

Aspects of Social Status in the *Biography of Doring Paṇḍita*

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Life 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 Paṇḍita* (*Rdo ring paṇḍita'i rnam thar*)¹ is perhaps one of the earliest examples of such secular biography or, to be more precise, secular autobiography.² The text was finalised shortly after 1806 by bSod nams bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor tshe ring (b.

¹ 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).

² 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 son³ 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.”⁴ 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.⁵ 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

³ 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).

⁴ Eco (1992: 64–65).

⁵ 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.⁶ 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,

⁶ 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.⁷

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.⁸ 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.⁹

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*.¹⁰ Even though

⁷ Weber (1978: 926).

⁸ 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 Daičing 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).

⁹ Petech (1973: 50).

¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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 pages¹² 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.

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).

¹¹ Petech (1973: 15).

¹² 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.¹³ 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*,¹⁴ 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

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ 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 Nobel 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 [...]¹⁵

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*,¹⁶ and, moreover, he was appointed

¹⁵ *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).

¹⁶ 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).¹⁷

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.¹⁸

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,¹⁹ 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*.²⁰

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

¹⁷ 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).

¹⁸ *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 Paṇḍita's saying is Sallie and John Davenport's in Sa skya Paṇḍita (2000: 142, No 203).

¹⁹ Petech (1972: 53).

²⁰ *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 1st class *taiji* as well as the title *gung*.²¹

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 button²² 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.²³

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.

²¹ 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*.

²² 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 1st class", whereas "the Kalon have only 3rd 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.

²³ *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 / rna 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 Paṅḍita] and his elder brother rNam rgyal tshe brtan.²⁴

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.²⁵

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]

²⁴ [...] *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).

²⁵ 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*²⁶ [...] ²⁷

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 3rd 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*²⁸ and [this title] shall remain [with your family] from generation to generation without interruption!”²⁹

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].³⁰

²⁶ “*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).

²⁷ *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).

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ *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).

³⁰ [...] *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)³¹ 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 3rd class *taiji* in 1751³² or rDo ring Paṇḍita's role in the interregnum from 1747 to 1750,³³ 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

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).

³¹ 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).

³² Rdo ring (1987: 33).

³³ *ibid.*: 43–52.

Zhwa dmar pa.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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.”³⁶ 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

³⁴ 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).

³⁵ Petech (1973: 14).

³⁶ *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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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 1762,³⁹ the 6th Panchen was clearly impressed by the 'Chi med bde ldan lha khang⁴⁰ 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!⁴¹

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.⁴² This suggestion was taken up and in 1765 during the 6th Panchen's second visit to dGa' bzhi,⁴³ 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

³⁷ Rdo ring (1987: 33–34).

³⁸ *ibid.*: 72–73.

³⁹ 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).

⁴⁰ *Rdo ring* (1987: 100–104).

⁴¹ *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).

⁴² *ibid.*: 106.

⁴³ *ibid.*: 137–139.

monasteries should be invited, what should be read in assembly (*tshogs dus zhal 'don*), and what should be practiced.⁴⁴ 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 1766.⁴⁵

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 [...].⁴⁶

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

⁴⁴ *ibid.*: 142.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*: 144–148.

⁴⁶ *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 18th-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."⁴⁷

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 1784.⁴⁸ 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:

⁴⁷ *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).*

⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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-1792.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ While the 10th Zhwa dmar pa allegedly committed suicide in Nepal,⁵² bsTan 'dzin dpal 'byor was accused of treason and thus called to Peking for trial.

⁴⁹ *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).

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

⁵¹ 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).

⁵² 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.⁵³ 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.⁵⁴ As Li suggests, "Bstan 'dzin dpal 'byor, as the head of the household, was undoubtedly under a thick cloud of suspicion".⁵⁵ 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 is interrogation at the court in Peking was partly understood as an attempt to excuse his illegal financial appropriations.⁵⁶

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 courts suspicion and Fuk'anggan's investigations regarding the 1789 agreement only during the interrogations that followed his rescue.⁵⁷ 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."⁵⁸

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

⁵⁴ Li Ruohong (2002: 254–255).

⁵⁵ *ibid.*: 256.

⁵⁶ *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.

⁵⁷ Rdo ring (1987: 894–895).

⁵⁸ *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"⁵⁹ but was nevertheless "guilty of having given up his own body into the hands of the enemy"⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹

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."⁶² But since they were not aware of this, the court was lenient and only demoted "both from the rank of *bka' blon* and at

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

⁵⁹ *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).

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

⁶¹ 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).

⁶² *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."⁶³

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. [...]"*⁶⁴

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)⁶⁵ where they were to stay together with a delegation sent by the 7th Panchen Lama.⁶⁶

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

⁶³ *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).

⁶⁴ *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).*

⁶⁵ 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).

⁶⁶ 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."⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸

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.⁶⁹

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,⁷⁰ 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.⁷¹ 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.

⁶⁷ 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).

⁶⁸ *ibid.*: 951–952.

⁶⁹ Li Ruohong (2002: 241–242).

⁷⁰ 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).

⁷¹ 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.⁷²

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."⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ 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."⁷⁵ The court reacted by ordering Amban Cebake 策拔克 (the Tse'u am pa of the *Biography*) to investigate the allegations.⁷⁶ 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.⁷⁷

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

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

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

⁷⁴ Rdo ring (1987: 1226–1228).

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

⁷⁶ Rdo ring (1987: 1228).

⁷⁷ *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].⁷⁸ 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*⁷⁹ of land that has been appropriated by way of extortion, dispute or request.⁸⁰

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,⁸¹ 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 1805.⁸² 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

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

⁷⁹ *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*.

⁸⁰ *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.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*: 1268.

⁸² This view is discussed widely based on Chinese and Tibetan sources, see e.g. Petch (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]”⁸³ and an “evil talk that is putting a black hat on a white person.”⁸⁴ 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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶

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,⁸⁷ and bsTan

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

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

⁸⁵ 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).

⁸⁶ Petech (1973: 59–62); Li Ruohong (2002: 281).

⁸⁷ 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,”⁸⁸ 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).⁸⁹ 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.”⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ 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

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.

⁸⁸ *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).

⁸⁹ See Hartley (2011: 69).

⁹⁰ [...] *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).

⁹¹ 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.⁹²

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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⁹² [...] *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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