

# 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 rGrod gyi ling”



Fig. 9 — *dPal khud Lake with horse* (photo: Hildegard Diemberger)

### *Acknowledgements*

This article is the product of collaboration between Hildegard and Yancen Diemberger and was inspired by Yancen's interest and passion for working with horses as well as by an essay she produced for her BA degree in Tibetan and South Asian Studies at the University of Vienna. Special thanks go to Michela Clemente for drawing attention to the manual on horse sciences and medicine in the Tucci collection; to Yangdon Dhondup, Humchen Chengatsang, and Dorje for offering information on Henan Mongolian Autonomous County; to Dawa Dargyay from Porong for providing information on his homeland and to all the participants in the Paris 2018 conference for offering precious comments and suggestions. Ethnographic fieldwork referred to in this article was enabled by projects focusing on related topics funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the British Academy, the Austrian Science Fund and, most recently, the Norwegian Research Council.

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