* strongly point towards an identification of 'Dzam yag as one of the agents of the Sa 'du tshang, one of the most powerful and influential Khams pa trading families.<sup>15</sup> The information contained in the *nyin deb* supports and supplements the events described in *Drel pa'i mi tshe*; whereas the latter offers a realistic and historically accurate representation of the life of a fictional *mi ser*, 'Dzam yag's account is an autodiegetic recollection of a "real" historical character, treading the same social stage depicted by Lhag pa don grub in his novel.

Following the new-historicist method, the dialogue between main text (i.e. *Drel pa'i mi tshe*) and ancillary sources (e.g. the *nyin deb*) will be put to the fore as illustrative of the conditions of mid-20th century Tibetan traders and hired caravan leaders.

#### *The main text*

In *Drel pa'i mi tshe* Lhag pa don grub narrates the personal growth of Zla phun, a young *bran g.yon*<sup>16</sup> from the gZhis ka rtse area, who earned his living driving caravans of pack animals along the Indo-Tibetan route, bravely facing the "dangers of mountains, rivers, and narrow passages, the fatigue of snow, wind, and rain, and the pain of hunger, thirst, and exhaustion".<sup>17</sup>

The novel starts with the death of bKra shis, Zla phun's father and late leader of the local donkey-drivers, employed for the transportation of commodities between their homeland—the branch estate<sup>18</sup> of Gangs ro—the trade-hub of Phag ri, and the landlord's

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*rgan res*, *hor 'dra*, *rgan chen*, and *bcu dpon*. For an in-depth description of the divisions of tribes in Nang chen, see *Yul shul rdzong*: 281 and '*Brong pa'i deb*: 39.

<sup>15</sup> At the beginning of the 20th century, A bo bhu, head of the Sa 'du household and father of Rin chen Sa 'du tshang, moved from sGa khog, at the easternmost borders of the kingdom of Nang chen, to the village of Gling tshang, a nomadic area lying about thirty kilometres west of dKar mdzes and only three kilometres east of Dar rgyas monastery, one of the largest monastic instalments of the Tre hor region. It appears plausible that the connection between the Kha stag family and the Sa 'du tshang preceded the latter's relocation in dKar mdzes; hailing from the same area of Nang chen, the two families might have collaborated in local trading ventures, entertaining relations that continued after the Sa 'du's relocation to dKar mdzes.

<sup>16</sup> Domestic servant belonging to a *dud chung*, lit. "small smoke", a term indicating small households of landless peasants who worked for wages. The *dud chung* is one of several statuses held by *mi ser* under the dGa' ldan pho brang government, see Goldstein (1971a, 1971b, 1986, 1987, 1989); Miller (1987, 1988); Bischoff (2013).

<sup>17</sup> *ri chu 'phrang gsum gyi nyen kha dang | gangs lhag char gsum gyis [\*gyi] dka' ba | ltogs skom ngal gsum gyi sdug bsngal / Drel pa'i mi tshe*: i.

<sup>18</sup> Gangs ro is presented in the novel as a branch estate (*gzhis lag*) of sKyel yul, the main estate (*ma gzhis*); both Gangs ro and sKyel yul were part of a *gser gzhis*,

residence in Lhasa. In a matter of a few days, another tragedy befalls Zla phun's family; the sudden demise of bKra shis meant a critical shortage of donkey-drivers for the estate, an imbalance to be corrected by recruiting the deceased's son. The pleas of sKyid pa, Zla phun's mother, who finds herself without any capable man in her household, are in vain; even her daughter, Phan thogs, is taken away from her, summoned as a domestic servant to the estate and prohibited from returning home at night. Zla phun joins his late father's co-workers, Don grub, the newly appointed team leader, and Phur bu, and leaves the quiet remoteness of Gangs ro to set off on a journey that will turn him into a man.

In narrating the first of their round-trips to Phag ri, Lhag pa don grub offers a rather detailed description of a *gan 'dzin*, a written agreement drafted between two or more parties. These obligation documents, often called *gan rgya*, were a common legal practice in pre-modern Tibet and were issued in a variety of situations, such as settlements of rents or leases of land, reception of loans, payments of outstanding debts and so on.<sup>19</sup> The contract concerns the delivery of several goods entrusted to the donkey-drivers by a Khams pa trader through the intercession of an innkeeper of Phag ri, who agrees to act as guarantor. The *gan 'dzin* reads as follows:

On the 29th day of the 9th month of the Water Horse Year (November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1942), [we] submit the content of an abridged contract of agreement, the main points [of which are as follows]. With respect to the merchandise from India to be dispatched to Lhasa by the chief-merchant Tshe dge lags from Brag g.yab for delivery to a *cag* sGrol dkar, resident of the Tre hor monastic household in Lhasa, the trio of donkey-drivers led by Don grub of sGo shar estate of Gangs ro, hereby agree to undertake the freightage and attest to the following considerations. The freightage comprises: 10 *do po*<sup>20</sup> of coloured prayer flags, each *do po* containing 20 bolts; 10 *do po* of jeans/cotton [(*ras*) *sbying*], each *do po* containing 10 bolts; 10 *do po* of Benares muslin cloth, each *do po* containing 15 bolts, all wrapped in jute and bound with bands, and 15 boxes of bowl-shaped rock-sugar and 15 boxes of bowl-shaped molasses, for a total of 30 boxes, tied together with metal bands. The freight charge for each back load is 75 silver *srang*. From the total freight charge of 2,250 silver *srang* for 30 loads, 1,125 silver *srang*, half the price of freight charges, has been paid now and the

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'aristocratic estate'. Lhasan nobility provided personnel to the dGa' ldan pho brang government which, in exchange for their service, allowed them to collect revenues on landed estates; since the head of the family usually resided in Lhasa, the management of the estates was usually entrusted to local administrators.

<sup>19</sup> Schneider (2002: 418).

<sup>20</sup> *Do po* refers to one of two packages that constitute a *khal rgyab gcig* or one full load for a donkey, mule or any beast of burden.

remaining half is to be paid when the loads are delivered in Lhasa, no later than the 18th day of the 10th month [November 26th, 1942]. Should the delivery be delayed beyond the above date, it is agreed that, for each day of delay, a fine of 1 silver *srang* and five *zho* shall be deducted for each back load. Should there be any breach of the agreement or shortfall in the quantity of merchandise due to fire, water, robbers, loss, theft, etc., the abovementioned donkey-drivers are solely liable for compensation according to the prevailing rate in Lhasa at the time, according to the proverb 'If you wash your head, you are expected to clean your neck as well',<sup>21</sup> rather than blaming each other, going back on their words and coming up with new thoughts, speaking with two tongues and [saying things like] 'At the time it was not like that', or 'It wasn't I, it was he'. According to the terms of this document of agreement, any transgressions shall be referred to the Justice Commissioner.<sup>22</sup> [Committing] to strictly abide by the law, [the agreement] is sealed by the three donkey-drivers including Don grub as recipients of the loads; the innkeeper of Phag ri, Nor chos, who offered to act as a guarantor; the chief-merchant, owner of the merchandise, Tshe dge.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The meaning of the saying is "to perform a duty completely", thus being fully accountable for what has been promised.

<sup>22</sup> The expression *lugs gnyis gong ma khrims bdag rin po che'i zhabs drung du zhu ba*, lit. "submitted to feet of the highest, the precious preserver of the law of the two systems" is a typical *inscriptio* of *gan rgya* documents. It addresses whichever official represents the Dalai Lama as administrator of the law at the time of the drafting of the contract. I thank Charles Ramble for pointing this out to me, see also Schneider (2002).

<sup>23</sup> *chu rta zla 9 tshes 29 nyin | gan 'dzin gcig bsdus su 'bul snying | don rtsa lha ldan tre hor khang tshan nang bzhugs a cag sgröl dkar lags nas rtsis bzhes mdzad rgyu'i brag g.yab tshong dpon tshe dge lags kyi lha 'gro'i rgya zog steng nas gangs ro sgo shar gzhis kyi bong bub a don grub sogs mi gsum nas bdal zhus kyis dngos grangs ca lag dar lcog tshos tshogs do rer ras yug nyi shu re yod pa do bcu | spying do rer ras yug bcu re yod pa do bcu | ka ci do rer ras yug bco lnga re yod pa bcu bcas rnames rtswa btun shan sbyar dang | shel dkar rting pā [\*ting par ma = ting kor ma (rting pā)] sgam do bco lnga | bu ram rting pā sgam do bco lnga bcas sgam do sum cu de lcags shan rgyun sbyar bcas rtsis sprod song bas rgyab rer bdal gla dngul srang bdum cu don lnga re byas khal rgyab sun cu la bsdoms bdal gla dngul srang nyis stong nyis brgya lnga bcu thob pa nas phyed bdal dngul srang chig stong brgya dang nyi shu rtsa lnga 'dir sprad zin | phyed bdal lha sar do rtsis sprad zin mtshams sprod rgyu dang | zla 10 tshes 18 'gyang med lha sar do rtsis sprad rgyu dang de nas 'gyang tshe nyin rer do rgyab re nas 'gyang chad dngul srang gang zho lnga re sprod rgyu bcas kyi kha dan gtsang zin dang | gal srid kha dan rgyab skyur dang | lam bar me chu rku shor bor brlag sogs kyis dngos zog tshang min byung na gong ming bong bub a rang nas lha sa'i yul thang gzhi bzung gis rtsis rgyag mgo dkrus mjing dag zhu rgyu las | de dus de min | nga min kho yin sogs kha gcig lce gnyis kyi dran gtam gsar skyes g.yas khag g.yon dkri byas tshe gan 'dzin 'dir brten lugs gnyis gong ma khrims bdag rin po che'i drung du byas nyes la gzhihs te khrims 'khur g.yo med bsgrub rgyu'i do bdag don grub sogs bong bu ba mi gsum nas rtags | khag theg 'gan len 'jal nus yong zhu ba phag ri'i gnas mo nor chos nas rtags | zog bdag tshong dpon tshe dge'i rtags / Drel pa'i mi tshes: 11–12.*



Albeit fictional, the *gan 'dzin* drafted by Lhag pa don grub replicates the formulaic structure typical of these agreements, thus achieving a remarkable degree of historical verisimilitude, as clarified by a comparison of the above with a *gan rgya* between *mi ser* as published in *Snga rabs bod kyi srid khrims* (henceforth *Srid khrims*).

An agreement submitted on the—day of the month—of the Iron Monkey Year.<sup>24</sup> The main point [of the agreement is the following]: since I, the shoemaker Don 'grub Phun tshog, am in urgent need of some money for my family, I am grateful to have been successful in my request for a loan of 100 *tam rdo* with an annual interest rate of the 20 percent from Lha gzim bSam pho's attendant Tshe nor lags. Within six years, I will unconditionally repay the loan and the interest in full, without any excuses or quibbles such as blaming others,<sup>25</sup> renegeing on agreed terms,<sup>26</sup> returning less than what was given,<sup>27</sup> being ungrateful,<sup>28</sup> and so on. It is submitted that, regardless of whether the terms of agreement are clearly specified herein or not, on the date and time specified above, the loan will be repaid in time without any excuses. Signed in person by Don ['grub] Phun [tshog].<sup>29</sup>

The fictional *gan 'dzin* share with the historical *gan rgya* a wide array of formulae, reproduced by Lhag pa don grub almost *verbatim*, e.g. "It wasn't I, it was he" (*nga min kho yin*), "at that time it was not like that" (*de dus de min*), and so on. Such formulaic expressions often provided the structure upon which a *gan rgya* was drafted, as demonstrated by several written documents contained in the archives of the Upper Tshognam, Mustang, recently published by Charles Ramble in collaboration with Nyima Drandul. The *gan 'dzin* hereafter is quoted as illustrative of other forms of formulaic compositions used in the drafting of written agreements, in this case a contract for

<sup>24</sup> Even though the lack of *rab byung* makes it virtually impossible to date with certainty the *gan rgya*, the context and the structure of the contract seem to suggest that it was drafted either on the Iron Monkey of the 14th *rab byung* (i.e. 1860) or on the Iron Monkey of the 15th *rab byung* (i.e. 1920).

<sup>25</sup> Lit. "it was not me, it was him" (*nga min kho yin*).

<sup>26</sup> Lit. "at that time it was not like that" (*de dus de min*).

<sup>27</sup> Lit. "cooked meat returning raw again" (*btsos sha rjen log*).

<sup>28</sup> Lit. "repaying tea with water" (*ja lan chu 'jal*).

<sup>29</sup> *lcags spral zla tshes la | gan 'dzin gcig 'thus su 'bul snying | don rtsa | gus pa lham bzo don 'grub phun tshogs khyim tshang la gang ci'i lag mdzangs ci cher brten | lha gzim bsam pho'i zhabs gras tshe nor lag kyi phyag nas lo 'khor bcu skyed 'khri 'bul zhu rgyur ngo bo tam rdo brgya tham pa g.yar zhus don smin bkrin che byung na | slar lo drug song mtshams ngo skyed grangs tshang gtsang 'bul gleng med zhu ba las | nga min kho yin | de dus de min | btsos sha rjen log | ja lan chu 'jal sogs gan don 'dir tshig gsal 'khod min la ma ltos pas gong gsal lo dus rang la ka kor med pa 'bul lam zhus 'thus su phul bas don phun ngo ma'i rtags | | Srid khrims: 412.*

a loan of grain at a rate of 25 percent interest.

A brief written contract (*'gan 'dzin*) presented on the—day of the—month. Tshangchog, a housemistress (*nang dag ma < nang bdag mo?*) of Tshug, has asked Sonamcan of Te to make her a loan of 100 *pāthi* of grain as her means of livelihood for this year and to take care of her child[ren]. She agrees that at the harvest time this year she will repay the loan in the form of wheat that is unadulterated by stones, moisture or chaff at a ratio of 4:5, *i.e.* 25 percent. There shall be no violation of this agreement; no reciprocal accusation; no acting as if one had two tongues in one mouth; no new raising of recollected issues.<sup>30</sup>

The formula “two tongues in one mouth” (*kha gcig lce gnyis*) is the same used by Lhag pa don grub in drafting his contract, whereas the expression “no new raising of recollected issues” (*bsam btang dran skyed*) strongly recalls the “going back on their words and coming up with new thoughts” (*dran gtam gсар skyes*) found in *Drel pa'i mi tshe*. The fictional contract was drafted among three parties: the Khams pa trader Tshe dge, the innkeeper Nor chos, and Don grub as representative of the donkey-drivers. The involvement of the guesthouse owner as financial guarantor for the donkey-drivers is not unusual; in her study of Eastern Tibetan trading houses (Tib. *a lcags kha pa*; Ch. *guōzhuāng*), Yudru Tsomu (2016) convincingly demonstrates their role as cultural and financial brokers. As safe-havens for travellers, pilgrims, merchants, and hired porters, guesthouses functioned concurrently as meeting points, temporary warehouses, rented lodgings, and supplies stations, even providing currency exchange services if needed.

The drafting of written contracts occurred frequently in Tibet, especially when money was involved. Even though 'Dzam yag makes no reference in his *nyin deb* to legal documents of any sorts, there are a few instances that suggest the existence of an *a priori* agreement. For instance, before setting off from Khams, he states clearly that he has cleared his debts and collected his loans from close friends and regular customers based in sKye dgu mdo, an activity that may have entailed the stipulation of *gan rgya* or *gan 'dzin* between the parties. Furthermore, being a trader, 'Dzam yag had to hire professional porters and pack-animal drivers like Zla phun, as he indeed did when the Khang gсар *bla brang* of Ngor E wam chos ldan entrusted him with 15,000 *dbyin sgor*<sup>31</sup> for a business venture to

<sup>30</sup> Ramble and Nyima Drandul (2016: 209).

<sup>31</sup> Generally used in Tibetan language to indicate British currency, the term *dbyin sgor* may here be a misspelling for *hin sgor*, “rupees”. At the time of 'Dzam yag's

Kalimpong, for which he engaged a caravan leader and two helpers, an event that presumably required the signing of a *gan 'dzin* very similar to the one Lhag pa don grub conjures in his *Drel pa'i mi tshé*.

*The price of doing business*

The agreement signed by Don grub establishes the payment of a substantial fine in case of delay, damage, or loss of the entrusted goods; the donkey-drivers are also responsible for the welfare of the pack animals, and, in case of the death of donkey, the price of the animal is deducted from their wages, as Don grub himself complains.

Last year, after two donkeys died on the Ka la phag plain because they were unable to bear the loads. Since the honourable manager of the estate took our monthly salary [to cover for] the value of the donkeys, the wages for the transport of two loads to Lhasa, and a fine for the delay due to our not being able to deliver the loads on time, it was hard even [to get] provisions for ourselves, let alone feeding our wives and children.<sup>32</sup>

Like any other *bran g.yon*, Zla phun and his co-workers receive a monthly wage (*phogs*) consisting of grains. When interrogated on the matter by the head of the aristocratic family and estate owner,<sup>33</sup> Zla phun identifies the amount of a domestic servant's wage as 10 *bre*<sup>34</sup> of grain per month; in his case, with only him and his sister Phan thogs working, the domestic income consists of 20 *bre* per month, barely enough to feed four people. Small side trade, allowed by the head of the estate, represents a vital source of additional profit, obtained by buying small and valuable items, e.g. cloth, tea balls and fuel, to be sold at a higher price. The loss of merchandise and animals is one of the hazards of doing business; as a matter of fact, the larger the quantity of goods handled, the higher the risk of losing everything.

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business venture (1952), the relatively new independence of India could have justified the use of *dbyin* either as a near-homophone for *hin* or as a slight anachronism for the [British]-Indian rupee (I thank Charles Ramble for drawing my attention to the possible misspelling). On January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1952, the finance section of *The Tibet Mirror* (a): 11–12 gives the following exchange rates for 1 rupee: 5 *srang* in Lhasa and 5 *srang* and 5 *zho* in Phag ri, thus making the investment entrusted to 'Dzam yag worth about 75,000 *srang*.

<sup>32</sup> *na ning ka la pag thang steng khal ma theg par bong bu gnyis 'chi ba des gzhis bzhugs sku zhabs kyis bong bu'i rin pa dang | khal rgyab gnyis kyi lha sa bar gyi bdal dngul | do po dus thog rtsis sprod mi thub pa'i 'gyang chad bcas tshang ma nga tsho gsum gyi zla phogs nas bcag stabs khyim gyi bza' zla bu phrug gso rgyu phar bzhag | bdag tsho'i lam rgyags kyang ha cang khag po byung // Drel pa'i mi tshé: 19.*

<sup>33</sup> *Drel pa'i mi tshé: 126.*

<sup>34</sup> Volume measure for solid, about 700 gr.

In the summer of 1954, 'Dzam yag and his nephew decided to store their goods in Lhasa in anticipation of the winter months and moved 70 *do po* of bundled goods from gZhis ka rtse to the river banks of the 'U yug dma', where they were carried away by the great flood that destroyed most of rGyal rtse and a quarter of gZhis ka rtse. The fury of the water swept away entire villages, bringing death and devastation.<sup>35</sup> 'Dzam yag himself was not left unscathed, since more than 60 of his bundled loads were lost in the deluge; in an attempt to recover some of his financial losses, he sent what was still in his possession—40 bundles of raw cotton and 100 *khal*<sup>36</sup> of grain—to Nag chu, entrusting his nephew Blo 'jam to cut the best deal possible with the nomads.<sup>37</sup> The small-scale trade done by the donkey-drivers pales when confronted to the amount of money handled by professional traders. For instance, on the occasion of his visit to bKra shis lhun po in 1946, 'Dzam yag met with rDo rje rNam rgyal, the business manager of the Sa 'du tshang in gZhis ka rtse, and with a *tshong dpon* ('chief-merchant') from dGong thog in Tre hor, Rin chen rdo rje, whose name appears time and time again as one of the author's business partners<sup>38</sup> and companions during his pilgrimage to India.<sup>39</sup> From bKra shis lhun po, the trader moved to Zha lu where he attended the celebrations for the *sa ga zla ba* (the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar) of the Fire Dog Year (May 1946), together with another companion from Tre hor, a monk named Pad ma rnam rgyal. Once back in gZhis ka rtse, 'Dzam yag acted as a trade agent for a certain bKra shis nor bu, the treasurer and government appointed trader of the Gra'u household, the strongest *be hu* of the Yul shul area. At the time, the trader transported 100 *do po* of butter from gZhis ka rtse to Lhasa.<sup>40</sup> A month later, when in Lhasa, the author acted again as a dealer for bKra shis nor bu, buying 773 *khal* and 5 *nya ga*<sup>41</sup> of butter packed into 96 leather bags (*mar ltang*), paying 33 *srang* for each *khal*. In addition, he bought a further 73 *khal* of butter, paying 780 *srang*. He calculated that, by selling these goods, he earned 26,297

<sup>35</sup> The flood hit the prefectures of rGyal rtse and Pa rnam on July 17<sup>th</sup>, 1954. More than 170 villages were submerged; among the 16,180 people affected by the natural disaster, 691 drowned and 34 died due to the severity of their injuries. 10,074 houses were destroyed, and thousands of animals were lost in the deluge. For information regarding the rescue activities carried out by the Tibet Work Committee, the Tibetan government, and the State Council in Beijing, see *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus* 23: 17–19

<sup>36</sup> Weight unit, about 13kg.

<sup>37</sup> *Nyin deb*: 234–235.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*: 46; 61–62.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*: 143.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*: 66.

<sup>41</sup> Weight unit, about 0.120 gr.

*srang*, 2 *zho*, and 5 *skar*.<sup>42</sup> The liquidity that traders enjoyed made them perfect business partners for the Lhasan nobility, whose assets were tied to land revenue. In *Drel pa'i mi tshé*, the purchase of three *lag*<sup>43</sup> of mules by the lord of the estate is made possible by a loan granted to him by one of the sPang mda' tshang's traders.<sup>44</sup> Incidentally, Lhag pa don grub provides us information about the price of mules at the time, since the *tshong dpon* offers 500 *ṭam rdo*<sup>45</sup> in cash, a sum deemed sufficient for the purchase of good quality mules from Xining, Amdo.

### *Khams pa trading families*

Ready cash, access to warehouses and lodgings in Lhasa, gZhi ka rtse, rGyal rtse, Phag ri, Kalimpong, and Calcutta, as well as a tightly-knit network of agents scattered in strategic locations represented the trademark of a few eastern Tibetan families who, by the beginning of the 20th century, emerged as a new force in the rather crystallised scenario of Tibetan society. By the end of the 19th century, the offices of some of the largest among the Khams pa trading firms—sPang mda' tshang, Sa 'du tshang, and A 'brug tshang—had been moved to the main cities of Central Tibet; their political influence increased with the burgeoning of their economic power, allowing them access to the exclusive circles of Lhasan nobility.

By the mid-20th century, any class divisions that still existed between aristocracy and wealthy traders had become blurred and porous at best; what traders lacked in terms of titles and lands was amply compensated by money and influence. Relationships of dependence and gratitude were forged through the granting of loans and the exchanging of gifts, in a *do ut des* system that allowed sPang mda' and Sa 'du representatives to enter the ranks of the government, customarily reserved for Lhasan nobility alone.<sup>46</sup> 'Dzam yag's *nyin deb* corroborates the porosity of social boundaries; in an entry dated November 1945, the trader recalls a visit paid to the

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*: 68

<sup>43</sup> Unit of ten horses or mules used for transportation

<sup>44</sup> *Drel pa'i mi tshé*: 139.

<sup>45</sup> Equivalent to *rdo tshad*, a *ṭam rdo* is a banknote with a value of 50 *srang*. 500 *ṭam rdo* are therefore equal to 25,000 silver *srang*.

<sup>46</sup> sPang mda' Yar 'phel was given the fourth rank in the dGa' ldan pho brang in 1940 (Goldstein 1989: 210), while Sa 'du Rin chen was accorded the fifth rank in 1948 (Sadutshang 2016: 107–117).

family of the *bka' blon* bShad sgra<sup>47</sup> from whom “a small amount of money was due”. Apparently, the household was ready to comply and added a gift to the sum already owed.<sup>48</sup>

In such a context of intertwined interests, friendship and business often went hand in hand; in *Drel pa'i mi tshe*, the sPang mda' trader who granted the loan to the *sku ngo*,<sup>49</sup> the incumbent Western district commissioner (*rdzon dpon*) of Phag ri, is none other than one of his mahjong game partners. The sPang mda' tshang make frequent appearances in Lhag pa don grub's novel; their agents, active in the main trade hubs inside and outside the Tibetan plateau, were on friendly terms with Zla phun's master at the time of his appointment as *rdzong dpon*. By entertaining good relationships with government officials, Eastern Tibetan traders made sure to maximise their income, often through a conspicuous reduction of taxes and customs fees.

Despite his connections, 'Dzam yag was not always able to avoid the payment of expensive tolls, especially at a local level. On the 9th day of the 10th month of the Wood Bird Year (November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1945), the trader left Lhasa, reaching gZhis ka rtse thirteen days later, accompanied by a hired labourer and several mules.<sup>50</sup> During his stay in gZhis ka rtse, 'Dzam yag was hosted by the abovementioned Rin chen rdo rje, most probably he himself an agent of the Sa 'du tshang. On the 25th of the 10th month (November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1945), the two of them went to bKra shis lhun po, where they discussed business with a certain Blo rdo rje, presented in the *nyin deb* as the treasurer of gZigs rgyab, a lama from Tre hor.<sup>51</sup> Three days later, 'Dzam yag set off with one of his nephews to Lha sa, with the intent of buying commodities to export to India. On the 11th month of the Wood Bird Year (January 1946), 'Dzam yag returned to gZhis ka rtse, bringing with him goods to sell in Kalimpong; on the way the trader met with his nephew Blo 'jam, who was then passing through gTsang. At the time of leaving Central Tibet, 'Dzam yag “joined some mule drivers who were going to Kalimpong, paying [their] wages for the transport of Chinese goods”<sup>52</sup> and, on the 25th day of the 12th month of the Wood Bird

<sup>47</sup> Although mentioned in 'Dzam yag's notes as *bka' blon* bShad sgra, the man in question was not the minister dPal 'byor rdo rje, who died in 1920, but simply a member of his household, one of the highest and wealthiest families of Tibet.

<sup>48</sup> *Nyin deb*: 44.

<sup>49</sup> Title of address for lay government officials.

<sup>50</sup> *Nyin deb*: 45–46.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*: 46.

<sup>52</sup> *rgya zong rnam bdal gla ka sbug du gtong ba'i drel ba dang 'grogs nas* (*ibid.*: 50). The term *rgya zong* is rather ambiguous since it is used to indicate both Indian and Chinese goods. Since 'Dzam yag was on his way to Kalimpong, it appears safe to assume that his commodities were mainly of Chinese origin.

Year (February 27th, 1946), they set off following the road that crossed the Myang chu. A few days later, having left rGyal rtse district behind them, the company reached Phag ri, thus approaching the Sikkimese border. Leaving Phag ri the next day, 'Dzam yag and his companions continued toward Kalimpong, but, at the border, they were forced to show their merchandise and pay further taxes.

At Shar gsing ma,<sup>53</sup> we had to show our loads and after that, because I had to pay a customs tax to the government office at sPel 'phel thang, I showed the documents [listing the goods I was transporting].<sup>54</sup>

After reaching Kalimpong at midday, 'Dzam yag immediately went to the market to sell his merchandise; the debts incurred during the business trip were cleared and the remainder of the profit he made was saved for religious offerings.

Taxes were, not surprisingly, a source of constant distress and frustration for the author; while passing through the Chab mdo area, on the 7th month of the Wood Bird Year (August 1945), 'Dzam yag commented on the rather arbitrary imposition of salt taxes (*tshwa shog*) by dGa' ldan pho brang officials. These taxes are reported to have particularly affected travellers from other provinces, and several Khams pa—'Dzam yag included—thereby lost a small fortune.<sup>55</sup> In another note dated to the 7th month of the Iron Tiger Year (August 1950), the author execrated the greed of certain lords of dBus-gTsang, who, after accumulating a great deal of wool, imposed a monopoly on the market, fixing the price and prohibiting the purchase of cheaper wool from their subjects. At the time, the district leader of gNam ru<sup>56</sup> summoned all the merchants who travelled to the area for trade and fined them for infringement of the newly established law; 'Dzam yag, who was among them, lost 29 *srang*. In the *nyin deb*, the author compares the “shameless custom fees”<sup>57</sup> to falling rain, vouching never to return to that place for trade.

As muleteers of the district commissioner of Phag ri, Zla phun and his coworkers are spared body searches and confiscation of merchandise; by merely showing a sealed letter from their master, they were immediately let through the customs gate of Shar gsing

<sup>53</sup> A township and administrative seat located in Lower Gro mo, at the border with Sikkim.

<sup>54</sup> *shar sems (\*gsing) ma la do bo (\*po) rnams ston dgos l de nas spel 'phel thang du gzhung sa la yar sho gam sprod dgos pas rtsis sprad byas // Nyin deb: 52.*

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*: 26.

<sup>56</sup> District located northeast of Lhasa.

<sup>57</sup> *'khrel med sho gam /Nyin deb: 194.*

ma.<sup>58</sup>

*The wool trade*

Social status and trade volume aside, our characters—the “fictional” Zla phun and the “real” ‘Dzam yag—share similarities. The first of them is certainly their involvement in the profitable business of wool. By the time of ‘Dzam yag’s departure from the Nang chen kingdom, in 1944, wool covered almost 90 percent of Tibetan international exports, most of it being sold at Kalimpong; by the turn of the 20th century, the centre had definitely replaced Kathmandu as a major trade hub, to the point that even the Newari merchants had moved their stores and warehouses to West Bengal, the final destination of the trade route connecting India to Central Asia via Sikkim. An emergent category of traders from central and eastern Tibet started distinguishing themselves by their skills and ambition, competing in the southward-bound wool trade with the local Marwaris.

Among those new traders, particularly active were the members of the sPang mda’ tshang, whose fortunes began at the beginning of the century, when the leader of the family, Nyi ma rgyal mtshan, gained the favour of the 13th Dalai Lama. In less than fifty years—from the end the 19th century to the 1920s—this fairly obscure trading family from eastern Tibet imposed itself in the social circles of Lhasa, winning the trust of the ruling elite and thus securing the monopoly of the wool trade.<sup>59</sup> The sPang mda’ tshang, however, were only the avant-garde of a new powerful social class, bound to play an important role in the political events of the following decades. By opening the path for the ambitious eastern Tibetan traders, the sPang mda’ tshang contributed, albeit indirectly, to the rise of other Khams pa trading families and their agents, becoming instrumental in the socio-economic consolidation of the “intermediate class”.<sup>60</sup>

From the early 1930s, the business between Tibet and India gained new momentum, especially along the Sikkimese route, and the largest Khams pa trading families set up offices and warehouses in both Phag ri and Kalimpong. In the mid-1930s, the Sa ‘du tshang occupied a two-storey wooden house about a kilometre and a half from the centre of the town; the members of the family resided on the upper floor, while the ground floor accommodated the two managers’ quarters and a storeroom. Commodities such as wool and

<sup>58</sup> *Drel pa’i mi tsho*: 153.

<sup>59</sup> On the sPang mda’ tshang and their rise to power, see Goldstein 1989b and McGranahan (2002, 2005, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> On the social impact of wool trade in Tibet in the first half of the 20th century, see Travers (2018).



consumer goods were kept in a large godown adjacent to the main house; the building had a large compound on the front, wide enough the pack animals on their way to and from Tibet for a few days.<sup>61</sup>

Valuable information regarding the wool trade in the 1940s and 1950s is also found in an essay written by Shar chen bKra shis tshe ring, a trade agent for the monastic establishment of dGa' ldan chos 'khor gling in Shangs, gZhis ka rtse district. The text was published in 1996 as part of the 19th issue of *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus dpyad gzhi'i rgyu cha bdams bsgrigs* (henceforth *Bod kyi rig gnas lo rgyus* 10), a collection of articles on Tibetan history and culture. According to bKra shis tshe ring, in the 1940s the price of a bale of wool on the Kalimpong market oscillated between 50–60 silver *srang* (wool of medium quality from the Shangs valley) and 70–75 silver *srang* (wool of higher quality from gZhis ka rtse). The bales of wool were referred to as *mon do*, a Tibetan rendition of the Anglo-Hindi word *maund*, a unit of weight used in India and other parts of Asia. Its value varied greatly according to locality; in India, a *maund* ranged from 25 to 82.286 pounds (11 to 37.4 kg), the latter being the standard *maund* adopted by the Tibetans. In the mid-20th century, the Shar chen family was dealing in terms of 3,000–4,000 *mon do* of wool per year; caravans made up of 20 yaks and about 13–14 donkeys transported the loads to Phag ri, and, from there, to Kalimpong. In Phag ri, the *mon do* were unloaded and loaded again onto local animals for each of which a transport fee was applied—15–20 silver *srang* per yak and 14–15 silver *srang* per donkey; the caravan was therefore entrusted to a local guide, especially appointed for the task of conducting the animals to the trade hub. Trade occurred during winter time, and to accommodate the needs of the Tibetans, most people of the Mon district hired their animals and travelled back and forth between Phag ri and Kalimpong, up to 12–13 times per season. In *Drel pa'i mi tshe*, Zla phun and his master comment on the resourcefulness of the local Pha ri bas in these terms.

[The *sku ngo* said:] “I reckon the people of this place [i.e. Phag ri] really don't have any other way of making a living apart from doing a bit of trade. If you cultivate grain in the fields, nothing grows apart from grass.” Zla phun answered: “Indeed, it is as you said. If there were a need to rely on the fields, there really wouldn't be any way of making a living. However, due to its location, this place is like the neck of the trade route between India and Tibet and there are many ways of earning a living.” The *sku ngo* looked carefully at Zla phun's face, saying: “Yes.” Zla phun continued: “Even though the grain is not ripe [yet], the households of the taxpayers of Phag ri pile up the

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<sup>61</sup> Sadutshang (2016: 30).

green sprouts and sell them at a high cost to the muleteers who travel the [trade] route; they get a large profit at the moment of the sale. Many families have nomadic pastures nearby, and they use [their] good resources [such as] white cheese, meat, and butter, not only for themselves but sell them to those who haven't got them. Some families import merchandise from Kalimpong to Tibet and sell [it] in gZhis ga rtse, rGyal rtse, Lhasa, and so on; those who have a small capital, after buying local products from Phag ri, export them to Bhutan. The money exchange business is done mainly by the different guesthouses as well as most of the small households; even if a small household trades just a load of the sPom mda' [i.e. sPang mda'] or Sa 'du's wool, just that is enough [for them] to make a living."<sup>62</sup>

The situation changed drastically in 1951, when the American ban *de facto* stopped the transactions of wool on the Kalimpong market; it was only in 1956 that a business agreement was signed, and Tibetan wool was once again sold in Kalimpong. The reinstated wool trade was, however, short-lived; in 1959 the Communist government imposed a restriction on the export of wool, and the *mon do* still in the Tibetan warehouses were sold on the Chinese market.

The Tibetan market had grown so dependent on the international wool trade that the cuts in the exports caused by World War II severely affected the country's economy. The incorporation of Tibet into China in 1951 had a devastating impact on the wool export trade by abruptly stopping any transactions with the United States, at the time the country's main business partner.<sup>63</sup> In 1951, following the signing of the Seventeen-Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet, the U.S. Treasury Department passed regulations prohibiting business deals with Communist China, and thus with

<sup>62</sup> "dngos gnas lung pa 'di mi rnams tshong phran bu brgyab na ma gtogs gzhan lto gos 'tshol thabs mi 'dug | zhing kha'i nang phar 'bru gshos na tshur rtswa ma gtogs gzhan gang yang skye rgyu mi 'dug" ces gsungs pas zla phun gyis "sku ngo yis bka' gnang ba de rang red | zhig khar brten dgos byung na dngos gnas 'tsho ba 'khyol thabs med | yin na'ang lung pa 'di chags sa rgya bod bar gyi tshong 'grul lam gyi med pa lta bur 'khel yod stabs lto gos 'tshol rgyu'i thabs lam mang po yod pa red" ces bshad pas sku ngos zla phun gyi dgong la zhib par zgigs te "o'o" zhes gsungs pas zla phun gyis mu mthud de "phag ri'i nang gi khral pa dud tshang tshos sa zhing thog 'bru ma smin rung ljang phung brgyab ste lam 'grul drel pa tshor gong chen po brgyab ste 'tshong dus yong 'bab chen po yod | mi tshang mang por nye 'gram du 'brog ra yod pas dkar phyur dang sha mar thon khungs bzang bas rang gis spyad pas mi tshad gzhan la 'tshong rgyu'ang yod | mi tshang khag cig ka sbug nas tshong zog bod du nang 'dren byas te gzhis rtse dang rgyal rtse | lha sa sogs su btsongs pa dang | ma rtsa chung ba tshos phag ri nas yul zog nyos nas 'brug yul du phyir tshong byed kyi yod | dngul 'dza'i tshong de gts'o bos gnas khag khag dang de min dud tshang mang che bas brgyab kyi yod | tha na dud chung khag cig gis spon mda' dang | sa 'du sogs kyi bal do po kho na brgyab ste lto gos da ga rang gyi 'phyid kyi yod" / Drel pa'i mi tshe: 146.

<sup>63</sup> Goldstein (2007: 263).

Tibet.

As the United States cut their economic ties with China, 4,000,000 pounds of wool were left rotting in the warehouses of Kalimpong.<sup>64</sup> In an attempt to avoid an economic breakdown, the Chinese government stepped in, inflating the value of the Tibetan wool by purchasing it at a price higher than the one set by the market.<sup>65</sup> By the mid-1950s, 70 percent of the wool trade between Tibet and India had been bought out by the Chinese State Trading Company directly from Tibetan traders, thus cutting at the source a long-standing business relationship for traditional Newar and Marwari traders based in Kalimpong.<sup>66</sup>

The Communist Party's decision to purchase 80,000 *mon do* of Tibetan white wool, offering 184 rupees per *mon do*, required every owner of wool loads in Kalimpong to provide certain information, as reported in *The Tibet Mirror*.

(1) The name and place of residence of the trader (2) Region of origin (3) Place of residence in Kalimpong (4) Year in which the wool was purchased (5) Calendar date (day and month) (6) Place of origin of the wool purchased (7) Number of eventual helpers for the wool purchased (8) Wool lost along the way (9) [Wool] that is in Phag ri (10) [Wool] that has reached Kalimpong (11) [Wool] that has been sold in Phag ri and Kalimpong (12) Whatever wool of the Water Dragon Year (1952) is in Kalimpong (13) Year in which the above-mentioned wool reached Kalimpong (14) State clearly the location of the warehouse<sup>67</sup> in which the above-mentioned wool is [stocked] in Kalimpong (15) Whether or not the above-mentioned wool in Kalimpong has been entrusted as a security loan (16) Whether or not other people's wool has been mixed with the above-mentioned wool.<sup>68</sup>

The sudden drop of the wool price in Kalimpong makes its dramatic appearance in *Drel pa'i mi tshe* too, and it could hardly be otherwise,

<sup>64</sup> Harris (2013: 39).

<sup>65</sup> Goldstein (2007: 264).

<sup>66</sup> Shakya (1999: 115).

<sup>67</sup> The new regulations were clearly addressed to the wealthiest Tibetan traders in Kalimpong, the only ones who could afford to keep warehouses at Phag ri and Kalimpong (Harris 2013: 38).

<sup>68</sup> 1. *tshong pa'i ming dang sdod gnas* | 2. *yul gyi ming* | 3. *ka sbug sdod gnas* | 4. *bal nyos pa'i lo khams* | 5. *zla dus tshes grangs* | 6. *bal nyos sa'i yul* | 7. *bal nyos pa lag yod do grangs* | 8. *bal lam phyogs khag tu lus pa* | 9. *phag rir yod pa* | 10. *ka sbug tu 'byor zin pa* | 11. *phag ri dang ka sbug tu btshongs pa* | 12. *ka sbug tu chu 'brug lo'i bal ji yod* | 13. *ka sbug tu gong gsal bal 'byor lo khams* | 14. *ka sbug tu gong bal gyi do khang gar yod kha gsal* | 15. *ka sbug tu gong bal gte gcol* [\*te bcol] *du bzhas yod med* | 16. *gong bal nang mi gzhan gyi bal 'dres yod med* / *The Tibet Mirror* (b): 12.

since Zla phun's master mainly hired his *lag* of mules to traders transporting wool bundles from Phag ri to Kalimpong. Fluctuations in the demand of wool initiated at the end of 1949, as correctly recalled by Lhag pa don grub in his novel, when the topic of the falling price of the commodity in the market of Kalimpong is brought up by the *tshong dpon* gSer thangs.

“Excuse me, precious *sku ngo*. Even though they say that in these days the price of the wool in Kalimpong has decreased, the price of yak tails<sup>69</sup> and musk is still good. I was planning to buy some from Lhasa, but I am a bit short of money.” The *sku ngo* said: “I can surely give you ready cash, if you need some.” The *tshong dpon* said: “If that's the case, tomorrow, after getting the money, I'll immediately buy yak tails and musk. I'll send them through [your] mansion's mules.”<sup>70</sup>

The American ban and the emergence of China and the U.S.S.R. as new business partners produced a series of shock waves bound to unsettle the markets of Kalimpong. The forced interruption of the wool transactions triggered a shift in the traders' attention. As the above excerpt from *Drel pa'i mi tshe* indicates, other products began to acquire new value in the eyes of visitors and merchants alike. To make even with the wool that remained unsold in their warehouses, local merchants began to increase the value of the rupee and the price of other goods on sale,<sup>71</sup> while decreasing the amount of money they were willing to pay for transport wages.

#### *Traders as go-betweens and intermediaries*

The connections (*'brel ba*) forged between traders and aristocrats went

<sup>69</sup> For a rough estimate of the fluctuations in yak tail prices on the market of Kalimpong between 1948 and 1958, see Harris (2017: 209).

<sup>70</sup> “*sku ngo mchog la zhu rgyur | deng sang ka sbug tu bal gong chag 'dug kyang rnga ma dang gla rtsi la gong yag po 'dug ces shog kyis | ngas lha sa nas tog tsam nyo rtsis yod kyang dngul kha thang tsam byas song*” *zhes bshad | sku ngo yis "tshong dpon la phyag dngul dgos kyi yod na ngas phul dang phul" zhes bshad par tshong dpon gyis "da byas na dngul de sang nyin rang len nas lam seng rnga ma dang gla rtsi nyos te gzim shag gi drel thog la gtong gi yin"* *zhes bshad | Drel pa'i mi tshe*: 245.

<sup>71</sup> Even though Kalimpong earned its fame as a wool trade hub, wool was not the only Tibetan commodity widely appreciated and sought after; among the Tibetan items most requested on the market were white and black yak tails—the first considerably more expensive than the latter—pig bristle, musk deer, snow-leopard, golden lynx, fox, and marmot hides, medicinal plants, and tea bricks; other goods, subject to market fluctuations, were cans of kerosene. Currency exchanges, as well as the value of silver and gold, based on quotations in Calcutta, were also reported. As for the Tibetan traders, they were keen buyers of Indian textiles, grain, and various paraphernalia coming from the West, such as watches, fountain pens, glasses, etc., see Harris (2013).

beyond business relationships developing into forms of clientelism. In the ninth chapter of *Drel pa'i mi tshé*, the owner of the Gangs ro estate, the *sku ngo* Thub bstan 'od snang, calls in favours to ensure the release of Zla phun, who has been imprisoned for manslaughter, following an unfortunate event that triggered a chain reaction involving several people—Zla phun's master, the official at the head of the Zhol las khung and the *tshong dpon* Tshe dge—thus giving a glimpse of the complex net of interregional and interclass affiliations and divisions. Out of respect for the old friendship that ties him to Thub bstan 'od snang, the official in charge of the Zhol prison agrees to an internal settlement of the matter, to be solved within the Khams pa trading community through the intervention of the *tshong dpon* Tshe dge, a relative of the chief-merchant of the gSer tsha tshang, the aggrieved party in the dispute. Tshe dge agrees to act as mediator in consideration of the help provided by the *sku ngo* during his term as district commissioner of Phag ri, thus *de facto* acknowledging the existence of a *quid pro quo* system. The incident is settled with the drafting of a *gan rgya* between the *sku ngo* and the *tshog dpon* of the gSer tsha tshang, an agreement that reads as follow.

On the 12th day of the 9th month of the Earth Ox Year (November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1949), the people concerned, names and seals listed below, submit to the Justice Commissioner the contents of this clear and irrevocable agreement. The main points are as follows. Zla ba phun tshogs, the muleteer of the *sku ngo* Thub bstan 'od snang, the incumbent Commissioner of the Western district of Phag ri, and Ngag dbang rig 'dzing, mule-driver of the mDo khams gSer tsha tshang, disagreeing on who had priority and right of way on the docks of the iron bridge, fought and attacked each other. Eventually, Zla ba phun tshogs used a pistol to shoot Ngag dbang rig 'dzing, thus taking his life. Consequently, the parties involved on both sides, having discussed the matter in person, and in accordance with the code of law for the compensation in case of manslaughter, have agreed that Zla ba phun tshog will pay 1,000 silver *srang* to Ngag dbang rig 'dzing's family without any kind of delay or excuses. After receiving the recompense, the relatives of the deceased are prohibited from renewing the dispute like inflaming an old wound and, especially, from resorting to any kind of physical attacks to take revenge according to the Khams pa custom of "Life for a Life". Should any contravention of the agreement occur on behalf of either of the two parties, the liable party shall be required to immediately pay a fine of 100 gold *srang* and subject to the severity of the criminal offence the golden yoke of law shall be enforced firmly. Sealed by the parties to attest the clear resolution of the case in the above terms: gSer tsha tshang *tshong dpon*

Rab brtan, the guarantors Khams tshang dGe legs and rNam sras.<sup>72</sup> The “blood price”<sup>73</sup> is set at 1,000 silver *srang*,<sup>74</sup> a sum advanced by the *sku ngo* to Zla phun after he vouches to repay it through his work as a muleteer. The clientelist network connecting Khams pa traders, Lhasan aristocrats, and government officials tightens a bit more, deaf to the cries of the powerless individuals trapped inside it.

The freedom of movement granted by their business made eastern Tibetan trader perfect go-betweens as intermediaries between religious figures as well. On the 1<sup>st</sup> month of the Water Dragon Year (February 1952), during a dinner with the retired abbot (*mkhan zur*) Thar rtse rin po che,<sup>75</sup> at the time about to leave Chu bzang ri khrod<sup>76</sup> for sGa pa, the trader produced a blessed statue of Mañjuśrī, entrusted to him by a relative of his root-guru (*rtsa ba'i bla ma*) rDo rje 'chang Ra nyag skal bzang rnam rgyal dpal bzang po. The *mkhan zur* Thar rtse rin po che, moved by the gift, accepted the statue as a “support” (*rten*) and reciprocated with a statue of rDo rje 'chang, to be given to the relative of 'Dzam yag's root-guru. Acting as a middleman between religious and aristocratic figures is indicative of the “liminal” social status of mid-20th century Khams pa traders—

<sup>72</sup> *sa glang la 9 tshes 12 nyin lugs gong ma khirms bdag rin po che'i zhabs drung du zhu ba | ming rtags gsham gsal do bdag rnam nas blos blangs 'gyur med kyi gan rgya gtsang 'bul zhu snying | don rtsa phag ri rdzong nub las thog pa sku ngo thub bstan 'od snang lags kyi drel pa zla ba phun tshogs dang | mdo khams gser tsha tshang gyi drel rjes ngag dbang rig 'dzin gnyis lcags zam gru khar 'don snga phyi'i thad ma mthun par 'thab res rgol res byas mthar zla ba phun tshogs kyi 'phril mda' spyad de ngag dbang rig 'dzin 'chi lam du btang ba'i mi srog bcad pa des phyogs gnyis kyi do bdag ngo ma gros mol byas nas mi bsad stong 'jal gyi zhal lce ltar zla ba phun tshogs phyogs nas ngag dbang rig 'dzin phyogs su dngul srang chig stong tham pa 'jal sprod ka kor med pa bya rgyu dang / 'das po'i spun nye rnam nas dngul 'bab byung phyin slad rma rnying bskyar 'bar gyis rtsod rnyog rigs dang | lhag par khams lugs kyi sha lan len pa zhes srog la rgol ba sogs gtan nas byas mi chog | gal srid do bdag su thad nas 'gal rigs byung tsho 'ba' nyes gser srang brgya tham pa 'phral sgrub thog nyes don la gzhigs te bka' khirms gser gyi gnya' shing de thog tu 'bebs rgyu bcad tshig 'khrun gtsang chod zin pa do bdag gser tsha tshong dpon rab brtan nas rtags | khag theg 'gan len khams tshang dge legs nas rtags | khag theg 'gan len rnam sras nas rtags / Drel pa'i mi tsho: 243–244.*

<sup>73</sup> Prior to 1950s, the payment of life indemnity (*mi stong*) was standard procedure in many parts of Tibet, especially in Amdo and Khams, for sealing off a blood feud and preventing revenge killing. On the practice of *mi stong*, see Ekvall (1954). For a discussion of the role of mediators among tribes in mGo log after the 1980s, see Pirie (2005).

<sup>74</sup> The payment of 1,000 silver *srang* seems to corroborate Ekvall's hypothesis that the term *stong* in *mi stong* stands for “thousand”, thus indicating the standardised custom of paying a thousand of a certain unit of value for life indemnity, see Ekvall (1954).

<sup>75</sup> Thar rtse rin po che acted as abbot (*mkhan po*) of the Sa skya establishment of Ngor E wam chos ldan until the Iron Tiger Year (1950), when he retired to Chu bzang ri khrod.

<sup>76</sup> Hermitage on the west side of U yug mda' mdo.

literate,<sup>77</sup> resourceful, reckless, they cut for themselves a special niche in the texture of Tibetan society, filling in the gaps between classes.

### Conclusion

*Drel pa'i mi tshe* ends at the beginning of the 1950s. The tide of change is about to sweep away the traditional way of life, yet the Tibetan youth is blissfully unaware and the atmosphere in Lhasa is vibrant and full of possibilities. Modernity has forcibly intruded on the scene: carts, bicycles, and motorcars are replacing mules and horses, posters of Indian movie stars decorate the walls of taverns, and Lhasan youngsters take active part in educational activities carried out by the Communist Party. Zla phun's life is also affected—the creation of roads and the purchase of cars drastically changes the display of wealth and power. Cars replace pack mules as status symbols, and the aristocratic mansions in central Lhasa are closed in favour of modern houses outside the city. Yet, the estate of Gangs ro seems unfazed. It is in this remote valley, secluded and peaceful like a mountain hermitage, that Lhag pa don grub chooses to close his narrative; Zla phun, released from his duty as muleteer, takes charge of the local mill. The inner tension between filial duty and responsibility as family provider is finally overcome: the boy, become a man, puts an end to his wanderings to take care of his aging mother, a clear homage to filial piety, a fundamental feature in the Tibetan system of values.

This contribution is meant to be open-ended, first and foremost because *Drel pa'i mi tshe* has still much to offer in terms of socio-historical material—travelling inside and outside Tibet prior 1949, currency exchange, social modifications during the early 1950s, or the emergence of forms of spiritual tourism in India, just to name a few perspectives.

My intent has been to show the value of a new-historicism investigation of modern Tibetan literature, finally conceiving it not as mere aesthetic product but as source of historical and social information, albeit delivered through the eyes of fictional characters. It is my hope that recent formulations of New Historicism could be eventually applied to Tibetan novels and short stories as well, thus

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<sup>77</sup> To take care of business, basic literacy and computational skills were vital. 'Dzam yag received his education at the local dGe lugs monastery in Rab shis, and his *nyin deb* is filled with annotations regarding texts read by the author during his travels. Zla phun, on the contrary, does not know how to write or calculate, a condition hampering his dreams of increasing his side trade (*Drel pa'i mi tshe*: 136). The compilation of ledgers (*brdzang tho*) is an activity closed to the mule-driver, who must rely on secretaries and/or traders.

bringing back into view the figure of the author, his/her intentionality, and his/her socio-historical perspective.

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# The Tibetan Novel as Social History: Reflections on Trashi Palden's *Phal pa'i khyim tshang gi skyid sdug*

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## Introduction

he Tibetan novel that forms the subject of this article is Trashi Palden's *Phal pa'i khyim tshang gi skyid sdug* (henceforth *Phal pa*), "The Life of an Ordinary Household",<sup>1</sup> first published in 1995 and again in 2002. The novel has featured in short English-language studies by at least two scholars: Tsering Shakya and Riika Virtanen.<sup>2</sup> In the case of the three works in question—one by Shakya and two by Virtanen—the authors situate *Phal pa* in broader discussions of modern Tibetan literature that provide important insights into the field in general and this novel in particular. Unfortunately, there is insufficient space here to give these two authors the attention they deserve, but I will refer to them periodically in the following pages. Unlike their exemplary studies, the present article will make little reference to the contemporary literary context but will focus more narrowly on the question of how this one novel might be regarded as a contribution to Tibetan social history.

The action of *Phal pa* is set in the village of Lingshong, a community of thirty households, in the Tsang province of west-central Tibet, and departs only occasionally, and never very far, from this location. The story covers just over two decades, beginning in the early years of the period of Democratic Reforms—implemented after the crushing of the 1959 uprising and the departure of the Dalai

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<sup>1</sup> The *skyid sdug* of the title is not a straightforward term to translate. Literally "joy [and] suffering," the term belongs to the category of abstract nouns that are formed by the juxtaposition of two opposites, as in *ring thung* (lit. long-short) for "length," *che chung* (lit. big-small) for "size" and so forth. Since there is no corresponding abstract noun in English, "life" is probably a reasonable approximation in the present context.

<sup>2</sup> Shakya 2004: 151–174; Virtanen 2018; Virtanen n.d. I am indebted to both colleagues for kindly permitting me to consult and to refer to their respective unpublished studies.

Lama to India—through the Cultural Revolution and the era of economic and social liberalism in the 1980s. The final part of this article offers an extended synopsis of the plot. However, at the risk of covering some of the same ground, we may begin with a much more succinct outline that will be an adequate, if minimal, basis for the discussion that follows.

One of the central figures in the story is Döndrub, an “Everyman” Tibetan villager for whom the “nameless religion”—tradition—holds a more important place than the intricacies of Buddhist doctrine, and who treats both political ideology and improbable religious explanations with equal scepticism. He has two daughters, Tsheten Lhamo and Drolma, by different wives: the first by Yangdzom, who has already died before the novel begins—though we encounter her in several flashbacks—and Chime Wangmo. The four of them share a house with Döndrub’s mother, Dedrön. Tsheten Lhamo’s childhood sweetheart is Phuntshok, a youth of good character—as she herself is—who has two younger sisters. The last character who must be named in the much-reduced outline is Lhakdor. As a member of the Blacksmith (*mgar ba*) caste he belongs to a social rank that was traditionally regarded as being inferior to that of the majority of the community. His seething resentment at his inherited social status is one of the engines that drives the dynamics in the relationships between the main characters.

The genealogical diagram of the main characters provided here may be a useful point of reference for readers who wish to be reminded of who is who.

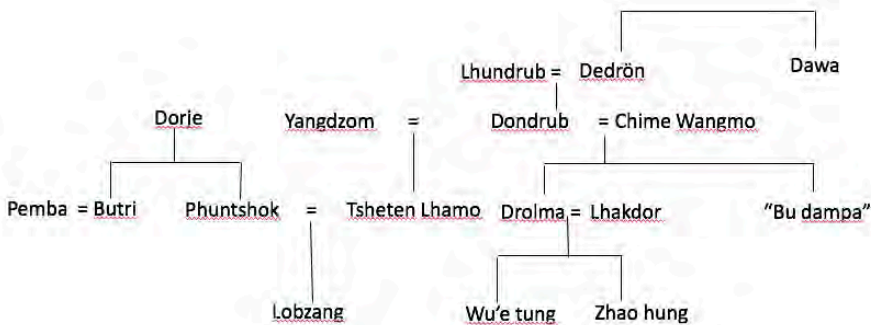


Fig. 1 — Genealogical diagram of the main characters in Phal pa

As far as their position in the drama of this constellation is concerned, it might also be helpful for readers to map these figures onto characters from well-known English novels—for example, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. In such an exercise, Döndrub would correspond (*mutatis mutandis*) to Mr. Bennett; Chime Wangmo to Mrs. Bennett; Tsheten Lhamo to Elizabeth Bennett, the heroine of the story; Phuntshok to Mr. Darcy (at least in terms of uprightness of character and adherence to principle, since he has no fortune to speak of); Drolma to the flighty Lydia, and Lhakdor to the dreadful George Wickham, who seduces an all-too-willing Lydia into an ill-advised marriage much as Lhakdor seduces Drolma.

Chime Wangmo's marriage to Döndrub as his second wife begins happily enough, but after the birth of her daughter Drolma, she becomes a storybook wicked stepmother to Tsheten Lhamo. So incensed is Döndrub by her shabby treatment of her stepdaughter, that Döndrub is eventually obliged to divide the household, with Chime Wangmo and her daughter Drolma living in one part and the rest of the family in the other.

Tsheten Lhamo, in the meantime, is betrothed to Phuntshok, in an arrangement whereby he will move into her house as an in-marrying son-in-law (*mag pa*), even though he is an only son. In the event, later in the story, Phuntshok's sister also marries a *mag pa*, thereby ensuring that there is a man in her house to maintain the succession. However, to everyone's consternation, Tsheten Lhamo's marriage must be postponed because Phuntshok is selected for training as a party cadre, which will require him to go to Lhasa for two years. He is chosen both for his personal qualities as well as his social background, insofar as his family are relatively poor. Döndrub's household, by contrast, is ranked as "middle-rich", and is accordingly disfavoured in the new regime. Collectivisation is under way, and Döndrub loses much of his land and livestock to the commune. As the reforms are intensified and eventually degenerate into the Cultural Revolution, he suffers even more privation, and is eventually reduced to being the herder for the commune's goats.

The main beneficiary of these reforms is Lhakdor the Blacksmith, whose lowly status during the old regime qualifies him for a position of considerable authority in the community. However, the prominence he has been accorded does not translate into social acceptance; people remain reluctant to "share the cup" with them and use the ironic deference with which they now treat him as a distancing mechanism. Nor does his personal comportment do much to win the acceptance he so craves. He is infatuated with Tsheten Lhamo, and when she rejects his advances he resorts—unsuccessfully—to force and to blackmail. Eventually, finding her

sister more amenable to his attentions (though she, too, has to ward off an attempt on his part to rape her), he leaves his long-suffering wife and children and moves in with Drolma and her mother Chime Wangmo.

After he has returned from Lhasa and has duly moved into Tsheten Lhamo's house, Phuntshok enjoys a position of prominence and respect in the commune. But this is not to last. He is aware of corruption among the officials—Lhakdor among them—that is causing hardship for the ordinary villagers. However, his investigations incur the anger of his superiors at the district headquarters, and after some heavy-handed treatment he is demoted. Not long afterwards he is attacked in the dark while on his way home and suffers a broken leg. Tsheten Lhamo, too, is weakened by privation and loses a child she is carrying.

With Mao's death in 1976 the tide begins to turn. Manufactured goods start to arrive in the village, people are no longer hungry, and there is a new style of leadership that is both more relaxed and more favourable to the observance of Tibetan traditions. Lhakdor is bewildered and distressed to find his authority ebbing away, and to see that people no longer pay him even the token respect they had previously extended to him. He is killed in an accident, but his ghost continues to linger in the community as a malign presence, until that, too, fades away. Phuntshok is disillusioned with the old Party policies that he had upheld so loyally, and teams up with his brothers-in-law to following the now officially-endorsed capitalist road. With the growth of economic prosperity, relaxation of political constraints and the restoration of religious and cultural activities, the novel ends in the glow of optimism that was so palpable in Tibet in the mid-1980s.

*Commoners and Blacksmiths: a question of status*

Phuntshok and Lhakdor are pitched against each other in the novel as hero and villain. Phuntshok is everything one might hope for in a son, husband, son-in-law, and public servant. He is too principled for his own good and maintains scrupulous standards of honesty out of loyalty to the Party and for the well-being of his fellow-villagers. If he is eventually disenchanted with the collective model this is not because he has at last parted company with prescribed attitudes, but because he has moved in pace with Party policy, which is now encouraging the accumulation of private wealth. He is, in a sense, the purest form of what the state may have to offer at any point in the unpredictable mutations of its policies over the twenty-odd years covered by the novel.



Lhakdor, by contrast, is anything but two-dimensional, and he is—as both Shakya and Virtanen rightly argue—the most interesting character in the story. Before discussing his role, however, a few words should be said about social stratification in Tibet.<sup>3</sup>

Agrarian communities in all parts of “ethnographic” Tibet—including those in the Himalayan borderlands of countries adjacent to China—were (and for the most part still are) stratified. Generally speaking, these strata—which we may think of as castes—consisted of four or more hierarchically organised groups, which included aristocrats, priests, commoners, and artisans. Some of these castes might exhibit further subdivision: thus, the topmost caste might be refracted into royalty and other nobility, while priests and commoners might also have further internal layers. The terms for these castes, and indeed for “caste” itself, varies from place to place. There may be a certain amount of porosity between castes: in some circumstances there may be intermarriage between aristocrats and priests, or priests and commoners, and even between certain commoners and aristocrats. Generally, however, aristocrats were and are usually endogamous, and artisans almost invariably so.

Caste distinctions are manifested in a variety of ways. Where inter-caste marriage does take place, the distinction may be objectified in the symbolic amount of bridewealth that is paid. The two most important public manifestations of social inclusion are the allocation of a place in a seating row and, if such a place is accorded, the right to “share the cup” with the members of that row. These criteria for inclusion are sometimes formulated simply as *gral* (“row”) and *kha* (“mouth”). One might say of a person, for example, that he has “row” but no “mouth”, meaning that he is entitled to occupy a place in a seating row ranked in terms of the members’ ages, but he may not share the cup with them.

The term “artisan” as I have used it here is not entirely accurate, insofar as it denotes just one section of a larger category of people who occupy the lowest rank of rural communities. Others within this category are fishermen, butchers, professional body-cutters, and certain others. The generic term for this category also varies from place to place and includes names such as *yawa* (*ya ba*), *mendrig* (*dman rigs?*), and *rigngen* (*rigs ngan*), which all, in spite of their different etymologies, correspond to the English rubric of “outcaste”. Caste

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<sup>3</sup> There are considerable local differences with regard to social stratification in Tibetan societies, and this outline is intended as a broad characterisation of general features that will take particular examples from only certain regions. For discussions of the subject, see, among other works, Aziz (1978); Fjeld (2005, 2008); Ramble (1984, 2014). Note that Ramble (1984) and Fjeld (2005) use the term “rank” rather than “caste”.

status is acquired by inheritance from one's parents. In the case of the children of mixed-caste parentage, status may depend on a number of other factors, among which residence may be a key element.

The commoner caste, too, is designated by different names according to the region concerned. In Himalayan areas such as Mustang and Dolpo, as well as adjacent parts of Tibet, the term used is *phalwa* (*phal pa*). I have not been able to determine whether the term was used for this social category in the vicinity of Shigatse. Barbara Aziz, whose classic study *Tibetan Frontier Families* was based on interviews with refugees from Dingri, gives the usual term as *miser* (*mi ser*), which was also current in Central Tibet proper. However, there is one possibly significant passage in *Phal pa* where Drolma rejects Lhakdor's advances and is accused by him of being an aristocrat. The author points out that it goes without saying that she is not of course an aristocrat but the daughter of a *phal ba* household.<sup>4</sup> Our understanding of the title of the novel may need to be revised, so that Döndrub's family would not be an "ordinary" but a "commoner" household.

Commoners do not accord artisans a place in their seating rows, and they do not share the cup with them. Sharing a cup with an artisan would result in being afflicted by *drib* (*grib*). Although *grib* is perhaps best understood as what anthropological terminology would classify as "ritual pollution," it is also considered as having a physical manifestation, insofar as it may produce pathological symptoms of varying severity.<sup>5</sup> Far more serious than the *grib* transmitted by sharing the cup is that which results from sexual contact. In South Mustang, a man of commoner caste or above who had sexual relations with an artisan woman would have to undergo a protracted process of ritual purification that including bathing in sacred springs, drinking water containing gold filings, and consuming grain husks left over from brewing; husks are used for scrubbing kitchen utensils and are considered to scour the digestive tract of a polluted person. A higher caste woman who had sexual relations with an artisan man had no recourse to social reintegration through ritual purification.<sup>6</sup>

It is broadly accepted in the more recent social anthropological literature on South Asia that the caste status of individuals is not defined by the designated occupations of the castes in question. Most brahman men are not priests, but follow different professions as doctors, lawyers, airline pilots, and professional cricketers, among

<sup>4</sup> *tshe brtan lha mo ni sku drag gi bu mo ma yin la rigs rus mtho po gang min tshad red ces shod rgyud med par mo ni khyi tshang phal pa'i bu mo zhig yin* (*Phal pa*: 207).

<sup>5</sup> Aziz (1979: 58–66); Fjeld (2005: 48–50). For a discussion of the social significance of *grib*, see Schicklgruber (1995).

<sup>6</sup> Ramble (2014: 207).

others. The same is true of the so-called occupational castes, although the limited economic and educational opportunities mean that they account for a relatively small percentage of the professions listed above. Caste is defined above all by endogamy, and the general tendency to avoid inter-caste marriage ensures the perpetuation of caste identity, irrespective of the professional activities of the members of the group. According to a common convention, where a caste designation is a profession, the name is written with a capital initial. Thus, a tailor is someone who earns a living by making clothes, whereas a Tailor is a member of a Tailor caste and may be a university professor or factory worker who has never held a needle in his or her life. A significant feature of Trashi Palden's characterisation of Lhakdor is that it makes no distinction between blacksmiths and Blacksmiths. Whether by literary design or through alignment with the world view that would have been part of his formative social environment, he conflates Lhakdor's heredity, profession, and personality into a single disagreeable composite. While this equation may sit uncomfortably with a modern Western sensibility, it is surely representative of the view held by a great majority of rural Tibetans of the commoner caste and above. Authors who translate Tibetan works into English may struggle to render terms such as *rigs ngan*, one of several terms for "outcaste," without reproducing its literal meaning as "bad kind," or to decide from the context whether *ma rabs* should be "lower class" or "ill-mannered", but the distinction is an alien imposition by a right-thinking Western elite. (By the same token, the dissolution of caste distinctions advocated in the discourses of the Buddha or exemplified in the antinomianism of the *mahāsiddhas* is the stuff of pious tales, not respectable Tibetan village life).

*Phal pa* is not a didactic essay that has tasked itself to subvert the social order by endowing a blacksmith with the qualities of a hero (as would have been the case in a work of Party propaganda) or of a decent human being, like the Dalit Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. Lhakdor corresponds to the type of character for whom authors of a bygone era are castigated by the critics of our enlightened age: he is Shakespeare's Caliban or Mozart's (and his librettist Schickeneder's) Monostatos, creatures whose moral debasement is consubstantial with their heredity; like them he is black—not in complexion, but in appellation: to other villagers he is *mgar ba nag po*, the "black artisan", and he is said to have "black bones", a metonymic reference to his inferior patriline. Like these characters, he lusts hopelessly after the daughter of the patriarch—Prospero's daughter Miranda in the first case and Sorastro's Pamina in the second—but is brutally reminded that such loveliness is not for

the likes of him.

But just as much as Trashi Palden does not reproduce in Lhakdor the stereotype of the hero of the revolution or the self-evident humanity of a Dalit, he does not let his readers off lightly by creating a two-dimensional monster that we can easily execrate; he allows us into Lhakdor's inner thoughts, beyond the meanness and brutality, to his terrible sadness. Like Caliban in *The Tempest*, he is given some of the most poignant lines in the story. At one point, after suffering yet another thinly disguised (though well-deserved) snub by Döndrub and Tsheten Lhamo,

Lhakdor let out a long sigh. "So there it is," he said. "Since I have black bones I can't be white-boned. And yet, whenever one of us has died, I've never yet heard a body-cutter speaking of anyone having black bones".<sup>7</sup>

In another passage, sensitively translated by Riika Virtanen, Lhakdor "wanted to clear away his own lot of inequality, and pondered on how all people on earth might become equal, free and harmonious." He cannot understand, when enlightened Party policy has created equality, and the leaders are members of the working class who hold power,

the reason why people still had to look down on him. But this was a remnant of an old custom that could not be changed overnight. In the face of this reality he felt despondent, and with a tired expression on his face there was nothing he could do but sigh.<sup>8</sup>

The author's—and, we may suppose, his fellow-villagers'—understanding of the relationship between occupation and heredity is articulated in an encounter that occurs near the end of the book. Earlier in the story, at the onset of the Cultural Revolution, a friend of Döndrub's named Wangyal is dismissed from the position he holds as a secretary (*hru'u ci*) ostensibly because of his numerous dalliances, which are considered to be inappropriate behaviour. When he reappears more than a decade later, he meets Phuntshok and his brother-in-law Pemba, and the three of them have a drink together. For all these years Wangyal has been a metalworker in a factory.

It's been a very long time since we last met," said Wangyal with a smile, and he offered his beer cup. "Oh no, not for me—who's going

<sup>7</sup> *Phal pa*: 205.

<sup>8</sup> *Phal pa*: 252–253; Virtanen n.d. Virtanen's translation has been slightly modified here.

to share a drink from a metalworker's cup?" said Phuntshok, and they all burst out laughing. Then Phuntshok took the cup from Wangyal, and after passing it to Pemba he had a drink himself. "Well," said Wangyal with a frown, "there were others who didn't let me drink from their cup on the grounds that I was a smith."<sup>9</sup>

He goes on to describe his experiences in the factory, where a number of the officials under whom he worked were from artisan families. After listening to his story Pemba remarks,

"I see. So that's how this works. In this generation no one cares in the least that Grandfather Wangyal was a metalworker. But after a couple of generations you can be sure that people would say, 'He's from a blacksmith lineage'."<sup>10</sup>

There is, in short, an almost Lamarckian conception of caste status in terms of the inheritance of acquired characteristics: by working with metal over generations, blacksmiths eventually become Blacksmiths.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the novel the reader wishes that Lhakdor might perform some selfless and generous act that will persuade the community that artisans are just as capable of noble thoughts and deeds as anyone else; that he will succeed in doing what Party policy has signally failed to do in elevating him to a position of authority. Perhaps the expectations of Western readers have been conditioned by novels and films in which such demonstrations are commonplace. An outstanding non-Western example of the genre is Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*, in which the seventh member of the team is the boorish peasant Kikuchiyo, masquerading as a samurai. Rather like Lhakdor, he despises the higher stratum of society and yet desperately wants to be a part of it; his grotesque bearing and undisguised concupiscence mark him as an impostor; but—in addition to endearing himself to his companions and to viewers as the film unfolds—he achieves redemption at the end when he avenges a samurai comrade's death by killing the chief of the bandits, an exploit that costs him his life. There is no such redemption for Lhakdor. Embittered at the realisation that the social advancement he had expected with the policies of the Democratic Reforms was a hollow promise, he tries to gain the respect of his fellow-villages by performing an act of reckless bravado, when he is a member of a

<sup>9</sup> *Phal pa*: 566.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*: 569

<sup>11</sup> "For some Tibetans, particularly in Lhasa, it is the fire that constitutes the polluting aspect of a smith's work. In the iron factories in Lhasa, Tibetans of all backgrounds are employed, but only those of the blacksmith *rigs* handle the fire" (Fjeld 2008: 133, caption to fig. 12).

work team that sets out to mend a wooden bridge on a torrential waterway. Not only does he fail to save the construction, but he is killed in the process. Far from being hailed as a hero, he returns to haunt the village as a parasitic ghost.

We may envisage different reader responses to Trashi Palden's treatment of Lhakdor. Among these might be a sense that the author had missed an opportunity to eschew the perpetuation of a social stereotype by offering a more optimistic vision of the possibility of a more equal society. Alternatively, we might conclude that the novel is not meant to be prescriptive but resolutely descriptive, and that even if Lhakdor's character is not necessarily a true likeness of a blacksmith it is an accurate depiction of the way in which artisans are perceived by the rural majority. It is precisely this ability to observe and record village life through the eyes of farmers and herders, without the prism of a social or political project, that makes *Phal pa* such an important contribution to Tibetan social history. The following section will examine more closely the nature of this contribution.

#### *Phal pa and social history*

Until the mid-1980s, anthropological accounts of Tibetan communities in European languages were based on interviews with members of the exile community who left Tibet in 1959, or else on field studies conducted in Himalayan regions adjacent to the TAR. In the latter category, the first such study to be conducted by a professional anthropologist was Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf's ethnography of the Sherpas, published in 1964. Tibet at this time was on the brink of the Cultural Revolution, and it would be another two decades before any ethnographic research could be carried out in the region. Accounts about rural life in Central Tibet in the period between the dissolution of the Ganden Phodrang government and the end of the Cultural Revolution are nevertheless not completely lacking. There are at least three bodies of information that are particularly worth our attention in this regard. The first is the *Tibetan Oral History Archive*, an ongoing project comprising transcripts, with English translations, of interviews with clerics, officials, and ordinary villagers amounting to several tens of thousands of pages. The project, conducted by Case Western Reserve University's Centre for Research on Tibet under the direction of Melvyn Goldstein in collaboration with Lhasa's Tibet Academy of Social Science, covers three periods: pre-1959; 1959-1966, the years spanning the implementation of Democratic Reforms up to the beginning of the Cultural Revolution; and 1966 onwards, the Cultural Revolution

itself and its aftermath. The most important study of the period to depend substantially on this resource is *On the Cultural Revolution in Tibet: The Nyemo Incident of 1969*, by Goldstein, Ben Jiao and Tanzen Lhundrup (2009).

The second corpus to be noted is the Chinese-language series entitled *Social and Historical Investigations of the Tibetan Nationality* (Su 2019).<sup>12</sup> This collection is part of the results of a well-known project that was initiated in 1953 by the PRC's Ethnic Committee of the National People's Congress and the Central Committee on Ethnic Affairs with a view to documenting—and indeed defining—China's minority populations. The project was suspended at the onset of the Cultural Revolution with the dissolution of the Central Committee on Ethnic Affairs but resumed in 1978 under the newly-constituted National Committee on Ethnic Affairs. The project culminated in the publication of 402 volumes in five series. The section concerning Tibet belongs to the fifth series, and after revision was republished in six volumes in 2009 as *Social and Historical Investigations of the Tibetan Nationality*, under the direction of Su Faxiang. The six volumes are organised according to the areas of the TAR that are covered. Insofar as it focuses on Shigatse Prefecture, the sixth volume in this collection would be the most relevant for any comparative study of the general area in which *Phal pa* is set. The study consists of socio-economic surveys carried out in a number of monastic, noble, and government estates, and provides a great deal of information about land tenure, taxation, peasant rights, and living conditions as well as social institutions such as marriage practices.

In view of the dearth of Tibetan documentary material from the two decades following the implementation of Democratic Reforms, these two bodies of information are clearly of immense value. We should nevertheless be aware of the inherent limitations that might make them a less than perfect record of the period they cover. In the case of the *Tibetan Oral History Archive* we are dealing with individuals' recollections of events four or five decades after they occurred; *Social and Historical Investigations* contains a great deal of quantitative data, but it should not be forgotten that both this material as well as the neutrality of interviewees' recollections may be compromised by the circumstances under which this information was gathered. The point of this caveat is that the ostensibly factual character of these two bodies of material is not in itself an assurance of their reliability. Paradoxically, although it is presented as a work of fiction, *Phal pa*—the third source for the social history of this

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<sup>12</sup> The following brief overview is based on an extensive English-language summary of the work that was kindly made for me by Wang Yuewei.

period—may be a more dependable witness of events because its author was not constrained by any political agenda, and because he is describing events a very short time after they happened.

But to what extent can we consider a novel such as *Phal pa* to be a valid document for our understanding of the time and place it purports to describe? The question of course relates to the more general discussion of the relationship between fiction and history. The invention of the English language historical novel is generally credited to Sir Walter Scott, with the publication, in 1814, of *Waverley*, and the series of works that followed it. The genre proved to be so successful that the narrative style was adopted by professional historians as a way of making their researches more accessible to a general readership—authors such as Greene, Carlyle, and Macaulay. But there was a reciprocal effect on the public perception of the novel: “This blurring of the line between history and fiction appears to have given more authority to pure fiction as historical source”.<sup>13</sup> The willingness to accept fiction as a medium for the delivery of fact provided a valuable platform for the work of novelists such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and—most important for the present article—Thomas Hardy.<sup>14</sup>

For Hayden White, the distinction between a historical account and a historical novel would seem to be one of degree. In his well-known comparison of three historical forms—the annals, the chronicle, and the “history proper”—the main distinction is the extent to which the narrative element is developed in each. Narrative is the connective tissue that brings events into a meaningful pattern; it is not inherent in the events themselves, but is something imposed by the author, and its presence has been accepted in historiography to the degree where “the very distinction between real and imaginary events, basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction, presupposes a notion of reality in which ‘the true’ is identified with ‘the real’ only in so far as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity”.<sup>15</sup>

If the 19th century saw the mutually assisted rise of both historical fiction and narrativised history, an important precedent for conflating the two modes had been set even earlier, with the publication of Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722. The book is presented as an eyewitness account of the progress of the bubonic plague that struck London in 1665, by an anonymous saddler in Whitechapel. Defoe was not in fact present for much of it

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<sup>13</sup> Rogers (2001: 217).

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*: 218.

<sup>15</sup> White (1980: 10).



but derived his information from accounts that were published soon after the event and embellished these. Assessments of his achievement have ranged from “authentic history” at one extreme to “absolute fiction” at the other, although the truth is perhaps best formulated in Sir Walter Scott’s own conclusion that the *Journal* is “one of that peculiar class of writing which hovers between history and romance”.<sup>16</sup>

But if we are to look for a well-known writer of historical fiction with whose work *Phal pa* might profitably be compared, then it is surely Thomas Hardy. From the very time in which he was writing, the value of Hardy’s work for its documentation of rural life at that particular time and place was noted, and this appreciation has continued to grow steadily ever since, as 19th-century “Wessex”—Dorsetshire and the adjacent counties of southern England in which the novels are set—recedes into an ever more distant past.

Hardy’s Wessex was exotic for most of his readers: the peculiarities of the Dorset dialect, the archaic technologies of agriculture and animal husbandry, and, perhaps above all, the remnants of pagan festivals that feature so prominently in many of the stories, would have been quite unfamiliar to them. The daily life of Lingshong village, by contrast, is broadly similar to that of any mixed economy agrarian/livestock-rearing (*sa ma ’brog*) community in West-Central Tibet. The author of *Phal pa* does not attempt to reproduce the features of the Tsang dialect in the characters’ dialogues; and given the likelihood that even his city-dwelling readers—the rural-urban divide being far less marked in 1990s Tibet than in the England of a century earlier—would have had some familiarity with the economic and festive rhythms of village life, he would not have been describing activities that were unknown to them. Trashi Palden does indeed devote a great deal of time and meticulous description to the routines of the domestic economy, a feature that Riika Virtanen attributes (quite rightly, in my opinion) to the author’s wish to convey a sense of the reality of village life.

In assessing the relevance of *Phal pa* for Tibetan social history, it is important to note that the work itself is not historical; it is ethnographic. There is nothing in there in terms of either time or space that the author himself could not have witnessed. As far as geographical range is concerned, the action rarely leaves the territory of the village. If the district headquarters, the *chus*, where one or two scenes are set, feels a long distance away, the county seat, the *rdzong*, is positively remote. As a dramatic device, this unity of place, so to speak, is a highly effective means of conveying what must surely

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Bastian (1965: 173).

have been the sense of a locally bounded universe for Tibetan villages at this time. When pictures of Mao first appear in the community buildings, some people are astonished to learn that he is a human being; the major upheavals of these two decades—the Great Leap forward, the Cultural Revolution, the campaign against the Gang of Four, and other events—are presented without the stark violence and drama that are so familiar to us from accounts set in cities of inland China or even Tibetan flashpoints such as Nyemo during the notorious uprising of 1969. The epicentres of these movements are a long way away, and their tremors reach the village in the form of low-level corruption, economic deprivation, abuse of power by local officials, and a miasma of general cheerlessness. Villagers have very little idea of what it is they are periodically incited to demonstrate about. In one grimly farcical episode, cited by Tsering Shakya, everyone is instructed to shout slogans in condemnation of the Gang of Four. Unaware of the significance of the names Wang, Zhang, Jiang and Yao that he is denouncing, Döndrub supposes vaguely that there is a Tibetan named Wangyal Jamyang who has fallen out of favour.<sup>17</sup> On another occasion Dorje uses the expressive analogy of beer production to characterise the relationship between the Central Government and the rural periphery: he has recently heard, he says, that Party policies are like the best-quality beer when it is first drawn off (*chang dang po*); the policies in the TAR are like the beer that is drawn when water has been added to the fermented must for a second time (*chang gnyis pa*); “but then these policies become progressively diluted,” he adds, “until what we in the villages get is the thinnest beer (*sing khu*).”<sup>18</sup>

Simultaneously obscuring the past and the rest of the world beyond the confines of the village casts a spotlight onto the community and isolates it in time and space. The villagers are actors without agency, amid policies and events that have been determined far away and handed down to them, and practically the only arena that affords freedom of action is that of domestic life and interpersonal relationships. The meticulous and extensive details of people’s livelihoods, household rituals—clandestine as some of these may be—and community celebrations, both traditional and modern, are the work of a conscientious ethnographer for whom no detail is too insignificant to document. One even has a sense of the political and cultural myopia of which neophyte fieldworkers are often accused, in their failure to locate the communities they study in a

<sup>17</sup> *Phal pa*: 486; Shakya (2004: 168).

<sup>18</sup> *nye char nga'i go thos ltar na krung dbyang gi srid jus ni chang dang po yin pa dang / rang skyon ljongs kyi srid jus ni chang gnyis pa yin pa / de nas rim bzhin sla ru sla ru song nas nga tshor sing khu las rag gi yod tshod mi 'dug / Phal pa*: 500.

broader national and international context, and in treating them as “people without history”. In Trashi Palden’s case this myopia is surely not a failure but rather a technique calculated to underscore the remoteness of Lingshong from the national centres of decision-making, and it serves to circumscribe the theatre of his interest.

To repeat a point that was made above: Trashi Palden is not writing social history through the medium of a novel, but fictionalised ethnography. As Shannon Rogers observes, one of the achievements of authors such as Dickens, Hardy and George Eliot is “the creation—usually unconscious—of historical documents through the medium of fictionalised social commentary”.<sup>19</sup> Like the English authors cited here, Trashi Palden is creating historical documents based on his first-hand experiences and, perhaps, on interviews with people about contemporary or very recent events. In this respect we may contrast him with authors such as Hardy, and even more so Scott, who added a greater temporal depth (much greater in Scott’s case) to their novels by recourse to published historical accounts and, at least with Hardy, by combining personal observation with the testimonies of elderly witnesses. Yvonne Verdier argues that “Hardy’s Wessex is very precisely situated in time. Hardy emphasises this himself, and to this extent he is not writing historical novels in the sense that Walter Scott does”.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps so, but while Hardy is certainly less “historical” than Scott, episodes like the description of George III’s review of artillery in *The Trumpet-Major* were based on what Hardy had heard in his childhood from “old people who were present,” while his reconstruction of battles on the European continent relied heavily on well-known accounts of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>21</sup> Trashi Palden, like Hardy, bears comparison with Ranke—one of the founding figures of European social history—in his quest to present the past “as it actually (or essentially) was” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). While the question of the proper interpretation of *eigentlich* in this manifesto has proved to be a fertile source of debate among historians, in Trashi Palden’s case at least the dominant actuality is the enaction of activities and events, rather than any hypothetical essence that might underlie them. Ironically, the descriptions of both daily and seasonal activities, whether domestic or communal, as well as one-off events such as the implementation of particular national policies, are accorded a prominence that would be hard to find in many modern

<sup>19</sup> Rogers (2001: 218).

<sup>20</sup> “Le Wessex de Hardy est très précisément situé dans le temps. Hardy le souligne lui-même et en cela il ne fera jamais de roman historique au sens de Walter Scott” (Verdier 1995: 64).

<sup>21</sup> Rogers (1985: 221–222); for a list of Hardy’s probable sources, see *ibid.*: 230, fn. 10.

anthropological studies. The following list of examples of economic and political activities will serve as an example of the novel's engagement with such descriptions: an explanation of seed-to-yield grain ratios;<sup>22</sup> an excursus on brewing and sewing;<sup>23</sup> the establishment of the commune, including the procedures for the reallocation of land and property;<sup>24</sup> the distribution of Mao's *Little Red Book* and the policy of slogan-shouting;<sup>25</sup> an account of daily domestic chores;<sup>26</sup> the process of clearing a landslide;<sup>27</sup> an excursus on tea making;<sup>28</sup> an exposition of the pyramidal structure of political authority;<sup>29</sup> the rise and fall of political slogan-writing;<sup>30</sup> the dissolution of the commune and the process of redistribution of land and livestock to families.<sup>31</sup>

These are just a few examples of instances where the author departs from the main narrative to follow a tangential, sometimes almost pedagogical, byway along which he feels his readers should be led. Outside the economic and productive side of village activities there are similar set pieces in which he educates us about the non-material aspects of social life, including the domain of popular religion—which, incidentally, demonstrates remarkable resilience even during the bleakest years of the Cultural Revolution. These include a lecture by Dedrön on the technique for calculating whether a couple may marry or if their consanguineal proximity precludes them from doing so;<sup>32</sup> an account of an “operatic” Ache Lhamo performance, with a compelling portrait of an impoverished and elderly jester;<sup>33</sup> an oracular seance in which a spirit medium is invited to treat Döndrub and Chime Wangmo's infant son;<sup>34</sup> the pervasive presence of proverbs in everyday conversation, but especially on more formal occasions such as the lengthy mediation process that precedes Döndrub and Chime Wangmo's separation;<sup>35</sup> a description of children's games;<sup>36</sup> divination with the use of a rosary;<sup>37</sup> the

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<sup>22</sup> *Phal pa*: 118.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*: 135.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*: 149–154.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*: 167.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*: 174–175.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*: 188.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*: 210.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* 363 ff.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*: 372.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*: 489 ff.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*: 35.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*: 45.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.* 94 ff.

<sup>35</sup> *ibid.* 113 ff.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*: 129.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*: 201.

blessing of a newly-established household with butter and beer;<sup>38</sup> beliefs concerning twins and triplets;<sup>39</sup> the traditional procedure for making formal requests, with the accompaniment of beer and gifts;<sup>40</sup> an example of an elaborate (and, apparently, lethal) curse;<sup>41</sup> a technique for repelling hailstorms.<sup>42</sup>

While the descriptions of some of these situations are relatively cursory, certain events are singled out for more sustained attention. This is the case with two weddings: that of Tsheten Lhamo and Phuntshok<sup>43</sup> and, later on, of Butri (Phuntshok's sister) and Pemba,<sup>44</sup> when all the components of these complex events are painstakingly catalogued.

Marriage is, of course, a rite of passage, not a calendrical ritual, and for all the importance the author attributes to the former it is the seasonal ceremonies that have a special structuring role in the novel. The crucial significance of such rites for Hardy has been noted by Yvonne Verdier—herself an anthropologist—in a study of his novels that was left unfinished at the time of her death. Hardy, she says,

absolutely needs custom; he needs *a* custom, and above all a calendrical custom to enable him to develop his stories and to shape his characters' destinies [...] [Rural society] is not defined by universal rites of passage but more assuredly by the cycle of seasons, calendrical events, and works and days [...] Hardy invites us to consider the ethnography of calendrical rites through the dramatic use he makes of them.<sup>45</sup>

While constraints of space prohibit a more systematic comparison of the role that customs—and particularly calendrical festivals—play in *Phal pa* and in Hardy's novels, we may at least note the significance, in the former, of two seasonal ceremonies: New Year and the midsummer festival. Arguably these are the two most important

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<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*: 262.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*: 305.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*: 351, 406.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*: 410.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*: 358.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*: 290 ff.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*: 532 ff.

<sup>45</sup> "Hardy a absolument besoin de la coutume, d'une coutume, et en tout premier lieu d'une coutume calendaire pour monter ses histoires, nouer le destin de ses personnages. [...] Ce ne sont pas les rites de passage, universels, qui...caractérisent [la société paysanne], mais plus certainement la ronde des saisons, les figures du calendrier, les travaux et les jours. [...] Aussi est-ce déjà l'ethnographie des rites calendaires que, à travers l'utilisation dramatique qu'il en fait, Hardy nous invite à considérer" (Verdier 1995: 85).

occasions in the annual cycle of any Tibetan village, marking, as they do, the opposite ends of the diameter that bisects it. The vicissitudes of these two ceremonies over the course of the quarter-century covered by the novel are emblematic of the condition of the community as a whole. The summer festival is marked by the *'ong skor*, the ritual circumambulation of the community's fields, and it is no doubt significant that we find an *'ong skor* soon after the beginning and again shortly before the end of the novel. Whether or not the author intended this to signify that a long—and in this case nightmarish—cycle had been described and completed, the second event is a clear statement that life has at last returned to normal: in the nadir of the intervening decades we have seen the *'ong skor* being abolished in favour of a soulless and much-resented invented tradition: *ba yi*—literally “Eight One”—in commemoration of the founding of the People's Liberation Army on 1 August 1927.<sup>46</sup> Losar—the New Year—had also fallen into abeyance, with only a short holiday for the agrarian New Year (*so nam lo gsar*) being permitted. These and other cultural events, as stated above, would by no means have been so outlandish to Trashi Palden's readers as Hardy's descriptions of, say, Club Walking, the Skimmington Ride and the Mummers Play would have been to his; Trashi Palden, like any villager in Tibet between 1959 and 1979, had no reason to think that the abolition of the festivals might one day be reversed, and we might imagine that he perceived the prohibition that he had witnessed as a warning that, if they were not meticulously recorded, these and other cherished customs could easily one day vanish without trace. If, as Yvonne Verdier suggests, Hardy uses calendrical rites to structure his plots,<sup>47</sup> a similar case may be made for *Phal pa*. Perhaps in order to emphasise the point that the major festivals are not merely a decorative froth but are inextricably entangled with the real lives of real people, Trashi Palden makes them the setting for pivotal events in the story. Thus the horse race at the opening *'ong skor* defines the characters of Phuntshok and Lhakdor and the subsequent rivalry between them, and is evoked later in the novel as point of reference; the dance that follows it is the setting for the tryst where Tsheten Lhamo and Phuntshok determine to spend their lives together; the first Losar is the scene of the bitter row that leads to the separation of Döndrub and Chime Wangmo and the partition of their household.<sup>48</sup>

It is generally agreed that the most disconcerting aspect of

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<sup>46</sup> *Phal pa*: 418–419.

<sup>47</sup> Verdier (1995: 81).

<sup>48</sup> *Phal pa*: 99ff.

Hardy's novels for many of his urban-dwelling readership was the endowment of his rustic characters with intelligence. To his critics, this attribution was a fantasy that fatally undermined the pretensions of his novels to realism. As far as I am aware, such preconceptions about the rural population of Tibet are not current among its city dwellers, presumably because the boundary between the two categories is porous enough to forestall the emergence of such fictions.<sup>49</sup> Depictions of Tibetans as naive and indiscriminating are nevertheless to be found in the work of a number of contemporary Han writers. A well-known purveyor of this notion is Wang Lixiong who, in an article entitled "Reflections on Tibet," defended the widely-held belief that Tibetans have been lobotomised by the "terrifying sense of isolation and helplessness" induced by the unforgiving environment they inhabit.<sup>50</sup> This intellectual submissiveness, the argument goes, explains the Tibetans' unquestioning faith in the Dalai Lama and their acceptance of the feudal system, as well as the seamless transfer of this acceptance to the Maoist regimes and the dictates of the Red Guards. Wang's argument was robustly challenged in a riposte by Tsering Shakya (2002), but the myth remains deeply entrenched in the perspectives of certain writers.

I would suggest that Trashi Palden's depiction of Tibetan rustics would be just as discomfiting to exponents of this view as Hardy's "thinking Hodge" was to Londoners, though the subversive character of the novel is by no means obvious. As Tsering Shakya observes,

Tashi Palden's narrative is very much a production of the time and reflects the acceptable form of characterisation [...] [T]he text, while being nativist on the one hand, on the other hand conforms to the Party's line of reasoning.<sup>51</sup>

The novel was published at a period when Deng's reforms were well established, and the palpable resentment of the Lingshong villagers to the policies of the time are, as Tsering Shakya points out, entirely consonant with the official position of the 1990s. But perhaps the really significant point about the villagers' attitudes is not so much that they are in line with the Party policy of the time when the book

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<sup>49</sup> This being said, there does appear to be an unflattering topos of the "dim-witted nomad" (*'brog pa 'thom 'thom*) among sedentary farmers, as pointed out to me with some amusement by two friends, the late Guge Tsering Gyalpo and Porong Dawa Dargye—both accomplished individuals from nomad families.

<sup>50</sup> Wang (2002).

<sup>51</sup> Shakya (2005: 173).

was published, as that villagers are capable of critical thinking at *any* given time. Contrary to what we would expect of the typical Tibetan imagined by Wang Lixiong, Döndrub is rather sceptical of the spirit medium who has been invited to treat his son,<sup>52</sup> just as he is sceptical about the benefits of collectivisation, slogan-shouting and other Party initiatives; and while he works in the harshest conditions as the commune's goatherd, the only moment of anxiety he ever experiences outdoors is when he climbs on to his roof one New Year's morning and thinks for a moment that the village may be on fire when he sees red flags flying above every house.<sup>53</sup>

### *Extended Synopsis*

The backbone of the novel is provided by the character of Döndrub, the head of the eponymous "ordinary household." He is described as being tall and lean, and "still in his prime". He has two daughters, Tsheten Lhamo and Drolma, and we find him near the beginning of the novel preoccupied with the question of which of the two should marry out and which should remain at home to inherit the household and take an in-marrying groom, a *mag pa*. The other members of the household are his wife, Chönyi Angmo, and his mother, Dedrön. He and his mother would like to keep Tsheten Lhamo at home, but Chönyi Angmo would prefer to retain Drolma.

During a discussion about prospective suitors for the girls the question of incest-avoidance arises, and Dedrön explains the principle whereby marriageability can be calculated by using the parts of one's arm to represent ascending generations. Candidates for marriage are represented by the extremities of the fingers, and ascending generations correspond to the finger joints, the wrists, the elbow and the shoulder. If the prospective couple have no common ancestor at any of these points—six generations—they are considered to be marriageable.<sup>54</sup>

It is summer, and the villagers are preparing for the *'ong skor*, the ceremonial circumambulation of the barley fields to ensure their protection. Religious activity and traditional festivals are still permitted at this stage, and the procession is even led by a monk on a white horse whose role it is to keep down the obstructive demons

<sup>52</sup> *Phal pa*: 94ff.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*: 278.

<sup>54</sup> Variants of this method of computation are to be found in other Tibetan communities. In parts of Mustang, for example, a couple may not have a common matrilineal ancestor between the fingertips and the wrist—four generations; having a common patrilineal ancestor in any ascending generation would disqualify the couple from marriage.



known as *sri*. As is usual with such agrarian summer festivals, this one features a much-anticipated horse race. The likeable young man name Phuntshok, for whom Tsheten Lhamo has a special affection, comes second. The race is also the first real opportunity for us to see something of the character of Lhakdor, who is from a blacksmith family. There has recently been an official declaration to the effect that the distinctions between social ranks that were traditionally observed in Tibet are to be dissolved: everyone is now “the same”—at least, in terms of ranking categories based on heredity, because stratification based on other criteria are soon to be enforced. Lhakdor suffers deeply from the social stigma of being a blacksmith. He is naturally delighted at the abolition of the social distinctions that disfavoured him but craves respect and recognition. Part of tragedy throughout the novel is that, in spite of official Party policy, all his efforts to earn respect go awry, and serve only to confirm people in their low opinion of him. His behaviour at the horse race is just the first of many instances of these failures. We are told that he looks after his horse well; but the night before the race he feeds the animals on meat and tea, which makes it uncontrollable the following day. When it refuses to respond to his commands and causes him to miss the race, badly, he is enraged at being let down and flogs it viciously. People watch this spectacle with contempt, and one remarks, “He really is a blacksmith (*mgar ba rang red*).” The race is followed by a performance of the Ache Lhamo, the so-called “Tibetan Opera”.

After a description of gendered division of domestic labour, the action returns to the festivities, where a village dance is now in progress. The occasion affords Phuntshok and Tsheten Lhamo, who have been close friends since childhood, to exchange intimacies and discuss the possibility of a future life together. Tsheten Lhamo’s family are wealthier than Phuntshok’s, and he is convinced that her parents will never agree to her marrying him. The reason is not so much the difference in wealth as the rules—or rather, conventions—of residence in marriage. In much of Central Tibet, residence is virilocal; that is to say, the bride takes up residence in her husband’s house. In a house with no sons the eldest daughter inherits and takes an in-marrying husband—the *mag pa* of the household. The difficulty for the young couple in the story is that Phuntshok is an only son, and, according to convention, should remain at home to inherit the household. He is aware that her father Döndrub wants to keep her at home as the heiress of the house. Döndrub is indeed determined to keep Tsheten Lhamo at home and resents his wife and younger daughter’s scheme to “turn my [elder] daughter out like a dog”.<sup>55</sup> On

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<sup>55</sup> *Phal pa*: 55.

the last page of the chapter his thoughts travel back several years to introduce a flashback that opens chapter two.<sup>56</sup>

It is eight years earlier, and there is an atmosphere of acute tension in the household. Chime Wangmo is patently favouring the younger daughter Drolma over her elder sister Yeshe Lhamo, and physically abusing the latter. Döndrub's mother Dedrön tells her son that she will starve herself if he does not intervene in the matter; she is particularly incensed because Chime Wangmo has hit the girl over the head for no reason. Unable to endure the conflict and the pressure Döndrub flies into a rage. He smashes a cup and declares that he will not take sides in family disputes. His maternal uncle, Dawa, is a calm voice of reason and good counsel, and has the family's best interests at heart. Döndrub is considering splitting the household into two units, but Dawa advises him against such a drastic move, and reassures him that it is perfectly normal for a family to quarrel.

In spite of Chime Wangmo's continuing abuse, Tshering Lhamo remains a model daughter. She spends a good deal of time with her favourite playmate, Phuntshok, but takes good care of her younger sister Drolma. When she carries Drolma in a blanket on her back, neighbours remark affectionately that she is "like a flea carrying a louse."

The authorities announce a plan to create a school, and boys and girls between the ages of thirteen and sixteen are expected to attend. Neither Tsheten Lhamo nor Drolma is keen to go to school. The school is to serve six villages in the *shang*, and since no building materials are provided the villagers proceed to tear down the Buddhist temple, and the wooden covers of the books are used as writing tablets by the pupils. After some discussion, Drolma is the one who is chosen to go to school; Tsheten Lhamo must stay at home and work. She and her paternal grandfather, Jowo Lhundrub, take care of the animals together, and he even cites a proverb to the effect that the task of tending livestock falls to people twice in their lives: first when they are children, and again when they are elderly.<sup>57</sup> In the course of the conversations while they are together, Powo Lhundrub accidentally lets Tsheten Lhamo into a family secret: she is not Chime Wangmo's daughter; she is actually the daughter of Döndrub's first, and now deceased, wife.

Tsheten Lhamo learns about her origins in the third part of the chapter, in a flashback that is introduced by her grandmother Dedrön, who decides to tell her the full story. Tsheten Lhamo's real

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*: 56.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*: 68.

mother is named Yangdzom. She has fallen seriously ill, but there is no doctor to take care of her. Her illness is interpreted as being the result of karma from a past life. Yangdzom has been the perfect wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, and the household has lived in complete harmony. But this idyll is too good to last, and Yangdzom dies at dawn. Three days after her death a sky burial is performed. Döndrub becomes increasingly withdrawn and morose.

The fourth part of the chapter takes us to the autumn following the death of Yangdzom. Tsheten Lhamo is just thirteen months old, and her father and grandmother have diametrically opposite attitudes to her: for Dedrön, she is an unbearable reminder of her beloved daughter-in-law Yangdzom; to Döndrub she is the only source of happiness in his life.

Now we learn more about the economic status of Döndrub's household in the village. His landholding amounts to one quarter of a full tax unit (*rkang*), which is "by no means small" (*chung chung ma yin*).<sup>58</sup> As far as livestock is concerned, he owns 30 sheep or goats (*ralug*). Although he is a capable farmer and herder, his uncle Dawa is able to shear two sheep in the time that it takes him to shear one. Dawa advises Döndrub to remarry. The family's landholding, as he points out, is too large for one man to manage all by himself. He knows of a young woman from Dzongkar who would be an ideal match: she is from "a pure family line" and speaks both Tibetan and Chinese. When he speaks of Yangdzom he never mentions her by name, but as '*das po*—"the deceased one." Döndrub reluctantly agrees: Tsheten Lhamo, he reflects, will still be young enough to think that the new wife is her real mother, but he refuses to consider the prospect of remarrying until the *lo mchod* ceremony, which marks the passage of a full year after the death of a person, has been completed. The *lo mchod* will be held in the eleventh month, and his marriage to his new bride will take place in the new year. On the appointed day, Chime Wangmo arrives amid ceremony, and immediately endears herself to Döndrub and his mother by taking care of Tsheten Lhamo. After eighteen months Drolma is born; and Chime Wangmo's character takes an unexpected turn.

In the fifth part of the chapter we return to the present time, where Tsheten Lhamo has just heard all the above from her grandmother. A month after starting school, the pupils are given a test; Drolma comes last and is publicly humiliated. Her grandmother comforts her, reassuring her that girls are not meant to go to school anyway; in fact, it is only monks and the sons of aristocrats who should receive an education. She goes on to console her for her humiliation by

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<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*: 83.

cataloguing the dreadful punishments that were meted out to schoolchildren in the past but adds that things are no longer thus in the modern era. Drolma avoids classes for three days, keeping the company of the cows and her grandfather, but eventually returns to school. By this time, she and Tsheten Lhamo have a baby brother, Buchung.

In the spring of that year there is an outbreak of dysentery in the community. The villagers consult an oracle, who declares that the epidemic is the result of hunting by the Chinese army, which has angered the local territorial god (*yul lha*), and he has retaliated by unleashing this affliction. Dedrön, Chime Wangmo, and Buchung are stricken and although Döndrub wants to take them to the army doctor his grandmother demurs, preferring the ministrations of the spirit medium. Speaking through his oracle, the divinity blames the family for the illness, but although he holds his peace Döndrub is bewildered about why they should be punished for transgressions committed by the army. The oracle further declares that Buchung is a special child, and when word of this gets around villagers come to the house to receive a blessing from him. The various rituals that are performed for the sick child are ineffective, and in the face of strenuous opposition from both his mother and his wife, Döndrub takes Buchung to the hospital at the district headquarters (*chus*). Here a doctor berates him for leaving matters so late and tells him to go to the country (*rdzong*) hospital, which has better resources to deal with such a desperate case. But by now the boy's condition has deteriorated so badly that nothing can save him, and he dies in his father's arms. The oracle announces that there was no remedy anyway since this was a case of "left-over life" (*tshe lhag*), in which an individual lives out the remainder of a previous incarnation that was cut short.

Although the family slowly come to terms with their loss, Buchung's absence is still felt during the New Year festivities. As in the case of other village festivals, the occasion gives the author an opportunity to describe a quintessentially Tibetan celebration in close ethnographic detail. One of the events of the ceremony is a ritual of propitiation for the territorial god known as *chu dar*, in which a young girl from a well-to-do house is chosen to play a prominent role, and Tsheten Lhamo is selected for this honour. Dedrön gives the girl her jewelry to wear for the occasion, something that enrages Chime Wangmo, who feels slighted at the thought that she has been bypassed in the transmission of property that should customarily pass through the line of senior women of a household. Döndrub tries as usual to mollify his wife by reassuring her that Dedrön's gesture is merely a loan for the occasion, but she remains implacable, and the

sight of her step-daughter wearing this finery on the occasion of the ceremony only intensifies her fury. Döndrub diverts his frustration to his mother, saying that she should have consulted him first, but she too snaps at him angrily. There is a hostile confrontation between Dedrön and Chime Wangmo, and even though Uncle Dawa, ever the peacemaker, tries to calm his sister by citing the proverb that “even a nun can be a king for the sake of peace in Tibet”, it is clear that the rift in the family is now irreparable.

Chapter three opens onto the scene of a tense and unhappy family. Chime Wangmo has taken to making *chang* clandestinely for her own consumption, and blatantly favours Drolma over her step-daughter by giving her pieces of meat. Although she protests to her mother-in-law that the *chang* was intended for the elderly, Dedrön forbids her entry to the pantry by locking the door. Chime Wangmo retaliates by locking Dedrön out of the house altogether on the grounds that a thief might enter while the other family members are away. Following a further confrontation in which Dedrön accuses Chime Wangmo to her face of drinking and stealing, Döndrub intervenes and declares that he has no choice but to divide the household. Word of the rift gets around the community and it becomes a talking point: “If the bride is a thief,” people mutter, “how can a household survive?” But opinions in the village are divided, with some people blaming the older members of the family and some the younger generation. Prominent members of the community—including Ngawang, one of the village’s representatives at the level of the *shang*—and Döndrub’s uncle, Dawa, are invited to mediate in the process of dividing the household and its property. The author devotes a substantial part of the chapter to this occasion, the like of which he must surely have often witnessed in his own village. One striking feature of the description is the extent to which all the speakers make use of proverbs during their interventions. After a great deal of discussion of the pros and cons of splitting the family, Döndrub decides in favour of a division, and invites one of the local leaders (*u yon*) to oversee the allocation of domestic property to each of the two hearths. According to the new arrangement, Drolma lives with her mother, Chime Wangmo, while Döndrub, his mother and his elder daughter Tsheten Lhamo form the other unit. For these three, the solution is a happy one. Tsheten Lhamo works hard and is a delight to her father and grandmother. Drolma, too, works hard at carding and weaving, but her mother is less indulgent with her than in the past, and beats her without reason.

These domestic developments are taking place against the background of more momentous changes in the country, and the ripples of these far-off upheavals begin to reach the village. There is

an intensification of political propaganda, and the better-off families begin to feel themselves threatened by the anticipated measures. Poorer families are especially welcomed at the now-daily meetings, and Chime Wangmo sees this new trend as a something potentially advantageous for her situation. In spite of the general ambience of domestic harmony in his home, Döndrub is troubled—not yet by the political wind that is blowing, but because of his anxiety about Tsheten Lhamo's future. As the eldest daughter of a sonless household she should remain at home and take an in-marrying *mag pa* as her husband. The problem for Döndrub is that, as far as he is concerned, the only candidate (and there are many suitors) worth considering is his daughter's childhood sweetheart, Phuntshok; but as an only son, Phuntshok will no doubt be required to remain at home to inherit his own household. Indeed, his father Dorje has visited Döndrub on more than one occasion to request Tsheten Lhamo's hand in marriage to his son. Without much hope of success, Döndrub nevertheless summons up his courage and pays a visit to Dorje. The family are poor, and while their relative indigence is what has convinced Phuntshok that Tsheten Lhamo's family would never accept him as a son-in-law, it also makes him a promising candidate for training as a future party cadre. Döndrub puts the question to Dorje who, to his surprise, graciously agrees to the match: it transpires that the benevolent and discreet Uncle Dawa has previously approached Dorje to prepare him for Döndrub's visit, and to persuade him of the advantages of the arrangement that he will propose. The wedding is duly set for the following February, at the beginning of the new year. The general atmosphere of relief and euphoria that ensues offers an appropriate point of departure for the author to insert an interlude about the games that the village children play, and between a passage about the preliminary political education that Phuntshok receives and a scene of chaste romanticism between him and Tsheten Lhamo, the author offers an ethnographic description of domestic activities, notably sewing and *chang*-brewing.

But this idyll, too, is threatened when Phuntshok learns that he will have to go to Lhasa for two years of training. On learning about this, Tsheten Lhamo bemoans her wretched *karma* while angrily attacking Phuntshok for having failed to consult her on the matter. One of the more perspicacious, if rather grim, proverbs that are cited in the midst of these exchanges runs: "With the law of the nation above and community tradition below, forget about any freedom to do as you please."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *mtho rgyal khab la khrims dang 'og sde pa la'ang srol yod pas de ltar rang snang gang dran byed rgyu ga la yong.*

Tsheten Lhamo's desolation in the face of Phuntshok's imminent departure for Lhasa is not alleviated by the visits of neighbours who come by ostensibly to console her but cannot resist warning of the dangers of the big city: Lhasa is a place of thieves and cars, and who know what other potential threats to Phuntshok's safety and fidelity. In the course of a brief moonlit meeting Tsheten Lhamo tells him of her fear that he will leave her for a sophisticated city girl, but he protests that this will never happen, and the two swear an oath of loyalty to each other. Following a simple wedding at home Phuntshok sets off for the city.

Most of the fifth part of the chapter is devoted to the political and economic reorganisation of the village with the establishment of a commune (*kung hre*). There is widespread anxiety about the prospect of collectivisation, and the sense of loss felt by many people at the appropriation of their fields. Moreover, livestock owners no longer have any say in the matter of whether their animals are to be slaughtered or not. An incidental concern is the abolition of the office of the village weather-maker, whose task it was to perform rituals to protect the fields from hail. There is indeed a storm, and Döndrub and Dorje are about to set out to check the fields but Dedrön stops them: there is no point in going, she says; the fields are now part of the collective, and they do not need to feel any responsibility for them. The dismissal of the weather-maker is part of a more general erosion of agrarian rituals; for the first time this year the *'ong skor*, the annual ceremony of protecting the fields by circumambulating them, will no longer be performed.

The redistribution of property takes place at a public meeting at which political speeches are made and the PLA is present. People are sternly warned that any foot-dragging may lead to offenders being marked as counter-revolutionaries. Döndrub loses his best field but asks to be allowed to keep his ageing donkey, even though this leads to accusations that he is private-property-minded. It very soon becomes apparent that collectivisation is going to bring with it a raft of unexpected hardships.

The reader's vantage point on these developments, as it is throughout most the novel, is the "middle" range of the socio-economic hierarchy represented by Döndrub's family, most of whom are displeased and disturbed by the changes that are taking place. However, the lower echelons are the winners here, and no one in the novel is more enthusiastic about the situation than Lhakdor the Blacksmith. His now-elevated status has made him bolder, and he visits Tsheten Lhamo with increasing frequency. While he hopes that his new social standing will induce her to treat him with the respect he was always denied, she deftly uses the transformation as a

distancing mechanism, addressing him formally by his title rather than his personal name. Irritated by her aloofness he asks her if she misses Phuntshok, and then adds that she might as well forget him since he is unlikely to be back for many years. The general stress of the situation causes Dedrön to fall ill, leading Döndrub to view the collective system with even greater loathing, since the strict work roster prevents him from staying at home to take care of his mother. Tsheten Lhamo, in the meantime, does her best to avoid Lhakdor, who is consumed with envy and longing; but always scheming.

The political situation continues to intensify at the beginning of chapter four. Years are not given, but we know that it must be 1967 or 1968 because there is a new term in the air: Cultural Revolution. Posters of Chairman Mao—already a familiar name, of course—begin to appear in public places. When people learn the identity of the man who features on the poster, they are astonished to discover that he is just a human. The *Little Red Book*, too, makes its appearance, and the villagers must now brandish it and shout slogans from it during official events. Dedrön has passed away in the spring, and Döndrub—who is now the donkey driver for the commune—and Chime Wangmo begin to grow closer again. Uncle Dawa, wise as ever in village matters, counsels Döndrub not to let this rapprochement happen too soon or too obviously, or else it will reflect badly on Döndrub's late mother—his sister—who will then be blamed for having driven a wedge through the family.

Tsheten Lhamo, in the meantime, is alarmed by another rumour, to the effect that her sister Drolma and Lhakdor the Blacksmith are becoming overly (as she sees it) friendly. Drolma defends Lhakdor with the remark that “now that he's an official he doesn't beat iron any more”,<sup>60</sup> to which her elder sister replies with a lecture on the nature of blacksmiths: that they are social marginals not because they beat iron but because of their hereditary character. She warns Drolma that if she associates too closely with Lhakdor she will no longer be able to share utensils—to “mix mouths”—with the rest of her family; she will be like the proverbial white crow that is conspicuously set apart from its fellows.

At a meeting that is held a few days later it is announced that one of the officials, Wangyal, is to be sacked from his privileged position, and reduced to being a metal-worker. The implied distinction between a blacksmith and a metal-worker is significant, because the matter is raised again at the end of the novel when the more drastic reforms of the Cultural Revolution are consigned to history, and Wangyal's rehabilitation illustrates the point that the mere fact of

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<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*: 172.



working with iron does not make one a blacksmith. The reason cited for Wangyal's fall from grace is his past record of dalliances with women, which is taken as evidence of "bad behaviour". Döndrub, who likes Wangyal, cannot see why his private life should have any relevance for his aptitude for political service.

Tsheten Lhamo misses Phuntshok more and more, and the fact that he has stopped writing convinces her that he has found another woman in Lhasa. Pachung, the postman with a fine white horse, teases her about her ill-concealed anxious anticipation. Conditions on the commune, meanwhile, are becoming harsher, and Döndrub, whose landholding was "by no means small," is subjected to criticism and opprobrium for his former prosperity. Now we meet a friend of his, Yeshe Palzang, who is described as a *grong chog pa*, a "village ritualist." When Döndrub grumbles to him about the difficulty of belonging to the commune, Yeshe Palzang replies to him, *sotto voce*, that even though he is not a commune member he is by no means free (*rang dbang*): he is not allowed to plant or to irrigate his fields, and others shun him. As a diviner (*mo pa*) he had a collection of scriptures but was required to burn them all. However, even though he has lost his books and other ritual items such as his divination dice (*mo sho*), he can still exercise his craft clandestinely with his rosary. And indeed, he has been invited to Döndrub's house precisely in order to determine whether or not Phuntshok will be returning to the village. The prognosis is favourable, but just as Tsheten Lhamo exclaims happily that she will not have to wait much longer for Phuntshok's return, Lhakdor walks into the house and catches Yeshe Palzang with his rosary in his hands, and fixes on him "like a dog that has spotted meat." Realising that the situation is an extremely dangerous one for Yeshe Palzang, Tsheten Lhamo insists that the diviner is present at their insistence, and that he should not be held responsible. But Lhakdor is not going to let such an excellent opportunity go to waste. He reminds the trio about the severity of the consequences for them if he reports the matter. However, he will consider dropping the matter ... if Tsheten Lhamo agrees to marry him. Döndrub is consumed with rage, inwardly excoriating Lhakdor as a "vile artisan" (*mgar nag*) but manages to control himself. Addressing Lhakdor calmly and respectfully as "honourable representative of the state" (*chab srid lags*), he suggests that just as clay and bronze images should not be kept in the same shrine, so it would be inappropriate for him to consider living under the same roof as someone who is so much his social inferior.

After this encounter, the author allows us one of the few, precious insights we are given into Lhakdor's innermost thoughts. The spurious argument offered by Döndrub about the incompatibility

between his daughter and Lhakdor notwithstanding, he is under no illusions: the real reason for Döndrub's demurral is the inferior status that has dogged Lhakdor into an era where such distinctions are supposed to have been abolished. He and others of his class are said to be "black-boned," but he has never yet heard a body-cutter speak of dismembering a corpse and finding it to have black bones.

Having suffered a series of rejections by Tsheten Lhamo, Lhakdor turns his attentions to Drolma, who is altogether more accommodating in spite of her family's warnings. She nevertheless rejects his all-too unsubtle advances, and when he accuses her of being an aristocrat the author reminds us that she is not in fact a member of the nobility but a mere commoner.<sup>61</sup> Lhakdor is still in two minds: he has strong feelings for Tsheten Lhamo, but he knows from Drolma's indiscretions that she and her father have said abominable things about him, and furthermore, they are in transgression of the law through having invited a class enemy, a diviner, to perform a forbidden ritual for them. From then on, he becomes a frequent visitor to Drolma's house. Drolma's mother, Chime Wangmo, is under no illusion that her daughter is his second choice and mutters a proverb to the effect that the best meat goes to the wolf, whereas the fox has to make do with what is left.

The social consequences of associating too obviously with Lhakdor begin to show soon afterwards. Döndrub has invited Chime Wangmo and his uncle Dawa to his house for a drink, but in the course of the evening Tsheten Lhamo declines to share Drolma's cup and puts her refusal down to having a cold that she does not want to pass on to her sister. Although Döndrub strongly disapproves of Drolma's dalliance with Lhakdor, he nevertheless berates Tsheten Lhamo for her unsisterly behaviour, causing her to break down in tears. A few days later Drolma hears an angry altercation outside the house. A crowd has gathered around Lhakdor and Tsheten Lhamo, who are hurling insults—thickly larded with proverbs—at each other. Lhakdor, Tsheten Lhamo claims, has tried to assault her. Drolma, preferring her own reading of the situation, returns home content in the knowledge that her sister has not succeeded in seducing Lhakdor.

Chapter five opens with Tsheten Lhamo returning home, desolate and lonely, after Lhakdor's assault, but the novel's attention soon shifts from her private misery to the public ennui of the daily political meetings to which everyone is subjected. In a flashback to a meeting of the previous night, an official reads a government document that the assembled villagers are required to discuss. The

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<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*: 207.

grinding tedium of the event, in which most of those present are falling asleep, is lightened for a moment when someone breaks wind, but the depiction of the scene leaves us in no doubt about the consensus, evidently shared by the author, that such meetings are nothing but a futile waste of everyone's time.

After the meeting (we are still in the flashback) Tsheten Lhamo accompanies her friend Butri—Phuntshok's sister—back to her house, and on the way home she is attacked by Lhakdor. He begs her to sleep with him just once, assuring her that he will never bother her again afterwards. As he tries to grab her, she resists vigorously, yelling so loudly that villagers come running to see what the matter is. "See what sort of leader this is!" she shouts to the gathering witnesses, denouncing her aggressor for hypocrisy as someone who pontificates against impropriety but himself engages in such depravity. The onlookers marvel at "how such a sheep is transformed into a tigress," while Lhakdor feels her words "like machine-gun bullets in his heart." He slinks home, humiliated and wretched, telling himself that succeeding in winning her favour "would be like reaching the stars".<sup>62</sup>

But his humiliation is mixed with rage, first at himself—for not having approached Tsheten Lhamo more delicately—and secondly at the world, that such a pernicious system of discrimination based on heredity should exist at all. He is enraged at the upper classes in general and at Tsheten Lhamo in particular.

Unexpectedly, in the second part of the chapter, Phuntshok returns to the village. He had left in 1966 and it is now 1968. The much-anticipated reunion between him and Tsheten Lhamo is deferred while each wonders anxiously if the other has found a new partner during the separation. The fact that Phuntshok has come with a female companion only serves to exacerbate Tsheten Lhamo's uncertainty. However, it transpires that the companion is nothing more than a colleague (although we are told she would have wanted things to be otherwise), and after her departure, just as Tsheten Lhamo is about to set off to pay him a visit, he arrives at the door. Phuntshok has changed: he is stronger, sports a moustache and can no longer sit cross-legged.<sup>63</sup> However, he reassures his hosts of his enduring Tibetanness, and when Döndrub expresses his regret that he was unable to welcome him home with a flask of *chang*—because such traditional activities are no longer permitted—he says that

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<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*: 225.

<sup>63</sup> During a visit to Tibet in 1985 I was informed by someone who had spent more than a decade in gaol that prisoners were forbidden to sit cross-legged, as this was considered to be a distinctively Tibetan posture; only squatting was acceptable.

*tsampa* will do perfectly well.

As if to highlight the sterling qualities of the principled and disciplined young man who has just returned to the village, the next part (4) of the chapter opens with an almost caricatural picture of Lhakdor. The consensus in the community is that he acted like an animal in accosting Tsheten Lhamo because he is a blacksmith. We also learn that he periodically beats his wife—which whom he has not had conjugal relations for some time—and that every time he beats her, she threatens to leave him. Drolma is kind to him, but even here the author denies him the redemption of gentle feelings, since his foremost interest, as she slowly matures, is about “defiling her body.” There is, we are told, no difference between a blacksmith and a butcher.<sup>64</sup>

Tsheten Lhamo is only the first to refuse to “share the cup” with her sister Drolma, but others, too, follow suit. Döndrub, her father, continues to share the cup with her, only to find that he too is subjected to the same exclusion.

Lhakdor now has the office of field-guard (*'ong srung*), whose duty it is to ensure that livestock do not enter the fields. At one point he accosts Drolma, who happens to be passing by, and attempts to drag her into his field, but she is saved when some cattle enter the crops nearby and Lhakdor is duty-bound to release her in order to evict the animals—to the derision of the owner of the cattle. But his aggression has not deterred Drolma, who continues to treat him with affection, and when they next meet, and he is drinking *chang*, he asks her, with a combination of pathos and bitterness, whether she minds that her bowl, from which he is drinking, is now polluted. It is no surprise that Lhakdor is an enthusiastic supporter of the Cultural Revolution. He is the first man in the village to cut his hair short, and he becomes a member of the Red Guards. And yet he wonders why, when this new social order has been created, people continue to look down on him. His relationship with Drolma intensifies, and when his wife eventually leaves him, he takes a large grain allocation and moves in with Drolma and her mother. The latter resents his presence, but soon comes to appreciate the material advantages of sharing a house with a member of the politically privileged class.

The division of Döndrub's household leads indirectly to another culture clash. Döndrub and Tsheten Lhamo pay a visit to Chime Wangmo, and Döndrub sets about putting daubs of butter on the stove, the pillars and the door lintels to effect the auspices. While this gesture elicits approval from some of those present, Lhakdor makes a show of indifference, and remarks that this is “unnecessary

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<sup>64</sup> *Phal pa*: 248.

superstition". But Lhakdor's mother, Pedrön, again praises Döndrub, with compliments about his illustrious ancestry and the remark that this observance of tradition "makes us ashamed of ourselves". Lhakdor is wounded by the implicit put-down. But the disadvantages of having even a "middle-rich" heritage soon become apparent again. The work of rebuilding the houses has depleted the commune's grain stocks, and members of Döndrub's socio-economic category receive little or no surplus grain.

Chapter six begins with an imposition by the party that is resented particularly deeply. Phuntshok, who is the secretary (*drung yig*) of the collective and sits at the head of the row, receives an order that the forthcoming Losar—New Year—festivities must be organised on a much more limited scale than was the case in the past: there will be only five days of holiday at the Agrarian New Year (*so nam lo gsar*); there will be no *chang*, and the Royal New year, Gyalpo Losar (*rgyal po lo gsar*), which falls a month later, will not be celebrated at all. And so Losar in the year 1969 is a crashing anticlimax; normally the air would be full of juniper smoke and a Gutor (*dgu gtor*) ritual for the purification of the community would be performed, but this year there is none of that. Flag-raising, however, is permissible, and this provides the opportunity for a barely-noticeable gesture of resistance on the part of one of the villagers. Döndrub raises a flag amid the ruins of the broken shrines in the village; Lhakdor erects a red flag; but one of Döndrub's neighbours raises a flag with a vulture feather attached to the top. Döndrub asks him in bewilderment about the significance of this feather. The man replies that he does not know, but that attaching a vulture feather to a prayer flag must surely be a gesture of "superstitious faith" (*rmongs dad*)—and, by implication, a discrete act of subversion.<sup>65</sup> But this is just a shard of levity in a drab world; Döndrub looks out and sees the fiery red roofscape of the community; there are no rituals, no dances, no games. It is a scene of cheerless misery.

Even the muted pre-nuptial ceremonies for Phuntshok and Tsheten Lhamo's wedding are a cause of tension. The seating order is established, grain swastikas are set at the head of each row, gifts are given. Lhakdor, who never had much affection for Phuntshok in the first place, is infuriated by the spectacle of someone who is, after all, a member of the Party, indulging in the "Four Olds".<sup>66</sup>

Drolma is pregnant by Lhakdor, but there are complications with the labour and fears grow for the mother's life. Word spreads that the affliction has been caused by a witch, and Döndrub is convinced that

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<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*: 277.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*: 295.

Pedrön, Lhakdor's mother, is the offender. The family engage the services of a traditional doctor (*sman pa*). Drolma believes she is dying, and when Pedrön visits her, her behaviour is such that even the doctor is convinced that she is to blame for the problem. When she leaves the house, Chime Wangmo follows her to the door and throws a handful of ash after her—as one would do for a “ransom” effigy (*glud*) that was being removed from a house at the conclusion of an exorcism ritual. Realising that he lacks the wherewithal to help Drolma, the healer advises the family to bring a doctor from the county headquarters (*rdzong*). Lhakdor is unable to go to the *rdzong* because he is fully occupied with commune responsibilities, and Döndrub duly sets off on his horse under the moonlight.

In the *rdzong*, the county seat, he meets a doctor of his acquaintance who hastens to the village by truck, while Döndrub returns slowly on his tired horse. On returning home he finds that Drolma has given birth to twin boys, and he falls to his knees in exhaustion and relief, thanking the doctor and the others who have helped. Lhakdor has not been able to do anything to help in the crisis, but Döndrub, realising that the circumstances were beyond his control, does not blame him for this—especially since he sees Lhakdor's genuine frustration at his own powerlessness.

This is 1969, and tensions are mounting over the border between China and India. Recruitment for the army begins, and Lhakdor is among the first to sign up—much to the annoyance of his mother and his wife, who point out how unreasonable this is in the light of his having two small children. They argue that he should at least have discussed the matter with them before making his decision. He counters that as a party official concerned with security issues, it was incumbent on him to enlist, and besides, there are certain material advantages to be had.

As the secretary of the commune, Phuntshok is not in the first wave of recruits, but Döndrub is, and although Phuntshok offers to go in his place he is not allowed to. In the end, the whole recruitment process is a fiasco. The morning after the women have said goodbye to their departing menfolk, they see them returning to the village following their rejection on grounds of physical unsuitability or inadequate provisioning from their homes.

Chapter seven begins in the same year. We are squarely in the Cultural Revolution, and political campaigns are being conducted to root out and crush recidivists. Lhakdor has been promoted, while Döndrub has been condemned as “one who combines the private and the governmental” (*sger gzhung mnyam 'brel*) on account of his privately-owned donkey. He is made to work as the commune's goatherd. Phuntshok, too, has suffered a fall from grace. He is aware

of discrepancies between what is allocated to the commune by the higher authorities and what actually reaches the grass-roots level. There is collusion among several corrupt officials—one of whom is, of course, Lhakdor—who ensure that Phuntshok is in no position to denounce their activities. By July 1970 there is no tea in the village any more, and people use the bark of wild bushes to make substitute infusions; everyone is hungry. A girl called Pasang comes to Döndrub's house to beg for a little *tsampa*, but Tsheten Lhamo—who, in the meantime, has had a son named Lobzang—has to tell her that they have none to spare, though she does relent and invites her in for tea. Pasang's family have had debts to pay, and things are especially hard for them.

Phuntshok, a true idealist, is furious at the injustices that are being perpetrated. He is upset at not being able to perform his duties properly and goes so far as to investigate the situation in other communes. His enquiries lead him to oppose publicly the official party line which claims that each year's harvest is better than the last.<sup>67</sup> Well-wishers warn him that what he is doing is against Party policy, and that he is treading a dangerous path. In spite of the pressure on him to desist, he is determined to speak truth to power. People are not starving; they are clandestinely eating the unripe grain as it grows in the fields and taking a little home for their families. Eventually he submits a report on his findings to the county headquarters—a report that is “like dropping a stone in the water”. He has been looking closely into Lhakdor's activities, in spite of Döndrub begging him to desist. At a personal level, too, relations between the two families are strained. Lhakdor's twins have been bullying little Lobzang, which in turn further sours the already strained relationship between their respective mothers, Drolma and Tsheten Lhamo.

Phuntshok is summoned to the district (*chus*) office, where the officials have learned about the report he has submitted. He is questioned by an official named Liu—one of only two Han Chinese (the other being a water engineer) to appear in the entire novel. Phuntshok explains his actions, but this only provokes Liu to greater anger. In the face of Phuntshok's refusal to back down, Liu orders him to stay in the *chus* overnight and to make a public confession. He

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<sup>67</sup> While the widespread practice of inflating figures for the harvest enabled corrupt officials to purloin part of the produce, it resulted in particular hardship for farmers because of the obligation to pay a portion of their yield as a “donation” (actually a lease fee) and also to sell a part of their surplus to the state. If the harvest records were exaggerated, in reality there was no surplus, and farmers were in fact parting with resources they needed for their survival. For a discussion of this problem, see Goldstein *et al.* (2009: 61–64).

is confronted by a group of officials, some of whom accuse him of being a member of the execrated Gyenlok (*gyen log*) faction of the Red Guards, while others beat him, but still he refuses to recant.

The following day, Döndrub brings bedding for him, but is not allowed to see him. Although Döndrub tells Tsheten Lhamo nothing she guesses that something is amiss, and wonders if Phuntshok will go to prison. She visits Lhakdor in the hope of obtaining more information, but he claims ignorance. In spite of his hope that things will turn out badly for Phuntshok, he is nervous and uncertain; he goes to visit one of his coparceners who reassures him that he has no cause for concern. And so indeed it turns out. A committee under the presidency of a firebrand junior official named Dekyi Saldrön censures Phuntshok for his activities, and although he is sent home with a reprimand, the corruption that he was trying to uncover remains buried—to Lhakdor's great relief.

Weakened by stress and general hardship, Tsheten Lhamo loses the child she is carrying. She has aged, and her father Döndrub finds it increasingly hard to be out in all weathers with the commune's sheep. But it is Phuntshok who is the next to fall seriously ill. He is, as the author observes, like the proverbial cow that is sick in spring and will die in the autumn. Tsheten Lhamo begs Ngawang, a commune official, to excuse him from work, but Ngawang responds that the situation is beyond his control. In desperation, she puts on her finest clothes and goes to Lhakdor's house with a flask of beer—the obligatory accompaniment to any formal request in a Tibetan village—and an apron she herself has woven.

Her sister, Drolma, and her stepmother Chime Wangmo give her a cool reception, making inconsequential conversation, while Lhakdor ignores her and smokes a cigarette. She cannot help noticing that they not only have tea, but even oil to put in it. She pours a cup of *chang* for Lhakdor with the entreaty that he intercede in having Phuntshok excused from work. Lhakdor drinks the *chang* but tells Tsheten Lhamo that she should have asked him earlier, and that she should now try talking to the commune leadership. Drolma keeps the apron her sister has brought, and Tsheten Lhamo returns empty-handed. She visits Lhakdor again when he is at home alone, and he implies, none too subtly, that he will help her in return for the favours she has denied him so far—adding, with characteristic inelegance, that it will not be such a big matter for her now that she is a mother. He lunges at her and she tries to fight him off, but at that moment Drolma walks into the room, yells at her sister that she is a whore and spits in Lhakdor's face, declaring her intention to leave him: "Now we'll keep the knife and the meat apart", she says. But Lhakdor, paradox that he is, presents Phuntshok's case to the



commune, and he is excused from work. Although Lhakdor no longer lives with Drolma, he is required to support the children, and becomes embittered towards both Drolma and her mother Chime Wangmo.

Although Phuntshok has been demoted he continues to challenge the system and announces his plan to write a letter to an even higher authority than the county. Döndrub again wisely counsels him against this course of action.

Shortly after this comes one of a few episodes in the novel when a praeternatural element enters the story. Tsheten Lhamo and Lobzang are at home together when the young boy suddenly says, "Dad is bleeding from the head".<sup>68</sup> She goes out to investigate, and finds Phuntshok unconscious in a puddle, with a gash in his head and a broken leg, having been ambushed on the way home by unidentified assailants.

The leg is badly broken and needs to be set, but the officially recognised *chus* district doctor demurs, on the grounds that he is unqualified to carry out such a complicated procedure. Döndrub, in his frustration, curses him as a parasitic *za 'dre* demon. Döndrub and the other senior figures know that there is an excellent bone-setter nearby, but he has been publicly denounced and humiliated by being made to wear the notorious dunce's hat and refuses to come. The official version of Phuntshok's accident is that he fell down a set of stairs. Dorje, Phuntshok's father, clandestinely visits the bone-setter who reluctantly agrees to come, but only under cover of darkness. After examining the leg, he announces that the bones have knit, and will have to be rebroken. Although he doubts that Phuntshok will be able to stand the pain, the latter insists, and the bone-setter duly proceeds, accompanied by the recitation of mantras. Phuntshok's leg is repaired, but he walks with a limp for ever after.

Phuntshok has been a staunch supporter of the Revolution and of the Party's position, and his crusade has been directed against corrupt individuals who have been parasitic on the system, not against the system itself. Now for the first time, we begin to see cracks in his unquestioning dedication. Following a brief excursus on the rise and decline of the campaign of slogan-writing, we learn that Phuntshok has come to the conclusion that slogans are actually nothing more than "empty words". Cynicism and disillusion are general. There is a new leader in the commune whose mission is to create new irrigation canals. All the canals are dignified with "Red" names, but with the humour characteristic of citizens in totalitarian societies they are given irreverent nicknames, like "Waterless

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<sup>68</sup> *Phal pa*: 365.

Irrigation Canal" (*chu med chu yur*), while the official himself has the sobriquet "Canal Secretary" (*yur bu'i hru'u ci*).<sup>69</sup>

Phuntshok is engaged in a propaganda exercise against Lin Biao (who plotted against Mao and died in a plane crash in September 1971) and the Gang of Four, and all the men of the village are away from their homes. Tsheten Lhamo is alone at home when she goes into labour, but fortunately Lobzang returns home in time to bring her the wool and the scissors she needs. He then goes to inform Drolma, who makes a pot of tea and hurries to visit her sister. She lights a fire and blocks the draughts in the house, and remarks to her that she could have died without anyone knowing about it.<sup>70</sup> Döndrub returns home from the pastures and is shocked to find out what has happened.

Chapter eight opens with a watershed moment in the novel. A message has gone out to everyone that there will be an unscheduled meeting, but that no one should beat drums or laugh or wear good clothing. The commune officials are being closely watched by outside mentors. Various theories are put forward about the reason for the meeting; someone suggests that they are going to be told that they will have to eat wheat (as opposed to the preferred barley) *tsampa* again this year.<sup>71</sup> Four armed guards are present at the meeting. Flags are flying at half-mast, and there is a white flower on Mao's portrait.

Phuntshok realises what is behind the meeting shortly before Mao Zedong's death is announced. All the officials on the podium burst into tears and fall to the ground in a display of grief. Butri, Phuntshok's sister, asks Tsheten Lhamo what they are meant to do. Realising that they are supposed to take their cue from the leaders on stage she spits into her hands and rubs her eyes until they are red and wet. Others follow suit, but in spite of their outward show of bereavement all are trying to conceal their hilarity at the absurdity of the situation.

Back at home, the question is raised about the significance of Mao's passing: "Does this mean the old regime will come back?" To which Döndrub remarks, with resignation, that whether foreigners invade or the old regime returns, it will make no difference to the lives of ordinary people. Tsheten Lhamo tells him to lower his voice, because little Lobzang might repeat the conversation; but Lobzang, child though he is, assures them that he will not say a word. The young women continue to joke about the histrionics of the officials earlier in the day—"What an actor Lhakdor is!" It transpires that the

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<sup>69</sup> *Phal pa*: 375; Shakya (2004: 169).

<sup>70</sup> *Phal pa*: 385.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*: 389.

officials, too, had rubbed spit into their eyes before appearing on the podium.

In the course of a meeting it is announced that Mao has a successor. Lhakdor is profoundly relieved, since the rumour that the old regime might return has been taken seriously by many. People are told that they may again dance and sing. Changes are soon felt: the work regime is reorganised, and agricultural machinery is brought to the village. A programme of literacy is launched, but there are few promising youngsters.

We are soon in the 1980s, and the responsibility system is introduced. The new leader of the commune, noticing how capable Phuntshok is and how respected he is by others, elevates his status. Sonor, formerly a vocal detractor of Phuntshok, now comes to his house with a flask of *chang* to ingratiate himself. During the visit he reveals that it was he who had attacked him and broken his leg, because Lhakdor had persuaded him that Phuntshok was having an affair with his wife. It was also Sonor who had made up the story of Phuntshok's having fallen down a flight of stairs.

After Sonor's departure, Tsheten Lhamo, Drolma and Butri are incensed by Phuntshok's forgiving and conciliatory attitude. Phuntshok responds with a saying, that "there's no point in soaking a corpse in water"—Sonor had been using weapons that had been made by someone else; and besides, one should operate within the framework of the law; to which Döndrub retorts that the law is useless. Butri, Phuntshok's sister, leaves peremptorily and goes to Lhakdor house. Standing outside it, she yells out a dire curse that ends with the wish that Lhakdor should die an unusual and lonely death. Lhadgor himself, sitting at home with his mother, shrugs off the curse as the ravings of a madwoman.

But he is aware that times have changed, and that his power is on the wane. He finds himself increasingly marginalised, and, as before, people are unwilling to share the cup with him. Moreover, Pemba is now back from military service and has no patience for Lhakdor's attitude. In the course of an argument he seizes him, threatening to give him a thrashing, but Phuntshok and others break up the impending fight. In the rest of the community, there is a general resurgence of optimism: there are tug-of-war contests, people play cards and other games, and sing songs.

Lhakdor's eventual demise occurs shortly after this. A work party, which includes Lhakdor, Pema and Phuntshok, sets out to repair a wooden bridge that has been damaged. Lhakdor is in the current, holding a beam, when the force of the water suddenly increases. He is trapped in the torrent, clinging on to the beam. Pemba makes a move to help him but is held back by the others for his own safety.

Eventually, the strength of the current is too great, and Lhakdor is swept downstream by the water. A search party sets out to find him, and they go as far as the confluence of the river with the Tsangpo, but there is no sign of the body, and no point in searching any further. The fact that he has died in his prime due to an accident, and that the absence of a body makes it impossible to have a proper funeral, mean that this is a highly inauspicious death. Sightings of Lhakdor's ghost are reported, and he is feared and execrated in death even more than he was in life. An elderly blacksmith, distressed by this affront to the memory and reputation of his deceased relative, complains to the commune about the resurgence of "superstitious beliefs" (*rmongs dad*) in the community; but the Cultural Revolution is now long past, the monasteries are opening again, and such complaints no longer carry any weight. It is rumoured that Lhakdor's ghost is haunting them because they had destroyed monasteries and temples, but although people are afraid, they are reassured that 49 days after his death his consciousness will be carried away "like a feather in the wind."

One day, his widow Drolma goes to the storeroom of the house and sees him sitting on the sacks of grain, staring at her. Items have been disturbed in the room. When a severely shaken Drolma tells the family what she has seen, Döndrub explains that the ghost has been extracting the nutrition from the grain. They discuss the possibility of commissioning an exorcism by means of a "burnt offering" (*sbyin sreg*) fire ritual, but Döndrub is sceptical: "It would be hard to burn someone who was so wicked".<sup>72</sup> Drolma wonders why, when Lhakdor was apart from her most of the time when he was alive, he should cling to her now that he is dead.

The social changes that have already begun gather pace in chapter nine. Material conditions are improving, and traditions are being revived. Most people are now wearing factory-made shoes (though Döndrub still wears home-made rope-soled felt boots). When Pemba and Butri (Phuntshok's sister) are married, the prayer flags that Pemba raises are "modern-traditional" (*gsar rnying*), and Pemba even gets drunk. Chime Wangmo remarks to her daughter Drolma that "caste-consciousness is returning" and expresses her concern for the social position of her grandsons, Lhakdor's children.

Phuntshok is in charge of the redistribution of land and, as we might expect, he does his best to achieve an equitable allocation. Drolma, by contrast, has fallen low. A widow with three children and no income, and stigmatised by association with her late husband Lhakdor, she has no income, and is despised by the neighbours she

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<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*: 437.

visits as a pariah.

By the beginning of chapter ten we are in 1981. The communes have been dissolved and preparations are being made for the implementation of the so-called "responsibility system." A delegation of new officials visits the former commune building in Lingshong and are amused by the old-style—that is to say, pre-1979—welcome extended to them by Ngawang. The locals, for their part, are astonished by the attitude of their visitors, who eat with them and even play dice. The team makes house-to-house visits to canvass opinions on the ongoing changes. They enter Dondrub's house and catch him with his rosary in hand. He makes to conceal it, but they stop him, saying that what he is doing is perfectly proper. After some hesitation, he expresses the view that things are better now than they were either during the old regime of the Ganden Phodrang or during the Cultural Revolution.

There is another Losar ceremony, but on this occasion the event is celebrated with all the traditional rituals, including the expulsion of a ransom effigy at the end of the old year. The expulsion is accompanied by fireworks, in the midst of which Ngawang loses his hand in an accident.

The marriage of Pemba and Butri, Phuntshok's sister, is described in close detail. The rebuilding of Buddhist temples has begun.

Later in the year the village fields are threatened by a strange cloud that has formed as consequence of the death of a half-mad priest, but Dondrub knows enough to perform a hail-repulsion (*ser zlog*) ritual, and the cloud bypasses the village.

Chime Wangmo's health has been failing, and it becomes clear that she will not live long. On her deathbed she expresses her dying wish that Dondrub should take care of his younger daughter Drolma and her three fatherless children.

Phuntshok, in the meantime, has lost interest in being a public servant, but, ever the obedient follower of the current Party line, suggests to his brother-in-law Pemba that they should go into business together: he proposes that they take a loan from the bank and buy a lorry. Wangyal, the friend of Dondrub who had been dismissed from his position of political responsibility on a spurious charge of immoral conduct, reappears and joins the two young men for a drink of *chang*. The discussion about the status of blacksmiths that follows is discussed above in the main part of the article.

The novel ends on the eve of the *'ong skor*, the summer festival. Tsheten Lhamo and her sister Drolma are reconciled, Lhakdor's son by his first marriage is now working with his grandfather as an apprentice blacksmith, and Phuntshok and Pemba, having concluded their financial affairs in the district headquarters in preparation for

acquiring their lorry, are seen in the distance returning home just in time to take part in the horse race.

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# Some Preliminary Reflections on the Boundary between Man and Animal in Pre-Modern Tibetan Society

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## *Introduction*

**A**s far as we may ever look back into history and whichever region on earth we may take a closer look at, human beings always lived together with a great variety of animals in the same environment. And humans have always been aware that they not only share the same world, but that they also have a lot in common: a body which allows movement, sense organs to perceive the environment, communication, the need to eat, sexuality and reproduction, birth, age and death as well as suffering. This knowledge has been part of all cultures long before Charles Darwin explained to us the reason why humans and animals have so much in common. Sharing the same environment also meant a complex human-animal interaction, based on observation, attempts at establishing relations, fear, affinity, convenience, and even admiration and piety. In sum: Humans could hardly not relate themselves to animals in one way or the other. The attitude toward animals could be determined in very different ways: by considerations of usefulness, by aesthetic aspects, by emotions like fear or sympathy, by moral considerations, by symbolic and metaphorical perceptions of animals and animal behavior, and by the desire to dominate animals. The development of such attitudes toward animals was accompanied by social constructions and by semantics supporting them.

In Western history and culture, that is to say in the societies based on the Greek-Christian heritage, the most significant social construction in this regard was the development of the animal as a category opposed to humans in a binary schematism. In spite of the fact that animals actually comprise an incredibly great range of very different life forms, all species were grouped under one term, the term "animal", and contrasted with man as the complete Other. The social construction of such a fundamental opposition concealed for a long period of time that man is evolutionary closer to some species



than to others or other species to each other. The opposition was justified by judgmental attributions that vindicated a hierarchical relationship as well as a purposefulness of the hierarchy, i.e. the animals as the lower species lacking the quality of intelligence exist primarily for the benefit of the humans as the intelligent beings created by God as the crown of his creation. Such attributions became part of the semantics stored for re-use in different circumstances and for observing the societal environment.

On a larger scale, criticism and deconstruction of the social construction of animals in our society has only just begun. To a great extent, it is the result of the animal welfare movement and the fight for animal rights. This movement drew attention to the fact that the human-animal relationship has been largely neglected by sociology so far. The person who in Germany in particular tried to fill the gap was the late sociologist Birgit Mütherich (1959–2011). She was not only a pioneer in developing a new research field, but also a combative animal liberation activist. In her scientific work, she drew on Adorno, Horkheimer, and the Frankfurt School. She saw the human-animal dualism on the one hand as the heritage of a patriarchal culture of stock breeders and on the other hand as result of the specific image of man in the monotheistic religions that saw man as God's own likeness and made the animal "the projection screen for the evil, God-distant and anti-human."<sup>1</sup> Thus, she identified the human-animal dualism as the major reason for exclusion and discrimination processes in occidental history that culminated in the terrible events of the twentieth century. For her, "the animal" constitutes the deep-cultural form or prototype of the other, which has to be controlled, and at the same time serves as a model for related forms of action—from training and manipulation to deindividualization and exploitation as well as to anonymization and annihilation.<sup>2</sup>

I am not sure whether the attribution of the human-animal dualism in occidental societies exclusively to the notion of man in monotheistic religions unduly simplifies matters. However, this question shall not be the focus of my paper today. Instead, I want to make use of Mütherich's provocative theses as a backdrop against which I will briefly discuss the social construction of animals or "the animal" in Tibetan society. Two questions are put to the fore:

- a) How were animals defined in Tibetan society, i.e. in a society not coined by a monotheistic religion?

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<sup>1</sup> Mütherich (2005: 7).

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*: 25.

- b) Which boundary line does the Tibetan semantics draw between humans and animals?

In doing so I will not just rely on what Tibetan Buddhist scholars have written, but I will also try to find an access to unconscious beliefs which to a great extent guide people's daily behavior.

*How were animals defined in Tibetan society?*

The Tibetan-Buddhist cosmology also starts with a dualism. It contrasts the container world, *snod*, with the contained sentient beings, *bcud*. For sentient beings in general there are mainly two all-encompassing synonyms in use: *'gro ba* and *sems can*. They simply describe qualities all sentient beings seem to have in common: they move around and they possess a mind. The latter quality prevents notions of animals as a kind of machine, working on the base of a simple stimulus reaction scheme. By contrast, such a notion of animals developed in the later course of the occidental history. Also, quite common for denominating living beings is the term *skye bo* which refers to the quality that all living beings are born. However, this term is ambiguous because it is also used in a narrow sense to refer to "people" alone.

Then, on the next level, sentient beings are further divided into classes. Leaving the animist worldview with its three layers of beings of an upper, middle, and lower world aside, we have the classical Buddhist concept of six realms of beings presenting six principle options for rebirth. Only two realms belong to the visible world: humans and animals. Thus, at least for the visible world we have a dualism too: Humans as one single species are contrasted with the category of animals, thus ignoring that the category "animal" comprises in fact of a huge amount of easily to observe and very different varieties. While *mi*, the Tibetan word for "man, human", is apparently of very ancient origin, the standard lexeme for animals as a single category seems to be a later formation. It is a compound, composed of two verbs or two verb forms, meaning "those who move bent over" (*dud 'gro*). Obviously, the term was simply formed in contrast to man who stands and moves upright. Therefore, a clear categorical boundary was then not only applied to quadruped "who move bent over", but also to birds, insects, and all beings living in the water.

Although Tibetan language confirms that there is a clear categorical boundary between man and animals in Tibetan society, there is—unlike in Western societies—no strict ontological boundary between the two. This is on the one hand due to the animist

worldview deeply rooted in Tibetan culture, but on the other hand also due to basic Buddhist concepts which explain animals as possible one's own forms of existence in previous or future lives.

Moreover, as beings bound to the process of cycling through one rebirth after another, they are all considered as living beings to be liberated. Unlike in the Christian tradition, the program of salvation does, therefore, not address humans alone, but is in principle an offer directed to animals as well. The difference lies solely in the higher intelligence attributed to man. Animals are counted as one of the *mi khom pa brgyad*, the so-called "eight unfree states", because they are perceived as ignorant and as often living in a state of subjugation, and as such regarded as not capable of receiving and understanding the Buddhist teachings.

Thus, it seems that for Buddhist scholars the animal world was never a genuine field of interest. It mostly served as a kind of backdrop against which the ideas on man and his position in the world were developed. Symptomatic is the poor elaboration of the animal world in Buddhist works on cosmology. While the beings in the realms of the gods and the underworld are usually described in great detail, the description of the directly observable realm of animals lacks accuracy and elaborateness. Thus, for example, the Sa skya scholar 'Phags pa writes briefly in his work *Shes bya rab gsal*:

The Animals live mostly in the Outer Ocean, hidden in the depths like dregs in beer; since the big beings eat the small ones, and the small eat the big ones, they fear one another, and since they are moved about by the waves, they are without fixed dwelling-places. They exist also scattered among men and Gods. As for the length of their life, the longest is like that of the Klu Kings, which lasts for one medium Aeon; the shortest is that of flies, etc., which lasts but an instant. The size of their bodies varies.<sup>3</sup>

That's all. Striking is that the description is based primarily on canonical Indian sources and avoids referring to personal observations. Thus, it is possible that here—just as with regard to the beings in the realms of the gods and the underworld—untested statements about beings living in the depth of the ocean are put in the first place.

By contrast to the works of Buddhist scholarship, the narrative literature paid much more attention to animals. Already the classical Indian reincarnation stories, the so called *Jātakas*, acknowledge animals either as protagonists or as specific object of compassion, care or protection.

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<sup>3</sup> Hoog (1983: 28).

Well-known in Tibet is moreover the popular legend of the origin of the Tibetan people from the union of a monkey and an ogress generally interpreted by Buddhist scholars as incarnations of two prominent Bodhisattvas.<sup>4</sup>

Also, Tibet's oral literature includes many popular animal tales. Mostly they are about animals the Tibetans are familiar with. To some extent, the tiger could perhaps be regarded as an exception, as—to my knowledge—it only had a natural habitat in the lower-lying areas in the southwest of the Tibetan settlement areas. I assume that especially by narrating animal tales to each other, the common Tibetan people did not just have fictional figures in their mind but were referring to the social construction of real animals. Therefore, animal tales, together with proverbs and metaphors of the colloquial language, offer us specific clues to the social construction of animals as it was deeply rooted in the semantics of the Tibetan society in general.

*Which boundary line does the Tibetan semantics  
draw between humans and animals?*

By taking Tibetan animal tales seriously, I am ignoring a very common objection stating that although there might be some deeper truth in such tales, in the end they all are allegories and thus can be subsumed under the term literal techniques or devices. By contrast, I assume that animal folk tales are a window on a world in which man and animals were living close together. That is to say: I am neither interested in the entertaining function of the stories nor in their literary quality. Instead, I try to learn something about how in these stories the boundary between animal and man is drawn and which animals are given a higher status.

For my analysis, I will look into animal tales, meaning tales in which animals are either the main actors or at least prominent actors. The tales which I select are orally transmitted stories and not fables in so far as they were not invented by a concrete author to convey an explicitly formulated morality but belong to the folkloristic narrative forms. Nonetheless, in terms of content, the transitions can be fluid. Although these animal tales have neither a single author, date, and place of composition nor an explicit purpose, this does of course not exclude that we have to reckon with intertextuality between oral and written literature. And indeed, topics and plot structures of oral literature in general often refer to classical written stories. And probably this also applies the other way round. However, what

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<sup>4</sup> See e.g. *Rgyal rabs* (1981: 49–54).

counts in our context is the circumstance that these stories were part of the Tibetan popular culture.

The corpus of texts on which I base my analysis is the result of the fieldwork of a group of once young Tibetologists I had the privilege to be part of almost 40 years ago. And I am a bit surprised to see that—perhaps except for linguistic studies—not much has been done with this rich corpus of material in the meantime. One of the observations we made was that there existed quite a few stories which seemed to be very popular, because they were known in different versions all over the Tibetan plateau. It goes without saying that in the sphere of popular oral literature we can hardly speak of “canonical” or “correct” versions of the respective story. It would not only be a hopeless but also an improper undertaking to search for a pure “origin” of orally transmitted and formed narrations. For the most part, the people who narrated the tales to us were people unable to write and to read. Thus, they had received the tales themselves solely by listening to other narrators.

Animals acting as protagonists in Tibetan orally transmitted stories are strongly typified, meaning that the described character is attributed to the entire species, not to an individual animal. Thus, the animals in the tales rarely have a personal name like pets. They are simply named as “the fox”, “the hare” or “the tiger”. This is not to be confused with speciesism, i.e. “the practice of treating members of one species as morally more important than members of other species”,<sup>5</sup> but it can be a step in this direction. What is striking is that most of the interactions do not occur within the same species. Rather, the protagonists of these stories mainly interact either with animals belonging to a different species or with humans. In all relationships, communication does not appear to be a problem. It just happens. In most tales, humans and animals use a common language without this occurrence ever being explained. This, indeed, does not indicate a strict dualism. In a few stories selected humans have or gain the ability to understand the language of “the animals”, that is to say: not the language of just one species but of all species.

In most cases the topic concerns cunning, sometimes paired with a spice of malice. The fox is more intelligent than the wolf who is depicted as voracious but silly. The frog can escape a silly raven thanks to his cleverness, and so on. In general, it seems that the smaller ones are regarded as the more intelligent ones. Tigers, bears, and wolves are depicted in the stories as the most dangerous species, but Tibetan animal tales always offer solutions about how to deceive them quite easily through cleverness. Thus, the most dangerous

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<sup>5</sup> Duignan (2013).

animals do not at all appear as heroes who are worth to be admired just because they are strong.

By far the most frequent protagonist of the oral Tibetan animal tales is the hare. At the same time it is the figure with the most complex character. The hare more or less takes the role which in animal tales of the western part of the world is occupied by the fox. From the moral point of view, he is very ambivalent, sometimes good and helpful, but in most cases, he is just evil minded. Nevertheless, all stories express undivided admiration for him. In the entire ensemble of Tibetan animal stories, the hare is always the one whose cleverness surpasses the one of all other actors, including humans and even including lamas. He is not only clever, but also wily. For each hopeless situation, he for sure finds an intelligent solution. Thus, it is impossible to really catch him. At the end of the story it is always him who escapes, while others are either left behind badly damaged or even killed. Other actors, including humans, ask him for advice. When together with other animals, it is therefore him who becomes the leader. In a few stories, he helps others without having a personal profit, but in most cases, he harms them without any reason. He does not even shy at outsmarting his own friends. In single cases, at the beginning the motive might be revenge, but soon it becomes obvious that he just enjoys deceiving others and demonstrating his superior cleverness. As a leader, he develops a common plan of action, for example, robbing a lama. Then he lets his stupid animal friends do the job, driving them in a way that leads to their own ruin so that finally he is the only one left to reap the benefit of the evil action. In particular, those appearing strong and most dangerous, like wolves, tigers, and bears are often the chosen victims of his cunning. Thus, to the hare tales applies what otherwise has been stated about the fox tales in Western so-called "fairy tales", that is to say that the narrations are variations of one and the same topic: duping and outfoxing of the strong one through the courage and cleverness of the small one.<sup>6</sup> This motive has nothing to do with moral correctness. On the contrary, it celebrates "Schadenfreude" or gloating. And it does not at all matter that the bad guy is rewarded or at least escapes without punishment.<sup>7</sup> Whatever misdeeds the hare does, the listeners admire his cleverness and are happy that in these stories the weak one is always the winner and the strong and fearsome ends—due to fatuousness, arrogance and greed—as the loser we can laugh about. The listeners easily identify themselves with the hero of the story because they usually perceive themselves as the underdog in life.

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<sup>6</sup> Solms (1991: 201).

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*: 206.

Moreover, they are aware that the hare's bad character traits are nothing they do not recognise from their own character. Thus, the stories offer a possibility to relieve one's own guilty conscience for a while.

Although the figure of the hare can be found in the Buddhist *Jātakas*, these Indian tales about the previous existence of the Buddha are definitely not the source which inspired the character of the hare as it is prominent in Tibetan oral literature. In the *Jātakas* the hare has an entirely different character. The *Sasa Jātaka* (*Jātaka* no. 316) tells us how the image of the hare was drawn on the moon. As one of the previous existences of the Buddha, the hare appears in this story as a wise Bodhisattva. In the *Daddabha Jātaka* (*Jātaka* no. 322) we are dealing with the proverbial timid hare whose fearfulness causes a completely needless panic among the other animals. By contrast, in the orally transmitted Tibetan literature the hare is neither wise nor timid. Instead he is depicted as clever and cool.

As already mentioned above, it is striking that the plot structures of the hare tales are more or less the same as those of the fox tales in other parts of the world. The reason why is still open to speculation. I have no clue what exactly predestines the hare to take the role otherwise reserved for the fox. The fox is well-known everywhere as an animal that steals goose and chicken. But the hare is not an animal of prey but a herbivore that runs and flees. Thus, people hardly could have had any bad experience with this animal.

Leaving the most popular topic of the weak defeating or deceiving the strong one aside, there are three more types of stories in Tibetan oral literature which have animals as prominent actors. In all three cases we always deal with man-animal interaction and not with animal-animal interaction alone. The first topic is that of the helpful and grateful animals: at the beginning, a human helps some animals and then, in the course of the story, the animals pay his/her favour back exactly in the moment when help is most urgently needed. Though these stories receive a Buddhist touch in so far as well-known Buddhist concepts and virtues are included, virtues like *tshethar*, liberation of life, and repayment of the kindness received by one's parents and teacher, these stories nevertheless follow a universal pattern found in oral literature outside the Buddhist world as well.<sup>8</sup>

When talking about the helpful and grateful animals one should, however, not forget to mention that Tibetan oral tales also

<sup>8</sup> For Tibetan examples see: Phukhang and Schwieger (1982: nos 45, 60); Kretschmar (1985: no. 43). For examples in Western oral tradition, see Woeller (1991: 146–150).

acknowledge the topic of the ungrateful animal. The plot structure of these specific stories is always the same: a dangerous animal of prey, a wolf, a tiger or a bear is liberated by someone out of compassion. Because of their great gluttony, these animals, however, are unable to keep their initial promise not to eat their saviour and to repay the good deed. Finally, it is always the hare who, thanks to his cleverness, restores the initial situation.<sup>9</sup>

The second type of story where we have a human-animal interaction is the topic of the animal as a bridegroom, a universal topic known in other parts of the world as well. In Tibetan tales the groom is usually a dog or a frog. In the end the animal always turns into a handsome young man from the best family background, i.e. either a god or a prince. The transformation of the animal into a human appears as a kind of redemption.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, I want to mention a third type: a man becomes the husband of a female bear. They even have a common child. In the end, the man leaves the bear. As a result, the bear tears the common child to pieces in the presence of her human husband. The moral of the story seems to be that a mixture of humans and animals is possible, but in the end does not work.<sup>11</sup>

All these stories with animals as actors in one or the other way show a permeable border between humans and animals. There is no insurmountable ontological boundary line. Given that orally transmitted folk tales were still a living tradition when we recorded them, they indicate that in the common people's view man and animals had much in common and much to share. One may also say that animals act in all the stories just as a kind of people.

But how, then, do we in the end have to see the animals in these stories? Can we at all call them animals or are they just people disguised as animals? To me they are neither real animals nor humans. They are a mixture. They are characterized by typical human weaknesses such as pride, arrogance, jealousy, vulnerability, credulity, and receptiveness for flattery. On the other hand, they carry distinct traits of their respective species—in their outer appearance as well as with regard to basic qualities: the gluttonous wolf, the agile hare, the plump-looking bear, and so on. In the end, it does not matter whether the animals of the oral tales can be called "real" animals or not. By the mere fact that animals are good for holding up the mirror to the human being, the border between

<sup>9</sup> Schuh (1982: no. 52); Kretschmar (1982: no. 44); Phukhang and Schwieger (1982: nos 27, 67).

<sup>10</sup> Kretschmar (1982: no. 35); Phukhang and Schwieger (1982: no. 38); Kretschmar (1985: nos 21, 22); Causemann (1989: nos 11, 12)

<sup>11</sup> Phukhang and Schwieger (1982: no. 20).



human and animal blurs and they become like us. Therefore, to me in such stories animals and animal behaviour cannot be reduced to literal means to talk about humans.

*Instead of a conclusion*

Finally, I want to present one of the most incredible stories told by Tibetans about the hare. It was narrated to me by a man from Bragg yab.<sup>12</sup>

Once upon a time there was a man and a woman. When both had to go out to work in the field, they had no one to look after their little child. Therefore, the husband said to his wife: "Shall I search for someone who can look after our child during our absence?" "Yes," said his wife. So, the man went out to look for someone.

The first one he met was a fox. "Do you know how to look after a child?" the man asked the fox. "Yes, I know." was the answer. "How would you look after a child?" the man asked. "The best food I would eat myself and the worst food I would give the child. The best clothes I would wear myself and the worst I would put on the child." Thereupon the man said: "You do not know how to look after a child." and he went on.

Then he met a hare: "Hare! Do you know to look after a child?" "Of course, I know," the hare replied. "How would you look after a child?" the man said. "Well, I would give the best food to the child and eat the worst food myself. The best clothes I would give to the child and the worst I would wear myself." This answer satisfied the old man: "You would probably be able to take care of a child. You are the right person for this job." and he took the hare home.

Then, every day together with his wife he went to work in the field. They left the hare alone with the child. One day the hare killed the child. Out of the meat he made a meal. This he brought to the couple working on the field. It tasted excellent. "Where did you get the meat?" they asked. "The king slaughtered yaks today. I traded the meat for two bushels of wheat." the hare replied. "It tastes really good," the couple said.

After the hare had returned to their house, he put the child's head back in the cradle so that it looked as though the head was peeking out from under the blanket and the child was sleeping. Then the hare ran away. In the evening, the parents returned home. When they took the child out of the cradle, they were horrified: they only held the child's head in their hands. They became very sad. "I have to kill the hare!" said the man to his wife. "Boil a pot of water and wait for me to come back! We will cook the hare alive."

The man ran out of the house. After a while he found the hare,

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<sup>12</sup> Schwieger (1989: 76–79).

grabbed it and put it in a sack. He tied the sack with a string and laid it on his shoulder. Because the way home was long, the man rested after some time. Exhausted, he slept a little. Then a magpie flew in and sat down on the opening of the sack, shouting: "Tshag! Tshag!" The hare said to her: "Magpie! Please, open the sack!" She released him from the sack. The hare put a piece of ice, a stone and some thorns in the sack. Then he tied it up again and ran away.

After the man woke up, he continued on his way. After a while, the stone in the sack hurt the man's back. "Do not push me with your fist! When I am at home, I will cook you." he said angrily. Again, after a while, the ice was melting. "Now, you also piss! Soon you end up in the cooking pot." scolded the old man. Again, after a while, the thorns began to sting: "What are you scratching me with your fingernails? Soon I will cook you in the pot."

When returning home, he said to his wife: "Open the pot! Here I bring the hare." When he then emptied the bag over the pot, the stone fell out and broke the bottom of the pot.

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# Horse and Social Status or How to Assess the Quality of a Horse

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## *Introduction*

The following paper introduces various kinds of social classes that humans assigned to animals, particularly horses.<sup>1</sup> The assignment of such classes to horses and other animals is not based on the idea of improving animals' lives but to qualify the animals in order to improve human lives.<sup>2</sup> Commonly, social class is a category that humans assign to themselves and to animals in order to structure their societies and organize their communal life. The focus of the paper is the analysis of aspects assigned to social class of horses. It will investigate the application of "social class" in other contexts aside from the Tibetan medical one, assessing any parallels in the neighbouring cultures of India and China that may have influenced the theoretical concepts in Tibet. The texts analysed consist of Old Tibetan manuscripts dateable to the 8th century, a Tanjur text translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan, and two 17th-century manuscripts found in Nepal. Tibetan manuscripts on hippology present various methods to categorise horses. These categories include the description of the horses' physical shape,<sup>3</sup> their behaviour, and mental qualities.

Any reflections on a horse's social status should take into consideration the value of animals in traditional Tibetan culture. All kinds of cattle and other livestock such as yaks, *dri*, *mdzo* and *mdzo*

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Fernand Meyer for his comments on an earlier version of this paper and the editors for their suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> Multi-scientific research approaches such as anthrozoology or Human-Animal Studies, ethnobiology, and anthropology discuss the relationship between human and animal, and in the last three decades, a huge amount of literature was published on this field of studies. To underline that the use of the terms "human" and "animal" purports two mutually exclusive categories, expressions such as "human animals" and "non-human animals" were created. For a discussion of related questions, see for example Sax, DeLapp and Tonutti (2011). Despite my sympathy and consent with these reflections, I follow Ohnuma (2017: xix) and adhere to the conventional terminology.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly in the Indian cultural context, the shape of horses, cows, elephants, and other animals is used for divination but also for assessing an animal's quality; see for example Bhat (1987, part II).

*mo*, cows, mules, horses, sheep, and goats played an enormous role in Tibet's agricultural and nomadic society and were indispensable to traditional life on the plateau: they provided food and drinks, wool for clothing and tents, and facilitated trade by transporting goods and people. The male *mdzo* was used for ploughing the fields and for threshing the grain. The bones and horns of cattle and other livestock had their place in rituals. Several animals' parts were utilised to manufacture daily objects: the skin of a goat or sheep—if not dried and used for clothes or warming seats—was occasionally turned into bellows, the stomach into a bag to keep grease, and the dung utilised as a fertilizer or dried and used to make fire. Traditional life without animals seemed unimaginable. The Tibetan terminology emphasises the value of these animals: the term *nor* translates to “wealth, property” and the word for “possessions” also means “cattle”;<sup>4</sup> and *phyugs*, “cattle”, is presumably connected with *phyug* meaning “rich”.<sup>5</sup> Although horses, a symbol of kingship, are not *nor phyugs*, they were and still are of an outstanding value among the animals living with men: for many centuries, they were means of transport and pack-animals. Their value shifted from that of a working animal to a status symbol; the animals for equestrian sports are still trade goods in their own right.



Fig. 1 — Decorated mule as working animal (photo: Petra Maurer)

<sup>4</sup> Jäschke (1985: 307).

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*: 351.

The abundance of manuscripts on horses proves their value and their need for special care. All the manuscripts examined here—the Old Tibetan texts and those found in Nepal—contain two main subjects: hippiatry, that is, the medical treatment of horses, and hippology, a field of knowledge dealing with the horses' typology, their shape, anatomy, and physiology. Hippological and hippiatrical texts are also found in neighbouring countries such as India, Mongolia, and China.<sup>6</sup> Tibetan literature includes three kinds of texts originating in different centuries that deal with hippology and hippiatry. These are:

- Indigenous Tibetan texts among the Old Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang such as Pelliot Tibétain 1061 to 1066.<sup>7</sup> The authors were most likely practitioners who tried to write down their experience with the treatment of horse diseases. Only Pelliot Tibétain 1066 also treats hippological subjects. The horse experts (*rta mkhan*) named here also appear in the 17th-century manuscripts from Nepal.
- Texts translated from Indian sources such as the *Aśvāyurveda* ascribed to Śālihotra. This *śāstra*, titled in Tibetan *Rta yi tshe'i rigs byed*, entered the bsTan 'gyur as a translation from Sanskrit by the famous Rin chen bzang po (958–1055). It focuses on subjects related to hippology such as the horses' character (*rta'i rang bzhin*) and colour (*kha dog*), the examination of eyes (*mig brtag*), teeth (*so brtag*), and odour (*dri brtag*), the examination of voice (*skad gsang brtag*), the quality of gait (*'gros kyi bzang ngan*) and so on. Śālihotra dedicated several chapters to the four classes of horses (*rta'i rigs bzhi*), and to their medical treatment (*nad gso ba*),<sup>8</sup> in particular the application of moxibustion and pharmacology. Contrary to Pelliot Tibétain, here the description of diseases follows the theoretical concepts given in the *Āyurveda*: the diseases are distinguished according to the three humours or pathogenic factors (*nyes pa gsum*), which are phlegm (*bad kan*), bile (*mkhris pa*), and wind (*rlung*).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Other manuscripts for medical treatment of animals refer particularly to those applied in warfare, such as for example camels in China and elephants in India.

<sup>7</sup> For the Tibetan text with translation, see Blondeau (1972: 174–327).

<sup>8</sup> See Śālihotra (1987: 215–218).

<sup>9</sup> Another source based on Indian knowledge goes back to Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor (1704–1788). He wrote the text titled "The fortunate examination of the horse in accordance with the Indian system" (*Rgya gar pa'i lugs bstun rta dpyad dpal g.yang*).

- Finally, there are manuscripts roughly dateable to the 17th century. These texts have been discovered in Nepal, and as they all lack a colophon, their authors are unknown. They equally treat hippiatric and hippological subjects and contain knowledge that can be traced back to Old Tibetan manuscripts and the *Śālihotraśāstra*.<sup>10</sup>

The hippiatric texts on the treatment of horses present the knowledge of practitioners who tried to preserve their experience in horse treating. They describe, and accordingly classify, the disease symptoms, assigning the ailment, for example, to an affected organ or a body part or explaining the assumed cause of a disease. These texts bear similarities to the horse manuscripts found in medieval Europe and known as “Rossarzneibücher”.<sup>11</sup> The hippological sections of these manuals on horse medicine also deal with the classification of horses based on the use humans made of them. A major scholar and author within this tradition is Albert Magnus (1200-1280). In book XII of his encyclopaedia *De animalibus*, he divides horses into four categories (*modi*): horses for warfare, horses for transport, those for breeding and for farm work.<sup>12</sup>

With their focus on hippology, the Indian texts emphasise the significance of assessing the horses’ quality in order to determine their use, deployment, and social status. Experts examined their shape and observed their behaviour, aiming to select the best specimen for the king and to find suitable horses for warfare:

With respect to elephants and horses, the special distinction comes from pedigree, breed, spirit, youth, stamina, height, speed, vigor, skill, steadfastness, stateliness, obedience, auspicious marks, and good conduct.<sup>13</sup>

The 17th-century horse manuscripts were written at a time when scientific knowledge in Tibet was restructured and rearranged. The texts combine the main subjects of the old Tibetan and Indian sources. Furthermore, they included knowledge based on human medicine such as anatomy and pulse diagnoses.

As the main subject of this paper is social status, I shall focus here

<sup>10</sup> Most of the texts available to me have been filmed by the Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP); see Maurer (2001: 39–109). A brief survey of the content offers Maurer and von den Driesch (2006).

<sup>11</sup> See Maurer (2001).

<sup>12</sup> Stadler (1916: 1378). For more information on the stable-master’s era, see von den Driesch and Peters (2003: 85–100).

<sup>13</sup> Olivelle (2013: 384); see also Rangarajan (1992: 643).

on the hippological sections. There, horses are either directly assigned to a social class or indirectly linked to it. These horse texts present two methods to qualify the social status of a horse: an Indian and a Tibetan one.

*The Indian horse classification*

Traditionally, Indian hippology is ascribed to the famous Indian Śālihotra,<sup>14</sup> a legendary figure regarded as the founder of Indian horse medicine. The *Mahābhārata* (II, 69) is the first source to mention his name.<sup>15</sup> The discipline named after him is called *Śālihotraśāstra*. The text is included in the bsTan 'gyur, Peking Edition, V, 148 with the title *Rta'i tshe'i rig byed sha li ho tras bsdus pa*.<sup>16</sup> Since the work was translated by a team of three translators—Śribhadra, Buddhaśrīśānti, and Rin chen bzang po—the Tibetan version can roughly be dated between 992 and 1042 CE. The *Śālihotraśāstra* spread throughout Arabic culture and was translated into Persian. We will encounter it again in one of its Persian versions titled *Tarjamah-i-Saalotar-i-asbaan*, translated into English by Joseph Earles and published under the title "A Treatise on Horses Entitled Saloter or, a Complete System of Indian Farriery".<sup>17</sup> Bearing the title *Sha li ho tra'i mdo'i gnas las rta'i rigs bzhi*, chapter eight of the Tibetan version of the treatise classifies horses into four social classes. The Tibetan term used for "social class" is *rigs*, commonly translated into English as "family, lineage, extraction, birth, descent" but "in a special sense: caste, class in society, rank".<sup>18</sup> Commonly, *rigs* is given as a translation of the Sanskrit *varṇa*.<sup>19</sup> From the terminological aspect, the *Śālihotraśāstra* clearly divides the horses into four social classes, namely *brahmin* (*bram ze*), *kṣatriya* (*rgyal po*), *vaiśya* (*rje'u rigs*) and *sūdra* (*mi dmangs*). With regard to this classification, I will ask the following questions: What aspects, characteristics, and features are assigned to each class? Or, which characteristics qualify a horse as a member of a certain social class?

Chapter eight begins with listing several criteria applied for the

<sup>14</sup> See Maurer (2001: 52, 55), also for the chapters on horse's hair-whirls.

<sup>15</sup> See Buitenen (1975: 352).

<sup>16</sup> See *mdo 'grel, ngo mtshar bstan bcos*. For the Tibetan translation, see Blondeau (1972: 11–13, 49–110).

<sup>17</sup> According to Meulenbeld (2000, vol. II: 576), the horse book was also translated into Arabic and Hindi. Under the patronage of the Mughal emperor Shah-Jahan, the emir Abdullah Khan translated the text into Persian.

<sup>18</sup> Jäschke (1985: 527).

<sup>19</sup> Lokesh Chandra (1990: 1152).



assessment of horses' social status: type of birth (*skye gnas*), stature or physique (*gzugs byad*), conduct or behaviour (*tshul spyod*), discipline (*'dul ba*), tone of voice (*skad gdangs*), shape (*dbyibs*), colour (*kha dog*) and odour (*dri nyid*).<sup>20</sup> The first of these criteria, i.e. "type of birth" (*skye gnas*), is extensively treated in chapter seven: here the term *gnas* clearly refers to the "type" or "class" of birth rather than the "place" of origin. In other contexts, the term *gnas* may denote also a "degree", thus assuming a meaning closer to *rigs*, as it is used to classify the horse's birth into four apparently inconsistent categories, i.e. good (*bzang po*), bad (*dman pa*), herbivorous animal (*ri dwags*), and mixed (*'dres*).<sup>21</sup>

As for the other criteria mentioned above, the descriptions provided in chapter eight lack a systematic order, rather they jump from one feature to another, from physical shape to behaviour, from mental characteristics to colour, and so on.

In the following paragraphs, I will introduce the four classes of horses with the aspects and characteristics assigned them in the text. To present a survey on the characteristics of each class, I will summarize the content of the passages on the four horse classes by selecting the most significant features. These are the horses' shape, coat colour, preference of food—depending on the horse class this aspect can be subordinate—behaviour, and character. Although the *Śālihotraśāstra* states that "these four classes are difficult to distinguish" (*rta yi rigs gzhi shes dka' ba*), the characteristics assigned to the respective horses' classes are quite unique.<sup>22</sup>

#### *The brahmin horse (bram ze rigs)*

The description of the Brahmin horse focuses on the visible features of the horse such as body shape and coat colour. Furthermore, the text emphasises the nutrition of the *bram ze* horse. Brahmin horses' "shape is good, they are magnificent" (*gzugs bzang dpal dang ldan pa*). A further specification of what makes a shape "good" is however missing. Certain coat colours are seemingly appropriate for these horses, as the text mentions yellow, yellowish like honey (*sbrang rtsi ltar ser*), white, and red. In particular, a "fine coat" (*pags pa srab*) with a "glossy sheen" (*mdog snum*) attracts the attention of all Brahmans to these horses. The *brahmin* horses' food is of major significance, and

<sup>20</sup> Śālihotra (1987: 40–41): *rigs bzhi rnam par dbye ba ni / skye gnas dang ni gzugs byad dang / tshul spyod dang ni dul ba dang / skad gdangs dbyibs dang kha dog dang / dri nyid las ni nyer shes bya ||*

<sup>21</sup> See Blondeau (1972: 58–59).

<sup>22</sup> The elephant, another animal in India that was particularly important in warfare, was assessed in a similar manner to the horse; see Edgerton (1931: 74–79).

the passages dealing with the topic almost anthropomorphise the culinary preferences. Their preferred foodstuff resembles food that is commonly recommended for *yogins* such as honey, roasted rice, bread, butter, milk broth, and roasted foodstuff (*sbrang rtsi 'bras yos khur ba mar / 'o thug sreg rdzas la dga' zhing*).<sup>23</sup> They like garlands of jasmine (*sna ma'i phreng ba*). Moreover, "they enjoy ablution and blessings" (*khrus dang bkra shis la dga' zhing*). These horses are clean and enjoy cleanliness (*gtsang zhing gtsang sbra dag la brten*), a preference extended to food, as they disregard the leftovers of such. Since they are pure, they stay away from human excrement, dung of horses, and urine.<sup>24</sup>

They presumably have a certain state of mind and a particular power, as "even when they lie down they do not sleep" (*nyal yang gnyid ni med pa dang*).<sup>25</sup> Moreover, they are assigned a unique disposition: when they sleep, they emit a beautiful smell of roasted rice, butter and so on (*gnyid log tshe ni 'bras yos dang / mar dang ur sher dri 'byung la*). They are attributed the powers of gods, *dri za*, the *gandharvas* (*lha dang dri zi'i (r. za'i) snying stobs can*). These horses are intelligent, of a good character, and they listen to the horse trainer. They are willing and obey their duties. They are fearless, clever, and can endure thirst and hunger; they have only little anger.<sup>26</sup> Their trot is excellent. With their auspiciousness and majesty they are to be recommended (*sngags par 'os*).<sup>27</sup>

#### *The kṣatriya horse (rgyal rigs)*

The text describes in great detail the class of the *kṣatriya* horse. *Kṣatriya jāti* denotes the military caste<sup>28</sup> and since this type of horse was presumably deployed in warfare, *kṣatriya* horses were of major importance. Generally, the information on the *kṣatriya* horse's physical shape, colour of the coat, and fodder is scarce and likely unimportant. As for the body shape, "tail and mane are well stretched" (*rnga rngog legs par brkyang nas*). The coat colour seems to

<sup>23</sup> Court historians of the Ilkhans report on this peculiar food for horses: butter roasted peas and cow's milk or *kichiri*, boiled with sugar and oil, see Kauz (2009: 133).

<sup>24</sup> Śālihotra (1987: 41), *btung dang kha zas bza' bya yi / lhag ma dag ni mi gtsang dang / rta sbrang dang ni de bzhin gcin / 'di ni ring du spong byed cing / /*

<sup>25</sup> The author of the Tibetan text might have been unaware of the fact that horses sleep while standing.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*: 41, *blo ldan ngang tshul bzang ba dang / 'dul sbyong mkhan gyis byas pa nyan [...]* *bkres dang skom la sran che zhing / /*

<sup>27</sup> For the full text, see *ibid.*: 40–41.

<sup>28</sup> Monier-Williams (1986: 325).

be insignificant as the author states that “[any coat] colour is good, there is no bad [coat] colour” (*mdog bzang kha dog ngan pa med*). A pure colour, that is to say no spots or speckles in the coat (*tshangs pa' mdog ldan shis par bya*), is considered auspicious. The text describes the coat as “fine” (*pags pa srab*). The horses' eye colour is “yellow like a jewel” (*nor bu lta bu mig ser*). Unlike the *Brahmin* horses, these horses do not prefer a special foodstuff and are therefore not limited to a specific environment.

The author puts great emphasis on the character and the behaviour of the horses, as *kṣatriya* horses are of pure character (*rang bzhin gtsang*) and their behaviour is easy-going (*spyod pa yang*). They are always capable of doing any kind of work (*rtag tu las kun nus pa*). Generally, they neigh out of pleasure (*dga' ba' yid kyis 'tsher ba*) and are sure-footed as they place their legs firmly on the ground (*rkang gnyis legs par 'dzug bzhin du*). They cast away sweat, urine, and their own dung (*rta sbangs*) with their limbs stretched (*rngul dang gcin dang rta sbang ni/ yan lag bskyang nas 'dor ba*). The following characteristics prove the horses' suitability for warfare: their appearance is wrathful (*khros pa'i tshul*),<sup>29</sup> their mind is sharp (*rang bzhin rno*), they are intelligent (*blo ldan*), brave, fast, and very strong.

They don't fear any danger, water, fire and the sound of thunder, loud sounds, falling, scratching, sharp or rough touch. They neither fear rough nor wild land or dense forest; they are not afraid to walk long distances and on narrow paths. They fear nothing and no one, neither big elephant herds nor the sound of bells or the sound of loud voices, the neighing of other horses, the sound of horns and big drums, the sound of [other] musical instruments or the sound of kettle drums. They are not afraid of a parasol, a victory banner and a flag. They are the best horses.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, *kṣatriya* horses intimidate other horses (*rta gzhan la ni sdigs pa*) which do not dare to approach them (*rta gzhang dag ni phyin nas ni / de ni 'gro bar bzod mi byed*). In battles, they subdue horses, elephants, and carriages. Then they neigh aloud with a gentle voice in all directions. They are strong and endure a lot of hardship:

<sup>29</sup> For the characterisation of the *kṣatriya* as “harsh” (skt. *krūra*), see Smith (1994: 38).

<sup>30</sup> See Śālihotra (1987: 41–42), ‘jigs pa rnam la mi sgrags pa / chu dang me dang 'brug sgra dang / sgra cher grags dang lhung dang phur / tsha dang rtsub pa'i reg pa dang / sa rtsub shing gi tshang tshing dang / ring du 'gro gang lam dog par / gang zhig 'jigs pa med pa dang / glang po'i tshogs ni chen po dang / dril bu rol mo'i sgra rnam dang / ca co 'don pa'i sgra rnam dang / rta gzhang 'tsher bar gyur pa dang / dung dang rnga chen sgra dang ni / rol mo'i sgra dang rdza rnga'i sgra / gdug[ls] dang rgyal mtshan ba dan gyis / sgrag par mi 'gyur rta mchog yin //

Though hurt by a weapon they hardly become sick or afraid of weapons. They are however easily to be disciplined and they are brave.<sup>31</sup>

Reactivity in combat is another important quality ascribed to *kṣatriya* horses: they react quickly (*spyod pa myur*) and in fights they quickly suppress their opponent (*dpa' ba dang 'thab tshe myur du pha rol gnon*). Like the Brahmin horses, they have the power of the gods and the *dri za*, the *gandharva*.

In conclusion, the *Śālihotraśāstra* qualifies *kṣatriya* horses as “the best horse” (*rta mchog*) an assessment presumably referring to their possible deployment in warfare.<sup>32</sup>

#### *The vaiśya horse (rje'u rigs)*

The depiction of the *rje'u rigs* horses is still focused on body shape but also extends to include the horses' nature and character. As for their body shape, it says: “The front and back part of the body are straight and big; the fore part of the body is larger [than the back part] (*ro stod che ba*)”. Acceptable coat colours are black, bluish, white or a hue reminiscent of the *dūrva*-grass. Their eye colour should be blue or yellow. Even the hooves are assigned a shape and a colour: they should resemble a palmyra tree. Commonly, they have the colour of a goose.<sup>33</sup> Though the *vaiśya* horses are not as excellent as the *brahmin* and *kṣatriya* horses, they are characterised as good horses: they are neither angry nor proud (*khro ba med cing nga rgyal med*).

These horses seem to be somewhat peculiar as the author compares their odour to camel's milk (*rnga mo'i 'o ma'i dri dang ldan*), that is to say, their smell is a bit strong but not bad. Moreover, they are considered able to bear the burdens of life: they endure diseases, heat, and hunger. Even when loaded with luggage they walk steadily and sure-footed with a moderate speed. Their strength and power are however only medium. The following statement seems to allude to some sort of deficiency: “These horses sleep deeply, and they do depend on the power of men”.<sup>34</sup> In other words: whereas *brahmin* and

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*: 42, *g.yul ngor rta dang glang po dang / shing rta dpung bu chung 'joms dang / rjes su skad 'don sgra 'jam pas / phyogs kun khyab par 'tsher ba dang / [...] mtshon gyis bsnun kyang nad chung zhing / mtshon cha mthong na 'jigs mi 'gyur / spyod pa myur zhing dpa' ba dang //*

<sup>32</sup> For the full text, see *ibid.*: 41–42.

<sup>33</sup> See *ibid.*: 43, *smyig ma ta la'i mdog 'dra dang / phal cher ngang pa'i mdog 'dra zhing*. Tibetan *mdog* here obviously means “look” and “colour”.

<sup>34</sup> See *ibid.*: 42, *bag chung gnyid ni che ba dang / mi yi snying stobs la brten pa //*

*kṣatriya* horses hardly sleep and their attentive mindfulness might even protect men from harm, *vaiśya* horses must be taken care of. Their further characterisation points to some kind of unreliability: they like to drink—although the liquid is not named—and are lazy. However, they are also calm, open-minded, tame, and of a good character. Their behaviour is disciplined (*dul ba'i spyod pa yang dag*) and they are even-tempered. Their overall rating in the *Śālihotrasāstra* is however only medium.<sup>35</sup>

*The sūdra horse (mi dmangs)*

The characterisation of *sūdra* horses is quite intriguing.

These big-bellied horses are commonly smoke or dust coloured, yellowish, reddish or pale (*du ba rdul 'dra'i mdog ldan zhing / ser skya mdog dro dmar skya'i mdog*). They lack elegance as they dig in the ground with their round hooves (*mig rkan mig ni zlum pa dang / rkang pas sa ni brko ba*). They are unqualified for any kind of activity as “the character of the *dmangs rigs* horses is bad. These are the most unattractive horses: their behaviour is unclean” (*dmangs rigs ngang tshul ngan pa dang / spyod lam spyod yul mi gtsang zhing*). They cough and spit phlegm. And there is more. Their odour is repellent: they stink like a nest of crows (*bya rog tshang gi dri bro zhing*). Whereas the *brahmin* horses indulge in cleanliness, these horses are in every sense closely linked to dirt. They like to eat leftovers of food and they cling to anything dry, inferior, or bad such as dung and urine.<sup>36</sup> They go to dirty places and sniff at excrements just like a dog. This behaviour might be the reason that they cannot even really enjoy eating food. Moreover, in contrast to the other classes, their character is extremely bad: they kick the horse herdsman with their legs. They bite not only one another but also walls and wood. They are so insensitive that they do not feel it when beaten with a whip. Men cannot use them in warfare as they are cowards; they fear everything and even worse, they are inattentive.<sup>37</sup> They need protection like the *vaiśya* horses, but

<sup>35</sup> For the full text, see *ibid.*: 42–43, *rje'u rigs btung ba la dga' brtan / zhi zhing blo che le lo can / mi khruḡs dga' bar 'gyur ba med / dul ba'i spyod pa dang / [...] dul zhing ngang tshul snyoms pa dang //*

<sup>36</sup> Similar aspects are applied in Indian animal divination. Varāhamihira presents the following assessments: “The horse that passes urine and dung too frequently, does not go along the proper direction in spite of being whipped, shows fright without any cause (such as vicinity to its enemies), and has tears in its eyes, does not betoken prosperity or happiness to its master”; see Bhat (1987: 824).

<sup>37</sup> See Śālihotra (1987: 43), *bshang gci snom par byed pa dang / za zhing nyung du spyod pa dang / mi gtsang sar ni 'gro ba dang / rta rdzi la ni 'phra ba dang / rang dang rtsig pa shing la sogs / so yis 'drad par byed pa dang / 'bring ba dbyug pa lcug ma yi / lcag mi*

their behaviour virtually prevents this as they are not peaceful. They are completely unreliable as they drop off to sleep when they smell blood and corpses. They have the power of the flesh-eating *srin po* demons. They can only work when they are angry, as they are incapable to do so otherwise. Therefore, they are of hardly any use at all.<sup>38</sup>

*The king's horse*

The horse for the king belongs to a category separated from the four classes. His horse is a unique specimen, and body marks such as the coat colour and hair whirls used for prognostication are of a special interest. Hair whirls can appear on any part of the body and the hair can turn clockwise or anticlockwise. These aspects indicate the horses' quality but also the owner's future wellbeing, prosperity, and victory or contrariwise illness, poverty, and loss. The king's horse requires ten steady whirls to be suitable for his royal rider.<sup>39</sup> Three colours indicate the rulership of a king: white, *ne tso*, literally "parrot,"<sup>40</sup> and red (*dmar*).

The best coat colour is shiny white, as this colour indicates positive aspects such as mental and physical purity and cleanliness. The white horse with the eyes of *mi la ka*<sup>41</sup> assigned to the Moon God (*zla ba'i lha*) is considered to be the horse of the king who will rule the world (*sa steng dbang du byed par 'gyur*). The qualities of the red and *ne tso* coloured horses are similar: *ne tso* is the colour of Sun's horse (*nyi ma'i rta*). If the king rides it in a battle, he will achieve his aims and rule the world. Red horses are linked to Vaiśravaṇa (*rnam thos sras kyi lha*). If the king rides a red horse, there is no doubt that he will govern the world. To resume, it is fair to say that these qualifications and assessments presumably served the purpose to find the best horse for the king and the suitable horse for warfare.<sup>42</sup>

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*tshor zhing mi 'khrugs la [...] 'jigs pa kun las sdar ba dang / mi gtsang ba la mi smod cing [...] bsrung bar rab du dka' ba dang //*

<sup>38</sup> For the full text, see *ibid.*: 43–44.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*: 95.

<sup>40</sup> The Tibetan term *ne tso* commonly means "parrot". Does it mean that the horse is bright coloured? The precious horse (*rta mchog rin po che*) as the one of the seven symbols of the *chakravartin* is of white or blue-black colour; see Dayab (1992: 107) where he also mentions two textual sources and Beer (1999: 163).

<sup>41</sup> A certain plant?

<sup>42</sup> See Śālihotra (1987: 94–97).

*The horse classes of "Saloter" in Persian*

This fourfold classification of horses spread in other cultures and entered Tibetan and Persian horse manuals. It was adapted for example in the 17th-century treatise *Tarjamah-i-Saalotar-i-asbaan*, "A Treatise on Horses Entitled Saloter or, a Complete System of Indian Farriery", a manual on horses that was translated from Sanskrit to Persian.<sup>43</sup> By the end of the 18th century, Joseph Earles translated this hippological and hippiatric text into English.<sup>44</sup> Although the basic medical concepts came from India, they were lately influenced by the Persian-Arabic tradition. The author dedicates one chapter to the four classes of horses: here they are called *brahmin*, *kehtrie*, *byes*, and *seuder*.<sup>45</sup> The character and qualities assigned to the classes resemble Śalihotra's presentation.

*The brahmin horse*

These horses

are for the most part of the Nukrè<sup>46</sup> kind, dove-eyed, finely shaped, of an elegant figure, and graceful in all their motions. They are remarkably clean and delicate in their food, and always calm and even-tempered. Their sweat is of an agreeable odour; they neither kick nor bite, but are under the strictest command and discipline. They bear the warrior well with their own and his armour, and have a clear, strong, animating voice.<sup>47</sup>

*The kehtrie horse*

These horses are considered "an alert, brisk, active, strong vehement, swift, choleric, vindictive, fierce race. Their bodies are always constitutionally in a ferment. They kick and bite but are neither afraid of an elephant nor a lion, fire or water, nor does the wound of a sword much affect them. Their understanding is of less magnitude than their bulk, but their voice, like the voice of a lion, is tremendous, loud, and awful. They are in general a very stout race of horses of the

<sup>43</sup> See [http://www.perso-indica.net/work/tarjuma-yi\\_salotar-i\\_asban](http://www.perso-indica.net/work/tarjuma-yi_salotar-i_asban)

<sup>44</sup> For the discrepancies between the Persian and the English versions, see Oloff (1981: 32–38).

<sup>45</sup> Earles (1788: 37–38).

<sup>46</sup> A study of the horses' coat colours might reveal further links to the Arabic tradition. The names used are obviously derived from the Arabic language. The colour white is called Nukrè "when appl[ied] to a horse"; see Earles (1788: 25).

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*: 37.

Kumaet colour—assessed as the best colour<sup>48</sup>—well-shaped, clean-limb'd, and excellent for war."<sup>49</sup> This characterisation does not sound as positive as Śalihotras' in the Tibetan translation but the assessment is still the same: they are the best horses for war.

*The byes horse*

These horses are for the most part of the sirgha or bright bay colour. They are swift, have thick short necks, and large bellies. If a horse of this kind should have yellow eyes, he will be so exceedingly fond, they say, of spirituous liquor that if a vessel full of it be laid before him, he will drink it as if water. He is never jaded with long fatiguing journeys and is admirably patient of hunger and thirst. The class of horses is excellent for the road, going expeditious, safe, and easy.<sup>50</sup>

*The seuder horses*

These horses like

impure and filthy things, eating ordure, dung and rubbish of stubble and sticks: they wallow in excrement and urine, and seemingly take delight in doing so. Their breath is nauseously foetid; they are patient under the whip, and their eyes are perpetually glutted with loathsome filthy rheum. They are in short altogether disgusting to the sight, and a very despicable weak race.<sup>51</sup>

The description closes with the following rhyme:

The Seuder being the lowest Indian Class,  
eats filth and excrement instead of grass.<sup>52</sup>

These insensitive horses are the worst of all, an ugly and disgustingly weak race. Like the Indian and Tibetan *brahmin* and *kṣatriya* horses, the *brahmin* and *kehtrie* horses are assessed as superior classes. Their outstanding quality is based on their character and nature and not on their exterior form such as body shape and coat colour. As for the *brahmin* horse, it is particularly the description of the fodder and

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*: 32. The colour called Kumaet (Arabic *kumayt*) is a mixture of black and red resembling the colour of a date, see *ibid.*: 29.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*: 37.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*: 38.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*: 38.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*: 38.



cleanliness which reminds the reader of the quality called *sattva*.<sup>53</sup> The *vaiśya* horses are attributed some unfavourable qualities and characteristics but they are still useful to men and ranked as of a medium quality.

Quite peculiar is the characterisation of the *sūdra* horses, anthropomorphised as outcast, low class, and as alcoholics—in the Persian manuscript the horses that are described as alcoholics are however the *byes* horses that corresponds to the Indian *vaiśya* and the Tibetan *rje rigs*—they are even assessed as unqualified to fulfil any tasks and as more or less useless members of the society. With regards to terminology, it is interesting that the Tibetan translators rendered *sūdra* with *mi dmangs*, a term that nowadays commonly denotes “people, masses”. Therefore, the use of the term in Tibetan literature would require further study.

#### *The origin of varṇa*

The categorisation of horses into these four social classes raises some questions: From where does this classification of horses originate? Where does *varṇa* come from? Is this classification applied to anything else? Why was it applied to the horse?

As we have seen, the distinction of horses according to these four *varṇa* followed the assessment of certain physical and behavioural characteristics of the animals. In Indian culture, the distinction of *varṇa* is an ancient system and can be traced back to cosmogonic concepts that originated in Vedic times. The original number of *varṇa* is four though the Vedic texts can refer either to a group of three or to a group of four *varṇa*, the category omitted being that of the *sūdra*. The *Pañcaviṃśa-brāhmaṇa* and *Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa* for example refer to three *varṇa* only, those who are not assigned to *brahmin* and *ṣatriya* as the ruling class belong to the “masses” which would be *mi dmangs* in Tibetan. The *Āpastamba Śrauta Sūtra* adds the *sūdra* as a fourth group.<sup>54</sup> To these *varṇa* are attributed certain qualities (*brahman*, *ṣatra*, *viś*), aspects of power (splendour, greatness, fame), ontological entities (self, human, animal), deities (Agni, Indra or Vayu, and Sūrya), the cosmological world (earth, atmosphere, and sky), natural elements (fire, wind, sun), times of day (morning, midday, afternoon), bodily functions (speech, breath, sight), sections of the

<sup>53</sup> For the characterisation of *brahmin* and *ṣatriya*, see for example Smith (1994: 36–42).

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*: 27–54.

Veda (*ṛg, yajur, sama*) and so on.<sup>55</sup>

The *Puruṣasūkta* in the *Ṛgveda* is the most well-known text on the origin of the *varṇa* and describes the magical and cosmogonic offering of the *puruṣa*, a kind of “Urwesen” out of which the world originates.<sup>56</sup> The Brahmins created the four *varṇa* to structure the society. Particularly interesting for the present discussion is verse twelve concerning the *puruṣa* as origin of the four *varṇa*:

Out of his mouth, the *brahmin*,  
 Out of his arms, the *kṣatriya*,  
 Out of his legs, the *vaiśya* and  
 Out of his feet, the *śūdra*.

Planets, gods, heaven, earth, directions and so on originate from the *puruṣa*'s sense organs and other body parts.<sup>57</sup> Presumably, the inclusion of the origin of the four *varṇa* in the *Ṛgveda*—the holiest of the Hindu texts—was meant to legitimise and establish the *brahmin*'s superiority. In order to do so, the authors used the word *jāti*, “birth”, a term nowadays usually translated as “caste”. Though the four *varṇa* didn't, and still do not, reflect the social reality, the *varṇa* theory was nevertheless applied to structure the thousands of Indian *jāti*.

There were social classes such as *brahmin* and *kṣatriya*. The designation *vaiśya* however is unclear. It is derived from *viś*, which means something like “lineage” and includes the complete population, the commoners or masses who are neither *brahmin* nor *kṣatriya*.<sup>58</sup> The term's connotation is negative as it determines the members of this *varṇa* via the exclusion from the others. Sanskrit *śūdra* becomes even more problematic as it includes all kinds of tribes.

### *Tibetan Classification*

Apart from the above Indian concepts, the hippological sections in the horse manuscripts also classify horses according to Tibetan or Central Asian models. These classifications are not directly associated with a social class; rather they are linked with other categories such

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*: 67.

<sup>56</sup> Schneider (1989: 44–49).

<sup>57</sup> For the German translation, see *ibid.*: 48.

<sup>58</sup> Smith (1994: 42–44) and Schneider (1989: 51).

as the elements, animal species or animated being (*srog chags*)<sup>59</sup>, and horse types, each element assigned to a certain physical shape and mental quality, in a classification process resembling the Indian one. After a brief survey of the Indian-Greek elements and humours applied in medicine, I will introduce the indigenous Tibetan horse types with their assigned elements.

*Horses in elemental classes*

Tibetan medical and divinatory sciences acknowledge two categories of elements: the Indo-Greek and the Chinese elements. As for the *varṇa*, the number of these elements is not fixed.

These cosmogonic elements are wind (*rlung*), fire (*me*), and water (*chu*). With earth (*sa*) and ether (*nam mkha'*) they total to five elements. They are linked to Indo-Greek medical concepts and related with the humours that correspond to the Sanskrit *doṣa*. They are *vata*, *piṭṭa*, and *kapha* and correspond to the Tibetan *rlung* (wind), *mkhris pa* (bile), and *bad kan* (phlegm), collectively referred to as *nyes pa gsum*. The Tibetan classification of horse classes follows the Indo-Greek elemental group, that is, wind, fire, water, earth, and occasionally ether. In the manuscript of Sras po 'Jigs med, the expert on horses called g.Yu gzher legs khrid summons seven pupils to transmit his teachings on the classification of five horse types: these are *mdo ba*, *bya to*, *gyi ling*, *gyam shing*, and *bu ron*, a classification found in many other hippological manuscripts as well.<sup>60</sup>

The *mdo ba* is of the wind element, the *bya to* of the earth element, the *gyi ling* of the water element, and the *gyam shing* of fire element. With the *bu ron* of the ether element, five types of horse are differentiated.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> The category *srog chags*, for example, is used in the manuscript of *bla ma Ye shes rgya mtsho* from Nyile in Tsum; see Maurer (2001: 70).

<sup>60</sup> This manuscript presents orthographical variations such as *bya lto* and *phug ron* and refers to two other types called *khu gyen* and *rong bu*; see Maurer (2001: 135–137).

<sup>61</sup> *g.yu gzher legs 'khrid de bdun bos / mdo ba rlung gi[s] khams / bya lto sa'i 'khams / gi ling chu'i 'khams / gyam shing me la / bu ron nam mkha'i rigs dang lnga ru 'byed / For the German translation, see *ibid.*: 133–134.*

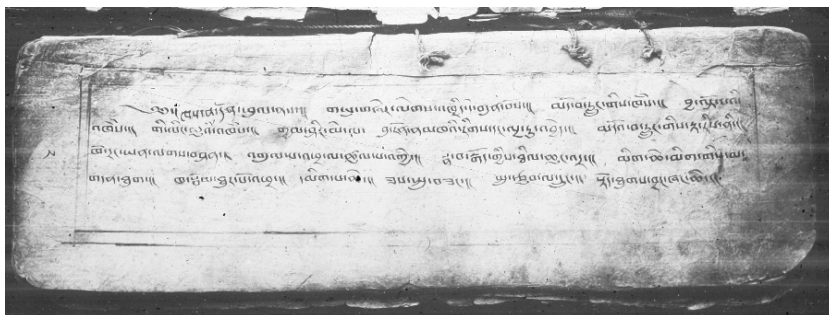


Fig. 2 – Horse Types and Elements. Photo courtesy of Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP, Reel No. 91/1)

The Gesar Epic also sheds some light on these types of horses:

*rta mdo ba'i rig[s] la rnam bzhi yod / mdo ba be to mu khengs gsum / gyi ling 'di dang rnam bzhi yin//*

Among the *mdo ba* horses, there are four different types: *mdo ba*, *be to*, *mu khengs*, these three and with *gyi ling* they are four types.<sup>62</sup>

The typology of Tibetan horses has not been studied in detail and it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the subject any further. Since the various types of horses are linked to the elements, I will very briefly refer to the information that the Tibetan dictionaries provide on them.

The term *mdo ba* occurs already in the Old Tibetan Dunhuang documents, and denotes not only horses but also yaks (*mdo ba* or '*do ba*).<sup>63</sup> The dictionaries relate this horse type to Eastern Tibet, usually Amdo, an area that was, and still is, famous for horse breeding. Jäschke describes this type under its variant spelling '*do ba* as "a breed of fine horses". Das differentiates "'do chung: a good breed of pony, prob[ably] those imported from Amdo" and includes the example: "'do chung nya rlon chab la lding pa 'dra the breed of '*do chung* goes smoothly as fish swimming in water". "'do chen: another Amdoan breed" with the example: "'do chen ri bong gyen du rgyug pa 'dra the '*do chen* horse gallops up-hill like a hare". The Tibetan-Tibetan-Chinese dictionary by Zhang regards '*do ba* as synonymous to "horse".<sup>64</sup>

Though Jäschke explains *gyi ling* as the "n[ame] of an excellent breed of horses", Das ascribes the type to eastern Tibet. He defines it

<sup>62</sup> Stein (1956: 304); the type *be to* is most likely identical with *bya rdo*.

<sup>63</sup> See Jäschke 1985: 279; Das 1983: 689, and Zhang 1985: 1413.

<sup>64</sup> See Jäschke (1985: 74) and Das (1983: 235).

as “name of a good breed of horses from Amdo where there are twelve different breeds, *gyi ling* and *gnam sa* being the best among them.” Zhang describes it simply as “the best horse”.<sup>65</sup> Das notes furthermore the type *gyer ling* as “a high breed horse or pony”,<sup>66</sup> which I assume could be a spelling variety of *gyi ling*.

As an additional remark, I would like to mention that according to Blondeau, the term *gyi ling* has been adapted from the Chinese language.<sup>67</sup> In volume three of the *Gzi brjid*, the meat of the *gyi ling* is listed alongside bird, donkey, buffalo, and cock meat included in the sixteen types of meat of lesser quality that should not be eaten (*nyams pa'i sha la bcu drug ste / gyi ling rta dang bya bon (r. bong) sha / ma he [...] khyim bya de po'i sha las sogs / nyams pa che bas spang bar bya / /*).<sup>68</sup>

Two further types are accounted for in the dictionaries: one is *rong rta* “a horse bred in ... [a rough country]”, or regarded as “horse bred in [...] Sikkim or Bhutan.” Zhang explains it just as *rong yul gyi rta*, without giving a clear definition of what is understood as *rong yul*.<sup>69</sup> In general, the term *rong* refers to deep and narrow valleys. The other horse type is *mu gyen* “n[ame] of a fine breed of horses imported from Kham and Amdo.”<sup>70</sup> *Mu gyen* is most likely an orthographic variation of *mu kheng*.

In the manuscript of *Sras po 'Jigs med*, these main horse types are assigned a certain physiology and quality:

The *mdo ba*, the horse type of the wind element: the trunk is straight, and the limbs are slender. The base of the neck is fine, and the lower part of the face is broad. The ears are like the small feathers of a vulture. The eyes are big and the lower eyelids thick. The mouth is coarse, and the region of the noseband is narrow. The hooves are big, and the hair of the mane is good [i.e. the hair is long and thick]. The coat is bristly and solid. The front body is strong, and the chest is broad. In any case, it is beautiful.

The *bya lto* horse, the horse type of the earth element: The site of the saddle is wide, and the hips are flat. The middle of the tail is thick and [the region of] the stomach and chest is big. The head is small, and the mane is flat. The eyes [resemble] those of a pig. Though its nutrition is simple, the shape of the horse is bad. It is not suitable for procreation. Therefore, it is best to sell it.

<sup>65</sup> See Zhang (1985: 382), *rta mchog gam phul du byung ba'i rta //*

<sup>66</sup> Das (1983: 236).

<sup>67</sup> Blondeau (1972: 157). The term *gyi ling* might correspond with the *zi ling* horses of the nomads in northeastern Tibet; see Ronge (1978: 12).

<sup>68</sup> *Gzi brjid* (vol. 3: 764).

<sup>69</sup> Jäschke (185: 536), see under the lemma *rong*; Das (1983: 1194), and Zhang (1985: 2727).

<sup>70</sup> Das (1985: 966).

The *gyi ling* horse, the horse type of the water element: The body is round like bamboo. The limbs are slender, muscles and bones are round. The head is square, and the ears are long. The oesophagus<sup>71</sup> is broad and the region between the nostrils is small. The part of the snaffle reins is exposed and the base of the neck slim. Although it is not the best [horse], it has the characteristics of a good one.

The *gyam shing* horse, the horse type of the fire element: The trunk is elongated, the head is long, and the ears are short. The front body is stocky and the chest broad. The flanks are long and round. The limbs are stubby and straight. The skin is loose. Its power is big. It is the horse of a robber, [suitable] for flight and pursuit.

The *phug ron*, the horse type of the ether element: The trunk is thick and the muscles big. The ventral border of the mandible is high and the indentation on the nostrils coarse. The coat is bristly and thick [literally: many]. The hair of the tail and the mane is good. It is slow, the steps are big and calm. The region of the belly is big. It is the riding horse of the *zhang blon*.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>71</sup> The translation of *og bar* follows the explanation of the healer and horse doctor mTshams pa Ngag dbang (personal communication in 1997).

<sup>72</sup> *mdo' rlung gi[s] rta ri[g]s ni / kho[gl] drang yan lag[s] bshan / 'gul pa 'phra la [m]tshul 'gye (r. bkyed) / sna (r. rna) rgod gyis (r. kyi) thülchung 'dra / mig che mig gi[s]ma gdan l' }thug / kha sbom thur po 'phra / [d]mig pa che / zas (r. ze) spu bzang / spu rtsub la drung / stod l' }thug[s] brang zhang (r. zheng) che/ gang ltar byas kyang yid du 'ong ba'o / bya lto'i rta rigs ni / rga (r. sga) l' }phrag yang[s] la spyi (r. dpyi) bo leb/ 'jug snying sbom la [g]sus snying che / mgo chung brgyud {b}leb[s] phag gi mig / gso ba bla (r. sla) yang rta ri[g]s ngan/ spel ba'i rigs men (r. min) tshong na bzang / gyi ling chu'i rta ri[g]s ni / lus po snyug ma 'dril ba 'dra / yan lag shan la sha rus 'dril / mgo ni gru bzhi sna (r. rna) ba ring/ l' }og bar yang la sna ba brag (r. phrag) dog / srab kha thar la ske mgul l' }phra / rab[s] ma yin kyang bzang ba'i rtags / gyam shing me'i rta rigs ni / khog[s] 'gyong mgo ring sna (r. rna) ba thung / {b}stod thung brang zheng che / rked pa ring la 'gril / yan lag sbom la drang / lpags lhod / shed che / 'bro[s]l 'ded byags (r. jag) pa'i rta yin no / phug ron mkha'i rta ri[g]s ni / khog sbom sha sul che / za'u (r. za yung) mtho la nyag sna rags / spu bgod (r. rgod) mang 'jugs ma dang ze ba bzang / sos dal gom pa che la dal / bsus (r. gsus) khyim che / zhang blon gyi 'og rta yin // For the German translation, see Maurer (2001: 133–136).*



Fig. 3 – The horse types *mdo ba*, *bya lto*, *gyi ling* and *gyam shing*. Photo courtesy of Nepal German Manuscript Preservation Project (NGMPP, Reel No. 91/1)

A summary on three horse types with a brief assessment of the *gyi ling* horse follows this physiological distinction:

As for the horse, three types are defined: The *mdo ba* resembles a cow placed on a base. One rides it in the region of the beloved relatives; therefore, it is a peaceful [horse]. The *rong bu* is like an antelope chased by a dog. One rides it in the area of the detested enemies. The *khu gyen* is like a she-wolf roaming around in the mountainside. One rides it to flee and to chase [someone]. In the evening, it is faster than in the morning. If one compares it with [others], one assesses it as a good analysis. The assessment of the *gyi ling*: It is the decoration of high nobility. It is the best animal.<sup>73</sup>

As these passages show, the names for the horse types are not fixed and change even within the same chapter of the text, and element assignments vary from one textual source to the other. Moreover, other texts assign the horse types to other elements.

<sup>73</sup> *rta la rigs gsum nges / mdo ba leng (r. glang) brtegs (r. stegs) la bzhang pa 'dra ste / byams pa gnyan (gnyen) yul du {g}zhon pas sos dal pa yin / rong bu sgo (r. dgo) ba khyis 'ded ba 'dra ste / gdang pa (r. sdang ba) dgra yul du {g}zhon / khu gyen spyang mo ri rtsibs spyod pa 'dra ste / 'brod (r. 'bros) [']ded byed pa la zhon / snga gro (r. dro) bas kyang phyi gro (r. dro) 'gyong (r. mgyogs) / blo bsdur nas bzang spyad (dpyad) 'di rtsis so / gyi lng rta yi[s] spyad (r. dpyad) / ya rab[s] gong ma'i {b}rgyan / dud 'gro rnamis kyi mchog[s] //* For the German translation, see *ibid.*: 135–137.

*Change in assignment and subcategories of horse types*

The elemental assignation of the horses appears to have been a matter of discussion: whereas Sras po 'Jigs med's text refers to an authority called g.Yu gzher legs 'khrid who ascribes the *gyi ling* to water, the horse book of Tshe ring bkra shis bla ma assigns it to the earth element. The expert (*rta mkhan*) here is Cog ro, a name common in manuscripts on horse texts, e.g. Cog ro, Cog ro bu mo rta yi lha and Cog ro rje khye'u chung. The term *cog ro* is well-known from Dunhuang sources as it denotes a Tibetan region and a clan.<sup>74</sup>

Tshe ring bkra shis bla ma's text also distinguishes new horse types and creates further subcategories. It omits the ether element and adds a new category created from all four elements (*'byung bzhi 'dus pa'i khams*). He assigns it to two horse types, thus totalling six types:

In this great practical teaching of Cog ro are, [regarded] from the exterior (*phyi ngos nas*) [of the horse] the four elements. The horse is composed of the four elements: The *mdo ba dar shog* [is the horse] of the wind element, the *jag to ar rgyus* is the horse of the water element, all *gyi ling* [are horses] of the earth element. The *rong ngu be gar* is of the fire element. The *mu gan* is of the element that combines the four elements. The *'dra men* is of the element that combines the four elements.<sup>75</sup>

As the present study shows, a comparison of the manuscripts of Sras po 'Jigs med and Tshe ring bkra shis bla ma reveals changes in the spelling of these types. The horse type called *bya lto* in the one text turns for example to *jag to* or *byeg to* in the other. To create subcategories, the latter links the types with colours and/or aspects. The *byeg to* (*jag to*) is assigned to white and black. The *rong ngu* horse is assigned to *nyin* ("day, sunny side") and *sribs* ("night, shadow"), a distinction that recalls the Chinese concept of *yin* and *yang*, a feature that appears to suggest some Chinese influence. It seems, however, that these assignments do not correlate with the horse's quality.

Remarkable in Tshe ring bkra shis bla ma's manuscript is the fact that the elements that are ascribed to the *gyi ling* horse change. The introductory passage links the *gyi ling* type with the earth element. Following, the *gyi ling* is assigned to various elements and

<sup>74</sup> See Zhang (1985: 745) and Blondeau (1979: 326, footnote 25).

<sup>75</sup> *cog ro'i dnar khrid chen mo 'di la phyi ngos nas 'byung ba chen po bzhi yod pas / rta 'byung ba bzhi la[s] grub pas / mdo ba dar shog rlung gi khams / jag to ar rgyus chu'i khams / gyi ling (thams cad) sa'i khams / rong ngu be gar me'i khams / mu gan 'byung bzhi 'dus pa'i khams / 'dra men 'byung bzhi 'dus pa'i khams //* For the German translation, see Maurer (2001: 143).



dimensions; these are space (*gnam*), atmosphere (*bar snang*), earth (*sa*), and water (*chu*). These manifold characterisations of the *gyi ling* could point to a certain peculiarity of these horses. Unlike Sras po 'Jigs med's manuscript, the author does not always ascribe a positive quality to *gyi ling* horses as shown below.

If the *gnam gyi gyi ling* resembles a lion, it cannot be compared with another. If the *bar snang gi gyi ling* is like a dragon it cannot be compared with another. If the *sa'i gyi ling* is like a frog that hides in a meadow one cannot compare it with another. If the *gnam rta gyi ling* is like a one-year old antelope that runs to a cliff it cannot be compared with another. If the *chu'i gyi ling* resembles a fish, one cannot compare it with another. The characteristics of the *gyi ling*: The agility with the mouth is big and the nostrils are large. The forehead is big and the region between the forelegs wide. The muscles of the back are good, and the chest is big. Tail and mane are good and the *tshe skor*<sup>76</sup> is wide. If it rolls on the back, it looks up and rolls [again]. In the middle of the night it likes to lie down. If it gets up it shakes the four [limbs]. These are the characteristics of the *gyi ling*. [...] About the five types of bad *gyi ling*: the head is short, the hind leg is long, the stomach [resembles] that of a stag. This is a bad type. If the *gyi ling* looks like a one-year-old sheep that is forced down by a load of salt, it is a bad type. If the *gyi ling* resembles a one-year-old goat whose companion was sold, it is a bad type. If the *gyi ling* resembles a cracked mask with broken loins, it is a bad type. The head is long, the hind leg short and the belly [like the one of] a she-dog. These are the bad types and they are five.<sup>77</sup>

*The elemental categories and the varṇa theory in other contexts*

The elemental categories and the *varṇa* theory are not solely applied in Tibetan horse medicine. They appear, rather, as two approaches used to structure visible features of bodies and environment. Chinese divination, for example, bases its divinatory concept on four (or five) elements and the associations among them, developed independently

<sup>76</sup> This body part is not identified, it could be related to *'tshe ba*, and denote the region of the psalterium, see Jäschke (1985: 459). According to mTshams pa Ngag dbang (personal communication in 1997) it could be the body part between the spur and the hoof.

<sup>77</sup> *gnam gyi gyi ling seng ge 'dra ba byung na cis kyang mi thub 'byung / bar snang gi gyi ling 'brug 'dra na cis kyang mi thub 'byung / sa'i gyi ling sbal pa na la gab pa 'dra na cig byung na cis kyang mi thub 'byung / gnam rta gyi ling sgo (r. dgo) thong zur la rgyugs pa 'dra na cis kyang mi thub 'byung / chu'i gyi ling nya 'dra ba cig byung na cis kyang mi thub 'byung gyi ling yin pa'i mtshan nyid ni kha rtsal che la sna bug yangs / spral sdeng (r. dpral steng) che la lag bar yangs / {b}shul sha bzang la brang gdengs che / rnga sngog (r. rngog) bzang la tshe skor yangs / 'dre (r. 'gre) ba'i 'dus na rte (rt. lta) 'dres (r. 'gre) byed / nyin mtshan phyed par nyal la dga' lang(s) pa'i dus na bzhi srugs byed / gyi ling chags pa'i mtshan nyid yin // For the German translation, see Maurer (2011: 144–145 and 147–148).*

from the Indo-Greek theory. The elements are related to five cosmogonic elements called *keg*, *ji*, *kungs*, *shang*, and *'u*. They are related to the five common elements (*rus khams*): wood (*shing*), fire (*me*), earth (*sa*), iron (*lcags*) and water (*chu*).” The *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705), the Fifth Dalai Lama’s regent, applies these categories in a very similar way, that is to describe physiognomic characteristics and/or the voice of a person.<sup>78</sup>

The *varṇa* theory appears as a more general pattern for qualification. In India, it was not only applied to categorise humans and horses but also a common qualifier for the building ground. The geomancer who determines the construction site tested the characteristics of the ground (*vastu lakṣaṇa*) such as the smell, taste, colour, and consistency in order to assign it to a specific class. Of a striking similarity to the horse’s characteristics is the following assessment of the ground described in a *Śilpaśāstra*: earth with a ghee-like smell is assigned to the *brahmin* class, a blood-like smell to the *kṣatriya*, a rice-like smell to the *vaiśya* and a wine-like smell to the *sūdra* class.<sup>79</sup> The Tibetans adopted this *varṇa* theory, with Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho adding a fifth category in the geomantic chapter of his *Vaidūrya dkar po*. The colour of the earth determines the quality and class affiliation: “Oily black earth or earth with the colour of the five precious things is good. White is assigned to the king (*rgyal rigs*), yellow to the nobility (*rje rigs*), red to the people (*dmangs*), green to the Brahmins (*bram ze*), and oily black for the outcasts (*gdol*).”<sup>80</sup>

### Conclusion

The Indian hippological tradition represented by Śālihotra characterises horses by assessing physical shape, the colour of coat and eyes, odour, and behaviour, including preferences for food. Finding the best horse for the king and the most suitable horses for warfare may be the main purpose of this assessment but it is certainly not the only one. Śālihotra links the horses’ physical and mental qualities with specific categories that are also applied to the structure of social classes (Sanskrit *varṇa*, Tibetan *rigs*).

A similar procedure is noticeable in Indian cosmogonic tradition, where social classes are used as a category to structure the world, the environment, and the universe. Here, the three or four social classes

<sup>78</sup> See Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1996, *stod cha*, 259.15 and 260.4–7).

<sup>79</sup> Bose (1926: 67).

<sup>80</sup> Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1996, *smad cha*: 282): *snun nag rin chen kha dog lnga / byung bzang dkar po rgyal rigs dang / rje rigs ser po dmangs dmar po / bram ze sngon po gdol pa nag / snun*. For the German translation, see Maurer (2009: 285).

are defined through other aspects such as directions, seasons, deities, elements and body parts and animals and so on.<sup>81</sup>

A similar approach is followed in the Tibetan hippological tradition, where the assignment of horses to the different elements—wind, water, fire, and earth—determines their specific physiology and mental quality.<sup>82</sup> The whole body of the horse, as well as its individual parts, are identified with a certain shape. In the Tibetan hippological tradition, social class appears to be of secondary importance, as horses are not directly assigned to a specific one, yet, depending on the elemental assessments, horses are qualified as particularly suitable for specific classes such as the *zhang blon*, the nobility in general or, for example, a robber who presumably represents the lowest class (*rigs*).<sup>83</sup>

The elements applied to characterize horses in Tibetan theory are identical to the natural-philosophical Greek elements. Initially three in number—wind, water and fire—the elements increased to four when the philosopher Empedocles (ca. 495–435 BCE) who, by the way, was said to be vegetarian—added earth to their group.

These in turn correspond to the bodily elements, namely the three—four by the beginning of the 5th century—humours of the Greek humoral pathology: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and brown bile.<sup>84</sup>

It was the Greek physician Galenos of Pergamon (ca. 130–200 CE) who ascribed primary qualities to the elements, both natural and humoral: warm and wet (wind and blood), cold and wet (water and phlegm), warm and dry (fire and yellow bile) cold and dry (earth and brown bile). The original theory focused on the micro- and macro-cosmic relations, the relation of the humours and the cosmic elements, their qualities and the seasons.<sup>85</sup> Later on, further aspects and qualities were assigned such as colour, taste, seasons, times of the day, age, and so on. It was the famous Plato (427/8–348/7 BCE) who linked the cosmic elements with physical shapes.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>81</sup> See for example Smith (1994: 67, 70, 75, 81). The number of social classes is not fixed.

<sup>82</sup> They correspond with the “bodily elements” or humours (*nyes pa*) wind (*rlung*), phlegm (*bad kan*), bile (*mkhris pa*); occasionally blood (*khrag*) is added the a fourth.

<sup>83</sup> Apart from qualifying a horse by assigning it to an element, the horse and its body parts are compared with other animals in order to describe its shape and to assess the horse’s quality.

<sup>84</sup> See Böhme (2014: 92–98). The theory started with three elements; after the 5th century they were found and ether as fifth element was added later; see *ibid.*: 143–144.

<sup>85</sup> The idea that seasons influence the elements also provides the basis for the Chinese elemental concepts, see Steinert (2016: 239–241).

<sup>86</sup> See Böhme (2014: 101–104, 163–167).

Furthermore, this concept formed the foundation for the distinction of character dispositions postulated in the doctrine on physique and body structure (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic), according to which there is a causal connection between elements and mental capacities. In the middle age, Paracelsus (1493–1551) developed, based on the same concept, the doctrine of signature that states a relation between the shape and the inner nature or character of nature and parts of it.<sup>87</sup>

This brief analysis shows that the “traditional Tibetan” concept in horse medicine that relates elements and humours with shapes and mental capabilities corresponds, in terms of medical theories, with Greek concepts.<sup>88</sup> These theories originated at a time when men were trying to understand the natural environment including animals and humans and represent the first steps taken in the fields of natural and philosophical sciences. The relations between shapes and characteristics assigned to each element express the effort to understand the world and its existing structures, both in terms of micro- and macrocosm, as they classify humans, configure the environment, and offer models of social organisation. By all appearances, social class and horizontal and vertical structures of any kind are nothing but a theoretical frame used to analyse society and could therefore be traced back and reduced to the elemental theories.

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<sup>87</sup> For Paracelsus, his activities and publications, see Böhme (2014: 127–131) and Eckart (1990: 122–127).

<sup>88</sup> Though there are links between the Greek and the Babylonian cosmic and medical concepts, it seems that these theories come originally from Greek or Indian tradition whereas the medical theories of hot and cold-diseases appears to originate in Mesopotamia. There, only two seasons where distinguished, summer (hot) and winter (cold). See Steinert (2016: 240).

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# The Social Life of Excellent Horses (*gyi ling*): a Textual and Ethnographic Exploration

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## *Introduction*

**I**n his book *Die Nomaden von Tibet* Matthias Hermanns dedicates a whole section to reporting on horses: their size, their breeds, the colours they can be found in, their gaits etc. In addition to a lot of useful information on the life of Tibetan nomads, this text reveals the fact that horses were evidently a key resource and held such significance that it was worth dedicating to them such descriptive detail.<sup>1</sup> This view is supported by more recent studies such as Sienna Craig's fascinating account of horses in contemporary Mustang.<sup>2</sup> Specific Tibetological work, most notably Anne Marie Blondeau's study of hyppiatry<sup>3</sup> and Petra Maurer's work on horse healing<sup>4</sup> also bear witness to the importance that horses and horse medicine occupied in Tibetan social life over time. The importance of horses on the Tibetan plateau was presumably also reflected in the legendary accounts that led the famous horse veterinary William Moorcroft (1767–1825) to explore Western Tibet in the early 19th century in search of fabled outstanding horse breeds to improve horse quality for the East India Company (and had through his encounter with Csoma de Koros a seminal influence on the dawn of Tibetan Studies).

The significance of horses is reflected in the rich and distinctive terminology that Tibetans have deployed to describe them. *Gyi ling* is a Tibetan term indicating horses with outstanding features. It can be found in horse science manuals as well as in songs and rituals. It is part of a rich vocabulary that captures equine features in multiple dimensions. In this paper we look at a text on *gyi ling* horses from the

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<sup>1</sup> Hermanns (1949).

<sup>2</sup> Craig (2008).

<sup>3</sup> Blondeau (1972).

<sup>4</sup> Maurer (2001).

Tucci collection as well as more recent Tibetological and ethnographic materials from Eastern, Central, and Western Tibet to interrogate this notion. *Gyi ling* emerges as part of a set of terms that highlight particular features of horses linked to their military, political, and social importance in wider cosmopolitical arrangements. On the basis of a preliminary study of textual sources and ethnographic cases we thus suggest that the notion of *gyi ling*, which apparently has strong mythological relevance, appears to be linked to the cultivation of actual horsemanship, horse medicine, and the breeding of excellent horses and as such deserves further cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural exploration.

*Why do horses matter?*

Horses, horsemanship, and pastures were of crucial strategic importance throughout Tibetan history and have shaped the identity of Tibet in many ways. They are a recurring theme in Tibetan sources and ethnographic observations, although in some areas their influence appears more pronounced than in others. A famous passage from PT 1286 (lines 35–37) associates fast horses with Tibet as a distinctive place (*rta mgyogs su 'phel ba'i gnas*):

This centre of heaven  
 this core of the earth  
 This hearth of the world  
 Fenced round by snow mountains  
 The headland of all rivers  
 Where the peaks are high and the land is pure  
 A country so good  
 where men are born as sages and heroes  
 and act according to good laws  
 a land of horses ever more speedy.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the imperial period, there was a constant tug-of-war, where the strategic goal of both Tibetan and Tang empires was to gain or maintain control over the region of grasslands in modern eastern Qinghai and southern Gansu. The historian Denis Twitchett observes that “for empires of this era, the control of horse pastures was as potent a source of power as the control of key oilfields in the modern world.”<sup>6</sup>

The strategic importance of horses was relevant not only for the relationship of Tibet with its neighbours but was also highly relevant

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<sup>5</sup> Aris (1998: iii).

<sup>6</sup> Twitchett (2000: 133).

in internal politics. The *Dbā' bzhed* chronicle refers to the presence of army's big horses as the backdrop for a Buddhist/Bonpo debate concerning the funeral of emperor Khri Srong lde btsan presided by the young Mu ne btsan po. Having ascended the throne aged 15, with the political leadership of the country torn by religious/political conflicts, he was in a delicate position:

In the Horse [Tiger?] Year (801/797?) in the first spring month bTsan po Khri srong lde btsan passed away [...] When it was to be decided to perform the funeral for the 'Son of God', the black ministers such as mChims btsan sher [...] set up a big *re'u* [in the area of bSam yas monastery] [...] From Chibs (= cavalry area) arrived many big horses (*rta po che*) and quick riders (*mgyogs pa*) and the place was occupied (*gzhi bzungs*) with stables and tents. Meanwhile one hundred and twenty-seven Bon po such as A gshen [...] arrived from 'Phan yul [...].<sup>7</sup>

The cavalry area (Chibs) presumably indicated vast pastoral areas in northern and northeastern Tibet,<sup>8</sup> in this case possibly Damshung and beyond (this was the area where later in history the Hoshuud Mongols used to keep the horses of their cavalry). Given the link between local deities, territorial cults, and political power the presence of the cavalry was certainly politically significant, keeping in mind that general sTag ra klu gong conqueror of Chang'an in 763 was a strong Bonpo supporter. With the rising importance of the cavalry it is not surprising that horse breeding and horse healing skills became increasingly relevant. It is under Khri Srong lde btsan that we have the first record of the emerging of horse science in a very cosmopolitan environment. At that time experts including Mongols, Persians, Turks, and Nepalis met to talk about medicine and horse medicine.<sup>9</sup> This is reflected in many textual and oral narratives.

The arising of the so-called Tea-Horse road shows also that the horse was not only an essential commodity for the rising Tibetan empire, but also for the parallel Chinese. During the 7th century Tibet's power and influence as a single entity increased suddenly, in a way that had never before been seen. The country united for the first time and began military expansion, leading to the creation of one of the most important trade routes of the ancient world,

<sup>7</sup> *Dbā' bzhed* folio 26a.

<sup>8</sup> See *Lde'u chos 'byung* (270), which mentions six *khod*: Bod, Zhang Zhung, Mon, Chibs dpon, mThong khyab, and an unnamed one. See also *Mkha' pa'i dga' ston* (185) mentioning: Bod, Zhang Zhung, Sum pa, Chibs, sTong khyab.

<sup>9</sup> See Maurer (2001) but also Martin ([2011] 2016: 117–143).

economically, politically, and culturally. It comprised of a network of trails that extended for over 3000 km, and was travelled by horses, mules, and porters. This route was known by the Chinese as the Cha Ma Do and became later famous in the West as the Tea-Horse road. The establishment of this road began by the Tibetan growing interest for tea. A common tale also tells of princess Wencheng bringing tea with her to Lhasa as part of her dowry in her marriage to the Tibetan emperor. To quench their newfound thirst, Tibet provided as the other side of this commercial equation a vital resource of top-quality horses to China's armies. At the time, the Chinese were in crucial need of these animals for defense of the northern frontiers against those who were "more culturally attuned to horses and could make better military use of them."<sup>10</sup> Within the Chinese empire itself, horses were bred, but Tibetan and Mongolian horses were much hardier, faster, and more suitable for military use. Particularly clear examples of China's need for warhorses are demonstrated with the nomadic invasion and fall of Han dynasty in 220 CE, Tang in 907 CE, and the Mongol control between 1260 and 1368.

The advantages of having a supply of army-fit horses were enormous; most noticeably, allowing a mounted army to be stronger and stealthier than one on foot. Although perhaps numbers may sometimes not have been in favour of the mounted army, horses gave such an advantage that this could become a relatively minor issue. In addition, horses enabled the rapid assembly of an army from widely scattered tribal groups, and their attack on a particular frontier at short notice. All of Tang China's foreign adversaries in fact (Turks, Turgesh, Tibetans, Uighurs, Xi, and Kitan, for example) based their military success on rapid campaigns by mounted forces. Furthermore, the horse's essential role in fast and effective communication shouldn't be underestimated. Messages sent and delivered by horse were the most rapid available in those times, connecting the heart of the Tibetan empire (Lhasa) and the vast geographical area encompassed by it, despite its difficult terrain. As observed by Denis Twitchett, "[...] this courier network was the nervous system of communications without which [a state] lost its territorial control, its cohesion, and its capacity to react to crises."<sup>11</sup>

An extract from Beer illustrates the ideal qualities of the horse and reflects the extent to which the precision of horsemanship developed within the Tibetan people:

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<sup>10</sup> Freeman and Ahmed (2015: 2).

<sup>11</sup> Twitchett (2000: 134).

The “pearl” of the horse’s eye is the chief of these thirty-two signs [of perfection]. The eye should be round with a pure white colour, the pupil bean-shaped and of a deep colour, the iris should have a hue of five colours. The mane should consist of ten thousand soft hairs, and the upraised tail should flow like a comet. The ears should be shaped like a willow leaf, the tongue slender, pink, and clean like a two-edged sword, the gums a light colour, and the incisor and molar teeth spaced firmly apart. The neck, forehead, breast, bones, skull, sinews, legs, knees, and fetlocks all bear similar signs of distinction. A particular mystique is also accorded to the colour marks of the forehead, hoofs, and body of a perfect thoroughbred steed, which though possibly highly strung is never disturbed by sudden sounds or startling sights.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding this quotation, we are told that these particularities are attributed to “thoroughbred” steeds (potentially *gyi ling*), the likes of which Beer claims were used from the start of Tibetan competitive horse racing.<sup>13</sup> Observing the favoured traits one can guess as to their underlying motives, drawing from knowledge of practical horse work.<sup>14</sup> For example, the definitive spacing between incisor and molar could imply a convenient fit for tack, and therefore better communication between horse and rider. Furthermore, the last qualities listed reflect characteristics that are nowadays advertised on the European horse market as “bombproof”, which would have been preferential within the military context of those times.

Horse racing is one among the many ancient cultural traditions that have been re-enacted and sometimes re-invented within the Tibetan-Chinese cultural context, showing many parallels with similar traditions across Inner Asia—most notably the Mongolian *naadam* and its link to Mongolian horsemanship and territorial cults.<sup>15</sup> On the Tibetan plateau several horse races take place at regular intervals throughout the year, and while some involve exclusively Tibetan communities, many have been publicized and touristicised. Nonetheless, at these races one can find an atmosphere pervaded with local and national identity, as well as pride of character. A most clear example of this can be seen when a horse race is used as a medium of worship towards a traditional mountain deity promoting good weather and fortune. Some of these races also take place in conjunction with re-enactments of ancient stories such as the Epic of Gesar of Ling, which itself highlights local and national heritage. To

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<sup>12</sup> Beer (1999: 60).

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*: 60.

<sup>14</sup> Yancen worked for Haggis Farm Polo Club (Polo club of the University of Cambridge) for 10 years and had experience training racehorses in Italy.

<sup>15</sup> See Sneath (2014: 458–472).

this day horses remain essential to these events, which may involve not only horse races but also acrobatic displays on horseback and even polo games. In some cases, polo or similar games involving mounted players competing for the carcass (or part of it, usually the right front leg) of a sacrificed animal used as “ball” (with some vague similarities to the Central Asian Buzkashi) links these ritual competitions on horseback to ancient mountain cults.<sup>16</sup> Whilst there are hints that the Tibetan army during the imperial period used to practice “polo”, in a recent study Tsering Dawa explores critically the widespread narrative that “polo” has a Tibetan origin and highlights its connections to Central Asian countries on the Silk Road. From this point of view, practices involving horses on the Tibetan plateau seem a variant of the widespread cultivation of horsemanship among pastoral and agropastoral communities across Inner Asia.<sup>17</sup>

Horses, along with specific geographical knowledge of the land, have also allowed Tibetan nomads to maintain a certain degree of autonomy from centralised power through distinctive ways of engaging and disengaging with the political changes that took place in modern Tibetan history. Not only have horses underpinned the nomadic attitudes that rebelled against submission, but they have also been key to maintaining a physical advantage over Chinese political movements that have ventured into their land even when numbers did not at all play to their favour. An instance of this is evident when in the Long March (October 1934–October 1935), the Chinese attempt to cross the north-eastern corner of the Tibetan plateau resulted in chaos.<sup>18</sup>

This instance is just one of many illustrations of the horse’s key significance within the preservation of nomadic identity, which in turn is seen by some as epitomizing the most original Tibetan culture.<sup>19</sup> However, whilst claims to cultural authenticity and originality are unsurprisingly the object of competition and contestation, it is certain that since time immemorial the social identity of Tibetan nomads has been tightly linked to horses. The potential enhancement of speed, strength, agility etc. enabled through the horse is one of the many aspects that render a strong sense of pride within the people of Tibetan nomadic communities, who answer enthusiastically to the name *bu rgod* or *bu rgod ma*—meaning “son untamed” and “son untamed female”. As Ekvall puts it:

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<sup>16</sup> See Diemberger (1996: 261–282).

<sup>17</sup> Tsering Dawa (2010).

<sup>18</sup> Ekvall (1983: 95).

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*: 97.

To whatever degree the Tibetan nomadic pastoralist, by the habit of riding and the feel of power between his knees, is touched with such megalomania of power and pride intertwined, then riding, as an experience in itself, plays a part in shaping personality.<sup>20</sup>

The collective knowledge on horses transcended through generations seems to provide yet another important element that joins them as a group, not only in relation to each other as a community, but also from external perspectives. The relationship between the individual person and the community, with the flesh-and-blood horse is therefore for many reasons evidently a key factor in the identity development of the Tibetan people, and more specifically, their pastoral communities.

*The horse in mythological, ritual, and epic contexts*

Given their importance for military enterprises, transportation and trade, horses have acquired great relevance in cosmologies across the Tibetan plateau and not only among nomadic communities. Most notably this is epitomized by the symbolism of the so-called wind-horse, the *rlung rta* discussed by Samten Karmay.<sup>21</sup> A frequently depicted elaboration of the horse as a physical bridge between the human world and that of the divine is the horse in relation to the *yul lha*—territory deities that are a fundamental aspect of the Tibetan culture. The image of *yul lha* riding on the backs of horses is a very common one throughout Tibet; one of its prevalent interpretations being that they are the vehicle that allows the travelling of the *yul lha* between realms. This kind of symbolism can also be seen reflected in the wooden horse head that used to adorn Tibetan ferries, thus enabling people to travel from one river bank to the other.<sup>22</sup>

Remaining within the mythical context yet stepping beyond the horse's role as means of inter-worldly travel, the epic of Gesar of Ling exposes different ideas about the significance of horses. Shared features among the innumerable versions include the initial compacted pre-history of Tibet, and the brief account of how Tibet converted to Buddhism. After the country's spiritual conversion, the epic narrates that not all negative demons and spirits had been fully vanquished. Consequentially, this caused Tibet to fall into a chaotic state, providing a reason for which the higher gods sent Gesar to be reborn into the human world and remedy the situation. The core of

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*: 90.

<sup>21</sup> Karmay (1993:150–157).

<sup>22</sup> See Lange (2009).

the epic is Gesar's life and his accomplishments. An important passage is that of the horse race where, still at a young age and after having undergone exile, Gesar is able to win the race, marry, and become King Gesar of Ling. Rolf Alfred Stein and Mireille Helffer highlighted the significance of this episode within which the horse itself has an important role, and the horse race is one of the climaxes of the story that stretches over several chapters.<sup>23</sup> Philippe Sagant, building on their work and that of Samten Karmay, notices the political importance of this mythological narrative and its link to ancient and current mountain cults<sup>24</sup>—a feature that finds significant parallels in Inner Asian cosmopolitics.<sup>25</sup>

In the Gesar epic one can also find an invocation and offering to King Gesar, under the form of "The Warrior Song of Drala", where "Drala" (*dgra lha*) refers to the focal point of cosmic strength and is sometimes translated as "warrior god"—a feature that seems to evoke the actual military importance of horses mentioned above. Within this "song", we are provided with an extremely intricate description of Gesar's horse: its appearance, its qualities, and its gaits. The sheer detail given in reference to the horse, and the event of the horse race, demonstrates its pivotal significance within the context of the epic. Despite the fact that "Tibet's epic hero, Gesar of Ling, is sometimes depicted on prayer flags riding his heavenly white steed Kyango Karkar through the billowing clouds",<sup>26</sup> we would distinguish the meaning underlying the horse from its representation in the *rhung rta*. The component that is emphasized to a greater degree in the case of the epic would appear to be that of strength in a direct sense as well as in the underlying idea that Gesar was in necessity of the horse to claim the throne. In this context, the horse is an element that unlocks the full potential of the rider through collaboration of the two individuals. As is clear within both the epic itself and the warrior song, the horse in the case of Gesar was the way to power for a uniquely significant character of Tibetan mythical history. Within this mythological context, there are explicit and extensive references to *gyi ling* horses as illustrated in the recent publication on the origin of the thirteen *gyi ling* horses.<sup>27</sup> This term however does not seem to be restricted to the mythological realm.

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<sup>23</sup> See Stein (1959) and Helffer (1977).

<sup>24</sup> Sagant (1990: 151–170).

<sup>25</sup> Sneath (2014: 458–472).

<sup>26</sup> Beer (1999: 62).

<sup>27</sup> *gling rje ge sar rgyal po'i sgrung—gyi ling bcu gsum 'byung khungs skor* by the bard Lo rgyas, Chengdu (2012).



*What is a gyi ling?*

*Gyi ling* appears as a type of horse according to hippological classifications given in a *rta spyad* text kept at the British Museum<sup>28</sup> and in manuals from Mustang and other areas.<sup>29</sup> According to these classifications *gyi ling* is one outstanding type of horse within a set of different horse categories.

The term *gyi ling* can also appear on its own, independently from hippological classifications. Blo brtan rdo rje and Stuart write that *rta gyi ling* is “fast, strong and a good breed from Amdo”.<sup>30</sup> However, the term appears also in Central Tibet as noted by Dan Martin in his on-line dictionary following Tucci’s Tibetan Folk Songs.<sup>31</sup> On the basis of her study of manuals from Mustang, Petra Maurer reports various forms of horse classification that include *gyi ling* as a category and observes that

The *gyi ling* type of horse must have had a particular significance. Sarat Chandra Das mentions two different types of *gyi ling* and in several manuscripts, there is a narrative of origin of this type of horse.<sup>32</sup>

According to a Buddhist legend reported in the *Rta gzhung dngul dkar me long* (attributed to the 8<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Gru gu Seng mdo ’od can, re-published in Lhasa 1990),<sup>33</sup> the original winged *gyi ling* horse had its wings cut off and became rideable by humans following the curse by a sage (*drang song*) angered by its misdeeds. Following this, regretting the suffering of the horses and wishing to cure them, the sage produced the means for diagnosis and treatments of horse illnesses. The Sog po rgyal po sGom ’phro and the Gru gu rgyal po Se tho yi offered these horses for human riding and tied them up. Whilst these horses were endowed with the original strength they could be used for riding by people. Since then, they were adorned and dressed up and cared for like children.

*Gyi ling in a horse breeding and horse medicine text in Tucci’s collection*

We came across the term *gyi ling* in a beautifully illustrated text on horses in the Tucci collection. The title is *Gyi ling rta’i spyad bo dang*

<sup>28</sup> See Blondeau (1972: 157).

<sup>29</sup> See Maurer (2001).

<sup>30</sup> Blo brtan rdo rje and Stuart (2008: 133).

<sup>31</sup> Tucci (1966: 116).

<sup>32</sup> Maurer (2001: 117). Our translation from German.

<sup>33</sup> *Rta rgyud rin chen ’phreng ba*: 111–136.

*bcos ka ra brgyud dang bcas* (described as “a treatise of hippopathology” in the catalogue). It is vol. 1277 in the Filibeck catalogue.<sup>34</sup> It is a *dbu med* manuscript, counting 24 folios, 10 lines per page, cm 9,50x25 (cm 6x21,50). It is a composite text, a heterogeneous collection of shorter texts assembled in a single volume. Like many hippological manuals, it has numerous spelling mistakes, abridged words, and a combination of literary expressions derived from ancient transmitted traditions and colloquialisms. The exact provenance of the text is unclear but given its similarities with texts from the Mustang region it is likely to have been retrieved by Tucci in Western Tibet and a closer textual analysis may highlight possible textual links. This text in fact shares many similarities with an untitled text (folio 19–46) included in the manuscript from Jharkot (lower Mustang) belonging to *sras po 'jigs med* discussed by Petra Maurer.<sup>35</sup>

After a homage to sage men (*drang srong*) of the past, there is a reference to *Cog ro bu mo'i rta lha mthong sman* and *'Bro ba'i bu mo dar za yug* as source of the knowledge (the passage is almost identical to *sras po 'jigs med*, folio 19). The first part of the text is a treatise on horse medicine, with features that are similar to *Bacot xylograph* as well as *sras po 'jigs med* illuminated manuscript from Jarkhot and recall *Dunhuang* sources.<sup>36</sup> This is followed by a short treatise on the colour of horse hair attributed to a *Cha za khri btsun*. Subsequently there is an extract from a treatise on horse divination attributed to the Indian master *Śālihotra*, the founder of Indian hippiatry. The final part of the text is attributed to *Gru gu Seng mdo 'od* (sic) who is most likely *Gru/Dru gu Seng mdo 'od chen*, a physician from the Turks who participated in the international medical gathering promoted by emperor *Khri Srong lde btsan* in the 8th century (according to *Zur mkhar ba's* medical history and other sources).<sup>37</sup> Whilst it is worth remembering that some Tibetans locate *Gru gu* in *A mdo* or *Khams*, references to *Zhang Zhung* as well as to Indian and Turkic traditions seem to link the horse knowledge reflected in this type of text to the wider web of Silk Road connections. At the same time, there is ample evidence of knowledge grounded in daily handling of horses as highlighted by Petra Maurer in relation to the Mustang manuals. Reference to an earlier orally transmitted knowledge about practices is explicitly suggested in a paragraph in the introduction to the text where it is stated that

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<sup>34</sup> Filibeck (2003: 428–429).

<sup>35</sup> Maurer (2001: 60).

<sup>36</sup> See Maurer (2001: 187).

<sup>37</sup> See Martin ([2011] 2016: 117–143); Martin (2017).

People who wished to benefit the horses of future generations and to heal horse diseases practiced the received teachings and passed them on, benefitting sentient being. In such a way, the memorized teachings were written down.<sup>38</sup>

The volume consisting of heterogeneous texts contained in the Tucci collection has an overall title that highlights the notion of *gyi ling* as referring to excellent horses in general and not just as one type of horse within a particular classification. This seems to be supported also by the fact that the author of one of the texts included in the volume seems to be the same Gru gu Seng mdo 'od chen to whom the text narrating the origin of *gyi ling* horses is attributed. This use of the term *gyi ling* finds also resonance with ethnographic contexts.

*Gyi ling among the Tibetans of Henan: excellent horses in the sacred landscape of Gyi ling la rtse*

The term *gyi ling* appears in a variety of contexts among the Henan Mongols in Amdo. The Mongolian enclave known as Henan Mongolian Autonomous County or Sogpo is particularly famous for its horses. Arriving in this area, one is likely to see beautiful horses, which are somewhat bigger than those that one can normally see on the Tibetan plateau. Whilst the majority of the population speaks Amdo Tibetan, the history of this place links it directly to the Hoshuud Mongols who took over the region in the 17th century and originated its ruling lineage.<sup>39</sup> An impressive statue of Tsaghan Tenjin, the first Henan Qinwang riding a splendid large and sturdy horse dominates the area in front of the restored royal palace.

Horse culture is currently strongly emphasized in this area and brings together different legacies. The most recent influence can be identified in the promotion of local Mongolness according to Inner Mongolian models. This has overlaid older Mongolian customs of Oirat origin and possibly even earlier Tibetan imperial ones (as horse races were popular too). The Henan Naadam was established in the 1980s to evoke an earlier similar festival in the framework of the revival of ethnic identity in the post-Mao era. However, it did so with more “Mongol” and less local “feudal” features.

At the time of the Henan Naadam, before the horse race the competitors take their horses to the top of the local shrine (*la rtse*), so that its blessing may enhance their performance. The cairn is located on a green hill to the south of the capital, where the main horse race

<sup>38</sup> *Gyi ling rta'i spyad bo dang bcas ka ra brgyud dang bcas*, folio 1.

<sup>39</sup> See Diemberger (2007a: 109–134).

takes place and is the site of the most important local protective deity called Gyi ling (pronounced Chilang in Amdo dialect) or more precisely bTsan rgod A myes Gyi ling (lit. "the Wild bTsan Spirit, Ancestor Gyi ling"). With the title of general (*dmag dpon*), this powerful "master of the land" (*sa bdag*) is the protector of all other local deities. It is considered closely connected to the first Hoshuud ruler of Henan and is particularly linked to horses, which is reflected in its name. Located close to the main town, it works also as a proxy for the more distant Tsendiri Latse (bTsan 'dus ri la rtse), the king of all spirits of the Henan Mongolian land.

In Henan there is a wide range of recently published texts that celebrate Gyi ling La rtse within the local sacred geography.<sup>40</sup> One of the publications discussing the Gyi ling deity highlights its links to excellent horses also through images. Here we see a horse whose size and structure are unusually large for the Tibetan plateau and seems to evoke a possible link between Gyi ling deity, *gyi ling* horses, Mongolian horse breeding skills, and the celebrated larger horses traded along the Silk Road.<sup>41</sup>

The Tibetan scholar Yangdon Dhondup recalled a remarkable symbolic link between heavenly horses and the Henan local publishing activity in the 1990–early 2000:

They used to use a strange ISBN number sold from Hong Kong, so that books could be published even if they were not distributed through official bookstores. The "publishing house" was called Tianma 天马, which is translatable as "heavenly horse". I noticed that a lot of Tibetan books published under Tianma have translated the Chinese term as *gyi ling*, "heavenly horse".

Whatever the possible symbolic association of *gyi ling*, this term is emphatically used in Henan when celebrating the outstanding and extraordinary characteristics of a horse during horse races, horse festivals or trade. This term may even evoke supernatural features. According to Chenagtsang Humchen, famous tantric master and journalist from Henan:

Gyi ling is considered to be the best horse. The term is used in Amdo and Kham but can be also heard in central Tibet. Mention of the *gyi ling* as a kind of supernatural horse can be also found in some *sngags* texts.

<sup>40</sup> See for example the section "Gyi ling" in *Rma lho sogs rigs rang skyong rdzong gi khor yug dang rig chu rig gnas*: 25–26.

<sup>41</sup> "bTsan rgod gyi ling": 17. See Fig. 8.

According to Dorje a horse expert from Henan (Amdo):

A *gyi ling* horse is the best horse. Also, *gyi ling*, sometimes referred as *rta gyi ling* or *gyi ling rta*, depending on the text, rhythm, and narrative composition might come from the Chinese term Qilin 麒麟, a mythical creature. The term is used in Amdo but can be also found in folk songs of some nomadic communities (who own horses) in Lhoka or near the Yamdrok Lake. The term is also found in many legends (*lha sgrung*) including the Gesar epic such as the *gling rje ge sar rgyal po'i sgrung*—*gyi ling bcu gsum 'byung khungs skor*.

There are many horsy places across the Tibetan plateau with their distinctive traditions that may or may not be connected. As highlighted by some of the Henan Mongols some ideas associated with *gyi ling* horses can be found also in Central Tibet.

*Gyi ling among the nomads of sPo rong: excellent horses descending from the klu spirits of the dPal khud lake*

sPo rong is a high-altitude pastoral area in south-western Central Tibet stretching northwards from the icy slopes of Mt. Shishapangma, one of the 8000m peaks in the Himalayan range. In the region, this area used to have a strong reputation for excellent horses (although currently worsening pastures and loss of horse relevance has entailed an overall reduction in horse breeding skills and horse quality). Here the term *gyi ling* is sporadically used and is understood both as a type of horse within a particular classification system as well as an excellent horse more generally.

The ancient ruler of sPo rong (sPo rong je dbon) used to live in a big tent called Bra chen, which worked as his administrative and ritual seat according to a setting recently described by the Tibetan scholar Dawa Dargye.<sup>42</sup> The place where this tent used to be located is still called Bra chen and few remains of the structures associated with it can still be identified in the landscape. In the vast grassland next to the big tent horse festivals used to take place. Dawa Dargye, the son of the sPo rong lord's secretary, in a personal communication commented on the quality and the celebrity of sPo rong horses.

sPo rong used to have excellent horses. They were considered to be the descendants of the *klu* spirits of the dPal khud lake. They were divine horses with an excellent lineage. For this reason, people from surrounding areas would take their mares to sPo rong so that they would produce offspring from this excellent lineage. At the time of

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<sup>42</sup> See Zla ba dar rgyas (2009).

the sPo rong rje dbon there used to be a “horse master” (*chibs dpon*) who exercised a tight control over this process. The last sPo rong chibs dpon used to take significant advantage from his position.

sPo rong seems thus to have had distinctive breeds of horses. A 18<sup>th</sup>-century document from the nomad area of sPo rong mentions the name of one of the areas under the jurisdiction of the sPo rong rje dbon as Gyi ling Ko rong.<sup>43</sup> Given sPo rong's reputation for horses, it is plausible that the toponym Gyi ling Ko ron included a reference to *gyi ling* horses as a type of excellent steed.

### *Horsy connections?*

The 18<sup>th</sup>-century sPo rong document reaffirmed the rights of the sPo rong rulers and the relevant community over their nomadic pasture land. These rights were granted thanks to the help sPo rong had provided to dGa' ldan tshe dbang, the Hoshuud general, in the war between Tibet and Ladakh—the so-called “Mongol War” in Ngari (1679–1684). Perhaps the divine horse lineage of sPo rong is as indebted to the *klu* spirits of the dPal khud lake as it is to interbreeding with Mongolian army horses and connections to Mongolian horsemanship.

Alternatively, the sPo rong special breed of horses may have had links to Western Tibet and reflect a much older set of connections that were not simply of military nature. Horses and horse knowledge may have in fact mattered not only for war and trade but also for marriage alliances as highlighted in narratives concerning the neighbouring area of Mang yul Gung thang.

A passage from the biography of Chos kyi sgron ma referring to her marriage seems to point towards a particular ritual connection between brides and horses. Around 1440, the daughter of the king of Mang yul Gung thang was being sent as a bride to southern La stod (crossing sPo rong lands):

Then the people from La stod [i.e. the bridegroom's party] had brought an untamed horse with a luck bringing mane. This was so wild that nobody had ever dared to ride it. [The bride] was asked: “In order to bring good auspice, please ride it for a moment.” Meanwhile another, tamer horse had been prepared for the journey. To the surprise of everybody, as soon as she mounted the wild horse, it started to tremble and sweat and eventually became very calm. Later she always liked to ride this horse.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Uebach (2007: 273).

<sup>44</sup> *Chos sgron rnam thar*: folio 12r.

It is difficult to fully appreciate and evaluate the symbolic significance of this passage (which seems to refer to Chos kyi sgron ma's ability to tame wild beings). It may however draw our attention to the fact that some of the names mentioned as sources of horse breeds and horse knowledge in horse manuals were linked to daughters and wives from ancient clans and petty kingdoms. Perhaps names such as Cog ro bu mo'i rta, Cog ro bZa' from Zhang Zhung, 'Bro bu mo'i rta etc<sup>45</sup> are elements that refer not only to horses and horse doctors (as suggested) but also to connections between horses and marriage alliances. Both Cog ro and 'Bro were important clans in Western Tibet during and just after the imperial period and were linked to the Tibetan ruling house through political ties and marriage alliances as well as trading relations. The vast nomadic pasture lands in the Kailash/Gangs Ti se area at the heart of the Zhang Zhung kingdom may have offered an ideal ground to develop horsemanship and the building of horse breeding skills possibly in direct connection to the Silk Road (any polity that stretched over the vast territory loosely indicated as Zhang Zhung would have been strongly dependent on horses). Our preliminary ethnographic investigations<sup>46</sup> in the area of Purang and Limi seem to support this. Toponyms such as rTa gling ("horse country") south of Lake Manasarovar and rTa lung ("horse valley") and rTa rtsig ("horse shepherd's place") in the adjacent Limi area in Nepal as well as the high number and quality of local steeds highlight the importance of horses and horse trade in this region. Horses are here also associated specifically with the well-being of households so that good horses are an important prestige indicator and play an important part in the performance of territorial cults. The name Cog ro is still used as toponym as well as the identifier of households worshipping the same ancestral deity (*phol lha*) residing in Kailash/Gangs Ti se. The term *gyi ling*—especially *gyi ling rta po*—is known locally as an indicator of an excellent horse and is often associated with mythical and epic narratives.

### Conclusion

Despite the overall loss of numbers of horses in modern Tibet, it seems that the horse preserves the main part of its prestige and

<sup>45</sup> See above and also Maurer (2001).

<sup>46</sup> I am referring here to our recent trips to Western Tibet and North-Western Nepal in the framework of the project "Himalayan Connections" (Norwegian Research Council) in collaboration with Prof. Hanna Havnevik and Dr Astrid Hovden and Dr Riamsara Knapp.

significance within the Tibetan identity through representation, at a time in which the logistics of transport and tools of war have been upgraded to metal contraptions that are comparably more effective and lower maintenance. The adoption of the horse symbol into Buddhism has been vital to the survival of this figure, due especially to widespread modern thought associating Tibet inherently with Buddhism. It would appear that the spiritual and symbolic pedestal on which the horse has stood throughout Tibetan history is the strongest and most lasting remnant of its significance for Tibetans.

An initial mapping of the term *gyi ling* has revealed that horses in Tibetan culture straddle remarkable pathways that cut across the symbolic and the real, reflecting a deep history of human-animal relations. The term *gyi ling* seems to be used at times as a category of horses within specific forms of classifications and at other times more generically as a term indicating excellent horses. Also, *gyi ling* (as illustrated by the Gyi ling La rtse of Henan and the role of *gyi ling* horses in the Tibetan epic) seems to be part of a set of terms that highlight particular divine features of horses linked to their military, political, and social importance in wider cosmopolitical arrangements. On the basis of this preliminary study of textual sources and ethnographic cases we thus suggest that the notion of *gyi ling* linked to specific cosmological and political settings as well as to the cultivation of actual horsemanship, horse medicine, and the breeding of excellent horses deserves further cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural exploration.





Fig. 1 — Image from horse science text, Tucci collection IsIAO



Fig. 2 — Gyi ling la rtse in Henan (photo: Hildegard Diemberger)



*Fig. 3 — Henan festival Gyi ling la rtse with horses (photo: Hildegard Diemberger)*



*Fig. 4 — Henan horse race (photo: Hildegard Diemberger)*



*Fig. 5 — dPal khud Lake in sPo rong (photo credit: Bruce Huett)*



*Fig. 6 — Horses in Limi (photo: Yancen Diemberger)*



Fig. 7 — Gangs ri lHa btsan, Mt Kailash protective deity worshipped by the Cog ro pa in Limi (photo: Hildegard Diemberger)



Fig. 8 — Image from “bTsan rgod gyi ling”



Fig. 9 — *dPal khud Lake with horse* (photo: Hildegard Diemberger)

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# May the Curd of *g.yang* Mature: a 14th-Century Allegory for the Domestication of Sheep

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he rather modest aim of this paper is to present a narrative from the 14th-century *Mdo dri med gzi brjid* (*Cha* section, chapter 4), which plays a central role in the origin mythology of *ju thig*, a rare form of rope divination unique to the *g.yung drung bon* clerical tradition. In addition to offering a rich mythological account of the primordial domestication of sheep, the episode also contributes to an understanding of the hierarchical social taxonomies that structure the performance of a number of cleromantic practices encountered in Bon cultural milieus.<sup>1</sup> Before proceeding too deeply into my discussion, however, it may be useful to first provide a short introduction to *ju thig*.

In brief, *ju thig* is a form of rope-divination that makes extensive use of sheep's wool in crafting both the ropes cast by the diviner and the surface upon which they are cast. Minimally speaking, in addition to the requisite texts, the diviner must possess six ropes: five "lesser cords", known as *thig gu*, which should measure roughly two cubits in length (e.g. roughly 88 cm); and a sixth longer cord, measuring one fathom (1.8 meters), known as the "divination guide", or *mo rta*. Over the course of the casting, the diviner places the *mo rta* over his shoulders and, having tied the various rope-ends together in a series of simple nooses, the ropes are collected into a bundle and cast on the ground. The diviner then refers to a divination manual in order to interpret the patterns formed by the casting and the location of the nooses in relation to the cardinal and intercardinal directions. In Figure 1, the reader will find an illuminated passage from a 19th-century *ju thig* manuscript, which illustrates how combinations of ropes and nooses are correlated with prognostics in manuscript form.

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<sup>1</sup> See Smith (2011, 2015).

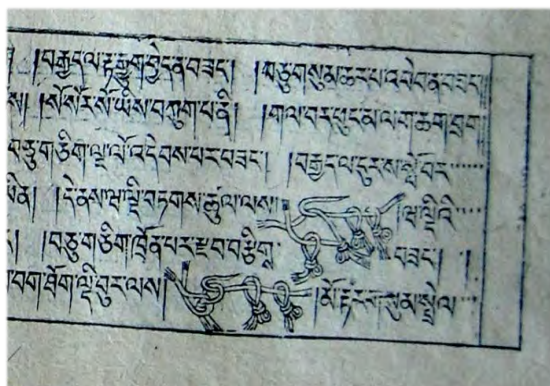


Fig. 1 — Detail section from the *Srid pa 'phrul gyi ju thig gi dpyad don snang gsal sgron me* (19th century).

*Ju thig* diviners also make use of a small white felt mat, roughly 15 to 18 cm square, which is known as the *lha gzhi dkar po*, or “the divine white base”. In some cases, this can serve as a casting surface for the ropes; however, more generally speaking, the *lha gzhi dkar po* functions as the *gzhi*—literally as the “basis” or “support” for the divination. In this ritual capacity, it plays a central role in appeasing the clairvoyant (*mgon shes*) deities that are invoked during the divination’s performance, each of whom is requested to be seated on the wool mat following the completion of the divinatory invocations.



Fig. 2 — *Ju thig* cords being cast (right center) with the *lha gzhi dkar po* displayed prominently (left centre) below. Photo courtesy of the IKGf (International Consortium for Research in the Humanities), Erlangen-Nürnberg.

Considering the importance of sheep's wool in fabricating both the *lha gzhi dkar po* and the *ju thig* cords themselves, when I first began to study rope-divination, I found it odd that many *ju thig* manuals did not appear to provide a mythological precedent for the usage of sheep's wool in the divination's performance. During my doctoral fieldwork, however, I had the opportunity to discuss the issue with the current Slob dpon of sMan ri Monastery in Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh. Having noted that the cosmogonic narratives (*smrang*) outlined in a number of *ju thig* manuals were not helpful in articulating the importance of sheep's wool, the sMan ri Slob dpon directed me to a particular episode in the *Mdo dri med gzi brjid*. The passage in question, which has also been briefly discussed by Tucci and Karmay,<sup>2</sup> pertains to the primordial conflict between Being (*ye*) and Non-Being (*ngam*), represented by the divinities Ye rje smon pa (aka Khri rgyal khug pa) and Ngam rje rtsol po (aka Med 'bum nag po) respectively, as well as the mediation of these forces through the prophetic abilities of the deity Phya bu g.yang dkar (aka Phya'u g.yang dkar).

The passage, which I have translated below, begins with a kind of armistice between the gods (*lha*) and demons (*bdud*), during which time a miraculous tree begins to grow on the frontier between the respective territories of Being (*ye*) and Non-Being (*ngam*). In order to ascertain who will be victorious in the brewing conflict between *ye* and *ngam*, the clairvoyant (*mngon shes*) deity Phya bu g.yang dkar rides a sheep (*g.yang mo*) to the peak of the Mountain of Existence and, ostensibly speaking, performs divination using a set of *ju thig* cords fashioned from the wool of the first sheep, Lug lha ba bal chen. In the *Mdo dri med gzi brjid*, this is depicted as an inaugural event, the primordial divinatory act that establishes divinatory knowledge in the world. Seen in this light, insofar as this episode serves as an origin myth for *ju thig*, it would appear that sheep's wool, when used as a divinatory aid, may be associated with the clairvoyant deity Phya bu g.yang dkar, as well as with the mythological inception of divination as a viable prophetic tool.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Tucci (1970: 234–235) and Karmay (1998: 142–144).

<sup>3</sup> It is also worth noting that sheep's wool—in particular white sheep's wool—appears to be a common feature in apotropaic and divinatory rites throughout the broader Himalayan region, as well as in many Central Asian cultures. That said, it is important to emphasize that structural similarities such as these never imply a genetic relationship between ostensibly homogenous ritual traditions.

## Translation

## I.

Long ago, when Ye and Ngam were on friendly terms (*'khrug pa ma*), in the age of the *Srid pa cam cam*,<sup>4</sup> a tree [began to] grow on the border between Ye and Ngam. Its leaves were made of fine silk. Its fruits were made of precious jewels and gold. Its sap was made of golden nectar. Its bark was made of life-protecting raiments. Its thorns were made of dangerous weapons and its flowers were a marvelous sight (*ltad mo*).

Who was able to interpret (*dpyad ma zhog*) the meaning of these [phenomena]? A *phyä* prince, *Phya bu g.yang dkar*,<sup>5</sup> interpreted them. He had come mounted upon a sheep, bearing a white-feathered *lha* arrow in his hand. He went to the peak of *Yod ri rdel dkar*, “the white pebble mountain of existence”, and performed a divination (*dpyad*) at the tree. Having done so, he saw that there would be a dispute between the teachings of the *lha* and the teachings of the *bdud*. Quarrels would arise between *ye* and *ngam* and there would be both intermittent (*dus kyī*) victories and intermittent defeats. A conflict would arise between the forces of Being (*yod*) and Non-Being (*med*) respectively; ultimately, however, he foresaw victory for Being and defeat for Non-Being. He proclaimed this prophecy from the peak of the three realms of existence.<sup>6</sup> All of Being and Non-being came to hear him and, as a consequence, the two forces went to war. The *phyä* prince *phyä bu g.yang dkar* was thus named *mngon shes kyī phyä bu g.yang dkar*, or “*phyä bu g.yang dkar*, he who is endowed with clairvoyance”.

*Phya bu g.yang dkar*, who was greater than all, did this [e.g. performed divination] for both enemies and friends. He correctly examined (*dpyad*) the trigrams and accurately predicted (*thig pa*) both the past and the future. [His techniques] were better than representing truth and falsehood in the palm of one’s hand. They were greater than all [other] forms of divination and were superior to [the techniques] of all female diviners. All of the treatises on calculation in the kingdoms [of the world] are derived from this event.

<sup>4</sup> The meaning of *srid pa cam cam* is currently unclear to me; however, it could perhaps be a reference to the *srid pa’i lcam dral bco brgyad*, a set of eighteen divine siblings who, according to Norbu (2009: 53–60), are cast as the forebears of mankind in the *Srid pa’i mdzod phug*.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that this figure’s name has been changed slightly from *phyä’u g.yang dkar*, which appears in the text, to the cognate *phyä bu g.yang dkar*.

<sup>6</sup> The three realms (*srid pa gsum*) mentioned in this passage are equivalent to the three levels of existence as imagined in a common cosmological schema that divides the universe into three vertical sections: (1) an under-earth, typified by the *klu*; (2) the earth, typified by human beings and animals; and (3) the sky, typified by the *lha*.

In what way, however, was the sheep born? In the distant past, for the great benefit of living, sentient beings, the god Srid pa ye smon rgyal po wished for an object that would fulfil man's need for precious stones and jewels. He searched from amongst gold, turquoise, and the five kinds of precious stones; however, [none of these were able] to satisfy the wants and needs [of man], as the objects for which he wished were [seen by man] as being worthless and [were treated] similarly to dirt and to the rocks of the soil. [Seeing this], he asked his consort, Chu lcam rgyal mo, "How is it that the needs [of humanity] can be met?" She replied, saying: "In order to achieve that which you desire, you [must] travel to the peak of Yod ri rdel dkar and bring together the essence (*snying po 'byung ba'i bcud bsdus*) of the heavens (*gnam mkha'*), the sky (*bar snang*), and the earth (*sa gzhi*). That which you wish for will be achieved".

Taking the advice of his consort, Srid pa ye smon pa sought out thirteen various kinds of dissonant (*mi 'phrod*) substances. First, sky, which is essence of curd on the verge of becoming yogurt. Second, earth, which is the essence of gold and silver. Third, water, which is the essence of the froth of the sea. Fourth, fire, which is the essence of the steam of bodily heat. Fifth, wind, which is the essence of a fragrant breeze. Sixth, a budding wing-feather (*the'u gshog*) of a lord of the *khyung*. Seventh, a banner crafted from the skin of a black antelope. Eighth, an agate gem from the hands of a *gnob sbyin*. Ninth, the tongue of a wise bat (*sgam khyer pha bang*). Tenth, [an amount of] molten flesh the colour of a blacksmith's charcoal. Eleventh, the semen of a divine prince (*lha bu*). Twelfth, the womb-blood of a *srin* woman. And last, [Srid pa ye smon pa] covered [all of these substances] with a white cloud and, from the peak of Yod ri del dkar, the god manifested as a gillying steed with a white face. He then made a wish, saying: "I am the lord of all of phenomenal existence. For the general welfare and prosperity of mankind, I desire an animal that is like me. If it should be kept, it will be wondrous. And if it should be sold, [its value] will be diffused (*'brim*). May it [provide] food for eating and may it slake thirst (*skom pa'i btung*). May it [provide] wool for clothing and wealth for accumulation. May the curd of *g.yang* mature!" Thus, he made his wish. Having done so, after three nights, on the morning of the fourth day, [Srid pa ye smon rgyal po] heard a sound [echoing from] the peak of Yod ri del dkar, which went "tong tong" and that had never before been heard. He looked and saw the following: a living creature, the perfect size, which corresponded to the sheep of the phenomenal world (*srid pa lug*). Its head was like that of a wild deer. Its legs were like those of common domestic animals. Its fur resembled the southern clouds and it had a melodious voice.

If you are suffering, a sheep will make you merry (*nyam dga' ba*). If it is examined, a sheep will be beautiful and appealing. If you keep it, a sheep is ready money (*smar ba*) and, if it is sold, its [worth] will be diffused amongst [other] men. [A sheep] is of great price and value.

Its yogurt provides life-sustaining nourishment and its fur provides [wool] for clothing. [The sheep] appeared as a creature that would increase both *phyā* and *g.yang*.

Having arisen in harmony with a wish of Ye rje smon pa, the Lord of Primordial Aspiration, the sheep was called *rin po che'i rkang 'gros lug*, or "sheep, the precious animal". Even so, in what manner was this [e.g. the creation of the sheep] accomplished? First, sky, which is the essence of curd on the verge of becoming yogurt, became the mind that thinks. Second, earth, which is the essence of gold and silver, became the soil that produces (*bskyed byed*). Third, water, which is the essence of the froth of the sea, became the blood that binds. Fourth, fire, which is the essence of the steam of bodily heat, became the bodily heat that conduces maturation. Fifth, wind, which is the essence of a fragrant breeze, became the breath that lifts. Sixth, the banner crafted from the skin of a black antelope became the [sheep's] rightward-twisting (*ldem pa g.yas 'khyil*) heavenly horn (*gnam ru*). Seventh, the budding wing feather of a lord of the *khyung* became [the sheep's] symmetrically opposed ears (*snyan pa rnam ldem pa*). Eighth, the agate gem from the hands of a gNod sbyin became the variegated, agate-like eyes with which [the sheep] sees. Ninth, the tongue of the wise bat became [the sheep's] wonderful voice, which says "baa" "baa" (*'ba 'ba*). Tenth, the molten flesh the colour of a blacksmith's charcoal became the iron wheel of [the sheep's] hooves. Eleventh and twelfth, the white semen [of the divine prince] and the red [womb-blood of the *srin* woman] became the [sheep's] curd, which is nourishing and abundant. And last, the windswept (*'bal le ba*) white clouds became the [sheep's] wholesome and plentiful wool.

Having attained this [form] from the [combination of] the thirteen various harmonious substances, [the sheep] came to be the source of nourishment for mankind and man received [from the sheep] all that he wished for and as much as he desired (*gang 'dod ci 'dod*). All of the treatises on the deeds (*bya ba*) of precious domestic animals are derived from this event.<sup>7</sup>

## II.

The *ju thig*, which was known as *shar ba rkyen drug*, appeared from the shoulder-wool of the sheep *Lug lha ba bal chen*. It could not be tied down, however, and blew away. It [first reached] the peak of the wish-fulfilling tree (*dpag bsam shing*) and, falling from [on high], it fell into a nest (*ra*) of a lord of the *khyung*. Yet again, however, it could not be tied down and blew away. It [circled] the summits of the seven mountains surrounding the world and, in the middle of these, it fell upon [the head] of Ma btsun 'phrul mo.<sup>8</sup> Yet again, however, it could

<sup>7</sup> 439 line 4 to 442 line 11.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that the newly created divination cords land briefly on the head of a figure named Ma btsun 'phrul mo. In his groundbreaking "Shenrab's

not be tied down and blew away. It then fell upon the great Tortoise [who supports] the golden ground [of the world]. Once again, however, it could not be tied down and blew away. [Finally, it returned] to the peak of Yod ri del dkar, where it fell upon the sheep g.Yang lha ba bal chen. [From this wool] were fashioned six knots, the nooses of which were called *mkhar drug*, or “the six castles”. The god Ye rje smon pa named this heap of knots *gur chen*, “the great pavilion”, and laid it upon the divine white base (*lha gzhi dkar po*).

After Kun shes drang mkhan had taken [the *ju thig* cords] as a witness, Phya bu g.yang dkar made use [of them] in his diagnoses. As a consequence, he was able to accurately calculate (*thib pa*) the aeons and the periods of arising, existing, destruction, and emptiness inherent to samsaric existence (*srid chags gnas 'jig stong*), as well as to predict the past, the future, and the present, [including] the duration of human lifespans. He was [also able] to measure the changing of the elements and to calculate [both] good and evil and virtues and faults.<sup>9</sup>

For our purposes, this passage is of interest for several reasons. To begin with, the narrative links the origins of divination to the creation of the primordial sheep (Lug lha ba bal chen) from a wish made by the god Ye rje smon pa, as well as articulating the central role played by the god Phya bu g.yang dkar in the mythological inception of divination as a viable means of prophecy. In both cases, the miraculous wool of the primordial sheep is of central importance and serves, in a narrative capacity, as a kind of Ariadne’s thread, linking the two dissonant episodes in the text. In the first section, divination also emerges as a catalyst causing the opposed forces of Being and Non-Being to go to war. In this sense, Phya bu g.yang dkar’s performance of divination could be read against cosmogonies in the Bon tradition, which share similar themes of duality and opposition.

Another aspect of the narrative that bears mentioning is the composite nature of the primordial sheep itself, which is crafted from the essences of thirteen different substances. Each of these substances is transformed by the deity Ye rje smon pa into one of the sheep’s physical attributes. As a result, the primordial sheep takes on a chimeric quality, with the various parts of its body composed using a type of thaumaturgic bricolage. This process and the correlation between the thirteen dissonant substances and their respective uses

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Ancestors and Family Members,” Kalsang Norbu Gurung notes that Ma btsun 'phrul mo is a minor figure in the *Mdo 'dus*, where she appears as one of Ston pa gShen rab’s female ancestors in the Phya lineage (2011: 14). This is interesting because, in the Bon tradition, divination practices are often associated with the Phya (as opposed to the dMu) clan. Bearing that in mind, this episode provides a previously unstudied account in which that particular association (e.g. between the Phya lineage and the origins of divination) is made explicit.

<sup>9</sup> 443 line 17 to 444 line 11.



in forming the attributes of the primordial sheep are illustrated below in Figure 3.

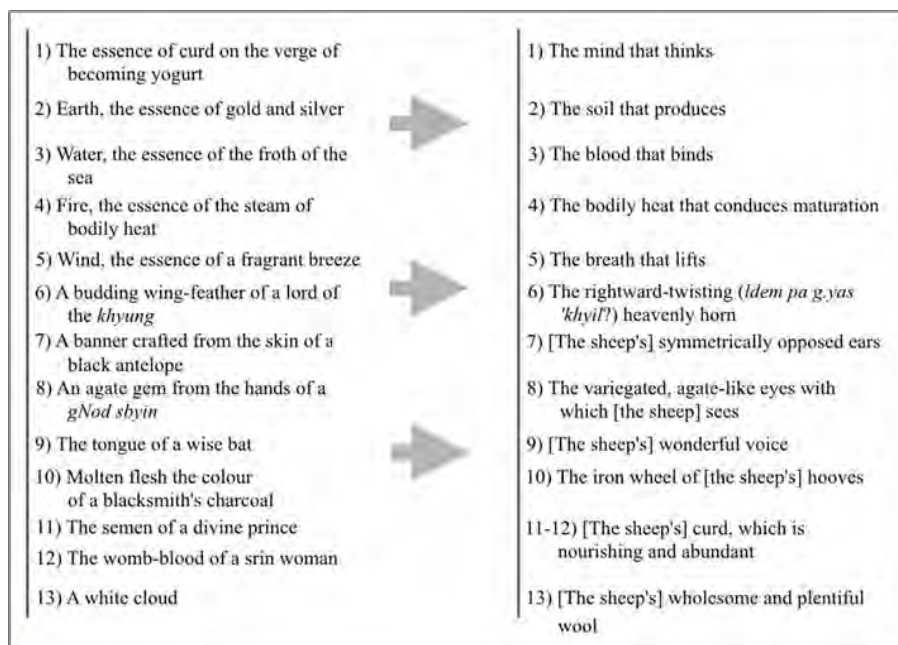


Fig. 3 — “The Generation of the First Sheep”.

Looking closely at Figure 3, it becomes evident that the author's choices regarding the correlation of substance and attribute have been carefully made. Substances two through five, for instance, incorporate four of the five the elements (excluding space) and link these directly to aspects of the sheep that make use of those respective elemental forces. Water forms the basis of blood, wind forms the basis of breath, and so forth. Additionally, a number of substances have been selected based on their resemblance to the physical features of common domestic sheep like Karakul, Altay, or Gansu Alpine (*ovis aries*) or, potentially, to regional breeds like the Himalayan Tahr (*hemitragus jemlahicus*). The derivation of the sheep's wool from white clouds and its horns from twisted *khyung* feathers, for example, play directly on the theme of physical resemblance. Along those lines, the choices of agate for the sheep's eyes and the tongue of a wise bat for the sheep's tongue are of particular interest.

Beginning with the sheep's eyes, agate is a stone composed largely of cryptocrystalline silica and microgranular quartz, which appears waxy or dull naturally, but becomes vitreous when it is worked and

polished.<sup>10</sup> The stone can appear in almost any color or combination of colors and is characterized by forms of multi-colored banding, giving agate a unique appearance, which can be supplemented by dyeing the stone or coating it with an enamel to alter its natural hue. Due to these features, certain small polished agate stones can resemble the colors and patterns of human and animal eyes. While this may account for the sheep's ocular symbolism, the origin of the sheep's tongue is more difficult to account for.

One possible solution can be found in broader Tibetan mythological representations of bats (*chiroptera*), which, as Charles Ramble points out in a recent paper, are sometimes viewed as chimeras due to their liminal and ostensibly composite nature.<sup>11</sup> In particular, the bat is sometimes characterized as a figure capable of miraculous forms of speech or serves as an intermediary between humans and the supernatural world. In the Bon *le'u* corpus, for example, a figure named "Capable Bat" (*rgon po pha wang*) appears as the offspring of a rDzi king and a Ngad queen, who possesses a variety of preternatural attributes, including the ability of being undefeatable in oral debate.<sup>12</sup> In his ethnographic research in Arunachal Pradesh and Eastern Bhutan, Toni Huber has studied a similar figure, called "Clever Bat" (*sgam po pha wang*), who appears as a trickster or messenger in a number of myths common to the region.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, as Professor Ramble points out, in the Naxi Dongba tradition, the bat is a reoccurring figure that serves as an intermediary between humans and the gods.<sup>14</sup> Keeping the secondary literature in mind, there appears to be sufficient data to suggest a correlation between bats and the mythological leitmotif of tricksters or divine messengers in certain Tibetan folkloric traditions. While this is ultimately an inductive point, it may help to articulate the incorporation of a bat's tongue in the construction of the primordial sheep.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return briefly to the theme of domestication. It is important to stress that, in the above narrative, the primordial sheep is created by the god Ye rje smon pa to respond specifically to the needs of mankind. Following its inception, the sheep not only exceeds humanity's desire for precious stones and jewels (e.g. for material wealth), but also provides food for eating, slakes thirst, and offers wool for clothing and trade. This leads the

<sup>10</sup> See Klien and Hurlbut (1999); Rice (1954).

<sup>11</sup> See Ramble (2014).

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*: 19–20.

<sup>13</sup> See Huber (2013).

<sup>14</sup> Ramble (2014); Rock (1952: 187); see also: Jackson (1979); Berounsky (2016).

author, at the conclusion of passage one, to state that the sheep “came to be the source of nourishment for mankind and man received [from the sheep] all that he wished for and as much as he desired.”<sup>15</sup> With that in mind, the above excerpt links the mythology of the first sheep to the primordial inception of divination and provides a compelling 14th-century narrativisation of the pre-historical process of domestication.

### Transliteration

#### I.

*sngon ye dam 'khrug pa ma langs nas / srid pa cam cam gnas dus su / ye dang ngam gyi so mtshams nas / 'bras men ljon men shing gcig skyes / lo ma dar dang zab las grub / 'bras bu rin chen gser las grub / khu ba bdud rtsi gser las grub / shun pa srog skyobs gos las grub / tsher ma gdug pa mtshon las grub / dal la gdug pa dri las grub / me tog ngo mtshar ltad dmod grub / de la gang gis dpyad ma zhog / de ltar phya sras phya'u g.yang dkar de / g.yang mo lug gis rta la bcibs / yod ri del dkar gyi rtse la byon / shel la dpyad dpyad dpyad btang bas / lha bdud bstan pa rtsod pa dang / ye dam 'khrug pa ldang ba dang / dus kyis pham rgyal 'byung ba dang / yod med so sor rtsod pa dang / yod la rgyal kha lha ba dang / med la pham kha 'byung bar rig / de srid pa gsum gyi rtse la bsgrags / stong yod med gnyis kyi tshor bar byung / de nas ye dang ngam gnyis 'khrug / phya sras phya'u g.yang dkar la / mngon shes kyi phya'u g.yang dkar btang / phya'u g.yang dkar kun las che / dgra dang zun dang gnyis ka mdzad / da mo la legs spar dpyad pa la / snga ltang phyi ltang thig pa la / bden rdzun lag tu bkram pa dang / rno*

(440) *mthong kun la bshad pa dang / mo ma kun las che ba dang / rgyal khams kun la rtsi ba'i gtan tshigs de nas byung ngo / da srid pa srid srid lug la srid / lug la ci ltar srid pa na / sngon srid pa ye smon rgyal po de / skye 'gro sems can don ched du / mi bu nor bu rin chen la / nor bu dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i rdzas shig 'dod / der dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i rdzas btsal pas / gser g.yu rin chen sna lnga las / dgos 'dod 'byung ba'i rgyu med kyang / de las bsam pa'i sems med kyang / sems med nor de sa rdo 'dra / sa rdo phrod du rdzas nges pa la / snying po med pa'i nor yin pas / nam dgos ci 'dod ga la 'byung / de la smon pa'i bsam pa la / chu lcam rgyal mo'i zhal na re / smon pa'i ci bsam 'grub pa la / dgos 'dod nor zhig 'e 'grub bsam / nam mkha' bar snang sa gzhi yi / snying po 'byung ba'i bcud bsdus la / yod ri del dkar gyi rtse la byon / gang 'dod smon pa 'grub ste mchis / zhes zer ba la / srid pa ye rje smon pa yis / mi 'phrod rdzas sna bcu gsum btsal / gnam zho khad ki ru ma dang / sa dngul gser gyi snying po dang / chu bcud rgya mtsho'i lbu ba dang / me bcud drod kyi rlang pa dang / rlung bcud ngar gyi zer ma dang /*

<sup>15</sup> The full passage reads: “Having attained this [form] from the [combination of] the thirteen various harmonious substances, [the sheep] came to be the source of nourishment for mankind and man received [from the sheep] all that he wished for and as much as he desired” (*de ltar mthun pa'i rdzas sna bcu gsum las grub cing / 'gro ba mi yi gsos su gyur pa / gang 'dod ci 'dod yon tan byung ba*).

spyi rje bya khyung gi thel shog dang / khri snyan sal le'i ru dar dang / gnod sbyin lag gi 'chong bu dang / sgam khyer pha bang gi smra lce dang / zhun chen 'gur gyi so dog dang / lha bu thabs kyi thig le dang / srin za mngal gyi rag ta dang / sprin dkar

(441) thel gyi nang du btums / yod ri del dkar gyi rtse mo nas / gyi ling kha dkar gyi kha la snang / de la ye rje smon lam btab / bdag srid pa kun gyi rje bo yin / mi bu rin chen dkor nor la / rang dang 'dra ba'i nor zhis 'dod / bzhag na mtshar la btsong na 'brims / gso bsnyan nya ra dbang po gsal / za ba'i zas dang skom pa'i btung / gon pa'i gos dang bsags pa'i nor / g.yang gi ru ma smin par shog / ces zer nas zhal nas smon pas / zhag gsum dros bzhi'i nang par / yod ri del dkar gyi rtse la snga nas ma thos pa'i skad snyan tong tong zhis grags pa / de srid pa ye smon rgyal po'i gzigs pas / srid pa lugs dang mthun pa'i sems can che chung tshad du ran pa / mgo ni ri dags 'dra ba / sug pa g.yung dags 'dra ba / spu ni lho sprin 'dra ba / skad ni snyan la gdung ba mthong na nyams dga' ba / dpyad na yid du 'ong ba / bzhag na dmar ba / btsong na mi la 'brims pa / gong dang rin thang che ba / zho la gsos su 'byung ba / spu la gos su 'byung ba / phyas g.yang 'phel kha zhis snang zhis / ye rje smon lam lugs dang mthun par ru byung bas / rin po che'i rkang 'gros lug zhes bya bar btags so / de yang ci ltar du grub na / gnam zho khad kyi ru ma las / bsam pa sems kyi rgyu ru grub / sa dngul gser gyi snying po las / bskyed cing sa yi rgyu ru grub / chu bcud rgya mtsho'i lbu ba las / sdud byed khrag gi rgyu ru grub / me bcud dros kyi rlang pa las / smin byed drod kyi rgyu ru grub / rlung bcud ngad kyi

(442) zer ma las / 'degs byed dbugs kyi rgyu ru grub / 'khri snyan sal le'i ru dar la / gnam ru ldems pa g.yas 'khyil du grub bo / spyi rje khyung gi thel shog las / snyan pa rnam ldems pa ru grub bo / gnod sbyin lag gi mchong bu las / gzigs pa'i mchong spyan khra bo grub bo / sgam chen pha bang gi smra lce las / 'ba' ba'i smra lce mgrin bzang du grub bo / zhun chen 'gar gyi so rdog las / rmig pa lcags kyi 'khor lo ru grub bo / thabs shes thig le dkar dmar las / srid len 'phel chen gyi ru ma ru grub bo / sprin dkar theg ce bha le las / srid bal 'bal le 'bol bzang du grub bo / de ltar mthun pa'i rdzas sna bcu gsum las grub cing / 'gro ba mi yi gsos su gyur pa / gang 'dod ci 'dod yon tan byung ba / rin chen rkang 'gros bya ba'i gtan tshigs de las byung ngo<sup>16</sup>

## II.

lug lha ba bal chen sog bal la / ju thig shar ba skya drug byung / de ma chags phur te song ba la / dpag bsam shing gi rtse mo nas / spyi rje khyung gi ra la babs / der yang ma chags phur de song ba la / ri bdun kha khyer bar ba yi / ma btsun 'phrul mo'i steng du babs / der yang ma

(444) chags phur te song / dbang chen gser gyi sa gzhi yi / ma ha rus rbal sten du babs / der yang ma chags phur te song / yod ri del dkar gyi rtse mo na / g.yang lha ba bal chen gyi steng du babs / mdud sgo drug la mkhar drug bcas / ye rje smon pa'i ming btags pas / de ding ding spangs pa gur chen bya / de lha gzhi dkar po'i steng du btag / kun shes drang mkhan gyi dpang

<sup>16</sup> 439 line 4 to 442 line 11.

*bzung nas / phy'a'u g.yang dkar gyis dpyad btang pas / da bskal srid chags gnas 'jin stong dang / tshe rabs snga phyi da lta dang / 'byung ba dus kyi 'gyur ldog dang / skyon yon legs nyes chags tshad dang / srid pa rtsa dkar 'phel 'grub dang / na shi dur gsum gui dpyad lugs dang / dgra bzhi dur gsum gyi dpyad rnams thig*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> 443 line 17 to 444 line 11.

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# Some Preliminary Remarks on Human and Animal *Materia Medica* in Tibetan Medicine

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## 1. Introduction

**T**here probably has never been a medical system, past or present, that did not make use of some animal-derived products.<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon of zotherapy—that is, using therapeutics based on medicines obtained from animals, or ultimately deriving from them—occurs all over the world and reaches back into antiquity.<sup>2</sup> Domestic and wild animals, as well as their byproducts, were important ingredients in drugs used for curative, protective, and preventive medicine. They were employed by physicians in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Rome, and Greece.<sup>3</sup> The medical traditions in Asia made ample use of animals and their products. Regarding Chinese medicine, it is estimated that about thirteen percent of all medicinal substances derive from animals.<sup>4</sup> According to some authors, more than 1,500 animal species can be utilized for medicinal purposes.<sup>5</sup> An even higher percentage of animal-based substances can be found in the Indian tradition of Ayurveda. It seems that about fifteen to twenty percent of its *materia medica* derives from animal products. They are frequently recorded in the classical texts of Ayurveda. In the *Suśruta-saṃhitā*, one finds approximately two hundred and twenty-five types of animals, while one also reads of two hundred and thirty types of animals and three hundred and eighty types of animal substances in the *Caraka-saṃhitā*.<sup>6</sup> Naturally, the use of animals is not limited to the written treatises of the prevailing Ayurvedic tradition but can also be found

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Andrew Taylor and Lucia Galli for editing the English version of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Alves and Rosa (2005: 2).

<sup>3</sup> Alves et al. (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Still (2003: 118).

<sup>5</sup> Alves and Rosa (2005: 2).

<sup>6</sup> Unnikrishnan (1998: 2).

in folk medicine as well. A recent review summarising and analysing the data in fifteen research works on zootherapeutic practices in different parts of India concludes that about one hundred and nine animals are used in two hundred and seventy medical applications.<sup>7</sup>

The medical traditions of China and India had a lasting impact on Tibetan medicine, an influence that can partially be observed in the use of some specific animals and the substances obtained from them. Naturally the use of animals and animal-derived products was also based on indigenous knowledge, independent from the medical systems of neighbouring countries. It seems that zotherapy was an integral part of the expertise of each Tibetan doctor. However, there are only a few studies addressing this subject in some depth. In the nineties, Virinder Singh prepared a list of wild animals used in Tibetan medicine for the Indian branch of TRAFFIC, a non-governmental organization that monitors the wildlife trade.<sup>8</sup> He did not carry out fieldwork but drew his information from a booklet on Tibetan drugs compiled by Tsewang Jigme Tsarong that was published in Kalimpong in 1986.<sup>9</sup>

He found more than a hundred drugs containing animal substances. In 2005, Chandra Prakash Kala conducted fieldwork in Ladakh and Lahaul-Spiti in northwestern India between 1998 and 2001 in order to evaluate the current practice of *am chi*, traditional practitioners of Tibetan medicine. He also recorded the ingredients used for Tibetan drugs. He found that the use of animal organs is a common practice among *am chi*. He documented thirty-eight animal species, the majority of which—thirty-one—were species of wild animals. He states,

The use of wolf tongue and antelope horns was admitted by 95% of amchis, which indicates the significance of these organs in Tibetan medicine. The most costly organs used by amchis were the musk pod of musk deer and gall bladder of Asian elephant.<sup>10</sup>

Kala's fieldwork provided precious insight into the *am chi*'s tradition but was also limited to a specific research area and to contemporary practices. A recent ethno-pharmacological study on animal-derived products in Tibetan medicine done by Bhutanese and Australian

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<sup>7</sup> Mahawar and Jaroli (2008: 10).

<sup>8</sup> See Singh (1990). The report is not dated. The TRAFFIC web site lists it under January 1980 but this date is impossible, because books are listed in the bibliography that were issued between 1976 and 1990. Moreover, the first edition of Tsarong's book appeared in 1986 (see next footnote).

<sup>9</sup> Tsarong (1986).

<sup>10</sup> Kala (2005: 1335).



scholars combined the evaluation of three written sources on Tibetan medicine together with modern books on Tibetan drugs in Bhutan and oral interviews with Bhutanese senior physicians for confirmation. They then identified the scientific names for the animals on the list they had obtained. They found

73 natural products belonging to 29 categories derived from 45 medicinal animals (36 vertebrates and 9 invertebrates), comprising of 9 taxonomic categories and 30 zoological families. Out of 116 formulations currently produced, 87 of them contain one or more extracts and products obtained from 13 medicinal animals to treat more than 124 traditionally classified illnesses.<sup>11</sup>

Their results impressively show that animals were and still are an essential and constitutive part of therapeutical and pharmacological knowledge in the Bhutanese form of traditional healing that is based on Tibetan medicine.

The present article intends to supplement and broaden the findings given above by taking a historical approach, examining five clinically-oriented treatises from the 11th to the 15th centuries and two drug lists from the 19th and 20th centuries. The main objective is to discern which animals were used and how frequently they occur. The ethno-pharmacological uses or traditional medical indications will not be considered, for they are too numerous to list and discuss in this paper. This must be left for future research, probably in the form of specialised studies on specific animals. The traditional classification of animals in Tibetan medicine will also not be outlined here as I have already discussed it in detail in a paper already in press.<sup>12</sup> The Western identification of the animals in Tibetan medicine always takes the most common identification.<sup>13</sup> Before examining some selected Tibetan works, I will make some remarks and briefly introduce four animal-derived substances that were very commonly used in Tibetan medicine.

## 2. *Common wild animal materia medica*

When speaking about the frequency of animal use in Tibetan medicine, one must begin with a note of caution. As mentioned above, in this paper I will examine how often certain animals occurred in historical Tibetan written treatises, but this does not

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<sup>11</sup> Yeshi et al. (2017: 192).

<sup>12</sup> Czaja (in press).

<sup>13</sup> One should note, however, that there occasionally existed different views in publications on Tibetan *materia medica*.

mean that we can be certain how frequently they were actually employed by Tibetan doctors. One would need data on the frequency of illness in Tibet, but such statistics and figures are totally absent for Tibetan medicine. There is also no tradition of case studies recorded by doctors in the past, as is found in Chinese medicine for instance. Moreover, the dosage of an ingredient is usually not recorded in medical works. So we remain completely uninformed about the quantity of a given animal product, whether it was just a very tiny amount or a substantial portion. Similarly, we cannot be certain about the use and application of specific therapies and drugs in practice. In other words, the inclusion of therapies and drugs does not tell us how popular they were among practitioners, how often they were applied and prescribed (regardless of the frequency of a given illness but as part of a style of practice of individual doctors or of a family tradition). Another very important aspect is the constant and popular substitution of *materia medica* in Tibetan medicine.<sup>14</sup> Naturally this also concerns animals and the substances derived from them. We can only speculate whether a doctor actually used an animal-derived ingredient or regularly substituted it. One may express a further note of warning regarding the data drawn from the treatises examined in this paper. A comparison is only partially possible, because each treatise has its own agenda, providing a selection of medical instructions that were not intended to deal with all diseases to the same extent. On the other hand, this lack of information might also be a kind of advantage, as it allows one to learn about the use of animals as a historical practice. Furthermore, one should be aware of the clear distinction between clinically-oriented treatises and drug lists. The latter evidently developed out of the former, but in the doctor's need to provide a concise and practical catalogue of drugs (and their ingredients and indications) the authors usually omit external therapies, diet instructions, and many other medical measures. Strictly speaking, the occurrence of animals in clinical works and drug lists are not comparable. Nevertheless I believe that to be worth doing, because none of them—clinical works and drug lists—could claim to represent Tibetan medicine alone; both shape and reflect the practical use of *materia medica*. Lists of drugs gained more importance from the 18th century onwards and show, to a certain degree, on which drugs doctors most relied.

Before investigating the use of animals in some clinical works, I would like to briefly introduce four products that came from wild animals and were very frequently used in Tibetan medicine. It is

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<sup>14</sup> On substitution, see Sabernig (2011) and Czaja (2017).

impossible to consult any Tibetan medical work without reading their names on every second or third page. I think it is therefore justified to group them together. These four very common wild animal products used in Tibetan medicine were honey, musk, bear's bile, and bezoar. Tibetan doctors distinguished several kinds of honey. For example, bsTan 'dzin phun tshogs (b. 1672) distinguishes eight types of honey based on colour, the site of collection, their basic effect on humans, and which animals produced the honey.<sup>15</sup> In Tibetan medicine, honey was mainly used as a vehicle delivering the drug to a disease (*sman rta*). It seems that there was no beekeeping as such in Tibet, and honey had to be traded mainly from Nepal.<sup>16</sup> Modern research on honeybee products, such as honey, propolis, and royal jelly, speaks of various health benefits based on honey's antibiotic, antiviral, and antifungal properties.<sup>17</sup> Musk, a substance from the gland or pod of a musk deer, was an important trading commodity in the past.<sup>18</sup> It was and still is widely used in Tibetan and Chinese medicine. As musk is still highly sought after in present times, musk deer farming has been established in order to meet the high demand.<sup>19</sup> In Tibetan medicine, it could be used to eliminate poison and for numerous other medical indications. It is a very frequently used ingredient in various Tibetan drugs. Equally regularly used was the bile of the Asian black bear in Tibetan and Chinese medicine, also in the form of the dried gallbladder with bile. The use of bear's bile was very widespread. Its Tibetan medical indications are too diverse to be listed here. For instance, Tibetan doctors employed it in wound treatment as it was said to remove rotten tissue and generate new one. Modern research attributes a wide range of pharmacological actions to it and has found evidence of its antimicrobial and anti-inflammatory effects. The fourth very common animal product in Tibetan medicine is known as *giwam* or *giwang* (*gi wam*, *gi wang*). It has been identified as an elephant's bezoar, enterolith, intestinal calculi, gallstone, or bile.<sup>20</sup> It seems that it corresponds to the medicinal substance called *rocana* or *gorocana* in Indian Ayurveda. The former can be understood as bezoar in general, and the latter is usually interpreted as cow's bile, solidified ox-bile, or

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<sup>15</sup> *Shel gong shel phreng* 454/10.

<sup>16</sup> Crane (1999: 284f.).

<sup>17</sup> See for instance Pasupuleti et al. (2017).

<sup>18</sup> See Akasoy and Yoeli-Tialim (2007) and King (2011). The musk deer is generally identified with the dwarf musk deer (that is, the Chinese forest musk deer), the Alpine musk deer, or the Siberian musk deer. For references see Czaja (2017).

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Yang et al. (2003); Meng et al. (2011).

<sup>20</sup> Sabernig (2011: 89).

a gallstone formed in bile inside the gallbladder of cattle.<sup>21</sup> Today *giwam* is the gallstone from domestic buffalos or cows.<sup>22</sup> Bhutanese doctors import it every year from India. In this article, I will use the simple term bezoar. Unless otherwise indicated, it refers to *giwam*, the bezoar of an elephant or ox. The animal substance *giwam* was traditionally used to alleviate contagious fever, poisoning, liver diseases, and fever of solid viscera. Due to the importance of this group of very common animal products, I will list them separately when discussing the occurrence of animal *materia medica*, as they can be considered as possessing a special status in Tibetan medicine. In the next paragraph, I will examine some selected Tibetan medical treatises, briefly introduce these works, provide data on domestic and wild animals (including humans), and offer some preliminary thoughts at the end.

### 3. *Animals in clinical treatises*

The selected treatises were written between the 11th and the 15th centuries. Their authors were well-known physicians who wanted to share their knowledge with their pupils and future generations of doctors. The treatises are of differing length and their range of subjects varies. Some represent a compilation of medical instructions handed down within a certain family or medical tradition. Some have only a single author. In sum, they allow an insight into the practical side of this formative phase of Tibetan medicine.

#### 3.1. *The Black Pithy Volume of Oral Instructions*

During the 11th century, a doctor named sKyes bu me lha came to the Tibetan regions from his homeland, located somewhere to the west of Tibet. It seems that his theoretical knowledge and his practical expertise had a lasting influence on Tibetan medicine. There are several written texts said to be authored by him, but it seems that only one work survived and is extant. It is entitled *The Black Pithy Volume of Oral Instructions* (*Be'u bum nag po*). It is a collection of about forty practical instructions dealing with a variety of subjects. It includes diagnostic techniques, such as the taking of a pulse, methods of examining urine, faeces, and vomit, as well as internal and external therapies, such as medication, blood-letting, and moxibustion for various diseases.

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<sup>21</sup> See Siklós (1996: 133 n. 52); Dash and Kashyap (1980: 202); Dash (1991: 186); Sharma (1992: 461); Sharma and Dash (1997 vol. 4: 479).

<sup>22</sup> Yeshi et al. (2017: 199).

A survey of human and animal *materia medica* produces the following data:

	human and common animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
0	human	19
1	honey	49
2	musk	41
3	bear's bile	32
4	bezoar	27

Fig. 1 — Number of occurrences of human *materia medica* and of the four most common animal *materia medica* in The Black Pithy Volume of Oral Instructions

	domestic animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	sheep	32
2	<i>dzomo</i>	19
3	pig	15
4	cow / ox	15
5	goat	12
6	donkey	5
7	dog	3

Fig. 2 — Number of occurrences of domestic animal *materia medica* in The Black Pithy Volume of Oral Instructions

	wild animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	shellac	25
2	crab	23
3	rhino	11
4	wild yak	7
5	serow	6
6	wolf	5
7	scorpion	1

Fig. 3 — Number of occurrences of wild animal *materia medica* in The Black Pithy Volume of Oral Instructions

Reviewing how often animals and their products occur in this medical collection (Fig. 1–3), it is evident that honey and musk are the most important of the animal products listed above. Bear's bile and bezoar also figure highly. Among domestic animals, sheep are most highly valued by sKyes bu me lha, mainly because of the meat. The *dzomo* (*mdzo mo*), a female yak-cattle crossbreed, gives yogurt and buttermilk.<sup>23</sup> The pig provided meat among other products (he did not use pig excrement. This is important because pig's excrement could be used for medical purposes, see below). The cow and ox gave not only meat, butter, and yogurt, but also urine. It appears that the most cherished substances from wild animals came from shellac, followed by crabs as a close second. They had to be brought from regions to the south of Tibet, as did rhinoceros' horn. The usage of these *materia medica* is not due to the foreign origin of sKyes bu me lha, but is, as we will see, common in Tibetan medicine. He often recommends the use of the horn and the meat of wild yaks, which is interesting because this is in contrast to the other physicians discussed in this article. They use them rarely compared to the other animal *materia medica*.

### 3.2. The Four Tantras

Yon tan mgon po's fundamental treatise offers a wealth of information on treating diseases. Its third part, the *Instructional Tantra*, deals with numerous illnesses in ninety-two chapters. Its last part, the *Subsequent Tantra*, contains chapters on medicinal powder, pills, and other drugs for a great variety of ailments. If one searches for *materia medica* of human origin, one finds a rather high number of human body parts and substances used for medicinal purposes (Fig. 4).

	human and common animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
0	human	246
1	honey	291
2	bear's bile	263
3	musk	184
4	bezoar	120

Fig. 4 – Number of occurrences of human *materia medica* and of the four most common animal *materia medica* in the Four Tantras

<sup>23</sup> On the *dzomo*, see Mizuno and Lobsang Tenpa (2015: 141f.).

Furthermore, one can also recognize that honey and bear's bile occupy the top ranks among the four most common animal *materia medica*, whereas musk and bezoar occur in significantly fewer numbers (Fig. 4). The section on domestic animals is led by *materia medica* deriving from cows and oxen. They are followed in succession by goat, sheep, horse, pig, and others. Yaks and their hybrids are just of medium importance. The top position of cattle can probably be explained by the huge influence of Ayurvedic medicine in Yon tan mgon po's work (Fig. 5, 6):

	domestic animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	cow / ox	178
2	goat	127
3	sheep	96
4	horse	66
5	pig	65
6	fish	57
7	donkey	54
8	dog	45
9	poultry	31
10	yak / <i>dri</i> <sup>24</sup>	32
11	<i>dzomo</i>	29
12	cat	11
13	<i>bamen</i> <sup>25</sup>	3
14	mule	1
15	<i>töl</i> <sup>26</sup>	1
16	camel	1

Fig. 5 – Number of occurrences of *materia medica* coming from domestic animals in the Four Tantras

	animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	urine	91
2	milk	20
3	butter	14
4	meat	14
5	yogurt	13
6	dung	12
7	buttermilk	11
8	thin hair	4
9	bile	3

<sup>24</sup> The Tibetans call only the male yak. The female is called a *dri* ('bri).

<sup>25</sup> A *bamen* (*ba men*) is the term for buffalo-calf or the *bamen* deer. The latter is a crossbreed between the wild Indian gaur, also called the Indian bison, and the domestic cow, see Mizuno and Lobsang Tenpa (2015: 143).

<sup>26</sup> A *töl* (*rtol*) is a crossbreed between a *dzomo* and a yak.

10	bone	2
11	kidney	2
12	horn	2
13	spleen	1
14	hoof	1
15	blood	1
16	skin	1
17	heart	1

Fig. 6 — Number of occurrences of materia medica from cow and ox in the Four Tantras

In Indian medicine and ritual, the “five products derived from a cow” (*ba yi nam lnga, pañcagavya*) have immense importance, and usually consist of milk, curd, buttermilk, urine, and dung. Particularly, cow’s urine was considered to have medicinal properties and was used for therapeutic purposes in Indian medicine.<sup>27</sup> Tibetan physicians, especially those whose expertise was based on the Indian tradition of the *Aṣṭāṅgahr̥daya-saṃhitā* medical treatise, such as Yon tan mgon po and Darma mgon po, frequently recommended the use of cow’s urine in their works.

	wild animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	shellac	54
2	rhino	53
3	cowrie shell	47
4	snake	38
5	crab	38
6	blister beetle	35
7	red deer	34
8	serow	24
...	...	...
96	stink bug	1

Fig. 7 — Number of occurrences of wild animal materia medica in the Four Tantras

Regarding wild animal *materia medica*, the *Four Tantras* made use of shellac, freshwater crab, and rhino horn more often than other body parts and products of wild animals, as in the *The Black Pithy Volume of Oral Instructions* by sKyes bu me lha, but it is supplemented by cowrie shells and snakes (Fig. 6). The blister beetle played an important role in cleansing the “channels” (on this see below).

<sup>27</sup> For cow urine in Ayurveda, see Randhawa (2010); Randhawa and Sharma (2015).



## 3.3. Medical Treatments. A Royal Treasury

The work *The Royal Treasury* (*Rgyal po'i dkor mdzod*) is a medical text authored by Grags pa rgyal mtshan (1147–1216) and probably later edited by his nephew Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251). It shows a medical tradition practiced at that time at the monastery of Sa skya. The treatise describes treatments for various ailments and diseases, especially head injuries. Substances from humans are frequently mentioned in *The Royal Treasury*. The four commonly used animal products, beginning with musk, and followed by bear's bile, honey and bezoar, all appear with high frequency (Fig. 8).

	human and common animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
0	human	120
1	musk	30
2	bear's bile	29
3	honey	24
4	bezoar	16

Fig. 8 – Number of occurrences of human *materia medica* and the four common animal *materia medica* in the Medical Treatments. A Royal Treasury

The group of domestic animals are dominated by goat, sheep, horse, dog, and cattle. The four most common wild animals are represented by rhino, shellac, red deer, and crab (Fig. 9, 10).

	domestic animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	goat	31
2	sheep	17
3	horse	12
4	dog	11
5	cow / ox	7
6	pig	4
7	donkey	4
8	yak	2
9	poultry	2

Fig. 9 – Number of occurrences of domestic animal *materia medica* in Medical Treatments. A Royal Treasury

	wild animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	rhino	12
2	shellac	10
3	red deer	8
4	crab	6
5	conch-shell	4

6	fish	4
7	wolf	3
8	serow	3
...	...	...
26	raven	1

Fig. 10 — Number of occurrences of wild animal materia medica in Medical Treatments. A Royal Treasury

The middle ranks are taken by conch-shell, fish, wolf, and serow. If one examines the domestic goat, sheep, horse, and dog, one further learns which body parts and substances were of interest for the authors of *The Royal Treasury* (Fig. 11).

	goat	30	sheep	17	horse	12	dog	11
1	meat	10	meat	7	bone	3	dung	5
2	milk	5	fat	2	milk	2	hair	3
3	blood	5	bezoar	2	dung	2	testicle	1
4	hair	3	kidney	1	mane	2	bone	1
5	bone	2	liver	1	blood	1	brain	1
6	butter	2	dung	1	urine	1	teeth	1
7	dung	2	skull	1				
8	urine	2	bone	1				
9	bezoar	1						

Fig. 11 — Number of occurrences of specific domestic animal materia medica in Medical Treatments. A Royal Treasury

As expected, one finds meat, milk, and butter for the diet a patient would need to consume in order to keep healthy, yet many substances were not used for eating or drinking but rather as part of preparing drugs and applications. The latter is most evident in the usage of a dog's different body parts and its excrement. Reviewing the tables, it is obvious that animals were just as important for diet as for drugs and applications. It also reveals that Tibetan doctors did not only make use of native fauna, but also relied to a high degree on animals found in neighbouring areas, such as the Himalayan region, Bhutan, and India. This means that trade in animal products was a necessity for their medical practice.

The tabular overview also shows that livestock were extremely important for affordable health care, as were wild animals. Interestingly, yaks and hybrids played only a minor role in medical treatments compared to goats, sheep, horses, and so on. Notably, it is possible that the high importance of goats, sheep, and horses for human medicine corresponds to an interesting economic model based on pastoralism in Central Asia and Tibet. In a recent study on

the emergence of agriculture on the Tibetan Plateau, it is argued that the

earliest agriculture was based on millets (broomcorn and foxtail) and was accompanied by a pig-based economic system. This early economy, which likely originated in western China, was later replaced by a better adapted system, similar to those identified in Central Asia. The later system was based on crops such as wheat, barley, peas, and millets, as well as sheep and goat pastoralism. Wild resources obtained through hunting, fishing, and foraging appear to have been complements to the diet on the Tibetan Plateau.<sup>28</sup>

It could be that a transition toward pastoralism took place in Central Asia in a period between approximately 800 B.C.E and 400 C.E. d'Alpoim Guedes et al. write, "[...] an economic system almost exclusively based on sheep, goat, and horse pastoralism quickly spread across Central Asia and brought with it a distinct cultural package [...]"<sup>29</sup> More research is needed to illuminate the relationship between folk medicine and elite medicine in Tibet. Perhaps for the moment one can work on the assumption that the tradition of using animals and their products to maintain human health did not begin with the formation of a written (and oral) body of medical knowledge that we call today 'Tibetan medicine.' I especially believe that in medicine the principle 'one keeps what one knows' is at work, even across generations, often regardless of the opinions of the established medical tradition, simply persevering in what has proved beneficial by experience. In other words, sheep, goats, and horses provided men with what they needed for their daily life, as well as in cases of sickness, as a kind of time-proven clinical experience.

In contrast to this, the absence of yaks, otherwise seen as the very symbol of Tibetanness, is noticeable. Yaks play a minor role for diet, drugs, and applications. Interestingly, this agrees with an observation made by Daniel J. Miller on pastoralism in Tibet: "yaks are generally thought to characterize Tibetan nomadic production, however, in much of western Tibet sheep and goats are more important economically" (it seems that he used the term western Tibet for the region of Tsang).<sup>30</sup> Miller gives an interesting example from the Pha lha nomad area of northwestern Ngam ring County. He found that the sheep in possession of a large nomad family only represented 28% of the livestock biomass, although contributed about 60% of total income. Goats were 21% of the livestock biomass and contributed

<sup>28</sup> d'Alpoim Guedes et al. (2013: 255).

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*: 263.

<sup>30</sup> Miller (1999: 18f.).

35% of the income. The ratio for yaks looked very different. They only contributed 5% of total livestock income but comprised 46% of total livestock biomass.<sup>31</sup> It is evident that sheep and goats were of high economic value. Naturally how a livestock herd was put together differed regionally. Nomads usually raise a mix of different animal species that vary across regions according to rangeland factors and suitability of landscape. Across most of western Tibet, sheep and goats are more common than yaks. The former are usually milked, while in the eastern Tibetan Plateau yaks were more commonly used to supply milk products.<sup>32</sup> Seen from this perspective, i.e. the historic development of pastoralism and its economic aspects, the high medicinal value of sheep, goats, and horses is less surprising, as they were an important source of both income and well-being. On the other hand, yaks and hybrids were unimportant or less important in Tibetan medicine, at least in central Tibetan medical treatises. It is safe to say that livestock was a pillar of human health care; Tibetan medicine would not exist without it. Therefore any research on animal use in Tibetan medicine must include the use of domesticated animals and not just wild animals. I will say more on both, especially with regard to specific medical issues, in the following paragraph where I discuss the work of a doctor who was active decades after the *Medical Treatments: A Royal Treasury* was composed.

#### 3.4. Concise Outlines and Abridged Outlines

gTsang stod Darma mgon po, who compiled both of the treatises mentioned above, lived in the 13th century. He belonged to a famous medical school known as Cher rje after its founder Cher rje Zhang ston zhig po. It emerged during the 12th century in Mang yul, a region close to Nepal. It seems that its medical expertise was deeply rooted in the Indian Ayurvedic treatise *Aṣṭāṅgahrdaya-saṃhitā*. It is said that Cher rje Zhang ston zhig po had three main pupils, Darma mgon po being one of them. He spent his life in the region of Mang yul, with prolonged stays in Gung thang and sKyid rong. It is reported that he established a centre for the study of the *Aṣṭāṅgahrdaya-saṃhitā* and related texts in bSam rdzong in Mustang, in present-day Nepal. We are relatively well-informed about his medical views because of the existence to present day of two of his compilations, entitled the *Concise Outlines* and the *Abridged Outlines*. They contain more than a hundred brief treatises on various medical

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<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*: 19.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*: 18.

subjects. Most of them deal with the treatment of diseases, but their author also explains how to diagnose an illness, locate 'channels' (of major importance for blood-letting and moxibustion), and make compounded drugs, among many other subjects.

If one searches his compilations for recommended human body parts and excretions, one finds the comparably high number of one hundred and twenty cases (Fig. 12).

	human and common animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
0	human	120
1	honey	179
2	bear's bile	136
3	musk	133
4	bezoar	93

Fig. 12 – Number of occurrences of human *materia medica* and the four common animal *materia medica* in the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

The four commonly used animal products occupy a high percentage out of total animal substances used. Honey takes the first position, undisputed even in comparison with all human, domestic, and other wild animal substances. It is followed by bear's bile and musk, which are virtually level. Bezoar (of an elephant or cattle) takes the fourth place. The important group of domestic animals is led by cattle, followed by goats in second place, with horses, sheep, and dogs occupying the following positions (Fig. 13).

	animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	cow / ox	173
2	goat	117
3	horse	69
4	sheep	68
5	dog	61
6	pig	35
7	donkey	33
8	<i>dzomo</i>	29
9	yak / <i>dri</i>	27
10	poultry	23
11	cat	21
12	camel	8
13	<i>yung</i> <sup>33</sup>	3

<sup>33</sup> A *yung* (g.*yung*) is a crossbred between yak and cow.

14	water buffalo	1
15	<i>töl</i>	1

Fig. 13 – Number of occurrences of domestic animal materia medica the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

Pigs, donkeys, *dzomo*, male and female yaks, poultry and cats take the middle positions. If one examines the wild animals recommended by Darma mgon po for medicinal purposes, one finds crabs taking the leading position, followed by rhinos, red deer, and snakes (Fig. 14). The blister beetle takes fifth place (on this see below).

	wild animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	crab	40
2	rhino	38
3	red deer	36
4	snake	32
5	blister beetle	31
6	shellac	30
7	serow	27
8	wolf	26
9	sparrow	24
10	fish	23
11	bearded vulture	23
12	peacock	19
13	cowrie shell	19
14	fox	15
15	rock agama	14
...	...	...
82	fish eagle	1

Fig. 14 – Number of occurrences of wild animal materia medica in the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

It might be interesting to take a closer look at some specific groups of *materia medica*. Human body parts and excretions vary noticeably (Fig. 15).

	human products	number of occurrences
1	bile	25
2	flesh	20
3	urine	17
4	hair	16
5	bone	13
6	skull	11
7	milk	11

8	faeces	9
9	blood	6
10	fat	1
11	unspecified	1
12	unspecified	1

Fig. 15 – Number of occurrences of human *materia medica* in the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

The gallbladder with bile is the most important substance. It corresponds to an overall high appreciation for bile of animal origin in Tibetan medicine. In descending order follow: flesh, urine, hair, bone, skull, milk, faeces, blood and fat. It is obvious that human organs are lacking in comparison with animal organs, which were used in medical treatment. Moreover, if one further examines the top-ranking cattle, one learns that their urine, milk, and butter were the foremost utilized substances (Fig. 16).

	<i>materia medica</i> of cow, ox and calves	number of occurrences
1	urine	46
2	milk	30
3	butter	21
4	meat	17
5	yogurt	17
6	dung	14
7	horn	6
8	buttermilk	5
9	bile	4
10	teeth	4
11	skin	3
12	dairy goods	2
13	hooves	2
14	hair	2
15	lungs	2
16	blood	2
17	kidney	1
18	blood	1
19	bones	1
20	penis	1
21	testicles	1
22	entrails (?)	1

Fig. 16 – Number of occurrences of *materia medica* coming from cows, oxen, and calves in the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

Urine was often used to prepare medicine or administered for the intake of drugs. The same applies to milk and butter, but they also

had a huge importance for the dietary modifications of a patient. Meat and dietary products also played a role in a patient's diet. In general, cows were more important than oxen and calves (Fig. 17).

	cow <i>materia medica</i>	126	ox <i>materia medica</i>	37	calf <i>materia medica</i>	20
1	urine	42	meat	8	dung	3
2	milk	27	horn	6	milk	3
3	butter	18	dung	5	urine	3
4	yogurt	14	teeth	3	yogurt	3
5	dung	6	bile	3	butter	3
6	meat	7	hooves	2	lungs	2
7	buttermilk	5	skin	2	meat	2
8	dairy goods	2	hair	2	entrails (?)	1
9	kidney	1	blood	2		
10	bile	1	urine	1		
11	blood	1	bones	1		
12	teeth	1	penis	1		
13	skin	1	testicles	1		

Fig. 17 – Number of occurrences of *materia medica* coming from cow, ox and calf in the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

Cow's urine was by far the most significant substance because it possesses medicinal properties in Ayurvedic medicine, while the Cher rje medical tradition was mainly based on Vāgbhāṭa's fundamental treatise *Aṣṭāṅgahr̥daya-saṃhitā* and its commentaries.

A mix of body parts and products used for diet and for drugs and applications can also be observed for other domestic animals in Darma mgon po's compilations. A good example are goats (Fig. 18).

	goat <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	blood	16
2	milk	13
3	urine	9
4	fat	8
5	horns	7
6	hair	7
7	yogurt	6
8	milk	6
9	meat	5
10	beoar	5
11	skin	5
12	buttermilk	4



13	bone	3
14	dung	3
15	bile	3
16	testicles	3
17	lungs	2
18	liver	2
19	brain	2
20	milk products	2
21	stomach	1
22	marrow	1
23	hooves	1
24	teeth	1
25	penis	1
26	heart	1
27	spleen	1

Fig. 18 – Number of occurrences of goat materia medica in the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

Darma mgon po knows of twenty-seven body parts and products deriving from a goat that could be beneficial in medicine. Interestingly, blood takes first place. It is used in drugs and external applications, especially liquid medicaments in the form of drops and ointments. The same usage applies for goat's urine. It appears that goat's organs were also occasionally used.

To get a more complete view of Darma mgon po's use of animals and their products, one can examine the birds he utilized in his medical practice (Fig. 19).

	bird <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	sparrow	24
2	bearded vulture	22
3	peacock	19
4	eagle-owl	13
5	cinereous vulture	12
6	pigeon	10
7	cormorant	9
8	snowcock	9
9	magpie	5
10	partridge	5
11	long-eared owl	3
12	hoopoe	2
13	chough	1
14	<i>bu</i> <sup>34</sup>	1

<sup>34</sup> The bird *bu* (*bya lbu*) could not be identified.

15	fish eagle	1
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Fig. 19 – Number of occurrences of materia medica coming from birds in the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

Interestingly, the sparrow is the most common. The bearded vulture and the peacock occur less frequently and occupy lower positions. Eagle-owl, cinereous vulture, pigeon, cormorant, and snowcock are in the middle. Magpie, partridge, long-eared owl, hoopoe, chough, the bird *lbu* (unidentified), and fish eagle represent roughly the lower third in this list. A few times in Darma mgon po's works, he does not specify which bird should be used, but instead just says that one should take bird droppings, bird eggs, and so on (Fig. 20).

	bird materia medica	number of occurrences
1	bird droppings	6
2	meat eating bird	4
3	bird feathers	3
4	bird meat	3
5	bird eggs	2

Fig. 20 – Number of occurrences of unspecified bird materia medica in the Concise Outlines and the Abridged Outlines

Summing it up, one can say that Darma mgon po's recommended usage of animals and their products is strongly influenced by the Ayurvedic tradition of the *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya-saṃhitā*. This is not just evident in the predominant position of cows and oxen among the domestic animals, but also elsewhere for specific wild animals. In some medical instructions, Darma mgon po copied or paraphrased entire paragraphs from this Indian medical treatise. One has the impression that in a few instances he was probably not fully aware of the true nature of specific animals mentioned in the Tibetan translation of the *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya-saṃhitā* that he consulted. One therefore finds the name in a corrupted form, making the meaning of the original text incomprehensible. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of *godhā*, a Sanskrit term for a kind of lizard. This also casts doubt on whether all animals mentioned by Darma mgon po were actually used in practice or were in some cases only written conventions without practical implications. Reviewing the animals in Darma mgon po's compilations, one finds that a large percentage were used for the treatment of illnesses caused by demons, very frequently in the form of fumigations. This relates to a general practice in Tibetan religion wherein one makes an incense offering to

wrathful *dharmapālas* that usually includes flesh and fat of human or animal origin. The chosen animal can correspond to the vehicle of the deity, as in the case of the *dharmapāla* rDo rje legs pa, who has a ram as his vehicle and is worshipped with incense that can include goat's meat and fat, sense organs, and solid and hollow viscera.

### 3.5. Ten Million of Instructions. Relics

The *Ten Million of Instructions. Relics* is a compilation of medical treatises authored by mNyam nyid rdo rje (1439–1475). It contains approximately one hundred and eighty treatises, covering all medical subjects, mainly therapies for certain diseases. In the past, slightly differing versions of this compilation existed. They often included later works of his pupils or works said to be written by him.

If one counts how often human body parts and excretions occur in this medical compilation, one obtains a rather high number (Fig. 21).

	human and common animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
0	human	286
1	musk	353
2	bear's bile	172
3	honey	158
4	bezoar	145

Fig. 21 — Number of occurrences of human *materia medica* and of the four most common *materia medica* in the Ten Million of Instructions. Relics

They are topped only by musk, one of the four most common animal *materia medica*. There is clear gap between musk and the three remaining animal products, which are rather close together in terms of their frequency of occurrence. The leading domestic animals, namely goats, cattle, sheep, horses, *dzomo* and pigs continue to maintain a dominating presence as seen in earlier medical treatises (Fig. 22).

	domestic animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	goat	92
2	cow / ox	84
3	sheep	58
4	horse	57
5	<i>dzomo</i>	56
6	pig	54
7	yak / dri	43
8	dog	34

9	poultry	15
10	donkey	14
11	<i>töl</i>	3
12	<i>yung</i>	1

Fig. 22 — Number of occurrences of domestic animal materia medica in Ten Million of Instructions.  
Relics

The list of wild animals offers some surprises (Fig. 23).

	wild animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	blister beetle	112
2	salamander	66
3	rhino	57
4	cowrie shell	53
5	crab	46
6	sparrow	42
7	snake	33
8	peacock	31
9	red deer	31
10	fish	29
...	...	...
174	raven	1

Fig. 23 — Number of occurrences of wild animal materia medica in the Ten Million of Instructions.  
Relics

The first position is taken by the blister beetle. Then follows a group comprised of salamander, rhino, cowrie shell, crab, and sparrow. A long list of animals starting with snakes forms the large middle part. The top rank of the blister beetle requires some explanation. It was mainly used in Tibetan medicine to cleanse the 'channels' and probably every physician had some medical instructions on this treatment that included blister beetles. It was known that blister beetles are poisonous, and doctors had developed several techniques to make sure that the poison is neutralized before the beetle is used in drugs and applications.<sup>35</sup> The next surprise in the list of wild animals is the salamander. It seems that this frequent use is a kind of specialty of mNyam nyid rdo rje. It often occurs in the context of the practice of essence extractions, tonics, and elixirs to maintain health, treating the aged, and restoring virility.<sup>36</sup> The next three animals—rhino, cowrie shell, and crab—were frequently used in Tibetan medicine in general and had to be traded from regions to the south of Tibet.

<sup>35</sup> For more information, see Czaja (in press).

<sup>36</sup> On this practice, see Gerke 2012a, 2012b, Cantwell 2017.

### 3.6. Medical treatises in comparison

In this section, I will draw some comparisons between the clinical treatises. I will begin by comparing the animal classes found in the *Four Tantras* and *Ten Million of Instructions. Relics*. Then I will examine birds as a specific class of animals in all clinical treatises and make a few remarks on the use of vultures in Tibetan medicine. Finally, I will compare the percentage of the main categories, namely humans and domestic and wild animals, in these sources.<sup>37</sup>

The wild animal classes in the *Four Tantras* distribute as follows (Fig. 24):

	wild animal class	number of occurrences
1	arachnids	13
2	bivalve	24
3	malacostraca	38
4	fishes	57
5	reptiles	11
6	snail	140
7	birds	166
8	insects	393
9	mammals	885

<sup>37</sup> The percentages on Tibetan *materia medica* in this article are roundings.

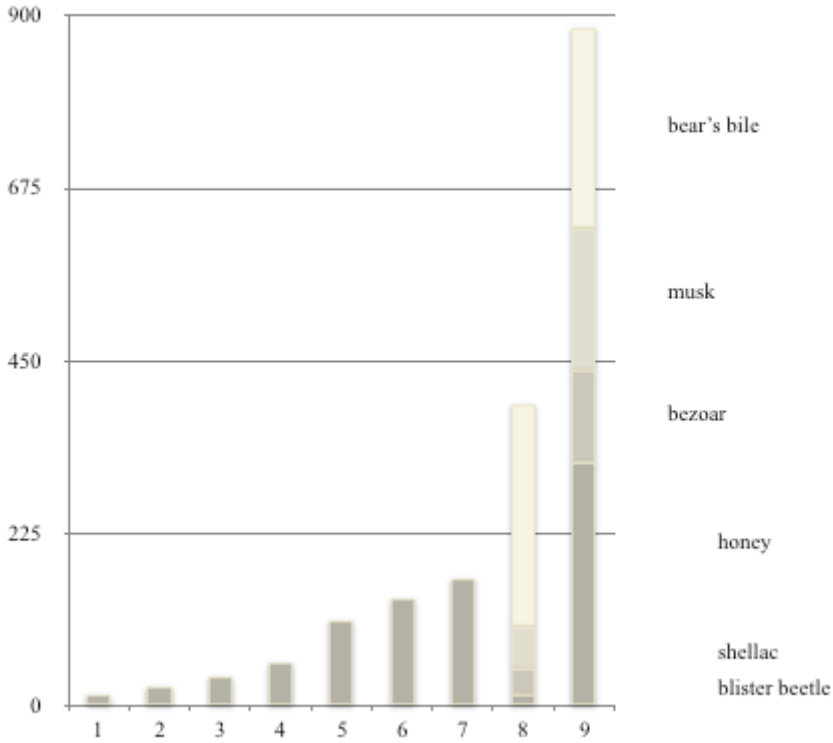
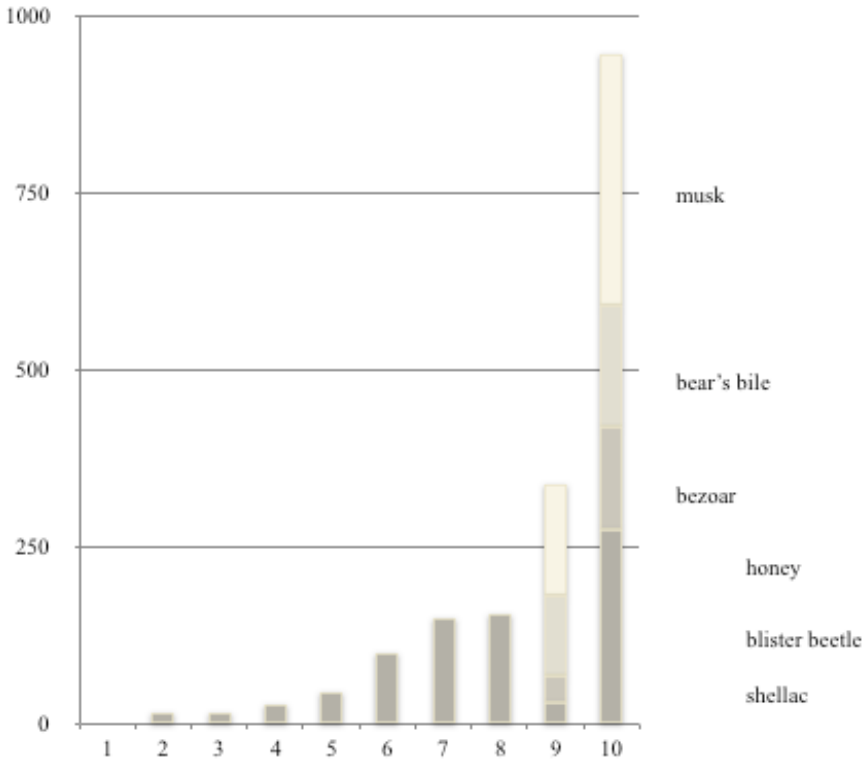


Fig. 24 — Number of occurrences of wild animals in the Four Tantras according to taxonomic class

The class of arachnids, such as scorpions, takes the lowest position in terms of quantity. There are only thirteen instances in which animals of this class are mentioned in the *Four Tantras*. The next ranks are occupied with animals that do not appear more than a hundred times in the source. They are comprised of bivalve, malacostraca, and fish. The classes of reptiles, snails, and birds occur between a hundred and two hundred times each. The largest group consists of insects and mammals. The animal classes in the *Ten Million of Instructions. Relics* is comparable (Fig. 25).



	wild animal class	number of occurrences
1	ascomycota	1
2	bivalve	16
3	arachnids	17
4	fishes	29
5	malacostraca	46
6	snails	100
7	reptils	150
8	birds	157
9	insects	339
10	mammals	945

Fig. 25 — Number of occurrences of wild animals in the Ten Million of Instructions. Relics according to taxonomic class

The classes with less than a hundred occurrences are comprised of ascomycota, bivalve, arachnids, fish, and malacostraca. Snails, reptiles, and birds appear between a hundred and two hundred times. Again insects and mammals are the largest classes. To sum up,

mammals (musk, bear's bile and bezoar) occupy the first position, insects (honey, shellac, blister beetle) the second, and birds the third. The next ranks are taken by reptiles and sea and freshwater snails.

As shown above, the class of birds ranks below insects and mammals in both treatises. If one adds up the bird species found in all five treatises, one finds the peacock in the top position, surely because in Tibetan medicine it was thought that it would be beneficial against poisons (Fig. 26).

	bird <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	peacock	74
2	Eurasian tree sparrow ( <i>mchil ba</i> )	66
3	cinereous vulture	49
4	bearded vulture	44
5	eagle-owl	24
6	cormorant	11
7	snowcock	24
8	long-eared owl	11
9	Eurasian tree sparrow ( <i>nas zan</i> )	13
10	hill pigeon	8

Fig. 26 — Number of occurrences of bird *materia medica* in all five clinical treatises

This is based on beliefs coming from the Indian Ayurveda. The second position is occupied by the sparrow. There are two terms for this bird in Tibetan and it is currently unclear whether they refer to the same or different species. In publications on Tibetan *materia medica*, they are regarded as identical. If so, the sparrow would take over the top position in this ranking. The sparrow was intensively used by Darma mgon po and mNyam nyid rdo rje, but not by Yon tan mgon po. The list also reveals the high importance of vultures, especially the cinereous vulture and the bearded vulture. According to bsTan 'dzin phun tshogs (b. 1672), various body parts and excretions of the bearded vulture could be used for medical purposes. A doctor might utilize its inner organs, such as its heart, gall-bladder, and stomach. He could also make use of its eyes, throat, legs, bones and meat. Its droppings and urine too could be beneficial.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the throat and stomach of the cinereous vulture could be of use for a Tibetan doctor. He could utilize not only its meat and brain but its feathers and droppings as well.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> *Shel gong shel phreng* 382/11, 384/11, 385/6, 388/14, 390/15, 394/, 400/18, 410/16, 413/21.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*: 384/11, 390/17, 396/22, 400/17, 408/13, 410/16.



It might be also interesting to compare all five treatises in terms of the respective share of human, domestic and wild animal *materia medica* (Fig. 27).

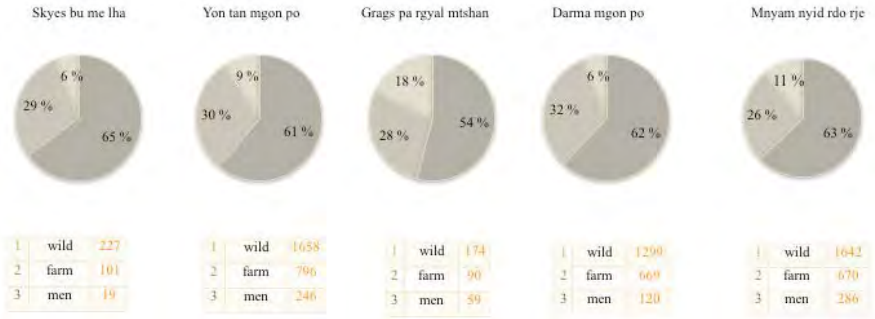


Fig. 27a – Percentage distribution of human, domestic and wild animal *materia medica* in all five clinical treatises

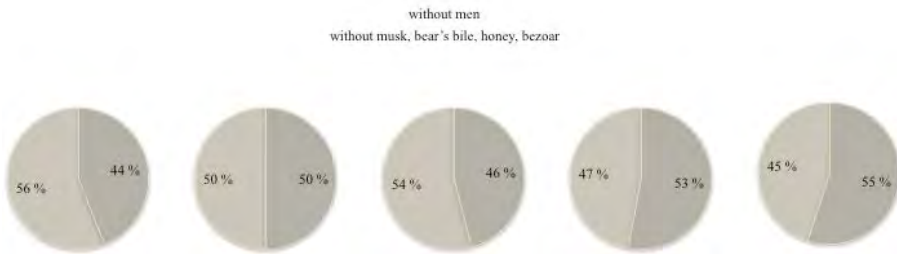


Fig. 27b – Percentage distribution of domestic and wild animal *materia medica* without the four common animal *materia medica* (below)

The upper row of diagrams shows the percentage if one includes both humans and the four common animal substances, i.e. musk, bear's bile, honey, and bezoar. The lower row of diagrams shows medicines lacking products from humans and the four common animal substances. In all five cases, the wild animals occupy the first rank, followed by domestic animals and humans. Interestingly, the percentage share of each category is quite similar. On average, human body parts and excretions made up approximately 10%, domesticated animals around 29%, and wild animals about 61%. If one excludes human *materia medica* and the four common animal substances, one obtains a percentage distribution of domestic and wild animals that is nearly equal. This means that not just wild animals, but domestic ones as well, were indispensable for maintaining human health.

It is interesting to juxtapose some of these findings and interpretations with other medical sources, especially with drug lists of a much later date, as done in the following section.

#### 4. *Animal materia medica in drug lists*

The first treatise was composed by O rgyan Theg mchog, alias O rgyan bsTan 'dzin rgya mtsho (b. 19th cent.), a personal physician of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. It is entitled *A Beautiful Ornament for the Concise Outlines. A Treasury of Medicine of Ambrosia* (*Zin tig mdzes rgyan bdud rtsi'i sman mdzod*). This work is actually a kind of supplement to another famous drug list authored by Kong sprul Blo gros mtha' yas, alias Yon tan rgya mtsho (1813-1899/1890). Kong sprul's work written in 1872 bears the title *A Collection of Concise Outlines. Drops of Ambrosia* (*Zin tig gces bsdus bdud rtsi'i thigs pa*). It was an important work but the difficulty in finding the relevant drugs in it was a serious shortcoming. O rgyan Theg mchog's treatise was meant to remedy this situation, so doctors could use it more easily. He described four hundred and seventy-nine drugs, arranged in accordance with the disease categories. If one tallies both the drugs containing and not containing human and animal body parts and animal-derived products, one finds that one hundred and sixty-nine drugs, or around 35%, possessed no such ingredients, and three hundred and ten drugs, or 65%, possessed such ingredients. There were animal *materia medica* of seventy-seven species. The number of human body parts and excretions was high but not exceedingly high (Fig. 28).

	human and common animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
0	human	78
1	musk	132
2	bezoar	95
3	bear's bile	67
4	honey	11

Fig. 28 — Number of occurrences of human *materia medica* and the four common animal *materia medica* in *A Beautiful Ornament for the Concise Outlines. A Treasury of Medicine of Ambrosia*

Reviewing the four common animal products, one notices the low frequency of honey, with only eleven occurrences. The remaining substances of musk, bezoar, and bear's bile show the usual high number of occurrences but with distinct gaps between each. This indicates that one hundred and twenty drugs, or around 25%, contain

musk, ninety-four drugs, or around 20%, contain (elephant's or ox) bezoar, and sixty-six drugs, or approximately 18%, contain bear's bile. Concerning the use of domestic and wild animals, there are a few surprises (Fig. 29, 30).

	domestic animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	pig	28
2	cow	10
3	goat	9
4	sheep	9
5	horse	6
6	dog	6
7	poultry	6
8	<i>dri</i>	5
9	donkey	3
...	...	...
16	<i>dzomo</i>	1

Fig. 29 – Number of occurrences of domestic animal *materia medica* in A Beautiful Ornament for the Concise Outlines. A Treasury of Medicine of Ambrosia

	wild animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	rhino	39
2	crab	34
3	shellac	18
4	bearded vulture	16
5	cowry	16
6	red deer	15
7	blister beetle	11
8	conch-shell	11
9	fossils	11
...	...	...
56	mammot	1

Fig.30 – Number of occurrences of wild animal *materia medica* in A Beautiful Ornament for the Concise Outlines. A Treasury of Medicine of Ambrosia

The most noticeable is the top position held by the pig, which will be explained below. The remaining domestic animals, such as cows, goats, sheep, and horses correspond to the clinical medial treatises. The section of the wild animals is led by rhinos and crabs. They are followed by a group consisting of shellacs, bearded vultures, cowry, and red deer. Similarly, the blister beetle and the conch-shell frequently occur in clinical works, as discussed above.

However, the occurrence of fossils is noteworthy. They are known as 'dragon's bone' (*'brug rus*) in Tibetan medicine, the same

designation as in Chinese medicine (龙骨 *lónggǔ*). They are usually the mineralized vertebrae and bones of the extremities, mostly of mammals such as deer, elephants, mammoths, and so on. They were recommended in the clinical treatises discussed above, like the *Four Tantras* by Yon tan mgon po, the *Concise Outlines* and the *Abridged Outlines* by Darma mgon po and the *Ten Million of Instructions. Relics* by mNyam nyid rdo rje. However, they do not occur very frequently. They appear only four times in the entire *Four Tantras*, ten times in the *Concise Outlines* and the *Abridged Outlines*, and twelve times in the *Ten Million of Instructions. Relics*. They were used for a variety of ailments and diseases, such as bone fractures and wound treatments. The comparatively high occurrence of fossilized bones in O rgyan Theg mchog's drug list is therefore unusual.

The second list of drugs considered in this paper was written by mKhyen rab nor bu (1883–1962) in 1951. It bears the title *The Book on Medical Compounds Essential for the Practice. An Excellent Vase of Ambrosia (Lag len nyer mkho'i sman gyi sbyor dpe bdud rtsi'i bum bzang)*.<sup>40</sup> It has to be seen in connection with a second work authored by him a few years before in 1949. This second work is a drug list entitled *A Summary of the Healing Potentials of Medical Compounds. Elegant Sayings of Happiness and Well-being (Sman sbyor gyi nus pa phyogs bsdu phan bde'i legs bshad)*.<sup>41</sup> It describes eighty-five drugs, but he gives only their names and their healing potentials. As a result, mKhyen rab nor bu wrote another work in 1951, in which he provided the ingredients and their quantity for these eighty-five drugs and many others. I consulted the work *An Excellent Vase of Ambrosia* to gather information on animal parts and products. It contains one hundred and thirty-one drugs in total. Thirty drugs, or around 23%, are without animals. The majority, one hundred and one drugs, or around 77%, have human and animal parts and products. Altogether the animals belong to sixty different species.

Compared to O rgyan Theg mchog's drug list, the number of human body parts and excretions is similar. Whereas they can be found in approximately 16% of the drugs in the former drug list, around 18% of the drugs in the latter drug list contain them (Fig. 31).

	human and common animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
0	human products	24
1	musk	47

<sup>40</sup> Mkhayen rab nor bu ([1951] 2007).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

2	bezoar	23
3	bear's bile	15
4	honey	3

Fig. 31 — Number of occurrences of human *materia medica* and the four common animal *materia medica* in An Excellent Vase of Ambrosia

The frequency and distribution of the four common animal products is also comparable. The first rank is taken by musk, followed by bezoar and bear's bile. Honey is in fourth place and occurs only three times. Expressed as a percentage, honey is found in around 3% of all drugs in both treatises (Fig. 34, see below). Bear's bile is an ingredient of approximately 22% of all drugs in O rgyan Theg mchog's list and around 17% in mKhyen rab nor bu's list. Moreover, O rgyan Theg mchog adds bezoar to around 31% of all drugs, while mKhyen rab nor bu adds it in around 26%. The most common ingredient, musk, occurs in 43% of the drugs recommended by O rgyan Theg mchog. This is less than the approximately 53% in mKhyen rab nor bu's work. Thus the difference between both lists is not significant and would have more or less similar implications on the demand for these four animal products. Musk would be a highly sought-after ingredient and honey was much less important for a doctor using the drugs on these lists.

Both drug lists are also comparable in their usage of other body parts and products coming from wild animals (Fig. 32).

	wild animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	crab	10
2	rhino	6
3	cowry	4
4	pangolin	4
5	shellac	4
6	dragon bone	3
7	beared vulture	3
8	snake	3
9	cinereous vulture	2
...	...	...
22	fox	1

Fig. 32 — Number of occurrences of wild animal *materia medica* in An Excellent Vase of Ambrosia

Crabs, rhinos, cowry, and shellacs were often used by mKhyen rab nor bu to compound drugs. One also finds fossils, alias 'dragon's bones', among his ingredients. A special case is the occurrence of the

Chinese pangolin.<sup>42</sup> The domestic animals also correspond in both drug lists (Fig. 33).

	domestic animal <i>materia medica</i>	number of occurrences
1	pig	8
2	goat	5
3	cow / ox	3
4	horse	2
5	dog	2
6	<i>dri</i>	1
7	sheep	1

Fig. 33 — Number of occurrences of domestic animal *materia medica* in An Excellent Vase of Ambrosia

Again, as in the case of O rgyan Theg mchog, pigs appear most often in the list of recommended drugs. If one compares the first six animals of O rgyan Theg mchog's drugs with a clinical treatise such as *The Royal Treasury* by Grags pa rgyal mtshan, the large percentage of pigs becomes very obvious. In Grags pa rgyal mtshan's work they comprise only approximately 8% of animal parts and products, but 41% in the list of O rgyan Theg mchog. If one takes a closer look at which parts and products of the pig were mainly used by O rgyan Theg mchog, one learns that around 82% are pig faeces. These are customarily added in the form of so-called 'black camphor' (*gar nag, gar bu nag po*), i.e. pig faeces burnt until they turn into powder. There are various drugs called Garnag-5, Garnag-8, Garnag-10, in which pig faeces constitutes the main ingredient. They were and are prescribed to cure various ailments like indigestion. The difference between the clinical treatises and the drug lists on this question might possibly be explained by how these drug lists came into existence. The drugs were drawn from a great variety of medical texts like the *Supplement to the Tantra of Instructions* (*Man ngag lhan thabs*) by Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705). This very influential treatise emphasized potent substances and drugs that in some regards might be seen as 'tantric' medicine.

Finally, one can compare the four very common animal substances in all medical works (Fig. 34).

<sup>42</sup> See Czaja (2017: 146f.).

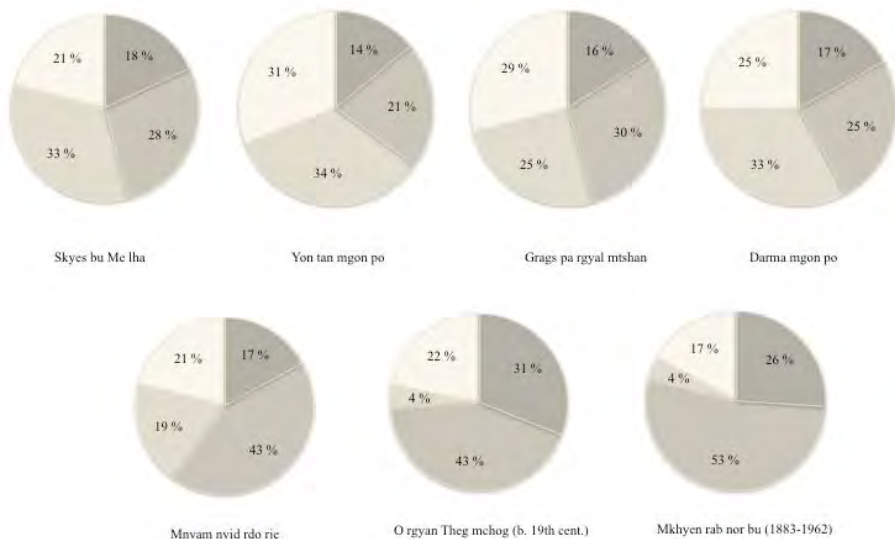


Fig. 34 — Percentage distribution of the four common animal materia medica in the five clinical treatises and in both drug lists

The diagrams show the percentage share of each category in this group. The four upper diagrams document a similar distribution with insignificant differences. It seems that the four clinical treatises written between the 11th and 13th centuries show a high level of conformity in this regard. The lower diagrams differ. There is a clear increase in musk and bear’s bile, and a decrease in honey and bezoar. More research is required to fully explain this difference. Perhaps one of the reasons might be that musk and bear’s bile were often used in wound treatment. Maybe there was a higher demand for both because of a prolonged warfare from the 15th century onwards in Tibet, but more studies are necessary to substantiate such a hypothesis.

### 5. Concluding remarks

There is no doubt that human and animal *materia medica* were an integral and important part of Tibetan medicine. Tibet’s medical tradition would hardly be imaginable without them. The survey given above demonstrates that one should not underestimate the *materia medica* of human origin, as they constituted an elementary means to cure ailments. Today we mainly speak of wildlife resources and their huge impact, as they are seen as a medicinal resource, but we often overlook domestic animals and their products. It is safe to say that both domestic and wild animals were equally significant in Tibetan medicine for treating diseases and maintaining human

health. It is evident that livestock was not just essential to generating an income and securing one's livelihood, but also to healing illnesses and staying healthy as well. It seems that in Tibetan medical thinking medicinal resources from domestic and wild animals, together with human *materia medica*, formed a unified whole. Moreover, it is clear that not all wild animals were used for medicinal purposes. One can also recognize clear differences as some animals were much more frequently utilized than others.

Some animal *materia medica* originated from neighbouring countries and had to be traded to be used in medical practice. Their high occurrence suggests that they were needed for effective medical treatment. It might be that they were sometimes substituted. Summing it up, it is worth exploring the world of Tibetan human and animal *materia medica* further as it will also help to understand Tibet's medicine more accurately.

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